



Seer's Requiem

Chapter 1: A Chink in the Armor

The Hyperion's lobby smelled like old plaster, stale coffee, and the faint metallic tang of blood—her blood, again. Cordelia Chase staggered through the double doors at a quarter past midnight, one hand pressed to her temple where the vision still throbbed like a bad hangover. The migraine had split her skull open and left her seeing two of everything: two dusty chandeliers, two worried faces swimming toward her.

“Cordy?” Gunn’s voice, sharp with that street-edge concern he couldn’t quite hide.
“You look like hell, girl.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere, Charles,” she snapped, brushing past him with a wobbly shoulder-check that nearly sent her into the reception desk. “And before you ask, no, I didn’t stop for donuts on the way back from my little vision hangover. Some of us actually work for a living.”

Wesley hovered at the edge of the desk, glasses sliding down his nose, the picture of tweedy uselessness. “The vision—did it give coordinates? Any indication of—”

“Save the Watcher monologue, Wes. I’ve got it.” She slapped a crumpled piece of paper onto the blotter, the ink already smudged with crimson from her nose. “Big nasty, warehouse district, midnight snack for the fang gang. Go play heroes. I’m done.”

She didn’t wait for their replies. Couldn’t. The room was tilting again, and if she stood here another second she’d either puke or cry, and Cordelia Chase did neither in public. Not anymore.

The boys left eventually, armed and arguing in low voices about who was driving. The lobby fell quiet except for the hum of the ancient radiator and the distant tick of the grandfather clock that had never kept proper time since they’d moved in. Cordelia made it as far as the cracked leather couch before her knees gave out. She sank down, head in her hands, fingers tangling in hair that hadn’t seen a decent conditioner in weeks. The nosebleed had slowed to a trickle, but the doubled vision lingered, mocking her.

Just another Tuesday, she told herself. Suck it up, Princess. Don’t bleed out in front of the help.

But the visions were getting worse. Faster. Meaner. The Powers That Be weren’t exactly sending Hallmark cards with their little gifts anymore. They were carving messages into her brain with a rusty spoon, and she could feel the cracks widening every single time.

She didn’t hear Angel until he was already there—vampire stealth, or maybe she was just that far gone. One second the lobby was empty; the next he filled the space between the desk and the couch like he’d always belonged there. Brooding in black, coat draped over one arm, eyes dark as the grave he’d crawled out of more than once.

“Cordelia.”

His voice was soft. Too soft. The kind of soft that said he’d been watching longer than she realized.

She lifted her head, forcing a smirk that felt like broken glass in her mouth. “What, no ‘hello, how was your day,’ small talk? I’m crushed.”

Angel didn’t smile. Never did when it was real. Instead he crossed the room in that measured way, the one that made her stomach flip even when she was pretending it didn’t. He crouched in front of her, close enough that she caught the faint scent of leather and soap and something colder underneath—old blood, old pain. His hand hovered near her chin, not quite touching.

“You’re bleeding again.”

“Observant much?” She swiped at her nose with the back of her wrist, leaving a rusty smear. “It’s nothing. Just the universe’s way of saying ‘thanks for playing, here’s your complimentary concussion.’”

“Cordy.” He said it like a warning this time, low and rough around the edges. Those eyes—God, those eyes—held hers until she couldn’t look away. “Don’t.”

The word hung between them, heavier than it had any right to be. She’d been dodging this conversation for the last few weeks. Months, maybe. Ever since the headaches started turning into nosebleeds, the nosebleeds into blackouts, the blackouts into that creeping certainty that her skull was a cracked eggshell and something vital was leaking out.

She laughed at her own hubris for thinking this was something she could keep from him until it no longer mattered. The laugh cracked halfway through, the sound thin and jagged in the quiet lobby. “Fine.” She swallowed hard, her gaze sliding away from his for a moment before she forced herself to meet his eyes again. “You want the truth?”

Her voice dropped, raw and reluctant.

“The visions are killing me, Angel.”

For a split second, pure denial flashed across Angel’s face. His eyes widened, then narrowed sharply as a dark, dangerous anger surged beneath the surface. His jaw clenched so tightly she heard the faint grind of teeth. He didn’t speak. Didn’t move. Just absorbed the blow, the storm raging behind his eyes while the rest of him stayed unnervingly still.

“Slowly,” she continued, the snark fraying at the edges. “Painfully. Like the Powers decided my brain makes a great piñata and they’re not done swinging yet.”

There. She’d said it. Out loud. To him. Only him.

He stayed perfectly still for another heartbeat, the brutal truth settling between them like lead.

He didn’t pull back. Didn’t offer empty reassurances or any of the careful distance he kept with everyone else. Instead his fingers finally brushed her wrist—light, careful, like she might shatter.

“How long have you known?” he asked, voice scraped raw, an edge of something fierce bleeding through.

“Long enough that I stopped counting the days.” Her voice wavered, just once, before the snark snapped back into place like armor. “Look, I’m not telling the others. Not Wes, not Gunn. They’ve got enough apocalypse on their plates without adding ‘Cordelia’s tragic brain-melt’ to the mix. This stays between us. You and me. Got it?”

He studied her for a long moment, thumb tracing the delicate skin over her pulse. Not romantic. Just... there. Steadying. Like he could hold the pieces of her together by sheer stubborn will.

“Got it,” he said quietly. “But I’m not letting you do this alone.”

The lobby felt smaller suddenly, the shadows deeper. The secret settled between them like a third body on the couch—warm, heavy, alive with everything they weren’t saying. She could see it in the way his shoulders curved toward her, the way her own breath hitched when his gaze dropped to her mouth for half a heartbeat before flicking back up.

Cordelia Chase had spent years perfecting the art of not needing anyone. Not really. But Angel—broody, cursed, impossible Angel—had a way of slipping past every defense without even trying. And now he knew. The one thing that could break her. The one thing she’d hidden from the world.

She swallowed hard. “Don’t go getting all heroic and soulful on me, okay? I’m still the same pain in your ass I was yesterday.”

A ghost of a smile touched his lips—there and gone, but it was enough. “Wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Outside, the city kept bleeding its own kind of darkness. Inside the Hyperion, something else had cracked open between them. Not hope. Not yet. Just the raw, terrifying beginning of something that felt a lot like falling.

And neither of them was ready to catch the other.

Not tonight.

But the secret was theirs now. And secrets, Cordelia knew, had a way of binding people tighter than any prophecy ever could.

Chapter 2: Midnight Confessions

Cordelia Chase wasn't supposed to be here.

She had her own place in Silver Lake—Pearson Arms, apartment 212, with Phantom Dennis doing his ghostly roommate thing and a bed that didn't smell like haunted hotel linens. But tonight she'd made a decision after the last vision had dropped her to her knees in the lobby, nose bleeding, skull splitting like it wanted to crack open and spill her brains across the floor. She hadn't called Wes. Hadn't called Gunn. She'd just looked at Angel across the desk and said, low and fierce, "I'm staying the night. Don't make it a thing."

He hadn't. He never did with her secrets anymore.

Now she stood in the doorway in ratty sleep shorts and one of his old flannel shirts—stolen from the laundry pile because it smelled like safety and she was too damn tired to pretend otherwise—hair loose and still damp from the world's quickest shower. The single bulb overhead painted everything in harsh shadows, turning the training dummies into silent judges.

She cleared her throat. "Hey, Tall, Dark, and Nocturnal. Some of us are actually heading to bed like normal people. Or, you know, normal people who decided not to drive back to Silver Lake after a vision tried to rearrange their gray matter."

Angel stopped mid-punch, knuckles flexing, black T-shirt clinging to the lines of his back. He turned, eyes dark and careful, the way they'd been since she'd told him, now a few weeks ago. *Just you. No one else.* The visions were killing her. Slowly. Viciously. And the secret between them had started pulling them into this—whatever this was—closer than they had any right to be.

He nodded toward the mats. "Couldn't sleep?"

"Visions don't exactly tuck you in with a lullaby and a warm glass of 'you're not dying, dummy.'" She sauntered in like she owned the place, because Cordelia Chase did not do fragile. Not even when her hands wanted to shake. "I figured if I'm crashing upstairs in one of the guest rooms tonight—don't get any ideas, it's just practical—I might as well check that you're not down here turning into a really tall, really broody gargoyle." A ghost of a smile tugged at his mouth, gone before it could stick. "Practical."

"Shut up." She dropped onto the mat beside where he'd been standing, back against the cool wall, knees drawn up. Not quite touching him when he sank down next to her. Close enough to feel the absence of his body heat, that vampire stillness that should've been creepy but felt like the only steady thing left in her world. "I'm serious, Angel. Don't go all broody-protector on me. I'm not some damsel waiting for your soul to go pfft again."

Her hands shook when she said it. She tucked them under her thighs, but of course he noticed. He noticed everything.

“Cordy...”

“No.” The snark came out sharp, the way it always did when the fear tried to creep in. “I told you because I had to tell someone, okay? Not because I want you playing undead night watchman. I’ve got this. I’ve always got this.”

Except she didn’t. Not when the migraines came like knives behind her eyes, carving out pieces of her one vision at a time. Because Angel wouldn’t look at her with pity. Angel would just sit here in the dark with her and carry it.

He shifted, shoulder almost brushing hers. The air between them thickened, heavy with everything they weren’t saying. She mattered—more than he could put words to, more than he’d let himself admit until the visions started carving her away piece by piece. It felt like he was about to lose part of himself, this slow, inevitable bleed of her life, and the realization sat heavy in his chest like old guilt he couldn’t outrun. He’d been teetering on the edge of it for longer than he wanted to think about. Not quite over. Not yet. His gaze flicked to her mouth for half a second, then away. Fast. Like even looking felt like tempting the curse that already loomed over them both.

“You’re not alone in this,” he said, voice low and rough, the way it got when the broody thing cracked open into truth. “Not anymore.”

Cordelia laughed, but it came out shaky. “Yeah, well, that’s the problem, isn’t it? Us. This.” She gestured vaguely between them, the space that felt smaller every secret they kept. “I’m dying, Angel. Slowly. Messily. And you’re... you. Mr. One-True-Moment-of-Happiness-and-Poof, Hello-Angelus. We can’t even sit here without it turning into some tragic opera where everybody ends up stabbed or soulless or both.”

His jaw tightened. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Famous last words from the guy who’s been undead since the eighteen-hundreds.” She bumped her knee against his—just enough contact to spark, not enough to name it. “I mean it. Go brood somewhere else. I’m fine.”

She wasn’t. They both knew it.

He stayed anyway.

The late-night talk stretched into a closeness neither of them could name. Beyond simple friendship. Not yet love. Just two people in the basement of a haunted hotel, trading snark and silence while the city slept above them and the visions kept carving. Closer than they’d ever been. Farther from safe than they’d ever admit.

Cordelia closed her eyes and let the quiet settle over her like one of his stolen shirts—warm enough to pretend, for a little while, that tomorrow might not hurt.

But it would.

It always did.

Chapter 3: The Vision That Bleeds

The afternoon sunlight slanted through the blinds of Cordelia's Silver Lake apartment like it had a personal grudge against her attempt at normalcy. She'd carved out this sliver of time—just one goddamn afternoon—to pretend the visions weren't carving her brain into confetti. Phantom Dennis had outdone himself: a frothy bubble bath, her favorite face mask that smelled like overpriced cucumbers, and a steaming mug of coffee balanced on the edge of the tub while he hovered a nail file like a tiny, invisible manicurist. Cordelia Chase, Queen of the Damned and Occasional Seer, was treating herself. No demons, no doom, no brooding vampires interrupting the vibe.

Until the vision slammed into her skull like a freight train made of rusty nails.

She crumpled mid-sip. The mug shattered against the tile, hot coffee splashing across her bare legs. Pain bloomed behind her eyes, white-hot and merciless, the kind that made her wish for a swift lobotomy instead of whatever fresh hell the Powers had queued up. Blood—warm, metallic—trickled from her nose, dripping onto the floor in perfect, accusing drops. The room spun. Her knees hit first, then her shoulder, and she stayed down because standing felt like a cruel joke.

“Dennis,” she rasped, voice cracking. “Phone. Now.”

The cordless floated obediently to the floor beside her, already ringing the one number she'd programmed for emergencies that weren't 911. Because screw hospitals—they couldn't fix this, and she wasn't about to let Wesley or Gunn turn her into a pity project. Not yet.

Angel answered on the first ring. “Cordy?”

His voice was gravel and worry, and for a second she hated how much she needed it.

“Get over here,” she managed, before another wave of dizziness threatened to pull her under. “Apartment. Bring... sunscreen or whatever. Just—hurry.”

She didn't remember hanging up. Time blurred in the haze of copper and thunder in her head. When the door finally burst open—literally, hinges protesting—Angel was already halfway across the living room, duster smoking faintly at the edges where the sun had caught him. His face was streaked with soot, hair disheveled, but his eyes locked on her like the rest of the world had ceased to exist.

“Cordy.” The word came out raw. He dropped to his knees beside her without hesitation, gloved hands gentle as they brushed hair from her sweat-damp forehead. “What happened? Vision?”

She tried for a smirk, but it wobbled. “No, I just decided the floor needed redecorating with my face. Obviously.” Blood still oozed from her nose; she swiped at it angrily. “It's

not urgent. Demon thing... day after tomorrow, maybe. Plenty of time for you to brood about it later.”

He didn't laugh. Of course he didn't. Angel never laughed when she was bleeding. Instead, he scooped her up like she weighed nothing—strong arms cradling her against his chest, the faint scent of singed leather and that damn cologne he pretended he didn't wear. She let her head fall against his shoulder because fighting it felt pointless right now.

“Bedroom,” she muttered. “Bathroom, actually. I look like a horror movie extra, and I refuse to die ugly.”

The words slipped out before she could stop them. Die. Not pass out. Not recover. Die. The visions were killing her; she'd known it for weeks, the headaches sharper, the nosebleeds longer, the blackouts deeper. She hadn't told anyone. Not Wes, not Gunn, not Fred. Only the universe and her bathroom mirror got to know.

But Angel... he was already carrying her through the bedroom, shoulder brushing the doorframe, and into the cool white tile of the bathroom. He set her on the counter with the care of someone handling spun glass, then wet a washcloth under the faucet. Steam rose as the water warmed.

“You're not dying,” he said quietly, as if he could read the thought scrawled across her face. His thumb traced the blood from her upper lip, gentle, deliberate. The cloth followed, cool against her heated skin, wiping away the evidence of the Powers' latest gift. “Not on my watch.”

Cordelia huffed a laugh that tasted like fear and copper. “Big talk from the guy who's literally allergic to daylight. Look at you—smoking like a bad barbecue. You ran through the sun for me? That's... new levels of stupid, even for you.”

His eyes met hers in the mirror. Dark, ancient, and suddenly too close. The cloth paused at her cheek. “I'd walk through fire if it meant you weren't alone on this floor.”

The air thickened. Dennis, bless his ghostly heart, dimmed the lights a fraction and retreated, giving them the illusion of privacy. Cordelia's pulse hammered—not from the vision anymore, but from the way Angel's hand lingered on her jaw, the way his thumb brushed the corner of her mouth like he was memorizing the shape of her defiance.

She was supposed to be snarky. Untouchable. The girl who'd survived high school hellmouths and still had perfect hair. But here, with blood on her shirt and Angel's coat still smoking from the risk he'd taken, the walls cracked.

“I am dying, you know,” she whispered, the secret spilling out because the closeness was unbearable, a live wire between them. “The visions. They're frying my brain. Doctors in my head say it's only a matter of time. I didn't... I didn't want the others to know. Wes would research until he dropped. Gunn would get that protective scowl that

makes me want to scream. And Fred—God, Fred’s barely been back a week, still hiding in her room at the hotel like the walls might eat her. I’m not piling my slow-motion brain-melt on top of that fresh hell. Pity party of one sounded better. But you—you’re already here, cleaning up my mess like it’s your job.”

Angel’s breath hitched. He set the cloth aside, both hands framing her face now, cool against her fevered skin. “Cordy…”

“Don’t.” Her voice cracked, but the snark fought through. “Don’t you dare go all noble and say you’ll fix it. There’s no fix. Just… this. Us. Whatever this is turning into while I’m still here to mock it.”

His brow rested against hers. “It’s everything,” he said, voice breaking on the admission. “You. Me. Falling for you when I swore I wouldn’t—when I can’t—but I am. God, Cordy, I am.”

The kiss wasn’t planned. It wasn’t soft. It was desperate, born of fear and the metallic tang of her blood still on his lips, the salt of unshed tears neither of them would admit to. His mouth claimed hers like the world might end tomorrow—because for her, it might—and she kissed him back with every ounce of fight she had left. Hands fisted in his shirt, pulling him closer, the counter edge digging into her thighs as if anchoring her to the moment.

When they broke apart, gasping, their temples brushed, Cordelia managed a shaky smile. “Tastes like bad decisions and copper pennies. Romantic.”

Angel’s laugh was hoarse, pained, but real. “I’m not letting you go. Not like this. We’ll figure it out. Secret’s ours. Whatever comes next… we face it together.”

She wanted to believe him. The vision’s aftermath still throbbed in her skull, a promise of more pain, more bleeding, more days where normalcy was a lie. But here, in the quiet bathroom with Angel’s arms around her and the taste of him on her tongue, love felt like the only thing sharp enough to cut through the dark.

Even if it hurt like hell.

Chapter 4: Secrets and Scars

Wesley Wyndam-Pryce leaned against the reception counter, polishing his glasses for the third time in ten minutes, the soft swish-swish of cloth against lenses cutting through the lobby's heavy quiet. Across from him, Angel hunched over the massive demonology tome, thumb creasing the edge of a page he hadn't turned in nearly half an hour. The vampire's jaw was locked tight, eyes glassy and far away, not really seeing the jagged illustrations of spinal demons or the cramped Latin warnings about neural corrosion.

"Angel," Wesley ventured carefully, sliding the spectacles back onto his nose, "you've been rather preoccupied these past few days. Is everything—?"

The front doors slammed open before he could finish. Gunn strode in, crossbow slung over one shoulder, Cordelia half a step behind him, both of them still riding the adrenaline high from torching the Skilosh nest in the warehouse district.

Gunn's grin flashed trouble as he clocked the faint reddish bloom along the side of Cordy's throat, just above the collar of her black tank. He leaned an elbow on her desk, eyes narrowing. "So, Princess. Those look suspiciously like vampire-shaped hickeys. Got something you wanna tell the class?"

Cordelia didn't miss a beat. She dropped her crossbow onto the blotter with a clatter, arched one perfect brow, and delivered the full Queen C death glare. "Please. If I had a vampire boyfriend, you'd know—because I'd have better taste than to let him leave evidence where the entire peanut gallery could see it. Besides, Gunn, last I checked, your idea of foreplay was a drive-by with a flame-thrower. Don't project your kinks onto me."

Gunn barked a laugh, hands up in mock surrender. "Damn, girl. Just saying. You been wearing scarves indoors lately. Thought maybe tall, dark, and fangy finally grew a pair."

"Grow a brain cell, Charles. The only thing tall, dark, and fangy is doing is ruining my dry-cleaning budget with demon guts." She flipped her hair, the motion sharp enough to hide the faint tremor in her fingers as she reached for the mail. Snark was armor; she wore it like couture.

But inside, the vise around her skull ratcheted tighter. The last vision—three nights ago at her apartment—had left her retching in Angel's arms, blood trickling from her nose, the pain like lightning behind her eyes. She hadn't told the others. Wouldn't. The secret sat between her and Angel like a live wire: humming, dangerous, impossible to ignore.

Angel's gaze burned across the lobby. He'd felt her flinch at Gunn's tease. Not hickeys, exactly. The imprint of his thumb where he'd cupped her jaw during that desperate kiss afterward, trying to anchor her while the world splintered behind her eyelids. She'd kissed him back like she was drowning and he was oxygen, all teeth and need and the

bitter knowledge that this—whatever this was—had an expiration date stamped in her brain.

Later, after Wesley buried himself in ancient Sumerian texts and Gunn headed out for street intel, Angel found her in the basement training room. She was hammering the heavy bag like it owed her money, each punch punctuated by a soft, involuntary gasp.

“Cordy.”

She didn’t turn. “If you’re here to lecture me about resting, save it. I’m not fragile. I’m pissed.”

He crossed the space in that silent way of his, caught her wrist before the next swing. Her skin burned fever-hot against his cool fingers. “The visions are getting worse.”

It wasn’t a question. She met his eyes, chin lifted in that defiant tilt he’d once found infuriating and now found heartbreakingly brave. “Yeah. Brain’s throwing a tantrum. Big surprise.” A bitter laugh escaped her. “Guess the Powers figured ‘mild migraine’ was too tame. Now it’s like someone jabbed the inside of my skull with a red hot poker. But hey—still standing. Still defiant. Still your favorite pain in the ass.”

Angel’s thumb brushed the fading mark on her throat. “I hate this. I hate that you’re carrying it alone.”

“You’re carrying it with me,” she whispered, the snark cracking just enough to let the raw edge show. “That’s more than I asked for. More than I deserve, probably.”

He pulled her in before she could deflect again, arms wrapping around her like he could shield her from the thing eating her from the inside. She melted against his chest, forehead pressed to the cool cotton of his shirt, listening to the silence where a heartbeat should be. For a moment the pain ebbed, dulled by the solid reality of him.

“I’ve been looking,” he murmured into her hair, voice rough with the kind of desperation only a man who’d outlived everyone he loved could summon. “Books. Contacts. Anything. The Powers designed those visions for Doyle—a half-demon. Even he could barely handle them. You’re human, Cordy. Pure human. Your brain wasn’t built for this kind of trauma. The doctors already told you what the scans show: micro-hemorrhages, swelling they can’t explain, the kind of damage that’s... terminal. But this is our world. There has to be something—some ritual, some artifact, some loophole in the damn cosmic fine print—that can fix what they broke when they dumped Doyle’s gift into you. I’m not letting you pay their bill.”

Cordelia pulled back just far enough to search his face, eyes glistening but her mouth still curved in that trademark smirk. “Angel... if this is it—if the visions are the bill coming due—then I’m not going out begging some higher power for a miracle. I’ve seen what that costs.” Her voice wavered, but she steadied it with pure Chase steel.

“But I’m also not sorry this happened. Us. The secret. It’s twisted and stupid and terrifying, but... it’s ours.”

Something shifted in his eyes—dark, ancient, and achingly tender. Love wasn’t supposed to creep in like a thief in the middle of the apocalypse. It wasn’t supposed to feel like this: equal parts salvation and slow-motion heartbreak. Yet here it was, stealing the breath he didn’t need, cracking open the armor he’d worn since the soul had been shoved back in.

He kissed her then, slow and deep, the kind of kiss that tasted like goodbye and forever at the same time. No urgency of battle, no frantic need to forget the pain—just the quiet acknowledgment that he was falling, hard, for the woman who mocked death with a smirk and a perfectly timed eye-roll.

When they broke apart, Cordelia’s smile was small and sharp and heartbreakingly real. “Don’t get all broody-hero on me, big guy. I’ve got enough scars for both of us.”

Upstairs, the phone rang—another case, another demon, another night pretending the world wasn’t ending in slow, vicious increments. But down here, in the dim basement light, the secret wrapped tighter around them, binding them closer even as it threatened to tear everything apart.

Love, it turned out, didn’t need permission. It just needed two broken people stubborn enough to hold on while the clock ticked down.

Chapter 5: The Night We Almost Said It

Cordelia's fingers dug into Angel's sleeve before Lorne even hit the chorus, hauling him out of his chair with a yank that nearly toppled the Fyarl demon beside them. "Outside. Now." Her voice was steel wrapped in velvet snark, the kind that brooked zero argument. She didn't wait for his coat to settle or for the green-skinned empath to finish warbling Sarah McLachlan like he'd personally read their doom in the stars. She just dragged him through the side door, the bass from inside thumping against her ribs like a second heartbeat she didn't have time for.

The alley door slammed behind them, cutting off the music mid-note. Cool night air slapped her face, but it did nothing to ease the fire under her skin—the one that had nothing to do with the visions and everything to do with the secret she'd been stupid enough to share with him alone.

She whirled on him, lips pressed into a tight, furious line that screamed don't you dare before she even spoke. "You think this is cute? Parading me into karaoke night like Lorne's gonna sprinkle happy-dust and fix everything? Newsflash, Angel: I'm not here for the sing-along. That song? That was aimed at us. At me. And I'm not playing."

Angel's eyes flicked over her shoulder, checking the empty alley out of habit, then locked back on hers. "Cordy—"

"Don't." She jabbed a finger into his chest, hard enough that any living man would've staggered. He didn't. "Don't 'Cordy' me like I'm one of your lost causes. You want me to spill to Wes and Gunn and Fred? Tell them every vision is frying another chunk of my brain until there's nothing left but static and goodbye? That I'm dying, Angel—slow, ugly, and on your watch? No. This stays between us."

His hand caught her wrist, thumb brushing the frantic beat of her pulse like he could memorize it. "They're your family," he said, voice low and rough, the kind that always slipped past her defenses. "We don't do secrets. Not the ones that matter. I'm watching you hurt and I can't—"

"Can't what?" She stepped into him, chin lifted, lips still that stubborn slash. "Fix it? Save the day? Join the club. You've got your own centuries of baggage, Mr. Brood-In-The-Shadows. This one's mine. I told you because... because you're the only idiot who looks at me like I'm still Cordelia Chase, Queen of Sunnydale, not some ticking time-bomb in heels. But if the others know, Wes'll drown in musty books, Gunn'll punch walls until his knuckles split, and Fred—" Her voice hitched, just once, but she powered through. "Fred's smiling again. I'm not stealing that. Not for this."

He moved then, crowding her back until the alley wall met her shoulder blades—rough brick catching on her jacket, grounding her when everything else felt like it was spinning out. Not trapping. Never that. Just close enough that the space between them vanished, the fight crackling like ozone before a storm. His free hand braced beside her head, leather creaking, and suddenly they were breathing the same ragged rhythm—

hers quick and alive, his unnecessary but matching anyway, like the demon in him refused to let her go solo even on this.

“You think I don’t get it?” he growled, forehead creasing in that way that made her fingers itch to smooth it. “Carrying something that’s killing you from the inside? Every damn day. But this—hiding it, just the two of us in the Hyperion at 3 a.m. with those books you pretend aren’t about seer brain-death—it’s not protecting them. It’s making us into something—”

“Us?” The word slipped out sharper than she meant, but her hand was already fisting in his shirt, pulling instead of pushing. “There’s no us, Angel. There’s me, the dying psychic drama queen, and you, the guilt-ridden hero who thinks proximity equals penance. Don’t twist this into—”

“Too late,” he whispered, so soft it should’ve been lost in the distant traffic hum. But it wasn’t. It landed between them like a promise neither of them had asked for.

Her eyes flew wide, searching that stupid, beautiful, eternally tormented face. The secret had done this—cracked open the space between them night after night until the almost-touch became this. His head bowed to hers, forehead to forehead, cool skin against her flushed one, and they stayed there, pinned by the wall and the weight of everything they weren’t saying. Chests heaving in sync. Breathing like they were alive. Like this moment could stretch forever if they just didn’t let go.

“Don’t you dare fall in love with me now,” she whispered against his mouth, the words cracking at the edges—snarky, defiant, but raw with the fear and the want and the why the hell now. “I’m not built for tragic endings, Angel. I was supposed to outlive you all and rule L.A. in Louboutins. Not... this. Not us in some filthy alley pretending the visions won’t win.”

His eyes stayed closed, lashes dark against pale skin, and for one aching second she let herself feel it—the bloom of something terrifying and perfect in the middle of the pain. No miracles yet. No easy outs. Just them, the fight bleeding into something softer, closer, inevitable.

Too late.

Chapter 6: Falling

The Hyperion's roof had become their confessional, the one place in this crumbling hotel where the city lights blurred into something almost forgiving and the visions couldn't quite reach. Cordelia climbed the fire escape every third night like it was routine, like she wasn't slowly bleeding out her brain one migraine at a time. Angel was always already there—coat collar up, shoulders hunched against a wind that didn't touch him—waiting like he'd been carved out of the shadows just for her.

She dropped onto the ledge beside him, sneakers scuffing gravel. "You know, if the Powers That Be wanted me to die dramatically, they could at least throw in a decent soundtrack. This whole 'quiet suffering in the dark' thing is so last season."

Angel's mouth twitched, the ghost of a smile he didn't quite let live. He didn't answer right away. Just shifted so his arm brushed hers, leather against bare skin where her tank top had ridden up. The contact lingered a beat too long, the way everything did now. Cordelia felt the tremor in her own ribs and hated how much she craved it.

"Snark level's high tonight," he said finally, voice low, rough around the edges like it always got when he was trying not to break. "Vision?"

She waved a hand, dismissive. "Yesterday's special. Felt like my skull was auditioning for a jackhammer role. But hey, I'm still vertical. Points for me." Her tone was pure Cordelia Chase—sharp enough to draw blood—but the way her fingers found the edge of his sleeve and curled there, just holding, gave her away. She didn't pull back. Neither did he.

The secret had swallowed them whole. Downstairs, Wesley and Gunn bitched about case files and takeout. Fred hummed equations under her breath. No one knew the visions were killing her. No one but Angel. She'd told him in the basement after the last bad one, blood trickling from her nose, voice cracking only once: Don't you dare tell them. I'm not going out like some tragic footnote. He'd nodded, jaw tight, and that had been that. Their world narrowed to these stolen hours—rooftop, back alley after a fight, the rare locked door in the empty wing where they could pretend the hotel wasn't listening.

Tonight the city hummed below them, distant sirens and car horns weaving into the kind of soundtrack she'd mock later. Angel's hand slid over hers, thumb tracing the inside of her wrist like he was memorizing her pulse. "You're getting worse," he said. Not a question.

Cordelia turned her head, eyes meeting his in the half-dark. Brown on brown, centuries of guilt staring back at her like he expected her to flinch. She didn't. "And you're still brooding like it's an Olympic event. Relax, big guy. I'm not dead yet." Her voice softened on the last word, betraying her. She squeezed his hand instead of letting go. "Besides... who else is gonna keep you from turning into a cave-dwelling cliché? Not Wes. He'd just quote some dusty book at you."

A low chuckle rumbled out of him—rare, rusty, real. It loosened something in her chest that had been knotted for weeks. Angel leaned in, forehead nearly touching hers, the cool of his skin a contrast that made her shiver in the warm L.A. night. “Cordy...”

“Don’t,” she whispered, but there was no bite left in it. “Don’t say it like you’re already writing the eulogy. Just... stay here. With me. Like this.”

His free hand came up, knuckles brushing her cheek, then cupping the side of her face with a reverence that made her throat ache. No words. They didn’t need them anymore. The secret had stripped everything else away—the walls, the sniping, the careful distance they’d kept since he’d come back from hell and she’d been too busy being Queen C to notice the way he looked at her. Now it was just this: his thumb sweeping across her lower lip, her breath catching, the slow tilt of her head until their mouths met.

Ever so softly. Just a press of lips that lingered, deepened by degrees—her fingers threading into his hair, his arm sliding around her waist to pull her closer on the ledge. She tasted the salt of her own unshed tears and the faint copper of old blood he carried like a second skin. When they broke apart, still within inches, Cordelia let out a shaky laugh that was half-sob.

“God, you’re terrible for my mascara. And my dignity.” She swiped at her eyes, but her hand stayed on his chest, feeling the stillness there where a heartbeat should be. “If anyone asks why I look like I’ve been crying, I’m blaming the smog.”

Angel’s eyes were dark, unreadable except for the storm she’d learned to read anyway—guilt twisting with something brighter, something that felt like peace for the first time since a certain Slayer had ripped his world apart. He pressed a kiss to her temple, slow and deliberate, like a promise he couldn’t voice. “I’ve got you,” he murmured against her hair. “Whatever comes. I’ve got you.”

She believed him. That was the terrifying part.

Below them, the Hyperion’s lights flickered on one by one as the team wrapped up another night. Up here, the world was smaller, safer, theirs. Cordelia leaned into him, letting the snark fade into the quiet press of her body against his, the way his coat draped over her shoulders when the wind picked up. They didn’t say the words. Didn’t need to. The falling was already done—quiet, inevitable, laced with the sharp edge of everything they were about to lose.

And for tonight, on this stupid rooftop under a smog-choked sky, it was enough.

Chapter 7: The Pain Threshold

The vision slammed into her like a freight train derailing at full speed.

One second Cordelia was in the Hyperion's lobby, mid-sentence about the latest skip-trace on a Brachen demon who'd stiffed them on rent, and the next the floor was rushing up to meet her. Pain exploded behind her eyes—not the usual migraine throb, but something sharper, deeper, like her skull was cracking open from the inside. Her knees buckled. She tasted blood, warm and metallic, trickling from her nose. Her vision tunneled to a pinpoint of blinding white, and somewhere far away she heard Wes shouting her name and Gunn cursing, but it all faded under the roar in her head.

Not again. Not like this. I'm not—

She didn't remember hitting the ground. She didn't remember anything after the images burned themselves into her brain: a little girl, no older than six, cornered in an alley by something with too many teeth and not enough mercy. The Powers weren't pulling punches anymore. The visions had evolved, and evolution, Cordelia decided in that last hazy flicker of thought, sucked.

When she woke, the world was dim and quiet and smelled faintly of old books and sandalwood. Angel's scent. She was in his bed—his bed, the big four-poster in the corner suite he rarely used because sleep was optional for the undead. Blankets were pulled up to her chin, and strong arms held her close, one hand stroking slow circles between her shoulder blades like he was trying to keep her stitched together by sheer willpower.

Her first instinct was fury.

She shoved at his chest—pointless, he was a wall of vampire—and glared up at him through the dim lamplight. "I'm not going out like some tragic after-school special, okay?" Her voice cracked on the last word, but she powered through it, because snark was armor and she was not letting the Powers take that from her too. "No slow piano music, no meaningful looks while I fade away in a hospital bed. If I'm dying, it's gonna be on my terms. With heels on. And maybe a decent blowout."

Angel didn't laugh. He just tightened his arms around her, careful, like she might shatter. His fingers trailed beneath her chin, cool against her fevered skin, tilting it up. "You're not dying," he said, low and rough, the way he did when he was lying to both of them. "Not today."

She wanted to snap back—Tell that to the blood on my shirt, hero—but the fight drained out of her all at once. The secret she'd been carrying since that first nosebleed in the bathroom, the one she'd only trusted him with, pressed down on her chest like a physical weight. The visions are killing me, Angel. Faster now. And I don't want the others to know. Not yet. She'd whispered it in the alley behind Caritas after Lorne's latest reading had come up all black and screaming. He'd listened. He hadn't tried to

fix it with research or a spell or a heroic sacrifice. He'd just held her while she shook, and that had been worse, somehow. Because it meant he believed her.

A sob tore out of her before she could stop it. Then another. She buried her face in the hollow of his throat, fingers fisting in his black shirt, and let the tears come—ugly, messy, the kind she never let anyone see. Not Doyle. Not the gang. Certainly not the mirror. Angel's hand slid up to cradle the back of her head, thumb brushing the damp hair at her temple.

"I've got you," he murmured against her hair. "I've got you, Cordy."

She cried until her ribs ached and her throat was raw. He held her through all of it, rocking her gently like she was something precious and breakable and his. The thought should have scared her more. It didn't. Not anymore.

When the storm finally eased, she pulled back just enough to look at him. His eyes were dark, endless, the kind of brown that swallowed light and gave nothing back—except to her. Always to her, lately. She could see the fear there, the same bone-deep terror she felt every time another vision clawed its way through her skull. But underneath it was something else. Something that had been growing between them in stolen moments and late-night talks and the way he looked at her now like she was the only star left in his sky.

"Angel..." Her voice was hoarse, barely a whisper. "I'm so damn tired of pretending this isn't happening. Of pretending we aren't happening."

His thumb traced the curve of her cheek, wiping away the last tear.

"I don't want to die without—" She swallowed hard. The words stuck, but she forced them out anyway, because if she was going to be brave about anything, it had to be this. "Without telling you I'm in love with you. Stupid, impossible, can't-believe-I'm-saying-it love. The kind that makes me want to kick your ass and kiss you in the same breath."

A shudder ran through him. His hand tightened on her waist, pulling her closer until there was nothing between them but the thin cotton of her tank top and the steady, unnecessary beat of his heart against hers. "Cordelia," he said, her name rough and raw, like it cost him everything just to speak it.

Angel didn't need to say more. In the silence that followed, his mind drifted back to that day in the office when she'd walked in, taken one look at his pathetic setup, and convinced him to form Angel Investigations and hire her as his Girl Friday. Doyle had been smitten instantly, but despite the fact that he'd been half-broken over his decision to leave Buffy, still convinced he didn't deserve anything good—Angel felt something, too.

Something had sparked that day. A light that seeped into the darker corners of his heart curling up inside. Growing with their friendship until he nearly destroyed it all. It had never truly left him, the need that had grown, for the importance of her being to his day to day existence. Family. He couldn't put a date stamp on it, an exact moment the admiration turned to a spark of attraction, but that slow burning fuse had been lit for a while now.

His thumb traced the curve of her cheek as Angel searched for the right words to describe the many layers of love that now filled his heart.

Cordelia didn't bother waiting for a verbal response. Her fingers found the collar of his shirt, tugging him down. "Shut up and kiss me before I change my mind and go back to insulting your hair."

He did.

Slow at first, so achingly reverent it almost hurt. His mouth brushed hers like he was memorizing every curve, every breath, the faint taste of salt from her tears and the sharper edge of desperation that clung to them both. Like if he went slow enough, he could make this moment last forever.

Then the kiss deepened, turning hungrier, more urgent—the kind that carried whole conversations without a single word. Stay. Mine. Not yet. It said everything they couldn't voice out loud, everything the visions and the Powers and the damn universe kept trying to steal from them.

Her hands slid under his shirt, palms flattening against cool skin, tracing the lines of his body like a map she needed to learn by heart. She felt the way he trembled under her touch, the way his breath hitched even though he didn't need to breathe. He whispered her name like a lifeline—"Cordelia"—over and over, soft and broken, as they moved together. Clothes fell away with shaking fingers, no rush, no shame, just the quiet, desperate need to be closer, to press skin to skin until the line between them blurred. Their bodies fit like they'd been waiting centuries for this exact moment, like every fight, every insult, every late-night vigil in the Hyperion had been leading here.

It wasn't perfect. It wasn't planned. It was raw and clumsy and necessary, born of fear and love and the terrible knowledge that tomorrow might steal her away. But in his arms, with his mouth on hers and his hands worshiping every inch of her like she was holy ground, Cordelia felt alive. Really alive, for the first time since the visions had started carving her open.

They came together in the dark, desperate and reverent, every touch a promise neither of them could keep. And when it was over, when they lay tangled in sheets that smelled like them both, Angel pressed his lips to her forehead and held her like the world outside didn't exist.

"I'm not letting you go," he said into her hair, voice cracking. "Not without a fight."

Cordelia closed her eyes, cheek against his chest, listening to the silence where his heartbeat should be. “Good,” she whispered back, snark threading through the exhaustion like a lifeline. “Because I’ve got a killer right hook and I’m not above using it on the Powers That Be.”

But even as she said it, the pain lingered at the edges of her mind—a warning, a countdown. She burrowed closer, letting his arms be the only thing that mattered.

In the quiet dark, they held each other like the world outside might forget them if they stayed perfectly still.

Chapter 8: The Others Start to Suspect

Wesley rifled through the top drawer of Cordelia's desk, muttering about the disorganized mess inside and the sanctity of the weapons cabinet key lost therein. His fingers brushed past gum wrappers, a crumpled headshot from some failed audition, and then his gaze snagged on the orange prescription bottle shoved toward the back—label facing out just enough to catch the light.

He almost dismissed it. Cordelia and her migraines were practically legendary. He kept digging for the key, came up empty, then froze. The drug name on the label registered like a slow-motion punch to the gut. Not the usual triptans. Not even the heavy-duty stuff she'd cycled through last year. This was the kind of prescription they gave when the patient was already running out of time.

Wesley's hand hovered, then closed around the bottle. He stared down at the label, mind racing through half-remembered medical texts, cross-referencing symptoms, side effects, the slow, vicious creep of something far worse than headaches. He set it back exactly as he'd found it, heart hammering.

Cordelia breezed into the lobby twenty minutes later, sunglasses shoved up like a tiara, lips already curved in that patented Chase smirk. "If you're here to nag me about the expense reports again, Wes, I swear on my Louboutins I will—"

"I found your prescription," he cut in quietly, no preamble. "In your desk. While looking for the key. It's not for migraines."

Her step hitched—just for a heartbeat—then the armor snapped back into place. "Wow. Personal space much? It's painkillers, British. Strong ones, because apparently my brain decided to throw a tantrum. You gonna arrest me for it?"

"Cordelia, that medication is—"

"Classified under 'none of your business,'" she finished, voice bright and brittle as she snatched the coffee pot like it owed her money. "Drop it, or I start asking why you keep that weird British cough syrup in your desk. We all have our secrets, Watcher Boy. Mine just come with better packaging."

She poured a mug one-handed, shoulders too straight, chin too high—the Cordelia special when the universe was trying to gut her. Wesley watched her, the lie hanging between them like smoke, and said nothing. For now.

Across the lobby, Fred perched on the counter's edge, legs swinging like she was still half-convinced the world might swallow her again. Gunn leaned beside her, absently running a cloth over a battle-axe that didn't need polishing.

“So,” Fred said softly, not quite meeting his eyes, “Cordy’s been staying over a lot lately.”

Gunn grunted. “Yeah. Silver Lake’s a haul after visions. Smart she finally claimed one of the guest rooms upstairs. Girl needs sleep before she starts yelling at us about rent.” Fred’s cheeks went pink. She twisted a strand of hair around her finger, a dreamy little smile tugging at her lips. “Um. Not exactly the guest rooms.”

He paused mid-wipe. “What?”

“I’ve seen her... coming out of Angel’s room. A couple times. Early. Like, really early.” Fred bit her lip, eyes going soft. “And once—after that vision last Tuesday—she was in there with him. They were kissing. I didn’t mean to see, I swear. I was just grabbing water and... they didn’t notice me. It was kind of sweet. And a little... hot, actually.”

Gunn’s rag stopped dead. The axe gleamed cold in the dusty light. “They what?”

Fred nodded, still wearing that starry-eyed look. “It wasn’t... casual. Looked like they really meant it.”

“I’ll kill him.”

“Gunn—”

“No. Hell no.” He set the axe down with a clatter that rang through the lobby. “She’s been through enough. Visions ripping her apart, and now Dead Boy’s sinking his fangs in while she’s vulnerable? After what Wes told us about Angelus? Man’s playing with fire and using our girl as kindling—and you think it’s hot?”

He stormed toward the basement stairs before Fred could protest, boots thudding like judgment.

Down in the training room, Angel was sharpening stakes with mechanical precision, the scrape of stone on wood the only sound—until Gunn’s voice sliced through it.

“You got something you wanna tell me, man?”

Angel didn’t look up. “Not particularly.”

“Fred saw you. With Cordy. Coming out of your room. Kissing her like it’s your damn right.” Gunn’s fists clenched at his sides. “She’s hurting, Angel. Bad. And you’re what—taking advantage? Risking the whole team because you can’t keep your soul in check?”

Angel’s hand stilled. The stake in his grip felt suddenly fragile. The promise he’d made Cordelia burned behind his eyes—she’d curled against him in the dark of his bed,

voice cracking as she whispered, Don't tell them. Not yet. I can't have them looking at me like I'm already dead. He'd held her while she trembled, her warmth bleeding into his useless chest, and felt the terrifying truth settle in his bones: he was in love. Not the careful, distant kind he'd armored himself against for a century. This was brutal, all-consuming, the kind that made forever feel like a curse and a gift at the same time. Every stolen night she sought him out, every time her fingers traced his jaw like he was the only real thing left, it carved deeper.

"I'm not taking advantage," he said, low and flat. "Mind your own business, Gunn."

"My business is this team. My business is making sure nobody drags Cordy down when they fall." Gunn stepped closer, voice dropping to a growl. "You lose it—Angelus comes out to play—you know what he'll do to her. And you're still—"

"Enough." Angel's eyes flickered gold for a heartbeat, then banked. He couldn't break the promise. Couldn't tell him the visions were carving her brain apart faster than any demon, that the drugs were just wallpaper over a collapsing wall, that every night she crawled into his arms because it was the only place the pain let her breathe. That loving her was the hardest, most necessary thing he'd ever done, and he'd do it until it killed him too.

Gunn stared, betrayal carved deep. "Anything happens... this is gonna tear us apart, you do know that. Whatever the hell this is."

Angel didn't answer. Upstairs, he could hear Cordelia's laugh—sharp, perfect, the sound of a woman spinning the lie of her life while her body quietly betrayed her. She was trading barbs with Wesley like nothing was wrong, but the fracture lines were spreading through the team like cracks in old glass.

Later, when the others had scattered to nurse their suspicions, she slipped into his room. The door clicked shut, and for a second she just leaned against it, eyes closed, the snark finally peeling away.

"They're starting to figure it out," she whispered.

He crossed to her in two strides, pulling her against him without a word. She fit there like she'd been made for the space between his arms—warm where he was cold, alive where he'd forgotten how. Her hands fisted in his shirt, and he felt the tremor she tried to hide.

"I told Wes it was just pills," she said against his chest. "Snarked him into next week. But Gunn... God, the look on his face when he came up from the basement. He thinks you're using me. Like I'm some fragile little victim you're preying on." A bitter huff of laughter. "If only he knew I'm the one who keeps crawling in here because your bed is the only place my brain doesn't feel like it's on fire."

Angel pressed a kiss to the top of her head, lingering. “I hate this. Hiding it. Watching them pull away.”

“Yeah, well. Join the club, broody.” She tilted her face up, eyes bright with unshed tears and that fierce, unbreakable spark that had owned him since the first time she’d called him a loser in a Sunnydale alley. “But I’m not sorry. About us. About... this.” Her voice softened, almost shy. “Falling for you. Even if it’s messy and stupid and probably doomed. It’s the least crappy thing in my life right now.”

He kissed her then—slow, aching, the kind that said everything words couldn’t. Not just heat, though that hummed between them like a live wire, kept carefully banked. This was love, raw and difficult, the kind that hurt because it mattered. Her fingers slid into his hair, pulling him closer, and for a few stolen minutes the rest of the world—the suspicions, the secret, the slow splintering of everything they’d built—faded to nothing.

When they broke apart, Cordelia’s smile was small and real and edged with pain. “We’re cracking them, Angel. The team. Because of me.”

“Because of us,” he corrected, thumb brushing her cheek. “And I’d burn it all down to keep you here.”

She didn’t answer with words. Just held on tighter, the secret wrapping around them like chains and wings at once—binding them closer even as it splintered the family downstairs.

The Hyperion felt smaller that night. Colder. But in the dark of Angel’s room, with Cordelia’s head on his chest and her hand tracing idle patterns over a heart that didn’t beat, the ache felt almost worth it.

Almost.

Chapter 9: Requiem Rehearsal

The vision didn't knock her down this time. It eviscerated her.

Cordelia Chase stood in the middle of the Hyperion's dusty lobby, mid-sentence about some half-baked plan to stake a nest of Fyarl demons, when the migraine detonated behind her eyes like a flashbang. She staggered, one hand clutching the reception desk, the other pressing uselessly against her temple. The images came fast and merciless: her own face, pale and blood-streaked, eyes wide with the kind of final terror she'd always sworn she'd never feel. Her body crumpled on cracked pavement, rain mixing with the blood pouring from her nose, ears, mouth. No heroic last words. No dramatic fade-to-black. Just pain, endless, grinding pain, and then nothing.

She tasted copper. Felt the warm trickle over her lip.

Great. Another nosebleed. Because dying in my sleep wasn't dramatic enough.

"Cordy?" Angel was beside her in that silent, vampire way of his, one arm sliding around her waist like it belonged there. Which it kind of did now, in the secret, stolen hours they'd been carving out since she'd first let him see her crack.

She forced a laugh that came out more like a wheeze. "Vision bingo. Ten points for the ugly demon with the tentacles. Nothing I can't handle, Broody. Back off before you wrinkle my shirt."

His grip tightened, thumb brushing the small of her back in a way that sent a different kind of shiver through her. "You're bleeding."

"Occupational hazard. Occupational suckage, but whatever." She swiped at her nose with the back of her hand, smearing red across her knuckles. Snark was her armor. Always had been. Even when the visions were showing her a front-row seat to her own funeral.

She kept it together through the briefing. Through Wesley's meticulous notes and Gunn's half-joking complaints about overtime. Through the hunt itself, where she played bait like always and pretended the headache wasn't carving canyons into her skull. Angel never left her side. Not really. His eyes followed her like a shadow, dark and knowing and full of something she was too scared to name yet.

Later, when the others had cleared out for the night—Wesley muttering about obscure texts, Gunn heading home with a wave—the lobby felt too quiet. Too intimate. Cordelia sat on the round couch, knees drawn up, staring at the floor like it might open up and swallow her whole. Angel leaned against the desk across from her, arms crossed, waiting.

She lasted maybe five minutes.

“I saw it,” she whispered, voice cracking like cheap porcelain. “Me. Dead. The visions... they’re killing me, Angel. Not some big bad. Not a demon. This. Every time it hits harder, longer. And tonight? Tonight it showed me the end credits.”

He moved then, dropping to his knees in front of her like gravity had given up. His hands—those big, cool hands that had held her through a dozen apocalypses—framed her face. “Cordy.”

“Don’t.” She tried to pull away, but there was nowhere to go. Not from him. Not anymore. “I didn’t want to tell you. Not yet. I thought... I don’t know, maybe if I ignored it, it would just... poof. But it’s not poofing, Angel. It’s getting worse. And I can’t—God, I can’t keep pretending I’m fine when every migraine feels like my brain’s rewriting itself into a tombstone.”

Tears burned hot and ugly down her cheeks. No pretty crying for Cordelia Chase. This was snot and gasping and the kind of raw, broken sound that made her want to punch something. Or someone. Preferably the Powers That Be.

Angel drew closer, his breath ghosting across her skin. “You’re not dying. Not on my watch.”

“You can’t brood this one away, hero.” Her fingers curled into his shirt, twisting the fabric like it could anchor her here. “I’ve been carrying this for weeks. Every vision’s a preview. My death. Slow. Painful. Alone in some alley because I pushed everyone away so they wouldn’t have to watch.”

“You’re not alone.” His voice was gravel and velvet, the way it got when the soul in him warred with the demon. “Not anymore. Not ever again.” She laughed through the sobs, snarky to the bitter end. “Yeah? Tell that to the Powers. They’ve got a real sick sense of humor. Give the cheerleader visions, make her useful, then fry her brain like an overcooked egg. Classic.”

He pulled back just enough to look at her, eyes burning with that intensity that always made her stomach flip. “I love you.”

The words hung there, simple and devastating. Not the first time he’d said it—whispers in the dark, half-confessions during patrols—but this time it felt like a vow carved in stone. Or a prayer.

Cordelia’s breath hitched. “Don’t you dare say that like it’s a goodbye.”

“It’s not.” His thumbs swept away her tears, tender as a promise. “It’s the reason I’m going to tear apart every book, every scroll, every damn demon contact we have until I find a way to stop this. There has to be something. A ritual. A relic. Hell, I’ll make a deal with the devil himself if it buys us more time.”

“More time,” she echoed, voice small. The admission tasted like ash and hope all at once. “Even if it doesn’t fix what’s already broken... just more time. With you. With this stupid, impossible thing we’ve got going.”

His mouth found hers then—desperate, claiming, the kind of kiss that blurred the line between comfort and need. She kissed him back like the world might end tomorrow, because it might. Fingers tangled in his hair, bodies pressed close on the couch as if proximity could defy fate. It wasn’t about heat tonight, not the way it had been in stolen nights before. This was raw. Anchoring. The kind of closeness born from secrets and shared terror.

When they broke apart, foreheads still touching, she managed a watery smirk. “If I die, I’m haunting your ass. You’ll never get a moment’s peace, mister.”

“Not happening.” His hand splayed across her back, holding her like she was made of glass and wildfire. “We fight this. Together.”

The next morning, the research frenzy began.

Angel tore through the books like a man possessed—which, technically, he was. Ancient tomes piled high on the office desk, notes scrawled in his precise handwriting. Vision suppression. Neural dampening. Demonic transference. Anything to take the visions away. Not a cure for the damage already done, maybe, but a reprieve. A little more time. A little more them.

Wesley found him there at dusk. The Englishman’s glasses were perched on the bridge of his nose, a fresh pot of tea steaming on the desk beside the stack of dusty volumes he’d brought with him. “Angel. You’ve been at this for hours. What exactly are we looking for? Another apocalypse? Because I’ve cross-referenced—”

“It’s nothing.” Angel’s jaw tightened. He slammed a book shut a little too hard. “Personal project.”

Wesley’s eyes narrowed, that watcher brain of his clicking pieces together faster than Angel liked. “Personal. As in... Cordelia? She’s been off lately. The nosebleeds. The way she deflects. And now you’re researching neural suppression spells like the fate of the world depends on it. Angel, if there’s something—”

“There’s not.” The lie tasted like dust. Angel met his gaze, steady as he could manage. “Just... old debts. Demon contacts. You know how it is.”

Wesley didn’t look convinced. He hovered there a beat longer, adding things up behind those wire-rimmed glasses—close, too close—before Cordelia’s voice cut through the tension from the lobby.

“Hey, boys! If you’re done with the cryptic staring contest, there’s a Fyarl nest that needs stabbing. And I’m not doing it in these heels.”

Angel exhaled, misdirecting with a shrug. “See? Nothing. Let’s go.”

But as Wesley turned away, muttering about “bloody secrets,” Angel caught Cordelia’s eye across the room. She gave him that trademark smirk, the one that said I’m dying inside but I’ll still out-snark you, and his chest tightened with the kind of love that hurt. They’d fight. They’d bleed. They’d fall a little harder every damn day.

Because a little more time? Yeah. It was everything.

Chapter 10: The Last Stand

Cordelia Chase gripped the hilt of her axe tighter, her knuckles white, her vision already swimming at the edges from the migraine that had slammed into her skull twenty minutes ago. She vaulted over the shattered remains of the lobby couch, boots skidding on scattered plaster and broken glass as the Hyperion trembled under the demon's weight.

Just another day at the office, she told herself. Visions from the Powers That Be, my ass. More like the Powers That Be a Pain in My Temporal Lobe.

The demon wasn't your garden-variety slimeball. This one called itself Varak—eight feet of obsidian scales, horns that curved like scythes, and eyes that glowed with the same sickly green light that had been haunting her dreams for weeks.

Varak swung a massive clawed arm, forcing Angel to vault backward as the broadsword in his hands sang through the air. "Pathetic champions," the demon boomed, voice like grinding stones. "The Powers gave the Seer a genuine gift—those visions forged her, turned a pathetic little human into something almost worthy. And they've kept you one miserable step ahead of us for years."

Cordelia lunged in from the side, axe biting into Varak's thigh with a wet crunch of black ichor. "Yeah? Well, this pathetic little human is about to redecorate your face, scales-for-brains!"

The demon roared with laughter and backhanded her—not hard enough to kill, just enough to send her skidding across the lobby floor. "But we—Wolfram & Hart—finally found the crack in her fragile human mind. We didn't create the gift. We simply... improved it."

Angel was on him in a blur, sword hammering down against obsidian hide. Sparks flew. "Shut your mouth," he snarled.

Varak twisted, catching the blade on a horn and shoving Angel off-balance. "Every vision these past months carried our little parasitic echo. Slowly carving her apart from the inside. Month after month of pain, bleeding her dry. Your precious Seer has been dying the whole time, and none of you even noticed." He grinned, teeth like shattered obsidian. "Turning the Powers' own weapon into her executioner—Wolfram & Hart's masterpiece."

Cordelia's stomach dropped. *Shit.* She'd wanted to keep it secret a little longer. She pushed up on shaking arms, axe still clutched in white-knuckled fingers. "Shut up!" she snapped, charging again despite the migraine shredding her skull.

She tried to dodge the counter-swipe. She really did. But the room tilted violently, knees buckling as claws raked deep across her side. Fabric and skin tore. Hot agony exploded through her.

"Cordy!" Angel's voice cracked through the chaos, raw and broken in a way she'd never heard before. Not even when he'd been Angelus. Not even when the world had ended a dozen times over.

She hit the floor hard, blood soaking through her blouse in a dark, spreading stain. The world narrowed to the copper taste in her mouth and the thunder of her own heartbeat. Not like this, she thought, even as snark bubbled up anyway. Because if she was going out, it wouldn't be whimpering. "Well, crap. Guess the lawyers finally billed me for all those visions. Tell me, big guy—does eternal damnation come with a severance package or just bad dental?"

Gunn skidded to a halt beside her, eyes wide. "Cordy, you're hit bad—"

Wesley's voice cut through the chaos, tight with shock as he parried another blow from Varak. "The demon said the visions are killing her! Cordelia—is it true? Have you been hiding this from us?"

Angel didn't answer them. He was there in a blur, dropping to his knees, broadsword abandoned like it meant nothing. His hands—those hands that had fought demons for centuries—trembled as they pressed against her side, trying to stem the flow. His face was inches from hers, eyes locked on her like the rest of the battle had ceased to exist. Varak roared somewhere behind them, but Angel didn't even glance back. Wesley and Gunn could handle it. The world could burn. His universe had narrowed to the woman bleeding in his arms.

Gunn's eyes narrowed, the realization slamming into him like a freight train. Angel hadn't flinched. No shock on that vampire face. No questions. Just this—pure, gut-wrenching terror and a desperate intimacy that screamed he'd been carrying the secret for months.

"You knew about this?!" Gunn barked, voice cracking with betrayal as his shotgun barked once, twice to cover them.

"Cordelia," Angel whispered, voice thick with something that went beyond fear. Beyond guilt. It was the same tone he'd used in the quiet hours after her last vision, when she'd finally cracked and told him the truth—the secret that had been eating her alive for months. *I'm dying, Angel. The visions are killing me. And I don't want the others to know. Not yet.* He'd held her then, too. Just held her. No promises he couldn't keep. Just the solid, unyielding weight of him against her, the vampire who'd seen too many goodbyes, falling anyway.

Now the secret spilled out anyway, messy and unavoidable, dragged into the light by a demon's cruel taunt.

Angel didn't look away from her. His forehead pressed to hers, cool skin against her fevered one. "Stay with me," he breathed, the words a vow and a prayer all at once. "You hear me? We've got this. The threat, the visions—Wolfram & Hart's little game ends tonight. But you... God, Cordy, I can't lose you. Not like this."

She managed a weak laugh, blood flecking her lips. Snark as armor, even now. "Look at you, getting all poetic in the middle of Armageddon. Careful, tall, dark, and undead. Next thing you know, you'll be admitting you've got feelings. Actual feelings. And not the 'I brood therefore I am' kind." Her hand found his wrist, gripping it with what little strength she had left. The touch was electric, the same spark that had been building between them in stolen moments—the late-night talks, the way his gaze lingered when he thought she wasn't looking, the ache of knowing

this was love, real and terrifying and too damn late. “Don’t you dare go all hero on me now. Cat’s out of the bag anyway—thanks to our scaly friend over there. Guess the gang gets front-row seats to the ‘Cordy’s Not Invincible’ show.”

Varak lunged again, but Gunn’s cry cut through: “We got it pinned! Wes, the ritual sigil—now!” The air crackled with magic and gunpowder as the team pressed the advantage, but Angel’s world stayed small. Just her. Just the woman who’d stormed into his unlife with heels and attitude and a heart bigger than any prophecy.

“I know,” he said, low and fierce, thumb brushing a tear from her cheek she hadn’t realized had fallen. “And I’m sorry. For every second I didn’t say it. You’re everything to me.” His voice dropped to a whisper meant only for her, raw with the weight of everything unsaid. “I love you, Cordelia. Have for longer than I want to admit. And if the Powers—or Wolfram & Hart—want to take you, they’ll have to go through me first.”

Her breath hitched, pain and something warmer twisting together. Love. Acknowledged at last, in the middle of blood and chaos, because that was them—never easy, never simple. “Took you long enough, broody. But hey... if I’m checking out, at least I get the good lines.” She coughed, wincing, but her eyes sparkled with that unbreakable Chase fire. “Now finish this overgrown lizard so we can argue about it later. Preferably with ice cream. And no more secrets—apparently that ship has sailed.”

The battle raged on around them—Varak’s death throes shaking the foundations as Wesley’s incantation sealed the rift—but Angel didn’t move. Not until Gunn’s triumphant shout confirmed the kill. Only then did he lift her, cradling her like she was made of glass and starlight, carrying her toward the safety of the upstairs rooms while the others stared after them in stunned silence.

The truth was out. The secret that had bound them closer than any prophecy ever could. Love, hard-won and aching, blooming in the shadow of death. Whether the visions claimed her or some miracle clawed them both back from the brink... Angel didn’t know. He only knew he wasn’t letting go.

Not tonight. Not ever.

Chapter 11: The Choice

Cordelia's breath hitched as another spike of pain lanced through her skull, white-hot and vicious enough to blur the edges of the world. She gripped the edge of the research table until her knuckles whitened, swallowing the groan before it could slip out. *Not here. Not in front of them.* The team was already buried in scrolls and spell remnants, chasing answers like it was just another Tuesday apocalypse.

Only Angel knew the full truth—the way the visions had turned traitor, carving her up from the inside. That secret had pulled them into something raw and terrifying: late-night confessions on the roof, his cool hands steadying her when the migraines hit hardest, the way her head fit against his chest like it belonged there. Falling for him had been the last thing she'd planned. But love didn't ask permission, especially not when it came wrapped in centuries of guilt and one dying Seer.

She forced a smirk anyway, the snark rising like armor. "So, brainiacs. Did dusting Varak actually cut the cord, or is Wolfram & Hart still playing 'Let's Fry the Cheerleader's Brain' from the cheap seats?"

Wesley looked up from the open tome, glasses askew. "Varak was the linchpin—their custom-built conduit splicing demon physiology with a Senior Partner's mark. His death should have collapsed the reroute. The visions were never meant to destroy the vessel."

"Should have," Gunn muttered, testing the balance of a freshly enchanted dagger. "But 'should' left the building the second those suits got involved."

Fred's laptop screen glowed with overlapping sigil diagrams. "There's a residual echo in the thaumic bleed. Tiny, but it's there—like they wired a failsafe. If we don't burn it out completely, another Varak could just plug right back in."

Angel's gaze flicked to Cordelia across the table, dark and protective in a way that made her stomach twist with something far sweeter than pain. He'd been her shadow since she'd whispered the truth to him alone, the two of them stealing moments where the world narrowed to just his voice murmuring, "I've got you," and her fingers tracing the line of his jaw like she could memorize him before the end. "Then we burn it out," he said, voice low and final. "Tonight. No more waiting."

Gunn set his dagger down hard on a crate as they started gathering supplies for the basement ritual. "Hold up—how the hell do the Powers let Wolfram & Hart do this to their own Seer? She's been bleeding out for them for years."

Wesley's voice was tight with scholarly fury as he arranged the candles. "As far as the Powers were concerned, she continued to fulfill her function. The visions reached the Champion. Collateral damage to the vessel was. . . deemed acceptable. She exceeded expectations, in their view. Personal cost was no doubt irrelevant."

The counter-ritual in the basement took everything they had—Wesley’s Latin rolling like thunder, Gunn anchoring the circle with sheer stubborn will, Fred channeling power through a makeshift crystal lattice that hummed like a live wire. Cordelia sat at the center, legs tucked under her, pretending the vise around her temples was just another bad hair day. Angel knelt beside her the whole time, one hand on her knee, thumb brushing slow, grounding circles that said everything the others couldn’t hear. When the last thread of Wolfram & Hart’s poison snapped, the air lightened, the hum died, and Cordelia exhaled like she’d been holding her breath for months.

“Score one for the home team,” she rasped, the smirk a little shakier than she’d like.

“Evil law firm’s murder plot officially tabled. Only a few dozen more to go before brunch.”

But the universe had never been that kind.

The air in the center of the room didn’t rip or roar—it simply *parted*, with a soft, almost regretful sigh. A figure stepped through: androgynous, glowing faintly, dressed in a suit that screamed neutral Switzerland for cosmic forces. The Powers That Be, wearing bureaucracy like cologne.

“You have succeeded,” the entity said, its voice a layered chorus of echoes. “The immediate threat is quelled. Yet the damage to the Seer endures.”

Angel was on his feet before the words finished landing. “Fix it.”

The being inclined its head. “There is one path. A restoration drawn from the original thread of existence. The vampire’s entire timeline—offered in exchange. Angelus’s atrocities undone. Every innocent life he took, restored. The world... unscarred by his darkness.”

Wesley’s eyes widened behind his glasses, a flicker of academic surprise crossing his features. “That’s... surprisingly equitable, considering the source. A clean slate on the darkness.” But skepticism followed fast, his brow furrowing. “What’s the catch?”

The entity’s voice never wavered. “Balance, however, extracts its price. His redemption would vanish too. Every soul saved. Every apocalypse turned aside. Every quiet mercy. All erased. A clean slate.”

Cordelia’s heart stuttered. “No. Absolutely not.”

But the entity kept speaking, and Angel didn’t blink. “Do it.”

“Angel—” Cordelia started, but he turned to her, and the raw, unguarded look on his face stole whatever protest she’d been forming. No Champion mask. Just him—

vulnerable, desperate, *hers*—the man who'd held her through the worst nights and let her see the cracks in his armor.

"I'd do it, Cordy. In a heartbeat." His voice dropped, rough and intimate, meant only for her even with the others frozen in place. "The good, the bad... none of it weighs more than you. I've spent two hundred and fifty years looking for something I couldn't live without. I found it."

Her eyes stung. She wanted to snap something sharp—God, you're such a walking cliché, always with the grand sacrifice—but the words lodged behind the lump in her throat. Instead she reached up, fingertips brushing the line of his jaw, and whispered, "You idiot. I fell in love with the guy who keeps showing up. Not the martyr who throws himself on the pyre every five minutes."

The entity watched them with detached patience. "The choice is not yours, vampire." Cordelia stared at Angel—really looked—at the way he leaned toward her like gravity had shifted, at the love and terror and absolute certainty burning in his eyes. She thought of every stolen touch, every almost-confession, every time he'd been the only thing keeping the pain from swallowing her whole. She thought of the world that still needed him.

She straightened, ignoring the fresh throb behind her eyes, and hit the entity with her best Sunnydale smirk—the one that once made vamps rethink their life choices.

"Easy," she said, voice cracking only a fraction. "Angel stays. The world needs its champion." Her gaze slid back to him, softening despite the ache. "And I need... whatever the hell this is we've got. So no timeline-erasing my vampire. I've invested way too much snark in him to cash out now."

The entity studied her a long moment, then gave a single, solemn nod. The portal folded shut with another quiet sigh, leaving nothing but the faint scent of ozone and the stunned silence of a choice that had just saved everything except maybe her. Angel's hands found hers, grip fierce and trembling. "Cordy..."

"Save the brooding monologue, big guy," she murmured, letting her forehead rest against his chest where his heart would have beat if fate hadn't been so cruel. "We've still got a miracle to hunt the old-fashioned way. And if I have to keep snarking through the fireworks in my brain until we do... well. I've had worse gigs."

Outside, Los Angeles spun on, blind to the stakes. Inside the Hyperion, four friends and one dying Seer stood with the man who would have erased himself for her—and felt the brutal, beautiful weight of what love really asked.

Cordelia Chase had never been good at goodbyes.

She wasn't about to start practicing now.

Epilogue A: The Angst of it All

The roof of the Hyperion was quiet except for the wind and the distant hum of a city that had never cared what it cost them. Dawn bled across the sky in ugly pinks and golds, the kind of light that made Angel's skin look almost warm. Cordelia was in his arms—lighter than she should have been, all sharp bones and sharper tongue, the visions finally winning the war they'd been waging since she'd whispered the truth to him alone.

Her head lolled against his chest, breath shallow, but those hazel eyes still sparked with that last defiant fire. She managed a weak, crooked grin, fingers tracing the line of his jaw like she was memorizing it one final time.

"Try not to brood so hard the forehead gets its own zip code, okay?" she rasped, voice barely more than a breath.

Then her eyes fluttered—once, twice—and the world held its breath.

For one impossible second Angel thought she might fight it the way she fought everything else. Cordelia Chase had never gone quietly in her life; why start now? But the visions had hollowed her out too far. Months of hiding the worst of it from everyone except the one person whose arms already felt like home had bought them this: stolen nights in the basement office, her head on his shoulder while she described the latest skull-splitting migraine in that dry, cutting voice that still somehow made him laugh. The secret had cracked them open. Late-night confessions turning into late-night touches. Touches turning into something neither of them had a name for until it was too late to pretend it wasn't love.

He remembered the first time she'd said it out loud, voice shaking even as she rolled her eyes at herself. "Don't make it weird, okay? But I think I'm in love with you, you big undead idiot. And the visions are killing me. So if we're doing this, we do it right. No holding back."

They hadn't. Not once. Not when she'd pulled him down onto the threadbare couch in the lobby at 3 a.m., not when she'd laughed against his mouth and called him "broody" even while her hands trembled from the pain. Every kiss had tasted like borrowed time. Every whispered "I've got you" from him had been answered with her snark and her fire and the way she'd curl her fingers into his shirt like she could hold the visions back by sheer stubbornness.

Now the stubbornness was gone.

Her chest rose once more—shallow, ragged—and then nothing. The bond they'd built in the dark, the love that had bloomed slow and painful and perfect between two people who'd already lost too much, simply... ended.

Angel didn't move. Couldn't. He kept her against him, cheek pressed to the top of her head, the way he had a hundred times when she'd fallen asleep mid-rant about Doyle or the Powers or how unfair it all was. The sun climbed higher. He felt the first warning prickle across his shoulders but didn't care. Let it burn. Let the city keep humming below them like nothing had happened. Like the best part of him hadn't just slipped away in his arms.

He closed his eyes and let the memory play one last time: Cordy's laugh in the dark, her fingers in his hair, the way she'd looked at him like he was worth saving even when he couldn't save her. "We're in this together, big guy," she'd said the night she told him. "You and me against the migraine from hell. Don't you dare go all noble and leave me to face it alone."

He hadn't left. Not once.

But the visions had.

And now she was gone.

Angel stayed on that roof until the sun forced him inside, carrying her down the stairs like she still weighed something. Like she still had somewhere to go. He laid her on the bed in the room she'd claimed months ago—the one with the ridiculous number of throw pillows and the single framed photo of the two of them that no one else had ever seen.

He didn't cry. Vampires don't get that luxury when the grief is this big. He just sat beside her, forehead against hers, and whispered the only thing left to say.

"I loved you, Cordelia Chase. More than I knew how to tell you. And I'm never going to stop."

The Hyperion was silent around them. Soon the others would wake—Wesley, Gunn, Fred, and Lorne. They already knew she was dying. They had spent the past days buried in frantic research, hunting through dusty books and calling every contact they had for any possible cure. Angel had asked them—begged them—to give her space, to hold back the pitying stares and the half-formed goodbyes she hated with every fiber of her being. Lorne especially had kept his distance, the empath sensing the depth of what was unfolding between them and quietly shielding the pair as much as he could. But now the books would go unread. Now Angel would have to go down and tell them their research had come too late. That she was gone.

The secret love they had carved out together in the dark—the one thing that had made the dying bearable—was over.

Not yet.

For now, this final moment still belonged only to the two of them.

One last time.

In the silence that followed, Angel finally understood what forever really cost.

The End.



Continue for Alternate Ending

Epilogue B: The Grace of it All

The roof of the Hyperion was quiet except for the wind and the distant hum of a city that had never cared what it cost them. Dawn bled across the sky in ugly pinks and golds, the kind of light that made Angel's skin look almost warm. Cordelia was in his arms—lighter than she should have been, all sharp bones and sharper tongue, the visions finally winning the war they'd been waging since she'd whispered the truth to him alone.

Her head lolled against his chest, breath shallow, but those hazel eyes still sparked with that last defiant fire. She managed a weak, crooked grin, fingers tracing the line of his jaw like she was memorizing it one final time.

"Try not to brood so hard the forehead gets its own zip code, okay?" she rasped, voice barely more than a breath.

Then her eyes fluttered—once, twice—and the world held its breath.

For one impossible second Angel thought she might fight it the way she fought everything else. Cordelia Chase had never gone quietly in her life; why start now? But the visions had hollowed her out too far. Months of hiding the worst of it from everyone except the one person whose arms already felt like home had bought them this: stolen nights in the basement office, her head on his shoulder while she described the latest skull-splitting migraine in that dry, cutting voice that still somehow made him laugh. The secret had cracked them open. Late-night confessions turning into late-night touches. Touches turning into something neither of them had a name for until it was too late to pretend it wasn't love.

He remembered the first time she'd said it out loud, voice shaking even as she rolled her eyes at herself. "Don't make it weird, okay? But I think I'm in love with you, you big undead idiot. And the visions are killing me. So if we're doing this, we do it right. No holding back."

They hadn't. Not once. Not when she'd pulled him down onto the threadbare couch in the lobby at 3 a.m., not when she'd laughed against his mouth and called him "broody" even while her hands trembled from the pain. Every kiss had tasted like borrowed time. Every whispered "I've got you" from him had been answered with her snark and her fire and the way she'd curl her fingers into his shirt like she could hold the visions back by sheer stubbornness.

Now the stubbornness was gone.

Her chest rose once more—shallow, ragged—and then nothing.

Angel's world cracked right down the middle. He pulled her closer, forehead against hers, the same way he had a hundred times when she'd fallen asleep mid-rant about

Doyle or the Powers or how unfair it all was. The sun climbed higher. He felt the first warning prickle across his shoulders but didn't care. Let it burn. She was gone—

Until the dawn light changed.

It flared brighter, colder, carrying the indifferent weight of something ancient and vast. The Powers That Be—the same silent bastards who'd let the visions carve her apart for months—finally answered. Not with mercy. With calculation.

A shimmer ripped through the air. Cordelia's body lifted, weightless, hovering just inches above his arms as white light poured into her like liquid starfire. Her eyes snapped open, hazel burning gold for one blinding second.

"Oh, great," she gasped, voice raw but still pure Cordelia. "Cosmic elevator. Couldn't have sprung for the express lane, you cheapskates?"

Angel's grip tightened instinctively, even as the power pushed him back a fraction. He felt her—felt her—shifting inside the light, the brutal visions that had been killing her reshaping into something gentler, something shared. Mind-to-mind. Only with him. A kinder conduit. A tether that would never quite let her walk the earth the way she used to.

The light faded as suddenly as it had come. Cordelia settled back into his arms, solid enough to touch, solid enough to cling to, but not quite... permanent. Her skin still carried the faint glow of dawn, and when she looked up at him, the exhaustion was gone—but so was the girl who used to steal his shirts and complain about the Hyperion's lack of decent coffee.

She reached up, fingers brushing his jaw the same way she had moments ago, only now there was a new sadness under the snark. "Higher Being perks—free astral plane travel and zero cellulite. You're welcome. But I... I'm not exactly me anymore, big guy. Not the way I was."

Angel's voice cracked. "I don't care what you are. As long as you're here."

The sun climbed higher, its rays sharpening against his shoulders with familiar warning heat. Cordelia felt the sudden tension in his arms and glanced upward with that trademark eye-roll, the one that had survived death and divine meddling both.

"Perfect timing," she muttered, the snark already snapping back into place like it had never left. "I survive the visions, get turned into a part-time Higher Being, and you're still allergic to daylight. Come on, big guy—let's take this inside before I lose you on day one of my very dramatic debut."

They moved together off the roof—her arm looped tight around his waist, his around hers—as if the secret they had carved out in the dark had finally been given a fighting chance to keep breathing.

The Hyperion was silent around them. Soon the others would wake—Wesley, Gunn, Fred, and Lorne. They already knew she was dying. They had spent the past days buried in frantic research, and Lorne had quietly kept his distance, sensing the depth of what was unfolding between them and shielding the pair as much as he could. Angel would have to tell them their books had been too late... and that something else had answered instead.

But for now the miracle was still theirs.

Just theirs.

One impossible, costly forever.

They remained locked together as the city stirred to life around them, closer than soulmates, both forever changed by the terrible and beautiful price they had paid.

The End.

