

Queen Zulu – Ski Trip

Rating: NC17

Pairing: Buffy / Faith

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Time Line: Amends

Summary: Snow in Sunnydale.

"So what was that all about?"

Faith spun away from the open front door where she'd been staring down the street after Buffy. Joyce was standing right behind her. Jeez, it was something to be trusted to keep Mrs. S safe, but couldn't B have taken five minutes to explain the sitch to her mom before bugging off? "Uh--" She took one last glance out at the street, but Buffy was gone. "Slayer stuff, I guess."

"Without telling me?" Joyce frowned and walked back into the living room. She prodded at the fire with the poker. "And on Christmas Eve. Why didn't you go with her?"

Faith closed the door and leaned against the wall, hanging back a bit. Did Mrs. S even know that Angel was back? And if not, then what could she really say without risking a mean right cross to the jaw when Buffy returned? She shrugged. "Well, y'know, I'm on guard duty, here."

Joyce looked up at that. "For me?"

Faith nodded and crossed her arms over the stupid good-girl blouse she'd chosen for tonight. Because it was a good-girl thing, right? Christmas Eve with the family, even if it hadn't been B's idea.

The fire got another vicious jab, and sparks went flying. The poker clattered as Joyce shoved it back into its holder. "So, what's Buffy up to tonight?"

"Uh, fighting the good fight?" she tried half-heartedly.

"Faith--" Faith winced at the 'don't even try to bullshit me' tone in Joyce's voice. "Call it a Mom thing, but I like to know where my daughter is on these occasions when my life is apparently in danger, but she doesn't see fit to tell me herself before going out and risking hers."

"It's Angel."

"Angel? The vampire Buffy promised me she would not be seeing again Angel?" Joyce shook her head. "Of course that Angel."

"He's, like, getting the Poltergeist treatment from some big bad," Faith said. "B just wants to help him." Right. Just help him. Like a friend. For sure not because he was the love of her life,

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or anything. 'Cause B had made promises to all of them about that.

"And I suppose there's nothing you or I can do until she comes home?"

Faith nodded, and said absently, "Unless he tries to relive his glory days and attacks us 'cause he thinks you're helpless. Then I poof him."

Joyce took a seat on the couch and stared at her. "You wouldn't have a problem with that?"

"I got this motto. Vampire, slayer, dead vampire."

Joyce smiled. "I like it."

Faith tried a tight smile, wishing there was more she could be doing. She was action girl, not sit-around-waiting-in-uncomfortable-silence girl. But there was really not much else to say. She hadn't come over for Buffy's mom's sake.

"Well, Faith, I guess this means you can help me with the cooking." Joyce headed for the kitchen. "The turkey's almost ready."

Faith followed behind her. Anything to take her mind off Buffy and Angel. Her dying, or him being rescued, or any and all of the cheesy star-crossed lover stuff they might be declaring to each other afterwards. "I don't know what B's told you, but I don't really do the Martha Stewart thing."

"That's alright. I'm going to make gravy. I'll let you carve the turkey--that's usually Buffy's job. I always wondered how she got so good at it when we moved here."

"I get a carving knife, huh?" Faith grinned. "Then I guess cooking might be my thing after all."

She followed Joyce into the kitchen, trying to forget she was borrowing family.

"Faith, wake up!"

She started upright, reaching in one fluid motion for the knife in her boot before recognising that her feet were bare and at some point she'd been wrapped in a blanket as she lay on the couch. Tangled, she nearly fell off before coming completely awake. "What? Is it a demon? Do I gotta slay?"

"No, come and see." Joyce smiled and held out her hand. As if I'm her kid or something, Faith thought, and allowed herself to take it. Looks like B never got back last night. Jeez, what if she's--

Dead?

With Angel?

"Come and look, Faith. It's snowing!"

Faith shook off the bad thoughts and walked out onto the front porch with Buffy's mom. She shivered at the sudden cold, feeling it shoot through her, and extended her arms out to the falling flakes. It was past sunrise, by her internal Slayer-clock, but the sky was dark with clouds.

"Wow, I didn't know you guys went all White Christmas out here," she said, hugging herself a bit in the wind but reluctant to go back inside. "It's like Boston, almost." Boston, but better. You wouldn't freeze your face off after ten minutes in this. And here, there were places where she'd be welcomed in out of the cold. Not many, but still...

"It hasn't snowed like this in ages," Joyce said. "Maybe we should break out the skis before Buffy's winter break is over."

Faith glanced over her shoulder. "You guys ski? That's wicked cool."

Joyce nodded. "Well, not since we moved here...Hank used to take us, back before...Well. Buffy always enjoyed skating, but she never turned down a ski weekend. All our equipment's still in the closet. Except I think my poles may have been used to fend off the undead a couple of months ago."

"Yeah, I heard about that. Zombies. Wish I coulda been there." She turned back to watch the snow falling, staring up the street in the direction Buffy had taken last night. She was starting to shiver, and Joyce was huddling in the open doorway, but neither of them said anything about why they weren't heading back inside. "I went skiing once," she said, softly, leaning against the porch post. It had been a class trip pretty soon before she dropped out--one of the only ones she'd ever managed to sneak away with. She forged her mom's signature on the forms and funded herself with the cash from half a dozen stolen wallets. She'd had no clue how to ski, but it was mostly about getting away for a couple of days, pretending like she was leaving forever. Finding out how much she enjoyed it was just a bonus...after she suckered a few lessons from ski-lunks wanting to 'improve her form', she had actually managed to escape into the rhythm of it. There was hell to pay when she got back--

"Faith--" Joyce hesitated, then asked, "Would you like to go with us? Skiing?"

Faith started and turned around, giving up her watch on the empty street. "For real?" She stopped, then started talking fast enough to outpace Willow at her worst. "I mean, uh, I don't wanna mess with your and B's holiday. And, I really can't, I got no cash, you know? And no stuff. Plus I guess there's the slaying, somebody's gotta keep on top of it if you guys are going out of town. And maybe B doesn't really want to do the best-bud thing with me, she'd probably want to go with Red. And I'm a pretty crappy skier."

Joyce smiled. "Sounds like you're sure."

"Right." The clouds were starting to break up now, strands of pale sunlight leaking through. There was nearly a foot of snow in the yard, pretty freaky for South Cal, and the wind was still icy. Faith shuffled her feet through the dusting of snow on the porch. Her feet were throbbing with cold, and she wondered how she hadn't noticed it before. "Anyway, looks like any vamp coming after you is kissing daylight by now. I better be getting back."

"Aren't you going to wait for Buffy? We still have gifts to open."

"Yeah, well, I got stuff to do, y'know." She didn't want to see Buffy. She didn't want to wait for Buffy, and know to the second how long she'd been gone. "I'll just get my jacket."

They stepped inside, closing out the sudden winter, and Faith hunted for her boots while Joyce got her coat from the closet. "So, anyway, I wanted to say thanks, y'know, for inviting me," she said quickly, and edged towards the door. She opened it to find Buffy standing there, just reaching for the knob.

"Oh, Buffy, you're back!" Joyce rushed into the hallway and hugged Buffy. "Good, now you can help me convince Faith stay for presents."

Buffy raised an eyebrow at Faith. "Not staying for presents? Where's the real Faith and what have you done with her?"

Faith shrugged and backed away from the door. "Nothin'. How'd it go with, uh, everything?"

"Score is Buffy: one, Evil: I'm boring, full of myself, and ineffective." Buffy bounced into the living room and held her hands out to the coals in the fireplace. With the encouragement of Joyce's motherly glare, Faith tossed her jacket in the direction of the closet. Kept her boots, though. Faith slumped back onto the couch where she'd spent the night. Looking down at Buffy, she could see that the whole story wasn't getting told any time soon. Despite her easy words, Buffy's eyes looked red from crying. Not something Faith was really good at noticing, usually. But if Buffy wanted to avoid, Faith was willing to play along--for now.

"So, you wanted me to stay, are you gonna open what I got you?"

Buffy spun around, a huge smile spreading over her face. Faith shifted, trying to hide her answering smile. She spent the night with Angel and left you to rot, she yelled at herself. She didn't even want you here in the first place. But seeing how a single word about her presents caused happiness return to Buffy's eyes made it too easy to forget. She was already tearing through the scraps of newspaper Faith had tied around her gift. Tossing the paper aside, she held up the stake like it was the Holy Grail or something.

"A new Mr. Pointy," she declared, as if a million stakes hadn't gone through her hands in the last few years. "Thank you, Faith. I'll save it for a special vampire."

"Yeah," Faith said. I can think of one 'special' vampire. Shut up, she likes it. "Don't go getting mushy on me, B, that thing's meant for using, it's not like I want you to set up a shrine or anything."

"I think it's very thoughtful." Joyce brought out a plate full of turkey leftovers from the kitchen. "Here, Buffy, eat, you missed dinner last night. Faith, did you want some breakfast?"

Faith nodded. She was pretty much trapped here, now, but it wasn't like she had plans. In fact, it was kind of nice, exactly what she'd hoped would happen last night. Maybe they could finally get over this whole thing between them, Mrs. Post and Angel and all that crap. Maybe she could finally relax. She reached over the arm of the couch to mooch some turkey cold cuts

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from Buffy's plate, and grinned when she got her hand firmly slapped. She stared at Buffy and wagged her eyebrows as she licked her fingers clean. Buffy stuck her tongue out in return. Yeah, this definitely had possibilities.

"Now, girls, I know you want to dive in to all the presents," Joyce said, "but I have an even better idea. Buffy, Faith and I were thinking it would be wonderful to take a ski weekend, the three of us, maybe over New Year's. What do you think?"

Faith started to object, but Buffy's squeal of excitement interrupted her.

"Wow!" Buffy jumped up, nearly spilling the turkey sandwich she'd piled together. "Really, Mom? Can you get the time off? Ooh! Can there be a hot tub? And really incredibly obscene amounts of hot chocolate? Can Faith really come?"

"I can't--" Faith started, and was immediately at the receiving end of two Summers glares. This was not happening. And yet... "I can't ski so hot," she finished lamely.

"No problem," Buffy said airily, waving away the objection. "You've got Slayer strength and co-ordination. And if that's not enough, I'm a great teacher."

Faith sank back on the cushions and watched as Joyce and Buffy proceeded to plan the next week of her life. She was going away with Buffy. To a ski lodge in the mountains. With a hot tub. Over New Year's Eve. Shit.

The line between amazing and disaster suddenly seemed a hell of a lot thinner.

Part 2

Faith jiggled with the radio dial to see if she could get less static and more of the techno dancebeat she'd chosen. At last, giving up with a sigh, she slumped down in the front seat, knees on the dashboard, and drummed her fingers along with the heavy bass. Behind her, she could practically feel Buffy pouting--call it a Slayer connection or just the way she always knew what B was getting her panties in a knot about (all the more reason not to wear them, in her opinion, but try telling that to Little Miss Modesty). That, and she'd seen how Buffy had to contort herself in several unmentionable ways to fit in with all the gear they'd stuffed into the back of the Jeep. But she wasn't gonna let that pout get the better of her this time. She was strong. She'd just pretend she had no idea she was the target of B's laser stare. She was just gonna sit here, mind her own business, and silently count down to the explosion.

Tiny nest of suitcases rammed against who-knows-what...ten...her mom calmly oblivious, eyes on the road...seven...everyone ignoring the puppy eyes and little wounded sighs...four...Faith stealing the front seat from right under her nose when they'd left the house...two...

"I think we should have measured with Faith's boots off."

Right on schedule. Faith threw back her head and rolled her eyes. "Face it, B, you're the shortest. And I called shotgun. To the victor goes the leg room."

"It's really suspicious, actually--how no one's ever seen you barefoot." Buffy nudged Faith's seat with her toe. "I bet you're secretly a midget."

"Yeah, I'm actually two people in one kick-ass costume." Faith glanced at Joyce, but she was carefully not listening--very Sunnydale of her; if you ignored the fight then it wasn't happening. Or maybe it was a parent thing, for car trips. "Y'know, you wouldn't be having this problem if you'd stopped packing after the third suitcase. Jeez, you practically spent more time pickin' clothes than we're gonna be gone."

"Hey, just because you're ready to go once you've tied your bundle--where does that word come from, anyway?--"

Faith froze. So that's what she thinks of you. Tramp. But you knew that, right? So, no biggie.

So why are you here?

Shut up.

Oh, great, she's still babbling about bindles.

She's cute when she babbles.

I said shut UP.

"Yeah, anyway, B, if you have a point, you know, we're all waiting."

Again, the pout. She could tell, even when it happened behind her back. "My point, F, is that it's actually three suitcases and a makeup case."

"Makeup? For skiing?"

Another nudge in the back of her seat, like Buffy was letting her in on a big conspiracy. "It's for the lodge, apres-ski. For all the cute skiing guys."

"Yeah?" Faith glanced again at Joyce. Still nothing. Amazing what that woman could block out without even raising a sweat. "What about soulboy, does he know you're looking to get down and dirty with some snow muffin?"

"I told you Angel and I aren't together like that. Especially since..."

Faith straightened in her seat and twisted to look back at Buffy. Buffy flapped a hand and resettled herself on her luggage, grimacing, and nodded towards her mom. Faith raised an eyebrow. It must be pretty heavy if it could break through Joyce's deaf act. Angel really wasn't her favourite subject, but it looked like B was willing to spill what happened Christmas Eve, at last. Faith turned back to the front, trying to process that. Did she really want to know? Not that she was likely to get a choice in the matter. And why was Buffy going to tell her? She hadn't even talked to Red about it before they left. So...okay. Great. Big confession time. With her. For her. Maybe B and Deadboy were actually going through with the breakup thing this time, and now...

Now what?

She's not here for you. This is the pity-friend thing, poor Faith alone on Christmas. Her mom invited you, for Chrissakes. She said she wants the ski-boys.

She turned around again. "The hump 'em and dump 'em plan is great, B, but you do know your mom's along on this trip, right?"

Buffy gave a wry smile. "Hey, I said nothing about humping. Again with the diverging life-philosophies. Although..." The smile widened, then, "No. I just need a break from all that codependent, passive-aggressive, and I use the word loosely, 'soul'-mate stuff. Future, not past. That's what I'm focusing on now."

"Oh." Faith shifted uncomfortably. "Well, y'know, if you, like, need to talk...or, y'know, whatever."

Buffy grinned, slamming on the full thousand-watt smile. "Faith, I do believe that somewhere in that mess of sentence fragments was a wonderful thought. Thanks."

God, she's beautiful. And I'm such a corn-dog. "Yeah, well, I'm figuring on getting killed on the hill, so, I'm making back-up plans for the full three days."

"I do not talk that much!"

Faith smirked and Buffy swatted her shoulder. A Slayer-strength swat, but a friendly one. Yeah. She could be comforting. She could do the friend thing. At least that.

"Well, this is it." Joyce's words broke through Faith's doze and she uncurled from the front seat. Blinking, she looked out of the windshield. The Jeep was parked in front of the biggest fucking so-called 'cabin' she'd ever seen. Which wasn't saying much, but still, the place was massive.

"Finally!" B kicked at Faith's seat. "Come on, out, I want to discover how much physio I'll need before my legs work again."

"Right." Faith stepped out, still staring. The place was three stories of stripped logs, with wide bay windows looking out across the valley, cedar-shingled and just gorgeous. The walk-out was directly under the lift-line, and around the opposite corner, she could see a hot tub set into the balcony jutting off over the dip of the mountain. A light dusting of snow over the steps and railings was burnished bronze by the falling sun.

"Isn't this place amazing?" Joyce put her hands on Faith's shoulders and followed her gaze. "A friend of mine from the book club offered me a few days of her timeshare in exchange for a deal with her redecorating. We get the top two floors, two bedrooms, bath, living room, kitchen...and all the fresh air you can breathe." Joyce spread her arms and sighed. "I'm glad we thought of this, Faith, I haven't had a vacation in far too long."

"Yeah. It's bitchin'," Faith breathed, then backtracked. "Uh, I mean, it's nice. Lovely. Good."

Joyce smiled. "I think you had it right the first time. I'm going to start unpacking. You two come in when you're ready."

"Okay." Faith watched her go, then rolled her neck, stretching out the car cramps. The air was cool, but still, and the sunset was leaving the last of its warmth before night fell. The snow banks absorbed sound, leaving the place amazingly quiet.

A little too quiet. Where was B, who by all rights should still be moaning about her pins and needles? Faith started to turn...

And was blindsided by a stinging faceful of snow. Sputtering, she wiped the slush from her face, and blinked at the sight of Buffy bent over, giggling, another snowball in one hand.

"Oh, you so did not just do that," she growled. Icy water dripped down the back of her neck.

Buffy gasped with laughter. "You turned...right when...and the look on your face..."

"You are going to pay for that, B." Faith bent over and scraped together a double handful of snow, ignoring the burning cold. Buffy's face changed from laughter to worry, and she started backing up.

"You wouldn't. My legs still hurt. It's getting dark. Faith..."

"Hey, you're still holding a snowball. This is just a preemptive strike." Faith took a step forward, crushing the snow into the perfect shape.

Buffy sidled around the other side of the Jeep. "Preemptive...? You've been talking to Giles again."

"You gonna talk, or are you gonna run?"

Buffy ran for the door, but Faith circled the Jeep just as fast, and whipped her snowball. It caught Buffy square in the chest, right where a stake would've gone into a vampire, and splattered over her sweater. Buffy retaliated with the ball she was holding, but Faith ducked it and charged.

"Hey!" Buffy was running in earnest, now. "Come on, that's one each. We're even, aren't we?" she called over her shoulder.

"Not until you eat snow, Summers!"

Buffy floundered through the drifts, breaking through the crust and hip-deep in snow, trying to see how close Faith was getting and still choosing the best direction to flee. Faith, with her trail already broken and several inches of height on her side, closed on her prey quickly and tackled her into a snow bank. Buffy struggled mightily for position, almost slipping out of Faith's hold, but Faith grabbed her wrists and straddled her, cutting off her escape.

"Now..." Faith said, as menacingly as possible. "You are gonna regret so much about the last

five minutes..."

Buffy wriggled like a caught fish. "Never!"

"Yep." Faith chose a handful of loose powder and let some of it drift down onto Buffy's face, grinning as she spat and grunted, twisting her hips under Faith's weight. Faith hissed as the contact suddenly became unbearably delicious, Buffy all red-faced and gasping beneath her. She lifted away a little. "Don't start what you can't finish, B," she said, shoved the snow in Buffy's face, and stood up.

Buffy glared at her, brushed the snow away, then reached for the hand Faith offered to help her up. "You got snow up my sweater," she said, sulking, and tramped back to the beaten path. Faith followed more slowly, trying to ease the chafing of her leather pants--really not the best winterwear--and regain her cool. Away from Buffy, she was freezing, and wet through by the snow-wrassling.

In more than one way.

Jeez, you can't control yourself for five minutes, how you going to last the weekend?

She started it.

Right. That makes it all better, then.

"Faith?"

Faith frowned at B's shadow ahead of her, lit by the cabin's windows. "Yeah?"

"I'm sorry I threw a snowball at your head."

"No, you're not."

"Well...not a lot. But some." Buffy reached out as Faith drew level with her and grabbed her hand. "Any outdoor activity earns you hot chocolate, you know."

"It better." But she was smiling again. Damn. Too easy.

"And the snow was scratchy." Wheedling, now.

"Yeah." Faith gave Buffy a light hipcheck. "I'm sorry I dumped you in the snow."

"No, you're not."

"Nope." Faith opened the door to the cabin and let Buffy lead her in. "Not even some."

Part 3

Joyce glanced up from the romance novel she was reading and gave them a single long look

when they came in. "I'm guessing I don't need to know?" she asked mildly.

"Snowball fight," Buffy answered, kicking off her shoes. "So do we get the tour or what? I need clothes from suitcases one, two, and five."

"Five?" Faith asked. She shrugged out of her jacket and tossed it on a stand near the door. "You mean there's more?"

"I packed stuff for you too." Buffy gave her a stern look. "You didn't dress for the weather. I'm not going to spend my weekend waiting on a sick Slayer."

"Nor am I," Joyce called, her nose buried once again in Brazen Desire. "I've had enough of that to last a lifetime."

"Thanks muchly, Mom. Making all that effort to survive the flu seems so worth it now." Buffy rolled her eyes for Faith's benefit and they shared a grin. "The bedroom's upstairs, right?"

"Actually..." Joyce smiled to herself. "I think you'll find what you need down here."

Buffy grabbed Faith and dragged her into the living room in front of Joyce. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?" she asked, practically jumping up and down with excitement.

"What?" Faith asked.

Joyce shook her head ruefully. "I know you're going to want to stay up late and talk about boys and give each other makeovers. And I know that you'd argue about who got the air mattress on the floor. So..."

"Um, I don't--" Faith said, intending to set the matter straight on her participation in these little sleepover rituals of Buffy's, but before she could finish, she got an elbow in the ribs. Buffy glared at her. "Hey--"

"So...?" Buffy lead her mom. "You were saying...?"

"Girls, why don't you two take the master suite? I'll just take the twin bed upstairs. Certainly I don't need the king-size to myself."

"All right! Thanks, Mom," Buffy said, and rushed away to check out the room.

"Yeah, thanks," Faith muttered. The floor sounded safer. But who was she to complain? If this is how B and Red spent their nights...

Joyce patted her shoulder absently, still reading. "You get settled in, and then we can see about dinner," she said.

There was a sudden high-pitched squeal from down the hall. "I think that's my cue," Faith said. She followed after Buffy. Suddenly, an arm snaked out of the room and dragged Faith in by the elbow.

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"Look," Buffy cried. "The hot tub is on our balcony." She let go of Faith and bounded across the room. She yanked open the glass doors and danced out, barefoot. "Faith, come on, take a look at this view!"

Faith grinned. There was just no way to not get excited when B was this happy. She sauntered out onto the balcony and aimed a test kick at the hot tub cover. The view was amazing. Buffy was leaning out over the railing, bouncing up to see the road below better, her wet jeans clinging to her, the thin sweater and cold weather leaving very little to the imagination. Which had never stopped Faith before; her imagination immediately went into overdrive.

She laughed. Buffy turned around, surprised, and Faith just shook her head. "You're like a little kid," she said. Then, with a significant look, "You cold, there, B, or just glad to be my roomie?"

Buffy's face became a very amusing shade of red. "I am going to change," she said with as much dignity as she could muster. Which wasn't much, considering how fast she'd crossed her arms.

"Right, you do that." Faith looked up at the stars. She could pick out Orion and the Big Dipper from her time hitchhiking, but out here they seemed so much closer. She looked after Buffy as she passed to go inside. "Hey, B?" she said quietly.

"What, you want to compliment my ass next?" Buffy asked, exasperated, then mumbled, "I knew should've brought a muumuu."

"No." Faith smiled into the dark. "I just wanted to say thanks. For inviting me. It's pretty much the best vacation I've ever had."

Buffy turned back, silhouetted in the doorway. Faith thought she could see an answering smile, and a hint of Buffy's eyes glimmering in the starlight. "Already? We just got here."

"Yeah. Already."

"Well, good. I'm glad you came." Buffy shivered. "But I really am going to change now."

"Okay. And B?"

"Yeah?"

"You've got a gorgeous ass."

Faith rummaged through the suitcase Buffy had told her was hers. After a late dinner at a restaurant in town, they'd spent some time checking out the closed stores before returning to the chalet. Buffy had immediately grabbed her bags and rushed for the shower, instructing Faith to find the pajamas she'd packed for her.

She found a pair of thick flannel pajamas with cartoon penguins on snowshoes. "No way," she muttered. "She has got to be kidding me." She pawed past the ski gear in the bag and came up

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with a dark red bikini that looked like it would be a bit on the skimpy side. "Okay...this is more like it...I guess..."

Buffy came in, her hair loose, wearing an identical set of pyjamas, except hers had pictures of polar bears wearing earmuffs. "Bathroom's yours," she said.

Faith held up the penguins. "Uh, B? These aren't really my style, you know?"

Buffy pouted. "They're cute."

"I'm not sure 'cute' is the word I want the docs to be thinking when I'm brought into the ER dying of heat stroke."

"I suppose you've got something better?"

"Well--" Faith stopped. Buffy was right that she hadn't brought much, and pyjamas were one thing that hadn't made the list. "I don't really wear..."

Buffy raised an eyebrow. "You sleep nude. Skin and sheets. Bare is better. I know, you've told me. On at least one occasion, in a lot more detail than I really needed. Ergo, penguins."

"Ergo?" Faith echoed weakly.

"It's a Giles word." Buffy crossed her arms. "In my bed, we wear clothes. Now, go change."

Faith snorted. "Fine." She grabbed the pile and went to the bathroom. When she was ready, she took one last doubtful look and pulled them on. "Cute," she sneered at her reflection.

She walked back to the room, picking at the sleeves. When she looked up, Buffy was lying on her side in the bed, propped up on her elbow. She was biting back a smile, her eyes sparkling.

"If you say one word..." Faith said, leaving the threat hanging. She could feel herself blushing. B could really pull off this look, but as for her, she felt more naked wearing flannel penguins than when she'd skinned completely out of her leathers.

Buffy nodded, gave her a weird, almost embarrassed look, and patted the side of the bed next to her. "Time for all that girly sleepover stuff," she said. "Like Mom expects."

Faith turned off the lights and sat beside her, hugging her knees. "Like you finally telling me exactly what went down with Deadboy on Christmas?" she asked. Anything to put off the actual sleeping part. The best defense is a good offense.

Buffy frowned. "He was going to kill himself."

Faith raised her eyebrows. "Angel?" She didn't add that she figured he was so committed to brooding that he could never make up his mind to do the dusty deed.

"Yeah..." Buffy sighed and lay back. "He was giving up..."

"But it was the First doing that to him, you said."

"I wasn't upset about that. It's--he didn't want to fight." Buffy looked up at her. "I killed the Bringers. We stopped the First. Angel's fine. But..."

Faith looked down at her toes. "But now you're back to all that you-and-him cursed vampire soap opera stuff," she said roughly. What else? Second verse, same as the first. A little bit louder and a whole lot worse.

"I don't think so." Buffy let out a breath that was almost a laugh. "I really don't, this time. We were walking through all that snow, hand in hand, and all I could think was how could I still be believing in him when he'd almost given up on me?"

"So what did you do?"

"With Angel, there's always so much drama. Love isn't supposed to be that depressing. And I told him so. I'm not going back."

Faith sat up straight. The room's darkness didn't mean much to her Slayer's eyes, and Buffy's gaze was clear and direct. "Yeah?" she said, keeping her voice as empty as possible. Because she didn't care. Because it didn't mean a thing. This week apart, next week endless love. Already she could see Buffy getting upset, her eyes bright with tears. She's just sorry she's going to have to apologize before she goes running back to him this time.

"Yeah," Buffy whispered. "I thought you'd--"

Faith interrupted, "So why didn't you tell Red about all this?"

Buffy shrugged and looked away. When she spoke, her voice was under control again.

"Willow is my best friend, she's always been a big Angel-and-me-together fan. But that's partly because she was supporting the idea of me in love, or the thought of love at all. She's a huge romantic. She wants it to work out. And after Christmas--" She paused, then said almost to herself, "There were things she wouldn't understand."

Faith nodded. "And you didn't want a cheerleader anymore." Well, there was no danger of that here. She'd listen, but she wasn't waiting with bated breath for the next guy to walk into Buffy's life. Like Scott Hope take two.

"Yeah." Buffy glanced up at her. "If I told her about--everything, I'd feel guilty because of how it'd make her feel. Crazy, huh?"

"Nah." Faith twisted around and lay down, away from Buffy's strangely significant stare. She laced her fingers together behind her head, feeling the heat of Buffy's body through their mutual layers of flannel. "Maybe it's just time for you to do what's right for you--what makes you feel better." She pushed away the bitterness that came with the words. "When you worry too much about how everyone else is doing, pretty soon you're mad at them because they'll take advantage of you if they can."

"That's not true. Not everyone's like that, Faith." Buffy's voice was soft again, trying to convince her.

"Yeah?" Faith felt her anger building. "Angel kissed you as soon as he thought he could get away with it. Xander pulled the I-told-you-so card practically the minute he found out. That's people for you."

"You didn't--"

"I wasn't there, remember?" Faith rolled over, away from her. Still feeling Buffy's nearness against her back. It was a fucking king-size bed. Why were they all scrunched together in the middle?

Buffy shifted, as if to reach out and touch her. Faith waited, wondering, but at last she heard Buffy's arm drop back to her side. "I'm sorry about that, Faith. I want you to be there--I mean, not at my personal inquisition, but whenever we meet. You don't have to be your own team."

Faith rolled back. Buffy was watching her closely, her green eyes wide and serious. She'd tried to push away the memory of what that bitch Post had done by blaming Buffy for everything. And it didn't help. People hurt you when they could. But this was one dead horse that didn't need another kick. And there was something in Buffy's face--

"Yeah, okay. Flying solo's not always what it's cracked up to be. I know." She sighed. "Habit, right? Maybe I'll get over it someday."

Buffy nodded. "I hope so. Anyway, that's not what I meant. When I had to go to Angel, you understood. And you haven't been all judgy tonight. You've never taken advantage of me."

Faith couldn't help it. She grinned and wiggled her eyebrows. "Not yet, anyway."

Buffy managed a wry grin and a disapproving glare all in one look. "Okay, I walked into that one."

Faith gave an innocent half shrug. "Hey, you're the one who was so psyched about us sharing a bed."

Buffy's grin turned evil. "Yeah, only so I could get my revenge for you dumping me in the snow. I'm whacking you with my pillow as soon as you fall asleep."

"Right, because we're not fulfilling enough of Xander's fantasies. We've got to fit a pillow fight in somehow."

"It's a busy schedule, but we wouldn't want to disappoint him when we get back. He needs new material--the alligator story is wearing thin."

"I'll just have to find something else to wrassle naked," Faith said, filling her voice with suggestion.

Buffy just nodded, that sheepish look back on her face. Faith gave herself points for winning that exchange. It was easier to get back into the rhythm of their joking than to accept what Buffy was saying. Sure, they were okay for now--friends--but sooner or later one of them would mess up, and it'd be gone...probably she'd be the one moving on. Buffy rolled onto her back, staring at the ceiling, and Faith wondered what she was thinking. Probably about Angel.

Queen Zulu – Ski Trip

It wasn't so easy to give up the brooding the instant you said you were moving on.

She sighed and closed her eyes. It was weird trying to sleep next to someone instead of giving them the heave-ho. The pyjamas were itchy. And hot. And she could feel Buffy watching her. She tried not to flinch under the weight of that stare.

Several minutes passed. Buffy whispered, "Faith?"

"Hmm?"

"You asleep?"

"Yes."

"Oh." A pause; the sheets rustling. Then: "Me too."

"Goody for you."

"Yeah."

It was going to be a long night.

Part 4

The red numbers glowed 7:43 AM and someone was in bed with Faith.

She stiffened for the two seconds it took to wake up fully and remember who that someone was; it took three more seconds to realise what that someone was doing--spooning her, soft bursts of air tickling her earlobe, one hand draped carelessly over her stomach and resting just below her breasts. Faith jerked forward in surprise, and the someone followed, snuggling closely behind her.

Buffy was not going to be a happy camper if she woke up like this. She probably wouldn't stop blushing for a week. And Faith wasn't going to be on her favourite-people list for a lot longer than that.

But this was not Faith's fault. They were on her side of the bed. In fact, a few inches further and they'd be on the floor next to her side of the bed. And there was no way to escape. And she was beginning to enjoy herself entirely too much.

If she moved, Buffy might wake up and know that she knew. If she didn't move, Buffy might wake up and know, but she wouldn't know that Faith knew. If she went back to sleep and Buffy woke up and moved, she might wake Faith...and then Buffy would know that she knew and that Faith knew that she knew Faith knew. If she stayed here all night and didn't move, the only thing she knew was that she'd go crazy thinking about it.

Thinking about how easy it'd be to hold Buffy's hand over her stomach and brush phantom patterns on her arm with her fingertips.

Thinking about how Buffy's breathing moved her chest back and forth, now touching Faith's back, now sliding away.

Thinking about how if she shifted ever-so-slightly they'd be completely pressed together, shoulder to toe, her hips cradled by Buffy's, their legs linked together.

They were bad thoughts. They were wonderful thoughts. They were--oh my god is Buffy waking up? thoughts.

"Sorry." Buffy's warm breath near her ear didn't sound sorry at all, and she let go entirely too slowly, and it did nothing to dull the ache between Faith's legs. She squeezed her thighs together, let her hand creep under the elastic of the pyjama bottoms and pressed, hard. If she could just ease the early-morning hornies until she could get to the bathroom, anywhere...shit. Shit. Bad move. She came, quick and hot, biting back her gasp and twitching away from Buffy. She scrambled out of bed to mask her movement, Buffy half sitting up behind her as though to follow.

"I'm-I'm gonna catch a shower," she said, hating the stutter in her voice.

"But it's early...vacation. Sleeping in is what we do."

Fuck it, fuck this, fuck all the goddamn self-control. Fuck B and her bedroom eyes, all half-sleepy and tousle-haired but so...so...fuck. "Yeah, well, cleanliness is next to--something good. So I hear. I'll be back."

Faith bolted for the washroom and wrenched open the hot water tap in the shower until steam clouded the room. Mist slowly faded her reflection from the mirror--face red, hair a wavy mess, eyes dark and wide, breath still catching in her throat. She nearly scalded herself climbing in.

Leaning against the tiles, she ran her hands down her body, still tight with unreleased tension. Wash it all away. God. Fucking...oh God. Hand between her legs now, fingers moving inside, still slick and wanting and the shower was hot, so hot.

Fuck you, B...fuck...you...

She tried to draw it out, but it was over too fast, again, a brief spurt of empty pleasure. Her knees trembled and she let her head hang, let her the water plaster her hair to her face. Let her breath quicken, not lust this time but tears. She swallowed them back, her throat constricting. At last, she lifted her face to the jet, eyes closed, and started to wash.

When she returned to the bedroom, wrapped in a towel, Buffy was laying on top of the covers, legs spread, her top riding up to expose the pale smoothness of her stomach. She'd fallen back asleep, or at least her eyes were closed, her chest moving with deep, even breaths. The room smelled like sex. Faith turned her back, dropped her pyjamas in a heap and grabbed her suitcase. She hauled out long johns and sweats and pulled them on without losing the towel. She yanked her hair back into a loose ponytail. When she finished, Buffy had rolled over and was watching her drowsily, eyes half-closed.

Queen Zulu – Ski Trip

"Bet Mom'll make us pancakes," she said. "Hungry?"

"Whatever. I'm gonna watch TV."

She threw herself onto the couch in the living room, flipping through channels until she found an old rerun of Spiderman, and then stared blankly out the window. It was snowing again, huge sticky flakes, and with a sort of dull surprise Faith remembered they were here to ski. How excited she'd been that they were going together...that B was going to teach her. All she could think now was that she couldn't wait to get back to Sunnydale, back to ignoring B and the Scoobies as much as she could. Back to forgetting everything she felt. It'd be easier, for everyone. All she had to do was survive the rest of this 'vacation' without saying anything. Yeah.

Two more nights...

"This..." Buffy paused dramatically and waved a ski pole at the panorama in front of them, "...is a ski hill."

"Yeah, I got that much, thanks." Faith shifted her weight from one ski to the other, adjusting to the fit and weight of her rented ski boots. She'd made it up the lift in one piece, had managed not to embarrass herself, yet. But she was convinced it wouldn't be long before she was rolling down the hill like a cartoon snowball with the arms and legs sticking out, and all the wavy motion-lines around it.

And B standing at the top of the hill laughing.

Faith scowled, knowing Buffy couldn't see it beneath her neckwarmer and goggles. After this morning, the magic had gone out of the so-called vacation.

"Faith?"

"What?" she snapped.

"I said, let's take that green circle run. It's the easiest."

"Fine." She shoved off, skating on her skis like she'd been shown by some cheap fuck from that long-ago Massachusetts ski hill. She knew she was acting the bitch, but she'd never modified her moods for anyone else's benefit in the past, and wasn't about to start. Buffy, however, was ignoring her outburst, following along easily behind her until they reached the top of the slope.

Faith looked out across the valley at the mountains opposite. "You first."

"I'm supposed to be teaching you." Buffy sounded hurt. Jeez, it was hardly her fault that Faith couldn't handle all this good-buddy stuff. They were supposed to be having fun. And she was messing it up. As usual.

Faith softened a bit. "Yeah, so I'll learn by watching. Go on."

Buffy gave her a brief look, head tilted, like maybe she was gonna ask some shrink-question-or sign them both up to be on a Very Special Oprah. But she probably knew Faith wasn't going to talk, so she dug in her poles and headed down the run.

Damn, but she looked good. Ned Flanders in a ski suit had nothin' on B.

Yeah, this wasn't getting any easier. Faith gave a disgusted snort. Maybe she should just get with the skiing.

No sooner than she thought it than she saw Buffy wobble on a sharp turn and do a monster faceplant in the snow. And, just like that, all her grumpiness melted into a fit of giggles. She cautiously pushed off and skied as quickly as she could to where Buffy was just sitting up.

Stopping beside her, Faith leaned forward on her poles and laughed. "Damn, B, if you're giving tips on what not to do, then you're the best teacher I've ever had."

Buffy pushed herself up and fished snow out of her collar. "There was ice."

"Right." Faith pushed her goggles up to her forehead, the better to show off her mocking grin.

"There was. And I haven't been skiing in three years." She twisted around, batting at the snow in her collar and missing.

Faith inched forward. "Here," she said. "You missed some."

"You're probably going to shove it down my jacket," Buffy grumbled, but she turned to allow Faith better access. Faith took off her mitten to brush the snow away. Buffy shivered, and Faith pressed her palm against the back of her neck, warming her. Buffy looked over her shoulder with a tentative smile. "Thanks."

Faith shoved her head away playfully. "Yeah, whatever," she said. "Clumsy." She grinned, tried to back away on her skis, overbalanced, and promptly fell on her butt beside Buffy.

"Oh-ho! Look who's talking!"

"I'm tangled in your skis."

"And that's my fault?"

"You fell first!"

They were both laughing. Other skiers were giving making wide turns around them, and still they sat in the snow. Buffy was smiling her light-up-the-room smile and Faith knew it was all for her. She was probably grinning like a dope herself. No way was she going to make the first move to get up--not even if she got frostbite in unmentionable places and they stayed here til spring. Christ, but she was fucking schizo around B. One minute ready to pack it all in, and the next--after just a look, or a smile--and she was back to being ass-over-teakettle in love.

Love?

Oh, shit.

Part 5

Love.

That changed everything.

For the rest of the day, on the ski lifts, on the runs, in the lodge eating lunch, it was all Faith could think about. Before she'd just been thinking that B was a hottie--that much she'd known since she got to Sunnydale--and that it'd do them both a world of good if they could get down and dirty. Sometimes, maybe, she thought about a date, like, a date date with dinner and a movie and beating demons to a bloody pulp to top the evening off, all romantic and shit. The closest they'd come to that was Homecoming, and that wasn't very close at all, what with B out saving the world again. But screwing was screwing and dating was dating and love was--different.

Love was scary, when you got right down to it. Especially when the girl you fell for had no fucking clue.

When the lifts shut off for the day she was exhausted. All her muscles felt like cooked spaghetti. It was better than a full night's slaying, dancing until dawn, and three rounds in the sack with whoever she'd managed to pick up. It was a peaceful kind of tired, like she was happy and for once she didn't have to fight for it.

Plus, B was still giving out those sappy smiles. Jeez, but she was getting mushy. And enjoying it, for frick's sake.

They were bickering easily by the time they reached the lodge at the end of the day. Joyce came out to meet them, a tall man trailing behind her.

"Girls, I'd like you to meet Mark Hewitt," she said. "We met on the ski lift and got to talking, and he's invited us to his New Year's Eve party tomorrow."

Faith gave the guy a half-hearted smile. He seemed nice enough, in an older, stuffy way, kind of like Giles but not so studly. Mrs. S. was pretty pleased with him, though, she could tell. But hell if Faith was going to go to his New Year's party. It'd probably be full of old people sitting around falling asleep before the ball dropped, listening to classical music and enjoying good conversation.

Buffy gave her an agonized look that said exactly what she was thinking: Boring.

"Uh, that's great, Mom. And, thanks, Mr. Hewitt. But, Faith and me--" Buffy squirmed like a bug on a hook under her mom's stare. "We were going to--uh--do something. With the plans, and all the planning we did. By ourselves. You know. Plans. Can't change them, 'cause then you wouldn't call them plans, would you--"

Faith kicked Buffy's shin to shut her up and smiled sweetly when Buffy stuck out her tongue.

The two adults exchanged glances. Mr. Hewitt grinned. "That's too bad; my son will be disappointed."

"Your son?" Buffy asked weakly.

"Yes. He's just over there--Craig!" Mr. Hewitt waved, and they all turned around.

Faith took him in with one glance: tall, dark, handsome, and constructed mainly from cardboard. Buffy's eyebrows shot up, impressed. Damn it. Her eyebrows were not supposed to be impressed. Neither, for that matter, was the rest of her. She half-listened to them exchanging hellos, then grabbed Buffy by the upper arm and started pulling with Slayer strength.

"Um, excuse us, so sorry, be right back," Buffy called over her shoulder as Faith dragged her away. "What?" she asked when they were across the room.

"Are we really goin' to this party?" Faith looked back at Craig over Buffy's shoulder. He was watching them. She narrowed her eyes at him until he turned away.

"I don't know. We were invited, like, five minutes ago." Buffy yanked her arm back to herself. "What's the problem? You like parties."

"Yeah, but with your mom there? I'd rather stay in with a bottle of Jack's. And at least the music would be better."

Buffy twisted and stared at her mom, still deep in conversation with Mark Hewitt. "Do you think she likes him?"

"What?"

"Mom and this guy. Do you think she's looking for, you know, a stand-in kisser?"

Faith shook her head, lost. "A stand-in kisser?"

"For New Year's. For midnight. You know, someone you get to know just enough so that you're not pathetic and alone when everyone around you has someone to kiss."

"I don't know." Faith folded her arms. Of course that was the sort of thing Buffy thought needed planning. Well, who did she expect to step up when the time came, unless it was Meathead over there, doing the polite thing with Joyce and Mark? Or did Buffy figure that they were supposed to be pathetic together? Joyce was touching Mark's arm and smiling. Yeah, she probably wanted to jump his bones, but if she told B that, she'd wig. "Why, is that what you're looking for? A stand-in?"

"Maybe it's a date." Buffy frowned. "Maybe they'll find out they have so much in common, and oh, look, he's from Sunnydale too, and then before you know it he's reading my journal and making spinach cookies for all the minigolfing picnics we go on."

"B, you're not makin' sense." Faith shifted. "Listen, we'll go, okay? Then you can watch 'em the whole time. Fuck if I care." She was about to stalk off when Buffy put her hand on her arm, eyes wide.

"Faith, wait!"

"Yeah, what?"

Buffy turned her concerned look on. "What if she wants to bring him back to the chalet?"

Disgusted, she shook free. "Then they can knock boots all night long. Face it, B. No matter what you say, everybody gets horny now and then."

"That's not what I meant!" Buffy chased after her. "I mean, ew, that is what I meant, because--yuck! She's my mother, and--I mean--" She stopped, and Faith twisted on her heel to look at her.

"Yeah, so what did you mean? 'Cause I got the feeling we're not even having the same conversation."

"Just--" Buffy took a step forward. "I don't know. I wanted--I mean, this was supposed to be our weekend. Right?"

Faith studied her boots. This was probably about the Post bitch. The part where Buffy says, 'I think we need to talk'. Fuck that. Aloud, she said, "I guess."

"So. Good, then." Buffy was nodding way too much. Finally she seemed to get control of it and smiled up at Faith. "Uh. So do you wanna try out the hot tub tonight?"

Buffy stepped with exaggerated care through the French doors, staring intently at the two huge mugs of hot chocolate she was balancing. "Here," she said. "I made it just the way you like it."

Faith took her cup and took a sip and nearly choked. "Tastes like you used more Bailey's than actual hot chocolate," she said.

"Nah, it's about even," Buffy said with an assuring wave, nearly slopping her half-full drink over her hand. "Whee. Look at my hand be all wavy."

Faith rolled her eyes. "Don't tell me, you made yours just the way I like it, too."

"Yeah. I think I like you." Buffy turned scarlet and continued to peer into the steam rising from her mug. "I mean. I like hot chocolate. I like it your way."

Faith hid her smile by taking a drink. "Damn, B, how much have you had already?"

"Just a few tests. Had to make sure I got it right." Buffy grinned. "All right. I am plan girl."

Queen Zulu – Ski Trip

Here it is: You. Me. Hot tub." She nodded along to her thoughts for a moment. "Yes. That's right. The three of us."

"You're probably going to fall in and drown."

"Aww, c'mon, Faith." Buffy turned the full force of pout and puppy-dog eyes on her. "I wanna show off my swimsuit." With a fake whisper, she added, "I got it on sale."

Faith felt her pulse leap in her wrists at the thought. "Okay, you've convinced me. I'll play lifeguard."

"Ha! So there. I win." Buffy started nodding to herself again, and took another big swallow of her Bailey's-laced drink. "Yummy. This is fun. Are you having fun?"

"Oh, tons. B?"

"What?"

"I think you've gotta go in again if you want to change."

"You too." Buffy stared at her solemnly. "You're coming too."

Don't I wish.

She changed quickly, smirking at the girl in the mirror who couldn't quite manage the usual tough-as-nails look while practically falling out of her top. "Sexy," she said, shaking her head. Who'd'a thought that B had such good taste? And what the hell was she doing buying a bathing suit for Faith, anyway?

In fact, she was feeling pretty what the hell? on a lot of counts. What the hell was she still doing here, what the hell was Buffy doing getting drunk, what the hell was going on? And so what the hell if she was about to get a fashion show that would have Angel half-souless just to think about?

But the Bailey's and the two shots from the bottle of JD's she'd packed for herself were making her brave, or stupid, or something.

So then why are you hiding in the bathroom?

Faith eyed the door. "What the hell," she muttered, and headed out to the tub. Not before taking another pull at her bottle, though.

The air outside was freezing, and Faith eased herself into the water, sitting where a jet would do the most good to her lower back. The contrast between the winter night and the steaming pool made her shiver. She tried to relax, wondering what was taking Buffy so long and if she was too drunk to get into her suit and whether maybe Faith should try to help her or if that would be a couple of lightyears beyond the "just friends" line.

Queen Zulu – Ski Trip

Then Buffy was standing in the doorway and Faith wasn't thinking much of anything beyond God damn, girl. She sucked in a breath and tried not to be too obvious about where her eyes were going, up the slender legs to the patch of royal blue, then to the dip of waist, her bellybutton, up to the swell of her breasts under even less blue, if that was possible. And then down again, as Buffy turned around to step into the hot tub.

"Whoa, B. Hot stuff."

Buffy preened for a moment, then sighed and sank lower in the water. She looked sideways at Faith, a silly grin on her face. "You too." She squirmed for a moment, then reached behind her and pulled out a duck-shaped sponge. "Look, I found a duck." She made it do a little dance over the water.

"I don't think you wanna touch that." Faith backed up, anticipating Buffy's reaction. "It's the thing they use for cleaning the tub."

"Eeeeeew!" Buffy squealed and flung the sponge away. She lunged across the hot tub, sending half the water flooding over Faith and on to the deck. "Ew ew ew ew EW."

Abandoning all ideas of personal space, Buffy was practically sitting in Faith's lap, cringing as far as she could from the object of her disgust. Faith didn't know whether to fend her off or bring her closer. She settled for just sitting as still as she could and leering at B's ass, as it was enjoying a certain proximity to her nose at the moment.

But Buffy didn't stay there for long. "Get it out, Faith!"

"Me?" she asked indignantly. "I'm not the one who dumped it in the water."

"Well, I'm not touching it."

They both stared at the offending sponge for a few seconds in silence, Buffy clutching Faith's arm as though she could protect her from whatever was currently fouling the water.

"If you do, I'll...I'll cook you something."

Faith glanced down at Buffy's iron grip on her arm. The feel of her near-nakedness managed to somehow be even hotter than the water, and that just wasn't fair. "You? Cook?" she asked, but she could feel a grin starting to form. Buffy was glaring with utter loathing across the pool, where the sponge was floating around in the currents created by the jets. Each time the whirlpool threatened to send it across the invisible halfway line, Buffy squirmed just a little bit closer.

"Next time we go Bronzing, it'll be my treat," was her next offer.

Faith snorted. "Next time's your turn anyway. Remember? You bet me I couldn't knock the head off that tall vamp with one kick 'cause my pants were so tight, and I said, 'Oh yeah?' and you said, 'Yeah,' and then I--"

"Okay, okay." Buffy splashed a bit at the bobbing sponge. "It's getting closer. Ugh."

"You could get out if you're so worried."

"No--I'll, I'll give you a back rub."

Faith sat up straighter. "That thing's probably full of bacteria. Or brain parasites." She paused, then: "Just my back?"

"Uh--maybe more than your back."

"Dead skin--soap scum--fungus--Ebola, for all we know."

"Fine, yes, all of you, full body massage. Just get it out."

Faith didn't hesitate. With a splash she stood up and pinched the slimy thing with one finger and thumb and tossed it over the railing to the snow below. "Guess this makes me your hero, huh?" She dropped back into her seat and pointed grandly at the other side. "There. It's as clean as it's gonna get."

Buffy didn't move.

"Uh, B? You wanna shove over? You're hogging the jet."

"I like this jet better," Buffy said, and tipped her head back, grinning slyly. "You want it, you're gonna have to share...hero."

Faith shook her head and settled into her seat. If she didn't know better...but she did know better. Maybe it just wasn't worth thinking about. Besides, with Buffy's eyes closed, it was just too easy to sneak peeks down the front of her bikini. She could ignore how close Buffy's hand was floating next to her thigh. She wasn't drunk--not like Buffy--but the tired and the heat and the Bailey's were all coming together to make the world spin nicely just out of reach.

Right about now, she could handle anything.

"Turn sideways."

Except maybe B's hands on her shoulders, pushing against the spaghetti straps of her top.

"What?"

"I said turn." Buffy grabbed her shoulders tighter and pulled her into the position she wanted, floating nearly between Buffy's legs.

"Why?"

"Because I'm massaging you. I said I would."

"But--now?"

Buffy manhandled her with drunken insistence. "Yes. Stay."

And she stayed. What the hell? was sounding suspiciously like oh my God yes! but who was she to argue? "You sure--ahh!"

"Good?"

"Ah--yeah--um--" Faith frowned a bit, half concentrating on the way Buffy's hands were sinking deep into her muscles, neck and shoulder, just so and destroying the knots--and half wondering when she'd lost herself so much, lost her control. When had anybody ever put her at a loss for words? Why couldn't she say what she needed to, to keep herself at a distance? Instead, there was only this deep hot pleasure at the endless strength in Buffy's arms, and she was melting.

"Want me to go lower?"

There was something in Buffy's voice, too, some husky echo of her bright flirtyness that somehow meant something, but all Faith could say was "Mmm-hmm," and then "Right there."

If the world had been spinning before, it was dancing now, far away and unimportant. Then the magic hands were gone and Buffy was saying, "I'll finish inside. I'm boiled."

Faith heaved herself out of the pool. Her skin was throbbing, her hands and feet pruned, and the falling snow feathered a shivery coolness on her shoulders. She followed Buffy inside and lay facedown on the bed, not even bothering to dry off. Buffy sat on her thighs and continued the massage, her fingers digging in as only a Slayer's could, and as only a Slayer could stand. Blood pounded through every inch of her and Faith felt her mind slipping away, leaking out with the leftover heat of the pool. Before she fell asleep, the last thing she felt was Buffy's hands moving downwards.

Part 6

Faith didn't want to wake up. Her brain had unhooked itself from her body and she couldn't move. She knew there was something she was supposed to be worried about, but she couldn't hold on to a thought, and anyway, maybe it was better to be paralyzed. Felt pretty good. Actually, it felt pretty fucking amazing.

"Faith, honey?" Joyce called. There was a cheerful knock on the door. "Are you awake?"

"Unnngggh," Faith said, hoping to stop the knocking. Apparently, though, groaning was a signal for "yes, please come in; I'm particularly chipper this morning" because Joyce stuck her head around the door.

"Rise and shine!" she said. "I've made eggs. Buffy's been up for a while. She wants to get to the hill."

Buffy. Skiing.

Massage.

Queen Zulu – Ski Trip

You fell asleep. During the massage.

"Faith? Okay?"

You fucking FELL ASLEEP.

Faith burrowed deeper under the covers. "Unnnngggggh."

"All right. Don't take too long, your breakfast will get cold." Joyce closed the door softly.

Faith listened to her footsteps heading down the hall, and finally forced herself to push her face off her pillow. She scrubbed a hand over her eyes and swung her legs over the side of the bed. It took a second of blinking to realize that the "we wear pyjamas in my bed" rule apparently wasn't written in stone.

"Fuck fuck fuck fuck FUCK." She was still wearing the bottom half of her bikini. After a moment of digging, she found the top buried under the covers of the bed.

When had that happened? How long had Buffy stayed awake last night? Long enough to massage the knots out of Faith's legs, at least, by the feel of it. And then what? Did she just sit there watching her sleep--getting a good eyeful?

Hardly. Maybe Buffy couldn't wake her up to get her to change. Then she'd fallen asleep herself. No big. Buffy was as straight as they came.

Are you sure?

Faith snatched her clothes off the floor and started pulling them on. Of course Buffy was straight. She wanted the ski boys. She'd practically drooled over Craig the Wonderbread Boy. And, hello, Angel. If you managed to live around Buffy for a couple of months and miss that saga, then you were seriously stupid.

But yesterday morning...

Was a mistake. She was asleep.

And the way she looked at you all day yesterday.

We're friends. Friends smile.

And all the times she's said "This is our special weekend..."

She's getting over Angel. She's moving on. That's what it's about.

Faith shook her head. It was just dumb, to think that there was anything more to Buffy's actions. Last night she'd been drunk, that's all. She couldn't go around thinking that every little thing had to mean something. That was a good way to go crazy. God. She needed a cigarette. She started riffling through her jacket for the pack, until she remembered she hadn't brought any.

Mornings sucked.

With a sigh, Faith banged her way out of the room and down the hall to the kitchen. Joyce smiled at her and filled a plate with eggs, bacon, and hash browns for her. Faith took the plate to the table and plopped down in a seat. Buffy, sitting across from her, didn't look up from her mug of coffee. Looked like the girl couldn't take her morning-after medicine. Or else she was purposefully avoiding Faith's eye.

Faith frowned and started shoveling eggs into her mouth.

Joyce brought a newspaper to the table and sat between them. "So, Buffy, have you and Faith decided whether you'll join me at Mark's party tonight?"

Buffy shrugged. "I don't know."

"Craig seems like a nice boy, don't you think?"

Faith snorted softly. Buffy glanced at her over the rim of her mug, and immediately turned bright red. Faith tried to pass it off, act like she didn't care, but instead she felt her own face turning hot. Buffy had looked. Or, she'd seen, anyway. The universe was obviously conspiring against her--Buffy gets a peek, and she got nothing? She stared at her plate and pushed the hash browns around with her fork.

Buffy said, "Yeah. Nice."

Joyce smiled and propped her chin in her hand. "If you don't like him, Buffy, it's all right to say so."

Buffy put her coffee down. "I met him for about five minutes. I don't know him."

"Well, I just think it would be nice if you got to know some boys your own age. There's only Xander at school, and--"

"Mom, stop." Buffy pushed her chair back from the table. "Just because I'm not with Angel anymore doesn't mean I want to meet boys. I'm happy with--uh, I mean, for now--"

"Okay. I'm sorry, honey." Joyce tilted her head. "But it's not just going to be us old fuddy-duddies at the Hewitts' tonight. You girls could have a lot of fun."

"We'll play it by ear," Buffy said. "You never know. Faith and I might cook up a lot of fun all on our own."

Faith nearly choked.

Buffy was bouncy all day. She giggled and babbled and lead the way down green and blue runs, giving Faith pointers and zipping ahead to watch how well Faith applied them. At the end of the day, when they got off the lift for the last time, Faith stopped before Buffy could announce which run.

"All right, B. I'm tired of this easy crap. It's like, the last run of the day. Let's take Forest Paradise."

"The double black diamond? Through the trees?" Buffy turned longingly towards the blue square run she'd picked out as their route down to the chalet.

Faith smirked. "You not up for it, B?"

"Of course I am," Buffy shot back immediately. "I could ski down this blindfold and backward."

"There's a show I'd pay to see." Faith moved closer to the edge, to see where she'd be landing on her first turn.

"But you're a beginner--"

"Yeah, I am. So if you don't follow me," she said, in a mocking singsong, "I might die..." And she shoved with her poles and leapt off the cornice down to the first open space of waist-high moguls. Keeping her knees loose, she gathered momentum, twisting a path through the powder. Below her, it was too steep for moguls, the snow blown away by the wind. It looked icy. The first trees were coming up way too fast. Faith tried to dig her edges in, but she was going too fast, and instead of stopping, she slammed into the hillside ass-first. Her bindings popped open and she slammed feet-first into a patch of spruce trees. Pain erupted in her right knee.

"Shit!" Faith rolled over to look back uphill at the trail of equipment she'd left behind. With her hands, she dug her leg out of the snow and flexed her foot carefully. No slaying for a day or two at least, was her first thought. Sprained knee for sure. Nothing else bad. She watched Buffy ski down after her, collecting all the gear.

"Faith, you'd better not be dead down there!"

"Nope. Just wish I was."

"I'm going to get the ski patrol. You stay still!"

"Okay." Faith lay back in the snow, her skis crossed in an X above her on the hill, and waited. Pretty soon she heard the drone of a snowmobile. Two ski patrollers, with Buffy, helped her into the toboggan and drove them back down to their chalet. Buffy helped her out at the bottom.

"We can help you to your lodge, miss," said the snowmobile driver. "But it would be better if you came to the First Aid office."

"I can take her." Buffy glared the ski patrol into submission.

"Yeah, it's not so bad," Faith said. "I think I can stand on it."

"Oh, no, you don't." Buffy smiled sweetly at the two guys. "I'll make sure she gets the

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attention she needs." Another glare for Faith, then to the patrollers, "Thank you for your help."

The patrollers looked at each other doubtfully, then nodded to Buffy and took off on their snowmobile.

Faith wriggled under Buffy's supporting arm. "The door is thirty feet away. I can hop, okay?"

The full force of Buffy's glare was turned on her. "I told the ski patrol you'd keep off it." Before Faith could protest further, Buffy swept her off her feet.

"Hey! Come on, B, somebody'll see."

"Stop...struggling!" Buffy tightened her hold. "You're lucky it wasn't your head that hit that tree! Oh, wait, then you'd be totally fine, because your head is made of rocks! I can't believe you wanted to do a double black diamond run on your second day! I was so worried. I thought--"

"Put me down!"

"No! I'm not finished. You're a stubborn, crazy, risk-taking--" Buffy kicked open the front door and stopped dead.

Joyce and Mark Hewitt were kissing in the living room. They both jumped back. Buffy just stood in the doorway, looking around like she expected Candid Cameras to leap out and yell "Psych!" Faith was caught somewhere between laughing and trying to escape Buffy's arms and stand on her own two feet.

"Um, hi," she said. "I hurt my knee."

"Oh, Faith, are you okay?" Joyce was moving towards them, and Faith felt Buffy grip her even harder.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I just need to stay off it. You know." Faith prodded Buffy. "Buffy is, uh, helping me."

Mark followed Joyce. "Buffy, do you need some help? Faith must be heavy for you."

"No..." Buffy looked at Faith, then at Mark, then abruptly dropped Faith's legs. Faith stood on her left foot, one arm still around Buffy's shoulders. "I mean, yes. Oof."

Joyce hovered next to Faith, an embarrassed smile on her face. "We--got back early. I didn't realize the time...Are you sure you're all right, Faith? Do you need anything? An ice pack?"

Buffy frowned at her. "I'll get it. You have--a guest. I can manage a little further." She hoisted Faith again and headed for the bedroom. "They were kissing!" she hissed.

"Yeah, I saw that, B."

"In the living room!"

"Saw that too. Um--you can put me down now."

Buffy looked around the bedroom like she wasn't sure how they'd gotten there, then at Faith, still cradled in her arms. "Oh."

Faith rolled her eyes. "On the bed would be fine."

"Oh. Yeah." Buffy lowered her down and sat beside her.

"So, are you gonna freak?" Faith shifted herself up to lean against the headboard. "About your mom?"

"Well...uh...no." Buffy gave her a pained look. "I fully understand and endorse all Mom's relationships. She can date whoever she wants. I mean, it's not my business. She can even sleep with him and that's okay. Because I don't judge. Judging is of the bad. We need to accept, learn, and grow."

Faith snickered. "Been practicing that speech long?"

Buffy smiled weakly and smoothed the bedspread nervously. "Not that long."

They pulled the television into the bedroom and ordered in pizza, watching pay per view movies. Finally Buffy snapped off the TV with a bored sigh.

Faith shifted the ice-bag on her knee. "B, you should gone to that party. Sounds like it'll be kickin'."

"No, it's okay," Buffy said. "Can I get you anything?"

Faith shook her head. "I don't wanna stop you from latching on to a guy for New Year's. I mean, it's tradition. Right?"

Buffy opened a pack of cards and started shuffling. "What is?"

"Duh, B, getting kissed at midnight. Isn't that the point of all this?"

"Gin? Crazy Eights? Go Fish?"

"I just don't want to be messing with your plans. All that moving forward crap. And for shit's sake, poker."

"I'm not leaving you all by yourself with not even Mom around. What if you did something stupid and hurt yourself worse?"

"Stupid like what?"

"Like, I don't know, you try to get up--" Buffy glared her into silence. "and then you trip and

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fall and crack your head open and then when I get back your brains are leaking out of your ears and staining the carpet. Like that."

"Yeah, right. I'm a fucking slayer. In a couple of hours I'll be good as new and you know it. It hardly hurts at all now." She paused. "So, what, are you scared?"

"Scared? Of what?" Buffy dealt the cards.

"Of actually taking the first step. You don't want Chris--"

"Craig."

"--to get near the goods?"

"I'll move forward in my own way. Anyhow, Craig smells like socks." Buffy slammed the deck down and picked up her hand. "Do you have any queens?"

"Socks or not, you're messing with tradition."

"Faith. Queens?"

"Yes, God, here's your queen."

"You just want me to go so that you can sulk in private." Buffy arranged her queens on the bed. "We've done that, this is better. Anyway, you just don't get it. You--you think I'm going to abandon you for boys. Where'd that get us the last time?"

Faith scowled. "Do you have any twos?"

"No. Go fish."

Faith grabbed a card from the top of the deck. "I can't believe we're playing this stupid game."

Buffy sighed. "I can't believe my Mom stuck her tongue down Mark Hewitt's throat."

Faith laughed. "Yeah, that was pretty cool."

The cheering on the television screen swelled as the one-minute countdown began. Buffy turned up the volume. "I guess it's time."

"Yep."

"Fifty-one...fifty..."

"Faith, you know what you were saying before, about tradition?"

"Forty...thirty-nine..."

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"Yeah? Kissin' somebody when the ball drops? Looks like you missed your chance. Greg's--"

"Craig."

"--probably all cosied up to some--"

"I don't think I have."

"Seventeen...sixteen..."

"--ski bimbo...Have what?"

"Missed my chance."

"Ten!"

"Chance? What the--"

"Seven!"

"To kiss somebody."

"Five!"

"--fuck are you saying?"

"Three!"

"Faith--"

"One!"

"Mmf!"

"Happy New Year's!"

Part 7

Buffy was kissing her.

Faith was so surprised, she tried to scramble backwards. She nearly fell off the bed when her knee reminded her that moving was not a happy thing right now. Buffy, kneeling beside her, only followed after her, raising her hand to cup Faith's cheek, holding her still.

Faith was pretty sure her heart had stopped beating entirely at some point in the last few seconds. When it started up again, it pounded harder than it did after an all-night slay. The feel of Buffy's hand, warm and still, the soft movements of her lips, melted away any and all thoughts that might have been in her head, the kind of responsible thoughts that she'd been

thinking all weekend. Slow down thoughts and but what the fuck does this mean? thoughts. She let her eyes drift closed, bracing herself against the headboard, the better to enjoy what was happening, since it was really not her fault.

She could have escaped, pushed Buffy away. But she didn't. And there was no way in hell she could stop herself from responding. Her lips were moving completely separate from her brain. Faith opened her mouth to say something--anything--and nearly died of shock when Buffy took the opportunity to slide her tongue against hers.

"Mmmnf..."

Hearing her own moan brought Faith up short. She turned her head and broke the kiss.

"Jesus, Buffy!"

Buffy sat back, breathing hard, her eyes bright as she stared at Faith. She licked her lips. Faith did the same, tasting the saltiness of the popcorn they'd shared, the coconut of the suntan lotion they'd both used.

"Jesus," she said again. Words were really not working in her head. She wanted to ask what was going on. She wanted to kiss Buffy again. She wanted to see exactly how far this could go...

"Faith..." Buffy's voice was soft, barely more than a sigh. "Sorry."

"Sorry?" Faith tried to shake away the heat rushing through her body and concentrate. "What the hell? You--I--sorry?"

Buffy looked down at the bedspread, picking at it with nervous fingers. "I thought--I thought you liked me. Like that. But, I guess--"

"Whoa!" Faith reached out to Buffy, ran her fingers down her shoulder, then had no idea what to do with her hands, and let them fall into her lap again. "I, you know I--I mean. God. I thought you were--" She shook her head, trying to figure out what had happened to the world she knew. "You wanna...uh...try that again?"

Buffy gave her a quick, brilliant smile. "Um...yeah?"

"Okay. Good. Uh--" Faith might have kept babbling, but Buffy silenced her. This time she was ready for it, but the sudden flaring desire spread so fast that she gasped into Buffy's lips. She felt Buffy smile, and then the slick warmth of her tongue. Faith kissed her back hungrily, tilting her head to get closer. Impatient, Faith lifted her hands to Buffy's shoulders and pushed until Buffy got the hint and shifted on the bed, placing one knee on either side of her. She pressed upwards, seeking contact, and it was Buffy's turn to moan.

Faith linked her hands loosely behind Buffy's back, urging her to sit down completely. Buffy arched back, and her hands tightened on Faith's shoulders. She looked amazing, flushed and free, her hair falling in loose waves around her face, the line of the ridiculous polar bear pyjamas falling open just enough to show the curve of her breasts.

"S'okay?" Faith asked, her voice husky. She slid her hands up Buffy's sides, then down again, then up, this time inside her top.

"Yeah--yes...s good..." Buffy's eyes were closed, her hips working gently against Faith's. She dropped her head, and kissed along Faith's jaw, bit gently on her earlobe. "You're beautiful," she whispered. Faith shivered at the feel of her breath. She turned her head to return the kiss and got a mouthful of hair instead. She chuckled somewhere deep in her throat, and felt it turn into a whine as Buffy nibbled on her neck.

Faith let her hands wander around inside Buffy's shirt, feeling the twitch of Buffy's muscles as she almost-but-not-quite tickled. She flattened her hands and moved upwards, over the ripples of ribs, then rubbed her thumbs across the sides of Buffy's breasts.

"Ahh--Faith..." Buffy moved into her hands.

Faith slid her hands closer, back and forth, teasing, then paused for a moment. "You sure, B?" she asked. She didn't even know if she was sure, and if Buffy turned around tomorrow and said "Thanks, that was great, but--", she was pretty sure it would break something inside her.

Buffy backed off a bit and stared at her solemnly, her seriousness a bit spoiled by her swollen lips and a smile she couldn't seem to lose. "Do you know I almost jumped you the first night we were here?" she asked. "And yesterday you fell asleep--"

Faith felt her face go red. "It was a good massage," she said. So she wasn't going crazy. B had been putting the moves on her. "You, uh--this is you moving forward, huh?"

"Yeah," Buffy said. "You think I didn't notice the flirting?" She traced a finger along Faith's face, ending on her lips. "Or the dancing?" She settled a little deeper into Faith's lap, grinning when Faith's breath hitched in her throat. "Or you asking me to Homecoming?"

"Oh...right. That." Faith frowned a bit, concentrating on the feel of Buffy grinding into her crotch. She was wet and hot and she could tell Buffy was the same and they were really wearing too many clothes and oh fuck that was good... "Ah...so...you're sure..." she managed.

"Mmm-hmm..."

"Good." Faith reached for the edges of Buffy's top and pulled it over her head, bypassing the buttons entirely. She leered at Buffy's surprise, and brushed her hands across her nipples, feeling the tingle in her palms as they hardened.

Buffy whimpered and wriggled closer. They both groaned as the contact increased, and Faith bent forward to catch Buffy's nipple in her mouth. She circled it with her tongue, half-listening to Buffy's pleas, finally sucking it hard. Buffy's hands were at work on her t-shirt, but she couldn't reach as far as she wanted, and she ripped it open.

"Hey!" Faith said as Buffy pushed what was left of the cloth off her arms. "That was--yours. Okay. Never mind..."

"Shut up and kiss me," Buffy said, grinning, then laughing as their hands got tangled reaching for each other. "Mmm...you have to sit up like that...?"

"Bed's in the way," Faith answered, a bit muffled as she mouthed Buffy's collarbone and tried to move downwards. Buffy traced the muscles in her shoulders, then reached lower and felt the rise of her breasts. She stroked tentatively, then with more authority, then went back to the feather-light touch. Faith twisted, watching the delight on Buffy's face as she toyed with her. "Fuck--B--please--"

"Like that?" Taunting, but also asking.

"Harder..."

Buffy smiled and wiggled backwards, lowering herself until she was pressed completely against Faith. She licked her way back up, then closed her teeth on Faith's nipple. Faith hissed and jerked up, the pain in her knee melding with the delight of Buffy's actions. She moaned Buffy's name, completely lost, until she felt Buffy's weight leave her. "What?" she asked, then felt Buffy's hands on her hips, dragging her down until she was lying flat. She tried to sit up and knocked her knee again. "Ow!"

"Just a second--be patient!" Buffy's fingers were busy on her fly now, tugging her pants down, being careful not to bump her knee. She quickly stripped off the last of the polar bears, tossing the pyjamas to the side. "There..."

"God, B..." Faith was practically panting as she watched Buffy crawl back on to the bed. "You're fucking gorgeous, you know that?"

"Said the kettle," Buffy answered, but her smile was smug.

Faith let her take her time, knowing she was in no shape to direct matters, and lay back to enjoy the view. She'd never been this horny in her life, and that was saying something. She was aching for Buffy's touch, but Buffy had the cutest look of concentration on her face, as though she was trying to memorize everything, exactly as it was. She knelt beside Faith, running her fingers softly over her stomach and thighs. That was as far as Faith's patience went. She grabbed Buffy and hauled her closer, kissing her fiercely, kneading every inch of skin she could reach. Wrapping her hands around Buffy's ass, she jerked her down until their crotches rammed together, slick with fluid. Buffy gasped next to her ear and thrust forward again. Their clits met again, and the thrill trembled through her. Buffy was kissing her and she could hardly breathe and the rhythm of her thrusts was building way too fast but it was good, so good, and she was working her hand down between them, reaching for Buffy, reaching--

And Buffy's fingers found her first. She almost came right then, but Buffy was moving too slowly, her fingers rubbing small circles everywhere except right where they needed to be.

"Come on, B, lemme--I'm, ah--"

"Slow is good," Buffy said, her voice breathless and aroused and even the sound of it was about the hottest thing Faith thought she'd ever heard. Buffy moved her fingers another half-inch lower. Faith writhed frantically, needing more friction, but Buffy held her down with one hand on her hip, and with her gimped knee she couldn't get any leverage.

"Oh, fuck you, fuck you--"

"Getting to that," Buffy said, almost laughing, and then her fingers were moving up and inside and Faith felt like she was teetering on the edge of the steepest fucking cliff on the entire mountain. It went on and on and somewhere far away her voice was begging for more and then she was falling. Pleasure exploded everywhere and she was completely lost. Buffy's fingers pumped harder, keeping it going, until she shuddered to a stop.

"You are so going to pay for that..."

"Promises, promises..."

Faith rolled over abruptly. Buffy squeaked, now pinned to the bed. Faith gave her the hungriest grin she knew how.

"Y-You'd better be staying off your knee," Buffy stuttered.

"It's feeling a hell of a lot better," Faith said, then put her mouth to better use. She worked her way down Buffy's body, leaving moist trails behind, blowing on them and watching the tiny hairs stand on end. Buffy squirmed, sighing, so much that Faith considered adding slow to her personal list of tortures. But that just wasn't her style. Reaching her goal, Faith sucked and nibbled for all she was worth, plunging her tongue inside and swirling it around, struggling to keep Buffy's hips in one place. Buffy was going crazy, moaning and calling her name, and Faith felt her muscles clamp down as she came. She waited for Buffy to relax, and then started again, kept going until her jaw hurt and Buffy could only make little sobbing noises that trailed off into silence.

She figured that meant she'd won. She rolled onto her back and closed her eyes, licking the last of Buffy's juices off her lips, enjoying the taste and the quiet and especially the warm body next to hers.

"Hey..." Buffy sounded as tired as she felt, and as happy.

"Yeah, B?"

"Get up here." Buffy tugged at her.

"Ow...gimme a sec..." Faith pushed herself up to lie beside her, and Buffy snuggled into her arms, dropping a kiss on her lips. Faith grinned, she couldn't help herself. This was just too good.

Which probably meant it would all go to hell tomorrow...

But the thought was passing, and she was tired, and she fell asleep listening to the far-away murmur of one more round of Auld Lang Syne from the TV.

Part 8

The strangest part was, waking up wasn't horrible.

At some point in the night, they'd crawled under the covers and curled up next to each other, Buffy sprawled half over Faith's chest. When Faith opened her eyes it was to see Buffy smiling down at her. Green eyes all bright and her hair messed up and under the blankets her toes were brushing against Faith's calf. Yeah, not bad at all.

"See somethin' you like?" she asked, her voice rough with sleep. She closed her eyes and smiled, snuggling back down into the pillow.

"You could say that," Buffy answered. She traced the line of Faith's dimples and brushed her fingers over her lips. "Um, Faith?"

"Hmm?"

"Are you awake?"

Faith raised an eyebrow. "Uh, far's I know." She blinked. Buffy's face was flaming. Oh. Oh. This could be fun. "Why d'you ask?" she said, as innocently as she could. Which wasn't very.

Buffy glanced away, still beet red. "Just wondering."

"Uh-huh." Faith wiggled her hand out from under the covers and wrapped it around Buffy's neck, pulling her down for a kiss. At first, Buffy's lips brushed lightly, teasingly, across Faith's. Faith gave an encouraging sound and slipped her tongue into Buffy's mouth. She kissed her slowly and thoroughly, feeling a gentle heat rising between them, still half-asleep and too happy to rush. She slid her hand down Buffy's back and under the covers, skimming over her ass and between her legs. She was already wet and swollen, and her breath hissed when Faith reached upwards.

Faith dropped her head back on the pillow, letting her fingers drift where they would, watching Buffy's face. God, she was hot, her mouth open slightly and her eyes dark. "You okay, there, girlfriend?" she asked. "Convinced I'm awake yet?"

"Yeah." The word came out on a breathy sigh. Buffy smiled suddenly, that thousand-watt grin that was so purely joyful. "I love that."

"What, this?" Faith gave a little nudge with her fingers, slipping them in a little further. The angle was awkward but who the hell cared. Slayer strength had to be good for something other than killing things.

"Ah, n--no. I mean, yes, God, yes, but--" Buffy shifted her weight slightly to take advantage of Faith's moving hand, her smile widening. "I mean you--you calling me 'girlfriend'."

Faith's hand stopped and Buffy gave a whimper of protest, pressing against Faith's leg. "For real?"

"Of course..." Buffy bent her head and kissed her again, harder this time, as if the movement of her lips and tongue could convince Faith of everything. Faith accepted the kiss, but she was all of a sudden remembering that they were going back to Sunnydale today. The ski trip was over. New Year's was over. Sunnydale was Angel, it was living in a crappy motel, it was

being second-string slayer, the backup, the leftovers. Buffy could say she was changing until she was blue in the face, but Faith knew what that really meant. It meant hiding and being a cheap fuck on the side whenever Buffy was frustrated that Angel couldn't do the deed.

She kissed Buffy furiously, sucking her bottom lip into her mouth, twining their tongues together. She got her hand in a better position and slid her fingers closer, rubbing slowly and rhythmically. Buffy moaned and moved her hips, supporting herself on one elbow and holding Faith's face in the other, then pushing her hand down between them to stroke her breast.

Faith sucked in a breath that was almost a sob, except that it wasn't, because she didn't cry. This was all she'd wanted when she met Buffy, wasn't it? A roll in the hay, get some get gone, Buffy taking in one, then two, then finally three fingers and crying out as she fucked Faith's hand, her head thrown back, looking wild and tan-gold and beautiful.

Not anymore.

"F-Faith..." Buffy moaned, her teeth tight against her lower lip. She quivered and came, collapsing on top of her, her breasts heaving, her nipples still tight against Faith's skin. She dropped kisses on Faith's shoulder, then inched her way down her chest, caressing and licking. Faith sighed, let herself feel it, the pleasure centering somewhere south of Buffy's mouth.

"Faith?"

"Yeah?" Her voice was husky, but she didn't cry. Not her.

"Can I-I mean-" Buffy rested her chin on Faith's bellybutton, looking up at her. "I've, uh, never done this before..."

"Oh." Faith didn't know what to say, but the idea sparked a desperate surge of need. She was probably blushing as much as Buffy. So much for the bad girl. "You don't have to."

Liar.

"I want to." Buffy kissed the tight, tanned skin of her stomach, her fingers trailing paths down to Faith's hips.

Oh, God. Just hearing Buffy say it turned her on so fucking bad. Her clit was throbbing, nearly hurting, she wanted Buffy to go down on her so much. She didn't say anything, just pushed her hips up to meet Buffy's hands, watched Buffy move lower, saw her tongue flick out once to wet her lips. She looked up. Their eyes met, and Buffy just smiled, and then--

Oh, shit, then.

Faith lost her breath and all her thoughts at once. She closed her eyes and gave herself up to the sensation, the quick firm strokes of Buffy's fingers, the lighter, more tentative slide of her tongue. She felt Buffy's teeth scrape against flesh so sensitive it nearly burned, and she bucked her hips, hard. It would have sent anyone else sprawling. Buffy just tightened her hold and moved closer, sucking now. Faith yelled something out that probably sounded like "Oh

fuck yes, oh God, yeah--" but in her head it was more like Fuck B I love you--love you--

Buffy's fingers pressed upwards then and found her g-spot, and all at once it felt like every muscle in her body constricted at once, like she'd been hit by lightning, except it was somehow longer and deeper and okay, hell, it was nothing like lightning, but Buffy's mouth was still on her and it happened again, a sharp shot of pleasure that rolled away in waves and left her floating.

"Jesus Christ, B," she said, eyes closed, her voice coming from somewhere far away. There was a pause, and then she was being kissed, and she tasted herself on Buffy's lips. The kiss was hot and hard and then it trailed off into gentle and exploring, then faded, and Buffy sighed and cuddled up beside her.

"Hey there," she said at last.

"Hey," Faith answered, companionably enough. Trying to ignore the doubts that were creeping back. B wouldn't do that unless she really meant it.

Would she?

"You hungry?"

Faith grinned and sat up. "Who's cooking?"

"You are." Buffy gazed up at her from the bed, eyes half-hidden behind long lashes, looking like she might fall asleep again at any moment. The covers were a tangled mess down at the foot of the bed, but Buffy made no move to cover herself. Faith let her eyes wander down her body, shoving aside the nagging voice that was yelling at her that something was going to go wrong, something had to, this was ending, somehow, and it'd be all her fault. Buffy yawned and stretched, smiling smugly as Faith didn't hide for a second that she was enjoying the show.

"As long as you're staying away from all things breakfasty, I'm starving. I'll show you my patented scrambled omelette."

"Omelettes aren't scrambled. Then you call them scrambled eggs. What's in it?"

Faith shrugged. "Eggs. Then everything else. And I don't mean for them to get scrambled, that's mostly just how they end up."

"I should have guessed." Buffy's eyes slid closed and she rolled over to hug a pillow. "I can't wait."

"You gonna help me, or are you gonna lie here all day?"

"I thought you didn't want me in your kitchen, Ms I've never burned salad so I think I'm a gourmet?"

"Yeah, but if you're not there, you don't get to watch me cook naked."

One eye popped open. "What about Mom?"

Faith glanced toward the door. It was mostly closed, but not quite latched. "Um, B, I don't mean to wig you, but seeing how loud we--well--I was, without anyone complaining, I don't think your mom's made it back yet."

"She never came home?" Buffy leapt out of bed and pulled on her discarded pyjamas so fast she nearly put both legs in one pant-hole. "Oh, she is in such trouble. I am going to--well--" She paused and looked back at Faith. "Not much. I'm accepting, learning and growing. Besides--" Her smile was embarrassed. "I'm kinda glad. Because, uh, you--and--that was, pretty much, uh...I mean, I, um. It--well, you know."

"Yeah." Faith ducked her head. She's going to dump you before you get within spitting distance of Sunnydale, the traitor-voice said. "I know."

"And, Faith." Buffy sat beside her on the bed, touching her arm. "I know what I said. About moving forward. And I am. But--"

Faith fought not to yank her arm back. Here it came. She wasn't going to cry. She didn't care. It was just another girl, another fuck, okay, it was awesome, but she could find somebody else in a heartbeat. But Buffy didn't notice how tense she'd gotten.

"I mean, I really like you. And, God, this was--I mean. It's amazing." Buffy lifted a hand to her face, pushed back her hair. Faith ducked her head away, her eyes hot, feeling naked. "And I know I didn't say it back. Maybe I should've. But it's all so fast, and I want to keep going, maybe, if you don't hate the idea, maybe a date first. Or several. And then, I'm sure, later on, I'll say it, and it'll mean something because it wasn't right away. Not that that's bad, I just didn't know you--felt that way. So. If that's okay. And, I'll shut up now. Sorry."

"Say it--?" Faith swallowed. Say what? But she didn't ask, because Buffy was looking at her so earnestly, so open and serious but with a kind of awed happiness behind it.

"Yeah. Because I'm, already, I'm falling in love with you. And it's scary. But I want to."

Faith shook her head, not believing, wanting to believe. Then it came to her, what she'd really said.

Fuck B I love you--love you--

And Buffy was looking nervous now, like she was taking too long to answer, and all of a sudden everything was perfect. She grinned and threw an arm around her, hugging her close.

"Okay," she said. "So how's Friday for you?"

"I think I might have to check my calendar...and there's patrol...I have this partner who hates it when I dump the work on her..."

"Hey, B?"

"Hmm?"

"Shut up." And Faith enforced the order with a kiss.

Yeah, waking up wasn't horrible at all.

Part 9

Everything looked innocent by the time Joyce came back. They'd eaten the mess of things-fried-together that Faith liked to call an omelette, and Buffy had started running the hot water for dishes, when they both heard the door creak open. Slayer hearing: sponsor of the Walk of Shame. Faith couldn't help but grin as she leaned over the counter. Mrs. S was peering around the door like she hoped to make it through the gauntlet unchallenged. Maybe, in Buffy's current mood, she could have. But accept, learn, and grow had no place in Faith's philosophy.

"Hey, Mrs. S!" she called out. "How was the party?"

Joyce winced and let the door slam. "Oh. Faith. I didn't expect you to be up yet. It's only..."

"Noon," Buffy said, walking up beside Faith and slipping a hand into her back jeans pocket. Faith grinned sideways at her. If anyone ever questioned the tight jeans again, this was an answer and a half.

"Hello, Buffy." Joyce took a moment to realize she was still wearing her coat and had her purse slung over one shoulder, and dropped both on the couch. The dress underneath was rumpled. Probably it had spent the night on the floor, but Faith figured she wasn't one to judge. Joyce cast about for an appropriate topic of conversation and settled on, "Did you have fun last night?"

"Best New Year's Eve ever," Buffy answered, perfectly straight-faced. And without a hint of a blush--had to give the girl credit.

"Oh, good. That's good."

"Yes. Yes, it is good."

Faith looked back and forth from one to the other. Joyce was waiting for the other shoe to drop, for Buffy to get that dangerous Slayer-look in her eye and start shooting questions like the bad cop in the interrogation room. Buffy was not quite smiling, enjoying the upper hand...and giving Faith a lot to think about with her lower hand. Clearly Faith had managed to corrupt her. Not such a bad thing, either.

"So Mr. Hewitt was a good host?" she asked. Okay, she was stirring the pot, but if she didn't this little face off might go on all day. "Did he show you a good time?"

Could she help it if every sentence out of her mouth sounded like she was talking about sex? It was practically another superpower. Cue the Summers blush, in stereo. Buffy elbowed her and Joyce looked like a trip to one of the nicer hell dimensions wouldn't be unwelcome right about then.

"Mark is a gentleman," Joyce said, with as much dignity as she could muster.

"Sometimes that's the best kind," Faith whispered for Buffy's benefit. "They turn out to be tigers in the sack." Buffy smiled sweetly and stomped on her toe. Faith didn't hesitate, but retaliated with a pinch in a place that, a week ago, she would have been staked for touching.

"Hey!" Buffy jumped away, yanking her hand out of Faith's pocket. Too bad. She'd been enjoying that. And if Buffy was willing to do that much right in front of her mom--whether she could see or not--maybe going back to Sunnydale wouldn't be so bad. Maybe.

"Are you all right, Buffy?" Joyce asked, now coming into the kitchen.

"Fine." Buffy stuck her tongue out at Faith. Since Joyce wasn't looking her way, Faith did the same...except more. She made a Spock-sign with her fingers and waggled her tongue between them, miming Buffy's actions from an hour or so ago. Shit if just thinking about it didn't turn her on. By the look on Buffy's face, it did the same for her. Go team Faith.

"Buffy?"

Buffy pulled her eyes away from Faith's display and focused on her mom. "Yeah?"

"I said, have you packed yet? It's a long drive home today."

"Oh. No, not yet." Buffy's face fell. She'd probably forgotten that this had to end some time. Faith wanted to wrap her arms around her and comfort her, and at the same time she wanted to back away. Love or not, she didn't want to be the cuddly type, the flowers-and-candy girlfriend. She hopped up on the counter, swinging her legs, and picked at a spatter of egg that they'd missed when they wiped up.

"I'm ready," she said. "Just tie my bindle together and I'm good to go, right, B?" The words came out more bitter than she'd meant them. She saw the hurt in Buffy's eyes and regretted it pretty much as soon as she'd said it. Buffy took a step forward and then glanced at her mom. She folded her arms and looked at the floor. Oh, great. Let the hiding begin.

"Well, don't worry, I'm not finished packing either," Joyce said. She stared hard at Faith, with a little frown on her face. She looked like she was trying to figure something out, and for a minute Faith thought she had them dead to rights. But then she just gave a confused shake of her head and headed upstairs. "Don't take too long, though," she called over her shoulder. "You probably want to get home before dark."

"And that's the closest she'll get to saying anything about our slaying," Buffy said quietly. She was still standing way the hell on the other side of the kitchen, arms crossed, not really looking at Faith.

"So, you talk to her a lot?" Faith asked. "'Cause I bet she's not going to start dealing unless you tell her more about it."

"She wouldn't be any happier knowing more. She'd want me to be home by sunset every night. She thinks she can protect me."

"Like that's a bad thing." Faith knocked her heels against the cabinets below her. "She's your mom. That doesn't always mean shit, and I should know, but with her it does. You tell her, she'll wig, then she'll deal, then she'll be glad you trusted her."

Buffy glanced up, sort of coy, with a hint of a smile on her face. "Are we still talking about the slaying?"

Faith scowled. "Yes." End of story.

Buffy came over to her and stood between her legs, hugging her where she sat on the counter. "Because you're right. And if we're not--still talking about slaying, I mean--then you're still right. Besides, I'm glad I convinced you that people should trust each other."

Faith grunted. "I don't know if I'd go that far."

"You want me to trust people with knowing about us. I want you to trust me to tell them." Buffy pulled Faith towards her and off the counter. Faith slid to the floor slowly, grinning as she rubbed against Buffy all the way down. She was even beginning to like the stupid polar bear pyjamas. Or maybe it was the fact that she knew Buffy wasn't wearing anything underneath. Buffy held her trapped, the edge of the counter digging into her butt. "And I'm sorry I said that, about the bindle. I just--my words are stupid sometimes."

"Only sometimes?" Faith asked, trying to hold back a laugh. She started forward like she was going to walk away, and Buffy shoved her back with her hips.

"Yeah. Sometimes. The rest of the time I'm really deep. Practically wise." She was leaning forward now, and Faith could feel her breath against her mouth. She licked her lips and was about to quit fooling around and take this where it was quite obviously headed--when Joyce cleared her throat.

Faith expected Buffy to leap away like she'd been goosed again, but instead she only leaned more firmly into Faith, resting her head against her shoulder, and watched her mom enter the kitchen. Buffy looked pretty confident, but Faith could feel her get all tense and trembly, the way she felt after an intense sparring session.

"Buffy?"

"Yeah, Mom?"

There was a pause, and Faith was sure that Joyce was going to explode into some bitch-monster yelling match about how could Buffy do this to her, and if she thought Angel was bad, at least he was a guy--an older, undead, unsoulable guy, but a guy nonetheless--and how dare Faith come anywhere near her daughter, and if she thought for one minute that this was going to continue she had another think coming.

Instead, Joyce said: "Don't forget to pack the things you've left in the bathroom."

"Right."

"Oh, and Mark might be visiting Sunnydale this weekend. Maybe we could all have dinner together on Friday."

Buffy shrugged. "Faith asked me out on Friday. How about Saturday?"

Another long pause. A really, really long pause with a staring contest and a silent battle of wills. Joyce did the head-tilt, puzzled-frown, befuddled-parent look, and Buffy answered with the innocent stare and the raised eyebrows. Joyce put her hands on her hips. Buffy hugged Faith tighter. Faith tried to pretend she was elsewhere.

Joyce cracked first. "That's...neat." She turned away, looked back, opened her mouth, closed it again. Then, in a tone full of motherly authority: "Load the Jeep."

"Okay."

Joyce nodded, wearing the expression of someone who had come into the room for a specific purpose and had forgotten it along the way. With one final confused head shake, she headed back upstairs.

Buffy burst out laughing.

Faith smiled at her, still a bit worried about Mrs. S. It looked like they'd turned her into a zombie or something. At least there hadn't been yelling. "What's so funny?"

Buffy finally got her giggles under control. She looked up at Faith, her eyes bright with suppressed laughter. "She approves."

"What?"

"She likes you. She thinks you'll be good for me." Buffy stopped and gave a slight frown of concern. "She's probably going to start worrying about whether you eat enough vegetables and if you should quit smoking."

"You got all that from 'load the Jeep'?" Faith paused, then added, "And I don't smoke that much."

"Come on, let's pack, I'll explain all about it." Buffy took her hand and tugged her towards the bedroom.

"Just pack?" Faith asked plaintively. She'd been sure there was about to be smoochies, as Buffy would say, and she wasn't one to settle for interruptions.

Buffy's grin was answer enough.

When Faith got out to the Jeep she understood why Buffy had been so happy to be volunteered into loading it. Most of their bags were shoved into the front, tied down by the seat belt, with only enough room free for Joyce to shift without knocking everything to the floor. The ski gear fit into the limited cargo space, leaving the back seat free and clear. Buffy

had tossed blankets and pillows back there, and it was pretty obvious where she expected the two of them to be riding on the way back to Sunnydale.

Joyce looked at the nest Buffy had created and at the stuff sharing the front seat with her. There was another brief bout of mother/daughter telepathy, then Buffy was pulling Faith into the back seat after her.

"Everyone ready to go home?" Joyce asked as she put the Jeep in gear.

"Yes, Mom," Buffy said, like a kid chorusing 'good morning' to a teacher.

Faith met Joyce's eyes in the rearview mirror. The weird zombie-doubt was gone from her eyes and she smiled back at Faith. "I guess I am," she said, surprised to find that it was true-- Sunnydale was home. And for the first time, she wasn't scared to go back. Who knew what would happen then--with Angel and the Scoobies and whatever big bad would be the next to claim the Hellmouth--but she figured they could handle it, B and her. The Chosen Two.

She spent the trip back watching the mountains recede behind them, Buffy snuggled against her, and her hands carefully hidden under the blankets, where they could do the most good.