

ANOTHER AULD
LANG SYNE



HOLLY DENISE



THE FIRST THOUGHT THAT FOUGHT ITS WAY ABOVE THE NOISE IN HER head almost made her laugh. Almost. Maybe it would have if the truth behind the thought hadn't been steeped in bitterness and all manner of things still unresolved. Everything had worked out, after all, and that's exactly what the argument would be were Willow to make it. She hadn't done anything wrong because *it had all worked out*. No harm, no foul, and no one had died so what was Buffy's deal, anyway? The intentions had been good. After all, most of Willow's intentions were, and Buffy knew that.

She also knew that her friend just didn't know how to exist in the in-between, the uncomfortable space that connected life's major events, the limbo of things undecided and uncertain, the breathing room between resolutions. Like, Willow wanted things to be okay with Buffy, not shaky or just surface-level fine. The last days in Sunnydale had fractured their friendship in such a way it was past mending. Yes, tempers had been high, as had the stakes, but kick someone out of their own home for the crime of being right and don't be surprised when it takes more than an apology to make the bad feelings go away.

Never mind that when Willow had first tried to mend the bridge she and the others had burned, it had been on her terms and her timetable. She hadn't wanted to hear that Buffy didn't want to talk yet. That Buffy, riding a tidal wave of mixed emotions, wasn't up to the usual post-averted apocalypse celebration, because she was also realizing exactly what their victory had cost.

Not the world. The world, after all, wouldn't miss him. But Buffy would. It might have taken her a few hours on the road, an adrenaline crash, and the prospect of sleeping alone for that knowledge to hit, but it had hit. The *after* that she had been hoping to discuss with Spike hadn't survived the fight. No, it was back in the crater of Sunnydale along with him, as well as all the things Buffy hadn't gotten around to saying, or had said too late, or hadn't realized she wanted to say until that moment. That *too late* moment.

It had been a victory for the world. And Buffy was so used to losing when she won that it had literally taken hours for the magnitude of what she'd lost to sink in. So, no. Thank you, Willow, but she had not been up for a night on the town or a heart-to-heart or whatever it was

that Willow had needed in order to feel like there hadn't been anything of value lost in the course of once again stopping the apocalypse. Buffy had wanted to sit with her wounds, both visible and not, and reflect on the conversation she would never get to have.

And somehow despite having known her for nearly eight years, Willow hadn't understood. Not that night, not the following day, nor the day after that. Every time Buffy turned her away, attempted to focus on doing rather than stewing, she caught a glimpse of that raw hurt look her friend had worn constantly in the weeks following the resurrection. Confused, resentful, not sure what she had done wrong or why the normal fixes weren't working. And Buffy had felt weighed down by the burden of expectation she could never meet, only the landing had been a little softer. Not much but enough. Cushioned by the way he'd regarded her that night they'd spent in the house, the things he'd seen in her; hell, the fact that he'd been able to see anything positive in her at all after the horror show that had been their previous relationship. He'd said he'd seen the best and worst of her and he was right. He'd known her better than anyone, and he'd looked at her with zero expectation because, as he'd said, she didn't owe him anything.

That had been his last and best gift to her—the knowledge that Buffy didn't owe anyone anything.

It had lasted like that for months. Buffy busying herself with rebuilding the Council, collecting slayers, establishing a new life overseas—as far as she could get from the memories of the one the earth had swallowed. Willow had been there and then not, occupied with her own stuff and thank god for that, but always circling back as the gang did. Always looking at her with those same eyes, always wanting to talk.

So eventually, one day, stretched to her limits, Buffy had talked.

Or rather, she'd screamed.

She didn't remember what she'd screamed, except that it had been a lot. Forget the most recent apocalypse, Buffy had had years of pain, of shutting up, to exorcise. The burden of meeting increasingly rigid expectations, of being everything for everyone without leaving anything for herself, how she had created distance and obstacles to

keep her apart from the only person she knew whose love and support had been selfless, without conditions, and how she'd wasted the last months together because of fears and doubts and hurt and stupidity, how one of his last memories of her had been her kissing another man and her fear that that stupid decision was the reason he hadn't believed her. She had so much she wanted to say that she would never get the chance to say, and no one seemed to care. She was the only one left to remember him and doing that out loud made the people who claimed to love her uncomfortable.

Willow had taken all this as well as Buffy would have expected—that was, not well at all. All wounded puppy, like the real crime wasn't that Buffy was hurting, but that she'd been loud about the hurt. And a good helping of, "Why would you think I wouldn't get that?" for good measure, because, after all, Willow had lost Tara. Xander had lost Anya. Dawn had lost Joyce. Giles had lost Jenny. Buffy didn't have to mourn alone if she didn't want to, only of course she did because the people everyone else had lost had been universally mourned, loved out in the open, understood to have been cruelly taken and all the other things anyone ever said about someone they had lost. Who was Spike, really? Buffy's former enemy. Her former lover. Her attempted rapist. Her years-long headache. The person she'd kept in the dark because she'd been too ashamed of herself to embrace him in the light.

That was the Spike *they* remembered. Not the Spike who had been Buffy's best friend, her lieutenant. The one with whom she had so many unfinished thoughts and conversations. The Spike she hadn't loved in time. There was nothing anyone could do to make mourning him something other than lonely.

Willow, being Willow, took that as a challenge. Which was how, a month later, Spike had been on Buffy's doorstep.

"It's not really him, of course," Willow had rushed to explain, hurrying over the threshold ahead of the thing that wasn't really Spike so she was shoulder-to-shoulder with Buffy. Buffy, who had stood quite frozen, grappling with a heart that was somehow both soaring and breaking at the same time. "I looked into how to bring a vampire back and it's apparently just really bad, dark magic. But I thought this might help."

Buffy hadn't known what to say to that. She hadn't known what to think or do or even how to breathe, for even in the world she lived in, nothing could prepare you for a ghost. Somehow, she'd found herself in the living room of her apartment, staring down the thing that wasn't really Spike as Willow explained—in an excited hurry, no less—what she'd done.

Not Spike. A Spikebot. Like the Buffybot, only much more advanced. Warren might have been good at the mechanics and general programming, but April had been an obvious robot from the word go, and the Buffybot... Well, perhaps not as obvious to the Scoobies for reasons no one had fully explored, but definitely more Bot than Buffy in the end. At least until Willow got her programming hands on her. The end result hadn't been perfect but a kind of *close but no cigar* thing, the result of having written over existing programming and Warren only having a vague idea who Buffy was from the start.

That was where Willow had truly outshone him. After all, she'd *really* known Spike, so his mannerisms, his speech patterns, his tone of voice, his wit—she had used all her practical knowledge to create something that was as close to the real thing as possible. She'd even gone to the trouble of surfing through some of Buffy's dreams to get an idea of what he'd been like when it was just the two of them. Also to get the anatomy as matchy as possible in the event Buffy wanted... Well, she hadn't said it in words but in pretty much every other way imaginable.

It was perfect, Willow had said. As close as she could get to the real thing.

"What am I supposed to do with it?" Buffy had asked dully. She hadn't had the mileage then to process what amounted to another violation. Another peek behind the curtain that she hadn't authorized. Another piece of herself that had been taken rather than volunteered. "Besides, apparently, fuck it?"

Willow had had the audacity to look scandalized, but also the good sense not to let that look rest on her face for more than a handful of seconds. Granted, the one she replaced it with wasn't much better. Just more of that wounded puppy begging to understand what it had done wrong, or why it wasn't getting praise.

“It wasn’t supposed to be for that,” she’d argued, though without checking to see if she had a leg to stand on because the detail in the penis alone (Buffy had been too curious not to look) blew that defense out of the water. “I thought you could...umm... You said there were things you wanted to tell him. Things you never got to say? Well, now you can! And he’ll respond just like the real Spike. It’s not perfect, I know, but I thought it might help with closure, so you can”—*move on*—“heal. You know he wouldn’t want you feeling like this over him.”

That last thing was the first thing Willow had said in as long as Buffy could remember that actually made sense. Spike had specifically told her to run, that it was her world out there, to leave him behind. He might not believe she would mourn him the way she had been mourning him, but he certainly wouldn’t want that for her. Not the Spike she’d gotten to know in their last months together. The one not governed by his worst impulses.

The Spike who had gotten on his knees before her at that house, told her that loving her had nothing to do with him, that she was the one, would want her to do exactly what Willow and everyone else wanted her to do. Only for her sake, not theirs. He wouldn’t want her living with his ghost.

So Buffy had swallowed her objections and pushed down the pain that was looking at a Spike who wasn’t Spike and agreed to give it a shot. Who knows, maybe it would help.

Much like the Buffybot before him, the Spikebot didn’t know he wasn’t the real Spike. From the second he opened his eyes—which, Buffy had to admit, perfectly matched the color of the real thing—he’d been Spike. Stumbling forward and breathing hard and looking at her the way only Spike could. Asking what had happened, where they were, how they’d gotten out. The last thing he remembered was the Hellmouth collapsing, Buffy holding his hand and telling him she loved him, and he’d been a goner, hadn’t he? Just what the hell was this?

It had been too much. Too close to him. Closer than she’d been prepared for. Courtesy of Willow taking a tour through her memories and her dreams, she supposed, an invasion that barely blipped on her radar for as used to it as Buffy was by now. Buffy had closed down and stepped back, shaking her head, watching as Spike-but-not-Spike

looked at her with concern and love, so much love she could barely stand it, before finally fleeing to the bathroom to cry.

And there she'd remained until Spike-but-not-Spike had rapped lightly on the door, said he hadn't meant to upset her and he'd go now. But he loved her and he wanted her to know that. Regardless of how she felt, that was how *he* felt, and how he would always. The words he'd used hadn't been quite right, but the voice had been his, as well as the feeling behind them, and Buffy hadn't realized she was moving until the door no longer separated them and she was in his arms. Arms that felt right, a chest that felt right, skin that felt like skin and even lips that mimicked the texture of those she missed so much. There had been no tingle or sense of otherworldliness, and almost no chance that Willow had worked it so he could slip into game face, but in that moment, it had been something and something was better than nothing.

She'd already done nothing, after all. And something was right here. Something wasn't perfect, wasn't *him*, and didn't make the ache go away, but somehow it became a drug of its own. Her way to halt the process of dealing because dealing meant moving on and despite however healthy that might have been, she hadn't wanted to move on. All the great losses in her life had been steamrolled by the next crisis, the next apocalypse, the next person to be saved, the next excuse to shelve her emotions and pretend that was as good as experiencing them. For the first time since she'd been a child, her life had been hers to live and she'd wanted to live it like this. Stay locked inside moments that could never happen, revisiting possibilities that had already expired, wallowing in chances she hadn't taken, and fuck if it was healthy and double fuck if it made anyone else uncomfortable. She'd fought and lost and suffered and sacrificed too much to be denied a little indulgent grief.

So instead of lashing out at her friend who had invaded her dreams and her memories, never mind her pain, she'd asked Willow if changes could be made. Improvements. Ways to bring him closer to the Spike she'd lost rather than just a near approximation. There were, of course, both then and as time went on. New technology, new innovations to bridge the gap between machine and memory, to bring her closer to

the vampire she'd loved too late. And that was exactly what they had done. Buffy would spend time with her Spikebot, all the while noting the differences, the imperfections, the words he'd use that the real Spike would never, the idiosyncrasies that she hadn't realized she knew as well as she did until she'd noticed that her facsimile Spike lacked them. She couldn't say that it helped her get better, necessarily, but it was better than the hollow that had been before. A way to live with his ghost and have that ghost listen when she spoke, hold her when she cried, tuck her to him in the late hours, never noticing the things that were missing because he'd been programmed to rationalize them away. Not questioning why they never had sex, the conversations they skipped, the blood he never drank, the sunlight that, when it caught him, didn't burn him at all. Steadily becoming more like Spike thanks to Buffy's notes, but never actually Spike, because Spike was actually dead.

That was what she'd believed, at least. What she'd believed for almost a year before one of the seers in Willow's coven had a vision—one that led her, along with a troop of slayers, to Los Angeles to help prevent the apocalypse her ex had started. Buffy had rushed in, scythe pulled back and ready to let demon heads roll, only she'd nearly tripped over her own stupid feet when she'd seen him. Soaked with rainwater and dripping with blood, tired and resigned, almost defeated, until their eyes met. Until he saw her seeing him and, just for a second, the world stopped spinning. The apocalypse stopped happening. Everything outside of them just ceased to be.

Spike was there. Spike was alive. Spike was looking at her with a combination of relief and wariness, offset by that familiar longing that no matter how many times Willow tried, the bot couldn't match. They hadn't had a ton of time to just stare at each other, not with all of hell unleashed, but enough that Buffy's off-kilter world had centered once more, giving her a sense of calm.

Not this time. He would not die on her again, especially not before he got to explain.

And that was what had carried her through, fueled her as she ducked and weaved and mowed down all manner of monster that Angel had unleashed. The knowledge that Spike was at the end of it.

She would fight and she would win and depending on what he had to say for himself, she might just decide to kill him all over again, but it was there. A point on her immediate horizon that was worth battling her way through everything hell had to throw at her just so long as she reached it.

She'd reached it. The city had been all but swallowed whole, some of her girls were dead, more were wounded, demon carcasses littered the streets and the staticky afterburn of magic buzzed through the air, and Buffy had fought her way through the wreckage, heart in her throat, until she'd caught a familiar flash of blond. Heard his voice, thick and raw, screaming her name, and then stopping abruptly when their eyes connected across the battlefield. She'd stared at him and he'd stared at her, and he hadn't been a mirage or a dream, and neither was she. Just people separated by time and death and resurrection—by all of it and none of it.

And when they'd finally broken, started tearing over the space that made up the distance between them, it had been as one. Buffy at one end of the alley then in the middle, Spike's arms around her, his real arms, his real chest, his real hands and legs and feet and eyes and mouth, and she was so angry with him she could cry and so elated she could scream, and there were so many coulds and shoulds and conversations and *what the hells* and in that moment, none of them had mattered. All that had mattered was he was there, he was alive, and he was with her. Pressing kisses along her cheeks, her chin, across her brow, whispering that he loved her, he loved her, and thank god he'd lived because if he'd died before he'd gotten a chance to be brave where she was concerned, that would've been the very definition of hell.

The full story had come out over the next few days, told in fragments of less important but much more enjoyable conversations in which they simply basked in the joy of being alive and together. Why didn't he try to contact her right away? He'd wanted to, but he'd been a ghost, or something close to it. The entire time? No, someone had flipped a switch in late November and Spike had gotten his body back. Why not then? That question had been harder to answer, and he'd taken his time. There was what he'd told everyone—that his exit had

been too good to spoil with an anticlimactic return, and yes, she'd let him know exactly what she'd thought of that excuse. The real reason was more complicated, tying to things he'd thought she wouldn't understand but had. After all, martyring themselves and being brought back against their will was something else they had in common.

Spike had had his own questions. What was the deal with the Immortal? There was no deal—Buffy hadn't even been in Rome during that debacle, but they'd let rumors spread in the hope of luring out some would-be assassin that had apparently set her in their sights and while she hadn't loved the idea of putting someone else in danger, the Immortal had gallantly offered to act as bodyguard. Also, shouldn't Spike have been able to smell the distinct lack of Buffy or Dawn in that little apartment? If he'd still been a jealous idiot after not using his senses, that was his own doing. And he hadn't been able to argue with that.

The other questions hadn't been as plentiful. He'd asked how she'd been doing and Buffy had only then remembered the Spike she had at home. The one she'd switched onto power saving mode after deciding that no, despite its enhanced strength and speed and all things that weren't vampire but robot, she wouldn't take it to fight in Angel's apocalypse. It might have not been her vampire, just a toy with his likeness and mannerisms, but it had been important enough to her to keep to herself rather than run the risk of losing Spike all over again. Somehow, the fact that he was probably replaceable had made him all the more irreplaceable, mostly because she hadn't thought she could stomach letting Willow build another one. At some point it would start to feel less like a coping mechanism and more like an actual attempt to delude herself that she could have him back.

Only she could. She did. And though he'd more than earned the right, Spike didn't respond with scorn or eyerolls or even scoff when she told him about the Spikebot currently charging in her London bedroom. Rather, he'd given her that look—that Spike look. That look the bot had never been able to master because Buffy had never been able to explain it, hadn't wanted to for her own reasons. Again with the whole not deluding herself thing but also it had felt...sacrosanct. That part of Spike. *Those* parts. She could tinker with his vocabulary and

make suggestions on perfecting things like his sneer, the feel of his hair under her fingers, the thing he sometimes did his tongue against his teeth, but the parts of Spike that were hers and hers alone, like the way he looked at her, had been mentally cordoned off as off limits.

The only question, at the end of the story, had been what to do with the bot. Spike had smirked and run curled fingers along her arm, murmuring that he'd be game if she wanted to have a bit of fun with it before making any decisions. That had been heady to think about—particularly as he'd whispered filth into her ear while fucking her jelly-legged—but the reality of it had been less tantalizing and more just bittersweet. The Spikebot had never been about sex, even the nights she'd been the most tempted, the most frustrated, the most twisted in her grief of all the missed opportunities. Telling the Spikebot the things she'd never get to tell Spike himself, except *never* hadn't lasted as long as she'd thought.

The Spikebot represented loss to her, and no matter how appealing Spike's offer was, she couldn't find that sexy. She also couldn't stomach the idea of just decommissioning the thing, its purpose served, its use depleted, for while it might just be a robot it had never known that about itself, and never once acted like anything other than Spike. Or as Spike-like as she and Willow could get it.

It was Giles who came up with the answer. The morning before they were set to fly out, return home from having stopped Angel's apocalypse, her watcher had been making nice over bagels and coffee the hotel had set out for its guests, doing what he could to mend bridges, as the last Spike had known him he'd been complicit in a murder plot. He'd asked, not looking at either of them directly, if there were plans for the Spikebot (she'd told him about it one night after too many margaritas) now that its purpose had been nullified before carefully suggesting that with as well-crafted as it was, they might find other uses for it.

"What sort of uses?" she'd asked.

He'd explained.

"Dunno about that, Rupert," Spike had replied, reaching over the table to grab a couple of creamers and placing them in front of Buffy without looking at her. "Haven't seen the toy myself, but if you aim to

fool others into thinking it's me, gonna guarantee there'll be some dead giveaways to the truth."

Giles had asked what sort of giveaways. Spike had answered. And they'd gotten to work.

The first problem had been the largest to solve. A vampire who wasn't a vampire but a robot needed to be realistic enough that even other vampires would believe the ruse, and if they didn't, equipped with a glamour powerful enough to help them disregard or overlook any anomalies. That meant developing a whole physiological system, one that relied on blood, could shift from human face to demon, and was wrapped in genuine flesh and bone. Like the Terminator, Xander had pointed out, except that the Terminator had known it was artificial life beneath the skin, blood, and sinew, and the key to the Spikebot integrating in demon communities would be its earnest conviction that it *was* Spike, William Pratt, sired in 1880 to Drusilla and the only vampire in the world that had ever fought for his soul. If he was wounded in service of whatever it was he was doing, he needed a body that would not only bleed, but purple and bruise. He needed limbs that would feel fragile enough to snap under the right circumstances but healed the way a vampire's would. The last bit was to add magical embellishments specific to vampire physiology. Skin that would smoke if it touched holy relics or water, a reflection that refused to appear, a stomach that demanded sustenance and a system that thrived on blood. He needed to be Spike, physically as well as mentally, in the event that he had to fuck his way close to a target—and there were a good number of demons and past lovers that would know the real thing from a stand-in.

That had been a bitter pill for Buffy to swallow, but swallow she had. It wasn't like she could be jealous of what a robot did when she had the real thing at home. But the Spikebot had been made for her and now it was going to be for everyone but her, and yeah, again with the irrational but feelings didn't have to be rational in order to exist. Still, she'd nodded and gone along with all the plans, the revisions, the upgrades, added to the Murphy's Law list of things that could possibly happen to the bot while it was out there doing its undercover thing, and workshopped solutions to address those possibilities. A lot was

plain ol' engineering know-how, but at some point they crossed the threshold of what could be achieved with modern technology and what needed to be amplified with magic. What would register as vampire tinglies for slayers whenever it was near, how it would smell to those species that had heightened senses, how it'd taste in various circumstances, its bodily functions down to producing semen and saliva. Then, of course, the glamour that would help anyone not convinced by any of the aforementioned just accept it and move on.

The last bit was its memory—everything it knew, everything it had experienced, everything it felt, the full Spike shebang. This had required Spike to submit to several days' worth of interviews with Willow and Giles, during which many notes had been taken, many corrections made, many suggestions heard, and many updates put in motion. There were things too broadly known about Spike to take anything for granted, including how he felt about Buffy. So in the programming went his reasons for staying out of her life, as well as some bitterness that Spike had mentioned wasn't so far off how he'd felt upon believing Buffy was involved with the Immortal. Knowing he wasn't entitled to her, that he'd made his own bloody bed by not seeking her out the second he'd become corporeal, hadn't diminished the hurt at all. Hadn't made him clear-headed about the choices she'd made, or the fact that after everything they'd been through together, she'd give someone *like that* space in her life. The new story included everything up until the big showdown in Los Angeles with a different spin on how things had unfolded following their reunion, Buffy moving on, Spike staying put, his heart bruised and the rest of him eager to put her behind him, if it was possible.

And where Willow hadn't managed to entirely override the Buffybot's initial programming, the Spikebot was a horse of a different color. She had the Council's resources, for one, which included archives of Ted Buchanan's—Buffy's once-almost robot stepdad—notes and schematics, as well as the unique privilege of having been the initial programmer. By the time she'd finished making all the adjustments, they'd had a vampire robot on their hands that was so sophisticated Buffy could only identify the real thing by studying Spike's eyes. The real Spike looked at her with compassion and that Spike-blended

deference; the robot with resentment and regret, though he wasn't above making lewd suggestions with the aim of getting a rise out of her, which Spike said was how he'd respond under the right—or wrong—circumstances. A version of himself living with a story he had told himself about Buffy's life, her happiness, and how he didn't factor into either. A way to keep him from reaching out to her, convince himself that she didn't want to hear from him. That things were better off with as much distance between them as possible.

It had been hard, looking at a version of the man she loved who seemed to regard her with disdain, but she'd done what she did best—shoved everything else to the back of her mind for the good of the mission. If this worked, if they managed to pull it off, it would keep them with a firm ear to the ground in one of the areas most affected by Angel's attack on the Circle of the Black Thorn. Spike being a morally gray sort of vampire, one who hadn't had the time to broadly establish his reputation as a good guy the same way Angel had, would help him get a foot in the door of places that might otherwise be closed. A true deep undercover. Meanwhile, the real Spike would only be the real Spike in certain situations, and never in public. Never where he could be identified by people not in the know. After a lot of debate, they settled on another handy glamour, and another handy cover story, with Spike assuming the role of a revolving door of Buffy's alleged boyfriends (and girlfriends, more than once), some demon, some human, some vampire, all to help establish her as someone who didn't get serious about anyone because women who were in loving relationships weren't as authoritative as women who dated casually without committing, or some other stupid thing.

The last bit had been to tweak the bot's memory so that it didn't remember any of the tests, or that there had been another Spike at all; anything that could make it question whether it was the real thing was erased or altered. And once that was done, Buffy had given it the baseline it needed to think they were well and truly through, then watched as he'd stormed out of her life, maybe forever, a lump in her throat that she knew didn't make sense but also did, because while the Spikebot wasn't Spike, while he'd been created from a violation, his existence had helped in its own way.

Except now he was gone. Really gone. Like in a different reality gone. And that was why Buffy's first thought upon receiving the phone call had nearly made her laugh, for Willow had truly outdone herself. Set a new standard for deception she probably wouldn't be able to reach again if she tried. The Spikebot had embedded itself so firmly into its role that entire years would go by without her hearing about it at all, except those times she became curious enough to ask Giles. And it wasn't like she needed the updates. Most of the time, practically all of the time, Buffy was perfectly content with her own obligations. Her vampire. Her actual and true Spike, with whom she had an actual and true life, filled with its actual and true obstacles, highs, lows, and everything in between, times she wanted to stake him and others she barnacled herself so tightly around him that it was a good thing he didn't need to breathe. It was messy and unkempt, raw and above all things real. Real the way she hadn't had real before and hadn't fully understood until she did. Until it was her everyday, her normal, waking up with him curled around her, going through their day, coming home at night, falling into bed and then doing it all over again. A relationship that felt like an actual partnership, where she held nothing back. Even her stupid mixed emotions over learning that her once-coping mechanism had decided to stay in a world where there was no Buffy.

For the real Spike knew the second she wandered back into the living room, her head still buzzing with Giles's parting words, that something was wrong. There was no pretending in this space. There was just them, exactly as they were.

Buffy licked her lips and made her way over to the couch on legs that were somehow numb but not so numb she couldn't feel them shaking. And he knew, in that Spike way of his. Knew enough to pause the game he'd been playing and set the controller down on the coffee table—the third one they'd had to buy since moving into this place because sexcapades kept wrecking their furniture—and shift over to make room for her on the sofa beside him. Against him. Curled into his Spike chest, breathing in his Spike scent, wrapped up in his Spike arms while the rest of her thought about the Spike-that-wasn't-but-had-been that she'd once called her own. The one she was likely never to see again.

He waited, knowing it was better than pressing. That she would tell him in her own time. Even now, years behind them and even more ahead, the simple act of being understood, known on a primal level was something that left her humbled, and more than a little resentful of the times she'd tried to fit into someone else's vision of who she should be. And it wasn't like their lives were normal people's lives. Wasn't like the situation she was still processing was something she could find referenced in the self-help section. When people died, they didn't come back. Except sometimes, in her world, they did. She had. Spike had too. And they had both returned to discover their loved ones had fashioned a robot replacement in their likeness, though for very different reasons. It just wasn't normal, so there was no existing vocabulary to help put her thoughts into words.

Eventually, though, she felt something inside of her relax, and the words she needed were suddenly there.

"I just heard from Giles. The bot... The you-bot..."

Spike squeezed her to him, anticipating. "It's gone?"

"Yeah. Not destroyed gone, but..." She wet her lips, feeling both foolish and not, now that she was talking. "There was a mission to another world. You know, like the one without shrimp? Only this was a world without Buffy."

"What a miserable bloody hellscape."

The words were delivered with such force, such earnestness, Buffy couldn't help but start to well up a bit. With everything they had been through, it still humbled her to know he'd choose this. The good was good, better than good. Sometimes it was blissful. But there had been plenty of bad, too. Bad that had nearly destroyed them, bad that never fully went away, no matter how much *good* they piled on top. It was always there, peeking out between the cracks, waiting for them to get comfortable, get complacent, get to a place where they thought it couldn't reach them. He knew that—they both did—which meant they both knew that they could never fully embrace complacency. Not without risking everything they had worked so hard to build.

Yet given the choice, Spike would choose her every time. Knowing that, being someone's choice, was the most powerful talisman Buffy had ever closed her hands around. And he took every opportunity to

let her know in ways big and small that it was still there. That it always would be.

"I guess Cordelia's the Slayer there," she went on, ready when he threw her a look of utter bafflement. "And there... It just got messy, I guess. With that world's Drusilla. But good messy. He and that Cordy and the others, one of our girls, Indira... They got it handled. And he decided that he wanted to stay."

"The bot fooled Dru?"

"I'm assuming so, considering Giles's phone call wasn't, 'Oh dear, well, your robot was destroyed by a copy of his old girlfriend.'"

Spike blinked at her, a very specific blink. A blink that said "I'm impressed but I don't want to admit it." While the Spikebot had been as close to perfect as it possibly could be, there had been unspoken but mutually understood scenarios that were likely to spell game over. Fooling random vamps or passing acquaintances was one thing; fooling Drusilla, with her second sight and her intimate knowledge, was something that would shift the game's difficulty setting from medium to extremely hard.

Yet here they were. In this world, sitting together on this sofa, and the Spikebot was off gallivanting somewhere else. Choosing a world that didn't have a Buffy. This creation that had been given form and purpose to bring her comfort when she needed it opting to get as far from her as it could because of the pain and rejection they had programmed it to feel.

It might not have been real, but it also had been. And now that piece of her history was creating history somewhere else.

Spike's lips brushed her temple, bringing her back to him. "You all right?"

"Yeah."

"Don't have to be, you know."

Buffy swallowed, blinking against emotion she couldn't define. "It's not like... It wasn't real. I know that. It wasn't *you*. But it..."

"I know, love."

And he did. That was the other wonderful thing about Spike. She didn't have to explain. Didn't have to try to figure out why she felt *this* about losing something that she hadn't even wanted in the first

place. She could just sit there in her home with her vampire and her weird Buffy emotions, the manifestation of grief that had gotten her through some of the darker months of her life officially out of its periphery. Off doing other things. Saving other worlds. Being something else to whole versions of people she'd never met but was somehow impacting all the same.

There was something to that, too. A bigger something that she also couldn't quite name. Maybe she didn't need to.

"Have I ever told you how happy I am that you came back from the dead?" she asked him, resting her cheek against his shoulder. "All the badness aside and all, because way with the bad, but this part? Have I told you how much I love this part?"

"A time or two. How about me?"

"A time or two." Buffy lifted her head to meet his eyes. "Thank you."

"Didn't really do anything, Slayer, but you're welcome just the same."

"No, you did. Thank you."

Spike just grinned and kissed her again, a brush of his lips across her temple, then cheek, then softly against her mouth.

"Can we stay like this for a while?" she asked, burrowing deeper into him. His warmth built from her warmth, his solidness, the realness of him there with her, in this room, in this world, in this life, the one she hoped the lessons of the past would keep her from taking for granted.

In that regard, then, maybe Willow had been right to say everything would work out. Right in a very wrong way, granted, but right all the same. Was it too much to hope?

"We can stay like this long as you need, love," Spike told her now. "Forever, if you like."

"I like very much."

Spike smiled, kissed her again, and gave her forever.

