

BLIP



HOLLY DENISE





WHEN HE FOUND HER THAT NIGHT, SHE WAS GETTING HER ARSE kicked.

The vampire who was on her wasn't anything special. A regular bloke wearing his Sunday best, still stinking to high bloody heaven of decay. He moved with the lumbering sort of quality common among vamps who didn't yet understand their own strength—those still getting a feel for their body after it had been made new again. It was nothing remarkable, nothing special. A scrappy fledgling who had only just climbed from the grave and discovered his fangs. Yet somehow, Buffy was on the ground. Taking whatever he gave her, grunting and hissing and covering her face but doing rot to fight back. Just accepting it the way she'd nearly accepted her death that night at the Bronze.

She was going to get herself killed.

And the second he had the thought, he realized that might well be the point.

Spike was in motion then, heart in his throat, and shaking the ground with his heavy, trampling footsteps. If either Buffy or her assailant heard him, they didn't betray it. One second he was by the old Alpert mausoleum, the next colliding into the fledge and toppling them to the ground. Spike stared into yellow eyes wide with shock—today's modern vamps seemed to take for granted that there were other predators out there with matching strength—before he plunged his stake through flesh and bone, and body became dust.

Just like that, it was over, and Spike was on his knees, staring at the stretch of earth where the fledge had been. The grass was all dewy and wet. His jeans would be, too, when he stood.

And Buffy was just a few feet away, sucking in deep lungfuls of air. Air that smelled of her sweat and blood, and the salty tang of tears he knew so well by now.

Fuck, if she started crying, he'd bloody well lose his head.

The last time he'd seen her—seen her properly, that was—had been at the Bronze following the witch's latest dalliance with magical fixes. Buffy had been distant, not willing to discuss what had happened, or not happened, between them. Turning away from him when he'd sought her out, as though anything were that simple. He'd stared and she hadn't cracked, so he'd gone out to find something to kill. Composed a load of

arguments he'd never get to make. Raged about the time they'd had that was just theirs, that had been building to something before it had been stripped away from him. All because a sodding demon summoned by none other than fucking Harris had forced him to remind Buffy of his lack-of-soul through song.

Because Buffy had been forced to stop pretending then. He'd called her out on her little play and she'd finally taken a taste. Only that taste had scared her senseless—so much so she'd decided to stop coming around at all.

Which, to be fair, was exactly what he'd said he'd wanted.

He'd been lying then. He also hadn't.

And now Buffy was here. Making soft, pathetic little sounds like she was trying to keep a hold on whatever she'd bottled up. Because that had gone so swimmingly in the past.

"Can't say this doesn't hurt, pet," he said after a long beat, unable to hold it in a second longer. "Always thought if you wanted a good night's death, you'd ask me to do it."

He expected a sharp, quippy retort, as was her custom. If not that, then certainly some sort of remark about how she never needed his help. That he was disgusting and loathsome and she'd sooner hook up with a fungus demon of her own before letting him touch her again. Any of the old standards would do. Hell, they might make him feel better than he did at the present. A Buffy willing to break his heart was infinitely better than a Buffy ready to cash in her death wish for the second time on his watch.

He didn't know what to think when the sharp, quippy retort didn't come. When she gave one of those deep, trembling breaths that smelled too close to tears.

He didn't. And then he did. It was what always came when she was around. That desperate, pathetic longing that had stripped him of the man he had once been, turned him into some caricature of himself. Someone lost and pathetic who swooped in to save the day rather than snap necks, who broke when he heard her breaking.

Fuck, what a right joke his life had become.

"Sorry to have mucked up your plans," he said through his teeth, digging his fingers into his thighs. "No one would've bought it as an acci-

dent, though. Would've torn the Bit up to pieces to find her sister had clocked the easy way out."

"Spike—"

The sound of his name on her tongue, broken and defeated, pushed him over some threshold he hadn't realized he'd been near. "This the part where I'm supposed to be sorry? Understand? That I just stand by and let you let some no-name tosser end it all? Sorry, ducks. I'm not—"

"I wasn't trying to kill myself," she said.

He whipped his head to her without meaning to, and the second their eyes met, the fire in him blinked out. Another sign of how far gone he was. Couldn't even hold onto his rage properly. "No?" he asked, taking her in. The twigs in her hair, the dirt on her face, made more obvious from the tear tracks carving paths down her cheeks. She sat on her elbows, looking at him in that lost way she did these days. Or had done until she'd decided she didn't need him anymore. "Put on a good show, then. What the bloody hell were you thinking?"

Buffy's lower lip wobbled. She sniffed and broke her gaze from his, fixing it on some point ahead of her. "Believe me. I've been asking myself that question nonstop."

"That supposed to make me feel sorry for you?"

"No." She shook her head and wiped at her cheeks. "It's not supposed to make you anything."

He swore she was the most infuriating woman on the bloody planet. Would serve her right if he just pulled himself up and stalked off, left her to her own devices. Even if she hadn't had a mind to make herself a martyr tonight, which he wasn't buying, she'd hardly asked for his help and he doubted she'd be thanking him for it, either.

"You work out what it is you're aimin' for, Slayer, you know where to find me."

"Spike."

He paused, met her eyes again. Those gorgeous eyes he'd follow into hell itself.

"I'm pregnant."



HE DIDN'T REMEMBER TAKING her to the crypt. Wasn't even sure he'd given her the option. All he knew for certain was he'd been gawking at her, the world falling out from beneath him, and suddenly he was home. Familiar walls. Familiar rugs. Familiar furniture—the same rot he'd shown off to her the night she'd come back from the dead. When she'd been here, staring at him, accusing but not accusing, and he'd been so desperate to keep her here, to make her understand, that he'd prattled on like a right git. Spilled his heart and then some, rationalizing his failures, hoping that she didn't remember how large they were.

Now she was here again. The first night since the big sing-off, when told her everything he'd meant to keep inside forever, so long as it meant she kept coming round. He didn't offer her a drink—not because of her condition but because he was bloody terrified of breaking the silence. He also didn't offer to show her to a seat. One of the cushy ones that wasn't someone's grave. He just watched her as she walked around his home, a faraway look on her face, the questions he had mounting. The hurt, too, the more he thought of it. Not right to feel hurt but he wasn't right anyway, according to her, so he felt it all the same. The idea that she could have gone from a kiss like the one they'd shared, all heat and passion and promise, to taking some other bloke to bed was one that cut deep.

And just when he thought she might do nothing but stare at the walls, Buffy sank into the green armchair, parted her lips, and told her story.

It had been that night at the Bronze, after everyone's memories had been set right. After he'd left in a huff, fed up with her and himself and the longing he couldn't seem to cut out of his chest. She'd gone looking for him and hadn't found him, but she'd found some other bloke instead. Someone nice and nonthreatening. Someone with a heartbeat and a pulse, and she'd thought, why not. All this pent-up tension, the need to uncork, the drive to feel something other than the nothing that threatened to consume her, and unlike Spike, this bloke was safe. Someone she couldn't hurt. Someone who couldn't hurt her. Someone who might take the edge off and so she could try to remember what it was like to be alive.

"It was awful," she said, not looking at him. Staring dead ahead, her

hair still a mess from the pummeling she'd taken, her cheeks stained with dirt. "I knew I'd made a mistake the second I... The second it was happening. I just wanted out."

But she hadn't gotten out. Instead, she'd gotten herself up the duff, courtesy of a broken condom.

Instead, she'd gotten this.

For a long stretch after she finished talking, they sat in the quiet. Spike thinking and trying not to think, trying not to focus on the parts that hurt. The parts that made him rage. That was what had gotten him in trouble before—thinking about himself. Keeping that longing so close to the surface that the demon's spell hadn't had to do much but give him a good nudge for him to spill all.

"You think lettin' some fledge knock the stuffing outta you is the answer?" he said instead. Better, that. Think about tonight. The scene he'd stumbled upon.

Only, he understood that, too. She didn't need to explain.

She did, anyway.

"I thought it could be an accident." Her voice was raw and shaking. "Dangerous job, you know. We all have our bad nights."

"An accident you made happen?"

Buffy flinched and crossed her arms. "I would've killed him before he could really hurt me. I just... I can't do this." She inhaled sharply, fresh tears sparkling in her eyes. "I can't do it, Spike. I can't be a mom. I'm barely holding it together as it is. Dawn and Social Services and the house is still falling apart, and won't stop anytime soon. I don't have the money I need to buy groceries, let alone diapers and formula. And..." She turned away, but not before he caught the way she almost shattered. That was Buffy through and through—almost shattering. Always stopping herself before she could. Not realizing what a marvel that ability was on its own.

But it was important that she say whatever it was that nearly had her shattering. Needed to own it. He didn't know how he knew that, but he did.

"And what?" he prodded after a beat.

There was every chance she wouldn't continue. Just leave the thought dangling, the way she'd left so much dangling these days. He was both

surprised and not when she didn't. Buffy was a lot of things, but she wasn't a coward. She also wasn't one to shy away from the opportunity to beat herself down when she thought she deserved it.

"And I don't... I don't want to. I don't want to have this baby." Another pause, then she dragged in another deep breath and began crying in earnest. "That might be the most horrible thing I've ever said."

"How do you figure that?"

She shook her head, trembling harder still. "I don't know who I am anymore."

It was another moment like in the graveyard. One second standing a few feet away, studying her, and the next on his knees in front of her. No sense of the time between. Just there and gone and back.

"Slayer," he said, hesitating, then reaching up to cup her cheek. It was a risky move, touching her at all, but she didn't flinch away when his fingers met her skin. "Nothin' wrong with not wanting to be a mum, you know."

"There's not wanting to be a mom and then there's hoping that some vampire kicks you hard enough that you..." A small sob broke off her lips and she looked down. Not at him, but at her lap. "I thought I did. Once. I thought... I always thought of kids as part of the normal package that I wanted. But all I can think now is this...fear. It's always something. It's always Dawn or the end of the world or people leaving, and it's always *me*. I don't have enough *me* for everyone. For the world. For my friends. How am I supposed to have enough *me* for a baby?"

Spike opened his mouth but closed it. He couldn't pretend to know what to say. There hadn't been many times since discovering he was in love with Buffy that he'd genuinely wished he had a soul, and those times had been rooted in anger and resentment. How much easier it would be to romance her if he checked off all her ideal criteria. If she didn't have the argument that he was evil to his core to fall back on, and had to confront the reality that was whatever they were to each other. Mortal enemies, yes, but something else. Something much more. Something that had been there from the beginning.

He'd never wished he had a soul so that he would know what to say or do. Not until right now, this moment, and the wishing was so deep and intense he could almost choke on it.



But he didn't have a soul. All he had was himself. He just hoped that would be enough.

"Don't have to," he said after the silence had stretched on just a smidge past comfortable. Then, realizing he was still stroking her face, he lowered his hand. He didn't want her associating his touch with this conversation. "Easier ways of gettin' rid of it than hopin' some tosser pummels it out of you."

Buffy flinched and looked away. But she didn't call him evil or disgusting, so he'd take that as a win. "It's different."

"How's it different?"

"If I lose it because of a fight... It's less that I did it. More that it happened to me." She shook her head and heaved a sigh. "I know. Don't say it."

"That's barmy."

"I said don't say it."

"Think you need to hear it. You go out there and let yourself get beaten, what bloody good does that do anyone? Fuck, could do a lot more damage than—"

"I know."

She kept saying that, but he didn't think she did. "This sprog's not worth losin' your life over," he said thickly. "Somethin' goes wrong—"

"Something *already* went wrong," Buffy snapped, meeting his eyes again, her own set into a glare. "Something always goes wrong when it comes to me and sex. Angel loses his soul or the guy is a jerk the next morning or he stays around long enough to decide I'm the problem and take off for the army. All I wanted was... I just needed to feel something."

"And you couldn't do it with me."

He didn't mean to let the words loose, but they fell out anyway. Selfish but true all the same.

But Buffy didn't take the bait. Didn't stoop to tend to his wounded ego. Instead, she sucked in her cheeks and looked away once more. "I just feel like I'm being punished," she said hoarsely. "And it won't stop. I can't get it to stop. No matter what I do."

That was it. All it took. The selfish thoughts, the jealousy, the resentment that he'd been trying to temper since she'd let slip what had happened, everything faded, and in such a way he knew it wouldn't come

back. This woman could break his heart a thousand times over—had done, by last count. Yet somehow, he kept ending up with her, ending up close to her when she wouldn't let anyone else. And that meant something. It all meant something.

He didn't need wonder after the others, if she'd asked the witches for a potion or Anya for some goodies from the shop. She was, as in all things, alone.

But alone with him, and that meant something too.

"Those things you said, they're things that just bloody happened," he said slowly, brain tripping over itself to find the right words. Say the right thing. Hope that whatever came out wasn't so monstrous she decided to take off. Whatever else, Spike was pretty bloody certain the last thing she needed at the moment was to be alone. "They weren't punishment for anything."

Buffy snorted but didn't look up.

"Told you once before you had bleeding tragic taste in men. Don't think that's changed a lick. You pick wankers who make you feel less than what you are. What *they* do, Summers. Not what you do." He paused, his jaw tight. He didn't want to think about whoever she'd shared her bed with last—didn't rightly trust himself to not snarl. The jealousy and resentment was gone, sure, but his hatred of whoever had been lucky enough to find himself between her thighs would burn until the stars winked out. Not a thing he could do about that. "Every choice you've made ever since I've known you has been because of what you think you *should* do or want. Or because you're so sodding eager to throw yourself on the sword so no else has to. Bound to catch up with you one of these days."

Now she did look up, and fuck if that wasn't heady. Having Buffy's attention, her focus on him. Her eyes clear and, if he wasn't completely out of his own bloody tree, she was really listening. A revelation that was both heady and intimidating as hell. Meant he had something to lose if he misspoke. If he let some of his demon out.

"What's it you want?" he asked. "And be honest with yourself. No one to hear you but me."

She hesitated, licked her lips. He tried and failed not to follow the motion with his eyes.

"I want to not feel like this."

"Like what?"

"Trapped." Buffy licked her lips again, pressed them together and shook. "Alone. Like I'm about to ruin any chance I had at...at ever *not* feeling like this again." She closed her eyes and rattled a deep sigh. "Like losing when I win, but I don't even get to win anymore. Like how last week I thought my life was already as awful as it would ever be but how now I would give anything to go back to last week. To just feel *that* and not *this* on top of everything else. To have those problems instead."

They had circled back to the obvious solution, whether she knew it or not. He just had to hope when he suggested it this time, she really heard. Push any harder and she'd likely shut down.

"I got some dosh," he said, still speaking slowly. Fighting his own instinct to speak without thinking, which was bloody hard. Harder than it ever had been with Dru. But then, Dru had never been prone to accusing him of anything other than something barmy like not loving her enough to make the big calls. Or not being monster enough for her, or loving someone else, someone he shouldn't, and that had been easy enough to argue because he'd thought she was telling tall tales to justify hurting him. It hadn't been true. Had been a thing he needed to prove wrong so she could eat bloody crow and welcome him back with open arms. "Not much, mind. Was scrapin' a bit away here or there. Tryin'... Doin' what I thought you'd want me to do when you weren't here. Lookin' out for the Bit. Bein' the mum you couldn't be anymore."

Buffy was looking at him now with interest. "How?"

"Play a mean hand of cards."

"For kittens. And you cheat. I've seen it."

"Not the only game in town, you know." He released a low, steady breath just for the sake of feeling his chest expand and deflate. "And it's not just monsters who are eager to empty their pockets."

"Spike..."

"Idea was I could squirrel it away for her. So she had it when she needed it. Didn't want it goin' to the witches or Harris, so I kept it myself." Spike flicked his gaze back to her face to catch her reaction. He

hadn't even noticed when he'd looked down. "Didn't say a bloody word to anyone about it until now."

Her brow had furrowed, forming those little lines he'd more than once thought about kissing just to catch her off guard. "Are you saying you had a college fund started for Dawn?"

Well, put like that, it was right ridiculous. Spike bristled and shook his head at himself. "Just didn't want her to need anything," he said again. "Not after... But then you popped back into the land of the living, so I started usin' it to buy the usual. Smokes and blood and the like." He didn't mention the half-baked and ultimately abandoned ideas he'd had about getting the money to her without her being in a moral tangle about it. Didn't figure now was the time. "Point is, Slayer, it was for whatever kid sis might need. Can be for whatever you need, too."

She understood immediately, and understanding meant remembering why she was here, which darkened the light that had started to enter her eyes. Buffy cleared her throat and hugged herself tighter, breaking her gaze from his again. And for a long time, it seemed, that was how they sat. The thing unspoken but heard all the same, the offer on the table. He wanted to push and knew he couldn't, wanted to make his bloody case. Argue with her that it wouldn't be wrong because it was legal, right, and legal things weren't wrong, but he wasn't so daft that he didn't see the Buffy logic that would overpower actual logic. Her sense of what was right wasn't so bloody straightforward and it never had been. Was enough to drive him out of his sodding head.

"Spike."

Spike lifted his eyes to hers again.

"Tell me... Tell me it's okay."

"What's that?"

"Tell me I'm not a bad person." She sniffed and fresh tears began sparkling in her eyes. "Tell me I can do this, and it'll be okay."

"You'll believe me?"

She shrugged. "Worth a shot."

At least she was giving him her honesty. That was encouraging.

"You put it all on the bloody line for others all the bloody time," he said, keeping his tone even and measured. "You choose your mates, your sis, the sodding world over Buffy Summers whenever asked. Way I see it,

not much has ever been your choice. Just the way things were. Doomed from the start.” A beat. “This here is somethin’ that can be your choice. What happens next. Only person on the line is you. Choosin’ yourself every now and then isn’t wrong, love. It’s how you survive.”

He waited for her to roll her eyes and scoff, sneer something about how typical it was of him to view it like that—black and white. That he thought whatever was growing inside of her wasn’t a person, and the reason he saw it that way was *he* wasn’t a person either, and the easy way out was easy because it was wrong, as most easy things were.

He waited for her to choose something other than herself. Instead, she looked at him through her tears and spoke in a voice that cracked. “I don’t think Sunnydale has a clinic.”

“No bother. Got me a set of wheels, don’t I?”

Buffy inhaled sharply. “The bike? You’d...you’d take me to LA?”

“Not a lot of places I wouldn’t take you if you asked. ‘Cept maybe to Angel’s doorstep.” Though experience and being a soft touch meant she could likely talk him into that, too, if it was that important to her. Spike never had been in the habit of denying the women in his life anything they wanted—even if it hurt him to give it.

“And if I change my mind...once I’m there. What happens then?”

“Not sure what you mean. You think I’ll muscle you into a sodding clinic? Not like I can.”

“No, you...you won’t think less of me.”

This surprised him—surprised her too, if the way she flushed and looked away meant anything. “Why would I think less of you?”

“I dunno,” she mumbled, pointedly not meeting his eyes. “For *not* choosing me. For... for letting this make my life worse. For falling on the sword—all the things you said. And I know... Spike, I know you’re mad that I was with anyone. After the kissage and everything.”

He shook his head as though by doing so he could keep the anger and jealousy he’d wrangled into submission from surging forward again. “Told me yourself it was a spell, didn’t you?”

“But you know it wasn’t.”

God, she was trying to kill him. “It’s nothing. Don’t worry your pretty little head about it. Was a prat to think we could be anything. That it could mean to you what I wanted it to.”

Buffy didn't respond at that, her silence both agreement and disagreement. So much of her lived these days in that gray area he didn't know how to navigate.

"I'll have to think of a reason," she said a moment later. "Something to tell the others. Why I'm going to LA."

He hated the suggestion even before it was out of his mouth, but said it anyway. "Could always be goin' back to see—"

"No. I don't want him to know anything about this."

Spike tilted his head. "Not suggestin' we actually drop by, love. Just reckon he's as good an excuse as any."

"No," she said again, firmer this time. And then she looked at him straight-on. "If we bring Angel into it, the others might call him if they don't hear from me. If I'm not... They might call him and then he'd know something was wrong."

"Runnin' the odds of that happenin' anyway. You go quiet on them and they're bound to ring up the giant walking forehead."

"I know that. I'm not dumb."

"Didn't say you were, pet, but—"

"But if that happens and they call him and say, 'Hey, Buffy said she was coming to visit,' that's worse. That's me lying to them which will just make them worry even more. And make Angel worry, and then everyone will be all up in my face about everything and I just can't take that." She said all this very fast, as though something were chasing her to get the words out. "That's them finding out. They can never find out. I'm not who Angel thinks I am. I'm not who anyone thinks I am."

"You're Buffy Summers. All you need to be."

"Well, they think Buffy Summers is something else. All of them do. And I... I think if I had to see how disappointed they'd be in me right now, it'd just..." She blinked but didn't tear her gaze from his. "You're the only one I can be around. Or you were. And I... I thought I'd lost that."

Fuck, he didn't care if she staked him. There was only so much a man could take. Spike surged forward and threw his arms around her, reeled her to his chest. Might not get much, might not get anything at all, but the need to touch her—to feel her warmth and her skin, to be who she needed him to be—overrode all else. "Never lose me, Buffy," he murmured into her hair. "Never. Even if you... Even if this is all it is."

She made no move to either embrace him in kind or push him away. Just let him hug her and spoke into his shoulder when she replied. "But that's not what you sang. You wanted me to leave you alone if I—"

"Want *you* more," he promised her. "Know what I sang. Can't say I don't feel it and god knows I can't turn it off. But it matters, yeah?"

"And what do you get out of it?"

"Knowin' I made a difference, I suppose. To you." Spike hesitated, then pulled back enough to catch her eyes. "I want you here when you're not. Even if havin' you like this, close like we are, drives me outta my head. Bloody song didn't include that bit."

He wasn't sure, but he thought he might have seen her lips twitch as though to stifle a grin. "Again with the not knowing if I'll actually go through with it," she said a moment later. "Could be a trip we take for nothing."

"You're gonna spend a few hours snuggled up behind me on the bike. Wouldn't call that nothing."

No missing it this time. He'd made the Slayer grin. Not the sort that brightened a room or stuck around for more than a second, but somehow more powerful because of it. Because he knew how hard it had been to win. An impossible task he'd conquered after so many failures where she was concerned. And that meant a lot. Meant bloody everything.

"You do what you need to," he said. "Got me for the ride no matter what."

Buffy's chin began to wobble again, but she didn't look away. Just sat there and let him watch her not be strong. Yet she was Buffy, which meant she could be nothing but strong. Even if she didn't see it. Maybe because she didn't.

"I need to call," she said thickly. "Probably. Make an appointment. If I can... If I do, I'll let you know. And if I don't...can we just never talk about this again?"

He nodded, even as the rest of him began screaming its protest. "Ball's in your court, Slayer. Whatever you decide."

It could go that way so easily, too. Buffy thinking and feeling one thing when she was with him and something else once she'd given it some distance. Coming back around on everything—on him. The things

she said and the things she believed, these horrible thoughts she was determined to live with. It would be just like her, especially now. Feeling the way she was about herself, what she'd done, and what came next.

But somehow, he knew she'd turn up tomorrow. Tell him the appointment had been made. He just felt it.

And if she did, if she chose herself, if she showed up to let him take her away...

Well, he wasn't sure he had the faintest idea what that would mean. Just hope it was something good.



HE WASN'T LOOKING for her the next night. Well, not consciously, at least. Couldn't say the thought that he might run into her hadn't crossed his head as he'd set out to get his own spot of violence in. And, fine, maybe he was a mite concerned that he'd find her trying to force a miscarriage again, but after the way he'd found her the previous night, no one could bloody blame him.

Turned out the worry was for naught. When he found Buffy, it was because she was out looking for him to tell him she'd made an appointment. The clinic in Los Angeles could see her as soon as Friday morning.

"If the offer stands," she'd said. "I still don't know if I'll... I might not do it."

The offer stood regardless of whether or not she went through with it, he assured her. All she had to do was show up.

That said, as the week crept on, his confidence began to wane. Buffy was someone who could do a lot of damage with time, particularly to herself. The more room she had to think, the higher the odds that she'd change her mind. Convince herself that anything he agreed to help her do would be evil, and therefore the opposite of what a good girl should do. That was, after all, what Buffy was through and through. A good girl. So good that just being around her made him burn with awareness of how good he wasn't, and how off his gourd he'd been to ever think she might go for something more than that one magnificent snog. There was always a reason to not put herself first.

But then Thursday afternoon transitioned into evening and she was



here. Standing on the other side of the crypt door, a bag slung over her shoulder, wearing sweats, a windbreaker, and a leather jacket over that. She had pulled her hair away from her face, which was makeup free, and regarded him with an uneasy look that was half-nerve and the rest bluster.

And she didn't hesitate. Just dove right on in.

"Ready?"

He blinked at her like a bloody moron. "Thought it was tomorrow."

"It is. In the morning. Not exactly prime vampire traveling hours, even if I did want to get up that early." Buffy's face fell a little when she caught him eyeing the travel bag. "I thought we'd need to leave tonight. A-and get a room. But the look you're giving me is making me think maybe I was an idiot, so—"

"No," Spike blurted, giving his head a shake and willing that to jar his brain into doing more than spinning its wheels. "Not you. We'll go now. Right now. Just give me a mo' to grab some stuff."

She shifted, uncertain.

"Buffy, you want to do this and we'll do it. Just wasn't expectin' to..." What should he say here? *Spend the night with you?* Because that was what was going to happen, right? If they left now, they'd need to get a place when they arrived. A place where he'd be with her when she slept, and fuck, that thought was more than a little heady. "Just hadn't thought it all through is all. That we'd need to leave tonight."

She dragged her teeth over her lower lip. "Maybe I should've been clearer when we talked."

"No, I should've cottoned on. Just bein' thick." Spike offered what he hoped was a reassuring smile. "Like I said, I'll be ready in a flash."

"We'll need a room. I don't know if you factored that into... I'm kinda being a mooch here." Buffy glanced down again. "I can't pay for that. I can't pay for anything that's not food or house stuff, and even that's iffy. I guess I... You already said you had money for the...the thing, so I kinda just assumed you'd cover getting a place for the night."

There it was again—the image of them sharing quarters. Buffy stripping down to her most vulnerable and cuddling up beside him. Perhaps resting her head on his chest, hugging him to her and letting him be the strong one for once. And because he was evil, that wasn't where the

fantasy stopped. While he had the dosh to book them a decent room, he also enough to book an *indecent* room at the sort of place with paper-thin walls where they could kip to the soundtrack of shagging on all sides. Not the sort of thing that fussed him much, except he might feel the need to polish his knob. Particularly with her scent in his nostrils, and her being soft and vulnerable, and relying on him more than ever.

But the bubble burst. The Slayer would know that was exactly the reason for that choice in venue and trying to make her feel more uncomfortable than she did at the present, trying to take advantage of that, would make him a monster in every sense.

And he wasn't a true monster. Not anymore. Or he didn't think he wanted to be. Especially if not being a monster was what it took to bring Buffy to his doorstep.

"Right," he said hoarsely, nodding. "We'll get us a room. Somewhere posh."

"I don't need posh. Just a bed." She went red in the cheeks. "Single bed. I mean, me in a bed and you in a bed. Separate beds. Way with the separate."

"Buffy—"

"Just to be absolutely clear, this is not a—"

"I know it's not," he snapped, likely harsher than he needed, given the way her face fell. All because he'd been thinking things he ought not think and she was quick enough to call him out on it. *Balls*. "Sorry, pet, didn't mean to... Just dunno what to say, you know?"

Buffy cracked a broken sort of smile that made his heart twist. "I know."

"Still goin'?"

She nodded, the smile fading. "Yeah. I... I still might change my mind when we get there. Not saying anything's final until it's final. But I want to go. Right now, I want to go."

So that's what they did. Spike found a pair of jeans and a T-shirt that smelled clean enough to mingle with whatever Buffy had packed, along with a fresh pair of socks and an unopened pack of fags, which he planned to smoke straight through once she was off doing what she needed doing. Better find a room with a bar nearby, too, or at least a

decent liquor store. He had a feeling he'd want to get nice and sloshed. Easier to hide behind bad booze than honest conversation.

Though if Buffy were to truly offer him that, he knew he wouldn't say no. Not when she was placing more faith in him and trusting him not to bungle it. Doing what he'd always hoped and never truly believed she would.

Buffy had thankfully thought ahead enough to have dressed sensibly for the trip. The windbreaker and the leather jacket should take the brunt of the cool air, though he made her wait while he tore through his things to see if he could find a pair of gloves. Seemed like the sort of garment Harm would have left behind, thinking they looked stylish or what all. Something Buffy would need. He remembered all too well how she'd complained about the wind the time he'd taken her to the card game, and that had been just a brief stint across town. All these human sensibilities he needed to make sure he considered.

At least he remembered the helmet.

"What's this?" Buffy asked after he pitched it to her.

"What's it look like?"

"You want me to wear a helmet?"

"Fancy arrivin' there with your skull all nice and in one piece, yeah, now that you mention it."

Her eyebrows winged upward. "Are you that crappy a driver?"

"No," he replied, drawing the word out, "but it's a long bloody trip, right, and I'm not gonna be the only vampire in sodding history who did a slayer in by makin' her something you scrape off the interstate."

She wrinkled her nose. "Thank you very much for that visual."

Spike snickered and overturned one of the more recent end tables he'd salvaged. "Don't suppose you brought gloves with you."

"That's what you're looking for?"

He lifted a shoulder, suddenly self-conscious. "Just want you to be comfortable, is all. Bit of a ride to LA."

There was a beat, one he didn't know how to read. Then he felt her shift and turned just in time to watch her drag a pair of leather gloves from the shoulder bag, the helmet propped up under her arm.

"Ah," he said. Should've started there. "Guess we're ready then."

Buffy offered a half-smile, and though it might have been wishful

thinking, he could have fooled himself into believing he'd caught a glimmer of light in her eyes. "Guess so," she said.

Right then. Nothing left to do but hit the road.

And keep trying to be the man she needed him to be.



IT WAS LATE by the time they rolled into town. Or later than it would have been had he been traveling alone. But Spike hadn't been traveling alone, and as such, had paid an inordinate amount of attention to highway novelties such as speed limits and road signs. Always ready to slow down and grab an exit if he felt the telltale squeeze around his middle—the way he and Buffy had pieced together she would inform him that she needed a loo or a bite to eat or both. True, she could have whispered in his ear and he would have heard her just fine over the roar of the wind, but he'd wagered there wouldn't be too many opportunities to feel Buffy hug him, and even if his system hadn't strictly been hugs, he'd take what he could get.

She hadn't said a word on the trip as it was. Not to him or herself, and he'd been listening. Ready to seize the softest sigh or groan, examine it to see if he could suss out what was going on inside her head. The Buffy who had lived before that final battle with Glory had been so easy for him to read. Not always and not wholesale, but in all the ways that mattered. He'd felt so attuned to her that the breaths she took echoed through him. All poetic, like. Being that close to his mortal enemy.

This Buffy was different. Not where it counted, of course, but he couldn't read her as well. Or maybe he could and he just didn't trust what he was seeing. Or feeling. Case in point—he'd spent the days following the night of their epic identity crisis wondering if he'd made a mistake, walking away from her when she'd given him the brush-off at the Bronze. Wondering what might have happened if he'd waited just a little, stood about while she drank her sorrows and been there, ready, when she slid off the stool and popped over to the loo.

And ever since she'd told him that she'd gone to find him—that when she'd taken her anonymous sperm donor to bed, it had been him she'd

wanted—he'd been bloody well torturing himself thinking of what might have been and what his fragile fucking ego had cost him.

At the same time, driving himself up the wall wondering if *she* wished it had gone differently. If *she* wished she had found him when she'd wanted, tugged him into some janitor closet or maybe outside—if she would have let him fuck her against the alley wall. Or if even now she felt like she had dodged a bullet. What was one little medical procedure compared to letting the undead into her heart again?

If that was even where he was. Where he'd be. Or maybe he'd dodged a bullet, himself. Loving her but not having her, the way it had been for Finn. Only, he couldn't imagine anything being worse than this. Feeling this desperate longing and knowing at least some of it was mutual, but never getting to touch. Never getting to go any further than this here. Being the person in whom she confided her darkest secrets.

The person who was her friend.

He was that, wasn't he?

The silence on the trip was good for one thing—gave him plenty of time to work over what sort of place they ought to hang their stakes for the night. She'd said she didn't need posh, but the more he thought about it, the more he was certain that was a load of bunk. For what Buffy was thinking about doing, for whatever she was turning over in her head, she deserved someplace nice. A place that felt close to luxurious. Hell, maybe he could talk her into treating herself, using some of the extras these joints all tried to one-up each other with. A spa or what all. One of those places Dru had always fancied but never actually gotten around to enjoying in full, as she'd get hungry in the middle of whatever service was being performed and that would be the end of that.

Come to think of it, there were a lot of wining and dining options in the city. He could pamper the Slayer like the royalty she was. Let her see just how nicely he treated the women he loved, no matter what they were going through.

Or, he reasoned, he could let her set the pace. Stop trying to impress her and just be for her what she needed. And all else aside, Buffy had been bloody good at letting him know what that was. There, at least, she was easy to read. As easy as she'd ever been.

The hotel he decided on was downtown, as close to everything as he

wagered a bloke could get in a city this sprawling. There was a garage nearby that would run up a pretty penny too, but he decided to forfeit pride just to avoid adding to Buffy's worries. While they were here, he'd do everything proper-like. Pay for any goods or services even if places were so ill-staffed they practically begged to be robbed. He'd care for her the way she needed. The way she asked.

"I didn't know you had that much cash," she said once they were in the room and the door to the hallway was safely closed behind them.

"Yeah, caught on for the way you were oglin' me downstairs," Spike replied, tossing his duster on the bed closest to the wall. "Subtlety's not your strong suit, Summers."

She gave him a look that was so refreshingly her that he couldn't keep from cracking a grin. "Whereas you are the epitome of stealth," she quipped. "Did you *really* win all that, or is this one of those things where the truth would be hazardous for your health?"

"Callin' me a liar?"

"Calling you a vampire, so yes, I guess."

He smirked in spite of himself. "Don't suppose I can account for every dollar. Wanted to do it right, the way you'd want me to do it, but there mighta been a night I was so pissed I fell back on old habits." Or just habits, regular. It wasn't like he avoided stealing if the opportunity arose. And after so many years, it had become second nature. Watching for gits who were woozy on their feet, paying attention to where they stashed their wallets, making a quick grab and disappearing before they knew to miss something. True, back in the day, it had been just as easy to snap their necks in the doing, but Spike had always gotten a thrill in managing to take something from a man without him ever being the wiser. There was no challenge to tearing a bloke's throat out—there was to unburdening him of his dosh without him catching on.

"Just tell me they deserved it," Buffy said, wandering toward the other bed. "It'll make me feel less guilty to spend money that's not mine."

"They deserved it," he replied quickly, meaning it but also knowing they probably had different definitions of *deserve* in this context. "We should get you fed."

"Not hungry."

“Don’t give me that. Felt your tummy rumbling against me the entire drive up.”

A pretty pink stole across her cheeks and she looked away. “Because that’s not creepy or anything.”

“What? You expect me to turn it off? Not exactly somethin’ that comes with a switch.”

Buffy didn’t respond at that, just kept staring at a spot on the wall behind him the way she did these days when she was mulling something over. After a beat, she released a breath and seemed to deflate. “Can...can you hear *it*?”

“Hear what?”

“*It*.” She hesitated before placing a hand against her belly in that universal way women seemed to have when they were expecting. “Do you hear a heartbeat?”

“That important?”

“I... I don’t know. No. Maybe.” Buffy dragged her teeth across her lower lip, still not looking at him. “Just trying to wrap my head around... My job is to save people. Save lives. If I go tomorrow and do this, am I even me still?”

“You’re always gonna be you, love.”

“I knew you’d say that.”

“Yeah, well, sorry to spoil the surprise. Doesn’t mean it’s not the truth.” Spike snapped his mouth shut, his mind turning over, trying to find the words she needed to hear, if they even existed. He wasn’t sure they did. He wagered they’d do this a hundred more times before she settled on what she aimed to do, and that was all right. He had the strength for it. Had learned Dru’s favorite rhymes and songs specifically so he could break them out on repeat whenever the mood took her. This might not be the same, but it was close enough. “Way I look at it, you’re savin’ someone whatever you choose.”

Buffy snorted and finally brought her eyes back to his.

“*You’re* someone,” Spike said, taking a step toward her. “Most bloody important someone there is, by my count. The one who keeps everythin’ moving.”

“One life against all those I’ve saved. Not the first time I’ve heard that argument.”

“Not what I said,” he replied, trying for patience he wasn’t sure he could fake. “Not against those you’ve saved. Against *you*. Makin’ the call that means you get to go on. Do your hero thing. Live the life you wanna live when you’re not tryin’ to save the world.”

She looked away, fell quiet once more—the sort of oppressive quiet that pushed against his shoulders. Then, softly, “Would you say the same thing if it was yours?”

“If *what* was mine?”

Buffy licked her lips and again flattened her hand against her belly. “If we’d... If you somehow got me pregnant and I didn’t want to keep the baby, would you say the same thing? Or would you think I was some sort of monster?”

*Bloody hell*, he swore it was this woman’s mission to exploit each way she could to knock him for a six. That was the only explanation he could find. “Vampire,” he said.

“This is a hypothetical. Your being a vampire doesn’t count.”

“Well, yeah, of course I’d feel different. Would mean somethin’ else, right?” Spike eyed her stomach, still flat, and tried to imagine her swollen and round, waddling around with a bit of him growing inside of her. It had been more than a century since he’d entertained such thoughts, what it would mean to have children. Even during his human days, that particular future that had always been hypothetical and distant. *Want* had very little to do with it—it was just the way things worked. Men got married and women got pregnant, end of bloody story. “But if it was doin’ to you what this is,” he continued a second later. “Makin’ you feel how you said you felt... Reckon it wouldn’t matter what I wanted.”

She gave him a look of pure incredulity. “Get real.”

“Oh, I’m real enough.” He bore his gaze into hers, daring her to look away. “Told you once there wasn’t much I wouldn’t do to keep you from pain, and that hasn’t changed. Always gonna want that because, like it or not, I’m in love with you. That’s not the sorta thing a man can turn off, and god knows I’ve tried.” Spike drew in a breath, felt the way his lungs inflated, the useless mechanics of it all. Life came in a lot of forms and always had. Some bright and obvious and others less so—others mimicking it best they could in absence of what people thought it meant to be



human. Maybe that was a simple way of viewing the world, but it was the only one he had, and it had served him well this far along.

"What I want is you," he said. "And you to be...you. To want to be here too. To not hurt. The rest doesn't matter."

The skepticism had faded from her eyes. Everything about her now was soft. "Do you mean that?"

"Much as I can."

That was the thing about hypotheticals. He could guess he was telling her the truth, mean what he said when he said it, but never actually know unless the impossible happened and the hypothetical became something more than smoke. He suspected the real question had something to do with the woman she was—if he could forgive her for doing what she thought might be unforgivable.

Truth was there was nothing she could do that wouldn't make him love her, and though he might not have the highest opinion of her mates, he suspected strongly that they would say the same.

"Thank you," Buffy said, bloody well startling him out of his thoughts. Spike whipped his head up just in time to catch her glancing away, her cheeks full of color once more. "For that."

"Was nothin'."

"No, it's definitely something." She worked her throat, and the air again stung with the hint of tears. "I need to... While I'm feeling it, while I'm *this* Buffy, I need to tell you something. And I need to not look at you while I do it."

There was a long, thick beat. He thought about asking what she meant but decided not to insult either of them by pretending like he didn't know.

"I meant what I said before," she went on at last. "That...I was feeling things. For you. I have been ever since I got back. To say this confuses me is a dramatic understatement because...well, you know why. And I don't know if I'll ever be not-confused where you're concerned." Buffy swallowed again. "I know that's not what you want to hear. I know you want me to just be able to be okay with whatever I'm feeling and go with it. Part of me wants that too. A not-small part, actually. But I hope you see why it scares me."

“Slayer, when I realized I was in love with you, it bloody terrified me. Wanted nothing more than for it to go away.”

He might have missed it were he anything but a vampire, but since he was a vampire, he didn’t miss anything. Her lips twitched like she was trying to ward off a smile, and like so many things where Buffy was concerned, it felt momentous. A victory worth celebrating. Getting to be with her but also being the one who put looks like that on her face. Like death and rebirth all over again.

“Flattering,” Buffy said dryly, though there was affection in her voice that she couldn’t hide. “But yeah. I just... I don’t know what it means or if it means anything. All I do know is that I kinda led you on and then hurt you with this. And you’re still here for me. You didn’t have to be but—”

“Buffy, I’ll—”

She held up a hand and finally met his eyes again, her own brimming. “I’m getting that,” she said. “There’s not much I get any more, but I do get that. Right now, at least. While I’m this Buffy. I’m sure I’ll have all kinds of feelings on it when I become the other Buffy.”

The one who ran, she meant. The one who couldn’t stand to be vulnerable around him. The one who had sought out another man in the hopes of putting whatever she was feeling for Spike behind her for good.

And maybe he was a sap for reading anything into this at all, but the fact that Buffy knew those dichotomies existed within herself filled him with hope.

“Anyway,” she said, “I just wanted you to know.”

Spike said nothing for a stretch. It was one of the only times in his life he could remember not having words within easy distance. At length, he cleared his throat and nodded, muttered a hoarse thanks, and decided now wasn’t the time to pursue anything more.

She had other things to worry about. He’d just as soon not be one of them.



SPIKE FOUND he liked the idea of *the other Buffy*. Fit rather nicely with the way he’d experienced her ever since the night she’d walked down the

stairs and damn near broken him just by the miracle of being alive. The Buffy who had shown up, stared at him while he rambled on like a prat. He'd been hungry to keep her around, say something that would make her want to stay with him, because letting her out of his sight was bloody painful. And he'd done something right then, because she had kept coming by. Letting him have her time, occupy her space, telling him things she couldn't share with the others for reasons he both did and didn't understand. Making him be the person who knew her best in such a way even she couldn't deny it.

That Buffy had been the one he'd kissed outside of the Bronze as the others had sung their little finale. The other Buffy was who he'd met the night after. Both Buffy where it counted, just in startling contrast to each other. As though there had been an internal schism, and she sometimes didn't remember the way things had been between them after Glory had tortured the stuffing out of him. Gentler, softer, with trust and even some affection, but that was always at war with the Buffy who had locked him out of her house after he'd declared his love for her. The hardened Slayer facing off with herself.

Made sense. She was so good, the only person who stood a chance at taking her out was her. That was how it had happened with Glory. No reason it shouldn't keep happening. Especially now, with the other Buffy. The voice she kept expecting to pop up and tell her that going to a clinic to solve a little problem like an unwanted pregnancy was the wrong, evil, selfish thing to do.

"Could you...could you come with me?" Buffy asked that morning as she set the hotel phone back in its cradle, having confirmed the appointment. This thing she was doing suddenly made real. "I don't think I can go in there by myself."

Spike had looked at her, taken in her drawn eyes, the way her hands shook, then turned to the window and regarded the spears of sunlight the closed curtains couldn't quite block out. He hadn't known why he hadn't seen that coming, and he still didn't. Buffy was the most independent person he knew, though a lot of that was by design rather than choice. "Of course," he'd said, having no bloody idea how he'd manage it but knowing he *would* manage.

And he did, and without much fanfare. One of the many perks of

being in a city bloody brimming with demons, particularly demons who had business to tend to throughout the day. The vampires in Los Angeles had a bit more ambition than those in Sunnyhell, and had gone to great lengths to make sure the sun wasn't an obstacle. Or as much as they could reasonably without drawing attention. When sewer access became an issue, there was a conveniently shaded awning nearby or a large building, the sort that people cut through all the time. It took some creativity, but every path had been tread at one point or another. All he had to do was spot the signs.

Once at the clinic, Spike let Buffy steer him toward a chair in the small lobby, one near a coffee table that hosted a stack of magazines in various conditions. He plucked one up and opened it to a random page, listening with intent as the Slayer talked with the check-in lady before being issued a clipboard and a form to fill out. Then she walked back to him and sank into the seat at his right to begin filling in her information, which she did quickly, the scratches of the pen against paper complementing the elevated rhythm of her heart. There were nerves and second thoughts and fear and all the things Buffy never betrayed around him, fully on display but unacknowledged. It was enough that he knew they were there.

The only time she spoke was to ask about the money. He shifted without standing, rustled out the cash he'd promised, and stuffed it into her hand.

"You're sure?" she asked, not meeting his gaze. "Last chance to back out."

She already knew the answer to that, so there was only one reason she would have asked. "Do you want me to say no?"

She didn't reply, not at first. Just looked at him as she had all week, lost and imploring. Wanting reassurance he wasn't sure he was equipped to give but would, anyway, until his voice ran out.

"Slayer," he said softly, "whatever you choose, you couldn't be a bad person if you tried. You wanna call the whole thing off, that's fine. You wanna walk through those doors, that's fine too. We'll make it work, you and me. Here for whatever you need."

Maybe that was wishful thinking too, but he wanted her to hear it all the same. Felt like she needed to amid all the questions she was firing at

herself anew. Everything they had already discussed. Arguments already made.

Still, when she took the money from him and rose to her feet, he almost called her back. Worrying about what would happen once it was done and she started to doubt, started to think a whole new slew of dark thoughts, all with him at the center. How she would rage, hate him for bringing her this far, for telling her things he couldn't know for sure because he was the one without a soul. All the anger and sorrow that might be coming. That might redefine whatever it was they were from this moment onward.

But he hadn't called her back. And she hadn't turned around. Just followed the nurse through the door and into the clinic proper.

Leaving him to wait.



IT WAS AMAZING, how little it took in the end, this thing that felt large. How a few days ago he hadn't known anything except he hadn't seen her in a stretch, and how everything she'd told him after finding her getting the tar beaten out of her had snowballed. How it was that he'd ended up here. Somehow. That he hadn't let his anger or jealousy roll him over, or shoved his foot so far down his gullet that he choked on it.

Buffy hadn't said anything since she'd emerged. She'd lifted her gaze to his just long enough for him to read that it was over. They'd left the clinic with a stack of papers filled top-to-bottom with instructions on what came next, what was normal and what wasn't after an abortion. What to do if she had heavy bleeding or cramps. How much pain reliever she could take, though Spike privately doubled the recommended amount and would make an argument for it if necessary. A load of other things he hadn't considered part of the deal, human medical care being somewhat of a mystery to him.

He took her back to the hotel without asking. Sure, they could make the drive home now, but he sensed she needed rest more than she needed anything else. And when Buffy didn't object, he knew he'd made the right call.

She walked straight into the room and shut herself in the shower. He made sure there was food waiting for her when she got out.

He also made sure she ate. Was prepared to shovel whatever he needed to shovel down her throat, risk her wrath and more besides. But Buffy didn't object when he told her he'd ordered some nosh. She didn't exactly eat with enthusiasm but did devour most everything he shoved under her nose, and that gave him heart.

It wasn't until night had fallen that she spoke. Standing beside the bed that was hers, staring at it with an unreadable expression, then looking at him.

"Could you just...hold me tonight?" she asked, her voice raw. Not with tears or emotion, but not with nothing, either. Like she had been thoroughly defeated and had no other way to express it. "Just hold me, and it not mean anything?"

Spike was in motion before he realized it, scrambling over her mattress and knocking the blankets all askew so he could tug her into his arms. Feel her warm and trembling and alive, and for the moment, at least, not hating him for being the one who was here with her now. The one who had brought her, told her it was okay. The one who would carry this secret the way he'd carried the others.

And it *wouldn't* mean anything. Not the way he wanted it to, at least, but that was okay too. The *okay* he'd have to live with the way she'd live with everything else. And he could handle that. He could be the man who was this close without having her.

With Buffy curled up against him, her scent in his nose and throat and everywhere else, her head against his shoulder and her breaths fanning his skin, Spike could be whatever man she needed him to be.

He thought about telling her so, but then, she already knew.



HE ENDED up paying for three nights at the hotel, even though they only spent the two. Had to keep the room until after sundown the following day, and he would have stayed longer if she'd asked. But she didn't ask, knowing as she undoubtedly did that this little detour from her regular life had to end in order to properly be a detour. No matter if she wasn't

physically up for an extended stretch on the motorcycle, which she promised she was. Slayer healing, and all. What took other women a few days to recover from worked differently with her.

Not that differently, he'd wanted to argue, but he hadn't, untrusting that his objections came from a place of genuine concern and not just the desire to hold her through another night. Or all the nights.

But Spike also knew the longer he kept her gone, the more likely it was that the other Buffy would show up, and he couldn't be around for that. Not at first, at least. Call him a coward or a jerk or selfish or all of it, but exchanging the soft warmth and gratitude she favored him with now for hatred and blame would be a bitter bloody pill to swallow. And odds were good the switch would come at any time, he thought. Saw that in the notes the docs had sent Buffy home with, that emotions could be all over the place after terminating a pregnancy thanks to hormonal changes and the like. Felt a bit like he was in a race with the clock.

After sunset, they packed up the room together, not speaking. Then they checked out, not speaking, and walked, not speaking, to the garage where he'd parked the bike.

It was only after he was astride the thing, Buffy's arms around his middle, that Spike felt safe breaking the quiet.

"Squeeze tight if you need anything, love," he said, looking over his shoulder to make sure her helmet was in place. "I'll pull over in a pinch."

He listened for a second for a reply that never came. There was the shaky cadence of her breath, the thump of her heart, and nothing but road ahead. So he revved up the engine, allowed himself a second to enjoy the way her grip on him tightened on instinct—just a little, not enough to count as a signal—and how it remained that way every mile he put behind them as they made their way home.

Maybe there were some things that couldn't go back to being the way they had been. Maybe.

It was probably too soon to tell.



SPIKE KEPT that last image with him for the next couple of weeks—the one of Buffy looking over her shoulder at him before she closed her front

door. The drive home had been straightforward to the point of boring—or *would* have been without the sensation of her head against his back. Hard for a fella to be bored under those circumstances, never mind the state his thoughts had been in.

He'd half-dreaded that the switch would occur the second he killed the engine outside her place, that she would have spent the duration of the drive silently hating him and waiting for the chance to let him know just how much. How he'd failed her when she'd needed him to save her, let her do something she would spend the rest of her life regretting.

That didn't happen, though. Not when she slipped off the bike nor when she pried the helmet off her head. There had been a beat, a long one, in which she'd stared at the house as though debating the virtues of walking through the door, and the moment where she'd realized she had to.

Buffy had turned to him then, still *this* Buffy, with her sadness and her uncertainty, and that undefined thing she felt for him that might never be anything except what it was in that moment.

"Thank you," she'd said, then leaned forward and brushed a small kiss against the corner of his mouth. She'd lingered just a beat too long to be innocent but hadn't pressed for more. Hadn't asked him to whisk her away again, or about accommodations he might have at the crypt, or any of the other insane possibilities that had run through his skull. Just that soft kiss and her warm voice, and the way he'd felt what she said the same way he felt his fingers and toes and fangs. The words sinking into his bones, becoming a part of him. Another quiet thing they would share—that would link them together forever going forward.

Maybe that other Buffy would show up. Catch his eyes and bristle at the thought that he knew this part of her. Hate him for being the one who carried it with her. Maybe she would, but for the first time since she'd mentioned it, Spike wondered if they both had it wrong. That by acknowledging that other Buffy existed, they'd taken away her need to make an appearance.

It was a fanciful thought, if not downright barmy. But he'd carried it with him home, and he carried it with him still. Every second.

And it was what was with him when she finally did turn up. A full seventeen days after that last glimpse at her doorstep. He came home



after a late-afternoon blood run to find her standing in his crypt, wearing a silky, flowy number that made her look more ethereal than usual. She turned when he opened the door, looked at him with eyes that didn't hate, and offered a small smile.

"Hey," she said, twisting her fingers together.

"Lo."

"You're probably wondering what I'm doing here."

He nodded, not willing to betray too much. Not willing to hope. "Well, you're not comin' at me with a stake, so call me optimistic."

"I couldn't stake you, Spike."

"Oh ho, that's a new tune. Like it better than the old one."

Buffy waffled for a second before pulling a face and nodding. "All right, that's fair. I admit my mood has been of the unpredictable as of late."

"Just as of late?"

"Don't push it."

To his surprise, he found himself fighting back a grin. "Suppose I had that coming. So, what brings you by today, if you're not about to do me in?" He paused and considered, then decided there was no point in beating around the bush or pretending he hadn't spent every waking moment since he'd left her wondering after her. If she hated him or herself or both. If she regretted the choice she'd made. "How are you?"

She inhaled a sharp breath and seemed to consider the question. "I'm... okay."

"Are you?"

"Well, I won't say the past couple of weeks have been a good time or anything. There have been feelings and...wondering and thinking maybe I did something just..." Buffy looked away as though to gather herself, then swallowed. "I knew that was coming. That'd feel this way, so that's helped. The knowing. And every time I wonder just... I think about what it would be like if I hadn't, and I'm just... relieved. If that makes me a bad person—"

"Think we've been over this a time or two."

"Yeah, well, it's me, so I'm gonna go over it a lot more probably." Buffy turned and met his gaze again, this time with a soft little grin that faded quickly but filled him with hope all the same. "It was the right call."

I keep coming back to that. Thinking about how I felt, how everything was just crushing, and it's not now. Even during the times I think I'm the worst person in the world, it's better than it was. It's something I can live with. And I don't know if I would've gone without you, so thank you. For everything, really."

Buffy thanking him for anything was an experience unto itself, and one he wasn't sure how to navigate. "Always, Slayer," he said, doing his best to keep his tone neutral. "Whatever you need. You know where to find me."

Buffy wet her lips, diverted her eyes from his once more. "Funny you should bring that up because that's the other reason I came by. I was hoping you could help me out." She hesitated, then took a step toward him, making the material of her skirt sway around her legs, her nipples poking through her slinky pale top. "I'm going to the Bronze tonight. With the others. It'll be my first time back since my little blip in judgment."

"Blip?"

"That's what I've decided to call it, yes." Buffy waited for another second, then drew in a deep breath and lifted her head. "You could come with...if you wanted."

He looked at her, all whole and wonder, and felt something inside of him shift for good. "Like a date?"

"Like an I-don't-know-but-maybe?" She cleared her throat, her heart suddenly beating so fast he swore he could feel it in his own chest. "I just know I'm me when I'm with you. And that means a lot to me."

There were moments that had the ability to make or break a man, moments when he saw clearly what could be if he did things just right. This was one of those few he'd had with her, and given that all the others that had come before had changed his life for good, what came next might redefine existence as he knew it.

Whatever he'd done right, he just hoped he could keep doing. Keep having moments like this with her. However long they lasted.

"Lucky for you, I haven't made any plans tonight," Spike said, and couldn't help but warm under her smile. The first genuine one he'd seen on her face in a long time. All bright and sunshine, all life and Buffy. Not unburdened, not okay, but on the road to both.

If he was very lucky, maybe she'd let him travel it the whole way with her. Show her it didn't intimidate him any.

"So that's a yes?" she asked.

"You want me there, Slayer, you got me. Choice was always yours."

Buffy stepped closer, and nodded again. "Thank you for that," she whispered, and kissed him for the fourth time, but also for the first.

Perhaps, if he played his cards right, this would be the one that stuck.

Notes:

This fic was inspired by the leaked documents that informed us that SCOTUS intended to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, the precedent that allowed for privacy in women's healthcare. I wanted it to be finished by the time the final decision was released, but it didn't work out that way. My goal with this piece was to present abortion in a compassionate way that was true to both characters without being overly preachy. I can't say whether I met that goal and I imagine opinions will vary.

I have no personal experience with abortion so the details involving Buffy's abortion were vague and, admittedly, relied heavily on "movie/TV logic" in some areas. I chose to tell the story from Spike's POV in part for this reason. Someone who has never had an abortion and is unlikely to need one, but is sympathetic to the person who does and will do whatever they can to help. And someone whose opinion on the matter might be considered less-than (Spike because he's a vampire, me because I'm not religious). It seemed more appropriate than trying to tell the story from a more personal lens.

All errors are mine.

