

Rating: R

Pairing: Buffy / Faith

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Spoilers: Various seasons of 'Buffy,' and 'Angel.'

Dedicated: For Illyana and Sinbad.

Notes: This story started life as a vignette; luckily the pesky little critter escaped, and this is the result. Many thanks to YesPlease and MsGiles for the beta; to Jo, for being an excellent sounding board; and to Dan for all the research help and long distance immoral support; I couldn't have done it without you. Any remaining inaccuracies are mine.

Summary: Buffy/Faith. Willow/Kennedy. Set post 'Chosen.' 'Five states. Twelve days. One pair of jeans.'

'For those who walk in darkness both in the daytime and the night time the right time and right place are not here.'

Ash Wednesday by T.S. Eliot.

'She who will free me is newly born of the storm. Seek her out. Seek her out.'

Our Lady of Perpetual Riddles.

Five states. Twelve days. One pair of jeans.

Buffy knows it seems strange. That her little band of Slayers and Scoobies are probably wondering why she is still wearing the same beat up shirt and pants; while they have all changed into a hastily grabbed assortment of summer-fashion-disasters. *Gotta love Giles' credit card.* A couple of times she has noticed Faith giving her that long, hard, unreadable look she probably perfected in kindergarten, if she ever went to kindergarten, then quickly looking away when Buffy catches her. It makes her feel vulnerable, defensive; like she's been found out doing something not strictly on the up and up. She knows she should slip into her new clothes with their sharp, fresh from the factory, smell; but somehow she doesn't feel ready for new just yet. Underwear is her only concession. So grunge-Buffy lives; and most nights, in whichever anonymous motel room she and Dawn are sharing, she washes her clothes in the too small sink. Rubbing the regulation tiny bar of soap over the dirt, and sometimes blood stains; watching bubbles form in the hot water, the colours of yet another day, another fight, bleeding from the cotton and the denim. And for a moment, standing, kneading the wet cloth in her hands, things seem almost peaceful. There is a hole stabbed through her once, white, shirt, front and back, that she can easily fit three fingers into; but she prefers not to think about how it got there. She can hear Dawnie in the bedroom humming

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tunelessly, then flipping through the TV channels, the shopping channel, some vacuous pop song about eternal luurve, sudden high pitched chatter in Spanish; and the creak of bed springs as she shifts her weight in an unsuccessful attempt to get comfy. *Yeah, almost peaceful.*

There is quiet knocking at the door; probably Willow she's the only person Buffy knows who ever knocks that quietly. Dawn sighs and yells "Come in," adding, "if you have a pulse, and no scales, or dripping viscous fluid, or..." There is a murmur of voices, then -- "Buffy."

May 20th 2003. Peoria. Illinois.

"Zoe Jane, are you listening to me? Have you heard anything I just said? Honestly, sometimes I think...oh God, are you okay?"

Yeah, I was listening, but I was kind of distracted by the feeling suddenly hitting me, like that hurricane we got caught up in when I was eight and me and Mom and Dad all went to Florida for Dad's work. That feeling of being swept up into the middle of something powerful that could rip you to pieces or pass you by without hardly even noticing you. Only difference is that all at once I feel like the hurricane, and I'm so shocked I'm falling before I know it. I come to, face down in the grass with Mom shaking me and trying to turn me over. She's freaking, must be thinking I had a fit or something. I'm wondering the same thing, but I feel so great, so alive, that I just start laughing, lying on our front lawn, nose to nose with Mr. Earthworm. I stop laughing when I flip over and see Mom's face. She's gone completely white, she just grabs me and hugs me like I was still a kid, and I stiffen up 'cause it's kind of embarrassing, I'm nearly sixteen and people might see. But I decide to give her a break, she's been pretty over the top since Dad walked out, so I hug her back like I mean it. Well, I do.

1688. Rennes-les-Bain. Southern France.

The church smells more powerfully musty this evening, a sure sign that autumn is coming on. The moisture in the air after such a dry summer seems to seep into the ancient stonework bringing out all those scents that have accumulated over the years. Father Jean-Baptiste wonders if his nose could be educated to read it like a book of days. If, after the proper training, he could walk up to the place in the corner beside the vestry where the plaster has begun coming away from the wall, take a long sniff and pronounce 'Ah, yes, this is the place where Father Jean-Luc spilled the communion wine all over the floor in sixteen fifty-six.' He is certainly skilled in the acquisition of obscure knowledge, knowledge which in truth no God fearing man should have; but his desire to comprehend, perhaps even wield, a small portion of the miraculous power of the Lord, cannot be contained by his fear of Hell. At night, when he is left to himself, he takes out his carefully hidden books and continues his study of the Dark Arts.

Jean-Baptiste starts, almost guiltily, as a sound behind him disturbs his reverie; and becomes still more flustered when he turns to find Isabelle, the baker's daughter, standing beside the

confessional. The evening light filtering through the high windows makes her fine features look almost ethereal, in contrast with her plain, flour dusted clothes, and too large boots. Hand me downs from one of her five brothers no doubt.

"What can I do for you child? Isn't it time you were at home beside your own fire?"

"I came to make my confession Father, if you will hear it." Isabelle has been rehearsing that sentence all the way here; holding her skirts up out of the mud the first heavy rains have brought to the main street, and repeating the words to herself, convincing herself that she will confess, she will be pure in the sight of God.

"Very well then." The priest runs a hand through his thinning sandy-yellow hair and takes up his place in the confessional box. He determines not to think of Isabelle as anything but a young girl in need of the loving guidance, and possibly admonishing hand, of Our Lord. He will not contemplate the rituals requiring a redheaded female virgin that he has read, and re-read, in Ziegler's 'Transformations.' He reminds himself he has not been watching her. He has not found himself standing in the narrow street outside her family's house waiting for some glimpse of her going about her daily, or nightly, tasks; imagining stealing her away to a place where no one knows them, Perpignan perhaps or even Toulouse. He stubbornly refuses to notice, as he has been noticing every day for weeks, that she has become a woman in the last year. That under the ever-present scent of fresh bread is another scent which his celibate life has not qualified him to identify, and it is driving him insane.

"Bless me Father, for I have sinned, it has been two days since my last confession." Isabelle stops, breathing hard, she will tell him. Of all the people she has met in her fourteen short years, he is surely the best, wisest and most holy; so he will understand. "Father, I had another vision; of Jesus."

Another vision. Jean-Baptiste senses a tide of anger and desire rising in him; would that this girl's spiritual raptures were filling up the void in his own heart.

"He came to me early this morning while I tended the ovens, alone. Stripped bare and bleeding he was, as he is shown on the cross in this church; and he spoke words without sound, and touched me with his own left hand, and I was pierced through to my heart with such a feeling of love that it was agony, and my whole body was full of fire, and when I wept it felt as though I wept tears of blood. But he vanished away, and I was left cold as stone, and wishing only for him to fill me again. Then I found my mind filled up with thoughts of the flesh, and I was ashamed. I so much want to be good, to be worthy, and I think maybe it was only my foolish pride which led me to believe that the Saviour would come to me, and maybe it was the Devil in disguise instead..." Isabelle stops. There is a strange sound coming to her through the dark cloth of the curtain, which gives the illusion of anonymity between her and the priest; the sound of the priest, moaning. "Father?" Perhaps he has been taken ill, he has been looking peaky lately; she will go and tend to him.

His hands are on her before she even has time to realize he has moved. "Father, please, what are you doing? Please -- Stop!"

This girl, Jean-Baptiste thinks, this stupid, innocent, tender girl, has been chosen, gifted with visions, while he, who has worked, and prayed and supplicated for twenty years, has been given nothing by God or the Devil. She could be a saint one day, or the greatest whore since

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Sodom fell. He could decide that for her, now. She must know after all how she inflames him, that she has no right to come here alone so late, and speak such words, and expect, expect him to...he has spells, he could work his will on her, make her want him, love him as he loves her; but his mind is too clouded by the sensation of his body finally touching hers. Through all his ministry he has never been tempted by a woman, but this little bitch has him sweating and grunting his lust like the lowest beast. Very well, let them both be damned for it. He can feel the fabric of her skirts tearing, hear her begging him to stop, and it only makes him thrust into her harder.

Later, when he rises from the floor and rearranges his clothes into some semblance of modesty, she is gone. No matter, she will be easy enough to find. After all, she is his now.

The river gives up Isabelle's body a day later. A boy out fishing finds it snagged in a fallen tree, near his favourite pool, and goes wailing home to fetch help. When the villagers manage to haul her sodden remains onto the bank they find her plain brown dress waited down by the stones she had bundled into her skirts to ensure her drowning; marking her out as a suicide, damned, and unfit to be buried in consecrated ground. It is remarked around the whole valley that the priest seems uncommonly distraught.

I was an idiot, Buffy thinks as she drags herself out of bed. Just for a second standing on the edge of the crater formerly know as Sunnydale I thought I might finally get to rest for a while, 'Ha, bloody ,ha!' Spike would say. Spike. Don't think about Spike. Spike lit up and burning. Spike dying, alone. She jumps at the slight shock of static as her bare leg slides out of the polyester sheets, then swears half-heartedly as her foot collides with a hold-all full of weapons. Slayer grace is not serving her well in the darkness of the early morning room. The illuminated travel clock reads four forty-nine am, another half hour and they should all be on the road again. She fumbles for the light switch. Amazingly Dawn is still sound asleep, making soft little snuffling noises like a new puppy. Buffy is loath to wake her but they have work to do, and Dawn would be none too happy if, when she finally surfaced of her own accord, around noon, she found the gang had abandoned her in a hygiene-challenged motel in South Dakota and gone Slayer hunting without her. A little gentle shaking and Dawn wakes, grumbling about how teenagers need more sleep than old people, and how this will probably stunt her growth. Absently, Buffy wonders if that explains why **she** never got any taller.

May 27th 2003. Peoria. Illinois.

Zoe Jane, tall and plain, never been kissed, tried but you missed. Freak. I know what you guys say about me. I see you whispering. I hear you laughing behind my back. 'Ooh, look at the queen of geek chic.' 'Hey, carrot top.' Yeah, check out the total lack of cool that is me. Only suddenly things seem different, I am different, and people are starting to notice.

Yesterday in gym class I won the four hundred meters, I beat Gwen 'I only date jocks' Stevens, and she's on the track team. I wasn't even out of breath, and everyone was staring at me with what looked a lot like respect.

Today when Donnie Walford pinged my bra strap I turned round and hit him, it was like a reflex, no thinking. Next thing I know, he's lying on the ground with his nose all busted up and bleeding like he was just decked by a heavy weight champ. Now I'm sure something very weird, like Twilight Zone weird, is going on with me, but what?

A few birds have begun chorusing in the solitary tree at the front of the motel by the time Buffy and Dawn return their room key and join the rest of the group. The dim glow of the motel sign combined with the coming sunrise makes the economy size army seem unreal, ghostly to Buffy, as she quickly scans them to see if anyone is missing. Principal Wood...Robin, of course, is gone, still in LA letting his battle wounds heal and using his administrative skills to impose some order on the global hunt for new Slayers. Most of the surviving girls have remained with him; except Chao Ahn, who gladly took the first flight back to China to join forces with a Watcher who had managed to escape the First Evil's purge. Her place was soon taken by Sanna, a fourteen year old street kid they tracked down in a Salvation Army hostel in Idaho; their second new Slayer. The other girls they found have stayed in their homes, in close contact with each other and the group. But Sanna has nothing to leave behind, nothing to lose, so here she is, deep in conversation with Rona and a confused looking Vi. She must be under five feet tall. Her clothes are way too big for her. And her greasy blond hair hangs over her eyes in a way that probably makes seeing a near impossibility. Yet she had already dusted one vamp solo by the time they found her, and Buffy can tell she is going to be one kick-ass fighter.

Then it begins happening again, just as it has every morning since they left the remains of Sunnydale. Buffy feels her eyes drawn to the space just behind those warm, solid, living, breathing human beings, to the shadows of those who will always be absent. They stand silently, little more than a dark ripple in the air, a person shaped space. Mom hovers protectively near Dawn. Behind Willow, who is leaning on Kennedy like she might fall down if left unsupported, stands Tara staring up at the sky. Anya is gesturing with her hands locked together in that agitated way she had whenever the subject of bunnies arose, but she is standing to Xander's left and he can't see her. Buffy doesn't know whether to be amused or horrified when Faith wanders up to the, now giggling, group of newbie Slayers and walks straight through Amanda's tall and angular shadow. She wants to turn away and not see the ranks of the dead, the ones she can name and all those she can't, flowing back until they become indistinguishable from the semi-darkness; but she feels compelled to stare until her eyes ache.

The first time this happened was in the aftermath of their flight from the 'all the Turok-han you can stake buffet' at the, finally closed for business, Hellmouth. They were milling about the lobby of the Hyperion Hotel in LA, patched up and glad to be away from the ER at last; though the smell of antiseptic and blood lingered. Dawnie was sitting with Angel, leaning her head against his shoulder and the soft leather of his jacket. Off in a corner Willow sat cross-legged and very upright, her body still suffused with pale light, like the momentary after-image of moving fire in the dark. Something about her posture said, keep your distance you are not ready to touch this, and Buffy understood, she needed to keep her distance too. She was trying to find something witty to say to Angel about world save-age, when she felt as if she had taken a sudden plunge off the top of a skyscraper; and as she plummeted by office

windows her mom waved cheerily at her from behind the plate glass of each one and continued playing Mah-Jong. She hit the metaphorical ground with crushing force, and when she opened her eyes, all around her she saw the shadows of the absent, the never to be present again, ever, unless Will really irons out the kinks of those resurrection spells; and she passed out.

That first time at least, Buffy could tell herself it was a crazed hallucination brought on by exhaustion, or blood loss, or concussion, or all of the above. Later that night she and Dawn folded themselves, still fully clothed, into the single bed of their spacious twin room, not caring about the damage they were probably inflicting on Angel's clean, oatmeal coloured, sheets. They clung onto each other for dear life until a shaft of daylight broke through the curtains, and the pure relief of being alive, and together, and of having a future, enabled them to move again.

1688. Rennes-les-Bain. Southern France.

Almost midnight. Kneeling just outside the churchyard wall, in the dirt of the graveyard of lost souls -- still born children, the ex-communicated, the suicides -- Father Jean-Baptiste stares up into the ominous blue-black sky, and finally feels certain that he is damned. The strange thing is that at some point during the previous nine sleepless days and nights he has ceased to care. All his study, all his hoarding of books, poring over forbidden knowledge until the tight calligraphy seemed to spider around the inside of his skull every time he closed his eyes, has brought him to this moment. The moment he will learn what it is to be as God.

The full moon rose while he was digging, grave robbing strictly speaking, and is casting a wan light on Isabelle's body, laid out before him in her burial shroud; his beautiful girl, the wanton bitch that brought him to this blasphemous act. Soon she will be whole again, and his forever, but presently he is trying not to breathe too often because of the stench of decay. He narrowly avoided retching all over his irreplaceable volume of resurrection spells earlier, and he wants to avoid a repeat performance. A priest turned necromancer, hardly a surprise. He wonders how many of his fellow brothers in Christ are also conducting dark rites tonight; but his sardonic smile turns into grimace as he forgets himself and inhales too deeply.

The circle is cast, black candles guttering in the cold breeze coming in off the nearby mountains. Jean-Baptiste's delicate hands are shaking, grazed and bloody, as he pauses for one excruciating moment before beginning the invocation. The thin layer of quick lime the grave digger left scattered over the shroud is eating into his skin. If God is going to intervene, send him a sign that it is not too late, that perhaps he can still turn back, it must be now. But there is no voice from the heavens, no burning bush, no ecstatic vision of Our Lady, only the sound of a dog barking mournfully somewhere in the village. Very well then. He raises the chalice he has filled with certain choice herbs and the egg of a T'thek demon -- which cost him nearly half a year's pay -- above his head; and does not notice a drop of blood from his own hand, fall and mingle with the precious mixture as he pours the offering over Isabelle's corpse and begins murmuring the ritual words to Osiris in his precise Latin, over and over, like saying a rosary.

The jolt of power he feels pass through him, shocks him to his core. He is enveloped in a flux

of harsh yellow-grey light and flung forwards, his fingers digging into the damp earth, his lips almost touching Isabelle's right foot, which has come free of her shroud, and he finds that in spite of everything he is praying, though to who or what he no longer knows, "bring her back...bring her back...bring her..." The girl's toe twitches, imagination, it twitches again, yes, and now Jean-Baptiste dares to look at her face. The signs of putrefaction are still there but less evident, and fading fast. Her sunken eyes slowly open, and gaze vacantly upwards, he is in awe. He expects to wake up any minute face down in a pile of books, but the all too real ache in his back from the unaccustomed digging is telling him he truly is awake, and Isabelle is...alive. He whispers her name and she moves her head, a minute nod of acknowledgement. Mine, he thinks; mine now, and reaches out to touch her exposed foot -- his hand meets rotting flesh. He screams and rolls backwards, something is going terribly wrong. The body, which seconds before, had been taking on the semblance of life is beginning to decay again, the decomposition moving rapidly upward from the girl's feet. Jean-Baptiste lurches upright, pulls back the shroud, completely, and almost passes out when the stench of rotting meat hits him. There are already maggots burrowing through the corrupted skin of her belly and breasts, clearly visible through the remains of her dress. But far worse than this, she is watching him, eyes wide and terrified, weeping, her mouth twisted in a silent scream. He has to think... his stomach is heaving... think... he can't breathe...think...there must be some spell, something useful you would learn just in case you ever needed to stop a girl you happened to resurrect from disintegrating in front of you...her legs are just shrivelled leather on bone now...both her hands have fallen away...think...there must be a way to save... something.

In the grey light of dawn a man, who is no longer Father Jean-Baptiste, walks out of the village of Rennes-les-Bain humming an old, old song. He moves with his mud and blood spattered head held high, though his feet drag from exhaustion and his face is blank. A momentary pause while he decides whether to take the road north or south, then he hitches up the weight of the large wooden box he's carrying on his back, turns north and trudges onwards.

Back on the battered yellow school bus, rattling through the edge of town, Buffy shifts in her seat, trying to pay attention to what Willow is telling her. But her jeans are still damp from the wash, and Xander and Andrew are arguing about Star Wars, again, and Vi's knitted pink and orange hat seems to be actually glowing, and Faith is draped over the seat in front, smoking a cigarette like she's just sauntered out of a classic film noir. It's all kinda distracting her from the matter in hand. The smell of burning tobacco is a painful reminder of Spike, but Buffy finds it's one of the less emotionally confusing things about having the prodigal Slayer back in the mix.

Faith is laughing at something Sanna just said like it's the funniest thing ever. She catches her breath with difficulty. "Titch, you're a genius."

"No shit Sherlock -- and will you quit calling me Titch, I'm almost as tall as Kennedy..." Sanna pauses then adds defiantly, "and I'm not done growing yet."

Faith grins at her, warm, unguarded. "Okay...short-ass."

Momentarily Buffy forgets to be wary, to hold onto the vestiges of her anger. But then she

wonders what would happen if she tried taking Faith's Marlboro's away. How much damage could a nicotine-deprived-rogue-Slayer-(reformed) do in a confined space? She concludes that wary is the way to be.

"Buffy, focus, please." Willow tries for her old appealing half smile, but can't quite manage it at this hour of the morning. She looks paler than usual, and Buffy notices lines on her face that make it clear she's not a teenager anymore; she realizes how long it's been since the last time she could really bring herself to see Willow.

"Sorry Will. Okay, here I am, back in the land of focus, ready to absorb the information, like...an absorb-y thing."

"Great Buffy, that's great. So, I only had a basic location for this new Slayer last night. I could feel her but it wasn't too well defined; like sometimes when you feel something really, really hot, or really, really cold, but it's so intense that you can't tell which is which, ya know? So then I went back and found a spell to cut out some of the input so I could tell if I was hot or cold, and it was amazing. I could see her, her house, her room, she even has this toy pig that looks just like Mr. Gordo...Buffy, what is it?"

Buffy doesn't answer, she doesn't trust her voice right now, and she doesn't want to cry over toy pigs. *Think about the girl, the sooner you get to her the more chance she has of surviving her life, your life, the new life you and Willow and that nifty spell with the Scythe gave her.* Finally she grunts "Huh, yeah" and nods at Willow to continue.

Willow gives Buffy a worried semi-quizzical look, tucks a strand of her long red hair behind her ear, and waits. But that tactic is not working today. Clearly whatever is troubling her friend is not to be shared just yet, maybe not ever, not with her. It's true the good guys are not renowned for their communication skills, and Willow has learned from bitter experience that that is of the bad; but she knows that now is not the time to push it. It hurts to admit it but she and Buffy are not as close as they once were. How can she expect Buffy to confide in her when she has not told Buffy half of what has happened to her since they closed the Hellmouth? Later, after they find this new Slayer, Slayer number six in this breakneck dash across country, from the Nevada desert to the mountains of Idaho. From 'it's Nebraska so it must be Wednesday,' to Buffalo, South Dakota; she will sit with Buffy in some generically comforting coffee house, and they will order mochas and talk, and perhaps it will be like old times.

"Hey, Red," Faith murmurs, her eyes half closed against the smoke drifting from her cigarette, "don't stop, I can feel you were just getting to the part where you just happen to see her blowing her boyfriend late one night in his daddy's penis extension of a car."

Willow shoots Faith a steely glare, and Faith can almost see her mentally re-shuffling her lecture notes. Giles, driving this leg of the journey at his standard forty-five miles an hour, takes a moment to turn and give her an exasperated look. *Damn he must have good hearing.* Only B makes no response. Faith wishes she would do something. A swift right hook would be almost welcome; better than being watched from so far away by those tired green eyes.

"The abridged version," Willow says, with none of her previous enthusiasm, "is this. I know pretty much exactly where we should be able to find this girl, but there is something else,

more a feeling, a hunch, than solid info -- we need to be in a big furry hurry, because trouble is brewing, something is coming for her soon, and I want to get to her before it does."

May 28th 2003. Peoria. Illinois.

So I got a weeks' suspension for beating up on Donnie Walford. My mom is seriously not happy. She gave me this whole big speech about how I've never been in trouble before, how could I lower myself to that kind of behaviour, don't I understand that violence only breeds violence and is no way for civilized people to solve their problems. In my defence I pointed out that I only hit him once, and not that hard. Then she got all stern and understanding and asked me if I was in a gang, or, oh dear sweet Jesus, on drugs! Who stole my mother and replaced her with "fifties mom"? I denied everything, and in the end she sighed and stroked my hair, and I thought she might cry, but thank the flying monkeys, she didn't.

Paulie thinks all this is cool, and funny, possibly the first simultaneously cool and funny thing I've ever done. He laughed so hard when I described the expression on Donnie's face after it connected with my fist that he blew Pepsi through his nose -- gross, must remember never to make him laugh while he's trying to swallow. He said he'd come over later, and sneak up the Virginia creeper underneath my bedroom window, 'cause my mom is in no mood to allow visitors right now. I hope he remembers to check his bootlaces are tied this time. I don't want to have to untangle him again.

Fact is I need to talk to him tonight, 'cause I'm starting to get scared, scared of what is happening to me, of what it might mean, and he's the only person I know who won't think I'm going psycho if I tell him that I think I'm seeing things, or more like sensing things, creature feature type things, and I'm not sure if they are following me or if I am following them.

On the open freeway, heading for Peoria, Illinois. Sounds like an illness, Faith thinks. *Yeah, you caught Peoria once while you were trekking through the Himalayas seeking enlightenment, but you're all better now. Grasshopper, understand, sickness only part of life illusion. She smiles to herself, head's still full of crazy shit, but at least it's not 'kill them all' crazy shit so much these days.* Life is as good as it's ever been, and Faith is enjoying her turn behind the wheel. Actually she's a little amazed they're letting her drive, but she isn't about to ask why in case they come to their senses and take the privilege away. It's going to take a while to adjust to being one of the in charge people. *You can take the girl out of the pokey, but...*

It's a wicked hot day, and after two weeks of almost constant travel the cramped interior of the bus is starting to smell pretty ripe. Faith's black tank top is clinging to her and she's considered taking it off, but she wouldn't want to cause a lust related traffic pile up. In temperatures like these she's almost glad Giles wouldn't shell out for leather pants. The driver's window is open as far as it will go -- not far, it's a bit the worse for wear like the rest of the bus and its passengers. But she is still burning some rubber in comparison to the G-man; being a wanted fugitive is a great incentive to travel light and fast.

During the last hour of motoring Faith would have really been riding the mellow; well, as much as she ever does; if it wasn't for one small thing -- Robin was right, she was -- is -- worried about Buffy. Of course the vibe around her these days is different than it was way back when; everyone changes, but it's more than that. Faith has tried to ignore it, it's none of her business really, but the original Chosen Two are still connected in ways she can't explain, *and you don't have to be fucking Freud to see that something is far wrong.*

They saved the world; again. In theory this should be a time of celebration, vacation even, wasn't that the plan? Yet the unnameable shadows gathered around Buffy have started creeping into Faith's own mind, like the memory of a shared dream, or nightmare; and she can feel a familiar downward spiral starting. She needs to understand, she needs to help, before things get any worse. *Like she would ever ask for your help; real funny Faith, excuse me while I die laughing, you clearly missed your calling as a stand-up. You're pathetic. Why the hell does everything always have to be about the skinny-blond-one anyway? You should have been over this long since -- should have closed down, shut her out, and curled up tight in your own skin; alone, safe, immune.*

But it's not that simple, it never is, and that desperate stab of wanting her is still there every time Faith lets her guard down. Sometimes, after they've been slaying, and her thoughts are ragged, and her whole body is humming like an electric wire, she wonders what would happen if she finally gave into it; pinned B up against a wall and screwed her into the other side of tomorrow and back. Fucking like animals until they were both torn up raw; half dead, fully spent; and all the bitter pain, and fear and darkness of a life time of bad choices, missed chances and betrayals had bled away and left them empty and clean. Other times she wonders what it would be like to wake up in Buffy's arms, knowing she'd been held all night. She thinks that last idea might scare her more, *but, whatever, it's never gonna happen.*

Her hands are shaking on the wheel; the mellow has officially gone bye-bye. All her life she's been a strictly 'get some, get gone' girl -- 'cause, *one of the first things you learn is it's always harder to hit a moving target --* but this is different, this is something she doesn't even have a word for anymore. *Christ, you're as bad as Angel.* The faded scar on her belly has started itching again. *Think about other things. Yeah.* Faith scans the interior of the bus in her rear view mirror. *There's B, she's slumped down in her seat; head resting against the dirty window; eyes closed, looks like she's sleeping. The flickering sunlight is striking little golden highlights in her hair. She's gotten her legs wedged up at some unlikely angle, and she's still wearing those goddamn jeans -- so beautiful. The brat is beside her, watching her protectively, playing at being big sis, what a picture, it's almost sweet.*

There are raised voices from near the back of the bus. Xander adjusts his eye patch and leans forward, for effect, until he is looking down on Andrew, who is squirming on the seat in front. "And I think I speak for all of us," Xander announces, "when I say you have taken annoying to a previously undreamed of level. Personally I feel that makes you very special. Now shut the hell up!"

Andrew tugs nervously at a piece of the fake leather seat that is beginning to peel up at the edge of a deep hole left after Rona accidentally shot it with a crossbow. He and Rona had been alone on the bus at the time, waiting for the others to return from a mission, and he had decided to alleviate the boredom by reciting his 'fifty things everyone should know about Dr. Who' list, in alphabetical order. He had just reached D, for Daleks and Davros, when the

crossbow bolt embedded itself in the seat two inches away from his right arm. Andrew isn't convinced it was an accident. "Bu, but..." he says, not looking up, hearing a slight whining tone come into his voice, "Timothy Dalton was the best James Bond".

For a moment Xander is silent, breathing hard as if struggling to control himself, his hands gripping the back of Andrew's seat; eventually he mutters "Don't make it so I have to smack you down," and collapses back into his corner. Man, he enjoys these tussles with the uber-geek. For almost a whole thirty seconds there he forgot that Anya isn't beside him, poised to join him in a volley of deadly sarcasm; and he's grateful to Andrew for that.

Giles sighs wearily and lowers the thick leather bound tome on 'Vampyre Cults Through the Ages' he has been engrossed in for the last hour. "It is clear," he says in his most adult and reasonable voice, "to anyone living, that Sean Connery was, and always will be the best James Bond. Boys, have you not ears to hear and eyes to see? Or, er, eye at least. Sorry Xander. Now kindly change the subject or be quiet, otherwise I'll be forced to ask Kennedy to remove you from the bus." Giles smiles a slight conspiratorial smile at Xander and returns to his book. He finds that revisiting his inner librarian is oddly comforting in the present circumstances, he can almost imagine himself back amongst the stacks at the old Sunnydale High, his kettle boiling in the office ready for four o'clock tea; and the Scooby gang gathered around the imposing wooden table gossiping and laughing. In a moment he'll march down there, clean his glasses and glare them back to work. Was it ever really like that he wonders. He can no longer remember. *'And I who am here dissembled proffer my deeds to oblivion, and my love to the posterity of the desert and the fruit of the gourd.'* Ah, T.S. Eliot. Yes. Quite.

May 29th 2003. Peoria. Illinois.

Zoe Jane, tall and plain, finally got kissed, Paulie didn't miss. Eeeek. My mom still won't let me leave the house. At this rate I'll be grounded when I hit my mid life crisis, but right now I don't fricking care! She's out at work and I'm drinking a cherry soda...Paulie kissed me...and working on my last English assignment, poetry by yet another middle class dead white male, big whoop...Paulie kissed me...and I've got Ani DiFranco, singing Not A Pretty Girl, pumped up to full volume, which is frightening the cat. And did I mention that Paulie kissed me, did I mention that?

Last night I was pacing up and down my room like Van Gogh, in the movie, right before he cuts his own ear off. Paulie could tell how nervous I was; and so he sprawled out on my bed pretending to be a walrus to make me laugh so I'd stop pacing, and rambling about power, and premonitions, and scary faces in dark places, and this feeling I have like I'm being watched...by something evil. Usually it would have worked and we could have talked about South Park, or how the Republicans are agents of Satan and the whole country's going to Hell. But something changed in me that day the hurricane knocked me flat on my face, and now I can't go back to who I was before, even if I wanted to. Paulie knows I'm a freak, so's he, that's why we've been friends so long, but even he couldn't quite believe what I was telling him. It was like his reality couldn't bend that far in case it broke. Finally he said, 'Hey, no more scary movies for you, it seems they really do corrupt impressionable young minds.' I was so pissed at him that I went and picked him up bodily and hoisted him above my head yelling, 'Are you imagining this? Well, are you?' He just hung there limp like a kitten when you pick it up by

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the scruff of its neck; he was so surprised he couldn't move, he wasn't the only one -- I was frozen. When I eventually remembered how to put him down he sat next to me on the edge of my unmade bed and stared at me for what seemed like years; running his hand through the spikes of his newly purple hair like he was checking it was still attached, and making that low humming noise he only makes when he's thinking real hard; then he leaned over and kissed me.

Iowa really is as dull as Kennedy thought it would be, *wholesome, all-American farm country, rolling hills, green fields, a cow, oh look, another cow, golly gosh, a whole state full of fucking cows*. She is sure that if Andrew suggests a cow spotting game and she kills him it will be considered justifiable homicide, and for the greater good.

It will soon be her turn to drive, which is something to do at least; but in spite of her boredom she doesn't want to move just yet because of Willow, who is curled up asleep on the back seat with her head pillowed in Kennedy's lap. Her eyelids are fluttering slightly, and she's twitching her way through another bizarre dream; probably of frogs and fire raining from the heavens, or nude academic failure. There are other, much less amusing, dreams that she will not talk about no matter how appealingly Kennedy pouts at her. The young Slayer has discovered that sharing a bed with Willow can be like doing ten rounds with an all in wrestler. Sometimes she thrashes about so violently in her sleep that if it wasn't for superhuman strength Kennedy would find herself on the floor.

She looks so fragile, strangely childlike right now, all the masks she usually wears stripped away. It's hard to believe just over a year ago she almost destroyed the world. Yet Kennedy will never be able to shake from her mind the image of Willow, glowing white and ecstatic as she channelled the power of the Slayer to every Potential in the world -- to her. Or forget the times, since they have been on the road, when Will has come back to her after some ritual to pinpoint a new Slayer in Burma or Albania, with the air around her still charged with magic; and smelling faintly metallic the way it does just before a summer thunderstorm. One of those times, in Nebraska, Kennedy had pulled her into a kiss a little too roughly in her urgency to find some lingering taste of that magic before it dissipated. The next thing she knew, a wave of energy had flung her against the wall on the other side of the room; knocking all the cockiness out of her, but certainly not the desire. Willow had crumpled up on the floor shaking and babbling apologies so fast they had lost all coherence. That day Kennedy, the smart kid, the rich kid who always knew what she wanted and exactly how to get it, understood that there are some things she may never entirely get. And if, when they make love in a snatched break between Slayer tracking and exhausted sleep, she thinks she hears Tara's name whispered instead of hers she chooses not to notice. Yeah, Will is unimaginably powerful, and Kennedy is often unsure if that is scaring her, or turning her on, or both.

Vampyre Cults Through The Ages.

Crevecour the Priest. Pages 214 - 217.

Over the centuries many tales have become attached to the shadowy figure of Crevecour, known as the Priest; and his constant companion Our Lady of Perpetual Riddles, the severed head of a young woman contained within a stout oak box. Present estimates place the cult of vampires, which has formed around him, at between one hundred and three hundred strong.

It is said that Crevecour has at his disposal powerful magicks -- can fly, summon storms, command various demons and animals, transform water into blood, speak many ancient demon tongues, raise the dead, and is supremely strong, even for a vampyre. He is renowned for his religious obsession and his cruelty, and seems to take particular delight in ripping out the still beating hearts of his victims. It has been postulated by some academics, well known in the field of vampyryology, that this particular practice may have earned him his name, which translates from the French as broken heart. Most strikingly, it has been reported by surviving witnesses that he does not fear the cross, and in fact wears a small silver crucifix next to his bare skin to demonstrate this power to his followers.

I'm sure he can also fox-trot and make an exquisite vodka martini. Giles has long since become immune to the overblown claims made about certain vampires. In his experience the bloodsuckers themselves are often the ones starting the rumours. He finds it all rather vulgar.

Of 'Our Lady' little is known. It is told that the head, although having the appearance of death, is animated and capable of speech. She is given to unintelligible prophetic announcements, and on certain occasions is said to weep bloody tears.

Hmm. Giles skims down the next page, *a list of atrocities probably connected with Monsieur un-holier than thou and his cult.*

1692. Gruissan. Rousillon. Southern France.

A mysterious priest was reported preaching in the town, inciting religious hatred between Catholic and Protestant factions. A riot began which rapidly led to a massacre, during which the man, Crevecour, was seen to be in the thick of the fighting; strangely for one in such a situation, with a heavy wooden box secured tightly to his back. Although this man does seem to match the description of the vampyre Crevecour, he must clearly still have been human at the time these events took place, as he was reported to have, ' -- stood, the sun blazing behind him like the fire of God's judgment.'

1701. Lucena. Andalucia. Western Spain.

A Good Friday mass was interrupted by a group of people who, the only surviving witness described as 'hardly human their faces were so hideously distorted with bloodlust, and their teeth grown so long and wolfish.' They held the congregation captive and forced thirteen of them to enact an outlandish parody of the Last Supper; during which 'one who they treated as leader buried his teeth in the neck of our poor priest, sucked out his blood, and, so doing, killed him. Then he laughed and blasphemed venomously until I was nearly sick with fear and rage.' At the conclusion of the tableaux the vampyres' leader, singing softly and whispering endearments all the while, ceremoniously unveiled the disembodied head of a young woman in a box, almost as if to witness the massacre of the terrified worshippers. Only the man who had played the part of Judas was set free to tell the tale.

A long litany of incidents follow -- Nuns found drained of blood, their hearts removed.

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Slaughter at an Irish seminary. Famous theologian found crucified upside down, heart missing. A Rabbi found dead, covered in blood and bacon rashers. Eight Buddhist monks found etc... Mormon choir found etc...then.

1977. New York. New York State. U.S.A.

On the night of June the first nineteen seventy-seven, fifteen year old, Loretta Rand was snatched from outside the church she attended in Brooklyn by 'two big white guys that were seriously messed up in the face.' Her account follows. 'They carried me way down into the sewer system. We went on for what seemed like miles, and I kept on screaming and fighting knowing ain't no one gonna hear me where I was, and they'd keep smacking me around and laughing. Finally we get to this broken down old brownstone, all abandoned, and it's full of these messed up dudes, five or six of them, like you couldn't imagine. They looked 'most like vampires from the movies, I swear, and I don't do no drugs. So, they got me tied up to a chair in the corner, and the tall blond one that seems like the leader, they all do what he says, he's talking crazy to this big wooden box like it's alive. Suddenly he comes over and scoots down on his haunches and looks me up and down real hard with his freaky yellow eyes; then he turns to his gang and hisses out 'she is not the one.' He looks like he's about to pop. Then he starts to smile and says 'there are always other things to do with a good hearted woman,' whips out the biggest switch blade I ever saw and starts singing *The Way We Were*. I'm sure now that these are my last moments on earth. And I'm just begging dear God please help me, and I'll pay back that money I took from my mom's underwear drawer last week, when this young black sister comes busting in from nowhere; all flying kicks and long swirly coat, and takes on the whole crew. Wham, bang, bam. And these bumpy forehead guys are just exploding into dust around her. It's like the coolest, scariest thing I've ever seen. Somehow she got me out of there, and home. She saved me. The Good Lord sent her, and she saved me; and though I've never seen her again since that night ten years ago I'll pray for her until my dying day.'

"Ye Gods." Giles lets out a deep breath and closes the book, "Barbara Streisand -- this Crevecour is a true creature of evil."

"Uh, who's a what with the who?" Buffy asks, sleepily blinking at Giles while trying to straighten out the crick in her neck.

"Ah, Buffy, sorry, I didn't realize I was thinking aloud. You mentioned that you had dreamed of a vampire with less fashion sense than Caleb, who 'keeps a girl's severed head in a box as some kind of bizarro table ornament,' yes?" Giles turns carefully to the correct page in his reference book, and hands it to the frowning Slayer. "I believe I've found your man."

The constant motion of the bus rolling on hour after hour is making Xander vaguely nauseous. Yet his stomach is rumbling 'feed me, feed me,' so loud that Dawn, who has moved to sit with him, can probably hear it. It's confusing and he'd like to resolve the conflict a.s.a.p.; but the only food he has left is the remains of breakfast from McDonald's Drive-Thru back in Kadoka, in what already feels like another time zone. He rummages under his seat until he finds the greasy paper bag and sniffs its contents suspiciously. *Holy rancid Egg-Mc-muffins Batman*, if he ate that he would be redecorating the interior of their transport in no time; and

much as it's in need of redecorating he doesn't think his fellow Scoobies would thank him. Xander remembers the big innocent smile the girl in Kadoka gave them as she asked, 'School trip huh?'

'You could call it that. It, um...yes, it is certainly an educational excursion of sorts, certainly is that,' Giles had replied.

The girl had flashed them all that big smile again as she crammed their order of eleven breakfasts through the half open driver's window, and told them all to 'Drive safe, and have a nice day,' with what sounded like genuine warmth; at seven am. Xander wonders how long it will be before she is calling on vengeance demons, or greeting rude customers with an AK-47. But it is long past the hour they would normally have stopped for lunch and he is more immediately concerned with his need to feed. Judging by the semi-mutinous looks he can see Rona, Sanna and even Dawn flashing in Buffy's direction, he isn't the only one. "Hungry Dawnster?"

"You betcha," she gestures to the crumpled paper bag he is still holding, and wrinkles up her nose, "but not enough to eat that...yet."

"Honestly, I think I'd rather eat my Mom's Cajun surprise than this. And that is not something to be said lightly, it may well have contained actual Cajuns." Xander turns and raises his voice to be heard above the noise of some Green Day album that Kennedy is insisting on playing to accompany her stint behind the wheel. "Hey, Buff." He waits for the Slayer to acknowledge him. She, Faith, Willow and Giles have their heads held close together and are speaking in low urgent voices. Which could either mean they are discussing how to avert yet another apocalypse, or whether Fudge-Choc-Chip or Rocky Road is the superior ice cream; it's always hard to tell. "Buffy." This time she looks up. "What say we all take a break at the next town and form a foraging party, see what kind of vitals they live on in these here parts? No good for the fighting if we're running on empty."

"I have low blood sugar," Andrew pipes in, "I'm starting to feel kinda dizzy, and if I don't eat soon there could be serious consequences. Also, I need to urinate. I'm just saying..."

"Okay, Xander. Go and tell Kennedy to stop at the next diner that doesn't look like it has a progressive approach to pest control; I don't really want to be finding a cockroach chowing down on my Happy Meal, again. Oh, and if you could persuade her to stop singing you would earn my eternal gratitude. There may be cookies."

The singing part could be a challenge he thinks; as he edges down the narrow isle of the bus, Kennedy is belting out, "I want to be the minority, I don't need your authority, down with the moral majority, 'cause I want to be the minority," in a surprisingly Janis Joplin-esque rasp. When Sanna joins in with great enthusiasm, but in an entirely different key, he can feel Giles' pained expression, even with his back to him. "I pledge allegiance with the underworld, one nation under dog, here of which I stand alone, a face in the crowd, unsung against the mould, without a doubt, singled out, the only way I know."

Summertime, and the livin' is easy.

It's a scorching hot day. I've been flaked out in a shady part of our garden for an hour trying to read, but I'm too spaced to actually understand complex things like sentences; my mind is so full of thoughts it's like they're cancelling each other out. I try to focus on small things, like the way brushing the palm of my hand over the spiky tips of the fresh cut grass, tickles and makes my toes curl. Or how the cut on that hand from this morning -- when I forgot how strong my grip is now and broke a glass -- has already vanished. But then I start wondering what in the hell is going on with me? Why has that cut gone, like it was never there, when I should have had it for days? And my brain starts to overload again.

I haven't seen Paulie since the night he kissed me. He was supposed to be coming back the next night but he never showed up. I kept trying to call him but he wasn't answering my messages. So yesterday, when, after some serious grovelling, Mom un-grounded me, I went round there but nobody was home; the house was all shut up like they had gone away for the weekend. I can't help feeling like I screwed up big time -- that I should have stayed quiet and not told him all the freaky stuff that's happening to me, because now he's probably hiding from me. And maybe he only kissed me because he was in shock, and he's embarrassed and doesn't know how to tell me to my face that it was a mistake.

Last time I felt this bad was the summer Dad walked out on us. It was like he had died, only worse because he had chosen not to be with us. Death didn't drag him away, he just didn't want us anymore; and every time I found something that had belonged to him lying around the house, I started hurting all over again because I knew he was never coming back. Bastard. Mom decided we had to have some fun, so she took me and Paulie for a tourist cruise down the Illinois River on one of those old-fashioned steamboats with the big, dangerous looking, paddle wheels at each side. That evening we all stood on Pekin Pier to watch the sunset. Paulie was silhouetted against the red-orange sky pretending to fish with an invisible rod. He must have hooked a giant 'cause he was struggling to reel it in, and I was laughing, and life was so beautiful I wanted to catch hold of it and make it stay just at that perfect moment. But even as I was thinking it, the sun dipped below the horizon, and I sat down on the rough wooden pier and burst into tears. Mom came and wrapped her arms around me so tight I could hardly breathe; and told me she was never going to leave me, that she just wanted to protect me, that everything was going to be okay -- all those things I wanted to believe and never quite could. I sobbed my heart out while Paulie stood a little way off pretending not to hear, and clutching his invisible fish.

There's a storm brewing, Faith can feel it. Her head is aching, and that, combined with too much enforced quality time with the Slayeretts is starting to make her edgy. She is jonesing for a fight, any fight will do. So now they are in the parking lot outside of the Double Meat Palace, Ankeny, she is standing a little apart from the others, talking herself down like she's some nut-job balanced on a high ledge ready to jump -- *screw gravity. Yeah, only when you jump you tend to take bystanders with you, so better stay on that ledge. Be still. Find your centre. Focus on breathing, in...out...in...out, and you won't do the crazy.* These are the moments she begins wondering whether she has changed, or if Wes was right and she never truly will. If those years talking to Kovsky, the shrink, in lock-up taught her to deal with her

inner psycho; or just hide her better, even from herself.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Buffy says, glaring at the Double Meat logo on top of the diner.

Willow gestures to a trail of French fries scattered on the hot tarmac leading to the entrance. "Hmm, you could be right, looks like they're trying to lure us in there with fried re-constituted potato sticks. It's probably a trap; we should go."

Xander marches purposefully forward. "Well you guys can stand here and starve if you want, but I'm primed and ready for action and I'm going in. Who's with me?"

Buffy has to take a speedy side step out of the way as he is answered by a tidal wave of hungry girls, and Andrew, making for the door as if it was the entrance to paradise. Willow and Giles tag along at a more sedate pace, and Buffy is about to follow them when she notices Faith is missing and turns to look for her; after all, Faith is usually the last person to miss out on munchies. There she is, at the far edge of the parking lot, standing under a tree like she's rooted to the spot, head down, shoulders tensed. Buffy thinks she should probably leave her to it, whatever it is, but finds herself walking over before she realizes what she's doing. *Damn.*

"Faith, are you okay?"

As Faith's head jerks up, Buffy thinks she sees a brief flicker of pain, and something that looks a lot like fear in her eyes, before she manages to cover it.

"Five by five." Faith folds her arms and nods towards a tall, well-muscled biker returning to his Harley. "Check out the beef-stick."

Buffy gives him an appraising look. She knows Faith's avoidance game and right now she's too tired not to play along. "Lunchable. With a change of clothes, and a sizeable investment in personal grooming products."

"Says the woman currently wearing the jeans that time forgot. You're hardly in a position to throw stones B."

"No, I'm really not." Buffy turns to leave, but hesitates when she feels Faith's, surprisingly gentle, hand on her arm. The gentleness throws her, it makes her care more than she would like; makes her remember a far off time when Faith had tasted of warm spring nights, and cheap whiskey and longing. She'd wanted her then, and she hates to admit it but part of her occasionally, very occasionally, wishes things could have turned out differently. *Bad Buffy. She'd probably taste of ashes now.* Faith is frowning, and seems to be on the verge of saying something. *Be quiet, don't make any sudden moves or you'll frighten the honesty beast back into hiding.*

She waits; not looking directly at Faith, but letting her eyes focus at some indistinct point just past her left shoulder. A plastic bag blows along the ground, lifted and dropped, lifted and dropped by the feeble breeze.

Faith wonders if she will ever know how to say the things she needs to say, or if when it really matters she will always be a shit for brains jerk. How can she tell B that that empty look

in her eyes scares her more than any demon. That sometimes she still dreams Buffy's dead, and wakes up in a panic, with the sheets twisted tight around her, crying like some stupid little kid because she knows that she's truly and forever alone. How can she tell her that she wants to make amends, to be forgiven, and that it's hard, so hard not to hate her for making her feel this way.

Buffy shuffles her feet. The silence is starting to get uncomfortable. "What is it?" She is aiming for sympathetic, but it comes out as sharp and irritated.

There is a rumble of distant thunder. Faith lets go of her arm and glances up at the sky. "Nothing...I'm hungry is all."

Willow is contemplating the plight of the Double Meat employee. Not unlike the story of Sisyphus, condemned to spend eternity in Hades pushing the same gigantic boulder up the same hill; or the story of the bad-ass Wiccan who will probably spend the rest of her days attempting to deal with the fall out from calling thousands of Slayers at once. *It was the right thing to do. Share the power. Spread the load. No longer, 'one girl in all the world,' but an army, who can, perhaps, even rid the earth of vampires and demons once and for all.* She should be rolling in puppies, Willow done good. Instead, she's having a hard time keeping from breaking down and begging someone else to take the job. To live with the sensation of mystical connection to all those lives, responsibility for finding all those girls, pressing on their nerve endings 24-7; driving them on way past the point of exhaustion or the ability to pun. But there is no one else. What remains of Watchers' Council is in chaos. Not even the Coven's most powerful seer can track Slayers this effectively; and Willow can never give this up. She has been chosen just as the Slayers have, and in spite of her present state of frazzlement she is grateful.

She has almost convinced herself that that moment of bliss during the Scythe spell is a gift she can live on for years if she has to; the grace of the Goddess that Tara always believed in but she never really did -- until then. She remembers one, ridiculously early, morning in Nebraska, waking in Kennedy's arms, shaking and drenched in sweat, after surviving yet another nightmare of flayed skin and incinerated meat. And as her girlfriend talked softly to her about the time her family 'did Europe,' and she got lost in the old Jewish quarter of Vienna, Willow felt the faint afterglow of forgiveness. She knows she has been given a second chance, and she is determined not to waste it.

Most of the Scooby gang are wedged around a rather sticky table in the corner of the diner nearest the fan that counts as the only air conditioning. Faith adds a liberal squirt of ketchup to her Double Meat Medley, replaces the top half of the bun, and licks her fingers. "Playing connect the incredibly obvious dots here. It seems like Buffy's dream vamp, Giles' Crevecour, and the general wiggins Willow's having about this new Slayer, all join up in Peoria. So what's the scoop on this city? What do we know about the place?"

"Um, ooh...penicillin." Willow sees the baffled looks she is getting and ploughs on. "During World War Two Peoria was the site of the first mass production of penicillin. The scientists hit on the idea of using the local corn steep liquor, which was plentiful, cheap, and excellent for growing mould fast. It led to a revolution in the treatment of infections."

"Not quite what I had in mind, Red."

"They have an annual pumpkin festival." Willow offers.

"Interesting," Xander mumbles through a mouthful of burger, "but I think we may be searching for something a little more demony."

"They could be evil pumpkins, bent on world domination through pie."

Xander reaches over to squeeze his best friend's shoulder. "Let it go Will."

"Okay, then I have nothing."

There is a loud explosion just outside in the parking lot. Willow drops her Dr. Pepper, fizzy liquid foaming all over the table. Buffy leaps to her feet and almost falls over Faith, who is moving with equal speed in an attempt to see what is happening. Xander starts choking on his fries. Giles reaches for the hold-all full of weapons he has left sitting next to his chair, and jumps perceptibly when another ear-splitting blast rings through the diner. This time the source of the noise is all too apparent. He stands momentarily immobile, staring, the school bus is burning, a shell of blackened metal wreathed in flames and smoke. A piece of shrapnel has embedded itself in the wall a foot away from his head. "Oh bugger." Giles murmurs to no one in particular. Vi and Rona already have their stakes out, commendable, though he doubts they will be much use in the present circumstances. Andrew is clearly trying to decide whether to hide or stand his ground; and Dawn is using language he would never have believed she knew; Kennedy looks impressed.

The sleepy Sunday afternoon diner is descending into chaos. Some sections of the room have been sprayed with broken glass and shrapnel. At least two patrons are down and bleeding. The air is beginning to fill with acrid smoke. People are milling about like passengers on the Titanic, yelling in panic and confusion as they rush for the door. A plump middle-aged woman is screaming and clinging to her large, fluffy purse as if it were a lifejacket; she makes for the exit and narrowly escapes being run down as a leather clad demon on a motorcycle comes crashing through the door and skids to a halt in the centre of the room. He is followed by four equally ugly companions, also dressed head to foot in scuffed black leathers; their tattooed and multiply pierced faces looking like pink wax that has been left out too long in the sun. *Hellions -- well that's simply marvellous.* Giles makes to put on his glasses, and realizes he's already wearing them. The few patrons who have not made it to safety stare in horror and disbelief. One of the demons, the one wearing crocodile skin boots, grabs the, now cowering, woman, easily holding her with one hand around her neck. His message is clear -- make a move and this bitch loses her head.

"Told you I had a bad feeling about this," Buffy mutters accusingly, pulling an engraved Byzantine hand-axe out of the weapons bag and taking a step towards the intruders. Her own bag, the one with the Scythe in it, the one she always has with her, except now of course, is in the former bus. Buffy is pretty sure the Scythe can take care of itself, but she would feel a whole lot better about this situation if she was holding it. She is aware of the rest of the gang ranged behind her, ready to charge as soon as she says the word.

Croc gives his captive's neck a warning squeeze, rubs his free hand down his pants leg and leers at Buffy. "Crevecour said you'd be here. That dude is never wrong."

"In case you haven't noticed -- hello! You're in a room full of majorly pissed Slayers, and an extremely powerful witch. You just blew up our bus and rudely interrupted our lunch. Looks like you're about to go violently, painfully and permanently into 'that good night.'"

It's taking all Faith's hard won self-control to keep from hurling herself bodily at the row of demons to see if they'll go down like bowling pins. *What the hell is Buffy waiting for? Okay, there's a hostage, but standing around making small talk isn't going to help.* She hears Willow begin whispering what she assumes is an incantation in Latin, or some other language that's useless unless you want to suck the world into Hell or turn your ex into a mongoose. Maybe that's the plan, a gang of mongooses shouldn't be too hard to defeat.

The demon laughs, a strange gurgling laugh. "We do not fear you. Crevecour has shown us the Truth. Crevecour has shown us the Way."

Faith snorts and adjusts her grip on her knife. "Great, that's all we need, Born Again Demons; wonder if they take time out from their busy schedule of rape and pillage to go door-stepping." She lowers her voice. "There are only five; we can take them, easy." This seems to amuse Croc; he shrugs, flings his hostage aside and pulls two semi-automatic shotguns out of his jacket. His friends follow suit, they are all heavily armed. As they open fire Faith flings herself to the ground behind an over turned metal table, Buffy hits the floor beside her, and a second later Xander slides along the ground hanging onto Willow like he's scoring a touchdown. It's a second too late. Will is lying on her back, with Xander half covering her but Faith can see a pool of blood already forming under her shoulder. "Willow -- you still with us?"

Willow draws in her breath through clenched teeth. "I think my wiggins just had wigglets; and also...ow!" She closes her eyes. *Tara. So this is what a bullet, a real bullet, feels like, Tara...*

Xander gazes appealingly at his friend. "Just hang in there Will, I'm going to get you out of here; somehow -- Will?"

"Xander," Buffy says trying to keep the edge of panic out of her voice, "give me your shirt."

Your shirt...Tara...please don't leave me...

"We need to try and stop the bleeding -- Now!"

Xander begins struggling out of his loud Hawaiian shirt, repeating. "Gonna get you out of here."

Willow opens her eyes, trying not to scream with pain, trying to focus. "No, you're not. I'm not going anywhere, I have to stay, and anyway I, er, I think we're trapped. Much as I...much as I love you I don't fancy doing a Butch and Sundance into a hail of bullets just yet." She puts on her resolve face. "Fight now, pass out later."

Giles, Dawn and Kennedy are crouching behind a bench, bullets whizzing through the air just above their heads. "This is precisely why I always said there should be stricter gun laws in this godforsaken country," Giles hisses, "but oh no, we must not infringe the rights of the citizen to bear arms; bloody Americans."

A bullet bursts through the back of the bench narrowly missing Dawn's arm. She grasps Giles' sleeve for comfort. "I totally agree but I think this would count as a flawed example. I mean demons -- not strictly citizens; and anyway..."

"I hate to interrupt this potentially fascinating debate," Kennedy breaks in sharply, "but do you think we can save it for after we don't die." She scans the room. "Do you guys know where Sanna is? And why is Xander doing the full Monty? Oh God...Will." She flattens herself to the ground and wriggles towards the place where Xander is hunched over Willow's terribly still body; past Andrew, Rona and Vi, who are behind another bench, bunched protectively around a terrified young couple and their little boy; past a less lucky customer lying twisted over a chair with what's left of her face covered in blood. She is nearly at Will's feet when the shooting stops abruptly.

Kennedy can hear the demons laughing as they admire the results of catching up with modern technology. One of them is shouting for the Slayers to come out and die, when Sanna comes hurtling out of the restroom behind them, she must have been in there the whole time, waiting for her chance. She grabs a fork from the counter and, without slowing down at all, sweeps the nearest demon's legs out from under him with a low spinning kick and, as he lands on his back, rams the improvised weapon into his eye. He howls with rage and pain, trying unsuccessfully to pull the fork out. Faith and Buffy are rushing forward, with Vi following, and Sanna is rolling away when the gunfire starts up again. Kennedy sees Croc take aim and the spray of blood as Sanna's thin body is riddled with bullets. The momentum carries her forward, a whirl of dirty blond hair and flailing limbs, until she crashes into a table. She jerks as another bullet hits her in the stomach; then lies still.

Dio mio. Merda! Merda, merda, this isn't how we were meant to end this trip. Kennedy finds she is rising to her feet, fully expecting the next bullet will be monogrammed especially for her, when suddenly the demon's weapons glow white-hot. There is a smell of singeing flesh and they drop their guns, stunned and cursing. *A spell; must have been Will, must have been -- she's still alive.*

Giles peers cautiously round the bench in time to see Kennedy wrestle one of the Hellions to the ground, and disappear from view.

Croc is clutching his scorched hands under his arm pits as Faith lunges at him, growling low in her throat. She knees him in the crotch and, as he recoils, follows through with a head-butt. He swings a punch at her but she ducks and, before he can regain his balance, stabs him in the gut, twists her knife, and yanks it upwards through his chest with such force it breaks through his ribs and back out again.

Vi has One-eye in a headlock and is attempting to snap his neck, while Buffy tackles his two remaining companions. She is moving so fast that the punches they are throwing look like an absurd display of air-swimming. As the demons take another furious swing at her she ducks at the very last moment, and slips out from between them so that they smash into each other. Turning in one easy movement she decapitates one with her axe as he groggily tries to get to his feet, and dodges as the other Hellion lurches at her with a long bladed knife. She smacks it out of his hand with a high kick and, as it clatters to the floor, backhands him into the counter and buries her axe in his forehead. A high pitched yell, and Kennedy wriggles out from underneath her deceased opponent and kneels beside him, looking blood stained and grimly triumphant. Vi lets go of One-eye's now limp body and stands up to survey the wreckage of

the diner. Her voice is shaking as she says "Do you think they'll make us pay for all this?"

There is a satisfying crunch of breaking glass as Faith puts her fist through the window of an old blue Chevy parked at the side of the Double Meat Palace. She is still so buzzed on adrenaline she doesn't even feel a scalpel-sharp fragment slice across her knuckles. She quickly unlocks the door, pulls it open, sweeps the driver's seat clear and slides behind the wheel.

Things are so crazy inside the diner she's sure no one saw her leave. She's not entirely sure she's here herself, after all isn't she a good little Slayer now? Shouldn't she be back inside helping her almost friends, and B, deal with the mess instead of running away, again? Skipping town before the medics and the cops show up to body bag the victims, punish evildoers and keep the righteous safe...from people like her. *'Gee, you look mighty familiar girl, aren't you that escaped murderer we've been a huntin' for?'*

You ain't going back to jail, no way, not now, not ever; and anyway, the Scoobies are probably better off without you. Always were.

Faith's hands are sweating as she rips out the plastic covering under the steering wheel and gropes for the cool metal of the ignition barrel. She feels her way along it and tugs out the four wires at the end. *Okay, get a grip. It's been a while but some things you never forget, right? Like the first night you spend in a Salvation Army hostel, when your mom has the DTs so bad she's seeing things and won't stop screaming. Or the first time you wake up naked on a motel room floor with some stinking prick snoring in the bed, and you're so wasted you can't remember how the fuck you got there, who he is, or why you're bleeding. Or the first time a kiss really means something, and you're so stupidly happy and so scared you think you're gonna die right there. Or how it feels the first time you kill someone. Shit -- this is all wrong.* Faith tears apart the tangle of wires she has been trying to connect and starts again. *The look on B's face the night she tries to gut you with your own knife.* Thunder rumbles directly overhead, there is a brilliant flash of lightening and, as if on cue, the first drops of rain begin spattering on the dusty windshield. *Kneeling in a filthy alley begging Angel to just kill you.* Faith bites her lip and touches the one free wire she's holding to the three she has joined together. This time the car engine sputters and then starts turning over steadily. *This is it, your chance to get out. Away; from her; from all of it. Leave it in a trail of dust. But go where? Anywhere. Just go. Jesus Christ, just go! You can keep on driving until you disappear off the edge of the world. But then what, genius? It's only trading one kind of prison for another.*

I could have been in France right now, Buffy thinks as she moves around the diner, trying to gauge the damage -- two dead, four seriously injured, much random destruction of property -- if I had taken Giles' advice and gone on that well earned vacation I could have been sitting in a sophisticated little café in Paris, with Dawn, eating calorific pastries, talking about things of no importance and watching the people go by. But I can't leave. My ghosts, those silent, accusing ghosts that even Will has no sure explanation for, won't let me. Buffy looks over to the bench where Willow is sitting; the shirt bound around her left shoulder is a sodden, red mess and her face is ashen but, as she meets her friend's gaze, there is a fierce light in her eyes. Xander and Kennedy are with her, her bodyguards, they look almost as white as she does.

"The ambulance should be here, what the hell is taking them so long?" Buffy turns furiously to Giles as if it's somehow his responsibility. She knows it's ridiculous, unfair, childish, but

she desperately wants him to make all this go away. They closed the Hellmouth; shouldn't that mean life starts getting at least a little easier, a little less, well, deathly, rather than going all Tarantino on them? He shrugs helplessly and continues trying to prevent Sanna from bleeding to death all over the linoleum. Dawn is kneeling beside them, mute, despondent; Buffy wants to comfort her, but any words of comfort would feel like a lie right now.

"Heads up B!" Buffy whirls round to see Faith marching through the door. "I found us some wheels, time to blow." She stops beside Sanna, staring at her, her boots touching the edge of the bloody puddle that has formed around the unconscious girl. "Sonofabitch!"

"Faith, what the hell are you talking about?"

Faith looks briefly angry, then perplexed. "Okay, the way I see it we have work to do; a Slayer to find, an evil, bloodsucking son of a bitch to turn into kitty-litter, and we can't do that if we stay here, so I found us some transport. Now let's move; I've got room for three."

Buffy folds her arms and asks wearily. "Stolen?"

"Borrowed, stolen, yeah, whatever. Jeez, should I have tried to get us a rental? Or maybe hailed one of those real convenient non-existent cabs out there?"

"I...no, I don't know, but this isn't the way."

"Why?"

Buffy shrugs, frustrated, disappointed. "Because it's wrong."

"Hmm. Plus, I had to off a couple of guys to get the car, probably shouldn'ta done that either."

"Faith," Buffy says, quietly warning.

"Kidding." Faith begins to raise her hands in a 'I'll come quietly officer' pose, then changes her mind and reaches for Buffy. "Look, I'm sorry." She feels like if she can just touch her it will make things alright. It will cancel out petty stuff like grand theft auto, and nearly running away again; she can be one of the good guys and -- Buffy bats her hand away like it's a roach.

"Don't."

Stupid. She will only ever see you as a killer. Faith clenches the hurt into her fists until her nails slice into her palms, and resists the urge to punch the self-righteous little bitch. "Shit, we can wrangle this out later. Now come on, this place is gonna be swarming with cops any second, and I'm not really in the mood for playing twenty questions. If you had any sense you would be out of here by now -- I thought speed was of the fucking essence!"

"You stole a car!"

"Er, yeah, again, I guess so. What are they gonna do B -- arrest me?" Faith's lips curl back in a feral grin.

Willow rises shakily to her feet, and still flanked by Xander and Kennedy, joins the rest of the

group, who are now circled around Buffy and Faith's little tête-à-tête. "She's right. We need to get to Peoria, speedy is good, and somehow I don't think the bus is going anywhere anytime soon."

"We? Will, have you gone completely insane? You can barely stand up, there is no way I'm putting you in anymore danger...today at least." Buffy's voice is steady but she has to blink back tears.

Xander raises his hand. "I second that motion."

"Me too," Kennedy says, putting her arm carefully around Willow's waist and scowling at Faith.

"Hey, since when have any of you been the boss of me?" Willow winces sharply as burning pain shoots down the length of her arm, and waits a moment for the room to stop spinning. "I'm good to go, really. And if this Crevecour is as powerful as the book says, I'm guessing you might need a witch on your side to help kick his un-dead ass." *Admittedly a witch who feels like she has about enough mojo to float a toothpick at present.* "No arguments. I'm going with you. Okay?"

Buffy shakes her head; she knows there is no reasoning with Willow when she's in this mood. "Fine. Then we have room for one more."

"Will goes -- I go," Kennedy states; looking subdued.

For a beat no one speaks, no one moves; the room is filled with the clamour of all those thoughts and feelings there is no time left to express. Then the sound of distant sirens cuts through the stillness. Buffy pulls Dawn into a quick embrace, then grabs the weapons bag from under an over turned table. "Xander, I'll call your cell phone when we're done, and we can figure out where to regroup." She surveys the motley band of Scoobies and Slayers standing uncertainly in the destruction that seems to follow them wherever they go; and all she can manage to say is, "Be safe."

June 1st 2003. Peoria. Illinois.

Zoe Jane...Zoe Jane...I know that name is familiar...something...Zoe Jane, something, something...follow the yellow brick road...I need to find her...there's no place like home...no place like...I'm floating somewhere inside my head...my head, oh God...and there's no sight just snow...jingle bells, Santa smells...snow like a TV screen that's not tuned in to anything...she...I...we read once that that's the energy from the Big Bang still playing on a TV near you...roll up, roll up for the beginning of everything...end of everything...same dif...Zoe Jane...that's me.

One of these mornings you're gonna rise up singing.

The sun sets, and Mom sighs and turns away from the last red glow in the sky; from me still standing out in the shadows of our backyard. It's drizzling again but I don't want to go inside, don't want to stop watching until all the light is gone.

You're gonna spread your wings and take to the sky.

Knock, knock. Who's there? Paulie. Paulie who? Just Paulie. Do you wanna come in? How about you come out? Mom nodding, 'Go' and turning back to the TV. Where...where have you been? Needed time to think. Lot of big stuff. Plus feeling kinda dead y'know. His skin looks faded. His lips are so cold on my mouth.

Until that morning nothing's gonna harm you child.

His bootlace is trailing he trips and squats down to re-tie it. I smile -- what a klutz. A van with blacked out windows glides by. Someone just walked over my grave. The monsters, the things from the dark are here -- so many, we're surrounded. They close in. I know I have to fight. Oh God -- Paulie run! Yeah, but why would I want to do that? Paulie, what's wrong with your face?

My nightlight is burning. I'm burrowed under my bedcovers holding tight to Mr. Oinkle. Daddy is mad at me for waking them up again; but Mom is sitting here singing to me 'cause I had a bad dream, and it helps sometimes if she sings. It's nearly morning and then I'll be safe. Not long, and I'll be safe. I'll be safe.

So hush now baby, don't you cry.

It's like being in a movie, Willow thinks hazily as she watches the multi-coloured reflections of Peoria's lights sliding across the car windows. Street lights, headlights, an illuminated restaurant sign, blurring together in the rain. Everything outside her seems to be happening in slow motion, abstractly beautiful, strangely distant. Only a few things seem real; the acute pain in her shoulder, wrapped in the packing and fresh bandages they grabbed in a 'middle of nowhere' drugstore; her tenuous connection with the Earth moving beneath her as she tries to draw healing energy into her body; and the feeling of foreboding, which intensifies with every mile they travel towards this new Slayer, until it is practically drowning out everything else.

The high-pitched ringing of Buffy's cell phone seems obscenely loud. "Giles...what? Giles, are you okay? Oh...oh God." She hunches down lower in her seat, wishing she could be some place private. "Huh...yeah, of course...thanks, for...for letting me know." She hangs up and carefully slides the phone back into her jeans' pocket.

Faith looks worried, she slips a gear abruptly and the car jerks in protest. "Hey, don't keep us in suspense -- what's the sitch?"

"Sanna." Buffy pauses, and starts again. "Sanna never woke up." She feels like the words are choking her. "She died an hour ago. Giles thought we would want to know." *Just one more casualty in this endless war -- right? Just one more anonymous blip vanishing off the radar screen as if she had never even been there - right. Right?*

Kennedy starts swearing profusely in Italian, under her breath, then notices Willow, still staring out of the window, has begun crying quietly, and takes hold of her hand.

M Phoenix – Journey To No End

Faith makes a dangerously sharp left turn down a side street, and narrowly avoids a truck coming in the opposite direction. Buffy is hanging onto her seat. "Y'know, I think we're going the wrong way."

"No, I'm going the direction Red told me," Faith says flooring the gas pedal.

Buffy tries again. "Shit, I mean I think this is a one way street!"

Kennedy is swearing earnestly, in English this time.

Faith lets out a harsh laugh and swerves hard, missing a head-on collision with an old, black Mini, by inches. "Yeah, and I'm going one way."

This is so not good, Buffy thinks. "Faith -- please!"

Suddenly Faith pulls over to the side of the road and slams on the breaks. She is breathing hard and gripping the steering wheel like she hates it and wants it dead. Buffy is preparing to launch into a tirade about how she's still a stupid, irresponsible, self-centred, murderous, worthless, psychotic bitch; when she notices the other Slayer is shaking, and instead simply says, "Faith?" There is no response, only the low rumble of the car engine idling. She reaches out tentatively and lays her hand on the back of Faith's neck, feels her jump slightly at the unexpected touch; then her breathing becoming more even as Buffy strokes her long, tangled hair. Finally, she lets go of the wheel, and shakes her head as if she's just waking up. Buffy finds she's almost reluctant to stop touching Faith; but her mind does not want to accept that particular confusing piece of information at present. She unbuckles her seatbelt. "We have to get moving -- I'll drive."

Well, what strange girls. Sarah Marquette plumps up the sofa cushions and settles back down in front of the TV. She stares at the screen, just snow, snow, snow on every channel, it must be broken. She clicks the off switch and stands up, paces to the window and pulls back the curtain. *Whoever they were they are definitely gone now.*

Sarah had answered the door expecting to find Zoe Jane there -- she always forgets her key -- but instead she was confronted with four dishevelled young women standing in the warm Summer rain; dirty and bloodstained, looking as if they had just escaped from some institution. They seemed so entirely out of place in her good, safe, suburban neighbourhood, that she was more than a little alarmed; *after all, you hear such awful stories.* She was preparing to shut the door on them when the thin blond girl, the one who could have been a cheerleader once, in another lifetime, smiled at her, and that innocent, sad smile was so oddly reassuring that she relented and asked. "Can I help you?"

"Sorry to bother you so late, we were looking for Zoe Jane Marquette. We...um...we really need to talk to her if possible. This is the right house isn't it?" The blond girl turned slightly to glance at one of her friends, a rather dazed and angry looking redhead with her arm in a sling. She nodded solemnly in reply.

Oh God what has she done? I mean look at these people. She is in a gang isn't she! "She isn't home. Maybe I could take a message, ask her to call you? Are you friends of hers?"

Sarah noticed the injured girl had closed her eyes and begun mumbling to herself, swaying gently. *Probably a few cookies short of a bake sale that one; poor kid.*

The dark woman standing just at the edge of the light from the porch flicked away her cigarette butt, then put her hand on the doorframe and leaned in. "Maybe you could tell us where she went." She looked so young, *well, a lot of folks do once you pass the big four o*, but she had the most intense eyes Sarah had ever seen; she found having them fixed on her was decidedly unnerving and took an involuntary step backwards. "Or maybe..."

"Faith, I'll handle this. I'm sorry, I should have introduced myself, I'm Buffy the -- I'm Buffy. These are my friends, and no, we don't know your daughter directly but we do have some news for her, and we've come a long way to deliver it. It's kinda important, and it's kinda urgent, so if you could tell us where we can find her it would really help us...and her. Please."

Sarah hesitated, unsure what to do. The anxiety and frustration emanating from the band of girls in front of her felt so thick in the air she could have touched it. It made her nervous, made her wish they would just go away and leave her to her quiet Sunday evening. Finally she drew in a deep breath, smoothed her hands down the skirt of her blue cotton dress and said, in a voice she hoped was authoritative. "It is getting rather late, why don't you all come back tomorrow evening, about six, and we can discuss whatever is going on properly then."

Buffy sagged slightly, and began again. "I understand this must all seem pretty weird. I mean we don't usually look like...the thing is we...it's been a rough day, but I promise you that we only want to help."

Sarah thought the last word came out sounding almost strangled. This girl standing, dripping wet on her doorstep; suddenly seemed so hurt, so lost, in some unfathomable way so like her Zoe Jane; that she was on the verge of inviting Buffy in, against her better judgement. Then her red haired friend cried out, and would have fallen if the diminutive young woman beside her hadn't caught hold of her with surprising speed and strength. For a second Sarah felt a surge of panic; when it passed she could just make out the last few words the red haired girl whispered to Buffy. "We have to. No time left to lose."

They left hurriedly. Piled into their battered old car and sped down the empty, tree-lined street, and out of sight, but not out of mind.

Yes, what strange girls. Sarah Marquette shakes her head as if trying to clear it of the memory and picks up the phone to call Paulie's house. It is time Zoe Jane was home.

Mildew, candle wax, incense, fresh blood and fear, the scents one will find in any church that Crevecour chooses to attend. Even after three centuries as a vampire he still finds the aroma of terrified human intoxicating; it evokes so many fond memories, promises so many pleasures. He allows himself a brief, nostalgic smile, as he finishes draining the pretty young pastor and flings his lifeless body aside. But he has no time for wallowing in past glories tonight, instead he must focus on the triumph to come, the fulfilment of his most cherished dreams.

Crevecour finds it hard to believe that Zoe Jane, this gangly girl, his followers left lying bound and drugged unconscious on the altar beside the ravaged head of his Lady, is the one he has sought for so long; the vessel who will free Isabelle. He has failed bitterly twice before. But this time he knows with absolute certainty that everything is right, the time, the place, the subject, and he will not fail again. The girl is no beauty, plain even, yet with her red-gold hair fanned out around her head she resembles nothing so much as a painting of Ophelia he saw once in London. The artist had captured her at the moment just before she sank beneath the surface of the stream. Skirts bloated with water, floating wild flowers surrounding her; the perfect tragic heroine. Only the look of pained acceptance on her face was all wrong, wrong for someone about to drown. He had laughed so loudly they had asked him to leave the gallery; the next day he was still picking the gristly owner out of his teeth.

As he begins casting the circle for his working, Isabelle lets out a high, keening cry; and when he turns to her there are bloody tears welling from her whitened eyes. He strokes her cheek. "Soon my love you will have a body again. Look, I found her for you just as I promised; and when you are made whole we will reign together forever." And what a body, he thinks, a Slayer, to make a Slayer one of his own, it is too perfect an irony. She was not easy to catch. Sebastian is still limping. Pivo has lost two fingers and a good deal of hair; and the new boy, Paulie, has deep scratches running down both sides of his face, yet he looks exultant. He has potential, that one. Buffy and her followers are coming to the rescue, his Lady warned him of as much. But even if his demon lackeys haven't reduced them to ugly red stains on the ground, he is confident they will be too late to stop him. After all, as it has been spoken so shall it be; and anyway, he has raised a barrier spell around the church. In the unlikely event that it fails, two dozen, or more, of his cult are attending him tonight, ready to live or die at his command, the numbers are to his advantage. He finishes his casting then stops to gather his thoughts, singing all the while to soothe Isabelle. "There's a place for us, a time and a place for us..." It helps sometimes when he sings.

It is time. The planets are in alignment, and the power of this place is rising, he can feel it stinging the soles of his feet through his white leather boots. Crevecour picks up the little wax poppets he spent the afternoon crafting with such care, one of his Lady and one of Zoe Jane, and begins binding them together with a silken thread, dyed dirty red with the blood of a moon old cuckoo. As he binds he chants in a cracked monotone.

"The Powerhouse Church of God in Christ," Faith announces loudly, reading the sign in a mock 'TV evangelist' voice. "Hallelujah. I'm saved."

Buffy stops the car and stares across the deserted street. In spite of the cheesy name, the large square, sandstone building seems friendly, almost inviting. The kind of joint Riley would have rolled up to dressed in his Sunday best, back in the day. Maybe he still attends; maybe he finds comfort waiting for him there among the flock. Buffy hopes so. Heaven is lost to her, and though the tearing pain of separation has faded, it never quite goes away; misery, she has discovered, has infinite variations. Sometimes she wonders if it would have been better to forget. As it is, this too sharp, too bright, too violent world will always be a place of exile. She imagines the church pews packed with families, brim full of belief and righteousness; a gospel choir warming up inside; normal, safe, maybe even happy. *That can't be good.* She can hear the low, chugging growl of a ship's engine passing somewhere nearby, and the slap of the wake against the quayside. The Illinois River must be very close. She briefly presses the heel

of her hand to the place between her eyes, where a slow ache is starting to throb; then twists round to look at Willow, slumped against Kennedy on the back seat. "Is this it?"

"Yu-huh." Willow closes her eyes for a moment, then opens them again and nods decisively. "This is it; and judging by the party Crevecour threw for us this afternoon, I'd guess there's quite a reception committee waiting for us in there."

"So, we should go mingle; enjoy the canapés," Kennedy says humourlessly, pulling a crossbow out of the weapons bag.

"We go in hard and fast," Buffy says, grabbing an axe and climbing out of the car; rapidly followed by the rest of the gang. "Our priority is to reach Zoe Jane. Faith and I can take the lead and try to deal with whatever nasties are in there, while Will distracts Mr. Magic until we can dust him. Kennedy, you watch her back; and --"

Faith slides across the hood of the car and hops down beside Buffy. "We rescue the girl, stake the bad guys, and go for pizza -- sounds like a plan." She points at the double doors on the side of the church nearest to them. "Count of three?"

"One," Buffy begins. She wonders if Faith will actually wait for the count; her barely contained violence feels like static in the air around her. It's making the fine hairs on Buffy's arms rise. "Two."

Willow is trying to focus, there is something, an odd shimmer that starts at the sidewalk a few feet away from them. She blinks rapidly. It is getting hard to keep her brain functioning on any level above basic survival. She knows her blood pressure must have dropped through the floor, and she's incredibly thirsty, soon she'll be hallucinating giant size Slushies. *Come on noggin, do your thing. That shimmer is familiar, but why? Oh hell.* "Wait! There's a --"

"Three."

Faith takes off like a greyhound out of the traps, with Buffy just behind her. At Willow's cry, Buffy stops dead, but Faith is moving too fast. A second later there is a noise like a moth hitting an ultraviolet insect zapper, amplified a hundred times; a bluish flash, and Faith goes flying. She lands on her back on the opposite side of the road.

"-- barrier spell," Willow finishes lamely.

"You don't say," Faith mutters, picking herself up of the asphalt, with difficulty, and limping over to lean on the car. Her clothes are steaming slightly.

Willow gives Faith a worried, apologetic look. "Are, are you okay. I mean, how bad..."

"Don't sweat it Red -- stings like a bitch, but I'll live."

Buffy lets out the breath she hadn't realized she was holding, and turns away. She stands at the edge of the sidewalk, and pokes the invisible barrier with her finger. There is another, smaller, crackle, and she draws back sharply. "Can you break through it Will?"

"I'll do my best, but it could take a while. Disabling a spell like this is, um, well it's not unlike trying to pick a lock with a wet noodle. Not that I've ever...never mind."

In the beginning, the void. Then the Word. Then the world. Then Isabelle -- always.

Crevecour continues to chant his spell, so simple, innocent, like a children's rhyme.

Great Hecate, hear my plea. Pluck the kernels from their shells.

But in his experience, sometimes the vilest poison can be found in the guise of innocence; an apple, a garden, a beautiful woman; or a girl, standing radiant in the light of an autumn evening, so long ago. It's a delightful conceit; one that cost him his soul years before he became a vampire.

Make it now their destiny, each in the other's place to dwell.

He can sense a shift beginning. The little wax poppets he is clutching are beginning to heat and meld, and as they do he can feel the essences of Isabelle and Zoe Jane are loosening in their skins. Soon they will wrench free, briefly pass each other travelling through the ether, and through him, changing partners in a ghostly dance, and when the music stops they will find themselves remade in another's image. An egg hatched in another bird's nest.

So close now, Crevecour's heart would leap, if it still could. Instead he freezes, there is a disturbance outside, someone is tampering with his barrier; it is weakening, disintegrating. No, this is unacceptable, it will not break. He is confident that there are few adept enough in magic to even dent it. He returns his full concentration to the spell.

Great Hecate, hear my plea.

There is a resounding crash from the right of the church, probably the oak of the doors splitting, followed by a clamour of shouts and curses from the group of vampires stationed there.

Pluck the kernels...

Crevecour feels the first flush of rage rising in him. It appears the Slayers have arrived, and brought a powerful witch with them. Their timing is impeccably bad, but he will not allow himself to be distracted. He is the master here, and it is his prerogative to ignore such minor annoyances. His followers are well seasoned and loyal; they can be trusted to deal with the intruders. He must think only of his beloved, trembling at the brink of freedom; his body touching hers once more. How he will sire her, teach her. How they will hunt and feed and glory in destruction across time and continents; their skins painted red with the blood of the kill; feared and worshipped by all.

...their destiny

He sees Pivo racing down the centre isle, leading a small group of vampires to join the mêlée at the side door. He is grinning like a gargoyle as a crossbow bolt hits him in the chest and he

explodes into dust. A second bolt wings by Crevecour at the level where his heart should be. It misses him completely and clatters ineffectually against the wall. He snorts; these children have no idea who they are dealing with if they think he will be that easy to kill; he has survived this long by becoming a creature of many tricks and deceptions.

Each in the other's place to dwell.

The Slayers have broken through the line, and the fighting has erupted into the church around him. Crevecour had hoped it would take them longer. He lowers his head, as he used to when he prayed, and stands his ground. For a moment he is half afraid this disruption will thwart his plans, that he will fail Isabelle yet again; it's like the bitter taste of bile in his throat. He will not fail. He cannot fail. And with that thought the spell peaks, and Crevecour, acting as the conduit, feels the prickling surge of torn spirits passing through him. A sudden blur of noise and unfamiliar emotions filling him until he thinks he will split at the seams; followed by an equally sudden and painful emptiness as they leave him. He looks down at the wax poppets gripped in his hands and realizes, with a start, they have passed right through each other and changed places.

He has not failed.

He stares at the body of the girl on the altar, darkly joyful -- he truly can do anything. His will is all, and God is nothing; a pathetic blister on the consciousness of humankind; one more thing that can no longer hurt him. His love is returning to him and all will be well, all manner of things will be well.

Faith has been itching for a fight like this. She got separated from B and the others as soon as they broke into the main body of the church, but that's okay, they all know what they have to do. There are five vamps circling her, weaving, swiping, trying to reach her, rip her to shreds, and she feels more alive than she has done in days. She has fallen into a familiar rhythm of punch, block, kick, block, jab, duck; that is almost too fast for thoughts. All she needs is a driving Industrial beat in her ears and she could be dancing. She catches a glimpse of a girl lying on the altar, Zoe Jane, and a tall figure, Mr. Crevecour she presumes, bending over her - - the target. But before she can get a better view, a vamp, who bares an uncanny resemblance to Arnold Schwarzenegger, smashes his fist into the side of her skull, then seems to hesitate for a second waiting for a reaction, for her to crumple up whimpering. *'Cause, hey, he's such a big, macho piece of undead beef and you're just a little girl. Chump.* Faith smiles sweetly as she stakes him; then lets out a battle roar and dives through the drifting cloud of dust before his friends have time to close the gap.

Three strides and she's on the altar steps, her blood is rising, singing in her veins. Crevecour turns to meet her; he's still wearing his human face, looking smug; his fingers steepled, the tips pressed to his lips. Faith experiences a millisecond of doubt -- human? No, she's made that mistake before, learned from it, and all her senses are screaming pure vampire; if for his dress sense alone. *This sonofabitch is toast.* She lunges at him, but for some reason she finds it hard to gauge his distance accurately, he isn't where he should be and her fists meet thin air. She follows up with a snap kick, and misjudges again -- nothing there. *Shit. This isn't funny. Either you're wrecked out of your gourd, or this is magic. Fucking magic. Where the hell is Red when you need her?*

"Come now," Crevcour says, bouncing a little on the balls of his feet, "o nce the Slayer was a

creature to be feared. I met her in Rumania, a formidable opponent, quite delicious. Surely you must be able to do better than that. I am disappointed in you."

Faith glances at the girl, Zoe Jane, and wonders if she could get to her. She sees B out of the corner of her eye, ploughing her way through a solid wall of vamps, fighting like she's possessed by a pack of wildcats. She's clearly trying to reach them, but she gets dragged back and disappears into the crush of bodies.

Faith's mouth has gone dry. She swallows, and gestures casually with her stake. "Don't fret lover, I'm just gettin' warmed up." With that she closes the distance between Crevecour and herself in one easy leap and rams the stake into his chest with all her might; except his chest isn't there of course. Faith feels him grab her right arm, the one she's leading with, and twist it out to the side as he steps behind her and palm strikes her in the back of the shoulder with huge force. A sudden keen pain as her shoulder dislocates, and she loses her balance and falls forward, landing unceremoniously on her face. Her arm will not move. She scrabbles frantically to regain her stake with her good hand.

Crevecour's boots appear abruptly in Faith's line of vision, she rolls away but he kicks her in the jaw so hard it flips her onto her back and makes her teeth rattle. Faith dazedly thinks it's like she rolled towards his foot instead of away from it. His voice is drenched with sarcasm. "Good show, but I think we should probably call it a day, frankly it is starting to become -- how shall I put this? -- embarrassing." He stamps on her exposed stomach and she doubles up, winded. She is going to kill this motherfucker so dead, just as soon as she can breathe. She struggles onto her hand and knees and considers trying to head-butt the bastard in the nuts.

"No need to get up, really, I can send you to Hell just as easily where you are," Crevecour says pleasantly, slamming his fist into Faith's throat, leaving her choking and retching on the floor.

Faith glares unsteadily at Crevecour's long, pale fingers, and manages to rasp out, "That may be where I'm going, but not tonight."

Poor girl; how she deceives herself. Her eyes are full of death, though whether it is her own or someone else's, Crevecour cannot tell. Rather a moot point now. He licks his lips remembering the unique flavour of Slayer blood, sweet and heady; back in Rumania he had got a trifle drunk on it. Maybe he should save some for Isabelle, her first meal. He thrusts his hand into the dark girl's hair and morphs into gameface, jerking her head to one side, the better to reach her jugular. She flails at him, uttering a stream of curses, and something that sounds like a brief snatch of a child's prayer. Crevecour laughs; this could well turn out to be the best night of his very long life.

Screaming. Somewhere at the edges of Willow's mind a tiny, terrified voice, nearly inaudible, like a radio turned down low. Someone has been working seriously dark mojo; she can feel the magic in the air around her, thick as molasses, clogging her nose and throat when she breathes. It's hard to ignore the illicit thrill that it gives her; and the sickening pangs of guilt and fear which immediately follow. She leans heavily against the cool plaster of the wall behind her and stares around. Kennedy is a blur of motion in front of her, keeping four vampires at bay. Beyond her she can see the Slayer they have been seeking lying on the altar, apparently unharmed, yet something is very wrong, her senses seem to be deceiving her; and that screaming in her mind is getting louder. Willow doesn't have time to ponder. As she

shifts to get a better view she sees a vampire, who can only be Crevecour, stooping over and half covering a thrashing body; *Faith -- oh God.*

Willow shouts the first spell that comes into her head. "Abiungo." A ball of electric blue light flies from her outstretched fingers and hits Faith, knocking her out of Crevecour's grasp. Strange, she had been aiming for the vampire. It's lucky for Faith it was a relatively innocuous spell, or she could have ended up a quivering pile of jello. Willow's thoughts are racing. Crevecour could well have cast a glamour of deception around himself, which might make things kinda tricky, but she thinks she can compensate. He snaps upright and spins round to glare directly at her, his yellow eyes narrowing to murderous slits. He already seems to have lost interest in Faith, who is taking her chance to crawl rapidly away.

Another spell is forming on Willow's lips as she watches Crevecour straighten his long, leather coat, then incline his head ingratiatingly as he says, "Enchante my dear." He is a pretty weird and unnerving sight. Tall, whip thin, and dressed entirely in white. With his pale hair and skin there is hardly any colour in him. He looks as if he has been bleached. But the thing which most draws Willow's attention is the small silver cross hanging over the bare skin of his chest; the skin beneath it is blistered, peeling and smouldering slightly, yet he seems quite unconcerned.

Crevecour waves his hand in a lazy spiral and Willow feels invisible bonds closing around her, cutting into her flesh. The pain sent blazing through her arm and shoulder is excruciating. She braces herself and whispers a freeing charm she learned from the coven in Wiltshire. The pressure vanishes almost instantly, and Willow sags in relief. She is exceedingly glad she was paying attention that day.

Crevecour is applauding; he is actually lolling by the altar and giving Willow a slow clap. "Well done. This could prove to be quite interesting."

You want interesting, huh? "Evincio." Willow watches the delicate green tendrils of a binding field encircle Crevecour and begin to lift him off his feet. She knows she's holding back, trying to keep her anger in check, but it's safer for everyone this way, and anyhow a spot of paralysis should do the trick. *Let's see if you still find all this amusing when we introduce you to Mr. Pointy, you arrogant sonofabitch. The great cosmic Dustbuster awaits.* Her triumph is short lived. Crevecour wriggles, makes a little scissor motion with his fingers and the binding field dissolves. Willow barely has time to register her increasing rage and disappointment before Crevecour attacks her with a ball of fire. She manages to extinguish it just as the heat begins searing her skin; but she's weakening fast, the room is swimming, and she's not sure how much longer she can remain conscious, let alone do battle.

Four-Mississippi-five-Mississippi-six... Six vampires are trying to kill Willow, and it is Kennedy's job to stop them, no matter what. Her desire to protect Will adds a previously unimaginable level of desperation to the way she wheels and circles. Left, right, up, down, forward and back and round and round. She can hear Buffy yelling, somewhere nearby, sounding mad as hell; but she's lost track of Faith and suspects she might be dead; she wasn't looking too hot at last sighting. Kennedy channels her growing sadness into a vicious double punch, spinning kick, stake through the heart combo. She shakes the ashes out of her hair as she drops back into a fighting stance, ready for the next assault. Every time she dusts one vamp he is instantly replaced by another; in this case a short, dumpy specimen in a hideous floral print dress, who comes barrelling into her at surprising speed. She -- it -- would look

like somebody's mom, the kind of woman who loves to make lemonade, and never misses a P.T.A. meeting, if it weren't for the fangs and the insane gleam in her eyes. Okay, she does kind of remind Kennedy of somebody's mom, though she doubts the lady in question had such a mean right hook. It's clear that the odds are against them. If Kennedy had been in a sharing mood she might have mentioned that this mission felt like a suicidally stupid thing to do from the get go. But there was no way she was letting Will leave without her. And they've done so many impossible things during the last few weeks that she is sure somehow they will win, because the alternative is beyond bad.

Willow flinches as a charging vamp drags Kennedy back by her collar and sinks his teeth into her neck before she has a chance to turn round. She cries out and twists away, kicking him into the wall before she stakes him, and flings herself back into the fray. That was too close. Willow sees puncture holes, blood welling, trickling onto Kennedy's shirt. Her vision is narrowing to a pinpoint of pure hate with Crevecour at its centre. She wants to eviscerate him, she wants to make him howl and beg; she wants to destroy him before she kills him. She is starting to scare herself. That tiny screaming voice in her head has begun shrieking, trapped and panicking. Willow can't shut it out, the empty horror of it, and it is scraping her mind raw. The temptation to resort to black magic is suddenly becoming overwhelming, the throb of dark wings beating inside her. The power is still there. Willow knows that in these situations she finds it easier to use, more potent than the frustrating earth magic she struggles so dutifully to master. *Balance, Gaia, menstrual life force, bla, bla, bla.* Her opponent is using black magic, thrashing her with it. *So why not fight fire with fire. It's so simple, I just have to say yes, just say yes and draw that power into me again. Let it burn. I could incinerate every evil, undead motherfucker within a ten mile radius...I could... I can...and I'm all with the ends justifying the means -- right? Just this once let it be easy. Just this once say yes and you can feel it again; lose yourself; let go. Say yes. Tara never understood that I...oh Goddess, what am I doing? I-I didn't mean it. I didn't.* But Willow knows that she did, and she feels like she's going to hurl. Shame and exhaustion are crushing her. Will she always be this weak? She thinks if she had a mirror she would be checking her roots round about now. Dark magic is a definite no-no. She can't afford to lose control, or risk Crevecour somehow using it against her. As a matter of fact he is baring his fangs at her in a knowing grin, which is both frightening her and **really** pissing her off.

The witch will not last much longer. Her energy is dimming, seeping away. Crevecour experiences a twinge of regret; he can't help liking the girl, he recognizes her potential. She is so terribly close to being kindred, yet she holds back and wastes her power. *It's a shame, but such is life.* Isabelle is beginning to stir; soon she will wake; and Crevecour is tiring of this game, it is time to finish it. He rapidly sketches sigils in the air and observes Willow collapse, writhing briefly on the ground before going rigid. *A shame -- indeed.* But wonder of wonders, as he turns he finds Isabelle is watching him intently through Zoe Jane's wide blue eyes. The features are different of course, but the expression is unmistakably Isabelle, and it renders her new face beautiful, transcendent, and oddly disquieting.

"My darling, my love; you have come back to me." Crevecour is in awe, he wants to worship her, prostrate himself before her. No, on second thoughts he wants to strip her naked and take her, here and now. Drink deep from her, make her his chalice, and let his own blood be her sacrament. Through him, and only him she will be born to eternal life. He throws back his head and roars with joy. Only when he reaches out to touch her does he realize she is still bound. Perhaps he should leave her so until he sires her, but no, he can trust her, she is his -- forever.

"Liberatio." The ropes binding Isabelle uncoil and fall away. She lies unmoving, staring at Crevecour. He sighs and bends to kiss her, as he has been longing to for centuries, 'a consummation devoutly to be wished.' Her fist lashes out wildly, fast as a snake striking, and hits him full in the mouth, sending him tumbling backwards. This is an unexpected turn, Crevecour thinks, groggily rising from the ground. He is utterly bewildered, he doesn't understand her behaviour; why would his Lady hurt him when he has shown her such perfect devotion? Well, he will teach her better manners; and her first lesson will be...not to run from him. There she is, making for the side door to the left. He is about to bound after her when a blast of crackling energy sends him flying into the pews. It appears that the witch is going to prove harder to kill than he had supposed.

Firecracker -- so cute, always running around; getting into everything; getting underfoot. Go fetch your momma a drink baby. Five vamps have driven Faith into the upper level of the church, and now she's cornered and fighting for her life. *You didn't mean to look at her wrong. You didn't mean to make her mad. You didn't mean to be a reject-mistake-worthless piece of shit.* Faith has lost her stake. Her right arm is hanging numb and useless at her side, and she was never as good with her left. Too many punches are getting through her guard; she can't block them anymore, so she's just taking them, letting them rain down. *You didn't mean to look at him wrong. You didn't mean to make him hurt you. You didn't mean to be a prick-tease-slut-sweet-tight-filthy little whore.* It's only pain, and Faith is defiant, she's been beat down too often to ever give in, even though she's sure she's going to die soon. *Shhh. Don't cry, someone'll hear you. Shhh. Be a good girl and I'll let you up. Shhh. Shut your fucking hole you stupid little bitch.* And Faith knows that if she works it right this punch, and this kick, and the next, and the next can feel almost like a caress, almost like love.

She hears familiar voices shouting through the chaos below. B sounding hoarse and near to cracking, and then Red closer, clearer, yelling 'Go.' A balding vampire wearing a Judas Priest T-shirt charges at Faith, knocking her backwards. They hit the balcony panelling with so much force they break through it and fall, locked together as if they're part of some doomed skydiving display. They crash land in front of the altar, but the floor is not solid; the thick wooden planks covering a large baptismal pool shatter with the impact, and they keep going, down into the blessed water. Blackness. Faith is pinned underneath the vamp, trapped and disorientated. She forgets not to breathe, and convulses, water burning in her nose, and throat, and lungs. The creature is beginning to sizzle. He is trying to climb out and escape, screaming and thrashing, but Faith wraps her arm around him and refuses to let go. If she's going to die she's taking this bastard with her. As the water begins frothing, and boiling like a Jacuzzi, Faith manages to surface, wheezing; the air welcome but agonizing. She holds the vamp under, riding his squirming body, her fingers splayed across his face, his hands still scrabbling at the sides of the jagged hole they made in the floor. Faith watches him disintegrating, sees the horrified look in his eyes before they bubble and melt; sees his skin scalding away, leaving him seeping lobster red. His screams turn to gurgles as he swallows another mouthful of holy water, and dusts, sending grey, sludgy waves over the sides of the pool. Faith is attempting to catch her breath, and blink the ashes out of her streaming eyes when another vamp drags her out of the water from behind. On reflex she grabs a piece of splintered wood; a perfect fit for her hand; a weapon.

Life kills. No fucking surrender.

Isabelle's palms strike the door with a loud thwack, and it swings wide into a burst of air and openness.

Deliverance.

She has known this for years.

Deliver us.

And she knows how it always ends.

Deliver us from evil.

This is her vision.

She walks. No she runs. This thing, this half remembered, headlong tilt of limbs and blood moving through space, is running. Runs through the coal black solitude of the night time street, and will not, cannot listen to the urgent calls of the woman behind her. Isabelle's fingertips are blazing with cold fire; each cell is a newly awakened universe. The delicate skin flexing at the backs of her knees is both wonderful and terrifying; skin that could hold a whole world in love, in joyful agony. She knows this night, she has seen this night so often in the ancient whorls of oak grain, in the seething depths and hollows of her mind. Each second brings a new explosion of awareness she can barely contain. *Holy Mary mother of...* She is the sound of the asphalt ringing out under her pounding feet; the creep of hair still growing on the scalps of the buried dead; worms crawling and tunnelling in the quiet earth; the girl with her head in a box, is a head in a box, is a head she wishes she could have saved. *Oh God, and there's no sight, just snow.* She is birth and annihilation. *The Slayer does not walk in this...world without end...we are alone...pray for us sinners...* Fine rain is falling like a benediction on her upturned face. She opens her mouth to let it run in, tastes it, cool and sweet mingling with the dried up salt of someone else's sweat and tears. *Agnus Dei.* The chasing woman is gaining on her, crying to her from deep within the shreds of her need. The shades she carries bound around her almost trip her as they billow out to encircle them both. So much loss. For the first time the woman has a name; not merely Slayer, but Buffy. A girl of once upon a time summer days. The street ends, giving way to sidings, and beyond them the railroad, and beyond that the river. *Now and at the hour of our death.*

Isabelle stops on the railroad tracks; waiting; it is all part of a story old before she was even born. She watches Buffy's stride falter as she comes to a panting halt a few feet away, and how she approaches slowly, turned slightly sideways, defensive yet trying to seem unthreatening.

"Zoe Jane? Please, just don't run away. Okay." She takes another step forward, her voice is soft but Isabelle can hear other echoes in it, fragments of past and future caught falling through the vibrations of her words. She could read her the signs, tell her, her fortune. "I'm a friend. I'm here to help you." The ground begins shaking with the first rumble of a train approaching. Buffy darts a look behind her at the rapidly moving lights coming into view in the distance; turns back with renewed urgency. "Come with me now, you'll be safe, I can explain, I can..." The train is getting very close. For a second Isabelle considers going with this woman, changing the vision, stepping out of the web of her life and creating something blessedly unknown; but she has seen this moment too. She has memorized the way that Buffy

reaches out for her as the thick wooden sleepers beneath their feet bounce and jerk in a clackaty-clack rhythm; the way she ghosts away from the touch; and the stricken expression on Buffy's face as Isabelle spins and drop kicks her, with every ounce of her stolen strength. The angry scraping noise as Buffy falls and tumbles down the incline at the side of the rails; and Isabelle runs.

A short trail of gravel and uprooted tufts of grass are left in Buffy's wake before she skids to a stop; face down, grazed and hurting. Sometimes she really hates her job. She feels entirely drained of energy. The adrenaline pumping through her body seems suddenly harsh and unwelcome. She's rapidly losing the will to do anything except stay where she is; close her eyes and sleep, with the hope that when she wakes up things will be...different, better somehow. Ignore the gravel under her cheek, the jagged stone digging into her hipbone, the rising dread she feels for Zoe Jane, with her terrified, lunatic-happy face. *Can a correctly applied band-aid fix a broken heart? Sure it can. Screw destiny. Screw the mission. I need my beauty sleep.* And she's on her feet and moving forwards before the thought is even finished. But the train has arrived right on time, cutting between Buffy and Zoe Jane as she reaches the tracks, and Buffy has to fling herself backwards to avoid being crushed by tons of metal moving at high velocity. A few of the passengers observe the night with idle curiosity from the brightly lit windows; their faces passing in a blur. Buffy can only watch, cursing silently, as she catches glimpses of Zoe Jane's receding form through the gaps between carriages, flickering like an old home movie, until the reel ends and it flickers out.

Lamb of God. Isabelle opens her arms wide as she rushes over the rubble strewn waste ground. The air feels miraculous playing hide and seek across the smoothness of her skin. She could fly like this forever, in this perfect freedom. But it must pass. It is an illusion, a trap; it is only flesh. The priest's hands are roving across the smooth surface of her skin, finding their way into her secret places, prodding, fondling, defiling. *Father, please, what are you doing? Please -- stop.* Her skirts are tearing as she tries to push him away. *Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the world.* Pain is ripping her apart as he rams himself into her, grunting, fast and brutal; cold tiles under her; the scent of tallow and her own blood; his hand over her mouth, smothering her screams. She screams for centuries, while he sings to gentle her, and builds all his perversions upon the visions she cannot keep from spilling out. Yet through it all she almost pities him. No more. She has reached the river bank, and without pausing, without regret, she jumps. *Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the world, grant us peace.* This is it; the end of it all, as it was in the beginning; the river, the river rushing over her head; carrying, embracing, welcoming.

No fear now.

"Zoe!" Buffy slip-slides along the muddy river bank, staring in wild disbelief at the eddying water where the girl must have sunk. "Zoe! Oh Jesus. No way, no way, oh shit."

For a moment Buffy is paralysed. She does not want to go in there. The water looks black, fathomless, and the few lights glistening on the tops of the ripples only accentuate the effect. She lets out a rather un-heroic squeak of fear and helpless frustration; looks around on the off chance a life guard might have considerably chosen this spot for a little late night stroll -- no such luck -- then takes a long breath, and dives after Zoe Jane. The river is deep; sluggish but strong as she goes under. She twists and kicks, hands groping out, trying to find the girl, trying not to panic as the freezing water surges around her, into her, dragging her down, down, choking her. She's being carried downstream in a tide of refuse and motor oil. No sign

of a lost Slayer, not unless she counts herself. Something thick and plastic-y feeling smacks into her legs and wraps around them, sending her into an underwater spin. She struggles to rip it and free herself; she is almost out of air -- not a helpful thought. *Think about the girl, saving the girl.* She has to stay calm and everything will be fine, but the damn thing won't let her go and the current is pulling her deeper. *Oh god.* She reminds herself she's faced down hoards of Turok-han, a psychotic Hellgod with a shoe fetish, and literally thousands of assorted demons and vamps, so she's not about to get hysterical when attacked by a super-tough garbage bag. But Buffy **really** doesn't want to drown. She wriggles frantically and this time manages to tear whatever is binding her, surfaces gasping for air; then immediately dives again. She's blind, desperate, forcing herself to stay down, keep searching for as long as there is any chance at all of finding Zoe Jane alive. It is starting to seem entirely hopeless when she nudges against something that feels like a drifting human body, and grabs hold.

Clouds are scudding over a full, sulphur-yellow, moon, hanging low in the sky; as Buffy half carries, half drags Zoe Jane's limp body to a patch of level ground, and gently lays her down. There is no pulse. CPR was never Buffy's strongest suit; she is generally more about the slaying than the reviving; but whatever skills she can remember are just going to have to be good enough. There is no way in hell she's letting this girl die now, not after everything, not after meeting her mom. *If only Xander was here.* As she turns Zoe Jane onto her back Buffy takes a greedy gulp of air and is racked by a coughing fit which leaves her weak and shivering. *Hurry up you dope. Tilt back the head, check for obstructions, pinch the nose closed, and blow into the mouth, yeah, like that, well done, full marks. Okay, now measure up three fingers from the bottom of the rib cage, X marks the spot for heart massage. Push. Careful not to break anything. Push. One more time. Push.* And so it goes on -- one breath, followed by three heartbeats, followed by another breath. A car horn blares somewhere in the distance. At some point the rain stops falling. Buffy has no idea how long she has been here; her entire focus is on the possible flicker of life she is attempting to fan into a fire. Nothing. Zoe Jane's eyes remain glassy, she feels terribly cold under Buffy's hands. Buffy simply carries on working. *She isn't dead, she can't be dead, she's just playing dead, little scamp. God -- I'm not stupid. This Slayer is deceased, no more, has ceased to be; has shuffled off this mortal coil. Gone to join the choir eternal. This is an ex Slayer. Shut the fuck up.* Buffy pumps harder, feels a rib snap, winces in sympathy. "Come on, wake up." Without thinking, she slaps the girl's face, her head simply flops, unresisting, to one side. "Sorry. Sorry; come on, please don't do this, please wake up..." She draws in another breath, but she knows now that it's hopeless; Zoe Jane is dead, extremely, and Buffy is responsible, just as surely as if she'd held her under and waited for the bubbles to rise herself. Groaning, she closes Zoe Jane's vacant, accusing eyes, which of course spring open again. Buffy always forgets that part; the part where the dead won't stop looking at her, no matter how sorry she is. She rocks back on her heels, and simply gazes up into the vast, indifferent darkness above them. The stars look very cold and far away.

Seconds, or hours later, Willow's voice cuts through Buffy's wretched blankness. Buffy jumps, wondering how the hell she managed to creep up on her, before she realizes the sound is inside her mind. A telepathic S.O.S, faint but clear; her friends are in trouble, and they need her back at the church -- now.

All for nothing, Crevecour thinks, as he unleashes a Pandocrine curse on the increasingly pallid little witch. He can feel no pleasure at the sight of her struggling with an enveloping

cloud of acidic purple gas; or of her pathetically devoted companion finally buried under a heaving pile of his followers; no, all he can feel is his heart shattering, the fragments piercing him through and through with the knowledge that Isabelle is dead. And so is he. This time he knows he cannot cheat the natural order of things to bring her back. His Lady has deserted him; everything is over. Jean-Baptiste, that insipid fool who wasted so many years in pining for the Lord and grovelling in prayer, died centuries ago; and now Crevecour has joined him in the mouldering wastes of whatever comes after. So what is he -- this thing that is left standing, this mockery, this remnant of the being he created with so much care? The bitter aftertaste of stale blood and wine. Crevecour summons up all the empty hatred he can still muster and strides towards the witch. There is still destruction, he can be that if nothing else -- perfect destruction. But inside him, the voice of a man who was once a priest says, *'I am nothing but dust and ashes.'*

On Halloween Paulie always ferreted out his long black cape and plastic fangs from the closet under the stairs, slicked back his hair, whitened his face, and he and Zoe Jane went trick or treating. It was the one night of the year he actually thought he looked pretty cool; and she arched her eyebrows at him and squealed in gleeful terror when he pretended to bite her. Being the real thing goes way beyond cool; or at least it did until just now, when Paulie got struck with an odd feeling that they are going to lose. He starts sneaking towards the back exit of the church, and is passing the altar, when he finds himself staring at the Head -- Our Lady Of Perpetual Riddles -- only it isn't, not any more; it's Zoe Jane trapped in there, and she's staring back at him. Awake. And the noise she starts making, it sounds like she's crying out to him, crying for help. His chest cramps up painfully, and he realizes he can't leave her. He needs her. What, in the name of all that's unholy, has he done? The game has suddenly stopped being fun. He makes a mad dash for the Head and runs into an unexpected veil of dust, and on the other side a blond haired Slayer wearing an expression that would make Darth Vader himself, soil his pants. Paulie snarls as menacingly as he can, but it is a wasted effort, the Slayer is already laying into Sebastian, who had been making with the stealthy attack from behind. This would be a great opportunity to escape, but Paulie is full of the creeping certainty that he cannot abandon his Lady, though he doesn't really know why. So he hides himself, way down amongst the pews, and he watches, and he waits for his chance.

Faith is at the back of the church, fighting two vamps with a kind of white-hot fury so intense that it has almost transmuted into calm. All she cares about now, all she knows is that she must get to Crevecour, and kill him. But it will have to be soon, she is vaguely aware, through the red mist filling her brain, that even **her** body will not take much more of this kind of punishment. As one of the vamps takes a sloppy swing at her, she feints left, sneers as the sucker falls for it, and stakes him while his guard is down. The other vamp is trying to get Faith cornered. *Not gonna happen.* She leaps three pews, landing precariously on the narrow backrest of the fourth, and nearly falls; the dead weight of her injured arm throwing her off balance. She simply lets the forward momentum carry her, hurtling recklessly along the backs of the pews, towards the spectral figure of Crevecour looming over Red. Time seems to slow and bend as Faith drops from the last pew, landing directly behind him. The fraction of a second left before Crevecour realizes she is there, and they get it on, stretches for infinity. Slow tickle of sweat trickling between her breasts. Sticky ooze of blood on her palm, where she gripped the improvised stake so tight it cut into her flesh. The subtle animal tingle of having B close by. Faith is desperately trying to calculate where his heart will be. She knows that his apparent position is an illusion, so somehow she has to allow for that, or kiss her ass goodbye. This is her chance to do something right, probably the only chance she has. Crevecour wheels round to fight her, his face a twisted mask of contempt and pain, eyes

burning dull yellow, thin lips drawn back, fangs glinting cruelly with the promise of death. And Faith does a crazy thing -- she closes her eyes, breathes deep, deep into her centre, and blindly trusts her instincts to sense where she should strike. Stillness. Earth below, sky above, and Faith, a pulse connected with it all. *Now*. She lunges and thrusts her stake out with all her remaining strength, feels the hiss of it moving through the air, then the jolt in her arm muscles as it meets flesh and bone with a wet crunch. There is a strange and terrible sound, Crevecour is laughing, the son of a bitch is laughing at her; she must have missed the heart. *Screw it. So much for mystical Slayer senses*. Faith pulls out the stake and opens her eyes, just in time to see Crevecour crumble into dust.

"Holy shit!"

Buffy finishes off the last vampire clinging to Kennedy, helps her to her feet, and glares around for more, but the bumpy forehead crowd are suddenly conspicuous by their absence. She turns at the sound of Faith's words, and sees her standing protectively over Willow, who is slumped low against the wall.

"Crevecour?" Buffy asks, pitching her voice above the distressing wailing noise coming from the direction of the altar.

Faith grins fiercely and indicates the film of fresh, grey ash covering her left arm and boots. "I'm wearing him. Guess that means we win, huh. Don't really think he does much for my complexion though." Her grin wavers when she catches Buffy's expression. "Er, B, last time I checked, us winning was a happy thing, what's with the gloom?" She scans the church. "Where's our newest little Slayer?"

"I...Zoe..." Buffy feels absolutely wrecked. She surveys her exhausted, battle worn friends and doesn't know how to make herself tell them that she has failed. Tiny drops of water are dripping from her hair, which is hanging in rat's tails over her eyes. She pushes it back roughly, and says, all in a rush, "Zoe Jane ran to the river, she must have been scared out of her mind, and I jumped in after her, and I searched, and I found her but it was too late. I was too late. She drowned. She's...she's dead. The body's still out there. I have to --"

"No, she isn't," Willow says, sounding cold and distant.

"What?" Kennedy asks, frowning in confusion as she holds Willow close.

Willow sits up as far as she can, though it makes her groan with pain, and points towards the head. "Crevecour did a switch."

Dead silence, apart from the unearthly wailing. Wailing that is bordering on screaming. Buffy can barely stay on her feet. This is a nightmare. She watches fixedly as Faith wanders over to the nearest wall, noticing that one of her arms is hanging limp and useless; she knows what's coming next, and finds the familiarity bizarrely comforting in the midst of all this horror. Faith leans into the wall, braces herself, and grunts as she bashes her shoulder against it, far harder than strictly necessary, to pop it back into its socket. Buffy remembers it was always a weak point, thinks she would have offered to help if Faith had asked; but she didn't, she never does.

Buffy squats down on the floor in front of Willow and Kennedy. She has to take charge of the situation. Do something. Think it through. Ask the important questions. She can't allow

herself to fall apart now. "Will; are you okay?"

Willow has been muttering quietly to herself, and she looks at Buffy with frightening incomprehension before nodding jerkily.

"Will," Buffy says, gently laying her hand on her friend's knee, to reassure herself that Willow really is alive, and not at all go throughable, "how do we help Zoe Jane? I mean it's magic, right? And-and you're our serious mojo gal, so do you know how to, you know, fix this?"

"Hmm. Major problem -- dead body. I can't do a body swap spell with a d-dead body, and...oh God." Willow's head whips back against Kennedy's chest, and she whimpers. "Sorry, I-I-I can feel...her."

Inky blackness is beginning to spread out from Willow's pupils. Buffy doesn't want to consider what that might signal. All they can do is deal with the situation as fast as possible. She grabs hold of a passing thought, though it makes her queasy. "What about a resurrection spell?" She says very quietly.

Willow lays her clammy hand over Buffy's. "Even...even if I could; that kind of spell is almost impossible to get right. There are so many risks. Consequences." She grips Buffy's hand tighter. "There's always a p-price, we may not be ready to pay. As it is, I can't do a resurrection spell without switching the bodies back; which I can't do; which means I can't do anything."

Right now Kennedy would like to be in Greenwich Village, in a little club called Ja Ja's, chillin' to some excellent music, and tickling Will under the table to make her start giggling and blushing. She's cute when she's embarrassed, and the blushing makes her freckles stand out, which is a bonus. Or there's this place in Santa Cruz that she would probably fall in love with, near the pier, there are sea lions, and Kennedy has to take her there one day, she should ask her about that. Yeah, they should go soon. Will looks awful. Her darkening eyes are staring at nothing, and she is shuddering and feverish.

"Can't do anything," Willow repeats.

Kennedy looks from Will to the Head, and back again, and feels like she's about to toss her cookies. "We can't just leave her like that."

"No," Buffy says grimly, "we can't."

"So there has to be another way; someone we could..."

"No," Willow says, her voice sounds stretched to breaking point. "There is only one thing we can do for her now."

There's a slow trickle of blood from Willow's nose, it bubbles out slightly when she breathes. Kennedy wishes she had one of those stupid mini packs of tissues her mom obsessively carries everywhere, something to wipe it with, make it stop doing that. For a second she's not processing the information, she doesn't understand what the hell Will is talking about. Then the realization hits her, they have to kill Zoe Jane. This could well be the worst day ever.

Faith straightens up from the place in the corner where she's been slouching against the wall. "I'll do it." It's practically a whisper, reluctant words; Kennedy has to strain to hear it.

"Faith. No, I will," Buffy says a little too quickly, darting a wary, desperate glance at Faith. She stands up stiffly, reclaims her axe from the nearby pillar it's embedded in, and walks slowly towards the Head.

The skinny homeless guy smells like vodka and piss and old newspaper, but Paulie is ravenously hungry and doesn't much care. He crouches on top of him, in the derelict warehouse where he found him sleeping, and drinks greedily. Paulie knows he is a coward. First he gave Zoe Jane to his sire, when he had a chance to take her for himself. Then when he saw what the Slayer meant to do to his Lady, he should have attacked; he should have stormed out there and torn her, and her friends, limb from limb. Instead he bit his own arm in order to stay mute, and hid until they had gone. He sits up, straddling the slack body beneath him, and wipes his chin. His fingers automatically find the almost healed scratch marks, running down both sides of his face. Now he has nothing, is nothing, he isn't even Paulie anymore. Being a 'Lost Boy' is nothing like the movie. He should demand a refund. He doesn't have a biker jacket, he doesn't have a bike. Maybe that's the problem. He'll have to steal one.

There are still a few hours left before sunrise, and he has no desire to spend them here, snuggling with a dead wino. He walks swiftly to the entrance, pauses a moment trying to decide which direction to take; then turns right and heads for the docks.

'You are going home this night to your home of winter; to your home of autumn, of spring, of summer. You are going home this night to your lasting home; to your unending rest, to your lasting bed.'

Homework notes, files and text books, are strewn all over the kitchen table. Tara peeks, playfully serious, at Willow over the top of her book, her hair and skin lit up with the warm, golden light filtering through the open window. She is trying to teach Willow something, something important, but Willow can't understand a word she's singing. Tara sighs and comes to pull Willow out of her chair, twirls her around till she's dizzy. They are dancing, deliciously slow and close, as if they are attempting to melt into each other's skin. Tara's laughing like the taste of strawberries sprinkled with salt. It makes Willow's mouth water, and she wants her, oh god, how badly she wants her. Tara spirits out of her hungry embrace. She's teasing, pleading, lying dead and bleeding on the carpet.

Kennedy is marching briskly through a Grimm's fairytale forest made of entirely charred matchsticks; swinging an axe at her own head, with admirable enthusiasm. No, she's bound to the bedposts, flayed alive and grinning, while Willow hovers above her, magic hissing and crackling from her hands; she's finally ripe. No, she's holding Willow, quieting her as they both burn.

A woman is hugging a young girl tightly, as they crouch down on a pier somewhere. The sun is setting. This moment is beautiful. It feels like the alpha and omega of everything, yet it is

the last gasp before the end of the world. Willow tries to call to them, but her cry echoes harsh and lonely as the voices of gulls swooping far out at sea. There is no humanity in it. When the child looks up, her eyes are empty and bleeding.

Tara is singing again, soft, like a mother. Not Willow's mother of course, but mothers the way she sometimes secretly imagined they could be. She is holding Willow, rocking her, watching a rosette of blood expanding from the bullet hole in her chest, soaking her top. Willow wants to say, 'I love you. Remember, I always love you.' But all that comes out is a choking gurgle in her throat, flecks of red on Tara's shirt. The world, Tara's face, the feel of the carpet under her hand, are all fading away, turning to snakes and flashes of light behind her eyes. White, then red, then only black. She is voiceless, dying, and none of it matters. None of it really matters at all.

There is a map of the world the size of a billboard painted on one wall of the old library at Sunnydale High. Giles is not going to be pleased. He'll probably start making that funny, strangulated, 'hmmph,' noise when he sees it. Kennedy is standing in front of the map, holding an instructor's stick, and pointing out all the different locations where Slayers are still to be found. She taps the map at a certain point and it lights up and beeps insistently. She looks stern. But Willow is frustrated and fidgeting in the campus Wicca group when she looks up and...An hour before dawn she's tending the ovens in the expectant chill of an autumn morning, when she sees...She's perched nervously on the edge of an unmade bed, beside a boy with spikey purple hair, when he leans over and...Kennedy is still tapping and talking, but she doesn't want to pay attention anymore. She closes her eyes and watches Zoe Jane rise up from the pier. The girl is grown now, and her hands are overflowing with flowers. Zoe Jane looks at Willow with Tara's eyes; a long, searching look; wise and sad. Finally she nods and says, with quiet understanding, 'It hurts.' Then she turns and walks away.

"Imm-hmn." The burly male nurse, Clyde according to his name tag, finishes checking Willow's IV and chart then smiles kindly at Kennedy. "Y'know hon, maybe you should go stretch your legs. Get some sleep even. She probably won't be waking up for a while. Ain't nothin' bad gonna happen to her here. I'll be looking out for you both. I'm on all night."

"Yeah, thanks. I probably should." Kennedy watches the nurse give her and Will one more sympathetic glance before leaving. Never trust a guy whose neck is thicker than his head. Clyde can indulge his mother hen tendencies all he wants; she has no intention of going anywhere. Anyone who tries to make her will have to have the, sadistically un-comfy, chair she's slumped on surgically removed from their nether regions.

The bleary eyed, ER doc had assured them that Willow would be okay. Kennedy had made him repeat it three times just to be certain, and would probably have asked again, if Buffy hadn't given her a look to shut her up. Even so, she's still pretty shaken. Willow is sleeping the innocent sleep of a woman full of painkillers, looking small and lifeless, trapped under the stark white sheets. The minute rise and fall of her breathing is the only indication that she's not dead; and Kennedy finds herself holding her own breath each time it takes longer than expected for Will's chest to begin rising again.

"I'm in trouble," Kennedy whispers, surprised that she said it aloud; and that it's true.

There was a time -- Kennedy can vaguely remember it -- when she didn't spend most of her waking hours thinking about Willow. Life was simpler then. Falling in love is a whole lot like developing some weird obsessive-compulsive disorder. Only instead of avoiding treading on the cracks in the sidewalk in case the bogeyman comes to get her; or washing her hands with anti-bacterial soap exactly twenty-eight times a day; she's living for the feeling of Will's hands surreptitiously finding their way under her shirt, brushing lightly over her hot, naked skin. Or the quizzical frown Will gives her when she asks her about the workings of an obscure spell, that she wouldn't have a hope of understanding, even if she actually wanted to. Anything Willow in fact. And Kennedy is a grade A schmuck for falling for a woman who does not, possibly cannot love her. Care for, need, desire, but not love. Not that she has ever said so, and Kennedy won't ask. Willow is a bad liar, and Kennedy doesn't want to hear the words.

She lets her head sink into her hands, beyond weary, but she doesn't close her eyes, because every time she does she sees it again. Will, her eyes rolled back, black as pitch. Buffy with an axe, talking to the screaming Head, saying, 'Zoe Jane,' and then a bunch of other stuff, before she...before. She's freaked now just thinking about it. Then she thinks how much worse it must have been for Willow, and she can't bear it. It makes her want to kill things with her bare hands. Luckily that's one of her job requirements.

Clock ticking. Buzz-saw snoring of the patient in the next bed, practically making the thin, dividing curtain billow. The fang wounds on Kennedy's neck are itching, she's sorely tempted to rip the dressing off and scratch them till they bleed. But Willow begins twitching; then tossing and turning so much that Kennedy is forced to go and hold her down, as gently as she can, in case she hurts herself.

"Will...Willow."

"Please," Willow says hoarsely as she wakes. She licks her dry lips and begins talking rapidly. "There's an-another new Slayer. South from here. I, um, yeah, I've got a pretty good idea where she is. We have to..."

"Shhh. Shhh. It's okay." Kennedy holds Willow as she struggles, weakly attempting to get out of bed. "You were dreaming. Shhh. It's okay Will, it's me. I've got you."

Willow opens her eyes. After a few moments they clear, and focus on Kennedy's face. "Oh. Hey." She lets her head flop back onto the pillow. "Wu-What happened?"

"You were about to go Slayer hunting in your sleep. I think that could count as over-working." Kennedy strokes Willow's hair. "You had me kinda worried."

Willow smiles apologetically. "I mean before. My brain's all candy floss-y. I remember the church, and Buffy, and, and...guh." She stares at the ceiling, images playing out behind her eyes. "And then it's all blank. Where is Buffy? Is she..."

"Buffy's fine. She went to get a drink or something."

"And Faith?"

Kennedy settles herself more comfortably on the edge of the bed. "Faith drove us and Zoe

Jane's...body to the hospital. Then she took off in a major hurry, said she had a job to do." She wonders if that job involves high tailing it to the Canadian border. She wouldn't really blame Faith. In fact, judging by the stories she's heard, she's a little surprised the infamous rogue Slayer has stuck around for this long. Still, she would be sorry to see her go.

"The rest of the gang," Kennedy says, anticipating the next question, "caught a Greyhound. They should be hitting town in a few hours."

"Hmm. What else?"

"Well, you weren't very cooperative with the charming police officers, due to being unconscious. Buffy and I dealt with them."

"What did you tell them?"

"I have no idea; but they seemed satisfied in the end. They went away, and none of us are accessorizing with handcuffs this season, so we must have been fairly convincing."

"Y' think?" Willow almost grins; then looks suddenly desolate. "Zoe Jane. Mrs Marquette. Does she know? Oh. Oh God. Did anyone call her?"

"Yeah. She was here earlier. Buffy talked with her." Kennedy looks away; remembering the low murmur of voices in the corridor outside. Then Mrs Marquette shouting -- shrill, almost hysterical -- and Buffy trying to calm her. And finally, broken, gut wrenching sobbing, and a hasty exit. When Buffy returned, Kennedy thought she had never seen her looking so upset. Not even when she was getting kicked out of her own house.

"Kennedy, baby." Willow trails her fingertips down Kennedy's forearm in a way that makes her heart flip over. "Thank you."

Kennedy sighs and looks up. "What for?"

"Everything."

Kennedy knows she should leave it at that. Enjoy basking in the glow of Will's gratitude, and hope it might drive away some of the horrors of the night. But instead she asks as casually as she can, "So, do you wanna tell me about this dream?"

Willow instantly gets that tight, closed off look she always gets when something is off limits, and says, "I, um...it doesn't really matter now. It was kinda...it just...I'm really tired. I'll tell you later, when my brain isn't so fuzzy. 'Kay."

"Sorry. It can wait. You should rest." Kennedy leans in and kisses Willow lightly on the forehead, lingering for a moment before she pulls away. She knows Willow will never tell her; it's just another one of those dreams that she can't share, not with her. Eventually she'll learn to stop asking.

"Are you gonna be here?" Willow asks; a slight tremor in her voice.

"Yeah," Kennedy says, slumping back into her chair. "I'll be here."

Finest ground Columbian; or instant lighter fluid from Wal-mart. Deep black and bitter as...as, well as bitter as Buffy's so called fucking life. Or latte with more sugar than the human body can handle. She doesn't care as long as it's coffee. Buffy is out in the waiting room, trying to get the drinks machine to work, and barely holding herself together. Right now coffee is the most important thing in the world. If she can just get coffee she knows she will survive the night. Unfortunately, the machine has other plans. It insists on giving her hot orange juice; then eats her money and refuses to give her anything else. She bangs it on the side, swearing under her breath. No reaction. She hits it harder. "Give me coffee you worthless piece of shit!" A passing nurse regards her disapprovingly. Buffy turns back to the machine; she can feel tears forcing their way out of her eyes. *This is ridiculous*. She is pulling back to hit it again, when Faith steps in front of her; clutching two Starbuck's and a full, brown paper bag.

"Y'know, I don't think it understands threats and violence; but I feel pretty intimidated." Faith holds out one of the cardboard cups. "Will this help? It's the way you like it; I think. Sorry it's not that hot anymore, I had to wait for the pigs to clear out. Thought they'd never leave."

Buffy thankfully accepts the coffee, removes the plastic lid, fumbles and drops it.

"Also," Faith says, putting her own cup on the floor, opening the bag and offering it to Buffy, at arm's length. Obviously trying not to notice the waterworks. "I got us some munchies, sandwiches and stuff. You want?"

Buffy shakes her head. She thinks she'd probably choke on food.

Faith shrugs and fishes in the bag herself, leans against the wall and begins unwrapping a chocolate bar. She's feigning relaxation, but she looks haggard and twitchy as hell. There are some impressive bruises blooming under the skin of her arms. One, dark purple, bruise seems to spread out from the ink of her tattoo, as if the design of thorns had run in the damp. Faith fingers the place absent mindedly, like she can feel Buffy looking. "Is Willow gonna be okay?"

"They said she should be able to go home in the morning. I mean, she'll be...oh God." Buffy sips her coffee, concentrating her best efforts on not spilling it all over her ruined shirt. Fat tears are rolling down her cheeks. She doesn't want to cry in front of Faith, which of course just makes her cry harder. Her shoulders are heaving with muffled sobs. It's humiliating, this loss of control.

Faith becomes tactfully fascinated by the opposite wall; the floor; and her boots, in turn. *Faith. Tact. What parallel universe is this?* She swallows the last chunk of her chocolate, crumples up the wrapper and drops it back into the bag. "I always hated these places," she mutters, pushing off from the wall and coming to stand in front of Buffy; close enough for Buffy to feel the heat from her body. There are track marks running through the smudges of dirt on Faith's face. Buffy wonders if she's been crying too, but decides sweat or rain, are more likely explanations. Even so, she has a strange urge to trace those lines with the tips of her fingers, see where they lead. See if...

"B."

"Huh. What?" Buffy pauses with her hand half raised towards Faith's face, and rubs roughly at her own stinging, eyes, as if that had been her intention all along. Clearly she's going insane.

"I said is there anything else we can do here tonight, except bitch-slap the vending machine, and sit on our butts?"

"No. No, I don't think that..." finishing sentences suddenly seems way too much like work, and Buffy simply shakes her head.

Faith drains the dregs of her coffee, and sends the empty cup arcing towards the nearest garbage can. It bounces off the rim. "Damn." She paces up and down a few times, scuffing the toes of her boots along the linoleum, apparently deep in thought. Right when Buffy is about to tell her to quit it before she wears a hole in the floor, she stops and says, "So, how about we get out of here?"

The hotel room costs \$30 a night; though Faith is well aware that in this kind of place you can pay by the hour. Not exactly the Ritz, but even after she and Buffy pool their, rather pulpy, cash, it's all they can afford. They need somewhere to sleep; or at least to be alone for a while. The lock is awkward, the key worn, and Faith almost breaks it trying to get into their room. When the door finally does judder open she makes the mistake of turning on the main light. It is harsh, unforgiving. It shows them exactly what she's come to expect -- the décor, circa nineteen seventy-four; the carpet you really wouldn't want to walk on barefoot; but, mainly, it lets them see each other far too clearly. After a few motionless seconds, Faith flips the switch off again. In the brief darkness, before her eyes adjust to the gloom, she pretends she can hide. That it didn't feel dangerous when B accidentally brushed against her, as they trudged up the four flights of stairs; that they didn't automatically shy away from each other as if they'd been stung. That her guard will hold; that her face will not betray all those things she's trying her best not to think about; that this wasn't the stupidest of all stupid ideas. Then streetlights, moonlight, and the eerie, neon-blue glow of the hotel sign dimly illuminate the room; and B, standing, looking at her, with eyes like beautiful cigarette burns -- *which is fucked up, 'cause cigarette burns ain't beautiful, they just hurt*. And Faith realizes she's lying to herself, because Buffy already knows. Maybe. And maybe that's why she came. But this is not the time to find out; this is the time to prove she can do the friend thing.

"B, are you...is there anything that..."

Buffy plucks at her shirt and sniffs, looking vaguely disgusted. "I need a shower," she says flatly; and walks out.

Faith pads after her, down the narrow corridor, until they reach the small bathroom situated right at the end.

"Alone," Buffy adds; closing the door before Faith has a chance to protest that she wasn't about to offer to scrub those hard to reach places; she just wanted to make sure that Buffy was alright.

So Faith wanders back to their room, glad she remembered to retrieve her smokes from the

car, and wishing she had a bottle of Jack to go with them -- something to take the rough edge off of things. Her shoulder hurts, and her ribs feel bruised; tight, flaring pain when she breathes too deep. The window opens with a rattle of protest. She sits on the sill -- feet up, back resting against the hard line of the frame -- sparks up, and waits, and waits, and waits, and tries not to worry. There's a late night session happening in Sullivan's Irish Pub, on the ground floor. Faith can hear the muted sound of the young folk-rock band belting out whisky soaked Pogues covers. Bass thumping as fast as her heart. Even at this distance she can tell their singer is authentically out of tune. Though he could probably argue that the rest of the band are out of tune with him; she gets that. These days she thinks B might get that too. *What the hell is taking her so long anyway?*

"Hey, Buffy." No answer, only the sound of water running. "You okay in there?" Nada. Faith knows she should probably just leave, but she is starting to feel irrationally scared. What if Buffy's blacked out and drowned in some senseless freak accident. Shit, what if she's done something to herself; she's not exactly full of the shiny happies right now. "B?"

The bathroom door is locked when Faith tries it; but not for long. A well aimed kick, and it swings open to show her Buffy, crouched in the bottom of the shower stall, still fully clothed, wringing wet, and shivering.

"Get out," Buffy says, without looking up. Faith can tell from her voice she's been crying again.

"Strange though it may seem, the usual custom is to remove your clothes before y --"

"Screw you Faith."

Don't say it. Don't say it. By some supreme effort of will, Faith forces back a stream of innuendoes all vying to get out of her mouth at once; but then can't help murmuring, "Hmm. Maybe later." *Oh crap. Well, it could have been worse. And B doesn't seem to have heard.* She reaches through the lukewarm spray of water and turns off the shower. "Think you've had enough. I'm cutting you off."

Buffy hugs her knees tight against her chest, and whispers, "I can't get clean."

Faith sighs heavily. "Yeah. I know."

After some hunting Faith manages to find a towel; wraps it around Buffy's shoulders, and leads her back to their room. She leaves her curled small in a foetal position on one of the beds; then goes to try and wash the worst of the dirt and vamp dust off her self.

An hour later, Faith is smoking her last cigarette, as slowly as she can; and B hasn't moved. Faith can't look at Buffy for too long; she doesn't know what to do, and it makes her feel helpless, and useless, and angry. She's bone weary, but too wired to sleep, so she returns her attention to the street below. The band have launched into an old, sad, number that Faith thinks she recognizes. They're wishing they were back in Donegal or County Clare -- somewhere far away -- and Faith finds she's suddenly homesick for places she's never been. The volume of music, voices, laughter, rises, and light spills onto the sidewalk; the pub door must have opened. She watches a man jog quickly across the street, and down a side alley, where another guy, odds on it being his dealer, emerges from the shadows to meet him. She

could be back in Boston, which is one place she's pretty damned sure she's not homesick for. *Whatever*. She observes the dealer, Parasiticus Low-life-us, at work in his natural habitat. It's all kind of detached, unreal, like a wildlife documentary on the Discovery Channel she can't be bothered to flip past. He's selling tickets to Never Never Land; instant pain relief -- no such thing; Faith has learned that the hard way. She thinks that life, at least her life, is a lot like watching those animals -- an endless cycle of fighting, feeding, and fucking -- only without the guy in the safari shirt, and the running commentary. It isn't enough.

She takes a final drag on her cigarette, then lets the butt fall and watches the glow spinning down until it disappears. Remembering another night; a different window; a bloody shard of glass falling. Wes cut up and beaten, tied to a chair. Faith thinks that here, 'on the outside,' she may never really be safe, never fully in control of herself; or have any clear idea of who the hell she is that she can hang onto for longer than five minutes. And maybe a junkie is always a junkie, even when they've been straight for years. But she has drawn a line in the sand that she would rather die than cross again. She is no longer the woman who tortured Wesley; or went to kill poor, harmless Lester, for the Mayor, as if he'd just asked her to pick up his dry cleaning; and she's not the woman who could...well, there are things she still doesn't want to think about. She has changed.

Thousands, millions of moments, choices, decisions go to make up a life. Buffy wonders which one it was that brought her here; which one set this train of events in motion. Because it isn't always the obvious things -- cause and effect. Sometimes it's the stupid, tiny, insignificant little brainstorm that might lead to the Tsunami that comes and tears her life apart a year later; sweeping away everything she thought was hers. And other times not so much. Part of her wonders if it's fate yanking her strings; and the control, the freedom, she thought she had, needed to believe she had, were simply illusions. She has always defied prophecy, always found the loophole, but what if she was meant to find it all along? What a joke fest that would be. Then again, perhaps this universe is pure chaos and nothing she does means anything at all. Either way it's more than she can handle right now. She feels as if she's trapped in some giant hamster wheel, running faster and faster, with no chance of escape. *Why couldn't my friends have understood enough to let me go*, she thinks bitterly. *It was my time. I was finished*. She wonders which one of those insignificant choices led to her killing another human being tonight? An innocent girl, with a name -- Zoe Jane Marquette -- and a mom, and a life that Buffy had been trying to save. How the hell did this happen; and why didn't she try harder to find the loophole?

Buffy can feel the familiar ache, and throb, and sting of her body healing itself. Broken skin, and bruised muscles being repaired with supernatural speed. It hurts, but not enough to cut through the numbness which is beginning to blanket her emotions. She has been here before. Her heart is shutting down, playing dead. A thick, grey fog of hopeless, agonizing apathy and disconnectedness is pumping out from it, trying to envelop her, until there's nothing, just nothing left. She can't bear it. It's worse than pain. She needs to do something; she needs to speak before it swallows her whole. Everything is slipping away from her again, except, strangely, Faith.

Moving is difficult, but preferable to not moving; so Buffy shifts gingerly underneath the scratchy towel, then sits up fast. It's better that way, like ripping off a plaster.

Faith starts slightly, swings her legs off the window sill as if she's going to come over, then seems to change her mind and stays perched there. "So B, what gives?"

Buffy fiddles with the small silver cross hanging round her neck, distractedly pressing the points into the pads of her fingers. *Now to speak, say words; perhaps string a few well chosen vowel sounds together.* "There should be a rule," she blurts out, "no fighting evil priests more than once a decade. What is it with these guys and women? I mean most demons, a little chanting, a little ritual sacrifice; what's not to love? But this freak kept his dead girlfriend's grotesquely reanimated head in a box for three hundred years."

"I guess it puts a whole new spin on getting good head." Faith glances at the ceiling and grimaces. "God. Can we pretend I didn't just say that out loud. I can't make it stop; it's like I've got fucking Tourette's or something."

Typical Faith. Buffy ought to be grossed out and mad at her for saying something like that at a time like this. But she finds she's laughing; if a sound as empty and humourless as the one she's making could qualify as laughter. She stops abruptly. "The car?"

"Huh?"

"What did you do with the car?"

"Torched it. Why are you still here?"

Buffy looks up sharply, but she doesn't see any animosity in Faith's face, just concern.

"Why haven't you gone on that vacation?" Faith asks; her tone soft but insistent.

Buffy doesn't answer. She is becoming aware of her ghosts, gathering silently in the shadows of the room. She feels frozen in spite of the heat. The back of her neck is prickling. There is a girl at the forefront who could be... Buffy wrenches her gaze away and stares hard at a stain on the carpet directly in front of her, as if it's the ink blot test that will prove her sanity. She refuses to look at the assembling spooks. They're early, and if they've decided to pull a double shift that's not her problem.

There is a cool breeze playing along Faith's skin. It would be quite welcome, except it seems to be coming from inside the room, rather than from the open window behind her, which is pretty weird, and she's had her fill of weird for the day. B has returned to doing her impression of an inanimate object, but it isn't fooling Faith, she is not letting her off the hook that easily. "Let me clarify -- being a Slayer is my life, it's all I've got, it's what I was made for, and I'm cool with that. But things are different for you; you've got a chance to live like a person now. You've got a future. You could do anything you want. So why are you stuck in a fleabag hotel with me, when you could be on vacation?"

Buffy's shoulders lift fractionally, in something which Faith interprets as a dismissive shrug.

Fine. Time to get metaphor-y. "Did you ever watch a whole big flock of geese flying south for the winter?"

"I guess so."

"They always fly in that V formation 'cause they cut through the air better; and the one at the

front has the hardest job 'cause she's breaking the way for all the others. Anyway, if you watch 'em closely, every so often they swap places, take it in turns. One of the geese from the back flies up and takes over the tough job, and the one in front drops back, takes a break."

"We're not geese Faith," Buffy says indifferently.

"No shit Sher -- That's not the point. The way I see it, you've been flying at the front for eight years solid, and that's a real tough gig. Maybe no one else could have even done it. But in case it's escaped your keen notice, you're not the one and only Chosen anymore. You..." Faith falters, trying to decide whether to go on. She takes a breath, and finishes. "You haven't been for a long time."

Buffy's face is unreadable in the blue-grey half-light.

Faith picks up her discarded cigarette packet, remembers it's empty, and drops it again. "Why don't you let someone else do the heavy lifting for a while? It's my turn to carry now." That sounds wrong, like she's staging a take over. "Me and all the newbies," she amends. "Giles, Willow, Robin, they can keep us in order. Make sure we --"

"It's not that simple." B is staring at something in the corner of the room -- her expression a mixture of guilt and blank misery -- and Faith is fairly certain it's not the wardrobe she's looking at.

A bitter chill is creeping through Faith. She may not be able to see whatever Buffy's fixated on, but she can sure as hell sense it. It's the same subliminal nightmare she's been time sharing for days; only now it's much, much stronger. This has to stop. For once in their lives can't they have a straightforward, honest conversation, without it metamorphosing into a joke, or a fight, or a glacial silence. "Listen, I ain't no brainiac Harvard scholar, but I'm not stupid. I know there's something going on B, I can feel it. You gonna tell me what it is? Please don't shut me out."

"That's rich coming from you."

"This isn't about me."

"No, it isn't, and I don't want to talk about it," Buffy says, in that way that makes Faith want to put her fist through a wall.

"Maybe I can help."

"No."

"Goddamnit, fucking tell me," Faith shouts; and instantly regrets it.

Buffy is winding her hands together in her lap, and slowly shaking her head. "Just drop it," she says, more pleading than commanding.

Faith is afraid that she may have blown it. That B will never talk to her now. She stands up and goes to sit beside her. "Tonight in the church, that was brutal, but you stayed strong. Did the right thing; the only thing."

That laugh again; worse than screaming or sobbing. Buffy's hands grip the edge of the bed, bunching the sheets. "You didn't have to see her mom's face. I'll never forget. And it isn't only...it's everything. You don't know the things I've done."

"We've all done things we regret -- me more than most -- but you can't change the past."

"I was meant to save her. It was my responsibility. My failure." Buffy continues, as if she hasn't even heard Faith. She glances towards the corner again. "In the end it's always...I-I mean, sometimes I just wish I could..."

With some trepidation, Faith reaches over and runs her thumb gently over Buffy's knuckles. Buffy's death grip on the sheets relaxes slightly, and when Faith takes hold of her hand, she doesn't try to stop her. It's no secret Faith is crap at these sharing your feelings conversations, and the strain of trying to maintain it is starting to get to her; but she wants B to understand, so she tries again. "It's like...like Ash Wednesday every day with you," she says; and is rewarded with a look of total incomprehension. She doesn't know why she said it. Considers trying to explain the feeling of the priest's thumb marking a tiny cross of ashes, mixed with sickly oil, on her forehead. About repentance, and mourning, and guilt -- always guilt -- and how she hasn't even believed in any of this bullshit since she was eight years old, so why should she bother. Instead she snaps, "Get over the fucking martyr complex or you're gonna end up dead. Again."

Buffy had forgotten the hate. Cool and heavy, well polished. How dare Faith sit there and pretend to understand, to care about her; and then presume to judge her. She couldn't ever...And how dare she be right. Buffy's not seeing red, so much as black, as her fist shoots out, and catches Faith full in the face, pitching her backwards onto the floor. Buffy braces herself for the retaliation she's sure is coming; wonders how far Faith will take it; but she's just lying there, cupping her jaw in her hand, and breathing fast and shallow. "Is hurting me gonna make you feel better?" She kneels up; her arms hanging loosely by her sides; hands open. "Go ahead -- hurt me. I want you to." The dim light exaggerates the contrast between her pale skin and dark hair, until she looks like a black and white photograph of herself, taken from a long way away. The expression on her face makes Buffy's throat close up.

And Buffy lunges at her. She doesn't have a plan; doesn't know what is supposed to happen next; she just moves, and isn't that surprised to find she is sprawled on top of Faith and kissing her, hard; hard enough to bruise. After a moment's hesitation Faith returns the kiss with equal force; her fingers snaking through Buffy's hair, pulling her deeper. The taste of smoke and chocolate on her tongue.

The logical part of Buffy's mind is yelling at her to 'desist at once,' in a voice that sounds a lot like Giles, at his most British. But she isn't going to be ordered about by imaginary Watchers; and anyway, she can't seem to make herself stop.

Buffy feels Faith's knee slide up between her thighs; one of Faith's hands travelling down her back to press and circle near the base of her spine; the rub of denim, and her jeans zipper pushing into her. She rocks against Faith and can't help moaning softly. Her kiss becomes a bite. The familiar, coppery tang of blood is beginning to fill her mouth. She realizes, distantly, as if this is happening to someone else, that her teeth must have split Faith's lip.

Faith growls something unintelligible that might be 'bitch,' and easily flips them over. A second of panic, struggle, as Faith slams into her, pinning her wrists to the floor on each side of her head, painfully tugging strands of Buffy's hair that are still caught in her fists. Buffy lets out an involuntary yelp, and Faith pauses, her face a blur, too close for Buffy to focus on. And Buffy knows that she's stronger than this, but her limbs have turned to jelly, and she can't fight. She is suffocating, trapped beneath Faith's slight weight.

Remembering Spike, frantic, grabbing at her in a cold white bathroom.

'Gonna make you feel it.'

'Ask me again why I could never...'

Remembering how his face changed, that last time, standing in the Hellmouth, the pure light of his soul streaming through him, amidst all the destruction.

'I love you.'

'No, you don't. But thanks for saying it.'

Then Faith relinquishes her hold on one of Buffy's wrists, and slips her hand up to interlace their fingers, palm against palm. Reassurance of a kind that threatens to break her open.

So close, but it's a lie. Don't let her in. It has to be a lie.

Buffy whimpers and closes her eyes as Faith dips her mouth to Buffy's neck; kissing, nipping, suckling on a pulse point that still bears a faint tracery of scars. Gentle, tantalizing, at first, slowly building their arousal; her lips and tongue matching the rhythm of their bodies undulating together. All fierce, contained fire; until suddenly her hips jerk and she's attacking the place with such desperate hunger Buffy half expects to feel fangs piercing, ripping her skin, her life gushing out and down Faith's throat, warm and crimson. That though leaves her shuddering violently; fear and desire coursing through her. Stars exploding behind her eyes. She squeezes Faith's body between her legs, trying to pull her closer; finds her hands are free and clutches urgently at Faith's back, feels her wince at the crushing pressure on her ribcage, her breathing getting harsher.

This need is burying Buffy alive.

Hard fingers at the vulnerable curve where her neck meets her jaw.

Rotting pine and dirt in her throat.

Hand on her breast. Kneading. Twisting. Not pretending to be gentle now. Not pretending to care. Better this way.

Clawing at woodfleshwood. Fingernails split and bleeding.

Have to get out. Touch me. Help me. Save me. Kill me. Make it stop.

She needs to strip away clothes and skin, and sinews, muscles and bones, until there's nothing

left of her -- of either of them -- to be scared, and hurting, and always alone. Faith bites down and she almost screams, her body arching. Whatever pride she may have had has evaporated. So now she's begging, jumbled and broken. "Fu-fuck. Oh. God. Faith. Fuckmeplease. Please."

Abruptly, Faith breaks away looking utterly lost and confused, and edges backwards across the floor, shaking her head. "I-I can't," she whispers, as if she doesn't quite believe she's saying it. "You don't really want this. You'll hate yourself. You'll hate me."

Buffy stumbles to her feet and savagely wipes the back of her hand across her lips. "How the hell do you know what I want; are you psychic now? Is this all part of the new improved Faith? Jesus Christ. You treat sex like most people treat fast food, and you pick now to grow a conscience -- or did one of your personalities decide to be shy?"

Faith has come to rest in the corner, with her arms wrapped protectively around her body.

Buffy knows she's being unfair, cruel even, lashing out at Faith when she is clearly trying so hard to do the right thing. But this is **so** not the right thing; and she is terrified and enraged and horny as hell. "I can't do this."

"What?"

"Play whatever stupid, fucked up little mind game it is we're playing now."

Faith's eyes are full of shadows. "I'm not playing," she says very quietly, and makes for the door. Jaw working, fists clenched, refusing to look at Buffy. "I'll be back before dawn."

Buffy's anger is crumbling rapidly. "Don't go."

Faith stops with her hand poised on the door handle. Doesn't turn.

The ghosts are closing in; hovering in the speckled dark. Just the imprints of people caught in the memory of a moment. Their presence smothering. They stand either side of Faith, leaving a space for her, almost as if she's one of them.

Buffy can practically feel the heft of the knife in her grip; the slight twist as she drives it into Faith's gut, up to the hilt. Shock. Blood. Watching her falling. These are the things which change you forever, haunt you forever; and occasionally return and check into sleazy hotel rooms with you.

It's true, this is not a game; this has never been a game.

She walks over and lays her hand on Faith's back, feels the muscles twitch in reflex. "I'm sorry. Please don't go." She slips her arms around Faith's waist, and hangs on; relieved to be touching her again, though she can sense the resistance vibrating through the other Slayer, the effort it's probably costing her not to bolt, or turn around and hit her. Instead Faith leans against the door, supported on her palms, and lets out a sharp breath. "I'm sorry," Buffy repeats; her chin pressed into the crook of Faith's shoulder. *Sorry I couldn't save you from yourself; that I didn't see the big, red warning signs until it was way too late; that when it came to it I couldn't even kill you right.*

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There is one thing she has to do -- to know. She slides her hand a little way under Faith's top, strokes the curve of her stomach, stops when she gets to the scar, but doesn't say anything, simply traces it. It's still there, the thin, raised line of puckered skin. This is the way Faith's body remembers. Slayers don't scar easily; Buffy doubts this will ever fade completely. She finds that she's shivering; they both are.

"I did that," she murmurs, running her fingers over the three inch seam in Faith's flesh.

"Yeah, it's..." Faith's voice cracks. "It's wicked sexy though. Drives 'em wild -- er, Buffy, what --"

Buffy has swung quickly in front of Faith, and dropped to her knees, in order to press a kiss against the place. Her lips and the tip of her nose nuzzling the warm, slightly damp skin of Faith's belly. She looks up; and there's so much she wants to say, but what comes out is, "Like this you mean."

Faith lets out a sound half way between a laugh and a sob, as her knees buckle and she crumples to the floor. This hurts more than she can bear. Her eyes are burning with unshed tears. The bitch is torturing her; and she's standing -- okay, technically collapsing -- here, and letting her. By now Faith should be three sheets to the wind, and negotiating a nice, safe, zipless fuck with some guy named Kyle or Mitchell; who'd be so mesmerized by her tits they wouldn't bother to wonder why she's bruised and dirty. Scratch the itch; run; forget.

But B is holding her like no one else has ever held her; and it's been so long, it's been so fucking long.

"Hey." Buffy pulls back to give her a sad, serious look. The loss of contact is like being dowsed with ice water. "What just happened? I didn't mean to..."

"S'okay. You kinda tickled me. Found my, my Achilles' heel. If you had a feather I'd be completely at your mercy."

"Faith." Buffy strokes Faith's face lightly with the back of her hand.

This three hundred and sixty degree turn from abuse to sympathy is not exactly new to Faith, but it's confusing the hell out of her all the same. She flinches away. "Shit, B, what are you trying to do to me?"

Buffy smiles weakly. "I don't really know -- is it working?"

"I can't stop shaking."

"Me neither," Buffy whispers, and leans in for a brief, strangely innocent, kiss, that leaves Faith dizzy and longing for more. "Is this alright?" she asks; suddenly looking so much like the girl Faith first met; except now there's a deceptive fragility in her body, a deadness in her eyes, which don't belong with that memory.

The word forming part of Faith's brain has gone temporarily AWOL.

"Do you want me to stop?"

There's a knot in Faith's stomach, the same as the last second in a game of Russian roulette before she pulls the trigger. "No," she says. "No, don't stop."

Even though this is breaking my heart, don't stop.

The bed creaks and settles as they fall onto it; tiredness making Buffy clumsy as she fumbles with Faith's clothes. They are nearly tussling in their hurry, uncoordinated, and getting in each other's way. Buttons and zippers never normally seem this complicated, now they are the enemy. Faith hisses in discomfort as Buffy accidentally elbows her in the ribs, but her apology is cut short as Faith rolls her over and kisses her, with lingering, half-painful tenderness. This feels like their first time; the way it did their one and only time. And it feels like a goodbye.

They undress for each other in silence; and when Buffy draws Faith down to her again, it's grief, slow, sweet grief, finally spilling out in every touch. Hurt and regret. Memory and forgetting. Even as she's here -- locked in this embrace; body slick with sweat; moaning with the rhythm of Faith's fingers sliding inside her -- it's as if she's looking back on this from some time far in a future she probably won't live long enough to see. And that's alright. Buffy knows this war may never truly be over, never won, but they will go on fighting to the last. It's what they do.

After a while she loses track of whose hands, whose mouth, whose thoughts; it's just them, a tangle of straining limbs and wanting. As the dead look on, she closes her eyes and gasps into her climax; thinking -- this is for everything we lost along the way. This is for all those precious things that could have been, and never will be, because their time and place have passed.

Then there is only Faith crawling up the bed; the taste of herself, still on Faith's mouth when she kisses her, soft and deep. There is only Faith. The way her body responds to pleasure, to pain; to the fine edge between them; and how Buffy wants to take her over that edge, and catch her when she falls. There is only Faith -- close now, bucking hard, breath hitching desperately; watching Buffy with intense, vulnerable eyes. Faith biting her lip when she comes; swallowing the sound back down inside herself like a secret that can't be allowed to escape. Shuddering with aftershocks. Tears forming and trickling slowly into her hair. So weird seeing Faith cry; but good, right somehow, that she isn't trying to hide it. It makes her seem stronger. And maybe Buffy doesn't really understand what just happened; and it's probably one more thing they will never, ever mention after tonight; but it makes her ache, all the same. So she holds Faith close, and whispers against her neck, "You're safe. You're okay," feels Faith relax into her; exhausted, trusting. "Safe," she repeats to herself, "You're safe."

Later, Buffy is drifting in the stillness that follows a storm; random wisps of memory floating through her mind.

Mom drinking fruit punch. And yawning. And brushing her hair.

The musty books, hormonal teenagers, Earl Grey tea, smell of the library at Sunnydale High.

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Tara singing while she made pancakes.

Dingoes Ate My Baby, playing live at the Bronze.

Jesse, who they never talk about; and Dead Gay Larry; and Harmony -- 'vacuous tramp.'

Her old room at Revello Drive. Mr Gordo, entombed there forever, under tons of rubble.

Miss Calendar.

Angel, trusting her, even as she sent him to Hell.

Jonathan, who did almost ask her to the Prom.

Chloe, and Eve and Amanda. The thousandth routine patrol at the Restfield Cemetery. Anya doing the dance of capitalist superiority.

Spike. Spike saving her every night...except when it counted, of course.

Xander, Giles, Willow. The people they used to be, and will never be again.

She remembers standing alongside her friends, staring into a five mile wide crater in the desert, where a town used to be. Dust settling. The open road stretching endlessly behind her; leading towards a whole world full of possibilities; and her sister's voice saying, 'Yeah Buffy, what are we gonna do now?'

In the nowhere hour before dawn, Buffy wakes from a fitful doze; automatically looks for the shadows gathered in the corners of the room, and finds they are only shadows. She heaves a sigh of relief, and lies, half watching the patterns of street lights reflected on the ceiling; the curtains twitching slightly in the breeze. Faith is still fast asleep in her arms, her head pillowed, warm and heavy, against Buffy's chest; making Buffy profoundly aware of her own heart beating. Thump-thump. Thump-thump. Faith's heart beating. Thump-thump. Thump-thump. She can't help thinking it's seriously ironic that the thing, steadily, inexorably ticking away the seconds of her life, is the very thing which tells her she is alive. *Kind of poetic. Kind of sad. Figures.*

Suddenly, surely, Buffy knows that when the morning comes she will not see her ghosts.

She will get up and rejoin the gang. She -- well, Giles and his magic credit card -- will buy two plane tickets to France; one for her, and one for Dawn. And she will finally retail therapy herself into some new clothes. But for now, just for this moment, she listens intently to the quiet, already familiar sound of Faith breathing, curled in her arms, and smiles into the fading dark; because **this** is all she has; this is all she will ever have; and it is a kind of peace.

Because I know that time is always time
And place is always and only place

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And what is actual is actual only for one time
And only for one place
I rejoice that things are as they are and I renounce the blessed face
And renounce the voice
Because I cannot hope to turn again
Consequently I rejoice, having to construct something
Upon which to rejoice

Ash Wednesday by T.S. Eliot.

Written -- November 2003 to May 2004.

To be continued.