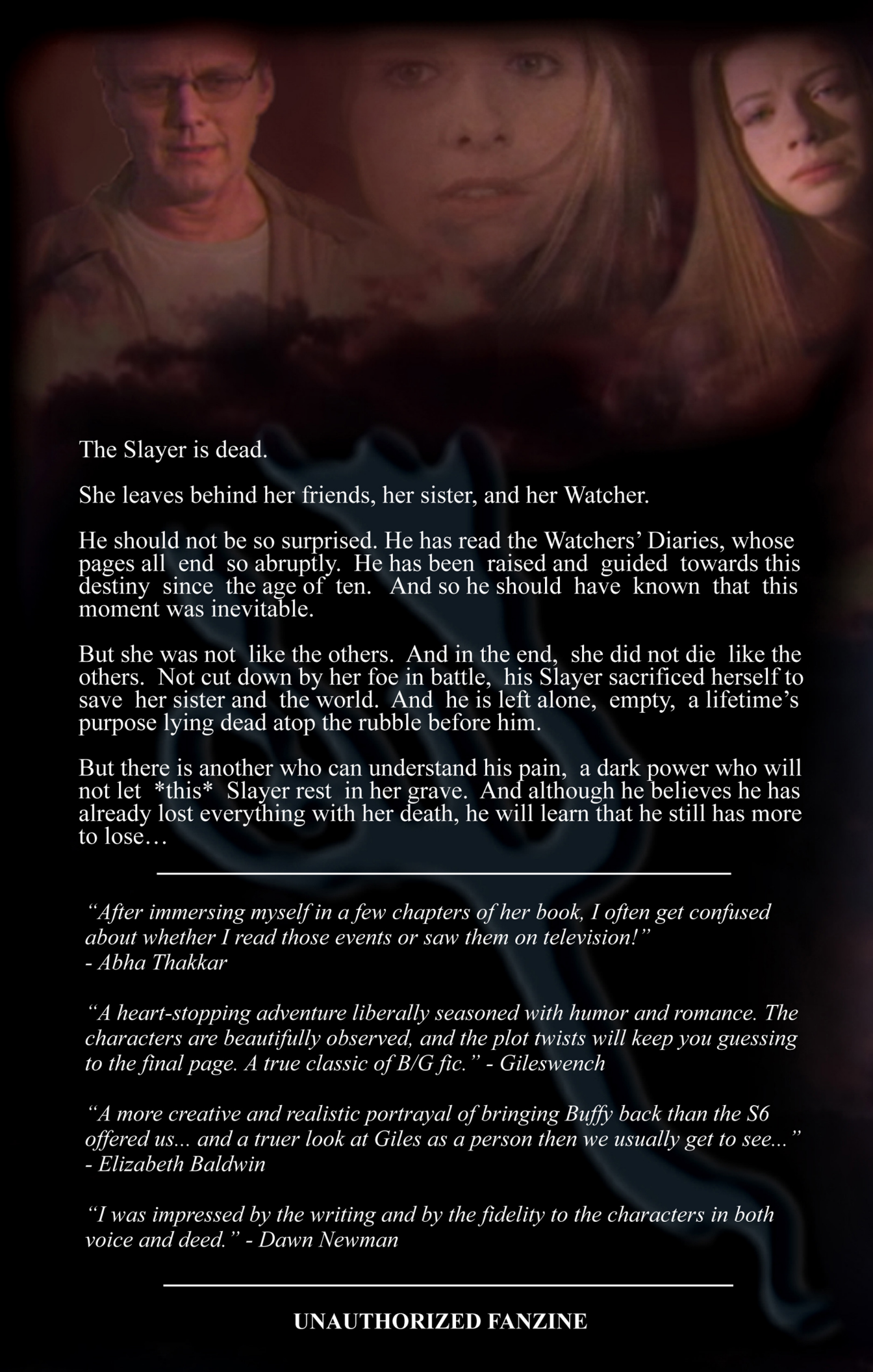


The book cover features a collage of images. At the top, a man's face is on the left and a woman's face is on the right, both looking forward. In the center, a figure is suspended in the air against a background of dark, swirling clouds. Below this, a man in a suit and glasses is shown in profile, looking down. At the bottom, a woman is shown from the chest up, looking upwards. The overall color palette is dark and moody, with shades of purple, red, and black.

J.K. Philips

*Death Brings
Clarity*



The Slayer is dead.

She leaves behind her friends, her sister, and her Watcher.

He should not be so surprised. He has read the Watchers' Diaries, whose pages all end so abruptly. He has been raised and guided towards this destiny since the age of ten. And so he should have known that this moment was inevitable.

But she was not like the others. And in the end, she did not die like the others. Not cut down by her foe in battle, his Slayer sacrificed herself to save her sister and the world. And he is left alone, empty, a lifetime's purpose lying dead atop the rubble before him.

But there is another who can understand his pain, a dark power who will not let **this** Slayer rest in her grave. And although he believes he has already lost everything with her death, he will learn that he still has more to lose...

"After immersing myself in a few chapters of her book, I often get confused about whether I read those events or saw them on television!"

- Abha Thakkar

"A heart-stopping adventure liberally seasoned with humor and romance. The characters are beautifully observed, and the plot twists will keep you guessing to the final page. A true classic of B/G fic." - Gileswench

"A more creative and realistic portrayal of bringing Buffy back than the S6 offered us... and a truer look at Giles as a person than we usually get to see..."
- Elizabeth Baldwin

"I was impressed by the writing and by the fidelity to the characters in both voice and deed." - Dawn Newman

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Literature quoted within this book:

Jonathan Livingston Seagull by Richard Bach; “The Highwayman” by Alfred Noyes; “The Jabberwocky” by Lewis Carroll; Poems by Catullus; “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “The Raven” by Edgar Allen Poe; Midsummer Night’s Dream, Romeo and Juliet, and Hamlet by Shakespeare; Les Miserables by Victor Hugo; A Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens; and a passing reference to “Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night” by Dylan Thomas.

Song lyrics quoted within this book:

“Someone to Watch over me” by Gershwin, “She” by Elvis Costello, “I Love You” by Sarah McLachlan, and “Too Much in Love to Care” from Andrew Lloyd Webber’s musical Sunset Boulevard.

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The Death Brings Clarity Trilogy

**by
JK Philips**

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Acknowledgements

First of all, I must thank my mother, who hooked me on Buffy to begin with, willingly read my book and scribbled little notes in the margins where I made her cry, nagged constantly for more pages as I wrote, and pimped out my book to anyone who would read it.

Thanks to my good friend Abha, who would get giddy at the prospect of more pages and lay on my bed as she read them. She would mockingly defend my use of smut with my standard rallying cry of “But it was necessary to the plot!” And sometimes she would even reluctantly admit that it *was* necessary to the plot. She helped with the India bits, as well as some of the others, but more than anything, our daily marathon of seasons 3 through 5 is what overloaded my brain with Buffy and resulted in this.

My dear friend Phil had never seen the show before beta reading for me. It all started with an innocent inquiry on the best angle with which to shoot your brains out, which, I’ll grant you, is an odd request. So I sent him the first book, just to reassure him that I did have a legitimate purpose for such information. He red inked all the chapters as I continued through books two and three, proving indispensable for the medical stuff and the British stuff. Also, as the only one of my betas not familiar with Buffy, he provided a much needed outside perspective on the story.

Gail... I can’t give her enough praise. Besides being a wonderful author herself, she has to be an incredibly giving person to donate so much of her time in editing a book for a complete stranger. She was exactly what I needed. She could quote Buffy better than I could, and she pointed out every bit where I had one of the characters off or had made a mistake with canon. She found even the smallest plot holes and truly challenged me as a writer.

Dusty was kind enough to design the lovely cover for this book. It’s beautiful and fits my story perfectly and most importantly, I could never have done it myself. I completely lack any kind of artistic talent in that regard, but thankfully Dusty had more than enough.

Finally, I must thank everyone who sent me feedback after I finished each chapter and consequently fed my muse and motivated me to write more.

Author's Note

Book One, Book Two, and more than half of Book Three (including chapter 10, which I must confess to having written before the other chapters) were completed over the summer hiatus following the season five finale, "The Gift." Thus, for obvious reasons, none of the events after the episodes "The Gift" for Buffy the Vampire Slayer or "There's No Place Like Plrtz Glrb" for Angel are included in this book. So no Buffy/Spike, no baby Connor, and no Angel/Cordelia. Although, I did steal and alter slightly one of Spike's lines from "Bargaining," and I included Wolfram and Hart's file clerk from "Dad" in a brief scene at the very, very end. But any other similarities between my book and Buffy's season six events- coughWillowcough- happened to be incredibly good guesswork on my part.

The first book begins with the events of "Spiral," moves through "The Weight of the World" and "The Gift" and then continues on from there into my own story. If you're not familiar with Buffy-lore, the story arc for season five, or the specifics of these particular episodes, I suggest you read the "Buffy Basics and Plot" at the end of the book before beginning at chapter one.

I have also included a character index you may wish to refer to occasionally if you can't remember who someone is. Or, if you haven't seen the show, you might want to read through the entire index in addition to the basics and plot.

Book One: Death Brings Clarity

by
JK Philips

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Chapter 1:
He knows his heart too late

He was dying. He knew from the moment they pulled him from the RV. But he also knew they wouldn't leave him behind. So for their sakes, for their safety, he struggled to put one foot in front of the other, Buffy and Xander taking his weight as they crawled towards the abandoned buildings a half-mile ahead.

Somehow he had made the distance and they were inside. He fell as Buffy released him, but another pair of hands took her place and were lifting him up. He landed on the hard surface with a jolt and cried out as the pain washed over him in waves. He clenched his jaw, his fists against it, tried to curl up around it. He could barely breathe and oh God, Angelus had nothing on this. Hands pressing on his side, he was shaking now, his breaths drawn in short shallow gasps.

You're going into shock. Shock, unconsciousness, then death.

The cold, calculating voice in his head ticked off the sequence like an obscure prophecy read from ancient parchment. It was the Watcher's voice inside him. But no, not his voice. Someone else.

They'll never get you to a hospital in time. Best die quick, Rupert, buddy, so your friends can get moving again.

He knew that voice. So close, right beside him, and the others so far away.

"We can't stay here. It's too close to the wreck. We're too easy to find," Buffy's voice drifted to him through miles of fog.

He wanted to stay with her, wanted to help her even if it was only to demand they go on without him, but the other voice was so much closer, so much louder, so much more insistent. *Some Watcher you are. The Slayer's bailing out your ass again, Rupert. I must say, I'm disappointed.*

He was back at the mansion on Crawford Street, bound once again in his chair, Angelus circling him, circling, circling, circling, smiling. Giles closed his eyes. "This isn't real. I've put this behind me. I'm over this." But when he opened his eyes again, he still sat in that infernal chair in the room that had become his own personal hell. Angelus crouched before him nearly nose to nose.

"Then what are we doing here, you and I?" Angelus patted him amicably on the cheek, then as an afterthought punched him viciously in the side.

Giles doubled over as far as his bonds would allow him, his breath stopped by the white-hot agony inside him. He watched his own blood drip onto the gray cement floor beneath him and struggled to remember why he was bleeding, why there was an ever-increasing circle of red sticking his shirt to his left side. Angelus had never cut him. Bruised, broken, but never bled. Angelus had needed him alive.

Giles' body screamed for air, and he drew in great shuddering breaths, each reawakening the fire in his belly.

Angelus stood behind him now, his hands digging into Giles' shoulders, pulling him upright against the back of the chair. "Don't wimp out on me, Rupert. Last time you held out for hours before you gave it up." He ducked down low, spoke into Giles' ear. "Let's see if you can set a new record."

"I won't tell you ... about the ritual," he managed through clenched teeth. "I won't tell you how to wake Acatla."

"Now, Rupert, let's get on the same page. This isn't about Acatla. You already traded that secret for Jenny's kiss. Remember? Or have you been hit on the head a few too many times?" Angelus laughed and illustrated his point with a blow that sent Giles' chin knocking into his chest. "There's some other secret buried in that head of yours. A much bigger secret."

Cool undead hands caressed his palms, and Giles tensed against the touch. Not the fingers. Not again. He remembered not just the pain of their breaking, not just the hours of Angelus' cruel play, but

also the months after when they refused to hold a pen just so, when they spasmed in protest of the slightest weight he forced them to bear. *Not the fingers.*

"I wonder why you never told her, never told any of them? Never told her it was your fault she had to send me to hell? Never told her you'd betrayed her for one last moment with your gypsy bitch." Angelus circled his fist around Giles' pinky.

Giles felt the shame burn his cheeks. Weak, he'd been so weak. "Sod off, you pillock."

Crack went the first finger, and Angelus moved his attentions to the next. "Wrong answer. Moving on. So I came back from Hell, and she never told you. You hated her for it, didn't you?"

Giles blinked back tears and focused. How had he managed before? Ah, yes. There it was. The hairline crack that traced an uneven path across the opposite wall. *Follow it with your eyes. Lose yourself in it. Shelving books in the library. A. "Alchemists through the 12th Century."* by... by... He couldn't remember.

"Asked you a question. You hated her for not 'fessing up." Angelus twisted the ring finger, near breaking but not quite.

"Yes!" Giles dug his right foot into the floor, trying to maintain control over his rising panic. His left foot was growing numb as the blood continued to drip, drip onto the cement. "Yes, I hated her for it! What do you bloody want from me?"

Angelus' grip on his finger relaxed, and he stroked it almost tenderly. "Only the truth. You can lie to yourself, but in the end you won't be able to lie to me. Although," he paused thoughtfully, "I guess I kinda am you, since this is probably all some sort of delirious near death experience you got cooking up in your head. Huh. Bet you thought there'd be lights or tunnels or ... or angels." He snickered and poked Giles in one shoulder. "Get it? Angels?" The vampire sighed. "Anyway, I've gotten off topic. You hated Buffy for not telling you. Some kind of Watcher/Slayer breach of trust, Rupert?"

"Yes. I couldn't very well do my job if ..."

Crack. The second finger caught him unprepared and his half swallowed scream sounded loud in his own ears. *B. Bradley, Richard. "A Treatise on Demon Mythology vs. Fact."*

"So I show up on your doorstep on Christmas Eve of all days. You think: 'Gee, just pull the trigger of this crossbow and dust Angel right here. What better Christmas present could I get?' But you don't. Can't say as though you were motivated by any warm fuzzy feelings for me. So what did hold you back?"

"Buffy..."

Angelus leaned in mere inches from his captive's neck. Giles could feel his cool breath across his skin and shuddered. "Getting warmer, Rupert. Pray continue. Buffy?"

"You had been a useful ally for the Slayer..."

Crack. The middle finger snapped like a twig. Giles groaned. *C. Countermeasures against Ecothsian Seduction Spells. by ... by Roverson, James.* It wasn't working. The pain was everywhere, and he couldn't push it out of his mind, couldn't escape far enough into himself or outside himself. He was panting, each exhale a soft moan.

"Am I going to have to break all your fingers? The test, Rupert, the test on her birthday. Any other Watchers ever fail it before?"

"No."

"But you told her everything, threw it all away, and for what?"

"Travers said ..."

Angelus bent back the first finger until Giles felt he would rip it right off his hand. "Funny, I don't give a damn what Travers said. Why'd you go against the Council?"

"Buffy would have died," he said quickly, trying to stave off further pain.

The pressure on his finger eased. “Yeah, so one dies, another is called. Isn’t that the point of the test? Weed out the weaker Slayers?”

“Buffy is the greatest Slayer the Council has ever had. The world needs her.”

Crack. Crack. His first finger snapped in two places. He closed his eyes to stop the hot tears that now trailed down his cheeks. *D. Devin, Thomas. Vampire Feeding Patterns in Greater Metropolitan Districts.* Why couldn’t Angelus just kill him and be done with it?

“For a smart educated man, Rupert, buddy, you are way slow on the self-realization. So you weren’t her Watcher anymore. Buffy’s off in college and too busy with her Captain All-American to give a second thought to you. What possible reason could you have had to stay in Sunnydale?”

“Because I couldn’t abandon her.”

Angelus’ fingers trailed up and down Giles’ thumb. “And why not?”

Giles shook from the pain, up and down his arm, through his side. A small puddle of blood had formed beneath his chair, and it reflected back to him his own haggard face. How much more could he take? And what would happen when he couldn’t take anymore? What was the secret that couldn’t be spoken aloud? Only Angelus seemed to know. And if he knew, then dammit what was the point of torture? “I could never live with myself if something happened to her, something I could have stopped.”

“And why not?”

“No matter what the Council says, she’s still my Slayer.”

Crack. The thumb went too, and Giles was too tired to hold back his cry. Hot tears trailed into his mouth, and he swallowed salt and bitter shame. *E. Everret, Marcus. “Anthology of Hibernating Demons.”*

“And then her mother died, and you went above and beyond the call of duty. Funeral arrangements, paperwork, the final estate. That fall under a Watcher’s duty?”

“No.”

Angelus began massaging the fingers of Giles’ other hand. “Tell me why,” he said as he squeezed them ‘til they hurt, ‘til they throbbed with the rhythm of his heartbeat.

“Because ... because...” Giles gasped as Angelus’ grip tightened. A little more and the bones in his palm would snap. “Because... I love her! Because I couldn’t help but fall in love with her as I watched her become everything I always wanted.”

His body shook, not just with pain, but with sobs that welled up as he heard himself voice the very thing he hadn’t even allowed himself to think. Always with Buffy he had seen the girl. If he saw her as a child, a girl, he was safe from these thoughts. But he knew now that she had never been a child, a girl, not even when he had first met her. A year of slaying had burned the innocence out of her, had aged her, and she had come to him a woman in a girl’s body. And he had loved her for years without realizing it, deceived by her youth.

Now she was 20, less than half his age on paper perhaps, but in her soul she was his equal. He could never go back, could no longer see her as the girl. She was a woman in his eyes and his heart now, and he loved her.

Angelus circled around in front of him, knelt so they were eye to eye. He grinned as he brushed tears from Giles’ cheeks. “You know that she’ll never love you. She’ll never look at you like she looks at me.”

“I know.”

A hand on the back of his head, and Angelus pulled him forward until their foreheads were touching. “And that, Rupert, buddy, is better than any torture I could ever devise.” The vampire stood

abruptly and ruffled Giles' hair as he laughed. "Close your eyes. Dream of Buffy. But you'll always wake alone."

Giles did close his eyes and allowed his head to dip forward onto his chest. He was so tired, and the pain in his side drained his energy with each passing moment. He could almost hear the blood dripping onto the floor.

So he closed his eyes, felt her hand in his, and knew he was dreaming.

But when he opened his eyes, she wasn't a dream. She was standing over him, holding tight to his hand, her eyes shining with tears. His golden angel, his beautiful slayer. He remembered now the RV, the spear, the crash. He wasn't afraid to die, having finally admitted to himself the true depth of his love for her, knowing that in death he would be free to love her with everything he was. He managed a smile for her, and her lips trembled.

"I'm sorry."

He swallowed hard. God, the pain was intense and unrelenting. *Just a few moments more, Giles old man, a few moments more. You owe her that.* "For what?" His voice rattled in his own ears, the barest whisper, shaking with his barely disguised suffering.

"We should have stayed. If we had, none of this would have happened."

"Don't. What you did..." His face twisted up in agony, and he grasped her hand tighter. He fought to control his breathing, bite back his pain. A few moments more, a few moments more. It became his mantra. He couldn't leave her with the guilt of his death. He couldn't have peace at the expense of hers. She had to know. "... was necessary. What I've always admired."

"Running away?" Her smile was forced and sorrowful. He rewarded her with a genuine smile of his own, filled with the love he only recently realized, a love that time would not allow him to express.

He steadied his breathing, drew air from the top of his lungs, slow careful breaths that would allow him to finish what she needed to hear. "Being able to place your heart above all else. I'm so proud of you. You've come so far. You're everything a Watcher..." He closed his eyes and paused. Not just a Watcher. It was Rupert Giles the man that loved her. But he could only hold on for moments more and there wasn't time. He opened his eyes again and focused on her, memorizing every detail of her face, the depths of her blue eyes. "Everything I could have hoped for."

She smiled true this time, a smile that touched her eyes and reflected her heart and her love, and Giles felt peace. He sighed, closed his eyes, and let the darkness claim him.

It was Xander's voice he heard first.

"I gotta agree with Spike on this one, which is probably a sure sign of the apocalypse."

But it wasn't time for Xander to be here yet. Jenny hadn't come. He hadn't given up the secret to Acatlha. He stirred, then groaned at the dull ache in his side. He forced his eyes open to see the water stained ceiling above.

"Hey, Giles is waking up." Anya's voice and then she was in his field of vision, leaning over him. "How are you feeling?"

He swallowed. "Like I was run through with a spear."

"But you're not dead. That's a good thing."

Her enthusiasm was less than contagious. "Yes, I'm somewhat surprised by that fact as well. What happened?" He blinked rapidly, trying to bring Anya's face into focus.

"Buffy's friend Ben, the doctor, he came and fixed you." Anya patted his hand and smiled brightly.

Giles turned his head to see past Anya. The counter beneath him seemed to spin, and he clutched quickly at the edge so as not to fall off. The movement should have cost him dearly, but he felt only a slight twinge in his side and that steady, dull ache. *Thank god for pharmaceuticals.*

His eyes took in his surroundings for the first time. Greasy, cement floor and ceiling, boarded up windows. He seemed to be lying on the front counter of an old gas station convenience store. Xander and Willow stood just behind Anya, alternately watching him and stealing glances off to their left. He shivered as he registered their lost, stricken expressions. He feared to even ask the question. "Buffy?"

Willow approached, placing her hand gently on his calf. "We don't know exactly how it happened, but Glory was here, and she took Dawn."

Giles closed his eyes, hoping that this too was part of his near-death delirium. He licked his lips and asked again. "Buffy?"

They all glanced over to their left again, past the edge of the counter, past his field of vision. Willow's forehead furrowed as various thoughts crossed her mind. She shrugged. "She hasn't moved or spoken. I don't think she even knows we're here."

"What?" He tried to sit, but failed miserably. "Help me up."

Anya slipped her hands under his shoulders and leveraged him up enough to see across the room. Buffy sat stone still in her chair, her eyes, God, her eyes stared at nothing, hollow and empty. Unbidden, Jenny's image flashed through his mind as she had lain in his bed that night, that same empty expression in her dead eyes. But, no, Buffy wasn't dead. She wasn't dead.

Later, if he were to look back in hindsight at this moment, he would say that this was The Moment the ground fell out from under him. What happened in the coming days could only be described as the slow tumble to eventual bottom. But this was The Moment that took Buffy forever out of his reach.

Giles polished his glasses for only the fifth time in as many minutes, as if that could somehow change the words in front of him.

Xander and even Spike had both hovered over him the last two hours, fetching books and tea and anything else he required so he would need to move as little as possible. Neither one of them had any idea that Giles had finished translating the ancient text they had brought him. In fact, he had fully translated it three times by now, using different sources and different references, but each time the basic meaning was the same.

He felt sick, nauseous, and not just from the blood loss or his pain medication slowly wearing off. The implications of his translation left him wishing he had died back at the gas station.

"Buffy's friend Ben, the doctor, he came and fixed you." Now that he could remember Ben and Glory's shared identity for more than two minutes, he wished he could forget. This was all his fault. If only he had used those last moments with Buffy to urge her to leave him behind, to take Dawn and the others and keep moving, Glory would have never caught them in time. The text in front of him spelled out the exact time for the ritual. If Buffy had left him behind, Glory would never have found them before her window of opportunity closed forever. But no, he had thought he was dying, he had thought those would be his last words. Selfishly, he had wanted to die in the arms of the woman he loved, wanted to pour out his heart to her, and failing that, he at least wanted to spend his last breath comforting her.

Those words had obviously not comforted as intended, but rather spurred her to take action to save his life. Now because he lived, Dawn would die. And Buffy would hate him for it.

He read the lines again. He had cross-referenced from ten different sources; he had double-checked the definitions of even the most common words used in the text. They had their solution, their way to close the portal. As a Watcher, he had to set aside his personal feelings and take whatever action was needed to save the world. No matter that Buffy would hate him for even asking it of her.

He slipped his glasses off and tossed them to the center of the table, rubbing his hands over his weary eyes.

"Hey, Giles, I know I'm not Research-Guy, but maybe if you point me to the right book, I could help out. You know, if it's in English."

"No need, Xander," Giles sighed, "I've already finished the translation. Now we just hope Willow can get through to Buffy."

Giles stood cautiously, waving off Xander's solicitous attempt at support and stepping gingerly towards the teapot. One hand unconsciously slipped to cradle his injured side as his mind churned with the various reactions he was likely to get from Buffy. None of them were particularly good. That was that, then. He would tell his Slayer that she must kill her sister to save the world, and she would hate him. No necessity to ever tell her how he felt, no hope his newly discovered love would ever be requited.

He supposed it was only fitting. Duty had brought them together, and now duty would tear them apart.

Giles, I'm sixteen years old. I don't wanna die.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. She was supposed to be different from the others.

I realize that every Slayer comes with an expiration mark on the package. But I want mine to be a long time from now.

She looked so peaceful. He always imagined that Slayers (the others, not Buffy, he never pictured her like this, no, only the others that came before) imagined that they should look angry, outraged and fighting their death to the last moment.

He approached on unsteady feet. She looked serene.

I don't understand. I don't know how to live in this world, if these are the choices, if everything just gets stripped away, I don't see the point.

What was the point? If he gave everything he had, and it still wasn't enough? If all of his knowledge, all of his training wasn't enough to save her? What was the point of a fucking Watcher's Council except to watch each woman die before she'd had the chance to live?

The spirit guide told me that Death is my gift.

Death was his curse. Randall. Thomas. Philip. Dierdre. Kendra. Jenny. Buffy. Their blood on his hands. He should have been able to save them. He should have been able to save *her*.

He stretched one trembling hand towards her. No pulse. No breath. His Slayer was dead.

Giles sat in the smooth leather chair and waited for the man on the other side of the mahogany desk to hang up the phone. His eyes wandered over the certificates lining the walls, the legal volumes on the shelves, coming to rest on the empty chair beside him. The last time he had been in this office Buffy had sat in that chair. He had come with her to settle her mother's estate. Now scant months later, he was here to settle hers.

“Terribly sorry to keep you waiting, Mr. Giles.”

“Hmmm?” He brought his attention back to the lawyer standing in front of him, shaking the proffered hand and watching as Mr. Thomas Stockwell strode across his office to pull some files from his cabinet. This man had been a friend of Joyce’s, had handled her legal affairs and those of the gallery. Giles imagined he must have also handled her divorce, but he’d never had the nerve to ask. He’d only met the man the one time, when settling Joyce’s estate. Stockwell had spoken of her fondly, mentioned meeting her at a benefit Hank’s office had hosted in L.A.

“I’m sorry we have to keep meeting under such circumstances. It’s a tragedy about Buffy. She seemed like such a bright young girl.”

Giles only nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

Mr. Stockwell sat on his side of the desk and began pulling papers from the thick file in front of him. A pensive expression creased his round face, and Giles wondered if the man was thinking of Joyce. “It’s only been three months, so the Summers’ finances haven’t changed much since you last went over these papers with me. We’ll skip the details, and you can look over the file later at your leisure.” Stockwell waited patiently for Giles to nod his assent. “There is a sizeable sum remaining from the sale of the gallery and Mrs. Summer’s life insurance policy. Buffy’s will stipulates that this money is placed in a trust fund until Dawn’s 20th birthday. She has named you as Dawn’s legal guardian.” Stockwell paused as he noticed Giles’ frown.

“What about the girls’ father?”

The lawyer tapped his pen on the desktop and smoothed his tie over his expansive waistline, using the moment to try and read the older man’s expression. “Buffy and I discussed this at length when I drafted her will last month. I’m sorry. I assumed you were a part of her decision.” He waited, but Giles made no effort to fill the silence, so Stockwell continued. “Apparently their father has played little role in their life these last few years. To be frank, sir, the man could not be bothered to return to Sunnydale after their mother’s death, even after they finally tracked him down. Can I ask? Have you been able to inform him of Buffy’s death?”

Giles pulled off his glasses and polished them a bit more forcefully than necessary. “His office informs me he’s at an extended business function in Italy. It didn’t seem like the sort of news I should ask a secretary to pass along. I did press upon them the urgency of the matter.”

“But he hasn’t returned any of your calls.”

It wasn’t a question, and Giles only shook his head bitterly, then slipped his glasses back on.

Stockwell sighed and forged ahead. “In either case, Buffy was adamant in her preference that Dawn remain in your care. If this is also your wish, then I’ll need your signature on some forms.” Giles reached across the desk for the papers he was offered. “The first is a basic form, simply stating that you accept responsibility as Dawn’s legal guardian. The second is a motion I’ll file with the court to have Mr. Summer’s parental rights terminated for abandonment.”

Giles looked up sharply, his pen poised over the first form. “Is that necessary?”

“He would have a limited amount of time to contest it before his rights terminated and you became Dawn’s permanent guardian. I can’t promise that the court wouldn’t overturn the judgment should he return at a later date, but it would at least give you a leg to stand on if you wanted to fight him for custody.”

Giles closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose with one hand as the pen in his other hand hovered over the papers before him. God, he’d never really even met the man. Just the fake Hank who had shown up all those years ago when everyone’s nightmares were bleeding into reality. Despite his workaholic tendencies, Buffy and Dawn had both loved him. He, Giles, had already stolen his oldest daughter, gotten her killed in her slaying duties. Could he steal this man’s youngest daughter too? “If

Dawn changes her mind... That is to say if she would rather be with her father, this could be reversed?"

"Of course."

Giles sighed and signed the papers quickly, shoving them back across the desk before he could reconsider.

Stockwell gathered them neatly and slipped them back into the file. "Just a few more papers, Mr. Giles. Now the house has been left to you in your name." At the man's startled expression, he continued quickly. "Buffy wanted to make sure you had the freedom to move quickly if need be. I didn't really ask why that was such an urgent concern. Also, as Dawn's guardian, you will be able to draw from her trust fund to pay for her expenses. All that will require is an itemized report submitted annually. I'm sure your store accountant can take care of that."

He passed these papers to Giles as well. He signed the deed for the house without a second thought, but he passed the authorizations for Dawn's trust fund back unsigned. "I won't need Dawn's money. I can provide for her just fine, Mr. Stockwell."

"Mr. Giles, you do realize that you'll only be drawing off the interest. It's highly unlikely you would need to touch the principal."

Giles's face set in stone, and he leaned forward over the desk. "I don't need Dawn's money."

Stockwell quailed under Ripper's gaze, and Giles regretted being so harsh. The lawyer gathered the papers all together quickly, obviously still flustered. "One last thing, Mr. Giles." Two envelopes, one with his name, one with Dawn's. "Buffy wrote these for each of you to read in the event of her death."

Giles made no effort to take them. He was not expecting a letter. He had come to the lawyer's office prepared for tedious and necessary paperwork. Dry, professional routine. He had not expected to feel her presence in this office. And now these letters, touched with her hands, filled with her final words to him, they caught him off guard and slipped past his defenses, reminding him all the more of her absence by the fleeting sense of her presence.

"Mr. Giles?"

He didn't remember reaching for them, only that they were now in his hand, the thin envelopes fluttering as his hands shook. He slipped the letters into his inside jacket pocket quickly, hopefully before Stockwell could notice his distress.

"Thank you, sir." Giles voice was rough with emotion. "Is there anything else?"

"No, I'll call you back to the office after the motion passes. My secretary will send you copies of everything we handled today." Both men stood as one, awkwardly shaking hands and shuffling towards the door. The lawyer felt compelled to ask: "The funeral is this afternoon?"

"Yes, three o'clock at Restfield Cemetery. There's a wake following the service at ... at ..." Giles floundered, unsure what to call the house on Revello Drive. Not Joyce's, not Buffy's, he couldn't think of it as his. "At the house. You're welcome to attend."

Stockwell nodded and stared at his shoes. "I'll see if my secretary can't clear some time this afternoon. I was awfully fond of Joyce's family. I remember when the girls were just kids, you know?" He shook his head and met Giles' gaze again. "Let me know if there's ever anything I can do for you or Dawn?"

Giles nodded and walked out of the office, one hand sneaking up to feel for the letters in his front jacket pocket.

Chapter 2:
The Funeral

Dawn stood alone. Willow leaned on Tara, sobbing brokenly. Xander white knuckled Anya's wheelchair, perhaps not even aware of the tears streaming down his own face. Various friends of Buffy and Joyce stood in small clusters around the open grave. But Dawn stood alone, her shoulders shaking as she cried.

Giles stepped beside the girl to fill the space that Joyce and Buffy had left. Dawn curled into his gentle touch and wept desperately against his chest. But for Giles, the tears would not come.

*Beloved sister, Devoted friend
She saved the world
A lot*

Dawn had insisted on adding the last. The simplicity of a 14-year-old girl. It amused him to wonder what strangers would think of Buffy's gravestone when they passed by a hundred years from now.

The service finished in a blur, and now came the condolences, the soft words of sympathy given to Dawn, to him, to Xander and Willow and Anya and Tara. They were her family. After a short time, they were the only ones left beside the grave, each at a loss as what to say to the others.

"Xander, I don't want to be here anymore. Can we go?" Anya, as usual, breaking the silence with her blunt statement.

"Yeah, sure. Meet you guys back at the house?"

The group nodded solemnly, and Xander turned the wheelchair towards the parking lot. The two witches followed, Tara pausing to ask Dawn, "You want to ride with us?"

Giles shook his head and answered. "I'll drive her. We'll see you there in a little while." He watched Dawn for a moment. She had drawn apart from him and wrapped her arms around herself, her shoulders still shaking. She startled when he touched her. "We can go whenever you're ready."

"Yeah, time for depressing potluck and Aunt Ellen's pink Jell-O goo."

"Goo?"

"Don't even ask what's in it. Just put some on your plate and you can dump it in the trash when no one's looking."

Giles glanced back as they left the cemetery, longing for the chance to say his private goodbyes to Buffy. He knew there would be all the time in the world for that. At this moment he needed to watch over her sister and her friends. It was what she would have expected of him.

He sat in his red BMW for several minutes, not even putting the keys in the ignition, before Dawn turned to him and sighed.

"We'd get there a lot faster if you actually started the car." It was meant to be cute sarcasm, but neither of them laughed.

"Dawn, I was at the lawyer's today. We need to talk." He met her eyes. Her tears had stopped for the moment, and she simply waited for him to continue. "I'm to be your guardian now. That is ... that is if you want me to be."

"What about my Dad?"

Giles whipped out a handkerchief and polished his glasses. He knew they were clean. It was only nervous habit, his way of avoiding meeting her gaze. "He's still in Italy on business. I'm sure once we're able to get a hold of him ..." He trailed off, unwilling to offer the girl empty promises. How could he know whether the man would want his 14-year-old daughter suddenly thrust back into his

daily life after 6 years of occasional phone calls and summer visits? “I know he’s living in Spain, now, but he might move back to LA or take you back to Spain with him or...”

Dawn interrupted, saving him from needing to say more. “No, no, it’s ok. I mean, I want to visit him and stuff. But Dad was never good at the sticking around part, you know? You ... you always stuck around for Buffy.” Her eyes grew wide. “Unless ... well Buffy was your Slayer, and I’m not, so maybe you don’t wanna ...”

“Shhh.” Giles laid one hand over hers as he slipped his glasses back on. “If this is what you want, then I’ll be happy to have you.” He squeezed her hand slightly as he said it, then turned back and started the car. “We better hurry back before someone finishes all of Aunt Ellen’s ‘goo.’”

“Giles?”

“Yes?”

“Can we put the top down?”

“Of course.” He reached for the control, but her finger beat him to it.

“Buffy always liked to ride in your car with the top down.”

“Hmm... I rather thought she didn’t. She always complained about the wind messing her hair.”

“Yeah, well, she didn’t always tell you everything.”

Dawn fiddled with the radio until she found something that Giles knew would give him a headache if they had to drive more than five minutes. But since they didn’t, he let her pick the station and remembered fondly the arguments he’d had with Buffy over her exercise music.

Giles parked himself on the couch, holding a glass of punch he never drank. Willow had taken over the role of hostess from one of Joyce’s gallery friends, and Giles was grateful not to have to put up a brave front and make small talk with people he barely knew.

Anya pulled her wheelchair alongside him, mostly because it was one of the few places she wouldn’t be in anyone’s way. “Who are all these people?”

Giles shrugged. “Some of Joyce’s friends, some of Buffy’s friends from school, some of Dawn’s. I really don’t recognize many of them.” He glanced over at the ex-demon. “How are you feeling?”

“Sad that Buffy’s dead. Sad that Xander is hurting so badly, and I can’t make it better. Guilty that a part of me is happy that it was Buffy and not Xander.”

“Those are all normal reactions, Anya, but I meant how are you feeling, physically?”

“Oh, yes, well, the doctor says I’m getting better. I should be using crutches next week.” A moment, then, “What are crutches?”

He was saved from further conversation when Xander returned with a tray of food and punch for both he and Anya. Tara and Dawn joined them a moment later, everyone eating in awkward silence. Giles swirled the punch in his glass, wishing it were Scotch, and not feeling particularly hungry.

Within a few hours, the house had emptied of all but the Scooby gang, comfortably arranged around the Summers’ living room. The mournful silence soon gave way to recollections of their time with Buffy, stories that sometimes even brought the sound of laughter back into the house. Giles’ pain medication was wearing off, but he was too tired to go to the car and fetch it. So he just let his side ache for the time being, as he closed his eyes and let their voices and occasional laughter wash over him. He could almost imagine they were back in the Library or in the Magic Box, almost imagine that he would hear Buffy’s voice at any moment.

And then, as it became dark, the conversation lapsed back into silence. Dawn brought him his painkillers without being asked. If she could tell so easily that he needed them, then he would take

them without argument. They must have made his head fuzzy, because when Willow finally broke the long silence, she made absolutely no sense.

"Sitting in a Paris café. Buffy's trying to order in French, but ends up insulting the waiter's mother."

Xander shook his head. "And the award for most random comment of the day goes to..."

"Anywhere But Here, Xander."

"Oh," he said flatly, then "Oh!" with more understanding. "I can top that. We're playing sand volleyball on the beach, and we're totally kicking ass 'cause Buffy's the Slayer, which completely makes up for Willow's lame 'I can't even get it over the net' bunts. For the final round we're playing against like ten Swedish..."

"Xander!" Willow swatted him on the arm and rolled her eyes. "At least it's better than Amy Yip at the waterslide park."

"What can I say? My tastes have matured."

Dawn plopped down on the sofa next to Giles, coming dangerously close to knocking his drink in his lap. "If you two could come back from your own little world, maybe you could clue us in to what you're talking about?"

"Yes," Anya shifted in the wheelchair. "I'd like to know who this Amy Yip is and why you were at the waterpark with her."

"I wasn't."

"It's a game that Buffy, Xander, and I used to play in high school," Willow supplied helpfully. "If you could be Anywhere But Here, where would you be? I guess I just thought of it when I was wishing I was, well, anywhere but here."

The room was silent again.

"I would be home having sex with Xander." Anya looked at the somber faces around her. "Oh, are we done playing that game?"

A knock at the door prevented any response. Dawn jumped up to answer it, and Giles admonished her, "It's after dark now. Don't specifically invite anyone in."

"I know, I know. I've lived here for how long?" She opened the door, and apparently recognizing the visitors, opened the door wider and stepped aside. As Cordelia and Wesley entered, Dawn threw Giles a glare and asked, "Angel's here too. Am I allowed to invite him in?"

Xander spoke up. "Yeah, I guess Deadboy can come in." He stepped over to the threesome. Wesley shook his hand awkwardly, but Cordelia simply threw herself in his arms and started crying.

"Oh, God, it's just awful."

Xander patted her on the back and led her to join the group in the living room. Wesley followed, seating himself next to Giles, but Angel hung back in the foyer, lounging against the wall and staring at nothing.

Cordelia continued to lean on Xander, sniffing and wiping her tears. "I just keep thinking maybe if I hadn't been in Pylea, maybe I would have got a vision or something. I mean they sent Doyle a vision when that Indian was mad at all the Pilgrims or whatever. Buffy was only in danger then. They would have sent me a vision if she was going to die, wouldn't they?"

Willow was up and moving towards the kitchen to play hostess. "Can I get you guys anything?"

"God, yes, I'm famished. We tried to leave LA sooner, but I had this vision, and we had to make a quick trip down the sewers, and then a quick trip to the showers. When we finally got to leave, Angel wouldn't stop for anything. I guess he forgets that the living have to eat."

Willow nodded. "Wesley?"

"Just whatever you have is fine."

Willow snagged Angel on her way to the kitchen. Giles imagined she wanted to offer Angel a shoulder to cry on. He didn't really care. There were enough people here that he hopefully wouldn't have to deal with the vampire. He had thought he was over the pain Angelus had caused him, but his experience at the gas station made it clear he was not. And now, looking at Angel only reminded him of what he would never have with Buffy.

A touch on his arm drew his attention to the ex-Watcher beside him. "How are you holding up?" Wesley whispered, although in the quiet room it wasn't as though they couldn't be overheard.

Giles swirled his still untouched punch for a moment. "She was truly the finest there ever was."

Wesley nodded and let that statement stand before he broached the next topic. "Does the Council think there will be a new slayer?"

Giles crossed his legs cautiously, still careful not to jostle his injured side more than necessary. "They aren't sure. This is the first recorded instance of two slayers at any one time. Perhaps another will be Called. Perhaps Buffy already Called her replacement in Kendra. If that's the case, then Faith is the Chosen One now."

"A role that will be hard to fill in jail." Watcher and ex-Watcher both fell silent. A world with no Slayer could end very quickly.

Giles glanced out the window. It had been dark for a couple hours now. Less than five days since Buffy had died, less than five days since the portal between dimensions had briefly opened, but already it seemed like an eternity. It would be a month or more before they cleaned out all the creatures that had slipped through into their dimension. The Watcher's Council would have to send a special ops team to kill the dragon that had holed up in some of the Initiative caverns outside of town. There was no way in hell Giles would send his charges on a suicide mission after it. It was bad enough to send them on patrol every night, while he could only wait for their check-in call and imagine the worst.

The first night he had tried to go with them, had gotten in quite a heated argument with Xander over it. After all, he had gone with them to fight Glory, hadn't he? In the end, Xander had finished the discussion with a not so gentle jab to Giles' side that had brought him to his knees.

"See?" Xander had said. "You're in no shape to fight anything. And you're liable to get one of us killed trying to look out for you."

Who would have thought five years ago that Xander would become the voice of reason?

"Time for patrol?" Xander's question brought Giles back to the present, and the others quickly divided out the evening's assignments, the added LA contingent allowing them to patrol in two groups.

Commenting on her need to have sustenance before slaying the undead, Cordelia left to retrieve both food and the missing Willow and Angel, who hadn't yet returned from the kitchen.

Anya smiled sweetly at her boyfriend. "I am unthreatened by your attempts to comfort your ex-girlfriend. I know you want to marry me and not her."

That was a bombshell that delayed patrol another hour.

Finally alone: the others gone to patrol, the newly-engaged Anya taken home on the way, and Dawn upstairs in her room, for once not staying at Xander's or Willow's. Giles slipped the letters from his jacket pocket and set Dawn's on the coffee table with his drink. He should have eaten something earlier, because now his hands were shaking. Must be low blood sugar, or perhaps the medication.

He hesitated before slipping his finger beneath the envelope's flap and instead glanced towards Joyce's well-stocked liquor cabinet. In the last five days he had been too busy with the things that had to be done to even think of a drink. Now tonight was his first night spent in Buffy's house, a place that he would have to make his home, a place filled with her things, her scent, her life. How could he open her front door everyday and not see her? But this was Dawn's home too, and she had already been through enough. He couldn't ask her to move. This would simply have to be the first of many nights in Buffy's house, and he would just have to deal with it.

One drink couldn't hurt anything.

Giles sat at the dining room table, his fingers tracing the letters of his name across the envelope. He poured himself a generous helping of Scotch and downed half of it in one swig, grimacing as it burned the back of his throat. He opened her letter and read.

Dear Giles,

If you're reading this, it means I must have died. Isn't that how these letters are supposed to start? I don't know, I've never written one. You think I would have, having the life expectancy of a Slayer, but I guess I never needed to worry about the people I leave behind.

Now that Mom's gone, I'm all Dawn has, so I have to think about those things. I have to think about who'll take care of her now. God knows Hank Summers proved himself Father of the Year when Mom died. Well, even before that, really. You're the only one I can trust Dawn to. I know you'll take care of her like you always took care of me. And not just 'cause she's the Key or 'cause there's a god after her, but because she's Dawn and she's my sister. I know you'll make her go to her classes, do her homework, eat her dinner before dessert, and never let her leave the house in any of those short, skin-tight outfits Mom actually let me wear to high school. Oh, and when boys come to take her out on dates, you have to give them that "Ripper" glare, and if you happened to leave a crossbow or a sword lying around where they could see it, I wouldn't hate that either. Mostly I know you'll love her, because you always loved me.

And now, if I know you, you're trying to be all British stiff-upper-lipped and trying not to cry. I only saw you cry the once, after Jenny died. You don't have to go through this alone. Willow and Xander are grown-ups now, too. Don't be afraid to lean on them, to let them help you.

Mostly, I know you're blaming yourself. Don't try to deny it, Giles, I know you. I obviously have no idea how I actually died, but it doesn't matter. I'm sure you've found some way to blame yourself, oh Watcher-mine. Listen very carefully to me, Giles: IT'S NOT YOUR FAULT! If anything, you have kept me alive this long. You have been the best Watcher and the best friend I could have asked for. I never would have made it this far without you.

Take care of yourself and take care of my sister. I love you.

Buffy

Giles wasn't sure when the tears had started, only that his face was now wet. The glass in his hand was empty, and he didn't remember when he had finished that either. He refilled it and walked to the window. He had buried Buffy today. It finally felt real to him, and he slid down the wall to his knees, his shoulders shaking as he sobbed. The full glass of Scotch tipped from his hand, spilling across the wood floor and rolling under the table.

"Giles?"

Dawn stood in the archway. He turned his face away from her, quickly wiping his tears on his sleeve. "I thought you were asleep. Is there something you needed?"

“No, don’t. Just don’t.” Her voice broke, and Giles realized she was crying too. “When Mom died, Buffy tried to be all strong and stuff. You know, like if I saw her fall apart, I wouldn’t be able to handle it or something. It just made it worse, like she didn’t care that Mom had died.”

He felt Dawn’s arms circle his neck. “It makes me feel better to see you cry, like I’m not the only one who had their heart ripped out when she left.”

The last of his self-control slipped away, and he couldn’t contain the sobs that now wracked his body, could only wrap his arms around Dawn as she, too, broke. For the first time in five days, he wept for Buffy, for his Slayer, for the love of his life.

Buffy watched them. She couldn’t touch them, couldn’t speak to them. She could only watch as they mourned her.

Chapter 3: The Daughter Test

She remembered the pain as she fell through the vortex. She remembered the light and the voices fading in and out around her. She remembered the warmth and security of her mother's arms. She remembered calling for Dawn. *Please, please, I just have to know she's okay.*

Just like that the light vanished.

The first few days of her ghostly existence drifted by in indistinct images and disjointed thoughts, which danced just beyond her ability to focus. Exactly as a grown man hardly recalls his newborn efforts to control his mortal shell, so Buffy had no memory of learning to exist without hers.

So when she realized finally that she was standing in her own kitchen, she had no idea how much time had passed, only that she needed to find Dawn *now*. She sprinted through the dining room and ran straight *through* Xander. Buffy fell to her knees, the sensory overload of passing through living tissue nearly shattering her tenuous hold on her non-corporeal consciousness. Xander merely shivered and closed a window before continuing on to the kitchen.

She caught her breath, well not so much her breath as her focus, but still it felt like breath, and then turned towards the living room where Xander had come from. There they all were: all the Slayerettes, quiet and somber and dressed in dark blues and blacks. And tucked between Willow and Tara, Dawn sat at the coffee table, twirling her fork through the remnants of some kind of casserole. Alive. Safe.

Thank you, thank you, thank you. Buffy smiled. It had worked. She had saved her sister. She had saved them all.

Buffy pulled herself to an isolated corner where she could sit without fear of people unexpectedly walking through her. And then she watched her friends at her funeral wake, her eyes continually drifting back to Dawn. She counted her sister's breaths, waited for the slightest hint of a smile at one of Xander's lame jokes, memorized every nuance she could soak up. This is what she had bought with her life.

After the others left, Buffy followed Dawn upstairs like a puppy dog, trailing behind her as her sister entered first their mother's room and then her room. Dawn laid on Buffy's bed, holding tight to Mr. Gordo, Buffy's childhood stuffed pig, the one Buffy had never let her play with. Face buried in pillows, Dawn cried until she made herself sick, until she vomited in the trashcan next to the bed, like she had the night their mother died.

And then Buffy shadowed Dawn as she crept down the stairs on wobbly legs, probably headed to the kitchen for a drink. She nearly walked through the littlest Summers, the only Summers now, as Dawn stopped short in the archway.

Giles knelt on the dining room floor, crying.

Buffy watched them together, reminded of that long ago night outside the warehouse when she had held Giles as he grieved for his lost love. Now it was Dawn whose arms held him, whose tears mingled with his, Dawn who would be his reason to wake in the morning. Buffy knew she had made the right decision in leaving her sister with her watcher. Giles needed someone to take care of just as surely as Dawn needed to be taken care of.

She spent that night walking between Dawn's room and the living room couch, standing over each of them as they turned fitfully in their sleep, sometimes waking with her name on their lips. And then just before sunrise, Buffy discovered that she too was starting to drift asleep. Whether ghosts actually needed rest or whether it was simply a habit she had picked up from living 20 years, it didn't really matter because either way she was now asleep.

Buffy woke next to her tombstone, as she had everyday in the month since she died.

She saved the world a lot.

“God, how cheesy. Giles must have let Dawn pick that out.”

She stood and stretched, long past wondering why her periods of rest always drew her back to her grave. She didn’t really understand anything about being dead. She didn’t know why she was stuck here or for how long. Sometimes she wished for another ghost to come tutor her, like that weird subway guy in “Ghost.” Or maybe she could find some kid who would be able to see her, like that creepy Osmond boy in “The Sixth Sense.” Or maybe she would just hang out and watch her friends until she knew they had each recovered from her death.

Buffy headed towards the Magic Box. Anya would be working there, and Tara now, too. Giles had hired her after school let out for the summer, and Anya had thus far relished her new role as supervisor. If it had been Willow in Tara’s position, Buffy wouldn’t have laid odds on the Magic Box surviving the summer. Lucky for her watcher, Tara seemed to have an endless supply of patience and didn’t mind taking orders from the ex-demon.

Giles relied more and more on Anya these days to keep the store running smoothly. He worked at the shop himself less and less now that Dawn had only half days for summer school. And in the few hours he did spend at the Magic Box each day, he was more likely to disappear back into Buffy’s training room than to actually wait on customers or catalog inventory.

Of all those she had left behind, Buffy worried about Giles most. The others and even Dawn, while they all had their bad days and their crying jags, were coping and moving on. Giles barely managed. He put on a brave front for the others, often offering a shoulder for Willow to cry on, listening to Xander talk about their high school exploits as they both patrolled in the evenings, or having long discussions with Anya about death and religion during particularly slow times at the Magic Box. Once he even invited Spike in the house for dinner, mostly because Dawn wanted to spend time with the vampire and Giles could deny her nothing. But after Dawn went to bed, Giles allowed Spike to stay and shared a bottle of whiskey with him, playing sympathetic ear for Spike’s grief as well.

For Dawn, Giles was a rock. He cooked her breakfast in the mornings, helped her finish her homework in the evenings, and told her all his Buffy stories. The ones from when her slaying was still a secret, the ones Buffy’s mom had probably never even heard. For the most part, he indulged Dawn, but he came down hard when he had to. Summer school, for instance. Dawn had thrown a fit when he enrolled her, but like it or not she was going to make up the school she had missed during her mother’s illness and death, her cutting classes, their flight from Glory, and Buffy’s death. Her teachers informed him that Dawn had fallen a full quarter behind the other students and summer school would put her back on par.

“It’s not fair!” she had protested. “Summer break is supposed to be a, you know, a *break*.”

“You’ll still get your break,” he pointed out practically. “Summer session is only 8 weeks, and you’ll have 4 whole weeks after that to do whatever is so crucial for teenagers to do over their summer recess. Besides, you’ll only be in school half days.”

“I don’t care. I’ll be the only one in my class who has to take summer school. It’s not fair! Just ‘cause you’re Mr. Study Guy doesn’t mean I want to be. If Mom were here, she wouldn’t...” Dawn choked on the rest of her statement and stormed up to her room, slamming the door behind her.

Giles had waited five or ten minutes before following her upstairs and letting himself in her room. She cried in his arms until she hiccupped uncontrollably, as he simply rubbed her back and murmured soft platitudes while she slowly calmed.

“Do I really have to go to summer school?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.”

Buffy had watched the whole exchange, a strange warm feeling she couldn't quite name thrumming through her at the sight of Giles so patiently comforting her sister.

Yes, her watcher was good with the brave face. He let his guard down slightly for Dawn, perhaps remembering what she had told him that night after Buffy's funeral. So when the girl caught him staring off into space or pausing next to Buffy's room, he would admit he was thinking of his slayer, or that he missed her. When she found him up at odd hours of the night, he would confess to bad dreams about Buffy. Even so, only Buffy herself perceived the true depth of his despair. It was when he was alone, that she could read the pain in his face, the fatigue of weeks with little sleep, the unshed tears that hovered at the edge of his carefully maintained control. Only Buffy witnessed the nightly struggle against the pull of the liquor cabinet, the stolen glances over an open book, the drinks that were poured but never consumed. Until finally he emptied every last drop in the house down the drain.

As his shaking hands upended each bottle, his breathing ragged, his eyes clenched shut against the sight of a moment's peace slipping between his fingers, Buffy knew. She knew without a doubt that had Dawn not been his responsibility, Giles would have gladly drunk himself into oblivion, tonight and every night until it killed him.

And so, out of all the ones she left behind, Buffy worried about Giles the most.

And if Buffy had initially turned from the light to make sure her sister was okay, she stayed now to make sure Giles would be.

She entered the Magic Box to a familiar sight: Anya enthusiastically demonstrating the best way Tara could organize some aspect of the store, or pack some shipment, or some other task that needed to be done. Anya hadn't quite worked up to letting Tara handle the money yet. And as usual, Giles was nowhere to be found.

Probably sulking in the training room again. Jeeze, how long can one man stare at a punching bag without actually punching it?

Moments later Willow and Dawn bounded through the front door, Willow perhaps slightly more chipper than Dawn. Tara met her lover halfway with a kiss hello. The two witches displayed public affection a bit more comfortably since Tara's brush with insanity, both grateful to have each other and to hell with what anyone else thought.

Dawn was more than happy to provide her opinion. “Eww. You guys are getting as bad as Xander and Anya.”

Tara smiled shyly. “So how was school, Dawnie?”

“Yes, how was school?” Giles echoed, emerging from the training room.

Dawn shrugged. “Same stuff, just hotter classrooms with no air conditioning. Oh,” she dug through her backpack and offered up a folded half sheet of paper. “We're studying the constellations in science class, so there's a field trip to the observatory Thursday night. I need you to sign my permission slip.”

Giles smiled wistfully. “I used to be quite the astronomer myself. Of course, I lived much further from the city, so on a clear night you could see...”

“I'm pretty sure they're full up on chaperones this time,” Dawn interrupted, holding up the slip. “Maybe when we get to the unit on demons and vampires, I'll ask if you can come along.”

Giles snatched the paper and signed it quickly. “No, no, I remember how embarrassing it is for anyone under 18 to be seen with anyone over 25. I've already some experience with teenagers.”

“Hey,” Willow bristled. “You never embarrassed us.”

Giles spared the redhead a grateful smile and handed Dawn back her signed permission slip. "Should we order in lunch today?"

Anya raised her hand. "Umm, Boss, remember you said you'd mind the store while we all went to look for wedding things?"

"That I did. Well, you lot enjoy yourselves and call if you'll have Dawn past supper."

The women filed out, chatting about which store they should visit first and what kind of bridesmaid dress they would each prefer, Anya quickly reminding them that being the bride she got final say.

Buffy watched them leave, torn between tagging along to witness the mayhem that would be Anya wedding shopping or staying behind with Giles. As the door closed behind the last of them, her watcher collapsed into the nearest chair with a weary sigh and Buffy's decision was made. He may not know that she was there, but she would keep him company anyway.

"There was this purple one, with straps that crossed in back, and long sleeves. I kinda liked that one best, but Willow wanted this green strapless one, with this really pretty sheer netting over the top. And Anya found this pink one that was awful. I think someone told her bridesmaids' dresses are supposed to be ugly, or maybe she saw it on TV, but then Tara showed her this peach one which was much better, kind of plain satin with a V-neckline."

Buffy smiled as she watched Giles' eyes glaze over. That familiar look he would get on patrol when his slayer would talk about who was dating who or what stores had sales that weekend.

Poor guy, he thought babysitting was rough.

Her watcher and sister were standing at the kitchen sink, Dawn washing dishes and Giles drying while Buffy observed their conversation from her seat on the counter behind them. Dawn had a captive audience at the moment and seemed completely unaware of Giles' lack of interest in the topic.

"Oh, and then Anya tried on some wedding dresses. There was this one that was really pretty with this beaded neckline, and a high-waist, and sleeves that kind of..." Dawn turned to demonstrate, forgetting about the spray hose in her hand. She nailed Giles full in the chest with a good stream of warm water.

"Ah!" Giles jumped back, throwing his hands up in defense.

"Oh my God." Dawn aimed the spray hose back in the sink. "I'm so sorry."

They stood for a moment staring at each other, Giles looking wet and slightly irritated while Dawn tried desperately not to laugh. The edges of her lips twitched as she said it again, "I'm sorry."

Giles lunged for the hose in her hand, catching her off guard. She shrieked as the water hit her, her face turned, her hands grasping for his. His grip was stronger, but her arms were bare and the water made her slippery. In moments she had the upper hand, spraying him intentionally this time. The water veered this way and that as he struggled to wrench the hose from Dawn's slick grasp. Water dripped down his glasses and his face, his shirt plastered to his chest. Giles turned the tables with a tai chi move that brought Dawn's weight forward and spun her into his chest.

"No fair!" she cried, held tight around the waist by one of Giles' arms as the other sprayed her thoroughly up and down. She was laughing so hard; it took her a moment to get the word out: "Uncle!"

He released her and tossed the nozzle back into the sink, the hose immediately coiling back up next to the faucet. Battle over, they surveyed the damage. Puddles across the counters, the floor, even the curtains were dripping.

“Ugh, my hair’s all wet.” Dawn pushed the soggy mess back from her forehead. One look at a very drenched Giles started her laughing all over again, and him as well.

For a full five minutes, they laughed. Anytime one stopped, they had only to look at their soaking counterpart to start all over again.

Buffy thought they both looked very much like drowned rats. But the sound of their laughter was balm to her soul. Dawn laughed so rarely since their mother died, not in that true laughing-so-hard-your-side-hurts-and-tears-stream-down-your-face kind of laugh. And Giles? Well, Buffy couldn’t remember the last time she had seen him more than smile, certainly not since she had died. It made him look younger, like Buffy could see a glimmer of the boy he had been. He looked handsome.

Oh my God, did I just think that about Giles?

But she was feeling that same warm tingling that she had been feeling off and on over the last month humming through her whole body. She realized with a start what it was.

Oh my God, am I having feelings for Giles?

As she sat on the counter and watched the pair clean up their mess, she knew she had indeed been feeling this way for some time. When she was very much younger and her mother had been dating, Joyce had described it as the “daughter test.” Any man who couldn’t get along with her daughters was a definite turn-off, but a man who showed genuine affection for them could melt her heart and win her over any day of the week.

So how could Buffy not have these feelings after spending a month watching Giles care for Dawn with such devotion?

So the Slayer examined her Watcher with new eyes, with the eyes of a woman coming to the revelation that she was falling in love with the man before her. Giles was handsome, always had been, even if Buffy had never let herself notice before. His eyes, she had always loved his green eyes, would know them anywhere, even in the body of a demon. He had a nice body, too. His waterlogged clothes hugged him tight, leaving very little to the imagination. Yes, their daily training had left him in very good shape.

She shook her head and jumped off the counter.

What are you thinking, Buffy? You have like the worst timing in the world. You don’t realize how much you care about Riley until it’s too late, and he’s on a helicopter to Central America. The only thing that could top that, I guess, is realizing you’re in love with your watcher after you’re dead and buried! Yeah, that’s real smart.

Smart or not, she could no longer deny her feelings as, later that night, she watched Giles tutor Dawn in geometry. He was smart; he was handsome; and he loved her sister. The only problem Buffy could see in this whole situation was that she was a ghost. She couldn’t even touch him. Couldn’t even tell him how she felt.

Being dead sucked.

Buffy stood over his bed. This room had been her mother’s, but now it was his. Dawn had been the practical one, pointing out that Giles couldn’t sleep on the couch forever and there were only the three bedrooms. Neither one had even considered the possibility of touching Buffy’s room. Giles had hesitated over even this one at first. Moving into Joyce’s room so soon after Buffy’s funeral seemed unwise. But Willow had insisted that enough time had passed since Joyce’s death, and especially now after Buffy’s, that Dawn needed a sense of permanence, the security of knowing Giles meant to stay forever.

So the Scoobies made a day of it: emptying Joyce's room and redecorating for Giles. Dawn cried over every piece of furniture and article of clothing, making Giles constantly second-guess his decision. But every time he asked her, Dawn was adamant that she was okay with this. They painted, hung blinds on the windows and artwork on the walls, and moved as much of Giles' stuff as would fit in the little bedroom. Less than three days after Buffy's funeral, Giles had his own room in her house and was sleeping in his own bed.

And now a month later, Buffy stood over that bed, the knowledge of her love for him so new in her mind that she had to constantly watch him in order to convince herself that what she was feeling was real. Knowing it was real only made her curse herself and fate even more.

Why couldn't I have figured this out before, when I was still alive? It's been here inside me this whole time, and I couldn't see it. And now it's too late.

Giles stirred, and Buffy drew closer. He started moaning, and then thrashing in his sleep. She had watched him suffer night after night like this and wondered if he had nightmares this bad when she was alive too.

She reached out one hand to smooth his brow, calm his panic, remembering too late that *oh, yeah, Buffy, you're dead and you can't touch him.*

Her hand passed through him, a light tingling that sizzled up her arm. Suddenly, the room spun, and she blinked away dizziness. Ghosts weren't supposed to get dizzy. She looked up and saw scaffolding criss-crossing to the night sky above her, reaching towards the platform Dawn was tied to. Buffy thought, *Oh God, this is the night I died.*

She spun around to dash up the stairs, desperate to stop these chains of events, but there was already another Buffy running just ahead of her, the Troll hammer discarded behind her on the floor.

"Can you move?"

She turned at Giles' voice. He knelt over Ben's bruised and bloodied body. She realized then what was happening. *He was having a nightmare, and I touched him. Now I'm in his dream with him.*

"Need... a minute." Ben coughed up blood, breathing heavily. Buffy wanted to feel guilty for beating him within an inch of his life, but she had never intentionally hurt Ben. She had pounded on Glory with the Troll hammer, and he just happened to share her body. Instead of guilt Buffy felt anger. Ben had come to the desert knowing the danger he put Dawn in by doing so, and still he came. For what? To flirt with her? To play the hero? A real hero would have sent someone else, would never have let Glory anywhere near Dawn.

"She could have killed me."

"No she couldn't. Never. And sooner or later, Glory will re-emerge and make Buffy pay for that mercy, and the world with her. Buffy even knows that, and still she couldn't take a human life. Because she's a hero, you see. She's not like us."

"Us?"

Buffy watched in horror as Giles' hand thrust out to cover Ben's mouth and nose. She had never seen his green eyes look so cold and ruthless, except perhaps when he had rammed the sword straight through the Mayor. He watched the man struggle beneath him, his expression never changing as Ben suffocated, as Giles took the human life that she couldn't.

She remembered what he had said to her in the training room, when all she could think of had been that he was referring to Dawn. *I have sworn to protect this sorry world, and sometimes that means saying and doing... what other people can't. What they shouldn't have to.*

Her hands came up to her mouth to hold in her cry. She had done this to him. She hadn't been able to finish Ben off, even though she knew it had to be done. At the time, she could think of nothing

except getting to Dawn. She had put Giles in the position of doing her dirty work, of committing murder on her behalf, and shouldering the burden of guilt after.

Ben's thrashing ceased. He was dead. And still Giles held him by nose and throat, still pressed him against the ground. Beneath Giles' hand, Ben shifted and morphed, his strong build shrinking into feminine curves, hair flowing outward in blond waves, face smoothing into lovely familiar lines. Buffy realized it at the same moment as Giles: that it was her form beneath him.

"No!" His anguished cry echoed across the construction site. He snatched his hand back as if on fire, his stone mask crumbling into panic and fear. "Buffy... Buffy ... BUFFY!" Giles was shaking her still form, then frantically trying to breathe life back into her. "Oh God, what have I done?"

Buffy reached out to touch him, expecting to pass through as she had every time before, but here in his dream she felt the soft curls of his hair.

"Giles?"

His movements stilled as he turned disbelieving eyes towards her. "Buffy?"

She smiled and nodded, tears now spilling down her cheeks. *He sees me. He can really see me.*

He stood, his fingers finding her tears and brushing them away. He traced the contours of her face reverently, smoothed back her golden hair. His eyes glistened. "I'm so sorry."

She leaned into his caresses like a cat, enjoying the simple sensation of being touched. "What for?"

"I should have made you leave me in the desert. If I had, none of this would have happened."

She reached out to cradle his face in her hands, fingers memorizing the feel of his skin against hers. "You couldn't have known, Giles. None of this is your fault. You were unconscious, and I asked Ben to come. I asked him. And even knowing how it would turn out, I would still have asked him. You would have died if I hadn't."

"But you would have lived."

"You don't know that. It may have turned out just like this anyway. Besides, I couldn't have left you in that gas station."

"Because of the things I said?"

"No. It doesn't matter that I could never have just left you to die. The bigger picture is that there was a whole army of Knights camped on our front step. We couldn't go anywhere, with or without you."

"Oh." He frowned as if he'd never considered that. He looked back towards Buffy's dead body. "It's not supposed to happen like this. You're always dead, and I'm too late." He turned back to Buffy, framed her face with his hands. "This can't be real. It can't be you."

Buffy placed her hands over his, pressing them against her face as if she could imprint his touch against her skin and take it with her. "It's not real. It's a dream. But *I'm* real. Giles, you have to listen to me. I don't know how much time I have before you wake up. I'm a ghost, and I've been watching over all of you. You and Dawn mostly. You're so good with her, and I'm so proud of you. But you have to let me go. You have to get over this idea that you're responsible for my death. You couldn't have done anything. You couldn't have saved me. I made the choice, and I would do it again. It saved Dawn. It saved you. It saved everyone.

"I'm fine, Giles, really I am. But I need you to go on. I need you to be happy. I told Dawn that the hardest thing in this world is to live in it. I need you to do that, Giles, to live in this world. Think of me and be thankful for the time I had. It's more than most slayers get. Be happy, Giles. Live for me."

He trembled beneath her fingertips, his tears falling freely now. She never expected him to kiss her, but he did. His kiss was soft and undemanding, yet filled with passion and longing. She returned the kiss and deepened it, her hands slipping from his to tangle in his hair and pull him closer. When he had drank his fill of her, he shoved her backwards, wresting himself from her grip.

“You’re not real. You’re just some fantasy I have in my head, telling me what I want to hear. The real Buffy would never have kissed me like that.”

“No!” Buffy reached for him, wanting to tell him she loved him, wanting to pour out her whole heart to him and make him believe that she was real. But there was no time. It was like running to the helipad too late to stop Riley. It was like holding Angel in her arms and watching Acatla open behind him. Too late. Too late. She was always too late. No happy endings for Buffy.

Because now Giles had bolted upright. He was awake, and Buffy was nothing more than a ghost beside his bed. She could only weep as he covered his face with his hands, his body shaking as he sobbed. No one to hold him tonight. Just Buffy to watch his misery and wonder if she had made it worse or better by stepping into his dream.

She stayed until he slept again, only then allowing herself to close her eyes and follow.

When she woke, she was laying beside her tombstone, as usual. But things were not usual at all. The ground before the headstone had been disturbed. Buffy’s grave was empty.

Chapter 4:
Another Slayer, Another Watcher

Willow hit the ground, stunned for a moment. The demon lunged for her, raking its nine-inch nails across her back as she rolled away. Where were Xander and Giles?

She scrambled to her feet and took off running, the beast barely a breath behind her. She dodged tombstones and ducked under trees. She lacked a slayer's speed and strength, but she had magic, if only she could catch her breath long enough to use it.

The demon tackled her, and she hadn't time to brace her hands against the fall before her chin knocked into the hard earth. She tasted blood, the world spun, and the demon flipped her on her back. Willow thrust one hand towards its scaly face, uttering the word, "Thicken." She backpedaled out from under the creature as it roared against the invisible barrier.

Her wounds stung, her head spinning as she stumbled away from the demon. How to kill it? She realized they had all grown careless after finding nothing but vampires on the last two weeks' patrols. Research had lagged. More important things to do. Wedding plans for Anya and Xander. Spending time with Tara. Helping Giles take care of Dawn. And trying every second not to think about how much she missed Buffy. She hadn't the slightest idea how to kill this monster. Her holy water and crosses would not be doing the trick.

The demon lumbered free of her barrier, aiming straight for her.

"Incendere!" She cried, and fire circled the beast. He kept coming, right through the flames.

Looked like fire wasn't the ticket either. Where were Xander and Giles? Giles at least had a sword and knew how to use it.

She opened her mouth to weave another spell, but the demon was faster, its hand snaking out to snatch her by the throat and cut off her air. It sneered, revealing a mouth full of sharp teeth and breath that made Willow gag.

"Witch," it spat as Willow felt her feet lift from the ground. Her vision was growing dark. She struggled to pry herself from its grip. *This is it*, she thought. *Buffy, here I come.*

She hit the ground, sucking in lungfuls of air, massaging her bruised throat. Her vision cleared. She saw the demon she had been fighting, now paired off with a girl, maybe 15 or 16, and the demon appeared to be losing.

The girl dodged its every advance, her blond braid whipping into her face as she spun-kicked the demon straight in the chest. It stumbled back, giving the girl time to draw a sword from the scabbard slung across her back. One stroke parted the demon's head from its body. It lay dead, and the girl wiped the blade of her sword across the grass before replacing it behind her back.

Willow pulled herself onto wobbly feet, slightly weak and woozy. "That was... wow... you were great. Um, who are you?"

"I am Nicole, the Slayer."

The redhead's eyes went round. "Oh, oh... You must be the one... I mean when Buffy..."

"Willow!"

Giles was calling for her. She turned to see him jogging up behind her from the other side of the cemetery, his sword unsheathed and blooded. Xander followed ten steps behind, limping and holding his right arm.

"Hey, Giles," she called back. "I'm okay. This is Nicole. She saved me. She's the um... the new... the new Slayer."

He faltered ten feet from them, then caught his balance and picked up his pace, one hand urgently searching his pockets as he crossed the distance to her. "Come here, Willow. Now." His voice was

cold steel. He never used that tone with her, or at least he hadn't since high school. Willow pivoted to look again at the slayer.

Nicole smiled, hands on her hips, head tipped to one side. "Look, Watcher knows who I am. It's much more fun this way."

Giles reached them, shoving Willow behind him with his free hand as the other brandished the sword in front of him. "Council reports have you dead in Liverpool."

"Yes, well, sometimes Slayers come back." She murmured something in French, then dashed out of the graveyard and was gone.

"Giles, you know her?" Willow asked.

"I know of her."

"What did she mean: sometimes Slayers..."

"Not now!" His eyes were scanning the rest of the cemetery. "We'll talk about this back at the magic shop. Xander, are you ok?"

The young man had joined them, still limping and pressing a nasty gash on his right arm. "I'll be fine. The ankle's just twisted. And the arm's stopped bleeding. I don't think it'll need stitches. Just some pressure and tape it up."

Giles nodded, still not looking at either one of them, still searching their surroundings. "Let's get back to the shop. We'll pick up Anya and Tara on the way. I think this is going to require some research, the sooner the better."

Willow didn't argue, just slid her arm around Xander and helped him to the car.

Anya and Tara were at Buffy's house, watching Dawn until the group got back from patrol, a fact that meant they only needed to stop once on the way to the Magic Box.

Halfway there, Xander leaned in close to Willow, whispering, "This must be serious. Giles hasn't said anything about me getting blood in his car."

Giles pulled in the driveway, left the car running, and told the two friends to wait for him. Ten minutes later he returned, followed by Anya and Tara, all three still in mid-conversation.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Giles," Tara was saying, "We really didn't mean to keep Dawn up so late on a school night."

"Yes," Anya echoed, as she climbed in the back seat next to Xander. "Dawn agreed to go to bed the minute you pulled in the driveway and pretend to be asleep. If you had come home at the normal time, we would have expected you, and you would have never known she was still awake."

"How thoughtless of me," Giles muttered.

Tara blushed and ducked her head.

"Is Dawn coming?" Willow asked.

"No," Giles answered as he backed out of the drive. "It's 12 o'clock on a school night. I sent her to bed with strict instructions not to invite anyone in and to call at the shop if there's any problem. And if I'm not mistaken, Spike is loitering across the street. She should be fine for a few hours."

"Hey!" Anya pulled Xander's hand from his arm. "You're injured."

Xander brushed her off, and put pressure back on his wound. "It's nothing. I'll be fine."

"But you're bleeding. We should take you to a doctor before your arm becomes infected and falls off."

"Really, An, I'm fine. We'll disinfect it and bandage it at the shop."

Anya scowled at him, settling back with her head against his shoulder.

Within minutes, they had pulled in front of the magic shop and were soon gathered around the large conference table. Willow fetched the first aid kit and tended Xander's arm while waiting for

Giles to gather the necessary books from the upstairs loft. After she finished, Xander took care of the cuts across her back.

The group was silent as Giles dropped the stack of books on the table. He sighed and began.

"Nicole Leblanc was a Slayer and the daughter of a Countess in France. In her time, prospective slayers were given to their watchers as children. Marcus Roderick Somerton was her Watcher and raised her from the age of three. When she became the active Slayer, he took her to Paris. She died in 1807 at the age of fifteen, barely six months after being Called."

Xander raised his good hand. "And this little history lesson is a big emergency because...?"

Willow jumped up. "Oh! That was her! Xander, that girl in the cemetery just before you caught up to us. She said she was Nicole, the Slayer. That was her, wasn't it, Giles?"

"I'm afraid so." He opened the book on the top of the stack and turned the page towards Willow. He pointed at an old lithograph drawing, and she recognized the girl dressed in period garments.

Anya leaned over to get a good look, too. "So if she died almost two hundred years ago, how did you see her on patrol tonight?"

Giles closed the book and replaced it on the stack. "She's a vampire. She was turned. By her Watcher."

"So her watcher's a vampire too," Xander deduced.

They were silent for a moment before Tara summarized, "So there's like a super-powerful Slayer out there with added vampire strength. And she has her own vamp-Giles with like all his knowledge plus two hundred years."

"Yeah," Xander confirmed. "Literal vampire slayer. The fun just keeps on leaving."

"Wait a sec," Willow chimed in. "She saved me from that demon. She killed it. Why would a vampire do that?"

Giles began polishing his glasses, and sighed. "That's their hunting pattern. I should have recognized it sooner. Vampire population rises. Demons disappear. I just thought, well, we've focused so much of our patrols on eliminating the demons that crossed over after the dimensional rift opened. I just thought we were being effective. And without a Slayer, it would be only natural for the vampires to multiply and become more arrogant. I'm such a fool. I can't believe I didn't see it earlier."

Willow patted him on the hand. "It's okay, Giles. Anyone would have come to those same conclusions."

Tara frowned. "So they hunt demons?"

Giles replaced his glasses and continued. "A slayer's drive to hunt doesn't disappear after she's turned. She needs to do more than feed, she needs to fight, and humans would be no challenge. It has the added benefit of eliminating competition for their food supply.

"Our last records of them are from England in 1928. They wiped out the demon population in the small city of Childwall, just outside Liverpool. They turned enough of the population to form a small army. It seems Marcus Somerton intended to destroy the Watcher's Council, which at that point had a branch office in Liverpool."

Xander whistled. "Gotta love a vamp with a plan."

"What happened?" Anya asked.

"They burned the Council offices to the ground. Over fifty watchers died fighting them. The ones that survived reported that Nicole and Marcus were dust. The reports were generally believed when they never came after the main headquarters in London."

"Except now they're in Sunnydale," Willow finished.

"Except now they're in Sunnydale," Giles confirmed. "We need to find out everything we can about them if we're going to fare better than the people of Childwall."

He handed out books to everyone, and the next couple hours passed in silence as the group reverted to research mode. The night was late, and everyone was tired, but they needed some answers. Coffee was made, donuts were fetched, and sore muscles were stretched as the stack of books in the center table slowly diminished.

"This is weird," Willow said at about 2:30 in the morning.

"What did you find?" Giles asked as he leaned over her shoulder.

"These dates don't seem right. All the books say she was turned by her watcher, right? In 1807? But I have a watcher's diary from 1812, another watcher who talks about Marcus Somerton. And he's still *alive*."

Xander leaned over Willow's other shoulder. "I thought only vamps could make other vamps."

"As far as we know that's true," Giles confirmed.

Willow shook her head. "No, this watcher doesn't mention anything about Nicole becoming a vampire. He just talks about how upset Marcus is at losing his slayer. See: *'I am deeply concerned for my friend's sanity. It has been almost five years, and Marcus speaks of nothing but Nicole. My servants must fetch him home from the local pub nearly every evening. I imagine the patrons think he is bound for the asylum to hear him speak of demons and vampires. The Watcher's Council would surely dismiss him were his family not so prominent among their ranks. This afternoon I came upon him in my garden holding a kitchen knife'* —see, Giles, outside and daylight equals not vampire— *'holding a kitchen knife, of which I quickly divested him. He gave no explanation, save that Nicole needed him to be with her.'*

"Okay, so he's still alive in 1812, five years after Nicole dies. How does he make her a vampire?"

"Yeah," Xander added, "Isn't there a time limit for making vampires?"

Giles slipped his glasses off, rubbing the bridge of his nose as he thought. "Everything we know about vampires tells us that they must be near death when they drink from their Sire, but they must still be alive. It's at the moment of death that the soul leaves the body and the demon takes over. It won't work on the dead, and certainly not someone who's been dead for over five years. If it did, vampires would be digging people up to turn them. And that's never happened as far as we know."

"Well, somehow he found a loophole," Anya pointed out.

Giles nodded and replaced his glasses, looking around at the tired faces surrounding him. "Why don't I take you all home, and you can get some rest. I think we've made some good progress here tonight. We'll keep working on it at the shop tomorrow. Stop in as you each have time."

Giles grabbed Marcus Somerton's Watcher diaries as he left, certain he would find something useful in there. They all piled in his car, and he took them home pair by pair.

Giles parked in front of the house on Revello Drive. He still couldn't shake the feeling that Buffy would be waiting for him inside, and it had been five weeks. Giles wondered if the rest of his life would be measured from Buffy's death.

He heard voices as he neared the front door. He shoved the key in the lock quickly, trying to anticipate who would be at the other side. He had taken all the Slayerettes home and had noticed Spike duck behind the neighbor's tree as he pulled in the drive. There was no one else who had reason to be in the house. If Dawn thought she could just invite people over when she was home alone at three in the bloody morning, he would have to have a word with her. In Sunnydale it just wasn't safe.

He saw her first, curled up in an armchair in her pajamas. She turned when she heard the door, her face sad and her eyes frightened.

He rounded the corner, stopping in the archway when he saw them sitting on the couch. A woman he didn't recognize. A man he did.

The man stood and crossed the room. "You must be Mr. Giles. I've heard so much about you."

Giles smiled tightly, his heart pounding in his chest. When it rained, it certainly poured. "Hank Summers." He offered his hand to the man, his grip perhaps a bit too tight.

Hank turned towards the woman on the couch, shaking out the hand Giles had just squeezed. "This is my fiancé, Susan."

The woman joined him at his side, shaking Giles' hand as well. Perfectly manicured nails, hair two shades too blonde, make-up and suit flawless. Closer to Buffy's age than Hank's, but who was Giles to condemn?

"Fiancé?" Giles questioned with an upturned brow.

Hank wrapped an arm around the woman and pulled her closer. "Yeah, it's new for me too. After I heard about Joyce, I guess it just hit me hard, how short life is. Christ, she was two years *younger* than me. Susan and I were in Italy on business, and I just figured seize the day. We rented a boat and cruised the Mediterranean, and I proposed. A few days turned into a few weeks, just sailing across the water on our own. No phones, no faxes, no pagers. When we finally docked in Naples, my office had been trying to get a hold of me for a month. They had about a dozen messages from you, and someone in marketing had found Buffy's..." His voice broke, and he took a moment to collect himself. "They had found Buffy's obituary. We didn't even go back to Spain, just got on the first plane to Sunnydale."

Hank looked shaken. The rest of them had over a month to begin to accept Buffy's death. Her father's grief was new.

Susan jumped in to relieve the tense silence. "We wanted to call and let you know we were coming, but we barely made each transfer, and there just wasn't enough time to use the phone. Our flight only arrived a half hour ago. I know it's late, but Hank needed to see Dawn right away."

"Of course," Giles nodded, his eyes searching out Dawn's. She was watching him, her expression blank, waiting for his response.

Hank looked back to his daughter. "Honey, you need your sleep, and it's been a long flight for us. Susan and I are going to check in a hotel for the night, but we'll be back in the morning. Is that ok?" Dawn nodded. "Good. Come give us a hug goodbye."

Dawn obediently came to him, wrapping her arms tightly around his waist, her eyes closed. Giles felt his stomach sink as he observed father and daughter together.

He stepped aside for Hank and Susan to pass, nodding blankly as Hank told him, "We'll talk tomorrow, Mr. Giles, about arrangements for Dawn."

The front door shut. He was standing less than two feet from Dawn, unable to meet her eyes. "Y-you... you have school tomorrow, Dawn," he stammered. "You should go back to bed."

She shifted her weight and played with the cuffs on her PJ top. "Dad said he would pick me up after school. Is that ok?"

He smiled weakly. "Of course."

She headed up the stairs, pausing after a few steps. "Giles?"

"Hmm?"

She frowned, and opened her mouth, as though she were about to ask him something. She shook her head, and then sighed. "Good night."

"Good night, Dawn."

Giles locked the front door and wandered into the living room. He noticed he was still carrying Marcus Somerton's Watcher diaries. They seemed so goddamn important barely half an hour ago.

Now, he tossed them on the coffee table with his glasses and sank down into the couch. Elbows on knees, face buried in hands, he wondered bleakly what more could go wrong in his life.

Did you really think the girl's father wouldn't come for her, Giles? Did you really think Dawn would want to stay with you when he did?

He snatched the first diary from the table and donned his glasses. Hopefully research would distract him.

"Willow, are you sure? You can always come back after class and help out." Giles was pouring them both tea as the young witch set up her laptop on the table.

"No, I'm fine. Not missing anything important, and I think I can help you out with the online stuff. You be Book Guy and I'll be Computer Girl. Like research superheroes."

Giles frowned as he watched her boot up the machine. "I just never imagined you cutting class. It's something Xander would be more likely to do."

"Hey!" Xander protested as he came up behind them. "My class cutting days are over. Now I just skip work. So book me. What do I got?" Xander flipped the top book off the stack, considering its weight as one might a bowling ball. "Ahhh. *Dark Magicks*. This should be... umm dark."

"Yes, I thought we might start with spells," Giles said, as he exchanged Xander's book for a thinner volume entitled, *Rituals of the Dead*. "I did further research last night. It seems Marcus Somerton was quite proficient at spellcraft."

Willow was still stuck on Giles' previous comment, sounding somewhat offended. "I can skip class if I want to. It's a college thing. It's what college students do: skip classes. And it's only summer school. That's almost optional. Besides, it's not like I'm skipping class to have wild orgy parties. I'm doing research. I'm studying. It's like class, but without the students and teachers."

Xander settled down next to his best friend and opened his book. "Me thinks Willow protests too much. Although, maybe we could jump back to that wild orgy party imagery. I'd be cool with you cutting class for that."

Giles sighed the sigh of the long-suffering. "Maybe we could just get back to the vampires who have the skills of watcher and slayer. As I was saying, Marcus' diaries indicate he had a talent for magic and a penchant for dabbling in the darker sides of his power. I think that however he turned Nicole, it must have involved a spell. If we figure out how he did it, maybe we'll have some idea as to their weakness."

Tara took a book and slid into the chair on Willow's other side, as Giles delivered a volume to Anya behind the counter. She looked at it with a frown.

"I have to watch the register."

"Yes," he said, as he returned to his own research, "But unless the entire graduating class of Hogwarts decides to pay us a visit, I'm fairly certain you'll have time for both."

"Ok, but I should get time and a half for this."

Giles only rolled his eyes and dove into his own studies. Willow smiled and leaned across the table to pat him on the arm. "Way to go with the pop culture reference, Giles. Dawn's a good influence on you."

He returned her smile somewhat sheepishly and sipped his tea.

The morning passed slowly as the frustration level only increased. Willow found Marcus Somerton's death certificate when she hacked into an online archive. He died in 1813 of severe blood loss attributed to deep puncture wounds in his carotid artery. So at least they knew when he was

turned, but they were still no closer to an answer on how he Sired Nicole. Her first reported sighting was a year after Marcus' death, and all sources seemed confident that he had turned her and not the other way around.

They had all had very little sleep and by noon they were getting snappish. Willow and Anya started trading insults and when Xander tried to play peacemaker, they both turned on him. Tara simply got quieter, sinking deeper into her book, as one hand tapped her pencil against the tabletop. Tap. Ta-tap. Tap-tap. Tap. Tap-tap-tap. Ta-tap. It was mere inches from Giles' open book, and he watched the pencil eraser rise and fall, the sound pounding into his head.

Finally he could take no more and slammed his hand over hers. "For God's sake, Buffy, stop it!"

The bickering triangle across the table stopped mid-sentence. Tara gasped. The room silenced. Giles realized his slip, but there was no way to take it back. "I'm so sorry, Tara."

"It's ok," she answered softly.

He could feel all their eyes on him, and it was more than he could take at the moment. "I'm going to... umm... I'll be right back. I'm going to make some more tea." He escaped behind the counter and lost himself in the familiar pattern of boiling water and measuring out tea leaves. The mood behind him had darkened, and he almost wished for the previous arguing to resume. For a short while it had almost felt like old times again, and they had almost been able to forget about their missing member. Maybe that's why he had spoken her name without thought. Because for a short while, it almost felt like she was here.

He rejoined a more somber group, each buried in their respective research.

Willow glanced up as he approached and offered him a sad smile. "It's almost 12:30, Giles. Do you want me to pick up Dawn?"

It suddenly occurred to him that he hadn't mentioned Hank to any of them. "Her father's actually picking her up today. They'll be by the shop later this afternoon."

Xander's eyebrows lifted. "Her dad's in town? When did this happen and how come you didn't tell any of us?"

"He only got in last night." Giles fidgeted with his teacup. "I didn't know he was coming. Then with our present situation, I simply forgot to mention it."

Xander slammed his book shut. "I can't believe the nerve! The guy thinks he can just swoop in after five weeks and carry Dawn off? Where was he five weeks ago? Where was he when their mom died?"

Willow placed her hand over his. "Xander." She shook her head no. She cast a sideways glance towards Giles. "Not now."

Giles realized the pain was clearly visible on his face. Truth was he was terrified of losing Dawn. Taking care of her made his days bearable, made him feel useful, gave him purpose. More than that, she was his last tie to Buffy. Giles ducked his head back into his book.

Xander muttered, "The guy's a bastard. That's all I'm saying." And then the rest was silence.

Giles lost himself in his research. Blessed research that had always blocked out the pain. After Randall, after Jenny, after Buffy, and now the possibility of losing Dawn. The analytical part of his mind kicked on, the emotive part kicked off. Until nearly two hours had passed, and he had reached a breakthrough.

"I think I have it." The others looked up, waiting for him to enlighten them. "It's a resurrection spell, but with a twist. It folds time around the corpse of the deceased, reverting the body back to the last few minutes of life. It only affects the physical form, so the soul is still gone. The spell lasts a short time, minutes at most, keeping the body alive while it is working. But once the spell fades, with no soul to animate the body, it would simply die a second time."

Tara leaned in to read over his shoulder. "Unless the body was turned into a vampire."

"Exactly," Giles agreed.

Xander frowned, his finger darting through the air as he pieced together the puzzle. "So you're saying this watcher guy, Marcus, his slayer gets killed and he's upset. He mopes around for five or six years until some vamp makes him dinner and turns him into undead watcher. He still misses Nicole, but it's been years, and she's got to be pretty rotten by then. Not to mention, she needs to be dying, not dead, for him to make her a vampire. So he finds this spell, works some magic, and turns her body back the way it was just before she died. And then in the few minutes before the spell can fade, he drains her, makes her feed off of him, and viola, actual Vampire Slayer."

Giles nodded. "I would say that is a fairly accurate summary of the events." He pushed the book away. "Unfortunately that leaves us back at the beginning. There's no inherent weakness in this spell for us to exploit. The spell ended two hundred years ago. Now we're just dealing with two regular vampires. Except one has the skills of a slayer and the other the knowledge and training of a watcher. We still don't have any idea how to defeat them without our own slayer, and we don't know what they're doing in Sunnydale."

Willow pulled the book to her side of the table, reading through the specific spell. "Most of these ingredients are pretty common, except for these three. They're usually the main component in whatever spells they are used for, but I've never seen all three together in one. Oooh!" Willow bounced in her seat and started typing on her laptop. "Anya and I have been converting your inventory and sales receipts into a searchable database. Let me check something out." Her brow furrowed as she focused. "Yup, here it is. About two weeks ago, someone came in and bought themselves everything they needed for this spell. But they paid cash, so we don't know who they are."

"Oh, I think we know who they are," Xander countered.

"Yeah," Willow agreed, "But if they had paid with a card or a check, we might have some idea where they were living."

The phone rang, and Giles crossed the shop to answer it. He glanced at the clock: after 3. He expected it to be Dawn's father. They wouldn't be home until after dinner. They wouldn't be home tonight. They had gone to LA and wouldn't be back until the weekend. They had gotten standby tickets to Spain and wouldn't be back at all. By the by, thanks for looking after my daughter, we'll be sure to keep in touch.

"Magic Box..."

The others listened with half an ear to Giles' side of the conversation.

"Yes this is he... I beg your pardon?... Are you sure?... Yes, yes of course... When?... Yes, thank you... Of course... Perhaps tomorrow, if that's ok?... Thank you again for calling."

The phone clicked back in its receiver. Giles looked very pale. He could see that his hands were shaking. He clenched his fists to steady them.

"Giles?" Willow sounded concerned.

"Dear Lord," he breathed, "I think I know why they came to Sunnydale. It seems... that is... Within the last couple days, someone..."

"Out with it!" Xander barked.

"That was the groundskeeper at Restfield Cemetery." Giles paused, took a deep breath. "In the last two days... the ground has been disturbed... Buffy's grave is empty."

No one moved. No one breathed. The world had tilted on its side.

Anya finally voiced the thought they all shared, but no one else could state aloud. "You mean they came to Sunnydale to use the spell on Buffy, to turn her into a vampire? You mean we might have to stake Buffy?"

"Let us pray it doesn't come to that." Giles leaned back against the counter. His knees felt weak. "We can only hope Marcus hasn't had a chance to perform the spell yet."

"Maybe this could be a good thing." Xander sounded hopeful. "What if, when he does the spell, we do our own spell and put Buffy's soul back, like we did for Angel?"

Willow shook her head. Her voice was barely above a whisper. "That was a curse for vampires."

Xander tried again. "Ok, so after he turns her into a vampire, we... we... curse Buffy... so she can never be happy. Yeah, ok, bad idea." He dropped his head onto the table.

Giles shoved his hands in his pockets. They wouldn't stop shaking dammit. "I think that wherever Buffy's soul is, she deserves her rest. Let's focus on preventing her from becoming the very thing she spent her life fighting."

Willow trailed her finger along the page of the spellbook. She wore a puzzled expression, and then reached for another volume on the table. "Giles, the incantation for the spell wasn't in that book. But here." She pointed to a page in the second book. "This one doesn't give a full description of the spell or list the ingredients, but it has the incantation. It has to be performed at the height of a full moon and sanctified in blood."

Giles crossed the room to read over her shoulder. "Hmm... Tomorrow night is the full moon. So we have until tomorrow night to stop the ritual and prevent them from getting their blood sacrifice."

With his usual sense of timing, Hank Summers chose that moment to enter the Magic Box with Dawn in tow. Susan was nowhere to be seen, and Dawn appeared to have been crying. Hank looked angry enough to put a fist through something, and from the focus of his glare, it seemed like Giles was the something he was aiming for.

"Mr. Giles," he said curtly, "May I have a word with you?"

Giles' eyes slid back again to Dawn. She was watching him with wide, frightened eyes, her chin quivering. "Willow, could you take Dawn in the training room and help her get started on her homework?"

"No." Hank held his arm out to prevent Dawn from coming forward. He pointed towards the door behind him. "I told you to wait in the car with Susan."

"But, Dad, Willow always helps me with my homework." Tears began sliding down pre-soaked paths on her cheeks. "Please."

"Go. Wait. In. The. Car. Now." Hank's gaze never wavered from Giles.

Dawn stuck out her chin defiantly and marched around her father. Her courage dissolved several paces past him, and she ran the rest of the way into the training room.

"Dawn! Get back here," Hank called after her, but made no move to follow.

Tara and Willow both rose and joined Dawn in the back room, shutting the door behind them.

"Mr. Giles, while I do appreciate everything you have done for my girls after their mother died, and everything you have done for Dawn the last five weeks, you have completely overstepped your bounds."

Giles scratched his head, his mind spinning for the explanation for Hank's anger. "Mr. Summers, I assure you, I have no idea what this is about."

"Someone's got it in that girl's head that she's going to be staying in Sunnydale. With you. You telling me you didn't give her that idea?"

Giles looked away, at once relieved and frightened. On the one hand, Dawn wanted to stay with him. On the other, her father wasn't going to make it easy. Giles couldn't imagine a court anywhere that would give custody to a forty-something foreign bachelor instead of to the girl's own father. No matter what Buffy's will said. No matter what motion terminating Hank's parental rights passed. All Giles needed was for the INS to pull his green card, and he wouldn't even be able to stay in the

country with Dawn. In the grand scheme of things, he really wasn't the fit choice. Except that Dawn wanted to stay with him.

"Mr. Summers, I only told Dawn that Buffy's will named me as her legal guardian. That in your absence—"

"Yes," Hank interrupted. "In my absence. I'm here now, and Dawn is my daughter, and you are going to go back there and explain to her that she will not be staying in Sunnydale with you, that she will not be staying anywhere with you, that she will be living with her father and her future stepmother."

"For how long?" Xander stepped up between the two men. Giles had completely forgotten that he and Anya were still in the room. "I'm sorry. Let me introduce myself. I'm Xander Harris. I was one of Buffy's best friends. And I do big brother duty for Dawn. But you would know all of that if you gave a rat's ass about either of your daughters."

"Xander!" Giles admonished.

"How dare you!" Hank sputtered. "I love both my girls, and if you think I'm going to leave Dawn in the care of strangers—"

"Strangers!" Xander laughed and stepped forward into Hank's face. "Let me tell you something, Mister. This man," he pointed to Giles, "This man has been there for Buffy and Dawn everyday for the last five years. He's been to birthdays and graduations. In fact, right about now I'm wishing you had been at Buffy's graduation. Front row, center."

"This man has been there for the high points and the low points. And more than a few of those low points have been the times their father stood them up for birthdays or weekend visits or annual camping trips. This man sat outside the morgue, filling out paperwork that *your* girls were too upset to think about, because their mother had just *died*. This man not only managed to actually attend *your* daughter's funeral, but he planned the whole damn thing. And when no one could track you down, this man packed up and moved in with Dawn, rearranged his whole life to take care of her."

"So, I'm just wondering how long you plan to stay in Dawn's life this time. 'Cause I know *this* man will stay as long as she needs him to."

Hank's eyes narrowed. "Are you quite through?"

Xander considered for a moment. "No. Just one more thing. You are a complete bastard." Xander stepped back and crossed his arms, as if daring the man to challenge his assessment.

Hank turned back to Giles, his stance hostile as if he expected a rant from him, too. "Mr. Giles, I'll be the first to admit I've made mistakes with my girls. What father hasn't? I let work interfere, when I should have been making them my priority. But I spent a lot of time these last few months thinking. When I asked Susan to marry me, I told her we'd be moving back to the office in LA. It wouldn't have been fair to make Buffy responsible for her sister when she had college and a life of her own." Hank closed his eyes against the pain of knowing that now Buffy had neither of those things. He took a deep breath and forged ahead. "Mr. Giles, you and I both know that this isn't about what Dawn wants. This is about what is best for her. I am her father. I'm the only real family she has left. If you care for her as much as everyone thinks you do, then I know you'll do what's best for her."

Giles looked back towards the training room. He didn't need to see through the door to guess what was going on back there. Willow and Tara would be trying to comfort Dawn, to promise her that everything would be ok. Dawn would be crying, terrified that her father would take her away from all of them and probably even more terrified that Giles would just let her go.

"Mr. Summers, I only want to do right by Dawn. If she wants to stay here with me, then I have to believe that is the right thing to do."

Hank's jaw twitched. "You can't keep her."

"Maybe not. But I can try. Buffy's will names me as Dawn's guardian. And the lawyer filed a motion to terminate your parental rights on the grounds of abandonment."

"What?" Hank took a step back, the shock clearly written on his face. "You're actually going to take me to court over this?"

"If I have to. I'd rather not." Giles slipped off his glasses and leaned back against the conference table. "Mr. Summers, your daughter still loves you. She told me as much. She told me she wanted to visit you and spend time with you. I just don't think she wants to live with you."

"No court in the land would give you custody."

Anya stepped forward, just behind Giles. "I don't think any court will give custody to a father who hits his daughter."

"Excuse me," Hank sized her up, obviously wondering how many more people were going to step up in Giles' defense. "I have never laid a hand on—"

"I saw you hit her not five minutes ago. Didn't you see it, Xander?"

Xander smiled wickedly. "Yeah, yeah, I'm pretty sure I saw him hit her, too."

"You two would lie for your friend here?"

Xander rolled his eyes in frustration. "You still don't get it, do you? This isn't about Giles. This is about Dawn. And yeah, I would lie for her."

Hank backed off and headed towards the front door, shaking one finger in Giles' direction. "This isn't over."

"No," Giles replied. "I imagine that it's only beginning."

Xander waved the man off with one finger of his own.

The door closed, and Giles released the breath he hadn't been aware he was holding. "You both went a little over the top at the end there. I hope you're not seriously considering crying abuse."

"Why not?" Anya asked.

"Because the man could just as easily do the same to me," Giles snapped. "And there are a helluva lot more skeletons in my closet to support his claim."

"Never thought of that." Xander looked repentant. "I wouldn't worry too much. I think we just scared him a little. Hopefully, when he cools down, he'll see things your way, about what's best for Dawn."

"I wouldn't count on it." Giles started back to the training room to fetch Dawn and the others. He stopped halfway and turned back to the young man who had so vehemently defended him. "Thank you, Xander. For what you said before."

Xander shrugged. "It was all true, you know."

Giles smiled, his eyes slightly misty. He crossed to the backroom and entered. How strange to have people in Buffy's room. He was perhaps the only one who came in here after she died. The room still seemed to resonate with her presence, the sounds of their training sessions still echoing in his ears, the smell of sweat mingled with perfume still lingering in the air, their many conversations clearly recalled by the near perfect memory of a watcher. It was an exceptionally good training room, and the remains of their gang certainly needed to train if they were to patrol in Buffy's place. But Giles never offered up this room for their use, nor did any of them ask. When they trained, they trained at Dawn's house or Xander's apartment. This was Buffy's room, and for anyone else to use it seemed a dishonor.

Tara and Willow looked up expectantly at his entrance. Dawn was curled up on the couch between them, her face buried in Willow's shoulder as the redhead stroked her back tenderly.

"Dawn," he called softly, but she didn't turn to him, didn't move, just muttered something unintelligible. "I'm sorry. Can you repeat that?"

"Are you mad at me?"

Giles knelt in front of the girl, his hand on her knee, thumb stroking lightly. "Why would I be mad at you?"

She sniffled and brushed tears from her face. Still she didn't look at him. "Dad yelled at you, didn't he? 'Cause of what I said? I know I shouldn't have said anything, but I didn't want to go to Spain or to LA or anywhere, and dumb old Susan kept talking to me like we were best friends or something. And I know you probably think I should live with my dad. It would probably be better for you. You could have your apartment back and your life back and you wouldn't have to worry about some stupid 14-year-old kid."

"No, Dawn, look at me." She turned watery eyes towards him. "You're not stupid. And I'm not mad at you. If you want to stay with me, then that's what I want too."

"Really?"

"Really." He smiled for her, and she managed to frown less.

"Dad hates you now, though, doesn't he? And it's my fault. He got mad when I said I was staying. He said that you were taking advantage of me, that you were turning me against him, putting ideas in my head. He said you were just a lonely old man who was using me so he wouldn't miss Buffy so much. And I told him that he was the one who was using me so he wouldn't feel so guilty about not being there for Buffy. And I told him..." She ducked her head down, found her fingernails suddenly very fascinating. Her voice got very small. "I told him you were a better father than he was."

Giles found he had no voice to respond to that. He simply gathered the girl in his arms and held her tight to his chest for long moments. Rupert Giles was not generally a physically demonstrative man. His own father had been a proper British watcher and his mother a submissive and formal lady. So as a grown man, Giles tended to show affection with actions or words, maybe an occasional touch on the hand or back. In the five weeks since Buffy died, he could think of maybe three times he had held Dawn like this, and every time one or both of them had been crying.

Now Giles hugged Dawn close not out of comfort or grief, but simply to show her what, for once, his words would fail to convey.

After a moment, he released her and stood, tipping his head back towards the door. "Your father's gone for now. Shall we rejoin Anya and Xander?" Tara and Willow were smiling at him, Willow wiping away tears of her own.

The four of them walked out of the training room, Dawn shyly curling her hand into his as they did. He gave it a squeeze, then sent her to the corner store for a newspaper. He didn't really need a copy of the local paper; it rarely had anything of value or truth, just stories of gang activities and people falling on barbecue forks. But he did want Dawn out of the shop for a minute. They would probably all be researching until time for patrol, and Dawn would be here with them. It was vitally important that she not overhear anything about Buffy's empty grave or the possibility that her sister could soon be a vampire. Willow came up with the code name Rumpelstiltskin, mostly because it was the first name she thought of and Dawn had walked back in the shop before anyone had a chance to improve upon it.

Empty pizza boxes were stacked next to the cash register. The store had closed promptly at 7pm. Now it was nearly 9, and the sun was starting to set.

Dawn lounged on the floor in a beanbag, playing with the Game Boy Xander had leant her. Occasionally Anya leaned over to watch and offer helpful suggestions on strategy. One of the others would always remind her that she was supposed to be helping them research.

Dawn had been overly polite and good-natured all evening, especially towards Giles. She did as she was told without question, never argued, and tried to anticipate what any of the others wanted of her. Giles suspected he could ask her to clean out the storage room and she would do it without complaint. He knew where her desire to please was coming from, and he would have a talk with her about it later. He would tell her she didn't have to be perfect to stay with him. But for now, he needed to focus on defeating Marcus and Nicole, and Dawn's new attitude just made things easier.

"Giles?" Willow was holding an open book in her hands, and she was practically beaming. "Umm... I know we're not supposed to be researching... Rumplestilskin... right now. But I think I found something."

Dawn looked up from her Game Boy. "There's a vampire named Rumplestilskin?"

Giles slipped off his glasses. "We'll be leaving for patrol in an hour or so, Dawn. Could you go back in the training room and pull out supplies for all of us? Crossbows and bolts for each of us. Stakes, crosses, holy water. And don't play with the crossbows, or the swords. You could hurt yourself."

Dawn wasn't a stupid girl. She knew she was being gotten rid of. She probably even knew it before, when he sent her for the paper. Yesterday even, she might have called him on it, protested that she knew what went bump in the night in Sunnydale and that she could handle whatever they were talking about. Today, she dutifully went back in the training room and left them to talk in private.

"What do you have, Willow?" Giles asked as he leaned over the table.

"I know we're supposed to be figuring out where Marcus and Nicole might be hiding out, how to stop them. But I just had to try."

"What is it?"

Willow passed him the book. "A spell, not a curse. It was used for possession, spirit channeling. But if we drop off the parts about displacing the host's soul, I think we can put Buffy's soul back in her body."

Tara frowned. "I don't know, Willow. Bringing Buffy back... It's messing with the natural order of things."

"No, it's not. I mean, it's not a resurrection spell." Willow took her lover's hands, almost pleading with her. "If Marcus does his spell, he won't be raising Buffy from the dead, he'll be turning back time, so she's still alive. And then we just call her back to this world, open a window so she can get back in her body. Marcus' spell ends, but the body won't die, because it's got a soul in it."

"Could this really work?" Xander was looking towards Giles, waiting for his assessment.

"Theoretically, yes." Giles was focusing on the page, trying to sort out his thoughts. "But the risks are too great. I don't think we dare."

"Why not?" Anya asked.

Giles took a deep breath, set the book on the table, laid his hands on either side of it. "Marcus' spell will last mere minutes. In that time you will have to call Buffy back, open the window so she can return into her body, and somehow prevent Marcus or Nicole from turning her. Your timing would have to be impeccable and even then, I don't think you'll have enough time."

"But we have to at least try," Willow countered.

Giles sighed, pulled his cup of cold tea towards him, and then pushed it away again. He glanced back towards the training room to see if Dawn were lurking nearby. Finally, he met Willow's eyes. "The time it takes this spell to call a soul back depends on how far the soul has gone. If we knew perhaps that Buffy were here with us right now, that she would be waiting next her body when you started the spell, maybe then there would be time. But for all we know, she has already crossed over to

whatever comes after this life. If she has gone that far, it could take as much as an hour or more for her to return, and she would be too late.”

“But we have to try,” Willow said again.

“Willow, if you call Buffy back, and she isn’t able to get back in her body, her soul could be lost forever or trapped here.” Giles paused. He was trying to focus on the dry facts, the intellectual puzzle. But this was Buffy they were discussing. His throat constricted just thinking about it. He took a sip of cold tea and grimaced. “I like to think that wherever Buffy is now, she’s at peace. I don’t think I could take the risk of doing this to her. Could you?”

He heard the thud as the training room door shut. Willow shook her head and lowered her eyes.

Dawn strolled up next to him, taking in the pensive expressions surrounding her, but choosing not to pry. “Supplies all around. Five neat stacks. You did say you were all going patrolling tonight, right? Anything else you guys need?”

Giles stood and stretched. “Just to take you home, where you will stay put until I return. Come on, then.”

Buffy had tried. Every moment since she had woken beside an empty grave she had tried. She had followed Giles around like his shadow, waiting for him to fall asleep. She had spent the whole frickin’ night standing over his bed with her ghostly hands wedged in his brain. The best she got out of him was a shiver and an attempt to curl deeper under the covers. She knew he was dreaming. She could see it when he turned or mumbled or his eyes darted all around under his lids. But she couldn’t get into any of his dreams.

It was just a fluke, that voice whispered to her. You’ll never get in his dreams again.

She tried to shut out the fear and doubt. Instead, she went to the others. Xander, Anya, Willow, Tara, Dawn. Even Spike. She would touch each of them as they slept, at the moment she could see they were dreaming.

Nothing.

As she watched their research unfold, the fear began to stalk her. Someone had her body. Someone was going to make her a vampire. Maybe she should have gone into the light when she had the chance, because this certainly had to be hell. To watch her body desecrated, turned into one of the unholy creatures she was made to fight. To be forced to watch as a demon in her body took human life, possibly the lives of those she loved.

And then Willow’s spell. The possibility that she could be channeled back into her living body, given a second chance at life.

I’m here! I’m right here! She had wanted to shout it at them. *Do the spell! Do the spell! It will work.*

And Giles. She wanted to take him by the shoulders and shake him until his teeth rattled, until she could jog his memory, make him remember his dream.

Giles, I came to you in your dream. You have to remember. I told you I was a ghost. I told you I was watching over all of you. You have to remember. You have to believe it was real.

That night she tried again. She visited them each in their sleep. It was the last chance she would get. The next night was the full moon. Marcus would do his spell, for better or worse, and Buffy would not be able to affect the outcome. Her only chance was to reach one of them in their dreams, convince them she was real and that Willow should do the spell.

All night she tried, and still nothing.

Chapter 5: The Spell

His breakfast sat untouched. Giles had a throbbing headache this morning, and Dawn wasn't helping any.

"The one time I actually *want* to do something for school, and you won't let me? It's bad enough I have to go to summer school. I should at least be able to do the fun stuff that goes with it. *Please*. I actually have friends that are going to be on this trip."

Giles massaged his temples and took another sip of tea. "No. There is something very important happening tonight, Dawn, and I don't want you out of the house. Especially not after dark."

"It's like two hours in the observatory and planetarium with like 30 other kids. How dangerous can that be? Oh, there'll be teachers there, too." Dawn watched him with her best puppy dog eyes as she pushed her eggs around her plate.

"I said no. Please don't argue with me. And eat your breakfast; you're going to be late."

Dawn sighed and dropped her head in her hands. It would certainly be the end of the world if she didn't get to go on her class field trip. She had a sudden thought. "What if they fail me?"

"They're not going to fail you." Giles dumped his uneaten breakfast in the trash and laid his plate in the sink.

"They could. This is all going to be on a test. The field trip was mandatory."

Giles returned to his cup of tea. "Then tell your teacher that I will take you stargazing another night."

Dawn frowned. "Is this because I didn't want you to chaperone? 'Cause they might still have room."

Giles laughed. He reached out one hand and cupped her chin, tilting it up to meet his gaze. "This is because I don't want you out after dark tonight. I want you here in the house where I'll know you'll be safe." He walked out of the kitchen, calling over his shoulder, "Five minutes, Dawn, and then we have to leave."

She sulked the entire drive to school, not even saying goodbye as she climbed out of the car.

Well, it seems her mood has certainly changed from yesterday. Last night I could do wrong. This morning I'm her jailer.

The others were already waiting for him at the magic shop. They had until nightfall to figure out where Marcus and Nicole were and where they planned to perform the ritual. The earliest the vampires could cast the spell would be midnight, when the moon would be at its peak. The power would wane after that, so Marcus would try to time it as close to midnight as possible. If they couldn't dust the pair before then, in all likelihood they would be fighting Buffy as well. Giles vowed they would find them before midnight.

The morning passed with no luck. Morale was sinking lower. Anya actually missed a customer who had stepped up to the register to pay. Tara took their money, and then drifted back into her own research. Xander even tried beating up Willy the Snitch, but he was much less intimidating without Buffy behind him. Xander gave up fifty bucks, but Willy didn't know anything either.

Giles tried Spike's crypt, careful to leave out the parts about Buffy. He wasn't entirely sure that Spike wouldn't be just as satisfied with an undead Buffy. But Spike hadn't heard of a vampire watcher and slayer in town and had no idea where they might be staying. He asked after Dawn, and Giles mentioned that he knew Spike hung around the house watching her. Spike shrugged it off as a promise to Buffy, then bent over to light his cigarette, mostly so Giles wouldn't notice him brush away tears. The two men stood in awkward silence for a few moments, before Giles escaped out into the sunlight.

Willow picked Dawn up from school. No one seemed to know how to act around her. It was nearly as bad as when they discovered she was the Key. When she approached any of them, they would hurriedly set aside whatever they were working on and force themselves into an overly cheerful mood. And everyone called her “Dawnie” way too much.

“Is this about that Rumpelstilskin vampire? ‘Cause if this is one of those fairy tales are real deals, I don’t think he’s all that scary. Isn’t he supposed to be like three feet tall?”

The others got real quiet. Giles steered Dawn to the back storage room. “I just got a new shipment in this morning. Anya and Tara are otherwise occupied. Do you think you could unpack the boxes and shelve the merchandise for me?”

Dawn crossed her arms and looked at the stack of boxes standing against the wall. “I know you’re just trying to get rid of me, so I don’t find out about the big important thing that’s happening tonight.”

“Well, then humor me,” Giles said, as he handed her a pocketknife to cut off the packing tape. “Ask me or Anya if you don’t know where something goes.”

He left her in the back room and rejoined the others who were desperately trying to figure out how to prevent her sister from becoming a creature of the night. Dawn came in and out as she restocked incense and crystals, amulets and herbs, tarot cards and idols. She even managed shelving the new books under the crazy alphabetical system Xander had found so difficult. Giles realized some time later that Dawn hadn’t reemerged in over an hour. He went in the back to check on her and found her sitting next to a broken Aztec statue, crying.

He knelt beside her, began collecting the broken pieces. “It’s all right, Dawn. It’s only a priceless antique. Nothing to cry over. Probably would have just collected dust anyway.” He turned one piece over in his hand, looked at it a bit closer. “Ah, see there, it’s a knockoff besides. No wonder it came so cheaply. I’ll have to talk to my supplier about this. He assured me this was a genuine...” Giles trailed off as he remembered the crying girl on the floor next to him. “Yes, well, never mind about that. Dawn, it’s okay, really. Accidents happen. You think this is the first thing that’s gotten broken in this store? Anya and Willow trashed the whole place while I was in England, and I’ve very nearly forgiven them for it.”

Dawn sniffled and wiped her tears away on her sleeve. “It’s not about the statue.”

“Then why the tears?”

She hugged her legs to her chest and dropped her head to her knees. “Dad called last night, after you guys went on patrol.” She paused, and then asked very softly, so Giles had to bend closer to hear, “Can he really take me away from you?”

Giles smoothed back her long brown hair, pulled her in close to him, and placed a chaste kiss on her forehead. He couldn’t bring himself to lie to her. “Probably. He is your father.”

Giles could see the tears pooling in her eyes as she drew away from him. She leaned her head back against the wall behind her, her eyes tracing the cracks in the ceiling paint. “Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad if Dad moved to Sunnydale, but I don’t want to go away. What if I never see any of you guys again? I don’t think I could stand it.”

“LA’s only two hours away. I think we’d manage to visit.”

“But Spain’s a lot farther. It’d be too hard to visit me in Spain. I wouldn’t ever see any of you again.”

“Dawn, I think your father’s planning on moving—”

“No,” she interrupted loudly, slamming her hands on the ground beside her, the grief in her voice giving way to anger. “That was before, when Buffy was here. But now it’s just me, and Dad said there’s nothing for him to move back for. He said work is going so much better over there that coming back to his LA office would be like taking five steps back.” The tears she had held at bay now

overflowed, and she was crying again. She looked so much younger at that moment, as she turned bright terrified eyes towards him.

"I'm trying to be brave. I am. That's what Buffy told me to do before she died. To be brave. But I'm so scared, Giles. First Mom, then Buffy. I just *can't* lose all of you, too. I just *can't*. I think I finally get what Buffy meant when she said that the hardest thing in this world is to live in it. Because having to go live with my dad in Spain would be *hard*."

Something clicked inside Giles' mind. Past Dawn's grief and her terror, something in her words just clicked.

I told Dawn that the hardest thing in this world is to live in it.

He slipped his hand under her chin, tipped her teary face up to his. "What did you say, Dawn?"

The urgency in his tone and his face startled her out of her crying jag. She blinked up at him a few times before answering. "It would be really hard to have to live in Spain with Dad."

"No, before that. What did Buffy say to you before she died?"

"Up on the platform, before she jumped. She told me to take care of her friends. That we should take care of each other. That I should be strong. That the hardest thing in this world is to live in it. And then she told me to be brave and to live for her."

The words from his dream echoed in his head.

I told Dawn that the hardest thing in this world is to live in it.

I'm real. I'm a ghost, and I've been watching over all of you.

Live for me.

He closed his eyes as he worked through the implications. He couldn't have known so precisely what Buffy had said to Dawn before she died. The only people who knew that were Dawn and Buffy. The chances that his subconscious mind could have arrived at those final words so exactly, well lottery odds wouldn't be an unfair comparison. Could Buffy have really visited him in his dream? Could she really be watching over them now?

He opened his eyes and smiled at Dawn. His thumb brushed the tears from her cheeks, and then he leaned forward and kissed her again on the forehead. "Come on, luv, get yourself together and then come out to the shop. I need to get you home, so the rest of us can get things ready for tonight."

Giles strolled into the shop, a spring in his step that had been lacking for five weeks. He grabbed his keys from under the register, tossing them in his hand as he called out to the others, "I'm taking Dawn home now. I'll be back in fifteen minutes."

The rest of the Scoobies traded glances around the table, clearly baffled by his light mood. Dawn followed behind him a moment later, picking up her backpack and heading towards the front door. She looked as confused as the rest of them. Giles slipped over to Willow's side and whispered in her ear, "Get whatever you need together for that spell."

Willow did a doubletake as he walked passed her. She hadn't found her voice until he'd nearly made it to the door. "Giles? Are you sure?"

He held the door open for Dawn and called back as he left, "Positive."

Dawn climbed in the passenger seat, studying Giles' profile carefully. Nearly five blocks from home, she finally asked, "So crisis over?"

"Hmmm?" His thoughts had been spinning with the possibilities. He had completely forgotten about Dawn sitting at his side.

"Whatever big crisis that was brewing, whatever had everyone so wound up. Is it over now? 'Cause you seem a lot happier."

"Things are certainly looking up." He pulled into the drive and led the way into the house.

Dawn followed him warily, still skeptical of his good mood. Maybe this was what people were like when they were possessed. Maybe she should say something to Willow.

Giles turned to her, held her by both shoulders, and gave her a very serious stare. "Now Dawn, listen to me. This is very important. I know it's not even..." He glanced at the clock behind her. "Not even four o'clock. But I have to leave you home alone for the rest of the night. I told you something important would happen tonight, and we have to be ready for it. I can't explain more now, and I can't have you at the store while we're working. But I promise you, I'll tell you anything you want to know tomorrow. Now can I trust you? Will you be okay here without me?"

Dawn nodded.

Giles smiled again and this time it was contagious. "Now you have the number at the store. Call if there are *any* problems. And here..." Giles pulled a twenty from his wallet. "Order in pizza or something for dinner. But..." He wagged one finger at her. "Don't invite the delivery man in. Just take it through the door."

"I know, I know."

Giles smiled again. It was as if he couldn't stop. "I just need a minute alone, Dawn. Okay? I'll be right down."

She watched him go upstairs and then pause before entering Buffy's bedroom. *That should nix his good mood in a hurry*, she thought.

She was partly right. Walking into Buffy's room made the reality of what he was contemplating come crashing in on him. What if he was wrong? What if the dream had been nothing more than a dream, and he was seeing what he wanted to see in it? Then his mistake could very likely cost Buffy her soul.

He looked around her room, untouched since she left it to fight Glory. Clothes scattered across the floor, her closet a mess. He picked up the red shirt she had been wearing the day her mother died. He could imagine her digging through her clothes, looking for something to dress the Buffybot in, and discarding this shirt because it had been the one she was wearing that day. He looked around at the other scattered clothes, remembered times she had worn this or that. She probably didn't think he noticed her clothing, but a watcher was trained to observe and remember.

Giles wandered past her dresser. His fingers lingered over her diary. He wondered if Dawn had read it. He wondered if Buffy would be angry if she had. He touched the small ice skating figurine sitting atop a music box. A sweet reminder of a childhood that ended all too quickly. He thought of her 18th birthday, how she had tried to ask him to the ice show, how he had been too preoccupied with the Test to notice at the time. How he wished he could go back and change things, prevent that most terrible betrayal of her, and take her to the ice show instead.

He turned towards her bed. The covers were rumpled. Dawn slept in here sometimes. Giles envied her that. For him to sleep in Buffy's bed would be an inappropriate intimacy. But how sweet would that be, to fall asleep surrounded by her and to wake the same? He wondered if he would have a night without dreams in her bed.

He sat on the edge of the bed. He buried his face in her red shirt, breathed deeply of her scent, and then let it drop to the floor. He bowed his head as a man in prayer might.

"Buffy," he said aloud. "I don't know if you're in this room with me, watching. I want to believe that you are."

"I've never been what you could call religious. After everything we've seen, I have to believe in a higher power. But I can't remember the last time I've prayed. It would feel a bit hypocritical of me now to pray to a God I can barely conceive of, a God who would send children out night after night to

fight and die against creatures that would give grown men nightmares, a God who would ask you to choose between your life and your sister's.

"I can't pray to Him. I'm still too angry, too hurt. So I want... *I need*... to pray to you.

"Buffy, there's a chance, a small chance that we can bring you back alive and whole. I'm taking a big risk. I'm hoping that you did come to me that night in my dream and that I'm not just deluding myself. What you said to me then, the exact words you said to Dawn. I have to believe that's not just coincidence. But it might be. Or you might have moved on since then. It's been a couple days. Or the spell might not work, or we might get the timing wrong, or Marcus might turn you before we can stop him.

"Oh, Buffy..." His voice broke then and his eyes lifted, as if he might see some sign that she were there. He lowered his head again and closed his eyes. "Buffy, if I'm wrong, if I mess this up, I could cost you your soul. I wish I knew what you wanted me to do. Maybe I'm just being selfish by even wanting to try. But I remember you always took the biggest risks. You were never one to play it safe." He chuckled. "Not even when I wanted you to. I imagine you wouldn't like to play it safe in death either. I hope I'm right about that.

"Buffy, I'm asking you to forgive me for what I'm about to do. For gambling with your soul. If I fail, if you're gone or trapped because of me, I just want to tell you right now... I love you. You are my reason, my purpose, my *life*, my Slayer, my Buffy.

"And I swear to you, I will watch over Dawn, her children, her grandchildren maybe. I'll watch over her until the end of my days. I'll even go to goddamn Spain if I have to. Your sister will be fine. I swear it."

He took a shaking breath then, and stood. His eyes traveled across the room one last time, across her things. He placed his hand over his heart. "Amen," he said softly.

And then he took the onyx pinky ring from his left hand, the ring that he had worn since becoming a watcher, the ring that never left his finger. He took his ring, kissed it, and laid it gently on her nightstand.

The plan formed over the rest of the afternoon and evening. The only missing piece was the location of the ritual. They had to get to Marcus and Nicole before they could turn Buffy. And so they continued researching. Through Marcus' diaries, through every reference to Marcus and Nicole's vampire exploits, looking for some pattern that would hint where they might be staying or where they were likely to practice magic. But the only pattern seemed to be the lack of a pattern. The two vampires had stayed in everything from dank crypts to posh mansions. They could be anywhere in Sunnydale, perhaps even outside of Sunnydale.

"Ok, I have these babies all programmed and charged up," Willow was saying. "Here's yours, Giles."

She handed him a small cell phone. He looked at it with something approaching dread. Willow leaned over him and demonstrated how to operate it. "Tara and I have one. That's one on your speed dial. Remember, one for your number one witches." Willow smiled, and Giles rolled his eyes. "Just press the button for a second, and the phone will dial for you. Anya and Xander each have one. They're two and three on your speed dial. Two for Anya, because she's your number two in the store. And three for Xander, because he's... he's..." She thought for a moment.

Xander jumped in. "Because he's got three of the silliest girl friends in the world?"

"Ok, that works. And Dawn at the house is four on your speed dial. Because..."

"Because we're doing this 'four' her?" Giles finished sarcastically.

Willow patted him on the shoulder. "Now you're getting in the spirit. Should I quiz you?"

Giles slipped the phone in his jacket pocket. "I am a watcher, you know, Willow. Memory is not generally an issue."

"Oh Ick!" Anya cried from behind them.

The other Slayerettes turned to see what the problem was. She was making a face, deeply engrossed in her book.

"What is it, An?" Xander asked, startling her. She obviously hadn't realized she'd spoken aloud.

"I'm reading one of these journals from the year Marcus turned Nicole." Anya flipped the book closed for a moment, holding her place, and looked at the cover. "Helena Collins, COW. Why would any woman call herself a cow?"

Giles sighed. "It stands for Council of Watchers. Please go on."

"Oh, right. Anyway, she talks about the murder of Nicole's brother. I just thought it was pretty brutal, and I was a vengeance demon. Do you think Marcus did it? Or did Nicole kill her own brother?"

Giles considered her question for a moment. "It's not unheard for vampires to kill their family or friends, sometimes even turn them as well. I believe I remember reading that Angelus killed his entire family." Giles tried to sound casual when he said it. He tried to push back the memory of those long hours of torture when Angelus had described for him in graphic detail just how he had killed each member of his family, had demonstrated on Giles some of the things he had done to them before they died.

"Great," Anya said. "Does that mean if Buffy becomes a vampire, she's gonna try to kill all of us?"

"I don't think that's what happened to Nicole's brother," Willow said. She was thinking hard, chewing absently on one fingernail, her brow furrowed in concentration. "Something about this ritual has been bothering me all day. I think I know what it is. Every other resurrection spell I've come across needs something from the deceased or their family. A picture, or a lock of hair, or a personal item, or *something*. And this spell doesn't mention anything like that."

Suddenly Willow gasped, her eyes wide as saucers. "Giles, it has to be sanctified in blood. I think it meant *blood* blood as in blood kin. Giles, I think Marcus needed the blood of Nicole's brother to do the spell."

"Dawn!" Giles had his keys and was halfway out the door before they could react. He stopped in the doorway, pointed back at Willow. "Get Dawn on the phone. Keep her on the phone. Make sure she doesn't leave the house."

Giles had wondered what more could go wrong in his life. Now he knew.

Hank and Susan were waiting for him in the living room. A man he didn't recognize was standing by the fireplace.

Hank rose and headed Giles off in the foyer, his demeanor barely civil. "Mr. Giles, this is Harold Cates, my attorney. If we could all sit down and discuss—"

"I don't have time for this," Giles snapped. "Where is Dawn?"

"I took her to the observatory for her field trip. She said you wouldn't let her go."

Giles turned on his heel and was out the front door, Hank chasing him down the driveway.

"Mr. Giles, if you think you can keep my daughter under some kind of house arrest just because you're afraid I'm going to take her—" Hank grabbed for Giles' arm, but if he thought he could hold

up the other man through sheer physical intimidation, he had yet to meet Ripper. Giles shoved him backwards, *hard*, hard enough to send Hank sprawling on his butt on the front lawn. Giles jumped in his car, slamming the door shut.

Hank was not going to give up. The top to the BMW was down, and before Giles could start the car, Dawn's father was back on his feet and leaning into the car over him. "You don't think I know what this is about. I know what you're after. My daughter's trust fund is worth close to quarter of a million. If I have custody, you won't be able to touch it."

Giles had finally reached his limit. He grabbed a fistful of Hank's shirt and pulled him closer, feeding him his best Ripper glare. It was the look of a man that had survived demons, vampires, gods, torture, and seven apocalypses, more or less, and wasn't going to be threatened by a little man like Hank Summers. "If *anything* happens to that child, I swear to God you are going to wish you had never come to Sunnydale." He released Hank, rather abruptly, and the man stumbled backwards. "One more thing. I may not be able to stop you from taking Dawn, but the house is mine not hers. So I have every right under the law to demand that you not be in it when I return."

Giles started the car and backed out of the driveway with all the power his "ultimate driving machine" could muster.

"Good show, Giles," he muttered to himself as he broke every speed limit. "And in front of the man's lawyer, no less. I'm sure that little display will be quickly filed in a brief under 'violent tendencies' and 'reckless behavior.'"

Right now that didn't matter. Right now all that mattered was getting to Dawn before Marcus and Nicole could. Otherwise, the debate over custody would be rather pointless.

Her teachers were sure they had seen her in the back row of the planetarium. The staff were in the middle of giving a presentation to the students before moving them on to the observatory and its high-powered telescopes. The theatre was pitch black, only false starlight and moonlight illuminating the rows of nearly empty seats. Thirty-some students scattered across the space meant for 200, all of them fully reclined back to view the night sky projected above them. It meant he couldn't see anyone at a distance, had to search each row, get up close to each reclining student before he could see that they weren't Dawn.

He called softly for her, asked each person he passed if they had seen her. Behind him, a teacher droned on about light traveling over time. The light from Vega, over twenty-five years old. The light from Antares, more than five hundred and twenty. Each prick of light like a window to the past. Very soon Giles would have his own window to the past. Which star would show him the light from five weeks ago? Which was the window to the night Buffy died? And if he failed here tonight, would the light in his heart go out like a dead star, would his life be nothing but darkness?

Giles was beginning to get frantic. He turned his watch until it caught the moonlight. 10:07. He looked up at the dome above him, with its artificial sky and moon, and wondered how far the full moon had risen in the real night sky. Less than two hours until the ritual.

He backtracked down the aisle he had just come from, aiming for the seats on the other side of the theater, the ones he hadn't checked yet. A teenager in an aisle seat he had passed a moment earlier flagged him down.

"Hey, Mister, you that English dude who brings Dawn to school?"

"Yes," Giles answered, kneeling beside the boy's chair. "Have you seen her?"

The student ignored him and turned towards his friend, punching the other teenager in the arm. "I told you that other guy wasn't him."

His friend just shrugged and shoved back, but Giles was dragging the first boy around by the arm to face him.

"What other guy?"

The teenager wrenched his arm from Giles' grasp, smoothed out the fabric of his shirt, and scowled at the older man. "There was another guy in here. He had an accent like yours too. 'Bout a half hour ago, he was in here asking around for Dawn. I told Rick he wasn't you. That guy was dressed all funky, like Obi wan Kenobe or something with the weird robe thing going on. I told Rick the guy who brings Dawn to school is too much of a tight-ass to dress like that." The young teen looked down at Giles' Oxford shirt, his silk tie, his corduroy jacket, then looked back up with a raised brow and a smirk.

"Did she leave with him?"

"Yeah, I saw them go out the back door together."

Giles swore with such vehemence, that the teen next to him seemed to reconsider his evaluation of the "English dude."

Giles exited the observatory and planetarium, was dialing his cell phone as he jogged to his car. Marcus took Dawn at least a half hour ago. Christ, they could be anywhere by now, were probably ready to perform the ritual, and he had no idea where to even begin looking. Giles looked at his watch again: 10:15. They were running out of time.

The phone was ringing. Willow answered, sounding perhaps a bit surprised that Giles had figured out how to work his new toy. He started the car as he updated her, then asked her to bring everyone to the house. Somehow Marcus had known Dawn would be at the observatory for a field trip, had planned for it in fact. It was possible he had been watching them all this time, mapping out their routines and schedules. The Magic Box wouldn't be safe. The house, at least, would require an invite, so Willow and Tara would do their spell there. Oh, and be sure to bring weapons.

He hung up the phone, tossed it on the seat next to him. He white-knuckled the steering wheel, grinding his teeth in frustration, trying to focus on the road. He hoped Hank Summers had the sense to leave, because if he was still there when Giles walked in, he couldn't promise not to deck the man.

He arrived before the others, not surprising since he was driving close to 50 mph on the city streets. The lights had all been turned off, and the house was dark. It appeared Hank had more sense than Giles would have given him credit for.

He fished for his keys as he strode up the steps, remembering a moment later that Hank wouldn't have been able to lock up. He turned the door handle just as he felt something beneath his foot. He took a step forward and reached inside the doorway for the porch light.

Placed on the porch directly in front of the doorway:

A folded piece of paper, now marked with the tread of Giles' shoe. On top Buffy's class ring, the one Dawn had taken to wearing on a chain around her neck. Next to it the silver cross Angel had given Buffy, the one she had been buried with. Giles pocketed them both and opened the note.

Watcher- Midnight. The old school library. Alone. — M.

He heard Xander's car pull in behind his, but he was still standing in shock when they came up the steps.

"Giles?" Willow approached him, and he merely handed her the note. She read it and always the optimist, replied, "At least we know where they're doing the ritual now." She passed the note back to Xander and Anya.

"He has Dawn," Giles said simply.

Xander read the note, crumpled it in a ball, and threw it at a tree. "Does everything in this town have to happen over the Hellmouth? Why do we even bother with the research and patrol? We should just set up camp in the library."

"Hey guys," Tara broke in. "Maybe we should go inside. It is after dark."

They filed inside, carrying in the weapons they had brought, Giles still sullen and quiet. He leaned against the archway, next to the stairs.

"Okay, what I don't get," Anya said, "is why send Giles a note? I mean they have everything they need for the ritual: they have Buffy's body and Dawn's blood. We can't stop them if we don't know where they are. So why send Giles a note telling us where they are?"

"He wants me to come to him," Giles murmured. "He needs his matched set: Watcher and Slayer."

Giles padded up the stairs, leaving the rest in shocked silence.

When he returned, Xander was waiting for him at the bottom.

"You're not actually thinking of going are you? By yourself? 'Cause I thought watchers were generally supposed to be smart."

"I don't have a choice, Xander. He has Dawn."

It was then that the young man noticed what Giles was doing with his hands. "Oh. My. God. Where did you get that? You know, unless they started making wooden bullets, I don't think that's gonna do much for you."

Giles was loading a clip into a sleek 9mm semi-automatic pistol. He checked the safety and slipped it in his jacket pocket.

"Xander's right. You can't go alone. It's suicide." Willow was standing in front of the door. As if she could stop him.

Giles looked at each of them. "Marcus doesn't care whether Dawn lives or dies. But I don't think he'll kill her. He only needs some of her blood. He wants me, badly enough to make a trade, I'll wager. But if any of you come with me, he'll just as likely kill her. I need you to stay behind. I need you each to do your jobs. The plan, remember? Willow, you and Tara prepare to do your spell here in the living room. Wait for my signal. Xander, you and Anya—"

"Wait outside the school for you to get killed," Xander finished in disgust. "Don't you get it? He wants to turn you into a vampire!"

"That's why you have the most important job, Xander." Giles reached over and picked up one of the crossbows they had stacked in the foyer. He handed it to his young friend. "When Buffy and I come out of that school, if we aren't holding up crosses in our hands, you can't hesitate. A bolt through each of us."

"Oh, man," Xander whispered, as he turned the weapon over in his hands. "You gotta be kidding me."

"Anya," Giles said, handing a crossbow to her as well. "You watch over the back of the school. The same thing goes for you."

She nodded as she took it. "Ok. Wanna live. I can do this. I can shoot you."

Giles smiled. Gallows humor. "You needn't sound so pleased at the idea." The smile faded. Serious again. "When Dawn comes out, you get her somewhere safe and make her stay there." He didn't mention the possibility of Dawn being turned. He couldn't think about that. He just couldn't. Dawn would be fine. She had to be.

He looked Anya and then Xander straight in the eye. "Remember, both of you: If I walk out of there without a cross, I'll know the plan. I'll know where each one of you is, and I'll be coming after you. You can't hesitate, and you may only get one shot."

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?” Anya asked. “Because I must say that you’re not good with the pep talks.”

Giles gave them each a hug. Willow began to cry, and he kissed her tenderly on the forehead, as he never would have done back in high school, as he never would have done even five weeks ago. “Shhh... Don’t cry for me before I’m gone. Tomorrow this will all be over, and we’ll all go out to celebrate at the nicest, most expensive restaurant in town. My treat.”

Willow nodded, but she didn’t look very convinced.

They waved him off at the door, looking for all the world like they knew they’d never see him again.

He parked in his usual spot. Over there was where Principal Snyder had parked. And over there Mr. Whitmore. Ms. Barton next to him. And right there was where Jenny had parked. Jenny. Maybe he would see her yet tonight. He wished it could take away the pain of knowing that, if he failed here tonight, Buffy would be gone, and he would never see her again. No, not even Jenny could fill that space.

He double-checked his pockets. Two large, thin crosses in his inside jacket pocket. One for him and one for Buffy. His gun in his right jacket pocket, a bottle of holy water and the cell phone in the other. Stakes secreted away in every place he could fit them. He leaned across to the glove compartment, pulled out two more crosses, and then slipped them in his other inside jacket pocket. No sense getting shot by Xander simply because he had lost his cross. For good measure, he took a third and fit it in the pocket with the 9mm.

He stepped out of his car, left the keys on the seat. Xander would take them when he came in a bit. If Giles was turned tonight, he didn’t want to leave his demon self any avenue of escape. That was one feature of his new car that was a blessing. Giles lacked the skills to hotwire the more sophisticated system of a BMW.

He glanced over to the passenger side. He imagined that’s where she would be standing. “Well, Buffy, here I go. Wish me luck.”

He walked towards the remains of Sunnydale High, his back straight, his demeanor calm and resolved. He wasn’t so vain that he couldn’t admit he was scared. More scared perhaps than when he was tied to that chair in the mansion. More scared than when they had pulled him, bleeding and in agony, from the RV. More scared than when Buffy had gone to the fight the Master. More scared, because this time it wasn’t just Buffy’s life he had placed on the line, but her immortal soul.

He entered the burnt out ruins for the first time since his own hand had leveled the building. The residue of smoke and ash still hung in the air and burned the back of his throat. He picked his way through the familiar and yet changed hallways, the hair on the back of his head prickling with nerves and his right hand clenched tight around the 9mm in his pocket.

He stopped just inside the cafeteria. The plastic tables and chairs had melted to form abstract sculptures in various shades of ash gray. He pulled the cell phone from his pocket and pressed three for Xander.

“I’m in,” he whispered. “I haven’t encountered any other vampires. If we’re lucky, it may just be Marcus and Nicole. You and Anya should come to the school now. Do a sweep of the whole area. Don’t let anyone else get in the building.”

He hung up and dialed Willow and Tara. He gave them a similar update, made sure they had everything ready for their own spell. “You’ll have to start on my signal exactly, not before, not after.

We want to give Buffy as much time as possible to get back in her body, but if we do it too soon, you'll force her into her dead body. When Marcus' spell takes effect, she would just be lost."

He didn't hang up this time, just slipped the phone in the breast pocket of his jacket, the mic facing out. He took the cross from beside the pistol, and switched it to his left hand. His right returned to cradle the gun.

He continued on towards the library. She was standing where the doors used to be, her back to him. She turned when he approached, her preternatural hearing either vampire or slayer or greater than the sum of both. Long legs, clad in black leather pants, strolled slowly towards him. She crossed her arms, the hem of her royal blue half top hiking further up her midriff. She had a good half-foot on Buffy, though in Nicole's face and the curves of her body, she was plainly a girl who had died at fifteen. Her long blond hair was braided, as it had been the night he had seen her in the cemetery. Giles was already planning how that waist length cord could be used against her in battle. Any watcher worth his salt would have asked her to cut it. Of course, if Nicole were anything like Buffy, she probably flatly refused.

"Uncle," she called with a grin. "Watcher's early."

Giles thrust the cross out in front of him, and she hissed as her game face slipped on. He forced her backwards into the library, holding her two feet ahead of him with the simple wooden cross.

His eyes searched for Dawn first and found her sitting near the space that had once been the stairs to the stacks. They had her bound, hand and foot, and gagged. Bloody bastards.

Her eyes lit up when she saw him. Giles imagined this is what Buffy must have felt when she had reached Dawn at the top of the scaffolding. Those eyes filled with such trust, such blind faith in him, and the certain knowledge that he would make everything all right. Giles knew that he would do anything, give anything, that was needed to justify that faith.

Buffy's words to him echoed in his head. *Then the last thing she'll see is me protecting her.*

"Come here, Nicole." The voice was deep, resonant. A strong British accent with the slight lilt of a man who had spent years in France. "The Watcher is no threat to us."

Giles looked for the voice and found Marcus sitting in lotus position next to the crack above the Hellmouth. The man had been 56 when he died, dark black hair graying at the temples, body thin and gaunt from six years of mourning Nicole. But his sharp green eyes were cold and ruthless. If anything, his grief had strengthened the iron in those eyes. He swam in the dark burgundy cloak he had chosen for this occasion, giving the appearance of a devil who could not fit in a monk's robes.

Marcus smiled at him, a smile of genuine affection that turned Giles' blood cold. "Come here, my friend. Let us have a look at you. I've only seen you at a distance."

"We are not friends." Giles didn't move, didn't lower the cross.

"No. I would say we are almost brothers." Marcus rose with the grace and nobility of 18th century British aristocracy. He walked away from Dawn, towards the melted remains of the book cage. It was then that Giles first saw her, or what he imagined to be her. Marcus had at least had enough respect to cover Buffy's body with a sheet. Giles hoped he could save Dawn from the sight of her sister, dead and buried now for five weeks.

Marcus looked down over the still form beneath the sheet, and Giles tried to use his distraction to get to Dawn. But Nicole was faster and within moments was sitting behind Dawn, had pulled the girl into her lap no less. Nicole brushed her fingers through Dawn's hair, pulled it back from the girl's neck. The slayer retained the visage of the vampire as she ran her open mouth up and down the girl's neck, her demon yellow eyes never leaving Giles' as she teased him with the girl's life. Nicole's fangs scratched against the skin slightly, drawing the smallest drop of blood. She lapped it up, smiling at Giles as she did.

Dawn was crying, but her eyes never wavered from him, never faltered in her trust of him.

Giles focused again on Marcus, who was still standing over Buffy's dead body. The vampire sighed and then turned to study Buffy's watcher for a moment. "I saw her once, you know, when she was still alive. Three or four years ago, I think. She was magnificent in battle. I've made a point of looking up each slayer when I can, when they last long enough.

"Nearly two hundred years since my Nicole Called her replacement. And in that time there have been nearly a hundred slayers come and gone. Ninety-four to be exact. I think that averages out to about two years per slayer. Barely two years of fighting for a world that they will never live in. Two years is just an average. Some get more, like your Buffy. Some get less, like my Nicole. But all of them get far less than they deserve.

"Ninety-four slayers I have seen come and go, but none compare to your Buffy. You did know how exceptional she was, didn't you?"

"She was the best," Giles answered, still standing in the doorway, still bearing his cross like a shield. His gaze traveled back and forth between Marcus and Dawn.

"Yes, of course you knew. You were her Watcher." Marcus left Buffy's side, strolled back to the Hellmouth, and then turned to face Giles again. "I have been waiting for her for nearly two hundred years. For a slayer who could match my Nicole, who would be worthy of her. I knew it, when I saw your slayer that day. I knew it would be her. And so I have waited. I have learned what I could about you and her. Her friends. Her family. I have waited for her death, knowing that even for the best of slayers, I would not be waiting long."

Giles looked at the other watcher with contempt. "Were you too afraid to face her when she was alive? Did you already know that she would best you? Did you already know that your precious Nicole, who couldn't last six months as a slayer when she was alive, that she wouldn't last six minutes against Buffy now?"

He heard Dawn scream and the cocky arrogance drained out of him.

Nicole's hand had wrenched the girl's neck sharply to the side. Dawn's face scrunched up in pain and fear, as Nicole smiled and bared her fangs. "Watch your tongue, mortal. Or I might not watch mine." She licked Dawn from collarbone to ear, and then released her hold on the girl's head. Dawn dropped her chin to her chest as she sobbed.

"Now, Nicole," Marcus admonished. "Play nice. Dawn is very nearly your sister now." He focused again on Giles, as if they were friendly neighbors who had needed to stop gossiping long enough to bring unruly children back in line. "Now where was I? Ah, yes. Your rather unfair accusations. I think the pair of us could have taken your slayer if we had wanted. We could have turned her into one of us that very first night we saw her. But I have never killed a slayer. And I never will.

"Perhaps there is a bit of the watcher still left in me. I suspect, though, that it is more a reluctance to steal what precious little time these girls have or to cause another watcher the grief I lived with for so many years. No, I have never killed a slayer. Sometimes I have watched them die. Sometimes I have even saved them.

"You must know about the ritual by now. The Watcher's Council may be a bunch of heartless bastards, but they do train us well. I'm going to give you a gift, Rupert Giles. I'm going to give you back your Slayer. More than that, I'm going to give you both immortality, so you shall never be parted from her again."

Giles drew the 9mm semi-automatic pistol from his jacket pocket and released the safety. "Like hell you are."

He met Dawn's eyes again, tried to convey to her in a look that everything would be okay. Her wide eyes watched him, still reflecting her absolute faith in him. Again Buffy's words rang through his head. *Then the last thing she'll see is me protecting her.*

Marcus laughed, as if Giles had pulled a good prank on him. "If you know about the ritual, then you know I only need some of the girl's blood. Doesn't matter if she's dead or alive when I take it. So go ahead and shoot her. Her death won't interfere with my plans."

"No, but mine will." Giles tipped the barrel up and placed it beneath his own chin.

Dawn screamed, and it cut straight to Giles' heart. He didn't want her to see this, but there was no other way. They couldn't make him a vampire if he were already dead. And if he pulled the trigger now, with the gun pressed beneath his chin, aimed back and up towards the base of his brain, if he pulled the trigger like this, he would be dead before he hit the floor.

Marcus knew all of this. He paled, if that were possible for a vampire, and then he asked, "Why? When I am giving you the very thing you have prayed for all these weeks?"

"Dawn walks out of here *now*. Or I pull the trigger."

Marcus narrowed his eyes. "You're bluffing. You're not going to kill yourself while the girl watches."

Giles' hand didn't even shake as it pressed the barrel closer against his neck, one finger poised over the trigger. No fear. No doubt. Just peace. Ripper had been quite the card shark in his youth, had earned his keep by it on occasion. Marcus would be able to read nothing in his expression. "You need me, Marcus. You can turn Buffy after I'm dead, but you'll have no influence over her without me. And all of this will have been for nothing. You want my Slayer? Then you need me."

Marcus nodded, conceding to Giles' logic. "All right. You win. But you'll of course allow me to take some of her blood. Not just because you can't stop me, but because you want me to finish this. You want me to perform the ritual. And after Dawn leaves, you'll willingly allow yourself to be turned. Because when your Buffy wakes, she will need her Watcher. And your duty will call to you, even then."

Giles did not lower his gun; he simply waited as Marcus walked to Nicole and Dawn, as he lifted the terrified girl to her feet. He produced a chalice and a knife from inside the folds of his robe. He sliced her arm in three places, holding the cup beneath to catch the flow. Giles could see that the cuts hurt, but he knew they were not serious. Dawn would be fine. She would live and walk out of here. And Xander and Anya would see that she was safe.

When the chalice was half-filled, Marcus set it aside. He removed the gag from her mouth and tied it around the wounds he had just inflicted. Then with the knife, he cut the bonds at her hands and her feet. He framed her face between his palms and bent her head, placing a kiss on her forehead, as if she were the daughter he had to let go.

He turned back to Giles, pulling Dawn against his chest and placing the knife against her throat. "Now, Rupert, come the rest of the way into the library. Go over and stand beside your slayer's body. I want to make sure you don't try to slip out with the girl when she leaves."

Giles did as instructed, the barrel of the gun beginning to bruise where he pressed it beneath his chin. "Okay, Marcus. Let her go."

The vampire removed the knife and gave her a shove towards the door. Dawn hesitated, like a deer caught in headlights. She froze, her eyes focused on Giles as she mouthed the word "no" over and over again without voice.

"Dawn, go on," he said gently. "Xander and Anya will be waiting outside for you."

She didn't move. She just shook her head, sobbing, her lips still forming the word "no" repeatedly. Giles realized that Dawn had reached her breaking point. Her mother. Buffy. Her father trying to take

her to Spain. And now here he was, holding a gun to his own head as she watched. This was the second time someone had offered up their life for hers. It was too much for the girl, and she had snapped in front of his eyes. But he needed her to get moving *now*.

"Dawn, I know it's hard, but you're going to be okay. You have to go now."

Her head shaking. *No, no, no, no, no, no, nononononono...*

"Dawn, I'm dead whether you go or stay. Please go. Let this mean something. Be brave. Live for me."

Her mouth closed, and then her eyes. When they opened again, there was acceptance.

Giles smiled for her, so like the final smile he had given Buffy as he lay dying in the gas station. "There's my girl. Go on, Dawn. I love you."

She still had no voice. She simply mouthed the words. *I love you.*

And then she turned and was running as fast as her legs could carry her, was running out of the library and out of Giles' life forever.

"Now then," Marcus was saying, "The girl is safe, and you can put down the gun. We both know you're not going to shoot yourself now. We both know you're going to let me finish the ceremony and you're going to let us make you into one of us."

"How can you be so sure of that?"

"I know what it is to lose a slayer. The slayer is everything to her watcher, more than daughter, more than lover, more than mother or sister or friend. There is nothing else in your life that will ever match it. We have no choice. It's in our blood. For a thousand years upon a thousand years, the Watcher's Council bred us to it. Like cattle. Bred us to crave the slayer. To treasure her above all else. And then after she is gone, your life is hollow. There is no purpose, no meaning. It is as if she takes your very soul with her when she goes.

"You want her back. Would do anything to get her back. And when you have her back, it is the sweetest thing in the world."

Nicole had stepped beside her watcher, and he pulled her against him, kissed her on forehead and then each cheek until finally they kissed on the lips as lovers.

"You can put down the gun, Rupert, because I know your heart as well as my own."

Giles allowed the gun to fall, clicked the safety back on, and slipped it in his pocket.

"I have a request."

Marcus smiled. "He asks me nicely, as if we were friends. Perhaps there is hope for us after all."

Giles glanced down at the still form beneath the sheet. "I want it to be Buffy. If I'm to be turned into a vampire, I want Buffy to be my Sire."

Marcus nodded without deliberation. "It is appropriate. There is a connection between Sire and Childe. It will only deepen the connection that exists between Watcher and Slayer. I will allow it."

Giles sat down in the rubble beside Buffy's body. Not much time now. Marcus and Nicole joined him, sitting on either side, the three of them forming a strange circle around the body of the finest slayer of them all.

"I have great plans for the four of us."

Giles only raised one eyebrow.

"It will be different than Liverpool. It will work this time. Nicole and I were not enough. Mindless minions just can't get the job done. But two slayers and two watchers... We will destroy the Watcher's Council once and for all."

"Why?" Giles asked.

"Do you even need to ask? Think what will happen when there are no more watchers. There will be no one hunting down potential slayers, stealing their childhoods, and training them to be killers.

There will be no one to tell the one Slayer that she must go out night after night to fight and possibly die. There will still be slayers, but they will not know their power or their destiny. They will make their own choices and live their own lives. Long, full lives. They will die of old age, tucked in their beds and surrounded by children and grandchildren. Think of it, my friend. We will free the slayers. You and I and ours. Your Buffy will be the last slayer to die performing her duty. Think of that legacy.”

Giles shook his head. “I think the real Marcus Somerton, the human Marcus Somerton, would disagree with you. As do I.

“I don’t know who came up with the idea of slayers and watchers. It isn’t fair. I know it isn’t fair to ask these girls to die to save the rest of us. It isn’t fair, but it’s necessary. Without them, the world would have been lost long ago. As a watcher, I can’t prevent the inevitable. All I can do is hold it off as long as possible, to give her all my knowledge and training so she can do what she must do. I would give my life for hers, but there are times I don’t have that choice. There are times when the Slayer must stand alone between us and total annihilation.

“And I think at those times, when given those choices, I think the Slayer is a willing sacrifice. God knows Buffy didn’t choose her destiny. Sometimes she wished to be just a normal girl, whose biggest concern was what to wear to the Bronze on a Friday night. And more than once, she has even turned her back on her duty. But she has always come back. In the end, she has always accepted her destiny, embraced it as part of who she is. I think if you gave her a choice today between being the Slayer and being a normal girl, she would choose to be the Slayer. Because to refuse those gifts would be to refuse the greater part of herself.”

Marcus chuckled darkly. “I think after you are turned, you will see things our way.”

“I have no doubt of that. But it doesn’t make what I’ve said any less true.”

Marcus looked at his watch. Five minutes to midnight. Time to begin the ritual. “Nicole, fetch the blood.”

Giles felt his heart begin to race, his palms to sweat, and his head to spin. *Dear, sweet Buffy, let this work. And if it doesn’t, please forgive me for what I have done to you.*

He stood back, near Nicole, as Marcus performed the ceremony. Dawn’s blood, his magic, and Buffy’s body. *Not too soon. Not too soon. Wait for it.*

The incantations, the chanting, the incense, the markings in blood. They lasted until just a few minutes past midnight. Marcus lifted his arms and called out the final words of the spell. At the same time, Giles bent low and whispered into the cell phone, “Now, Willow!”

“Revertete tempum! Quid mortuus sum fiam vivus. Nunc! Nunc!” Marcus’ words rang out through the bombed out shell of the library. The Hellmouth below them thrummed with the magic of his spell. *Reverse time! What was dead becomes living. Now! Now!*

Giles watched as Buffy’s form began to glow. Slowly, the weeks of death lifted from her appearance, her sunken cheeks becoming full, her dull pallor regaining its color, the blue of her lips turning to pink. And then he saw her chest rise with breath, her muscles twitch with life. The glow surrounding her flashed a brilliant blue and then was gone. Lying there before him was Buffy, alive and beautiful. She looked as if she were sleeping and nothing more.

Giles had waited for this moment, prepared himself for it. His left hand had unscrewed the cap of the holy water while in his pocket. Now he pulled it out and moved to throw it on Marcus before he could come near Buffy.

If he had prepared for this moment, then Nicole had expected it. She was fast, faster than a slayer, faster than a vampire. She was greater than the sum of both. She had his arm and was throwing him against the wall, the holy water spilling out of his hand and onto the ground. Some dripped on her

arm, and she screamed as it burned her skin, but still she didn't let go of him. The flask was empty. She still held him by one arm, and now the other took him by the throat, shoved him into the mangled book cage behind him. She held him there by hand and throat. Giles was helpless. He could only watch in misery as Marcus bent over Buffy's living form.

I'm sorry. Buffy, my love, I'm so sorry. I've failed you. I've cost you everything in this life and the next.

Marcus transformed into his vampire mask, opened his mouth over her neck.

And then Buffy's eyes opened.

Dear God above, her eyes were opening.

"You know, you shouldn't take things that don't belong to you."

Her voice was the sweetest sound that he had ever heard.

And bam— she had head butted the vampire leaning over her. Marcus stumbled back as Buffy flipped onto her feet. "Especially other people's bodies." Wham— she kicked him right in the chest. He landed flat on his back several feet from her. "People get really touchy about things like that."

Nicole had turned wide eyes towards the battle waging between her watcher and Buffy. Her grip on Giles had slackened. More importantly, her attention had drifted. He reached into an inside jacket pocket with his free hand and pulled out a cross, thankful that he had put them on each side of his jacket. He pressed it against her bare stomach, branding her with its mark. She screamed and released him, jumping back from the cross. Pure hate filled her eyes, and she moved towards Giles, determined to rip his heart out and feed it to him, and to hell with whatever momentary pain his cross caused her.

But Buffy had seen Giles' predicament, and before Nicole could take a step, she found herself whipped back by the length of her braid. Buffy wrapped it twice around her neck, pulling tight.

"Anyone ever tell you it's time for a haircut?"

"Buffy!" Giles called, tossing her one very pointy stake.

She caught it in one motion, and then tugged on the end of the braid. Nicole spun out like a top, and when she came to a stop, Buffy stabbed forward with the stake. The Vampire Slayer's eyes went round before she crumbled to dust.

"No!" Marcus bellowed, recovered now from the shock of a living, souled Buffy and the pounding she had so recently delivered. He sprinted across the ten feet that separated him from his slayer, as if by reaching her, he could hold her together. His hands touched only dust as they moved through the space she had occupied not half a second before.

Buffy spun and easily delivered a second blow with her stake. Marcus didn't seem to notice. His eyes never left the dust that filtered through his hands until he also disintegrated, joining his slayer, his dust mingling with hers.

Buffy brushed herself off and looked up at Giles with a grin. "I think you were pretty generous when you gave her six minutes. I don't think that could have been more than two."

Giles swallowed. He couldn't speak. The reality of what had almost happened choked him. They had come this close to being turned, both of them. Worse than that, he had been moments from losing Buffy's soul, from damning her to oblivion or to an eternal prison. He began to shake. His knees failed him. He collapsed onto the floor. Buffy leapt to his side, wrapping her arms around him. To his utter humiliation, he began to retch, his stomach purging its contents onto the ground in front of him. Buffy simply held him, rocked him as he doubled over again and again, her fingers softly stroking his hair. When he was finished, he closed his eyes and leaned back into her embrace, his face burning with shame.

"Are you okay now?"

He nodded wearily.

“Good.”

He looked up into her face, the tears glistening in his eyes. His golden angel, his beautiful slayer. She was warm and alive, and Marcus was right. Having her back was the sweetest thing in the world.

She traced her fingers along his jaw and smiled brilliantly. “I would kiss you now, but... You know with the throwing up, maybe that can wait until we get home and you brush your teeth.”

He laughed then, a full-bodied laugh that shook his sides. He wrapped his arms tightly around her, still laughing, until the laughter gave way to tears, and he was sobbing in her arms. He held her tighter, as he sobbed with the grief and misery he had tried to keep contained for five long weeks.

Bloody hell. What’s wrong with you, Giles? You’re falling to pieces, and you’re jumping from one extreme to another without any control.

But Giles realized that where Buffy was concerned, there could be no control, only surrender.

When the flood had slowed to a trickle, he drew back from her, wiped his face on his sleeves. His eyes found the dust that had been Marcus and Nicole. Softly he whispered, “That could have been me.”

She followed his line of sight, looked back to him. “What?”

“Marcus. He could have been me. His grief after he lost his slayer. It destroyed him. It had barely been five weeks for me, and God help me, I wanted him to do the ritual. I wanted you back so badly; I didn’t care about the cost or the risks. Marcus had lost Nicole for six years. What would I have been after six years, Buffy? Would I have let some stray vamp take me, just to end it, to end the pain?”

“Giles, look at me.” She took his face in her hands. “You could have never become Marcus. You’re nothing like him. Through this whole thing, you’ve done nothing but think of me. When the risks were too high, you told Willow no. When you thought there was a chance, you came into my bedroom, prayed to me, wanted only to know what was best for *me*. Marcus never thought of Nicole. Not once. He didn’t care what she would have wanted. He didn’t care that she would have never wanted to become a vampire. He only cared about his own grief and pain.

“No, Giles, you could never become Marcus.” With gentle fingers, she cleared away his tears, smoothed his brow, and fixed his hair. “What do you say we go home now? There’s a lot of people who are going to be happy to see us.”

He nodded. “Home sounds good.”

They heard a chorus of cheers from his breast pocket, and Giles chuckled. He pulled out the cell phone and looked at it. He had completely forgotten they had an audience. “We’ll be home in a little while, Willow. See you and the others then.” He clicked it off, dialed three for Xander. “We’re coming out. Be ready.”

Watcher and Slayer stood, and arm in arm they walked towards the exit.

Chapter 6:
Bittersweet Homecomings

Buffy pulled her watcher back from the entrance of the school. He looked at her, a puzzled expression creasing his face and a giddy grin lifting the corners of his mouth. She raised her eyebrows and stared at him expectantly.

"What is it, Buffy?"

She sighed and rolled her eyes. "Do you wanna get shot? 'Cause I've been dead twice now, and believe me, it's not all it's cracked up to be."

Giles had the grace to look contrite as he fumbled for the crosses in his jacket. "Sorry, sorry." *Get your head together, Giles. You're starting to make stupid mistakes.*

He passed one to her and gripped his tightly. He took her by the hand, leading her from the school, both of them displaying their crosses high in the air. Xander saw them and let out a whoop of joy. He jumped in the air a couple of times before he took off running towards them, flinging the crossbow off to the side as he went.

Giles frowned. "That was one of my best bows."

Xander managed to actually knock the Slayer off her feet when he reached her, both of them tumbling to the ground in a tangle of limbs.

Dawn saw them at a distance, too, but she was not prepared for the sight of her sister. Dawn's eyes rolled up, and her knees buckled. She crumpled in a heap.

"Dawn!" Buffy called, untangling herself from Xander.

"Oh my God," Xander added, also pulling himself to his feet.

Giles, being the only one not laid out on the ground, made it to her side first. He gathered her into his arms, seeking out her pulse, strong, and placing his hand against her forehead, cool. He turned to Buffy as she and Xander reached him, assuring his slayer, "It's probably only a little shock from seeing you, mixed with the stress she was under today and the blood loss. She'll be fine in a little bit." He checked her arm where the gag was tied. "The cuts have stopped bleeding. Let's just get her home."

He slipped his hands under her back and knees, scooped up the young girl he had been willing to die for, and stood.

Anya rounded the corner of the school at that moment. Took in the sight of Giles holding an unconscious Dawn. Xander, with his arm around Buffy. None of them holding crosses. And Xander's crossbow in a heap 25 feet away. As if there were a struggle.

"Ahh," she screamed, as she raised her own bow. "You killed Xander! My Xander!"

"No, no, no," Xander insisted, waving his hands in front of him. "We're not vampires."

Buffy had already darted to Giles' side and pulled out the cross she knew was there in his jacket pocket. She swung it first in front of Xander's face, then in front of Giles'. She held it out for Anya to see. "Not vampires, Anya."

"Oh, good," Anya cried, as she dropped the crossbow and leapt into her lover's arms.

Giles looked down at the discarded weapon. "Does no one remember that those are expensive pieces of equipment?"

Anya kissed Xander soundly, and then released him. "I'm very happy that you're not dead. Or a vampire." She remembered Buffy standing a few feet away. She smiled even brighter and bounced over to give the slayer a hug. "I am also very happy that you're not dead anymore. Everyone was very sad while you were."

Giles cleared his throat. "While I would like nothing more than to stand out here and enjoy Buffy's miraculous resurrection..." He adjusted Dawn's weight in his arms. "Dawn is beginning to get heavy."

"Right, right," they all responded as they turned to the parking lot.

Giles cleared his throat a second time. He tilted his head to the side. "Are we forgetting something?"

They looked to where his head was pointed. "Oh, yeah," Anya exclaimed as she fetched her crossbow.

"Xander?" Giles said.

"Yeah, yeah," he grumbled as he dashed the 25 feet to retrieve his.

"I wish you would take more care with those," Giles scolded, as he started walking towards the parking lot. "A good crossbow's awfully expensive."

Buffy patted him on the back as she followed him to the car. "Nice to see you've got your priorities straight."

Giles shifted Dawn in his arms, glanced down on her sleeping face. "I do have my priorities straight. Those crossbows could be a liability if they lock up on you in battle just because Xander and Anya couldn't take a moment to lay them down proper. They might have bent the frames or snapped the catch."

Buffy smiled as she opened the door to his car, helped him place Dawn across the back seat, and buckled her up. Xander came running up behind them with Giles' keys. He pressed the remote entry switch for the trunk, nodding his head appreciatively as it popped open.

"Hey, Giles," Xander said. "Anyone ever tell you how much cooler your new car is than your old one?" He dumped his crossbow in the 'boot' as Giles would call it. Anya's soon followed.

Giles reached for his keys, but Buffy nabbed them first. "I don't suppose my favorite watcher would let me take it for a spin?"

Giles held out his hand patiently. "No, I don't suppose he would."

"Aw, come on," Buffy pouted. "Isn't this supposed to be Buffy's-back-from-the-dead Day? Like when the birthday girl gets whatever she wants for the day?"

He snatched the keys from her hand. "I rather think this is Buffy's-back-from-the-dead-and-I'm-going-to-at-least-get-her-home-in-one-piece Day." He climbed into the driver's seat. "Besides, one brush with death today is enough for me."

Buffy bit back her protest and dutifully sat in the passenger's seat. Xander and Anya got into their own car, and at a little after 12:30 in the morning, not even a half an hour after Buffy had returned to her living body, they were all on their way back to the house on Revello Drive. The house that was once again Buffy's.

As Giles pulled onto the main road, he noticed that his slayer's hand had crept over to find his own. He flipped his hand into hers and laced their fingers together. They stayed like that, in silence, until he pulled into the driveway and the necessity to shift into park forced him to reclaim his hand.

Dawn woke as Giles moved to lift her from the car. He knelt on the ground beside the backseat, waiting for her to open her eyes and motioning for Buffy to wait beyond her sister's line of sight. Willow had already come barreling out of the house to envelope Buffy in a bear hug, Tara following close behind. When Giles motioned them back, the three women simply waited by the passenger's side of the car, behind where Dawn was still sitting in the back.

Xander had parked his car on the side of the road, so when Dawn began to stir, he and Anya quickly slipped in behind Giles to smile down on her.

Dawn groaned softly as she blinked open her eyes and looked up at the concerned faces of Giles, Xander, and Anya. She smiled, her eyes filling with tears, as she stretched out one hand to touch Giles' face, as if to assure herself she wasn't dreaming. "Hi," she said quietly.

"Hi," he answered back, just as softly.

And then her arms came up around his neck, and she was clinging to him as if he might float away. He rocked her gently as she cried, shaking his head at Buffy when she moved to come closer.

"I thought... I had... lost you... too," Dawn managed between choking sobs.

"Shhhh," he whispered in her ear, still rocking her, still stroking her hair back along her head and neck. "Everything's all right now, luv. Everything's all right."

After a moment she quieted and drew back from him, wiping away her tears on the palms of her hands. He would have offered her his handkerchief, but he had emptied his pockets of everything but the weapons he would need against Marcus and Nicole.

"Giles, I was dreaming that Buffy was in the schoolyard with you. It seemed so real. I thought you were both ghosts, that you were dead too."

He smiled, smoothed back her hair, and tucked the long strands behind one ear. "Dawn, I have something to tell you. I didn't want to say anything before. I didn't want to get your hopes up, and then have it not work. It's rather a long story, which you will get in full tomorrow when we'll have more energy to tell it. The short of it is that it involves magic, and folding time, and summoning spirits back from the dead."

"Buffy?" she whispered.

He nodded. "Your sister is alive. She's right here. You weren't dreaming, Dawn."

Buffy had tiptoed around the front of the car and now came into her sister's field of vision. "Hey, kiddo."

Dawn beamed, the sorrow and grief melting off of her, her shoulders lifting as if a weight had been taken from them. She stood on shaky legs, and Giles stepped aside for her to cross to her sister. They embraced, Dawn and Buffy, and if their last embrace on the platform all those weeks ago had held all the sorrow in the world as they parted, this one consumed all the joy in the world as they reunited.

The Slayerettes settled their Slayer on the couch, the rest of them arranged around her, and Dawn curled up into her lap, her arm cleaned and bandaged. They had a thousand questions for Buffy, but no one was taking turns, and it soon became a tangled mess. They all laughed at the absurdity of the situation for several moments before Willow piped up with the question they had all been asking, but in different ways:

"What was it like being dead, Buffy?"

"Well the first time I died with the Master, that was only a couple minutes. This time was way different." Buffy's fingers were playing with her sister's hair, and Dawn was dozing off and on beneath the gentle touch. It was way past her bedtime. "There was the light, and a tunnel I think. I don't know. I didn't really go into the light."

Buffy looked down to see if her sister was sleeping yet. She appeared to be. Buffy continued on in almost a whisper. "I think I felt Mom there. It was nice. But I needed to know that Dawn was okay. When I turned away from the light, it was just gone. I spent the rest of the time as a ghost, just following people around and stuff."

“Wow,” Xander said. The others simply nodded in agreement.

“Yeah, it was really weird,” Buffy added. “I didn’t feel different. I still got tired and fell asleep, which is something you wouldn’t think you’d have to do after you’re dead, huh? And the strangest part: I always woke up next to my grave, and I don’t know why. Do you know why, Giles?”

He looked up, startled, as if his mind had been wandering off somewhere else. “Hmm? Oh, no, I... I don’t know why that would happen, Buffy. There’s a lot we know about demons and monsters, but not much about what happens to people after they die.”

She nodded thoughtfully and glanced down at her sleeping sister. “Yeah, it didn’t feel a whole lot different. Although, I didn’t get hungry, which is a good thing, ‘cause I couldn’t have eaten anything anyway. But mostly it was like being myself, but no one could see me. Walking through things was kinda wiggly. I tried not to do that.

“And then the whole thing with Marcus and Nicole taking my body. It was pretty scary not being able to do anything. And Willow found the spell to put me back, but I couldn’t tell anyone. I got into one of Giles’ dreams once when I touched him. That was really...”

Giles’ head came up, their eyes meeting from across the room. Buffy smiled.

“...really different,” she finished, unwilling to betray the privacy of his dream. “But he didn’t remember it, or didn’t believe it was really me until almost at the end there.

“And then stepping back into my body after Willow did the spell. It was like slipping on an old pair of jeans that fit just right, you know?”

They were silent for a moment, and then Xander asked hesitantly, “So, Buffy, when you were our little ghostly stalker, did you... umm... did you watch us like all the time? ‘Cause that thing Anya and I did with the cowboy hat and boots...”

“Aaagh!” Buffy cried, holding up her hand. “Please, Xander, like being dead wasn’t bad enough without watching you and Anya have sex. How much of a pervert do you think I am?” She shuddered and shook her head as if she could clear that image out of her mind. Too late. She was already thinking of a new interpretation for “Cowboys and Indians.”

“No, you guys should all be pleased to know that I gave you some privacy. I had no desire to follow anyone into the shower or anything.” Well, all right, maybe there was that one person, but she had resisted really, really well.

Xander’s face was burning with embarrassment, and he was very, very eager to change the topic. He jumped to his feet. “You hungry, Buff?” he asked. Willow had already made her hot chocolate.

“Yeah, I guess I haven’t eaten in over a month. Now I think about it, I don’t think this body ate at all the day we fought Glory.”

“What can I get? Omelets? Grilled cheese? Cereal? Anything beyond that, and you’ll have to order in, ‘cause that’s about the limit of my culinary skills.”

Buffy smiled and looked down at her sister, sleeping peacefully in her lap. “Actually, all month I’ve been watching Giles make Dawn these really thin pancake things—”

“Crepes,” Giles supplied.

“Yeah, those. They looked really good. Think you can make some for me?”

“They’re really good with strawberries and sugar,” Dawn murmured, blinking open her eyes. “Can I have some, too, Giles?”

Buffy resumed petting her sister’s hair. “I thought you were asleep.”

“Almost.”

“Would anyone else like some?” Giles asked. “As long as I’m making them.”

The others nodded their heads, and as he crossed to the kitchen, Buffy called out, “I want mine like yours, with the butter and the powdered sugar, and then all rolled up. That looked good.”

Dawn made a face. "He puts lemon on it too."

"Oh yeah," Buffy called, a little louder. "Put the lemon juice on mine, too."

"Gross," Dawn said, and then Buffy began tickling her along her side until Dawn batted her hand away, crying, "Stop it!"

"Look who's talking, Miss Peanut Butter and Salami Sandwich."

"They're good, if you'd just try one," Dawn protested.

Buffy pushed her sister off her lap and stood, stretching. "Okay, while Giles is cooking me a midnight... well an after one in the morning snack, I think I'll go upstairs and change into something less..." She looked down at the white lace dress she was wearing. It actually had ribbons on the sleeves and neck. As a ghost, she had pretty much been wearing the white sweater and pants she had died in, but this was... this was... She searched for the right word. "...something less Victorian."

She made a face and called out loudly to the kitchen: "God, Giles, is this what you picked out to bury me in? It's *sooo* not me."

"I tried to tell him that was the dress Mom made you wear to Aunt Ellen's 60th birthday party," Dawn explained. "But he thought it looked nice."

"I think this is just his revenge for all the jokes I made about his tweed." Buffy smiled at all her friends, and scampered off up the steps. She came back down a short time later wearing sweatpants and a tank top. And still a little loose, even on her second finger, she wore Giles' onyx pinky ring.

He noticed. As he served crepes to the group seated around the dining table, he noticed the familiar glint as she reached across the table for more sugar. Their eyes met, and she blushed, possibly embarrassed. He merely smiled, nodded his head, and slid the sugar closer to her side of the table.

The gang didn't last long past 3:30, but no one wanted to go home. They all wanted to be near Buffy. Dawn hadn't made it more than ten minutes after they finished their meal and retired to the living room. She snored softly in Buffy's lap, and when the slayer was sure her sister was down for the count, she carried Dawn upstairs and laid her in Buffy's own bed.

When the rest of the gang had slowed down in their story swapping, when silence and drowsy giddy grins had replaced the sound of laughter and boisterous teasing, Buffy sent them all to bed too. She gave Willow and Tara Dawn's bed. Xander and Anya got the couch. And Buffy would sleep with her sister. For just as much as they all wanted to be near Buffy, Buffy wanted them to stay just as badly.

He couldn't reach her. Nicole had him by the throat, and she was just too strong. He could only watch as time stood still, as Marcus bent over Buffy's form, as he drained her. And then, even worse, as he placed his bleeding wrist over her mouth and forced her to drink.

"Shhh, Giles, it's all right. I'm right here." Buffy's voice, but not from the still form beneath Marcus. This voice came from everywhere.

"Wake up. You're dreaming."

And then he did. His heart was pounding, its rhythm ringing in his ears. He was panting, shaking. He felt fingers gently combing through his hair and turned. Buffy was sitting on the edge of his bed, smiling.

"You were having a nightmare. I heard you down the hall."

He closed his eyes and asked, "I didn't wake Dawn, did I? Or the others?"

"No. That kid can sleep through just about anything. You should know. You're the one who's had to get her out of bed the last five weeks. And I think Willow and Tara are pretty wiped from the spell they did. Xander and Anya are all the way downstairs. So yeah, just little ol' me."

He smiled and looked up at her. He took her hand in his, held them both over his heart. "I'm sorry I woke you."

"S'okay." She shrugged. "All month I've been watching you have really bad dreams, and I couldn't do anything. It's nice to be able to wake you up before they get *really* bad."

They stayed like that for a minute, Giles letting himself calm after his dream and Buffy just watching him thoughtfully.

Finally, he released her hand and looked over to her. "It's late. You should go back to sleep."

"Giles?"

"Yes?"

"Can I sleep in here with you?"

Her question startled him, and he hiked himself further up his pillows for a better look at her. "What?"

"I mean just sleep. It's no big. I mean, I'm dressed and you're dressed..." She stopped. "You are wearing pajama bottoms under there, aren't you?"

Giles blushed and pulled the blankets closer to his chest. "Yes." He was somewhat thankful at the moment to also be wearing the matching pajama top.

"See, no big," she said, as she slid under the covers next to him. "We'll just be two fully dressed friends who happen to be sleeping in the same bed." She snuggled up next to him, her breasts pressing against his side through the soft silk of her pajamas and his. She wasn't wearing a bra. Giles could feel himself beginning to get hard, and he shifted away from her.

"Buffy, I don't think this is a good idea."

She raised herself up on one elbow, looking down at him with what, even in the dim lighting, Giles could recognize as a pout. "Please. It's just that... I've woken up every day next to my grave. I've spent the last five weeks not being able to touch anyone. I guess I'm just afraid to close my eyes and wake up and find out that this is all a dream and that I'm still dead." One tear spilled down her cheek, and he caught it before it could fall. "Please, Giles, I just want someone to hold me through the night. And I think... I think you need to wake up with me in your arms, too."

He nodded mutely. How could he deny her anything now, especially when she put it like that? And a small, selfish part of him wanted to feel her close to him, to wrap his arms around her, and to know without a doubt that this wasn't a dream, that she was real.

She settled in next to him, pillowed her head on his chest, and wrapped her arm around his waist. He slid one hand up to lie over her arm. The other found her hair and stroked it gently back from her face again and again, allowing the silk strands to flow between his fingers.

"Giles, you're shaking."

"Shhh... Go to sleep, Buffy."

She was silent for a moment, and he thought perhaps she had. But then she asked very softly, "Giles, did you have dreams that bad before I died?"

The hand trailing through her hair stilled. He rested it across her back. "Occasionally."

"But not every night?"

"No, not every night."

She pulled herself tighter against him and sighed.

"Buffy?"

"Hmmm?"

He paused for a moment. "You watched over me while I slept... Did you watch me *every* night?"

"Yeah. Every night. You were in pretty bad shape. Sometimes it scared me. When you thought you were alone, when there wasn't anyone around to be strong for, sometimes it scared me how bad off you were."

Giles kissed her on the forehead and wrapped his arms around her tightly. He frowned as another thought hit him. "Did you come into any of my other dreams?"

She tipped her head up to look at him, her chin still resting on his chest. "I don't know. Why don't you tell me about them, and I'll tell you if they sound familiar."

He blanched. She giggled. "Now Giles, have you been having naughty dreams about me?"

He blushed and rolled his eyes. "I'm beginning to think this sleeping in the same bed was a rather bad idea."

"No, you're not." She laid her head back on his chest, nestled in closer. "You're loving it. You can't fool me." As if to prove her point, she slid her knee up to brush against the hardness that was growing between his legs.

"B-buffy," he stammered, as one hand pushed her leg back down. "Go to sleep."

She kissed him softly on the chin. "You first."

He sighed and wrapped his arms around her, tried to relax into the feeling of having her here, warm and alive and in his arms. He closed his eyes and knew that tonight there would be no more dreams. Tonight he would sleep through the night.

Sometimes when the big things click into place, you just forget about all the little things. That is until the little things become the big things. That's pretty much what happened the next day as they all pattered around the house, sleeping late, skipping school, skipping work, shop closed, everyone just enjoying having Buffy back in their lives again. And then in the late afternoon Xander and Anya, Willow and Tara, they all went home, but only long enough to change for the celebratory dinner Giles had promised them. Yes, after getting Buffy back, none of the little things really seemed to matter anymore. At least not until the DCFS showed up at the door for Dawn.

Dawn had just come down the stairs after taking an overly long shower. Buffy had stood outside the door, pounding, insisting that she would also like to take a shower, sometime *today*. When they passed in the hall, Dawn had teased her older sister, commenting on Buffy's noticeable absence from her bed that morning and the fact that Giles' bed was probably a lot more comfortable.

"Maybe you should shower with Giles. You could save water," Dawn had pointed out sarcastically.

Buffy had taken her sister by the shoulders and firmly moved her aside from the bathroom door. "Hey you, it's absolutely *none* of your business whose bed I slept in last night." And then she had leaned in closer and asked nicely, "But please don't mention it to anyone else, ok?"

Dawn had merely shrugged her shoulders, muttered, "Whatever," and bounced down the stairs as Buffy started her shower.

When the doorbell rang, she was standing right there in the foyer, so she called out to Giles, "I got it," and opened the door. She expected it to be one of the gang: cleaned up, changed, and ready to go out for some much deserved merriment. Giles had made five o'clock reservations for them at a Japanese restaurant where they cooked your dinner right at the table while you watched.

When she opened the door, it wasn't Xander or Anya or Willow or Tara or even by some miracle a smoldering Spike. Standing on the front porch were two women in business suits, carrying clipboards, and a uniformed police officer.

"Dawn Summers?" The blond woman asked.

Dawn nodded blankly.

"Is Mr..." She adjusted her glasses on her nose and peered down at the clipboard she held in her hands. "Is Mr. Giles at home?" She pronounced his name with a hard "G" like "Guy-uls."

She looked at the two women in front of her and the cop beside them. Then she noticed her father and Susan standing on the sidewalk near the road.

Dawn backed up towards the dining room until her shoulder hit the archway. The terror that had stalked her the last couple days again closed in around her after the brief respite Buffy's resurrection had given her.

"Giles," she whispered softly. And then again, a little louder, "Giles!"

"What is it, Dawn?" He rounded the corner from the living room and stopped short when he saw them too. The three strangers entered the house, standing in the foyer between Giles and Dawn.

"Mr. Giles." The blond woman got his name right this time. "I'm Anna Iverson from the Department of Child and Family Services." She extended her hand, but he didn't take it. She pulled it back and wiped her palm against her skirt, as if her attempt at a handshake had been nothing more than a nervous tick.

"Mr. Giles," The second woman continued, an overweight middle-aged woman with dark black hair pulled tight into a bun. "I'm Stephe Miller and this is Officer Griffin. Is there somewhere we can go to discuss Dawn's situation?"

"Well, now that those pleasantries are over," Giles said coldly, "I'd like to ask you all to leave my home. I am Dawn's legal guardian, and unless you've brought a summons—"

The police officer drew an envelope from his shirt pocket and handed it to Giles. He opened it briskly and glanced over the legal phrasing. They were taking Dawn away.

When Giles looked up again, Hank and Susan had moved to stand in the doorway, watching the drama in the entry unfold. Giles glared daggers at Dawn's father. "What is this about?"

Hank met the other man's gaze evenly. "When I picked up Dawn from school the other day, I gave them the number at the hotel where I could be reached. They called me today to tell me Dawn hadn't shown up, no one had called in for her, and the line was busy at the house."

Giles crumpled up the paper bitterly and threw it on the floor. "And what? You thought I had taken her out of the country? You thought you should bring in the law before you even tried to come here and find out what was going on for yourself?"

"After your little display last night, I wasn't sure what to think, Mr. Giles." Hank pulled his fiancé closer, as if to draw strength from her. "But I was pretty sure I didn't want to leave my daughter here in your care."

Giles spared Dawn a glance. The poor girl looked terrified. He tried to give her a reassuring smile. "Why don't you wait up in your room for a minute, Dawn?"

She turned to go up the stairs, but Hank stepped forward and pulled her back by the arm. Dawn yelped in pain and flinched back from his touch. Her father released her immediately, his eyes drawn to the three thin lines of blood that were now beginning to show through the bandage on her upper arm. "Honey," he said softly, "What happened to your arm?"

Dawn's eyes slipped to Giles, silently pleading with him to give her an answer that wouldn't include vampires and blood rituals. But Hank took that as her answer and turned on Giles with a cold

fury. Only the officer between them prevented Hank from attacking the other man out of the same protective anger Giles himself had felt last night.

"You bastard! You didn't want her to go on her stupid field trip, but she went anyway. So you what? You sliced her up? She didn't even want to go, but I made her."

"Dad, no!" Dawn was crying, her face dropped in her hands. "He didn't do it. It was an accident."

The police officer shoved Hank away from Giles and raised a warning hand. Dawn's father backed off reluctantly, running both his hands through his sandy hair, his face burning with rage. There was nothing Giles could say in his own defense. *Really, I didn't touch your daughter, Mr. Summers. It was a vampire who needed her blood so he could bring your other daughter back from the dead.* There was no way to explain away three such perfectly made cuts as an accident. They were deep enough to have needed the butterfly closures Giles kept in his first aid kit.

"Come on, Dawn, you're leaving with me." Hank took his daughter by the hand and made to go, but the cop and the two social workers intercepted him.

"Mr. Summers," the thinner blond, Anna, was saying, "I'm sorry, but Bureau policy in these cases demands that Dawn be placed in foster care until this situation can be resolved."

"No," Dawn begged, clinging to her father's hand. "Dad, please. Don't let them. Daddy, please."

Hank looked stricken. Giles couldn't resist the chance to dig the knife in deeper. "You think this is what's best for your daughter?"

Hank glared at Giles and spat back, "It's a damn sight better than leaving her with you."

Anna stepped towards the girl, placed her hand on her back, tried to lead her towards the door. "Come on, dear. It's only for a little while."

"No!" Dawn screamed. "Don't touch me!"

Giles heard the water upstairs turn off. Buffy must have heard her sister's cry, and would join them post haste. That could only improve the situation, to have Dawn's dead sister come down to talk with the DCFS agents.

Dawn turned and bolted into Giles' arms. He held her tightly, staring down Hank Summers, as if daring the man to challenge Giles' right to comfort the girl.

"Please, Giles," she was begging through wrenching sobs, "Do a spell. Make them go away. Don't let them take me."

He could do nothing, except hold the girl as she cried. He focused on one of the social workers, Anna. He smiled at her sadly. She was, after all, only doing her job. "Ms. Iverson, would it be ok if Dawn packed some of her things to take with her?"

"Of course."

Dawn was shaking her head, her hands clutching his shirtfront in a death grip. He patted her back kindly and murmured for her ears only, "Compared to last night, this is nothing, Dawn. Just a little while, and then you'll be back home. I promise." He pried her fingers loose from his shirt, and steered her towards the stairs.

It was at that moment that Buffy came barreling down the steps: her hair dripping wet, clothes still sticking to her damp frame, and a toilet plunger raised over her head as a weapon.

"Buffy?" her father whispered, disbelieving.

"Buffy?" the middle-aged social worker, Stephanie, echoed as she searched through the papers on her clipboard. "Dawn's sister Buffy? Our records list her as deceased."

Buffy lowered the plunger, let it drop on the steps next to her, and looked over the group of people in the foyer. "What's going on here?"

She grunted as her father claimed her in a desperate embrace. Her sister soon joined him. "Oxygen!" she pleaded. They both released her, her father leaving his hand on her shoulder, as if to anchor her in this world. "Ok, what is going on here?"

Giles stepped forward to fall into his usual role of lecturer. "These people are with the Department for Child and Family Services. Your father went to a judge and obtained an order for them to take Dawn from my custody."

Buffy stared at her father incredulously. "Is this true?"

Hank straightened himself defensively, for the moment forgetting about his confusion at seeing Buffy alive. "I was just trying to take care of Dawn. I thought that's what you would have wanted."

"What I wanted was for *Giles* to take care of her."

"Excuse me," Anna broke in. "I know that this is difficult for all of you, but Dawn really needs to come with us now."

Dawn started crying again.

"Buffy," Giles said gently, "Why don't you take your sister up to her room and help her get some things together."

Buffy led her sister up the stairs, Dawn following meekly and looking just like a prisoner marching up the steps to the guillotine.

Anna considered the two men in front of her and then the clipboard in her hands. "You'll each have a meeting in the morning before the judge. I'm sure he'll want to know why Buffy's alive, or rather why we thought she was dead in the first place." She shifted her glasses up higher on her nose and shuffled through some papers. "This is most unusual. We don't regularly make this kind of mistake. In fact, I could have sworn there was a coroner's report in Dawn's file." The social worker lapsed into silence as she read over the papers on her clipboard another time.

Hank and Giles waited in cold silence, staring across at each other in mutual contempt. Giles knew the man was waiting for an explanation for Buffy being alive. But Giles was damned if he was going to say anything; he was going to make Hank actually ask him for the answer. And Hank, he just stood waiting. There was no way in hell he was going to ask Giles for anything.

A few minutes later, Dawn came down the stairs with her backpack clutched in one hand and Mr. Gordo in the other. She looked back at Buffy, and Giles, and then her father. She walked past Susan. And then she got in the police car and was gone.

The four of them were left standing in an empty house, each of them wondering what they could have, no *should* have, done differently.

Buffy broke the silence. "Dad, what were you thinking?"

"I was thinking you were *dead*!" Hank shook his head, as if he could clear out the confusion and it would somehow make sense. "Can someone explain to me how I got that one wrong? I mean, I saw your obituary, Buffy. I hadn't actually made it to your grave yet, but the groundskeeper knew right where it was. And *you*," he pivoted to face Giles, "if you knew my daughter was alive, why didn't you say anything? All this time, you've let me believe she was dead, you heartless son-of-a—"

"Dad!" Buffy shouted, bringing his attention back to her. "Listen, it's a long story. One I do *not* have the patience to tell right now. And just so you know, Giles thought I was dead too, so just get off his back already." She took a deep breath and collected herself. "I want you to get out of my house now."

"But Buffy—"

"Dad, just go. I love you, but I just can't look at you right now." She pointed at the door, still open from Dawn's exit only minutes before. "And take your secretary with you."

Hank bristled. "She's my fiancé."

“Whatever.” Buffy threw up her hands. “Just go.”

Hank reluctantly obeyed, heading out the door as Susan said lamely, “It was nice meeting you, Buffy,” before she followed. Giles shut the door behind them.

Buffy plopped down on the last step, leaning her head against the banister. “What do we do?”

Giles joined her on the bottom step, feeling every bit as miserable as Buffy looked. “We get a lawyer.”

Buffy looked over at him, leaned her weight the other way, and rested her head against his shoulder. Her wet hair made a damp spot on his shirt. He suspected that some of the wetness there might also be her tears, but he didn’t bend his head to look.

Minutes later Willow bounced in the front door, followed by Tara, both dressed up for dinner. The redhead frowned at her friends’ dejected appearance and glanced around the house. “Where’s Dawn?”

Buffy pulled herself into Giles’ arms and started sobbing.

A call to London and an explanation of the last few days’ events. Within the hour the Watcher’s Council did what they did best: a few pulls of a few bureaucratic strings and they had Buffy’s alibi. Complete with phony medical records from an LA hospital where Buffy had spent the last five weeks in a coma under the name Jane Doe. Head trauma after being hit by a car, no identification anywhere on her person. It was Giles’ idea to embellish the story with why she went to LA, and Buffy wasn’t thinking clearly enough to argue with him. It was perhaps cruel to say Buffy had gone to LA to try and track down her father through his old offices. It was sure to cause Hank some measure of guilt to know she had lain in a coma, because he couldn’t bother to come home after her mother’s death. Giles couldn’t seem to care.

The Council quickly altered Buffy’s own records as well. She had fallen from a great height, and now the coroner’s report said that the victim’s identity could not be conclusively proven, because of facial and head trauma from the fall. It went on to state that the victim’s friends had identified her by her clothing and jewelry, and she had been buried as Buffy Anne Summers. The service had been closed casket, so no one would know the difference. Especially not after the coroner found himself reassigned to a posh Beverly Hills hospital at twice his salary. The Watcher’s Council was good.

So Buffy and Giles went to Mr. Stockwell’s office and explained to him what had *really* happened to Buffy. Dawn had been having problems in school, and Buffy had been concerned that she would lose custody of her sister. All true. So she had gone to her father’s old LA offices to try and get the contact numbers for his business trip in Italy. (That would have been about the time they road tripped into the desert to escape Glory). Her first day there, wouldn’t you know it? Mugged. Someone stole her suitcase, jewelry, wallet with ID, and money. She had nothing but the clothes on her back. On the way to the police station, and upset to distraction, she must have stepped in front of a car. That part was still a little fuzzy. And then the next thing she knew, she was waking up in an LA hospital five weeks later. And the entire time, no one in the hospital had known who she was. Of course, she had come back to Sunnydale as quickly as possible, only arriving the previous evening. She felt just terrible about everything she’d put everyone through. And she had planned to tell her father everything, but he had come to the house himself before she’d had a chance.

As for Giles, he was suitably relieved that this was all one big mistake. Whoever had found that poor girl’s body, the one who had stolen Buffy’s clothes, jewelry, and ID, whoever had found her after the fall had naturally called him. His number had been in her wallet. So they had all gone to the hospital, identified her clothes and jewelry, and believed the doctor when he said Buffy had died.

They had all simply assumed that Buffy had returned from LA, and for whatever inexplicable reason fallen from the top of the construction site. Of course, now that they knew it wasn't *Buffy* who had fallen, it all made more sense. That other girl probably did have a reason for going up there.

And when that other girl's friends missed her, they came looking. Perhaps they also had whatever else of Buffy's belongings the girl had stolen. If so, then they would have known Buffy's name. They would have probably figured out that their friend had been mistaken for Buffy. And they must be the ones responsible for taking the body from Buffy's grave. When they saw that it was indeed their friend, they must have taken her body home for burial in her own grave. Who could know for sure? The body had disappeared, and now they would never know who had been buried in Buffy's place.

Buffy and Giles were both very good liars. And they had the proper falsified documentation to back up their lies.

Mr. Stockwell put together a case so Buffy could keep custody of Dawn. The judge would be much more likely to rule in favor of a blood relation. But under the terms of the agreement, Giles would continue to live in the house and help Buffy out. Buffy was young, and that was likely to be a strike against her, but with Giles there as well, her age would not be such a problem.

Dawn's wounds were explained as self-inflicted. Giles had protested initially, when he and Buffy had discussed it.

"Buffy," he had said, "You go in there and tell the judge that Dawn cut herself, and you're likely to cause more problems for her."

Buffy had stirred her tea, around and around and around with her spoon. Giles had made it for her to help settle her nerves, but it seemed to make her more agitated as she fiddled with the spoon. Maybe if she actually drank it, that would help.

"Giles, it makes the most sense. I mean, Dawn cut herself up pretty good after she found out she was the Key. She needed stitches, and the school counselor wanted us to take her to talk to someone."

Giles had removed Buffy's hand from the spoon, held it tightly in his own to try and offer her some amount of reassurance. "That's exactly my point. You tell them Dawn cut herself, and it would be the second time she's done something like that. They'll more than likely send her for a psych evaluation. With the amount of distress she's experiencing at the moment, they might even hold her under a suicide watch. She's been through enough lately without us adding to it by allowing the authorities to believe she's a danger to herself."

Buffy had simply leaned over, laid her head against his shoulder, and sighed. "We can't let them think you did it. They'd never let you anywhere near Dawn. They might even press charges. And I don't think I stand a chance of getting custody from my dad without you."

Giles had given her hand a little squeeze and rested his cheek against the top of her head. "Maybe if we talk with your father, try to reason with him..."

Buffy had laughed bitterly. "Don't forget: I may have been dead, but I was watching. I've seen how he's been since he got into town. And I know my dad. He was like that at the end with Mom, too. He won't listen to me. And he most definitely won't listen to you. He really hates you, you know?"

Giles had chuckled. "I know. I'm somewhat ashamed to admit the feeling's become almost mutual." He had taken to stirring his own tea nervously, just as he had been annoyed at Buffy for doing moments before. "Buffy, I'm really trying. I know he's your father, and you love him, but—"

"But sometimes he can be a really jackass. Yeah, I know. Which leaves us back at the beginning. We can't let them think you hurt Dawn. We certainly can't tell them the truth. So unless you can think of how she got sliced three times on accident..." There had been no response from Giles. "Yeah, I didn't think so. That means we just have to tell them that Dawn cut herself. She trusts us. She knows she can't tell anyone the truth. She'll go along with whatever we say."

So sitting in Mr. Stockwell's office, Buffy and Giles lied again. They told their lawyer that Dawn had cut herself, having become so distraught over the thought of having to live with her father in Spain. The reason had again been Giles' idea. He couldn't resist the chance to shove a little more guilt in Hank's direction.

The lawyer thought they had a pretty good case. And there seemed to be no love lost between Thomas Stockwell and Hank Summers, although the lawyer held back for Buffy's sake. He seemed pretty determined that Hank not get custody of Dawn, though. When Stockwell had stepped to the file cabinets against the wall, Giles even thought he heard the man mumble something about "the son-of-a-bitch didn't want them the first time around," but the words were spoken softly and the watcher could have been simply projecting his own feelings onto them.

Mr. Stockwell didn't even think Dawn's cutting herself would present too much of a problem, putting to rest many of Giles' concerns. The cuts weren't that serious, and located on the upper arm as they were, Stockwell didn't think she would be deemed suicidal, just upset. If anything, her actions might sway a judge to come to a final decision sooner.

And of course, there was Hank's lawyer, Harold Cates. The man was an excellent lawyer, but not cheap. He had a reputation for representing the less deserving, but far wealthier clients. It couldn't help but color the judge's perceptions just a tad.

The only thing that might work against them, the lawyer said, was the fact that judges liked to place children with a parent if they could, especially one who was about to remarry. Judges liked giving children to stable, two-parent homes.

And so Buffy and Giles went back to the house, spent the evening with the Scoobies, and tried not to think about the morning's meeting with the judge. ("What judge works on Saturday?" Buffy had asked. "You should be thankful," Giles had answered. "Otherwise we'd be waiting until Monday.") For the rest of the evening, Stockwell's words continued to echo in Buffy's head: *Judges like to give children to stable, two-parent homes.*

Their friends all tried to cheer them both up. When they first walked through the door after meeting with their lawyer, Anya had presented them with a cake.

"I baked it myself. From a box. Not from an actual box. The ingredients were inside the box." Anya stopped rambling abruptly and held out the cake proudly. "Here. The ritual exchange of baked goods is a time-honored tradition between people when they're upset. I believe the usual offering is chocolate chip cookies, but they didn't have a box for that."

Giles smiled slightly. "Thank you, Anya, that was very thoughtful of you."

Anya beamed at her success and took the cake to the kitchen to cut it.

Tara grimaced and whispered to them, "I don't think Anya's ever baked a cake before. She insisted that the directions didn't say to 'de-shell' the eggs before adding them."

Giles and Buffy both shuddered. "Thanks for the warning," the slayer said.

They walked into the living room, where Willow was busy at the coffee table with her laptop. "Hey guys," she waved, looking rather pleased with herself. "Guess who hacked into the DCFS computers and got the number where Dawn's staying?" She waved a little piece of paper in front of them. "You can call her if you want."

Buffy's mood actually lifted. "Thanks. I think I will." She took the number and went to use the upstairs' phone.

Xander bobbed his head expectantly. "So...? What's the sitch? You guys gonna be able to take Dawn home tomorrow?"

Giles sat on the couch next to Xander. "Mr. Stockwell seems to think we stand a good chance."

Xander leaned back and stretched. "Don't you worry. I've got a secret weapon ready. There's no way they'll give her to her dad."

"Xander?" Giles asked suspiciously.

"Hey just be patient, G-man, you'll find out tomorrow."

Giles sighed. "I've told you not to call me that. And whatever it is, it had better not be illegal, or get us in trouble with the judge. We really don't need you to screw this up for us, Xander. No offense."

Xander patted the older man on the shoulder. "None taken. Trust me, Big-G, everything's gonna be fine. It's just a little devious and underhanded, but nothing illegal. Or at least, I don't think it's illegal."

"Xander!" Giles admonished. "I'm not liking the sound of your plan already."

Anya saved her fiancé from further scolding when she arrived with slices of cake. She handed a plate to Giles and waited expectantly. He inspected his dessert with some trepidation. He could see small flecks of white in the chocolate cake where the eggshells had mixed in the batter. The white frosting looked edible, probably from a can.

"Anya, what are these red things on the frosting?" Giles asked, trying not to sound too worried.

"The picture of the cake on the box had pretty red sprinkles on it. I didn't find any in your cupboards, but I thought the crushed red pepper you had in your spice rack looked almost the same." Anya seemed pleased at her resourcefulness.

Giles simply nodded and smiled, picking around his cake with the fork. "It looks delicious." The earlier trip to the lawyer had already established that Giles was a very good liar.

"Where's Buffy?" Anya looked around, still holding the second slice of cake.

"She went upstairs to call Dawn," Willow answered.

"Oh." Anya frowned. "She'll miss the cake."

"I'm sure she'll be very disappointed." Giles almost managed to keep the sarcasm from his voice. Almost.

"But it's supposed to cheer her up," Anya protested.

"Hey, An," Xander said. "Why don't you give me that slice, and go get Willow and Tara some."

"Ok."

As soon as she'd left the room, Willow rescued the two men and dumped their cake in the trash. Anya returned to find their plates empty. "Would you like some more?"

"Yes," Xander said.

"No," Giles said at the same moment.

She left to fetch more, and Willow and Tara's pieces found their way into the trash as well. They were able to keep Anya occupied fetching cake as fast as they dumped it in the trash until there was just the one slice left.

"Wow," Anya had commented. "You guys must really have liked my cake. Perhaps I should consider becoming a chef." She frowned down at the last piece. "I know you all asked for more, but this is the last slice. I feel like we should save it for Buffy."

"Yes." Giles grinned wickedly. "Definitely save the last slice for Buffy."

Giles was just beginning to drift asleep, when he felt the bed lower next to him, and quickly blinked awake.

"Buffy?" he asked groggily.

"You have a lot of women climbing into your bed in the middle of the night?"

"No, of course not. I just... What are you doing here?" He watched her as she slid under the covers and joined him in bed. He took her in his arms as he had the night before, still somewhat baffled by her presence. "Buffy? You do have your own bed."

"I know, but the house is so quiet and empty. The gang all went back to their own places and Dawn..." She trailed off. "I just wanted to sleep in here with you tonight."

He paused, struggling with the best way to broach the subject. "I thought we both agreed that last night was a one-time affair." He grimaced, and she giggled. "Poor choice of words. I meant that last night was an exceptional situation. We were both vulnerable and needing to feel secure in the other's presence. But we agreed that sleeping in the same bed would be a one-time event."

Buffy snuggled up close to him, head nestled up under his chin, arm wrapped around his waist, one leg draped across his. "I don't remember agreeing to any such thing."

"Buffy, this is rapidly becoming inappropriate."

"Giles," she began thoughtfully. "I was in your dream, remember? You kissed me like I was the antidote to whatever you were dying from."

He tensed beneath her. "Dreams can't always be taken literally. Sometimes they're symbolic. I was grieving. I was missing you terribly. I don't think you have any idea what it was like for me."

She looked up at him. "Then tell me."

He closed his eyes in pain. "Buffy, please..."

"Dawn said it was like having her heart ripped out. Marcus said it was like she took his soul with her. What was it like for you, Giles?" He didn't answer. His eyes were still clenched shut. "Giles? You're shaking again. Talk to me."

"Buffy," his voice was hoarse, trembling. "I hadn't seen you alive in nearly five weeks, not even in my dreams. I dreamt of you every single night, but you were always dead. I used to wish..." He choked on the words, and Buffy began to stroke his forehead softly. "Every night I would close my eyes and hope that *this* would be the night I would see you alive. Hear your voice. But you were always dead. Sometimes the dreams were so bad, I was afraid to let myself go to sleep."

He swallowed and continued. One tear slipped from beneath his closed lashes. "Once I spent the whole afternoon digging through your family's video collection, looking for home movies, for anything that would have you in it."

"Yeah," Buffy said, "We never got a camcorder. No home movies for Giles." She kissed him tenderly on the chin and waited for him to finish.

"Yes, all I found were old musicals and black and white romances." He opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling, not meeting her sympathetic gaze. "I thought if I could find a home movie, if I could see you smiling and laughing one last time, then maybe you might be alive in my dreams." His hands began stroking lightly up and down her back. His fingers trembled as they touched her. "When you came into my dream that night... God, Buffy, I had been terrified that I was forgetting you, the sound of your voice, the way you smile and move and shrug your shoulders and roll your eyes and have that little bounce in your step and the way you look at me. Most especially the way you look at me. I had to go through three family albums before I could find a picture that showed your eyes clearly. God help me, Buffy, I couldn't remember the exact shade of blue in your eyes."

His eyes had closed again, his forehead creased with pain. His hands stopped their nervous travel up and down her back. Instead they clenched into the fabric of her pajamas and pressed her tighter against him. His whole body shook beneath her like an egg teetering on the edge of a counter and very nearly ready to fall off. His breathing sounded labored. His voice, when it came again, sounded raspy. "When I kissed you, Buffy... I knew I was dreaming, but I didn't think I would ever see you alive again, even in my dreams. I thought all the nights that came after would be like all the ones that came

before. I thought it was my only chance... I thought I would keep having the other dreams for the rest of my life."

She was still stroking his forehead softly. She trailed her fingers along the curve of his cheek and dried the few tears that had escaped from behind his closed lashes. She kissed him again on the chin, and then becoming bolder, continued up the side of his face and cheek until she was nose to nose with him, looking down into the face of her beloved watcher. He opened his eyes, losing himself in her blue depths. How could he have forgotten that most beautiful shade of blue?

"Giles," she whispered. "I think you're in love with me." She placed a finger over his mouth to still his protest. "I know a little bit about men." She reconsidered. "Ok, I didn't know that Angel was going to dump me or that Parker was such a punk or that Riley was addicted to vampire bites and was going to fly off to Central America." She frowned. "Ok, at first glance it doesn't seem like I know much about men. But really, I think I know when someone's in love with me."

She smiled down at him. "And you, Rupert Giles, don't just love me, but you are *in* love with me. I watched you for the five weeks I was dead. In the beginning, I stayed to watch Dawn, but after a while it was mostly just you. And I saw how good you were with her. That's when I first began to realize what *I* was feeling for you. The more I watched you, the more I realized that it had been there all the time. I saw you in a whole new light. And I knew. I just *knew*. I don't just love you. I'm *in* love with you."

She closed the distance between their lips and kissed him tenderly. It was so much better than what they had shared in his dream. His lips were warm and soft beneath hers. And this time there was no desperation, no fear that he would wake at any second. This time they had all the time in the world.

She pulled back and looked down at him. "Tell me I'm wrong about this. Tell me again that when you kissed me in your dream, it was a symbolic grieving thing. If you can look me in the eyes and tell me you're not in love with me, then I'll go back to my own bed, and we can pretend this whole conversation never happened. I'll just file it away under 'times Buffy made a complete fool of herself over a guy.'"

She waited patiently, and he brushed her blond hair back and behind her ear. "Buffy..."

"Yes?"

"We have to see the judge in the morning. Go to sleep." He pulled her head back down on his chest.

"Does that mean I'm sleeping here tonight?"

"Yes," he murmured. She giggled, and he sighed. "What is it, Buffy?"

"I was just thinking about what Mr. Stockwell said. 'Judges like to give children to stable, two-parent homes.' You think if we mentioned all of this in the meeting tomorrow, it might help?"

He wrapped his arms around her. "I think if you mention any of it tomorrow, your father's very likely to come after me with a shotgun."

They both laughed for a moment before he again told her to go to sleep.

"Goodnight, Giles."

"Goodnight, my love."

Giles closed his eyes. He could easily get used to falling asleep with Buffy in his arms.

The judge spoke to each of them separately. First Hank and Susan, then Buffy and Giles. He was quite enthralled with their tale of Buffy's coma and mistaken death. He looked over the paperwork

their lawyer had sent, and if he had been at all suspicious, well everything seemed to support their claim.

Both couples waited in the hall with their lawyers, sitting across from each other on opposing benches. Hank kept watching Buffy, obviously wanting to speak with her, but unwilling to do so in front of Giles. Hank's lawyer had all the same papers the judge did, so her father knew the story of Buffy's miraculous 'resurrection' by now, complete with all the guilty details Giles had added. Giles still didn't think the man looked suitably guilt-ridden.

After about an hour, the judge called them all back in for one meeting together. Hank and Susan sat in a pair of chairs on the left side, Buffy and Giles in a pair on the right. Their lawyers stood in the middle, in front of the judge's desk.

Hank's lawyer spoke first. "Your Honor, we would like to introduce a witness."

The judge frowned. He seemed like a kindly older man, maybe in his mid to late 60's. Small, wrinkled, completely bald, he looked like he had shrunk into his black robes until they were too big for him. The judge looked down his nose at Hank's lawyer in his expensive Armani suit. "Mr. Cates, this isn't a trial."

Harold Cates nodded respectfully. "I know, Your Honor, but this witness speaks to the very character of Mr. Rupert Giles. If you are going to consider him as a kind of co-guardian for Dawn Summers, then I would ask that you hear the testimony of my witness. Otherwise, I would demand that Mr. Giles' name be stricken from the motion for permanent guardianship and Miss Buffy Summers be considered as the sole applicant."

Buffy turned terrified eyes towards Giles. He reached for her hand and laced their fingers together. He gave it a little squeeze, and she relaxed back into her chair.

Mr. Stockwell looked at Giles quizzically. Giles only shook his head and shrugged. He could only think of one person they might be able to bring in here to badmouth him. Ethan Rayne. And as far as Giles knew, Ethan was still in an Initiative detainment facility in Nevada.

Stockwell turned back to the judge. "I, of course, object to bringing witnesses into this meeting. But if my learned colleague feels this is necessary to keep Mr. Giles' name on the motion, then I'll allow it. I, of course, reserve the right to cross-examine. If we're going to call witnesses like a trial, then I should be able to ask my own questions of them too. And if this witness affects your ruling, Your Honor, I reserve the right to appeal and bring forward my own witnesses to *Mr. Summer's* character." Thomas Stockwell let his gaze fall on Hank Summers. Giles got the distinct impression that Stockwell already had said witnesses in mind, and they wouldn't reflect well at all on Hank's parenting skills.

The judge steepled his fingers thoughtfully. "I'll allow your witness, Mr. Cates, with Mr. Stockwell's provisions."

The transcriptionist opened the doors behind them and motioned someone inside. She said very sternly, "There's no smoking allowed in here. It's a public building."

"Sorry, pet, I guess I didn't see the signs." A very familiar figure, in a long black trench coat, dropped his cigarette on the marble floor and squashed it with his boot.

Buffy's eyes grew wide with disbelief, fear, and anger. Giles found that he couldn't really feel all that surprised. Just angry.

Mr. Cates turned to the judge. "I'd like to introduce William—"

"Just Spike, mate," the bleached blond interrupted, and then threw a wink in Buffy's direction. "Hey, pet, never thought I'd see you again."

Buffy glowered at him and made a small staking motion with her hand. Giles reached across quickly and pushed her hand back in her lap.

The judge looked over the blond vampire thoughtfully. “What do you have to say to support Hank Summer’s custody claim?”

“Oh him?” Spike eyed Buffy’s father a bit contemptuously. “Don’t know anything ‘bout that bloke. Thought I was supposed to come and talk about Rupert here.”

“You know Mr. Giles?” the judge asked.

“Oh, we go way back. He’s tried to kill me more than once.”

“Excuse me?” the judge exclaimed.

Spike grinned at Giles. “Yeah, this fella’s bloody crazy. Thinks he’s some sort of vampire hunter or something. Hangs out in cemeteries all the time.” Spike pointed at the judge as if he’d just had a thought. “Hey, I bet you get your hired goons in here to search him, you’ll find actual wooden stakes and crosses. Guy should be in the sodding loony bin, not taking care of some poor kid.”

Giles’ jaw clenched, but he resisted the urge to stand up and throttle Spike. That was all he needed in the middle of the judge’s chambers. Instead he focused on Buffy’s hand, gently stroking it with one thumb, trying to keep her calm. He wouldn’t be able to restrain his slayer if she decided that Spike needed a good staking. And that, most definitely, would not help their case.

“You did know he owns a magic shop, right mate?” Spike continued. “Not just the showy Anne Rice, tarot card, crystal ball, and incense, draw the tourists in kinda shop. No, this bloke actual believes he can summon spirits back from the dead and make magic walls and float pencils around and all that crap.” Spike waved his arms in the air as he said it, demonstrating clearly that he thought it was a load of hogwash. He leaned back in his cocky, strutting pose and drew out a cigarette before he remembered that he couldn’t smoke in the building. Instead he used it to point at the judge and punctuate his next statement. “Now tell me *that* ain’t crazy.”

The judge leaned back thoughtfully, then focused on Giles for a moment, clearly trying to decide how much of Spike’s testimony to believe.

At that moment, Spike turned to Harold Cates and in what was supposed to be a whisper, but was still clearly audible, he asked, “So when do I get paid?”

“What?” Mr. Cates responded.

“*Paid*. As in you give me money, and I say everything I just said ‘bout Rupe over there. Come on, Harold, buddy, we had a deal.”

The judge waved the two men’s attention back to himself. “Just a second. Mr. William... er... Spike, did Mr. Cates pay you for your testimony?”

“Well, not yet,” Spike answered, clearly annoyed. “That’s what we were just discussing, if you don’t mind.”

The judge banged his gavel on his desk to draw their attention again. “I do mind. There are procedures for hiring witnesses to provide expert testimony, but you can’t go around bribing character witnesses. Mr. Spike, was any of your testimony in the least bit truthful?”

“Your Honor,” Mr. Cates protested, “I assure you, I made no deal with this—”

“I wasn’t speaking to you at this moment Mr. Cates. You will let your witness answer. How much truth was there in your statement, Mr. Spike?”

Spike seemed to consider it for a moment, glanced over at Hank’s lawyer, then back at the judge. “Every word.” He leaned back over to Mr. Cates and whispered, “How was that?”

The judge shook his head in disgust. “I’m afraid I’ll have to disregard everything your witness has told us here today. Mr. Cates, is there anything else you’d like to add to these proceedings?”

“Your Honor, I had no idea that this Mr. Spike—”

"Hey, mate, I still get paid, right?" Spike interrupted. "That was the deal. I show up. I talk about Rupe. I get paid. Nothing in there 'bout the judge having to believe me. Personally, I thought I sounded pretty good."

"Will you shut up," Mr. Cates said. "I never agreed to pay you anything. I don't know what you're playing at, but I'm not amused."

Hank jumped up out of his seat. "I know what's going on here. This Spike is one of Mr. Giles' friends. We've been set up. They're trying to make us look bad."

"Please," Spike rolled his eyes. "Can't stand the sight of the man. And don't pretend you didn't ask me here to talk trash about him. Just 'cause you're afraid you're going to lose to your own daughter, don't go jumping down my throat. Maybe if you'd actually stopped by a few times in the last couple years for a visit, you might have won 'father of the year.' But noooo, you were too busy shagging your secretary. Can't say as I blame you, she's a mighty fine dish if I do say so. Although," Spike glanced back and forth between Buffy and Susan, comparing the two. "She's a little young for you. And she does bear some resemblance to your eldest there, Hank old boy. There's something a little sick and incestual about that, wouldn't you say?"

Spike had pushed Hank to his limit and was standing barely two feet from the man. Buffy's father decked Spike straight across the jaw, knocking him into the judge's desk. "How dare you!" Hank sputtered, his face burning with rage, his fist shaking.

His lawyer was pulling him back, trying to restrain him. "Mr. Summers, please." He looked up at the judge. "Your Honor, I'd like to request a short recess."

The reality of what he had just done was beginning to dawn on Hank. There was no way to take it back. *Now*, Giles thought, *Hank looks suitably guilt-stricken.*

"That won't be necessary," the judge was saying. "I've seen everything I need to see here today. I'm granting Mr. Stockwell's motion. Permanent custody of Dawn Summers will be given to her sister, Miss Buffy Anne Summers. Mr. Rupert Giles will continue to live at the house and assist in Dawn's care, as he has done for the last five weeks. Visitation will be at their discretion. That is all." The judge gathered his papers and was out of his chambers in a huff.

Hank sank down in his chair, numb. He barely glanced up when Buffy walked over.

"Dad? I know Dawn would still like you to come visit when you can. I'd like that, too. And maybe if you're in the States for Christmas sometime or something?"

Hank nodded absently. Then he stood and took Buffy in his arms, kissing her on the cheek. "Oh, Sweetie, I'm so sorry about everything. I just went crazy when I thought you were dead. I'm so glad you're ok. You know I love you, right? Even if I'm not always the best dad."

Buffy hugged him back tightly, her eyes closed. "I know."

He pulled her back by the shoulders, gave her a hard stare. "God, look at you. All grown up. Not my little girl anymore. You'll take care of Dawn just fine. I have faith in you. And if either of you need anything, call me. I promise to keep you updated with all my phone numbers," he said with a chuckle. "Maybe I'll even get a pager or something, just for the two of you."

"That would be nice," Buffy said, as she wiped a few tears from her face.

Susan stood up next to him, waiting shyly for Buffy to acknowledge her.

"It was nice to meet you, Susan." Buffy held out her hand, not quite up to hugging her future stepmother yet.

Susan shook her hand and smiled with affection. "We'll see you at the wedding for sure."

"We'll stop by the house this evening," Hank said. "To see Dawn."

"Wait until tomorrow," Buffy requested.

“Ok.” Hank didn’t argue. He paused and looked at Giles for a moment. He wasn’t going to even try and be civil. As far as Hank was concerned, this was all Giles’ fault, including Spike. He simply nodded at the other man in defeat and walked out of the office with his lawyer and his fiancé.

Spike had left immediately after the judge, so now it was just Buffy, Giles, and their lawyer. They thanked him profusely, finished whatever paperwork needed to be done, and got instructions on picking up Dawn from foster care. They left the office, Stockwell in one direction, Buffy and Giles in the other. They had nearly reached the exit, when Buffy noticed Spike loitering in the lounge, smoking. They both approached him.

“Hey,” Buffy said.

“Hey,” he answered, glancing around as if this were some secret conversation that shouldn’t be watched. “So you’re all back from the dead now, are you?”

She smiled.

“Good, ‘cause I was gettin’ right tired of lurking in the shadows, looking after the niblet.”

“Thank you, Spike. For everything you did against Glory. For watching over my sister. Although, why didn’t you stop Marcus from taking her?”

Spike shrugged, ducked his head down, rather embarrassed, and kicked some dirt off of one boot with the other. “Her father was driving her. I figured she’d be okay. If I’d known what a right bastard he was, I might have followed him too.”

“It’s okay. Thanks also for what you did in there for us. I was about ready to stake you at the beginning, but by the time you were talking about getting paid, I had it figured out.”

Spike took a long drag on his cigarette, blew the smoke off to his side like a long comet’s tail. “You should thank Xander for it. Was his idea.”

Giles groaned, and rolled his eyes, as if something had just clicked into place.

Spike glanced at the watcher curiously, and then continued with his tale. “He roused me out of my crypt with a sad song ‘bout Dawn’s father taking her off to Spain. Though, he coulda mentioned the part ‘bout you being alive again somewhere closer to the beginning.” Spike rubbed the side of his jaw. “Tell the boy he owes me a good watching him get hit.”

Buffy leaned up and gave Spike a kiss on the cheek. He looked sweetly touched. “Maybe stop by some night, any night but tomorrow. My dad probably won’t be too eager to see you. But any other night would be ok. Dawn really has a soft spot for you. And I guess you’re kinda growing on me, too. Although,” she raised one warning finger, “that doesn’t mean I won’t stake you if you ever go back to being evil.”

“Course not, Slayer.”

Buffy smiled again, and took Giles’ hand. They started walking towards the exit. Just at the inside doors, Spike called out to her.

“Buffy!”

She turned around.

His mouth quirked up on one side. “I had myself a real good day today.” And then he stamped out his cigarette and walked off, his long black cloak billowing behind him.

“What was that about?” Giles asked.

“Private joke.” She tugged on his hand. “Come on. Let’s go get Dawn.”

“They were nice and all, but they had like ten kids of their own. And they kept trying to convert me. So I started talking about magic and stuff and about how Giles has a magic shop and I know how

to put curses on people and stuff. Well, I don't really know how to put curses on people, but they didn't know that. Wouldn't it have been cool if Willow had shown me how to float pencils or something? That would have totally freaked them out. Anyway, they started getting kinda worried that I was gonna brainwash their kids or something, maybe turn them into Satan worshippers, so they rearranged everyone's rooms, so I got to sleep by myself. And like, whenever I got up to go to the bathroom or anything, Mr. Fredericks would like be standing outside his door when I came out again, like I was gonna sneak in one of his kids' rooms and suck their soul or something. And then, at breakfast—"

"Dawn!" Buffy interrupted, exasperated. "Maybe you would finish your dinner a lot sooner if you stopped talking long enough to actually eat it."

Dawn sighed and dutifully dug into the food she had been pushing around her plate. She had been in a bubbly mood ever since they picked her up, and as thankful as Giles was to have her home, he was beginning to wonder if she would ever shut up. Her good cheer was understandable, though. All was once again right in her world. She had Buffy back, alive, and she didn't need to worry about her father taking her away to Spain anymore. This was her home, now and forever, with both Buffy and Giles.

The Scoobies were all at the dining table, eating with them too. After all, they were also family. It wasn't the fancy dinner out that Giles had promised them, but that would come another night. Tonight, Tara had organized a sort of potluck for all of them. Buffy and Giles were grateful not to have to cook after their eventful day, and their friends were all pleased to be doing something useful for them.

Willow had begged steaks off her mother, using the excuse on her parents that if she didn't bring the meat, it wasn't likely to be kosher. Willow's mother had a special recipe for marinade that made the steak just melt in your mouth like butter. Tara had made a fruit salad covered in a sweet glaze. Xander had brought salad and potatoes, saying that it was pretty hard to screw either one of those up. And Buffy and Giles had vegetables in the freezer that they warmed up.

"What are these?" Dawn asked, as she picked up a flattish, round disk.

Anya pushed the basket closer to Buffy's sister. "They're dinner rolls. I baked them myself. After my previous success at cake baking, I thought I would try making something from 'scratch.' Try one."

Dawn looked over at her sister in fear. Buffy took the roll from Dawn's hand and replaced it in the basket, saying, "Dawn has a bread allergy."

"Oh," Anya said, and then she smiled mischievously as if she'd just thought of something. "One time, there was this man I cursed back in colonial Massachusetts. He had been sleeping with the baker's daughter, so his wife wished that he would be allergic—"

"An, honey," Xander interrupted. "What have we said about vengeance stories at the dinner table?"

"Right, sorry." Anya smiled brightly and leaned over to give Xander a kiss on the cheek. "Here, have a roll."

Xander looked suitably worried.

Anya rubbed his arm and turned to the rest of the group. "I've learned that wives must cook for their husbands, so I'm practicing for when Xander and I get married. Through the centuries, most of the scorned women I've helped were either lousy in bed or bad cooks."

Xander patted his fiancé on the arm reassuringly. "I wouldn't worry about the first one. As for the second, maybe we should have a more modern, enlightened marriage, where I do most of the cooking."

"But you don't cook. You just microwave Spaghetti-O's and eat cereal."

Xander looked at his roll thoughtfully. "Yeah, but maybe I should learn."

"Hey, guys," Buffy changed the subject. "You know we haven't gone on patrol the last two nights, what with Marcus and Nicole and then Dawn. The vamps are gettin' a little too cocky. I figured with the Slayer back on the job now, we might be able to bring their numbers back down."

Giles tensed next to her and suddenly found his food very fascinating. He wasn't ready to send her back out to fight and maybe die. He just wasn't. Marcus' words echoed in his head: *I have waited for her death, knowing that even for the best of slayers, I would not be waiting long.* Giles wondered how much longer he would have with her before he would have to bury his slayer again.

Buffy noticed his discomfort and slipped her hand in his, lacing their fingers together. He lifted his head up and smiled weakly at her. She squeezed his hand and stroked it with her thumb.

"Hey, Buffy," Dawn said. "You have a bigger room than I do, and I was wondering if I can have it. You know, now that you and Giles are sleeping together."

Xander choked on his water, spitting it out on his food. "What?"

Giles and Buffy had pulled their hands apart as if burned, but the others had already noticed.

Willow's eyes were round as saucers. "What? Buffy! Omigod, why didn't you tell me?" She started pointing at Buffy's hand. "Omigod, that's Giles' ring. You're wearing *Giles'* ring. Why didn't you guys tell us?"

Buffy glared menacingly at her sister. "You are *sooo* gonna die for this."

"No, it's cool, Buffy," Xander insisted. "Really it is. Hey Buffy, whatever you and Giles want to do... is really something I don't want to hear about. But if you're happy, Buffy, then I'm happy for you, Buffy. Really, Buffy, I'm totally cool with it."

Buffy frowned. "You're saying my name an awful lot."

"I think it's nice." Anya curled her arm into the crook of Xander's elbow and laid her head on his shoulder. "Giles deserves lots of orgasms."

This time it was Giles who choked on his water.

"Anya, honey," Xander scolded, "When we get home, we're going to have a little talk about private thoughts and public thoughts. And a little thing called 'tact.'"

"We already had that talk."

Xander nodded. "But we're going to have it again." Anya just shrugged.

Tara smiled shyly and offered up her opinion. "I think it's nice, too. I mean, Giles really missed you while you were gone."

Willow was still shaking her head, her cropped red hair bobbing as she did. "Wow, Buffy. I mean, wow. I mean, I knew about Giles. It was *sooo* obvious. Especially after you died. The guy was a wreck."

"Willow!" Giles complained.

"Sorry, Giles," she continued, "but it's true. We were all really worried about you. But you, Buffy, I never had any idea you might feel the same way. I had a crush on him all through high school." Willow blushed when she realized what she had let slip, but she continued on bravely. "But all that time, you never said anything like that. I mean, wow, Buffy. You and Giles. What brought this on?"

Buffy shrugged. "I dunno. I guess death brings clarity to a girl. I just *knew*. And I realized I've felt this way for a long time." Buffy smiled sideways at Giles and linked her hand with his again.

"A toast," Xander demanded, as he held his water glass in the air. "To three happy couples."

"Here, here," they all answered and clinked glasses.

Dawn sighed and asked, "When can I have a boyfriend?"

Buffy ruffled her hair playfully. "When you're... *never*."

And so the Slayer and her Slayerettes passed the rest of the evening in conversation, blissfully happy for the first time since before Buffy had died, since before they had battled Glory, since before

Buffy's mother had died. Probably for the first time since they had all had Christmas dinner together all those months ago.

Giles laid in his bed awake and waiting for her. She hadn't let him go on patrol, insisting that *someone* had to stay home and watch Dawn. They would really need to work out a system for that. He couldn't just sit at home every night, not doing anything, wondering if she would ever walk through that door again. He just *couldn't*. It would drive him mad.

He looked at the clock again. Nearly two in the morning. He should have made her take Xander and Willow and the others. But no, the Slayer had wanted to go alone. She had called it hunting. Tomorrow night he would go with her. Xander and the others could take turns sitting with Dawn, and that was all there was to it. Giles would go patrolling with Buffy every night until... until... well he would just go patrolling with Buffy every night.

He heard her footsteps on the stairs and breathed a sigh of relief. He heard the water run in the bathroom and closed his eyes as he waited for her to finish getting ready for bed. He felt the bed move as she climbed in next to him. He opened his eyes to look up at her.

"Dear Lord, Buffy, what are you wearing?"

She smiled innocently. "My yummy sushi pajamas just weren't doing it for me. You like?"

Buffy was sitting on the bed next to him, dressed in a red satin camisole with spaghetti straps. The sheeress of the fabric revealed the shadows of breasts and curves. Her long legs were bare. He turned away from her quickly. His body was already letting him know just how much he liked.

"Buffy, I don't think... That is to say..." he stumbled over the words. "What I mean is that this is all still very new. I'd rather not rush into anything that you might regret later."

He felt her hand on his cheek, turning his head to face her. She was looking down on him, her hair falling over him like a curtain to the outside world, its long waves shining in the moonlight. "I want to rush, Giles. I've been dead twice now, and I want to rush into everything. I don't want to wait for the right time or the right place or even for tomorrow. Sometimes tomorrow never comes. I love you, and you love me, and I want to have tonight and every night after."

She bent down and kissed him, leisurely, with a deep, smoldering passion. He returned her kiss with equal fervor, his hands coming up to tangle themselves in her hair and pull her closer. After a moment, she came up for air and smiled down on him sweetly. "See? No regrets." She kissed his chin and then up along the length of his jaw, stopping beside his ear. "Please, Giles," she whispered urgently, her breath hot against his neck. "Make all this death and pain go away. I need you to make me feel *alive*."

He took her in his arms and rolled them both onto her back. She was his Slayer, and he could deny her nothing. He brushed her golden hair back from her face and stared down on her in awe. Their foreheads touched, and he murmured softly, "I shall try."

Then he kissed her and endeavored to make them both feel alive.

Two hours later the new lovers lay naked and sated in each other's arms. Buffy nuzzled her nose against the nape of his neck, murmuring, "So that's what a stevedore is."

Giles merely chuckled and replied, "So that's what Slayer stamina is."

Buffy laughed and rolled away from him, stretching out in the bed. "Oh, honey, that's just a taste of Slayer stamina." She pulled him back on top of her forcefully, as if to demonstrate, surprising him still with the measure of her strength. "Maybe you need another lesson."

He smiled down at her fondly, holding himself up on his elbows. "Oh, Buffy, I think I need more of a break than that, else you're going to be the death of me."

"Ah, no, no, no," she said as she placed one finger over his lips. "We're not going to use the D-word tonight."

He kissed the finger against his lips, turned his head to kiss her wrist and down her arm. "It's rather more like morning now. We should probably go to sleep. I imagine Dawn will tease us relentlessly if we spend the whole day in bed."

She turned her head to look at the clock. A little after four in the morning. She shrugged, wrapped her arms around him, and pulled him down to lie on top of her. "It's Sunday. No school. No work. Meant for sleeping in. Dawn will keep herself entertained."

Giles groaned. "Yes, doesn't that concern you?"

They were silent for a moment, relaxed and sleepy, Buffy running her fingers along his back and through his hair. After a bit, she tilted her head to see if his eyes were still open. He was watching her curious expression.

"Giles?"

"Yes?"

"How long of a break?"

He laughed and kissed her cheek. "Go to sleep, Buffy."

She yawned and darted forward to kiss his nose. "Dawn thought we might save water if we showered together."

He settled down against her, his eyes beginning to drift closed. He murmured, "There's something to be said for being frugal. Maybe we'll try that tomorrow, Buffy." She didn't stir. "Buffy?" he called softly.

He glanced up and saw that she was already sleeping. He brushed the back of his knuckles across the soft skin of her cheek. "So much for Slayer stamina," he whispered. He laid his head back down on her shoulder and closed his eyes as well.

Watcher and Slayer slept the peaceful sleep of the happy and loved. There would be other battles and other foes. And Fate would come one day to steal her away from him. But for right now they had each other and they had Dawn. And for right now, that was enough. Everything else would have to wait until tomorrow.

~Finis~ June 24, 2001

Book Two: The Ticking Clock

**by
JK Philips**

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Five months later...

Chapter 1:
A Touch of Nymphomania and a Taste for the Hunt

Giles found the pages of the book to be a lot softer than he imagined. Not as soft as a pillow, mind you, but at this point they were a welcome substitute. He would just close his eyes for a moment, and then he would be fine.

"Giles!"

Anya's voice startled him, and he bolted upright. Flustered and disoriented for a moment, his glasses still askew across his face, he blinked around him, searching for the source of her voice.

"This customer has a question. And if you answer it properly, he might purchase something."

He had managed to straighten his glasses and rearrange his clothing to some level of presentability before turning to around to face Anya and the elderly gentleman she had brought to speak with him. He answered the man's questions in short order, trying not to yawn through every other word and failing miserably. When the customer walked towards the register with Anya, Giles allowed himself to sink back down into his chair. He propped his head up on one hand, as if he lacked the strength to even hold it up anymore.

Willow bounced into the chair across from him. She looked far more chipper than anyone had a right to be. "God, Giles, you look like hell."

"Thank you for your kind observation, Willow. I'm just a little tired. Haven't been sleeping well lately."

The redhead frowned sympathetically and ducked her head to try and look into Giles' eyes, which were now wavering at half-mast. "Dreams?"

He shook his head and yawned. God, his head felt like it weighed a ton. He never thought the hard, wooden surface of a table would look so inviting.

Having finished ringing up her customer, Anya joined them at the center table, informing Willow knowingly, "Giles and Buffy have been having a lot of sex."

Giles' raised his head enough to flash his employee an irritated glare. "Giles and Buffy have been *patrolling*. Training and patrolling all hours of the day and night. I don't know what's gotten into her lately. Time was she used to beg me for a day off. Now I'm the one begging. Willow, you patrolled with her on occasion in college, didn't you?"

"Sometimes."

He rested his head again in his hands. "You ever known her to patrol until the sun came up? As in from sunset to sunrise?"

Willow looked surprised. "Wow. That's some serious slayage. No, she never did that, not that I know of at least."

Giles took his glasses off and rubbed his bloodshot eyes. "I was just going through my old diaries. Or at least I was trying to. I'm so bloody tired. Buffy's had me up all night for the last three nights. She doesn't even seem to want to sleep. I've gone through all my old diaries, and I can't find any times where she's patrolled like this. Usually she's only out until 2 or 3 in the morning at the latest, about the time even the most diehard of human night-owls have made it home safely to bed."

"She putting a good dent in the vampire population?" Willow asked.

"She's averaged ten or more a night as of late. Her instincts for them seemed to have sharpened considerably. She just *knows* which buildings have nests. And last night, I think she tracked a vampire who was a good three blocks ahead of us."

"Wow." Willow watched him thoughtfully, and then darted one hand towards him, knocking his elbow out from under him. His head fell forward, stopping only inches from the tabletop.

"Hey!" he protested, as he pulled his head back up.

"Giles, you're falling over, you're so tired. Why don't you go home and get some sleep? Anya and I will keep a watch over the store."

He grunted noncommittally. "Like you both did while I was in England?"

Willow crossed her arms and drew herself up straight. "Are we ever going to live that down? 'Cause really, that was like a year ago."

"Besides," Anya added, "it was really Willow's fault, with her spell and—"

"My spell?" Willow interrupted. "What about *your* ex-boyfriend the troll? And if you hadn't been bothering me while—"

"Well if you hadn't been stealing supplies from the store, I wouldn't have needed to—"

"Girls!" Giles shouted, drawing their attention back to himself. "I really don't need a headache at the moment." He replaced his head in his hands with a sigh. "And while I appreciate the offer, Willow, Buffy and Dawn should be back from school at any moment. And I imagine Buffy will want to train."

"Come on, Giles," Willow reached over and gave his shoulder a friendly little squeeze. "You're going to turn into Rip Van Winkle if you try anymore training or patrolling—"

"Or sex," Anya added helpfully, and Giles gave her another glare.

Willow continued as if she hadn't been interrupted. "You just have to face the fact that you're not going to be able to keep up with Buffy."

Giles ran one hand through his hair and nodded wearily. "Yes, I am beginning to feel my age, I'm afraid."

Willow pounded her fist on the table once, startling him. "No! You're not old, Giles. You're just not the Slayer. None of us could expect to keep up with Buffy. And yet you've gone on patrol with her every night since... Well for a long time." None of them spoke about Buffy's death anymore. They wanted to forget what it was like without her. "And now she's on some kind of slayer mission. You just have to give yourself a break."

"I tell you what," Willow continued, "I'll patrol with Buffy tonight. I don't have any papers or exams tomorrow, and I can be her Wicca backup. Maybe Dawn can sleep over at a friend's, or maybe Xander and Anya can take her?" She looked hopefully at the ex-demon.

Anya smiled and nodded. "Sure. Dawn promised to show me how to make amusing prank phone calls. Like knock knock, your refrigerator is running away. Or something like that."

Giles and Willow both looked at her strangely, and then turned back to each other as if she hadn't spoken.

"See, Giles, it's a plan," Willow pronounced happily. "Dawn stays at Xander's, I go patrolling with Buffy, and you," Willow poked him in the shoulder with one finger as she said it, "you, Mister, go home and have a long night's sleep. Maybe even sleep in and let Anya open up in the morning. Buffy can come over to our place after patrol, so you'll have the whole house to yourself."

He shook his head slightly. "I don't know, Willow. Maybe if I—"

"No, no, no," Willow scolded. She scowled at him and pointed one finger at her face. "See. Resolve face."

He sighed and merely nodded his acceptance. He was so very tired. Maybe a nice, long night's sleep would be just the thing.

A moment later, Buffy strolled in the front door, Dawn in tow. "Hey Willow, mind helping Dawn with her homework while Giles and I squeeze in a little training?"

Giles placed his hands on the table and slowly lifted himself from his chair, as if he were twice his actual age. He shuffled back to the training room, and Willow snagged Buffy as she moved to follow him.

"Hey, Buffy, go easy on him. The guy's exhausted."

Buffy shrugged and smiled brightly. She patted Willow's cheek and answered, "Don't worry, Will, it's just a little light training." And then she followed her watcher into the back room and shut the door behind them.

Anya leaned over and whispered to Willow, "Training is code for sex."

Willow merely rolled her eyes, shook her head, and picked up her bookbag. "Come on, Dawn, let's go sit at the corner coffee shop and study. Anya, tell them that's where we'll be when they're finished."

The two left Anya alone in the shop, muttering to herself, "Training, indeed. I mean, please, I'm over eleven hundred years old!"

"Buffy, please!" The door had barely shut behind her before she had him against the wall, nibbling along his neck and ear as she unbuttoned his shirt. His hands came up to stop her progress, but she only moved her attentions on to his mouth, which she covered with a passionate kiss.

When he pulled back, panting for air, her fingers slipped down to his belt buckle, and he again stopped her hands. "Buffy, please. I thought you wanted to train."

She smiled seductively and wrapped her arms around his neck. She kissed beneath his chin, and then up the length of his jaw, finally stopping to blow softly in his ear until he shivered. She giggled, and then whispered quietly, "We'll both get a good workout this way. And it's so much more *fun*."

She began kissing him again, all along his neck, his cheeks, his mouth, her hands moving down to stroke him through the fabric of his trousers. The whole time she kept talking. "God, Giles, I wanted you all day." Kiss. "I'm trying to pay attention in lecture." Lick. "Boring stuff about some place I'll never see." Nip. "People way dead." Suck. "The whole time the professor's talking." Nibble. "And all I can think about is what I want..." Deep kiss. "...To do..." With tongue. "...To you."

"Buffy!" He finally pushed her back by the shoulders and held her at arm's length. She pouted for a moment as he caught his breath. "While I'm flattered by your obvious desire, I'm just... well, I mean... I find it hard to believe... Are you telling me that after the shower, the kitchen, the back storage room, the car, even, God help me, the *park bench*, and, oddly enough, the actual bed, after all that in less than 24 hours, and you want to go *again*?"

Buffy frowned and smoothed his brow with her fingers, letting them play with the soft curls of his hair. "Willow said you were tired."

He chuckled and caught her hand, turned his head to gently kiss her palm. "I would imagine so. If all that weren't enough, then I'm sure the all night patrols are the final straw that puts this man out of commission for the time being."

She leaned forward and kissed him tenderly on the mouth. "Then maybe I should take you home and put you to bed."

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her closer, laughing. "Somehow, I don't think that will lead to any kind of rest." He stroked her hair softly, after all these months still enamored by the feel of the perfect silk of her golden locks flowing between his fingers. "Willow offered- well demanded really- to go on patrol with you tonight. I imagine she'll drag you home with her afterwards. And

Anya's going to take Dawn for the night. I'm to have the house to myself. I've been ordered to have a long night's sleep, followed by a morning of sleeping in."

Buffy sighed dejectedly. "All right. I suppose I have to let you go home and recharge." She looked up and studied him for a moment. "You do look tired. Why don't you go home right now and get like 20 hours of sleep or something totally ridiculous like that." She grinned widely. "Then tomorrow night you're all mine." She suddenly made a face, and cried, "Aghhh!" as she bent her head to his shoulder.

"Buffy, what is it?"

"I just remembered! We promised the gang we'd go to the Bronze with them tomorrow night. It's like Xander's big promotion celebration. We told Dawn she could have a friend over and stay home alone, remember?" She took a deep breath and lifted her head to stare into his eyes. "All right, but as soon as the celebration winds down, you and me are going to fit in some personal training."

He smiled at her fondly and gave her a quick peck on the nose. "It's a deal."

Their lateness was conspicuous. Giles felt the warmth of a blush spread over his features as the gang all threw them knowing looks. He had tried to tell Buffy that a stop at lover's lane would be easily deduced if they showed up over an hour late to Xander's party. Buffy, on the other hand, had been very insistent, and very imaginative as she convinced him.

"Nice of you two to show," Xander said with a smirk.

"Yeah," Willow added, "We were beginning to wonder what had happened to you."

Anya looked at the witch in confusion. "No, we weren't. We were all just saying that they were probably having sex in Giles' car. Giles has a nice car to have sex in. One time, Xander and I borrowed Giles' car, and—"

Xander quickly fed his fiancé a french fry. "An, honey, let's not swap stories right now."

"Please don't," Giles seconded. "Wherever that was going, I'm sure it would have led to a quick trip to the car dealership and a trade-in."

Buffy and Giles joined their friends at the table, their hands still linked together. The last week or so Buffy had needed to be touching him at all times. Holding hands was fine. It was when she tried to take other liberties that he felt somewhat embarrassed.

"I'm going for a drink. Can I get anyone anything?" Buffy had managed to sit for five minutes. Nearly a record. Now she was jumping up to run for refreshments.

Everyone shook their heads in the negative, and Giles watched her bounce off to the bar.

"Giles, you okay?"

"Hmm?" He brought his attention to Willow, who had moved to sit next to him.

"You look a lot more rested."

He studied the young redhead at his side. "Yes, I am. But I can see the circles under your eyes."

Willow dropped her head on the table. "Omigod, you were *sooo* right about the Buffy slaying marathon. We didn't get home until five. *Five* a.m., Giles. The last two hours, I don't think we saw a single vamp, but she wouldn't call it a night. She was just itching to do some more slaying. I think she was truly disappointed that we didn't find anymore to stake. I actually fell asleep in a class today. I never do that." She lifted her head and looked him in the eye. "You can have her back tonight. I'm going to sleep." She suddenly smiled brightly. "Oooh. Maybe Xander and Anya can go patrolling with her tonight."

Anya frowned. "No, Xander and I have plans. It's his big promotion. He's a foreman now, and he gets to boss people around. I find that incredibly sexy. Besides, Buffy's the Slayer. She doesn't need anyone to patrol with. Buffy used to patrol alone, before—"

"Now, Anya, maybe if Buffy needs us," he began gently, placing his hand over hers. He didn't mention that it was Giles more than Buffy that needed someone to patrol with her. They all tended to dance around that issue, including Buffy.

"No, that's ok, Xander," Giles insisted. "You two enjoy your big night. I'm really feeling much better today. I think I'm up for a little patrol."

At that moment Buffy returned with a diet Coke for herself and a double latte for Giles. He accepted it with a raised brow. "It would seem that you feel I require a rather heavy dose of caffeine for the evening."

Buffy smiled as if she had been found out and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "You're not falling asleep on me tonight. I have plans for you."

Giles blushed hotly, but the others were kind enough to look away and pretend they hadn't heard. Buffy herself merely turned back to watch the band play on stage, her fingers nervously spinning her straw around in her Coke.

The music pounded all around them, but they were sitting far enough from the stage to still carry on a conversation. Giles watched the throng of young people on the dance floor, gyrating and grinding into each other. He would hardly call that dancing, more like foreplay. He wondered if any of their parents had any idea what went on at the Bronze on a Friday night. And then, realizing what he had just thought, he began to feel really old.

He glanced over at Buffy, sitting at his side. She could always make him feel young. Then he noticed that the nervous stirring of her straw had become an absent stroking of its length. In long, sensuous motions, she caressed the straw from top to bottom, one finger massaging the very tip. She seemed completely absorbed in the band on stage and completely unaware of what her hand was doing. He reached out his own hand to stop her, to lace their fingers together and rest them on the table. She turned and smiled at him sweetly, not really comprehending why he was holding her hand, only that he was.

Giles examined the others sitting around the table to see if they had noticed Buffy's odd behavior. They seemed just as entranced by the band's music as she was. The next song began, a rapid beat that only increased the frenzy on the dance floor. He felt a tug on his hand and looked at his slayer. She was trying to pull him off his chair and onto the dance floor. It was meant as an invitation. If she really wanted to drag him onto the floor, well she was the Slayer.

"No, Buffy, really I don't dance."

"Come on, Giles, *please*." She slid her arms around his neck and leaned forward until their foreheads were touching. "Just one song."

He shook his head. "No. I'm afraid I really can't dance like... like that," he said, motioning to the grinding and groping that was going on closer to the stage.

"Come on, Buffy. Tara and I will go dance with you." Willow took her lover by the hand, and Buffy followed them onto the floor.

Xander elbowed Giles in the rib. "Three girls dancing together. Pretty hot, huh?"

Giles gave him a withering stare, and Xander returned to his french fries, muttering, "Oz would get it."

Buffy, Willow, and Tara formed a small circle as they danced together, throwing their heads back and moving their hips in time to the music. Giles watched them, but mostly he watched Buffy. Her whole body swayed with the beat, her eyes half closed as if she were in her own dream world. Her

hips rocked in a sensual dance that lacked only the partner to grind up against. Her hands began to explore her own body, sliding over legs and stomach and breasts. Her fingers slid up her neck, piled her golden hair on top of her head, and then let it fall through her fingers.

And then she had her partner. A young man, maybe 19, had positioned himself behind her. His hands came around her waist, and now his hips were moving in rhythm with hers. Giles waited for her to push the boy away, to show him perhaps some of her slayer strength for daring to be so presumptuous. Instead she pulled his arms tighter around her, arched her back into him as they moved with the music, and then turned around to accept his embrace.

She touched him. Buffy's hands were pulling the boy closer, caressing him across arms and shoulders and neck. Her head tipped back, her eyes still half closed, heavy with passion. The whole time they never stopped moving together, undulating and grinding together in time with the music. A dance that Giles had moments before described as foreplay.

"No sweat, Big-G," Xander was saying next to him, although his young friend sounded more than a little concerned. "They're just dancing. Buffy's danced with me like that before. No big. Just dancing."

If Giles had looked, he would have noticed Willow and Tara's dancing slow to an awkward rocking and then stop altogether, as they too stared at the young couple beside them. But Giles didn't notice them; he had eyes only for Buffy.

Xander inhaled sharply. "Ok, Buffy and I never did *that*."

But Giles barely heard the young man. His entire world had narrowed to the sight before him. Buffy and her dance partner had their arms wrapped around each other, the boy's hands sliding down to her butt and pulling her closer into their grinding dance. And they were kissing. Kissing like the world around them had disappeared. Kissing like they'd each lost something down the other's throat. Kissing like she kissed *him*.

Giles didn't see Buffy pull away, didn't see the total shock on her face. He didn't see her hands come up to her mouth or her head start to shake as if to deny what she had just done. He didn't see any of it, because he had already dropped his car keys on the table and left.

Buffy paced the floor of the living room, chewing on one fingernail. It was nearly three in the morning, and they had looked *everywhere* for Giles. She had even been desperate enough to ask Spike to help them.

The others were still out driving around, looking, but Buffy had come back to the house, hoping to find him here or hoping to be here when he returned. He had left his keys behind at the Bronze for her to drive herself home. Giles never let her drive his car. That in itself made her worry about his state of mind.

She kept replaying the events of the evening. She had no idea what had come over her. Only that she had been all over Giles on the drive over, managing to convince him to take a detour through lover's lane. And still, by the time they got to the Bronze, she felt like she was ready to crawl out of her skin. She was itching to go on patrol and kill as many dark nasties as possible. Lacking that, she was ready to lay Giles right out on the floor of the Bronze and have her way with him.

The music had only peaked those twin desires. She had felt the beat thrum through every cell of her body. She had wanted to dance with Giles, to wrap her arms around him, press her body against his, and let the music set the pace for their passion.

When he refused, she had thought that maybe dancing by herself, with Willow and Tara, maybe just dancing would take the edge off. But when that boy had put his arms around her, my God she didn't even know his name, when he had danced with her, it had awakened every carnal instinct she had struggled to keep at bay. She had touched him, moved her body against his in rhythm to the music, and had kissed him. Kissed him with a lust she hadn't felt since Xander had put the love whammy on all the women of Sunnydale.

It was as if she were possessed or under a spell. Yeah, that's what it had to be. That's what she would tell Giles. Because she would never have done that of her own free will. She had instantly regretted it, had rushed back to their table to beg Giles' forgiveness, but he had already gone. Gone to God only knows where to stew over her betrayal of him.

Part of her was terrified that he would never come back. That's what men were like. Angel. Parker. Riley. Her dad. Men left, and they didn't come back. Why should she think Giles would be any different?

She called the local cab companies *again*. Without a car, that was his likely means of transportation. She prayed he had the sense not to walk home alone after dark in Sunnydale. She kept reminding herself that he always carried a cross and a couple stakes just in case. Still, she called the hospital *again* just to be sure.

When she heard the sound of a car door slamming, she jumped to the window and peeked through the curtains. Headlights, and not Xander's car. She was pretty sure it was a cab. She heard the handle on the front door rattle and moved to the foyer to let him in. She remembered that he wouldn't have keys to get in, having left them for her back at the Bronze. He must have realized it too, because she heard him through the door.

"Bloody hell!"

She turned the deadbolt and opened the door wide. He stood staring at her for a moment, as if trying to place what she was doing there.

"You needn't have waited up for me, Buffy," he slurred. "I hadn't planned on waiting up for you."

And then he shoved past her on unsteady feet, his hand reaching out to the archway wall to regain his balance.

She shut and locked the door behind him. She hadn't seen him like this since Spike had turned them all against each other when they were fighting Adam. "Giles, are you drunk?"

He pushed off the wall, stumbled through the archway and into the dining room, and made his way over to the corner liquor cabinet. "Not drunk enough apparently." He rifled through the cabinet, finding only Buffy's wine coolers and a few bottles of stout ale. He'd never adequately restocked the liquor cabinet after having dumped the entire supply during those dark days following Buffy's death. "Bloody hell!" he said again.

Buffy was afraid to face him, afraid to see the recriminations and betrayal in his eyes. But she wasn't sure how much better it was to just stand and watch him throw back his bottle of beer. "Giles, please, we need to talk. I am so sorry. I don't know how to tell you how sorry I am."

He swallowed the ale and turned to her. He pointed at her with the hand holding the beer, his aim wavering through lack of coordination. "You're sorry? Good for you. I'm sorry too. You know what I'm sorry for? I'm sorry I thought this could ever last."

She took a few steps towards him, her eyes filling with tears. "It was a mistake," she said, meaning of course what happened at the Bronze. But he read a different meaning in her words and hurled his beer bottle at the opposite wall. She flinched when it smashed and broke, the sound of it echoing through the house.

"Damn straight it was a mistake, Buffy," he was shouting at her now, his voice filled with anger and despair and self-loathing. "It was a mistake to think that I could ever compete with someone your own age. I was a fool to think that you would love me, would want to be with me, when you could have your choice of any man."

She rushed forward, her arms outstretched in a plea. "I don't want any man, Giles, I want *you*."

He laughed bitterly, threw his head back and threw off his balance. His hand darted out to steady himself against the dining room table. "Yes, tonight you gave a rather impressive display of how little interest you have in other men." He met her gaze again, and his eyes shimmered with unshed tears.

She tried to touch him, but he shrank back as if burned. Oh God, how could she ever make this right? "Please, just tell me how I can make this up to you."

"Spare me your pity, Buffy. This, all of it, was inevitable. You had died, and I had lost you, and we came together to make the pain go away. People come together in times of crisis. It's only natural. And then when the crisis passes, the feelings go away. I was an idiot not to see it coming. Tell me honestly, when exactly did you wake up and realize you had stuck yourself with an old man?"

"Stop it!" she yelled. She was crying now, wanting so badly to touch him and wondering if she would ever again be allowed that privilege. "That's not how I see you. I *love* you!"

In two strides he was on her, his hands gripping her shoulders and pushing her against the archway behind her. His eyes drilled into her with that cold Ripper glare she had only seen him give to Ethan, to Angelus, to the Mayor, to Travers, to her father, but never to her. Never to her. "Save the waterworks, Buffy. You can't fix this with tears and pouting lips and quivering chin. Something must be terribly wrong with us, or you would never have acted as you did. Why don't you think about it and let me know when you've figured out what you want from me? But I'm tired, and I'm going to sleep."

He shoved her aside and stumbled to the staircase. He paused on the bottom step and stared thoughtfully at the couch. "Perhaps we should discuss sleeping arrangements. There are just the two bedrooms now. Do you want the bed, Buffy?" He glanced back at her, leaning against the archway, still weeping into her hands. "Oh, bloody hell. You're the Slayer. You take the damn couch. I'm going to sleep." Then he trudged up the stairs, slamming the bedroom door behind him.

Buffy wiped her tears away, and leaned her head back against the archway. Could entire worlds really fall apart in one night? And over a single kiss? Even with Angel it had taken a whole lot more than a kiss.

She went out the front door, slamming it behind her. Buffy was going hunting.

The sound of glass breaking startled her out of a deep sleep. She looked over at her friend Melinda. The crash had woken her, too. Then Dawn heard Buffy and Giles nearly screaming at each other, and she began to cry. Melinda pulled her sleeping bag closer and patted her friend on the back, talking to her and trying to distract her. Dawn heard the doors slam, first one upstairs, and then a moment later, one downstairs. She started to cry even harder. It was her parents' marriage all over again.

Buffy sat at the kitchen counter, eating breakfast and pretending to read the paper. Giles hadn't even looked at her when he left this morning. And she had been too much of a coward to say anything.

Dawn and her friend soon joined her at the counter, pouring themselves cereal and watching Buffy. An oppressive silence filled the room, and Buffy wondered how much the two girls had heard.

After they had finished eating, Buffy asked, “Melinda, would you like me to give you a ride home?”

“That would be nice, Miss Summers.”

God, when had she become Miss Summers? Buffy looked over at her sister, who had been quiet and sullen since coming down. Yeah, she definitely knew.

Dawn glanced up then, and met her sister’s eyes, her expression clearly saying that she knew that Buffy knew that she knew. “Where’s Giles?”

Buffy shrugged casually. “At the Magic Box.”

“I thought Anya opened on Saturdays.” There was anger in her sister’s eyes. Just as Dawn had blamed Mom when their dad left, she was now giving Buffy that same look of resentment and hurt and fear and *how could you let him leave?*

Buffy busied herself with putting away the milk and cereal, dumping the dishes in the sink, anything to avoid her sister’s cold glare. “Probably got a new shipment or something. You know Giles.”

“Yeah.”

Melinda looked decidedly uncomfortable and was probably wishing she’d chosen another night for a sleepover.

Buffy smiled at her, a polite fake smile given to company when they happened to be the only thing between you and an all-out screamfest. “Hey, Melinda, why don’t you go upstairs and get your things. I’ll take you home now.”

Dawn’s friend left, but she stayed. Dawn crossed her arms and said, “Melinda invited me over to her house for the day. We’re going to play Nintendo.”

“Fine.”

And then Dawn’s icy front broke, and she bit her lip not to cry. In a small child’s voice she asked, “Is Giles coming back?”

Buffy turned her face away, her hand coming up to brush away a careless tear. “I don’t know, Dawn. I don’t know.”

Willow held her best friend as she sobbed. Buffy was crying like her heart was breaking, like she hadn’t cried since Angel had dumped her before the prom. Willow didn’t know what to say, so she just held her. Tara had left to give them privacy. It was really more of a best friend thing.

“He... hates... me... now,” Buffy choked out between sobs. “He... wouldn’t... even... listen.”

Willow stroked her friend’s hair, at a loss as to what to say. She couldn’t really blame Giles. It must have been painful for him to see her kissing that other guy. None of them really understood why Buffy had done it. But that didn’t matter. The best friend’s job was to listen, to sympathize, and to badmouth the boyfriend, even if it happened to be Giles.

“Yeah, Giles never listens when he’s upset.”

Buffy pulled herself out of Willow’s lap, turning terrified eyes to the young witch. “What’s wrong with me, Willow?” She sniffled and wiped away some of the tears. Her hand came away smeared with mascara, and her face was red and blotchy. “It’s like every minute I’m *craving* the slaying. When I stake some vamp, the rush lasts like a second, and then I need it again. And if I’m not thinking about slaying, then I’m thinking about sex. It’s like I can’t get enough of Giles. But when I can’t have him, the closest guy feels just as good. That’s what happened last night, Will, when I kissed that guy, he

just happened to the closest guy. I don't think I even knew what I was doing until it was too late. It's like my body has a mind of its own."

Buffy laid back on Willow's bed and crossed her arms over her face. "Don't you dare tell anyone this, but last night... God, even Xander was looking good!"

Willow sat a little closer to Buffy and crossed her legs Indian style. "Yeah, that might not be something you'd want to mention to Anya."

The two women both laughed, the tension lifting for a moment. Then Willow continued. "Maybe something is wrong with you, Buffy. Maybe you should go talk to Giles." Buffy rolled away from her and groaned, but Willow pressed on. "Really. He's at the Magic Box today, right? He's probably had a chance to cool off. Talk to him. Apologize. Maybe he can crack open his books and figure out the problem."

Buffy nodded and got up. "You're right. Thanks." And then she gave Willow a hug goodbye and went to the shop to do just that.

When she got there, Giles was nowhere to be seen. She walked up to the register and asked Anya, but Anya continued sorting through the day's invoices as if Buffy hadn't spoken.

"Anya!"

Anya glanced up in irritation. "I am pretending not to hear you, because I am very unhappy with you right now. I believe it's called the 'cold elbow' or something like that. You hurt Giles, and you shouldn't have been kissing another man, especially not right in front of his nose. This is exactly why vengeance kept me so busy.

"Now if you must know, Giles went to pick up a package at the post office and should be back in ten or fifteen minutes. You can wait if you like, but I don't think he'll speak with you." Anya closed the store ledger with finality. "In the meantime, I'm just going to continue to ignore you. Unless you want to buy something, then I guess I would have to tell you how much money to give me. But I wouldn't tell you to 'have a nice day.'" Anya turned on her heel and walked into the back storage room.

Buffy began to browse through the shelves dejectedly. She deserved everything Anya had just said to her. She hoped it was a spell or possession or a demon or something. Because the thought that she could have done this to Giles all on her own was too much to bear.

There were a few customers in the store. One, a college boy about her age, approached her.

"You look like you could use this," he said, handing her a small vial. "Aromatherapy. Lavender. I think it's supposed to lift your mood. I'm not sure, though. I don't really understand most of this stuff. My roommate's into it, and I'm trying to find him a birthday present." He stuck out his hand. "I'm Dave."

Buffy smiled slightly and shook his hand. "Hi, Dave, I'm Buffy."

They talked for a little while, lightly flirting and closing into each other's personal space. Buffy didn't really realize what she was doing until she saw Giles' figure framed in the entrance. He was staring at her. And Buffy had just been leaning in to whisper something in Dave's ear, her hand placed on his bicep as the other hand playfully swatted her hair back over her shoulder. Buffy froze, her eyes wide. She tried to move around Dave, tried to cross the distance to Giles, but it was too late. He had already disappeared out the front door. Buffy followed a moment later.

And Anya, who had caught only the last couple minutes, muttered to herself, "I'll have to give Giles the chant for Avantanin, patron saint of scorned *men*."

That night, Buffy hunted as she had never hunted before. She was no longer Buffy Summers. She had no life outside of this moment. She had no man at home who was ready to leave her because she had strayed. She had no sister who hated her for driving him away. There was only this moment. Only the chase and the fight and the kill. She was simply the Slayer, and in this moment that was her whole identity.

Chase. Fight. Kill. Over and over again. Until she had beaten her own record. Until nearly 20 vamps were dust. And still it wasn't enough. She still ached. She still craved. Her body trembled with her longing. She still yearned for Giles.

She turned towards home. What was it Faith had taught her? *Want, Take, Have.*

Giles had fallen asleep, only by burying himself in his research. He would have rather buried himself in a bottle, but Buffy had never come home and Dawn was looking to him to hold her world together. For Dawn's sake, he had spent the evening pretending everything was all right, that Buffy was just out doing slaying type stuff and tomorrow they would all have a big Sunday brunch, one big happy family. Dawn was getting too old for fairy tales.

He had fallen asleep with the book still on his chest, his glasses crooked on his nose. He woke when he felt the bed shift.

"Buffy?" He blinked up at her, still slightly disoriented. "What are you doing here?"

She took the book and the glasses and laid them on the nightstand. Then in one fluid movement, she was straddling him, leaning over above his face. "I've heard make up sex is just the kick."

He took her arms, started to push her off of him. "Yes, but that requires some kind of make up first."

She had his wrists, one in each hand, and was pushing him down, holding him down. He was no match for her strength. *Want, Take, Have.*

"Buffy, what are you playing at?"

She smiled down on him, and her smile was almost predatory. "I thought I would prove to you that I want you and no one else." Then she pulled his wrists together, held them down with one hand as the other reached behind her back. She drew something from her back pocket and dangled it from her fingers for Giles to see. Handcuffs.

"Buffy, I'm not amused. Kinky sex is not going change what you did or how I feel about it. Now, please, go, and perhaps we can—"

She didn't let him finish. She covered his mouth with a kiss, which left him breathless and struggling to turn away from her and draw air. But she was his Slayer, and her strength meant the kiss would not end until she decided it would end. When she did finally pull away from him, he was gasping and panting. He noticed that she had also used the kiss to cuff his hands together and through the bed railing. He tested them briefly. They were snug, and he was chained firmly to the iron railing of the headboard.

He looked up at her. She was gazing down at him, her eyes glowing with desire and lust. He filled himself with a confidence he didn't feel and demanded, "Buffy, unlock these now."

She ran one finger down the buttons on his shirt. He had fallen asleep in his clothes and had never bothered to change for bed. She ripped his shirt open, the buttons flying in all directions. "We're going to have some fun first." And then she licked and kissed along the length of his stomach and chest. He squirmed beneath her, trying not to enjoy what she was doing, but when she took one nipple in her mouth, sucking as her tongue played over its hardness, he was done for. He was up and wanting her as

much as she wanted him. It had been over a day, and considering their recent track record, that was quite a long time.

She straddled him lower and unfastened his belt buckle and then his pants. He lifted his hips for her as she pulled off his trousers and boxers. They landed on the floor. His socks followed. She stared at his erection for a moment and then bent her head to kiss across his inner thighs, around his groin, teasing him by never kissing *there*. And then suddenly, she took him in her mouth. He bit his lip not to cry out from the sheer ecstasy, and he clutched the railing of the headboard so as not to chafe his wrists on the handcuffs.

She continued sucking and doing incredible things with her tongue before replacing mouth with hand. She stroked his length with the same finesse she had shown the Coke straw, while her mouth took in the soft sacs of his balls and her tongue darted out to caress the tender skin of his perineum below.

Giles bit his lip harder; he thought he tasted blood. He arched his head back into the pillow, every muscle taut and straining towards release. But release didn't come and neither did he. When he was so close that he could almost feel her touch pulsating all the way up behind his eyes, she stopped. He moaned and began gasping, raising his head to see what she was doing. "Buffy?"

She was crawling up his body, not touching him, her body mere inches from his. She bent down to kiss him, and he could taste himself in her mouth. Their tongues fought as she kissed him with a hunger that left him breathless. He struggled to turn his head, but her hands held him in place. She was in control here. She would start, and she would finish.

She sat up abruptly, and he drew breath in deep, shuddering gasps, like a drowning man coming up for air. She waited for a moment, straddling his chest and watching him.

When he could breathe again, when the world was no longer spinning, he met her eyes. "Buffy, uncuff me." But she only shook her head and smiled wickedly. "Please," he asked again, "I only want to touch you."

She reached down for the hem of her blouse, pulling it over her head and tossing it on the floor. "Like this?" she questioned, her hands questing over her own body. Her fingers caressed the blue silk of her bra, sliding up her neck and into her hair, and then tracing the contours of her face until one finger slid into her mouth. She sucked on its length, her eyes closing until she slipped it out and drew a wet line down her neck with its point. Her hands curled up around each breast as she asked him again, "Like this?"

He shuddered and nodded, watching as she reached behind her and unhooked her bra. It landed on the floor beside her top, and she licked her lips in anticipation. She cupped her breasts again, her fingers tracing circles around her nipples. "My skin is so soft, like peaches in summer."

"I remember," he murmured.

She rolled off of him, and he followed her with his eyes. She stripped off her pants and her panties and was now lying naked beside him. He was going crazy not touching her. It was torture. He could only watch as she touched herself, as her fingers stroked between her legs, as her other hand massaged her own breasts. She turned her head to watch him watching her. Her smile was filled with promises and regrets.

Buffy flipped back over on top of him, straddling him once again and sliding down closer to his straining erection.

"Buffy!" he cried urgently, his head turning to the nightstand.

"Oh yeah," she replied, one hand reaching out and pulling a foil packet from the top drawer. She opened it quickly and slid herself further down his body, teasing him by allowing herself to brush against him as she passed over. The condom rolled on in one motion, and she followed in the next.

Giles gasped, turning his head to press against his arm. He gripped the railing again. Every instinct was telling him to curl around her, to wrap his arms around her, to slide his hands down her body to her hips and urge her into the rhythm that would push him over the edge. He couldn't touch her. He could only sink his teeth into the fabric of his shirtsleeves and wait.

She hesitated for a moment, just allowing him to be inside her and nothing more, before she eventually began rocking and thrusting at a pace that was infuriatingly slow. He tried to meet each thrust, tried to increase the tempo, but she held him down, and she was so much stronger than he. He had no control in this. He could only kiss her when she bent her head to be kissed, could only arch his head back into the pillow when her mouth claimed each nipple in turn. His knuckles were turning white where they gripped the railing, his muscles aching from the tension.

She kept him always on the edge.

She would drive him right up to the brink and then stop. His body and hers were covered in a thin sheen of sweat. When she stopped, he would moan beneath her and thrash and shake his head from side to side and try to buck up against her, anything to finish already. But she would hold him down, and her strength was too much to overcome. She would lean down to cover him with kisses until he thought he would cry from not being able to touch her. She would wait for him to come down just enough, and then they would start all over again.

She kept him on the edge for almost an hour.

This time when she stopped, he nearly screamed from the frustration. His entire body ached and trembled from the constant tension. He couldn't even feel his hands anymore. They had become part of the railing.

And then Buffy leaned over him, touched her forehead to his, and demanded, "I want you to beg for it, Giles."

What Angelus couldn't do with his long hours of torture, what he had failed to do with the broken fingers and the brutal beatings and the hot pokers and the sleep deprivation and the hunger and the thirst and the unbearable pain, what Angelus had failed to accomplish, Buffy did. With Giles' desire for her, his wanting and needing, with her touch and her body, Buffy succeeded where Angelus had failed. She broke him.

"Dear God, Buffy, please, I'm begging you."

She smiled triumphantly and began their dance again. This time she did not slow or stop, this time their rhythm increased with their passion. He could feel himself reaching the edge, and this time he was not pulled back. This time she urged him forward. And he felt that blessed moment, that point of no return, that moment where she could no longer pull him back, even if she wanted to. His hands released the railing, straining forward mere inches before the handcuffs stopped him. The metal cut into his wrists, but the pain only merged with the exquisite pleasure that overwhelmed him. He soared.

He screamed his climax, and Buffy swallowed his cry with a kiss before she too followed him. Then she collapsed against him and began weeping. He could feel the hot wet tears streaming across the skin of his chest as he panted and caught his breath. But again, he couldn't touch her, couldn't dry her cheeks. He could only bend his head to look at her and whisper, "Please don't cry, Buffy."

She laid on top of him, wrapped her arms around him, still sobbing. "What's wrong with me, Giles? I've been patrolling like an animal. And then tonight, I sure acted like an animal. I wanted you so bad, I handcuffed you to the bed and practically raped you."

He bent his head to rest against the top of hers, her golden hair soft against his cheek. "I can certainly think of less pleasant times I've been tied up. Angelus comes immediately to mind."

That only started her crying harder.

"I'm sorry, Buffy, I shouldn't have brought that up." Giles had never felt so helpless as Buffy wept against his chest. Handcuffed, as he was, he could offer her no comfort except to listen to her tears.

"It's not that. It's just... Something is *wrong* with me. The slaying. The sex. The other men. Something is *wrong* with me. A spell or a sickness or *something*. Please, Giles, you have to help me. You have to figure out what it is and *fix* it."

He believed her. The Buffy who had wanted to dominate him was not *his* Buffy. And he had to admit that her indiscretions in the last days were probably symptomatic of this larger problem.

"Shhh... Buffy, we'll get to the bottom of this," he soothed.

She looked up at him then, her eyes filled with hope. "Really? You believe me?"

He smiled for her, and there was forgiveness in his eyes. "Of course."

She leaned forward and kissed him, tenderly this time, and smiled in return. "You are *sooo* gonna kill me, but I really have to go hunting again. I can't help it."

She slid him out of her and hopped off the bed, collecting her clothes as she started towards the door.

"Buffy!" he cried in panic.

She turned back, surprised by his urgency.

He rattled the handcuffs against the headboard and pleaded, "The key!"

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she was saying as she climbed on the bed next to him, pulling her bra back on as she did. "I think they're the handcuffs from your little band candy adventure. Any idea where Mom might have put the key?"

He closed his eyes in pain. "Bloody hell, Buffy. You cuff me to the bed, and you don't even have a key?"

"I'm sorry," she said, her top sliding back on as well. "I wasn't exactly thinking ahead to the letting you go part. Surely you guys got the key, too?"

"Yes," he replied sarcastically. "We were high on the candy, behaving like teenagers, and after stealing that copper's gun and handcuffs and knocking him unconscious, we of course thought ahead to this moment when you might need the key to unlock me."

"Don't forget about the part where you had sex with my mother on top of the police car. Twice!"

Giles groaned. "Yes, please, let's do remind me of that as often as possible."

Buffy sighed as she sat on the edge of the bed, pulling on her panties and then her pants. Giles was beginning to feel quite naked. And cold. And just a little sticky between the legs.

"How did Ethan get out of them?" she asked.

He closed his eyes and marveled at his blind stupidity. "He picked them, of course. Quick, Buffy, get me some hair pins or something." And then as she started out the door, he added, "And some tissues."

She returned with the bobby pins and some Kleenex. She removed the condom and cleaned him up as he focused on picking the locks on the handcuffs. The second was much easier to get after he had freed one wrist. And then he was sitting up, stretching his arms and massaging sore muscles. "Much better," he declared.

Buffy was smiling at him slyly. "Wow, you really were the little troublemaker when you were my age. You gonna teach me how to pick locks, hotwire cars... What else do you know how to do?"

He laughed and pulled her into his embrace. "How to stack the deck, deal from the bottom, and count a three card shoot."

She made face. "Giles! You were a cheat!"

He gave her a wink and a push towards the door, as he bent over to collect his own clothes. "All skills I will not be teaching you. Although, I could show you a one handed cut if you asked nicely."

Now, off with you! Go hunting, if that's what's going to keep you from ravaging me long enough for me to get some research done."

Buffy blushed, something he didn't see her do often. It was cute on her. She slipped out the door as Giles dressed. His mind churned with the various avenues of research. What could be making Buffy behave this way? He stopped just before walking out the door himself. He picked up the handcuffs from the bed and placed them in the top drawer of the nightstand. Next time, he would make Buffy wear them.

Chapter 2

Last Call

Giles researched through the night. The next morning was Sunday, and the shop was closed. Perfect for Scoobie research. He called the group together and explained Buffy's situation, editing out the more intimate details of the night before. It was enough to tell them that she was putting in overtime with the patrolling and that her sexdrive had well... umm... had really gone through the roof. He blushed, and the others took a moment to tease him and further enjoy his embarrassment before he could pull them back on topic.

Her behavior at the Bronze on Friday night and her flirting at the store yesterday were both explained as part of whatever was happening to her. Her friends seemed relieved by that explanation, because none of them had really been looking forward to choosing sides between Buffy and Giles. With a little prodding from Xander, Anya apologized for her comments to Buffy, and the gang were all of the good once again.

They spent from Sunday until Friday researching Buffy's symptoms. Willow and Tara researched through the spellbooks and the rest poured through Giles' volumes of past watcher journals. Every time they thought they might be close to the answer, they hit a dead end. Willow thought she'd found a love spell, and suspicion immediately fell on Spike. But the counterspell only proved that Buffy wasn't under the influence of that particular magic. That led Buffy to remember the Tirer la Couture spell she'd done when her mother was ill. So Willow tried to "pull the curtain back," but when she looked at Buffy, she was just Buffy, without a trace of magic.

So they all focused on the Watchers' Diaries. And through the whole week, Buffy hunted like a slayer possessed. With Giles, she was insatiable. Without him, well they never left her unchaperoned. Xander was quickly taken off the list of chaperones after Buffy kissed him too. She was mortified, and it took some convincing before Anya would agree that vengeance was not necessary in this case.

A whole week, and still no closer to an answer. But then when Buffy returned home after her Friday classes, she found Giles waiting for her and Dawn spending the evening with Willow and Tara. Something was definitely up.

"Uh-oh. You got Watcher-face. Did you figure out what's wrong with me?"

Giles crossed to the living room and sat on the couch, motioning for Buffy to follow. "Buffy, sit down with me."

"That can't be good." But she did as he asked.

"I've been reading through stacks of Watchers' Diaries. There are literally thousands of them, Buffy. I, myself, have filled three in the five years you've been my slayer. But since I started focusing on the slayers who reached your age, I've found other instances of these same symptoms. I think we have our answer." Giles removed his glasses and looked into her eyes. "Buffy, I think you're nesting."

"Nesting? What am I, a bird?"

He continued, his tone and demeanor very serious. "At this point in your life, your Slayer metabolism has kicked into overdrive. Your body is telling you that your biological clock, as it were, is about to run out."

"Are we talking babies here, Giles?"

Giles looked down at the glasses in his hands, answering her very softly. "Yes."

Buffy leaned back into the couch, completely stunned. "My body's telling me to have a baby?"

Giles replaced his glasses and studied her for a moment before answering her question. "Your body is telling you that, as the Slayer, you don't have the same window of time as other women. You

feel the urge to hunt so that you may eliminate as many threats as possible before pregnancy would necessitate that you take a break. And the increased sexdrive..." He trailed off.

"Would be how I'm supposed to get the baby," she finished for him. She chuckled to herself. "Guess Slayer metabolism didn't take into account birth control."

Buffy looked over at her Watcher. He didn't look amused. He looked like they were discussing the apocalypse. There was something he hadn't told her yet. "So how long does this nesting stuff last?" she asked.

"Do you want some tea, Buffy?"

She blinked, startled by the abrupt shift in conversation. "What I want is for you to tell me why you're looking at me like I'm dying or something."

His eyes grew wide, and he quickly covered her hand with his own. "No, no, Buffy, it's nothing like that. You're going to be fine."

"Then why with the long face?"

He turned from her, that same expression of imminent doom flashing across his features. He laced their fingers together, his thumb nervously stroking the back of her hand. "Some of the watchers' journals become somewhat vague or have significant periods of time missing. I think those are the slayers who gave into this drive. The Watcher's Council frowns on pregnant slayers, so those watchers were probably attempting to protect their slayers until they delivered. But I did manage to find a few references to the slayers and their babies, so we know those slayers suffered no ill effects and had healthy children."

Buffy leaned forward so she could look into his eyes. "Why do I get the impression that I'm not going to like what happened to the other slayers, the ones who didn't go and get themselves knocked up?"

He shifted on the couch to face her. He released her hand and instead put his arm around her shoulders, pulling her up against his chest. "You're going to be fine, Buffy." He placed a kiss on her forehead. "The vast majority of slayers who experienced this chose not to have a baby or were prevented from doing so by their watchers. The records of them are much more detailed. The symptoms always disappeared within two or three months."

"*Months?* Two or three *months*?" Buffy pulled away from Giles, her eyes wide with panic. "I can't keep going like this for two or three *months*!"

Giles smiled slightly, the first smile he had given her since sitting her down for their serious talk. One hand brushed her blond hair back from her face, and then rested against her cheek. "You'll manage, Buffy. And in two or three months, you'll be yourself again."

Buffy frowned, growing suspicious. Nothing Giles had told her so far warranted his dark mood. "What aren't you telling me? You seem rather glum for someone who just found out his slayer's going to be okay."

The smile left his face, and he took one of her hands in both of his. "Buffy, all of the other slayers who experienced what you're going through, after the symptoms disappeared, they... well..." He took a deep breath and just blurted it out. "They couldn't have children anymore."

"What?" Buffy's head was spinning. At 20, she didn't really give much thought to kids, but the idea that she wouldn't ever have the option, well it was like whole worlds of possibilities had just been snuffed out. "*Ever?* But why?"

Giles squeezed the hand he was still holding between both of his. He looked up, as if the answer could be found written somewhere on the ceiling. "None of the watchers knew why and neither do I. But after the symptoms disappeared, the slayers all stopped... umm..." He cleared his throat and finished awkwardly. "...stopped menstruating."

She was silent for several moments before she felt his eyes on her, trying to gage her reaction. She knew he was concerned, and for his sake, she tried to reassure him with a soft smile and a light joke. "On the upside, no more PMS." And then his quiet compassion was too much, and she just couldn't sit there anymore.

She stood and started pacing in front of the coffee table. "But that might not happen to me, right, Giles?"

He looked pained and in the end couldn't meet her eyes. He hid behind the motions of polishing his glasses. "After the first few references, I wanted to be sure. I was able to find over 30 different slayers who went through this, but the result was always the same."

Buffy nodded absently and crossed her arms. He was watching her again, and then he rose and moved to stand in front of her. He didn't seem to know what to do, but he was trying. He touched her softly on the shoulder. He swallowed and murmured, "Buffy, I'm so sorry."

Part of her wanted him to hold her, wanted to weep against his chest and wrap herself in his warmth and kindness and protest the unfairness of the whole slayer package. But she needed to think about everything he had just told her. And if she stayed here, Giles' soft sympathy would be her undoing. She had to keep it together long enough to think everything through.

"Giles, I need to go for a walk. Alone. I need to think."

Riley hadn't understood this need while Buffy was dealing with her mother's illness. He had thought that he owned her completely and any part of herself she withheld was a part she denied *him*. But Giles simply nodded, understanding. This was how he dealt with his hurts too. Time alone to think and then after, if needed, time to confide and be consoled by another.

"I don't know how long I'll be. Don't wait up."

Giles nodded again and walked her to the door. "However long you need, Buffy. Just be careful on patrol."

She walked out the front door, still in a daze, but at the last moment doubled back to give Giles a parting kiss. "I'll be fine," she whispered.

"I know," he answered.

Buffy left with no clear destination. She walked the streets of Sunnydale in a fog. The only clear images she saw were those of mothers and daughters, fathers and sons. She passed a pregnant woman just outside the coffee shop. She went to the mall, and it felt like every person she passed was pushing a baby stroller. She sat in the food court for an hour, watching mothers feed their children, and wipe ice cream from their fingers, and tell them not to stand on their chairs, and *don't torment your brother!* Fathers and mothers who weren't slayers, who could have children whenever they liked, who wouldn't be sterile at 20.

Sterile. Adjective. Incapable of producing offspring; barren. Infertile, childless, empty, desolate, inhospitable.

She had told Angel once that she didn't need him to give her children. And he had told her that one day she would want it all. He was right, but that didn't matter. Slayers didn't get to have it all.

Buffy dropped her head onto the table in the middle of the food court and started sobbing. Passersby gave her sympathetic looks, but no one stopped to ask her what was wrong.

Giles slept fitfully, waiting for Buffy to come home. He had fetched Dawn from Willow and Tara's soon after Buffy left, mostly to keep him company and keep him occupied. They had rented videos and ordered pizza and spent the evening together, just the two of them. Dawn had asked him

what was wrong, but he answered that it was something her sister would have to tell her. Dawn had gotten pretty good at reading Giles, after living together all these months. So she had kept him distracted with funny stories and wisecracks about the movie they were watching. She had even discovered, quite on accident, that Giles was ticklish. He had let her stay up late if she promised never to let her sister in on that fact.

And now it was the middle of the night, and her sister had yet to return from patrol. Giles got up and slipped on his robe. He walked down the hall towards the stairs, intending to check if he had missed Buffy coming in and if she might be downstairs. But when he passed Dawn's room, the room that used to be Buffy's before they gave Dawn the bigger bedroom and converted her old one into his study, when he passed her room, the door was ajar and Buffy was sleeping curled up next to her sister.

He smiled sadly, wishing he could somehow make this easier for his slayer. He turned and went back to sleep in his own bed.

Dawn woke up when she had to go pee. She nearly fell on the floor when she tangled herself up in the body lying next to her on the bed. Buffy, who hadn't been there when she went to sleep. Dawn would have fallen, but sometimes there were benefits to having a sister with slayer reflexes.

"Dawn, are you okay?"

"Yeah, but I didn't know I was sharing my bed."

Buffy bit her lip and stared down at her hands. "I just wanted to sleep with you tonight. Is that okay?"

Dawn shrugged. "Sure." She looked towards the hallway and then back to Buffy. She really had to pee, but she could hold it. She climbed back in next to Buffy, and they snuggled together as they had as children camping, when they'd had to share the one bed in the pop up trailer. "Did you and Giles have a fight?" she asked.

"No, just some bad news."

Dawn reflected back on the evening she had spent with Giles and thought of the something he said Buffy would have to tell her. "Is it about whatever's been making you act all weird?"

Buffy began petting her sister's hair, smiling sadly. Dawn could see that her sister was on the verge of tears. "Yeah, he figured out what's wrong."

Dawn felt terror fill her whole body. This is how it had started with Mom. She couldn't lose Buffy again. The last time was the worst time of her life. She could barely choke out the words. "You're going to be okay, right?"

"I'm going to be fine, Dawn. I'll be back to normal in a couple months." Dawn nodded, relieved, and Buffy continued. "Turns out it's a slayer thing. My body wants me to have a baby right now. Kind of a last chance deal. After the symptoms go away, and I'm back to normal, I won't be able to have kids anymore."

Buffy closed her eyes, and Dawn could see a few tears slip down her cheeks. Dawn reached out, and now she was the one stroking Buffy's hair. "So, are you gonna?"

Buffy opened her eyes again, her forehead creasing in confusion. "Gonna what?"

Dawn rolled her eyes. Sometimes her sister could be so dense. "Have a baby."

Buffy seemed to think about that for a moment, as if it hadn't crossed her mind before. "I don't know. I guess I hadn't thought about it. What do you think?"

Dawn shrugged, trying to seem nonchalant, but she was already getting excited about the idea. "I dunno. Might be kinda cool. I'd like to be an aunt. And you know, Giles would make a good dad."

Ooo, and you can make the study into a nursery, with like cows or puppies or something non-demony. And Giles can watch him while you're at class. And maybe I could babysit sometimes."

Buffy laughed and pulled Dawn in close. "Ok, you're starting to scare me. How long have you been planning this out?"

"So are you?"

Buffy smiled and kissed her sister on the cheek. "I'll think about it. Now go to sleep."

"Ok, but I have to go pee first." Dawn slipped out of bed and down the hall, stopping in front of Giles' study and trying to imagine how it would look as a nursery, with a crib and a changing table and a little mobile hanging from the ceiling. She tried to imagine what it would be like to come in here at night and watch her little niece or nephew sleeping.

"Wow," Willow said. "That's like *huge*."

Buffy sighed. "I know."

The two friends were sitting on Willow's bed, discussing Buffy's dilemma. Tara sat on the floor across from them, listening quietly.

Buffy sighed again. "You know, I always thought about kids like way in the future. Way, way, in the future. But I don't really have a way-in-the-future to have kids in. I s'pose it's only natural for a Slayer's body to be like 'Come on, girl, last call for babies.'" Buffy dropped her head in her hands, feeling totally lost. "What should I do, Willow?"

Willow waved her hands in a kind of 'no, no, no' gesture. "I can't tell you what to do here, Buffy. Ask me about what you should order for breakfast or which outfit you should wear to the Bronze. Those are the kinds of decisions I'm good at. But *babies*? Ok, now we're way over my head." Willow threw a 'help me' glance in Tara's direction, but the blond witch just shook her head quickly. Willow turned back to her best friend. "What does Giles think?"

Buffy shrugged. "I haven't really talked with him about it."

Willow threw up her hands. "Omigod. Well, there's where you should totally start."

"I don't know, Wills, I just want to sort it out by myself first. Figure out what I want. Then I'll talk to him about it."

There was a knock at the door, and Xander walked in. "Hey, Will, the movie starts in 15 minutes. Aren't you ready to go yet? Come on, it's *Gladiator II*, and I can't wait to see how they bring Russell Crowe back. 'He defeated the Emperor. He defeated Death. Can he be defeated in the Arena?'" Xander stopped his deadpan imitation of the movie's promos when he took in the serious expressions of everyone around him. "What's the sitch? You guys look like someone died." Then his eyes got really big, and Willow jumped in to stop him.

"No, no, no one died, Xander. Giles just figured out what's wrong with Buffy."

He released his held breath and shook his head. "Ok, so that's a good thing, right? I mean, Buffy's going to be okay? Giles can fix it?"

Willow looked back at her friend, and so Tara stepped in to bring Xander up to speed. A few moments later, and Xander had joined Buffy and Willow on the bed, also in shock.

"Wow, Buffy," he said. "That's *huge*."

"Yeah." Buffy started picking at a loose thread on the hem of her top. "The thing is... If this is my last shot... I think I might want it... want a baby, I mean. You guys think that's crazy? You think I could do it? Be a mom?" She didn't look up to see their reactions. She was a little afraid of what she might see in their expressions. She was being crazy. She was too young.

But Willow sounded hopeful. "I think you'd be a great mom, Buffy. And you'd have all of us. We'd help out."

Tara added helpfully, "Yeah, we'd all help. Anything you need."

Xander put in his two cents. "Hey, it'd be like Scoobie gang does babysitting duty."

Buffy looked up then, tears shining in her eyes. "You guys are all great. You know how great you guys are? You are all like the *best*." Then came the group hug, and Buffy left the dorm in a much better mood than when she came.

She sat in the Espresso Pump the rest of the afternoon, thinking. She thought about it the whole afternoon. She wrote up a list of pros and cons on a napkin. If she was going to do this, then she would be mature about it. Mature. If she was going to be someone's mother, then she would have to be mature. That went down in the 'con' column.

Then just before Giles would usually get back from the magic shop, she went home and talked with Dawn. She sat, watched TV with her sister, and waited for Giles to get home, feeling perhaps more nervous than she had ever felt before.

Giles walked in the front door. Dawn bounced up almost immediately and waved goodbye to her sister, saying to Giles, "Gotta run. Melinda said I could have dinner at her house tonight. Back at 9, ok?" She gave him a goofy little grin and surprised him with a kiss on the cheek before running out the door.

Buffy was sitting on the couch watching him intently.

"Why do I get the distinct impression that I'm being set up?"

Buffy patted the cushion next to her. "Because you're smart. And you're right. Come sit with me, Giles."

He frowned. "That can't be good." But he sat, and he waited.

"I've been thinking a lot about everything you told me yesterday. Actually, it's just about all I've been doing." He raised his eyebrows, indicating that she should go on. She seemed nervous, and started to babble. "I never really thought about wanting kids. You know the whole slayer thing. And then you know Angel couldn't have them, and Riley... It's a good thing I didn't go through this phase a year ago, 'cause this would have really freaked him out."

She shook her head, as if to clear away this train of thought. She met his eyes, and there was something in them he couldn't read. She took a deep breath. "Ok, just realizing that a girl shouldn't talk about past lovers when she's trying to ask a man to father her child."

He blinked. Twice. He couldn't have heard her right. "Buffy?"

She sat sideways on the couch and plunged ahead. "I've thought it through. I spent the whole afternoon making up a list of pros and cons." She pulled a little scrap of napkin from her pocket and shoved it at him. He was too numb to take it. "See? I'm totally serious about this. It's not a whim. I thought it through, and I want a baby. I talked to Dawn about it, and she's totally excited by the whole idea. And I talked to Willow and Tara. Oh, and Xander came in at the end too. They all said they'd help out with whatever we need."

Giles stood abruptly. This was not what he had expected from her at all. "You talked to Dawn about this? And Willow and Tara and Xander?" He snorted in annoyance. "I'm so very glad I fit there on your list somewhere. Tell me, is there anyone else you've told? Maybe you should go discuss it with Anya before we decide if we're going to have a baby."

"No, that's ok. I'm pretty sure Xander's told Anya by now."

He turned and gave her a look of astonishment, and she frowned at his expression.

"You're mad at me. Ok, maybe I should have talked with you about it first."

"Maybe?"

"But—" She stood and crossed her arms, the very picture of determination. "But I wanted to figure out what I wanted before I talked to you. This is what I want. If this is the only shot I'm going to get, then I want a baby now. With you. So now it's up to you to decide what you want. In the end, this is going to be your decision."

He shook his head and turned away from her, walking to stand next to the archway near the front door. "My decision? Why my decision?" He reached out one hand to lean against the wall.

"Because you're the one who's going to be there for them when they grow up. I'm the Slayer, Giles. Who knows how long I'll have..."

"Stop it!" he shouted, whipping around to face her. "I don't want to hear you talk like that."

"I know you don't," she shouted back as well, striding over to stand mere inches from his face. "We never talk about it. I want to talk about it, Giles. Right now. We dance around the issue. We pretend like you go patrolling every night with me, because you like my company. The fact is that I've died twice already. The next time we won't be so lucky. The next time, I'm probably going to stay dead."

He dropped his head, and very softly murmured, "There's Marcus' spell. We could try that again."

He felt her fingers beneath his chin, tilting it up and forcing his eyes to lift from the ground. "We both know that it was a very close call the last time. The spell might not have worked in time. It might have cost me my soul. The chances that we could try it again... Besides, I'm thinking this time I'd like to be cremated. Avoid that whole body snatching scare."

Giles paled two shades, stumbled back from her. "Buffy, stop it. Stop it right now. No more talk about death and burial. You have years. You have time for children later, when you're older. There's always adoption. Dear God, Buffy, you're only 20. You have college. You're not ready."

She took his face in her hands, shaking her head. "I don't have many years, Giles. We both know that. Maybe this isn't the best timing, but it's the only timing I've got. I'll get ready. I'll have nine months to get ready."

She leaned in and kissed him. He wrapped his arms around her and held her tight, as if he could keep her safe here in his arms forever. She looked up at him, smiling, and her eyes were shining with sympathy. "I want this. I want a baby with you. With my eyes and your smile. I want it for me. But I also want it for you. The last time I died... Giles, the only thing that kept you going was having to look after Dawn. This time will be a hundred times worse."

"Buffy, stop." He choked on her name and pushed her away from him. He stepped to the front door and rested his head against the wood. "Please, stop," he begged.

But she didn't. She kept going. "Giles, I want you to have this after I'm gone. A piece of me, a piece of us. A reminder of how much we loved each other. I think it'll be easier for you, if you have our child with you. But you have to decide. You have to figure out if you could raise our child without me."

His hand reached for the door handle. "I can't... I just can't... Buffy, I can't listen to anymore."

He opened the door and left. He was driving with no real recollection of getting in the car or turning the key. He was pulling into the parking lot of a local bar without really knowing why he'd gone there. He walked in. The place was a real dive. Dingy and dirty, only the diehard locals came in there. The kind of place where no one bothered you. Which was just fine with him.

He ordered bourbon and sat in a dark corner booth. He didn't drink. He just turned his glass around in circles, watching the ice shift, watching the condensation form circles on the sticky bar table. He

didn't drink; he just thought. He wasn't sure how much time had passed. The ice had completely melted, turning his drink all watery. The sun had set, plunging the bar into a darkness that shrouded its neglected appearance.

And still he thought.

Could he ask Buffy to bring a child into the world, knowing she would never see it grown? And was he ready to raise a child by himself and Dawn as well? Could he be responsible for them both if, no *when*, he corrected himself bitterly, when he had lost Buffy for good?

Twenty-six. He had never told Buffy this, would *never* tell Buffy this, but twenty-six was the age of the oldest slayer on record. She had lived under the reign of the Roman Emperor Vespasian, over nineteen hundred years ago. And in the end, the longest-lived slayer of all time died not in stopping some apocalypse, or in facing some Master, or in destroying some ascending demon, but was herself slain by a simple, solitary vampire while on a routine patrol. Buffy had outlived perhaps 80 percent or more of her predecessors. She was right. The next time they would not be so lucky. What was that saying again? Ah yes. *Third time's the charm*, he thought darkly.

Did he want to have her child with him, to fill the space she would leave when she died? Would that be fair to ask of any child? To live, to *exist*, only because Buffy could not? And would the father of this child cherish her as the living image of her mother, the proof of what they had shared? Or would he hate to even look at the girl and be reminded everyday of everything he had lost?

No. He could never hate his own child. He hadn't even had it in him to hate Dawn. And she had been the reason for Buffy's death. His slayer had died in her sister's place, and in the end Giles had been willing to die for her as well. No, if he and Buffy had this child, he would cherish the girl just as he had cherished Dawn: as his last link to his slayer.

The girl. He was already thinking of a daughter. Most fathers wanted sons, but he already imagined a daughter. With Buffy's eyes and smile and golden hair. A daughter he could give the kind of childhood and life that had been so cruelly stolen from Buffy. A daughter.

Giles smiled then. He knew what his answer would be. He looked down at the glass in his hand. The bourbon no longer tempted him. He dropped money on the table and exited the bar quickly. He was going home. To Buffy.

Buffy walked in the front door after patrol. The whole house was dark, and she wondered if Giles and Dawn had gone out. And after she had come home early from patrol to spend time with them and everything. Then she noticed the candlelight shimmering from the dining room and the soft music playing on the stereo. She smiled and stepped closer to the dining table. Beautiful purple orchids filled a vase in the middle of the table. Not roses. Giles never bought roses. Not after Jenny. But the orchids were more lovely than roses, and she touched their velvet petals and leaned closer to inhale their scent.

Next to them, six candles burning in a candelabrum. Champagne chilling in an ice bucket. And a small wrapped box with her name on it. He was so sweet.

She touched the box reverently. It was "TV wrapped," as her mother used to call it, so she could simply slip the top off without ripping off the paper. She opened his gift.

Baby booties. Tiny, little white baby booties. She pulled them out and held them both in the palm of one hand. My God, did people really start out so small as to fit into them?

She sensed his presence with her acute slayer perceptions, sensed him before his arms slid around her waist. She simply leaned back into his embrace and let him hold her for several moments before she asked, "Giles, are you sure?"

"I've given it a lot of thought, Buffy. If this is what you really want, then I want this for you."

She turned in his arms, wrapped her own around his neck. "And you? Is this what you want?"

He leaned forward and kissed her. A long, gentle, tender kiss. When she had opened her eyes again, he nodded his reply.

"You're totally sure? 'Cause this is one of those things you don't really get to change your mind about later. You ready for a baby?"

He laughed and combed his fingers through her hair. "I found myself suddenly responsible for a 14-year-old. I think in some ways, it might be easier to start at the beginning. Besides, like you said, we'll have nine months to get ready."

Buffy drew away from him slightly and examined the baby booties again. So tiny. She turned and placed them on the kitchen table behind her. Then she took him by the hand and started tugging him up the stairs.

"Wait!" he protested. "I had this whole romantic evening planned. There was supposed to be seduction and..."

She stopped him with a kiss. "Time's a wasting. Clock's going tick-tick-tick. Save the romance for when I'm big and fat and could really use it."

They lay on their backs, side by side, panting.

"Wow." Buffy turned her head to the side to look at Giles. "I mean, wow."

Giles turned his head as well, staring into her beautiful blue eyes. "Yes, it is rather more intense without the... umm... the..."

"Yeah," Buffy murmured. "You can say that again." She paused thoughtfully before she asked, "You think that did it? Or should we try again?"

He rolled over to lie on top of her again, his breathing still rapid as he kissed along the soft flesh of her neck. "Better safe than sorry, I suppose."

"Hey," Buffy protested. "Don't you need to rest first, or something?"

He looked up at her, captured her mouth in a kiss. "What was it you said a little while ago? 'Time's a wasting.' I'm just warming you up. Don't worry, luv, I'll catch up."

They made love until sunrise.

Chapter 3
9 ½ weeks

"Buffy, all I'm saying is that it's too soon. You can't possibly be having morning sickness the very next morning."

She opened the bathroom door and glared at Giles as he leaned against the doorframe.

"Then how would you explain the miserable nausea and the throwing up?"

He sighed patiently. "I know you probably don't want to hear this, but I imagine it's more than likely just psychosomatic."

She looked at him blankly. "Psycho what? Are you saying I'm crazy?"

"No, no, no." He took her by the shoulders. "I'm saying that you want very badly to be pregnant, so your mind is trying to fulfill that desire by giving you the symptoms."

"You're saying it's all in my head?"

"I'm sorry, Buffy, I don't mean to disappoint you."

She laid her head against the doorjamb weakly. "I don't know, Giles, it feels more like it's in my stomach." Then her eyes grew wide, and he found the door abruptly slammed in his face. He heard the sounds of her retching, and he leaned back against the wall, sighing.

"What's up with her?" Dawn said, as she came to stand beside him and listen to the sounds of her sister puking in the bathroom. "She got the flu or something?"

"She thinks she has morning sickness."

"Isn't it kinda early for that?" Dawn asked, looking at him curiously. "I mean you guys didn't start trying 'til last night, did you?"

Giles blushed and crossed his arms, more than a little uncomfortable having this conversation with Dawn. "I did try and tell her it was too soon. I think it's just wishful thinking on her part."

They both heard Buffy moan, followed by another round of violent retching.

"Wow," Dawn commented. "That's some pretty powerful thinking."

Buffy strolled through the mall, eating ice cream. She insisted she was having cravings. Willow and Tara walked hand in hand on one side of her, Xander and Anya on the other. It was the Sunday before Thanksgiving, and the diehard shoppers were getting their Christmases started early.

"I don't know, Buffy," Willow was saying. "Giles is probably right about this. If you guys only started trying last night, then this morning is too soon to be all sick."

"It's not just the morning sickness, Will. I mean, look at me. Out mallwalking with my buds. No impulsive patrolling or slaying. No insatiable desire for... well, *you know*. And look! No urge to do anything to Xander other than mess up his hair." Which she promptly did.

"Hey," he protested, batting her hand away.

"I'm glad you don't want Xander anymore," Anya said with relief. "Because you can't have him."

Buffy flashed Anya a hundred-watt smile, and then licked the ice cream up that was running down the side of the cone. "See, Will, I think all my symptoms have just vanished. And I just *feel* different. Yup, definitely preggers. Now if only I could convince Giles."

"May-m-maybe you should get a test," Tara stuttered as they all turned eyes in her direction. "From the store. One of those pregnancy tests."

Buffy nodded. "Yeah, that's a good idea. Thanks, Tara, I think I'll do that tonight. Maybe more than one. Giles is going to need a lot of convincing." Finished with her ice cream now, she wiped her

hands off on a napkin and tossed it in the trash as they passed by. "Although, I wouldn't mind if he wanted to keep trying. You know, just to be safe."

"Aghh!" Xander cried, plugging his ears. "Way too much information. Let's just pretend this was an immaculate conception, okay? For my sanity, Buff?"

Buffy laughed as she pulled his hands from his ears. "No problemo. I won't mention the handcuffs then."

"Aghh!" he cried again, giving her a little shove.

"Oooh!" Buffy bounced in place, giddy and pointing at a store just ahead. "You guys want pizza?"

Willow frowned. "You just had ice cream."

"You're going to get fat," Anya stated.

"But I'm *famished*," Buffy protested as she ran up ahead of them.

Monday morning, and another bout of morning sickness like the day before. Giles brought her tea and crackers to settle her stomach, again gently reminding her that it was too soon to be experiencing pregnancy symptoms. He asked her to wait and be patient. Really, he just didn't want her to be disappointed if she did get her period this month. After all, he thought to himself, they really only had two, three months at the most, to get Buffy pregnant before her window of opportunity would close forever.

Buffy went to class, and he dropped Dawn off at school on the way to the Magic Box. The day passed uneventfully. Anya was in a chipper mood. She offered him constant advice on the best way to get Buffy pregnant: specific positions and timings for a boy vs. a girl. Apparently she had been reading Cosmo on her breaks. He begged her to stop.

Tara came in and worked a few hours in the afternoon, restocking amulets and crystals, on part time status now that school had resumed. Willow stopped by and hung around until Tara was ready to leave. Buffy and Dawn never came in, probably going straight home after school. When Giles was ready to leave for the day, Anya waved him off with a cheery smile, wished him good luck, and gave him a fertility charm, which he reluctantly accepted with some amount of embarrassment.

The house was empty when he walked in. A note on the kitchen table informed him that the sisters were out grocery shopping. Their mother's jeep, now Buffy's, was missing from the curb. Still, after five months, it made him nervous to think of Buffy driving. But in all practicality, he couldn't chauffeur them around all the time. It was lucky that he hadn't sold the jeep after Buffy's death, and she was very lucky that she hadn't wrecked it yet.

He settled down in the chair by the desk and began reading. Buffy and Dawn came home, started supper, and left him to read in peace until it was done. Barely a half an hour later, Buffy rather unceremoniously snatched the book out of his hands and jumped into his lap sideways.

Giles removed his glasses and gave her a very annoyed glare. "What is it, Buffy?"

She pulled a box from behind her back and held it out in front of her. "Look what I picked up at the store." It was a home pregnancy test.

His face softened, and he brushed her hair off her shoulders kindly. "I keep telling you, Buffy, it's too soon. Those tests are meant for after you've missed a period, like two or three weeks from now. They're not going to tell you anything after two days."

She reached into the box and pulled out the little stick. She smiled broadly. "Then why'd it turn blue, Giles, huh?"

He took the stick from her hand and studied it. "You've already taken the test?"

“Yup. Big ole blue popsicle stick.”

He snatched the box from her hand and began fumbling for the instructions. “This can’t be right. It couldn’t possibly give you a positive result this early. You must have done it wrong.”

She began laughing at his flustered appearance. “Pretty hard to screw up, Giles. Pee on a stick, wait five minutes.”

“Then this test must be defective.” He handed the box back to her.

She pulled out three more sticks, all blue. “I took the test four times. Which is better than I did on my Math exam. Five times. Stupid derivatives.”

Giles took the three sticks from her and added it to the one he was already holding. Four blue sticks. His head was spinning. “This can’t be right. It’s too soon.”

“Can we get past the Buffy-was-right and Giles-was-wrong and skip ahead to the Omigod-we’re-having-a-baby?”

He paled about two shades and dropped the four blue proofs of that fact on the ground. “Omigod,” he breathed, “We’re having a baby.”

“There it is.” She nodded with satisfaction. “Now comes adoration and pampering for the mother of your child.”

The box tumbled from her hands as he pulled her into a passionate kiss. They parted for a moment, and he gazed at her in awe as one hand came to rest against her still flat stomach. He pulled her into another lingering kiss before Dawn turned the corner into the living room and started making retching sounds.

“You guys have your own room, you know. I’d rather not be around for the baby-making activities.”

Giles blushed to the tips of his ears, something Buffy always told him looked adorable. Jenny used to tell him that too.

“Hey, Dawn, come here.”

“Buffy,” he murmured in her ear, softly enough so Dawn wouldn’t hear. “Let’s wait before we start telling people.”

“Wait, schmait. I want to tell everyone.” She jumped out of his lap and took Dawn’s hands in her own. “Hey, kiddo, ‘bout nine months from now you’re going to be an aunt.”

Dawn beamed. “Really?”

“Yup.”

Dawn squealed and leapt into Buffy’s arms, letting her sister twirl her around as they both laughed in delight. Giles frowned. Buffy really shouldn’t be picking her sister up like that. And then Dawn was jumping in his lap and giving him a big kiss on the cheek.

“Smile, Giles,” she admonished him. “You’re going to be a *dad*.” Giles couldn’t help but grin like the Cheshire cat. It was the first time someone had called him that.

Buffy and Giles hosted Thanksgiving dinner at the house. He and Dawn ended up doing most of the work, as Buffy complained that the mere smell of the food cooking made her nauseous. Giles suspected she was exaggerating in order to duck out of turkey duty. Willow and Tara arrived in the afternoon to help, and Xander and Anya joined them a couple hours later, after stopping by to wish his drunk relations a happy Thanksgiving.

By dinnertime, Buffy had regained her appetite and devoured everything that was put in front of her. This small band of misfits, who had been brought closer than family by danger and battles fought

and battles lost and death and apocalypse and resurrection, these misfits simply enjoyed each other's company and conversation and laughter. When the meal was finished, they took turns saying what they were each thankful for.

Giles was grateful for many things. He mentioned only the friends around him, Dawn, Buffy, and their coming child. But as the others spoke their thanks, he reflected back on the last year and everything that had brought him to this point in his life.

Only a year ago, he was living in his own apartment and had come here as a guest for the holiday meal. In the time since then, Joyce had died, Buffy had died, he had made this his home, had taken care of Dawn like his own daughter, Buffy had returned to him, had blessed him with the miracle of her love, and now they were to have a child.

He wished that Joyce could still be here with her family. He saw the occasional flashes of pain cross her daughters' eyes when some nostalgic Thanksgiving ritual would remind them of years past. This was their first real holiday without their mother. Christmas would be even harder. He would do his best to make the season happy for them, but he wished it wasn't necessary. It wasn't fair for Joyce to have died so young, younger than he was. He would have given anything to have Joyce at the table with them right now, to have her join in the conversations and laughter, to have Buffy tease her about becoming a grandmother. His dear slayer was likely to miss her mother even more, now that she was to be a mother herself.

And when they all settled down for a little post-dinner movie marathon, he soon found Buffy dozing against one arm and Dawn against the other. He slipped his arms around them both and pulled them in closer, one hand sliding down to rest against Buffy's stomach. He closed his eyes and promised Joyce that her family would be protected and loved. Then he laid his head against the golden curls of her eldest and allowed himself to fall asleep too.

It was a week after Thanksgiving, and Buffy was 12 days pregnant. It was nice to be sure of the date so exactly. Giles had demonstrated a manly sort of pride in knowing that he'd gotten it right on the first try. And now, he had plunged headfirst into Watcher research mode. Only this time, instead of ancient, dusty volumes of prophecy and demon lore, he poured through books on pregnancy and birth, purchased brand new from the local Barnes and Noble. Sometimes Buffy thought he resembled a little boy, waiting for his new toy to arrive, as he gleefully pointed out to her facts gleaned from the book illustrating their baby's development.

"Look, Buffy," he would say, "She already has a head, next week she'll have eyes and ears."

She, always she. Giles wanted a daughter.

Buffy strolled through the cemetery, twirling her stake in one hand. She had dropped it twice already, which was odd, but she was probably just distracted. She had taken to talking to her baby as she patrolled the cemetery, telling it stories about her adventures slaying and about the people who would be part of its life after it was born. Giles would kill her if he knew she'd gone. But she had a term paper due in the morning, and she had writer's block. A couple hours slaying: good for procrastination, and hopefully good for writer's block as well.

She asked the baby what it thought the main connections were between literature and the arts during the Renaissance. But the baby obviously didn't know.

Buffy was in the middle of Restfield Cemetery, near where she had been buried, an area of the graveyard she avoided if possible. Suddenly, she felt a cool hand on her shoulder and spun, drawing back her stake in preparation for the plunge.

“Whoa, whoa, hang on there, Slayer. It’s just me.”

The tension uncoiled from her body, and she lowered the stake, panting. “God, Spike, don’t you know better than to sneak up on a Slayer in the middle of a graveyard?”

Spike shrugged casually. “Didn’t know I *could* sneak up on a slayer. You feelin’ alright, pet?”

Buffy nodded, brushing one hand through her hair and continuing her patrol through the cemetery. Spike fell in step beside her. “I must have been distracted,” she answered.

“Distracted slayer’s a dead slayer.”

She spared him an annoyed glare. “You sound just like Giles.”

“Speaking of the Old Watcher,” Spike began, looking around the cemetery, “I don’t see him lurkin’ about. You two birds have a fight? ‘Cause if you did, and you need some consoling...”

Buffy stopped, and Spike passed her by two or three steps before he stopped as well and faced her. “We did not have a fight,” Buffy insisted. “And as much as you hate the idea, Giles and I are kinda a forever thing. Especially now that... well never mind about that. The important thing is that you and I are friends, Spike, and that’s all we’ll ever be.”

Spike dug the toe of his boot in the ground, and Buffy felt sort of sorry for him. He drew out a cigarette and lit it. He took a long drag, blew a suave smoke ring, and commented, “Yeah, well, you’re probably a right pain to live with anyways. So where’s Mr. Forever-guy then?”

Buffy started her sweep of the cemetery again, Spike still trailing along beside her. “If you must know, he didn’t want me to patrol tonight. So I had to sneak out.”

Spike’s eyebrows hit his forehead. “Isn’t that a bit, I don’t know, *paranoid*? Not to mention against the rules or whatever it is Watchers have? Keeping the Slayer from her sworn duty’s probably up there on the list of no-nos. I know the bloke’s been mighty worried ‘bout having you die on him and all, following you on patrol most every night like he was your bodyguard or something, but isn’t this a little extreme?”

“And how would you know he patrols with me, unless you’ve been following me around too?” Buffy countered with a knowing look.

“Yeah, well,” Spike hedged, “I just happen to live in the cemetery. And if you and your ex-librarian wander by... Oh bloody hell,” he sighed. “Yeah, I follow you on patrol too. Happy now?”

Buffy smiled and gave him a playful shove. She frowned when it didn’t knock him off balance. “I *am* the Slayer, Spike. It’s not like I didn’t know you were there. Well, except for tonight at any rate. And I do appreciate the thought, but if you want to actually patrol with me now and then, you wouldn’t have to always hide out in the shadows.”

He made a face and tapped out the ash from his cigarette. “Who said I wanted to be a professional demon hunter or something? Just ‘cause I watch your back sometimes doesn’t mean I’m lookin’ to join up with the Scoobie gang. Glory was a special case. But I’ll leave you your nightly slayage, thank you very much. I’ve got enough demons think I should be lining a flowerbed already. Don’t need a rep as the Slayer’s faithful sidekick.”

Buffy noticed the two vampires approaching from behind Spike, a girl and a boy, neither one of them very intimidating.

“Fine with me, Spike. But you better get out of my way. The nightly slayage is about to begin.”

He turned and saw them too. He stepped aside for her to walk into battle, but when the scrawny man in the ripped jeans and the weathered biker jacket was able to send the Slayer sprawling on the first blow, Spike stepped into the fray.

Spike deflected the male vamp’s attention, allowing Buffy to catch her breath and focus on the woman. This one was dressed like a bad TV prostitute, with the fishnets and an arm full of bangles. If Buffy wasn’t feeling the stabbing fear thrumming through her body, she might have made a remark

about her opponent watching 'Pretty Woman' one too many times. As it was, she was focusing all her energy on staying alive and figuring out how these two had gotten one up on her so quickly.

Buffy aimed a right cross at the girl, but the vamp caught the blow in her hand, sending a shock wave vibrating up Buffy's arm. God, it hurt! The vampire sneered and grabbed the Slayer by the front of the shirt, kneeing her in the stomach and flinging her several feet to the left.

Buffy hit the ground hard and rolled. She doubled over and tried to make it to her feet, but couldn't. The vampire was on her in a moment anyway, flipping Buffy on her back and grinning as she began to strangle the Slayer. Buffy tried to break the deathgrip around her throat, struggling to breathe and reaching one hand for the stake in her pocket. The woman slipped into her vampire mask and pinned Buffy's hand to the ground. She had to be the strongest vampire Buffy had ever faced. Or else the slayer herself was the weakest she'd ever been, like those long ago nights of the Cruciamentum.

"I've heard Slayer's blood is like getting high and drunk at the same time. Mind if I give it a try?" And then the woman was leaning over her, baring her fangs.

A moment later, Buffy was coughing, both from the release of the vampire's chokehold and the dust that now rained down on her. Spike stood above her, looking more than a little concerned. Buffy was barely aware of his presence. She curled herself into a tiny ball, crying. She felt his hand touch her, and she grabbed him like a drowning woman might grab a life preserver.

"Spike," she begged. "Hospital. Baby."

And then she felt Spike's strong arms lift her from the ground. It seemed like he was running. She couldn't really focus on anything except that she hurt and she was terrified. She closed her eyes and prayed, over and over again, that she hadn't lost her one chance at a child.

The ringing phone pulled Giles from a deep sleep. He reached for the receiver with something approaching dread. Buffy had promised him she would come right to bed after she finished her term paper. She had promised him she wouldn't go patrolling. It was after one in the morning, and he was still alone in their bed.

Of anyone he could name, Spike was probably at the bottom of the list of people Giles would expect to call him. Did Spike's crypt even have a phone? But when Spike told Giles where he was and what he was doing there, Buffy's Watcher and the father of her child was pulling on clothes and halfway down the stairs before Spike could even realize that he'd been hung up on.

Almost to the door, Giles remembered Dawn sleeping upstairs. He couldn't just leave her without letting her know he was gone. And if he told her where he was going, she wouldn't want to be left behind. Bloody hell. He turned around and ran back up the stairs, for the very first time cursing that Dawn was in his custody.

He burst in her room like the police on a raid, calling her name and telling her to wake up as he fumbled through her drawers for clothes. He knew his panic was likely to upset her, but at the moment he couldn't control it, couldn't pretend that he knew everything would be fine, not even for Dawn.

She was still blinking sleep from her eyes, groggy and confused, when he handed her a sweatsuit and demanded that she get dressed quickly.

"What's going on?" she asked, slipping the sweatshirt on over her pajamas.

"Your sister's in the hospital," he answered, and then rushed out of her room and down the stairs. He fumbled on the end table for his keys. He had dumped them in the dish with the loose change, and

his fingers kept pulling up quarters and nickels. He finally upended the whole thing across the table and retrieved his keys.

He turned, and Dawn was on the bottom step, watching him with wide, terrified eyes. He reached for her hand, mostly to pull her along at a faster pace and not out of any attempt at comfort. She shut the door behind them, and Giles didn't bother to lock it.

He had the car started before Dawn had even sat beside him. He glanced over at her, and then pulled out of the drive before she'd had the chance to do up her seatbelt. Normally he would have waited for her, made sure she was belted in before shifting into reverse. Right now, he just didn't have the time.

The drive to the hospital passed in silence. At some point in time, Dawn started crying. *Some father you'll make*, Giles thought bitterly. *You've frightened the poor girl out of her mind, and you don't have it in you to even try and reassure her.*

He pulled in next to the emergency entrance, having far too much experience with late night trips to the ER. He was striding through the doors, Dawn jogging to keep up. She reached for his hand, and he took it, pulling her along faster. He banged on the counter as soon as he reached it, trying to get someone's attention.

"Buffy Summers!" he demanded, as the nurse walked up.

She was an older woman, maybe 60 or so, with gray hair piled on top of her head and loose wrinkly skin hanging from her thin frame. Her nametag said Emma. She started flipping through charts at an infuriatingly slow pace as she asked him, "And you are?"

"The child's father."

"Her father?"

Giles closed his eyes, tried to calm himself, tried to bring his panic down to a more productive level. "No, the baby's father."

The nurse raised an eyebrow at him, but didn't comment further.

Giles felt Dawn release his hand and then heard her exclaim, "Spike!" He turned in time to see her throw herself into the vampire's arms. He approached Spike as well, hoping to get answers that the nurse was still dawdling to find.

"What happened?"

Spike shrugged, still holding Dawn close and rubbing her arms reassuringly. "Couple vamps got the better of her. I jumped in and staked 'em. Buffy was all doubled over in pain, so I brought her here. Doctor's in with her now."

"Which room?" Giles asked as he moved to pass the blond vampire.

Spike hooked the watcher's arm before he could get more than a few feet. "Best have a seat, Rupert. Let the doctors do their stuff. Nothing you can do but wait. They'll let us know soon as they have something to tell."

Giles was numb, and he let Spike push him down into a waiting room chair. He leaned forward, elbows on knees, face in hands. Every second he had to wait was agony. He barely registered Spike sending Dawn off on an errand, apparently to sneak a couple bags of O+ from the blood bank. If Giles had been more himself, he would have stopped her.

The vampire sat down in the chair next to him, and Giles could feel predatory eyes boring into him. "What?" he finally said.

Spike pulled out a cigarette. Catching the look of an orderly as he pointed to the no smoking sign, Spike slipped it back in the pack. "You're a lucky bastard, you know that?" Spike said softly.

Giles leaned back in the chair and stared up at the ceiling. "I don't feel so lucky right now."

Spike drew out two cigarettes this time and glanced around to see that the orderly had gone. They were pretty much the only ones in the waiting room at the moment. He passed a cigarette to Giles, who looked at it for a few moments in confusion. "Steady your nerves," Spike explained and then lit them both.

Giles hadn't smoked since the band candy incident, and before that not since his Ripper days. But he took a long drag anyway, feeling the burn down his throat and chest. He exhaled and looked sideways at Spike. "Don't tell Buffy," he requested with a wry half-grin.

Spike only smiled back and took a long drag on his. "Slayer said something 'bout a baby?"

Giles nodded and fell into the familiar motions of smoking. Like riding a damn bicycle. "We just found out maybe a week or so ago. Only been trying less than two. Buffy's going to be devastated if she loses this child."

That seemed to surprise the vampire. "Slayer was *trying* to get herself in a family way? Hmm... Never pictured her going all domestic."

Giles tapped his ash out into the garbage can next to him. "She shouldn't have been out patrolling. I told her not to."

Spike stretched out in his chair, looked behind Giles towards where the doctor was still in with Buffy. "Yeah, wouldn't get on her back 'bout that if I were you. She's feelin' bad enough as it is."

The desk nurse, Emma, came over at that moment, carrying a chart. She frowned at both men until they extinguished their cigarettes and looked properly chastised. "Mr. Summers?"

"Mr. Giles," he corrected her. He saw the look that flashed across the older woman's features and knew that he was being judged for not having the decency to marry Buffy.

"The doctor's finished examining your friend." She emphasized the friend, as if hinting that it should have been wife. "She's asking for you, if you'd like to go in. Dr. Strader was just about to perform an ultrasound. Room 112." The nurse turned on her heel and walked back to the desk.

Giles stood and looked down on Spike for a moment. "Watch Dawn for me until I get back?"

Spike crossed his legs as if he were just settling in. "Yeah, sure, whatever." But when Giles turned to leave, Spike called him back. "Rupert!" He picked at the handle of the waiting room chair, not willing to meet Giles' eyes. "I know when I don't stand a chance. I still love her, you know. But the whole way here, you were the one she was crying for. I just..." Spike tilted his head up to fix Giles with a serious stare. "Make her happy, mate. And if you hurt her... Chip or no chip, I'll put you in the fucking ground." And then Spike was out of his chair and across the room to inspect the vending machines.

Giles watched the blond vampire for a moment before walking down the hall to Buffy's room. He read the numbers off the wall until he found room 112. He knocked politely and stepped in. Buffy was alone, lying on the bed in a hospital gown and covered with a sheet. Her eyes were red and swollen from crying. When she saw him, she reached for him desperately, and he was at her side in moments.

Giles smoothed back her hair and leaned down to kiss her tenderly on the forehead. She started crying again, clinging to his hand and begging him to forgive her.

He smiled. "What's to forgive? Maybe you shouldn't have gone on patrol alone, but you are the Slayer. I can't exactly keep you at home, barefoot and pregnant."

He pulled up a chair beside her bed and lowered the side railing so he could be closer to her. He slid his arm under her head and laid his own beside her on the pillow. She was still clutching his hand, her tears now giving way to hiccups. She turned to the side, their foreheads touching, the world around them falling away as he looked into her eyes.

"Giles, I'm so scared."

"I know, luv," he whispered. "So am I."

Her hand tightened convulsively around his, and he stroked the back of it lightly with his thumb. Her eyes closed, and she licked her lips. He knew she was trying to work up the courage to tell him something. Something he probably wouldn't like.

"Giles, I think I lost all my slayer powers."

"What?"

Her eyes opened again, and he saw in them the same fear he had seen during the Test. The fear of being just a normal girl, of being helpless and weak, of not being able to protect the ones she loved. She sniffled and wiped her tears across the back of her hand. "Those vamps almost killed me. I couldn't stop them. When they hit me, it hurt. I had no strength. It was like my birthday all over again."

He closed his eyes, not wanting to remember his betrayal of her. "We'll figure it out, Buffy. I promise." But he was already figuring it out. He was already connecting the dots. All those vague references in the Watchers' Diaries, all the missing time, those watchers weren't just protecting their pregnant slayers from a Watcher's Council that would be irritated by slayer maternity leave. Those watchers were guarding a secret from the demon population, protecting future slayers by preventing it from becoming common knowledge. That a pregnant slayer was no longer the Slayer.

He tilted his head to kiss her on the lips and seal his promise. But she pulled away and screwed up her face, not the reaction he was accustomed to receiving.

"Giles, have you been smoking?"

After a beat, he put on his poker face, hoping she hadn't noticed the guilt that flashed in his eyes first. "No, of course not, Buffy. Spike's in the waiting room. As usual, he was smoking. Must have stuck to my clothes. Where's that doctor?" he finished, sitting up and staring at the door.

Buffy patted him on their joined hands, and when he looked down, she was smiling slightly. "The smoke kinda makes me nauseous. That's a good thing, right? That means I'm still pregnant?"

He returned her smile and rested his free hand against the top of her head. "Let's hope so."

The doctor entered a moment later. Her nametag said Dr. Elizabeth Strader. She was young, blond, and thin. Giles didn't think she looked old enough to be a doctor.

"Well, hello again, Buffy and...?"

"Giles," his slayer supplied. "He's the baby's father. There's still a baby, right?"

Dr. Strader smiled kindly and flipped open the chart. "Well from the pelvic and from some of the tests I ran, it doesn't appear that you miscarried. I'd like to do a quick ultrasound just to make sure." She lowered the sheet and raised the gown, exposing Buffy's well-toned stomach. "This will be a little cold," the doctor warned as she smeared some gel across Buffy's skin. She chatted with her patient as she worked, trying to put the terrified young woman at ease. She asked about Buffy's name, amused to discover they shared the same name, Elizabeth, and more than a little curious about the unique derivative.

The doctor flipped a switch on the monitor and watched the screen as she moved the small doppler across Buffy's stomach. Dr. Strader frowned as she focused, and Giles desperately tried to read something in her expression. The display on the monitor made no sense to him, and he needed to know if Buffy had lost their child.

The doctor smiled at them both, and then reached her free hand to the instrument panel. "Here, listen to this." She turned a dial, and the soft thrum of a rapid heartbeat gradually filled the room. "That's your baby's heartbeat. It sounds good and strong. I'd say everything's going to be fine."

"Wait," Giles stopped her. "Heartbeat? Isn't it a little soon for that?"

The doctor set aside the doppler and wiped the gel from her patient's stomach with a washcloth. "No, right on schedule. I'd put you at about 8 or 10 weeks, Buffy."

"Eight or ten weeks?" Buffy and Giles exclaimed in unison.

Buffy settled back to process that new information, but Giles was clearly in a mood to argue with the doctor. "I assure you that's quite impossible. It's only been 12 days since we started trying."

Buffy was tugging on their linked hands, trying to bring his attention back to her. "Hey, you, ever consider that this might have happened before we started trying? You know like an accident?"

Giles frowned for a moment as if he were only now beginning to consider that possibility. He dropped down into the chair next to her bed, staring at their joined hands. "But we were so *careful*."

Buffy shrugged. "Well, nothing's a hundred percent. Happens to the best of them. Be thankful we didn't find out a month ago. It might have really freaked us out. Consider it fortuitous timing."

"But... But..." He raised his head to seek out the doctor. "But she had her cycle this month. And last."

Buffy sat up straight and gave him a look. "You keep track of that sort of thing?"

He squirmed in his chair, clearly uncomfortable. "Well I am..." He glanced over at the doctor significantly and then back to her. "I am *responsible* for you. And the people who gave me that responsibility—"

"Omigod. You write that kind of stuff in your books? Eww! Some guy in England gets to read about my periods? What else do you write about?"

Giles stared at the doctor again. "Buffy, perhaps this can wait until we get home. For right now, I'd like the doctor to answer my question. How can she possibly be 8 or 10 weeks along?"

The doctor sat on the little metal stool and slid over in front of Giles and Buffy. "It's not uncommon during the first trimester, and even into the second, especially around the time a woman would usually be getting her period. It's called 'spotting.' I wouldn't worry about it, Buffy. You and the baby are doing fine. Although, I don't mean to minimize your fall. You were very lucky not to miscarry. I'd like you to take it easy for a few days. By that, I mean stay in bed and be waited on hand and foot." She gave Giles a pointed look, and he nodded his understanding.

The doctor released them after scheduling a follow-up appointment with an OB for the next week. They picked up Dawn on the way out, thanked Spike for his help, and drove home with the glazed expression of two people who had just had over two months carved off their nine months of preparation time.

Buffy lounged on the living room couch, watching Xander and Dawn duke it out over Dr. Mario. Giles had bought a Nintendo to keep his restless slayer occupied during the three or four days she was supposed to stay in bed. He probably never guessed it would keep the house full of constant guests and reduce college age adults to childish bickering over whose turn it was.

For now Giles had been thrown out by a cranky girlfriend, who insisted that if she had to spend every minute of every day with him hovering over her, then he was certainly not long for this world. Discretion being the better part of valor, he beat a hasty retreat and left her in the care of the other Scoobies.

Willow sat on the floor beside the couch, casting half an eye on Xander and Dawn's game as she talked with Buffy. "So 8 or 10 weeks, huh?"

"Yeah," Buffy said. "Baby's a boo-boo. Although Giles got mad when I called it that."

"How's he taking it?" her friend asked.

"I think he's mostly embarrassed, so I wouldn't tease him about it if I were you. He wanted to be like 'The Man with the Plan.' Now he's just the man who knocked up his girlfriend. I think he wants to apologize for it or something. I have to keep reminding him that we *wanted* a baby."

"So, how are *you* taking it?"

Buffy shrugged. "Mildly freaked out. I was *supposed* to have nine months to get ready. Now I have less than seven. Middle of July instead of the end of August. But the heartbeat was really cool, Will. You should have heard it. I have a little person's heart beating inside me."

Willow smiled and put her hand on Buffy's flat tummy. "How long you have to stay like this?"

Buffy sighed and tossed her head back. She was getting *sooo* bored with just laying around. Giles only let her up to go to the bathroom, and even then it was an interrogation to see if she was trying to cheat her bedrest. "Doctor said two more days. Giles says three. I'm going batty here, Will."

Xander jumped to his feet, his hands raised in victory. "Who's the man?"

Dawn crossed her arms. "You are. You're such the man. You can beat a 14-year-old girl. I think my speed's set too high. I should get a handicap."

Xander laughed and started tickling Dawn until she giggled. "I think someone's just a sore loser." He had pity on her and let her up, turning towards the couch. "Hey, Buff, want to play?"

"Naw," she answered. "You'll just cry when I beat you, and then I'll feel all bad." She could see he would have tickled her too, except perhaps that he feared the wrath of Giles. Sometimes there were advantages to being pregnant.

Giles turned the handle on the bedroom door, but it was locked. That was very odd. He didn't even realize their bedroom door had a lock.

"Buffy?"

"Go away."

He could tell that she was crying. "Buffy, is something wrong? Please let me in." He tried the handle again, even applied a little force. He was growing concerned. "Buffy, please, you're worrying me."

The door opened a crack and one red-rimmed eye poked out. "None of my pants fit," she informed him.

He tried not to smile. That would only make her angry. He pushed the door open further, and she let him take her in his arms. "That's to be expected, Buffy. It will probably be a long while before they fit you again. But that doesn't change how beautiful you are."

"Sweet talker," she mumbled against his chest. She pulled away from him and walked back into the bedroom. Clothes were strewn everywhere, across the bed, the floor, hanging off of the nightstand and even the lampshade. She must have tried on 30 pairs of pants.

Buffy flopped down on the bed, clad only in a T-shirt and undies. Giles could see the slightest curve to her stomach, and then he did smile in spite of himself.

"Giles," she wailed. "It's just happening too fast. They all fit just yesterday, maybe a little snug. Today I can't even zip them up."

Something she said clicked inside his head. *It's just happening too fast.* A suspicion began to grow inside him, and he felt his stomach knot up. He wouldn't say anything to Buffy, not until after the doctor's appointment confirmed or denied his hypothesis. No need to worry her for nothing. But he was beginning to wonder if the Watchers' Diaries with their vague comments and missing chunks of time, if maybe they weren't hiding more than pregnant slayers who'd lost their powers.

"Come on, Buffy," he told her. "Put on a pair of sweats or something loose. We'll be late for the doctor's appointment."

Buffy paced the length of the living room over and over again. Giles had been Mr. Research ever since they got back. And he wouldn't tell her *anything*. Not until he was sure, he told her. He didn't even eat dinner with her and Dawn. Buffy just brought him a plate and set it on the coffee table. It was after dark, and he hadn't eaten more than half of it.

After about the fifth time Buffy had snapped at her sister, Dawn had slunk off to her own room, muttering about hormones. Now just her and Giles in the living room. And he might as well be a million miles away for as much as he noticed her presence. A strange mix of old journals and new pregnancy books lie open across the coffee table. Giles kept punching numbers into a calculator.

"Giles!" she tried again, bending over into his line of sight. "Come on. You said you had the explanation for our incompetent doctor. So start explaining already. I'm having visions of alien babies here."

He twisted away from her, still buried in his book. "Please, just a minute. I almost have it."

She huffed and resumed her pacing. Giles hadn't seemed the least bit surprised when the doctor told them she was 12 to 14 weeks along and put the due date at the middle of June. Buffy was ready to demand a second opinion, but Giles had quickly silenced her, played the passive patient for the doctor, and then ushered them out as quickly as possible. Another month carved out of their prep time. Now only six months or less.

"Dear Lord," he breathed, leaning back against the couch in a daze.

Buffy was at his side in a second. "What is it? Come on, share already!"

He looked up at her, and then drew her to sit down in his lap. Uh-oh. This couldn't be good.

"Buffy," he began. He was still staring off into space, his eyes glazed over. "I've done the calculations three times. I think you lost your slayer gifts, because your metabolism is focused on this pregnancy. You did conceive that first night we tried."

"But, Giles—"

He silenced her with a finger on the lips. "That puts you at twenty days right now. Taking that, plus the timing of the various symptoms you've experienced, adding in the estimate the doctor in the ER gave us, and now the very different estimate the OB doctor gave us, I think I've determined your real due date. Buffy, we don't have nine months. We have nine weeks."

"What?" She collapsed against him, her eyes glazing over as well. "Nine *weeks*?"

"Well, closer to six weeks now, actually. Near the end of January, I believe."

"Omigod! Don't slayers get to do anything by the book?"

"Apparently not," he answered, now absently running his fingers through her hair.

Suddenly she bolted off his lap. "Omigod! Giles, how far will I be on January 5th?"

He adjusted his glasses and leaned forward to look over his calculations. He punched something in the calculator. "Six months."

Buffy groaned. "Anya is totally going to kill me. I'll have to have my bridesmaid's dress completely refitted. I'll look like a big orange pumpkin."

Giles quickly punched some more numbers into the calculator, and sank back into the couch. "Buffy, isn't your father's wedding the following weekend?"

Her eyes grew even wider, and her hand came up to cover her mouth. "I'll have to be refitted for that dress too."

"I was thinking more along the lines of you showing up at your father's wedding seven months pregnant. He hates me enough as it is. Now he really is going to kill me." Giles removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes wearily. This was turning into a nightmare. There was no way they would be ready for a baby in six weeks.

"Giles," she said softly, crawling back into his lap. "Is this like a pregnancy thing? Or will the baby... I mean... Should we be looking at colleges for next year?"

He chuckled and rubbed her back reassuringly. "No, it's just a slayer thing. Your body's speeding things along. It makes sense, really. The Slayer can't afford to be out of commission for nine months. After the baby is born, she should be just fine."

Buffy sighed, and they both sat in silence for a moment. It really was rather overwhelming.

"What do we do?" She sounded very small and very frightened. He wrapped his arms tightly around her, trying to lend her some of his own strength.

"Well," he started, thinking through the whole matter from a more practical standpoint. "We make a list of everything that must be done before the baby comes. The others will help, I'm sure. Then there are the doctor appointments. We will need some help from the Council, either by sending us a doctor we can trust or by fudging your medical records. If it's the latter, then you'll have to see a different doctor at each visit."

He continued on, his mind working through the problem logically, the rest of him completely numb from the implications. "I hate to do this to you, Buffy, but you'll have to drop out next semester. Finish your exams for this term, but then the next... It would be rather hard to explain your sudden pregnancy after just the Christmas recess. You shouldn't leave the house much at the end, either. People would ask too many questions." He hugged her closely and kissed her on the forehead. "Everything will be fine. We'll work it all out. Please don't worry."

Buffy snuggled up closer. "What would I do without you?"

He laughed deprecatingly. "I imagine you wouldn't be in this mess in the first place." He slid her off his lap. "Now, do you want to tell Dawn, or should we both do it?"

Buffy shook her head. "I better do it. Actually, I think she'll be excited. Nine months seemed like a long time to her." And his slayer headed up the stairs to enlighten her sister on the recent turn of events.

Six more weeks and he would be a father. He couldn't comprehend it.

A black Accord with out of state plates pulled up across the street from 1630 Revello Drive. The driver killed the lights and engine, and then snapped a telephoto lens on his digital camera.

"People should learn to draw their shades," he murmured as he took half a dozen photos. He waited for the man to turn for a clear shot, and then- click- the driver snapped one last picture.

A laptop rested on the passenger seat, and the digital camera was quickly plugged into its port. He downloaded the images and attached them to an email. He encoded it, and then sent it. Nothing left but to wait for the phone call.

Ring. He answered his cell before the second ring.

"It's me," he said simply. "That your man?... All right, then, target acquired. I'll need the first half up front... What?... No really, I prefer to work alone... Fine, but it'll cost you another five if you want me to play nice with others... Agreed. So where am I meeting this contact of yours?"

The driver reached across to the laptop and opened up notepad. He typed in the directions to the rendezvous.

“Make sure he knows that I’m in charge of this operation... Yes, of course... I understand. Not quick at all. I’m good at these kinds of games. I’ll keep your friend ‘entertained’ until you can arrive. You are still planning to be there for the big finale?... Good. So this guy I’m meeting, what’s his name?”

The driver typed below the directions: R- A- Y- N- E.

“Ok, got it. Ethan Rayne. Tell him not to be late. I hate waiting. I charge extra for that.”

Click. He hung up the phone. Moments later, the black Accord had pulled away and was gone.

Chapter 4

The Ghost of Christmas Past

Buffy studied her profile in the full-length mirror. She smoothed the T-shirt over her rounded stomach and looked down. She couldn't even see her feet. She heard Giles' laughter behind her, and spun quickly to see him leaning against the bedroom doorway, his arms crossed.

"If you're going to get that big, perhaps we should rethink this whole baby thing."

Buffy pulled the pillow out from under her shirt and threw it at him. He ducked.

"Willow and Tara are taking me shopping for maternity clothes. I was trying to get an idea of what size I'll need. And you should know better than to mock your pregnant girlfriend." He looked away at the word girlfriend. He did that a lot lately.

Buffy grabbed her purse and swept past him. "We're going Christmas shopping after. It's only two weeks away. You promised to get a tree on the way home from the shop. Don't forget." She stopped and walked back to him, remembering that she'd forgotten to kiss him. "Oh, and I'll pick up Dawn after school. You gave Anya the afternoon off, and we're all going for our final fittings." She frowned and picked up the pillow from where it had landed on the floor. "Maybe I should take the pillow for my fitting. You think this is six months?" She shrugged. "They can always take it in before the wedding. They'll have to fit me again right before anyway. How will I explain that one? Maybe I should wear it to my fitting."

Buffy stuffed the pillow under one arm and the purse under the other, not noticing that Giles had merely listened to her babbling without comment. He didn't seem to be taking this as well as she. He was really and truly freaked out. She had taken a few days to adjust, but now she just accepted that they had a baby coming in about five and a half weeks. Kind of like getting the overnight shipping instead of the standard ground. She had even started to look for the silver lining. Her morning sickness had already gone, and she wouldn't have to spend months feeling big, awkward, and uncomfortable.

Giles, on the other hand, was in a panic. He made The List. The List was carried around on his person at all times, constantly added to as more necessities came to mind. Sometimes The List was copied off and highlighted, so that others could help finish some of the tasks. Always next to The List could be found The Calendar. He had distilled volumes of pregnancy books and converted all the relevant dates into their own timetable, which he then wrote in teeny, tiny fly writing on The Calendar. Also could be found important dates like Xander and Anya's wedding, her father's wedding, Christmas, New Year's, and Dawn's birthday. The fact that the last five weeks before the baby came spanned all of these events only added to her poor watcher's stress levels.

Once she had written in "de-stress Giles" on The List, but he had not been amused. He had crossed the offending item off and explained in very serious tones the importance of The List and The Calendar. She had struggled not to laugh.

In spite of all her teasing, she was grateful for Giles' organization and planning. In the four days since their due date had abruptly shifted, Giles had already emptied his study in preparation for a nursery, gotten the Council to fly in a doctor from their ranks to care for her until term, convinced Spike to patrol in Buffy's place, and purchased a beeper for the big event. He had even gotten them signed up for a one day crash course in Lamaze. The normal courses spanned weeks, which in their case was quite impossible.

Sometimes he had nightmares. Not as bad as when she had died, but still worrisome. At least until she heard him mumble things like, "Not yet, Buffy, we don't have a crib." and "They won't let us take her home without a car seat." She would snuggle a little closer, and usually that was enough to settle him back into a peaceful slumber.

She met her two favorite witches at the mall. Her friends were all cool with the new timetable. Shoot, it wasn't their baby. All this meant for them was less waiting before they could start spoiling it.

"So how is the pregnant one today?" Willow asked as they met outside the Gap.

"Perfect," Buffy answered.

"And the little Rabbit?" Willow had taken to calling the baby Rabbit after commenting that nine weeks sounded more like the time it took to grow rabbits than babies.

Buffy patted her stomach. In sweats and a baggy T-shirt, it still looked pretty flat, although when she ran her hand across it, one could see the slight roundness developing there. "Little Rabbit's had me in sweatpants the last four days. Come on, let's find something more fashionable."

They headed off to Motherwear, chatting as they went.

"So how is Giles today?" Tara asked. It was always smart to keep tabs on the mood of one's employer.

"Yeah," Willow seconded. "Anything more from The List that we're supposed to be doing?"

"Probably. I didn't stop to ask."

Willow took Tara's hand and swung it between them as they walked. "So is he still wiggling? Or is he a little cooler now?"

"Totally wiggling. Sometimes I think he feels like he's the guy in the movie who's defusing a bomb. And there's like that big clock going 10, 9, 8... And he doesn't know if he'll find the right wire in time. Yeah, sometimes it seems like he's got that big digital clock superimposed right over The List. Every time he looks at it, he just gets that panicky glazed expression. Strangely enough, though, at other times I think he's just glad that he didn't get me pregnant on accident. He's proud to be just the One-Try Guy again."

Barely an hour after entering the maternity store, Buffy exited in a foul mood, carrying only one bag and with the two witches following at a safe distance.

"Does no one make decent maternity clothes? I mean, jeeze, they have Baby Gap, don't they? Where's my Mommy Gap? Everything they had in there was stuff... well, stuff that I could see *Giles* buying for me. Much more his taste."

"It's only five weeks or so, Buffy," Willow attempted to cheer her up. "And I don't think they make the kinds of clothes you like to wear for people..." she trailed off, seemingly aware she was crossing over into dangerous territory.

Buffy shrugged. "For people as fat as I'm going to get? It's okay, Will. I've accepted it. I'm hoping the whole slayer package will trim me back up after the baby comes."

Tara suggested, "Maybe you can just buy normal clothes, but in bigger sizes."

Buffy brightened. "Hey, there's a thought. Come on girls, more shopping!"

By the time they left to pick up Dawn, Buffy had accumulated a trunk full of clothes. Probably more than she would ever really wear for the remaining five and a half weeks of her pregnancy, but clothes were her thing, and Buffy saw no reason to sacrifice her fashion sense just because she was going to be a mother. Although, Giles might tend to argue with her when he saw how much she'd spent.

Then off to the bridal shop, where Anya was haggling with the clerks over the cost of alterations. To turn Buffy's dress into maternity wear would cost nearly as much as the dress itself. In the end, Anya was a tough customer and had bargained them down to half the original quote, plus a discount on the other bridesmaids' dresses as well.

Buffy had the dress for her father's wedding altered at the same time. She still hadn't worked up how to inform him of his impending grandfatherly status. Walking down the aisle at his wedding

seven months along didn't seem like such a good idea, although it could be rather fun. But really, she didn't hate Susan *that* much. Besides, Buffy would rather Giles lived through the night.

Alterations were quickly followed by Christmas shopping, and the group split off and came together several times so people could buy things for each other. Buffy found an exquisite gold pocketwatch for Giles. The kind of solid watch you passed down through generations. She immediately fell in love with it. Dawn thought that she was being extravagant and that Giles was likely to be cross with Buffy for spending so much. But Buffy wanted him to have it. It reminded her of the Giles she had first met back in the library at the very beginning, before Jenny and Angelus and all the pain his slayer had caused him. The stuffy English librarian with his tweed suits and waistcoats. She'd always thought he should have a pocketwatch tucked in the front of his vest. It just fit him more than a wristwatch. She imagined that he would have pulled it out, snapped it open, and timed her during training and patrol. *Plunge and move on, plunge and move on*, he had scolded her.

So she plunged and moved on, purchasing the watch and placing an order with the jeweler to have it engraved. One word in perfect calligraphy to be carved on the inside cover. Daddy.

The watch was ready an hour later, and the others were too. They met again by the gift wrapping, teasing each other with hints about their gifts. Since Buffy had purchased nothing for Dawn today, she asked her sister to have everything wrapped for her while she made a run to the restroom. If she had to go this often already, she couldn't imagine what it would be like five weeks from now. She gave Dawn one last reminder to put gift tags on everything, or it would be a nightmare to sort out on Christmas day.

"Oh, and don't let anyone see Giles' present," she admonished as she headed off to the bathrooms near the food court. "I want it to be a surprise."

At the end of the day, Buffy pulled into the driveway and started unloading the car, somewhat grateful that she had beaten Giles home. Maybe he wouldn't notice how much stuff she had bought. Her feet were achy, and she was tired. She considered taking a long hot soak in the tub. The very thought made her perhaps a little too eager to get in the door. She didn't notice the envelope resting on the front step.

Dawn noticed it as she followed her sister in, and handed it to Buffy. "What's this?"

Buffy frowned and examined the plain manila envelope. No address or postage, it had been hand delivered. On the front were simply the letters "R.G." She opened it and pulled out an 8 by 10 black and white photo.

"What is it?" Dawn asked again, leaning over to see.

An old photo of five young ruffians, standing together in the alleyway outside an unsavory pub. None of them more than 20 or 21, the only woman in the picture probably closer to 16 or 17. They wore the kind of expressions that if the average person saw them approaching from down the block, he would cross the street to avoid them.

Buffy recognized the man straddling the motorcycle. Ethan Rayne. Younger, unkempt hair, dressed in leather, smoking a cigarette, and grinning at the camera with the same devil-may-care smirk she remembered receiving as he tied her down and tattooed the big demon homing signal on the back of her neck.

There was only one other person she knew from the photograph. Giles. His hair was long like Ethan's, but in that stylish rock star look, like in the photo Xander had shown her after Eyghon. He was smiling at the camera too, but in the way a hunter must smile before he takes down his prey. She shivered at the thought of the very different man Giles might have become, had he continued down that path. Ethan, for all his bravado, was nothing but a coward beneath. But Giles, if he had taken the path of dark magic and demon summoning and chaos, would have become a man to be feared. She

had seen glimmers of it, when he had faced Ethan or the Mayor or when she had watched him strangle Ben in his dream. Giles could have become a man to equal Angelus.

In the photo, he held the young woman against him with one arm, his hand low across her hip, nearly at her groin. His other hand held a cigarette away from their bodies, the ash having burned so far up its length that the slightest breeze could have dissolved the whole thing. And the woman, the girl really since she couldn't be more than 16, she was leaning back against his chest, her head tipped up to whisper something in his ear. The expression on her face was one of complete adoration. But Giles didn't return her affection. He was focused on the camera, grinning that predatory grin at whoever was taking the picture.

Buffy felt uneasy. Not because of the content of the photo. What did she care about his past lovers? Giles had found his girlfriend murdered, her body arranged in his bed in a cruel mockery of seduction, was captured, and then sadistically tortured, all done by Buffy's ex-boyfriend. Was she supposed to get worked up over a twenty-year-old photo of Giles holding another woman in his arms?

No, what left her cold was the fact that someone had left this on her doorstep in the first place. They knew where she lived and were near enough to have hand delivered it today. More than that, the initials on the outside indicated that it was meant for Giles.

She turned the photo over. Written clearly on the glossy paper were the words, *Why didn't you come back for me?*

"Let me see already." Dawn snatched the picture from her hand, turning it over to study the young delinquents again. She peered intently, and then her eyes widened. "Wow. Is that Giles? He was pretty cute when he was young. If he looked like that now, maybe I could understand why you—"

"Dawn," Buffy interrupted, grabbing her hand and backing them both out of the house. "Come on, I'm taking you next door. I want you to wait with Mrs. Isaacson until I say it's okay to come home."

Mrs. Isaacson was happy to watch Dawn for a few minutes, but Buffy had to talk her out of calling the police.

Buffy returned to the front door and stepped in hesitantly. She hoped Giles would be back soon. She didn't relish a confrontation with an intruder without her slayer powers. She pulled out a small saber from inside the front closet. She still had the knowledge, if not the strength or the reflexes. She took a few steps before she frowned and looked back at the closet. That would have to be childproofed. She would have to tell Giles to add it to The List.

She made a quiet sweep of the house, upstairs and down, but no sign of trespass. And then she heard footsteps on the stairs behind her and spun 180 degrees, her sword leveled.

"Jesus, Buffy!" Giles exclaimed, stumbling backwards on the steps and grabbing the rail to keep from falling. "What are you doing?"

The saber clattered to the floor, and she threw herself in his arms. "I'm so glad you're home."

He stroked her back fondly, asking softly, "Is this a slayer pregnancy thing? Should I start wearing protective gear around the house?"

She scowled at him in irritation. "No, but someone was at the house. They left something on the porch for you."

He looked concerned. "Show me."

She took him back downstairs and gave him the picture, but he didn't seem as surprised as she thought he should be.

"Who's the girl?"

His face was contemplative, lost in memories. One finger stroked along the woman's outline. "Diedre Page. Ethan found her waiting tables in some dive strip club. She'd run away from home and just gotten thrown out of her flat. He brought her to ours. I think he was rather put out when she

fancied me over him.” Giles shook himself out of his reverie and met Buffy’s gaze. “Does it bother you?”

She shrugged. “No more than Angel should bother you.” A pause. “Okay, bad example. I meant, no it doesn’t bother me. Who are the others?”

He didn’t point out Ethan. He knew she would recognize him. He merely identified the men on either side of the picture. “Thomas Sutcliffe. Philip Henry. Philip you might remember from the incident with Eyghon. He died, and then you locked him in the book cage after he attacked you.”

Buffy nodded. “The dead guy who turned to goo?”

“Yes,” Giles answered softly, again drifting away from her and into the long ago past. “We were inseparable. The six Musketeers for lack of a better analogy.”

“Six? I only count five.”

He blinked up at her for a moment, seemingly disoriented by the shifts back and forth between present and past. “Randall. He must have taken this photo. He had majored in photography at Oxford. That’s how I met him. He dropped out and joined up with us, but he never gave up the camera. He was always snapping pictures of the lot of us. I don’t think I’d seen any of them before now. He would never show them to us.” Giles touched his fingers to the images of each friend, even Ethan. “Out of all of us, there’s just Ethan and I left now.”

Buffy didn’t want to rush him through what appeared to be some powerful emotions, but she needed answers. “Giles, what does this mean?” She flipped over the photo in his hands. He caught his breath and paled when he saw the words.

Why didn’t you come back for me?

“Giles?”

He looked up at her, startled, and then tossed the photo onto the end table with finality. “Nothing you should be worrying about right now, Buffy.” He laid his hand across her stomach to make her understand his meaning.

“But if something’s—”

“No,” he said firmly. “Let me handle this. Now where’s Dawn?”

“I sent her to stay with the neighbors until I knew it was safe. I’ll... I’ll go get her.” Buffy paused at the threshold. “Umm... There’s some packages in the Jeep, if you want to bring them in. Umm... Now, don’t flip, but there’s actually a *lot* of packages. But really, I like needed a whole new wardrobe.”

He chuckled. “Buffy, we’re not poor. I’m not going to begrudge you your maternity clothes or whatever else you needed.”

“Yeah, okay, but there’s really a *lot*. And some stuff for the baby. And I may have gone overboard with Christmas. But no peeking. Well, they’re wrapped anyway, so you can’t. But don’t even try. Oh, did you get the tree?”

He shook his head. “You took the Jeep, Buffy. How would I have brought it home?”

“Aghh! We were supposed to switch cars today. I’m sorry. I forgot.”

“It’s alright, really. I did hesitate at the thought of you driving my car.”

She scowled and tossed him the keys. “I’ll be back with Dawn in a sec. And just for that, I’m not helping to carry anything in.”

She shut the door behind her, trying to forget about the picture or the look on Giles’ face when he read those words. They would have a nice, non-demony Christmas, and that was all there was to it.

Giles opened the hatch of the Jeep and was truly astonished at the number of bags. But the store was doing well, he had sublet his flat, the house was paid for, and Buffy and Dawn had money enough from the gallery and their mother's life insurance. If his slayer wanted to splurge, then he would let her.

Each trip in, he would pause at the photograph. One person not in the frame. But he had heard the voice. When he was closing up for the night, almost out the door, he had answered the phone.

Seven little words at the other end. "Why didn't you come back for me?"

Click. And then nothing more.

A voice he had thought dead ages ago. A voice he had frankly not thought about in four years, and before that nearly twenty. Randall's voice. His hand had shook when he replaced the receiver. With the clear reasoning of a Watcher, he had quickly dialed the operator, but the call couldn't be traced.

Why didn't you come back for me?

Why was this happening now of all times? And would he be forced to pay for his past sins for the rest of his life? Could he ever balance the scales? How many lives would he have to save before he would be redeemed?

He looked into his own eyes, into the image of the man he had once been. His younger self seemed to be mocking him, smiling *at* him, as if to say, *You'll never be free of me. I'll always be inside of you.*

He slipped the photograph into the desk drawer and out of sight.

Four days later, and it was Saturday. Buffy seemed to grow more each day. Every time she stepped onto the scale, she despaired of ever fitting into any of her leather pants again. Giles advised her not to weigh herself everyday, as it only seemed to depress her. On her petite frame, the curves of her pregnancy began to reveal themselves sooner than they might have on any other woman. Already, her stomach was sufficiently rounded enough to cause her classmates to wonder if she were pregnant, but not large enough that they would dare ask. It would be terribly embarrassing for them and insulting for Buffy if they were wrong. Thankfully, she had final exams on Monday and Tuesday, and then she was done.

She had also begun to feel the first flutterings of movement. She had been in the Magic Shop with Dawn when it first happened. She had screamed Giles' name, and he had knocked over a crystal ball, shattering it in his haste to reach her. He had thought something was wrong, but she had simply snatched his hand and placed it against her belly.

"What?" he had asked, clearly concerned.

"I can feel the baby moving," she had replied in awe. "Can't you feel it?"

"No," he answered quite honestly, but he was content to stand and watch Buffy enjoy the sensations of their child moving inside her.

The phone calls continued. Giles wouldn't tell her who it was or what they were saying, but she always knew when it was one of *those* calls. He seemed to get more distraught after each one, and would then try and put on a brave face for her. The operator could never give him the number, and the calls never lasted long enough to be traced. But Buffy was beginning to worry for her watcher's mental health.

He had nightmares every night. Only now he wasn't mumbling about baby strollers and car seats. And a simple cuddle wasn't enough to quiet his fear. He would wake as she called his name, and kiss her softly, and tell her not to worry. But she did worry.

A photo was left on the door every day, five total now. Always left while no one was home. Different photos that Randall had taken: of the five friends in a diner booth, of Giles and Diedre dancing, of just Ethan and Giles, and finally a portrait of Giles dozing in their flat with a book spread over his chest and his boots propped up on chair. Of all the photos, that one reminded Buffy of her Watcher and not the Ripper persona revealed in the others.

Each photo came in a plain manila envelope inscribed with the letters, "R.G." And on the back of each photo were written the words, *Why didn't you come back for me?*

Giles put them each in the top desk drawer, but sometimes Buffy caught him looking at them when he thought she wasn't there.

Between the photos and the phone calls and the brief time they had to prepare for their new baby and the whole Christmas season besides, Buffy was afraid that Giles was nearing the end of his rope.

So four days after the first photograph arrived, Buffy collected her watcher for their second doctor's appointment, hoping this would lighten his mood. Dr. Michaels had said at their last visit that he would do an ultrasound the next time, and they could learn the sex of the baby if they wished. Buffy hoped, for Giles's sake, that it was a girl. A daughter would really brighten his mood.

Dr. Michaels strolled into the examining room, smiling up at Buffy and Giles. The clinic was mostly empty on a Saturday evening, but given their unique circumstances, that's how they preferred it. Dr. Jeffery Michaels was one of the best the Council had, and Giles seemed at ease with him, which of course went a long way towards alleviating any misgivings Buffy might have had. He had been granted hospital privileges at Sunnydale and scheduled Buffy for visits once a week the first two weeks, twice a week the third and fourth, and every other day the last week.

Today their doctor sat for a while and spoke with them, answering questions. Giles had written a few down on a piece of paper he kept beside The List. Buffy pretty much let Giles ask the questions; he had enough for both of them.

Then Dr. Michaels moved on to the ultrasound. He lifted her top and lowered her pants enough to reveal her growing abdomen, and then smeared on the gel. It was their first ultrasound since the trip to the ER. This time they would likely be able to make out features: hands, face, feet.

"You two decide if you want to know the sex?"

"Yes," Giles answered. He really wanted to know. Buffy hoped he wouldn't be too disappointed if it was a boy.

"Yes, you decided, or yes, you want to know?"

"Yes, please tell us," Giles clarified.

The doctor moved the doppler across her stomach, pointing out the different shadows across the screen. "There, the hands, the nose right there, feet." The doctor smiled. "Look, a boy."

Buffy glanced up quickly to see how Giles was taking the news. He seemed to expect her concern and bent to kiss her quickly on the lips. He smiled. "A boy is fine, Buffy. He'll still be a part of you, and that's all that matters."

She felt herself getting teary. Damn hormones. She pulled him down for a longer kiss, and then turned back to look at their son. Dr. Michaels was frowning, moving the instrument across her stomach at various angles.

"Buffy, can I get you to roll over on your side?"

She exchanged a panicked look with Giles and grabbed his hand. "Is something wrong?"

"I don't know. I'm just trying to get a better view."

Giles helped her scoot over on the bed onto her side. He was still holding her hand, and now stroking her hair as well. The doctor continued manipulating the ultrasound in solemn silence, and Watcher and Slayer could only wait with held breath.

"Hmm..." Michaels said, not seeming to be aware of their presence anymore. "A girl."

"You mean you were wrong?" Giles sounded hopeful. "It's a girl, not a boy."

"No," the doctor said with a mischievous grin. "I mean one of each."

"Twins?" the parents cried in disbelief.

Giles dropped down into the chair he was very fortunate to have waiting behind him. Buffy could feel his hand shaking in hers.

The doctor pointed to the screen again. "There's the second baby's head, hands. Almost positive it's a girl. And see, if I angle it just right, see right there, both hearts beating. They're almost beating in sync. Must be why we never heard the second heartbeat before."

Giles leaned forward against Buffy's shoulder. She gave his hand a little squeeze. Dr Michaels turned off the machine and wiped the gel from her tummy. "Why don't I give you both a minute to absorb this before we talk some more?"

Giles groaned. "Can you give us back our nine months?"

The doctor chuckled as he left their room.

"It's okay, Giles," Buffy whispered, rolling over on her back to look at him.

Her watcher sat up in his chair, his face stricken. He was shaking his head and trembling. "I can't... Two babies in five weeks... I'm not ready. It's too much. I can't... I just *can't* do this."

Buffy felt her heart begin to race as she clutched at his jacket. "You're not leaving me like this, Giles? You *can't* leave me!"

He met her panicked expression and blinked down at her. "No, no, Buffy, I wouldn't." He kissed away her fear. "Never," he assured her, and then leaned into her again, nuzzling against her neck, wrapping his arms around her. Buffy realized he was asking her to be the strong one for right now, and here she was, just as freaked out as he.

"I feel like everything keeps spiraling out of control," he whispered beside her ear. "I keep thinking we might have made a big mistake, but it's too late to take it back. I didn't think there was enough time for one, but now two. God, Buffy, you have to help me get through this."

"Shhh..." she murmured, stroking his hair softly with one hand. "Breathe, Giles, breathe. We'll be fine. We can do this. How many apocalypses has it been now? Seven? Twins will be a piece of cake. First thing we do is throw away The List. Whatever gets done before the babies arrive, gets done. Everything else we just let go of. If they have to sleep in laundry baskets the first week, then so be it. Babies don't really care about fancy cribs and strollers and if they have curtains or wallpaper in their room anyway. It'll all be okay, really it will. The world won't end if we bring home two babies instead of one." She tickled him behind the ear, and he jumped away from her in annoyance. Buffy wondered if he would ever forgive Dawn for letting her in on *that* little secret. "You gonna be okay now?"

He nodded weakly and placed his hand against the bare skin of her rounded stomach. A son *and* a daughter.

"Good," Buffy said, placing her hand over his. "Cause now it's *my* turn to panic."

Willow was currently losing to Dawn. Perhaps that was because, in spite of her computing talents, she had never been one for the video games. Maybe it also didn't help that she had Xander behind her backseat game playing.

"No, no, Will, you got to turn it and put it on the blue... no over there by the yellow and the red... See, now you went and messed it up. You could have totally won."

"Shut up, Xander. And Dawn, quick, turn it off. I think Buffy and Giles are home." Dawn jumped up and collected the Nintendo, shoving it into a box and into the closet. Giles had become irritated with the thing very quickly and as soon as Buffy had been off her bedrest, had threatened to hide it from all of them, so Dawn had hid it first.

They quickly arranged themselves around the living room in an innocent tableau and waited for Slayer and Watcher to walk in. The two entered, not really noticing the friends around them, and made their way over to the couch, where they slowly sat in the space that Tara and Anya quickly vacated for them.

Willow took in the dazed and defeated expressions on their faces and came to the same conclusion that Xander voiced.

"A boy, huh? Tough break, Giles, but on the bright side you can teach him baseball or hockey or any number of other manly sports which you don't play. Umm... okay, but you could teach him fencing! Fencing is a kind of manly sport, except with the outfits and the... Okay, shutting up now. Willow, wanna help me out?"

Willow studied Buffy and Giles for a moment. They looked like their world had just collapsed in on them. "Hey, guys, is everything okay? I mean, it's a boy, right?"

"Yes, a boy," Giles murmured absently.

No one seemed sure what to say, so they all said nothing. A moment later, Buffy startled as if she'd just realized where she was. She added quietly, "A girl."

Now they were all confused. Willow stepped in to clarify the situation. "So which is it? A boy or a girl?"

"Both," Buffy and Giles answered together.

Anya frowned. "It's a boy *and* a girl? That's some freaky kid you got growing in there, Buffy. I told you the nine weeks thing couldn't be good."

Giles spared her a look of irritation. "Twins, Anya, twins." And then, as if those words had drained all the energy out of him, he leaned back into the couch and rested his head against the top.

Willow jumped up. This was *huge*! "Omigod! Twins? This is *sooo* cool!" The others joined in her excitement, Dawn climbing on the couch to give her sister a big hug, Xander patting Giles on the back, but Willow held back when she fully processed the expressions on the two parents' faces.

"Umm... guys?" She addressed the other Scoobies. "I was thinking maybe we could help out by making Giles and Buffy dinner tonight." She motioned them all out of the living room.

Anya bounded up, informing them all, "Oh, good. I have a new recipe that I want to try."

Giles managed to rouse himself out of his daze enough to ask Willow, "Please, for the sake of my unborn children, don't let Anya help with dinner." He laid his head back against the couch and added, "Anya, dear, you are a lousy cook."

Willow snagged Anya by the arm before she could protest and herded them all into the kitchen. If Giles could no longer find the grace to be tactful, then things really were bad.

"Okay, guys," Willow said as soon as they'd all assembled. "It's time for some Scoobie action. Giles and Buffy are about to have a nervous breakdown. And we are going to get them everything they want for Christmas."

Xander raised his hand meekly. "Don't mean to rain on your parade, Will, but with the wedding and Christmas and all, Anya and I are scraping the bottom of the barrel so to speak." He pulled her up next to his side, and she nodded her agreement.

Willow shook her head. "This isn't a money thing. It's a time thing. They don't have time to finish everything. Now there's ten days until Christmas, and between us we have five pairs of hands. Well, six if we can talk Spike into helping. Let's see how much we can all get done before then, okay?"

Dawn added helpfully, "If we need money, we can take it from the store. Giles won't mind if it's for the babies." She smiled. "Babies," she said again, as if still getting used to the idea.

Willow nodded. "Okay. But it'd be nice if we could make it a surprise."

"Giles never looks at the books," Anya added helpfully. "He won't notice if anything's missing."

"All right," Willow pronounced, now giving orders. "Dawn, you start making dinner. The rest of us are going to work on strategy. Anyone have a copy of The List?" Three hands shot up in the air, two of them were able to pull copies from their pockets. "Good. Now let's start at the top."

"How come I have to make dinner?" Dawn complained.

Willow scowled at her. Resolve face. "Would you rather I asked Anya to make it?"

"All right, all right. I'm going," Dawn grumbled.

While dinner cooked, The List was divided out into five chunks.

Two days after their ultrasound, Giles could feel movement. They were standing together at the sink, washing dishes, when Buffy grabbed his soapy hand and placed it against her stomach. He dropped the glass in his other hand, and it shattered. But he didn't even notice. She took his now free hand and placed it against the other side.

"You feel that? I think they're kicking each other. Must be missing, 'cause I'm the one they keep hitting."

"My God, Buffy," he whispered reverently. "It's incredible." Under one hand he could feel his son, under the other his daughter. It was the first time it felt truly real to him.

Dawn came jogging into the kitchen. "You guys okay? I heard something break." She had become almost as protective of her sister as Giles.

"Come here, Dawn," Giles said very softly, and when she had tiptoed around the broken glass to stand next to him, he pulled her between him and her sister and placed her hands beneath his on Buffy's stomach.

"Wow," Dawn murmured. She leaned back against Giles' chest, and the three of them just stayed there like that for several moments until the babies stopped moving beneath their hands.

When the kicking finally ended, Buffy leaned forward to kiss her sister and then up to kiss Giles. She turned back to finish drying her dishes, but Giles wrapped his arms around Dawn and kissed her on the crown of her hair. The two of them stood together in silent awe until Buffy scolded Giles for falling behind on the washing.

Three days before Christmas the Slayerettes sent them both on a romantic weekend getaway. Giles had protested at first, but by the time they convinced him, Buffy was already packed. A little bed and breakfast overlooking the ocean would be just the thing to ease the tension. In the end, he only agreed to two days away because it would be good for Buffy and good for the babies. But as he lay in bed, spooned up behind Buffy, his hand against her stomach, he had to admit that it was good for him too.

"Mmmm," she murmured contentedly, turning her head to face him. "Our first romantic getaway."

He kissed her softly on the cheek, and then nuzzled into her neck. "And our last for quite awhile, I'm afraid."

She frowned and tried to roll over to face him. Five months along with twins, she needed Giles' help to make it all the way. "Uh-uh," she insisted. "They have this marvelous new thing called a babysitter."

He chuckled and kissed her softly. He brushed her hair back from her face and asked with a sly grin, "Again?"

She laughed. "If I didn't know better, I'd say my little stevedore's stolen all my slayer stamina."

"Little?" he protested as he began kissing down her body, across her swollen breasts, over the mound where his son and daughter slept. He trailed his fingers across the curve of her womb, placing a kiss over each child and receiving an answering kick on one side. Maybe not sleeping after all. "Well, hello, little one. Which one are you, I wonder?"

Buffy pouted at him. "Forget about them for a minute. Mommy needs attention."

He smiled and continued down her naked body with fingers and lips. When he'd reached her feet, he drew them into his lap and massaged across arch and toes and heel and ankle. Buffy sighed and sank back into the pillows. "Ahh, there's the stuff. Sweet domestic bliss. I'll tell you when you can stop."

He massaged up her legs, and then rolled her on her side to knead out all the tension along her back. When he had sufficiently relaxed her, he pulled her into a lingering kiss, his tongue tracing out the contours of her mouth. And then with hands and mouth, he began to restore all of the tension he had so carefully removed.

Buffy and Giles were holding hands when they approached the front door of their home. The two days had indeed recharged them, and now Giles felt more equipped to deal with everything that lay on the other side of that door. Twins and phone calls and weddings and photos and long dead ghosts. He was perhaps a bit surprised to find all of their friends waiting on the other side of that door as well.

"Surprise!" They shouted.

Willow bounced forward and pulled them both into the house. "It's kind of a Christmas Eve baby shower."

Xander stepped forward in front of the redhead and presented Giles a piece of paper, handed over his other arm as a waiter might offer wine. In a bad French accent, he announced, "I present to you, Zee List."

Giles noticed that every item but two had been crossed off.

Buffy took The List from her friend and scanned down its length. "All that's left is baby names and... and a car. A car? Giles, why do we need a new car?"

"My car can hardly fit two baby seats and the three of us. Not comfortably at least."

"Awww," she said, squeezing his hand. "You're getting rid of the Beemer for me. That's so sweet."

"Not sweet, Buffy. Just practical."

But their friends were eager to show them the results of their efforts, and quickly pulled them into a tour. Xander pointed out the latches at the tops of the closet doors, just low enough for Buffy to reach, but far too high for any child. Willow showed them the sliding gates at the tops and bottoms of each staircase. Childproof latches on all the cupboards. Covers over all the electrical outlets. Two car seats waiting in the garage. Xander had put up shelving along the walls of the garage, and every potentially hazardous item had its place on them. A separate, locked shed beside the garage for the lawnmower and power tools.

They continued through the house. Xander showed them the sturdy bracketing he had installed on the bookcases and cabinets throughout the house, so that the children could practically climb them without bringing any furniture down on top of themselves. He demonstrated by scaling one bookcase himself. He jumped down when he noticed Giles frown.

The bathroom was childproofed as well. Even a lock on the toilet lid.

"That will be irritating," Giles commented.

"Yeah," Xander agreed. "But I made up for it with this." He opened the shower curtain with a flourish and a ta-da. Dual showerheads, one on each side. "I figured as long as I had my crew in here to add the shower hose for easier baby-bathing, well it wasn't much more work to add in a little bonus for mommy and daddy."

Giles blushed and looked away. "Yes, well... that was... thoughtful. You had your crew in here, Xander?"

He shrugged. "A few of the guys were willing to help out on their own time. It was fun. But that's why we needed you two out of the house."

"Come on," Dawn insisted, pulling on Buffy and Giles' hands. "You have to see the nursery."

The nursery was perhaps the most impressive accomplishment. New paint, new carpet, but aired out enough that Giles didn't need to worry about Buffy inhaling the fumes. The gang must have worked on this first. Two cribs sat on either side of the room, mobiles hanging over them. A changing table against one wall. A rich, mahogany rocking chair pulled up beneath the window. Buffy sat in this right away, appearing to admire the smooth sway as it rocked. She smiled.

A tall chest of drawers took the space between the closet and the door. Giles opened a few drawers and found them full. Boy's clothes on one side, girl's on the other.

"Oooh!" Willow called as she sidled up next to Giles and opened the bottom drawer. "I saw this and just couldn't resist!" She pulled out a little tweed suit, with tie and vest and everything. "See, little mini-Giles!"

He gave her a kind smile and squeezed her shoulder in affection. He moved on to look in the closet. It was full of games and stuffed animals. A double baby stroller was pulled into one corner. He turned around again, looking up at the wallpaper border running across the top of the wall and meeting the blue sky and cloud painted ceiling. Fluffy little white sheep danced across the wallpaper, matching the curtains that hung from the window.

Anya stepped up beside him. "I insisted on the sheep. Willow and Dawn wanted bunnies. But who would be mean enough to give a kid *those* nightmares?"

Giles startled Anya with a warm embrace, patting her on the back. "It's perfect. It's all perfect. But expensive. I hope you didn't spend your own money."

"We took it from the store," Willow said reluctantly.

"Good," was Giles' only response.

Willow continued on in excitement. "But I think we got everything done on The List, and more besides. Look, even packed a suitcase for the hospital." She held it up to show him. "You're all set to bring the babies home today if you had to."

"No, no," Giles insisted. "A month will be soon enough."

Tara spoke up and informed him that, "Willow and I set up protection spells around the nursery and the house. If anyone tried anything, they'd get a pretty good jolt."

Giles gave the shy young witch a hug as well.

Buffy was still sitting in the rocking chair, and now she was crying. "You guys are all like the *best*."

Christmas Day started out perfect. It didn't quite end that way.

The Scoobies didn't begin their celebration until Willow and Xander had returned from obligatory appearances at their own family gatherings. Dawn could barely wait for them to return, reminding Buffy of childhood Christmases when her sister would wake her at the crack of dawn.

"Can I be Santa and hand out the presents?"

"Sure, Dawn, go ahead." Buffy settled back against Giles' chest, her back achy, her feet sore. Mostly she was just tired.

Giles slid his hand against her stomach, and then glanced down with a small smile. "Babies moving a lot?"

"All the time," she groaned. "I swear they take turns sleeping."

He bent and placed a kiss on her forehead. "That doesn't bode well for us after they're born."

Dawn handed out presents one by one. She got to an envelope that had no label. "Who's this for?"

Giles nodded to the engaged couple sitting next to the tree. "Xander and Anya. It's a Christmas and wedding present."

Buffy studied her watcher's face. He was holding out on her. He hadn't mentioned anything about a Christmas slash wedding present.

Anya took it gleefully. "Let me open it." She ripped open the envelope and frowned. "What's this? A couple pieces of paper with computer printing on it? I thought there would be money." She sounded disappointed.

But Xander's eyes had gone wide. He leaned over her shoulder and read the printing. He snatched the gift from her hands. "An, honey, these are airline tickets." He fumbled through the papers. "And a seven day cruise in the Caribbean. Oh. My. God. Giles, this is too much."

Buffy turned astonished eyes to her watcher, and he glanced away, seemingly embarrassed. "Nonsense," he assured Xander. "You two deserve a decent honeymoon. Think of it as Anya's Christmas bonus if you must. I've already given her the week off."

"I don't know what to say." Xander was still staring at the tickets. "Thank you."

Anya, however, had raced across the room to give Giles an enthusiastic hug and a kiss on the cheek. "Xander and I can have sex on the beach. It will be very romantic."

"Yes, well..." Giles stammered. "Just keep the details to yourselves and that will be thanks enough."

Anya returned to her fiancé's side. Buffy leaned over to give her lover a proud kiss on the other cheek. Sometimes he could still surprise her. "Dawn," she said. "Find Giles' present from me."

Dawn rummaged through the packages under the tree until she found a small wrapped box with Giles' name on it. "I think this is it."

Buffy watched in anticipation as he carefully undid the tape and wrapping. "For God's sake, just rip the damn stuff," she exclaimed as she helped him do just that. She looked at the box in puzzlement for a moment. She could have sworn they had given it to her in a jeweler's box. Oh, well, perhaps the mall giftwrappers had put it in another box. A jewelry box would have been a dead give away. "Open it already."

He lifted the lid, and the smile left his face. Buffy didn't recognize what it was, but it was definitely not his pocketwatch. Giles lifted a silver talisman from the box. It looked like a paperweight, forged in the shape of a half-closed eye. His hands were shaking. At the bottom of the box rested a piece of paper, asking him, *Why didn't you come back for me?*

"What is it?" Buffy demanded.

Giles replaced it in the box and closed the lid. "It's a charm we used to summon Eyghon." He rose and placed the item in the desk drawer with the photos.

"Ok, Giles, someone was in our house. They put that under our tree. We need to figure out what's going on."

"Let me handle this," he said firmly.

"I don't see you handling it. I see you ignoring it." She stood to face him. It might have been a little more intimidating if it hadn't taken her two tries to get off the couch. Would she ever get used to the shift in her center of gravity? "Giles, you have to let us help."

"No," he practically shouted, and then a little more calmly, "Buffy, please, don't think about it. I've been in contact with some friends in the Council, and I've been doing some research on my own. I'll take care of it. Now, let's not ruin everyone's day. Come on, then, there are still presents to open."

He settled on the couch, and drew her back down to sit next to him. He returned to his previous good cheer, but Buffy could see the fear beneath his brave face. She laid her head against his shoulder and prayed that nothing bad would happen before she could regain her slaying powers. Then she would be able to protect him again. And their children.

Presents were followed by a holiday meal. A houseful of happy friends and joking and laughter, and Buffy was almost able to put the strange occurrences out of her mind. Sometimes she would catch Giles sneaking a glance in the direction of the desk drawer, and she would remember again.

But it wasn't until after the table was cleared, the dishes were done, and Buffy had snuck out to the kitchen to snack on leftovers, that things really fell apart. Giles had followed her out of the living room, teasing her that eating for three was just a saying and not meant to be taken literally, even as he made her tea and cut up pickles for her leftover turkey sandwich. Before they could return to the movie playing in the living room, Dawn stopped them in the kitchen doorway, looking panicked.

"Buffy, you and Giles have to leave *now*. Out the back door and don't come back until later. Much, much later." She started pushing them each back towards the door.

"Dawn, what is this about?" Giles sounded both concerned and irritated.

But she addressed her answer to Buffy. "Dad and Susan are here."

"*What?*" She handed Giles her plate of food and took Dawn by the shoulders. "That's not funny."

Hank's voice confirmed her worst fears. "Buffy, honey, where are you?"

Oh, no, he was headed their way. Buffy stepped behind the kitchen island quickly, letting the counter shield her growing stomach. She pleaded with Giles, giving him her most panicked expression, "I haven't told him yet."

"What?" Giles joined her beside the island, setting the food down.

"Well there just didn't seem to be the right time. I tried calling a couple times, but... It just seemed too hard to do over the phone."

"Yes, of course," Giles replied sarcastically. "Telling your father while he was thousands of miles away and would have time to cool off before I would have to see him in a houseful of weapons would have been terribly difficult for you. I'm so very glad you decided on this method. Letting him just show up at our door was truly the wisest choice."

"I didn't *know* he was coming for Christmas. I didn't think he would be back in the States until their wedding."

Giles shook his head ruefully. "Any bets on whether he uses a sword, a crossbow, or the gun?"

Any further argument was cut short when Hank entered the kitchen. "There you are."

Buffy gave him her best fake smile. She pressed herself as close to the counter as her stomach would allow. Maybe he wouldn't notice if she stayed here like this all night. Maybe she could do like they did on TV, when the actresses were pregnant and their characters were not. She could always be holding something in front of her stomach, a few well placed potted trees... Yeah, that could work.

Her father frowned when he saw Giles, but he focused his gaze instead on Buffy. “Come on, sweetheart, I haven’t seen you in six months.”

Five and a half months. Yeah, that was about right. How would she explain the over seven months at his wedding?

“What’s the matter, honey?” Hank said, his arms outstretched. “Getting too old to give your dad a hug hello?”

Dawn stifled a giggle. “Yeah, she’s getting too *big* to give you a hug.”

“Dawn!” Buffy gave her sister a warning glare. “Go back and finish your movie.” She sighed and slipped her hand in Giles’ behind the counter. He gave it a little squeeze. “Dad, maybe you should have a seat. We need to talk.”

Chapter 5
Always a Bridesmaid, Never a Bride

“Dad, maybe you should have a seat. We need to talk.”

Hank frowned and approached the island in the middle of the kitchen. “Is something wrong? You know you can tell me anything, honey.”

Buffy snuck a glance in Giles’s direction, hoping to give herself the strength to go on. “It’s about me and Giles.” Hank’s mood darkened noticeably, and Buffy plunged ahead. “He’s not just living here because of Dawn’s custody agreement. We’re kind of living together, like in the same bed.”

“What?” Hank took a step forward, and Buffy took a step back. She realized a second too late that she shouldn’t have done that. She had stepped back from the protection of the island counter, and her father’s eyes immediately fell on her pregnant stomach. She laid one hand across it, as if to protect her children from his anger.

Giles was the one who needed protecting, though, because a moment later and without warning, Hank decked him straight across the jaw, sending him stumbling back into the refrigerator. He caught himself on the handle, but the door opened when he tried to pull himself up.

“I *knew* it,” Hank snarled. “I *knew* you weren’t just trying to play father figure to my girls. I should have appealed the judge’s decision. I should never have let you—”

“Dad!” Buffy stepped between her father and her lover. “Stop it! This isn’t his fault.”

Hank gave his daughter an uncomprehending look. “You mean he’s not the father?”

“No,” she said. “I mean yes. Yes, he is. But I was the one who fell in love with *him*. I started this relationship. There was no advantage-taking on his part.”

“Is that what he’s got you believing? Dear Lord, Buffy, you’re only 20 years old, and he’s got you pregnant already.”

“Dad, it’s complicated.”

“Complicated, my ass!” Hank started pacing the floor. Buffy felt Giles’ hand on her shoulder, and she turned to give him a sympathetic look. His other hand was massaging the right side of his jaw, and he gave her a wry I-told-you-so grin. Hank glared at her watcher and pointed an accusing finger. “This man is using you, Buffy. You’re just a fling to satisfy his mid-life crisis. I’ve seen the red convertible in the driveway. I’m not an idiot. I know what’s going on here.” Hank stepped closer, right in Buffy’s face. But it was Giles that received the full fury of his gaze. “The man’s *my age*, for pity’s sake. I just don’t want to see you get hurt. He hasn’t even married you, has he? I’m telling you, you’re just a phase for him, Buffy, and when he’s had his fun, he’ll leave you.”

“Why? Because that’s what *you* did?”

At first Buffy didn’t know why her head had snapped to the side. Her father couldn’t have hit her. He had *never* hit her before. But when her cheek began to smart, she realized that he had indeed slapped her for her remark.

“How dare you speak to your father like that,” he said coldly.

She felt Giles pull her behind him. She looked up with watery eyes, not because her father had hit her all that hard or because it hurt very much, but because she couldn’t believe he had hit her at all. Giles’ image wavered through her tears. Her watcher had placed himself between her and her father and spoke now with a deadly calm.

“Mr. Summers, I’m willing to forgive you striking me. It’s probably what I would have done in your position. But if you *ever* touch Buffy again, I will get a restraining order, and you will not come near your children or your grandchildren again. Do I make myself clear?”

Hank searched his daughter’s eyes, but she quickly bent her head to rest against Giles’ back.

Giles continued very calmly. "I suggest you go say goodnight to Dawn and leave this house. Don't come back until you can sit down and discuss this with us like a reasonable adult. And I expect you to have an apology prepared for your daughter when next we meet."

There was a long period of silence, and then Buffy felt herself drawn into Giles arms. She began to cry against his chest.

"Shhh... Your father's gone now." He smoothed the hair along the back of her head and down her neck. He showered kisses across her forehead and crown. "Everything will be alright. You'll see. Your father just needs some time to cool off. He'll come around."

"He hates me," she wailed.

"No, luv, he hates *me*. And that's only because he loves *you* so much."

She pulled away and sniffled. Giles handed her his handkerchief to wipe her tears. As she did, her fingers found the mark her father had left on her cheek, and she sighed. "I feel like such a wuss. Here I am the Slayer; I've taken some pretty good beatings, even got kabobbed through the gut, and now I wimp out from a little slap. Your slayer's turned into a complete wussy wuss."

Giles chuckled and rubbed his own jaw. "You're not the Slayer at the moment, don't forget. And I must admit that my jaw's rather sore too."

Buffy started laughing then at the sight of the two of them nursing their wounds. She opened the freezer and tossed him a bag of frozen corn. She placed a bag of frozen peas against her own cheek. "So are you saying that after vampires and giant snakes and gods and way too many apocalypses, that my brave Watcher has been defeated by his girlfriend's father?"

Giles looked down guiltily. "Buffy, what your father said before... About me not marrying you..."

"Pish-tosh," she said, waving off his concerns. "My father's a big hypocrite. He lived with his secretary for like three years before he got around to marrying her. Don't pay him any mind." And then she gave him a deep and passionate kiss as if to prove that she didn't.

"Hey now," a voice called out from behind them, "give a fella a bit of warning 'fore you get all naked in the middle of the kitchen. Wouldn't want to walk in on *that*."

"Spike," Buffy grumbled, "when did you get here?"

He shrugged. "Not long. Said hello to your dad."

"Great, just great." Buffy sighed. That was just the thing to smooth things over with her dad, to have him find out the surprise witness that botched his custody case was now spending Christmas evening with them.

"He didn't seem to be much for the holiday spirit. 'Course five minutes with the two of you's likely to bring anyone's mood down. You over the parent panic attack yet? 'Cause let me tell you, that's getting *old*." He ambled past them and opened the fridge, grabbing a packet of blood. "Thanks, mate, knew I could count on good ole Rupe to keep me in blood and beer, seeing as you have me out doing the Slayer's job every night 'til she pops out those kids. And when will that be, by the way, 'cause from the look of you, Slayer, you're ready to burst."

"Spike," Giles said as if he were using the very last of his patience, "what are you doing here?"

"Dawn invited him," Buffy answered. "For Christmas."

"Ah, of course, because it wouldn't be Christmas without undead vampires coming for a visit."

Buffy pulled him down for a quick kiss. "Be nice." She frowned at their new guest. "That goes for you too, Spike."

And then Buffy rejoined her friends in the living room, intending to put all unpleasantness behind her and enjoy the remainder of the holiday.

New Year's Day and another doctor's appointment. Buffy was at the end of her second trimester, although with twins and her petite frame, she looked closer to the middle of her third. Giles was now getting to experience the full range of her mood swings, her constant complaining about backaches, stretch marks, and fatigue, her cravings that had him up twice now at three in the bloody morning to get cookie dough ice cream from the local 24-hour grocer. The second time he'd bought a gallon of the stuff, hoping to avoid similar trips, but the next day she'd sent him out of the Magic Box for something called peanut butter moose tracks. He was beginning to be grateful for their shortened timetable as well, because nine months of this would have been exhausting, and he wasn't even the one having the babies.

The clinic was again empty, being a holiday and all, which was again how they preferred it. A routine visit, except for the doctor setting them straight on the due date. Turned out twins generally came earlier, and Watcher and Slayer had a week or more cut off their timetable. They had perhaps another two weeks, and then they should be ready for the big event to happen at any time. Giles decided that he would have preferred nine months after all.

He left the clinic in a darker mood, after Buffy had teased him with images of her going into labor during her father's wedding. They stopped in the lobby, so Buffy could catch her breath and use the bathroom, two more things she complained about on a regular basis. Giles waited patiently, trying to push away the thought of Hank Summers and a full church all in an uproar as Buffy's water broke while standing at the altar.

They reached the car in silence. Giles opened the door for her and offered his hand to help her get in. But Buffy took a large step back and made a face. "Eww! Have you been smoking again, Giles?"

"Not since the ER, Buffy, I promise." Giles poked his head in the car. The top was up and the doors were locked. And yet, in the car ashtray, a cigar was still burning. Giles recognized the scent. He hadn't smelled it in twenty-five years, and yet it seemed like only yesterday. Randall hadn't liked the cigarettes that he and Ethan smoked. Randall had preferred this particular brand of cigar.

Giles reached in and extinguished the cigar, throwing it in the grass when he'd finished. He rolled the windows down and brought the top down. "Come on, Buffy, get in. You won't be able to smell it in a minute."

"Okay, this is really beginning to freak me out. Spill already! Does this have something to do with the phone calls and the photos and the mysterious Christmas present? You gotta let us help."

He held out his hand again to help her in the car and said firmly, "No. I said I would take care of this, and I will. I think I might be close to an answer, and maybe the solution."

"Good, 'cause the Caller ID didn't help with the phone calls. It only ever says 'unavailable.'" Buffy took his hand and maneuvered herself down into the passenger seat with a grunt. Giles smiled in spite of the mysterious cigar. His poor slayer wasn't being afforded the time most women got to accustom herself to her growing body. It made her more awkward than most.

They drove home. Most of the way Giles kept one hand on her stomach. She had placed it there when she realized one of the babies had hiccups. A few moments and the other side started in the same rhythm. They both had hiccups. By the time they'd pulled in the driveway, it had gone from cute to irritating, and Buffy pushed his hand away, shifting in her seat to try and relieve the sensation.

"Maybe you could give them a good scare," she said as he handed her out of the car.

He guided her to the door, one hand resting on her lower back, but when Giles slid the key into the lock, he realized the bolt was not engaged. Someone had been in their home. "Buffy, wait out here."

"Giles, maybe we should—"

"I said wait out here," he snapped. He pushed the door open and entered tentatively. Things looked pretty much untouched, as long as you didn't look at the walls. But across every wall he could see, someone had painted a symbol in red, over and over again. A symbol he would give anything to forget.

He undid the childproof latch on the closet and took a longsword, even though he knew in his heart that a sword would offer no protection against the one who had done this. He swept quietly through the house, checking closets and locks. He walked upstairs, the symbol filling his field of vision on both sides of the hallway. He entered first Dawn's room and then the nursery. Both untouched. Thank God for small mercies.

He met Buffy in the hallway. She was carrying a crossbow. "I thought I told you to wait outside."

"You did. I didn't." Her eyes hadn't moved from the vandalism painted across the walls. "This symbol. It's the one from your tattoo."

"Yes," he affirmed. "The mark of Eyghon."

She sighed. "At least it got rid of the babies' hiccups."

He moved past and paused at the threshold to their bedroom. "Please stay there, Buffy."

He turned the handle and stepped inside. Again, the mark of Eyghon painted several times on three walls. The fourth wall, the one behind their bed, bore another message. Directly above the headboard and in large letters from one corner to the other was written, *Why didn't you come back for me?*

Giles reached out with trembling fingertips and touched the ghostly message. His fingers came away wet. The paint hadn't had time to dry.

The phone rang. The caller ID flashed "unavailable." He knew before he even lifted the receiver. This time he was ready. This time he filled his voice with rage and screamed one word into the phone. "RANDALL!"

But all he heard on the other end was what he always heard.

"*RANDALL!*"

"Why didn't you come back for me?" Click. And then a second click as the man from the black Accord shut off the tape recorder and turned to his accomplice.

Ethan Rayne still felt chills every time he heard Randall's voice. This time he got double goosebumps when he also heard Giles scream the name they had been tormenting him with.

"The Boss should be here any minute," Sulla reminded him.

Sulla. It was the only name Ethan knew the man by. No last name. Just Sulla.

On meeting, he had been informed that Lucius Cornelius Sulla had been the lowest of Roman citizens, and through cunning, ruthlessness, and murder, he had earned the highest honor of the Roman army and raised himself to Rome's highest office. As consul, he had ruled with an iron fist. Men had lived and died at his word.

Great, Ethan had thought, a history lesson.

Ethan imagined that the man's real name was Morton or Humphrey or Reginald the Third or some other name that no self-respecting bad ass would use. Maybe even Rupert.

God, Ripper had hated it when anyone called him that. Once, they'd all been pretty drunk, and Philip had been goading Ripper into a temper. The final straw had been the use of his real name. When some other customers got in the middle, it had turned into a full fledged bar fight, fists and chairs and glasses flying. A large man with a baldhead and a tattoo of a skull across his scalp had

thought he could best dear old Ripper in a knife fight. Didn't bother him much that Ripper wasn't carrying a knife at the time.

In the end, the guy had landed a blow on Ripper, gave him the long scar he now carried across his forehead, but Ripper had done far more damage with his fists. He had snapped the wrist holding the knife, and then the arm as well for good measure. The fool had to be taken out by ambulance after Ripper was finished with him, and Ripper himself wouldn't even go in for stitches.

Ethan wondered if Sulla would be able to hold his own against Ripper. Not Rupert Giles, the librarian, the Watcher, but Ripper, the man that Ethan remembered.

"When the Boss gets here," Sulla informed him, "you keep your trap shut. Let me do the talking."

"Yes, of course," Ethan said with some amount of disdain. "From what I've seen talking is definitely your strong suit." The man had barely said more than three sentences to him in the three weeks they'd been reluctant partners.

"Look, if it were up to me, you wouldn't even be here." Sulla spun in his chair, facing the monitors once again. Surveillance cameras gave them a view of each door and a couple of interior shots of the house as well. Giles was still surveying the damage they had done with a cold fury.

"Yes," Ethan agreed, "if it were up to me, I wouldn't be here either. But you have to admit it, mate, you need me." Ethan was feeling some amount of pride over his handiwork, and he wanted the credit. After all, who had listened to hours of Randall's tape recorded letters home to his family and found the perfect line which, when taken out of context, could elicit the desired effect in his old friend? Who had been able to dredge up after nearly twenty-five years the skills necessary to forge Randall's penmanship on each photo and envelope? Who had fed Sulla all the dirty details for their little game: the mark of Eyghon, the talisman for summoning him, and even the brand of cigar that Randall smoked for God's sake?

Sulla needed him, and by God, he was going to admit to it. Ethan pressed his point. "You would have never gotten this far with him without me. You could have set yourself up as some dark stalker, but it's so much more frightening this way. I've made it personal. You could have had some fun with the stuff the Boss gave you, but he would have thought it was blackmail or a cruel prank. I've got him actually believing that it's Randall."

Sulla didn't seem to be paying attention to him, and Ethan sat down on the edge of the hotel bed dejectedly, flipping on the TV. He gave one last attempt at convincing his cohort that he was indispensable. "You would have never gotten past the two witches' protection spells without me. Ripper would have more than likely come home to find you unconscious on his front step. And if not, it would have at least raised suspicion when they found their wards breached. No, without me this whole operation would have been a dismal failure. And without my magic, you would have never defused the witches' wards or been able to reset them."

Sulla gave no response, just continued watching the surveillance feed as they waited for their Boss.

Buffy made Giles sit on the bed. She gently lowered herself down to sit next to him. "Okay, I've been patient, but now it's time to share. What's going on?"

He had told her the story of Eyghon before, back in high school, back when the demon had returned to Sunnydale to finish what it had started. He had confessed to her his rebellious past, revealed for her how he had turned to dark magic and sorcery to escape his destiny as a watcher. She knew about how they had gotten off on the euphoric high of being possessed by Eyghon, taking turns allowing the demon to come into them in their sleep as the others stood guard with the proper

precautions and protections. Willow had found mention of people using possession for bacchanals and orgies, but Buffy really didn't want to think about that.

With shame and regret, he had also told her the end of the story: how his friend Randall had lost control during one such encounter and had paid for their fun with his life. And then for twenty years they had each thought themselves free of Eyghon, until the demon had returned to claim them one by one, drawn like a homing signal to the mark they each bore, tattooed in the bend of one elbow.

Buffy had always thought that was the whole story. Lately she had begun to wonder if there wasn't more. She suspected that now she was about to hear the something that he had left out.

"Giles, please," she asked again. "Who painted over our walls? Who's been doing this to you?"

He dropped his head into his hands and answered very softly. "It's Randall. The photos, the phone calls, this, all of it. It's Randall, and he's haunting me."

Buffy shook her head. "I don't know, Giles. This seems more like a living stalker guy. Are you sure that Randall's not *alive*, and doing this to you?"

"I saw him die, Buffy. I killed him with my own hands."

Buffy placed her hand beneath his chin and made him look at her. Would her watcher never stop carrying the blame for everything on his shoulders? "Look, I know you feel responsible for what happened, but things just got out of control. It was an accident. You have to stop blaming yourself."

Giles took her hand and kissed it before enfolding it with his own. His head remain bowed, and he wouldn't meet her eyes. "No, I mean, after we couldn't exorcise the demon from Randall... He was... He was going to kill Diedre... I had to... We had tried everything we knew to save Randall, but we couldn't. There was nothing left but to save Diedre. In the end... It was my sword, my *hand*, that dealt the deathblow. I killed the demon that had taken control, and Randall with him. He dissolved, like Philip in the library."

"Oh," she said quietly.

"This could only be Randall. His voice on the phone. The photographs that he took. All of this. He's haunting me. And maybe I deserve it."

Buffy shifted sideways on the bed and made him face her. She took his face in her hands and kissed him tenderly. "Giles, stop it. No one deserves this, least of all you." But Buffy knew in her heart that he would never stop blaming himself, just as he had blamed himself for Jenny's involvement with Eyghon, for Jenny's death, probably for Buffy's running away, and for her death as well. She had a sudden thought. "Could it be Ethan?"

Giles shook his head. "This isn't Ethan's style. He regrets what happened to Randall as much as I do. He would never torment me with it. Besides, he's still in that government facility in Nevada."

Buffy accepted Giles' reasoning. "So you think this is Randall's ghost? That we can somehow exorcise him?"

Giles nodded.

"What did he mean then... The photos, the phone calls, our bedroom wall... What did he mean by '*Why didn't you come back for me?*'?"

Giles glanced up at the message above their headboard. "I don't know, Buffy. I truly don't. Maybe there was something we missed, something we could have tried. Maybe we could have somehow gone back for him, somehow reached him past Eyghon. In the end, I was the one who gave up trying... I was the one who didn't go back for him... I was the one who killed him."

Buffy pushed herself off the bed, and Giles automatically offered out his hand to steady her balance. He really was so sweet to her, with all the little things he had done in the last few weeks: the back massages, the loving words, the midnight runs for ice cream, the unending patience with her

mood swings and crabbiness. Buffy vowed that whatever was tormenting her beloved watcher would end, one way or another.

“So,” she said, “sounds like the first thing we try is an exorcism. If that doesn’t work, we’ll move on to possible living scum.”

And she picked up the phone to gather the Scoobies together for said exorcism.

Ethan Rayne studied his Boss. He didn’t really want to be working for the guy, but hey, he’d gotten an offer he couldn’t refuse.

Everett Longworth walked with a limp and a cane. Ethan judged the man to be in his late sixties, possibly early seventies. Mr. Longworth (Ethan intended to show the man the proper respect) still owned a full head of white hair and the kind of classic good looks that only deepened with age and made him seem mature rather than old. Ethan imagined the man must have had the ladies lined up for him when he was young.

“Are we ready for the grand finale?” Mr. Longworth asked Sulla. Their Boss didn’t address Ethan. Ethan Rayne was only there because they needed him to accomplish the plan. Longworth had made it plain that if he’d had his druthers, Ethan would be right there beside Giles. As it was, Ethan had received his freedom from the government facility in Nevada and his life had been spared, as Giles’ would not. An equitable trade for his small part in this affair, Ethan thought. He still had some lingering affection for his old pal, would be sorry to see him fall to such a fate. But as Ethan had told Buffy once, he liked himself much, much more.

“Ready to go,” Sulla answered. “Just give the word.”

“Good.” Mr. Longworth smiled and leaned in to watch his prey on the monitors. Then a puzzled frown crossed his face. “What’s that?” he asked, pointing to an open doorway in the picture frame. “Is that a crib?”

Sulla enlarged the image. “Yeah, your man and his girlfriend are having a baby. She looks to be getting pretty big.”

Mr. Longworth smiled and touched the image of the crib on the monitor. “You say he’s planning to exorcise Randall’s spirit?” Sulla nodded. “Let him. We’ll stop with our games for the time being. Let them think they’ve won. Let them become happy and complacent once more. And then at the moment of his greatest joy, I will take everything from him.”

Buffy walked into the frame of the video. Longworth smiled when he saw the curve of her belly. One finger traced it reverently. “Find out when she’s due. And after that, we’ll have a lot of work to finish if we want to be ready. Yes, I’m liking this plan much better.”

Ethan wanted to say something, but he didn’t dare. He had never agreed to this. Buffy and her baby were innocents in this. As much as he’d been willing to betray an old friend, the thought of harming a child left a bitter taste in his mouth. He had standards. And then Ethan imagined what Longworth would do if he refused anything that was asked of him. Ethan Rayne decided that standards could sometimes be lowered.

Willow and Tara performed the exorcism that very same day. Giles assisted, but he was adamant that Buffy be out of the house, so she went to stay with Xander and Anya for the evening. When he

thought it was safe, she was allowed back. It seemed to work, because they had no more disturbances that day or the next.

Thursday, Xander called in sick to his job along with one of his construction buddies. Everyone would think they were hungover from his bachelor party the night before anyway. While Buffy and Giles were at the Magic Box, he and his buddy, along with Dawn, Tara, and Willow, repainted over all the walls that had been desecrated with the mark of Eyghon.

The women mostly pointed out the spots the two men had missed, and fetched them lemonade. Although Willow tried to help with a little spell, in the end her magicked paint brush made a mess across the dining room floor. Xander needed to get paint remover and reseal the finish, and Willow was relegated to lemonade duty with the others. Tara, on the other hand, showed a flair for the fine details of painting along the edges and corners, and she was promoted to working with the men. Dawn complained that she wanted to paint too, but she spilled on the newly resealed dining room floor as well, and after Xander fixed the floor again he sent her to the kitchen with Willow.

So Willow and Dawn made the crew lunch, grumbling about men and their intolerance for small accidents.

When the work was done, and the walls looked better than new, and the tarps pulled off the furniture and edges of the floors, the group assembled at the magic shop to surprise the expectant parents with news of what they'd done. Of course, it meant Buffy would have to stay at a hotel overnight until the fumes could air out. She smiled at Giles in a way that made him blush as she suggested that she wouldn't mind as long as Willow and Tara could take Dawn.

"Ewww," Dawn commented. "Aren't you like too huge for that stuff?"

"Oh no," Anya informed Buffy's sister. "Pregnant women are perfectly able to have sexual relations right up until the baby's born."

The group turned and looked at the ex-demon, but her fiancé spoke up quickly. "An, honey, you would know this because...?"

She smiled brightly. "Giles has all those kinds of books lying around, and sometimes I read them on my breaks." Xander's eyes grew round, and she patted him on the chest. "Breathe, Xander, breathe. I'm not having a baby. But with our imminent marriage, it is the next logical step. I thought I should begin researching for when we decide to procreate."

Xander began coughing, and then turned to take her by the shoulders. "How 'bout a house, Anya? A house would be the next logical step. Then maybe a puppy. Babies a long, *long* time from now. We're like *way* too young." He looked towards Buffy with a panicked expression. "Not that you're too young, Buff. I mean you're like our age, but special circumstances, and you got Giles, and... Willow, help."

Buffy smiled tolerantly. "It's okay. Just don't say that kind of stuff in front of my dad. He's liable to think he has people on his side."

In the end, Hank did know when he was outnumbered. He showed up Friday morning, fiancé in tow, to apologize to Buffy and listen to her side of the story. He was frankly quite surprised to see how much she'd grown in just the week and a half since Christmas, but seemed to buy the explanation of twins. He sat patiently and quietly through Buffy's tale of her mysterious medical condition, which the doctors had attributed to the five weeks she'd spent in a coma. The looks he gave to Giles were full of nothing but contempt, and it was obvious that Hank didn't believe this was her one shot to have a baby. They offered the number of their OB to back up their story, but whether he called was another matter.

The due date nearly blew their whole story. The twins could come anytime after Hank's wedding, although hopefully not during, which meant any idiot could count back nine months. Hank was not an

idiot, and nine months made Buffy pregnant *before* her coma. They convinced him that she would only be seven months along, since twins came early. Hank didn't know enough about pregnancy to question their figures, but even still that put conception awfully close to the time she had returned and he had been in town fighting for custody of Dawn. Hank continued to glower at Giles at every opportunity, knowing the man had wasted no time in taking advantage of Buffy's vulnerability.

Susan, however, seemed thrilled about the new babies, asking Buffy about names and touching her stomach when they kicked. She tried to get her fiancé to show the same enthusiasm, which won her some points in Giles' book, but Hank couldn't bring himself to demonstrate any pleasure at the thought of becoming a grandfather. She gave up after a little bit and asked Buffy to show her the nursery. As they walked up the stairs, Susan told her future stepdaughter that she hoped the twins would come before she and Hank had to return to Spain the week after their wedding. It would be such a shame if they didn't get to see them while they were still small.

That left just Giles and Hank standing awkwardly together in the living room.

"So the wedding's a week from tomorrow?" Giles attempted to ease the tension with lame small talk. "I know Buffy's looking forward to it."

"So you've saddled my daughter with twins?" Hank contributed his own lame small talk. "That must make you proud." Giles sighed, but Hank continued on without letting him speak. "Let's just get this straight. I don't like you. I frankly think you've ruined my daughter's life. Nearly seven months and neither one of you have had the guts to call and tell me about it. And in all that time, you haven't even had the decency to marry her. Now maybe Buffy doesn't care about that. But you and I come from a different generation, the *same* generation in fact, but that's a whole different conversation. And the way I was raised, a man doesn't just knock up his girlfriend and run off."

Giles pulled off his glasses in a quick gesture and began polishing them in frustration. "No, sir, you had the decency to wait fifteen years before you ran out on your family." Before Hank could respond to that, Giles slipped his glasses back on and vented all the things he had wanted to say, but couldn't in front of Dawn or Buffy. "Mr. Summers, I have no intention of leaving Buffy. I will be here as long as she and Dawn and the twins need me. I know that you are the girls' father, and for their sakes I have been trying. But over the years, I have seen you do nothing but neglect them. There were times when I wondered if they even had a father. So don't you dare lecture me on parental responsibility.

"Now the girls want you in their life, and Buffy wants you in our children's lives, and that means the two of us will have to get along. All I want is a little civility, and I don't think that's too much to ask for. Especially right now when Buffy doesn't need any extra stress in her life. Do you think you could pretend not to hate me?"

Hank crossed his arms and looked away. "I still think she's too young. And I'm not happy about it. But for Buffy's sake, I will make an effort to be supportive."

Giles nodded. "Thank you."

At that moment their women returned, and Hank and Susan bid adieu. Hank gave his daughter a hug and even brought himself to lay a hand on her stomach as they pulled apart. He smiled sadly. "Congratulations, Buffy. See you at the wedding next week."

When the door closed, Buffy smiled up at her watcher. "See, that didn't go so bad."

"No, it didn't," he agreed.

Giles opened his gold pocketwatch. Buffy smiled to know that he carried it with him always. She touched her fingers across the engraved letters. Daddy.

He frowned down at her. "Buffy, will you please concentrate. This is important. I'm supposed to be timing you."

She had imagined him timing her patrols and slaying and training. She never pictured sitting between his legs, leaning back against his chest, surrounded by twenty other pregnant couples while he timed her fake contractions and encouraged her to breathe. She giggled.

"Yes," he said. "I'm sure you find Lamaze very amusing at the moment, but the time may come when you might wish you'd paid attention. Not to mention that our instructor is becoming very irritated by your snide remarks."

She tipped her head backwards against his chest to look up and upside down at him. "Can't you do the homework, Giles, and you know, give me like the Cliff notes version? Besides, aren't you supposed to be my coach? Isn't paying attention supposed to be *your* job?"

The Lamaze instructor passed by them, offering a scolding glare.

"Okay, okay," Buffy said under her breath. "I'm panting. I'm blowing. Happy now?"

The instructor, a short plump brunette woman, stepped up to the front of the classroom. Buffy knew that Giles thought they should be there, but frankly she didn't feel like she had that much in common with the couples around her. Granted, she was pregnant, but beyond that... No one else was having twins off a two-month pregnancy and returning to a livelihood of nightly near death hi-jinks after giving birth. Plus, they all looked at her and Giles like there was something wrong with... well... her and Giles. When the lady pulled their registration, she mistook him for Buffy's father. A lot of people seemed to do that, and it was really beginning to tick her off. She really thought they could do without the Lamaze. She was the Slayer, after all. How bad could it be compared to nightly thrashings? She'd even been stabbed in the gut with her own stake once and hadn't needed to go to the hospital.

"Okay, students," the instructor gathered everyone's attention. "I hope you've all enjoyed our class today. Now, before we send you home, we're going to finish with a video, so you can see how everything you've learned fits together."

The lights dimmed. The video started. Fairly quickly Buffy found herself hoping that Giles had paid really good attention in class.

They walked to the car in silence, and he helped her into her seat, but when he moved to start the ignition, she stopped him.

"I don't think I thought this baby thing all the way through, Giles. I think maybe I'd like to change my mind. I can still change my mind, right?"

He smiled kindly and squeezed her hand to offer some amount of courage. "A little late for that, Buffy. You'll be fine. Don't worry. You can do this."

She clutched his hand and turned wide eyes in his direction. "You were watching the same video I was, weren't you? I can't do *that*."

He ran his thumb across the back of her hand soothingly and leaned forward until their foreheads were touching. "You can do this, Buffy. Women do it all the time." He took back his hand and started the engine. "Besides, maybe you'll be lucky. A nine-month pregnancy shortened to about eight weeks. Maybe your labor will be similarly reduced."

"Like five minutes?" Buffy asked hopefully.

Giles paled, and his hand missed the gearshift. He met her gaze again, and this time it was his green eyes that held fear. "M-m-maybe I should research emergency delivery procedures," he stammered. "Just in case."

Then they drove home to pick up Dawn for Xander and Anya's rehearsal dinner.

It rarely rained in Sunnydale. Hence the name. When it did rain, it never lasted. The day of Xander and Anya's wedding, it poured all day long. The bride was oddly pleased by this, knowing that rain on one's wedding day was believed to be a portent of good luck. She would have been more concerned by a beautiful cloudless day with little bunnies hopping around in the sunshine.

She waited in the side room of the church with her bridesmaids, Buffy and Tara, and her flower girl. Dawn had complained at first about being too old to be a flower girl, but she got to wear the same dress anyway, and Anya didn't know any small children to ask. She didn't want to wait for Buffy's twins to be old enough, and Anya really wanted a flower girl.

The bridesmaids' dresses were orange. Bright *orange* orange. Buffy hadn't been exaggerating when she told Giles that she would look like a giant pumpkin. The cut would have perhaps been flattering in any other color, on Dawn and Tara at least. Nothing would have really flattered Buffy's round figure at the moment.

Anya herself looked radiant in white. She had chosen a traditional dress with a full skirt and a long train. It was made of simple satin, tasteful beading decorating the low neckline and trailing into the long sleeves. She spun again in front of the mirror and smiled.

It was when she spun that Tara got a glimpse of what was under the dress. "Anya," she asked, "why are you wearing blue socks?"

The ex-demon lifted the hem and looked down. "They're so my feet won't get cold. I've heard that's a problem for some brides. And they also fit two of the four criteria for good luck."

"Something blue and...?" Dawn prompted.

"Something old?" Buffy joked.

"No," Anya replied in irritation. "They're new. They're something new. The something old is me. I'm over eleven hundred and twenty years old. I figure that's old enough. And the something borrowed... Well, I'll give them back to you, Buffy, after the honeymoon."

"Anya?" Buffy was growing suspicious.

Anya smiled and bent over for her white pearl handbag. She pulled a pair of handcuffs from inside.

Buffy blushed and stuffed them back in Anya's purse, hopefully before Dawn could see them. "Where did you find these, and how did you know I had them?"

Anya shrugged. "At the mall before Thanksgiving. You made a joke to Xander about them. And the nightstand was the logical place to look. I would have put them back, probably before you even noticed they were gone."

Buffy cast an eye in her sister's direction. Dawn was smothering a giggle behind her hand. "You know they don't have a key," the slayer whispered.

The bride smiled. "Then they'll be even more fun."

Moments later the organist began to play, and Anya headed for the aisle and for the love of her life.

Xander was pacing. Poor boy was nervous.

"So you didn't see any trolls or ogres or other ex-boyfriends of the demony persuasion?"

"No, Xander," Giles assured him for the hundredth time. "I had a look just a minute ago. Only friends and family."

"Yeah well, if they're *my* family..." Xander tilted his hand back and forth in a so-so gesture. "Kind of fit in that gray area. Some days I wonder if they've been living near the Hellmouth too long, you

know what I mean?" He clapped his older friend on the shoulder enthusiastically. "I'm counting on you, G-man. Now that Buffy's on temporary slayer mommy leave, you're my man. When the minister gets to the part asking if anyone has cause why these two should not be joined... You see trolls, you see demons, you have my permission to slay them."

Giles chuckled. "Your faith in me is humbling. I will endeavor to keep uninvited guests from ruining your big day. But really, Xander, everything's going to be fine."

"Right. Fine. No sweat." He didn't seem to be convincing himself.

"What about me?" Willow asked. She was waiting with the men and dressed in the woman's equivalent of a tux. Long black satin lines and coat tails suited her slender frame. Giles thought she looked quite elegant and had complimented her. "Me, your *best* man. Best woman, or person, or whatever. Anyway, I could help out with a little magic."

Xander smiled and pulled her in for a quick kiss on the forehead. "Sure, Will. And remind me again whose spell unleashed Anya's ex-boyfriend the troll?"

"Well, that wasn't my fault," Willow countered. "If Anya hadn't... Okay, shutting up now. Giles has demon duty. Got it."

The minister entered a moment later to inform them he was ready to start the service.

Giles followed Willow out the side door to the altar, and they both stood beside Xander as the organist played the wedding processional. Dawn came down the aisle first, hanging on the arm of Xander's little cousin Michael, who kept trying to wriggle his arm away from her. She dropped rose petals, and he held proudly the pillow bearing the rings. The scent of roses still made Giles slightly nauseous, even after all these years. But he pushed away his thoughts of Jenny as he watched the bridesmaids glide down the aisle. First Tara, giving Willow a private little smile and wink, and then Buffy, who did the same for him.

Then the traditional bridal march began. Anya had never looked more lovely or more happy as she reached Xander's side. They faced the minister and exchanged vows, but their eyes never left each other. Buffy cried through the whole service, which thankfully for her poor back and feet lasted a brief twenty minutes.

After the bride and groom kissed for several long moments, the church burst into applause and the wedding recessional echoed into its arches. Dawn and Michael exited first, followed by the happy couple. Willow stepped up to take Tara's arm, and they left next. Buffy slid her arm into the crook of Giles', and they left last, her watcher passing her his handkerchief to dry her tears.

They stood in the reception line, shaking hands as they were introduced to various members of Xander's extended family and their friends. Xander's construction buddies each clapped him enthusiastically on the back as they offered their heartfelt congratulations. Giles thanked them all as they passed for their help with the nursery and for painting over the vandalism across the walls. He realized a moment too late that he had made a crucial slip when one of the men teased Xander for it.

"I knew you weren't sick!"

Xander just shrugged and smiled.

The guests numbered between fifty and seventy-five, a nice small wedding, and all were from the groom's side. A moment later, though, and the bride had her own guest.

A large boom echoed through the church lobby, followed by a pillar of smoke. From the smoke stepped a large cloaked man with pointed ears, goat-like features, and horns protruding from his bald head.

"D'Hoffryn!" Anya exclaimed.

"Anyanka," he addressed her with a sly smile as he stroked his long white beard.

Giles attempted to step between them, not really sure what he would do without any weapon, but Buffy pulled him back.

D'Hoffryn approached the bride and groom, his hands outstretched towards Anya. "Don't worry. I haven't come to spoil your little celebration. I'm only here to offer my congratulations. After eleven hundred years in my service, you feel almost like a daughter to me, Anyanka."

Some of the other guests were discussing the strange new arrival in loud whispers. Buffy informed them confidently, "He's one of Xander's friends. From a Babylon 5 convention. Some kind of weird role playing thing they're doing now, I think." She dismissed the whole thing with a wave and tried to guide the crowd some distance from the scene. Giles stayed with the wedding party, ready to offer whatever assistance they needed of him.

But there seemed to be little cause for concern. D'Hoffryn only held Anya's hands against his chest and brushed back one blond lock with his scaled hand. "You look very happy."

Anya nodded. "I am."

"Good," he responded, as he drew something from inside his cloak. "It would appear that making you mortal was a gift rather than a punishment. Perhaps the best wedding gift I could give you. But still, I feel I would be remiss if I didn't honor your union with something more tangible."

He handed her a jeweled necklace covered in rubies and diamonds. Anya gasped as she took it. "It's beautiful."

"It's magic," he informed her. "Wear it, and your young man will... Well, he will be physically unable to commit adultery against you." Xander coughed violently, and D'Hoffryn grinned as he continued. "It would be a shame for you to fall to the same fate as so many of the scorned women you have visited through the centuries."

Anya ran her fingers across the glittering gems, but then she handed it back to her former boss. "It is a thoughtful gift, but I don't want it. I trust Xander completely. I don't need magic to know that we will love each other forever."

Xander melted at this, and turned his bride's head to claim her in a passionate kiss. Anya leaned into him and smiled back at D'Hoffryn. "See?"

The demon nodded and slowly stepped back towards the scorching hole in the carpeting that marked the place from which he had arrived. "Then I wish you a long and happy mortal life, Anyanka." With a puff of smoke, he disappeared just as he arrived.

"That was so cool!" one of Xander's construction buddies commented. "Is he going to be doing more magic tricks at the reception?"

Xander shook his head. "No, he has his own gig to go to."

The wedding party and guests adjourned to the Bronze for the reception. They had rented the club for the evening and hired a DJ who came equipped with karaoke. Giles groaned when Buffy pointed it out to him. An evening of drunken amateur singers was just the thing if you wanted a headache.

Watcher and Slayer curled up in a corner booth with their dinner, Giles massaging Buffy's bare feet with one hand as he ate with the other.

She sighed. "Heels are just not meant for pregnant women. And neither is standing. Think dad will let me bring a chair?"

Giles smiled as he fed Buffy a french fry.

The Bronze was decorated in orange and green, the colors Anya had chosen for her wedding. They had tried to tell her that those were Halloween colors, but she liked Halloween and she liked orange and green. So her bridesmaids wore orange, the cake had green frosting, and the whole place was covered in streamers of both colors.

The evening passed with the usual wedding events. The bride and groom had their first dance, followed by a dance for the entire wedding party, which Buffy and Giles quickly realized was their first dance *ever*. Buffy informed him he looked incredible in a tux, even better than prom, because this time he was hers. She also warned him that any snide remarks about his arms not fitting all the way around her, and he could expect to be sleeping on the couch. He chuckled as he took her in his arms for the slow song, pulling her close, and saying, "See, perfect fit," after he easily wrapped his arms around her. They swayed to the music for the length of the song, dancing cheek to cheek until a fast song came on, and Giles quickly exited the floor.

Buffy pouted at him, but joined in with Willow and Tara and all the others. She moved a bit awkwardly with the weight of twins in front of her, but she seemed to be enjoying herself.

The DJ cleared the floor again for the groom to dance with his mother. The boy looked rather uncomfortable, and Giles remembered that the two were not always on the best of terms. In fact, Giles doubted that anyone out of their group besides Willow and Anya had even met her before. The song ended, and the DJ called for the father/daughter dance for the bride. Giles thought that was rather odd, considering Anya had no mortal father. But then she held her hand out to him, and he was moved beyond words.

"I hope this okay," she said to him as they danced. "I don't remember what it was like to have a father when I was mortal, before I was a vengeance demon. But I think if I did remember, it would feel a lot like you do."

Giles kissed her tenderly on the cheek and allowed her to settle against his chest as they swayed in time to the music. "I'm honored, Anya. And I'm so very happy for you and Xander."

Anya closed her eyes and sighed against his chest. "After Buffy died, you talked to me about death and mortality. You told me about different religions and their beliefs about the afterlife. And you listened to me when I was scared and when I was sad. I never thanked you for that. I never told you that it helped, that it made me less scared."

Giles simply patted her back and rested his head against the top of hers. The song ended, and he returned to a teary Buffy, who immediately pulled herself into his arms and began sobbing. He again offered her his handkerchief.

The couple cut the cake, Anya dutifully smearing her bite across Xander's face. They had the toasts, and the obligatory drunk relation that everyone tried to ignore. They tossed the bouquet and the garter to a sea of single guests. Anya tossed the bouquet in Buffy's direction, and was extremely irritated when one of Xander's cousins reached up and caught it instead.

"Hey, that's not fair. I want to do it over. Buffy was supposed to catch it."

But Buffy bowed out, saying she didn't care that much about the bouquet anyway.

Spike showed up after he'd finished patrol. He sprawled out in a dark corner with a beer, despite Dawn's best attempts to get him to join in. And as the evening wore on, and people got more alcohol in them, there were more and more trips up to the stage for karaoke. Giles grimaced through terrible renditions of "I Will Survive" and "Total Eclipse of the Heart." He flinched as someone slaughtered half the notes of whatever Celine Dion song was popular at the moment. They all sounded rather the same to him. Some of the Scoobies themselves tried out their singing voices, which were somewhat better than the others who had tried. It could also be because they were mostly sober while attempting it. After each person left the stage, Buffy would always prod him into going next.

"Come on," she begged. "I've never heard you sing."

"Nor will you tonight," he replied.

"*Please*. I'm the only one of the Scoobies that didn't get to see you at the Espresso Pump. They all said you were really good. You used to sing for total strangers, and you can't sing for me?"

“Total strangers being the key phrase in that sentence, Buffy. People that I never had to see again. I was rather embarrassed when the others walked into the coffee shop that evening. It’s not an experience I would care to repeat.”

She leaned her head against his shoulder and gave him the puppy eyes for which he usually had no defense. “Here I am, bearing your children, and you can’t give me one song?”

He rested his head against her forehead, for once not willing to give in. “You first,” he answered, as if that would end the discussion. He knew Buffy would never get up on stage and sing.

Barely half an hour later he was proved wrong.

She had disappeared on one of her many trips to the bathroom. He never expected to hear her voice carried to him through the sound system. He especially never expected it to be singing. He recognized the melody immediately as an old show tune, and he groaned at her choice.

“There’s a somebody I’m longing to see. I hope that he turns out to be someone who’ll watch over me.”

He faced the stage and found her standing there with a mic in one hand and the other resting against her belly. She gave him a devilish smile when she saw that he saw her.

“I’m a little lamb who’s lost in the wood. I know I could be oh so good to one who’ll watch over me.”

Her singing voice was nice, if not very practiced. She only missed a few notes and not by so much that he cringed.

“Although he may not be the man some girls think of as handsome, to my heart he carries the key.”

Whatever she lacked in singing talent, she made up for in enthusiasm, and he found himself smiling at her in return. If she wanted him to sing that badly, then perhaps he would sing.

“Won’t you tell him please to put on some speed, follow my lead, oh how I need someone to watch over me.”

Willow was at his shoulder then, giving him a playful nudge as Buffy finished her song.

“Where is that someone to watch over me?”

And then his slayer blew him a kiss and mouthed the words, “You’re next.”

“You gonna sing, Giles?” Willow asked him.

“I suppose. In a little while. Distract Buffy for me so it will at least be a surprise.”

Buffy returned to their table and sulked as soon as she realized Giles still had no intention of singing. Suddenly she doubled over. “Oww!”

Giles jumped off his chair so fast, it tipped over behind him. “Buffy?”

She took his hand and placed it against her stomach. The babies seemed to be quite active. “I’m fine, Giles. They’re just moving a lot. Must be all the music. Maybe my singing. One of them just kicked me really *hard*. Must be your son.”

“My son?” he asked with a wry grin, still holding his hand against the moving mound of wriggling babies.

“My son would never be so mean to his mother. Must be yours.”

“Yes, well, in any event,” he said, “you’ll not get me on stage through any attempt to fake labor.”

Willow bounced on her feet, staring eagerly at Buffy’s stomach. “Can I?”

Buffy threw up her hands. “Have at it.”

An awed smile slipped over the witch’s face as she laid her hands on the pregnant tummy. “Wow, Buffy. I can feel them. Real, live people inside you. You and Giles made people. This is better than magic.”

Giles took the opportunity to slip away as Willow kept Buffy occupied. He asked the DJ for the list of karaoke songs and skimmed through his options. He chose and stepped up to the microphone. He still couldn't believe he was doing this. But then the music was starting, and there was no backing out.

"She may be the face I can't forget, the trace of pleasure or regret, may be my treasure or the price I have to pay."

Buffy had turned in her seat to watch him, and he focused on her eyes. Let the rest of the room fall away. He was singing just for her.

"She may be the song the summer sings, may be the chill the autumn brings, may be a hundred different things within the measure of a day."

His voice resonated through the Bronze, every note hit perfectly. The background chatter quieted. Giles performed so rarely in public that he forgot how much others enjoyed his voice. To him, it was just his voice, nothing special, just something he had always possessed. And now he filled that clear voice with everything he had ever felt for his beautiful slayer, but hadn't been able to put into words. It leant his crystal tenor the power to move even the coldest of hearts as they watched him from the audience.

"She may be the beauty or the beast, may be the famine or the feast, may turn each day into a heaven or a hell."

Tears flowed down his sweet slayer's cheeks now, and her arms curled to embrace the twins she carried inside her, the proof of their love.

"She may be the mirror of my dreams, the smile reflected in a stream. She may not be what she may seem inside her shell."

He took the mic from its stand and moved closer to the edge of the stage, closer to Buffy.

"She who always seems so happy in a crowd, whose eyes can always be so private and so proud. No one's allowed to see them when they cry."

He closed his eyes at the next part, closed them against the memory of her death, against the knowledge that he was certain to lose her once again.

"She may be the love that cannot hope to last, beckons indeed from shadows of the past that I'll remember 'til the day I die."

He opened his eyes again and found her. Only her. She was his sole audience. He knew that tears shimmered in his own eyes now as well as hers.

"She may be the reason I survive, the why and wherefore I'm alive, the one I'll care for through the rough and ready years."

He drew breath to fill his lungs, to give power to his voice for these final lines. And through his voice, he bared his soul.

"Me, I'll take her laughter and her tears and make them all my souvenirs. For where she goes I've got to be. The meaning of my life is she."

He held the last note until the audience began to scream and applaud. And then he held it even a little longer, letting it fade away with the music. He had forgotten he had an audience. He had let himself be drawn so far into Buffy that he noticed no one else. Now he was quickly reminded of everyone else in the Bronze as they continued to applaud and scream and pound on their tables. Of course, some of that enthusiasm could be attributed to the empty bottles and glasses littering nearly every table.

Giles made his way back to their table, shyly accepting praise from the other guests he passed. The embarrassment factor was now kicking in, and he would be glad when they left. Ah, the things his slayer got him to do.

He reached their table and received an enthusiastic and passionate kiss, which left him winded. Buffy was still crying, and he dried her tears with the back of his hand.

The evening ended far less pleasantly than it began. Xander's parents had consumed enough alcohol to start screaming at each other about whether or not his father had his eye on another female guest. Luckily, two other relations were able to split the pair up and take them both home in separate cars.

Xander appeared embarrassed by the whole scene, and it put a damper on the festivities. People began to take their leave of the newlyweds in pairs and small groups, until just the Scoobies were left sitting around a table. Buffy was dozing against Giles' shoulder, completely exhausted after the full day and after skipping her usual nap. Dawn was totally wired, having consumed an equal amount of caffeine to the amount of alcohol Xander's relations had put away. She was the only one still talking, the only one still left with the energy, and she complained about having to start back at school on Monday after such a nice Christmas break. She tried to convince Giles that she should stay home the next week as well, so she could help Buffy through the last week or two of her pregnancy. Giles only shook his head. Dawn wouldn't be missing any school if they could help it, even after the twins came, he added when she started to ask him that very thing.

They all said goodbye to Xander and Anya, wished them a happy honeymoon on their cruise, and went home to their beds.

Her father's wedding turned out to be far more grand and far less fun. Giles grumbled about having to wear a tuxedo again when he wasn't even in the wedding. Buffy explained to him just exactly what seeing him in a tux made her want to do to him, and he stopped complaining.

Her father's wedding was a dull black tie affair. All the men in tuxes, all the women in evening gowns. The wedding party wore white tuxedos with tails, and the bridesmaids were dressed in sleeky red silk dresses. Of course, Buffy's dress had much more fabric than any of Susan's anorexic friends, but still it flattered her. The spaghetti straps and low-slung back showed off her well-toned arms and back. The front draped across her pregnancy-enhanced cleavage in such a way, that even Buffy found herself looking down and thinking, *Wow, where did those come from?* And then the simple, elegant lines of the skirt fell across her stomach in the most flattering way it could. Giles had called her a vision in red.

The wedding went off without a hitch, although Buffy's back was killing her by the time the priest finished the service. Apparently, Susan's family was Catholic, and Catholic weddings were long. Not to mention that all the stand up, kneel down, stand up, kneel down, and so on was not so easy to accomplish while she was nearly ready to burst with twins. Buffy was the equivalent of 32 weeks, which Giles informed her made her the same size as a full term woman with one baby. That didn't improve her mood to know that she could only get bigger. The babies could come anytime, then again it could be a week or more as well, the doctor had told them. A week or more meant a whole month, month and a half worth of getting bigger. She couldn't imagine that she could stretch anymore than she already had.

The reception was a formal dinner at a local country club. During the meal, Buffy sat back with her feet on a chair Giles had pulled up for just that purpose. Poor guy was off sitting by himself, since she and Dawn were at the head table with the wedding party. Besides the three of them and the newlyweds, Buffy didn't know another soul out of the 500 or so that filled the hall. She had told Giles knowingly that her father's wedding would be a business function. Besides Susan's family and

friends, the majority of guests were colleagues, clients, associates, and potential business allies. Hank sometimes seemed almost irritated to be pulled away from productive networking conversations only to perform some wedding duty like cutting the cake or dancing with his new wife.

And you could be sure that there would be no karaoke here tonight. Just a classic swing band and a DJ who played during their breaks.

Giles, Dawn, and Buffy sat at a table together, watching the guests dance around them, and wondering how early they could leave without being rude. A slow song came on, and Giles led Dawn out onto the floor, making her laugh when he twirled her a few times. The next slow song was Buffy's turn. She needed some extra help getting out of her chair, and this time his arms couldn't fit all the way around her as they had the week before at Xander's wedding. She waited for him to tease her, but he wisely kept his tongue.

The babies didn't seem to get as energized by the music this week as they had the last at the Bronze. Maybe it was because the music generally sucked. She called it elevator musack, but Giles actually liked it. Maybe they just didn't move as much because there simply wasn't enough room. As it was, they were sitting right on her bladder, so she had to go every 15 or 20 minutes, and were pressed right up to her lungs, so she had to catch her breath halfway up a single flight of stairs. She was tired and achy, and her back *always* hurt, and she was completely ready for it to be over. How did women do this for nine months? It had only been two months for her, and she had totally forgotten what it felt like to have her body all to herself.

She laid her head down against Giles' shoulder, tucked beneath his chin, and sighed. They swayed back and forth to the music, lost in their own little world.

"Thomas or Philip?" he said.

"Naw, too many bad connotations. You'll always think of Eyghon. Austin or Dawson?"

"You watch too many soap operas," he scolded. "Andrew or Charles?"

"Aren't those British royals? Hmm... Let's try girls. Haley or Monica?"

He shook his head. "Haley, again soap opera. Monica... the whole Clinton scandal."

"Good point," she said. "Amber or Charlotte?"

"Amber sounds too much like a stripper. Not the idea I want people to get about my daughter. Charlotte's pretty, though."

She slid her arms around his neck and turned slightly sideways, so she could nestle closer against him without her stomach getting in the way. "Michelle or Jenny?... Maybe not. Bad connotations there too."

He laid his head against the crown of hers. "No, actually I kind of like the idea of Jenny."

"I'll think about it. Marshal or Mitchell? For the boy." When he didn't answer right away, she nuzzled him under the chin. "Giles?"

There was a long silence, and then he asked softly, "Will they have my name?"

Buffy cringed. "Rupert Jr.? No offense, but I really never liked your first name. I mean, it is okay that I call you Giles, right? Rupert would just be too weird. That's what the old guys from the Council call you. I look around for Travers every time I hear it. Nope, Giles is definitely who you are to me."

"That's what I meant. Will they be Summers or Giles?"

She pulled back to look at him. Where was this coming from? "They could be one of each, I guess. Or is this about all the weddings we've been to? Is this about marriage?"

He leaned down to touch his forehead to hers. "Maybe I'm being old fashioned, maybe it's just the difference in our generations, but I always imagined I'd be married to the mother of my children."

"Are you asking? Is that a proposal?"

"Well yes, I suppose it is. Will you?"

She chuckled. "I gotta tell you, that's one lame ass proposal."

He stopped dancing, stopped swaying with the music, and dropped to one knee. "Buffy Summers—"

"Omigod!" she interrupted, hauling him to his feet. "What are you doing? People are *looking* at us."

"I thought you wanted—"

"I was *kidding*, Giles." She examined him more closely. "You're totally serious about this, aren't you?"

"Well, yes."

She smiled. If that's what he wanted, then that's what he would get. "How 'bout now? Let's get married right now."

"Here at your father's wedding?"

"Yeah, it'll be fun. Come on, Giles. We've been to two weddings in the last two weeks. I'm not really feeling a big hankering for white dresses and chapels, are you? Not to mention, we have twins coming any day now. We don't exactly have a lot of time to plan a big wedding. So here we are. You're dressed up. I'm dressed up. There's like a whole slew of photographers running around. What do you say we grab Dawn, a couple of witnesses, steal my dad's preacher, and duck in the back room to get ourselves married?"

Giles frowned, his eyes searching hers. "I don't know. We could have a real wedding later, if you liked."

"I could care less one way or the other. But this is important to you, isn't it? And you really kinda would like it to happen before the babies come, wouldn't you?" He nodded reluctantly. "All right then. It's settled." She kissed him, as if to seal the deal. He was still frowning. "What?" she asked.

"Isn't it rather bad form to take over someone else's wedding?"

She laughed. "It's my dad. You guys barely tolerate each other. Don't deny it. There's a part of you that enjoys the idea of crashing my dad's wedding." He smirked and looked away. She knew him too well. "Besides, we don't have to tell him. Just go find the priest or preacher or whatever. I'll get Dawn and a couple people we don't know for witnesses. Meet back in the gift room in ten minutes." She covered his eyes. "Don't look at me anymore. It's bad luck for the groom to see the bride before the wedding." She spun him away from her and gave him a little shove. "Go on. Baby clock's ticking, and I wouldn't like to go into labor at *our* wedding."

When Buffy told her sister, Dawn screamed, garnering curious looks from all those around them. The two stepped off to the side for more privacy and continued the conversation in hushed whispers.

"Right now?"

"Yes, right now," Buffy answered. "And you *cannot* tell Dad."

Dawn beamed. "Awesome! But you know Xander and Willow are going to totally kill you for leaving them out. Tara and Anya too."

Buffy shrugged and patted her stomach. "We're on a deadline."

The priest had at first balked when Giles asked him. There were too many things that had to be done first: couples counseling and blood tests and marriage certificates. Plus, he couldn't possibly marry them outside a Christian church. He advised the watcher that marriage was a holy institution and not to be entered into on a whim.

And then Buffy joined them in the gift room, and when the priest saw her condition, he decided to make an exception. Giles may have also hinted to him that she had already gone into labor.

The service was brief, containing only the bare necessities. Buffy placed her hands in his, and they each vowed to love, honor, and cherish the other, as long as they both should live. Sealed with a kiss, and as quickly as that, they were husband and wife.

The priest pulled out a spare marriage certificate he had brought for Hank and Susan just in case. He fudged on the blood work for them and directed the two witnesses Buffy had brought, members of the swing band on a break, to sign in the appropriate places. He informed them that he would file the certificate and mail them a copy, that there might be more paperwork for them to take care of later, but that in every way that mattered they were now married.

Dawn kissed them both, skipping ahead of them into the reception hall. Buffy and Giles followed at a more leisurely pace, holding hands and gazing adoringly at each other. It had all happened so fast and in such a blur, he could still hardly believe that his slayer was now also his wife.

They reached the dance floor just as the DJ started a slow song. Giles took his new bride in his arms, and the two moved as one.

I have a smile, stretched from ear to ear, to see you walking down the road.

"This would be our first dance, then, wouldn't it?" She smiled up at him, wrapping her arms around his neck.

We meet at the lights. I stare for a while. The world around us disappears.

"Yes, it would, Mrs. Giles," he answered, leaning down until their foreheads touched. The slow, sensual rhythm of a Sarah McLachlan song drowned out the background chatter of those around them. Her eyes hypnotized him. His world narrowed until there was only her.

It's just you and me on my island of hope. A breath between us could be miles.

"Kiss your new wife."

Giles caught Hank's glare out of the corner of one eye. "Your father's watching us. He doesn't look too happy."

Let me surround you, my sea to your shore. Let me be the calm you seek.

"Well here's your chance to show him how much you love me."

And Giles did just that, losing all track of time as his lips met hers, as his tongue gently traced the contours of her mouth until she opened for him.

Oh and every time I'm close to you, there's too much I can't say, and you just walk away.

He drank deeply of everything she offered him, of her love and her passion and her trust.

And I forgot to tell you I love you. And the night's too long and cold here without you.

He opened in turn for her as well, and she explored his secrets with her tongue, tasting his honor and his courage and his terrible fear of the fate he could not shield her from.

I grieve in my condition for I cannot find the words to say I need you so.

They parted breathless and hungry for more. He brushed her hair back from her face, amazed that such a little ritual could make him feel such a deeper connection to her. She completed him. She was in his very soul.

Oh and every time I'm close to you, there's too much I can't say, and you just walk away.

He felt his children move between them, where her stomach pressed against his. A son and a daughter. As he gazed into their mother's blue eyes, he prayed that they would each share that shade of azure. To be able to look into Buffy's eyes until he died, that would be heaven. Giles certainly thought he deserved a little heaven. Burying his slayer had been the worst kind of hell.

And I forgot to tell you I love you. And the night's too long and cold here without you.

They kissed again before the song ended, drawing apart on the final note. In short order, the slow melody was replaced by a fast Latin rhythm, something by Ricky Martin. Giles groaned. "Shall I get Dawn to come dance with you, or are you leaving the floor with me?" She didn't respond. "Buffy?"

He tipped his head to try and look at her face where it rested now against his chest. Her eyes were closed, her breathing slow and deep. She had one hand against the side of her belly, and he placed his against it as well. It was very tight and hard as a rock. "Buffy?"

A moment, and then her stomach softened under his hand, and she sighed as she turned up wide frightened eyes to him. "That was a contraction, wasn't it? Not one of those little hiccupy things that the doctor said was okay to get sometimes?"

"Braxton Hicks," he reminded her. "And no, it seemed a lot stronger than that. Perhaps we should go to the hospital now."

They walked from the car to the house in silence. Dawn was disappointed that she didn't have a niece and nephew coming tonight. Buffy was both impatient to be finished and relieved to not be in labor yet. Giles didn't really know what he was.

The doctor had held her for a couple hours before deciding that it was probably false labor. They both felt somewhat embarrassed for running off to the hospital at the first twinge, but the doctor assured them that given their unusual circumstances, it was probably a wise choice.

Giles stopped her at the doorway with a wry grin and hoped to lighten her mood. "I'd carry you over the threshold..."

It worked, and Buffy chuckled. "But we'd probably end up at the hospital again if you tried. I'd put your back out for sure."

He followed her inside, and the three of them went to bed after their long and eventful day. Any hopes Giles might have had about consummating his new marriage were dashed when his pregnant wife promptly fell asleep. He smiled and spooned up behind her, laying one hand across her full belly.

She woke him at nearly 3:30 in the morning.

"Giles?"

Groggy at first as she shook him, when he came to himself, he bolted upright. "Buffy?" He was suddenly wide-awake. "Is it time?"

She smiled sheepishly. "Time for ice cream?"

He groaned and sank back into the pillows. "What kind?" he asked with a resigned sigh.

"Could you go to the store and get me some chocolate peanut butter?"

This was really getting to be too much. "Buffy, there must be fifteen different flavors in the freezer already. Wouldn't you like any of those?"

She stuck her lip out and pouted at him. "Your new wife wants chocolate peanut butter."

He looked at the clock and then scowled at her. "It's 3:30 in the morning."

She tugged on the sleeves of his pajamas. "Your son and daughter want chocolate peanut butter."

"Very well," he said as he pulled himself out of bed. "But when I get back, you bloody well better eat it. The last two times you fell asleep while I was gone."

He put the top down on the drive there and back, just to keep himself awake. When he returned, sure enough, she was already dreaming. He slipped the carton in the freezer with the others and returned to bed. *Just another week at most*, he reminded himself. *Then you'll be getting up at 3:30 in the morning to take care of your babies instead of your wife.*

The next few days passed very slowly. Giles felt like he was on a constant state of alert for the slightest signal that Buffy's time had come. He insisted on bringing her to the Magic Box everyday, where she spent most of her time napping on the sofa in the back training room.

His poor slayer was constantly uncomfortable, never finding the right position to relieve the pressure on her back or ease the weight of the twins from her muscles. She cried at the drop of a hat.

On Wednesday afternoon he received just another example of this as she screamed his name, and he dashed back into the training room, only to find her watching a commercial on TV. She was sobbing and pointing at the screen.

"Look, that old woman doesn't get any mail, and she's lonely, and her neighbor put a card in her mailbox, and now she's happy."

It was a Hallmark commercial.

He turned off the TV and handed her his handkerchief. It seemed to be spending more time in her hands than in his pocket of late. Perhaps he should buy her some of her own.

"I have to pick up Dawn from school now. Will you be okay until I get back?"

She reached up for him to help her off the couch. "Can I get her?"

"I don't know, Buffy."

"*Please*, Giles, I'm going batty here. I just need to get out for a little while. It'll be like ten minutes. You've been driving the Jeep all the time, 'cause it has the car seats all ready to go in it and stuff for the hospital. I can drive the Jeep. *Please*."

"Be careful," he said finally, kissing her softly. "Be *very* careful."

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!" She beamed at him and bounced up to reward him with a more passionate kiss.

He didn't notice the time until he realized a half an hour had passed, and Buffy had not yet returned. After an hour, he called the school, but no one at the office could track down Dawn or Buffy. He was beginning to panic.

When Dawn finally walked through the door after over an hour and a half, he quickly snapped at her, "Where's your sister?"

"That's what I want to know," Dawn answered as she stormed into the shop. "I waited for her to pick me up from school for like an *hour*. Finally I just walked."

He felt like he couldn't breathe, like his heart was beating too fast. But he didn't want to upset the girl in front of him. Maybe it was nothing. "Dawn, go in the back and start your homework." He kept his voice neutral, lest he worry the girl, but his face had already betrayed him, and he could see that she was becoming concerned.

"Giles?"

He smiled at her in what he hoped would be a reassuring way. "I'm sure it's nothing. Just go start your homework."

Dawn didn't believe him, but she also read his mood and didn't press the issue, but instead obediently went in the back to start her homework.

Giles couldn't help but be concerned. Any number of scenarios filled his head. He pushed those images away and reached for the phone again. Maybe she had gone into labor. Maybe she was at the hospital and hadn't been able to call yet. He startled when the phone rang before he could lift the receiver. Anya emerged from the back room to answer, but stopped when she saw him standing there.

It rang a second time.

"Aren't you going to answer it? It could be a customer. With money."

It rang a third time.

There are moments in your life when you know the person on the other end is going to change your life forever. Giles just *knew*. And he didn't want to pick up the phone.

After the fourth ring, he gave into the inevitable.

"Magic Box... Yes, I do. I'm her husband... Yes, she does... Yes, those are her plates... Are you sure?..."

No, no, this wasn't happening.

"I see... of course, right away... Yes, I know where that is... Thank you, officer."

Click.

He couldn't get the receiver to stay in the cradle. He tried to adjust it, but his hands were shaking so badly, he knocked it right off the counter.

He heard Anya's voice, but couldn't comprehend anything she was saying. He was numb. He felt her hands on his shoulders, steering him over to a chair, and he found himself sitting without the memory of having gotten there.

Buffy was right. This time was a hundred times worse.

He needed to go, needed to get to her, but his body wouldn't move. His body belonged to someone else. His mind was merely trapped inside it, waiting for this nightmare to end.

"Giles!"

Xander's voice cut through the fog. When did Xander get here? Anya must have called him. Giles looked blankly at his young friend. Xander was still wearing his work clothes and his little orange vest. He smelled of sweat and dust and sun.

"I have to go," Giles murmured.

"Where? Is it Buffy? Is she in labor? I'll take you to the hospital."

Giles stood. He stumbled slightly. His knees were weak, and Xander steadied him. "No, to the docks. The police called." Giles didn't realize he was speaking. The words seemed to be coming from someone else. "They pulled her Jeep from the bottom of Crystal River. There was blood in the driver's seat. They're dragging the bottom for..." He choked. This was the moment he realized the words were coming from his mouth. When he spoke again, it was softer. "They're dragging the bottom for her body."

Chapter 6 And the Cradle Will Fall

Giles could see the emergency lights at a distance. Traffic was backed up for miles, and the slow pace was shredding his already frayed nerves. He closed his eyes, pressed his head back against the headrest, and took slow deep breaths. His heart hammered in his chest, so loud he could hear it pounding in his ears. He placed his hand over his heart, as if that could quiet the thrumming, as if that could ease the ache in his chest or stop the twisting of his stomach. Every few minutes Xander would look over from the driver's seat and ask him if he was alright. Giles would only nod. He had lost the ability to speak some miles back, now unable to force sound past the lump that had settled in the back of his throat.

"Screw this," Xander said finally and pulled onto the shoulder of the road, zipping ahead of the other cars. The other rush hour commuters, already irritated by the delay, gave them dirty looks and honked their horns and flipped them off and rolled down their windows to shout obscenities that wind and distance stole away before Xander and Giles ever heard them.

They made it a couple miles before an irate businessman in an SUV pulled onto the shoulder in front of them to block their way. By this point they could see the bridge just ahead, where the road now narrowed to one lane. Giles could just make out the tiny figure of a police officer directing traffic, allowing some cars to pass and then stopping others so traffic could cross the bridge from the other direction.

Xander jumped out of the car, as did the man in the SUV. They started shouting at each other, and Giles could only catch a few words here and there. Not because they weren't loud enough to carry to him, but because it took more than he had in him to focus on the words.

A squad car pulled up on the shoulder behind them, its lights flashing, its siren wailing for a moment before the car turned off. After a calmer conversation between Xander, the businessman, and the cop, the SUV pulled back into its own lane, the squad car passed them on the shoulder, and they had a police escort the rest of the distance to the bridge.

There were several police cars there already. An ambulance, on the off chance they would find someone who could still be saved. From the way the paramedics lounged about next to their rig, drinking coffee and chatting, it was apparent that they didn't feel they would be needed. A few other rescue vehicles were parked along the closed lane, but Giles didn't recognize what they were for. Some kind of special operations.

He climbed out of the car and slowly approached the scene, Xander following closely behind. The officer who had escorted them walked up and began talking with them. Xander answered all the man's questions. Giles paid no attention to them. His eyes had found her Jeep.

Boat docks lined the riverbank on either side of the bridge. It was a popular launch. In fact, he and Buffy had patrolled through here on many different occasions. Crystal River fed right into the Pacific and was a convenient place to dock one's boat to take advantage of both ocean and river boating.

On the bank nearest the bridge, an oversized tow truck had backed right up to the water's edge. Cranked up on its wench, Buffy's Jeep was held aloft at a strange angle. The police officer had been kind on the phone when he had told Giles only that there was blood in the car. Her Jeep was mangled. He saw the scuba divers at the ends of the nearest docks, going in and coming out, searching for his slayer.

Xander tugged on his arm, leading him away from the sight of her Jeep and taking him up to the bridge, where their escort was bringing them to the officer in charge.

“Mr. Giles?” An older, uniformed man with graying hair and a salt and pepper beard was holding out his hand for the watcher.

Giles couldn’t tear his gaze away from the sight behind the man. Black skid marks traced a path several meters long, turning from the right lane and veering across the narrow shoulder and over the edge. The guardrail had broken at the point of impact, twisting and curling out past the bridge and over the water.

“Mr. Giles?”

He snapped his attention back to the cop standing in front of him. He forced himself to shake the man’s hand.

“I’m Lieutenant Brady. I spoke to you on the phone. I’m the one running this show. Is there anything I can get for you? Coffee maybe?”

Giles shook his head, and Brady pulled out a small notepad before continuing. “This is all we know so far. A couple witnesses report seeing a woman in a black Jeep slam on the brakes, lose control of her vehicle, and drive through the guardrails and over the edge. We have five separate 911 calls from cell phones, all around 3:15 pm. The rescue team was able to locate the vehicle and retrieve it from the river at nearly 3:55. It didn’t appear that the doors or windows had been opened, but there was blood in the passenger compartment, and the windshield had been completely blown out.”

Giles tried to imagine how Buffy might have escaped. Perhaps she had been able to unfasten her seatbelt and bail out as the Jeep plunged over the side and into the river. Perhaps she had gone down with the Jeep, but smashed out the windshield herself and climbed out to safety. Eventually he had to admit to himself that at over 34 weeks with twins, she wouldn’t have been able to do either of those things. She had barely been able to get off the couch by herself.

Brady was still talking. “We pulled up the car’s registration and cross-referenced it with the owner’s license. The witnesses were able to corroborate that the woman driving matched the DMV photo for Buffy Summers. We had a home number, but it took a bit of time to track down your place of employment. I’m sorry we couldn’t reach you earlier. And I’m sorry we don’t have better news for you. Right now the likeliest possibility is that she was thrown through the windshield at impact and is somewhere in the river as well. We’ve been dragging the bottom, and the divers are searching also, but it’s been nearly two and a half hours. We aren’t going to find her alive. With the current, we might not find her at all. I’m so sorry.”

Giles looked past the officer to the guardrail again. He was trying not to imagine what it must have been like for her, trying not to picture her as she went through the windshield and tumbled into the water, the Jeep following behind. Why wouldn’t she have been wearing her seatbelt? Except that lately it had been bothering her to have it across her stomach. Giles had always shamed her into wearing it, despite the discomfort. Why couldn’t she have worn it today?

Giles brought his eyes back to the man in front of him. He found his voice again, but still it was very quiet. “She’s full term with twins.”

Brady looked down. “Again, my deepest sympathies.” He held out a small card. “This is my number at the precinct. You don’t have to stay here if you don’t want. We’ll call if there’s any further information.”

Giles took it numbly. “Thank you.” But he didn’t leave. He stayed for as long as the rescue workers did. He sat on the edge of the bridge, his legs dangling over the edge, Xander sitting quietly beside him, and watched the divers and the workers as they searched for his slayer, as they tried to at least give him the body of his wife and the children she carried.

Giles and Xander were both numb. It was like when they all sat in the library after they thought Willow had been made a vampire. It was like those first hours after finding Buffy at the bottom of the

scaffolding. It was too overwhelming, too sudden to believe. It couldn't be real. Just a few short hours ago she had been warm and alive and in his arms, and he had sent her to her death.

He'd always known it would happen one day, but he had thought he would be sending her to fight a demon or stop an apocalypse. He never imagined that he could lose his slayer to a common car accident. Not the Slayer who had killed Lothos, the Master, an ascendant demon, who had even fought a god, who had died *twice* and come back. *Third time's the charm.*

They had all made fun of her rotten driving ability. He shouldn't have laughed it off with the others. He should have spent time improving her skills. He shouldn't have let her go pick up Dawn. What was he thinking? She was in no condition to be driving around by herself. She had probably gone into labor. That's probably why she lost control.

The rescue team continued until after dark, with high-powered lights and handheld flashlights. It wasn't long after dark before they brought him something they'd found of hers. The bracelet he had given her for Christmas. She had been wearing it when she left, and now one of the links was snapped. That was when Xander began crying. Giles only thanked the officer who had brought it and slipped it in his pocket.

They didn't work very long into the evening. They probably only worked as long as they did because Giles was sitting on the bridge watching them. By quarter to nine it had been exactly five and a half hours since the Jeep went into the water. Like Lieutenant Brady had told him, after this much time they had no chance to find her alive and with the undercurrents strong as they were, her body could likely be in the Pacific by now.

The emergency crews packed up their gear and left in their rigs. Lieutenant Brady offered his condolences again before leaving as well. Soon it was just Xander and Giles sitting on the bridge and looking over the water. This was more than likely the only grave they would ever have for Buffy.

Willow stopped before knocking on the front door. It had been more than a day since it had happened, and she had cried until she didn't think she could cry anymore, until her tears had run out and she had only the red marks under her eyes and down her cheeks to show her grief. But now, standing in front of the door, she was afraid that she would start all over again. And she *couldn't*. Not right now.

Willow turned panicked eyes towards her lover, whose own eyes were red as hers. "Tara, I can't do this."

Tara framed Willow's face with her hands and kissed her tenderly on the lips. "Strong like an Amazon, remember?"

Willow closed her eyes and nodded, taking a deep breath. "Right. Strong like an Amazon. Okay, I can do this. Dawn needs me. Giles needs me. I can do this." She felt Tara's hand join with hers, and she knew she could do this. She had Tara, and together they could do anything.

Willow knocked.

Dawn answered the door. She had been crying, was still crying, and immediately came into Willow's arms for a hug. Willow heard the music drifting out to them, a slow sad melody, the same melody she had heard in the background when Dawn had called them.

Dawn gave Tara a hug too, and the three of them stood on the porch for a moment without going inside.

"How is he?" Willow asked.

Dawn shrugged. "Dunno. He hasn't said two words. He just sits and listens to that stupid song over and over again and drinks. He drinks a lot. I think he's drunk. He hasn't eaten anything. He fell asleep in the babies' room in the rocking chair last night." She wiped the tears from her cheeks and crossed her arms angrily. "I just can't stand that stupid song anymore, and he won't let me turn it off."

"What is it?" Tara asked.

Dawn sniffed and looked down. "Something by Sarah somebody. I dunno. It was what they danced to after they got married."

Willow nodded in understanding. Wow, could that have been only Saturday? And now here it was Thursday, not even a week later, and he was mourning her and their babies that he had never even gotten to see. "Dawn, do you want to go for a walk with Tara?"

"Sure."

Tara looked at her, concerned. "Willow, you sure you don't want me... I mean, when you... We could just wait out here if you wanted."

Willow shook her head, and gave the blonde witch a small smile. "I'll be fine. Strong like an Amazon. You two go to the park or get ice cream or something."

When she said ice cream, Dawn started sobbing, and Tara pulled the girl into her arms and started walking her down the porch steps, giving Willow one last look over her shoulder before they left.

Willow stepped through the front door, shutting it behind her. The song echoed through the whole house, the melody full of longing and regret, a slow sensual rhythm that Willow could imagine Watcher and Slayer dancing to.

She found him sitting on the couch, a glass and a bottle of Scotch on the table in front of him, both half empty. He was wearing one of his Oxford shirts over dress slacks. It looked like what he'd probably been wearing at the Magic Box the day before. It looked like he'd slept in them. Jacket and tie missing, cuffs rolled up, first three buttons of the collar undone. His pocketwatch lay open on the table beside his drink. She saw his fingers touch the engraving before his shaking hand took the glass and drained it in one swallow.

I grieve in my condition for I cannot find the words to say I need you so.

"Giles?" She approached him until she was standing directly in front of him. He didn't seem to notice her. He still clutched the glass in one hand. The other reached unsteadily for the bottle. She grabbed it first. "You've had enough."

Oh and every time I'm close to you, there's too much I can't say, and you just walk away.

His head came up slowly to look at her. She had never seen his eyes look so empty. Not even after Buffy died the last time. Willow doubted if even Dawn would be enough to keep him going this time. His trembling hand reached for the bottle, but she held it further beyond his grasp. "No. This isn't helping, Giles. This isn't what Buffy would have wanted."

And I forgot to tell you I love you. And the night's too long and cold here without you.

His hand dropped. His head bowed. "Just leave me alone, Willow."

I grieve in my condition for I cannot find the words to say I need you so.

The music faded into silence. And then the song clicked over and started again. Willow could understand why it had been driving Dawn nuts. It was like a constant funeral dirge. She could only imagine what it was doing to Giles, to remember dancing with his new wife, to remember when the song was romantic and filled with promises.

I have a smile, stretched from ear to ear, to see you walking down the road.

"I'm not going to leave you alone, Giles, so you can just stop fighting me right now and save us both a lot of hassle. Come on. We're going to sober you up. And then you're going to eat something." She set the bottle beside the wall and reached for his hand.

We meet at the lights. I stare for a while. The world around us disappears.

"I am sober," he murmured. "I can't seem to get drunk. I keep drinking, but I can't seem to get drunk. I think that might be nice. It's got to be bloody better than this."

It's just you and me on my island of hope. A breath between us could be miles.

Willow pulled him to his feet, and he didn't resist her, but he did sway and cling to her for balance. "Maybe you should rethink that whole sober thing. You seem pretty drunk to me. Come on. How does coffee sound?"

Let me surround you, my sea to your shore. Let me be the calm you seek.

"Terrible," he answered. He staggered as they walked towards the kitchen, and Willow looped one of his arms over her shoulder to support him. As they passed the dining room table, she noticed the various empty liquor bottles sitting next to the ones that hadn't even been opened yet. There were more empty bottles than full. Giles had drunk a lot. Maybe she should take him to a doctor or something.

Oh and every time I'm close to you, there's too much I can't say, and you just walk away.

She could hear the music even out in the kitchen. It was an undercurrent that flowed beneath everything. It set the mood for the house. She wanted to turn it off, but first she would have to get Giles situated. She deposited him on a stool next to the island counter, started a pot of coffee, and opened the fridge to see what she could feed him.

And I forgot to tell you I love you. And the night's too long and cold here without you.

She put a couple frozen dinners in the microwave. He probably wouldn't like them, but it would get something in his stomach. She gave him a glass of water in the meantime, glaring at him until he drank it.

I grieve in my condition for I cannot find the words to say I need you so.

"Willow," he spoke very quietly, leaning against the counter, his head tipping very low as if he soon wouldn't be able to hold it up anymore. "Do you think they would have had her eyes?"

Oh and every time I'm close to you, there's too much I can't say, and you just walk away.

Willow bit her lip not to cry. She couldn't start now. She wouldn't be able to stop. Strong like an Amazon. She could do this. She could be the one he leaned on for once. He had always been the one they leaned on. "I think they would have had her eyes and her blonde hair. But Buffy used to tell me that she hoped at least one would have your green eyes. She always liked your green eyes."

And I forgot to tell you I love you. And the night's too long and cold here without you.

Giles began to cry. Willow had never seen him cry. Buffy had, after Jenny died, but he had never done so in front of any of the others. Not after Jenny. Not after Buffy died the last time. Not once. Willow wasn't sure that he would want her to see this, not sure that he wouldn't be embarrassed to break down in front of her. But she couldn't just leave him like that. So she cautiously wrapped her arms around him. When he returned her embrace, she pulled him in tighter, feeling him shake against her as he sobbed.

I grieve in my condition for I cannot find the words to say I need you so.

The music faded again, and the song clicked over, starting once again at the beginning. The microwave beeped. The coffee had finished brewing. She would have to eventually turn off that damn song, pour him some coffee, and make him eat something. All that could wait, though. For right now, she had to hold Giles while he cried.

Buffy measured out the space of her prison: 10 feet by 10 feet. Her dorm room had been bigger. A nice big double bed took up most of the room. A small dresser. She opened it: three drawers of clothes and a couple spare sets of sheets. Maternity shirts, pants, even underthings. Ethan had also been thoughtful enough to provide her with nursing bras.

He certainly seems intent on keeping me here until the babies come. And then after. She didn't even want to think about how long she would have after before Ethan took her children to the people who had hired him. *Giles will find us.* It became her mantra over the next few days. *Giles will find us.*

She sat on the bed. Comfortable at least. She would need that or her back would be killing her in no time. Next to the bed, a simple nightstand with a digital clock. It had a large red display. Hours. Minutes. Even seconds measured out in the neon red lights. So she could keep track of every moment of her imprisonment.

She slid out the one drawer of the nightstand. A couple Harlequin novels. Because what Ethan wanted of course, she thought sarcastically, was a horny pregnant slayer.

Beneath the trashy novels, a blank baby book with a pen. Places for babies' footprints, handprints. And pages and pages of blank space for her to journal. *Ethan wants me to be able to take home my memories.* She wasn't sure if it was meant as a kindness or a further way to torment her with what he would take from her.

She slid the drawer back in and looked up at the video camera above the door. There was one on each side of the bedroom, and two in the bathroom as well, so there wasn't one inch of space in her prison that they couldn't watch her.

She rose from the bed and crossed again to the dresser. On top sat a half-fridge, like she'd had in the dorms. Inside, it was well stocked with things they had thought she might want to eat. On the dresser beside it, they had stacked some dishes and silverware.

She tried the door for the hundredth time. It was solid metal, had no handle, and latched with a sophisticated locking mechanism like the doors at the Initiative. Except that she wasn't at the Initiative. She really had no idea where they had taken her. But she knew she wouldn't be getting out the door on her own power, even after her slayer skills returned.

She walked into the bathroom. There was no door separating the two rooms that she could see. The cabinet below the sink was stocked with all the white fluffy towels and washcloths that could fit. Like a hotel, except that she couldn't check out.

At that moment, the door revealed itself. It slid out from inside the wall and sealed off the doorway, trapping her inside the bathroom. She pounded on the metal surface and tried to slide it open, but it was as secure as the outside door to her prison. After about fifteen minutes, the door suddenly opened again, and she was allowed back into the bedroom. A tray of hot food was now resting on the bed, along with a note, which read, *Any requests? –Ethan.*

"Yeah," Buffy said, crumpling up the note and looking up into one of the cameras. "How about letting me the hell out of here before I have to hunt you down and beat the living shit out of you?"

But there was no response, and she was hungry, and the babies were going to make her eat, and so she ate. She thought back to the chain of events that had brought her here and tried to work out if there was anything she could have done differently. No, there wasn't. There hadn't been time. They had been expecting her. She hadn't even made it into the Jeep. The car had pulled up behind her so quickly, she hadn't time to turn around before a man she didn't know had grabbed her from behind and pressed something up to her mouth and nose. She had recognized Ethan Rayne immediately when he stepped in front of her. He had given her an apologetic smile and told her he was sorry as he took the keys from her hand. She had struggled against the stranger's grip behind her, struggled to breathe

through the thick chemical smell. The last thing she saw before she blacked out was Ethan climbing into the driver's seat of her Jeep. The whole abduction had taken less than 30 seconds.

She had come to on this bed in this room, Ethan sitting on a chair across the room, watching her. He had been quite talkative. He seemed to want her to forgive his involvement in all of this. He was merely following orders from his mysterious Boss and his accomplice. They had freed him from Nevada, from the place *she* had sent him, he quickly reminded her. As if this made them even. And then the part that had made her blood run cold. He had told her that they planned to take her twins after birth, but unless she gave them a lot of grief, Ethan could probably convince his cohorts to let her go afterwards.

She had told him to go to hell, and he had left. She had rushed to the door as it opened, but the weight of the twins made it feel like running through quicksand, and she was far too slow. She hadn't seen Ethan since then. And now it appeared that they intended to lock her in the bathroom anytime they wished to enter her room. In her condition, she could only hold it for so long, so they would have lots of opportunities.

She finished her meal and set the empty tray on the dresser. She curled up on the bed, running her hands lovingly across her belly. The twins were sleeping at the moment, and she was trying to formulate some kind of plan in her head. She was drawing a blank. It seemed her only hope was to have Giles rescue her. She started to cry, hating herself for doing so, for giving Ethan and whoever else was watching her on the monitors the satisfaction of witnessing her tears.

Today was Wednesday. Probably Wednesday. She couldn't have been unconscious that long. The big neon clock on the nightstand read 8:45 pm. It matched the time on her watch. They had no reason to mess with her sense of time, so the clock was probably correct. That was when she noticed the bracelet on her other hand was gone, the one Giles had given her. She began crying again. If she couldn't have him here with her, then she wanted something of him to keep her grounded and hopeful. There was nothing else. They hadn't time to buy wedding rings yet, and she had wanted to wait until the swelling in her hands went away. No point in having it resized after the twins came.

One of the babies moved. Still too cramped for the gymnastics and hard kicking they had done a couple weeks ago, she could feel the movement more like the early stirrings she had felt at the beginning. She smiled and patted over the baby tenderly. She had his son and his daughter inside her, and that would have to be enough. She poked over the hard mass of her stomach, feeling for elbows and feet and butts. She felt a small answering kick to one of her pokes, and she played with the baby until the other woke as well, and they were both moving inside her.

Thursday came and went, and Friday as well. Buffy was bored. She paced. She actually picked up the Harlequin books and read them. She napped. She tried to ease the constant ache in her lower back, but she couldn't reach, and Giles wasn't here to massage her. The bathroom door locked behind her a few times each day, so they could bring her each meal. She snacked on Jell-O from the fridge, and finally lowered herself to actually asking Ethan for mint chocolate chip ice cream, which was dutifully delivered with the next meal.

She got used to the video cameras and the lack of privacy. She would give them the finger while sitting on the toilet. Sometimes, though, she almost wished that Ethan would come into her room again, although she would never actually ask for it. The silence and the loneliness were the worst. She took to talking to her babies, calling them Rabbit 1 and Rabbit 2. She wished she and Giles had thought of names sooner.

By bedtime Friday night, she was feeling as big as a house. Her feet had disappeared from view long before Xander and Anya's wedding. Now she almost imagined that she wouldn't be able to fit through the bathroom door if she went sideways. And it usually took her a minute or more to work

herself off the bed or get back on it. But as ready as she was for this to be over, she was terrified of going into labor here by herself with no doctor, no Giles. He would have to find her before that happened. But it was Friday already, and the clock was seriously ticking. Saturday made her 36 weeks, which Dr. Michaels had told her was the average delivery time for twins. Wednesday would put her over 38 weeks, and depending on size, the doctor had discussed inducing her if she went much past that.

So Friday night, before bed, Buffy stepped into the shower, hoping to relax herself with a long hot soak. There were handrails against each wall, and she leaned on them as she let the water run over first her stomach and then her back. She wished again for Giles' hands to rub away all her aches. One of the babies had shifted so his head was in just the wrong place and pressing against her back. She turned the nozzle to massage and let the stream pound against her lower back. It helped only a little.

Finally she had pruned up enough and relaxed to the point she thought she could sleep. She turned off the water and grabbed a towel from the rack. When she had completely dried off, she felt a sudden gush, and the insides of her legs were wet again. She looked down. Her water had broken.

Don't panic, Buffy, she told herself. It was hard not to. She couldn't remember what she was supposed to do. Giles had been the one to read all those books and study up on all of this. He had tried to interest her in it, and now she was wishing she had listened to him. She dried herself off again and stepped out of the shower. She pulled on a nightgown and looked up at the cameras.

"Please, Ethan, you have to send me a doctor. Dr. Michaels would come. He's a Council man. There wouldn't even be questions. I need a doctor. Michaels told us one of the babies is breech. She's going to need extra help. *Please.*"

Buffy waited in the bathroom for a half an hour, but the door wouldn't lock her out. She paced along the tile, splashed water on her face from the sink, and tried to slow her panic.

It's going to be fine, Buffy. The doctor only said that she might need help. The babies will both be fine. You'll be fine. You can do this.

She looked up into the mirror, and her reflection seemed to say, *Liar.*

Finally she was tired and went to bed. She tossed and turned for an hour or so before she could still her mind enough to sleep. 11:30pm was the last thing she remembered the clock saying. She woke at 3:30am when she felt her stomach tighten, like it had at her father's wedding, only this time much stronger. She pressed her hand against her belly and shifted her weight on the bed. Long, slow, deep breaths and eventually the sensation passed. Her first real contraction. That wasn't so bad. She didn't know what she had been so afraid of. She closed her eyes and drifted back to sleep.

Ten or fifteen minutes later and another one woke her. By nearly seven they were a steady eight to ten minutes apart, and she couldn't sleep between them anymore. Her water continued to leak with each one, so by now she was sleeping in a wet bed anyway. She got up and changed the sheets, laying a layer of towels over the top. She changed into a fresh nightgown and started to pace back and forth across her prison, leaning over the dresser or against the bedpost during each contraction. They were getting stronger, and by nine they were starting to hurt.

She tried different positions, but it didn't seem to matter. She sat on the foot of the bed with her legs dangling over the edge and took long slow breaths, curling her fingers into the sheets and towels as the tightness slowly changed to pressure and pain. She tried the next one on the bed, kneeling on all fours. But that didn't seem to be much better. The wave rose inside her, and she rocked back into her hips, her forehead pressing against the bed beneath her. She tried on her side for the one after that, but she only ended up curled into a little ball, staring at the clock, willing the seconds to move along faster.

By noon, they came a constant five minutes apart and lasted 45 seconds to a minute. She knew the length of each surge almost to the second, because her eyes never left the clock during each one. Sometimes she wondered if the clock was broken, because the seconds seemed to slow down during the contractions. It seemed to get stuck completely at each peak, leaving her gasping there for long moments before the seconds started moving again and she could come down.

Sometimes she had them while in the bathroom, and they were always more intense. She would sit on the toilet with her hands pressing against the sink and the wall, her head shaking back and forth as she held her breath and waited for the peak so she could come down. Sometimes the intensity forced a deep guttural moan from the back of her throat. Sometimes the pain made her legs shake uncontrollably.

She tried to stay in bed as much as possible. They were just too intense when she was walking or when she was sitting. She couldn't remember how she was supposed to breathe. There was some magic pattern that was supposed to make all of this go away. If she could remember the special breathing patterns, then it wouldn't hurt anymore. She was wishing she had paid attention in Lamaze. She was wishing she had listened to Giles when he had tried to help her practice this stuff. They were getting closer and stronger, and she didn't know how much stronger they could get before they wouldn't just snap her in two.

She hadn't wanted to have the babies here alone. She had wanted to stall until Giles could come. But now she just wanted it over. *Over, over, OVER*. Sometimes instead of breathing, she would groan and tell the babies to come down, down, *down* already. But they were disobedient little things. Must take after their mother. Buffy's own mother had warned her that one-day her children would give her the same grief that Buffy had given Joyce and then she would appreciate just what her mother had to put up with. If Joyce had gone through this agony with Buffy, how had Dawn ever come along? Buffy would definitely not be doing this again, even if she had the choice.

By four, the waves were lasting a good minute each time and coming pretty much two or three minutes apart. Buffy had lost track of the exact time on the clock. She saw only the digits for the minutes and the seconds. Now she was sure there was something wrong with the clock, because each second couldn't possibly be dragging on for this long. She had passed the point of trying to control them, of trying to be brave or strong or trying to breathe through them or change her position or of caring whether Ethan or anyone else saw her fall apart. She had reached the point where she simply writhed on the bed with each one and screamed until her throat was raw, screamed as if she could send the pain out of her body with her voice, as if the screaming would make Ethan do something, would make him send a doctor or do *something*. And sometimes between them, she would curl up and cry and actually beg Ethan for a doctor. She was surely dying, and he didn't seem to understand that.

Ethan Rayne stood outside the door to the magic shop. He peered in the store window, seeking out one Rupert Giles behind the register. Nearly six on a Saturday, and they were about to close. Ripper seemed to be more collected today. Maybe working helped take his mind off Buffy's apparent death. But Ethan knew the cool exterior was only a front. He had been watching the footage from the surveillance cameras. He had seen the total breakdown. Mr. Longworth had recorded it onto VHS and sometimes rewatched it for hours. His old friend was hanging on by a thread.

Ethan wasn't sure what he was doing here, except that Buffy was in bad shape. Neither Mr. Longworth nor Sulla seemed to care one way or the other whether she lived or died. Longworth

wanted the boy, would probably let her keep the girl, but he would not be terribly disappointed if something happened during the delivery.

Watching Buffy on the monitors made Ethan's skin crawl. It seemed beyond cruel to just leave her like that for who knew how long. When she started screaming, he had to turn down the volume or be driven mad by it. The worst was when she screamed his name. No, he was wrong. The worst was when she begged him, when the proudest of slayers actually begged *him* for help.

The others had only laughed when he suggested that they might want to bring in some help for her. He had tried to reason with Mr. Longworth that if they brought in Dr. Michaels, she had a greater chance of delivering her son safely into the world, and Longworth would have his prize. They refused to even entertain the idea of bringing in a doctor.

But in the end, he had convinced them to let him bring in Ripper. Not because Longworth cared that it would help Buffy. Only because it would cause Giles more grief to attend her and not be able to do anything for her. And because if anything happened during the delivery, he would be devastated, would be forced to watch, and would blame himself afterwards for not doing enough. Ethan could only hope the man had researched this whole pregnancy and birth thing with the same dedication he put into studying demons and prophecies. Ethan could only hope the man would be prepared to deliver his own children.

He took a breath and opened the door just as the blonde store clerk was coming to lock it. He didn't recognize her, and she didn't recognize him, but she frowned at him.

"We're closing," she informed him firmly. "Unless you plan to spend a lot of money, you will have to come back on Monday."

Ethan looked past her to where Ripper was standing at the register, intently focused on a book, his pen poised over its pages. The sorcerer walked around the young blonde, and she yelled, "Hey!"

Ethan ignored her. "I've come to see an old friend."

Ripper looked up at the sound of the familiar voice. The rage in that face might have cowed him in days past, but he knew Ripper wouldn't touch him. Ethan had something the man wanted. He was holding his wife and children.

"Ethan Rayne," Ripper growled. "You always seem to know just when to show up, just when I feel the need to give someone a good thrashing. How considerate of you."

Ethan smiled. "Can we skip over the hostile banter and cut right to the chase? Your time is running out, mate, and I'm here to do you a favor."

Ripper laughed darkly. "Right. If I remember correctly, the last time you tried to do me a favor, I woke up as a Fyarl demon."

Ethan put up his hands to indicate surrender and backed up into the nearest bookshelf as his old friend advanced on him. "I did my time for that, as the saying goes. Two years in an Initiative detainment facility as they poked and prodded me, trying to figure out where my magic came from. I'd say that's more than enough penance for a harmless prank."

"Harmless prank?" Ripper was on him, shoving him back against the shelves with one hand. "You almost got me killed by my own slayer."

Ethan shrugged and tried to smile charmingly. "Funny you should mention her. That's actually what I came to talk to you about."

Ripper released him and turned towards the blonde woman watching near the entrance. "Anya, clear out of here." She didn't need to be told twice and was gone. He turned back to Ethan, grabbing the sorcerer by the throat. "You have two minutes. And then I start breaking things."

Ethan gestured to his throat and was released. He coughed for a moment and then began telling his tale, still massaging his sore throat. "Two minute version is that Buffy's still alive."

Ripper staggered back. "What?"

"Now keep in mind, old friend, that I only have the teeniest little part in this. Well, okay that's a lie. But none of this was my idea. Someone's paying me. Same someone who got me out of Nevada. Considering who else he's been willing to hire... Well, if I didn't cooperate, he would have likely sent me back to Nevada for good. In an unmarked grave in the desert with the vultures picking my bones."

Ripper's jaw did that twitching clenching thing. Ethan knew his two minutes were nearly up. "It would have been a generous end for you."

Ethan shrugged. "Should hear what they had planned for you." He grimaced. "Even I had a hard time with that one. Didn't want to watch, that's for sure. Lucky for you, plan's changed."

Ripper took a threatening step forward. "Get back to Buffy. Now."

Ethan held up his hands in defense. His two minutes were definitely up. "Okay, okay, I was just getting to that. See, my boss made her the new plan. When he found out you had put a couple brats in her— good show on that, by the way. I've always found your slayer to be quite the eyeful." Off his adversary's glare, he continued quickly. "Right, right. Anyway, my boss fancied the notion of taking your kids for whatever reason. So we nabbed her and staged the accident. Little illusion spell, so the witnesses would see her driving. Little control spell, so I could drive the car without actually being *in* it. Blood spilled across the seats, her bracelet thrown in the water for the divers to find, and a few small explosives to blow the window out as the Jeep hit the rail and went over. We did a pretty thorough job. Had you fooled."

Ripper shoved him against the shelves again with a hand on the chest. "Where. Is. She?"

Perhaps Ethan shouldn't have been so proud at his success. "Easy, mate, I was planning on telling you. In fact, I came to take you to her. She's in labor and not doing very well. I thought maybe you could help her."

Ripper released him and took a few steps back, running one hand through his hair. "Is there a doctor with her?"

"Believe me, if I could have, I would have brought back a doctor over you. That's probably what she needs. But these men that are working with me... They wouldn't have it, and I wasn't about to argue with them. So I have to settle for you. This is some sick game with them, and letting you in with her plays right into their twisted little scheme."

Ethan could see the wheels spinning in his old friend's head. "How many did you say there were? Maybe together we can—"

"No, no, no. No good, my friend." Ethan was shaking his head. "There's only the hitman, the Boss, and a couple other hired thugs he brought in to help him get out of town with the babies. But the place is a fortress, and they all have guns. You try and go in there and play the hero.... You'll only get your slayer killed."

"If I go with you, you'll take me to her?"

"That was the plan. I come back with just you, and they'll let you in to be with her."

Ripper was pacing. Ethan recognized the way the man mentally worked through his problems. The glasses came off, polished briskly while he thought. That was a new habit. "You could take Dr. Michaels in, tell them he's me."

"No good. They know you."

Ripper sighed, resigned. He looked more like the librarian now than the rebel he had been in their youth. "Fine. But I need to make a phone call first. And you'll let me bring some things? The doctor gave me a kit, in case of emergency. There were special circumstances. We weren't sure how much time we would have to get to the hospital."

Ethan nodded. "Phone call, no. Supplies, by all means. As for time, you needn't have worried. It's been over fourteen hours. You would have had plenty of time."

Ripper paled at that and hurried to get his things. He paused at the phone, but Ethan shook his finger. "Let me just clue you in to the fact that we bugged your house and shop with cameras. They're watching us right now. The only mics we have are in Buffy's room, but the cameras will still give them a pretty good shot of you calling out. They'll assume it's to the cops. They'll likely cut their losses, shoot your slayer, and skip out of town."

Ripper acquiesced and walked out of the shop, carrying a small bag slung over his shoulder. He probably suspected a trap, but for Buffy's sake he would take the chance. They both climbed into Sulla's black Accord. Ethan put the keys in the ignition, but he didn't start it. He turned sideways in his seat to face his old friend. "First things first, Ripper old chum, they'll search that bag soon as we get there. They find anything they don't like, they won't let you take it in at all."

With a sigh, Ripper emptied the bag of a gun, a switchblade, a magic charm that could be used to create blindness, and a cell phone. Now, nothing but the medical supplies the doctor had given him. Ethan imagined that the man had to at least try. "Alright. Second thing. You've got to wear these." He pulled out a pair of handcuffs and a blindfold.

"What is it with handcuffs lately?" the man grumbled, but obediently held his hands out.

"No, behind your back." When Ripper balked, Ethan reminded him, "They won't let us through the gate if I don't have you properly restrained. Without the blindfold, they'll just shoot you on sight. No good having the enemy know the location of your hideout."

Ripper turned and allowed the handcuffs to bind his hands behind him. "Will you at least call the house for me? There's a girl there, Dawn—"

"The Slayer's brat sister? Yeah, I remember her."

An irritated sigh. "Tell her I'm fine. Tell her you're a supplier or something, and I got a new shipment in and won't be home for a while. I'd rather not worry her. Oh, and tell her to ask Willow to wait 'til tomorrow before we work on that teleportation spell like we had planned for tonight."

Ethan clucked his tongue as he took the glasses off and neatly folded them into the watcher's lap. "Coded messages, Ripper? How stupid do you think I am? Wait, don't answer that. But I will call the house for you, tell the girl you're out on the town with an old friend, needing a bit of cheering up after your horrible loss, be gone maybe a couple days. Wouldn't want to worry anyone."

And then he tied the blindfold on, making sure his old friend would be able to see nothing. The rest of the trip passed in silence. Ripper was probably trying to work out their destination by the turns of the car and the sound of the road and the time elapsed. Ethan knew those tricks. He took various detours along the way.

Buffy doubled over, curled herself around the tightness that built up around the top of her stomach and ground down into her pelvis. She pulled her legs up and then stretched them back out. She clenched her fists into the towels and the bedsheets beneath, turning to first one side and then the other. There was nothing she could do, no position that would ease this terrible pressure, pressure, *pressure*, constantly getting stronger, stronger, *stronger* every moment. She watched the clock, hoping for distraction, for focus, but it was stuck again, stuck on this moment, stuck on this pain, and it wouldn't ever move forward again. She had stopped screaming some time before, maybe hours? Time had no measure anymore. The yelling hadn't helped anyway, had only made her throat sore, and now the contractions were just too strong. She didn't have the breath to scream.

The surge was still building, still rising inside her, and every second she kept thinking that *this* had to be the peak, because it couldn't possibly get *more* intense. But it did. She shut her eyes and held her breath against it.

She felt a soft touch on her shoulder. She thought it was *him*. She hoped it was him. She couldn't open her eyes, couldn't focus on anything but the intensity of the pain. She clutched the hand that was offered her and shook her head back and forth, biting her lip. A soft whimper escaped her lips at the peak, and then she was coming down, her body shaking as the contraction slowly released its grip.

She collapsed back into waiting arms, breathing hard and licking her lips. She opened her eyes, and it *was* him. She smiled, and her chin trembled. "Giles?" Her voice was raspy and raw from the hours where she had thought screaming would help. "How did you...? Am I dreaming?"

He smoothed back the strands of hair that clung to her damp face. "No, luv, I'm here. Ethan brought me to help you."

She closed her eyes again and relaxed into the arms that cradled her. "You didn't happen to bring a doctor and a whole lot of Demerol with you, did you?"

"Just me, I'm afraid."

She pulled herself tighter into his embrace. Clutching the front of his shirt, she began to cry. "Why is Ethan doing this? Who hired him, and what do they want with our babies?"

She felt his arms squeeze her closer, his head resting on top of hers. "Shhh... Don't think about that now. You need to rest, gather your strength. We'll worry about Ethan and whoever else is behind this after the babies are born."

She nodded and wiped her tears with the back of one hand. He laid her gently down against the pillows, and then climbed off the bed.

"Giles! Don't go!" She reached for him desperately.

He took her outstretched hands in his own. "I'm not going anywhere, Buffy. I'm just going to get you something to drink. Maybe some ice. Would you like that?"

She nodded weakly and released him. He had only gotten halfway to the small fridge before she sat up again and called him back. "Giles, another one!"

Her stomach was tightening again. She rubbed her hand over it, along the bottom curve of its surface, where the pressure and the pain were building up the strongest. She began shifting her legs again, pulling them up and straightening them out in a constant rhythm as the intensity built inside her, as it stole her breath away.

Giles was lightly stroking her back and arm, but it was distracting, it wasn't helping, *he* wasn't helping. She pushed his hands away roughly. That wasn't what she needed right now. She needed... She didn't know what she needed, except that she needed this to *stop*. It was still rising and taking her with it, as she pushed herself inches above the bed, as she rose up as if to rise up out of her body and leave this agony behind her. She twisted her legs and tilted onto first one hip and then the other, but nothing she could do would stop it, would slow it, as it continued to grind her, to crush her.

"Buffy, it will be easier if you can relax into it."

Relax? He had to be kidding. The wave was still building, squeezing her until she felt it would turn her inside out. Every second she wondered how it could possibly get worse, and every second the pressure, the pain only intensified.

"Buffy, you're hyperventilating. Slow down your breathing. Like this." He demonstrated and leaned in closer. She turned her head to watch him and try to match him. She released her death grip on the bed sheets and grabbed for his shirtfront to pull him even closer. Forehead to forehead, nose to nose, she focused on his eyes and forced herself to breathe in time with him. She reached the peak and exhaled in a long groan that vibrated down through her whole chest. And then it was fading. She

dropped her head to his shoulder and curled her legs in beneath her, willing the damn thing to just *go* already. After it had, after she had rested against him for a moment, Giles spoke softly in her ear.

"Has it gone?"

She nodded slightly, and he placed her back in the bed, leaving her side to fetch the drink he had promised her. She stretched her legs out, let her breathing slow to normal, and turned her head to watch him. He assembled a whole array of necessities on the nightstand beside her: several glasses of water and juice, glasses of ice, a bowl filled with cool water and washrags, and a stack of bath towels he placed on the floor beside the bed next to a bag he must have carried in with him. Every time he went into the bathroom for towels or washcloths, her heart hammered as she imagined the door slamming and locking behind him, Ethan laughing as he watched on the cameras, as he locked Giles away from her. She couldn't do this anymore by herself. She wasn't sure she could do this with Giles either.

When he seemed satisfied that he had made all the preparations he could make, he climbed on the bed beside her, lifted her head, and placed a glass of water to her lips to drink. She took a few small sips. Any more than that, and she was sure she would be sick. He gave her an ice chip to suck on and wiped her brow with the cool rag.

She snatched his hand for the next contraction, lying on her side and rubbing her legs together like a cricket as the pressure built. He laid on his side facing her, maintaining eye contact as he talked her through it, as he helped her breathe. When it passed, she continued to hold tight to him and in a soft voice lamented, "It *hurts*."

He smiled kindly and returned to mopping her brow and neck with the cool rag. "I imagine so."

She shook her head. "No, I mean *really* and *a lot*. How much longer?"

"I don't know." He twisted to reach behind him and resoak the washcloth in the cool water before placing it again on her forehead. "How long has it been?"

She closed her eyes and threw one hand over her face, pressing the cool rag against her warm skin. "I lost track. I know it's been four o'clock twice already. What time is it now?"

"Eight," he answered as he turned back to grab an ice chip and pop it in her mouth. "I'm sure it won't be much longer. Just take them one at a time. It won't hurt so much if you can stay relaxed through it."

She tried. She really did. For the next few hours, she tried to lay still and breathe when he told her to and focus on his voice and block out everything but his eyes. But the contractions were getting so much stronger and so much closer and she couldn't help but curl herself into a little ball around them until she would beg him: no more no more no more no more no more no more and please, Giles, just make it stop and please, there must be a spell you can do, and omigod, just do *something*.

Between, she would close her eyes and try to rest and try not to think about how soon the next one would come or how much worse it would be. Giles would make her drink more water or feed her more ice chips or wash off her sweat with the cool rag or help her into the bathroom.

The worst was when a wave hit her as they were walking back to the bed after one such trip. She couldn't move, could only stand there, leaning up against Giles and swaying her hips as her legs shook beneath her. He tried to help her breathe, but the breathing wasn't helping and the rocking wasn't helping, and the tight ball of babies was pressing, pressing, *pressing* down until she couldn't stand it, and the wave was crushing her like a vise until she finally did scream on that one. And she could see how it rattled Giles to hold her as she screamed, but still she couldn't stop until the contraction did. And then he helped her into bed, massaging along her feet and legs, reminding her how much easier it would be if she could only relax.

Sometimes when he thought she was dozing, Buffy would catch him prowling along the perimeter of their room, looking for weaknesses in the walls of their prison, checking the lock on the door, and testing to see if he could force it open. Buffy wanted to tell him that she had done the same thing the last three or four days— *how long had it been?*— and he would find their prison just as secure as she had, but the attempt seemed to make him feel useful, so she just let him try. And then when she would feel another begin, she would writhe and reach her hands up to clutch the headboard, and he would be at her side in a moment, trying to get her to relax and breathing slowly with her and holding her hand until it passed.

By one in the morning, she was exhausted. He looked tired too, and he hadn't been at this for nearly as long as she. After one particularly difficult contraction, as she caught her breath, she asked him again, "How much longer?" When he could only answer that he didn't know, she lamented, "What happened to my short five minute labor? Doesn't this translate to like a week in real time?"

He smiled sadly and fed her more ice chips. "I think we were wrong to think that your labor would be reduced. Your slayer metabolism is focused only on the babies, helping to bring them to term more quickly. This part, it would seem, you will have to get through like any other woman."

And then the next one was coming, and she clutched his shirtfront, moaning and breathing with him and shifting her legs. Bend, straighten, bend, straighten. She bit her lip, and the peak was coming and his hands were trying to massage along her arms and back, but he wasn't doing it right, he never did it right, and she was shoving him away, saying, "Stop it, stop it, *stop it*." And she was shaking uncontrollably again, and that only made the peak worse as it washed over her. She fell back against the pillows as it released her, panting and looking towards Giles, her eyes pleading with him to save her.

That was when he suggested that she might like a bath, that it might help her relax, relieve some of the pressure, maybe take the edge off, and that she might even be able to get some sleep between. He started the water, coming back when she called for him and talking her through the next one.

When the bath was full, and she had just finished with a contraction, he helped her into the bathroom. She started to step into the tub, and he asked if she wouldn't like to undress first.

"No, if you think it will help, then I just want in *now*."

But when she dipped her foot in, it was too hot, and he started the cold water running.

Then the next one started, and she was standing there, unable to move, pushing against the wall, crying, "Giles, Giles, *Giles!*" He caught her as she slid down to her knees. She was pounding on the wall, choking on her own breath as the pressure just got stronger and stronger and unbearably intense. She shook like a leaf. Then she reached for him, her eyes growing wide as she told him, "I'm going to be sick."

He helped her to rise, not an easy thing while her body was still trying to fold her in half. The sink seemed closer for some reason, and she lurched for it, leaning over the basin as she threw up. The retching only made the contraction worse, as her stomach spasmed over the crushing, tightening, pressing wave. She moaned as she dry heaved, as he held her hair back from her face and tried to take some of her weight. She stopped as the wave left her, resting against the countertop and panting.

He helped her stand again and walked her to the bathtub. She put one foot in.

Now it was too cold.

Five am. Giles sat on the floor beside the bathtub, one hand resting against Buffy's stomach, the other stretched across the back of the tub, supporting her head. He had been able to settle her in the

bath some hours before, and it seemed to help. She was able to doze now between each one, although he was fighting not to fall asleep with her. It was harder on her if she woke in the middle of a contraction without the time to prepare. So he kept his hand against her belly and roused her from her slumber at the beginning of each one.

He was feeling tired and helpless. He had read the books. He had taken the class. He had gone in to see Dr. Michaels without Buffy, when he had worried that the babies would come too quickly. The doctor had showed him what he should do, had explained how to deliver each baby, even the girl who was breech. But Giles had never done this, and though he may have owned the photographic watcher's memory for all that he had studied, he still didn't know how to help her. All his planning had focused on what to do if they came too quickly. Now he didn't know what to do for her while it was taking so long. If they were in a hospital, she would have taken drugs a long time ago, and he wouldn't have blamed her for doing so. She was in a lot of pain. Although, maybe in the hospital she wouldn't have been so terrified, maybe she could have relaxed more, and it wouldn't have been so bad.

He felt some measure of guilt for her suffering. Not just that he had gotten her pregnant. Although, that was the more irrational part of his guilt. The majority of it came from the knowledge that she was here instead of at a hospital because of him. Because Ethan and some nameless foe wanted to punish *him*, and now she was paying the price for Giles' past sins.

Her stomach tightened beneath his hand, and he gently shook her awake, murmuring her name. He held her eyes with his and tried to help her breathe, but within moments she was in too much pain to focus. She clutched his hand tightly, and if she'd still been the Slayer, she would have broken his bones. As it was, he flinched, and now he was doing the breathing for himself as well as her. He kept his eye on the clock he had brought into the bathroom, counting out the length of the contraction for her. It seemed to help her when she knew how close she was to the end. And then her legs were moving again, restlessly kicking out and drawing in, and she was turning on her side. The water sloshed out of the tub as she turned and with each kick, soaking him to the skin as it had on every one before. He might as well be in the bloody bath with her for as much as she was drenching him.

And then he could tell when she was reaching the peak, because she would start to shake uncontrollably and whimper and get irritated with him for something he wasn't doing right. This time she snapped, "Count faster!" She moaned at the top and pushed herself out of the water before sinking back down against his arm and gasping as the tension slowly left her. She released his hand, and he shook it out, flexing it gratefully, and working the feeling back into his fingers.

She asked him again, as she had a hundred times already, "How much longer?"

He gave her the only answer that he could ever give, that he didn't know.

"It's not supposed to be like this, is it? I mean, it shouldn't take this long, even for normal women?"

From what Ethan had told him, Giles guessed that she had been in labor around 24 hours. The books said 10 hours was average for a first time mom, but that 24 hours was still within the realm of normal. Thirty-six and forty-eight hours weren't unheard of either, but he wasn't about to tell her that.

He dodged the question, like he always did. "Just go back to sleep, Buffy. Conserve your energy." She closed her eyes, and her exhaustion pulled her into an immediate slumber. Her arms floated at the surface, her nightgown swirling in the water below them and sticking to her damp chest and neck.

Giles snaked his free hand over to snatch a dry towel. He tried to soak up what she had drenched him with, and then used the towel to line the side of the tub and hopefully catch some of the overflow before it landed in his lap the next time. The water was cooling again, and he should add some more

hot water, but he couldn't reach the faucet without waking Buffy. It was more important to let her sleep for now.

He placed his hand once again on her belly in preparation for the next one. He wished he knew how close she was, but he had no idea how to check for dilation. He doubted that Buffy would let him even if he did. There were some things that were too personal, even for a husband.

Giles had nothing to compare this to, so he wondered, just as she did, whether other women labored this hard or this long. It crossed his mind that this might be part of the slayer package, that her powerful muscles might make labor more difficult. If her superhuman metabolism was focused on the babies, then maybe she was contracting with the intensity of a slayer. The Watcher's Diaries all had huge blanks, and none of them described their slayers' delivery experiences.

Then again, maybe this was normal for some women. Maybe it had something to do with Buffy's tiny frame. There was another possibility he didn't even want to consider. The twins could be stuck. Dr. Michaels had said it was very rare, but that "locked twins" could jam together and fill the space in such a way that neither could get out. If that were the case, then without a Caesarian, Buffy would labor until she died.

He closed his eyes against that thought and let his head fall against his own arm, beside her. He was so tired now, too, and maybe he could sleep for a few minutes also before he had to wake Buffy again. In the four hours since he had put her in the tub, her contractions had slowed to four or five minutes apart instead of the previous two or three, giving them both more of a break between.

He didn't wake in time to prepare her for the next one, and it caught her halfway on the way up. The water splashing over the side as she bolted upright was what woke him. He blinked sleep from his eyes quickly and tried to help her, but she was already doubled over, stroking her abdomen and biting her lip. Her hand slammed into the wall, pushing against it with all her might as her head shook and buried itself against her own shoulder. He tried to massage out the tension from her back and shoulders, but she yelled at him to "Stop touching me!" and he knew she was at the peak.

She came down into his arms, and he laid her back against the tub, using this opportunity to add more hot water to the bath and to get the glass from the sink counter so he could make her drink. It was orange juice this time, because she needed not just the hydration but also the energy.

She smiled at him weakly and murmured, "I couldn't do this without you, Giles."

He smiled in return and smoothed the wet strands of hair from her cheeks and face. "No, I imagine you wouldn't be doing this at all if it weren't for me."

Buffy chuckled at that before she closed her eyes and went back to sleep. He mopped the water from his lap again and curled up next to the tub, with one hand over his son and daughter. He wouldn't fall asleep this time. He would stay awake, and the next one wouldn't be so bad.

But they were getting worse anyway, and closer together again. By eight in the morning, Buffy couldn't fall asleep between them anymore. She seemed to have drifted into her own world, so sometimes he had to say her name three times before she would realize he was there. Eventually, she asked him to sing to her. She thought it would help her relax. So he sang during the contractions, sang the song he had sung to her at Xander and Anya's wedding, sang some songs by the Beatles, even sang a Backstreet Boy's song that Dawn was always listening to. That made Buffy laugh to realize that he knew the words. Giles tried to keep her laughing. The pain didn't seem as bad when she was. So he sang her silly songs, and bawdy drinking ballads, and told her lewd jokes that she couldn't believe he knew.

Within a couple hours, he couldn't keep her laughing anymore, and she was clinging to him, begging to know how much longer. She wanted him to sing now not just during the contractions, but between as well. She said it helped her to not think of the next one if he was singing. So he sang softly

and constantly, even though his throat was getting sore. He sang relaxing lullabies and romantic ballads. She asked for the song they had danced to after marrying, and he sang that too, not revealing to her the pain it also carried for him now, how it reminded him of the last few days as he had mourned her.

He sang, but the whole time he kept one eye on the clock. They were three minutes apart, and then two. By noon they were a minute or less apart, lasting sometimes 80 or 90 seconds and sometimes coming back to back without a break. He knew she was in what the books called transition, and it wouldn't be much longer. He had to get her out of the tub. He didn't have the skills to try and deliver the twins underwater and in such a confined space, even though it probably would have been easier on Buffy. He frankly didn't know if he had the skills to deliver them on the bed either, but it would at least be easier for a beginner.

Giles gathered some towels in preparation and when her contraction passed, he ordered her firmly out of the tub. She was too far-gone to argue, and obeyed without question. Giles thought he could order her to stand on her head, and she would just do it.

He dried her quickly and slipped a clean dry nightgown over her, hoping to make it back to the bed before the next one. They made it only as far as the doorway before she was leaning against him and moaning. He caught her as she went down to her knees and held her and rocked her and sang to her as she began to cry and then to scream. They seemed so much more intense when she was walking or upright. They were probably stronger out of the water too.

After it had passed, he helped her up and into the bed, insisting that she drink some more juice and placing cool rags against her forehead.

Giles moved the clock from the bathroom back to the nightstand. 12:24 pm. Buffy had been in labor nearly 33 hours. But she was almost at the end. He would be a father soon.

She is not the Slayer. The Slayer could escape this, could defeat it. The Slayer would laugh and make jokes and scoff at her for being such a baby. She is not Buffy Summers either. Buffy has a past that stretches beyond this room and a future that will contain more than this pain. Whoever she has become has only this moment and the one that came before and the one that will come after. Whoever she is now has no memory of not laying here, twisting on the bed, listening to Giles sing to her, and watching as each tick of the clock slows way d o w n . . . a n d . . . t h e n . . . s t o p s . . . She hangs at the top and wonders who she has become. Buffy Summers is only the girl who did not think ahead to this moment. Buffy is the one who decided to have these babies, but whoever she is now, that woman did not choose this.

They seem to come in a steady stream of fire with no break. Giles tells her there is a minute between most of them, but it isn't enough time to even catch her breath before the next one begins. And sometimes there really isn't any break, and she can feel the next one rise before the last is even finished.

She is stuck between two such contractions, the next rising before the last has gone. Her fingernails dig into her palms even through the layers of bedsheets and towels; she is clenching them that tightly. And still the pressure builds, builds, builds, getting stronger beyond her ability to stand it. But she must stand it, because there is no choice. She cannot see the end to this pain. The intensity only climbs higher, like climbing a mountain and the top always seems to be just ahead, but you get there and realize that it's an illusion and the top is just a bit further ahead, and you continue on and on, the peak always dancing just a little further ahead of you.

She moans and begins to bang her head back against the headboard. Giles quickly puts his hand behind her and tells her she mustn't do that, she might hurt herself. She looks at him as if he is a stranger. He belongs to a world outside of this. He belongs to the Slayer and to Buffy Summers. Whoever she is now, he is outside her world, looking in. He does not feel this. He does not know her anymore.

"Keep singing," she orders him bitterly.

She doesn't know what he is singing. She hasn't known for some time. She only hears him far away in the background, and it is a small comfort. It lets her know that time is still moving forward.

And she has climbed to the peak of her mountain, her whole body trembling from the effort, her mouth open in a silent scream. But she does not scream. To scream, one must have breath.

It goes away slowly, and she is counting the seconds down as well as up, always afraid that it will begin again before it releases her. This time it does stop, and she lays back against the bed, panting and waiting, knowing she won't need to wait long before climbing the mountain again.

He says that she is in transition. She does not know what she is transitioning to. Is this the passageway that will lead to motherhood? Is this the doorway to some deeper mystery that will make her truly a woman? Will this buy her into that secret sisterhood who whisper together at parties and tell her she couldn't understand until she's had children of her own?

He tells her this is the shortest part, that it will all be over soon. He lies. He has been lying since the beginning, telling her over and over that it won't be much longer. But it has been so much longer than she could have imagined. It has been lifetimes. The longest lifetime has been since climbing out of the bath and into this bed.

It is so much worse out of the bathtub, without the water to cradle her and take some of the pressure. She could almost relax a little in the water. She looks towards the tub with longing, but he will not let her get in, and she cannot make it by herself. She hates him for making her climb into this bed.

He wants her to drink, but she will not. She pretends to sip, so he will leave her alone. If she drinks, she will have to go again. If she has to go, she will have to leave her bed. If she leaves her bed, she will have to stand. If she stands, the wave will wash over her while she does. If it comes while she is standing, it will be more intense. If it gets any more intense, she will surely die. It is already more than she can bear. So she will not drink.

He has stopped singing again and is talking softly to her while he washes her skin with the cool rag. She is so hot. She has never been this hot, and she has lived her whole life in California. One summer the air conditioner broke for two weeks during a heat wave, and still she was not as hot as now.

But the next contraction is coming, washing over her, folding her in two with the power of it. Her hands grasp the sheets again, her legs bending and straightening. He is not singing. He is talking to her, and she must focus to understand the words.

He tells her to relax. Relax, relax, relax. As if she is just being stubborn. As if she wants it to feel this bad. She is reaching the peak, wavering at the top, holding right there and shaking and thrashing and whimpering, and it's like sitting on top of the first rise for endless moments as she waits for the roller coaster to finally drop down beneath her. He tells her to relax one more time, and she snaps, "You fucking relax." He wisely shuts up, and the wave is slowly ebbing. High tide. Low tide. She wonders which this is.

And then, minutes later, in the middle of a contraction, she grabs for him and tells him she has to go right now. He tells her it's the baby she feels, but she shakes her head back and forth because it's pressing, pressing, pressing down *there* and then at the peak she has to *push* right now. He tells her to

go ahead and push, as if she needs his permission, as if he could stop her. And the wave passes, and she is laying back in the bed once more and panting and trying to rest before the next one can sneak up on her. She tells him she can feel the baby's head right there, and it must surely be halfway out. But he only wipes the cool rag across her brow and informs her that she will probably have to push for a while yet.

She pushes on the next one with everything she has, and it is like a birdcage turning inside out. The contraction leaves her with just the fullness, and now the pressure remains even after the pain passes. She asks if he can see the head, but he answers that it will be a while yet. But it *feels* like it's right there, she insists.

She pushes on the next one and the one after that. She keeps pushing and pushing, and it seems as if nothing is happening. She feels like she is rolling a boulder up a hill, and it keeps sliding back down as soon as she is close. The pressure remains unbearably strong between the contractions, and it means she gets no rest, but constantly shifts to find a better position. There is no better position, and he reminds her that it won't go away until the baby is out. And then another one is coming, and she grabs for his hand and pushes down into the pressure and begs the baby to come out, out, *out*.

She flops back into the pillows, gasping, and asks him what time it is. He tells her not to think about that and just rest for now. She lifts her head and demands, "Just give me the goddamn time."

"A little past three," he answers.

The number means nothing to her. She still doesn't know how long she has been pushing. She continues until he tells her it is half past four. The sounds that come from her mouth seem almost inhuman. She didn't know she was capable of such deep guttural noises and sometimes the pitch rises as the intensity rises until she is almost screaming through the pain, and he must bring her focus to him and help her lower the tone. Sometimes he moans with her, deep and resonant in his chest, and she feels the vibration where their foreheads touch and where he cradles her shoulders, and she can keep her tone deep and low as long as he is doing it with her.

Her body shakes with the effort and with the intensity. A little after five, and the pressure changes to burning, and he tells her he can see the head. Just a little more. The next one, and she is stretching until it feels like she will split open. Just a little more. Another, and still the pressure, the burning, the stretching. Just a little more. She is gasping, her energy almost gone. She is pushing with everything she has, and still it is not enough. This will never end. And she tells him she doesn't believe him. He is lying because he feels sorry for her. He has been telling her she is close for hours, and it will be hours more. But he takes her fingers and places them between her legs, against their baby's head. She can feel the wet curls of hair, and asks him what color hair the baby has. He laughs and says they won't be able to tell until it dries.

Then she realizes that it is a baby she is touching. Her baby. The next contraction comes, and she pants over it, pulling him up to her side, saying, "I can't do this. I *can't*."

He smooths back the hair that clings to her forehead and neck. "Just a few more pushes, Buffy. You're almost there."

But he misunderstands. "No, no, no." She is still panting over the intensity of the contraction, panting so she won't push, and she insists, "I'm not ready to be a mom. I won a goldfish at the fair, and it died after like a week. How am I supposed to take care of a baby if I can't keep a stupid fish alive?" The wave fades away, and she leans against his chest. "I won't know what to do when he cries. What if I drop him? What if he doesn't like me? How am I supposed to get him to do his homework and go to bed and not run out in the street if I can't even get Dawn to listen to me? And I don't know why the sky is blue or why dinosaurs are extinct or how far down the dirt goes. He's going to think I'm stupid."

He shuts her up with a kiss and holds her chin in the palm of his hands. "You are going to be a wonderful mother, Buffy. No one gets it all right on the first try. Everyone makes mistakes. But look how much you've done for Dawn since your mother died. You have more love in you than anyone I have ever known, and that is all these babies will need from you. Don't forget, you are not alone in this. We'll figure it out together." He kisses her again. "You are going to make an excellent mother. I have no doubt of that. You can do this. Are you ready?"

She nods, and he slides back to sit between her legs. The next one comes only a moment later, and she is bearing down with a power and force she didn't even know she possessed. The head is almost there, but the wave is passing, and she must wait for the next. She moans and whimpers against the incredible pressure and the fullness and the burning and stretching and the strange sensation of having the baby's head right *there*.

The next one comes, and she releases herself over to it, surrenders and throws herself into the eye of the storm. She pushes once and the head is free, again and each shoulder follows, one last time and her child slips from her, with an unbelievable sense of release. Giles tells her they have a son and lays him across her stomach. She is crying, and when she looks, she can see tears in his eyes too. He is drying the boy with a towel, and the baby begins to cry, his skin pinking up, his little hands clasping and unclasping, his feet stretching out and then curling under him.

"Oh my God, Giles, he's perfect." She is laughing and crying at the same time, tracing her fingers over the lines of her son's feet and hands. His eyes are open, and he is looking up at her. She reaches for his father and kisses him until he is as breathless as she. Giles lays his hand over their son, letting his fingers brush against the tiny cheeks, letting the tiny hand curl around his finger. He kisses her again on the forehead, and returns to his spot between her legs. He pulls something from the bag he brought and is clamping and cutting the cord. He takes a clean towel and bundles the child in it before giving him back to his mother.

"Let me know when you're ready for the next baby," he tells her.

She balks. "Even if I could get pregnant again, I have to tell you that this is a one shot deal, Mister."

He chuckles. "I was referring to the second baby you still have inside you. Tell me when you feel the need to push again."

"I have to do it again?" she wails. "Isn't one enough?" She looks down at the baby in her arms, so tiny, so perfect. She can see a little of herself, a little of what Dawn looked like as a baby, her mother's forehead, and some of Giles' features as well. She passes the baby to his father, and he holds his son against his chest until she tells him that she feels the next contraction. He lays the baby down out of the way, and they start all over again.

5:17pm was the exact moment his son came into the world. The boy's first cry brought tears to Giles' eyes and filled a space he didn't even know was empty. He thought he did pretty well for his first attempt at delivering a baby. The child was squirming and turning pink within minutes. Of course, Buffy had done most of the work. Poor girl had labored for nearly 38 hours, had pushed for over three. She was crying now with joy, but he could still see the total exhaustion in her face. And she wasn't finished yet. Neither was he. The next one would be trickier, would require more help on his part, and he mentally reviewed Dr. Michaels' instructions as he towed off his son. He clamped and cut the umbilical cord, knowing that if he did it wrong, Buffy would lose blood as the second twin came.

And then he was holding his son in his arms for the very first time. He guessed the boy couldn't weigh much over five pounds. It looked like he might have Buffy's blue eyes after all, but Giles remembered reading somewhere that all babies had blue eyes in the beginning.

Buffy called for him again, even as she curled up and bore down. He set the baby on the bed out of the way and waited for his daughter. Dr. Michaels had said the second twin would come much faster, in normal births within 15 or 20 minutes of the first. He was right, because in less than ten minutes, Giles could see her little bottom. He asked Buffy not to push for a moment, and from her soft whimpers and shaking head, he could tell what it was costing her not to give in to her instincts.

His heart raced, and he replayed the doctor's instructions three times before he carried out each action. He followed the curve of the baby's butt, sliding two fingers inside along the back of the baby's calves. Buffy howled as he did this, glaring at him as if she couldn't believe he was adding to her pain. He felt for the knees, eventually sliding his other two fingers inside to reach. Her eyes got even wider as he did. His thumb held the baby's bottom firmly in place, preventing any further progress.

Buffy was panting and her soft whines became more desperate. She must have been nearing the peak. He could feel her pushing against his fingers, and he firmly reminded her again, "Don't push."

"I'm *trying*," she wailed. "But you're not helping. Whatever you're doing, it feels really weird. Not to mention *hurts*."

"I'm getting the baby's legs," he informed her. His fingers gained a solid grasp on the knees, and he wriggled the legs free, unfolding the child from Buffy's body. Her contraction had passed by then, though, so he would have to wait for the next before he could finish. He cradled the lower half of the infant's body in his hand, trying to keep the weight from cutting off the precious flow of oxygen through the cord. The girl's legs curled up and kicked out in his hand, and he smiled. So far, so good.

"Buffy." She had slipped into her own world again, and he had to say her name four times before he had her attention. "This is important. On the next one, push with everything you've got."

"Instead of all the other times when I was holding back?" she retorted sarcastically.

"Yes, well, we have to get her out in one go or her oxygen's likely to get cut off. I'll help you."

Giles placed his free hand at the top of her stomach and waited for the next contraction to begin. As it started, Buffy took a deep breath, tucked her chin to her chest, pulled her knees up, and bore down. The moment she did, he pressed down on the top of her stomach with his own hand, adding his force to hers.

"Owww!" she screamed at him. "You can stop helping me!"

"Keep pushing, Buffy," he told her. "The shoulders are out. Now just the head."

He continued to push down with her, and she howled in pain. "Stop it right now! You're hurting me!" She tried to shove his hand off of her, but he held firm.

"Come on, Buffy," he urged her. "Just a little more."

One more push, and he caught the girl as she was born. Buffy collapsed back against the bed, but Giles had eyes only for his daughter.

Something was wrong.

Her feet and hands scrunched up close to her body, but she made no effort to breathe or cry.

Don't panic, Giles, he thought to himself. *She's still getting oxygen through the cord. You have time.*

He grabbed a towel and vigorously rubbed the baby from head to toe, trying to stimulate her first breath. He swept one finger in her mouth to clear the passage. She wouldn't breathe.

"What's wrong, Giles?" Buffy asked weakly. "Why isn't she crying?"

He looked up to try and reassure her, and that's when he saw it. Blood soaking into the sheets and towels between her legs. Too much of it. He looked back and forth between his wife and daughter. He didn't know how to help either of them. He turned to the video camera in desperation. "For the love of God, Ethan, send us a doctor!"

"Giles, what is it?" Buffy's voice was panicked, but she lacked the strength to rise off the bed.

"Just lie still, Buffy. Rest." Buffy was crying, and now his son was wailing as well. But there was no answering sound from the girl. *CPR*, he remembered. *You know this. You can do this.*

Giles lifted his daughter. Barely five pounds, she fit completely in both hands. He bent over her, covered her mouth and nose with his lips, and breathed for her. Small puffs of air, and he saw her chest rise and fall with each one. The cord had stopped beating, now she was getting all of her air from him. Six or seven breaths, which felt like hours, and then the baby shuddered in his hands and began to cry. She curled herself into a tight little ball and howled her protest at leaving the comfort of her mother's womb.

Giles breathed a sigh of relief and leaned his forehead down to touch hers. Her tiny hands waved through the air, and her keening wail turned into hiccupping sobs. "Shhh, Little One," he soothed. "You gave your father quite a scare."

"Let me see her," Buffy whispered.

He turned to his wife and saw that there was even more blood than just a few moments ago. He didn't know how to stop it. He laid his daughter on a clean towel, clamped and cut her cord as he had his son's, and bundled her tight before passing the baby up to Buffy. He took their son and placed him in her arms as well.

"They're both perfect," she murmured solemnly.

"Yes," he agreed, still watching the blood slowly flow from his wife. The afterbirth hadn't come yet. The doctor had said hemorrhage was a risk with twins. *Nothing to be concerned about*, he had told them, *a little Pitocin should fix whatever problems she might have*. Except that Giles didn't have any damn Pitocin.

Her legs were shaking, and her voice was faint when she told him, "Giles, I'm cold."

He took a blanket and covered her and their twins. He smiled sadly and kissed her gently on the mouth. "The afterbirth hasn't come yet, Buffy. Let me know if you feel like you have to push again."

She nodded and relaxed into the pillows, her eyes half open. Giles returned to his position, watching the circle of blood continually expand outwards across the sheets between her legs. How much blood could she lose? After all this, would he really be forced to sit here and watch Buffy bleed to death? Could Fate be so cruel?

"Giles," she whispered.

"Now?" he asked, but even as he asked it, he saw that she was looking past him. He turned to follow her stare, and that's when he saw Ethan and the two other men beside him. He hoped one of them might be a doctor, but he doubted it.

"Ethan," Giles pleaded. "You were my friend once."

"Mr. Rayne has only the smallest part in this," the older man beside him said. "And he will follow my orders at this particular moment. So let us leave him out of this conversation for right now. Let us talk, just you and I, Mr. Giles."

The white haired gentleman approached, leaning heavily against an ornate wood cane. Any hope for heroics that Giles might have had were quickly dashed when the man beside Ethan drew a revolver from his belt and leveled it at the Watcher. Ethan shrugged, as if to say *what can I do?*

The elderly man, perhaps seventy years old, more or less, neared the side of their bed. He smiled at Buffy and the twins. "Such lovely children your girl makes. I must admit you impressed me today, Mr. Giles. I never imagined you had it in you to play midwife."

The man owned a refined British accent, but Giles couldn't place the exact dialect, only that it was familiar. He had been away from home too long. "Am I supposed to know you?"

His adversary limped over on his cane, stopping directly in front of Giles. "I had been informed that watchers were prized for their excellent memories. Perhaps you should look closer."

Giles studied his opponent. The man had aged well, wrinkles across his brow and around his mouth and eyes. Thick, white hair. A build that was neither impressive nor weak. Dark eyes, long nose, and thin lips. There was nothing about the man that was familiar. At least until he smiled. The smile was all too familiar, and then the other features clicked into place as well. Giles hadn't seen the man in twenty-five years, and then only the once. But turn back the clock all those years and he would know the man on sight. He had certainly seen enough photos of the man before him.

"Everett Longworth?"

Longworth laughed and tapped his cane on the floor a couple times. "Good show. I knew you would remember me."

Giles heard Buffy's voice behind him. It was getting so much softer. "You know him, Giles? Who is he?"

Giles swallowed his guilt and looked away. "He's Randall's father."

"Oh," she said.

"Did he tell you how he murdered my boy?" Longworth asked, turning and limping away. "Did he tell you how there wasn't even a body for them to send home to me?"

Giles looked over to Ethan, but his old friend wouldn't meet his eyes. "Mr. Longworth, believe me, if my life would have saved Randall's, I would have given it. Gladly. None of us meant for that to happen. We did everything we could to save him."

Longworth began pacing, three hobbling steps in one direction and then three steps back. "Do you know how many detectives I had to hire? How many so-called paranormal investigators? How much information I had to purchase to discover my son's true fate? The coroner's report said he was burned to ash when a fire leveled your flat. But *you* set the fire, didn't you, Mr. Giles?" Longworth spun and pointed his cane at Giles. "You set the fire to hide what you had done, what all of you had done. Randall was all I had. His mother died when he was five. He was my only son. I don't know how he got involved in witchcraft and black magic. I suspect you might have pressured him into it, Mr. Giles. Before he met you, he only wanted to be a photographer. To walk along a street in India or China and capture simple pictures of people in their everyday lives. Instead, you got him to drop out of Oxford, got him to involve himself in magic and demon summoning."

"We never thought it would go so far," Giles insisted again.

"But it did. And it cost Randall his life."

Giles bowed his head in shame.

"It took me over ten years to piece together the story of Eyghon. And then I searched for all of you, but you had scattered. And you, Mr. Giles, some organization called the Watcher's Council had you shielded behind so much red tape I couldn't find you. In the end, I could only find young Thomas Sutcliffe. But in the end, that was enough, or at least it should have been. I had used my twenty years well, Mr. Giles. I could play by your game as well as you. You see, I was the one who summoned Eyghon back and put him in Thomas." Longworth laughed, stopped pacing, and limped back over to Giles. "I couldn't find all those who had killed my boy, so I summoned the demon to hunt you for me."

Giles stood and stepped mere inches from the older man's face. The watcher could feel the cold rage wash over and consume all his guilt and shame. He returned the older man's hatred now with an equal passion. "Thomas. Diedre. Philip. What we did by mistake, you have done three times over. You have become the very thing you condemn us for. Only we were never murderers, never killers. Randall's death was a tragic accident, one which we all regretted and wished we could take back. We were young and foolish and thought we were invincible. But when you summoned Eyghon, you knew what you were doing. You summoned him to commit murder on your behalf."

Longsworth's dark eyes narrowed. "Not murder. Vengeance. Justice. Poetic justice, actually, to send the lot of you to the same fate you sent my son. How you and Ethan escaped that fate was something that took a bit more research. And finding you took a bit more time."

"So now what? You going to kill me? Will that bring Randall back?"

A slight smirk twisted the older man's mouth. "No, I am done with killing. Ethan I have spared for his help in this matter. But you, Mr. Giles, were the one who actually murdered my boy. You gave up on him and put your sword through him. You see, money buys all kinds of information." Longsworth turned and hobbled towards the door, leaning heavily on his cane. He paused before exiting the room and faced Giles once again. "I won't kill you, Mr. Giles. I want you alive. I want you to suffer as I have suffered." Two other men entered the room behind him and walked towards the bed.

"You took my son, Mr. Giles. Now I'm going to take yours."

There was nothing Giles could do. The man beside Ethan had a gun pointed at him. One of the newcomers had a gun as well, pointed at Buffy. The second newcomer approached the bed and reached for the baby.

"No, please," Buffy sobbed behind him, clinging to the two twins. The hammer of the revolver clicked back into position, and she released their son.

"Take the girl as well," Longsworth added.

"Wait!" Ethan finally spoke. "That wasn't part of the deal. You said they could keep the girl."

"I changed my mind. You would do well to remember, Mr. Rayne, that you live by my grace alone. You say one more word about it, and perhaps I'll just have his wife shot for good measure."

Ethan backed down.

Their son was given to the man holding the gun on Buffy. Then their daughter was taken as well, and the two newcomers left the room, carrying the twins away from their parents.

Longsworth addressed the man beside Ethan. "Sulla, make sure he doesn't follow us."

Sulla only grinned and aimed his gun. He fired once, bringing Giles to his knees. The bullet caught him in the upper thigh, and he couldn't breathe for a moment for the pain. He leaned against the bed, holding his leg, feeling the blood run through his fingers. It was coming so fast, Sulla must have hit an artery.

And then the parting words before Longsworth and Sulla left. "Remember this day always, Mr. Giles, and know what my Randall's death has cost you."

Only Ethan remaining, and he looked between Watcher and Slayer, as if unsure what to do. "There's an ambulance coming for you and Buffy. Just hold on, mate."

Ethan walked out as well, leaving Giles alone with his wife. The door their children were taken through barely ten feet away and open now. But Giles could not make it even that far. He pulled himself closer to Buffy, still pressing on his leg, still trying to stop the flow. The pain carved its way up his leg and into his groin, down from the wound and into his calf. He reached for his slayer's hand. The blood was still seeping into the sheets beneath her, and her tears were becoming more labored.

"Giles, I'm so tired. I can't keep my eyes open."

He clasped her hand in his and laid his forehead on their joined hands. "Hold on, Buffy, just a little while longer. Help is coming."

They were both bleeding to death. She had a head start on him, but he was quickly catching up. His vision was already growing dark, and he looked down at the growing puddle of blood he was sitting in. When he returned his head to rest once again on their hands, she was watching him through half-open eyes. "Buffy, I swear to you, we'll find them." He kissed her fingers, and that was the last thing he remembered.

Chapter 7

Half-Hearted

Giles woke to the steady bleeping of the monitors around him. His sensations felt deadened, as if a blanket of lead covered him. He opened his eyes slowly, as if that simple act took everything he had to give. Even still, they only opened halfway.

He was on a hospital bed, hooked up to various machines that hummed and reported his vitals in soft beeps and clicks. His mouth was dry, and he tried to swallow. That was when he noticed the tube in his mouth and down his throat, helping him to breathe. It felt strange, as if he wanted to gag on it, but it was so far down his throat he couldn't.

He couldn't turn his head, only his eyes, but he saw Xander sitting in a chair beside the window, reading a magazine. He watched his young friend for a couple of minutes before Xander noticed he was awake and pulled the chair up to the side of the bed.

"Hey, that was fast. They didn't think you'd be out of the anesthesia for at least another hour." Xander hit the call button for the nurse, and then slipped his hand into Giles', giving it a little squeeze. "How you feeling?"

Giles closed his eyes for a moment before opening them and meeting Xander's gaze again.

"That's right. You can't talk yet. Don't worry; the doctor should be in here in a minute. They had to put that tube in you while you were up in surgery, but the doctor said they could take it out once you came out of the anesthesia."

Giles gripped Xander's hand tighter, the watcher's eyes begging the question he couldn't put into words.

Xander smiled, as if he could read the older man's mind. "Buffy's fine. The others are all upstairs with her now. You were in way worse shape than she was. You lost a lot of blood. Doctor said if the ambulance had gotten there even five minutes later, you would have been a goner. As it was, they had you in surgery for like *hours*, man. You had us really worried." Xander ruffled his friend's hair affectionately, probably because he knew he would have never gotten away with it if Giles were well.

Giles closed his eyes and continued to hold Xander's hand tightly. Buffy was fine. He was fairly certain that he would be too. Now his mind was just spinning with how he would track down his children. Xander had said he'd been in surgery for hours. That meant Longsworth could have taken them out of the country by now. He would have to get on the phone to the Council as quickly as possible, pull in every last favor that anyone owed him. Longsworth couldn't have simply vanished. He had to have left a trail.

The doctor entered then, and Giles opened his eyes when his name was called. His doctor was a tall, lithe redheaded woman, who reminded him something of Willow in the way she carried herself.

"Mr. Giles, I'm Dr. Webster. I was the chief surgeon during your operation. I'm pleased that you're awake so quickly. Maybe the rest of your recovery will go as easily." She was at his side, studying the monitors beside him, flipping through the reams of paper printouts they had produced. She smiled. "Everything looks good. We can extubate you now, get that tube out of your mouth. Would you like that?"

Giles nodded slightly. The doctor moved behind his head and removed the tape that held the apparatus in place, curling one hand under his jaw and the other around the tube. "I want you to take a nice deep breath, and then exhale really hard. Okay? Let's go."

Giles did as he was told, coughing as the last of the hose came from his mouth. He licked his dry lips and swallowed. He tried out his voice, and it was quite hoarse. "I need to speak to my wife."

"What you need, Mr. Giles, is some rest," the doctor insisted. She gave him a drink of water through a straw. "You've just come off an eight hour surgery to repair your shattered femur and ruptured artery. Add in the sheer amount of blood loss, and you are quite lucky to be having this conversation with me. That bullet did quite a lot of damage. But if you listen to your friendly surgeon, who if I might say was at the top of her form when I fixed up your leg, well then in three or four months you might have only the slightest limp. If you're really lucky, maybe none."

"I don't have three or four months," he insisted. "I need to..." He swallowed again. His mouth was so dry. She gave him more water, and he continued. "Buffy..."

Dr. Webster pulled up a chair beside his bed. She leaned her arms on the side rail. "I have it on good authority that your wife is just fine. I'm sure as soon as her doctor says it's okay, she'll come down for a visit. But for right now, I would like to discuss how you are doing. Would you like your young friend to go or stay?"

"Stay."

The young redhead began to brief him on his medical condition, what they had done for him in surgery, what he could expect for his recovery. A metal plate in his upper thigh to hold in place the bone they had pieced together. A month in bed in the hospital. Another six weeks with a cast and crutches after that. Physical therapy after the cast came off. Giles was becoming frustrated. He didn't have time for this. Every minute he spent in this bed was another minute's head start that Longworth gained on them. In three months, he could disappear so completely that no one would find him or the twins he had stolen.

When the doctor finished her recitation, he asked to speak to Buffy again.

"Have you been listening to anything I've said? You're going to go to sleep now, Mr. Giles, even if I have to give you a sedative. We don't generally allow visitors in the recovery room so soon after surgery. I made an exception for your friend here, because they were all quite persuasive. But he will have to leave as well. In a few hours, we'll transfer you out of recovery and into your own room. And then tomorrow, if I'm satisfied with your progress, you may have one visitor at a time." She grinned wickedly. "Now don't argue with your surgeon. She assigns the duty roster for sponge baths. Your behavior could mean the difference between Carlotta and Bob."

Xander raised his hand. "About this Carlotta? Is she pretty? And do you have to be technically a patient...?"

"Xander," Giles groaned.

"Right, right," he muttered. "Married man. I have to keep remembering that. Maybe Anya and I will have to play—"

"Please shut up," Giles begged.

Dr. Webster chuckled as she rose from her chair. "Five minutes, Xander, and then you need to leave him to his rest." She exited the room, leaving behind silence and the steady beeping of the machines.

"So, G-man, can I do anything for you?"

Giles took a deep breath. He couldn't believe how tired he was. Just a brief conversation with the doctor, most of it quite one sided, and he felt as if he'd run a marathon. "You can tell me how Buffy is doing."

"Fine."

"You've said that already. I was hoping for a little more detail." Giles closed his eyes and took a breath to steady his voice when he said the next. "The babies are gone. I need to know how she is coping."

"I won't lie. She's sad. I don't think it helps that they put her on the same floor with all the mommies and babies... But she's doing okay. We got the whole gang working on how to bring them home. Willow's got the laptop in Buffy's room, trying to hack into Longworth's financial records and figure out where he might be headed. Anya and Tara borrowed books from the shop and are trying to find a location spell or something. So I think Buffy's pretty hopeful that we'll find them. Plus, she seems to be getting her slayer powers back. She's recovering from surgery faster than any of the doctors can believe."

"Surgery?" Giles exclaimed, coughing as the shout scratched against his sore throat.

"Oops," Xander said. "It's no big. Really. I wasn't supposed to say anything. Buffy didn't want you to worry."

"Xander," Giles warned. Even lying in a hospital bed, he could still make himself somewhat intimidating.

"Alright, alright, I'll spill. I guess they had a hard time stopping her bleeding when they brought her in. I think some other stuff went wrong. I don't know. I don't really get all the medical stuff. They did a little surgery, and now she's fine. Buffy says it's no big deal. She couldn't have children anymore anyway."

Giles closed his eyes and groaned. "A hysterectomy? Dear Lord, what have I done?"

"See?" Xander cried, throwing his hands in the air. "This is exactly why I wasn't supposed to tell you. Buffy knew you'd go all blaming yourself. She told me to tell you that it's not your fault. In fact, she prepared a little speech for me to read to you." Xander unfolded a piece of paper from his pocket and recited her words verbatim. "And I quote: '*Dear Giles,*'— She actually uses some more mushy words, but I'm not going to read those to you, because that would be too weird— '*If Xander's reading this to you, it means he keeps a secret about as well as old lady Thorton at her bridge game.*' —Hey, I take offense at that!"

Xander glanced up at Giles watching him intently before continuing on with Buffy's letter in a singsong type fashion. "*I want to pound it into your abnormally thick skull right now that none of this is your fault. I know you think if you hadn't been making with the Eyghon orgies, Randall would still be alive. And if Randall weren't dead, then his dad would have never come looking for you or taken our babies, blah blah bitty blah.*"— She actually wrote the blah blahs," Xander added, pointing them out on the paper for Giles, who only rolled his eyes and waited for Xander to continue. If Giles only had his glasses, then he wouldn't have to sit through Xander's leisurely reading and smart-ass comments.

"*The fact remains that Randall's death was an accident and not your fault. And that Longworth creep is just a sick freaky guy, who probably would have gone postal over something else, like a long line at McDonalds or the rising price of gas. We just happened to be convenient. You can't blame yourself for what he did. And no one could have done a better job helping me with the whole birth thing. Dr. Michaels said I probably would have had these problems in the hospital too. He thinks you did a pretty good job. And, yay me!, I didn't even need stitches.*" Ughh, I sooo did not need to know about that." Xander shuddered, before composing himself enough to continue.

"*So they had to do a little surgery. So what? It's not like I was ever going to use it again anyway. The whole one-shot-slayer-deal, remember? Not to mention that I would never repeat that experience in a million years. I'm fine, Giles, really I am. Super slayer healing powers now reinstalled, and I'll be out of here way before you. The gang's all working on the Longworth problem. We're going to find our babies, and you taking off on a guilt trip is not going to help us out in any way, shape, or form. What I need you to do is everything the doctor tells you to do and get better as quickly as possible. I'll come visit as soon as they let me. Love, Buffy.*" Again, the end was more mushy, but I'm not reading

it.” Xander folded the letter with finality and stuffed it back in his pocket. “There you have it. If I leave you here wallowing in guilt, Buffy’s going to have my head. So shape up, Mister, ‘cause I’m not looking forward to having the Slayer kick my ass now that she’s the Slayer again.”

Giles smiled slightly. “Tell Buffy thank you for her letter and that I look forward to her visit, but that I won’t feel better until we can bring the twins home.”

Xander stood and took a bow. “I shall deliver your message to the lady with all due speed. God, I feel like the go-between in some cheesy romance novel.”

The doctor poked her head in the room at that moment. “Five minutes are up, Xander.”

Xander smiled at his friend, patted him on the hand, and then left. Giles fell asleep while cataloging spellbooks and friends in various governmental positions. He would find a way to bring his children home. He would make it right again for Buffy.

Willow stared at the computer screen for long moments. After hours of her most skilled hacking ever, she had finally found Longworth, but Buffy wouldn’t like what she had found. Now Willow knew what went through doctors’ minds when they had to be all like “sorry we couldn’t save your loved ones.”

Buffy was stirring her Jell-O with a spoon, listening while Anya and Tara tried to cheer her up with an amusing story from the store. Dawn sat beside her in the bed, resting her head on Buffy’s shoulder. Down the hall a baby started to cry. Buffy looked up quickly, and then set her Jell-O down, pushing her tray away.

“Sorry, just every time I hear it, I think...” She trailed off, playing with the edge of the blanket across her lap. “Did I tell you how perfect they were? They both had the tiniest little feet and hands. He wrapped his little hand around my finger as soon as Giles put him on my stomach. There’s nothing like it, Will.” Buffy sighed and flopped her head back against the pillow, staring up at the ceiling. “I just miss them. I even miss them kicking me all the time and making me go to the bathroom like every five minutes. I can’t believe only two months ago we were trying to decide whether we wanted a baby or not. I know I used to be a big fan of the short pregnancy thing, but now I’m thinking nine months wouldn’t have been that bad. I would have had more time with them.”

Willow smiled sadly. “Are you feeling any better after getting a little sleep?”

Buffy shrugged. “Some. I’ll feel lots better when Xander gets back from Giles’ room. I just can’t stand this wondering how he is. But yeah, the sleep helped. I’m still a little sore, but the slayer healing is helping with that too.”

There was a pause, and then Dawn asked timidly, “What was it like? Having a baby? Well, two babies?”

Buffy kissed her sister on the forehead and wrapped one arm around her shoulder. “Not fun. And let me offer you a piece of advice, Willow. If you and Tara ever decide to have babies, if I were you, I would talk Tara into having them. Sorry, Tara.”

They all laughed slightly on that, and then the room drifted into silence. No one really knew what to say to Buffy to console her. Willow knew what she had to say, but she was hoping to stall as long as possible. Her time ran out when Buffy asked her, “So how you coming over there, little hacker girl?”

“Well, I think I might have found something.” When Buffy leaned forward anxiously, Willow shook her head. She didn’t want to get her friend’s hopes up. “It’s not a good thing. Last night, a few hours after you and Giles were brought into the hospital, a private jet owned by Longworth went

down over the coast of Newfoundland while en route to England. There weren't any survivors. They pulled out some bodies of the crew, but Longworth is missing and presumed dead. Some of the London papers already have elaborate obituaries printed for him. You know, local shipping tycoon, millionaire and sole remaining member of the illustrious Longworth family, yadda yadda yadda. He will be missed. He names some undisclosed family friend in his will to inherit his entire estate. London society is reeling after the sudden loss of one of their own. I think one of the articles even has a quote from the Queen."

"So Longworth is dead?" Buffy clarified.

Willow took a deep breath and met her friend's eyes. Did doctors get some kind of training for this? 'Cause really, she had no idea how to do this. "Buffy, the passengers included Longworth's personal secretary and her newborn twins, also missing and presumed dead."

"My twins? No, I don't believe it. He set this up. He wasn't on that plane and neither were my babies."

"Buffy—" Willow attempted gently, but was quickly interrupted.

"No! They weren't on that plane. It's like he did with me and the Jeep. You guys all thought I was dead, but I wasn't. He did that so you wouldn't look for me. See, this is his style. He set up the plane crash, so we would stop looking for our babies. But they're alive. I know they are. I would feel it if something happened to them. I would. So you just keep looking, Will. You figure out where Longworth *really* went, and then we'll find our babies."

The others watched Willow in silence, unsure what their response should be. Willow looked down at her laptop, ran her fingers over the keyboard. "Sure, Buffy," she said softly. "Of course I'll keep looking."

If Buffy needed her to keep looking, she would keep looking.

Ethan lit the candles that circled him one by one. So Longworth thought he could play their game, did he? He thought he could dip his fingers into the dark arts like one might audit a history course. He thought the magic couldn't touch him, couldn't taint him. But hadn't they all learned that lesson with Randall?

Ethan hadn't known the whole story until the moment Longworth had taken the twins. He had known the man was Randall's father, had known he was out for vengeance, and had known he blamed Giles more than any of them. Ethan had rationalized his own actions as a little chaos thrown into Ripper's otherwise orderly little life. Ethan had thought it might be somewhat entertaining to watch his old friend worm himself out of his predicament. Much like the fun he'd had in turning his old mate into a Fyarl demon. After all, Ripper always managed to land on top. Ethan had been so wrong this time.

He hadn't known that it was Longworth who had summoned Eyghon the last time, who had killed Thomas and Diedre and Philip, who would have killed the last two of them as well if he could have. Ethan knew in his heart that Randall would have never wanted his father's vengeance. Ethan knew, as Ripper did not, that none of them should bear the guilt for that death, that Randall himself would have never blamed any of them. Randall and Ethan had been much alike in their youth, and if Ethan had been in Randall's place, he would have assigned no blame either. Ethan would have seen it for what it was, for what he had always known it to be: the hand of Chaos shaking things up a bit for the mere mortals who thought they could maintain control over anything for any length of time.

Ethan worshipped chaos. Chaos was not evil. It was not good either. Chaos served both in equal measure. It was merely the natural state of the universe: to be wild and unpredictable, to let things fall apart, to unravel the threads of an event until it ends as you could have never expected. A butterfly could flutter its wings in China, and you have rain in Sunnydale. That was such a simple metaphor, which failed to convey the full breadth of Chaos. Chaos was what made you oversleep for work, and you cursed it, until you passed the accident on the road and realized that could have been you. Chaos was also what made it that other person instead, who maybe could have left five minutes sooner or five minutes later and avoided his fate. Chaos was behind battles won and battles lost. The Titanic went down because Chaos willed it. It was responsible for all the close calls as well as all the times you were caught red-handed. Bad and good in equal measure. It was sometimes called coincidence or luck, but those were just other names for the raw power of Chaos.

That was the draw for Ethan. He could start a chain of events without any idea where it would lead. If he turned all of Sunnydale into their Halloween costumes, and the Slayer became a helpless 18th century maiden, would she die that night, or would there be other factors he couldn't have foreseen? If he cursed the high school's band candy so all the adults who ate it became irresponsible teenagers, what kind of glorious bedlam might ensue? In that particular case, he could have never guessed that it would bring Ripper out to play. From the way he and the Slayer's mom had their hands all over each other in the factory, well Ethan imagined that Ripper should thank him for his handiwork. See, good and evil in equal measure.

There was another reason Ethan revered Chaos so, one that Ripper would never understand. In worshipping Chaos, Ethan paid homage to Randall and respect to the fates that took him. Ripper wanted to believe in order, in cause and effect, that everything had a meaning. Do this, and this will happen. They summoned Eyghon, and so Randall died. Thus they were all guilty. But that logic overlooked intent and denied Chaos. They never meant for Randall to die. Chaos forged his fate. Just as Ethan never intended to kill Buffy or Giles. If he had, well it would have been so much easier to slip the man some poison than turn him into a demon. That had been a tricky spell. The costumes, too. He could have cast a more deadly spell on the Slayer than give her that gown for Halloween.

Chaos was neither good, nor bad, and neither was Ethan. He served Chaos, and to those on the outside, it might appear that he switched teams an awful lot, but Ethan's conscience was clean on which god he worshipped.

Longworth summoned Eyghon with the intent to kill, and he succeeded. Thomas, Diedre, Philip, sacrificed not to Chaos as Randall had been, but murdered by Longworth. And now Ethan overcame his usual drive for self-protection, because now the balance had been skewed, and Longworth's perfectly laid plans were rapidly unfolding just as he had intended. Longworth thought he could control every piece in his little drama, he thought he could control the outcome of the events he set in motion, but he had never counted on Ethan. Ethan detested control. He did not delude himself into thinking he would ever have it.

And now, by all the gods that Ethan worshipped, he swore that Longworth would feel the hand of Chaos. For Thomas, for Diedre, for Philip. And yes, even for Ripper. The hand of Chaos might not have been as black and white as vengeance and revenge, nor as swift, but it was much more insidious. Even Ethan wouldn't know how this would play out, but that was the joy of Chaos. In the end, perhaps Longworth would best Ripper and cheat the watcher out of his twins. If the old man could still win after Chaos had its fun with him, then perhaps he deserved to. On the other hand, perhaps this would give Ripper the luck he needed to prevail. If so, then Ethan might find some amount of pleasure in that.

Chaos was neither good nor bad, and Ethan could not use it for either means. But Chaos was about to make things a whole lot more interesting for one Everett Longworth. And whether the outcome of that would be good or bad was up to the gods to decide.

Ethan bowed his head and began to chant. The candles circling him blew out. He called on his god.

Emily Lochter opened her door for her nine o'clock appointment. The secretaries in the waiting room were all gathered in a group, chatting and laughing. Emily cleared her throat, and they all looked up guiltily. The group parted, and Emily saw at the center a young woman and an older gentleman, leaning on a cane. They each held newborns, which explained the gaggle of gushing secretaries.

She stepped forward with a smile on her face. "You must be my nine o'clock, Mr...?"

"Mr. Hampton," he supplied.

She looked down fondly at the baby in his arms, a little sleeping boy dressed in a darling sailor outfit, complete with tiny hat. "What beautiful babies. Are they twins?"

Mr. Hampton smiled graciously. "Yes, they are. They're my grandchildren, by my son."

Emily turned to the young woman holding the other newborn, a little girl wearing a tiny calico dress and white lace booties. The infant was awake, her eyes moving across the waiting room of the law office, her feet and hands constantly in motion. Emily smiled at the young woman holding her. "And this must be their mother then?"

"No," the older man answered. "That is what I needed your help with. Perhaps we can continue in your office?"

"Of course." Emily Lochter led them in, shutting the door behind them. Her white-haired client limped over to a chair and sank into it gratefully, resting his cane against the desk. The young woman stood behind his chair, gently bouncing the baby in her arms. Emily sat at her desk and motioned her new client to begin.

"This is Jolina, the governess I recently hired." Mr. Hampton waved at the woman behind him, and then shifted the weight of the baby in his arms. "I'd like to thank you again for seeing me on such short notice, Mrs. Lochter. It is rather an emergency. I understand you arrange adoptions?"

Emily nodded. "My main specialty is mediating custody disagreements, but sometimes that involves arranging adoptions for step-parents and the like."

Mr. Hampton stared down thoughtfully at the sleeping boy he held in his arms. "Then perhaps you can help me with my dilemma. You see my son died some months back, before he ever got to see his children. He was murdered."

She gasped. "I'm so terribly sorry."

He accepted her sympathies with a tilt of the head. "Thankfully they caught the man who did it. I guess whoever said you can't get justice anymore wasn't giving the American legal system its due."

"You're English?" she asked, guessing from the accent.

"Yes, although my daughter-in-law was American. They lived here in the States. Tragically, she died giving birth to my twin grandchildren. She was alone in the world after my son's death, so now I am the only family these babies have left."

"I'm so sorry for your loss," she said again.

"Mrs. Lochter, I need to make whatever legal arrangements are necessary for these children. I am in somewhat of a hurry. I need to return home as quickly as possible. I have, of course, brought all the proper documentation: birth certificates, death certificates, my own identification."

"Are you going back to England?"

Mr. Hampton shook his head wearily. "I have purchased a home elsewhere. The cold, rainy weather is more trying on my old bones than it was in my youth. But still, I will need to leave the country as soon as possible."

Emily glanced over the paperwork he passed her. Everything seemed to be in order. "Only a day old? I must say, you are in a hurry. And the hospital keeps sending them home sooner and sooner. Well, let's see what I can do for you."

Just then, the baby boy started fussing. Emily smiled. She wanted a baby soon, but she would have to talk Rick into taking a break from Jet Ski racing first. They could never afford a baby if she stopped working, not if he continued to pour his money into that passion. "May I?" she asked.

Mr. Hampton held out the boy for her, and she came around the desk to claim him. The baby settled down in her arms immediately as she swayed with him, just staring up at her, one little fist clenching and unclenching beside his cheek.

"You're a natural, Mrs. Lochter. Do you have children?"

"No. My husband and I have been discussing it." The boy yawned, and she couldn't help but laugh. He blinked up at her again. "My word, he has the greenest eyes of any baby I've ever seen. You truly have a beautiful grandson, Mr. Hampton. I can't get over how small he is. He can't weigh over five pounds."

"Five and a half, actually. Twins usually start smaller. He'll catch up, I'm sure."

Emily reluctantly passed the infant back to his grandfather. "What's his name?"

The white haired gentleman brushed his fingers across the baby's cheek tenderly. He said the name almost as a prayer. "Randall."

Giles finally flicked off the TV in frustration and tossed the remote onto his hospital tray. This was far worse than all those months he'd spent watching Passions with Spike. At least then he'd been able to curl up with a glass of wine and a decent meal. And he hadn't felt this ticking clock in his head, constantly reminding him that every second he was stuck here diminished his chances of ever finding his children again.

He heard a voice at the door and pulled himself into a more sitting position. Hospital beds were another thing he couldn't stand. They made rotten chairs, and he was always sliding down the raised back when he tried to sit up.

"Hey, there, visitor-getting guy."

He smiled as he watched the nurse wheel Buffy into his room. It had been two days, and apparently both their doctors felt they were recovered enough to see each other. The nurse left them alone, and as soon as he did, Buffy jumped out of the wheelchair and practically leapt into Giles' arms. He flinched slightly when she jostled his left leg, and she pulled back quickly.

"I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?"

"No, I'm fine. But Buffy, should you be quite so... so energetic?" He nodded towards the wheelchair, and she followed his gaze.

"Oh, that? That's just to make the nurses feel better. I'm mostly all healed, just a little sore sometimes. Dr. Michaels is trying to figure a way to get me discharged that won't seem too suspicious. I guess they classify it as major surgery, you know three or four weeks in bed. But two days and voila!" Buffy lifted her pajama top and lowered the waistband of her bottoms. There was now just the red scar below her navel to mark the incision. "A couple more days, and I'll be a hundred percent, not even a scar."

Giles' fingers reached out to trace the five-inch line across her lower abdomen. She swatted his hand away and rearranged her PJ's back to normal.

"Hey, now," she scolded. "No guilt-tripping. I told you this wasn't your fault."

He looked away. "Buffy—"

"No," she insisted. "This wasn't your fault. *None* of this was your fault. I won't hear another word about it."

He met her eyes again. She seemed rather determined on the subject. Her arms were crossed, and she watched him with a steely glare. He sighed. "Very well."

Her resolved expression transformed into a bright smile. Then she bit her lip and looked down shyly. "Would it be okay...? I mean I wouldn't hurt you if I just...? You know, just on your right side...?"

Giles extended one arm and motioned her up onto the bed beside him. She carefully arranged herself against his right side, her head pillowed on his shoulder and her fingers absently stroking his chest.

"You sure this is okay? I know Xander said they've got you pumped up with some good stuff. But even if you're feeling no pain, I don't want to accidentally hurt you more."

"I'm sure my doctor would frown on it, but I can't see any harm. I've missed you."

She tucked her head under his chin and hugged him tighter. "I heard you were especially missing me after I was kidnapped. Dawn told me about the Jeep in the river. My poor watcher thought I was dead again, and the babies too. She said you had a total meltdown."

He returned her hug just as strongly. "Your sister may be exaggerating things a bit."

Buffy lifted her head and studied him for long moments. Her fingers came up to trace along his brow and the contours of his face. "I don't know. Willow seemed to agree with Dawn's assessment." And then she leaned forward to kiss him tenderly on the lips. His hands slipped through her hair, cradling the back of her head and pulling her in closer. He had forgotten how soft her lips were. She tasted of hospital Jell-O, and he broke off the kiss with a laugh.

His slayer merely sighed and rested her head once again over his heart and below his chin. "I missed you too. I was going crazy locked in that room all alone. And then when it started to hurt, I was so scared of having the babies by myself. I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't come. I don't remember being scared after you got there."

"Good," he replied, his fingers playing with her golden locks. "I was scared enough for the both of us."

"You? I wouldn't have guessed it."

He chuckled. "You already knew I was a good poker player."

There was a long silence between them. Giles knew they were both thinking of the twins, but neither of them wanted to voice the unspoken fear lest it come true. Buffy took the plunge finally.

"You think we'll find them?"

"I know we will," he answered, also knowing that she would see his bluff for what it was. "Have the others found anything?"

Buffy updated him on their progress. She told him about the plane crash and how she thought it was another set up like the Jeep. Giles wondered about that. People actually died in the plane crash, and Longworth didn't seem quite so cold-hearted as to sacrifice innocents to an elaborate ruse. Then again, he had held Buffy against her will, would have let her labor to death if there had been complications, had stolen the twins, and had Giles shot in the leg. Longworth had probably only summoned the ambulance because Giles would have died without it, and the old man wanted his son's killer to suffer. If Sulla had given him a less serious wound, Giles would have been forced to watch

Buffy bleed to death before Longworth would have called for an ambulance. Or maybe it had been Ethan who called for it. The ambulance did arrive fairly soon after the others left. In the end, Giles had to agree with Buffy, and not just because he didn't want to believe that his children were dead.

So if the plane crash was a ruse, they needed to find Longworth's new name and where he was headed. Buffy brought him up to speed on Willow's progress hacking into the estate's financial records, which had so far turned up nothing useful. Whoever the undisclosed heir was must be Longworth's new alias. Unfortunately their prey had money enough for excellent computer security. Willow had been trying to breach it all day.

Dawn and Xander were scouring the Internet for adoption records on newborn twins. Willow had hacked them into some of the most likely private adoption firms, but there were a lot of records to pour through, and law offices didn't provide handy searchable databases for possible hackers who were looking for something specific.

Tara and Anya focused on locations spells. Most of them required something belonging to the someone you were looking for, which of course they didn't have. Tara thought they might be able to modify one of the spells to use Buffy and Giles as the key ingredient. But they would have to wait until they could sneak the group into Giles' room on a night shift, and Dawn would have to keep the staff occupied until they could finish the spell.

Buffy herself had contacted the Council and actually lowered herself to ask Quentin Travers for help in finding Longworth. Giles gave her the names of a few of his closer friends on the Council who might also be able to help. Dr. Webster hadn't allowed him a phone in his room yet, knowing all too well that he would start working and stop resting as soon as she did. So Buffy would call them on his behalf.

Giles also told her that they needn't bother looking for Randall's father in America or England either one. Longworth would have left the country as soon as possible and would be too easily recognized in his homeland. Giles suggested that they start looking for the man in other English speaking countries, possibly ones that had been former British colonies. When Buffy made a face, he explained to her that America hadn't been the only British colony. And then he simply sighed and said that Willow would know where to look.

After Watcher and Slayer exhausted all the possibilities for finding their children, they again lapsed into silence. Giles continued stroking Buffy's hair, knowing that she was aching for their babies just as he was, if not more so.

A moment later he heard her mutter "Uh-oh," as she crossed her arms over her chest.

Giles frowned and glanced at his slayer, but Buffy ducked her head down, not meeting his eyes. "What's wrong?"

"I... umm... I think it's all the talking and thinking about our babies, but umm... I'm kinda... *leaking*."

He smiled softly. And here he'd thought it might be something serious. He pulled her closer and kissed her on the top of her head. "It's nothing to be embarrassed about, Buffy. It's perfectly natural."

She sighed. "Yeah, well, I'd better go back to my room. Dr. Michaels gave me something so I'd still be able to nurse the twins when we get them back."

"A breast pump?"

Buffy studied him with a puzzled frown. "You know, there is such a thing as reading *too* many books. Sometimes it's just a little freaky that you know so much about this stuff. No one likes a walking encyclopedia."

He chuckled and brushed his knuckles across her cheeks. "I didn't hear you complaining when I was delivering the twins."

She laughed too and leaned into his caresses. “Actually, I think there was a whole lot of complaining on my part. Someday you’ll have to tell me just how big of a bitch I was, ‘cause really it’s all a blur right now. I remember that it hurt a lot and that it seemed to go on forever. When were they born?”

“5:17 and 5:35 on Sunday evening.”

She laughed again. “So exact?” Then her eyes widened. “*Sunday* evening? It was Friday when my water broke, and maybe about 3:30 or 4 in the morning on *Saturday* when I started getting contractions. Oh my God, I was in labor that long?”

“Around thirty-eight hours, I’m afraid.”

She laid her head against his chest again. “Maybe it’s a good thing that the details are sort of fuzzy. I don’t remember much. I swore at you, didn’t I?”

“Only at the end. And it was understandable.”

“Sorry, sweetie.” She gave him another quick kiss before she carefully climbed off his bed. “Well, I’d better go change before I win a wet T-shirt contest. I’ll come back and visit when they’ll let me. But I swear, your doctor is like a prison warden. Someone must have warned her that you were a lousy patient. She’s got it figured out that you’ll only rest if she gives you no choice.”

He only glared at her as she climbed back in the wheelchair and rolled herself out of his room. Really, she did exaggerate at times. Over his years as watcher, he’d had plenty of opportunities to play patient, and he wasn’t as difficult as Buffy made him out to be. He always followed the doctors’ instructions. Well, usually. And he only disobeyed when there were matters of grave importance at stake, like apocalypses and demon sacrifices. Which, come to think of it, happened quite often. Alright, maybe his surgeon had the smallest justification for her over-protectiveness. And maybe there was a reason the Sunnydale doctors took his car keys away whenever he needed to come in after patrol nowadays. Giles had always suspected the new ER policy applied only to him.

He turned on the TV again, flipping through the channels and looking for something that wasn’t a soap opera or infomercial. What he wouldn’t give for a book right about now. Or even better, a phone or even, God forbid, a computer. Anything so he could feel like he was contributing something to the search for his children. He stopped on a familiar show. *Passions* was on. He hadn’t watched this in a while, and, he rationalized, he had nothing better to do at the moment.

Friday came, and the twins were now five days old. The Scoobies were no closer to finding them, but it was Dawn’s 15th birthday, and they would take a break to throw her some kind of party.

The mood was reserved and the good cheer forced, even on Dawn’s part. Five days and still no lead on the twins. Buffy and Giles were beginning to despair of ever finding them, and the rest of the gang was losing hope even more quickly. They all gathered in Giles’ hospital room by special permission of his doctor, who quickly ordered Dawn off his bed when she climbed up beside him. Dawn waited until Webster left before returning to her position at his side.

Buffy relinquished her usual place to her sister (it was her birthday after all) and sat on the windowsill beside Tara as Dawn opened her gifts. Dr. Michaels had found a way to get Buffy released. He had first transferred her to another ward, because staying in maternity with all the babies was not helping his patient who had lost hers. He had fudged the dates in her file as he transferred her, so the nurses in the new ward thought nothing of Buffy’s hospital discharge only a couple of days later. Buffy had completely recovered from surgery, not even a scar, and in fact one would never know she had been pregnant a mere five days before. Her leather pants even fit once again, much to

her delight, and she gave bountiful thanks to her slayer metabolism. She still wore baggy T-shirts, however, since her breasts were producing milk and fuller than in her pre-pregnancy days.

Now the Slayer spent most of her time in her watcher's room, sleeping on the pull-out couch and letting Dawn stay with Willow and Tara. Giles attempted to convince his slayer that she would probably get more rest in her own bed at home, but Buffy knew he liked having her around. And with his room becoming Mission Control, he was feeling more included in the search for their babies.

Now, watching Dawn open her gifts as she nestled against Giles' right side, Buffy wondered if she shouldn't let her sister sleep on the pull-out couch with her. Dawn missed Buffy, but they saw each other everyday when Buffy would drop off or pick up something from the two witches' dorm. Dawn had seen Giles maybe once since his surgery, and it was obvious that the girl had been missing him. More than that, he had been missing her too.

Presents opened, and a mess of wrapping paper strewn across the floor, and it was time for cake. Anya displayed the birthday cake for Dawn, which the ex-demon assured everyone that she had purchased, not baked. After an off-key chorus of Happy Birthday, Dawn blew out the candles, laughing as they relit. She licked her fingers and extinguished the flames, but they relit again. She glared at Willow, who gave a sheepish grin, waved her hand, and let the flames blow out.

Even as the slices of cake were handed out, and the group seemed happy, Buffy couldn't help but think of her twins and wonder if they would get to have birthdays like this. Would Willow have the chance to keep their candles lit with a touch of magic? Would Giles be able to sing to his children on their birthday? Would Buffy be able to wipe sticky frosting from each child's fingers before they squirmed away to run off and play? Would Xander and Dawn gang up on the twins in a tickle fight, or would the three of them gang up on Dawn? Buffy sighed and tried to banish the longing from her expression before Giles noticed it. Too late. He gave her a sad smile from across the room, knowing exactly what she was thinking because he was thinking it too.

Birthday over, and Dr. Webster insisted they all leave Giles to his rest. Dawn kissed him goodbye, and Buffy had a flash of the last birthday, also in the hospital, when the girls had gathered in their mother's room to celebrate not only Dawn's birthday but Joyce's successful surgery as well. They had been so happy then, so certain that Mom would recover and share many more birthdays and Christmases and Thanksgivings. Buffy tried to push that thought from her mind, but her goodbye kiss to Giles caught him off guard with its passion. She only smiled at his confused look and took Dawn home for a little musical marathon like they used to have with Mom. A little Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Maybe a little Audrey Hepburn.

The days passed slowly, and then turned into weeks. The twins were exactly a month old when Giles was released from the hospital as promised. The crutches took some getting used to, and even more so, the cast that secured his leg from ankle to groin. Buffy mocked him in his baggy sweatpants and T-shirts, calling him Gimp despite his frequent protests, even as she waited on him hand and foot.

Neither Watcher nor Slayer would give up on their twins. Giles pulled in every favor he had coming, spending long hours on the phone with various old friends from around the world. Buffy hadn't enrolled in college for the semester, not wanting to start classes at a full and unexplainable eight months along, and so spent her free days searching through whatever computer system Willow had hacked the night before. The location spells did nothing, even with Buffy and Giles as the matrix.

Buffy's birthday came and went, but all she wanted were her babies back. She knew their friends were beginning to think it was a lost cause, but she would not give up. She knew Giles would also keep looking for as long as it took, and that provided her some amount of comfort.

Half a world away, Longworth was feeling the hand of Chaos. Subtle at first, he wouldn't notice it until it was too late. It had started at LaGuardia airport with a man reading the newspaper. He

happened to be on the page with an article describing Longworth's death in a plane crash, complete with a photo of the shipping tycoon at a charity function. He looked up in time to see the very same man walking through the terminal, looking for his gate. The traveler dismissed it as a striking resemblance, but it was enough to warrant a mention to his wife as they talked on the cell. She in turn thought it made an amusing anecdote to tell her boss, who in turn mentioned it in jest while emailing an old university buddy, a friend who had been watching Longworth's company stocks after the CEO's death. That friend in turn forwarded the email to another friend at the British museum who had only recently begun fishing for information on Longworth. Turns out the recipient of that forward was not only a curator of the museum, but also under the employ of the Watcher's Council. Six degrees of separation. That was how Chaos worked.

Chaos followed Longworth to his destination as well. As soon as he disembarked, a small child snapped a Polaroid picture and then demanded five dollars for the print. The old man refused and pushed past with some amount of irritation. But a tourist took pity on the boy and gave him five dollars for her picture and another five for Longworth's as well. When she returned home, she was perhaps a bit distracted while scanning her vacation photos and didn't notice that she had included the stranger's as well. Someone else who happened past her website noticed the photo of Longworth holding a small baby, and soon that found it's way to the Watcher's Council also.

Chaos continued to unravel Longworth's carefully laid plans even as he settled into his new home. The British ambassador heard of the wealthy Englishman who had bought a mansion overlooking the Mandovi River. He decided to pay a visit to his fellow countryman, perhaps hoping for some tea and hospitality and maybe even a little payoff for favors that could be done or strings that could be pulled. The ambassador was quite surprised to find that Mr. Hampton would not see him, and he complained loudly about it to his friends back home. Sure, he could hear the baby crying in the background, but that didn't mean the man couldn't agree to see him some other time.

Chaos was not swift, was not the sudden light bulb over the head and "Ah-hah!" of certain knowledge. Chaos could not arrange an anonymous package delivered to the Slayer's door or a neon sign above Longworth's house, announcing: "Stolen children here!" But over time, like water carving through rock, Chaos could make itself felt. A butterfly flaps its wings in China, and you have rain in Sunnydale. A phone call, a photo, and an ambassador, and five weeks after their children were stolen, Buffy and Giles had the airport they departed from, their eventual destination, and Longworth's new alias. A day after that, and Watcher and Slayer were on a plane to India to claim them.

Buffy hadn't wanted Giles to come. She thought Willow or Xander would be more useful, since Giles had only recently been released from the hospital and wouldn't be very mobile with a full leg cast and crutches. But he had insisted, saying the twins were his children too and he would see them safely home. It was his responsibility. He had brought Longworth into their lives. Buffy wondered if she could ever free her watcher from the guilt of Randall's death.

He did reluctantly agree that having Willow along would be helpful with the computers and the more difficult magicks that he couldn't do. Buffy added that another pair of working legs couldn't hurt either. So the young witch asked all her professors for time off, which was granted, and joined her two friends on their mission.

Willow provided a necessary buffer for the newlyweds on the long plane ride and even longer layovers. Giles could find no comfortable position to sit in, and Buffy finally convinced him to rest his plastered leg across the laps of his two traveling buddies. They hit turbulence during the final nine-hour leg from Paris to Bombay, and he actually reached for the painkillers he hadn't touched since before his release. That was when they realized the just-in-case medication had disappeared, was

probably stolen, sometime during their layover in France. Buffy's poor watcher was miserable for the duration of the flight, consuming several glasses of Scotch in lieu of the narcotics and gritting his teeth through every bump.

Buffy teased him by suggesting he do the Lamaze breathing and just *relax*. This was the part where Willow made a wonderful buffer, because Giles was not at all amused by Buffy's remarks, and in fact was more crabby than his slayer had ever seen him. She wisely held her tongue and withheld her "I-told-you-so"s and her "you-should-have-stayed-in-Sunnydale"s. By the time they were an hour from Bombay, Giles had turned very pale and was white-knuckling his armrest. Buffy took pity on him and rearranged their seats so she could sit behind him and massage the tension from his neck and back. His leg rested mostly in Willow's lap now, and she kept him distracted with inane chatter, factoids about India from a guidebook, and questions about spells she already knew the answers to. The plane set down roughly, and Giles gasped as each bump on the runway jostled his leg against Willow's lap. Buffy sent the witch ahead to refill his medication as she helped her watcher onto his crutches and off the plane.

Bombay was hot and crowded. If Buffy had thought the LA malls were crowded during the Christmas season, that was nothing compared to the press of people surrounding them in Bombay. She was somewhat concerned to learn Giles didn't speak Hindi, but he assured her that enough people spoke English for them to get by.

The threesome made their way to a small outdoor café near the airport, where they rested, drank chai, and ate samosas, while waiting for Giles' medication to take effect. He seemed to be right about the English, because the waiter was able to talk with them quite easily, but Buffy wondered if that would be the case further from the airport. Willow started her laptop, pulling up a map of the area and planning out their next step. They would take a bus a few miles to the domestic airport, where they would hop a plane to Panaji, Goa. They had reservations in a fancy hotel that happened to be directly across the river from Longworth's mansion. With binoculars, they should be able to keep watch over the estate. Buffy wanted to just storm the place and take their babies, but Giles talked her into the more cautious approach.

If her poor watcher had thought the airplane turbulence was bad, well it was nothing compared to bouncing along unpaved streets in an overloaded bus with a score of children running up and down the aisle, occasionally tripping over his cast until Buffy thought he would hit the roof. They reached the smaller airport in plenty of time for their flight, and Giles took another dose of painkillers. He had been doing fine without them back in Sunnydale, but after over 42 hours in airplanes and airports and rickety old buses, Buffy was ready to ask him to share, which meant he most assuredly needed them. Broken legs were not meant to travel.

They arrived in Panaji and took a cab to the hotel, again bouncing over every pothole and then parking with one tire right up on the curb. Situated on the west coast, near the Arabian Sea, the air over the water cooled the city to a much more comfortable temperature than Bombay. They drove past the beachfront and numerous five-star hotels, which seemed to cater to the European tourists. Only about half the guests in the hotel lobby were Indian.

After checking in and finding their room, Buffy sent her watcher immediately to bed to recover from their long journey. She and Willow sat at the window with a pair of binoculars, watching for Longworth and the babies on the other side of the river. Buffy screamed when she caught sight of one. A young woman was walking back and forth across a third story window, holding a squalling baby in her arms. Giles pulled himself out of bed and hobbled over to have a look as well. Buffy saw the smile light his face when he saw their child through the binoculars, and she pulled him down into a passionate kiss, which sent Willow out of the room to supposedly fill the ice bucket.

They took turns keeping watch, writing down who they saw in what windows and what times they saw them. By day three they had a rough idea of the layout of the house, its daily routine, and the number of staff they might expect to find. It was time to claim the twins.

The plan was to sneak in at night while most everyone was in bed, take the twins quietly, and leave undetected. They had seats booked on the very next plane and would be halfway home before Longworth would realize what had happened. It helped that the Watcher's Council had provided the necessary papers, so no one would question that the babies were theirs when they boarded the plane.

The Watcher rang up an old friend at the British embassy who was able to arrange a meeting with a black-market weapons dealer. Buffy and Giles obtained short swords and tranquilizer guns for both of them. Willow had her magic, but they bought a tranq gun for her as well. Giles also purchased a 9mm similar to the one he had at home for himself. Buffy worried about what he intended to do with it, but he assured her it was only for show.

They waited in the hotel room until night had fallen. Willow cast the first of her spells. She slid one hand against the bare skin of Giles' hip and the other against his ankle. Buffy poured a circle of sand around them and lit candles in the four corners of the room. A few words uttered in Sumerian, and then the sand poofed up into the air around them, disappearing like red mist and leaving the watcher's leg restored as if he had never been shot. Willow stepped out of the room to pack the last of their supplies, while Buffy cut the cast off her husband's leg. He stretched gratefully and itched along the length of his leg before pulling on pants that were actually real pants and not sweats. Buffy wished the spell could last longer, but as her watcher had often reminded her, the magical and medical weren't meant to mix. A reprieve of a few hours would be all he needed, and in the long run, it would probably be better for him to heal naturally.

They donned dark clothes, strapped on their weapons, and headed out the patio door and down to the Mandovi River. They had a boat waiting, and glided silently across to Longworth's mansion. They docked the small boat beside Longworth's larger one and crept up to the back fence of the property. Willow cast the second of her spells, dimming their presence so they could slip like shadows past the few sentries along the gate and hallways. They left her in an empty sitting room, focusing her energy to maintain the spell that would keep Watcher and Slayer unseen and unheard.

They found the third floor nursery in minutes, Giles immediately striding across to one crib and lifting the baby from it. But Buffy was looking around at her surroundings. The nursery was decorated in reds and blues, with a firetruck motif in all the trimmings. But there was only the one crib. Ethan had told her Longworth wanted the boy. Now where would she find her girl?

"Buffy?" Giles whispered.

"Where would he put the second nursery?" she asked.

That was when he noticed that there was no second crib behind him. He handed her the sleeping boy, telling her to go right while he went left, and they would search all the rooms until they found their daughter. Buffy only hoped that Willow's spell would be strong enough to keep them unseen and unheard as they split up and frantically opened and shut doors along the hallways of the third floor and then the second. The baby began to fuss, and Buffy wondered if the spell would be strong enough to contain the sound of a screaming baby.

"Shhh, little Rabbit," she soothed. "Please don't cry. Mommy has to find your sister before the whole house wakes up and catches us. If you're a good boy, Mommy will give you anything you want."

Buffy reached the end of the second floor hallway and still no little girl nursery. More importantly, Giles hadn't come down to the second floor yet. It couldn't have taken him that long to search the other rooms on the third floor, and if he had found their daughter, he would have come down by now

too. A sick, sinking feeling settled in the bottom of her stomach, and she raced back up the stairs to three and down the left hall where he had gone.

She entered an elaborate master bedroom, with gold plated doorknobs and a mahogany four-poster bed with silk sheets. The burgundy sheets spilled onto the floor where Longsworth knelt, a 9mm pressed to the back of his head and Giles' finger hovering over the trigger.

Buffy held their son close to her chest and whispered her watcher's name. He didn't acknowledge her presence, but spoke softly to the old man at his feet.

"Where. Is. She?"

Buffy could see the way his jaw clenched, like when he had put the sword through the mayor, like when he had pulled Ethan from the library table by the scruff of his neck, like when he had faced Angelus in the factory. He was not Giles now. He was Ripper through and through. Longsworth's eyes found hers, pleading with her, his voice shaking as he answered the man holding a gun to his head.

"I told you already. I didn't keep the girl. I only wanted the boy. The girl never even came to India with me. She's not here."

"Tell me where I can find her." Ripper's tone was steel, and he pressed the barrel closer, forcing the old man to bow his head.

"I don't know. That's the truth. I don't know where she is. She was adopted, and I don't know where she is."

Buffy could see her watcher's expression harden, smoothing into the same stone mask he had worn while suffocating Ben. "How unfortunate for you," he said.

She stepped forward and spoke urgently. "No, Giles, you're not going to do this. You're not what he thinks you are. You're not a murderer. You're not a killer."

"What would you know?" he snapped. "I have killed, and I can kill again."

"Randall was an accident. Ben was war. I know about Ben. I was in your dream, remember? Killing Ben was survival, was the only way to defeat Glory. If you pull that trigger, Giles, this will be murder. You can't do this. You don't have it in you. You have too much to lose. You have me. You have our children." Buffy glanced down at the squirming baby she held tightly in her arms. She continued desperately, trying to reach her husband past this dark remnant of his rebellious youth.

"What do you want them to see when they look at you? Because the man I see, the man I love, is a hero. You save people night after night. You save the *world* like other people make a sale. You keep me alive battle after battle. You *are* a hero, Giles. That's what I want to tell our children. I don't want them to *ever* find out their father shot a man through the back of the head like judge, jury, and executioner. No matter how much you or I might think he deserves it. You do this, and you'll be *exactly* what Longsworth thinks you are. You'll be a killer, and you won't be the man I love anymore."

The gun wavered, and then finally lowered. Longsworth began to weep like a child, twisting the sheets between his hands and rocking with his fear and grief. Giles' hand was trembling, and the pistol fell to the ground. Buffy quickly retrieved the 9mm, slipping it into the back waistband of her black leather pants. She pushed the baby into Giles' shaking hands, admonishing him not to drop the boy.

"Make sure Willow's okay. I'll catch up in a minute, and we'll go."

"Buffy—" he protested, but she cut him off.

"I have to tranq him, or we'll never make it back to the hotel, let alone out of the country. I'll be right behind you. Make sure Willow's ready to go."

She shoved him towards the door, and he left. She turned her attention back to Longsworth, who was still blubbering on the floor, his head dropped in his hands. She pulled out the tranquilizer gun

and prodded him with it. He jumped back against the bed, once again terrified for his life. She just let him believe it was the 9mm she poked him with.

“Everett Longworth,” she murmured coldly. “Do you know who I am?”

The old man merely swallowed and nodded.

“No, not his wife, not the mother of his children. Do you know who *I* am?” It was clear from his blank look that he had no idea where she was going with this. She knelt down to bring herself level with him, the tranquilizer gun still pressed against his side. “You knew he was a Watcher. What did you think the Watcher’s Council watched? I’m surprised Ethan never told you. You see, I’m not just his wife, I’m his Slayer.”

Longworth’s brow furrowed. He swallowed, still breathing heavily, still finding no voice to respond to her. Buffy grinned at his fear. She wouldn’t kill him, but he didn’t know that.

“You don’t know what a Slayer is, do you? One girl in all the world with the strength and skill to hunt the vampires, to slay the demons. My job description pretty much says I kill evil things.”

His eyes widened.

“Yeah,” she confirmed his fears. “I’d say a man who could kidnap a pregnant woman and steal her babies probably qualifies as evil. And you know what the best part about being the Slayer is?” Longworth shook his head meekly, and she answered her own question. “I don’t need this gun to kill you. I’m strong enough to rip your limbs from your body with my bare hands.” She stroked his chest softly with one finger. “I could push my hand right through your chest and pull out your heart while it was still beating. I did that once, only to a demon, and it wasn’t a heart so much as a uranium power core, but hey, it should work just the same.”

Longworth was shaking, and he found his voice. “Please, don’t hurt me. I loved your boy like he was my own. I would have given him everything. I only wanted a child to love as I loved Randall.”

“No,” she corrected. “You wanted to hurt Giles like you imagined he deserved. You want a kid? Adoption, buddy, look it up. You thought Giles killed your son, and you were after vengeance. Let’s not try to sugar coat this. Funny thing is, at the end of the day, you deserved everything you were trying to do to him. Giles isn’t the man you think he is. He’s a good man. He has honor and courage, two things you wouldn’t recognize if they were standing in the same room with you. You want to see evil? You want to see a killer? Go look in the mirror.”

“Please don’t kill me,” he whispered even softer.

Buffy’s eyes held only contempt. “And a coward besides. Not so big and tough without your hired goons? Don’t wet yourself. I’m not going to kill you. But what was it you told that creep before he shot my watcher? Oh yeah, make sure he doesn’t follow us. I gotta make sure you don’t follow us. So which one is your good leg? Or should I just break them both?”

Longworth looked panicked and tried to pull himself back tighter against the bed. Buffy halted him by grabbing one knee and dragging the older man closer to her. Her own knee came up with the force of a slayer and smashed the femur like a twig. Randall’s father howled in pain, and Buffy wondered if she hadn’t gone too far. She hoped Willow’s spell would prevent anyone else in the house from hearing the old man’s screams.

She leaned over him. “That was for Giles. This is for me.” She aimed the tranquilizer gun and shot him directly in the groin. He curled into a fetal ball, and as the tranquilizer took effect, she warned him, “You come near me or mine again, and I won’t need to stop Giles from killing you, because I might do it for him. You try to take my children again, and I *will* make an exception to the demon-only slaying rule.”

Longworth was slowly relaxing, his eyes drifting closed. Buffy made sure she was the last thing he saw. She waited a moment longer to be sure he was unconscious, and then replaced the tranq gun

in her waistband beside the 9mm. She dashed out, closing the master bedroom door behind her, and raced down to the sitting room to Willow, Giles, and her baby.

They were waiting for her, Giles absently swaying to keep the baby quiet, Willow still focused on her spell, and the baby solemnly staring up at his father. They slipped out of the estate as quietly as they had entered. They reached the boat docks, Buffy coming to a sudden stop when she recognized the man sitting beside their boat.

Sulla stood, stretched his long legs, and smiled at Giles. "Look at you, up and about. I thought I had messed you up more than that. Maybe my aim's not as good as it once was. Maybe I should get a second chance."

He reached behind him, but Buffy beat him to the draw. She held the 9mm steady, even though her insides were quaking. She had no idea how to fire the thing. Giles had never trained her to use a gun. She didn't know if the safety was on or if she needed to do anything before pulling the trigger. She hoped Sulla wouldn't notice her inexperience.

"Hands up," she ordered.

He obeyed with a smirk. "I saw this little boat pull up and wondered who was paying us a visit. Thought I would come check it out, wait for the owners. Never imagined I'd see any of you again. Now tell me, little girl, you really gonna shoot me? I don't think so. Especially not before I call the guards to come drag your sorry asses back in to answer to the Boss."

Buffy knew if he drew attention to their flight, they would likely lose the baby as well as their lives. She glanced over at Willow to make sure the witch was still holding her spell. Willow's eyes were half closed, her lips chanting silently. Buffy sighed in relief, knowing that they would still be unseen and unheard by anyone who wasn't specifically looking for them.

That moment's distraction was all Sulla needed. He lunged forward and disarmed Buffy, sending the gun clattering to the dock and over the side into the water. Giles stepped back, pulling Willow with him, shielding both her and his son from the battle. Buffy smiled. Sulla had made a gross miscalculation if he thought he could best the Slayer in hand-to-hand combat. Then again, he was probably as clueless as Longworth on that point.

Sulla tried to hit her, and she ducked. Again and again. She blocked some of his blows, and he clearly felt the impact. He shook out his arms, his eyes widening as he looked at her in surprise. Buffy merely shrugged as if she had learned that from a few karate classes. He came at her again, and she danced around him easily.

"Stop playing with him, Buffy," Giles scolded. "We don't have the time."

"You heard him," she said to Sulla. "I can't play anymore. I have to go home."

She took his next blow in her palm, and then spun to deliver a right cross right across his jaw. Sulla dropped to the dock. But he was still conscious, his hands rubbing the mark she had left. Buffy had pulled her punch. She kicked him once in the stomach, and then leaned over to disarm him of his own gun, which winked out at her from its holster across his back.

"I have to warn you, I've never used a gun before. So I'm really hoping I don't accidentally shoot you. 'Cause that would be a bad thing." She casually aimed the gun and pulled the trigger. It fired. Hmm... guess there wasn't anything to it after all. "Oops. And right in the leg. That's gotta hurt. I guess Giles could tell you about that. If you get a good doctor, in three or four months, you might not even have a limp."

"Buffy," her watcher reminded her, "we need to go now."

She tossed the gun in the water where hers had fallen while Giles helped Willow into the boat and then passed her the baby. Buffy withdrew the tranquilizer gun and knocked Sulla out before climbing into the boat herself. Willow held the spell until they could safely row the distance back to the hotel.

Giles continually watched the coastline to see if anyone had heard the gunshot, but Willow's magic was good.

Giles chided his slayer for her impulsive act. "You shouldn't have done that. You might have ruined our entire escape." This coming from the man who was going to blow Longworth's brains out. "How many times have I told you? Plunge and move on, plunge and move on. You should have taken the first opportunity to knock out your opponent and been done with it. And I can't believe you pulled your punch."

"Yeah, yeah," Buffy agreed, as she rowed in time with him. "I guess I just had this compulsion to shoot *him* in the leg."

Giles gave her a wry grin and let the subject drop.

"I tell ya," Buffy added, "If we don't find our daughter, I'll be wanting to come back here and break *both* his legs."

Giles bowed his head, but Buffy still saw the flash of guilt cross his face. "We'll find her," he whispered softly and said not another word the rest of the way across the river. He seemed to have drifted into his own world, rowing even after the boat hit land. Buffy had to call his name three times before he lifted his head, and even then he wore a dazed, defeated expression. Willow took the baby up towards the hotel, and Buffy had to urge Giles to follow. She led him up the embankment and through the patio door of their room.

"Hey, Will, can you go in the other room and call an ambulance for Sulla? Maybe tell them you saw something suspicious through your binoculars?" Willow nodded, and Buffy gave her watcher another look over. "After that, could you give us some time alone?"

"Sure, little Rabbit and I will be in the other room. But don't forget: I can only hold Giles' spell another hour maybe at the most. And our plane leaves the hour after that." The witch closed the door to their adjoining hotel rooms behind her, still carrying the baby in her arms.

"Giles?" Buffy sat him on the bed and softly stroked along his forehead and cheeks until his eyes focused on hers finally.

"I've failed you," he murmured. "She's gone."

"No, no, no." Buffy placed feather kisses along his cheeks and jaw. "We found our son. That's something. That's a start. And you didn't kill Longworth. That's a good thing. Tomorrow you'll agree with me on that. And we'll find her, Giles, we will."

He bowed his head to rest against hers. Buffy wrapped her arms around his neck and reassured him, "I love you, Giles, and you have never failed me. You have been more than I could have ever hoped for."

But there was only one way she could prove her love to him. She coaxed him back against the bed and slowly unbuttoned his black shirt. His hands stilled her progress.

"Buffy?"

She smiled as she leaned over to place a kiss on the tip of his nose. "Willow can hold the spell for another hour, and she's watching the baby. It would seem like such a shame to waste two perfectly good legs. Who knows when you'll get another chance to be on top?" She kissed him on the mouth, and he let her finish undoing the buttons of his shirt.

"It has been a long time," he finally conceded.

They came together with a quiet desperation. They carved out this small window of time and made it theirs, trying to forget in each other all the pain that had come before and all the sorrow that would come after. He moved above her, each touch a promise, each kiss a vow. He would find her, he would find her, he *would* find her. He swore it, not in blood, but in heat and sweat and passion. Buffy opened beneath him, and welcomed him inside her. She gave him absolution with her body and redemption

with each kiss. Time stood still for their lover's dance until their twin cries of release echoed the cries of their single twin in the adjoining room.

They remained entwined in their embrace for long moments, and she could feel him shaking above her. She said it again and branded it into his skin with a kiss on each word. "You. Have. Never. Failed. Me." She squeezed him against her possessively, showing him just a touch of her slayer strength. "You are my Watcher, my husband, my *Giles*. You are everything that Longworth thought you weren't, and everything I thought you were." She paused. "Did that make sense? It was supposed to be all dramatic, but I think it just came out confusing."

He chuckled and looked down on her. "How do you always do that? Make me feel as though everything will be alright? I believe that's supposed to be *my* job."

She combed her fingers through his hair and gave him one of her hundred-watt smiles. "It is your job, and you do it very well, Mr. Giles, but I should get to return the favor every once in a while."

He leaned down and kissed her one last time, sighed, and resigned himself to his fate. "Come on, Mrs. Giles, time to return me to my plaster prison before the spell breaks and my leg with it."

She dressed quickly and threw him his black button-down to slip back on. Then she rolled him onto his back and pulled out the supplies they had bought. She had watched the doctor do this the first time, and it had looked extremely easy. Ha. Things that looked easy never were. She focused intently, but tried to hurry, because with their little lovemaking delay, the hour was almost up. The baby cried periodically in the other room, and she knew she would have to feed him soon as well.

When she had finished, the cast was a lumpy mess, but it would hold until they got back to Sunnydale and Dr. Michaels could redo it for them. Dr. Webster would have a fit if she knew her patient had taken it off. Buffy turned to Giles with a proud smile, and that was when she noticed the mischief he had done while she was working on his leg. He had used her distraction to plaster up the toes that rested so unsuspectingly on the bed beside him.

"Giles!" she scolded.

He only grinned and said, "I was beginning to wonder if you would ever notice. You were quite absorbed in your work. Although, no one would know it to look at the finished product."

"Hey!" she protested. "I'd like to see you do better. Especially on your own leg."

He gasped, stiffened suddenly, and curled his fingers into the sheets.

"Giles? Are you okay? Is the plaster getting too hot?"

He exhaled slowly and shook his head. "No, the spell broke. It caught me off guard is all. For a moment it felt like getting shot again, but it's starting to fade. Not bloody quick enough, though."

"Does it hurt?"

He glared at her. "Why don't I shoot you in the leg, and you can tell me if it bloody well hurts?"

"Okay, okay," she said, fishing through their bags for his painkillers. If he would admit to it, then he must really be hurting. She smiled wickedly. "Just breathe, honey. *Relax*."

He rolled his eyes. "Not funny."

She handed him the prescribed dosage plus one, and opened a bottle of water for him. Just then, Willow knocked on the door. Buffy quickly covered her watcher with a sheet and told her friend to come in.

The redhead was bouncing the baby in her arms, but he was still wailing. "I can't trick him with the finger in the mouth anymore. He's got it figured out that there's no milk there. And I think he's pretty hungry." She looked towards Giles. "I hope you guys finished with umm... *everything*... You know the recasting. I tried to hold the spell as long as I could, but it was starting to give me a nosebleed."

Giles smiled weakly. "I appreciate the time you were able to give me."

Buffy claimed the screaming baby from the witch. He settled down slightly in her arms, and she smiled at Giles. "Look, he calmed right down when I took him. Think he remembers that I'm his mom?"

"Of course he does," Giles answered. "He lived inside you for nine... well for nine weeks. Granted, nine months does sound more impressive, but he still knows you."

Buffy sat on the bed beside Giles and laid the baby across her knees. He curled up tight and started to fuss again, making plaintive little wails and turning his open mouth towards his father when Giles stroked the boy across one cheek. She unbuttoned the top few buttons of her shirt, unhooked her bra, and held the baby to her breast, more than a little nervous about doing this for the first time. A breast pump was not a wriggling, screaming baby. What if she couldn't do it right? What if he wouldn't nurse after over five weeks of bottle-feeding? Her fears were quickly quelled when her son latched on and began nursing enthusiastically. His eyes closed, his lashes still wet with his tears.

Buffy touched him along the apricot soft skin of his cheeks and arms and little kicking legs. "Look, Giles," she whispered. "It's working. He's eating."

Giles laid one hand over the baby's head, and she leaned back to rest against her watcher's chest. She couldn't believe this tiny person in her arms was *hers* and she would get to take him home this time. Willow left quietly to pack the rest of their things, and Buffy continued to touch her son and examine him from head to toe as he nursed. Ten little toes attached to two little feet that pushed against her hand when she tickled his little arches. Ten tiny fingers that wrapped around hers with a strength that made her giggle. Two bright eyes that blinked up at her in solemn contemplation.

"Giles, look," she whispered. "He has your eyes. The exact same green. He's absolutely perfect."

"Just like his mother," Giles whispered in her ear, and then kissed along the nape of her neck.

"Feeling better?" she asked.

He nodded, wrapping his arms around both wife and son. "I think the side effects of the spell faded. And the drugs helped too."

The baby finished nursing, and Buffy passed him to his father, where he snuggled contentedly and started to drift asleep. She did up her bra and shirt and packed the rest of their belongings quickly, calling for Willow to help her carry everything down to the lobby. She left the witch to babysit their luggage as the Slayer made one last trip to collect her menfolk. She helped Giles into a pair of sweats and carried the baby as he hobbled along on his crutches behind her.

A cab to the airport with a stop on the way for basic necessities like diapers, washcloths, and some baby clothes and blankets. Again the short flight to Bombay, the bus to the international airport, and then a long wait for their plane home. Giles tolerated the travel somewhat better, pleasantly numb from the narcotics and holding his baby boy for most of the time. He stayed with the luggage and the baby while Buffy and Willow went in search of the baby supplies they hadn't realized they'd forgotten until the plane ride to Bombay.

First on the list were pacifiers. Buffy had needed to nurse the baby the entire flight to keep him quiet, which was easier done on a 45-minute plane ride than a nine-hour one. Giles had said the constant nursing probably kept the baby's ears equalized while the pressure changed. Buffy hoped a pacifier would do the same trick, or else they and all their fellow cabin mates would likely suffer through hours of baby's screaming.

She returned to find her watcher singing softly to the fussing baby, and he immediately passed the boy to his mother on her arrival. Buffy frowned, but Giles insisted the child was hungry, which he wasn't, but he calmed down as Buffy strolled around the terminal with him. She stopped at a payphone to make several calls and update everyone on their progress. The baby started fussing again

as she talked to Dawn, and her sister asked Buffy to put the phone closer so she could hear the cries more clearly.

"A couple weeks from now," Buffy said, "and you'll be a little less excited to hear him cry."

Her flight was being called, and she had to hang up and rejoin the others.

The plane set down, and Giles woke up, glancing around at the other passengers in confusion. He couldn't have been asleep for that long. He looked down at his watch; they had only left Paris two hours before. "Buffy, why have we landed? We haven't been in the air more than a couple hours."

Buffy smiled sheepishly, and he began to get suspicious. "Willow arranged a stopover when she booked the tickets."

He glanced over at the redhead, but she was concentrating on trying to make the baby laugh, to the purposeful exclusion of his questioning stare. Giles focused again on Buffy. "Where?" he asked, with some amount of dread.

"Spain."

Giles groaned. "That's hardly a stopover. That's a set up. Possibly even a conspiracy."

Buffy stood and passed him his crutches. "Dad's going to hang out in the airport with us for a little while and meet his grandson."

"How little of a while?"

She took their son from Willow before answering his question very softly. "Five hours."

Giles pulled himself up onto his crutches. This was likely to be the longest part of their 46-hour journey home. And her father was very likely to blame him for the missing granddaughter. Not that Giles didn't think he deserved the blame. He just didn't need Hank of all people to remind him of his failure.

They waited their turn to disembark. Buffy started to bounce the baby in her arms to settle his fussing as Willow gathered their carry-ons. Just as they started down the aisle, she told her watcher, "Maybe just before we get back on the plane, I could maybe tell him you're his new son-in-law." She caught his withering stare and changed her mind. "Or maybe not. Maybe that's a phone call thing."

Hank snatched his grandson the moment they reached the gate. The child took an instant liking to the man, even smiling and giving him little baby gurgles. Giles thought his son would have been a better judge of character than that.

"What's his name?"

Hank sat at a table near the food court, and they all joined him, his wife and daughter on each side, while Willow ducked out of this family time to go make phone calls to Xander and Tara. "We haven't decided yet," Buffy answered.

Buffy leaned against her father's shoulder, and Hank put one arm around her, still not turning his sight from his grandson. "Seems like only yesterday you were this small. And then Dawn. God, time goes by so fast. Don't waste it, Buffy. Don't make the same mistakes I did."

She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "So you're not mad at me anymore?"

"At *you*? No, never." Buffy spared Giles an apologetic look before her father grabbed her attention again. "Look, honey, he has the greenest eyes. You ever seen such green eyes?"

She touched the baby's hand softly, letting him curl his fingers around hers. "Actually, yes. He has Giles' eyes."

Hank scoffed at that, lifting the baby into the air a few times until he elicited another smile. "I prefer to think of it the other way around, that your no-account husband has my *grandson's* eyes."

Buffy gave her watcher a panicked look. "Husband?" she repeated timidly.

Hank had the baby curled against the crook of his elbow again, tickling the boy mercilessly. He answered Buffy's question while speaking in baby talk to his grandson. "The nice priest told your grandpa, didn't he? Yes, he did. He told me during the reception. And did your mommy even think that I might like to give her away? No, she didn't, did she? But I would have, even if I thought she was throwing her life away to spend it with your father. Even if I thought he didn't deserve her. Because all I ever wanted was for your mommy to be happy. Yes, it is. Yes, it is." Hank laughed then as the baby scrunched up his face, smiled, and made a sound somewhat close to a giggle. "You'll make your mommy happy, won't you, little...?" He turned to his daughter and admonished her, "You'll have to give him a name soon, Buffy, or I'm just going to start calling him George."

"Dad!" She gave him a playful swat on the arm.

Hank rose from the table. "Honey, would it be okay if I just took him for a little walk? Just around the terminal?"

"Of course."

After Hank was out of earshot, Susan reached across and grasped Buffy's hand, giving her a knowing wink. "I told you he would come around. Babies have a way of melting even the most stubborn hearts."

Buffy sighed. "Yeah."

"Give him a little more time, and he might even come around on the subject of your Mr. Giles. He *was* a little hurt that you left him out of the wedding. Well, after he was done being ticked off about you getting married at all. I actually had to remind Hank that he was currently dancing at his own wedding reception with *his* much, much younger bride, and that *my* parents were okay with it. I just wouldn't expect him to ever call your Mr. Giles 'son'."

Buffy laughed at that. "Thanks, Susan."

Her new stepmother looked down at her hands and continued shyly. "One more thing. It might be nothing. But I know you're still looking for your daughter, and it might be a lead."

Giles leaned forward, his attention caught. "Go on."

Susan glanced between them, and then pulled out a small slip of paper with a name and a phone number. "I have a lawyer friend in LA, who occasionally arranges adoptions. We talk on the phone sometimes. Her name's Emily Lochter. She said an older man came in about five or six weeks ago after his daughter-in-law had died giving birth to twins. It bothered her, I guess, because he had her arrange all the paperwork so he could be official legal guardian to his grandson, but he had her find an adoptive home for his granddaughter. Emily couldn't believe he wouldn't keep them both. He had money enough to hire help."

Buffy's eyes lit up, and she threw herself into Giles' arms. "It's her! I just know it."

Giles patted his slayer's back affectionately. "Thank you, Susan."

She shrugged. "I don't know if it's the same guy, but it might be worth a try."

Hank returned with the baby before too long, and Willow rejoined them soon after. The small group made light conversation for a few hours, consistently avoiding the topic of the little girl who was still missing. Hank wouldn't give up his grandson to anyone, allowing Buffy to take him only to nurse, and then claiming him again as soon as she finished. Hank even changed the child's diapers, which was more than Giles ever expected him to do.

Hank's mood seemed much brighter than the last time they'd seen him. He recounted tales of Buffy and Dawn's first days, embarrassing his daughter terribly when he confessed to Giles that they'd had a helluva time getting her to keep her clothes on between the ages of two and three. His

animosity towards Giles seemed to have lifted somewhat as well, and he even offered the watcher some advice about women and babies.

"Joyce was always telling me it was my turn to get up with the baby. So I'd just get up. Wouldn't be until the next morning that I'd realize she hadn't gotten up once. Buffy's liable to try the same thing on you, just wait and see." Hank paused for a moment as they announced something in Spanish. "They're calling your flight, Buffy."

Susan reached for the baby. "Can I hold him even once before they leave, Hank?" He passed the child over, and she carried him to the gate.

They milled around, waiting to board, Giles constantly adjusting his crutches beneath him. Another passenger came over to admire the baby, speaking in Spanish to Hank and Susan. Giles translated a little for Buffy, knowing she was feeling left out. Hank looked up at that, asking the watcher if he spoke Spanish fluently.

"He speaks like five languages fluently," Buffy boasted proudly. "He can carry a conversation in like another three or four."

Hank looked reluctantly impressed. Giles blushed humbly. "Yes, well, Spanish tends to fall in the latter category. I never used it enough to become completely fluent, although as Buffy said, I can generally get by with it. If we were talking about archaeology or the occult, I might even pass for a native speaker."

Hank seemed uncomfortable with the brief mention of the occult, even knowing that Giles owned a magic shop. The watcher wondered what Buffy's father would think if he knew his daughter was the Chosen One, the Slayer, the very reason they still had a world in which Hank could disapprove of his new son-in-law and then go home to his secretary-turned-wife and continue to neglect his family for the almighty dollar, or in this case the peseta.

The stewardess called for pre-boarding, first in Spanish and then in English. With Giles' broken leg and their tiny baby, they certainly qualified. Willow politely said her goodbyes and then boarded with their carry-ons. Buffy gave Hank and Susan each a hug goodbye, retrieving her son from her stepmother. Susan gave Giles a hug as well, and Hank actually offered out his hand. Giles took it awkwardly, balanced as he was on his crutches. The two exchanged some words in Spanish as they shook hands, and then Giles and Buffy boarded the plane.

As soon as they were seated comfortably, Buffy turned to her husband and asked, "So what did my dad say to you?"

Giles sighed. He was only surprised that she had waited until they'd gotten to their seats. "If he had wanted you to hear it, I'm sure he would have spoken English."

Buffy pouted at him as she adjusted their baby in her arms. "Come on, spill! You're not supposed to keep secrets from your wife. I think that's in the vows there somewhere. Just tell me, was it bad or good?"

Giles smiled patiently. "It was good. It was an apology of sorts, or at least as much of an apology as I'm ever likely to get from your father."

Buffy settled up against his side with a smug grin. "See? My dad's not always a total jackass."

Emily Lochter was with another client when her secretary buzzed over the intercom. "Shirley," she said with an apologetic look at her client. "I'm still with my two o'clock."

"I know, but these people insist that it's an emergency. They said Susan Summers sent them."

Emily sighed. Susan was an old friend, had been her secretary when she was just starting out in the offices across town, and if they were Susan's friends, she would make time for them. "I'm so sorry, Mr. Caufield. Would you mind waiting for me for five minutes? I'll be right back."

She stepped out in the lobby, where she was greeted with a middle-aged man on crutches and two younger women, a redhead and a blonde carrying a baby. The blonde looked very familiar. "Can I help you?"

"I certainly hope so," the man answered. "My name's Rupert Giles, and this is my wife, Buffy, and our friend Willow. Susan told us you might have some information about Mr. Hampton and an adoption you arranged for him."

Emily finally placed where she had seen Buffy before. "Weren't you a bridesmaid in Susan's wedding?"

"Yes," Buffy answered, swaying with the babe in her arms. "I was like hugely pregnant, though. With twins."

Twins. Emily leaned over to get a good look at the baby, who was awake and content in his mother's arms. He had such distinctive green eyes, just like the boy Mr. Hampton had brought in. "Oh my God! Are you saying that man stole your twins?"

Mr. Giles simply nodded, and Emily led them to a side conference room. "Wow. I never imagined. I did think it was odd that he could give up his own granddaughter so easily. But he seemed genuinely attached to the boy. I guess I just believed that it was his grandson. And he had all the necessary paperwork."

"We're not blaming you, Mrs. Lochter," the man on crutches insisted. "I'm sure he was able to make it all appear completely legitimate. We just want to know where our daughter is."

Emily felt a wave of sympathy for these people. To have their children stolen... She couldn't imagine what they were going through. And she couldn't help but feel guilty for her part in their tragedy. She wished she could just give them what they were looking for. "I'm sorry, Mr. Giles," she said, "But I usually only arrange adoptions within families. You know, stepparent to child. I had to contact a private agency to find an adoptive home for your daughter. I'll give you their name, and the lawyer I worked with, but private firms are notorious for keeping their adoption records extremely confidential. That's why so many couples use them. You might have to get an order from a judge before they'll turn over their records."

Buffy looked on the verge of tears and focused her attention on the baby in her arms. The man simply thanked her, took the names and numbers she gave them, and left with his two companions.

Longworth could not have anticipated using a lawyer who was friends with Buffy's new stepmother. That was the hand of Chaos. Ethan had set his spell in motion without knowing the possible repercussions it might have. It could bring the Watcher and Slayer closer to their children, or tear them even further apart. But that was the joy of chaos, in its unpredictability. So far it had worked both for them and against them. Through its trail of coincidence and luck, it had led the two parents straight to the man who had stolen their twins. But as Chaos often did, it threw them unexpected curves. Chaos gave them their son, but denied them their daughter. For Longworth did not have her. Emily Lochter did not have her. The private adoption agency did not have her. They had only a name and an address to give Watcher and Slayer. And when the two parents went to claim her, they found only more misfortune. The baby girl at that name and address was Hispanic and not theirs. The agency

pleaded computer error and misfiled papers and incompetent secretaries. The truth was Chaos had swallowed Buffy and Giles' daughter. She was gone.

Buffy, Giles, and Willow sat in the taxicab outside the adoption agency for long silent moments. Buffy could think of only one more thing to try.

"Where to?" the driver asked again with irritation. "The meter's running, and you're going to have to pay either way."

"The Hyperion," Buffy said finally. She met Giles' surprised stare with a determined one of her own. "If he can help us find our daughter, then you're going to swallow your pride and ask him for his help."

Giles turned to watch the streets pass outside the cab window. Buffy knew her first lover and her last could work together if they had to. After Angel had returned from hell, Giles had reluctantly taken him back into the gang, never again the friends they had been, but still cooperative colleagues. The watcher had even sat beside the vampire's deathbed in the very same room that had echoed with his own screams only the year before, sat beside his torturer as Angel slowly died from Faith's poison. Giles had sided with Buffy when Wesley had informed them the Council would deny the vampire his cure. He had hosted Angel in his home as a guest over Thanksgiving the following year, when the vampire had returned to Sunnydale without Buffy's knowledge.

Giles had done these things, because intellectually he knew that Angel had a soul as Angelus had not. Intellectually, he couldn't hold Angel responsible for the things Angelus had done, not for Jenny's murder, not for his own torture. And above all, Giles was an intellectual man. But Buffy could see it in her watcher's eyes when she mentioned Angel's name and every time the two of them were in the same room. Buffy knew that Giles' mind and heart were at war where Angel was concerned. She didn't blame him for it. She understood it all too well. Her own mind and heart had warred over Angelus, her mind trying to convince her that he was a killer and a demon she should slay even while her heart continued to whisper to her that some part of him was still Angel.

When he had returned from hell, whole and souled, she had felt peace. Angelus was no more than a bad memory for her, and when she looked at Angel, she only saw *her* Angel, who she loved. But Buffy knew that Giles would always see Angelus in those eyes, would always feel the primal jolt of fear, and would always return to those memories of the factory and the mansion. No matter how he tried to intellectualize it. Buffy knew that he would likely have terrible nightmares tonight, but it was a price she was willing to pay to find their daughter.

She stepped out of the cab with their son, Willow and Giles following a few steps behind. It would be the first time she saw any of the LA group since her death. She had spoken to Angel briefly on the phone all those months ago, but she had asked him not to come.

The hotel lobby was large and spacious, elegant couches and a wide staircase leading up. She approached the desk, leaning over to catch a glimpse of Cordelia in the back office. The phone rang, and she answered it.

"Angel Investigations. We help the hopeless... Omigod, Buffy!" Cordelia caught sight of the slayer halfway through answering the phone and simply hung up on their potential client. "Wesley! Angel!" she screamed, heading around the desk to greet the new arrivals. "Willow! Giles! What happened to your leg? And whose kid?"

Angel and Wesley came running moments later, probably thinking Cordelia was having another vision. They stopped short when they saw the small group from Sunnydale.

"Hi, Angel," Buffy said quietly.

"Buffy." Angel always seemed to say her name like a prayer.

"Come meet my son," she told him.

"Your son?" Cordelia exclaimed. "It hasn't even been nine months since you came back to life. God, Giles, you sure didn't waste any time."

They didn't bother to explain the Slayer heat or the short pregnancy. None of that mattered. They were here on business. Buffy watched Angel as he watched her. He seemed hurt. Wasn't this what he wanted for her? Didn't he leave her because he wanted her to be with someone who could walk in the sun with her, who could make love to her, who could give her children? He had hated Riley for being that man. Would he hate Giles even more for giving her the children that Angel never could?

"I didn't know you were coming," Wesley said.

"Neither did I," Buffy responded. She handed over the baby to Cordelia when she asked for him and stepped closer to her ex-lover and ex-watcher. "We need your help. We had twins. A son and a daughter. But they were stolen, and we've only managed to find the boy."

Wesley frowned, polishing his glasses just as Giles did. Buffy wondered if that habit was taught in watcher training. "They could have been taken by someone wanting a Slayer's child." He replaced his glasses and looked past her towards Giles. "Have you checked the *Rohannon Chronicles*? I think I recall reading about a couple different cults—"

"No, no, no," Buffy interrupted. "We already know who took them and why. We totally took care of that already. But the guy put our daughter up for adoption through some LA firm, and now they can't figure out who they gave her to."

Cordelia gasped. "The LA firm isn't Wolfram and Hart, is it? 'Cause those guys are seriously evil."

Buffy looked at her blankly. "No. It's just a small private adoption agency. I guess they're getting huge fines for shoddy record keeping, but that doesn't help us find our daughter. I thought a private detective might be able to get the job done. And hey, I just happen to know one."

Angel nodded. "Of course. I think I know where we might start."

The LA investigators took their new clients to a bar. Buffy thought it was a strange way to conduct business, but she didn't argue. The place was filled with patrons and employees of the demony persuasion. It reminded her somewhat of Willy's back home, except with class. A Chaos demon with a large dripping rack of antlers was standing on stage singing.

"Look, Giles, karaoke!" Buffy said brightly. Giles only groaned.

A green man with horns and the most hideous purple suit that Buffy had ever seen came over immediately. "This is neutral territory," he said to Buffy. "So don't go slaying any of my customers, chicky."

Buffy wondered how the man knew her so quickly. Outside of Sunnydale, demons didn't usually recognize her on sight. Before she could ask, the green man addressed Angel.

"So this is the infamous Buffy? Now I finally see what you've been mooning over. Not bad." He extended one hand to the slayer. "I'm the Host. Pleased to meet you."

Buffy shifted the baby in her arms and shook his hand.

"What a cute kid you got there, too. We don't usually get kids in here, as you might imagine. Angel, you didn't tell me your slayer had a kid?" he scolded.

"I didn't know," Angel muttered. "Look, we need your help. Their daughter is missing, and we thought you might give us a lead on where to find her."

"Twins!" the Host exclaimed. "Well, this should be interesting. I'll need the daddy to sing too. A duet."

Angel nodded towards the watcher, but Giles was aghast. "Sing?"

The Host motioned them further into the bar, clearing a nearby table of a couple lingering customers. "Go up to the bar," he told them. "They'll give you a free drink." The three from Sunnydale and the three from LA sat together at the table, the Host hovering behind them. He addressed Giles, sparing Buffy a few glances as he spoke as well. "Here's the score. I can see things, visions if you will, a little peek into somebody's future. But you gotta be singing for me to see anything."

"I rather think not," Giles stated plainly.

The Host shrugged, waving a waiter over with drinks for his new guests. "You want me to find your missing kid? Then I need Mommy and Daddy on stage singing together. You can't be any worse than Angel singing Manilow."

Buffy laughed, mouthing the word Manilow as she threw Angel an incredulous stare. He dropped his eyes down to his drink quickly. Willow giggled too, and Angel grew even more uncomfortable.

"He's really bad," Cordelia assured both women.

"Alright, alright," Angel snapped. "I thought we were talking about Giles and Buffy singing."

"Very well," Giles conceded with a sigh.

Watcher and Slayer rose from their chairs. "Angel," Buffy said, "hold the baby while I'm on stage." She didn't know it was possible for a vampire to pale, but he did. "Come on. You can't tell me in 250 years, you've never held a baby." She placed the child in his arms before he could argue further. She could feel Giles' cold stare boring into her back, but she didn't care. Angel wasn't going to hurt their son.

Angel smiled slightly, and then the baby began to kick and wave his little fists in the air. Buffy wasn't sure if he could sense the coolness of the undead hands holding him, or if he missed hearing a steady heartbeat, or if he could just sense vampires as his mother did, but her son began to scream in Angel's arms, and she passed him quickly to Wesley who seemed just as uncomfortable. Men. Cordelia and Willow smiled at her in silent collusion. The baby settled in the ex-watcher's arms, and he was just stuck with the child for the time being.

Buffy turned and followed Giles as he hobbled up to the stage. She didn't miss his irritated stare, and replied quietly, "Come on. You can't deny it. Part of you enjoyed knowing your son doesn't like Angel anymore than you do. Another part of you is really hoping he spits up all over Wesley."

Giles hid his smirk behind the song list, as he tried to decide what they should sing. Buffy begged him to pick something that wasn't opera and was maybe written in the last decade. He rolled his eyes when she pointed to Sonny and Cher's "I Got You, Babe."

"I was kidding," she insisted.

"It has to be something you both like," the Host informed them, startling them when he strolled up right behind them. "The words, the meaning, none of that's important. You just have to sing something you like, and I'll get a flash of what you want to know."

Watcher and Slayer finally agreed on a song, a showtune from a musical they had taken Dawn to at the beginning of the school year. Dawn had liked it, and Giles had enjoyed it as well, although he wouldn't rank it on par with any of the classic operas. Buffy had claimed to dislike it, but her mother had given her a taste for the old musicals. Surely from their collection of black and white movies, Giles could see that. Once, he had caught her listening to the CD Dawn had purchased at the show, and Buffy had finally admitted that she'd liked the musical too. Although, that didn't mean she wanted him to drag her off to the theatre every month. She'd much rather go to the Bronze.

Giles sat on a stool, and Buffy leaned his crutches against the wall. They each took a mike and began their duet for the green demon standing off to one side and watching them intently.

Buffy started alone, nervous, but hopeful that this would bring them closer to their daughter. "When I was a kid, I played on this street. I always loved illusion. I thought make-believe was truer than life, but now it's all confusion. Please can you tell me what's happening? I just don't know anymore. If this is real, how should I feel? What should I look for?"

She was grateful to stop singing and give Giles his turn. He really did have a much better voice than she did. He didn't even need to look at the words scrolling across the monitor. He had a really good memory.

"If you were smart, you would keep on walking out of my life as fast as you can. I'm not the one you should pin your hopes on. You're falling for the wrong kind of man. This is crazy. You know we should call it a day. Sound advice, great advice, let's throw it away. I can't control all the things I'm feeling. I haven't got a prayer. If I'm a fool, well, I'm too much in love to care. I knew where I was. I'd given up hope, made friends with disillusion. No one in my life, but I look at you, and now it's all confusion."

Buffy took her turn again, smiling at Giles. He reached for her hand and laced their fingers together, giving her a little squeeze to bolster her confidence. She did okay as long as she didn't look out into the audience much. And then she had finished her verse, and it was time for them to sing the last one together. Giles' beautiful tenor made even her voice sound good. Buffy thought they might actually be almost in harmony.

"I thought I had everything I needed. My life was set, my dreams were in place. My heart could see way into the future. All of that goes when I see your face. This is crazy. You know we should call it a day. Sound advice, great advice, let's throw it away. I can't control all the things I'm feeling. We're floating in mid-air. If we are fools, well, we're too much in love to care. If we are fools, well, we're too much in love to care."

The music died, and Buffy blushed as Willow and Cordelia hollered from their table. She turned quickly to pass Giles' his crutches, and then exited the stage without waiting for him.

She reached their table in record time and noticed the way Cordelia was watching Wesley with the baby. Buffy thought the two were just friends, having tried and failed at romance, but there was something about seeing a man holding a baby that really upped his desirability. She left her son with the ex-watcher for the time being. He was happy enough in Wesley's arms.

Giles sat at the table a moment later, and they both waited anxiously for the Host's advice. The green skinned demon patted her watcher on the back, telling him, "You got a good set of pipes on you, boy. I don't know why you were so embarrassed to sing. I could keep this place full if I had you in here every night."

Giles gritted his teeth. "I'm not interested in your comments on my musical talent."

"Right, right," the Host said, glancing at Buffy. "You didn't do so badly either, Slayer. Although, I hope your kids get their father's voice. You could send them on tour."

Buffy could see that Giles' patience was wearing thin. "Just tell us what you saw," he snapped.

The Host bristled and glared at the watcher. "You want the message? Let me tell it in my own way." He pulled up a chair between Wesley and Cordelia, looking straight across at Giles and Buffy. "You're not going to like the message much, I'm afraid. You're not getting your daughter back anytime soon. I see her as a little girl in someone else's house." He held up a hand to forestall their questions. "I didn't see enough details to give you any idea where. Could be LA, could be Canada for all I know. But you do get her back as a little girl. And from there, it could go one of two ways. I saw two possible futures. Dark and light. You might be able to keep her, which would be a very good thing. Or you might lose her again, in which case she would be raised into the ways of darkness. Through all of it, through her and both of you, I sensed the hand of Chaos. I sensed magic twisting

events. And whichever way it plays out, whether she will belong to you or to the darkness, I sensed that magic will be what tips the scales in either direction.” The Host rose from his seat, straightening his suit. “That’s all I saw.”

“Perhaps if we sang again?” Giles asked.

The Host grinned. “Feel free. I could listen to you all night. But it won’t buy you anything I haven’t already told you. The Powers That Be only send me one message, and it’ll be the same no matter how many times you sing. But I would like to hear you do Billy Joel. ‘The Piano Man’ is one of my favorites.”

Giles pulled himself to his feet with some amount of irritation. “Let’s go,” he told the others.

Buffy reclaimed her son, Angel thanked the Host as they left, and they returned to the Hyperion. Giles seemed to think the entire trip was a waste of time. Wesley reluctantly informed him that the Host had never been wrong to their knowledge. Even if it wasn’t something Giles wanted to hear, it did seem unlikely that they would find their daughter.

Giles turned on Angel with a cold fury. “You owe me. You owe me for Jenny. You owe me for every hour I spent at Crawford Street.” Buffy gasped. Giles never talked about it, especially not with Angel. It was one of those things people pretended never happened so they could stand to be in the same room with someone. But Giles continued, getting right in Angel’s face, somehow making himself intimidating even on crutches.

“You do this, Angel, you find my daughter...” His voice broke, and his gaze dropped to the floor. “Find her, and you’ll have a clean slate with me. We’ll be even.”

Angel nodded solemnly. “I’ll try.”

Giles met the vampire’s eyes again. They stared each other down for long moments. Buffy wondered what unspoken things passed in the air between her first lover and her last. Neither of them had ever told her exactly what had happened in the mansion on Crawford Street. She had seen some of the scars, but Giles would never tell her which were from Angelus and which were from his Ripper days. And he would never tell her how he got any of them. Whatever passed between the two men, who each loved Buffy so deeply, harkened back to that day spent in the mansion, back to words and deeds that both had tried to leave behind them. But Giles’ eyes now said plainly that he remembered all of it, and Angel’s answering shame revealed plainly that he did too.

“I’ll try,” Angel said again.

Giles accepted that answer and left the hotel. Buffy and Willow said their goodbyes. Cordelia held the baby one last time, and Wesley offered his congratulations to his former slayer. Angel merely laid his hand on the child’s head, and then leaned forward to kiss Buffy on the cheek.

“You look happy,” he stated.

“I am,” she answered.

“Good.”

Willow left, and Buffy followed, leaving the three figures from her past behind her. The May Queen and Reigning Bitch of Sunnydale, who had been first friend, then snobby social superior, and then friend again. The ex-Watcher, who had tried to take Giles’ place and failed, who had in the end swallowed his pride and allowed her to lead him in the fight against the Mayor. And the Vampire with a Soul, who had loved her from both afar and right up close, who had lost himself by loving her, who she had sent to hell to save the world, who had done the noble thing by leaving her so she could have the kind of life he could never give her, who she had once thought would always be the one true love of her life. She was wrong. What she felt for Giles had eclipsed whatever bright passion she thought she shared with Angel and had consumed whatever part of her heart she thought belonged to her first love. Now she felt only friendship for Angel. And pity for the knowledge that he still loved her.

Buffy and Willow passed a young black man as he entered the hotel. He stopped and gave them a second look. Buffy smiled. This must be Gunn, who she had heard the others talk about. She introduced herself as Buffy, and it was clear that he knew who she was too. But then the cab driver was honking, and Giles was waving for them to get in, and she said goodbye to Gunn as well.

Buffy heard a scream as she turned the lock and opened the door. Dawn came running down the stairs, hooking one hand out on the archway to slow her momentum and stop in front of Buffy.

"Omigod," she breathed, reaching for the baby boy. Buffy handed him over, smiling as Dawn walked into the living room with him. "He's so tiny. How much does he weigh?"

Buffy laughed. "I don't know. Get out the scale and weigh him."

She helped Willow bring in the luggage, sitting down beside Giles on the couch when she was done. The other Scoobies were circled around Dawn, admiring the baby too.

"He's got the cutest little feet," Tara said.

"He has Giles' eyes," Xander added.

"He is very small," Anya stated. "Is he supposed to be this small, or is he a runt?"

Giles seemed offended, and Buffy patted him reassuringly on the arm, before correcting Anya. "He's not a runt. Dogs and rabbits have runts. He's just a little smaller than most, because he's a twin, but he'll catch up. He's probably eight or nine pounds now, which is what most babies are born at."

"Oh," she said. "Can I hold him?" Dawn passed him to the ex-demon and newlywed. Anya stroked the soft hair on his head. She smiled when the boy did and touched his little fingers and nose. "He's so small and helpless. His skin is so soft, and he has a distinctive smell. I feel an overwhelming desire to reproduce and have my own short person."

Xander looked panicked and reached for the boy. "Okay, An, you're done holding the baby now. It's my turn."

Xander seemed at ease with the infant, and Buffy was somewhat impressed. She never pegged him as being good with babies. She always pictured him as more of the climbing trees and playing tag type of Uncle. She looked over at Giles, and he nodded at her to go ahead.

"So, Xander," she began innocently, "how do you like your namesake?"

"He's a lot cuter than I thought you or Giles..." He trailed off and looked up at the two of them. Very timidly, he asked, "Namesake?"

Buffy exchanged a smile with Giles before answering Xander's question. "We thought he should be named after you and Willow." She stood and walked to her friend, tickling her son under the chin as she said to him, "William Alexander Giles, meet your Uncle Xander."

"William?" Willow sighed with some amount of satisfaction. "Wow, guys, that's... Wow."

Buffy stood behind her sister, slipping her arms around the girl's waist. "When we find his sister, she's going to be Tanya Dawn, after the other three most important people in our lives." Tara, Anya, and Dawn smiled brightly at that announcement, and then fell back into a brooding silence as they each wondered if Buffy would ever find her daughter.

The Slayer saved them all from the silence a moment later, when she retrieved the boy from Xander's arms and told her friends, "There's one more person I want to introduce Alex to. I want to get there before dark, if you guys don't mind."

Giles took his crutches and followed her out. He held the baby while she situated the car seat in his BMW. "We need another car now that my Jeep is gone," she told him.

"Yes," he agreed. "And you need some driving lessons."

"Hey!" she protested, but he continued on.

"I'm quite serious, Buffy. That Jeep in the river scared me beyond belief."

"I wasn't even driving," she answered defensively.

"No, you weren't, but I've seen you drive, and the idea that you could put your Jeep at the bottom of a river wasn't so far fetched. For my own peace of mind, I'd just like you to become more skilled."

Buffy reluctantly gave into his demands as she belted the baby into the seat. Then she stretched out her hand for the keys. "Now's as good a time to start as any. You can be my first instructor." He hesitated, and she scolded him. "Giles, you can't drive with a broken leg. Fork them over." He did, and they arrived at their destination without incident, although Giles had marks in his palms from the armrest.

Buffy sat in the grass, Alex laid across her legs, his little hands trying to catch a dragonfly that kept buzzing in and out of his field of vision. She had her body turned to block the setting sun from his eyes, and she shooed away the pesky insect whenever it got too close. Giles leaned against a tree some distance away, giving them a little privacy.

Buffy plucked a few weeds from the base of the headstone and tossed them aside. Her fingers traced the lines of her mother's name in stone.

"Look, Mom," she said softly. "I'm a mom now too! His name's Alex, and he's perfect. But you knew that already. I know I haven't visited in a while, but you wouldn't believe how crazy the last three months have been.

"I know I'm probably too young for this, and I hope you're not mad at me for having a family so soon, but it was my only chance at a baby. One more drawback of being the Slayer. I hope you're not mad at Giles either. He's really a good man, and he loves me a lot. We both thought really hard about it before we decided on a baby. He was really great through the whole thing. Oh, and we're married now! It doesn't feel much different, but I guess I'm Buffy Giles now.

"I only wish you could be here to see Alex grow up, and make him hot chocolate, and watch old sappy movies with him. But I'll tell him all about you, and so will Dawn."

Buffy sighed and leaned down to kiss her son on his soft cheeks. "Mom, I have a daughter too. Twins, can you believe it? We've looked everywhere for her, but she was stolen and we can't find her. We won't ever stop looking for her, but I'm starting to think that we won't get her back. We have to build a life for Alex and Dawn, and we can't do that if we're searching for our daughter 24/7 forever.

"I guess I would feel better about it if I knew you were watching over her. She probably has a nice home with two parents who love her. She was adopted. I miss her, and I want her back, but I have to think about Alex too. So could you just... I don't know... Just be her guardian angel or something? Make sure she's happy and safe. I think I could be okay if I knew you were watching."

Buffy looked over to the setting sun. It would be dark in less than an hour, and she would need to get home before then. Alex was much too young to take slaying. In fact, he would always be too young to take slaying. She waved Giles over, and he approached somewhat unsteadily, his crutches sinking into the ground on each step. He placed a bouquet of flowers on top of the gravestone, not even attempting to bend over and lay them on the ground. His hand rested briefly against the granite.

"Joyce," he said. "I'm doing my best for your family. They're my family now too. But I'll never be able to take your place, nor would I ever try. You are missed."

Buffy smiled and wiped tears from her cheeks. She lifted her child to rest against her shoulder and stood beside her husband. They studied each other, no words needing to be spoken, whole conversations passing with a single look. She placed her ear over his heart to hear the steady thrumming, and he bent his head to kiss her lightly on the forehead. Then they turned and left the cemetery, walking towards the car and their home.

Giles nudged Buffy gently, but she only groaned and rolled away from him. He poked her in the ribs, calling her name softly.

“What?” she finally said, sitting up and wiping the sleep from her eyes.

“The baby is crying,” he told her.

She listened for a moment and didn’t hear anything. “No he’s not.” She flopped back into her pillows, but mere seconds later the wailing came through the baby monitor again. Giles nudged her once more. “I’m going. I’m going,” she muttered.

Buffy climbed over her husband, pausing as she straddled him. She glared. “You’re really milking this broken leg thing for all it’s worth, aren’t you? Let me tell you, I’m keeping count, and when you get that cast off, you’re going to owe me a lot of sleep filled nights when *you* can get up with the baby.”

Giles chuckled and pulled her down for a kiss. Their son cried even louder, so they could hear him even without the monitor. Buffy sighed and rolled off of Giles and out of bed, stumbling down the hallway. Giles heard her over the monitor a moment later as the baby quieted and she explained to the boy that his father was a lazy gimp. The boy’s father only grinned, settled deeper into his pillows, and returned to a peaceful sleep.

He woke when he felt a slight weight on his chest. Alex was looking up at him with wide green eyes, while sucking on one little fist.

“Buffy?” Giles asked groggily.

She climbed over them to her side of the bed, snuggling up against her watcher’s side. “I fed him. I changed him. I rocked him. He still won’t go to sleep. I think it’s time for Daddy to sing to him.”

Giles sighed and hooked one arm around Buffy, pulling her against his chest, and the other arm around his son, gently patting the baby on the back. Giles sang a soft lullaby until mother and child were both asleep. He kissed them each on the forehead, deciding to leave them as they were rather than wake Buffy to put the baby back in his crib.

He thought about how quickly his life had changed, each turn unforeseeable and irreversible. For years he had lived alone, content to be a watcher and defined by that destiny. When Buffy had died, he had found himself forced to play father to Dawn. And then Buffy had returned, had loved him as he never expected, and he was no longer alone. It seemed like they would be like that forever: he and Buffy and Dawn, living in the house and forming their own family. But Fate had decided they were ready for a baby, even if they might not have agreed. Buffy’s last chance at a child, and he had reluctantly opted to become a father for real. In only two months, he had not one child but two, both stolen by a ghost from his past.

That’s all that Longworth was now. A ghost. Buffy wanted to believe that her beloved watcher was not a murderer, so he would let her believe that. But Giles knew better. Even Tara had known better, when her insanity had allowed her to see through illusion and self-deception straight to the core of naked truth. She had called him a killer, and she was right. He had killed, not once, not twice, not thrice, but four times. Randall. Ben. Longworth. Sulla. Buffy might have stopped his hand, but Giles could kill with a phone call as easily as a 9mm. He had pulled in one last favor from a friend on the Council, who had ordered Weatherby and two other special ops to finish the job Buffy had stopped Giles from doing. Longworth and Sulla’s bodies would turn up near the plane wreck he had engineered over Newfoundland, and that would be the end of the mystery. To protect Buffy. To protect his son and his daughter. To protect them, Giles could kill.

Alex squirmed on his chest, and Giles sang softly for a moment until the baby stilled. Becoming a father was perhaps the biggest change in his life, especially without the time that most men got to accustom themselves to the idea. Two months, and he had twins. And a wife.

Giles knew he should be happy. He had Buffy and their son, but he still felt as if half his heart belonged with the daughter he had held for scarce minutes. He felt the weight of his wife and child against his chest and wondered how arms that were so full could still feel so empty. His daughter had disappeared into an endless sea of strangers, and Giles knew that half his heart would remain with her always. He traced the tiny fingers with his own, eliciting a small shudder from the sleeping boy before the baby shook his head and cuddled up closer. Giles kissed the child again, and then closed his own eyes. He drifted to sleep and dreamt of a daughter with Buffy's blue eyes.

She stirred when she heard the baby crying. She climbed over her sleeping husband and staggered to the nursery for the fourth time that night. The child quieted when lifted from the crib, and she hoped that she could simply rock the baby back to sleep. She felt her husband's arms slide around her waist, and she smiled.

"What are you doing out of bed?"

"I thought I should take a turn," he answered in his deep voice.

She passed the fussing baby to him and made her way back to bed, pausing in the doorway to watch father and child together. He swayed until the fussing calmed and the tiny mouth opened in a yawn. He touched the soft wisps of hair tenderly.

"Come on, Robin, be a good little girl for your daddy."

He sat down in the chair beneath the moonlit window and rocked his newly adopted daughter to sleep.

~Finis~ July 30, 2001

Book Three: The Family Business

**by
JK Philips**

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Three years later...

Chapter 1:
Momma's Boy

Alex paged through the booklet in his hands very carefully. He pointed to one letter and said to his father proudly, "A for apple."

"Yes, it is," his father answered very softly. "But you must be quiet now. Everyone is trying to watch the play."

Alex didn't know what the play was about, only that Aunt Dawn was going to be in it. He didn't see her on stage yet. But a lot of the people had masks. Maybe one of those people was her. He pointed to someone near the edge of the stage. "Is 'at Dawnie?" he asked.

His father shushed him again. "I'll point her out when she comes on."

Alex squirmed in his father's lap, and his dad stopped his legs from kicking the seat in front of him. Alex sighed. He was bored, but he was trying to be good. He wanted to see Aunt Dawn in her play. He had been too little to go last year. He paged through the booklet in his hands again. His father had read it to him, pointing out Dawn's name and explaining what the play was about. But it was an old play, like his daddy's books, and he didn't understand it.

There were letters on the back of the booklet that he knew. More than that, his father would be excited that he knew them. "Look, Daddy," he said, pointing at each one. "Gamma Phi Beta."

The people in the row in front of them turned around to look at him. They must really be impressed that he knew those Greek letters. Alex waved at them and smiled brightly. "I'm Alex. I'm free," he informed them, holding up three fingers to demonstrate his age.

His father apologized to the people watching them and reminded Alex again that the theatre was supposed to be a quiet place, like how he had to whisper in the library.

"Can I sit wif Mommy?"

His father passed him over, and he sat in his mother's lap for a few minutes. "What's 'at?" he asked her, pointing to something they had brought on stage.

She leaned over and whispered in his ear. "I think it's supposed to be a boat."

Alex giggled. "Silly. Boats go water." The people turned around to look at him again, and he waved.

"Please, Alex," his mother asked softly. "Can you be quiet until the lights come on? Dark means quiet. Pretend your lips are stuck together."

His mother made a face at him, with her lips all squished together. He copied her and looked back at the stage. He was trying to be a good boy and be quiet. But then he saw Aunt Dawn come on the stage. She had her hair all braided on her head and was wearing a long dress, but he knew it was her. He forgot to be quiet.

"Auntie Dawnie!" He tried to stand in his mother's lap to wave at Dawn. She must not see him, because she didn't wave back. The people in front turned around. He smiled at them and pointed to the stage. "My Dawnie," he told them, because they obviously didn't understand just who was on stage right now.

"Come on, Alex," his mother whispered. "Now you've gotten to see Dawn in her play, let's go for a walk around the school."

"It's okay, Buffy, I'll take him," his father said. "You stay and watch Dawn."

And then his father's arms were lifting him from her lap and carrying him down the aisle. He waved at Dawn on the stage, but she still must not see him. "Bye-bye, Dawnie," he called with a final

wave. The back doors of the theatre closed behind them, and they were standing in the high school hallway. A few other people milled about talking. His father set him down and took his hand. They walked aimlessly. Alex spotted a glass case and pressed his nose against it.

"What's 'at?" he asked.

"Trophies," his father answered. "Eagerly sought after by a school that would rather pour money into athletics than anything useful."

He frowned up at his father. He liked how his dad never talked down to him like he was a baby. He wasn't a baby. He was a big boy now. Still, that meant he didn't always understand. His father didn't like the pretty trophies, and Alex didn't know why. "Shiny." He pointed at the case, trying to sway his father's opinion. "Pretty."

His father laughed. "Yes, that's about the sum total of their positive attributes. Come on, son, would you like to play in the gym while we wait for your Mummy and Dawn?"

Alex nodded eagerly and tried to skip on ahead, but his father grabbed his hand and made him walk slowly beside him.

They entered the gym and found another father and child making the same use out of the wide-open space. He had brought his daughter, probably the same age as Alex, to work off some nervous energy. She came running to greet the new arrivals.

"I'm Alex," the boy told her.

"Sarah," she answered.

He looked up at his father, who didn't seem too happy. Alex didn't think his father liked little girls. They always made him unhappy just by being there. And then one time, Alex had asked his parents for a sister for his birthday. But his mother had left the room crying, and he had told his father that if they didn't like little sisters, then he would take a little brother just as happily. His father had pulled him up onto his lap and had told him very seriously that Mommy and Daddy couldn't have any more children, and so Alex was a special little boy.

"I see you had the same solution in mind," Sarah's father said to his father. "Perhaps we shouldn't have stopped for ice cream first, because my wiggly little Sarah's on a sugar high." He tickled his daughter on the last words.

She giggled and turned to Alex. "Wanna play?"

He nodded and the two of them started running in circles. They raced from one end of the gym to the other, laughing as they each won in turns. They spun around until they were dizzy and fell on the floor giggling. Alex zoomed around in figure eights, with his arms outstretched and making buzzing sounds.

"Look, Daddy," he called. "I bubblebee! I plane! Fly! Fly!"

But his father was talking to the other man and not paying attention to him. That was when Alex noticed the bleachers along the wall. They were pushed up flat with only the little ledges sticking out. He wondered what it was like at the very top. He had seen mountain climbers on TV, pulling themselves up sheer rock face by their bare hands. Alex could be a mountain climber too.

He walked to the bottom step, looking up at the straight wall above him. He reached his hands to the second ledge, only making it on his tippy toes, and wiggled his legs up to the first ledge just below.

Sarah watched him with wide eyes, shaking her head. "Uh-oh. Bad boy."

Alex kept climbing, his fingers on one ledge as his feet pulled themselves up to the one just below it. He was only just tall enough to reach across two steps, and sometimes he had to stretch so far to grab the next that he would nearly slip from the last. But he always caught himself before he fell, and soon he was hauling himself up onto the narrow platform at the top of the bleachers. He stood on tippy toes and touched the ceiling of the gym. He turned around triumphantly.

“Look, Daddy, I mou’ain climb!”

He finally had his father’s attention, but Daddy didn’t look very happy. He sprinted the distance across the gym, calling urgently, “Alex, don’t move. Stay right there.”

The other man followed, saying, “We could pull the bleachers out a little, take the steps up to get him.”

But when the man moved them a little, Alex could feel the narrow platform beneath him wobble, and his arms flailed as he tried to regain his balance.

“No,” his father told the other man. “Don’t move them. You’ll knock him over.”

His father looked up at him, his face very frightened. Alex wanted to tell his father not to be scared, because he wasn’t. He could touch the ceiling from here, and it was really neat. He had never been this high up before, staring down at the people below him like he was king of the mountain.

“Alex,” his father said very sternly. “Sit down right now and don’t move. I’m coming up for you.”

Daddy reached for one of the ledges, but his fingers were too big to fit and his toes only slid off from the small purchase. The other man was looking behind the bleachers, to see if there was a way up from the back. But Alex knew how to get down. He had seen it on the same show as the mountain climber. Parachuters. He could be a parachuter too and sail through the air like a bird.

“Daddy, catch!” Alex jumped. He soared like an eagle, like one of the paper airplanes his father would make for him at the store, like a pebble skimmed across a lake. It was only a moment, but it was a rush.

His father staggered as he caught him, stumbling back onto one knee and breathing hard.

“See? I climb.” Alex smiled proudly.

“Yes, you certainly did.” His father hugged him tightly to his chest, a little too tightly.

Alex squirmed, struggling to free himself from his father’s grip. “I go ’gain,” he insisted.

“I rather think not.” His father stood back up, still holding tightly to his boy. “Most emphatically not,” he added as he caught his breath.

Sarah’s father joined them, his daughter leaning against his leg. “And I thought my girl was a handful. But your boy’s got me beat.”

Alex held up three fingers and informed the man, “I’m free.”

Sarah’s father laughed. “And how old will you be next year, little Alex?”

Alex frowned, clearly stumped. He stuck out another finger to his three and counted them aloud. “One, two, free, four.” He held out the appropriate digits proudly. “Four!”

“Well, aren’t you the little counter? Well done.”

He smiled at the praise and proceeded to count for the man in Latin, Greek, and Sumerian. His own father laughed at the man’s surprise and told him they had to go. Alex waved bye-bye to Sarah and her father as they left the gym and walked back along the length of the school hallway.

“Down,” he demanded.

“No,” his father responded, but he did the next best thing and let Alex ride up on his shoulders. They peeked through the theatre doors to see how soon before the play ended, and Alex caught a glimpse of Dawn kissing a boy. “They’re just pretending,” his father explained.

They strolled along the corridor, Alex asking many questions. Was that the room Dawnie went to school in? Did she have a locker? Could he climb inside one of the lockers? Were her teachers nice? Was school scary? When would he go to school? Would he go to school with Dawnie? His father answered all his questions patiently. Sometimes Mommy would get irritated with all his questions, but Daddy never did. He thought it was a good thing and had told Mommy so. He had used a big word. He had told her their son was inquisitive.

They reached the front doors of the school, and Alex pointed. “Ou’side.”

"No, son, it's after dark."

Dark was a bad time. He never got to go out when it was dark. There were bad men out at night, and it was Mommy's job to stop them. A moment later and Alex saw the pretty blue and red lights in the parking lot and pointed again. "Mommy's car."

His father was just noticing the police car too. "No, not Mummy's car," he corrected, and then added under his breath, "I suppose we're not any safer in here. This is a public building with an open invite."

They walked out of the school and into the night air. Alex looked up to see all the pretty stars. Aunt Tara used to take him up to the roof where she and Aunt Willow lived. Tara would point out all the pretty stars for him, and they would make up names for what they looked like. When his pet turtle had died, they had named a star after it, so Tuck could live in the sky forever. Alex still didn't know which star to name after Aunt Tara. None of them seemed bright enough.

His father reached the police car, and in fact there were two cars. One of the officers came over to stop them from coming closer, and then noticed the boy on his father's shoulders.

"Well hello, Alex. Is your mother here?"

He nodded and pointed back to the school.

"Is everything alright?" his father asked.

The cop shook his head and glanced over his shoulder just beyond both cars. "Found a body. Some poor high school kid. Nothing the paramedics could do; there wasn't a drop of blood in him. We think it might be gang related. Kid had a mark burned into his chest with acid."

"Can I have a look?" Off the cop's puzzled expression, his father elaborated. "I'm familiar with some of the more obscure gang symbols."

The officer shrugged. "We're drawing a blank. If you can help, by all means." He held out his arms to Alex. "Come on, kid. Want to sit in the car and play with the siren?"

"Gun," Alex corrected. He knew what he liked.

His father hesitated before passing him over. The officer only laughed and assured the man, "The *radar* gun. He meant the radar gun. His mother lets him play with it when she brings him by the station. Go on. Detective Cricks is with the body. Tell him I said it was okay for you to have a look."

His father handed him over and left. The officer bounced him a few times before climbing into the squad car. "Let's see what fun toys your pal Rick has for you, little Alex."

Alex played with the radar gun for a while. He understood that the numbers told him how fast something was going. He couldn't find much that was moving. He pointed it at his father, who was only going two. But then another car drove through the parking lot, and he aimed and pulled the trigger. Thirty-one.

"A little fast," Rick said, "but we have more important things to think about right now."

Alex played with the sirens and the lights. Rick let him call the nice lady from dispatch. She always had cherry suckers for him whenever Mommy brought him into work. Alex even got a little toy badge to pin on his shirt.

His father claimed him after a little while, and they went back inside the school.

"Look, Daddy," he said, pointing at the toy badge. "I cop like Mommy."

"Heaven forbid," his father muttered. "That's all I need. Why can't you pick something safe? How about a librarian, Alex? As long as your library's not sitting on a Hellmouth, you should be fine. Or an accountant? My accountant makes fairly good money. Or a grocer? I wanted to be a grocer when I was your age."

"Mou'ain climber?" Alex suggested, remembering his earlier adventure. "Pair'chute?"

His father sighed. "Why do I get the distinct impression that you're going to have me worried sick everyday for the rest of my life?"

Alex laid his head on his father's shoulder, wrapping little arms around his neck. "I drive big trucks like Uncie Xand? Vroom, vroom."

"Yes," his father answered, patting him on the back. "That doesn't tend to be a life threatening profession. Perhaps we will have to take you to visit Uncle Xander at work more often."

A few minutes later the theatre doors opened, and the audience began streaming out. He squealed his excitement when he caught sight of his mother, and she scooped him up from his father's arms, spinning him in circles.

"So, little Rabbit, wanna go backstage and tell your Auntie Dawnie just how wonderful she was?"

He nodded, and they walked down a side hallway, his father and Aunt Willow and Aunt Anya and Uncle Xander following behind. He told his mother all about his mountain climbing adventure and how he parachuted off the top and about Rick letting him play in the police car and then he showed her the badge he wore. The whole time he was talking, his mother stared over his head at Daddy, until Uncle Xander spoke up, laughing.

"Giles, you are in *sooo* much trouble. She gives you the kid for less than an hour, and you have him jumping off of bleachers and sitting in cop cars while you look at dead bodies." Xander laughed. "I'm glad I'm not in your shoes right now."

And then Dawn came out the side door of the theatre, and Alex was squirming to be let down. "Auntie Dawnie!"

He raced over, his arms raised to be picked up. She obliged and almost dropped him several times until he was giggling and begging her, "'Gain! 'Gain!"

Some other people he didn't know passed by to tell Dawn how well she did. Alex smiled and informed her proudly, "I wave at you."

"I saw, honey."

He was set down on the ground, everyone else crowding around her with their own congratulations. Alex slipped over to Aunt Anya's side. She wasn't allowed to pick him up anymore, because she had a baby growing in her tummy. So he just put his hand on her round stomach, and she smiled down at him, shifting his hand to one side until he could feel the baby moving inside her. He wanted to see the baby, but everyone kept telling him it would be three, almost four, months more. And then they would make jokes about when Alex was in his mother's tummy, and Uncle Xander would tell them all their jokes weren't funny. But Aunt Anya would say she liked the sound of four weeks better than four months, and Alex wouldn't understand why everyone was laughing.

Everyone came over to his house after the play, even Aunt Willow. Alex climbed up into her lap with a book, but she said she was too tired to read to him. It was really hard to get Aunt Willow to smile, especially now that Aunt Tara was in heaven. He remembered when Willow used to be happy all the time, and make all his stuffed animals float around the room, and sneak him out for ice cream after his parents said he couldn't have any. Now she was never happy and never did magic anymore. Mommy and Daddy told him that she missed Tara and would be herself again if they all gave her enough time. But Alex could see that his parents worried about her as much as he did.

Dawn had some of her friends over to celebrate after opening night, but Alex didn't know who any of them were. He climbed off Willow's lap and followed the teenagers into the kitchen when he heard them talking about cake. Dawn gave him a little piece with one of the frosting flowers on it. He ate it while sitting on her lap, listening to the older kids around him joking and teasing each other. They teased him too, and he was happy to be included in their group.

His father came looking for him, frowning at Dawn when he saw the cake. "You shouldn't have given him that so close to his bedtime."

Dawn kissed her nephew on the top of his head and smiled knowingly. "That's why I'm his favorite."

"Yes, well, it's not your bed he'll be climbing into after he gets a stomach ache tonight."

His father took him from her lap and washed his sticky fingers off under the sink, wiping his face with a wet paper towel until he was wiggling and squirming his face away from the wet rag.

"Time for bed," his father told him.

"No!" Alex protested.

"Yes," his father replied firmly. "Don't fight me about it, and you can have a story. Now go say goodnight to everyone."

"No bed!" Alex insisted, and then he began to cry. It wasn't fair. He always got sent to bed while everyone else was still up and having fun without him.

"Please, Alex, don't pitch a fit over this. I said I would read to you before bed."

But he continued to cry and kick his legs out against the kitchen counter and thrash in his father's arms. "I want Mommy!"

"She's only going to tell you it's time for bed too."

Mommy came in a moment later, and he held his arms out to her. She took him into her own arms, kissing away his tears, and saying to his father, "He can stay up a little while longer, Giles. It is a special occasion."

Alex sniffled for a moment and wiped the backs of his hands across his wet cheeks. He laid his head on his mother's shoulder and looked over at his father with some amount of smug satisfaction.

His father sighed. "Really, Buffy, how can you ever expect the boy to listen to me if you tell him he can do something as soon as I tell him he can't?"

Alex watched the silent argument between his parents until his mother finally lost, which meant of course that he did too. "Ok, Alex, Daddy says it's bedtime."

"No!" he screamed, throwing himself backwards in her arms, but she held him tight and headed out of the kitchen.

"Wave goodnight to everyone," she told him as they passed by the living room and up the stairs.

But he was too busy crying and begging to stay up just a little bit longer. "I be good," he promised. She wasn't swayed and continued up to his room. Just before the doors closed, he made one last effort. "I want Daddy!" he called, loudly enough for the whole house to hear.

Mommy only laughed and reminded him that Daddy was the one who sent him to bed in the first place.

Alex sat on his bed, watching through watery eyes as his mother pulled out pajamas and turned on his nightlight. She pulled off his clothes and slipped on his PJ's, even as he protested that he could do it himself. Then she carried him into the bathroom and set him on the counter to brush his teeth while she brushed hers with him, making funny faces around her toothbrush until he couldn't help but smile. When they'd finished, she washed the tears from his face with a cool washcloth and gave him a horsy ride back to his bedroom.

His mother tucked him into bed and pulled out the book his father had been reading to him the night before. They were just at the part where Charlotte had woven "super" into her web, and Wilbur wouldn't be eaten. Daddy liked to read to him, but Alex liked it better when Mommy did. She made up funny voices for each of the animals and silly faces to go along with them. Sometimes she would act out the scenes as she read them, until he would be giggling and trying to play along with her. Daddy would never read in funny voices or make silly faces. He would only read a book just as it was

written and answer Alex's questions when he didn't understand something. And Daddy never, ever changed the ending.

Tonight, his mother read quietly, and he had to ask her to do the goose's voice. He yawned and couldn't remember if he had also asked her to do Wilbur's voice, because she wasn't doing that either. But then he closed his eyes while he listened, and soon after that he was fast asleep.

Giles woke when he felt a soft tap on his arm. He opened his eyes to see Alex standing beside the bed.

"Can I s'leep wif you?"

"Do you have a stomach ache?" Sometimes Alex got sick during the night if he ate too much junk before going to bed. They'd gone for ice cream before the play, and Dawn had fed him cake. Giles couldn't remember if the boy had eaten more than two bites of his actual dinner.

But Alex only shook his head, his little chin quivering.

"Did you have a bad dream?"

The boy nodded and repeated his request. "Can I s'leep wif you?"

Giles sighed and started to climb out of bed. "How about if I lay with you in your bed, just until you fall asleep?"

But then he felt Buffy's hands pulling him back to her side. "Just let him sleep with us, Giles. It won't hurt anything. Come on, sweetheart, you can get in bed with us."

Giles could barely keep the irritation from his voice. "Buffy, he has to learn to sleep in his own bed sometime. I can't remember a night in the last two months where there wasn't three of us in this bed." But he lifted his son up and laid him between the two of them. The boy immediately shifted over into his mother's arms, and Buffy wrapped herself around the child, smoothing his hair back and stroking his cheeks.

She looked over at Giles with an expression that brooked no argument. "I'm the expert on nightmares here. If he's having bad dreams and wants to sleep with us, then he can. I was in *high school*, and I still slept with Mom sometimes when the nightmares were really bad."

Giles felt like quite the heartless monster at the moment. "Buffy, I'm so sorry. I had no idea..."

"It's okay. Just come snuggle with us."

He curled up closer to Buffy, their son sandwiched between them. Alex's eyes were already closing, and one thumb found its way into his mouth. Giles pulled the offending thumb out, but the other one only replaced it. He pulled that one out too, and Alex's eyes opened long enough to give his father an irritated glare.

"Don't!"

Alex was sleepy and crabby, and finally Giles just relented and let him suck his thumb. The boy tucked his head beneath his mother's chin and fell fast asleep. Buffy smiled, and then her eyes closed as well. Giles leaned over to place a kiss on her mouth, eliciting another smile and a hand on the back of his head to deepen the kiss. She sighed contentedly, her eyes still closed, and he lay there, their foreheads pressed together, simply watching her.

Buffy made a wonderful mother to Alex, although she usually left it up to Giles to be the disciplinarian. Sometimes that bothered him, and he hated being the one who always said no. He had to admit that some part of that was jealousy, since Alex seemed to prefer Buffy whenever given a choice. He would want to sit in his mother's lap, and go to the store with her, and have her read to him

at night. Giles wondered if he wouldn't be more favored if he were the one doing more of the spoiling and Buffy were the one saying no and handing out time-outs.

Other times, he didn't mind being the "stompy foot" as Buffy called it. When he watched the two of them together, there were times he could see the fear in Buffy's eyes, like she knew her time with her son was running out. She had just turned 24. Two more years, and she would match the record for oldest slayer. After that, and they would be into uncharted territory. Buffy didn't know this, of course, but Giles did. He felt it every night when she went on patrol, even if he went with her. He felt it like a cold grip of panic around his insides that sometimes choked away his very breath. Those were the times he didn't begrudge her being the favorite. He would have a lifetime with Alex, and she would not. Giles didn't want her to waste the time she did have doling out punishments and playing the heavy. He wanted his son's memories of her to be of walks in the parks, and trips to the zoo, and bedtime stories, and nights like this, when he slept in her arms.

She felt her time with her husband slipping away too. Sometimes his fingers would find tears trailing down her cheeks after they made love. She would laugh away his concerns, saying that it had just been *that* good. She would make grand gestures, which always angered Giles, more than pleased him. She had thrown him a huge birthday party the past year, even flying in some of his old friends from England, friends he hadn't seen since moving to Sunnydale. They had a huge fight in the kitchen, away from the guests, over something trivial that Giles couldn't even remember now. And he had a good memory. His anger had come more from the sense that she was ready to give up, that she had arranged a lavish party for him because she knew it would be the last birthday they spent together.

And then there were the close calls, the times she barely made it home. There seemed to be an apocalypse to avert every year, but worse than that were the times she was injured on routine patrols. Sometimes while she was alone or with one of the others, sometimes right in front of his eyes while he was powerless to stop it. Twice she had landed in the hospital, and Giles had thought he really had lost her. Most of the close calls gave her cuts and bruises he could just treat at home. Sometimes she wasn't hurt at all, except for the knowledge that a second either way and she would have been dead.

Giles would tend her hurts, whether that meant washing away her blood and taping her cuts, or wrapping her sprained joints, or whether that meant simply drying her tears and holding her until her fear passed. And then there would always come the moment when she would turn very quiet, when her tears would stop, when she would be so very calm and so much older than her age, older than even he, when she would be the oldest woman that Giles had ever known.

Buffy would demand the promises from her watcher. She would trap him with her slayer strength, and he had no choice but to stand there and listen to her as she brought him to tears with what she asked of him, as she denied him even the smallest mercy of his dignity and private grief. She would wrest the promises through his sobs, until he would promise her anything if she would just let him go, if he wouldn't have to stand there and listen to anymore. Promises that Alex wouldn't be drafted into the Watcher's Council. Promises that Dawn would be made to finish college, no matter what thrilling acting job presented itself. Promises that Willow and Xander and Anya and the coming baby would be watched over. Promises that Giles himself would find someone after she had gone, would remarry and be happy without her. Worst of all, the promises for her funeral arrangements, for the money that would come from her substantial life insurance. The hardest promise to give: to cremate her. Dust and ash, the end she had brought to so many vampires was the end that she wanted. No fear of being turned, of having her body stolen. Just dust and ash, and she didn't care what he did with it.

No matter how many times he promised, she would want to hear it the next time too. The promises had changed over the years. At first, when Alex had been smaller, she had been terrified that she would die while he was too young to remember her. Giles had promised that their son would know

her through him, that he would keep her alive through stories and pictures and home movies, that Alex would always know how much she loved him.

But the final promise had never changed. He made the same vow every time. That he would find their daughter and bring her home, no matter how long it took.

And then Buffy would be satisfied and hold him until his sobs quieted, and Giles would feel as if he had mourned her so many times his heart would break from it. If she were injured, he would finish tending her wounds, his hands still shaking, his breathing still ragged. And if she were not, he would retreat the moment she released him, burying his grief in a book and a bottle of Guinness.

Giles glanced over at the clock on the nightstand. 4:16am. He couldn't fall back asleep. His mind was spinning down paths best left untouched. Plus, there was the matter of the symbol burned into the body found outside the high school.

He gently slipped his arm out from under Buffy's head, careful not to wake her. He paused for a moment after climbing out of bed, checking to make sure that wife and son were still sleeping peacefully. Then he grabbed his robe and made his way quietly down to the living room. One bookcase and a desk were all that remained of the study he had sacrificed for Alex's bedroom. The rest of his collection he stored at the shop, doing most of his research there or else carting the necessary volumes back and forth between work and home. As much as Giles would miss Dawn when she started college in the fall, he was already looking forward to converting her room into his study.

As expected, the volumes he needed were not on his shelf, but rather at the shop. He flipped through the pages of the books that he *did* have, absently searching for the symbol he had seen burned into the dead flesh. It didn't seem the least bit familiar, and he hoped some of his more obscure texts on vampire cults would show him the symbol and provide him some information on who had done it. He was fairly certain a vampire was responsible. The victim had been drained of blood with the telltale puncture marks at his neck.

What worried him was that the detective said it wasn't an isolated occurrence. It was the third body bearing that mark in as many months. Giles would have to ask Buffy to look into it when she reported for duty on Monday.

That turned his mind in whole new direction, one he was just as desperate to avoid and just as powerless to stop. His wife was a cop.

Of all the things Buffy could have chosen to do with her life, she had to pick a day job that equaled the danger of her night job. She had managed to graduate with Willow and Tara, taking summer school and a full credit load to make up the semesters she had missed after her mother's death and her own pregnancy. Giles had watched Alex at the shop while she was at school or working on papers. And when she had walked across the stage in her cap and gown, they had waved at her from the audience, Alex only 16 months old and not understanding why he couldn't go up on stage with Mommy, Dawn trying to distract him with the itsy-bitsy spider, Xander making jokes about how much better this was than her high school graduation, and Anya complaining that it was too hot to be outside. Giles had been so proud of his slayer.

He didn't know why he had expected Buffy to go on to graduate school with Willow and Tara. School had never been her thing. But he had certainly never expected her to bring home admission brochures for the Police Academy. They'd had the biggest fight of their lives over that, and it had lasted for days. He'd slept on the couch, and every morning it would be the same argument until one of them would storm out of the house.

Giles had been under the mistaken impression that he had some say in the matter. At first Buffy had tried to reason with him. She already had more combat skills and experience than any officer on the force. Now she would just learn how to use a gun and be able to call for backup when she needed

it. Plus, she could turn the sirens on, and everyone would have to get out of *her* way. That last had instead become an argument against the Academy, since Giles could only imagine how fast and recklessly Buffy would drive if she had sirens and no worries about getting a ticket.

Buffy thought her career choice fit perfectly with a life as the Slayer. She would catch bad guys during the day and would kill bad demons during the night. It could only help to have someone on the inside, and she would be able to access information that even Willow couldn't hack. She would be called to the scene of a crime while she still had some chance to save the victim. They wouldn't ever have to fight the law at the same time they were trying to fight the forces of darkness. And her slaying would never become suspicious if she had the cover of a cop on patrol.

None of that had swayed Giles, who only wanted a safe, normal job for her during the day, one where he wouldn't have to wonder whether she would make it home for dinner. She may be the Slayer, with superhuman strength and healing, but even the Slayer was not immune to gunfire. And Sunnydale may not be LA, but it was on a Hellmouth, and a cop in Sunnydale had a shorter life expectancy than one in LA.

Buffy had finally given up on trying to convince Giles and had ended the argument. He didn't get to make this choice for her. This was what she wanted, and he would just have to deal with it. She was going to be a cop, and he could either divorce her and find her another watcher, or support her and help her through it. There had followed a few days of complete silence and more nights on the couch. They would each talk to Alex and Dawn, but not to each other.

Giles had finally known when he was beaten. He was too stubborn for apologies or sweeping romantic overtures for forgiveness. Especially since he was not wrong about this. He had simply gotten up one night and gone upstairs to climb into bed beside her. To her credit, she hadn't demanded any apologies or concessions from him. She hadn't questioned why he was there. She had simply scooted over in the bed until she was lying on top of him, falling asleep in his arms, and they had never talked about it again.

Buffy had breezed through the Police Academy in record time. Her physical prowess had amazed her instructors. The full training had lasted six months, but by the third month, she was helping to teach basic self-defense and showing her fellow recruits innovative ways to break choke holds and block attacks. Even her instructors couldn't take her down, and she had graduated at the top of her class.

She had been hired immediately, which Giles said was only proof that the department lost officers faster than it could replace them. He had spent the past year and a half grumbling about her job and trying not to panic whenever the phone rang. She had tried to calm his fears and assured him that she was only a rookie, and that they never sent her on the dangerous calls, and that she was at far more risk when she patrolled at night as the Slayer.

None of her well-intentioned assurances mattered on nights like this, when he was up at five in the bloody morning, wishing that Monday would never come so he could keep her here safe at home. Sometimes the more irrational part of his mind would wish that he could get her pregnant again, so she would *have* to stay home, no slaying, no police department, no worries for eight or nine weeks.

He sighed and closed the book. He wasn't in any frame of mind to research. He didn't have the books he needed anyway. He went in the kitchen to make himself some tea. He would watch the sunrise and enjoy what he could of his Saturday morning before heading out to the Magic Box. And as long as he was up this early, he would make the weekly phone call. Vampires were nocturnal, after all.

The water boiled, and he left his tea to steep. He lifted the receiver, still surprised after all these years that he should still feel the slightest bit of hope stir in his chest, but he did.

The calls were short and the same every week.

"It's Giles. Anything?"

"Sorry. Nothing."

"Thank you." Click. It had become easier and easier to say thank you to Angel. The conversations used to be longer. Sometimes Wesley or Cordelia used to answer. Someone used to tell him what they had done over the past week. People they had talked to. Places they had been. The conversations had shortened over the months and years. Angel came to expect the calls every Saturday morning and soon made sure he was the one to answer them. By now the calls were scripted, the same exact words every week.

Giles didn't know anymore if Angel Investigations still bothered to look for his daughter or if they had given up hope and were only humoring him. But the weekly calls were the ritual he still clung to. Giles himself had nothing left to try, no more leads left to follow, no more favors left to call in. They had hired their own investigators until the money had slowly slipped away, until the store was mortgaged and the house too. He had sold his flat across town and some property in England. He would never be going back there again anyway. What money they could afford to spend, they spent. And it still wasn't enough to buy him back his daughter. Not even Buffy's contacts on the force had brought them any closer.

Giles sat at the kitchen island with his tea and a book he didn't read. It was an hour later before he remembered that he had forgotten to go outside and watch the sunrise. It was a few minutes after that when his son came toddling out into the kitchen, wiping the sleep from his eyes.

"Good morning," Giles said with a smile.

It was only a quarter after six, and Alex was still sleepy. He held out his arms to be picked up, and Giles lifted him onto his lap. The boy was an early riser, as his mother was not, and mornings tended to be their time together.

"Would you like some cereal?"

"Crap."

Giles chuckled. "Crepes? With strawberries like Aunt Dawn likes?"

Alex nodded eagerly and grabbed for his father's tea. Giles pushed it quickly out of reach. "Caffeine and three-year-olds, not a pleasant mix." They had let him have some once, thinking he would spit it out in disgust and that would be the end of his demands, but he actually liked tea. Buffy had laughed, saying that only proved who his father was.

One only had to look at the boy to know who his father was. Alex had his father's sandy brown hair, and green eyes, and the shape of his mouth and chin. In fact, Giles could see nothing of Buffy in the boy at all, which weighed on his heart and made him fear her loss all the more. The child had learned some of her mannerisms, though, including her pout and puppy dog eyes, which Giles found strange coming from his own green eyes. Alex was smaller than other boys his age, still trying to catch up from being a twin. In spite of his size, the boy was fearless. The swan dive off the bleachers was only one of many close calls, and Giles often wondered whose bright idea it had been to teach the child to walk.

He balanced his son on his left hip as he cooked with his right hand, even breaking the eggs deftly with only the one set of fingers. He used to be left-handed, but ever since Angelus, he found himself doing more with his right. His left hand still ached sometimes, and his left leg too, mostly on the days where he did too much with them. But he only limped on those days where he pushed himself too hard, which was a better recovery than the doctor had expected for him.

He felt Alex's head against his shoulder, the child's soft breaths against his neck, and Giles was filled with an overpowering love that he couldn't have imagined before becoming a father. He had

loved before; he had loved Buffy and Jenny and all the children that had somehow wandered into his protection. But he hadn't been lying to Buffy before the final battle with Glory, before the battle that killed her. He had told her that he loved Dawn, but that he would kill her to protect this sorry world. And Buffy hadn't been lying either, when she had warned him that she would kill him if he tried. He understood now what Buffy had felt that day. Giles knew he would give anything for Alex. He would have given Angelus the secret of Acatla to save his son and to hell with the rest of the world.

He sat the boy down with his breakfast and a glass of milk. Giles joined him a moment later, and they ate in silence. By the time Alex had eaten half his meal, he was more awake, and squirming on the kitchen stool.

"Done. Down."

"Two more bites," Giles insisted firmly.

Alex obeyed, while swinging his legs back and forth off the end of the stool. He pushed his plate back on the final bite, clearly indicating that he would take no more. "Go park."

"Yes," Giles answered, collecting the dishes and rinsing them in the sink. "Your mother's taking you to the park when she gets up." Catching the glint in his son's eyes, he added very firmly. "No, you may not wake her up. She didn't get home from patrol until very late." How strange to think that word now had a double meaning. With the others, he had to specify whether Buffy was slaying or working.

He washed the sticky fingers under the sink, and the sticky face as well. When he was finished, he set the boy down and led him by the hand up to his room.

"Now let's both get dressed, shall we?"

Alex had reached the age where he liked to pick out his own clothes, but he wasn't quite at the age where he was any good at it. Giles discouraged some of his choices, until the boy was finally dressed in an acceptable outfit.

"Daddy go park?" he asked.

Giles helped him with the buttons of his overalls as he answered. "Daddy will join you this afternoon. I have to work at the shop this morning."

They slipped into the bedroom where Buffy was still sleeping. Giles collected clothes to wear to the Magic Box, carrying the boy to prevent him from waking his mother. Giles dressed in the bathroom while Alex brushed his teeth and mimicked the actions of his father shaving. Giles let him smear on some shaving cream and smiled as Alex mirrored each stroke of the razor with his own little finger. He always wanted to help, and Giles always had to remind him that the razor was too sharp. They both washed the remaining spots of foam from their faces, and Giles finished with aftershave, giving Alex a few drops as well.

They started back downstairs again, Giles needing to quickly head off the boy before he could make it in to wake Buffy. Giles was somewhat more lax about Dawn, and let Alex slip into her room.

"Hey!" she complained when she woke to a giggling three-year-old on her chest.

"Late night?" Giles asked with a smirk, leaning against her doorframe.

She glared at him with that long-suffering expression unique to teenagers, the kind that only tempted him to push her buttons even more. "You never let him wake up Buffy," she whined.

"Your sister was out until two this morning. And then up again at four when someone came into bed with us after I told you not to give him cake." Giles straightened his tie, crossed his arms, and began to study her ceiling very casually. "You, on the other hand, if I recall, went to bed promptly at 10:30, and so should have had plenty of sleep by now."

Alex was trying to tickle her, and she batted his hands away in irritation. "That doesn't mean I went to sleep right away. I could have been on the net or something."

Giles sighed and fixed her with a level stare. "Yes, of course, you sent all your friends home from your opening night party after only an hour, so you could come up here and use the computer."

"Maybe."

"Don't lie to me, Dawn. You climbed out the window and sneaked off. This used to be Buffy's room, remember? She made ample use of that tree when she was your age."

"So what if I did?" Dawn countered. "I'm eighteen now, and I can do what I like."

Giles strolled into her room. He took a deep breath. God, he couldn't believe he was about to say it. His father used to say it to him, and he had sworn the same words would never pass through his lips. "As long as you live in my house, you will follow my rules. We have a front door for a reason, and you will use it. Climb out the window again, and I will cut that tree down. Are we clear?"

She shrugged noncommittally. "I don't see what the big deal is. I got home before Buffy did."

He closed the rest of the distance between them, sitting on her bed and pulling Alex into his lap. "Dawn, I shouldn't even need to tell you this. You're not ignorant of the dangers that are out there at night. Your classmates may have an excuse but you should know better. We just want to keep you safe. If something had happened to you last night, and we had both thought you were asleep in your room, no one would have realized it until morning."

"I was careful," she insisted. "I took a cross."

Alex started squirming in his lap, impatient with this conversation. Dawn tickled her nephew's feet, playing with the boy and not meeting Giles' eyes. He pressed on. "Dawn, I know Buffy may not like to consider this possibility. She still thinks of you as her little sister. But you're of an age... And it would be highly probable... Well, it has crossed my mind that you might have a boyfriend. It would actually be highly unlikely for a girl your age *not* to have had at least one boyfriend by now. And you have become quite an attractive young lady..."

"Giles," she said softly, sparing him from any further babble. "I've had a boyfriend."

He paused for a moment, but she didn't continue. "I rather thought so," he said. He waited, but she didn't elaborate, and he wasn't really sure if he wanted the details anyway. "You don't have to climb out windows in the middle of the night to see him. You could invite him over sometime. Although, without actually inviting him in, you know, just to be safe."

Dawn laughed hard at that, until tears were streaming down her face. Alex laughed too, without really knowing what they were laughing at. Finally, she had to bite her lip to compose herself and dismiss his concerns. "Trust me. He doesn't need an invite."

"Well, in any case, you needn't keep him a secret from us. I think Buffy would be hurt by it. I'm sure she would consider this a big sister, sharing sort of thing."

Dawn quickly became more somber. "I wanted to tell you guys, but I was afraid you would freak out."

"Give us a little credit. When your sister dated Angel again after he returned from hell, I didn't 'freak out.' Perhaps a little at first, but still. And as your sister is often fond of reminding me, she did catch me with your mother after the band candy. Well, you would know best how she handled that."

Dawn flopped back against her pillows. "It totally wiggled her out."

Giles sighed. "Well, how much worse can your young man be?"

Dawn groaned. "Just don't say anything yet, okay? I'll tell her, but not yet."

Giles nodded reluctantly, not relishing the idea of keeping secrets from Buffy. They were silent for a moment before Alex piped up, "Dawnie boy'fend?"

She pulled the covers over her head and lamented, "God, Alex, you're going to rat me out, aren't you?"

Giles rose from her bed, pulling his son into his arms as he went. "It would appear that you should tell your sister sooner rather than later."

She remained under the covers, and called out to him as he left, "Wake me when it's time for college."

He spent the rest of the early morning downstairs with Alex, reading to him and coloring and doing any number of other activities that would keep him quietly occupied so his mother could sleep. Finally, Giles could wait no longer, or else he wouldn't be able to open the shop on time. He allowed the boy to at last wake his mother, which Alex wasted no time in accomplishing. Giles kissed her goodbye and left for the Magic Box.

Whatever time he wasn't spending with customers, he used to research the symbol from the body the night before. When Anya came in mid-morning, he started her on the same task. They were looking for a crescent moon turned on its side, with a lightning bolt straight through the center. Anya took one look at his hastily reproduced drawing and announced that she had never seen the thing before, as if that were all he required of her. He quickly set her straight with a stack of books, and she complained that a large amount of reading wasn't good for the baby. Off his withering stare, she grudgingly cracked the first book.

Several times Giles found himself wishing things back the way they were, when the whole Scoobie gang would tackle research together. The bulk of that duty had fallen back on him, which was, he supposed, how watchers had done it since the beginning. Perhaps he had grown lax in his studies or overly dependant on the others, but he preferred to think that the team effort was what had kept Buffy alive for so long. Anya usually helped when she could, and sometimes her eleven hundred and some odd years of experiences could point him in directions he wouldn't have otherwise thought of going. Of course, Buffy, Xander, and Dawn too, now that she was older, all pitched in with what they could. But research and poring through old books had never been Buffy or Xander's specialties, and Dawn had understandably developed a distaste for all Hellmouth and apocalypse related things. She just wanted to be a normal girl and forget all about having once been the Key.

Tara had always been so quiet, so much in the background, that Giles had never realized how much she held the group together until after she was gone. She had always been the one to bring the gossip and the jokes and the teasing banter back on topic. She knew how to gently rein in her friends before they went too far and when to suggest that they all needed a break. She always thought of everyone else first and never once complained, even though none of this was her responsibility or her calling.

When Tara died, she took Willow with her. The young witch was only a shadow of her former self. Willow no longer researched with the group or touched magic in any form. Giles knew she blamed herself for Tara's death, and he knew exactly how she felt. He had gone through the same thing after Eyghon and Randall. And just as Giles had buried himself in his watcher's studies, Willow buried herself in her graduate work, spending less and less time with the friends that had once been her whole world. Giles had hoped that time would bring her back into the fold, but it had been over four months and she only seemed to drift further away. He even considered tracking down Oz to help her through her grief, but he couldn't find the werewolf through any contacts in Tibet or Bombay or Jerusalem or any other place he thought the young man might go.

Without Willow or Tara, he was lost on the computers, and Anya was a poor substitute. He felt their loss in the research too, realizing now that they had nearly been his equal in their familiarity with the library and the ease with which they found the pertinent facts from its volumes. Willow had even begun to pick up some of the languages in the texts: a little Gallic, a little Latin, bits of other languages he hadn't known she studied until she would point out a relevant passage to him, knowing the correct translation herself. Now he was the only one who could sift through the texts that weren't in English.

Anya knew phrases in French, German, a few demonic languages, but the moment she was trapped in her mortal guise, she had lost the multi-lingual talents she possessed as a vengeance demon and was no longer fluent in any of them. For the first time in nine years, Giles was experiencing what it was truly like to be a Watcher.

If the two witches were nearly his equals in research, then they had definitely surpassed him in magic. Separate, they were each formidable. Together, their power was astounding. That was where he felt their absence most keenly. He had been a rather impressive sorcerer in his youth, but after Randall he had stopped practicing. After more than twenty years of disuse, his skills were lacking, and with Willow and then Tara on the team, there had been no need for him to brush up. He had the knowledge, but not the practice. And now the few spells he had tried... Well, he regretted ever being so harsh with Willow when her magic backfired. It was the difference between reading about swordplay and actually wielding a blade to save your life.

Swordplay. Giles suddenly remembered seeing the crescent moon speared with a lightning bolt. It had been painted on a sword, wielded by a demonic soldier in one of his books' illustrations. Now if he could only remember which book.

He wished again for Willow and Tara. A familiar pang of guilt immediately followed that thought, that he should only regret Tara's death in these moments when he needed their help. But that was not all there was to it, he assured himself. He genuinely missed the girl. Tara had grown on him, and more than any of the others, she had been like him. Quiet. Reserved. Not overly emotionally demonstrative. She had possessed a quick mind and a quiet strength. She had even tended to get tongue-tied or stutter when she was nervous, one of his own faults as well.

He did miss Tara, and more than that, he hated what her death was doing to Willow. This was by far worse than when Oz left. Giles couldn't even interest her in newly acquired books, or spells that he really shouldn't be showing her, or in recent archeological finds. Sometimes it seemed like she couldn't bear to even come in the magic shop anymore, so they had her over to the house as often as she would come.

Giles removed his glasses and rubbed his weary eyes. Five volumes, and he still couldn't find the lithograph with the symbol on the sword. Anya didn't seem to be having any luck either. Giles' mind reasoned through the only clues they had so far:

A crescent moon turned on its side with a lightning bolt through its center. The moon. Usually tied to cults that involved themselves with a goddess figure. Perhaps tipped on its side to symbolize the dethroning of such a female deity. Perhaps he should look for a male centered cult. Or perhaps it was not a moon, but an archway, or a gateway. Perhaps an image of the sun rising over the horizon. No, something about this reminded him of the moon.

The lightning bolt. Usually a representation of raw power: the power of nature, the power of magic, the symbol for a myriad of different kinds of power. Perhaps the bolt through the moon symbolized the destruction of the female goddess by that power, or the theft of her power by a greater force?

Giles glanced at his watch. After one o'clock. He was already late for his rendezvous in the park with his family. The afternoon help had arrived for her shift. He had hired Charity a few months after Tara's death. Not to replace her, he rationalized, but rather to help Anya with the tasks she could no longer do while pregnant.

He gave Anya a few suggestions to continue with the research, knowing she would abandon the books for the financial ledgers as soon as he had left. He asked Charity to keep her boss on track and hide the ledgers for the time being. He grabbed a stack of books for himself and headed out to the park.

He saw them at a distance. Buffy and Alex were playing tag through the grass and then weaving back and forth between the swings and the merry-go-round. Dawn and Xander were stretched out on a blanket a short distance from the playground. Willow, as usual, was absent. Alex caught sight of his father mid-run, and simply changed direction, his little arms flailing through the air as he came charging, screaming, "Daddy! Daddy!"

His son's joy at his arrival never ceased to lift even his darkest mood. Giles nearly dropped his stack of books when he stopped the boy's momentum with one arm and lifted him up into a warm embrace. It never mattered whether it had been a day or an hour; Alex always greeted him with the same enthusiasm.

"I go slide," his son informed him. "Swing high. Go monkey by self."

Giles had reached the others by then, Buffy meeting him halfway. He raised a questioning eyebrow in her direction. "He made it all the way across the monkey bars by himself?"

"Yeah," she confirmed. "I couldn't believe it. He didn't fall once. Come on, Alex, let's go show Daddy."

He leaned over for his mother to take him, and the two headed off to the monkey bars. Giles sat down on the blanket with his stack of books. Xander looked over with a wry grin.

"More research?"

Giles passed him a book. "Yes, and your help would be greatly appreciated. We're looking for anything that has this specific symbol." He offered out the same drawing he had shown Anya.

Xander studied it for a moment, frowning. "Looks like a bow with one messed up arrow."

Giles reached across and rotated the paper 90 degrees. "I believe it's a crescent moon tipped on its side with a lightning bolt running through its center."

"Oh," Xander said. "That makes much more sense. I was about to comment on your lousy artistry." And then he dutifully cracked open his book, paging through it as he lay on his back on the blanket.

Dawn groaned. "It's Saturday. You're not supposed to work today."

"Unfortunately the demon population is not aware of that fact," Giles told her, as he passed a book to her as well. She huffed in irritation, rolling over onto her stomach and paging slowly through the book he gave her.

Giles looked up to see his son hanging from the monkey bars. His little arms shook as he dropped each rung and reached for the next. Buffy walked just behind him, ready to catch him should he fall. Sure enough, he made it all the way across. He spun to face his audience, his arms raised triumphantly, and his father applauded for him. Alex turned back to his mother, and the two resumed their game of chase. She caught him as they bounded over the sandbox, tossing him into the air again and again as he cried, "Higher!"

Xander watched them together for a minute or so, shaking his head and laughing. He threw Giles a look over the top of his book. "Momma's boy has a whole different meaning when your mom's the Slayer."

Giles chuckled and quickly agreed.

Chapter 2

Little Girl Lost, Little Girl Found

“Willow Rosenberg, right?”

Willow glanced up from the papers she was grading. She came to the library to be left alone, not to socialize. But she plastered on a fake smile anyway and set her pen down on top of her stack of papers before turning to face her visitor. It might be one of the undergrads from the class she TA'd, after all, and it wouldn't do to scare them off. The students were scared enough of Professor Allens as it was. They wouldn't have anyone to help them if Willow started alienating these poor freshmen too.

But the woman wasn't familiar, and was definitely too old to be in Willow's class. She was probably in her late 20's, with cropped brown hair that curled around her ears and a trim petite frame that reminded Willow somewhat of Buffy.

“Yes, I'm Willow,” she answered, watching as the woman slid into the seat beside her.

“Hi, I'm Sabrina Perkins.” She leaned forward, her eyes darting around to inventory the people at the surrounding tables. She lowered her voice. “Someone told me you were a witch.”

The smile dropped from Willow's face, and one hand absently brushed a lock of red hair behind her ear. “I don't know who told you that, but it's not true. Witches! Please. I'm just a history TA. Maybe some kid in my class didn't like the grade I gave them, but—”

Sabrina interrupted before Willow could continue protesting too much. “Tara helped me out with a protection spell a couple years ago. She said you were better at the magic, but I thought she did pretty good. She's actually the reason I got into magic. I was so sorry to hear she died. She was a really nice woman. A little shy. I wish I'd gotten to know her better. But I just wanted to tell you I'm sorry.”

Willow looked down at her papers again. Her hand began fidgeting with the pen. She replied very softly, “Thank you. Not many people knew her that well, but... yeah... she was really nice.”

“I wanted to say I'm sorry, but that's not the only reason I wanted to talk to you. I know you and Tara used to do the magic together, but now... Well, there's a group of us, *real* witches, not the Wicca-wanna-blessed-be's, and we would really like it if you came over sometime and cast with us.”

Willow felt her throat constrict and her heart race at the mere thought. She gathered her papers a bit too abruptly and shoved them into her book bag. “Thanks, but no thanks. I don't do magic anymore. Umm... Sorry, but I gotta run. I forgot. There's this... thing I have to go to.”

Sabrina stopped her with a gentle hand on the forearm. “I understand. Really, it's okay. After my partner died, I felt the same way. No one else really got it. I think they all thought it was just a phase, a college thing. Everyone just expected me to pick up and move on, like Abigail had been a faithful dog or something. Sometimes it felt like I couldn't talk to anyone about it, and I never thought I would ever be able to do the things we did together again. But one day I met someone. Not *someone* someone, just a friend, but we started doing magic again, and there was this whole group of us doing spells, and it wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. Doing the magic again... I think it helped me remember Abigail even *more*. It's like she's with me every time I feel the magic.”

Sabrina held out a small business card with her name and phone number. “I just wanted you to know that if you ever need to talk to someone who will understand... If you're ever ready to use your gifts again... I'm here. Even if you don't want to do the magic, that's okay. You can just come and talk with us, make some friends that weren't *her* friends too. I know how important that was for me.” Sabrina smiled sympathetically. “I'm always really good at reading people. It's one of *my* gifts. And I can see you, Willow Rosenberg, the real you that's underneath all this grief. I just want to help you if I can. And I sorta feel like I owe it to Tara to at least try.”

Willow took the offered card and slipped it quickly in her pocket. She did feel something like a kindred spirit in this other woman, who might understand as the others could not. Buffy and Giles had each other. Xander and Anya had each other. What did any of them know about losing someone they loved so dearly? Well, okay, Giles had lost Jenny, and Buffy had killed Angel, but they sure didn't *act* like they understood her grief. And some part of her had always suspected that her friends considered Tara to be just a little college experimentation.

As soon as Tara had died, Giles had been on the phone looking for Oz. Like she wouldn't figure out what he was trying to do from the rushed goodbyes and hang-ups as soon as she walked in the room or from the various books on lycanthropy that he had taken a sudden interest in once again. Like she would just return to her first love if he came back to town. Like Oz could ever replace Tara. Willow knew that, just like everyone else, Giles thought she was only experimenting with the gay thing and if he could bring her old boyfriend back, she would just go straight again. And all would be right in the Scooby world once more.

Sometimes Willow considered confronting Giles about it. But that would just have been too much work. He would want her to talk about it. Everyone was always trying to get her to talk about it, even though she could tell they were sick of hearing about it. Willow, at least, was sick of hearing variations on the theme: "Time heals all wounds." Screw that. It had been over four months, and time was verging on medical malpractice.

Sabrina gave Willow's arm a gentle squeeze, and the redhead responded with a sad smile. "Thank you," she told her new friend. "I'll think about it. Maybe I'll come by sometime to meet everyone. But, really, I won't do the magic."

"No pressure." Sabrina rose from her seat. "I'll let you get back to grading your papers. I didn't mean to chase you out of the library."

Willow watched the other witch leave. She felt an irrational pang of guilt. Was she attracted to this petite brunette? No, she couldn't be. She still missed Tara. Sabrina was nothing more than a new friend. An attractive friend, but just a friend all the same.

Whoosh. Clang. Swoosh. The blades of each sword sang as they danced through the air, as steel met steel and then came apart. Giles felt each impact reverberate up his arm. He had kept his opponent at bay for some time, but now he was being slowly backed into a corner. He parried the approaching blade swiftly, but his answering thrusts were deftly turned aside, his own momentum used against him to send him stumbling three steps back.

"So Dawn has a boyfriend, huh?"

Buffy came at him with a series of forceful swings he blocked easily with a minimum of effort. Would she ever learn to forgo the dramatic for the practical? She was expending far too much energy on each stroke and giving her opponent far too much warning. He jabbed forward, tapped aside her parry, and thrust again, almost nailing her thigh. He had her on the defensive now, and she was moving back to gain more maneuverability.

"What... gives... you... that... idea?" Giles might be a skilled swordsman, and he might be holding his own at the moment, but squaring off against his slayer inevitably left him winded.

"A little Rabbit told me," she answered, as she ducked his thrust and rolled across the floor, coming up behind him. He barely turned in time to block her swing, and their swords locked together as she pressed him several steps back. She smiled smugly. "So who is it?"

"I... don't... know." He spun to the side and let her momentum carry her forward before he followed with his own more economical swings.

"I think you're holding out on me. I think I'm gonna have to beat it out of you." Buffy advanced on him like a runner who had saved one last reserve of energy for the final stretch. Giles took two steps back for each one his slayer took forward. He was actually panting now, grunting under each impact of the blades, his sword blocking and parrying so quickly there was no time for offensive moves.

He took her swing across the length of his blade, the swords locked crossways once again, and he felt himself pressed backwards as before. This time, though, her leg swept outwards and knocked his own out from under him, landing him flat on his back. He felt the impact even through the protective padding, wheezing slightly as she landed across his chest and held the blade beneath his chin.

"You okay?"

He nodded, still out of breath.

"So who's this guy?"

He shook his head, still gasping to catch his breath.

She teasingly pushed the broadside of the blade tighter beneath his chin. She wagged her eyebrows and demanded in an accent so bad he couldn't place it, "Talk now, or heads vill roll." She trilled the l's, and he couldn't help but chuckle, which sent him coughing.

"Really, Buffy... I don't... know."

She set the sword aside and climbed off his chest, offering him a hand up. He bent over for a moment, head between knees, taking slow deep breaths until he no longer felt like he was going to pass out. He slipped off his facemask and undid the clasps of his vest. Buffy only watched him as he stripped off the layers of protective gear. She was wearing a tank top and spandex biking shorts. Her idea of gearing up for training was pretty much limited to changing into running shoes rather than whatever God-awful fashion trend she had currently strapped to her feet and then pulling her hair back into a ponytail.

"Your defensive skills are improving," he commented. "You averted my every attack. But offensively, you waste too much energy on the big moves. Your strokes were too wide; your thrusts had too much windup. Each flourish you add with your blade contributes nothing but alerting your opponent to your next move."

She frowned at him. "So remind me again: which one of us just got laid out on his ass?"

He peeled off his gloves and added them to the pile. "Something you should have accomplished at least twenty minutes ago."

"So I really can't win, can I?"

"Pardon me?"

She crossed her arms and glared at him. "If I let you win even for a little while, I get the 'you're not training hard enough' lecture. And if I take you down in five minutes, you get all sulky and act like it's time to start looking at nursing homes. Our last session, you used the words 'half century.'"

"I am very nearly that."

She threw her hands in the air and rolled her eyes. "You're 48."

Giles chuckled as he stretched out tired muscles. This seemed to bother her more than him. "Almost 49, which is just a short jump to the half century mark."

She crossed her arms again, defiantly. "See? I can't win. I let you stay ahead of me for a little while, and you're *still* going to get all sulky. Pretty soon you'll start saying things like you're too old to be my Watcher and... and... I should have the Council send someone younger, like Wussy Wesley."

Ah, so that's what this was about. "Buffy, you're the Slayer, and I'm a mere mortal. You should be able to take me down in under five minutes, no matter what my age. Tell me, you used to spar with Riley, didn't you?"

"Yeah, yeah," she answered, plopping down on a nearby bench. "I know where you're going with this. He was my own age, and I could still beat him in record time if I wanted to. So am I supposed to bring up Riley every time you get depressed about your age?"

Giles frowned. "Maybe not." He joined her on the bench. "Look, Buffy, you have always been, *will* always be, my better in strength and speed and stamina. That's the nature of the Slayer. There was a time when I might have kept up with you through superior skill and experience and training. But not anymore. And that doesn't depress me. It makes me proud. After all, I am the one who trained you. So you *should* take me down. Again and again. Until you can do it in two minutes instead of five. Otherwise, there is no point to our training."

He reached out one hand and brushed his knuckles across her cheeks. "And I will always be your Watcher. There is no age limit to the position. In fact, there have been slayers with watchers in their seventies, even, so no matter how old and decrepit I get, I'll still be able to tell you when you're dropping your shoulder or leading with your left side or taking too wide of swings with your sword." He considered this for a moment. "Although in my seventies, perhaps we'll find someone else for you to actually spar with. I foresee that I would be living up to the title Watcher in a very literal sense."

Buffy laughed then, and pulled herself into his arms. She made a face. "You're all sweaty."

He patted her on the back. "You're no rose yourself at the moment."

She looked down at her damp shirt and quickly agreed. "Well, I definitely need a shower, and you definitely need a shower. It's only logical that we should save time and water by showering together."

Giles rose and drew her along with him. "I must be a better teacher than I realized. Not only has your skill with a sword improved in your years as my Slayer, but some of my intellect appears to have rubbed off as well."

They headed to the bathroom and shower at the back of the training room. As Buffy locked the door behind them, she asked one last time, "So you really don't know who Dawn's boyfriend is?"

The coroner watched them wheel the gurney in as he scrubbed and gloved up. The police were anxious to know if the cause of death was the same as the others. A uniformed officer was actually waiting for the autopsy report so he could hand deliver it back to homicide.

"Alright. Let's see what we've got."

The coroner drew the sheet back. A woman this time. The other three had been boys, no more than high schoolers. This one was a young undergrad. He shook his head. What a waste.

He took the scissors and careful cut off the expensive cashmere sweater. He sliced up both seams of her fashionably torn jeans. He peeled off each layer of clothing until the body was naked on his slab.

"See? Same symbol," the officer said as he pointed to the mark on her torso. The young rookie looked a little green already. He might need to wait in the hallway for the remainder of the procedure.

"Yeah, I see," the coroner replied. The same symbol burned into her skin like acid. Not on her chest, as it had been for the three high school boys, but completely covering her stomach. He traced his gloved hand across its pattern, checking the damage and trying to match it to anything he might have seen before. It reminded him of how cattle were branded. But, no, this was definitely the work of

acid or some other corrosive substance. He scraped a small sample of her burned skin into a vial for lab testing.

What he couldn't figure out was how such a perfect symbol could have been so precisely burned into her skin by acid. It's not like the killer could have just painted it on with a brush. And pouring a corrosive liquid in such exact lines wouldn't have been an easy task.

He traced the pattern with his gloved fingers once more. A crescent moon curving from hip to hip and over her navel. A jagged lightning bolt beginning between her breasts, piercing the moon, running straight over her belly button, and coming to a point just above the curls of her pubic hair.

The coroner wondered what on earth the symbol could mean. He had seen some strange things during his time in Sunnydale, but this was a puzzle.

Two hours later, the rookie cop left the morgue, in possession of the autopsy report, but missing his breakfast. Cause of death: heart failure. Just as it had been with the others. No obvious reason for said heart failure. And just like the others, this woman had been too young and in too good of health for her heart to have just given out on its own. They would send various samples off for lab testing, but if this was a repeat of the other three, the labs wouldn't find anything more to add to the report.

Willow woke when she heard urgent knocking on her door. She shrugged into her robe and stumbled over to the apartment door. She hadn't been on Scooby duty since Tara's death, so she wasn't used to middle of the night emergencies anymore. Time was she would have been awake and alert in moments, prepared for battle or hitting the books. Now she peeked out the peephole with one bleary eye, recognizing the person in the hallway far later than she should have.

She undid the deadbolt and chain and opened the door, years of habit preventing her from actually inviting the woman in.

"Sabrina?"

The brunette witch stepped inside, passing the vampire test with flying colors. "I hate to bother you this late. Campus information gave me your address. Willow, we really need you right now." And then the brunette began to cry. She covered her face with her hands and leaned towards Willow until the sleepy witch instinctively wrapped comforting arms around the sobbing woman.

"What's wrong?"

Sabrina pulled back slightly, wiped away the tears with the back of her hand, and took a deep breath. "We told Morgaine not to do the spell by herself. We would have helped her with it tomorrow. But she was convinced that she was ready for it. I think she was trying to prove something to herself, and she cast it all alone. Now she's trapped inside herself, and no one can reach her. We've tried everything."

Sabrina leaned forward and grabbed Willow's shoulders like a drowning woman might grab a life preserver. "I know you said you wouldn't do magic, but just this once. *Please*. You and I together might be strong enough to reach Morgaine. And then you never have to do it again."

Willow considered for many more moments than it should have taken. Helping those in trouble used to be in her job description. Time was Giles or Xander would have had to rein her in before she charged headfirst into a situation she wasn't prepared for. Now the very thought of doing magic again made her hesitate. In the end, though, her sense of compassion and responsibility won out.

"Okay, just give me a moment to get dressed."

She changed into a simple cotton dress that was loose and comfortable, slipped on her shoes slowly, and then pulled her long red hair into a meticulous ponytail, spending two or three minutes

making sure she caught every last strand. The entire time she got ready, her gaze was fixed on a framed photo on the nightstand beside her bed. She and Tara snuggled together on the front porch of Buffy's house, both dressed as Disney characters. It was the last picture she had, the last celebration they'd had together, before It happened. Alex had helped them pick out their costumes, deciding on Tinkerbell for Willow and the Little Mermaid for Tara and Robin Hood for himself. Willow smiled as she remembered Halloween, the last time the Scooby gang had been whole and happy: pumpkin carving, trick or treating with Alex, a haunted house in the backyard, Anya's happy announcement that she was pregnant, and Xander's Kodak worthy total shock.

Willow touched the image in the photo reverently before she returned to Sabrina in the living room.

Sabrina had calmed while waiting, seemingly more collected now that she knew Willow would help. She led them to her car and drove them to a building on the far side of campus, past the rows of fraternity and sorority houses. She pulled in front of a house so newly built that the construction vehicles were still parked on a half-finished driveway.

"Wow, it's a beautiful house," Willow commented as she stepped out of the car.

"Yeah," Sabrina agreed. "They were supposed to have it done before the semester started, but you know how that goes. We couldn't move in until almost the end of January."

They walked across the barren front lawn and over discarded shovels and picks. Sabrina opened the door and waited for her to enter.

The inside of the house was finished beautifully with large, spacious common rooms typical of a sorority house. Sabrina led them up a sprawling staircase and down a long hallway with dorm style bedrooms on either side. Willow could see their destination at a distance. It was the only room with a light on, and several people milled around outside in the hallway.

"This is Willow," Sabrina said as she led the witch past them and into the bedroom.

A young black woman sat inside a pentagram drawn on the floor. A few other women stood along the perimeter, their tears a silent testimony to their failure. Morgaine's head was bowed, a mass of cornrow braids flowing down her back and over her shoulders. When Willow bent down in front of her, she could see that the woman's dark eyes were still open, but blank and empty. It reminded her of when Buffy had gone comatose after Glory had taken Dawn. Maybe the same type of spell would reach her.

"I need five candles, one at each point of the pentagram. I need sulfur and ground frogstone and some lilac incense to cover up the smell." Willow's confident orders spurred the room to action. "I need the same kind of powder she used to draw the symbol. We'll need to open it up for me to get in, and then enough powder to close it behind me."

"You're going to get inside her mind? Draw her out?" Sabrina asked.

Willow nodded, her eyes still examining the scene in front of her, her encyclopedic mind pulling out dusty and long unused volumes on magic until she could remember the proper ceremony.

The smell of lavender. The heat of fire.

No, no, no. She couldn't think about that right now.

"I'm going with you," Sabrina stated, and it took a moment for Willow to really hear her words. "I know Morgaine, and you don't. If we both go inside her mind, we have a better chance of bringing her out."

Willow didn't argue. She had the power to get them both in the door, but Sabrina would be the only one who could make sense of what they found on the other side.

Five candles burned, one at each point. The smell of lilac barely concealed the stench of sulfur and frogstone. Willow carefully opened the circle and stepped through. Sabrina joined her. The others closed the symbol behind them. Sabrina sat behind Morgaine, Willow sat in front.

I don't know how much longer I can hold the shield. Please hurry. I've almost got him, Tara, just a minute more.

No, no, no. She shouldn't think about that right now.

Instead, Willow slipped her hands into Morgaine's own, the pale cream of one set of fingers contrasting with the rich chocolate of the other as their fingers laced together. Sabrina touched her friend on the brow, bringing the comatose woman's head back level. Willow shuddered at the vacant expression that met her and closed her eyes.

Oh God, Willow, what are you doing? I just need a little more power. Just a minute more, I promise.

Willow shook her head and focused. They were still sitting in the pentagram, in front of and behind Morgaine. She thought for a moment that the spell hadn't worked, but then she saw the same woman standing in the doorway watching them.

"Morgaine?"

The spell had worked, and they were inside her mind. And this, the pentagram, the room, the house, all of this, existed as an internal representation of her thoughts. However real it seemed, it wasn't. Willow knew their bodies remained quiet and focused, still sitting in the pentagram in the real room of the real house.

Morgaine turned and walked away from them. They each stood and followed, leaving behind the unmoving form of Sabrina's friend. Morgaine strolled down the staircase. A pyre burned in the middle of the living room.

"Let me talk to her," Sabrina whispered and shadowed her friend down to the fire.

Willow watched as the two witches circled the bonfire. Morgaine shifted with each lap. She was in turns an African tribal medicine woman, a Jamaican voodoo queen, a colonial slave, a tacky television psychic, and lastly just Morgaine, herself. Sabrina shifted as she circled the pyre as well. She was ancient priestess, country wisewoman, Puritan witch, flower-power hippy, and then just herself. Centuries of witches, of magic, both feared and revered. Willow watched them dance around the fire as they spoke words she could not hear, and she wondered briefly whose pyre they danced before.

Willow, help me! I'm losing the shield.

Willow tried to push away the memory, but the taste of magic was bringing it all back.

They stood on opposite sides of the battlefield. It was the coming apocalypse. Wasn't it always? The minions circled the beast they had just raised. Giles and Xander brandished broadsword and mace, struggling valiantly to breach the ranks of lesser demons, so Buffy would have a window to reach the larger threat. Even Anya, newly pregnant, fought beside them, wielding a crossbow and felling demon after demon with flaming bolts.

The heat of fire.

The smell of lavender at her feet, and the heat of fire as Anya lit each bolt while standing beside her.

They couldn't let this newly raised beast reach the surface. It had the power to eclipse the sun, to send the world into everlasting darkness, a happy prospect for those creatures of the night who had called it. A more dismal idea for those who enjoyed actually living.

But the thing was huge. King Kong would have climbed into its arms and called it Mommy. There was no way Buffy could beat it. Even Giles knew that. Willow could see it in his expression as he watched his Slayer work her way through the minions guarding their prize. He knew with a sad

certainty that this would be her last battle, and that the best he could hope for would be for the beast to die with her.

Tara and Willow stood at opposite sides of the battlefield, maintaining the shield that held the monster in place. He roared and beat four arms like California redwoods against it. They felt each impact to their bones.

And then Willow had the idea. The creature was called from fire. Ice could be its prison.

"Hold the shield," she told her lover, her voice carried across the distance by magic. "Just for a moment. I think I can kill it."

And she let Tara bear the weight for her side of the spell.

She called to the four winds. She called to Mother Nature.

"I don't know how much longer I can hold the shield. Please hurry." Tara sounded strained. The spell was too much for her to hold alone against the beast's onslaught. But Willow only needed enough time to cast the spell, and they would win. What were a couple of nosebleeds and migraines compared to that?

"I've almost got him, Tara, just a minute more."

She could feel the coolness across her brow. She could feel the breeze swirl past her and circle the beast. It roared in anguish. She could see its hooves turn blue. It stamped its feet, but its movements were becoming stiff. Willow's spell was working. The beast was turning to ice.

But her power was waning. She needed more than what she had if she were to seal the creature in a tomb of ice. She needed Tara.

"Oh God, Willow, what are you doing?" Tara's voice shook as she was torn in two directions: holding the shield and joining her lover's spell.

"I just need a little more power. Just a minute more, I promise."

The beast couldn't move below the waist. The beating of his arms against the magic forcefield slowed, and he looked like a swimmer in quicksand.

She heard Tara scream.

"Willow, help me! I'm losing the shield."

And then came the Choice. The Choice that would haunt her days and her nights for the rest of her life. She could drop the spell and fortify the shield. And then all would be lost. The beast would break free of the beginnings of his ice prison, leaving Buffy to shoulder the last hope of the human race. The Slayer would die saving them all, but there was a chance she could kill the thing and stop yet another apocalypse. Then again, they might all die, and the world with them. A never-ending eclipse. An everlasting night.

Or Willow could finish the spell and finish off the beast right now.

She chose. And for the rest of her life she would wonder if she had made the wrong choice.

She drew what more she needed from Tara. She felt the shield waver as she did. Her hands rose. Her eyes darkened. Willow chanted in Greek. The cool breeze surrounding the beast hardened, and his movements stopped. He solidified in cool, translucent ice. The minions turned to his defense too late. And what could they do against her magic anyway?

She uttered the final words of the incantation, sealing him inside his arctic tomb.

Giles and Xander and Buffy and Anya slaughtered the remaining minions.

But Willow had felt Tara's magic break. And she was all the way on the other side of the battlefield.

Willow frantically attempted to shore the forcefield, but there was nothing left. The spell had broken. So she stumbled down the steep rock bed and into the crevice. She ran across the battlefield, not even noticing how close she came to death. Anya's bolt brought down one demon before it

reached her. Giles' sword halved another before it could touch her. Xander's mace knocked a third to its knees before it moved more than three steps in her direction. Oblivious to these close calls, she ran.

She climbed the opposite rock bed, not caring that she cut and scraped herself in her haste. She reached the top and found her.

Tara lay still across the stones.

"NO!"

Willow knelt at her lover's side, her hands smoothing back the blonde hair. Tara was still alive and watching her.

"Hold on, Tara. Giles will be here in a minute. He'll know what to do."

Tara smiled sadly and licked her lips. Blood flowed from her nose, from her mouth. What could Giles do? There was nothing physically wrong with Tara, nothing a doctor could fix. And Willow could see already that Giles would never make it here in time.

"You did it."

Willow misread accusation in her lover's words. She had done this. She had killed with her magic, had killed the one person she loved more than anything. She began to weep, still smoothing back the blonde hair, and now leaning down to place kisses across forehead and cheeks. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Forgive me, Tara. I'm so sorry."

"Shh..." Tara soothed, lifting one shaking hand to touch the tears that Willow wept for her. "You did it. You got to save the world for once. I'm so proud of you." And then she wound one lock of fire-red hair around her finger and pulled her lover down for one last kiss.

Willow tasted Tara's blood in her mouth, but she kissed her deeply and passionately, as if she could anchor her here in this moment by sheer will.

They said it at the same time.

"I love you."

And then Tara's eyes closed forever, and she died in Willow's arms.

Giles did reach them moments later. And he was too late.

And Willow vowed that she had cast her last spell. Her magic died with Tara.

She blinked away the memory, focusing instead on the flames in the living room. She had wondered whose pyre it was. It made no sense. This was Morgaine's dream, not hers. And yet, Willow knew the funeral pyre was Tara's. Killed by magic. And burned like a witch.

"Willow?"

She turned around. Sabrina and Morgaine were standing behind her, waiting patiently.

"We're ready for you to take us back now."

Willow faced the fire one last time. She half expected to see the First Slayer prowl around from its edges, her ghostly face peering through the flames.

Death is your gift.

But no, that was Buffy's dream. If this was Willow's dream, if this was Tara's pyre, then the flames were always empty.

She spun quickly, resolved, and headed up the stairs with determination. She had cast her first spell. She had broken her vow. But it had saved Morgaine. And Tara would forgive her that.

They returned to their positions in the pentagram, and Morgaine stepped into her still body. A moment later, and they all three gasped in unison. Willow looked around. The others were watching and looked relieved as their friend came to herself. They opened the circle for Willow and Sabrina to step out. Morgaine followed, still a little stiff.

One teary friend batted her on the shoulder. "Girlfriend, you had us freaked! Next time you want to mess with the hard stuff, you let me get your back. You hear me?"

Morgaine nodded sheepishly. She turned to Willow. "I can't thank you enough. You saved my life. I am going to see you again, right? You're coming to our next meeting?"

Willow smiled, a little teary and emotional herself. On the one hand, she had just revisited a moment she tried to keep buried. On the other hand, her magic had just saved someone. Maybe spending time with these people was just the thing she needed. And Sabrina had told her she didn't have to do magic if she didn't want to.

"Sure," she answered. "Tell me when and where, and I'll be there."

The young black woman enfolded her in a warm embrace, and several others piled on as well.

"Willow Rosenberg," Sabrina said, "you are welcome here anytime you like. But I will give you the dates and times for our group meetings just the same."

"She needs the tour," someone insisted.

So they gave her the tour of the house. It looked like any other sorority house, if a bit newer. Poshly decorated for the rich college girls whose parents liked to buy them into a selective society. The tour ended in the living room as they escorted her out. Plush couches surrounded a 52-inch television screen. To one side, a fake fire blazed in the fake fireplace, and over the mantle hung the symbol of their sorority.

"That's weird," Willow said, pointing. "Never seen that before."

Sabrina shrugged. "We're not technically a sorority. I mean, we're not on the campus roster, so no Greek letters or anything. But we needed a symbol just the same. You like it? I picked it out. They're going to put a big one on the front of the house if they ever finish our driveway and parking lot."

Willow studied the symbol hanging above the fireplace. A crescent moon tipped on its side. A lightning bolt running through the center. It was a pretty symbol. It reminded her of old pagan rituals. It seemed to fit a coven of witches.

"Yeah, I like it," she answered, and then walked back to the car with Sabrina.

"Woo! And might I add a big honking Hoo!"

"Hey, Buff, whadya find?" Xander asked.

Buffy seemed rather pleased with herself. "I actually found something for once. Look at me: big research girl."

Giles grew impatient and grabbed for the book in her hands. "For Pete's sake! What is it?"

"Hey," she protested, holding the book out of his reach. "Can't I just gloat for a moment? For once *I'm* the one who found something. It's always you or Willow or Anya or..." She trailed off and left out Tara's name. She shrugged her shoulders. "Even Dawn strikes gold sometimes. When Xander or I actually find something while researching, we should be allowed to gloat."

Giles sighed impatiently and held out his hand. "Are you quite through gloating yet? They found the fourth body with this mark yesterday. Perhaps you'd like to wait for body number five?"

She passed over the leather bound volume, suitably chastised. He adjusted his glasses on the bridge of his nose and examined the page she had opened it to. They had found the lithograph he remembered seeing earlier, but it hadn't provided any useful information. It had only been an illustration of a Dhanari demon raising a sword bearing that mark. He stood on a field of fallen knights, and a lightning bolt lit the blade with a blue fire, the only color in the illustration. They still didn't know the name of the sword or the mark or what it did. But they were able to expand their research to include Dhanari demons in the hope that the mark was related to them.

Buffy had found a similar illustration in the book he was now examining. Except that the scene portrayed a troll wielding the sword. And he stood at the altar of a church, the entire congregation lying dead at his feet before him. And just like in the other illustration, a bolt of lightning branded the blade with a blue flame.

Giles sighed and tossed the book to the table, removing his glasses and rubbing his weary eyes. They had been stuck on this puzzle for entirely too long. "I'm afraid this doesn't give us much more information than the first illustration we found. Again the sword bearing the mark, the dead on the ground, the lightning touching the sword."

Buffy sighed and sank back into her armchair. "Does that mean I didn't find anything? All that gloating for nothing?"

Giles smiled kindly. "Well, it is a troll in this lithograph. That means we can abandon our research into the Dhanari. They obviously do not have an exclusive tie to this sword or its mark."

Buffy brightened. "Yay me! Less research." Xander high-fived her across the coffee table.

Giles replaced his glasses. "Actually that means we should expand into other demons. The sword and the mark could originate with any of them."

Xander scowled. "*More* research? Okay, Buffy, you are no longer my hero."

Anya passed over the book she was working on. "I'm hungry. Someone must go get me pizza and pickles."

Xander patted her stomach affectionately. "An, honey, there's pickles in the fridge, and we can order pizza."

She pouted. "Pregnant women are supposed to send their husbands to go get the food they're craving. It's no fair if you can just have it delivered. Buffy was always sending Giles to the store for ice cream."

Giles glanced over his book with a smirk. "Alex and Buffy keep the freezer well stocked with ice cream if you'd like some." Men had to stick together.

Anya scowled at her boss and then her husband. "Fine. Order me pizza. With olives and pickles and ham."

"Oh my!" Buffy added with a giggle. Anya didn't get the joke, but Buffy couldn't stop laughing.

Just then Alex wandered into the living room, dragging a rather beat up Mr. Gordo by one limb and rubbing at his sleepy eyes.

Buffy pulled the boy up onto her lap. "Hey, little Rabbit, what're you doing out of bed?" He leaned into her embrace and stuck one thumb into his mouth. "Did you have a bad dream?" He nodded, and she gave him a big hug. She tried to wiggle his thumb out of his mouth, but he only started sucking on the other one instead.

Dawn was coming down the stairs and sneaking past them towards the front door. Buffy stopped her. "Hey, Dawn, any idea where Alex gets this whole thumb-sucking from? I didn't suck on mine. You didn't suck on yours. You remember Mom talking about anyone in our family sucking on their thumb?"

Dawn shook her head impatiently. "Umm... Melinda's picking me up in a few minutes. I'll be home by eleven."

"Ten thirty," Giles corrected. "It's a school night."

Dawn rolled her eyes and sighed. "Ten thirty." And then she was out the door.

Buffy looked at Giles knowingly. "She's meeting up with this mysterious boyfriend. Whadya bet? Melinda's just covering for her. I know it." She passed Alex over to his father's lap. "I'm going to follow her and see who it is."

"Buffy, no." Giles stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. "She'll tell us when she's ready, maybe invite him over. No need to spy on the girl. We should be thankful she's not sneaking out the window anymore."

"Come on, Giles. You knew us in high school. Remember the round robin? You think our parents had any clue we were fighting the forces of darkness? You think my Mom had any idea about Angel?"

"And if your mother had followed you out one night, how would you have felt? Show Dawn a little trust, and she'll trust us." He adjusted his son in his lap, so he could continue reading. "Of course, that doesn't mean we can't check up on her alibi and ground her if she's lied."

Buffy laughed. "Poor Alex. You're not going to get away with anything, are you?" She tickled her son under the chin and again tried to wrest the thumb from its happy home. "Come on, Alex, you don't want to suck on that icky thing, do you? Really, I don't know where you get that nasty habit from. Mommy and Dawn never..." Buffy trailed off, her dawning realization and a smug smirk plastered across her face.

Giles turned the page as if he hadn't noticed. He focused intently on his research.

"Omigod! Giles, you sucked your thumb."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Ah-ha!" Buffy stood triumphantly. She pointed to his ears and neck. "See, you're turning red. And you didn't deny it; you only said something that could be interpreted as a denial. See, I know you too well." She laughed maniacally. "You totally sucked your thumb. For how long?"

"Buffy, please, we have work to do."

She crossed her arms. "I'm going to assume you were like nineteen or twenty unless you tell me different. And I just had this image of Ripper sitting on a motorcycle with his thumb in his mouth. Weird. Disturbing. But still way funny."

Giles sighed and tossed the book onto the table. "I was five. Father said I couldn't go to grammar school until I'd stopped. Grandmother put quinine on it, and all in all, it was one of the worst first days of school a child can have. Happy now?"

Buffy giggled and pointed at him. "You sucked your thumb 'til you were five."

Giles rolled his eyes and reached for another book. Buffy was likely to be amused by this new discovery for at least the next month. He would have to remind her of the childhood stories her father had told him. Maybe he would have to dig out that photograph from her fourth Christmas as blackmail. That would surely shut her up.

Alex studied his father with wide eyes. He offered out his other thumb. "Want my thumb, Daddy?"

Buffy actually fell to the floor in hysterics.

"No thank you, son," Giles answered patiently and kissed the boy on the top of his head.

"Color?" Alex asked.

"I suppose if you're not going back to sleep in the next little while." Giles set the boy on the ground in front of the coffee table. He pulled out a pad of paper and some crayons reserved for just that purpose. "Remember, Alex, just color on the paper. Daddy's books are *not* coloring books."

Buffy settled down after a little while and returned to her research too. The pizza came, and Anya was happy. Alex wanted some too, but he didn't like olives or pickles or ham. Xander picked them all off for his namesake, and Buffy informed her son that his Uncle Xander must love him a lot to go through all that hassle, because she would have just made him eat it, olives and pickles and all.

"Ah-ha!" Buffy exclaimed sometime later. "This is an actual woo-hoo moment and cause for some serious gloating." She passed the book over to her husband. "Slayer: two. Watcher: zip. Remind me again what they pay you for?"

Giles took the book and studied it intently. At the same moment, Alex was clamoring to show him a drawing. "Just a minute, Alex. Daddy's looking at this."

Alex crawled beneath the book and onto his father's lap. He laid the crayon drawing on top of the pages his father was looking at so seriously. "See?"

Giles moved the drawing out of the way. "In a minute, Alex."

It appeared Buffy had hit the jackpot. The mark of Camela. The crescent moon and lightning bolt. Branded on her sword for her chosen champion, the sword of Camela had the power to infuse its bearer with stolen gifts. Her chosen champion, the Mortog beast, had lost his blessed blade three thousand years ago, and had been searching for it ever since. The book had a graphic illustration of the beast, with enormous bullhorns and an elephant's trunk and the body and claws of a bear. Or at least that's what it looked like in the illustration.

Giles flipped to the front cover. He had bought this volume at an estate sale just last month. No wonder he hadn't remembered seeing this passage. He hadn't read the book yet.

He turned back to the relevant page, reading more about Camela and her enchanted sword.

"Bad dog," Alex pronounced as he pointed to the illustration of the Mortog beast. If he didn't know what kind of animal something was, it generally fell under the heading of dog. As did most of the monsters he happened to catch glimpses of.

Giles had completely forgotten about his son on his lap. He closed the book quickly. They tried to shield him from these kinds of images if they could. "Yes, Alex, a bad dog. You let Mummy and Daddy worry about it. Why don't you color some more?"

But Alex was more interested in his father's book. He squirmed in his father's lap as he tried to wrestle the book from Giles' hands. The book fell open to the same page, and Alex pointed to the picture again more urgently.

"Bad dog!"

"Yes, you've already said that—"

"Bad dog," Alex insisted, not waiting for his father to finish. "Bad dog hurt Watchers."

Giles' breath caught. He could feel Buffy's eyes on him. They never spoke to Alex about Slayers and Watchers. He knew his mother was a cop and his father owned the magic shop. But he didn't know they were the Chosen Ones.

"What's a Watcher, Alex?" his father asked.

Alex shrugged. "Dunno."

Buffy came to kneel on the floor in front of him. "Was the bad dog in your dream, honey?"

He nodded.

"Did the bad dog hurt people?"

Alex nodded again. "Hurt Watchers."

Buffy met her husband's eyes, fear filling her blue depths. "Giles..." She sounded stricken.

He touched her tenderly across the side of her face. "We don't know that it means anything. Children have bad dreams. He might have overheard something or seen something."

She shook her head. "Or it could have something to do with the fact that his mother has prophetic dreams."

Giles closed the book and set it aside. He sat his son straight on his lap and looked into his eyes. "Alex, can you tell me about your dream?"

He shrugged, and his hands started to play nervously with his father's tie. "Bad dog came. Hurt Watchers. I ran and ran. Cold. Wet. Bad dog want me. Want Robin. But we hide."

His little chin started to quiver, and Giles pulled the boy into a tight embrace. "It's okay, Alex. Mummy and Daddy are here. It was only a dream. You're safe now." The child started to snuffle and latched onto one thumb to comfort himself.

Buffy leaned forward and kissed her son on the forehead. Then she asked softly, "Honey, who's Robin?"

Alex brightened slightly and wiggled out of his father's arms. He reached for his drawing and showed it to his parents. There was the typical drawing of their house: a solid square with a triangle on the top. Green squiggly lines for the grass. A big round yellow sun. And a whole mess of stick figures covered the rest of the paper. Alex pointed them each out to his parents.

"Auntie Wiwo." A girl with a triangle skirt and long red hair. "Uncie Xand and Auntie Aunie." Xander was driving a big red truck. That was always Alex's favorite part about visiting Xander at work. Anya he had drawn as a stick figure with a big round stomach.

"Hey," she protested. "Your son thinks I'm fat. Your son needs some serious art classes, because that doesn't look anything like me. None of his people look like real people. If their heads were really that proportionally big to their bodies, they wouldn't be able to stand up."

Giles stared at her until she stopped talking. "Not now, Anya." He turned back to his son. "It looks fine, Alex. Please continue."

"Auntie Tara." He pointed at a figure in the sky with wings. Giles held the boy just a little tighter, and the child pointed to another figure with fangs. "Uncie 'Pike."

Giles sighed. "He is *not* your Uncle Spike."

Alex blinked up at his father. He pointed to the figure again and insisted, "Uncie 'Pike." Then he continued on with the others. "Auntie Dawnie. Grampa. Gramma Susie." Then he pointed to the four figures in the center of the picture. "Mommy." He had drawn Buffy with her blue officer's cap and a star for her badge. "Daddy." Giles had obscenely large glasses and was holding a big book. At least he knew what his son thought of him. Between the two of them, Alex had drawn two smaller figures: a boy and a girl. "Alex. Robin."

Buffy held her hand over her mouth. Her eyes were slowly filling with tears. Giles touched his son's drawing, his fingers tracing over the figure of the boy and then the girl. Very softly he asked, "Who is Robin?"

Alex looked up at his father as if the man were stupid. He pointed again to the picture. "Robin."

"It's a very nice drawing, son, but who is she?"

"My sis'er. She come live wif us."

Buffy fled from the living room in tears, and Giles could only watch her go, knowing that tonight she would likely cry herself to sleep in his arms. He leaned back into the couch and cradled his son close to his chest. They would have the talk again. Xander picked up a book and pretended to read. Anya didn't care about pretense; she openly watched father and son.

"Alex, do you remember when you wanted a sister for your birthday?"

The boy nodded.

Giles closed his eyes and lightly stroked his son's back. "I told you Mummy and Daddy couldn't have anymore children. No brothers. No sisters. You are our special little boy."

"Robin *real*, Daddy. We ran from bad dog."

"In your dream?"

Alex nodded.

Giles stood, still holding his boy in his arms. "Daddy will read some of his books, okay?" Alex nodded eagerly and settled his head on his father's shoulder. Giles carried him into the kitchen. "For tonight, I'll give you some of my special, magic no-dream potion. Would you like that?"

Alex smiled brightly and nodded once more.

Giles pulled an old prescription bottle from the top of one kitchen cabinet. He fiddled with the childproof cap for a moment, finally needing to set Alex on the counter before he could get it off. Damn silly to have a childproof cap on the thing. The bottle was completely harmless. It had been emptied of its original contents long ago, had probably contained one of Giles' numerous prescriptions for pain medication from one of his numerous injuries. Probably had been something he had never even used. The label now read simply: No-Dream Potion, printed by computer and taped over the original doctor's label. Alex didn't even read yet, but Willow had insisted.

Giles finally got the lid off, and poured a little of the potion into a spoon. Nothing more than water with a touch of blue food coloring, but Alex downed his dose greedily, convinced that it would keep away his dreams. And it usually did.

Giles sealed up the potion and returned it to its place. He collected his son and carried him off to bed. With any luck, Alex would be asleep shortly, and Giles could check on Buffy. It was never a good idea for the Slayer to head out on patrol while still so upset. And after his son and wife were taken care of, Giles himself had a whole lot of research to do.

Willow did go to the next meeting of Sabrina's group, her first meeting with her new friends after Morgaine's close call. She went to a second, third, and fourth meeting as well. She made fast friends with the other women and soon found herself spending more time at the group house than at her own apartment.

Willow still visited Buffy and Xander and the others, but it was like that old saying: you can't go home again. Sabrina and the others were home now, a home that didn't remind her of everything she was trying to forget.

And then there was the magic. She had a taste for it again. She had started small, pressured into assisting with little glamours or household tricks when someone needed a little help with their spellcasting. After the crisis with Morgaine, the others looked up to Willow like an expert, asking her advice and questioning her about the finer points of witchcraft. She had developed a taste for that too. Buffy and the others respected that their friend was a powerful witch, but they second-guessed her a lot, as if they didn't fully trust her. Even Giles treated her like she was still in high school. After her rash and unsuccessful attempt to seek vengeance on Glory for Tara's insanity, Giles had actually put the darker and more dangerous spellbooks under lock and key. She had more than exceeded his skills in the black arts, and yet he still behaved as if he were her mentor.

So it was more than a little nice to have a score of young undergrads look to her as *their* mentor.

Somehow the occasional little magic grew into a whole lot more and a whole lot bigger. Until it was either Willow or Sabrina at the center of everything. Willow had forgotten the rush of magic, its power and the exhilaration that came with it. She hadn't realized how much she missed it. And Sabrina was right. The taste of magic brought her closer to the memory of Tara and the feeling of being near her.

More than that, Willow took pride in the fact that she was helping these young witches grow into their gifts, that she was helping them avoid the same mistakes she herself had made, and that she was no longer the student but was now the teacher.

It was Sabrina who had suggested the healing spell. It was what Willow had been trying to do with the my-will-be-done spell after Oz left: to heal her broken heart. A different spell with different results. Two of the strongest from their group helped Sabrina cast it. They made a circle of three

around Willow, and this time there was no blindness, no unnatural nuptials, no demon hoards. They just gave Time a little push, like hitting the fast forward button, and Willow felt as if months of grief washed away. Time heals all things. But instead of months, it took minutes. And Willow felt a peace she hadn't felt since Tara's death. She still missed her. She still loved her. But the ache in her heart had eased enough for her to breathe, enough for her to live.

The healing spell snapped the last of her loyalties to the old group. They would have denied her this peace. They would have told her that she simply had to get through the pain over time, and that in the long run, she would be better for it. Giles would have scolded her for plunging so deeply into magic so soon after Tara's death. He would have frowned at her, and she would have felt like she was in high school again as he lectured her.

"Your energy is too unfocused right now. You're grieving. You shouldn't do spells alone."

He had told her something similar after Oz left, and he would say the same thing now.

Buffy would side with him. She always did. Xander would do something silly and try to get her to laugh, like they were both still six or something. Anya would make some blunt and tactless remark. It was almost like having Cordelia around sometimes. And Dawn would likely be the only one to come to Willow's defense, which would probably not work in her favor.

Willow still considered them all to be her friends, her close friends. They would always be that. But they were no longer family. Sabrina and the others were her family now.

"You have my cell number?" Giles patted down the pockets of his tux to make sure he was still carrying it.

"Yeah, yeah," Xander answered. "You wrote it on the white board on the fridge. You gave it to me on this little piece of paper along with the pediatrician's number, poison control, and Buffy's friend at dispatch. Would you like to tattoo it on my hand?"

Giles only glared and straightened his tie. Damn black tie affair. He frankly would rather stay at home with Alex than go to a charity dinner with Buffy's whole department. But the police were hosting the function, and she had insisted that her boss would give her dirty looks for the next month and stick her on assignment giving out traffic tickets if she didn't drag her husband along too. Giles actually preferred the idea of Buffy relegated to something nearly as safe as a desk job. But then she had informed him what his life would be like for the next month if that happened, and he had reluctantly agreed to attend.

Xander leaned back in the couch and propped up his feet on the coffee table. "You act like I've never babysat for you before."

"Actually, I recall quite vividly the last time you watched Alex for us. It involved fingerpaints and a garden hose and a week afterwards when we had to convince the boy that making handprints and footprints throughout the house in *real* paint was a bad idea."

Xander waved off his concerns. "I repainted over his mess, didn't I? I even got it out of the carpet. Not my fault Dawn left her art stuff out where he could get into it."

"Yes, but you did teach him the joys of painting with one's body as the brush. He had paint in his hair for a month. *Green* paint. *My* son." Giles pointed one warning finger at his younger friend. "You'll have one of your own soon enough. And I have three years of paybacks to catch up on. Just remember that when you're figuring out how to entertain my son this evening."

"Hey!" Anya protested, as she entered the living room behind him, carrying a bowl of ice cream. She settled on the couch beside her husband and placed her feet on the table beside his, the bowl

resting comfortably on her round stomach. "The baby is mine too. I don't see any reason I should be punished because Xander and Alex get into trouble when you're gone."

Giles scowled. "Then I suggest you keep them both in line." He heard footsteps on the stairs and glanced up, but it was only Dawn. She was rather dressed up for going to the movies with her friends. "Going out with your young man again?"

She rolled her eyes and stretched up on her toes to give him a kiss goodbye on the cheek. "Melinda and everyone else will be there too. Don't go all overprotective on me. I told you where I'm going and what time I'll be back, and I *swear* I'll bring him over to see you guys soon." She smoothed the lines of his shirt and then his cummerbund and jacket. "I just really like this guy, and I don't want to ruin it, you know?"

He brushed the hair back from her shoulders. She had truly turned into a beautiful woman. "Are you afraid we'll scare him off?"

She shrugged. "Something like that."

He smiled. "I'll hold your sister off as long as I can, but she's terribly curious."

Dawn gave him an enthusiastic hug, and then smoothed the lines of his tux once more. "You look way good in a tux. You should send Alex to spend the night at Xander's, and you could get really lucky with my sister tonight."

Giles blushed and shoved her towards the door. "Go on your date already."

He could hear her giggling even as the door shut behind her.

He felt slender arms wrap around his waist. He hadn't noticed Buffy come down the stairs. "You do look pretty darn yummy in that get-up. Maybe we should skip the charity banquet."

He turned and wrapped her in his arms. "I wouldn't be averse to that suggestion."

"Hey!" Xander called from the living room. "Delicate pregnant woman in here. Don't start her puking with all that mushy stuff."

Anya looked up from her ice cream. "I think it's sweet. I hope you and I continue to have frequent sex after the baby comes."

Giles sighed and steered his wife around the corner and into the dining room, out of sight. He held her at arms length, really studying her for the first time since she came downstairs. She was stunning. Then again, she always was. She was dressed in a floor-length, strapless blue sequined gown. Simple, elegant. She wore blue evening gloves to the elbow to match and a simple sapphire pendant with matching earrings that he had gotten her for their first anniversary. She had her hair pinned up off her neck, a few stray tendrils curling around the sides of her face.

His fingers traced along the curve of one cheek reverently. "You are a vision." And then he leaned in and kissed her softly, his eyes closing for long moments. He was in no hurry to get to the banquet.

"Purse, Mommy." Alex stepped up beside them, his little hands offering up her evening bag helpfully. They pulled apart like guilty school children.

"Thank you, honey," Buffy said, taking the purse with one hand as she ruffled his hair with the other. "You'll be good for Uncle Xander and Aunt Anya, won't you?"

He nodded obediently. "Paint."

Giles shook one finger firmly. "No paint. No sledding down the stairs. No using Daddy's books for dominoes. You have real dominoes now. No sword fights with wooden spoons. And your bedtime is still nine o'clock, on the dot." Giles looked at Xander as he said the last.

They each knelt down to kiss their son goodbye, and he waved them off at the door, looking entirely too eager to see them gone. Giles wondered what kind of mischief his son had planned for his favorite uncle and dreaded what kind of state he would find the house in on his return.

The banquet was as dull as Giles had feared. Buffy was constantly pulled from one group to another for a steady flow of introductions. He settled himself beside the refreshment table with the other spouses. Unfortunately, Buffy was one of the few women on the force, so Giles found himself surrounded by officers' wives, the only husband in the group. Some of them had jobs, some of them were stay-at-home moms, but as soon as they found out that he had a three-year-old son, they all started talking about kids and offering him parenting advice. There was no tactful way to bow out of the conversation and no better place to go even if he did. So he simply played martyr.

When another woman joined their group, the wives all grew quiet. Someone offered her punch. The conversation turned to the children's little league games that would start up over the summer. They asked her if her sons would be playing this year.

One of the wives, Maria, leaned in close to Giles and whispered in his ear, "That's Julia. Her husband died on patrol last month. Messed up pretty bad, I guess, and they never got the guy who did it."

Giles took a swig of his punch, thankful that it was spiked. He had a sudden image of himself in Julia's place, as all the officers' wives consoled him on Buffy's death.

He felt a presence beside him and turned to see another man standing at his side.

"You smoke?" the man asked.

Giles shook his head.

"Good," he answered. "How 'bout a walk outside?"

Giles found himself steered out of the banquet hall.

"Thought you might need a rescue before they started swapping chili recipes. John Tims," the man introduced himself. "My wife is a detective in homicide."

"Rupert Giles. Just Giles is fine. My wife is new. Eighteen months."

John laughed. "New wife or new cop?"

Giles laughed in return. They had stopped at the edge of the banquet hall parking lot and were now staring across the street at the ocean. "New cop. Buffy and I have been married three years now."

John leaned back against a nearby SUV. "Buffy, huh?" He chuckled and shook his head. "Sorry. Name like that, I just get this image of the stereotypical twenty-something blonde clotheshorse who you might have swooped up right out of high school..." He trailed off, his expression growing more serious. "Hit the nail on the head there, didn't I? Sorry."

Giles shrugged and crossed his arms. The night was growing rather chilly for spring. "That's how most people see it, I suppose."

John studied the other man for a moment before nodding in understanding. "But that's not how it is." It wasn't a question, just an affirmation. "Want a beer? Better than the crap they're serving in there." The man didn't really wait for Giles' answer before opening the back door of the SUV he was leaning against and pulling two cans from a cooler in the backseat.

Giles accepted the offering and studied his new and unexpected acquaintance. John appeared to be of a similar age: late forties, possibly even early fifties. Dark, full hair, speckled with gray, a neat beard, and dark, intelligent eyes. He seemed trim and fit, perhaps slightly soft around the middle.

"So what do you do?" John asked him.

Giles opened his beer, holding it away from his body slightly as it foamed over. "I own the Magic Box. It's a store near the downtown."

"I've seen it. I've always wondered what kind of people shop there. I never imagined there'd be enough demand to keep a store like that up and running."

Giles shrugged and took a sip of his beer. "It's a niche market, but business is good."

John leaned back against the SUV once more. "I'm guessing from your accent: you're not from around here."

"England originally."

"I'm from Minnesota originally. Not as exotic, but still a whole lot different from here. Never thought I'd actually miss the snow, but I do sometimes."

Giles sighed. "I miss the rain sometimes."

They both slipped into a companionable silence as they finished their beers. John finally filled the silence as he pointed to four men near the door of the banquet hall and told Giles, "Those are the other husbands. You can always find them smoking just outside any police function. I thought about taking it up once, but hey, now we can rescue each other." He crushed his can and tossed it in the backseat. "See the guy on the far right? The redhead?"

Giles squinted and took off his glasses until he could see the man at this distance. "Yes."

"That's Toby. He's a pretty okay guy if you can get him away from the other three. They're a bad influence. I think they're all a little insecure when they come to these things, like they're lesser men just 'cause their wives are cops and they're not. They take it to the other extreme. Testosterone overdose. It's really pretty pathetic. I mean, hell, my April's the best damn cop they've got in homicide. Nearly twenty-five years. Not that I won't be happy when she retires, and I can stop worrying every time the phone rings or there's a knock at the door, but still... I'm really proud of her." John shrugged and leaned his head back to look up at the stars. "Maybe I'm just used to being the odd man out in a room full of women. Doesn't bother me anymore."

Giles slipped his glasses back on and leaned against the SUV as well. "You work with a lot of women?"

John turned his head to meet Giles' eyes with a small smirk. "I teach at a grade school. Second graders. Not as glamorous as tracking down killers, but I like the kids and I like what I do. I'm okay with letting my wife be the action hero. I even did the whole Mr. Mom thing when our kids were small."

Giles chuckled. "I'm actually doing that right now. Our son is three. He comes to the shop with me while Buffy's at work."

John shook his head. "Three? I can't imagine how you do it. A three-year-old at my age... gives me chest pains just thinking about it. Our eldest is having her first baby this fall. I'll be a first time granddad and that's just about my speed right now. Spoil 'em, and then ship 'em back home when you get tired." John grew quiet for a moment as he thought. "And teenagers in my sixties..."

"Yes, I've done the math," Giles groaned.

John patted him on the back. "You're a braver man than I, my friend. I think you deserve another beer." And John fished out two more from the cooler.

They stayed out in the parking lot talking for two hours or more while the banquet continued on inside without them. Giles worried that he should make an appearance for Buffy's sake, but John assured him that showing up was enough and that Buffy would be too busy to pay him any attention anyway. By the time the guests started to wander back to their cars, John and Giles had gone from acquaintances to good friends. They had talked about their wives and their kids and the mistakes of their youth, serious subjects and small talk both. They had discussed books they had enjoyed and music that had influenced them. They shared what it was like to fear for their wives' safety on a daily basis, close calls they'd each had, and fights about dangerous assignments. John even cried as he told his new friend about the two partners April had worked with before, who had each died in the line of duty.

By the time Buffy came looking for her husband, John and Giles were sitting in the back hatch of John's Explorer, their legs dangling over the edge, laughing like two little boys as John recounted the story of their family vacation to Vegas, including flat tires and carsick kids and suitcases flying off the station wagon's luggage rack and April's failed attempt to use her badge to weasel them out of a ticket. It was after eleven, and they had been talking for close to five hours.

"Don't you know better than to climb into cars with strange men?" Buffy scolded him.

Giles reached for her, and she slipped her gloved hand into his. He pulled her into a warm embrace. "Buffy, this is John. John, this is my wife Buffy."

They shook hands, and John whistled appreciatively. "God, Giles, you failed to mention that your wife is drop-dead gorgeous."

Buffy blushed, and Giles smiled. It was so hard to get a blush out of her, but she was so cute when she did. He would have to have John over to see if he had a talent for making Buffy blush.

"Thank you," Buffy replied demurely. "I'm still new, floating around departments and stuff, so I'm sorry, but I don't remember where you work."

John smiled. "Ah, yes, your husband has yet to learn that introductions must be accompanied by ranks and departments. My wife is actually the cop. April Tims."

Buffy nodded. "Homicide detective. I've met her. She was very helpful. I'm thinking about joining up with homicide when I get the chance."

Giles deflated somewhat, and John noticed this. "Yes, well that's a conversation you'll want to have with your husband when I'm not around. If you'll excuse me, I've got to find my wife before she gets talked into going out with her partner and his friends."

John and Giles exchanged phone numbers before parting. Giles hadn't realized how much he missed friends his own age since coming to Sunnydale, most especially since Jenny had died. Hell, he'd even ended up out drinking with Ethan. That should have been a sure signal. And in John, he felt a kindred connection. John knew what it was like to send the woman he loved out day after day and not know if she would come home. Giles wouldn't be able to tell the other man about the slaying and the demons and the magic, but with a little careful editing, he would have someone to talk to about the things that really mattered.

Buffy and Giles strolled back to their car, arm in arm. Giles couldn't stop grinning, and she gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Aww, you made a friend. Good for you. Let's have him over for dinner sometime. April, too."

They stopped beside the BMW. They hadn't sold it after all, had simply gotten a practical car to replace the Jeep instead.

"You okay to drive?" Buffy asked him.

He smiled softly at her concern. "I haven't had anything since seven or so. I know you've been the social butterfly this evening and have probably lost all sense of time, but it's now quarter past eleven. I'll be fine."

She frowned. "Sorry. I didn't mean to ditch you all night, but my Academy instructor was here, and he was introducing me all around, and he can really help me get a good position. I checked up on you once, but you looked like you were having fun with that other guy, so I didn't want to bother you."

Giles brushed his knuckles across her cheek fondly. "I'm not complaining, Buffy, just teasing. I actually enjoyed this evening more than I thought I would."

"Good." She removed her sapphire pendant and earrings and handed them over to him. "I don't want to lose them. Hold onto them for me. I'll meet you back at home in a few hours."

Giles frowned. "You have weapons enough for patrol?"

She turned her head and pointed to the two decorative wooden stakes holding her hair in its elaborate arrangement. She lifted the slit of her skirt higher to reveal the stakes stored in a garter belt around her thigh. She tugged at the hem of each glove and showed him the thin stakes she had secreted away beneath the blue satin. Lastly, she hiked up her cleavage, and he saw the bottle of holy water she had slipped between her breasts.

“Buffy!” he exclaimed, glancing around to see if anyone else had witnessed her near striptease.

She pulled him down into a kiss. “I’m the Slayer, and someone really wonderful trained me to never leave the house unprepared. So I’m going to do a quick round of all the graveyards. Vampires can’t resist the helpless maiden routine, and this dress is great for that. I’ll be home in a couple hours. Sooner hopefully.”

She ran the soft satin of her gloves across his face, and then down the buttons of his shirt. Her arms slid beneath his jacket and around his back. “You know why I like tuxes with tails?” He shook his head, and her hands slid further down his back until she had grabbed his butt and pressed him tightly against her. “No one notices a little hanky panky.”

“Buffy!” he protested, although not very vehemently.

She kissed up his neck and then whispered in his ear. “Leave the tux on, and when I get home, you can disarm me.” She pulled away from him and winked seductively. “I never showed you where I hid the throwing stars. Or the cross.” She licked her lips and smiled before turning and running out of the parking lot.

Giles sighed. Two or three hours seemed like a very long time.

Alex came running down the stairs when he heard the doorbell. Aunt Anya was asleep in Dawnie’s bed, and Uncle Xander was still struggling to get himself untied. Daddy had been trying to teach Alex how to tie his own shoes, and he had mastered the art of the knot. Uncle Xander hadn’t seemed to know that when they started playing Cowboys and Indians.

Alex opened the door and looked up at a strange man dressed all in black. Not Dawnie. Not Mommy or Daddy either.

“Hello,” the man said. “You must be Alex.”

He nodded.

The man smiled. “You look just like your father. Can I come in?”

Alex nodded and stepped aside.

The man didn’t move, but he knelt down in the doorway, eye-level with the boy. “I’m pretty sure I need more of an invitation than that. Your father has a tendency to de-invite me after every visit.” The man stretched out one hand and met with invisible resistance. He looked like a mime as his hand pressed against the invisible wall in the doorway. “I just need you to say the words, Alex. Say: ‘Come in.’”

“No. Daddy says no.” His father was always very strict about that. Bad men could come in if you said they could.

The man didn’t seem upset. He just laughed. “Your father has you well-trained. I should have expected that. Is he home?”

Alex shook his head.

“Your mother?”

Again, the head shake no.

“Dawn?”

Another negative. "Uncle Xander," he informed the man.

"Can you get him for me? He'll invite me in."

Alex frowned and chewed on his lip. He looked up towards the staircase. He had mastered the art of tying knots, but not the art of untying them. And Uncle Xander had said not to wake Anya. "No," he finally answered.

The man sighed and bowed his head. "You didn't like me when you were a baby, and you still don't like me, do you?"

Alex smiled and held out three fingers. "I'm free," he told the man proudly.

"And I'm frustrated. You're as stubborn as your father." The man took something from the inside pocket of his long dark coat: a picture. He flipped it over and wrote on the back in ink. "Will you give this to your father when he gets home?" He passed the picture through the doorway as far as his hand could reach. "Tell him Angel was here."

Alex took the picture and smiled as he looked at it. "Bye-bye, Angel," he said.

Angel stood, and looked down at Alex with a sad expression. "You're not anything like Buffy, are you? For some reason, I thought you would be. His eyes. His face. Buffy told me, but I guess it's different seeing you in person." He sighed and studied the boy for a moment more. "You're a lucky little boy, you know that, Alex? You have a lot of people in your life who love you."

Alex blinked up at him solemnly for several moments before he informed the man, "Dawnie has boy'fend."

Angel laughed. "Okay, so you're a gossip like your mother. And on that note, I think I'll just go. Goodbye, Alex. It was nice to finally see you. Maybe next time you'll actually invite me in."

"Bye-bye, Angel." And Alex waved at the man as he turned and walked into the night, his long dark coat billowing behind him. Alex shut the door and took the picture up to his room, so he would remember to give it to Daddy.

Uncle Xander had two loops of the rope off, and was nearly free. Alex tried to untie the last loop.

"No, no, Alex," Xander said. "Don't help me. I've almost got it."

Too late. "Oops," Alex said. He'd only made it worse.

Xander sighed and glanced over at the clock. "Ten-thirty. I'm beginning to suspect that this was an elaborate plot to stay up past your bedtime. Admit it, kiddo, you're a criminal mastermind."

Alex giggled.

"Your dad is so gonna kill me if you're still up when they get home."

Buffy strolled through the last graveyard, her hair now blowing free around her bare shoulders. She had used the stakes from her hairdo sometime before. Four vampires so far, and she was nearly ready to call it a night. But her dress was like a regular homing beacon, and she thought she would give this last graveyard a try before heading home.

"Oh dear me, where did my date go?" She called out her question in an almost singsong fashion. "I thought he went this way. I hope I'm not lost. This graveyard is so big and so scary at night. And I'm so defenseless." She wrapped her arms around herself in an attempt to look timid. But really she was cold. She should have asked for Giles' jacket before she went on patrol.

"I hope nothing mean and nasty attacks me while I'm all alone here. I couldn't even run very far in these really high heels."

She sighed and continued on to the mausoleums at the back of the graveyard. No one seemed to be taking the bait. Maybe she should run like something was chasing her. Vampires could never resist a little trip-and-fall.

She spotted movement up ahead. Her “spider-sense” was tingling. Definite vampire. She approached quietly, ducking behind trees and tombstones to catch the creature unawares. That’s when she saw Dawn. And Dawn was up against a tree, sucking face with some guy.

Don’t think about that now, Buffy thought. There’s a vampire around here, and Dawn could be in trouble.

She crept up closer. She would get a good look at this mysterious boyfriend while she was here. All in the line of duty, after all. She wasn’t being nosy or intrusive or snoopy. She had to get this close if she was going to protect Dawn from the nearby vampire. And if she happened to find out Dawn’s big secret at the same time, well that was just a bonus.

The couple pulled apart for air finally, and Buffy jumped up from her hiding place, screaming.

“Omigod! Spike! You and Spike! Ughh! Double ughh! And ack! And omigod! You and Spike!”

Dawn and Spike looked in her direction. Dawn seemed panicked and closed the distance between them.

“Buffy, calm down. Please calm down.”

“Calm down? I’ll show you calm down.” Buffy pointed firmly towards the graveyard exit. “Get your ass home right now, and maybe I’ll calm down enough to let you out of the house ever again before you go to college.”

“Buffy, please...”

The Slayer waved her hands in the air. She wasn’t hearing any of it. “You are so grounded, your kids won’t be able to leave the house. And you.” She advanced on Spike. “You are dust.” She slipped a wooden stake from inside one blue evening glove and raised it menacingly. He backed up until he hit the tree, his hands outstretched defensively.

Dawn grabbed her sister by the arm and tried to halt her progress, but trying to stop an angry Slayer was like trying to stop an elephant by grabbing its tail. “No, Buffy, you can’t slay him.”

“Give me one good reason why not.”

“Because I love him.”

Buffy stopped and looked at her sister. “Okay, I covered the ughh, right? And the ack? And the omigod? Can I add a what-the-hell-are-you-thinking?”

“I always had a crush on him. You knew that. But I was a kid, and we were just friends. And then I grew up, and we were still friends and then—”

Buffy held up one hand. “I don’t want to hear anymore. You’re going home, and I’m having a talk with Spike.”

Dawn crossed her arms defiantly. “If you stake him, I’ll never forgive you as long as I live.” And then she marched across the graveyard towards home.

Buffy turned to Spike, but he got in the first words. “Be pissed at me all you like, Slayer, but you can’t let her walk home alone.”

She glanced back towards her sister. Damn. She hated it when Spike was right. “Fine. The talk was going to be short anyways. Let me give it to you in five words or less.” She held up her fist and uncurled a finger on each word. “Stay. Away. From. Dawn.” She paused for a brief moment. She still had one finger left. She uncurled her pinky with a sneer. “Pillock.” And Giles thought she never paid attention.

Buffy turned on her heel and dashed across the cemetery to catch up with Dawn.

As soon as she’d reached her, Dawn turned and started desperately, “Please, just let me explain—”

Buffy shook her head. "More walking, less talking. I don't think you want to explain anything to me right now. I don't think you want to explain it today or this week or maybe even this month. If you know what's good for you, you'll go quietly to your room and start figuring out which colleges have online classes, 'cause you're not leaving your room ever again."

"I love him."

Buffy shuddered. "If you think I'm pissed, wait 'til you see Giles when he finds out."

Dawn didn't say another word the rest of the way home.

Giles unlocked the front door. He braced himself before he walked inside.

Everything seemed to be in order: nothing broken, nothing spilled, no overturned furniture arranged in an elaborate fort, no mounds of flour and sugar "sand-castles" on the kitchen floor. The house looked just as he had left it, in fact.

"Xander? Anya?"

Alex came barreling down the stairs. "Daddy! Daddy!"

Giles lifted him up and sighed. The living room clock said eleven thirty. A broken bedtime, maybe not the worst thing that could have happened.

Alex bounced in his father's arms. "Play cowboy an' injuns. Yee-haw."

Giles smiled in spite of his irritation. "Your mother tells me they're called Native Americans now. You'll have to change your vocabulary if you want to be politically correct."

Alex frowned at him. "Yee-haw," he said again.

"It would appear Uncle Xander has taught you a new word."

"Yee-haw."

"Yes, you've said that."

Xander came down the stairs a moment later, looking rather sheepish. "I know he's supposed to be in bed, but we were kinda busy and lost track of time."

Alex kissed his father on the cheek with a loud smack. "Knots bad. All tied up."

Giles gave Xander a concerned stare. "You tied up my son?"

Xander chuckled nervously. "More like he tied me up. I didn't know he knew how." He rubbed his hands together. "But no harm done. We'll just be going now."

Anya was coming down the stairs, wiping sleep from her eyes. "He wants to go before you find the broken ceiling fan."

"Anya!"

"Broken fan?" Giles asked, quite alarmed.

Xander steered his wife towards the door, explaining as they left. "Alex piled stuff on your bed until he could reach. He thought he could ride the ceiling fan in circles if he held on, but the blade broke. I would have stopped him, but hello, tied up."

"Yee-haw," Alex added to the story.

"Where were you?" Giles asked Anya.

"Napping. I was tired."

Giles stood on the porch, watching them leave. He called out to them as they got in their car, "Just wait. Uncle Giles is going to find lots of fun games to teach your offspring."

Giles sighed and closed the front door.

"Yee-haw," his son said brightly.

“And so many irritating words for the child to learn,” Giles added under his breath. He carried the boy upstairs. It was far, far past his bedtime. “Come on, time to sleep. I think you’ve had enough games and stories for today. How about straight to bed?”

He set the boy on his bed. He immediately started jumping.

“Alex, no.”

The boy continued to bounce on the mattress like a trampoline. “Yee-haw,” he cried gleefully.

“William Alexander, stop that right now!”

The boy quickly stopped and lay back against his pillows. Giles pulled out pajamas from a middle drawer. That’s when he noticed the picture sitting on the dresser top, a picture of Buffy as a little girl, maybe three or four. He didn’t recognize this one specifically, but there were so many of them. Alex must have gotten into the family albums.

Giles carried the photo over to his son. “Where did you get this, Alex?” The boy was silent for a moment, and Giles asked again. “I won’t be mad at you. I just want to put it back.” He also wanted to check that the rest of the album wasn’t in shambles.

“Angel came.”

Giles frowned for a moment, not understanding. Then his breath caught as he looked at the photo once again. The camera had imprinted the date when the picture was taken. ‘3-22-05.’ Just this past week. His fingers shook as they touched the image softly. A little girl on a swing. She had Buffy’s blue eyes, and her blonde hair, the same color she’d had as a girl before it had darkened and she had resorted to bottle blonde. The resemblance was so striking he had mistaken it for Buffy’s childhood photo.

He flipped the picture over. Angel had written on the back.

Come to LA. I’ve found your daughter. Be discreet. There are Watchers everywhere.

I kept my word. This makes us even. For Jenny. For Crawford Street. I’ve done everything I can do to make it right again.

Angel

Giles fought against the tightening of his stomach, the clenching of his jaw. He had promised that Angel would have his clean slate, and he would.

Giles turned the photo over again and studied the image of his daughter. “Tanya Dawn.” He hadn’t spoken the name in three years, and it caught in his throat.

Alex leaned over his shoulder, staring at the picture too. “Uh-uh,” he told his father emphatically, pointing at the little girl. “Robin.”

Chapter 3 Another Man's Child

Giles sat on the living room couch, staring at the photograph of his daughter. Alex had settled to sleep shortly after being put to bed, and neither Buffy nor Dawn was home yet. He was alone in a quiet house, fighting an internal war with himself.

Should he tell his wife and her sister what Angel had brought? Buffy would hate him if he kept this from her. But how much more would he hate himself if he let her get her hopes up over another dead end? Tomorrow was Saturday. Buffy would be on duty for once, seeing as the more senior officers had taken the day off after the banquet. And Dawn would be at voice lessons, followed by rehearsals. He could let Anya watch the store for the day, and he and Alex could be in LA by mid-morning. And then if there were anything to this new development, he would tell Buffy.

He studied the photo in his hands. He had it memorized, and yet there was something reassuring about holding it between his fingers. It was the first real evidence he had that she existed, that he had not merely dreamed the baby girl or imagined the feel of her in his hands as he breathed life into her tiny lungs. There were days when he wondered. They never spoke of it, he and Buffy, except in those post-battle moments when she would make him renew his promise to find their child. Beyond that, they never spoke her name. Buffy left it to him to talk to Angel, to consult the other detectives, to make occasional phone calls to the Council. She even left it to him to pore through the information she brought home from the precinct. Giles didn't complain. It was his burden to bear. It was his fault their daughter was missing.

So no one spoke of her. The twins' nursery soon became only Alex's, until Giles couldn't remember what it had looked like with two cribs. Buffy would cry at the slightest reminder, and so he tried not to remind her. It was almost as if their girl had been stillborn. The conspiracy of silence had closed in around him until he wondered if his daughter were only a figment of his imagination, a fervent wish, and a desperate longing. But he was holding something of her now. He had her picture. She was real.

The door slammed loudly. He slipped the photo into the pocket of his dress shirt quickly and pressed it close to his heart with the palm of his hand. Buffy and Dawn were home. And they were screaming at each other.

"You won't even listen! You don't understand!"

"Don't understand? Hello? Three years of Angel. At least he had a soul."

"Girls, please." Giles stepped between them. They didn't seem to have noticed his presence until that moment. "What is going on here?"

Buffy crossed her arms and glared daggers at her sister. "You want to tell him or should I?"

Dawn crossed her arms in a matching stance. "Why should I care? You're both just going to gang up on me anyway."

Giles flinched from the venom in her statement. What had he done to deserve that? "Would someone just tell me before I have to lock you both in separate rooms?"

A long staring contest ensued between sisters before Buffy finally turned to him, her cheeks still flaming with anger. "Mystery boyfriend? Spike!" She shouted it a bit louder. "Spike! Did you hear me? Dawn is dating *Spike*!"

Giles cringed at the volume and covered his ears slightly. "I'm not deaf, Buffy, although I soon will be if you keep that up."

She grabbed the lapels of his jacket, shaking him slightly. "Why aren't you freaking out? Dawn is dating *Spike*!"

"Buffy, calm down." He disentangled her fingers from his tux. "I think we should all take some time to think and to cool off. A little sleep wouldn't go amiss either. We'll all discuss this tomorrow, like two reasonable adults and one completely insane teenager." He ripped off his glasses and spun to face Dawn, the reality of the situation finally hitting home. "*Spike?* Have you lost all common sense? *Spike?* I would have never expected such complete and utter lack of judgment from you."

Dawn stamped her foot and ran her fingers through her hair. "Would you both just stop it? You don't know him at all!"

"I know what he is capable of. I have a library of Watchers' Journals that chronicle over a hundred years of murder and rape and plunder and violence. Dear God, Dawn, he got his name from driving railroad spikes through innocent *people*."

"He doesn't do that anymore," she protested.

"Ah, yes, water under the bridge then," Giles replied sarcastically, donning his glasses again in one fluid movement. "I think you'd best get to your room, young lady, before I say something I'll regret later." She turned and huffed up the stairs. He called out after her: "We'll both be in periodically to check on you tonight. Sneaking out the window would *not* be a wise choice."

The door upstairs slammed shut, and the one behind them opened. They both jumped. Buffy rammed their new visitor into the wall.

"Giles," she said through clenched teeth. "Where did you put that de-invitation spell again? 'Cause I got one vamp I'd like permanently off our guest list."

"Hey, hey," Spike said, grimacing from the Slayer's force. He held out his hands in surrender. "Come on then, truce, white flag, and all that."

Buffy released him and stalked to the other side of the foyer. "God, Spike, I let you in my *home*. I had this weird idea that we were actually *friends*. All those times I trusted you with my sister... That was what? A first date?"

Spike's lip curled in a sneer. "And all those times I helped you? Glory. Patrolling for a knocked up Slayer. Chrissake, I staked Dru, my *Sire*, to save your sorry ass. There ain't a demon in a hundred miles wouldn't pay good money to see me dead. Doesn't any of that count for anything with you, Slayer?"

Buffy's jaw twitched, and Giles felt no compulsion to rein in his slayer's anger. "So when you couldn't get me in the sack," she said, "you thought you'd give my sister a try?"

Spike sprang forward the three feet between them and decked Buffy straight across the jaw. They both bent over, clutching their heads in pain. Giles stepped in, snatching the back of Spike's jacket mid-stride as he forced the vampire out the door and flung him in the grass.

Spike rolled and came up sitting. He stared back at Buffy. "We've *never*. Niblet's not like that. She's a real lady. Maybe you should both give her a chance to get two words in 'fore you go damning her for something you don't understand."

Buffy was rubbing her jaw with one hand, the other leaning against the doorjamb. "I'm not going to watch my sister make the same mistakes I made. I'm not going to watch her get her heart broke by the likes of you."

She turned her back on him and marched up the stairs.

Leaving Giles standing in the doorway, looking down on Spike. Cool, collected, with the steely gaze of Ripper. "I expect that will be the last time you see the inside of our house."

He closed the door, knowing that would unfortunately not be the last they saw of Spike.

The Hyperion. Giles hadn't seen it in just over three years. It hadn't changed much. It gave the illusion that he was stepping back in time, walking in after that fateful trip to India, stepping through the doors in search of his daughter, and this time things would turn out differently. The same elegant décor, the same wide-open spaces. He could almost believe that he would get the last three years back. He glanced down at his son at his side, the child's small hand curled tightly around his own. No, no one could give him back the last three years. With any luck, Angel could give him the next three years, and every year after.

"Hello?" he called.

Cordelia Chase came out of a back room. And she had changed. In the same ways that Buffy had changed, but Giles hadn't witnessed the daily metamorphosis. So he recognized three years of transformation immediately. Time had matured her into a lovely young woman in her prime. No longer the shallow, high school cheerleader he had first known, her eyes held the depth and experience that came from being an instrument of the Powers That Be. Wesley Wyndham-Pryce was a lucky man.

"Giles!" she exclaimed, quite surprised.

"Hello, Cordelia," he answered warmly.

"And you brought Alex."

"Yes. Alex, this is—"

Introductions were swiftly interrupted as Cordelia pushed them both towards the exit. "Did you see the new Starbucks they put up on the corner? Let me buy you both some coffee. Unless kids don't drink coffee. Do kids drink coffee? Is there anyone in LA who doesn't drink coffee? Well I drink lattes, but that's pretty much the same thing, only trendier."

Giles halted her progress. "I think you've had enough. Is Angel in?"

Her eyes grew somewhat panicked. "I think you both should go somewhere that's away."

Wesley emerged into the lobby from another back office, and Cordelia turned around to look at him. "Oops," she said.

At his side was Quentin Travers, who had now spotted both Giles and Alex.

"Rupert, I must say this is a surprise." Travers strolled over to meet them. "But it does save me the bother of a trip to Sunnydale."

Giles' hand tightened over his son's. They had thus far managed to keep the Watcher's Council out of Alex's life. Every father thought his child the smartest, the fastest, the best, but Rupert Giles could be objective. And Alex was exceedingly bright for a three-year-old. He knew not only his alphabet, but the Greek and Sumerian alphabets as well. He would likely be reading before kindergarten. The child had an excellent memory, an inquisitive nature, natural coordination, and a fearless disposition. With his lengthy lineage of watchers on his father's side, and a slayer for a mother, Alex was everything the Watcher's Council could want and more. And that wasn't just a father's pride.

"Well hello, Alex," Quentin Travers said, squatting down to bring himself eye-level with the boy. Travers lowered himself for no one. He must have a keen interest in the child indeed. "I'm a friend of your father. My name is Quentin Travers."

Giles moved himself slightly in front of his son. Travers noticed this. The two men carried on a silent conversation with their eyes. Giles would not budge on this matter. Alex would have the choice his father never had.

The boy frowned up at the older man. "Don't go."

Travers looked confused.

Alex elaborated. "Don't go water."

The older watcher gave Giles a baffled expression, but he only shook his head. "I don't know what he's talking about." And then he lifted his son into his arms. Enough of Travers examining the boy as if he were a microscope specimen.

Travers stood and brushed off his trousers. "Rupert, perhaps we can speak alone. I'm sure Wesley will allow us the use of his office."

Wesley only nodded.

Giles hesitated, unsure who to hand his son over to: the Seer or the ex-Watcher. His choice was quickly made for him.

"Angel!" Alex cried as he spied the vampire walking down the staircase on their side. The only one in the room that the boy recognized, and the only one Giles would rather not leave him with.

"Will you be alright with Angel for a few minutes while I talk with Mr. Travers?"

Alex nodded, and Angel approached them. Now or never. The Vampire with a Soul had earned his clean slate, and Giles would have to keep his word. He passed his son over to the hands that had snapped his bones, looked up into the eyes that had watched his suffering. He swallowed hard. There were no words.

He followed Travers into Wesley's office. There was a file already sitting on the wood desk in anticipation of Giles' arrival. Except that he hadn't been expected.

"Please, Rupert, have a seat. Would you like something to drink?"

"Just get on with whatever it is you have to tell me."

Travers shrugged. "As you wish." He crossed to the other side of the desk, near the window, and opened the folder, sliding it across to Giles. Another photo of his daughter, taken outside a daycare center, a photo of her in the parking lot of a local grocery store, hand-in-hand with a young woman, and a photo of her through a second-story window, as the telephoto lens showed a clear view of a bedtime story. She looked like Buffy as a child. There was no doubt who her mother was.

"Robin Deanna McGregor," Travers said softly.

So that was his daughter's name. Alex was right. Robin. That had other implications for the boy, but Giles would think about that later. Right now, his fingers stroked the images tenderly. Blonde curls and blue eyes and round cheeks. The photo of her in bed was the clearest; he could see her face: Buffy's eyes and the shape of her face and the curve of her smile. But there was something of Giles in the girl too. She had long fingers like he did, and his chin, and a touch of his pensive expression as she studied the book the woman read to her.

Travers closed the folder, seeking to bring Giles' attention back to himself. "You are aware, of course, that one of the duties of the Council is to seek out potential slayers and keep tabs on them?"

Giles turned slightly and sat on the desk sideways. He knew where this conversation was leading him, and he was in no hurry to get there. "Keep tabs yes, but preferably take into custody at a young age so they can be properly schooled and educated should they one day become the active slayer."

The older man nodded, not ashamed of the things the Council did to protect the world and all who lived in it. "In this modern age, it is becoming increasingly difficult for the Council to pull those kinds of strings. Parents have a strong desire to keep their children."

"Imagine that," Giles muttered. He shared a sardonic look with Travers before the man continued.

"In some countries, we can just go in and take a potential slayer, compensate her parents with money or influence, but even that is becoming more rare. We are looking at a new age, where we will have to watch the potentials at a distance until one of them becomes the Slayer. It will put them at a disadvantage. Your Buffy was the renegade, but soon it will be the norm. To train them after the fact, to educate them in their destiny after they are Called. We can expect the life expectancy of a slayer to decline. They will not all take to their duty as Buffy did."

Travers sighed and pulled the folder back to his side of the desk. He flipped past the photos, through other paperwork, skimming through the contents as he talked. "This girl was brought to our attention two months ago. We have been studying her to confirm the initial analysis. She bears the mark. She has the potential to become the Slayer."

Giles bowed his head. He had known the words were coming, had known since he first saw Travers in the lobby, but until they were spoken, they could still be denied. He had wanted to give his daughter the life that had been stolen from Buffy, but Fate always seemed to conspire against him. Daughter would follow mother, and it was out of his hands.

"She may be a potential, but she may never become the Slayer." It was the last bit of hope he had to cling to.

Travers nodded, allowing him that small measure of optimism before resuming the briefing. "Very few in the Council have met Buffy face-to-face, therefore the resemblance wasn't noticed until only recently. In our research, the adoption records were located and found to be inaccurate. Our suspicions were raised, and we discovered that she was your missing daughter. It makes the Council's job easier. Overturning the adoption should be quick work."

Giles stood abruptly and crossed to the window beside Travers, finding the street outside unnaturally interesting. "On the condition that we train her? You will help us get her back if we agree to raise her as a proper slayer?"

"Who better to train the girl than her own father, her mother's Watcher? You have made Buffy into one of the most extraordinary slayers of all time. You can give your daughter the same fighting chance."

Giles pivoted to face Travers, staring down the older man with the same icy glare that had always made Ethan quake. "You never intended to tell us. I was not expected here. If Angel hadn't found her as well, you would have overturned the adoption on your own and taken her away."

"There is a bigger picture here, Rupert."

Two strides, and there was no more than two inches between them. He didn't lay a hand on the old watcher, but Travers backed up all the same. "Now listen here," Giles spat. "This is the only picture you need to see. That girl is *my* daughter, and you have no right to her."

Travers drew himself straight with pride. He tugged slightly on his lapels and rocked back on his feet. His face hardened with all the authority he could muster. "Don't make this more difficult than it needs to be. You must be aware that we have the power and influence to make sure that the McGregors' adoption stands."

"I am the child's father."

"There is precedent. The girl has been with them three years. Sometimes judges are swayed to give a child to the only home she has known, even above the rights of blood relations. The court only wants what is in a child's best interests, after all. And they may not find it in her interests to give her to a father with a violent and delinquent past and a mother who is so often linked to trouble."

"This is below even you, Quentin."

"The Council does what it must."

Giles stalked across the small width of the office, like a tiger in a cage, his anger rolling off of him in waves. Travers only watched, not even flinching as Giles made each pass in front of him, the large wood desk between them. Finally, the younger watcher faced him, leaning forward, his hands pressed to the red, cherry surface, his cold eyes boring into his adversary's very soul.

"And how will you hold us to this bargain? You can't threaten my green card anymore. I've married an American. You can shut the store down. You can fire me and cut off my salary. I imagine

you can find various ways to make life more difficult for us. But we'll get by, and once we have our daughter, what will you have to hold against us?"

Travers' gaze never wavered. "Longworth. Sulla." A longer pause. "Ben."

Giles paled and his heart sank.

"We have a tape recording of the telephone conversation ordering Longworth and Sulla's deaths. The special ops who did the job will turn state's evidence if we ask them. And in the surveillance videotapes we recovered after Longworth's murder, we have what amounts to a confession for Ben's murder as well." Travers rounded the desk and leaned smugly against the side, watching Giles with a sympathetic and solemn expression. "The Council, of course, will not condemn you for those deaths. We know better than anyone that sacrifices must sometimes be made for the greater good. Sometimes you do what you must. Just as the Council does what it must."

Giles deflated, his head bowed, his eyes closed.

"Unfortunately, the courts would most likely not see it that way," Travers continued. "And you certainly can't tell them the truth. Tales of gods and Keys and demons would only get you laughed right into a mental institution. On the other hand, a conviction on three murder counts would put you away for life, with no chance of parole. Neither option seems particularly appealing. But fortunately for you, the Council intends to protect you and conceal these crimes. For as long as you will support us, we will ensure that these tapes do not fall into the wrong hands."

Giles lifted his head, and his eyes narrowed. "Blackmail, Quentin?"

Travers pursed his lips in thought for a moment before answering. "Such an ugly word. But it is an ugly war we are fighting. The choice is simple. You can fight us on this, and the full weight of the Council will defend the McGregors' rights to Robin. You will lose your daughter forever. Or you can allow us to reclaim the girl for you on the small condition of her training as a slayer. And if you attempt to renege on your agreement, the tapes will find their way into the hands of the district attorney."

Travers crossed his arms with finality and tilted his head as he studied the younger watcher. "While you may be willing to spend the rest of your days behind bars as a martyr for your children, please remember that their mother's days are numbered. And who will care for them when she is gone?"

Giles wished for the ground to open up and swallow him whole. That never happened when you wanted it to. "You pompous bastard." But the fire had gone out of his voice. He was defeated.

Travers clucked his tongue and pushed himself off from the desk. He gathered the folder on Robin Deanna McGregor and headed towards the office door. "Now, now, Rupert, there's no need for hard feelings. After all, the Council is fully prepared to support your claim on the girl. And as for the rest... Well, how much under our thumb are you now?" A small smirk twisted his lips. "It would seem our positions have reversed themselves since our last encounter."

"I want to see her. If I am to bargain her life away, I want to at least see her first."

Travers tipped his head in acceptance. "We have already made arrangements to visit the McGregors this afternoon. They believe we are from the adoption agency, coming for a routine three-year follow-up. Of course, there is no such creature, but they are blissfully ignorant, and we have rather official looking paperwork to show them. I will be by at half past one. Until then, I have work I must attend to. But I am quite glad we had the chance to chat, Rupert."

Travers left, and Giles resumed pacing the office like a caged cat, like a lion wound tight and ready to spring. He wanted to put his fist through something. He wanted to pick up a sword and go ten rounds with his slayer. It would take her more than five minutes to take him down right now. He wanted to hunt down the Powers That Be and put his hands around their necks and make them answer for the cruel twists of fate they continued to heap on his shoulders.

He had found his daughter, but the Council had found her first.

Perhaps it would be better to leave her with the McGregors rather than condemn her to the life of a potential slayer. She would have the happy, normal life he wanted for her, and with any luck she would never be Called, would never know about the destiny she escaped. That would be the best thing for her. And no matter how much it would break his heart, he only wanted what was best for his daughter.

If that were his decision, then he shouldn't go to see her this afternoon. He would never find the strength to leave her behind if he set eyes on her, if he touched her and heard her voice and saw Buffy's blue eyes staring up at him. He would want his child, no matter the price.

Then again, what if she were Called? That would be a matter left to Fate, out of his hands, out of the Council's hands. If she did become the Slayer, she would need everything he had to give her. All the training and knowledge and skills that were his to give, they would buy her time, precious time to have some semblance of a normal life.

Giles was not a betting man. Even in his youth, he had always stacked the odds in his favor. At any one time, there were perhaps two hundred potential slayers of varying ages. When one dies, the next is Called, nearly always between the ages of 14 and 16. Which meant the Chosen was chosen from approximately a dozen or more possibilities. The probability that his daughter would be the right age at the right time *and* be the one chosen was slight. The smart bet would be on leaving her with the McGregors to have a long and happy life.

He knew it was wrong, that it was selfish, that it would only complicate what should be a well-thought out and well-reasoned decision, but he wanted to see his daughter. If he were to leave her, he needed to know what kind of a home he was leaving her to. He would see her first, and *then* he would decide what to do about the Council.

"You cold," Alex stated.

Angel adjusted the boy in his arms and glanced back to the office Giles and Travers had disappeared into. He was unsure if the watcher had educated his son about vampires and demons. Angel cleared his throat. "Yes, a little cold."

Cordelia giggled, and he glared at her.

Alex wiggled his fingers beneath the buttons of Angel's shirt with the boldness of childhood. The vampire startled, grabbing the child's hands quickly.

"Heart no beat," the boy said with certainty.

Wesley pushed up his glasses, stepping forward to attempt to rescue his friend. "Umm... Hello, Alex. My name is Wesley. Would you like to come with me and see some... umm... some really neat swords?"

Cordelia swatted him on the arm.

"Ouch! What?"

"Some 'neat' swords?"

"How am I supposed to know what a three-year-old would like? Do you have any better suggestions on how to entertain the child?"

The Seer, the ex-Watcher, and the Vampire with a Soul all stared at the little boy for long moments.

Cordelia smiled brightly. "They're really neat swords."

But Alex was enthralled by Angel. “You bad man?” His curious fingers reached up to stroke Angel across the forehead. “Bumpy head?”

So the child had seen a vampire before.

The smile faded slightly from Cordelia’s face. “No, sweetie, he’s a good guy.”

But Angel was unwilling to lie to Giles’ son. “I was a very bad man for a very long time. But I changed. And now I try to help people. I’m trying very hard to be good.”

Alex considered this for several moments. Then he wrapped his small arms around the vampire’s neck. “Like Uncie ’Pike?”

Angel started laughing in spite of himself. It was the funniest joke he had heard in a very long time. “Uncie Spike?” Those were two words he would have never expected to come from Giles’ son. He could only imagine what the Watcher thought of his child’s misplaced affection.

He took a few steps back so he could sit down on the staircase steps. He was still laughing and wiping tears from the corners of his eyes. “Yes, just like Uncie Spike, I suppose.” And he would have never expected to lump himself in the same category as good old William the Bloody. But then today was just full of surprises. Here he was, sitting on the steps of the Hyperion, holding Buffy’s child in his lap, entrusted into his hands by the man he had tortured and very nearly killed. That was the curse of his soul: that he could remember his crimes and his thoughts as he committed them. Giles had perhaps hoped it was only an idle threat, but Angelus did have a chainsaw, and were it not for Spike’s intervening hand, Angelus would have used it.

The child was still studying him, perhaps trying to work out the joke he didn’t quite get. Angel lifted the boy off his lap and placed him on his feet.

“So, Alex, what would you like to do while we wait for your father?”

Thoughtful eyes scanned the interior of the old hotel-turned-detective-agency, coming to rest on the wide stretch of stairs. He pointed. “Sled!”

“Well, aren’t you a little devil?” Cordelia said, swooping in to tickle tender sides. “C’mon. I got a few video games on my computer. And I’m betting your father’s never let you try the stuff.”

Angel watched Cordelia and Wesley take the child behind the front counter and sit him in front of the computer screen. She found something suitable for him to play, and Angel simply remained on the staircase watching. There were moments when Alex giggled or tipped his head just so, that Angel could see a flash of Buffy. His heart ached at each glimmer and each reminder of her. He wondered if he would always love the Slayer. In his case, eternal love had a literal and painful ring to it. Perhaps that was part of his curse: to have her always so close and yet beyond reach, to watch another man give her all the things he could not, to forever stand in the shadows as a silent guardian over their children. For that was the vow he made to himself. After she had gone, and Giles too, Angel would watch over their twins and their children and each generation until he was dust.

Travers exited the office sometime later, nodding curtly at Wesley as he passed. For Angel, he could not even manage that. Angel knew that in the old watcher’s eyes, he was a vampire and the enemy, as cut and dried as that. The Council would not give him the antidote to Faith’s poison, nor would it spare his life in return for the rogue slayer. And Angel Investigations had complicated what should have been a routine kidnapping, by first preventing the abduction and then by bringing the child’s father to town to claim her.

But with raging British insincerity, Travers smiled thinly and said, “A pleasure to finally meet you, Angel.”

Angel stood and crossed his arms. As the old man moved to pass him, he stepped in the way. Very softly, so his voice wouldn’t carry to his co-workers at the other side of the lobby, he told the watcher,

"You hurt either of those kids, and I'll do worse to you than Angelus could ever imagine." And for the briefest of moments, he allowed Travers to see a flash of the demon inside.

To his credit, Travers didn't flinch, only looked down his nose at the vampire and replied, "Not every slayer who comes along will hold you in such high regard. Interfere in our affairs again, and the Council will send the next one hunting for you." He stepped around Angel like so much curbside trash and walked out of the Hyperion.

It was several minutes more before Giles emerged into the lobby. Angel could smell the anger radiating from the man in the same way he could smell fear. He had smelled both in the mansion on Crawford Street, and Angelus had gotten high off it. But the Watcher was outwardly calm, only Angel noticing that his breathing was a little more rapid and his heartbeat a little faster.

"Daddy!" Alex cried. "Look! 'Puter game."

"Yes, how wonderful," Giles muttered as he joined his son. "I'm so glad Cordelia and Wesley could introduce you to the joys of mindless video games."

"C'mon, Giles," Cordelia protested. "You gotta let the kid live a little, or he's going to turn 20 and start wearing an earring, join a rock band, summon demons, and call himself 'Ripper.' Wait, that was you. See? I rest my case."

Giles gave her an irritated glare, before smoothing over his expression and taking a deep breath. "I really hope this isn't an imposition... I need someone to watch Alex for a few hours, maybe more. I'm not sure how long I'll be gone exactly."

"No problemo," Cordelia insisted. "He can come hang out at my place with me. It'll be like a day off, but for a good cause." She looked at Angel as she said the last. "C'mon, Alex, let me show you this cool thing called a television. I bet your dad doesn't let you watch nearly enough of it."

Giles rolled his eyes as he watched the pair leave.

"Bye-bye, Daddy." Alex waved as he walked out the door. "Bye-bye, Angel."

There was silence for a moment before Wesley turned to his fellow Englishman. "How did the talk with Travers go?"

Angel could smell the man's anger peak. "My daughter is a potential slayer. The Council will help me get her back if I agree to raise her as such. Arrogant sods! Buried so far in their bloody books, they wouldn't recognize human love or compassion if it rammed a sword straight up their..." He trailed off and glanced between the two men watching him. "Sorry. Travers managed to push all my buttons, as always."

Wesley reached across and gave his shoulder a friendly squeeze. "Of course, if there is anything any of us can do to help, you have but to ask."

Giles smiled softly and nodded. "Thank you."

"Does Buffy know?" Angel asked.

"No, not yet." Her watcher dropped his head, guilt twisting his features. "I wanted to see what there was to tell first. She'll probably hate me for making this trip without her, but we've thought we were close so many times before... it always breaks her heart."

He raised his eyes to meet Angel's. And how could Angel blame the man for wanting to protect Buffy? Hadn't he done the same thing on more than one occasion? Prom. Graduation. Thanksgiving. He nodded his understanding and his absolution.

"What more do I need to know?" Giles asked.

And so Angel told him the whole story. About how Wesley had recognized another watcher he had trained with. How they had secretly tailed the man and stumbled upon his two other accomplices. How the three watchers had led them straight to the girl. How they had discovered the Council's plan to overturn the adoption and take the child back to England without her birth parents any the wiser.

Angel had gone to fetch Giles as quickly as possible, but that very night the watchers had figured out that the detectives were on to them. Cordelia was warned of the danger in a vision, and Wesley and Gunn had foiled the Council's attempt to spirit the girl away in the dead of night. Travers himself had shown up in the morning, quite irate with Wesley for interfering and even angrier with Angel for involving Giles.

Having now brought the man up to speed, Angel waited for him to process the information.

"What will you do?" Wesley asked.

"If I don't agree to properly educate and train her, the Council will back the McGregors' adoption."

Wesley shook his head. "That makes no sense. They wouldn't give the child any slayer training either. There would be no purpose in keeping the girl with them."

"Except to spite me. For Travers, that may be enough." Giles took a deep breath, followed by a meticulous polishing of his glasses. "I'm afraid that may be the best thing for her, though, to leave her with her adoptive parents. She would have a better life than a prospective slayer. I keep thinking of the potential my father trained. I was fourteen or fifteen, I think, and she was no more than eleven. Sparring with a quarterstaff she barely had the strength to lift. Pulling back the strings of a crossbow so often in one day, it would make her fingers bleed. I don't remember ever seeing the girl smile. I don't even remember her name. She had her duty, and we had ours. And that is the kind of life Travers wants me to give my daughter."

"And if she becomes the Slayer, won't she need that training?"

Giles met the ex-Watcher's eyes, his own bleak and weary. "I have considered that. But in the end, does it matter? If she is Called, she will die. They all do. They fight. They die. And if I can give her fifteen or sixteen years of happiness and innocence, maybe she'll have something worth fighting for, worth dying for. Maybe that's why Buffy has exceeded all their expectations." He sighed. "I don't know. I don't know what I'm going to do." A pause. "Angel, will you walk with me?"

He hesitated. "It's daytime."

"That's fine. I'm not in the mood to walk in the sun today."

"Okay." And Angel led him to the underground tunnels that ran beneath the City of Angels, so aptly named, because it was his city now. And he walked with the Watcher who had once been his friend. And they talked like they had in the beginning, when he had been Rupert and not Giles, when they had shared late night conversations about politics and prophecies and Buffy, when Angel had been trusted and liked. And Angel knew the man was only seeking distraction, but he didn't care. Because for the moment he could simply pretend that nothing had changed between them; that those terrible months of Angelus had never happened; that he had not murdered the man's lover and savagely tortured him for hours. And he wondered if this was what a clean slate felt like.

Giles stood on the front porch of the middle class, two-story, two-car-garage, white with black trim, house. A mini-van and a gold Camry sat in the driveway. A red tricycle lay overturned and abandoned on the immaculately kept front lawn. The house looked identical to every other house on the block, which looked identical to every other block in the new subdivision. Slight variations in color and landscaping, but other than that, they were cookie-cutter copies all in a row.

He felt Travers' eyes watching him and wondered if his nervousness was that apparent.

"Are you ready, Rupert?"

Giles stuffed his hands in his pockets and looked away. He nodded slightly. No turning back now; Travers had rung the bell.

The door opened quickly. They had been expected. An average looking man in average looking clothes answered the door. He seemed as nervous as Giles felt.

"Shaun McGregor. Please come in."

Giles frowned. Only two hours from Sunnydale, and the man carelessly tossed off verbal invitations to complete strangers. Even if it was the middle of the day, the words "come in" were nothing but trouble. They entered the house, Travers taking the lead.

"Mr. McGregor, thank you again for having us."

Shaun shrugged. "I was told it was required."

Travers faltered, unaccustomed to American brashness. "Of course. At any rate... I'm Quentin Travers. I'll be conducting the interview today. This is my assistant, Rupert Giles."

Giles flinched. Assistant. Travers was enjoying this entirely too much.

They followed their host past the foyer and into a formal living room with its white carpet, plush white sofas, a baby grand, and a large seascape covering the furthest wall. Giles couldn't imagine that a three-year-old had ever seen the inside of this room. He prowled around the perimeter, inspecting the contents of the room, searching for something of his daughter's presence. He vaguely heard Travers and Shaun McGregor talking behind him. It didn't really matter what they were discussing. Travers was merely the front. They were here for Giles to see his daughter.

"Where is the girl?" he finally asked, after he had had enough of Travers beating around the bush.

Shaun looked distinctly uncomfortable. "Catherine and Robin went to the store. They'll be back soon. Maybe you'd both like the full tour?"

Giles nodded, barely containing his impatience as Shaun led them through the formal dining room and then the kitchen and family eating area. He proudly showed off the screened-in porch and its lush foliage. Just beyond was a spacious backyard, with swing set and sandbox. Giles scanned every wall, but found only artwork and dried flower arrangements. No family pictures. No photographic chronicle of his daughter's first years.

They passed the stairs leading up to the bedrooms and entered a library that even Giles envied: floor to ceiling bookshelves along every wall and a reading desk beside a window that overlooked the backyard. He skimmed through the titles: mostly classics, many books that he loved, all perfectly organized. One set of shelves housed a children's collection, containing many of the same titles Giles was reading to Alex.

He followed Shaun out of the library and into the family room. Giles held his breath for a moment. This is what he had come for. Every wall was filled with framed photos, nearly all containing his daughter. They told the story of her last three years, of everything that he and Buffy had missed. Professional baby portraits and family snapshots alike. Her first steps. Her first birthday, with chocolate cake smeared across her face and hands. A day on the beach. Her first Christmas, sitting on Santa's knee. A day at the park and pony rides at the zoo. His daughter was so beautiful and so resembled her mother that it made his heart ache.

"Maybe we went a little overboard with the pictures," Shaun said, coming to stand beside him. "Robin's an only child, so you could say she's a little spoiled."

Giles smiled tightly. He shouldn't hate the man beside him, but he did. He hated the man for becoming everything he had no right to be, for being Robin's father when it should have been Giles.

A door slammed, and a woman's voice called out to them, "Shaun?"

"In here," he answered.

A woman joined them in the family room, dressed in tasteful linen slacks and a navy blazer over a white top. But Giles had eyes only for his daughter, standing just behind her. The girl's eyes lit up, and it was Buffy's smile that beamed from her face.

“Daddy!” she squealed and came bounding towards Giles.

But she stopped just before reaching him. It was Shaun McGregor’s arms that lifted her up, his neck she wrapped her arms around, and his face she covered in kisses. Giles could only watch in mute agony.

“Hey Princess, remember I said some people would be by to see you today? This is Mr. Giles and this is Mr. Travers.”

“Hi.”

Her eyes met his, and he smiled softly. They studied each other for several moments. He had searched for her for so long, now that he had finally found her, it seemed almost surreal. He had imagined this moment so many times: what she might look like, the sound of her voice, a little girl’s giggle, and the flash of Buffy’s smile. Now here she was in front of him, the daughter he had delivered into the world, whose first breaths had come from his mouth, whose slight weight he had cradled in his hands for the briefest of minutes before she had been stolen from him.

She regarded him seriously, a case of shyness causing her to lay her head on Shaun McGregor’s shoulder and curl her fingers into the collar of his shirt. One thumb found its way into her mouth before she turned her face into the man’s chest, away from Giles’ curious eyes.

“Shall we begin the interview?” Travers asked.

The McGregors sat side by side on the family room couch, Robin perched on Shaun’s lap. Travers sat near them on the loveseat. Giles chose a seat in an armchair slightly removed, watching the family wistfully. Travers asked them pointless questions, appearing to consider each answer carefully before jotting notes on the paper clipped to the clipboard in his lap. Giles paid no attention. His eyes greedily drank in the sight of his daughter, as if preparing for the long drought ahead.

His mind tried to work out whether this was the kind of home he wanted to leave her to. He tried to deduce the family relationships through each shared look, each casual touch, and the words that lay beneath the ones they spoke. He hoped Robin would misbehave, so he could observe how they handled it. If either of them struck his child, slayer training or no, he would take her away from them in a heartbeat.

Robin’s shyness faded after a few minutes, assisted along by extreme boredom, and she slid from her adoptive father’s lap. First came colored blocks, stacked in towers until they toppled. Then came dolls, which must be undressed and then redressed before being rocked and lined up in a cradle. She moved onto dress-up from there, placing a toy tiara on her head, bangles around her wrists, chains around her neck, and a wide brimmed hat over the tiara. She slipped her stocking feet into a pair of her adoptive mother’s old high heels and disappeared out of the room. Moments later she returned with an armful of books, which she unceremoniously dumped into Giles’ lap.

“Read,” she demanded.

He grinned. Pushy little thing.

“Robin,” Shaun scolded. “Ask nicely. I’m sorry about that,” he said to Giles. “I hope she’s not bothering you.”

“No bother.”

Robin blinked up at him with wide, blue eyes. “Pwease,” she asked sweetly.

Giles laughed and lifted the books out of the way. She climbed into his lap without needing more of an invitation than that. She settled back against his chest, and he needed to tip her hat slightly and smooth back its feathers in order to see the book.

“Hmm... What do we have here? Dr. Seuss?”

She shook her head and closed that book before he could begin reading. She shuffled through the stack, pulling up a more acceptable volume.

“‘Where the Wild Things Are?’ A tale of nighttime monsters. More appropriate than you know.” And then he began softly reading to his daughter, Travers and the McGregors droning on in the background.

Occasionally she lifted her head to watch him as he read, always glancing back to the illustrations when he turned the page. After he had finished, he closed the book, and she applauded happily for him.

“Gain,” she insisted, opening the book to the beginning once more.

He repeated his performance, and this time when he’d finished, she was staring at him intently.

“You talk funny,” she commented.

He laughed at the blunt honesty of childhood. “Yes. I come from very far away. From England.”

“Wif Queen?”

His eyebrows rose slightly, surprised that a three-year-old would know anything about other countries. “Yes, we have a Queen.”

She climbed off his lap and took his hand. “See my room.”

Shaun McGregor glanced over at them with some amount of surprise. “She certainly has taken to you. She’s usually pretty shy around strangers.”

“You don’t mind, do you?” Giles asked. “If she gives me the tour?”

“Not at all.”

“Just don’t let her boss you around too much,” Catherine McGregor added. “Once she gets over being shy, she can be kinda pushy. Not to mention talk your ear off.”

“I’ll manage,” Giles replied with a grin.

Robin tugged on his hand, and he followed, but obviously not fast enough, because she had to urge him on, “C’mon, c’mon.”

She led him out of the family room, through the library, and up the staircase by the kitchen. They passed a couple doors, reaching her bedroom beside the master bedroom at the end of the hall. She had a canopy bed and a room all in pink, with shelves of dolls and stuffed animals. She pulled him along to a child-sized table and chairs.

“Sit,” she ordered, pulling out one small chair for him.

He chuckled. “I’m not sure I would fit.”

Her bottom lip quivered, and she pleaded, “Pwease.”

How could he say no? He folded himself into the chair, his long legs nearly up to his chest. Robin pulled out a tea set from under the table and laid out cups and saucers for each of them.

“A tea party, is it?”

“Wif Queen,” she answered, pointing to a stuffed rabbit sitting in another chair.

“Ahhh.” Giles smiled in understanding and nodded in the rabbit’s direction. “My pleasure, your Majesty.”

She giggled and filled his cup with imaginary tea from the pot, and her cup as well. “Sugar?”

“Two please.”

She measured out imaginary sugar from a bowl and added it to his cup before sitting in the chair across from him. She sipped her imaginary tea, her little pinky raised in the air. The child probably watched far too much television.

“Drink,” she insisted, pushing his cup closer.

He obliged, his pinky also raised because the cups were awfully small.

“Cake?” She offered him an empty plate, and he pretended to take a slice.

She chattered for a while, telling him about the neighbor’s new kittens and the ballet classes she could take when she turned four and how Miss Lowe at the daycare taught her to play chopsticks on

the piano. Giles quietly disapproved of the thought of his daughter in daycare, but other than that, he listened with rapt attention. Robin seemed thrilled to have such an attentive audience and soon moved on to reciting nursery rhymes and singing for him. It pleased Giles to note that his daughter had a natural talent for song even at three. Of course, the only examples he had to go on were "I'm a Little Teapot" and "The Itsy-Bitsy Spider."

Catherine McGregor joined them moments later, laughing at the sight of Giles and Robin sitting at the tiny table. "Oh dear," she exclaimed. "Honey, what are you doing to that poor man?"

Robin raised her cup. "Tea wif Queen."

"Say goodbye to the Queen. And say goodbye to the nice man. His friend says they have to go now."

Giles quickly looked down into his empty teacup. His heart hammered in his chest, and his throat suddenly felt dry.

"Bye-bye," she told him.

He looked up into his daughter's blue eyes. He swallowed hard. "Goodbye, Robin." He set the cup down and awkwardly lifted himself from the chair. He wanted to say something more to her, but he had no voice, so he simply followed Catherine McGregor out of the room and back downstairs to the family room where Shaun and Travers were waiting for them.

"Please, Mrs. McGregor, have a seat," Travers encouraged her.

She sat beside her husband, and he slipped one arm around her shoulders. They both studied the older watcher expectantly. Giles crossed his arms and leaned against the nearest wall.

"We are here for more than a three-year follow-up." Travers leaned back in the loveseat. He had always enjoyed the power he had to mess with people's lives. The Cruciamentum. The information he withheld on Glory. The blackmail he had on the three murders. He seemed to enjoy the power he held over the McGregors as well. "I'm sorry to inform you that the adoption will soon be contested. The birth parents never signed over their legal rights to the child, and they want her back."

There was a moment of stunned silence before Catherine bolted to her feet. "No! No, it's been three years, and the agency told us we were safe now, that it was too late for them to change their minds."

Travers nodded in a show of sympathy. "Unfortunately, they never relinquished her in the first place, so that is no longer true."

"No! I'm not giving her up. I'm her mother. I'm the only mother she's ever known." She started to cry, and Shaun rose from his seat to enfold her in his arms.

"Shhh, darling. We'll fight this. Don't cry."

Catherine lifted watery eyes to her husband, shaking her head vehemently. "I can't, Shaun, I just *can't*. I can't go through this again. I can't lose another baby. Especially not now, not after this much time. Robin is ours. She's *ours*. And now some judge who doesn't even know her is going to ask us to give her over to strangers just 'cause... 'cause what? 'Cause they had a good fuck and a little accident and nine months later a little baby they didn't want?"

"Cat, please," he admonished.

"I'm sorry," she murmured, wiping away her tears. "I'm sorry. I'm just so angry. What right do they have to her? Did they get up with her at three in the morning every night? Were they there for her first step? Her first word? Did they sleep in a chair by her bed when she spent a week in the hospital with tonsillitis? Do they know what to sing to her when she can't fall asleep? Will they know to cut her sandwiches diagonally and not across or she won't eat them?" Catherine was sobbing now, her husband valiantly trying to soothe her even as tears began to stream down his own cheeks. "They may

be her blood. They may have had the making of her, but we've raised her and cared for her. In every way that matters, we're her parents. Robin is *ours*. Shaun, how can they take her away?"

"Shhh. We'll get a lawyer. We'll fight this."

"Of course," Giles interrupted, swallowing hard. He took a deep breath and focused on the laces of his shoes. Anything not to look at them. "Of course, the agency will do everything it can to help you keep the child. I wouldn't worry about it too much right now. The birth parents might even be pressured into dropping the whole thing."

Travers glanced over at him in surprise. Giles met his gaze evenly. He had made his decision. The Council would not have her. The McGregors would.

"Yes, well, that concludes our visit," Travers managed through clenched teeth. "Thank you for having us." He rose from his seat, his eyes never leaving Giles'. The McGregors led them to the front door, arm in arm and slowly composing themselves. Travers turned to them just before walking out the front door. "I do apologize for upsetting you. I'm sure you have nothing to worry about."

And the two watchers walked down the steps, the front door closing behind them. Just before they each reached their cars, Travers faced him.

"Would a slayer's training really be so terrible, Rupert? That you would rather not have her at all?"

Giles stared at the ground. His voice was soft. "She will be loved and safe. And with any luck, she will never know anything of slayers and watchers." He met the other man's eyes, and Travers nodded his resignation before climbing into his car and driving off.

Giles was heading towards his own car when he heard the front door open. He looked towards the house and saw Catherine and Robin walking towards him. He met them halfway.

"Robin wanted to give you something."

The girl held out a drawing, and he knelt in front of her. "For you," she said proudly.

He took the picture from her hands, smiling softly as he looked at it. A house and grass and the sun and a lovely stick figure family all in a row. Children the world over made identical drawings. "It's perfect, Robin. Thank you. I shall keep it somewhere safe."

She pointed to each figure in her drawing. "Mommy. Daddy. Robin. Alex."

Giles glanced up at her, startled. He looked back down at the four figures in the drawing, while her adoptive mother laughed off her statement.

"Alex is her imaginary brother. We keep telling her we can't have children, but she doesn't seem to understand. She's always talking about this brother Alex she's going to have. We just humor her, set out an extra plate for dinner and that kind of thing."

He nodded absently and folded the drawing carefully, tucking it into an inside jacket pocket. One hand reached out to brush against his daughter's cheeks and then cup her chin in his palm. "You be a good girl for your mother and father, Robin." There was more he wanted to say, but he couldn't with Catherine McGregor standing right there. "Goodbye, luv."

"Bye-bye, Giles."

He closed his eyes for a moment, savoring the sound of his name from his daughter's lips. She pronounced it right and everything. Then he stood and walked resolutely to his car without looking back. This was the right thing to do. He had to keep telling himself that.

He got in and started the engine. They were both waving at him from the porch. He waved back once before shifting into drive and pulling away from the curb. He curled his hands tightly around the steering wheel. By the first stoplight, his knuckles were white. Dear God, what had he just done? He had given away his own child. *It was the right thing to do*, he reminded himself again.

He reached Cordelia's apartment in record time, easily following the directions Wesley had given him. He waited impatiently for the elevator, finally taking the stairs. He needed to see Alex. He needed to hold his son in his arms.

He knocked, and the door opened on its own. How strange.

"Daddy! Daddy!" Alex came running at full speed, and Giles lifted him up eagerly, holding him tightly until the boy squirmed to be let down. "Look, Daddy! Look, I fly!"

Sure enough, the boy started to float around the room all on his own. Flying. "Bloody hell!" Giles darted forward and snatched his son mid-air. All he needed was a child who could fly whenever he wished. That would certainly go over well at his first day of school.

Cordelia chuckled. "Say bye-bye to Dennis, Alex."

"Bye-bye," Alex said, waving to no one in particular.

Giles adjusted his grip on his son, somewhat nervous that the boy would fly out of his arms at any moment. "Umm... Thank you, Cordelia, for watching him."

"No big. Dennis did most of the work."

"Yes, well..." He glanced around the apartment warily. Dennis? Wesley never mentioned that she had a roommate. "Thank him for me."

Then he turned and beat a hasty retreat. The door closed and locked behind him. He could have sworn Cordelia had been on the other side of the room.

"I want ghost too," Alex begged.

Ghost? Giles glanced back at the closed door. That explained a few things. How fascinating. He would have to talk to Wesley about this ghost Dennis. If he could truly interact with the living, they would be able to learn so much from him. Book titles were already dancing in his head.

"Want ghost," Alex demanded again.

Giles smiled as he carried the boy down the staircase and outside. "Sorry, son, you can't have one. Maybe you can visit Dennis some other time."

He belted Alex into his seat and climbed into the driver's side. One hand retrieved his daughter's drawing from his pocket. She was another man's child now, and this was all he had left of her.

Alex watched him quietly for a moment before asking, "Go see Robin?"

Giles nodded and put the drawing back. He reached for the ignition, but his hand was shaking and he dropped the keys. The weight of his choice had just come crashing down on him. The Council would back the McGregors if he and Buffy tried to fight for custody. And if by some miracle they beat the Council in court, Travers would simply play his trump card: the tapes. Not only would Giles go to jail for his crimes, but Buffy would know the whole truth of Longworth and Sulla's murders.

Giles bowed his head until his forehead touched the steering wheel, his hands tightly gripping either side. He had lost his daughter forever. He was missing her already. Only now, there was no hope that this ache would ever lift, that he would ever be able to bring her home. And it was his fault that she was gone, his fault that they couldn't reclaim her. She belonged to the McGregor's now. Forever.

He heard the click as Alex undid his seatbelt, felt the boy's tiny hand on his arm. "Don't cry, Daddy."

But he couldn't stop. He covered his son's hand with his own, his head still bowed to the steering wheel, the hot wet tears streaming down his face. Small fingers combed through his hair and then patted him gently on the back.

The boy said it again. "Don't cry, Daddy." And then small arms circled his neck, hugging him tightly, and Giles felt his son's kisses across the back of his neck and shoulders.

Chapter 4

Truth and Consequences

Buffy sat at the dining room table. She hadn't changed out of her officer's uniform after coming home from work. She wanted to look like a cop, because Dawn was sitting in a chair across from her and Dawn was in so much trouble.

"Okay. I'm calm. I'm collected. I even got a little sleep. I wanted to wait for Giles, but I don't know where he and Alex went. You know what? Let's start without him." Buffy took a deep breath and placed her hands neatly on the table. She would stay calm. She would stay calm no matter what. "First things first: you can't see Spike anymore."

"That's so unfair!" Dawn jumped up from her seat and then reluctantly sat back down when she caught Buffy's glare.

"Life's not fair, kiddo. Time you learned that. If life were fair, I wouldn't be having to tell my kid sister she can't date a vampire."

Dawn crossed her arms and scowled. "So you can date Angel, but I can't date Spike?"

"Angel had a soul, and Spike does not. And no, before you say another word, having a chip in his skull is *not* the same thing as having a soul." Buffy sighed, tired of explaining it. "And let's not forget: Spike was in love with me. He couldn't have me... so what? He moved on to you? Dawn, do you really want to be second choice? You deserve so much better than that."

"God! Ego much?" Dawn jumped up again, and this time she didn't sit back down when Buffy glared at her, but instead began pacing across the length of the dining room. "Does everything have to be about you? Is it really so hard to believe that Spike could want me, that he could love *me*?"

"Yes!" Buffy cried, now bolting out of her seat as well and closing the distance between them. "Tell me, Dawn, what do you two really have in common? Let's see. You go to high school. He sleeps in a cemetery all day." She tilted her hands back and forth as if balancing their two worlds on a scale. "You have a future and a long life to look forward to. He died over a hundred years ago. You've never killed anyone. He used to do it every night. Please tell me, what's the attraction? Is this just a rebellion thing? Are you doing this just to tick us off? 'Cause it's really working. Or is there really something more to this than 'the young innocent girl is drawn to the dark and dangerous brooding figure in the shadows?'"

Dawn shifted on her feet and glanced off to the side. "Spike doesn't brood. Angel was the mopey brooder. And for your information, there *is* a whole lot more to it. Spike treats me like a grownup, always has, unlike *some* people. And he's nice to me, and way more mature than any of the other boys at school."

"I should hope so," Buffy scoffed. "He's like ten times their age."

"And... and... we're both artists."

"Artists?" She rolled her eyes. "What's Spike do? Draw rude pictures on the mud floor of his *crypt*?"

Dawn bristled and met her sister's eyes. "He's a poet. He was a poet before he died, and he still looks at the world with a poet's eyes."

"You'll have to do better than that. As a poet, he stank. They called him 'William the Bloody' 'cause his poetry was so bloody awful. Spike told me that himself."

"Yeah," Dawn protested, "but he's had over a hundred years to practice and get better. You should read the stuff he writes now. He's got this whole tough guy exterior, but inside—"

"—he's just a cold blooded killer?"

"Why won't you believe that he's changed? Why can't you accept that I *love* him?"

Buffy was about to give her a whole list of reasons, but the front door opened before she had a chance. Giles and Alex walked into the house. She had never been more happy to see him. Maybe her watcher could talk some sense into Dawn.

"Giles!"

But Giles looked as if someone had just died. And Alex, although lifting up his arms for a welcome hug, wasn't dispensing his usual enthusiastic greeting. Her watcher's next words only increased her dread.

"Dawn, will you take Alex to the park for a little while? I need to talk to Buffy alone."

Buffy gave her son a hug hello, and then a kiss goodbye before handing him over to her sister, who seemed very eager to escape the line of fire. Buffy's eyes never left her husband. She heard the door shut behind them and waited. And waited. Giles looked distinctly uncomfortable, never meeting her eyes, just standing there, shifting his weight and adjusting his hands in his pockets.

"Oh God," she whispered. "Who died?"

"No one's died," he answered. But he still couldn't look at her.

"But things are definitely not of the good?" Only silence answered her. "C'mon, Giles, you're freaking me out, here."

"I'm sorry, Buffy," he murmured. He took a deep breath and looked up at the ceiling, at the chandelier, at the table, with a longer glance towards the corner liquor cabinet. He couldn't look at her. The last time he'd had this problem had been her eighteenth birthday with the Test, the Cruis-something, when he'd been shooting her full of slayer kryptonite on the sly. Giles could lie like a politician to strangers, but with those he loved, with things that mattered, he got all stuttery and was about as believable as Alex trying to explain how the cookie jar had toppled off the counter all on its own.

"Giles!"

He drew something from his jacket pocket, a piece of paper or a photo or something, and played with it between his fingers as he spoke. "I'm just trying to figure out a way to tell you something and... and have you not hate me when I've finished."

She frowned as she studied him. "Oh, Giles, I could never hate you."

He chuckled darkly. "Don't be so sure about that." And then he handed her the paper between his fingers.

She gasped as she took it. She knew from the first what it was. It was a photograph of a little girl. *Their* little girl. Her hands started to shake, and her eyes filled with tears. "It's her," she whispered reverently. "Oh God, she's so beautiful."

"Yes, she is," he agreed. "Her name is Robin. She's... she's happy. She has two parents who love her and... and a pink room with a canopy bed and all the trimmings. A big backyard and a swing set beside a sandbox and a tricycle and... and she's frankly spoiled rotten."

Buffy's eyes darted up to meet his. He was looking at her finally, his green eyes sad and haunted. She knew now where his reluctance and his guilt came from. "You saw her? You went to see her, and you didn't tell me?"

He swallowed hard. "Buffy, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I never meant for it to happen like this."

He stepped forward and reached out one hand hesitantly towards her. In the end, he couldn't touch her, and his arm dropped back to his side. His eyes slid to the floor. He took a few steadying breaths, his chin moving without words. It was the library all over again, his confession of his betrayal of her after the Test and the same anger filling her heart. Her words to him on that occasion echoed in her head. *If you touch me, I'll kill you.*

She focused on him, her Watcher, her husband, the picture still clutched in her hand. “You went to see her, and you didn’t tell me? That’s where you and Alex went today, isn’t it? You went to see her without me?”

“It all happened so fast.” His words were calm, carefully chosen. “It was never my intention to go without you. I meant only to see Angel, to determine if he had really found our daughter. I just didn’t want to get your hopes up only to disappoint you again.”

She nodded absently, tears spilling down her cheeks. She focused on the picture in her hands. They had found their daughter. That was all that was important right now. “When can we bring her home?”

His answer was so soft, and she certainly couldn’t have heard him right. “We can’t.”

“When?” she asked again, her gaze alternating between him and the photo in her hands.

He closed his eyes as he repeated himself. “Buffy, we can’t.”

“What?” She took two steps back. Her body was trembling now, her tears falling freely, the picture desperately clutched in her hand as an anchor, as the proof that her daughter was close and the years of searching were finally over.

He stepped towards her, and she stepped back. He made no more attempt to come closer. He made no effort to meet her eyes. He removed his glasses and polished them as he spoke, his voice calm and collected, as if this were a lecture on a new demon threat or an obscure prophecy, not an explanation of why they could not bring their daughter home.

“Robin is a potential slayer. The Council will allow us to reclaim her on the condition of her slayer’s training. Travers was there already, and he took me to see her. She was so happy, so vibrant and loved. How could I take that from her and give her a life of demons and fighting and death?”

Buffy focused on the picture in her hands. Her tears were falling on the glossy paper, and she wiped them away quickly before they could mark the photo. Her daughter looked so much like her. She had often wondered what that was like. There was so little of her in Alex and so much of Giles. Now to see this child who could easily be a smaller version of herself made her heart swell until it felt like it could burst.

She sniffed back her tears and tried to reason with Giles. “She may not become the Slayer, and even if she does... Well, I’m the Slayer, and my life hasn’t been so horrible. I had a mom and a sister and a dad sometimes. And I had ice-skating and cheerleading and school dances. So what if she’s a potential slayer? I just want to bring her home.” Her voice broke on the last word, and she started sobbing. She felt his hand gently grip her shoulder, trying to draw her into his comforting arms, but she stood firmly apart from him.

“Buffy, you had all of those things *because* no one knew you were a potential slayer. You were not found until you were Called, and so you escaped a slayer’s training. Even after, neither Merrick nor I trained you as a conventional Watcher would. We had to adapt to you, to allow you freedom and a life of your own. Remember Kendra?”

Buffy snorted slightly with a soggy laugh. “She named her stake ‘Mr. Pointy.’”

Giles nodded and smiled at the memory as well. “Because she had none of the typical accoutrements of childhood. No toys or stuffed animals. No friends. She trained for as long as she could remember, and she lived for that one purpose alone: to be the Slayer. She followed the Slayer’s Handbook and obeyed her Watcher in all things.”

Buffy giggled slightly again, and wiped her tears on the cuff of her uniform.

“Yes, something I had also expected from you right up until I actually met you. Kendra was the Council’s ideal slayer. In the end, what did it get her? She barely lasted a year.” He took a deep breath and tilted her head up with a finger under her chin. “I couldn’t condemn Robin to that kind of a life,

and the Council will only allow the adoption to be overturned on that condition. So I told Travers that she should stay with her adoptive parents.”

Buffy’s expression darkened, and her face twisted with rage. She knocked his hand out from beneath her chin. “What right did you have?” She shoved him backwards roughly. “What right did you have to decide that all on your own?” She clutched her head between her hands, her tears flowing freely once more. She couldn’t remember being this angry, not even during the Test. She wanted to scream it at him: “She’s my daughter, too!”

“I know that. God help me, I *know* that, but there was no time for discussion.”

She turned from him, spinning in a slow circle. She couldn’t breathe. She couldn’t think. She pressed her daughter’s photo against her chest, and then slipped it into her front pocket. She faced her watcher again. This betrayal hurt worse than the other, because this time he had chosen it. She closed the distance between them and grabbed him by the front of his jacket, pushing him backwards until he hit the wall. She wanted to shake him, to hit him, but she held herself in check.

“You gave away our *child*?” she asked through her wrenching sobs. “How could you?”

Giles shoved back, his own voice filled with pain. “You think it was easy for me? You think I didn’t want to bring her home? God, Buffy, you think I wanted any of this? Leaving her there was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do. Harder even than putting you in the ground. But it was what was best for her. I did it because I love her enough to let her go. I wish you could have come with me. I wish we could have discussed it. But I stand by my decision.”

Buffy’s eyes narrowed. She had never imagined that she could actually hate him. “*Your* decision. Fine. Stand by *your* decision,” she spat bitterly. “Just don’t expect me to stand beside you.” She pushed past him and was striding out the door just as fast as her legs could carry her.

He followed her as far as the front porch, informing her calmly, “He won’t tell you where she is. None of them will. I asked them not to.”

She glared at him as she climbed into the driver’s seat and slammed the door. It was hard to tear out of the driveway like a bat out of hell when you were driving a nice family sized minivan. Especially when it made beeping sounds as you backed up. Buffy gritted her teeth, wishing she had brought her squad car home from work.

She wasn’t sure where she was driving to. Giles was right. Angel wouldn’t tell her where Robin was. Even when they had been dating, Angel had had an irritating habit of deferring to Giles over her. They had both thought it was their job to protect her. She was a grown woman now; she didn’t need their protection; and she was getting real tired of their chauvinist attitudes. All she wanted was her daughter back.

The road blurred with her tears.

Giles paced the living room as he waited for Buffy to return. What would he say to her when she did come home? She hated him, and he could hardly blame her. He hated himself. The Council had him by the balls for as long as they had those tapes. And that was his fault too. How could he have been stupid enough to let the Council’s own operatives do the job on Longworth and Sulla? And he had opened his big mouth about Ben too. Wasn’t that how it always happened in the movies? The killer was never caught until he bragged to someone about his deed.

Finally, he could stay in the house no longer. The walls were closing in on him. He grabbed his keys and left, walking through the neighborhood with such a cloud of gloom surrounding him that people gave him a wide berth. He passed through the park, but Dawn and Alex were not there. They

must have returned home. He backtracked, and sure enough Dawn was sitting in the living room, but Alex was nowhere to be seen.

"Buffy came to the park, took Alex, and left," Dawn informed him before he could ask. "So you're in the doghouse now too? Join the club. At least she seems to have forgotten about me and Spike for the time being." She frowned. "You're not going to start in on me about that, are you?"

Giles settled into the chair beside his desk. At least Dawn didn't hate him. Then again, she probably didn't know what he had done. "That is the last thing on my mind at the moment."

"Good," she answered. "Can he come over then?"

"No," he said without hesitation.

"Can I go see him?"

"No."

Dawn scowled. "You know, you should suck up to me a little bit more. I can get you off my sister's shit list."

Giles sighed, tossed his glasses on the desk, and rubbed his weary eyes. "Don't swear, Dawn. It doesn't suit you. And I rather think there is very little you could do that would get me off your sister's 'shit list,' as you so delicately put it."

"I don't know," Dawn hedged. "What if I told her that Spike asked me to marry him, and he was going to live with me in LA after I graduated, and I was going to be an actress and not go to college?"

Giles studied her for a moment. "Is any of that true?"

Dawn shrugged noncommittally. "What if I told her that?"

He watched her with narrowed eyes. "I daresay that would take an enormous amount of heat off of me and place it directly on you." He stood and crossed to the couch, standing just in front of her. "Is any of it true?"

She wouldn't look up at him. She shrugged again and picked at a snag on her pant leg. "Maybe all of it?"

His jaw clenched. It was Angel all over again. Except this time he wasn't about to stand by and say nothing as some undead creature of the night kept a beautiful young girl from living the full and happy life she so richly deserved. Angel, at least, had the decency to realize that he couldn't be what Buffy needed, but Giles doubted that Spike would ever be so noble. Dawn had a chance at a normal life: college and friends and a career. She had a chance to get out of Sunnydale, away from the Hellmouth and demons and fighting and death. She had a chance at love and children and the American dream. He was going to make sure that she got that chance, that she got the chance to find a man who could share a life with her and give her children and walk in the sun and grow old with her. Spike wasn't going to steal that from her. Not while Giles still had breath in his body.

He turned and aimed for the front door.

"Where are you going?" Dawn asked in alarm.

Giles paused at the threshold. "To have a chat with William the Bloody." He slammed the door behind him. "William the Bloody-cradle-robbing-soulless-traitorous-miserable-excuse-for-a-vampire," he muttered to himself. The idea of giving Spike a good thrashing lifted his spirits somewhat.

"Auntie Wiwo!" Alex squealed, bouncing in his mother's arms. Willow smiled softly at him, and he reached for her. She took him in her arms, and he gave her an enthusiastic hug and a sloppy kiss. Aunt Willow was always good at making things better.

“Buffy?”

His mother was still crying and tentatively stepped around them to enter the apartment. She had been crying ever since she picked him up at the park, and nothing he did seemed to make her feel any better.

“Mommy sad,” he whispered in Willow’s ear.

She nodded and closed the door, following Buffy into the living room. “Hey, Alex,” she said as she set him down. “I bet you don’t remember what I’ve got in my toy box?”

A shy grin slipped over his face. “Legos!” And he dashed over to the chest in the corner to pull them out. Aunt Willow had the best collection of Legos, second only to Uncle Xander’s collection of matchbox cars. He began building a big robot with four arms and five legs, glancing up occasionally to watch his mother cry in Willow’s arms. She was sad because of Robin, just like Daddy. But Alex wasn’t sad, because he saw her sometimes in his dreams, and he knew she would come live with them.

He walked over to the couch with his Lego creation, proudly holding it up between the two women for them to see.

“It’s nice, honey,” his mother said softly, wiping away her tears.

Willow ruffled his hair playfully and asked him a few questions about what his robot could do. He climbed into her lap and excitedly pointed out to her the claws on its hands so it could pick stuff up and its five legs so it wouldn’t fall over. She set the robot on the floor, and waved her hand over it. It began to walk on its own and swing its hands through the air.

Alex clapped gleefully. Aunt Willow was certainly much happier than the last time he’d seen her. And she was doing magic again. Maybe she had stopped being so sad about Aunt Tara going to heaven.

But his mother was frowning. “When did you start doing that again?”

The young witch shrugged. “You guys have been nagging me to get a life, so I did. I made some friends, and we do magic. Things are actually getting much better.”

But Alex was tugging on his Auntie’s arm. He pointed at the robot. “Make fly. Pwease.”

She gave him a wink. “You’ll have to build me something with wings first.”

So he quickly tumbled out of her lap, grabbed the robot, and dashed over to the Legos. He started building an airplane, and then thought maybe he would like a flying dinosaur better. Terry-something his father had called it. His mother and Aunt Willow continued to talk, but he never glanced up. He was focused too intently on building his dinosaur. When he had finished, he ran over as fast as his legs could carry him, stumbling once and holding his prize up so it wouldn’t break. He thrust the dinosaur into his Auntie’s lap and demanded again, “Fly!”

She laughed and held the winged Lego blob up into the air above her head. Alex was eye-level with her stomach, so he noticed it right away when she raised her arms and her shirt slid up slightly. She had something painted on her stomach. He lost interest in the Terry-dino that was now flying through the apartment. He had gotten his face painted at the fair once, and he wanted to see what Willow had on her tummy. His hand darted forward to lift her shirt. Her hand came down to stop him, but his mother had already noticed.

“Willow, what’s that?”

She shrugged and batted the boy’s hands away when he plucked at the hem of her top once more. “It’s nothing, Buffy.”

But Alex wanted to see what it was. He had gotten a red fire truck painted on his cheek, because Uncle Xander had suggested it. And then on the other cheek, he had gotten a bunny, because Aunt Willow had said that Aunt Anya would like it. And Dawnie had thought he should get a butterfly, so

he had the lady paint one on his hand. Anya hadn't liked the bunny, but he wouldn't wash it off, so she had thought he should get a clown painted on him somewhere, as she glared at Xander. So he had the lady paint a clown on his other hand. And then he had liked the picture of the lion, so he asked her to paint that real big on his forehead. She even gave him a black nose and whiskers just for the fun of it.

They had all gone to meet Mommy and Daddy by the Ferris wheel after, and he had been real excited to show them all his artwork, but his parents were less than enthused about the amount of face and hand painting he had gotten done in their absence. They hadn't left him alone with his Aunts and Uncle for the rest of the day. Somehow he had managed to keep the paintings for a while, even over his parents' protests. Maybe Auntie Dawnie had something to do with that. But then five days later, she had gone to school, and Daddy had decided that enough was enough. Alex had screamed and stamped his feet in the tub and angrily splashed water at his father as all his beautiful pictures were scrubbed away.

Now he wanted to see what Aunt Willow had painted on her tummy, and she wouldn't show him.

But Mommy was as determined as he was, and a lot stronger. She reached across and lifted the shirt up enough to see some of the design painted across Willow's stomach. It kinda looked like a moon and a big lightning bolt.

"Willow," she said. "I know this symbol. We've been researching it for weeks. Dead bodies are showing up with this symbol, just about where you have yours."

The witch shoved her friend away and stood up, smoothing her top back down over her stomach. "It doesn't mean anything. It's harmless. We all have it painted on us, 'cause it makes it easier to do the group spells when we have this to link us all together. I could wash it off anytime I wanted to."

His mother stood too, and Alex glanced back and forth between them. He didn't understand why they were fighting. Willow's tummy painting wasn't that ugly. Maybe a dragon would have been better. Or some pretty colors.

"This is bad news, Will. Maybe this group you're hanging out with isn't all tra-la-la through the daisies and group hugs."

Willow's face darkened. The Lego dinosaur fell out of the air and hit the floor, breaking into all its separate pieces. "They said you wouldn't understand, and they were right. You wanted me to get a life and get over it, but only if it was the life you wanted me to have. You can't stand that I have friends besides the Scooby gang, that I'm doing stuff that doesn't involve slaying and watching people I love get killed."

"That's not fair. I never said that."

"You didn't have to. You're jumping to conclusions about people you don't know anything about. It's just a focal point for a harmless joining spell. That's *all*. And you... you want to make it into some sort of evil-Willow-fell-in-with-a-bad-crowd-and-I-have-to-save-her thing."

Buffy threw her hands in the air. "Don't you get that people have died, and it had something to do with that symbol?"

"Don't you get that I'm *happy*?" Willow retorted. "I know these people. I trust them. And whoever else is using this symbol for whatever other reason, my friends don't have anything to do with it." She crossed her arms. "Now, if you're going to say anything more about it, then I think you should leave."

"I think I should leave then."

And his mother picked him up in her arms and carried him briskly towards the door. He waved over his shoulder sadly. "Bye-bye, Auntie Wiwo," he called just before the door closed behind them.

Spike was dreaming of Dru. He did that sometimes, now that she was well and truly dead. He wondered if Angel dreamt of Darla after he staked her. They had both done it to save Buffy, and yet he didn't think it had cost Angel as dearly. Spike had honestly loved Drusilla. She was his black beauty, his savior, and he had kissed her one last time as she turned to dust in his arms.

But he never dreamed of that. She was always alive in his dreams, and it was always the past.

This time it was a Chicago speakeasy, and she was draped across his lap as he played poker with a roomful of gangsters. Little did any of them know that they were gambling with their lives now that they had invited Spike to the table to play.

"Naughty boy," she whispered in his ear. "All those kings and queens and no princes to come after. Tsk, tsk, who shall rule when they are dead?"

The others at the table groaned and folded.

"Dru, darling, it's kind of hard to play this game when you keep telling everyone what I've got in my bloody hand!"

She pouted at him. "But I want to play a different game. I want to play murder. If you're very good, I might let you win."

The others at the table looked confused. The kingpin asked them, "How do you play that game? It doesn't have a lot of wild cards does it?"

"Two wild cards," she informed him. "And it's very easy to play." Her face transformed into her vampire mask, her yellow eyes glittering in delight as she laid out the rules. "We kill you, and you die. Child's play."

And then all was a blur as the table overturned and the men ran and they were in the middle of the hunt and the kill. Only Spike didn't kill. He held some punk kid by the arm, and the guy fought against him, and Spike could feel the bloodlust and his fangs against his tongue. Only he didn't kill. He just stood there staring at this twenty-something kid. The first time, he remembered he had drained the boy, and half the room after, and his head had swum with the heady taste of bootleg liquor in their blood. Now he just stared at the fear in this kid's eyes.

Drusilla came up beside him and snapped the boy's neck, pushing his dead body out of the way. She tapped her Childe on the forehead. "Tin soldiers' knick knacks can't hurt you yet." There was blood on her lips, and he tasted it when she leaned in to kiss him. "You're free here. Free to hunt. Free to kill."

"I can't," he answered softly.

"Awww," she soothed as she stroked along his bumpy forehead until it smoothed back into its human guise. "My poor, poor boy. Someone has stolen his heart and keeps it in her pocket." She pressed her hands to her temple and jerked her head to the side with each statement. "Can't hunt. Can't kill. She'll hate you for it." She circled his neck with her arms. "Poor Spike. Thought the Slayer had the key to his heart. But she wasn't the Key, was she?"

Spike sighed and smoothed her long black hair back from her face, and she leaned into his caresses. "Ahh, Dru, even without a soul, we can still love quite well, can't we?"

"If not wisely," she reminded him.

"You see: this, what we had, *this* was right, wasn't it?"

She smiled. "Right as the pretty dead orphans all in a row."

He turned from her and paced to the other side of the back storage room they were in. "The Slayer... the Slayer was all wrong. She was the enemy I couldn't kill, and there's a thin line between love and hate. But Dawn's different. She was gradual, comfortable, until I couldn't remember not wanting her. But it's wrong, isn't it, luv? It'll never work."

He felt Drusilla's arms slide around his waist and her cool breath against his neck. "I have a little secret for my Spike. The pixies whispered it to me while I was sleeping so far away. Something's coming. I feel it calling to me, singing across my whole body." She squirmed against his back, writhing against him. "The Beast is coming, and won't they need my precious Spike, then? Topple their house of cards, and the Watcher will call you brother."

He turned and took his black beauty in his arms. "What do you mean, Dru?"

She giggled and pressed one finger to her lips as if she had a wonderful secret. "Magic, Spike. Ding-dong, the witch is dead, and you'll have to play with her toys while the Watcher sleeps."

"I don't do magic, Dru. I'm not some soddin' wizard or something."

"Just an itty-bitty spell, Spikey. And then he'll give you the Key to your happiness." She leaned forward and kissed him tenderly on his cheek. "Be happy, Spike. If you can't find your happiness in the kill, then find it in her. I couldn't save you, but she can. Tsk, tsk," she scolded with a wagging finger. "Watcher's here, and you haven't any tea."

He was about to ask her what she was talking about when he heard the loud bang and bolted upright from his dream. The Watcher had flung open the door and was striding into his crypt. Spike wiped the sleep from his eyes. "Christ, whatever happened to knocking?"

He was lifted from his sarcophagus bed and rammed into the wall behind him by way of reply.

"Bloody hell," Spike gasped. "Who woke up on the wrong side of the Slayer this morning?"

"Dawn tells me the two of you are getting married and living in LA together."

Spike smirked and tried to shift beneath the other man's grip. "Yeah, so what? What business is it of yours?"

Giles abruptly released him and began pacing the length of the crypt. "Last time I checked, you had to be alive to get married."

Spike shrugged and pulled out a cigarette. "Yeah, I guess for it to be all legal and stuff. But there's a bloke downtown who does fake papers for some of the demons who live 'round here." He stopped when he caught the Watcher's glare. Maybe the man hadn't come to hear about wedding plans. "So you've come to give me the 'I forbid it' lecture, have you?"

Giles bent over and picked up a rock, throwing it neatly at one of the black painted windows near the top of the crypt. The glass shattered, and Spike ducked to avoid the sunlight now streaming through the middle of his home. The Watcher picked up another rock and bust out another window, and Spike had to jump out of the way to narrowly miss those rays.

"Hey! Hey! Hey! You don't see me showing up at your door with a shotgun, do you? Well, okay, there was that one time, but I didn't shoot anything." A third window broke, and he was pressed against the wall to avoid the sun.

"You claim you love her. If you truly do, then you'll say goodbye to her, and let her live a normal life."

Spike pulled out another cigarette. He had dropped the other. He had also dropped his lighter. He shrugged and stuck one finger in the sunlight until it burned. Christ, that hurt, but he had too much pride to let it show. He lit the cigarette from his finger, and then smothered the flame from his smoldering digit. The Watcher was watching him, and he didn't seem all that impressed. "I do love her." He took a satisfying drag off his cigarette. "I know you find that hard to believe, but I do."

The Watcher retrieved another rock from the crypt floor and made to bust out another window. Spike held out his hands to stall him. Giles paused, his arm in mid-swing, and waited.

"The Great Poofah wants to date your slayer, and it's all poetry and star-crossed lovers. Even after his little stint in Hell, you lot take him back with open arms. Because he is the great brooding souled wonder, able to melt hearts with a single look of suffering and regret. But Spike will never measure

up, will he? No, because he lacks that all-important-gotta-have-it-or-he's-less-than-a-man-soddin' Soul. You know what? Screw Angel and his fucking Soul."

Spike tapped out the ash from his cigarette and squeezed along the perimeter of his crypt until he had reached the one remaining dark corner where he could pace with the full power of his anger. "His amazing disappearing Soul. They could never be happy together, 'cause he can't be happy with *anyone*, or it's bye-bye Angel, hello Angelus."

He faced the Watcher, punctuated his words with the cigarette between his fingers. "Dawn and I can be happy, perfectly happy together." Giles raised the hand holding the rock once more, and Spike waved at him desperately. "No, no, no. Not just happy in the Biblical sense. I mean all around happy." Giles lowered his hand, and Spike took that as invitation to continue. "I mean, put Angel next to me, and who's the better man? Without my soul, I can still choose to fight the good fight and be a white hat and all that. Without his soul... well, you would know better than anyone what a sadistic bastard he can be." Spike saw the shudder go through the man, and he wondered if the Watcher had ever let his merry band of children know exactly what had been done to him in that mansion.

"You're still not a man, Spike. You can't give her everything she deserves. You can't give her any kind of life. You can't even get a job. And what about children?"

The vampire shrugged and took another drag off his cigarette. He blew a smoke ring and watched it in contemplation. "Might surprise you to know that Dawn already has a plan for that. She thought you or Xander might give it up." Spike smiled. The Watcher looked speechless, and that was always fun to do. "Not my first two choices, mind you, and I think I'd rather it be Xander, but Dawn knows you always had your heart set on a daughter. She knows it wouldn't be yours and Buffy's, but it would be a Summers all the same."

Giles dropped the rock and turned away from him. Spike finished smoking and stamped his butt out on the ground. He glanced out one broken window. Maybe another hour to sunset, and then he could get those fixed. With any luck, he could maybe pay Dawn a visit.

"You don't deserve her."

"No, I don't. You don't deserve her sister either, but Summers women are pretty stubborn in who they love, aren't they?"

The Watcher stepped to the door to leave, but Spike stopped him at the threshold. "One more thing, mate: you can stop her from seeing me, ground her and what have you, but Dawn's old enough to make her own choices now. In the end, she'll do what she likes, so you have to ask yourself: do you want to be part of her life or not?"

The Watcher disappeared out into the sunshine without another word. Spike carefully made his way to the other side of his crypt, avoiding each patch of sunshine, until he was sitting on his ragged old couch. He turned on the telly. At least the Watcher hadn't thrown a rock through that.

Jonathon huddled deeper into his sweatshirt. He had thought California nights would be warmer than this. He had also thought two hundred dollars would get him a lot farther than it had. He was wrong on both accounts. He saw an older woman coming down the alleyway towards him. He pulled his knees into his chest, trying to curl around himself and make himself smaller. Maybe she wouldn't notice him in the doorway and walk past. He was barely seventeen, but that didn't seem to matter much. He had already been propositioned several times by older women. One had actually been almost twenty-seven.

She did notice him, and changed direction to approach him. Jonathon groaned softly. He was tired of saying no.

“Hey, kid, need a place to stay tonight?”

He shook his head, hoping she would just go.

“Are you sure? ’Cause it looks to me like you’re sleeping in a doorway in some dark alley in a pretty seedy part of town.” She knelt down in front of him. “You look familiar. Jonathon, right?”

He glanced up, startled. “Did my parents send you?”

She laughed lightly. “No. Don’t worry about that. I just think I recognized you from an audition I helped with a few weeks back. You tried out for that chicken soup ad, didn’t you?”

“Yeah.”

She turned to sit in the doorway beside him, her back leaning against the chained and bolted door. She drew up her knees to her chest to match his posture. She was a lot smaller than he was, but Jonathon thought she was maybe 26 or 27, maybe even 28. Short hair, a friendly smile. He began to feel at ease with her right away.

She turned to the side and studied him. “LA’s a big town to be in by yourself. You know, I was a runaway a long time ago. Came here to hit it big. My parents didn’t understand. I lived in this tiny little town in the middle of nowhere, and they couldn’t understand why I didn’t want to just meet some nice farmer and settle down with a flock of kids.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, mine too.”

“I packed up one night with all the cash I had saved and took a midnight bus to LA. Never looked back. That what you did, kid?”

He shrugged. “Pretty much.”

“I think we have something else in common,” she said with a small smile. “I thought I had an advantage over all the other fledgling talents. I thought I could give the directors a little push, give myself a little glamour, maybe make my name stand out just a little bit brighter. You know... magic?”

Jonathon’s eyes grew wide, and he stared at her in shock. He had never told anyone his little secret. He had grown up in a town of just over 700, and magic was wrapped up with the devil in their eyes. “How... how did you know?”

“C’mon, you got called back, didn’t you? And sorry to tell you, but you weren’t *that* good.” She pulled a business card from her pocket. “Tell you what. I run a shelter for runaways on the side, and you come by, I’ll put you up. We have about twenty boys there right now, and I think you’ll fit right in. Maybe I can hook you up with some acting jobs, maybe teach you a little magic in your spare time. Would you like that?”

He smiled widely. “Yes, I would. Thank you...” He glanced down at her card to find her name. “Thank you, Sabrina.”

Giles tried to focus on the book he was reading, but he was spending more time looking at the clock on the wall. It was getting very late, and Buffy still hadn’t brought Alex home. She never took him on patrol with her, and she hadn’t skipped a night of slaying in quite a while. He was beginning to worry. Dawn, at least, was safely upstairs on the computer, probably telling her online friends how mean her guardians were to keep her from her boyfriend. If Buffy had truly left him, she would have taken her sister. So at least he knew she would be back.

Finally at a little after midnight, the phone rang. There was a moment where he felt sick to his stomach, and he didn’t want to answer it. But he swallowed that feeling and picked up the receiver.

"Giles?" It was Xander.

"Is everything alright?" He wasn't sure he wanted to hear the answer to that.

"Yeah, everything's fine. That's why I was calling. I know Buffy's pretty ticked at you right now, but I thought someone should at least call you and let you know that they're fine. They're probably staying overnight, and then Buffy said something about shopping tomorrow. But, hey, she's gotta work on Monday, so she can't stay... Hey!" Giles heard a commotion in the background and a loud crash. Xander's voice was muffled. "Alex! C'mere, Uncle Xander's got a present for you. Shh... Don't tell Mommy." And then he was talking into the receiver again. "I'm back. Sorry about that, Giles, but I think you owe me a new Babylon 5 collector's plate."

"What is Alex still doing up? It's past midnight."

"He was asleep for a while, and then he woke up, and Buffy's on patrol, and Anya gave him some ice cream, and he's a little wired. Here, just a sec. Hey, Alex, wanna talk to Daddy?"

He heard his son's chorus of affirmations, and Giles smiled. A moment later he heard his son's soft breaths over the line. "Daddy?" the boy said softly.

"Hello, son."

Alex giggled. "Wiwo make Lego fly. Tummy painted."

"You had your tummy painted?" he asked, confused.

Alex giggled again. "No. Wiwo. Auntie Aunie i'cream."

"Yes, Xander told me about that."

"Oopsie. Broke p'ate."

"Yes, I heard that too."

His son was silent for a moment, and Giles wondered if he was handing the phone back to Xander. But then the child informed him very quietly, "Mommy cry."

Giles didn't know exactly how to respond to that. He leaned his forehead against the wall, holding the receiver a little more tightly. "Yes, she's very sad right now, so you'll need to be extra nice to her for me. Okay?"

"Kay," the boy said brightly. "Uncie Xand talk. Bye-bye. Luf you, Daddy."

"I love you too."

But Xander already had the phone by then. "Wow, G-man. You love me? That's so sweet."

Giles sighed. "Xander..."

"Yeah, well, I'd better get going before Buffy gets back from patrol. Listen, she told me everything that happened, and... well... I know she's pretty upset about it, but... I just wanted you to know that I probably would have done the same thing in your place. So... you know... if you wanted to stop by tomorrow, Anya and I are probably going to order in Chinese and watch movies."

Giles was touched by Xander's concern. But he hesitated before answering. "This wouldn't by chance be an elaborate attempt to force Buffy and me into the same room together, would it?"

"God no!" came the insistent reply. "I don't want an angry Slayer in my house. If we were going to fix you two up, that would be more of an eating out thing. So... you coming over?"

"Thank you for your kind offer, but I really have a lot of research to go over. I managed to pick up a few books with information on the sword of Camela while I was in LA."

"Suit yourself. Hey, Slayer in the house. Gotta go."

Giles heard the click, and he hung up as well. At least they were safe. He sat at his desk and focused on his reading a little more easily. He had no desire to lay down in his empty bed, so in the end, he fell asleep at his desk, his head resting on the book before him.

He woke the same, slightly later than usual. He pattered around the kitchen, fixing tea and eggs. His morning routine seemed empty without his usual three-year-old shadow. He rarely spent this

much time away from the boy. Alex came to the store with him when Buffy worked, and the only times she had their son alone were the Saturdays he worked at the store and she had off. Sundays were their time together, he and Buffy and Alex and Dawn.

He ate his breakfast alone, missing his son terribly. But then, he imagined that was the point. Buffy wanted to hurt him as he had hurt her. He wondered bleakly if she would ever forgive him.

Dawn joined him after a short time, and they sat in silence, not sure what to say to each other. She saved him the bother by leaving to go to her friend's house. He called to check up on her after a little while, just to make sure she hadn't snuck off to see Spike.

He had a Sunday to himself, something that hadn't happened since living in this house. He wasn't sure what to do with himself. There was always research, and yet his heart just wasn't in it. Within a few hours, he had an unexpected visitor to provide some distraction.

"John!"

His friend stepped around him, glancing around the house as he entered. "Aren't you going to ask how I knew where you lived?"

Giles shut the door behind him. "I imagine you looked in the phone book."

John grimaced. "Damn. I could have done that, I guess. Probably would have been easier than having April look it up in the precinct database. Having a cop for a wife is kinda cool, sometimes you forget there are more conventional ways to get information."

Giles laughed and waved the other man to a seat in the living room. "If it were Buffy, she would have just shoved a phone book in my hands. Can I get you anything?"

"Nah, can't stay long." Giles couldn't quite conceal his disappointment, and John seemed to reconsider. "Well, maybe a Coke."

When Giles returned with the soda for his guest and tea for himself, he found John holding a framed photo of their little family. The man chuckled. "Poor kid got his father's looks."

Giles nudged him playfully as he passed over the soda, and John chuckled even more. "So where is the little munchkin?" the man asked.

Giles sat in the armchair just to the side of John. "Buffy took him shopping for the day. Dawn, her sister, that's the other girl in the picture, she went to a friend's."

"So they left you home alone?" John took a long swig from his can, and then studied his friend for several moments. "You and the Mrs. have a fight?"

Giles found himself caught off guard, and the teacup rattled against the saucer. "How did you know?"

"Women and shopping. I think it's a genetic thing. They get mad at you, and they go shopping. If you sent her out with a credit card, you'll probably be forgiven by the time she gets home."

Giles laughed and set his cup on the table. "I doubt that very much."

"A man can hope." He sighed. "I wish I could stay longer, but I only dropped by to see if you wanted to have dinner with April and me on Tuesday night. Bring the family. It'll be fun. I'm going to cook out on the grill, and I guarantee you've never had anything like my barbeque chicken."

Giles smiled and accepted. "Although, such an invitation could have easily been extended by phone."

John shrugged sheepishly. "Alright, so I kinda wanted to have a look at your place and maybe meet your kid. And I had a little time to kill before my daughter came for lunch."

They sat in silence for a little longer, before they resumed their conversation from the night of the charity banquet. And the little time John claimed he had to spare soon turned into an hour, at the end of which he rushed home, saying *his* wife was going to go shopping with *his* money now that he was so late.

Giles was left alone once more with his empty house and his heavy heart. He buried himself in research, not expecting Dawn home until after dinner or Buffy until she absolutely had to return for work. He was somewhat surprised to hear his son's chorus of "Daddy, Daddy, Daddy!" sometime before dinner.

He had barely turned the corner into the foyer, when he was met with a flailing mass of waving arms and sprinting legs. He lifted the boy easily, and gratefully accepted the child's enthusiastic hugs and kisses.

Alex bounced excitedly in his arms. "Go park. Go beach. Feed birdies." He held up one tiny finger, now wearing a band-aid. "Bad birdies. Owie." He held the finger to his father's lips, for him to kiss and make better, which Giles gently did.

Buffy came up behind them, and Giles searched her expression for some hint of what she was feeling. But she was closed off from him, and told their son, "Go play in your room for a little bit, Alex. I have to talk to your father."

Giles set the boy on the ground, and he dutifully climbed the stairs to his room. Giles braced himself for whatever was coming next.

Buffy crossed her arms. "The Host."

"What?" He shook his head. Surely he had missed some part of this conversation?

"The green guy at the demon karaoke bar. We sang, and he told us we would get our daughter back, but if we lost her again, she would belong to the darkness. Tell me you didn't just give her up to the darkness."

Giles sighed. "Prophecy is a tricky thing, Buffy. And I don't tend to have a lot of faith in what the man at Caritas told us. It was all very vague, and well... a karaoke bar."

"He said we should keep her, that if we didn't, it would be a bad thing."

"All we can do is make the best decision we can with the information we have at the time. Whatever vague warnings the Host might have given us are vastly outweighed by the very real choice the Council has laid before us. Let her adoptive parents keep her, or raise her as a slayer. Given that choice, there is only one acceptable option. You must see that."

She looked down, still unwilling to let go of her hope. "Maybe we *say* we'll train her, and take her, and then back out. What are they going to do? They can't take her back."

This was the moment he had dreaded. He wasn't sure how much of that blackmail he could reveal to Buffy. "I had considered that possibility, but Travers set me straight rather quickly. They have proof that I killed Ben, and they'll bring me up on murder charges if we try it."

Her eyes darted up to his, and there was compassion there. "Oh, Giles!"

He swallowed and looked away. Would she still show him such sympathy if she knew the truth about Longworth and Sulla as well? "I would take it, Buffy, if I thought... I'm not afraid of going to jail, and I would do it gladly to bring her home to you, but... that is to say..."

She stopped him with a tender touch on his chest. "But I don't have forever, and if you were gone too, they wouldn't have any parents."

He nodded softly and felt her arms slide around him, something he had never thought to feel again. He wrapped his own around her and held her tightly as he felt her begin to sob against him. Her tears slowed for a moment, and her voice was muffled against his chest. "I know you probably did the right thing by leaving her there... but I still hate you for it... I can't help it... You should have told me... You should have taken me with you... I know you think I shouldn't see her... that it would just make it worse... but I don't need you to protect me." Her sobs resumed in earnest. "Oh, God... I just... want to... be with... her."

He rubbed her back kindly as she wept in his arms. "I know, luv, so do I."

Sabrina paced impatiently. Joseph Zalk watched her pace, finding her impatience very irritating.

"It's coming, it's coming," he assured her.

Joseph Zalk was practiced at cool and collected. He was a lawyer after all. Or at least he had been before that fatal wine tasting. He probably would have even made partner at Wolfram and Hart by now, but they didn't as a general rule employ vampires. They only kept them on as clients. So he had paid his money, and they had gotten him what she wanted, and now Sabrina would get him what *he* wanted.

Two other vampires finally entered the warehouse, carrying a long box between them. She nearly jumped up and down when she caught sight of it.

He motioned the two over and opened the box, pulling out the coveted item. He drew it from its sheath and handed it over.

She held it as if it were made of glass, tracing her fingers over the etching on the blade and the symbol on the hilt. "The sword of Camela," she breathed, as though the words were her favorite prayer. "Finally, after all this time."

He snatched the blade back from her hands and re-sheathed it. Her face darkened, and he said curtly, "You'll get your payment *after* I get mine."

Sabrina crossed her arms. "Fine. I've just found the perfect boy to round out our circle. A circle of twelve, and I will be the thirteenth, the center. We'll cast our spell tomorrow night, so you be ready with your men."

"The spell will show us the location of every last one?" He had asked the question many times before, but he was a lawyer, and he hated loopholes. He would have rather had a written contract, but witches didn't generally work that way.

"Yes," she replied in irritation. "The spell will show you every last potential slayer in the whole world. If you've done a good enough job spreading your men out across the globe, you should be able to pick them all off."

He smiled happily. "And then when we kill the Slayer..."

"There will be no one to Call," she finished for him. "No more slayers ever."

He nodded approvingly and rubbed his hands together happily. This would definitely buy him back into the employ of Wolfram and Hart. Perhaps even into a partnership. "We'll hold the sword for safekeeping until the spell is finished, and the slayers are all dead. Then I will gratefully give you your payment."

Sabrina nodded her acceptance and exited the warehouse. Joseph re-boxed the sword of Camela and made sure it was stored somewhere only he had access to it. If Holland Manners could see him now, wouldn't he be proud?

Chapter 5

Daddy's Little Girl

Things were still tense between Buffy and Giles, but at least she had come home. And they had slept in the same bed, albeit on completely separate sides. When he woke in the morning, she was gone, having gotten up extra early to miss him as she left for work. That was a sure sign of her anger, because Buffy was not a happy morning riser.

Giles arrived at the Magic Box with Alex in tow and soon discovered that Anya had taken it upon herself to save his marriage. She was plum full of helpful advice for him and articles she had clipped from Cosmo and Vogue and oddly enough, Money Magazine.

"A good stock portfolio should win over any reasonable woman," she told him.

The articles from Cosmo and Vogue, on the other hand, all involved sex. "Ten Ways to Make Her Scream" and "Bedroom Secrets Every Guy Should Know" and "What Women Want (But Are Afraid to Ask For)" and other titles that made him blush without even reading the content.

"Anya," he protested, shoving the articles across the counter to her. "I assure you that *this* is not the problem we are having at the moment."

She stared at him as though he were daft and shoved the articles back to his side. "Yes, but good sex can fix a whole lot of other problems, or at least make them seem less important."

He blushed even more hotly, and then belatedly realized that they had forgotten about their possible audience sitting nearby. He was quickly reminded when his son asked the one question that every parent dreads: "What sex, Daddy?"

He floundered for several moments, before Anya stepped in to explain the facts of life. Giles immediately stopped her and carried his son into the side office where the boy could play dominoes without listening to lifelong-therapy-inducing conversations with Anya.

He returned to find two more articles she thought pivotal to his and Buffy's reconciliation. He sighed. "While this is... thoughtful... in a strange sort of way, I don't believe these articles are going to be of any help. I'm sorry."

She glared at him. "Well, they certainly don't have any articles called, 'Six Ways to Get Your Wife to Forgive You After You've Given Away Your Only Daughter.'" Her brow furrowed in thought. "Or at least I don't think they do. I haven't read them all yet."

Not knowing how to respond to that, he didn't. He just returned to stocking his new shipment of books on the shelves. Sometime near noon, Anya decided that flowers were the way to go. He wouldn't have known what she was up to, except that she asked him how to spell 'transgressions' and he got a look at the note she was composing for him.

"I can buy my own damn flowers," he assured her.

"Then please do," she retorted, sliding him the phone book, opened to where she had circled the more inexpensive florists.

The final straw came a couple hours later, when she involved Alex in her little quest. They were in the back office, looking through catalogs, and the boy was helping her pick out the perfect gift for his mother. He ratted her out as Giles walked by: "Look, Daddy! Pretty for Mommy."

He scooped up his son and stared down Anya as he spoke. "Yes, son, it's lovely, but your Mummy has enough pretty things. And while your Aunt Anya's intentions are well-placed, emptying my bank account will not make your mother any happier."

"It certainly couldn't hurt," she grumbled.

So it was with no small amount of relief that he locked up for the day and returned home. Alex had missed his nap at the store, and so promptly fell asleep in the car. He slept through dinner too, which

wasn't necessarily a bad thing, because the ominous silence between his mother and father and Dawn would have only disturbed him. Giles thought the child might even sleep through the night, and so buried himself in research. Dawn was ignoring him now too, whether because of Spike or because Buffy had told her about Robin, he couldn't be sure.

But Alex didn't sleep through the night. Shortly after his mother had left for patrol, he came toddling down the stairs to find his father.

"Daddy?" There were tears on his cheeks, and his chin was quivering.

Giles set aside his book and moved to lift the child into his lap, but Alex resisted, tugging his father instead towards the front door.

"What is it, son?"

"Go Robin. Now."

Giles knelt on the floor in the foyer and wiped the tears from his boy's cheeks. "We all love Robin very much, Alex, but this isn't going to be her home. Some very nice people are taking care of her for us."

Alex shook his head and tugged on his father's hand again. "Go Robin. Now."

"I wish—"

"Now!" he insisted, stamping his feet. "Fire!"

Giles felt his heart sink into his stomach. All the color drained from his face. "What?" he whispered.

"Fire! Fire! Fire!" the boy chanted, stamping his feet.

Giles didn't want to believe his son, he didn't want to remember how the boy had known his sister's name before they had, didn't want to think that his child was having prophetic dreams. More than anything, he didn't want to imagine that his daughter could be trapped in a fire.

His moment of hesitation passed, and he was on his feet, racing for the phone. LA was two hours away, and he would never make it there in time. Please, God, let Angel be in.

Only the answering machine.

"Angel, are you there? Pick up. Anyone? This is Giles. I have reason to believe there may be a fire at my daughter's house. Please, someone check it out."

He hung up, frustrated beyond belief. Angel had a cell phone. Giles found that number and tried it. It rang a couple times, and then there was silence, followed by a voice talking to someone else. "Wes, any idea how to work this blasted thing?"

He heard some static and then a clear voice, Wesley's voice. "Hello?"

"Thank God," he sighed. "Wesley, I need someone to run by Robin's house. I believe there may be a fire. Don't ask me how. Just... can you do that for me?"

"Of course, but you should know we're in hospital right now."

"What's happened?"

Wesley's voice came through slightly more muffled, as if he were trying to shield the conversation from eavesdroppers. "Cordelia had a whole slew of visions, so many that she's passed out. The staff are trying to keep her sedated, but it doesn't seem to be doing the trick. Each time she regains consciousness, she's in the throes of another vision until she blacks out again. It's like when Voca turned up the intensity of her powers, except this time we don't know how to stop it."

"I'm so sorry."

"We're taking turns in the hospital with her and on the street. Fred and Gunn and some of his friends are patrolling right now. Unfortunately, without Cordelia being able to tell us what she's seeing, we're just blindly searching the city for trouble. But I will send Angel by Robin's house."

“Thank you, Wesley. Have him call me on my cell phone when he’s done that. You have that number, right?”

“Yes. You won’t be at home?”

Giles was already scribbling a note for Buffy. “No, I’m coming up there. It will put my mind at ease. And maybe I can offer some assistance for Cordelia’s condition. Thank you again for doing this. And thank Angel for me.”

He hung up, picked up his son, and dashed up the steps to Dawn’s room. “You have to watch Alex until Buffy returns. I’ve left a note for her. I have to go to LA. I’ll call as soon as I have more information.”

“Is this about Robin?”

“Yes.”

Alex only watched with wide eyes, his desperation gone now that his father was taking action. He crawled up into Dawn’s bed and lay down. Giles had his keys and was out the door a moment later. He wished he knew where Buffy might be patrolling, so he could bring her along. She would truly never forgive him if he went without her a second time. He watched the graveyards as he drove out of town, but he didn’t spot her, and he didn’t dare take the time to search for her. He felt his son’s desperation and urgency driving him to reach LA as soon as possible.

Angel called twenty minutes into the drive, telling him that all was fine at Robin’s house. No fire, no one lurking about. He would check again, and periodically through the night, but they were all still frantic to help Cordelia and to stop whatever evil her visions foretold. He called again a half hour later, saying that Robin was still fine, but that Cordelia had become coherent enough to direct them to a nearby hospital, where vampires were raiding the nursery, before she passed out again. Not another call the rest of the drive. It was the longest hour of Giles’ life.

He imagined Angel and the others were at the hospital trying to stop Cordelia’s vision from coming to pass, but while they were busy with that, Robin could be in very real danger.

Giles turned onto the side street leading to the McGregor’s house, and his worst fears were realized. Moonlight illuminated the thick cloud of smoke that billowed up from the two-story house where his daughter lived. He parked beside the curb and climbed out of his car without bothering to turn off the ignition. A neighbor who had seen the smoke was standing in the front yard in her nightgown, peering up at the second floor windows. He dashed up to her, demanding urgently, “The McGregor family... Did they all get out?”

She shook her head. “I haven’t seen them.”

He ran towards the house, paying no heed to the neighbor’s shouted warnings: “Don’t go in there! I’ve called for a fire truck. It should be coming soon.”

They were all inside. He knew it. Where else would they be? It was after midnight, and their cars were both parked in the driveway. The door was locked. Of course. He wrapped his hand with a handkerchief and smashed in the decorative glass beside the front door. He reached his hand through and turned the deadbolt.

He entered the house, coughing and bending over to stay below the worst of the smoke. The security alarm he had just tripped by smashing the glass now blared over the steady screeching of the smoke detectors. The smoke made his eyes water, and he shook the glass from his handkerchief before holding it over his mouth to help him breathe. Flames blocked one path, so he took the only other one open to him. He stumbled through the formal living room, past the formal dining room, into the kitchen, and came to a dead standstill before the kitchen table. He had found Shaun and Catherine McGregor.

He quickly turned from the gruesome sight, but not before he caught a glimpse of how their bodies had been mutilated and draped over the oak table, which now stood at the center of a symbol drawn in blood across the tiles. Giles had a strong stomach. He had to in his line of work. But even he felt his legs grow weak and his stomach heave at the sight of what had been done to the McGregors. He caught himself with one arm against the wall. He drew in several deep breaths, coughing as the smoke made it in with the air. He knew he would have to turn around and look again. He had to make sure his daughter was not lying with them.

He looked back at the pair, only long enough to be certain that they were alone. He gave silent thanks for that mercy and a brief prayer that the couple had died quickly and not endured the violence that had been done to them. He noticed also the symbol that surrounded them. The familiar symbol of crescent moon and lightning bolt.

He turned away from the sight again, noticing the trail of blood leading across the tiling and up the stairs. They had died, been dragged, and then placed here. He could not continue into the library. Already he could feel waves of heat bombard him as the flames licked ever closer, dancing across the bookcases and nearing the kitchen.

“Robin!” he called urgently, coughing with each breath. “Robin!”

Where would she be? It crossed his mind that she might not be in the house at all. Whoever had done this might have taken her. But he had to look for her on the off chance that she was trapped in a burning house. She would die if he left her here. He didn’t hear the sirens from the fire trucks yet, and the fire was spreading towards the kitchen, crawling closer to the staircase. The firemen would never make it in time.

He dashed up the stairs, forced back at the top by the flames down one hallway.

“Robin!”

Where would she go? Where would Alex go if he were trapped in a burning house after his parents had been murdered? Giles wasn’t sure the layout of the second floor exactly, only where her room was and that of her parents, but he had only one option open to him at the moment: the hallway that was not currently on fire.

He leapt through the edge of the flames and stumbled down the hallway, falling to his knees and choking on the thick fog of smoke. He pressed his handkerchief closer to his mouth and nose, squinting ahead to the open doorways on either side of the hallway in front of him. Sweat beaded down his face, and he blinked to see clearly.

“Robin! Please answer me. I want to help. Let me know where you are.”

The trail of blood continued on in front of him, leading straight to the room at the end of the hall. Her parents’ master bedroom. He crawled along beside it, calling out to his daughter every few feet. He passed the bathroom on the left, an office on the right. He reached her bedroom beside her parents’ room. He could see the flames licking up through her bedroom window, tasting her curtains and her walls and the little stuffed animals that rested on a shelf beside the windowsill.

“Robin!”

He started into her room, but stopped when he saw the little blood footprints. If he hadn’t been kneeling on the floor to avoid the smoke, he might have missed them in his haste to reach her.

The first set of prints tracked through the thick trail of blood and left little barefoot shadows leading into her bedroom.

Dear God, no! Her prints came from the direction of the master bedroom and led into her own room. *She must have witnessed her parents’ murder, and then ran into her own room after their bodies were dragged downstairs.*

He pushed aside the thought of what his daughter must have gone through: her terror and confusion and grief. He had to find her first, and the second set of bloody footprints would surely point the way. They crossed the blood trail left by her parents and went into the office opposite her bedroom.

He darted into the room, still staying low to avoid the worst of the smoke. Even then, he couldn't stop coughing.

"Robin!"

Still no answer. The little blood prints faded quickly as they trailed across the rose carpeting further into the office. He wasn't sure where she would have gone after entering the room. He checked under the computer desk and in the closet.

"Robin!"

Then he noticed the thin, straight crack in the wall beside the bookcase. He wedged his fingers into the space and pried open a half-door made of simple wood paneling. Behind lay a dark crawlspace too small for a grown man.

But just the right size for the three-year-old who huddled in the far corner.

Giles reached one arm in, but he was a good foot short of touching her.

"Robin, give me your hand."

She didn't move, just sat curled into a little ball, rocking and shivering. She watched him with wide, frightened eyes. Giles kept his hand outstretched to her, remaining very still and patient, even though his mind was screaming at him that he had to get her out of here *now* before they both burned to death.

"I'm not going to hurt you. You're safe now."

He wedged himself farther into the opening, as far as he would fit, and still it only bought him inches. The dim moonlight barely penetrated the cramped crawlspace, illuminating just the outline of her features and glinting off her wide eyes.

"It was very smart of you to hide here where they couldn't find you. But it's time to come out now."

She just stared at him, not moving. Each second lowered both their chances of getting out alive.

"You remember me, don't you, Robin? I read you a story when I came to your house. We had a tea party with the Queen. You're safe now. I won't let anyone hurt you. Come on, luv, give me your hand."

Very slowly she uncurled one arm from its grip around her tucked up knees. Her hand tentatively drifted towards his.

"That's a good girl. Just a little more."

Her arm straightened and her fingers stretched to touch the tips of his own. Not quite close enough.

"Robin, please just come a little bit closer. I'll keep you safe. I promise."

She leaned forward slightly until her tiny hand slipped into his. Giles smiled and gave it a comforting squeeze before pulling the girl into his arms by their joined hands. She clung to his shirtfront immediately, burying her face into his neck and trembling against his chest. She had her stuffed rabbit clutched under one arm, and its fur tickled his cheek.

"Shhh... It's going to be okay," he soothed, rubbing her back as he unfolded himself from the crawlspace entrance. He turned back to the office. The smoke had gotten thicker in the short time it had taken him to retrieve Robin. They were both coughing. He pressed his handkerchief over her nose and mouth, and she squirmed away from the cloth.

"You won't cough so much if you breathe through this."

Her struggles ceased, and she let him hold the handkerchief over her face as he crossed to the door.

The fire had spread further down the hall, blocking their escape down the stairs. The heat was intense, and Robin began to cry. Giles shielded his daughter with his body as he skirted the edge of the flames and headed down the only path open to him: into the master bedroom.

He stooped to stay below as much of the smoke as he could, and he turned his head to cover his mouth and nose with his shirtsleeves. Even still, his eyes watered, and he coughed against the smoke insinuating itself down into his lungs. He would probably be hospitalized for smoke inhalation. But hopefully, if he got them out soon enough, Robin would not.

He saw the blood covering the bed, handprints on the wall above it. The McGregors had been alive through their ordeal. And Robin had likely seen the whole thing. She was still sobbing in his arms and trembling, and he tried to block her vision of the bloody bed. He made his way to the window and looked down on the front porch. Flames had reached the front of the house now as well, and were climbing the walls to this window. They couldn't go out and down. They certainly couldn't stay here. The only option was out and up, onto the roof.

He adjusted his grip on the girl and instructed her to wrap her arms around his neck and hold tight. She obeyed, still crying, still clutching the stuffed rabbit by its ear. He held her tight around the waist with one arm. His other opened the window and gained a solid grasp on its frame. He hauled himself out onto the ledge, looking up at the roof just above him. He would need both his hands to pull himself up.

"Robin, hold tight to my neck." He slowly released his grip from her waist, making sure she had him tight enough that she wouldn't fall. She had him tight enough that he could barely breathe. He reached up for the edge of the roof and gained purchase with both hands. He pulled at the same time that he swung his legs up and to the side. Solidly over the edge, he rolled onto his back and rested for a moment, Robin lying across his chest.

"You don't have to hold so tightly now, luv," he whispered, as he tried to ease her chokehold on his neck.

Giles stood, and Robin screamed. She began thrashing in his arms, and his balance on the sloping shingles was already precarious at best. Her frantic struggles sent him stumbling to his knees to keep from falling to the flames below.

"You have to stop that, Robin. Everything's going to be fine." She still didn't stop screaming or squirming in his arms, and he tried a less gentle, more parental approach. "Robin Deanna McGregor, stop that this instant!"

That didn't seem to work either. He twisted to the side to see what her hands were grasping for. She had dropped her stuffed rabbit on the roof behind them. He rescued the thing and returned it to her. She settled back down against his chest immediately.

"Well, that was easily fixed. Careful not to drop her again."

He stood once more, carefully picking his way along the perimeter of the roof, constantly watching over the side for a safe place to climb down. A few feet ahead of them, flames suddenly sprouted from the shingles. He turned around to backtrack, but the fire had followed them and closed off their path. He tried to see the driveway from where he was standing. Where were those damn fire trucks? It had to have been at least fifteen minutes since he entered the house. He looked down. A two-story drop might be painful, but it would not be life threatening, and they were rapidly running out of options.

He chose a spot that looked to be fairly flat and relatively free of foliage and was the furthest from the fire that he could get. He turned around and cradled Robin close to his chest, making sure her arms and legs were no longer wrapped around him, but instead tucked close to her body. With any luck he could drop to the ledge beneath the second story window before falling the remaining distance. He

would rather try for a second jump to the first story ledge before dropping to the ground, but the flames had already climbed higher than that.

He knelt beside the edge of the roof and gripped the overhang with one hand as the other clutched Robin tightly to his chest. Slowly he lowered himself over and down, their combined weights too much for one arm to support.

He fell.

Ten feet from the roof to the first ledge, and the impact jarred up his legs even as he bent his knees to absorb some of the shock. He stumbled slightly, nearly toppling off before catching the window frame with one hand. He coughed against the smoke cloud they seemed to be standing in. He could feel the heat of the fire directly below them. Next stop: the ground. And this time he wouldn't be able to lower himself from the ledge first. They needed distance between them and the fire. This time Giles would have to jump.

He glanced over his shoulder. Less than ten feet left to fall, but the smoke formed a veil of mist below them. From Giles' perspective, it seemed as if they could fall through the haze forever.

He took a deep breath of acrid air and fought back the coughing impulse that stung the back of his throat. He bent his knees, and then pushed off with his feet, so he could put as much distance between them and the burning house as possible. Robin squeezed her eyes shut. If it were Alex, he would have taken it as an amusement park ride and begged to go again when they hit the ground.

That was the only thought he had time for before his back struck the ground. The impact knocked the wind out of him, and he couldn't breathe. He couldn't move either, and pain shot straight up his spine. He could feel the heat from the flames less than five feet away, but at the moment all he could concentrate on was trying to breathe. His mouth opened and closed, his attempts becoming more desperate, his hand massaging his chest, trying to force air into his lungs. His vision swam. He felt hands beneath his shoulders. Neighbors were dragging him back from the house. Robin was screaming. They couldn't pry her from his arms.

His first breath came like fire in his lungs. He rolled to the side and started coughing violently. He heard the sirens now and saw the indistinct blur of fire truck and ambulance. The neighbors were asking about Catherine and Shaun. He couldn't answer, could only focus on each breath between the coughing fits. A man in a white uniform knelt beside him and slipped an oxygen mask over his face. Another man tried to help Robin, but she would not loose her grip on Giles' coat. She screamed, and actually grabbed a fistful of his hair to hold her place. Giles lifted one hand to slide down the oxygen mask. He smiled at her softly. Breathing was somewhat easier, and he attempted speech.

"S'okay, Robin." He coughed again, and it burned the back of his throat. "They'll help you."

But she continued to cling to him for dear life and scream and cry. It was only because he was lying on the ground that he noticed the blood on the paramedic's shoes. A chill ran through him. He turned to the paramedic on the other side of him. Blood on his shoes as well.

He pulled Robin into his arms, holding her close to his chest. He slipped a crucifix from his coat pocket and simply rested it against her back as he held her. The paramedics took one look at it and slowly backed up, disappearing into the crowd.

"Where are they going?" one neighbor lady asked.

"Shouldn't they be taking them to the hospital?" The small group watched in bewilderment as the ambulance drove away without its patients.

"I can get there myself," Giles insisted, stiffly raising himself to his feet.

"I'll drive you," someone offered.

"No, no, I'll drive myself." He started coughing again, casting serious doubt on his ability to make it to the hospital on his own, but he was not about to trust anyone with his daughter's life. He limped

to the car and belted her into the seat. She screamed and clawed frantically at the belt buckle until he was in the driver's seat beside her. He reached across and took her hand, and she was calm as long as he was touching her.

They made it to the hospital in incremental bits. He needed to pull to the side of the road for each coughing fit. Robin, thankfully, had stopped coughing as soon as they escaped the fire. And he had taken the brunt of the fall with his body, so she was relatively unharmed. Physically, at least. Her eyes were haunted, and she spoke not a single word the entire drive.

At one point, she started shivering in her thin nightgown, clutching her little stuffed rabbit tight to her chest. He pulled to the side of the road and removed his jacket, wrapping it around her. He was cold then, too, so he put up the top and turned on the heat. Her hair and face were greasy with smoke, her hands too, so he cringed when he saw her begin to suck on one dirty thumb.

The phone rang just as they pulled into the hospital parking lot. He turned off the ignition and answered it, still holding Robin by the hand to keep her calm.

"Giles? It's Angel." The vampire's voice sounded panicked, and Giles almost smiled, knowing what was coming next. "After we finished at the hospital, we went past Robin's house again. I don't know how to tell you this. I don't know what happened exactly, but—"

"There was a fire," Giles finished.

"Yes, and the firemen said they thought there were still people trapped inside."

"It's alright, Angel. I got Robin out of the house. She's with me, and we're at the hospital right now." He started coughing again, and it was a moment before he could continue. "The McGregors are both inside, but they're already dead. There's no one else."

"They can't go inside. The fire's too intense. They're trying to put it out."

"Assure them that there's no one left to save inside. That should make them feel better."

"What hospital are you at?"

Giles peered up at the sign and coughed again before answering. "Good Samaritan Hospital."

"Cordelia's in the neuropsych unit there."

"I'll be sure to pay her a visit." He started on another coughing fit, this one lasting nearly a full minute.

"Sounds like you should maybe go in there yourself, Giles." Angel signed off.

He unbuckled his daughter first and pulled her into his lap, rather than endure her screaming as he came around the car to get her. He walked into the ER, past a woman bleeding from a nasty gash on her forehead and a mother holding a screaming infant and a slightly drunk man with a large nail protruding from his hand. Off to another side were a trio of teenagers, each wearing a high school football jersey and watching down one hallway intently. The triage nurse seemed tired as she took his information and then pointed him to a chair he could wait in until a doctor was available.

For as much time as he spent in them, Giles really hated hospitals. He reclined against the back of the hospital bed, Robin's weight against his chest as she began to doze. The oxygen mask seemed to be helping his breathing, as did the medication they had made him inhale earlier, although it had sent him on a coughing fit that had lasted almost five minutes. They had given the same treatment to Robin as a precaution, but she didn't seem nearly as affected by the fire as he.

She had fought against the oxygen mask at first, and then screamed when they had tried to draw blood. She was overtired and cranky and terrified and traumatized, and from where Giles was sitting, her lungs had sounded quite healthy. He had leaned down close to her and had begun softly singing to

his daughter, her crying stopped mid-wail as she turned watery eyes up to him in fascination. He had attempted to wipe away her tears, but only managed to make sooty smears across her cheeks.

Right now, Robin slept soundly in his arms, a peaceful, dreamless sleep for which Giles gave thanks. He could not risk sleep for himself, not while she was still in danger. Every figure that passed their door sent a jolt of primal fear, the most basic fight-or-flight instinct, straight up his spine. A stake and a cross in his jacket pocket, and he kept his hand always near to them.

He suspected he was not a favorite among the hospital staff at this moment. He had refused to change into a hospital gown or to allow them an examination of his back after his fall. He had refused the X-rays. In short, he had refused any treatment that would separate him from Robin for any length of time. The pediatrician, even, had to care for the girl while she sat in Giles' lap. He saw the looks they gave him as they passed outside his exam room, and he didn't care. Someone had tried to kill his daughter, had succeeded in murdering her adoptive parents and burning her house down while she was still inside, and had most likely killed the two paramedics they had impersonated just so they could snatch Robin from his grasp. Giles wasn't about to allow his daughter out of his sight for a moment. He wasn't about to give them another opportunity to hurt her.

He was impatient to leave. His breathing had improved, and Robin seemed unharmed. The doctor wanted to at least wait for the results of the blood tests, although he would rather keep them overnight for observation. But Giles could only imagine the two vampire paramedics hunting them down, and he didn't want to wait for anything, and he most certainly wasn't saying overnight. How hard could it be to find a man and a girl who had escaped from a fire? Giles wanted to go home *now*. They could receive the rest of their treatment at Sunnydale's own hospital.

The doctor returned, reading over something on a clipboard. The nurse followed in behind him. Giles hoped the blood tests were back and they could leave now. But when the doctor glanced up, his eyes were cold and stern, filled with more than his simple annoyance with a difficult patient. "We brought up Robin's medical file. It appears that you are not her father, Mr. Giles. Her grandparents have been contacted and are on their way. Social Services have also been alerted. I'm afraid you won't be allowed to leave with the girl."

Giles glanced down at the child in his arms. In spite of all the activity surrounding her, she remained sleeping, physically and emotionally exhausted. He tenderly brushed a stray lock of hair from her face, and then lowered his oxygen mask before answering the doctor's unspoken accusation. "I *am* her father. She was stolen from us at birth, and we never consented to her adoption. We have been searching for her all this time." He raised his eyes and met the other man's gaze. "I have court documents. I can have my lawyer send them over."

The doctor mulled this over for a moment. It probably wasn't an everyday occurrence in the ER. A simple kidnapping would be the more logical explanation. Luckily for Giles, the police had already taken his statement, and the witnesses had corroborated the facts of his arrival on the scene *after* the fire and his heroic rescue of the child from the burning house. It also helped that one of the officers had known Buffy from the Academy. If the McGregors' neighbors hadn't been so blessedly nosy, then Giles would probably already be in lockup on suspicion of setting the fire and murdering Robin's parents. But thankfully, the neighbor who had called for the fire trucks had also seen the perpetrators leave before Giles ever got there.

"Yes," the doctor finally replied, "we'll need you to do that before she can leave. And we'll need your permission to run a paternity test on the blood samples we've already taken from both of you."

"Of course."

"Fortunately, we have excellent lab facilities right here in the hospital." The doctor frowned. "Even so, it will take a few hours to run a DNA test, so you might as well let us have a look at your back, Mr. Giles."

"I'll pass, but thank you."

The doctor's jaw clenched slightly, and he turned on his heel. No, Giles most definitely wasn't a favorite among the staff.

As the doctor left, it didn't escape Giles' notice that there was now a security guard stationed outside the door. He sighed. He wouldn't be leaving any time soon after all. He wondered if the guard would at least discourage would-be attackers. Then again, they would likely be dressed as hospital staff and rouse no suspicion.

The nurse smiled at him kindly as she replaced the oxygen mask. Long, thick, raven black hair curled around her face, her nametag read "Carol H." and she at least seemed somewhat sympathetic to him. She nodded to the phone on the side table. "You can call your lawyer with that phone. No cells in the hospital. Just dial nine to get an outside line."

She left him to make his phone calls. First call to Buffy, and he needed to persuade her to stay in Sunnydale and wait for them. But she would take the day off of work; she couldn't be talked out of that. Dawn knew nothing; she would go to school as normal. It would be better to start Robin out with the least amount of people possible. Just Buffy hopefully at first, and then Alex would wake, and later Dawn would come home from school. One at a time Robin would accustom herself to the people who would now be part of her life.

The second call was to Thomas Stockwell, and he faxed the court documents to the ER with all due speed, sounding rather pleased that they had finally found their daughter, after he recovered from the annoyance of a nearly two in the morning wake up call.

The final call was to Angel's cell, but Wesley answered this time. He had said they were taking turns at Cordelia's bedside, but Giles wondered if the young man had yet left her side.

"Giles? Angel tells me you're at Good Samaritan as well."

"Yes, in the ER. How is Cordelia?"

Giles could hear the concern in the other man's voice, even as he tried to couch his words in the most optimistic way possible. "The visions seemed to have stopped. She hasn't regained consciousness yet, but the staff are still trying to keep her sedated. Sleep is probably what she needs most right now."

Giles nodded thoughtfully, even though the man at the other end wouldn't see it. "Angel and the others?"

"They've gone out patrolling again. They were unfortunately unable to save the babies from the hospital nursery. The vampires got there first." A deep sigh. "The visions Cordelia was sent are rather pointless if she cannot tell us what she saw. We cannot stop them if we don't know what we are trying to stop until it is too late."

Giles didn't need to be in the same room with the man to imagine the frustration etched into Wesley's face. He could hear it in the other man's voice as clear as his underlying fear for Cordelia's well being. "Cordelia will be fine, Wesley. And you have all done everything you can do. The Powers can ask no more of you than that."

There was a long silence. "Thank you for that. And at least your daughter is safe. We can be grateful for that mercy."

Giles looked up as Carol entered his room, clutching a small bundle close to her chest. He signed off with Wesley, promising he would stop by before leaving for Sunnydale.

"I thought these might fit Robin. We get donated clothes and stuff sometimes. Well, I just thought you both might like to clean the smoke off while you're waiting. There's a full bath down the hall you can use. Sorry, no shoes, though. She'll have to go barefoot."

He took the small stack of clothing. "Thank you. These are appreciated."

The nurse smiled at him warmly as she tucked one long strand of black hair behind her ear. She led him to a room down the hall, the security guard also shadowing them five steps behind.

"Do you need a hand?"

"I'll manage," he answered with a smile, before shutting the bathroom door.

He sat on the edge of the tub and started the bath. He wasn't eager to wake the child in his arms, but neither did he want to leave the residue of her ordeal on her any longer than necessary. It could only serve to remind her and conspire to rob her of her sense of security. He wanted his child to feel like a normal little girl again, and a bath was a good place to start.

He dipped his hands in the warm water and began to wash the dried blood from the bottoms of her feet where they dangled over the tub. He wanted to clean her parents' blood from her body before she woke. He wished he could just as easily wash the memory of their murder from her mind.

She stirred as she felt the water on her feet. She blinked up at him and rubbed at her eyes with one fist. Giles smiled. "What do you say we clean you up? How does a bath sound?"

She pointed one finger to the toilet behind them.

He knelt on the bathroom tile as he dried off her feet so she wouldn't slip. "Do you need help?"

She shook her head and handed him her stuffed toy before climbing on the toilet. He turned away, slightly embarrassed. He wasn't accustomed to caring for a little girl yet, and he wondered how awkward he would feel bathing her. Even turned away from her, she still held onto him by the collar of his shirt, as if by letting go of him she might lose him. He could empathize with that feeling.

She finished, and flushed, and tugged for him to help her up to the sink.

"You're going to take a bath in a minute anyway."

But she insisted, and he helped her wash her hands, marveling at how her parents had managed to teach her better habits than they had accomplished with Alex so far.

He stripped off her nightgown, laid the rabbit safely out of the splash zone, and set her in the tub. It wasn't nearly as bad as he had feared it might be. It was almost the same as bathing Alex. Except Giles didn't know what to do about her long hair. He tried the shampoo, but the suds dripped in her eyes, and she started crying. He felt terrible as he washed her face and tried to soothe her. Just a few hours in his care, and he was already making a mess of it.

"Don't cry, Robin," he murmured. "The bottle says 'tearless.' How was I supposed to know? I'll be more careful. I promise."

She settled down after a few moments, and he was able to rinse her hair without further incident. He examined her closely: pink and rosy, without a trace of soot left. Which was more than he could say about himself. Robin seemed to have a remedy to this problem and began to splash him quite enthusiastically. He held up his hands to stop her, but she was smiling, and it was the first time he had seen her smile since pulling her from the house. So he splashed back, hoping for a little girl's giggle, but having to content himself with her smile, because her laughter was not forthcoming.

When they had emptied enough of the tub onto the floor, Giles finally ended their war and pulled her out of the tub and into a dry towel. She still hadn't spoken, and it was beginning to worry him. So he sat her up on the counter beside the sink and tried to engage her in conversation.

"Would you like the pink shirt or the blue?"

She pointed to the pink, but he tried to get her to say it. "I'm sorry, which one?"

She shook her finger at the pink one, her face screwing up in frustration, and he could see a tantrum coming. So he just gave up and dressed her. Pink shirt and little blue jean coveralls that were just a tad too big. The nurse had left a comb, which he tried to run through her wet hair, but he was terribly clumsy with it. He kept pulling her hair, and she would whimper and hold onto her scalp with both hands, which made it even more difficult to accomplish. And to think, Giles had once had even longer hair himself. But he couldn't remember it being this difficult to care for. He eventually admitted defeat. What did he care if her hair was tangled? At least she was clean and dressed.

He fixed himself up a little as long as they were there. He rolled up his shirtsleeves and washed his hands and arms and face in the sink. Robin watched him quietly, and then reached out to touch his Eyghon tattoo in the bend of his elbow. He smiled. Alex had been curious about it too.

He touched her finger with his as she traced the outline of the symbol. "It reminds me that I can make mistakes sometimes."

She looked at him with wide somber eyes. Giles dried his arms and face. She was too young to understand. He scooped her up, and she started to whine and squirm as he moved to leave. Her hands were reaching out, clenching and unclenching in desperation. He turned to see what she wanted and spied the little stuffed rabbit still sitting on the ground.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to forget her." He retrieved the slightly wet toy and passed it over. Robin clutched the toy like a life preserver and quieted down against his chest immediately. Giles took one last look around the bathroom to see if they had forgotten anything else. They had definitely made a mess. That was the one perk to a hospital bathroom, he supposed, that he didn't have to clean it.

He returned to their room, the guard following them back and resuming his station outside their door. The nurse saw them as they passed and joined them a few moments later.

"Wow, looks like there was a real pretty girl under all that dirt." Carol smiled at Robin, but the girl ducked her head into Giles' chest. "Looks like Daddy could use a little help with your hair. May I?" she asked him as she reached for the comb.

"By all means."

Giles sat at the edge of the hospital bed as Carol gently combed through Robin's golden tresses. The child seemed frightened at first, digging her hands into the front of his shirt, but she relaxed after a few moments, after she realized the woman was not going to take her from his arms.

"Never had a girl before?"

It didn't seem so much a question as a conclusion, but he answered her anyway. "She's my only daughter. I have a son at home, but..."

"Yes, well, you want to start at the bottom and work your way up. That way you can hold on above where you're combing and not pull on her hair. And a little conditioner or detangler wouldn't hurt either." Carol smiled as she finished. Robin's hair was softly curling as it dried. "Don't you just have the prettiest curls? You're going to have the men lined up for you."

Giles groaned. "Yes, in the far, far future."

Carol laughed. "How about a nice braid to keep it neat?" In less than a minute she had expertly woven the long gold curls into a lovely French braid. She pulled a rubber band from her pocket and tied off the ends.

"You must have a girl of your own. You're quite experienced at this."

"Two actually. But mine are a little more rambunctious. She seems like such a quiet little thing."

Giles sighed and glanced down at his daughter, so timid and withdrawn now. "She didn't used to be. I wish I could get her to talk."

Carol tenderly stroked her hand across Robin's face, and then met Giles' eyes with a kind smile. "Kids are amazingly resilient. She'll bounce back. You'll see. All she needs is a little love and patience. And maybe one of these," she added, pulling a lime green lollipop from her uniform pocket.

Robin refused the treat.

"How about a red one?"

She twisted her hands tighter into Giles' shirt and turned her head away. He frowned and kissed the crown of her head, his heart breaking for his child's grief. He had wanted to shield her from death and vampires and demons, but he had only ended up abandoning her to face those things alone. And now her parents were dead, and there was nothing he could do to protect her from the pain of that.

Their doctor entered at that moment, carrying a clipboard. "Well, Mr. Giles, it seems you were right. Your lawyer sent us the documents, and the blood tests came back. To a ninety-nine point nine percent accuracy, you are Robin's father, and you do have a legal claim to her. I must sincerely apologize for doubting you, but it did seem like such an outrageous story."

"I understand."

"I must admit: I called a friend at the precinct to check up on your claim. I was quite skeptical, and well... anyone could have faxed us those papers. But he found the police report from three years ago and verified the judge's rulings that your lawyer sent us. Plus, it seems there's a pending lawsuit against the adoption agency. So... stolen baby." The doctor shook his head. "Again, my deepest apologies, but it just seemed like something out of a movie-of-the-week. Social Services say I should let you take her, as the adoption was illegal and is now invalidated, making you her legal guardian now. In any case, we can't keep you from leaving with her, although you should know that her adoptive grandparents will be here soon. And no matter what your court orders say, they'll probably want to fight you for custody."

Giles nodded, not wanting to deal with them at this moment. "I'll contact them later. Right now I just need to get home."

"Well, the blood work shows a clean bill of health for Robin. I'd like you to go in for a follow-up with your own doctor and have some X-rays taken, but I think I already know how likely that is."

"You're beginning to sound like my wife," Giles complained as he signed the release forms. He noticed the doctor had written AMA on his papers with the X-ray circled beside it. "Now where's the neuropsych unit?"

The doctor gave him a puzzled look.

"I want to check on a friend."

"Third floor."

He thanked the nurse Carol as he left, and he would have thanked the doctor too, but the man had already moved onto the next patient. Almost five in the morning, and the ER waiting room was still half full. Such was life in LA, he imagined. There were several drunks, a few homeless people who were most likely looking for beds rather than medical attention. A woman who was probably a prostitute, pressing her hand to a bleeding wound on her neck. Giles imagined she had found a vampire rather than a human in her bed, but somehow she had managed to survive the encounter. The high schoolers from before were still waiting and watching down the same hallway, except now their numbers had increased. It seemed as if the entire football team were waiting for news of some kind, and some of them were crying.

The neuropsych unit was quiet in contrast. The nurse at the front desk glanced up as he passed, but made no move to stop him. She had probably gotten used to people coming and going from Cordelia's room and had given up on enforcing visiting hours.

Cordelia was alert when he entered, only Wesley at her side. She smiled weakly, her head resting back against her pillow. But she managed to muster up some of that patented Cordelia spunk as she took in the sight of the little girl in his arms.

"Giles, you brought me a present. Isn't she just the cutest thing?" Cordelia reached a hand over to tickle Robin's feet, but the girl jerked them away and tucked them tighter beneath her. "Cranky! I think you should get a refund."

Giles shifted his daughter's weight in his arms. "She's had a trying day."

Cordelia sighed and closed her eyes. "I know how you feel, kiddo."

Wesley was sitting on the other side of Cordelia, holding her hand. "I am very glad you were able to get her out in time. And I am sorry we were not there for her sooner."

"I understand," Giles told them, and he truly did. "My concerns were unsubstantiated, and Angel did check on her as often as he could. Besides which, you had Cordelia's very real visions to attend to."

"We couldn't save the babies," Cordelia murmured softly, and Wesley returned his attention to her. He lifted her hand tenderly to his lips. She was barely holding back the tears. "We couldn't save any of them. The visions just kept coming and coming, and they didn't let up long enough for me to tell anyone anything. I saw so many of them: women and girls and babies, and they were all being killed. There were just too many of them in too many different places."

The two men grew very quiet, and Wesley stroked her softly along the length of her arm. She turned dark, weary eyes towards Giles. "I felt something in each of them, Giles, in my visions. I think... I may be wrong, but...I think they were all mini-slayers like Robin. You know, with the potential or whatever."

He shared a glance with the ex-Watcher. Someone targeting potential slayers on that kind of scale was unprecedented. It chilled him to the very core.

"I'll speak with the Council," Giles assured them.

Cordelia smiled faintly and licked her lips. "I don't mean to be Miss Rude-Get-Out-of-My-Room, but could ya get out of my room? I'm beat."

Giles smiled and reached out to give her shoulder a friendly squeeze before stepping out into the hallway. Wesley was standing, moving to follow him, first bending to place a kiss on Cordelia's forehead.

They softly shut the door behind them.

"If they're targeting potential slayers, then Robin is still in danger," Wesley whispered softly, glancing up and down the hallway to make sure their conversation would be private.

"Yes, that is why I am rather eager to return to Sunnydale."

"Will you need an escort? Protection?"

Giles considered for a moment, but Angel Investigations had enough problems of its own to worry about at the moment, and he had a Slayer at home who could offer better protection than any of them. "No. But if Cordelia remembers anything from her visions, any clue about who might have done this, you will call me?"

"Of course."

He said goodbye to the ex-Watcher and left the hospital at five thirty in the morning, while it was still dark out. Robin had fallen asleep in his arms again during their visit to the neuropsych unit, and he held her tightly against his chest, his cheek pressed to the top of her head. The possibility of anything happening to her burned his lungs and stole his breath more cruelly than the smoke inhalation ever could. And he didn't even want to consider what might have happened to her had he not heeded Alex's warnings, had he made it there even ten minutes later.

He may have refused Wesley's offer of an escort, but he wasn't above asking a security guard to walk them to his car, not wanting to present too tempting a target to any vampires that may be laying in wait for them. And Robin remained asleep even as he buckled her in.

He drove past sunrise before stopping for gas. Robin woke slightly while he was standing at the pump and panicked when she didn't see him. It took him five minutes to calm her. She was trembling and sobbing long past when the pump had shut off. There was a side diner attached to the station, and he took her inside to feed her and settle her down before continuing on to Sunnydale. It wouldn't do for Buffy to meet the girl while she was still so upset.

But Robin wouldn't eat. She wouldn't drink either. Giles wasn't sure what she might like, so he kept ordering things, one after another, but she refused them all. Eggs, cereal, pancakes with syrup, he even tried chocolate cake. What child could resist cake? Buffy would never let him live it down if she knew he was trying to tempt their child with dessert for breakfast, but he just wanted her to eat *something*.

She reached for the fork, and he let her have it. Maybe she just needed to feed herself. She stabbed herself a bite of pancake, but she turned in his lap and tried to feed it to him instead. He accepted the mouthful and insisted that the next bite would be for her. But Robin only seemed interested in feeding him. After twenty minutes, he gave up on the idea of getting any breakfast in her. Nor any water, or milk, or orange juice, or even soda. Not even the twisty straw the waitress brought made any of them appealing to her.

He buckled her in the car, and she snuggled up against her stuffed bunny, one hand holding tight to the cuff of his shirt. She fell asleep again before they even merged back onto the highway. Not surprising, since she had spent half the night awake. He was tired as well, but they were only a half hour from home.

Buffy came out to meet them as they pulled into the drive. She had probably been waiting at the window for hours. Robin didn't stir when he pulled her from the car, so she didn't protest when he handed her over to her mother.

"Oh my God," Buffy whispered, touching the soft cheeks resting against her shoulder, running her hand along the braid down the back, tracing the outline of fingers that held firmly to a little stuffed rabbit.

"Let's go inside," Giles murmured, ushering her up the steps. "Dawn?"

"At school." Buffy never looked away from the sight of her daughter. "I can't believe it's really her. I feel like I'm dreaming."

"Alex?"

"Sleeping. I kept him up late after I got your note. I figure he should sleep in for a while. Look at the way her forehead crinkles up while she's sleeping. You do that."

"Do I?" he asked with a kiss on her cheek.

She turned to him, perhaps seeing him for the first time. "God, you're filthy."

Giles chuckled. "But alive. It's refreshing to know you are so overjoyed to have me back in one piece."

"That's not what... You know I'm happy you're okay... Just go up and shower." She gave him a shove towards the stairs. "Wash the smoke and dirt off you and change your clothes. You smell like Spike's crypt."

"In that case, I'll be eager to do so."

She laughed as he started up the stairs. "Grass stains on the back of your jacket? Rupert Giles, have you been having midnight trysts in the park without me?"

He flashed her a wicked smile. She was teasing him. That had to mean at least the beginnings of forgiveness. "Now where would the fun in that be?" he answered.

He grabbed some clean clothes from the bedroom before starting his shower. It felt blissful to wash away the layer of grime left by the fire. And relaxing. He hoped Buffy hadn't been counting on his company, because he was starting to feel really tired. With any luck, he could sleep all morning.

He was just toweling off, when he heard Robin start screaming. He threw on his clothes as quickly as possible. He heard her little fists pounding on the bathroom door and Buffy's voice trying to calm her. She practically fell into his arms when he opened the door. Little feet stomping on the ground as little hands attempted to climb up his body.

"Shhh," he soothed, scooping her up and gently swaying with her. "Everything's alright. I'm right here." Her tears slowed to little hiccupy sighs, as she slowly relaxed in his arms. "This is Buffy, Robin. She's been waiting to meet you for a very long time."

But the little girl only wrapped her arms tighter around his neck and turned her head into his chest. Robin wanted nothing to do with Buffy.

Chapter 6

The Last Slayer

Shortly before sunrise, two men in leather coats entered through the emergency doors of Good Samaritan hospital. To the best of their knowledge, only one potential slayer had survived, and they had tracked her to there. The first man took a seat in the waiting room, opening his laptop and turning it in the direction of the admissions desk. The second man approached the triage nurse and asked after a friend. When she failed to find the name in the computer, she left her desk to ask a doctor. He took that opportunity to rifle through the patient charts. He found one Rupert Giles and one Robin McGregor. He ripped the pages from the clipboards and stuffed them in his pockets. Facing his accomplice with the laptop, he waited for the signal. A nod of the head, and they were both walking out of the hospital, before the triage nurse could even return and tell them their friend was not a patient here. Before the first rays of daylight could even touch the pavement.

Buffy sensed his presence, but she didn't look up. "She hates me."

She felt the couch move as he sat beside her, but she didn't uncurl from her remarkable impression of a threatened armadillo.

"She doesn't hate you."

She sniffled slightly. "Yeah, right. She scream in mortal fear when you try to pick her up?"

His hand attempted to brush back her curtain of hair, so he could see her face. She merely tucked her head further into the cushions. He sighed and let his hand drift down to rub her back in slow circles.

"She witnessed her parents' murders," Giles whispered. "Very violent murders. By some rather frightening creatures, I imagine. Her house burned down, and she barely escaped from the fire. Now she's in a strange place with people she doesn't know. She's only three years old, Buffy. This is a lot for her to cope with."

"She doesn't hate *you*," Buffy replied petulantly.

"She saw me once before. And I saved her from the fire. She's just latching on to something familiar, to one person she feels she can trust. She'll learn to trust you, too. Just be patient."

Buffy bit her lip not to cry. She was tired of crying. She felt like she had spent the last three days crying. "It's not fair. I've waited so long, and now she's finally here... Giles, you don't know how scared I was that we wouldn't find her, not before... scared that I would never know her, that she would never know me. And now she's here, but I'm shut out. What if she never lets me in?"

She felt his arms slide under hers as he curled his long frame around her. He held her tightly as she cried, not saying anything. Her tears dried up after a minute or so. She had cried so much lately that the proverbial well had run dry. She wiped her cheeks with the back of her hands and nudged Giles off her back. She slowly sat up, her knees still drawn close to her chest. She glanced over at her watcher, sitting beside her, one arm draped across the back of the couch, watching her intently.

"She sleeping?"

Giles nodded.

"And Alex?"

The slightest ghost of a smile. "I think you did a rather good job keeping him up. He curled up beside her and immediately fell back to sleep."

Buffy rose from the couch and crossed to the little desk, where she began nervously fidgeting with a stack of papers. Yeah, like these bills had to be paid right now, and these store flyers were oh so interesting. "You look kinda tired," she said. "Maybe you should go sleep, too. I'll just... you know... get some stuff done around the house."

She heard his footsteps behind her and shrugged off the hand he laid on her shoulder. She couldn't help it. She was still angry with him. She thought it would all go away when he brought Robin home, but she only felt worse. She knew it was stupid and childish and not true, but she felt like he had stolen Robin from her and made her all his. Maybe he hadn't done it on purpose, but their daughter wanted only him.

Giles didn't press her, didn't try to touch her again, just walked past her and up the stairs. Buffy pulled Robin's photo from her front pocket and stared at it, just as she had for the hours she spent waiting for their return from L.A. She curled up on the couch once more and fell asleep herself.

Joseph sat back in his leather chair, steepling his fingers before him. It may have only been a dirty office in a run down warehouse, but he had splurged on a conference table and nice chairs. One could hardly be expected to conduct negotiations over packing crates and folding chairs.

Sabrina sat on the other side of the rich mahogany table, drumming her hands on the surface. She didn't do calm so easily.

Joseph himself had no reason to be calm. His plan, so brilliantly designed and expertly implemented, had somehow failed. There was still one potential slayer left, and that was one too many. The two minions who had missed her, the idiots who couldn't find one small child in one not so large house, well they had been dealt with. She had survived the fire, and they hadn't even bothered to track her to the hospital. It would be a trap, they insisted. The man who saved her knew of their kind and would be prepared for them. Cowards. They were dust now, slayed by Joseph's own hand right in front of the next two minions he sent looking for her. Her trail disappeared at Good Samaritan hospital. The man had taken her there, but there was no record of either of them, no clue where they might have gone after being released. He didn't even know the man's name.

Joseph had no reason to be calm except years of practice in the courtroom. Sabrina could give him the last slayer. She had the upper hand here. But she would never know that. Joseph's cool demeanor would allow him to remain in control. That and the sword.

"I held up my end of the bargain. The spell showed you every last one."

Joseph tilted his head in acknowledgment. "But there is still one left alive."

"That is hardly my fault." She stood and began to pace the small confines of his office. The conference table left very little room to spare. "If you couldn't get her, you can hardly blame me. I want my sword. I'm done with waiting."

He shook one finger. "I said you would get your payment after the spell was finished—"

"Which it is!"

"—and the slayers were all dead." He withdrew a small tape recorder from his suit pocket and replayed that portion of their discussion. If he wasn't going to get a written contract, if he was going to have to go on verbal agreements, then he would at least have some record of them. "There is still one alive. Until she is dead, we don't have a deal."

"So what am I supposed to do about it?"

He tucked the tape recorder back in his pocket. It was recording again, but she failed to notice. "Re-do the spell and find her. After she is dead, you will have your prize."

Sabrina brushed one hand through her short, brunette waves. The corners of her mouth began to twitch, and she sat on her knees on the chair across from him. “Just one left? I have a much better plan for you. Why should you completely eliminate the power of the slayer?”

He laughed dryly. “Could it be because the Slayer exists for the sole purpose of making sure we don’t? That seems like a pretty convincing reason to me.”

“Only because she is trained to. One potential slayer left. Kill the Slayer, and she is Called. The girl is young and can still be corrupted. Take her. Train her. Raise her to be *our* Slayer, not theirs. That will be a prize that will buy you your partnership. With a Slayer of your own, you won’t need to go crawling to Wolfram and Hart; they’ll be begging *you* to come back.”

He steeped his fingers again and tapped them on his mouth. “An interesting idea, but it lacks long-term vision. If we don’t finish them off now, we’ll have to contend with more slayers after this one is dead.”

Sabrina shrugged. “The Watchers do it. How hard can it be?”

His brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“C’mon, Joseph, you have resources. You have money. You managed to organize a one-night campaign to eliminate all the potential slayers across the whole world. And you very nearly succeeded, with only one left alive. Why don’t you come up with a little long-term vision here yourself? Why limit yourself to third chair in someone else’s orchestra when you can be conducting the whole symphony?”

“You mean take over Wolfram and Hart?”

She rolled her eyes. “I mean forget about Wolfram and Hart. I’m talking about making your own Council. A Council of... of... of Killers. Yeah. You can find and train the slayers just as easily as the Watchers can.”

She climbed off her chair and over the conference table, leaning close to him, her forehead mere inches from his. Her voice became low and sultry. “I know what it’s like to never measure up, to always follow in someone else’s footsteps. You must have gotten that a lot, huh? Daddy was a legend, wasn’t he? And you always fell short in everyone’s eyes. But I also know what it’s like to break free of that legacy, to set my own goals and exceed everyone’s expectations. And let me tell you, it’s a rush like nothing else. You do this, and when they talk about your dear old dad, they’ll be saying: ‘Yeah, isn’t he Joseph Zalk’s father?’”

Joseph stood from his chair abruptly and pivoted away from her. If he had a window, he would have strode over to it and stared out through the glass. As a vampire, having an office with a window was not a perk. So he merely studied the certificates he had hung on the wall. His undergraduate degree from Harvard. His law degree from the same. His license to practice in the state of California. He felt her eyes on the back of his head and smiled.

“Save your mind games for someone else, Sabrina. You can pull whatever you like from my head, but you can’t use it to influence me. I’m not human, remember?” He spun to face her, and she was sitting cross-legged on the tabletop. On his beautiful, expensive, mahogany conference table tabletop. He scowled and ushered her off into a proper chair. “So what’s in it for you, my dear? Why so eager for me to start my own slayer training academy?”

She studied him for a moment before answering, perhaps trying to decide if she should tell the truth. “I need 280.”

“Come again?”

“After you give me the sword, I need 280. Your men drew the symbol around each of their kills, and there’s the four I killed before they could run away from our happy family. But there weren’t nearly enough with enough power to get even close to 280.”

“So you want my slayer to land you your quota?” Joseph noticed that he had already begun using the phrase “my slayer.” Whatever ulterior motives Sabrina had for her suggestion, it was a very good plan, and it was beginning to appeal to him. “She’s just a child. It will be years before she’ll be ready to send hunting.”

Sabrina began absently twirling a pencil on the table. Of course, she wasn’t actually touching it. It was just twirling on its own about an inch above the wood surface. “That’s not what I meant at all. I have another idea. And I think it might be to our mutual benefit to work together.”

Joseph returned to his seat across from her. He laid his hands casually on the smooth mahogany. A proper table to conduct negotiations at indeed. And he was thankful to have the recorder still running. “Ok, Sabrina, I’m listening.”

A rhythmic prodding of his sides woke Giles from a deep sleep. He cracked one eye open slightly to see Alex kneeling beside him on the bed, smiling innocently as he poked his father in the ribs.

Giles turned his head slightly. Robin had adopted a matching stance on his other side and a similar cherubic expression as she engaged in the same activity. He took a deep breath, opened his eyes fully, and grabbed them each by their hands before they could continue.

Alex squealed, but Robin only laid her head on his shoulder.

“Dear Lord,” he groaned. “You two couldn’t possibly have gotten enough sleep.”

“Mommy sleep,” Alex informed him as he pounced on his father’s chest.

Giles flinched at the impact and grimaced slightly as the jolt of pain up his spine reminded him of the fall he had taken the night before. “Yes, I envy her that right now. I’m also kicking myself for teaching you never to wake her.”

“Eggs,” the boy demanded as he leaned over to give little Eskimo kisses, nose to nose. Dawn must have taught him that.

“I suppose I can’t starve you. Come on, then, race you downstairs.”

Alex jumped off the bed and bounded out of the bedroom. Why did children always fall for that? Like Giles had any intention of racing anywhere right now. He pulled himself stiffly out of bed, the bruises and soreness kicking in now that he’d gotten some rest.

“Come along, Robin. You need to eat something, too.” He held his hand out to her, but she wasn’t satisfied with that. She took his hand and reached up her other to clutch his shirt. She tried to pull herself into his arms. He lifted her from the bed and set her on the floor. “Now, I know you are fully capable of walking by yourself.”

She whined desperately, bouncing on her feet with her arms raised to him. He sighed and picked her up, his back protesting slightly as he did. He carried her downstairs where Alex was waiting for him in the kitchen. Buffy still slept on the couch. He would let her sleep for now.

“Up,” Alex demanded, tugging on one pant leg.

Giles ruffled the child’s hair fondly. “I’ve only two hands, son. If I carry you both, I won’t be able to cook breakfast.”

Alex stomped out of the kitchen to sulk. Ah well, there were the beginnings of sibling rivalry. Giles made eggs and toast and tried to encourage his daughter to talk. She only watched him work quietly, her fingers wound into the fabric of his nightshirt. He called Alex to come eat, and the boy came, towing his mother in behind him.

“Good morning,” Giles greeted his wife.

She wiped the sleep from her eyes and yawned. "Morning." But her gaze didn't so much as touch on him; she focused entirely on the little girl in his arms. "Hey, Robin."

The child buried her face in his neck, and Buffy dropped her eyes to the island counter beside her.

"She won't talk for me either," Giles said, hoping to lessen the sting.

Buffy sat on a stool and pulled Alex into her lap. "You love me, don't ya, little Rabbit?"

Alex grinned and gave her an enthusiastic kiss on the cheek. "Park?" he asked.

She laughed. "You think every time Mommy's home she should take you to the park, don't ya?"

"Go swing," Alex said happily as he reached for the eggs his father had just placed before him.

Giles cringed as the boy began eating with his fingers. He slid a fork closer to the child. "Manners, Alex. We don't eat with our fingers."

Buffy pulled her plate in front of her and defiantly took a handful of eggs.

"Yes, very good, Buffy," Giles muttered. "At least I know where he got his disobedient streak."

Alex glanced back and forth between his mother and father. He picked up his fork and speared a mouthful of eggs, watching his father expectantly. Giles smiled, and Alex shoved the bite in his mouth, spilling less than half in his lap. His mother had picked up her fork too, and Alex asked again. "Go park? Monkey bar. Robin see-saw."

Buffy squeezed him really tight and gave him kisses in his ear until he was wiggling and giggling in her arms. "So you finally have someone your own size to put at the other end of the see-saw, huh? Yeah, I don't blame you. Daddy always cheats and never lets you down."

Giles blushed and ducked his head slightly to focus on Robin. She wouldn't eat again today, and it was beginning to concern him. He gave her the fork, but she only wanted to feed him, like she had at the diner. He took the implement back and tried again, but she turned her head away every time he brought the food close. Her hand lashed out finally, dumping the eggs in his lap.

"Please, Robin. Two bites. Look, Alex ate all his eggs."

"Maybe she doesn't like eggs," Buffy said.

"I stopped for breakfast this morning." He glanced at the clock. "Well, less than four hours ago, I guess. I ordered everything on the bloody menu, but she wouldn't touch it." His voice grew softer. "Even cake."

She laughed and choked on her orange juice. "Cake? You tried to bribe our kid with cake? Okay, you are *sooo* not allowed to give me the 'he shouldn't have ice cream before dinner' lecture again."

He rolled his eyes and tried to tempt the girl with another forkful, but she turned her head at the last moment, and the eggs only ended in his lap again.

"Cake?" Alex asked eagerly.

"No you may not have cake," Giles replied, still attempting to put food in his daughter's stomach.

"Try the airplane," Buffy suggested.

"Pardon?"

"You know. The stock parenting trick. Mom used to do it with Dawn all the time. Zoom, zoom, the airplane's coming into the hanger, open up." She demonstrated with her own fork, zipping it around in the air in front of her.

He sighed. "Buffy, I'm firmly convinced that the reason most Americans are morons is that they're taught to be so from a young age. Now, she will either eat or she won't, but me making a fool of myself is not likely to sway her decision."

Buffy shrugged. "Suit yourself. But I'm telling you, it would work."

Buffy did take Alex to the park after breakfast, seeming somewhat disappointed that Giles and Robin didn't go too. But he had research to do, and Robin would not go without him. She also wouldn't allow him to set her down, which made research rather more difficult. The books had

illustrations he would prefer she didn't see, especially after the previous evening's events, but he couldn't interest her in an activity of her own. She seemed firmly convinced that he was about to read to her from the old volumes in his lap and wasn't about to be distracted.

Finally, he turned on the television and between soap operas and cooking shows, was able to find some children's programming that captured her attention. Something with a purple dinosaur to which they had thankfully managed to avoid introducing Alex. Eventually, she allowed him to slide her onto the floor between his knees. At one point in time, he was even able to sneak off to the bathroom and then into the bedroom to dress. That didn't last long, though, because the moment she noticed his absence, she was pounding on his door and crying. So when he resumed his research downstairs and again placed her between his knees, she wound one arm around his leg to keep him with her.

He started with the books on the sword of Camela, since that had been the symbol found beneath her parents' murdered bodies, picking up at the passage he had left off at the day before. He occasionally tried reaching the Council, but the lines were either busy and he couldn't get through, or they rang and no one answered. If potential slayers the world over had been attacked, then the Council was likely very busy.

He tried Robin's grandparents once as well, reasoning that maybe it would help Robin to see them. But no one answered at the number the hospital had given him, and Giles was beginning to feel uneasy about the fact that they had not contacted him yet regarding their adoptive granddaughter.

So he read, but could find no connection between the sword of Camela and the attacks on potential slayers.

And the mighty sorceress Camela was felled by her enemies. Left for dead on the field of battle, she called to her side her faithful servant, the Mortog beast. Cradled in the arms of the Beast, she placed its claws on the hilt of the blade that pierced her heart.

"Take of mine blood and mine gifts. For you shall avenge me, and you shall have of the power of each that you slay in my name. Ten for each night of the moon shall you take. The last shall I strike down from the very heavens themselves. Thus in blood and fire shall this blade be blessed that whoever shall bear it will command the power of the slain. And so we shall become our enemies, and we shall use their own power to defeat them."

With her dying breath, the mighty sorceress wove her last spell into her enemy's blade, and the Beast removed the sword of Camela from its mortal sheath. Branded into the blade by blood and magic, the mark of crescent moon and lightning bolt gave proof of her promise.

Armed with the power of the sorceress and the sword forged by her death, the Mortog beast stalked its prey for century upon century and snuffed out the bloodlines of each who had stood against them. Careful to take only the most powerful in her name, the Beast counted nine and two hundred slaughtered. But it would take no more. For the mighty sword of Camela was stolen from the Beast's grasp by one who had learned of its power. And so it has been found and lost many times over, its power claimed and squandered by a succession of demons and mortals alike. And for three thousand years, the Mortog beast has never stopped searching for the key to the power it was promised.

Giles startled as a tiny hand suddenly tugged on his own. Translating from Arabic, which was poorly translated from Sanskrit, was not his forte and required all of his attention as well as frequent dips into the dictionary. He realized as his daughter tugged on his hand that someone was knocking at his door. He had been too absorbed in his work to even notice.

He scooped her up into his arms without a second thought, knowing she would quickly protest if he didn't. And yet, as he approached the door, she began to tremble against him. He stopped in the foyer, holding her tightly and swaying gently as he whispered in her ear.

"Shhh... You're safe here, Robin. I won't let anyone hurt you."

She seemed to relax a little, but her fingers still held the front of his pullover in a desperate grip of fabric and chest hair. Giles pressed a kiss to the top of her head as he opened the door.

"Rupert, I'm glad to see you and the girl made it home safely."

Giles' face darkened. "I assure you, Quentin, this is a bad time to pay us a social call."

"Not a social call. I'm here on Council business." Travers swept past him without an invitation. Just as well, because Giles hadn't intended to offer one. The older man paused in the archway between the foyer and the living room. He turned back with one raised brow. "Barney the dinosaur?"

Giles hurriedly passed him, flicking off the television awkwardly. "Yes, well, after last night... Well, if it held her interest, I was hardly going to..."

Travers chuckled. "I understand. My grandchildren are positively addicted."

They shared a bemused smile between them, before Giles remembered himself and smoothed his expression. Whatever Travers' reason for coming, it would not be good.

"I've been trying to reach the Council all morning. Is it true, Quentin?"

Travers lowered himself to the couch and picked up a book absently. His eyes seemed very far away, and he nodded faintly. "This has never happened in recorded history. We're not even sure how they found them all, except that it must be by magic. Very powerful magic. Well beyond anything the Council is capable of. But they did find them all, Rupert. Every last one. Some that even we hadn't discovered yet. Some that weren't even born yet."

Giles slowly sat in a chair opposite, rhythmically stroking his daughter's arm, then the length of her braid. Robin laid her head on his shoulder. He had no words.

"You do know what this means, don't you?" Travers began carefully. "All the other potentials are dead, even the ones who had passed the age where they might be Called. They didn't just kill the girls, Rupert; they killed the women, too. Robin is the last slayer. When Faith dies, she will be Called."

Giles closed his eyes. They sat in silence for several moments before Giles removed his glasses and rubbed at the bridge of his nose. Robin reached out and took his glasses, slipping them on her own face and blinking up at him through large lenses perched at the tip of her nose. He chuckled slightly as he reclaimed his glasses, little fingerprints now on the lenses, so he had to polish them before wearing them again. He pulled her in tight against him, his head resting on the top of hers. This precious child who meant the world to him. How could he save her from that kind of life?

His eyes found Travers' across the room. "Faith?"

The older watcher leaned back, making himself comfortable on the couch, crossing his legs casually. "Security has been stepped up at the prison. She's been moved to solitary until we can sort out the danger."

Giles nodded to the books resting on the couch beside the older man. "I've been researching that myself."

Travers looked skeptical as he perused one thin volume. "The sword of Camela? I hardly see how this relates."

"I found the mark in the house."

"The mark?" Travers flipped through several pages, before he stopped, his eyes widening slightly. He offered out the volume for Giles to see the illustration. The familiar mark of crescent moon and lightning bolt. "This mark?"

Giles nodded.

"Hmm... This could prove useful. We found this same symbol painted on or around most of the potentials killed. On their watchers or parents as well. We assumed it was the symbol for a spell, perhaps the same spell that led their assassins to them. It appears we were mistaken." Travers took a

deep breath, absently touching his fingers to his mouth as he thought. "You're saying Shaun and Catherine McGregor—"

Robin tensed in her father's arms and began to whimper. Giles quickly put an end to the conversation. "We can discuss this further at a later time. Robin doesn't need to hear these things." The girl began to cry softly, and he rose, swaying gently with her for a moment before moving towards the kitchen. "I'm making tea. Would you like some?"

"Please."

Giles escaped into the kitchen, murmuring to his child, trying to calm her. Perhaps she was only now realizing that her parents were gone.

He began his familiar ritual of making tea, because that, of course, was the answer to everything. Some unknown foe had killed all the potentials the world over, was probably still hunting his daughter, but a spot of tea would make everything better. Robin could not escape her fate: she would be the next Slayer, but a little Earl Grey would clear his head.

The water started to boil, and he realized that Robin's breathing had evened out. He glanced down and saw that her eyes were dipping closed, her fingers relaxing from their grip of his gray pullover. He hummed softly as poured two cups. The poor girl needed more sleep than she had gotten last night, and if she was anything like Alex, would be needing an afternoon nap as well. But Giles was unsure whether he should lay her down to sleep alone. His arms were tiring, though, and he couldn't carry her the whole day.

He brought the tea into the living room, Travers standing up to relieve him of the tray he was holding in one hand. Buffy and Alex entered at that moment, Buffy stopping short in the foyer.

"What's *he* doing here?"

Travers set the tea tray on the coffee table and straightened his spine proudly. "There are things I needed to discuss with the two of you, Miss Summers."

"Mrs. Giles," she corrected sharply.

"Yes, well, at any rate, the events of the last day have broad ramifications for the Council and for you."

Her eyes narrowed and her arms crossed. Giles bit back a small smirk. It was perhaps petty, but he would enjoy watching Buffy take the man down a notch.

"Flower," Alex stated proudly, offering up a wilted dandelion to his father.

"Very nice, son, but I think it's time for a nap." Giles had seized the boy's hand before he could escape.

"No nap!" Alex insisted, desperately trying to wriggle free.

Giles found it much more difficult to handle the boy with only one available hand. He tried to reason with the child instead. "Please, Alex, Robin's already fallen asleep, but she'll be frightened if she wakes all alone. You don't want her to be scared, do you?"

Alex shook his head reluctantly.

"You don't have to take a nap if you don't want to. You just have to stay in bed with Robin while she sleeps. Can you do that for her?"

The child stopped fighting him and seemed to consider this. Finally, he allowed Giles to lead him up the stairs by the hand.

"Good, this will give me an opportunity to speak with your Slayer alone," Travers said, and Giles glanced towards Buffy. Damn, he would miss the verbal sparring.

He tucked Robin into his own bed, with Alex curled up beside her. The boy's bed was not big enough for two, and at least this would be familiar to her when she woke. They would have to get her a bed of her own and clothes and toys and perhaps a tiny table and chairs with a tea set like she'd had

before. He frowned. Perhaps they shouldn't get her the same kinds of toys she'd had at the McGregors'. Maybe that would only stir up painful memories. Perhaps a dollhouse instead. He shook his head, out of his depth. How did one help a child recover from a trauma such as this? He really didn't know what to do for her.

"Daddy?"

"Yes?"

Alex shook his head. "No s'leep."

Giles smiled and kissed him on the forehead. "You don't have to. Just lie here with Robin. I'll read you a story while we wait for her to wake up."

He reached for a book on the nightstand and lay down beside his twins. He'd only read three pages before Alex was asleep as well. He touched them both on their heads and smiled. In spite of everything that had happened, in spite of the danger that still hung over them, he felt a peace he hadn't felt in over three years. Both of his children were home. He felt complete.

He quietly slipped out of the room and down the stairs. He found Buffy and Travers sitting across from each other in the living room. Buffy was actually drinking the second cup of tea. It was all much more civilized than he had expected. He was ashamed to admit that he was somewhat disappointed. But then, he noticed the tension coiled in Buffy's frame and realized that he hadn't missed the fireworks after all.

"Bite me," she said bitterly.

"Colorful as always," Travers replied calmly. "But surely you must see the necessity."

Giles took a seat on the arm of Buffy's chair, his hand resting on her shoulder: a show of solidarity.

"And if we don't?" Buffy asked. "You'll what? Give her back to the McGregors? They're dead."

Giles squeezed her shoulder slightly, hoping to rein her in before she went too far. "Actually, Buffy," he murmured, "her grandparents could easily fight us for custody. And the Council could back them if they chose."

Travers set his cup on the coffee table before leaning back into the couch. "Actually, your Slayer is more right than she knows. The McGregors are dead. All of them."

"What?"

Travers smoothed his tie and tucked it further into his waistcoat. "Last night, this morning, one by one: the grandparents as well as all her other living relations. They killed all the McGregors."

Giles nodded, his eyes closed, his voice barely a whisper. "Looking for her."

"Yes, they appear much more organized than any other vampires or demons we have run across. And they have enormous resources at their disposal. To find and kill all the potential slayers around the world in one night... There must be literally hundreds working together."

Buffy leaned forward, asking urgently, "But they don't know Robin is here? They don't know she's ours?"

"Not as yet."

Giles was on his feet. "Dear Lord, I gave the hospital in LA my name and address."

Travers didn't seem nearly as concerned. "The Council has already taken care of your lapse in judgment. All record of your visit to LA has been expunged. That is how we knew she survived. That is how I knew to come speak with you."

Giles flinched as Buffy swatted him on the arm. "Oww! What?"

"You gave them your name and address, Mr. Stealthy-Pants? What, did you fail the class at watcher school where they teach you *not* to leave a big ole paper trail for your would-be killers to follow?"

He sighed. "I would have rather given an alias, but there were police there, asking about the fire, and they knew you. It would have been rather difficult to be incognito. Not to mention that the doctors wouldn't let me leave until I had proved I had a legal right to Robin." He drew himself up taller. "And I *never* failed any classes during my watcher's training."

Travers coughed. "Well, there was that one class..."

Giles spun and glared daggers at the other man. "I can do without your input, thank you very much."

Buffy shrugged and stood up. "Well, discussion over as far as I can see. Robin's *our* daughter now, and we're not going to turn her into the ultimate fighting machine. So you can just stuff it up your English Channel, 'cause the Council isn't going to touch her."

Travers didn't flinch at the venom in her tone. "You forget about the tapes, my dear."

"Tapes?"

Giles felt the panic seize each muscle. The older watcher was about to lay bare his darkest secret, the only one he still kept from Buffy. He remembered her words to him from the mansion in India: *You do this, and you'll be exactly what Longworth thinks you are. You'll be a killer, and you won't be the man I love anymore.* She thought she had stopped him from killing Longworth. What would she think when she learned she hadn't?

Travers arched one brow in Giles' direction. "You never told her?"

He tried a gambit: a lie cloaked in the truth. "She knows about Ben."

"Ooooh," Buffy said in understanding. "*Those* tapes."

But Travers wasn't buying it. He saw the full truth in Giles' omission: that Buffy did not know about Longworth and Sulla and that Giles was terrified she might find out. But the man would never enlighten the slayer. That information would be much more valuable in its ability to make Giles dance to the Council's tune.

Buffy stepped over to stand in front of Travers, her hands planted on her hips, looking down her nose at him. "We both know it's a bluff. You don't want to send Giles to jail. Because then you wouldn't just lose a potential slayer, you would lose the *actual* Slayer. And I'm thinking all you watchers would rather, well.... *watch* than actually get your hands dirty." She bent down to bring them face-to-face. "So you can just go back to England, and I'll let you know if and when we need you." She straightened abruptly. "Hey! Were you just looking down my shirt?"

"Most certainly not!" Travers sputtered indignantly.

"You were totally looking down my shirt!" She spun and crossed back to Giles, pulling him down into an unexpected and passionate kiss. She released him after a moment and smiled, whispering for his ears only, "Did you see how red Mr. Repressed got? God, that was fun!" Then she faced the older watcher again, all the amusement gone from her face. "I'm going upstairs to check on the twins. I believe we're finished here."

And she disappeared around the corner and up the stairs.

Quentin chuckled.

"What?" Giles snapped, still trying to compose himself.

"I was just thinking of when I fired you. How wrongly I judged you. 'A father's love for the child' indeed!"

Giles removed his glasses and carefully polished them. He answered softly, "She wasn't a child."

"No, most slayers aren't, I suppose. They don't have the luxury of childhood." Travers studied the younger watcher intently, and Giles blushed under the scrutiny. "You were in love with her even then, weren't you?"

He paused for a moment before replacing his glasses. "If I was, I didn't know it, or at least I didn't admit it to myself."

"I was still right to fire you. And I would fire you again if I thought I could. It's never a good idea to love your slayer, Rupert, in any capacity."

"Tell me honestly, Quentin, has there ever been a watcher who hasn't?"

"None that were any good." The older watcher sighed and looked off to the side in contemplation. "But it only creates complications. There will always come the choice, the moment when you must choose between her and duty, when you must send her out to die. If a watcher ever loves his slayer too much to make that choice, then we are all lost." His eyes returned to the younger watcher, his gaze stripping him bare. "Tell me, Rupert, as long as we are speaking honestly with each other: could you still make that choice?"

"No." Giles didn't even hesitate before he answered. He sank back down into his chair and stared at his hands for long moments before continuing. "But to even ask me that... you underestimate the slayers in this equation. It is never the watcher's choice to make. It is never *my* choice."

He leaned back, ran one hand over his face. His mouth quirked up in a small smile at the memory. "I tried to stop her once, you know, many years ago. She was only sixteen years old and fated to die. And she looked at me with tears down her cheeks, and her eyes were filled with almost hatred, I would say, for everything I represented at that moment. And she begged me to find a way for her to live. I tried to stop her from facing the Master. I tried to go in her place. But if you had ever had a slayer of your own, Quentin, you would know. You can't stop a slayer. *She* made the choice, and I had no say in it. She bloody cold-clocked me, and I was unconscious on the floor."

Travers chuckled again.

"Yes, do laugh at my pain," Giles muttered. "My jaw was purple for a week. My point in all this, Quentin, is this: if I didn't love her so much, I wouldn't fight so hard for her. I couldn't stay up night after night, researching and losing sleep because I needed to find the smallest bit of information that would give her even the smallest advantage. I wouldn't work so hard at her training or pick up a sword and fight beside her. You think my love for her is a weakness, but I'm telling you that it's a strength."

Travers nodded as he stood. "I hope for all our sakes that you're right about that." And then he turned and walked out of the house, glancing up the stairs once before closing the door quietly behind him.

"What do we do, Giles?" Buffy asked softly. She came down the last few steps into his view.

"How long have you been standing there?"

She shrugged. "Long enough. How do we keep Robin from becoming the next slayer?"

Giles crossed to the staircase and leaned against the railing as he thought. "Assuming another potential slayer is born within the next year, she would have to reach fifteen, I think, before we could be certain she would be the one Called. Fifteen is the prime age to Call a Slayer, and Robin would be past nineteen."

Buffy nodded. "So we have to keep Faith alive another sixteen years. That would make her what? Almost forty? That's doable, right? I mean, what's the record for oldest slayer?"

He dodged the question. "We might have a chance as long as Faith is in jail and not actually functioning as a slayer. But when she is released... Well, she's always been much more reckless than you."

"Not to mention more psychotic." She came down the remaining steps and leaned against the bottom banister in a pose to match Giles. "She's locked up on a whole laundry list of stuff, isn't she? I mean, she's not getting out anytime soon, right?"

He nodded slightly. "But, Buffy, if you... Well, after the last time... there was no new slayer. Called after the battle with Glory. You had only been... gone... f-for five weeks, but if the evil had become too much for us to fight alone, the Council would have activated the next slayer."

"They can do that?" He stared at her for long moments, and then her eyes widened with comprehension. "Oh. I get it. They would have killed Faith. Harsh."

Giles didn't respond, so Buffy summarized their discussion. "So, the game plan is for me and Faith to celebrate our over-the-hill, big four-oh birthdays. Doable, right?"

He smiled sadly. "We can certainly try."

Their eyes locked. They each knew they were lying to themselves. Robin would be the next slayer.

"Morgaine?" Sabrina closed the spellbook she was studying. "What's up?"

Morgaine shut the door behind her, raised her hand, and murmured some words beneath her breath. It must be something serious indeed if she felt the need to ward the room against prying eyes and ears.

"It's Willow."

Sabrina pulled herself to the edge of her bed. "She's not thinking of leaving, is she?" She had really hoped to use Willow for the next few spells they had to cast, not to mention the grand finale. It would be such a shame to waste such power, even if it would count towards her 280.

"No, but she's starting to ask questions. I think she's been talking to her friends. I don't know what they've been telling her, but she's asking about the bodies, about the four who tried to leave before."

"Hmm..." Sabrina began to pace. "We have to cut her off more completely. She spends most of her time here, but she still goes to her apartment sometimes. We have to make sure she spends *all* her time here. And we have to break her trust in them."

Morgaine nodded in agreement. "Yeah, but how we gonna do that?"

"Leave it to me. I'll talk to her. I'm good at reading people. It's all about listening, my friend. If you listen hard enough, it's like they write your whole half of the conversation for you."

"Are you sure about this, Buffy? We don't have to go."

Giles was sitting on the bed with Robin, trying to get a pair of shoes on her feet, but she was busily occupied with trying to fit a doll's dress over her stuffed rabbit and moved every time he had the shoe almost on.

"You're the one who insisted that we should get back to life as usual. Me to work, Dawn to school, and you to the Magic Box." Buffy was busy with a similar activity: trying to put shoes on Alex. She was hampered by the fact that he wanted to tie the laces by himself, and she wouldn't let him. "Routine and stability are what she needs to regain her sense of security, you said."

"Yes, well, I may not have exactly known what I was talking about."

"Oooo, can I have that in writing?"

He gave her a withering stare before taking the rabbit from Robin's hands. "Here, luv, let me." He couldn't believe he was putting doll clothes on a stuffed rabbit, a quite dirty one at that. It probably wasn't the cleanest before the fire, and now it was a dingy gray. They would have to wash it when they got home.

They had taken the children shopping after Dawn returned from school, buying clothes and a bed and toys. Dawn and Buffy had perhaps gone overboard with the girl stuff, ooooing and ahhhhing over

dolls and Barbies and miniature kitchens with tiny plastic food until Giles wondered who they were buying it for. Alex remained firmly convinced that Robin would want a certain robot to play with, and he allowed the boy to add it to the cart. Robin, herself, had no opinion, not pointing out anything to them, simply watching with wide eyes. She ducked her head into Giles' shoulder anytime passerby tried to talk to her.

Out of everything they had brought home, Robin was only interested in which doll clothes she could fit on her stuffed rabbit. And now Giles sat with the damned thing in his lap, his large fingers fumbling with tiny buttons, reminding him of those first weeks of dressing a squirming Alex in tiny baby clothes and his frustration with the small fastenings. He handed the dressed toy back to the girl, and she was contented enough to sit still as he put her shoes on.

"I'm sure John and April will understand if we want to reschedule," Giles said.

"C'mon, it'll be nice. Alex will have fun. You've been researching all day. You could stand to get out of the house. And Robin will just be attached to your neck no matter where we go. Dawn's managed to forget about the whole Spike thing, which should last maybe a day. And I know I would like to just be a normal family for once, without demons and slaying and stuff. It's just one evening. Let's just go."

So they went. The Tims lived in a modest one-story house with a large fenced-in backyard, complete with swimming pool. Dawn and Alex both had to be told that it was too cold to go swimming. April answered the door. She was a tall, slender woman, with long dark hair streaked with gray that she had tied in a knot at the back of her neck. She smiled as she greeted them, making a fuss over the children, which Alex loved and Robin shied away from. She led them into the backyard, where John was busy grilling. He seemed caught off guard when he spied the two small children.

"Who's this little doll?" John asked as he attempted to tickle the little girl. Robin made a face and swatted his hand away.

"She's not good with strangers right now," Giles apologized. "This is our daughter, Robin, and our son, Alex, and Buffy's sister, Dawn."

"Nice to meet all of you," John replied.

Alex held up three fingers. "I'm free," he informed the man.

Not to be outdone, Robin extended three fingers as well. Giles smiled. It was the first time she had shown any interest in interacting with anyone but him.

"You told me they had a three-year-old son," April scolded her husband. "You didn't tell me they had twins."

"I didn't know," John insisted, giving Giles a look that clearly said he would pay him back later.

"Can I get anyone anything to drink?" April asked.

"Milk," Alex requested. "Cocoa milk."

"One chocolate milk coming up."

Buffy, Dawn, and Alex followed her into the house. John turned back to his grill, flipping chicken breasts and spreading on more sauce. He was shaking his head.

"Two three-year-olds at your age? You deserve a medal. Either that or a stern tongue-lashing for forgetting to tell me. I think April has some Ginkgo Biloba in the kitchen you could take."

"Ha bloody ha. This is actually the first day she's been with us." And then came the story of her abduction, carefully edited, and a brief mention of her return, also edited so as not to disturb the young girl.

"Well, let me know if there's anything I can do for you," his friend offered. "Summer break is in less than two months, and then I'm free as a bird. We could tag team them if you want."

Giles chuckled. "I don't think that will be necessary. I think I can handle them both just fine."

"You say that now. You've only had her a day. Wait two months and tell me that again. Twins, walking at the same time, usually in opposite directions... You'll see."

Giles adjusted his grip on Robin. His arms were becoming very tired. "Why? You have twins?"

"No, thank God. But April and I did have our first two less than a year apart, so I have a rough idea of what it's like. And I was much younger and more energetic back then," he added with a poke at Giles' side.

Robin didn't seem to like that and batted John's hand away with a petulant grunt.

His eyebrows rose, and he chuckled. "Someone's a wee bit possessive, eh?"

Giles was similarly surprised and amused. "It would seem so. I must warn you: if you don't cease teasing me, I shall have to sic her on you."

They both laughed at that, and Robin ducked her head against his chest. They talked until the chicken finished cooking. Giles confessed that his daughter hadn't spoken yet, and it was beginning to concern him, so John made it his mission to coax at least one word out of her. He knew lots of silly stories and songs, having taught second grade for a number of years, and he tried them all out. Giles couldn't help but laugh at the sight, even as he felt the pang of disappointment at his friend's failure.

They rejoined the others in the house, Alex immediately bounding over to his father.

"Look, Daddy, look!" he cried. "Doggy!" He dragged the poor thing over by one ear for Giles to see.

Giles knelt down and took his son by the hand. "Be nice to the doggy, Alex. I'm sure he doesn't like that." He covered the boy's hand with his own and demonstrated how to pet the animal properly.

"Want doggy!" his son demanded.

Giles would have said no, but he watched as Robin's hand stretched out to pet the animal too. "We'll think about it," he said instead. He set her down in front of him, so she could better reach the dog, but that ended her interest in the animal. She turned and desperately tried to climb back into his arms. He sighed and lifted her as he stood.

They sat together at the table and ate. Robin sat in Giles' lap, but still wouldn't take anything he offered. He neglected his own meal in his attempts to feed her. Perhaps wanting some attention of his own, Alex fussed over his food, even after Buffy cut it into tiny pieces, insisting that he wanted to be fed too. Buffy sighed and pulled the boy into her lap. John and April shared a knowing look across the table.

Dawn asked April all the cop questions that Buffy couldn't answer or that Giles didn't want to hear: Did she ever track any serial killers? Had she ever been shot at before? Had *she* ever shot anyone before? Did she ever put someone away and then find out they were innocent? What was the most bizarre murder she ever solved?

Giles could see that John was becoming uncomfortable with the conversation, as was he, so he deftly changed the topic to theatre, which Dawn was just as eager to talk about. Alex proudly announced that he had seen Dawn's play and that she had kissed a boy. Everyone laughed.

April and John were describing a performance they had seen in New York to Dawn, and Buffy was busy trying to make Alex use his napkin. Giles was nearing the end of his patience, trying to get Robin to eat something. He sighed in resignation and picked up a forkful of food. Leaning close to her ear, he whispered, "Zoom, zoom, here comes the airplane, open up." He twirled the fork in front of her, and miraculously, she opened her mouth and accepted it. He smiled triumphantly and repeated his success. Then he glanced up and caught Buffy's smug smirk. He blushed to the tips of his ears.

"That was wonderful," Buffy said when the meal was finished.

"Yes, thank you for inviting us," Giles seconded.

"I'cream," Alex begged.

April laughed. "Well, we don't have any of that, but we do have some of these." She set a tray of cookies on the table, and the boy eagerly reached for one.

"What do you say, Alex?" Giles scolded.

"Tank you," the boy answered around a mouthful of chocolate chips.

Giles handed one to Robin, who, now that she had begun eating again, no longer had any hesitations about stuffing her mouth full of cookie.

They said goodnight to their hosts. John glanced back and forth between the twins and again reminded Giles of his offer to tag team over the summer break, possibly even babysit some weekend before that if Mommy and Daddy wanted some time alone.

"Nah," Buffy said. "That's what we have Dawn for."

"Hey!" her sister protested. "I graduate in May, don't forget. And then your free babysitting days are over."

Buffy frowned. "No, if I remember correctly, you're grounded until the *twins* graduate."

Dawn's face darkened, and she stomped off to the minivan. Oh well, a perfect evening would be too much to ask for.

"Well, the offer's there if you want it," John finished.

"Don't let him fool you," April insisted, sliding one hand into the crook of her husband's arm. "He's not doing it out of the goodness of his heart. He wants to get some kiddy practice in before our first grandchild gets here."

John bowed his head, apparently found out.

They waved goodbye and headed back to the van, Alex skipping on ahead of them. Giles kept a watchful eye. It was, after all, past dark.

Buffy smiled. "See? I told you it would be nice."

"Yes, you were right."

She whistled. "Twice now in one day. I really need to carry a tape recorder." She tugged on his arm and stretched up to give him a peck on the cheek. She was intercepted by Robin's hand, shoving her face back. Buffy blinked in surprise. "God, possessive much?" She tried to make it sound like a joke, but Giles could hear the hurt in her voice. She reached out one hand to touch their daughter, and Robin recoiled. He could see the pain fill Buffy's eyes.

"Just give her time," he murmured softly.

"Yeah, time," she echoed as she climbed into the minivan.

Mustn't say a word. Mustn't say a word.

Mommy told her that as she carried her out of her room. Robin blinked the sleep from her eyes and reached for Queenie, but they were already in the hallway and Queenie was still on the bed.

She could hear awful noises downstairs and things breaking and her Daddy's voice shouting. He sounded scared. Robin wrapped her arms tighter around her mother.

Mustn't say a word. Mustn't say a word.

Mommy said it over and over as she tucked her into the laundry hamper. Robin began to cry, and her mother's hands dug into her shoulders as she shook her once.

"Be quiet. Quiet as a mouse, Robin. You mustn't say a word."

The lid slammed down, and Robin was left in darkness, curled into a little ball, watching through the tiny cracks in the hamper.

She saw her father land on the floor. Her mother screamed, and there were bad men in the room, monsters with scary yellow eyes. They tore open the closet, looked under the bed and in the cabinets, constantly shouting, "Where is she?"

One of them hit her mother, and Robin shut her eyes real tight and tucked her head into her knees and held her hands over her ears. Mommy and Daddy started screaming, but if she was good and quiet like a mouse and did as she was told...

Mustn't say a word.

It got real quiet, and she couldn't hear anything. She didn't move for a long time after that. Then, she heard the fire alarms go off and was torn. Fire was a bad thing, and she was scared and couldn't remember what they had taught her to do. Finally, Robin poked her little head out of the hamper, but everyone was gone: the monsters, Mommy, Daddy, everyone. She climbed out and tiptoed to the phone on little mouse feet. 911. She could do that. But nothing happened when she pushed the buttons. The phone made no sound.

She dropped the phone and turned around. Everything was red. She sniffed back the tears and snuck silently from her parents' room and into hers. Everything was messy and her covers were on the floor. The monsters looked in here too. She pressed her hands to her ears. The alarm was so loud. It hurt. She found Queenie lying on the floor and snatched the rabbit, quick as a bunny, and dashed across the hall to the office, to her special little hiding spot, where nobody would find her.

Only big enough for her, she pulled the door tight behind her and crawled back as far as she could. It was dark, very dark, and she couldn't see anything. She pressed her back up against the wall behind her and curled her knees up to her chest, clutching tightly to Queenie. The alarms sounded much farther away now. It was dark, and she was scared, and she couldn't see anything, not even the tiniest sliver of light through the crack of the door.

The darkness moved in front of her, molding itself into shapes and forms her imagination turned into monsters and animals moving closer towards her. She cowered deeper into the crawlspace, pressed tight to the wall, but dark things were moving. She could feel their breath on her skin. She could feel a cold, clammy hand on her arm. She screamed.

She felt strong arms around her and continued to scream and to kick and to struggle desperately. A soft, familiar voice was saying her name over and over. The light came on, and she wasn't in her hiding spot anymore. She was in bed with Giles and Buffy, and he was holding her. She started to cry, and he rubbed her back in slow circles.

"Giles?" the lady asked.

"I'll take care of it. Just go back to sleep. You have to work in the morning."

"So do you."

He got out of bed and carried her into the hallway. Alex was standing in his doorway, wiping his eyes.

"Bad dream," he said.

"Yes," Giles answered. "Robin had a bad dream. She'll be fine in a bit. Now, go back to sleep, son."

Alex frowned and shook his head. Dawn was standing in the hallway now too. "You wanna sleep in my bed, kiddo?"

The boy nodded vigorously and followed her into her room. Now just the two of them in the hallway. Robin sniffled and laid her head on Giles' shoulder. He took her downstairs, into the kitchen. He sat her on the counter, but she didn't want to be set down. She whimpered and wrapped her arms tighter around his neck. He sighed and picked her up again.

"You keep this up, and your legs are going to atrophy," he told her, as he reached for a medicine bottle on the top shelf. He struggled with the lid for a moment, finding it hard to open while holding her against his hip.

"You believe in magic, don't you, Robin?" he asked as he finally got the lid off. She nodded solemnly. "Good, because this is my extra special no-dream magic potion. Alex takes it to get rid of his bad dreams."

He poured some into a spoon. It was blue. She turned her head to the side when he tried to feed it to her.

"Please, Robin. I promise you won't taste it. It will help keep the bad dreams away."

She finally gave in and accepted the spoonful. He was right: she couldn't taste it. Maybe that was why it was magic medicine. She laid her head back on his shoulder. She missed Mommy and Daddy, but she was okay when Giles was with her. She didn't ever want him to go away like they did.

Buffy rolled over, and then opened her eyes. The bed was still empty. Giles and Robin hadn't returned yet. She looked at the clock: almost three in the morning. It had been over two hours. And Giles hadn't gotten much sleep the night before either.

She tiptoed out of her room and down the stairs. She found them in the living room and simply sat on the bottom step, watching unnoticed.

It was a sight she hadn't seen in ages: Giles was walking the floor with his child. It had probably been a year or better since he'd needed to do so for Alex. She remembered how she would sometimes sneak down the stairs like this to watch him. Sometimes she would catch him singing soft lullabies or telling the baby stories, half fairytale, half mythical saga of his mother's own exploits. Sometimes Giles had looked as he did tonight: half dead on his feet. Those were the times she would take pity on him and take over the baby-soothing activities. That probably wouldn't work in this instance.

Robin's arms draped limply over his shoulders, her head tucked up against his neck, her dangling feet swaying with his movements. Giles' own arms were crossed beneath her butt to hold her in place, his head dipping down to rest against hers, his eyes drooping half closed. The poor man was exhausted. And yet, he continued to wear a circular path on the floor in front of the coffee table. Buffy leaned forward to peer through the railing. Robin's eyes were closed.

"Giles," she whispered.

His head jerked up sharply, as if he'd been caught napping in class.

"I think she's asleep." She approached the two of them, stooping slightly to assure herself that, yes, Robin had finished counting sheep.

"I know," he answered, stopping his endless circle and now just swaying from side to side. "But every time I stop moving, she wakes up."

Buffy reached out and stroked the soft gold curls. The only time she could touch her own daughter was when the girl was sleeping. It broke her heart. Things were mending between her and Giles, but this was the hardest to bear and the hardest to forgive. She'd always known that she was Alex's favorite and that it bothered Giles sometimes to come second. But Alex still loved his father dearly, would ask after him when he was gone, would bring him legos and cookies when he was sick in bed, and would even vehemently defend him when Anya got too harsh in her teasing. Buffy could understand if Giles was Robin's favorite in the same way, and it even made some sense. Alex was more of a roughhouse kind of boy, outgoing and sociable, all things that suited Buffy. And Robin seemed like such a quiet girl. She probably should prefer her reserved, bookish father. But that Buffy

didn't even get a piece of her heart was beyond unfair. And even though she tried not to, she couldn't help but blame Giles for that fact.

She leaned closer to press a kiss to her daughter's cheek. Giles stopped swaying for a moment so she could. A moment's stillness was all it took, for Robin woke again.

"See what I mean?" he grumbled as he resumed his circular pacing.

"You know, I don't *have* to go to work tomorrow. I could stay home and maybe let you get some sleep."

He smiled softly. "I'll be fine, Buffy. I've gone many sleepless nights before while researching. And I do still think it's best for Robin if we maintain some sort of stable routine."

"Yeah, stability, security, that's what you've always been best at. Giles the rock." He frowned at her as she said it. Perhaps she hadn't completely kept the bitterness from her voice. She turned and trudged up the stairs, muttering under her breath, "Yeah, you're exactly what she needs right now."

Giles walked into the Magic Box forty minutes late. Alex had been more than a handful this morning, perhaps feeling a bit jealous of the attention Robin was receiving. He had hidden all his shoes and by the time Giles had found a pair, the boy was naked. Robin started giggling, and trying to catch and dress one mischievous boy was nearly impossible to accomplish with one clingy girl slung under his arm. That would have been the end of his tardiness if Alex hadn't also insisted on pouring his own milk for his cereal, which Giles would have never let him do if he hadn't also been trying to brush Robin's hair at the same time. The milk spilled everywhere, including on Alex, necessitating another undressing and redressing. Giles had almost wished that Buffy and Dawn had stayed home for the day. A stable routine indeed! Bollocks!

Anya smiled brightly as they entered. "This must be your newly returned daughter. She's very Ahhh!" She screamed and jumped back two feet. "What's... What's..." she shook her finger in Robin's general direction, "*that!*"

Giles looked down, baffled. "This? It's a stuffed toy, Anya."

"It's a stuffed *bunny*," she clarified. "Why would you get your child something like that? You're sick! Sick!"

He sighed. "We didn't buy this for her. It's actually the only thing she has left from her old home."

Anya shuddered. "You should have let it burn."

Robin whimpered and clutched her bunny tighter.

Giles gave his employee a stern glare. "That's enough, Anya. The girl had nightmares all night as it was without you upsetting her further today."

She ran her hand protectively over her rounded stomach as she turned back towards the register. "Yeah, I would have nightmares, too, if you made me sleep with *that*."

Giles herded Alex into the side office with some puzzles and dominoes. He needed to do some research while he was at the store. He had some ideas about how to find those responsible for killing all the potential slayers, and he just needed a little time. It shouldn't be that difficult. After all, he always brought Alex to the shop with him, and as long as he found something to occupy the child, he had never had a problem finishing his work before.

Seven hours, one broken statue, one priceless volume of spellcraft ruined with chocolate milk, two temper tantrums, and four time-outs later, and Giles realized that he was sadly mistaken. Robin didn't seem much of a bother in that regard, except that his arms were aching from constantly carrying her. He had done the same for Alex until the boy was one or so, but he had also weighed less than half as

much at the time. But every time Giles set the girl down for even a moment, she was whining to be carried again. And without being able to set her down for even a moment, he couldn't read some of the darker volumes he needed. He feared how she might react to the illustrations.

So at the end of the day, he had only a stack of books to take home and study later to show for all his trouble.

And Anya, as she left, informed him that, "It isn't very professional to have children running all over the shop while customers are trying to buy things."

He rolled his eyes. "This from the *employee* who hoped to bring her own baby to work with her."

She frowned and shook her head. "Well, *my* child will be much better behaved. I've been reading parenting manuals."

"Yes, I pity the poor thing." Giles was in a foul mood and had a monster headache. He locked the front door with finality, took Alex firmly by the hand, and started for the car. He was trying not to be angry with his son. The boy was only acting out. His world had changed overnight, and as much as he might want a sister, a three-year-old could hardly be expected to have any idea what that entailed.

Over the next week, things settled into a pattern, and Robin seemed to improve with this stability. By the third day, he didn't need to carry her constantly, although she toddled along behind him wherever he went. She sat in a chair beside him instead of in his lap. She fed herself without coaxing. She played with her brother, and his misbehavior died down somewhat as he discovered the joys of having a constant playmate. She still slept in their bed, curled up against Giles. Alex was allowed to sleep with them as well, and the pair wedged their parents to opposite sides of the bed.

The nightmares came much more infrequently by the end of the week, helped along by the no-dream potion and Giles' revelation that she was now terrified of the dark. A nightlight graced each corner of their bedroom now, and in the dim lighting she was much easier to calm when the nightmares did come.

She smiled on a regular basis, and laughed as well. She colored and played with her dolls and picked out books to be read to her. She no longer pushed Buffy away when she came near Giles, although she tended to be possessive if anyone else was involved. Xander was not allowed to sit on the other side of her father. Only Buffy or Alex.

She let Buffy touch her sometimes, although she was still leery of Dawn. And she would sit quietly on the floor outside the bathroom door without pitching a fit when her father was inside.

But as much as Buffy wanted to play a bigger role in her daughter's life, Giles remained her primary caregiver. He bathed her and dressed her and worked out how to wash her hair without getting soap in her eyes and how to comb her curls without pulling them. Anya even taught him how to do a simple braid. He was the one who walked the floor with her at night when she couldn't sleep and the one she gave a goodnight kiss to when they tucked her in.

He could see how much it hurt Buffy. She cried sometimes in their room alone, and he couldn't even comfort her without bringing Robin in with him, which only made things worse. He didn't know what to do or say, except to ask for patience. It had been over a week since the fire, and Robin had improved tremendously. Given more time, she would accept Buffy as well.

But in all that time, even with all the strides she had made, Robin spoke not a word.

In the past week, Giles had continued his research as well, nearing a possible solution. Magic left a taint, a trace, on those it was cast on, even after the spell dissipated. He found another spell that could trace the magic back to its source. He began assembling his ingredients. The last component would come in his mid-week shipment. After that, he would be able to cast the spell on Robin, to trace back to the ones who had used magic to find the potential slayers. And then his Slayer would kill them.

Buffy was just washing up the last of the dinner dishes when the phone rang. It was John. She paused before calling for Giles. His friend didn't sound just right.

"John, are you okay?"

"It's April. She umm..." The man's voice faltered. She heard him take several deep breaths. "She was investigating a lead on a case, I guess. She failed to answer a page, so they sent another car. They... umm... they found her."

He didn't say anything more, and Buffy was afraid to ask. "Is she...? Is April...?"

"No, no," he quickly answered. "Her partner is. God, Scott had a wife and kids. We were supposed to go to his daughter's fifth birthday party this weekend." The man started to cry. Buffy could hear his shaking sobs over the line.

"John, where are you?"

"Sunnydale Memorial," he managed. "She's up in surgery. I just..."

"It's okay," she said. "Giles will come. I'll uh... I'll go get him. You can talk to him yourself."

She set the phone down carefully and stepped to the stairway, calling for Giles. He appeared on the landing a moment later, holding a dripping Robin wrapped in a towel.

"What is it, Buffy? I'm rather busy."

She gave him the two-sentence synopsis, and he was hurrying down the stairs and into the kitchen. He had barely picked up the phone when the doorbell rang. Dawn was upstairs, keeping Alex entertained. Or rather, he was keeping her distracted from any thoughts of visiting Spike. So Buffy crossed over to the foyer.

She opened the door, still focused on listening to the phone conversation going on in the next room. When she faced the new arrival, her entire train of thought completely derailed. Her mouth dropped open and remained there. She couldn't even string together the words "Come in" or "Hi" or "What the hell?"

"Hey, B."

Faith's eyes rolled back into her head, and she crumpled into a heap right there on the front porch.

Chapter 7

The Council's Last Stand

Frederick Billington paused in his shelving duties. He thought he heard a sound emanating from deeper in the stacks. Standing frozen in place, he waited several seconds before he exhaled and laughed at himself. Just his active imagination again, helped along by yesterday's lesson on poltergeists and disembodied spirits. After their insightful class, his roommate Anthony had kindly left a tape recorder playing in their room all night. Random doors slamming, faint whispers, and the sporadic echo of a child crying left Frederick in a cold sweat until he had discovered his roommate's prank.

The Council Archives were vast and housed in the basement of the sprawling complex that served as the main headquarters. The rows of shelves sat on rollers, so that by turning a switch, the rows either compressed together or pulled apart enough for someone to pass between them. This allowed the already impressive square footage to contain even more floor to ceiling bookshelves and even more priceless books.

It also meant that whoever had the job of re-shelving spent a great deal of time waiting for the last row to shut and the next to open. Only three rows could be accessed at the same time, and Frederick had a system.

He replaced the final book on his cart and wheeled it to the aisleway. He flicked the switch, closing the last three rows one at a time and opening the next three. Three at a time was his system, and he loaded the cart with the appropriate volumes as he waited.

Aside from the occasional tour, no one ever came down into the Archives except the students who re-shelved and the librarian who ran it. Watchers requested specific volumes, which were fetched and returned for them. They spoke of the Council Libraries with the sense of wonder and awe of those who spent no time in them. Frederick, for one, would be glad to be finished with his watcher's training and done with the menial tasks assigned to his out-of-class schedule. Then someone else could fetch *his* books for once.

He started down the aisle, pushing a cart full of books containing information on the sorceress Camela, swords and artifacts, the Mortog beast, and locator spells. It seemed to be the project of the week in the halls. Anthony had told him about a rumor circulating among the other students that all the potential slayers had been kidnapped and the watchers were trying to find them to bring them home. If that were true, then it would account for the dark mood hovering over all the watchers.

Frederick froze once more, holding even his breath and straining his ears. He swore he heard something this time, and not just his imagination playing tricks. The empty Archives were creepy, but he wasn't that much of a pansy. Footsteps. He heard them again, coming down the aisleway, four or five rows past him.

"Hello?"

Good one. Why don't you just paint a big bull's-eye on your chest? Haven't you seen enough horror movies to know better?

The footsteps stopped with his voice. He set down the book carefully and silently made his way towards the end of the row opposite from which the footsteps came. No harm in being cautious. The footsteps resumed a moment later. Now that his focus was completely attuned to them, he noticed that the footsteps didn't sound like the soft tread of expensive Italian leather or even the slight squeak of rubber-soled tennies. Each fall contained the sharp click of nails on marble. Or claws.

Frederick's heart pounded faster. His throat felt dry. He pressed his body tight to the end of the bookcase. There was no exit on this side of the stacks. He would have to cross the rows to the other aisleway to escape.

He waited as the soft click-thump of each footfall passed him and continued deeper into the stacks. He waited a few minutes more before he tiptoed through the row and towards his freedom.

He was standing in the middle of the shelves when he first heard it: the whirl of gears turning.

The path before him narrowed as the shelves on either side of him began to close in on him. He stood still for a moment, panic gripping him, before he shook himself back to reality.

This was ridiculous. He had spent too many days and nights studying demons and ghouls. Someone had probably just come down into the stacks for a book and was moving the shelves to retrieve it. More than likely, it might even be Anthony, ready with another prank. Well, this time he wasn't going to fall for it. He marched resolutely towards the exit.

Half a shelf of books tumbled onto the floor in front of him. An enormous fur-clad and clawed hand shot through the opening just made. Frederick stopped in his tracks.

"Anthony?" Despite his best attempts, his voice wavered slightly. "I don't think this is very funny."

He heard a deep, guttural growl. He turned and made a mad dash for the other end of the row, but he heard the pounding of footsteps in time with his, and the creature's arm again reached through just ahead of him, spilling books as it did.

Frederick backed up again. Already the row had narrowed sufficiently that he bumped his shoulders on the shelves as he turned. A few more steps, and he was turning sideways to clear the bookcases. He tripped on some of the books that had spilled, hurriedly pulling himself back up. The shelves wouldn't crush him, he had to keep reminding himself. They'll get very narrow, but they'll stop at the first resistance. Frederick stopped at the first word.

"Watcher."

The word was raspy and mangled, but still understandable.

The books directly in front of him emptied onto the floor, and he saw his attacker's face. He wanted to tell this thing that he wasn't a watcher yet, but he didn't expect it to care one way or the other. After stocking all those books over the last week, he was able to identify the thing on sight. The Mortog beast eyed him from the other side of the bookcase. It was truly his final exam for his watcher's training, and he had passed, but a fat lot of good that would do him.

The Mortog beast pushed on the shelving, and the bookcases crushed poor Frederick Billington between them.

Buffy stood frozen in the doorway for several moments, her mind still trying to wrap itself around what had just happened. Finally, higher brain functions resumed operating, and after a moment's delay her head was able to tell her body to move.

She knelt on the porch and hefted Faith over her shoulder in a fireman's carry. She glanced around the neighborhood to see if anyone had noticed the fugitive on her doorstep before bringing the young woman inside. She laid her out carefully on the couch and began checking for injuries.

Faith had a nasty gash on her head, her dark hair matted with blood. Impressive bruises on her arms and across her stomach, even more impressive because slayers didn't bruise easily. She was wearing very un-Faith-like clothing: a long flowing black skirt dotted with roses and a cream silk blouse embroidered along the neckline. Buffy figured it was the first outfit the slayer could steal off someone's back after her escape. Prison garb would be so obvious, especially if it was that tacky

orange jumper like Harrison Ford had in *The Fugitive*. Buffy smiled slightly at the thought of Faith having to wear something like that.

She wore a lightweight black wool coat over the whole ensemble. The black wool hid the bloodstains on the cream blouse. Thin dots of it across her back, where Buffy found a couple of long, shallow cuts, apparently from a knife. More distressing was the larger bloodstain near her shoulder. An entrance wound and an exit wound, it looked like she had been stabbed straight through, just below her collarbone. The slayer had attempted makeshift bandages, but they were soaked through, blood dripping down her side, staining her top, her skirt, her coat. Faith had likely lost a lot of blood.

Buffy stood to gather supplies and met Giles as he came out of the kitchen.

"I'm headed to the hospital," he informed her. "As soon as I've dressed Robin. I'd rather not bring her along, but..."

"Yeah, yeah," she replied. "I don't relish a three hour screamfest."

He frowned, concern etching little lines across his forehead. "Buffy, are you alright? Are you hurt?"

She glanced down: blood on her hands. "Umm... There's kind of this thing that came up while you were on the phone. C'mere."

She led him into the living room, and he stood in front of the couch for several moments before saying anything.

"Dear Lord!"

Buffy bit her lip. "So what do we do with her?"

He turned their daughter's face from the sight and shifted her weight in his arms. "It is in our best interests to keep Faith safe and healthy. I don't think we dare take her to a hospital until we know what happened. We can't be sure she would be safe there... or back in prison either. I'll try to contact the Council. For now, let's just treat her as best we can."

"Should I tie her up? 'Cause I'm just remembering all the times she tried to kill me. Oh, and the body snatching and the boyfriend stealing. Not really in the mood for any of that right now, you know what I'm saying?"

"I don't think she poses much of a threat at the moment. Let me get the first aid kit."

Buffy shook her head and darted ahead of him. "Nah, I can do that. You get Robin dressed."

They met back a few minutes later, Robin wearing a little denim dress with her hair neatly pulled back in a ponytail— Giles was really getting better at that— and Buffy carting their full arsenal of medical supplies.

Giles took a pair of scissors and neatly cut off Faith's blouse. He started with cleaning the more superficial wounds across Faith's back and on her head, disinfecting and bandaging them carefully. Buffy leaned over his shoulder and watched intently.

"Maybe you should shave off her hair so you can take care of that head wound properly." Buffy flashed him an innocent expression when he glared at her. "What? Ok, so I'm Revenge Girl. No one's perfect all the time. I just keep thinking about walking in on her and Angel... It burns me up is all. And him all defending her like 'oooo, she had such a hard life and oh, she's really trying to change.' Like, I had a really crappy year and stuff, with my mom dying and my boyfriend going all heart of darkness on me. And then the being dead really sucked too. But *I* didn't come back and try to kill all *my* friends. I guess after Riley, seeing her with Angel just..." Giles gave her another irritated glare. "Ok, ok, shutting up about Angel now."

Only the shoulder left to care for. Her watcher frowned as he worked. He took care of her enough times; Buffy always knew how serious her injuries were by his expression as he bandaged them. And the look on his face right now was the "I'm seriously considering knocking you out, drugging you up,

or otherwise dragging you to the hospital at gunpoint” look. She really hoped Faith would be okay. And not just for Robin’s sake. Buffy and Faith had a twisted, complicated past, but tangled up in all of that was friendship. Looking at her fellow slayer now, lying unconscious on the living room couch, her face pale and bare of makeup, she looked vulnerable and childlike, all her pretenses and cocky attitude stripped away.

The shoulder cleaned and bandaged to the best of his ability, Giles strapped her arm against her chest so it wouldn’t move and further aggravate the injury. He covered her with some blankets for warmth and modesty. Buffy was impressed. Stripping Faith down to a bra, and her watcher hadn’t even blushed.

“I should...” he tried lamely.

“It’s okay. Really. We’ll be fine here. You go sit with John for a while. See if he needs anything.”

Buffy shooed him off in the general direction of the door.

“I’ll take a cell,” he promised. “I’ll keep trying the Council until someone can tell me about Faith.”

“I can do that too. I’ll call Angel, see if he knows why Faith’s here.”

Giles and Robin left. Buffy grabbed the cordless, turned a chair around and straddled it, and began her Faith watching duties. One thing she had learned over the years: never turn your back on this woman. Not even when she’s supposedly in a coma.

Giles sat in the waiting room beside John. Neither man said anything. Robin played with some building blocks the hospital had lying around to keep waiting children occupied. She glanced over every few minutes to assure herself that her father was still there.

The nurse came out periodically to offer updates on April’s condition. Giles tried to reach the Council repeatedly, without success. He brought his friend coffee. He called the house a couple times, getting updates from Buffy on Faith. She was still unconscious, and Angel’s team was unaware of her escape. A couple of hours passed, and Robin grew restless, bringing him a children’s magazine to read to her. When she tired of old copies of Highlights, a nurse found some crayons and a coloring book stashed behind the desk, and the girl was happily entertained again.

“Sometimes I don’t care,” John whispered.

“Hmm?” It was the first thing his friend had said since greeting him on arrival, but Giles wasn’t sure he understood what the man was talking about.

“Sometimes it just isn’t worth it.” John was staring into his half-empty coffee, long since cooled. “I know what she does is important. But sometimes I don’t care if people get away with it. I don’t care how many killers are walking the streets, as long as she doesn’t have to track them. Pretty selfish, huh?”

Giles reached across and rested his hand over John’s wrist. “Not selfish at all. I’ve felt the same way myself, many times.”

They each turned their heads to look at the other, and understanding passed between them. Who else could appreciate what John was going through except someone who had been in his place before?

Giles withdrew his hand, and John set his coffee on the ground beneath his chair. He glanced over to the nurse’s desk expectantly and then leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. He looked at Giles for a moment before asking, “You think it’s a choice?”

“Hmm?”

“You think they choose to save the world from bad guys and fight the good fight, or you think it’s just in their blood, something they have to do no matter what anyone else thinks?”

The corners of Giles' mouth twitched into a wry grin. He had an unusual perspective on that question. "I think some things are too important to be left to chance. The things they do... I think they're Chosen for it."

John nodded, accepting that answer. Another long silence stretched between them before John spoke again, his head dropping down into his hands. "I wish she had never taken that case. She promised me she wouldn't take anymore serials."

"Serials?"

"It's been in all the papers. Those bodies that each turned up with the same symbol burned into them. She took the case over from Detective Cricks after the last body was discovered. She had a lead on a sorority on campus. That's what she was investigating when she disappeared. Maybe she was getting close to something or to someone. Cricks went back to check it out." John chuckled darkly. "He's a moron. He won't find anything."

Giles nodded absently. He felt sick to his stomach. The mark of Camela: the case he was researching. John's wife was up in surgery because Giles hadn't done his job, because he hadn't found the ones responsible yet. And they had hurt her.

A young woman, in her late twenties or early thirties, entered the waiting room, aiming straight for them. "Dad!"

John looked up. "Becky!" He stood and crossed to meet her. They embraced for several moments, and the young woman was crying. "I came as soon as I could. Liz and Kyle already left. They should be here in a few hours."

John nodded and wrapped one arm around his daughter's shoulders as he guided her over to the waiting room chairs. "Becky, this is my friend Rupert Giles, and his daughter Robin over there. This is my Becky. My eldest, and my first grandchild right here," he added with a hand to her flat stomach.

"Dad!" She pushed his hand away and blushed, brushing her hair back from her face and wiping her tears away with the back of one hand. "Not for more than six months."

"Here, have a seat. You should get off your feet."

She didn't argue, but made sure she pulled him down into a chair too. "Do they know anything yet?"

The smile left his face, and he looked back at the nurse's station. "So far, so good. She's still in surgery."

Giles felt distinctly uncomfortable, as if he were witness to a private moment. His friend didn't need him to be there anymore. His family was there, and more coming. Giles stood, and Robin was beside him in a moment, her small hand slipping into his.

"We should go. You'll be alright now, yes?"

John rose, and they awkwardly held out their hands and took them back until John simply stepped forward and embraced Giles in a firm hug. He released him, and with a parting pat on the shoulders, he thanked him sincerely for coming and sitting with him the past few hours.

"You're quite welcome."

Giles went home. He had research to do. Not just for Robin, but for John now too.

They took turns watching Faith all night. Dawn wanted to take a shift too, but Buffy didn't want her sister anywhere near the rogue slayer. So Dawn's job was to keep the children away from her, or Alex at least. Giles was pretty much the only one who could handle Robin. Dawn suggested that

Spike could help, but Buffy and Giles both firmly nixed that idea. Although, they did bring in Xander for a little backup, something that Anya wasn't so keen on.

Whoever was up watching Faith would try the Council, but still no one ever answered. It was like that day after all the potentials had been attacked, something that worried both Buffy and Giles. She and Xander would sleep when they weren't on duty, but Giles didn't sleep. He spent that time researching the spell he thought would lead him to those who killed in Camela's name. Robin fell asleep curled into an armchair beside him, and he placed her in bed beside Alex and Dawn.

Morning came, and nothing had changed. Afternoon then, too. No one went to work. Anya minded the store. Dawn, however, was forced to go to school. John called to inform them that April had come out of surgery fine, but was still listed in critical condition.

It was after dinner before Faith stirred. It was Xander who was sitting with her, and he backed up about five paces when he saw her move. "Buffy!"

Buffy and Giles raced into the living room, and Xander cowered behind them, insisting that he and Faith had "history" and all that time in jail probably didn't help matters.

"Tell her I'm married," he requested as Buffy knelt at Faith's side. "Tell her I'm gonna be a father."

Buffy rolled her eyes. "Faith?"

The other slayer's dark eyes opened. "B? Did I make it or is this some sort of hell place?"

"No, you're alive."

"Yeah, I guess hell would have homework and Sleepless in Seattle on repeat." She closed her eyes and licked her lips. "Fuck, I'm tired. I don't think this slayer healing thing's doing its stuff."

Buffy exchanged a glance with Giles. He removed his glasses and rubbed at his eyes tiredly. "It's possible that the blade that injured her was poisoned, perhaps with the same substance..." He replaced his glasses and shoved his hands in his pockets. "... uhh... the same substance that the Council uses," he finished awkwardly.

"Blade?" Faith protested hotly. "Thing was a big ass sword. Guy tried to put it through my chest. I'm lucky he only got my shoulder. Cramped quarters, really hard to fight in, even for a Slayer, know what I mean?"

Giles stepped closer, pushing Robin back when she tried to follow. "I was told the Council had increased security around you."

Faith tried to slide herself up the couch a little, gritting her teeth against the pain she had to feel in her shoulder. "Yeah, thank 'em for that sometime for me. Locking me up in isolation, where there're no witnesses, no one to call for help. Oh, and here's the best part: the guards still let your lawyer in to talk with you when you're in isolation."

"Your lawyer did this to you?" Giles exclaimed.

"Not *my* lawyer, dumbass. Three guys in suits flashed their secret lawyer society decoder rings and got an hour pass into my room to beat the crap out of me. Don't know how he got the sword past security. The other two had cooking spray and lighters: portable flame throwers, which... well, hello, irony." Something unrecognizable flashed through her eyes, and she glanced down, smoothing the blankets around herself after she realized she was only wearing a bra.

Could that be guilt in her expression? Buffy wasn't sure she should believe the Karla Faye Tucker routine. Faith was, after all, the master of manipulation, the pro at mind games, the double agent and unrepentant Judas. Buffy had truly believed, all those years ago, that Faith had only played Angel, given him a flash of wide tortured eyes, a few tears of regret, a plea for redemption, all things that Angel, with his own past to atone for, would have no defense against. Could Buffy have been too quick to judge, blinded by anger and perhaps a touch of jealousy too?

Faith slid the blankets and her skirt gingerly up to mid-thigh. The side of her left leg had turned an angry red and blistered along her upper calf. "Payback's a bitch, huh?" she joked bitterly.

"Oh dear," Giles murmured. "We didn't notice the burns." He reached for the first aid kit they had left beside the couch and began tending them. Buffy restrained Robin from following, and the girl whined in protest, twisting her arm in Buffy's grasp. Faith seemed to notice her for the first time.

"So that's your kid, huh? Looks just like you, B." A pause, and a mischievous grin played over her lips. "What with the whining especially."

"This is Robin," Buffy said, ignoring Faith's barb. "Alex is upstairs with Dawn."

"Wow. Twins." Faith inhaled sharply as Giles applied cream to one especially tender spot. "Angel told me, but I always kinda thought he was having a big ole laugh at my expense."

Buffy scowled and crossed her arms indignantly. In doing so, she released Robin, who immediately crossed to her father, standing behind him and holding tight to his coattails. Buffy, however, was still fuming over Faith's comments.

"Why is it so hard to believe that Giles and I...? I mean, you haven't been here in a really long time—"

"Hey, hey." Faith held up one hand in surrender. "You want to get pelvic with your watcher, have at it. Better than that cool, undead, look-but-you-can't-touch package you had back in high school. Or that soldier Momma's boy Kylie or Riles or—"

"Riley."

"Yeah, him." Faith shrugged. "You don't have to defend yourself to me. Remember, B, I was a big fan of the younger, cuter watcher. You were the 'raise your hand if eww' vote. It's just a surprise to see such a one-eighty."

Buffy blushed, ashamed of her previous jabs at his expense. "I was 17," she protested. "It wouldn't have been exactly legal."

Faith smiled wickedly. "See? I knew it! All those times patrolling in high school, you played all innocent, trying to convince me you never thought about putting in a little personal training time with your watcher. I gotta know, B: slayers get all hot and bothered from the slaying... does that mean a good night's research makes watchers all horny?"

Giles cleared his throat emphatically and paused in his dressing of her burned leg. "Please, if you two could try and remember that I am standing right here."

A moment's silence. "Well, technically sitting," Buffy corrected.

"Yes, well, find something else to discuss."

"So that's a yes then, right, B?"

Giles had just finished wrapping Faith's leg. He sighed, closed the first aid kit with finality and exited the living room, Robin trailing behind.

Faith's eyes landed on Xander, noticing him for the first time. "Yo, Xander, you're quiet. No hello? No hostile banter?"

"I'm married now," he said nervously, pointing to his wedding ring. "Married man now." He took several steps back, gesturing between the two slayers. "You guys have a lot of catching up, I guess. So... yeah, three's a crowd." He turned and fled.

Buffy and Faith looked at each other and then away. An uncomfortable silence stretched between them.

"You could borrow some clothes," Buffy offered.

"That'd be nice." Faith covered the bandaged leg with the blankets. "So, who's the Mrs. Xander?"

"Any. Ex-vengeance demon."

Faith chuckled. "He sure knows how to pick 'em, huh? Likes his women dark and dangerous, does he?" She thought for a moment. "Wait. Wasn't she the little blonde sex fiend I met when... well, when we switched?"

Buffy nodded. "She went to high school with us too, but you probably never met her, having turned all evil before that."

"About that... B, I never got the chance... I don't even know how to begin—"

"Don't." Buffy held up one hand to forestall the heartfelt apologies and pleas for forgiveness that could never make up for all the things Faith had done.

Faith let the matter drop and another silence fell between them.

"So why come all the way back to Sunnydale?" Buffy preferred to make the conversation a purely business discussion. "Angel and you are buds, right? And he's there in L.A. Seems like that's the logical place to go after a prison break."

Faith licked her lips and considered her answer. "Angel and I are just friends. You know that, right? Nothing ever happened between us, and not just because of the curse."

Buffy shrugged. "None of my business, really."

"I don't think he ever stopped loving you."

"Also not my problem."

Faith sighed. "He would visit me in prison sometimes. Only one who would. I was his special project, I think. So yeah, I went there first, but they probably knew about Angel, and they had the place staked out. So, this was the only other place I could think of that wouldn't just turn me back in for the lawyer scum to finish off."

Buffy slouched back in her chair. "Makes sense. Of course, being a cop, I'm sorta obligated to turn you in. Harboring a fugitive could land me in a whole heap of trouble, probably more than the Council could fix, not that we're exactly on their good side right now anyway."

Faith sat up straighter, a momentary flash of pain crossing her face as she moved. "A cop? *You're* a cop? That's rich. So are Sunnydale's finest still clueless as ever?" Faith studied her fellow slayer sideways. "You're not really going to turn me in, are you?"

"Eventually. Right now I'm just going to pretend I don't know you're wanted. Until we figure this all out, you're safer here."

They again struggled for a topic of conversation. "So where's Red?" Faith asked.

Buffy shrugged, not really in the mood to play catch up on the past five years. "Ever since Tara died, she hasn't been herself. Took it really bad. We don't see her much. I think we just remind her of everything." She stood abruptly, like a cat that suddenly needed to be in the next room. "So... clothes and something to eat. Right back."

Faith stopped her at the archway. "Hey, B."

Buffy turned. "Yeah?"

"I'm sorry 'bout your mom."

"Thanks."

"She was a real nice lady. I liked her. Never looked down on me, always treated me like I was worth something."

"Yeah, right up until you threatened to kill her."

Faith's eyes dropped to her lap. Buffy turned her back on the rogue slayer and marched upstairs.

Giles watched over her that night, something that Faith insisted was unnecessary. But Giles remembered how coolly she had looked him in the eye and told him that Buffy had killed that man in the alley, how her eyes had glittered with dark, primal hatred as she held the blade to Willow's throat while they traded the Mayor's box for their friend's life. He remembered, too, training with the girl. Buffy always knew his limit, pushed him only so far and then released him. With Faith, he had sometimes wondered if she forgot that they were only sparring. Giles was not about to trust this woman unguarded in the same house with his children.

Morning came, and Giles was working on his second night with no sleep. A stack of books rested on the table before him, three or four volumes open to various sections. His glasses hung from his fingers by their earpiece, his other hand massaging his tired eyes. Tomorrow he would finally have his shipment, delayed two days by a customs' raid on his supplier. Apparently not all of the man's Egyptian artifacts were legally obtained. Barring any further complications, tomorrow he would have the last component necessary before he could cast the trace spell on Robin.

Xander had gone home rather quickly after Faith regained consciousness, much to Alex's dismay. The boy was rather fond of his Uncle, perhaps because Xander was the only other man in the boy's life besides his father. Three visits in three years hardly ranked Hank Summers as any better of a grandfather than he had been a father. And Spike was not likely to be paying the child any visits in the near future. Giles thought again of John, that he would be a welcome role model for his son and that he hoped April would live and recover. John had said her condition was upgraded to serious, a promising improvement even if she hadn't yet regained consciousness.

He donned his glasses again, the triple pressure of Faith, Robin, and April driving him to seek answers. He felt almost as if he held their fates in his hands. Being responsible for Buffy, for a Slayer, was a heavy enough burden by itself. This was almost more than he could bear. It made him wish once more for Willow and Tara, for the ease with which the whole group had divided out the research between them and made his burden lighter.

Buffy slept upstairs. She had gone to sleep after patrol, offering to take a shift later, but Giles had seen no point in waking her, since he was up researching anyway. Faith slept most of the night, her body demanding rest for her injuries. But even still, he found her up and sitting across from him at nearly two in the morning. A slayer's restless drive for the hunt, he supposed. He wondered idly how Faith managed it in prison: not yielding to a slayer's natural desires.

She said nothing to him, nor had he expected her to. But he took the opportunity to clean and redress her wounds. They seemed to be healing nicely, indicating that whatever toxin had inhibited her slayer healing had likely worked its way out of her system. Perhaps in a day or two she would be well again.

She watched him as he researched for a while before she slipped silently back to the couch and back to sleep. So unlike Faith to be quiet and demure, without a smart-ass remark on the tip of her tongue. Perhaps the fact that she was not currently dressed in something see through or skin tight or that she was not plastered with enough make-up to make a French whore cringe skewed his perception of her somewhat. Or perhaps her time in prison had indeed changed her. She was there by choice, after all, and her own confession. She had just proved by her escape that the legal system had no power to hold a slayer against her will. So Faith had accepted responsibility for her actions and served her time by choice.

And yet Giles could not shake the memories of the last time they had thought her changed, had thought she accepted her fate. After killing that man and escaping the retrieval team, she had returned to accept the Council's rehabilitation. And had become nothing more than the Mayor's double agent. How could he trust her now? How could he believe that this was anything but another deception? The

bitter irony was that this woman, who he had come to despise and fear and distrust, owned a fate intimately linked with his daughter's. Faith must live another sixteen years, or Robin would die a slayer's death. For that reason alone, he was forced to care about her fate.

Giles pushed aside his books and picked up the phone. Redial. No answer. Try again. He had rung the Council periodically throughout the night, but there was never any answer. A special ops team would be far better equipped to handle Faith than any of them. No threat of them harming her this time; the Council had no use for a three-year-old slayer.

A little after six in the morning, he found himself besieged by two sleepy toddlers. They each climbed up onto one knee, each with a thumb firmly planted in their mouth.

"Good morning."

Robin laid her head on his shoulder and began to doze off again. She would probably have slept another hour if she hadn't wakened to find him gone. Alex, however, was accustomed to mornings with his father, and as was their routine, the boy tried to steal a drink of tea.

"No, no, no. Let's have some breakfast, shall we?" He stood with a soft groan, not yet adapted to the weight of a child in each arm. He carried them into the kitchen and set them both down on the floor, having learned quickly that what he couldn't do for both, he had to do for neither. Alex felt displaced enough as it was, and playing favorites with Robin only made things worse.

The twins seemed to agree on pancakes, and Giles was still thankful enough that Robin was eating that he didn't much argue with whatever she chose. He was intent on his task, feeling her little hands wound into his pant leg, her little head leaning against his side, as he made the batter. It took him several minutes before he noticed that Alex was missing.

Giles' heart stopped, and he rushed to the living room in long strides. He paused at the threshold, unsure whether to move closer or stay back. Alex was sitting on Faith's stomach, showing her some drawings he had made.

"Alex," he called softly.

Faith was watching the boy through half-open lids. Her gaze flickered over to him in the archway. She smoothed back Alex's sandy hair as she held his father's eyes. The motion was tender, maternal, but there was something chilling about watching Faith perform the action.

"Alex, come here."

"Go on, short stuff." Faith nudged him off her stomach. "You can show me later." Her eyes reflected sadness as she looked at Giles, regret and disappointment even, that he didn't trust her with the children. Why should she have expected any different?

Then it occurred to him that she must have gone through her slayer heat as Buffy had. Faith must be aware now that she would never have children. To see that Buffy had both a son and a daughter must cut deeply for a woman so young who would never have her own.

"He's quite a friendly little guy," she commented, her eyes never leaving his.

"Yes," Giles agreed, swiftly taking his son's hand as the boy reached his side.

"City like Sunnydale... boy's friendly to the wrong person, he's liable to get himself hurt."

He couldn't read her expression. He wasn't sure he wanted to.

"Alex," he murmured. "Take your sister into the kitchen for breakfast. I'll be right behind you."

"Faith breakfast too?"

"No, son, not with us. Maybe in a little bit." He waited a moment until he knew the children were out of earshot. "Faith, if you ever, *ever* lay so much as one hand on either of my children—"

She fidgeted slightly, her eyes growing wide in alarm. "That's not what... Jeez, I just thought you and Buffy would have taught your kid some street smarts, raisin' him up in Sunnyhell and all."

"How we raise our children is none of your concern. It happens that you are a guest in our home, and by virtue of that fact, Alex feels he can trust you." Giles didn't move closer. He didn't need to. Physical intimidation would be pointless with a slayer anyway. He narrowed his eyes, and then crossed his arms. "If you ever prove that child's trust misplaced... If you ever bring harm to either one of them, directly or indirectly... So help me God, I will turn you into a rat and feed you to the neighbor's dog."

He turned on his heel and strode into the kitchen, still fuming with anger and fear for everything the rogue slayer was capable of. She had tortured Wesley unmercifully. He had the dry and brutal account of it from Cordelia. And unlike Angelus, she had done it not for information, but merely for the sheer pleasure of it.

He wanted her out of his house. With shaking hands, he snatched the phone and tried the Council again, but still no answer. He slammed the damn thing back in the cradle. He wanted the Council to take her off his hands, out of his house, and away from his family.

Hopefully she would not see through his bluff. He chuckled slightly at his own audacity. He could not turn the girl into a rat or into anything really. He didn't have the kind of power that Amy or Tara or Willow had. Perhaps if he had stayed with Ethan, he might have, but he had neglected his magic for too many years to even aspire to such power. But Faith would not know that. She would be blessedly ignorant about the dark arts, with only enough knowledge of magic to fear it and hopefully, by extension, him as well.

"Hungry, Daddy," his son demanded, tugging on his pant leg.

Giles forced himself to smile and push back his anger. He lifted the boy into his arms, squeezing him tightly and kissing him soundly on the forehead. Robin soon clamored for attention as well, and he lifted her in the other arm, holding them both close for several moments.

Alex could not quite appreciate the tender moment Giles was trying to share with them. "Pancake," he whined insistently.

Giles smiled and sat them both on the counter, where they could watch him cook and he could watch them just as closely.

Morning passed uneventfully. Dawn went to school. Buffy and Giles stayed home with Faith and the twins. Alex seemed fascinated by the dark slayer, so much so that it was a full time job for someone to keep him from sneaking into the living room to watch her. He asked his parents questions they couldn't answer and even offered Faith Mr. Gordo to speed her recovery, as the stuffed pig always made him feel better when he was sick... that, and his father's soup and sleeping in bed with Mommy while she read Peter Pan. Buffy became strangely possessive of the stuffed toy, intercepting the gift and placing it on top of her dresser even as she placed Alex in his room.

Robin clung to her father's side even more so, perceiving his fear of this strange woman and copying it. She would not lay down for a nap with Alex as she had done for the past few days. So Giles lay down in the bed with her, intending to stay only until she fell asleep, but two nights of missed sleep quickly caught up with him, and he drifted off, his twins nestled on either side.

Dawn came home. She walked a thin line in Faith's presence. Dawn had been twelve when Faith came into their lives, and she had developed a serious case of hero worship. Sure, her sister was the Slayer, but Faith was a much cooler Slayer. Dinners at their house and catching the girls sneaking in after patrol only cemented the young girl's idolization. Faith would wink at her and tell her saucy stories when Buffy would leave the room. She had let her put on lipstick once, but Buffy had made her wipe it all off. And one time, Faith had even showed her a little kickboxing move guaranteed to bring any man to his knees. Faith and Xander were simply the two coolest people on the face of the Earth.

But Dawn had missed everything that came after, so she had no bad memories of Faith, nothing to make her fear her. Buffy had sheltered her from that, and so now it was hard to see and understand how the others treated the other slayer. She couldn't pick up the friendly teasing and comfortable relationship they had before. But neither could she hate Faith as Buffy and Giles and Xander seemed to. All she could do was keep Alex out of their hair. A part of her really hoped they could forgive Faith. Because if they could accept Faith, then there was the smallest chance that they could accept Spike, too.

Dinner seemed almost normal. Faith ate at the table with them, her shoulder healing quickly, the burns across her leg nearly gone. The conversation was strained, but not unbearable. Faith managed not to pick a fight. Buffy and Giles managed to be cordial. Dawn got a milk-out-the-nose laugh from Faith when she told her about Spike. The twins managed to distract everyone with their adorable attempts to replicate Faith's milk-out-the-nose feat.

The trouble didn't start until after dinner. It began with a hard rap on the door. Buffy and Giles and Faith exchanged glances. People who knocked were never people you wanted to let in. It could be the police, looking for their fugitive. Faith was ushered upstairs to sit with Dawn and Alex.

But it wasn't the police. It was Quentin Travers. Again.

Buffy crossed her arms and screwed her face up into an impressive scowl. "I thought you went back to England."

"I had business to finish first. My plane was to leave tomorrow."

Giles ushered the man into the house, angry for his own reasons. "I've been trying to reach the Council for two days. A fat lot of good you are if you won't answer your damn phones."

Travers seemed puzzled for a moment as he studied the two of them. Giles noticed then how haggard the older man looked and the circles carved beneath his eyes. Giles' demeanor changed, and he waved the other watcher into the living room.

"Quentin, what is it?" he asked softly.

The other man seemed taken aback, at a loss for words, truly a remarkable occurrence for one generally as composed as Travers. "You really don't know?" And then he laughed, a dark and humorless laugh. He made a slight tutting sound with his tongue, shaking his head, as he walked across to the television. "Not everything you need to know can be found in a book, Rupert. Generally American news is nothing but gossip and fashion, but if you cast an eye to it on occasion, you might be more informed."

He turned the set on and flipped the channels until he had found one of those 24-hour news stations. He turned up the volume and took a seat in a nearby armchair. "We shouldn't have to wait too long. It's still one of the leading stories."

Buffy flopped down on the couch, sliding Faith's bedding off to one side. "You know, I'm not exactly Patient Gal. Just spill already."

But Travers was fixated on Giles' expression. And Giles was fixated on the images on the TV. He dropped into a chair himself, pulling Robin up into his lap. Camcorder footage of smoldering ruin played across the screen; the banner scrolling across the bottom mattered little. Giles recognized the remains of this building. The newscaster voiced over the footage of men in protective suits picking through the rubble.

"Investigations continue in the UK after a series of explosions leveled buildings in London, Manchester, and Bath early Wednesday morning. The destroyed buildings all belonged to one organization, the C.O.W., a company dedicated to the collection and preservation of rare books and artifacts. Authorities have no lead yet on who might be responsible, if indeed this was a targeted attack. Sources involved in the investigation haven't ruled out the possibility that the company's own

labs may have been responsible for the explosions, but deny allegations that these labs involved weaponry research of any kind. The most likely theory..."

Buffy stepped between him and the TV. "I'm not interested in lame official stories for whatever happened. I want the truth. C.O.W.? We are talking Council of Watchers here, aren't we?"

Giles was still focused on a spot just past Buffy, where he would see the images of the devastation on the television if she weren't standing in his way.

Travers answered for him. "Yes. The Council of Watchers. The public designation is slightly different, and its official purpose is as something like a private museum. The labs they speak of are on record as restoration facilities for chemically reconditioning damaged books and artifacts. Although off the record, we had laboratory facilities for alchemy and magic as well."

"Had," Buffy emphasized. "Had, as in it's all gone?"

Travers gestured with one hand to the television behind her. "You see what is left. Our headquarters in London. Our branch offices in Bath and Manchester. There is nothing left."

Giles swallowed hard, his glasses resting on an end table, one hand covering his face. "Survivors?" he asked softly.

There was a long pause before Travers answered him. "None." Giles looked up then and searched the other man's face. Travers repeated himself. "None... that I have been able to locate, at least. Even those who were not at any of the Council compounds were... hunted."

Giles replaced his glasses and absently touched his fingers to his mouth as he thought. "A spell? Like the one that located all the potentials?"

"Not nearly as difficult as that. Whoever- whatever- destroyed the Council complexes could have easily accessed our systems to locate the missing watchers before leveling the buildings. It wouldn't have been a huge undertaking to eliminate them after. Most of the watchers sent on assignment to potential slayers had already been killed in those attacks. Many of the senior watchers and the students were housed within the main headquarters themselves. The short of it, Rupert, is that you and I appear to be the only two they missed."

"Wesley?"

"Ah, yes. If you remember, he was fired for tolerating such insolence from his slayer. He is therefore no longer a watcher and no longer my concern."

"The special ops teams?"

"Weatherby's team had returned to the Manchester office after completing an assignment. Another team was at headquarters, training new members. A third... They managed to get a phone call out before they were likewise killed."

"What did they say?"

Travers snorted in frustration, scratching his head. "I'm not entirely sure. It was from a cell, and the reception was poor. I heard something about 'the beast' before we were cut off."

Giles slid Robin off his lap and stood, his hand darting out to the back of the chair to steady himself. He felt off balance, adrift. He found Travers' eyes again, trying to ground himself, to somehow make sense of all of this. "You are sure? That no one else...?"

Travers sighed. "No, I am not sure, but for the moment we should proceed under the assumption that you and I are the only two watchers left."

Giles nodded, distracted by his own thoughts. He felt Buffy's hand on his arm and glanced over to take in her concerned expression.

"Does that mean whoever did this will be coming after the two of you too?"

He knew that she was only concerned for his safety, but he felt irrationally irritated by her worry. His fate mattered little in the grand scheme of everything that had just happened. Perhaps she could

not grasp the scope of the tragedy, because the Council had never been more than a faceless entity to her. She had not grown up among them, been trained by them, or devoted her life to their ideals. She did not know them by name or by reputation. They were simply the Council, and Travers was their mouthpiece. Her dislike of Travers had likely colored her perception of the entire organization. She could not know that most watchers were decent, honorable, and dedicated. Gwendolyn Post was an aberration. Wesley Wyndham-Pryce had been too desperate to climb out of his father's shadow. These were the only examples of the Council she had, and so she could not understand the depth of loss Giles felt at the destruction just laid before him.

Travers answered for him again. "Possibly. As head of the Council, my whereabouts are not filed in the database. As watcher to the active slayer, Rupert's would not be either, a safeguard against just such a contingency. If our attackers hunted us down through our own database, then the two of us may indeed be overlooked. A location spell, on the other hand, would leave us vulnerable. It would seem the wisest course of action would be to find and destroy the ones responsible before they can find us."

Giles pulled away from Buffy, lifted Robin into his arms, and made his way to the front door. He needed some air, some breathing space. "I'm going for a walk," he murmured and was out the front door before she could protest.

The door slammed, and Buffy looked towards Travers helplessly. "He shouldn't go by himself, should he? It's not safe, right? Especially with Robin."

Travers flicked off the television and stared at the blank screen for a moment. "Who knows? You have all the information I do at the moment." He sat in Giles' vacated chair. "Give him some time to think about it. This is a lot to absorb. The Council... the Council is gone. Bloodlines that trace back farther than the first Roman to touch Italian soil. The lines of watchers are simply gone." He shook his head, the breadth of it too staggering. "Only one potential slayer left. Two watchers. The Slayer is the instrument; the Council is the hand. Have all the contempt you like for us, Buffy, but without the Council, you would have never lasted a year."

Buffy bristled at Travers' speculation. "I did fine on my own for more than a year."

He chuckled, a condescending amusement reserved for a foolish child from a wiser adult. "You are an arrogant thing, aren't you, Slayer? Rupert was still your watcher in all but name. We could have pulled his green card in a second if we really wanted to leave you on your own. You see, you may have turned your back on us, but we never turned away from you. Did you really think we wouldn't keep tabs on you? Did you really think in all that time that Glory was the first your watcher ever contacted the Council for help? And when the Initiative folded, did you really think the government would just slink away and leave you in peace without a little persuasion?"

"You?"

Travers stood and strolled slowly across the room to stand in front of her, staring down his nose at her. "The Slayer is the instrument; the Council is the hand. We point you to your enemy, give you the information you need to destroy them, and clean up your messes when you screw up. Without us, you are nothing but strength and power, with no direction. Without us, you would not know who you are fighting or why."

She stood on her toes to bring herself nose to nose with this man. And he thought *she* was arrogant? "Listen here: I've never liked you. You have an awful big opinion of yourself for someone who never actually gets his hands dirty. It may surprise you to know that I'm actually a pretty damn good slayer. I don't need a guy in a tweed suit to point me to a vampire or throw me a stake. I've

killed more vamps and demons than you've had nightmares about. And even without the Watcher's Council, I can still get my job done. Tell me: without the Slayer, can you still get your job done? I don't think so."

Travers arched one brow. "Well, then, by all means go and perform your sacred duty. Remind me again: who are you hunting? Who killed the potential slayers? And the watchers? Who is even now searching for your daughter?" He smiled as she turned away from him. "No. I suppose you will have to wait for your *watcher* to tell you that."

Buffy chewed on her bottom lip. She hated that smug jerk. She faced him again, not about to admit that he might have a point. "So, Information Guy, you think you're always one step ahead of us? So how come no one at the Council had any idea Faith escaped?"

That did seem to rattle his calm. "Faith escaped? When?"

"Two days ago. On Wednesday..." She trailed off and flopped down onto the couch. "Probably right after the Council went bye-bye. Okay, so maybe that doesn't prove anything. But, yeah, someone tried to kill her, and she escaped." Buffy sighed. She was so not winning this argument. And it quickly dawned on her that there was no need for everyone to hide out upstairs anymore. "Guys, you can come down anytime."

Dawn and Alex came down first, and Buffy really didn't like the way Travers was looking at her son. Like he had found himself a prize stud. His words about bloodlines and watchers echoed in her head.

"Don't even think about it," she warned him.

If he had planned to argue with her, the sight of Faith stopped him. They had never met, to Buffy's knowledge, but Travers clearly recognized her.

"You must be Faith," he said flatly.

Faith crossed her arms and swished her dark hair over her shoulder with a twist of her head. She sized up the aging, balding, overweight man with a sneer. "Watcher?"

Buffy confirmed her assessment. "Head watcher."

Faith rolled her eyes. "Look, you guys tried the taking me back to England thing twice now, and we both know how that worked out. So let's say we just save me the hassle of knocking your guys' heads in and call it a strike three for the Watcher's Council. I swear, I'm going right back to jail after we figure out who wants me dead and stop them."

A long silence from Travers was her only response, so Buffy decided to fill the others in. "You don't have to worry about them taking you to England. It's kind of gone." Travers glared at her, and she clarified. "Not *England* England. That's still there. But the Council part of it's gone. Travers and Giles are it for watchers."

Faith seemed to consider that for a moment. She opened her mouth, then closed it, then tried again. "Wesley?" She tried to make it sound casual, but Buffy could hear the actual concern in her voice.

Travers answered stiffly. "Mr. Wyndham-Pryce is no longer a watcher. He is, I assume, just fine."

Alex stared up at the older watcher. "Don't go water," he told him.

Travers seemed puzzled by the boy's sudden statement and knelt down beside him. "What?"

Buffy would rather her son spent as little time as possible being sized up for casting in Watchers: The Next Generation. She scooped him up into her arms. "I think it's bedtime."

Travers stopped her with a hand on her arm. "He said the same thing to me in LA. He warned me about the water. Does he...? Does the child have any gifts for prophecy?"

Buffy felt her heart stop. She thought of his dreams about his sister, about the fire. He'd even known her name before they had. If Travers got wind of any of that, he would surely find a way to

trap her son into a watcher's life. Especially now that they were such a rare commodity. "No," she answered firmly, meeting Dawn's stare and daring her to say anything. "Never."

She took her son upstairs and put him to bed.

Giles returned home shortly after, Robin asleep in his arms. He deposited her in the bed next to her brother. Buffy wondered why they even had beds for the children. He passed her by without a word and disappeared into the kitchen to make tea. She started to follow him, surprised when Travers intercepted her.

"What do you want?"

He lowered his voice to a whisper. "I thought I should remind you. You did remember that Giles' father was a watcher?"

"Yeah, and his grandmother too." Her eyes widened as she caught Travers' meaning. "His father... oh. I guess I always thought he was dead or something. Giles never talks about him."

"I don't imagine that he would. His father was an instructor at our headquarters in London. He would have been in the building..."

"Oh." She glanced back towards the kitchen. "Even if he didn't like the guy, losing your dad's got to be pretty wiggly."

Travers smiled at her turn of phrase. "Yes, quite."

Buffy turned back to the older man still holding her by the elbow. She had thought he was a smug jerk and pretty much insulted him from the moment he arrived, but was now beginning to suspect that she had been too hard on him. "Did you... lose anybody too?"

He let go of her arm and glanced down. "I was the head of the Council, Miss Summers. I lost more than I can count."

Buffy frowned. She wouldn't correct his use of her maiden name this time. She didn't know exactly what to say. "I'm sorry."

Travers met her eyes, and for once she thought she could see him as the man and not the position. "My grandchildren never showed the aptitude for a watcher's training, thank God. They were not in our database. My daughter worked in the Archives. My son-in-law was an alchemist."

"I'm really sorry. And I didn't mean to be so harsh before, but—"

"But I was banging on about duty and destiny," he finished. "And you were sick of hearing it."

She shrugged, ashamed that he had hit the nail on the head. "So how come you're here, talking with us, instead of...? I mean, after everything, wouldn't you rather...?"

"Of course I would rather. But all that talk about duty and sacrifice isn't just for trying to boss you around. It might surprise you to learn that I actually believe it. Watchers have a sacred calling, just as you have, to protect this world, and sometimes—"

"That means saying and doing what other people can't, what they shouldn't have to."

Travers nodded as she spoke. "Well said."

"Giles told me that once. We had a big argument about duty and sacrifice, the sacrifice being my sister, and he told me that. Kind of the watcher credo, huh?"

"Watchers and slayers must continue on into future generations, or this world is lost. Until we find and stop those responsible, I don't have the luxury of grief. And neither does he." He handed her a small slip of paper. "My number at the hotel. It's getting late, and you appear to have a full house. I'll continue tracking down my own leads. Call if there are any further developments."

"You just don't want to stay in the same house with Faith."

Travers smiled softly as he turned away. "Goodnight, Buffy," he called over his shoulder as he left.

Buffy cast an eye towards Faith, sitting cross-legged in front of the TV. The rogue slayer had found their Nintendo and was busy hooking it up. Maybe Dawn had shown her where it was. Her sister still had a soft spot for Faith.

She wandered into the kitchen where Giles was leaning against the counter, watching his kettle heat up. Dawn had joined him and was attempting to involve him in a conversation, without much success. Sometimes where Giles was concerned, her sister could see things more clearly than she could. Now that Travers had opened her eyes, it was obvious that Giles was overwhelmed and lost.

"Dawn, can I have a minute?"

Giles didn't seem to notice her leaving. Buffy laid a hand on his arm, and then he did look up. "I guess I'm kinda slow. I didn't even think about your father."

Giles chuckled darkly, his forehead creasing in thought. "Yes, my father."

"You've never mentioned him. I guess I thought he'd already died or something."

"Or something," he echoed bitterly. "I was a disappointment. After Eyghon and Randall, he wanted very little to do with me. We haven't spoken since I left to be your watcher."

"So he didn't know about us? About the twins?"

"I'm sure he received the information in a memo somewhere along the way." His expression softened when he caught sight of her concern. "Really, Buffy, I'll mourn very little for my father. He had a chance to be in my life, in our children's lives, but he couldn't bother to even call. I've long given up on the idea of mending fences with him. After Mother died, there was very little room in his heart for anything but his work. I always expected that his death was the only closure I would ever have."

Her eyes traced the lines across his forehead, the sadness that turned down his mouth slightly, the flecks of amber that swirled in his green eyes. She thought she knew him so well, but there were other times she felt like she didn't know him at all. "You never talk about your family. Or about anything from when you lived in England, really."

"It's in my past, very far behind me."

"I still want to know. It's part of what made you who you are today." She touched her fingers to his forehead, ran them down along the side of his cheek. He turned slightly from her touch. "Promise you'll tell me everything someday?"

"Someday," he assured her. "When the world isn't falling down around our ears."

She frowned. "Is that a sneaky way of getting out of it? 'Cause the world's pretty much always falling down around us." That earned her a wry laugh, and she wrapped her arms around him. She had spent so much time lately being mad at him about Robin that she had forgotten how wonderful it felt to simply be held by him. A shame that it took such a tragedy to make her get over herself. "Still, I'm sorry about your dad."

He held her tighter in his arms. "His loss, really, that he never knew what a wonderful woman I married."

She tipped her head up to meet his eyes. "Or what a wonderful son he really had."

Giles smiled and bent his head to kiss her quickly on the lips. The whistle sounded and startled them both, and he pulled away from her to remove the kettle from the burner. "Why don't you go to bed, Buffy? I'll be up for a while researching anyway."

"Uh-uh," she answered firmly, setting the kettle aside and taking him by one hand. "Three nights of research not allowed. You're going to get some sleep, Watcher-mine."

"Really, I can't."

"You can and you will. You were just complaining before Travers got here that you'd gone through everything you have three times already and still haven't found anything useful."

“Yes, but—”

“No buts.” She took him determinedly by the shoulders and steered him towards the stairs. “You also said you’re going to do this really important spell tomorrow, the one that will give us a clue who’s doing this. I’m thinking it might be a good idea to get some sleep for that.”

In the end he didn’t argue with her, which was a good thing, because she was planning on being really stubborn.

Giles’ hands shook slightly as he drew the circle. He couldn’t remember ever being this nervous about performing a spell. Of course, back in the day with Ethan, they had all been too stoned and too arrogant to even consider the risks or the costs. And now the risk was too high, the possible cost too dear, that he would never have even considered performing it were the risks not greater in doing nothing.

Robin watched him from the couch, her eyes so trusting of him. She would be fine, he told himself. She would be fine. He would shield her with his own magic if he had to, but she would be fine.

Alex had been sent to Anya’s along with Dawn. Buffy and Xander and Faith were upstairs, out of harm’s way. He wished he could send his daughter away too, even if it meant she would scream for him for hours, but he needed her for this spell. The magic had touched her, and he would need her if he were to trace it back to the caster.

“Come here, luv,” he whispered tenderly, one hand extended to her.

She slid off the couch and tottered over to him without hesitation. He framed her face between his hands and then leaned forward to kiss her on her forehead. Sitting back on his knees, he looked at her for several long moments, his eyes misting slightly at the thought of everything that could go wrong.

“You’ll be safe, Robin. I promise.” He said it more for his benefit than for hers.

He dipped his fingers into the bowl to his side, holding a concoction of things best not dwelt on. With his thumb, he drew a star on his daughter’s cheek. On the other one, he drew the sun. Across her brow, he drew a straight line. She looked like an Indian warrior. Native American, he quickly corrected himself, with a fond smile for the memories that triggered.

He repeated the markings on his own face. Both of them now decked in red war paint. Fitting really, since this would be the first act of war. Or perhaps the war had already begun. One potential slayer left. The ranks of Watchers decimated. Perhaps this could be considered their counterstrike.

He knew he should think of his father, that he should feel grief or anger or something for his murder. But he had said goodbye to that man, boarded a plane to America, and given up hope of ever regaining the smallest measure of approval. If being chosen as Watcher to the active Slayer was not enough to redeem him, then nothing would ever please his father and to hell with him.

No, the sadness and grief he carried in his heart was not for his father, but for the others. Their faces drifted into his consciousness unbidden: a teacher he had respected, his roommate during his watcher’s training, friends he had made in his years spent with the Council. People he hadn’t seen since leaving England. Dr. Michaels who had cared for Buffy through her pregnancy. He thought of them, of April, of Robin, and even Faith as he made preparations for his spell. He did this for them, to protect them, to avenge them, but not for his father.

“Now, Robin, you must sit in this circle just like this.” He illustrated a cross-legged pose, and she jumped into the circle and tried to mirror him. “Very good. Now I’m going to sit just like that in this triangle here. We’re going to play a game. You’d like to play a game with me, wouldn’t you?”

Her eyes lit up, and she nodded enthusiastically.

“Good. We’re going to see who can stay inside their shape the longest, okay? So you can’t move your feet outside the circle or your hands or even your nose. You have stay completely inside or you lose. Do you understand?”

She nodded again.

He hoped she understood. She couldn’t break the circle during the spell or there would be dire consequences. That was the part that made him the most nervous. A three-year-old was terribly unpredictable to partake in magic, but he had no choice.

“I’m going to give you something to hold.” He pulled out a small, shiny orb. It was the object he had needed to special order, the one he had been waiting on to perform the spell. He handed it to her, and she held it up to her face to look through it like a kaleidoscope. He pushed it back into her lap. “Now, Robin, I want you to just hold that in your hands, and I’m going to float it in the air like magic. Would you like that?”

Her eyes widened, and she smiled.

“Remember: you must stay in the circle completely or you’ll lose the game, and I won’t float the pretty ball anymore. Are you ready?”

She nodded, and he closed his eyes. He wiped the nervous sweat from his palms onto his knees. Slowing his breathing, he focused on the orb in her hands. He began the incantation for the spell and could feel the power in the orb thrumming in answer to his call. He could feel it lifting from her hands. She squealed in delight.

The final words of the spell projected his thoughts through it to her. It was as if the point of the triangle he sat in and the curve of the orb floating above her lap both narrowed and channeled his magic straight to her. He could see his daughter in ways beyond human vision.

He felt the touch of familiar magic surrounding her. Colors in deep burgundy and indigo. The smell of cigarettes and smog and incense. The taste of cheap liquor and even cheaper women. The feel of Chaos. Ethan Rayne. But that magic was old, clinging to her like the lingering cold of a midwinter morning. It was probably a holdover from when she was a baby. Ethan must have cast a spell on the twins. Maybe that’s why they couldn’t find her. Or maybe that’s why they had found Alex. Either was a possibility where Ethan was concerned. He could trace the magic back to his old friend if he wished, discover where the man was hiding out now, what trouble he was stirring up, but he didn’t really care.

More distressing to Giles now was the fact that Ethan’s spell had not dissipated in over three years. Chaos still held her in its grip, warping the spell that Giles even now cast around her. He knew then, without a doubt, that Chaos had saved his daughter. He thought back to the series of coincidences and sheer luck that had prevented her from sharing the other potentials’ fate that night. Not luck. Not coincidence. The hand of Chaos.

But Chaos could take as well as give, could destroy Giles’ plans as easily as his enemies’. Chaos was a fickle master.

Giles couldn’t counter Ethan’s spell, not in the middle of another casting, but he knew his friend’s magic intimately, enough to find a way around it. He reached past the Chaos and a whole range of sensation flooded him.

Black and white, gold and amber, sapphire and rose, peach and violets, loud and soft, deep and low, rushing, rumbling, melding, and merging. The hush of a lover’s whisper, the crash of thunder, and the howling of a lone wolf. The feel of silk and rain and cool metal and warm sand coupled with the smell of burnt rubber and fresh flowers and sweat and perfume.

He gasped against the sensory overload. The spell was cast not by one, but by many, their essences weaving and meshing together into a jumble of competing voices.

He quieted his own mind and methodically unraveled the noise into separate threads. Thirteen distinct auras, and he followed them until they split in two directions.

He chose one path and followed it, the one that the greater number originated from. If necessary, he would follow the second path later.

He saw a house on a row he recognized from Buffy's college days. The spell came from right here in Sunnydale, from campus. He remembered then what John had said at the hospital: April had been following a lead on a sorority house on campus. He reached further to find them, the ones responsible. He expected to find demons, dark creatures plotting the end of the world. He never expected to touch the magic of another so familiar to him.

The smell of lilacs and lavender, pinks and oranges and all the colors of the sunrise, the smell of the library and dusty old books, the sound of light laughter and the soft click of deft fingers across a keyboard.

Willow.

He would recognize the feel of her magic anywhere.

His shock made him careless, made him drift too close, made him forget for a moment why he was there. It only took a second, and then it was too late. He had reached far enough for them to sense his presence. The eight strands of magic he had followed to this house now wrapped themselves around him in an overwhelming din of sight and sound and smell and taste and touch. He felt the flash of their anger and the awesome power of eight working as one.

A moment later and all was silence. He went limp as the tidal wave of power released him, allowing him to catch his breath. He blinked his eyes and looked around. This was not home. This was not the sorority house either. He sat in a massive cavern, stalagmites on either side of him, the roof far above. He knew this place.

Standing several feet away from him was Willow. He could sense the others in the distance behind her, but she was the only one here, if indeed they were actually there at all, if it were not simply an illusion.

Anger burned in eyes that had only held despair for so many months now.

Giles stood, brushing dirt from his trousers, the sound of his movements echoing around him. He studied his surroundings more closely. Yes, he knew this place. This was where Tara had died.

"You knew," she whispered, her voice cold steel.

"Willow, I don't know what's going on, what you've gotten yourself into—"

"Did I say you could talk?" She waved her hand, and his throat closed up. He could make no sound. "Sabrina told me, but I didn't want to believe her. I wanted to believe that the Watcher's Council was good, that you were good."

Giles rubbed at his throat, trying to make a sound, trying to speak to Willow, to reason with her, but her magic was strong. Dear Lord, he hadn't any idea how strong until this moment.

"The Council with all their secrets. They want to study power, to understand it and lock it up in a vault where no one can use it." She began to pace in front of him, and he followed her with his eyes. "Did they tell you to hide those books? Let her learn this much and no more?"

He shook his head, his eyes pleading with her to understand. He had done it to protect her, to keep her from delving into things she was not ready for, to stop her from making the same mistakes he had made with his power.

"They want to keep the strongest magicks to themselves, because everything has to be done the hard way, doesn't it? She'll just have to get over Oz like anyone else would. Tara too. Magic's just a cheat, a crutch. Good people never use it unless they have to." She stomped across the distance

between them and grabbed him by his shirtfront. "Look me in the eyes. You knew. You knew, and you let her die."

Giles wrenched himself from Willow's grip. He didn't understand what she was talking about, but he couldn't voice his confusion.

"I told Sabrina that you didn't have that kind of power, but here you are spying on us. For them. I know what the Council did to the other four who bore our mark. Killed because you were all afraid of our power. And they'd do it to the rest of us if they could. But I won't let them. Or you."

She took several steps backwards and gestured to the ground with her hands. A circle of blue flame flared to life around him. He covered his face with his hands, spinning around to find that the flames completely enclosed him.

"When Oz left, you could have helped me with the magic, helped heal my heart. They did. The spell was simple and easy, and just like that the pain was gone. Just because something is simple and easy doesn't make it wrong. But I can tell you what *is* wrong. Standing there and doing nothing when you have the power to make a difference."

She was shouting at him now with all the breath she had in her body. Giles had never been afraid of Willow before, but now he was very, very afraid. He shrank back as far as he could in the circle she'd drawn around him in fire. He tried to think of protection spells, shields, anything that didn't require a spoken incantation, anything he could do without voice.

"You stood there and let her die when you had the spell and the power to save her. You knew, and you did *nothing*."

He shook his head desperately. Is that what she thought? That he could have saved Tara and didn't? He gestured to his throat. She had to let him speak, had to let him explain.

He saw her eyes turn black as she lifted her hands. Power crackled in the air around her. Static and silence and the clean scent before lightning strikes.

His lips moved. He didn't know if the magic would work without voice, but he had to try. Somewhere very far from here his daughter sat inside a circle, his magic woven around her. He released her from it, untangled all the threads that held them together. He would shield her with his own magic. He had sworn it. He would shield her even if it meant he could not shield himself.

Her black eyes narrowed. Her voice quivered with her hate. "The Council can keep its secrets and its power all locked away where no one can use it. Because I have my own power, and you're about to taste it, old man."

With that she stretched out both hands towards him, chanting in Sumerian. He recognized the spell, recognized that it was so far beyond her, he wondered how she had ever learned it and what book she could have found it in. But then he felt the seven behind her, felt their magic join with hers into a perfectly woven tapestry. He solidified the shield around his daughter with every drop of magic he possessed. Willow's spell would not touch her. He would take it all.

The magic whirled around him. He was at the eye of the hurricane, the center of the tornado. He braced himself against the onslaught. Willow's spell would not kill him. She was not so far gone for that yet. But he feared that her spell would be worse than a clean death. He feared it as every thinking person would. The nightmare of a whole mind locked inside a useless body. The power of eight spiraled around him.

Very far away in a house on Revello Drive, Giles' body screamed.

Buffy heard the scream and barreled down the stairs so fast, she nearly tripped on the last one, slayer reflexes or no. It was worse than she imagined. Giles was slumped over on the floor, unconscious, unmoving. Robin sat a few feet away, curled into a little ball, crying and rocking.

Buffy turned her watcher on his back, cradled his head in her lap. His eyes were closed, and he wasn't breathing. "Giles!"

She heard Xander and Faith behind her, but didn't turn to see them. "Oh God, oh God," she moaned. "I don't know what to do!"

Xander placed one hand on her shoulders, before easing Giles from her lap. "CPR, Buffy. Faith, call for an ambulance."

"I can't. I can't. You do it." Buffy's head was shaking, her hands pressed to her ears. All she could hear over and over again was the sound of her mother's ribs cracking beneath her slayer strength. She could still feel the coolness of her lips as she tried to breathe life into her mother's dead body.

"Faith, an ambulance now!" Xander was shouting, but Faith just stood frozen in the foyer. A moment later and she opened the door, running from the house. "Dammit! Buffy—"

"I can't. I can't."

Xander tilted Giles' head back and began breathing for him. Buffy crawled over to her daughter and pulled the crying girl into her lap. Less than a minute and Xander had him breathing on his own, his pulse strong. He leaned back against the coffee table and met Buffy's tear-streaked gaze.

"What do we do?" she whispered. "Do we call for help?"

"I don't know. The spell he was doing... did he mention anything like this?"

She shook her head, wiping the tears from her face, but more just spilled down after. "He said it would let him see whatever magic had touched Robin and trace it back to the person who did it. I don't know what's wrong with him."

"If it's magic, there isn't much a doctor could do." Xander snapped his fingers. "Willow."

She shook her head. "We've been trying for days. Giles thought she could help with the spell, but she hasn't returned any of our calls. What do I do, Xander? I don't know anything about magic. I can do the trancey meditation stuff, like the spell I did for my mother. Maybe that will work." Her eyes grew wide with hope, and she slid Robin from her lap to come closer to Giles. "I could maybe do that pull-the-curtain-back thing and see whatever spell is on him."

"And then what?"

Her face fell again. She was out of her depth. Giles was the knowledge guy. Travers was right: she couldn't do this alone; she couldn't do any of it without a watcher. She smoothed his hair back from his forehead tenderly and bent to place a gentle kiss over his mouth. She stayed like that for several moments before sitting up and meeting Xander's compassionate gaze.

She shrugged. "I thought maybe... I don't know... Sleeping Beauty or something. Silly, huh?"

Robin crawled closer to her father then, coming between her mother and him. The girl probably understood about Sleeping Beauty, because she bent to kiss him too. She frowned when nothing happened and studied him very seriously. One hand poked him in the side a few times, and then a little harder, trying to make him move.

Robin sighed and lay down beside him, her head resting on his shoulder. Very softly she said, "Giles."

Buffy dropped her head in her hands and began to cry in earnest. It was the first word her daughter had spoken since coming home.

Chapter 8

The Long Sleep

They argued back and forth about what to do with Giles. Buffy wasn't sure they should move him, wasn't sure it wouldn't affect whatever magic was on him, wouldn't make it more difficult for them to help him later. Xander didn't think the spell Giles had cast was the issue. Robin was fine and had left her circle without repercussions, and the orb had shattered. He thought this was something else entirely.

"Because you're the big expert on magic?" she snapped.

"No, you're absolutely right. Let's just leave him on the living room floor. Dawn and Alex will love that when they come home. We can use him for a coffee table."

She started crying again, and Xander just held her for several minutes until she calmed. Through everything, Robin simply lay beside Giles, her head on his shoulder.

In the end, Buffy relented and agreed to move him upstairs. Maybe he would be more comfortable in the bed, and it would at least save Alex the pain of seeing his father like this. Between Xander and Buffy they arranged the watcher in his bed. Buffy took a dish of water and methodically washed the paint from his face. Xander raised his eyebrows.

"What?" she replied defensively. "We already moved him, so this can't hurt anything. Besides, you didn't see the stuff he used to make it. Blaghhh. I don't think he'd want that on his face all night."

Getting the stuff off Robin proved more challenging. She squirmed impressively and started kicking and screaming if Buffy pulled her too far from Giles. She finally had a clean face, and Giles probably had a sprinkling of bruises across his sides and arms from his daughter's frantic struggles.

Finished with all of those details, they were still left with the same dilemma as when they started: figuring out what spell Giles was under and breaking it.

Buffy felt helpless. Give her an enemy to fight, and she could maybe do something. But she could no more do magic than she could read Greek or translate Arabic or do any of the things that Giles, as her watcher, did.

Worse than that, she didn't know who to ask for help. Their crack Slayerette team had slowly dissolved: Tara dead, Willow wanting nothing more to do with the slaying, Anya too far along in her pregnancy to even dare magic, and she and Xander useless for what needed to be done.

Buffy sighed. What they needed was Giles. He had picked up the slack for each missing Scooby. Now, without him, there was no one to research, no one to cast spells.

She sat on the bed beside her husband, holding his hand and brooding miserably over a myriad of what-ifs and should-haves. Robin sat on his other side, still occasionally trying to rouse him with determined prods to his side and soft pleas of his name. Xander watched over both of them silently.

Finally she could take no more. Angel was the mooney brooder, not she.

"Xander, find Willow. Go to her apartment, ask her professors, whatever you have to do. Just find her."

"What are you going to do?"

"Call Travers." She pulled out the slip of paper with his hotel number. "I don't know how much good he'll be, but he's a watcher, right? He's pretty much all I've got right now."

Xander nodded, agreeing with all of her plans so far. "So what do we do about the escaped psycho? She pretty much booked it at the first opportunity."

"Faith?" Buffy shrugged, reaching for the nightstand phone and punching in Travers' number. "At this point in time I'd offer her an all-expense paid trip to hell, but lucky for her I don't have the time." The operator answered, and Buffy gave him the room number. "Right now all that matters is Giles,"

she finished to Xander. After several rings, she frowned and hung up. "Hmm... Travers isn't in. Okay, maybe Anya could help." Off Xander's look, she clarified. "With the research part, not the magic part. After all those years of experience casting terrible spells on men, maybe this one will be familiar."

"Not a clue," Anya declared, standing beside the bed, staring down at Giles. "Vengeance spells are a little more dramatic, more messy. Maybe if he had boils or if someone had shrunk his..." Anya peeked under the blanket covering him. "Maybe you should take his clothes off and check."

Buffy sighed and leaned back against the bedroom wall. "No, I don't think there's anything physically wrong with him."

Anya dropped the blanket again. "This isn't like anything I've ever seen." She brightened. "Oh, except once I cursed this man so he would always fall asleep in the middle of sex." Her smile faded. "But you and Giles weren't having sex. You haven't had sex since before this whole finding Robin, giving her up, getting her back, and her not wanting you thing."

"Anya!" Buffy glanced towards her daughter, blushing and feeling both embarrassed and irritated. "That is *way* not open for public discussion... and... and I can't believe you... I mean, how do you know?" She leaned closer, her voice lowering. "Giles doesn't talk about... stuff, does he?" She shook her head, dismissing the whole conversation. "Never mind. It's really none of your business."

Anya laughed. "*Please*, Giles can hardly stand to hear about it. Like he'd ever talk about it. And it is so my business. Your sex life... or lack of one... directly impacts my work environment. He gets all grouchy and makes me double check the inventory database."

"Anya," Buffy said, with more patience in her voice than she had in her heart. "Can we get back to figuring out how to help Giles?"

Anya frowned in concentration. "Are you sure he's not just sleeping? He hasn't really gotten a full night's sleep in a while, you know." She leaned down, barely an inch from his face and shouted, "GILES!"

Buffy pulled her back by the arm. "He's not sleeping."

Robin seemed to think it was worth a try, too, and began chanting loudly in his ear, "Giles, Giles, Giles!" She punctuated each repetition with a petulant jab to his side.

"Although, he's probably going to be deaf soon." Buffy perched on the edge of the bed, reaching across to still the child's hands and pull her to Giles' other side. Robin didn't protest sitting in her lap or the rhythmic caresses through her hair. "Robin, honey, Daddy's going to sleep for a little while."

She blinked up with wide blue eyes, so like Buffy's own. "Why?"

Giles had tried so hard for so many days now to break her silence. She was finally speaking again, and he couldn't even enjoy it. And of all the conversations Buffy had imagined having with her little girl, this had not ranked among them.

She brushed the girl's long hair back behind her shoulders, smiling kindly. "There's a spell on him, and we have to figure out how to break it."

Robin looked back towards her father, frowning. This must be a lot for a child her age to process. Finding the lines between fantasy and reality blurring beyond detection was often more than most grown-ups could handle. Hence the citywide epidemic of repression. Buffy was fifteen when she became the Slayer. She couldn't imagine what it would have been like to be raised to it like Kendra, or surrounded by it like Robin and Alex. Alex, at least, had the security of an almost stable home life and a circle of devoted family. Robin had lost her whole world. Giles was the center she clung to. Now, to

lose that center too... Buffy didn't have the slightest idea how to reassure the girl. That was another thing that Giles would know. He would know what to do for Robin. He would know what book to look in and what spell to try. He would know how to quiet Buffy's own fears and how to prepare her for what she needed to do. Buffy knew nothing.

Robin looked up again at her mother, her forehead still furrowed with her concentration. She asked quietly: "Bad witch? Bad spell?"

Buffy nodded slightly, quiet for a moment as she tried to maintain control over her emotions. When she was sure her voice wouldn't break, she answered. "Yes, a totally evil spell. But don't worry, honey, we're going to undo it, and then he'll be all better."

Robin seemed to accept this and crawled out of Buffy's lap to cuddle against Giles' side. Buffy wondered if she had just lied to her daughter. Yeah, they would undo whatever had been done to Giles. Piece of cake. Just like they would de-rat Amy. Here it was almost seven years later, and all they had accomplished was the assembling of the world's most impressive Habitrail.

Buffy leaned down to kiss her daughter's forehead, and then reached up to smooth back a few stray curls of hair from Giles' brow. She wanted nothing more than for him to open his eyes and smile and tell her he'd had a nice nap. What if she never got to look into his eyes again?

"Robin, Aunt Anya and I are going in the hallway to talk. Will you be okay here with Daddy?"

She nodded.

Anya led the way, and Buffy shut the door carefully behind her. Alex loitered in the hallway, scuffing his feet against the baseboards and staring intently at the closed bedroom door. She squatted down eye level with her son.

"Hey, Little Rabbit, what're you doing up here?"

He shrugged, rocking on his feet and tugging on the zipper of his light spring coat. She reached across, unzipped, and peeled off his jacket. He cast a lingering glance over her shoulder as she did. Buffy turned to follow his eyes, staring at the closed bedroom door now too.

"Daddy sick?" he asked.

Buffy lifted her son into her arms as she stood, hanging his jacket on the stair railing for now. She saw Giles' eyes looking into hers, and she ached all the more for it. "Daddy did some magic, and now he's sleeping. But Mommy and Xander and Anya and Dawn are going to find some more magic to wake him up. Okay?" Buffy carried the boy downstairs, glancing around the living room and into the dining room for Dawn. "Where'd Dawn go?" she asked her son.

He pointed towards the front door. "Ou'side."

Buffy had a sneaking suspicion where her sister might have disappeared to, but she was so not in the mood to worry about it right now. She looked over her shoulder to where Anya had followed to the bottom of the stairs. "Could you watch the twins for me? Until Dawn or Xander get back? I'm going to find Travers."

"Sure. Kids like me." Anya smiled and stroked her rounded stomach. "I've been researching entertaining and educational activities for different age brackets. I can think of seventeen different games that they should find enjoyable."

Buffy frowned. "Really, you don't have to entertain them. Maybe just make sure they don't get into too much trouble." She looked back and forth between her son and Anya with some amount of trepidation.

"Come on, Buffy. Giles brings Alex to the shop everyday. And he sticks me with kid-watching duty every time he has a prophecy to hunt down or some fascinating demon to research. Alex and I are buddies, right, kiddo?" Alex nodded eagerly. "Also, I'm much more strict than Xander. They'll be fine. And well behaved and orderly. It'll be like the Von Trapp family with the whistles."

Buffy frowned again, before setting her son on the ground. "You'll be good for Aunt Anya?" The boy agreed happily. "And do whatever she says?" Another affirmation. "And remember that she can't pick you or Robin up right now?"

Alex sighed and nodded, clearly tiring of these questions.

Buffy steered him towards the living room. "Your father's going to kill me for this, but I think this is the perfect time for a little cartoon marathon." She found something acceptable, and her son was immediately glued to the set, every bit the pop culture addict that his mother was and his father abhorred.

She walked back to the foyer, talking softly to Anya as she slipped on a light coat. "Just keep an eye on them. I don't think Robin will leave Giles' side. Keep checking on them and see if you can't find something for her to do while she's in there. If anything happens... If Giles... Well, call an ambulance if you have to, but I'd rather have him here at home." She spared one last look for her son. "Try and keep Alex from sneaking into the bedroom. Seeing his father like that would only upset him."

"Go get 'em." Anya slugged the Slayer in the shoulder. "Good luck finding Travers. I hope you both find a spell to help Giles."

Buffy smiled weakly as she opened the door. She paused in the doorway as she thought of something else. "If Dawn gets back before I do, don't let her out of your sight."

Spike heard his crypt door bang open behind him, but didn't bother to turn away from the TV. He hoped it wasn't the watcher again. He wasn't in the mood for another trip to the hardware store for tinted windows. Not to mention that he was in the middle of a really good show.

"Back for another round of wail on Spike?"

"No." The voice was soft and far more feminine than even Spike would ever accuse the Watcher's of being.

He turned, his heart in his eyes when he saw her. "Dawn!" He jumped up from the battered couch, but stopped just before touching her.

Her eyes were sad and hurting. The smile left his face, replaced by concern and sympathy and just a touch of anger for the bastards who claimed they loved her at the same time they caused her such pain. He reached out one hand to cup her chin in his palm.

"Sweet Bit, I'm sorry. Shoulda never let them stand between us."

Her long fingers wrapped around his wrist, pulling his hand from beneath her chin and up to rest against her cheek. His thumb brushed across her cheekbone as he bent to kiss her tenderly on the lips. So soft, so innocent. She was the only taste of heaven his demon could ever hope for.

He pulled away slightly, hoping to have erased some of the sadness from her eyes, but only finding it etched deeper in her face. A warm tear slipped between his fingers, and he wiped it away. "You gonna tell me about it, or you gonna cry me a river?"

Her eyes closed, and she took a deep breath. "It's Giles."

He spun away from her, shaking his head. He felt the bloodlust rise in proportion to his anger. Damn this sodding chip. Who wouldn't he love to kill right about now?

"Damn watcher. Always sticking his nose where it doesn't belong. I've half a mind to rip it off his face and—"

"Spike!"

He faced her again, stopped mid-rant by the desperation in her voice. "I take it you didn't give them the slip so you could commiserate 'bout how much you missed me?"

She shook her head.

"Big bad on the prowl?"

Dawn shrugged and walked slowly towards him. "Giles won't wake up."

Spike took her by the shoulders and guided her toward the couch where they both sat. She stayed still for several moments, her head bowed, and he brushed her long auburn hair back so he could see her face. Poor Niblet. Watcher may be acting like a real prick right about now, but even Spike had to admit that the man had been a better father to Dawn than her own miserable excuse for a sperm donor. Dawn did love Giles. If she didn't, she wouldn't have cared so much what he and Buffy thought, would have just packed up and disappeared into the night with her vampire boyfriend. And Spike wouldn't have argued with her one bit.

He cocked his head to one side as he studied her. "He have a stroke or something?" Spike realized that the man was mortal and not exactly in his prime, something the others seemed to overlook in light of Buffy's slayer lifespan.

She shook her head, more tears spilling down her cheeks. Spike scowled and got off the couch, striding to the other side of the crypt to light a cigarette. He really didn't know how to handle weepy women. Except when he was killing them. Then he had always appreciated the tears.

"He get knocked on the head again? Twelfth concussion comes with a free coma sort of deal?"

"No," she managed between sniffling sobs.

Spike took a drag off his cigarette, cursing his sharp tongue. He was only making things worse for Dawn, and he didn't know how to stop.

"You said you wouldn't do that anymore," she said softly.

He kicked a rock across the room, frustrated with himself. "Sorry, Niblet. More than a hundred years of mouthing off's a pretty hard habit to break." He followed her gaze to the lit cigarette in his hand. "Oh, *that*." He stomped it out beneath his boot. "Yeah, a hundred years of that's pretty hard to break too." He crossed back to her, kneeling in front of the couch. "Look, whatever you need, I'm your guy. You need me to bash anyone's head in, I'll be more than happy to oblige." She gave him a somewhat soggy laugh, and he took her head between his hands, pressing their foreheads together. "You need a shoulder to cry on, I can do that too. Coat may be leather, but it's waterproofed." He wiped off her tears with the back of his hand. "You need me to come back with you, I'll even risk a staking by big sis."

She smiled bravely for him, and he kissed her fiercely on her forehead, and then looked deeply into her eyes. "So you gonna tell me what's what or we gonna play twenty questions all night?"

"Giles was doing a spell," she told him.

And then Dawn filled him in on everything he had missed over the last two weeks. Apparently he had missed a lot. Everything from reclaiming the missing twin to the slaughter of all potential slayers save one to the destruction of the Watcher's Council.

Dawn was calm by the time she finished, but Spike was sprawled out on his side of the couch in shock. "Bugger. Kill all the potentials, kill the Slayer, no more slayers. Wish I'd thought of it." He caught her wide-eyed glare out of the corner of his eye and coughed. "Back when I was evil. When I liked doing evil things. Not now of course." He stood and started pacing in front of her. "The Watcher's Council. Now that's something else entirely. They got the potentials; they made a try at Faith. All they got to do now is finish off the littlest slayer and Faith, and they win. What's their gripe with the watchers?" He stopped pacing as he considered and then dismissed his own question. "'Sides thousands of years of trying to wipe our kind out of existence, that is?"

Dawn shrugged. "Giles was researching it. Thought he could figure out who was doing all of this by casting a spell on Robin."

"Looks like that worked out splendidly." She seemed near tears again, and Spike knelt down in front of her once more, tipping her chin up to look him in the eye. "We'll figure it out, Lil Bit. Give the man some credit. He's stronger than you think."

She held his eyes with her own, silently pleading with him. "You can help him, right? You've done magic, Spike. You can figure out a spell for Giles."

He shook his head, flashes of a dream spiraling through his skull. *Just an itty-bitty spell, Spikey. And then he'll give you the Key to your happiness.*

"I can't do magic, Dawn."

"But... but... That time in New Orleans and that guy with the—"

"Just stories. I was only tryin' to impress you, and all those 'I killed the whole family' stories were wearing a bit thin."

"So you lied to me? None of those things really happened?"

He turned away from her, ashamed now. "No, they all happened just like I said. 'Cept Dru was the sorcerer, not me. I'm no better of a magician than a poet, or an evil vampire for that matter." He faced her again, his mind searching, his heart desperately wanting to help her. "Why don't you get Red to do her mojo on him?"

"Xander went looking for her, but... Ever since Tara died..." Dawn trailed off, and Spike finished.

"Red hasn't been the eagerest bestest Wiccan in Sunnyhell. Cracked her crystal ball, if you ask me."

"Spike, please."

"Now look here, Platelet, I know you're fond of the witch, but ever since Glory, you've all turned a blind eye to the kinds of stuff she's been dipping her hands into. I know it's no longer my place, and my Scooby membership has probably been permanently revoked for the unforgivable sin of loving the Slayer's kid sister, but this affects you, and so I can't just keep my mouth shut.

"The kind of power Red has... it seems like a good thing to have around for puttin' up invisible walls to keep out armies and puttin' souls back in bodies and creepin' through mansions in India without makin' a sound. But there's a price for that kinda power. You get a taste for it, and it's not so easy to go back to pig's blood, if you catch my drift."

"Willow stopped doing magic for months."

Spike stood and strolled away from her, stopping to lean against the sarcophagus, his back to her. He feared very few things in his unlife. But in the past few years he had discovered one of the drawbacks to caring about mortals: they inevitably died. Even Dawn, who wasn't a slayer, would eventually be laid into the ground. He just would rather it were many years from now. The thought that he could lose her at any moment, that something could happen to steal her away now rather than later, that was one of the few things that a vampire such as he could still fear. He looked over his shoulder at her. She was watching him, waiting. He wondered why he even had to explain it to her, why they hadn't seen it even before Tara died.

"Just bottling it up. Mark my words: the fallout's coming, and when it does, you'd be wise to reach a minimum safe distance."

Dawn crossed her arms defiantly and stood. "Willow would never hurt anyone."

"No? The minute Glory brain-sucked Tara, she went charging in, throwing every wicked bit of power she had at the bint. Red went up against a *god*, Dawn. And now Tara's dead. How much more pissed off do you think she is?" He sighed and lowered his eyes. This conversation was going nowhere fast. "I just don't want anything to happen to you is all."

He heard Dawn's soft footsteps on the cold dirt of the crypt floor. He heard her with his vampiric senses: each tentative footfall, the quiet breaths, and the steady thrum of her heartbeat. So he didn't startle when he felt her hand slide up his stomach, across his chest. He just reached up and laid his own hand over hers.

"I'll be careful, Spike. I promise. And I'll make sure Buffy has a talk with Willow. But... we still need to help Giles. Now. And we can't find Willow, and Anya's having a baby, so no magic allowed, and with Giles unconscious and Tara... dead... well, that's it for magic-type people in the gang."

Ding-dong, the witch is dead, and you'll have to play with her toys while the Watcher sleeps.

He still heard the faintest echo of Dru's voice in his head, and he wondered if she had truly visited him in his dream, or if it had all come from his own mind. He wasn't sure which answer he wanted to believe.

"Please, Spike."

He traced the curves of her face with his eyes and squeezed her hand slightly. "Sure, Lil Bit, I'll do my best."

Willow curled up on her bed, sobbing. This betrayal hurt worse than she could have imagined. She hadn't wanted to believe Sabrina, but it all made too much sense to ignore. Travers had always given her the creeps, and all those watchers poking their noses around the Magic Box like they owned the place and asking all those questions like the Spanish Inquisition. She remembered how that Indian watcher had interrogated them, Nigel something or other. *And you're registered as practicing witches under the names as you gave them to me?*

Registered so they could be watched.

Willow had been down with the hurrahs and the go-Buffy's after the Slayer's standoff with the Council: getting Giles reinstated and putting those self-righteous prigs in their places. But now she wondered if being brought back under the wing of the Council had been a victory.

It made sense that the Council would want to monitor those possessed of power, would want to keep them from becoming too strong or learning too much. They were like the mob... the occult mob... the English occult mob with tea instead of booze. Willow knew they killed when they felt it necessary, and not just demons. The special ops team had come for Faith after her coma. Giles had said the special ops performed the dirtier work of the Council: smuggling, theft, wetworks. Wetworks: a nice clean word for murder, the kind of word you could use while discussing it over tea.

Four bodies so far, all bearing the mark of their group, all murdered. The Council was afraid of them. Thought they were getting too powerful. Sabrina warned her to be careful. But even if Willow could believe what the Watcher's Council was capable of, she hadn't been able to believe it about Giles. He may be a watcher, but he was her friend. If he'd had the power to save Tara, he would have. But he didn't have that kind of power, or at least she had thought he hadn't. He'd proved her wrong and Sabrina right with his little peeping Tom spell.

And it hurt. Hurt more than she could bear to be betrayed by those she had trusted.

"Willow."

Sabrina's voice startled her slightly, but she didn't move. The semi-darkness hid her tears, but not the desperate catch in her voice with each breath.

"Willow, I'm sorry about your friend. I was really hoping that I was wrong about him. But you can't keep beating yourself up about it. It's not your fault. He had you fooled."

Willow pulled herself up, her back pressed to the wall, her knees drawn up to her chest. "God, Sabrina, did you feel his power?"

Her friend sat on the bed beside her, a sympathetic frown on her face. "Yeah."

"I mean, I've done a spell here or there with him, but nothing like that. I had no idea he could..." Her eyes grew distant, her heartbeat pounding in her ears. "He could have saved her, couldn't he?"

Sabrina shrugged and looked down at her fingers. "Maybe there's some kind of watcher rule about—" Willow cut her off with a seriously intense look, her old "resolve face." Sabrina finished in a whisper. "Yeah, he probably could have."

Willow started sobbing again, dropping her head to her knees. She felt Sabrina scoot over on the bed, her hand softly resting on her shoulder. "You couldn't have done things any differently, and you can't change things now. You can't blame yourself."

"I don't. I blame him. I hate him."

"You don't hate him."

"I do." She wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand. "But I should... I can't just leave him like that. I should..."

"Willow." Sabrina waited until their eyes met. "You were very brave. You saved us. If you hadn't done that, the Watcher's Council would probably have taken more of us by now. It's up to you, but if you let him go, he'll just tell the Council and they'll send others."

Willow nodded reluctantly, not trusting herself to speak.

Sabrina rose finally and slowly walked towards the door. She paused with her hand on the doorknob, frowning slightly. "I've been thinking. That was a pretty close call. And we haven't always been so lucky. Maybe it's not safe here anymore. I think we should all just go. Just in case. And then when we're settled someplace else, someplace safer, you could undo the spell, after we're sure he can't find us again."

The door closed, and Willow slid back down, curled into a ball on the top of her bedspread. She was doing the right thing. She had to keep reminding herself of that. She was protecting her friends, practically her family now. But if this was the right thing to do, why did she feel so terrible about doing it?

Alex waited until he heard Anya close the bathroom door before sneaking up the stairs. She went to the bathroom a lot. He paused outside his parent's bedroom, his ear pressed to the door, listening for a moment before he stretched on tiptoes to reach the knob.

He entered hesitantly, unsure what he would find. Robin sat cross-legged on the bed with an assortment of coloring books and crayons. His father looked like he was sleeping. Alex climbed onto the bed, then bounced on his father's chest with a timid smile. He waited for his father to groan or to crack his eyes open or to suddenly grab him and tickle him. Alex bent over to give little Eskimo kisses on the nose, waiting and watching, but his father didn't move.

"Sleepy Giles," Robin informed him bluntly.

Alex looked over at her, and they stared at each other in silence for a long time. He hadn't expected his sister to talk, but neither did it shock him all that much. He just accepted it, like he accepted the blue crayon she offered out to him. They sat on either side of their father and colored pictures of houses and trees and flowers and a big beautiful sun suspended in a clear blue sky.

It was Anya who took care of the details for Giles. Buffy came home to find that a nurse had already visited, and would be by three times a day for as long as needed to take care of Giles' physical needs. Home hospice care. Anya had made up some story, and the agency hadn't questioned her when she paid in cash.

Buffy knew she should be thankful for Anya's practicality, but she resented her initiative. Arranging medical care for him meant that Anya thought he would be like that long enough to need it. Buffy was still holding on to the hope that he would wake in time to fall asleep in her arms that very night, for once not curled up on opposite sides of the bed as they had been for two weeks now. Seeing him lying so still and pale, an IV slowly dripping into his arm... Buffy choked back her tears lest she break down in front of the children.

They moved the television into the bedroom, because it seemed more traumatic to try and keep the children from their father than to simply let them stay beside him. A part of Buffy wondered if a nonstop marathon of Barney and Sesame Street might be just the thing to coerce Giles out of his unnatural sleep. At least it kept the twins occupied. They had already tried their hand at a crayon mural for the bedroom wall when Anya wasn't watching.

Buffy halfheartedly leafed through the stack of books Giles had left on the dining table. Travers was a no-show. He had checked out of his hotel, in a hurry apparently. Too much in a hurry to let the Slayer know where he had gone. She wondered if it was spite or pride or simply the habit of years of answering to no one, of having the invisible ranks of watchers working beneath him, ready and able to take her call.

Xander's mission was also a bust. Worse than that, actually. Willow was not at her apartment, her apartment in fact being vacant. No one had any idea where she might have gone. No forwarding address. Even her professors had no idea where to find her. Apparently she had taken personal leave from her master's program.

So they were no better off than when they had started. They all ended up sitting in the master bedroom: the twins on either side of Giles, Buffy sitting on the edge of the bed, leaning against the headboard, Anya reclining in a rocking chair, her feet resting in Xander's lap where he sat on the floor massaging them. For some reason none of them could tear their eyes from the purple puppets' rendition of "near" and "far" played out on the television.

"This is a classic," Xander informed them, imitating their voices as his hands drifted "near" and "far" from Anya's-

"Xander!" Buffy scolded with a wide-eyed glare. "Impressionable children sitting not so 'far' from where I'm 'nearly' ready to smack you upside the head."

He held up his hands and in the Count's voice pronounced, "One, two, two hands keeping all to themselves over here."

She sighed and glanced over to Giles' still features. Sliding off the bed, she headed back downstairs. Enough sulking and feeling sorry for herself. Time to hit the books.

Buffy was just coming down the stairs when the front door opened. Dawn stepped through, Spike standing on the porch just behind her. The two sisters stopped mid-step, a stony silence descending between them.

Dawn turned to look at Spike, still waiting at the threshold for his invitation. "Spike—"

Buffy darted forward the remaining distance between them, covering her sister's mouth with her hand. "Don't you dare invite him in. Dawn, I can't believe with everything going on that you would sneak off to make time with *Spike*." She felt Dawn's tongue lick across her palm and snatched her hand back. "Eww! That's gross!"

Dawn crossed her arms and glared. "Will you listen to me for two seconds?"

"Fine."

"Don't mind me," Spike offered, leaning sideways against the invisible barrier barring his way into the Summers' home. "I'll just wait right here while you two birds have it out."

"Shut up, Spike," Buffy snapped.

"Don't tell my boyfriend to shut up."

"Excuse me?"

"I went to get Spike because I thought he could help Giles."

"Okay, I'll bite." Buffy looked pointedly at her watch. "What have you been doing the rest of the last three hours? Never mind. I don't think I want to know. Get up to your room."

"Supplies, you stupid git." Spike held up a small bag bearing the Magic Box logo.

Buffy gave the vampire a sideways glance. "You really came here to help?"

He sighed and rolled his eyes, still lounging against the invisible barrier. "I'll do what I can. Ain't promising it'll work, but I'll give it a try."

She focused on her sister again. "And this has absolutely nothing to do with trying to win us over to the idea of you and Spike as a couple?"

"If it helps Giles, does it matter?"

"It won't work. The winning us over part, I mean." Buffy shook her head, resigned. How could she refuse even the smallest chance of helping Giles? She groaned at the thought of having to accept Spike's help, but swallowed her pride and said the necessary words. "Fine. Spike, come in."

The barrier he was so patiently leaning against disappeared, and he landed on the floor in a heap.

Dawn reached down to help him up, but Buffy stepped between them. She pointed her finger in Spike's face. "No touching of my sister. No kissing of my sister. And no mooning over my sister."

"Mooning? Pfft! Please, Slayer. Tell me: am I allowed to be in the same room with your precious sister?"

"As a matter of fact, no." She snatched Dawn by the hand and escorted her up the stairs.

"Hey! This is so not fair!"

"Yeah? Well neither is my watcher in a coma."

"You're bloody welcome!" Spike's voice echoed behind her.

Buffy pushed Dawn into the master bedroom, informing Anya and Xander that they were relieved of duty and now Dawn would be watching the children.

Which left the rest of their group assembled around the dining room table staring at a large stack of books, all the books that Giles had been working on that Buffy could find. The same books that had gotten him into this mess, and hopefully the same books that would provide the way out of it.

"Who said he could join the party?" Xander complained when he caught sight of the vampire.

"If he can help, I'm going to let him."

"Fine, but if helping at any time leads to staking, I call first dibs."

At the end of two hours, the only progress they had made involved sorting the books into two piles, one of the piles noticeably larger than the other. Dawn had joined them as well, after the twins were both asleep, but was forced to sit on the opposite end of the table from Spike.

Xander sighed and propped his chin up with one hand. "Anyone ever notice just how many of these books are *not* in English?"

Dawn picked up a book from the smaller stack and leafed through it briefly. "Is this English? It looks like the stuff they made us read with Chaucer, and they had translations for that too. What does 'waymentynge' mean, anyway?"

“Lamentation, crying out in pain.” Anya took in the incredulous looks of all around her. “Hello? Eleven hundred years old. I used to talk like that when I was human... The first time, I mean.”

Dawn handed over the book. “This one’s all yours.”

Buffy picked up a book from the much larger stack and flipped it open. She couldn’t even tell what language it was in. The writing looked like something off a hospital EKG. Her heart sank a little lower. “I guess all those times he was reading us stuff from his books, I figured he was, you know, *reading* us stuff from his books.”

“I had two years of Spanish, if it helps,” Dawn offered.

“Here, Dawnie,” Xander shuffled through the stack. “I think this one’s Spanish.”

Buffy picked up another volume and opened it. “Anyone read Martian?”

Spike leaned over her shoulder. “That’s not Martian. It’s Kynarr demon.”

“You can read it?”

“Nah, just recognized a few words. ’Bout the only Kynarr I know is ‘piss off’ and ‘kill that.’” He shrugged. “You don’t exactly hire mercenaries to make small talk.”

“Wow, Dawn, I think I finally get exactly what you see in him.”

Dawn dumped her book back on top of the towering stack of unreadables, ignoring her sister’s sarcasm for the moment. “Maybe I should have been more specific. Two years of *high school* Spanish. I could maybe order dinner and get directions to the mall. They didn’t exactly cover vocabulary words for blood sacrifice and demon summoning in class. But I recognized the word blood. Yay me!”

Buffy fell into her chair, near tears. “This is hopeless. I never thought I’d say this, but I’d give my right arm for the Council to come stick their noses where they don’t belong.”

“Travers still missing in action?” Xander asked.

“What did the Watcher’s Council have against moving into the 21st century anyway? Would it hurt him to carry a beeper or a cell phone that he actually- God forbid!- *answers*?”

“Wesley?”

“Still being harassed by the LAPD over Faith. If he came, and she’s still actually in Sunnydale and not halfway to Mexico, then he’d lead the cops right to her. As much as I really don’t care if she goes back to prison for the rest of her life, I don’t want her dead and calling my daughter for slayer duty. Wesley offered to research from there, but...” Buffy gestured towards the mountain of research covering the dining table. “But Giles already borrowed all the useful books when he was in LA the last time.” She sighed and propped her chin up on her hand. “If Willow were here, she could maybe scan some stuff and email it to him. But if Willow were here, she could probably just fix Giles herself.”

Xander clapped his hands together once as he thought of a plan. “Kinkos? Group outing? They have scanners there.”

Buffy shrugged, without lifting her chin from its perch. With her free hand, she indicated the stack of books, Vanna White style. “What specifically are you going to scan? You gonna sit at Kinkos for the next three days scanning books?”

“Good point.” Xander became as demoralized as her. He rested his chin on his palm in a matching pose.

“Besides, I kinda got the feeling from Wesley that their phones were tapped. He was trying to be all stealthy and use code words. And he kept calling me Brenda.” Buffy sat up straight, laying her palms on the table, a rush of determination filling her. “Look, we’ll just have to figure this out without Wesley... or Giles or Travers or anyone else who could actually be useful.” Buffy groaned and flopped her head down on the table. Her fleeting sense of determination left her. This was hopeless.

“Look here, Slayer,” Spike said as he tentatively laid his hand on her shoulder. “Watchers aren’t the only ones who can translate musty old books.”

She lifted her head slightly. “You saying you can figure any of that out?”

“No, but I got a few favors I could call in.”

Spike’s reassurance was less than reassuring.

“Hey!” Anya cried excitedly. She was laying out several volumes from the larger stack. “He put all these post-it notes by different passages. He must have his translations around here somewhere.”

“His diary!” Buffy jumped out of her seat and dashed up the stairs, returning with the volumes he had tucked away in the nightstand. He kept two diaries: a personal one and a watcher one. She had them both, in case there was anything relevant in his personal entries, but it was only his watcher’s diary that she handed over for the others to see.

Anya took the leather bound book and opened it, everyone else crowding around to look over her shoulder.

Xander squinted at the page and leaned closer. “My God, can the man write any smaller? No wonder he needs glasses.”

Spike snorted his amusement. “Don’t know why you’re so surprised the watcher should write like a nancy boy. He does everything else like one.”

Anya smiled as she paged through the diary, each page filled from top to bottom with tiny writing. “One time he wrote out a special order for a customer. She was quite irate when she received petrified hamsters instead of ground frogstone. He had to pull out a magnifying glass to prove he’d written it right, and I said if you need a magnifying—”

“Stop it!” Buffy shouted, silencing them all. “Can we not do this now? Can we not mock Giles right now?”

She met their started expressions for a moment before escaping into the kitchen. She leaned over the island counter, trying to control her tears, trying to still her thoughts. Giles would be fine, she kept telling herself. They would find the answer. They always did. Part of her knew she was only lying to herself, just as she had lied to Robin. She felt a hand touch her shoulder and turned to see Xander watching her compassionately.

“Buffy? Look we’re sorry. You know we’re all worried about Giles. Well, except for Spike maybe. And you know how I have a tendency to crack jokes under pressure. And Anya is still learning about tact. And... well, there really isn’t an excuse for Spike.”

“Oh, Xander,” she breathed, wrapping her arms around his neck and weeping against his chest. He rubbed her back and kissed the top of her head, holding her tightly until she calmed. She pulled away after regaining control and hiked herself up to sit on the island counter. Wiping her cheeks with the back of her hand, she stared at a spot on the floor. Her voice came in a quiet whisper. It was as if she had opened a floodgate, and now all her pent up fears and doubts came spilling out, a torrent of words she couldn’t hold back.

“Ever since the twins were born, I always imagined that he would be there for them long after I had... well, gone the way of all slayers. I sometimes hated him for it: that he would get to see all those things that I wouldn’t. Little league and track meets, school plays and dances, first dates and high school graduation. Maybe watch them get married, or hold our grandchildren in his arms. Sometimes I hated him, but mostly it made it easier, knowing that they would all be okay, taken care of, that they would have him and he would have them. I could do what I had to do because I knew without a doubt that if something happened to me, that everyone I loved would be okay. In all that time, I just never imagined that Alex and Robin would lose him first.”

Her voice wavered as she fought against the tears in the back of her throat. "What if he's like that forever, Xander? Just a vegetable lying in a bed? They won't have anyone after... and I don't know how to do this by myself. I just can't."

"Buffy, look at me." With a finger under her chin, he tilted her head up. He was leaning up against the counter between her knees and studying her very seriously. "You're not by yourself. We're all here, in any way you need us to be. And..." He broke their intense stare, dropping his gaze as he struggled uncomfortably with the next part. "I truly think Giles is going to be fine. We'll find whatever it is we have to find to fix him, and we'll fix him. But if we don't..." He looked up again and smiled softly at her. "Anya and I may be having our own baby right now, but... You know we both adore Alex, and Robin is just so cute. They're like a matched set. What I'm trying to say is that if anything ever happened to both of you, they would be taken care of. I promise."

Buffy leaned forward and kissed Xander on the cheek, moved beyond words. She felt like she could deal again, a great weight lifted from her shoulders. And then she had an image of Xander and Anya raising her children, and couldn't help but laugh. "Oh God, you're going to turn them both into Trekkies, aren't you?"

"No, of course not," he answered with an answering smile. "They'll have the full range of science fiction obsessions. There's Babylon 5 and Star Wars and when Alex is older, I'm sure he'll appreciate the beauty that is Lucy Lawless in a Xena costume."

She swatted him on the arm lightly, and he flinched back in mock pain. She jumped off the counter. "I think the two of us have shirked enough research. Back into the fray."

He shrugged. "Shirk a little longer, and they might have it all figured out for us."

"Tempting, but no. I want to be able to tell Giles that I figured out the research part without him."

"Then he'll only make you help with research more often."

"Hmmm... Good point. In that case, I'll just have to tell him that you came through with the books in my hour of need. Giles will be quite impressed with you."

"After that stirring and selfless speech I just gave you, this is the thanks I get?"

They rejoined the others, all deeply engrossed in their own books. Buffy noticed that they had torn the pages from Giles' diary, so they could each study the separate translations from the separate books. Oh, was he going to be pissed when he saw that. She and Xander were each handed pages, along with the original texts they matched up with.

Xander read aloud from his translation. "*Take of mine blood and mine gifts. For you shall avenge me, and you shall have of the power of each that you slay in my name. Ten for each night of the moon shall you take. The last shall I strike down from the very heavens themselves. Thus in blood and fire shall this blade be blessed that whoever shall bear it will command the power of the slain.*" Man, what's with all the flowery language? Can't they just say: 'Kill all these people and you can have their power?' Succinct. To the point."

"Ten for each night," Dawn mused. "That's 280?"

"281," Anya corrected. "You have to count the one struck down from the heavens."

"So Giles was pretty convinced this sword of Camela thing relates to whoever tried to kill Robin and Faith?" Xander flipped through the pages of the foreign text, stopping at each illustration. "So they were after lots of little slayer power?"

Buffy shook her head, mulling it over. "No. I don't think there's a lot of power in a potential slayer until they're actually the Slayer. And it's not really a family thing, so their parents wouldn't be that useful. I don't think whoever tried to kill Robin and Faith was doing it for a tally. I think they really wanted to permanently get rid of the Slayer."

"So this sword thing's probably a dead end?" Xander snapped his book closed.

Buffy gasped and sat up straighter. "The Watcher's Council." Everything was clicking into place. She glanced around at the faces surrounding her. "That's where they got their 280. They're going to take the power of the watchers."

Anya raised her hand, and everyone stared at her until she lowered it. "Watchers generally come from powerful families; that's how they get to be watchers. Most of them have a talent for magic, like Giles, but they also have a knack for finding potential slayers. It's kind of their first sacred duty."

Buffy made the next logical deduction. "They want their own slayers. With the power of all the watchers they killed, they'll be able to find them and train them themselves." She looked towards the staircase, where her daughter was sleeping upstairs. "They'll want to kill Faith and take Robin."

Xander leaned over and placed his hand on her arm. "But we're not going to let that happen."

She smiled weakly. "No, we're not. We're going to figure out whoever has this sword and stop them." She frowned. "After we figure out what spell is on Giles and break it."

She heard a small, childish squeal from the general direction of the staircase and the rapid patter of small feet dashing across the foyer. A tousled head of sandy hair ducked under the table, and Buffy could feel the child brush against her knees as he passed by. Alex reappeared at the other end of the table as he climbed up into Spike's lap.

"Uncie 'Pike!" he greeted the vampire happily.

Buffy rolled her eyes.

"Well, hello there, Half Bit. Miss me?" The boy nodded enthusiastically, and Spike threw his mother a satisfied smirk. "I might have stopped by now and then if your Mum and Dad didn't hate me so much."

Alex gave his mother a betrayed pout, to which she simply replied, "What are you doing out of bed?"

"Can't s'leep."

"Want Mommy to take you upstairs and read you a story?"

"Uh-uh. Sit wif Uncie 'Pike."

Spike adjusted the child in his lap. He looked down his nose at Buffy, as if daring her. "You heard the boy, Slayer. He wants to sit with his Uncle Spike."

Buffy sighed and flipped open a book, turning the pages more forcefully than necessary. "His Uncle Spike is *not* his Uncle and is just begging for a good staking."

"Uh-uh!" Alex objected fiercely, standing up and placing his hand over Spike's heart, nuzzling his little head into the cold neck. "No stake!"

"You tell her, Alex," Dawn seconded.

Spike's satisfied smirk grew into smug smile. "That's right, Half Bit, you protect your Uncle Spike from that mean old slayer."

Buffy rolled her eyes again and backed up ten pages. She had been too distracted to pay attention to what she was looking at. "It's okay, Alex, I'm not going to stake him. Yet."

The boy settled down in the vampire's lap, watching the flurry of research going on around him. When he bored of that, he turned to wiggle his fingers beneath the buttons of Spike's shirt so he could feel the heart not beating. Spike jumped slightly at the touch on his skin, and the boy giggled as he turned his eyes up to him. "Grrr," he pleaded.

Spike sighed. "Grrr," he replied in kind, slipping into his vamp face.

The boy giggled again, his fingers reaching up to touch the bumpy forehead. "Grrr," he said a little louder, crinkling up his nose and forehead, his other hand moving to touch his own smooth face. The vampire growled back, and the two proceeded to have a small growling contest, which Buffy ended with a stern glare.

“Spike, if you keep that up, my son is going to think all vampires would make swell playmates. I’d rather he had at least a little fear for creatures which could potentially kill him.”

Spike’s features smoothed back into his human guise, and he looked suitably chastised. “Your mum’s right about that,” he told Alex seriously. “Most vampires are bad news. Spike’s the only one you let near you, you hear me, kid?”

“Angel too!” Alex cried.

“Pfft! That wanker? What you want to hang around with him for?”

One of the illustrations caught Alex’s attention, and he pointed to the book in front of Spike, the previous topic of conversation promptly forgotten. “Bad dog hurt watchers.”

Five sets of eyes turned in his direction.

“He mentioned that dream before,” Anya remembered. “Maybe he knows something.”

Buffy lifted her son from Spike’s lap. “Honey, can you tell me everything you remember from your dream?”

“Bad dog hurt watchers.” His eyes filled with tears. “Me an’ Robin run. Run, run, run. All cold, wet. Bad dream. No s’leep.”

Buffy wrapped her arms around him and swayed gently with her son. “Do you have this dream a lot? Is that why you can’t sleep sometimes and have to get in Mommy and Daddy’s bed?” She felt him nod against her shoulder. She sat down and made him lift his head to look at her. “Alex, is there anything else you can tell me? Where were you and Robin running?”

“Cold. Wet.”

“Wet. Was it raining?”

He shook his head, sniffing a little. “Sand.”

“Sand? Were you on the beach? By the ocean?”

He nodded. “Mou’ain.”

“On a beach by the mountains?”

“Uh-huh,” he answered softly, nodding slightly as he laid his head back down on her shoulder.

“Kayer’s Bluff?” Xander guessed. “It’s the closest thing to beaches and mountains we got around here.”

“It’s worth a look,” Buffy said.

“No!” Alex insisted, clutching her shirt tightly and managing to grab hold of her bra strap as he did. “No go!”

“Shhh, honey, you aren’t going,” she soothed. “Just Uncle Spike and I.” She cringed as she heard herself call the vampire Uncle Spike.

“No go!” And then he started to cry.

Buffy stood and walked from one end of the dining room to the other, trying to calm her terrified child. The others watched her for a moment before turning back to their research. Spike was seriously considering the illustration that had drawn the boy’s attention.

“Bad dog, huh?” He laid Giles’ translation next to the book. Buffy stopped just behind Spike’s shoulder so she could see the drawing too. It looked like a big bear, except its head looked like a mishmash of other things, maybe other demons, maybe other animals, but all in all: butt ugly.

“Mortog beast.” Spike exchanged a glance with the Slayer. “Says it’s the one this sword was made for. Ten bucks says it’s the one you’re after.”

Buffy’s face hardened. She thought of Robin and the fire, Giles’ father and Travers’ children and all the other watchers, her husband lying upstairs unconscious, and her son now crying in her arms, plagued by nightmares of this thing. “Figure out how I kill it.”

Travers woke, first aware of the pounding in his head, followed by the realization that his movements were severely hindered by the ropes binding his wrists and ankles. He opened his eyes, flinching at the bright overhead lighting. When his eyes grew accustomed to the harsh fluorescents, he absorbed the details of the room around him: posters of young adolescent boys, a small side table with a lace skirt and covered with various bottles of cosmetics, clothes laid at the foot of the bed he rested on, boxes on the floor in various states of packing or unpacking. He wasn't sure which. On the ceiling directly above him, a poster of a kitten dangling from a rope advised him to "Hang in there."

He struggled to shift himself into a more upright position, attracting the attention of whoever was sitting behind him.

"Lookie, lookie what we caught spying on us."

He turned to meet the dark gaze of a young black woman.

"Don't bother trying to make noise," she told him. "It's a silence spell."

He tested the spell. Just as she promised, he could make no sound.

"Hey, Willow, want to go get Sabrina for me?"

Travers turned in time to see her walk out of the room. He was more than confused and wondered if the concussion might be muddling his thinking. Willow Rosenberg? The Slayer's friend?

With her departure, he realized he was alone with this young black girl. She looked like she might be a college student, and this room might be a dorm room. But when she leaned forward to invade his personal space, he saw something in her eyes that convinced him that her act was all a façade.

"You can let go of the idea that any of them will help you. As far as they're concerned, you're the bad guy. You and the Watcher's Council. Never mind that the Council is rubble. Shhh... that will be our little secret." She smiled and touched the side of his face in such a way that he shuddered. "You will be the last. You will light the sword."

Faith waited in the back alley, watching demons enter and exit, her slayer senses tingling through her whole body. She hadn't had a good slay in years, and she was aching for it. But that would give away the game.

In Sunnydale she could maybe go unnoticed. That was Buffy's town, and there it was Buffy who struck fear in evil hearts. But three hours of hitchhiking had brought Faith back to LA, and she had come to think of this as her town, even if she only saw it through a two-foot by two-foot barred window. And here in LA, Faith would be recognized, both by the police who were searching for her and the vampires who had tried to kill her.

It was a risk to come back here, but hey, if she couldn't stand a little risk, she was in the wrong profession.

It was worse to just sit around Buffy's house doing nothing. And if she had stayed, she might have been turned over to the cops as soon as the ambulance showed up. Better to fly solo, avoid the cops for as long as she could, or at least until she had put a stake through the heart of whoever was looking to activate the next slayer. To that end, she needed to do her own research: the kind that would actually produce results, the kind that required introducing her fist to someone's face.

By two thirty only the occasional demon happened through the alley. Faith figured the club was about to close. She waited a bit longer before entering, adjusting Buffy's clothes across her shoulders, shifting the pants on her hips. Better than prison gray, but not by much. She wanted something tighter,

higher cut or lower cut or daring enough that people saw only her body but not her. She wanted to paint her face into a mask of vice and hide behind the familiar routine of proposition and taking and using and throwing away. She felt naked and vulnerable in Buffy's clothes, without even the smallest bit of lipstick to help her play her part.

She ran her hands through her jet-black hair, her natural color, but so dark that it seemed dyed, fake, which had always suited Faith just fine. "Screw this." She marched to the entrance and flung open the door with more force than necessary.

She surveyed the mostly empty bar, neon lights casting strange shadows across the inhuman patrons. The stage lights were dimmed, and no one was singing at the moment. The human looking bartender was washing glasses and stowing away the liquor bottles. It was probably past last call.

So this was Caritas.

Angel hadn't been pulling her leg when he told her about the karaoke bar for demons. Although she was reasonably sure that he had made up the part about putting Wesley in charge of Angel Investigations. Yeah, she could just imagine tall, dark, and brooding taking orders from Mr. Screams-like-a-woman.

She scanned the room for her target. Two o'clock. Just as Angel described him. Green, horned, with terrible taste in designer suits.

She strode across the room with grace and purpose. He didn't even see her coming before she had him pressed against his own bar, his arm twisted behind his back.

"Look, Mister, I haven't killed anything in a really long time, and I'm gettin' kinda itchy. Tell me what I want to know, and I'll slay something else instead."

"Hey, hey, hey, didn't you read the sign? No violence in Caritas. It's a sanctuary."

"Sorry, I was never one for rules." She wrenched his arm further up his back and saw the answering grimace flash across his face.

"Let me offer you a piece of advice, sister: I don't exactly hold my customers to the honor system. There's a spell on the whole bar. Try any real damage, and you'll be waking up back in prison."

She released him abruptly and took two steps back. "How did you-?"

"Know you were a psychotic escaped convict doing time for multiple homicide?" He turned around to face her, massaging his shoulder and sizing her up with one glance. "Faith, right? Angel warned me you might stop in. I'll have to thank him for putting my bar in your tour guide."

"Look, Green-skin, I just want—"

"Lorne. My name's Lorne. Green-skin's offensive to my people."

"Well damn, I usually try so hard to be pc. So how's this work? Do I hafta sing?"

"I don't know, sugar. Are you any good?"

She shrugged and crossed her arms. "I'm usually better at making other people sing."

"So I've heard." He tilted his head towards a nearby table and led them both to chairs. "Lucky for both of us, singing will not be required tonight. Although I have you pegged for an Alanis Morissette number, something that really screams 'men are evil.' Anyway, Angel left a message for you in case you dropped in and threatened to kill me. He'd deliver it himself, except for his ever present tails: LAPD and scourge-of-the-day-come-scourge-of-the-night."

"Huh?"

"Lawyers turned vampires. Apparently some up-and-coming lawyer at Wolfram and Hart grew himself a pair of fangs and recruited a full staff. Angel's pretty sure those are the ones you're looking for." He pulled a pen from the inside pocket of his purple suit coat and scratched something on a napkin. "This address is their headquarters."

"So if Angel knows where to find them, why hasn't he dusted them already?"

"Hasn't had a chance yet. The LAPD's keeping him hopping."

"They think he busted me out."

Lorne, the Host, shrugged. "They think he knows where you are. Which technically he did until you bailed out on his old flame."

"Hey! I didn't bail. I just didn't see the point in sticking around, you know? I needed to get in on the action and... Well B didn't seem to want me there. None of them did, really. I just made everyone nervous."

"Can you blame them? Hey, maybe you can drop in and say hi to Wesley on your way out of town."

She slammed her fist down over the napkin, making the table shake and Lorne jump as she took the address and slipped it into her pants pocket. She stood and leaned over him with one hand on the back of his chair. Her eyes bored into him as a wicked smile played across her lips. "I'd chill the attitude if I were you. This dive may be a sanctuary, but you have to show your face outside sometime. Buffy and Angel may embrace diversity, and I may be reformed, but I see a demon, I pretty much see a demon." She moved in closer, her voice pitched low and seductive and her breath hot against his ear. "And they don't send you back to jail for killing demons."

A voice from behind made her stand quickly. "You okay, boss?"

She spun to glare at the human bartender that stood there regarding her warily. Her gaze traveled between him and the Host. "Sure. We're five by five, aren't we, *sugar*?" She said the last word with venom.

Lorne cleared his throat nervously. "Whatever you say. It's okay, Bob, Faith was just leaving."

She gave the bartender a once over before departing and a saucy slap to his rear as she passed by. She sauntered out of Caritas, hearing the Host call after her, "Nice to make your acquaintance, Faith. Be sure to *not* stop by when you're in LA again."

The twins slept, one on each side of him. Buffy rearranged Alex slightly so she could sit on the bed beside him too, leaning back against the headboard. Her fingers began methodically combing through her watcher's hair. She rested her head back against the wall, closing her eyes and speaking softly.

"I guess this is the cheesy coma scene. You know the one: where the wife sits at her husband's bedside and pours out her heart to him. And the audience gets all weepy. And right after she confesses her undying love, his hand twitches, and he opens his eyes, and it's happily ever after." Her hand paused, and she watched expectantly, before continuing her tender caresses through his hair, down each side of his face. "I don't know if you can hear me. I kinda feel like I'm talking to myself. It's weird. But John said he talks to April, and it helps, so what the heck."

"Remember when I was dead, and you came into my room to pray to me? I guess I'm in your shoes now. If you can hear me, if you're really listening, then you're probably waiting for the same sorta speech."

"Well, you're outta luck, Mister. I ain't gonna do it. You wanna hear an apology; you wanna know just what you mean to me? Then you're going to have to snap out of this, because I want to be looking into your eyes when I say it." The first few warm tears slipped down her cheeks. Her voice sounded much smaller to her own ears. "You have to snap out of this. I can't do this without you."

And then she slid down the bed, arranging herself against his side, mindful of the various tubes snaking in and out of his body and the sleeping child tucked up against him. Unbuttoning two of his middle shirt buttons, she slipped her hand beneath his shirt and pressed her palm against his bare

chest. She counted out the beating of his heart. She watched the steady rise and fall of each breath. He was still alive. She had that much to be thankful for.

"Come back to me, Giles," she begged. And then she cried, silent tears that would not disturb their children.

He didn't come back to her that night. Or the next. More than a week passed, and nothing changed. They fell into a steady routine. Anya ran the store during the day, Buffy took personal leave from work and cared for the twins until Dawn came home from school each afternoon, and Spike had more or less moved in with them. In the evenings Xander brought take out for dinner and picked up Anya after work, and they would all bury themselves in research. Spike would disappear for hours after dark, returning with blood on his knuckles or torn clothes and on occasion a spell they could try or a lead on the Mortog beast. But nothing they tried would stir Giles from his slumber.

They found nothing at Kayer's Bluff except sand and stone. They found nothing of the Mortog beast except rumors and false sightings by drunken demons looking to be bribed. They accomplished nothing in more than a week except to lower their hopes and exhaust their limited resources.

Buffy visited John in the hospital sometimes after the children were in bed and before she went on patrol. She imagined that Giles would want her to. And there was some comfort to be found in her husband's friend, as he sat vigil beside his wife. She told him about Giles' condition, and he grieved with her. She listened to the daily updates on April's status, each an echo of her own: no change, hasn't regained consciousness, unresponsive to stimuli. They took turns crying on each other's shoulders, alternately upbeat about the other's chances and despairing of their own partner's hopes. John even left the hospital once to visit Buffy at her home. They stood together at Giles' bedside, and Buffy allowed herself to truly break down for the first time. She sobbed in John's arms until she had no breath, until her eyes were red and swollen, until her belly ached with her grief. Just when she thought she was finished, he offered her a handkerchief from his pocket, and in that little gesture, she was reminded of her watcher and started crying all over again.

The twins tested her patience. She didn't know how Giles did it. She hadn't taken care of both of them by herself since Robin came home. He had gotten their meals and bathed them and kept them out of trouble. The fault for that was not entirely on her shoulders. Robin had stubbornly refused anyone but him. Now she didn't have a choice, which only made Buffy's work that much harder. She thought if she put them both in the tub at the same time, that maybe Robin would tolerate a bath given by her mother rather than her father. But Robin screamed for Giles anyway, and splashed water angrily in Buffy's face, and flailed her slippery little arms every time Buffy tried to get a solid grip. And Alex took the opportunity to sneak out of the tub and run through the house naked. It was Spike who delivered the wayward child back to his bath. Buffy gave him a grateful smile. During the days, she and Spike were alone with the children, and she was surprised to find that she was actually thankful for his presence. Except for the occasional colorful word the boy picked up, Spike was good with Alex. Which freed Buffy to focus on Robin.

By the end of the week, the girl was warming up to her mother. She still remained at Giles' side whenever possible, but she didn't throw a fit over bath time or dressing anymore, and she ate what Buffy set in front of her without coaxing. Once she even colored a picture for her mother, and Buffy felt her heart melt when she saw that not only were Alex and Giles beside Robin in the picture, but she had included Buffy as well. The moment that truly gave Buffy hope that she might connect with her daughter, however, came just before bedtime one weekday night. The gang was struggling with the translations Giles hadn't gotten to yet, dictionaries opened between them, the occasional argument erupting over the meaning of a certain word. Spike had disappeared on one of his usual walkabouts. And Buffy was curled up on the sofa, reading a story to her son. She stumbled over the words when

she caught sight of Robin in her peripheral vision. Buffy looked up, becoming very quiet and still. She felt like a hiker glimpsing a fawn in a clearing, trying very hard not to startle the creature and scare it off. It was the first time Robin had willingly left Giles' side, before or after his coma. She stood on the bottom step, her arms wrapped around the banister, her whole body tensed and on alert, as if she might bolt at any moment.

Buffy smiled and slowly extended her hand. "Would you like to listen to the story too?"

Robin hesitated, clearly torn between wanting to be upstairs with her father and wanting to be read to. She cautiously made her way towards the sofa, climbing up to sit beside Alex on Buffy's other knee.

Buffy blinked away tears, and smoothed back her daughter's hair. She beamed, her joy filling the emptiness the last weeks had left. It was such a little step, but in the end wasn't life all about little steps? She started again at the beginning of the book, thrilling to the feeling of holding both her children in her arms.

He drifted. Time had no measure. There was only darkness. He was aware of his body, lying there, beyond his control. Sometimes he heard their voices. Buffy, Xander, Anya, Alex, Dawn. He thought he imagined Robin's voice sometimes. She was always calling for him, and he couldn't reach her. Sometimes, though, they all sounded so far away, he could barely make out the words.

He was conscious, wherever he was, stuck between living and dying. He was aware of himself, his thoughts, his fears and frustrations. Not sleeping, not dreaming, his mind wandered through the darkness.

He tried to keep himself occupied, stave off the fear and despair, but soon Latin conjugations and store inventories could not hold back the darker thoughts his mind forced upon him. He had nothing to distract him: no book to open and lose himself in, no way to contact another person for simple conversation, nothing but his mind locked inside a stone body.

Poor, poor watcher.

He sensed her magic, sharp and bitter. He felt them sometimes: the seven who had joined with Willow would come near him with their magic, like spiders inspecting the fly they had ensnared in their web.

He never sensed Willow. He hoped sometimes that he would, that she would realize what she had done, how she had been corrupted by these others. Other times he remembered the anger in her eyes, the hate in her voice, and he was very glad she stayed away.

In his darker moments, he fought against the spell that bound him. It only seemed to strengthen the magic surrounding him. Each time he gave up more quickly than the time before, sinking back into despair and bad memories and dark thoughts he had no power to banish.

Poor, poor watcher. Such power buried deep inside you, but you were always afraid of it, weren't you?

Of the seven who sometimes hovered near him, she was the only one who ever came close enough for him to hear.

Suddenly they were standing in a circle of stones, just the two of them. He did not know this place, but it was the illusion she always manufactured when she came to him as herself. Sometimes she came as his father, and then it was the bedroom he'd had as a child. Sometimes as Ethan, and then they were lounging in a dark pub. Once she had come as Jenny, curling up beside him in his flat, and once she had even dared to come as Buffy in the training room. But no matter the face she wore, he

always knew it was she, so she didn't play those games anymore. Now it was always the two of them standing in the circle of stones.

"You don't seem happy to see me, Watcher."

"Should I be?"

"I would think you'd be happy to have some company." She stretched out atop one of the stones. "Would you rather be left alone? You don't seem to be enjoying the solitude either."

"What do you want, Sabrina?" he said through clenched teeth.

"I just find you fascinating. Is that so wrong? You have all this power at your command, but you choose not to use it. I'm just trying to understand. It's not just because of Randall, is it?"

"How did you...?" But he didn't finish his question. He already knew the answer. Sabrina was gifted. She could pull whatever information she wished from his mind. She had already taught him that lesson with the games she had played as his father... Ethan... Buffy... Jenny. Jenny had been the hardest. So much unsaid between them, so much of his grief buried beneath even his awareness, so much he had never even confessed to Buffy, all laid bare by Sabrina's merciless probing. Why should he be surprised that she saw Randall in his mind? She could see all his most painful memories. Why not Randall too?

"So you killed your friend. So what? We all make mistakes. We learn from them. Even I learn from mine. But you're wasting a beautiful gift. Come on, you remember the high of magic, of danger, of touching something dark and feeling the answering darkness inside yourself. Don't you miss it?"

"Is this what you did to Willow? How you brainwashed her?"

Sabrina smiled, seeming to enjoy his bitter rejoinders. "Nah, you and I are just conversing. I need nothing from you except to pass the time. If I wanted to, I could influence you. I'm pretty good at it. Although, shhh..." She placed her finger against her mouth and smiled wider. "Just between us, it's harder if the person knows you're trying to do it." She swung her legs back and forth like a child on a swing. "No, I just enjoy coming here and talking to you."

"Lucky me."

"It's like I can tell you anything. You're really easy to talk to, a good listener. That's a rare trait to find nowadays. Must be the Watcher in you, huh? I'm a good listener too. It's one of my gifts. But sometimes it's nice to have someone else listen for once." She grew serious for a moment, her brow creasing in serious thought. "You know why I like talking to you?"

"The phrase 'captive audience' springs to mind."

She chuckled and jumped off her stone perch, now strolling in casual circles around him. "That's a big part of it, I must admit. I can whisper in your ear and have it stay there. God knows you'll never speak to another living soul again. But it's more than that. Joseph doesn't appreciate the big picture, everything that I'm doing for him. He can't see past Wolfram and Hart and his own shortcomings reflected in his father's eyes. If he hadn't found the sword for me, I would just kill him and be done with it. He can't see how brilliant my full plan is. It will change the order of things for the next thousand years. I guess I need to share with someone who can admire my long term vision."

Giles crossed his arms, refusing to let her casual laps around him affect him, her movements like a shark testing its prey. "Isn't this always the downfall of the villain? When you talk too much, when you reveal your plans before you've finished them?"

She shrugged and stopped directly in front of him. "But it's also the pleasure. Where's the fun in destruction, in vengeance, if you can't enjoy the misery that comes after?"

"Vengeance?"

There was venom and hatred in her answer, the first time he had seen her show real emotion. With everything else, she was blasé, amused, entertained, but not invested. With her next words Giles, for

once, caught a glimpse of *her* inner demons. “For her. I gave my word. I would destroy them with their own power.”

The words seemed familiar, but he didn’t have time to think about them too deeply. She was still talking to him, making him jump as she touched him on the arm.

“But enough about me. I’m still trying to work out why you keep your magic all locked up. Not that it could save you now. The beauty of this spell is that the more you fight it from the inside, the tighter it will bind you.”

“And if I don’t fight it at all? Is my struggle feeding the spell its power? Will it simply dissipate without my force behind it?”

She considered his words for a moment. His imprisonment was a simple intellectual puzzle to her. He thought perhaps she might even answer his question truthfully. “Perhaps. You could try. But you will still end up trapped between. To escape, you must push through the spell, which you can’t do without strengthening it. Catch 22, I suppose. Your only chance is for someone on the outside to free you. And Willow right now hates you for your betrayal of her, of us. She’d sooner kill you, I think, than set you free. No, your only chance was when she cast the spell. You could have fought her, matched her magic with your own, unlocked Ripper from his cage, and become what you fear most.”

She gasped in understanding, and he dropped his gaze from hers, as if that could give him any protection from her mental invasions. “That’s it, isn’t it? Why you keep all that power buried inside you? You’re afraid to touch it, to taste it, and lose control. You *do* remember the thrill and the power, and you couldn’t get enough of it then. You’re afraid you won’t be able to get enough of it now. Can’t have just one drink?” She laughed lightly and wrapped her arms around his neck. He tried to push her away, but she held tightly to him. He closed his eyes in shame. “You’re afraid of what you’ll become. You know you walk the line already. You’ve taken human life: Longworth, Sulla, and with your own hands: Randall, Ben. You remember what it felt like to strangle Ben, so much different than putting the sword through Randall, when all you could see was Eyghon. No, with Ben, you saw nothing of Glory, only the human man beneath you. Did you feel like a god, Rupert? Did you enjoy it?”

“No.”

“No conviction behind that. Don’t lie to me. I see through you. You *are* afraid, Rupert, afraid of yourself. You’re afraid that you’ll become the thing that needs to be killed.”

He opened his eyes, feeling naked before her. He shook his head. There was nothing he could say to her, no way to deny the truth she had pulled from his mind. “Please stop.”

“Shhh... dearest.” She laid her head against his chest. “No need to be afraid. You’re locked away, safe as houses, and you’ll never get the chance to become anything. A pity, really. I am truly curious whether you would have been a match for my Willow... you know, if you had allowed your power free reign. But you couldn’t let it out, not even to save yourself. Are you that afraid of your own darkness? That it could so easily control you?”

He didn’t answer, but she smiled anyway. She saw the answer in his heart and in the shame that blazed across his face. He begged her again, “Stop, Sabrina. Please. I’m tired of these games.”

“Shall we play a different game then?”

The scene around him shifted. No longer outside in a woodland grove circled by stones, they were standing in the training room, and it was Buffy in his arms. Buffy’s long golden hair instead of Sabrina’s short brunette waves, Buffy’s curves instead of Sabrina’s girlish figure, and Buffy’s loving blue eyes instead of that penetrating dark gaze. He tried to wrench himself from her grip, but she held tight, with Buffy’s slayer strength that this illusion gave her. But it wasn’t Buffy. It was still Sabrina.

“Come now, dearest.” It was Buffy’s voice, and he had to keep reminding himself that this wasn’t real. “How many times did training lead to... more? Sometimes easier than at home, with a toddler

constantly climbing into your bed and a teenager just down the hall. It's been a while. Things have been strained between the two of you. You've been fighting, and haven't quite managed to... make up." She trailed her fingers down the side of his face, and he flinched from her touch. "Would it be so hard to close your eyes and pretend I'm her? I look like her, sound like her, smell like her." She pressed her body close to his. "I *feel* like her. You'll never get the chance to touch her again in the real world. Would it be such a betrayal to have one last moment with her in this one?"

He met her questioning gaze with a steady one of his own. "I think I'd rather you sent me back, where I was, alone."

He saw anger flash through her eyes. No longer a simple amusement, mere entertainment, he had touched something inside her. She shoved him backwards, pinning him against the wall, bruising him with Buffy's slayer strength. For the first time since Willow had bound him with her spell, he felt true primal fear. He struggled against her briefly, but it was Buffy's strength fueled by Sabrina's anger. She kissed him on his neck, hard, marking him, branding him with her lips and teeth.

She laughed. "You like it rough, Watcher? You like your Slayer's strength and passion and fire? Yes, you hunger for the fire, don't you? You like a dragon in your bed. What would you do with a beast like me? Would my fire destroy you or would it cleanse you of your doubts and fears? Would it strip away everything but the Ripper and free your magic from its chains?" She kissed him on the mouth, a forceful, claiming kiss, with none of Buffy's love or affection.

He focused on his breathing, his heart rate. He waited for the kiss to end, waited until she looked him in the eye. "You going to rape me? With my Slayer's own strength no less. Is that the new game?"

She pulled him back from the wall, only to slam him against it again. She released him and spun away from him. He had angered her, enough that her illusion of Buffy was slipping. It was Sabrina's dark brown eyes and not Buffy's blue that glared at him from across the training room. "I find you less entertaining and more irritating every second."

"I'd like to go back now."

"You think that's the worst I could do to you? Send you back to the darkness, trapped in a body beyond your control? You know I could send you somewhere far less pleasant. I could leave you in the mansion with Angelus. Or I could force you to relive Randall's death ad nauseum." The corners of her mouth twitched with repressed amusement. "Or hers."

The brick walls and weapons cabinet and punching bag and training mats around them wavered, coalescing into the construction site of Glory's tower. The sky darkened, and it was night. He could just make out Buffy's form at the edge of the platform. He wanted to turn away from the sight, but he was frozen. His heart stopped as he watched her plunge over the side. Even knowing that she would come back to him, the sight of her rapid descent tore his very heart from his chest. This was not just a memory; he was reliving it, with the feel of the night air across his skin and the ache of his wounded side and all the pain with which her death had overwhelmed him.

Sabrina's voice was soft beside his ear. "How many times can you watch her fall before it destroys the last shred of your sanity?"

He clenched his hands into fists and gritted his teeth to regain control of his emotions. "You're a prize sadist."

She laughed, her anger gone. He was once again nothing more than her plaything. "How else am I to entertain myself? I think I could drive you over the edge if I tried hard enough. But I've pushed enough for today, and it's time for me to go. Because I really don't want to destroy you. I want that to happen all on its own."

"You see, Morgaine and I actually have a little bet going: without all these mind games, without either one of us tormenting you, just all on your own, how long will it take for you to go insane? The isolation, the sensory deprivation, and that brilliant mind of yours. She doesn't think you'll last a month, but I have faith in you. You'll hold on to the hope that they'll find the key to your freedom. You'll hold on to the memory of your wife and your children. I think you might last a year."

The construction site around them faded out, growing dimmer, darker. He blinked rapidly to clear his vision, squinting to make out vague forms. He knew what was happening, but it was almost a habit to fight against it. It reminded him of another of Willow's spells from years ago, her my-will-be-done spell that had stolen his vision, had slowly turned the world dark until he was blind. He fought against the same panic that had threatened to overwhelm him then. He focused on slowing his breathing, even as he heard Sabrina's voice echoing in his ears, no longer beside him but coming from all around him.

"They say that even in the deepest madness, there are occasional moments of clarity, when you can see and understand what you have become, mere moments when you are sane and can feel the horror for all the time that you are not. Moments when you are sane enough to feel it slipping away again, but powerless to do anything about it."

He felt the weight of his body, his sensations deadened, just darkness and the prison of his useless body. He remembered Tara's insanity, what Glory had done to her, how the very thought had terrified him. *Don't... please don't with that treachery. I told the cats. And now I beg my mother, sitting all alone.* How she had looked at him and known even before he had. *You're a killer. It's all set down...* He remembered how she had described it afterwards. Sabrina was right. Tara had experienced moments of lucidity, breaks in the storm when she could see light. Light, but also the storm clouds that approached, beyond her control to stop them.

"I wonder which is worse: to lose your mind or to know that you have lost it?"

It was the last sound he heard. He was alone again in the darkness. He struggled desperately against the spell, fought longer than he had ever fought before, until he had exhausted himself and still made no progress. His body lay still and quiet. No matter how hard he concentrated, no matter what meditation techniques he used or what magic tricks he tried, he could not move even his littlest finger. He was paralyzed. Trapped. Nothing but his thoughts locked inside his skull, careening down paths Sabrina had kindly opened for him. Thoughts of Randall and Ben, thoughts of going insane, memories of the taste of dark magic and power he had tried to forget he owned. How many times do we stop our train of thought, distract ourselves from unpleasant musings, by physical movement? A shake of the head, a deep breath, a swallow, a clenching of fists, a change in position, or a furious polishing of glasses? Giles could do none of these things. The harder he tried not to think of them, the larger these thoughts and fears loomed in his mind. The idea that he was already losing control terrified him, filled him with a cold panic. He wished, not for the first time, that Willow had simply killed him.

True!- nervous- very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad?

He laughed to himself at his choice, but the words were vivid in his mind and so he continued. Ever practical, he began at the beginning. He would get through this. Whatever it took. He would trust Buffy and the others. They would find a way to free him, and he only needed to hold on until then. He would hold on. For Buffy. For Alex. For Dawn. For Robin.

The more cynical side of him pointed out that this was just how Sabrina had predicted he would hold on, how he would last a year. The thought of a year like this threatened to overwhelm him, and he tried to push that out of his mind. Today. He would just get through today, whatever it took. He dredged up the words, the memory of the pages, the scent of his father's library. To be lasting, memory must have a sensory component, a smell, a touch. He remembered the book, the words. He

turned it into a game, a test of his memory. To see what snippets of what stories he could remember. The recitation would be a blessed escape, would mark time and keep him focused, keep him from drifting where he didn't wish to go.

The disease had sharpened my senses- not destroyed- not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then am I mad? Hearken! And observe how healthily- how calmly I can tell you the whole story.

Buffy had pulled up a chair beside John. They both watched April in silence. The monitors around her beeped occasionally. She looked small beneath the array of bandages, tubes, and wires that cocooned her. Her injuries were healing; she was recovering from surgery; the doctors were optimistic. But she had yet to regain consciousness.

John and Buffy had already had their conversations, confessed their fears. Now when one or the other visited, it was usually spent in companionable silence. It was really all they could offer each other. Sometimes they would hold hands. Sometimes they would walk together through the hospital corridors or around her neighborhood. John had his family and she had hers, but there was something missing that they only found in each other. For his children, he felt the need to be strong. For Dawn and the twins, so did she. When they were with each other, they were allowed a safe space where they could be weak.

Buffy saw it first. She wondered if she might have imagined it, so she waited before saying anything to John. But then April's hand moved again, and she knew it was more than a trick of her tired eyes.

"John," she whispered.

He looked up just in time to see his wife's hand close into a loose fist and then open again. "April?"

Buffy hit the call button for the nurse as John leaned closer to April's bedside. Her eyes opened a crack, slightly glazed over and unfocused. He touched his fingers to her cheek, and she smiled softly in recognition.

Buffy's eyes filled with tears as she watched the happy reunion. A part of her burned with shame that she resented John even the smallest bit for getting his wife back while Giles was still lost to her, but mostly the tears she wept were joy for April's recovery.

The other police officer turned her head slowly to look at the figure behind John. "Buffy?"

Buffy smiled and moved closer, placing a hand on John's shoulder. "Hey, April. Have a nice nap?"

She chuckled silently and then looked back at her husband. "What happened?"

"You didn't answer your page. Something must have attacked you. You're in the hospital now. They did surgery, but you're going to be fine." He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. "You're going to be fine."

She closed her eyes in concentration, as if willing the memories to come back to her. Her voice was raspy from disuse, and she swallowed before attempting speech again. "I was checking out that new house on frat row. I think it's supposed to be a sorority. I didn't recognize the symbol over the mantle. I think... I think I walked in on a séance?"

John kissed her hand again. "Shhh... Don't think about that now."

But Buffy was thinking about the other woman's words. A symbol. A séance. Could she have walked in on some magic? Could that house be the one Buffy was searching for?

"Scott?" April asked. John didn't answer her immediately, and she made the obvious conclusion: her partner was dead. She started to cry softly, and he tried to soothe her.

The nurse entered at that moment and noticed that her patient was both awake and upset. "Only the husband can stay. April needs her rest, and the doctor will be down in a minute."

Buffy made to leave, but April stopped her with an urgent question: "Did anyone go back there? Did they find anything?"

"I think they sent Detective Cricks, but no luck. I'm not sure if they found anything else. I'm kinda on personal leave right now." She shrugged casually. "Tell you what: I'll go check it out myself right now."

April nodded, relaxing slightly, beginning to doze back off into a drugged exhaustion. "3231 frat row," she murmured. "Be careful. There was a bear, I think."

Buffy stopped in the doorway. "A bear?"

The nurse tried to shoo her out. "She needs her rest."

"I think a bear," April answered. "Claws. Got me 'cross the stomach. Had horns too, I think. Horns? No, that can't be right. It didn't look like a bear in the face... Don't know. It's all fuzzy."

The nurse tried to silence her. "Now, now that's enough, dear. Don't upset yourself more. You need to gather your strength."

"Wait, Buffy!" April tried to sit up, but was restrained by both John and the nurse. "I got off a shot, before... blacked out. I'm a good shot. Nailed it right in the chest. Nothing. Shoulda killed it."

"Don't worry, April. If I come across it, I'll kill it."

Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing, doubting dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before.

The darkness faded. Perhaps not faded. That was not the right word. It lightened. Faint at first, and then growing brighter. He shrank back from it, blinded by it, holding his hands in front of his eyes.

But the silence was unbroken, and the stillness gave no token, and the only word there spoken was the whispered word, 'Lenore!'

He realized then that he was no longer locked away in the darkness, that he had been brought out into the light, that his hands were his to move, and that he could feel each breath through his chest, the trembling of his hands, and the grass beneath him. She had brought him here again, to her circle of stones, and he wasn't sure which was worse: the darkness or her.

He murmured the words under his breath as he curled into a ball, dropping his head down to his knees. "This I whispered, and an echo murmured back the word 'Lenore!'"

Her breath was hot beside him. "Merely this and nothing more."

He flinched away from her and focused his mind on his recitation. Maybe he could shut her out; maybe if he filled his head with enough nothing, she would see nothing inside him.

Back into the chamber turning, all my soul within me burning, soon again I heard a tapping somewhat louder than before.

"Ah, dear boy, I am much more than the wind. And I am after much more than simple entertainment this time."

He tried to ignore her, but she had him by the arm and was hauling him to his feet. "What do you want?" he ground out.

"Her."

“Whatcha doing?” Xander asked.

“Read to Daddy. Daddy fave’it.”

While Xander doubted that “Yertle the Turtle” was Giles’ favorite, he knew it was one of Alex’s, and so sat beside him as he read. For a moment he thought the kid was actually reading, a feat that would have been unexpected and quite humbling for a guy who had barely squeaked through high school. Alex had the words mostly right and turned the pages at the appropriate times. But then Xander realized the kid wasn’t even looking at the book and just had the words memorized. He wasn’t sure which was more impressive.

The doorbell rang, and he heard Spike call out, “I got it.” A pause. “You got to be kidding me!” The door slammed.

Xander hurried out of the bedroom, meeting Dawn in the hallway and urging her to stay back with the twins. When he reached the bottom of the stairs, Spike was leaning over the couch, peering out between the curtains.

“What’s going on?”

“Vampires. A whole friggin’ brigade of ’em.”

“How bad can it be?” Xander leaned up against the couch beside Spike and peeked out the window too. “Oh, that bad.” The house was surrounded.

Spike jumped off the couch and strode quickly to the front hall closet. He tried the door three times before he noticed the childproof lock. He sighed, undid it, and flung open the door. Crossbows, swords, stakes, crosses... He snatched his hand back before he could unintentionally burn it. A whole arsenal, and he handed out weapons to Xander and then Anya as she stepped up behind them.

“Hey, hey, what do you think you’re doing?” Xander snapped as he snatched the crossbow from his wife.

She snatched it back. “Trying not to get killed.”

He made another grab for it, but she held firm, and they started a tug of war over it. “You’re way too pregnant to play Rambo.”

“Oh! I’m too fat? Is that it?” She slapped his hand hard, but he didn’t loose his grip. “I’m still a better shot than you.”

Spike stepped between them and ended the discussion by taking the crossbow himself. “No one’s playing Rambo. There’s too many of them. We’re going to wait them out ’til morning. They can’t get in without an invitation, *remember?*” He handed the crossbow to Anya. “Let’s see how many we can pick off in the meantime. And for God’s sake, be careful ’round the windows.”

“And to think, we were going to redo that spell, but now you’ve delivered her right to us.”

He felt a cold shiver of fear shoot down his spine. “Who?”

“The last slayer.”

Giles curled his hand into a fist and swung with every bit of anger he possessed. Sabrina laughed and ducked easily. She danced a few feet in front of him, jeering him on.

“Have you forgotten? I can anticipate your every move. Come on, then, let’s give it a go. I have a few minutes to kill.”

“You lay one hand on her—”

"And you'll what? Think very bad thoughts about me? Your body is lying in a bed, stuck full of tubes, where it will stay until it withers away and dies many, many years from now." She smiled as she saw the pain lance across his face, as she saw his crushing fear of the very future she described. "I don't think you'll be doing anything to me."

Giles backed down, knowing she was right, taking a seat on one of the stones in defeat. Knowing didn't make it any easier. "Please," he spoke softly, his head bowed. "I'm begging you. Leave her be."

"Don't be absurd. After all that work we did killing off the others? Only one escaped us. Irony, isn't it, that she was *your* daughter? I saw her in your mind." She squatted down in front of him. "You're the reason I found her."

He covered his face with his hands, rocking rhythmically as he tried to quiet his traitorous thoughts, tried to prevent himself from betraying anyone else he loved. *Caught from some unhappy master whom unmerciful Disaster followed fast and followed faster till his songs one burden bore-* He felt her fingers through his hair.

"If it helps, she won't be harmed. They want a slayer of their own. And I want..." She laughed, and the sound of her voice moved until she was behind him, her fingers tracing lazy patterns across his back. "Let me tell you a little secret, just between us. I have my two hundred and eighty, chosen carefully to be only the most powerful. Most of them watchers. Your daughter buys me the sword. And then one last watcher: that Travers fellow. He will be the one that lights my sword and gives me the power of all I have taken in her name. That would make you the last. I considered killing you as well, adding your power to the others, but this is much more... cruel, wouldn't you say? And I'm all about cruel."

He stood abruptly and walked several paces away from her. "You've had your gloat. Send me back and let me be."

"Tut-tut-tut," she clucked her tongue at him. "I told you I needed something from you."

He turned to look at her, trying to keep the litany going in his mind, trying to keep her out of his head. *Whether Tempter sent, or whether tempest tossed thee here ashore, desolate yet all undaunted, on this desert land enchanted-*

"I need you to give me an invitation."

He blanked on the rest of the stanza. He shook his head, his eyes pleading with her. "She's just a little girl."

"I think it will be more fun if you're there when you do it."

Like a door slamming, like being sucked down a whirlpool, not in the least bit gradual like before, he was plunged back into darkness, shoved back into his lifeless body. He couldn't move, couldn't control any of the events happening around him. He was more aware this time. The voices surrounding him were clear. He could feel his children's trembling forms pressed against each side. Dawn kept reminding them to keep their heads down, pushing them down against his chest. Anya's voice was shouting from another room, and Xander answered her from somewhere off to the right. Spike's voice came from that general direction as well.

Giles felt his lips move, but he couldn't stop their movement any more than he could force his eyes open. He heard the sound come from his own throat and wished he could swallow it back.

"Come in."

His awareness receded. The sounds around him faded; the sensations of his body dimmed. He was slipping back into the darkness. The last sound he heard was the simultaneous scream of both son and daughter. After that, all was black and silent.

Anya shouted for more bolts.

"In a minute," Xander called back. "They're kind of shooting back at us over here." He hugged the wall tighter as another bolt came flying through the window and embedded itself in Buffy and Giles' dresser. "Hey! You guys are paying to have that fixed! Those drawers are dovetailed, Mister."

Spike rolled his eyes and jumped up to take another shot out the window before ducking back down. "Maybe if you stopped *missing* them, you wouldn't keep them stocked up with ammo."

"You know, maybe a vampire shouldn't insult someone who's holding a crossbow."

"You know, maybe I'd be the teeniest bit worried if you could actually *hit* something with it."

Xander heard Giles' voice, so faint he might have imagined it.

He heard Giles say, "Come in."

Spike threw a glance towards the bed too, and Xander knew he hadn't been the only one who heard it. He looked at Spike. Spike looked at him. They said it at the same time.

"Shit."

Chapter 9

Waking the Dead

Buffy picked her way through the sorority house. It appeared to have been hastily abandoned. Nothing of value had been taken: the electronics were still there, and the plush furniture and the baby grand. But all the personal items were gone, the rows of dorm-like bedrooms upstairs in disarray, emptied of clothing and pictures and jewelry. Whatever could fit in suitcases and assorted boxes was taken, everything else left where it lay. Some rooms had obviously packed more than they could carry, evidenced by the packed boxes stacked against walls and on beds.

Buffy stopped as she passed one room, drawn in by the brief glimpse of something familiar. It was hurriedly packed like all the others, but she recognized a few of the belongings left behind. The bedspread looked exactly like it could belong to... And the clothes strewn across it and the posters still hanging on the walls, they were all exactly like her friend's. It couldn't be. But it was. Buffy bent to pick up a small snapshot, forgotten on the floor. Her own face laughing back at her, framed by Xander and Willow, all of them looking so young, so different. It was from their first year of high school together, she thought, back when Xander had a crush on her, back when Willow was pining away after her best friend, barely able to string together two words in front of the opposite sex, and back when Buffy herself had thought playing star-crossed lovers with a 240-year-old vampire was the height of excitement.

This was Willow's room, or it had been until recently. Whatever was going on, whatever these people were up to, Willow had some part in it. And she had discarded her old friends just like the photograph in Buffy's hands.

Buffy had thought that in losing her watcher and husband she had hit rock bottom. But here was a lower place. Her best friend had switched teams, and not in the straight then gay kind of way. Buffy was fairly certain these people had something to do with Robin and the other potential slayers and probably the watchers as well. But even if they didn't, they definitely had something to do with April lying in a hospital bed the last two weeks.

How would she stop her best friend? Did she have it in her to square off against Willow? Was it too late to offer her friend a helping hand out of the darkness? She thought of Faith, how they had tried to help her and lost her, thought about that fated battle before graduation day, how she had slid Faith's stolen knife in her gut- *slid in like she was butter*- and almost lost herself. *What are you going to do, B? Kill me- you become me. You're not ready for that.* What would she become if she were forced to hurt Willow? Would she be worse than Faith? Would it be better to simply walk away, let Willow do whatever she wanted, rather than take a human life, a life she loved? Should she just write Willow off as Giles had written off Ethan?

She stared at the high school snapshot, longing for simpler days, when things had been more black and white: kill a demon, save the day. Was the price for saving the day now too great? Not even to save the world could Buffy sacrifice her sister. What would it take before she would be willing to sacrifice Willow?

They were strolling hand in hand through the streets of Prague. Dru had always liked Prague. Since Angelus and Darla had gone their separate ways, it was just the two of them, and he brought her here often, although they were never good at laying low. Consequently, they were never able to stay in Prague long. They never stayed anywhere long.

They stopped in front of a dressmaker's shop. Dru pointed excitedly at the dress the mannequin wore.

"Oh, Spike, isn't it lovely?"

He eyed it skeptically. "We killed a shopkeeper not two blocks back for the dress you've got on. Don't tell me you're tired of it already."

She pouted at him. "Yes, but this one smells of her, and she tore the lace trying to run away." She lifted the beaded hem of the overskirt so he could see more clearly the tear across the elaborate underskirt. "Naughty girl. Wouldn't even mend it for me."

"She was dead, Dru. You killed her."

"Oh, right." She eyed the dress in the window longingly. "Such a lovely color, like dead roses, all faded and dried on their stems. I want it, Spike."

He sighed as he studied her in profile. In many ways she was like a child, able to find joy in such simple things. "Then you shall have it, my love." He stepped over to the front door, and stooping over for a rock, busted out the side window. She applauded for him giddily as he reached through to unlock the door, stepping aside for her to enter first.

The shop was dim, lit only by the light that filtered in from the street. He nosed around until he'd found the shopkeeper's store of matches and lit the oil lamp beside the register. Dru had already peeled the dress off the mannequin and was holding it against herself as she twirled in front of the full-length mirror.

"Dru, darling, you don't have a reflection," Spike reminded her very patiently.

"If I close my eyes, I can see it," she murmured approvingly. "It's perfect, my William. I'm going to go put it on." She stopped mid-twirl, her eyes focused on a spot just behind him. "Well, well, maybe she can mend my dress for me."

He turned to see what had caught her attention. A young woman in her nightclothes stood just behind the register, holding aloft a candle in its holder. They had apparently wakened the shopkeeper who lived above the store. With any luck, there were more upstairs.

Spike smiled appreciatively. "Well, aren't you a bit fresher than the last? What do they call you, little girl?"

"Tara."

He stopped in his advance, overcome with a strange sense of déjà vu and the feeling that things had just been set on their side. Dru slipped in behind him, sliding her hand into his. She leaned forward to whisper in his ear, "Do you want to, or shall I?"

He remembered this. He remembered what happened next. He and Dru would drain the young woman together, unable to decide which should have her. They would go upstairs, and the little girl would invite them in, because Dru had a dolly for her. And they would play with the young toddler while the father begged for her life. They would kill them both and sneak out before the morning light could reveal what they had done. And Dru would wear her new dress through the streets of Prague the next night, window-shopping for a bit of jewelry to go with it.

He remembered all of this, even though it hadn't happened yet. He wondered if Drusilla's visions were beginning to rub off on him as well. But just as he remembered everything that would happen next, he also knew without a shadow of a doubt that the woman's name hadn't been Tara. Not the first time. Her hair had been longer, darker, and pulled up in rag curlers. This woman was fairer, her thick blonde hair worn straight to her shoulders. And she was familiar.

Dru tried to walk around him, impatient for the kill. He restrained her, his eyes never leaving the woman before him, and her eyes fixed on him as well. He knew what to ask, without knowing why he

knew or why he cared about her answer. It was all very surreal, like a dream. "You have something to show me?"

She nodded and started up the steps directly behind her. He followed, Drusilla on his heels. She was forced back at the stairwell by an invisible barrier. Spike turned to see her standing there, pounding against the air, unable to follow him. He wondered how he had passed through without an invitation.

"You've already been invited here," the young woman informed him, as if she could read his mind. She waited at the landing for him, holding the candle to light his path.

Spike continued up the narrow stairwell, which turned once, then twice before ending on the second floor. But it wasn't the shopkeepers' apartment he ended at. It was someone else's house, someone else familiar, whose name stayed just out of reach. Modern conveniences in the bathroom, the tellie blaring from the end bedroom. All things that shouldn't be here in this time.

He laughed at himself, at his own stupidity. "I'm dreaming."

The woman smiled. "Something like that." She stretched her hand towards the ceiling and a small ladder stairway unfolded itself to the ground, leading up to a dark attic. She offered him the candle. "It was my mother's book. I never showed it to anyone, not even to *her*. I think it will help."

He took the candle from her hands, feeling the warmth of the flame and the wax as it dripped down to the taper. He watched Tara for a moment, feeling like he was standing astride two worlds. "It's really you, isn't it? And it was Dru before, in the other dream?"

Tara shrugged bashfully and ducked her head. "It's easier for the dead to visit the dead." She raised her eyes again, her expression serious and urgent as she reminded him again: "My mother's book."

"Yeah, yeah, I'll find the thing. And it bloody well better be useful, if you're going to go disturbing a perfectly good dream to bother me about it."

Tara smiled, the shy, timid smile Spike remembered of her. She wrapped her fingers around the hand holding the candle, her grip on his wrist strong. "Tell her I'm happy. I miss her, but I'm happy. And I want her to be happy too."

"Sure, whatever." He rolled his eyes. "Anything else? Should I take notes? Bleedin' messenger service for the afterlife. Is that what I am now?"

Tara's smile widened. "Goodbye, Spike. And take good care of Dawnie. She's loved you for a long time. You know, you may not have a soul, but you have a heart, a good heart."

"A dead heart," he scoffed.

She shook her head emphatically. "A heart that loves is never dead."

"Yeah, yeah, put it on a greeting card and sell it. We finished, ducks?"

She blew out the candle, and that was her answer.

He was plunged into darkness. He heard voices a great distance away and felt a slap across his cheek, then another. He opened his eyes and caught the hand before it struck again. Anya was kneeling beside him.

"Finally! You were a lot more difficult to wake up than Xander. You sleep like the dead, which makes sense, I suppose, since you are."

Spike bolted to his feet. "Dawn!"

Xander stopped him before he'd taken more than two steps. "She's fine. She's downstairs trying to get a hold of Buffy at the hospital. We're all fine, except I think I got a concussion and the twins are gone."

Spike puzzled through Xander's assessment. He thought for sure he was dust when the attacking vampires got the better of them. Vastly outnumbered and outmaneuvered, they hadn't lasted more than ten minutes against the invaders. "Why aren't we dead?"

"I heard them talking to each other after you both were knocked out. They were under strict orders from somebody not to kill Giles," Anya answered. "I guess they didn't know which one of us was Giles, so they didn't kill any of us. And they didn't knock Dawn or me out, which wasn't a bad thing either. But they took the children. We couldn't stop them. I think they were surprised to see two. I think they were only sent after one of them, probably Robin."

Spike nodded. "Any idea where they've gone?"

"No," She answered despondently. "We need some of those homing things like they have in the movies, and then we could follow the twins like little blinking dots on a computer screen."

"Okay, Q," Xander replied sarcastically, "any ideas for the real world?"

"A locator spell?"

Xander rested his hand against her round stomach. "Except..."

"Yes, except..." They both looked towards Spike. "Could you do it?"

He shrugged. "Could try." He tilted his head back towards where Giles was still resting on the bed. "Watcher would be better at it, if we could break that damn spell." His thoughts continued on even as Anya and Xander talked in the background, thoughts of his dream with Dru and then Tara.

"What's up with the invitation giving?" Xander asked. "He wakes up just long enough to invite in a bunch of vampires?"

"No, it was whoever cast the spell on him," Anya explained. "They made him give the invitation. They probably hired the vampires to steal the children, too."

Xander's eyes lit up with an idea. "Hold on. I think my fuzzy, concussed head just had an idea. We find the twins, and we find whoever put the spell on Giles, right? Then we'll make *them* break it."

"Good plan. Now how do we find the twins, sweetie?"

His face fell. "Oh, yeah. We were just trying to figure that out. I think it involved breaking the spell on Giles so he could do a locator spell." He groaned and held his hands to his head. "We're just going in circles here, and it's making me dizzy."

Anya smiled, and patted him on the arm soothingly. "Maybe Buffy will have an idea."

Xander frowned. "I'm not so sure. I think she might have a total shutdown. She's spent the last week thinking that Giles might never wake up. When she finds out vampires abducted both their children, she might go a little catatonic. Remember when Glory nabbed Dawn?"

"Oh, yeah, and then Willow did that spell to bring her out." A long silence followed her statement. "Right. Another spell none of us can do. We need to put an ad in the paper or something for another witch, because we really seem to be coming up short right now."

Spike had finally sorted out his dream. Tara had led him to the second floor of *this* house, *Buffy's* house, and they'd been standing not even ten feet away in the hallway. "What'd they do with Tara's stuff after she died?"

The young couple stared at him, baffled for a moment. Xander had a cutting comment on the tip of his tongue. "Why? You looking to fence it to buy beer?"

"Just answer the bleedin' question."

Anya reached out her fingers to probe him along the back of his head, and he flinched away. "Can vampires get concussions too?" she asked. "Because your question in no way fits into the conversation we were having."

Spike glared and gritted his teeth. "What did they do with the witch's sodding stuff?"

Xander studied him for a moment, and then reluctantly answered his question. "Willow didn't want to keep any of it. She said she couldn't look at it. She wanted to get rid of it, but Giles thought she would regret that later. He and Buffy boxed everything up and stuck it in the attic, in case she decided she wanted some of it later."

"The attic?" Spike strolled out into the hallway and looked up at the outline of the doorway in the ceiling, just like he had seen in his dream. He laughed. They'd been searching all week, and now all he'd have to do is pull down the stairs, climb up into some dank attic, and sift through the witch's stuff 'til he found her mother's book. Why couldn't Tara have dropped in on one of his dreams days ago? It's not like he hadn't dreamed before today.

Dawn came up the stairs then, smiling when she saw Spike. He cupped her chin in his hand and pulled her into a crushing hug. Whatever Xander and Anya wanted to think be damned. There had been a moment where he thought her lost, thought he had failed to protect her. When the vampires rushed them in numbers too great to hold back, he had experienced a moment of despair and failure every bit as great as that moment at the top of Glory's tower when he had failed to stop Doc, when he could only look at her helplessly before being thrown from its height.

"I thought I'd lost you," he murmured into her hair.

"Me? Nah." She gave him a brave smile. "Slayer's kid sister, remember? I have years of experience getting into trouble and walking away. Buffy's the one who died twice. Worry about her."

He chuckled softly and touched her cheek with his hand.

Xander interrupted their tender moment. "While a lovefest between Dawn and Spike is... well... *gross*." He shrugged sheepishly. "Sorry, Dawn, but it is. Anyway, we really should figure out a workable plan before Buffy gets home."

Dawn faced them, still leaning against Spike. "She left the hospital a while ago. She should be home..." The front door banged open. "...right about now."

"Guys?" Buffy called as she jogged up the stairs. "Oh, good, you're all here. I'm afraid I have some really bad news."

The foursome exchanged meaningful glances before looking anywhere but at Buffy. Spike spoke. "Sure, Slayer, you first."

He heard the girl's wailing before his minions had even reached his office. But when the band of vampires entered his presence, they carried not one child, but two between them.

"What is this?" he demanded, glaring back and forth between one very hysterical little girl and one very sullen little boy.

"There were two kids, boss, and we didn't know which to take, so we took them both."

"You idiots!" He backhanded the vampire closest him and then advanced on the next, who held the boy up as if to use him as a shield. Joseph didn't strike again, but his eyes focused on each subordinate with contempt. "Slayers are always girls. Always! What am I going to do with a little boy? There isn't even enough blood in him for a decent snack." His hand thrust out to grasp the boy's face in his hand, feeling the child's heart rate quicken beneath his fingers as he forced the small head to the side. But the boy's green eyes didn't even waver as Joseph slipped into his demon visage.

"Aren't you afraid of me, little boy? Aren't I the kind of monster that gives you nightmares?"

"Leave him be, Joseph." Sabrina pushed him back and motioned for the boy to be set down. She knelt on the ground in front of him. "Sometimes you vampires are so dimwitted, I'm surprised the sun ever shines for you." She smiled coyly. "Oh yeah, it doesn't." She grasped the child by his shoulders and pulled him closer to her, sizing him up thoughtfully. "Anyone can see that the boy's worth ten of her. He has his father's power."

Joseph scoffed. "And the girl has her mother's power. Her mother, the *Slayer*."

Sabrina shot him a look over her shoulder. "Fine, then. She's yours. Make her into whatever kind of slayer you like. Our business here is done. Give me the sword. And I want the boy, too. A little bonus for making me wait."

He nodded to two lackeys at the door, and they left to fetch the witch's payment.

Joseph sized up his little slayer, cowering in the arms of one of his less threatening minions. The man used to work in the mailroom of Wolfram and Hart. And here his slayer was, trembling in fear of this gawkish, beanpole, nothing vamp.

"She's rather timid for a slayer. Are you sure she's the right one, Sabrina?"

"Yes." A weary sigh. "She's a child, Joseph, and you are a monster, what would you expect her to do? Pull out a mini stake and attack your kneecaps? Fear is your ally, in this case. Fear is how you will control her and make her yours. You would have more to worry about if she showed no fear." Sabrina turned back to the boy in front of her, reaching out her finger to bop him on the nose as she smiled. He met her stare levelly. "Yes, if she showed no fear for you, you would have no choice but to put her down."

She leaned down closer and whispered, "What is your name, little man?"

The child's chin jutted out stubbornly as he crossed his arms.

"That's alright. I'm sure your father will tell me."

His eyes grew wider at that statement, and Joseph wondered how she knew the child's father.

The lackeys returned then with their cargo, and Sabrina seemed to forget about the boy as she rushed to claim her sword. Joseph had never seen a child more eager for Christmas than she was for that damn blade.

She tested the weight of it in her hands, gave it a few swings to hear it slice through the air. She beamed at him. "Thank you. I had almost given up hope, but you came through for me."

He shrugged, playing modest. "You just have to know where to look, who to bribe, who to kill. Networking."

She bowed slightly, graciously. "All the same, I salute your resourcefulness. And I hope you found it to be a fair trade. But I believe our business is concluded." She slipped the sword back into its ornate sheath, strapped it across her back and moved to take the boy.

Joseph stopped her. "Am I not invited to your big hurrah?"

"Really, you don't want to go. Lots of chanting, blood sacrifice, that sort of thing. Quite dull. It's liable to take all night. Stay home. Enjoy your little slayer. I'll give you a call sometime. Maybe do dinner?"

She scooped the boy up into her arms. He didn't resist, but neither did he wrap his arms around her.

"Wait," Joseph insisted, restraining her by the arm. "I thought we were partners."

"Partners?"

"You know, you're taking the power of all the watchers...? I have the last slayer...? Ring any bells? You were going to find the potentials as they came. Our own Council. It was *your* idea."

She laughed. "You're a man of resources; you find the next generation of slayers. I got rid of this one; I got the Council out of the way. What you do with it from this point on is your own affair."

His grip on her arm tightened. "*You* got rid of the Council? And the slayers? By yourself? If I recall, it was a team effort."

She sighed in exasperation. "Fine. I showed you where the slayers were, and your minions killed them. I destroyed the Council headquarters, and you took care of the branch offices and finished off the stragglers. The point is: I did my part. You're set up nicely to play watcher if you like. Or not. I don't really care either way. I'm done."

He shoved her back roughly. "If I could find the potentials on my own, I wouldn't have hired you to do the fucking spell."

"Language, Joseph." She adjusted the boy's weight on her hip. "If you don't think you can handle it, then just kill her, kill Faith, and be done with it. But if you're ready to stand on your own two feet, then stop whining to me about what you can and can't do and figure a way. You're out of your father's shadow now; you're out from under Wolfram and Hart's wing; it's time to walk in the sun for once." She paused before adding, "Metaphorically, of course."

Joseph studied the little girl, sobbing brokenly at the feet of the mailroom clerk. His slayer now. Maybe Sabrina was right. Maybe he didn't need her. He had orchestrated a worldwide massacre of all potentials in a single night. Sabrina had only told him where to strike. He could do this. And if he missed a slayer here or there over the years, well there would be no watchers to find them either.

He focused again on the witch, who was waiting patiently for his leave to go. "So you are sure there are no more watchers left?"

"None that should cause you any concern." He gave her a skeptical look, and she elaborated. "Only two. One will be dead tomorrow. The other will simply wish he were."

He nodded. "Fine. Go. Good luck tomorrow. Tomorrow night is the crescent moon, isn't it?"

"Yes. You cut it close delivering the sword. Then again, I would have had another chance next month, so no harm, no foul."

"Your coven is staying at the shelter now?" He spread his hands wide in surrender when she hesitated. "I just want to know where I could send flowers."

Sabrina laughed heartily. "Yes, at the shelter. The sorority was compromised." She shook her head in disbelief. "I thought fruit baskets were the traditional thank you from lawyer to client."

He shrugged. "I suppose I am no longer the traditional lawyer. That is something I will need to remember in the future. Thank you, Sabrina, for everything."

She acknowledged his gratitude with a tilt of her head and swept out of his office with the sword and the boy.

Joseph dismissed his minions and shut the door behind them. Alone in his office with his slayer, he paced around her like a tiger. "So, little slayer, they tell me your name is Robin." She didn't uncurl or raise her head, so he sat on the floor just in front of her and waited patiently for several minutes. Tired of waiting, he gripped her chin roughly and forced her head up. "I asked you a question. You *will* learn to mind me or you will suffer for your disobedience. Whatever life you had before is gone. I am all you have now. I can make you very happy, or I can hurt you terribly." He tucked a few stray locks of golden curls behind one ear. "Now, your name is Robin, right?"

She nodded meekly.

He smiled. "That's better. My name is Joseph. Do you want something to eat? Some toys perhaps?"

Faith paced and stretched, returning periodically for a look over the edge of the roof and down on the alleyway below. She was about to crawl out of her skin. After more than a week of tailing vampires and watching them from the shadows, she was craving the hunting like nothing she had experienced before. Worse even than those two months a couple of years ago when she had begged them to lock her in solitary before she lost control and killed someone or... Well, there'd been those other urges too.

She wanted to just bust in there, guns blazing, and dust as many as she could before they took her down. And they would take her down. There were just too many of them. This lawyer vamp had a full staff, just like that demon at Caritas had warned her. Bodyguards and errand boys and limo drivers and a frickin' mail clerk sorting mail in a side office. She needed to dust the leader first, the lawyer vamp, and then some of the others would bail out, even up the odds a little. She was pretty sure she had it figured out who he was and where his office was. Getting to him was another matter entirely. Faith had learned a little caution while in jail, and so she wouldn't just bust in there, guns blazing. She would wait for the right moment. In the meantime, all this waiting was making her crazy.

She stole another look over the edge at the alleyway. The woman who had entered earlier was leaving now, except with a sword strapped to her back and a kid in her arms.

"What's a vampire doing with a kid?"

The kid looked suspiciously like Buffy's kid. Faith decided to come back for the lawyer later. She would follow the woman first.

Buffy went through phases. First she had been a flurry of activity: let's go, let's find them, let's bring them home. She tried to track the vampires, but they'd been gone too long. She beat up Willy the Snitch. She paged through all the books they'd already paged through. Second had come the despair. She'd fallen, sobbing, to her knees, her grief a keening wail that tore at everyone around her. Dawn had started crying too, embracing her sister, the two of them clinging to each other on the floor. Now she had burned herself out and moved on to an empty, sullen stage. She sat on the couch, staring at nothing. Dawn sat beside her. Xander and Anya helped Spike sort through the boxes from the attic, unsure what they were looking for, but knowing it was at least something to keep them busy.

They nodded off one by one through the night. The nurse came promptly at eight in the morning to take care of Giles. Neither Buffy nor Dawn had the stomach to eat breakfast. Anya complained that her back ached from sleeping on the couch, and Xander shushed her quietly even as he sat beside her to give her a back rub. Spike threw a box against the wall, frustrated with constantly pulling out clothes and trinkets and love letters and, all in all, *junk*. He tramped off upstairs for another box.

The phone startled them all when it cut through the miserable silence. Xander was the only one who moved to answer it, and when he tried to hand it over to Buffy, it took him three tries before he had her attention.

"Buffy, it's for you. It's Faith."

Buffy stared at the cordless blankly.

"Faith. She wants to talk to you." Xander waved the phone back and forth.

She blinked and finally moved to take it. "Hello," she said softly.

"Hey, B, missing a kid?"

Buffy sat up straighter, her attention caught. "What do you know?"

"I know where Alex is. Come to LA. Meet me at five o'clock by the Redondo Beach Pier." The rest of the conversation was abruptly cut short. "Shit. Gotta go."

Click. That was it. No time to ask questions, no chance to ask about Robin. Just a time and a place for a rendezvous. Buffy wasn't even sure if she would be walking into a trap, if Faith had sold her out yet again.

She jumped up off the couch, issuing orders as she crossed to the hall closet. "Spike, Xander, you're with me. Anya, Dawn, stay here with Giles. I'll take my cell; call if anything changes, if Faith

has any more messages. She knows where Alex is, so we're meeting her in LA." She stuffed her pockets with a few stakes, grabbed a couple crossbows and a couple crosses for good measure.

"Hold up," Spike told her. He had a hand-sewn patchwork quilt in his hands and was slowly unfolding it. Wrapped at the center of the bundle was a worn, leather bound volume of considerable bulk. "Jackpot."

"What's that?" Anya asked.

"The ticket to waking up Watcher-boy, I'll wager." He smiled at his success.

"How do you know? We have a whole stack of books over there, and none of them were very helpful. How can you be sure this one is any different?"

"I just know, okay?" he snapped. "I knew it was up in the attic, didn't I? Give me a little credit here."

"Fine." Buffy's stern tone prevented any further argument between Anya and Spike. "You stay here and try to wake up Giles. Meet us in LA as soon as you can."

"Hey!" Spike protested. "Just 'cause I found the damn book doesn't mean I can do anything with it."

"Well, you have a better shot than anyone else here. I'm counting on you, Spike. We need Giles. Anya can help you figure it out and get supplies."

"No, I can't. I'm coming with you."

Xander balked. "I don't think so."

Anya crossed her arms. "Well, *I* think so."

"Buffy, tell her." He glanced back and forth between his friend and his wife. "Tell her she can't come."

The Slayer hedged. "Anya, I really don't think..."

"No, you don't think," Anya retorted. "Who's going to drive the car while you two are off doing whatever you're doing, which is probably going to involve getting screwed over by Faith? Parking in LA is hell. You need someone to drive the getaway car. And I can answer the phone, take messages for you while Faith is selling you out. And then I can call for backup after you both walk blindly into Faith's trap and get yourselves almost killed."

Buffy frowned. "I'm getting a feeling that you think Faith is going to stab us in the back."

"Yes, she is," Anya stated without hesitation. "Possibly literally. Possibly metaphorically. But one way or the other, there will be back-stabbing." She sighed. "Look, I don't want to get hurt. I don't want the baby to get hurt. I'll stay out of harm's way, I promise. I'm a good shot with a crossbow at a distance if I have to, and I'll stay in the car, so there's always the possibility of speeding away. But you need me to drive your getaway car. I think it will improve your chances of actually getting away."

"No, absolutely not," Xander insisted. "This is me putting my foot down. Hear the satisfying thud?"

Buffy bit her lip and screwed up her face in apprehension. "Umm... Xander? She kinda has a point. I think she should come."

Anya grinned triumphantly. "See? This is me going. Hear the door opening?" She grabbed the car keys and made a dash for the car.

Xander glared at the Slayer darkly. His tone was very serious. "If anything happens to her, or to the baby... I'll never forgive you." He snatched the crossbows from her hands and slammed the door on his way out.

Buffy faced her sister and the platinum haired vampire. "I hope you're right about that book. Bring Giles to LA with you if you can, but I need you there either way. And, Dawn," she took her sister by the shoulders. "I need you to stay here at the house no matter what."

“But-”

“No buts. You’re Mission Control. We’ll be checking in on the cell, and if we get separated from Anya, you’re how we’ll find her again.” Buffy gave her a kiss goodbye and turned back to the closet to retrieve a heavy longsword. She tossed it back and forth between her hands, testing its weight and balance. She smiled grimly. “They have a sword. I have a sword. I can’t wait to see who’s better at using theirs.”

She grabbed her coat on the way out, pausing as she saw Alex’s jacket resting beneath it. She swallowed back the emotions rising in her throat. “He’ll be cold,” she whispered. “He gets cold easily.”

“You’ll find him,” Dawn assured her. “And Robin, too.”

Buffy nodded. “Yes. Yes, I will.” Her eyes lingered on the length of her blade before she joined the others waiting outside.

Faith hung up the payphone, catching sight of the woman she’d followed exiting from a side door to the shelter. There were several people with her, one of whom she recognized as Quentin Travers. So that was the game, was it? The Council wanted Faith out of the picture, wanted to activate themselves a new slayer. Maybe the Council wasn’t as dead as he made them out to be. Maybe they’d just relocated and blown up their own buildings. This Joseph Zalk guy had tried to kill her, and this woman had something to do with him, and Travers was somehow involved with her. The pieces were all falling into place. If she’d stayed at Buffy’s house, Travers would have probably managed to have her killed by now.

They were getting in a car. She needed to find her own transport, and fast. A motorcycle sat unattended a few parking spots down. Another woman in her cellblock had been in for grand theft auto and had tutored Faith in all the necessary skills. Faith had soaked it all in, mostly because it was more interesting than listening to gossip about the newest warden or recaps of the latest Jerry Springer episode. The woman knew her stuff, because less than two minutes later, Faith was buzzing down the street, trying to catch up to the car carrying Quentin Travers.

Morgaine couldn’t remember what her name had been before. Nor could she remember what it had been the last time or the time before that. Sabrina had decided on their names for this incarnation. They had needed to gather themselves a coven, to attract power to themselves, power they could use to fuel the sword, and so they had decided on witchy names. The name Morgaine had dignity and a little nobility to it. She had featured in the legend of King Arthur, had delivered the instrument of his final destruction. Sabrina was just cute, the name of a television witch from a show that pandered to adolescents. But Sabrina had insisted that a cute, saccharin sweet name could only cloak the darker menace that lay beneath. Much as the name Buffy concealed the steel might of a Slayer, a warrior.

In the end, Morgaine wondered where Sabrina’s darkness had gone. They had gathered power to themselves, one at a time, but in the end Sabrina could not take them, could not count them among the 280. She had taken the watchers instead, claiming expediency, but Morgaine wondered if her resolve was weakening, if she were growing soft and too attached to the others in their group.

She watched out the beach house window for Sabrina’s car. The preparations for the ritual were nearly complete. Tonight the crescent moon would rise, and with it their power. Morgaine thought it

should be Willow who lit the sword; she had more power than any of the others. But Sabrina wanted another watcher. The car pulled into the drive. She would see what she thought of this watcher, if he was worthy of being the last.

Faith parked the motorcycle in the lot for public beach access. She pretended to engage herself with the engine while she watched the beach house a hundred feet away. The car unloaded its passengers, Travers getting out last. This time, seeing him from behind, she could tell his hands were tied behind his back with thick rope.

“Great! Just great!” She had wanted to blame him and hate him for her current predicament, but now it looked like she would have to rescue him instead.

Morgaine and Sabrina strolled along the beach. The others were in the beach house with Travers and Alex while she and Sabrina scouted the location where the ritual would be performed that night. They walked past the public beach, past a few private houses, and on to where the beach became less sandy and more rocky, less public and more private. Maybe a fifteen minute walk from their rented house.

Sabrina pointed to a spot just ahead, where the rocks rose up to become cliffs, a good hundred and fifty feet above the water line. There were two peaks, with a clearing of sandy beach between them and a fencing of thick forest shielding the beach from the road. They had discovered this spot some time before and decided upon it, renting the beach house for its close proximity.

“There,” she said. “We’ll put two at each peak, three along the edge of the forest, and you and I will complete the circle of nine at the waterline. We’ll need to bring a stake or something. The watcher will need to be tied down if we’re to keep him in the symbol until the end of the ceremony. How will we manage that in the sand?”

“A binding ritual.”

“Of course!” Sabrina clapped her partner on the shoulder. “I’d be lost without you. No rope then, just magic.”

“Are you sure about the seven you chose? That we can count on them?”

She seemed unconcerned. “I told them convincing lies.”

“So we can trust them? Even Willow?”

“Willow is firmly in my pocket. She would kill her old friends, I think, if I told her to.”

“Don’t think, *know*,” Morgaine snapped. Sabrina’s cavalier attitude was beginning to grate on her. So many things had gone wrong so far, and she had dismissed them all. Four of their group had tried to escape, one at a time, and had needed to be dealt with, leaving the symbol of their order exposed to those who might try and stop them. Joseph had nearly refused them the sword because one potential slayer had escaped. His attempt on Faith had failed, although, granted that was not their fault. Those detectives had stirred up trouble for them, forcing a move to the shelter in LA. And the other watcher had found them by magic and would have blown the whole plan wide open if Willow hadn’t caught him spying.

Less than a day to the big payoff, and Morgaine thought that deserved a little worrying, a little hedging of bets.

"Everything will be fine," Sabrina assured her. "This time tomorrow, the power will be mine, and you will have everything I promised you."

"And if the watcher escapes?" Morgaine countered, catching sight of something on the other side of the embankment.

"He won't. You worry too much."

Morgaine pointed behind Sabrina. "Isn't that him? And the Slayer?"

"Shit!" Faith dragged Travers back by his collar. "They saw us. I told you we should have just taken off while we had the chance. We should have grabbed the kid and hightailed it outta there. Now if we go back for Alex, they'll be waiting for us."

"The boy was too well guarded. If we'd tried to take him too, they'd have caught us all. We couldn't chance it. It was far more important to know where they were planning to perform the ceremony. If she activates the sword, her power will be beyond belief. We need to stop her before that happens."

"And the kid was expendable, huh? A little like slayers. Yeah, well, your plan only works if you live to tell someone about it. Come on." Faith hauled him up by his arm and propelled him into a run towards the road and her waiting stolen motorcycle. They were far short of their goal, and Travers was already wheezing from the exertion. "Jeeze, you watchers spend your lives training potential slayers, and you can't handle a brisk jog?"

"I'm sixty-eight... and for your information... I've never had a slayer."

"It shows." She shoved him towards the woods that cloaked the road from their sight. "Keep going. I'll stall them. Pick me up on the bike down the way."

He was blowing hard to catch his breath. "I don't know... how to operate... a motorbike."

"You're so smart- *figure it out!*" She started running in the opposite direction, towards the beach and their ominous pursuers. Her blood was pounding, her senses soaring, her body feeling completely alive in the way it only did during the hunt and the kill. This was the part she missed, the part that even Buffy didn't understand. For Buffy slaying was a duty, a burden. For Faith it was a joy, what she was built for, what she lived for. Slaying was the high she craved. As Faith, she was worthless. As the Slayer, she meant something. And during the hunt, the fight, the kill, there was no part of her that was Faith.

Buffy had a life outside the slaying, and she resented her calling for interfering with cheerleading and running for homecoming queen and dating a string of losers. The life Faith had was not one anyone would want. Beat down by her abusive father. Put down by her drunken mother. Her childhood had been an endless cycle of screaming and breaking glass and name calling, her father becoming more violent each day, her mother withdrawing further into her own world and deeper into the bottle after each fight. Until the day came that her mother hadn't gotten back up, had just lain on the floor where her father threw her. And twelve-year-old Faith, her own nose bloodied, had mustered up the nerve to hit him back. He'd thrown her through the window for her temerity, and she hadn't gone back in that house again, had turned and run away into the night.

A shiftless, distrustful runaway is what her watcher found. But the woman had instinctively known how to channel Faith's rage into her training, and for the first time in her life Faith knew what it was to be valued and cared for. She knew what it was to actually be good at something. And when she was Called, it was like the Universe was telling her: "They were wrong about you. You *are* important. You *do* matter."

She wondered sometimes what her life would be like now if Kakistos hadn't murdered her watcher. Emma Dosser had been the only person in the world who had ever given a damn about her, but in the end Faith hadn't been able to save her, hadn't been good enough, was never good enough, and poor Em must have drawn the short straw to have gotten stuck with her. If she'd gotten Buffy, she might be alive now, because good old Buffy always saved the day.

None of that mattered right now, except to fuel the fire for this fight and this battle. She met the pair halfway, channeling her momentum from running into a flying leap kick, meant to knock each of them to the ground with a blow from each foot.

The instant before impact, her targets vanished, her feet passing through only air. A solid kick to each of their chests would have given her the push-off she needed to regain her footing. Failing that, she landed flat on her butt. She heard laughter behind her and rolled to her knees. The woman she'd been following was standing there, bouncing back and forth on her feet and daring Faith to make another try. The black woman who'd been with her was gone.

Faith tried again. She jumped to her feet and charged the smaller woman, swinging her fist with a windup that would likely break the woman's jaw. Her target disappeared again, and her fist connected with only air... again. She was slammed from behind, knocked onto the ground... *again*. She rolled and pulled herself into a squat.

"Come on, Faith. Did you really think you'd save the day? When have *you* ever saved the day? It was always Buffy. You were never more than the sidekick."

Faith launched herself at the woman in a fury of flailing arms and legs and a bloodcurdling war cry of rage. She passed through thin air, stumbled, and turned around. The woman was standing behind her, laughing at her.

"What the f—"

Brunette curls bobbed as the woman shook her head in amusement. "Magic. Teleportation. Quite useful with the rising cost of gas and all."

Faith lunged, and the woman dodged easily, not disappearing, but seeming to anticipate the Slayer's every move.

She taunted the Slayer, dancing just beyond reach. "Give it up, Faith. You're worthless. You're not even any good at this."

Faith spun kicked, again flying through empty air as the woman teleported the second before impact. She felt a blow across her shoulders and fell to the ground. The grass beneath her hands began to grow. She blinked her eyes, sure it was her imagination. But tendrils of weeds were wrapping themselves around her wrists. She snapped their hold, struggling to her feet, but tripped before she could stand. She was on her back now, creeping vines crawling up her legs and around her arms. They multiplied faster than she could break their hold.

The woman advanced on her, stood over her, looking down. She sneered at the Slayer, now pinned with chains of green vine.

"You're *nothing*, Faith. You're not even worth killing."

And the woman turned and walked away.

Travers felt his heart pounding in a rhythm that threatened to split his chest open. Each breath burned his lungs. A man his age was not meant for battle. A man his age was meant to pull the strings from afar. But Faith had delayed his pursuers, and he was nearly to the motorcycle. The forest broke, and he could see the road not even fifty feet ahead. The motorcycle waited for him there, but there was

a woman sitting astride it. He stumbled slightly as he stopped his run. It was the black woman from the beach, the same one who had been in the room with him when he first woke after his abduction. Somehow she had beaten him there.

She smiled as she swung her leg over and climbed off the bike.

He doubled back the way he had come, running into the forest, taking a hard right and praying he could lose her in the underbrush. He nearly tripped over a log. He caught himself on a tree and pushed onwards. Her voice echoed behind him, calling him, taunting him. The underbrush crunched with each step, advertising his location to anyone within a hundred meters.

The forest gave way to sand. He was nearing the ocean again, somewhere further down the shore from the location of the ritual. There was no beach here, only rock, rising up to cliffs that towered over the surf. He heard a voice to his left and couldn't help but steal a glance. The second woman, the leader, Sabrina they had called her, she stood leaning against the rock face, watching him in amusement. She waited for the shock and fear to cross his face before she moved to chase him.

The sand shifted with his strides, slowing him down, forcing him to run in slow motion. She had nearly caught up with him when he fell to one knee. His next actions were quick and without thought, the last ditch desperation of an animal backed into a corner. His hands touched the sand as he fell, and he scooped up two fistfuls, twisting and throwing the sand in her face as she came closer.

Her hands scrubbed at her eyes, trying to clear her vision, and she howled in frustration. Travers was already on his feet, running beside the cliffs. A crevice opened in the rock face, and he darted inside, hoping her vision was still too obscured to have seen him.

The terrain was hazardous, slick and uneven, and he picked his way carefully along the crevice towards the water. With any luck he could turn back and make his way along the beach, back towards the beach houses, waterfront condos, and tourist traps they had left earlier. He left no footprints on the rock. If he were very lucky, he could put enough distance between himself and his two kidnappers to elude them.

The crevice opened up to the surf, great boulders tumbling down into the water below, where the ocean waves broke upon their surface. He looked left, then right. There was no path along the shore, no way to travel along the beach in either direction. The cliffs to both sides blocked his way. He was trapped.

Beneath the roar of the ocean and the crash of each wave, he heard the heavy breathing of something less than human. He remembered then the vague warnings that Rupert's young son had given him. *Don't go water.* He felt a presence behind him and knew as clearly as if *he* were the prophetic one. He took a deep breath and drew himself up straight. He would at least die like a man.

He turned. The Beast struck him down. The surf rolled red with his blood.

Morgaine stared down at the tangled growth and snapped vines. She glared at Sabrina with an anger she had never imagined she would feel for her friend.

"You let her live? You let her escape?"

Sabrina shrugged off the disbelief in those words and started walking back to their beach house. "She is unimportant. I was more concerned about him."

Morgaine waited a moment before rushing to catch up. "I was taking care of him. You should have trusted me. You should have focused on her."

"What's done is done. She is gone, and he is dead. Let's move on." She fished in her pockets for the rental keys and then tossed them back and forth in her hands, their steady clang setting a rhythm

that matched their strides. "If she tries to interfere in our ceremony, we will kill her then. Otherwise, she can remain Joseph's problem."

Morgaine studied her friend sideways. "And who will light the sword?" She watched her friend's thoughtful features as the other woman considered and discarded several options. They walked in silence the remaining distance to the house.

Inside, the others of the coven were putting things back in order. Only one witch had been knocked out, and three others were forming a healing circle around her. Apparently Faith had opted for stealth rather than force. No one else had been aware of Travers' disappearance until his guard began to painfully regain consciousness. They apologized profusely for their failure, but Sabrina was forgiving and placed no blame. Only Morgaine noticed how Sabrina studied each of them, sizing up their power and possible use as the final sacrifice.

Willow was the only one missing. She would not come until nightfall. Sabrina claimed this was so she could keep watch over the others at the shelter, but Morgaine suspected her hold over the witch was not as complete as she claimed. She suspected Sabrina knew that if Willow saw the boy, she would see them for what they were, would finally comprehend what her power was being used for. More than any of the others, Sabrina wanted to believe she owned Willow. And Morgaine was beginning to realize that her hold over Willow, over all of them, was more tenuous than she wanted to admit.

They retired into a back bedroom, and Morgaine set the wards without thought.

"I think it should be Willow," she insisted. "She is more powerful than any of the others."

"No." Sabrina vetoed that choice quickly.

"You're going soft. You're attached to her," Morgaine accused. "When this is all over, do you really think she will have any place with us? She will have to die one way or another."

Sabrina watched through the window as the ocean chased the shoreline. "Maybe. Maybe not. There are two kinds of people in this world, Morgaine. One man can betray his morals and commit an act so evil that it will haunt him for the rest of his days. And in evil, he finds redemption, turns back to the straight and narrow, and spends the rest of his life trying to atone for his sin. Another man can be driven to the same act, and yet for him it severs his ties to the man he once was. And that man will spend the rest of his life doing more and greater evil, trying to prove to himself that he is the monster he thinks he is.

"I want to know which Willow is. When she learns what her power has wrought, will that knowledge reform her, or will it drive her deeper into the arms of darkness? Will she belong to us, or will she return to them? And will they welcome her or hate her for what she has done? I find these questions interesting."

"You are a coward."

"Excuse me?"

Morgaine crossed her arms, the reservations she had accumulated over the last few weeks now pouring out in a torrent. "Those are all very good excuses. You want to see how evil you can make Willow. You want to see how long before the watcher goes insane. You would rather take the Council than any of our coven. The fact is you've gone soft. All these years spent living among them, and you've developed empathy, sympathy, *feelings*. You can't kill them because you know them. You *care* about them."

Sabrina turned from the window, stepped toe to toe with the fellow witch. "Careful what you say. Maybe I'll prove you wrong. Maybe I'll make *you* the sacrifice."

She laughed in her face. "Hah! I'm not afraid of you, Sabrina. Aside from your mind games and until you activate the sword, my power is equal to yours. You know I'm right. Tell me, oh heartless

one, when Joseph delivered the sword, did you call fire down upon him and all who served him? Or did you spare him?"

"Because I do not choose to kill indiscriminately does not make me compassionate or merciful. What would Joseph's death have gained me, and what does his life cost me? I have my reasons for the Council, and I won't hesitate to kill any member of the coven who betrays us. As for the watcher... do you have any doubt that I have given him the worst kind of lingering death? That he is even now praying to the darkness that has become his whole world, praying for some kind of end, some kind of release?" She turned back to the window and its ocean view. "As for Willow, if this breaks the last of her spirit, she will make an impressive ally. And if she returns to her do-good ways, we can always kill her then. But think, Morgaine: if we make her the sacrifice, will we not lose the loyalty of the rest of the coven? We need nine for this last spell. After that, we can kill the whole lot of them if you like, if it will convince you that my heart is pure and untainted by love."

Morgaine bowed her head. She wanted to believe her friend. They had been through so much together. They had worked towards this moment. Maybe she was just getting jittery now that they were so close to the end. Maybe that's why she was having doubts.

"Fine. You will have my trust and my faith. I will stand beside you without question, obey you without hesitation, if you do this one thing for me."

Their eyes met. "Name it."

"Make the boy the sacrifice." Morgaine could see the other's eyes widen, her head shaking in denial. She pressed forward. "The others will not question it. He is a watcher's child, and you already lied to them; you already told them the spell required a watcher's blood. They do not need to know the boy will die for it. They will accept your decision, especially now that Travers has escaped. Not knowing that he is dead, not knowing that the Council is in ruins, they will fear the Council's reprisals even more. And the boy is worth little to us alive."

"The boy has power."

"And his power will be yours. The sword will give you his power and all the ones who came before. You claim you want to see which path Willow will take. What will it do to her to learn she has killed a child she loved? What will it do to the others to learn they were a part of it? There is every reason to make him the sacrifice and no excuse not to. So are you still dark, Sabrina? Are you still worthy of the sword?"

She stepped forward, her pale hands framing Morgaine's darker features. She bent the woman's head down to place a kiss across her brow. "And if I am willing to kill a child, will that prove that I am still the same woman I have always been? Will that earn your trust?"

"Yes."

"I had wanted the boy for other things... to mold him into something... something that would have been a wonder to behold." Sabrina smiled and leaned closer until their foreheads were touching. Her voice was an intimate whisper between lovers. "But for you. For you I will sacrifice him. To keep your loyalty and friendship. To prove your value to me. I will do what you ask. Tonight, he will light the sword."

Morgaine closed her eyes and leaned into the other's embrace. So close. Morning would see it finished.

Buffy had her feet propped up on the dashboard. Giles never let her do that. Her head was turned to the window, watching the world pass by them. The top was down, and the wind played with her hair,

valiantly struggling to free it from its ponytail. Xander was driving. He tried to engage her in conversation sometimes. Sometimes it worked, sometimes she just pretended like she couldn't hear him over the sound of the wind and the road. Anya sat in the backseat, napping with her head resting against the glass.

It seemed like the longest two hours of her life.

"How much longer?" she asked him finally.

"I think it's been two miles since you asked the last time."

"Oh, yeah." She sighed and looked out the window again. Two more miles passed before she looked at him again. "How fast are you going? You know, Beemers are designed to go fast."

He glanced over at her patiently. More patiently than she would have expected. She knew she was being a pain in the ass. "Yes, and getting there in one piece also has its advantages."

"So no call from Dawn yet? No new news about Giles or Faith?"

She could see now that he was beginning to get irritated. "Are we riding in the same car? Or do you think I'm in some parallel dimension car where I'm answering phone calls you don't hear?"

"Okay, so no phone calls." She rested her head back and looked up at the sky. The afternoon sun was falling closer to the horizon. They would reach LA by four. The rendezvous would be at five. The sun would probably set by seven. Call it a slayer's sixth sense, but Buffy had a powerful feeling that time was running short. "You think Spike will be able to fix Giles? You think that book will really do anything?"

Xander pretended he hadn't heard her questions.

"It's okay, Xander. We're going to find Alex either way. And Robin. And even if we can't fix Giles today, we'll figure it out eventually."

He nodded and glanced over at her, giving her a sympathetic shrug. "I just don't want you to get your hopes too high, and have it not work."

"Gotcha." She measured an inch out between her fingers. "This much hope and no more." She looked over at Xander again. "You think Dawn will be okay by herself? You think those vampires will come back tonight?"

"Nah, I think they got what they came for. She'll be fine. Besides, she's not alone. Spike's with her."

"Yeah, Spike."

They both drifted into a thoughtful silence. They looked at each other a moment later.

Xander frowned. "I'm just starting to realize... Leaving Spike alone with Dawn... Isn't that kind of like leaving a fox to guard the hen house?"

Buffy frowned and reached for the cell phone. "Yeah, I was just thinking the same thing. You think I should call?"

"And if there's anything going on, do you really want to know?"

Buffy set the phone down and made a face. "Ick! Spike and my sister. What did I do to deserve that?"

"The less forgiving among us might say... oh, I don't know... *Angel*. But that's neither here nor there."

She glared. "Bite me." They returned to their separate thoughts, the hum of the road, the whoosh of the wind over them, the warmth of the afternoon sun on their faces.

Buffy's patience ran out quickly. "How much longer?"

"Would you like to walk?"

She sighed and shifted her feet on the dashboard. "You know, I can't help but feel like I've already fought this battle. The whole twins getting kidnapped thing... been there, done that. You would think

having your children stolen would be a once-in-a-lifetime experience. But not for Buffy, no siree. I guess Fate is running low on creativity.”

“I don’t know, Buffy. I mean, look at Dawn. How many times have we had to go rescue her? Way more than the twins.”

She considered his words and had to admit he had a point. “I guess you’re right. Maybe everyone I love is just doomed to get hurt. Slayers should come with a warning label: knowing this girl may cause kidnapping, torture, coma, or death. Approach with extreme caution.”

“You’re being too hard on yourself. Hey, we’re buds, right? And no one’s had to rescue me since high school.” His eyes widened, and he gripped the steering wheel tighter. “Oh God, I just jinxed myself, didn’t I? Something terrible’s going to happen now, isn’t it? Oh God, why did I have to say that? Stupid, stupid.”

She laughed. “It’s okay, Xander. I’m sure nothing’s going to happen to you.”

He groaned. “Now you’ve jinxed me too. Double jinxed. I’m doomed. Maybe I should stay in the car with Anya tonight.”

He did not come at the dawning. He did not come at noon; and out of the tawny sunset, before the rise of the moon. When the road was a gypsy's ribbon, looping the purple moor, a red-coat troop came marching, marching, marching, King George's men came matching, up to the old inn-door.

The light was bright, brighter than he could bear. He clenched his eyes shut against it and pressed his head into his knees. He could feel the cool air across his skin, the unyielding stone against his back, and knew that she had brought him back to her circle.

Her eyes grew wide for a moment; she drew one last deep breath, then her finger moved in the moonlight, her musket shattered the moonlight, shattered her breast in the moonlight and warned him with her death. “And has thou slain the jabberwock? Come to my arms, my beamish boy! O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!” He chortled in his joy.

He felt her touch on the back of his neck. It burned like fire for one so numb for so long. He jumped away from her, his head still bowed. The light was overwhelming. Touch, sound, sight, it was overpowering; it was sensory overload. Movement felt awkward, as if his body belonged to someone else, as if he had to reacquaint himself with how to work it properly.

He tried to keep the recitation going, though it had started to lose cohesion sometime before, though it had started to flow and seep together. He tried to focus on the words. She must see nothing in him. He must betray nothing.

He took his vorpal sword in hand: long time the manxome foe he sought. Yet, if they press me sharply, and harry me through the day, then look for me by moonlight, watch for me by moonlight, I'll come to thee by moonlight, though hell should bar the way.

“I thought you should know,” she whispered. Her voice was soft, and still it sounded like thunder. He covered his ears and groaned. “I thought you should know that Travers is dead. You are the last watcher.”

Back, he spurred like a madman, shouting a curse to the sky, with the white road smoking behind him and his rapier brandished high. One, two! One, two! And through and through the vorpal blade went snicker-snack! Blood-red were his spurs in the golden noon; wine-red was his velvet coat-

“I thought you should also know that I have your son.”

That caught his attention, motivated him to lift his head to see her. He felt the tremor go through his body, and it shook him to the core. She smiled at him, and he hated her. But in the end he could do

nothing but drop his head back to his knees and curl tighter into himself. There was nothing he could do for Alex. Not like this.

“Ah, so that’s his name. Alex.”

He bit his lip, allowing the pain to drive out all other thought. Nothing. Nothing. She must see nothing. He started again.

You ask how many of your kisses are enough for me? As great a number of Lybian sand lies in silphium rich Cyrene between the oracle of sweltering Jove and the sacred tomb of old Battus. One kiss, my bonny sweetheart, I’m after a prize tonight, but I shall be back with the yellow gold before the morning light-

“Your son’s power is different than any other I’ve tasted. I can’t read him. I can’t see through him. He is a blank slate to me. I find him incredibly fascinating for that very reason.”

He felt her fist in the back of his hair, pulling his head up to meet her eyes. He blinked to clear his vision, squinting against the unaccustomed light. He felt the warmth of her breath on his face as she leaned in close.

“Don’t skip out on me yet. You’ll have all the time in the world to go mad later. We were talking about your son.”

“You see the darkness in people,” he told her. His voice felt strange in his own ears. His lips moved silently, as if practicing before speaking again. “You saw all my fears, my weaknesses, the moments in my life at which I have felt my greatest losses.” He allowed his eyes to meet hers. “He is a child. Innocent. There is no darkness in him, no loss, no despair. There is nothing for you to see. You are blind to anything that is good.”

She released her grip on his hair, ran her fingers through its curls, and kissed him fondly at his temple. “Even half-sane, you are a wise man, Rupert Giles.”

He bowed his head again, the touch of her lips on his skin still warm, a lingering kiss that would not end. The words. He must fill his head with words.

Separated lovers belie absence by a thousand chimeric things that have their own reality. They are prevented from seeing each other, they cannot write to each other; they find a host of mysterious ways to correspond. They exchange the song of the birds, the perfume of flowers, children’s laughter, sunlight, the sighs of the wind, the starlight, the whole of creation. O Spring! You are a letter that I write to her.

“Pity that I won’t get to see what kind of power he would grow into. But Travers is dead. So now your son will be the sacrifice. Your son will be the one that lights my sword.”

Giles rocked with his grief. He had never felt so helpless in his life. His mind blanked on all the words that had flowed before like water through his consciousness. He could think of nothing but his son. Memories of a tiny infant, cradled close as he worked the register at the Magic Box. First steps across the training room mat as his mother did headstands for his entertainment. Trips to the zoo and bedtime stories. Eager hands that stretched for his father’s tea each morning. A trusting smile before the unexpected leap from the second-floor railing at the store, knowing his father would catch him. The tears from a pair of scraped knees, so easily soothed with a tight embrace and a soft lullaby.

Giles lifted his head, his eyes seeking her out, pleading with her. “Please.” She was standing not even two feet away. He made his body move towards her, his movements stiff and halting. He was on his knees before her, his hands held out in supplication. “Please. Take me instead. Make me the sacrifice.”

She took his hand, and he grasped hers in both of his. He bent his head to rest against their joined hands. What Angelus couldn’t take, he was willing to offer freely. She could have him: body, mind,

heart, soul, whatever she wanted. He would give anything to save his son. "Please," he begged her, his tears wetting their hands. "Please, my life for his."

"It's not my choice to make. Morgaine wants him, and so she shall have him."

"No," he breathed, his body beginning to shake when he could no longer hold back his sobs. "Anything. I'll do anything."

"I only came to see what I could of him in your mind. He's quite a stubborn little thing. He tells me nothing." She pulled her hand from his grip, and he folded to the ground with the loss of contact. He was broken, as nothing in his life had ever broken him before. "I also came to say goodbye," she told him. "Tonight everything will be finished, and I won't be back to see you again. I wanted to thank you. You've made the time pass more quickly. For me, at least."

She started walking backwards, away from him. His heart hammered with his panic. His breath caught with his tears. He stretched his hands towards her. The thought that the last living person he would ever see would be this... this monster, taunting him with his son's death... it was beyond bearing, and yet he wanted her to stay. Until she was gone, there was still a chance. There had to be something he could say, something he could do to change her mind.

But she was wavering, disappearing, and the circle of stones inside the grove of trees was fading. He curled his fists into the grass, digging his fingers into the dirt beneath, as if he could hold himself there by force of will. His vision was growing dark, and he shook his head while he still could, his voice repeating one word for as long as he could: "No, no, no, no no nononono..."

But the darkness was coming, and everything else was fading. The sound of his voice in his ears gave way to silence, and he was back in his mental prison. No sound, no sight, no touch, no sensation. His grief was a silent weeping in his soul. His thoughts continued to echo in his mind, a constant mantra, as if he had any power to deny what was to come.

No. No. No, no, no, no, no no nonononono...

Alex!

Anya was parked in the public lot just off the beach. The top was up now, and the doors locked. Buffy and Xander could see her from where they sat on a bench near the pier. She kept the engine running. She was still fairly convinced they would need to make a speedy getaway.

Buffy watched the crowd for Faith, for anyone who looked suspicious. It was daylight at least, but that didn't preclude other kinds of monsters. She wasn't wearing a watch, but she continually grabbed Xander's hand to look at his. He finally took it off and handed it to her. By a quarter after five, she was getting nervous.

"Calm down, Buffy. Punctuality is not exactly one of Faith's good qualities."

"Yeah, I'm trying to remember what is."

Before Xander could answer with a pithy reply to lighten her mood, she caught sight of the dark slayer walking towards them from the parking lot. Xander's eyes immediately searched out his wife, assuring himself that she was still tucked safely in the car, untouched by Faith.

Faith had stolen clothes more suitable than Buffy's cast offs: black leather pants and boots, a red halter, tied in back with string. Her lips were painted red as blood. Her dark eyes were lined with black. Buffy had never hated so her much, not even seeing her in Angel's arms. Buffy was on her feet, moving, burning with rage, meeting the other slayer halfway and, with a swing, aiming to put real blood on those blood red lips.

Faith ducked and dodged again and again, but she made no attempt to return the blows, not even when Buffy nailed her in the stomach, nor when her fist connected with her jaw.

"Where are my children?" she asked with each strike.

"So, B, we gonna dance all night, or we gonna cut to the chase?"

Buffy stopped mid-swing, waiting, panting with exertion and high emotion.

"I didn't take them. I was following the guy who set me up in prison, and I saw some woman leave with Alex. Okay? I'm on your side here, B."

Buffy felt Xander's presence behind her, but didn't turn. She continued to watch Faith intently. "You're going to take me to them, and if you double-cross me, I'll put you in the kind of coma you don't wake up from. We clear?"

"Crystal."

Faith started back towards the parking lot, the other two following behind her. She was surreptitiously wiping blood from her mouth, smearing her lipstick across her hand at the same time. She looked sideways at Buffy several times, as if working up the courage to tell her something. "Look, I only know where Alex is. I never saw the girl."

Buffy tried to push down the stab of disappointment. "Well, it's a start. We'll find him, then we'll find her."

But they found neither. The beach house was abandoned. A message of sorts was left for them. The body of a young man lay on an upstairs bed, his shirt open and spread apart to display the burned mark of Camela across his chest. A greeting card rested on his stomach, a flowery Hallmark one from one of those machines where you could design your own. Buffy picked it up and read it.

"Roses are red, violets are blue, interfere with our plans, and I'll kill you too."

The others were packing the car. As far as they were concerned, the watcher had escaped, and they were trying to stay ahead of the Council. Somehow just the knowledge that the boy was a watcher's son had made him seem less sympathetic, and no one had balked at using him in the ceremony. Perhaps if they knew it would kill him... But that was something they could all regret later.

Sabrina pretended to be worried, concerned for everyone's safety, remorseful that the boy needed to be a part of all this. Morgaine played the same part. But when her friend looked at her, she could see Morgaine's irritation at their forced move so close to the ceremony, her irritation that Sabrina had let the Slayer go. Perhaps she was right to be angry. Sabrina wasn't sure why she hadn't killed Faith, except that it had seemed worse not to, in the same way it was worse to leave Giles locked away in the darkness. The Slayer wanted death, or had wanted it at one time. Words had echoed through Faith's head, memories of another battle. *I'm bad... I'm bad... Just do it... please. Just kill me...* And so Sabrina had found more satisfaction in walking away than in delivering the final blow.

Her friend's anger would pass. And with the boy as the sacrifice, their friendship would be mended. If the Slayer came, she would be killed, and if she didn't, she could stew on her failure for the rest of her days.

Jonathon approached her, asked to speak with her a moment. Sabrina could see in an instant what he wanted, but she smiled cordially and told the others to go on without her. She stopped Morgaine at the threshold.

"See if they won't give us a room with a balcony. It would be nice to have a view."

And then she was alone with the young man. She waited for him to say the words she already saw in his mind.

"I can't do it, Sabrina. The magic was cool and everything, and you taught me so much, but... I don't know. It just feels kinda wrong now. Like maybe these guys chasing us... Maybe if they want us so badly, maybe they have a point and we shouldn't be doing some of the stuff we're doing. And now this kid... He's just a kid, you know? I can't do it."

Sabrina smiled. Inside she was fuming. Here was this seventeen-year-old nothing she had taken off the streets of LA, given shelter and guidance to, brought into her inner circle, and this was how he repaid her? But she shrugged her shoulders and feigned indifference. "Sure, Jonathon. I'm not going to try and make you do something you're not comfortable with. Go back to the shelter if you want. I'll have Willow bring someone else to be the ninth."

"Well, umm... I kinda thought maybe I'd go home. I talked to my Mom the other day... I don't think it would be so bad now, give high school another go."

"Sure." Sabrina smiled wider. "Good luck with that."

He seemed relieved that she wasn't angry with him. She curled her fingers into fists, feeling the magic thrum to life in answer to her call. At first he didn't put it together; he just scratched absently at his chest. But then his eyes widened as he looked at her. He wasn't such a stupid boy after all.

He ripped his shirt open, buttons flying, and stared down at the symbol painted across his chest, now flaring into an angry red. He stumbled back, his hand pressed over his heart that now hammered in an unnatural rhythm.

"The symbol does work nicely for joining," she told him. "Joining you to me, not to the group. Pity you couldn't be a team player. For some reason the runaways were always harder to control than the sorority girls. Maybe sorority girls are just more naturally the follow-the-leader types."

He fell to the ground, gasping for breath, doubled over now that the symbol began to blister and blacken as it burned through.

"Awful young for a heart attack, but these things can't always be predicted."

She watched him die. Never one to waste opportunity, she decided that he could be the message she left behind in case the Slayer dared to return.

Dawn lit the candles that rested on the floor at the four points of Giles' bed. She hoped this would work sooner rather than later, because the nurse was supposed to be there at six, and Dawn wasn't sure how she would explain to the woman that they needed to wait and see if her vampire boyfriend's spell would work before they would know if Giles still needed caring for or not. Dawn sighed. Her thoughts were babbling again.

She looked over at Spike, sitting on the edge of the bed, studying the book in his hands. He looked way less nervous than she was. "So why does every spell need candles? What's so special about candles anyway?"

He glanced up at her. "Do I look like I made this stuff up? I'm just doing what the book says to do."

"Sorry."

He relented, and his expression softened. "Sorry, Lil Bit. Didn't mean to snap at you. Truth be told, I might be the teeniest bit nervous 'bout doing this spell."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. If it doesn't work... I don't relish the idea of gettin' stuck in Rupe's head for any amount of time." His eyes traveled over the still figure of the man Dawn had grown to love as a friend and as the

kind of father she'd always wished she'd had. "If I get stuck in there too, I think I'd rather you staked me than leave me like that."

"Spike, no!" She rushed into his arms, and he held her passionately, his cheek resting against her hair.

He tilted her head up and kissed her softly on the lips. "Promise me, Dawn. If something happens, you'll make Buffy do it."

She nodded solemnly, tears slipping down her cheeks. She gave him a brave smile and a soggy laugh, turning it into a joke, wanting him not to be worried about her at this particular moment. "I think she'd have to fight Xander for the chance."

He laughed too, perhaps seeing through her attempts at humor. He looked back at the man he was about to risk his life for, his smile fading. "I know the lot of you don't want to think about it... But have you considered that he wouldn't want to stay like that neither? Keeping him alive like this, it's not the kindest thing you could do for him. I'd break the poor bastard's neck myself if I didn't have this blasted chip."

"Spike, no! Stop it." She tried to worm herself out of his grip, but he held her fast.

"Dawn, look at me." She did, tears blurring her vision. "You know I'm right about this. Buffy'd put me out of my misery fast enough, but she'd never be able to do the same for him. Xander probably couldn't either. Anya might. She's the only one you could ask. She might not be able to do it with her own hands, but she'd find a way. Something in his IV would do it right quick." He pulled her into a close embrace, let her cry herself out against his shoulder. "Promise me, Dawn. Promise that if something goes wrong with this spell, that he'll get the same mercy I would."

She nodded against his shoulder, unable to bring herself to say the words aloud.

"Right then. Now that that's taken care of, let's get this show on the road, shall we? Twins in peril and all that." He took her by the shoulders and held her out at arm's length. He brushed the tears from her cheeks and tapped her beneath her chin fondly. "Buck up, Niblet, everything's going to be fine. You'll see. All puppy dogs and kittens and running through the daisies. I promise."

She nodded and sniffled. She didn't seem able to do much talking right now. With one last glance over the spell, he handed her the book and climbed onto the bed beside Giles. She clutched the book against her chest and stepped out of the sacred space they had made with the candles and incense.

With her back against the wall, and her knuckles turning white around the book, she finally found her voice. "Spike!"

He turned his head to look at her.

"I love you."

His eyes studied her with that intense soul-penetrating stare that she always found so sexy. "You're the only good thing that ever has."

He closed his eyes and began the incantation he'd memorized from the book. His hand moved to the side and found Giles'. He interlaced their fingers, and then he was as still as the watcher.

Alex sat on the bed in their new hotel, watching the lady watch him. She had offered to take him for a walk on the beach earlier, but he didn't want to go. He remembered his dream, and he didn't want to go to the beach. Now she was offering him a Happy Meal from McDonalds, and he was hungry, so he took it. But he wouldn't say anything to her. He wouldn't even say thank you, like his father always told him he should.

“So, Alex...” The lady knew his name now. She said his father told her, but he didn’t believe her. “What do you want to do before bed? You want to watch a movie? Disney?”

He shook his head, intent on his french fries. He didn’t want to do anything the lady wanted him to do. Maybe if he was naughty enough, she wouldn’t want him anymore and she would give him back. He dunked his fries in the ketchup and dripped it across the bedspread. He watched her defiantly.

She only laughed. “That’s okay. We’re only renting. Make as much of a mess as you like.” She took one of his fries and dribbled ketchup across the bed also before eating it herself. “You’re a cutie, aren’t you? Wish I had more time with you. I had such big plans for you, little boy. I wanted to see what kind of power you would have had as a man, if it would have equaled what your father’s power could have been, unchained.” She sighed and ruffled his hair. He didn’t flinch back, just took a bite of his hamburger. “But I need you for a spell tonight. So this is sort of your last meal, although you probably don’t understand what that means.” She pulled the toy surprise from his bag: a colorful plastic whistle. “I figured Happy Meal, good choice. Kids like McDonald’s, don’t they?” She handed the whistle to him, and Alex put it in the front pocket of his overalls. “You want some ice cream after dinner?”

He scowled at her, his best angry face, the one he gave his father when he didn’t want a time out or to go to bed, and the one he gave his mother when she wouldn’t take him to the park or read him a story.

He finally said something to the lady. He told her, “Mommy beat you up.”

The lady laughed. “If your Mommy tries, I’ll kill her.”

Alex took a long drink from his orange soda, trying to be a brave boy and not cry. He knew his Mommy would come. Mommy’s job was stopping bad guys like this lady. But he didn’t want anything bad to happen to her either. He didn’t want the mean lady to hurt her.

But Mommy was strong and brave, and she would win. He told the lady again with conviction, “Mommy beat you up.”

The lady laughed, and ruffled his hair, and left him alone.

One can no more keep the mind from returning to an idea than the sea from returning to a shore.

He wondered how much time had passed. He wondered if his son were dead yet or alive and if he would know when it happened, if he would feel it. He wondered if his child were crying for him.

Beware the jabberwock, my son. The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!

He thought of Robin, that he would never know what fate had befallen her. Was she with Sabrina? Was she with her brother? Or was she alone and frightened?

Whichever way it plays out, whether she will belong to you or to the darkness, I sensed that magic will be what tips the scales in either direction.

He thought of Buffy. He prayed that she would find them in time. And if not... He wondered how she would cope with the loss of their children, how she would bear it by herself. Would she crumble as she had after Glory took Dawn? Would she be trapped inside her own mind as he was now trapped inside his? Would they lay her body down beside his, the pair of them a mockery of living?

Oh, to be laid side by side in the same tomb, hand clasped in hand, and from time to time, in the darkness, to caress a finger gently, that would be enough for my eternity.

But mostly when he thought of Buffy, he ached for her. He missed her. He wished that he could still hear her voice at least, even if he couldn’t answer. He imagined that she must sit beside him and talk to him sometimes, his Buffy. He wished he could hear the words she spoke to him.

There is a strange thing-- do you know what? I am in the night. There is a being who has gone away and carried the heavens with her. But overcome space, and all we have left is Here. Overcome time, and all we have left is Now. And in the middle of Here and Now, don't you think that we might see each other once or twice?

He knew he was losing focus. He knew his mind was slipping. The words continued to fragment and come together. He was skipping across passages and books. One sentence would blur into the next. It wasn't working anymore. It wasn't keeping him anchored. And yet, he didn't know what else to try.

That you have but slumber'd here while these visions did appear. And this weak and idle theme, no more yielding but a dream.

He imagined that he saw light. He wondered if it were the first of the hallucinations to come. Did people choose to go mad? Did it offer them a pleasant escape? He wondered if he might like it, if he might even believe that he were home with Buffy and the children. If madness were nothing more than a Sunday sleep-in with his wife and twins, the television playing cartoons and the paper folded out across his lap... maybe it would be better than this, whatever this was.

But he could not go gentle into that good night. It was not in his nature to lay down his sword and admit defeat. So he would stubbornly hold on to sanity for as long as he could. He would fill his head with nursery rhymes and sonnets and the lullabies his mother sang to him as a child. He would see what good a watcher's memory was to him now.

I talk of dreams, which are the children of an idle brain, begot of nothing but vain fantasy; which is as thin of substance as the air, and more inconstant than the wind. For in that sleep of death what dreams may come, when we have shuffled off this mortal coil, must give us pause: there's the respect that makes calamity of so long life; for who would bear the whips and scorns of time, the oppressor's wrong...

But the light would not be ignored. It grew brighter. He shut his eyes against it and realized he *could* shut his eyes, and so he opened them again. He made each hand into a fist and stretched them open. His nerves tingled with feeling, the feel of breath, of life. He blinked his eyes and searched his surroundings.

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves did gyre and gimble in the wabe; All mimsy were the borogoves, and the mome raths outgrabe.

It was dank and dark, and he knew this place. It was Spike's crypt.

"Well, hello, Watcher."

He flinched and put his hands to his ears. The vampire's voice was loud. He curled into a ball, pulled his legs into his chest, and dropped his head to his knees. He wondered why Sabrina would come to him as Spike.

And as in uffish thought he stood, down the ribbon of moonlight, over the brow of the hill, the highwayman came riding, riding, riding, the redcoats looked to their priming!

"No hello? No, gee, Spike, thanks for risking life and limb to rescue me? No grudging respect for the vampire who found the book *and* the spell while the Scoobies were still trying to muss out how to play watcher in your absence?" He laughed, and it echoed through the crypt. "Thankless bastard. See if I ever go out on a limb for you again. Right then. Let's go."

The reduction of the universe to a single being, the expansion of a single being into God, this is love. Love is the salutation of the angel to the stars. How sad the soul when it is sad from love!

"Are you deaf? I said let's go."

Tlot-tlot; tlot-tlot, in the distance? Were they deaf that they did not hear?

He felt the vampire's hand on his arm, hauling him to his feet. He wavered where he stood, unused to keeping his balance. Spike held him steady.

"Time. To. Be. Going. Then." The vampire enunciated it slowly, as if speaking to a small child.

He lifted his eyes. He was tired of these games. He was tired of her cruel tricks. *Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me.* He might have believed for a moment that he had been holding Jenny, might have even believed that she was Buffy, but that time was past. He was not going to believe that she was Spike. Did she think she could make him believe he was being rescued, raise his hopes, and then pull the rug out from under him? What perverse satisfaction could that give her? How bored must she be?

He wrenched his arm from her grasp, stumbled several steps, and caught himself on the stone sarcophagus to keep from falling over. "Piss off, Sabrina. Send me back and let me be."

"Who?" Spike looked around the room, as if checking to make sure they were alone. "Bloody hell. Look who's gone off the deep end." He tapped himself on the chest. "Spike. Spi-ike. William the Bloody. He who you love to hate...? Undeserving of the love of the littlest Summers...? Am I ringing any bells here?"

Giles shook his head, trying to clear it, and lowered himself to the ground. "You pulled all of that from my mind. I'm not falling for it this time." He looked into Spike's eyes, tried to see the sorceress behind them. "Have you come to tell me my son is dead? I don't think I want to hear it. You said you weren't coming back again. I think I'd rather you kept that promise."

The vampire came closer, studying him. "Oh, I get it. Someone's been mucking about in your head. Hmm... Let's see. How do I convince the Watcher I'm me?" He snapped his fingers and pointed. "Oooh, I got it! When I was staying at your house and your merry band of children were off in college having a life without you, bet you never told them I used to beat you at Jeopardy all the time. Nasty blow to your ego, that was."

Giles glared. "I would expect someone who has lived through a hundred more years of history than I have to be at somewhat of an advantage." He rested his head back against the stone coffin. "Besides, you could have gotten that from my head same as the rest of it."

Spike frowned and tried again. "Remember when Buffy was in the hospital, almost lost the babies? We were smoking in the lobby together. Bet you never told her that."

"Actually she figured that out all on her own. I smelled of it."

Spike sat on the ground beside him, both of them leaning back against the sarcophagus. "The next time she landed in the hospital... Skovish demon, wasn't it? Anyway, she was in surgery for hours, in the ICU for days after that. Bet you never told her I took you out and got you thoroughly sloshed."

He chuckled slightly. "No. I was thankfully able to keep that to myself. I think she would have been mortified to learn her husband got picked up by a fellow officer, even if he understood the circumstances and let me go with a warning."

"No, no, no. She was still in college then. You're thinking of the next time, after that run in with those--"

"The Disciples of Hnong. Right." He turned his head and studied Spike with a puzzled frown. "You do seem to have a tendency towards getting me tanked in moments of crisis."

Spike shrugged off the assessment with a knowing smirk. "Well, you are loads more fun when you're drunk."

"Actually, under those circumstances, I believe I made more of a bitter, angry, pathetic drunk."

"Yeah. Like I said: more fun." Spike elbowed him in the side, but Giles' skills at keeping his balance were rusty, and Spike had to snatch his arm to keep him from toppling over. "So, Watcher, have I convinced you that I am who I say I am?"

“No.”

“No?”

“No.” Giles sighed. “It’s rather a Catch 22 you’ve found yourself in. Anything you could tell me to confirm your identity is something she would just as easily know as well. Anything that wasn’t in my head for her to find... well, you could tell me, but I wouldn’t know for sure that you weren’t just making it up.”

Spike jumped to his feet and started pacing. “You gotta be kidding me! Do you have any idea how hard it was to find you in here? And now you’re just going to stay here? I don’t think so.” He stormed back across the crypt, stopping directly in front of the watcher. “Snap out of it and let’s get the hell outta here!” Spike struck him across the face hard. But it was Spike who cried out in pain, as his chip brought him to his knees, clutching his head in pain.

Giles merely rubbed his jaw and watched dispassionately.

Spike threw an accusatory glare upwards at the Powers That Be. “For the love of... This isn’t even frickin’ real, and I can’t hit him? Who made up those rules?” He brought his angry gaze back level with the watcher. “See here: I can’t leave here without you. It’s part of the spell. And I don’t fancy spending the next fifty years trolling through your head for a bit of entertainment. I think I’d rather die.”

“Think me up some wood, and I’ll oblige you.”

“Ha ha. Very funny. Regular comedian.”

“Hold on.” Giles clenched his eyes shut in concentration. His head was still all muddled, stray bits of quotes and phrases crowding in his brain. It was hard to hold onto to anything for any length of time. “I think I had a thought.”

“Well, there’s a news flash. Careful or it’ll dribble out the other ear.”

“Shut up, Spike!” he snapped. “Something about staking you.” He pressed his hands to his head, as if he could push out all the useless clutter. He rocked slightly, as an autistic might, as he tried to focus. “When she was Buffy, she had slayer strength. The strengths... and the *weaknesses* of the form she takes.” His eyes popped open in triumph. “When you come to me as Spike, I can stake you.”

The vampire backed up several paces. “You know, I’m suddenly not liking the new, improved, less-than-sane Rupert.” He stopped his retreat. “Wait a sec. You don’t have a stake. What am I worried about?”

“No, but...” Giles scanned the crypt with his eyes. “This is a fairly good representation of the real thing, in which case I know where you keep your arsenal.” He sighed and laid his head back against the stone.

“But you’re not going to stake me?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Good. As long as no one’s getting staked.”

“You’d only change form before I could do it.”

“Damn straight I would.”

Giles sighed. He was so weary of this, these games, this nightmare. He just wished it would be over.

Spike approached him again, tentatively, and resumed his seat beside him. “Has it occurred to you that I might be the real thing? That maybe you could go home now?”

Giles tilted his head slightly in acknowledgement. “It has. It’s also crossed my mind that you might be a delusion, a manifestation of my somewhat tenuous grip on sanity.” He frowned. “Although, if you are, I’m quite disappointed in myself. I can think of much better hallucinations than a chit-chat with Spike of all people.”

The vampire leaned forward slightly and placed himself in the other's line of sight. "What do you say we take a chance? See which one I am? Come back with me. Where's the harm in giving it a shot?"

"Where's the harm?" Giles chuckled mirthlessly and then descended into a dark and brooding silence. *Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn, it shall clasp a sainted maiden...* When he spoke again, it was with hushed voice and bowed head. "Where's the harm? There's a small chance you might be real. While we're just sitting here talking, I can let myself believe it, if only a little. But I know that there's a greater chance that you're not, that you're her or me. Either one ends the same... back in the darkness." He swallowed and clenched his hands into fists, clenched them tightly enough that he could feel his fingernails bite into his palms. He wanted to assure himself that he could still feel something. "I'm trying... Do you know, I don't think I dream while I'm there, or sleep? Plays hell with my internal clock. Feels like an eternity sometimes. I'm trying to hold on, but... I can't... stand it... anymore."

He turned his head to the side and studied Spike, who was watching him with something that looked surprisingly close to sympathy. Whether the vampire was real, or her, or the first step down that slippery slope into madness, it didn't matter. It felt like someone was listening to him, and that was all that was important for now. "Can you understand, then, why I'm in no hurry to go back there? Why I might like to pretend for just a little bit longer that I could maybe be free?"

Spike stood and, looking down on the watcher, offered out his hand. "Come on, Rupert, let's go home. You have to take the chance sometime, and we both know you're not one to put off the inevitable."

"Inevitable," Giles echoed bleakly, but he accepted the hand and allowed Spike to pull him to his feet. "So how's this work? Back through the looking glass? Tap my heels together three times and there's no place like home?"

The vampire laughed and led him by the hand to the door of the crypt. "Nothing so grand as that. I did the spell to bring me here, now I reverse it to bring us out. I've never done this before, so... Might be wise to hold tight to Daddy's hand as we cross the street."

Giles rolled his eyes, but did as he was instructed. Spike moved to open the door, and Giles stopped short, a momentary jolt of panic surging through him and tightening his grip on the vampire's hand. Spike paused and squeezed back gently. "There's light at the other side of the darkness this time, Rupert. Promise."

It was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us...

Giles nodded for the other to go ahead. The door opened, and he was in darkness, as dark as it had ever been. But this time he could feel a cold hand in his, and he could hear Spike murmur something in an ancient tongue. His watcher's mind tried to translate and decipher the words. Aramaic perhaps, or Arabic. Whatever it was, Spike was slaughtering it horribly, and he hoped the spell wouldn't be affected. There was silence for a long time, and he was afraid that maybe none of this had worked after all. She had tricked him, or he had tricked himself, and no one was going to be coming to his rescue. Nothing left but half-remembered prose and poetry to keep him company.

Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak December; and each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor.

But he still felt Spike's hand in his, and if he listened hard enough he could hear his own pulse thrumming and his breath shaking through his chest and the myriad unique and quiet sounds of his own house: the radiator kicking on, the rattle of a loose shutter against the wind, the creak of a footfall on the second from top stair. And when he opened his eyes, he could see his own ceiling above him.

He rolled his head slowly to the side and saw Spike lying on the bed beside him, watching him, still holding fast to his hand. The vampire's voice was low and teasing.

"Hello, lover."

Giles chuckled and felt his chest shake with it. He swallowed and moved his lips tentatively before trying out his voice. "I'll gladly wake in bed with you, Spike, if it means waking at all." He brought their joined hands to rest against his heart. "You've set me free. I can't thank you enough."

"No, you can't."

He heard a girlish scream and felt the bed shake as Dawn jumped in to join them. "It worked! It worked! Omigod, you're both okay!" She was squealing in delight and hugging Spike fiercely. Giles released the vampire's hand so Spike could return the embrace and then turned his head so he wouldn't have to see it.

"Nice to see you too, Dawn," Giles muttered sarcastically. The words were barely out of his mouth before he felt her pounce on him too, knocking the wind out of him with elbows in tender places. She nestled her head beneath his chin, and he felt her begin to cry. "What's this?" he murmured.

"I missed you so much, Giles. We all did. And Buffy cries all the time. And everything's falling apart. And the twins are gone. And no one can read any of those books and Willow's in trouble and we didn't know if Faith set a trap, but she didn't, which was good, but we still don't know where the twins are and we didn't know if we'd ever get you back and I didn't wanna hafta find someone to kill you like Spike made me promise."

"Shhh... Breathe, Dawn. Slow down." His brow furrowed as he tried to make sense of her torrent of words. "Kill me? What?"

She lifted her head and looked down on him with tears still streaming down her cheeks. "You can fix it now, right? You can go to LA and help Buffy?"

"I'll do what I can, Dawn." He reached up to wipe away her tears and noticed for the first time the IV trailing into the back of his hand. He lifted his other hand and noticed a matching one taped to that one as well. "I appear to be stuck full of tubes."

"Yeah, liquid lunch," Dawn quipped as she climbed off him, sitting up now on the bed and drying her eyes, Spike sitting cross-legged behind her. "The nurse came at six, but I sent her away, 'cause you were in the middle of the spell. I can have her come back and unhook you now if you want."

"I don't think that will..." He trailed off as he started to sit up. He reconsidered her suggestion when he realized he had tubes going into other places as well. "On second thought, maybe that would be a good idea."

Dawn reached for the phone from the nightstand, and Giles fixed Spike with a level stare. "How long have I...?"

Spike shrugged, and it was Dawn who answered. "Eleven days."

He gasped. "Is that all? It felt like much longer." He closed his eyes as he absorbed that piece of information. "Eleven days? Hmmm... Sabrina would have lost her bet. I don't think I would have made it the full month even."

After exchanging a few brief words with the nurse, Dawn hung up the phone. She smiled, giddy now. "You want some tea, or... or anything?"

He reached across the bed for her hand, and she gave it. Such a small thing, holding her hand, that failed to express the full breadth of his emotion at that particular instant. To even be able to hold her hand felt like a miracle, something he had thought never to experience again. He swallowed back a surge of emotion. How could he tell this sweet young girl just exactly what she meant to him? How could he make any of them understand just how lost he had been without them? But more practical concerns had to take priority. There would hopefully be time later for heart-to-heart talks, for words

that should have been spoken long ago. For now, he had to find his children, had to stand beside his slayer in her battle. "Tell me what's happened. Everything."

"Pretty much what Lil Bit said. Someone nabbed the kids. Faith called with a lead, and the rest of them went off to LA for a look-see. But the place was deserted when they got there. Oh, and that Travers bloke is missing."

"Dead," Giles corrected.

"Yeah, whatever. That's about all we got."

Giles closed his eyes in concentration. His head was still all muddled, and all of the stimuli surrounding him was taking its toll on his sensory deprived nerves. He took a few deep breaths, resisted the urge to curl his legs up against his chest, and focused on the information they had before them. "She has the sword, and she has Alex, and she's going to use Alex to activate the sword."

Spike got off the bed and started pacing. "The sword of Camela? So that thing *does* have something to do with all of this?"

He nodded, his eyes still closed.

"If that's the plan, they'll do it tonight. Tonight's a crescent moon, and the books said that's when this Camela chick can strike down lightning on the last victim."

Giles opened his eyes and felt his heart beat faster. He turned towards the window. It was already past dark. He realized then that he couldn't wait for the nurse. "Dawn, load some weapons into the car. We'll be down in a minute. Spike, go in the closet and pull me out some pants and a sweater."

The vampire waited until Dawn had gone. "What you gonna do 'bout..." He gestured with his thumb to first the tubes and then to the IV stand in the corner.

Giles didn't answer, merely extended his hands in front of him and focused. His arms were trembling, and his heart was racing. Sabrina was right. He was afraid. For more than twenty-five years, he had mostly done little stuff and only when necessary. The spell with Robin had been the most difficult thing he had attempted in all that time. He had been thankful to have Willow and Tara do most of the magic for him. But now he would be required to do much more. He would be required to reach down into a part of himself he had buried with Randall.

Best to start small. Test the waters. He took a deep breath and called on the power he kept locked away. "Laxare."

The IV, the tubes, all of it vanished. It had worked.

Spike whistled. "All right. So that's what you're going to do 'bout it."

He eased his way to the edge of the bed, unused muscles protesting at the sudden exertion. "Spike, I might need your help." He blushed savagely, which only embarrassed him further. "Dressing, I mean."

But Spike kindly refrained from jests at his expense. The vampire said nothing as he helped the watcher into his clothes. He didn't even wait to be asked before putting his arm out for Giles to lean on, steadying the watcher with his other arm whenever he seemed ready to topple.

Giles smiled apologetically. "This walking thing will just take a little getting used to again."

"Sure thing, whereas I'm sure you'll take to the weaponry like a fish to water."

They made their way slowly down the stairs where Dawn was waiting for them. She gave him another crushing hug and informed him that Spike knew where Buffy and the others were headed. "I'm Mission Control, so call if there's any problems or you can't find them. I'll tell them you're coming."

He indicated to them the books on Camela and leaned against the doorjamb as they gathered them into the van beside the weapons. Giles couldn't help a pang of irritation when he noticed that Buffy

had taken *his* car. Spike went upstairs for another book, one that Giles didn't recognize immediately, but one he couldn't worry too much about at the moment.

While the vampire was upstairs, Dawn turned to him and asked hesitantly, "Giles, who did this to you? The spell, I mean."

"It doesn't matter now."

Spike had caught Dawn's question and Giles' dismissal as he came down the stairs, book in hand. Giles could sense Spike's scrutiny and, as soon as they'd had their hugs goodbye from Dawn and shut the door behind them, the vampire guessed what Giles had avoided saying.

"Willow, huh? She put the whammy on you?"

"Yes," he answered quietly, not lifting his eyes from the ground.

"I told Dawn the fallout was coming. Guess you got the brunt of it."

Giles waited while Spike opened the passenger door for him. There had been no need for discussion on who would be driving. "No, Spike, the fallout's still coming."

Giles put his hand on the door, but didn't actually climb in. It was almost like getting into a box, and he didn't know if he could do it. Spike was already sitting in the driver's seat, staring at him, while he was still standing there with his hand on the door.

"Sometime *before* they do the blood sacrifice thing on your kid would be good."

That spurred him to action, and he finally climbed into the van, feeling his heart race and his hands tremble. His finger pressed the down button for the automatic window at the same time as he shut the door.

He could feel Spike's eyes on the back of his head, studying him. "My, my, someone's picked up a wee bit of claustrophobia, haven't they?"

Giles clenched his teeth and ground out, "Shut up and drive." He leaned his head against the doorframe, feeling the breeze across his face as they started for LA.

"So when we get there, your plan is to curl up into a fetal ball and wish them dead, is it?"

"Just get us to LA, and then we can worry about the plan." Giles pressed one hand over his eyes, and tried to think over the cacophony of sound and feel and movement. He tried to think through everything he knew about Camela and the sword and Sabrina and... and... It was all blurring together. His mind was drifting again. He tried to rein it in.

Camela stood alone against the Numidian army, and with one word, she felled them where they stood. Came riding the Chosen champion to defeat her. And he rode with a jewelled twinkle, his pistol butt a-twinkle, his rapier hilt a-twinkle, under the jewelled sky.

Giles found himself pulling his legs up onto the seat and his knees into his chest. It was all so overwhelming and too much to take in, being out of the darkness. But for Alex, he had to get past it.

Joseph buttoned up the coat around his little slayer. It would be cold by the water. His fingers brushed across her skin as he did up the top button, and she trembled. He smiled at her fear.

“Let’s go, boys.”

He carried Robin out of the warehouse, a large contingent of vampires following behind him. Sabrina thought it was time to stand on his own two feet, to leave his father’s shadow and forget about Wolfram and Hart. Maybe she was right. Maybe he would show her a thing or two about what exactly Joseph Zalk could accomplish on his own.

Joseph looked up at the night sky. The crescent moon was rising.

Sabrina had searched for so long, had schemed and manipulated more people than she could count, all to bring her to this moment. She would have her vengeance, and she would have her power, and she would have the sun and the stars and the moon too if she wanted them. Her hands clutched the hilt of the sword tighter. In blood and fire, in wind and rain, she would have what was *hers*.

Sabrina looked up at the night sky. The crescent moon was rising.

Morgaine stood beside Sabrina. Her doubts were fading with the tide. The boy would be the last, as Sabrina had promised, and his death would prove her faith justified. For more years than she could count, she had been the right hand, the shadow, and the rock. She could not remember the girl she had been, the girl who had been left on the mountaintop for the Beast. She had been the sacrifice, but now it would be her salvation.

Morgaine looked up at the night sky. The crescent moon was rising.

Buffy stood at the edge of the forest, Xander and Faith beside her. They had walked the perimeter, looking for weaknesses, but found the invisible barrier unbreakable. Beyond the forest, her son waited on the beach, waited for his mother to save him. But even slayers had limits. She was barred the way by magic. And without magic, she could go no farther.

Buffy looked up at the night sky. The crescent moon was rising.

Willow stood at the edge of the cliff, her hand clasped in the hand of the woman beside her. The joining symbol warmed her stomach and tingled down between her thighs. She could not see the ritual clearly at this distance, not while she was focusing on the others forming the circle, focusing on weaving the beginning matrix of their spell. It didn't matter. She trusted Sabrina, and tonight Sabrina would act as the center: she would guide their power, and Willow would give herself willingly, as would the others. They were a team, a family, a sisterhood. One for all and all for one. And when the spell was finished, the Watcher's Council would never be able to hurt them again. They would be safe.

Willow turned her face up to the starlit sky above her. The crescent moon was rising.

Giles had stilled his panic by the last half of the journey. He sat in his seat properly, poring through the books they'd brought, looking for weaknesses, for ways to stop the ritual. He knew he couldn't defeat Sabrina with magic. She could anticipate his every attack. Buffy wouldn't be able to score a hit either. But to save his son, he had to find a way. That was when he noticed the book Spike had brought. Curious and unfamiliar with the volume, he opened it. The breeze ruffled the pages, and he looked out the car window.

The crescent moon was rising, rising, rising, the crescent moon was rising into the jewelled sky.

The Mortog beast felt it coming. Three thousand years of searching at an end. A vow made would soon be honored. Vengeance would be sated, and the Sorceress would rest at last. No one else knew what was coming, what the ritual would bring, not the power hungry witches or the troubled runaways or the innocent sacrifice. Only the Beast knew.

Above, the crescent moon was rising. Camela would answer the call.

Chapter 10
The Last Watcher

The music was pounding. The volume couldn't have been that loud and yet it seemed like the bass was vibrating through his chest. Spike was drumming on the steering wheel, bobbing his head in time to the music, and occasionally singing a line or two before returning to his drum solo on the steering column and dash. Giles had no idea the song or group, but he was fairly certain Buffy would have enjoyed exercising to it.

Finally he could take no more and snapped, "Must we listen to that infernal noise?"

Spike looked at him sideways and rolled his eyes, but thankfully turned the stereo off. "Better, Grandpa?"

"Much," Giles answered, not rising to the bait. He rubbed at the bridge of his nose and adjusted his glasses before continuing with his perusal of the unfamiliar book Spike had brought. "You say this was in our house?" he asked again, still amazed that such a powerful volume could have escaped his notice.

"It was in the attic with Tara's stuff." Spike shook his head. "Did you even go through any of it 'fore you packed it away? 'Cause, honestly, I found a whole lotta crap in most of those boxes. Really think anyone'd be needin' all those back issues of *Cat Fancy*? And you might as well have given all those clothes to Goodwill. That's probably where she got 'em from anyway."

Giles glared. "We were leaving it to Willow to decide what to keep and what not to. We were waiting until her grief had passed enough for her to think clearly."

Spike barked out a laugh. "Looks like you would have been waiting a long time."

Giles ran his fingers along the perfect ink penmanship on the pages before him and murmured, "She's not a lost cause yet."

"After the mess she made of you, you really gonna forgive and forget?"

Giles didn't lift his eyes from the book, but he spoke clearly and without hesitation. "Not forget, no. As for forgiveness... Should it surprise you so much?" He did raise his eyes then, but the vampire was focused on the road in front of him. "How much have we forgiven you? Your past, your attempts on Buffy's life, as well as Willow and Xander's, not to mention your betrayal of us to Adam. After all that, how many nights have you spent in our home as if we were friends?"

"As if," Spike echoed, his voice bitter now, devoid of humor. He glanced at the watcher, true anger glittering in his eyes. "That's just it, isn't? You'll forgive me enough to send on patrol and run your errands and save your hides and be your little whipping boy, but you'll never let me in." Both hands gripped the steering wheel now, and his eyes returned to the road. "I'll never be part of the gang, be a friend, be anything but a convenient necessity. And I'll damn sure never be forgiven enough to be considered anything more than Dawn's big mistake. No matter that I love her, that I'd die for her. Oh, but you'll take Willow back fast enough, no matter that she left you to rot inside your own skin, no matter that she's likely cost you both your children. She'll weep and show remorse, and Red'll be back on Scooby duty before you can say 'Oprah's reunion special.' "

There was a long silence, and Giles continued to stare at the book in his hands, but he wasn't focused on the words. Finally he spoke. "And have *you* shown remorse, Spike? Have you for even one second regretted any of the evil you've done?"

"No."

"Then there's your answer. There's the limit to our forgiveness, why you'll never be one of us."

Spike turned the steering wheel sharply, slowed down, and pulled the van to a stop on the shoulder of the road. Giles looked up in surprise, but before he could demand an explanation, Spike was twisting in his seat to face him.

"Look here. What's done is done. All the whining in the world ain't gonna change anything. Angel may go for all that atonement crap, but if I had it all to do over again, I'd do it exactly the same. It's made me who I am today, and so I wouldn't trade any of it.

"And what did all that sulking get Angel? All those years with a soul, and he didn't do diddly but hang out in the sewers eatin' rats, moaning 'bout all the wrong he did. Took seeing your slayer to make him actually *do* anything about it."

Spike leaned closer, his hand on the middle console and a dangerous glint in his eye, and Giles shrank back against the doorframe. "Let me tell you one more difference between me and old Angelus. Sure, I killed. I fed. I enjoyed it. Hell, I'd be lying if I said I didn't miss it. But the kill was always clean, quick." He licked his lips and seemed to reconsider. "Maybe not always. The railroad spikes... well, sometimes critics have got to be put in their places. But my point is this: I never tortured anyone. I never got off on the suffering like Angelus and Darla and even Dru. If I'd been the one trying to wake Acatla..." His voice lowered to a whisper. "I would have just turned you. 'Cause, really, what was the point of puttin' you through all that?"

Giles swallowed, but didn't answer.

Spike pulled back slightly, a shadow of a smirk on his face. "What's the point of regrets or of wishing things different? Not if it would turn me into a slayer-whipped pansy arsed Angel-clone. No thank you. I'd rather keep all my kills than chance that. I don't regret anything. Not even gettin' chipped."

Giles' eyebrows rose at that, and Spike smiled wider.

"Yeah, that's a surprise, huh? I'm a better man today as a vampire than I ever was as a human because of it. And there's Dawn. Without the chip, I would have never even known what I was missing." Spike's eyes hardened. "So ask me."

Giles shook his head. "Ask you what?"

"No one cares 'bout what I did before. None of you would have anything to do with me if you did. 'Sides..." His eyes stripped the watcher bare. "I'm not the only one with blood on his hands."

Giles dropped his gaze to his lap, the red-hot flush of shame burning his cheeks.

"There's only one thing any of you care about. So be man enough to ask me already."

Giles looked up again and met the vampire's stare steadily. "If something happened to your chip... If tomorrow you found yourself suddenly able to kill again, what would you do, Spike?"

"The same thing I'm doing today, same thing I did yesterday." Spike turned in his seat, facing front again, and pulled the minivan back onto the road heading towards LA. "Go ahead, ask me why."

"Why?"

"I have a place, like I never did before. Dru loved me, you know. And I loved her. Always been a bit in love with love, wrote these God awful poems about it, pined after women who wouldn't give me the time of day, but I never really knew what it was to be loved, unconditionally. Not even Dru did that. Left me 'cause I wasn't dark enough for her. If something happened to me, Dawn would cry for me, same tears she'd cry for you. Never had anyone love me enough to cry for me."

Giles looked back out the window, the breeze blowing across his face. "So you wouldn't kill again if you had the chance? Because Dawn would never forgive you if you did?"

Spike chuckled darkly. "You just don't get it, do you, mate? Dawn *would* forgive me, that's just it. It'd break her heart to do it, but she'd forgive me anything, 'cause she loves me *that* much. I think if I ever went back to my old ways, she'd bare her neck for me and let me turn her. That's what scares

you. Scares me, too. But I'd never let that happen to her, never put her through that. It's not worth hurting her. So no, while I may get a bit nostalgic for a good killing spree, I'll never actually do any killing again."

Giles nodded thoughtfully, unsure whether to believe Spike or not. He seemed sincere enough, but they would never know for sure unless, heaven forbid, his chip actually did malfunction.

Spike gave him a sideways glance. "Though I might make an exception in your case, if you ever manage to piss me off enough."

"I'll try to keep that in mind," Giles replied sardonically.

And then, as if to signal that the topic was officially closed, Spike resumed their earlier conversation about the book in the watcher's lap, asking about its usefulness.

"It's a family spellbook," Giles answered, leaving his concerns about Dawn and Spike for another time. "An assortment of spells passed down and added to over generations." He shook his head in disbelief. "Her mother must have been quite powerful. Some of these spells... Some of these are certainly beyond anything that's ever passed through my hands. I can't believe Tara never mentioned this before. I can't believe we didn't notice it when we packed her things away."

"It was wrapped in an old quilt. Anything useful in there?"

"Possibly."

Spike shrugged and studied the road intently. "So what's the plan? How we gonna stop this witch bitch from activating the sword?"

"We're not. We're not going to stop her; we're going to help her finish the ceremony."

That brought the vampire up short. "Is this some sorta thrall thing? 'Cause I may not be able to hit you, but I can get someone else to."

Giles laughed. "No, just trust me. We have to make sure she finishes the ritual, just not with my son."

"Doesn't this sword give her a whole lotta power?"

Giles took his glasses off and pinched the bridge of his nose in concentration. Every time an oncoming car's headlights crossed his vision, he thought he would go blind from the unaccustomed brightness. How strange that a part of him wanted nothing more than to retreat back into the hated darkness. He sighed and replaced his glasses, his mind already forgetting Spike's question. "I'm sorry, what?"

Spike repeated himself slowly. "The sword. Power. We help her. She gets power. Right?"

"I've been giving that a lot of thought. In all of these books," he motioned to the scattered volumes on the passenger floor and on the backseat, "we hear about the activation of the sword, the illustration of the lightning bolt and the 280 dead, but nothing afterwards. If the bearer truly gained all that power, what did they do with it, and how did they lose the sword to the next person?"

"S'pose with that kinda power, you could do some real damage, kinda damage people might write about."

"Precisely. But none of these books mention what the sword was used for after, just tale after tale of its theft and the murders done to unlock its power. And not a single mention of the previous owner being killed to obtain the sword."

"Which means...?"

"Which means, I think, that they were already dead. I keep rereading the account of its creation, and I believe the sorceress Camela is the only one who can wield this power."

"She's dead, right?"

Giles tilted his head in half-hearted acknowledgment. "Not quite. She gave her magic to the Mortog beast. Everything she could do, the Beast can now do. So the Beast is the only one who can

wield the power of Camela's sword. Anyone else who tries... the power is too much for them. It destroys them.

"Sabrina is the one with the sword this time. She..." He closed his eyes against the memories. "She came to me while I was trapped. I think I know her a little. She's too powerful by herself. She can read minds somewhat, enough to anticipate any offensive moves you might make against her, magic or otherwise. I think our only chance is to let her activate the sword, to let the sword's power destroy her for us."

Spike nodded in approval. "Sounds like a plan. Means someone else'll have to play blood sacrifice in your boy's place."

"I had considered that."

"See, Rupe? We're not so different you and I: both killers when we need to be."

Giles focused on the book in his lap once more, unable to argue with Spike's conclusion.

It took everything Buffy had in her not to bolt from their hiding place. Xander's hand on her arm kept her still and quiet. There had to be more than thirty vampires grouped in the clearing, far more than even two slayers and one determined young man could take. They had arrived in a motorcade of limos like they were arriving at the Golden Globes. She and Faith and Xander had ducked into the bushes to watch and wait.

Faith didn't seem to like the waiting any better than she did. The dark slayer was white knuckling her crossbow in the same way Buffy was gripping her sword. Too bad crossbows didn't fire like machine guns; they could have dusted all of them before even one could reach their hiding place. But there was a reloading factor, which meant that they needed to wait for the crowd to thin.

Two vampires were standing at the forefront of the group, waving something at the invisible barrier and chanting. Apparently they were successful in opening a door, hopefully a door she could follow them through.

At least the party crashers are good for something.

They started to file through in pairs. Xander's hand on her arm tensed, warning her not to rush them too early. Still, her body trembled, every muscle taut as a bowstring, ready to fly at the first opportunity, needing to reach her son before anything could happen to him.

But there was a sight she wasn't prepared for, and even Xander's soothing presence couldn't curtail her instinctive reaction after she had seen it. She caught a glimpse as the crowd parted slightly, as they jostled for positions to make their way through the barrier's narrow doorway.

Robin.

Her daughter held in the arms of one of these demons. Creamy bare legs dangled off the man's hip. Golden curls obscured the face that was pressed against his shoulder. Her daughter.

The others might not have seen her. Buffy caught only a glimpse before the gap closed back up again. But Xander glanced at her when he felt the jolt of shock that nearly let loose the bowstring tension through her body into action. Even so, she held herself in check. Just barely.

She managed to wait until there were only five or six still on this side of the barrier. Then she came charging out of her hiding space, trusting Faith's crossbow and her own sword to finish them off before they could finish her off. She beheaded two before she realized the others were dust too. Faith was quick on the reload. Then she ran through the narrow doorway, not waiting for Faith and Xander to catch up.

She swung her sword once, twice, three times and dusted the three that had turned back in the clearing to take care of her. Maternal instincts mixed with slayer ones made her a force to be reckoned with. She started into the forest quietly, ducking behind a tree and observing the remaining vampires just ahead of her. Nine down, only twenty or so left to go. Easy as pie. Lucky for her, the battle had been silent and quick. The vampires she was tailing seemed unaware of her presence.

The one closest to her stopped, turned around, and studied the break in the forest just behind him. A puzzled frown creased his already wrinkled brow, and he motioned to another comrade. "Hey, Frank, what happened to Nick and Carlo?"

Frank shrugged. "Who cares? Move faster. We ain't where the Boss wants us when he wants us, he'll fit us both in an ashtray."

They continued on, and Buffy breathed a sigh of relief. She still had the element of surprise on her side. She turned around, her eyes searching for Xander and Faith. She even backtracked a few steps to get a better view of the clearing she had just left behind.

Apparently they hadn't been as quick as she had. Either that or Buffy had made it through in the nick of time. The sad fact was that the door through the barrier had closed before Faith and Xander could pass through. Buffy would have to go it alone.

Joseph walked onto the beach as if he owned it. Just him and his little slayer in his arms. Sabrina was the only one he recognized, the only one he had ever dealt with, and she was near the water's edge beside a young black woman. Sabrina's eyes widened when she saw him, and Joseph took some amount of selfish satisfaction in her surprise.

"Hello, Sabrina," he called out, invading their sacred circle as he strolled past the three nearest the forest. He noticed the little boy standing in the middle of their sand drawn symbol and apparently so did his little slayer. She began whimpering and growing restless in his arms. He tightened his grip on the girl, threatening her with a low growl, after which she quieted obediently.

"Joseph," Sabrina hissed. "What are you doing here?"

"What I should have done from the beginning." He set the girl down as he reached the sorceress. The child didn't move from his side. "You were right, Sabrina. I don't need Wolfram and Hart or my father or, for that matter, a partner. I'm ready to run the show myself, see what I can do with my own vision."

Her eyes narrowed in anger, but he remained unflappable. "If you want that vision to include tomorrow," she warned, "then I suggest you leave."

"You hired me for a reason, don't forget." He snapped his fingers in the air: a signal to the men who were waiting for him. A dozen or more vampires stepped out from the forest and onto the beach. Joseph smiled smugly. "Superior manpower."

Xander kicked a rock and eyed Faith warily. "So now what?"

She was running her hands over the spot where the door had been and meeting only the invisible resistance of the barrier. She looked like a mime. "We tried over. We tried under. Around didn't work either. Tried bashing it, and all I can say is 'oww.' I'm thinking..." She sighed and faced him. "Actually, that's pretty much all I can think of."

Xander was thinking of the wrecking ball he had knocked Glory over with and wondering if that would knock a hole in it. He sighed too. "Yeah, I think we pretty much need Willow, a good-on-our-side-Willow, or—"

"Giles!" Faith finished brightly.

"Yeah, Giles could maybe..." He trailed off as she nodded towards the road behind him. He turned and saw Spike and Giles making their way towards them, the watcher holding onto Spike's shoulder for balance. "Oooh, Gi-iles," Xander said, understanding now. "This is definitely of the good."

And then, in spite of all the bad stuff that was still going on around them, he couldn't help but give in to the goofy grin that twitched on his lips. Giles was okay. Maybe a little wobbly on his feet, but he was okay.

"Definitely of the good," Xander repeated before bounding off to meet his friend halfway.

"You don't want to do this, Joseph," Sabrina insisted. "You forget that I could cut you down with a thought."

"Not quite," Joseph laughed. "Although, you'd like to think so."

"Try me."

"Let me just spell it out for you, Sabrina: you're outnumbered. Even with just the men you can see. Add in the ones you can't, and you don't stand a chance. Doesn't matter what you can see in my mind or theirs; won't help you defend yourself against that many opponents."

"Walk. Away," she ground out between clenched teeth.

"Perhaps you need a demonstration?"

He snapped his fingers again, and she heard a scream. She felt the stab of pain through the joining spell and turned in time to see one of her coven fall from the cliffs above, a crossbow bolt driven straight through her heart.

"One down, eight to go," he told her coldly. "How many do you absolutely *have* to have for the ritual to work?"

"What do you want?" Sabrina glanced up at the rising crescent moon, hoping that whatever Joseph came for, he could make it quick. She didn't have time for negotiating. But neither did she have time to fight with him and his associates.

He smiled, and she met his eyes, shock clearly written across her face. He knew he didn't have to say it. He knew she had just seen it in his mind. She had seen in his thoughts what he had come for. He hadn't come to bully her into becoming his partner, into using the stolen power of the watchers to find the potential slayers for him. He had come to claim the power for his own.

He had come for the sword.

Willow saw the men step onto the beach below her. She counted them. Seven. Ten. Twelve. Thirteen. Fourteen. And they were only nine. She couldn't make out specifics at this distance, even though her concentration on the spell matrix had just been broken. The man closest to Sabrina was carrying something and set it down, but she couldn't get a clear look.

Julia was at her side, her hands shaking. "Watcher's Council?" she asked tremulously.

Willow nodded. "That'd be my guess."

Then she heard a scream, carried across on the cool night air. Helpless to stop it, she watched one of their own tumble from the opposite cliff. Falling. Falling. *Buffy fell*. Then, she had been too magicked out to stop it. Now, she simply didn't react fast enough. The woman had hit the ground before Willow could call up the spell.

"No!" Willow's cry of anguish choked in the back of her throat. It had been either Melody or Delilah. She couldn't tell from here, but it didn't matter which; they were both her friends. Separated from her now by the distance of beach and the height of the cliffs she stood upon, just as a battlefield and a rise of rocks had separated her from Tara. She blinked away the memory of stumbling down that rock bed, of racing across the crevice, of the scrapes and cuts on her hands as she desperately tried to climb to her lover before it was too late. *Too late. Too late.* Too late to save Tara. Too late to save her friend now. She could have saved her if she'd been faster. Giles could have saved *her* if he'd wanted.

Julia had dropped to her knees, her hand covering her mouth. "Oh God, oh God, oh God," she was murmuring. "What do we do?"

Willow wished she could panic too. Wished she could cry and fall apart. Wished she could go back and be just a little bit faster this time. Wished, for once, that she didn't have to play hero, that she didn't have anyone depending on her help.

But if wishes were horses... and all those years of Scooby duty had taught her how to push her feelings back long enough to get the job done. She took a deep breath, unshed tears still blurring her vision, and turned to Julia. "Climb down. Go back to the shelter. Get help. As many as will come."

Alex watched the lady and the man argue.

When they had first brought him to the beach, they had made him stand in just this spot and drew something around him in the sand. The other woman had wanted to do something more to keep him there, but the lady had said no. She had said that he wouldn't go anywhere, that something terrible would happen to him if he tried. She had been looking right at him when she'd said it, and he'd been very scared.

But there were bits and pieces of this he remembered from his dream. He remembered standing in the sand, his shoes sinking slightly every time he fidgeted in place. He remembered how cold it was with the breeze off the ocean, and how he felt the wet mist on his skin as each wave crashed just behind the lady and her friend. He remembered the bad dog, the monster that had come, and so he was afraid to run, afraid the monster would find him if he did. At the same time, he remembered that he *had* run, had taken Robin and run and run and run until his little legs were so tired, he just wanted to fall on the ground where he was.

So when he saw the man bring Robin, he knew he would need to go soon, that something worse would happen if he stayed.

He watched someone fall from a cliff, screaming. It looked like something out of a movie, like something out of one of those shoot-em-up movies that Uncle Xander always got in trouble for letting him watch. She fell faster than they did in the movies. No slow motion. No rising music. It was very quick, and he had never actually seen anyone die before.

Alex knew his mother had fallen once, long before he was born. It was one of those things he wasn't supposed to know about, one of those things people started to talk about before remembering he was there. He'd always imagined that his father had caught her. Now, watching this woman fall, he

wasn't so sure. Maybe his father hadn't caught her. Maybe his mother had gotten hurt when she fell. Maybe that's why his father always looked so sad whenever anyone mentioned it.

But his mother had gotten better, and maybe this woman was only hurt and would get better too.

The lady seemed pretty sure that the woman was dead, though. She was yelling at the man for it. She was yelling at him about the sword she was holding, too. Alex didn't understand. Mommy and Daddy had lots of swords. They never cared who used what sword. They only yelled whenever he managed to get his hands on one.

And then everyone started fighting. The lady's friend said something, a magic word, like "open sesame" or something, except that it didn't open any doors. It made three of the bad men fall down, holding their heads in pain. That made the others mad, and they started fighting.

And no one was watching Alex anymore, or Robin either.

He tiptoed over to her quietly and took her hand. She didn't seem to want to go at first. She kept looking at the man who had brought her. But he tugged a few times, and she finally allowed him to pull her away from the beach.

They were small, and therefore below most everyone's field of vision. No one noticed them as they crept past pairs of people fighting. No one noticed until they were nearly to the forest. And then someone called out, "Hey!" and pointed in their direction.

Alex pulled on his sister's hand harder, and they were both running into the underbrush, running as fast as they could, and it was just like his dream. They were being chased, and they were running. He couldn't remember much more of his dream than that. Except that he always woke when he saw the bad dog. He always woke knowing that the bad dog was looking for them, that it was hunting them, and he never knew how his dream ended. He never knew if it actually caught them.

Buffy didn't dare step into the clearing. She didn't know how many vamps were watching, unseen. They had killed the woman on the cliff with a crossbow. If Buffy stepped into the open, she would be kabobbed in a second. So instead, she focused on moving through the trees, sneaking up on each hidden vampire, and kabobbing them first.

She could barely see her twins, whenever she neared the edge of the forest enough to actually see the beach. She wanted to call to them, wanted to swoop in and rescue them. But first she would have to eliminate every last sniper.

She wished Faith were here. And there was a thought she had never expected to have again.

Silent as a ghost. Spreading her slayer senses out. Searching for the next target. And then gliding in from behind, careful with each step, not to break a twig or crunch a leaf or kick the smallest pebble, not a single sound to give away the game. Light on her feet, like a dance, and quick like lightning. A rain of dust and ash before he even knew she was there.

She looked out on the beach again, as she did every time she was close enough to see it. The witches and vampires were fighting each other now, but her eyes cared only to find her children, to assure herself that they were fine. Her heart caught in her throat when she realized that they were no longer there.

Giles sat on his knees in the grass, the book in his lap, poring through pages, through his memory, searching for something that would get them through this barrier. He was aware that he was rocking

slightly as he did, but it seemed necessary to keep him focused. It seemed to provide comfort and a steady sensation that could almost drown out everything else and allow him to think. He was also aware that the others were watching him, were talking about him softly like he couldn't hear. But he could hear them. He could hear everything, feel everything, smell the grass and the damp night air, feel the dull ache through the bones Angelus had snapped and the leg Sulla's bullet had shattered, hear the steady roar of the ocean waves and the occasional rumble of a car passing on the road behind them. It was hard to concentrate, to push everything else out while the whole world was trying to push in. He had taken for granted how easy it was to tune out the myriad insignificant details of surroundings and self, to focus on one thing to the exclusion of all else. It was a skill he would need to relearn, and fast.

"He going to be okay?" he heard Xander whisper to Spike. His eyes returned to the beginning of the page, and he tried to force himself to pay attention to the words in front of him and nothing else.

"Sure." Spike sounded doubtful. "Even if he ain't... Well, he's not as bad off as Dru, and she could still get the job done. Maybe you have to have a few screws loose to be any good at the magic. I mean, look at Red: trading in her grip on reality sure bought her into the bad-ass mojo crowd."

"Just so he doesn't turn us into rats or anything," Faith muttered.

Giles turned and glared. "Your distracting conversation is making that ever more likely."

They jumped when he spoke and quickly shut up. Blessed silence. Well almost. But the sounds of the night around them could not be so easily cowed into silence, and he would just need to ignore them. Rocking helped, as did moving his lips while he read, as a child who is first learning might sound out the words.

He heard a branch snap, and his head snapped up with it. He heard another, then the crunch of leaves, coming from the forest just beyond the barrier.

The others heard too and were coming to stand beside him. Faith wondered the same thing he did. "Buffy?"

But Spike nixed that idea. "Too noisy for the Slayer. Probably a deer or something."

But he was wrong too. Stumbling into their sight in the distance beyond the barrier, where the underbrush thinned into the clearing they all sat in, Alex and Robin came running. The children caught sight of their father, and they picked up speed, their faces filled with a desperate fear.

Giles tried to warn them back, but it was Robin who hit the invisible wall first, and she fell flat on her butt, rubbing her nose and crying. It would have almost been comical if the situation weren't so tragic. Alex saw her knocked back and stopped himself just in time.

Giles smiled reassuringly for them, and pressed his hand against the barrier. His son mirrored him on the other side, his chin trembling as tears slipped down his small cheeks. Giles wanted nothing more than to hold the boy in his arms and never let go, but the best he could do was rest his forehead against the invisible wall as his child did the same. Robin stood beside her brother now, too, pounding her fists on the barrier and crying. Giles laid his other hand against where her cheek pressed, trying to calm her with soft words, wishing he could touch her cheeks and wipe away her tears.

"Giles," she whispered plaintively.

He smiled, the tears stinging his eyes. She had spoken. She had spoken his name.

"Giles," Spike echoed, but it was a warning.

He looked over his children's heads and saw the vampires step into the clearing. He looked back down into his son's eyes. Robin was too upset to listen, but Alex had to be made to understand. Giles filled his eyes with unwavering authority, became the strict disciplinarian who had reached the count of three and now there would be no story before bedtime, no more arguments, no more chances. It was the same expression his father had worn before reaching for the strap, and Giles hated himself for

looking at his own son in the same cold, unforgiving way he had sworn he never would, just as he had sworn never to repeat all of his father's other mistakes.

"Run," he told the boy firmly.

Time seemed to move more slowly. The vampires were only a few feet from the twins when Giles raised himself to his feet. Alex had grabbed his sister's hand, but she resisted leaving her father's side.

"Go, Robin!" he yelled, forcing his voice to anger as she had never heard it before. And then the dreaded word, the one that spurred all children to immediate action, stressed with the threat of what would come after that word if they didn't act. "*Now!*"

Alex pulled her, and they started moving to the side, even as the vampires were moving more quickly towards them.

"Back," Giles told the demons, uttered with the force of will, and anger, and power.

They flew back into a tangled heap, and the children disappeared into the forest off to the right. The vampires tried to regain their footing, but Giles was holding them in place, muttering the incantation under his breath, trying to buy his children time to escape.

He could feel his spell wavering. He was out of practice and old and used up and why did he ever think he could stand against Sabrina's power? He couldn't even hold three vampires in place.

The one closest to him sneered as he broke free of Giles' power. "Your boy's blood is going to be just the pick-me-up I need."

"Ha! I wish you luck in finding him," Giles snapped, raising his hands, calling out the words, his anger and fear fueling his magic. "Seeking dead three shall not find or see but shall blind be!"

The three vampires stumbled as they got to their feet, squinting at him, at their surroundings. They made their way unsteadily towards the forest the twins had escaped through, nearly colliding with each other and various trees before disappearing from sight.

Giles collapsed onto the ground, spent, unable to think of another spell to stop the vampires from following his children. He was no mage. Even Ethan would be better at this than him.

Xander approached him and offered a hand up, which he accepted. "What'd you do to them?"

Giles shrugged, not terribly impressed with himself at the moment. "It was supposed to make them blind, but..." He stared at the spot they had gone through. "But I think it just made them a little nearsighted."

"Yeah, whatever," Faith said, dismissing the whole scene. "We'll pick them up later at Lens Express. Let's work on getting us on *that* side of the invisible wall."

"I'm doing the best I can," he snapped. "Do you have any helpful suggestions to offer?" He stalked over and snatched the book back up off the ground, nearly losing his balance from the furious movement. Spike, thankfully, caught his arm and prevented him from toppling over. But Giles wasn't as thankful as perhaps he should be. He was irritated and frustrated that he did need help now of all times, now when his children needed *him*. He was cursing himself and his body that wouldn't work just as he remembered it had, that couldn't just climb out of the darkness and his bed as if nothing had happened. He glared at Spike, although the vampire had done nothing to deserve his anger. But he was convenient and easy to be angry with. Spike released his arm, allowing him to stand on his own two feet, however unsteady they might be.

Faith seemed to have taken his harsh rebuke at face value; she was trying to think of suggestions. "Well those other vamps seemed to think it was easy enough. They waved something at it, chant, chant, and poof: magic door. Can't ya just figure out whatever spell they did and... I don't know... redo it?"

Giles froze, closed his eyes, and sighed. "Of course. I'm profoundly stupid. I don't need to find a new spell; I just need to redo what's already been done. Faith, I never thought I would be so grateful

to have you at my side.” He was reminded of that long ago war council before the battle with Glory, when Anya had similarly come through in a pinch after he had yelled at her for her incredibly uninfected enthusiasm and sad lack of ideas.

Giles stepped closer to the barrier and dredged up the necessary redo spell from memory. As he concentrated on uttering the correct incantation, the others gathered behind him, weapons at the ready and all blessedly silent, considerate of his current limited capacity for concentration in the face of distraction.

The door opened, and they passed through the barrier.

“Faith, Spike, find Buffy and help her. I’ll back you up as soon as I can. And Spike, remember what I told you about the sword.” Giles headed in the direction his children had gone, still slightly unsteady on his feet, but strengthened by his desperate need to save his children. “Xander, help me find Robin and Alex before their pursuers do.”

“Shoulda turned them into rats,” Xander muttered as he followed.

Spike started laughing so hard everyone stopped to look at him. He returned their looks with an incredulous one of his own. “Come on! Don’t tell me I’m the only one who gets it. Three blind mice?” No one else laughed, and he blew them off. “Oh bugger, go find your tots while we rescue the Missus.”

“Hey!” One of Joseph’s minions shouted, pointing towards the fleeing children.

Joseph and Sabrina paused in their shouting match, and the other pairs stopped their fighting long enough to look as well.

Whatever else might have forced them into the roles of adversaries, in this they were on the same side: they both needed those children. For Joseph, he was watching his hopes for his own slayer disappear with Robin’s retreating back. For Sabrina, she needed Alex as her sacrifice, and her window of opportunity was rapidly closing. What the others thought as they saw the running children didn’t matter. The others were Joseph and Sabrina’s to command.

They looked at each other, and the vampire offered diplomatically, “Truce?”

The witch nodded her acceptance.

“Halt!” Joseph called out, and each vampire on the beach took a few wary steps back from their opponents.

Stop. Sabrina ordered through the joining spell, and her coven backed off.

“We find the twins as a team,” she told him, “and I will have the sword, and you will have me as an ally.”

She could feel his indecision. Joseph did not truly want to be in charge. His years at Wolfram and Hart had done that to him. While he might enjoy being boss of his own division, while he might have truly enjoyed being a full partner of the firm, there had always been someone to answer to. Even Holland Manners had had to answer to the enigmatic senior partners. And so while Joseph could play the cutthroat game of competition and backstabbing as well as any other lawyer still with the firm, he didn’t know quite what to do with himself without a boss of his own. And Sabrina would be all too happy to assume that role for the time being.

On the other hand, he didn’t trust her. And rightfully so. Because if he could see inside her mind as she could see inside his, he would know that as soon as she gained the power of the sword, she intended to strike him down with it for his insolence.

He studied her, and she knew he hadn't quite decided whether to align himself with her or make a play for the sword himself. For now that would have to be enough. Later, she would see that he made the right decision. She might not be able to use her gifts to influence a vampire as she could a mortal, but all of the self-doubt and insecurity she saw inside him, all of his father's cutting remarks and his colleagues' mocking jibes that still echoed in his mind, all of that had to be good for something. After all, she only needed to buy herself enough time to claim the sword and its power.

"We'll find the twins, and then we'll discuss it," he finally answered her.

They split up into groups of three, all vampire or all witch, none of them trusting the other enough to mix. They set off into the forest, and Sabrina looked up to each cliff on either side of her. Delilah was starting to climb down. And on the other side, Julia was almost to the bottom. More distressing was the fact that Willow seemed on her way down as well.

That would never work. As long as Willow remained at a distance, she would remain ignorant of the true nature of this ritual. But one glimpse of Alex, and she would know. Despite Sabrina's masterful manipulations of Willow's own weaknesses and desires, she could never hold her after that.

She felt Morgaine's eyes on her and met her friend's knowing stare. It was almost as if her friend could read *her* mind, could see in her thoughts what she would never admit out loud: that in this final moment, her control was only a tenuous illusion.

"Go," she snapped at Morgaine, angry with her for being right, for the "I-told-you-so" she could see burning in her eyes. "Find them."

And Morgaine obeyed, wisely keeping her tongue, letting Sabrina's self-recriminations be enough.

Willow started to climb down the rock face, intending to help where she could, afraid that her magic could hurt the wrong person if she tried from here. She might currently have the best vantage point, might be able to see the entire battlefield, but she couldn't see enough detail to discern friend from foe. Her friend on the opposite cliff seemed to have the same idea as she. Melody or Delilah, she couldn't be sure which was left, was carefully scaling down her own precipice to the beach.

Willow had only taken a few steps down the steep but doable path along the side leading into the forest. She was no mountain climber to try scaling down the sheer rock face along the beach. Even so, the path towards the forest was treacherous, much scarier on the way down than it had been on the way up. She started down in a crawl, her hands seeking purchase and anchoring her in place before her feet stretched for the next step. She'd only taken a few such careful steps when she heard Sabrina's voice in her head, carried to her by magic.

Willow, no.

But you need help, she answered. *I've sent Julia to the shelter to get backup, but you need help now.*

Delilah is coming.

So Melody was the one who died, Willow thought, not questioning how Sabrina knew. Sabrina always knew. Her power was awesome, was what Willow aspired to. If Sabrina were standing in Willow's place, the height of the cliff would not limit her ability to protect them all.

Let me help.

She felt Sabrina's desperation, an echo of her own. *No! I need you there.* Willow wanted to argue, but Sabrina continued on, not giving her a chance. *I need someone at that vantage point, someone to be my eyes over the whole beach if I need it. Melody is dead, and Delilah and Julia are coming down here. You're the last. I need you to stay up there.*

But I can't see anything from here. I'm no use to you.

If I need you, my magic will let you see. Please, Willow, be patient.

Willow sighed and resumed her post, standing sentinel on her precipice and watching over the now nearly empty beach. She hoped Julia would bring reinforcements soon.

Giles kept a pace that even Xander had difficulty matching. His long legs were an asset in that regard, as was the panic that gripped his heart whenever he thought of the vampires reaching his children first. That thought urged him on, even though his body was rapidly tiring and his legs were beginning to ache. He stumbled more readily than he used to, losing his balance over slightly uneven ground or when stepping over fallen branches. Usually Xander caught him, but sometimes the young man was a few too many paces behind him and could only offer him a hand up after the fact.

They reached the edge of the forest and stopped for a moment to look out over the beach. The sand opened up to the water far off to their left, but directly in front of them the sand quickly turned to rock that rose straight up towards the sky.

"Now which way?" Xander asked.

But Giles was studying the cliffs in front of him, his eyes tracing their slopes upward. He was thinking of his son's myriad close calls: jumps off the second story railing at the Magic Box that had necessitated him adding a gate, various time-outs for being caught scaling the bookcases Xander had had the foresight to bracket firmly to the wall before the child was even born, an endless parade of jumps off the couch until something was inevitably broken, and fresh in his mind, the memory of Alex's daring climb up the school bleachers during Dawn's play.

"Alex wants to be a mountain climber," Giles murmured.

Xander followed his gaze up the rock face. "Are you kidding? Even I would be scared climbing up there."

Giles shook his head and started in that direction. "Alex is fearless. And Robin would be more afraid of being alone."

The challenge was finding where the children had started climbing. The incline was more gradual off to their left, near the beach, enough that a person could almost walk up, but Giles' instincts told him that they hadn't gone in that direction. So they continued to the right, hugging the edge of the cliffs to present a less visible target and watching the heights above them for the children.

Only Faith's reflexes saved Spike a staking. Her hand stopped Buffy's blow inches from her target. She shoved the other slayer back, and Spike whirled to see the danger he had narrowly missed.

"Hey, hey, I'm on *your* side," he protested.

Buffy blinked at both of them, surprised by their presence. "How'd you get through the barrier?"

"Giles," Faith answered, and Buffy's eyes grew wider, filling with hope. She looked at Spike, understanding his presence now.

"Giles?" she asked him, hardly daring to put into words her hope, lest he dash it with his answer.

"Yeah, I rescued your man," he answered, straightening his leather duster by tugging on its lapels. "I think that deserves *not getting staked*."

Buffy closed her eyes in relief, a weight lifted off her shoulders by the simple knowledge that her watcher, her husband, had rejoined the land of the living, that he was somewhere close by, that when

this crisis was over, she would be able to look into those green eyes once more and give him hell for all the worry he'd caused her. Her eyes popped open in the next instant when she'd fully processed Spike's accusation. "Hey, I didn't know I was about to stake *you*," she replied defensively. "I sense vampire, I've just been going for the kill. I've dusted eight already. Add in those nine we got by the barrier, and I'd say that's half as many vamps as we started with."

Faith shrugged and adjusted her crossbow in her hands. "Double the slayers, double the fun. Been a while since we played on the same team."

Buffy smiled faintly. Not that she didn't trust the other slayer. Well, alright, she didn't trust the other slayer. A few betrayals, a little body snatching, and some extra-curricular boyfriend stealing wasn't so easy to get over. But there were more important things at stake. "Yeah, maybe another time." She turned to the vampire, not even wanting to think about the fact that Spike of all people was the one she trusted more. "You and Faith got it covered? I have to find the twins."

He hooked her arm and pulled her back before she could go more than a few steps. "Giles and Xander are on it. Your watcher wanted me to make sure you knew. First priority's gettin' to Sabrina and the sword."

Buffy shook her head. "The beach is pretty much abandoned. No ceremony tonight. They went after the twins."

"That's just the thing." Spike drew out a cigarette and started smoking. God, time like this and the vampire couldn't lay off the cancer sticks for five minutes? Buffy and Faith both coughed when he exhaled a large cloud of smoke. "See, it goes something like this," he continued. "Watcher doesn't give us good odds 'gainst Queen Witch there. He wasn't a match for her, and he doesn't reckon you are either."

"She's the one who cast that spell on him?" Buffy gripped her stake tighter and shifted the sword and scabbard slung across her back, every nerve on fire with her anger. Slaying was comfort food, and the last days without her watcher had left her craving some serious comfort. She hoped this Sabrina was demon enough to slay, but even if she were human, Buffy didn't know if it mattered enough to stop her hand this time.

Spike smiled slyly as he tapped off his ash. "No, not her. But I'll give you three guesses who did."

Buffy felt her anger run cold. *No. Please, no.* She found her mouth suddenly dry. She had wondered, standing in the sorority house, staring at Willow's forgotten picture, if she had it in her to face off against her best friend. Fate seemed determined to put that question to the test. Just the idea of hurting Willow made her stomach churn. Best friends since day one. And ever since that first night at the Bronze, Buffy had felt responsible for Willow. If not for her, the shy high schooler would have never learned about the ooglie-booglies it was *Buffy's* destiny to fight. If not for her, Willow would probably be at Oxford right now, learning some language only two other people in the world could speak, or inventing some computer thingie that would put Microsoft out of business.

If she had a choice, she would do what Giles had done: he had walked away from Ethan. After Randall, after Halloween, after Eyghon, and even the band candy. With a sharp threat on his tongue and a dark warning in his eyes, he had turned his back on his friend, let the man disappear back into the underworld, and made no effort to track him down and bring him to justice. The Initiative may have taken Ethan off to Nevada for a short time, but even after securing his freedom and helping Longworth to steal their twins, Ethan was spared retribution from his old friend.

Giles had his limit, of course, and that was the warning that always darkened his eyes. But he didn't want to be pushed to that limit, didn't want to be forced to fight someone he had once cared about.

And neither did Buffy.

Spike nodded a small confirmation as he saw the recognition in her wide eyes and ashen complexion.

Faith, however, hadn't connected the dots. "So, *who* cast the spell on Giles?"

Buffy looked down at the ground. Spike answered the question. "Red did."

"Red?"

Spike squashed out his cigarette to punctuate his reply. "Red."

Buffy could feel Faith's eyes on her. The other slayer sighed and offered kindly, "God, B, I'm sorry."

Buffy shrugged off the sympathy and started walking through the undergrowth, the other two quickly falling in step beside her. "Right now let's just focus on stopping this Sabrina and finding the twins. We'll worry about Willow later. So we find the sword and destroy it or something, right? Living Flame like with the Glove, right?"

Spike shook his head. "Your watcher doesn't think you're a match for her. She'll turn you into a slug or worse. Best Giles can do at the moment is change your eyeglass prescription before your yearly checkup."

"And she'll be even more scary powerful if she activates the sword." Buffy stopped and studied the bleached blond vampire. They had done the research. It all seemed to be pointing in the same direction, and yet it felt as if she were missing something. "So we destroy the sword, *right*?"

"Wrong," Spike countered. "Your watcher is certain the sword can only be used by the Mortog beast, that the Sorceress who made it gave the Beast the power to wield it. Anyone else who tries, finds themselves properly dead, and the sword starts over from square one. You try and go up against Sabrina, you won't get close enough to land a blow. But if you let her activate the sword, you won't have to. She'll get herself killed for you."

"So that's the plan."

"Means you'll need a sacrifice."

Buffy grumbled, "Volunteering?"

Spike laughed, but Faith piped up with the best idea Buffy had heard all day. "Can a vampire count as the sacrifice?" She was quick to add, "One that isn't Spike, I mean."

Buffy and Spike exchanged a glance. The vampire smiled wickedly. "Looks like we're hunting vampires. Good, something I *can* hurt."

They were all hunting something. Giles and Xander were hunting the twins, as were Joseph and Sabrina and the many vampires and witches spread through the forest and along the beach. Buffy, Faith, and Spike were hunting for the sword and the sacrifice. Willow was hunting the brushline for the first sign that Julia had returned with reinforcements. And the Beast. The Beast was so close, it could taste it. It was hunting as well, unseen and unknown. It hunted the children, wanting its vengeance and its promised power. It thought sometimes that they knew it was near, was nipping at their heels. The Beast could sense it in the boy's thoughts, in the boy's gifts, that the child had Seen this moment coming, that he had woken in the night, trembling in fear with the knowledge. The Beast might not have cared before who was the sacrifice, as long as the power belonged to it in the end. But now the Beast wanted the watcher's child. Predator and prey, it hunted. The other watchers had spilled their guts with each stroke of its claws, and the Beast had tasted their blood. The boy would be the last of the watchers. And the girl...

And so we shall become our enemies, and we shall use their own power to defeat them.

The girl would become their instrument, their slayer. Let an army come. The memory of Camela would stand fast, defended by the very power that had been her death. As the Beast had promised, she would be avenged, for the lines of watchers would soon be wiped from the earth and the slayers would die and be Called forevermore in Camela's name.

Robin was crying. Alex kept telling her it was only a little bit farther. He didn't think she'd ever climbed before, not even a tree, because she kept almost slipping. He didn't think it was that hard; they'd found a spot where the cliffs went up at an easier angle and there were lots of weeds and roots to hang onto as they climbed. But she kept shouting at him to "Wait!" and he kept shouting at her to "Hurry!"

He reached the top first and turned to look down. They were very high up, higher than he'd ever been before, and the view was amazing. The ocean went on forever and ever, a black mirror reflecting the night sky. Each white cap glittered in the faint light of the crescent moon.

Robin reached the top a moment later, and she scurried back from the edge. That was when Alex noticed that the ledge they were standing on continued back into the rock, turning into caves. He wished he knew how his dream had ended, but he always woke as they were running through the forest, running from the bad dog. He didn't know what to do now, except to wait and hide and hope his parents found him before anything else did.

They didn't have to wait long before they heard voices. But it wasn't their parents. It was the vampires who had been chasing them. And obviously they knew where the twins were hiding, because they were climbing the cliffs after them.

Robin started whimpering when she saw them, and Alex put his arm around her, even though he was just as scared as his sister. They both sucked their thumbs and waited.

Giles was tiring, was leaning against Xander's arm. They'd had a couple of close calls when they'd nearly been seen by some of the vampires who were also after the children, but they'd either managed to tuck themselves into a divot in the cliffs and evade notice or they'd managed to dust the vampires before they could alert any others. Giles made a mental note to give the young man some crossbow training when they got home. For some reason, he had thought Xander was a better shot than that. One poor vampire had taken a bolt in the shoulder, stomach, and groin before Xander had finally nailed the heart. Giles was fairly certain the vampire had welcomed death at that point, especially after the bolt to the groin. Luckily, for both them and the vampires, the next two were felled on the first try. Still, a little after hours crossbow training couldn't go awry. Giles had done the same for Jenny after that fateful incident in the park when she had shot him in the back.

The rocks opened up slightly just ahead, and when they neared the crevice, they could see a narrow path carved through the rock and leading to the ocean. Giles paused for a moment, wondering if the children might have hidden themselves in there. He chanced calling their names and waited, listening to the answering silence.

Xander tugged on his arm. "Come on. The cliffs don't look so hard to climb up ahead. They kinda go up at an angle. Don't worry, we'll find them."

Giles nodded, calling out for Alex and Robin once more before turning to follow Xander.

A moment later, and they heard an earsplitting whistle above them and looked up.

At first Alex thought he had imagined his father's voice, but then Robin raised her head, and he knew she had heard it too. Their father called each of their names, and he sounded very close by.

Alex stood and went to the edge to look down. The vampires were halfway up, and their father was nowhere in sight. Robin tugged on his arm and pointed to the caves behind them.

"Giles," she said with certainty.

So they went back through the caves, holding hands, both of them stopping for a moment when they entered total darkness. In the end, they were more afraid of the monsters behind them than the darkness ahead, and they pressed on, their courage bolstered by the promise that their father was nearby.

They heard him call their names again and followed the sound out of the darkness, which was thankfully brief. The caves opened up again onto another ledge similar to the one they had just left. The view was of a flat rock face straight ahead, but it was still the most beautiful view Alex had ever seen. Because directly below them, he could see Daddy and Uncle Xander.

"Giles," Robin called softly, plaintively, but nowhere near loud enough for anyone to hear more than five steps away.

Alex tried a little louder: "Daddy!"

But his father didn't seem to hear him, and they were starting to move away. That was when Alex remembered his Happy Meal toy from dinner. It was still tucked safely in the front pocket of his overalls. He pulled it out and gave the little plastic whistle a good blow.

"Jesus!" Xander exclaimed, his eyes tracing the sheer rock face up to the children. "How the hell did they get up there?"

Giles was wondering the same thing. "There must be an easier way up on the other side."

"Either that or you're going to need me to brick up the kid's window so he can't climb out."

Giles laughed off the comment, but in the back of his mind, he was thinking it wasn't such a bad idea. He waved at the children, and they waved back happily. But when he started to move around the corner, Xander quickly stopped him.

"Whoa, hang on a sec. You're barely mobile there, Giles, and in hardly any shape to try mountain climbing. Stay here. I'll scout out a way up that doesn't involve pickaxes and rappelling equipment."

Xander passed him the crossbow and left. Giles carefully maneuvered himself farther into the crevice, his hand gripping the rock wall for balance and his feet sliding slightly on the slick, uneven surface. His mind was already working through a plan B, because that was pretty much what a watcher's mind was trained to do. And if Xander couldn't find a way up to them, they would have to find a way down for the children.

Plan B soon became Plan A. Xander was only gone for a few minutes, but his return made it clear that no one was getting up to the children.

"There's an easier climb on the other side, but there are already three vampires almost to the top. And some others heard Alex's whistle and came running."

"Did they see you?"

"No." Xander took back the crossbow. "I could try and pick them off, but there's a lot of them, and I'm thinking we would need a slayer for this."

“Or at least someone who’s a better shot,” Giles said, more harshly than he’d intended.

“Hey! I got three.” Xander relented a little on his defense. “Okay, the first took a few tries, but if he hadn’t caught the first bolt in mid-air, I’m telling you, I would have dusted him in less than a second.”

Giles smiled softly. “I’m sorry. I’m not quite myself yet, and I’m worried about my children. It all makes me a bit snappish, I’m afraid.”

Xander patted him on the shoulder and looked back towards the clearing. “Forget about it. So, full front-on assault?”

Giles frowned and tilted his head in thought. “High casualty risk. Low chance of success.” He was looking in the opposite direction, towards the ocean. “I say we get the children to jump in the water and go in after them there.”

“Okay, there’s a plan I would expect *my* father to come up with, and he’s a sick bastard. Are you crazy?”

Giles started carefully picking his way towards the ocean, not deigning to reply to the young man’s jibes. He blew out a frustrated breath when he felt Xander’s hand on his arm, stopping him. “What? Unless you have a better idea, this is the only way.”

“Can I ask you something, Giles? Back in England, did you happen to grow up next to the ocean?”

“No,” he replied quickly, eager to get this over with.

“And in all the years you’ve been in Sunnydale, how many trips have you made to the beach?” Xander interrupted before he could reply. “Where you actually went in the water?”

“Well, none. Your point being...?”

Xander started stripping off his shirt and shoes. “My point being: stand aside for someone actually born and raised near the ocean. Uncle Rory used to think it was funny to dump me overboard and make me swim for shore. If he was really drunk, he’d fall in after me, and I’d have to haul him back in the boat. Yes, sir, you are looking at a swimmer extraordinaire, summer lifeguard, and star of the Sunnydale High swim team.”

“Xander,” Giles warned with a small smile.

“Well, okay, I was only on the swim team for a week, but I played no small role in saving them all from becoming fish people, so I say that makes me a star.” He wagged his finger in the older man’s direction. “I’m telling you, if I’d wanted to, I coulda won medals. They didn’t know what they were missing, not putting Xander Harris on the relay team.”

Giles nodded his acceptance of Xander’s revision to the plan. As much as he hated to admit it, if he were to try diving in after his children right now, he would likely end up drowning with them. “If you bring them both to shore safely, I’ll pin a medal on you myself.”

“Let me swim out a little ways before you get them to jump.”

And barefooted, Xander trudged across the slick rocks and performed a perfect swan dive off the bank and into the water. Giles motioned to the children to follow along the ledge to the outcropping reaching over the water. He got as close to the bank as he dared, glancing over the side to assure himself that the children would clear the rocks when they jumped.

“Ready,” Xander called.

Giles pointed to Alex and tried to illustrate in gestures what the boy was supposed to do. He was really terrible at charades. “Jump to Uncle Xander,” he repeated over and over to his son, pointing to the young man treading water. Finally, Alex seemed to get it and stepped closer to the edge, staring down at the water and trying to discern his Uncle’s dark form floating in a sea of dark water.

Giles gestured madly, trying to get the boy to move. “Jump far,” he told him, wanting him to get as far out into the water and as far away from the rocks as possible. “Like a parachuter, Alex.”

This Alex seemed to understand, and he backed up a few steps before taking a running leap over the side. Ah, the fearlessness of youth. The child was actually giggling as he freefell. Giles, however, felt his heart stop for those few seconds as he waited for his son to hit the water. He felt nauseous and swallowed back bile as he blinked away the vivid image of Buffy falling from Glory's tower, falling to her death. Sabrina had kindly made that image fresh in his mind, and for a moment he thought he could feel a twinge of remembered pain through his side. He was able to replay Buffy's fall more than twenty times before Alex plunged into the water with a splash. His son would be fine; his son would be fine. He hoped if he repeated it to himself enough times, he could make it come true.

And part of him was afraid of how easily Alex had jumped off the ledge. With the same careless abandon that he had jumped off the bleachers at Dawn's school. This was much worse than then. This was much higher, the landing less visible and more treacherous, and his father wasn't catching him, no one was. And yet, once Alex had understood what he was to do, he had done it without hesitation. Giles wondered how he would ever instill caution in the boy and what might befall him if he didn't.

He waited and watched as Xander swam to where Alex had dropped below the surface. He counted the seconds off in his head. One-one thousand. Two-one thousand. Three-one thousand. He wondered how long the child could hold his breath. Xander dove beneath the surface, and Giles was still counting. Four-one thousand. Five-one thousand. He wondered how strong the undertow was. But then Xander broke the surface with Alex in his arms. The boy was gasping and clinging desperately to his uncle. But he was fine. And Giles smiled, taking a gasping breath of his own, realizing for the first time that he had been holding his breath for as long as Alex.

Xander dove beneath the water before the spot Alex had hit, ripples still marking the point of impact like a bull's-eye. He wasn't sure if the boy had gone deep enough to reach the undertow, but if so, he would hopefully pass the child as he swam in against it. Xander was a good swimmer, always had been, and if he'd cared anything for sports, he might have done well on the swim team. But letterman jackets and school trophies paled in comparison to the nightly struggle against evil that had comprised his high school career, and so he had never bothered. Or rather, that's how he had rationalized it to himself. Sour grapes, some might say. Athletics tended to be one part ability and two parts popularity, and Xander had always come up short in the latter category.

The water was dark, too dark to see, so there was no point in opening his eyes. He reached out with his hands, far and wide, high and low, as he swam, searching for Alex. Surprising how much of his lifeguard training he still remembered: how to search murky or dark water for a drowning victim, how to get them both to the surface, different grips to swim them to shore. He had thought it would be a cool summer job after his freshman year of high school, but it turned out to be a lot more boring than it seemed on Baywatch. So he hadn't gone back and had never expected to use that training again.

But sometimes fighting evil required an eclectic set of skills. For example, when learning how to operate a wrecking ball, he had never needed to ask the foreman, "So, if I were to hit say... a hellgod with this thing, how much damage could I expect to do, and would I need a second hit?"

His hand touched denim, and he clamped on, pulling the child towards him by the strap of his overalls. He felt the boy's arms slide around his neck, trying to almost climb up his body in panic, and Xander adjusted his grip so he had hold of him from behind instead, so Alex couldn't grab him and drown them both as Xander struggled towards the surface.

He reached the surface and took a deep breath of air. He hadn't actually been under for that long and wasn't winded, but Alex was gasping, probably from a combination of having smaller lungs, being more afraid, and holding his breath longer.

"Shhh... It's alright, kiddo. We'll get you to shore and give your sister a go."

Alex was shivering, and Xander realized he was cold as well. The ocean was nippy this time of year. He swam them both to shore, where Giles was reaching for them and motioning frantically for Xander to hurry.

"Get her to jump," he told the watcher as he passed up the child, and then started back out into the water.

But Robin was more timid than her brother. Xander wondered briefly if she would have jumped if Giles had been the one waiting to catch her. But as the situation stood, she wouldn't budge. He could hear Giles pleading with her to jump, promising her that Xander would catch her, which was somewhat of a lie. But he would get her up to the surface in a hurry. The girl looked like she wanted to jump. She kept peering over the side. She was scared, and Xander didn't blame her. He wasn't sure he would want to jump in her place.

"Come on, Robin," he called, holding up his hands to her for a moment before needing them to tread water again. "People pay money to do this at the water park all the time. It's fun."

She made a few tentative tries, backing out at the last second before ever jumping. But her time ran out, and Xander saw the vampire behind her before she did. She screamed when it picked her up from behind.

"You want her?" the demon taunted, holding her out over the edge.

Xander clenched his jaw, muttering to himself, "Come on, just throw her in, you stupid jerk."

But it turned out the demon wasn't that stupid and didn't just throw her in for Xander to get. The vampire turned away from the ledge and disappeared from their vision.

Xander swam for shore with a speed that would have won him first place in any race. Giles offered him a hand up as he clambered up the rocks along the bank. As soon as he had regained his footing, he found young Alex pushed into his arms.

"Take him back to Anya at the car. I'm going up for Robin."

"Don't be crazy, Giles. There's like half a dozen vampires up there and probably more coming. We'll have Alex wait for us down here and go up together."

"No. Take him back to the car. Make sure he's safe. Take the crossbow with you."

"You're not the Slayer, Giles. You can't fight that many vampires hand-to-hand."

The look Xander received was deadly serious and brooked no argument. "No, but I can fight them with magic. Go."

Giles turned and walked off without waiting for any further debate.

Xander sighed and looked down at the child he was holding in his arms. "Your daddy's really stubborn, you know that?"

Alex sniffled. "Daddy 'ake up. No s'leep."

Xander smiled and slipped his wet feet in his shoes with a squish each. "Yeah, your Uncle Spike woke him up."

"Code," Alex complained, shivering as if to illustrate.

"Yeah, me too." The cool water mixed with the night air made it very cold indeed. Xander wrapped his dry shirt around the boy instead of putting it back on and earned a kiss on the cheek for his consideration. "Come on, let's get you back to Anya, and then I'll find your mommy. I wonder what she'll have to say about your daddy's little suicide mission."

The Beast saw the vampires near the top of the cliff and knew they had found the girl. It saw the watcher near the bottom and knew he was going after her. So the boy was not the last of the watchers after all. His father still lived and had broken free of the witch's spell.

And the watcher's son had already been rescued and spirited off.

The Beast roared its frustration and heard its cry echo across the landscape. Above, the crescent moon was nearing its zenith. The ceremony would need to be finished soon. It sensed that more witches had come to the beach and decided that one of them would have to do for the sacrifice. The watcher's child could be dealt with later. For now it had to claim the power of the sword.

It turned back into the forest.

Buffy eyed the other slayer warily. Faith had an unconscious vampire slung over her shoulder, which she promptly deposited on the ground in front of her.

Buffy pushed her own choice of sacrifice forward, the demon's hands firmly bound behind his back with her shoelaces and his mouth gagged with her hair band. She had really liked that hair band, too.

"Wish I'd thought of knocking him out," Buffy said with a frown.

"Where's Spike?" Faith asked.

"Still looking for his own sacrifice, I guess. But we beat him back. I say we just head for the beach." Buffy nudged the unconscious vampire with her foot. "Mine's a little more mobile than yours."

Faith shrugged and staked him. "Problem solved."

Buffy frowned down at the pile of dust with a thoughtful expression. "Notice how all the vampires in this little cult are men?"

Faith slipped her stake back into her front pocket, unconcerned by that bit of knowledge. "Yeah, I hear the glass ceiling on these vampire law firms can be a real bitch."

They heard a sound echo around them, something between a lion's roar and the first rumble of an earthquake.

"What the hell was that?"

Buffy's eyes were searching the woods around her. She was remembering her son's dream, how he had kept mentioning the bad dog and pointing to the Mortog beast. She was remembering April's description of the mutant bear that had attacked her and walked away from a bullet wound to the heart. She was thinking about what Spike had said: that only the Mortog beast could wield the sword.

Buffy swallowed and answered Faith. "I'm thinking Sabrina isn't the only one who wants the sword. Let's hurry."

Giles could feel his legs shaking from the effort of scaling the cliff. Even if it were an easier climb and a less hazardous incline, he was not in the best of shape to attempt it. But he could see the second group of vampires near the top and knew the first had already captured his daughter. That was enough to give him strength to go on.

His hands gripped each patch of tangled weeds and roots as his feet sought out purchase on each protruding rock. He needed to reach the top before the vampires started back down, or they were likely to just push him off. To that end, he struggled for a spell that might help.

Concentration was still difficult, and he wondered how long it would take him to recover from days of forced isolation and deprivation, or if indeed it might mark him forever. He actually had to pause in his climb for a moment to think of the spell, because he found he could not do both at the same time.

The answer skittered just beyond his grasp when he heard the Beast's howl. Not animal or human or vampire. It was definitely a demon of some kind. Whatever it was, it didn't sound happy, which he hoped foreshadowed a victory for the forces of good.

The spell. Focus.

He thought of a small bit of magic, something he had used at Oxford before dropping out, before joining up with Ethan, before Randall's death, before locking his magic away deep inside and avoiding its use at all costs. A small spell to make the long walks between classes and his dorm a little shorter. His roommate had always wondered how Giles always arrived everywhere first.

He spoke the incantation softly, his memory for the whole spell returning after the first few words, as something learned by rote flows to the end once it's begun. The spell folded distance, making each step he now took worth ten.

He reached the top in record time and pulled himself up onto the ledge. He strode into the cave, meeting the vampires on their way out. Four of them. The first three blinked at him in the dim moonlight, their vision still weakened by his previous spell.

"You again," one of them said.

The vampire he didn't recognize was the one holding his daughter. It looked as if the others had been fighting over her, but now this one held her and met his gaze evenly. Giles addressed this vampire, his voice cold and unforgiving.

"Get away from my daughter."

"Or you'll what?" Two vampires stepped out from the shadows behind him, leaving him surrounded on all sides. He remembered too late that there had been six total. "You are outnumbered and unarmed, mortal."

Giles raised his hands. "Incederete mortuū reī sed relinquerete meam cognatam integram!" The other vampires surrounding him burst into flame and fell as dust to the floor. Now just him and the vampire holding his daughter. "I'm telling you: put my daughter down. *Now.*"

The vampire appeared shaken, his previous arrogance evaporated. He clutched the girl tighter to his chest, one hand resting against her cheek. "I'm willing to bet my life that I can break her neck before you turn me to dust. Are you willing to bet hers?"

Giles hesitated. If he did nothing, she was dead. If he did something, she was dead.

A moment later, the decision was taken from him. He felt a cold hand grab his throat in a crushing grip from behind. His own hands came up in a pointless effort to loosen the chokehold enough to breathe. All he could think of was that he had failed her. Again. He had lost his daughter to the darkness, and there was nothing he could do to save her. Robin would watch him die, and then she would become the slayer they molded her into.

His panic was banished in the next instant when he heard Spike's voice beside his ear. "So what you got there, mate?" Spike was in vamp-face and speaking to the other demon. "She doesn't hardly seem worth draining. You know, you catch 'em that small, you got to throw 'em back in. Wait for 'em to get bigger, big enough to eat. Like this one here." He stepped forward a few steps, still holding Giles in a death grip, his lungs screaming for oxygen. "Go ahead. Have a taste. I had my fill of the

witches down on the beach. Couldn't drink another drop. I'll hold him for ya. Won't get a chance to do none of that mojo on you. Promise."

The other vampire smiled and set Robin on the ground. That was his fatal mistake, because in a single motion, Spike tossed the watcher aside with one hand as he raised the crossbow he had hidden behind him with the other. The vampire was dust less than a second after he realized his betrayal.

"Stupid fucking moron."

Giles remained on his knees for several moments, coughing and trying to catch his breath. He felt Robin's arms circle his neck, and he turned to take his child in his arms. She was trembling and frightened, but then again, so was he.

Spike stepped over to offer him a hand up.

"You didn't have to actually choke me," he complained.

"Had to look real."

"Yes, well, very successful. I nearly blacked out."

"Wouldn't be the first time. Well maybe the first time without actual head trauma. Although, I do recall Angelus throttling you 'til you were unconscious, so..."

Giles rubbed his throat and glared. "Don't you have a chip in that skull or something?"

"Your slayer and I went 'round on this before. Like I told her: only kicks in if I mean to harm you. You weren't in any danger."

"Tell that to my bruised windpipe."

Spike rolled his eyes. "Do stop being such a baby. Poor watcher. Your life pass before your eyes? Cuppa tea, cuppa tea, shagged the living daylights out of Buffy, cuppa tea? On second thought, not such a bad life to watch on repeats."

Giles sighed and glanced down at his daughter, still trembling against his chest, her arms wrapped tightly around his neck, her face burrowed into the crook of his neck, her bare legs cold to the touch. Strange, that after they had kidnapped his daughter, he should find it in himself to be irritated with them for not dressing her properly for the cool night. He rubbed her back in soothing circles as he shifted his weight back and forth, trying to calm her terror. "Speaking of Buffy?" he asked the vampire.

"Me and Faith caught up with her." Side by side, they both walked out of the cave and stood at the edge of the ledge. "I told her 'bout the sword, and we split up to look for a sacrifice. Figured demon would do as well as human. That's when I ran into a half-naked Xander, said you might need some help."

Giles nodded, thankful to whatever twist of fate was responsible for that chance encounter. "That makes twice today that I owe you my life. And now Robin's as well."

"Yeah, I'm thinking this deserves at least a month's supply of blood and some of your best Scotch. You could cut Dawn a little slack while we're at it."

They both looked over the cliff's edge at the distance they would have to climb down. Giles shifted Robin's weight in his arms and took a deep breath. "There's one more favor I need to ask of you. As much as this pains me to say, Spike, would you please take my daughter back to the car with Anya and Alex? I think she might be safer with you."

"You seemed to do alright for yourself there, calling down fire and all that."

"Yes, well..." Giles trailed off, his eyes seeking out the entrance to the cave, his mind tracing its possible route out to the ledge Alex had leapt from and on to the neighboring cliff, possibly on from there to the next and the next until connecting to the very cliff beside the beach and the ritual. "I have a strong suspicion that my magic might be needed elsewhere tonight. Will you take her?"

Spike slung the crossbow over his shoulder and reached for the girl, but she was having none of it.

"Spike, you're still in vampire face."

"Oh, sorry." He smoothed his features and tried again. "Come on, Half Bit. Uncle Spike won't let anything hurt you. Promise."

Giles rolled his eyes. "You are *not* her Uncle Spike."

"Well, I'm sure that nice snark will win me her trust."

"I'm sorry." He closed his eyes, having run out of patience for the moment. "Now, Robin, you'll have to go with Spike. He'll make sure you get to Anya safely. Alex and Xander are there as well. Be a good girl and go on. I'll join you as soon as I can."

She whimpered as he tried to hand her over, and he felt her nails dig into his shoulders as she held on. She pleaded with him softly, her voice beside his ear, "No, Giles."

It broke his heart, but it had to be done. "I'm sorry, Robin. Spike, just take her."

She started to cry as she was ripped from his arms. Her little hands stretched for him desperately, and Giles had to turn his face from the sight. "Don't drop her on the climb down," he admonished the vampire softly.

"No worries. Your son's more of a handful at bath time than she could ever be."

Giles paused for a moment, wondering how on earth Spike could know that, before turning his back on both of them and heading into the cave.

Buffy and Faith had argued until the last possible moment. Faith seemed to doubt her fellow slayer's skills at undercover work. And while Buffy may not have had past experience at deceiving her friends and playing double agent, she didn't trust Faith to keep her cool long enough to play the lead in their little game.

So when they reached the group of witches standing in the clearing, they both tried to speak at the same time.

"So, guys, need help?"

"Look, we brought the sacrifice!"

The coven stared at them silently. A short sorority girl with long black ringlets eyed them skeptically. "Who are you?"

Buffy stepped forward in front of Faith, taking over their charade. "Friends of... you know, one of...umm..." What had Spike called her again? Oh, yeah. "One of Sabrina's friends. We came to help." She pushed the bound vampire in their direction. "We brought another sacrifice. Whadaya say we get the show on the road?"

Another sorority girl stepped forward. She seemed to be evaluating Buffy and Faith's taste in clothes. Buffy was reminded somewhat of Sunday's superior arrogance, and she felt a little like a freshman again.

"How come we've never seen either of you before?" the girl asked.

Buffy rolled her eyes and dismissed the question. "Like we don't have better things to do than hang out with all of you. So we going to do this or not?"

She felt Faith poke her in the side and with an irritated sigh turned to look at her. Faith was pointing to the forest behind them. Vampires. At least a dozen of them. One of them smiled. "Slayer," he said. *So much for the undercover approach.*

The sorority girls gasped. "*You're* the Slayer?"

Buffy shrugged. "What? No slayers allowed in your little club? Gotta tell you, the University'll be having a talk with you about Equal Opportunity."

Faith had already drawn her crossbow and was starting to take down the first line of vampires as they charged them. Buffy drew out her stake and joined the battle. The witches, thankfully, did nothing more than make an appreciative audience. She wasn't sure how she would have handled vampires *and* magic if they had joined in. Although, she began to suspect that they were offering the vampires a little magical protection. Each foe seemed a little stronger, a little faster, a little harder to stake than normal. And Faith's bolts were just falling to the ground as fast as she let them fly. Eventually she gave up on her bow and tossed it to the side, joining her fellow slayer in hand-to-hand.

Sabrina's coven of witches continued to watch and to use their magic to defend, but not strike down. And Buffy and Faith placed their backs to each other and fought in unison as they hadn't since the accidental slaying of the Deputy Mayor.

Spike was thinking to himself that Buffy's kid was pretty much a pain in the ass. A brat. He would like to think that she got that from Giles, but having heard Dawn's stories from her childhood, he was pretty sure that trait was inherited from the girl's mother. According to Dawn, Buffy had always insisted on getting her own way. And when they were younger and still living with both their parents, back when Buffy had still fit the stereotype of vapid cheerleader, she'd had a tendency to whine when she wanted to weasel something out of their parents.

Robin was still fighting him. She'd struggled against him the whole climb down and almost gotten both their necks broke. He'd nearly lost her in the clearing at the edge of the forest, when he'd needed one hand to feel for the door Giles had magicked in the barrier. The little bint had actually bitten him, and he'd almost dropped her. "You don't want to get in a biting contest with me," he'd warned her.

Now he could see Giles' car just ahead and Anya in the driver's seat, dutifully ready to take off at a moment's notice. And the girl continued to kick and squirm in his arms. Alex, on the other hand, came running at the first sight of the vampire.

"Uncie 'Pike!"

He hefted the boy up with his free hand, carrying both children like footballs back to the car. Alex was cold and wet and making a damp spot where he pressed against Spike's side. But the boy was giggling, and Spike bounced him a little as he walked, eliciting more fits of giggles.

"I go sp'ash. Jump water. Big s'pash." Alex relayed the tale of how he got wet, not caring that he had already told the vampire when they met in the clearing earlier.

Xander was standing next to the car, his arms crossed over his bare chest, shivering. Alex was still wearing his shirt, which was now just as damp as the rest of the little boy. "Where's Giles?" the half-naked young man asked.

"Playing hero. Or getting himself killed. One or the other." Spike kicked the door, demanding that Anya open it, and she scowled at him as she did. He tossed the girl in the backseat. Luckily when Robin made a break for it, she found the door on the other side locked and childproofed. Spike wasn't sure where the girl would run off to, given the chance, probably to look for Giles, but wherever she wanted to go, it would be far less safe than staying in the car with Anya.

He tossed Alex in the backseat with his sister, and the boy immediately began tormenting her by rubbing his wet hair on her shirt.

"Stop it!" she whined, swatting him away.

"Good luck with the pair of them," Spike muttered to Anya, before shutting her in with the twins. He turned to Xander and looked the young man up and down. "A little more of you than I ever wanted to see, Harris."

Xander was rubbing his arms to warm himself up. "I didn't exactly bring a change of clothes. Didn't expect *swimming* to be on the agenda."

Spike sighed and rolled his eyes. Christ, he could remember when he used to be *evil*. When had he gone all soft? He stripped off his black leather duster and handed it off to the young man. Xander didn't seem to know what to say, and Spike had an uneasy feeling that they were headed towards some sort of tender moment. He nipped that in the bud when he warned the young man dourly, "Mind you: ruin it, and I'll be mighty put out. Got that coat off the last slayer I killed."

Xander's arms were already in the sleeves, but he made a face before buttoning it up. "You have washed it since then, right?"

"What, and lose the lovely slayer smell?"

Xander shuddered, but was obviously too cold to refuse the coat on that basis. The pair of them headed back to the beach to offer whatever backup they could.

Sabrina and Morgaine reached the site of the ritual at the same time. They saw the battle raging between slayers and vampires, with their own coven tipping the scales in the vampires' favor.

"There's the slayer you said was Joseph's problem," Morgaine pointed out bitterly. "And look, she brought a friend."

"Give me the lecture later," Sabrina retorted, turning her eyes up to the night sky above. "We are running out of time." She pointed with Camela's sword towards the symbol still drawn in the sand. "Start the ritual. I'll make sure they don't interfere."

Morgaine didn't argue, but Sabrina could feel her friend's anger. Perhaps she was right. Perhaps she had taken too many chances, been too cavalier with their successes and too dismissive of their setbacks. It had become a game. But no longer. The finish line was in sight, and Sabrina would no longer concern herself with the other runners in their race, would no longer worry about who she could destroy and who she could turn dark, would no longer worry about anything except gaining the power of the sword.

She closed her eyes and found Willow through their joining spell. The twins were gone, and so there was nothing here for Willow to see that might shake her confidence in Sabrina and the coven. Only the two slayers, but that was easily explained, and Willow's faith in her old friends was already broken. This would put it to the test.

Willow!

Sabrina looked through the other's eyes, surveyed the battlefield from above, and listened to the witch's heart, knowing just what she wanted to hear, just what she needed to hear.

The Council has found us, Willow. They've sent the slayers to hurt us. If we can just finish the spell, we'll be safe.

I can't. Willow answered. *I can't see at this distance. My magic might hurt someone.*

Then let me be your eyes. Sabrina used the joining spell to channel some of her own power to Willow, to bolster her vision so she could see the battlefield not just with her eyes but with her magic as well. *Protect our circle. We just need enough time to finish the ritual.*

And then Sabrina strode across the sand in long strides to stand beside the others. Morgaine had already divided them out, choosing eight to form the circle around the symbol and sending the others to stand guard and defend them against any would-be attackers. The bound vampire was positioned in the center of the symbol to serve as the sacrifice. But that would never do. What did Sabrina want with a vampire's power? She called another of their coven to stand as ninth in the circle. When the time

came, Sabrina would push her into the symbol, and she would be the sacrifice. But the poor thing was innocent and trusting and never wondered why, with Sabrina, they now had ten and not nine.

Faith hadn't felt so alive in years. The adrenaline was pumping, the whole world had fallen away, and she felt righteous again. Things were simple again. She was fighting bad guys, and she was one of the good guys again. With Buffy at her back, it was like having a second pair of hands, like they could read each other's minds. Buffy would lose the upper hand with the one she was fighting and toss him in Faith's direction. Faith would return the favor. Both vampires would turn to dust at the same moment. It was like a choreographed dance, how they each made room for the other, how they filled in the gaps and weaknesses of the other, how they made a natural team.

Faith didn't seem to care much that the vampires seemed faster, stronger. It only made it more of a challenge. She still had that same familiar feeling: the one that told her that they were going to lose and she was going to win.

That feeling faded somewhat when she felt herself go flying across the beach and land flat on her back. She shook her head to clear it. She noticed that Buffy was in a similar position on the other side of the beach, the group of vampires now between them. They had been separated.

Buffy looked up at the cliff behind her and shouted to Faith, "It's Willow!"

Faith looked up and saw it too: the figure standing on a ledge high above them. Buffy was headed in that direction, but Faith knew she couldn't let her go. She raced across the distance, dodging vampires and ducking blows until she had reached Buffy's side. "No, B, I'll go."

Buffy shook her head. "I have to do this. She's *my* friend."

"That's exactly why you shouldn't have to do this." Faith didn't know how to make anything up to anyone, how to atone for any of the wrongs she'd done. Angel had told her that she would get through it one day at a time, a fine philosophy for dealing with her own pain and guilt, but it couldn't hope to even the score. In the end, she had done the right thing by confessing and going to jail. That was the more abstract right, but it did nothing to mend the more concrete wrongs she'd done each person. Not Wesley. Not Buffy. Not anyone. This was something she could do for Buffy. She could spare her fellow slayer the pain of fighting her friend. Because Faith knew as much as it had pained Buffy to fight *her*, it would kill her to have to fight Willow.

Buffy finally nodded, her eyes haunted with the knowledge of what would have to be done, their blue depths grateful to Faith for bearing that burden for her.

Faith headed for the path up to the cliff, leaving Buffy behind to take on the less confusing evil of the vampires surrounding her.

She reached the ledge, and Willow was waiting for her. Her eyes were black, not the slightest sliver of white in them. Faith had heard that the more powerful magic did that to people, but she had never seen it up close and personal. It dawned on her then that she had no idea how she was going to fight Willow. All those years ago in the Mayor's office, Willow had barely had the power to float a pencil, let alone square off against a slayer. Faith had threatened her with the knife the Mayor had given her, and that had been enough. Now, she doubted if any weapon would be enough against a bad-ass witch hell bent on tearing her apart.

"Faith," Willow said sharply. "I should have known the Council would send you."

Faith shifted slightly on her feet, her hands twitching in anticipation. She felt like they were two gunfighters from some cheesy western, each waiting for the other to make the first move. She licked

her lips and tried talking first. "So how 'bout that 'Willow, we're still your friends, we can help you, it's not too late' speech?"

Willow shook her head, her face serious. "Oh, it's way too late for that."

"That's what I was afraid of." She tried a different approach. "How 'bout we take a time-out to figure out which side you're really on here, Red. I mean, they must have really done a number on you if you're willing to fight Buffy and... and Giles of all people. I mean, hello, librarian. Not exactly Big Bad material."

"You wouldn't understand."

Faith rolled her eyes. "No, of course I wouldn't understand being seduced over to the dark side, 'cause I've never been standing in your shoes before."

"No, you haven't," Willow spat back. "I didn't betray my friends. *They* betrayed *me*! Tara is dead and... and you wouldn't understand that either, because you've never loved *anything*."

"Okay, so I don't understand. Explain it to me. Make me understand why you would turn your back on your best friends, why you would mess up Giles with that spell, why you would hook up with this witch bitch who would make the Mayor look like Mister Rogers."

Willow knocked Faith back three feet with a simple gesture. The slayer glanced behind her and realized one more foot would have sent her over the edge. She looked back at the witch. Willow's face was pinched with anger.

"She's not like that. She's nothing like the Mayor. Sabrina's *good*. She's only trying to protect us. It's the Council that's messed up, Faith. And the fact that they would take *you* back has got to be proof positive of that."

Faith pulled herself to her feet. Keep her talking. This was good. She didn't actually have to fight her; she just had to keep her talking. "Maybe that's how things are in your world, Red, but here in the real world, the facts are just a little bit different. The Council is toast. I'm talking bombed out, no survivors, hole in the ground to mark the spot, toast. Giles *is* the Council now, so if you've got issues with him, you two should sit down and have a little heart-to-heart. And your friend? Yeah, she's so good, she tried to kill me. Killed Travers. Kidnapped Alex, tried to use him for this insane ritual. And just a little heads up here—" Faith pointed to where the witches were circled together on the beach. "*That*? Not a good thing. Someone's about to get killed down there."

Willow laughed. "And why should I believe anything you say? Every word out of your mouth has been a lie from day one." Her eyes narrowed. "The Council set you free, Faith? They make a deal with you? You'll be their little assassin, and they'll set you up real good like the Mayor did?"

Faith felt her temper flare. Willow was making the same mistakes that she had and was still playing the role of little Miss Perfect. Talking, apparently, was going to get them nowhere, not with Red's holier-than-thou attitude. And Faith was starting to feel the need to give someone a good beating. "So, we gonna throw down, or what?"

"I'd like to see you try and touch me."

And then Faith was having second thoughts about a face off and was wishing she could go back to the talking part. Because Willow was chanting something in some language she didn't know, and the air was beginning to swirl around her, and Faith was realizing that she was out of her league.

With a final word, power crackled from Willow's fingertips, and she unleashed her spell. Faith thought briefly of Giles lying unconscious on the floor, of his soul-rending cry that had sent Buffy charging down the stairs, of how even now he was marked by it, how he had sat curled in the grass with the book across his lap, rocking and murmuring to himself like the guy from Rainman.

Faith hoped that Willow would just kill her. Not just to avoid Giles' fate, but also to put an end to all her regrets, an end to every hour of every day when she was haunted by the memories of what she

had done: Wesley's bloodied face staring at her in contempt, *You are a piece of shit*, looking at herself through Buffy's eyes and pummeling her own face as she repeated it like a mantra: *You're nothing; you're nothing*, and always, always, the face of Deputy Mayor Allen Finch as the light went out in his eyes.

Let Willow kill her. What could Faith do to stop it? This could be her redemption. She would die in Buffy's place, and this would make everything right again.

Willow's power coalesced into a raging fireball that came hurling straight towards the slayer. Faith closed her eyes. A moment later, and she opened them again. Willow looked as baffled as she was. The fireball had dissipated before ever reaching its target.

But all was soon explained by the familiar voice inside her head, and Faith smiled. She closed the distance between them and punched Willow in the jaw, knocking her back on her butt. Hands on hips, Faith looked down her nose at the witch. The scales had just tipped back in her favor.

"Check it out, Red. I got watcher back-up."

Willow turned her face to look out across the beach. Giles was standing on the opposite cliff.

Willow's head was pounding. It felt like Faith had broken her jaw. And with her magic-enhanced vision, she could see Giles standing on the opposite cliff where Melody and Delilah had stood before Melody's fatal fall.

Giles had escaped her spell, and now he had come with the other watchers and the slayers, and Willow didn't intend to make the same mistake twice. She had held back her power before, trapped him and nothing more, but this time she would hold back nothing. Melody was dead. Four others of their group were dead. Tara was dead. No more innocent blood would be spilled for the foolish ideals of the Council, not if Willow could help it.

She raised herself to her feet. "God of wind and winter storm, I call on thee my will perform: walls of cold unyielding ice surround and squeeze him like a vise."

She felt the cool wind rise at her command, sensed the force of her spell begin to solidify into his ice prison, but then his own magic lashed out and met hers. Her spell crumbled beneath his will. And Faith was advancing again, was pressing her advantage.

Willow struck out at Faith: "Kali, Hera, Kronos, Tonic... Air like nectar thick as Onyx... Cassiel by your second star... Hold mine victim, as in tar!" The air became impossibly thick, and Faith pushed against it, struggling to come closer to Willow, but barred by this barrier.

Willow felt herself flung backwards. She hit the rocks behind her hard and slid down to the ground. Raising her head, her eyes found Giles. He wasn't giving an inch; he was already casting the next spell, meaning to bind Willow this time, and God, was his magic strong. Willow had the disadvantage in this situation: her attention was divided between Giles and Faith. She raised her hand and blocked his spell, their power clashing in the air above the beach, exploding like fireworks in the space between the cliffs.

But it weakened her hold on Faith, and the slayer came closer. Willow couldn't hold them both off, but she could divide his attention as he had divided hers. She wondered if he could protect both Faith and himself.

She faced the slayer and smiled in anticipation. She had always privately thought that someone should turn her into a rat. "Goddess Hecate, work thy will: before thee let the unclean thing crawl!"

Light swirled around the slayer, but it crackled as it failed to solidify. Giles was shielding her. And so Willow lashed out at her old friend and mentor. Her magic increased steadily, and his own

weakened as he fought to shield both Faith and himself. He dropped to one knee. The air between them rippled and flashed with light and energy. She knew tricks that he couldn't even imagine. Sabrina had taught her well, hadn't hidden books out of sight or scolded her for curious explorations. Under Sabrina's tutelage, Willow had awakened power within herself that Giles and the Council would have rather lain dormant.

And so she wanted him to see what she had become, what he had tried to deny her. She wanted him to taste her magic and know that she was no longer a naïve schoolgirl. And so she threw every bit of power she had at Giles. If he wanted to fight her with magic, then he would learn the hard way that she couldn't be bested.

Giles struggled to hold back Willow's onslaught, feeling himself torn in two directions as he also tried to maintain the shield around Faith.

He had followed the caves through the cliffs, past the ledge Alex had jumped from and onto another set of caves and another. He had been right to hope that they might eventually open out onto the beach and the ritual. He had searched, not just with his eyes, but with his power as well, the magic becoming easier the more he used it. He had searched for Buffy first. She was on the beach, fighting for her life against a horde of vampires. He had wanted to help her, but he had noticed Faith then, standing off against Willow on the opposite cliff. In times past, there wouldn't have even been a choice. But now Faith's fate was linked with his daughter's, and to choose between Buffy and Faith was also to choose between Buffy and Robin.

In the end, Buffy was holding her own, and Faith was in dire straits. So he had used his power to stop the fireball Willow had hurled at the other slayer.

Now, he was thinking very little of how he could help Buffy or Faith, and was more worried about keeping Willow at bay, stopping her from sending him back into the darkness or worse.

He was tiring. He was a match for her, but not with his concentration divided. The air between them was alive with power, a raging firestorm above the beach below. He blocked her every spell, but that left him with nothing to mount his own attack. He protected himself, and he protected Faith, and even those two ends were becoming more difficult. Willow was powerful. And she was angry. And for some reason, she blamed him for Tara and for who knew what else. She lashed out at him with a righteous rage, and he didn't know if he had it in him to give as good as he got. He didn't know if he had it in him to actually hurt Willow.

He couldn't keep this up for much longer.

Faith. He called to her, as he had after blocking the fireball. *Be ready. I'll give you an opening, and then you must take out Willow.*

He bolstered the shield around Faith and felt his own weaken accordingly. He whimpered slightly as wind like sharp knives assailed him. He took a deep breath and braced himself as he knocked down the barrier between Willow and Faith.

Pain.

He flew back against the rocks behind him, as there was nothing now between him and Willow's assault. Half a dozen of her spells that he had kept at bay now roared to life around him. Fire and ice, serpents and steel, quicksand beneath him and a rain of glass across his skin. He cried out and felt blood spill out his nose and into his mouth. He tasted blood and fear, and through it all, he held the shield around Faith.

Faith pushed against the barrier. She was trapped, like trying to move through drying cement. She had felt a brief moment of panic when she had thought Willow might turn her into a rat. She remembered that after Buffy and Willow had narrowly avoided being burned at the stake back in high school, that they had shown her Amy in her little cage with her little wheel. Faith might have thought prison was bad, but she would gladly take those bars rather than that tiny cell.

But she could almost see the shield that kept Willow's spell at bay, and so she thankfully wasn't turned into a rat. Giles, of all people, was protecting her.

She could do nothing but stand witness to the mage battle being waged before her eyes. She could make no move. She could offer no magic of her own. She could only stand idly by and hope Giles' shield would hold. She watched their power clash in the air at the mid-point between their cliffs. She could barely see Giles at this distance, and she wondered briefly if his eyes were as black as Willow's, if his hands crackled with power that arced between his fingertips as Willow's did.

And then she heard his voice inside her head, just as she had after the fireball had miraculously dissipated. Just like then, it momentarily scared the crap out of her, having someone else's voice suddenly inside her head. But she recovered quickly and focused on his words.

Faith. Be ready. I'll give you an opening, and then you must take out Willow.

Like a runner at the starting block, she prepared herself for that opening. She saw a flare of light from the shield surrounding her, and then the thick air around her thinned enough for her to move. She sprinted the short distance between her and Willow, and without hesitation, landed a punch that should have knocked the witch out cold.

But Willow had seen her coming and had time enough for some small measure of magical defense. The blow only knocked her off her feet. Those black eyes were focusing once again on Faith, and the slayer rushed forward in an attempt to head off the witch's next spell.

I can protect you, Faith. Giles' voice in her mind again. He sounded winded. He sounded tired. He sounded like he was in pain. *Knock her out, but don't kill her. You understand me, Faith? Don't kill her.*

Faith wasn't making any promises.

Her hands around Willow's throat, she would introduce Red to unconsciousness if she could, but if it came down to saving her own skin or saving Willow, Faith would weep no tears over this death. Not an innocent life beneath her hands, but not a demon either. Willow had made her choices, and that put her somewhere in the middle.

One of Willow's hands tried to loosen Faith's grip on her throat. The other hand was pressed against Faith's belly. Where it touched her, she grew steadily warmer. She hoped Giles was doing his stuff, and if he was, she wondered how much worse it would have been without him.

Faith's hands began to slide from Willow's throat. The warmth changed to pressure, and Faith found herself again thrown back nearly to the edge.

Willow charged, determined to be the one on top this time, determined to have her own fingers around Faith's neck. Faith waited for the right moment, and then she turned Willow's momentum against her. She flipped the witch over and past her, except that there was no ground on the other side for Willow to land on. Nothing to keep her from falling except Faith's hand, still gripping Willow's arm tightly.

How could a Slayer lack the strength to hold onto one petite young woman? How could the hand that could keep its grip on a sword while being hammered by a 300 pound, battleaxe wielding Slith demon lose its grip on another person's hand? Faith knew they would ask her those questions later.

She knew they would believe that she had done it intentionally. It didn't matter what they thought. All the Slayer strength in the world couldn't keep hold of Willow's arm as it slid through Faith's fingers.

Willow fell, with only the beach to catch her.

Buffy didn't see her friend fall. She didn't see much of anything except the mouthful of fangs that leaned over her. Two other vamps pinned her down as their friend tried to sample a bit of slayer's blood. But then he was dust, and soon after so were his two friends. Buffy coughed and tried to see through the cloud of vampire remains.

"Spike?" The air settled, and the figure became clearer. "Xander?" Her friend offered her a hand up. "Why are you wearing Spike's coat?"

"Been asking myself the same question," the vampire answered from behind her. "Duck!"

She and Xander both dropped to their knees as one. Spike staked the vampire who had thought to sneak up from behind.

They rose again, and Buffy sized up her two allies: Spike and Xander each had a crossbow strapped to their backs and a stake in their hands. Xander was also clutching a large cross in his other hand.

"Think you can handle the LA Law rejects?" she asked them.

"Sure," Spike assured her gamely. "You've already thinned the herd a bit for us."

"Keep them occupied. I have to get to the ritual."

And Buffy was off. She pushed her way through the line of vampire lawyers, Spike and Xander lending a hand to give her room. And then she was face-to-face with the small group of witches assigned the job of guarding the circle.

"Hey, look! It's Harry Potter on a broomstick!"

None of them turned to look.

"Alright, looks like we do this the hard way." There were only four total, and Buffy doubted any of them were really prepared to hurt someone. So far they had only used their magic for defense. She expected that's what they would do now. Or at least she hoped that's what they would do.

Her slayer speed allowed her to catch the first one off guard. A solid punch to the jaw, and she was out cold. The second one didn't go down so easily. The other two were shielding her. They probably expected Buffy to keep trying until she'd knocked her out. But Buffy never did the expected. She spun and delivered a round house kick to one of the other pair, abruptly shifting targets. Her partner stood in shock, unable to recover fast enough to shield the punch Buffy delivered to her immediately afterwards.

Three out cold, and Buffy faced the one left standing. She looked impossibly young. Closer to Dawn's age than college-age, she must be one of the runaways instead. The girl's eyes went wide, and all the color drained from her face. She didn't wait for Buffy to knock her out; she turned tail and ran.

Buffy strolled over casually to join the circle standing around the sand drawn symbol. They were chanting. Their hands were moving in a synchronized pattern. It reminded Buffy somewhat of a very odd cheerleading routine.

Sabrina was holding the sword aloft, and her eyes narrowed when she caught sight of the slayer. Buffy smiled sweetly and drew her own sword, using it to gesture between them as she mouthed the words: *You're mine.*

Sabrina's eyes darted up to check the moon's progress across the sky.

“Go ahead and finish,” Buffy told her. “I can wait.” *Can’t wait to see your power go boom, though. Want a front row seat for that.* She thought of Giles lying pale and still on their bed, thought of Alex crying himself out in her arms after a terrible nightmare, and her anticipation for Sabrina’s destruction only increased.

Sabrina seemed to accept Buffy’s reprieve, and her eyes closed. The chanting continued, reaching a crescendo, and Buffy waited. Bored, she studied her opponent head-to-toe, disappointed that she couldn’t deliver Sabrina’s destruction with her own hand. At the moment, Buffy felt no moral compunctions against taking a human life. As she would have taken Faith’s life to save Angel, she was ready to take Sabrina’s life to protect her family.

That was when she noticed it. Her gaze skipped past it at first, but quickly backtracked to focus on that spot. A slayer’s intuition and the past days’ research... Alex’s dream and April’s attack... Giles would be proud of her. Buffy had just pieced the puzzle together, as even her watcher hadn’t. In that single instant, with that tiny, seemingly insignificant detail, everything clicked into place, and Buffy knew.

She knew that Giles was wrong.

She leapt through the circle and tackled Sabrina on the other side. Both their swords went flying across the sand.

“Don’t stop!” Sabrina shouted to the others. “Finish the ritual!”

The nine witches continued without pause as Sabrina struggled to gain the upper hand on Buffy. She was rapidly succeeding. There wasn’t a single move Buffy could make that Sabrina couldn’t anticipate. Buffy found each blow blocked before she could even think of it. Buffy was not so lucky. Sabrina seemed to know just where to hit, just how to use the slayer’s momentum against her, exactly how to slip beneath her defenses, and just where each weakness lay.

Buffy heard Giles’ voice inside her head: *Let her take the sword, Buffy. It will destroy her.*

But Buffy was too absorbed in combat to carry on conversations in her head. The two of them rolled across the sand, and Sabrina landed on top. She smiled down on the slayer and whispered, “They’ll forget you, you know. After you’ve died. They’re too young.”

Buffy took a swing, which Sabrina easily avoided. The chanting lent a steady drumbeat to their fight, an urgent reminder that time was running out.

Silence. All the more quiet in contrast to the urgent chanting of moments before. Morgaine tilted her face up until she could feel the moonlight across it. She could feel the light of the crescent moon at its zenith shiver through her whole body. She knew the others felt it too. They caught their breath and waited, feeling it across their skin and in the wind as it whipped across the breakers and over the shore. The first smatterings of rain tickled her cheeks, and she smiled as she heard the faint rumbling of thunder.

The light raindrops pricked random holes in the sand, and the circle of nine waited, watching the vampire in the middle of their crescent moon and lightning bolt, a sacrifice bound by rope and spell to their altar. Camela’s sword lay abandoned only a few feet away, and soon it would contain the power for which it was forged.

“Well, well, well,” a voice called out from behind her. “Sabrina leave you in charge, did she?”

Morgaine stiffened and spun to face the intruder.

Joseph Zalk held a crossbow leveled at her, and she had a sinking feeling that Sabrina would soon learn just what sparing his life would cost her.

Giles wiped the blood from his nose with the back of his hand. He stumbled closer to the ledge's sharp drop-off. He had untangled himself and defused all of Willow's spells. He was now left with shallow cuts across his face and hands, a monster migraine, and a slight ache and limp in his right leg as reminders of their battle. *Great, just great. You'll have two lame legs when this is all over.*

Faith was headed down after Willow, but he couldn't think about that right now. He couldn't dwell on the possibility that Faith might find her dead at the bottom. For right now, he had to focus on the battles yet to be decided.

Buffy was losing to Sabrina, just as he had feared she would. He had tried to remind her.

Let her take the sword, Buffy. It will destroy her.

But why should he have expected her to listen to him? His slayer was stubbornly independent that way. And now that stubborn streak was likely to get her killed.

Because how could she hope to fight a foe that could practically read her mind?

Morgaine flicked one of her fingers ever so slightly and conjured a small distraction. It was all she needed to make a play for the crossbow in his hands. But never having fought a vampire before, she found him stronger than she had imagined. He held tight to his grip on the weapon, and they wrestled for it, sending the loaded bolt flying into one of the unsuspecting coven. The girl went down to her knees, the bolt driving itself into her side, her cries of pain echoed by the rising thunder.

Morgaine and Joseph twisted and switched positions again and again, neither willing to relinquish their hold on the crossbow. She drew breath to utter a spell, and that was when he seemed to realize he couldn't win.

He let her have the crossbow. She was tugging against him so hard that when he abruptly let go, she found herself staggering backwards, knocking into the bound sacrificial vampire and bumping him out of the symbol. She landed on her butt, the bow in her lap. Her eyes traveled over the sand surrounding her: the half-circle of crescent moon, the jagged line of lightning bolt, the small divots the soft rain had poked in the sand.

She jumped to her feet as quickly as she could, but she wasn't fast enough. She heard the crack of lightning, and her eyes sought out Sabrina's one last time.

For hundreds of years, they had stood at each other's side. Sabrina had freed her from mortality, had shown her worlds she had never imagined. Morgaine smiled for her friend, hoping she would appreciate the irony.

For they had met all those centuries ago on just such a rain dappled, moonlit night. She wasn't called Morgaine then. She couldn't remember what they had called her. But she could still remember the sound of drums and the smell of burnt offerings left on the rocks before her. She had come to Sabrina as the sacrifice, and now she would leave her in the same way.

Sabrina's attention wavered, her head snapping up the moment Morgaine toppled into the symbol. It gave Buffy the chance to free herself from the witch's hold. Buffy should have pressed her advantage, but she couldn't resist following Sabrina's line of sight to the ritual circle and the woman

standing in the center. She was smiling back at Sabrina. It was only a half-second at the most, the crash of thunder booming near, before a loud crack rent the air, its sound sharp like trees snapping in half.

An arc of lightning reached down from the heavens and struck the woman. Blue flame consumed her, and Buffy was reminded of Gwendolyn Post after the Glove of Myhnegon was sliced from her arm. Morgaine screamed, and it seemed like her mouth opened wider and wider, becoming a chasm she disappeared into until the only thing remaining of the black witch was the spotty aftervision her brilliant departure burned into each observer's eyes.

Buffy blinked several times before that too disappeared. No one was moving. Even Sabrina seemed riveted to the spot lightning had struck.

So Buffy was the first perhaps to notice that the ritual symbol drawn in sand was now alive with blue flame. And the sword too glowed blue, like it had just been pulled from some unnatural forge.

She was the first to notice, Sabrina was the second, and Joseph was the third. They all started to move at the same instant, Sabrina and Joseph each making a desperate bid to reach the sword first and Buffy caring only to stop Sabrina.

She managed to tackle the witch to the ground, buying Joseph the remaining seconds he needed to reach the blazing sword. Sabrina howled in defeat as she saw him lift Camela's blade from the sand.

"My own Council," he told her smugly. "Each generation of slayers will be mine, from now until the end of time."

The blue halo of the blade spiraled down the hilt and then around his arms. The blue energy continued to circle him, wrapping its power around his shoulders, his torso, and down his legs. Joseph smiled and brandished the sword high in victory. The blue light completely enveloped him and began to infuse him with its energy. The smile abruptly left his face, and he started to tremble.

"What's happening?" he asked Sabrina in panic.

His arms were shaking, his teeth chattering, his whole body beginning to convulse as the power of Camela's sword overtook him, as he began to incinerate from the inside out.

Buffy had seen it happen before. Not the most pleasant of ways for a vampire to die. She had done it to Kralik on her eighteenth birthday, given him a glass of holy water to wash down his pills. In the same way, smoke began to rise from Joseph's mouth, from his body. He screamed once before he exploded in a cloud of dust.

The sword tumbled through empty air, embedding itself in the sand, the blue glow fading, the blade standing upright, its hilt offered out like Excalibur in the stone for whoever wished to pull it from the sand.

Sabrina pivoted to face the slayer. Buffy was surprised that the witch's glare didn't just incinerate her on the spot.

"You *will* pay for that," Sabrina promised her.

Giles watched from his perch, vindicated by Joseph's destruction. He was right. Only the Mortog beast could claim the power of the sword. However, it didn't change the fact that it should have been Sabrina and not Joseph who was consumed by Camela's power. Now they were still left with the dilemma of how to stop the formidable witch.

Giles attempted a small spell, just something to knock her off her feet, something to give Buffy the slightest opportunity. His own magic only rebounded back to him, and he found himself knocked back to the ground.

Patience, dear Watcher, Sabrina's mocking words rang through his head. Your turn will come.

She and Buffy circled each other on the beach below, exchanging blows. The witch dodged each attack and returned them with relish. His slayer was able to avoid some, but most connected solidly, driving her back again and again. Buffy could not stand her ground. Retreat. Retreat. Giles could do nothing except stand and watch his slayer get thrashed.

Clear your mind, Buffy. It was the only advice he could offer her: the memory of their training sessions and the meditations he had taught her. *Let the world fall away. Fight with instinct, not thought.*

He doubted if it would be enough. One thing he had learned during Sabrina's visits to his mental prison was that she could see straight through to the thoughts you had buried beyond even your own awareness.

Buffy's voice echoed back to him, a desperate plea for his help: *Giles, how do I kill her?*

I don't know. It cut him to the quick to think it. *If she had taken the sword, it would have destroyed her. But now-*

No. Buffy's voice was firm in his mind, even as she landed on her back, rolling quickly to avoid Sabrina's kick. *Don't you get it? She is the Mortog beast.*

What?

I saw it. Even in Buffy's projected thoughts to him, she was panting with the effort of her fight. *The Beast attacked April, but she shot it in the heart before she passed out. Sabrina has the scar on her chest. And she's strong, Giles, stronger than any human has a right to be.*

Of course! He didn't know why he hadn't thought of it before. *Camela gave the Beast her powers before she died.*

I'm guessing shapeshifting was on the list.

He shuddered to think what would have happened had Buffy not reached the conclusions that he had overlooked. The Beast would have claimed the power of the sword, and she would have been even more unstoppable than she was now.

No point in dwelling on what-might-have-beens. The important thing was to use this new information to their advantage. Knowledge was power, and knowing one's enemy was half the battle. The Mortog beast, undoubtedly wearing Camela's face as well as wielding her power, was a difficult demon to kill. Giles could think of nothing but a clean decapitation that would do the job. But add in the Sorceress's power, and Buffy stood no chance of landing that final blow.

And what could Giles do? Sabrina would see him in every spell he tried, making a mage battle rather pointless. Not to mention that he could hardly hope to out-magic her. Willow, perhaps, although at a price too dear to contemplate. Now that he was willing to touch the power he had pushed down deep after Randall's death, Giles would not be boasting if he were to claim an equal level with the young witch. And the magic seemed to get easier the more he used it, as his doubts and fears of his darker side began to fade and the memory of his skills began to return to him as if never forgotten. He could hold his own against Willow, no matter how deeply he might regret it later, but the sorceress Camela had been legendary, and a demon with her gifts would be out of his league.

He paused for a moment, returning to an earlier thought. *She would see him in every spell he tried.* That was the basic dilemma they faced, but suddenly Giles realized that could be the solution as well. She would see *him* in every spell he tried.

He focused on his slayer, sending his thoughts out to her, surrounding her with everything he was. He murmured it beneath his breath, and it was more than the incantation to a spell, it was the truth of his existence:

"I am yours."

She struck hard, and Sabrina lay unmoving on the ground, the shock clearly written on her face.

Buffy could strike because Giles cloaked her with his magic. He could not fight with magic, because the Sorceress would be prepared for every spell. His slayer could not fight with fists or sword, because her opponent could anticipate each attack. But together they were a formidable weapon. Giles understood now what it truly meant to be a Watcher, how it had been in the beginning, why the bloodlines of the Council were chosen for their power. Centuries and generations had turned the watchers into scholars, had removed them far from the war they waged and placed them in an ivory tower of academia, until only the blood in their veins remembered and only the words remained, a hollow metaphorical idea that old men in dark libraries used to soothe their consciences when they sent young girls to their deaths: The Slayer is the instrument; the Council is the hand. The slayers change, the Council remains. It's been that way from the beginning. Travers had told him that, and Giles, filled with righteous indignation, had said that it was a very comforting bloodless way of looking at it, that Buffy was in fact no one's bloody instrument. But Travers was not the first to use that turn of phrase. Giles had seen it in other watchers' diaries, had heard it from other watchers' lips: The Slayer is the instrument; the Council is the hand.

Here on this battlefield, his slayer *was* the instrument by which he fought Sabrina. And he *was* the hand. Not the hand that gave her the sword or pointed her to her enemy or took each practice blow in his padded palm or turned the pages of a book while sitting far from danger. He was the hand that shielded her with magic, the hand that stood between her and her foe's power, power not even a slayer could defeat. Sabrina would see nothing but him. He covered her, and his slayer wore his magic like armor. Let Sabrina see whatever she wanted of the Watcher, because it would not help her fight the Slayer.

The Slayer is the instrument; the Council is the hand. She is the sword; he is the shield she carries into battle. He understood now his place, the instinct he had felt from the beginning to be always at her side, even against the Council's orders, even against their protestations that he felt too deeply, that he had lost all objectivity. At what point had they *stopped* feeling, had they tried to deny this pull that was at the very core of the watchers' blood they had so carefully bred into him? Surely it had been after Camela, because he saw it in the Beast's fury, even from this distance, that *this* was how the great sorceress Camela had fallen when even an army could not stop her. When the Numidian armies had lain dead on the ground before her, it had been a slayer who had come to put the sword through her belly. A Slayer and her Watcher.

And this was why the Beast had destroyed the Council, the potential slayers, and had tried to turn the next slayer into an instrument of darkness. *And we shall defeat them with their own power.* This was the vengeance she had sworn.

The Beast bellowed in rage and fought the Slayer hand-to-hand, losing ground now she could no longer see each blow coming, could no longer slip past each block, could no longer see anything but him and his magic. They tumbled across the sand, his slayer still struggling against an evenly matched foe, but no longer on the defensive.

They came apart, and Sabrina reached for Camela's sword. He heard her voice in his head: *Your blood will wet this sword before the night is finished, Watcher. You and your slayer will be the first of my new tally. And at the next crescent moon, I will have the power I was promised. Your daughter, your son, all who you hold dear will die in her name.*

Giles laughed, because he could see Buffy reaching for her own sword, and he knew by his unwavering faith in his slayer that Sabrina would eat those words.

But she foresaw Buffy's advance in his mind and was ready for it. The clash of their swords rang out across the night air, and for a moment, Buffy was beaten back by the Beast's fury. Giles knew,

from long hours of practice, how his slayer fought, what her next move might be. He had trained her in swordplay, and she had learned most of her moves from him. It was his job to notice her weaknesses, to find the holes in her defense. And so Sabrina saw all of that in his mind.

She could not see Buffy's attack coming, but she could fight the Slayer with the knowledge of the Watcher.

The Beast landed a blow, and Giles felt it. He took his slayer's pain so it would not distract her from battle, though it was still her arm which bore the gash. But cloaked in his magic, her slayer healing was amplified, and he saw his own surprise reflected in her eyes when the cut closed mere moments after spilling blood.

Sabrina's mocking voice again rang through his head, gloating that she had found a way past his spell, that she could still see the Slayer's weaknesses reflected in the Watcher's eyes. *It will be written in the annals of history that today was the day that the last Watcher and the last Slayer fell.*

The Last Watcher reached out to his Slayer, projecting his thoughts once more into her mind: *Fight her as if she were me, Buffy. Take her down in less than five minutes.*

Their swords met again, and this time Buffy was driving the Beast back. Thrust and parry, deflect and strike. Buffy knew how Giles fought, what he would expect of her, and she used that knowledge against Sabrina. For once, her offensive strikes were clean and subtle, giving the Beast no clue where the next might land. Even Giles himself could not see his slayer's future assaults telegraphed in her movements. There were some tactics he had never even seen before. Perhaps Angel had taught them to her all those years ago. Perhaps they simply flowed from her gift for improvisation. He smiled at the memory of her more unorthodox battles: staking a vampire with a carousel unicorn's horn, beheading one with a cymbal, dusting another with a pool cue, fighting with the number-two pencil she had handy while studying for the SAT's.

He let his thoughts wander, knowing they would only distract Sabrina further. Buffy landed another blow, and then another. A clean cut to the forearm and then to the hand, and Sabrina was disarmed. The sword of Camela hit the sand, and still the Beast was forced back. A clever and athletic combination of sword swing and leg sweep brought her to her knees. Never one to resist the chance for a pun or a cutting insult before delivering the fatal blow, Buffy smiled and taunted, "Know what I'm thinking now?"

She sliced Sabrina's head from her shoulders.

"Didn't think so."

Sabrina's head landed in the sand with a thud, and her torso tilted sideways until it too followed. The short brunette waves shimmered, her open, unseeing eyes darkening as the guise of Camela melted from the Beast's dead form. Lying on the sand before Buffy was the great head of the Mortog beast: its horned, furred, demon monstrosity staring up at her, its body laying unmoving beside it and leaking prodigious amounts of slimy, green, demon blood. Ick. Slaying cleanup was always Buffy's least favorite part.

She let her own sword drop on the ground beside her and turned to gaze up at the cliffs above her. Giles smiled back at her, knowing she would sense it even from this distance. Then he allowed the cloak of his magic to fall from his slayer and let the exhaustion of the last hour bring him to his knees.

Battle over. And together they had won.

Chapter 11

A New Beginning

After Xander assured her for the third time that the twins were just fine, Buffy left him and Spike in charge of cleanup. They didn't have a whole lot to take care of, not like when they'd had to burn that nest of dead four-eyed demon things, four-eyed in the literal sense of having four eyes and not in the sense of wearing really dorky glasses. Hauling all those demon bodies onto the bonfire had taken most of the night, not to mention ruined one of her favorite halter tops, and the smell was definitely something she would like to forget. This time there was just the body of the Mortog beast. The rest of the cleanup involved taking care of the casualties, something else the gang had much experience with. There was the body of the witch the snipers had shot off the cliff, the one witch who'd taken a crossbow bolt to her side, and the three unconscious witches Buffy had knocked out, who should all probably make the trip to the hospital along with their bleeding comrade.

The fourth witch, the young runaway who had cleared out of Dodge posthaste, was nowhere to be seen. The seven who were left of the circle were only too happy to help after they got a good look at Sabrina's true form. They were already muttering about being under a spell, something Buffy truly doubted, but sometimes there were certain lies that could be negotiated and agreed upon to make things easier for everyone involved. The vampires that weren't scattered as fine as the grains of sand lying across the beach had already made a hasty retreat when they saw their boss incinerated by the power of Camela's sword. And Morgaine had thoughtfully allowed herself to be consumed by the bolt of lightning that had culminated the ritual, leaving no messy cleanup for them after. That accounted for everyone but two.

Buffy's parting words to Xander were: "Find Faith and Willow" before she set off to meet Giles halfway.

He had just finished climbing down the cliff side when she first saw him. Either that or he had finished a little while before and was now resting. He looked tired. There were fine cuts across his face and hands, a nasty bruise coloring his temple, and a gash just above his collarbone that was slowly turning his shirt red. He smiled when he saw her, and she walked faster until she was practically running the remaining distance between them.

He grunted softly as she claimed him in a crushing hug, which was quickly followed by a passionate and desperate kiss.

"Don't ever freak me out like that again!" she chastised him through her tears. "You don't know how scared I was that you'd never wake up."

He continued smiling at her fondly, and as she looked into his green eyes, she was reminded all over again of everything that she had almost lost. She started to cry in earnest, and he passed her his handkerchief. For some reason, that made everything feel right again.

"I missed you," he told her, as he reached out one hand to run his fingers through her hair. "I missed you more than you can imagine."

"Let's go home."

His knees started to buckle, but she caught him before he could fall and held him upright. She laughed. "You're a little wobbly. How'd you manage to get up there without breaking your neck?"

He followed her gaze up the side of the cliff, a more gradual climb than the sheer drop by the beach, but a definite climb nonetheless. "Adrenaline is an amazing thing. I should think the climb down after was the more impressive feat."

"Will you make it back to the car, or will I have to carry you?"

He laughed, too, a breathy release of the last weeks' tension. "Heavens, no. That would be devastating to my ego." He swayed slightly, and she clutched him tighter to prevent him falling. "Although I wouldn't be averse to leaning on you a bit. I'm afraid the last few hours of spell casting and mountain climbing are more than my body's been accustomed to lately."

"Lean on me all you like, Watcher-mine." She kissed him again, a softer, more tender kiss than the one before. She released him only reluctantly. "The twins?" she asked hopefully.

"To the best of my knowledge, they are both safe with Anya."

That earned him a smile and another kiss. She ruffled his hair playfully as they pulled apart, and he scowled at her. "Hey, you should thank me," she scolded as they started back to the car, his arm slung across her shoulders to steady his balance.

"What for?"

"The twins were this close—" She illustrated by holding up her first finger and thumb with only a sliver of light between them. "—to testing out their rainbow assortment of magic markers on your face. Alex thought you might like to have your face painted. Spike would have let them, too, if I hadn't caught them. Actually, I suspect it might have been his idea."

"Hmmm..." Giles mused. "Then I suppose I can consider us even for him saving my life."

Buffy groaned. "No. I think Spike'll hold that over our heads for a *long* time." They both chuckled softly before Buffy urged him into a faster pace. "C'mon, Gimp Boy. With any luck, Xander'll have found Willow and Faith by the time we get to the car."

The smile left Giles' face at the mention of Willow, and he averted his eyes from her questioning gaze. Buffy lapsed into silence then, not wanting to ask, not wanting to know. Soon they passed through the forest, the barrier along its perimeter now fallen without the coven holding it in place. Just at the rise of the hill, they could see the convertible parked on the shoulder of the road, Anya and Xander standing beside it.

"Why is Xander wearing Spike's coat?" Giles asked.

"I've been wondering the same thing myself," Buffy answered, thankful for the momentary distraction from her downward spiraling thoughts.

But the distraction was only momentary, for her heart soon began to beat faster when she noticed the conspicuous absence of any enthusiastic greetings from the children. She picked up her pace, feeling the matching tension through Giles' arm where it rested against her shoulder.

Their distress must have been obvious, because Anya's first words when they reached the car were: "The twins are sleeping."

"Sleeping?"

Anya sighed. "Well they are very young, and it is quite late, and... well, I sang to them a little."

"*You* sang?" Giles echoed in disbelief.

She seemed offended. "I'm not totally tone deaf, you know. And I've been practicing." She stroked her pregnant belly fondly. "Lullabies are a proven method for soothing crying babies."

Buffy peeked in the backseat, where sure enough, both children were curled up together, sound asleep.

The minivan screeched to a stop beside them a moment later, Spike behind the wheel and some of Sabrina's coven in the back. "We going or what?" he called out.

"Buffy," Xander murmured softly. That was when she noticed for the first time that her friend had been crying. She dreaded his next words, knowing that in the end the responsibility would rest with her. She had been the one to send Faith. Xander stared at the ground, forcing the words out in one breath: "Willow's hurt. She's hurt bad."

Buffy closed her eyes, the weight of those words sinking like a rock to the bottom of her stomach. What had she thought would come of sending Faith after her friend? She had thought to avoid fighting that battle herself, that's what.

Giles squeezed her shoulder gently, to offer what support he could. "She fell over the edge, Buffy. Faith tried to catch her, but..." He leaned closer and whispered softly beside her ear for only her to hear, "We all did what we had to do. She left us no choice."

It was a valiant try, but Buffy's conscience wasn't soothed.

Spike was either blind or didn't care about the somber mood around him. Probably the latter. "Come on, already. I ain't listening to no whining from you lot if she up and dies on you while you're dilly-dallying around here." He honked his horn to punctuate his haste.

Anya jumped in to explain. "Faith called from the hospital while you were all still on the beach. She took Willow to UCLA Medical Center."

"Right, let's go," Xander replied numbly, climbing in the car with Anya and letting her drive for now.

Buffy started for the minivan, her arm still looped around Giles' waist to keep him upright. He stopped a few steps short of the side door. "I think I'd rather ride with Anya and Xander."

"Don't be silly. The twins are in the backseat. You won't fit." She studied him thoughtfully for a moment: his face was pale, worry lines drawn across his brow, and the tension through his shoulders and down his back was making his muscles tremble beneath her fingers. "Giles, are you okay?"

He swallowed and nodded, but she wasn't convinced.

"You know, you're probably right," she began, trying to offer him a way to save face. "One of us should ride in the car, in case the kids wake up on the way there."

"Right, right," he agreed enthusiastically, and Xander was quickly demoted to the minivan to make room for Giles.

Buffy sat in the passenger seat beside Spike, watching the convertible just in front of them. Giles had put the top down before they'd even pulled away from the shoulder.

"Spike, is Giles okay?" she asked the vampire softly.

"Sure. Sanity's overrated anyways," he replied with a casual shrug.

"Spike!"

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, and his expression softened slightly. He sighed and answered her sincerely this time. "I'm pretty sure he's a touch claustrophobic now. Easily distracted. Likely to startle if you touch him unexpected. Short temper. A little unsteady on his feet."

Buffy bowed her head, overwhelmed by that litany. The battle was over, and they had won. Why couldn't things just go back to normal now?

"It wasn't just the spell," Spike continued. "Sabrina messed with him while he was trapped. In fact, he mistook me for her when I first got inside his head. Wouldn't say exactly what went on, but I imagine she played some pretty sick games with him."

She stifled a sob with her hand, not wanting to think about it anymore than she had wanted to think about his torture at Angelus' hands.

Spike did something then that she would have never expected. He reached across and took her hand, holding it gently until she had composed herself again. His eyes left the road for a moment to look at her. Buffy had never imagined that she would see true compassion reflected in his eyes. He had been kind to her during her mother's illness, and then after her mother's death while trying to protect Dawn from Glory, and again in the last week and a half while practically living at their house and searching for a cure for Giles. But in the back of her mind, Buffy had always considered those kindnesses to be motivated by an ulterior motive, namely his big ole crush on her.

Now for the first time, she could believe that it was compassion in his eyes and nothing more.

She shook her head and looked out her window. "Wish I could put Sabrina's head back on and lop it off again," she muttered bitterly.

Spike chuckled and squeezed her hand before letting go and placing both hands on the steering wheel. He shifted in his seat and stole another glance in her direction. "Don't fret about it too much. Just give him some time to adjust to being back. I'm sure he'll be fine before you know it. Although," he added thoughtfully, "he's likely to try and go on with the training and research right away like nothin' happened. You might have to make him take that time."

She smiled bravely, comforted and amused by Spike's words. "How do you know my watcher so well?"

He was quiet for a moment, his mood darkening, and she wondered what she had said to upset him. "I know you all better than you think," he finally answered. "Been standing on the outside, watching you all for years." And then he leaned forward to turn on the radio and tune her out.

They pulled up to the emergency entrance for the Harbor-UCLA Medical Center less than ten minutes later. Buffy's stomach was already churning with nerves, and Xander never looked at her as they all climbed out of their vehicles. He didn't really look at anything but the ground. She had never seen him so subdued.

First, they got the attention of one of the staff, who was lounging in the ambulance bay on a cigarette break. She brought gurneys and doctors for their four wounded, and the rest of the coven stayed with their friends. Spike didn't wait to be asked before leaving to park the van. Anya looked torn between doing the same and staying with Xander. Giles' offer to park the car himself decided her, and she made it very clear that she doubted his ability to do so in his current condition, before she pulled away from the curb.

Giles and Buffy were left standing by the emergency doors, holding a sleeping child each.

They followed Xander inside, Buffy making a brief detour to snag a wheelchair for Giles.

"I rather think not," he huffed as he walked past her.

Buffy could see that he was limping, that even Robin's light weight was tiring him, as he constantly shifted the girl in his arms. "Stubborn fool," she muttered.

"Nag," he retorted with a small smirk.

The admissions nurse directed them to the surgical waiting area, where they found Faith waiting for them.

"B!" She rushed over to them, her words tumbling out in a rush. "I tried to catch her. I didn't mean for this to happen. I was just going to knock her out, but she charged me, and went over, and I barely had hold of her."

"It's okay, Faith. I get it."

Faith looked relieved and took a deep breath. Xander had already dropped into a waiting room chair, still staring at the ground. Giles had taken up a seat beside him, Robin snuggled contentedly against his chest.

Buffy licked her lips and braced herself for whatever answer Faith would give her. No point in delaying the inevitable. "How is she?"

Faith shrugged. "Alive. Wouldn't surprise me if they had her in a full body cast, though. She was busted up pretty good. I got her here quick as I could. Stole one of the vamp's limos. Might as well go in style, huh?"

An awkward silence grew between them. Buffy was thinking of her own failures, was replaying the evening's battle a hundred different ways that didn't end with Willow here. She wasn't sure what Faith was thinking. Faith probably had plenty of her own regrets to stew over.

“So give me the highlights,” the other slayer demanded. “Was Giles right about the sword? Did it turn Sabrina into a crispy critter?”

“Yes and no. He was right about the sword. But it was the head vampire lawyer who got toasted. Sabrina was actually a demon, the Mortog beast, who had inherited a bit of magic and shapeshifting from the witch who made the sword. But Giles and I beat her. Beheaded her.”

“Cool.”

Anya joined them then, sitting down on Xander’s other side. He leaned his head against her shoulder, and she wrapped her arm around him. Buffy ached for her friend. As much as all of them cared for Willow, he was her best friend. They had known each other as children, had been inseparable for most of their lives. If anything happened to her, it would crush him.

“Can I get anyone anything?” Faith offered generously. “Food run? Coffee run?”

No one seemed very interested in food or coffee.

“Maybe you could find Alex some dry clothes? Blankets or something?” Buffy requested, knowing Faith needed something to make herself feel useful. Hell, they all wanted to feel useful. “Xander looks a bit shivery too.”

Faith bounced off, and Buffy took a seat beside her watcher. Sitting four in a row, they all stared at the doors to surgery, as if they could will the doctor to come out and tell them everything would be fine. She leaned up against Giles, and he shifted Robin to one knee before wrapping his arm around Buffy in a matching pose to Anya.

He kissed her temple and whispered again for her ears only, “She left us no choice. We did what we had to do.”

“Then how come I feel so rotten?”

Faith returned soon after with a nurse, who brought them blankets, a t-shirt that was way too big for Alex, and scrubs for Xander. Anya had to coax him into going into the bathroom to change, promising that she would come straight in there, naked men or not, if there was any news.

Alex hardly woke as Buffy stripped off his wet clothes right there in the middle of the waiting room. He yawned and blinked bleary eyes at her as he obediently held his arms out to slide in the sleeves. The hem of the shirt came down past his knees. She bundled him up in a blanket and handed him over to his father’s lap, partly to give herself the freedom to pace and partly to keep his father seated in his chair, pinned as he now was by a child on each knee.

Alex yawned wider. “Daddy no s’leep. Never ever ’gain,” he insisted as he cuddled up close.

Giles kissed the boy on his forehead and smiled. “A rather difficult promise to keep, son. But I shan’t ever sleep for so long again. Will that do?”

Their son nodded and laid his head against Giles’ shoulder. He noticed then the circle of blood sticking his father’s shirt to his skin. “Owie,” he said, pointing to the spot. He kissed his fingers and touched them to his father’s wound.

“Ah, now it is all better,” Giles said, but Alex’s eyes were already closing, and he was asleep in the next moment.

The doors to the OR opened, and everyone jumped to attention, but it was a doctor for someone else waiting in chairs on the other side of the room. Buffy resumed her pacing. Xander came out of the bathroom and modeled his scrubs, still wearing Spike’s coat over them. She wondered then where Spike was, and Anya guessed that he had gone back to the beach to take care of the body of the Mortog beast.

“Yeah,” Buffy said with a sigh. “I don’t suppose waiting in hospitals is really his thing.”

“He did it for you,” Giles responded absently.

“Huh?”

He looked up then, as if surprised that she had heard him. "When you were in the hospital, he waited with me. Quiet, in the background. I guess it was easy to forget he was there."

Buffy finally stopped pacing and plopped down in a chair facing the others, with her back to surgery. The waiting was driving her mad. She remembered her mother's surgery: the long hours of sitting in uncomfortable chairs, not knowing if her mother would be okay, and feeling completely helpless. Faith joined her, sitting quietly beside her for several minutes before finding the nerve to speak.

"I'm sorry Willow got hurt. Really, I am."

Buffy only nodded.

"I'm sorry about... you know, all the other stuff, too."

"Yeah."

Faith nudged her gently. "If it'll count for anything, I'll let you be the cop to bring me in."

A small smile played across Buffy's lips. "I'll probably get a medal for it. Maybe even a promotion."

"You'll tell them I turned myself in, though, right?"

Buffy turned to study her fellow slayer, to see the sincere regret in her eyes, to know for certain that Faith had found her way out of the darkness. "I'll tell them you saved my life. You did, you know."

Faith looked away and tapped her fingers on the arm of her chair. She and her tough guy exterior, couldn't give anyone the impression that there might be a soft side underneath. After a moment, she regained her composure and met Buffy's eyes again. She said it nonchalantly, "So, B, we cool here?"

"We're five by five, Faith."

The other slayer accepted that and abandoned her chair for the drinking fountain on the opposite wall.

It was another hour before a doctor came out of surgery to brief them. Xander was out of his chair before Buffy had noticed the doctor's presence.

"She's going to be fine," he told them.

Everyone cheered, and hugs were exchanged. Faith waited on the edge of the group, but even she was smiling. The doctor continued to brief them on her injuries, what they had done for her in surgery, what they could expect for her recovery, but Buffy heard none of it. The doctor's first words were on repeat inside her head: *She's going to be fine. She's going to be fine.* Until now, she'd been hearing a very different version inside her head. She'd imagined the doctor telling them Willow was dead, imagined a dozen different ways for him to tell them.

She began to relax for the first time in weeks.

"Can we see her?" Giles asked the doctor.

"She's in recovery right now." He seemed to consider their request. "Are you family?"

"Yes," Xander answered without hesitation.

"I suppose one visitor, but make it brief. The nurse will take you in." He nodded towards the young woman shadowing him and then left.

Xander moved to follow the woman, but Giles stopped him with a hand around his wrist, juggling the twins in his lap so he could sit forward in his chair. "Xander, I know you very much want to see Willow. I wouldn't ask you this if it wasn't important. But I need to be the one to go in tonight. Please."

Xander stared at the doors leading to surgery and recovery. The conflict was evident in his face.

"The doctor said she would be fine, and you will more than likely be able to see her tomorrow."

Xander looked deep into Giles' eyes, perhaps trying to determine the seriousness of his request, before finally taking Alex from his arms and agreeing to let Giles go first. Buffy took Robin, and Giles

gave Xander a reassuring squeeze on the shoulder before following the nurse back through the swinging doors.

Xander sat down, deflated.

"She'll be fine," Buffy reassured him. "You heard the doctor."

"Guess I just wanted to see for myself."

Buffy looped her arm through his, and Anya on his other side softly combed her fingers through his hair. Framed by two women who loved him, he relaxed back into his chair and closed his eyes.

Buffy had a sudden, terrifying thought: "Omigod! Did anyone call Dawn?"

"I called her from the car on the way here."

"Anya, you are a lifesaver."

"Here's the phone." She passed the cell over to the slayer. "You should call her and tell her Willow's going to be fine."

It was nearly morning by the time they got home. Faith was behind bars once more, and her lawyer was busy making sure no charges were pressed for her escape. According to him, Buffy's testimony on her heroic behavior and the fact that she had willingly turned herself back in were likely to weigh in her defense. Willow had yet to regain consciousness, but they were assured that someone would call them at home as soon as she had. After she was stable, they would transfer her to the hospital in Sunnydale, nearer her parents and on the list of approved facilities for Willow's health insurance. Medical bureaucrats!

Spike returned with the van and loaded up the gang, their business in LA concluded. Buffy and Giles took the convertible, glancing in the rearview mirror constantly to reassure themselves of their children's sleeping presence in the backseat. Giles tried her patience with his backseat driving. Good thing he'd never done a ride along while she was on duty. She liked to turn the sirens on and go fast.

Dawn had tried to wait up for them, but they found her asleep on the couch. Spike was allowed in, and so she woke to the sight of him smiling down on her. Buffy and Giles carried the sleeping twins upstairs and grudgingly gave the couple some privacy.

The children slept until a little past noon. Buffy napped on and off during that time. But every time she woke, she would slip out of bed in search of Giles. The first time, she found him sitting on the back porch with a cold cup of tea, staring out at nothing. She remembered what Spike had told her about startling him, so she called his name softly before approaching him.

The other times, she found him busy doing something: putting Tara's boxes back in the attic, changing the light bulb above the stove that had been burned out for months, even doing the laundry. Once, she found him sorting through the mess they'd made of his books while researching. He had his watcher's diary open in front of him, and he'd discovered the torn out pages.

"Was this really necessary?" he asked her when she sat down across from him.

"You should get some sleep."

"I'm not tired," he answered, then took his diary and went to sit on the back porch once again.

He was lying, of course. She could see how tired he was. His cuts had been tended, he'd showered and shaved, he'd changed his clothes, all in all a very different man now than the one who had climbed down the cliff after their battle. But his eyes were heavy, his shoulders slumped with exhaustion. He reminded her very much of their son, desperately trying to keep himself busy so he wouldn't fall asleep.

When the children woke, they provided their father with some much-needed distraction. Buffy went back to bed. If Giles wasn't going to get any sleep, then she would.

They ordered pizza for dinner, rented movies, and spent the evening as if everything was back to normal. Spike was the new addition to that scenario, sitting on the couch beside Dawn, but even he fit in as if he had always been there.

They tucked the children into their parents' bed that night, Robin not willing to lie down until Giles had lain down beside her. But as soon as the children had fallen asleep, he climbed out of bed and disappeared downstairs. Buffy sighed and wrapped her arms tighter around her sleeping son. Spike said Giles needed time, and so she wouldn't push him for now. She closed her eyes and slept, still catching up on all the rest she had missed during their last weeks' ordeal.

Buffy woke at almost three in the morning. It shouldn't have surprised her, really; she'd slept for half the day.

She tiptoed down the stairs and found him as she had on so many nights before: asleep in the armchair, his neck crooked at an uncomfortable angle, his glasses askew on his face, his lap and the floor around him littered with open books, the desk lamp still lit, although this time he had also carelessly forgotten to turn off the lights in the foyer and dining room as well.

She carefully removed the books from his lap and took their place. He stirred when he felt her weight in his lap, and when he opened his eyes, her arms were wrapped around his neck.

"Don't you ever get tired of falling asleep in uncomfortable places?" she teased. "The couch at least won't make your neck sore tomorrow."

His eyes were guarded, and she could feel the tension in his neck and shoulders where her hands rested.

"Giles?"

He looked away, the tension still coiled in his body. Then it hit her all at once: he thought he was still there, thought she was *her*.

"Giles, it's me, Buffy, your slayer." She attempted to adjust his glasses on the bridge of his nose, and he flinched back from her touch. "Spike pulled you out, remember? Big battle? We won? Score one for the home team?" She sighed and laid her head against his chest. "You're home now. Whatever happened to you with that spell, it's over."

She didn't try to press him any further, just waited him out, holding him in a loving and gentle embrace. After a few minutes, he began to relax in her arms. She heard his heart rate slow to normal, watched his chest as his breathing deepened, and finally felt his soft touch as he combed his fingers through her hair.

"I'm sorry, Buffy."

"It's okay." She nestled more comfortably in his embrace. "Come up to bed now. Enjoy the wonders of a soft mattress."

He tensed again, and she sat up to look into his eyes. She reached out one hand to trace her fingers along the curve of his cheek. "I get it, Giles. You know, if you're not so fond of beds right now, you can just say so."

He smiled weakly and dropped his gaze to the floor.

She laid her head back down against his chest. They were quiet for several moments. "You know the couch is very un-bedlike," she offered finally. She felt him kiss the top of her head.

"It's only partly the bed. It's mostly the closing my eyes and sleeping that I seem to find worrisome." He sighed and removed his glasses, rubbing at his eyes, before tossing his frames onto the side table. "It's humiliating, really, that such a little thing should bother me so much. That I can't

even get in the blasted car without feeling as if I might have a panic attack. And it's not exactly like I can just stop sleeping."

"Hence the massive research session." She leaned over, far enough that she nearly toppled from the chair, and retrieved a couple books from the floor. "What big evil are we fighting now?" She read the titles with a puzzled frown. "'The Complete Works of Edgar Allen Poe'? 'A Tale of Two Cities'? Did some librarian get vamped into the newest big bad or something?"

He snatched the volumes from her hands and placed them on the side table beside his glasses. "I do happen, on occasion, to read books that have nothing to do with demons or prophecy."

Buffy mentally counted the stacks of books surrounding them. "Okay, so you're catching up on your fun reading." She fetched another older and thicker volume from the ground. "'Les Miserables.' Hey, Dawn and I saw this musical." She flipped through the pages and made a face. "It's in French."

He took that book from her as well. "Yes, that is how it was written," he replied dryly.

"I have traumatic memories of high school French class. I've repressed the whole language." She studied him with a serious frown. He was still trying to be all stiff-upper-lippy, hold-it-all-in guy. "Come on, Giles, give. What's with the lit refresher course?"

He closed his eyes and sighed. Buffy recognized the look of resignation on his face; she had seen it many times. He rarely failed to give in to her eventually.

"Where I was... those eleven days, I believe Dawn said?" She nodded and indicated that he should continue. "There was nothing, Buffy. It was utterly black and silent. Sabrina made brief... visits... on occasion, but other than that, there was nothing to keep me occupied. I recited what I could remember of different things, just to pass the time. I suppose I wanted to see how accurately I remembered it, now that I'm back."

"I bet you nailed it, huh?"

He smirked slightly. "Would that be boasting?"

"Nah." She looped her arms around his neck. "I have an idea. How 'bout we both lie down together on the couch. No sleeping," she added when he opened his mouth to protest. "Just get comfy, and I can help with your lit research. I can read to you."

He chuckled then. "I'm not a child, Buffy, who needs to be read to in order to fall asleep."

She slid from his lap and padded over to the couch, book in hand. "I believe I said no sleeping. Besides, everyone should be read to every now and then, even bookworm watchers. C'mere."

He obeyed reluctantly, stretching out on the couch and taking her into his arms. She cracked open the book and began: "'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...' Hmm... That pretty much sounds like our life, doesn't it?" He smiled, and then yawned. She smiled back at him knowingly and continued. "'It was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness...' Yeah, that pretty much sums up my life. 'It was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity—'"

His fingers began rhythmically combing through her hair. "Buffy?"

"Yeah?"

"If I happen to break the no sleeping rule, will you... will you keep reading?"

She turned and kissed him on the cheek. "Sure, but if you fall asleep, I'm going to start changing stuff around, spice it up a bit. I think we need a car chase in here somewhere, maybe a few explosions."

He groaned. "Dickens would turn in his grave."

"Just as long as he doesn't rise from it. Now, where were we? Oh, yeah... Life was good and it really sucked, we were smart and also dumb..."

He chuckled softly and slid one arm around her waist. She settled back against his chest, enjoying the soft caresses his fingers started to trail across her bare arms. She had missed him like the other half

of herself. If their battle with Sabrina had taught her anything, it was that he was exactly that. Her watcher, her husband, her other half. She continued reading, listening to his breathing and waiting for him to fall asleep.

Giles was feeling much better in the morning, well enough for a day at the shop, despite Buffy's protestations. They couldn't keep the world on pause, after all. He'd been absent from the shop for nearly two weeks now, and Buffy needed to return to work as well. If anything, it would keep all their minds off of Willow.

She had regained consciousness, but her parents were the only visitors she was permitted for the time being. She would be transferred to Sunnysdale tomorrow, and then they would all be allowed to visit. Buffy and Xander were eager to see their friend, to repair the breaks in their relationships, but Giles wondered sadly if Willow would be as eager to see them.

He had spoken to his friend John earlier, slightly embarrassed to have forgotten him amidst all the recent events. John was surprised and delighted to hear from him, although he couldn't talk long, as April's hospital room was full of their children and friends, and far too noisy for decent conversation. But April was thankfully recovering nicely, and Giles promised to visit tomorrow when they came to see Willow.

The shop seemed unaffected by his absence. Anya had done very well without him, and Giles skimmed over the receipts happily. Now they had found Robin, there would be no more detectives' fees, no more lawyers' fees. If the shop continued to prosper, they might even be able to pay off its mortgage ahead of schedule.

Those were the thoughts that were uppermost in his mind when the bell over the front door rang. He glanced up to see who their new customer was, if it was perhaps one of their regulars. A man in a charcoal three piece suit surveyed the store with an icy stare, adjusting his grip on a briefcase as he stepped down into the main shop area.

Giles came around the counter to greet him, Robin following him like the little shadow he remembered. "Can I help you?"

"Are you Mr. Rupert Giles?" The man owned a refined, upper-class, British accent, which would have usually screamed Watcher, except that they were all dead.

"Yes."

The man's eyes lingered on Anya, intently pricing their new shipment, and then landed on Robin, standing by her father's side. He unbuttoned his jacket and smoothed down the line of his tie before addressing Giles again. "May we speak somewhere in private?"

Giles glanced over at Anya, who was staring back at him with the same curious expression. "Will you watch the children for a moment?"

"Sure. Alex is my little helper over here. He's pretty good with the price gun, although I have to keep reminding him that we only need one tag per talisman."

Alex peeked out from behind the counter and held up the price gun proudly. He had some price tags stuck to assorted parts of his body as well. "I help," he informed his father solemnly.

"Yes," his father replied, equally solemn. "I'm sure you are a big help to Anya." He steered Robin over to join them. "Perhaps you can teach Robin how to use the price gun."

Neither twin seemed happy with that idea.

"Do self," Alex pouted, hugging his toy to his chest.

"Stay wif you," Robin begged, clinging tightly to his hand.

Giles knelt on the floor in front of her. He was loathe to cause her more trauma after the last days' events. He should be thankful she hadn't regressed back to silence or needing him to carry her everywhere. But even so, she must learn that she couldn't be at his side every minute of every day, that there were other people in her life she could trust too.

"I'll be right in that room there if you need me. And Anya is here. I won't be long. Can you stay out here for just a little bit while I talk to this man?"

She focused on him with her wide, blue eyes as she considered his words. Finally she nodded.

"Good girl." He tapped his finger beneath her chin before raising himself to his feet. "Share with your sister," he warned Alex sternly before turning to face their mysterious visitor. The man seemed irritated by the delay sorting out the children had caused. Oh well, Giles was hardly going to be brisk with his own children for the sake of this man's convenience. "My office," he said, leading the way into the small side office. Normally, he would speak with people in the larger back training room, but not knowing who this man was or what he wanted, Giles wasn't sure that he wouldn't find a roomful of weaponry a tad alarming.

The man lifted his briefcase to set it on the desk, stopping short when faced with an array of Legos and matchbox cars. The side office tended to serve as the children's play area more than anything, and their toys cluttered every surface. Giles quickly swept the offending items to one side to make room.

"My name is Andrew Ludgate," he said as he set the briefcase on the desk and clicked open the two locks. "I represent the firm of Cole, Oldham, and Watkins. The C.O.W. has sent me here—"

"C.O.W.?" Giles interrupted.

Ludgate smiled stiffly. "The Council did have their fingers in everything, didn't they? But I am not technically involved with them. Cole, Oldham, and Watkins are more what you might consider affiliates to the Council. So I am not truly a watcher, if that was what you were wondering." The lawyer turned and sized up Giles with a penetrating stare. "No, it would appear, in fact, that *you* are the last watcher. And that is why I was sent. We have some business to discuss, Mr. Giles. Council affairs to be put in order."

"What sort of affairs?"

Ludgate flipped open his briefcase with a flair for the overdramatic. "Why, everything. You are, for all intents and purposes, the Council now, Mr. Giles. There are some decisions you need to make regarding the direction you would like to take this organization. And dare I say, some recruitment strategies would not go amiss at the moment."

Giles held out his hand to stop any further discussion. He took a seat on the desk, jumping up momentarily to remove Alex's double nine domino from beneath him before sitting back down. He removed his glasses and rubbed his forehead for a moment in thought. "Mr. Ludgate, I am hardly in a position to act as the Council. I don't have the resources. Frankly, I don't know that I have the desire."

Ludgate removed several papers from the briefcase. "I cannot speak to the latter, but as far as resources, you have the Council's assets at your disposal. Perhaps we should start with the Council's current fiscal status." He handed over the papers in his hand. "These are the current bank balances from the Council's various accounts, the majority held in England, Switzerland, and Austria. Although, there are some in the States, India, and other scattered accounts you'll find listed on page ten."

Giles replaced his glasses and scanned over the papers in his hands, mentally adding the columns together. There was some kind of misprint. There couldn't possibly be this many zeros. The paper started to tremble in his shaking hands. "Dear Lord. This is more money... well, more than a small nation, I would imagine."

Ludgate laughed heartily. "Oh, far more than that. Those are only the liquid assets. All told, you are now worth more than the entire British treasury... and that of a small nation or two as well, I imagine. I bit of advice, if I may?"

"Yes, please," Giles breathed, still numb.

"I am not a watcher, but our firm has served the Council for... well, honestly our firm was probably established to serve the Council. If I were you, the first thing I would invest that money in is acquiring a few alchemists. No point in touching the principal if you can continue to pay for your expenses through magic." He drew out some more papers and began arranging them on the modest amount of space the small desk afforded. He pulled a pen from the front pocket of his three piece suit and clicked it open. "Now, if you will, Mr. Giles, there is some paperwork that needs to be attended to in order to make this inheritance final. Cole, Oldham, and Watkins will, of course, be more than happy to manage your estate as we have done for the Council for centuries. However, if you would prefer to hire on a law firm of your own choosing—?"

"No, no, that won't be necessary," Giles insisted, still staring in shock at the paper in his hands, as if some of the zeros might just fall off before his very eyes.

"Well then, shall we begin with the line of succession? I assume you shall want your son to follow as head of the Council after your death?"

Giles looked away from the paper in hands for the first time since it was handed to him. Ludgate was watching him intently, and Giles could only stare back blankly.

The lawyer raised one questioning brow. "Or perhaps there is another you would like to name as your direct successor?"

Giles' mouth was dry. There was really no one else.

Lilah Morgan leaned forward and hit the page button for her secretary. "Kelly, get me Richard Zalk on the phone." She gave her visitor an annoyed once over. "Well?"

The tall, skinny vampire shifted self-consciously in place. "We had a deal."

"Yeah, you should have gotten it in writing. You used to work here. You should know that." She made a small shooing motion with her hands. "Now get lost. Frankly, I didn't like you all that much when you were alive."

He glowered at her, but obediently turned and left. Jeeze, like she would have looked twice at the mailroom clerk, dead or alive.

The door opened, and she briefly thought that Richard Zalk had gotten there very quickly. But it wasn't him; it was Nathan Reed, one of the junior partners. She jumped to her feet, quickly and respectfully, although she was somewhat disappointed that he wasn't Richard Zalk. She had really been looking forward to telling the man his son was dead. Again.

"What can I do for you, sir?"

He strolled around her office and picked up a framed picture from her shelf, one of those motivational scenes: an image of hands linked together and written below were the words, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

"I just had some interesting news, Ms. Morgan."

"It's truly a tragedy about Joseph Zalk," she replied with a straight face.

"I wasn't referring to him. Are you familiar with the Watcher's Council, Ms. Morgan?"

She smiled coyly. "I have caught some CNN footage. There's a rumor that Joseph was responsible for their sudden downsizing."

"Yes, he did have some hand in that." Nathan withdrew a manila envelope from his inside jacket pocket and handed it to her.

She opened it cautiously, pulling out two photos, recognizing the one immediately. "I know this girl. I've seen pictures of her in Angel's file. She's the slayer he ran out on back in Sunnydale."

"Very good. The man is her watcher, Mr. Rupert Giles. They're the two newest players in our game. He has now been appointed head of the Council, by virtue of being the only candidate."

She laid the pictures on the desk and reached for the phone. "Should I put a contract out on them? I think the agency we used last month is running a two-for-one special."

"No." Nathan laid his hand over hers, keeping the phone in the cradle. For a short, completely bald man, he could be very intimidating. And very creepy. "They are not to be touched."

"What?" Lilah blew out a frustrated breath. "The senior partners want Angel alive. They want these two alive. Tell me: are we planning on getting rid of *any* of our enemies?"

"You're already aware that Angel has been prophesied to be a major player in the apocalypse."

"Yeah, yeah, I know the drill. You just don't know which side he's playing for, and you're hoping to turn him into a Company man."

Nathan casually slipped his hands into his pockets. "Our translators are logging overtime this week. The same prophecies that mention Angel also seem to refer to these two."

Lilah shook her head and crossed her arms over her chest. "You think you can turn them dark too?"

"Oh no," Nathan said with a laugh. "The prophecies are very clear on that point. When the final battle comes, they will not be on Wolfram and Hart's side. But they will affect Angel's role in that battle. The senior partners are hoping that means they can use the watcher and slayer to deliver Angel to our side."

He picked the photos up off the desk and held them out to her. "Congratulations, Ms. Morgan. We've decided to put you in charge of this operation. These two are your newest and most important project. Keep tabs on them. I want to know their plans, who they recruit, any contact they have with Angel, their friends, their family, what they have for breakfast, how many times they go to the bathroom in the middle of the night. Everything. I expect a report on my desk the first of every month."

Lilah glanced down at the photos in her hand and sighed. Her day was rapidly turning to shit. "Great. Glorified spy work. Look, but you can't touch."

"I said you couldn't mess with *them*. I never said you couldn't have some fun with their friends." Nathan turned and walked out of her office.

Lilah looked at the photos one more time before sliding them in her top drawer, only this time she was smiling. Her secretary came over the intercom and announced Richard Zalk. Lilah smiled wider. Her day wasn't turning out so badly after all.

Buffy came home from work, eager for one of Alex's enthusiastic homecomings and hopeful for some small kind of acknowledgement from Robin as well. And after the children were suitably distracted, she intended to kiss Giles senseless.

The house was dark when she walked in. "Alex? Robin?" She frowned and tossed her purse on the dining room table. Giles' car was in the driveway, so they had to be home.

She wandered through the kitchen and noticed that the back porch light was on. That seemed to be Giles' favorite place lately.

Sure enough, he was sitting on the top step, holding a cup of tea and staring out over their backyard. His tea was probably cold, but he wouldn't notice until he went to take a sip of it, whenever that might be.

"Giles?"

She sat down beside him, careful not to crowd his space. The sun was just beginning to set, the sky turning orange, the light dimming, the porch light seeming to brighten in the growing darkness, and the shadows stretching father across the ground. He still didn't seem to notice her presence. Good thing it wasn't completely dark yet, or a vampire could have easily happened by and made him a snack.

"Giles!" she said a little louder.

He turned and looked at her.

"You okay?"

He nodded and resumed his study of the trees fencing their property.

"Where are the twins?"

His answer was slow in coming, as if he were far away in thought. "Dawn took them to the park. They'll be home soon, I'm sure. She promised to have them back before dark."

"Robin too?"

"Surprisingly enough, yes. I gave her my pocket watch and showed her where the hands would be when she would see me again. A trick my mother used to use on me when I was small. It was enough to give her the courage to go to the park at least."

"You gave her your watch?" Buffy already had images of it coming home in pieces.

"Yes, although I think Alex was rather jealous. It might be time to get them both watches of their own." He took a sip of tea and frowned when he found it cold. He set it on the ground between them. "Buffy, if you could have given Travers a list of demands for the Council, what would they have been?"

She rolled her eyes at the memory of Travers, surprised to find a little sadness for his death mixed in there with all the standard irritation she associated with his memory. "For him to pull the big ole stick outta his butt."

"Buffy, I'm being serious here."

"Alright, serious." She gave it some serious thought for all of a minute. "I think I kinda did give them a list of demands when Travers showed up here with his whole entourage for my 'review.' I pretty much told them they worked for me, and they could just shove their 'review.' And in case you were wondering, those were my sarcastic air quotes. Oh," she added brightly, warming up to the memories, "I got to throw a sword at that one watcher who interrupted me. I bet he wet himself. And remember that cool part where I got you reinstated, with your salary paid retroactively?"

"Yes, and I was very grateful for that. But beyond your immediate needs for their assistance against Glory, what would you have asked of Travers?"

"I'm still thinking pulling the stick outta his butt wouldn't have been a bad idea."

Giles sighed, exasperated. "Forget about Travers. Let's make this more hypothetical. As the Slayer, how would you have liked to see things run differently? In what ways were we an asset? In what ways did we fail you?"

Buffy shrugged, having never considered the question before. "I dunno. You were always a really good watcher, Giles. And Merrick was too, even if you were both a little too stuffy at first. I guess I figured the rest of the Council was like you guys. At least until Travers showed up the first time. And

then Wesley. After that, I was pretty sure you two were the only good ones outta the bunch.” She looked over at him again. “Why?”

He pulled something from his pocket, a folded piece of paper he worried at with his fingers as he spoke. “I am the last watcher, Buffy. A lawyer came by the shop today with some papers. It appears that I’ve been given the daunting task of rebuilding the Watchers’ Council.”

“Oh.”

“Oh, indeed.” He handed her the folded piece of paper. “I’ve also inherited the Council’s assets to assist me in that endeavor.”

She unfolded the paper and couldn’t contain the small gasp of surprise that escaped her lips. Her eyes widened, and she placed her hand over her chest to assure herself that her heart was still beating. “My God, Giles, we’re filthy rich.”

“Not we, Buffy. That is the Council’s money. I have an obligation, a duty to spend it wisely.”

“Wisely doesn’t include that new Gucci scarf I’ve had my eye on, does it?”

“Probably not.”

Buffy began to giggle madly. It all seemed so surreal; she couldn’t quite wrap her mind around it. “Wow. You could buy out Microsoft, you know. That would be one way to move the Council into the 21st century. Oh, and anal-like watcher programmers could probably make a product that actually worked like it was supposed to.”

Giles took the piece of paper back from her and slipped it in his shirt pocket again. “The lawyer suggested I begin by hiring on some alchemists.”

“Are those the ones that make gold or money or whatever?”

He smiled. “Yes, very good, Buffy.”

She frowned. “Why would alchemists work for anyone? I mean, can’t they make all the money they want?”

“Group health insurance.”

“Oh.”

They sat quietly. Buffy understood now why Giles had been so out of it when she first got home. This was all so overwhelming. If Giles was even the tiniest bit of a practical joker, she would have chalked this up to one big farce.

“Give me a little time to think about it, Giles, okay? We’ll figure a way to make it even better this time.”

He nodded. The sun had disappeared past the horizon, and the last lingering rays of light were rapidly fading. That was the cue for the front door to bang open and two rambunctious toddlers to come barreling inside.

Willow glanced at the clock. She was getting tired. Today was the first day she was allowed visitors, and she’d had a steady stream of them: some of her parents’ friends she barely knew, some parishioners from the synagogue she vaguely remembered from her childhood, and several of her friends from the sorority, who had all been uncomfortably silent. There was very little they could talk about with her parents sitting right there. It figured. The one time they actually decided to notice her existence, and she wished they were elsewhere.

Now it was just her and her mother. Her other visitors had left, and her father had returned to work to catch up on things, now that they had transferred her back to Sunnydale and he was no longer a two hour commute from the office. Watching daytime television with her mother was rapidly draining

what little energy she had left, and she suspected she would need it when the last of her expected visitors arrived.

"This kind of programming is marketed towards young stay-at-home mothers; however, their children are also exposed to these messages. I was reading a recent study that showed that children of mothers who watch an average of—"

"Mom!" Willow rolled her eyes. "It's just a soap opera. It's supposed to be meaningless entertainment."

"Come now, Willow, you're a smart girl. You can't tell me the people who produce these shows don't know exactly what they're doing."

The last of her expected visitors chose that moment to walk in. Willow sat up a little straighter in bed, the best she could manage at least, with casts on both her arms and one leg, and her ribs taped tight. Her hand unconsciously went to her head to smooth her hair before she remembered that her head was all bandaged up. She only ended up knocking herself on the forehead with her cast. *Ouch*. She winced.

"Hello, Xander," her mother said brightly.

"Hi, Mrs. Rosenberg," he answered, his eyes focused on Willow, but she lacked the courage to meet his stare. She couldn't stand to see accusation, disappointment, or worst of all, forgiveness in his eyes. She didn't deserve it.

Willow noticed the conspicuous absence of the children, of Anya, of Dawn. Just Giles and Buffy and Xander standing in her hospital room. They didn't trust her. Could she blame them?

Her mother continued to make small talk. "You were a teacher at Willow's high school, weren't you? Mr. Giles, isn't it?"

"Yes," he answered with a slight nod.

"And you own that magic store now, the one Willow's always going to?" Her mother looked back at her with a triumphant smile, as if knowing a few insignificant details of her daughter's life was an accomplishment. "Willow tells me you were married recently. Congratulations."

Giles and Buffy exchanged amused smiles. Willow couldn't help one of her own. It had been over three years.

"Mom, could you see if they'd bring me more Jell-O, the strawberry kind with the marshmallows?"

"Sure, honey." She paused as she passed Willow's friends. "So nice to see you again, Bunny."

Buffy shut the door behind her.

"So how'ya feeling, Will?" Xander pulled up a chair beside her bed.

She shrugged. "You know, like a total idiot."

Xander nodded in understanding. "Ah, I have much experience with that feeling. I've learned that it's just best to accept that in this case you were a total idiot, and then skip ahead to the groveling." He pulled something from his pocket and laid it in her lap. It was one of those handheld video games he was so fond of. Yahtzee. "To while away the long hours of bedrest. Your fingers still work, right?"

She wriggled the ten digits that poked out from her casts. "Just my arms broke. Well, my arms and assorted other parts."

Buffy stepped forward with an offering of her own. "Chocolate. Comfort food. Best when eaten with friends."

Willow bit her lip not to cry. This wasn't what she had expected. She had expected them to be angry with her. After all, she had betrayed them as terribly as she had thought they betrayed her. One of her sorority friends had managed to fill her in on all the details while her mother was otherwise involved in a discussion with the other girls about the feminist repercussions of sororities. Willow

knew now Sabrina's true identity. With a sick horror, she had discovered the true intent of the ritual, learned that she had almost gotten little Alex killed, and found that for the first time in her life, she had been fighting for the wrong side.

Why didn't they hate her? Buffy and Giles should at least. She'd almost cost them their son, not to mention the misery she'd inflicted on Giles.

She did start to cry then, unprepared for their kindness. "I don't deserve any of this."

"Would you rather we were mad at you?" Buffy asked, sitting on the end of her hospital bed.

"Yes."

"Well, I am," she replied. Willow saw the anger glittering in her friend's eyes, and it was what she wanted, what she deserved. Buffy continued, and Willow braced herself for the lectures and the recriminations. "You should have trusted us. You shouldn't have just cut us out of your life like that. I know things have been bad since Tara died, but you should have known that we would have helped you if you'd let us.

"But you know what? When I found out you were working with Sabrina, I wasn't mad at you, Willow. I wasn't afraid of you or what you'd do. No, the very first thing I thought, the thing that hit me right here..." She touched her chest and paused a moment to compose herself before continuing. "The thing that terrified me was the thought that I might have to hurt you to stop Sabrina. I didn't know if I could do it, Will. Even knowing what you did to Giles, knowing you had a hand in getting our kids nabbed, I didn't know if I could fight you. I love you, Willow. We all do.

"So what's the point of holding grudges? I could stay mad and you could stay guilty for the next year if we wanted, but it wouldn't do either one of us any good. Everything turned out okay, for us at least. So I, for one, would like to fix whatever's broken and just try to move forward." She met Willow's stare, love reflected in her eyes. The anger was still there as well, and the forgiveness in her words had not yet reached those blue eyes, but the love was enough for now. As long as Willow still saw love in her friend's eyes, she knew the rest would come with time.

Buffy reached out and, unable to take Willow's hand, settled for linking her fingers with the digits that poked out from Willow's cast. "You did some pretty stupid things. But I've done some way stupider things, and nine times out of ten, you were there for me after. Sometimes you said the things I needed to hear, the things I didn't really *want* to hear, but when it came right down to it, you always stood beside me. Especially that year Angel turned. You were my rock. So I want to do the best friend thing here, or at least I really want to try. I want to be the kind of friend you always tried to be for me. The only question is if you'll let me. Do you want to be friends with all of us again? I can't make promises about how long it will take for things to be the way they were, but I want them to be. Do want that too? Do you want to be a Scooby again?"

Buffy realized what she'd just said, and her eyes got wider. "But if you don't want to do the Scooby thing, that's okay too. We can just do the friend thing."

Willow shook her head emphatically. "No, I want to be a Scooby again. I guess I kinda feel like I have a lot to make up for, now." She brushed her tears away with her fingers and smiled. Buffy smiled back, and Willow felt as good as someone could feel with half a dozen broken bones, bruises in every place that wasn't broken, and the weight of so many mistakes on her heart. Xander's arm slid around her shoulders, and she leaned closer to him, their foreheads touching.

When her eyes lifted to find Giles, he was still standing near the doorway, watching them. He would not be so easy to make peace with. She would have to do way more than detail his car to make up for all the pain and grief her spells had caused this time.

Her mother returned then with the requested Jell-O and some magazines for Willow to read. Buffy snagged some of them for herself, disappointed when they turned out to be not fashion magazines, but

rather science journals the doctors were willing to loan her. Willow finally convinced her mother to make a run to her own office to catch up on some of her own work, leaving them alone once more.

They talked for an hour or more, catching Willow up on everything she had missed: finding Robin, the Council's destruction, and the murder of the other potential slayers, for which Willow knew she bore a great deal of responsibility, Sabrina's manipulations notwithstanding. The Council... the slayers... now that the fallout of her spells with Sabrina were being spelled out for her in such black and white terms, the enormity of what she had done threatened to overwhelm her.

Xander switched topics deftly, to something trivial and amusing, cracking jokes to lighten the mood. For as far back as she could remember, he had always known how to distract her from broody thoughts. In dire straits, he would sometimes resort to doing the Snoopy dance to cheer her up, even if it wasn't Christmas.

They tried to stay on non-threatening topics: various names Xander wouldn't let Anya pick for the baby, the blackmail-worthy sight of Spike on his hands and knees inside the fort Alex had built out of blankets, Buffy's struggles to keep her son in the bathtub while being simultaneously splashed by her daughter. When they finally broke down and told her about Dawn and Spike, Willow thought they were kidding at first. When she realized they weren't... she would have laughed harder, but it hurt her ribs too much.

"Hey," Buffy protested.

"I'm sorry," Willow gasped, holding her side. "It's just... Dawnie and Spike. It wouldn't be so funny if... Never mind. It'd be funny no matter what."

"Yeah," Xander seconded. "Who knew vampire fetishes ran in the family?"

She was still gasping for breath, enjoying the laughter even if it caused her a little pain. "You think your mom ever got it on with Angel?"

Buffy rolled her eyes. "Why not? She got it on with Giles." She quickly clamped her hand over her mouth. "Omigod! Did I just say that?"

But it was too late to take it back, and Willow and Xander were staring open-mouthed at Giles, who was sitting in a chair on the other side of the room, cleaning his glasses and valiantly trying to disappear into the background. The slightest hint of a blush colored his cheeks.

The three friends erupted into a fit of giggles, and Willow wrapped both her arms around her chest in an effort to hold her ribs still. The pain stabbed through her strong enough to stop her giggles and force a moan from her throat.

"Will, you okay?" Xander sat forward and touched her on the shoulder, his own giggles quickly replaced by serious concern.

She nodded, feeling for the first time as though things really would be okay in time. "Just don't make me laugh so much."

"Maybe we should go for now?" Buffy suggested. "We promised we'd visit John and April before we go home, and Dawn can only keep the twins occupied for so long, especially Robin. She's pretty clingy with Giles."

Buffy and Xander left, promising to visit again tomorrow. Giles stayed behind, saying he would catch up in a few. Willow suspected he had been waiting for the opportunity, and now it was just the two of them. Her previous good mood evaporated.

"You gonna stay on the opposite side of the room the whole time?"

"Maybe," he answered.

Silence.

"I'm *so* sorry, Giles."

"I know."

“God, what I did to you... It must have been awful.”

“It was.”

She couldn't read him. He was tight, controlled, closed off. It reminded her of... Oh, God, it reminded her of how he was around Angel after... She started to cry then. She had done as bad or worse than Angelus. Worse, because she had no excuse. She'd still had her soul when she'd done all of it. “I don't know how I can ever make it up to you. I can't say sorry enough... You don't trust me anymore.”

“You'll find trust is a hard thing to regain after you've betrayed it. But not impossible.”

She sniffled and tried to wipe away some of her tears, but more simply spilled down after. “You came in to see me that first night, after I got out of surgery, didn't you?”

He leaned back in his chair and studied her for a moment, his face inscrutable, his eyes hard as glass. “Yes.”

“The doctor told me.” Her eyes dropped down to her lap. “I had kinda already figured it out myself, though. I tried to do a spell, something small. It was like a part of me already knew, and I just needed to be sure.” She swallowed and closed her eyes, not knowing if she wanted to ask, not knowing what the point would be, since she already knew the answer.

She lifted her eyes and saw him watching her coolly. “You took my magic away, didn't you, Giles?”

There was only silence between them. Silence, and an intense staring contest. It was like he was waiting for something, waiting to see what she thought of losing her power. She didn't care about that. If he hadn't already taken it, she would have told him that she never planned to touch it again. She had made much the same vow after Tara, fearing that magic would only bring back painful memories of her death. Now, Willow knew the taste of power would always remind her of that battle on top of the cliffs, when she had become the monster he needed to fight.

“It's okay,” she assured him. “I'm not mad at you for it.”

He barked out a bitter laugh. “How bloody generous of you. You have no right to be angry with me, Willow.”

“I know,” she answered softly.

“You helped them cast the spell to find the potential slayers. Now, because of that, my daughter has lost the innocent parents who loved her, and whom she loved, almost died in the fire that destroyed the only home she'd ever known, and will almost certainly be called as the next slayer. She might have been anyway, but now you've sealed her fate, as it were.”

Willow nodded, deeply shamed.

“Alex might have died that night on the beach. You put them both in danger. And you left me locked away in some living nightmare. There were moments that I wished you had simply killed me.”

She nodded again, dazed, unable to refute any of it, nor wanting to, but needing to explain all the same. “I wish I could say I was under a spell, that someone made me do those things. Turns out Sabrina could get in our heads, but the truth is, it wouldn't have done anything if she wasn't telling me exactly what I wanted to hear. I wanted to believe her. I haven't been able to stop thinking about Tara's death. I was mad at you. I thought that maybe if you hadn't tried to keep me from learning the stronger magicks, maybe I would have known a different spell to try, maybe I could have saved her. Or maybe you could have.”

Willow dropped her eyes from his scrutiny. Her voice became very soft. “I wanted to believe that it was your fault. Because as long as it was your fault, then it wasn't mine.”

“It wasn't anyone's fault.” His voice was equally soft. “Tara died. It isn't fair, but it happens sometimes.”

She felt his fingers beneath her chin, lifting her head to look at him. He was standing beside her now, no longer entrenched on the opposite side of the room.

"Willow, one of the mistakes I've always regretted is turning my back on Ethan. We were very good friends in our youth. But then..."

"Eyghon," she finished for him.

"Yes. We both made some terrible mistakes. Afterwards, he was a mess, I was a mess, and I simply walked away from him. I've often wondered how different things would be if I had forgiven him, forgiven myself, if I had tried to mend our friendship instead of giving up on it." He slipped his hands into his pockets and focused on a spot just past her. "I miss him sometimes. I wish I could go back and do things differently, but I can't. Things have come too far, and Ethan is no longer the kind of person I could be friends with."

He focused on her once again. "All I can do now is learn from that experience. I know that I don't want to repeat it. I don't want the same thing to happen to us."

"Neither do I," she agreed, shaken by his capacity to reach past all that she had done and moved to tears that he could still care for her at all. She should have known him better; she should have known that he would never have done the things Sabrina had accused him of.

He nodded, as if that settled it. "I should leave you to your rest now." He headed towards the exit, pausing in the doorway and glancing back at her. "I didn't take your magic, Willow. No one can do that. I've just locked it away where you can't touch it."

"It's okay, Giles. You were afraid I would hurt somebody else."

He tilted his head in confirmation. "I didn't know how easy it would be to convince you of the facts after you had regained consciousness. It was safer this way." He pulled off his glasses and began cleaning him, the standard action for situations in which he was struggling to find the words. "That wasn't the only reason, though. You had almost died. You had just come out of surgery. I was afraid that if you tried anything, you might hurt yourself."

He replaced his glasses and met her gaze once more. "I'll remove the spell after you're well, and after you've earned back our trust. I should hope by then that you might demonstrate a modicum of judgment for the use of your not inconsiderable power."

He shut the door on his way out.

Willow sighed and laid her head back on her pillow. She wasn't thinking about getting her magic back. She was wondering how she could ever make things right with Giles, how it could ever be the way it was again.

When they got home, they found themselves thrust into the middle of a squabble between the children.

"He took," Robin pouted to her father, pointing at Alex. "Give me."

"Daddy say share," Alex protested, ducking behind his mother's legs.

Buffy sighed and glanced towards the living room, where Dawn, Spike, and Anya were sitting innocently. "Would the babysitting brigade care to fill us in?"

"Alex took Giles' pocket watch from Robin," Anya answered. "In his defense, she was looking at it every two minutes. It was beginning to annoy even me."

"I suggested we let 'em duke it out," Spike added. "Course no one ever listens to me."

Giles knelt on the floor, and pulled both children to stand in front of him. He held his hand out in front of Alex patiently until the boy had handed over the pocket watch. "If you're going to fight over it, then neither of you shall have it." He slipped it back in his pocket.

Anya pushed herself awkwardly to her feet, stretching and making her way over to the foyer to claim her husband. "Did you have a nice visit with Willow?"

Xander kissed her tenderly, and she smiled against his mouth. "Yeah, I feel a lot better now."

"Good. Does that mean Willow's done being evil?"

Xander sighed and closed his eyes. "An, Willow's not evil. She made some mistakes, and she's sorry."

"Oh. Does that mean I should cancel my call for vengeance?" His eyes widened in panic, and she laughed. "I'm kidding."

"Not funny," he insisted as he steered her to the door. "Bye, guys," he called out as they started down the front porch. "So no vengeance spells of any kind, right?" was the last thing they heard him say.

Spike stretched out and plopped his feet on the coffee table. "I'd get out of your hair now too, 'cept you did ask me over 'fore sunrise, and well, daylight now. Give it another couple hours, the sun'll go down, and you'll be rid of me."

"Or you could stay?" Dawn asked hopefully, glancing towards her sister as she said it. "Maybe another movie night like we had the other night? That was nice."

Buffy ignored the question. "Did the twins take their nap?"

"Yeah, right," Dawn answered, rolling her eyes. "You try and get them to sit still for two seconds. If they weren't fighting, they were running laps through the kitchen."

Buffy glanced sideways at her husband. "Giles, could you...?"

"Of course."

Alex had already caught the gist of the conversation and started in a run. He'd only made it to the kitchen doorway before his father caught him and hefted him under his arm. The boy started crying and flailing his limbs in an effort to escape naptime. Giles groaned. "I'm too old to chase wayward children." He held out his hand to Robin, and she was thankfully more compliant.

When they were gone, Buffy took a seat on the couch beside her sister and the vampire who loved her. "We need to have a conversation."

Dawn sighed and nodded. She straightened in her seat, as if guarding herself against whatever was about to be said. Spike shifted too, sliding an arm around her shoulders in a show of support.

"Giles and I talked about this. Actually, this is one of those things Giles said was up to me. Him not being your father or anything, he didn't really think he was in a position to make decisions about this kinda stuff."

"I love Spike," Dawn said defiantly.

"I know. And I'm starting to believe that he loves you." Buffy looked past her sister to the vampire she had known for so many years now, as both enemy and friend. She remembered his bruised and bloodied face after the torture he had endured at Glory's hands, for her, for Dawn. She remembered how he had taken her sister in without question after Tara was brainsucked, how Dawn had seemed more at peace after a few short hours in his company. She remembered inviting him in her home before the battle with Glory, standing in her living room and making him promise to protect Dawn. He had said it so calmly, with such intensity: *Till the end of the world. Even if that happens to be tonight.* Had he loved her even then?

She licked her lips and started with the speech she had mentally rehearsed earlier. "Spike said something to me when we were driving to the hospital from the beach. He said he's been standing on

the outside for years. He's right. And maybe it's time to change that. I would be a pretty big hypocrite if I forgave Willow for everything she did without also acknowledging everything Spike's done for us in the last couple weeks." Buffy smiled at the vampire, a genuine smile of gratitude. "You saved Giles. Without you, he'd probably still be lying upstairs in a coma, and I might have been sitting down here planning our children's funerals." She closed her eyes and swallowed. It was the first time she had put it into words, the first time she truly realized how narrowly she'd avoided that possibility. It made her sick just thinking about it.

She felt Dawn's hand slide into hers, and she laced their fingers together. With a sigh, she opened her eyes and continued. "Spike, you are welcome in our home anytime you like. And if you want to date my sister... Well, I'm not going to do the dance of joy about it, but I'm not going to stand in the way either."

Dawn smiled widely and leaned across the couch to give her sister a big hug.

As soon as they'd pulled apart, Buffy shook one finger in her face. "That doesn't mean there aren't still rules. You may be eighteen, but you're still in high school, and you're still living in our house. That means you still have a curfew, and homework comes first, and I can still ground you if you get in trouble."

"Okay, I get it," Dawn assured her.

Buffy glared at Spike. "And if you want to date Dawn, then you will have to remember that she is still living by our rules. No drinking. No smoking."

Dawn made a face. "Ewww! Like I'd smoke."

Buffy continued as if she hadn't been interrupted. "And you will behave like a total gentleman. Of course, this where I have to tack on the obligatory 'If you ever hurt her, I'll use your ashes for fertilizer' disclaimer."

"Yeah, yeah, I've heard that song before. We finished?"

Buffy sighed and looked at the two of them. "I guess." She shook her head. "Aren't you the least bit embarrassed, Spike, that you're a hundred and twenty-five years old and your girlfriend has a curfew?"

"Least she's sane this time."

Buffy got up off the couch, and spared them one last glance, still shaking her head. "I'd rather not see any kissing, though, if you can help it." She shuddered. "I'm going upstairs to check on the kids."

They were both sleeping when she got up there. Giles was lying beside them, just staring at them. His fingers reached out to brush some hair from Robin's forehead. Buffy slid into bed too, spooning up behind him.

He accepted her arms around his waist, laying his own hands over them. "Thank you," he murmured softly.

"For what?"

He rolled over onto his back so he could see her. "For giving me two such beautiful and amazing children."

She smiled and kissed him. "You're welcome." She shifted position so she was lying on top of him, her head resting on his chest. "As wonderful as I think they are, I still wouldn't mind breaking them of sleeping in Mommy and Daddy's bed."

He chuckled. "Give it a few more days. Robin still had a terrible nightmare last night. Maybe this weekend we can reacquaint them with their own beds."

Buffy began kissing him along his neck and chin. "And then Mommy and Daddy can get reacquainted."

With a hand to the back of her head, he pulled her to his lips and demonstrated just how eager he was for such a reconciliation. Soon their kissing became too passionate, too heated and desperate, and they needed to pull apart or risk not being able to stop.

Buffy laid her head on his chest once more as she caught her breath. She glanced over at their sleeping children and groaned. "The sacrifices parents have to make," she sighed.

"Indeed," he agreed, his fingers tracing feather light paths down her spine. "Did you and Dawn have a productive conversation?"

"Yeah, we'll probably be seeing a lot more of Spike in the future."

"I suppose I should make some half-hearted jibe at his expense, but the truth is he's grown on me."

She nuzzled closer. "Me too," she muttered softly. They were both silent for a little while as they pondered that revelation. Less than two months ago, Buffy would have never expected it: betrayed by a friend and saved by a former enemy.

"Giles?" She was the first to break the silence and change the subject. "Have you been thinking anymore about how you're going to rebuild the Council?"

His hand stilled its movements across her back. "I can hardly think of anything else." He sighed, and his fingers resumed their nervous caresses, this time through her hair. "It's overwhelming. I grew up surrounded by the Council, its traditions, its beliefs. It seemed so big, so old, so *permanent*. I don't know how to even do it justice, starting over with only myself and my modest collection of books. None of the watchers' diaries I have here date back much farther than the Crusades. Whole chapters of Council history are just gone."

He tilted his head to see her more clearly. "Did you know the Watcher's Council used to have a place of honor beside the Roman Emperors at the Coliseum? In fact, they sometimes hired gladiators to help train their slayers."

"Hmm..." she answered thoughtfully. "Feel free to hire Russell Crowe anytime you like."

"I'll consider it," he retorted dryly.

"You know, I've been thinking about what you asked before: what would I change about the Council?"

"Yes," he encouraged.

"First off, I'd get rid of that test, the one from my eighteenth birthday."

"The Tonto di Cruciamantum."

"Yeah, that."

He wrapped his arms tighter around her. "Never again," he promised fiercely.

"And you could rehire Wesley. He was technically a watcher."

"I had considered that. I had actually considered hiring on their entire team."

A beat. "Angel too?"

"He would be an asset, and I did promise him a clean slate."

She nodded against his chest. "You should ask Willow, too. I always figured she'd eventually join up with the Council."

"We'll see," he replied, noncommittally.

Buffy raised her head to look at him. She wasn't stupid. The tension between them in that hospital room had been palpable. The tension now in his frame was an echo of it. She touched her fingers to his cheek and waited until she had captured his gaze.

"We've never talked about it, Giles," she began softly, "but I know it hurt you that I forgave Angel so easily. After what he did to Jenny, to you. You probably wondered how I could do it. God knows it wasn't easy. But just because I forgave Angel, loved him, doesn't mean I forgot what it was like when he was Angelus. Now maybe Willow's the same deal, or maybe it's even worse this time, because she

didn't just hurt you, she hurt our babies, she could have got them killed. And yeah, I feel angry and betrayed, and it's *hard* to reach past that, and if I had lost any of you, then maybe I wouldn't be able to forgive her. But the way things are now, and even after everything she did, I can't help how I feel. I still care about her. I don't want to turn my back on her or cut her out of my life. I guess that's just how my heart works, Giles: when I love somebody, I love them no matter what."

He framed her face between his hands. "That is something I've always admired about you, Buffy. You offer your heart out with both hands."

She leaned down and kissed him, as if to erase his pain over Angelus and Willow both.

"Just give me time to mend fences with her," he begged when they finally pulled apart. As soon as she had nodded her assent, he steered the conversation back to the original subject. "What other ideas have you for the Council?"

"That spell you did when we were fighting Sabrina; that was pretty cool. It was like I could feel you with me, around me, part of me. I felt so safe, so protected, and yet so powerful. It was like I was the Slayer times ten. And when she nailed me with her sword, did you see how it just closed up right away?"

"Yes, I felt it when you were cut."

"Slayer metabolism is cool, but that was *amazing*. Is that normal, Giles? Is that a watcher thing, or a magic thing, or is it just you?"

He pondered the question for a moment, his brow lined with concentration. "I'm not sure. It's something we might need to experiment with. I suspect it might be part of being a watcher, a part that the Council had simply let fall by the wayside. It would make sense, though, if watchers have always continued through family lines, that it might have something to do with them needing this skill, needing to be able to shield their slayers with magic."

"Well, it sure saved my ass. Think that's a tradition we could bring back?"

"Most assuredly. It could prove to be an invaluable asset. I would need to accompany you on patrol, of course, but remain at a distance from the front line in order to work the magic properly." He tilted his head to study her a moment. "You're certainly a wealth of helpful suggestions this evening. Have you any more?"

She smiled then and traced circles on his chest with her finger. "I thought that since watchers get a salary... I think it's only fair that slayers get paid too."

He considered it for a moment. "And if I paid you a salary, would you give up your day job?"

"Give up being a cop? No way! I know you hate it, but I love it. I kinda need it, Giles. To be something besides the Slayer."

She could see that he was disappointed. She felt a little guilty that she couldn't give him this. After all, he only wanted to keep her safe. But being a cop was in her blood now too, and she would miss it. She would only grow to resent him if he pushed her to quit. He must have known that as well, or he would have argued with her. But this was the first time he had mentioned anything of the sort since their initial blowout over her enrollment in the Academy, and he let it drop just as quickly as he brought it up.

"You aren't the first to think of paying the slayer. The Council decided not to, long ago and for many reasons. In the past, her basic needs were always provided for by her watcher. In your case, you were still a dependent of your parents until your mother's death. And now, you have your job, and I have the store." He glanced down at her quizzically. "Why? Do you feel you require a salary?"

"It's more the principle of the matter. Now that I've seen their bankbook, I'm just thinking they were a bunch of cheap bastards. So why don't they pay us? We pretty much get the messy, no-fun,

high-risk part of the deal. Seems like a pat on the back, ‘Well done, pip, pip,’ and a monthly check wouldn’t be too much to ask for.”

“Being a slayer is not a job, Buffy, it’s a sacred destiny. It’s not a choice you were given, nor is it something you can ever quit. It’s a part of who you are. To pay you would be to cheapen your calling. Should we receive a salary for being Alex and Robin’s parents? Being the slayer is more than a job, and as the slayer, you can’t afford to ever think of it as such.”

“And watchers don’t have a sacred destiny? What happened to all Travers’ talk about the bloodlines of the Council, a duty passed down through generations? They get to be chosen and paid at the same time.”

She thought she had him when he paused, that maybe for once she might have beaten him at a debate, but after several moments’ thought, he answered.

“There is an element of destiny and birthright for watchers as well, I’ll grant you that. But watchers have left the Council before, or refused to take up the mantle of their calling. If a watcher turns his back on his duty, there is another to take his place. There is only one Slayer. If she decides it is a job she can simply quit, there is no one to take her place.”

“So you don’t pay us, ’cause you’re afraid we might go on strike for better working hours or something like that?”

The shadow of a smile flickered over his lips before he was serious once more. “There is more to it than that, Buffy. A slayer’s essential duty is to kill. If the Council pays her for this, does she become nothing more than a paid assassin? And if so, then how easy does it become for someone else to pay for her services as well?” He paused for a moment and watched her expression as she mulled that over. “A slayer is not something that should be available to the highest bidder. You are the righteous sword in a nightly battle against evil, and there is no appropriate compensation for that.”

She frowned as she thought about his words. Finally, she tilted her head up to look at him, her chin resting on his chest. “Okay, that all makes sense. But *you* should definitely give yourself a raise if you’re going to be the head watcher dude.”

He laughed deeply then, wrapping his arms tightly around her. “Let’s go downstairs before Spike and Dawn get too comfortable by themselves.”

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Giles asked as he loaded the cooler into the back of Xander’s car.

Buffy rolled her eyes. He had been questioning this trip since the first mention. “Come on, Giles, they live in California. You want them to be afraid of the beach the rest of their lives? A little sun, sand, and fun will do them a world of good.”

“Besides,” Xander added, clapping his friend on the back. “It’s Saturday, the sun is shining, and it’s about the warmest day we’ve had this spring. You want to stay cooped up inside with a stack of books all day?” He gave the watcher a quick glance up and down. “Never mind. I forgot who I was talking to.”

Buffy followed her husband into the house for one more load. “My mom always taught me to get back on the ice, and I—”

“Ice?” he interrupted. “I thought we were going to the beach?”

She sighed and handed him the folding chairs and beach towels. “Ice, as in ice skating, as in getting back on the ice after you fall down. Kinda like getting back on the horse, except I never really went

horseback riding, unless you count those little pony rides at the fair, which I don't think you can, 'cause they only really go in circles and—"

"You had a point, Buffy?"

"Right," she said, grabbing the last of their picnic supplies and a wide brimmed straw hat she tugged on her head. "My point is we take them to the beach today, and we make it fun, and they won't be scared of it tomorrow. Besides, you and I could stand a little R and R. No thoughts about Willow or the new Council or Spike or the next big bad headed our way... and those better not be research-type books I saw you sneak into one of the bags."

They loaded the last of their things into Xander's car, and the Giles family piled into the little red convertible, leaving Xander and Anya to follow in their own, well-stocked car.

"Go park?" Alex asked brightly.

Buffy turned in her seat to face him. "Sort of, honey. There's a swing set where we're going and probably lots of other little kids to play with."

"Go slide?" Robin asked hopefully.

"I don't think there's a slide there," Buffy answered.

"Sure there is." Dawn was sitting in the backseat between the twins. It prevented them from starting a shoving contest. "They put a waterslide in just off the pier."

"We'll see," Buffy hedged. She was sure Alex would be willing to jump, especially after hearing about his earlier dive off the cliffs, but she wasn't sure she wanted him to. The water was probably too deep for him. Robin, on the other hand, wouldn't dare.

They arrived at the beach and found a place to spread out their blankets and chairs and picnic stuff. The sand was peppered with little islands of blankets and umbrellas, while the waterline was dotted with figures in bathing suits. The weather was warm and conducive to sunbathing, and so it seemed a large percentage of Sunnydale had decided to spend their Saturday taking advantage of it.

They managed to stake out a more secluded portion of beach, and Buffy immediately began lathering Alex with sunblock, even over his squirming protests. Robin, on the other hand, claimed a spot on Giles' lap and refused to budge.

"Here, do her," Buffy ordered, passing him the sunblock. "And don't miss any spots, or she'll end up polka-dotted."

Alex was eagerly watching a group of children build a sand castle, but seemed uncharacteristically hesitant to join them. Tethered to the edge of their beach blanket, he stared at the other children wide-eyed, as his thumb slowly found its way into his mouth. Buffy exchanged a significant glance with Giles.

"We can build a sand castle right here," she told her son, kneeling at the edge of the blanket and beginning to do just that.

He quickly warmed up to the task, his Uncle Xander offering helpful construction suggestions. Dawn was on pail duty, bringing back pails of water to mix with the sand until it was damp enough to pack together. Anya and Giles both reclined on their respective beach chairs, reading. Hers was "The First Year," his was "Fox in Socks," for his daughter, of course.

Robin grew restless after a short while, stealing glances at the castle construction currently in progress. Giles encouraged her to join the others, assuring her that he would still be seated right here if she needed anything. Buffy smiled when her daughter finally relaxed enough to begin playing in the sand.

They were devious in how they weaned the twins out of their sheltered alcove and onto the greater part of the beach. The castle's moat and attached structures stretched closer and closer to the water and farther and farther from their blankets. The twins were too occupied with building to notice until

they'd reached the waterline. Robin jumped back slightly when the water washed in almost to her toes. Impulsively, she reached for her mother's hand, and Buffy felt a rush of joy and promise at the small gesture.

The next wave washed in farther and brushed over the little girl's toes. She reached her arms up for Buffy to lift her off the sand, her eyes scanning the beach for Giles' form until he waved back at her. That calmed her, and she turned back to study the waves smoothing the sand. Completely consumed by the water's movements, Robin absently laid her head against Buffy's shoulder.

Buffy's eyes misted up with the weight of her daughter's head against her shoulder. She felt the child's soft breath against her neck and dared a tender kiss on the girl's brow. For the first time since getting her back, Buffy felt like Robin's mother, that there might be some hope of claiming a part of the girl's heart for herself.

"Why?" Robin asked her softly, pointing one finger at the wave washing in.

"Why what, sweetie?"

"Why move?"

Buffy hadn't the faintest idea how to explain ocean waves to her daughter; she didn't really understand it herself. The girl had been silent for so long after her adoptive parents' deaths, but now that she had regained her tongue, she had turned into a little fountain of questions.

"I think that's a Daddy question. Here, I'll show you something cool you can do with it, though."

She knelt in the sand, just past the highest waterline. She waited for the water to roll out, and then quickly wrote "Robin" in the sand with one finger. A moment later and the next wave washed over it, erasing the letters completely.

"Primitive Etcha-Sketch," she informed her daughter solemnly.

Robin smiled and reached out her own finger to give it a try. Buffy set her down to give her room. She didn't time her artwork just right, though, and the water washed over her fingers mid-stroke, splashing some water up into her eyes. She blinked startled eyes in Buffy's direction.

Buffy had some experience with this. If Alex took a tumble, he looked to his audience before deciding what his own reaction should be. If they laughed, he laughed. If they, and by they Buffy was mostly thinking of Giles, hovered and checked him top to bottom for injuries, Alex figured he was hurt and should cry.

So Buffy laughed and splashed her own hands in the water. Robin echoed the laughter and resumed her attempts at drawing in the sand.

"Mommy!" Alex jumped on her back from behind, his arms circling her neck. "Go swim. Pwease," he pleaded.

"Alright. But if you get cold, you have to come out."

"Look!" Robin begged, tugging on Buffy's hand, apparently competing for her attention now. But the water had washed her artwork away before Buffy could see it. "Watch," she demanded.

She drew a rather shaky letter R in the sand and pronounced that "R for Robin," before the water wiped clean her accomplishment.

Alex figured out their game and drew his own letter in the sand. "Omega," he said proudly. Then he tugged on his mother's hand and gave her the puppy dog eyes he had learned at her knee. "You swim too."

Buffy sighed, pulled in separate directions by her two children. She led them both back up to the blankets and took off their outer layer of clothing. Underneath, she had already dressed them in their bathing suits. She'd done the same for herself and stripped off her shorts and shirt. That pried Giles' eyes from his book long enough to get a good look at her in her bikini.

"Daddy swim," Alex asked as he climbed on his father's chest.

Robin climbed up beside him. In this, they seemed to be in agreement.

"I would," he promised them, "but I've forgotten my bathing suit."

"*Conveniently* forgotten his bathing suit," Buffy added. "C'mon, race you."

She took off at a run, and the twins were soon on her heels, giggling until they'd all run splashing into the surf. Xander came running behind them and dove in once the water was waist high. Dawn was the last one in, tiptoeing along the edges, complaining that the water was too cold, until the twins had both splashed her and she was wet anyway. She started to chase them, but they hid behind their mother, and Dawn had far too much experience in splashing contests with Buffy to even attempt it.

"Robin seems to be much less clingy," Anya commented as she glanced over the top of her book.

The watcher's diary in Giles' hands seemed to be more show than anything; he had barely read two sentences out of it. Mostly, he had been watching Buffy and the twins over the top of it. A part of him wanted to join them, but he saw how Robin was beginning to warm up to her mother, and he couldn't bring himself to intrude on their bonding.

"Yes," he answered. "I think the time I spent under that spell forced her to rely on Buffy and Dawn. I believe she's beginning to trust other people again."

Anya nodded and lapsed into silence, absorbing herself in her book once more.

Giles interrupted. "Anya, if you had so much money, you didn't know what to do with it, what would you, umm... *do* with it?"

She turned her head and stared at him blankly. "You can't ever have *too* much money," she informed him.

"Ah, of course," he answered and resumed pretending to read the watcher's diary in his hands as he watched the others in the water.

Within an hour, the twins were shivering and ready to come in out of the water. Buffy had been ready after the first ten minutes, but children were generally willing to turn blue before admitting to being cold when it came to swimming. Buffy remembered camping trips with Dawn all too well, the pair of them needing to warm up by the campfire after particularly brisk swims.

They all dried off, pulled on dry clothes over their suits, and gathered around their blankets for a picnic lunch. Robin claimed a spot on her father's lap and regaled him with her swimming exploits, including the wave that had knocked her over from behind. Alex jumped in with his own story, because the wave that had knocked *him* over was much bigger.

Food eaten, the twins resumed their sand castle building activities. The adults stretched out and enjoyed the afternoon sun.

"Those supplies you ordered were in this morning's shipment," Anya remarked offhandedly.

"What supplies?" Buffy asked, as she turned to her watcher.

Giles tilted his head and pursed his lips as if screwing up the courage to tell her something. "When I did that spell, to trace the magic back from Robin..."

"Oh, no," she insisted. "You're not trying that again."

"No, I'm not," he assured her. "But I discovered something then, a spell that was still on Robin. It's very likely on Alex as well."

Buffy sat forward, her eyes growing round with alarm. "What kind of spell?"

He hesitated, dropping his gaze as he said it softly, "A Chaos spell."

She felt a rush of slayer adrenaline. She wanted to put her fist through something, or rather through *someone*. "Ethan Rayne. Oh, I hope he shows his face in Sunnydale again, so I can introduce him to Mr. Pointy. He is *sooo* dead meat. He's worse than dead meat, he's... he's..."

"The fungus that grows on the carcass of dead meat?" Anya offered helpfully.

"Yeah, that." Buffy pointed enthusiastically at the ex-demon. "I'm so gonna kick his ass right back to that Initiative detainment facility. They'd take him back, wouldn't they?"

Giles sighed. "Buffy, he cast the spell a long time ago, probably when they were both babies. It might be what prevented us from finding Robin, but it might also be what led us to Alex. And there is also a very good chance that Ethan's Chaos spell is the only thing that saved Robin from sharing the other potentials' fate that night."

She frowned. "So it's not a bad thing?"

"Not entirely."

"But you're still going to get rid of it?"

"Chaos is wild and unpredictable. It might have saved her the last time; it might put her in danger the next. The safest thing would be to remove the spell from both of them."

"Okay," Buffy agreed, then began smiling wickedly as she caught sight of something behind Giles. She waved off his curious expression at her inappropriate amusement. "Just thinking about Chaos: unpredictable, wild, bad or good, depending on your perspective." She inched back from him ever so slightly as she burst out laughing.

He frowned at her suspiciously. "What's so funny?"

"Oh, you'll find out in a just a second."

And just a second later, he shrieked and bolted to his feet. Buffy didn't know he could shriek like that, all high-pitched and girly. Apparently none of the others did either, as he had garnered the attention of all. He stood stiffly, with water dripping down his hair and shoulders and shirt. Twin giggles chorused behind him, and he turned to see the two children standing innocently with their empty pails.

"Well, that was... bracing."

They must have seen something flash in his eyes, because they both took off at a dead run. He was on their heels a moment later, foiled when they split off in opposite directions. He caught up to Alex, scooping the child up and tossing him over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. He turned in Robin's direction. She had lost her head start when she stopped to laugh at Alex's capture, but after seeing her father start in her direction, she valiantly struggled to put distance between them. Small legs and small lungs were her downfall, and Giles had her tucked under his arm within moments.

"You want Daddy to go for a swim, do you?"

Both children squealed and laughed, kicking and struggling against his grip as he walked ever closer to the surf. Buffy didn't think he would actually do it, not fully clothed, not after insisting that the water was too cold. But he did. He waded out knee deep and then dove backwards into a wave, taking both the children with him. The water washed over them, and then he reemerged at the other side of the wave, standing up with a child in each arm. The three of them were thoroughly drenched as they made their way out of the surf. Buffy laughed at the sight. Poor Giles was wearing jeans.

He set the twins down halfway back to their blanket, and they raced back to their mother. She had a dry towel waiting for each of them. Giles stopped just in front of her, and she sized him up and down.

"You could have at least taken your shoes off first."

He gave her a lopsided grin. "My glasses would have been the wiser choice. I appear to have lost them in the surf." His grin evened out into a full smile. "Care to help me look for them?"

“Huh?”

Alex leaned over to whisper in her ear, “Daddy throw you too.”

Buffy’s eyes widened, and she was on her feet, running.

“You weren’t supposed to warn her, Alex,” he scolded before taking off after her.

The shifting sand beneath their feet put them both at a disadvantage, and Buffy was laughing too hard to keep whatever edge being the Slayer might have given her. He was pulling her back by her wrist before they had gone a hundred feet. She twisted and spun him off balance, and soon they were sparring in the sand. They traded blows, Buffy ever careful of the fact that he wasn’t wearing protective gear, and Giles seemingly in a Ripperish mood: he fought dirty. She found herself actually struggling to stay ahead of him and countering moves that he had never taught her.

They attracted a curious audience. Buffy earned a few “Ooo’s” and “Ahhh’s” as she executed a fairly athletic flip onto her feet after Giles knocked her to the sand. She tried to return the favor, but he caught her leg sweep before it could connect and used her momentum to spin her past him. Unfortunately for him, he also caught her next blow, this time with his chin.

He staggered backwards, bent over with a hand pressed to his jaw.

“Omigod!” Buffy cried, rushing to his side. “I’m so sorry! Giles, are you okay?”

He hefted her over his shoulder before she knew it, and was carrying her towards the ocean as he scolded, “How many times have I warned you not to let your guard down, even when faced with an apparently incapacitated opponent?”

“Ah! That was a dirty trick. Put me down. I already went swimming. Now I’m all dry and dressed. No fair!”

“The forces of evil rarely fight fair.”

He waded out knee-deep, and now she was holding tight so he *wouldn’t* put her down.

“If you don’t throw me in, I’ll cook dinner for the next week,” she begged.

“Is that supposed to be an incentive?”

“I’ll keep the twins out of your hair all day tomorrow so you can have some peace and quiet.”

“I spent eleven days learning that peace and quiet are vastly overrated.”

“Alright, I’ll talk Dawn into watching the twins tomorrow so *we* can have some *not* peace and quiet.”

He seemed to consider her offer.

“C’mon, Giles, it’s been like a month.”

“And whose fault would that be?”

“Well, mine,” she admitted. “But here I am, trying to make it up to you.”

He turned towards shore, and she was sure she had won. “Actually,” he told her, “I’m fairly certain you won’t deny me on account of some harmless fun.”

Turned out he had faced shore only to give himself a better angle for tossing her into an approaching wave.

She stood up, dripping wet and cold and shivering. “Oh, you are going to regret that, Mister.”

He smiled wickedly. “Am I?”

She trudged out of the surf, stalking him as he slowly retreated back towards the blankets. “Oh, not now,” she promised him. “But soon, and when you least expect it.”

The sun went down, and the group curled up beside a bonfire they’d built on the beach. Spike had joined them at nightfall, and he and Dawn were taking a leisurely stroll along the waterline. That was

one good thing about her sister dating a vampire: she didn't need to worry about after dark attacks; Spike would protect her. Anya was curled up against Xander's arm as he attempted to demonstrate for her the proper way to cook marshmallows. She preferred them black and burnt, and he decreed that there was no hope for her. The twins were consuming their uncle's marshmallows as fast as he could make them, so the graham crackers and chocolate he had waiting never actually became s'mores. Buffy nibbled on the chocolate until only the graham crackers were left, and Xander pronounced his whole s'more making effort a complete failure.

Buffy and Giles were nearly dry, nestled up together near the fire. She had slipped on a light jacket over her bare arms and pair of sweat pants over her shorts. The night had rapidly cooled as the sun set, and the warmth of the fire was more than welcome. Giles was wearing his jacket now too, but the poor man's jeans were still damp.

The beach was mostly empty, so the figure she spied moving towards them stuck out like a sore thumb. Buffy felt the familiar tingle even at this distance, and looked sideways at Giles.

"Umm... Don't want to upset you, but..."

He glanced over at the approaching figure. "It's okay, Buffy. I invited him."

"You did?"

"I promised, remember? A clean slate." He stood and took each of his children by their sticky hands. "Come on, Robin, let's go meet your Uncle Angel, shall we?"

Buffy smiled, knowing that Angel had earned the title Uncle, that he would have a place in their lives, not just as part of Giles' new Council, but as part of their extended family.

Alex looked at his father and informed him solemnly, "Angel big poof wif lame hair."

Giles turned to give Buffy an astonished look.

"Don't look at me. Ten bucks says Spike taught him that."

Giles laughed. "Yes, well let's not repeat that in front of Angel, okay, Alex?"

Buffy watched the three of them meet Angel halfway. Whatever brainwashing Spike had managed ran only surface deep. Alex didn't hesitate to weasel a piggyback ride out of Angel within the first two minutes. Robin, however, stayed close to her father as they walked slightly away from the group. Buffy wished she could hear what they were saying. She and Xander would have taken bets on how long before Giles asked the vampire to join his new Council. Buffy would have won. She knew her watcher, and there was only so much social chit-chat he could exchange with Angel. Giles would have cut to the chase within the first minute.

She asked Angel later, when it was just the two of them sitting alone on the pier. She was right. It had been the second thing Giles had said to him.

"So are you going to be part of this new Council?"

His face was unreadable, as she had always remembered it. The tall, mysterious, brooding stranger who was the crux of every teenage girl's romantic fantasies. "I'll have to discuss it with the others, of course. I think Cordelia will lobby for it, mainly because of the steady paycheck. Gunn will be the only one we'll need to win over, I think. Let him be a freelance operative, though, and he might agree to it."

"Gunn? I think I met him briefly when we were in LA after the twins were born."

"Yes."

She shook her head, and then tipped it back to look at the stars. "Seems weird to think of you with this whole separate life, with friends that I don't even know. It seems like we just got put on pause: you walked off into the mist and nothing changed between us."

He leaned back to stargaze in a matching pose. "I don't know. You were pretty angry with me when Faith was there. And I have fond memories of beating up your commando boyfriend."

She smiled and nudged him playfully with her shoulder. "Okay, so we didn't stay exactly the same. Still, you think we've changed enough that we could do the friendship thing? You think it's been enough years now?" She felt his eyes on her and turned to meet them.

"I left because we both wanted more than friendship, and we couldn't have it. Things are different now. *We* would be different."

She nodded and leaned sideways until her head was resting against his shoulder. "This is nice. I've missed you." She sighed sadly. "It's too bad about that perfect happiness clause."

There was a long silence before he spoke. "Why? I thought you were happy with Giles?"

She laughed and looped her arm through his. "Oh, I am, but this is usually the part where the happily married woman tries to play matchmaker for her ex."

He shrugged and deadpanned, "You could match me up with someone who would make me perfectly miserable."

"You are being sarcastic, right?"

"Yes, I am," he assured her with a shadow of a grin.

"I'll have to get used to that dry wit of yours again." She placed her head on his shoulder once more, and they sat in companionable silence.

She tapped him on the shoulder, and he startled, glancing back first at her and then Angel. "Hey, Giles, let's go for a walk, just the two of us."

He checked the time before he considered it. "It's starting to get late. We should think about getting home, putting the children to bed."

She exchanged a knowing look with Anya, the two women smirking. Buffy tugged on his hand insistently. "The kids are already all asleep and cozy right here. Angel will watch over everyone. No harm in a little walk."

He acquiesced, and they walked hand in hand along the beach. She asked him to point out the stars to her, which he did, with a great deal more detail than she had wanted. They ventured past the public beach, and she led him up the embankment to a sheltered alcove, made private by a small rise of boulders.

"Buffy, what are you—?"

He trailed off when she pulled him behind the rocks and he saw the blankets, the wine, the candles. "Anya arranged to have all this set up for us."

A bemused expression washed over him, and he shook his head. "I should have guessed."

"She says you get crabby." Buffy wrapped her arms around his waist and reached up to give him a gentle peck on the nose. "And I figure, beds or the backseat of a car probably aren't appealing options for you right now, so..." She tossed her head back, smiling up at the night sky. "So just the stars above us and a blanket beneath, 'cause sand in tender places... not good."

He laughed and returned her embrace. "The thought is nice, but we really should take Dawn and the children home soon."

Her eyes lowered from the starlit sky above and found his eyes watching her. Her smile grew wider, and she shook her head. "When Spike and Dawn get back, the gang'll see everyone safely home, and Dawn'll watch the twins 'til we get back."

"Angel?"

"Will be returning to LA, supposedly to talk to the team about joining the Council, but mostly I don't think he wants to overstay his welcome. We had a nice visit, though. Thank you for inviting him."

"You're welcome," he answered sincerely, rubbing her back as his eyes scanned over the seduction scene laid out before him. "If you'd like to invite him over another time, I wouldn't mind."

"Enough talk about Angel." She leaned forward and kissed him, closing her eyes. His hands slid down to her waist, pulling her tight against him. She smiled as their kiss ended, still feeling the lingering tingle of his mouth on her lips. "Enough talk, period."

He lowered her to the waiting blanket and demonstrated his agreement. His touch was warm against her skin, his fingers sliding up beneath her jacket and shirt. Each kiss became more passionate than the last, as they both tried to communicate without words the full range of their emotions for the other. So much had happened between them since the last time they had made love. She had hated him for giving their daughter away without so much as a word to her on the subject. The hurt had carved itself even deeper when Robin's return only proved that she was his child alone, when the girl spurned every touch but his. And then had come Willow's fateful spell, and Buffy had a taste of what her life would be like without him. She didn't like it. She had regretted her earlier anger towards him, had wanted nothing more than for him to open his eyes, so she could tell him she was sorry, that he was forgiven, that she didn't care what he had done, as long as they had each other and their children, nothing else mattered. Night after night, she had lain beside his still form, wanting to tell him so many things.

She poured her heart out to him now, with the desperation of her kiss, with her fingers exploring every part of him they could reach, gathering him to her possessively, with her mouth tenderly kissing over all the bumps and scrapes he had earned in battle, had earned defending *her*, with her tongue memorizing the taste of him, tracing over the lines of collarbone and ribs and hips, with her soft sighs as he touched her in just the right places, with her tears that streaked unbidden down her cheeks as she took him inside her.

It was a reunion of sorts, an affirmation that the past was now firmly behind them, and the future was all that was important. A new beginning.

There were so many things he wanted to tell her as well. There were no words necessary; she could sense it all: his regret for the pain he had caused her over Robin, his need for her forgiveness, his guilt, deserved or not, for all that had happened, for Longworth's theft of their daughter, for the other watchers and potential slayers they could not save, and his fear like a raw wound still healing after his ordeal at Willow's hands: fear of the darkness that forced him to leave the lights on like a small child wherever he went, fear of being closed in, locked in, trapped, so that he rarely shut doors behind himself anymore, so that even Buffy noticed the flooded bathroom floor each morning, sadly aware that he could not bring himself to close even the shower door completely, and greater than any of the others, his terrible fear of the loneliness he had endured. He had missed her dearly, and she knew the true depth of that ache without words ever passing between them. She knew it from his touch, from the way his breath caught as she kissed along his jawline, from the touch of his fingers across her skin as he proved to himself that she was real and not merely a dream, from the way he worshipped her with his body until she was writhing in his arms as if on fire.

She begged him to come for her, and he shook in her arms as he did, desperately clinging to her as if she might disappear in the next instant. He kissed her then and continued to love her and touch her until he'd brought her to her own release, her eyes open and unguarded and looking into his as she came.

The night air rapidly cooled them, so they reached for a second blanket to lay over themselves and shared the warmth of their bodies, snuggled up together beneath the stars. Giles offered to pour them each a glass of wine, but she refused to let him out of her arms long enough to do so. He sighed and pressed her head down to rest against his chest, and they enjoyed a rare interlude of blissful calm.

As all good things must end, it was Giles who finally reminded them of their obligations back at home.

"We should probably head back, make sure Dawn was able to get the twins settled in bed without difficulty."

"Uh-uh. You promised."

"Promised what, my love?"

"To tell me your life story, when the world wasn't falling down around us." She snuggled closer, gazing up at the night sky. "The stars are bright, not a cloud in sight." She made a face, and he chuckled. "Tck, that rhymed. My point is we've made the world safe for democracy again. So pay up."

"Very well. I did promise." He sighed and absently ran his fingers through her hair as he spoke. "Once upon a time, there was a boy, Rupert Giles. Handsome and charming and suave and resembling a young Hugh Grant... Oww!" He jumped as she pinched him. "Or possibly Jude Law?" She began tickling him unmercifully, and he rolled them both several times off the blanket and across the sand as he attempted to evade her assault. Laughing, he caught her hands in his own and pulled her down for another lingering kiss.

She stayed as she was, sprawled on top of him, laying her head down in the crook of his neck. "No fair trying to distract me. I'm serious. I want to hear it."

He resumed stroking her hair, shaking bits of sand from it. "If you insist. I suppose our hero's tale begins when he was very young, when his father told him that his life belonged to a girl not even born yet."

"And he was bummed out?"

"Exceedingly so."

"Because he wanted to be a fighter pilot?"

He tilted his head down and flashed her a wry, embarrassed grin. "You remember that?"

"Oh, yeah, baby. I told Xander and Willow, and they used to salute you when you weren't looking."

"I was ten, Buffy. I'll wager that when you were ten, you wanted to be a princess or a fashion model."

"Uh-uh. I was going to be Dorothy Hamill." He stared at her blankly for a moment, waiting for the explanation. "Ice skater."

"Ah. At any rate, this stalwart and true young lad tried very hard: learning languages and studying the occult, all the while wishing nothing more than to be like other boys his age. Sound like a familiar tale?"

She raised herself up on one elbow to look down on him, her hair falling over them. "I'm sorry. I kinda ruined your life, and I wasn't even born yet. I guess I'm kinda good at messing stuff up."

He took her face between his hands, his fingers caressing her cheekbones and brushing over her lips. His expression was open, tender, and forgiving. "Ah, but you must let me finish the story. You see, if he had known at the time the girl he was destined to serve, he would have given up everything gladly."

"He would have really given up all of his dreams, just for her?"

"She would have been the dream that burned more brightly."

“Mmmm... mushy talk. You get a kiss for that.” She bent her head slightly to close the distance between them and kissed him deeply, her hand sliding up to touch where his fingers rested against her cheeks. Their eyes closed, and time stopped.

“She would have been his North Star, his light at the end of the tunnel, the promise he clung to in moments of despair—”

“Okay, now you’re bordering on overkill.”

He chuckled. “But here’s the rub: he would have gladly chosen his fate if he had known her, but he didn’t and the choice was not his to make. So he resented the burden of his destiny and grieved for everything it cost him. He hated his father for forcing it upon him, and the two bickered at every opportunity. He turned to his mother for comfort, but she died when he was fourteen, leaving him to his father’s mercies and the man’s desires for a proper education: a private all boys’ school sponsored by the Watcher’s Council and more study than anyone that age could bear.”

“What was she like?”

“Hmmm? My mother?”

“Yes.”

“I’m afraid my memories of her are colored by my general unhappiness at the time. She was the only thing in my life that had nothing to do with watchers and study, and she often intervened with Father on my behalf. In hindsight, I would have to say that she had a tendency to coddle me.”

“And you loved her for it.”

“Dearly.”

She was shivering in the cool night air, and he guided her back over to their blankets, wrapping them both in soft cotton. She prompted him to continue with his tale, “So your mother died, and you sorta rebelled against the whole watcher thing?”

“Not exactly. You’ll have to let me finish the story. The rebellion came later. No, at first I tried to be the perfect son. I seemed to think I had an obligation to Mother to put the pieces back together and to help Father cope with his grief, even while I was struggling with my own. I had this misguided notion that he might be willing to reach out to me, that her death might bring us closer, but it only pushed us farther apart. It didn’t matter how hard I tried, I was never what he wanted. I could never make up for her loss.”

“And then you hooked up with Ethan and dropped out and stuff?”

He frowned at her. “You’re certainly eager to skip ahead to my wilder days.”

She blushed and buried her head against his shoulder. “Sorry. It’s just... I’ve always been curious how you went from this stuffy, proper, traditional, tweed-wearing watcher-in-training to this lock-picking, car-hotwiring, cheating-at-cards little hellion.”

He chuckled and turned his head to kiss her forehead. “It might surprise you to learn that the whole affair with Oxford and Ethan and Eyghon and Randall was not my first such rebellion.”

She raised her head, her attention caught. His eyes were sparkling with mischief. “Really?”

He nodded and paused for a moment in thought. “The cursed band candy made us all behave as if we were about how old? Sixteen? That would be about right, I think.”

“What happened?” Buffy leaned closer, desperately curious.

He smiled at her avid interest, clearly intending to torment her by disclosing the details only sparingly. “Well, in order to fully appreciate that whole story, I think I first have to tell you a little bit more about my father...”

She listened to his words, losing track of time as she received a long overdue education in her watcher and husband.

Three months later...

The song was slow, wistful, some trite pop song about fathers watching their daughters grow up. Giles was more than surprised to find that it was actually making him a bit misty. He tightened his grip around Dawn's waist and pressed his cheek to the crown of her hair, closing his eyes and trying to ignore the camera flashes from the photographers.

"I kept my end of the bargain," he murmured softly.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," she sighed, as if they'd already had this conversation a hundred times, which they had. "I'll finish school."

"And if you expect me to pay for it," he added, "I'll need to see your report card at the end of each term."

"God, Giles, it's not like you and Buffy aren't gazillionaires."

"And it's not like you don't have the talent to do well in school, if you don't let yourself become distracted."

"Fine. But you haven't exactly kept up your end of the bargain yet."

He frowned down on her and paused the slow swaying of their dance for a moment. "I haven't?"

She turned her face up to him then. She had grown into such a lovely young woman. Her face was accented with more make-up than he had ever seen her wear, and her hair was swept up in an elaborate arrangement that seemed so much more adult than he could bear to think of her. In her dark eyes, he still saw the ten-year-old girl who had followed Buffy into the library that first year, complaining that Buffy was supposed to take her to the mall. He remembered the iron will in those eyes that next summer, as she had stood defiantly in the middle of his library, demanding that he explain to her why her sister had run away and why no one would tell her anything, insisting that she knew that he knew, because she wasn't stupid and she heard him and her mother downstairs talking all the time after they thought she was in bed. Dawn had started to cry then, but she was resolute in her determination that he would tell her everything.

Intellectually, he knew that those events had never actually happened, but it didn't erase the images from his mind or change the fullness of his heart when he looked down on her. She was eighteen now, but still impossibly young in his eyes, far too young for any of this, in his opinion. But it was the iron will in her eyes that had coaxed his blessing on this marriage, against his better judgment. As he had looked into Dawn's determined brown eyes, Spike's earlier words had echoed in his mind: *Dawn's old enough to make her own choices now. In the end, she'll do what she likes, so you have to ask yourself: do you want to be part of her life or not?*

A part of him wanted to keep her young and innocent, wanted to shelter her as he couldn't shelter her sister, but the greater part of him knew that Dawn hadn't been young or innocent in a very long time, not since they had put Buffy's coffin in the ground. Not since before that, really. Not since their mad dash through the desert to escape a hellgod, or the unexpected loss of her mother before that. Not since that moment at Buffy's twentieth birthday party, when Dawn had stood so calmly in the living room with a carving knife in one hand as blood dripped down the other. *Is this blood? This is blood, isn't it? It can't be me. I'm not a key. I'm not a thing.* That had been the moment she had said goodbye to her childhood.

He might think she was rushing into this, but half a lifetime lived on a Hellmouth, surrounded by death, had surely taught her that life was precious and fleeting and that happiness should be snatched with both hands and held tight for however long one could protect it.

She stroked a perfectly manicured hand down the side of his face. "You promised to be civil the entire day, and the day's not over yet."

"I've kept my tongue so far, haven't I?" He grinned ruefully as he caught sight of something out of the corner of his eye. "I promise you, Spike and I will get along famously for the remainder of the day. Your father, on the other hand, has been glaring daggers at me since dinner."

She stole a glance in her father's direction, and then gently steered their dancing so as to put him out of Giles' line of sight. "Dad got to walk me down the aisle, didn't he? And we had our dance. He shouldn't be mad just 'cause I wanted a dance with you too."

He laid his cheek against her hair once more. Their song would end soon. "We'll all miss you around the house."

She laughed lightly. "Yeah, right. I bet you've already been in my room with the tape measure, figuring out how many bookshelves you can fit."

He chuckled too. "No, your sister informs me that Robin shall require her own room. So, unless we move to another house or add on to this one, I'll have to make do as I always have."

"Poor Giles," she sighed.

"We truly shall miss you, Dawn. *I'll* miss you."

"Yeah, you might actually have to start paying for babysitting."

"Dawn," he chided.

"Yeah, I know. I'll miss you guys too. You have to come visit. Maybe spend Christmas with us. The twins have never seen snow. We'll take them sledding."

He sighed sadly. "Not that I'm not incredibly proud of you for being accepted to Yale, but you couldn't choose a college that wasn't on the other side of the country? Stanford also has an excellent theatre department, you know."

"Meryl Streep went to Yale. And Sigourney Weaver and Jodie Foster... and one day they'll say that's where Dawn Summers went."

Her voice was filled with such youthful enthusiasm, he couldn't help a sly comment in response. "Yes, that terribly famous actress with the odd husband who never ages or goes out in daylight."

"Hey, hey," she protested. "You promised."

"Yes, I did," he answered, suitably chastised. In truth, he was being good; he had withheld a much more biting comment about Spike.

The music stopped, and he tucked her hand in the curve of his arm and escorted her from the floor. She gave him a bright smile, and he leaned forward to kiss her gently on the cheek. Spike was waiting to claim her for their own dance, and Giles smiled for the vampire as well before handing Dawn over to his care.

"Here, have some champagne." Buffy pressed a flute into his hand. "It makes the whole thing easier to watch."

He wrapped one arm around her and spared her a sideways glance before taking a long swig of bubbly. "They seem very happy together."

"Yeah," she reluctantly agreed. "But I always thought Dawn had better taste than Spike."

Giles nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, it's a shame she couldn't settle down with a man who was only twice her age."

A smirk was beginning to twist his lips, and Buffy nudged him in the ribs. "Okay, I get it." She lifted her own glass in a toast. "To unconventional relationships. May they all turn out as well as ours."

"Here, here," he answered, clinking their glasses before taking another swallow of champagne.

Anya sat with two pieces of wedding cake in front of her. She had scraped the frosting off of one, and was working on sneaking one of the frosting flowers off of Xander's piece. The placard in the middle of the table read: *Reserved- Scoobies*.

Willow sat on Xander's other side, chatting with Buffy about the latest happenings at Sabrina's old sorority house. After the debacle with Camela's sword, the sorority girls were left more or less leaderless, and Willow had stepped in to fill that role. She felt responsible for them, and cleaning up the mess Sabrina had made of these girls' lives, not to mention the young runaways at the shelter, could be considered appropriate penance.

Time was healing the rift between Willow and the rest of the group, each side doing their level best to reach past their own hurt for the sake of friendship. Even Giles had had his moments, when he and Willow were both bent over their respective books during late night research sessions and able to exchange teasing comments about who had eaten the last jelly donut without the awkwardness that had been present only a month ago. Even so, Giles had yet to give her back her magic, although Willow didn't seem to mind doing things the hard way this time.

Giles was sitting on Buffy's other side, their hands clasped together, watching the twins on the other side of the reception hall. Three months had done wonders for Robin, and she had certainly revealed herself to be a little social butterfly when given the opportunity, although she still favored Giles over anyone else. At the moment, she and Alex were competing for their grandparents' attention, and Hank was lavishing it on them both as if he hadn't neglected his family for the entire previous year.

Anya licked the frosting off her fork and thumped it on the table, grumbling loudly enough to stop the other conversations at the table, "I don't understand. This baby was supposed to be born eight days ago. I had the date marked on the calendar."

Giles pulled his attention away from the twins and smiled at her kindly. "Babies don't always come on schedule, Anya."

She glared at him. "I didn't ask for your opinion. Your children came on their due date, not to mention six months earlier than other babies do."

Buffy chuckled. "I never thought about that. I guess they did come on their due date."

Anya gave her a withering glare twice as scathing as the one she had given Giles. "Yes, aren't we the lucky little Slayer? I don't understand. I've tried everything it says in the book. Xander and I have had so much sex, even I'm getting sick of it. Well, okay, maybe not."

Xander blushed and offered to fetch her more cake, corner pieces with much frosting, quickly disappearing before waiting for her answer.

Willow patted the despondent mother-to-be on her hand. "Just be patient; it won't be too much longer."

Anya bit off another mouthful of cake before mumbling bitterly, "What would you know about it? Evil lesbian."

Willow slowly withdrew her hand.

"You know what worked for me?" Buffy offered. "Getting kidnapped. That's a sure way to get labor started." Everyone else at the table stared at her incredulously for a moment, and she frowned back. "What? I can't crack jokes? I was more than six months along with *twins*, and Anya had me dressed up like a pumpkin. Be thankful Dawn let you duck out of the whole bridesmaid thing."

"My bridesmaid's dresses were very pretty," Anya protested before stuffing her mouth with more cake.

Giles took a swallow of champagne and leaned back in his chair, legs comfortably crossed. "I have something that I think might make you feel better, Anya."

She looked doubtful. "If you have more labor-inducing suggestions, I assure you, we've tried everything mentioned in those books. And might I add, that some of those sexual positions are not so easy to accomplish with nine months of baby inside you."

He cleared his throat and shifted in his seat uneasily. "I was thinking more of something that might lift your spirits. You may have noticed that my work rebuilding the Council has absented me from the shop quite a bit as of late."

"Of course I've noticed," she answered sharply. "*I'm* the one who has to pick up the slack. I think we should ask Charity on full time over the summer break, and then maybe hire someone else when she goes back to college in the fall."

He set his champagne flute on the table and twisted the stem nervously. "That's probably a wise decision. What I wanted to speak with you about, however, involves... ownership issues. I'm afraid heading up the Council is going to be a full time endeavor, and there really is no point in my keeping the Magic Box... You see where I'm going with this?"

She gasped and slammed her hands down on the table. "Of all the nerve! You're selling the store out from under me? Now? With impending parenthood making financial stability all the more imperative? What if Xander gets laid off? Then we won't have any money. Do you want our child to live on the street? Is that what you want?"

"Anya. Anya! *Anya!*" he shouted above her, trying to get her attention. He leaned forward across the table and took her hand. "I'm not selling the store. I meant... I'm *giving* you the store."

"Oh." She settled back in her chair and processed that. "Oh." She laid one hand on her belly and began to cry.

Xander returned with a piece of cake in each hand to find his wife in tears. "An, honey, the baby will come soon. Please don't get yourself all upset over it."

"That's not why she's crying," Buffy assured him.

"Giles," Anya managed between sobs, pointing at him sitting across the table.

Xander glared sharply at the watcher. "What'd you say to her, Giles?"

"Nothing bad," he answered defensively. "I j-just... just gave her the bloody store." He finished his glass of champagne in one swallow, and Buffy smiled sympathetically, laying her hand over his.

Xander pulled up a chair beside his wife and rubbed her back soothingly. "This is a good thing, right? Why are you crying?"

"I don't know," she sniffled, shaking her head. "I guess I'm really happy. Oh, Xander, we're going to make lots and lots of money!" She latched onto the lapels of his jacket and pulled him forward into a passionate kiss. He smiled and brushed the tears from her cheeks.

"Xander, I have a proposition for you as well," Giles began. "Have you ever thought about owning your own construction company?"

The young man's eyes widened. "That's too much. I-I couldn't... I mean, I wouldn't feel right..."

Giles tilted his head in acknowledgement. "Think of me as an investor, then. I'll put up the capital to get you started, and you can pay it back as the company begins to profit."

"I don't know..." Xander shook his head, obviously overwhelmed. "I mean, I know you and Buffy came into all this Council money, but it would kinda feel like charity or something, you know?"

Giles laughed sharply. "Hardly. I assure you, this is entirely self-motivated on my part. I need to rebuild the Council, and that is going to require some literal rebuilding. I haven't the first clue about construction, and I'm going to need someone I can trust heading up the job, someone who won't rob

me blind or do a second rate job, someone who will understand the unique requirements that Council buildings will have.” He crossed his hands on the table and leaned forward. “Are you up to the job?”

Xander looked like deer caught in headlights. Anya slapped him on the shoulder and snapped, “What are you doing? Take his money!”

That seemed to jolt him from his daze. “Okay.” A slow grin crept across his face. “Okay.” Giles offered his hand out across the table, and Xander grasped it. They shook on it. “Okay, boss.”

Giles groaned. “Please don’t call me that. The point of this is that *you’ll* be running the construction company, so I can have minimal involvement in it.”

“You got it, G-man.”

“On second thought, ‘boss’ has a rather nice ring to it.” He rose from his chair. “If you’ll excuse me, I have some more business to take care of.”

Buffy watched as he walked away, headed off to speak with Spike now that the vampire seemed to be momentarily alone. That was a conversation she would be disappointed to miss.

“Boy, Giles is sure getting into this whole rebuilding the Council thing, isn’t he?” Willow commented.

“Yeah, it’s kinda become the family business. I help out when I can. And Robin’ll probably be a slayer someday.” Buffy noticed how her friend looked away in shame. She sighed and continued, “Giles is thinking of training her for it- our way, not the way Travers wanted us to- and Alex’ll probably be a watcher someday, although we’re not going to make him or anything. Add in all the other people Giles is enlisting, and the Council really is going to be our little family business.”

“Yeah,” Willow answered, making little fork marks on top of her white frosting. “Angel and Wesley and Xander... kinda got everyone working for the Council now.”

Buffy would have to be deaf not to hear the longing in her friend’s voice. “Do you want to be a watcher, Willow?”

Her green eyes flashed up in surprise. Skepticism creased her brow. “Is this a hypothetical question, or are you actually asking me?”

“I think you’re everything a watcher should be: you’re smart, good with the research, kick-ass with the magic.” Her friend’s eyes again lowered, and Buffy pressed on. “Sure, you’ve made a few mistakes, but that just makes you human. I think you should be part of the Council.”

Willow seemed thoughtful for several moments, considering it. Finally, she met Buffy’s gaze. “Are you asking me, or is Giles?”

Buffy floundered for a moment. “Well... I am. But he’ll ask you eventually, too.”

Willow nodded and smiled sadly. “When Giles asks me, then I will.”

Giles headed Spike off at the door. The vampire was obviously sneaking out for a cigarette, now that the sun had finally set and he could actually leave the protection of the building that had hosted both wedding and reception without him disintegrating into a pile of ash.

“I s’pose you’ll tattle to Dawn on me, eh?” Spike complained. “Look, we came to an agreement. I wouldn’t smoke ’round her is all. Not like it’s going to kill me or anything.”

Giles shook his head, although he was still preventing Spike from going outside, mostly because he didn’t want to stand in a cloud of smoke himself. He may have indulged when he was younger, but now he would rather avoid getting the smell into his tux. “I could care less whether you choose to indulge in that nasty habit. There’s something else more important I wanted to discuss with you.”

Spike groaned and rolled his eyes. "I shoulda seen this comin': This is where the new father-in-law sets the new husband up with a cushy job that'll keep his daughter all provided for. I'm right, ain't I? Corner office? Night time hours?"

Giles fidgeted uncomfortably. "I'm hardly your father-in-law," he complained, knowing the vampire had the rest of it right.

"You might as well be Dawn's father."

"If you want to get technical, I suppose you're my brother-in-law now."

"Brothers, eh?" Spike laughed. "Never thought Dru would have got that part of the dream right. So, brother, what kinda set up we talking here? Demon hunter? Hired assassin? 'Cause you sure ain't turning me into some kinda bookworm watcher. And frankly, I'm not much for the Nancy Drew thing Angel has going."

"Informant." Giles lowered his voice as an old lady in a peach dress passed by. "Someone who can infiltrate the demon population and pass on any useful information. You'll be going to Connecticut with Dawn, and the demons there won't know you're working for us."

Spike seemed to consider it. "I don't know. I don't fancy working for anyone. Never had to before."

"That's because you steal what you want, and frankly, I don't fancy sending Dawn off to college with someone who's going to furnish their home with stolen goods."

Spike pulled a cigarette from his pack and rolled it between his fingers as he thought.

As much as Giles believed Spike could be an asset to this new Council, he wouldn't be trying so hard if not for Dawn's sake, to give Spike some kind of anchor to the side of good, now that the pair of them would be so far away from the influences of the rest of the gang and the nightly battle against evil. Spike needed something to keep him on this path he had chosen, something besides just her. Giles owed it to her, and he also owed it to the vampire who had saved his life.

He still had one more trump card to play. "Angel Investigations is already in the employ of the Council. If you're looking for an official title, Spike, I could put you one tier above them."

Spike laughed. "You mean like Angel's boss?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

The vampire doubled over with his laughter, finally righting himself and giving Giles an enthusiastic pat on the back. "You really haven't forgiven him, have you?"

"Do you want the job or not?" Giles demanded irritably.

"So I'd really get to boss Angel around?"

"Within limits. If you needed them to investigate something you'd discovered while undercover, so to speak, or you had other Council business for them, then yes, they would answer to you."

Spike grinned and slowly backed out the front door, pointing the cigarette back at the watcher. "Sign me up." He lit the cigarette and took a long drag as he walked out into the night, shaking his head.

John felt something bump against his leg and lifted the tablecloth for a look underneath. Giles' little girl was crouched beneath the table, and she held a finger to her mouth to beg his silence. He scanned the room until he'd found what she was hiding from: the twin boy was peeking under tables six rows ahead, searching for her.

"Hide and seek, is it?"

She nodded and giggled.

John smiled. The two children had been little angels through the ceremony, diligently playing the roles of flower girl and ring bearer, picture perfect in their miniature formal wear. Although, Robin had seemed to think her job was finished as soon as she'd strewn a flower path up to the altar, and she had climbed into Giles' lap once she'd reached the front row.

At the reception, however, they'd revealed their true colors: perpetual motion machines, defying all laws of physics. John had teased his friend, guessing that the coma had merely been an effective way to catch a break. The offer to tag team the children still stood, and John was willing to lay odds that Giles would take him up on it before the summer was out.

"I thought you were keeping your grandparents busy?" He whispered.

She pointed off to the left, and John looked up to see Susan checking under tables several rows away.

April leaned over to give him a fond peck on the cheek. She still bore a scar across her face from her ordeal, and another that marred one breast. Every time they made love, it reminded him of how close he'd come to losing her. But the last three months had slowly returned things back to normal. April had reported for duty as soon as she'd recovered, and when her sergeant began looking for another partner for her, April had requested Buffy. It meant he and Giles saw a lot more of each other. There was always a special camaraderie between partners and their families, something John was delighted to share with his newfound friends. And for some reason he couldn't even explain to himself, John felt safer knowing that Buffy was with his wife.

"Go on," April murmured in his ear. "You know you're dying to play hide and seek too."

He smiled sheepishly and waited all of two minutes before darting beneath the table to join Robin.

His wife rolled her eyes and said it with mock disgust, although he knew it was one of the things she loved about him, "I swear you only teach second grade 'cause you wish you were still *in* second grade."

Robin giggled, delighted that he was willing to play with her.

John took her by the hand. "Shall we make a break for it before they get to this table? I think we could sneak off to the coat room without being caught."

She nodded, and they both bent down to peek beneath the table skirt, waiting for the right opportunity to make their escape.

"Whacha lookin' at?" Buffy sidled up to her watcher, who was staring intently in the distance.

Giles pointed with the hand holding his champagne flute, pointed across the room at two figures standing near the bar. "Your father is talking to Spike. Now there's a conversation I'd pay money to hear."

She giggled. "I can just hear my dad now: 'So, son, what do you do for a living?'"

"Well, I used to kill people 'til the government put this soddin' chip in my skull. Now I mostly mooch off your daughters." Giles had deepened his voice and affected more of a gutter accent. It reminded her somewhat of when he'd been under the influence of the band candy. She laughed giddily. He did a pretty good impression of Spike.

She deepened her own voice and continued with their little game. "'And how did you and Dawn meet?'"

"Well, I'd been dumped by my first girlfriend, who was mad as a hatter, and Dawn invited me in for some hot cocoa and sympathy with her mum. But it wasn't 'til I started stalkin' her sister a couple years later that we really started to get close."

Buffy slapped him lightly on the arm. "Okay, stop it. You channeling Spike is just too icky."

He laughed and kissed her, smelling of cologne and tasting of liquor.

"You know what this means, don't you?" she asked him.

"What?"

"You're the good son-in-law."

Giles laughed and finished off his champagne. "One would think. But somehow your father has managed to blame me for this whole relationship. He said as much to me before he walked Dawn down the aisle. Apparently, I should have shown better judgment in the kinds of boys I let her date. As if he bore no accountability for the fact he's only been a marginal influence on her life for the last ten years."

"You didn't say that to him, did you?"

"No, that was before the champagne. Now, however, I just might."

Buffy giggled and leaned against his shoulder. "Don't. Dawn'll kill you if you pick a fight with Dad today."

He glanced down on her with a puzzled frown, and she couldn't help another giggle. "Mrs. Giles, I do believe you're rather tipsy."

"No! I mean, I had the one for the toast... and then the dance... and a whole glass after Spike kissed the cake off Dawnie's face... and..." She started counting them off on her fingers. "Okay, I'm tanked. But you know, after a couple glasses, this whole Spike/Dawn thing is no big deal."

He steered her towards the balcony doors. "Perhaps a little fresh air would do you some good." He started to follow her, but then backtracked at the last moment.

"Hey," Buffy protested, tugging on his hand in encouragement.

He shook his head. "Your father seems to have needed some fresh air after his conversation with Spike; he's gone out ahead of us. Unless you'd like to incur Dawn's wrath after I make a scene on her big day, I suggest you go on without me. And should *you* choose to loosen your lips on this particular matter, well Dawn can hardly hold me accountable for that."

Buffy allowed him to bow out, deciding that some time alone with her father wouldn't be so unwelcome. She closed the balcony doors behind her and quietly slipped over to her father's side. He was leaning over the railing, staring down at the street below and seeming very far away. She leaned against the railing in a matching pose, enjoying the quiet after the last hours of constant activity.

Although he didn't turn his eyes from their far off contemplation, he obviously knew she was there, because he began speaking softly to her. "You know, you want to keep your kids young forever, but they just grow up too fast. I imagine a big part of that's my fault. If I had been around more, maybe you girls wouldn't have had to."

Buffy leaned her head against his shoulder, part of her angry with him, part of her feeling sorry for him. She was angry, because he did this every time she saw him: spouted off sentiments of guilt and remorse, but his actions never changed. He would go back to Spain next week, and who knew when they would see him again. But part of her felt a little sorry for him too, knowing he bore very little responsibility for them growing so quickly. One daughter the Slayer, the other the Key, and that, more than any absent father, had forced them past childhood faster than other girls their age.

But he didn't know any of that. He knew very little about her life, really, not since he and her mother had split. And maybe that's why she missed him sometimes, why she was always happy to see him again, no matter how long it had been, or how angry she was with him for missed phone calls and forgotten birthdays and broken promises. He was her tie to a life before the Hellmouth, a life filled with ice skating lessons and weekend trips to the country. Sometimes, when it was quiet and just the

two of them, she could lean against his shoulder like this, and close her eyes, and pretend she was twelve years old again.

"I wish Mom could be here for this," she finally whispered.

"Your mother always did love weddings. She always cried, even when she barely knew the bride and groom."

"Mom was a sucker for happy endings."

Hank chuckled. "Did she still have all those old movies? 'It's a Wonderful Life' and 'Breakfast at Tiffany's' and 'Singing in the Rain'?"

"Yeah," Buffy answered, remembering sadly. "We used to have moviefests on my birthdays or... or when life was just really crappy."

"The only woman I ever knew who hated 'Casablanca.'"

"It didn't have a happy ending. They said goodbye at the end."

"Life isn't always happy endings," he replied bitterly.

"I know," she sighed, haunted by her own memories. "*Believe* me, Dad, I know."

He did turn to look at her then, and Buffy thought that maybe he might actually be seeing her for once. "You know, I think you do." He shifted to the side, leaning against the railing with one elbow as his other hand reached out to cup her cheek. When he spoke, his voice was filled with amazement and awe. "I'm so proud of you, Buffy. You have become this mature, beautiful woman. And maybe you haven't made the choices I would have made for you, but I look at your life, and I can't help but admit that the choices you made were right for you."

She smiled, a stray tear slipping down her cheek, and he brushed it quickly away. "Even Giles?" she asked hopefully.

He groaned and withdrew his hand. "You're going to make me say it, aren't you?"

"You don't have to say it to me, but I think you should say it to him."

He shook his head, not in disagreement, but in frustrated resignation. He quickly changed the subject. "I had my reservations about Dawn getting married so young, like you did. I had nightmares about her ending up divorced with half a dozen children before she hit 24."

Buffy barked out a loud laugh. "I don't think you have to worry about them having a passel of kids. I guarantee no accidents in Dawnie's future."

He seemed puzzled for a moment, and then dismissed the odd comment with a shake of his head. "But then I look at you, Buffy, and you give me hope that this might turn out alright for her. Tell me honestly: Do you think Dawn is making the right choice for her?"

"For her? Yeah. I mean, I think she could have waited, but... Around here, waiting doesn't always turn out so good either."

He nodded, accepting that. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close, both of them staring out into the night. Buffy sighed and snuggled against his chest. It had been a long time since she could be with her father like this: just enjoying his company and not feeling the need to be constantly on the defensive.

It seemed the right moment to ask him something she had always wanted to know.

"Dad, tell me about the first time you and Mom met."

She felt his silent laughter shake through his chest. He kissed her on her forehead and paused for a moment in thought. "She was a freshman in college; I was a junior. Our dorms were near each other, and we often studied at the same library. After a few weeks, I started to notice her. She was always sitting at the same table and—"

"Uh-uh," Buffy countered. "Mom started to tell me once, and I believe it involved her going stag to the homecoming dance, and you... well, she was kinda vague on this point, but it sounded like you ditched your date for her."

Hank colored deeply. "She told you about that?"

"She said it was a very funny story, but I never got to hear it. Please?" Her eyes pleaded with him in a very childish way that belied their entire previous conversation about maturity.

"Oh, alright. But you know, if your mother were still alive, she'd kill me for telling you."

But he relented and told her all the sordid details, although Buffy got the impression he was still holding back a little. Even so, her mother was right: it was a very funny story.

Alex had found them in the coat room and now it was the three of them hiding from Susan. She was very near to discovering their hideout, and John rather suspected that she already knew, but was only humoring the children. Alex wanted to sneak into the kitchen, but John was thankfully able to convince the boy that it would be a bad idea.

Susan wandered closer to the coatroom, and he knew she had it figured out. She leaned against the doorway, standing two feet from where the small group was kneeling on the floor, hidden by the racks of coats. Robin covered her mouth with her hands to try and stifle her giggles.

"Oh, dear," Susan sighed melodramatically. "Now I suppose I shall have to go back to the hotel by myself. If only I could find those children. Their parents gave them permission to stay overnight with their grandfather and me, but now I guess I'll just have to go swimming in the hotel pool by myself."

"No!" Alex cried, charging out from his hiding spot. "Go swim," he pleaded, his arms circling her legs.

"Me too," Robin begged, also abandoning the game of hide and seek for the promise of a hotel swimming pool.

John climbed out from behind the coats as well, standing up and smiling bashfully at Susan.

"I don't know," she told the children, laughing. "I think your friend John will be sad after you go. He won't have anyone to play with."

Alex seemed to consider this seriously for a moment before offering up the suggestion that John could come swimming too.

He laughed. "No, thank you. Perhaps another time."

Alex turned back to Susan, bouncing on his feet as he asked again, "Can we, Gamma?"

"Go say goodbye to your parents first. And Dawn and Spike."

The children dashed off as soon as the words had left her mouth.

She looked at John, shaking her head. "Sounds funny, doesn't it? I'll only be twenty-seven next year, and I'm a grandma."

He held out his arm to escort her back into the reception hall. "Trust me, grandparenting is much nicer. All of the fun without the work."

"You have grandkids?"

"Not for a few more months, but I'm pretty sure all the same."

Buffy had only recently returned from her conversation with her father and had immediately cornered Giles into dancing with her. A slow song was playing, and he had relented without protest,

taking her into his arms and laying his cheek against her head as she curled up close to his chest. He was having a hard time judging her mood. She seemed both happy and sad, and when he finally placed his finger beneath her chin to tilt her head up, there were tears streaking down her cheeks.

"Buffy?"

"I'm okay, Giles. I just... I guess it finally hit me while I was talking with Dad: Dawnie's all grown up and going to college soon, and she'll be living so far away. And... and..." She took a deep breath. "And I guess I was just missing Mom too. You know, this wouldn't have wiggled her out as much as it did all of us. She always liked Spike for some odd reason."

Giles smiled and wiped her tears away with the back of his hand. "Maybe it just took the rest of us a little longer to see the potential your mother saw from the beginning."

"Yeah." She gave him a worried frown. "Would it bother you if I said I was also a little sad that Angel and everyone couldn't come?"

"Of course not." He paused. "Although, I hope you don't consider me somehow responsible for their work taking priority."

"No, don't be silly." She stretched up and gave him a peck on the nose. "I know they have to go where Vision Girl sends them, and there's not much you can do about that, even if you are their boss."

He smiled, grateful for her understanding, and then bent to return her friendly kiss with a real one, much more passionate and placed squarely on her lips. The impact of two running children against their legs quickly interrupted them, not to mention nearly toppled them over.

"Go swim wif Gamma," Alex blurted out. The child's face was flushed with excitement, not to mention the inordinate amount of sugar he had consumed through the course of the evening. Buffy lifted him up, and he chattered happily about their game of hide and seek with John and Susan and his future plans for the promised sleepover with his grandparents.

Robin placed her little feet, adorned with their black patent leather shoes, squarely on top of Giles' own. Holding onto his pant legs, she smiled up at him and said, "Dance wif Giles."

He smiled back at his daughter, swaying gently with her, his heart constricting painfully at the knowledge that he could have easily missed out on all of this, that he could have lost her to the darkness the Host had foreseen more than three years ago, or that she could have remained forever missing. Less than six months ago, he had never even laid eyes on her.

The children kissed each of their parents goodbye, and then set off in search of Dawn and Spike, the last of their required goodbyes before they could leave with their grandparents.

Buffy and Giles resumed their dance, although the song had changed. The tempo was still slow, however, and they both swayed to the music as they watched their children from a distance.

Buffy slid her arms beneath his tuxedo jacket and around his waist. She sighed as she laid her cheek against his chest. "Do you think Robin will ever call us Mommy and Daddy? Do you think she'll ever think of us like that?"

He pondered that question for a moment, his eyes still focused on the two children who were giving the happy couple enthusiastic hugs goodbye. "The McGregors took care of her, loved her, and she loved them. It might be too confusing or feel like too much of a betrayal for her to simply replace them with us." His arms tightened around her reassuringly. "She's only three, though, Buffy. Given time, she'll come to think of us as her parents, whether or not she actually calls us by those names."

"Easy for you to say," she grumbled. "At least, she calls you by your name."

He couldn't help chuckling, although it earned him a dirty look from his wife. He tried to erase the amusement from his face, very unsuccessfully. "She used to call you Buffy. The fact that she's recently dubbed you something else should be a fairly good indication that your relationship with her is improving."

“Yeah, but... Muffy?”

He choked on his laughter, and even Buffy’s scowl wasn’t enough to silence his giggles this time. “Yes, well, ‘Muffy’ is...” He needed to take a deep breath before he could continue. “Well, it’s a lot closer to ‘Mummy’ than Giles is to ‘Daddy.’ Besides, I think it’s rather cute.”

She didn’t seem very consoled. “If I *ever* hear you call me that, I’ll set Alex loose on your books with an assortment of magic markers and a triple scoop chocolate ice cream cone.”

He shuddered. “The word shall never pass my lips.”

The music inevitably changed, and Giles led her off the floor, passing Willow and Xander as they headed onto the floor to dance. Anya was still sitting at the Scoobie table, writing furiously on napkins. She had a small stack of filled ones beside the frostingless remains of her cake.

“Shall we join her?” Giles asked his slayer.

“Nah. She’s been like that since you gave her the store: composing ads and calculating profit margins. Besides...” She twisted suddenly to stand in front of him, looping her arms around his neck. “The twins are staying with the grandparents, Spike and Dawn are driving out to Vegas for a honeymoon, and we have the whole house to ourselves tonight.” She slipped her arms from around his neck and seductively caressed her fingers down the front of his shirt.

“So...” she murmured, leaning forward on her toes until her lips were barely an inch from his. “If the Slayer took the head of the Council home and had her wicked way with him, would people worry that she was sleeping her way to the top?”

“No, they would just think she was ambitious.”

The heat between them built, but they didn’t kiss, hurrying off instead to say their goodbyes, so they could go home and do more than kiss.

Lilah stepped up to the front desk of Wolfram and Hart’s Files and Records department. She knew exactly which cabinets stored the files she needed, but she didn’t feel like sorting through them for hours, looking for the relevant information.

She waited patiently until the file clerk had glanced up from her computer monitor.

“You’ve read the file on Rupert Giles, right?”

“Of course, Miss Morgan. I’m Files and Records. That’s my job.” Her voice was crisp, precise.

“Right.” Lilah was still holding the envelope in her hand, received in that morning’s mail drop and containing one audiotape and one videotape. She’d written the names on the back flap. “Do the names Longworth, Sulla, or Ben mean anything to you?”

The file clerk cocked her head to one side, staring off into the distance as her eyes flashed white, whirling through the data with an audible clicking sound. After a few seconds, she straightened her head and met Lilah’s questioning stare. “Longworth, Everett. Born 1931. Died 2002. Owner of the second largest shipping company in the United Kingdom with yearly receipts averaging \$6.4 million. In 1978, his only son Randall dies while being possessed by the demon Eyghon and is subsequently killed by Giles, Rupert. November 1997: he attempts to avenge his son’s death by sending the same demon after those involved in the possession rituals. The only remaining survivors are Giles, Rupert and Rayne, Ethan. January 2002: Longworth again attempts vengeance, kidnapping twin infants Giles, William Alexander and McGregor, Robin Deanna. He is later presumed dead in a plane crash off the coast of Newfoundland, final obituary dated February 25, 2002.”

Lilah smiled smugly. “Oh, he didn’t die in a plane crash.”

The clerk frowned, again staring off into the distance as her eyes flashed white. She turned back to the lawyer. "I have no data on that."

"Well, now you do." Lilah handed over the envelope in her hands. "Add those to the file and mark them as copies. I have the originals in a safe location."

"Yes, Miss Morgan. Will there be anything else?"

Lilah strolled out of Files and Records, tossing over her shoulder as she left, "No, I think that's exactly enough."

~Finis~ March 16, 2002

Epilogue: The Fine Art of Blackmail

by
JK Philips

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Six months later...

Chapter 1: The Deal He Can't Refuse

Giles stopped and did a doubletake as he passed the dining room table. Buffy was sorting through an entire shoe box worth of brochures. One of them had caught his eye: a colorful snapshot of a full retinue of circus performers: trapeze, clowns, contortionists, sword-swallowers, and a woman in little more than a sequined bathing suit, sitting astride an elephant. Buffy was holding the brochure in her hands, studying it thoughtfully.

"Dear Lord, Buffy!" he exclaimed. "You're not hiring on an entire circus."

She didn't even glance at him. "Why not?"

"Well, for one thing, they're not likely to fit in our backyard. For another..." He leaned over her shoulder, one hand resting on the back of her chair, the other pointing at the sword-swallower in the picture. "Don't you think we'd be taking Alex to the ER the very next day, after he tries to stick a steak knife down his throat?"

"Okay, ixnay on the sword-swallower. No fire-eaters, either. But the rest would be fun."

Giles sighed and pulled up a chair beside her. He removed his glasses and spoke very softly, so any eavesdropping children wouldn't hear him. "This isn't the last birthday you'll spend with them, Buffy."

"You don't know that," she replied, equally quiet.

He didn't have an answer for that, so he remained silent. Buffy's twenty-fifth birthday would come shortly after the twins' fourth. One more year, and she would be living on borrowed time, would be setting the new record for oldest slayer. The close calls seemed to be getting even closer lately, and Giles wondered if slayers lost their edge after a certain number of years, if their bodies were driven to die and Call the next, younger slayer.

Buffy shook her head, clearing away her own morbid thoughts, probably similar in nature to his, except missing that magic number twenty-six.

"Really, it's not about that, Giles," she assured him. "This will be Robin's first birthday with us, and I want it to be special."

"She'll be four. Give her some cake and a party hat, and she'll be thrilled. Ten years from now, she won't even remember her birthday."

Buffy paled several shades, her face draining of emotion and clouding over with the bleak, haunted expression she wore after each close call. Giles realized he had royally screwed up that pep talk, and it was too late to pull his foot out of his mouth.

"I'm sorry. That's... that's not what I meant." He tossed his glasses on the table and rubbed his hand over his face. "I only meant that she won't remember this specific day, what we did, if there were clowns or magicians or what have you. She'll remember the things that mattered: spending time with us and what we did together, not just on her birthday, but on all the other days too." He met her eyes. He could see that she very much wanted to believe him. "Buffy, think back to when you were a little girl. What is your most vivid memory from when you were her age?"

She chewed on her bottom lip as she thought. The memory washed over her face in the next moment, filling it with a mixture of happiness and innocence and longing. "I remember Dad took me to work one day. He'd never done that before. I guess, looking back on it, it wasn't a big deal; he probably just decided to go in on a Saturday and Mom couldn't watch me or something. But I was so excited to go to work with Dad, and he let me sit in his big leather chair and spun me around in circles." She smiled bashfully. "Stupid, huh?"

"Not at all," he answered very seriously. "That's a lovely memory of your father."

"Okay, I get it. It's the little things that matter." She set the brochure aside. "No big top this year. But maybe pony rides?" she asked hopefully.

Giles rolled his eyes, grabbed his glasses, and stood up. He started out of the dining room, slipping the frames back on as he went.

"And maybe two parties?" she added brightly.

He stopped and pivoted to face her. "*Two* parties?"

"Well, Alex hasn't been very happy about having to share his birthday with his sister, so I thought we should maybe give them separate birthday parties."

Giles shook his head in disbelief. "I leave it up to you. Whatever kind of party or *parties* you think they should have. Just... no live animals. And nothing that will require permission slips from the other parents."

"Darn. Guess parachuting's out."

Giles balked, and she laughed.

"*Kidding*, Giles. Jeeze, lighten up."

"You laugh," he shook his finger at her as he continued out of the dining room and into the foyer, "but our son would do it."

He opened the front door, stepping out onto the porch to check for the mail, the direction he had been heading before Buffy's birthday party plans had distracted him. The mailman must have been running late, and Giles had already checked the box three times in the last hour. He was expecting an important delivery.

He wasn't expecting the woman walking up their sidewalk.

She was dressed in a tailored black pinstripe pantsuit and talking on a cell phone. She hung up as soon as she saw him and continued up the walk, boldly striding up the porch steps and stopping directly in front of him. A black limo was parked at the curb, waiting for her.

"Mr. Giles," she said warmly. "Just the person I came to see."

He frowned as he studied her. Her dark auburn hair fell straight and long, and she tossed it over one shoulder with a confident arrogance he was sure spelled trouble. "Do I know you?" She obviously seemed to know him.

She offered out her hand. "Lilah Morgan."

He shook it hesitantly, still unsure what she wanted from him. Since becoming the head of the Watchers' Council, it seemed every Sunnydale entrepreneur had some kind of profitable investment in mind for Giles' newfound wealth. "Let me guess," he grumbled. "You have a business proposition for me."

Lilah smiled approvingly. "Straight to the point. I like that."

He pulled out a business card from his front shirt pocket, with the practiced air of a man who did that quite often. "Feel free to give my secretary a call and arrange an appointment. But this is my home, and I'm not currently available to discuss business."

He turned his back on her, intending to go back inside without checking on the mail. He didn't want to be harassed at home; he didn't want Buffy to be harassed at work. If he gave this woman anymore of his time, then everyone would try surprising him when he stepped out to pick up the morning paper or went out for groceries.

This woman didn't give up easily. She continued, speaking quickly as he reached for the doorknob. "Maybe your wife has time to talk with me. I'm sure you've already told her how you put a hit out on Longworth and Sulla."

Giles froze with his hand on the knob. His stomach plummeted into his toes. After the Council's destruction, he had thought himself safe from their blackmail. The special operatives who had done the job were dead, and he had presumed the tapes were ruined, buried somewhere beneath the London rubble. He had never thought to hear those names again.

He lowered his hand slowly and turned to face her once more. He remained composed, but he was fairly certain she could see that she had rattled him. He waited for her to make the first move. No point in giving anything away until he knew how much she knew.

She offered out a business card of her own, her smile turning smug. "We have something you want; you have something we want."

He took a single glance at her card, slipping it in his pocket quickly, before the trembling cardstock could reveal his shaking hands. "Ah, the infamous Wolfram and Hart," he commented. "Have you finally grown bored with harassing Angel Investigations?"

"I assure you," she replied, "Wolfram and Hart are the victims in this particular situation. Angel has stolen an object of great importance from my employer. Since *you* are technically *Angel's* employer, I thought we could prevail upon you to recover our property."

"And if I do? What then?"

She twisted sideways and opened the fashionable purse that bumped against her hip. From inside she pulled out an unlabeled audiotape and handed it to him. "Wolfram and Hart recently came into possession of some tapes that were recovered from the ruins of the C.O.W. headquarters in London. Of course, if you were to help us with this small Angel problem, we would be more than willing to take you on as a client."

Giles' eyebrows rose. "Client?"

"Normally, Wolfram and Hart would be legally, morally, and ethically obligated to report this evidence." Her straight-face as she laid claim to *having* morals or ethics made him laugh. She seemed not to notice his amusement. "If you were our client, however, you would be protected by attorney/client privilege and only a subpoena could force us to turn over these tapes."

He shook his head and crossed his arms. "Although in that case, no one would be filing any subpoenas. You're the only ones that have any idea what I did."

"You want to keep it that way? Five days, Mr. Giles. You have five days to recover the Ring of Gormlois from Angel Investigations." Her eyes narrowed, becoming hard as glass. "Let me paint you a picture of your life if you choose to refuse our generous offer: you can expect one of Wolfram and Hart's own lawyers to be heading up the prosecution. You *will* be convicted on three counts of murder: Longworth, Sulla, and Ben. You will watch your children grow up, separated from them by a pane of glass. That is if their mother decides to forgive you, both for your crimes and the lies you must have told her to conceal them. Otherwise, she may never bring them in to see you. But I'm sure the satisfaction of knowing you didn't cave in to a bunch of evil lawyers will be enough to keep you company through those long, lonely years."

He clenched his jaw and fisted his hands at his side. "Are you quite through?"

"Five days, Mr. Giles. You have my number." She turned away from him, starting back down the sidewalk towards her limo and calling out on her cell phone again before she'd even reached the curb.

Buffy glanced up as the front door closed. Giles looked to be in a sour mood. "Mail still didn't come, huh?"

Her voice seemed to startle him out of a daze, and he glanced over at her with a puzzled frown. "Pardon?"

"Mail? No show?"

"Oh," he answered, finally catching on. "Yes. I-I mean, no... Er, no, it hasn't come yet."

He had something in his right hand, something he was absently rubbing at with his thumb. She pointed at it and asked, "So, what's that then?"

"Hmm?" He looked down to where she was pointing and seemed to notice the object in his hands for the first time. "Nothing," he insisted almost too forcefully, as he shoved what appeared to be a music tape or something into his pants pocket.

"Are you okay?"

He nodded and gave her a wan smile. He tossed his head in the direction of the backyard. "I'll just go... go check on the twins."

He was gone before she'd had a chance to answer.

"Okay, Giles," she murmured softly as she looked at the brochure in her hands, "Just let me know if you have any objections to hiring actors dressed as children's characters for an afternoon of nursery rhymes." She paused. Silence. "No? Okay. Barney and Sesame Street it is. And I don't want to hear any complaints."

She set the brochure on top of the stack with finality.

Another one caught her eye, and she picked it up. "Or... or maybe a magician. That's a classic." She groaned and threw her head back. "I'll never decide."

After the children were in bed, and he and Buffy had returned from patrol, he left his slayer to chat with their on-call babysitter, Marianne. (With Dawn off in college, backup babysitting was a must for possible slaying emergencies. They had purchased the house next door and paid their babysitter a handsome salary in addition to providing the roof over her head. A swell deal, since Giles preferred that either he or Buffy care for the children whenever possible, and so she was only called on when absolutely necessary, or when they patrolled together in the evenings.)

Marianne and Buffy sometimes liked to stay up late together after patrol, talking about things that would usually make them both giggle a lot. Sometimes, on nights where he just wanted to sleep or to get some serious research done, it irritated him slightly. Other nights, when Buffy returned from patrol feeling as though death was only one lucky vamp away, Giles thanked God that Marianne was waiting at home to lighten his slayer's mood. Tonight he was especially thankful for her presence. He left the two of them talking on the couch, discussing some movie that was supposed to be released soon, to which Buffy would no doubt drag him. He took the cordless phone to a private corner of the house and dialed Angel Investigations.

Wesley answered. The other watcher was just the person Giles had been hoping to reach.

"Wesley?"

"Giles!" he answered warmly. "Those new heat sensors you sent work marvelously. Fred tinkered with some of the code, and we can accurately identify more than 62 different kinds of demon by the variation in their body temperatures, down to less than a two percent temperature difference between species. Of course, for demons that are too close to the range of human body temperature, we daren't risk it, but—"

"Very good," Giles interrupted. "But I called about something specific."

"A case?"

“Not exactly.”

“Another potential slayer? I know you’d hoped one would be born within the first year.”

“No, no, Robin’s still the only one, to the best of my knowledge.”

“What is it?”

Giles took a deep breath. “An object stolen from Wolfram and Hart. The Ring of Gorlois.”

A long pause answered him, and Giles wondered briefly if Lilah Morgan had drawn the wrong conclusions. Perhaps Angel Investigations didn’t have her ring.

“Yes, Angel acquired it off a lawyer he accosted in a parking lot.”

So much for that hope. “Accosted? Are you telling me Angel mugged this lawyer?”

Wesley laughed nervously. “No, of course not. Wolfram and Hart have been on us with an Equal Opportunity suit ever since we refused to hire the spy they sent in to apply as our new file clerk. Angel thought he could try a little intimidation on the man heading the case.”

“So he pilfered the man’s pockets?”

“He was going for the man’s cell phone. Angel ditched him in the middle of nowhere and wanted to insure he had a long walk back to the home office. The ring just happened to be a lucky break. Angel didn’t know what he’d found until he’d shown it to me.”

“What can you tell me about it?”

“The Ring of Gorlois?” Wesley seemed to consider it. “Legend has it that it’s the very ring Merlin enchanted to gain Uther entrance into Cornwall and into Igraine’s bed. Supposedly, it gave him the appearance of Gorlois and fooled the guards into letting him pass.”

“Nonsense.”

“Be that as it may...” Wesley seemed to agree with Giles’ dismissal of the ring’s fanciful origins. “The ring does possess the power to give its wearer the complete illusion of another person.”

“Shapeshifting?”

“Not exactly. Shapeshifting takes a great deal of power and skill to do, especially anything so difficult as the nuances of specific human faces and voices. And should the spellcaster need rest or the spell be disturbed, the illusion would be broken. No, with this ring, all that is required is for the person to wear it, and the illusion would hold for as long as the ring remains on their finger.”

Giles pondered that. “What were Wolfram and Hart planning to do with this artifact?”

“I shudder to think.”

And there was the answer to the question that had been simmering in the back of his mind. Would this one little trade be such a high price to pay? Yes. With this ring, Wolfram and Hart could impersonate whoever they liked. Frame innocent people. Gain access to places and information they shouldn’t. Giles wondered if the Ring of Gorlois would get them past retinal scans and fingerprinting. Perhaps the illusion would be strong enough to fool even magical detection.

“You have the ring somewhere safe, I assume.”

“Of course,” Wesley answered. “Wolfram and Hart would need supernatural assistance to find it.”

Giles nodded to himself, although the other watcher, of course, couldn’t see it. It was settled. He couldn’t give Lilah what she wanted, not even in exchange for his own freedom. “Good. Keep it safe. I’ll check in with you later.” Giles hung up the phone and stared at the receiver for a long while.

Five days.

He had five days to get his affairs in order.

Chapter 2: Hard Time

He didn't sleep well that night, or truly any night that followed. He supposed he could sleep all he liked in prison. He would rather make the most of the time he had left. Whenever sleep eluded him, he would watch Buffy's peaceful slumber, would lightly trace his fingers across the curves of her cheekbones, careful not to wake her. Sometimes she would turn into his caress, and in her sleep she would pull herself into his arms, and he would hold her in a desperate and tight embrace, kissing her forehead and trying not to imagine what the rest of his life would be like without her.

He wanted to confess everything to her. There were moments when they would first climb into bed or when they would first sit down on the couch after putting the children to sleep, that he would say her name, and she would look at him expectantly. He never got any further than that. He would smile and shake his head and say it was nothing. Tomorrow. He always promised himself that he would tell her tomorrow. Until he finally decided that there was no point in telling her until he absolutely had to, no point in upsetting her, no point when there was nothing she could do to stop it. Better that their last days together be happy rather than filled with arguments and high emotions. It was a lie, a lie that didn't even convince him. He was a coward, as plain and simple as that. He would hear her voice in his head, repeating the warning she had given him in India, the words that had finally dropped the gun from his hand and temporarily spared Longsworth's life: *You do this, and you'll be exactly what Longsworth thinks you are. You'll be a killer, and you won't be the man I love anymore.* The memory of those words would stop his confession before it could ever leave his lips. When she knew the truth of what he had done, would she forgive him or abandon him?

Eventually his time simply ran out. No more time to wrestle with his conscience, no more chances to almost confess to her and then back out, no more time, period. Five days pass very quickly for the condemned.

They came for him while he was on a site survey with Xander. The construction crews were laying the foundation for what would become the new Council headquarters. Not half a world away, but right at the mouth of Hell, where it could be of the most use to the Slayer. The rubble of the high school had already been cleared away and in its place Giles would build his vision of the Council: a Council of Watchers who would stand beside their slayers, who would be the hand of magic, the shield to the Slayer's sword. The twins were at his side, wearing their tiny hardhats, although the small group was only viewing the construction site at a distance, Xander pointing out where the various secret passageways had already been poured.

Giles didn't see the officers until they were standing on the rise beside them. Xander smiled and called out a friendly greeting, thinking perhaps that Buffy had sent them. Giles knew better. They were friends of Buffy's; that much was certain. He had seen them at various police functions. But they were there on business.

"Mr. Giles?" the first asked as he approached. Giles remember sharing a drink with the man after a ceremony honoring Buffy and April for their work on a particularly difficult case.

"Yes."

"I'm sorry. I... I have a warrant." The officer wore a grim expression as one hand reached behind his back, presumably for handcuffs.

"Please," Giles pleaded softly. "Not in front of my children." He turned his head slightly in Xander's direction, not meeting his young friend's eyes, but rather staring at his work boots. "Xander, could you take them to the Magic Box for me? See if Anya will watch them until Marianne can come for them. Anya should have her pager number."

"Giles, what's going on? Should I get Buffy?" The alarm in his voice was unsettling the children. Robin wiggled her hand into her father's, and Alex dropped the stick he'd been using to dig in the dirt, looking back and forth between his father and his uncle with interest.

"No, she knows already, I'm sure. Just take the twins, please." He forced a reassuring smile for his children, and they went willingly with their Uncle Xander. Giles watched them until they were out of sight, and then faced the two officers waiting patiently beside him. "Alright, let's get this over with."

He waited alone in the bare interrogation room. He had asked for his lawyer, and he had asked for his wife. So far they had brought him neither. They had kindly brought him a cup of coffee, though, and a tape recorder on which they had played that fateful conversation with the Council's black ops. He was expecting it, however, and so it had failed to rattle him. When he had again asked for his lawyer, they had assured him that he had been sent for, and then they had left him alone.

Giles' eyes sometimes drifted up to the one-way mirror that stretched the breadth of one wall. He wondered who might be watching him, if maybe Buffy was standing on the other side of the glass, what she might see now when she looked at him. He wondered what she would tell their children. Coward that he was, he had neatly avoided that unpleasant duty by putting off his confession until it was too late. Would she tell them the truth? Would she tell them their father was a murderer? Or would she gloss over the exact details: their father had to go away for a while, but they could visit him sometimes like they did Faith?

He heard the lock click and the door open. His heart dropped when he saw it was only Xander.

"She wouldn't come," Giles guessed.

Xander paused for a long moment before finally shaking his head. "She's pretty mad. I think she just needs to cool off. I'm sure she'll come tomorrow." He sat on the opposite side of the table.

Giles bowed his head. "I've lost her." His voice was flat, resigned, defeated.

"No, don't be silly," Xander insisted. "You just have to give her a little time to deal."

Giles gave his friend a grateful, if doubtful, smile. They sat in silence as they waited for the lawyer to arrive. There was really nothing to say. Giles could feel the shift in their friendship, the awkwardness between them now as Xander tried to reconcile this new information with everything else he knew about the watcher. Buffy, at least, had known about Ben. But Xander had probably never guessed that his friend and mentor had the capacity to be a cold-blooded killer when given the right circumstances. Xander had never seen him in the factory, beating on Angelus with the flaming baseball bat and consumed by a single minded rage. Nor had he witnessed the cool and detached manner in which Giles had smothered Ben.

The lawyer arrived. The meeting was brief. Giles was advised to remain silent and was promised that his case would be given top priority. Such were the advantages that money could buy. Xander offered to play peacemaker with Buffy in order to hopefully convince her to come to the hearing the next day. The lawyer seemed to think that if a judge and jury could see a loving and supportive family sitting in the front row, Giles would present as a more sympathetic defendant.

Afterwards, he was taken to spend the night in lockup. Not a terribly daunting prospect in and of itself; he and Ethan had earned an overnight stay on more than one occasion in their youth. No, what was unbearable was the long walk leading him there. Giles was well-known to the police force of Sunnydale, both as Buffy's husband and as the previous owner of the Magic Box, now newly minted billionaire. This would likely feed the gossip mill for months. He heard the whispers as he approached each small group, the other officers quieting mid-word and following him with their eyes as he passed

by. He ducked his head and understood now why people on the news were always holding their jackets over their faces. He felt terribly exposed with so many pairs of eyes drilling into him, shame burning his cheeks. He curled his hands tighter to his body, self-conscious of the handcuffs and wishing that his guards would walk him to his cell a little faster.

After the iron bars had locked behind him, there was very little for him to do, and pacing back and forth across the narrow confines of his cell grew tiresome rather quickly. So he simply lay down on the single cot and surprised himself by immediately falling asleep. He slept the hard, deep sleep of one who had spent the last five nights tossing and turning. Now that the dreaded event had actually arrived, his worry and anticipation disappeared, leaving in their place a calm acceptance. Whatever happened now was out of his control.

A hearing was scheduled before the judge the next day. The lawyer heading up his case brought him a clean suit to change into, and they walked into the courtroom together, Giles' eyes immediately scanning the gallery for familiar faces. Xander and Anya were there, as was Willow. Beyond that, the audience was mostly comprised of court reporters, a cluster of law students, and an assortment of curious gawkers. Giles wondered if he'd made the news.

But the one face he was truly looking for was absent: Buffy. She was still angry, and obviously even Xander had failed to persuade her to make an appearance.

Lilah Morgan sat at the prosecutor's table, although it was a local lawyer that actually argued the state's case. The judge came to a decision quickly. The evidence warranted a trial, and Giles would be held over without bail. That part caught him off guard, as he had hoped to return home for the duration of the trial, had hoped to be given that extra time to somehow work things through with Buffy. Now his only chance would be if she deigned to visit him, currently a highly unlikely possibility.

Giles glanced over at the prosecution's table and noticed that Lilah was smiling back at him smugly, her eyes measuring his reaction to the judge's denial of bail. Wolfram and Hart, it seemed, were responsible for the motion convincing the court that Giles was a flight risk.

He schooled his face into a neutral expression, although his heart was sinking with the knowledge that he would most likely never see his home again, or, unless some miracle lifted Buffy's anger, his wife and children. He folded his hands in his lap and became so lost in his maudlin thoughts that he didn't even notice the hearing was over until the bailiff had tapped him on the shoulder and motioned that it was time to go.

Xander called his name, and he turned, the bailiff kindly giving him a moment to speak with his friends.

"I brought you some books," Xander said. "You know, something to do. Figured you might be bored. The guard said he'd take them in to you."

Giles smiled slightly, his mind still brooding on his previous darker thoughts, but he was making an effort to be upbeat, for their sakes. "Thank you, Xander. That was very thoughtful of you. I was just thinking that it would be nice to have something to read."

"I put some of your favorite tea in the box too," Anya piped in eagerly. "And a whole carton of cigarettes. Because you can trade them for things. They do it all the time in the movies."

That did wrest a soft chuckle from him, and he reached out his hand to tuck a loose lock of hair behind her ear.

His eyes fell on Willow next. She was fidgeting with her hands and her head was bowed. One tear fell from her cheek, and he suspected there were more where that had come from. He reached out and squeezed her shoulder gently. Taking them all in a glance, he tried to reassure them. "I'll be fine. Honestly."

The bailiff cleared his throat, and Giles took the hint. He followed the man out of the courtroom and was quickly returned to his holding cell beneath the courthouse. Lilah was waiting for him in the corridor, leaning against the bars of the opposite cell. She crossed her arms as she saw him approach, that same smug smile plastered across her face as she watched them remove the handcuffs and lock him behind the bars.

He waited until they were alone to say anything. "I believe it's against the law for you to be here. Opposing counsel are required to go through my lawyer."

She strolled across the corridor, stopping a few inches from the bars. Her fingers idly walked up and down one length as she spoke. "It's not too late. The trial hasn't started yet. Tell me where the ring is, and I can get the whole thing dismissed."

"You've already given them the tape. You've already opened Pandora's box, as it were."

"And I'm saying we can still close it." Her voice became lower, more intense, her fingers now curling around the iron bars tightly. "Where is it?"

"I don't know," he answered quite honestly.

She took a few steps backwards. "Maybe this will jog your memory," she offered out casually. "Wolfram and Hart made arrangements for your stay here with State Corrections."

He raised one eyebrow coolly, not rising to the bait.

"Your cell is impervious to magic. The handcuffs they use for you too. We're aware that you can wield a sizeable amount of magical power when you choose to, and we've prepared for it."

"So?" Giles replied with feigned apathy.

"So: no popping out to pay a visit to the wife and kiddies. No spell to watch them from a distance. Nothing that would defeat the purpose of your being here. You're going to serve your time same as anyone else who didn't have an education in the black arts."

"I expected nothing less." He could see that she was growing irritated at her failure to rile him. Her jaw twitched slightly as she watched him, as she tried to find something to push him into revealing the location of the coveted ring.

She was getting warmer.

"You were claustrophobic for a while, weren't you, Mr. Giles? How's that going for you now? Any better?"

He had made great strides in the nine months since being trapped by Willow's spell. He hadn't had a panic attack since the summer, drove the minivan without problem, and slept as well as he had before his ordeal, which was to say sometimes well and sometimes not and sometimes facedown in a stack of books. But if he were to be honest with himself, it was still there below the surface, a fear he could not completely shake, could only bury deep and try to control. Lilah's mention of it seemed to rattle the cage of the claustrophobia he kept locked away. He was beginning to feel it awaken.

"You may change your mind about our deal," she speculated. "You're going to be in here a long time, and I imagine that for someone with your condition, this cell is going to feel a little smaller everyday. I just hope, for your sake, you have a change of heart while we can still do something to help you."

He knew his neutral expression had faltered. She seemed pleased at the effect her words had on him and left.

He was alone.

He curled his hands around the bars that locked him in. He didn't know why he felt compelled to test Lilah's claim. Why did the waiter's warnings that the plate was hot always prompt Buffy to touch it and see how hot? In the same way, Giles closed his eyes and tested the magic barrier that had supposedly been erected around him.

He got a nasty jolt for his trouble and ended on his butt on the floor. It appeared that, in this, Lilah was telling the truth.

He stood up and scanned the room with his eyes. It felt like it was shrinking, like he could reach out both hands and touch each wall.

He sat on the edge of his cot, rubbing his sweating palms across his knees and taking slow, calming breaths. His heart was already pounding, his hands shaking. If he wasn't careful, he would have another panic attack right here.

It's not like before, he reminded himself. You can move. You can talk and read and walk circles in this little room if you like. It's not dark or silent or endless.

His eyes landed on the box Xander had brought for him. The guard must have left it while they were at the hearing. He reached over and dragged it closer. Xander had mentioned books, and that was exactly what Giles needed right now.

The trial passed quickly. His friends couldn't afford to be there everyday, but they took turns, and there was always someone sitting in the front row directly behind him, someone to talk with during the breaks, someone to bring him books or magazines or drawings from his children with which he could pass the time in the evenings while he was alone in his cell.

Xander would crack jokes and make sarcastic comments about the prosecuting lawyers and the possibility of inbreeding among the jurors. He could usually coax a genuine smile from Giles, and once he'd even elicited a brief fit of giggles when he'd told the story of the site inspector whom Alex had pummeled with water balloons when the unsuspecting man had made a wrong turn, ending in Giles' office instead of Xander's. Marianne, even, had blasted the man with her Supersoaker 3000, thinking at first that he was Xander. They would be lucky if the inspector didn't report half a dozen violations to fine them for. Giles' giggles attracted the attention of one of his lawyers, who frowned and scolded the two of them, insisting that a murder trial was hardly the place for jokes.

When it was Willow in the front row, the conversation would be more subdued. She would involve him in some slayer-related discussion, asking him to clarify specific points of demon lore or to help with tricky translations. She did the research for Buffy now, took the reports from his slayer after her patrols and followed up with the appropriate study. Giles suspected that Willow was only keeping him occupied with her questions, that she had already worked out the answers on her own.

Anya would give him the baby to hold during the breaks, and the girl was always trying to pull his glasses off his face, usually poking his eyes with her chubby little fingers in the process. His lawyer would smile at the scene, hopeful that the vision of Giles holding a happy baby would sway the jurors in their favor. Even if it wasn't his child or his wife.

His wife and his children never came.

John came sometimes in the late afternoons, after school had let out. Poor John had no clue why his friend was sitting trial for murder; he hadn't the slightest inkling about watchers and slayers and demons and magic. He taught second grade, had sat on the back porch with Giles while their wives talked cop talk in the kitchen, and had sometimes babysat the twins when Marianne needed to go out of town. This was outside of his experience, and yet he came sometimes to offer his quiet support.

April came twice. She didn't mention Buffy, but she did inform him that he was the hottest piece of gossip at the station and was on the news most every night. She teased that she was going to sell the shirt he'd left at their house on Ebay. Then she gave him the inside scoop on each of the lawyers acting as opposing counsel.

Buffy never came. Never sent a letter. Never picked up the phone when he called. Never brought their children to see him. The trial lasted over a month, and if that weren't enough time to cool her anger, then there was no hope that it ever would.

When the last day came, and each side made its closing arguments, the courtroom was full, his friends all sitting in the front row and the rest of the gallery packed with people who had been following the trial on the news. He had held onto the tiniest bit of hope that she would come, but he felt the familiar pang of disappointment when he saw that she had not.

They waited for the verdict in a side conference room. Six lawyers he had working in his defense, and not one of them seemed very upbeat. His friends tried harder to fake optimism, but Giles soon saved them the trouble.

"Look, we all know what the verdict will be. Let's not spend however long it takes the jury to deliberate sitting in here worrying about it."

Anya suggested Monopoly. He wasn't sure what his lawyers had expected, but that was not it. They watched with incredulous fascination as the six friends played board games. The baby sat on his knee, her hands constantly reaching for the game tokens, and she finally started crying when he wouldn't let her have any. Willow took the infant- she'd already gone bankrupt- and walked the length of the conference room until the baby had fallen asleep in her arms.

April and Xander were soon out of the game, too, leaving just Anya, Giles, and John. The game turned cutthroat. Anya considered herself the epitome of capitalist superiority and losing at Monopoly would be like failing the board exams for the title. John had taught the second grade for over twenty-five years and was no slouch at playing games. Giles just felt the need to win at *something* today.

Anya landed on Boardwalk, where Giles had already placed a hotel. She would have to mortgage all her utilities to pay him and was well on her way to Chapter 11. John, on the other hand, controlled more than half the board.

But winning didn't appear to be in the cards for Giles today. That was the moment the bailiff came in to inform them that the jury had returned with their verdict. The game would have to be a draw.

Anya offered him one of her playing cards. "Want my 'Get out of jail free' card?"

"Anya!" Xander scolded, not finding her joke very amusing.

Giles, however, laughed and took it. He could have a dark sense of humor sometimes.

They filed back in the courtroom, the rest of the audience already present and waiting, the jury sitting in their box, and Lilah making a small slashing motion across her throat as she met his eyes. The deal was off; he had passed the point of no return.

Giles stood at polite attention, his entourage of lawyers standing to either side of him, as the foreman read the verdict. He was prepared for it, but even so, hearing the word 'guilty' was a blow for any man. He heard Willow burst into tears behind him and, appropriately enough, the baby joined her.

He was escorted back to his cell to await sentencing the next day.

Three consecutive terms. That's what he got. Transferred to the LA prison where he would spend the rest of his life, he said goodbye to his friends, thanked his lawyers for their efforts, and was escorted from the courtroom for the last time.

Xander and Anya were the first to visit him in LA. The baby was asleep in her mother's arms. Giles sat at the small wooden table, separated from them by thick glass. Xander lifted the telephone receiver, and Giles followed.

"Hey, gettin' settled in?" Xander asked.

"I've managed to unpack, yes," Giles answered with a ghost of a smile. He had exactly one box of belongings.

"Gotta say, better than the tweed," Xander commented, gesturing with one hand to the plain gray prison jumper Giles wore. "Although I liked the suits you wore at the Magic Box better. Classy."

"Yes, well, I don't have to launder these, so there's an upside."

Anya tugged on Xander's sleeve, and the two of them had a brief conversation Giles couldn't hear. Finally, Xander put the receiver back to his mouth. "Anya wants me to ask if you've seen Faith."

"They don't as a rule mingle the men with the women."

"That's what I tried to tell her."

They chatted for a short while about inconsequential things. Giles didn't ask about Buffy, nor did they volunteer any information. If she had forgiven him, she would have been there. Anya took the receiver and talked with him for a short while. She mentioned what Xander hadn't: that the twins had been asking for their father, that they missed him. Robin slept in one of his shirts, though it hung nearly to the ground on her. Alex carried his father's pocket watch around in his front pocket and often asked where the hands would be when it was time for Daddy to come home.

Giles swallowed and bowed his head. He missed his children more than he thought possible.

Xander and Anya had brought him a small care package, and the guard delivered it to him on the other side of the glass. A few more books, more tea, some chocolate, and pictures from the twins' fourth birthday party. He looked through the photos while his visitors were still there, and Xander filled in the details for each one. There were some photos of Buffy as well, helping the children to unwrap their gifts and blow out their candles. She was smiling, but it didn't hide the deeper sadness he saw in her eyes. He had hurt her, disappointed her, made a mistake that would cost them their future together. He didn't blame her for hating him.

All too soon his allotted time ran out, and it was time to say goodbye. Xander and Anya left, and he was returned to his cell.

He had already hung a few of the children's drawings on the walls. It made the place seem less barren. He added a couple of the photos beside them, and then sat down on the cot, staring across at his collage. He sighed before flopping down on the bed, still holding one of the photos in his hands. He traced his fingers across the images of son and daughter, lingered briefly over that of Buffy, and then pressed the photo to his heart. Giles had never felt so homesick. As he stared up at the ceiling, he had to remind himself that this *was* his home now.

Giles' heart was pounding, his breathing rapid and shallow. He sat bolt upright, disoriented in the darkness and sure that the room was closing in on him, that he could reach out in the darkness and touch all four walls of his prison. The darkness was suffocating, achingly familiar, and triggering the beginnings of a panic attack. He needed light.

"Guard," he called softly, his voice failing him as he fought to control his breathing. He swallowed, about to try again, only louder this time.

"Giles?"

Buffy's voice, coming from right beside him, her arms sliding around his waist and up his chest, encouraging him to lie back down on the bed. "Shhh... It's okay."

His hands covered hers, and then slowly traced a path up her arms, reassuring himself of her presence. "Buffy?"

"Yeah?"

He clasped her tightly to his chest, clutching her like a lifeline. “What are you doing here?” he whispered against her hair, his throat tight with emotion.

She squirmed in his embrace, adjusting herself into a more comfortable position. “I kinda live here.”

“What?” he gasped, still not understanding, sleep still muddling his thoughts.

He felt her laugh against his chest. “You’ve been waking up with me for more than four years. Shouldn’t be that much of a surprise.”

He released her with one hand, unwilling to let go with the other, and with his free hand explored his surroundings. His fingers found the headboard, the edge of the mattress, knocked against the nightstand. He turned his head, and the faint green glow of the numbers on the clock radio threw a tiny circle of light into the otherwise pitch dark room.

“I’m home, in my bed,” he concluded, still baffled by the reality of it.

“Yeah, you are.” Buffy kissed his cheek. “If you were in anyone else’s, I might have to do some serious ass kicking.”

“But it seemed so real,” he insisted, still afraid to believe that it had only been a nightmare. “What day is it?”

“Thursday.” She paused. “Do you want me to get Robin’s nightlight? Just for tonight maybe. You’re still shaking.”

“No, I... I... Thursday?” He thought back to when it had all started, before his conviction, before the trial, before his arrest. Thursday had been the day Lilah Morgan had first come to him, blackmailed him with the tapes, and demanded the return of the Ring of Gorlois. It was still that same night. He still had five days left before her deadline.

Holding Buffy in his arms, he knew the first thing he needed to do with that time.

“Buffy,” he murmured softly, still remembering the pain of her abandonment from his dream, not entirely certain that he wasn’t just dooming himself to repeat it. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

Chapter 3: Coming Clean

The darkness made it easier to say. He didn't have to look into her eyes as he said it, didn't have to see the hurt or disappointment or accusation that would surely be in them when he was done. Ironically enough, the darkness that so often stirred such terrifying memories of being trapped by Willow's spell would now give him the courage to confess.

"Buffy, there's something I've been keeping from you." She was silent, waiting patiently, and he pressed on. "There's really no way to pretty it up, no way to make it sound different than it is, so I'll just come out and say it. I killed Longworth and Sulla. Not myself, but I had it done."

She withdrew from his arms, and he didn't try to hold onto her. He just let her go, feeling the emptiness in his heart as well as his arms. "I'm so sorry, Buffy," he murmured softly. "You must be terribly disappointed in me. I know that when you stopped me in India, that you didn't want to think me capable of murder. But it would appear that, in the end, I'm not the man you thought I was."

She flicked on the nightstand lamp, and he squinted in the harsh light, trying to make out her expression. She was sitting straight up in bed, glaring at him.

"Do you think I'm stupid, Giles?"

"Of course not!" he sputtered. "Whyever would you ask such a question?"

"You must either think that I'm stupid or that I never pick up a paper." She pondered what she had just said for a second before she tacked on, "Okay, I guess I'm not usually Current Events Gal, but still... All those times I was up in the middle of the night with a crying baby, because his father was claiming the broken leg excuse—"

"Hey!" Giles protested. "I got up every night with him while he was teething."

She shrugged. "Fine. We're even. My point is this: there's nothing on at three in the morning except CNN, Xena reruns, and Gilligan's Island. I must admit that Gilligan's Island won out on some nights, but there were lots of other nights that I would sit on the couch downstairs, watching the news while I was nursing Alex or trying to get him to go back to sleep. When they pulled Longworth and Sulla's bodies from the water... Well, they might have written it off as two more casualties of the plane crash, but I knew I'd seen them both alive since then."

She crossed her arms defiantly. "You think I didn't figure it out, Giles? You think I wasn't looking over the phone bill the next month and connecting the dots: when they'd died, when you'd called? You must think I'm a pretty lousy detective, huh? You called the Council's black ops, didn't you? The ones that tried to kill me when I was in Faith's body?"

Giles sat up in bed now too, giving her a matching glare. "You *knew*? All these years, I've been terrified that you'd find out, terrified that you'd never forgive me, and you already *knew*?"

She poked him in the chest with her finger. "Let's not forget which one of us had the big earth shattering secret he wasn't telling the other one of us. My knowing about it doesn't even rate on the scale of secrets, and it sure doesn't change the fact that you should have told me way before this. Jeeze, Giles, it's been four years. I was beginning to think you'd never 'fess up."

He shook his head in disbelief. "All this time... you knew, and you didn't hate me for it?"

She crawled out of bed, slipped on her robe, and began pacing. "Maybe I did a little, at first. When I saw it on the news, when I first figured out what you had done, I didn't come to bed that night. I just sat on the couch and cried, like all night long. The next day, I told you I had been downstairs with Alex the whole time, which technically I had, and then I went to spend the day with Willow. If I hadn't already figured it out myself, she would have filled me in. She showed me an article she'd clipped out about Longworth."

"Willow knows?"

“And Xander, which I guess means Anya, too. Although none of them know about Ben. Anyway,” she continued, as if the details of who knew about his crimes were inconsequential, “I talked with Willow, and... well, I couldn’t hate you, Giles. I was holding our *son* in my arms, and looking at him, I understood why you did it. Hell, I broke the old guy’s leg while we were in India, and it took a whole lotta restraint to shoot him with the tranq instead of the 9 mm. I wanted him dead, after what he put us through, after he cost us our daughter. So I understand. And maybe the smallest part of me is ashamed to admit that I’m glad you did it, that they’re dead and I never have to worry about either of them showing up here again.”

She faced him, her eyes still filled with the anger and hurt he had been afraid he would see in them. “I forgave you a long time ago for sending the black ops after Longworth and Sulla. But I am still angry with you for never telling me, for keeping such a huge secret from me. And I asked Willow and Xander not to say anything. I wanted to give you the chance to come clean yourself.” She crossed her arms. “Sure took you long enough. Why tonight?”

He dropped his eyes to his lap, unable to meet her piercing stare. “Remember when Travers was trying to blackmail us into raising Robin as a slayer?”

“He had proof that you’d killed Ben.”

“Not just Ben. Longworth and Sulla too.”

“Oh,” she answered softly. “You kinda left that part out.”

“Yes,” he answered bitterly, resting his head back against the headboard and closing his eyes. This conversation was not going as he had expected. “I must admit that the greater part of Travers’ threat was that he would tell you what I had done. If I had known that you already knew... well that might have changed things slightly.”

“Well, sor-rry,” she retorted caustically, “maybe if you had actually *told* me, you wouldn’t have had to worry about it.”

He opened his eyes, and they stared at each other for several tense and silent moments. Buffy finally sighed and climbed onto the bed beside him, resting back against the headboard in a matching pose to his. “So... that was still a long time ago, and Travers is dead now...” she prompted him for more.

“He had audiotapes, the actual conversation I had with the black ops. Someone must have recovered them from the Council ruins. And now those tapes have found their way into the hands of Wolfram and Hart.”

“The evil law firm Angel talks about?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.” Her voice became softer, lost the hard edge of anger. “This is bad.”

“Very bad,” he agreed. “A lawyer came by today with an ultimatum: I have five days to recover a stolen artifact for them or else they’ll turn the tapes into the district attorney and bring me up on murder charges.”

He felt her fingers grasp his. “What are we going to do?” she asked him as she leaned her head against his shoulder. It didn’t escape his notice that she had said “we” and not “you.”

“I’m afraid there isn’t much we can do. The artifact they’re after would be too dangerous in their hands. I daren’t chance it. Besides, I do this one thing for them, and they’ll find something else to demand of me. I give into them now, and they’ll hold those tapes over our heads for the rest of our lives.”

She squeezed his hand softly. “Too bad they don’t just want hush money. We have plenty of that.”

He chuckled wryly. “Is this my police detective wife talking?”

"Sometimes you have to break a few little laws in the interest of world save-age. Just little things like breaking and entering, stealing things outta public museums, blowing up high schools... Shall I continue?"

"This is very much different than that, Buffy. I didn't do this to track down an Incan mummy or stop an ascendant demon. This was murder, plain and simple as that."

"No." She turned, hiking one leg over his until she was sitting straddled across his lap, the ends of her robe pooled around their legs. She looped her arms around his neck, leaning forward to touch their foreheads together. "You're not a murderer, Giles. You're a father who was protecting his children."

"Let's hope a jury sees it that way," he muttered.

"You're not giving up that easily," Buffy insisted fiercely. "We'll find another solution, something besides the two options Wolfram and Hart gave us. You're not going to jail, Giles."

He gave her a level stare. "Maybe I should."

She tilted her chin up and kissed him on his forehead. "No, Giles. You're worth ten of them. Look, I said I forgave you a long time ago. So forgive yourself already. Randall was an accident. Ben was war. And Longworth and Sulla were two bastards who kidnapped our children and would have probably tried it again. The fact that you feel so guilty about their deaths only proves that you're not a murderer. Just a man who made some understandable mistakes under some difficult conditions."

Giles shook his head. She had it all wrong. She had known his sins, and yet she knew nothing. And this was the confession he had dreaded, the part of himself he was afraid for her to see, the truth that could drive them apart. He lifted one hand to tenderly brush a lock of hair from her forehead. "Oh, my dear, sweet Buffy, that's exactly my point. I don't regret what I did, would do it again if given the chance. I only regret getting caught. And isn't that the classic line of the guilty?"

She leaned forward and kissed him once more, this time on his lips, slow and sweet and banishing all his fears with this demonstration of her unconditional love. She knew now his darkest secrets, but that knowledge earned him no condemnation from her, only this tender devotion. She pulled away from him then, and stared into his eyes for several long, quiet seconds. When she finally spoke, it was with a normalcy that belied their entire previous conversation: "We should go back to sleep. We'll be up bright and early tomorrow: stereo alarm clocks."

Giles smiled at the thought of the twins' waking them, as they did every morning. "Have I mentioned lately that I miss having Dawn in the house?"

She smiled in return. "You're only sorry she went off to college just when you found yourself free to sleep in in the mornings. I know it's not exactly free babysitting, but Marianne could stay over sometimes to keep them occupied in the morning. Or everyday if you wanted. We pay her enough."

"No... I-I know I tease, but I actually think I would miss it."

"Me, too." Her smile faded, and she touched him on the side of his face. "We'll figure this all out tomorrow. Big Scooby meeting, and we'll figure it all out."

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. "I don't deserve you."

"You're stuck with me all the same," she answered, shedding her robe and crawling back under the covers beside him. "For better or worse. I think that was actually in the vows there somewhere."

He spooned up behind his wife and slayer and allowed the conversation to end for now. Tomorrow they would make the hard choices, but for tonight he would sleep soundly, knowing that Buffy still loved him despite the wrongs he had done, and knowing that whatever he had to face tomorrow, he would not face it alone.

"The tapes are all they got, right?" They were all seated around the Magic Box table, just like old times. The store hadn't opened yet, and Anya was feeding the baby her breakfast. Willow was seated beside Buffy, and Xander paced back and forth behind them. He was the one who had asked the question.

"The tapes are the only proof in existence, I believe," Giles answered, still astounded at how easily the others had accepted and forgiven that he had ordered two men's deaths. Xander had thumped him on the shoulder and motioned to Anya and their daughter, saying he would have done the same. Willow had only dropped her eyes and in a low voice said that she had done far worse.

Anya had seemed to understand his motivation far better than any of the others, who all wanted to believe he'd done it to protect Buffy and the twins. Anya, former vengeance demon, had patted him on the arm in that awkward and forced way of hers, not forced because she didn't mean it, but forced because human gestures were still not second nature to her, and assured him very quietly that she, more than anyone else, understood the temptation of vengeance.

"The ops who did the job died with the rest of the watchers," Giles continued, "and... and they were professionals. There wouldn't have been any evidence."

"So we steal the tapes," Xander suggested, holding his hands out to solicit opinions from the rest of the group.

"They probably have copies in different places," Willow sighed. "We'd never know if we got them all. And even if we did, they'd just say we didn't. We wouldn't know unless we called their bluff."

"So stealing the tapes is out," Xander summarized. "We can't give them what they want, so giving in to their blackmail is out. Hey, what about blackmailing them ourselves?"

"With what?" Willow asked.

"I don't know, Hacker Girl." He waved at the laptop sitting untouched on the table in front of her. "Couldn't you dig up some dirt on these guys? An evil law firm's gotta have some serious skeletons in the closet."

"Not to mention a kick-ass security system at the door," Willow lamented. "I've tried before. Remember when Angel wanted me to find out where they were hiding that demon larvae Spike had warned him about?"

The group deflated.

Buffy perked up suddenly and suggested brightly: "We may not be able to dig up the secrets they already have, but we could make something up to blackmail them with."

"Make something up?" Giles frowned. "I don't think they'd find that very threatening. Especially as it wouldn't be true."

She rolled her eyes at him. "I meant we set them up, Candid Camera style, and *then* blackmail them with *that*."

"Who'd do it?" Xander asked. "They know all of us. Probably even Spike. They'd be too suspicious to fall for anything we set up for them."

Anya had been quiet thus far, intent on feeding Zoey. The baby was happily oblivious to the serious conversation occurring around her, eagerly focused on each mouthful her mother offered her and crankily demanding the next by banging her fists on the highchair tray. Anya carefully spooned a mouthful of pureed peaches into Zoey's mouth. The girl looked at Giles. He winked at her. She stuck her tongue out and blew a raspberry at him, spilling glops of orange peach goo all down the front of her. Anya glared at him. Giles smiled back innocently. It had taken him half a day to teach the child to do that. After all, he had three years of paybacks to catch up on.

Anya continued scowling at him as she cleaned off the baby's face. "I vote for letting Uncle Giles go to jail."

“Anya!” Buffy, Willow, and Xander shouted in unison.

Giles only arched one brow and replied coolly, “The quality of your mercy humbles me, Anya.” Although he would never admit it to anyone, he missed the daily verbal sparring that had comprised their previous employer/employee relationship.

Anya glanced at the others quickly before resuming Zoey’s feeding. “I’m actually not joking about Giles going to jail. It would be the most practical and logical thing. Giles turns himself in, which would hopefully work in his favor, and then uses his massive fortune to hire expert legal counsel, much as OJ Simpson did, except that he also sold his soul to a minor imbalance demon. Giles wouldn’t have to do that, though. He has a lot more money and a much more sympathetic defense.” She pointed at him with the spoon. “Maybe you could even buy off the jury.”

Giles frowned at her suggestion. “I’m not sure which is greater: your faith in capitalism or your cynicism for the criminal justice system. But, as much as it might shake the foundations of your belief system to hear this, I must tell you, Anya, that money can’t buy everything. This, I’m afraid, would be one such instance.”

She sighed. “For most people that might be true. But with the kinds of black markets we have access to... well, that trite cliché just doesn’t hold water. You can buy anything you like with enough money. The only question is if you’re willing to pay the secondary costs associated with your purchase.”

“Let’s just take it as a given,” Buffy insisted, “that we can’t buy the jury. What are our other options?”

Giles leaned forward, his voice becoming graver. He knew Buffy wouldn’t want to hear this. “Aside from jury tampering, Anya may have the rest of it right. It would appear that our best option is for me to turn myself in and hope that a trial would end in my favor.”

“No way,” Buffy said firmly. “The courtroom is like Wolfram and Hart’s home turf. We wouldn’t stand a chance against them in there. We have to find another way.”

“We seem to be running short of ideas.”

Her face hardened into an expression he recognized from many lost arguments. He wouldn’t be able to change her mind about this. “We have five days to figure out a better idea,” she reminded him.

“Fine, but if we fail to arrive at a solution by then... I’m not waiting for Wolfram and Hart to do the honors. I’ll turn myself in.”

Willow went back to the sorority house, but she shut her door on the other girls and pretended to be grading papers. She didn’t want to be bothered. There was very little time, and far too much work to be done.

Five days.

She had five days to fix things for Giles. Hopefully, in doing so, she could set things right between them.

She booted up her laptop. Magic would have been easier, but Giles hadn’t lifted his spell yet, and so she would have to do things the old-fashioned way. She hated to admit that she was actually beginning to miss the magic. With it, she might have been able to hack past Wolfram and Hart’s firewall, but she wasn’t about to mention that fact to Giles. She played the dutiful Scooby and researched whatever she was given without complaint, but her extracurricular reading had expanded back into the magic she had previously abandoned. Sometimes she left the magic books she was reading lying around where he would notice them, hoping he would catch the hint that she was ready

and responsible and had learned her lesson. If he got the message, he never said anything. And Willow didn't have the nerve to do anything more than hint. She would never actually ask Giles to give her back her magic, even if it meant being plain, powerless Willow for the rest of her life.

She started scouring the chat rooms that some of the seedier elements of the magical community frequented. Her mind kept replaying Buffy's suggestion: set them up and blackmail them back. Xander was right, though: none of them would be able to do it. So Willow had to find someone who could.

Chapter 4: Deal with the Devil

Willow shouldered her way through the smoky bar. A live jazz band was playing on the small stage, and the place was packed. The bartender had pointed her towards a corner booth, but getting there was another matter entirely. She'd been leered at, propositioned, knocked into, both on purpose and by accident, and had half a glass of beer spilled on her. The whole place reeked of cigarette smoke and a thicker undercurrent of something less legal. Seedy deals were being hashed in dark corners, but she didn't want to think about any of that. There was only one person in the whole place she was at all interested in and one deal she cared anything about: the deal she intended to make with him.

She reached his booth, but he had his back to her and didn't see her approach. The woman seated across from him did, but didn't seem to feel it worth mentioning. They were holding hands across the table, leaning towards each other to be heard over the band, and the woman was smiling coyly at whatever he had just said to her.

Willow tapped her on the shoulder and ordered firmly, "Get lost."

The man noticed her then, and he didn't look too happy to see her.

"Bloody hell, what are you doing here?"

"You know her?" the woman asked.

It was perhaps the oldest cliché in the book, but it was what came immediately to Willow's mind. "*Know* me? I'm his girlfriend. Who the hell are you?"

"Not interested," the woman answered, grabbing her purse and sliding out of the booth.

"Wait!" he called out after her, trying to follow, but Willow blocked his path, and the woman disappeared back into the crowd too quickly.

He sighed and sank down in his seat. He motioned to the now vacant space opposite him. "And how do you know your little game didn't just break up a happy relationship of two years? Maybe I was about to propose to her."

Willow rolled her eyes and sat down. "You just met her in a chat room last night. I was there."

He shrugged in acknowledgement of that fact. "But it might have blossomed into something more if you hadn't so rudely interrupted." Ethan Rayne slugged back the last of his drink, and then waved to a passing waiter for a refill. "Ripper send you?"

"Giles doesn't know I'm here."

He smirked. "I can't imagine that he'd approve."

She sighed sadly. "No, he really, really wouldn't."

Ethan motioned between her and the waiter, and Willow soon found a full glass of something sitting in front of her. He raised his own. "A toast. To hell with authority and rules and a hard day's work. There's a world of pleasure out there for the tasting, and you, my dear, have just taken the first step."

She pushed the glass towards him and crinkled her nose. "Like I would ever have a drink with *you*. I'm not that dumb. Last time Giles went out drinking with you, you turned him into a demon."

"I turned him back, didn't I?" He downed his own drink in one go and waved to the waiter for another. Willow suspected he was drunk. "Was only trying to get him into the Initiative, so he could see for himself what I was talking about. I thought it was rather clever of me. But Ripper was never one for 'the ends justify the means' though, was he?"

"You helped kidnap their babies. Why would I trust you?"

He pushed the drink back to her side of the table. "Because you need something from me. Need something badly enough to track me down on your computer and traipse to the other side of the continent to find me. Have the drink already. It'll make it easier to ask me."

Against her better judgment, she picked the glass up. He couldn't have slipped anything in it; she'd watched the waiter deliver it to the table. She took a sip and grimaced. It was hard liquor like she'd never had, and it burned the back of her throat. Ethan was laughing at her, however, and so she forced herself to take another larger swallow, just to prove to him that she could.

The booth was one of those "U"-shaped ones with a single curving bench around the table. He quickly slid the length of it until he was sitting on her side of the table, right beside her, without a sliver of personal space between them. "I know why you came," he told her.

"You do?" she squeaked. She was thinking she had better finish off her drink. Liquid courage.

He leaned in close and murmured it in her ear as if it was a secret, his eyes scanning the bar for eavesdroppers. "You want me to free you."

Okay, now he had lost her. "Huh?"

"Your magic is in chains, luv. It's pounding on the walls, shaking the bars of its cage, screaming to be let out. Can't you hear it?"

She stared at him, open-mouthed, her heart pounding furiously. Part of her was saying, *Yes, yes, I feel it everyday. Please, I just want to be free.* She shook her head, as if to deny her own thoughts. "How... how did you know?"

"You fairly reek of Ripper's magic. Your chains are fashioned from it. He would have done the same to me after Randall, 'cept he swore off the magic." Ethan indicated to the waiter that she needed another drink. Willow didn't remember finishing the first one. "I can break his spell. For the right price, of course."

She straightened her shoulders and elbowed him out of her personal space. "That's not why I came," she told him firmly.

He arched one eyebrow. "No?"

"No. Giles will break the spell himself when he thinks I deserve it."

Ethan snorted in derision. "So he fancies himself the Magic Police now, does he? You really think he's ever going to lift that spell off you? I'm sure he believes he's only protecting you from yourself. He's a noble bastard that way." He slid back around to his side of the booth and leaned back casually, with his arms resting on the back of the booth. "No, I'm your only chance, Red. Won't cost you much." He paused dramatically. "Just your soul."

Her eyes widened, and he burst into loud gales of laughter. After a moment, he regained control of himself, wiping tears from his eyes while still chuckling silently. He shook his head. "Just kidding," he assured her. "I've always wanted to say that. Christ, you should have seen the look on your face. Bloody priceless."

She glared at him, beginning to regret her decision to ever seek him out. Somehow the plan had seemed so perfect in her head. She hadn't factored in the actually having to deal with Ethan part of it, though. "I told you. I didn't come here to get my magic back."

"Pity. I remember you had the makings of a pretty impressive witch. I sensed it briefly that Halloween. Actually, I had the perfect costume in mind for you, but you had your heart set on hiding yourself under that ghost's sheet." He was beginning to look bored with the turn in their conversation, his eyes wandering over the crowd and seeking out a more entertaining diversion. "So, what do you want then?"

"Giles is in trouble."

She had his attention again. He leaned forward eagerly. "Really? Oh, this I have to hear. Do tell."

Willow chewed on her bottom lip as she tried to decide how much to tell him. He needed to understand the plan, but giving him too much information would only add him to the list of people who could blackmail Giles. That would definitely not be good. Because while Willow would need

Ethan if her plan were to succeed, she knew she couldn't trust him. "There's this law firm, Wolfram and Hart, and they're causing problems."

He nodded. "I've heard of them. Met a few people who've done freelance work for them. What's their truck with dear old Ripper?"

"Giles is head of the Council now, and he's worth billions." She hoped he'd buy that as the extent of Giles' trouble. She wasn't about to tell him the rest of the story.

"So they're gouging him?"

"Yeah."

"What they got on him?"

Willow dropped her eyes to her lap and started nervously twisting her fingers. She was such a terrible liar. "What makes you think they got something on him?" She was cursing herself. Her voice had surely just given everything away.

"Well, if he's paying them hush money, they have to have something." A long pause. Willow couldn't bring herself to look up. He would see everything in her eyes. Ethan continued, "Is it about Randall? About the things he did in his Ripper days?"

She nodded enthusiastically, relieved that he had just given her a way to avoid revealing the truth. "I have a plan to get them off his back, but none of us can do it. They know all of us. We need someone they wouldn't recognize."

"So you naturally thought of me? I'm flattered. But what makes you think I care if Ripper's in trouble? What makes you think I'll fall in line with your little crew of do-gooders?"

"Because Giles was your friend."

He saluted her with his glass before finishing it off and slamming it down on the table. "You got the past tense in that statement right." He stood, dropped money on the table, and started walking away from her, pushing his way through the crowd towards the exit.

She bolted to her feet, her eyes wide with alarm, and chased him. She was surprised to find that her legs were a little wobbly and her head a little swimmy from just that one drink. God, she was a lightweight. "Wait!"

He didn't slow down, and she tried to keep him in her sight as she struggled to forge a path through the crowd. If he got away from her, she didn't know what she'd do. She wouldn't be able to find him again before Giles' five days were up, not if Ethan knew she was looking for him, not if he decided to disappear. And without Ethan, Willow didn't have a clue how to help Giles.

"Oh God," she moaned at the very thought of losing. "I think I'm gonna be sick."

Like the Red Sea before Moses, the crowd parted for those magic words. Someone just in front of her loudly warned the others, "Make way! She's gonna ralph!"

Willow hurried to the exit and caught up with Ethan just outside. "He misses you."

"Does he?" Ethan didn't break stride, turning onto Decatur Street and pulling a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket. He offered her one absently, and she made a disgusted face before shaking her head. He shrugged and lit up.

"He said you were one of the biggest mistakes of his life," she told him.

Ethan laughed and blew out a smoke ring. Willow had to admit to being a little impressed. Even Spike couldn't do that. "I suppose he believes his life would have never strayed from his perfectly chosen path if it weren't for me. Truth is no one was twisting his arm to play hoodlum."

"That's not what I meant. After Randall, after all of it. He said one of his biggest mistakes was letting your friendship go. He told me he always regretted that and wished he could change things between you." She couldn't read his expression. He looked thoughtful, serious, more than she'd ever

imagined Ethan Rayne could look. For several moments, he seemed to contemplate her words in silence.

Suddenly he stopped, pulled his fist back, spun, and punched the man walking directly behind them. The man hit the ground, unconscious, his long trench coat spread out on the ground to either side of him. Ethan immediately started shaking his hand out, as if the punch had hurt him more than the man he'd knocked out cold.

"What was that for?" Willow gasped.

Ethan bent over and retrieved something from the man's pockets. People were rubbernecking the scene on all sides, but no one stopped or tried to get involved. Ethan handed her a small, flowery drawstring purse. "This yours?"

Willow patted her coat pocket, surprised to find her little money purse was indeed missing. "Yeah."

"Pickpockets," he informed her flatly. "As much as New Orleans would like to claim itself the vampire headquarters of the world, you're more likely to lose your money here than your life." He slung one arm around her shoulders and started them walking again, urging her into a quicker pace. His eyes were vigilant for the night life around them. "I should walk you back to your hotel at least."

"See?" she said brightly. "You can be a good guy sometimes."

"How do you know I'm not walking you back to your hotel so I can take advantage of you in private?"

She frowned. "Ok, I don't, but... but you know what I think, Ethan?"

"No, but I'm fairly certain you're about to tell me anyway."

"I think you just like people to think you're a bad guy. I think underneath, you're kinda good."

"I'm neither. I'm gray. Gray's less comfortable than black or white, because you don't know how to classify it, don't know what to expect. It's unpredictable. I love unpredictable. Without balance, without Chaos, this world would be frightfully dull." He squeezed her shoulder and looked down on her, giving her a wink. "I could teach you if you liked. Let me break Ripper's spell, and we'd have fun, you and I. I could show you whole new facets of your magic; all the things stuffy old Rupert has deemed off-limits."

"No, I've already done the bad girl thing, and believe me when I say that I'm way over it."

"You've done dark. You've done light. But you haven't done gray. Chaos is an entirely different experience, gives you a new perspective on life. You might enjoy it, if you gave it a chance."

"No, thank you."

"Suit yourself." Ethan fell silent as they turned onto St. Anne and strolled towards her hotel. Passersby might have mistaken them for a couple, him with his arm wrapped protectively around her shoulders, casually smoking a cigarette, and her leaning ever so slightly towards him, comfortably matching his gait. No one would have guessed that they were looking at a powerful sorcerer, servant of Chaos, and an ex-witch who had been the fall of the Watcher's Council.

Day two of Giles' five day countdown began with another Scooby meeting at the Magic Box. Buffy stayed home from work. Xander and Giles, each being their own bosses, didn't need to make excuses for their absences. Anya complained about her store being commandeered once again for meetings and research, saying that she would be grateful when the Council Headquarters were finished and everyone could meet there instead. Not to mention that she had big plans for Buffy's old training room once she was relocated to her new slayer gym.

Willow was the only one absent. She claimed to be near a breakthrough on getting past Wolfram and Hart's firewall, and so everyone felt it best to leave her to work at home.

Buffy had suggested leaving the twins with Marianne, but Giles felt the need to be near them as much as possible in these last few days. He researched while Robin perched on his lap, intently coloring outside the lines of her coloring book. Alex was on a quest to find his hidden birthday presents, sure that they were somewhere in the store. Zoey was lying on a blanket near the corner, intently trying to make her arms and legs work together in some sort of crawling motion.

A little after noon, a woman in formal business attire strolled through the front door. Anya greeted her as she did every new customer, "Thank you for coming to the Magic Box. Please buy something."

But Buffy noticed how Giles immediately snapped to attention. He rose, holding Robin against one hip, and met the woman halfway. Buffy guessed that she might have something to do with this whole mess. Plus, the expensive suit, the perfect manicure, and the smug, superior smile. Oh, yeah, definite lawyer.

"I'm surprised to see you still here," she said. "I thought you'd take advantage of the time we gave you to hightail it out of here."

Robin stuck her thumb in her mouth and buried her face against her father's shoulder, seeming to sense his discomfort with this stranger.

"You're not getting the Ring of Gorlois," he told her.

"But you know where it is?"

"Not exactly."

Buffy stood as well and placed herself at her husband's side. "You got a lotta guts, lady, to show your face here, where it's likely to get punched by a pissed off slayer."

"Buffy," Giles chided sharply.

The woman pursed her lips as her eyes scanned over Buffy. She faced Giles again and met his eyes. "So, you told her?"

Buffy crossed her arms. "About Longworth and Sulla?" she answered for Giles. "He didn't have to. I already knew. About your blackmail? Yeah, we all know. And we're currently trying to figure out a way to screw Wolfram and Hart over."

The woman nodded approvingly. "You have spunk, girl. I think I see why Angel had a thing for you." She offered out her hand. "Lilah Morgan. Pleased to meet you, Buffy."

Buffy merely narrowed her eyes and glared.

Lilah shrugged and withdrew her hand. "Let's talk, woman to woman."

"Or woman to scum, as the case may be," Buffy threw in bitterly.

Unfazed, Lilah took a deep breath and plowed ahead, "I'm thinking you might be a little more practical about this. You want to keep your husband out of jail, don't you? Being a single mom's no picnic. But you already knew that, seeing as your mom was pretty much one. All we want is the ring. Call Angel, get it for us, and your man walks."

"Get out," Giles ordered, and Buffy flinched at the anger in his words.

Lilah walked backwards a few steps, holding out three fingers, reminding them all that they had three days left. Robin lifted her head from her father's shoulder and echoed with three fingers of her own, reminding them all that she was three years old.

Alex darted out from behind the register and ran up to the Wolfram and Hart lawyer. He tugged on her skirt to gain her attention, and Buffy winced.

"Fingerpaints!" Alex announced proudly, holding up his multi-colored, dripping hands, which had left rainbow smears down Lilah's skirt. Buffy thought it seemed like such a sad fate for such a nice designer skirt, even if it did happen to be adorning an evil lawyer.

Lilah placed her hand on the top of Alex's head and forced him back a step. "Cute kid," she said with disdain. She turned and walked out of the shop, but a giggling Alex made sure she left with a colorful handprint on her butt.

"Alex!" Buffy scolded after the door had closed, calling him over, and hauling him by one elbow over to where she could clean him off with napkins.

"Don't yell at him," Anya begged. "It was my idea. I put the fingerprint on his hands and told him to go get it on the lady."

Buffy glared at the ex-demon as she cleaned off her son. "I can't wait 'til Zoey's older. We're gonna buy her fingerpaints and sand art and a musical bear that only plays one song... What song was that, Giles?"

"This Old Man," he groaned as he sat back down and resumed his reading. "Yes, Zoey will definitely require one of those, preferably one that needs no batteries and lacks any kind of an off switch."

"Yeah," Buffy seconded. "And... and drums!" She was definitely getting into the spirit of this now, remembering over three years of Uncle Xander and Aunt Anya's thoughtful gifts. "Zoey's getting like a whole drum set as soon as she can hold the sticks."

Anya's forehead crinkled up into a puzzled expression. "But we already got Alex drums for his birthday."

"What!" Buffy cried, jumping to her feet.

"Hey!" Xander cut in, trying to divert attention from this particular topic of conversation. "Aren't we forgetting something? Giles in trouble? Evil lawyer just paid us a visit? Come on, people! Priorities!"

But Anya continued, still seemingly confused by Buffy's irritation. "Xander said drums were the traditional present for a fourth birthday. Was he wrong?"

"Bang! Bang!" Alex shouted gleefully.

"Yes, well he can play with them when he visits you," Giles insisted, putting to rest the argument before it could go any farther. "Xander is right about one thing, however: we should return to work."

They all resumed their research, trying not to let Lilah's visit and her reminder of their rapidly approaching deadline diminish their hopes.

Willow paced beside the security gate, constantly checking her watch and scanning the line. Airport security had already pulled her aside for a more thorough check, since she did look pretty suspicious and nervous. Ethan had less than ten minutes to get through security before they wouldn't let him board his flight. She hoped he remembered that he needed to arrive plenty early. What if he didn't come? He had claimed he needed to go back to his hotel for his stuff, but what if that was just what he had told her so he could bail out? She couldn't believe she'd let him out of her sight.

Then again, she didn't have much of a choice about that. They wouldn't be able to sit together on the plane, wouldn't be able to be seen together any more than absolutely necessary for fear that Wolfram and Hart would realize that Ethan was acting as a double agent. After being so considerably walked back to her hotel room, Willow had spent the majority of an hour convincing and begging Ethan until he had finally agreed to the plan, persuaded not so much by the idea of helping his old friend as much as by the prospect of playing havoc with a bunch of control-freak lawyers. Willow would just have to be satisfied with that for the time being. It was probably as close as one ever got to trust where Ethan Rayne was concerned.

She sighed in relief when she saw him queue up at the end of the line. He gave her a peppy little wave, and she rolled her eyes before walking off to find her gate.

She didn't see him again on the plane, nor when they disembarked. They took separate taxis when they landed in LA, and they arrived at the same building by different routes. She met him in front of the door to Cordelia's apartment, and he was late, again. She waited at the door, fervently hoping that no one from Angel Investigations would choose that moment to drop by.

"Miss me?" he whispered beside her ear, making her jump, and she let out a little squeal before clamping a hand over her mouth. She hadn't heard him approach from behind. She glared, and he smiled, entirely too pleased by his little games.

"So this is it?" Ethan asked, tracing his eyes over the lines of Cordelia's door.

"Yeah. Wesley said... you know, when I called him, pretending that Giles wanted to know... Anyway, he said Cordelia had the ring."

Ethan jiggled the door handle and scoffed, "I thought you said this would be difficult? I don't sense wards or spells of any kind, and this lock is so pathetic, even *you* could pick it." He pulled something from his pocket and squatted down in front of the handle, sticking a thin piece of metal in the keyhole and fiddling with it for a moment before standing and repeating the procedure on the deadbolt. He turned the handle and opened the door wide. "I hope the ring is in a safe or something. Give me *some* sort of challenge, at least."

The door slammed back in his face. He heard the lock click and the deadbolt slide home.

His expression radiated complete bewilderment. "Bloody hell! I thought you said no one was home?"

Willow feigned ignorance. "They're not. I doublechecked. Hmm... This is weird." She wasn't sure what possessed her to withhold this bit of information, except that she liked seeing Ethan rattled. He had sure enjoyed rattling her. She suspected that he had decided to help her from the moment he had started walking her back to her hotel last night, but had made her go through with the arguing and begging just for the hell of it. Well, if Ethan wanted to play, she could needle him right back. Turnabout and all that.

"Hello?" he called out tentatively before again disengaging the locks. He threw open the door and waited a moment. "Hello?" he called again, sticking his head in to verify that the apartment was indeed vacant.

He pulled his head out just in time, a mere fraction of a second before the slamming door would have knocked him unconscious. Click. Thud. Both locks firmly engaged.

"Well, quite the conundrum, I suppose." He looked at her sideways. "You, however, are transparent as glass. You don't find this the least bit odd."

She shrugged, letting him off the hook. "Cordelia has a ghost living... or ummm... not living, I guess... just staying, a ghost staying in her apartment."

He nodded, uttering the first few words of an incantation she recognized. She jumped forward and covered his mouth with her hand, preventing him from finishing. "No! Don't hurt him. He's a good ghost. Just unlock the door again, and I'll get us inside."

She fished something out of her purse as he unlocked the door for the third time. The door swung open, and she held a picture just inside the threshold. "Friends of Cordelia and Wesley. Giles sent us." Half a lie, but what was Dennis going to do? Call Giles and doublecheck? It was a picture from high school, when Cordelia had been dating Xander and the whole group had been sitting on blankets in a park. The picture was old, but Willow didn't think she and Cordelia had changed *that* much, as to be unrecognizable to her ghostly roommate.

She held up a second picture, just in case: Wesley had visited more than a month ago, to work with Giles on Council-related things, and had the misfortune of sleeping through the twins coming down for breakfast. Each child had later blamed the other, but the fact remained that *someone* had drawn on Wesley's face with permanent marker. And Buffy had insisted on pictures before anyone let Wesley know what had been done to him. The picture was of a smiling Buffy and Willow on either side of a rather silly looking and completely clueless Wesley. Giles had snapped the picture.

The photos were enough to buy them entrance.

"Thanks, Phantom Dennis," Willow said, as the door gently closed behind them.

"Yes, thank you for not slamming the door in my face this time," Ethan tacked on bitterly.

Willow scowled and shook her finger in his direction. "Be nice!"

They split up and started searching the apartment for the ring. Willow found a lot more of Wesley's things than she had expected. She knew the two were dating, but it seemed like he had practically moved in. Cordelia had even given him an entire drawer of her dresser and half her closet. Things must really be serious between the two of them for Queen C, Cordelia Chase, to voluntarily part with half her closet space. Willow smiled at the memory of their visit to Caritas after returning from India, and how the sight of Wesley holding a newborn Alex might have been the very thing that had rekindled Cordelia's crush and resulted in a shared laundry hamper and matching bathrobes nearly four years later.

She turned just in time to catch Ethan rummaging through Cordelia's bras and underwear. "Hey!"

He sighed and rolled his eyes at her indignation. "Isn't this where most women keep their valuables? Beneath their knickers? Fitting, I suppose."

Willow flopped down on Cordelia's bed, feeling defeated. "It's no use. I thought you'd be able to find it, like sensing magic or something. I guess Wesley's right: it's hidden somewhere no one can find it. He said a thief would need supernatural help to get their hands on it."

"He said what?"

Willow continued on as if he hadn't spoken. "Guess your magic isn't going to be good enough to get it. We need—"

"To ask for a little supernatural help," Ethan finished. He looked up at the ceiling and then each wall. "Dennis, we're looking for a little bauble, a ring about so big..." He held his fingers slightly apart. "Haven't happened to see it, have you?"

They heard a loud thump, like someone pounding on the wall once.

Willow perked up, jumping off the bed. She exchanged a hopeful look with her accomplice. "Could you give it to us?"

Two thumps.

Ethan nodded, understanding. "She asked you to guard it for them, didn't she? Make sure no one who happened to sneak into the apartment could nab it?"

One loud thump answered him.

"But we're good thieves," Willow protested. "We're only trying to keep the ring from Wolfram and Hart, only we can't tell Wesley or Cordelia or anyone here, 'cause then the lawyers might know what we're planning. You understand, right?"

Thump.

Willow smiled. "So you'll give us the ring?"

Thump. Thump.

She pouted and crossed her arms. "I thought you were a good ghost," she muttered.

"I could make you solid," Ethan announced. "For a short time, anyway. A day or two maybe. That must be worth something."

Silence.

"All this time, living with Cordelia... You'd be able to talk with her, touch her, go out, see the world... And really, in the larger scheme of things, you're still helping to protect the ring by giving it to us. So you're not technically breaking your promise to keep it safe." He waited, his eyes scanning over the apartment, as if searching for Dennis' technical location. "What do you say? We have a deal?"

A long pause, followed by one loud thump.

Willow jumped up, her hands raised in victory.

Dennis floated the ring to them from wherever he had it hidden and placed it in Willow's waiting hand. The ring was thick, heavy, gold, tarnished and bearing an insignia she didn't recognize. Both the insignia and the etchings along the band had accumulated years of dirt in their grooves. That such an unimpressive piece of jewelry should have inspired such battles over its possession... she thought it needed a good polish.

Ethan performed the spell as promised. Willow averted her eyes as soon as she realized becoming solid didn't automatically include clothing. Dennis seemed too preoccupied with his new visible status to notice.

"Thank you," he said to Ethan, still staring at solid hands, wiggling solid fingers in front of his face. He touched his throat as soon as he'd spoken, awed by his own voice.

"It'll wear off eventually, and you'll find yourself back here. Until then... enjoy yourself."

Dennis nodded, and Willow overcame her embarrassment enough to step forward and give this ghost a tentative hug and kiss on the cheek. "Thanks for helping. And you might want to borrow some of Wesley's clothes," she whispered in his ear as she pulled away.

Dennis looked down, noticing his nakedness for the first time. "Oh!" He darted into Cordelia's room, and the two thieves took that as their cue to leave.

"Won't Cordelia figure out what we did," Willow asked as they walked down the apartment hallway, "when she comes home and finds her roommate not so ghostly?"

"You really think Dennis will wait around for her to get home? Or you think he might take a walk around the block, go shopping, get a milkshake? We'll have time to make a clean getaway yet."

"I guess you're right."

Ethan stumbled just as they reached the stairway, and Willow caught him quickly, holding him steady. He breathed heavily for a moment, leaning against her. "That spell took a little more out of me than I expected," he admitted sheepishly.

She helped him down the stairs, allowing him to lean against her for balance. They reached the bottom, and she eyed him skeptically. "You gonna be okay?"

"Sure. Little nap, and I'll be good as new. So the plan for tomorrow... I'm to keep Ms. Morgan occupied and without alibi while you wreak havoc wearing her face?" He scowled. "You get the fun part."

"Well, *I* can't keep her occupied. She'd be all suspicious. She knows me. You can string her along and promise her whatever evil things she wants. I have absolute faith in your ability to lie and string people along, Ethan."

"You wound me."

They parted as they stepped outside, walking in opposite directions. Willow was inside the taxi before she put her hand in her pocket to feel for the ring.

It was gone.

She swiveled quickly to look out the back window for Ethan, but he, too, was gone. She groaned and laid her head back against the seat. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Trusting Ethan, letting him know about

the ring, taking him with her to get the ring, and most of all: falling for his stumbling, “I’m so weak and wobbly, let me lean on you just a little” routine. He’d picked her pocket.

She was back to square one. Well, more like square negative five. Because not only did she have no idea how to free Giles from Wolfram and Hart’s blackmail without the ring, but she now only had three more days left in which to do it, and not only that, but she’d just lost the very thing Giles had been willing to sacrifice his freedom to protect.

Ethan Rayne had the Ring of Gorlois.

Giles suggested researching in the park. Tensions were high with everyone working side by side in the Magic Box and no one seeming to make any progress. Buffy was riding everyone hard, pushing for a breakthrough, and Xander and Anya’s tempers were beginning to fray under her constant nagging.

So he took his family to the park and left Anya and Xander to do whatever research they liked at the shop. Buffy’s mood only darkened, as she sat on a blanket, a book open across her lap, and watched Giles push his son and daughter on the swing set, each child wanting him to push them higher than their twin on the neighboring swing.

The children eventually tired of the swing set, and jumped off mid-swing, racing over to beg their mother to join them on the merry-go-round. Giles followed a moment later, smiling down on her. “Come on, Buffy. Take a break. It’s a beautiful day today.”

“In a minute.”

The children had already raced over to the merry-go-round, taking turns pushing each other until one of their parents could come and make it spin *really* fast.

Buffy glared at him, his good mood only increasing her anger. “Do you even care?”

He sat beside her. “Of course I care.”

“You don’t seem to be trying very hard to fix it.”

He gently closed the book that lay across her lap. “We won’t find the answer in a book or through hours of research. This isn’t a demon to kill or a prophecy to stop. We’re fighting the truth, Buffy. I did the things they’re accusing me of, and they have the proof of it. Spending the next three days buried in books and snapping at Anya and Xander for things they have no control over... Well, it will simply be a waste of those three days.” He stood and offered out his hand. “Come on, take a break, use that slayer strength to spin us on the merry-go-round until we’re dizzy.”

“*You’re* going to ride the merry-go-round with them?”

“Sure, why not.”

She reluctantly followed him across the playground to join their children. She tried to smile and laugh with them as the twins begged her to make it go faster, but all she could think about were the stack of books waiting for her on her blanket, the plan that hadn’t yet formed, and how Giles seemed to be okay with just giving up.

Ethan stood in front of the hotel mirror, holding the ring in one hand as he studied his reflection. He knew about the Ring of Gorlois. He’d done a little reading on the subject after Willow had told him that’s what they were after. He would have helped her with her plan. He truly would have. Except he didn’t like the role she had assigned him. He wanted to be the one who played with the toys.

He thought about Willow, about the awesome power he felt humming just below the surface of Ripper's spell, about how he yearned to mold that power, to introduce her to the mysteries of Chaos, to create and to teach. Ripper seemed to fancy the roles of teacher, mentor, father figure, and Ethan had to admit to feeling his age. He wanted to leave a legacy, a mark, something that would outlive him and prove that he had existed, that he had made an impression on this world. Ethan wanted a student, a protégé, someone to come after.

He wanted Willow.

He was still thinking of her when he slipped the ring on his finger, and he watched his reflection change into hers. He touched his face, and then the short, bobbed, red locks. They felt real. His eyes were green, and the smile was hers.

"Well, well, the real thing." The voice was hers too, but different, sounding as it must in her own head. He laughed, a girlish giggle which only made him laugh harder.

He took the ring off, and the illusion was gone. He thought about his old friend, wondering if Ripper would thank him for saving his neck, or if he wouldn't hate him for doing this favor, for reminding him that they had been friends once and placing him in the position of owing Ethan anything.

Probably the latter. Ripper's precious sense of honor demanded that favors be repaid. And Ethan smiled at the knowledge that Ripper would owe him big time for this. Maybe enough to lift the spell from Willow. Maybe even enough to turn his head should Ethan decide to visit her on occasion.

Ethan slipped the ring back on his finger and smiled as his features transformed into that of his old friend. It was Ripper's dangerous grin that reflected back to him from the glass. Ah, what glorious mischief could he stir wearing Giles' face? Would Buffy know, he wondered? Would she kiss him? Would she take him into her bed, thinking he was her watcher? And what would Ripper do, besides kill him of course, after learning that Ethan had known her touch, her taste, her passion?

He laughed. Games enough for another time, for when he had tired of this town and had gone as far as he could with Willow, when he was ready to leave and never come back. That would be a game he could never recover from. But first things first. First, he had to save Giles and keep him in the game long enough for Ethan to have his fun later.

He pulled out the directions Willow had given him: a little hand drawn map to Wolfram and Hart's offices and a small snapshot of Lilah Morgan.

Buffy abandoned her research at the dining table and joined Giles and the twins on the back porch. Alex and Robin were running through the backyard with bubble wands of various sizes and shapes, trailing a sea of bubbles in their wake and then chasing each soapy sphere and popping them before they could touch the ground. Buffy sat down next to her watcher and passed him a cup of tea.

"If I remember right," she commented casually, "those were supposed to be birthday presents."

Giles ducked his head, looking guilty. "I know. They were just little ones, and Alex was rather persistent in begging to open a gift early."

"Hmm... Ice cream on the way back from the park. Now early birthday presents. You're spoiling them rotten, you know."

"I know that," he agreed quietly.

"That's usually my job. You're usually Mr. Time Out, No Snacks Before Dinner, Brush Your Teeth and Straight to Bed Guy."

The twins raced back over to the porch to refill their wands. Giles held out the bottle of bubble formula for them each to dip their various wands in, and they dripped some of the slimy liquid down his arm in their enthusiasm.

"Look!" Robin demanded, climbing in her mother's lap. "Mine biggest!"

Alex disagreed, and the children had a brief contest to see who could blow the biggest bubbles.

Robin's kept popping before they could float from her wand, and she began to grow frustrated. "You blow, Muffy," she said, holding out the wand for Buffy to try.

Buffy blew slowly and continuously until the bubble was as big as Robin's head. Alex seemed impressed, but quickly changed the game to who could blow the most bubbles. The children refilled their wands and sloshed more bubble mix down Giles' arms before scampering off to fill the air with as many bubbles as they could.

He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and dried off his arms.

Buffy watched him for a moment before finally voicing the thing that had been on her mind all day. "You know, this isn't the last week you'll spend with them," she echoed back the words he had said to her earlier, when she'd been planning their birthday party.

"You don't know that," he replied solemnly, echoing her response from then back to her.

She leaned her head against his shoulder, and wrapped one arm around his waist. "I hate that you've already given up. Fight for us, Giles. Fight to stay with us."

"What do you want me to do, Buffy?" His voice was quiet, resigned. "I can't give in to their demands. I can't change what I did. I can't stoop to their level just to secure my freedom."

"Why not? Stoop, Giles. Please? For me?" She turned pleading eyes up to meet his, and he smiled as he brushed the backs of his fingers across her cheek.

"Would you really want that? Would you want me to use my magic, money, influence, to change things to my liking? When there's a chance innocent people could be caught in the middle, could be hurt just to save me from my own mistakes? I wouldn't be any better than the people we're fighting. I wouldn't be a fit father for Alex or Robin. I wouldn't be worthy of calling myself your husband. I'd rather own up to what I did and go to jail for it than sell my honor to buy even one more day with you."

She closed her eyes and rested her head back against his shoulder. "But if we find a non-evil way to beat Wolfram and Hart, one where no one gets hurt, you'd do it, right?"

"Yes."

"Then let's just pretend that's what'll happen. Maybe Willow will find something we can use against the lawyers or something... Let's just pretend that we have forever, okay?"

"Okay." He draped his arm across her shoulders and pulled her in closer to his side.

"So no more spoiling. No more early birthday presents. You have to be the stomp foot, Giles, 'cause I suck at it. And when I say I want to take them to Disneyworld for their birthdays, you have to rein me in and tell me I'm going overboard."

"About that..."

She groaned. "No. See, you're supposed to be the level head with all this birthday madness."

"I was just going to suggest that perhaps we could celebrate early, tomorrow or the next day. Nothing extravagant. Just cake, balloons, presents."

She shrugged off his touch and stood. "See!" She turned to face him, hands on her hips. "You've already stopped pretending."

"I'm sorry." He dropped his head. "I just want to be there. Let's have the party early. Please, Buffy."

She stepped forward, bent slightly, and took his face in both her hands, tilting his chin up to meet her gaze. "You *will* be there. It's not going to happen, but even if it did... You'll always be in their lives," she promised him. "Birthdays, Christmas, all of it. You're their father, and we'd come to visit all the time."

"Thank you." She heard the rough emotion in his voice, saw the sheen of tears he refused to let fall. "I needed to hear that."

"It's not going to happen, though," she insisted stubbornly, and then leaned down to kiss him.

She heard twin giggles behind her and straightened. Alex started in on his new favorite song.

"Mommy 'n Daddy sittin' tree, k-i-s-s..."

Buffy groaned. She was going to pummel whoever had taught him that song. She suspected that it was his Uncle Xander. Tickling quickly ended Alex's chorus, but Robin simply picked up where he had left off. Buffy only had the one set of hands, but Giles was thankfully able to take over the task of tickling Robin, and they were spared the second verse.

Ethan groaned as he came to and struggled against the ropes which fastened his wrists behind him and tied him securely to the chair he sat in. Bound and gagged, and still in the lawyer's office, sitting in the chair before her desk like some unwilling client. He didn't know how she had seen through him so quickly. He had been a good enough actor to play the role of simpering librarian, begging to cut a deal with Wolfram and Hart. Maybe it had been the begging that had given him away. Maybe Giles did let a bit of old Ripper out now and then with people who weren't Chaos worshippers.

Lilah had the ring, and Ethan had a headache. He should have gotten out of town while he had the chance. This would teach him to play philanthropist. Never again. Chaos and mischief and trouble was all he would look to involve himself in from here on out. No more helping, no more favors. Just as soon as he got himself out of this mess.

Willow paced the length of her office at the homeless shelter in LA. No one thought anything of her stopping in for a visit; she did that on occasion, making sure things were running smoothly, still atoning for her involvement with Sabrina. If locking herself in the office and not talking to anyone was unusual, well, no one mentioned it. She couldn't stop pacing, holding the cordless phone in her hand, just staring at the keypad. There was something physically wrong with her fingers, because they refused to push the buttons. She had messed everything up, and she didn't know how to tell Buffy and Giles. There would be yelling, and Giles would take off his glasses and rub his eyes and sigh in that way that said, "I'm so disappointed in you," which would be almost worse than Buffy's yelling.

A knock on the window startled her so badly she dropped the phone.

"Ethan!"

He had come back and there was still a chance now, a chance to put everything right, to stick it to Wolfram and Hart, and save Giles, and earn back her place with the Scoobies.

She crossed to the window, almost bouncing on her feet with her excitement. "See! I knew you were a good guy, deep down," she said as she unlocked the window. "I knew you wouldn't bail out on me."

She leaned out to help him in, but he grabbed her shoulders and hauled her out instead, his grip bruising on her arms.

Her eyes widened, and she struggled. "You're not Ethan."

"Good guess." The man wearing Ethan's face held something to her nose, and although she tried not to breathe it in and tried to fight against him, in the end, she couldn't help but black out.

Xander and family had come and gone. The children were tucked in their respective beds. Giles and Buffy were curled up, side by side, on the couch. Buffy had been trying to reach Willow all evening, but no one was home. Research was getting them nowhere, and she hoped that Willow, at least, was making better progress with her attempts to hack into Wolfram and Hart's computer system. She was rapidly becoming their last hope.

"Can't we give them the ring?" Buffy asked.

He brushed a kiss across her forehead. "No."

"I mean, deactivate it or something with magic, so it's no good to them, but give them the ring."

"They'll ask for something else. They'll keep asking."

Buffy snuggled closer. "I hate lawyers."

"The evil ones are tiresome, at any rate."

She drew small circles on his chest as she said it timidly, "Maybe Lilah was right, though."

"Hmm...? Right about what?"

"Maybe we should go somewhere, you, me, the children. We could run off somewhere, some country where they don't have... you know, where they wouldn't give you back."

"Where they don't have extradition?"

"Yeah, that. We could live happily ever after somewhere that's not here."

"And who would guard the Hellmouth? Sunnydale? Your friends? We have a higher duty, obligations."

"And how am I supposed to do that without my watcher?" She sat up straight and twisted on the couch to look him in the eye. "I was beginning to think that maybe... with your magic shielding me on patrol, that maybe I might get to see our kids grow up, you know? You're breaking up the team here, Giles. I won't make it very long on my own. We both know that."

"You could ask Wesley to be your watcher."

"Yeah, 'cause we worked so well together the last time."

"He's changed since then. You've changed."

She leaned forward and laid her head against his chest, resuming her previous position snuggled up against his side. "Please, let's start over somewhere else. There's evil to fight all over the world, right? Riley ran off to fight demons in Belize. Belize sounds nice, don't you think? Warm, tropical. Wesley and Angel and everyone could take care of the Council stuff here."

"We'd be fugitives. You'd never be able to come back here, something the demon population would likely catch onto rather quickly. What about Dawn? Your job? April and John and their new grandson? Xander and Anya and our goddaughter? Willow? And I think you'd most likely perish

without a mall or Starbucks close at hand.” She giggled slightly, and he pressed her tighter against him. “You know we can’t.”

“I know. But let’s just pretend we could.”

“I thought we were pretending that everything was going to turn out all right and Willow was going to save the day?”

“That, too. But let’s also pretend that we can run away to some exotic location with palm trees and room service and drinks with little umbrellas.”

He frowned. “Are we running away or going on vacation?”

The doorbell rang and ended their conversation for the time being. Marianne was standing on their doorstep, and Buffy smiled back at her watcher as she let in their babysitter. “Time for patrol,” she told him.

Willow woke up to find Ethan Rayne staring at her. She remembered that he had also been staring at her just before she passed out, and she attempted to scoot backwards from him, which was when she figured out that she was all tied up to the chair she was sitting in. That’s also when she figured out that he was all tied up, too, except he was also gagged.

She noticed movement out of the corner of her eye and turned her attention to the woman crossing from behind her. The woman took a seat behind the desk and glanced at her computer screen for a moment, before finally noticing Willow glaring at her.

“Oh, good, you’re awake.”

Willow scowled at the woman. There was a time when she would have considered herself to have a pretty bad ass scowl, but she didn’t feel so scary now without her magic. She felt like just plain, old Willow trying to puff herself up like a blowfish. “You better let us go before the Slayer comes here to kick your ass.”

The woman laughed. “My, my, it seems there’s no shortage of spunky women in your group.” She got up out of her chair and walked around the desk, sitting on the edge facing Willow. “Trust me on this one: when the Slayer comes, it’s not my ass she’ll be kicking.”

Willow nodded in Ethan’s direction. “Well, she’ll probably kick his ass, too.” Ethan made a muffled noise of indignation. “But there’ll be plenty to go around, lady, if you don’t let us go like right now.”

“Lilah. Lilah Morgan. Seems only right we should be properly introduced, seeing as you’re going to be tied up in my office for a while. I am really sorry about the rope. It’s only until they can spare someone from security to come babysit the pair of you.” She gave Ethan an apologetic shrug. “And sorry about the gag. That’s only until someone from spellcasting can come ward my office. Can’t have you zapping in goblins and orcs and what have you. I just had my office redecorated.”

“Oh, you can leave him gagged,” Willow assured her. Ethan threw her a betrayed glare, and Willow merely turned up the voltage on her scowl and aimed it in his direction. “Mr. Steals the Ring Outta My Pocket and Then Lets It Fall into Enemy Hands. Yeah, you! This is all your fault!”

Lilah laughed. “Dissention in the ranks? In his defense, since he can’t speak for himself at the moment, it would have ended this way no matter what. We were keeping close watch over all the members of Angel Investigations, which meant we had staked out Cordelia’s apartment. We saw you both go in, and we followed you both out. Only questions were which one of you had the ring and did anyone else know what you were up to?”

She leaned forward, getting into Ethan's face as she taunted him. "God, the whole department is still laughing at how you waltzed right in here with the ring, like we wouldn't recognize it." He averted his eyes, his cheeks flaming red, with embarrassment or anger, Willow wasn't sure which. Lilah shook her head in disbelief. "You don't offer someone a ride home in the car you just stole from them."

"What are you going to do with us?"

Lilah returned her attention to Willow. "Nothing. This has never been about you or your friends. You're all simply a means to an end. This has always been about Angel."

She pushed off from the edge of her desk and started pacing lazy circles around the office, picking up pictures and knick-knacks, glancing absently at them, and then setting them back down again. Willow twisted her head and followed her with her eyes as she talked. "Wolfram and Hart have prophecies which outline the final apocalypse. Angel's a player, only neither side's managed to draft him yet. We want him to play for our team. And the prophecies tell us that the watcher and slayer will determine his allegiance. The senior partners hope to turn Angel dark, to change him back into the glorious killing machine he once was. And they think they can use the watcher and slayer to do that.

"So we needed the ring, but we'd prefer that they not know we have it just yet. It actually works out better this way, with the pair of you giving us the ring instead of the watcher trading it for his freedom. It allows us to continue with the original plan. But it also means that the two of you will just have to stay here as our guests until this whole thing plays out to its natural and gruesome conclusion."

Willow didn't like the sound of that. "What are you going to do?"

Lilah stopped her casual pacing and perched on the edge of the desk once more. She leaned forward and whispered it to Willow as if it were a secret, smiling proudly as if the plan were her idea. "When we're finished, your friends will hate Angel, but more importantly, he'll hate himself."

The children were in bed, and they had said goodnight to Marianne, Buffy seeing her safely home as she always did after dark. Patrol had been routine. A few fledgling vampires and an unidentified grave robbing demon that would require some research before the next night's patrol. Giles stretched and padded out to the kitchen for an icepack. He rarely took a beating on patrols anymore, as he no longer fought beside his slayer on the front lines. Whenever a fight would break out, he would retreat to a safe vantage point from which he could offer Buffy his magic as armor. Cloaked in his power, her own injuries would heal faster than with slayer metabolism alone, sometimes so quickly that she was unmarked by battle's end. Her slayer instincts were more attuned to her enemy, her reflexes sharper, even her strength bolstered by his magic.

Giles couldn't understand how the Council could have given up such a powerful weapon, how they could have sent their slayers out to fight alone, knowing how much more formidable they were when paired with their watcher. Except that he made himself a target by doing so, and some of the wiser vampires had figured out that in order to stand a chance against the Slayer, they first had to eliminate her Watcher. Buffy had never let any get close enough to pose a threat, but Giles imagined that in years past, slayers had lost their watchers on a regular basis. And there was the answer to his question: the Council had abandoned their slayers to save themselves.

He placed the icepack against his sore shoulder and closed the freezer door. Though he rarely took a beating on patrol anymore, during tonight's training session, his slayer had given him enough bruises to make up for it. The last days' events had left her filled with anger and frustration, which she had inadvertently taken out on him.

Giles turned around and jumped, dropping the icepack.

"Angel!"

"Sorry, didn't mean to startle you." He motioned with one hand to the back door. "Door was unlocked. And I still had an invite."

Giles bent over and retrieved the icepack. He didn't look in Angel's eyes as he said it, but his voice was sincere. "You *are* welcome here. You gave me back my daughter. I'll never forget that."

Their eyes met briefly before Angel turned his head to look out into the dining room.

"Buffy's upstairs," Giles informed him, answering the unspoken question.

"That's okay. I really came to speak with you. There's something I need to show you."

Giles nodded and set the icepack down on the counter, heading out of the kitchen. "I'll just let Buffy know."

"No, no time. It'll just take a minute." Angel took his hand and led him out the back door, propelling him onto the back porch ahead of him.

"What is—"

Giles felt the blow to the back of his skull, and it sent him stumbling to his knees. He turned, his arm instinctively coming up to shield his head, but the vampire struck another blow across his jaw, and Giles landed on his back, the world rapidly growing dark. Angel was smiling down on him, the same smile that still occasionally gave him nightmares so many years later. Giles blinked, only his eyes didn't open again, and his thoughts slipped away from him.

The last thing he heard was Angel's mocking voice, "Lookie, lookie, watcher gets another concussion."

Buffy trudged down the stairs, tired and disheartened. "One more glass of water and a goodnight kiss from Daddy, and they *swear* they'll go right back to sleep," she muttered as she pulled two kiddy glasses out of the cupboard and filled them halfway with water. She wasn't sure how the twins managed to hear them come in from patrol every night, but they always woke up and always needed their parents to tuck them in once more before they would settle back to sleep.

She saw his icepack sitting on the counter, and she stuck it back in the freezer.

"Giles? You're wanted upstairs." Only silence answered her. "Giles?" she called louder.

Then she noticed that the back door was open. "Giles?"

She walked out onto the back porch, expecting to see him sitting there. It was where he went whenever he was feeling closed in, whenever he needed open space, and he often forgot to close the door if he was feeling especially claustrophobic. In the last two days, with the threat of jail hanging over his head, he seemed to crave open space like he had during those first few weeks after Willow's spell had trapped him.

But he wasn't sitting on the back porch.

"Giles?"

She walked down the first few steps, her eyes scanning the backyard for some sign of a struggle. Fear was beginning to tighten her stomach and speed her heart rate. She dashed back inside and grabbed for the phone.

Chapter 5: Reprise

Day three of Giles' five day countdown dawned not so brightly as the day before. Partly because thick curtains sealed away the morning light and shrouded him in darkness, partly because in waking, he discovered a pounding headache and an uncomfortable queasiness in the pit of his stomach, but mostly because waking on that third day confirmed that he was Angel's prisoner, gagged and bound to a chair in the very same mansion, in the very same room in which he had been tortured nearly seven years before. A sense of dread settled over him as he concluded that he was about to endure a repeat performance.

A cool touch stroked along the nape of his neck, and he shivered.

"Good. You're awake. I was beginning to get worried. And bored." Angel swam into his blurry vision as he pulled up a chair in front of him and straddled it. He leaned forward, and Giles jerked back, reconsidering the sudden movement when it only increased the pounding in his skull and the miserable nausea.

"Thought maybe I hit you too hard." A finger tapped on his forehead, and he flinched back reflexively. "You got a thick skull, though. How many times is this for you?"

Giles flexed his jaw, attempting to shift the gag in his mouth. It was tied too tight, biting into the corners of his mouth.

Angel hooked a finger beneath the cloth and twisted once, increasing the tension across his jaw. "Yeah, I'm not so fond of the gag either. Ordinarily, I enjoy a good soundtrack with my torture, but I hear you got in touch with your inner sorcerer." Angel twisted his finger a second rotation, pulling the gag even tighter. Giles squeezed his eyes shut and wondered if the vampire were going to start by dislocating his jaw. "Wouldn't want you to turn me into a rat or something. Or even worse: curse me with a soul again."

He abruptly pulled his finger out from beneath the gag, and the cloth loosened until it was only moderately uncomfortable. Giles let his head fall forward in relief.

"Yeah, the whole soul cursing thing never turns out well for me. First time: spent a hundred years skulking in shadows, eating rats. Second time: girlfriend sent me to hell. I'm thinking this time, just as a favor from you to me, you get the chance... just dust me. Leave the ensouling to Spike if you feel like neutering some vamp." Angel rose from his chair, laughing. "Right... Spike already *is* neutered."

Giles glared daggers at Angel, trying to convey through his eyes the misery he would inflict before allowing Angel the mercy of dust. Flaming baseball bats were nothing compared to the spells he was imagining right now.

The vampire began to pace the confines of the small room. "We got some time to kill, you and I. Sun just came up, so I'm stuck here 'til it goes down again. Aw shucks, I had them turn the cable off when I moved to LA. What, oh what, shall we do to pass the time?"

Giles twisted his hands behind him, straining to loosen the ropes. He was tied more securely than he had been the last time, his wrists fastened tightly together and then lashed to the chair back. Angel had taken the precaution of binding his legs this time as well, his ankles strapped to the chair legs with rope knotted as tightly as that around his wrists. Angel was actually afraid of him this time, afraid of his magic, afraid of his power, as well he should be.

Angel dragged the empty chair over to place it behind Giles. He could sense the vampire's presence behind him, cold hands hovering over his own. The fingers. He knew the fingers would be the first.

"You'll let me know if I'm not doing this right, won't you? You probably remember it better than I do. A few hundred years in a hell dimension can make a person forgetful."

Giles turned his head to study the thin crack of light that trespassed beneath the drapes. Angel had said the sun was up, but Giles guessed just barely. The light was still hazy, the shadows it cast too long. He judged it to be just past sunrise. He calculated the time until sunset, tried to remember how long he had suffered the last time, and found that he couldn't remember. The whole experience had blurred together, nightmares and memory melding into a surreal mesh of pain and fear.

Giles flinched as the first finger broke, biting down on the gag as he braced himself for the next.

Buffy had searched for him all night. All twelve cemeteries. Crypts, woods, abandoned warehouses, alleys, demon lairs. Marianne stayed with the children while she did, looking after little Zoey as well so that Anya and Xander could do their part: stopping into Willy's to see if any demons had stopped by to brag about bagging a watcher, making the rounds of the hospitals to see if he had been brought in. Buffy asked dispatch to send two patrol cars on a sweep of the city.

By sunrise, Buffy was desperate, sleep-deprived, and convinced that Wolfram and Hart had something to do with her husband's disappearance, but clueless on how to strike back at the law firm. Angel had been battling them for years without success. And they were human, so she couldn't just charge in, guns blazing, not even for Giles.

She banged the front door behind her and dropped onto the couch, exhausted. Alex climbed into her lap, sucking on his thumb. Robin loitered at the bottom of the stairs.

"Find Daddy?" her son asked.

Buffy threw Marianne a stern glare. "You told them?"

"No, of course not. Alex just knew. He had a nightmare last night, and when he woke up, he said a bad man was hurting his father. I told him you were out looking, that you'd bring his father home. It was the only way I could get him back to sleep."

She closed her eyes and kissed her little boy on his forehead. She was remembering the prophetic dreams her son had on occasion: knowing his sister's name, knowing about the fire that nearly killed her, warning Travers about his death, foreseeing the Mortog beast and the terrifying events of that night on the beach. Buffy understood about prophetic dreams. She had them quite often herself. The difference here was that Alex was only three, nearly four, and scary visions were too much to ask a child that age to cope with. If Giles was being hurt... If Alex had seen the details... She hugged her son closer to her chest.

But there was also the possibility that Alex had dreamt something useful, something that would help her find Giles, and so she needed to ask their son the specifics of his nightmare.

"Little Rabbit, can you tell me about your dream?"

Alex snuggled closer into her embrace, as if he could burrow right back into the safety of her womb. Robin turned and ran upstairs, which was just as well. She didn't need to hear this.

"Bad man take Daddy."

Buffy rubbed his back gently, trying to soothe him. He was trembling, and she could hear in his voice that he was near tears. "What did the man look like, honey?"

"Like Uncie Angel."

"You mean a vampire? Yellow eyes, bumpy head?"

Alex nodded against her, and then started to cry. "Daddy hurt. Scared."

"Shhh," Buffy murmured against the boy's hair, holding him tight and rocking him. "Mommy'll find him. Everything's going to be fine."

A vampire. Vampires were easy. And she was allowed to kill vampires. In fact, it was kind of her job title. Vampire Slayer.

It was different this time. Angelus was different. The first time, the vampire had tortured with words as well as hands, had enjoyed listening to the sound of his own lilting Irish as he taunted Giles with what he would do next. He had forced him to listen to graphic descriptions of Jenny's murder, a vulgar account of Buffy's virgin night, detailed promises of what torment he intended for the Slayer in the future if Acatlha didn't open and the world didn't end. Better to give up the secret now and save her the pain.

This time, Angel was more silent than not. Giles wasn't sure if that made it better or worse. On the one hand, he didn't have to endure endless verbal assaults as Angel poured salt into already raw emotional wounds. On the other hand, without the vampire's constant mocking narrative, Giles couldn't anticipate the pain, and that made it sharper when it came, meant he was always bracing himself for whatever might come next, meant that even if he were allowed a short respite between sessions of torture, he couldn't seem to relax and rest, knowing that the pain would resume again without warning.

His ribs were broken. It hurt to breathe, and so he tried not to do it too deeply. Short, shallow breaths, and even those stabbed. He tried not to look at the curtained window too often either, with its small sliver of light which was his only indication of the passage of time. A watched sun never sets. At last check, he had guessed midmorning, not even noon yet, not even half over yet. And that was only if Angel truly planned to end the torture when the sun set. Best case scenario. But there was nothing stopping him from continuing past then, or from going out to feed, to hunt, to drop in on Buffy unawares, incapacitate her, drag her back here, and force Giles to watch her die before beginning all over again.

He didn't need Angel's mocking narrative. Giles' imagination painted enough horrible possibilities all on its own.

Giles stiffened suddenly in his chair as a sharp jolt spiraled up his arms. Angel had returned from wherever he had disappeared to, and the break was over. Cold hands were twisting his broken fingers, sending relentless waves of agony pulsing up his arms. Giles fought to control his breathing, to maintain the slow, steady rate that would save him the added pain of his broken ribs. But then Angel laid one hand on his shoulder as the other continued toying with his broken digits, and with one swift movement of that preternaturally strong hand, Angel dislocated Giles' shoulder.

Giles screamed. No longer able to control his breathing, he sucked in great gulps of air, his ribs protesting each inhalation.

"Don't know about you, but I find Southern California can get a little chilly in the winter time. Whadya say we warm things up a bit, huh?"

Angel entered his field of vision, dragging something behind him. Giles turned his head to see what it was. A small brazier of hot coals was warming various metal instruments in its fire. Groaning, he averted his gaze. His eyes sought out the sliver of light beneath the drapes, trying to guess at the time.

He felt the vampire's fingers brush across his skin as the undead hands carefully unbuttoned the front of his shirt. Angel whistled appreciatively as he spread the fabric to either side, reaching out to trace his fingers across the patchwork pattern of old scars.

"Souvenirs of our time together."

Giles shuddered beneath the vampire's reverent touch.

"Makes me a bit nostalgic." Angel spread Giles' shirtfront further open, sliding the fabric down over his shoulders and as far down his arms as the watcher's bonds would allow. He tugged the hem from his trousers and tucked the fabric behind him, out of the way. "Ever wonder what it feels like to be a vampire?"

Giles felt himself panic as he hadn't in all the hours leading up to now, and he struggled violently against the ropes holding him. As a vampire, freed from human feeling or conscience, but still possessing a watcher's knowledge and training, Giles knew he would finish what Joseph and Sabrina had started. He would kill Faith and Buffy. He would kill his own daughter. No more slayers. His son and Wesley would die next. No more watchers.

He writhed his hands behind him, mindless of his broken fingers, and twisted his feet desperately against the rope that held his ankles firm.

Angel laughed at his frantic struggles, leaning over him, nuzzling against his neck. Giles squeezed his eyes shut and tipped his head to the side, trying to evade Angel's fangs, but in doing so, he only bared his neck more. He heard his heart hammering in his ears. He'd rather die than drink, rather die than be turned, but he knew Angel could force the blood down his throat. There was nothing Giles could do except pray that Angel would remove the gag first, that he would inadvertently give the watcher an opportunity to use magic.

Angel pulled away, laughing. "That's not what I meant, but it's a good idea. I'll have to keep it in mind for later." He turned and pulled something from the coals with a pair of pliers. He held it up for Giles' inspection: a large metal cross, the size of a man's hand. It glowed red from the heat of the fire.

"Ever wonder what it feels like to be a vampire?" he asked again.

Ethan's pacing was beginning to drive Willow nuts. Two guards at the door, magical wards in place, they weren't going anywhere. He might as well have a seat. Except he was having a nic fit, dying for a cigarette, and Lilah had forbidden him from smoking in her office. Willow could almost feel sorry for him. Almost.

It would have been a good excuse to get him outside, past the wards where he might cast a little bat signal spell or something, but the guards weren't that stupid.

Lilah came in and out. Willow watched her when she came in, watched her fingers over her keyboard, intently watched every keystroke. People underestimated her now, thought she was powerless with her magic all locked away. Lilah certainly seemed to think so. Plain, mousy Willow, who couldn't float a pencil with 10 feet of fishing line. People forgot that she could work magic with computers. And she was fairly certain she had figured out Lilah's passwords.

When the lawyer left again, Willow kicked Ethan in the shin as he walked past her.

"Ow! What the hell was that for?"

"Sit down already. You're making me dizzy."

His chin jutted out, and he defiantly continued his pacing, purposefully avoiding passing within kicking distance again.

Willow rolled her eyes. Stealth was lost on Ethan. He needed an anvil dropped on his head. Literally. "Dissimuläre." It was the beginning incantation to a cloaking spell, which wouldn't have done a bit of good in the warded office, even if she did have her powers, except that maybe now Ethan would catch a clue.

He eyed her skeptically before dropping down on the couch beside her. He picked up the television remote from a side table and flicked on the TV that was built into the office bookcase across from them. "Nothing else to do. Maybe there's something on the telly." He turned the volume up, not enough to be obnoxious or obvious, but enough that they could whisper without the guards overhearing.

Willow feigned interest in the television program, even as she mumbled out the side of her mouth to Ethan. "I think I can get into Lilah's computer if you distract the guards."

"What's that going to do?"

"I don't know. But it's worth a shot, right?"

Angel had found a new game. Giles was exhausted and beyond caring if he lived or died. He just wanted it over. The marks left by the cross on his chest, his stomach, his shoulders still burned almost unbearably. The thirst was beginning to take a toll now, too. The cloth gag had long since sucked dry every last drop of moisture from his mouth, and its cotton fibers tasted of the bile he barely kept down when the pain was at its worst. His broken fingers still ached, and his ribs seemed to progressively hurt more with each shaking breath. His shoulder was barely returned to its socket, and it screamed bloody murder if he strained against his bonds too fiercely. All of that paled in comparison to Angel's new game.

It had started when Angel had again brought the searing cross towards his chest in slow motion, enjoying Giles' desperate attempts to avoid the burning metal for as long as possible. Angel had dragged the moment out, only gradually moving the cross closer and closer, until Giles could feel the heat scorching his chest by its mere proximity. He already knew from experience that the actual touch of that fiery cross would be infinitely worse.

Giles had pushed himself as far back in the chair as he could, his spine pressed flush to the high wood back, and still Angel moved the cross forward at a snail's pace. Giles had continued to writhe his hands in their bonds, trying to squirm out of them or somehow loosen the knots. His fingers were already slick with sweat or blood from his efforts, but his struggles accomplished nothing. He had exhaled in an attempt to buy himself even one more second before the inevitable agony.

Angel had stopped and held the cross right there. Giles was spared for as long as he could hold his breath, but he knew the first inhalation would expand his chest enough to bring him into contact with the waiting cross. He had held his breath for as long as he could, his face turning red, sweat beading his forehead, his whole body shaking with the effort. But when he had reached his limit, his body forced him to draw that next breath.

Intense and excruciating and beyond bearing. He had exhaled as quickly as he could, holding his breath once more.

And that was Angel's new game. Giles was uncertain how long they had remained like this, Angel holding the burning cross a single breath away, and Giles staving off every breath for as long as he could, but it seemed like an eternity. He was afraid to turn his head and seek out the light beneath the drapes, afraid that it would tell him that it had only been minutes. Sometimes he teetered on the edge of passing out, and he wished he would, but that damnable instinct for self-preservation would always force the next breath into his lungs. Sometimes another and another, three or four gasping, agonizing breaths until he had enough oxygen to hold it again.

Angel pulled the cross away finally, and Giles went limp, sucking in air like a drowning man. The vampire was only heating the metal in the coals again, but for the moment that meant Giles could

catch his breath, could release the tension coiled in his body, could close his eyes and rest for even a moment.

“You do realize this has nothing to do with you, don’t you?”

Giles cracked an eye open slightly. Angel was stirring the fire with the pliers, digging out a nest of white hot coals to bury the cross in.

“It’s always been about Buffy. You think I cared what it did to you, finding her broken body in your bed? No. I waited outside Buffy’s house until you called her. It was her grief I wanted to witness. I hurt you because it hurt her. And when she’s hurt, she’s sloppy. Rattle her, and she loses her edge. Rage, anger, and defiance fuel the fire, give her strength. But grief, despair, and guilt give her doubt, make her hesitate. How many times could she have killed me in those months? Perhaps your Jenny would still be alive. But she was blind to what I’d become, blinded by emotion, and it made her hesitate. Made her weak.”

Angel dragged his chair back over in front of Giles and casually flipped it, straddled it, and rested his arms over the back. He studied his prey for several moments before reaching out to gently remove the glasses from Giles’ face. He patted the watcher’s trouser pockets until he’d found the ever present handkerchief and whipped it out. Angel breathed on the glass and carefully polished Giles’ sweat from the lenses. He held the frames up to the light to check they were clean before replacing them on his captive’s face. One finger on the nosepiece pushed the glasses up to their proper place, and Giles flinched back at the memory that evoked. Past and present were all melding together.

Angel smiled.

“Her feelings for you run a little deeper this time, huh, Rupe? Must admit, I still haven’t puzzled that one out. I mean, let’s be honest with each other here. You’re looking your age. You’re tired, worn out.” Angel smirked and leaned forward to brush his fingers across the many burn marks now beginning to blister Giles’ skin. “Marked up. Plus, there’s that whole mentor thing. Don’t you feel like you’re taking advantage of your young charge? I always figured you’d be walking her down the aisle, not standing on the other end of it.”

Angel shook his head. “Can’t imagine what Buffy sees in an old fool like you. Doesn’t matter, I guess. Whatever the reason, you mean the world to her.” He paused. “I’m going to shatter that world. I’m going to shatter *you*. Until she can’t see straight, until she can’t *fight* straight.”

Angel abandoned his chair in favor of pacing circles around his captive. Giles tensed, bracing himself for the next onslaught. Angel stopped just behind him, and he felt the vampire’s hands curl over his shoulders. He tried to make himself relax. If Angel wanted to rip his shoulders from their sockets again, then it would hurt much less if he didn’t try to fight it. But the basic flight or fight response is a difficult one to overcome, entrenched deep in the human psyche, and Giles found he couldn’t relax, his whole body trembling beneath Angel’s hands.

“I’m just trying to figure out what would *really* mess Buffy up. What could I do to you that would send her over the edge?” He leaned forward and whispered it in Giles’ ear as his hand snaked down the watcher’s burned chest, reaching lower. “What could I do to her *husband*—” He spat the word like a curse. “—that would shake her to the core? That would make her careless?” Angel’s hand found its mark, stopping between Giles’ legs, inhuman grip grabbing at his crotch, squeezing cruelly until he couldn’t breathe, even if he wanted to.

Angel laughed at Giles’ misery. “So, you’ve had a taste of being a vampire: why we really hate crosses. Ever wonder what it’s like to be a vampire with a perfect happiness clause, my friend? I know. Let’s castrate you, and you can find out.”

Giles mercifully blacked out.

“You won’t find him if you black out for lack of food either, Buffy. You haven’t eaten all day, have you? Come on, ten minutes. We’ll go through the drive-thru, and you can eat in the car.”

April didn’t wait for Buffy’s response before steering their patrol car towards the McDonald’s entrance. If she was honest with herself, Buffy was in no shape to be patrolling. She looked like she hadn’t slept in days. Worse than that, she seemed permanently stuck in the role of “bad cop” to April’s “good cop,” so much so that April actually felt sorry for the questionable characters they stopped to interrogate.

She shouted their order at the drive-thru speaker, understood nothing of what was repeated back, and pulled up to the first window. Buffy had claimed she wasn’t hungry. April had simply ordered for her.

She studied her partner as they waited for their food: sullen, brooding, face devoid of the usual spark that signified Buffy, eyes glazed over with fatigue and despair, hair haphazardly pulled back in a ponytail, dark circles beneath her eyes. April had seen her partner after sleepless nights, she had seen her upset and emotional, but she had never seen her like this. She wondered if this was the face John had seen so many months ago, when both she and Giles had lain unconscious, lost to those who loved them best.

“You look like shit,” she told Buffy. A partner was nothing, if not brutally honest. “You need a break. You need some sleep.”

“Not ’til I find Giles.”

“You know, there’s a reason you’re not the only cop on the force. You can’t do everything by yourself. They’ve given us as many men as they could spare. That means you nap, and they keep looking. Then they sleep while we look. It’s this whole rotation thing the chief came up with. I think he’s calling it a work shift.”

Her sarcasm failed to get a rise out of Buffy. She merely turned weary, but determined eyes in April’s direction and asked, “Could you stop? If it was John?”

Well, she had her there. April sighed and handed over her money to the teen at the first window. She pulled up to the second and waited for their food. She handed over the warm bags to Buffy’s lap, stuck the sodas in the cup holders, and stole a french fry off the top as she pulled into a parking space. She waited until Buffy had started eating before saying anything.

“John went missing once, five or six years ago. I was heading the investigation of a particularly gruesome serial killer. He liked to remove his victims’ brains.”

“Brain sucking demon,” Buffy muttered, and then stole a guilty glance in her partner’s direction, as if she had let something slip.

“Yeah, there are some pretty sick people in the world,” April agreed. “I guess you could call them demons. Anyway, I got home after getting a good look at the latest crime scene, and John wasn’t there. I flipped. He was gone the whole day, and I fully expected to find him at another crime scene, outlined in chalk. By the end of the day, I was so distraught, that night on patrol I actually thought I saw a pair of werewolves.” April giggled sheepishly. “Silly, huh? Can you say ‘sleep-deprivation-induced hallucinations?’

“My point is this: John wasn’t being tortured by some sadistic killer. He was fine. He had gone to LA with a friend for the day, knowing that I would be tied up at work, and he forgot to leave a note. He got home before the ten o’clock news, bearing a fresh carton of milk and laundry detergent, and without the slightest clue that half the Sunnydale Police Department was looking for him.”

"Giles didn't wander off for the day. He was home, and then he was gone. For the whole night. And now most of the day, too."

April patted Buffy on the knee. "I know. I'm just saying... Don't assume the worst. He's probably fine. And when this is all over, he'll owe you flowers and chocolate for worrying you so."

"So they pay you pretty good?"

"Ethan!" Willow scolded.

"What? Don't act all surprised. You already knew that I've no qualms about auctioning off my services to the highest bidder." He sidled up to the two guards at the door. "So Wolfram and Hart... they pay pretty good?"

They each shrugged and nodded gamely. One guard tacked on, "My wife complains about the long hours sometimes, but the Firm gives us stock options, great health insurance, 401K, the whole nine yards."

Ethan nodded thoughtfully and leaned against the wall. Whether this was his attempt to distract the guards or whether he really was contemplating joining up with Wolfram and Hart, Willow couldn't be sure. But the guards had both turned to face Ethan, leaving Willow unwatched for the moment. They were still standing between their prisoners and the door, so they probably felt little need to watch Willow that closely. What could she do in Lilah's little office after all? Actually, quite a lot.

"So... Any idea if they're looking to hire on another sorcerer? My particular specialties run to chaos and mischief, something I think Wolfram and Hart might appreciate."

"You could check with Human/Demon Resources after they let you go. There's a job posting board outside the main office."

Willow typed quietly and quickly. She could feel the adrenaline pumping through her, her heart rate increasing, and she was getting all sweaty. She had to hurry before security noticed what she was up to.

"Now would you suggest signing on full time, or doing freelance work? Because I've found that working in a team is really not my strong suit."

"They generally start you off as a contractor anyway before offering you a job. I freelanced for them maybe three years, mostly security for parties, dark rituals, that sort of thing, before I got hired on permanent. Chuck here, he only worked as an assassin for... what?"

"Six months."

"Six months before they gave him a job."

Lilah's passwords were good, and Willow had successfully breached all her security measures. Now all that was left was to find something in her files that could prove useful.

"Assassin?" Ethan sounded distinctly uncomfortable.

"Former assassin," he was corrected.

The other guard laughed. "Chuck here's like the pit bull you keep in the shadows. The doberman's to scare off the crooks, but the pit bull... you won't hear him coming, and he'll take you down before you know he's there."

Willow had found everything she needed. She compressed it, emailed it to herself, then erased every trace of her snooping from Lilah's computer. *Come on, Ethan*, she mentally prayed. *Give me just one more minute.*

"So be straight with me now. Who around here do I want to avoid working for? Biggest pain for a boss?"

Cold water across his face forced him abruptly to consciousness. For a moment, he could allow himself to believe that it had simply been another nightmare, but the pain awakened as he did. He moaned softly as the last of the fog lifted from his head. He hurt everywhere.

“Thought I went a little too far there.”

Angel’s soft voice drifted to his ears from somewhere behind him, each word imbued with the slightest hint of an Irish brogue which only rose to the surface in the incarnation of Angelus. Souled, he had no accent, as if time and regret had stripped him of both the man and the monster he had been. Angel was neither, a lesson Giles had apparently not learned well enough the first time. He had treated Angel as a man, and as a consequence, now found himself reintroduced to the monster.

Giles shifted in his chair. Remembering the last moment before unconsciousness, his eyes dropped to his lap. There would be blood, surely, if Angel had... And more pain than just the dull ache. Or perhaps Angel had merely wanted alert prey for the big finale and had waited for him to regain consciousness.

His fears seemed confirmed when Angel circled around to the front and dropped to his knees before Giles. Angel walked two fingers up the length of one leg, pausing over the zipper of Giles’ trousers as he savored the sight of his captive’s weak, panicked struggles. In the end, Angel’s hand fell away as the vampire collapsed in a fit of laughter, his head dropping to rest against Giles’ knee.

“Not that I wouldn’t love to, my friend, but you’d only pass out again, and I need you awake enough to tell Buffy exactly who has been your host today. The girl lives in the land of denial sometimes, and I’m afraid she’s gonna need to hear it from you before she believes what’s right in front of her eyes.”

Angel lifted his head and grinned wickedly. “Doesn’t mean there aren’t other games we can play for the next few hours. Plenty of games that’ll still keep you right here. With me.”

He sat up on his knees, leaning forward until they were nearly nose to nose. “There’s more than one way to break a man,” he assured Giles.

Cordelia stumbled in the front door, not bothering to close it behind her, and unsteadily made her way to the couch, sinking down onto its cushions gratefully. “Dennis, can you get the door?” She cradled her head in her hands, as if that could help slow the pounding. “Dennis?”

She blew out an irritated breath and pulled herself up off the couch. “Fine. I’ll shut the door myself.” She slammed it a little too hard and flinched as the loud noise only increased her headache. “Okay, Dennis, I know you’re mad at me about the other night. We were supposed to watch Thursday night TV, and I ditched you for Wesley, and I’m *sorry* already. But this silent treatment is really getting old.”

She crawled back on the couch, pulling an afghan over her. “Vision Girl just wants a little pampering tonight. Is that too much to ask for? I mean, I selflessly suffer through these skull-splitting techno-color visions so people I don’t even know can avoid having their livers served with fava beans and a nice bottle of chianti. Can’t you just be not mad at me long enough to bring me like a whole bottle of Tylenol? Or maybe some of that migraine stuff the doctor prescribed?”

Only silence answered her. She sighed. Maybe she deserved his anger. It was pretty easy to take someone for granted when you couldn't even see them. But would it kill him to float her out *something* from her medicine cabinet?

"Dennis? Come on, roomie, I need you. Wesley's still out with Angel and the gang, saving those kids from my vision. And I think if I try to stand up again, I'm gonna puke." She pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes. Light was not her friend at the moment. "I'll even settle for a couple Mydol, if you feel like being a smart ass again."

Nothing. If your invisible roommate chooses to ignore you, you can be fairly certain that you've achieved a whole new level of bitca.

"I really am sorry, Dennis."

Everything flashed bright, and the pain exploded in her skull once more. "Angel!" she screamed. Rapid fire images assailed her: Angel in game face, Wesley thrown across the room, Gunn and Fred not fast enough to reach him before...

She sat bolt upright. "Buffy!" Oh, God, this couldn't be good.

Buffy saw it before she'd reached the front porch: a single, long stemmed red rose balanced between the doorknob and jamb.

Her step faltered, and April followed her gaze. "See? I told you everything would be fine. He was probably just out, planning some romantic surprise." She nudged her partner playfully. "Lucky girl. I can't remember the last time John bought me flowers."

Buffy ignored her and marched up to the front door. She took the rose stem gingerly between two fingers, as if it might contaminate her, and tossed it aside. Giles never bought roses. Giles *hated* roses.

She threw open the door and gasped.

The lighting was dim, romantic. Puccini played over the stereo, an opera Buffy didn't recognize by name, only by Giles' reaction when he happened past it once on the radio. Wine was chilling in an ice bucket sitting on the foyer table, two champagne flutes waiting beside it and a folded piece of paper leaning against the bottle. Buffy didn't need to look at it to know what it would say. *Upstairs*. The stairs were littered with more roses, votive candles lighting the path.

April moved to leave, still believing that she was intruding on a romantic setup, but Buffy grabbed her hand before she could go. She must have finally taken in the stricken expression on Buffy's face, because her voice quickly filled with concern. "Buffy? Are you okay?"

"Turn off the music," Buffy demanded sharply before starting up the stairs.

One step at a time. Her hands were shaking, her knees felt weak. She was torn between wanting to run up the flight of stairs and wanting never to go up them at all. She seemed to be moving in slow motion, and yet she was standing in the hallway before she knew it.

Their bedroom door was open, candlelight flickering against the walls. Buffy hesitated in the doorway, her hand darting out to steady herself against the wall.

Oh God, oh God, oh God, oh please, God, no.

She took a deep breath, braced herself, and crossed the threshold.

Giles was laid out on their bed, unmoving and still, so pale, so fragile in the candlelight. She couldn't tell if he was breathing or if he was...

She shook herself out of her daze and rushed to his side, clasping one of his hands in hers. He cried out as she touched him, his head arching back into the pillow. He was alive at least. She placed his hand back down on his chest, as gently as she could. She noticed then the unnatural bent of his fingers

in repose and remembered watching from a distance, all those years ago, as his splinted fingers removed his glasses, as he limped to join the friends she had planned to abandon.

His eyes blinked half open, glassy with exhaustion and pain.

"Giles?" she whispered softly, leaning over him, as close as she could get without actually touching him. She didn't know where else he was hurt. She noticed the angry, red burns peeking out from beneath his open collar, and she stifled a sob.

He rolled his head slightly to the side as his eyes sought her out. His voice was hoarse. "Buffy?"

"Right here." She blinked back tears and dared a tender caress across his brow, her fingers lingering at his temple. She could hear April in the background, radioing dispatch for an ambulance.

He closed his eyes again, mumbling, "Tired."

She knew it was a redundant question. She didn't even know why she asked. Except that she had to know for certain. "Giles, did... did he do this? Did...?"

She didn't need to finish her question. He knew what she was trying to ask. His eyes were still closed, but she heard the rage in his answer, one word filled with the memory of a bed of roses and death, fire and smoke, pain and fear, loss and betrayal.

"Angelus."

The front door stood open. Long gone paramedics had trampled the roses on the stairs. Most of the votive candles had burned out. A few guttered their last moments. April had thankfully shut off the stereo. The house was silent. Buffy made not a sound as she strode down the stairs, past the untouched wine, weapons bag in hand, a grim mask of determination set on her face. She unlocked the front closet and flung it open, reaching in for more weapons, her movements steady and calm as she was not.

She closed the bag and hefted it over her shoulder in one fluid movement, as she swept out of the house without bothering to close the door behind her.

She had ridden in the ambulance. Giles had faded in and out of consciousness, helped into a merciful daze by the drugs they gave him. She had waited at the hospital only long enough to know that he would survive before taking off again. With any luck, April wouldn't notice her disappearance until she was halfway to LA. Buffy had returned to their defiled home with a singular purpose, and within minutes had changed out of her officer's uniform and traded in her gun for an arsenal of more appropriate weaponry.

There would be people enough to sit with Giles. Their children, too, would be cared for.

For this mission, she had to go alone. This blood was hers and no one else's. This time, she was no lovesick teenager. She was a woman. A mother. A wife. But Slayer, first, foremost, and always.

Tonight she had a past to face, a duty to fulfill, a wrong to put right.

An ex to slay.

Chapter 6: Bloodlust

Willow sat innocently on the couch, as if she hadn't just plundered all of Lilah's deep, dark secrets. Lilah, however, seemed oblivious to the suspicious silence of her unwilling guests. She was more focused on the other lawyer who had followed her in.

"And how would you know that, Gavin?"

"I have my sources." The second lawyer seemed to be roughly the same age as Lilah, handsome, Oriental, the same smug attitude that seemed to come with a Wolfram and Hart paycheck. Watching the two of them, Willow felt almost as if she had ringside seats to a title fight.

"Well, I'll have you know," Lilah informed him haughtily as she crossed her arms, "that I *meant* to bring the Slayer here."

Willow sat up straighter. *Buffy?*

Gavin Park shook his head as if amused. "On a rampage, no less. What could that possibly accomplish?"

"She's going to force Angel into a kill or be killed situation. My money's on our boy for this fight. And if killing the love of his life isn't enough to turn him dark, then Wolfram and Hart might as well call it quits on this little project."

Gavin raised one eyebrow. "And if *she* kills *him*?"

Lilah shrugged. "He's threatened my life more times than I care to count. I won't exactly be weeping over his loss."

"Maybe you should be weeping over your own. Senior partners find out you got Angel dusted... They'll sack you. Literal sacks, Lilah."

Lilah strolled closer, putting herself inside the other's personal space. "Sometimes to get the big rewards, you have to roll the dice. You'd know that, Gavin, if you ever did anything except pester me. Now run along, and when I get promoted, maybe they'll let you have my office."

Ethan leaned closer to Willow and murmured, "Those two really hate each other."

Willow rolled her eyes. "Duh!"

He looked affronted at her casual dismissal. "It's more than a simple observation. Being a student of Chaos means understanding the relationships between people, the complex web that draws them together or holds them apart."

"I'm not your student," she insisted petulantly.

"Perhaps not. That doesn't mean you still can't learn something from me. These two," he nodded towards the two lawyers who were still trading insults, "push every button the other has. If you pay attention, you'll know just how to get under their skin yourself. Maybe that might be useful at some point in time."

She shifted away from him. More than 24 hours locked in a room with Ethan was too much to ask of anyone. And what normal person likes pineapple on their pizza anyway?

Gavin finally left, making it clear that he left not because Lilah was kicking him out, but because he had something more important to do.

Gavin was gone no more than five minutes before Lilah had another visitor. Willow jumped to her feet. "Angel!"

Angel smiled at her. "Hey, cutie."

Willow frowned. He was a little more chipper than she was used to. "Okay, you've never called me that before."

Lilah took a seat at her desk. "Everything go as planned?"

Angel sat across from her, propping his feet up on her desk. "Easy as pie."

Willow's eyes went round with shock, and she pointed back and forth between Angel and Lilah. "You're... you're *working* for-for...? Angel! How could...? Oh... oh..." She covered her open mouth with her hand as she finally got it. "You're not Angel." Not Angelus either, for Willow had seen the ring on his finger.

He confirmed her deduction, absently twisting the ring on his finger now that she had noticed it. "No, not Angel. But I know my darling boy well enough to play the part convincingly."

"The information we gave you was sufficient?" Lilah asked. "The police reports? His medical file?"

"Plus the parts Drusilla let slip. The parts that made sense, at any rate. The Watcher and I had a fun day together, revisiting some history back at the mansion. I get why Angelus needed Dru to break him. Pain alone won't cut it."

Willow sank slowly down to the couch. Her hands dropped limply into her lap. "You tortured Giles again?"

"And again and again and again." Angel smiled in her direction, and although she knew he wasn't Angelus, she shivered all the same when he looked at her like that. "And again. What Angelus did the first time and more." He faced Lilah and finished his report. "Left him in his bed for the Slayer to find. I imagine she's on her way right now."

Willow wrapped her arms around her middle, feeling like someone had just punched her in the gut. Her head was all swimmy, and she wanted to barf. Poor Giles. She felt Ethan's hand rest between her shoulder blades, and his quiet touch was more soothing than she would have expected. Then again, he cared about Giles too, didn't he?

Angel removed his legs from Lilah's desk and stood up, crossing to the window, staring out over the LA nightlife in contemplation. "I still think it would have been easier for me to come to Angel as Buffy, to give him that moment of perfect happiness."

Lilah frowned and shook her head in disagreement. "Angel's too noble. Even forgetting for the moment that Buffy's a happily married woman, he wouldn't risk his soul, not knowing about the curse as he does now."

She came to stand beside Angel's doppelganger at the window, not looking out over the city, but studying the vampire's stolen face instead. "And even if you did get him into bed... because that worked out so well the last time you tried it," she tacked on bitterly. "Do you really think he'd be happy with Buffy, knowing that they could never have any kind of a future, that he would have to let her go home to another man and their children? Even as Buffy, the best you could give him would be another night of perfect despair."

"So Angelus will kill her instead," he muttered softly.

"And he'll be dark. And yours."

He rested his forehead against the glass. "My poor, darling boy. He'll still have his soul. His rotten, filthy soul. He'll still suffer for everything we ever did. And he'll hate me."

"He'll be driven to you, same as the last time he hit bottom. Only this time, he won't be having any epiphanies, won't be climbing out of the darkness to rebuild broken friendships. He'll have killed the love of his life. He'll be messed up, depressed, and pathetic, but he'll be yours, Darla. Forever. You can have him like that or not at all. Those are your choices."

The ring came off her finger, and the visage of Angel wavered like a mirage, solidifying into the small frame of Darla, Angel's Sire. She handed the ring off to Lilah, ran a shaky hand through her straight, blonde hair, and walked resolutely to the door. The guards parted for her, but she paused at the threshold, informing Lilah firmly, "When my boy comes for me, we're finished with Wolfram and Hart. You won't come looking for us."

“Whatever you want, Darla.”

The vampire left. Lilah spared an apologetic look for her unwilling guests. “I’m sorry. Just a teensy bit longer, and you both can go home.” She exited as well, and it was just Willow and Ethan and their two heavily armed babysitters.

Willow turned desperate eyes in Ethan’s direction. “We have to get there before Angel kills Buffy or she kills him.”

“Shhh...” he soothed, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and glancing significantly at the guards. He pulled her in against his chest and wrapped the other arm around her, and Willow didn’t fight him, just closed her eyes and rested her cheek against the smooth silk of his tacky shirt. She didn’t care that it was Ethan. She just wanted someone to hold her for a moment, because everything was too overwhelming.

She kept thinking of Giles after the last time, how he had been that summer after Buffy ran away, hurting and lost and too stubborn to let any of them help him. Xander had stayed that first night, not because Giles had let him, but because he had been too tired to throw him out. After that, it had been put on a brave front and get back to business and pretend everything would be okay once they found Buffy, like none of them guessed at the nightmares that painted dark circles beneath his eyes or saw the pain flash across his face if he moved too quickly or noticed how he kept forgetting about the finger splints until he absently tried to use his hand and gasped in pain. And now, for Giles to have to go through it all again, just when things were really getting good between him and Angel... Willow started to cry, and Ethan held her tighter.

She felt so helpless. Too late to do anything for Giles. And they couldn’t do anything to stop Buffy’s suicide mission. Not stuck here in Lilah’s office like they were.

His hand tenderly stroked her hair, a gentle motion that continued down her back. She had never thought of Ethan as gentle before. “Shhh...” he murmured beside her ear. “First law of Chaos: things never go as planned. Not for either side. The bad guys have had too much luck today for things to play out in their favor. Trust Chaos, my dear. It hasn’t shown us its hand yet.”

The red convertible came to an abrupt stop outside the Hyperion. The two-hour drive had allowed Buffy’s anger to warm to a nice boiling point, her resolve strengthened as she stewed on what had been done to Giles. She had the crossbow out of her bag and loaded before she’d crossed the courtyard. She banged the front door open, her eyes immediately scanning the interior for her quarry, her slayer senses spreading out, searching, as she had a thousand times before, for that twinge, that spider sense that signaled vampire.

She descended the stairs smoothly. Rage gave her the grace of a panther. Kendra hadn’t understood this, that slaying needed to be more than flawless technical skill, that it had to burn through your blood, had to well up from someplace deep inside that you couldn’t bear to look at too closely, someplace primal. Dracula had tried to show it to her; the First Slayer had tried to make her understand, but she had blown them both off with her usual sparkling banter.

I walk. I talk. I shop, I sneeze. I’m gonna be a fireman when the floods roll back. There’s trees in the desert since you moved out. And I don’t sleep on a bed of bones.

You’re not the source of me.

She had wanted to believe that there was always the bigger picture, the greater good. But sometimes in the moment, there was only the hunt and the kill, and the rest was just pretty window-dressing. She was the Slayer, the Chosen One, the mightiest of hunters. That she served the forces of

good didn't change her basic nature. And right now, there was only this moment, the hunt, the kill, and her prey.

Gunn and Fred stood up from where they were sitting on the lobby sofa. "Buffy!"

Wesley came out from the back office, wiping something off a short sword. "Buffy?"

She ignored them all and focused on the staircase. She could feel him coming down, his preternatural hearing probably alerting him to his friends' warnings. He leaned over the railing of the second floor landing. "Buffy?" He sounded pleased to see her, was smiling at her even. Angelus.

She raised the crossbow and fired, driving a bolt through his shoulder. Missed the heart. Meant to. A quick death was too good for him. He needed to feel the blows first, to see his death coming, to know why.

"What was that for?" he asked, bewildered, grunting as he pulled the bolt from his shoulder.

His friends were coming towards her, as if any of them could stop a slayer. She was reloading the next bolt almost as soon as the last had flown. She was surprised to find that her voice didn't shake, that it was calm and unrushed. "You tortured Giles."

He stepped back, as if she had slapped him. She fired another bolt, and he caught it mid-flight, tossing it aside. "Yes, I did," he answered evenly.

Wesley reached her side and attempted to wrest the crossbow from her hands. She shoved him hard, holding nothing back, pulling no punches, and he sailed across the room.

She dropped the bow and charged up the stairs two at a time. Her feet touched the second floor landing, and she channeled her momentum into a flying leap kick that knocked Angel back into the wall. She advanced on him. "You broke his fingers." She backhanded her former lover. "You broke his ribs." Again. He landed on his knees. "You covered him in burns." She punched him, and his head jerked back with the hit. "You tore up his shoulders." She grabbed him by the front of his black shirt and hauled him to his feet, shoving him roughly against the wall. "Tell me you enjoyed it. I wanna hear you say it."

He met her eyes. "Of course Angelus enjoyed it. Every minute."

Oh, her rage was a living thing, throbbing in rhythm to her heart. Her hand reached for the stake inside her jacket, brandishing the weapon of her calling over the heart of her enemy.

"Buffy!" His eyes went wide with alarm, and he grabbed her wrist, arresting her blow before she could drive it home. "What are you doing?"

"My job. Take a beat to appreciate the synergy." She spun him out from the wall, their limbs locked together, stumbling, crashing through the balcony, landing in a tangled heap on the floor of the lobby below. She flipped to her feet, ready in battle stance. He mirrored her.

"Listen to me, Buffy. I'm sorry. I can't take it back. I wish I could. But it was a long time ago."

"Bored already? Moving on to the next bit of fun?" She swung, and he blocked. She kicked, and he sidestepped. Again and again. He didn't fight back, nor did he lie down and take it. Defense, but no offense, they danced. "I'm sorry if I can't move on quite as quickly as you, Angel, but they hadn't even finished patching him up yet when I left."

"What?"

Wesley, Gunn, and Fred tackled her, toppling her to the ground by sheer weight. "Get off of me!"

"Damn girl, I get that you got issues, but try wailing on a pillow or something 'fore you go all Xena-crazy-bitch." Gunn said before she sent him flying, crashing into Fred as he went.

Wesley she pinned with a steely gaze. "He turned, Wes. He's Angelus now, and I have to do this. I don't want to hurt any of you, so stay out of my way." She shoved him backwards, as if to demonstrate her resolve on this issue, and then pulled herself to her feet.

"I'm not Angelus," her ex protested, holding his hands out in a gesture of truce. "I'm still Angel."

"Then who left Giles in my bed?" Her eyes narrowed. "You bastard. The same pretty gift wrap you gave him for Jenny."

Angel continued waving his hands in front of him as he backed up a step. "I'm starting to get that something's happened to Giles, but I had nothing to do with it."

"He told me it was you, and I'm not buying your lies this time. I'm not waiting until you start killing my friends and trying to unleash hell on earth before I do what needs to be done. I understand now, like I didn't then. Angel's dead, and you're the thing that killed him."

She came at him again. He blocked some of her blows, others made it through. She might have been exhausted, sleep-deprived, crazy with grief, but she was still the Slayer, the Vampire Slayer, and stronger than him, a mere vampire. She drove the stake towards his chest, and he deflected the blow, turning with her momentum, using it to send her stumbling. She crashed into the weapons cabinet. Glass shattered at her feet. She reached one arm in and grabbed for the first thing she touched. She twirled the weapon in front of her, admiring its weight and balance. "Nice axe."

She swung at him. The blade grazed across his chest, drawing blood. Another red line across his arm. She could see that all of his focus was centered on dodging each swing. "You know you can't fight me like this, Angel. Come on, show it to me. I wanna see it. Show me your true self."

He rolled beneath the arc of her swinging axe, and came up behind her. He reached for and grabbed the wooden handle of her weapon, a hand to either side of her. He pulled them both backwards, the length of the axe's handle pressing beneath her chin and forcing her head back so they were cheek to cheek. She felt the cool breath of his voice whisper across her face. "If I were any other vampire, you'd be dead. You're upset and angry and not thinking clearly. You're fighting sloppy, taking stupid risks. You need to stop for a minute, Buffy. You need to cool down."

She held firm to the axe handle, bent over, and used her leverage to flip Angel. His back slammed hard to the floor, and he lost his grip on the axe. She adjusted her own grip, bringing the sharp blade to rest beneath his chin. "What I need... Just a sec, and I'm gonna get exactly what I need." She lifted the axe for the death blow, but before it could descend, she dropped the weapon behind her, arching her back as a crossbow bolt skewered her right shoulder.

She spun to see who had shot her. Fred, standing in the office doorway, gave her an embarrassed little wave before fleeing into Wesley's office.

Angel was standing when she faced him again. His eyes were focused on the protruding bolt, the spreading circle of red at her shoulder. She couldn't reach back and pull it out from behind, nor could she get a solid grip on the small point that came through the front. Her right fingers were going numb. Nothing for it. She would just have to fight one-handed. Cradling her arm against her chest, she gritted her teeth against the pain and slowly advanced on him. "Smell blood, do you? Your demon is just screaming at you to take a taste, isn't it? I wanna see him. I wanna see the demon. Show me the monster that tortured my husband."

With her left hand, she hauled back and hit him. Too preoccupied with the scent of her blood, he didn't block her.

The second strike he did block, holding her wrist suspended at the apex of her windup. She changed tactics and kned him forcefully in the groin. He doubled over, releasing her arm.

"Show me your face, damn you!"

A left hook, filled with a woman's rage and a slayer's power, and she brought him to his knees. He spat blood and snapped his head up to look at her. He snarled, in full game face.

Buffy smiled, vindicated. "That's what I'm talking about, baby."

Cordelia groaned, one hand trying to keep her head from splitting in two and spilling her brains across the floor while the other hand valiantly scrabbled for the phone just out of reach. Her fingers touched a magazine that rested beneath the desired item, and she inched it closer to her, hoping to drag the phone closer as she did.

The phone toppled off the coffee table, landing on the side opposite her, putting it even further out of her reach. To make matters worse, the receiver had dislodged from the cradle and soon began beeping steadily, seemingly in rhythm with her throbbing head. She swore colorfully, a long string of obscenities that only Dennis would be unsurprised by.

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and attempted to gather the strength to pull herself off the couch and crawl over to the phone.

She felt the receiver touch her fingers as it was placed in her hand. Not opening her eyes yet, she gave her roommate a faint smile. "*Finally*, Dennis. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Her eyes snapped open. A man was kneeling beside her. A strange man she didn't know. She would have jumped backwards, maybe vaulted over the back of the couch and made for the door, that is if any part of her body would cooperate with such a plan. But two visions in one day definitely vetoed any plan that didn't involve sleeping.

Seeming to sense her fear, he backed away slightly, sitting on the coffee table. "I'm Dennis," he told her softly.

"Ri-ight," she agreed. *Let's not provoke the crazy man who broke into your house.* "Sooo... whoever you are, do you mind if I make a quick call to my friends before you knock me out, rob me blind, or otherwise kill me?"

"I'm Dennis," he insisted again.

"Uh-huh," she agreed again, her fingers dialing the number for the Hyperion as her eyes remained focused on her uninvited guest.

Fred answered, handing the phone over to Wesley when Cordelia asked for him. He sounded distracted.

"So how'd the thing go? Did you get there before those kids woke the angry zoo monster?"

"I'm rather busy at the moment, Cordy. We'll talk when I get home."

"Wait!" she shouted before he could hang up. "I had another vision. Buffy's coming there to kill Angel. He should leave. Town. Like I hear China is nice this time of year."

She heard his laugh, dark and dry. When he spoke, he sounded entirely too blasé about the whole thing. "Really? Buffy's coming here to kill Angel? Well, that certainly explains the lunatic slayer currently trashing our lobby. Thanks for the heads up."

"She's there?"

"I believe I just said that. I really have to go now, Cordy. I'm trying to mix a tranquilizer capable of incapacitating a slayer with the few ingredients I happen to have lying around the office. I feel a bit like McGyver at the moment. Fred, no Fred, bottom drawer. I have a full set." His attention returned to her. "We're doing our best to stop her without getting our necks broke in the process. You just rest now and let us take care of this."

"That's just it, Wes. My vision. You don't have to stop Buffy. You have to stop *Angel*. He's going to kill her."

"Are you certain?"

"Uh... yeah. Got the sneak preview, remember?"

"All right. Rest, Cordy. Two visions in one day..."

"You don't have to tell me. It's *my* head. Maybe the crook who broke into my apartment will be kind enough to bring me some painkillers before committing felony larceny and assault."

"Cordelia?"

"Nevermind. Good luck. See you later. Hopefully." She hung up, and warily studied the man currently perched on the coffee table beside her.

"I *am* Dennis," he insisted before she could say anything.

"Again I say: 'Uh-huh. Ri-ight. Sure. Whatever you say.' See, here's the thing: Dennis is dead. You don't look so dead to me. Plus, there's the whole I can see you thing, which is a dead giveaway that you're not Dennis."

"One time you stayed up all night to watch a Star Trek marathon."

"Xander got me hooked," she protested feebly.

"You eat frosting out of the can with your fingers, listen to Madonna's *Evita* while you clean house, and sometimes in the shower—"

"Okay, okay, so you're Dennis," she finally relented, and then paused thoughtfully as she studied him with new eyes. "Somehow I thought you'd be taller."

Chaos never fails. It is the one true god. It doesn't always give you what you want, what you've asked for, what you've prayed for. Ethan isn't so esoteric as to believe that it even gives you what you need. But it always gives you something. Something delightfully unexpected, deliciously unpredictable. As the world tries to bring order from chaos, chaos strikes back and tears things down. Science has already concluded that chaos will be the end of all things, entropy killing each star, felling each world from its orbit, the whole universe losing cohesion and expanding into nothingness. That makes Chaos the most potent force in all existence, more powerful than good or evil, right or wrong, and Ethan Rayne worshipped at that altar. As its servant, he found his prayers answered more often than those of the many misguided people who pray for order and meaning.

Gavin Parks walked through the doors of Lilah's office, as though delivered by the very hand of Chaos.

"Lilah isn't here?" he asked with a puzzled frown.

Willow was still tucked into herself on one end of the couch. Poor thing, still dwelling on whatever cruel torment had been heaped on Ripper's broad shoulders. Throwing herself a little pity party in honor of all the things they couldn't do from their 28th floor prison. Ethan nudged her gently to gain her attention. *Watch and learn, little grasshopper.*

He smiled at Gavin. "No, she's gone."

A servant of Chaos has an eye for the great tapestry of life, understands the precarious balance involved between people, whether they are drawn together or forced apart, and knows just which threads to tug to unravel the whole sorry mess.

Ethan smiled at the lawyer who was firmly in the employ of darkness, whose eye was always cast towards the light, as if that were his only foe, but who was blind to the subtle gray of Chaos. Ethan would blindside him. "I believe she's gone to inspect her new office. Senior partners are impressed by her strategy. Seers smell the slayer's blood on the wind. Lilah smells promotion."

Pick, pick, pick. All the little buttons Lilah had pushed when the two rivals had argued in this office only a few hours before. Ethan worked those sore spots like punching in the access code on an electronic keypad. Three. Two. One. Freedom.

Less than ten minutes later, Ethan bestowed a gloating grin on his reluctant partner. They were standing on the sidewalk outside Wolfram and Hart, Willow desperately trying to hail a cab while he enjoyed a long awaited smoke. Gavin Parks had freed them, far more interested in Lilah's failure than his own success. A clever story about how he was only trying to ensure that Angel didn't get dusted, and Gavin might even be commended for his actions.

"We have to get there before one of them gets killed."

"And what are you going to do when you get there? Hmm?" He casually tossed aside his cigarette butt, letting it fall wherever it may. "How are you going to stop a death match between slayer and vampire?"

"Well, I... I'll..." she faltered, completely forgetting about the taxicab for the moment. She took a deep breath. "My... I could..."

Poor thing. Little bird whose wings were clipped, never remembering until it landed on the ground that it could no longer reach the sky. "Use your magic?"

She screwed her face up into an expression of determination. "No, I'll... I'll talk to them. Tell them it was really Darla."

"Right," he said, laughing. "Before or after they knock you across the room?"

A cab pulled up to the curb, the passenger window rolled down. The driver leaned over, asking them if they wanted a lift. Willow seemed torn. Ethan could feel her teetering on a precipice. Just a little push, and she would be closer to him and farther from Ripper. And it would seem so innocent, really.

He motioned for the driver to wait and closed the distance between himself and Willow. He brushed the hair back from her face, fire red like the magic he could feel boiling beneath the surface, and bent to whisper in her ear, "It's the only way to save Buffy. And wouldn't Giles want you to save her?" He called the man Giles, as the children did. But not children any longer.

She lifted her eyes to him, too ensnared by the choice before her to balk at his proximity. "You have magic. You could..."

"One of us needs to go back in for the ring. Need magic for that, too. 'Sides, what are the chances Buffy or Angel either one'd believe me? It's the only way to save her, Willow."

Who could resist their deepest, most selfish desire when offered to them wrapped in the rationalization of selflessness? She nodded decisively. "Okay, Ethan, do it."

"Really?"

She squeezed her eyes shut and licked her lips. "Just hurry up before I change my mind." The last poured from her mouth in a rush, belying her outer bravado.

He closed his eyes, senses reaching out to feel for the skeins of Ripper's magic. He gripped her shoulders as his mouth began mumbling incantations, searching for the key to her chains. He felt Ripper's magic ripple against his own and knew that he had nearly picked the lock. He pressed his lips to her forehead, the kiss not necessary for the magic, but when else would he have the chance to steal a taste of her?

Snap. Ripper's magic crumbled beneath his own, and she was free.

Ethan stepped away from her, smiling. What a glorious protégé she would make indeed. One finger tapped her beneath her chin, signaling that she could open her eyes.

"Fly, my little bird. You're free."

She did not seem as light as she should, but weighted down with guilt. How did Ripper engender such loyalty? He would need to free her of that as well, for why should she feel guilty for reclaiming what was always hers?

Willow climbed into the cab and was gone.

Ethan spun on his heel and headed towards the door he had exited only a few minutes before. Back into the lion's den. He murmured the words to the spell, becoming unnoticed and unacknowledged. Dimming, dimming, he marched through Wolfram and Hart's massive revolving glass door, past the security guard, and was gone.

Slayer and vampire were evenly matched. She no longer had him beat in strength and speed. The pain from her wounded shoulder and the necessity to fight one-handed handicapped her. If anything, he was gaining the upper hand on her, now that he had allowed the demon to rise to the surface. It was a mixed blessing. Seeing him in vamp face quieted any inner turmoil she might feel in fighting him. He *was* Angelus, not Angel, when he showed her that face. On the other hand, he was stronger, no longer holding back, no longer trying to maintain the illusion for his friends that he was still Angel and would never intentionally harm her. In his yellow, demon eyes, she could see his bloodlust rising in proportion to her own.

Lesson the first: a Slayer must always reach for her weapon. I've already got mine.

Angel had his, fists and fangs, while hers were on the other side of the lobby in the discarded duffel bag. She had clearly not thought this plan completely through. Every time she attempted to maneuver herself closer to her weaponry, he cut her off. She could fight hand-to-hand for as long as she had to. If she tired, she need only remember the sight of Giles' battered and broken body arranged in their bed, his small gasp of pain as they lifted him from bed to gurney, the doctor's face as he recited the list of injuries, before she found her second wind. Holding her ground was one thing, but she needed a weapon to have any prayer of finishing Angel.

They were locked together, each trying to topple the other's balance when it hit her. A small prick, not like the bolt from before. Her eyes flicked down quickly to find the dart sticking out from her thigh, its flights painted with the British flag. Wesley.

She couldn't feel the fingers of her right hand. Useless. The left was still grappling with Angel. Leaving her no hands to pull the dart from her leg. The room was starting to spin. Wesley must have dipped the tip in something potent, something fast acting. Her knees were already beginning to give out beneath her.

Holding tight to Angel, she pulled him down with her, landing on her back, the crossbow bolt driven further through her shoulder, a great crack as the end broke beneath her weight. She cried out with the pain, arching her head back, her good hand still twisted in the fabric of Angel's shirt.

Angel landed on top of her, his fangs so close to the neck that was quickly bared for him, the smell of slayer's blood hot in his nostrils, the siren call of his demon impossible to resist with the fog of bloodlust still upon him and the adrenaline of battle still in his veins.

Like that long ago night before graduation, before the Mayor's Ascension, when Buffy had tricked him into draining her, into taking the slayer's blood that would cure Faith's poison, by goading him into battle until the demon was in control and the man was a mere witness... The beast rose, and the man faded.

He sank his teeth into the scars he had left from that night and drank. He felt her struggle beneath him, but that seemed unimportant, far away, nothing like the heady taste of her warm blood across his tongue, driving out all human thought and leaving only the demon to savor the way each beat of her heart pumped another mouthful for him to swallow eagerly.

He dimly registered the others moving towards him, three heartbeats quickened by desperation. The demon inside him gloated that they had hesitated just a moment too long, that their movements

were just a little too slow, that their pathetic mortal strength could not hope to wrest a vampire from its prey in mid-feed. The man inside him knew the demon was right.

Her struggles quieted, her form limp in his arms, and still he drank. The demon was never satisfied with stale blood, warmed in a microwave and sipped primly from a straw. This was what it hungered for: fresh blood, still tasting of life, coppery and sweet and tinged with fear, human blood, taken by force.

“Back!”

He was ripped from his prey by invisible hands, thrown backwards to slam into the wall, and pinned there by a foe he couldn’t see. Panting, he shook his head, trying to clear it.

“Willow?”

She had stepped in front of him, blocking his view of Buffy.

Buffy... Oh, God, what had he done? He felt his features shift back to human, the horror of his actions sobering him out of his bloodlust and battle-induced stupor. He still had the taste of Buffy in his mouth.

“Is she...?”

Gunn and Fred were already at her side. Wesley was on the phone, and Angel’s vampire hearing informed him that the man was calling for an ambulance.

“Her pulse is really weak,” Fred advised him, her voice shaking with her concern. She pressed one hand over Buffy’s shoulder, the other over her neck, trying to staunch the flow of blood. Gunn plucked the dart from her thigh.

Angel’s eyes flitted desperately from one face to another. “I didn’t mean to. I’d never... You have to believe me.”

He felt Willow’s spell release him, but the shock of his own actions held him immobile as surely as any magic.

Willow stepped closer, giving him a sympathetic head nod. “It’s okay, Angel. We get it. Really. Wolfram and Hart set this all up. They stole the Ring of Gormogon, pretended to be you, kidnapped Giles, and pretty much convinced Buffy you were Angelus again by recreating all the bad stuff you did back then.”

“Now, Angel.” Wesley walked out from behind the front desk and joined the rest of the group in the center lobby. He was trying to be the voice of reason, perhaps trying to prevent another descent into darkness like the one after Drusilla turned a resurrected and human Darla before she could earn her redemption and his. Perhaps Wesley was right to worry. Angel was feeling the urge to lock a bunch of Wolfram and Hart lawyers in a room with a vampire. Only this time, he’d like to be that vampire.

“Let’s think this through calmly,” Wesley insisted. “Gather all the facts before charging off on a rampage.”

Angel focused on Buffy, lying there, unconscious, bleeding, possibly dying because of him. He listened for her heartbeat: weak, slowing. He had drained her nearly to the point of death. Another second and she might have died in his arms. “If she dies, they die. Every last one of them. And you won’t be able to stop me.”

“You do that, and they win. You’ll have given yourself over to the darkness.” Wesley paused significantly, his face grim. “Angel, you won’t be able to come back from it this time.”

“I won’t want to.”

Willow laid her hand against his bicep, and he looked at her, bracing himself for whatever speech she was about to offer him to change his mind, whatever words she had planned about his higher purpose and the city of people who still needed his help, prepared himself to hear her say,

This isn't what Buffy would have wanted. As if she was already dead. As if he had already killed her. What Willow said, however, was unexpected.

"You want something to kill? Kill Darla. She's the one who was wearing the ring, who tortured Giles, who set Buffy up to come after you. She's expecting you, I think. Expecting you to join up with her again, not to kill her. Find Darla, and beat the crap outta her, whatever dark, twisted things you want to do to those lawyers. Get it all out of your system, and then stake her."

That seemed like a sensible plan. Far better than Wesley's "wait around and do nothing" approach.

Angel strode out of the Hyperion, grabbing Buffy's duffel bag as he went. He assumed she had packed weapons enough to kill vampires, hopefully weapons suitable for a slow and painful end. Holy water. Crosses. Buffy had mentioned once how she had beheaded a vampire with an Exact-o knife. Maybe he would try that. Angel was also remembering the time she had stuffed a crucifix down a vampire's throat until it revealed the location of her captured friends. That would be satisfying. After all, Darla was definitely a screamer.

And then there were the things he had done as Angelus, things he had done with Darla. Now he would do them *to* her. He hoped she would enjoy the irony. She had always appreciated a sick sense of humor.

Darla wanted her darling boy back, and she would have him.

Chapter 7: Mending

“Buffy?” Willow hesitated in the doorway, as if she were a vampire who needed an invitation.

They’d had the talk, and Buffy’d had the rest of the night and now most of the morning for everything to sink in. She’d almost killed Angel. Not Angelus, but Angel. Not to save the world, but because she’d let her emotions get the better of her, deluded herself into thinking it was a slayer mission and not a personal vendetta, stormed off without a plan or even all the information. Played by Wolfram and Hart. That stung, too.

She had dreamt about Acatla all night. Only this time, the portal wasn’t opening behind Angel when she drove the sword through his belly. His hand reached out for hers, shock and betrayal in his eyes, and then... *then* the portal opened behind him, wider and wider, sucking them all in. She had opened the gates to hell with Angel’s blood and damned them all.

“Buffy?” Willow asked again. Why couldn’t she just leave her alone? Why couldn’t they all just leave her alone? Wesley and Cordelia, Gunn and Fred, some guy named Dennis who the others kept sneaking glances at. They had all visited her hospital room, bearing flowers and obnoxiously cheerful balloons, and made nice, bland conversation, as if she hadn’t tried to kill their friend the night before. As if some of them weren’t sporting bruises because of her.

“There’s someone here to see you.”

And she knew who that would be. Everyone else could ask for themselves. Only one person required someone else to announce their presence.

“I don’t want to see him right now.”

“I don’t think he’ll go away until you do.” Willow didn’t seem to be listening to the “I don’t want to see him” part of what she’d just said, because her friend entered her hospital room anyway. (Dammit, why didn’t people need invitations, too? So much simpler that way.) Willow turned the blinds for each window, shutting out the sun, and then left.

Could have at least stayed. Not abandoned me to do this alone.

Angel waited in the hall, framed by the doorway. He didn’t actually need an invite, as the hospital was public domain. Or did he? She *was* technically living and sleeping here at the moment. She’d have to ask Giles about that later.

“Come in, Angel.”

He stood awkwardly next to her bed for a moment, neither of them sure what to say. Angel finally broke the silence, which must have been a first, because under normal circumstances, he would win any kind of a brooding contest.

“I brought you a get well present.”

“I’m almost all better, actually. Slayer healing.”

“Still, I think you’ll like it. Hold out your hands.”

Reluctantly, she did as asked. He reached into one coat pocket and then pulled out his closed fist, the other hand quickly cupping beneath it. He opened his hands over hers, a dark powder sifting through his fingers into hers.

“Darla,” he told her simply.

“Ewww,” she answered, her nose scrunching up. “You couldn’t bring me flowers? A little Hallmark card: ‘p.s. I killed Darla.’ Somebody’s ashes... not exactly a pick-me-up.”

“I thought you’d feel better knowing.”

“I should, I guess, but...”

“You wanted to do it yourself.”

Their eyes met. Angel knew her almost as well as Giles. “Yeah.” Buffy studied the fine dust in her hands, some of it floating through her fingers or teased by a breath of air to land like little specs across the hospital sheets. She focused on the dust in her hands and wondered if it had hurt, if he had broken her first, if he had snapped her fingers and cracked her ribs and poured holy water down her chest. Buffy hoped he had, and she wondered if that made her a terrible person. She’d killed vampires before, but she’d never tortured them without reason, for pleasure, for payback.

She emptied her hands into the trash can and brushed them off. “Okay, gross. Again, chocolate: always a welcome get well gift.”

“Buffy,” his voice was so serious, she looked up. He always stared into her eyes with such intensity. She remembered in high school, how it had made her feel like the only person in the world. “You hated me before, when you thought I had...” He paused, as if searching for the words. “Buffy, you do know that I did those things to Giles, right?”

“When you were Angelus.”

He nodded, accepting that distinction reluctantly. “But I also have to share some of the blame for what Darla did this time. I could have killed her, but I didn’t. I... I just wanted to feel something besides the cold. It’s not an excuse, I know.”

The realization hit her like a sucker punch. “You slept with her.” It shouldn’t bother her like this. She was married, had children, slept in another man’s arms every night. But Angel was her first love, and because of his gypsy curse, she had never had to imagine him with anyone else.

“It was a long time ago, Buffy. Everything had lost meaning. But when I woke up beside her, I realized I was in danger of losing my soul again, not from happiness, but from apathy. She saved me, and for that, I let her live, let her walk away, and never tried to hunt her down again. If I had... Giles wouldn’t...”

“No.” Her eyes filled with tears, a few stray drops escaped down her cheeks. “If what Darla did to Giles is in any way your fault, then... then Ms. Calendar is my fault, too. Because I couldn’t kill you when I had the chance.”

“No. Don’t even think that.”

She sniffled and wiped away her tears with the sleeve of her hospital gown. “I won’t if you won’t.”

A ghost of a smile lifted his lips. “Deal.” He placed his hand over hers. “Friends?”

“Always. You think I’m gonna let a bunch of evil lawyers mess with my head and get the best of me? Nope. They’ve got another think coming. We’re good here.”

Angel leaned forward and placed a cool kiss on her brow before leaving her alone. She maintained her composure until she was sure he was far enough away that his vampire hearing wouldn’t overhear her tears. Then she cried and cried; she couldn’t stop. She wasn’t entirely sure why she was crying, just a vague sense that things would never be the same. The extreme lack of sleep and whatever the doctors had given her for her shoulder might also be contributing factors. All she knew was that she was sobbing into her hospital pillow as if her heart was breaking, so desperately homesick that it was an actual physical ache in the pit of her stomach. She wanted go home to Sunnydale. She wanted Giles to be there waiting for her, not lying in his own hospital bed, wanted everything to be the way it was before, before last night, before last week, before the blackmail and the torture. But she knew that it would never, never be the same again.

“You sure you’re good to go? They don’t want to keep you longer?”

Buffy had arrived at the Sunnydale hospital to find Giles dressed and waiting to be released. She hadn't been very surprised.

"Of course they'd like to keep me longer. I, however, don't wish to stay."

They stood beside each other, not touching, but comfortably positioned in each other's personal space.

"Maybe if they want you to stay... Maybe they know a little bit more about medicine than you do. I mean, I don't remember ever seeing D-R in front of your name."

He sighed and held her gaze for a moment before he spoke. His eyes looked so hollow, so tired, like coal painted beneath them. He couldn't have slept very well last night. "Buffy, I have done this before. After... A-acathla... I was at school the next day."

"I remember. It didn't look so bad standing across the street. Just..." Her fingers reached out to lightly brush over the metal finger-splints, then up to gently touch the cut on his forehead. "Seeing it up close this time... Was it this bad before?"

"Nearly so." He gestured helplessly with his two useless hands. "Although Angelus at least left me with one good hand."

"I wish I'd been there for you."

"You're here now."

"Yeah, but I shouldn't have gone."

"Then or now?"

Her eyes snapped up to his. And her watcher was reading her with the same scrutiny he showed any of his ancient tomes. He nodded when he found his answer.

"You were gone when I woke. I suspected."

"I told you: Willow figured out that it was Darla, and Angel staked her. I wasn't in on that little hunt."

He wasn't fooled by her cool denial. He glanced away, finding his uneaten breakfast tray incredibly interesting. "You could have gotten yourself killed, running off after Angel in a temper. I should know. I did the same after Jenny."

The doctor came in at that moment with the final paperwork, saving Buffy from any further scolding.

"So, Mr. Giles, tired of our hospital-ity already?" The doctor laughed at his own pun. "Let's just go over a few things first, shall we? You'll need to keep those ribs taped for at least the next three weeks. Will you be able to do that?"

"I can help," Buffy offered.

The doctor frowned at her. "The dressing on your burns will need to be changed twice a day to prevent infection."

"I can do that, too."

The doctor seemed displeased with her answer, and his frown deepened. Obviously, the point of his discharge instructions was to convince his patient that he wasn't ready to be discharged. "Avoid overextending those shoulders or lifting anything with them; they'll be easier to dislocate until they've healed properly."

"I got it covered, Doc. No lifting. No reaching." Buffy was not helping the doctor's cause.

The doctor crossed his arms over his clipboard and gave them each a level stare. "You may find simple tasks more challenging with ten splinted fingers."

Buffy crossed her arms as well, doing the best a girl her height can do to look intimidating. She may have agreed with the doctor at the moment about Giles not being ready to go home, but if he

wanted to check himself out against medical advice, then by God, she was going to stand by her man. "Whatever he needs me to do, I can do."

"Very well. Sign here, Mr. Giles, and you are free to go." The doctor thrust the clipboard in front of Giles, and he automatically reached for the proffered pen, realizing at the last moment that he had no way of holding the writing instrument in his hand. The doctor smiled smugly, having just illustrated his point. Buffy grabbed for the clipboard and signed, smiling back equally smugly, having just illustrated hers.

They left, walking side by side down the hospital hallway. "Thank you."

She shrugged. "It's what we do for each other. In sickness and in health."

"Yes, well... I don't think I could have stayed in that room another minute. It will feel good to be home again. I thought about it sometimes, about you and the children, when..." He swallowed and took a deep breath that made him wince. "It-it made things more bearable."

Silence until they'd nearly reached the parking lot, a slow steady pace that still forced him to curl one arm across his chest in support of his ribs. He was limping slightly, distinctly favoring one leg over the other.

She offered him her shoulder to lean on. "Giles, why are you limping?"

"Do you really want to know?"

No, she supposed she didn't. He accepted her offer of support, and she took some of his weight as they continued on. She gasped slightly as he leaned too hard on her injured shoulder, reminding her that slayer healing or no, getting skewered by a crossbow bolt would take some time to heal.

Giles stopped where he was, turning to examine her with his eyes. "You're hurt."

She shrugged, trying to brush it off. "If we're comparing war wounds here, I think you win."

And then his hand reached out towards her neck, the metal splints on each finger clicking together as he awkwardly tried to touch the scarf she had tied around her neck. She tugged on one end and allowed the scarf to fall free, letting him see the bite marks.

He sucked in a painful breath. "Oh, Buffy, why didn't you say anything?"

"No big, Giles. Really, I'll be fine. Unlike *some* people, the doctor said it was okay for me to go home." She switched to the other side of him, offering him her good shoulder to lean on. "We should really get moving again, 'cause at this pace, we'll get to the car sometime tomorrow."

"You could have pulled up to the curb for me." He thankfully let the previous topic drop, although she wasn't so naïve as to think they wouldn't be having a conversation about it later.

"Yeah, if I was smarter and not so distracted by my watcher getting tortured and nearly killed. Come on, we're almost there now anyway."

She paused before opening the passenger side door for him. She looked up at the mid-morning sun shining brightly in the sky. "Doesn't seem like the sun should be out today. Too cheerful. Feels like it should be dark and rainy."

He looked up into the clear, blue sky as well. "Day four."

She gripped the car door tighter. She hadn't thought about it, not since finding him in their bed. "Giles, you don't really think they'll take you away tomorrow? I mean, they got the ring back. Not from us, but still... They got what they wanted and did what they wanted with it. They won't turn you in tomorrow, will they?"

"I don't know what to expect, Buffy. It's still a possibility." He sighed. "Lilah's plan backfired, and she may be in a mood to lash out. I may be a convenient target. We should be prepared."

She understood then why he was so desperate to leave the hospital and go home. He believed it might be his last chance.

The children were happy to see their parents, but they stood at polite attention to either side of their babysitter, whereas the expected greeting would have usually involved them clattering full speed down the stairs and tackling the new arrivals in enthusiastic hugs. Buffy explained to her confused husband, "Marianne and I decided that a 'look but don't touch' policy should be in effect for a few days."

The children climbed into her arms eagerly when she offered, and she held them up one at a time to give their father a careful kiss on the cheek before sending them off to play.

She pointed at Giles firmly. "Food for you. No arguments. And no complaining about what I fix. You're at my mercy until you can make your own."

They passed through the dining room, Willow sitting at the dining table, so engrossed in her laptop that she seemed oblivious to their whole arrival. Buffy bent close and whispered, "Boo!"

Willow jumped half out of her chair, glaring then after she caught her breath. She whacked her friend on the arm, and the slayer feigned pain.

"Whatcha got?" Buffy asked, leaning over to peek at the computer screen.

"Stuff I emailed myself from Lilah's office. Inside stuff from Wolfram and Hart." Her eyes slid past Buffy to find Giles, and she fidgeted in her seat as she took in his appearance. "Hey, Giles. You okay?"

"I've had better days," he tossed back lightly.

"Maybe this will help: I got some real dirt off Lilah's computer, stuff she wouldn't want anyone to know about. Wolfram and Hart would have her hide... and I mean literally." Her nose crinkled up in disgust. "There's a Baktar demon running Accounting who collects the skins of disgraced lawyers as wall hangings." She swiveled the monitor so he could get a closer look. "If the firm knew about this, I guarantee they'd be adding to his collection."

Giles pursed his lips thoughtfully as he skimmed over this new information. "So a stalemate then?"

"Good news, right?"

Buffy smiled brightly and wrapped her friend in a warm hug. "Best I've had all day."

But Giles didn't seem as happy as he should. Maybe being tortured put a damper on his party spirit. Or maybe it had something to do with the way he and Willow were staring at each other, a thick silence building between them like a developing storm front, a palpable tension Buffy hadn't witnessed in months.

Willow didn't break eye contact with him, just patted Buffy gently on the arm and asked, "Could you give me a moment alone with Giles?"

Buffy glanced over to Giles first, seeking his permission, which he gave with a curt little nod. She slipped out to the kitchen, ostentatiously to fix Giles breakfast, but unable to resist a little eavesdropping as long as she was there.

In the staring contest, it was Willow who dropped her eyes first. In the animal world, wasn't that a show of submission? She was sure she'd seen that on the Discovery Channel.

"How?" he asked simply.

She had expected him to sense it the moment he saw her. He could probably feel the lingering traces of the magic she'd already done, the spell to knock Angel away from Buffy, the spell to keep Buffy stable on the seemingly endless ambulance ride, to keep her breathing and her heart beating until they could get her to the hospital. Willow had never doubted that Giles would realize his spell was broken. And so knowing that, it seemed like she should have had something prepared to say.

She floundered for a moment before beginning the story at the beginning.

"I had this idea for blackmailing Lilah, and it was a really good idea, only it needed someone they wouldn't recognize and... and the ring. So I tracked down—" She swallowed nervously, and her voice got very quiet. "—Ethan Rayne."

Giles' face was expressionless, and she started babbling to fill the silence. "'Cause Wolfram and Hart wouldn't recognize him, and it would have totally worked if we hadn't gotten captured and Wolfram and Hart hadn't gotten the ring, but we escaped in the nick of time, and I stopped Angel from killing Buffy and got the blackmail on Lilah after all, so it kinda worked out in the end, except for the part where you got tortured again, and I'm *so* sorry, Giles."

"So it was Ethan who freed your magic?"

"Yeah, but not right away. He wanted to, but I wouldn't let him. I wanted... wanted you to think I was ready for it. But then Ethan had to break your spell so I could save Buffy."

He nodded thoughtfully and lowered himself into a chair. "And where is Ethan in all of this?"

"He went back to get the ring from Wolfram and Hart. But it's okay, Giles, 'cause he's on our side now. I think he wanted to make things up to you just like I did."

"Ethan is never on anyone's side but his own. You mustn't forget that, Willow."

She dropped her eyes, suitably chastised. "Are you mad? Disappointed?"

He sighed, and she wasn't exactly sure what kind of a sigh it was, only that she wasn't looking forward to the words that would follow it. "You were attempting to prevent me from going to trial for murder. I would say that in this particular instance, I'm hardly in a position to take the moral high ground with you."

"You could do the spell again if you wanted, when you're feeling better. I would let you."

Their eyes met, and he asked her very seriously, "Do you think I should?"

"No." She straightened her spine, unsure where this sudden rush of confidence was coming from. "I think you should have lifted the spell a long time ago. I made a mistake, and I learned my lesson, and I've been doing everything I can to make up for it. But the thing is that I *can't* ever make up for it, and I get that. I hurt you, and all those slayers... all those watchers... they're all dead, and I can't make any of it right again. I can't fix it or make it better, not even with magic. So I've been working hard at what I *can* do: studying, teaching, helping the girls at the sorority, volunteering at the shelter in LA, doing whatever research you want me to do here. It's not enough, won't *ever* be enough, but it's all I got."

She took a deep breath, couldn't believe she was saying all of this, but it kept tumbling out. "Now if you don't think I deserve my magic back, fine, you can take it. But Buffy would have died last night if Ethan hadn't broken your spell. And sooner or later it'll happen again, not the same exact thing, but... Giles, I don't want my magic back for me. I mean, it was nice, and I miss it sometimes, but now I'm a little afraid of it too, and I'll always think about... about Tara. So I'd be okay if I never did another spell the rest of my life, but someday someone's going to need my magic. And if someone dies because I couldn't save them, because you had my power all locked away, isn't that just as bad as everything I did when I had magic?"

"You're right."

"I am?"

"You can't balance the scale, Willow, and that's a hard lesson to learn. Maybe I should have given you a chance to prove yourself before now, but I think you've earned your second chance." He paused, worry lines creasing his forehead. "Promise me? That you'll think twice before you touch your power? That if you have doubts or concerns, you'll come to me?"

"I will."

"You should have come to me before involving Ethan. You can't trust him, Willow. I know you meant well, that you wanted to help me, but he's extremely dangerous."

She didn't know what compelled her to defend Ethan. Maybe it was the way he had so gallantly rescued her purse from that pickpocket and walked her to her hotel with one arm wrapped protectively around her. Or maybe it was the way he had encouraged her to cry on his shoulder after learning about Giles' torture. There had been moments when Ethan seemed so kind. Surely he couldn't have faked them all.

"I know he does bad things sometimes, Giles, but other times... I could kind of see why you were friends with him."

Ah, she hit a nerve. Giles laughed bitterly and shook his head. "Ethan appealed to a side of me you wouldn't wish to see, a side of me that, frankly, is responsible for this whole blackmail mess in the first place. It was wrong to have Longworth and Sulla killed. I knew it, and I did it anyway, and that is the man that Ethan was friends with."

"Maybe." Willow leaned forward and rested her hand over his wrist. "Maybe that's a tiny part of who you are. But for the most part, you're a good guy, and maybe, just maybe, *that* part of you appealed to a side of Ethan you never gave him a chance to show."

Giles was quiet for a moment, and then he laid his own hand, with its five metal splints, over her own. "Be careful, Willow. That's all I'm saying."

"A *movie*?" Cordelia planted her hands on her hips. "You've been dead for half a century, and you want to spend what could possibly be your last hours outside the apartment at a *movie*? Where's your sense of adventure, Dennis? Parachuting, hang gliding, mountain climbing? You're already dead, not like you have to worry about getting deader. But, no. Thrill seeker that you are, decides on Imax."

"They didn't have screens that big when I was alive," he protested. "And surround sound, THX... Your TV's so small, Cordelia. Can we just go? The two of us, like you promised?"

"Fine. But afterwards, I'm taking you to Caritas."

She saw it again, that guilty look that flashed across his face. All day, she'd gotten the feeling he was keeping something from her, usually whenever she mentioned the spell wearing off and him being stuck as a ghost in her apartment again. She'd figured that he just didn't want to be reminded of it, but now she got the same nervous glance away when she mentioned Caritas, too.

"Okay, you've only had facial expressions for like two days now, but I'm starting to get the hang of reading them, and that, Mister, is the 'I have a secret' expression. As former Gossip Queen of Sunnyside High, I'd know that look on anyone's face. So 'fess up."

"I already went to Caritas. That first night."

"Oh." She deflated somewhat. "Okay."

"I sang."

She felt an unexpected pang of disappointment that she'd missed it. "What'd you sing?"

His lips twitched as he tried to suppress a smile. "Doesn't matter."

She batted at him playfully. "Come on, can't be any worse than me singing 'Greatest Love of All' for my high school talent show, and I didn't even have the excuse of getting my future read back then. What'd you sing?"

"Billy Joel." He finally gave in to the smirk. "'Only the Good Die Young.'"

They laughed together for a moment before she asked the inevitable question. "What did the Host tell you?"

The smile died on his lips. "That I'm ready to move on. I... I won't be coming back here when the spell wears off, Cordelia. I'm sorry."

"Oh." She tried to plaster on a fake smile. He was watching her, all concerned, and she didn't want him to worry about her. "Don't be sorry, Dennis. Good for you. Moving on to another plane of existence... 'cause in my experience, this one usually sucks." She sniffled slightly. "We'll be fine, and it'll be nice to have the apartment to myself for a change. And honestly, Wesley's always a little weirded out when we, you know, *do* anything here." She blinked away tears. "We'll be fine. I mean, it's not like I can miss someone who I can't even see or talk to, right?"

A few Kleenex found their way into her hands, and she started balling. "See? This is what I'm going to miss. You always know just how to take care of me. You've been like the best roommate ever!"

He touched her softly on the shoulder. "Cordelia? Let's go to the movie."

"Is it a tearjerker?" She wiped away the smears of mascara. "'Cause I'm strangely in the mood for a good old fashioned, high tissue count, chick flick."

They walked out of the apartment together. "I guarantee someone dies before it ends."

Giles sensed that someone had entered his bedroom. The painkillers muddled his thoughts, even at half the recommended dose, but he was still alert enough to know he wasn't alone. He opened his eyes, and turned his head.

"Hello, Robin."

She was studying him intently, her brother lurking just outside in the hall. She tentatively reached her fingers out to hover over his. "What those?" she asked, almost afraid to touch the splints.

"My fingers are broken," he answered evenly. "The doctor put these on to keep them still until they're better."

Alex took a few cautious steps into the bedroom. Robin dared to climb onto the bed beside her father, sitting cross-legged at his side. She touched her finger to the cut at his forehead. "Owie."

"Yes, I'm afraid I accumulated quite a few 'owies' yesterday. But I'm going to be fine."

Giles sought out his son, still lingering just inside the doorway. The child looked haunted. They both did. Giles didn't want his children to see him like this, battered, hurting, but unless he'd rather lock himself away until he'd healed, there was no preventing it.

His attention was on Alex when he first felt it. A warming sensation across his chest, spreading out, radiating down into his arms, not uncomfortable or painful, just warm like the afternoon sun. His fingers tingled. He blinked quickly, everything spinning, the drugs in his system dulling his thoughts, slowing his reactions. He felt magic wrapping itself around him, the touch of it bright and clear, not fire like Willow's or shadow like Ethan's or granite like his own, but sunlight and air.

"Alex?" The boy was watching him so intently, and Sabrina had said that the child would have magic to equal his father's.

But whatever potential his son had, it was still buried beneath Giles' sight.

And so his eyes returned to his daughter, sitting beside him, her hand resting on his chest. Robin's magic rolled off of her, soft waves that rippled outwards in ever widening circles, like raindrops across a still lake. Each pulse filled him, healed him, made him dizzy with the beauty and the power of it. His daughter's magic was not something she did, but rather something she was, not a choice made, or a spell invoked, but an instinct yielded to, as natural and subconscious as breath. She loved him, and she touched him, and the magic became an extension of that love and that touch.

Robin was crying, silent tears running down her cheeks, her chin quivering, the fear unmistakable in her eyes. She didn't understand what was happening to her, to them. Giles tried to push her away, but he was so weak after his ordeal, and the magic was exhausting him further, forcing him down into a healing sleep.

She took a shaking breath, and blood spilled out her nose, two rivers running down her face, dripping down her chin. She cried harder. Alex ran out of the bedroom, and Giles, terrified, shouted, "Buffy!"

Thunder pounding up the stairs, the bedroom door banging hard into the wall as Buffy came bursting into the room. Giles fought to keep his eyes open and demanded of his wife, "Get her away. Don't let her touch me."

Buffy snatched Robin from the bed, the spell immediately broken with the loss of contact. The child's silence was broken as well, and Robin's keening wails reverberated off the walls.

"Her nose is bleeding. She's shaking. Giles, what do I do?"

The girl burrowed into her mother's arms, hands clutching her head, blood and tears staining Buffy's shirt.

"Get Willow." It was all he had energy for. He managed those two words, and then everything went black.

Willow hadn't moved from the couch in more than three hours, her laptop long forgotten on the dining table, her fingers never pausing in their rhythmic stroking of Robin's hair. The little girl had fallen asleep with her head in Willow's lap, and no one had wished to disturb her. At first her breathing had maintained that hiccupy sigh standard for any child who had cried themselves to sleep, but now it had evened out into a more peaceful slumber.

The room was silent, the world on pause, as everyone watched the little girl sleeping.

"You should get lots of fire extinguishers," Anya warned Buffy. "She could be like that little girl from 'Firestarter': make her mad and spontaneous combustion." She frowned. "You aren't planning to bring her into the store anytime soon, are you?"

Buffy sighed. "Robin's not going to turn into a little pyro, okay?"

Xander was seated on the floor between Anya's knees, leaning back against the chair she was sitting in as she massaged his neck and shoulders. He studied the sleeping girl thoughtfully. "I don't know, Buff. She kinda looks like Drew Barrymore."

Willow brushed a lock of hair from Robin's forehead, feeling the need to defend her. "Maybe cute Drew Barrymore from 'ET.' Not freaky Firestarter Drew."

Giles made his appearance then, ending the teasing banter as soon as everyone had noticed him standing at the bottom of the staircase. He looked much better. A three-hour nap had done him a world of good. That, and Robin's magic.

Buffy was at his side in a moment, worrying over his injuries. The finger-splints were gone, and he flexed his hands to demonstrate their range of motion. "Still a little sore, but functional."

His eyes focused on Robin. "How is she?"

Willow shrugged. "Achy head, nosebleed. I remember vividly how I used to get when I tried stuff that was too advanced for me. She'll probably have some headaches and be crabby for a few days, but she should be fine. We gave her some children's Tylenol, and that seemed to help."

He came closer, kneeling in front of the couch. He was still limping a little, and gingerly touched his chest as he settled himself on the ground in front of his daughter. Obviously, he was not completely healed, but Robin had definitely given him a short cut on the road to recovery.

He reached towards her and then seemed to reconsider, his hand hovering just above her cheek. "I'm afraid to touch her."

"It's okay, Giles," Willow encouraged him softly. "You can't hurt her."

He smiled at her gratefully and rested his hand on top of his daughter's head. Buffy came to stand behind him, her hands on his shoulders.

"This isn't normal, is it, Giles?" Buffy asked. "For her to have magic at her age? She seems awfully young."

"She *is* too young. Those who are extremely gifted can sometimes sense a child's potential for magic, but that potential is never accessible until at least adolescence, and even then, usually not fully realized until early adulthood. And yet..." He withdrew his hand from Robin's head and looked at his fingers, curling them in and then out. "And yet here is the proof of it."

"What do we do?" Buffy sounded so lost, out of her element when dealing with magic.

But Willow understood what had to be done. She remembered the mistakes and the poor choices she had made while learning to control her own power, and she'd been in high school and college then. Robin was not equipped yet to handle her gifts; she was far, far too young. She could hurt herself or others, either unintentionally or during a preschool tantrum.

Willow shared a look with Giles. He understood the situation as well as she and had drawn the same conclusion. He had probably sensed right away that Willow had worked her own magic on Robin earlier, meant only as a temporary fix until they determined a more lasting solution. As Willow looked into Giles' eyes, there was no discussion necessary to agree on that solution.

"Will it hold?" he asked her.

She considered the irony, that she would be the one to seal away this little girl's magic so soon after being freed from the same spell herself. "I already did the spell, just a temporary kind of ward. As long as she doesn't try to fight it, it'll hopefully hold until I can get supplies from the Magic Box. If you're serious about making the wards last... I should be able to cast something strong enough to hold for as long as you need. Might knock me off my feet for a few days, but hey... Robin and I can be the Migraine Twins."

Willow looked down at the sleeping girl still draped half across her lap. "She's so strong, Giles. It was like a dam burst, and I was trying to push all the water back with my bare hands. I'm only guessing here, but it wasn't like that with me, was it?"

"No." They had never really spoken of it since that day in the hospital. It was the topic that just wasn't discussed, the silence that fell between their words. And now, this made two whole conversations in the same day. It felt good though, that they could finally talk about it. Giles sighed and pulled off his glasses, his eyes focusing inward in remembrance. "In your case, I had intimate knowledge of your magic."

Willow felt the familiar rush of shame at the memory of using her power against Giles, but she resisted the urge to look away. He lost that faraway expression and focused on her, as if also unwilling to allow himself any kind of emotional distance, forcing himself to replace his glasses and look at her as they discussed what they had avoided for so long.

"I was familiar enough with your power to know the size and shape of it, if you will, to know... to know just what kind of a cage to build for it." He swallowed and shook his head. "I'm so sorry, Willow. I think that right now is the first I've realized... You've been ready for quite a while, and I... I think at some point my spell became less about protection than punishment."

She could feel the tears welling up. She tried to keep her voice level. "I didn't care about that so much as... I just wanted you to forgive me."

"Oh, Willow." He sat up on his knees and pulled her into a warm embrace. Willow closed her eyes, feeling even lighter than when Ethan had freed her magic. Giles gasped slightly, and she realized she was holding him too tightly, not because of slayer strength, for which Buffy was guilty on occasion, but because his chest still hurt him. She relaxed her grip, but he continued to hug her just as fiercely, ignoring his own pain.

Applause behind them broke them apart, each of them blushing at having forgotten their audience. Their sudden movement jostled Robin enough to stir her from her slumber as well, and they each laid a soothing hand on her to settle her back to sleep.

"Does this mean Willow will be a watcher now?" Anya asked. "Because, honestly, if I were in her place, knowing how much money you're sitting on, I wouldn't do as much work as she does for free."

Giles laughed. "If she would like, we can make it official."

He was looking at her when he said it, and Willow felt herself tearing up all over again. She didn't care about the money or the title, she only cared that by inviting her into the Watcher's Council, he was inviting her back into his trust. She nodded, accepting his offer, and a few tears slipped down her cheeks despite her best efforts to hold them back. He dried them off with the back of his hand.

Willow ducked her head shyly, her eyes coming to rest on the little girl still sleeping in her lap. She thought about what needed to be done. In times past, she would have been arrogant enough to think she could do it on her own, powerful mega-witch Willow with her occasional sidekick Tara, vain enough to think that she could beat a hellgod in a show of power, conceited enough to believe that the Watcher's Council cared what kind of spells she did or would waste their time having Giles spy on her, arrogant enough to think that she had power over life and death, that she could have saved her beloved. But hard won wisdom made it very plain to her that this was not about proving herself, not about redeeming herself in Giles' eyes, not about showing off her newly restored power. This was about making sure little Robin stayed safe. And so Willow would ask for help, would admit weakness.

"We should do the spell together, Giles, if we want to be sure it holds."

He nodded. Cages and walls and doors without locks. She had built him a prison out of darkness, and he had built her one of shame, and together they would fashion Robin one of something else.

"So you two are going to lock Robin's magic away?" Buffy summarized, wanting to be clear on the plan.

"Until she's older," Giles qualified, twisting slightly to look up at her. "Until she can safely learn to control it."

She glanced off to the side, towards the dining room. "If she has it... then maybe Alex..."

Giles and Willow both looked in the same direction as Buffy.

"Alex?" Giles called.

The boy emerged from the kitchen, pausing in the foyer. Marianne followed him a moment later, his attentive shadow. She was holding Xander and Anya's baby against her hip, doing double babysitting duty as she often did.

"Help feed Zoey," Alex informed them all proudly, lisping a little on the "z."

"Come here, son." Giles motioned the boy closer, and he obediently hopped over to the couch, sparing a concerned glance for his sister.

Giles took Alex by his shoulders, studying him intently. Willow could feel the soft flicker of Giles' magic, and it still had the ability to catch her off guard after having lived more than six months without. He turned to her then, asking her silently. She shook her head; she sensed nothing from the boy either. Then again, Robin had taken them completely by surprise.

"Maybe we should do him, too," Willow suggested. "Just in case."

"No harm in it, I suppose," Giles conceded reluctantly.

"Will it stop his dreams, too?" Buffy asked. "Are those magic?"

Giles frowned, and brushed his fingers across his son's cheek. Alex tried to wriggle away, so Giles turned his loving caress into a playful tickle. His son giggled. "I don't know, Buffy. We can certainly hope. I can't imagine his dreams are easy for him to deal with, especially considering the kinds of things he tends to foresee. Yet even so, he remains happy and cheerful most of the time. His dreams, thankfully, don't appear to be doing any lasting damage."

"He saw you," she said quietly. "He told me Angel was hurting you. I thought... thought he just meant a vampire. I didn't really think of Angel until..." She stopped and took a deep breath. "He saw everything, Giles."

Alex shook his head. "Not Uncie Angel. Just look like." He reached out curious fingers to touch his father's hands. "Robin kiss 'n make better?"

Giles smiled softly. "Yes, she did at that."

Alex beamed and nodded, pleased, before his smile slowly faded and he shyly leaned up to whisper something in his father's ear.

Giles chuckled. "You'll have to ask your mother. I'm afraid you have a tendency to kick her out of bed."

Buffy rolled her eyes and sighed dramatically. "I suppose you can sleep with us tonight." She held out her hands, and Alex skipped over for her to pick him up. She kissed him on his forehead and shared a look with Giles, a sad, worried, "he might seem okay most of the time, but he sleeps in our bed an awful lot" kind of a look.

Willow didn't envy Buffy and Giles the responsibility of caring for two children who were coming into power so early in their lives. Robin's magic, Alex's dreams, the knowledge that to a ninety-eight percent certainty Robin would be the next slayer and Alex would be... Willow wasn't sure what Alex would be, except that it would be amazing and powerful and probably more than either of his parents had bargained for.

Giles had chosen the venue with care, although it might have appeared to an outsider that he just couldn't be bothered with more formal arrangements. In truth, he knew the lawyers would not be intimidated by whatever modest meeting accommodations he could manage. Sitting across from them at the Magic Box table or, God forbid, in the chaotic, half-finished room that served as his temporary offices at the construction site, either option would only reinforce their attitudes of smug superiority. They just might, however, find something unsettling about watching a slayer train, seeing power and grace in motion, and so he met with them in the back training room.

"Oh dear," he exclaimed as the small entourage of well-dressed attorneys filed in. "Is it that time already? I must have lost track." He pretended to have forgotten them, motioning awkwardly towards Buffy as if to explain. She was artfully pounding the stuffing out of the training dummy, landing punches and kicks in a blur, the dummy shaking beneath her assault.

"Buffy," he called loudly over the constant thump-thump of her blows. "Why don't you try something a little quieter until I've finished here?" He pulled several throwing knives from their rack on the wall, and casually threw them *at* her, one after another as fast as his hands could fly. And he was good, not as good as Wesley perhaps, as their last game of darts could attest, but still Giles could have killed with each one of his throws, his aim and speed deadly.

Buffy snatched each from the air, scant centimeters before they touched her body. He motioned her back. Every time she stopped, he waved her back further until she was nearly pressed to the far wall.

"Let's work on your precision at a distance," he told her.

He faced the lawyers again, unfazed as Buffy began throwing the knives back, the blades whizzing through the air between the uneasy new arrivals, not touching any of them, but so close they could feel the rush of air. Each knife stuck into the target board with a soft thud. Giles smiled when he saw Lilah's reaction to their target practice: an 8x10 photograph of herself which Buffy happily outlined in daggers.

"I hope you don't mind," Giles said diplomatically, gesturing vaguely towards Lilah's picture. "But it does seem to give her greater motivation when we train. Now... shall we get right to business?"

Lilah cleared her throat, the other four lawyers she'd brought along for appearances slowly inching their way closer to the exit and away from Buffy's target practice. Lilah, to her credit, remained where she was. "I must admit, Mr. Giles, your offer was... interesting and unexpected."

He pulled the knives from the board and tossed them back to Buffy. "I take it you found my paperwork all in order?" Willow had sent two sets of documents: one to blackmail Lilah and a second to threaten Wolfram and Hart. After all, they needed to provide her with some sort of believable reason to explain her change of heart to her employers. "I imagine the press would have a field day to learn that Wolfram and Hart have been skimming close to eighty percent off the profits of their most cherished charity foundations."

"Overhead gets more expensive every year," she replied caustically. The knives continued to buzz between them as Buffy filled her target with more holes.

"Yes, but people tend to be quite particular about knowing where their money goes." His insinuation hit home; Lilah shifted uncomfortably. She might wish to keep Wolfram and Hart's dirty dealings from receiving public attention, but she would be even more keen on keeping her own embezzlement from the attention of her employer. The lackeys she had brought with her certainly knew nothing of the second, more thorough set of documents that Lilah had received, but Giles knew those files were at the heart of today's negotiation.

She pulled a folded piece of paper from her leather attaché and offered it to him. "A standard client contract. Congratulations, Mr. Giles. You've won this battle. But not the war. You'd do well to remember that."

He closed the distance between them, a dangerous expression on his face, and leaned in close to her, his mouth beside her ear. For her ears only, he had this bit of advice, "I could care less if you cook the books, fail to report a few cash bribes here or there, or otherwise exaggerate your expenses in order to fatten your retirement fund. But from what little I know of Wolfram and Hart, I'm sure they care very much." He grabbed her shoulders hard, smiled thinly against her cheek, a cold, predatory, Ripper grin. "But they are the least of your worries. You'd do well to remember that I am a murderer. You have the proof of it. Just give me a reason to kill again."

He shoved her away roughly, and she stumbled a few steps in her high heels before regaining her balance. "Stay away from me. Stay away from my family. If I never hear from you or your firm again, we'll stay in each other's good graces." He tapped the contract she'd given him against one hand before slipping it into his jacket pocket. "My own attorneys will have a look at this before I sign it. And may I remind you that Angel Investigations are technically under my employ. That means that as I am now your client, so are they, and as such, shall be afforded the same client/attorney privilege. Good day, Ms. Morgan." He pointed towards the door.

Her entourage wasted no time in exiting. She waited a moment longer, staring at Giles with burning hatred or desire, he wasn't sure which. Could it be that this woman actually found losing to be a turn on? A knife through her leather attaché decided her.

"Oops," Buffy said. "I'm generally a good shot, but even slayers miss the mark sometimes."

Lilah glanced between them, squared her shoulders, and departed.

Buffy squealed and came running across the training room, throwing herself into his arms. "We did it!"

"Ow, ow, ow," he protested, easing her out of his arms.

"I'm sorry. Oh, God, I forgot. I'm sorry. Are you okay?" She fawned over him, touching his face, his chest, his sides, as if she could feel for his injuries.

He closed his eyes and drew a tentative breath. It was his ribs more than anything that still bothered him. He nodded and smiled weakly for her. Flexing his fingers and trying to massage out the soreness and cramping in them, he complained, "Remind me to wait a few more weeks before we try anymore knife throwing."

She clasped his hands in her own and took over the task of massaging them. Warm, expert fingers kneading out the tension, he sighed and closed his eyes.

"I can do more than your hands if you like."

He opened his eyes and saw the playful glint in her gaze. "I'm afraid I won't be able to reciprocate."

She shrugged. "I'm sure you can figure out something else to relax me." Her hands worked their way up his arms to his shoulders. "Let's celebrate. We got rid of the lawyers. No more worries about jail. You did the spell with Willow, so no fear of magic-enhanced three-year-old... almost four-year-old tantrums from either kid. Life is good." She kissed him. "Very, very good."

"Lock the door."

"Gladly."

"I'm four!" Alex informed the new arrivals happily, holding out the appropriate number of digits.

"Yes, you are," Wesley answered as Cordelia ruffled the birthday boy's hair. "You're getting to be a very big boy. I'm sure your parents are very proud of you."

Alex beamed, and his father laughed, pulling him out of the doorway. "Let's not keep our guests standing on the porch, Alex."

"Especially guests bearing presents," Cordelia added.

Alex bounced and clapped his hands eagerly. "Mine?"

"Some of them," she laughed. "But some of them are for your sister. You wouldn't want those anyway. They're icky girl presents." She held out the hand not currently juggling packages. "Show me where these go, 'kay, kiddo?"

Alex led her off, and Giles motioned the other watcher inside.

"Fred and Gunn would have come," Wesley apologized, "but we do still have clients, and it seemed unwise to bring all of Angel Investigations."

"I understand."

"And Angel..." Wesley tapered off.

Giles' mood darkened.

"Angel sent gifts for the children and wished them..." Wesley again trailed off, this time in thought, as if trying to make sure he quoted the vampire correctly. "...wished them free of their mother's 'birthday curse,' whatever that means."

Giles chuckled softly, his mind still dwelling on Angel and the memories that were not even a week old, turning his laughter dark and bitter.

"Angel would have liked to come, but he didn't think you or Buffy either one were ready for that."

"I appreciate his consideration." Giles absently rubbed at his aching fingers, remembering the sharp pain as each one of them had cracked.

Wesley sighed. "I am sorry for what you suffered, but Angel had nothing to do with Darla's actions. I hope you won't let this become an issue between you."

Ah, yes, it wasn't Angel, but Darla; it wasn't Angel, but Angelus. It was never, never Angel. He'd heard that chorus a thousand times through the years, from others and from himself. It didn't change the fact that he remembered Angel's face, Angel's voice, that he wanted to shrink into a corner when Angel entered the room. Intellect be damned, his heart couldn't just accept the facts on a moment's notice. Angel would have his clean slate again, but Giles needed time to heal first.

"And have you spoken to Faith recently? How is she getting on?" Giles knew it was a low blow, but it shut Wesley up on the subject of Angel.

They strolled into the backyard, the noise of nearly twenty squealing preschoolers hitting them like a force ten hurricane.

"Dear Lord," Wesley murmured.

Giles agreed with his fellow countryman.

The theme of the party was indistinguishable, because Buffy had been unable to decide on any one, and so had chosen to mix them all together. Robin had wanted fairies, and so she and several of the other little girls wore little fairy wings as they frolicked about the yard, Robin covered in a generous amount of glitter so she shimmered in the sunlight. Alex had wanted something different every time they asked him: racecars, and Harry Potter, and the Lion King, and Narnia, and he had begged for a pool party and stormed off to his room in tears when they both said no. He wore a little wizard's hat and a lightning bolt painted on his forehead and argued with the other children over whose turn it was on the little go-carts, which Giles had groaned would tear up the grass and Buffy had insisted would be worth it. There was a clown and a juggler, three-legged races, pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey, and piñatas. Despite the party's lack of pony rides or lion tamers, their backyard had become a complete and utter circus of activity.

"You can see why I've stationed myself at the front door as welcoming committee."

Wesley nodded. "Do you require assistance?"

But Cordelia was waving him over to help dish out ice cream, and Giles abandoned the other watcher to return to the relative peace afforded him inside.

More children were dropped off by their parents, and Giles directed them to the backyard. He wondered where Buffy had found all of them, as he couldn't remember Alex and Robin having so many actual friends. Next came more of Xander's construction buddies: large, strong men who always gushed over the twins whenever Giles brought them onsite.

And then came a very unexpected guest.

"Hello, Ripper."

Giles didn't move from the door or invite the other man inside.

Ethan held up two neatly wrapped presents. "Come on, now. I've even brought gifts for the little brats."

"Now, I wonder why I have such a strong aversion to any gifts you might bring for my children?"

Ethan rolled his eyes. “They’re harmless, boring books. Same rot you probably liked at their age. Let’s call it a truce, old mate, pretend we actually like each other for the day.”

“Ha! You can bloody well go to hell, Ethan. The last time I saw you, you had a hand in kidnapping my children.”

“And a hand in getting them back— the boy at least.”

“Ah, your chaos spell, which I’ve long since undone.”

“And what about my recent acts of goodwill? Little witch asked for *my* help, which I generously provided. Got you off the hook with those lawyers, didn’t it? And I undid your shortsighted spell on her magic in time to save your precious slayer, didn’t I?”

“After which you bunked off to retrieve the ring from said lawyers.” Giles held out his hand, palm up, and cleared his throat significantly. “The Ring of Gorlois, which I would have to be crazy to even consider leaving in your possession.”

A slow grin spread over Ethan’s face, an expression Giles knew all too well. “Believe me when I say you don’t want the ring, my friend. Let the lawyers have their fun with it.”

Giles narrowed his eyes and crossed his arms. “Ethan,” he warned, his tone becoming threatening. “What did you do?”

“Nothing!” Ethan feigned outrage at Giles’ mistrust. “Nothing horrible, at any rate. It’s just a bit stickier than they remember it. Might be rather hard... well, alright, *impossible* to remove. Gives new meaning to the parental warning: ‘Careful or your face will freeze like that.’ And isn’t that way more fun than simply stealing the ring back?”

Giles knew he shouldn’t, but he couldn’t help but laugh. He hoped Lilah would be the one to give the ring a try. He somehow doubted she would choose her new persona wisely. Ethan was laughing as well, and there was something comfortable about it, in spite of all the things that had come between them, the two of them laughing together until they were out of breath, and Ethan hadn’t even needed to get him drunk first.

“Little Willow-tree said you missed me, Ripper, that you might be willing to bury the hatchet.”

“Bury it *in* you maybe.” But the animosity and anger had faded from his voice, replaced with the teasing banter from their youth. He had missed Ethan.

“So... Going to introduce the kiddies to their Uncle Ethan?”

Giles shook his head sadly, the laughter fading. “I’m sorry, but I can’t trust you, Ethan, not with anyone I care about.”

His old friend nodded, not angry or disappointed, just resigned. “I know. Can’t expect a tiger to change his stripes after so many years. And I can’t exactly live in your world either. Too structured, too controlled, too... too...” He made a face and said the last as if it were a dirty word. “Too *orderly*.”

Giles tilted his head in acknowledgment of the gulf between them. They looked into each other’s eyes for several moments, and for once there was no hostility between them. Giles smiled at his old friend. “Is there a place in the middle, between chaos and order? I would... would like to see you sometimes, I think.”

“Come out for drinks with me tonight, after you’ve tired of the birthday festivities. Bring the fair witch along if she’s game.” Ethan gestured with his chin, and Giles turned around. Willow was walking through the dining room towards them.

“Giles, Buffy says to stop hiding out in here and get your butt out in the backyard. It’s time to open pressies.” She stopped abruptly when she caught sight of Ethan. “Oh, hi. You coming too?”

“No, I just stopped by to invite Ripper out for an evening of debauchery.” He quirked one eyebrow at her. “Care to join us? I’m always up for a threesome.”

She crinkled her nose at him. “Ewww. You are disgusting, Ethan, and being locked in a room with you for a whole day is more than enough Ethan-time to last me a while.”

He glanced back and forth between them. “Your magic seems more or less intact. Quite the day for mending fences, it would appear.”

Willow stammered something unintelligible and beat a hasty retreat back outside.

Ethan’s smile grew wider. “She’s amazing. Power, ambition, with just enough recklessness to make things interesting. Your girl may be the Slayer, Ripper, and downright gorgeous to boot, but this one’s got her beat, hands down.”

Giles laughed again, a full-throated laugh that bent him in half as he tried to catch his breath, a hand to his side in an effort to contain the stabbing pain from his ribs. “Oh, my poor Ethan, forever doomed to rejection. Willow’s quite gay, and no matter how effeminate you may appear, I’m afraid she won’t look twice at you.”

Ethan scowled. “Just for that, see if I don’t slip something in your drink tonight.”

“I’ll meet you at eleven. Same bar as before.” Giles shut the door, still chuckling as he made his way out into the backyard. The horde of rambunctious, sugar-fueled children cheered his arrival loudly. Apparently, they had been waiting for him before beginning the present opening activities.

Giles worked his way over to Willow, sliding an arm around her and giving her a playful wink. “It would seem you have an admirer.” She blushed and ducked her head. Giles squeezed her shoulder, his demeanor becoming more serious. He murmured to her softly, “Be careful, Willow. I’m serious. Ethan has his eye on you, and he’ll play on your sympathies, perhaps even convince you he’s trying to reform. He’ll feed you sweet lies, but he’s a slave to the Chaos. You can’t forget that.”

“He was so nice to me, Giles, when everything was so awful, when all I could think about was you going to jail, losing you forever, and then what Darla did to you...” Giles squeezed her shoulder again, and she rested her cheek against him. “He was nice to me when I needed it.”

“I’m sure he was. Ethan can be decent sometimes.”

“And you two are friends again, right? I mean, it seemed like you weren’t hating each other. Plus, Ethan wasn’t bleeding. Would it be so bad if I was his friend, too? Maybe that would be good for him.”

“The difference is that I know what I’m getting into. If I choose to be friends with Ethan, I also know well enough not to turn my back on him. He can be kind, Willow, but he’s still dangerous. Just promise me you’ll be careful? You’ll come to me if you ever have any concerns about him?”

She nodded against his shoulder, and he gave her another half-hug. Buffy was waving him over to the main table then, and the twins were clamoring to show him some of the presents they’d already unwrapped, and so he slipped away from Willow’s side, putting Ethan out of his mind for the time being, vowing to himself to keep a close eye on whatever relationship sparked between the two of them.

The twins were eagerly opening the mound of presents the party guests had brought for them. They had made a fairly good dent in the pile when Giles motioned for Marianne to bring down his own gift.

“Would you like to open Daddy’s present now?”

It was really more of a rhetorical question, as he hardly expected either of them to refuse. But they each answered quite noisily in the affirmative, begging to know which of the boxes was his, and if it was the biggest, and if it might be one of the things they had asked for.

“Marianne’s gone upstairs to get it, and no, it’s not anything you’ve asked for. But I think you’ll like it all the same.” Buffy gave him a suspicious look, which he ignored. “Now, it’s one gift for the two of you, so you’ll have to share.”

Alex and Robin glared at each other. Sharing was not usually a voluntary action between the two of them. The drawback of having been only children for three years, he supposed.

"Will you be able to share, or shall I take your present back?"

They each turned up wide, desperate eyes to him, shaking their heads emphatically. No, no, they would share, they insisted.

Buffy pinched him to get his attention and whispered in his ear, "You're making me nervous here, Giles. We got them each a b-i-k-e, but you never mentioned getting them something from just you, something they have to share. What is it?"

"You'll see," he replied enigmatically, kissing her on the cheek.

Marianne carefully made her way through the press of children around the table, holding a medium sized box, still unwrapped, because that would have been rather difficult to accomplish, but topped with a bright bow on the lid.

"Giles," Buffy gasped, nudging him hard enough to make him flinch. "There are holes in the box. Why are there holes in the box?"

Marianne deposited the box in front of the twins, who immediately lifted off the lid and stuck their heads inside, knocking foreheads.

"A puppy!" they shrieked, four hands lifting the poor sleeping creature from its cardboard bed.

"A puppy!" Buffy shrieked a moment later, turning outraged eyes in his direction.

"Yes, well..." Giles cleared his throat and shifted guiltily. "I thought it should be my turn to spoil them."

Robin had claimed the pup first, a small chocolate lab that gently licked the face she pressed close. Alex skipped over to give his father a crushing hug.

"Tank you, Daddy," his son gushed, tilting his face up for a kiss.

"Tank you, Giles," Robin echoed, the puppy beginning to squirm in her arms.

"You're welcome," he told them both, aiming a wide smile in Buffy's direction. "My gift would appear to be a hit."

"Showoff," she grumbled. "You can clean up after it and walk it and feed it, and it is sooo not sleeping in our bed."

She did seem annoyed with him. Maybe he should have discussed it with her first. He would apologize for it later. For now, he would worm their new family addition into her good graces. "Robin, let Mummy hold the puppy while you both finish opening your presents."

Only the promise of more presents distracted the twins from their new pet, and Buffy quickly found herself holding an armful of adorable, squirming cuteness, licking her face and everything. How could she possibly resist that?

She crinkled her nose up. "Ewww. I think it just peed on me."

The children all giggled, and she passed the puppy over to Giles, disappearing into the house to change.

He set the little thing on the ground to finish its business. A pair of legs stopped in front of him, and he glanced up.

"In the doghouse?" John punned.

"Ha bloody ha." Giles lifted the pup back up when it was finished. Its whole back end was wagging with its tail.

"You should name it Lucky."

"And why is that?"

John grinned. "Because you won't be getting lucky for at least a month."

"You are enjoying this far too much."

“Hey, if you can’t laugh at your fellow man’s misfortune, what point is there to life?”

“There must be someone else here you can pester. I don’t think Marianne’s seen the latest photos of your grandson.”

The puppy continued to squirm in his arms, wanting down to run and play, something Giles didn’t think was wise in this sea of tots. Xander and Willow saved him the bother of looking after the thing when they came over to admire Robin and Alex’s gift, scooping the pup from his arms and spiriting it off.

Robin and Alex were still diligently working their way through their birthday gifts, a tangle of wrapping paper at their feet and a stack of opened presents to either side of them.

Wesley stepped forward and offered them each his own gifts. “It’s not a puppy,” he apologized. Nothing else could quite top that gift, but the children still seemed pleased with everything they received.

Robin opened hers first: a small wooden sword. Alex had a matching gift, but it had different implications for Robin. Beneath her sword, lay a larger sword with a wooden handle, its grip large enough to suit an adult. Giles met Wesley’s eyes across the table. They’d had many discussions about this. Four years old was the typical age at which a potential slayer began her training, at least in the old ways of the Watchers’ Council. While Wesley had been willing to back Giles up when Travers had threatened to force him into training her, it was a different matter altogether now that Robin was the only potential slayer left. She would be the next slayer, and that meant she needed to be trained for it. As a watcher, Wesley had insisted that Robin receive such training, but he was not her father. Giles found it much harder to cut such black and white rules where she was concerned.

He reached over Robin’s shoulder and picked up the wooden sword that was meant for him. He couldn’t imagine ever using it, couldn’t imagine ever sparring with his daughter as he did with Buffy, not now, not ever.

The children had no qualms about using their toy weaponry however: the clack, clack of wood smacking together rang out across the yard. They knocked a few boxes from the table in the midst of their eager play, hopefully nothing breakable. Giles confiscated the wooden swords quickly, promising they could play with them later, while supervised in the training room.

Xander whistled. “Wes, man, I know you’re new to the whole annoying gift giving gig, but wooden swords... Stroke of genius, especially with the whole twin thing. Wish I’d thought of it.”

Giles spied Buffy returning from changing her clothes, and he hurriedly gathered the swords back into their box, knowing she would go ballistic if she saw them, knowing she would deduce the meaning behind the gifts more readily than Xander.

“Okay, where’s the leaky little monster?”

“Leaky,” the twins chorused together, giggling.

“Oh dear,” Giles groaned. “Why do I foresee an unfortunate moniker for our new addition?”

Assorted guests pointed towards where Willow and Anya were playing tug of war with the puppy. Zoey sat in the shelter of her mother’s arms, watching with wide eyes, still deciding whether she wanted to be afraid of the puppy or play with it.

Giles took advantage of Buffy’s return to slip into the house, motioning for Wesley to follow him. They stopped in the kitchen, and Giles placed the box with the swords on the island counter.

He removed his glasses and rubbed at his eyes wearily. He had endured too much in the last week to deal with this now, but neither would it accomplish anything to delay the inevitable conversation. “We’ve had many discussions about my daughter’s training, Wesley.”

"I know. And I was willing to set aside Council precedent on the chance that she would never be Called. But as much as you'd like to avoid the issue, as much as you'd like to pretend things were different, Robin *will* be the next slayer. The chances of Faith living until... even in prison... it's almost nonexistent. The only responsible thing we can do is to plan for Robin's eventual future."

"I can't do it. Buffy was my slayer before she was anything else to me. She'll always be my slayer, first, foremost, and always. Robin is my daughter. I'll never be able to see her as anything else."

Wesley's voice hardened, his stance showing some of the backbone he had developed since leaving Sunnydale. "She must be trained. As much as you dislike the prospect, surely you must realize that if you deny her this, you greatly decrease her chances of survival. Training will buy her time, maybe enough time to have something like the life you've given Buffy."

"I know. You're right. But I can't do it." Giles removed the wooden sword from the box, the one meant for him, and offered it out, hilt first, to Wesley. "I can't be her Watcher."

Wesley was struck speechless by the gesture and made no move to grasp the hilt. Giles felt rather silly holding out the wooden sword, nothing more than an oversized child's toy, and bequeathing it to a fellow adult as if it were the Holy Grail. On the other hand, objects become imbued with the significance given them, and this was arguably one of the most critical decisions he would ever make. Somehow the sheer magnitude of his choice transformed the plain timber into something sacred, as precious as any ancient text or mystical artifact.

Wesley seemed to understand this, and so when he finally did take the toy sword from Giles' hands, it was with great reverence and humble awe.

Giles fixed the younger watcher with a stern glare. "I'm warning you right now: I'll fight you tooth and nail for every last shred of normality I can keep in her life."

Wesley nodded, accepting this, and returned the glare with one of equal resolve. "And I'll fight you just as hard to make sure she gets the training necessary to keep her alive."

"Then here's the first battle we'll wage: you'll not train her 'til she's ten."

Wesley's resolve quickly turned to outrage. "While I agree that four is terribly young, no matter how the Council has done it for centuries, your daughter is in a unique situation: It's highly possible she could be Called before then."

"Even if she is, she'll not take up the mantle of Slayer until she's at least fifteen."

"Well then, we'll simply have to reschedule any impending apocalypses to fit in with your timetable, won't we?"

"I'm serious about this. It's the age Buffy was Called. It's the age most slayers are. She won't go before then."

Wesley seemed inclined to argue, but let the matter drop for now, perhaps deciding to take a wait-and-see approach, to pick his battles when they became unavoidable and not before. But the stubborn set of his chin clearly indicated that he would not simply bow to Giles' will, now or in the future. And Giles would not have it any other way. Robin deserved a watcher who would fight for her.

"There is something else you should know." Giles glanced behind him, to assure himself that they were still alone. Earlier, they had decided to limit the number of people who knew this important detail. It was safer for Robin that way. "She will have magic. To the best of my knowledge, she will be the first to be both slayer and mage."

"That's... that's quite unprecedented. Are you certain?"

Giles flexed his fingers absently. "Positive. She's come into her power already. She... she healed the worst of my injuries." He took a deep breath, raised his hand to stall Wesley's questions. "Willow and I warded her magic. We believe the spell will hold until it's lifted, and then... she'll need to be trained for that as well. I can help with that part of her education. Willow, too. But I don't know how it will affect a slayer's gifts, the magic. I just thought you should know."

Wesley nodded thoughtfully.

Xander walked into the kitchen at that moment, took in the sight of Wesley holding the wooden sword, and grabbed for one of the twins' smaller weapons. "En garde," he cried dramatically, making a few half-hearted feints before Giles disarmed him from behind.

"Now see here," Xander explained. "No fair confiscating the kiddies' toys to play with them yourselves." He pointed a scolding finger at Giles. "That goes double for Alex's new drums."

Giles rolled his eyes, the mood suitably lightened with the young man's entrance.

"Time for birthday cake and candles." Xander lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "Buffy got the kind that won't blow out." He wrapped an arm around each of the watchers and escorted them back outside.

There would be time enough later to research and deliberate, to seek portents and signs, to shape the course of one girl's destiny and to mold the gifts given her by fate. For now, her father and her watcher would celebrate her fourth birthday together and leave all the rest for another day.

Ethan lounged in a corner booth, his back placed cautiously to the wall, and watched the early evening crowd gathering for a pint after work. He was surprised by how much he was looking forward to seeing Ripper. Knowing that the meeting was unlikely to involve him getting his teeth knocked down his throat was also a bonus. Maybe this could become a regular event, the pair of them spending time together on neutral territory, toasting old times and dead friends.

Ethan knew it couldn't last. It wasn't in his nature to conform, and sooner or later he'd cross the line again and Ripper'd show him the door. But until then, they could enjoy each other's company, could reminisce about things that no one else could possibly understand, because no one else was left to remember.

And then there was Willow. Ripper had misunderstood Ethan's interest, had laughed off his admiration and informed him quite bluntly that she was gay. And while Ethan's imagination could appreciate the fantasy of two women in his bed, he was far more interested in the witch's power than her body. More than a day locked in Lilah's office with her, trading insults, thrust into an unwilling partnership, only confirmed his initial gut instinct.

Willow was a prize worth earning.

He could see that she hungered for the kind of knowledge Ripper would never give her. She had decided to walk the straight and narrow for now, but he could also see that she might be easily tempted to stray from the path. He wanted to show her how much more interesting life could be if one skipped the museum tour, took risks, broke rules. He wanted to take her under his wing and show her the world. She would be the student who rose above her teacher, his protégé, his legacy, his ultimate gift to Chaos.

And so Ethan would drink with his old friend, and mend fences, and actually behave for once in his life.

Because Ripper was his way to Willow.

Wesley waited for Cordelia to unlock the door, but she just stood there in the hallway.

"Cordelia?"

"You know, I think it just hit me that he's not going to be there when I walk through the door."

His own thoughts had been so preoccupied with the unexpected duty bestowed upon him that afternoon, he had completely forgotten about Dennis' passing. It seemed odd somehow to mourn someone who had already died. Then again, very little in their lives could be considered normal.

"We don't have to stay here if it upsets you."

She nodded. "Let's go back to the Hyperion. I'm sure Angel has a spare room or eighty he could lend us for the night. It is a hotel, after all."

She turned to go, and he stopped her with a hand on her arm. "I didn't mean just for tonight, Cordelia. I meant... We could stay somewhere else *permanently*... A place of our own, a place that was ours."

"Oh." She considered that for a moment. "Okay."

Just like that. In just one day he'd become both watcher to a potential slayer and live-in boyfriend to Cordelia Chase.

The bedroom light was still on when he tiptoed up the stairs, much later than he had intended on returning home. The stairs seemed to be rocking slightly, and he grabbed at the banister for balance. *Going to feel like hell in the morning*, he thought to himself.

Buffy was sitting up in bed, reading a book, exactly as he had left her after the evening's patrol. Of course she had waited up for him. She considered the whole idea of drinking with Ethan to be a very bad one. Earlier, she had reminded him of the laundry list of Ethan's sins against them, before finally sending him out the door with cab fare and stalking up to their bedroom for a good sulk. If Spike had still been around, Giles suspected he would have had an assigned shadow for the evening. As it was, police cars happened by the pub more often than strictly necessary.

She set aside her book at his approach and gave him the disapproving look which used to be his stock and trade. She could tell straightaway he was drunk. No point trying to covering it up.

"Evening, luv. You get the pup squared away for the night?" A tried and true tactic: distracting her from one bad judgment call by reminding her of another.

She sighed, his evening's carousing with Ethan momentarily forgotten. "I put him in his little cage to go to sleep, but he cried for like an hour."

He sat on the edge of the bed hard, misjudging both the distance and the coordination of his limbs. "I am deeply sorry about the puppy, Buffy. I should have discussed it with you first."

"Better to ask forgiveness than permission?"

He chuckled. "That wasn't my intention. I really thought you would adore him as much as the children."

She blushed and lowered her lashes coyly. “Well, ummm... about that.” She slowly peeled back the blankets, and there was the little chocolate lab, snuggled against her leg and sleeping soundly.

“Buffy!”

“Well, okay, he is really cute, and he was all sad and pathetic, crying in that little cage, and I couldn’t help it.”

He kicked off his shoes and climbed into bed beside her. Reaching out with one hand, he pulled her close enough for a kiss. She squirmed slightly, perhaps wanting to keep up the pretense of still being angry with him, but he didn’t stop kissing her until she’d relaxed against him. Just enough of Ripper left in him from the booze to still make the girls melt.

“I’m assuming, then, that you don’t wish me to take him back?”

“Nah, I guess Leaky can stay.”

He groaned as he flopped back on the bed, drawing the puppy over to rest against his chest. “You’re not seriously considering naming him that?” He lifted the little dog into air as he stared at him speculatively. “You do realize he’s the tie-breaker. The women of the house are now officially outnumbered for the first time since I moved here, and I think he needs an appropriately masculine name.”

“Because ‘Rupert’ just screams I’m big and tough and don’t mess with me?”

“People in glass houses, Miss Buffy.”

“Yeah, well, the twins seemed pretty decided on ‘Leaky,’ and he is their dog, after all.”

The puppy yawned and pawed his feet in the air, searching for solid ground. Giles laid him back down on his chest and pet him fondly. “Oh well, I did try to stick up for you, you poor thing.”

“You still should have asked me first,” Buffy grumbled as she snuggled up next to him.

“Yes, you’re right, I should have.” He stroked the puppy quietly for a moment, thinking of other decisions he had made that night. She hadn’t exactly been happy about him allowing Ethan back in his life, however marginally, but she at least had the sense to know she didn’t get a say in his friends anymore than he got a say in her vocation. But Robin was another matter altogether.

He turned his head to look at his slayer and his wife. She was scratching behind the puppy’s ears and making cute faces at it as it made a few sleepy attempts to lick her nose.

“Buffy, you do know that there are other decisions that I have to make without you, right?”

“Like what clothes to wear and what to eat for breakfast? You seem pretty capable on those fronts. Although, you might need a little help with the ‘when to stop drinking’ kinds of decisions, ’cause you don’t have the best track record there, and if I wake up tomorrow with some kind of slimy demon in my bed, Ethan is going to wish he was never born.”

“At the moment, I wish *I* was never born. And maybe this isn’t the best conversation for me to be having while I’m two sheets to the wind, but it’s the first chance I’ve had to speak with you alone since this afternoon, and I want to get it off my chest. After the whole blackmail fiasco, I don’t want to have secrets between us, not even for a day.”

She stopped fussing over the puppy and propped herself up on one elbow. “I’m thinking this can’t be good. Well, you already have the little red two-door convertible, so it can’t be that, unless you bought something even more midlife crisis, like one of those little Porsches, which, personally, I always thought looked like little toy cars.”

“It’s not a car, Buffy.”

“You didn’t invite Ethan to crash here, did you? He’s not downstairs on the couch or something, is he? ’Cause that’s where I draw the line.”

"No, Ethan has gone... wherever Ethan is staying. I didn't ask."

"Okay, so what did you do that you should have asked me about first?"

"I honestly can't remember. You keep changing the subject, and my thoughts are swimming in half a bottle of Jack Daniels." He held one finger up in triumph. "Wait, I've got it. Not something I should have asked you. I was trying to explain why I had to decide this on my own. A decision I had to make as a watcher, you see."

"That's fine, honey, but you do remember that your slayer doesn't listen to most of your decisions anyway?"

"Not about you. About Robin." He clenched his eyes shut. The drinks were beginning to catch up with him in a headache sort of way, and he wanted to get through this while he still could. "There are parental decisions which we share. But this one I made as the head of the Council, and it was mine alone." He opened his eyes again. "I asked Wesley to be Robin's Watcher."

He braced himself for the inevitable tirade. Perhaps he should have waited until he'd fully recovered from an evening out with Ethan.

But she only looked sad, not angry. "You're not going to teach her?"

"I can't. I honestly can't."

"Okay."

He frowned. Buffy never failed to surprise him. "Okay? Just okay? You're not angry with me? I just made what could possibly be one of the most important decisions regarding our daughter's life without even consulting your opinion. You should be just a little bit angry at least."

"You always expect me to get angry at the wrong things. I wasn't mad about Longworth and Sulla; I was mad you didn't tell me. And now you're telling me about Wesley and Robin, and it really is okay, Giles. I get it. I'm the Slayer, and you're my Watcher, and we're a team. But then you're also rebuilding the Council on top of that, which is a whole separate thing. You don't come down to the precinct and tell me how to run my cases, and I don't tell you how to run the Council. Sometimes you ask my opinion, and sometimes you don't, and sometimes I just give it to you anyway, but in the end it's your call, your responsibility. So you made Wesley Robin's watcher. That's your job. And when more potential slayers are born, you'll give them watchers, too."

"When did you get to be so wise?" he murmured.

She started to strip his clothes off, making a face at the cigarette smoke still clinging to them. "I've always been this wise. You're just now starting to notice."

He snorted, then giggled. It was only partially the whiskey.

"Besides, this means we can just be Mommy and Daddy, right? Wesley can be in charge of all the watcher stuff, and we can worry about all the normal stuff, and Robin will hopefully grow up to be the kind of slayer who is fully capable of telling her watcher to go stuff himself."

"I suppose you'll teach her that?"

"Tormenting Your Watcher 101, as can only be taught by one slayer to another."

"Come here, slayer." He kissed her until the puppy wiggled between them, and they pulled apart, laughing. He settled for curling up beside her and falling asleep in peaceful contentment.

Slayer and Watcher. No secrets between them. No lies. Giles felt free, as he hadn't since making that call to the Council's black ops. Free of Longworth and Sulla, free of his own guilt, free of Lilah's threats. A free man with wife, son, daughter, friends.

He slept without dreams in the shelter of Buffy's arms.

Lilah fidgeted in her seat and crossed her arms. Granted, crossing her arms only reminded her that there was nothing left of her chest to interfere with that action. Crossing her legs was also a whole new experience.

She glared at Gavin Parks, who was sitting next to her and couldn't seem to stop staring. "This is all your fault," she told him venomously.

"My fault? In what possible way is this *my* fault?"

"You let them go! The slayer would be dead, and Angel would be dark, and I would be having drinks right now with the junior partners to celebrate my new promotion if it weren't for you."

"And who told you to put the ring on?"

"How was I to know it wouldn't come off again?" Lilah tried to run her fingers through her hair in frustration, but she had much less than she remembered.

"We could always cut your finger off. I'm sure your health plan would cover another."

"But the ring would still be *on* my finger, even if my finger weren't attached to my body, and so the damn spell would still be in effect."

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," a voice scolded from behind. Nathan Reed entered the conference room and closed the door behind him. He glanced back and forth between the two lawyers with undisguised amusement. "It would appear we have an interesting dilemma on our hands. Until Wolfram and Hart can find a way to rectify the situation, we'd like to take advantage of it."

He looked back and forth between them again, this time with confusion. "Mr. Parks?"

Gavin raised his hand. "That would be me."

Nathan smiled. "Then you must be Lilah."

Lilah Morgan, stuck in a replica of Gavin Park's body, courtesy of the ring of Gorlois which Ethan had cursed, raised her hand. "Yeah, that would be me."

~Finis~ June 26, 2002

Character Index and Backstory

Character Index

Amy Madison is a witch who turned herself into a rat to escape being burned at the stake. She's lived in a cage at Willow's ever since (reference season 3- Gingerbread).

Anya is Xander's girlfriend, who he proposed to in "The Gift." She's an ex-vengeance demon. As Anyanka, she granted wishes to scorned women for a thousand years, but then lost her powers and became mortal (reference season 3- The Wish). She works for Giles at the store.

Angel was Buffy's boyfriend, a vampire cursed with a soul, but with a catch. If he has a moment of happiness, he loses his soul. They had sex, guess what? He lost his soul and reverted to Angelus, the evil vampire he was before the gypsy curse (reference season 2- Surprise and Innocence). Angelus killed Giles' girlfriend Jenny (reference season 2- Passion) and tortured him brutally for hours. Angel got his soul back at the last possible moment, but Buffy had to kill him anyway, since the portal to hell was already beginning to open and his blood would close it (reference season 2- Becoming 2). Angel spent a brief sabbatical in hell before coming home (reference season 3- Faith, Hope and Trick). But he and Buffy could never be happy together, so he left for his own show (reference season 3- The Graduation 2).

Ben was just a normal human, a doctor, but had this god trapped inside him. Giles killed him in order to defeat Glory (reference season 5- The Gift).

Buffy Summers is the Vampire Slayer. There is only one at a time, and when she dies, the next is activated or "Called." She died for a few minutes when she was 16 (reference season 1- Prophecy Girl) and activated her replacement, Kendra, who later died (reference season 2- Becoming 1) and activated her replacement, Faith, who turned evil and is now in jail. It's up in the air whether Buffy dying a second time would activate a new slayer.

Calendar, Jenny (see Jenny Calendar).

Charles Gunn (see Gunn, Charles).

Cordelia Chase used to date Xander and later had a crush on Wesley. After graduating high school, she moved to LA and works with Angel. Angel's old assistant, Doyle, got visions of people in trouble. Before he died, he kissed Cordelia and now she gets the visions (reference Angel season 1- Hero). The whole LA gang was off in a separate dimension for the last few weeks of their season, so they missed Buffy's big crisis and death (reference Angel season 2- Over the Rainbow, Through the Looking Glass, and There's No Place Like Plrtz Glrb).

Darla was Angel's Sire. She made him into a vampire and stayed with him for 150 years until the gypsy curse returned his soul (reference season 2- Becoming 1). He staked her to save Buffy (reference season 1- Angel), but Wolfram and Hart resurrected her as her human self (reference Angel season 1- To Shanshu in L.A.). They wanted to use her to turn Angel dark and had Drusilla make Darla into a vampire again (reference Angel season 2- Reunion).

Dawn Summers is Buffy's sister, but not really. Here's where it gets tricky. Dawn is the Key, living energy. The monks that were protecting her were about to be slaughtered, but before the bad guy got in the fortress, they cast a spell. They wanted to send the Slayer the Key and make sure that she would protect it with her life. So they transformed the Key into a living person, the Slayer's sister, and inserted her into their lives. Everybody has false memories of Dawn's whole life, including Dawn, who just thought she was

Buffy's normal kid sister (reference season 5- No Place Like Home). Eventually, one by one, they each found out that Dawn was the Key, including Dawn (reference season 5- Blood Ties). She has only been in their lives for six months, and all their memories before that are fake. But it doesn't change the fact that she still feels like Buffy's sister and everyone still remembers her that way.

Dennis is Cordelia's phantom roommate in L.A. She got the apartment cheap, because it was haunted (reference Angel season 1- Room w/a View).

D'Hoffryn was Anya's boss when she was the demon Anyanka. He refused to restore her powers after she was made mortal (reference season 3- Doppelgängerland).

Diedre Page was one of the group who summoned Eyghon during Giles' youth. She died when Eyghon later returned (reference season 2- The Dark Age).

Doc was the demon who made it up to the top of Glory's tower to bleed Dawn for the ritual. Spike tried to stop him, but was thrown from its heights. Buffy tossed Doc off the tower right after, but she was too late and Dawn's blood was already opening the portal (reference season 5- The Gift).

Doyle was Angel's assistant, a half-demon who would get visions of people in trouble. He sacrificed himself to save others, kissing Cordelia goodbye first and thus passing his visions on to her (reference Angel season 1- Hero).

Drusilla (aka Dru) had visions of the future. Angelus drove her insane and killed everyone she loved, turning her into a vampire on the day she took her holy orders at a convent (reference season 2- Lie to Me). Later, Dru made Spike into a vampire (reference season 5- Fool For Love).

Faith became a slayer after Kendra's death (reference season 2- Becoming 1). She showed up in Sunnydale after her watcher was killed (reference season 3- Faith, Hope, and Trick). After the accidental slaying of Deputy Mayor Allen Finch (reference season 3- Bad Girls) she turned evil and sided with the big bad of the season, the Mayor. Faith poisoned Angel, and the antidote was slayer's blood, so Buffy fought Faith to bleed her for Angel's cure. She put her in a coma for more than eight months (reference season 3- The Graduation 1). When Faith woke, she went after Buffy, and tricked her into a body switch. A few days in Buffy's body gave Faith an attack of conscience, and when they finally switched back, Faith skipped town (reference season 4- This Year's Girl and Who Are You?). She went to LA, where Wolfram and Hart hired her to kill Angel. She kidnapped and tortured Wesley to push Angel into a fight. But in the end, she broke down crying in his arms, begging him to kill her because she's bad. Angel tried to help her, and she eventually turned herself in and is now in jail (reference Angel season 1- Five by Five and Sanctuary).

Finch, Allen, the Deputy Mayor, was accidentally killed by Faith when she mistook him for a vampire and staked him (reference season 3- Bad Girls).

Finn, Riley (see Riley Finn).

Fred (short for Winifred) got lost in Pylea, where she spent five years as a slave, returning with Angel and company when they went back home (reference Angel season 2- Over the Rainbow, Through the Looking Glass, and There's No Place Like Plrtz Glrb).

Ethan Rayne was friends with Giles in their youth. Their friendship fell apart about "the same time you started to worship chaos," Giles told him (reference season 4- A New Man). After their friend Randall died during an Eyghon summoning party, Giles snapped back to the straight and narrow path his family had chosen for him, but Ethan moved in the

other direction. Ethan showed up on occasion to shake things up for his old friend: turning the town into their Halloween costumes (reference season 2- Halloween), spiking the high school's band candy (reference season 3- Band Candy), and turning Giles into a demon, at which point Ethan was captured by the Initiative and taken to a detainment facility in Nevada (reference season 4- A New Man).

Gavin Parks is another lawyer at Wolfram and Hart and rival to Lilah Morgan. First appeared in Angel season 2- Over the Rainbow.

Giles, Rupert (aka Ripper) was Buffy's Watcher under the cover of librarian at her high school. Slayers have Watchers, who are sent from the Watcher's Council in London. As far as we've seen, all watchers are British. Watchers do the research, tell the slayers how to kill their opponents, help train them, find them in the first place etc... Like slayers, becoming a watcher is more a matter of destiny than choice. It is passed down through families, and they are trained from a young age. Giles had a dark past when he rebelled against his destiny as a watcher. He was quite the youthful offender and became involved in dark magic that got his friend Randall killed before he finally returned to the straight and narrow (reference season 2- The Dark Age). Giles had a girlfriend, Jenny Calendar, in Sunnydale for a little while, but she was murdered by Angelus. Giles found her dead body in his bed and took off on a suicide mission to kill Angelus for it before being rescued by Buffy (reference season 2- Passion). When Angelus needed the secret of Acatla, he kidnapped and tortured Giles for it. He couldn't break him, but Drusilla was able to trick him into revealing the secret when she did a little magic to make Giles think she was Jenny (reference season 2- Becoming 2). On Buffy's 18th birthday, the Council forced her to undergo a test. Poor Giles was forced to betray his slayer and actually administer the injections that temporarily stole her powers. She passed the test, but Giles was fired because he loved her and helped her when it wasn't allowed. Even though he was no longer her official watcher, he continued to act in that capacity (reference season 3- Helpless). After blowing up the school to destroy the Mayor (reference season 3- The Graduation 2), he spent season 4 jobless and directionless. He later purchased a magic shop after the previous owner's demise and built a training room in the back for Buffy (reference season 5- Real Me). He was later reinstated as Buffy's official watcher (reference season 5- Checkpoint).

Glory was a hellgod, banished from hell by two other gods, and wanted the Key (Dawn) so she could open the gates of Hell and go home (reference season 5- Spiral).

Gunn, Charles a young, black man who led a gang of vampire fighters before joining up with Angel.

Hank Summers is Buffy's father, who we've seen like twice. Mostly we just see the flowers he sends her when he stands her up for birthdays or visits. He's off in Spain with his secretary, "living the cliché" and couldn't even be found after their mother died.

Harris, Xander (see Xander Harris).

Holland Manners used to run Wolfram and Hart before Angel allowed Darla and Drusilla to kill him (reference Angel season 2- Reunion).

The Host (Lorne) owns the demon karaoke bar Caritas. He can read a person's fortune when they sing.

Jenny Calendar was the computer teacher at Sunnydale High and Giles' girlfriend. She was sent by the Kalderash people, descendants of the gypsies who cursed Angel, to keep watch over him and make sure he suffered (reference season 2- Surprise). She didn't

know what would happen, that Angel could lose his soul, but after it happened, Buffy felt betrayed and angry. Giles stood beside his slayer and turned his back on Jenny (reference season 2- Innocence). Just when it seemed they might reconcile and she might make amends by restoring Angel's soul, Angel killed her (reference season 2- Passion).

Joyce Summers was Buffy's mother. Over the course of season 5, she was diagnosed with a brain tumor, had surgery, and seemingly recovered. Just when we thought she would be fine, she died suddenly of a brain aneurysm. Buffy came home to find her mother's dead body on the living room couch. Probably one of the most powerful and well-done episodes of the series (reference season 5- The Body).

Kendra became a slayer after Buffy's brief demise (reference season 1- Prophecy Girl) and was later killed by Drusilla (reference season 2- Becoming 1). Kendra's death called Faith as the next slayer. (Kendra appeared in episodes: season 2- What's My Line 1 and 2, and Becoming 1).

Lilah Morgan is a lawyer at Wolfram and Hart, promoted to head of special projects after Holland Manner's death.

Lorne (see The Host).

Mayor Wilkins was the big bad of season three. Mayor of Sunnydale, he gave the graduation commencement address and ascended into a big snake demon, eating part of the senior class before being blown up with the school (reference season 3- The Graduation 2).

Merrick was Buffy's first watcher in L.A. and died defending her.

Morgan, Lilah (see Lilah Morgan).

Mrs. Rosenberg, Willow's mother, learned everything she needed to know about parenting from psychology journals, but knows squat about her daughter (reference season 3- Gingerbread).

Nathan Reed is one of the junior partners at Wolfram and Hart, the one who actually promoted Lilah. Really creepy looking bald guy with thick, black glasses.

Nigel was part of Travers' entourage for Buffy's "review" and interviewed Willow and Tara about their witchcraft (reference season 5- Checkpoint).

Oz (Daniel Osbourne) was Willow's boyfriend. Bitten by his cousin Jordy, he became a werewolf and has to lock himself up near the full moon every month (reference season 2- Phases). He left Willow after a run in with a female werewolf made him realize he had to find a way to control his animal side (reference season 4- Wild at Heart).

Parker bedded Buffy, and then never called her again, moving on to seduce a string of other innocent freshman girls, leaving Buffy feeling used and broken hearted (reference season 2- The Harsh Light of Day).

Parks, Gavin (see Gavin Parks).

Philip Henry was one of the group who summoned Eyghon during Giles' youth. He died when Eyghon later returned (reference season 2- The Dark Age).

Principal Snyder lived to make Buffy's life hell and was appropriately eaten by a giant snake at their high school graduation (reference season 3- The Graduation 2).

Quentin Travers (see Travers, Quentin).

Randall was one of Giles' and Ethan's friends in their youth and died tragically when the demon Eyghon took him whole during one of their possession parties (reference season 2- The Dark Age).

Rayne, Ethan (see Ethan Rayne).

Riley Finn was Buffy's boyfriend and part of a government monster hunting squad, the Initiative. Buffy always held him at arm's length, so he fell in with a vampire "brothel" and got addicted to vampire bites. He left to Central America with his soldier friends, and Buffy got to the helipad too late to stop him (reference season 5- Into the Woods).

Ripper was Giles' nickname in his delinquent youth (see Giles, Rupert) (reference season 2- The Dark Age).

Rosenberg, Willow (see Willow Rosenberg).

Rupert Giles (see Giles, Rupert).

Spike, formerly William the Bloody, is a bleached blond vampire who smokes. He was evil in the beginning of the show, but then was captured by the government monster hunters, who then put a chip in his head so he can't hurt anyone (reference season 4- The Initiative). Now he gets his blood from the blood bank and has slowly become good. Unable to kill the slayer, he fell in love with Buffy instead, but it's not requited (reference season 5- Out of my Mind). He's also British.

Summers, Buffy (see Buffy Summers).

Summers, Dawn (see Dawn Summers).

Summers, Hank (see Hank Summers).

Summers, Joyce (see Joyce Summers).

Sunday was a snobby upperclassman vampire, who Buffy staked her first week of college (reference season 4- The Freshman).

Tara is Willow's girlfriend, also a witch. Shy, quiet, stutters sometimes.

Thomas Sutcliffe was one of the group who summoned Eyghon during Giles' youth. He died when Eyghon later returned (reference season 2- The Dark Age).

Travers, Quentin was the head of the Council. On Buffy's 18th birthday, the Watcher's Council had a test, where they took her powers and forced her to face a vampire as a mortal. He warned Giles not to interfere and fired him when he did (reference season 3- Helpless). Travers returned in season 5 when Buffy needed information on Glory and tried to intimidate her back under the Council's influence, but she turned the tables on him, setting the Council to work for her and having Giles reinstated (reference season 5- Checkpoint).

Wesley Wyndham-Pryce became Buffy's watcher after Giles was fired. After Faith poisoned Angel, Buffy asked him to seek help from the Council, but they refused. So she fired both Wesley and the Council (reference season 3- Graduation Day). Wesley tried his hand at being a rogue demon hunter before joining up with Angel's investigative team. After Angel abandoned his team to hunt Darla, Wesley took over the leadership role, and after Angel returned to the fold, remained their official leader.

Willow Rosenberg is also one of Buffy's best friends. She's a powerful witch. She used to date Oz, a werewolf, but is now gay or "no longer driving stick" as Faith phrased it, having fallen in love with fellow witch, Tara.

Willy the Snitch is a human who owns a demon bar in Sunnydale. Buffy sometimes threatens him with violence to get information from him. The rest of the gang have to bribe him for the same effect.

Wyndham-Pryce, Wesley (see Wesley Wyndham-Pryce).

Xander Harris is one of her best friends and works as a construction worker. He used to date Cordelia, lost his virginity to Faith, and is currently with Anya.

Original Character Index

Lest you rack your brains trying to figure out which episode of Buffy you saw these in, I'll save you the bother. They weren't on the show. I made them up. In order of appearance:

Death Brings Clarity

Thomas Stockwell- the Summers' family lawyer.

Nicole Leblanc- French slayer.

Marcus Somerton- Nicole's watcher.

Susan- the secretary Hank ran off to Spain with.

Harold Cates- Hank Summers' attorney

Anna Iverson- social worker.

Stephie Miller- second social worker.

The Ticking Clock

Melinda- one of Dawn's friends.

Emma- ER nurse.

Dr. Elizabeth Strader- ER doctor.

Sulla- hired gun.

Mrs. Isaacson- next door neighbor.

Dr. Jeffery Michaels- Council doctor.

Everett Longworth- man with a grudge.

Lt. Brady- cop doing his job.

Dr. Webster- chief surgeon.

Emily Lochter- adoption lawyer.

The Family Business

Alex- the son.

Charity- part time help at the Magic Box

Sabrina Perkins- head of the coven.

Morgaine- Sabrina's right hand witch.

Camela- a long dead, powerful sorceress.

Robin- the daughter.

John Tims- officer's husband.

April Tims- homicide detective.

Shaun McGregor- Robin's adoptive father.

Catherine McGregor- Robin's adoptive mother.

Jonathon- not the Jonathon from Buffy, a different Jonathon.

Joseph Zalk- a victim of Darla and Drusilla's wine-tasting massacre. Former Wolfram and Hart lawyer, now a vampire.

Carol H.- ER nurse (I was actually thinking Carol Hathaway from ER, so not so made up).

The Mortog Beast- servant to Camela.

Scott- April Tims' partner

Frederick Billington- red shirt watcher.

Becky- John Tims' daughter.

Emma Dosser- Faith's watcher, who was killed by Kakistos.

Julia- one of Sabrina's coven.

Melody- another, less fortunate, member of Sabrina's coven.

Delilah- another in the coven.

Andrew Ludgate- lawyer.

Richard Zalk- Joseph's father, lawyer at Wolfram and Hart

The Fine Art of Blackmail

Marianne- the nanny.

Zoey- the baby.

Buffy Basics

The Slayer is the Chosen One, one girl in all the world with the strength and skill to hunt the vampires. She heals quickly and is stronger and faster than vampires who are stronger and faster than people.

Vampires can be killed by a stake through the heart, beheading, fire, or sunlight. Crosses or holy water will burn. A vampire is made by draining the person's blood, then having that person drink their blood. The person actually dies, their soul leaves the body, and now a demon exists in the body with all of that person's memories and experiences. But not that person, just a demon. When they're killed, they turn to dust. They usually look human, but when they turn into a vampire, their forehead gets bumpy and their eyes turn yellow. They can't enter a person's home unless they're invited. If they tried to walk through the door, it would be like an invisible barrier.

Anyway, on to where my story begins...

The Plot

There was a god, Glory, who was after the Key (Dawn) so she could open the gates of Hell and go home. Of course, Buffy is no match for a god. Thankfully, Glory has a weakness: she had been banished from hell by two other gods and forced inside a mortal prison. So there's this doctor, Ben, who is just a normal human, but has this god trapped inside him. So they morph back and forth like split personalities, but no one who sees this presto-chango can remember it until the very end when the spell dies. So the god can only be killed by killing the man she's trapped in.

So Glory figures out who the Key is and is coming to collect. Buffy's no match for her, as we've said, so everyone piles in an RV to get out of town, pronto. Unfortunately, there's a whole army of human Knights who are also after the Key, so they can destroy it (kill Dawn) before Glory can get to it. They attack the RV. Big battle. Buffy wins. Everything seems fine. Until one of the Knights rides up to the front of the RV and drives a spear right through the windshield and right through Giles, about mid-to-lower left abdomen. He's understandably in a lot of pain and loses control of the RV, crashing. Through the course of that episode, the viewers are led to believe that his wound is near fatal. If he doesn't get medical help, he's going to die.

This is the moment where my story begins. They're pulling him out of the RV.

I'll fill in a little more. Since my story assumes the reader has seen all the episodes, my story only fills in the parts the show left out. So here are the events over the last three episodes of fifth season, which I left out of my story.

They get to an abandoned gas station, with the Knights hot on their heels. Giles is pretty much unconscious for most of the rest of the episode, although there is a sweet scene between him and Buffy for which I filled in the subtext, but the dialogue is straight from the show. Anyway, he's unconscious, which is where I made up the torture delirium.

What's going on while he's unconscious: the Knights attack. Willow casts a spell, making a barrier no one can pass through in either direction. The knights camp out, trying to bring it down and get inside. Buffy finds out what the Key, her sister, will do if Glory gets to use it. The Key opens the portals between all dimensions, allowing all manner of hell to escape into Earth. Basically total annihilation. Typical day at the office for the Slayer. She also finds out about the mortal prison thing: kill the man and you kill the god. But no one except us viewers knows who the man is.

So Giles is dying. He and Buffy have their sweet scene, in which he basically says his goodbyes and loses consciousness again. Buffy decides she can't let him die. She gets the knights to agree to let her bring a doctor in for him. Rules of war and all that. So she calls Ben, who happens to not just have a god inside him, but is also the only doctor Buffy can think to ask for help. He stabilizes Giles, but wouldn't you know it? He morphs into Glory. Glory takes Dawn, busts through Willow's barrier, and kills the hundreds of Knights outside in minutes.

Buffy breaks. Her mom just died, her sister's stolen. She goes comatose.

Anyway, my story follows what happens to Giles after they leave the gas station; whereas the show focuses on Willow getting inside Buffy's head through a spell to snap her out of her coma.

Buffy comes out of it, joins everyone at the magic shop. Giles has new information and tells her that the way Glory will use the Key is by bleeding Dawn. They have a big fight about it, but of course none of this is in my story, because it was in the show. Turns out that the ritual must be performed at a specific time and place, after that it won't work. Dawn's blood will open all the gates across dimensions and the gates will stay open until her blood stops flowing, i.e. until she's dead. The faster she dies, the faster the gates close, and the less hell comes into this world.

Buffy won't consider killing her sister. If they can't stop the ritual in time, then they all die, "and I'll kill anyone who comes near Dawn," she says.

The ritual is at a construction site, and they almost manage to stop the bleeding before it starts. Spike had a sexbot of Buffy (the Buffybot) from an earlier episode, because he's in love with her. They dress the robot up to fight Glory. They also had a god's troll hammer, and Buffy beats up on her for a while with the weapon of a god. Xander runs a wrecking ball through her. Eventually she morphs back into Ben, and Buffy can't kill an innocent man. So after she leaves, Giles does.

Buffy gets to the top of the platform, maybe 10 or 20 stories up. But she's too late. Dawn is already bleeding, and the gates open. There are cool effects with cracks opening in the ground and sky, like a dragon flying by and demons and bolts of lightning and stuff. Dawn knows she has to jump into the gate and close it with her death, but Buffy stops her. Then she realizes that she and Dawn have the same blood. They're sisters. Buffy's blood will close the gates, too. So she makes this beautiful speech to her sister, then turns and takes a running swan dive off the platform, through the gate, and onto the ground. Dead.

My story picks up again as everyone approaches her dead body, devastated. Anya is hurt and being carried by Xander, having pushed him out of the way of falling debris. Tara had been insane for a few episodes, after Glory sucked out the essence of her brain. But Willow did a spell to undo it. So Willow and Tara are holding onto each other. Spike is cowering in the shadows, trying to avoid the sunlight, and sobbing over Buffy's death. Dawn comes down the steps, safe. And they all gather around Buffy's body. Giles is standing alone and is the only one to actually walk up to her.

The finale ends with a shot of her grave, headstone (cheesy text), and it looks like it has been there a while, with the grass over it and all.

Anyway, my story continues on from Buffy's death, in an attempt to fix everything. So everything after her swan dive off the platform is what I made up. I hope it may be a bit easier to understand now.

There are a lot of quotes and references to past episodes littered throughout the whole thing, so some of it you non-Buffy fans may not get, but I think for the most part the little background I gave you should be sufficient.

