

BRUISED

Enemies with Benefits #5



HOLLY DENISE



*Love just leaves you bruised
And I've got the scars to prove it*

This had seemed like a good idea at the time. And yes, the fact that she was thinking in clichés told her point-blank just how *bad* an idea this had been. Famous last words, and all.

Buffy forced another smile to her lips when her gaze connected with Riley's. Riley, who was still showering her with hopeful attention and clearly had different expectations for where tonight would go. Just drop by Lowell House, he'd said. They were having a party and it'd be a good chance for them to talk one-on-one, see if there was anything reparable in the broken thing that was their relationship. Her first instinct had been to say no, which just proved how dumb she was for having not followed that instinct. To her, a party setting seemed ideal for cementing the fact that they were indeed broken up and that no amount of time or space would turn her around on that. Best of all worlds, had been her line of thinking. Take a firm stance with Riley so he knew in no uncertain terms how over they were, and do it in a public place around his frat and/or Initiative bros so he wouldn't be able to argue without losing face. It had been the perfect solution.

But Riley just wasn't that guy. It was easy to tell herself one thing when considering an event that was on the horizon—it was another thing altogether to have the event upon her. While she trusted Riley wouldn't fall to pieces, she also knew he didn't have much of a poker face—which, now that she thought about it, made his role in secret ops kind of suspect. If the guy couldn't keep from sending her sad puppy dog eyes during Initiative debriefs, then trusting him to not broadcast to the entire campus that he'd just had his heart smashed was just dumb.

Still, she couldn't wait any longer. In the time that had lapsed between the body-swap incident and now, Buffy had done what would charitably be considered a crapton of thinking. How betrayed she'd felt when she'd heard Riley and Faith making the porno sounds and how that feeling had nothing on the nosedive her heart had taken when Spike had told her that he and Faith-as-Buffy had played tonsil hockey.

It bothered her more that Spike had made out with the skanky slayer than it did that her boyfriend had banged her. That was the hurt she kept coming back to. Then there was the question of what it meant that she'd gone to Spike at all during that episode, that he had been her first stop and that his explanation for what had happened—his, not Riley's—was the one she revisited when it felt her world was spiraling apart.

It was Spike telling her he loved her.

Not that he'd repeated it the one time they'd seen each other since then, and she didn't know how to take that, either. Granted, they'd been under the influence of a spell at the time and in the presence of others, so there hadn't been a good chance for a heart-to-heart, but her spell memories had included Spike's little confession, so she knew his had as well. In any event, she'd think that seeing the woman you claimed to love after professing said love for her would trigger some sort of reaction. All Spike had given her were leers and innuendo, and that had felt just...normal.

She'd wondered more than once if that hadn't been intentional on his part. If he were embarrassed or regretted that he'd even flirted with the words, much less said them, or if he thought it better to give her time and space to determine what she wanted. Because, in Spike's case, time and space were very much a part of a healthy diet. Regardless of how Spike felt about her, Buffy had to figure out what *she* wanted, untangle that from the confusion still surrounding the reasons she'd gone to him in the first place. Spike had been the safe bet in terms of where her heart was concerned. Get him to teach her how to fuck so that she wouldn't screw up her future relationships. It had been simple, straightforward, and yeah, maybe a little reckless but also ingenious in its own way. People had sex without getting all emotionally involved all the time, and since he was the last person she wanted to be emotionally involved with, she could use him and walk away, no worse off. Better off, in fact.

Didn't explain how she'd wound up where she was now, with two men's hearts on the line and her own more twisted and confused than it had ever been before. Angel had left her so she could have a chance at normal and look where she'd managed to land.

There was that, too. The pain of knowing what Angel would think about all of this. How disappointed he would be. He'd done what she hadn't been strong enough to do—walked away from his soulmate, knowing it was for the best even if it killed them both. Knowing that slayers and vampires did not mix unless there was fighting, blood, or dust involved, even when the entire universe seemed to scream that they belonged at each other's side, always. He'd done that for her, and she'd turned around and gotten herself entangled with another vampire almost immediately. It hadn't been her plan, but it had happened anyway, and now...

God, she didn't even know what *now*. Only that she'd stumbled away from Spike's crypt with a headful of warring, confusing thoughts. That it had mattered to her as much as it had—still did—that Spike hadn't wanted Faith. That just the Buffy packaging hadn't been enough for him when it was all she'd been determined to give him from the start. And that somehow, impossibly, he loved her.

Or at the very least, he thought he loved her. He *thought* he did.

Buffy braved a glance in Riley's direction and felt her heart plummet when she found him still staring at her with more of that stupid hope. Spike issues aside, she needed to woman-up and do what she'd come here to do so that he could set his sights on someone who was capable of giving him something more than Buffy had to offer at the moment.

Which she intended to do, right now, except someone appeared behind him where he stood in the doorway. Someone bleached blond and wrapped in leather, whose eyes found hers almost at once.

Buffy's heart thudded hard against her ribcage. What in the world was *Spike* doing here? Did he seriously have a death wish? There were about twenty commandos loitering about and his recapture was still very much at the top of their to-do list. Spike might not be the brightest bulb in the box, but he typically wasn't outright stupid.

Her questions must have been broadcast across her face, for Spike's eyebrows shot up just as Riley frowned and made to turn to see what she was staring at. Thankfully, the bleached idiot seemed to realize where he was in time to move before Riley caught a glimpse of him, and Buffy took the opportunity to dart away as well. She negotiated

her way through throngs of idle couples, most of whom were sucking face—or at least on the way there—toward a hall opposite from the secret entrance to the Initiative, trusting Spike would find her.

He did. No sooner had she turned a corner than Spike was there, crowding her against a wall, his eyes dark with intent.

“What the hell are you doing here?” she whisper-yelled. “You know this is the—”

But that was as far as she got before his lips were on hers and the argument she had queued up and ready to unleash shot straight out of her head. Buffy’s legs trembled and she swayed a little—it had been too long since he’d last kissed her—before throwing her arms around his neck to keep herself anchored. This was bad—it was so bad, but she sank into it, nonetheless. Into him, and the hot, desperate way his mouth moved over hers, how he clutched and groaned and growled and poured every bit of himself into his kisses. In retrospect, that should have been the first clue that her plan was insane. Her inability to keep her mouth off his, even though they’d agreed...

Dammit, they’d agreed on so many things and stuck to none of them. If they had, she wouldn’t be here. Wouldn’t be trying to climb him like a tree, fighting his tongue with her own, whimpering when he parted her legs with his knee so that she was practically straddling his thigh. She wouldn’t be thinking about empty rooms or dark corners and she definitely wouldn’t be cursing herself for having avoided him these last few days. No, her world would be level and sense-making, and she’d likely be getting felt up right now by the very guy whose heart she’d come here to break all final-like.

At last, Spike pulled his lips from hers—good that he did it, seeing as she apparently lacked the ability—and kissed along her jaw and to her ear. “Scurried off the other night before we could have us some fun,” he murmured, and Buffy whimpered again, this time at the way his voice seemed to hit some inner erogenous zone she hadn’t known she had. The fact that he’d curled his tongue around her earlobe didn’t help. “Makes a fella wonder.”

“I was...busy.”

He chuckled and nipped at her ear. “Mhmm, yeah. Busy Betty the Big Man’s Sidekick. What was his name again?”

Buffy rolled her eyes, or she would have had he not pressed against her center with his leg. “Jonathan,” she moaned, then wrinkled her nose because that was a name she never wanted to moan again. “And you fell for it, too, jerk.”

“All I can remember is bein’ sure White Bread wasn’t the competition I needed to worry about.” He pulled back just enough that she caught his eyes, which were—and there really was no other word for it—dancing. “Gotta say, life’s more fun when *you’re* my mortal enemy. Little bloke didn’t have the moves...”

Spike’s mouth was on her neck again before she could respond, and the protest she had ready slipped away. He was being really presumptuous, all things considered. Cornering her at a frat party and making with the kissage. Pushing his leg against her crotch so she was practically humping him—okay, the humping was on her, but no one had asked him to put that leg there. The fact remained that they hadn’t talked anything out just yet and she still wasn’t sure what she wanted with him, aside from the obvious.

Not that long ago—yet somehow *forever* ago—Spike had suggested that they ride it out. It had been right after the first night in the motel. The ground had shaken and there’d been an apocalypse on the horizon; she and Riley had kissed for the first time, then she’d discovered he was one of the commando guys and everything had been up in the air. All she’d known was she needed to see Spike. Understand why kissing Riley hadn’t moved the earth for her. She should know—the earthquake hadn’t come until the following day.

So she’d blown into Giles’s, where Spike had been staying at the time, and made with the smoochies. And the earth had more than moved. And they’d more than kissed. The second her lips had touched his, all good sense had flown out of the head of Buffy. Spike had thrown her onto Giles’s table—the same one where she’d served Thanksgiving just a few weeks earlier—and proceeded to fuck her brains out.

It had been afterward, when the lust-fueled fog had dissipated and she’d started to spiral, when Spike had suggested it. Keep on screwing until they were out of each other’s systems, or until the novelty wore off, or until Buffy found a guy she thought she could love. She’d called

him disgusting at the time and stormed off, swearing she'd never so much as look at Spike again.

She suspected it was too late to tell him she'd changed her mind now that he'd let slip that he loved her. Sex was one thing—love was serious. It was commitment. It was a bunch of things she didn't want to feel, especially for him.

Even if she didn't love him, Spike loving her—or thinking he loved her, or whatever a soulless thing's equivalent to love was—made the matter far too complicated to give serious consideration.

These were all things she knew.

But the longer he did that thing with his mouth, the harder it was to care about the big picture. It had been warm in here since she'd crossed the threshold—warmer than usual. The time Buffy had spent at Lowell House as Riley's girlfriend had taught her that the men liked to keep the temperature hovering around the arctic range. She'd chalked the extra degrees up to the fact that it was a party, which meant there were a lot of people around, and that was a surefire way to get things warmer, but even Spike felt hot now. Hot and good-smelling, and there were things she needed to do—conversations she needed to have—but her skin had never tingled like this. Like something had lit her up from the inside.

It was him. It had to be. Every time he was close, her focus couldn't help but shift. When he was close and kissing her? Touching her? Making those toe-curling yummy noises like she was the best thing he'd ever had in his mouth? It was a wonder she could remember her name, let alone anything else.

Why *had* she come here again?

"Fuck," Spike whispered, slipping a hand under the waistband of her skirt. "Wouldn't believe it possible, but you're hotter than usual, Slayer."

Buffy rolled her head back hard enough that it thumped against the wall, closing her eyes and trying to think about something else. Anything else. But her skin was buzzing and her body was on fire and she needed him to touch her more. "You too."

She didn't see his grin—she didn't need to. It was in his voice when he spoke. "Don't get hot, pet."

“But you are. You feel it, can’t you?” She forced her eyes open, trying like hell to think but the part of her brain in charge of thought seemed muffled and far away. As it was, her eyes got stuck at his mouth, his plump lower lip, the contrast of soft pink against his pale skin, how it pulled at the corners when he was amused and provided a tantalizing glimpse of tongue. Then her mind started spinning, providing her with flashes of the way that mouth looked when he had it between her thighs, or when she could see the shine of her juices across his lips. “Spike...*please*...”

He replied with a low growl, palming her pussy over her panties. “Need somethin’, do you?” he asked, closing in so his mouth was by her ear once more. “Ask me nicely and I might just give it.”

Buffy forced her throat to work. It was there, at the edge of her mind, the reason she’d come here, but she couldn’t see it. That there might have been a motivation that didn’t involve Spike’s hands, mouth, or cock was dumb, anyway. “Touch me,” she whimpered, rolling her hips again. “*Please*.”

Spike’s eyes went a shade darker, which would have made her legs shake if she weren’t now resting most of her weight on him. “I’ll touch you,” he replied. “Touch you all over. Until you can’t walk.”

He swallowed her with another kiss before she could think to reply, his fingers dipping under the elastic at her crotch and slipping between her labia. Then he groaned and she groaned and he pushed those fingers into her and she rolled her hips again to meet him, *needing* him, needing more, and needing now. That she was in a hallway in a frat house and just a few feet from her not-yet-totally-dumped ex-boyfriend became incidental, unimportant. The only thing that mattered was this—feeling *this*.

“Bloody hell, you burn me up,” Spike swore into her neck. He skimmed the skin there with his blunt teeth as he pulled his fingers back, rumbling another growl when she worked her muscles around him. And damn, she liked it when he growled. Liked it more when he did while pounding into her, but muffled against her skin was nice too. “Need to feel you around me.”

That was the best idea she’d ever heard. Buffy nodded and captured his lips again as her fingers found his belt loops and started trailing

along the leather of his belt. "Yeah," she whispered, feeling a bit drunk and a lot reckless. "Do it, Spike."

"Here?"

She didn't know why he sounded so surprised. He felt it too, she knew he did. "Uh-huh."

"You want me to fuck you right here where anyone can see?" He nibbled along her chin, pumping his fingers into her pussy at a rhythm, and god, that felt good. Not as good as his cock would, but really good. Even better when he began nudging her clit with his thumb—just a light brush, a tease. They'd only been together a few times but he'd learned exactly the way she most liked to be touched. "Not above givin' your soldier a show, but don't want you cross with me in the mornin'."

Soldier. Riley.

Buffy furrowed her brow and stopped pulling at his belt. "I...need to talk to him."

Spike snorted. "A good shagging's what you need," he said, twisting his wrist so his fingers were rubbing her *there* and making her brain melt, "and we both know he won't deliver."

"No... Wait, I'm supposed to...to..."

"Bugger what you're *supposed* to," he said, this time with a growl that sounded less seductive and more possessive, which—damn him—was still seductive. "Thought it was over between you and the enormous hall monitor, anyhow."

"It is." It was. Because, try as she might, Buffy couldn't get enough of what Spike did to her. How he lit her up just by smirking, the asshole, never mind what he could accomplish with his hands and mouth. Things like what he was doing now, crowding her, confusing her, dragging his lips across her skin as he pumped and speared and it all felt so good. The sort of *good* that ought to make her feel guilty—did, on a level—because physical decadence like this wasn't right. Couldn't be right. It was shameful, sinful—it was everything she shouldn't want but did, and part of her hated herself for it, but she wasn't strong enough to say no. To push back. He was there, rubbing his thumb over her clit and filling her ears with the low, rumble sound of his voice, offset by the wet suction of his fingers pushing into her again and again. Filling her just the way she liked but also *not* the way

she liked since what she really liked was his cock, which he rubbed against her just enough to tease.

Wrong, wrong, wrong. All of it was.

Something shifted—maybe it was the world. But Buffy found herself tumbling along a series of walls, her legs somehow wound around his waist and colors and scenery blurring past her eyes. Then the noise of the party became muffled and the world dark, and Spike was there, skimming his lips along her neck as he fumbled to free her legs and she fumbled to free his cock. She didn't know where she was anymore—a closet? A bathroom? Did it matter?—only that there was a door at her back, her skirt was hiked around her waist, her panties gone, and Spike at her front and then his cock was parting her soaked folds and running a line up and down her slit, teasing her entrance before scoring up to press against her clit. He did this a few times, and even though it was dark, she could make out his grin. Make out that and more. The fire in his eyes, the need there, as he finally notched himself at her opening and began pushing inside of her. Large and hard and cool, so cool even if he felt warm, kissing her neck again, then biting down with blunt teeth and a hard growl and sinking all the way in. She felt herself pulsing around him, throbbing in that way she'd only read about in books she'd sneaked out of her mother's nightstand, hugging him to her and wanting him there forever. But vampire or no, he couldn't give her forever, just the moment, something he reminded her of when he pulled back and started to thrust.

Again, Buffy threw her head back, clutching her arms around him and crossing her ankles at his ass to leverage him deeper inside. It was unfair, how he could claim her so easily. How effortless this felt, how *good*. This thing they shouldn't be doing yet couldn't seem to stop. In seconds, they were outright fighting each other—as they always had, rocking and hitting and snarling and biting. And like when they fought, Spike seemed to be everywhere. At her neck, at her breasts, teasing her nipples through her shirt—she'd forgone a bra—as he bruised and punished her with his body, knocking her hard enough into the door he had her propped against that the sounds surely had to reach the party. That anytime now, someone would search them out and then

they'd tumble back into the hall, Spike over her, pounding into her pussy like he was mad at it. And her.

The way he was now.

"You're for me," he rasped, his voice somehow reaching her over the smack of flesh meeting flesh, the jingling jostle of his belt and the scrape of denim against denim. "This is what you want. No one fills you up like I do, Slayer. No one. Tell me."

He clamped his teeth around her earlobe and tugged hard—hard enough a thrill of pain shot through her body. Pain that wasn't pain, that had her muscles tightening on reflex, and that was wrong too. That she could ever want it—that pain of any kind might make her moan and clench and claw for more ran counter to everything she had ever known or cared to know about herself. It was minute, that pain, but sweet with its tantalizing promise of *more more more*.

Then he was talking again, filling her ears with the low timbre of his voice, which was soft yet still somehow seemed to drown out the raw cadence of his thrusts against the otherwise still air. "Tell me. Tell me who's fucking you now."

Buffy's head smacked the door so hard stars exploded behind her eyes. She wanted to tell him where to shove it, as full-of-himself as he sounded, but it was hard to think, let alone be annoyed with him when he was doing that hip-swirly thing she liked and when every other sound that erupted off her lips was a moan. "Spike," she gasped, digging her fingers into the leather of his coat. "Spike. *Spike*."

"That's right. Spike's got you. Spike's got you, baby." He kissed his way along her jaw until her lips were under his again, and there was something about kissing him like this—when he was moving inside of her—that seemed more intimate than anything she'd done with anyone else. Open and honest, because he knew the parts of her she kept from the world, knew them and didn't care. And now that she knew he loved her—or at least felt something more than he had before—she could taste it, too. Spike had always seemed hungry for her mouth but not like this. Or maybe exactly like this and she'd been too much of an idiot to realize it.

He broke away first, leaving her to drag in hard, desperate gasps of air that tasted like them together as he buried his face in her neck with

a growl, his thrusts almost bruising now. “Do it,” he said, then pressed his cool tongue against her burning skin. “Let go. Squeeze me so nice I pop.”

She opened her mouth to say something—something like *don't tell me what to do* or *make me* or, knowing her luck, *don't make me*, but before she landed on the right words, he had his hand between them, perfectly positioned so her clit dragged along his roughened fingertip every time she rolled her hips to chase his cock. And she felt his grin again, wide and pleased, and it pissed her off so much she wanted to headbutt him to the floor so she could take what she wanted like the confident, take-charge slayer she was. Show him who was the boss of her—and him, come to think of it. Because if she knew nothing else, it was that. Spike might be a lot of things—a lot of things she hated—but he was hers first and foremost.

In the end, she did none of those things. Her body made the decision for her, tightening and trembling as Spike scaled her neck with his teeth, her clit skating across his fingertip. Buffy pressed her face into his shoulder as sensations coalesced and broke, white-hot euphoria lighting her up from the inside out. And he felt it too, felt it and growled, knocking her harder against the door before he tensed and began to spill, meeting her hot with his cool. Buffy had never been so *aware* of herself during sex as she was with Spike—the things she felt on her own and the things he made her feel, the awareness of him inside of her, that part of him would still be with her even when he pulled out. Then there was the way he responded, the litany of praises that tumbled off his lips, things she would never think or say about herself that he fed her without hesitation. About how fantastic her pussy felt, how much he loved it when she drenched him, how she nearly made him black out when she squeezed him like that, how hard she made him, how much he always wanted her, that he could have her like this every day for the rest of eternity and still want more because that was how magnificent she was. Pretty things that she was starting to believe, even against her better judgment. That was why she was here, after all.

“Fuck,” Spike muttered before dropping a kiss against the hollow of her throat. “You’ve ruined me, Summers.”

Considering she felt pretty ruined herself, that sounded perfectly fair to her. Buffy breathed out a little laugh, trying to convince her legs to untangle from around his waist. Trouble was, they didn't want to untangle. In fact, the thought of pulling herself away from Spike was all-around unappealing, especially when she felt his cock begin to swell once more. It was a chain reaction—having him there, hardening inside her pussy, pushing against her flesh... All of it shoved aside the pretense of rational thought. She released a trembling breath, clenched her muscles around him then gasped when he groaned and began to move all over again, the sensation almost painful for how good it felt.

“Bloody hell, I’m gonna drown in you,” Spike said, gripping her ass to leverage her into his thrusts. “So hot. All that juice just for me.”

Buffy nodded, or meant to. The next second, light speared the darkness as the door at her back started to swing out and she thought, for an awful, wild second, that the scene she’d imagined just a moment ago was about to come to fruition. Spike and his cat-like reflexes came to the rescue, though, and he tugged her forward to assume most of her weight, not bothering to stop rocking his hips in the process.

“Buffy!”

Well, there was one way to kill the mood.

Though no one told Spike, who was using the grip he had on her ass to work her up and down his cock at a faster pace. “Little meddlin’ witch,” he muttered, wholly unbothered. Then, in a louder voice, he said, “Oi! You gonna close the sodding door or were you hopin’ to catch a show?”

Buffy opened her mouth to protest—or maybe to scream at him. This was her nightmare, after all. Someone finding out about her and Spike, never mind catching them in the act. She knew this, felt it, the stirrings of horror and shame, the knowledge of what came next, of how her friends would look at her now that it was out. It was there, pushing at the edges of her mind, but strangely muted. Like she’d felt the once or twice she’d been brave enough to get drunk since the whole caveman-Buffy incident, saying things she knew she’d regret but too buzzed to give much of a damn in the moment.

It was alarming—even more so that she couldn’t seem to stop.

For his part, Spike didn’t so much as pause, just kept pumping into

her. "Bloody hell, Red, find your own sodding closet," he snarled. "This one's occupied."

"I was just...trying to find Buffy," Willow said. "Riley is looking for her."

Riley. *Riley*. Something resembling rational thought fought through the fog, even as Buffy's body attempted to pull her back. Something was wrong—very wrong. Sneaking off for a quickie—or a marathon—in a closet was not her. Nor was casual voyeurism, or voyeurism of any kind, actually. But the door was still open and Spike was still fucking her and everything had gone super wrong super fast.

"That's right," Willow said loudly. "He's looking for Buffy. So *if you see her*—" This last bit she all but shouted before slamming the door shut without another word.

"Good bloody riddance," Spike drawled, tightening his grip on her ass and shoving her against the door once more. "Thought she'd never leave."

But that wasn't right. None of this was. Buffy had come here to see Riley, tell him...tell him something, right? Something about it being over. Everything that had happened before Spike had grabbed her and made with the kissage seemed distant, like it had happened to someone else a long time ago. And as much as she wanted to sink into him, the way he was moving and bucking and daring her to follow him, Buffy managed to fight through the cloud that had settled around her mind and push him back.

Spike thunked against the opposing wall, right next to the vacuum cleaner—there really wasn't much space in here—and flashed yellow eyes at her. "The fuck, Slayer, what'd you do that for?"

Buffy shook her head, struggling to right her clothes with shaking hands as every inch of her pulsed with desire. Her pussy was throbbing all over again, aching and empty, and he was so close. All she had to do was—

"Something's...not right," she managed, whimpering as she straightened her skirt. "I shouldn't be here."

He stared at her, his eyes reflecting the light that leaked in through the crack between the door and the floor. "Oh, here it comes," he drawled, wrapping a hand around his cock and starting to stroke. "Off

with you, then. Till the next time you find yourself with an itch you can't reach on your own, at least."

That Spike was able to both set her on fire with that mouth *and* make her want to stake him was one of those things she would never understand, though she supposed it spoke to her depravity. As it was, it was easier to think now that he wasn't touching her. Easier but not *easy*, that was, because even with the shock and horror of having been caught, the sound of his hand tugging on his cock had her damn near aching with want. The pull was there, strong and nearly irresistible, to throw herself back on him, forget everything outside this closet, but another voice—smaller but no less present—kept insisting something was wrong. She wasn't thinking clearly, was barely thinking at all, and once that was no longer the case, she'd really start to panic.

"Go home," Buffy choked out, stumbling against the door. "I need to...see Riley."

Spike sat forward, his nostrils flaring. "Not in that state, you don't."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Got you nice and hot, didn't I? Didn't do that so you could sneak off with Wonder Bread."

She would have been less stunned if he'd vamped and gone for her throat, she decided, standing there, staring at the man who had just been whispering naughty little endearments into her hair as he'd moved inside her. The man who had taken her neat, orderly world and her neat, orderly plan and upended both without thought or care for what it did to her. For what it meant—any of this. That she was sneaking off to fuck him in closets, that she'd more or less ended things and had only come here tonight to make sure Riley understood that. That she'd gone to Spike at all the night that Faith had stolen her body because, on a level she hadn't been brave enough to confront just yet, she'd known he'd know. She'd felt that—that and more. And when he'd told her he loved her, begrudging as the admission had been, everything she'd thought she'd known about him and her and vampires had been thrown into question.

That he could look at her and say that, even think it, was more than just insulting. She was devastated. And god, she wished she

weren't. For instead of seizing anger—righteous, justified anger—she felt her eyes fill and a sudden, desperate pressure on her chest. What now felt like a thousand years ago, Buffy had sworn she'd never again let a man see he'd made her cry—not after she'd sobbed her freaking soul out for Angel.

Seemed she was good at breaking promises to herself.

“Go to hell,” she said, grateful that at least her voice wasn't shaking. Then she turned and bolted into the hallway, leaving the vampire and her heart behind.



The more space she put between herself and Spike, the better she felt. That was her story, and she was sticking to it.

Though the fact that something wiggly was definitely going on didn't hurt as far as distractions went. While Buffy would be the first to admit that she hadn't exactly been thinking clearly, she was pretty sure the party she'd left had been a run-of-the-mill, old-fashioned frat party. Not an orgy.

Not that she'd ever been to an orgy or watched any orgy videos or had any idea what happened at orgies, granted, but if someone had come up to her and said, “Hey, Buffy, what would an orgy look like?” the answer would be, well, this. Coeds in various states of undress, bent in awkward positions and doing thing that were, well, behind-closed-doors stuff. Not public stuff.

It wasn't everyone, though, and it wasn't all X-rated. She saw Xander was enraptured in a game of spin-the-bottle, which seemed innocent enough until some skanky redhead climbed into his lap and shoved her tongue down his throat. Buffy wrinkled her nose, thinking distantly of Anya and wondering if this was one of their sex games. That unpleasant thought had barely flickered across her mind before another girl, choking back sobs, nearly plowed her right over, not bothering to stop or slow down. Buffy wobbled but managed to stay upright—*thank you, Slayer dexterity*—but turned to track the girl's progression down another hall, around a corner where a group of people was apparently taking turns feeling up a spot on the wall.

All the while, the steady thrum of need that Spike had brought to life kept tempo between her legs. That wasn't natural, either. None of this was.

She needed to get out of it—out of here.

“Buffy.”

Someone touched her arm and her skin flamed. Buffy whirled around, tried not to pay attention to the way the fabric of her shirt scraped against her nipples with the movement. Or how hot it seemed in here, how the edges of her mind were softer, hazier, and the concerns of just a few seconds ago far, far away. She didn't even realize she was staring at Riley until he said her name again, lowering his face close enough to hers that she could smell his aftershave, and it smelled good. All of him did.

No. No, no, no. Get out of here.

But her body didn't obey. Her body needed, and she'd left Spike in the closet.

“I wanted to talk to you,” he said in a voice that sounded impossibly low and rough. “Do you have a minute?”

No, she didn't have a minute. She needed to leave. Get to Giles. Find out why everyone was acting like extras on the set of *Caligula*.

“I can talk,” she heard herself say. “Just...not here.”

Riley nodded, seeming to understand. Of course he would. “Yeah,” he said, closing his hand around her wrist. “Let's go somewhere else.”

Somewhere else apparently meant his bedroom. She didn't know how it had happened—how she'd been downstairs just a second ago and was suddenly up here, back in the room she'd never intended to step inside again. The door behind her closed, and though the party still clearly raged on below—and though that door was an ordinary, run-of-the-mill door—the sounds of voices and laughs and cries and pornographic groans became strangely muffled. Too muffled.

Buffy shook her head again, only succeeding in making the room spin. Everything was hot, her temples were throbbing, but not nearly as much as her pussy, which was still slick and swollen and desperate for attention. That Riley was here, so close, and they were a million miles from whatever was going on downstairs suddenly seemed super important.

"I'm glad you came," he said. His voice wasn't right, though. She didn't know why.

"I...had something to tell you." Buffy wetted her lips, trembling when he followed the movement with his eyes. *God, think*. This wasn't why she'd come up here. She was sure it wasn't. "Riley...this is hard for me." Mostly because her tongue felt too big for her mouth for some strange reason. "I told you I needed a break."

"I know. I understand why." Had he gotten closer? She fluttered her eyes shut, then popped them wide open again. The door was at her back and he was in front of her, a solid wall of man, so tall and bulky. And hot. She could feel the heat rising off his skin like steam. There was so much of it. Too much. Way more than the freakish warmth Spike had worn. "But I've missed you."

"Y-you have?"

"I wanted to see if we could maybe try again. I know what happened with Faith... God, you can't imagine how much I regret that, Buffy." Now he closed his eyes, his face contorting like he was trying to hold something back. Or maybe that was just her imagination. "Can't you forgive me? If I had known—"

"It wasn't just that," she blurted, digging her shoulder blades harder against the door at her back. She was slowly becoming aware that an alarm was going off—softly but insistently, and from somewhere inside her own head. Some part of her screaming that this was wrong, that everything was wrong, that something of the unnatural was going on and she needed to *move* before she got swept up inside it.

"It wasn't?" Riley asked thickly.

"There's someone else."

"*Someone you shouldn't want*," a seething, scolding voice whispered into her ear. Or seemed to. "*Someone who should disgust you*."

She didn't have time to question where that voice had come from, for it had triggered an explosion inside her head. Or a parade. Or maybe an explosion and a parade. At once, she found herself drowning in a sea of thoughts she'd thought she'd managed to shut up a long time ago. No, not shut up—just shove somewhere deep inside herself, so far down she couldn't hear them unless she made a point to listen. They'd been with her from the beginning, from the moment she'd stepped into Giles's

house and made that damnable deal in the first place. That sense of low, simmering shame that she carried with her everywhere she went. Her very own scarlet letter, though this one branded on her insides so only she knew it was there. It chafed against her skin, intensifying every time she went back for more, and soon it would consume her and leave nothing of the old Buffy behind. That gnawing, constant reminder of what she'd done and why. How she'd let Spike touch her, stroke her, kiss and be inside of her—how she'd made a bargain with a soulless creature and sold her body in the process. Was it any wonder her watcher couldn't look her in the eye anymore? That he seemed to be pulling away from her, that Willow was almost a stranger even though they shared a dorm room, and Xander was suddenly fooling around with demons, himself? Her job was to protect the world from monsters, and instead she'd let one take her. No, not even that. She'd been the one to make the offer, the one who'd had the brilliant idea of getting tutored in sex, and who had immediately thought of Spike as the ideal instructor. She had gone to him knowing exactly what he was, and she kept coming back.

Something inside of her was broken. She was sick. Damaged. She needed to be punished.

She needed to get the *hell* out of this frat house.

"Riley," Buffy blurted, everything going foggy again.

"Do you love him?" Riley asked thickly. "Whoever this...other guy is?"

Her heart gave a mad lurch and her sinuses started to burn. "No," she said, though it didn't feel like the truth—didn't feel like a lie, either, but certainly not the truth. As though the situation couldn't get worse.

"Then I don't care," Riley said, closing his hands around her arms. "I just...want you." And then she'd been pulled against that too-large chest, his warm, human mouth sliding over hers in a possessive kiss that both inflamed and infuriated because that alarm was still going off—deafening, insistent—and she was forgetting why it had worried her. Why she had come here at all—why she had followed him upstairs or what she had been trying to tell him. Why she had bothered to fight when it was clear all she wanted to do was give in.

But this wasn't who she wanted to give in with. She might loathe herself for what she'd done with Spike, but that didn't make her crave it any less.

"Riley," she managed to say before he covered her lips once more. "Something's wrong. I can't...stop."

"Then don't."

"No, Riley, I—" But he was kissing her again, his mouth hard and demanding, intent on her the way she'd been intent on Spike earlier. Reacting as though he didn't hear her when she knew he did, tugging her closer when all she wanted was to pull away. Only it wasn't *all* she wanted—just what the parts of her that felt and like the authentic Buffy were telling her to do. There were other parts at play—parts that had been stoked to life earlier by a vampire and were raging now, disappointed with her new choice in playmate but more than willing to make up the difference.

Then some internal lightbulb went off, her sluggish mind connected the dots, and she knew.

She'd felt like this once before. Well, not *just* like this—she hadn't been as lucid that time she and Angel had acted out the alternate ending to a tragic love affair, but her body had certainly been out of her control. *Possession* was what Giles had called it, and that was what this felt like.

Riley was walking her back to his bed and she'd lost her top somewhere along the way and her skirt was again around her waist. God, this couldn't be happening. She had to get him to snap out of it, come to his senses, realize that they had never once acted like this even when they had been dating. Hell, she needed control of her own damn body back and she needed it before she did something with Riley that she very much did *not* want to do.

Yet the parts of her that were Buffy, the ones in full rebellion against what was happening, seemed to grow weaker rather than stronger. She no longer had control of her mouth, which was busy trying to kiss Riley's lips off, or her hands, which were fumbling with his belt. The louder she screamed the more furiously her body worked against her. And he should know, too. Know from touching her,

stretching his fingers inside of her, possibly feeling still the evidence of the man who—

Stop! Stop! Stop!

And then it did stop. The door smashed open hard enough that it rebounded off the wall, and the haze filling Buffy's head vanished as though it never had been.

"What?" Riley pulled back, dragging his fingers out of her pussy, and swung his head toward the door. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Buffy pressed her eyes closed. She didn't need to look to know who it was—the tingle at her neck had already given him away.

"Sorry," Spike spat, his voice shaking. With pain or fury or both, she didn't know—she didn't *want* to know. "Just lookin' for the bird I was puttin' it to earlier, but I see she's occupied."

Above her, Riley went rigid. She pictured his face going slack, could feel his shock—his incomprehension—as though it were her own, but she didn't open her eyes. Couldn't let it be real.

"Oh, no worries, mate," the vampire continued, still with that low tremble. "I've had my fun—only sporting that you should have a go. She's all yours."

The words were a lance. Buffy jerked upward with a gasp, her eyes flying open now, her heart seizing and twisting, pain punching its way through her so that, if she hadn't already been off her feet, she would have been knocked aside. But she wasn't. Instead, everything remained exactly where it was, giving her the perfect view of Spike's retreating back as he stomped down the hallway and out of sight.



The key to being the Slayer was learning how to compartmentalize. Fortunately, Buffy had already taken the definitive crash course in separating her personal life from her duties, courtesy of her last vampire boyfriend. As such, she was able to mostly focus on getting the situation at the frat house under control before someone ended up with an STD or an unplanned pregnancy. The rapey ghosts were, as it turned

out, spiritual manifestations of sexual repression, brought upon by—as Giles theorized—horny poltergeists.

Yes, apparently, horny poltergeists were a thing. In this case, horny poltergeists who had been abused by an old-school puritanical bat by the name of Genevieve Holt, back when Lowell House had been the Lowell Home for Children. The punishments she'd wreaked upon the children had built a torrent of sexual energy that, among other things, had fairly well consumed everyone at the damn frat party. And like any good old-fashioned poltergeist sex bash, there had been plenty of recrimination to go around in tandem with the hormone explosion. Which was why one girl had locked herself in a bathroom and given herself a bad makeover, among other things.

There were some question marks as to how the poltergeists had gained enough sexual momentum to unleash their repression on unsuspecting partygoers, though the consensus was that Buffy and Riley, who had—up until the body swap incident—been working out the bedsprings extra hard, had given them their boost. Which was a nice way to say it was Buffy's fault. As though she couldn't feel worse.

Truth was, prior to catching Faith with Riley, Buffy had been an enthusiastic jumper of Riley's bones—almost manic in her need to prove to herself, if no one else, that he got her motor running. Or that the sex could get better if they kept at it. Or that she could fuck Spike right out of her system and fuck another man into it, as had been the entire point of boinking Spike in the first place. So it was entirely possible that she had stirred the poltergeists' libidos into action.

That was the working theory, at least. Buffy and Riley had created the energy, and even though they hadn't been together in a couple of weeks, that energy hadn't gone anywhere. It might have been kept on a low simmer by the other members of the house, none of whom were exactly monks. Maybe even Riley himself—masturbating in absence of having a real-life girlfriend, as Xander had so tactfully put it. Then the party had hit and there had been a perfect storm of circumstance that led to...well, what it led to.

The part no one knew—or at least, no one was saying—was that while Buffy and Riley might have created the energy, it had been contained until Spike had shown up on the scene. His arrival had been

the catalyst—the moment sense had abandoned her head, and Buffy had given herself over to all the dark desires she'd been attempting to outrun ever since she'd propositioned him in the first place. That was the moment things had gone from heated and flirty to downright pornographic, the moment the haze had become a physical presence in her head as much as her own thoughts. And had it not been for the fact that Willow had interrupted them mid-fuck, Buffy might have just kept going with Spike until she died from sex overdose. Which was apparently also a real thing with hauntings of this nature.

So far, Willow seemed to be subscribing to the don't-ask-don't-tell approach concerning what she'd seen in the closet. But Buffy wasn't naïve—it was only a matter of time before her best friend decided she'd given her enough time to get her story straight and cornered her, intent on answers. That she hadn't done it yet was a testament to how good a friend Willow truly was—either that or just how much she didn't want to know. Then again, Willow was hardly in the dorm room herself, anymore, something Buffy was certain she would have found worth investigating if she weren't so damn terrified of the conversation she knew was on the horizon.

She hadn't waited around after Spike had stormed off, and she hadn't offered any explanations. Everything had been a blur to the door. Dragging on her clothes in a rush that undoubtedly made her the hottest piece of Lowell House gossip, even with everything that had been going on downstairs. Riley's friends—fellow commandos—had a vendetta against her, anyway. Not that she had been Their Girl Friday beforehand, but apparently being the dumper and not the dumpee in the relationship had done little to earn her friends, even though she knew damn well that Forrest had been lobbying for a spectacular breakup almost from the moment they'd started dating.

But the truth was, she owed Riley an explanation. Especially after... Well, especially.

The entire Initiative/slayer relationship had been precarious since she and Riley had called it quits. None of the men wanted her there but the cat couldn't exactly fit itself back into the bag where her existence was concerned, and since they were all ostensibly on the same side, the party line they were toeing now seemed to be it was better to

be friends than enemies. She avoided the looks the others gave her as much as possible when she showed up at Lowell House late the following afternoon and asked to speak to Riley. The reception she received was in line with what she'd expected—cold but accommodating, even if they didn't invite her inside.

Which was just fine with her. Buffy could happily live the rest of her days without ever setting foot inside that frat house again.

It wasn't until Riley came into view, his expression stony, that Buffy experienced her first true misgiving. But she managed to shove it down with everything else. Working together had been awkward enough since the break—this was essential in order to ensure things between them didn't get worse. There was still a killer part-man, part-robot on the loose in her town, and being that it had been born in the labs just beneath the ground on which she stood, she couldn't afford to sever this one connection.

"Hi," she said, then winced at the false cheeriness in her voice. "Umm, we need to talk."

He studied her a moment, then gave a clipped nod. "Let's go for a walk."

Buffy tried to mask her relief that he wasn't inviting her inside, but knew she did a lousy job when he arched his eyebrows. She opened her mouth to explain and shut it just as quickly. There was no need. He didn't want her in his space any more than she wanted to be in it, and they both knew why.

Neither of them said a word for the first few minutes, the careful composition Buffy had been mentally piecing together doing what all her great explanations did when thrust under the limelight. It made her feel only a little better that Riley didn't immediately start yelling or cursing or both, that he seemed as discomfited by the prospect of talking about it as she was. Still, by the time they'd reached the edge of the block, Buffy was antsy to get this over with, and since she was the person who had committed the larger of the crimes, it was on her to go first.

"I dated a vampire," she said in a rush. "Before you."

Riley didn't say anything for a long moment. But when he did, his conclusion didn't surprise her. "Spike."

“No, not Spike. Though...I get why you’d go there.”

“You did tell me you were marrying him once.”

“That was a spell. Willow—it’s a long story.” She twisted her fingers together. “The vampire I dated... It went bad. Really bad.”

“Hard to imagine.”

“No, Riley, it wasn’t like that.” Had anyone ever used those words and managed to sound convincing? “Angel was different. He had a soul—something vampires very much do not have. There was a curse involved. A curse with a very specific escape clause that neither of us knew about.” She swallowed. “We were together and then he lost his soul and tried to end the world. You remember when I told Professor Walsh about Acatla?”

“Stone demon that tried to suck the world into Hell,” Riley said, like he was reading out of a textbook. “Hard to forget how many apocalypses you’ve stopped.”

“Well, what I left out there was that Angel was the one who woke him up.”

She started to say more but didn’t get too far. She was doing it again—glossing over her history, trying to skip the parts she’d rather not revisit in order to paint herself in a better light. Part of being honest with Riley was owning the times she hadn’t been, so with a deep breath, she started from the beginning. How Angel had first come to her as a man, not a vampire, and how she’d found out what he was. The clause in the curse that neither of them had known about, exactly how they’d broken it, and a summary of the events that followed, including Angel’s potshots at her experience in the bedroom. She detailed running away to Los Angeles and coming home, Angel’s return from Hell and the dance they’d done around each other for months before they’d started dating again. Then how Angel had broken things off, broken her heart in the process, but not before telling her that what she needed was a nice, normal guy that she could actually have sex with. That her sex life had been important enough to Angel that he’d actually left town so she could move on to a relationship where sex was not off the table. How that had led to Parker, and how Parker had reinforced soulless-Angel’s account of her sexual skill-level. How she’d been so determined to not mess that up with the next

guy she dated that she'd made a deal with the devil, and how the devil had gotten under her skin.

There was only one thing she found she couldn't tell him, and that was that she had gone to Spike to learn how to give a blowjob following Riley's lackluster response to her inaugural attempt. The rest, though, she didn't shy from. Even the stuff that she knew hurt, like how she'd run to Spike immediately after she and Riley had had their first honest conversation because she hadn't felt what she needed to feel when he kissed her. And that Riley's dalliance with Faith had only been part of the reason she'd asked for a break—that Spike had known it was her immediately had tapped into confusing things she'd wanted so badly not to feel but felt anyway. And yeah, that before Riley had led her upstairs at Lowell, she and Spike had really gotten the party started in one of the coat closets, and likely had instigated the supernatural sexathon.

"I'm sorry," she said when she was finished, her voice hoarse and her skin hot. "Riley, you have no idea how sorry I—"

"Do you love him?"

His tone was low and neutral, but she knew him well enough by now to hear the pain behind it. And while a smarter girl might have seen the question coming from a mile away, Buffy was not—in this case, at least—a smarter girl.

"What?"

"Are you in love with an HST?" He worked his throat with what seemed like an effort. "With Hostile 17?"

It was the second time in less than twenty-four hours that he'd asked her that. The second time that the question had caught her completely off guard when she knew it was a fair one. Buffy opened her mouth, not knowing what she intended to say, only that the word *no* would be heavily featured. Her feelings for Spike were complicated, yes, but they weren't love. Of that she was certain. There was a draw there she couldn't deny, a sense of freedom in giving herself over to those impulses, to letting go the way she could when they were together, and she craved that. Craved him in ways that made her feel both very adult and very ashamed, and it was a crashshoot which sensation would pull ahead for the win.

He loved her, though. Or at least he thought he did. And he knew her, perhaps better than anyone ever had. Enough to recognize her when she looked at him through the eyes of another woman. To know what she wanted when she couldn't put it into words and give it to her when she didn't have the courage to ask.

But she couldn't love him. Angel hadn't left so she could fall in love with another vampire. Angel had left so she could fall in love with someone like Riley.

Her throat tightened and her eyes burned, and suddenly she very much wanted to get out of there. Away from her ex-boyfriend and his questions, and quite possibly the truth, while she was at it.

Loving a vampire had nearly killed her before. Hell, it *had* killed others. That vampire had hunted and maimed and raped and murdered, all as the pre-show entertainment to ending the world. Spike had agreed to this so he could return to the killing machine he'd been before the Initiative had wired up his head. That hadn't changed with all his talk of love. He was who he'd always been.

"No," Buffy said at last in a voice much shakier than she would have liked. Like she wasn't certain she was telling the truth when she was *so* certain—when she couldn't be anything but certain.

Riley heard the tremble, and from his eyes, she knew he didn't believe her.

Well, that wasn't her problem. She'd done what she'd come here to do.

"I'm sorry," she said again, not knowing what else to say. She'd never broken up with someone before—not really. The last time she'd tried with Riley had obviously been a bust. He'd still been waiting, hopeful that she'd declare the break over. Then there had been that time she'd told a boy named Owen that she didn't want to date him anymore. Before that, she'd been forced to end her relationship with Tyler because her parents were divorced and her mom was moving. "I didn't mean for... It wasn't supposed to be like this."

"Yeah," Riley said shortly, drawing away from her, his expression flat. "See you around, Buffy."

He didn't give her time to process, much less reply, just broke away from her and started down the sidewalk at a clip, back toward Lowell

House. Her heart twisted. None of that had gone right. The words she'd used hadn't come out the way she'd wanted. She'd known that as they'd tumbled loose and hadn't been able to stop, because poorly chosen or not, they had been true. Everything she'd told Riley was true, and it sucked. She had hurt someone nice and that sucked *a lot*. Someone good and wholesome and one-hundred-percent the sort of guy she should be with.

Then again, she couldn't help but wonder if she'd set out to fail. That seemed like something Professor Walsh would have said or theorized. Not that she put a ton of stock into the advice of psychopaths, but as twisted as Walsh had been, she'd known her stuff. And Buffy couldn't deny that every decision she'd made—starting with the brilliant idea to get stupid sex lessons in the first place—screamed that she had been looking for excuses.

Hadn't she relished on some level how horrified Angel would be if he knew he'd driven her to do the nasty with Spike for pointers? Hadn't she been a little happy that Riley had reacted poorly to her attempt at oral—hell, had she done *that* on purpose? Squeezed him a little too tight so she'd have a readymade reason to ask Spike for one more session just so she could be sure she was doing it right?

These thoughts surfaced, one after the other, an all-out assault on her conscience. And before she could stop them, her stupid eyes had filled with tears she hadn't earned.

This was what being with Spike had done to her. Made her someone who looked for loopholes, justifications, a rationale for why doing something bad actually wasn't bad at all. Yeah, the first part was on her—no one had made her offer him that deal, and of course he'd accepted. He'd gotten sex and a favor out of it, hadn't he? Bonus, he'd gotten Buffy to take a moral dive, wheedled his way into her head and made himself at home there.

More than made himself at home there. He'd had her thinking things, considering the impossible, wondering if she was crazy to wonder or hope half of what had run through her head. Spike infuriated her, but he also saw her the way no one else ever had. And since the day he'd told her he loved her, Buffy had been asking herself the same question on repeat.

Could it work?

Never mind the host of reasons why it shouldn't matter. Why she should forget him and relegate everything that had happened between them to a fluke or something worse. Despite knowing the things she did, despite the pain that was having already learned this lesson, Buffy didn't want to give him up. Bad idea or not, being with Spike had reshaped the way she looked at the world. There was how he made her feel, the things he did to her, and how she trusted that when they were together, he was being his genuine self. She hadn't had that before—the absolute knowledge that the man she was with wasn't holding back, putting on a show or telling her things she wanted to hear. He could make her forget who she was, who *he* was, and why those things mattered.

But things didn't work just because she wanted them to. At his core, Spike was still, well, Spike. The guy who had introduced himself by means of a death threat. He'd sent assassins after her, kidnapped her friends, beaten the snot out of her on campus, gloated after she'd gone down on him, and told Riley to have fun with her when he'd burst into that room. Sure, the last thing had been out of hurt, but *that* hurt, too. The same as it had when he'd inferred she might not be able to help herself but jump Riley's bones if she left that closet. That he could look at her when she wore another woman's face and still see her, but not see just how *not* Buffy she had been last night just proved the point. Anyone who could think that of her didn't know her at all.

He'd turned and walked out of the room last night when she'd needed him. He hadn't seen anything beyond his own pain and anger, and that was something she couldn't just forget.

For Spike, everything would always be about Spike. Not her or others or anything else that was going on. And that was but one of a million reasons why she had to end things with him, too. Permanently.

No matter that she didn't want to. No matter that the thought alone made it hard to breathe.



Buffy was a fan of the band-aid approach to unpleasant tasks. While her conversation with Riley had left her exhausted—both emotionally and physically—she knew it was best not to put off the talk she had to have with Spike. For one thing, she wouldn't be able to get any meaningful rest with it nagging in the back of her head; for another, procrastinating would give pesky, however persuasive, second thoughts enough time to settle in, and that was something she couldn't allow, lest she give in to them and find herself right back in this situation in a few weeks.

She was the one who had left the door open—the one who had violated the terms of the initial agreement by going to him after the earthquake. Last night at Lowell House was the first time Spike had played the aggressor, shown up to find her, seduce her. Angry as he might have been when he'd left, she knew him well enough to know he would come sniffing around sooner or later, needing to have out what he'd seen if not attempt to get into her pants since she'd proven it so easy. She had let this happen and she was the way it would unhappen.

So, with a heart pounding so hard it made both her head and chest hurt, she kicked open the door to his crypt, the words *we need to talk* ready and waiting on her tongue.

But she only made it a step before the floor fell out from under her.

Buffy had never seen Spike kiss anyone before—ever. At least not anyone who wasn't her. Not Dru or Harmony or anyone who might have shared his bed in between. She hadn't seen Spike kiss anyone, but she knew damn well how it felt. Turned out that it felt the way it looked. Desperate and hot and needy, like he couldn't get enough, like the woman was blood itself. Or something better than blood, something he wanted more than he wanted to keep living. That thought was the one that landed the punch, threw her off her equilibrium and shoved her from numb shock into a place that redefined pain. Buffy stood there dumbly, cracked down the middle, her heart open and screaming and her blood screaming and everything screaming, but no one hearing a damn thing because all that screaming was between her ears, and Spike was kissing another woman.

It took him a moment to realize she was there, caught up as he was in the other woman's mouth. Those seconds—hours, days, years—

allowed her time she didn't want. Time in which other details filtered through her stunned senses with a helping of salt to make everything worse. The woman—vampire, whoever she was—wasn't wearing a shirt. Spike's belt was undone, his fly still up but his cock clearly strained against the denim, and his hands were entangled in a mane of blonde hair, holding some strange woman's face to him as he ravaged and plundered and generally made Buffy feel like throwing up. It wasn't until she felt the familiar sting behind her eyes that Spike seemed to notice her. He fluttered his eyes open, his mouth still fused to his new friend's, and for a long beat they just looked at each other. Him kissing someone else, Buffy standing there to watch, the words she'd come here to give him not coming. Nothing coming but nausea and pain and god, why was she still here? Still watching this? Why wouldn't her stupid feet *move*?

At last, and with a very loud smack, Spike pulled himself free from his make-out partner long enough to give her a leer. And there was nothing in that leer—none of the warmth she'd seen before, experienced before. None of the love that had burned there, wanted or not, voiced or not since he'd first given it to her. It was as though he were staring through her. Unsurprised and uncaring, just bored.

"Well, you gonna just stand there," he demanded at last, "or you gonna join? Those are your options, Slayer. Pick one."

Then he went right on back to what he'd been doing with a hungry growl, and that was it. The last she saw. The last she *could* see. Buffy was moving the next second, moving, moving, and out back into the fresh cemetery air, chased by echoes she couldn't outrun. Images she couldn't unsee. Pain she couldn't unfeel.

God, she'd been stupid. So freaking *stupid*.

Knowing that didn't make the hurt go away, though, or do anything to dry up her tears. Both just kept coming.



Her mother thought it was Riley—the reason Buffy showed up on her doorstep with an overnight bag slung over her shoulder, eyes puffy and

her heart breaking. Buffy decided to let her believe it. Hell, she wished it were true. Then she wouldn't feel quite so foolish.

But it wasn't and she did, and there was no getting around that.

Joyce was good enough not to press for details. At some point over the past two years, they had reached a tacit understanding about boundaries. Not that her mom had pried too much in the past—usually just enough to be greeted with an eyeroll or told to butt out. Tonight, though, she barely said a word. After determining the reason for Buffy's impromptu sleepover was heartache, she'd leaped into *Mom* mode—ordered a pizza with Buffy's favorite toppings, offered to go get some ice cream, and told her she could stay as long as she wanted.

Buffy figured she'd need just a day or so to get herself under control. The pain would run its course, as pain always did, and she'd make it through to the other side. The side where she knew Willow waited with questions she would have to answer. The side where she'd have to see Riley at the next Initiative debrief. The side where she still owed Spike a favor.

At least making good on their deal would get him out of her town, if not her head. It seemed likely Spike would occupy that space for a good, long time.

That night, though, when the possibility of skipping patrol flitted across her mind, she experienced the first and very welcome surge of anger that dwarfed the sound of her pain.

No way was any vampire, especially that one, keeping her from doing her job. She was better than that. If anything, the fact that she had entertained the thought at all had her so pissed off that she practically launched herself out the window and down the tree that had served her so well in high school. Once she was on the ground with her stake in hand, Buffy squared her shoulders and went out to do what she did best, woe betide the vampires who crossed her path tonight.

And if she thought she felt a familiar tingle along her neck or caught a hint of cigarette smoke, it was just her imagination hard at work.

Like it had always been where Spike was concerned.

