

Shadow Lands (The Immortals #5)

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Prologue

Hallowe'en 2018

Eleven thirty p.m.

In a small, run-down, desecrated cemetery in a small, run-down desecrated area of Chicago, three students searched by torch-light for a specific mausoleum.

Sophomores in the University of Chicago, they were each majoring in the somewhat esoteric, yet hugely popular subject of Parapsychology. As a sideline, they had also chosen the related course of Occult Studies.

Ever since before the birth of the new millennium, students from all over the United States were more and more drawn toward Chicago's university to study in its renowned halls. The Faculty of Parapsychology was one of the largest in the country and with the upsurge of interest in all things New Age, prospective students flocked toward it. Recently applications had far exceeded demand as young people found themselves fascinated - in some cases obsessed - by what lay beyond most humans' understanding.

Three such people, lucky enough to gain entry by virtue of high grades, intelligent interview technique and the sheer strength of their belief that they would be granted a place, were Sally Adams, Peter Harvey and John Knight. During their time at the university, they had struck up an unlikely, yet strong friendship based on their mutual interests. However, they all held rather different views on their chosen subject and held many fierce debates amongst themselves.

It was Peter Harvey, a thin-faced, intense looking individual, who had instigated tonight's little escapade, but the others had gone along with it almost gleefully. After all, what else were they going to do on Hallowe'en? Go trick or treating? No. Too old, too pseudo-sophisticated for that. A Hallowe'en ball? No way. They sneered down their well-educated noses at dressing up as fantasy characters. Too grown up to pretend. And why bother to pretend, when they could do the real thing?

Hallowe'en, after all, was the night that things were sup-

posed to happen.

Sally Adams, Peter Harvey and John Knight were hoping to do exactly that. Hoping to make things happen.

"Thought you said it was easy to find. Thought you said you'd been here to check it out."

John Knight's voice was sceptical, but that was only to be expected. He was, after all, the sceptic of the group. It was an oft-stated fact that he'd only come along tonight to prove Peter's little pet theory wrong. Peter, the true believer, who maintained that there was a kind of life after death, was going to be made to eat all his words. One by one. And John would enjoy feeding the unsavoury meal to him.

"Told you, I checked it out the other day. But it looks different at night. Kind of... darker."

A little snigger from John here.

"Darker, yeah. Right. Wouldn't have thought of that, it being night and all."

"Shut up and look..."

Sally, on the other hand, kept her mind open, as she always did. Inquisitive mind open, careful mouth shut. Instead of joining in the argument that was rapidly boiling up between the two young men, she concentrated on searching. Consequently, it was she who found what they'd been looking for.

"Hey guys..." she called. "This is it."

Two more circles of torch-light joined hers. In the triple beams of light, a low sepulchre made of dark marble that had obviously not been cared for in many decades, if it had ever been cared for before. Surrounding the tomb, a surprisingly high fence of rusty iron railings into which a wrought iron gate had been set. Naturally, the gate was locked.

"Oh great, we'll have to climb over," John groaned. He cast an evil look in Peter's direction. "You didn't say anything about chains and locks."

Peter shrugged.

"Yeah, well, didn't think it mattered. We'll just feed the

equipment through the bars, then climb over. No big deal, right? I mean, you're certainly big enough and ugly enough. We can help Sal, right? If she needs it, of course," he added hurriedly, seeing Sally's frown, indicating that she didn't like being thought of as the helpless female of the group.

"Wonder why it's fenced round though?" Peter added, as if the thought had only just occurred to him. John laughed.

"To stop Breton escaping?" he quipped, but Peter shook his head.

"Shouldn't mock," he cautioned. "Breton was said to be powerful..."

"Powerful purveyor of crap," John interrupted rudely. "C'mon, are we going over or not?"

Brief silence, then both Peter and Sally nodded in agreement. Bags were pushed through spaces and one by one, they ascended the fence, dropping down onto the other side.

Once over, they examined the structure more closely. The marble was badly worn, and there was no decoration. Just a plain, simple tomb, except for the small plaque on the front wall: FRANCIS BRETON. Died 1835. There was no mention of a date of birth, or an eulogy indicating that the said Francis Breton would be sadly missed, or that he was a dear husband or father, or anything else, to anyone. Just that simple legend. But this mattered nothing to the three students who stood, about to cross the threshold to the tomb's interior. Because they knew who Francis Breton was, and were not surprised that he had died unmourned.

The late, apparently unlamented, Francis Breton had been a necromancer and before he had died, at the comparatively young age of thirty-eight years old, he had boasted of infiltrating the lands of the dead and commanding their legions. Condemned by ordinary people and churchmen alike, Breton had eventually died during a mysterious ritual. Or so the legends went. It was this mythical ritual that Sally Adams, John Knight and Peter Harvey hoped to recreate tonight. A ritual that would open the doors between the bright land of the living and the shadow lands of the dead. The fanciful story surrounding Breton's death didn't scare them off, only enhanced their desire for a little excitement. Even if nothing happened tonight, as John continually predicted, they would at least know they'd spent the most haunted night of the year in a dead necromancer's tomb performing an honest-to-God magical ritual.

Inside the tomb, it was fairly bare. Just a plain dirt floor and plain marble walls. In the centre, Breton's sarcophagus. None of them intended on opening the sarcophagus of course. They had only come here for atmo-

sphere, because it seemed more fitting that Breton's ritual be done in his tomb, in his dead presence.

Peter was rummaging in his bag for the candles he'd brought with him for illumination. The ritual - written in an archaic language that none of the students understood, but which Breton himself had conveniently translated - stated that they needed thirteen black candles. John had scoffed at this, as he scoffed at everything else. Thirteen candles indeed! And black at that! But Peter had insisted they carry out the ritual to the letter.

While he placed the candles in the specifically described shape around the floor, John and Sally set up the rest of the equipment.

"Borrowed" from the faculty's labs, along with the precious ritualistic texts, there was a tape-recorder, temperature sensitive equipment, and a video camera that would record proceedings as they happened. If tonight's escapade was discovered by anyone in authority, the chances were high that all three would serve a prison sentence. The texts themselves were apparently priceless, as a piece of historical curiosity, if not for their magical properties. As it was, Sally had had to use persuasion of the most intimate kind to convince her boyfriend, who worked in the university archives, to let her borrow the texts, or else none of the trio would have been here tonight at all.

When the equipment was set-up and running, some way away from the area where Peter would perform the ritual, the trio slipped long black robes over their conventional clothing. This wasn't essential, but Peter had felt there was some benefit in wearing ceremonial garb. This, he told the others, would focus them, get them into the right frame of mind.

"So," Peter said, his voice sounding slightly breathless in the chill atmosphere of the tomb. "Are we ready?"

John cast a final look at the instruments, made sure they were working properly. Everything was whirling, winding and gauging efficiently so he nodded.

"Yeah, go on. Amaze us." A smirk indicated that he was only amazed that he'd allowed himself to be talked into what he evidently considered a supreme waste of time, but Sally shook her head.

"You've seen things," she argued. "Heard things that couldn't be explained. You told us."

"I have," John agreed. "But it doesn't mean I believe it's supernatural. You know, Professor Kershaw says that most paranormal phenomena are made by the minds of the people who experience them. Ghosts, poltergeists, demons. They all come from us. From the power of our mind which projects..."

"I know, but..."

"Hey, guys," Peter interrupted; he sounded irritated. "If we're gonna do this, we have to say the words at midnight."

John rolled his eyes.

"See what I mean? Putting special significance on insignificant things?" He shrugged. "Well, go ahead. Like I said, amaze me."

Peter picked up the ceremonial knife that had belonged to Breton, and which was reputed to have been used in his last ritual. With this knife, at the appropriate moment, Peter would "cut" the Veil that was said to separate the dead lands from the living. On the night of Hallowe'en, according to ancient tradition, the Veil was at its thinnest and was easily torn.

"On this night, when we revere the Dead, our ancestors, we seek to sever the Veil so that we might speak with them and honour them." Peter made a cutting motion in the air with the knife. "Open up the door to we breathing creatures, so that we might end the separation between us and the Land of the Neverborn. Let us speak with the great Deathlords, so we might better understand all human fate. And let us listen to the knowledge and wisdom of the Restless Ones." Another movement of the knife, a vicious slicing movement which depicted the shape of a door. "Show us your Mysteries, so that we will no longer fear the greatest journey a man will ever take. The journey to the Land of the Dead."

Here he paused and nodded at the other two. This was the part that none of them much relished, but that Breton categorically stated was necessary. The spilling of living blood. John had originally laughed at this when Peter told them what was involved, asked why they didn't just cut a virgin's throat while they were at it. Then said it was just as well, because virgins were in short supply on campus.

But Peter had ignored this scepticism, and explained patiently that the dead on the other side of the Veil apparently demanded something warm and tangible as an offering before they would open the door to those who sought their wisdom. And Breton had recommended the freshly spilled blood of a human who still lived. Or, in their case, humans, plural.

So now, all three stood with their wrists extended toward Peter's knife.

"We offer the warmth of our life to you, the Neverborn, the Deathlords and the Restless Ones. Partake of our living life-force so that you might be given substance to share the lore of the unknown with us."

He swept the knife across his wrist, careful not to sever a main vessel. Soft blood pattered to the floor. Again the knife swept down, this time over Sally's wrist, and she gasped, as much in shock as in pain, although she'd

been expecting it. Then he cut John's skin. John made no sound, but smiled wryly as though he couldn't really believe he'd agreed to any of this.

Dead silence as the blood flowed gently down, gradually stopping as the small wounds slowly began to clot. Only the sound of the instruments whirring in the background disturbed the utter quiet.

"Nothing," John said after a few moments. He sounded pleased, and Peter cursed under his breath. Sally was looking around her, a frown on her pale face.

"I thought..." Peter began, then sighed. "I'll say the words again."

"Don't bother." John's voice was heavily sarcastic. "It's not gonna..."

A candle went out. Sally whirled round.

"Just a breeze," John said. Another candle went out.

"Getting cold in here," Sally observed.

"It's coming on for winter," John pointed out. "Of course it's getting cold."

"No..." Sally rubbed her arms briskly. "It's getting really cold."

She walked over to the temperature gauges, peered at them in the dim light. The temperature had gone down by five degrees. Just below freezing now. She related this fact to the others. Peter looked impressed but John just smiled.

"Be a frost tonight..." he began, and an unearthly wail split the air, cutting his words off short. "What the Hell?"

That had unnerved him, Peter was glad to note. Again, heavy silence as they waited for something else to happen. Nothing did, except it got colder still, so they shuddered, despite the heavy robes they wore over their clothes.

"I think we should go," Sally began; she sounded eager to get out of there. Whether it was because she was half-frozen, or whether it was because she was afraid, she couldn't define in her own mind. Whatever, she just wanted to put distance between herself and the atmosphere of this suddenly unappealing place that was rapidly coming to feel like deepest winter.

"Oh, c'mon, Sal, just a few moments longer?" Peter was even more breathless; excitement made his voice shake.

"I don't see..." Sally began, then stopped abruptly, transfixed by what was happening. John too, was staring; still his expression was sceptical. But not as sceptical as before.

"Are you doing that?" he asked Peter, referring to the blood drops, that were now rising in thin strands up into the air, to form the exact shape of the "doorway" that Peter had cut with the knife. Peter shook his head

vehemently.

"No..."

The rest of the candles blew out; the temperature dropped several more degrees. Sally hitched in a sobbing breath.

"What's happening?" she asked in a high quavering voice that sounded like a little girl's.

"It's happening, of course," Peter said from out of the darkness, sighing with exhilaration. "God, it's working. We're gonna..."

Another eldritch shriek, louder than before. The blood-defined door-frame shimmered now, clearly visible, like skeletal stripes of red neon. The trio stood, hypnotised by what they were seeing. For once, John had nothing disparaging to say. His mouth just opened and closed like a land-stranded fish's.

"I think we should get out of here." Sally again. Now she sounded frantic. Her open mind was suddenly way too open. Open to dead voices that whispered, teased, and sent a sane person mad. "Oh God, can't you hear them?" Yes, madness in her voice.

More shrieks now, high pitched sobbing. Screaming, gobbling laughs that held the secrets of insanity. And above the cacophony, a new sound. That of a whirling wind that increased as the ruby-neon light faded and the outline of the doorway became black on black.

John was the first to crack. It is said that when a sceptic has his views suddenly and forcibly changed, he will be the one who has the most intense reaction. So it was with John. Rushing to the door of the tomb, he tugged on the iron handle. Found it wouldn't budge.

"Jesus, guys, come and help me..."

No reaction from Peter, who stared, transfixed at the black hole. Issuing from it, borne on the phantom wind, nebulous shapes. Not human forms, but wisps of vapour, like tendrils of smoke.

John wasn't certain, but he thought he could make out features within the mists, the sparks of things that might have been eyes. They whirled around Peter and Sally, entwining themselves around them, as though exploring the warmth they emitted. The temperature in the tomb had gone down even more. The breath the humans expelled was now turning to ice crystals.

"Help me," John said again, but his voice had fallen to a whisper, and he didn't think either Peter or Sally heard him. His hand, numbed from the bitter cold, had fallen away from the door.

Sally, he saw, was hyper-ventilating, her hand at her throat, as though breathing was hard, getting harder. John thought he saw a finger of mist probe at her lips, as though trying to gain entry. She tried to thrust it away,

but it encircled her hands and John saw tens of tiny icicles form there. A moan burst from her mouth and the mist immediately leaped toward her open mouth, pushed itself inside, and disappeared. Sally gave a final, strangled sound, and John watched in horror as she became still and silent, evidently freezing from the inside out. With a sound like breaking glass, her body shattered into a hundred tiny pieces and more mist emerged from the wreckage of a once pretty girl.

"Pete, for Christ's sake..." John managed, but like Peter, he was paralysed by what he had just seen and was still seeing.

The doorway was expanding now; infiltrating more into the real world until the difference could barely be seen. John briefly - almost mindlessly - wondered if it would eventually open so wide that it would take over the whole area. The city. The world. Then Peter started sobbing. True, John couldn't hear him properly over the screeching and wailing of the entities that were steadily issuing from the gateway, but he saw tears streaking his thin cheeks, watched as they froze to his skin.

Peter clutched his chest, his face suddenly contorting in pain.

"Oh God..." Like Sally's, his breathing became rapid. John ran back to help him, finally freed from his terror-induced trance. When he reached Peter, he saw that his friend's lips were becoming blue, and not just from the intense drop in temperature. Peter fell into John's arms. "Pete?" John said, trying not to think that Peter was dying, that Sally was already dead. "Pete?"

No reply, just those harsh, laboured breaths and the agonised expression that indicated sudden heart failure. Peter went lifeless in John's arms, and John knew that all the shaking and pleading in the world wouldn't bring him back. And worse, John was now alone with the unquiet, eternally restless Dead he had helped to summon. Briefly, he wondered if Peter and Sally were among them now...

Looking toward the ever-growing rent in the air, he knew he had been wrong to disbelieve. Knew that there were things beyond death.

And knew, as he watched something terrible birthing itself into the living world, shambling toward him, that those things were worse than anything life could ever dish out.

Because some deaths, he now understood, were not the end. Some deaths did not lead to Heaven, Hell or even rebirth.

Some deaths, John understood even as he slowly died, were eternal...

One

Hallowe'en Night 2018

Seven thirty p.m.

Sitting before her dressing table mirror, Buffy reflected that the last thing she needed was to attend a Hallowe'en ball. What, she wondered, applying a second coat of mascara, was there to celebrate? As far as she was concerned, ghosts, demons, ghouls and any other denizen of the supernatural races were nothing to get excited about, let alone throw parties in their honour. Maybe she was too sensitive - okay, she was too sensitive - but as far as she was concerned, they could all go to hell and stay there. Make her life easier.

"Not so exciting maybe," she admitted, muttering through a blood-red mouth, pouting at herself. "But definitely easier."

Still, there was no getting out of it, although she'd tried her hardest. Even this afternoon, she'd purred around Morgan in an attempt to get him to phone and call off. But Morgan, who could see right through her, had just grinned and reminded her that he'd already accepted the invites, the costumes were ready, and besides, did she really want to disappoint Willow and Xander, who were looking forward to a little fun? Dropping the sweet innocent act, which never fooled Morgan anyway, she'd gone off and sulked for a little while. Then, deciding to accept the inevitable, she'd come upstairs at around six and decided that she'd just as well make the best of it. But she still didn't want to go.

Buffy knew that at least part of her reluctance was because of the occurrences of - oh, had to be almost twenty years ago now - that Hallowe'en night in Sunnydale. Wrongly assuming that her then-lover, the vampire Angel, would like her better as a demure eighteenth century damsel, she had hired a beautiful, old-fashioned dress.

Mistake. The owner of the costume hire shop had turned out to be Ethan Rayne, an evil magician associate of Rupert Giles. Rayne had cursed the clothes and turned their wearers into the characters they had dressed as. Consequently, Buffy had lost all her Slayer powers and became a useless, fainting female. Almost got herself killed. Buffy didn't much fancy that happening again. A very good reason for not going tonight. She had never dressed up for Hallowe'en since that night. Just in case.

Still, shouldn't be a problem this evening, Buffy thought, standing, twirling in front of the full-length mirror. Tonight, just to be on the safe side, she had dressed as an Amazon, one of the legendary mythic

race of female warriors. True, she thought, she looked a little like that character in the old TV programme, Xena, but better than becoming a simpering wimp. In fact, Buffy thought, smirking a little, she quite liked it.

Her dress was black leather, a few inches above knee length. Sewn from the waist were strips of thinly beaten silvery metal, that were in turn joined to an ornately decorated silver breast plate. Around her waist, a studded leather belt from which a mock sword hung. Around her neck, a silver choker, and on her arms, snake bracelets slithered upward from thick wrist-lets. Her shoulders were bare, and she had dusted opalescent shimmer-powder over them. Her hair, she had gelled back and plaited into a single thick braid, decorated it with silver twine. The final touch was a pair of leather sandals, which laced all the way up to her knees. All in all, Buffy thought, narrowing kohl-rimmed eyes, she looked pretty damn good. Dangerous. And at least no one could accuse of her not making the effort in the costume stakes.

She studied herself further then, not from vanity, but from a sudden sense of total weirdness. Here she was, thirty-eight years old, frozen in time as a young woman in her early twenties. No lines. No signs whatever of growing older. Never would be. Totally bizarre, thinking about it. To never feel the natural aging processes that nearly all humans went through. True, she could still get ill, but her illnesses were never long drawn-out; her immortal body restored itself quickly. True, she could feel pain and be wounded, but the wounds - the physical wounds, anyway - mostly healed within a few moments. Unless they were serious, of course.

Once she had felt lonely in her immortality, her eternal youth. Now she accepted it, mostly felt blessed for it. Because now she had Morgan, the three children, and Morgan's son, the priest Ramirez. Six immortals to fight evil now, not just her one. And Willow and Xander, of course, although...

A bang on the door, which then opened, interrupted her musings. A figure swathed from head to toe in black, so that only the eyes were visible, poked its head round.

"You ready?" The tone, slightly muffled by the costume, suggested mild impatience.

"Yeah, yeah."

"For someone who was whining only this afternoon about how much they really didn't want to attend this event, you've certainly pulled out all the stops."

Buffy wrinkled her nose.

"Just as well look good," she muttered. A smile, then

another pout of the crimson lips. "Do I, Morgan?" She saw his eyes crinkle, knew he was smiling. He came into the room, shut the door behind him.

"You know," he said, removing the fabric from around his mouth so he could speak more easily, "We don't really have time for me to show you exactly how good you look." His eyes travelled over her, scrutinising carefully. "You'll do, I suppose." A smirk. "Of course, if you wanted to be really historically correct, you should consider going bare-breasted."

"Should I?" Back to a pretence at wide-eyed innocence. A game she loved to play with him.

"Oh, yes. The Amazons always went bare-breasted into battle. Known fact. And it'd certainly cause a stir in the hallowed halls of the University."

He was laughing a little, and she didn't know whether to believe him or not, strongly suspected he was making it all up, playing his own games.

"Anyway," he continued. "We wouldn't get out of the house if you were, so maybe it's just as well." The smile faded then, his silver-grey eyes clouded. "And we don't really want every man in the place ogling you, do we? Well, not too much."

"Don't we?"

Morgan shrugged, lightened his mood again, but Buffy knew he'd meant what he just said. Ever since she was almost raped by Gared Madon, the embodiment of Armageddon, several years before, Morgan had been somewhat over-protective of her. He'd more or less got over it recently, but occasionally mild insecurity surfaced. Not that he was worried about her betraying him, but Morgan never wanted her to be put in such terrible danger again. Buffy pointed out that she was a Vampire Slayer - danger went as part of the deal - and most of the time, Morgan accepted that and let her go her own way. But sometimes, she knew, he still worried.

"Car's coming for us at eight," Morgan reminded her now, apparently over his brief fear that every man attending the ball would want to drag her off.

"I know. Are Willow and Xander ready?"

Morgan laughed again.

"Oh yes." He looked at her again, that same appraising stare that turned her insides to jelly, that still never failed to make her heart lurch. "You know, maybe we should call off..."

He took a step toward her, black robes swirling like smoke around him. The black robes of an ancient Bedouin war lord, complete with head-dress and sword belt at his waist. He looked, Buffy thought, like some romantic sheik from an old black and white movie. But fierce too, predatory, every bit the ruthless warrior. Laughing, she held out her hands and pushed him off

before he could touch her.

"No way," she said. "You'll mess up my make-up."

"Oh, well, that's charming, I must say." Pretend hurt in his voice, on his tattooed face. "Your make-up's more important than me, is that what you're saying?"

"Absolutely."

"Not even a kiss?"

"No! I spent ages getting this lipstick looking right." A pause; she looked at him from under her blackened lashes. "You can kiss it off later, if you're good."

"Promise?"

"Promise. Maybe..."

She skipped out of his reach and went out the door, and he followed her downstairs to the large lounge, where Willow and Xander were waiting for them. Dressed as Morticia and Gomez Addams, they made a somewhat astounding-looking couple.

Once more, Buffy felt a certain strangeness creep over her. Although Willow and Xander weren't immortal like she was, they both retained the bloom of youth. Looked younger, in fact, than they had before the threat of Armageddon. Buffy put this youthfulness down to Willow's powerful Wiccan magic. She had stopped the magical plague that had threatened Chicago, that had almost killed Xander, and ever since, they hadn't seemed to age a day.

Buffy wondered how long this state of affairs could go on. It was almost painful, seeing her friends staying young. Sometimes she found herself waiting for them to suddenly get older. Would they, she often pondered, torturing herself, look late twenties right into their eighties, and then suddenly dissolve into lines and wrinkles and infirmities, like vampires caught by sunlight? When those thoughts struck Buffy, she almost couldn't bear it. To think of Willow and Xander, so beloved to her, dying caused her immense sorrow.

Of course, she had discussed this in private with Morgan. Was Willow's Wiccan power granting them eternity in some way? Might she and Xander become immortal too, one day? Morgan said he didn't know. Obviously something had happened to them during that terrible time, something wonderful, but exactly what it was, he couldn't say, and refused to hazard a guess. But he had told Buffy not to get her hopes up too much.

"I think it's just delayed," was all he'd said, the only theory he would offer. "Just be glad of that, make the most of them." He hadn't added: While they're with us, but Buffy had seen the thought in his head and shut it off quickly.

So now, she was taking his advice. After all, they were still relatively young, Willow and Xander. Plenty of time to love them. And she loved them now.

"I have to say, Will, that you are the most voluptuous Morticia I've ever seen," Buffy remarked.

Willow smiled in return. Under her pale make-up, she still looked radiant with her own special enchanted beauty. She had temporarily dyed her hair jet black, and it somehow suited her, as did the long, clinging black velvet dress she wore, and the startling dark eye make-up. Only one thing detracted from the slender form she presented - a tiny bump in her lower abdomen that pronounced her four-month pregnancy. After all these years - her son Jordan had just turned thirteen - Willow had become pregnant again.

Xander, who was dressed in a somber black suit, had slicked back his hair and grown a small moustache especially for tonight, drew Willow close to him, and beamed with husbandly pride.

"Best Morticia I've ever seen," he said, dropping a kiss onto her head, his hand slipping over the small bulge, then going around her waist.

"Oh, please..."

Another voice, somewhat cutting, and definitely not impressed, joined the conversation. Ceri, Buffy's daughter from her relationship with James Harrison, her long ago Watcher, looked up from the book she was reading. Some dry old tome on demonology. She was frowning, blue eyes dark with disapproval.

"You know, you all should grow up." Her eyes held Xander's, as though to say: Especially you. "Going to a Hal-lowe'en Ball. Bit childish, I think."

"Ceri..." Buffy began.

"You know, Ceri, it's better to be a bit childish than to have no sense of fun at all." This from Xander, who was obviously a little put-out that she'd looked at him specifically. "You're only acting so sour because you weren't asked to go along too."

"Some people," Ceri said, addressing him directly now, her eyes positively sparking with anger, "have never grown up. And like I said, I wouldn't wanna go to some stupid dance anyway. And as for that," she said, looking at Buffy now, "I don't need a babysitter tonight. I'm more than capable of looking after the twins and Jordan."

Buffy sighed. Ceri sure had a difficult attitude sometimes. Rudeness to Xander, whom Ceri mostly considered a waste of space, was just one of the ways her inner insecurities and darkness manifested themselves.

"Ceri," Buffy said carefully, "you may look and act like a seventeen year old, but in terms of years you're still only twelve, and legally, that means I have to provide you with a sitter. Besides, it's Ramirez. You like him. God knows, you spend enough time with him usually." Ceri shrugged, got up from her chair, book in hand.

"I guess," she admitted grudgingly. "Anyway, I'm going to my room." A faint smile on her pale features. "Have a nice time."

"You won't go out, will you?" Buffy said as Ceri went to leave. Turning, Ceri smiled. A proper smile now, it lit up her too-solemn face.

"I can look after myself, mom. You know that." Her voice was rather too bright, rather too reassuring, which worried Buffy a little.

"I know. But promise me, don't go out, okay? Not tonight."

"Whatever." Ceri turned back, kissed Buffy, then Morgan, then Willow. Finally, as an afterthought, just to be polite, Xander. "See you later." Then she was gone.

"Don't know what I'm gonna do with her," Buffy said as the door closed behind her. "She's so..."

"Cold?" Xander suggested, and was rewarded by a dig in the ribs from Willow.

"Xander..." Willow hissed, frowning, but Buffy shook her head.

"No. No, he's right, Will. She can be cold. And Xander's got a right to complain - he has to live with her too, and Ceri's attitude toward him stinks sometimes."

"Well, maybe I deserve it sometimes," Xander admitted. "I know I annoy her, to say the least. But well... It's just me being me, right?"

"Yeah, just you being you, Xander," Buffy agreed.

"I can't help being a jerk."

"True," Willow said, but she gazed at him lovingly.

"You know, maybe I shouldn't go," Buffy hedged, but Morgan shook his head. "I don't know if I should leave her..."

"Stop trying to get out of it," he told her. "Ceri needs her own space, that's all. She's solitary, you know that. Besides, as you say, she likes Felipe. He's good for her." The doorbell went. "Too late anyway. He's here now."

There was noise outside in the hallway and Buffy heard the twins, Lucas and Kaitlin, squabbling over who was going to answer the door. There was a lot of squealing and laughter and excited chatter, then the lounge door burst open and the room was filled with noise.

"Hey mom," Lucas said; his eyes went round. "Are you really going out like that?"

Kaitlin - known simply as Kate - rushed to defend her mother.

"I think you look great," she said, with an accusing look at her brother. "Doesn't she look great, dad?"

"Your mother always looks great," Morgan said smoothly. "Hello, Felipe," to his other son, Ramirez, who had foregone his priest's clothing tonight in favour of more comfortable, less formal wear.

"Father, Buffy, everyone," he said, with a faint smile, although his eyes were warm. "You all look very... interesting." His voice, with its pronounced Spanish accent, was amused.

"Wish I could come," Kate said wistfully. "Wish I could dress up."

"Girl's stuff," Lucas said disparagingly. "I bet dad and Xander wish they could stay home. Bet they're only going because they have to."

Xander laughed.

"Yeah," he said. "I'd much rather sit around and watch the football."

Buffy drew Ramirez aside from the general noise, spoke quietly.

"Watch Ceri for me, Felipe," she said. "She's in a weird mood tonight." A sigh. "You seem to understand her better than the rest of us."

"I'll take care of her for you, Buffy. Have no fear."

"Not while she's with you," Buffy said, and kissed his cheek. "Thanks, Felipe."

"Car's here," called Xander, and it was time to go.

The car sent by the University wasn't exactly a limo, but it was comfortable, and a bottle of champagne had been provided. Giggling like a bunch of teenagers, Buffy, Morgan and Xander set about drinking it. Willow, being pregnant, didn't indulge. Nowadays, alcohol made her feel sick.

The reason for their attending the University Halloween Ball was thanks to Morgan's association with the Ancient History Faculty. Morgan had done a lot of work for them over the years, including providing them with a couple of very successful books on the culture of his own people, the ancient Celts, for which he was handsomely rewarded.

Of course, the people at the university had no idea of Morgan's origins, that he was a druid priest over two millennia old. Morgan somehow doubted they'd believe him anyway, even if he told them. But he had been pleased to offer his services, and nowadays, occasionally lectured, although he was careful not to get into the habit of it.

Just lately though, he had been discussing with Buffy whether they should leave Chicago, go elsewhere where they weren't known. After all, they'd been here a long time. Soon, someone somewhere would notice they weren't changing at all. A downside of immortality, he reminded her. They'd have to move around quite a lot, just to give themselves the chance of a relatively normal life.

Buffy didn't want to move - she was happy in the big house, it was her first proper home - but she knew that what he said made sense. Idly watching the streets go

by, she wondered where her next home would be. They hadn't gotten around to discussing that. Although she rather liked the idea of Europe. Italy, maybe. Then changed her mind. She'd spent a couple of months in Tuscany with James, Ceri's father - Ceri had probably been conceived there - and decided that maybe Italy might bring back painful memories. France? Yeah, maybe...

"Come back to us, Buffy," Willow said, and she jumped a little, smiled at her friend.

"I was miles away," she said. And she had been, literally, in her head. She glanced at Morgan, who smiled at her somewhat sorrowfully. Had he heard her mind meandering? Maybe. But even if he hadn't, he knew her moods too well. Knew if she was happy, sad, or angry, just by a certain set of her features, her body language. His hand squeezed hers.

Everything will be fine, his mind told hers, and she just smiled. With Morgan, it would all be fine. More than fine. Where he went, she went. Simple as that.

The car drew up outside the main university building at about eight thirty. Getting out of the car, Buffy felt the late autumn chill creep over her body, and she briefly wished she'd worn a coat. Her outfit was a little too scanty to stand around outside for too long.

"Ball's in the main hall," Morgan said, producing the invites from somewhere in his costume. They followed him as he went through the entrance, down brightly lit corridors. As he walked, several people greeted him in friendly manner. Obviously, Buffy thought, Morgan was well liked. So what else was new? Everyone liked Morgan, once they got past the initial shock of seeing the facial decorations, which were an indelible sign of his high-ranking priest-hood.

For herself, Buffy had never set foot inside the university buildings before. She and Morgan had agreed that maybe it was best if he didn't mix the two areas of his life, because he'd already had several comments that he must take a magic potion to keep looking so young for so long. Adding Buffy into the equation would have made things even more questionable.

Tonight was different of course. A one-off occasion, and Morgan seemed relaxed and willing to merge private and public selves for once.

The main hall was an amazing sight. Seeing it, Morgan laughed.

"They've gone to town," he said, giving the door person the invites and stepping inside. "This place is usually very much the respectable hall of learning. I'm impressed."

Buffy was too. The hall was decorated as a gothic ballroom. Cobwebby fabric hung from the ceiling, from

the galleried balcony. Fake stone columns had been erected, into which sconces holding electric candles had been set. In fact, the only lighting was from electric candlelight, which flickered in a perfect imitation of the real thing.

"Looks like Dracula's castle," Buffy said; the genuinely eerie atmosphere that had been created made her shiver. "Hope he doesn't turn up."

"Well if he does, you'll be here, won't you?" Morgan pointed out. "But it's not very likely, is it?"

"Anything's likely on Hallowe'en," Buffy replied, all senses on red alert, knowing she was over-reacting, but unable to help herself. "Come on, I need a drink."

"You've just had a third of a bottle of champagne," Xander said. "Jesus, what a lush. We live with an alcoholic, Morgan."

"I know," Morgan sighed. "It's the only way she can cope with living with me."

"Well, that's true," Buffy said. "You're enough to drive anyone to drink."

They exchanged glances and laughed. The pretend bitchiness was just the friendly banter of two people who could say anything to each other, knowing they didn't mean it. Of course, the real arguments were a different matter. Fortunately, they were very few.

Refreshments were free, and Buffy reflected that if anyone wanted to get seriously drunk, it would be all too easy. Willow stuck with plain mineral water; tasted like sparkling wine, she claimed. Buffy reckoned that Willow could actually do that - not turn mineral water into wine, of course, but at least make herself believe it tasted like it. Sometimes Buffy envied Willow her Wiccan talents, but although Buffy was adept in many things, the art and science of Wicca wasn't one of them. Buffy simply didn't have the patience. She left the magic to Willow and Morgan.

They'd been there about fifteen minutes when a man in his fifties dressed as Julius Caesar approached them, all smiles.

"Morgan!" he exclaimed. "Glad you could make it. Very dramatic costume, if I may say. Looks very authentic."

Morgan smiled, shook the man's hand.

"Glad to be here, Harry. Place looks great." He turned to Buffy. "Buffy, this is Harry Dudley, Head of the History Faculty. Harry, this is Buffy, my wife." They'd agreed on this form of introduction before they'd arrived. It was easier, they'd decided. And besides, they were married, kind of. Willow had performed the Pagan ceremony of Handfasting just after the twins were born, and there had been the traditional exchange of silver rings.

Buffy smiled, took Dudley's hand.

"Hi," she said. "Morgan's talked about you. Glad to

meet you at last."

"Likewise." Dudley frowned. "You must be taking the same potion of eternal youth that Morgan takes. He tells me you've been married six years. You have to have been a child bride."

Buffy felt a flush creep over her face. Morgan was right; this was difficult, and she understood why he was becoming anxious to leave.

"Something like that," she said with a too-wide smile. Hurriedly, she introduced Xander and Willow, and the awkwardness passed.

"Can't tell you how useful Morgan's been to us," Dudley continued. "His work is so authentic, you'd think he'd lived it or something. Amazing knowledge for someone so young. Don't know what his sources are." He smiled conspiratorially. "Come on, Buffy, let me in on his secret."

"Oh, I don't think Morgan would be very happy with me if I did that." Another wide smile, so wide, Buffy thought her face might split. She took a hurried gulp of her drink and cursed Morgan for making her come along tonight. Xander, she saw, was smiling a little, obviously amused at her discomfort. She cursed him too. Only Willow seemed to share her unease. Still, Buffy knew she'd have to cover it. Had to learn to deal with it. Her first real lesson in the downside of eternal youth and beauty. Still, Morgan wouldn't get away with this...

"So, what do you do, Buffy?" Dudley was saying.

"I look after the children." The words were out before she realised that maybe it was the wrong thing to say. Of course, Dudley seized upon her disclosure.

"Children?" he enquired. "Morgan didn't mention that you had children."

"Didn't he?" Buffy looked at Morgan, pleased to see that he looked embarrassed now.

"Oh, we have twins," Buffy said. Dudley's eyebrows raised high on his forehead.

"Twins?"

"Yeah. Boy and a girl. And another daughter too. Of course, my mother wasn't too pleased, me getting pregnant so young, I mean, I wasn't even out of school, but there you go." She smiled sweetly at Morgan, who remained silent. Xander and Willow, she saw, were watching her, barely able to keep from laughing. "That's probably why Morgan didn't mention it. I mean, he was a brilliant student, but soo wild..."

"All right, thank you, Buffy, sweetheart," Morgan said at last; his voice, she was pleased to note, was very strained. "Harry doesn't want a life history, do you, Harry?"

"Oh, I don't know..."

"No. You don't. Believe me."

"Oh, yes. Right." Dudley shook his head and Buffy knew that Morgan had gotten to him, steered his mind away from the subject. "Anyway, good to meet you all. Must mingle."

When he had gone, Morgan turned to Buffy.

"You," he said grimly, struggling to keep the amusement from his voice, "are in big trouble."

"Oh, promises, promises," Buffy said, unrepentant. Xander was properly laughing now.

"Don't encourage her," Morgan told him. "I doubt I'll ever hear the end of this. Pregnant schoolgirl indeed."

He sounded disgusted. "I need another drink." Another look at Buffy, who put on her best innocent expression. "Oh, stop looking so damned gorgeous. How am I supposed to be angry with you, when you do that?"

He tugged on her hand, pulled her to him, kissed her. "You're still in trouble," he whispered. Buffy just smiled.

The evening passed quickly in a blur of dancing, drinking and conversation. Many people knew Morgan, and they all wanted to be introduced to Buffy, Willow and Xander. Buffy found it increasingly easy to field questions, although she noted that Morgan was slightly wary, evidently wondering what far-fetched story she might come out with.

By the time midnight struck, they were all riding high on a wave of excitement, and Buffy thought this was probably the best Hallowe'en ever. Then, almost as a cliché, the electric candles flickered on and off, as though someone was intermittently playing with the switch. People ooh-ed and ah-ed as the lighting continued to gutter.

"Great effect," Xander remarked, somewhat sarcastically. "Next thing, there'll be ghostly noises. Chains clanking. Could've been more original..."

As though on cue, a cold wind blew through the hall, and Xander shuddered.

"Now they've turned the heating off..." His words trailed away, because the wind wasn't the result of bad heating, it was a proper wind that bit into them. "Someone's left a door open," Xander continued, but he didn't sound like he believed his own words anymore.

"Feels like..." Willow began, then put her hand protectively over her bump. She shook her head.

"Will?" Xander sounded worried. "You okay?" Willow nodded.

"Just feels like... being haunted..."

Buffy heard herself laughing.

"We're just being over-sensitive, guys," she said, looking to Morgan for back-up. Absently, he nodded. "I mean, we've all seen too much weird stuff, right? Right, Morgan?"

"Yes. Right." But Buffy felt he seemed distracted. Then the chill wind stopped, as suddenly as it had started, the lights righted themselves, and people began to talk normally.

"We'll just forget it then." Xander sounded positively eager to forget it, and Buffy didn't blame him. "C'mon, Buffy, let's dance?"

She went into his arms gratefully, saw Willow and Morgan dance together, and let herself relax. Whatever that chilly breeze had been, it wasn't anything supernatural.

"Memorable party," Xander was saying, when she caught sight of something that made her stiffen in his arms, stop dancing abruptly.

"What the Hell...?" she began. Xander frowned.

"Buffy?"

"I saw... I thought I saw..." She shook her head.

"Saw what?" Xander looked in the direction she was staring in, but what she'd thought she'd seen was no longer there.

"Have you seen anyone dressed as...?" She shrugged, not finishing the sentence, feeling a little stupid.

"What?"

"As the Grim Reaper?" Buffy finished.

"Well, surprisingly, as it's a Hallowe'en Ball, no, I haven't. But there's loads of people here, Buffy. Could've been."

"Yeah... yeah... But you know, it looked so real. Like... like it was looking over us all... Making decisions..." She tried to dismiss her misgivings, felt totally ridiculous now.

"Decisions? What decisions? Buffy, you're scaring me. I mean, I know I'm easily scared, but..."

Making the decision of who was gonna die." Buffy gave a fake laugh. "I've been drinking too much. Seeing things. Right?"

Xander's answering laugh was just as false.

"Right," he said. And they danced again.

But Buffy was left with the impression of a figure cloaked in a gore-soaked shroud, holding a scythe encrusted with human death, and remembered an old story she had once read. Recalled a line from it...

And the Red Death held sway over all...

Two

Once behind the closed door of her bedroom, Ceri allowed herself to relax a little. Not too much. Ceri was never truly relaxed, ever. But tonight she was ultra-tense. Like there was something in the air feeding her nerves poison. Tonight, she didn't feel like being pleasant to anyone. Not even to Ramirez, with whom she had a close relationship, closer maybe than with her own mother.

Settling herself on her bed, taking a few deep breaths, she opened her book on demonology. A Slayer had a lot to learn, she had discovered. Sometimes she thought she'd never absorb it all, clever as she was. Sometimes it all seemed like too much hassle. Trouble was, she liked to be independent. Didn't like to bother anyone, preferring to try to absorb it all by herself. As though asking for help was somehow admitting weakness.

Ceri hated to be thought of as weak. Even at her relatively young age, she was a full Slayer, and full Slayers shouldn't need help. Oh, of course her mom and Morgan encouraged her to talk to them, to get her to discuss her thoughts. Her hopes. Her dreams. Her fears. Ceri pretended to go along with this to a certain extent, but generally, she kept herself closed. Didn't let them see the confusion and hurt inside, that never seemed to go away, despite the loving care she was given.

Take tonight, for example. That little spat with Xander. She'd been rude to him, and part of her regretted it. But Xander treated her like she was still a little kid. Like she wasn't a vampire Slayer who had made her first kill several years ago. No. Xander still spoke to her like she was a sixth grader instead of someone who had left school over a year before.

Ceri supposed she should be in school, but it just hadn't worked out. Like a fish out of water, she had felt displaced, almost unable to function.

Too young to do anything the other kids did, having to refuse dates because her mom would never let her go, too clever, finding the work boring and mundane, she just hadn't fit in. Consequently, she had become even more withdrawn and hostile, causing trouble, being picked on, being called a freak because of her exceptional strength.

The final straw came when she got into a fight with the class bully - a hugely muscled thug who had been on her case since she'd joined the class. Finally taunted beyond endurance, Ceri had pretty well bashed his ugly face to a pulp. After that, there had been no choice. Ceri had been suspended, and Buffy and Morgan decided - maybe belatedly - that high school was no place for a child like Ceri. Frankly, Ceri was lucky she wasn't charged with causing bodily harm, but the boy's parents hadn't pressed charges.

Since then, Morgan had taken over her education, teaching her what he thought she needed to know, and Ceri was much happier. Morgan was a good teacher, patient, never losing his temper with her, even when she was at her most unresponsive. Perhaps because her mom had had a hard time during her own teen years, they had never punished her. Just tried to instill a sense of decency into her, and a sense of pride in who she was. Ceri wasn't altogether sure they were succeeding.

Still, since ditching school, she hadn't been idle. Most days she helped Ramirez at his youth centre in Cabrini Green, a poor estate in the worst part of Chicago. Before Ramirez came and took it over, the estate had been a terrible place. Slowly, under Ramirez' guidance, it was improving. Ceri found a certain satisfaction in helping the deprived kids he tried to drag out of the gutter. Put her own perceived problems in some kind of perspective. Unlike her, those kids came from miserable, often abusive, homes. They had no parents to care for them, no-one but Ramirez and his helpers to guide them through the dangerous maze of their lives.

Tonight though, Ceri felt as though she had the weight of the whole world on her shoulders. And she didn't particularly fancy a pep talk by Ramirez on why she should consider herself lucky.

Lucky! she thought, flipping the pages of the book, looking at the pictures of demons that balefully glared out at her, trying unsuccessfully to take anything in. This was to be her life, of course. Her mom had made that quite clear. If there were demons around, then Ceri would have to help fight them. Later - and in the not-too-distant future - the twins would join the fight against evil too. It was their fate, their destiny. Her mom had told her there was no point fighting against either. She had tried, she told Ceri, but had come to realise that acceptance was better.

Well, Ceri had accepted, but that didn't mean to say she didn't resent it sometimes. Often, she wondered what her future actually held. Sure, her mom had a pretty nice life these days - well, they all did - but how long before it was all interrupted again? Like it had been last time. When Armageddon came.

Shuddering, Ceri put the book down and remembered that terrible time, going into the dark Netherworld that was her subconscious. Nightmares still plagued her, all these years later. Secretly, although she pretended otherwise to her mother, she thought it would always haunt her. How did someone get over seeing their mother half-naked and spread-eagled on a bed, waiting to be raped by Lucifer's own child? How did someone get over the threat that they would suffer the same fate? Ceri had been much too young to be able to fully

deal with that and she still wasn't dealing with it very well. Since that time, Ceri had made a vow: she would never allow anyone to get close to her in that way.

Deep inside, Ceri was glad that her mother didn't let her go on dates. Truthfully, she was afraid of sex and anything involved with it, associating it on some deep level with violence of emotion. The whole idea made her feel faintly nauseous. Even now, as she thought about it, she saw her mother, helpless again, manacled. Saw Gared Madon's expression of filthy lust as he looked from her to Ceri. Read from his thoughts, heard from his foul mouth exactly what he was going to do to both of them. Corrupting her young mind with perversions so vile, no one should know them.

"Stop it," she told herself now, feeling her mind about to go into overdrive as she remembered that time. But she guessed she'd never stop thinking about it. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if she could bring herself to discuss it with her mother. Her mother was the only other person who knew how she might feel, because she had suffered too. Worse, in fact.

But Ceri couldn't discuss it. Even thinking about it made her feel faintly dirty; talking about it was impossible. And besides, her mom was so happy with Morgan that Ceri was vaguely afraid that she might laugh at her if she voiced her fears. Sometimes, Ceri found it hard to understand the way her mom and Morgan were together. Openly affectionate, they were always flirting with each other, kissing, holding hands. Never anything offensive, of course, just loving each other. How could her mom and Morgan give themselves up so utterly to that kind of commitment? How could they bear to be so close that one almost was the other? And what was the line between that intense, almost worshipping love, and the violence she'd seen when Armageddon had held them? Was there a line, really? Wasn't all such deep emotion violent in its own way?

Ceri didn't know and she wasn't prepared to let herself find out. Relationships were dangerous. Anyway, who would take her on? Even if she wasn't an emotional mess, she was immortal and no ordinary man would understand her, would most likely feel threatened by her.

Abruptly Ceri stood, and the book fell to the floor with a thud. She had to get out, never mind what her mother said. It was late now - she'd isolated herself in this room for almost two hours now, and if she stayed in any longer, she'd go loopy. Definitely something in the air tonight, making her brood so long on these destructive thoughts, when normally she could kill them quickly.

It's because it's Hallowe'en, she thought, knowing that was a little crazy, but unable to discount the idea en-

tirely. After all, Hallowe'en was a weird night. Even her mom hadn't wanted to go the Hallowe'en ball at the university because strange things had been known to happen at this haunted time. Maybe, Ceri thought, it was a Slayer thing. Maybe Hallowe'en night got to Slayers too. Who knew? After all, her life was full of weirdness. Why not a little more?

Stooping, she picked up the book, supposing she shouldn't let it lie because it was quite old and quite valuable.

Demons, she thought again. Would there be demons on the streets tonight? Was that why her mom didn't want her to go out? A sob strangled her throat suddenly. Her father had been a demon at the end, hadn't he? Before Morgan killed him. Did that mean she had part-demon inside her? Shaking her head, Ceri pushed that insane thought out of her head. No demon inside her, only her personal ones, which were bad enough. No, she was a Slayer child. A Slayer child with a dead demon father.

Not for the first time, she wondered what her father James had looked like at the end. Had he been a monstrosity, like these things in the book she held in her shaking hands? Ceri had made Morgan mind-play his cataclysmic battle with James out in his memory so she could watch what had happened, like a mini horror flick. Made him recall it time and time again, although it hurt him to do it because he had almost been killed himself. Yes, she'd seen how it was, how her real father had looked. Human but inhuman at the same time. But still, she wondered if Morgan's mind had represented it accurately.

Suddenly desperate to see James, Ceri went to her dressing table, pulled open her top drawer, where she kept photos of him from the time before she was born. From before he became... What he became.

When she saw the photos, she stared at them fixedly, feeling even more hurt. Ceri didn't often look in mirrors - as long as she was clean and tidy, she didn't much care what she looked like - but she looked now. Took in every single detail. Nothing of her mother in her appearance; she was entirely her father's. Tall but slender. Slightly angular features in a pale face. Almost impossibly blue eyes. Hair so black it was like someone had painted the night sky around her face. Dead straight, it hung just below her shoulders like a heavy curtain. Her mom had told her she was beautiful, that when she was fully matured she would be stunning. Looking at her father, she supposed she had to agree. Her father had been a handsome man, in a patrician, classical kind of way. Her soul ached to look at him. Again, she wished with all her heart that she could have known him.

Of course, she had Morgan. He was the only father she

had ever known, and she loved him, and things had been more or less okay before the twins had been born. Ceri had almost been able to pretend she was his. But since the coming of the twins, Ceri knew she couldn't pretend any more. She was not Morgan's child; she was the product of a doomed, second best relationship with a doomed, second best lover.

Feeling horribly ashamed of her feelings, Ceri made a little noise in the back of her throat - half-sob, half sound of disgust at her own sudden sense of worthlessness. She wasn't worthy, she told herself. Not worthy of her mother's love, or of Morgan's. Or anyone else's. She dwelled too much on what she couldn't have, not enough on what she already owned. So much given to her, but she was still an ungrateful, miserable wretch.

Still sobbing, she looked at her father's photograph. It was hardly his fault, but she blamed him anyway.

"You should be here!" she whispered, voice distorted by tears. "But you're not. So stop haunting me! Just go away!"

So saying, hardly knowing what she was doing, she ripped the photo in half. Then quarters. Then reduced the picture to shreds. Caught up in this cathartic act, she pulled out the other photos she had of James, proceeded to tear them up methodically too, so her father's face was completely obliterated.

Leaving the bits of film all over her floor, Ceri grabbed the Slaying knife that her mom had given her just after she'd made her first kill, and left the room. She fully intended to go out and walk the streets until there were no thoughts left in her head. If there were any vampires out on the streets tonight, they'd better not mess with her.

She'd no sooner set foot outside in the hall when Jordan's door opened. Dark haired and dark eyed, at thirteen, a younger version of his father, he stood smiling at her. Ceri gave him a flat look.

"Going out?" Jordan queried. His voice, in the process of maturing, cracked a little, causing him to blush fiercely. Now Ceri smiled; Jordan always blushed around her nowadays. Able to read him like a book, she knew he was acutely aware of her young womanhood and it amused her. Jordan was no threat to her whatever and she treated him with the same casual disrespect that she dished out to Xander.

"Yeah," she drawled. "Gotta get out of here." She looked him over. "Shouldn't you be in bed, Jordan? It's..." She looked at her watch, saw another half hour of dreaming had passed with her barely noticing, "ten-thirty already."

Another flush, and no witty come-back. A brief cloud of shame engulfed Ceri; the poor boy had done nothing

but have a massive crush on her.

"Can I come with you?" Jordan had obviously decided to press on regardless and Ceri forgot her shame and laughed.

"You crazy? I'm not supposed to be going anywhere, so I sure as Hell don't intend to be responsible for you... Oh great..."

The twins' bedroom door had opened. Two more pairs of eyes - one grey pair, one green - watched her.

"You're not supposed to go out, Ceri," Lucas, the owner of the grey eyes remarked. "Mom told Ramirez. I heard her."

"I'll go crazy if I'm cooped up here any longer. Gonna go hunting."

"Mom'll be mad." This from Kate, the green-eyed one. Ceri sighed.

"Oh, come on, give me a break, you guys. Mom'll be okay..."

"No, she won't. She was real concerned that you should stay in." A smirk from Lucas, which made him look exactly like Morgan. Another reminder that she was an outsider, that she didn't really belong.

"I don't care," Ceri hissed.

"You don't care about anyone..."

"That's not true!"

Their voices had raised now, enough for Ramirez to hear them.

"What's going on up here?" he called, mounting the stairs quickly. Ceri set her mouth stubbornly. She had hoped to get out of here without involving him. It seemed that was not about to happen.

"Ceri?" Ramirez said; his black eyes searched hers.

"Why the fighting?"

"Ceri's going out," Lucas said.

"You little rat!" Ceri said, stepping forward, reaching for him, but he ducked out of her way easily. Lucas, she knew, wasn't being malicious in any way, just stating the truth. But still, he had that little brother's joy of dropping his big sister in the mud.

"Ceri, is this true? You're going out when your mother specifically told you not to?" Ramirez' voice was low, calm, and she turned her eyes to look at him. His eyes radiated power - not the hypnotic, magical force of Morgan, his father - but just sheer personal authority that came with five centuries of living. He might only be slightly built, Ceri thought, but he was immensely strong, both physically and mentally. Ceri was the first to drop the gaze, feeling herself flush slightly.

"You don't have to tell mom," she said quietly, but Ramirez shook his head, was about to say something, then changed his mind.

"Come downstairs," he told her. "You three," addressing Jordan and the twins, "stay up here. And no prying minds please, Kate, Lucas. I want to speak with Ceri alone." His tone brooked no argument and no-one tried to contradict him. Obviously expecting Ceri to follow, he turned and went back down the stairs, into the smaller of the two lounge rooms. Sighing, Ceri trailed after him.

"Your mother and my father left me in loco parentis tonight..."

"Loco par-whatis?" Ceri said; he was always so formally spoken, Ramirez.

"It means I'm in charge of you, acting on their behalf. It means that I'm responsible for you and..."

"Oh come on, Ramirez." Ceri never addressed him as Felipe. "You know I can look after myself."

He inclined his head in agreement.

"I know. But I promised your mother, and you will not leave this house tonight."

"What's so special about tonight anyway?" Ceri mumbled. "All nights are dangerous for Slayers..."

"And you are very young," Ramirez interrupted. "Tonight of all nights, your mother doesn't want you going out alone. There are always more Evil Ones out on All Hallows Eve." Ramirez sighed impatiently. "I should not have to reason with you, Ceri. You are old enough to understand this."

"Yeah, well, I may understand it, but I'm going anyway." She stared at him defiantly. Now she had backed herself into a corner, she refused to give in, although she knew her stubborn rebellion hurt the little priest.

"I forbid it, Ceri!" Finally, his voice was angry. "I forbid you to walk out of that door."

"Oh yeah? And what're you gonna do? Hold me against my will? Tie me up? Chain me...?"

Her voice broke and she ran from the room, his call ringing in her ears. Hurling herself out into the night, she jogged until the house was far away. Then she leaned against a wall and let herself relax a little.

Happy now? she asked herself. Happy now you've upset almost the only person in the world who really understands you? Or would, if you let him? You should go back, apologise.

But Ceri rarely apologised either. Apology was another sign of weakness, as was backing down. Still, she regretted her bad treatment of Ramirez. She loved him. Not that she'd ever admit to him in so many words. Her love for Ramirez wasn't the same kind of love she had for her mother, or for Morgan, or even for her pesky half-siblings, and she did love them, despite her sometimes unkind treatment of them. No, she loved Ramirez because he knew who she was. He knew what it was like to

carry the deep hurt and insecurity that was her burden. Because up until he'd come here during the threat of Armageddon, he had been like her. Displaced. Arrogant. Unwilling to bend or open up to anyone. Least of all to Morgan, whom Ramirez had hated then with stiff, unyielding frigidity. But during that time, and ever since, Ramirez, once a master torturer in the Spanish Inquisition, had softened, become human. And he gave Ceri hope that maybe one day, she would have hope too.

But still, she didn't feel much hope now, leaning against a wall in a dark street, shivering because in her haste to get out, she hadn't bothered to put on a coat. Still, the cold air was putting her thoughts in order a little, clearing her head, blowing away the fog there. Detaching herself from the wall, she began to walk toward Downtown. A long walk, but never mind. She couldn't go back now, tail between her legs like a whipped dog. She refused to look stupid in front of anyone, so she'd go back later, just so her point had been well and truly made.

Still, no getting away from it, she had behaved badly. Had been what Xander, with his over-developed so-called sense of humour called "Ceri-fying". Ha ha. Very amusing. Kind of apt though, she grudgingly admitted. When it was aroused, her cold anger made other people afraid of her, made them back off. Most likely why she didn't have any friends. Not that she wanted any. Did she?

"Oh quit analysing, Ceri," she muttered as she walked, quickening her pace so she was walking very fast, driving the thoughts from her head with hard physical exercise. "Find a vampire to kill, for God's sake. You're good at that."

True, these days there weren't many vampires residing in Chicago. Most vampires avoided the city, there being a Slayer family living there. But a few hardy - possibly mad, or at least stupid - Undead stayed, apparently willing to risk their unives. Mostly they kept themselves to themselves, occasionally they didn't.

Ceri had had plenty of arguments with her mom about that. Ceri wanted to go out, openly hunt them all down and exterminate them like the vermin they were. Her mom just said that unless they rebelled and started murdering people again - like the New York uprising they had been called to in September 2016, where Ceri, her mom and Morgan had slayed well over a hundred Undead - then they should be left alone. They might be stupid demons, her mom told her, but none of them were actively killing these days.

Well, Ceri didn't care about that. Tonight she was out alone, with no mom watching her. Tonight, she didn't care if they were actively killing or not. She was gonna hunt. And she was gonna Slay.

Making a snap decision, she went to the second biggest cemetery in Chicago, attached to the church of Mary Magdalene. Quite an old cemetery, it was still regularly used these days, ever expanding as Chicago's inhabitants continued to succumb to disease, violence, whatever.

Making sure no-one was around, Ceri scaled the high fence. Once on the other side, she began her patrol, searching with her incisive mind for signs of Undead.

After about twenty minutes of wandering, she heard something. Scrabbling beneath the ground. Smiling, she went in the direction that her acutely telepathic hearing directed her.

It was a newish grave - around six months old. JO-ANNE KNIGHT, the headstone read. MUCH LOVED DAUGHTER, TAKEN TOO YOUNG. JANUARY 2000 - MAY 2018.

Sad, Ceri thought, perching on the headstone, listening to the movement in the earth beneath her. Waiting. A young girl, turned before she'd reached her prime. But she wasn't a young girl anymore, she was a demon. Ceri wondered who'd turned her; guessed that whoever it was, they hadn't stuck around to care for her.

A hand with filthy fingernails appeared out of the soil, groping around, then another, followed by head, shoulders, then the rest of the body. A dirty, pathetic creature, encrusted with grave-dust and soil. As the vampire stood there, for a second unaware that Ceri was watching her, Ceri sensed the weak demonic force within her. This one, Ceri decided, hadn't fed in a while and although ravenously hungry, wasn't strong enough to attack anything but the weakest street person. Not much of a challenge for Ceri. But better than nothing.

"Hey, Jo-Anne," Ceri sing-songed. The vampire whirled round, shock on her demon's face, in her muddy yellow eyes. When she saw Ceri, she didn't attack at once, just shrank back, and Ceri knew that she had been recognised as a Slayer. "You know who I am, yeah?"

The vampire bared her fangs, but failed to look menacing, only confused. Ceri launched herself off the headstone and stood in front of her.

"Your maker left you?" she said. "All alone with no help?" She drew her knife. "You're better off dead, Jo-Anne. So I'm gonna kill you."

Now the vampire moved. The demon inside her couldn't help itself. Weak or not, she threw herself at Ceri with surprising speed for someone who was starving. Ceri kicked out, caught the vampire girl in the gut, and felt soft flesh give under the force. The vampire staggered backward, clutching her abdomen, then recovered herself, and, growling, came back for more. Ceri swiped toward the vampire with her knife, felt skin

part beneath its silver blade like wet wallpaper peeling off a wall. The stench of rot filled the air as the vampire's blood flowed out over Ceri's knife-hand. Behind her, in the distance, Ceri heard the church bell tolling midnight.

"Okay, gotta go," she said, and lunged forward, plunging the knife with perfect accuracy, watching the vampire explode into dust. Ceri felt vaguely disappointed. That had been much too easy. Not in the least bit satisfying. But she'd had to finish it. Ceri knew it would take her around forty-five minutes to walk home again, and she didn't want to risk getting back after her mom. If she got back before her mom did, maybe she could persuade Ramirez to keep his too-honest mouth shut.

Wiping the knife on the grass, Ceri prepared to return. Saw something. Stopped dead in her tracks. Just across the avenue of graves, someone was watching her. Ceri clutched the knife harder. Whoever it was, it was male, his face so pale in the moonlight that at first she thought he was another vampire. He didn't feel like a vampire but she had to be sure. So she walked in his direction, ready for a fight. She had to walk in that direction anyway, to get out of the cemetery and be in the right place to walk home.

When she got closer, she saw he was watching her intently, as though he'd been hypnotised. In his pale face, his eyes were wide and round, as though he couldn't quite believe what he'd just seen. Reaching him, she stopped, still tense and ready, although this young man seemed more frightened than vampiric.

"You staring at me?" Tension made her abrupt. Silently, the young man nodded. Up close, Ceri saw he was quite young, only around seventeen, and almost femininely beautiful. Amber eyes caught her challenging stare tentatively. His hair, honey-brown, was cut quite short, apart from a fringe that kind of flopped over his eyes. Physically, he was not much taller than Ceri, but she was tall for a girl, and he seemed almost fragile. The grey great-coat he wore over plain white shirt and grey trousers, accentuated his delicate build. His pallor was the reason that she'd originally thought him a vampire, but up close, she knew he was no such thing. Instead, he radiated warmth.

The young man was shuffling from foot to foot, evidently as unnerved by her as she was by him.

"I apologise, miss," he said. His voice was pure Southern, deep and warm, like heated cream. "Didn't mean to stare, but I never seen anything like that before."

Ceri raised her eyebrows, at a loss for an immediate reply. Miss? she thought. Who calls anyone "miss" these days? She found herself unable to stop looking at him, although she guessed it was kind of bad-mannered to

stare. She saw a deep scar on his forehead, and suddenly wanted to touch it.

"I... uh... What did you think you saw?" she said at last. The young man shrugged.

"Can't rightly say, miss." More shuffling of his feet. "Thought I saw you fighting with someone and then that someone just... exploded into... dust..."

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess they did."

Ceri found herself telling this stranger exactly what had happened. As she told him, she wondered if it was safe, but she told him anyway. His round eyes grew rounder.

"Look, you mustn't say anything to anyone about what you saw, okay?"

"On my honour as a gentleman, miss," he said, and Ceri found herself smiling. His way of speaking reminded her a little of Ramirez. Old fashioned and courteous. Unusual, but better than the way some boys had spoken to her. "Can't tell anyone anyway," he was saying. "I'm new around here. Don't know anyone."

"Oh. You're alone?"

The young man seemed to think before he replied and Ceri took the chance, tried to get into his thoughts. If he was hiding anything, she'd see it. Usually she found it easy to get into unsuspecting minds. But she didn't see it. His mind was unreadable, unreachable, and that surprised her. Surprised because non-telepaths mostly couldn't protect themselves against the likes of her. And because when he looked at her, he seemed to have no idea of what she'd just tried to do.

"I... uh... ran away from home. Couple of nights ago."

Was that the truth? Ceri wondered. She absolutely couldn't tell. But she went with it, trusted him instinctively, although she knew it was crazy. And Ceri never gave her trust lightly, if at all.

"Where you staying?"

"Around." No answer, and Ceri found herself frustrated. Now this was a challenge, trying to decide if he was on the level or not. He was certainly no threat to her, this young man with the face of an angel. But he was intriguing, compelling somehow. Ceri wanted to find out more. Was torn between wanting to stay and talk and needing to get home pretty damn fast. Deciding she was in enough trouble already, she guessed she should go.

"Like I said, don't tell anyone what you saw. Okay? I gotta go home."

Somewhat gratified, she watched his face fall, but he didn't argue.

"May I walk with you, miss?" he asked.

Ceri found herself laughing.

"Well, nothing's gonna happen to me... You saw what I just did. You know what I just told you."

The boy shrugged.

"A gentleman can't allow a lady to walk home alone," he said. "That just wouldn't be right."

Ceri considered, torn again. The solitary part of her wanted to tell him to go away and stop bothering her, but the part of her that longed for something else clamoured for attention. Besides, she told herself again, he was intriguing. Something... different...

"Okay," she heard herself say. "Some of the way, anyway. And I guess, if you're gonna walk with me, you can't just call me "miss". I'm Ceri."

"Nicholas," the boy said, extending his hand. "Nick, if you like. Your name - it's very pretty."

Ceri took the extended hand; it was warm. The touch made her close her eyes and there was a brief flash... of something. She couldn't tell what. Just knew she wanted to feel it again.

"Thanks."

They walked; Nick helped her over the iron railings, although she hardly needed it. They talked - mostly about her life, although she made a lot of it up, telling him she was seventeen. After all, her real age barely mattered; hadn't in years. Age was only years, wasn't it? Not a true sign of a person's maturity. She noticed that Nick told her nothing of himself, not really. And still, when she tried to read him, she found she couldn't.

When they were a couple of blocks from her house, she stopped.

"I'll go alone from here."

"Are you sure?" Somehow, Nick seemed unable to accept that she could walk alone in the dark at night.

"Sure I'm sure." She hesitated, unsure after all. Wanted to see him again, couldn't admit it. Was afraid to admit it. Was confused by what she was suddenly feeling.

"Would it be wrong of me to ask to see you again?" There, he'd asked her. Totally and utterly terrified, she nodded.

"Okay." Her voice was barely more than a whisper.

"Where? I mean... When...?"

"Tomorrow?"

Ceri thought. She was supposed to be helping Ramirez tomorrow, and she guessed that there was no way her mom was going to let her go out on a date at night. She blushed furiously. A date...!

"Yeah." Ramirez could fend for himself. "Noon? Here?"

Nick smiled and Ceri felt suddenly weak.

"Tomorrow, then."

Ceri turned and fled without another word. When she got to the end of the street, she turned, deciding to risk a wave. But Nick was gone. There was no sign of him. Obviously he hadn't stuck around.

Feeling a mixture of guilt, terror and elation, she walked toward her home.

Three

"Mom and dad are gonna be really pissed," Lucas announced, and heard Kate give an exclamation of delighted shock.

"Lucas! You mustn't say that!"

"Say what?" Lucas grinned back, saw Kate flush.

"You know what."

"No I don't. Go on. Say it."

"Mom and dad don't like us swearing..."

"Mom and dad aren't here, are they? Go on, Kate, say it. What are mom and dad gonna be?"

"They're gonna be... pissed..." Kate and Lucas began laughing simultaneously, muffling their amusement behind their hands. Their laughter escalated until finally, they threw themselves on Kate's bed, holding their stomachs. When they eventually got themselves under control, Kate spoke.

"Ceri was grouchy tonight, wasn't she?"

"She's always grouchy. Thinks she's something special. Like she's some kinda... sad princess in a fairy tale."

"She's been through a lot, Lucas," Kate pointed out. Their mom had told the twins a little about what had happened before they were born, not much, just enough, no more. Afterwards, she had trusted them not to use their telepathic powers for prying further into matters they had no right, as yet, to pry into. Young though they were, Kate and Lucas would never abuse their mother's trust. Tempting though it was. So they knew partially why Ceri was so disturbed, sometimes so hostile and rebellious.

"Doesn't give her the right to treat the rest of us like crap," Lucas observed, causing Kate to laugh again.

"Maybe."

For a while they were silent, enjoying the comfort of their twin-ship, their togetherness. Inseparable, Kate and Lucas. Always had been, from the time of their birth, if not before. The fact that one was a boy, the other a girl, made no difference. Their bodies may not have been identical - Lucas was quite a bit taller than his sister, dark haired, grey eyed, a miniature model of Morgan as he must have been when he was a child, so many years ago. And Kate was like her mother, not blonde, because after all, their mother's blondness wasn't entirely natural - but fair, with green eyes, small and slender, belying her already advanced strength.

Their minds though were irrevocably entwined, totally in tune. So much so that they often held conversations in their heads without even thinking about it, without knowing they were doing so until they were reprimanded that such behaviour was a little ill-mannered

around other people. Such activities were natural as breathing to the twins. When one was hurt, the other experienced pain too. One shared all the highs and lows of emotion that the other felt.

Soon though, they understood that they would have to sleep in separate rooms. They knew their parents were thinking of moving on in the near future, because what with Willow's baby coming in a few months, and the very real possibility that Buffy and Morgan would soon add to their own growing brood of children, the house, big as it was, simply wouldn't accommodate them all. And none of the grown-ups wanted to move away from the others, all preferring to live together, because, as their mom had told them often, true friendship was a precious thing, something to be nurtured. And the four adults had been through so much together that they didn't want to go their separate ways.

Besides, their mom and dad pointed out, the twins were growing fast now. At six years old, they were the size of the average eleven-year-old, and had started seventh grade in September. Soon, Kate would blossom into young womanhood, and Lucas would grow into a man. It simply wasn't right that they should continue to share a room once they reached puberty.

Kate and Lucas weren't developing as quickly as Ceri had. Although growing much more rapidly than normal children, they hadn't had the massive growth spurt that Ceri had had thrust upon her at an even younger age than they were now.

Buffy and Morgan had theorised it was because there was no great threat to world safety right now. After all, the coming of the apocalypse was potentially pretty earth-shattering stuff. And as Ceri, whose own development had slowed dramatically after those terrible events, was almost full-grown, there apparently wasn't the need for more full Slayers yet.

Still, the twins were grown enough to warrant separating them as far as sleeping arrangements were concerned. They wondered where they would live next. Probably it would be abroad somewhere. Abroad... Scary. But exciting too.

"Shall we go down and see Felipe?" Lucas suggested. Kate wrinkled her nose, shook her head.

"He'll think we should be in bed. It's gone eleven and anyway, he won't be in a very good mood, what with Ceri disobeying him and all."

Kate was a little in awe of Ramirez, and when he was angry, as she had correctly guessed he would be, their ultra-religious half-brother was positively forbidding.

And they knew just enough of his past to fear invoking more anger. Just in case. So Lucas nodded in agreement.

"Yeah. Guess you're right." A pause. "It sucks that we can't go out on Hallowe'en. Not even trick or treating, before. It's like everyone else is out enjoying themselves but us."

"Jordan's still here."

"Jordan's only... normal..." Lucas got off the bed, went over to the window, opened the curtain. Nothing out there but the blackness of the garden and the deeper black of the old oak tree silhouetted against the night sky.

"D'you think mom and dad are enjoying themselves?" Kate asked; she still sounded wistful.

"Yeah," Lucas said, still staring out. "Grown ups like things like that."

"I think it's romantic. A Hallowe'en Ball. Mom looked good, didn't she? And dad. And the others."

"I guess." Lucas turned back, letting the curtain drop. No monsters out there. No monsters ever came to this house; their dad had protected it against evil influences, and Willow's Wicca, which the twins were starting to learn the basics of, enforced his magic.

Buffy had not made the same mistakes as she had made with Ceri. Whatever the twins wanted to know, she told them, within reason. Made sure they understood, encouraged them to ask. They knew something about their father's past too - how old he was, that he had witnessed many things over the years, some good, some bad. Had done many things, some good, some bad. That he wasn't the perfect man they sometimes thought he was. No one, Morgan had told them, was ever perfect, including himself. The twins didn't know the full gory details of their father's chequered past, although they had asked. Morgan had said that some things were best left buried in time, where they belonged, and they had to be content to leave it at that for now. This they accepted. Morgan might not think he was perfect, but according to his youngest children, he was almost akin to a god.

The thing they liked best was the way he loved their mother. Morgan had told the twins that he was almost a lost cause until he had met her, that she had rescued him from a life of wandering and searching. That she had restored him, and that as the twins were joined, so were they.

As for Buffy, they knew pretty much everything about her. Determined to be honest after the fiasco with Ceri, when the child had read her mother's diaries and discovered that she had lied to her about her father, James, Buffy kept nothing back. And although the twins knew

how traumatic her past had been, they also knew that she had come through it all the stronger. And she told them much the same as Morgan told them: that he had rescued her from grief, despair and soul-destroying hate. If their father was a god to them, then their mother was their goddess.

The twins were glad to live in such a happy household. As well as their mom and dad, they had Willow and Xander. Unlike Ceri, the twins loved Xander's sense of fun, were still young enough to appreciate its childishness. Quite honestly, although they knew Ceri had suffered, they didn't fully understand why she was so bitter. So she didn't have her real father around. So what? Their own father more than compensated for that. Being so happy, the twins, for all their telepathy and empathy, couldn't see why Ceri wasn't happy too.

Already they were working toward their destinies. Both Kate and Lucas had accepted their fates, had grasped it in both hands and hugged it to them. They were special, predestined to become Warriors of Light, along with their mother, their father, Ceri and Ramirez. And, to a lesser extent, Willow, and even Xander, who had done his share in the past. Lucas, in his own way, was even more special, the first Slayer boy to be born in... Well, forever, according to Buffy and Morgan. But they didn't treat him any differently, didn't allow him to get a swollen head about it. Unique in the Slayer race, Lucas might well be, but he still had to start at the bottom and work his way up to full strength and skills.

Every day, either their mother or father would take them into the basement, where there was a fully equipped gym, and taught them Slaying techniques. Fighting moves, practising with mock weapons. Honing their bodies into efficient machines that would serve them well when the time came to face the real thing. In the evenings, their mother, or their father, or, quite often, Willow, would teach them theories and facts about their heritage, versing them in history, demonology, and the very basics of magical practise. Not every evening - there were other things in life other than Slaying, after all - but usually three evenings out of seven, they would be taught the foundations of what they needed to know.

Their father had tried to explain to them what their immortality meant. Or at least, what it meant to him, so far. The concept was awesome, but the twins knew nothing else. Their mother, they knew, still didn't really see herself that way. She was still young, after all. But she was beginning to learn.

Lately she was worried for Willow and Xander. The twins knew that she wondered why they weren't aging normally. They knew that she dreaded that the time

would come when one day, they would die. Well, the twins weren't too happy about that either, but there was nothing anyone could do about it. But maybe Willow's amazing Wiccan power would keep them around for a long time yet. Mostly for their mom's sake, but for their own sakes too, they hoped so.

"D'you think Ceri'll kill a vampire tonight?" Kate wondered aloud.

"Who knows?" Lucas plonked himself beside her again. "I bet she'll hunt them out. In her mood, she'd dig them out and murder them."

"Wonder what a vampire looks like?"

Neither of the twins had ever seen a vampire. Plead though they might, their parents had absolutely refused to allow them out while Slaying was going on. According to them, it was much too dangerous, and the twins, young and unseasoned as they were, might even be a liability.

When they were ready and properly trained, they would make their first kill in controlled conditions, as Ceri had. A vampire would be found for them, lured to a quiet place, and they would fight it, either separately or together. Help would be available at all times, should they need it. After that, they would make more kills under supervision, until they were competent enough to be allowed out alone. Mustn't run before they could walk, their father told them. But both were itching to get in some real experience.

"It's gone midnight. I suppose we'd better try and get some sleep," Kate, the more sensible twin, suggested. Lucas scowled. Neither of them were tired - their super-human genes meant they didn't need much rest - but they knew they were expected to at least try to make an effort to act like normal people. "We have got school tomorrow."

"I wanna wait till Ceri gets in," Lucas said. "I wanna see if she manages to beat mom and dad home." He grinned, looking like his father again. "Be a big row if she gets in later." His tone indicated that he would find that fun, even if none of the parties involved would.

"I don't like it when they argue - mom and Ceri, I mean." Lucas tutted.

"Mom lets Ceri get away with murder," he muttered darkly. "Just 'cause she's had a hard time, mom just lets her say what she wants. If we were to argue back like Ceri does, we'd be in deep shit."

"Lucas!" Kate batted him affectionately and laughed again. Personally, she felt sorry for Ceri. True, Ceri wasn't very loveable at times; certainly, she was impossible to fathom, but Kate was a little more able to put herself in her place than Lucas was. Probably it was a girl thing. And Ceri had no one with whom she had

a soul-bond. Not like Kate and Lucas. Or their mom and dad. The closest person was Ramirez, and he was a priest. No, Ceri felt alone, even if she wasn't.

Kate shivered.

"D'you feel that?" she asked, referring to the chill that had begun to emanate from the centre of the room. Lucas frowned. Nodded.

"Yeah. It is getting cold." He went and felt the radiator. "It's hot. So why's the room cold? Weird."

Suddenly Kate burst into tears and Lucas hurried to her, put his arms around her.

"Kate?" But suddenly, he felt overwhelming sadness too. Like something had infiltrated his soul and infected it with deep unhappiness. He took a shuddering breath, held Kate tighter, afraid now, as well as feeling like he wanted to cry too. When he saw a faint mist begin to appear, his eyes opened wide.

"Kate... Kate... Look..."

Kate made herself stop crying, looked where Lucas was pointing. Gasp. The mist was slowly solidifying, taking human form. A female shape, the apparition was of average height, slimly built, with fair-ish hair that reached just below jaw level. Around fifty years old or thereabouts, she wore a green dress, and was crying pitifully - the source of the sadness in the room. Both twins thought she looked somewhat familiar. As if they'd seen her before. They also realised they could see right through her to the wall beyond.

"A ghost!" Lucas said, his voice cracking slightly with a mix of excitement and fear. "An honest to God ghost!"

"Yeah." Kate had dried her tears, although the creature's sadness lingered. But after her initial fright, she knew this was nothing harmful. And it did look familiar...

The ghost flickered a little, as though her supernatural power supply had been momentarily cut off. Then she returned, came into sharper focus again, materialised fully, so that now she was opaque, almost human.

"Who are you?" Kate asked. "And what d'you want?"

"It's Hallowe'en, Kate," Lucas said, sounding slightly superior. "We're supposed to have ghosts on Hallowe'en..."

"Shut up, Lucas," Kate said, staring intently at the ghost.

"Who are you?"

In reply, the ghost just sobbed louder.

"Oh please don't cry..." Kate felt herself becoming distressed again, the ghost's emotions were so strong.

"Can't we help you?"

The ghost's mouth moved, as though she were trying to speak. As though the effort of appearing had almost drained her energy and speaking would deplete it completely. Then she managed it.

"You've seen me before." The voice was hollow, echoey,

like they'd expected a ghost would sound. "Photos... I'm Joyce. Buffy's mother. I'm your grandmother. Please don't be afraid of me..."

The twins' mouths dropped open in astonishment. Peering more closely, they saw that yes, indeed, she was the person they'd seen in old photos. Any lingering fear they might have felt evaporated entirely. Questioning her never occurred to them; they simply knew she was who she said she was. Still, seeing their first ghost was a bit of a shock. Especially as that first ghost was related to them. Then, simultaneously, they remembered what Joyce had been before she died, remembered their mother's tears when she'd told them what had happened to her. Claspng each other's hands, they shrank back.

"You're not gonna... bite us, are you?" Lucas said, and the ghost cried even harder, shaking her head.

"No... No, my babies... That part of me died when my body did. And... and... Oh, you're so beautiful... I can't bear it..."

On instinct, Kate got off her bed and went to embrace the ghost of her grandmother. Found herself clutching at thin air.

"You can't touch me," Joyce said sadly. "I can't... can't give myself a real body. Not strong enough. Save your tears, child," when Kate cried again. "I'm just glad to be here, with you." A smile, a sigh. "Oh, I knew my Buffy had beautiful children, but seeing you like this, properly..."

"You've seen us before?" Lucas spoke now. "How can you have seen us, when we've never seen you? Is it because it's Hallowe'en?"

A shake of the spectral head.

"No. No. I've tried to come before, but I've been stuck in... in the Shadow Lands..."

"The Shadow Lands?" Lucas frowned. That sounded familiar and he was about to say so, when Joyce explained further.

"Where the Dead... go..."

"Yeah," Lucas jumped in. "The Otherworld, our dad calls it." Another pause. "Do you know our dad too?"

Weird this, having a conversation with their dead grandmother. But kind of natural too, somehow. Certainly nothing two Slayer children were fazed by, after the initial wonder. Joyce's ghost smiled faintly.

"I have seen him, yes." The smile widened a little and for a few seconds, the ghost seemed to forget her sadness. "I never dared hope that my Buffy would be so happy. That she would find someone like him. Not after all she suffered."

"Yeah, he's cool, our dad."

"Cool. Yes." The smile faded again. "But you're wrong

about the Shadow Lands. They aren't the Otherworld of your... father's people. The Shadow Lands are where we live, the ghosts who are... restless. Who can't settle. Who died too young, or who were... killed... Or..."

"Did it hurt to die?" Kate's voice was hushed.

Joyce closed her eyes, seemingly remembering.

"Did it hurt?" In a papery voice like rustling autumn leaves. "Ah, not the second time..."

"The second time?" Lucas's turn to whisper now. Maybe it was wrong, this conversation, talking about if it hurt to die. Something neither of the twins would know, unless they were very unlucky.

"The first time was when he took me." A long, sad look at the children. "Do you know about Angelus? Did your mother tell you?"

"Yeah..." But Lucas didn't add that Buffy hadn't told them all the terrible details. Just that her mom had been killed by the vampire who had once been Buffy's lover, had been made one herself, and had to be staked. No more than that. They knew how badly their mother had been hurt by it, but Joyce's pain was almost worse. Almost intolerable.

"Angelus made me what he was. A beast. I tried to kill my own daughter, did she tell you that?"

"No..." They spoke together now.

"Ah, my poor Buffy. So much pain for someone so young. More than anyone should know. I've so longed to come back and tell her how sorry I was for that, for all of it, but I've been stuck in the Shadow Lands until tonight, reliving my death... my wretched, miserable deaths..."

Both twins began sobbing now; their grandmother's sorrow was so palpable, it ate into them. At once, Joyce looked ashamed.

"Please don't... I'm sorry... You were the only ones I could come to. I don't mean to hurt you. And the Dead - we forget how to speak to the living. Forget that it might hurt you. It's been so long, you see. Too long. Please don't cry. Oh, I wish I could hold you..."

"We do too." Again, together. Then Lucas spoke, alone, the first to recover himself.

"How come you're able to come through now? Is it because it's Hallowe'en?"

"The Shadow Lands are separated from the Living Lands by a Veil," Joyce began. "On Hallowe'en night, it's thin and some ghosts can come through, if they're strong enough. I've never been strong enough before. But tonight..." A shrug of the shoulders. "Tonight... It's just not there anymore. The Veil has gone."

"Gone?"

Another shrug.

"Gone. And so I had to come to you. My first time in the

Living Lands for so many years. How could I not come? And I don't want to be sent back. I want to stay with you." A long sigh. "Do you think your father will let me stay?"

"Dad?" The twins looked at each other. "Why would he send you away?"

"He will say I need to be at peace. He will want to send me on to Paradise. And he can do that, your father. His magic is powerful."

"You know about magic?"

"We ghosts know many things we didn't know about as humans. And I was a Slayer's mother, even if I wasn't anything... special myself. And I know your father's magic and prayers can send me away. Please... Don't let him... I can't rest..."

"Why not? Don't you want to go to Paradise? Don't you want to be happy?" Kate couldn't understand this. Why would a ghost want to hang around, being miserable, if she didn't have to? "Please let our dad help you?" She thought. "Or our half brother. He's a priest."

"No. I can't. I'm afraid. I want to see Buffy but... You can't let your father send me away."

"But why?"

"Because of the disappearance of the Veil. It's the only reason I was able to come through, I told you. I feel there's some terrible danger coming to your world."

"What danger?" Lucas asked, feeling alarmed. "Now you're frightening me, grandma..."

Joyce flickered for a second, then re-materialised.

"I don't know. I don't know..."

"Please let us tell our mom and dad?"

But Joyce flickered even more, became increasingly transparent and they knew she was going to wherever ghosts went when they couldn't be seen anymore.

"Come back," they entreated, but the chill left the air and it was as though she'd never been in the room.

Four

At around one thirty, the party-goers began to disperse. Deciding to call it a night too, Buffy, Morgan, Willow and Xander said their goodbyes to Harry Dudley.

"We had a great time," Morgan assured him, glancing at Buffy, mind-begging her not to make another controversial comment. Buffy smirked silently; obviously Morgan didn't trust her to keep her mouth shut, and she supposed she couldn't blame him. More than a little drunk, she thought that whatever came out of her mouth right then might be controversial. Or worse, unintelligible. So she just shook hands with Dudley, said a polite thanks, along with the others.

For a few moments, the twins sat still and silent, clinging to each other, hardly able to believe she'd appeared to them at all, both hugely affected by the misery she had exuded. Deeply uneasy, they wondered what she'd meant when she'd said that the Veil had disappeared. Did that mean there was no barrier at all between the world of the living and the land of the dead? Did that mean they were surrounded by ghosts? Or did it only mean they could come through if they wanted to, but weren't compelled to if they didn't?

"I don't understand this," Kate said; she was pale, only her green eyes gave her face any colour. "I wish mom and dad would come home." She looked at her brother. "D'you think we should tell them? Grandma said she didn't want us to."

Lucas nodded grimly, heard the clock strike one on the grandfather clock in the hall outside.

"Oh yeah, we should tell them all right."

"Mom'll be sad. But I think you're right. Maybe dad can make her come back, tell us what she meant. Dad can summon spirits, can't he?"

"I think so..."

"I'm scared now, Lucas. I hope Ceri's okay. She hasn't come home yet... Hope... nothing's got her..." She swallowed the huge lump in her throat. Silence fell again.

About five minutes later they heard the front door slam shut. Heard voices downstairs. Ceri had returned, and was speaking to Ramirez. Arguing with him, actually.

The twins relaxed a little. Hearing the voices downstairs settled them, even if those voices were raised. At least now, they had a sense that they weren't all alone in the house, apart from whatever ghosts might be wandering around.

Still, they wished with all their hearts that their parents would return home soon.

"Hope to see you soon," Dudley said. "Morgan, I'll contact you about more work, all right?"

Morgan nodded, agreed, but although she'd had a little too much to drink, Buffy noticed he seemed a little distant. Remembered that soon, they'd all be looking into leaving town. Maybe by the time Dudley offered Morgan more work, they'd be gone. Certainly, if Morgan was roped in to give a lecture in the next couple of months, it would be his last. At this university, anyway. The thought was a little sad, somehow. They'd lived in Chicago a long time. Although the city was overcrowded, busy, in some areas, downright dirty and run-

down, Buffy had grown to love it.

Oh well, she thought, grasping Morgan's hand as they left the building, she guessed she could grow to love any place, as long as Morgan and the kids were with her. And Willow and Xander. Couldn't let *them* go. *Wouldn't* let them go. Enveloped in a warm cocoon of love, she smiled, looking forward to many more good times with her dearest friends.

Buffy had more or less dismissed the grim apparition she'd seen in the hall as the result of too much imagination and too much red wine. Other than that cold wind that had blown through the hall at midnight, and the brief power cut, nothing else unusual had happened. She giggled a little at her own silliness, and Morgan glanced at her, amused.

"Something funny?" he teased, leading her to the car that had been sent round to take them back home.

"You're drunk," Xander told her, sounding a little slurred himself.

"Am not!" Buffy injected indignation into her voice.

"Are too. Yeah. You are. You're drunk. Disgusting, going home to the kids in that condition."

"Kids'll be in bed." Buffy settled herself against the leather seat, felt Morgan's arm go around her shoulders and nestled down, felt his fingers playing with the back of her neck. "At least, they'd *better* be." She glanced at Willow, who was leaning against Xander, eyes closed. "You okay, Will?"

Willow opened her eyes, smiled serenely.

"Just tired. We pregnant women shouldn't go out partying until all hours. Straight to bed for me, I think."

"Me too," Buffy murmured, realising then that she envied Willow, who was becoming rounded and radiant with the new life growing inside her. God, she was getting broody again. No. She wasn't *getting* broody, she *was* broody. She looked up at Morgan, felt his lips brush hers. Wanted him. Right then. Suddenly, the wanting was almost painful. But she'd have to wait. Couldn't attack him in the car, with the others around...

And who says I'm in the mood anyway? Morgan's voice in her head, his eyes on hers, knowing her every thought, her every need. Buffy felt herself melting, absolutely weakened by him, as he reached out with his free hand, brushed an escaped bit of hair away from her face, and she leaned into his palm. Mind whispered...

You're always in the mood...

His mouth on hers again, another brief, but burning kiss. Then Xander, clearing his throat.

"Hey, you guys, your libido's showing."

Buffy and Morgan pulled away from each other as though they'd been burned, saw Xander grinning at them, Willow too.

"Sorry..." Buffy muttered. Xander grinned wider.

"Hey, don't mind us. It's interesting, right, Will?"

"Shut up, Xander."

More laughter, but Buffy found herself catching Morgan's gaze again, was unable to take her eyes off him. Sighing, she supposed she'd have to exchange pleasantries with Ramirez when they got home and she didn't want to. She only wanted to...

Control yourself, woman.

Make me...

Later...

Xander, seeing them drowning in each other's eyes, just shook his head and sighed.

"Hopeless," he muttered.

Back at the house, Buffy walked into the lounge only to find that everyone, except Jordan, was up waiting for them. Ceri, she saw, had slumped herself in a chair, arms folded tightly across her chest, face set in a sullen glare at Ramirez, who was obviously angry with her. Kate and Lucas sat together on the leather sofa, an odd mix of worry and joy - possibly from Ceri's all too apparent disgrace - on their faces, as though they weren't sure which emotion to give precedence to.

"Welcoming committee?" Xander quipped, then fell silent just as fast.

"Not exactly," Ramirez replied; Ceri just glowered at him more darkly.

"Okay, right then, we'll... er... just go to bed then... Right, Will?"

Buffy saw Willow nod, and cast a sympathetic glance in her direction.

"Yeah. Xander and me... we'll go to bed. I'm tired anyway. I'm the tired girl."

"G'night Will, Xander," Buffy said, but she barely saw them leave.

Once they'd gone, Buffy looked at the other occupants of the room, from one to the other, feeling her warm bubble of happiness burst abruptly. A hard, inner core of irritation replaced it.

"Okay, what's going on? Can't we go out for one evening without coming home to some kind of family crisis?" A wild exaggeration, true, but none of her children seemed inclined to defend themselves. Ramirez stood. "Sorry, Buffy, but I think you'll find that Ceri has something to tell you. Lucas and Kate also."

Ceri, Buffy saw, had gone pale, except for a deep red flush staining her cheeks. Observing that Ceri looked most guilty, Buffy decided to start with her. Morgan, she noticed, was keeping a low profile for now, waiting to assess the situation, ready to step in if necessary.

"Okay, Ceri, let's hear what you've got to say," Buffy said; from out of the corner of her eye, she saw Lucas nudge

Kate and smirk, turned on him with what they called "one of mom's looks", and he looked down, apparently deciding that the carpet was more interesting.

Of course, locked up though Ceri's mind was, Buffy had guessed what had happened that night. But Buffy was determined to make Ceri say it aloud. To admit that she'd done wrong.

"So, Ceri? You have something to tell us?"

Deep silence from Ceri, and Buffy felt anger replace the irritation. God, but Ceri could be stubborn when she wanted to be. Staring Ceri down, Buffy saw the defiance in her blue eyes, felt it come out and hit her like laser beams, piercing her right through the heart. If Buffy hadn't been a stronger person, she might have reeled under the look. But she didn't reel; Ceri's defiance only made Buffy more angry.

"I asked you a question, Ceri."

Ceri dropped her glance at last.

"Okay, okay, so I went out. So what?" Her tone, not her eyes now, held deep rebellion. Obviously, she was challenging Buffy to say something, and usually, Buffy might have been understanding. Buffy knew her eldest daughter's continued inner conflicts, and rightly or wrongly, tended to indulge her. Let her get away, as Lucas was so fond of pointing out to Kate, with pretty much anything as long as it didn't put anyone in danger or cause too much dissension amongst the family. Buffy supposed it was a way of compensating for the bad things that had happened to her child, because in some deep part of herself, Buffy felt responsible.

Tonight, though, Buffy knew real anger. No way was Ceri getting away with this.

"Buffy, I apologise," Ramirez was saying. "You specifically asked me to care for Ceri but I failed you..."

"It's okay, Felipe." Buffy didn't glance in his direction. "It's not your fault that Ceri's a spoiled, disobedient brat who can't be trusted to obey clear, simple instructions. Is it, Ceri?"

"Buffy, calm down." Morgan intervened, obviously trying to defuse the situation a little, because Buffy was starting to raise her voice. Worst thing he could have done, like pouring petrol on a fire. Buffy turned on him, eyes blazing green fire.

"Don't you dare tell me to calm down!" Her voice rose another notch. "D'you think Ceri was right?"

"No, of course not, but..."

"Then why shouldn't I be upset? Ceri could've gone out all alone and gotten herself killed or something..."

Morgan raised his hands in a gesture of appeasement and backed off. Seeing the twins staring at her, eyes wide open and full of dismay at their mother's sudden and explosive loss of temper, not only with Ceri, but

also with their father, Buffy took a breath. Forced her voice back down to a normal level.

"I'm sorry, you two. You shouldn't have to see this." Another breath, back to Ceri. "Go upstairs to your bedroom and try and think of a good reason why I should trust you again. You have no respect, Ceri." She shook her head against sudden tears. "No respect for me, and none for Felipe, who you've embarrassed."

"Mom, that's not..." Ceri was stung into a reply but Buffy cut her off.

"Get upstairs. I don't wanna see your face."

Flying out of her chair, Ceri fled the room. Buffy watched her go, aching to soothe her wayward child, but too furious to do so. Ramirez, she saw, seemed upset too.

"Perhaps I should go to her?" he suggested. "I should have been stronger with her..."

"No, Felipe. Let her stew."

"Perhaps I should leave?" Ramirez hesitated, obviously even more uncomfortable. Buffy shrugged.

"Whatever. Oh, I'm sorry, I shouldn't take it out on you, right? I guess you tried to stop her best you could. D'you know where she went?"

"No. Just that she slammed out of the house at around ten thirty and returned just after one. Refused to answer questions and you know I cannot read her."

"None of us can, Felipe," Buffy said, feeling sad, her anger draining away. "Sometimes it's like we're getting on just fine, and then she does something like this. Sometimes I think she'll never settle, ever..."

Morgan went to her then, as ever able to gauge that she needed him, drew her to him. Felipe took her hands, squeezed them.

"I was delivered from my own darkness," he said. "So shall Ceri be." He kissed her cheek. "I will leave you. Kate and Lucas have their own... news for you."

Ah, yes, Kate and Lucas, Buffy remembered again, as Ramirez left them.

"So, you two, why are you still up?" This from Morgan, who'd obviously decided to take charge for now. His tone, Buffy noticed, was tight, tense. Not a good sign, Buffy thought, because Morgan acting uptight meant he was ready to get angry himself, and Morgan angry was much worse than Buffy angry. When Morgan lost his temper, which wasn't often, everyone took cover. Not that he was ever physically violent, but he was verbally cutting, icy cold in a way that Buffy never was. But then Buffy realised his tenseness wasn't a prelude to anger. Morgan was just suddenly very tired.

"We saw something tonight." Lucas spoke, always the leader of the twins. He was obviously impatient to get his news out in the open, but seemed to be struggling

with himself. Morgan knelt before him, took his son's hands.

"Would it be easier if I read it from you?" he asked. Lucas shook his head.

"No. No, my mind's all jumbled up. Kate's is too. It's better if you let us just say it, right, Kate?"

"Uh huh."

"All right. Go on."

Buffy saw two pairs of eyes turn in her direction then, felt her children's combined apprehension, their fear, their eagerness and under it all, their wonder. Their emotions evoked identical feelings within her.

"We... we saw a ghost tonight." Kate spoke at last, and she seemed afraid of what Buffy might say to this. Why, Buffy wondered, was Kate afraid of her reaction? Why wasn't she worried about Morgan's reaction, Morgan who followed his daughter's gaze to look into her mother's eyes? Buffy shuddered then, remembering - God knew why - the figure at the ball that night, how it had seemed to include everyone in its dead line of vision. Oh why was Kate looking at her like that? Lucas too?

"Buffy?" Morgan queried. Buffy shuddered again, feeling coldness creep through her. "Are you sure about this?" Now Morgan questioned the twins, who nodded together emphatically. Buffy saw no reason to disbelieve them. Having Morgan's blood coursing through their veins, she was only surprised they hadn't had a ghostly experience before tonight.

"Who was it?" she heard herself asking, saw Lucas and Kate exchange a glance that completely unnerved her.

"It... It was your mom..." she heard Lucas say. Buffy laughed - a reflex reaction at something so entirely crazy it couldn't possibly be true.

"Don't lie to me, Lucas," she said, saw his face fall, saw him cling onto Morgan's hands more tightly.

"He's not lying, mom." Kate defended her brother hotly.

"We both saw her, and... and we talked to her..."

"My *mother*...?"

All at once, Buffy felt faint. Cold sweat broke out all over her and she let herself collapse into the nearest chair before she fell to the floor. From a long way away, she heard Kate and Lucas calling to her, then Morgan was holding her, but his closeness made her feel stifled and she pulled herself away, gradually feeling stronger.

"My mother?" she said again, kept muttering the words repeatedly, aware that Lucas and Kate were staring at her as though she'd gone mad. Which maybe she had.

"When was this?" she heard Morgan ask the twins, and was glad that he at least had the presence of mind to ask something relevant.

"Just after midnight," Kate replied, and Buffy shud-

dered again. Midnight. That was when she'd seen that reaper thing...

"And you're absolutely sure it was Buffy's... your grandmother?" Morgan continued.

"Yes, dad!" Indignant voices raised together now at this continued interrogation.

"How can you be so certain?"

Buffy's temper flared up again, a result of the shock she'd just had.

"Morgan, you sound like the goddamned Spanish Inquisition or something. Don't you think they *know* what they saw?"

Morgan stood, obviously upset by her jibe. Buffy felt a little ashamed - that was tact-less, given that his son had been involved with that particularly notorious institution.

"I'm sorry. Sorry. I'm just shocked, you can understand that, right, Morgan?"

Although his grey eyes still showed his hurt, he nodded, and Buffy guessed she wasn't quite forgiven. But she would be. Morgan forgave her pretty much anything.

"What did... what did my mom say?" she asked now.

Between them, the twins gave a brief account of the occurrences of that night. How Joyce had been sad. How she had cried, and said how much she'd wanted to be with them. How she had only been able to come over to them tonight. And how she was afraid that Morgan might send her away. That he might compel her to find peace, something she was convinced she could never have.

At this, Buffy, who had been fighting tears, gave in to them.

"My mom's unhappy?" she cried. "Morgan, you have to send her on to the next plane. If she's unhappy, you have to help her. Oh, please..."

Instantly, feeling her torment as though it was his own, Morgan held her tightly.

"Of course I will. If you want me to, I'll summon her, help heal her spirit and set her on the path she should take."

"No!" Again, the twins spoke together, protesting. Buffy frowned, wiped her eyes. "Grandma can't go!" Lucas alone now.

"She's entitled to peace, Lucas," Morgan said. "Your grandmother has suffered enough. And so has your mother, by her death, and by hearing what you've just told us. It's my duty to do this. It would be wrong not to..."

"You don't understand, dad. Grandma said that something called the Veil is destroyed. The thing that separates..."

"Us from the Shadow Lands," Morgan finished.

"And that's bad, right, dad?"

Buffy felt Morgan hesitate, knowing he didn't want to frighten the children by agreeing that this was indeed a bad thing, but unable to lie either.

"Summon her, Morgan," Buffy pleaded. "Let's find out." Morgan nodded solemnly. Then glanced at Buffy and smiled, like the sun coming out from behind the clouds. "You do realise," he said, "that we've been having a very serious conversation in very silly fancy dress?"

Buffy grimaced.

"Guess we'd better change then. Can't talk to my mom dressed like this."

"Could have been worse." His smile turned into a grin, dispelling the last of the gloom, at least temporarily. He came close, whispered in her ear. "You could've been bare breasted, like I suggested."

Once they'd changed into more suitable clothes for spirit summoning, Morgan went into the room at the end of the hall that he and Willow used for performing their Magick. Kate and Lucas wanted to go with him, and at first, he put them off, saying they'd already had enough ghostly experiences for one night. But they pleaded with him, and Buffy. They wanted to see their grandmother again, they begged. They weren't afraid. Buffy, feeling increasingly emotional, said she thought they were right. And as for that, then Ceri should be involved too. Joyce was her grandmother too. Outnumbered, Morgan had little choice but to agree.

While Morgan, Kate and Lucas prepared the Magic Room, Buffy went to find Ceri. Any remaining anger had faded when she'd heard about her mother's appearance. Somehow, Ceri's disobedience seemed almost trifling now, in the light of what was about to happen. On her way to Ceri's room, Willow, obviously having been disturbed by the comings and goings down the hallway, stuck her head out of her room.

"Everything okay, Buffy?" she queried.

Buffy hesitated. Wasn't sure whether or not to tell Willow. But how could she keep something like this from her dearest friend? So she told her. At once, Willow was sympathetic.

"Anything me and Xander can do?"

Buffy shook her head.

"No, Will. This is something... Well, you know...?" She prayed Willow would understand what she meant, and sure enough, she saw her friend nod.

"Yeah, I know, Buffy. It's a family thing, right?"

"Not that I don't think of you and Xander as family, Will," Buffy assured her. "To me, you are... But... She's my mom..."

"I understand. I do, really." Buffy found herself enveloped in Willow's arms, felt the rounded bulge of her

stomach as they hugged. Felt that pang of envy and longing again.

"It'll be okay," she whispered. Willow just smiled, nodded, kissed Buffy and went back into her room.

Now Buffy had to face Ceri.

Ceri was lying on her bed in the semi-dark, gazing up to the ceiling. She had a weird look on her face, as though she was in a waking dream or maybe a trance. In fact, if Buffy hadn't known better, she'd have said that Ceri looked like she was on drugs or something, from the spacey expression on her face.

"Ceri?" Buffy found herself almost afraid to speak. Ceri dragged her eyes away from whatever was fascinating her so.

"Yeah?" Tone flat, still hostile.

"Oh Ceri..."

Buffy found herself going through the story again. By the time she was finished, she was weeping. When she looked at Ceri's face, half expecting to see the same stony look of before there, she saw Ceri was crying too. Hand in hand, they walked down the hall.

In the room, all was ready. Morgan and the twins had constructed a large magic circle for them to sit in as a protection against spirits.

"Not that your mother's spirit's evil," he assured Buffy quickly. "But we're summoning, and although I'll be very careful not to bring anything else through... Well, you never know what might be lurking around."

Not very reassuring, Buffy thought.

Once they were settled inside the circle, Morgan began the summoning. He spoke in Latin.

"Veni huc ad me, spiritus moestifer..." *Come to me, sorrowful spirit...* "Tu, quae turbatus est, inconcessus caelitus..." *You who are restless, banned from Paradise...* "Veni huc ad me, spiritus dolereous..." *...unhappy spirit...* "Me a vobis parendum est..." *I command thee...*

Then Morgan called Joyce's name, repeating the incantation, repeating her name. Soon, the misty form of Joyce Summers, close by and unable to resist Morgan's insistent call, had formed outside the circle. When Buffy saw her mother, she began crying again, wanted to go to her, hold her, but Morgan held her back.

"No, Buffy. You can't touch her. Stay here in the circle, where it's safest."

"But that's my mom... Mom...?"

The spirit looked toward Buffy as though she'd just realised she was there. Like her daughter, she began to weep.

"Oh Buffy... I never dared hope we'd be able to speak again. This is... It's like a miracle."

Buffy smiled through her tears.

"A miracle," she echoed. "How are you, mom...?" Pause. "Stupid question... I'm sorry. I don't... Now you're here, I don't know what to say to you..." Glancing at Ceri and the twins, she saw they were watching the exchange in awe.

"It's all right, Buffy. It's just good to see you, to hear you again, and to know you can see and hear me. All these years, Buffy, I've longed to tell you..." Joyce covered her eyes and shook her head. Muffled sounds of weeping filled the air, sounds that broke Buffy's heart again.

"Mom, please don't..." Blindly, Buffy groped for Morgan's hand, felt it close around hers, and she clung to it, needing his warmth, his solidity.

"I wanted to say sorry, Buffy..."

"You have nothing to say sorry for, mom..." Buffy began.

"No, Buffy!" The spirit's voice was agonised. "Please let me say it... I tried to murder you... My own daughter..." Her eyes sought out Ceri then. "And you... So lovely, Ceri... Like your father. Such a good man, James..."

At this, Ceri's eyes overflowed with tears too. Buffy forgot her own pain instantly, let go Morgan's hand and embraced her daughter, felt hot tears soak her T-shirt.

"He's dead now, mom... I guess maybe you know that" Joyce nodded at this. "But I'm happy now, mom... We're happy now, all of us together..."

"I *hate* Angelus." Ceri raised her head and spoke vehemently, somewhat negating Buffy's last statement. "He caused all this... First he hurt mom, then he hated my dad, then he... He killed you, grandma, and then he tried to kill the rest of us. I wish he was dead too..."

"No Ceri." Joyce's voice was infinitely kind now. "Promise me you'll try and forget this hurt. All this pain inside you, festering. It's destroying you. Don't hate anymore, Ceri. Angelus couldn't help what he was. He was a demon. It's all Fate, Ceri. I've learned that. All this is more or less pre-destined. You can take any path you choose, but it will all lead to one final place. Your mom's fated, your brother and sister are fated. Morgan is fated. Everything happens for a reason. So promise me, Ceri. Promise me you'll try to be happy? Don't take the hard path."

But Ceri just cried harder.

"I don't know if I can stop it," she wept. "But I'll try. I promise I'll try... Is... is my father... Is he at peace now? If I can know that, then maybe I'll know that there's a point to trying."

Joyce smiled. Nodded.

"He was allowed to ascend. That's all I know. But ascension means peace, Ceri. Please be at peace too."

Morgan spoke into the highly charged emotional atmosphere.

"I need to speak with you, Joyce. May I call you Joyce?"

Joyce's ghost nodded.

"Of course you may." A brief silence. "It's so good to see that Buffy finally has someone who can properly love her how she deserves to be loved."

"Always, Joyce."

"Are you going to send me away?" Now she looked a little afraid of Morgan, who didn't answer the question directly.

"What's happened to the Veil, Joyce?"

"I don't know..." The ghost shook her head. "Please, don't send me away. I only want to be with Buffy. Just for a little while."

"The Veil, Joyce?" Morgan persisted, and spirit tears leaked from Joyce's eyes again.

"Morgan... Don't hurt my mom, Morgan..." Seeing her mother's tears, Buffy's began again.

"I'm not hurting her, Buffy. And we have to know. Joyce, you're compelled to answer me, because I have brought you here. Tell me what you know."

"I don't know anything. I just know it's gone."

"*How* is it gone?"

"I don't *know*... Please stop asking me..."

"Morgan, leave her alone, you're bullying her."

"This is important, Buffy, and I'm not bullying, I'm asking." He sighed. Squeezed her hand. Softened his tone. "I'm sorry if I was insensitive. I apologise. But do you know anything, Joyce? Other than the Veil has gone?"

"If I knew, I'd tell you. I just know that at last, I can speak with you, tell you all that I love you. And perhaps warn you that now the Veil has gone, the barriers that kept the Dead from the Living are broken. All the unhappy dead that have been kept from this world will start to plague it."

Silence as this sank in, then Buffy spoke.

"Morgan, how can we rebuild it? Can it be rebuilt?"

Morgan considered, then he sighed again, more heavily. "Buffy, I have no idea. And no disrespect, Joyce, but you could have got it wrong."

"My mom's not a liar!" Buffy said hotly.

"I'm not saying she is, Buffy. I'm saying that in my experience, dead souls sometimes see things unclearly, are sometimes confused and misguided." A faint smile.

"However, we must take this seriously. And you know what that means?" A wider smile. "Research."

Buffy heard this with a kind of fatalism. Research. How many times had that word come up? About a million, she guessed.

"Xander'll love this," she said.

"Can we help?" Kate and Lucas spoke together, sounding excited. "We might be able to save the world, mom." They looked imploringly at Morgan. "**Please**, dad?"

"I expect we'll find something for you to do."

"Yay!" A dual exclamation of pleasure.

"I want to help too." Joyce's ghost spoke from outside the circle.

"You deserve peace, Joyce," Morgan said. "Let me help you attain ascension?"

"No. Let me help? Please let me help? Buffy needs me, and now I can be here for her."

Buffy felt Morgan hesitate and she sent out a plea with

heartfelt force. *Please let my mom help? Afterwards help her to ascend, but just let her do this final thing for me? For us all, Morgan.*

"All right, Joyce." Morgan had caved in to Buffy's request. How could he not? Joyce's face relaxed into a beautiful smile. For the first time since her summoning, she looked truly happy.

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you."

Five

Closing the door behind her, Willow reflected on the brief conversation she'd just had with Buffy. Hearing the shocking news that Joyce Summers had returned as a ghost had shaken Willow up more than a little. Not especially because it was a supernatural event - Willow was well used to those by now - but because Buffy would be reminded of past pains that had been successfully buried. Willow supposed that Buffy seeing her mom's ghost might be a good thing for her friend, might resolve issues that still troubled her, but for Willow, it caused her own past pains to resurface, like a drowning man gasping for breath. Maybe it was because she was pregnant, and therefore over-emotional, but Willow felt like crying suddenly.

Going into the en-suite bathroom attached to her bedroom, she saw that Xander was out of the shower, and standing in front of the mirror over the basin, clean shaven again, having meticulously just shaved off his newly-grown moustache.

"Glad to get this damn thing off," he began, then Willow saw him take in her white face. "Hey, Will, what's up?"

Willow shrugged, made to smile, then out-of-control emotion took over and she burst into tears. Hurriedly Xander wiped the remaining shaving foam off his face and went to his wife.

"C'mon, Will, I know you thought facial hair suited me, but this is an over-reaction, right?" Willow knew he was just trying to comfort her by making a joke, but she just cried harder.

Xander guided her through into their bedroom, sat her down and let her cry against him, stroking her hair, until finally, Willow felt able to talk.

"I mean, just when you think the past's dead and laid to rest, it suddenly comes back and bites you," she finished, wiping the last of the tears away. "Poor Joyce, twelve long years since she died..."

"Since I killed her, you mean," Xander reminded her, his voice low, holding a world of shame. "Turned her to dust."

"You had to do that, Xander," Willow assured him. "You

know you did. No choice, right?"

"Doesn't mean I don't feel bad about it. D'you think she's forgiven me?"

"I think she'd bless you for it. But she's not really released, Xander. That's why she's back, I guess. To... make amends." Willow sighed. "All this time, and she's still not at peace. It's not fair, is it?"

"No, it's not. You should know after all these years that nothing ever is. Well, not often."

Willow managed a wan smile. Xander, the philosopher! Still, he'd grown up a lot over the past few years. Had been forced to mature, although it sometimes went against his naturally clownish nature. Of course, the clown still came out to play quite often - usually at poor Ceri's expense, because the more she hated his jokes, the more he made them - but he was a proper grown-up these days. Had to be, seeing that he was a father with another child on the way.

"D'you think anyone's ever at peace, Xander?" Willow asked. "I mean, no-one ever really seems to be, do they? Not even when they're dead."

Xander considered.

"Well," he said at last, apparently deciding to put his gloominess of before behind him. "If we did lead peaceful lives, it'd be boring. We thrive on weird goings-on, Will, even if it's not easy or pretty. Keeps us young, right, Will?" A pause. "Well, *something* sure keeps us young. For which I'm grateful."

He switched off the bedside light, just leaving a small night-light burning. Then he pulled her down onto the bed, so she lay full-length in his arms. Bizarre, having this conversation at two-thirty in the morning. In the semi-dark. But Willow felt she couldn't sleep. Not yet. Although she guessed she'd be wrecked tomorrow. *Today..*

"D'you ever regret it?" she asked. "Living here, with Buffy, Morgan and the kids, I mean?"

"Well, it was weird at first, I have to admit. Being the only normal one amongst magickal people sucks sometimes and us living all together kind of emphasised that.

As if it needed emphasising." He grimaced. "But then, *you* were always magical, Will. Even when you weren't... magickal..." A gentle kiss. "Still, I guess it's good now, like we're one big family."

"Yeah. Funny, how one person can change your life so much. Buffy, I mean. When she first came to Sunnydale, I was like, Nerd Girl. All mousy, not much personality. But she helped me to change. You too, Xander. For the better, too. Now we're all hip and with it and I can do Magick and all. I'm Bad Ass Wicca Woman."

"Saint Buffy," Xander murmured and Willow thought she detected a slightly sardonic tone in his voice. Well, maybe she *had* exaggerated it all. Maybe they would have grown and matured into popular, successful adults without Buffy. But they wouldn't be the same, and Willow liked the people she and Xander had grown into. And their close association with Buffy had to take some credit for it. Who wouldn't be changed, after the things they'd seen and endured together? They'd had to emerge stronger. Either that, or they would have crumbled.

"Wonder what Oz and Cordy would have made of it all?" Willow mused, supposing it was entirely natural that she should think of them at a time like this. "And Giles. Wonder what would've happened if they'd all survived, or escaped unscathed? If we were all still together now?"

Of course, they'd had this discussion before, but not lately. And it was fun - kind of - to speculate. To imagine.

"Well..." Xander mused. "Oz would've have been his usual self - not saying much but keeping his werewolf eyes on all the angles, taking everything in. Guess maybe you two might've been married instead of us..."

"No, Xander, don't say that!" Willow jumped in, but Xander shook his head.

"You two were pretty close, remember? 'S okay, Will, it's just fantasy, right?"

"I guess..."

"Yeah... Cordy'd have her own chain of fashion outlets and be married to some big-shot tycoon." Willow giggled, feeling better. Yeah. She could imagine that.

"And Giles?" she said.

"Ah... The G-man. Well, he'd be shackled up - nah, married; Giles wouldn't do the shacking thing - with some proper English lady - preferably another librarian - and they'd be blissfully happy drinking tea, talking about books and discussing what tweed to wear."

"Xander, you're horrible. You were always unkind to Giles."

"Nah. Just a cover. Loved him really, Will. We all did, right, even if he *was* so... English..."

Willow felt tears prick her eyes again.

"Yeah. Funny, but we all loved each other, didn't we? Even when we didn't get on, or fought, or hated each other, we still had that love that bound us together. Think that's how we all survived as long as we did. Or is that too idealistic? Putting a rosy tint in my memory glasses?"

"A little, maybe. 'Cause I'm here to tell you, Will, that I for one can categorically state that I never loved *Angel*. Ever." The sardonic tone was back, tinged with bitterness, and intense dislike for good measure. "Best thing ever happened, when he got put out of the picture for good."

"Ah, but what if things'd been different?"

"Even if he'd grown wings and a halo, I'd still vote for him being locked up. Dead Boy," he muttered darkly.

Willow decided maybe it was best to drop it. Best to drop all discussions of the past. The past, so it was claimed, was another country, and you couldn't revisit it. And she guessed she couldn't blame Xander for his continued bitterness against Angel. Xander had suffered from Angel's presence, because in Sunnydale, he'd believed himself in love with Buffy. And later, there was that time when Ceri was just a baby, when Morgan had first come to them, and Xander had been under Angelus' evil influence. For a short, terrible time, Xander had made Willow's life a living hell. Buffy and Morgan's too...

Best not go there either. Just be grateful and happy that she and Xander were happy now, loving each other more than ever. And staying young together, which Willow guessed was due to her Wicca and working with the Forces of Light.

That was another thing they discussed, she and Xander. For six years, they'd ceased to age. Was that a reward for Willow's stopping the Plague sent by Armageddon? And if it was a reward, how long before the Powers That Be decided that they'd been given enough? Not that Willow wanted immortality, like Buffy and Morgan and the Slayer children, but the less she aged, the less she wanted to...

And that was another thing she didn't want to think about at - oh, gone three a.m. now. Or, preferably, not at all. Not now she had a new baby to look forward to. Boy or girl? she wondered.

"Penny for them?" Xander said. Willow realised she'd been drifting, almost on the edge of sleep.

"Just wondering about our baby. Another child in the house, Xander. Well, wherever we end up." She smiled into the semi-dark, snuggled closer. "It's like after all our troubles, we've all been blessed. I think Buffy's thinking about having another baby too. Soon, I think."

"She's gonna be a baby-machine," Xander remarked. "Making a new race. Don't you think that's kinda... sad? Like she's a battery hen or something?"

"Xander!" Willow was shocked at this; she'd never even guessed he'd seen Buffy's life that way. "That's a terrible thing to say. She adores her kids, and secretly, I think she kinda likes the whole matriarchal dynasty thing, with her at the head of the family. She was born for this, Xander. Besides," another Willow-giggle, "it's lotsa fun making babies, right? Well, practising, anyway. And I guess she and Morgan get plenty of *that*, the way they are around each other."

"What're you saying, Will?" Xander said, and Willow heard the pretend hurt in his voice. "That *we* don't get enough practise or something?" He tickled her and she curled into a ball, laughing. Then he drew her to him again. "Well, no practise tonight, anyway. I'm exhausted, even if you're not. Gotta be at the office in..." he groaned. "Six hours... Okay. I'm asleep. Night, Will." She kissed him. Suddenly she was tired too.

"Night Xander. Sweet dreams."

"You too."

Sleep came almost at once...

Whether it was because they'd been talking about old times, Willow found herself dreaming about the past. She dreamed she was in the Sunnydale High School library. Smiling to herself, she breathed in the atmosphere of books and learning. Always smelled the same, even in dreams. Old books and dust, with just a hint of damp.

The library was empty and dark. As Willow walked, her footsteps echoed around, rebounding off the darkened stacks. She never did like those stacks, Willow reflected. They always reminded her of hulking brutes waiting to pounce. When that bookcase had fallen on her, knocking her out cold, she'd liked them even less because they'd proved their malevolence.

Nice thoughts only allowed, she told herself. *Be Nice Thought Girl*.

No, she'd never liked the library at night, with its brooding bookcases, but she'd had some good times here too. In an oh-God-we're-in-terrible-danger-again kind of way. Exciting. Made her feel she was part of something special. Lots of time in here, spent researching. She smiled, remembering. Xander was Research Boy. And she was Net Girl. Oh, good times...

Funny, dreaming this. Going back to a time of innocence. Innocent, despite the terrible things they'd witnessed. She was always such an innocent, Willow. Buffy still said she was still an innocent, had retained all her sweetness. Always the best of them, Buffy maintained. Always thought the best of other people. Never had that

sweetness knocked out of her, despite the bumpy road she'd travelled.

Wow, deep thoughts for a dream! Willow heard herself laugh and the sound echoed around the library, rebounded off the stacks and came back to dance around her. Philosophising in a dream! Typical Willow.

The laughter was doing a kind of dance in her stomach. Kind of a fluttering, like bird's wings. Then a wider smile split her face. Folding her hands over her lower abdomen, she realised it wasn't laughter she felt there, but the movement of her unborn child.

The first time I've felt it move. And it has to be in a dream... Oh, my baby...

Willow realised she was touching bare skin, and looked down at herself. Just dressed in bra and panties, which showed off her rounded belly. Oh well, no-one else here to see...

And now she knew for sure she was dreaming. No way would she walk into the real library so scantily clad. She gave half-horrified giggle. Giles might see... But this was a dream and he wasn't here. *No-one's here...*

A sound then. Kind of a rustling that made a mockery of her last thought. Sounds meant someone moving around, didn't it? Or *something*. And the sound came from... Willow narrowed her eyes, concentrating. The sound came from...

... the Cage... Where they used to lock Oz up at *that* time of the month.

Was it Oz she could hear moving then? More visions of the past dredged up from her unconscious subconscious.

Moving toward the cage, she saw, without much surprise, that Oz was indeed in there. Funny, but she could have sworn the library was empty before. When she'd first arrived.

He was fully dressed, in traditional Oz loose shirt and blue jeans. In his hands, he held a guitar - not his electric bass, but an acoustic instrument. When he saw her, he smiled, and began strumming a tune.

It was the tune that had been playing when they'd first made love. When she'd lost her virginity. Horrified, Willow found she couldn't remember what the tune was called.

"Hey, Will," Oz said. Oh, that voice. Laid back and cool, but suppressing deep passion. Passion that he'd reserved for her. His face, stubbled with a couple of days' worth of reddish beard, lifted a little in a tranquil Oz-smile. Fixing her with his hazel-gold eyes - wolf's eyes - he began whisper-singing the words of the song. Feeling herself grow hot with that old, half-forgotten longing, Willow leaned against the cool metal of the cage and listened. Remembered how it had been, that first

time. How she'd cried when they'd made love, in a mix of fear, pain and growing, spiralling, intensifying ecstasy...

"Hey, Oz..." A breathy whisper.

"Been a long time, Will," Oz said, ceasing his singing, increasing his staring.

"Yeah..."

Oh weird. *Double* weird...

"How you been Will?" Oz looked her over, and she felt exposed and vulnerable and fearfully aroused. "Lookin' good, Will." Another faint smile, and Willow's face burned red.

Some dream, she thought. *Should make myself wake up before it goes any further. Don't want to wake up...*

"Why are you in the Cage?" She managed to keep the shaking from her voice. Oz nodded his head in the direction of the of the small window in the cage wall.

"Full moon," he said, and Willow wondered why she hadn't noticed the moon before, shining full-bellied, pregnant with lunar light.

Pregnant, like me, Willow thought.

"I... Why aren't you changed then? You always change on full moon."

Oz shrugged. Played a chord on his guitar. He still had black-painted fingernails, Willow saw, her stomach churning with mixed feelings, but mostly sheer lust.

"I can control the change now. Learned."

"Oh. Oh, that's great, Oz... How? I mean, when...?" He made her feel like a schoolgirl again, all fluttery, like the intermittent fluttering of her baby in her distended womb.

Another cool Oz smile.

"After I died," he said. "Remember, Will? I died."

Willow felt some of her insistent desire flow away, felt a little worried at this turn in the conversation. This dream had suddenly taken on a grim feeling of reality and she wanted to wake up.

"Don't like this dream," she murmured. Saw Oz smile again. And wasn't there a little ferocity in the smile now? In his wolf-eyes?

"Who says it's a dream?" he replied.

At this, Willow tried to force herself to waken. During the time she and Xander had lived with Buffy and Morgan, Morgan had taught her the basic concepts of Dream Magick. Willow was no master like Morgan, couldn't expect to be. But she knew how to escape from nightmares. The spell he'd taught her had so far been infallible. She said the words of deliverance now. Said them wrongly. Wrongly again. Why couldn't she remember?

"I won't let you remember," Oz said. "I'm controlling all you see, do and think. I can do that, now I'm dead. I

can come into the dreams of the living and direct them. Like a film director."

"Oh." The word came out as a squeak. *Pathetic Willow.*

"Oh."

"You called to me, Will."

"I didn't..."

"Yeah, you did. You were just talking about me. Tonight. With him..."

"Xander?" How did Oz know what she and Xander had been talking about?

"I can see into your world, Will. And I saw that you were talking, with him."

Willow didn't like the tone with which Oz said "him." There was a world of contempt there, as though Oz considered Xander below him.

"You heard us?"

"I just told you that." Another strum of the guitar that sounded like the toll of doom. Willow's doom. "Although, it was more... *felt*. Yeah. Felt. You were pulling me to you, Will. Oh, you can deny it as much as you like." Willow had begun shaking her head. "But I know. It's because of the disturbance, you see, Will..."

"What disturbance? I don't understand. Oh, please let me wake, Oz..."

"The disturbance in the Veil. We can come through easier. Give us better access to the Warm Lands. *Your* land, Will." A smile, a chord. "And control's easier now. Child's play."

Oz rose from his seated position on the floor. As he did so, the guitar he'd been holding fell to the floor with an unmusical clang of twanging strings and a splintering of wood. Willow watched as the instrument exploded in slow motion, saw Oz walking toward the door of the cage. He walked with an easy stride. Almost a lope. Oz had always loped. Like the wolf he was inside. The untamed beast that lay hidden beneath the human skin. Despite her growing dread, Willow felt that twinge of deep desire again.

"This is sick," she whispered.

"We always wanted each other, Will. Remember? First time I spoke to you properly, it was like you'd cast a spell over me. And you weren't even a proper witch then." He flung open the door to the cage and Willow shook. She'd thought the cage door would be locked.

"Why would it be locked, Will?" He could read her mind? Of course he could. He was controlling her mind. In turn lulling her, scaring her, confusing her. Manipulating her. "This is my creation, so why would it be locked? I knew you would come, Will. I knew you wouldn't resist me."

"Please let me go back, Oz?" How many times did she have to plead? And *where* were the words Morgan had

told her? Deep in the back of her possessed mind.

"Not gonna let you go back, Will." Out of the cage now, he came to her, came close, seemed to sniff in the scent of her. When he leaned in, Willow could smell the death on him. Smelled the rot of the corpse he'd become... Oh... Twenty years before... Twenty years...

Willow moaned in the back of her throat but didn't move away. Nauseated, she understood that death had lessened none of his appeal. Or was he controlling that too?

"Ah, so many questions, Will. What's real? What's not?" He began circling her. "'S okay, Will. When you're dead, you'll understand it all better. It'll all go away, the confusion and pain." He touched her belly, and she was torn between holding his hand there and jerking away. Oh, his *touch*... "This'll go away too..." Referring to her pregnancy. "Should've been mine, Will. Should've had *my* babies. Little werewolf babies. They could've eaten their way out..."

"*Please Oz...*" Ah, the tears had started now. Back to pathetic little Willow. No Bad Ass Wicca now. Just a frightened little girl terrified for her unborn child and her sanity.

"*Please?* What're you begging for, Will? I love you. Want us to be together. Like we should've been. Is that so wrong? I've ached for you, all these years. Now the time's right, I have to take you. Won't let you go again." Paralyzed, Willow struggled to rid her mind of his voice, his insistent voice, that sounded so sweet, despite its words. Wasn't there another spell that Morgan had taught her? Something even stronger...?

"Yeah, but you can't recall it, right, Will? 'Cause you're too afraid."

Oz began to alter and Willow could do nothing but watch. His skin erupted into flame suddenly, began peeling from his face. Sweet Oz, obliterated. Eyes filming over, boiling inside. Limbs shrivelling in the heat, as they had when he had died at the catastrophic closing of the Sunnydale Hellmouth. Incinerating into a charred walking skeletal ruin before her eyes. And still she couldn't move. Or speak. When the skeleton began to distort further, became a decaying, mutated wolf with patchy, mangy fur on scabrous skin over which unnamed creatures writhed, Willow still didn't move. Just watched. Hypnotised with horror so pure it was almost erotic.

It was only when the nightmare wolf reared up on two blistered, fluid-weeping legs to embrace her that the spell he'd cast broke. Willow shrieked with all the force in her body, her mind.

"Love me, Will," the wolf growled, sending currents of death-filled exhalations into her face. "Be dead with

me..."

His fanged mouth touched her throat; she felt the diamond hardness of his canines on her soft skin. And like diamond light, she heard the words of Morgan's spell in her head. Screamed them through a swollen larynx.

And watched Oz fall into blackness...

Willow felt a kind of rushing in her head, as if she were falling through a tunnel, and she was back in her body, her bed. Weak mewling sounds, like those of a newborn kitten, escaped her mouth.

Around her, the bed was wet with sweat, surrounding her with warm clamminess. Four am, she saw, looking at the clock display beside the bed. Only been asleep about an hour. God, what a nightmare. So real. Too real.

Nausea overcame her then as she smelled death again. More sweat - cold this time - broke out all over her body and her heart went into overtime, beating so rapidly she thought it might actually give up. Flinging back the covers hurriedly, she dashed into the bathroom and was violently sick. She heard Xander wake, call her, but she couldn't heed him as wave after wave of sickness racked her body.

"Will? Jesus, what's wrong?" Xander behind her, his voice high with worry. "Will...?"

Willow vomited again, felt him kneel beside her, stroke her sweat-wet back.

"It's not the baby, is it? Nothing wrong with the baby?"

"No." Willow took a huge breath. Her stomach was settling a bit now, and she let out a long breath of relief.

"No. Just a nightmare."

"A *nightmare* made you sick? You sure there's nothing else?"

"Yeah. Sure. Just a nightmare, woke me up suddenly..."

"Must've been a real goody, to make you sick like this..."

"I'm pregnant, Xander. Pregnant women get sick sometimes." A flip answer, but the best she could give just then. Willow had no intention whatever of telling Xander that she'd had a nightmare so terrible she thought she'd die of fright. If it *had* been a nightmare.

Yeah. Of *course* it had been a nightmare.

"Come back to bed, Will," Xander said, helping her up.

"Wanna wash my face."

"Sure..."

Willow ran the cold tap, splashed some water over her face, which was alternately hot and cold. Rinsed out her mouth. The cold water grounded her a little and the visions receded further. Xander handed her a towel.

"Oh, what a mess," Willow groaned, referring to her, which was bone-pale, with dark circles beneath her eyes. The dyed black hair accentuated her extreme pallor. She'd wash *that* out tomorrow, she vowed. *Today..*

"Look, why don't I phone the office later and take the day off?" Xander suggested.

"You can't do that, you've got cases to handle..."

"Hey, it's only work, right? Even high paid defence attorneys can skip off sometimes. Especially when their wives are sick. C'mon, Will, you can spend the day in bed with me waiting on you."

"No." The last thing Willow wanted was to spend the day in bed. "No, I'll be fine. Buffy's here. And Morgan. They'll look after me. Besides, I told you, it was just a nightmare. I'm okay now."

She met Xander's eyes in the mirror and for a second his reflection seemed to waver, and Oz's face was superimposed over it. Willow felt her stomach lurch again, and she turned away abruptly.

"I'm going downstairs. Make myself some camomile tea or something. Just to settle me."

"Want some company? You don't look like you should be by yourself."

"I'm okay!" Willow didn't mean to snap, but she wanted to be left alone. "Look, I'm sorry. You go back to bed. I'll be fine. Really." They walked back into the bedroom. Go on. Back to bed. I'm being Strict Wife now."

Six

As dawn light filtered through the curtains, Morgan watched Buffy, who had fallen into a shallow sleep.

He had finally dismissed Joyce's ghost at around three-thirty a.m., about the time that Willow was in the throes of her spectral phantasm. Afterwards, emotionally wrung out, they had all gone straight to bed. Even Morgan had been affected by the intensity of the experience, and he was usually able to detach himself from the spirits he summoned. It was important, he had learned over the years, to remain slightly aloof from the dead, because if attachments were formed, they could be difficult to sever. The dead loved the livings' warmth, and would suck it from them as vampires sucked blood, if they were allowed to.

But this ghost *was* Buffy's mother, and because Morgan largely felt what Buffy felt, especially when her feelings were so openly displayed, as they had been last night, he had found himself empathising with her. Wanting to weep with her. Only his years of training and self-control in such situations had prevented him from doing so. And he had seen Joyce before, from afar, when he had watched Buffy during her high school years, although he had never before spoken with her. By the time he had come to Buffy, Joyce was already dead.

Funny, he thought now, as he watched Buffy sleep, that

"Okay, okay. If you're sure."

"Yeah. I am." She kissed his mouth gently, went to the door. "See you later."

Out in the hall, all was quiet. Willow wondered if Buffy had spoken to her mom's ghost yet. Wondered what else was going on behind all the closed doors. What other weird stuff. Any other nightmares? She fought with the urge to see if Jordan was okay. Managed to convince herself she was being paranoid. Jordan was fine; it was his mother who was in imminent danger of becoming a basket-case.

Down in the huge kitchen, Willow boiled the kettle, set a camomile teabag in a cup with hot water and waited for it to brew. When she'd finished drinking it, she couldn't face going back upstairs again.

So she stayed up until dawn light filtered through the closed blinds and she heard movement from upstairs, the sounds of the house coming to life around her.

Relieved, Willow rose to face the day.

Put to the back of her mind that there was still the night to come. And the next. And the next.

Decided that she didn't ever want to sleep again.

Because she knew what awaited her...

his own parents - dead oh so long ago - had never appeared to him. But probably that was a good thing. Probably that meant they were Ascended. After all, they had both been high-born druids of the first order, so maybe their souls had achieved highest karma and been given final peace. Or maybe they had been allowed to reincarnate. Who knew? Not Morgan, who dismissed this unknowable subject from his mind. Put their memory - faint now with the passing of centuries, so that he could barely remember what they looked like - to the back of his mind.

Joyce now, she was a different matter. After she had done what she could to help them discover what had happened to the Veil - whatever that might be - Morgan could and would send her on her way to the next plane. Once she was sent to that level, her soul would rest, be healed by those that tended wounded souls, and then she would, like his own parents, either be born into another human body or else know eternal repose. Either way, her pain would leave her. And that was the greatest gift Morgan could give her. And, he guessed, the greatest gift he could give Buffy too.

Ah, but she looked lovely, the dim light reflecting from her skin, giving it a lightly luminous glow. Her face was relaxed with sleep, softening the hard planes of worry

and concern that had been there earlier. Her hair, loosened from its braid, spilled over her pillow, pale strands of gold. Reaching out, Morgan touched it, couldn't help rubbing a lock of her hair between his fingertips, feeling its silken texture. *Living silk*, he thought, smiling at the fanciful notion. But then, Buffy always brought out the hopeless romantic in him.

Her eyelids fluttered then, and he knew she was waking. Called from her doze by his fixated scrutiny. But although she was waking, no, awake now - Morgan knew it from her mind-waves - she kept her eyes shut. Knew he was watching her, played the game of pretending to be unaware.

Morgan knew what she wanted. Same thing she'd wanted last night after he'd sent her mother's spirit back to wherever she'd been. Buffy had wanted *him*. Again. Again. And again. As though trying to dispel the sadness she had felt at the sorry plight of her mother's ghost. She had told him - almost begged him - to make her pregnant; to fill her with new life, so there would be something living born from the midst of the death that had surrounded them that night.

And she wanted him now, despite her pretence at sleep. Still playing, she turned her back on him, and Morgan smiled. Saw a flash of pearl-pale naked skin. Velvet Buffy skin, he thought, trailing a fingertip along the ridge of her spine, feeling her body, her mind, shiver with the desire that the touch evoked in her.

Leaning over her, he kissed the top of her ear, the back of her neck, heard her sigh, a long, languorous exhalation. Trilled his mouth over her bare shoulders, smelled the ghost of last night's perfume lingering there. Musk and jasmine. Exotic. Erotic. Setting his senses alight. Under his mouth, her skin tasted of honeyed warmth and womanhood.

She turned in his arms then, eyes finally open, hazed with longing. Winding her arms round his neck, she pressed herself close. Velvet Buffy skin against his. Kissing her, Morgan felt that he was losing himself in her.

Then, suddenly, she went stiff and drew away.

"What?" Morgan said, nuzzling her neck, tasting her again, like a bee irresistibly drawn to a nectar-heavy flower. Felt her shrug.

"I don't know..." she began, hesitating, obviously feeling a little silly. Then admitting the thought that had distracted her. "It's just... I feel maybe... D'you think my mom's around somewhere, watching us?"

This alarming thought made Morgan pull right away from her, his passion dying at the words. Stone cold dead.

"Well thank you for that, Buffy," he said. "Great thought. Didn't seem to bother you before, did it?" His

tone was pure acid, and he saw he'd hurt her. Felt almost glad of it.

"Didn't think of it before," she mumbled, reddening. "I just... needed you."

"Oh, so now I'm a commodity just to be used, am I? Thanks a lot, makes me feel like *I* don't matter, like you just want what my body can give yours."

"Morgan, that's crazy. You know I'd never think that." Her eyes pleaded with his, and although he knew she spoke only the truth, he didn't want to acknowledge it. He shook his head and sat up. "Morgan, don't go all cold on me." Her hand reached out to touch him, but he jerked away.

"I'm going downstairs," he told her, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. Again, he was aware that he was hurting her; again, he didn't much care. He wondered if he'd ever want to touch her again after her remark. "You know," he added, "the thought of a ghostly mother-in-law watching us make love isn't exactly my idea of romance."

"Morgan, for God's sake..."

But he was out of bed, hurriedly throwing on some clothes, slamming the door behind him as he left the room. Buffy, he decided, took entirely too much for granted. Expected him to be at her disposal whenever it suited her. And he had encouraged her. Given her everything, including his soul, and now she was just abusing him. Well, not anymore. Spoiled brat! She needn't think she could come crawling to him for sex just when she felt like it any time soon. Or if she did, he'd make her beg...

Morgan stopped for a second as these thoughts assailed him. What was he doing, thinking this way? He was being downright unkind. Vindictive even. Not like his usual easy going self, and never where Buffy was concerned. He loved Buffy with all his being, but he'd acted like he'd hated her just then.

Going downstairs, he decided that last night had taken its toll on him. Ghosts were always difficult to deal with, even the harmless ones. And he was worried by the sudden absence of the Veil. He supposed he should go back upstairs to apologise, but decided that maybe they both needed time to cool down. Buffy wouldn't have taken kindly to his being so off-hand. Off-hand. That was putting it kindly.

In the kitchen, he saw he wasn't the first up. Willow was there, and Jordan, having breakfast, although, Morgan noticed, Willow didn't seem to be eating much, was just crumbling a bit of dry toast between her fingers.

The twins were up too, milling around, preparing their own cereal and juice before they went to school. Chattering to each other. They seemed, Morgan thought,

high-spirited, ebullient, and not at all tired after the night's events. Ah well, they were immortal children, he reminded himself, who rarely felt the after-effects of too-late nights. When they saw him come into the kitchen, they both smiled, glad to see him. Identical smiles in non-identical faces.

"Hey, dad!" Voices in unison. Morgan returned the smile.

"Hey, you two." Reflecting that after all these years of living with Buffy, and now Willow and Xander too, he was beginning to sound like an American. Picking up the phrases, hearing the slight change in his accent. He didn't mind much, although he was determined that he wouldn't lose his real identity.

Soul stealing druid, his mind piped up, giving Morgan a start, reminding him of what he had been, once. *No. No, not that, not anymore... Not since the beginning. And never again.*

The twins were staring at him quizzically over their cereal. Looked at each other, and Morgan thought he heard a brief exchange go through their heads.

Lucas: *Why's dad looking like that?*

Kate: *Dunno. Looks like he's not with us anymore...*

And then he tuned the voices out, remembering it was impolite to peek into people's thoughts uninvited. Instead, he poured himself a mug full of black coffee, hoping it was strong enough to maybe shake himself out the weird mental fugue he'd got himself into. For a moment, thinking back on last night, he found himself strongly resenting Joyce's reappearance into her daughter's life. The effect it had had on him, and Buffy, had been nothing but detrimental in his opinion. Sooner he sent Joyce on, the better it would be for all of them.

"It was good, last night, wasn't it, dad?" Lucas said, as Morgan joined the others at the table. "Being able to speak with grandma, I mean? Not scary at all."

Morgan swallowed his bitterness along with a gulp of steaming coffee, which was almost as bitter.

"Not all ghosts are frightening, Lucas," he replied, and saw Willow jerk her head up. In her unusually pale face, her eyes were wide and he thought he saw a flicker of unalloyed terror there for a second.

"Is everything all right, Willow?" he asked. Morgan always referred to her as Willow, thinking that the whole sounded better than the shortened version. Too quickly, she looked away, seemed to force a false smile onto her face.

"Yeah. Sure I am. Why wouldn't I be? Just didn't sleep too well." A pause. "Nightmare. Probably brought on by... all the excitement. Of Joyce appearing and all. How did it go? Did you manage to speak to her?"

Funny, but hadn't Lucas just said so? Obviously, Willow

hadn't had her whole attention on what had been going on so far that morning.

"Yes, we spoke with her." Morgan hesitated. Wondered whether to mention to her about the Veil's tearing. Decided that maybe Willow looked as though she had enough worries on her mind already, didn't want to add to them. Because if the Veil *was* ripped, there'd be plenty of time to worry later. Worry big-time.

Morgan was tempted to go into Willow's mind and see what else was in there. She'd always fascinated him, Willow. Not in a sexual way, of course, but because she was always so outwardly serene and... Well, the word *perfect* sprang to mind. Was she so perfect, under that calm exterior? Or did she harbour dark desires, dark dreams?

He blinked the notion away. God, what was wrong with him this morning? He couldn't seem to stop thinking vaguely unpleasant thoughts.

"Buffy must be so happy," Willow was saying, naturally unaware of the way his mind was working. "Speaking with her mom and all."

"Yes. She must be," Morgan said, and saw Willow frown, realised he'd spoken a little sharply. "Sorry, Willow." He managed a tight smile. "I'm feeling a little out of sorts today. Spirit summoning on top of drinking too much. Never a good combination."

"S okay, Morgan. I think we're all a little strung out today. Something in the air, I guess."

"In the air. Yes."

The twins had finished their breakfast, now they drained the last of their juice. Rose from the table, went to move away.

"Don't forget to clear up after yourselves," Morgan said, referring to the used bowls and glasses. Lucas made a face.

"Dad, we don't have time to clear away." His voice was a kind of whine. "We'll be late for the school bus."

"No you won't. Do as you're asked, please."

Tutting, acting as though Morgan had asked them to scrub the whole house, the twins cleared away their mess, taking the bowls and glasses to the sink.

"And you can wash them up while you're at it," Morgan added, staring back into his coffee, watching steam rise from the hot liquid.

"*Dad!*" A joint protest, then Lucas spoke.

"Well, you'll have to do it, Kate. I'm more behind than you are."

"No way. We share chores around here."

"I haven't packed up my bag yet and..."

"Don't care. I'm not doing your work for you."

Irritated, Morgan glanced round at their increasingly raised voices. Kate was standing, arms folded, a minia-

ture version of Buffy at her most stubborn, her face set, brows drawn down. Lucas was grinning, maybe deciding that aggravating his twin was fun.

"You're a girl anyway!" Morgan heard Lucas play his trump card, saying the thing that would cause Kate to blow up even further.

"Yeah, and *you're a pig!*"

Morgan decided he'd had enough. Standing, overturning his chair in his haste, he stepped in.

"Will you two for God's sake just *shut up!*"

The twins stopped in mid-argument. He'd shouted, loudly, injecting real anger into his voice. Again, two pairs of eyes turned on him, hurt eyes this time. In Kate's case, tearful eyes. Now she was unhappy miniature Buffy, and the sight of her tears almost broke Morgan's heart. Always close to her father - maybe even closer than Lucas - Kate loathed it when Morgan was angry with her. The more so because he was usually even tempered, the more easy-going parent. A push-over, Buffy often teased him. Too lenient. And here he was, flaring up over a stupid thing like clearing away dirty dishes.

"I'm sorry. Sorry, kids. You were just... getting too much there..." He held out his arms and Kate flew into them, hugged him close, and he stroked her hair. Lucas just smiled faintly, then grinned, so it was like Morgan was looking into a memory mirror of his past.

"Sorry, dad." A simultaneous apology.

"All right. Let's forget it." He kissed the top of Kate's head. "You'd better get going. Go upstairs and say bye to your mother."

The twins disappeared, along with Jordan, who hastily kissed Willow, who still sat at the table, sunk in her own thoughts. Morgan picked up the overturned chair, re-joined her. Apologised to her too, but she waved his apologies away. They sat in silence for a few moments, then Xander appeared, hastily knotting his tie before going to Willow.

"Will, I can stay home if you want me to," he said, and Morgan had the feeling that Xander and Willow had already had this conversation before.

"I *told* you, I'll be fine." Ah, the usually imperturbable Willow was becoming snappy now. She *must* be tired, Morgan thought. Willow was similar to him in temperament and it was unusual for her to be anything but composed. He felt Xander hesitate, then saw him grimace at Willow's tone.

"Okay, well, I'll see you later then..." His words trailed away and helplessly, he kissed Willow and left.

"You want to talk about it, Willow?" Morgan asked, but Willow just shook her head and smiled wanly.

"Told you, Morgan, I'm just tired." But she sounded

more than tired, she sounded overwrought, close to tears even.

"Perhaps you should just..." he began, when the phone on the wall began shrilling. Almost glad of the distraction, Morgan went to answer. "Morgan Ash." He listened to the voice on the end of the line, felt himself chill inside at what it was telling him. "I take it you're not kidding around? No. No, of course you wouldn't... Not with something like this. I'm sorry, it's just a shock... Yes. Yes, I can do that... I'll be there shortly." Morgan replaced the receiver, feeling like he'd been punched in the gut. Willow looked over at him.

"Morgan? You look like I feel. Whatever's wrong?"

Morgan stared at her for a long moment before he replied, assimilating what he'd just been told, so he could articulate it properly.

"That was Bill Symonds, from the History Faculty. He wants me to... to give Harry Dudley's lectures this morning..." He paused, still unable to believe what he'd just been told. "Harry... he was found this morning... Killed, Willow."

Willow's face blanched.

"Oh, how terrible. When...? How...?"

"Around two thirty, three a.m., the scene-of-crime people reckon. As to how..." Morgan almost couldn't bring himself to say it. "Willow, he was... He was torn to pieces..."

"Oh God..." Willow put her hand over her mouth, her eyes wide with shock. Then she mumbled something incoherent and rushed from the room. Morgan heard the downstairs bathroom door slam shut, knew that the news had turned Willow's stomach. Well, he knew just how she felt. And he supposed that now he'd have to go upstairs, tell Buffy, who still hadn't surfaced, that he had to go out for the morning, if not the whole day. Walking past the bathroom, he heard retching sounds. Willow. Torn between seeing if he could help, and getting going to the university, he paused. Then decided he couldn't hang around.

In their bedroom, Buffy was still in bed, which Morgan found himself resenting for some reason.

"You can lay sulking there for as long as you like," Morgan said, "but I have to go out."

He told her why and Buffy instantly forgot their near-argument that morning, and so, Morgan decided at last, should he. After showering and putting on fresh clothes, Morgan told her that he thought Willow needed her. But now he had to go.

They parted with a kiss, and a word of love.

Driving to the university campus, Morgan decided that maybe he'd pay a visit to the Occult Studies department after he'd given Harry's lectures. Poor Harry... Mor-

gan hadn't been that close to him, but they had had a friendly relationship. His death was a terrible thing, not to mention a grave loss to the faculty. Morgan thought it more than an accident that his death should coincide with Joyce's revelation that the Veil was torn, and the thought caused Morgan to shudder. If... *something*... had come from Beyond and murdered Harry, then who knew what else might come through?

Of course, that was only speculation. Might have been a knife-wielding maniac for all Morgan knew, but... *Torn to pieces*... Not stabbed, or shot, or strangled. *Torn to pieces*. Morgan only hoped that no-one asked him to look at the pieces, because he didn't think he'd be able to. Reassured himself that he wouldn't be asked. He was there to lecture, maybe to help the Chicago Police Department with their enquiries, because he had after all seen Harry at the Hallowe'en Ball. Probably all the guests would be questioned. Just, Morgan thought, what he didn't need. And maybe he wouldn't go along with it. Maybe he'd just *persuade* the police that neither he nor Buffy, Willow or Xander had anything to do with last night's murder. Yes, he guessed that was what he'd do, if necessary.

Outside the History Faculty building, police officers were out in force, milling around. Morgan avoided them, went inside to find Bill Symonds, who was in his office being interviewed by a police officer. When he saw Morgan, he stood.

"If you'll excuse me a second," Bill told the officer, "I just need to talk to Mr Ash here. He's come to give Mr Dudley's lecture this morning." He wiped a handkerchief over his face, and Morgan saw the strain there. "Morgan, thanks for coming at such short notice... Harry's notes are in his office..."

"Did you know Mr Dudley, sir?" The officer came forward, spoke to Morgan, who smiled coldly.

"Of course I knew Harry," Morgan said, contemptuous of the stupid question.

"And you were at the Hallowe'en Ball last night, Mr Ash?" The officer was looking at a long list - obviously the guest-list for the Ball. Morgan looked at it too.

"Well, I expect you can see that I was, seeing that my name's practically at the top there. We left at one thirty, my party and I, and that was the last we saw of Harry."

"And what were you doing at around two-thirty, to three am?"

Morgan, disliking the officer's tone, fought with himself not to say that he had been summoning the spirit of his wife's dead mother. Instead he fixed the officer with his gaze.

"Nothing *you* need worry about," he said softly. "All right, officer?"

The officer blinked, then nodded.

"That's fine, sir."

"Thought it would be." Morgan projected into the man's mind that he wouldn't need to interview Buffy, Willow or Xander either. They had enough problems without the police. He turned to Bill Symonds, who stood watching the exchange silently. "I'll get along then," he said. "Need to see what the subject of the lecture is. I'll come back later, Bill, when you're not so busy."

Bill nodded, and Morgan left for Harry's office. Wondered where his body had been found. The *pieces*... Morgan shook his head. Couldn't think like that. He had students to consider first.

The lecture material, Morgan was glad to see, was the Icenian Rebellion against the Romans in AD61. He smiled. He knew that subject inside out. Should have done. He had been there, experienced the horror, the terror, and the savage joy of seeing the Romans slaughtered mercilessly as the British tribes, led by the fearless warrior queen, cut a fiery swathe through Southern England. Of course, he'd had no soul then, so the sadistic pleasure he'd got out of it was more intense. And although he'd been pleased to ally himself with the emperors themselves at various stages of his early, soulless life, he'd still rejoiced in the deaths of his people's enemies. Well, any deaths, really...

Ah, Boudicca, he remembered. *Now she was what I call a woman...*

He saw her now, wild and untamed, thundering through the Roman hordes, mowing them down with the knives that had been set into the wheels of her chariot. Thrusting into flesh with her spear. Impaling her living captives to show there would be no clemency, no surrender, sacrificing them to the goddess of victory, Andraste. Covered in woad and blood, hair flying behind her, Boudicca herself was the epitome of the avenging goddess. Rather, Morgan thought, like Buffy was now. Ah, such courage, such endurance. Boudicca had almost decimated the Romans, who had handled the whole sorry affair incompetently and...

Morgan smiled. He was supposed to be telling the students this, not reminiscing over ancient times. Picking up the notes, not really needing them, but carrying them for effect, he walked to the lecture hall.

In the hall, the students - sophomores - were quiet and subdued. Obviously they had heard of Harry Dudley's death, if not directly, then through the university grapevine. When Morgan entered the hall, they barely glanced at him. Looking around, he recognised most of the faces - a good group, vocal and usually lively. He'd soon get them going, he decided. His previous lectures with them had been more than successful. No reason

why this one shouldn't be either, once he'd got them hooked.

Morgan began to speak and the atmosphere soon improved. Not that they'd forgotten poor Harry, but for now, Morgan's potent charisma took their minds off his death.

One student in particular, Morgan noticed, concentrated on him more intensely than the others. A pretty little thing with elfin features, short dark hair and the pale, translucent skin almost unique to people of Celtic descent. Morgan knew her name. Ria Stuart. He also knew she had a major league crush on him. A lot of the students did, Morgan knew. Not just girls either. He was aware that he had strong personal magnetism and used it to help them learn and absorb.

But Ria was different. Ria had convinced herself that she was in love with him. Her emotions constantly assailed him, although he mostly switched himself off to them. Certainly he'd never intruded on her thoughts to see exactly what she thought. Normally, he wouldn't have dreamed of taking such advantage of a young girl. But today, as he saw her watching him, he found himself wondering. Found himself thinking: *What the Hell? Why not see exactly what she thinks of me?*

As he gave the lecture, without missing a beat, he probed Ria's mind, not even looking at her, except the once to establish mind-wave contact. Opening her mind, he listened.

Such naivety there. Such blind attraction that she could barely concentrate on his words. She fantasised about him, dreamed that one day he would notice her and...

Ah yes, naivety.

Ria didn't have a boyfriend, hadn't ever had a proper relationship. Painfully shy, she rejected the young men who asked her out on dates because she was terrified of showing herself up. Besides, they weren't *him*, the object of her desire. Ria was still a virgin, but she'd give it up for him, if he asked. If she only had the courage, *she* would ask *him*...

Morgan favoured her with a warm smile, saw her flush deep red, saw her look away, confused with the feelings he had caused to stir in her, feeling her heartbeat inside his head. Her arousal, infant and immature, talking to his own body, reminded him of his frustrated desire earlier that morning. All this without disturbing the flow of his words.

Then he felt disgusted with himself. Utterly revolted

with self-loathing. Like a voyeur watching someone in the act of love, getting spurious pleasure from someone else's fantasy. Since finding Buffy, he hadn't even looked at another woman that way, hadn't even considered it. Buffy was his world. His love. His very life. So why was he thinking about what Ria Stuart would look like in the throes of naked passion?

Stop it, he told himself angrily. *Stop it right now. You belong to Buffy.*

At the end of the lecture, he watched the students file out of the hall, watched Ria's face as she passed him, saw her smile shyly. Their eyes - hers were as grey as his - locked, and she hesitated.

"Ria, isn't it?" he said, knowing he should dismiss her there and then, that talking would only encourage her. Nodding, the flush on her face deepened, and Morgan found himself fascinated with her innocence.

"Yes." Soft voice. Did she have soft skin...? "I... I loved your lecture, Mr Ash..."

"Morgan, please." Would *she* sigh, "*Morgan, please...*" if he...? He shook his head to dispel the too-vivid images that had sprung there unbidden, but they wouldn't leave him. Soft virgin skin... Unexplored territory...

"It was as if..." Ria smiled, looked down as though looking at him hurt her. "You'll think me silly, but it was like you'd been there, experienced it."

"And what would you say, if I were to tell you I *had* been there?"

She looked up, startled, but Morgan just laughed. God, this girl was so fresh and sweet. Would she taste as sweet as she appeared? Like peaches steeped in honey syrup...

"It's all right, I was just joking." Morgan looked at his watch. He had been intending to go over to the other side of the campus to do some research but... "D'you have anything you want to discuss with me?" he asked Ria. "Anything you didn't quite understand?"

Again she looked away, and he knew she was desperately trying to think of something. Anything.

"Do you have another lecture?" Morgan decided to put her out of her misery. He saw her shake her head. "All right, you can make me a coffee then. You have a room on campus, don't you?" He knew she did, of course. Ria looked startled and for a second she hesitated and he thought she was going to refuse him.

Please refuse, he thought desperately. *Save us both.*

But, as he knew she would, she smiled and nodded.

Seven

Ceri stayed in bed as long as she could. Not that she was tired; she was just hoping to avoid talk and further confrontation for a while. Ceri hadn't slept a wink all through the night; she had too many thoughts swirling through her mind to rest. Not least the thought of seeing her grandmother in the almost-flesh for the first time.

Weird that, talking with the dead. A dead person who had once been related to her. Who was still related, Ceri guessed, because dead or not, Joyce was still her mom's mom. Weird too, finally meeting someone she'd only ever seen in photos before, live and smiling. Funny, that although her grandmother had been there last night, she hadn't been there.

Ceri frowned. That didn't make much sense, not even to her. Ceri supposed that what she meant - and here she struggled to get her thoughts in order - that what she had seen was only the sad essence of Joyce, not Joyce herself. On dying, on not finding rest, Joyce had become insubstantial in all ways. Couldn't really be Joyce again until she passed over properly, as Morgan intended, after.

"But after what?" Ceri muttered to herself. "After what?"

Ceri was more worried by what Joyce had said than she was prepared to admit. Even to herself. She understood what the Veil was - she remembered reading a little about it before, in some old book during her still ongoing Slayer training. But she didn't really understand how it could be damaged. If it wasn't a physical thing, how could it be hurt? Well, she supposed, spirits could be hurt, and they weren't physical things either. But if the Veil covered everything there was to cover then how...?

She shook her head. The enormity of the thought was beyond her limited understanding. More important, she guessed, was this question: If the Veil were ripped, what would be the eventual effect? Would the rip spread throughout the physical world so that the two dimensions became merged, so that there would be no distinguishing between the living and dead lands? And if that was so, would the living be affected? And... And... Here, Ceri's questioning imagination went into overdrive. If people died and left spirits, did ideas leave spirits too? Did fallen trees leave spirits, and plucked flowers? And what about animals? And myths? And the spirit of lost civilisations? Did her very thoughts have a spirit...?

"Oh, stop it, Ceri!"

And then wondered if the words would come back to haunt her.

Ceri decided that she couldn't think about it anymore.

She'd send herself crazy if she continued down that path. All she wanted to do was shut out bad thoughts, let in good ones. Enough bad things had happened to her in the past.

Only nice things now, she pleaded with no one in particular, except maybe the god of Fate, if there was such a being. Haven't I suffered enough?

Yes, enough. Even before she was born, Ceri reflected, she was in Hell. Quite literally, albeit in the warm cocoon of her mother's womb. Even then, she had been a pawn in the diabolic game plan. Ceri's unborn life, or the life of James, her father. That was her mother's choice, and she had chosen Ceri. Or rather, been forced to choose Ceri because James had insisted upon it. Because had her mother chosen James, Lucifer Prince of Hell would have rendered her infertile and there would be no Slayer race.

Sometimes, given the pain and uncertainty she had already endured in her short life, Ceri wished that her mother had chosen her father instead. Was it wrong, to wish she'd never been born?

"Yeah. Yeah, of course it's wrong."

Her mom was right in what she'd said last night, that Ceri was an ungrateful brat. From now on, Ceri vowed, she would be different. After all, she had promised her grandmother last night, hadn't she? And a promise made to a dead person couldn't be broken. Especially a dead person who could come back and remind her of that promise. So, she'd put aside her bitter thoughts. Try to be bright and sunny, like the twins. Make a proper attempt at the model daughter act. Drop the cool, aloof exterior and show the loving person that screamed for release inside her. No more closing herself off.

So why was it she was planning to meet Nick today? Keeping it from her mom? Why was it she was planning to lie to both her mother and Ramirez, for the sake of a boy she barely knew? Because for the first time since Armageddon, she found herself understanding about attraction, and the effect it could have on a person's mind and soul.

Weird, how Nick had just appeared like that, like he was a ghost himself. But then, Ceri had been busy at the time, slaying the vampire Jo-Anne. Most likely, she just hadn't noticed his arrival. And, she remembered, he was a runaway, and runaways, from her experience in Ramirez' youth centre, tended to shelter in odd places because they couldn't afford proper accommodation. So why not a graveyard? Most likely, she had disturbed him from sleep or something.

And face it, Ceri, she told herself. You've been thinking about him ever since. Yes, thinking. Dreaming in her

bed. Seeing his face. His amber eyes. It was, Ceri decided, almost worth the strife her mother had put her through later when she discovered that Ceri had disobeyed her. Funny, how a person could touch another's heart in so short a time. Ceri, the Ice Maiden, was thawing.

She giggled then - a most un-Ceri-like sound. Ceri hadn't giggled in years, certainly not since Armageddon. Obviously good thoughts (romantic thoughts?) were good for her. She asked herself if she believed in love at first sight. Was there such a thing? Ceri didn't know; she hadn't allowed herself to think of love with regard to her own life. For a start, she was too young, although, in her case, age was nothing but a number. And secondly, she reminded herself, she was never going to fall in love with any man. But maybe opening her heart just a little was a good start to driving away her inner darkness.

Ceri forced herself out of her warm, cosy bed. She had to meet Nick at noon and it was already way past ten. Two hours to make herself look nice. Opening her wardrobe, Ceri decided that she didn't have anything to look nice in. By choice, Ceri only owned functional clothes.

"I'll borrow some from mom," she decided. And went in search of Buffy, making up untruths on the way. Her mom was in the small lounge with Willow, close in body and conversation. Buffy had her arms around Willow, who appeared tired and wrung-out. But it appeared that it was Willow who was supporting Buffy, because from the snatches of conversation that Ceri heard, they were talking about last night and the materialisation of her grandmother's ghost. When Ceri walked into the lounge, the two women pulled apart, smiled. Ceri noticed that her mom's eyes were slightly reddened, teary, and knew she'd been crying. Felt bad at the lie she was about to tell, but found herself locking up her mind even more tightly so she wasn't caught out in it.

"Hey, Ceri," Buffy said; she held out her arms, and Ceri went into them, hugged her mother tight, feeling the guilt inside her increase. Feeling that she wanted to blurt it all out, but couldn't because the habit of keeping her inner thoughts and feelings was too ingrained to stop just because she wanted to stop it.

"Hey, mom." Pulling away. "Hey, Will." Willow just smiled.

"You okay this morning, Ceri?" Buffy asked.

"Yeah, why wouldn't I be?"

An expression of flickering grief passed across Buffy's face, which she just as quickly hid.

"Well, it's not every day that... that you're visited by... by... your dead grandmother, is it? I mean, it meant a lot

to me, but I can understand if you felt afraid. Or even... I don't know..." Ceri felt more shame flower inside her. Despite her own pain, her mom's first thought was still for the welfare of her child.

"Sorry, mom," she said, hugging Buffy again. "Yeah, I... it meant a lot to me too. You know it did." And that was no lie; the encounter had moved her, made her think. Whether Ceri would follow the advice given remained to be seen. "Mom, I have a favour to ask of you."

"Oh yeah?" Buffy sounded both amused and wary.

"I... er... I was wondering, you know, you wear nice things, right?"

"Well there's a first, a real paranormal phenomenon. A teen praising her mother on her choice of clothes," Buffy teased, and Willow smiled, more genuinely this time.

"Yeah, well, you're hardly the average mother, are you?" Ceri mumbled, reddening. "I mean, you don't look too many years older than I do. Which is majorly weird."

"Okay, okay, Ceri, cut the unnecessary compliments." A frown. "If that was a compliment. Just tell me what you want."

"I wanna... I wanna borrow something, mom. Wanna wear something nice for once and... all my stuff, it's so... dull."

Buffy looked at Ceri for a long moment, then she smiled, a smile half of pleasure, half of sadness.

"Oh, Ceri, Ceri." Ceri noticed that her mom sounded kind of choked again. "I don't... You really are growing up, aren't you? I'm trying to keep you as a child, but I can't..." Tears formed and spilled over and Ceri clasped Buffy's hands. Buffy smiled wryly and blinked away her tears. "Soon you'll leave me, I guess."

"No, mom!" But Buffy ignored the protest.

"Yeah, you will. I'm just beginning to realise, Ceri. This is what our lives are, why I was born, why you were born. You'll go your separate way, go to another country, maybe or... Or I will. Because that's what building the Slayer race means, right? Spreading across the world to protect other humans."

"You'll have Kate and Lucas. And Morgan." Ceri didn't like the way this conversation was going. It was blowing her attempt at good thoughts out of the water of her mind. "And other children... Mom, please don't... I won't leave for ages and ages..."

"Yeah, Buffy," Willow chimed in. "Ceri's right. And like she says, the children may leave, but at least you'll always have Morgan. He'll never leave you, right?"

"I guess." But Ceri noticed that her mom didn't sound one hundred percent enthusiastic about that, and it unsettled her. But maybe she and Morgan had had a row or something. Then Buffy smiled again. "Okay, so why

this change of image? I mean, you're only going to the youth centre, right?"

"Yeah," Ceri said, "but I was thinking about what grandma said last night. She said I should make the best of my life and I guess that means making the best of myself too. So I just thought I'd start right away." Ah, but the fabrication tripped off her tongue so easily. Although it wasn't a complete lie. Ceri did want to look good. It was time for her to flower. And her explanation seemed to please her mom, which was the main thing. Buffy's face broke into a smile, although, Ceri noticed the shine of moisture in her eyes. But if there were tears this time, they were tears of happiness that Ceri had finally decided to emerge from her self-imposed personal seclusion.

"Ceri, you can borrow whatever you want." A pause. "Well, within reason, anyway. It's about time you showed the world how lovely you are." Another pause. "Just make sure those boys at the centre don't find you too lovely, okay? You're still very young."

Ceri just wished her mom would stop making her age an issue, but she guessed it was hard for a mother to let go, even as open-minded and modern a mother as hers was. So she just smiled and nodded.

"I'm not interested in any of them, mom." She flushed, thinking of the one boy she was interested in. "Yuk. Boys!"

Buffy gave her a suspicious look and Ceri hoped she hadn't pushed too far, but then Buffy stood.

"C'mon, Will," she said. "Let's find something nice for Ceri to wear."

And Willow smiled, nodded, and appeared glad of something normal to do. And Ceri thought that Willow seemed kind of haunted too. Although what by, Ceri didn't know, and it would be wrong to try to find out. Maybe Willow was remembering her own teen years.

Ceri loved Buffy's room, which was decorated in midnight blue and silver, and had a calming atmosphere. Usually. This morning, though, Ceri caught a lingering impression of... She tried to define it. Conflict? Yeah, some. Faint bitterness with a tinge of anger. Her mom and Morgan had indeed had an argument, and it had happened in here. Ceri shut off her senses. She didn't want to know what the quarrel had been about, because she sensed it hadn't been about money, or her, or the twins. It had been something personal, and Ceri didn't want to know about that. But she felt insecure again; had to ask her mom if everything was okay.

"Where's Morgan?"

Her mom seemed rather startled at the question, even flustered. Ceri noticed that she flung a kind of wild look at Willow before she answered.

"He had to give a lecture at the University at short notice. Nothing to wonder at, Ceri." Her mom gave her a piercing glance and Ceri shored up her mind barrier, just as Buffy had a second before. Ceri knew there was more to it than that, much more, a lot of omissions and half-truths flying around, but she just shrugged and said nothing. Confused, she decided to drop it.

"Okay. About these clothes..."

Buffy wore great clothes, in lots of wonderful fabrics. In her wardrobe right now were her winter clothes, the summer wear having been packed up and put away until next spring. Ceri picked out a dress in burgundy velvet that she had secretly long admired and held it up against herself.

"This?" she said, and saw Buffy shake her head.

"Way too formal, Ceri. At least for a youth centre. But look - how about this, if you must have velvet?"

Buffy brought out a crushed velvet top in a mix of blues, from deepest midnight to lightest sky, all intermingled so it looked as though the sky couldn't decide what time of day it was. The effect was beautiful, strangely shimmering, and when Ceri held it against herself, she saw that her eyes instantly became bluer.

"What can I wear with it?"

Buffy grinned.

"Got loads of stuff you can try," she said, and began picking out skirts.

Eventually they decided to go the whole velvet trip after all, but Ceri just wore the top with a plain velvet skirt that matched with the darkest blue on the top. The effect wasn't formal, but it was entrancing.

"You know, I don't know if this is right for..." Buffy began, but Ceri shook her head.

"Mom... Please... I love it."

A long sigh from Buffy.

"Okay, okay."

"Can I wear make-up?"

"Make up? I don't know, Ceri." Suddenly Buffy sounded unsure again, as though she thought that maybe the outfit was grown up enough, without adding to it.

"Please, mom? Just a little. You do it for me."

She turned her eyes on Willow, who was smiling wistfully, and this time, Ceri knew she was remembering the fun and uncertainty of growing up, of wearing nice things for the first time. Of using make-up. Of just rejoicing in the sheer beauty of youth. Not that Willow or her mom were old, of course. Ceri knew her mom never would be, and who knew with Willow. But still, those days of first experimentation and uncertainty were long gone. Ceri saw Buffy's face relax suddenly.

"Oh, okay. Just a little. Come on."

Buffy didn't apply much make-up, a little blue eye-shine, a little mascara, and a little pale pink lip-gloss. Nothing much, just enough. When she was finished, Ceri preened in front of the mirror.

"Thanks mom." Looked at the clock. Eleven thirty. "I have to go soon. Ramirez will be expecting me."

"D'you want me to drive you?"

"It's okay. I'll get the bus."

"Ceri, are you sure?"

"Yeah. Mom, you gotta let me grow up."

Buffy looked sad again, then she nodded.

"I know. I know. That's what I'm so afraid of, Ceri. You're way too grown up already and..."

"Mom, don't. Please. I am what I am. You made me what I am, you and my father. You gave me my heritage and my... my Slayer genes. I'm grown up because I'm meant to be, so let me be it, mom. Please."

"Okay, Ceri. Okay." Buffy turned away, and waved her hand, and Ceri saw that she wiped her hand across her eyes. "Go on. Get out of here or you'll be late. See you later, baby."

"Yeah. Later, mom. Bye Will."

"Bye, Ceri."

Ceri went out of the house and began to walk to the spot where she'd arranged to meet Nick. On the way, she stopped at a pay phone and called Ramirez to tell him she was busy and couldn't make it. It was easier lying, on the phone.

Now all she had to worry about was whether Nick would turn up.

He did, of course. Ceri saw him walk toward her and felt a kind of jump inside her chest, realised her heart had started beating faster. As she watched him, she almost wished he hadn't come after all. Being stood up would have been... safer. She could have gone to Ramirez and told him that she'd been able to make it after all.

"Hello, Ceri." Nick was by her side now, smiling down at her, his face wreathed in a smile that almost stopped her heart. In the daylight, he seemed even more delicate in appearance, almost otherworldly. She remembered her fanciful thoughts of earlier - that maybe he was a ghost - but he was too substantial. Too warm.

"Hi," she breathed, barely managing the single word.

"I... You came..." And could have kicked herself for stating the stupid obvious. Her inexperience with the opposite sex was shining through, all too clearly. But Nick seemed not to care, and Ceri reminded herself that he wasn't like other boys she knew, at least, not from what she'd learned so far. Which was precious little.

"I wouldn't have let you down," he was saying, as though he'd read her mind, which was impossible, because she knew that whatever else he might be, Nick

was certainly no telepath. He smiled again, took her hand in his, warm despite the late autumn chill in the air, raised it to his mouth, and planted a tiny kiss on the back. Ceri thought she might actually swoon. His action was kind of corny, she guessed, but utterly bewitching, because it was done so naturally, as though it was customary for him to greet girls this way. Ceri jerked her hand away, unsettled by the feeling the kiss had evoked in her, and Nick looked instantly contrite.

"I'm sorry," he said in that melted-honey voice. "It was wrong of me to assume..."

"No. No, it's okay. I just... I'm not used to such..." She shrugged; her words dried up again and she was painfully aware that she was making a fool of herself. Why couldn't she be cool and confident? The answer was clear enough: she'd cut herself off so much that she didn't know how to relate to other people very well. But she was okay at the youth centre, she reminded herself. Only Nick had this effect on her.

"I thought that perhaps we might go for a walk," Nick was saying, either unaware of her embarrassment or else ignoring it in the hope it would soon fade.

"A walk. Yeah. Okay." At least if they were walking, they could talk about what they saw. And Ceri guessed she could show him round the city, well some of it.

They got a bus downtown, then walked along the river for a little while. Ceri pointed out various places of interest, noticing that Nick was wide-eyed and fascinated, touching buildings, taking in everything she told him. It was almost as though, Ceri thought, he hadn't been in a big city before.

"Where are you from?" she asked eventually, after they'd wandered round a huge department store, during which time Nick seemed almost in a dream, looking at the televisions, the hi-fi systems, the video-recorders. He smiled at her question, flushed a little.

"Born in Louisiana," he said. "We had nothing like this where I came from." He didn't elaborate, and Ceri didn't like to ask, thinking that he obviously had no desire to talk about it. He must have had a hard life, she reflected, thinking about the kids at the centre. Abuse maybe? Beatings? Alcoholic parents? Who knew why Nick had left? Ceri didn't know him well enough to start asking personal questions. But she wanted to know. Wanted to know everything. Like how he'd got that scar on his forehead.

"You're a long way from home then," she remarked, and he nodded, his eyes sliding away from hers for a second before he met them again. His expression, she noticed, was sorrowful, but he smiled.

"Yes. A long way, Ceri." And his tone didn't invite questions.

They went for a coffee and some lunch then. Ceri guessed Nick wouldn't have much money, so she'd brought her own. Again, she noticed how he savoured the food and drink, eating slowly, sipping the hot coffee, evidently relishing every bite, every mouthful. At one point, he actually closed his eyes as though the experience was overwhelming him. As though he hadn't eaten or drunk in ages and he couldn't quite believe he was doing so now. Almost as though - Ceri frowned at the thought - he was remembering how to eat. Still, he was a runaway, and Ceri guessed that he maybe hadn't eaten much since he'd been on the road. But her gut feeling told her there was more to it than that. More to Nick himself. Much more. She'd thought that last night; she was convinced of it now.

"Tell me about yourself," Nick said, catching her gaze, holding it, so she felt herself tongue-tied again.

"What's your life like, Ceri? What have you seen?" He was obviously referring to her slaying, and Ceri didn't really want to talk about that. It set her apart from other people and that was exactly what she didn't want with Nick. But if she didn't open up, he might lose interest in her and she didn't want that either. Despite the awkwardness between them, which was entirely her fault, she wanted to know him, keep knowing him.

"You saw what I do," she said. "That's my life, I guess." That sounded self-pitying. "I have a mom and she's... she's..." Ceri was about to say "immortal" but how crazy did that sound?

"She knows?" Perceptive, she thought.

"Yeah. She knows. I... I... uh... I have a stepfather, Morgan, who's great. And I have a half-brother and sister. They're twins."

"And they all know too?"

"Uh... Yeah..."

"Do they worry for you?"

"Oh yeah. They worry for me." At least that was no half-truth. They worried about her too much and maybe they were right to do so because Ceri was aware that she was getting into deep water here. "How... how are you so... accepting of this?" she asked. He hesitated and she had the strongest sense that he was trying to decide what to tell her. Eventually, he stood. Held out his hand.

"Come with me, Ceri." A pause. "You must have seen some very strange things," he added as she stood. Ceri nodded.

"Oh yeah. You could say that."

The feeling that the metaphorical water surrounding her was rising way over her head was undeniable now. Ceri guessed she was on the threshold of learning another "strange thing". Guessed, as she had guessed that morning, that Nick was no ordinary boy, that he wasn't

a runaway. But he couldn't be a vampire or a ghost because... because vampires couldn't walk around in the sunlight and ghosts were insubstantial, like her grandmother. And she knew too, even as she followed him out of the coffee shop, that she shouldn't go with him, that she had no weapons. If he was something malign, she only had her own fighting skills to fall back on.

But he wasn't malign, Ceri decided. She could tell that much; he was genuinely sweet, genuinely considerate. What was once called a gentleman. So she went with him, hardly speaking on the way, until, without much surprise, she found they were standing outside the gates of the cemetery where she'd met him last night.

"I disturbed you last night, right?" she said. "I mean, the fight was loud and you were asleep, and I woke you, right?"

Nick smiled.

"Not exactly."

"How long have you been a runaway?" Keep the conversation normal, she told herself, knowing that was impossible, knowing that what he was about to show her - tell her - was nothing normal.

"A while."

He took her hands in his and she felt his warmth radiate through her. Certainly no vampire. Vampires were cold as Hell. The thought made most of Ceri's doubts disappear, and then she remembered the vampire Angel and how her mom had gone with him. Actually let him... Ceri flushed at the thought. Then felt the old resentment flare inside her. If her mom could have sex with a vampire - Angel at that, one of the vilest creatures to walk the earth - then Ceri could certainly talk with Nick, hold his hands. Nothing else would happen. She wouldn't be like her mom and get sucked in (Ha, Ceri. Sucked. A joke.) as she had. Or if she did, she'd handle it better.

"Why did you leave your home?" They were walking through the cemetery, which was almost deserted this time of year. Nick looked at her, seemed aware now that she was asking questions in an attempt to trick him into incriminating himself. Didn't appear worried by it.

"I had no choice," he told her with a little shrug. "But it's in the past now."

"Sometimes the past hurts. Real bad."

His hand tightened around hers and she saw tears stand in his eyes for a moment before he blinked them away.

"Yes. It does."

They stood outside a tomb now. It was a marble tomb with the inscription "Johnson" etched upon it. A family tomb, Ceri realised.

"What's here?" Ceri asked.

"If I tell you about myself, will you reject me?"

"I don't know. Tell me what?" But this was just a game, she knew.

"This is where I first saw you, Ceri. Last night. The vampire you killed - she lay just across the way."

"And?"

"I... I wasn't sleeping here. I..." He closed his eyes. "I found myself here. I was walking and I found myself here."

"You're a... You're a ghost, aren't you?" Ceri said, blurt-ing it out. "You came through the rip in the Veil."

Nick looked shocked.

"You know about that? How do you know?"

Ceri smiled faintly, felt almost like laughing.

"Because I saw my dead grandmother last night and she told us that the Veil was damaged." Now she did laugh.

"You know... you're the first boy I've ever been inter-ested in and you have to be... to be..."

"Dead."

"Is this your tomb?" she asked, ignoring the word he'd said because it was so ugly and didn't fit with his young male beauty. Saw him shake his head.

"No." He closed his eyes again, and she saw tears seep from beneath his lashes. At once she reached out, touched his tears; they were warm too.

"How are you so warm, like you're living?"

"Some of us have the gift," he said, holding her hand to his face. "It's the same as materialisation only more ad-vanced, more substantial. For short periods, we can do anything any normal human does." His eyes opened, met hers. "Except live."

Oh so dangerous. Not physically, Ceri knew, but emo-tionally. Emotionally because Ceri knew she could be sucked in, and she was glad she had the lesson of her mother's stupidity to keep her safe and careful. Ceri was

forewarned and could protect herself.

"Why show me this tomb?"

"Seemed... right. I don't know. Except it's warm in there, and I can... I want to tell you, Ceri."

"Tell me?"

"What you want to know. Because you're who you are, and you'll understand... You can say no, if you wish. I would understand if you wanted to go away. If you wanted to leave me."

She put her other hand to his face, feeling the remain-der of the stone wall around her heart crumble at his last words. He was lonely, she knew. And she knew what it was like, to be lonely, isolated despite being sur-rounded by people who loved you. Poor Nick had no one. So alone. Ceri remembered her grandmother last night; she had cried and seemed alone and solitary. No one - not even dead people - should feel that way. Drop-ping her hand back into his, it was Ceri who led the way into the tomb, where they sat on the stone floor together. He was right too; it was warmer than being outside. And more appropriate somehow than sitting in an impersonal coffee shop.

"I can show you things," Nick said, "that you've never dreamed of seeing."

"How do you know my dreams?" Ceri asked. Oh, but now she was being sucked in, but still believing she could control it, she allowed it to happen.

"Because you're like me, Ceri," he told her. "You're lost too. But we found each other. Do you believe in Fate?" Fate, Ceri thought. Grandma said we were all fated. Was this what she meant?

"Yeah, I believe." She swallowed hard. "So show me, Nick." A kind of challenge.

And she closed her eyes.

Waited.

Eight

Wrenching his mouth away from Ria's, Morgan came to his senses. Thrusting her away, he sat up and back-wards, almost falling off the bed in an attempt to get away from her.

Ria was staring up at him, an expression of extreme confusion written all over her elfin features. Her mouth, swollen from his kisses, was open and her breath came in short gasps. Her shirt was undone to the waist, and she wasn't wearing anything beneath it but white skin.

"For God's sake, cover yourself up," Morgan said, clos-ing his eyes, but not before he saw Ria's eyes fill with childlike hurt, her confusion deepening. He felt her emotions come off her in waves, felt them flap-

ping around him like uncaged wild birds, their sound whirling, screeching, in his head. Her mind-voice in his head too, a babble of unformed, incomprehen-sible thoughts that she was trying to put together. But he heard the words that came out her mouth clearly enough.

"Don't you want me?"

A little girl's voice. God, Morgan thought, that was all she was. A little girl. But yes, he wanted her. How could he deny that? How could any man not want her, when she'd practically begged him to make love to her? And if he listened to the insistent voice in his head and the pull of his body that urged him to take her and take her

now, he knew he could find release from the arousal that consumed him.

But Morgan knew he couldn't listen to that voice. Because if he listened to its siren song, he would lose everything he loved, and he couldn't do that. Wouldn't do that.

No one has to know, do they?

That voice again, whispering, cajoling.

No one has to know, you can keep it from them. Even Buffy, if you really try. You can shut her out. God, whose voice was that? Oh, his own, of course.

Backing toward the bedroom door, he felt a moment of almost total panic. Then realised he hadn't even answered Ria's question. Saw that she was sitting up now, holding her shirt close to her slender body, and looking more like a child than ever.

"No," he said. "No, I don't want you."

He spoke more forcibly than perhaps he'd meant, almost viciously, but he had to drown out the other voice, the alien voice inside him that was contradicting every good thought in his head. Ria stood, shook her head in disbelief.

"I don't believe you," she said. "We... we just..."

She moved toward him, but he held up his hands in a gesture that told her to stop, that made it look like he was warding off a demon.

"We just kissed. Just..."

He shook his head. Oh, it was more than just a kiss. That was why her shirt was unbuttoned, that was why he could still feel the texture of her soft skin under his fingers. But that was all. He shook his head again. That may well have been "all" but if he'd let it go on much longer, it wouldn't have stopped at "just" a few kisses, "just" a few caresses, would it? Much longer and Morgan knew it would have got to the stage where turning back would have been physically impossible.

"I'm sorry," he said more softly, realising how pathetic that sounded. Although he just wanted to get out of there, to stop having Ria look at him as though he'd struck her instead of saved her - saved them both - he knew he couldn't just walk away. That would have piled unkindness on unkindness, and he guessed he owed her some sort of explanation after letting her bring him here and then hurting her feelings. "This is just... It's not right, Ria. It would be wrong of me to..."

His words trailed off, because he saw that she wasn't really listening to him, because she still wanted him. Because he was her fantasy, and she wasn't going to let him off that easily when she'd come so close to making the fantasy a reality. And now she'd had a taste of him, she'd lost many of her inhibitions, wanted him more than she had before.

"I'm married," Morgan said, saw her face fall. "I have children. Now do you see why I can't let it happen?" Despairing, he saw her shake her head.

"If you love your wife, why are you here with me?"

Oh, good question. One Morgan had no good answer for. Why was he here? He didn't have a clue, not really, except he'd listened to the voice inside him - his voice, he reminded himself - that had told him that Ria was a ripe, luscious fruit ready to be plucked from her virgin tree. By him.

"I do love my wife," he said at last. "I love her more than..." He hesitated for a second. Wondered if he should say what he'd been about to say. The decided he had no choice, because he had to make Ria see. "I love her more than my own life. My children too."

Her face fell again, became utterly miserable, and Morgan hated himself for being the cause of that misery, and the humiliation she so obviously felt too.

Hey Morgan, his inner voice said, and it sounded amused, self hate. Remember that? You don't have to hate yourself, you know. You can just have her and put her out of your mind. You know that's what you want.

"Shut up," he said, and realised he'd said it aloud, because he saw Ria's eyes fill with tears, and knew she thought he'd spoken to her. Time, he thought, to get out before he felt compelled to comfort her. Because he knew where that would lead. And if it led there, he'd never be able to look Buffy in the eyes again.

"I have to go." He picked up his discarded jacket from the floor, put it on, feeling its heavy weight settle comfortably around his shoulders, as though another layer of clothing was a protection. "It's best we don't see each other again..."

"Aren't you going to take any more of Mr Dudley's lectures?"

"No." Morgan decided they'd have to manage somehow. No way could he look at Ria's face again, see his own shame reflected back at him. "It's best this way, Ria. Believe me. Best for both of us. Find yourself a boyfriend who can give you what you deserve, who can give you love. Because I can't."

He smiled bleakly, and immediately regretted it because her face softened a little, then a lot, and he knew the smile had wiped out the meaning of every single word he'd just said. That she was every bit as enamoured of him as she had been when they'd left the lecture hall.

Enough, Morgan decided, was enough. Forgetting his lecture notes, laid on her bedside table, he opened her door and fled, hating himself in a way he hadn't hated himself in... Oh, so long.

When he was clear of the building, he stopped. A feel-

ing of utter shame enveloped him, so strong it was like a punch. Then disgust set in again. Along with deep despair and a sense that he was disintegrating where he stood. As though his soul was fragmenting, or not his own somehow. As though he had made it dirty with the thing he had nearly let happen.

These feelings, intense and all consuming, expanded until they were almost pain. No, they were pain. Morgan felt that a relentlessly grasping hand was squeezing his undying heart, causing his chest to ache. His stomach churned, then clenched, then contracted, and he wrapped his arms around himself, leaned against a tree for support, because if he didn't he knew he would fall to the ground on which he stood. A cold sweat broke out all over him, drenching his clothes, making him shiver in the late autumn chill. Gasping against the pain, he was aware of people stopping and staring at him, then passing him by hurriedly. Just as well, he thought, feeling the inner torment slowly subside. What was he to say to them? Oh, I nearly committed adultery and this is just my reaction to my self-loathing? And that sent the thoughts running through his mind again, endlessly, self-perpetuating. How could I have let that happen? It's not as though I was ever even attracted to her before. Barely noticed her, except to know that she... liked me... And how could I have almost done that to Buffy? If I had allowed it to go on...

He could see Buffy's face now, big green eyes staring at him, hurt, devastated, filling with disbelief and tears. Betrayal. God knew, she'd had enough of that in one way or another over the years, and he'd sworn to himself that he would never be the cause of any hurt to her. And he'd almost wiped that out with one stupid act of... Not even love - how could it be love when he only loved Buffy that way? Lust. Pure simple misguided lust. God, so close to destroying her. And himself. And the children.

Suddenly he needed to speak with her. Needed to hear her voice. Not like him, to need so badly. Being needy wasn't his thing. But he felt it now. If he didn't hear her voice, he thought he might lose himself. Pulling his mobile phone out of his pocket, he dialled their home number. Please be there, he thought, prayed. Please, please be there.

"Hello?" Her voice. Morgan thought he might faint with relief. "Morgan?" Ah, she knew it was him, even over the airwaves. Of course she did. Then, on the heels of that thought: If she'd known it was him, what else did she know? Somewhat belatedly, he clamped the part of his mind that contained his shame firmly shut.

"Yes."

"Is everything okay?" Not too late then; Buffy sounded

both friendly and concerned. "Have you found out anything more about Mr Dudley?"

"No. Not too much. What with preparing and giving the lecture, I didn't have a lot time." How he wished he hadn't gone to the lecture at all.

"Did it go okay? The lecture, I mean?"

"It was all right, I suppose."

He heard her laugh softly over the phone.

"I bet you had them eating out of your hands."

"Whatever." Please stop talking about that...

"Morgan, are you sure everything's okay? You sound kind of weird."

"I love you," he said, knowing it was out of context with her question, but needing to say it, needing to confirm his sense of self, of who he was. Morgan Ash. The immortal man who had been blessed with the gift of his soulmate after so many centuries of seemingly pointless existence. "I love you, Buffy." He could almost hear her frown at the other end of the phone.

"I know you do, Morgan." But there was a smile in her voice too.

"I just... I needed you to know that. I feel badly about what happened this morning." In more ways than she'd ever know. "I was... I was..."

"Insensitive? Unfeeling? Sarcastic?" She supplied the description, but she was still smiling, he could tell. Still, the words cut into his heart and Morgan was glad of it.

"Yeah, you were all those things."

"I know. And I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me."

A pause, a silence. Then Buffy spoke.

"Well, I guess I wasn't very tactful either, was I?" Another pause. "You could always come home now. Pretend none of it happened and start again." The smile was back in her voice, and the hint of a promise that told him a smile wasn't all he'd get if he agreed. For a few seconds, he was tempted. He could almost feel her touch on his body, her mouth on his...

"Hold that thought," he said, feeling a little better, able to smile at long last. "I have to go to the Faculty of Occult Studies to do some reading. Remember the Veil, Buffy?"

"Yeah. Yeah, how could I forget? Well, okay. I guess that's more important, right?" She laughed, but the laugh sounded strained and a little forced. "I know I should be used to all this weird stuff, but I feel kind of freaked."

"Oh, me too. Believe me." Morgan thought that "freaked" was putting it mildly. "I'll see you later then. Love you."

"Love you too. Bye."

Then she was gone, and as Morgan put his phone away,

he felt a sense of near-normality settle over him. Only near though. There was still some way to go before he'd put this morning properly behind him. A bit of research, he guessed, would push it back more. Although the subject matter was hardly comforting... Over in the Faculty for Occult Studies, he searched out Dan Healy, a professor he'd become acquainted with over the years, and struck up a friendship with. Morgan had pretended that his interest in occult affairs was purely academic, but he wondered if he might have to come clean about his interest in the Veil. He'd have to play it by ear, he thought. Do what was appropriate to his requirements. Eventually - by tracking Healy's own faintly psychic brainwaves - Morgan found him in the archives department, way down in the basement. To Morgan's surprise, there was a police officer down there too. Apparently, he was finished interviewing Healy though, because Morgan saw the officer nod curtly and disappear out the other exit.

"Anything to do with Harry Dudley?" Morgan asked, after he'd greeted Healy, who shook his head.

"No. At least they don't think so." Healy shook his greying head sadly. "Dreadful thing, Harry's murder." Morgan nodded, decided to ask a few questions of his own. All he knew was what he'd been told over the phone that morning, which was bad enough.

"Where did they find his body?" Healy made a face.

"Where did they find the bits, you mean?" he said. "Oh, apparently he'd gone into the Archaeology Department after the ball last night. Maybe to do a bit of last minute work, no one knows. Anyway, a cleaner comes along this morning and finds what's left of him."

"That would have been a nasty shock." Healy smiled at the understatement.

"Poor woman's still under sedation. I would be too, if I'd found that. Poor old Harry. What a way to go, eh?"

"Hacked up, wasn't he?" Oh, very nicely put, Morgan...

"Well, from what I gather, he wasn't actually hacked up, he was torn apart. The wilder rumours say that no murder weapon was found because there isn't a weapon. Word is that whoever did this, did it with bare hands. Not only hands." Healy shuddered. "The words teeth and nails have been used in conjunction with the murder too. Of course, the police aren't issuing specific details, but these things do have a habit of leaking."

"So why was there an officer down here?" Healy smiled wryly.

"I called them in. I came down here earlier to check the inventory - something I like to do when I have no lectures - and I found that Matt Chandler, my archivist, hadn't turned up for work. No phone calls to say he's sick or anything. Anyway, I checked around and I dis-

covered some missing stuff. Valuable stuff. Now, I may be wrong, but I put two and two together, and thought maybe he'd "borrowed" it. Could be wrong of course, but as I say this stuff is valuable, if just for the fact that it's the only copy in existence."

"Copy of what?" Morgan wondered, although he was feeling slightly uneasy.

"I doubt you'll have heard of Francis Breton?" Healy asked. Morgan searched his memory banks for a few seconds, but the name meant nothing to him.

"No. Who was he? Or is he?"

"He died in 1835, and he was a necromancer. Small time sorcerer, but outstandingly talented at talking to the dead. Some people have that ability; it's an inborn thing that can be encouraged to grow. If you believe in that kind of stuff, of course. I know not everything believes. Even I sometimes have trouble believing, and I've seen and heard some very strange things."

"Oh, I believe it," Morgan said, thinking of all the spirits he'd seen and spoken to, because he was one of the few born to it. The seventh son of a seventh son delivered from his mother's womb with a caul still covering his face, which his people believed was the sign of one who could "see". Even before his druid training, he had spoken with those passed on to the Shadow Lands.

"Well, Breton left a lot of notes on his experiences, but most important of all, he left a series of documents that told about how a mortal man might enter the Land of the Dead."

"Oh?" The uneasiness increased.

"Apparently he had discovered how to open a gateway between our world and that world. The ritual was carefully laid down, and according to Breton, he had successfully achieved it several times. He pushed his luck a bit too far, according to contemporary writings, because during the last ritual he performed, his soul was sucked from his body as he closed the doorway, and he died horribly just before his thirty-ninth birthday. Of course, that might all be just rumour, as so much of these tales are, but what isn't rumour is the fact that Breton's writings on this subject, and the ritual knife, have gone missing."

"You think Chandler stole them?" Morgan asked.

"Well, it hardly seems a co-incidence that some equipment from the labs has also gone. Video tape recorders, sound recorders, temperature gauges. All stuff we use in psychic investigations. You tell me." Morgan felt like telling Healy that he could guess exactly what had happened. That Chandler had taken the stuff and repeated the ritual. And it had worked, or partly. Obviously, the gateway opened hadn't been closed because supernatural occurrences had happened since. At least, to his

own family. And Joyce had told them about the rip, hadn't she?

"Cops're going to look into it. Pay Chandler a visit. Then we'll know. I might be wrong, of course, but as I said, it seems too much of a coincidence to me."

"And you say there are no copies of this ritual?" Healy looked faintly ashamed, and he shook his head.

"I kept meaning to ask Chandler to make them, but I never got around to it. No, Breton's original documents were all there was. That's why they're so valuable. That and the knife, which was said to have been given him by some powerful entity. Although I guess that's just conjecture and myth."

Morgan didn't like to contradict him but he thought that Healy was being far too naïve for a professor of occult studies. Didn't he know that conjecture and myth always had a basis in some kind of reality? Surely, given even his small degree of psychism, he must know? But Morgan supposed that being psychic didn't give a person automatic, in-depth knowledge of the worlds beyond human existence. Only years and years of study and the right kind of experience could provide that sort of knowledge.

In Morgan's right kind of experience, powerful entities could and did exist, in several dimensions other than the one that most ordinary humans - and even psychic humans - were aware of. Demons. Gods. Subhuman monsters. Elemental spirits that controlled air, wind, fire and water. Everything natural had a spirit; even man-made things had their own bizarre life force, although it wasn't recognised as life. Morgan knew little about the Shadow Lands - it was one dimension he had never entered and never wished to - but he knew enough to hypothesise that whatever "powerful entities" existed there, they almost certainly wouldn't be beneficial to mankind.

"Anyway, what did you come here for, Morgan?" Healy asked, and Morgan fought a short inner battle within himself, decided that Healy probably had the right to know.

"I don't quite know how to say this," he began, "but what you've just told me fits in with information I was given last night. Information I came here to investigate."

Healy frowned.

"What information? Given by whom?"

"Well, Breton wasn't the only person with real psychic abilities," Morgan said. "I can also communicate with spirits..."

"You can?" Healy sounded sceptical, and Morgan nod-

ded.

"There's a lot you don't know about me, and a lot I can't tell you, but I can assure you, Dan, that I'm telling you the truth. If you don't believe me, I can summon one up easily enough, given the right surroundings and conditions."

"I find this very..." Healy began, but Morgan interrupted.

"My wife's dead mother came to us last night. She told us that there was a rip in the Veil, and she told us that it could possibly be dangerous. Does that tie in with what you've told me? I think it does."

Morgan saw Healy's face go pale.

"Are you telling me the truth?"

"You know I am." And Morgan was prepared to push it if he had to, but then Healy nodded.

"Yes. Yes, I know. My intuition tells me you're not lying. It's just unusual to meet someone with genuine ability. This ghost, did she tell you how the Veil came to be ripped?"

"No. But I think you just have, Dan. I think Chandler did take the ritual documents and the knife and made it happen. Although why someone would want to do that is beyond me. I mean, I know it was Hallowe'en last night and it's traditional for people to mess about with things they don't understand. But this seems a bit over the top."

"I know. And Chandler always seemed like the kind of young man who wasn't interested in these things. That's why he was such a good archivist, because he was able to stay objective, slightly detached from his work. Doesn't quite fit, somehow."

"Any friends who might be of use?"

"Oh, I've given a few names to the police officer who was just here. Matt had a girlfriend in the..." Healy's words trailed off. "Sally," he said. "Sally Adams. Student of mine. I suppose it's not impossible that she's involved too. In fact, thinking about it, seems highly likely. Sally has a very enquiring mind." Healy shrugged helplessly. "Oh well, the cops have her name too, and the people she went around with. They'll find out." Healy paused, smiled grimly. "I wonder what the prison sentence is for opening gateways to other worlds?" he said with bleak humour.

Morgan shook his head.

"I don't think that'll matter if we can't find out how to close the gateway, do you?"

And both men sunk into morose silence as they considered the possibilities of a human world overrun by the dead.

Nine

Buffy put the receiver back into its cradle, a frown creasing her brow. Willow, who had heard part of the conversation, looked at Buffy enquiringly.

"What's wrong, Buffy?"

Buffy shrugged. She didn't know what was wrong, not really, but the call had unsettled her.

"That was Morgan," she said. "He sounded... really weird."

"Weird?"

"Yeah." Buffy went to sit next to Willow on the couch, traced a fingertip over the glass top of the coffee table, making smudges on the polished surface. "I don't know, Will. He was acting strange earlier." She paused again, feeling vaguely guilty. "I've been bending your ear all morning about my problems..."

"It's okay, Buffy," Willow assured her. "Just tell me what's wrong."

Buffy thought Willow seemed positively eager to hear her troubles, maybe too eager. Quite obviously Willow didn't want to discuss her own problems - and Buffy knew there was something wrong with Willow - and was using Buffy as a way of avoiding it. Later, Buffy decided she would quiz Willow, but for now, she was glad of the support of her friend.

Flushing, she told Willow everything that had happened between her and Morgan that morning.

"I mean, I didn't really mean it about my mom. I just... Well, it was kind of strange, speaking with her the night before and I wondered if she was still around somewhere close. But Morgan overreacted. He was just plain nasty, Will, and you know he's not that way normally. It was almost like he hated me."

"Oh come on, Buffy. You know that's not true. Morgan adores you. Xander and I were only saying last night..."

Buffy raised her eyebrows.

"You and Xander were talking about me and Morgan?" she said, not sure how to take this. Did Willow and Xander make a habit of discussing other people in the house? Willow shook her head hurriedly.

"No, not exactly. Not gossiping or anything like that. We were just talking generally - your mom's appearance kind of threw us too - and..."

"Will, you're gabbling." Buffy supposed she knew well enough that Willow wouldn't gossip behind her back. Xander might - when it came to gossip, Xander could outdo any woman - but Willow wasn't the type to indulge in mindless chatter.

"Sorry," Willow said. "I wouldn't want you to think..." She shrugged, changed the subject, came to the point.

"Well, anyway, we got around to talking about how much you and Morgan obviously love each other, that's all. I mean, it shines out of you both. It's like watching lights come on or something, the way you look at each other. And Morgan would never hurt you deliberately, Buffy. That's all I was trying to say." Buffy drew more patterns on the table top, feeling jittery and still vaguely unhappy with the way the morning had begun. Still uneasy about Morgan's call and the tone of his voice.

"Yeah, well, that's what I thought till this morning," she replied. "I swear, Will, he was being unpleasant on purpose just because we weren't going to... you know...?" Buffy sighed heavily. "And that phone call just now - he sounded like he was... Well, he sounded like he was falling apart or something."

"Well, I guess he maybe had a difficult morning, what with Harry Dudley being murdered and all." Willow fell silent for a moment and Buffy had the impression that she wanted to say something else but wasn't sure if she should.

"Come on, Will. You want to tell me something, right? If it's about Morgan I should know, right?"

"I guess, but it's not really my place to say... Oh well, this morning when he came downstairs he was acting kind of odd too. Kate and Lucas were messing about, arguing, just being kids really, but Morgan lost it with them. Really lost it. Made Kate cry, Buffy." Willow covered Buffy's hands with hers reassuringly, but Buffy didn't feel reassured. Exactly the opposite in fact. Willow carried on hurriedly. "He didn't hit them or anything, just shouted, but... Well, it was uncharacteristic."

"Yeah." Buffy smiled wryly. "It's usually me who does the shouting, right? Oh Will, I just have the strongest feeling that there's something wrong with him. But it's so vague, so... not really there that I can't say what it is. Apart from the bad temper that is. And the call just now."

"Well, maybe he's just tired."

"Look, I know you're trying to make me feel better, Will, and I appreciate it, but we've all seen Morgan tired before. He just goes a bit quiet. No shows of temper or maliciousness."

"Well, could he be sick?"

"Come on, Will, you know better than that. Morgan doesn't get sick. Not really. No more than the kids do, or I do. We're immortals. We fight off sickness pretty quickly." Buffy shrugged. "I guess I'm making too much of it, right? I guess he's a bit unstrung because of last night. God knows, I am. Put the two together and I

guess arguments are inevitable."

Buffy stopped talking, felt rather stupid and very selfish. Here she was, rambling on about something that wasn't even concrete, just because she and Morgan had had a bit of a disagreement that morning. They'd had quarrels before, much worse than that, and she'd never come to Willow before, all paranoid that there was something wrong with Morgan. That she was afraid he didn't love her anymore. After all, he'd been okay with her on the phone, hadn't he? He'd told her he loved her, hadn't he? Three times...

Yes, but he'd sounded odd...

Shut up, Buffy...

Enough of her problems She was being self-indulgent, nothing more. Making up problems that weren't really there. Now Willow, with those deep, dark circles under her eyes, definitely needed her help. And Buffy was going to give it, whether Willow wanted it or not.

Just before Morgan had left, he'd told Buffy that Willow was unwell. An understatement, Buffy had discovered. Upon going downstairs, she'd found Willow in the downstairs bathroom, retching so hard that Buffy was half-afraid she'd bring her insides up. Willow had said it was just pregnancy sickness, but that didn't sit right. Willow hadn't been sick for weeks now. But then Willow, having stopped retching at last, had cleverly diverted Buffy's questions away from her well being, and started talking about Buffy and the night before.

But no more. Willow, Buffy noticed, still looked exhausted, although as ever, she put on a bright front.

"You know, I'm not gonna worry about me anymore, Will. You're the one who was sick this morning, and you still don't look great now."

Willow pulled a face.

"Gee, thanks Buffy. That makes me feel much better." Her face closed then. "I'm fine. Really."

"No. You're not. Now, you've listened to me long enough, been supportive. Haven't told me to pull myself together and lighten up, like maybe you should've. Now it's my turn to listen. C'mon, Harris, talk to me."

"Buffy..." Willow was about to clam up again, Buffy could feel it, and it worried her, because usually Willow was very open. For a moment or two, Buffy considered dragging whatever it was directly out of Willow's mind, but she knew it was wrong. Dishonest and dishonourable. A person's mind was their own unless they gave permission to enter it, and she would never do that to someone she loved unless the situation was truly desperate.

"Please, Will? Have I upset you in some way? I know I've been laying my problems on you, maybe too much. Ever since I first saw you this morning you've looked

kind of haunted yourself."

At this, Willow took a deep shuddering breath. When she finally spoke, her voice was low and barely audible. Buffy correctly guessed that Willow was only just holding back tears.

"Oh, Will..." She laid a hand over Willow's, but Willow jerked away.

"No, no, Buffy. If you touch me, I'll break down, I know it." She gulped convulsively, evidently choking the tears back, and Buffy was suddenly terrified for her friend. There was something truly, badly wrong here. What was it? The baby...? "You know I told you I'd had a nightmare?" Willow was saying. Buffy nodded.

"Yeah."

"It was about Oz."

"Oz?" Buffy was somewhat shocked. This was the last thing she'd expected, that Willow should be close to weeping over a dream of Oz. That a dream of Oz had made her so sick, because that was what Willow seemed to be implying. But apparently, that was indeed the case, because Willow was nodding, and her face had gone parchment white.

"That thing your mom said about the Veil?" Willow said. "I remembered that was what Oz said too. I thought the whole thing was a really bad night terror at first. I mean, when I woke up I was drenched in sweat and it had all seemed so real. But when I came down here and sat for a while, and the sun finally came up, I decided that maybe it was because I was pregnant and all." She smiled wanly. "You know how weird you get when you're pregnant, right? You know, how your dreams are so real and all, more than usual, so it's like you're living them, and then by the light of day, they just seem plain crazy?"

"Oh yeah." Buffy could identify with this one hundred percent. When she'd been pregnant with Ceri, she'd had terrible dreams, but of course, most of those were justified. Angelus had been hounding her, threatening her, and she'd just lost James. But even with the twins, which had been a happy pregnancy, she'd still had dreams that had possessed the air of prophecy, none of which had come to anything. So yes, she knew what Willow was experiencing. "But Will, I sat here and told you about the Veil and you've said nothing until I just about dragged it out of you. I mean, surely it must have registered then?" Willow shrugged.

"Yeah... But I don't know... I felt kind of stupid, Buffy. Like I might sound like a hysterical pregnant woman or something. I mean I... Oh, I don't know what I mean. I'm so tired, Buffy, can't think straight, but I don't know if I ever dare sleep again. I think Oz might be waiting for me if I close my eyes."

"Will, you can't stay awake forever. Not even until the Veil is repaired, because who knows how long that'll take? You'll collapse, make yourself really sick. And not just you, Will, but the baby too. Have you told Xander?" Buffy tutted when Willow looked away, avoiding her piercing gaze. "I see. Left him in blissful ignorance, huh?"

"Something like that. I don't want to upset him..."

"You gotta tell him, Will. You're his wife, and he loves you. He'd want to know." She saw Willow flush under her pallor, knew she'd maybe made Willow feel worse and a flash of remorse passed through her, but only a flash. "This thing's obviously affecting us all, Will. Having a negative effect. Whatever happened, it happened last night. Hallowe'en night. Y'know, I think I'll declare Hallowe'en a non-event from now on. The only people who haven't had a weird experience in this house overnight are Xander and Jordan. Lucky them, I guess. Although their peace will be shattered when we tell them what's happened." Buffy stopped. "I guess I better come clean too. My mom coming back from the Great Beyond wasn't the only thing that happened to me last night."

She told Willow about the Reaper thing she'd seen at the Hallowe'en ball just after midnight. How it had coincided with the chill wind and the mini-power cut.

"I think that's when the damage to the Veil must have happened, Will. I was like you, I thought it was imagination or something, but now there are too many things going on to believe that anymore. I think tonight we'll have to get everyone together and talk about this properly."

"Can't we do anything before then?" Willow appeared rather desperate. "I'm scared, Buffy."

Willow, Buffy decided, looked like a kicked puppy, all big eyes in a face hollowed with exhaustion.

"I am too. Don't your Wiccan studies tell us anything? Haven't you read about this kind of thing anywhere?"

"No. Not really. I can fight magic with magic, Buffy, but how do you fight ghosts? I guess I could be Net Girl again."

"It'll be a start. Give us something to do rather than sit here going crazy. I mean, if it was something physical, it'd be different. But like you say, you can't fight spirits. Not like you can fight vampires, or demons or whatever." She sighed, then brightened a little as an idea struck her. "I wonder if Felipe knows anything?"

Willow also brightened at this.

"Yeah. He's a priest. He must know a lot of stuff. Been around a long time."

Buffy made a decision, felt better for it.

"I'll call him. He's part of the family, right? He should be

involved, should know what's going on."

"Should you maybe wait till Morgan gets back?"

Buffy laughed at this.

"He could be all day, Will. Besides, I don't need his permission to call his son, do I? Morgan doesn't rule me, you know."

Willow smiled, and the threat of tears passed completely.

"You're right there."

"So, I'll call Felipe. Get him to bring Ceri back too. Don't like the thought of her out of my sight, suddenly. I'm really uneasy about all this, Will. And what you told me makes it worse."

Willow nodded and Buffy saw the extreme weariness return to her face again, passing across it like a black cloud. If Willow really couldn't get some rest because Oz was haunting her dreams, how long could she last without before she did become ill? The pregnancy might be affected. No, Buffy couldn't let Willow suffer any more.

"Funny, how Oz turned bad in death," she mused, thinking that maybe she shouldn't talk about it, but needing to. Amazingly, Willow shook her head.

"No, Buffy. I don't think he's evil. Not as we'd recognise evil, anyway. I mean, the whole experience was terrifying and all. I knew if I didn't wake, I could die, and I don't want to die yet." She smiled sadly.

"But I guess that's kind of the point of Oz being there, right? I mean, if my natural time had come, and I went peacefully and without regret, then I'd most likely Ascend, wouldn't I?"

"I hope so, Will." God, Will, don't talk about dying, when I can't even bear to think about losing you. Ever...

"But if I was dragged into death kicking and screaming, I would have gone into the Shadow Lands with Oz. We would have been together. And that's all he wanted."

She swallowed hard. "He was... scary and threatening because he's angry. He died before his time and his dying was hard, Buffy. It prevented him from Ascending, I think." Now she choked on tears and when Buffy took her hand this time, she grasped it tightly. "He wants what he had before he died. And part of that was me. And the only way he can have me is if I... if I die too. If he kills me." Her voice was muffled with weeping now. "I think that's so sad, Buffy. So terribly sad. I mean, the living Oz would never hurt me, right? But the dead Oz... he can't understand why he shouldn't." Willow paused, got herself together again. "Does that make sense, Buffy?" Buffy nodded and pulled Willow close to her.

"Yeah. Yeah, in a terrible way, it makes a lot of sense. Forever love, Will? It can mean so many things. And I guess sometimes that's the really terrible thing, because the forever love he had for you has been twisted into a

hurting thing."

"You want to know what's even more twisted?" Willow said into Buffy's shoulder.

"What?"

Willow pulled away, looked into Buffy's eyes, and Buffy saw deep shame staring back at her. Now Willow's pale cheeks were flaming.

"Despite everything, Buffy, I still found him attractive. At first, he just looked like sweet Oz." A tiny smile. "Remember that look? Kind of cool, but... hot at the same time? He was like that at first, and I... I wanted him. I'd almost forgotten, you know, what we were like together, how good it was. But, Buffy, even when he changed into the awful thing he became at the end, I still wanted him. I was horrified, desperate to get away, but still... Buffy, what does that say about me?" Buffy shrugged.

"I'm hardly in any position to judge, am I, given my track record? I mean, look at what Angel turned into in the end..."

"That's not the same thing, is it, Buffy?"

"Yeah, it is, kind of. I mean, you loved Oz, didn't you? He was your first lover, and you never forget that, right? Counts for a lot, Will, especially when you love that person. I guess maybe part of you still loves him too, although you don't think about it anymore, and love Xander." She smiled. "Course, you've always loved Xander. Look, Will, don't feel bad. I'll go call Felipe. You go get hooked up to the Net." She paused. "Funny, doing research again. Like the old days."

Buffy got off the couch, went to phone Ramirez at the youth centre. When he answered the phone, he sounded glad to hear from her.

"I had intended to call you later," he said, his Spanish accent heavier than usual, which told Buffy he was agitated about something. "I need to speak with you all."

"Oh?"

"Some very strange things have been happening, Buffy. Things that I believe are connected with Kate and Lucas seeing your mother's spirit. I have had many people coming to me, telling me they have had overnight visitations from dead relatives. Conversing with them. Some of these people have been very afraid by what they have seen. Do you have any idea what is happening, Buffy?"

Buffy told him, and there was a long silence at the other end of the line.

"From what you say, Felipe, the problem is spreading."

"It appears so." Ramirez, Buffy noticed, sounded perfectly cool now. Never one to show his feelings too openly, Ramirez.

"We've had more problems here, Felipe. And while Morgan's out, I'd appreciate it if you could come and give us

the benefit of any experience you might have."

"Of course. I would be glad to. I can be with you in about an hour."

"Good. I'll be happier if Ceri's home anyway."

"Ceri?" Ramirez sounded confused.

"Well, yeah, she's with you, right?"

"Er, no, Buffy. No, I thought she was home with you. She called me and said you were keeping her busy."

Buffy felt a ring of ice form around her heart, a mix of cold fear and cold anger.

"She lied to you, Felipe. She told me she was going to see you... Oh God..."

All the dressing up in nice clothes. All the fuss about wearing a little make-up. All that sweetness, when usually Ceri was never one to be sweet. Buffy realised she'd been deceived and lied to, that Ceri had successfully duped her into believing what Ceri wanted her to believe. So where the Hell was she? This, Buffy decided, was all she needed. A delinquent, much-too-grown-up-for-her-own-good daughter whose advanced mental powers had enabled her to fool Buffy.

Well, that was it, as far as Ceri was concerned. Buffy would ground her for eternal life when she eventually deigned to come home. Buffy didn't even consider that Ceri might be doing something perfectly innocent. She had lied, that was enough. And after last night's stunt, too.

Then a cold hand gripped her heart, adding to the icy ring, and a shudder passed over her body. Part mother's intuition, part Slayer's prophesying, told her that Ceri had to be in some kind of trouble.

"Felipe, can you please come now?"

"Of course. Buffy, you sound panicked. Ceri can look after herself, you know. And remember: if she needs you, she can call to you with her mind."

"I guess..."

"I'm leaving now. Try not to worry, Buffy."

But that was like telling her not to breathe, Buffy thought, as she put the phone down. How could a mother not worry about her child, especially a child like Ceri? Briefly, she toyed with the idea of calling Morgan, then decided against it. He was likely busy with trying to discover a solution to the big problem, and she shouldn't disturb him. Besides, she didn't want to appear weak and dependent, unable to cope with her own daughter.

"Felipe's on his way," she told Will, who was already hooked up to the Net on the other phone line. "But Ceri's not with him."

Willow looked up at once, and Buffy tried not to show the alarm that was ringing inside her head like a fire bell.

"Where is she then?" Willow asked.
"I have no idea, Will. I have no idea."
And try as Buffy might to reach her, no matter how hard

Ten

She didn't know how it happened, but Ceri seemed to become part of Nick. Or perhaps he became part of her. It began with hand-holding. Hers in his. Then she felt herself meld with him, so they became one entity, although all through the melding, she was still aware of herself. But more than self. A duality of being.

This wasn't a mind transfer, at least not as she knew it. It was more that he'd opened up a kind of window into his past, and she'd climbed through it. Whatever this was, Ceri decided, it was something much more effective than telepathy or empathy. She was living it.

As they melded, she heard a kind of rushing in her head, and then not just in her head, but all around her, surrounding her like the sea. She felt herself buffeted by its waves, whirling round in a steady spiral of colours which mixed together until all the colours were one and she found herself travelling through a black hole. Rushing though it. Kind of nauseating, this spiralling round in total darkness, like being on an enclosed, unlit roller-coaster ride that seemed eternal. As she fell through the darkness, there were the occasional blinding flashes of light from outside the helix. She heard voices coming and going, raised then quiet, then raised again, in many different languages, some of which she thought sounded familiar, others of which were totally unrecognisable. She wondered if the voices were trying to say something to her, to tell her what to expect from this out-of-her-control experience, but she learned nothing. Couldn't tell one voice from the other.

As Ceri fell through the twister's centre, the voices became louder, raised until they were shouting. A Babel of utterances. The flashes of light increased, until they were steady and strobing making her vision blur and the nausea in her stomach increase. And then, just as she thought she'd give in to this weird travel sickness, she was ejected from the tunnel into a scene that made her wish she'd kept right on going into infinity.

It was daylight, but could have been night from the palls of smoke that all but obliterated the sky above her. Beneath her, the ground on which she lay was wet and trampled, the grass destroyed under the pressure of many feet and hooves. When Ceri began to raise herself up, she saw that the ground was wet because it was drenched with fresh and congealing blood. Blood that daubed itself all over her skin, soaked into her clothes.

she sent out her thoughts, Ceri's mind was nowhere to be found.

The noise around her carried on unabated, hurting her ears. Even clapping her hands over them did nothing to deaden the sounds. The sounds of cannon and gun fire. The sounds of horses neighing in terror. The sounds of men shouting. Of injured men screaming. Of injured men dying.

A battlefield, she thought, seeing for the first time through the clouds of dense grimy fumes. I've landed in a battlefield... What's going on? Where's Nick...?

She saw him then. He'd been by her side all the time, but she hadn't recognised him. Or perhaps her senses had been so overwhelmed, she just hadn't noticed. He was in a soldier's uniform, which was all grey, apart from the splashes of gore that decorated it, a warrior's trophy. Boots covered in crimson mud reached to his knees. By his side, he wore a long silver sabre, and in his hands, he carried a rifle tipped with a much-used bayonet.

As soon as she called his name, screamed his name, he looked at her. In between spearing a man with his bayonet as a fisherman spears a fish, he spoke, yelled above the din.

"No need to be afraid." But the shout was calm, if ever a shout could be so described, and Ceri, who was close to fleeing panic, wondered how anyone could be calm when death lay all around them. When death in the shape of a bullet or a cannon or a bayonet through the heart could strike any second.

I'm immortal, she thought, trying not to listen to the hysteria that was brewing inside her. I probably wouldn't die if I got shot or speared or blown up but I'd be hurt. I'd be maimed. I'd be useless...

She felt a hand grasp hers. Nick's hand. Slimed with blood and sweat. He looked into her face, and she saw him close up, almost unrecognisable, twisted with the killing lust of an embattled man. Kill or die, for Nick. Nothing more. Not right now.

"We must go forward," he commanded. "Forward is the only way to escape this."

Ceri felt herself being dragged along, wondered maybe if this was some weird dream, but dreams - not even hers - didn't have this quality of sight, sound, touch, smell and even taste, because she could taste blood in the air as she allowed herself to be pulled along, inexorably, toward the line where the big guns shot their

deadly missiles toward them.

"What is this?" she shrieked at Nick.

"Gettysburg!" he shrieked back.

Gettysburg? Gettysburg! One of the bloodiest final battles of the Civil War? Ceri thought she understood his uniform then. Grey. The colour of the Confederacy. Louisiana. A confederate state of aristocratic slavers. An extinct breed.

"Nick! Nick, this is a battle you won't win!"

He turned and smiled even as he shot a bullet into a blue-coated Union soldier.

"It doesn't matter..."

Around her, horror piled upon horror. Men fell. Men died.

Ah, but she'd seen horror before, she reflected. Armageddon to name but one. But that almost faded into nothing beside this, this man-made brutality in the long history of war. This, she realised, was where her Free America was born. On the deaths of men who believed in a cause they would die for. Everything she had taken for granted, born from the blood of dead men...

A bullet whizzed past her ear and she fell to the ground, still holding Nick's hand.

"We have to find cover!"

But he just shook his head, pulled her up.

"No cover, Ceri. We must go forward." He smiled, white teeth in a smoke-blackened, bloodied face. "It's nearly finished."

And he dragged her onward, apparently oblivious, apparently uncaring for their fates.

Almost beyond terror, gone over into a state of dreadful wonder, she shouted that she didn't want to die here in his dream.

"This is no dream, Ceri," he shouted. "This is..."

And then he stopped abruptly and she saw a bullet hole punch into his head. In silent slow motion, she saw him drop to the blood-soaked earth, felt herself drop with him. Felt the earth open hungrily to engulf them. All became quiet now. Perfectly calm. The sounds of the battlefield faded behind her, replaced by a sense of peace so strong that Ceri wanted to close her eyes and sleep. The flashing lights of the cannon, of the gunfire, had ceased, and there was only soft darkness.

She was laying on something cold and hard. Beside her, within touching distance, Nick lay. Reaching out with her hand, she felt for him and felt him stir, although he was cold as death. The darkness lightened a little, and she saw the outline of his body.

Sitting up, he smiled at her. No blood now. Just that hole in his head, that was closing until it was only a red circle, like a bindi. The scar, she thought as he stroked her hand gently.

"Worst is over now, Ceri," he said. Then frowned, as though unsure. "At least, I hope it is."

"Was that what you wanted to show me?" she asked in a hushed voice. "Your death?"

"If I could have spared you that, I would have," he replied. "But dying is the only way to come here. My death brought you with me."

"Where's here?" she asked.

He swung his legs over the sarcophagus they'd been laying on, held out his arms and she descended too. Looked at the tomb. Read the words engraved there: Nicholas de Valois. Born 1845. Died at Gettysburg 1863. Le Fils Perdu.

"This is you?" Ceri said, and Nick nodded. "What does that mean - Le Fils Perdu?"

"Means 'The Lost Son.'" My mother took my death very hard. Soon, you will meet her." He smiled and the expression melted away the last of Ceri's fear, and she felt tears start to her eyes. "Don't cry for me, Ceri. I'm used to this, my death."

"But I'm not," she sobbed, drawing away from him. "I'm not. Because it's already too late for us, isn't it?" Silence was his answer for a moment or two, then he spoke, took her hands, grasped them tightly.

"It doesn't have to be, Ceri. The gates between our worlds are open. We've found each other for a reason, don't you feel it?"

She considered, thought again of her mother and the vampire, Angel, and how they had managed to be together for a while, if only imperfectly. And Ceri was a Slayer too, she decided, and could be as strong as her mother was. Stronger. She couldn't fall at the first hurdle. And yes, crazy as it was, too soon though it was, she thought Nick was right. They'd been brought together for a reason, and in her heart, she believed it was for a good reason.

So she smiled and nodded.

"Let's go," Nick said, and she allowed him to guide her out of the tomb.

Outside, night had fallen. Not just any night, but one that was humid and sultry, heavy with storm clouds that scudded across an indigo sky, seemingly in a hurry to unload their drenching contents upon whoever stood beneath. Thunder growled, voice of the storm-beast that waited to pounce, and jagged silver lightning streaked, providing occasional, eerie light. Ceri thought she heard a resonance like that of many heartbeats underneath the sound of thunder.

Looking down, Ceri saw that the blood and muck of the battlefield had disappeared from both their clothes. With a kind of shock, she saw that she now wore a kind of white cotton shift dress that hung to her an-

gles, where it floated like a cloud, clinging to her body where it touched. Her hair fell dark and straight over her shoulders. When she had gone out that morning, it had been up in a loose bun. Nick was also dressed all in white, actually looked like a ghost here, all colour gone except for his pale eyes and honey hair and the scar on his forehead, which stood out lividly against his white skin. With a shaking hand, Ceri touched it; the bullet hole was perfectly dry and when she took her fingers away, no blood stained them.

"Does that hurt?" she asked, and saw him shake his head.

"No."

"And where are we now?" Ceri looked around the night-time vista. Sub-tropical trees swayed in the warm tempestuous wind, wafting the heavy scent of flowers through her whirling senses. Honeysuckle, Ceri thought, not knowing how she knew, just knowing, and magnolia. Some distance away, a huge house stood in which no lights burned.

"This is the de Valois plantation," Nick said. "Or... Or its ghost, if you like. All that remains of a once great dynasty." Ceri frowned, didn't fully understand. "Part of the Shadow Lands, Ceri. This is where I... exist, trapped here forever. Here, and the place of my death."

It hit her again, what Nick was, and she determinedly swallowed her sadness.

"Then how can I be here?" she said instead, seeming to remember that physical beings couldn't enter the Shadow Lands without long and complicated ritual, and even then, it was dangerous, often ending in the visitor's death. Was she dead then? But Nick explained, and she understood, kind of.

"You can come here because I've guided you. Perhaps normally that might not be possible, but the gates are open, Ceri, and you are not a normal person. You're an immortal, a... a supernatural being in your own right, and in these circumstances, all is possible. I've been in your world. I wanted... wanted you to share mine." He paused, frowned, as though a less pleasant thought had occurred to him, or maybe he had been suppressing it.

"And I feel... I feel there is another reason... That there are things you must learn." Ceri felt her heart begin beat faster, so hard in her chest that surely it was audible? Things she must learn? God, wasn't coming here, to the Land of the Dead, enough of a lesson?

"Come on." Nick tugged at her hand, pulled her toward the great plantation house. They walked across lush, damp grass, and Ceri felt wetness seep into her shoes, which had been transformed into fabric pumps, felt the hem of her dress become heavier, knew that was collecting water too. She felt like a heroine out of some old

fashioned melodrama or something. Any moment now an evil villain dressed all in black would appear and kidnap her. Then she shuddered, found herself thinking of another evil villain, perhaps the ultimate evil villain, who had captured her mother and...

Will I never forget?

And tried to put it from her mind again.

Up close, she saw that the plantation house was in a state of advanced decay. The stonework cladding was chipped - great hunks of it had crumbled away from it, to lay littered around the earth beneath. The marble pillars that made up the portico were worn, and the statues that had been built into them had no faces - they had long since been eroded. What paint remained around the windows was peeling and almost colourless. The vines that grew up the stonework had died to withered branches. Yet despite this, Ceri thought it beautiful, in a heart-aching way. And if it was beautiful now, then what must it have been like when it was... alive?

She remembered what she had been thinking about only that morning in bed. Did everything have a spirit, she'd asked herself? Well, it certainly seemed to. Even bricks and mortar were transferred into the Shadow Lands, but they were somehow lessened, leached of their life and colour.

"Come inside." And she let herself go with him, needing to see, curiosity overwhelming any fear she felt. Inside, the sense of decayed grandeur continued. The entrance was a great atrium, with a grand staircase situated at its centre. A crystal chandelier overhung it all. But many of the crystals had dropped to the floor, where they'd smashed: Ceri felt them crunch under her feet. The staircase had lost much of its gilding and the carpet was threadbare, its pattern destroyed by time and... death. But how did things die?

"How can this place be here?" she asked. "I can understand the battlefield but... but... How?"

Nick shrugged as though he'd never questioned it. Or even considered it. But he was an intelligent being, dead or not, so it seemed unlikely. Surely he had thought about it?

"It just is," he replied. "I don't know why. Except that everything that has ever been and ever will be comes to the Shadow Lands eventually. When someone dies, when a civilisation dies, when a thought dies, it comes here. That's all I know." He smiled faintly. The ghost of a smile, Ceri thought. "No doubt the intellectuals in Elysia would know."

"What's Elysia?"

Nick shrugged again, as though that was of no consequence to him either.

"A place far from here. It's told that souls who are close

to Ascension go to Elysia, but the rest of us..." He left the sentence unfinished, but his meaning was clear. Nick wasn't close to Ascension. Was he sad for that? No. He seemed to accept it. For now. But what would happen when he began to question living this unending death? Perhaps that was when the quest - if there was a quest - for Ascension began?

"No more sadness, Ceri," he said. "Death is something you need never consider for yourself, or at least, not under normal circumstances." He reached out, touched her hair, then her face. "You're immortal. Undying."

"But I feel sad for you," she said, close to crying again, but he just smiled that smile.

"I told you, I'm used to it. Now no more. Come upstairs with me."

"Upstairs?"

"My mother will wish to meet you. To see that there is still life in the warm world."

She didn't question him, was beginning to understand the fascination the living held for the dead, their warmth, their colour, their life. It didn't occur to Ceri that Nick might not want to let her go back; she knew instinctively that he was not a ghost greedy for her life, her warmth. He was just happy to share his world with her, as she could now share hers with him. For as long as it lasted.

They walked up the staircase, along a dimly-lit corridor hung with cobwebs, which smelt faintly of dust and decline. From what Ceri saw of the house, it wasn't a like a haunted house, not a frightening place, but sad, like Nick was sad. Sad from lack of vitality. Again, she found it strangely lovely. Was death, she wondered, beginning to attract her, when she supposed she should be repulsed? No use wondering. She was here now, and must learn whatever there was to learn. When she went back to the living world, she could relate what she'd seen, and maybe it would help. But part of her didn't want to help. She wanted to be able to have access to Nick and his world forever. Wanted to explore more of this strange realm.

Nick led her to a salon which had once been decorated in brilliant shades of gilded aquamarine and royal blue but which had now faded to pale imitations. In the room, a woman stood by the window, looking out at the night sky. Upon their entrance, she turned, stared. Her face, exquisite in her pallor, held a question, and a little fear. Eyes the colour of faded sapphires looked into Ceri's.

"You are warm," she said, in a French accent that sounded like music. "Why have you brought a warm person here?" This to Nick. "You know it is forbidden."

"Maman, something has happened. Someone from the

warm world has caused damage to the Veil that imprisons us. I can cross over freely now, and I have brought Ceri here. She is no ordinary human, Maman."

The woman - an older version of her son - came closer to Ceri, and Ceri felt waves of cold emanate from her. Obviously she didn't have Nick's ability to warm herself, and she seemed less substantial than her son, although still solid, almost still human. Almost.

"Non, I feel that she is different, but she is still forbidden here. You take a risk, Nicholas, with a living person's life-force. And I feel that now is not the time to take risks." She went to the window again. "The slaves, they are restless tonight. They are drumming, singing their songs, and I have heard that the Voodoo Queen visits with them." She closed her eyes. "I hear them, Nicholas. Like a heartbeat inside me. Ah... To have a beating heart again." Now she looked toward Ceri again. "You are so beautiful, Ceri. So warm. My son was wrong to bring you here, he has put you in danger because of your vitality. But since you are here, I am Gabrielle de Valois." She extended a slim white hand, and tentatively Ceri took it. Gasp as the coldness from Gabrielle infiltrated her skin, seemed to spread throughout her. Although she knew it was rude, she snatched her hand away. The chill left a lingering imprint that remained for hours after.

"I'm sorry..." she began, but Gabrielle just smiled.

"I understand. Our touch can be painful to you who still live." She smiled in Nick's direction. "My son is one of the lucky ones; he can be warm, as you are. But even he cannot be warm always. Always he must return here to restore himself. We ghosts are bound here, no matter how much we visit your world and pretend to be part of it."

"Maman..." Nick began, but Gabrielle shook her head.

"Non, Nicholas. I cannot blame you. If I could, I would do it too." She closed her eyes, sighed. "Go to the slave quarters, Nicholas. See why they drum and chant so. I cannot bear their noise. See what makes them so afraid."

"Yes, Maman." Nick turned to Ceri. "Come with me. Perhaps what you need to learn lies with the slaves."

Filled with a hundred questions, Ceri could only nod and follow Nick, after a rushed goodbye to Gabrielle, who merely watched her sadly.

"Why is your mother here with you?" she finally asked Nick when they went outside the house.

"I was my parents' only child. All their hopes, their dreams, their wishes, went into me. When I was killed, my mother pined away for me. She is here because she cannot bear to let me go. And of course, after the war, the plantation went to ruin, and..."

"Your father?"

"He's not here. I have never seen him. He is either Ascended or elsewhere."

Ceri thought on this as they walked through the heavy night. As she walked, she heard the sound of drumbeats, the sound of chanting, the sound of wailing singing. The sound of the plantation slaves.

"How do you have slaves even after your death? And... and slavery was abolished..." Nick stopped walking, turned to her.

"Ceri, these slaves were part of us, part of our lives when we lived. I know it is difficult to comprehend in your modern society, but to us, our slaves were our family. Oh, some plantation owners were cruel, some were barbaric, but we were not. To our slaves, we were not only masters, but mothers and fathers too. They relied on us for everything..."

"But they were taken from their homes, their countries..."

"Many of our slaves were born here, they knew nothing else. And when they died, their spirits chose to stay here."

"Chose? Who would choose slavery?" Ceri couldn't comprehend this way of thinking. No person should be a slave to another, no matter the circumstances.

"Ceri, they loved us, and they love us still. And really, they are no longer slaves, because the dead serve no-one. Except perhaps the Death Lords and the One Light, and none of those things bother us much here." He shrugged. "This is the way it is. The way we are. No more. No less."

Oh, why was it so complicated? Ceri wondered. Each moment here deepened her confusion, shook her preconceived ideas about life and death. And attraction. Here she was, a child no longer at her young age, undying, warm and breathing, fatally attracted to this creature of the Dead World. Were affairs of the heart always so complicated? Or was it only complicated until you met the Right One? And how did you know who the fabled Right One was? She wondered too, if the Veil was repaired again, would she still be able to see Nick? Had his coming through meant he could always be able to pass through now?

"Have you ever been to our world before - since you died, I mean?"

"Ah, yes. There are parts of the Veil that are always thin, but not always to all souls. That's what a haunting is. A place that meant a lot to a person - their place of death, or where they lived or loved - will often be accessible to that person's spirit. Although that's not always so." He smiled, touched her hair and Ceri felt a shiver run through her that had nothing to do with death. "If

you were to visit the plantation ruins in Louisiana, or the battlefield of Gettysburg, you may see me, if you're properly attuned. But nowhere else. Although, the cemetery in Chicago will be important to me from now on. Because it's where I first saw you."

"Oh." Moved by this last statement, Ceri felt her throat lock with emotion. "I've just found you, and if you can't come back..."

He laid a finger against her mouth.

"Hush. We have now, and now is all any of us ever have. Tomorrow is never guaranteed, Ceri."

Surrounded by the drumming sounds, the eerie chanting of the slaves, the rain began to unleash itself upon them. Nick was soon soaked, but Ceri felt the fat droplets pass right through her, as though she were the insubstantial one, leaving her dry and untouched. Only the chill on her skin told her that the ghost rain was touching her, and the chill on her skin went right down to her bones as the pressure of the rain increased. Strangely, Ceri found the sensation exhilarating, if unnerving. She found herself in Nick's arms, kissing him, and his mouth was warm against hers, his tongue warm in her mouth, his hands warm upon her body, and she understood the meaning of passion, where before she had only ever rejected it. Passion born of fear...And even as they kissed, she wondered if she would ever know passion born of love's purity, not of fear, or hate, or death.

Nick pulled away first; he appeared both afraid and aroused, and Ceri understood his mixed emotions. What could come of this union? Nothing but pain, she guessed. But she wanted it anyway...

Again he pulled her along, not talking now, perhaps past talking, until they reached clearing where a group of thirteen people had gathered. The plantation slaves. They sat in a circle around a mulatto woman of around forty years old. Some of them were drumming, all were singing that weird chant. Before the mulatto woman there was an altar upon which a set of tarot cards were laid out. The cards in the centre were Death and The Tower. On either side of these were The Magician, The High Priestess, The Knave of Cups and The Moon. Below and above were The Fool and The Hermit.

When Ceri and Nick arrived, the drumming and the chanting stopped abruptly and the woman looked up at them. Ceri saw that she was very beautiful, but her eyes were white, except for two half-moon shaped pupils.

"Marie Laveau," Nick murmured.

"Who?"

"The Voodoo Queen of New Orleans..." He bowed his head in her direction and her apparently sightless eyes saw him, because she smiled, but the smile was cold

and somewhat frigid.

"Bon nuit, Nicholas." She spoke another sentence in Creole French that Ceri couldn't understand. Then she fixed her white gaze on Ceri, who squirmed uncomfortably. "Les deux mondes sont unis..."

"What's she saying?" she asked Nick, who translated as Marie Laveau spoke.

"The two worlds are united... The gateway that must remain closed is opened... And the Warm Lands will become Cold and all will... perish..."

"Les Seigneurs de Morts..."

"The Lords of Death will ride forth and... Oh, God... The Neverborn stir in the abyss of the Oblivion into which all souls will be sucked..." Nick fell silent and listened to the rest. "She speaks of how, if the gateway can be closed, then the rest of the damage will heal itself. Something deliberately opened must be deliberately closed." He frowned. "Closed with love."

Marie Laveau stopped speaking and closed her odd eyes and slowly, she, her cards and the altar upon which they were laid, faded away. The slaves began drumming and singing again until it was a howl, and Ceri clapped her hands over her ears, felt Nick draw her away.

"This is why you were allowed to come here," he said, sounding infinitely sad. "Not for me, but to receive the warning."

"But what use is a warning if I still don't know what to do about it? How can I know?"

"Is there no-one who would know?"

Eleven

Four thirty p.m. Morgan and Dan Healy were still in the archives department, trying to find something useful. So far, they had uncovered nothing new. Francis Breton's general notes on his knowledge of the Shadow Lands told them no more than they already knew. That the gateway could be opened and that travelling between the warm world and the dead world was possible. And that such an undertaking was extremely hazardous for the living.

To make matters worse, adding to the general gloom that pervaded both men's minds, Healy had received a call saying that Matt Chandler had been in his apartment all along. Dead. The cause of death was uncertain as yet. Apparently, he had been found sitting in a chair in front of a still blaring television, a bottle of beer gripped in cold, stiffening fingers. On the floor, a half-eaten TV dinner. So far the only clue to the possible cause of his death was the expression on his face, which could have been due to extreme pain or extreme

Ceri just shook her head, and knew she had to return home. Had to give the others the vague piece of information, if such it could be called, which she had committed to memory almost instinctively, and hope it made sense to someone. Maybe her grandmother would know? She had to tell Morgan to bring Joyce back so she could be informed of this latest small, but significant development.

"I must go back." Fleeting alarm. "Can I go back?" A sad smile flitted across Nick's face.

"Yes. But I can't come with you. I must... regain my ability to come to you another time. Or do you never want to see me again? Can you consider it worthwhile to care, only to have it taken away again?"

"Can you?" But she thought about what he said, and she knew that to care, even for a short time, was better than never feeling at all. She had been hiding her inner self away for too long. Time to break out. To take risks. She smiled then, nodded. "Yeah. It's worthwhile. For however long." Face the heartache later.

They kissed again then, and then Ceri felt that rushing feeling, knew she was being sent back.

When she next opened her eyes, she was alone in the tomb in the Chicago cemetery.

Suddenly terrified, shaken by her experience, feeling lonely and empty, she half-crawled out into the late afternoon air. Headed toward home to confess to her mother that she'd lied. And to tell her everything she'd learned.

fear.

"They're guessing heart attack," Healy told Morgan, who listened to this news with an increasingly despondent air. "They're also guessing that the time of death was some time between midnight and two am. And they didn't mention anything about any stolen files either. If they'd been there, the police would have seen them, because they've got Property of the University of Chicago stamped all over them."

"So how old was Chandler?" Morgan enquired.

"Mid-twenties. Much too young for a heart attack. That's what you were thinking, wasn't it?"

"Yes. That's what I was thinking. And I'm also thinking that perhaps he was visited by something that caused him to die of fright." Morgan saw Healy nod, saw an expression of fear pass across the professor's face.

"Something big going on here, Morgan. Some huge power."

Morgan reflected on this, knew it was true. Bigger than

maybe he'd imagined. No doubt bigger than whoever had performed the ritual had expected. World threateningly big? Maybe. Eventually.

Oh yes, Healy was right to look afraid, and while the idea repelled Morgan, he found it excited him too. He found himself thinking dark thoughts again, as though the idea of such a force had opened a dark gateway of its own inside his mind. The events of earlier, with Ria, and his sickening guilt, were half-forgotten, or at least, not so important now.

You could share in this power, Morgan. Ah, so the voice was back, was it? Wheedling into his thoughts, muddying them with its unclean insinuation. His own voice, he reminded himself. At least, it sounded like his own voice. You could harness something you let go centuries ago. A chance to be...

With an effort, he shut the voice off, but the effort was greater now, because suddenly this wasn't just about some silly infatuated student offering herself to him on a silver platter. This was about something much more tempting. Power. But the way he was thinking today was more than just a little crazy, and he had no idea why these thoughts should be entering his head. It was disturbing, because he didn't want to go back to those early days of his immortality, when he was soulless, hurting people just because he could. Just because he had the...

Power... Oh, don't you, Morgan? Don't you want it? Doesn't every man dream of ruling his own life? And those of others...?

Healy was talking, and Morgan shook himself of his increasingly murky inner reverie.

"I'm sorry," he said, not really feeling too sorry at all, feeling kind of disassociated from everything, like maybe he'd taken drugs or something. "I wasn't really concentrating just then."

Healy gave him a confused glance, then spoke again.

"I was saying that the officer who called about Chandler's death told me that the three students I told him about have gone missing too. Sally Adams, Chandler's girlfriend, Peter Harvey and John Knight. All sophomores. No one's seen them since before last night."

"You think they're involved?"

"Seems likely, in hindsight."

"And you think they did the ritual?"

"Seems probable." Healy sighed, shook his head slowly, as though trying to stir his thoughts into some kind of cohesion. "Peter's a believer. Utterly obsessed with trying to prove the reality of supernatural entities. John's a sceptic, taking the course in order to prove the opposite, believing that everything has a basis in scientific logic. And Sally has a perfectly open mind. They're al-

ways having long deep discussions - heated ones from what I've seen. In lectures, they'll always take great pleasure in trashing each others' opinions. Occasionally, so I've heard, the two boys have come to blows. But strangely perhaps, they all remain firm friends." Healy put his head in his hands. "Last night was Hallowe'en, yes? What better night than to...? Oh, stupid, stupid kids." He looked up at Morgan. "And I've been stupid too. Overlooking the blindingly obvious."

"Which is?"

"Francis Breton is interred in a cemetery in Chicago. About twenty minutes' drive away. How enticing would that be, to perform the ritual in Breton's tomb?"

"Oh, very, I should imagine."

Morgan knew it was inappropriate, but he found himself smiling, although what was amusing about that, he couldn't quite think. It was as though a dark cloud had formed inside his mind, fogging the good thoughts and letting the... bad... ones through.

"I suppose that's quite inventive, anyway," Morgan murmured. "But obvious too, when you think about it. Where better to perform a death ritual than in its inventor's tomb?"

With an effort, he wiped the smile off his face because Healy obviously didn't see the delicious black humour of the situation. Healy was looking at him as though he thought Morgan had taken leave of his senses. And in truth, that was exactly how Morgan felt. He felt himself surrendering to the increasing inner (evil?) curiosity that was beginning to take him over. He was determined to check out this tomb, see what lay inside.

"I think we should go there," Healy said, not sounding overly thrilled at the prospect, so that Morgan wondered if he'd unconsciously pushed out and implanted the thought in Healy's mind. "Do you think I should call the police?"

Morgan shook his head at once. That idea certainly wasn't one of his own and he rejected the notion at once. He didn't want them involved, any more than he had wanted them involved in talking to Buffy and the others earlier. No, not yet. Maybe never. Why involve the police when the three students were almost certainly dead? Why not save all the knowledge for himself?

What was that thought? Save it for himself? He was trying to put it right. Wasn't he? Why would he want to keep important information from anyone else? He shouldn't be thinking this way. Thinking of using... whatever they might find to his own advantage... Keeping it from Buffy and the others. That would be... It would be wrong.

Ah, but the power, Morgan. That word again, throbbing

in his brain like a pulse. Power. If you can...

"So, should we go?" Healy's voice came at him from a great distance. Morgan stared at him for a while. Nodded slowly.

"Yes," he said decisively. "Yes, I really think we should." He thought of Buffy again then. Supposed he ought to phone, tell her what was holding him up for so long. Let her know when he'd be back.

When Buffy picked up, she sounded upset, scared too.

"Morgan, I was kind of hoping you'd call. But I didn't want to bother you..."

"Oh? What's the problem?" He didn't want her to have a problem because it might hinder him.

"It's Ceri." Oh, now he heard tears in her voice, knew Ceri had yet again done something to upset her mother.

"What about her?"

"She... she's gone on the missing list, Morgan. She lied to me this morning about where she was going and to Felipe too. No one knows where she is."

Little bitch, Morgan thought. Over-indulged, selfish little bitch...

"Ceri can look after herself," he said, his tone surprisingly hard.

"That's what Felipe said, but Morgan, I think something's happened to her..."

"Well, if it has, she only has herself to blame. I suppose she's cut herself off as usual?"

"Yes, but..."

"There you are then. I doubt she's in trouble. Just up to no good, as ever."

"Morgan, what's wrong with you? You sound like you don't care."

He took a deep breath, irritated, tried to control it because he saw Healy look at him strangely too. Moving further away, he lowered his voice.

"Buffy, Dan Healy and I have discovered something very useful and we have to follow it up. It's important."

"Well, so's my daughter." Ah, now she sounded angry as well as upset. Typical Buffy. Couldn't get her own way, so she resorted to becoming angry with him. Morgan could see where Ceri got her unreasonableness from. "I want you to come home, Morgan. I need you."

"You'll have to do without me," Morgan said, unmoved.

"I have to follow this up now."

"I can't believe you're being so unsupportive." Buffy sounded like she was having trouble speaking.

"Ceri's had one too many chances, Buffy. I shouldn't bother worrying about her. Quite obviously, she doesn't bother worrying about you."

"I'm her mother. Mothers worry. Morgan, for God's sake..."

"See you later. Not sure when," he said, and hung up before she could answer. Turned his phone off so she couldn't call him back, shut up his mind so she couldn't reach him that way either. He didn't know why, but he felt resentful toward her. Didn't want to talk to her anymore. Couldn't believe how he'd just about crawled to her that morning. After all, what had he done that was so bad? A few kisses. A few caresses. So what?

Madness, his normal voice spoke up. You're going mad, Morgan. You know what was so wrong. It was a betrayal of trust.

No, the other voice contradicted. Not taking it all the way was madness. Buffy thinks she owns you, Morgan. But no person owns another...

"Let's go," Morgan told Healy in a perfectly normal tone.

"Let's see what we can find."

He noticed how Healy appeared uneasy, saw how he looked at him as though maybe the... weird... whatever it was... inside him showed.

"If you think you should go home instead..." Healy began, but Morgan just smiled and shook his head.

"No, they can cope there. We need to find out what's going on."

They took Morgan's car, drove the twenty minutes journey to the cemetery, with Healy directing. The cemetery was in a run-down, poorly maintained part of the city. The houses in the surrounding area were long-deserted, condemned and awaiting demolition. Morgan guessed that the cemetery, set around a no longer used wrecked church, would also be bulldozed over to make way for whatever development, if any, that would be built here in its stead.

They parked just around the corner in an unlit alley, walked the short distance to the cemetery gates, the lock of which had long since been broken by vandals. As soon as Morgan walked through them, he sensed the change in atmosphere. Oh yes, something different here, all right. He could sense it, scent it. Felt the presence of many spirits surrounding him. Looking around, he saw shapes flitting about, insubstantial wraiths in the cold air, making it colder still. Healy had stopped walking, seemed reluctant to go on.

"It's here," Healy said, his voice a kind of moan, his eyes closed. "Can you feel it too?"

"Yes." Yes, of course he could. Anyone, even a person who wasn't attuned to the spirit world, would be able to feel this. And he felt the source of the main power too. It was deeper in the cemetery, beckoning him. "This way," he told Healy, and walked off, hardly caring if Healy followed or not. Although he knew he would. Healy was so afraid, he wouldn't want to be left alone in the haunted graveyard.

After about five minutes, he found Breton's tomb. The door to the small mausoleum was closed, but the iron gates in the fence surrounding it looked as though they'd been blasted apart. Walking through them, Morgan made to try the door.

"Morgan," Healy said, his voice quavering. "Do you really think it's wise, opening that?"

"This is what we came here for, isn't it?" The urge to push the door open was almost overpowering.

"But we... I don't think we thought this through properly. The spirits out here... I didn't realise... Maybe we should go back."

"And do what? Come back with what? We can only look, assess what's happened. Hopefully the students will have been frightened off by what they did and have left Breton's notes here. Then we can follow the instructions, close the gateway and have done with it."

"Do you believe it'll be that simple?" Healy sounded supremely unconvinced and Morgan didn't blame him. Because Morgan didn't believe his own words either. He just knew he wanted to go inside. Had to. Never mind the consequences.

"Look, Dan. Enough damage has been done already. Can you, in all conscience, leave here and give it time to get worse?"

Gentle persuasion now, Morgan thought. If Healy still didn't agree, he'd force him to. Or else just go in alone. Either way, he was entering that tomb.

"No. No, Morgan. I don't want that. But we haven't even tried to protect ourselves and..."

Not giving Healy the opportunity to finish, Morgan pushed the door open. Felt the icy chill rush out at him, smelled the charnel house stench of death. Breathed it in. He grasped Healy's wrist.

"Come inside," he said, ignoring Healy's reluctance, and pulled him over the threshold.

Inside the tomb, the ruins of the students lay littered around. Various body parts that had once belonged to Sally Adams had been thrown across the floor of the tomb as though she had exploded outward. John Knight was intact, apparently the victim of heart failure. And Peter Harvey... Well, Peter Harvey's body had been... Got at, was the only fitting description. As though something had devoured parts of it. But by far the most terrible thing was the swirling gateway that had been opened, so black against the tomb's blackness that it was dizzying in its intensity.

Morgan heard Healy give a sob of terror, heard him retch, then vomit almost uncontrollably. Again, he felt detached from the man's horror. All he could think of was the tremendous force that emanated from the gateway, felt galvanised by it, wondered if it could be har-

nessed by a living person. By him?

"Morgan, this is... This is worse than I could ever have thought... We ought to get out of here. Look." Healy pointed. "Breton's notes are scattered around. We must gather them up, take them away. Study them. Then close this... this monstrosity..."

Morgan felt his head shake, although his normal, sane self was as terrified as Healy was.

"No."

Healy stared at him, no comprehending.

"What do you mean, no?"

"Look at it, Dan. A chance to see what lies beyond death. A chance perhaps to control it. Can you see it, Dan? To have the power to control death? To..."

"That's insane, Morgan. That's... that's... It's insane..."

Morgan turned to face Healy.

"Is it?" he said softly. "You know all my life - and it's been a long one, Dan - I've wondered what it would be like to travel through the Land of the Dead, but haven't ever dared attempt it. Think, we can talk with the spirits now, freely. Find out their secrets, use them..."

"No, Morgan. We have to close it."

Pure, unalloyed dread in Healy's voice now; he stared at Morgan with huge, frightened eyes. Sweat had broken out on his forehead. But Morgan ignored the man's fear, thrust out with his mind to prevent Healy from backing out of the open door as he knew he wanted to, was about to. Began muttering long-forgotten words under his breath, in the direction of the gateway. A summoning, not of any feeble ghost, but of stronger entities. Dangerous, he knew, but he felt the darkness that had only been there partially before deepen, engulf him, take him over and he knew he didn't care about the danger.

As he muttered the words, he thought he saw the gateway bulge outward, knew that something was coming.

"Morgan!" Healy screamed, able to speak, though he was kept motionless by Morgan's mind-lock. "Morgan, Jesus!"

What was emerging, bit by dreadful bit, may have been human once - almost certainly had been - but it wasn't human any more, but a dead soul twisted and perverted by the passage of a tortured death and the stygian forces of Oblivion's pull. Serving the corrupt beings that preyed on innocent spirits, not for food, for spirits no longer had the need for sustenance, but to make slaves of them, or else bend them to their will, these terrifying spectres were the stuff of living men's nightmares. And Morgan, seeing the expression on Healy's face now, saw that the professor's worst dreams had been realised.

The creature was not unlike the thing that Buffy had

seen at the Hallowe'en ball the night before. A being clothed in a grave-shroud that was tattered, full of holes, revealing a body beneath that looked as though it were formed from dismembered body parts that had been carelessly sewn together. The occasional white flash of pitted bone poked obscenely through the putrescent skin. Its head, partially covered with a cowl, was an insectile death's head with eyes that had the same swirling quality of the opened gateway.

Morgan watched, his weird dissociation disappearing, terrified away by the appearance of this creature from beyond death. Too late, he began speaking the words that would banish the creature, but he botched them, said them wrongly, and the creature emerged fully from the gateway, looking around it with its inky gaze. It looked at - or even through - Morgan, and he shuddered as though in a fever, unable to control the spasms that racked his body. His legs gave way from under him, he collapsed to the floor, and he waited for the creature to cut out his soul with the rusty scythe it carried.

But it bypassed him and Morgan felt the icy wake of its passage as it made its way toward the paralysed Healy.

"For God's sake, man, move!" Morgan yelled, watching as the spectre came within touching distance. But Healy was terror-struck; he didn't even appear to have heard Morgan, just stared fixedly, his breathing suspended, his mind wiped clean by what he was seeing.

The creature raised its scythe above its head; Healy's eyes followed it, and Morgan knew the man was fatally fascinated. Knew he was going to die but was unable to prevent it.

The scythe swept down, through Healy's body, but it left no wound. Healy gave a hissing sigh and collapsed to the ground. As the creature pulled its scythe upward again, Morgan saw Healy's spirit pulled out of his body, which jerked once more and then stopped, his heart unable to cope with the forcible removal of its soul.

The reaper opened the bag it carried on a cord around its middle and the soul was sucked into it. Then it made its way back toward the gateway. As it passed Morgan, it stopped again, and Morgan was certain that it had only overlooked him before, that now he would suffer the same fate as Healy. But the reaper did not raise its scythe again. It looked at Morgan, and Morgan thought he saw a spark of something in the pits where its eyes should have been. Recognition, perhaps.

"You dance with Oblivion now," it said, its voice as inhuman as its appearance. "And you will serve the Darkness beyond."

Morgan shrank back as the reaper pointed a bony finger at him, saw the finger extend, and although he tried to escape it, felt it touch his body, over the area of his

heart. Frost seemed to fill him, and he felt his emotions freeze. His soul became encased in a block of spiritual ice, so that barely any of the caring, loving Morgan remained, and that which did was suppressed by the reaper's touch of death.

When the reaper withdrew its finger, Morgan found that his doubts, his worries, his guilt, had disappeared, and he felt fine. Just fine.

He watched as the reaper went back into the void beyond the gateway, then he methodically - almost robotically - picked up every piece of paper that made up Breton's notes. Going over to the gateway, he let them go and they swirled away, lost to the human world.

Then, leaving the bodies in the tomb, which he resealed with a magically repaired lock, he went back to the car. He dialled his home number and Buffy picked up. She sounded cold toward him, still angry about his hanging up on her earlier.

"Sorry about before," he said, injecting feeling he no longer felt into his voice. Decided the act must have been a good one because Buffy immediately warmed to him.

"It's okay. Ceri's back now. Morgan, she says she has something to tell us, but wants to wait until you come back. Will you be long?"

"No. No, I'm coming home now. Won't be more than half an hour."

"Good. I need you here." A pause. "Did you discover anything, Morgan? You said you thought you might."

Morgan smiled, but he didn't allow the smile into his voice.

"No," he said. "No, not a thing. False alarm. Dan's gone back to the university to carry on researching, but it all looks pretty hopeless from this end."

"Oh." Buffy sounded disappointed, like she'd been relying on him or something. "Oh well, I guess we'll have to start somewhere else. Ceri might be useful."

"I'll see you soon," Morgan said. "We can talk about it more then."

"Yeah. Yeah okay."

They said goodbye and Morgan turned off his phone. Keeping his mind carefully closed, he began the drive home, and wondered how best to deal with his Slayer wife. And anyone else who might want to prevent the arrival of... whatever was coming. For Morgan, in his newly dead heart, knew that he could be a greater power than he had ever been. Not just a collector of souls for his own good, using them to keep him from falling into his old, evil ways.

No, now he knew he could be a master of souls. He could remove them, sell them to the Darkness. Make slaves of them. And gain favour in the eyes of whatever

was about to invade the warm world.
And if anyone tried to stop him...?

Well, he'd just take their souls too...

Twelve

In the lounge, Buffy, Morgan, Willow, Xander, Ceri and Ramirez sat in tense silence, all lost in their own thoughts. Looking round at them, Buffy could see the differing emotions on each face.

Willow was quite obviously afraid to speak, unwilling to spill out the contents of her dream for everyone to hear. Buffy knew that she was especially afraid of confessing to Xander, especially after she'd told Buffy that she'd made a point of convincing him that everything was fine.

In turn, Xander was uptight, having been dragged away from work early to attend this so-called family meeting about the current situation. He had been less than pleased to learn that a big supernatural event was going down, even less pleased because it had occurred when he had discovered at work that morning that one of the partners had gone sick overnight and that Xander had to take over his work. Consequently, he had an important case in court coming up very soon. When informed over the phone by Buffy that this was serious, he'd merely given a big sigh and said he'd be back as soon as he could. But even over the phone line, Buffy could tell that Xander was not a happy man. After listening to what Willow had to say, Buffy guessed he'd lose the rest of his happy thoughts.

Ceri and Ramirez sat together on the two-seater sofa. Ceri was upset and could barely bring herself to look at anyone, but even during the shouting match she'd had with Buffy when she'd arrived home, distraught and apologetic, she hadn't given away anything she'd learned. Instead she'd insisted on waiting until everyone was home, so she could tell them all together. Buffy shuddered to think what Ceri might be about to tell them. By the look on her daughter's face, she knew it would be nothing good. Frankly, she was pleased of Ramirez' presence; he kept Ceri calm, and it was to him that Ceri had instantly gravitated when Buffy had lost her temper with her. He who had mediated in the following argument.

In a way, Buffy felt hurt that Ceri seemed to be so close with Ramirez, who sat now regarding everyone with unreadable black eyes. Ramirez' custom was not to speak until he had formed a well-rounded and logical opinion on everything.

And as for Morgan, he sat apart from everyone else, as unreadable as his son. And seemingly unreach-

able too. Insular, like an island in an unfathomable sea. Although he had been friendly enough on his return home, Buffy knew there was something still badly wrong with him. And as important as the rip in the Veil was, for Buffy, Morgan's strangeness was even more important.

Above all, over the past twelve years, she'd always known, that whatever else might happen, she'd have Morgan to rely on. He was her rock, her anchor in the often stormy sea of her life. He had been there for her when times became almost too difficult to go on. Without Morgan, she guessed she might never have been free of Angelus. Since that time, Morgan had been there to give her love and reassure her that everything would be all right. Sure, they'd had their ups and downs. Just because they were soul mates, didn't mean they didn't ever fight or disagree. But even the worst fights were exhilarating in their own way. Because there was always the making up to look forward to.

But Buffy felt differently about this new change in Morgan. She felt as though she might be losing him, and the thought of that terrified her more than any demon, vampire or Big Evil she might face. Because without Morgan, she thought she'd crumble. She supposed she'd go on for the sake of her children, but once they were grown - well, what would be the point of going on without the one person she'd believed would never leave her?

Surely though, her thoughts were just crazy. But then she reminded herself that today, although she'd tried and tried, she just hadn't been able to reach him. Not by phone, which was turned off at his end. And not by their telepathy, because his mind was also closed to her. That worried her more than the phone, because Morgan never, ever cut himself off from her. And that freaked her out, because she couldn't understand why he was doing it to her. More and more, she had the devastating, yet insistent feeling that overnight he had just stopped loving her. But surely that was even more crazy? A person didn't stop loving someone just like that. So Buffy tried to push these thoughts aside, although they niggled within her, and she spoke into the silence.

"So, who's gonna start?" Even to her, her voice sounded too loud, and the silence deepened. Unable to help herself, she glanced over at Morgan, who returned her

gaze with a smile, but the smile wasn't heartfelt, and definitely not comforting. Feeling like she wanted to scream, she looked away abruptly.

Please let him still love me. Please let my mind just be playing tricks. But it's not. I know it's not. What's happened to him...?

She saw his mouth twitch in another tiny smile that wasn't altogether pleasant and she wondered if he'd heard her. Well, she thought savagely, she hoped he had. Bastard! Buffy just hoped no-one started arguing, because she didn't think she could deal with it right then. She'd crack up.

"Okay, look," she persisted. "I don't have anything new to tell, so maybe someone else better start."

She saw Xander nod, saw him look at Willow.

"Seems I haven't been kept properly informed," he muttered, causing Willow to flush under her exhausted pallor. "So maybe Will should tell us." He smiled tightly. "Yeah, Will. Share it with us, why don't you?"

Willow cast a helpless look at Buffy, who just shrugged, then nodded her encouragement. So Willow began speaking, telling them all about her dream, about how Oz had been there, in the library at their old school, and how he had turned savage and tried to kill her. As she spoke - leaving out the bits about how Oz had still excited her, Buffy noted - Xander's face became more and more upset. By the time Willow had finished speaking, he seemed consumed with anger. But, to Buffy's surprise - and shock - the anger wasn't directed at the ghostly Oz, but at Willow herself.

"Why didn't you tell me, Will?" Oh, his voice was controlled, but it was obvious that he wanted to lose that control, to shout. At once, Willow went to take his hand, but Xander snatched it away. "You know, I'm glad we had the foresight to send Jordan upstairs, because I wouldn't want him to have heard this. Dreaming of old boyfriends, Will? Aren't I good enough for you or something?"

"Xander, it wasn't like that, weren't you listening?" But Willow's face was flaming red, and Buffy saw that she couldn't quite meet his eyes.

Giving her thoughts away, Buffy thought, thinking how weird it was that one day, life was going great, and the next day, it spiralled out of control like a car hitting a bend at high speed.

"Oz wanted to kill me, Xander. If I hadn't woken up... Or rather, remembered the words that Morgan taught me to get out of the dream - I'd probably have died."

Xander closed his eyes at this.

"He still loves you, Will. Even after his death, he still loves you. How d'you think that makes me feel?"

"Xander, this isn't about you," Buffy said, defending

Willow at last, but Xander shook his head.

"Yeah, yeah it is about me. And our son, and the child she carries now." He paused, seemed almost unable to articulate his fear. "Will could be taken from us all. She nearly was last night, wasn't she? And what about when we die, Will? Am I gonna have to fight him for my own wife?"

"No, Xander. Of course not." Willow sounded ready to choke.

"Well, I don't know how you can say that, Will, because quite obviously, nothing's certain. Not even death. When we die, and if we go to the Shadow Lands, then how can I be sure that he won't be there waiting to take you from me? I mean, who'd have thought that Oz would be so vindictive? But it seems he is, right?"

He stared at Morgan now. "How are we gonna deal with this? Can't you summon Oz and send him away or something?"

Buffy saw Morgan take a deep breath, saw his eyes glitter dangerously just for a second, so fleetingly that she thought maybe she'd imagined it. But she knew she hadn't.

"Why do you assume that I can do anything?" Morgan asked, and Buffy felt a chill emanate from him, so cold it froze her blood. Then, just as quickly, it was gone. Xander, Buffy noticed, didn't seem to have felt anything unusual, because he went right on talking, caught up in his own turmoil.

"Well, you're the hot shot magician, right?" he said, rather tactlessly, emotion apparently getting the better of his good sense. "I mean, I can't believe that after two thousand years, you don't know how to do that. Or that you don't know how to control anything else that's going on. I mean," he carried on, and Buffy believed that he was quite enjoying himself in a spiteful, grim kind of way, "you got all those old books upstairs, right? Not to mention friends in the university. I just find it hard to believe that there's no information that can help put this right."

Buffy waited - along with everyone else - for Morgan to erupt. Given his present state of mind - whatever that was - she wouldn't have been surprised if he did. But although he went slightly pale, he just answered calmly, his tone almost infuriatingly reasonable.

"First of all, Xander, those books upstairs don't deal with this particular problem. Demonology, yes. Undead, yes. Calling, controlling and banishing spirits and entities, again, yes. Even dream magic. Sorcery. But not this. Quite frankly, death isn't something I want to dabble with." That smile again, that cold smile that definitely didn't reach his eyes now. "As you quite rightly point out, Xander, I have been around for over two mil-

lennia, and I don't especially have the desire to mess around with it now. And, old as I may be, I don't know everything about everything. I'm not an all-powerful God."

He fell silent again, seemed to withdraw into himself.

"Well, what about the archives then?" Xander seemed to have lost a lot of his previous bluster under Morgan's iciness.

"The archives? I've spent all day in archives with Dan Healy." Now he began to relate everything that had happened to him that day. Buffy listened, heard how he'd gone to the cemetery where the inventor of the ritual had been interred. "Unfortunately, we didn't find anything there," he finished. "A waste of time."

Buffy frowned. Oh, it all sounded very plausible, very reasonable. Very true. But Morgan sounded almost too sincere, too convincing. But why would he want to pretend at being normal? And why was she suddenly finding it hard to believe him? But the others seemed satisfied with his explanation. Maybe she was being paranoid again?

"So what do we do about Oz?" Xander said. "I can't have Willow upset like this. Jesus, she's pregnant. Anything could happen. You must be able to do something to help her, at least, Morgan?"

Morgan stared at Xander steadily for a few seconds, and Buffy had the increasingly awful notion that he was about to refuse his help. Then he smiled and nodded.

"All right. Willow, I'll teach you another spell that will ensure that nothing bad can infiltrate your dreams. Including ghostly old boyfriends." He ignored Xander's look of pain, just concentrated on Willow.

"And that will work?" she asked.

"Yes. Yes, it'll work. I promise."

Buffy found herself listening for a lie in his voice, was more relieved than she knew she should have been when she detected none. Nothing but his true, normal self, at least toward Willow. So, satisfied that for now anyway, Willow would be safe in her dreams, she now decided to let Ceri have her say.

"All right, Ceri. What was so important this morning that you had to lie to me and Felipe so you could do it?"

Ceri flushed as red as Willow had before, and Buffy found herself feeling sorry for her. Had to remind herself that Ceri had caused her utter terror for a couple of very long hours before she'd eventually turned up unharmed. So, although she knew this was difficult for Ceri, she decided that whatever she had to tell, it didn't excuse her behaviour. The subject would still be far from closed.

"I met a boy," Ceri muttered. Going even more scarlet, she moved in closer to Ramirez and Buffy was again

floored by that sense of... what? Jealousy? Sadness that Ceri didn't relate to her in that way? That she obviously felt closer to this emotionally repressed priest than she did to her own mother? Oh where, Buffy wondered, had she gone so wrong with Ceri?

"A boy?" Buffy repeated blankly. "What boy?"

A boy? My Ceri has been dating...?

"He's called Nick," Ceri began, and then Buffy listened to the story about how her daughter had not only met a ghost, but had actually gone with him through a rip in the Veil into the Shadow Lands themselves. The explanation did nothing for Buffy's peace of mind. Nothing whatever.

She saw everyone else's expressions as they listened, struck speechless with shock, as she was. Willow and Xander seemed to have forgotten their conflict for now; they just focussed all their attention on what Ceri was telling them. Ceri had moved even closer to Ramirez now. Although they were sitting, he seemed to be physically supporting her, holding her hands, giving her gentle words of encouragement when she faltered in her story. Buffy was amazed at his calm. For herself, Buffy wanted to... Well, she didn't know what she wanted to do to her wilful daughter, but it certainly didn't involve sitting down and being nice to her.

Again, she glanced at Morgan to see his reaction, but really, she didn't need to see. Pure fury poured off him in a sickening flow.

"You mean to tell us," he said slowly, "that you crossed over into the Shadow Lands with a dead boy that you barely know?"

Dead boy...

Ceri looked at the floor.

"Uh... Well, it wasn't quite that simple..."

"Not that simple?" Morgan repeated. "Not that simple?"

"I didn't really understand what was going on..."

"No, Ceri. You never really do, do you? You never stop to consider anyone else's feelings but your own. Ceri does what Ceri wants..."

"Morgan, let her speak," Buffy interrupted, but Morgan just went on talking.

"I think she's said enough, don't you?" As though Buffy had no right to express an opinion. As though she wasn't even there. "You crossed the threshold over into the Land of the Dead without knowing what you were doing. Without telling anyone where you were going. You could have been lost forever, you stupid child, and what would that have done to your mother? Broken her heart. Is that what you want, Ceri? To break your mother's heart?"

His voice had risen to a shout and Ceri had begun

to sob. Buffy, horrified by this unprecedented attack of Morgan's on Ceri, whom normally he defended, couldn't respond.

"And do you know what can happen to living souls who go into the Shadow Lands?" he continued. "Living death, Ceri..."

"Shut up!" Buffy finally pulled herself together. "Just shut up, Morgan, you're being unkind and unfair. Can't you see she's upset?"

"Upset?!" Morgan yelled, jerked to his feet like a puppet on a string, so that Buffy became truly afraid that he was losing his mind. "Upset! We're all upset, Buffy, but we don't all..."

"Father, what's done is done." Ramirez spoke quietly into the war-like atmosphere. Now he had an arm around Ceri, was cuddling her like she was a little girl again, and Ceri was crying into his shirt. "Ceri knows that what she did was wrong, but she has had the courage to come and tell us because she knows how important her knowledge could be."

He met Morgan's eyes, stared at him implacably, not dropping his gaze even under the full force of his father's fury. Buffy had to admire him; Morgan was capable of doing considerable damage to the unprotected mind of a non-telepath, but Ramirez seemed not to care. He would, Buffy knew, defend what he saw as right up until death, if he had to. Not for nothing did Ramirez consider himself a Warrior of God. Morgan, she saw, was grappling with an inner desire to strike out; his whole posture screamed aggression. Then, all at once, he backed down. Sat back down.

"All right, all right." His voice was calm again, perfectly controlled again. But there was no apology forthcoming, which was also uncharacteristic. Morgan always apologised if he was wrong - something Buffy couldn't truthfully say of herself. But not now. Oh yes, Morgan had lost some part of himself, all right. And she didn't like the thing it had been replaced with. Not one bit.

"Okay, Ceri," Buffy said, her voice shaking a little, trying to pretend that Morgan's outburst hadn't happened. Trying to pretend that Willow and Xander weren't staring at him, desperate to get out of this lunatic asylum, but not quite daring to. Because what lay outside might be worse. "Tell us what you learned..."

"When you deliberately broke faith with your mother." Morgan broke in with skin stripping sharpness, finishing the sentence. Buffy glared at him piercingly.

"If you can't say anything useful, you'd better get out," she snapped, trying to ignore the hurt inside herself. Again, Morgan subsidised into isolated silence, his presence brooding like a snake ready to spit venom. Buffy swallowed hard. "Go on, Ceri."

She saw Ceri throw a frightened look in Morgan's direction, then she began speaking again. When she got to the part about Marie Laveau, Morgan looked up again.

"Marie Laveau?" he said, and Ceri nodded hesitantly.

"Yeah..."

"A great witch," he mused, all aggression apparently gone for now, although who knew when it might blow up again? "The Voodoo Queen, they called her, down New Orleans way."

"So... so she was a real person, then?"

"Of course. A very potent practitioner of voodoo magic. Died in... Oh, 1870's, I believe. What did she tell you?"

Ceri repeated what the sorceress had told them, and Buffy listened to the part about the Death Lords riding forth, and about the Neverborn. She didn't know what they were, but they sounded bad. At the description of the Tarot layout, Willow spoke, explaining briefly. All the time, Buffy noticed, she cast nervous glances in Morgan's direction, as though expecting him to interrupt and verbally attack her. But when he remained silent, she continued more confidently.

"Death - usually means great changes, but put with the Tower, I'd guess real disaster is in the air. The Magician and the High Priestess - could be people but more likely it's to do with ideas and secrets, and the hidden world - maybe... maybe the Shadow Lands themselves. The Moon represents the Great Mysteries, and in many decks, it shows the entrance to the Land of the Dead, so it's symbolising that too. What else? Oh yeah... The Fool - a new... Well, can be a new beginning, new ideas. Or else acting without thinking. Or a journey into unknown territory. And Chaos. The Hermit is self-sacrifice and reflection, but it can also represent help. Last one was the Knave of Cups?" Ceri nodded. Willow frowned. "The only card that isn't a major one. This could be Nick himself, I guess. Someone sent to show us the way? But you said he didn't know anything?"

"No. He seemed to think that too, that maybe he's just a go-between, a messenger between the two worlds." Ceri met her mother's eyes, and Buffy saw the beginnings of first heartbreak there.

"It's all a bit obscure," Morgan muttered then. "I mean, that interpretation, accurate though it may well be, doesn't tell us anything else, does it? Only that a Bad Thing is on its way. A baby could've worked that out."

But Buffy thought he sounded almost relieved, and the idea occurred to her that maybe he was being manipulated in some way. But surely Morgan, so old, so strong, wouldn't be susceptible to evil influences? Oh, that was exaggerating, wasn't it? Morgan just wasn't himself, that was all. She'd talk to him later, get him to tell her what was wrong, why he was acting like he wasn't even Mor-

gan anymore. But for now, she was more worried for Ceri. Another thought had just occurred to her, and it was almost as disturbing as Morgan's behaviour.

"I can't believe I'm gonna ask you this, Ceri," she said. "But you and Nick... You didn't... I mean... You haven't...?"

"Mom!" Ceri looked around at the others, face beet-red.

"NO! We only just met!"

"But you like this... boy? And you say he can materialise so that he feels human? I just..." Buffy paused. "You do know that nothing can come of this, don't you?"

"Oh yeah. I know," Ceri said, defending herself by attacking her mother. "Like you and Angel knew that nothing could come of it, but it didn't stop you, did it?"

"Ceri, that was different." Buffy felt like she'd been punched in the stomach. "It was much more complicated..."

She saw Morgan give her a weird look, then he spoke again.

"Yes, more complicated, Ceri. Because when your mother was with souled Angel she was, after all, really with me. On a soul level, anyway. Physically, he was still a cold, dead bloodsucker, of course." He looked directly at Buffy again, and she felt that icy frigidity come from him. "Ghost or vampire? Frankly, I don't know what's worse."

Buffy had heard enough. Had taken enough. Abruptly, she stood, although she wasn't sure her legs would support her after Morgan's last attack. She didn't see anyone but Morgan now, and what she saw, she found herself hating.

"Teach Will the dream spell," she hissed at him. "We're getting nowhere here, are we? You don't seem to want to help at all. You just sit there and... and..." She couldn't continue, because Morgan was just sitting there, staring. She heard a choking sound come out of her mouth. "And don't bother coming anywhere near me ever again until you can apologise to everyone in this room, and until you can be supportive." She knew she was making a bad scene worse but she didn't care. "Today I've seen a side of you I've never seen before. And I don't like it, Morgan. And I'm not putting up with it. No way."

She slammed out of the room aware that she'd made everyone squirm at the end of an evening of pure misery. The feeling that everything in her life was spoiling became impossible to ignore.

In her bedroom, she sank onto the bed she shared with Morgan and laid her head against his pillow, began sobbing into it. Oh, she tried not to cry, because it was something a lovelorn teenager might do, but she couldn't help herself. But the events of the previous night, of seeing her dead mother, and dealing with Wil-

low, and fearing that she'd lost Ceri, caught up with her. And now Morgan was being revolting to her... It was all too much to cope with.

After a while, she cried herself into an exhausted sleep in which she dreamed she saw Morgan standing in a graveyard surrounded by spirits, who seemed to worship him. In his cupped hands, he held a small glass jar in which a glowing ball of light that seemed to be crying out in pain flickered. Beyond Morgan was a gateway, and he opened the little bottle and the glowing light ball was sucked toward the gateway and...

She was being shaken awake, and she opened her eyes, saw Morgan leaning over her. At once she rolled away from him.

"Don't bother," she said bitterly, feeling tears still wet on her cheeks. "I had this crap with Angel when he went bad on me, and I'm not going through the same thing with you."

She felt his demeanour alter then. Felt a tidal wave of confusion and misery break from him, over her, and she turned, the change in him making her feel sick and dizzy.

"What's wrong, Morgan? Jesus, what's happening to you?"

There was no colour in his face, except for the two small tattoos on his cheekbones, and what she saw in her eyes she could only describe as total panic. Reaching up, she touched his skin, jerked her hand away again. Cold. He was cold. She recalled that his mouth had been cold earlier when he'd kissed her on his return from the university, but she'd put that down to the chill November air he'd just come in from. It was like she was touching a corpse. Or... Or a vampire...

"I don't know," Morgan said, and Buffy thought it was like he was forcing the words out from across a great internal barrier, as though it was hurting him to say them.

"Morgan... Please...?" She thought about the way he'd sounded earlier, like he was lying to her. "Did you really find nothing earlier? Morgan, please tell me?"

Again that confusion within him; she felt it hit her harder this time, and the panic in his eyes deepened to racking pain. But he shook his head doggedly.

"Told you. Nothing."

He was lying, she saw it clearly now. Did she have to drag the thoughts out of his head, then? Utterly terrified, she backed away from him, but he grasped her wrist, and she thought she saw the real Morgan come through for a moment.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "So sorry..."

He crushed her to him then; she felt his body shaking, and the coldness came through his clothes to chill her.

"It's okay..." Although it wasn't. Not at all. But she

rocked him back and forth, like she used to rock the children when they were little. A kind of desperation seeped from him, and the terrible chill increased. Somehow the opening of the gateway had affected him in some profound way, but until she knew in what way, she could do nothing.

He drew away from her, looked into her eyes, and he kissed her. Not wanting to, but unable to resist him even now, she kissed him back. There was a kind of frenzy in his kiss, she thought, as though maybe he thought he could kiss away whatever bad thing had gotten into him. And she responded equally, trying to breathe her love into him, trying to stop his transformation into an uncaring, cruel stranger. The kiss deepened, their passion turning into something close to madness. Then Morgan pulled away. Got off the bed. Looked at her. Buffy saw that his expression had changed yet again.

"I'm going out," he announced, as though he hadn't been half-crazy with emotion only seconds before.

Buffy felt her mind slip a notch, still not able to believe what was happening to them.

Thirteen

Although Joyce had said she'd help, she really had no idea of what to do. Or rather, she did have an idea, but didn't know how to implement it.

She sat in her home now, sank deep in thought. Her residence in the Shadow Lands was a faded replica of the apartment where she'd lived in New York, right down to the smallest detail. But the city in which this ghostly apartment was set was quite unlike that bustling, living metropolis.

Desolation, this city was called. Set in the Land of Perpetual Tears. Desolation was just one of the grim cities where those who had been murdered, or who had committed suicide, which was, after all, self-murder, went. Mostly, there was no way out of these cities. All the gates led to the Wilderness, which in turn eventually led to the Void, a swirling maelstrom where hapless spirits without the ability to negotiate it became lost forever. Occasionally, if the time was right, a spirit from the Land of Perpetual Tears might be able to enter the human world. Joyce's time was July 6th, the day she had been murdered by Angelus, which was her real death, not the subsequent staking. On that day, and also on Hallowe'en, she was able to revisit the apartment where she'd lived in life. Other than that, she could only watch the world of the living, and then also only infrequently. But now the Veil was damaged, she had been able to

"What?"

"I don't want you," he said, and Buffy felt once more that he'd been replaced with someone who looked like Morgan, but who wasn't really him. An evil robot or something...

"I can't believe I'm hearing this..."

"Believe it," he told her, and left the room.

On the bed, Buffy sat staring after his retreating figure. Well fine, that was it. No way was she about to crawl to him, she thought, feeling the coldness he'd left imprinted on her body seep into her heart. But the chill didn't last long and soon the heat of her pain came back, and once more she cried, felt utterly helpless. Hopeless. Morgan, she believed, was lost to her, and although she'd do anything she could to get him back from wherever he'd gone, she realised he'd be no help to any of them while he was.... different.

She heard the front door slam, knew he'd left the house. Wondered if he'd come back. Wondered if she wanted him to.

Despondent, she could only hope that her mother's ghost had come up with something...

visit her daughter, Buffy, and tell her how much she meant to her. And how sorry she was for how she'd tried to murder her. And that she would do anything to help.

Well, brave words, but words weren't actions, and until they became actions, they were only so much hot - or in her case, cold - air.

Going off on another tangent, Joyce thought about her daughter. Her only child. Amazing, how Buffy had survived so long as a Slayer. Of course, she was immortal now, which upped the odds in her favour. Unending life, rather than Joyce's unending death. But even before her immortality, Buffy had time and time again proven herself to be a survivor. Despite everything her calling had thrown at her, she had never buckled. Never given in. Even in her sojourn in London after that terrible time with the closing of the Hellmouth, when all those young lives were ruined, she still hadn't given up. Joyce wondered what she had ever done to raise such a strong young woman. And now Buffy was raising her own children, something Joyce had despaired of ever seeing, even while she was alive. She had rarely dared hope that Buffy could ever be truly happy.

Buffy had suffered with Angel, suffered more than any person should for love, which ought to be joyous and uplifting, not something that almost killed with misery. Joyce, like any other mother, had suffered right along

with her. The times when Angel was Angelus had broken Joyce's heart too, every bit as much as it had broken Buffy's. But now Buffy was with a man who was able to love her, who could walk in the sunlight with her, who could give her children and hope for the long, long future ahead. True, from the little Joyce had seen, Morgan could be frightening with the power he wielded. Not exactly what she'd call a nice normal young man, but then, Buffy wasn't what she'd call a nice, normal young woman either. The two - Slayer and Shaman - complemented each other perfectly.

Yes, her thoughts went, but you saw something else in him too, didn't you? Something you hadn't seen in the admittedly few, very brief times you'd seen him before. A Blight...

It had been very faint, what Joyce had seen on Morgan, so faint that she wondered if maybe it was just a trick of the light. But really she knew it was no optical illusion. All ghosts had the ability to see a Blight on a living person, just as they had the ability to see how much life was left to any given individual. For example, all the members of Buffy's family had an infinite life force, as would be expected in an immortal. As for Willow and Xander... Well, Joyce knew that their life was running out much more slowly than that of normal humans, but it was running out. Sad for Buffy, who was so attached to them, but eventually, she would have to accept it, and grow with it. But none of them had this Blight that Morgan had.

Oh, Ceri had a Blight too, but hers was entirely different. This was something she'd carried on her soul for years, the result of insecurity and inner unhappiness that she didn't allow out. When Ceri allowed herself to love fully, the Blight would go. But Morgan - this was a new thing for him. Something that had occurred with the damage to the Veil. Joyce had an idea what the problem was, but she couldn't be certain until she had been to the person she thought might help her.

The only problem was getting to that person. And if she couldn't get there, then she feared her daughter would face new heartbreak. Who knew, she might be facing it already.

Joyce needed to get to Elysia, in the Land of Hope Reborn. That was where the person she needed lived, as it were. But there were several problems with this. First, she had no idea of where Elysia was, except it lay outside of her plane of being, far beyond the Void, which led to her second problem: she didn't have the ability to cross the Void. Thirdly, if she did get to Elysia, she may not be allowed inside its hallowed gates, because she wasn't at the right stage of Karma. She'd been in Desolation twelve long years, and had only just managed to

achieve a lightening of her spirit that would allow her to go to the next level. No way was she Elysia bound yet.

So what to do? The only thing she could think of filled her with a kind of dread. But dread or not, how could she let her precious Buffy down?

Resolutely, Joyce got up, went outside into the grey, cold streets of Desolation, and made her way to the one spirit in this truly God-forsaken city who could conceivably help her. She only hoped the price for his help would not be too extortionate.

Desolation, by its very name, was a depressing place. Many spirits, trapped in its dreary walls, never made their way to the next level of Karma. Far too many spent this part of their afterlife reliving their deaths, simply because it was better than existing in this existence. But Joyce had vowed that she wouldn't spend her time bewailing what had happened to her. Oh yes, she relived it every year, and during her first couple of years in Desolation, had died over and over at Angelus' fangs. Now she was over it. Or as over it as she would ever be until she'd repaid her debt to Buffy. When she'd done that, she knew she would be sent on. She didn't know where, but anywhere was better than here.

Trailing through the streets, she came to a house that was quite in place with the jumbled up buildings from all time periods. This house was Sixteenth Century and belonged to a spirit of a man called Johannes Krantz.

Most spirits in Desolation were afraid of Krantz; even the Lord of the City, Duke Ironheart, treated him with respect. It was whispered that Krantz didn't want Ascension because he enjoyed living in the wallowing misery that lingered in the stale air of Desolation, because it fed him. He was said to have several haunts, and the ability to lurk there almost as he wished, and had been the reason for several humans to have nervous breakdowns with his constant, malevolent activity. In life, it was also rumoured, Krantz had been a disciple of the Church of Satan, and had murdered many children as sacrifice. And then he had committed suicide in the belief that his infernal master would reward him in Hell. He was wrong; as a suicide, he had come straight to Desolation. But in Krantz's view, that was almost as good. In Desolation, Krantz was almost the biggest fish in a pond of minnows. And he relished letting everyone know it.

So, shaking, Joyce banged on his door, hoping to be able to face this unpleasant creature with some dignity.

"Yes?" The spirit that answered the door was that of a man in his late fifties, very gaunt, with lank greying hair that fell over his shoulders. The very picture of frailty, except for the reddish-tinged eyes burning in his thin face. Johannes Krantz. "You look afraid, Joyce Sum-

mers," he continued in an accent that was of Germanic origin. "So you must be after a favour. Come in."

He stood aside, and Joyce went into the house. In the main room, which was almost bare of furniture and which was so dimly lit that she could barely see anything, there were hundreds of books, relics that Krantz had replicated upon his death. There were also skulls, various other skeletal parts, and a lot of scientific equipment that looked entirely unwholesome, and which reminded Joyce of the other rumours about Krantz: that he liked to experiment on souls stupid enough to underestimate him. Experiment, Joyce thought, was a polite word for torture.

"I do need your help, yes," Joyce said, keeping her voice very steady. "I know you have the ability to go through the Void, and I want you to take me to Elysia."

"Elysia?" mused Krantz. "Elysia. And why would you, who have barely enough Karma to rise out of Desolation, want to go to Elysia?"

Keeping her patience, and her confidence, Joyce told Krantz what had happened to the barrier between the two worlds. Krantz seemed singularly unimpressed. And nastily gleeful.

"But this is good news, if it's true." He all but rubbed his hands together. "A proper outlet for we ghosts at last. A chance to be in the living world again. Cause some real mischief."

"And that's what you want, is it?"

"Why not? A few miserable hauntings, a few humans gone mad. Where's the satisfaction in that? No, if the Veil is being damaged, then we can..."

"There is talk of the Neverborn emerging from their pits," Joyce said, and although she only had the very vaguest idea of what the Neverborn were, she knew this was a terrible threat to humankind and spirit-kind alike. With some satisfaction, she saw that Krantz appeared rather shaken.

"The Neverborn?" he queried. "Are you certain?"

"Well, not certain. I know very little. But would you be willing to take that chance, if you knew you could avert it?"

Krantz considered this, then fixed his reddish eyes on Joyce, who managed to meet his gaze without shuddering.

"And you say that the spirit who can help you lives in Elysia?"

"Well, if anyone can help."

"Elysia is difficult to approach. The Void-way is particularly twisted at that end. If I do this, there will be a price to pay."

"For my daughter, I'll give you anything."

At this, Krantz laughed.

"Anything? What do you have that could possibly interest me?"

Joyce thought long and hard. Really, she didn't have that much at all.

"All the things in my apartment?" she said weakly, but Krantz smiled wolfishly.

"And what use are things to me?"

"I don't have anything else."

"Oh, but you do, Joyce. You do." He examined her carefully. "You are close to next Karma. You have built up a lot of spirit in a very little time. Something to be admired, Joyce. Some poor spirits spend hundreds of years getting to your stage, which shows great single-mindedness on your part. Another year - or a hugely beneficial act on your part - and you will be out of here. Now, Joyce, the way I see it is this. You can choose the price you pay me. All the Karma you have built up, you give to me to sell to less strong spirits. Or else, you may enslave yourself to me for the rest of your time here."

What kind of choice was that, Joyce thought in horror. All her Karma, given over to this creature? All the years of struggling to better her spirit that she'd endured in this terrible, terrible city, wiped out in one act? Oh, she knew that Morgan had offered to give her peace and send her on the path to Ascension, but even he wouldn't be able to do that if she sacrificed her Karma. She'd have to put up with Desolation for longer, even longer than before because she would have given up her Karma willingly.

So, slavery then? Be a party to who-knew-what terrible things Krantz was involved with. And wouldn't willingly participating in those things make her Karma slip anyway? Wouldn't she lose it by being deliberately evil? Oh, God, it was no choice, not really.

"You can have my Karma then," she said. "Take it or leave it."

She fancied that Krantz appeared disappointed, but he hid it quickly.

"Very well..." he began.

"But not until you've gotten me to Elysia and I get the information I need. You know that I'll have to come back here afterward, so I can't go back on it."

Krantz thought for a long few seconds, then nodded.

"Very well. But you do realise it will be necessary for me to Mark you? To show that you are in debt to me? Otherwise, you may take the chance, however small, of cheating me."

"I wouldn't do that." Ah, but wouldn't she? If she had that one, small chance? She supposed Krantz was right to be careful.

"I will take no chances. So, prepare yourself for the Marking. And if you do try to cheat me, then the Spirit

Hunters will find you and then... well, you know what will happen to you."

Now Joyce did shudder. The Spirit Hunters were like debt collectors, but much less willing to listen to reason. In fact, reason wasn't a word in their primitive vocabulary. Every spirit feared the Hunters. Forget Hell, it was said. If the Hunters got their claws into a spirit, then that soul was brutally ripped apart and thrown into the Void, where they would stay for eternity. Or until Oblivion got them. For these souls, which were never re-joined to make a whole, damnation would be pleasure. So Joyce knew that once she'd made her choice, she was bound to it.

"Make your Mark," she said fatalistically.

The Mark was made with a strange knife-like instrument that burned right through Joyce's soul, and as it seared into her, she cried out with the pain it caused. Krantz ignored her pain, and when he'd finished Marking her with his name, he just smiled and looked at her.

"Let us go," he said.

They went through the gates of Desolation. Before them, stretched the Wilderness, which few souls attempted to cross because it only led to the edge of the Void. But Krantz didn't need to go to the edge of the Wilderness. All he had to do, was wish himself to Elysia, an ability so advanced that few souls were strong enough to manage it. If this was botched, then Krantz and Joyce would find themselves splattered across the Void, and the pieces of their souls would develop into ghastly creatures that searched the Void for unsuspecting spirits who dared venture there, and feed on them. Joyce fervently hoped that Krantz's ability was as big as his arrogance.

She felt Krantz take her hand, closed her eyes on his order. Then there was a rushing, much like Ceri had experienced when she had travelled to Nick's small realm, which was also situated in the Land of Perpetual Tears, only in a different facet of it. After what seemed like a forever ride of buffeting and sickening motion, all was still again.

"We're here," Krantz said. "Now, I'm going back. When your job is finished here, you will automatically return to Desolation, because that is where you are meant to be. But remember what I told you. If you try to break faith with me, your soul will..."

"I know." Joyce said. And then she felt Krantz disappear and she was alone.

Opening her eyes, she almost closed them again under the glare of golden brilliance. For there, across from a chasm that was spanned by a jewelled bridge, was the fabled City of Elysia, wondrous and glowing with light. On the air, sweet music chimed in her ears, and

the scent of wild flowers filled her skull, reminding her of long, blessed summer days when the sun was warm and life was perfect. Not many of those moments, but even one such could make a whole life worth living.

Joyce swallowed, felt humbled by what she saw, was seized with the impulse to get down on her knees and start praying. This was what every spirit sent to the Shadow Lands aspired to, to reach Elysia. Some looked upon Elysia as the ultimate Ascension, because souls in Elysia could still feel, speak, hear and love and know spiritual peace. True Ascension was the same, but minus the senses, just perfect peace and rest for the Ascended soul. Joyce supposed though, that while any spirit had any senses, there must still be doubt, and where there was doubt, there was imperfection. But still, from what she could see, Elysia was as close to heaven, or whatever it was called, as she was going to get for a long, long time. She only hoped she would be allowed in.

Crossing the bridge, she saw a river flowing in the gorge below. A river of rainbow colours, that sparkled like the gems she stood on now. Again, the effect was humbling, hypnotic, and Joyce stood on the bridge for a long time before she realised that she had been wasting time. Resolutely, she walked the rest of the distance to the city gates.

There was a guard at this gate. He was dressed in shimmering armour and carried a ceremonial sword. At Joyce's approach, he raised the sword, and challenged her.

"You are not of this city," he said. "You have the stench of Desolation upon you."

"Please, it's important that I'm allowed entry."

"Nothing can be so important that the likes of you can gain entry here."

Joyce hesitated, irritated that she should have to explain herself to a guard, of all things. But even this spirit's Karma was greater than her own, so she was obliged to spill the whole sad story. The guard listened with increasing interest.

"You are not lying? No. But we have not heard of such a thing. Then again, we are very isolated here on the edge of Ascension."

"Please, you can see how vital it is to speak with my friend? Please see? I'm not here to cause any trouble for anyone, just to try and set something right that has gone very wrong."

The guard looked her over one more time.

"Very well. But one wrong action, and you will be cast into a much worse place than Desolation. And there are worse places, believe me." He opened the gate, and motioned that she step through. "Follow me. I will take

you to the place you seek."

Elysia was so beautiful, so full of radiance, that Joyce could barely drag one foot after the other without gaping like some ignorant tourist. The spirits on the street were light, some were transparent with luminosity, some just appeared to burn with unharmed, perhaps holy, fire. All appeared peaceful. There were no cries or moans or shouts, or the sound of fighting, as was common in Desolation. Here was just singing and birdsong.

The guard stopped outside a large building made from perfect white marble.

"Wait here. I will see if you may be admitted."

Joyce waited for what seemed an interminable time before the guard returned. He managed a small smile that transformed his stern face.

"Follow me," he said again. "Your friend will be delighted to admit you."

Delighted to admit me? What's this? Some kind of transformation to ghostly royalty?

But she followed dutifully, both afraid and excited at the same time. The guard led her through many corridors, all perfectly decorated with life-like statues and heart-breakingly wonderful works of art, until they reached two huge, polished wooden doors. The whole thing reminded Joyce of an old Hollywood film set in ancient times. She half expected the Emperor Nero to come say hello any minute. But of course, Nero wouldn't be here. Not unless Elysia welcomed mass-murderers, that was. The guard flung open the doors.

"In there," he said, smiling again, somewhat disconcerting Joyce. She walked through then the doors were shut behind her.

He'd taken her into a huge room that was bright and airy, full of columns that seemed to reach to the sky. Indeed, the cerulean sky showed through the ceiling-less chamber. White gauzy curtains hung between the pillars, swaying in the gentle breeze. And everywhere she looked, Joyce saw books. Hundreds upon hundreds of them.

A man seated at a desk, upon which were piled what appeared to be a thousand scrolls, looked up, smiled in welcome and pure delight.

"Hello, Joyce," said Rupert Giles.

Giles rose and went to greet her. Joyce could barely believe he was the same diffident man she had known in Sunnydale. Even after they had been lovers that one night - especially since they had been lovers that one night - Giles had always been somewhat shy and tongue-tied around her. Buffy had often joked that he was scared of her because he loved her. But Joyce knew instinctively that Giles was just self-conscious

around women, and that Jenny's death had made that shyness worse.

He didn't seem shy now, though. He embraced Joyce, kissed her cheek softly.

"I had no idea you were... passed over," he said, that English accent still impeccable. "We in Elysia are so dreadfully cut off, and I've been here almost since my own death. And to live in Desolation. I am so very sorry, Joyce. If you don't mind my enquiring, how did it happen?"

"Angelus murdered me," Joyce said, looking at him properly. Getting a shock, just as Giles had a shock at hearing how she had died.

He appeared younger, for a start. Oh, he'd always had a slightly boyish air, Joyce had thought, but worry for his charges had made him seem older. The grey in his hair had gone; it was now a pure colour that was mid-brown but seemed to ripple with light, as did the rest of him. And he didn't wear heavy, dull tweed anymore; he had apparently ditched that along with his glasses, which he no longer wore either. Always needing to be formal, Giles still favoured wearing a suit, but it was of pale cream linen, spotless, crease-less, and more appropriate to the summer land he was now privileged to live in.

But more than any of this, Giles had undergone another startling transformation. In his forehead, set like a gleaming jewel, was a purple third eye.

"What is that?" Joyce said. "I've never seen anything like that before."

Giles smiled.

"I have gained many abilities here in Elysia," he told her. "This is merely the natural extension of my psychic chakra. The so-called third eye that all humans have, and that I have developed into a real organ of vision."

"What does it do?" Joyce knew it was rude to stare, but she couldn't help it, and Giles didn't seem to mind.

"I have true psychic ability now. I understand the Mysteries that always eluded me before. I see the Truths that few are able to see. I can speak with the One Light."

"God?" Joyce queried and Giles smiled again; she'd hardly ever seen him smile so much in one short period of time.

"There is no name. Names are for humans who must give what they don't understand a label. The One Light is not physical, but spiritual. But it is everywhere, should you choose to find it."

"You're very close to Ascension, Giles." Not a question; she felt it on him, and it made her both sad and elated at the same time. Sad for herself, who was so far from this exalted state of grace. She'd thought she didn't deserve it - still believed it to a certain extent - but feeling

Giles's inner serenity, she wanted it. So badly.

"Well, I can choose. I could have chosen Ascension almost at once, but I believed there was one more thing to do before I made that choice. And Joyce, I believe you have come to me to tell me what that one thing is. Am I correct?"

Fourteen

If it hadn't been for the twins crying in the other room, Buffy knew she wouldn't have been able to force herself to get up off the bed where she lay, too desolate to want to move. Funny, she thought, wiping her swollen eyes, but it had only been half-an-hour since Morgan had slammed out of the house. It was almost eleven now. Only an hour since the acrimonious scene downstairs. Felt like forever.

Buffy laughed bitterly and without mirth as she hauled herself off the bed. Forever. She'd had high hopes for forever. Forever life. Forever love. She should've known better. Nothing lasted forever.

C'mon, Buffy. Get a grip. There's something wrong with Morgan, yeah, but it'll get better. He's only been this way since... since the Veil was damaged. When it's repaired, he'll go back to normal... But her other voice, the little voice of pessimism that piped up whenever she was feeling down, spoke. Oh yeah? Says who?

"Says me," Buffy said aloud, sending the personal demon fleeing, at least for now. Her children needed her, and whatever else, they had to be her first priority.

They weren't crying aloud; it was a mix of mental telepathy and mother's instinct that told her they'd caught the atmosphere and had been upset by it. Well, who hadn't, Buffy thought as she padded down the hallway, trying not to make any sound because she didn't want anyone else coming out of... wherever they were to see if she was okay. Actually, she sensed they were all still downstairs, no doubt discussing her and Morgan's behaviour.

Gossiping... Oh, now her pessimism had turned darker. She had a horrible feeling that what was happening to Morgan was happening to her too. Like she was seeing everything through black tinted glasses. Maybe that was better than the rose-tinted ones she'd taken to wearing lately, though. At least if you expected to be miserable, it wouldn't come as such a great shock when unhappiness finally found you and bit you. Grasping the door handle of the twins' bedroom, she took a breath to dispel her inner gloom and went inside.

Kate and Lucas, who Buffy had believed had been asleep before the adults had started the discussion

Joyce felt tears start to her eyes, felt them overflow.

"It's like this," she began, and Giles listened as she explained. When she had finished, Giles bowed his head.

"I'll be glad to be of service," he said.

And Joyce thought she might faint with relief.

downstairs, were huddled together on Kate's bed. At Buffy's entrance, they looked up at her. Kate, Buffy saw, had been weeping - it was obviously her mental cries she had heard; Lucas, who rarely allowed himself to shed tears, was close to it.

"Oh, kids..." Her throat locked up again, but she forced herself to override it, to be strong. If she went to pieces, what good would she be to them? Going to them, wondering how much they had heard with their telepathy, she put an arm round each child and cuddled them to her.

"Dad's gone," Lucas said; his voice sounded like the toll of doom.

"No..." Buffy knew she shouldn't - probably couldn't - lie to them, but it was an automatic reaction to protect her children.

"He hates us," Kate whispered, and Buffy saw her lips quivering, knew how close Kate and Morgan were, knew all too well how Kate, above all of them, would suffer if her pronouncement was true.

"Of course he doesn't..."

"Yeah, he does. Or... he's starting to." Lucas turned eyes that were a constant reminder of Morgan's up to Buffy. "This morning he almost went crazy just because we were having a little argument about the dishes." He paused. "He hasn't been normal since Grandma visited with us." He bit his lip and Buffy knew he was a little reluctant to carry on, so she squeezed his shoulder reassuringly, to encourage him to voice his opinion. "It's like he's... he's got someone else inside him. A bad someone else..."

Like a possession? Buffy thought suddenly.

"Yeah," Lucas said, reading her mind. "Like a possession."

Buffy was about to answer, to say that if this was a possession, then they could probably deal with it, when the room started to go cold. She felt the twins pull away from her. Kate's eyes were fixed on a corner of the room. Suddenly she smiled.

"Grandma's coming back..." A frown mingled with the expression of unexpected delight. "And someone else..."

"Someone else?" But Buffy could feel it, another presence forming alongside the rapidly materialising ghost of her mother. A figure she knew so well...

"No way," she muttered, sitting up straight, watching, along with the twins, forgetting her misery for the time being as Giles finally stood before her. A smiling, radiant Giles that she barely recognised as the often-uptight, usually harassed, Englishman. "Oh my God! Oh... my... God..."

"Hello, Buffy," Giles said softly.

Buffy stood, her mouth opening and closing in an attempt to speak, which failed totally. She looked at Joyce, who was also smiling, who seemed nothing like the sad ghost of before.

"Mom?" Her voice sounded cracked, felt cracked with a mix of sorrow and pure joy.

"He's here to help us, Buffy," Joyce said, and then Lucas spoke.

"Who's he?"

Buffy shook her head to clear it, laughed and sobbed at the same time.

"This is Rupert Giles," she told them. "D'you remember, I told you about him? My first Watcher?"

"Yeah..." Twin voices in unison.

"Giles... These are my children. My twins. Kaitlin and Lucas... But we call Kaitlin Kate and..."

"I know, Buffy." Giles broke into her gabbling. "I know all about it. Joyce told me."

"You look so... amazing... You've developed a third eye, Giles." Buffy knew all about chakras and their functions, instantly recognised the formation in Giles. Oh, but he must be something special in the spirit world. Special, as he had been in the human world. Her teacher. Her mentor. She'd have been dead a long time ago without Giles. Full realisation came to her. "You're so close to Ascension, Giles. Almost ready to become... at one with the Light."

Walking closer, she felt that the cold wasn't coming from Giles, but from her mother, instantly understood how far along different paths these two spirits were. Silently she put out a hand in Giles' direction, wondering if he was untouchable, as her mother was. Her hand went right through him, but left her with a warm feeling. Buffy knew if she did the same to her mother, the chill would bite into her.

"Why you?" she asked Giles, feeling a terrible grief for her mother. "Why are you so close, and my mom's not?"

"It's the way of the spirit world," Giles said, and Buffy thought he was perhaps being tactful, trying to save Joyce's feelings.

"Buffy, Giles saved the world when he closed the Hellmouth." Joyce spoke; she didn't sound bitter, just ac-

cepting. "He only went to the Shadow Lands because he believed he was still needed."

"You had the choice and you still chose not to Ascend because you believed Humankind needed you?" Buffy was awed by Giles's selflessness. Would she have done the same thing? She hoped so.

"Buffy, let's not make too much of this," Giles said, and here he wasn't so different, just his usual modest self. "I'm here to help you. And to tell you that all needn't be lost, if we act soon. Have hope, Buffy." He smiled at her. "Your children are a credit to you. Immortal, as you have become. As it was always prophesied. I'm sorry I kept that from you."

"Kept what from me?"

"The prophecies about the Slayer's potential for immortality. For everything you have become. But I was bound to silence by the Council."

"It doesn't matter, Giles. It wouldn't have made any difference then, would it? I think it all happened as it was supposed to happen. Mom said that everything was fated. I think she's right."

She saw Giles smile at her mom warmly.

"Yes indeed. Joyce is quite right."

Buffy suddenly remembered everyone downstairs.

"I guess mom's told you I have another daughter? James Harrison's child. You knew James, right?"

"Of course. Given Ascension as soon as he was released from his demon state. A good, courageous man. I was sorry to hear about your loss, Buffy. Joyce has told me everything that happened to you."

"As much as I know, anyway," Joyce chimed in.

"James was lost to me thirteen years ago, before Ceri was born. His final death was a relief. I..." Buffy decided that she didn't want to go through all that now. Maybe another time. When everything was settled, when she felt more secure. "Would you like to meet the others?" she asked, changing the subject. "I... You know that Willow and Xander are here with us? That they're married?"

"Yes. An... interesting combination." Now Giles looked and sounded just like his old self. "But I suppose it was always on the cards. And of course I would like to see them again. I need to speak with everyone here."

"And..." Buffy hardly dared ask. "You know about Morgan?"

"What do you mean? About Morgan? I know that he is your soulmate, your life partner."

"He's turned... Very strange..." Buffy found she was near tears again, and she felt Giles' hand pass through her, give her that inner warmth again.

"Don't worry, Buffy. It will pass. I'll help you decide what to do. Once we know exactly what's affecting

him."

"Thanks Giles." Once again she felt safe. Was reminded of how Giles had almost always made her feel safe, like he was her father. In many ways, more of a father than her real father had ever been. "Come on."

"Mom?" Kate said. "Can we come too?"

"Baby, things are getting serious now," Buffy said. "I think you're better off out of the main event."

"But dad said we could help..." Lucas began.

"Your father doesn't seem to be in his right mind."

"But we're always shoved aside and told to keep out of it."

"For your own safety, Lucas." Buffy went back to the bed, hugged her twins again. "You're growing fast. Very soon you'll be able to patrol and Slay. Soon you'll reach your potential. But first you have to mature. And you might not live to mature if you don't listen to what I tell you. Immortality doesn't protect you from being killed, just from natural death. When you're ready, you can help us. But you're not ready yet." She kissed them both, trying to take the sting out of her words. "I may have lost your father, for now at least, but I can't lose you too. I won't. Okay?"

"Okay, mom." Kate was the first to answer. Always able to show her emotions easily, she kissed her mother back, held her tight in a huge embrace that almost choked off Buffy's air supply.

"Okay, mom." Lucas said next, and he hugged her too, although his embrace was slightly more reserved, not the boyish thing to do.

"Bring dad back," Kate said. "Please bring him back to us."

Buffy nodded, swallowed hard.

"Sure I will."

"And don't get hurt yourself," Lucas added. "We need you."

"I'm not going anywhere, you guys. Okay?"

They nodded together, and Buffy stood again.

"I'll stay with them," Joyce said into the emotional atmosphere. "If that's okay?"

If Joyce had been solid, Buffy would have hugged her.

"Kids?"

"Yeah. Yeah, that'd be good."

"We'll let you know what's happening," Buffy promised the twins. "But it could get bad. Be brave for me? For all of us." They nodded again and Buffy, satisfied for now that the twins were taken care of, turned to Giles. "C'mon, Giles. Just like old times, right?"

"In a way, Buffy," Giles said, following her out of the room, although Buffy guessed he could just have walked through the wall. "But in many ways, it's rather better."

"Don't know how you can say that." Buffy began walking down the stairs. "You died. That's not a good thing, right?"

"Buffy, as you see, death isn't always a bad thing." He looked at her intently. "But I suppose immortals wouldn't necessarily see it that way. Death, Buffy, as you know, is a release from the body's cares. A peaceful death is the greatest gift that can be bequeathed upon a mortal person. That and the gift of true love."

"But so many don't die peacefully. You didn't. My mom didn't..."

"We all work our way to peace eventually." Giles regarded her somewhat sadly. "In some ways, I sorrow for you, Buffy."

"Why?" His words shook her and she stopped in the hallway. Was he saying that dead was best?

"Because except for some terrible fate befalling you, you won't ever know that peace."

"God, Giles, thanks for making me feel better."

"I apologise, Buffy. I didn't mean to sound..."

"Hey, Buffy. Who you talking to...?" Xander came out of the lounge. He appeared pale and strained and his pallor increased when he saw Giles. "Giles?" Xander seemed to stagger backwards. "Giles...?"

"Xander," Giles said. A smile twitched his mouth. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Giles... Making a joke..." Xander clutched his chest theatrically. "Think I'm having a heart attack." He peered more closely at Giles. Groaned. "No tweed? Jesus, I don't think I can take any more..."

By now, the others were appearing at the open door. Willow's reaction was similar to Xander's, if less outrageous. Ceri and Ramirez just stared.

"Let's not all stand around gawping," Giles said, and Buffy had the distinct impression that he was enjoying being back amongst the living, if only for a short while. "We have work to do."

Once the introductions had been made - and Buffy again found it extremely odd to be introducing a ghost to her living companions - they began speaking about the exact details of the phenomenon that had happened.

"Giles, can you explain to us the effects of this thing?" Buffy said. "You understand, it right?" she added hopefully.

"Yes, I understand it." Giles smiled a little. "I understand many things that eluded me before I died. Very well, to begin. If the gateway - because rips in the Veil never just occur spontaneously - is not closed, then it will be disastrous for both the living and the dead."

"How can that be?" Xander asked. "I mean, I can understand how it would be bad for the living, but not for

the dead."

Giles thought for a moment, apparently trying to decide how to explain.

"Think of the Veil as a natural barrier, Xander," he began. "It protects the living from seeing what can happen after death, and it prevents the dead from mingling freely with the living. The barrier is made of spirit material - plasm, or ectoplasm, which you'll have no doubt heard of. But it is also made of need - the need of the living, and of the dead too, to be separate. Are you with me so far?"

"I guess," Xander said. The others nodded.

"This gateway has been opened by someone living - I doubt anyone dead would do such a thing - there are great punishments for such transgressions, and besides, all ghosts know what life is. They don't need to explore the living world. Oh, they might want it, but they can't have it. But no-one living knows what death is, not really, and I think that's what's happened. Someone became too curious."

"Okay, okay, but why the danger?"

Giles looked at Xander almost severely.

"I see you haven't altered over much, Xander. Always impatient, always skipping over important details." Then he laughed. "It's good to know that some things don't change. All right, the danger to the living is, as Xander says, obvious. The dead would smother the living - the majority of dead souls simply wouldn't be able to help themselves. They love your warmth, and are mostly denied it. They love the physical sensations the living feel, and are mostly denied those too. And of course, there are what you might term the evil dead, those spirits who have been corrupted either by the manner of their deaths, or by what they have seen on the Other Side, or by a natural soul weakness when they were alive. If let loose in the human world - and I have reason to believe that will already have happened to some small extent - they will capture souls from the living and enslave them. Soon the living will become the dead."

"And how does that affect the dead?" Buffy asked, feeling a shiver pass through her.

"It's rather more complicated, but essentially no-one will Ascend. The dead will become murderers of the living and lose what we call Karma, which they cannot regain. And if there is no Karma, there can be no rebirth. Always assuming that there will be any living bodies to be reborn into. This world will become a dead world, a damned world."

"And Hell will rise?" Buffy asked.

"It's worse than Hell, Buffy. Those in Hell deserve their punishment. Karma isn't only about Ascending, but

Descending. Judgement is given over many lives, not just one. Although it is whispered by some - by many, in fact - that Hell is just a part of the Shadow Lands..."

"Wasn't very shadowy when I went there, it was very real," Buffy muttered, and Giles gave her a sympathetic look.

"Well, whatever you experienced, wherever you experienced it, it was obviously happening to you. But the Shadow Lands are very real too, that's what I'm saying. If Hell is part of the Shadow Lands, then yes, Hell will rise too. But whatever happens, the earth will be overrun with restless spirits, humankind will be destroyed, and there will be no peace. Ever. Because how can a spirit know or aspire to peace if it knows it can never be reborn or never attain the Light?"

It all sounded very confusing to Buffy, but she guessed she understood the implications.

"Okay, we've got that it's a Very Bad Thing. How can we close the gateway?"

"Well, do you know who opened it? How they opened it?"

Buffy sighed deeply.

"Morgan was investigating that. He told us that he'd discovered nothing." She paused. "I think he was lying." She saw the others' faces change, realised it hadn't occurred to them that Morgan, despite his erratic behaviour, had deliberately told them untruths. She remembered Willow's predicament then.

"Did he teach you the spell, Will?" she asked, was horrified to see her friend shake her head.

"When you... left the room, he just sat for a few moments, then left too. We thought he'd gone after you to make up."

Buffy sighed.

"No... No, at least not straightaway. I didn't hear him come upstairs," she said. "But... Well, we all know that Morgan can be utterly silent when he wants to be. If he doesn't want someone to know what he's doing, then no-one will know it. Not even me."

"Tell me more about Morgan," Giles said. And Buffy, as concisely as she could, explained to Giles exactly who Morgan was, and what he was capable of.

"A real sorcerer," Giles mused, sounding impressed, and Buffy smiled wryly.

"He wouldn't necessarily thank you for calling him that. He'd call himself a druid shaman, but yeah, I guess he is, when all's said and done."

"If he was able to become immortal through magic, then I think we can safely call him a sorcerer, don't you? Not to mention the soul-stealing..."

"He doesn't do that anymore. He gave it up when he got his real soul back." Buffy thought that made it sound

like Morgan had given up drug addiction or something. "And besides, that's not important anymore. It's what's happening to him now that's important."

"True enough. I will tell you what I believe is happening to your Morgan, Buffy. To your father, Felipe." He addressed the silent priest, who merely nodded. Obviously, Buffy thought, he was taking everything into his incisive mind. "Your mother, Buffy, told me that she had seen a Blight on him. On his soul."

"A Blight? What the Hell's a Blight?" Buffy asked, feeling alarmed.

"Just what it sounds like. A blight. A flaw. A... a kind of damage. Joyce tells me that she had, on the occasions she'd been able to see through the Veil before, never seen this Blight on Morgan previous to the Veil's damage."

"And what does it mean?" Buffy felt her stomach begin to clench, knew she wasn't going to like what Giles was about to tell her. Not one bit.

"Everyone has a good and bad side, Buffy. We all know this. Nothing in the human world is ever black and white, just shades of grey. In the spirit world, though, it's slightly different. Our souls are released from our body. The bad side of a person that the mind's conscience usually holds in check is no longer suppressed, but becomes... almost another soul, although it is still part of a single being."

"Wow. This is heavy stuff," Xander muttered, and Giles nodded.

"Yes, Xander. Very... heavy, indeed. Sometimes, the bad side takes over entirely and the good is lost. It's rather like a possession, but not by an outside entity."

"But my father is not dead." Ramirez spoke at last. "If you are implying that this has happened to him, it makes no sense."

"To normal humans, perhaps not. But immortals such as yourselves are different, and an immortal like Morgan would be especially prone to such a thing."

"Why?" Buffy asked, feeling more helpless by the second, because if it could happen to Morgan, couldn't it happen to any one of the immortals in this room? To Lucas or Kaitlin? "Morgan is very strong, very old. He could fight it, right?"

"How do you fight your own soul, Buffy? If the Shadow - which is what this Blight is known as - begins to take you over, then for a while your conscience will resist it, but as it becomes stronger, then, like a demon, it will kill the conscience. If Morgan is affected by this Blight, then he will be helpless against it."

"But I don't understand why!" Buffy cried. "He's such a... a good person. He rarely loses his temper, he's sunny natured, he's..."

"He's human, Buffy," Giles said gently. "And as such, he's not perfect. And besides, it's always the good people who are affected more severely. The Shadow always waits patiently for such a rift in the soul, and when it occurs, it will fight extra hard in a good person to make them do things they will suffer for later. Or else twist it out of shape forever." Giles paused, thought for a moment. "And as an immortal of exceptional strength, Morgan has cheated Death for over two thousand years. Now that Death has come full force to the living world, don't you think he would be a natural target for the evil ones who seek to distort and destroy souls? Don't you see how such an evil would be able to use Morgan's soul against himself? To warp him so he would serve Death, not cheat it anymore. Become living dead, Buffy. A fate worse than true death in every possible sense, because there would be occasional moments of lucidity in which he would realise what he did but was too controlled by his Shadow to stop it."

Buffy burst into tears as she remembered how cold Morgan was when she'd touched him. How he'd seemed to look at her as though his emotions were dead, except for that too short time when he was Morgan again, and how he'd seemed in such terrible pain. As though, she thought suddenly, that something was... Was killing his humanity.

"How would that happen? So quickly, I mean...?" Then she stopped. Remembered. "Oh God."

"What?" Xander asked.

"You remember when I was dancing with you at the Ball - remember I told you about the figure I saw there? The... the Reaper thing?"

"Yeah..."

"I thought it seemed as though it was looking around. Deciding. When I heard about Harry Dudley's death, I thought it'd gone for him - well, maybe it did too - but what if it... it singled out Morgan too? Infected him with its... its death? But couldn't kill him because Morgan's immortal?"

Her theory sank into the others' heads; Buffy could see their minds working. And as she said them, the words made almost perfect, twisted sense.

"Buffy's theory would certainly explain the rapidity of his decline," Giles said. "But there's one way to find out for certain."

"How?" Buffy asked. "I'll do whatever it takes."

"You don't need to do anything much, Buffy." Giles indicated his third eye. "This sees all. I can cast my vision anywhere, see anything. Just project to me Morgan's... essence... and I will find him. Discover if I'm right."

"And if you are, Mr Giles?" Ramirez asked.

"If I am, he will have to be sedated and restrained. And

you, Father Ramirez, will have to perform the exorcism I will teach you. I am physically incapable of it. And you, Buffy," he said, second-guessing Buffy's protest that she would do the exorcism, "are too close. Your souls are joined. During the exorcism, you may be affected too." Buffy sank into morose silence, digesting this unpleasant piece of information. "Take heart, Buffy," Giles said. "The sooner we help Morgan, the sooner we can get whatever information he obtained from him."
"He was working with Professor Dan Healy," Buffy said. "Someone should call him - his number's in the book. He might tell us what Morgan... wouldn't."
"I'll do that," Xander said, sounding glad of something to do.
"And Giles - before we start, can you help Willow?" Yet more explanations of Willow's particular plight followed.

Fifteen

"Hello Ria," Morgan said when she opened the door. "I know it's late, and I know I behaved very badly earlier but... May I come in?"

Morgan smiled warmly, although inside he felt like ice. Like he'd never be warm again. Like the little boy in the story of the Snow Queen, he had been infected by a splinter of frozen evil, lodged deep inside his heart. He neither knew nor cared if he were capable of feeling anything good anymore.

He looked at Ria's face. So young. So innocent of the wickedness of the world. She was unsure of him, reminded him of a frightened child who has opened her door to find a monster from a nightmare waiting outside it. And maybe, he thought, she had. If she knew what he could do to her, what he was about to do to her, she would slam the door shut and go out the window. Never mind that her room was three floors up. Better to risk breaking her neck than... What he was about to do to her... Even dying would be better.

But her wide, scared eyes began to lose their fear, because here he was again, Morgan Ash, the object of her abject fantasy, come back to her. Hopefully to fulfil that desire, and never mind his wife, or his children. If he was here, with her, he knew she was reasoning, then his family obviously didn't mean as much as he had protested they did this morning.

Tentatively returning his smile, Ria stood aside, opened the door wider.

"I... I guess it's okay." He heard her intake of breath as he swept past her. "I... You left your notes here before. I wondered if you'd come back for them."

"Of course I..." Giles began, but Willow shook her head emphatically, put her arms around Buffy.

"No way am I abandoning you, Buffy," she said.

"But you need your rest..." Buffy protested.

"Right now, you need me more than I need rest. Get Morgan back, then I'll sleep for a while. Okay?"

Buffy smiled gratefully, kissed Willow's cheek.

"Thanks Will." A pause. "I love you, you know that, right?" She looked around. "I love you all, and I think we're gonna need all the love we can get." She pulled away from Willow's embrace. "Okay, Giles. Let's do it." Giles nodded.

"All right, Buffy. If you'd just like to sit down. Concentrate on Morgan. Look at me... Yes... Yes... That's right." And Buffy felt the connection begin...

Saw where Morgan had gone...

It was worse than she'd thought...

Morgan saw the lecture notes, still laid neatly on her bedside table. Saw her bed. Neat virgin's bed. Remembered how she had laid upon it that morning, wanton with wanting him.

"Well, yes," he said, catching her stare, holding it, seeing the last of the fear thaw and drain away, become that very same helpless wanting he'd seen before. "But the notes aren't really that important, Ria. I came back because I felt very badly for the way I acted this morning. And very stupid too."

"Stupid?" she echoed.

"I behaved like a silly schoolboy, made it more complicated than it really is. It doesn't need to be complicated, does it?"

"Complicated?"

"Oh yes." He moved in closer. "I mean, it's simple really, isn't it? You want me. I want you. So why throw it away?" He reached out and touched her burning face, felt her respond to his touch, saw her swallow hard. Ran his thumb over her mouth, knew she was helpless. Poor little rabbit, caught in his snare of manipulation. Almost disappointingly easy. "Do you still want me, Ria?" Dumbly she nodded. He felt her mouth move silently against his skin.

Yes...

Of course he could hear her mind if he wanted to. Her mind, which was all the way open to his mind, entrapped as she was by his hypnotising eyes. Oh, but he'd forgotten how good this felt, this power over innocent, unsuspecting minds. Not the same as with Buffy; Morgan couldn't control her. Not without a lot of effort

anyway. He'd taught her to be strong. Too strong. The pupil was almost as adept as the master. But this little girl wasn't a pupil. She was just a... slave. Master and slave. Once upon a very long time ago, it had been one of his favourite games.

"Time to play, Ria," he whispered, moving his hand down to her neck, stroking, pushing her back against the bed so she buckled and lost her footing, had to sit before she fell. "Lay down, sweetheart," Morgan said, sitting beside her. "Just as well get comfortable."

He watched as she complied, knew she was under his influence completely, marvelled again at just how simple it was. He could do anything to her, including what he knew she wanted him to do, and she couldn't do anything about it. But he wasn't about to be unfaithful to Buffy, no matter how alluring sweet little virgin Ria might be, no matter how much his body might want to invade uncharted territory. Because there were better things than fast, ultimately unsatisfying sex.

There were souls.

And having power over them.

* * *

"I can't stand this," Buffy gasped, abruptly breaking her connection with Giles. She knew she was about to freak out any second now. "He's with another woman and I'm not gonna sit here and take it."

She saw the others' faces, all struck with shock at what she'd just said. Buffy watched as Ramirez struggled to regain his composure, and when he had, he shook his head vehemently.

"My father would never betray you in such a way," he protested. "He loves you too much."

Literally shaking with rage, Buffy rounded on him.

"You didn't see him!" she shrieked, half-insane with terrible, terrifying jealousy. "You didn't see..."

"Buffy," Giles broke in gently. "Neither did you. You broke the connection when the girl... Ria... When she lay on the bed... You didn't see what happened afterwards, and you prevented me from seeing too. However unpalatable this might be, you have to follow it through."

"But he might... They might be... I can't watch that..."

"I think Giles is right, Buffy," Willow said carefully. "I mean, you have this chance to see, right? Supposing... supposing you refuse to see? And when everything gets back to normal, you'll look at him and wonder, right? Because... because no matter how close your minds are with each other, he might not want to hurt you by showing you... whatever there is and it'll always be there, like a cancer, and then, you'll keep stuff from him, and soon there'll be all round dishonesty and it'll eat away at your relationship, and soulmate or no soulmate, you'll

slowly but surely destroy the wonderful thing you have together."

"Gee, thanks, Will," Buffy said sarcastically. "Thanks for painting it an even deeper shade of black than it already is." She sighed heavily, looked at Ceri. "I'm sorry, Ceri. You shouldn't have to see or hear any of this. Mothers are supposed to inspire their children, not make them think they're total whackos."

Ceri smiled wanly.

"S'okay, mom. I'm used to total whacko, right? And, sorry for the sappy sentiment, but you're always an inspiration. If it's any help, I agree with Giles and Willow. You have to see."

Buffy looked helplessly at Xander, who had been trying unsuccessfully to get Dan Healy on the phone ever since he'd first suggested it, but he just shook his head and she knew she was outnumbered. Besides, she wanted to get Morgan back to normal, didn't she? But God, she'd give him Hell later...

"Okay. Okay." Back to Giles. "Get on with it then. But I swear, if he becomes... intimate with her, I'll..."

"Just look, Buffy. Just see."

* * *

Ria was in a waking dream-state that Morgan had induced in her malleable mind. She was unsure of what was real and what wasn't. Morgan sat back and watched her, calculating when it would be the right time to act.

In Ria's fantasy, which was so authentic it was indistinguishable from reality, she finally had Morgan exactly where she wanted him. Morgan was able to observe quite coldly, feeling very detached from the pictures he was injecting into her mind. Very erotic pictures, he thought, quite pleased with his inventiveness. But it was necessary to get Ria to that state of total abandon, so that her soul was close to the surface of her being.

Sex, he had found in the past, was always the best way through which to take souls. Or at least the kindest way. This way it wasn't painful, there was no nasty, messy struggle, and the victim wasn't killed. True, they might well be mentally scarred for life - or until the soul was returned to them. True, they might end up as psychotic sociopaths with no conscience. Or completely insane. But at least they were still alive. If you could call it living. In the old days, Morgan had truly regretted taking the souls he stole, but it was a necessary evil then. But there would be no regrets now. Regrets, he had decided in the past few hours, were pointless. A waste of precious time...

Ah, it was close now, he decided, looking at Ria, who was flushed, moaning his name. Time to act, he thought. From his jacket pocket, he brought out a little glass bottle. A soul jar, bound with magic strong enough

to confine a soul's power, to prevent it from escaping until he needed it to. Once, Morgan had owned quite a few of these little bottles. He had destroyed most of them when he found Buffy, but had kept this one as a reminder of what he must never become again.

"Must have been a premonition," he told himself, smiling. And glancing at Ria again, coldly calculating that she was ready to let it go, he unstopped the glass jar and began saying the words that would cause her soul to flow from her body. That would cause it to become his.

He saw it begin to happen. Ria suddenly became utterly still, utterly silent. A silvery-gold mist began to surround her body, but Morgan knew it was no mist, rather it was the visual effect of her spirit rising out of its fleshly confines. Morgan increased the intensity of his chanting, compelling the soul to break the connection. After a few seconds, it hovered over Ria's still body, and Morgan saw the silver cord that anchored it there, like an umbilical cord. For a second he hesitated, knowing in some deep part of him that this was wrong, that he was about to ruin this young girl's life. But then the blackness fogged his brain again, and he uttered the final incantation, and the soul jerked upwards, causing the cord to become suddenly severed, detaching the soul completely.

Ria gave no reaction to this - the last stage of this kind of soul stealing always induced unconsciousness in its victim - but the soul was obviously distressed. Held by Morgan's spell, it nonetheless tried to get back into the body it was born into. Morgan took no heed of its anguish. He merely held up the bottle and compelled the soul to go into it. Crying in protest, it had no choice but to obey.

Morgan placed the stopper back in the bottle. Studied the ball of intense light within it as it bounced helplessly against the glass walls, trying desperately to escape. A new soul, as far as he could tell. That explained Ria's total innocence, her air of being untouched. And that was good, because new souls were easier to control. In the Shadow Lands, Morgan guessed it would become a defenceless vassal to the dark forces that he now served. He thought he would be well-rewarded for this capture. What his reward would be he didn't know. But there was one way to find out. Go back to the graveyard.

Standing, putting the bottle back in his pocket, he decided there was no time like the present.

Plus, he didn't want to be around when Ria regained consciousness.

Quite often, such a recovery wasn't a pretty sight...

* * *

"We have to stop him doing this," Buffy said, breaking

the connection again, her jealousy having receded, replaced by horror.

"Stop him doing what?" Willow asked. Buffy could see it on her friend's face, hear it in her thoughts: What was Morgan doing that was worse than being unfaithful?

"He's stolen that poor girl's soul," Buffy told them, no longer hostile toward Ria, feeling only sympathy that she had been sucked in by Morgan's mind power. "We saw him, right, Giles? Saw him lift that girl's spirit right out of her body."

Giles nodded.

"Yes, indeed. A very masterful piece of magic..."

"You needn't sound so... admiring, Giles," Buffy snapped.

"It's not very often you see someone so gifted in magical practices," Giles told her, but Buffy glared at him. "All right, Buffy. I know it's a terrible thing that he's done. I wasn't condoning it, just realising how adept Morgan actually is."

"The thing is, what can we do about it?" Xander asked.

"I think this is obvious." Ramirez spoke now. "Two things. Firstly we must - I hate to use the word, but there is no other - capture my father, ensure that he cannot do this thing again. And then we must release the soul so it can find its way back to its owner. Where is he, Buffy?"

"Well, he was in the girl's room on campus, but he's now going to a cemetery in a condemned part of the city." She gave the name of the cemetery. "Fortunately, we know all the cemeteries in Chicago. This one isn't active nowadays - burials stopped there about ten years ago. But Morgan's going there for some reason. I couldn't see exactly why, I was only in his mind a few seconds, while he was concentrating on removing Ria's soul." Buffy shuddered. "You were right about the effect of the Shadow, Giles. What I saw when I was inside... It wasn't Morgan at all. It was a monster. I... it was like when Angel became Angelus, only there's no demon, is there? It's all Morgan. The dark side. I hadn't imagined just how bad he could be, or just how strong his will and conscience must be to keep it down. Giles, tell me he can really be put back to normal?"

"Buffy, let's just find him first. Put right what he's done, bring him back here, and then we can assess it. See what damage has been done. It hasn't been that long. It should be reversible."

"Should?" Buffy thought she might choke. "Should? You mean he might not recover from it?"

"Buffy, let's not think of that," Giles said gently but firmly. "We must be positive, whatever else happens. Negativity will not help Morgan. The Shadow will feed from it. Now, we will need sedation for Morgan. No

point in too much struggling and fighting. Besides - and don't go all hysterical on me, Buffy - he's likely to strongly oppose coming with us. Mostly likely he'll resist with extreme force. A sedative will be our best option. Does anyone here have access to such a thing?"

"I do," Ramirez said. "They know me well at the hospital closest to the centre. If I call them and tell them I have a problem with one of the more disturbed clients, they will prepare me something."

"Injectable?"

"If necessary, yes."

"Then make the call, Father Ramirez." While Ramirez went into the hall to use the phone, Giles continued. "I can't fight physically, but I can be there to help the girl's soul to return, so I shall come along. Xander, we'll need you. You're quite strong. You'll be useful when it comes to... restraining Morgan."

"Oh thanks," muttered Xander. "I've been on the receiving end of his bad temper before. Not something to look forward to." But Buffy knew his grumbling was only so much noise. Xander would do anything he could to help.

"And of course, I'm coming," Buffy said.

"Buffy, it won't be pleasant. Do you really want to be involved in a struggle where you might have to hurt Morgan?"

"Well, let's just say I feel the need to let off some steam right now. I know it's wrong, but I... I feel angry with him. And besides, I don't think Ramirez and Xander could hold him on their own. It'll take two people to keep him in check and someone else to inject him. So yeah, I'm coming."

"Me too," Ceri said, joining in after a long silence.

"No you're not, Ceri," Buffy told her.

"You need me."

"Ceri, I want you to stay here and... I don't know, I just want you to stay here, okay? This isn't a free-for-all. This is Morgan we're talking about here, not some dumb vampire, and I don't... I don't think it's right that you be there."

"You're going," Ceri pointed out. "And you're closer to him than I am."

"That's my problem, Ceri, and my responsibility. And so are you, no matter how old you think you are, or seem to be. Please, stay with Will and the others. And..." She struggled to think of another reason to keep Ceri at home. "And I guess things need preparing here."

"What things?"

Buffy turned helplessly to Giles, turned pleading eyes on him.

"Your mother's right, Ceri," he said, evidently understanding Buffy's need. "When Morgan is brought back

here, he'll need restraints of some kind for the exorcism. We'll define the details later but you can help by preparing those restraints and having them ready for us."

"Oh," Ceri said. "Okay." She frowned, and Buffy saw that the mention of restraints had deflated her determination to go with them. Giles spoke.

"Now, we should stop wasting time talking, and leave. I will go on ahead, Buffy."

"But you don't know where..." Buffy began.

"I will know, Buffy. Just get there as quickly as you can. Quickly, Buffy."

With that, Giles faded away, and soon, only a lingering warmth told them he'd ever been there.

Ramirez came back into the room.

"All arranged," he told them. "What they will have prepared for us would sedate a bull elephant." His attempt at humour fell flat.

"Let's go then," Buffy said dully.

Together they filed silently out of the house.

* * *

Morgan reached the cemetery, which was still teeming with spirits that wandered around, seemingly unsure of where to go now they had access to the living lands. In his pocket, the soul jar was a strangely heavy weight. And warm too, with the heat of the soul trapped inside it. Living spirits were always warm, unlike the usual chill of most dead souls. A living spirit, Morgan guessed, would be a much-prized slave amongst the dark entities that would use it. He guessed too that eventually they would drain the warmth from it, so that even if the soul did ever return to Ria, it would be of no use to her. Any way you looked at it, Morgan mused, Ria was doomed to a life of degradation and not knowing right from wrong. And that was the best case scenario. Still, never mind. Ria was just a stupid little girl who had chosen the wrong man to become involved with.

He was approaching the mausoleum now, about to step through the gates, when another spirit materialised. Morgan recognised that this was no normal phantom - it glowed with a gold aura, gave off an intense heat that was almost painful to Morgan's frigid spirit. And it was someone Morgan recognised from... Oh, almost a quarter of a century ago, when Buffy had first moved to Sunnydale. Someone who had given his life for the sake of humanity.

"Rupert Giles," Morgan snarled. "Thought you of all people would have Ascended. Weren't you good enough, after all?"

He saw Giles smile serenely, wanted to punch the expression right off the ghost's face, but of course, physical violence was no good against someone who wasn't solid.

"When this matter is dealt with, I shall Ascend," Giles said.

"This matter will never be dealt with," Morgan replied.

"This is bigger than either of us. Better to join it, not fight it."

"Armageddon was bigger, but that was stopped."

"Armageddon made the mistake of becoming a physical entity, capable of being killed. You can't kill spirits, not in any normal way."

"No, but we can close the gateway within this tomb, Morgan. Restore the status quo."

"You don't know how to close the gateway," Morgan said, assessing Giles, resorting to using guesswork, because he couldn't read this spirit, which was frustrating because he could usually read anyone.

"Do you know how to close it, Morgan?"

"I'm not discussing this with you. Get out of my way, I have to go into the tomb."

"Francis Breton," Giles read, not moving. "I know that name from my Watcher days. A sorcerer - small time, not like your good self, Morgan. Not really worthy of close examination, so I believed at the time. I was wrong, wasn't I? Was it his incantation that opened the gateway?"

"If you don't get out of my way, I shall disable you. I can't kill you, of course, you're already dead, but I can hurt you."

"You can try."

Morgan knew a lot of spells that would cause a spirit extreme pain. He tried one now, the strongest one he knew that didn't require any equipment. But the words seemed to bounce off Giles like water off waxed paper.

"You're wasting your energy, Morgan," Giles told him.

"A soul as close to Ascension as I am cannot be hurt or bound by another, so don't bother trying that, either."

"Very well. But you can't stop me, so I'm going in there anyway."

"I don't think so," said a voice behind him. Buffy's voice.

"Morgan, give it up. I know what you've done. Give the girl's soul back, and come home with us?"

Morgan felt insane rage bubble up inside him. Accompanying Buffy, he saw, were Xander and his own traitor priest son, Felipe.

"You've been spying on me." He saw Buffy shiver at the tone of his voice, which would have frozen boiling water.

"No... Morgan, please stop it? You're not in your right mind."

"I wasn't in my right mind when I got involved with you. That's the stupidest thing I ever did."

He saw hurt register on her face, but hurting her didn't feel as good as it should have done. Maybe this would

make him feel better, he thought, suddenly exploding into movement, throwing an accurately placed punch, hitting Buffy in the face, watching her fly backward, an almost comical expression of pain and disbelief on her features.

Turning, he made to go into the tomb, only to have Xander jump on his back, grabbing him round the neck, trying to bring him down. Morgan grasped the hands that were cutting off his air supply and wrenched them apart, shoved back hard with his elbow, catching Xander a heavy blow to his abdomen, causing him to fall backward, gasping. While Xander was regaining his breath, Morgan turned and dealt him the same treatment as he had Buffy. He felt the satisfying crunch of bone under his fist, saw a burst of blood erupt from Xander's broken nose.

"Jesus, Morgan!" Xander yelled, putting his hand to his face, trying to stem the flow of blood, which dripped through his fingers down onto his clothes. Then he launched himself forward again, along with Ramirez, rushing Morgan, bringing him down, trying to keep him down without hurting him too much.

Morgan had no such qualms. He knew what they were trying to do and he wasn't about to lay there and take it. Bringing up an unrestrained leg, he managed to connect a heavy kick to Ramirez, catching him squarely in the crotch. Ramirez expelled air in a moan, and an expression of extreme pain passed across his face, but he didn't let up his hold on his father.

"Let me go, you bastard priest!" Morgan screamed, struggling hard, managing to dislodge Xander, whose blood was pattering down on his face. As Xander fell off him, Morgan managed to kick upward again, and this time, Ramirez, feeling another blow to an already agonised area, rolled away, temporarily disabled. Rising to his feet, Morgan saw Buffy, who had recovered, sprinting toward him. Xander was also standing, and Ramirez, panting, was also beginning to force himself into action. Morgan backed up - only a few steps and he could be inside the tomb, which had a lock.

Buffy threw herself toward him and he found himself staggering backward, felt the wall of the tomb slam up against his back, felt the air forced from his lungs at the savagery of her attack.

"No man hits me," she growled at him through a swollen, bloody mouth. "I don't give a damn that you're not yourself. No man hits me."

He tried to shake her off, but fury had made her strong, almost his match. He felt her deliver a blow to his midsection that winded him, heard her shout to Ramirez and Xander, who needed no second bidding to come to her aid. Within seconds, as he was recovering himself,

roaring terrible threats, he felt Xander help her hold him against the wall.

"Pull his head aside, expose his neck," he heard Ramirez, his treacherous son instruct urgently. "I need access to a vein..."

And within seconds, despite his struggles, Morgan felt

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Buffy drew back and watched as Morgan dropped to the ground, completely senseless from the effect of the drug. She spat blood from her damaged mouth, checked to see if all her teeth were still in place, because Morgan had hit her so hard, she felt sure he must have dislodged something. Thankfully, all seemed normal, even if her mouth did feel as though it had been hit with a sledgehammer. Taking a deep shuddery breath, she turned to Ramirez, who still held the empty syringe in his hand, which hung limply at his side.

"Didn't think he was gonna go down for a minute there," she remarked, trying to sound flippant, but only succeeding in sounding exhausted. Ramirez nodded gloomily, tore his eyes from his father's prone form to look up at Buffy.

"You were right to insist that you came along too. Xander and I would never have held him alone."

Xander, having fallen away from Morgan, was holding his hands up to his face again. The blood had stopped flowing, but his face was a mess. Tomorrow, Buffy thought, he would be spectacularly bruised.

"Bastard broke my nose," he mumbled through his fingers. "Guess it'll mean a trip to the hospital to get it splinted when this is over."

"Xander, I'm so sorry..."

Xander shrugged.

"Yeah, well, maybe he's done me a favour. Might make me look tougher in court, right? Frighten off the heavens."

He managed a short laugh, but Buffy knew he was upset and shaken. Well, she knew how he felt. Never in all the time she'd known Morgan had she ever imagined he'd hit her, let alone look at her with that unalloyed hate she'd seen in his eyes just before he succumbed to the drug. She only hoped she could still feel the same way about him afterwards. If she'd ever trust him again.

"Guess we'd better get him back home," she said unenthusiastically.

"Wait," Giles said; he had been hovering around, watching the proceedings from a slight distance.

"What?" Buffy said.

"In his pocket. The soul jar. You need to release Ria's

the sharp prick of a needle on his skin, felt a needle slide into his jugular vein, and cool liquid flowed from the syringe that Ramirez held into his blood.

Soon his struggling stopped, and Morgan felt himself slip into a drug-induced sleep.

soul, so it can go back to her."

"What, here? Won't it be dangerous for her?"

"No more than anywhere else. Do it, Buffy. If we wait, it means more suffering for the poor girl. I will say the necessary words to ensure that she goes back safely and joins back with her body."

"But her soul cord's been cut..."

"It will heal, Buffy. Now do as I ask, please. We don't have a lot of time."

"Okay."

Kneeling down beside Morgan, Buffy reached into his inside pocket, found the soul jar, felt the heat that emanated from it. Brought it out into the night air, where it glimmered in the darkness. As though attracted by the heat and the glow of a living soul, dead souls began to gather round. Buffy rose to her feet slowly, looking around, saw Xander and Ramirez watching too. Heard Ramirez begin to pray in a strong, sure voice. The ghosts didn't come any closer though, didn't appear threatening. Rather, although they were obviously drawn to the soul's heat, they seemed afraid.

"Are they being held back by Felipe's praying?" Buffy asked. Giles smiled.

"Partly because of that, but mostly because of me. A soul near to Ascension always has dominion over lesser souls. It's because they can't bear the Light they see coming from me."

"Saint Giles," Xander quipped, only to be silenced by a severe look from both Giles and Ramirez.

"Don't be irreverent, Xander. Now, Buffy, open the soul jar when I tell you to. Are you ready?"

Buffy put her hand on the stopper. As though sensing it was about to be released, the soul rushed toward the top of the jar.

"Ria's soul, forgive the man who took your soul from your body. He is sorely sick and in need of cleansing. Bear us no ill will or bitterness, but go back into your body, back to your life, sanctified by the power of love and Light." Giles came closer, ran his hand through the jar, and a light emanated from him, into it. "Go in peace, Ria's soul. May no evil trouble you on your journey." Turned to Buffy. "Open the jar."

Buffy obeyed and the golden light flew upward and away. Although it was obvious that the observing spirits wanted to follow it, they were held back by some invisible force that Giles had apparently evoked when he'd said the simple words. Soon the soul was gone.

"Not even a word of thanks," Xander said, apparently on a bad humour overdrive, a sure sign he was very afraid and unhappy.

"Smash the jar, Buffy," Giles said. "Nothing must remain of Morgan's magic."

Without hesitation, Buffy obeyed.

"Now can we go back?" she said. "We don't know how long this drug'll last on Morgan and I'm getting nervous."

"Yes. Let's go. Or rather, you three go. I will go back to Elysia and find the appropriate ritual for Morgan's cleansing. But first, I will see you through this throng." Xander and Ramirez hoisted Morgan up off the ground and carried him forward. Deeply unconscious, he was obviously a heavy weight, despite his natural leanness.

"What about that tomb?" Buffy asked as an afterthought as they began to walk. "I heard you say something about the gateway being inside? And Morgan certainly seemed to want to go in there."

"Best left, Buffy. Until we know what to do, it'd be suicide going in there."

"Always an overrated pastime, suicide..." Xander shut up abruptly at Giles' glare. They walked in strained silence the rest of the way.

Going through a crowd of ghosts was an unnerving experience, even for three seasoned warriors against the supernatural. Although Giles kept the spirits at bay, and to some lesser extent, Ramirez' praying, they only just kept their distance from the living humans who walked amongst them. The chill that came off them made the late autumn night - already frosty here in Chicago - seem warm, and Buffy, Xander and Ramirez found themselves shivering uncontrollably. But even worse than the chill were the sounds.

The ghosts whispered incessantly, a non-stop susurration of noise, so that Buffy, whose frayed nerves were already stretched to breaking, wanted to scream at them to stop.

"Help us... Warm us... Love us... Embrace us... Help us... Warm us... Love us... Embrace us..." And so on it went.

"Ignore their cries," Giles told them. "Do not acknowledge them in any way."

But although the distance between the tomb and the cemetery gates was short, Buffy and the others were trembling hard at the end of it, and not just from the drop in temperature. Opening the car door, Buffy heaved a sigh of the relief. The ghosts hadn't followed

them out of the gates.

"Why didn't they follow?" Buffy asked Giles, while Xander and Ramirez unceremoniously shoved Morgan onto the back seat.

"I would imagine that the ghosts we saw are bound to the cemetery where they were buried. The cemetery's very old - perhaps it's all they know of this world now. Just be glad they didn't follow. Now, are you all right?" Buffy nodded. "Then go home. Restrain Morgan. And I shall be back as soon as I can."

Giles disappeared in that disconcerting way ghosts have, and Buffy turned to Ramirez.

"Would you drive?" she asked. "I wanna sit with Morgan. And I ought to phone home, to tell them what's happening."

Ramirez got into the driver's seat, with Xander in the passenger seat beside him, and Buffy sat in the back seat, tried to make Morgan as comfortable as possible, putting his head in her lap. She was still angry with him for hitting her, but the anger was fading, and she felt sorrow coming through instead. Although he was still unconscious, almost comatose, Buffy could feel the pull of his soul to hers, and she knew the deep disturbance within him, a disturbance so profound that it caused pain within herself. Overwhelmed then with pity, she leaned down, kissed his sweaty forehead. His skin was clammy, corpse-like under her lips.

"It'll be okay," she whispered. Closed her eyes, prayed. "Oh, please let it be okay."

Knowing she was about to crack, she got her mobile phone from her pocket, called home to take her mind off it.

"Hey, Will," she said when Willow picked up. "We're coming back."

"How did it go?" Willow sounded tired, but was obviously trying to be bright for Buffy's sake.

"Don't ask," Buffy said darkly. "Let's just say that Morgan put up a fight, okay? But we're all intact, more or less. Look, Will, did you and Ceri manage to find some restraints?"

"Oh yeah," Willow said. "We found some stuff that'll work okay."

"Okay. I'll see you soon. Oh, and Will, when we get home, make sure that none of the kids are around - Jordan included."

"Well, Jordan did come and ask what was going on, but he's with Lucas and Kate and your mom now."

"It's really important they don't see Morgan. It'll upset them, okay? I wish there was somewhere else they could go, but it's too late now."

"I'll keep them out of the way, I promise."

"Ceri okay?"

"Fine. Buffy, you'll be home soon. We'll see you then."
Buffy said goodbye, laid a hand on Morgan's icy face. Closed her eyes and tried to relax. Of course, it was impossible.

After a journey which seemed to take forever, but was in fact only about twenty five minutes' duration, they arrived home. Willow, obviously having heard their arrival, came to the door, Ceri with her. Again, Xander and Ramirez had the job of hauling Morgan around, this time out of the car and into the house, then upstairs to Buffy's bedroom. Willow exclaimed sympathetically over Xander's broken nose and Buffy's hurt mouth, and Ceri clung to Buffy in a way she hadn't since she was a small child. Then Xander and Ramirez were left alone to perform the task of making sure Morgan was properly restrained.

"Is Morgan gonna be okay?" Ceri asked, sounding like a small child too. Buffy looked into her daughter's perfectly beautiful face, stroked the soft skin. She knew she couldn't lie to her, so she just told the truth.

"I hope so." She pulled away from Ceri. "I have to speak to Lucas and Kate now, and Jordan too. Warn them. I guess... I guess that whatever's coming, it won't be pleasant. I guess it could get bad, Ceri."

"Okay. Can I do anything? I wanna help, if I can."

"No, baby. Just stay strong, and try not to be distressed if things get... you know... difficult with Morgan. I have to be with him, you know that, right? When Giles and Ramirez do whatever they have to do."

"I know, mom. I'll be okay."

"Well, maybe you should go in with the others, Willow too. Be strong for us together kind of thing."

"Whatever you want, mom. And I'm sorry - for lying to you before."

"Doesn't matter now. You said there was a reason for Nick to be around. I don't think we know what it is yet. But I think we will - soon. Now, I must get on."

With a heavy heart, Buffy forced herself to go into the twins' room. They, and Jordan, were sitting around, and when Buffy came in, they leapt up. Joyce, Buffy saw, also looked anxious.

"What's happening, mom? You brought dad back, didn't you? Why can't we see him?" Kate seemed almost out of her mind with terror.

"Yeah, we tried to read it from Willow but we couldn't. Her mind's a mess..." Lucas sounded both afraid and defiant.

"Your father's... not exactly himself right now. You were right, Lucas, when you said that maybe it was a possession. Something similar has happened to him, and we have to cure it. Now, I don't want you to leave this room, ever, while Felipe, Giles and myself are making

him well again. I mean it, Lucas, before you start arguing. I really, really mean it. Ceri and Willow are gonna come and keep you company, help your grandmother care for you while it's going on. I know we're not exactly a religious family, but you know about the power of Love, right? I want you all to pray and pray and pray for Morgan. He needs your love, more than he's ever needed it. And no matter what you might hear coming from my bedroom, I'm telling you again: you are not to leave this room."

Buffy didn't like the expression of fear her words had put in the children's eyes, or the deep sympathy in her mother's, but she couldn't help it.

"Okay, I'm going now. I don't know how long it'll take." She managed a tremulous smile. "Hug?" she said, and the twins, and Jordan too, enveloped her in warmth.

"I wish I could hold you, Buffy. A mother should be there for her child," Joyce said, but Buffy just shook her head and managed another smile.

"You're here. That's all that matters. Now, let me go, kids. And be strong." Same words as she'd said to Ceri. Be strong.

Trailing down the hallway, Buffy entered her bedroom with a dread she'd never felt before eating her up inside. Xander and Ramirez had secured Morgan to the bed with a strange mixture of leather belts, which they had tied tightly around his wrists and ankles before tethering them to the sides of the bed. Around his body, at three points, they had used some heavy-duty cord. The sight of Morgan, still unaware of what was going on around him, strapped down and helpless, nearly reduced Buffy to tears. It also reminded her of her almost-rape six years ago, brought back the sheer impotent horror of the way she'd felt then, remembering how it felt to be bound and powerless. For a few seconds she almost fled the room, might have if Xander hadn't come to her quickly and held her tight.

"I know it looks bad," he told her, his battered face full of loving concern, "but you know it has to be done."

"It is hard for me too," Ramirez pointed out. "For so many years, I hated my father because I thought he had abandoned me, because I despised him and everything he is, everything I am, because of him. But I have grown to love him, and now..."

"Don't say it, Felipe," Buffy pleaded, but the priest regarded her with dark eyes and shook his head.

"And now I might lose him again," he finished. "We cannot shy away from that possibility, Buffy. We cannot blindly believe that everything will be good again simply because we deny the bad things. We must know the possibilities and face them."

"I..." Buffy began, but then Giles began materialis-

ing and Buffy, relieved, broke away from Xander, ran to him, forgetting she couldn't hold him, went right through him, slithered to the floor in a heap.

"Tell Felipe he's wrong," she begged a surprised Giles. "Tell Felipe that everything will be okay, Giles. Tell him he shouldn't be so pessimistic. He seems to think it could all go wrong and that we'll lose Morgan."

"Ah," Giles said.

"Mr Giles," Ramirez said. "I have officiated at many exorcisms, and I know that it is always dangerous, for all concerned. That is all I was trying to tell Buffy, that she mustn't be blind to the possibility. God knows, Morgan is my father, yet I must face all the aspects of what we must do, including the unpalatable ones."

"He's wrong, right, Giles?" Buffy got to her feet. "If we're negative, it'll only be worse, right?"

Giles was silent for a few seconds. Buffy recognised the expression on his face as his how-can-I-be-tactful-but-still-tell-the-truth expression.

"Buffy, I know how you must be feeling, and I know you want everything to be perfect, but this ritual is..." He sighed. "It is spiritually very strenuous. And there is a certain amount of danger involved."

"Yeah, okay, danger. Why doesn't that amaze me?" Xander sounded completely unsurprised.

"Danger to who, exactly?" Buffy asked, ignoring him.

"Buffy..."

"Oh, will you please for pity's sake just spit it out, Giles?" Buffy exploded, not giving Giles the opportunity to continue.

"Although this is an exorcism of sorts, it is also a rejoining of the splitting of Morgan's soul that occurred during the formation of the Shadow. Father Ramirez and I must bring out Morgan's Shadow, judge when it's right to stop so that he's not completely deprived of his natural balance between light and dark, and then merge his soul again. Although he has only been affected a very short time, the rapidity of his deterioration, and its intensity, suggests this will not be a simple matter. There is a very real possibility that things could go wrongly."

"What do you mean, wrongly?" Buffy was having difficulty keeping control.

"Do you really want to know?" Giles asked.

"We must know," Ramirez said simply, and despite her anger with him, Buffy had to admire his calmness. Buffy knew she had a lot of good qualities, but calmness where the well being of loved ones was concerned wasn't always one of them.

"Very well. There is the possibility that we cannot remove the Shadow, that it is too strong to defeat and Morgan will become more and more evil. But that," Giles said, holding up a hand to stem Buffy's protest, "is

by far the worst thing that can happen. It is most unlikely, but you should know the risk. There is the possibility that, conversely, we may remove too much. All humans need a certain amount of instinct within them to protect themselves. Remove too much and we will disable him. He would have no fighting instinct, not recognise danger, etcetera. And finally, if we cannot merge the two halves of his soul, well, Buffy, the conflict within him will be enormous and..."

"And?" Buffy prompted, interrupting again. "And what, Giles?"

"He would be rendered incurably insane by such a conflict."

Deep silence fell. Buffy, glancing at Ramirez, noticed that the priest had tears in his eyes, but he kept his iron control. Xander had gone pale, was looking at the floor, obviously trying to pretend he hadn't heard the last thing that Giles had said.

"Father Ramirez and I will do everything we can to get this right, Buffy." Giles said. "I promise you."

"I promise you too," Ramirez said, his voice, like his composure, quite steady despite his glistening eyes.

"Should I stay?" Xander asked.

"We may need you, Xander," Giles said. "Things could become... violent. Now, Father Ramirez, I suggest that we go through the ritual together. This is what you will need and what we must do..."

While Giles and Ramirez were discussing the ritual, Buffy sat beside Morgan on the bed, took his cold hand. "Lifeless," she said to Xander, who was looking on, obviously feeling useless, obviously wanting to be somewhere else. "If it wasn't for the fact that he's breathing, I'd think he was dead."

Morgan, dead. Not something she'd ever seriously considered, had always believed him strong enough to overcome anything. Even now, even with Giles' explanation of how the Shadow had overtaken him, she couldn't quite grasp how Morgan had succumbed to it. That now, because of his strength and power, which should have protected him, Morgan had been overcome by his own dark side, had been made something monstrous.

"If he doesn't come through this..." she began.

"He will, Buffy. He will." But Xander's efforts to reassure were only so much lip service, Buffy thought. Xander wasn't sure either. No-one was.

Ramirez, Buffy saw, was busy laying out a kind of altar on one of her cabinets. He had placed a large white cloth over it, and she heard him praying, making the sign of the cross over it. He lit a blue candle, then a white candle, which she knew were the colours of purity and protection.

"We need salt," he said, and before Buffy could react, Xander rushed out of the room. She heard him go downstairs, and when he returned, he had the salt cellar in his hands.

"This okay?" he asked, breathing heavily through his mouth because his nose was still bunged up with dried blood.

"Thank you, yes." Ramirez took the salt cellar, blessed its contents, then began going around the room, sprinkling salt everywhere, murmuring words. "O holy salt of purification, protect us all at this time. Absorb all dark energies, all that would harm us. Safeguard us now."

Buffy saw the white grains on her carpet, thought stupidly that she'd have a lot to clear up later, shook her head to dispel such idle thoughts.

"Now," Giles said, "that is the initial protection. Buffy, Xander, now you must concentrate on yourselves. Close your eyes. Visualise a ball of gold light enveloping you, feel it warm you."

Buffy did as she was told, Xander too. It was hard to relax, to stay focussed, but she knew Giles was helping her, and Ramirez too, by his total faith in his own God.

"Now repeat: Divine Light, surround and envelope me. Let perfect peace flow through and around me. Let everlasting peace and protection be mine from this moment on, forever through all time." The words hung in the air. "Good. Make it a chant, over and over. Over and over."

For about ten minutes, they chanted the protection ritual. It was similar to the ritual Morgan went through before he performed any potentially dangerous ritual, so Buffy was familiar with the gist of it. By the end of the chant, Buffy felt warm, almost calm again. Looking at Xander, she knew he felt better too. They needed this extra measure of inner peace to see this through.

Morgan, however, was muttering now, apparently coming out of his drug induced sleep. The words were unintelligible, but the tone was distressed.

"He feels the Light in the room," Giles said. "And you must not be swayed or thrown off your course by it. You must continue to call to the Light in your hearts. Of course you will be afraid, but that should make your desire to see him cured all the stronger. Are we all ready to continue?"

Silently Buffy nodded. Then Xander.

"Can I hold Morgan?" Buffy asked, but Giles shook his head.

"Stay away from him. If anything should happen, it may affect you if you are touching him. As it is, you may well feel his pain."

So Buffy grasped Xander's hand instead. Watched Ramirez approach the bed.

"Lay your hands upon him, Father Ramirez," Giles said. Ramirez laid his hands flat against Morgan's chest. Morgan moaned as though he'd been burned; his body jerked upward a little. Ramirez did not flinch. "And speak my words exactly as I say them."

As Giles spoke, so Ramirez repeated.

"I touch the inner soul of this man with my love. I send the heart of the Prana into his soul, which is black with Shadow."

Morgan's eyes snapped open; Buffy could see that the drug's effect had completely worn off, that his eyes were wild with that hate she'd seen before, and the knowledge that he was bound.

"Let me go, Felipe," he said, "and I won't curse you into Hell forever."

"I bind your mouth against curses, my father," Ramirez said, seemingly unruffled. "I bind your tongue from uttering them. I bind your eyes from looking upon us with hate. I bind your mind from sending out a curse against any person here." He laid his hand over Morgan's mouth, then his eyes, on his forehead. If Morgan hadn't been strapped down, he would have thrown himself off the bed with the pain that Ramirez' words induced in him. But instead, he could only writhe helplessly, and a long, loud wail came from his throat.

Buffy felt her insides cramp, and she clutched Xander's hand more tightly, saw him grimace.

"You're hurting him!" And me, she wanted to scream. You're hurting me too. But she kept her mouth firmly shut.

"This is only the beginning, Buffy," Giles said. "It is necessary. Father Ramirez, if you please..."

Ramirez laid one hand against Morgan's forehead, one against his chest. As he did so, Morgan kept up a constant screaming cry, straining against his bindings. She saw beads of blood begin to drip from his wrists and ankles, where the leather chafed against his skin. The cords around his body were digging into him - they would leave great red welts on his skin for a few days afterwards. Ramirez, Buffy noticed, was beginning to sweat.

"Dominus Adjuto Meus. Hearken unto me, O divine source of Light. Grant this man true knowledge of his being. Help me to strip away the Shadow that has cursed his true nature, and let him emerge into Light. To thee I make this supplication."

The screaming had reached an impossible pitch, Morgan's blood flowed faster where the leather had finally severed blood vessels, and Buffy thought she might well faint. She had let go Xander's hand, approached the bed on nerveless legs, smelled the combined stench of sweat, blood and pain.

"Go back, Buffy," Giles said, for Ramirez was repeating the prayer again. "Buffy, go back!" She felt herself blocked by a wall of warmth, knew that Giles was preventing her from approaching too closely.

"He's hurting," she said again, each word a strangled sob. "I can't bear it..."

"You must bear it..."

"The circle in the centre is the centre of this man's being," Ramirez was saying, making concentric circles on Morgan's skin. "The points of this star are rays of healing light." A pentacle of light glowed against Morgan's skin now, sank inward, and Buffy, who had thought his torture couldn't possibly get any worse, was knocked off her feet by a sensation within her that was so intense, she thought she might die. Black agony exploded in her head, and she knew she was suffering what Morgan was suffering.

Buffy... Her head jerked upward. Even in the extremity of his pain, he felt their connection? Help me... His mind sounded lucid, normal even. She sensed that the small part of him that wasn't Shadow had broken through.

I can't. Only they can help you...

If this doesn't work, Buffy...

It will. It must. I'm nothing without you...

You're everything, with me or without me... Ah, Buffy...

The pain is killing me...

"I burn out the coldness," Ramirez was intoning. "I burn out suspicion. I burn out hate..."

"Shut up!" Buffy screamed at Ramirez. "Shut up! You're destroying him..."

Buffy, let it be. Morgan in her head again. Let it be. Under the pain, he sounded frail, as though he were unable to go on much longer. If this fails, and I am left... not myself, you know what you must do.

What?

Buffy, you know.

I'll look after you...

No. Strength in his mind-voice now. You must kill me, Buffy.

NO! Never!

Buffy, you must. You know it. Think. What would it be like, for you, for our children, if I was left... evil or insane? If nothing else, think of our children...

"I can't do that!" she sobbed aloud, her voice inaudible under Ramirez' praying and Morgan's outer self shrieking like a demon. She was only barely aware of Xander's arms around her, as he tried to inject his love through her wall of anguish. But she knew Morgan was right, that if he survived with the Shadow intact, or his own self destroyed, that she would have no choice but to do as he'd pleaded. The knowledge made her sob harder.

"I burn up all the poison in this man's soul," Ramirez had come to last part of the first, most dangerous, phase. "Burn up the death, burn up the Shadow that blights his life. I burn through the Shadow with the Light of Love. In the name of Love, I command the Shadow out of this body."

Buffy was barely aware of what happened next. She saw, but it was as though she was removed from the proceedings, as though she had been sent mad herself by the ritual. But she saw Giles move forward. In his hand, he had a jar similar to the soul jar that Ria's soul had been captured in, except it wasn't made of a physical substance. From Morgan's body, Buffy saw a black substance begin to flow, like a cloud of polluted smoke. It writhed as Morgan writhed, shrieked as Morgan shrieked, but although it fought viciously against the compelling, it had no choice - as Ria's soul had had no choice - but to go into the Light-blessed container. Abruptly Morgan fell silent, except for heavy, rapid breathing, and Buffy, relieved of the pain inside her, pitched forward, only avoided damaging herself by Xander's strong arms.

"The worst is over, Buffy," Giles said. "I will destroy this Shadow, so it may never return to him. But first, the restoration. Father Ramirez, are you quite all right?"

Ramirez, who was drenched with sweat and very pale, straightened up.

"I have to be," he replied. "Now, my father suffers still. We must continue. Speak, Mr Giles." He began to repeat the final part of the ceremony. "Hear me, divine Light. Guide this man's soul back to unity. Restore to him the balance of his mind, restore to him the natural love and light of his being. Give to him the true knowledge of Self." More signs, more repeats of the words. Buffy saw Morgan's respiration return to something like normal. Then she saw Light flow from Ramirez' fingers, and settle into Morgan, who still gave no other sign of life.

"It is finished," Giles said.

"Is he okay?" Buffy hardly dared ask.

"It went well," Giles replied, and Buffy could only wonder dimly what it would have been like if it had gone badly. "Soon we'll know. But he's exhausted. May take some time to come round. Then we can judge."

It wasn't until dawn broke the dark sky that Morgan began to move again. Buffy, being soul-linked to him, was the first to hear him.

"Wait, Giles said. "He may be..."

But Buffy wasn't listening. She rushed to the bed, feeling the connection inside her, knowing it was all right, not even needing to look at Morgan to know that he was restored.

"Help me untie him," she said, beginning to remove the

restraints.

"Buffy..." Xander echoed Giles' caution, but Buffy ignored him too. Soon Morgan was released, and Buffy, slowing now, looked at him. The expression in his eyes was one of deep shame and confusion. His breathing was hitched, as though he was trying not to weep.

"I'm sorry..." His voice broke and Buffy could stay away from him no longer. Climbing onto the bed beside him, she held him, felt his arms go around her, felt the warmth of his tears on her skin, the clamminess of

blood from the wounds on his wrists. She knew that he was still desperately weak, that it would take time for him to be completely recovered. But he would recover, that was all that mattered to her.

"It's okay," she whispered over and over, knowing that she'd forgiven him, would forgive him anything, as long as he was whole and with her.

Oblivious to all but Morgan, Buffy didn't hear the others leave...

Seventeen

Morgan slept all through the day, into the evening. During that time, Buffy never left his side, except to come out and reassure her children that he was "fine" and to confirm what Ramirez, Xander and Giles had told them. That the exorcism of the Shadow and the restoration of Morgan's Self were complete.

Also during that time, Giles taught Willow a warding-off spell so that she might be free of Oz - or any other intruding spirit - in her dreams, and she was able to sleep too. Xander took himself off to the local hospital to get his nose set. And Ramirez and Ceri stayed on guard in the house while Buffy and Morgan rested, speaking with Giles and Joyce, fascinated to hear about the differing levels of the Shadow Lands. The children all refused to attend school that day. How could they expect to behave normally, they protested, when absolutely nothing around them was remotely normal at the moment? Besides, Lucas and Kate wanted to be near Morgan, and Jordan wanted to be near Willow. Seeing their individual needs, the adults didn't argue.

For herself, Buffy didn't sleep. Instead, she watched Morgan intently, just praying that they weren't wrong, that he was indeed "fine", as she'd told the children. Although she felt it inside her, she was afraid that she was deluding herself. When he finally opened his eyes, she had to restrain herself from asking the thousand questions that were whirling in her mind like a tornado. Instead, she just smiled, laid her hand on his face - warm now, she was relieved to feel.

"Are you okay?"

"Okay?" he echoed, unsmiling, as though he wondered what the word meant. "Do you think I deserve to be okay?"

"What?" His response threw her; she had expected him to be relieved and happy, as she was. Instead, he appeared withdrawn, even depressed.

"I know what I did. Look at what I did to you." He touched her mouth, still slightly swollen, although her

immortal flesh had mostly healed. Likewise, she noticed, the wounds on his wrists, which had closed. "In a short space of time, I betrayed everything we mean to each other. Did you know I was nearly unfaithful to you?"

His honesty, almost brutal, hurt her, and she half wished he'd kept it locked up inside himself, but she nodded. If he could be honest, so must she.

"I know. You went to the girl - to Ria - last night. Giles and I, we tracked you..."

"No... Not just then. Yesterday morning." Morgan went on to tell Buffy everything that went on between him and Ria, how she had wanted him, how he had decided to use her, how he had almost let it go too far.

"You weren't yourself," Buffy said, carefully keeping her voice even, not allowing even a shadow of blame to surface. Then, despite her belief that she'd forgiven him, jealousy asserted itself. "Do you still want her?"

"God, no!" His face was stricken. "That's what makes it so much worse. I never really did. It was just the pure power I had over her that mattered. I never want to see her again, ever, but I feel I must. I must restore her, Buffy."

"Giles already did that. He sent her soul back. There's no need for you to see her." And again, those nagging doubts in her mind surfaced. If Morgan saw Ria, he might decide he wanted her after all...

"Buffy, I wouldn't. I swear it." He knew her inner insecurities, heard her fears, which she hadn't - couldn't - voice. "But - I put this to you - would you still have accepted me back if I had... had sex with her?" More brutal honesty, this time in a question.

"You weren't yourself," Buffy repeated doggedly, but Morgan shook his head.

"Yes, well, there's the thing, isn't it? I was, really."

"No..." she began, but Morgan closed his eyes, shook his head again.

"It was part of me, Buffy. And I don't know if I'll ever feel

cleansed of it."

He got off the bed. Buffy noticed how he swayed on his feet, as though he were drunk, knew how weak he still was. She felt useless because she realised that no matter what she said, no matter how much she might forgive him, he had to forgive himself before he could hope fully to become his proper self again.

"I'm going to take a shower," he said dully.

"Do you want me to help?"

His face closed.

"No. I don't want you to touch me while I'm unclean."

"But you're not..."

"I am." He disappeared into the shower-room, shut the door behind him. Locked it, and Buffy felt mild hysteria threaten. He'd never locked a door against her, ever. Buffy guessed she could kick the door down if she wanted to, but how would that look? Immature, certainly. If he wanted space, she decided, she guessed she'd better give him space. Just give him quiet, loving support and pray that he'd get over it. So she sat and steeled herself to wait.

When he finally emerged, he dressed in brooding silence. Then he turned to her.

"I expect I have some apologies to make? I seem to remember breaking Xander's nose, for one thing. And I have some things to tell you all."

"Okay. Let's go." She reached for his hand and for a horrible second she thought he wasn't going to take it. That he'd meant it when he said he wasn't going to touch her. Then she felt his fingers curl around hers, knew that despite his belief that he was tainted, above all he needed to feel her loving warmth. He managed a wan smile, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. Buffy supposed it was a start.

Buffy gathered everyone together in the lounge. As soon as Kate and Lucas saw Morgan, they rushed to him, hugged him like they'd never let him go again. Buffy waited to see if he'd reject contact with them, like he'd initially rejected it with her, but he didn't. She felt a brief resentment against him - why could he hug the children so openly, so gladly, but not her? Why had he only favoured her with a brief touch of his hand? Decided that maybe it was because she and Morgan had such a binding soul closeness that he felt his pain - his inner sense of being soiled - might infiltrate her again, and he didn't want her to feel any more hurt because of him. So she pushed her brief negativity aside and rejoiced that at least Kate and Lucas had evoked some happiness inside him.

Once the children were satisfied, they let him go, but insisted on sitting with him on the sofa. Everyone else looked at him expectantly. No-one, not even Xander,

who had white sticking plaster strapped across his broken nose and had taken his share of jokes because of it, appeared to bear him any ill will. Giles and Joyce hovered in the corner of the room.

"Firstly, I want to apologise to everyone here," Morgan began, almost in a whisper. "I know I gave you all a lot of grief, and I'm sorry. I don't want to hear any "it doesn't matter", because it does matter. All I can say is..."

"We know what you are trying to say, father," Ramirez said. "I felt what was in you, and I know it was impossible for you to fight it. No one could have fought it. Believe me, I tell you only the truth. You know that."

Morgan was silent for a moment, then he nodded briefly. Buffy could tell he wasn't entirely convinced, but he evidently decided to accept the words for now. But later, Buffy guessed, he would speak to everyone individually and apologise some more.

"The cemetery is the source of the Veil's rip," Morgan said. "Or, more accurately, the tomb of Francis Breton."

"We had rather gathered that," Giles said from his corner. "The black power coming from the tomb was very clear. We decided not to go inside."

"Yeah," Xander joined in. "I tried to get hold of Dan Healy to see what he knew but..."

Buffy saw Morgan stiffen and his face became, if possible, paler.

"Kate, Lucas, Jordan, I think you should leave," Morgan said. "What I have to say now is unpleasant and..."

"We're not going anywhere," Lucas said, his defiant look creeping over his face. "We could've lost you, dad, and we're not gonna leave now."

"This isn't suitable for you to hear," Morgan insisted; Buffy thought he sounded close to weeping again and longed to comfort him.

"We're not babies anymore. We know what goes on. We're hardly normal kids, are we, not even Jordan. If you make us go, we'll only listen in."

Jordan, Buffy noticed, looked rather uncomfortable, reflected he was just like his father when it came to confrontation. He didn't like it. But he had also inherited the other part of Xander too - the part that faced up to bad things. And he had a lot of Willow's quiet resolve in him too. Despite his peaceable attitude, Jordan possessed a deep inner core of bravery for a young teenager.

"I think we should be allowed to stay," Jordan said. "This affects us all, doesn't it, Morgan? My mom's affected. She doesn't say much to me but I know she's upset. And my dad's come out of it with a broken nose. We may be young, but we have a right to know what's going on."

"Willow, Xander?" Morgan looked at them, apparently deciding to go by their decision.

"I guess they're gonna find out anyway, if Lucas carries out his threat to eavesdrop," Xander said, looking at Lucas somewhat angrily. Lucas returned the stare coolly - not with insolence but with determination. Willow sighed, nodded. Morgan turned once more to Lucas.

"Do you want to risk hating me, Lucas?"

"I could never hate you," Lucas said simply, and Kate nodded. "We understand what was wrong with you. And like I said, we're not babies. None of us."

Morgan took a breath.

"Very well," he said. "The reason you can't contact Dan Healy is because... Because he's dead. And I good as killed him."

The silence that greeted this confession was total. Morgan spoke into it, told them all exactly what had happened, from the time he'd left the house the previous morning, to the time he'd felt the Reaper spirit touch his soul and caused the full emergence of the Shadow within him. When he had finished, he was shaking, his voice choking on bitter tears. Horrified at his complete devastation, Buffy decided he'd had enough.

"You need to rest," she said decisively, before anyone else could speak. "Willow, we need you."

"Me?" Willow's voice was almost a squeak; she couldn't take her eyes off Morgan, who was shivering uncontrollably.

"I know you've had a rough couple of days, Will, but please, do a healing ritual for Morgan?"

"Perhaps she doesn't want to," Morgan said. "I wouldn't blame her..."

But Willow nodded at once, as ever full of the compassion that made her such a good healer. Together, they helped Morgan upstairs, and within thirty minutes, he was sleeping again, this time under the influence of Willow's curative magic.

"Does anyone have anything to say about what Morgan told us?" Buffy asked when she and Willow returned. Defensiveness, she knew, had crept into her voice despite her trying to make it neutral, but she couldn't keep it out. "Does anyone here think that Morgan is a murderer?"

Silence again. Buffy could see everyone's mind working. Then Ramirez, who had once been Morgan's greatest critic, spoke again.

"The only person who can judge my father is himself," he said. "I for one bear him no resentment. I say again: no one could have fought what was within him once it began to take hold."

Silence again, then the others nodded in agreement.

"Ceri?" Buffy asked, for Morgan was the only father she

had ever known, and Buffy knew how judgmental her eldest daughter could be.

"I can't condemn him. Not after some of the things I've done and said."

"Kate? Lucas?"

"He's dad," Lucas said with no hesitation. "We love him, right, Kate?"

"Right," Kate said, and Buffy began to relax.

"Okay. Thanks. Now, question: we know there are four bodies in that tomb - other than the rightful occupier. Do we tell the police?"

"No," Giles said. He sounded quite emphatic. "Not until that gateway is closed. Can you imagine if the police went in there? Enough damage has been done already. No, first we must close the gateway."

"Okay. Another question: How?"

"As Morgan destroyed the appropriate writing that told us the rituals while he was... indisposed, we must locate Francis Breton and ask him."

"And I suppose he's in the Shadow Lands, right?" Xander asked, to which question Giles nodded.

"Unless he's Ascended. Which I should think is highly unlikely."

"Where?" Ceri asked. "How can we find one ghost in a dimension so big? It'd be like searching the entire earth. Or several Earths, if the Shadow Lands exist as different eras."

"As was briefly explained before, the Shadow Lands are indeed hugely diverse. Whatever existed on Earth exists there. The dimension grows constantly as people and cultures die..."

"Oh great. So Ceri's right: he could be anywhere?" Buffy said.

"Well, in theory, yes. In practise, it's easier than that. Easier than searching the earth, perhaps. In Elysia, we have a Hall of Records that catalogues everyone who's ever lived and died. The records tell us of their state of Karma, their movement through the Shadow Lands."

"Jesus - Big Brother watches us even after death," Xander remarked. "What do they do, tag your soul or something?"

"Not exactly, Xander. The records themselves are spirits of a very specialised kind. When someone dies and goes into the Shadow Lands, a minuscule piece of their soul detaches itself, comes to Elysia to act as a kind of guiding light for its final destination before Ascension. When this fragment comes to Elysia, it is put in the Hall of Records, and there automatically plots its progress."

"You say everyone who has ever lived is recorded there? Are we there?" Lucas asked; he sounded enthralled.

"Yes, Lucas. Everyone on Earth is catalogued there, but humans are rather differently recorded, since you have

your whole soul. In the case of living humans, we have a soul blue-print, as it were, which is created at birth and which remains inactive until you die. It's rather complicated, and not necessary for you to know in this instance."

"So this system will help us find Francis Breton?" Buffy asked.

"Yes. Absolutely. And I will go to Elysia and discover where he is, and then bring him to you so that we may question him."

"Can't we just do a summoning, like Morgan did with my mom?"

"I doubt it. Breton was a sorcerer. The souls of sorcerers are notoriously difficult to raise, even more difficult to work with. After death, their powers are much enhanced because they become pure spirit and thus unrestricted by the physical. No, much better, not to mention much less dangerous, if I persuade him."

"Okay," Ceri said. "I have a question. You know I went to Nick's plantation and saw the Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveau? Before you came, Giles."

"Yes, go on."

"Nick translated what she was saying and she prophesied that... that the Death Lords were coming, and that something called the Neverborn were stirring in Oblivion. Do you know what that means?"

Buffy saw Giles' expression change. As a ghost, he was already pale, but although his skin tone couldn't alter, the look on his face could and now he reacted as though death had come for him anew.

"Those were her words?" he gasped.

"Yeah. I suppose that's bad, right?"

"Oh Ceri, you have no idea how bad. Well, this makes it all the more imperative that we find Francis Breton quickly, find out what the ritual exactly was, how to reverse it."

"Giles, what are those things?" Buffy asked. She saw him cast a doubtful look at the children, but then he answered.

"The Death Lords in the Shadow Lands, contrary to their frightening appellation, are relatively benign powers. They rule over the victims of the kinds of death that people suffer. For instance, the Lord who rules over the victims of disease is the Plague Lord; the Lord who rules over murder is the Cruel Lord and so on. There are twelve such lords, and they guide the dead, set the rules and so on. In their own place, they are mostly good rulers, but set free on Earth, given free rein... Imagine what that would be like."

Buffy imagined. She didn't like what the idea flung up in her mind. Glancing at the others, she saw her expression of dismay etched on their faces.

"But the Death Lords are guardian angels compared to the Neverborn," Giles continued. "The Neverborn give birth to the kinds of spirits that touched Morgan yesterday. Worse, for that was merely a dark form of the Reapers that in their normal form help souls when they die. Anyway, the Neverborn, amongst other things, take spirits and twist them until they become purely evil, preying on innocent spirits."

"But what are they?" Willow asked. "Did something like that happen to Oz?"

"Ah, Oz. A similar, yet quite separate thing, Willow," Giles said. "No, that isn't exactly what happened to Oz. He was a lycanthrope, a werewolf by infection, not by birth. I have heard of such things before. The human Oz would certainly have gained Ascension for the sacrifice of his life. But the wolf side within him has become warped and permanently intertwined with him. It doesn't understand why it cannot become freed from its human soul and it affects Oz's perspective on his death."

"Can he be cured?" Willow said; she sounded heartbroken, and Buffy saw Xander, who had been angry about it before, reach for her hand and squeeze it. Giles sighed.

"I don't know, Willow. But I will look into it. Once this is over. Now, back to the Neverborn. They are called such because they have never been born, and thus have never died, yet they are spirits, almost dark Gods amongst the dead. Universally feared. It is said they were formed before the beginning of Time, from the left-over hate and terror in the Universe that occurred as a by-product of the Creation. At first, so the mythology goes, they were able to move about the Shadow Lands freely and corrupt directly. But as hatred and fear grew in the both the human and dead worlds, so the Neverborn grew more and more bloated from over-feeding, and eventually were unable to move out of their original home, the terrible pit of Oblivion. Now the Neverborn corrupt souls and have made a huge army of bitter spirits who no longer know the meaning of humanity or any other pleasure but that of hurting and recruiting others to their cause. If a soul isn't recruited, it is fed to the Neverborn, or else thrown into Oblivion, to be digested eternally by its blackness. Some mythologies say that the Neverborn do not only feed off human souls, but off all souls, from all over the Universe."

Giles stopped there. Buffy knew that if he'd still worn glasses, he would have taken them off by now, and would be cleaning them ferociously, as he had had the habit of when he was still alive and feeling especially disturbed by something.

"How would they then be able to move into our dimension?" Ramirez asked. "If they are unable to move?"

"Well, perhaps they won't move, Father Ramirez. Perhaps they will send their armies to bring them souls. Or perhaps they are in some way able to expand Oblivion so that it extends to our world. Does it matter what they do? The end result will be the same. Total absence of hope and love in this world. Complete annihilation of humanity, and perhaps, eventually of all life everywhere."

"No," Ramirez said thoughtfully. "No, I suppose it doesn't matter. All that matters is that it is stopped."

"Quite so. Now, I will return to Elysia. Find Breton and persuade him that it's in everyone's best interests - including his own - that he helps us." Giles looked at Joyce, who stood still and silent. "Joyce, what do you want to do?"

Buffy saw her mother's face become sad.

"I doubt there's anything I can do," Joyce replied. "I think I've played my part. I warned Buffy. I found you, Rupert. Now I should probably go back."

"I don't want you to go back," Buffy said. "You've only just returned to me. You can't go back."

"I must go back," Joyce said.

"No you don't. You're here. You can live with us." She gave a shaky little laugh. "Be our resident ghost. Please, mom?"

"Buffy, I owe a debt to someone back in the Shadow Lands. I must repay it."

"What debt? How can the dead have debts?"

She saw Giles look at her mother sharply, saw that he was almost looking right through her, into her. Then he sighed deeply.

"Oh, Joyce," he said; his voice was low and sorrowful. "Now I see."

"Mom? Why's he looking like that? Why can't you stay with us?" Buffy was beginning to feel afraid.

"You tell her, Giles, as you've obviously seen what's happened to me." Joyce closed her eyes.

Buffy heard Giles tell her about the Mark that he'd just sensed on her. How she was bound to a spirit on the other side of the Veil, and that if she didn't honour her debt to him, her soul's life would be forfeit.

"You did that for us?" Buffy felt humbled by her mother's sacrifice.

"What choice did I have? It was this, or face slavery to that creature. Or else, not find Rupert at all. It's all right. I'll rebuild my Karma."

"Giles, can't you do something about this? It doesn't seem fair. No, it isn't fair..."

Giles shook his head.

"I'm not permitted to interfere with other spirits'

Karma. Hard as it may appear, your mother made her choice. Just be grateful that she did. But, chances are, her actions will be looked upon favourably, and she will regain her Karma quickly. Such sacrifices are noted and rewarded."

"And Krantz?" Buffy felt angry. "Will he be punished for what he's done?"

"Buying and selling Karma is common practice, but ultimately unprofitable. Spirits who sell Karma don't gain by it in the long run; neither do spirits who are foolish enough to try to build it up by buying it. Be assured, Buffy. As the saying goes, what goes around, comes around."

"When Morgan's feeling better, I'll..." Buffy began, knowing that she was going to lose her mother again and there wasn't a thing she could do about it.

"You will do nothing," Giles said. "You will let this go, because you will only be encouraging Morgan to stain his soul - and your own - by acts of vengeance. Leave it, Buffy."

"Yes. Leave it," Joyce agreed. "But I suppose I can stay a little longer, if you want me to."

"Please? I need you here. Just for a while."

"I won't be any use to you, Buffy."

"Yeah, you will be. Your being here is enough." Buffy looked at Giles. "Before you go get Breton - you saw what Morgan was like. Is that normal? Are you sure it's okay, that the ritual went okay? He's not himself. No way."

"Think about it, Buffy. The things he did in a short time. How would you feel if you knew you'd done those things to the ones you loved?"

Buffy nodded, understood.

"Oh. Yeah. I guess I wasn't thinking about it from that point of view. I just thought he'd be glad, like we all are, that he's okay."

"And he will be, Buffy. Morgan's strong. He's an immortal of immense power. He'll get over it, with everyone's love and support. Now, if that's all, I should leave you."

"Yeah. Good luck, Giles."

When Giles had gone, they all looked at each other.

"I guess that's it for now," Buffy said. "We just have to wait. I wish there was something we could do in the meantime. To stop the spirits coming through, I mean. Who knows what's going on out there?"

"Yeah, always frustrating, the waiting period," Xander said. "Remember in the old days - we'd find out some demon was gonna try and take over the earth, but we had to sit and wait until it decided to show its ugly face? It's like that. You wait and wait, you get bored and scared, then pow, it's action stations and everything happens at once." He sighed. "Nothing really changes,

does it? You just get older, that's all." He paused. "Well, we mortals do, anyway."

"Well, if Giles doesn't find Breton, none of us might get any older, mortal or not."

"He will find him," Ramirez said. "Your Mr Giles is a man - a spirit - of great integrity and courage. I have faith that he will be successful."

"Me too," Ceri agreed. "If there were still Watchers, and I needed one, I'd choose him."

"I'm sure he'd be very touched if you told him. Now, I think we should rest while Giles is gone. We need to recharge. And I need to see if Morgan's okay." Buffy turned to Lucas and Kate. "You go and sleep for a while, kids."

"I'll renew the protections on the house, just in case," Willow said. "I had a good sleep this afternoon and I feel just great. Full of energy. Jordan, you should take Buffy's advice, please."

Eighteen

Morgan opened his eyes to darkness, which temporarily disorientated him. For a few heart-stopping moments, he couldn't remember where he was, or even who he was. Total memory blank. Then, as visions from the past twenty-four hours began to assail his mind, he wished his memory had been wiped for longer.

Yesterday morning - was it only yesterday morning? - Ria's face, Ria's mind, eager for his approval. For his touch. And he'd given her that, hadn't he? Given her a part of his life, albeit small, that should by rights have belonged to Buffy. That was bad enough. But there was worse to come, wasn't there? His lies. His deceptions. Deceptions that ultimately led to the death of a friend.

Poor doomed Dan Healy. Dead because Morgan had listened to the Shadow in his mind - the Shadow of his former, vainglorious self, a soul-less self that didn't care who or what it hurt to achieve its aims. And then, more deceit. Lying to Buffy - to everyone - that he'd known nothing, seen nothing, when all the time a picture of a doorway to another world, the dead world, lay glinting in his mind like a flawed black diamond. Had he truly wished them all dead for the sake of knowledge of what lay beyond it? For the sake of what he might gain from it?

At the time...

Yes...

He had.

Morgan sat up abruptly, shoving the sheets off his body, the sensation of crawling contamination overpowering him again like a swarm of ants. The darkness around

With a little grumbling, the younger ones did as they were asked. Then Buffy went upstairs to Morgan. He was sleeping deeply, still under the restorative spell that Willow had cast. Buffy decided she wouldn't disturb him, but she'd needed to see him, to reassure herself that he was peaceful.

Going back downstairs, she found her mother, still with Ceri and Ramirez.

"I know it's a lot to ask," she said to the other two, "but can I be alone with my mom until Giles comes back?" She blinked away tears. "May be our last chance to talk."

Ramirez smiled in understanding, Ceri too.

"Ceri and I will leave you," he said. And they melted away quietly, going like ghosts themselves. Alone with Joyce, Buffy sat down.

"Talk about old times?" Buffy said. Joyce smiled.

"All of them, Buffy. All of them."

him had eased a little - although not the dark shame in his mind - as his eyes adjusted and he saw that it was just after midnight. He'd barely slept a couple of hours under Willow's spell. Even her white magic wasn't strong enough to defeat the Stygian misery that ate him up from the inside.

He decided to take another shower, although he knew it would take more than just soap and hot water to cleanse him of the filth that stained him. As he stood, he saw himself hitting Xander, felt the sickening disintegration of bone under his fist, the warmth of blood. Then saw himself striking Buffy...

"Stop it," he whispered, covering his eyes, although that made it worse. Covering his eyes brought back the pain of the exorcism, of feeling the part of him that was Shadow ripped out. It was a sensation akin to when he'd lost his soul by black magic, but worse, somehow. At least then, when he'd recovered from the thing that had happened to him, he'd felt strong. Now he felt unmanned, weak as a newborn baby. Never in the whole of his too-long life had he felt so useless.

"Got to do something," he mumbled, staggering toward the shower room, stripping off the clothes he'd slept in, letting them fall to the ground uncaring of where they lay. As far as he was concerned, they were contaminated too, because they'd been in contact with him. He turned the water on to very hot, felt it scald his body, welcomed the almost-pain. Concentrated on the self-discipline it took to remain standing beneath it. But still the thought that he was unclean wouldn't leave his

mind, and eventually he turned off the water, slumped against the tiled wall.

After a few moments he found the will to dry himself, dress in fresh clothes. Then he decided that if he were ever to gain his self-respect, not to mention the right to Buffy's love again, he had to take positive action. Just what that was, he didn't really know.

The light from the hallway was burning brightly when he left the bedroom - it hurt his eyes a little. Then he saw Willow going around with a little bottle of water, anointing the windows and walls with it. Protecting the house, he realised. She sensed him at once, flew around, a look of surprise etched on her pretty features.

"Morgan! You're supposed to be sleeping!"

"Just woke," he muttered, ashamed to look her in the face.

"Do you want me to...?"

"No, Willow." He cut her offer of further help short. Only one person could help him get over this. Himself.

"Where's Buffy? And where's Felipe?"

"I...uh... Buffy's downstairs in the lounge with her mom and Felipe's in the study. I think Ceri's with him."

"Thank you, Willow." He forced himself to meet her eyes. "You know..." He stopped. He'd been about to say that he would never have hurt Xander under normal circumstances, but remembered when the relationship between them wasn't quite so amicable as it was now. When he had positively resented Xander being in Buffy's life. How many times had he wanted to hurt him then? Quite a few, he seemed to recall. "You know I'm sorry," he finished, knowing that sounded pathetically inadequate.

"Morgan, it's okay," Willow said. "We all know that you wouldn't have... acted the way you did if you'd been... yourself. It's forgotten, okay?"

But Morgan shook his head.

"No Willow. It can never be okay, not until I do something to help put it right. Buffy's downstairs, you say?" he continued, again cutting off Willow's words. Silently she nodded, her concern for him all too evident. He attempted a smile, succeeded only in grimacing. Turned and headed downstairs.

Who first? he wondered. Buffy or Felipe? Who will best understand that I need to absolve myself?

Not Buffy, he decided. Buffy knew him heart and soul, it was true, but because of that, she wouldn't want him to take unnecessary risks. Would tell him he was too weak to defend himself now. There would be a lot of crying, no doubt, and a lot of "please-don't-do-this". Well, perhaps he was exaggerating just a little. But Buffy had never done anything so terrible that she needed absolution from it. She wouldn't understand his continuing

guilt. On the other hand, Ramirez would know exactly what he meant.

Briefly he knocked on the study door, went in. Ramirez and Ceri were deep in discussion, and it occurred to Morgan briefly that these two were barely ever apart. He wondered if Ceri's ghost boyfriend would change their relationship. Then dismissed that from his mind. Nick - or whoever he was - wouldn't be a fixture in Ceri's life. Couldn't be.

"Hey Morgan," Ceri said, eyeing him with the same concern as Willow had. "Feeling better?" Her eyes narrowed. "No. No, you're not, are you?" Ah, super-sensitive Ceri had seen right into him. Well, not surprising, because his defences were way down. "You wanna speak with Ramirez alone, right?"

"Thank you, Ceri." He could have kissed her. No tip-toeing around with Ceri. No silly games. Straight and to the point, just like her mother. Right now, Morgan needed that.

"I'll go disappear then." And true to her word, she left them at once.

"You are still troubled, father?" Ramirez said; straight talking, like Ceri. Relieved, Morgan sat opposite his son.

"I know you helped rid me of the Shadow and I am in debt to you," he began, "but it's not enough, Felipe. I felt things during that short time that I haven't felt in centuries, and I need to rid myself of that. Do you understand?"

Ramirez considered for a few long moments, then nodded.

"Yes, I understand. Before I came to you, saw that you were a good man with a loving home and family, I'd dwelled constantly on how much I hated you. You know this."

"I know this," Morgan repeated, smiling faintly at his son's old-fashioned use of words, which hadn't modernised one jot in the six years since he'd come to Chicago.

"I still feel guilt at how I despised you. It was, I know now, un-Christian, inhuman even, to carry such loathing for so very long. My transgression against you and my God was great and I am still trying to make amends for that. And although your transgression was much less than mine, I understand your need. You want to pay penance, father?"

"If you like," Morgan said.

"But you will not pay penance in prayer, because you do not share my beliefs..."

"Your beliefs have changed a little since you came to us," Morgan pointed out. When Ramirez had come to them, he had been fanatically Catholic, to the point where anyone who wasn't would automatically, in his

eyes, be cast into Hell on the instant of their death. Since then he had mellowed greatly, adapted his views a little to encompass what he had learned. But now Ramirez shook his head.

"I know that I was over-zealous, and that I misjudged - no, judged too harshly - those who did not share my religion. But I still believe in the Holy Trinity, father. God is Love, and He will redeem us all."

"Even me, a heathen pagan?" Morgan said, somewhat bitterly. But Ramirez smiled.

"You are still God's child, father. What you call it and what I call it may differ, but the force is the same. And God has blessed you with eternity and an eternal love. You are a warrior of Light, and you are helping to create a family of warriors on this earth. Of course you will be redeemed."

"I need it now, Felipe. Not in the eternity you speak of. Will you help me find it?"

"Yes."

Just that, a simple yes. Once Ramirez gave his loyalty and love, he gave them unflinchingly.

"I can't close the gateway," Morgan said, referring to the portal in the tomb. "I don't know how it can be closed ..."

"Mr Giles is looking into that," Ramirez said, explaining about Giles going in search of Francis Breton. Morgan nodded, relieved to hear it.

"Good, then. But what I want to do is keep the gateway stable somehow, to stop it expanding, stop spirits from coming through. It will expand, I think, after time. And the spirits that are already there - I want to start sending them back. They're held in the cemetery now, I think. Bound there..."

"Mr Giles said that too..."

"Did he? Well, I agree with him. Anyway, I think we should send them back before they can start causing trouble. If the gateway can't be closed just yet, for whatever reason, the spirits will become stronger in this world and begin to plague the living."

"You really want to go to the cemetery, father? Is that such a good idea?"

"Good idea or not, I must go, Felipe. I must at least help put right some of the damage my lies and holding back have caused. If I'd come straight back here with the information then..."

"We will never know what might have happened, father. But if you wish to do this, then I will come with you."

"No need, Felipe..."

"There is a need, father. You cannot send the spirits back and hold the gateway. And I believe the gateway is more important than the spirits. So I will come. I will say prayers for the spirits; you will hold the gateway. Al-

though I will be interested to see how you achieve that." Morgan smiled grimly.

"Me too," he said. "But it's a portal to another dimension. The rules must hold for that, as it does for any other."

"I pray that you're right."

Morgan stood.

"I'll prepare myself then," he said, feeling better already at the thought of taking positive action. But the next thought made him quail. He had his son's support; now he must now gain Buffy's.

* * *

"You want to do what?" Buffy yelled, an incredulous look on her face. Morgan had just explained his intentions to her. Buffy, he thought wryly, was indeed unhappy about it. "You're not going anywhere, Morgan. You've just been through a horrendous ordeal and you're not strong enough."

"I'm not strong enough because I'm sick. Here." He touched the area over his heart. "I must do this. It's the only way I can ever feel worthy of my life - of you - again."

"That's crazy." Buffy turned to Joyce, who had faded away a little. "Mom, tell him that's crazy?"

"I'm not getting involved in an argument between man and wife," Joyce said. Morgan saw Buffy scowl fiercely, saw tears shining in her eyes, felt that unmanly shame eat him up from the inside again.

"You see," he said, pushing his emotions out at Buffy in an attempt to get her to comprehend his need. "You see my dishonour? If I hadn't succumbed to my Shadow, you wouldn't be feeling this pain now."

"Morgan, stop it..." Buffy gasped, ashen under the weight of his emotion. Even more ashamed, Morgan shut himself off. "Please, you can't do this. You might... Well, you might..."

"Die?" Morgan supplied, not unkindly. The urge to comfort her was insurmountable, and although he still felt unclean, he went to her, held her tight, felt her resist a little at first, then fall against him. "Buffy, if I die, it's because it's ordained."

"It can't be ordained," Buffy sobbed, "because you're immortal. You can't die."

"Buffy, you know better than that by now. You know what this immortality means as well as I do. And you know..."

"Don't you say it!" Buffy hissed, pulling back from him.

"Don't you dare say it! How dare you say you're willing to risk dying, to risk leaving the children and me? It was bad enough during the exorcism, you saying that, although it was understandable. But to say it now, for the sake of your wounded male pride, is unforgivable."

Morgan sighed; he'd known she'd react like this, but what was he supposed to do? Go and do it without telling her? Lie to her again, shut her out again? He'd never lied to her before the coming of the Shadow, and he wasn't going to start now. But he had to make her understand.

"Buffy, time's short, and I can't waste it explaining to you..."

"Waste?" Her voice rose again. "Waste? Is that all I am to you, a waste of time?"

"Please... Please listen to me? You know I didn't mean it like that." He grasped her wrist, pulled her round to face him because she'd turned away in pure disgust. "If this was you, you'd do the same thing and you know it."

"I'd never leave you and the children," she insisted so vehemently that Morgan backed down a little.

"Well, maybe you would, maybe you wouldn't. But hear me, Buffy. I may live in this time and place, with you, my modern wife, and my modern children, but I was brought up to believe that a man - especially a warrior priest - must atone for his dishonour. You know that from what I've told you about my life before. And now I have dishonoured myself, brought harm to you and my children and my friends. I can't... I can't be a proper husband to you, or a father to my children, while this thing hangs over me. While I feel filthy with the sins I committed."

Buffy fell silent. She searched his eyes, and she searched his heart and mind. Morgan, knowing how crucial it was that she understand, let her search. Let her see. Everything he was, everything he'd ever been. Oh, she knew it from his many stories, but she'd never really seen his old, warrior-priest self before, except in the occasional mind-flash or dream. It hadn't been necessary for her to see it, or to feel how it was then. Only a few seconds went by in real time, over two thousand years in past time. Finally she tore her eyes away.

"Let me come with you?" she whispered, but Morgan shook his head emphatically.

"You should stay here, listen to what Giles says when he returns. That's more important, because with luck, he'll have the secret to closing the gateway."

"Giles will know where to find us. I want to come with you."

Oh, so stubborn. Morgan sighed.

"There may be equipment you need to gather together, from here or somewhere else. Please stay." Please, I need to do this without you? "You know I'm right, Buffy."

She searched his face again, then, although she gave no indication that she'd heard his mental plea, she caved in. Gave a helpless sign of assent.

"Go then. But come back."

Grateful, he nodded. But he made no promises for his return.

* * *

Morgan and Ramirez gathered the equipment they thought they might need from upstairs. Nothing spectacularly complex: white candles, freshly blessed holy water, and some blessed quartz wands. Some dried herbs and a burner. Around his neck, Morgan wore a bloodstone, the traditional stone of personal protection amongst those who practised magic. The bloodstone, which he had owned for many centuries, was engraved with various sigils that would repel negative forces. Ramirez dressed himself in traditional priest's clothing, and wore a great golden crucifix around his neck, his own form of defence. Everything else, they carried in their heads. Spells and prayers, learned long ago, indelible on their brains.

They drove to the cemetery, neither man speaking, each concentrating on the part he would play. Looking at Ramirez, Morgan saw that his mouth was moving silently, knew that he was praying already, gathering his God's love in his heart. Closing his eyes, he did the same thing, calling on the powers of Love and Light to guard him. To give him courage, to touch his heart with love so that the Shadow might not return to him.

They felt the chill even from outside the cemetery gates, greater than the night before. And the night seemed darker here than anywhere else and not just from the absence of street lights.

"It is spreading, I think," Ramirez said. "Are you certain you want to carry on with this, father?"

Morgan looked into his son's face; there was no fear there, just loving concern. Holding Ramirez' gaze, he nodded.

"Do you?"

"It is necessary," Ramirez said, and Morgan nodded, thankful for his son's unspoken understanding that even if it wasn't necessary, he knew that Morgan had to do this and he would support him however he could.

Walking toward the cemetery, they saw that the overlap of the spirit world with the living world had already started. In a dark corner near the cemetery, an old man lay dead, his grey face frozen in an expression of sheer terror. No doubt about what had happened to him. This was no ordinary death of a vagrant, no succumbing to pneumonia or choking on alcohol-induced vomit. This was death by soul snatching, and not the kind Morgan had used yesterday, but the agonising fate that had befallen Dan Healy.

"If this old man has been taken," Morgan said, "then how many more?" He stared at the body for a few mo-

ments as Ramirez administered prayers over it, rather doubting that prayers would make any difference if this poor man's soul had been snatched by the kind of dark spirit that had killed Healy, probably Harry Dudley too, and touched Morgan's own soul. But he waited until Ramirez straightened up, then they walked the rest of the way.

The ghosts were still confined to the cemetery, confirming in Morgan's mind that these spirits were merely lost souls who were confused and unable to leave the place in which they were interred. But, judging from the emanations coming from the direction of Breton's tomb, he guessed that soon there would be no holding them. That soon they too would leave and roam unchecked amongst the living.

"What will you do?" he asked Ramirez just before they entered the cemetery.

"I will go to every grave, call its occupier, say prayers for it, compel it to return beyond the gates of death," Ramirez said. "Hopefully give some of them peace."

Morgan nodded; Ramirez' faith was so strong, he didn't doubt for one moment that he could pass it on to at least some of these souls. No doubt he could send some of them on to Ascension.

They parted at the gates with an embrace that conferred strength to both men. Feeling terribly alone despite Ramirez' love, half-wishing he'd allowed Buffy to come with him, Morgan made his way to the tomb.

Even since the previous night, the tomb had changed a little. A seething blackness crawled over the monument and Morgan knew the gateway's influence was indeed expanding. He feared that his good intentions would be fruitless, that he alone couldn't stop its growth. Then realised that any fear would prevent him from doing any good. And how could he recover his honour if he behaved like a coward? Closing his eyes, he grasped the bloodstone around his neck, imagined himself glowing with Light, and the fear receded. Taking a breath, Morgan pushed open the door of the tomb and went inside. The first thing that struck him was the smell of putrefaction, which sent him reeling backward. The bodies of the students and Dan Healy were beginning to rot, despite the cold. Swallowing hard, Morgan lit a candle with shaking fingers to help disperse the gloom. In the half-light he thought he saw Healy's eyes watching him accusingly, as though to say: How could you allow this to happen to me? You betrayed me... Morgan blinked, saw that Healy's eyes were in fact closed, that it had been an illusion. Hadn't it?

Then, in the next second, his eyes were drawn to the gateway. Before, it had shimmered and rippled like a sheet of black glass. Now it positively throbbed with

energy, sending out beams of what Morgan thought of as death-rays, like a huge heart pulsing out streams of decaying blood. Intrigued despite his revulsion, Morgan peered through the gateway into the dimension beyond, wondering if he could catch a glimpse of what lay there. He could see nothing, but as he watched, he felt its pull. Like a man who stands on the edge of a cliff, tempted beyond all reason to jump, so Morgan felt almost compelled to step through.

God, what's it like, to exist in the dead world? I've visited the dream realm, other parts of the spirit realm, even the demon realm, but never the Shadow Lands. What would happen if I went through? I want to go through...

Without realising it, he was stepping forward, closer to the portal. He felt a frigid wind stroke its fingers across his face, felt it lift his hair, ripple through his clothes, penetrating his skin, his flesh, his bones. Almost impossible to resist its call. Death, which he had cheated for so long, was calling him home. Putting out a hand, he stuck it into the portal and the experience was so shocking, it brought him back to his senses. Feeling like his skin had been flayed, he withdrew it abruptly. Sickened, he saw that his hand had turned white, the nailbeds blue. Worse, there was no sensation in his fingers. Dead, he thought, both awed and horrified at once. My hand's dead.

Then pain in his arm as he felt the cold travelling up from his hand, knew that the death was trying to spread. Now it felt as though his arm was on fire, and he dropped to his knees from the extent of the pain. Sheer fright rendered him speechless, and he doubted that Ramirez would have heard him anyway if he'd cried out. Then he realised what was happening to him - his immortal blood was fighting the death that had infiltrated his body. That was the cause of the pain. His arm had quite literally become a battlefield for life and death. This knowledge calmed him a little and he waited for life to win the battle. Within a few moments, his hand had regained his warmth and movement. Looking up at the gateway again, Morgan shuddered to think what would have happened if he'd gone right the way through it. He would have been lost forever.

Was that another failure? he wondered, opening the small holdall that carried the few protective items he'd brought with him. Have I reached the end of my useful life now that I've fathered two immortal Slayers? The idea was terrifying. Morgan might have lived a long time - at times, he'd thought his life unbearably long - but now it didn't seem like nearly long enough. So much ahead of him, so much to do, so much love to give. He couldn't die now. Yet ever since the gateway

was opened, events seemed to be conspiring against him, seemed to be forcing him toward the end of that life.

Doggedly he began to set up the magical items before the pulsing black mass. They should repel its negative forces and prevent it from exuding more power. But they might not prevent other spirits from trying to come through. Only Morgan's own magic could do that. In a circle around the gateway, he set up several perfect quartz crystals, fervently speaking a protective spell as he did so, imploring the forces of Light to contain it. In between the crystals, he sprinkled blessed water. Then, in the brass burner he'd brought along, he lit a fire made of marjoram, a herb known for its powerful protective qualities, especially in magic where the dead were involved. If the dead were immersed in its smoke, they

would be gently led back to their rightful place beyond the gateway.

Once he had constructed his circle of stones, water and burning herbs, Morgan felt more reassured, felt his strength returning to him. The gateway, he hoped, would become more stable now, would cease to grow in strength. Finally, from the holdall, he removed a slender quartz crystal approximately twelve inches in length. A quartz laser wand which he used in binding and compelling magic. If anything of real power came through the gateway, Morgan would direct the power of his magic through this crystal, which acted as both a channeller of energy, and as a psychic sword.

Closing his eyes, thinking only of Light, he waited.

Soon enough, his waiting was at an end.

Morgan prepared himself for the first fight...

Nineteen

Buffy and the others waited throughout the night, a traumatic experience. Morgan and Ramirez were on everyone's minds. What were they facing in the cemetery? Were they okay? Were they hurt? They weren't dead, that was all Buffy or Ceri could tell the rest of the worried group. They would have felt the connections severed at once if that had happened. That was the only bright spot in what was so far the darkest night of all since this had begun.

By now it was the weekend. Normally they would have something planned. Two days set aside for family enjoyment. Time away from school, from studies, work and everyday cares. Usually weekends were sacred. But Death didn't respect that sacredness. Every day, according to the rules of Death, was a day to die.

So the group sat around morosely, watching the seconds, minutes, hours tick by inexorably. Every so often, Buffy stated that she wished she had insisted on accompanying Morgan. Then Ceri would say that she wished she'd gone with Ramirez. Surely together, they reasoned, was better than apart? But this had the knock-on effect of frightening Kate and Lucas, who had woken to find their father had left them yet again. Buffy fretted more, worried that their relatively safe, secure little world was being torn apart. She knew it had to happen, their becoming aware of evil's dark world, but she wished she could have spared them from it for just a little longer. Or at least introduced them to it slowly. But this of course was their fate, part of their growth. More casualties of their Slayer heritage.

Willow had managed to get a little more rest. The intense psychological pressure and the psychical expen-

diture of cleansing the house had depleted her energy levels. Xander tried to take his mind off proceedings by catching up on some work and Jordan tried to occupy Kate and Lucas, who didn't want to take their minds off it.

By the time dawn came, they were all becoming fractious with each other, snapping at the tiniest thing.

"Where the Hell's Giles got to?" Buffy worried aloud. "Supposing he hasn't been able to find this so-called Francis Breton? What're we supposed to do then? Morgan and Felipe can't hold the gateway forever. And what if Morgan's been overtaken by the Shadow again?" She couldn't stop thinking about that, about how it was too soon for Morgan to get involved in foolhardy acts of so-called bravery. Surely someone who had just been cleansed of evil influences shouldn't be facing those very same influences quite so quickly? He hadn't had time to recover. He...

"I sense a change in vibration, Buffy," Joyce said. "I think Giles is returning. But I don't think there's anyone with him."

Buffy concentrated, couldn't feel anything yet. Looking at the blank faces of the others, she saw they weren't detecting any changes in the atmosphere either. But Joyce, Buffy reasoned, was a ghost herself and was probably more susceptible to psychic resonance than a human would be.

Sure enough, a full five minutes later, just as Buffy was beginning to think that Joyce had been mistaken, the air in the middle of the room began to shimmer, and within seconds, Giles stood before them.

"Did you discover anything?" Buffy asked, not wasting

time on unnecessary pleasantries. "You've been gone long enough." Giles smiled his by now familiar unruffled smile.

"Our Monsieur Breton is an elusive creature," he replied. "Able to flit about the Shadow Lands quite freely. But yes, I found him eventually."

"And he's gonna help, right? You are the bearer of good news, right? Because if you tell me that..."

"Buffy, calm yourself. He has agreed to come."

"Well, where is he then?" Buffy knew she was being unnecessarily aggressive, but she couldn't help it. Every second passed was another second too long.

"To be on the safe side, I think it will be best if we construct a magic circle first, invite him into that, confine him within it. He say he means us no harm, and will co-operate fully, but you never can tell with sorcerers. Someone ought to go and prepare that now."

Willow stood at once.

"I'll take care of it." She looked around. "Kate, Lucas and Jordan, come upstairs and help me prepare the room."

Buffy breathed a sigh of relief. The three children needed something constructive to do, and Willow knew that instinctively. Buffy smiled at her gratefully as she led the unprotesting children from the room.

When they were gone, Giles looked around.

"And talking of sorcerers," he said "Where is Morgan? And Father Ramirez, come to that?"

"They went to the cemetery to try and hold the gateway. And to send some of the spirits that have come through back."

"Oh dear," Giles said.

"Oh dear, what?" Buffy snapped back.

"Breton tells me that once opened, the gateway becomes more unstable over time. As we know it is already causing rents in the fabric of the Veil, but well... The longer it remains open..."

"The longer it remains open, what?" Buffy said impatiently, when Giles paused for a second.

"This isn't exactly like a door, Buffy, although obviously it is a doorway to another world. This is literally a rip, and like any rip, it will become wider with every extra pressure put on it. The more spirits that come through, the wider it will become, and the wider it becomes, the more the knock-on effect on the other small tears that have occurred. Small tears merge into bigger tears etcetera. Do you all understand what that means?"

Buffy looked across at Ceri, Xander and Joyce, who had remained with her, saw that understanding had indeed dawned, just like the November sun had dawned outside.

"Yeah." Buffy spoke for them all. "It'll explode outward

and there will be no Veil at all." She shivered, wrapped her arms around herself. "I knew it was wrong for them to go. I told Morgan that he was taking stupid risks, but he wouldn't listen. Just kept on about how he'd dishonoured himself. And now he's trying to stabilise the equivalent of a spiritual nuclear bomb that could detonate at any time. And put Felipe at great risk too. Stupid dumb man..." Her voice wavered, and immediately Ceri went to her, hugged her.

"Well, Buffy," Giles said, "there's nothing we can do about that just now." He paused, said something out of character, or at least the character Buffy recognised. "Sometimes a man has to act like a man, Buffy, no matter how dumb it might seem to others."

"Yeah, but he has nothing to prove to me. Or anyone else here."

Giles smiled faintly.

"In every life there are defining moments, Buffy. Well, you all know that. Things happen that make you take stock of your life. Obviously, for Morgan, what happened to him when the Shadow overtook him was one such time. He must do whatever it takes for him to feel whole again. Truly, it has taken death to make me understand that."

"Giles, I don't know how you can say that. You were always brave," Buffy protested, saw Xander, who had given up on work as a lost cause, nod.

"Yeah, that's right. I mean, I know we gave you a hard time sometimes, but you were always... Well... The G-Man."

Another faint smile.

"Thank you, Xander, for the memory of that title. But seriously, I was never always as brave as I should have been. Often thought too much of duty, and sometimes, not always enough of what was right. I..."

The door opened, Lucas came in.

"Will says to tell you that the circle's ready."

Giles nodded.

"Thank you, Lucas." Turned to Buffy. "Come on then. Just you, Buffy," he added, when the others made to come too. "No offence intended, but it's best there's only the three of us. Buffy, Willow and myself. Breton may refuse to co-operate if there's a big audience. As I say, sorcerers can be awkward."

"Don't I know it?" Buffy muttered blackly, thinking of her own resident awkward sorcerer. Praying for the thousandth time that he was okay. Then she left the room with Giles and trudged upstairs.

Closing the door of the room upstairs that was reserved for magical practices such as this, she smiled grimly at Willow, who responded equally grimly.

"While I summon and speak with Breton," Giles began,

"I want you, Willow, to ensure that the circle remains confining. If Breton decides to try and work magic in the circle, it should be reflected back at him."

Willow nodded.

"And what am I supposed to do?" Buffy asked, feeling that she might go mad with inaction. In all other events of supernatural evil, she had always been at the forefront, using her fighting skills and Slayer attributes. But she couldn't use any of her skills on this incorporeal spirit stuff. There was nothing physical to fight, and she felt somewhat out of her depth.

"Just listen carefully," Giles replied, hardly a satisfying answer, but she nodded anyway. "Ready then?"

Buffy and Willow nodded. Giles began speaking the summoning - more an invitation than a command - that would bring Breton to them. Within minutes, he materialised.

A short man of about forty years old and stocky build, Breton had cropped dark hair and a craggy face. Dressed in simple, if old-fashioned, shirt and trousers, Buffy thought he looked more like a farm worker than a powerful magician. But appearances were deceptive, Buffy knew, as she watched him bow with impeccably good manners. And when he looked directly at them, Buffy's image of the farm worker disappeared instantly. Breton's dark eyes glistened with intelligence and radiated power.

"Mes dames." He spoke with a charming French accent, addressing Buffy and Willow with another bow. "M'sieur Giles. I am Francis Breton. I understand that I may be of assistance to you?" He looked around him, studied the circle that had been built. "I did tell M'sieur Giles that no circle was necessary. I intend you no harm whatever; indeed, I deplore the fact that any ritual that I invented has been abused and used to cause such damage." A sigh. "But I understand that you felt you had to be careful."

"You opened the gateway," Buffy said, ignoring his charm, because she knew that charm often hid a dangerous personality. "Why didn't it stay open then? I mean, the experience killed you, right? How did it close then?"

"I was a fool," Breton said, so sincerely that even Buffy began to be swayed by him. "Even as I was dying, I understood that what I had done was stupid in the extreme. As I was taken over to the Other Side, I managed to recite the words that would shut it again." A look of some pride came over his face. "I was after all the inventor of the ritual, and the forces obeyed me. Or perhaps I was merely fortunate. I was the only one who suffered in the unfortunate incident."

Buffy couldn't help but smile at this and she saw that

Willow was smirking a little too. Unfortunate incident, she thought. What an understatement that was.

"Sounds easy enough," she said aloud. "A few words, that's all it'll take?"

When Breton shook his head, she could have screamed. "Unfortunately, it is not so easy now. The words will not be enough."

"Why the Hell not?" Buffy fought to keep her temper, and her control. "I mean, you're here. You can say the words like you did before. As you so rightly say, you invented the damn ritual, you can do it now."

"You must understand, I violated a Rule of Death. We departed souls may not interfere with the boundaries between the Dead and Warm worlds. Such a thing is forbidden."

"Oh yeah, right. Like they can kill you for it." Heavy sarcasm in Buffy's voice.

"My dear Madame, I am quite certain that you are coming to understand that there are worse things than death by now? Eternal torture, to name but one. But even if I were not afraid of what might happen to me should I perform the ritual, it simply would not succeed. I am literally unable to do such a thing. I have been rendered incapable of performing Death Magic anymore. Such abilities were taken from me upon my arrival to the Shadow Lands." He looked shame faced. "My foolish actions were wholly responsible for that particular judgement upon me."

Buffy looked from Willow to Giles. Her despair was echoed on their faces.

"So what are we supposed to do then?"

Breton obviously saw her desperate expression because his features softened.

"There is no reason to give up hope, Madame. Warm people opened the gateway, so warm people must perform the ritual to shut it. The opening requires blood sacrifice, and also its closure."

"Yeah," Buffy said fatalistically, having been down this particular road before when she, James and Angel had opened a portal into Hell. "Blood yet again. Might have known."

"But also, it requires the sacrifice of a willing spirit."

Buffy's heart froze at this. Glancing at Willow, she saw her own alarm reflected back at her.

"Someone has to die?" she whispered. "Not just blood sacrifice, but life sacrifice?"

Breton shook his head.

"No, no. Not necessarily. Better that it is not a living spirit, in fact."

"Why not? You said the dead couldn't get involved..."

"No, I said we could not perform rituals that would interfere with the boundary, I did not say that we couldn't

be used in the rituals."

"Confusing," Willow remarked.

"Not really. Let me explain. You know that the Veil is composed of spirit, yes? And the need of Humanity to be separated from the Shadow Lands, so they do not stare death in the face every waking moment?"

"Yeah, I guess," Buffy said.

"Well, the need part of the sacrifice will consist of the living blood that must be shed, the willingness of humans to play their part in the restoration. And the spirit part should be just that, but not a living spirit. A living spirit would want its life back too fervently, would not settle in the fabric of the Veil, cause constant disruptions. No, to get a perfect result, it should be a dead spirit."

"I will of course be happy to give myself for this cause," Giles said at once. Buffy turned and stared at him, Willow too.

"You can't do that!" Buffy exclaimed, shocked. "You can't give up your chance of a peace that has been so hard won. No way."

"M'sieur Giles, your offer is appreciated, but we cannot use you for exactly that reason. You have paid your debt in death, and the Higher Powers would not accept your offer, even though it is so freely given."

"Then who?" Giles said, then looked directly at Buffy, who shook her head violently, immediately guessing his thoughts.

"I can't ask my mom to do that," she said. "She's suffered enough. Don't ask me to do that."

"Please, let us not overstep ourselves," Breton intervened. "We shall find someone, and it must be someone willing, or else the ritual will be nullified."

"I have a thought," Willow said, and went on to relate to Breton the prophecy and the tarot reading made by Marie Laveau. As she spoke, so Breton nodded his head enthusiastically, obviously understanding the meaning at once.

"Ah, so it is foretold, so shall it be. It tells us the main characters in this drama, does it not? The ones who must make sacrifice for the living. The High Priestess is yourself, Madame Willow, she who understands the mysteries, but it is also you, Madame Buffy. The she-warrior, the Slayer of darkness. The Magician is he who holds the gateway now..."

"Morgan?" Buffy said.

"He is the Light Warrior, and the Sorcerer. His blood and that of the High Priestess must mingle to close the gateway."

"My blood?" Buffy asked, saw Breton affirm this.

"Yes. Yes, better than ordinary mortal blood. Your blood has magic in it, his too. Male and female forces com-

bine to block out death and make way for the forces of life. Madame Willow must be the one to take the blood. The Moon card represents the gateway itself, and tells us the best time to close it. Tonight is full moon, we should wait until then."

"But Morgan and his son are at the cemetery now. They can't hold it all day." Buffy's alarm was quite apparent in her voice, but Breton appeared unmoved.

"They must hold it. And after this puzzle is unravelled, you must go and help them. Once more, with regard to the reading, Death and the Tower are self evident. If the gateway is not closed, then Death and Chaos shall rule. I am afraid that I must take the part of the Fool," Breton continued with a self-deprecating smile. "If not for my foolishness, this would never have happened. And M'sieur Giles plays the part of the hermit, the one who helps. Only the Knave to find. And this is traditionally a male card. Do you know of any male spirits?"

Buffy thought hard. Knowledge flared in her head, clear and bright.

"Ceri," she said. "The reading was given to Ceri while she was with Nick. He must be the one. Why else would he have been granted the knowledge?"

"If you know of such a spirit, then he must be brought and made to agree. The sacrifice must be willing, remember. If it is not willing, it will not work."

Buffy looked from Willow to Giles, sighed.

"This is history repeating itself," she said, pain for her daughter flaring in her heart. "Remember Acathla and the portal to Hell? Only Angel's blood could close it. Remember I had to do that? Now poor Ceri has to go through the same thing, sort of."

"It's not the same thing, Buffy," Willow said. "Not really. Ceri barely knows this Nick guy. You and Angel had a relationship."

But Buffy smiled sadly.

"In Ceri's mind they're already close. Oh, she knows it can't work, just as I always knew it couldn't work with Angel. Because it wasn't right, because there was always something to stop it from being right. But it doesn't mean it won't hurt, does it?"

Willow thought for a moment, then nodded.

"Poor Ceri. She's been through enough already."

"I'll be gentle with her," Buffy promised. "And I think she'll understand. Oh God, I hope she does. And when all's said and done, it's not her who has to make the sacrifice, is it? If Nick is the one, if he refuses, we'll be in bigger trouble." She paused. "One way of finding out, I guess." She turned to Breton, who stood silently in the circle. "You will be on hand to perform this ritual?" she asked, but Breton shook his head.

"I told you, it is not permitted for me to be involved. I

will teach the ritual to M'sieur Giles and Madame Willow, since it will be up to them to perform it. So, go now to your daughter, tell her what is required. Ask her to call the young man to her. Make her realise what is involved."

Silently, Buffy left the room, went to find Ceri. When she found her, she took her aside and explained what they hoped would happen. Although Ceri listened carefully, she said nothing. Buffy saw flickering emotions cross over her child's face, from anger, to sorrow, then to acceptance. This last surprised Buffy.

"I thought... I thought you'd get more upset. I thought you'd..." Her words trailed off. Ceri smiled, but Buffy could tell that she was already getting used to the idea of losing Nick forever. Could almost see Ceri rebuilding her emotional armour around herself again.

"You thought I'd scream and shout?" Ceri asked. "How could you know what I'd think or how I'd react?"

Buffy struggled to think of something to say.

"You keep yourself so closed, Ceri. You won't let any of us see."

Ceri smiled scornfully.

"Would you have cared anyway, if I'd let you see?" she asked, cutting right to Buffy's heart. "I mean, you've been so caught up with what's been happening to Morgan these last couple of days, you haven't given the rest of us much thought."

"Ceri, that's..." Buffy had been about to say "crazy", but she knew it wasn't. She knew it was true. "Ceri, you seemed okay. I thought you understood..."

She saw Ceri's expression soften then, saw her begin to open a little.

"I'm sorry, mom. It was unkind, what I said just now. I did understand, really. It was right, that you only thought about Morgan. You were afraid that you were gonna lose him. And not just you, right? Losing him would have affected all of us, especially Kate and Lucas. How could I lay my thoughts on you at a time like that? What I was going through seemed trivial."

Buffy knew that precious time was passing with every word, knew that every moment spent away from Morgan and Ramirez meant extra danger for them, but she couldn't leave Ceri when she so patently needed her, even if she didn't want to admit it. Torn. She was torn.

"Tell me now, Ceri."

Ceri shrugged.

"I feel stupid," she mumbled. "But all the time you were worried about Morgan, I couldn't stop thinking about... Well, about Nick." Her voice choked. "I mean, I'm gonna lose him too, aren't I? And it's not fair. It's so not fair. It could've been good if he'd been alive and... and... we won't ever have the chance to find out."

"Oh Ceri..." Buffy held out her arms and after a second's hesitation, Ceri went into them. "You know, you may not believe me, but these things, they do happen for a reason."

"What reason?" Ceri sniffed tearfully. "Why did Morgan have to go through the Shadow thing? Why do people have to be unhappy? Why do people have to lose people they... want to care for?"

Suddenly it occurred to Buffy that it wasn't only Nick who was the issue here. James was also someone that Ceri had wanted to care for, but hadn't been able to. Despite her promise to try to put it behind her, Ceri was still brooding on events that had happened before she was born.

"We may not see the reasons, or understand them, but they're there. When you've seen as many things as I've seen, you'll understand more." Buffy kissed Ceri's hair. "I sound old, right? But it's true. Your grandmother said that things were fated, and they are."

"So Nick was just fated to come and be a sacrifice? So why did I have to like him, to start caring for him? Is that right?"

Buffy thought for a while. Then she nodded slowly.

"Yeah, Ceri. I think it is right. Because it's taught you to open your heart, if only a little. And although that hurts, Ceri, it means you're still alive inside. A young girl like you shouldn't be so closed, so afraid of caring. Being alive inside doesn't just mean misery, Ceri. It means that you can find happiness too, although I know it may not seem that way right now." She paused. "Ceri, will you try and find Nick, try and contact him? I mean, you don't have to, any more than he has to agree. It's a choice you both have to make. But think what it will mean for all of us if you don't. I believe his appearance to you meant something more than teaching you to open your heart. Don't you?"

Ceri drew back; her eyes were reddened and still awash with tears. Reluctantly she nodded.

"I'll go find him," she said slowly. "I guess I'll find him easily enough. If what you say is right, if this is what's meant to happen, he'll be waiting for the call to come across."

She stood, and Buffy saw that Ceri's emotional barriers were well and truly rebuilt, wondered if anything she'd just said about caring and opening her heart had sunk in. Buffy longed to discuss it further, to get to the real crux of the problem, but there just wasn't any more time. It was mid-morning now and she had to get to Morgan and Ramirez. Not only that, but she guessed there'd be a lot of preparation for the ritual which would take place as soon as the full moon rose later that day. She supposed she ought to find a safer place for the

three children to stay until this was finished, whatever way it went. But she vowed that when this was over, she would do something to help Ceri say goodbye to the ghosts that had troubled her ever since she had discovered the truth about her parenthood. It was, Buffy decided, long past time.

"Good luck," she told Ceri, but Ceri just nodded, locked up inside herself again.

Twenty

Stepping out of the house into the cold morning air, Ceri wrapped her heavy coat around her body. Shivered. Looking up, she saw a watery sun shining down on her, its rays barely tepid on her face. Scary to think that sun might be obliterated if the Shadow Lands infiltrated this world. Or was there sunlight there? If there was, Ceri thought it would be dead sunlight with no heat, not even this meagre amount of warmth. Dead sunlight, dead plants, like she'd seen on Nick's plantation, dead and crumbling phantom houses. Dead... everything. Would she die, she and her immortal companions? Would she become like Nick, a ghost?

The thought was somehow appealing in a morbid kind of way. If she became a ghost, she could be with him. Give their budding friendship time to become... whatever it would become. Because the dead loved. Their emotion, their passion, didn't die with them, that much was clear. Nick had looked at her with desire the last time she'd seen him. Was it only two days ago? God, but it seemed so much longer than that.

Suddenly her heart ached to see him, and she didn't want her heart to ache. She wanted to feel nothing, exactly as she had promised herself. But her mother was right; once you started feeling, you couldn't stop it. Feeling truly made you live. But if feeling hurt, afraid, and needful of someone was living, Ceri thought she didn't want to be alive. Dead inside was better. Wasn't it?

I will stop caring, she promised again. If I find Nick, I'll tell him what's required. Keep it cool and impersonal. I can do that. Yeah.

Holding that thought tight to her as she walked, she went in the direction of the cemetery where she'd first met Nick. If he were to be found anywhere, it surely would be there? The cemetery was obviously another place where the Veil was damaged, because that was where he had been able to come through. But then Ceri guessed that all cemeteries were places where the Veil was thinner than usual. Cemeteries were after all places where Death ruled over life, places that normal humans

As Buffy watched her go, she felt her heart bleed, in a way that only a mother's heart can bleed when her child is hurting and there is nothing she can do to alleviate the pain.

"Good luck," she whispered again into the empty room. Then she stood, preparing inwardly to face her own ordeal.

shunned except to tend to departed loved ones' graves. Normal humans, not like her or any of her family. Still, she thought gloomily, death was immortal too. Nothing really died, did it? She was coming to learn that slowly.

Entering the cemetery gates after a long walk that had only served to make her more broody, Ceri saw that quite a few people were here this morning. As it was a Saturday, they had taken time out to visit dead relatives, wives, husbands in their eternal resting places.

Don't forget dead lovers, Ceri told herself, walking slowly. Not that Nick's my lover. But he might have been. One day. No. Never gonna have a lover...

It occurred to her as she made her way to the tomb where she and Nick had gone through to the Shadow Lands that maybe that particular tomb might have visitors today too. But then she seemed to remember that it was an old tomb, maybe one of the oldest in the cemetery. Visitors of the normal kind were unlikely.

When she got there, he was waiting for her. Ceri wasn't expecting that, had hoped for a little time to prepare herself. Instead, she felt her heart give a wild lurch in her chest, felt blood rush to her cheeks in an infuriating schoolgirl blush. As soon as he caught sight of her, stopped dead on the path, he detached himself from his waiting place, went to her. Watching him walk toward her, Ceri felt her legs go weak. When he spoke, in that honeyed Southern voice, they went weaker.

"Where have you been?" he asked, his golden gaze catching hers so that she was unable to look away, try as she might. "I waited here yesterday and the day before. Prayed that you'd come to me. Time is short, Ceri. I have a lot to tell you."

Ceri opened her mouth. Shut it.

Time is short? A lot to tell me?

"If it was that urgent, you could've come to the house," she stammered at last. So much for being cool and detached. His words, the look in his eyes, had completely disarmed her.

"I tried. But I couldn't materialise inside. Or anywhere in the grounds, for that matter."

"Oh. Right." She realised why. "Yeah. The house is protected. Only invited... people can come in."

"That would explain it," he replied, with a faint smile, which faded almost as soon as it touched his mouth. Ceri wished that she could touch his mouth, had to concentrate hard to make sense of what he was saying. What he said disturbed her more, made her wish she hadn't bothered listening so hard. "I saw Marie Laveau again. The Death Lords have mustered great armies. As soon as the gateway is wide enough, they will come through and there will be no stopping it. And..."

"And?" Ceri interrupted, forgetting his mouth and wanting to touch it, in the sudden fear his words evoked. "Isn't that bad enough?"

"No, Ceri, it isn't. The Death Lords are only doing their job - grim though it might be - which is to take souls to be their subjects." He paused. "Do you remember that Marie Laveau mentioned about the Neverborn?"

"Yeah."

"Do you know yet what the Neverborn are?"

"I... Yeah... I know what they are."

"They are also gathering armies, Ceri. But not armies like those of the Death Lords. These are armies of twisted souls who..."

"I get it," Ceri said. "We were told all about that too. How they take souls for Oblivion and... and how everything will be destroyed."

"If you know that, then you must also know that you have to do something about it, because as I said, time is short." He looked away from her. "The Voodoo Queen also told me that I would be involved - more than I am already. But she wasn't permitted to know how."

Ceri bit at her lips. Here he was, unknowingly inviting her to tell him his fate, and she was flunking it. But she didn't want to tell him. She wanted to keep him with her. Let him stay in the land of the living. For as long as it lasted.

"I'd happily do anything that would help," Nick continued, apparently unaware of her wanting. Or if he was aware, he gave no sign he'd seen it. "Anything to save us all from the Neverborn and Oblivion." He looked at her again. "It's too late for me, Ceri. I'm already dead. But you're not. Look at you, full of young, bright, beautiful life. If I can help save that life, any other life, I will." God, was he suddenly a mind-reader or something? No, no just sincere. Just behaving in the way she guessed he'd been brought up. As a true gentleman. Not many of those about nowadays, a dying breed. Drawing on her reserves of courage, Ceri nodded. Forced herself to speak.

"There is something," she told him. And related everything she'd learned from her mother. As she spoke,

she watched his expression intently, trying to detect changes in him, trying to gauge his emotions. As before, she was unable to read him. Came to the obvious conclusion that although the dead appeared real, even solid, as Nick was, they existed on a different plane of reality from everything else. A reality that was never meant to cross over with the human dimension. How could she have ever kidded herself, even for a second, that she could have been close to him? It was even more hopeless than her mother's relationship with Angel.

"You don't have to do it," she told Nick at the end. "I mean, it isn't a compulsory thing. I guess we could find someone else."

"Could you?" Nick asked. "You'd do that when the obvious is staring you right in the face? And how long would it take you to find another willing soul? Two nights of the Full Moon have already passed. This would be your last chance for a month. And then... Then it would be too late. Wouldn't it, Ceri?"

Ceri shrugged, but she knew he was right. Another month, maybe even another day, and the gateway would be pushed outward to extend over the whole world. They'd be swallowed whole by death and then, if the Neverborn and their armies were victorious, by Oblivion. And here she was, trying to pretend that Nick didn't have to be the sacrifice if he didn't want to be. Because she was being selfish.

"There's no choice, Ceri. Of course I will do this." He was saving her from answering now. Brave, she thought, in the face of his... She didn't know what to call it. Not death. He was already dead, after all. Fate worse than death? To be part of the Veil, his soul stretched out and... And what? Would he still think, feel? Hurt? "Don't cry for me."

Was she crying then? Yes. Moisture in her eyes, falling down her cheeks. So much for not caring. So much for self-control and self-containment. Self-control and self-containment had both fled almost as soon as she'd set eyes on him.

"I can't help crying. It just doesn't seem right."

"My life was taken from me when I was seventeen years old. Was that right?" He smiled faintly. "There is no right, no wrong, in death, Ceri. Only Karma, which dictates where you go after, and when you go there. This is my Karma. I've been dead long enough to know not to fight it."

There was no answer to this, so Ceri determinedly wiped away her tears. If he could accept it, then she must.

"I'm not sure where you're supposed to go or what you're supposed to do," she said. "I guess we should go back to my house. Maybe they'll be preparing there."

Nick nodded, and they began to walk in silence.

* * *

Back at the house, Buffy and Willow had managed to dispatch Lucas, Kate and Jordan to friends' houses, where they would stay overnight. Persuading them to go was difficult; they had wanted to stick around but both mothers, fearful for their safety, had refused permission.

That was hard enough. It occurred to Buffy and Willow - and Xander, too - that maybe they wouldn't see their children again this side of death if it all went wrong, and it took all their strength to let them go without breaking down.

Now Buffy had to face the trauma of saying a tearful farewell to her mother. Both had decided there was nothing more that Joyce could do; it was better that she go back now. Buffy knew that once the ritual - and any fight they might encounter before it - began, she couldn't have Joyce on her mind. So now they stood, face to face, unable to touch, weeping. Needing the comfort of contact, unable to give it.

"Take care, Buffy," Joyce said. "And take care of my grandchildren. I shall miss them so much." Her own parting from Kate and Lucas had been rough on everyone concerned. They'd decided that time was too short to wait for Ceri, who could be gone ages.

Buffy nodded mutely; the thought of losing her mother again was overwhelmingly devastating. But swallowing her tears, she decided that at least this time, she was able to say goodbye properly.

"I'll miss you, mom." An understatement. Since the horrific death of both her parents, barely a day had gone by that Buffy hadn't thought of them. Special times, like the birth of the children, her handfasting ceremony with Morgan, holidays, birthdays, were especially poignant. But this was worst of all. Having to say goodbye to the shade of her mother face to face, probably forever. And knowing that Joyce was going back to an unspecified period of slavery to a cruel, greedy spirit. This last was hardest to accept, but what could Buffy do about it? Nothing.

"I'll think of you," Buffy promised Joyce. "Always. And I'll pray for you. We all will. And we'll... we'll..." She shook her head. Couldn't articulate her feelings verbally.

"Don't, Buffy," Joyce said in a strangled voice. "Don't make this harder on either of us. You know I can't stay." Another mute nod from Buffy. "So, I'm going now. I love you, Buffy. And I have faith that you'll repair the Veil. That you'll help to save us all."

Buffy watched silently as her mother faded away. She didn't want to speak because if she spoke, she'd cry, and

she didn't want Joyce feeling any worse than she already did. So she watched her mother go, and only when Joyce had disappeared did she give into tears, which burst from her like a storm.

"Goodbye mom," she whispered. "I love you too."

After a few long moments, she managed to stop the floodtide.

Wiping her eyes, forcing herself to think only of what lay ahead of her, she went back upstairs to find Willow, Giles and Xander, who were trying to memorise the ritual that would close the gateway.

All they needed now was for Ceri to return.

* * *

Ceri approached the house with a heavy heart. She and Nick hadn't spoken much since he'd volunteered to give himself up for the ritual. What, after all, was there to say? Goodbye, nice meeting you? Have a nice eternity as... As what? What would Nick become? Didn't matter, did it? He was going, simple as that. He was...

Nick had stopped at the gates of the house. Ceri was a few paces in front of him before she realised.

"Have you changed your mind?" Ceri asked, perversely hoping that he had, then knowing that if he had, they were all dead and good as sentenced to Oblivion. But she saw him shake his head.

"I can't come through," he said. "The protection on the house prevents me."

"Oh. Right." She remembered what he'd said, that he couldn't materialise inside the house or within its surrounding grounds. Again it hit her how impossible it was for them to remain together, as friends or anything else. The unfairness of it almost choked her. "Wait here," she muttered, then shook her head, because after all, what choice did he have but to wait? "I'll... I'll go ask Willow to let you in."

So complicated, she thought, as she ran to the house. This wasn't the same deal as with a vampire. That was easy - a vampire couldn't come in unless it was invited. One word of welcome, that was all it took. But it looked like Willow would have to do a temporary lifting of the spell she'd cast so that Nick could even cross the threshold onto the land. And that would take time too.

Fortunately Willow was able to lift the spell easily enough, nothing too involved there. But Ceri was acutely aware, as she finally walked with Nick to the front door, that if he was able to stay, the limitations of his spirit state would constantly be a strain. She was slowly coming to the conclusion that maybe it was better that he couldn't. That some things were worse than losing people you cared for. Sometimes, Ceri was learning, it was just easier to let go, and never mind how hard the letting go was. For the sake of your own sanity.

Ceri led Nick upstairs to the room where the ritual was being discussed. As she went in, she was acutely aware of everyone turning and looking, staring at Nick, assessing him. They all had expressions of deep sympathy in their eyes, and it was almost too much. Ceri wanted to shout at them to stop looking at Nick like he was about to be crucified or something. Only the thought that she had to be mature about this stopped her.

"Mom, everyone, this is Nicholas de Valois." Somehow, it seemed more dignified to use his full name. "He's agreed to... help.."

She saw Nick bow; he seemed unafraid, but who knew his real feelings? He could be terrified for all Ceri knew, but as usual, she was unable to read anything from him. She watched as Buffy came over, saw her embrace Nick, heard her introduce herself and the others, and found herself envying Buffy's easy show of gratitude.

"Thank you," Buffy said. "Thank you so much. I guess you know what this means to us?"

"I know," Nick replied simply. "And I'm honoured to be able to help."

"Well, Nick, you must come with me and I will explain your part in this." Giles spoke now. "Monsieur Breton, the inventor of this ritual, has left us, and entrusted myself, and Willow here, with carrying it out. Your part is... well... Come with me and let me explain. You may of course change your mind if the ritual sounds too... onerous for you. But I think you know what it means if you say no."

"I won't change my mind," Nick said. "But may I speak with Ceri alone first?"

Ceri saw her mother hesitate and she was afraid she was about to refuse. Then Buffy smiled faintly, nodded.

"Sure, but don't be too long. We need to get to the cemetery. Morgan and Ramirez need us."

Once they were alone, Ceri felt awkward and tongue-tied. Again, she wondered what she could say to someone who was about to sacrifice himself for the sake of both humankind and spiritkind alike. Nothing seemed adequate.

"No regrets, Ceri," Nick was saying. "This was why I was sent to you, and this is what must happen."

She looked at his face. No, no regrets there. Just acceptance now, as though he'd shut himself off from feeling anything else. Bizarrely, his placidity angered her.

"Don't you care?" she burst out. "I thought... I don't know... I thought you... you liked me. I... You kissed me... My first kiss. It meant something to me."

Momentary sadness on his face then. His hand went to her face, then to her hair, and he smoothed it infinitely gently.

"And to me, Ceri. And to me. My first human contact in... so long. My first real joy since I died. You almost made me feel alive again. These past few days, I've pretended to myself that... that I was. That I could be. With you. But it's all a fantasy, Ceri. We both know that. Why delude ourselves otherwise?"

"Because... because delusion is good. Delusion doesn't hurt. I'm so tired of feeling hurt and... and..."

"Delusion is pain, Ceri." He was stroking her face now; Ceri felt too weak to push his hand away. Besides, his touch felt good. So good. Too good. "Death is all about delusion. You delude yourself that it's better to stay alive. You delude yourself that if you hadn't died the way you died, it'd be easier. It keeps you from moving on, Ceri. And eventually we must all move on, alive or dead."

"But you're just... you're just giving yourself away, like this means nothing. You don't even know what's gonna happen to you."

"Ceri, this is pointless. Discussing this isn't going to stop it. And my giving myself away means everything. Doesn't matter what will happen to me. Let me go with gladness, Ceri. That's all you can do now. And I'll know that you're going on because you helped me make the sacrifice. That's enough for me."

Ceri wanted to argue, oh how she wanted to argue. But he was right, and she knew it. So she nodded silently, staring up at him solemnly, gathering her courage to say the inevitable last few words to him before he left her.

"You'll find someone who can love you, Ceri," Nick was saying. "Someone who can give you everything you deserve."

Did she believe him? His statement held the quality of prophecy, but it might just have been so many meaningless words strung together, used to placate her. Whether she believed it or not, she knew now was the time. On impulse she lifted her mouth to his and kissed him. Let him go, he'd said to her. But she guessed she should let herself go too. He returned her kiss, gently, then with passion. Finally Nick was the one who pulled back. Set Ceri away from him.

"Mr Giles," he called into the air around him, sounding somewhat desperate. "Mr Giles, I'm ready for you." He looked toward Ceri. "Go now," he whispered as Giles began to materialise. "Go."

Ceri fled the room without another word. Within seconds of leaving the room, she found herself sobbing in Buffy's arms. For a while she accepted her mother's comfort. Then she steeled herself and removed herself from Buffy's embrace.

"I'm sick of this," she said. "Let's finish it." And saw Buffy nod grimly.

Twenty One

Approaching the cemetery in daylight, Buffy hoped they wouldn't encounter anyone else in the surrounding area. Police officers, for example, who might look unkindly on people who might appear that they were performing strange, possibly depraved, acts in what was supposed to be a holy place.

She needn't have worried; the area was as ever deserted. Finding Ramirez' car, she parked her own vehicle next to it. No-one inside, which kind of scotched Buffy's faint hope that maybe he and Morgan had given up and come back here for a nap or something. Still, it had only been a faint hope. Deep inside, she knew that neither Ramirez or Morgan would leave their posts. Once they committed themselves to something they saw it through to the end, however bitter.

"Ready, you guys?" She addressed Ceri, Willow and Xander, who all nodded.

"Yeah, absolutely," Xander said, his voice slightly nasal because his nose was still in a splint. "We laugh in the face of Death, right?"

"And spit in the face of Danger," Willow added.

"This isn't a joke," Ceri said. "Why do you have to make a joke of it?"

Buffy thought Ceri sounded tearful, knew she was thinking of Nick, who had gone off into the Great Beyond with Giles, and hadn't been since. Knew that Ceri was thinking of the sacrifice he would be making later.

"We know it's not a joke, Ceri. Sometimes - well, sometimes a joke just helps break the tension. You know that." Buffy didn't add that she would be making her own sacrifice, and Morgan too. And Willow, in a way, because she was the one who had to inflict pain and injury on her dearest friends. But, Buffy supposed, at least they would still be alive afterwards. Hopefully. Nick would be... Well, Buffy didn't know what Nick would be. But alive certainly wasn't in the scenario.

"I don't want the tension broken," Ceri said, her tone surly. "I want to stay as tense as possible. That way I get to blast away anything that comes near me with absolutely no mercy whatever."

"We don't know if the weapons will work," Willow reminded Ceri, who just scowled in response.

Giles had brought back weapons with him from the Shadow Lands just before he had taken Nick away to wherever he had taken him. Weapons that would inflict damage on spirits. But the weapons, being from the Shadow Lands, had been formed from spirit matter themselves, and thus unusable by humans. Willow had had to perform a lengthy spell of transmutation upon

them, so that they were made solid, but no-one would know if that solidity would render them useless. This foray into the cemetery was their first and only opportunity to test them.

Buffy hoisted a hold-all from the back seat, handed out the weapons. Buffy would carry a kind of machete, Ceri a dagger, and Xander a gun that fired plasm-destroying bullets. Willow carried no weapon, except the knife she now strapped around her bulging waist. But that knife was a specific artefact that could only be used in the ritual, not for fighting. However, her lack of weapons wasn't too worrying; Willow had the power of Light spells at her disposal. Any evil ghost trying to get at her would find themselves zapped into nothingness. Well, that was the theory.

"Right, let's do it," Buffy said, and like she'd been jerked by a string, Ceri made purposefully toward the cemetery. Half-despairing, Buffy knew that Ceri had reverted back to her former angry state. If anything, she seemed angrier than she ever had before she'd become acquainted with Nick. As Buffy followed her troubled daughter, she again swore that she would make every effort to help Ceri put the painful events of her past behind her. Anything it took, she vowed. Anything.

They passed the remains of the old man that Morgan and Ramirez had passed - oh, many, many hours ago. Buffy stopped for a second, Xander and Willow too, but Ceri barely gave him a second glance.

"He's dead," she said impatiently. "You can't do anything for him. You're just wasting time." And strode on. Buffy hurriedly caught up with her; she didn't want Ceri to go off hot-headedly into the unknown alone.

At the cemetery gates though, they all halted. Buffy frowned at what she saw. Or rather, at what she didn't see.

"What's this?" she muttered, looking through the wrought iron bars. "It all looks... so normal."

When they had been here before, at the time of Morgan's possession by the Shadow, there had been obvious signs that something was wrong. But now the cemetery appeared peaceful - run down, true, but there were no ghosts, none of that sense of impending doom they'd felt before.

"Maybe Morgan and Ramirez managed to... to make it right again," Willow offered, but she didn't sound convinced.

"Well, if that's so, where are they?" Buffy replied. "I mean, the car's still parked, right? And if by some miraculous fluke they'd actually managed to close the gate-

way, they'd have at least called."

"Could have fallen asleep somewhere," Xander chipped in, but he sounded as unconvinced as Willow.

"One way of finding out," Ceri said, and unhesitatingly stepped through the gates. Buffy followed on after her, Willow and Xander trailing behind.

Passing through the cemetery gates, Buffy understood, too late, what had happened. She felt the air around her bend as though it was elastic, felt a moment's resistance before she was propelled forward. On the other side, she saw Ceri standing stock still, looking around her uncomprehendingly, her dagger hanging loosely at her side. Turning, Buffy made to shout to the others not to come through, but saw that Willow and Xander were already emerging, as though from a mist. Their mouths dropped open as they realised what Buffy had just realised. That the cemetery had been infiltrated by and become part of the Shadow Lands, and they were probably cut off from the living world. But still Buffy went toward the gates through which they'd just come, trying to go back. It was like coming up against a wall, and she fell backward. Tried again, with the same result.

"It's spreading already," Buffy said, painfully aware that she was stating the obvious.

"So why did it look normal from outside?" Ceri asked. Buffy shrugged.

"How would I know?" she snapped, then regretted her irritated tone. "Sorry, Ceri. Maybe the... whatever it is that's spreading shrouds the truth from the living... Or something." Then panic flooded her. "And if it is spreading, then Morgan couldn't have held the gateway." The feeling that she might faint hit her suddenly and she sank to the ground abruptly. "I have to find him..."

"Er... Buffy... I don't think we're going anywhere," Xander said; his voice held more than a hint of barely controlled panic. Looking up, Buffy saw shapes drifting toward them. Ghosts, she realised. But not the uncertain crowd of spirits she had seen here before. These ghosts, she could tell from the threatening atmosphere that was surrounding them, meant trouble.

"You think they can damage us?" Ceri asked, holding her dagger out in front of her in readiness for a fight.

"We're in their dimension," Buffy said rising to her feet. "Who knows what they can do to us?" She held her machete in both hands; Xander, she saw, had hoisted his gun to battle level. His face was very pale.

"I just had a thought," he said, as they watched the wraiths come closer. "If we're in the Shadow Lands, are we dead too?"

"Xander, don't," Willow moaned, running her hand over her pregnant belly. Buffy knew what she was thinking

- if they were dead, the child inside her was dead too. And if they were dead, what about their living children? How long before...? Buffy thrust the thought from her mind.

"Don't feel dead," she told Xander. "And Ceri didn't die when she went to the plantation, did she? But we might die if we don't pull ourselves together and fight off this lot. We have to find Morgan and Ramirez..."

With a howl of primal ferocity she launched herself forward, toward the nearest ghost, slashed her blade through it. The ghost, that of a young woman whose features had been hideously twisted into a skeletal horror with no eyes and a mouth that dripped yellowish fluid, flew apart. Buffy screamed in triumph, but her scream was abruptly cut off when she saw the spirit parts come together again.

"What the...?" she muttered. She heard gunfire, saw Xander rapidly shooting bullets in the general direction of the main mass of ghosts. He was screaming too as he fired, as plasm splattered in all directions. Only to reform. Also the ghosts that Ceri slashed mercilessly at. Willow, Buffy saw, was hanging back a little, and Buffy felt her friend's terror for her unborn child roll off her in great sickening waves. Willow was, Buffy understood, trying to summon up her courage, her power, to send forth a Light spell that would disintegrate the evil here, but it was taking too long. Way too long.

"Why aren't the weapons working?" Xander yelled as yet another ghost reformed itself, shaking bullets from its ectoplasmic body.

"I don't know," Buffy shouted back, hacking through a spirit that came too close, watching without much surprise as its decapitated head settled back on its body, ready to resume the fight.

A ghost with huge wings that seemed to be made of black smoke had wrapped itself around Ceri like a tangled sheet, and although she was stabbing at it, it lifted her upward. Buffy watched in horror as it went higher and higher, up into the dead night sky, heard Ceri cry out shrilly as though she were in some kind of pain. When the ghost reached a zenith of height, it let Ceri go. Like a stone, she dropped to the ground with a sickening thud, and lay still.

Shrieking Ceri's name, Buffy dashed forward, hacking indiscriminately as she went. In the background, she could still hear rapid fire, and now Willow's voice - finally - at first hesitant, then stronger, as she recited the words of a protective spell. But Buffy didn't hear the exact words as she knelt beside Ceri, who was bleeding heavily from a head wound, bleeding from her ears. For a heart-stopping second, Buffy believed the fall had killed her. Then she saw that Ceri was breathing.

"Ceri... Ceri, can you hear me...?" Oh please hear me, my baby... She heard Ceri moan, saw her eyes flutter open; even in the gloomy half-light, Buffy saw they were very bloodshot.

"Mom?" She sounded very young, in dreadful pain. Turning her head, Ceri coughed agonisingly; blood appeared at the sides of her mouth, ran down her chin. Barely aware of the light that was slowly surrounding her - the successful result of Willow's incantation - Buffy wiped the blood away, hardly able to think of what to do next as Ceri lapsed into unconsciousness. She felt a hand on her shoulder.

"Buffy, Will's prepared the way for us." Xander's voice, intruding on her dread for her child, Xander kneeling beside her, the expression on his face at once concerned and urgent. "Buffy, we can move forward now. Let me carry her for you?"

"I don't think we should move her," Buffy said, stroking Ceri's blood-matted hair, unable to put constructive thought together. "She's hurt bad..."

"Buffy, if we don't go now, we may not be able to go. Will can't keep the spell up forever." The hand on her shoulder tightened. "C'mon, Buffy..."

"I don't know if I want to go forward, Xander," Buffy said. "I'm afraid... Afraid of hurting Ceri more. Afraid of what we'll find... I don't know if I can do this."

She felt herself pulled none too gently to her feet.

"You don't have a choice," Xander said, stooping, lifting Ceri up into his arms, taking care not to jar her broken body too much. "You have to do this." He swallowed hard. "We all do. Right?"

Buffy looked at her injured child - bright blood livid on bone pale skin - thought for a second that now Ceri looked exactly that, nothing like a full fledged Slayer. Just a broken child, after all.

"Okay. Okay, Xander." She nodded, and although the dread settled inside her, threatened to choke her, she moved forward toward the tomb of Thomas Breton. As she walked, Xander on one side, Willow, brilliant with light, on the other, she saw how the hostile ghosts now fell back, shielding their eyes, moving away from Willow's radiance, prevented from attacking.

After about ten long, seemingly endless moments, they stopped outside the tomb. A low noise came from within, like the thrumming of electrical currents through power lines. Buffy could feel it reverberate around her body, a thousand extra heartbeats. The feeling was somehow pleasant, not at all menacing or disturbing. Closing her eyes in gratitude, she let out a long sigh.

"Morgan," she whispered. "He's in there. Surrounded himself with protective energies." She choked on a sob

of relief. Although she couldn't hear Morgan's thoughts - the energy he'd conjured was too strong and stopped her from penetrating it - she knew he was in there. She hoped Ramirez was inside too, safe under his father's magical guardianship.

"Let's go in then," Willow said, sounding exhausted. "I can't hold on any longer."

Pushing open the door of the tomb, they went inside. Buffy saw a bubble of light that shone into the stygian darkness surrounding them. Within the bubble, Morgan and Ramirez sat, clasping each others' hands so that the sphere they had created around them might not be broken. Before them, hovering like a great beast waiting to pounce, the doorway to the Shadow Lands, opened wide like a gaping mouth. And issuing from the doorway, fissures ran across the substance of the Veil. Buffy understood why the cemetery had been enveloped - the other world was leaking out onto the human one. Slowly for now, but definitely. Unless they performed the ritual soon, it would explode and corrupt everything.

"Morgan," Buffy said, because he and Ramirez were apparently concentrating so hard on maintaining their protection that they hadn't noticed Buffy and the others coming into the tomb. "Morgan!" Raising her voice. Saw his consciousness awaken, Ramirez' too, and they turned to look. At once the protective circle disintegrated, leaving only Willow's continued muffled chanting of the light spell to protect them. But that too was fading rapidly, leaving Buffy to wonder if Willow would have enough stamina to perform the ritual when the time came. And where, come to that, were Giles and Nick? They were needed too.

"Buffy..."

Morgan rose to his feet, hurried toward her, Ramirez a few paces behind him. They seemed to come at her from a long way away and it occurred to Buffy that the tomb was much bigger inside than it was outside, like it was a little island of death set in a much bigger sea. Then Morgan embraced her, and for a second, feeling his arms around her, she forgot everything.

"What happened to Ceri?" Morgan asked, bringing her back to harsh reality.

Buffy related everything that had occurred, watching Ramirez, seeing his face blanch, seeing a kind of drugged horror on his face as he looked at Ceri, like he was her parent rather than Buffy.

"She's not dead," Buffy told him, trying to make her tone reassuring. But Ramirez shook his head and Buffy knew he wasn't fooled by her attempt. No, Ceri might not be dead, but she had remained comatose since the first and only time she'd opened her eyes.

"Let me tend to her," Ramirez told Xander in a tone that made him hand Ceri over at once. Ramirez set her down on the floor of the tomb, making sure her position was comfortable, as though she were still awake. Then he sat beside her, eyes closed, his right hand on her forehead, the other holding her hand. From the silent movement of his mouth, Buffy knew he was praying. Deciding she could do no more, she turned back to Morgan.

"The ritual must be carried out as soon as the moon rises," she said. Briefly she and Willow outlined what must be done, their voices becoming ever more urgent because the atmosphere in the tomb was rapidly becoming more and more oppressive as the Light magic finally began to lose its power.

"I couldn't hold the doorway," Morgan said; he sounded weary and ashamed, heart-sick. "It's just too unstable. I'm only glad that Felipe managed to get to me so that I was able to protect us both while we waited for you to come. It was all I could do, Buffy. I'm sorry."

Buffy stroked his face, kissed his mouth gently.

"It doesn't matter anymore. You're alive, we're here, and soon we'll perform the ritual." She looked at her watch; the second hand had stopped ticking and the time was stuck at one p.m., the time they'd entered the cemetery. "Watch's stopped." She saw Morgan nod.

"Mine stopped too, ages ago."

"Guess we'll just have to wait until Giles comes," Buffy said.

"I can maintain a protection for a while longer," Morgan decided, and one by one, they sat on the dirt floor, held hands and Morgan began his protection rite again. But Buffy knew it was harder now; he'd been working defence magic all night, first for himself, then for Ramirez too. Now he had six people to shield for as long as it took for Giles to show up. Buffy prayed it would be soon.

No-one had any idea of the passing of time. Cocooned in the sphere of light, they watched as the doorway to the dead lands pulsed and pounded, watched as the rips extended ever outward through the fabric of the Veil. From time to time, a spirit drifted through the doorway. One or two were ordinary ghosts, others were twisted spirits intent on destruction.

"We should try and stop them," Buffy said, fighting the urge to break out of the circle and resume the battle. But Morgan shook his head.

"No point. This is their territory now. We can't fight them."

"And I worked out why the weapons didn't work," Willow chimed in. "Because I made them solid matter, and this cemetery no longer belongs to the solid world.

Ironic, really. If I'd left them alone, they'd have done a lot of damage."

"You weren't to know, Will," Xander reassured her, taking her hand and squeezing it. "You..."

"Giles!" Buffy said; he had materialised at last, Nick by his side. But Nick was no longer a physical being; instead he shone with an otherworldly radiance that was incorporeal, pure spirit. The radiance flickered however when he saw Ceri lying on the ground, badly wounded. Buffy saw him start toward her, but he was restrained by Giles.

"She is nothing to do with you anymore," she heard Giles tell him.

"But I..." Nick began to argue, but Buffy saw Giles holding his gaze and he became silent, hypnotised back into serenity.

"It's time," Giles told the rest of them. "Are you all quite ready?"

"Yeah," Buffy said fervently. She didn't care that she was about to be cut now; she just wanted this done. One by one she heard the others agree.

"Morgan, drop the protection. Willow must take over from now. You know what your part in this is?"

"Buffy and Willow told me," Morgan said, letting the light fade from around them. Giles nodded, apparently satisfied.

"Very well, Willow. Begin as soon as you are ready. I shall be at hand should you need reminding of anything."

"Good luck," Buffy said, and went to Willow, kissed her, held her tight. One by one the others, including Ramirez, kissed Willow too, adding their good wishes to Buffy's. Then Willow motioned to Buffy and Morgan to come forward, Nick too. Nick, Buffy noticed, moved as though he were in a dream state, and thought that maybe it was for the best.

"I conjure thee, O spirits of protection." Willow was intoning. "Guardians of the North, lend us the power of the Ever Turning Sword." She made a sigil in the air with her knife, which glinted suddenly with blazing energy. "Guardians of the South, grant us the protection of your eternal Fire." Another sigil; a ring of flames sprang up around them, making Buffy gasp. The flames had cut them off from the others; Buffy could just see their faces in the flickering light. "Guardians of the West, aid us in the regeneration of the boundary that has been lost." Another sign. "Guardians of the East, confer upon us the power of divine restoration, that we may heal the breach." She turned to Nick. "Stand between Buffy and Morgan now." Still appearing as though he were in a dream, Nick moved forward, took the required place. "Buffy, Morgan, hold out your wrists and join hands

above his head." They complied.

Willow stepped forward, and Buffy saw how she appeared to have overcome her exhaustion, saw how, in the light of the fire, she appeared full of some huge power, like she was inhabited by some wondrous force. A goddess, perhaps.

She felt her wrist grasped, felt the point of the knife dig against her skin. Gave a gasp of pain as Willow pierced the flesh, bit her lips against a scream as the fiery blade was dragged down, down, down through the flesh of her arm, feeling a warm rush of blood as the knife severed the major artery. She watched as Willow repeated the procedure with Morgan, who stood unflinching as she wounded him, and Buffy knew that he was still, even now, redeeming himself in his own eyes by refusing to show pain, as a true warrior must always refuse to acknowledge it.

And she saw the blood raining down in great torrents on Nick, who seemed to be absorbing it into himself.

So much blood, Buffy thought, wondering how two people could have that much blood in them. Or out of them, in hers and Morgan's case. We gonna bleed to death?

"Blood of immortal life, merge with immortal death, merge with immortal spirit." With a hand on each of their chests, Willow pushed outward, separating Buffy and Morgan, so that Nick stood alone, a pillar of glowing blood. Buffy could see his eyes had opened wide - even the whites were red - and she saw pain there now. Felt it, deep inside her. Morgan's eyes held pain too, but again, his face showed no sign of it. Willow held the knife in both hands, pushed it into Nick, began walking round in a circle, the knife sweeping through his spirit constantly. The effect was like that of peeling an apple; Nick began to separate, began a spiralling swirl that eventually became a hurricane of movement. "Be One with the Boundary," Willow ordered. "Take your place in the Fabric that separates Life and Death. Become forever unbroken. Protect us now!"

With a final flourish of the blade, she flung out her hands, letting go the bloody knife, which was seized up by the spiritual whirlwind that Nick had become. Buffy who had sunk to the ground with Morgan, watched as the bloody wind blew toward the gateway, from which another horror - much worse than anything they'd previously witnessed - was beginning to emerge. Hitting the gateway at something approaching the speed of light, the whirlwind hit the gateway, forcing whatever was trying to come over back through it.

Inside the tomb, a wailing sound issued as the fabric of the Shadow Lands began to suck itself back through the closing portal. The flames around Buffy, Willow

and Morgan were doused abruptly, and the screaming, howling sound of the psychic wind rose around them.

"Hold on to something - get down at least," someone yelled - Buffy thought it sounded like Giles. Already on the ground, Buffy threw herself flat, saw Morgan and Willow do the same; had to assume that Ramirez and Xander could look after themselves and Ceri. When the wind reached its height, she felt as though she would be lifted up to be sucked through the gateway, but she imagined herself melded with the earth beneath her, and somehow the thought kept her grounded.

Finally the wind stopped. There was a popping sound. Then silence. After a few seconds, Buffy raised her head. Gone. The gateway was gone. Not only that, but the oppressive atmosphere that was death had gone too. Slowly Buffy got up onto her knees, saw that the others were daring to look too. Bursting into tears, she fell into Willow's arms.

"You did it!" she exclaimed. "Oh Will, you did it!" Then it occurred to her that her arms were no longer bleeding, and the pain had gone. She looked down - the wounds had healed up. As had Morgan's. And if they were healed...

Buffy crossed the short space over to Ceri, who was, she saw, moving around, the first sign of proper life since she had been dropped by the winged ghost.

"Mom?" Ceri said again, sounding groggy. "Mom, what happened?" Buffy saw that blood no longer trickled from her mouth or ears, and the gash on her temple had disappeared.

"It's finished," Buffy said, finally certain. "It's finished." And she saw a mix of relief and regret pass across Ceri's face. Knew that she had to begin to accept the loss of someone she'd cared for, albeit briefly.

"The bodies are gone," she heard Morgan say. "The students, and poor Dan Healy. Gone. I suppose they were sucked through the gateway."

A brief silence settled. Then Giles, who had somehow remained with them, spoke.

"You should all go home and rest," he said; simple words, but he sounded elated, ecstatic.

"You're coming with us, right?" Buffy said. She saw Giles nod.

"Soon I'll Ascend," he said. "I can delay it no longer, and my time with you is concluded satisfactorily. But first, before I go, I will come home with you. I have something important to say that all of you should hear."

"What?" Buffy said.

"A prophecy," Giles said cryptically.

"A prophecy? What prophecy?"

"Later," Giles said. "When you get home."

"But Giles..." Buffy said, saw Giles smile widely, shake his head and dematerialise. Knew she had to wait.

"Sooner we get home the better," Morgan said, taking her hand. "Willow's exhausted, Ceri's just about recovering. Best we go now."

"But the prophecy..." Buffy persisted, and saw Morgan smile.

"Can wait. Come on."

One by one they filed out of the tomb, which suddenly seemed claustrophobic, shrunk back to its normal size. Buffy felt the familiar weight of Morgan's arm go around

her shoulders, and she leaned into his warmth. Willow and Xander were holding hands, Willow still looking ethereally happy, despite her obvious exhaustion, and Ramirez was supporting a rapidly improving Ceri. Outside, the early evening air embraced them. Living air, Buffy thought, taking a long, deep breath. Crisp with the promise of a new night, and after, a new day. New days stretching off into an eternity of new days. Silently they walked through the deserted graveyard, heading toward home, toward their future. Toward prophecy, whatever that might be...

Epilogue

Ten years later

Buffy stared in dismay at the stuff littering the bed. Underwear, a vast array of clothes, not to mention beauty items and shoes. In the middle of the mess, a large suitcase, already three-quarters full. On the floor beside her, another large suitcase, its lid closed over its bulging contents. Just. She'd had quite a struggle, wrestling to get that zipped up.

"You do know they probably won't let you on the plane with that lot, don't you?" Morgan said, coming into the bedroom, surveying the chaos. His tone held a smile, and just the merest hint of bemusement. "I really can't imagine what you think you're going to do with all that. We're hardly going to the back of beyond, after all."

Buffy cast him a black look. Men, she thought, just didn't get it, did they?

"Your stuff's in there too," she countered, and heard him laugh scornfully.

"Oh right. You very graciously allowed me a quarter of one suitcase. My meagre allowance makes a lot of difference."

"You could've had more space if you'd wanted it. It's not my fault that you have simple clothing requirements. Besides, a girl can never take too many clothes on a trip. Don't you know that by now?" She saw him smirk. "What? What's funny?"

"Do you think the term 'girl' is appropriate now?" The smirk became a wide grin. "Grandma."

Buffy hurled a pair of socks at him, which he caught with lightning reflexes.

"Better get used to the title," he said, unrepentant. "Because I'm sure that's what little Maria will call you when she can talk."

"Makes you a granddad then," Buffy retorted, but it was hardly the same, she supposed, because Morgan had been a grandfather many times over in his long history.

"Well, I've never seen a more beautiful grandma, any-

way," Morgan said, relenting, going to her, putting his arms around her waist. Well, as far around her waist as her six-month pregnancy would allow. "You're sure the airline said it's okay for you to fly?"

"Yeah, yeah. Stop fussing. God, you'd think you'd be used to me being pregnant by now."

"You didn't fly with any of the others."

"Speaking of which, you'd better take them to Will's soon. Get them settled in before we leave."

Kissing her briefly, Morgan let her go.

"I'll bring them up to say goodbye."

He went to leave, but Buffy caught his hand, restrained him.

"They will be okay, won't they, with Will and Xander?"

"You know they will, Buffy. They're like second parents to them. Besides, Kate and Lucas aren't far away. They'll be here too, should they be needed." He leaned in, kissed her again. "We're only going for three weeks anyway, remember?"

"Yeah. Okay. I know. Just being over-hormonal and over-protective."

Morgan nodded, disappeared, leaving Buffy reflecting on her past. And the future.

* * *

This had all been predicted. Ten years ago. After the closure of the gateway to the Shadow Lands, Giles had told the still exhausted group the prophecy he had promised them.

"Are we gonna like this prophecy?" Buffy asked - as far as she was concerned, prophecies were usually full of doom and gloom. She wasn't at all sure, now it came to finding out what Giles had to say, that she wanted to hear it.

"Well, most of it, I think." Giles smiled.

"So what do we want - the good news or the bad news first?" Xander asked. "I mean, from what you just said, there is some bad news, right?"

One by one, they looked at each other.

"Bad news first," Buffy said. "Might as well hear that. Then you can wow us with the good stuff."

"Are you quite sure?" Giles asked. "Telling the... as you put it... bad news first will rather put a damper on the good..."

"Oh just say what you have to say. God, you sure can be cryptic sometimes."

"Very well. I was allowed to pass on this information to you..."

"By who?" Buffy wanted to know. Giles raised his eyes Heavenward.

"God, Buffy," Ramirez said with quiet assurance. "Higher Power. Is that right, Mr Giles?"

"That is correct, Father Ramirez. Now, if I may continue? I am permitted to tell you that henceforth there will be one hundred years of peace upon this earth..."

"A hundred years?" Buffy said, not expecting this at all. Through her shock, she saw Giles nod.

"One hundred years, during which time there will be no vampire rebellions, no attempted uprisings by Hell, nothing to shatter the security of your lives. This is your long overdue reward for everything you have endured, for every time you have saved the world from evil's destruction."

"Hey... That's great," Xander said. Then fell silent. When he did speak, he sounded gloomy, even afraid. "I guess we won't be here, though, will we? Me and Will?"

"Xander..." Buffy said, but then she stopped. GuesSED he was right. He and Willow were only mortal, after all. Felt a terrible sadness descend upon her. All they had contributed, all they had suffered, and still they were only mortal. What reward was that, for her loyal friends? But then she saw that Giles was smiling, shaking his head.

"Xander and Willow have been bequeathed a gift, also. Granted to you for the invaluable aid you have given Buffy and Morgan throughout the years. For those one hundred years, you will cease to age..."

"No kidding?" Astounded, Xander looked toward Willow, who was suddenly crying and laughing at the same time.

"I'm gonna have my best friends with me for a hundred years?" Buffy squealed, sounding like a little child who has just been told that she could have Christmas every day.

"Not only that," Giles went on, after the news had been absorbed and remarked upon, "but their children have also been so blessed. Once they have achieved adulthood, they will also remain at their peak of strength."

"Our kids too?" Willow, tears still streaking her cheeks, stroked her bump.

"Your children too," Giles confirmed.

"Oh my God..."

"This is leading to something else, isn't it?" Morgan said.

"I mean, this stuff about one hundred years of peace is all very wonderful, but I take it that after this long period of time, something will happen?"

"Morgan, d'you have to put a dampener on it?" Buffy said, not wanting her bubble of happiness to burst.

"Can't we just be glad of what Giles just told us?"

"Of course," Morgan agreed. "I for one will be glad of some peace and quiet, and time just spent with you and our children, not worrying about when the world will next be threatened. But... prophecies often have two sides to them. So, tell us, Giles. Tell us the rest."

"Very wise, to have all the facts at your disposal," Giles said. "But before I tell you the rest, let me tell you a few more things. Not too many, don't want to ruin the surprises, but just a few. Firstly, your families will be always be together."

"Together?" Buffy asked.

"You will always remain loyal to each other, and you will never be separated, at least not in love, even if you are by distance. Your families will grow, until you spread over the earth. You, Buffy, will be the Great Mother, the founder of a great race..."

"Oh, fabulous," Xander moaned, grinning. "She's gonna be unbearable, you do know that, right?"

"And Morgan will be the father of the race," Giles continued, ignoring Xander's comment, although he smiled. "Their bond is unbreakable, as is yours, Xander and Willow."

"So we're all stuck with each other?" Buffy said, but she was laughing, felt ecstatic. Found she didn't much care what would happen after a hundred years. The knowledge that they would all be together, and happy, was enough.

"What about me?" Ceri asked, causing Buffy's laughter to dry up abruptly. Her poor troubled baby sounded alone and afraid. But she saw Giles smiling again, felt her heart lift once more.

"Very soon, Ceri," Giles said, "you will know peace. And you will know eternal joy."

"How?" Ceri sounded extremely sceptical, as though she didn't think she'd ever know any kind of joy, let alone that of the eternal variety.

"Just be assured that what I say is true. As I said before, I wouldn't want you to know it all. Some things are best discovered spontaneously. But, Ceri, you will find it, the happiness I promised. You all will."

"Okay," Buffy said. "Now tell us the rest. I think we can cope with it, right, guys? After what you've just told us?" Giles nodded, began speaking again.

"You were right, of course, Morgan, when you guessed that at the end of this hundred years, something big will happen. Apart from being a time of peace, the century is a time for you to grow; as I said, to spread. At the end of the hundred years, there will be a vampire war to end all vampire wars. One or other race will perish. But it is not foretold who."

Deep silence followed this disturbing piece of prophecy. Then Buffy shrugged.

"We got a hundred years, right?" she said. "A hundred years to make a race of Slayers. We can do that, right?" She saw Morgan's mouth lift in a smile, and she knew he was finally back to normal, that even the shadow of the Shadow had disappeared.

"Better start practising as soon as possible then," he said. "Wouldn't want to shirk our responsibilities, now would we?"

Buffy blushed....

* * *

They were coming upstairs now, her brood. Buffy could hear the patter of many feet as they approached.

Five children in ten years. And another one on the way. Four girls, another boy. So far. Finding names for them all was becoming difficult. And soon, she guessed, they'd have to move to an even bigger house. Still, at least Slayer children grew fast. Kate and Lucas had been off her hands for a long time now.

Buffy didn't mind her frequent pregnancies. In fact, she loved being pregnant. Loved all her children with the fierce, protective passion of a tigress. She had even grown to love the process of giving birth, because every child she brought into the world would grow and become part of the fight against evil. And these children would have their own children, thus increasing the race.

She smiled then. Willow and Xander's kids too, of course, were a big part of the equation. Apart from Jordan, they'd gone on to have another three boys. Matthew had been born four months after Giles' Ascension and was now ten years old. Then came David, who was five, and finally, cute little Ryan, who was two. That had been fun, because Buffy had been pregnant with her last child, Emma, at the same time as Willow was pregnant with Ryan. Even more fun when she and Willow had given birth within hours of each other. And it was still fun now, sharing it all...

Her reverie broke as the children burst into the room. From eight year old Beth, to seven year old Josh, down through Lucy, Rachel and Emma, who were six, three and, of course, two respectively. Buffy had no idea what she was going to name the one she carried inside her. Although, if it were a boy, a name would be easier to

find. Rubbing her belly, she grinned. Just as well she liked a challenge.

"Hey you guys," she said, thinking how much she'd love to take them all with her. But of course, it was impossible. This time, anyway. "You gonna be good for Aunt Will and Uncle Xander?"

"Yes, mum," Beth said, speaking for all of them. She spoke with a perfect English accent. Not surprising, really, considering that was where she had been born, where she was growing up. Buffy smiled again; who would have thought she would raise little English people? Not her, not really.

"I wish we could come with you," Beth said. "I want to see Ceri and Felipe too."

"I know, sweetie," Buffy said. "And you can go stay with them some day soon. Or they'll come see us. But Ceri's just had her baby and she needs her rest, okay?"

"Okay."

Buffy said goodbye to the children, kissing them one by one, soothing a fractious Emma, who didn't want her parents to leave her for a minute, let alone almost a month.

"Mommy and daddy will be back before you know it," Buffy said, feeling a lump forming in the back of her throat. "And Aunt Will and Uncle Xander have lots of things planned so the time'll go so quickly, you won't have time to miss us." She looked at Morgan with big eyes. Take them, before I crack up, she pleaded, saw him nod.

"Come on, you lot," he said, scooping Emma up into his arms, holding out his hand to Rachel, who was also tearful at the thought of being left for the first time in her short life. "Mummy has to finish packing." He looked at the chaos spread over the bed. Shook his head. "If she can."

"Bye, babies," Buffy said as they filed out of the room again. "See you soon."

And she thought of her first baby, so far away.

* * *

"I'm not coming with you," Ceri announced, causing Buffy to freeze in mid-sentence.

Six months had passed since Giles' prophecy. Six months since he had left them in a joyous goodbye as he finally took Ascension.

Since then, the families had taken time deciding where they'd like to live. A complete change of scene, by mutual agreement. They'd written off to several countries, making enquiries about jobs, schooling, and other considerations. In the end, both Xander and Morgan, by some fluke, had both landed jobs in the English city of Oxford. Morgan as a permanent lecturer in Ancient Studies, Celtic History, and Xander a position in an ex-

tremely prestigious law firm. They had been offered other posts elsewhere, but none so close together, none so... convenient. It seemed to everyone that Fate had decided for them. And they had all learned that they couldn't fight Fate.

So here they were, on a brief visit to England, checking out accommodations in a picturesque village close enough to the city for easy access, yet far enough away that they weren't living in its shadow.

They'd found suitable houses for both families - they'd decided for reasons of sheer logistics that it was easier to live separately - and all of them were very excited at the possibilities that were opening to them. Willow had discovered a property for let nearby that would be perfect for the project she had in mind: a New Age shop that would act as a foil for the more important practise of her ever increasing Wiccan power. This way, she'd make money out of it too. As a sideline, she would also offer aromatherapy and various forms of alternative healing. It could, she told the others, be very lucrative, and knowing Willow's shrewd business sense, everyone agreed wholeheartedly. Buffy had already decided that she would help Willow when she could, but she knew that her most important job was to provide the world with enough Slayers to form the beginning of the new race.

And now Ceri, who had accompanied them on the trip only with great reluctance, had dropped this bombshell.

"What d'you mean, you're not coming with us?" Buffy said. "You have to come with us."

"No, I don't." Ceri sounded adamant. "Look, mom, this place is all very beautiful, but... but I don't feel part of it. It's nothing to do with you, or anything else. You know that. It's to do with me. It doesn't feel right for me."

"Look, it's a change, sure, but..."

"Don't tell me I'll get used to it, mom. I... I don't wanna get used to it. I just feel it's wrong for me, to leave the States."

Buffy sighed. This was the last thing she'd expected, that Ceri would want to stay behind, that she would be so utterly opposed to leaving. Certainly, despite her reluctance, she'd said nothing before. So now, Buffy wondered, what was she supposed to do? Ceri couldn't stay behind. There was no one to look after her, and grown-up or not, Ceri was in terms of age still just a young teenager. No way was Buffy about to let her fend for herself.

Later, when the adults were eating dinner in the local pub, Buffy mentioned Ceri's objections, her refusal to move with them.

"I don't know what we should do now," she said, push-

ing food around her still full plate. "I mean, we feel this move is good for us, she doesn't. I'm torn. I'm always torn with Ceri."

There followed a discussion about possible solutions to the Ceri problem. None of the proposals were really viable. Morgan wondered if maybe they put off their move, but although Buffy was touched that he was obviously willing to forgo his upcoming job for Ceri's sake, she knew it wouldn't work.

"It'll be years before I feel I can leave her alone," she objected. "And we need to make this move now, you know it."

"So what do you intend that we do? Force her to come?"

"I don't know. I..."

"I may have a suggestion," Ramirez said. All eyes turned on him; up until now, he had been silent, which had surprised Buffy. Ceri's welfare was always foremost in Ramirez' mind. "I would be quite willing to stay behind with her when you leave. Take guardianship."

"We can't ask you to do that, Felipe. You've accepted the priest-ship at..." Buffy began, but Ramirez shook his head. Floored her with another surprise.

"Well, actually, I accepted two posts. Provisionally. The one you know about, and one in New York, which you didn't. Somehow, it felt right to consider both, although I believed I would be coming here. And now I know why."

Ramirez sounded certain, and Buffy had to admit that his actions also seemed directed by something other than his consciousness.

"I don't know," she hedged.

"Do you not trust me with the responsibility?" His black eyes challenged her, and she flushed.

"You know better than that. I trust you with her life, you know that. It's just... well, it just seems too much to ask."

"You did not ask, Buffy," Ramirez pointed out. "I offered. Having Ceri around will be no hardship to me. In fact, she will be helpful to me, as she always has been. Please, consider it."

"What do you think, Morgan?" Buffy asked.

"I think it's Ceri's decision," he replied, and Buffy knew he was taking care with his words, so as not to upset her.

"No-one else's. If she says no, then we'll have to think of something else. If she says yes, then it's meant to be."

And so it was. Ceri was jubilant. She didn't care that staying with Ramirez meant a move to New York. That was still home, as far as she was concerned. Buffy knew that the next time they left the States, the firstborn of her children would no longer be with her. But first, on this short trip to England, there was one more thing to do. She and Morgan had discussed it at some length,

and agreed that maybe it would help Ceri finally come to terms with herself. To put her on the path to self-healing.

"There's a special place I'd like to take you before we leave," Buffy said. "Just you and I, Ceri."

Ceri looked at her with big blue eyes.

"Where?"

Buffy smiled.

"A secret," she whispered, hugging her soon-to-be-gone daughter. "I think you'll like it."

Next day they got on a train down to the coast. Then a taxi to another small village, out of the village, up a narrow lane to a large house set on a cliff-top overlooking the churning sea.

"What is this?" Ceri asked.

Buffy felt tears sting her eyes; it was the first time she had ever seen this place too, and it caused all sorts of conflicting emotions to course through her.

"It's the place where your father was born," she whispered, her words almost swept away by the wind that whistled around the cliff-top, and the constant shrill cry of gulls, which seemed to float on the strong air currents like paper birds. "The present owners agreed that we could look around. I thought it'd be good for us to see it together. Just so you can say hello to your beginnings. Maybe, if you like, we could throw some flowers into the sea. Just to remember him. Just to... say goodbye. Properly."

For a long moment, Ceri stared hard at Buffy, who wondered if she'd been terribly mistaken, that this had been a horribly morbid idea. Then Ceri threw her arms around her, and she knew it was probably the best idea she'd ever had in the whole of her life.

Fate, she guessed, had intervened again.

* * *

"All set then?" Morgan asked. Buffy nodded. The final piece of luggage had been packed, the house was secured, and they'd said their goodbyes to Willow, Xander, Kate and Lucas the previous evening over dinner. Now they had to go to the airport.

"This is so weird," Buffy said, when they were finally sitting in the terminal waiting for the plane to New York. "I mean, it was weird enough when Ceri told us that she and Felipe were getting married. But them having a baby together..." She smiled, shrugged. Morgan returned the smile.

"I know. And to think when he first came to us, he was so... Well, no one would ever have thought he'd fall in love and leave the priesthood. But as he said, his religious fanaticism was really just a substitute for the love he never thought he wanted, and the family he'd never had. Ceri's changed all that. He's quite happy, helping

his underprivileged kids in the Centre, and now he has his own child at home."

"Yeah. And as to that, you know there were times when I despaired of Ceri ever being settled. But she's a different person now. Funny how things work out. I guess they were meant to be, just like we were."

"Ah well," Morgan said. "We know our lives are fated. Every one of us is being directed."

"Well, we're in a great place right now," Buffy mused. "We're blessed, aren't we? I mean, there were times when I thought my life was a curse, and now..." She shrugged. "All sounds cheesy saying these things aloud, but I have everything I've ever wanted. Great kids, great friends to share my life with." A sidelong look, a tiny, secret smile. "You. And the best thing is, I know it's not about to end any time soon. I've got security. Sometimes I think I'm gonna wake up and find it's all gone."

"The family won't always be in the same place, Buffy. You know that."

"Oh, I know. But they'll be out there somewhere, won't they? I know the kids have to move on. Ceri already has, Kate and Lucas will follow when they graduate in July..."

"Now that will be odd," Morgan interrupted. "The twins, splitting up, going their separate ways. I kind of thought they'd always stick together."

Buffy smiled.

"Love does funny things to a person. And Jordan wants to be off. It's a great opportunity for Kate too. It's not often a person walks out of university with a degree in Archaeology straight on to a major dig."

They fell silent for a while, both thinking the same thoughts. About Kate's upcoming graduation and marriage to Willow and Xander's son, Jordan. The eldest of the four Harris boys, Jordan was now twenty-three years old. He was also a graduate in Archaeology, and had managed to land a job with the British Museum on gaining his degree from Oxford the year before. Just his good luck, because the museum was funding a huge dig in the Holy Land and had invited Jordan to accompany it. Jordan, although intensely excited by this, had nonetheless refused to leave his precious Kate behind. He'd pulled a few strings with the organiser of the dig - another Oxford graduate - and Kate was allowed to attend, in a minor capacity at first, working her way up. As they would be away a minimum of three years, Kate had plenty of time to prove herself. Although to a certain extent, she had already done that by being one of the very few people in the world to have gained an honours' degree at the tender age of sixteen. Both she and Lucas had been hailed as prodigies for a while, until the novelty had worn off.

And as for Lucas, his degree in Ancient Studies - taught

in part by his own father - was also something to be proud of. Lucas didn't intend to use it yet though. Well, not directly. His intention was to go off, backpacking with a group of friends, working his way around the world, taking whatever employment that came his way. He would, he had told his parents, find his path eventually. This was something he knew instinctively, a kind of fire that burned inside him. Both Buffy and Morgan had enough faith in their son - who was showing himself to have the heart of a true explorer - to let him go his own way. It was sad, true enough, to say goodbye, but the prophecy was fulfilling itself.

The Slayer race would spread, as foretold.

"British Airways flight 238 to New York JFK is now boarding," a metallic voice over the tannoy system announced, bringing Buffy and Morgan out of their thoughts, back to the flight ahead.

"I guess that's us," Buffy said, standing, feeling a little cramp in her back from sitting too long in one position, an occupational hazard of being six months' pregnant that she could have done without.

"Need a hand, grandma?" Morgan joked, and she gave him a little shove, not really offended because in truth, despite her protestations to the contrary, she quite liked the idea. And she hardly looked like a grandmother, after all. Youth, beauty and a toned, supple body under the bulk of her pregnancy. No, she reflected, she didn't mind it at all. And that was just as well, she decided, as they made their way to the boarding gate, because the rate her children were growing, she'd be a grandmother many times over before too long. And then a great-grandmother and then... Simply the Great Mother that Giles had titled her with. The joint head of a vast dynasty. Such a grand thought could quite turn a girl's head, if she allowed it.

Buffy let herself doze some of the journey. She'd seen the in-flight movies a dozen times, and she just wanted to relax before they landed. Morgan lost himself in a book, a horror novel about passengers on a plane flight that broke through a barrier into another dimension to a terrible doom. Buffy hadn't been very happy about his reading choice - it was like tempting fate - but he'd just smiled at her objections.

"Not about to happen to us, is it?" he reminded her.

"We're safe from that kind of stuff for now."

And Buffy laughed; sometimes she forgot that. Sometimes she forgot that for the next few decades, she could just be normal. Well, as normal as an immortal Slayer

who held the guardianship of the human race could be. "We're about to land," Morgan told her now, shaking her out of her light sleep.

A great excitement surged through her. The first time she had seen her first grandchild, only a few days old. This would be the first time in six months that she'd be with Ceri, although they talked at least once a week the telephone, and also in personal chat rooms on the Internet, complete with video-camera so they could see each other as they spoke. But being with Ceri was way better. Being with Ceri was real.

Landing went smoothly. And then they were out in the early May sunshine, walking toward the gate. Soon Buffy saw someone waving frantically - Ceri, of course. Ramirez, by her side, held a tiny bundle close to him. He also was smiling widely and Buffy again was struck by the change in this once stern, often unsmiling man. Oh, he was still seriously inclined - a person couldn't change their basic personality - but now he was truly happy at last.

"Mom!" Ceri threw herself at Buffy, and Buffy saw in the fleeting instant before they held each other how full of beautiful, vibrant life Ceri was. Completely recovered from the birth, Ceri was glowing with health and vitality. "It's so great to see you both." She embraced Morgan. And then there were hugs for Ramirez, who'd handed the baby over to Ceri.

"This is our grandchild then?" Morgan said, peering at the tiny child, who amazingly was still sleeping despite the excitement. "She's beautiful. You both must be very proud."

Ceri and Ramirez exchanged a glance that spoke eloquently about just how proud they were, and Buffy felt tears threaten again. All this joy was overwhelming.

"And another sister or brother for me, too," Ceri said, looking at Buffy's bump. She wrinkled her nose then. "Not too sure I wanna go through giving birth again any time soon." Then she smiled at Ramirez again. "Guess it's worth it though."

"Yeah," Buffy said, thinking how there were three generations of Slayers here today, about the future generations to come. About the future they all had to face, and how those generations would eventually fight the ultimate war against their enemies. Feeling the love surrounding her right now, Buffy had no doubt about who the victors would be.

"Yeah," she said again, in answer to Ceri's last remark.

"Yeah, it is."

THE END

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