

CAVALRY

A Drive Story



HOLLY DENISE



“WE NEED HELP.”

Buffy drew in a breath, glancing at Spike to see if he'd heard. He had and was already sitting up on the bed, having switched the television onto mute. “What's up?” she asked, all nonchalance. Just because this was exactly what she'd been waiting for didn't mean she was prepared.

It helped, though, that Willow seemed just as uncomfortable. “I don't know the full story. My security clearance isn't what it was before... Well, before.”

“I don't need the full story. You can skip to the highlights.”

“It's not that easy.”

And it wasn't—not for Willow and not for Buffy, either, though she would love for it to be. The whole being undead thing had been massively oversold to her in some ways. Like, before she'd become one, she wouldn't have believed it possible that a vampire could become as nervous as she was each time she called someone in Sunnydale. She'd thought she'd at least be blessed with the gift of not caring. Alas.

“Okay, so start from the beginning, I guess.”

There was a breath. A beat. Then Willow started talking.



“LAST CHANCE, PET,” Spike said after slamming the DeSoto's trunk closed. “Not one little bit of that is your problem.”

No, it wasn't, but leaving her former friends and her former mom (her former watcher had evidently absconded back to England, so no worrying about him) to deal with the fallout of a failed army experiment in her former town just wasn't in her wiring. She knew that, and she knew Spike knew it too, the same way she knew that he would keep reminding her of this each mile they closed between themselves and Sunnydale. It was a big deal, going home. A bigger deal being *asked* to go home—for the others to admit they needed more than whatever they'd been doing to fight the forces of darkness on their own.

And call her curious, but Buffy wanted to see what happened when she did show up. If anything had changed since her last visit.

“Blood supply is good,” she said. “We should be able to drive through the night.”

“As my lady commands.” Spike moved toward her, and then he was there, against her, his hands on her face and his lips on her lips in a soft kiss. “Was lying before, about it being the last chance.”

“I know.”

“Say the word and I’ll forget the way to sodding California.”

Buffy grinned but shook her head. “It’s not like we were doing anything all that exciting anyway.”

“I beg to bloody differ.”

She rolled her eyes, still grinning. The past month or so had been a lot like the time they’d spent on the road during their ill-fated rush to Denver for the chip removal services that didn’t exist. Except with no real destination in mind this time, just a sprawling cross-country journey containing plenty of theft, fighting, and fun. Pure, unadulterated fun the likes of which Buffy hadn’t truly believed was in the cards for her until she’d died.

It wasn’t hard to find, either. Her enhanced abilities owing to her slayer lineage just meant that any brawl she got into needed more than one opponent to be a challenge. Or at least someone bigger and beefier than the average vampire. Most days, she didn’t even wear the gem. As they had discovered when they had taken on the Scourge, she was too fast for anyone to catch and way too strong for anyone to hold. That fight hadn’t been easy, but it hadn’t been hard either. At no point had she doubted who was going to walk away. Spike having the gem just ensured she wouldn’t walk away alone.

Whatever was happening in Sunnydale sounded on par with the fight with the Scourge. A town overrun by mutant demons, courtesy of the impressive mishandling of the fallout of Buffy’s attack on the Initiative. The ensuing heavy military presence had been over-zealous in making up for the losses they’d suffered—all two of them—and involved a lot of bagging and tagging of any demon they came across until the holding facility was full to bursting.

Then, rather predictably, it had burst, hence the SOS from the people on the ground.

And she and Spike *hadn’t* been doing anything all that exciting

when the call had come. They hadn't had time, having just settled into another hotel in a long string of hotels. The demon hotspot they'd planned to hit would have to wait.

"All right," Spike said, gripping her by the shoulders. "Not talkin' you outta this, am I?"

"Do you want to?"

"No. Reckon if you got word all your mates were slaughtered and you weren't there to stop it, you'd find a way to make it my fault." A smile tugged at the side of his mouth. "Might be worth it, at that. Sure you'd punish me real good."

"Spike."

"Right, right. Into the bloody car I go."

He didn't, though, until she had climbed into the passenger seat so he could close her door like a gentleman. One of the more baffling things about Spike—the dualities that made him her bad rude Victorian dandy vampire. Buffy waited for him to circle the hood of the vehicle and climb in behind the driver's seat, then assumed her customary position cuddled up against him as he started the engine.

"Could be worse," Spike said, steering one-handed out of the motel parking lot, his right arm around Buffy's shoulders. "Last time we were there, I was too unconscious to mow down the welcome sign."

"I did it for you."

He gave her a fond look. "Did you really?"

"You told me it was tradition."

"It is. Just didn't figure you were listening."

Buffy snuggled deeper into him, sinking into the familiarity of worn leather, and let her eyes drift closed. Tried not to think about how, in just a handful of hours, she'd be back in the town she'd left behind and all its related baggage.

It was the right thing to do, returning to Sunnydale.

She just hoped she still felt that way when it was time to leave again.



THEY BEAT the sunrise into Sunnydale, but only just. Close enough

that all the creature features that had reportedly been plaguing the streets had scurried back to their respective holes, though Willow had warned her that some were becoming braver as they adjusted to the paradigm shift. Still, no one was around to witness the epic defeat of yet another welcome sign, and the streets between the edge of town and 1630 Revello Drive were likewise vacant. And even though this wasn't all that surprising considering the hour, something about the tableau had Buffy's nerves on edge.

"Do you feel that?" she asked Spike, staring at the scenery outside the passenger window. She didn't expect an answer—not really—as she wasn't entirely sure what she was asking, but he gave her one anyway.

"Smell it, more like."

"What is it?"

"Fear."

Buffy frowned and sat back. "Is that really a thing? Smelling fear?"

His mouth twitched the way it did whenever she asked a question he thought she should already have the answer to. Like she was adorable.

"What?" she demanded before he could provide a response. "It just seemed like a bad guy line."

"Tellin' me you haven't noticed?"

"I don't make a point to hunt down humans." Not intentionally, at least. She had killed two people in pursuit of freedom from the chip the Initiative had shoved into their heads, but that had been out of necessity rather than desire...though Buffy would be lying if she said she hadn't enjoyed it a little. The monster had been desperate for its pound of flesh, and she hadn't hesitated to claim it when provoked. If either Riley Finn or Maggie Walsh had excreted a fear scent, she hadn't clocked it at the time.

"Well, this is what it smells like," Spike said, gesturing at the window. "Bit pungent. Good way to tell if someone's bluffing or not. Whatever's goin' on here has your townies by the shorthairs."

"Which means Willow wasn't kidding." In Sunnydale, the existence of monsters was a bit of an open secret, even if people routinely went out of their way to rationalize anything not normal. If suddenly the

entire town was legitimately afraid of what went bump in the night, the situation was indeed of the dire.

And if she needed further proof, it was there waiting for her when Spike pulled up to the house she used to call home. Or tried.

“Didn’t take a wrong turn, did I?” Spike asked, leaning across her lap to peer at what appeared to be a vacant lot. The trees were there where they had always been—the one in the front and the one Buffy had made such consistent use of during high school—but the walkway to the front porch was gone, as was the front porch itself and the house that had been attached to it.

“Willow told me they put a glamour on the house, whatever that means.”

“Better check fast. Sun’ll be up in a blink.”

Buffy nodded and made to open her door. “All right, I’ll be quick.”

He seized her by the wrist before she could negotiate her way out of the car. “Take the ring, yeah?”

“I’ll be back before I’ll need it.”

“Slayer, if the place is crawling like you were told, could be there are things waitin’ for you to step outside.” Spike pressed the Gem of Amara into her hand before she could come up with a reply. “You get yourself killed because you get into a scuffle in the daylight without protection, and I swear I’ll follow you to hell itself just so I can kill you again for bein’ so thick.”

She rolled her eyes but slid the ring onto her finger without complaint. “I love you too, honey.”

Spike huffed, cupped the back of her neck and pulled her in for a kiss, and it felt very silly and dramatic, but she couldn’t deny that every one of her instincts was on full alert by the time she did step outside of the DeSoto. The funky smell she’d previously only caught through the window was almost a tangible thing without the barrier of glass, something that shifted against her skin as she moved. Fear so dense it was soupy.

Yeah, whatever was going on here needed to be handled, and swiftly. While the part of Buffy that was all apex predator felt right at home, the rest of her just felt watched, and she didn’t like it.

She made it to the porch just fine, though—the porch that

bloomed into being exactly where it should be the second the toe of her boot hit the steps. It was like a flicker in one of those old timey movies when the pieces of film were edited together. Now you *don't* see it, now you do—the house that had been her home plopped back exactly where she had left it. Buffy drew in a ragged breath and drew back. The second she pulled away from the step, the house vanished once more, camouflaged as a slightly overgrown vacant space between the neighbors.

“Glamour works great, Will,” Buffy muttered before turning and hurrying back to the car to collect her vampire.

And then it was a race, Spike with his duster pulled over his head, his always creative curses filling her ears as the sun began to crawl its way across the lawn. Once again, the house materialized the second her feet touched the porch, and Buffy didn't slow down, didn't hesitate before bursting through the front door and spilling into the foyer of her former home with Spike thundering behind her.

“Buffy!”

Buffy whirled around, kicking the door closed as she went. When she stopped, she found herself facing Willow, who stood in the living room, staring at her with blatant surprise.

“Oh, hi, Will,” Buffy said, taking in the scene—the rumpled mix of pillows and blankets on the couch, the flannel PJs—and winced. “I... Umm, I guess you were waiting up for us?”

Willow wiggled as though self-conscious and tugged on the hem of her pajama top. “You said you'd be here right around sunrise so I thought I should probably sleep down here to make sure you had a way in.” She pulled a face and glanced at the now slightly warped shape of the front door. “My mistake.”

“The disappearing act outside threw me off a little,” Buffy replied somewhat defensively. She hadn't meant to kick it *that* hard.

“I said there'd be a glamour.”

“You didn't say the glamour would vanish the whole house.”

“Oh, well. It does. Only the people who know absolutely that there is a house here can even get to the porch.” At that, she straightened her shoulders with unmistakable pride. “We wiped it completely off official town records, too, so no one can look it up. A precaution, since

your mom was living here by herself and most everyone knew about you.”

Buffy frowned and glanced at Spike to see if he shared her surprise. If he did, he was doing a good job hiding it. “*What* about me?” she asked as he came around to stand at her side.

“That you’re a massively strong vampire who goes to extreme lengths to protect the people she loves?” Willow replied. “They also knew from Riley’s reports that you were living here as a vampire and didn’t hurt your mom. And from everything I’ve heard, Adam is obsessed with finding you. It didn’t seem far-fetched that he would try to use your mom as bait.”

“And Adam is...?”

“One of the many things I couldn’t tell you on the phone.”

Yeah, that didn’t narrow it down. Though she had indeed started the story from the beginning, Willow had also been sparse on the details out of an excess of caution, as there was no telling if the call was being traced or recorded. Buffy had insisted on a race back to Sunnydale based on the bare bones of the problem—a problem she could clearly see was real but had no idea as to the size or extent.

But for as many questions as she had, Buffy figured the answer part would come after she and Spike had crashed for a little while, and the other members of the household had woken up. She wasn’t sure who all was here—there were five individual heartbeats echoing throughout the house, and only three familiar scents—but it seemed more prudent to wait until everyone was alert and in the same room to avoid having multiple versions of the same conversation. Plus, the nerves she’d been riding ever since Willow had asked her to come home needed a chance to calm. The last thing anyone needed was to be on the receiving end of a cranky sleep-deprived slayer-turned-vampire. It wasn’t pretty.

“There are some things to grab in the car,” Buffy said after a beat. “We didn’t have much blood left, but it’s enough to get us through another meal or two, and I’d like to get that in the fridge before the cooler becomes completely useless. And my favorite weapons are in the trunk. Will, can you show Spike the basement? Or wherever you’re putting us? We don’t need to sleep long, just a couple of hours. That

should give everyone else a chance to wake up and us a chance to charge our batteries.”

“You don’t need me to get the car stuff?” Willow asked with a pointed look at the window beside the front door, where sunlight was burning its way through the curtain.

Buffy bit back a grin, knowing it would only wig her friend out more than she already was. She also decided against reminding Willow that she had seen the gem in action with her own two eyes not all that long ago. The fewer people who knew about the ring, the better. Even people who were more or less trusted. “I’ll be fine,” she said instead. “I’ve gotten good at getting around during the day. And if things out there are as hairy as you say they are, better me than someone else, right?”

“I guess,” Willow replied, unconvinced.

That was as good as she was going to get, so Buffy didn’t press for more, rather shifted her attention to Spike, who regarded her with a mixture of amusement and caution—a silent *watch it, you’re not bloody invincible, no matter what you think* reflected in his eyes. She fought the urge to hold up her gem-wearing hand in response—I *am while I’m wearing this, dummy*—but decided against that, too. They’d made an agreement early on not to be overconfident just because they had an ace in the hole, as people who went around bragging about what made them untouchable somehow always ended up tempting fate. They did not need to go down in history as another cautionary tale.

Though Buffy maintained Spike was more conscientious of this agreement of theirs when she was the one wearing the ring. When it was his turn, he was as brazen as always—perhaps even more so just to get a rise out of her.

In any event, the run to the car took under a minute. She collected her travel bag from the boot—as she’d taken to calling the trunk, much to Spike’s delight—along with the weapons they were partial to on those occasions they decided to use weapons, and rescued the remaining packets of blood that were in the cooler in the back seat. Once inside, she dumped the weapons in the living room and took the blood to the fridge. Someone would need to run to the butcher’s day after tomorrow at the latest; otherwise the fanged

members of the household were apt to become very grumpy very quickly. That, however, was a conversation that could wait until everyone was up.

She traipsed down to the basement just as Willow dumped fresh linens on a cot that Buffy had never seen before.

"Is there, ahh, a time I should come and get you?" Willow asked as she made her way toward the stairs. "You said just a couple of hours?"

"Once everyone's up is fine," Buffy replied, stifling a yawn and stripping her shirt over her head without thought. Vampires weren't the most modest of creatures by nature, and while it had taken her a while to truly acclimate to this part of being undead, it was the sort of thing that was hard to stuff back into the bag once it was outside. She didn't even realize she'd done anything unusual until it registered that Willow's heart was beating a little harder than it had been a moment ago, indicating surprise or discomfort or both.

Spike, for his part, just gave her an appreciative smirk and tugged her onto the cot once she was close enough to grab. "Lucky she wore her knickers today," he told Willow. "Hell, lucky she has any knickers to wear."

"He *is* hell on my underwear," Buffy confirmed with a short laugh, exhaustion creeping in. The combination of having completed the journey to Sunnydale and entering a dark basement had worked its magic, and within seconds, she was struggling to keep her eyes open. "Sorry, Will. Didn't mean to flash you."

"No, it's...it's okay. I was just..." Willow trailed off, either because she couldn't find the words or because Buffy was now pushing down her pants. "I'll just get out of your hair. Let you sleep. And if you promise you won't bite me, I'll wake you up when everyone's ready."

"Have some blood warmed up," Spike advised, pulling Buffy to his chest. "The smell will be different, and purer, so we'll know not to snap our fangs."

"That is not the confidence-instilling sentiment I was hoping for, but okay."

If Spike replied, though, Buffy didn't hear it. Her eyes were closed and everything else was far away. Everything but the chest she lay against, the sensation of falling into her true home as the world

tipped away, of lips against her brow, a whisper of words that ran together but didn't need to be repeated, for she knew what they were.

And for the first time in what already felt like a long time, she drifted into the comfort of nothing.



IT WAS late morning by the time everyone had awakened and congregated in the living room—everyone being *everyone*, including her mom, Willow, Xander, and the two other heartbeats she'd heard when she'd entered the house. One belonged to Xander's prom date, of all weirdness, and the other to a pretty blonde who smelled enough like Willow to identify her as Willow's lover. Buffy sank into the cushions of the sofa next to Spike, handed him a warmed mug of blood, and did her best not to guzzle down the one she'd brought for herself. Not because she wasn't hungry, or even that she wanted it to last, but rather because no one in the room seemed very comfortable with the idea of there being vampires in the house and she didn't need to make things worse by giving herself a blood mustache.

"All right," Buffy said, placing her mug on the coffee table. "So... who's gonna go first?"

"Go first with what?" asked Anya. At least Buffy thought that was the name of the former vengeance demon who was now, at minimum, sleeping with Xander. Probably more than that, given she'd earned herself a corner on Revello Drive. If it was serious enough that Anya was Xander's girlfriend, well, Buffy would just have to find time to point out to her former friend what a fucking hypocrite he was. It had just been last year when Anya had recruited a group of vampires to turn the Bronze into a crime scene.

But pointing out Xander's definitive lack of standable legs could wait. They had bigger demons to fry.

"Willow said when we got here that there were a bunch of things she couldn't tell us on the phone," Buffy began.

"Right, like who the bloody hell this Adam wanker is and why he's got this sodding town by the short hairs," Spike added, leaning forward

to place his mug beside hers. "See what a difference there is when you don't have the Slayer standing between you and creatures like me."

"He's not," Willow replied.

"Not what?"

"Anything like you."

"Considering he has this town in the palm of his hand, dunno if I ought to be flattered or offended by that," Spike drawled.

Xander snorted. "Nice boyfriend you have, Buff."

Oh, he *so* did not want to go there. Buffy narrowed her eyes. "I'm sorry he doesn't meet your standards, but all the ex-vengeance demons were taken."

"Buffy," her mother said in what was unmistakably her *be nice* voice, which was so rich Buffy could choke on it.

"I meant Adam's not a vampire," Willow said quickly as though to recenter the conversation. "He's not like anything we've seen before. He's not a demon or a human or any kind of monster we can look up. He's lab created."

Buffy stiffened. "Lab? You mean the Initiative made him?"

"Not the Initiative. Not really. It was more just Professor Walsh. A project of hers that she was working on under the radar."

"And continued working on as a ghost?"

Willow glanced at the blonde at her side, who didn't say anything but offered a soft, encouraging smile. The sort that said *go on, you've got this*, and alluded to intimacies that Buffy couldn't help but find surprising. She hadn't expected to come home and find her friend in a relationship of any kind a mere six months after Riley's death, let alone one where they had already progressed to gentle encouragement and unspoken conversations. So more than a lover, then. A girlfriend. Moral support.

And honestly, given that, Buffy should have expected what came next.

"They asked *me* to finish him," Willow muttered, flushing. "I mean, not at first. It wasn't like, 'Hey you, over there, wrap this up.' But once they found the schematics, the plans, saw that she was thinking, like, *big*—like super-soldier big—I guess they saw the potential. They started talking about how we'd be unbeatable in war and it'd save a

bunch of lives if we could find out how to finish him. Like, no more soldiers dying in combat, maybe, once they understood how to make more Adams. So they looked at their personnel, and I guess they wanted to keep it off the books, too, because I can't figure out why else they would come to me."

"Maybe because you're a genius," Xander replied, rubbing his hands together, his gaze on the floor. "And you'd been working up close and personal with Walsh before Buffy decided to go full vampire."

Buffy rolled her eyes. "Oh, that's right. I keep forgetting that in the world according to Xander, I should've let her stake me."

"I never said that. I just said you could've found another way. One that didn't involve leaving a corpse behind."

Joyce let out a deep breath like she was about to hop in, but Buffy beat her to the punch. She had not come all this way so that all the formers in her life could make her feel bad for what she'd done to survive.

"Okay, well, I'll keep that under advisement the next time I'm in a situation where someone is running at me with a stake and I'm standing between her and someone I love with seconds to decide what to do." Buffy glanced at Anya and offered a flat smile. "At least you know that if you're ever in that position, Xander doesn't want you using lethal force to protect him. He'd rather let the bad guy win."

Xander bolted to his feet, his eyes blazing. "You got something to say to me?"

"Yeah, I do, actually," Buffy replied, pointedly *not* bolting to her feet. Rather, she placed a hand on Spike's thigh, felt the rush of his strength beneath her fingers—strength he shared with her. The reason she'd been able to come back here at all, even knowing this was going to be a part of the welcome committee. "I understand that you have had a hard time getting on the whole pulseless wagon where I'm concerned. I did, too. Becoming a vampire wasn't anything I asked for and definitely not what I wanted, but I tried, Xander. I tried when I was here, and no one ever understood or appreciated how hard that was. Every time I was with you"—she turned her gaze to Willow and her mom, because this was hardly a Xander-only observation—"with *any* of you, I felt like I was on display. Like you were just

waiting for me to slip up and do something monstrous, and that even having the thoughts I had—which I can't control, by the way—was a sign that I was failing. That I wasn't Buffy. Do you have any idea how hard it is to live like that? This huge thing happened to me, and instead of having my friends to help me through it, I had my friends treating me like I had done something wrong. So since we're here and we're letting it all out, maybe you can tell me what it is I did to deserve that. Was it getting killed? If that's the case, I'm sorry to have inconvenienced you. I can't imagine how difficult that transition must have been."

"It was difficult, Buff," Xander said, though his tone had gentled a little. Not a ton but enough that hearing the words didn't make her feel like throwing him head-first out of the window. "It was... It was the worst thing I've ever been through."

"Yeah. Me, too." She swallowed, and realized with a start that she was shaking. "But I'm not going to apologize for what I am, or what I did to survive. I'm not going to apologize for not staying in that place where I didn't know how to act, and I'm not going to apologize for not hating that I am a vampire now, because I don't. It's not what I wanted but I am happy. Really, finally. And I will kill to protect myself or the people I love and I will *not* feel bad about it. That's the Buffy Summers you have now. If you can't handle that, then maybe we made this trip for nothing."

Xander blinked at that, so taken aback she might have laughed had the sight not made her want to scream. Or better yet, roar, fangs out and everything. Instead, Buffy did what she did best around her friends these days—she waited. Either for the fight or the fury or the accusations or the acceptance. Not surprised when Xander opted not to respond but disappointed all the same. Perhaps where he was concerned, she truly never could go home again.

"For what it's worth, sweetie," Joyce said, breaking the silence, "I think you're right."

Buffy blinked, stunned right out of her tension. "You do?"

"Yes. I've had a lot of time to think since you left, since all this started happening and... I was unfair to you. More than unfair, actually. It was a miracle, you coming home. Being as much you as you were."

"You said you worried I'd tear your throat out at night," Buffy reminded her. She hadn't intended to bring it up; while her feelings on the subject remained bitter, things had been better with her mom the last time they'd been in the same room. Still, what Joyce had thrown at her the day Riley had shown up had stayed with Buffy long after they'd made their escape. Made her question herself, whether Buffy could still be alive if she was dead, if all her efforts were for naught. In retrospect, it was the first time since she'd been killed that she'd truly felt dead to anyone. That was a hard thing to come back from.

"I know what I said," Joyce told her now. "And I did worry. But I was wrong to worry. And, while I don't love that you and Spike were clearly being...*friendly*, especially at the volume you were being *friendly*, it didn't take long to realize that if the most that had changed when you changed was you were slightly less considerate, then I was fool to count myself anything other than fortunate to still have my daughter. And you *are* my daughter, Buffy. After what Willow told me you did... You defended yourself and the person you love. I wish it hadn't involved death but I certainly can't fault you for doing what you needed to do to survive. Cordelia's phone call helped as well."

"Cordelia?" Buffy croaked.

"Yes. She called to tell me you showed up and rescued them from some sort of doomsday device."

"Bloody right, she did," Spike agreed, stretching his arm along the couch at Buffy's back. "She was magnificent."

"And even though Angel tried to have you killed, you didn't kill him in cold blood. You were honorable. You were the daughter I raised." Joyce swallowed. "I was so proud of you when I heard that. And realized then just how horribly wrong I'd been. So yes, I think you're right. And I think everyone in this room who made you think anything else owes you a big apology." She was still a beat, then glanced at Xander out of her periphery. "I won't *demand* that anyone apologize, but I will require that you and Spike be respected while you're under my roof. Anyone who has a problem with that is more than welcome to leave."

Xander shifted visibly, his cheeks flaming red. Then, without a word, he walked himself back to his seat and plopped down hard enough the frame whined under his weight. Anya patted him on the

back, looking somewhat pleased, as though this was exactly what she had hoped.

And while that wasn't much, it was also everything. More than Buffy could have ever asked for, let alone expected. She pressed her lips together in an effort to keep from crying, and managed out a hoarse, "Thank you," that left her feeling very much the center of attention, but also lighter than she'd ever thought she'd be in this house again. Vindicated in ways she'd only dreamed about.

"This is all with the good," Willow said after a beat. "Really, really good. But...Adam? We should get back to Adam. It is the reason why you're here."

Buffy nodded and resituated. Right. Monsters first. Touching mother-daughter reconciliation later. "Sure. Tell me about my bad guy. You said they asked you to finish him?"

"Yes. I was less enthused but I agreed to do it. I was thinking that I could figure out how he was supposed to work, at least, and how many people knew about him and where they kept the records on how he was made. All that stuff." A pause. "It didn't get that far, though. *I* didn't get that far. I was poking around, trying to make sense of the schematics and he kinda...woke up."

Spike snorted. "Coulda seen that one coming."

"Well, I didn't," Willow replied defensively. "Not even a little bit. Suddenly there's this massive...*thing* sitting up on this lab table and calling me *mommy*—"

"Mommy?" Buffy echoed, wrinkling her nose. "Okay, eww."

"Way eww. And he tried to kill me—he has this skewer on his arm from a Polgara demon and it was all with the extended, and he was coming at me and I don't even know what spell I did, I swear." She was babbling a mile a minute now. "It was just the first thing that came to me and I said it and whatever it was, it worked, because there was this flash and then I was running and I don't know what happened after that, except a few days later, the scientist who had taken over for Walsh was gone and then *his* replacement was gone and the higher-ups kept telling us not to panic and, well, that has never once made people not panic. Then some of the demons in the Initiative's containment facilities went missing, and the next thing we knew, there were other

hybrid things running around. Part-human, part-monster creatures that Adam made. He had control of the entire facility before anyone could stop him—before anyone realized how much knowledge he'd been programmed with, and how much more he could get just by plugging himself into the network. Then his creations would go out and get more demons and he'd make more hybrids with them, all the while controlling military communications so the Pentagon kept sending more men, giving him an endless supply. Some of the military guys we think were just implanted with chips and not transformed into anything, just made into people puppets." At last, Willow broke off, breathing hard. "Adam is...so far unkillable. The Initiative has these guns that are like... They shoot electricity? Energy? Whatever it is, Adam absorbs it like a power-up. Bullets are useless too. Everything we've tried on him is useless."

"He rarely leaves the lab he created at the Initiative," said Willow's girlfriend. It was the first time she'd spoken at all, and she seemed to realize it mid-sentence. Like she heard her voice in the air, recognized it as her own, and felt the accompanying shift of attention. Something she clearly did not want, for she promptly ducked her head. "I-I just th-thought that was worth n-noting. We think—*Willow* thinks h-he might control everything from there? Like...maybe all the monsters h-he's made could be switched off?"

"Switched off?" Spike asked, leaning forward. "How you reckon?"

But the blonde wasn't talking anymore. She shook her head instead and tried to fold in on herself, jolting slightly when Willow placed a hand on her shoulder as though she'd expected something else.

"Adam loves chaos," Willow said. "I think his early experiments were done just to see how things worked. Some of his first victims were pulled apart like they had been dissected, like he was trying to figure out how to engineer a person. But not *just* people, because we found demons like that too. Just like he had a certain vision in mind and was doing his research to make sure he got it right before setting it loose. And now the town *is* his, and we're worried he's thinking bigger—the more he learns, the more he conquers, the more ambitious he becomes. But it's all by *his* design. No one else's. *His* vision for the future. I don't think he's human enough to be paranoid but definitely

to think about what would happen if he created another, well, Adam. I think there has to be a kill switch in his lab so that if his experiment gets out of control, he can nuke it and start from scratch.”

Well, that certainly made sense, but it was still way too speculative for Buffy’s taste. Fighting her way into a lab with a walking, talking and so far impervious Frankenstein thing was a taller order than any other Big Bad she’d put into the ground since becoming a vampire. Not to the point of being intimidating, but Buffy would feel a lot better about the prospect if she knew for sure there was a button she could press to ensure it was just one Frankenstein creature and not legions.

They wouldn’t know until they looked, though.

“Okay,” Buffy said, leaning forward. “We need to get into this lab, then. See if this kill switch exists.”

“And what do you do if you run into Adam?” Anya asked, surprising her because she hadn’t thought the former demon was paying attention. “I think Willow mentioned the whole ‘he’s obsessed with you’ thing, being that you’re stronger than the average vampire. Add to the fact he might know you’re coming since he controls pretty much all communication going in and out of the town.”

It was a decent point. Buffy sighed and shifted. “Willow, is there *anything* of use you can tell us about Adam that might indicate a weakness of some kind? Like, is he decapitable? You said guns and stuff don’t work on him, but it sounds like you also know more about him than anyone else. Get a peek at his insides, anything?”

“Yeah, there’s actually the only weakness I know. But it’s not a great weakness. In fact, insofar as weaknesses go, it kinda sucks.”

“Try me.”

Willow pulled a face like what she was about to say would hurt. “It’s a uranium power core. Without it, he’s just a lump of machine and demon parts. But you’d have to hack at him for a good long time before you got to it, *without* him pulling you apart limb from limb. As long as it’s in place, he essentially can’t be killed.”

Buffy frowned and rolled her shoulders back. “I’m stronger than I was before. Could just punch my way to a solved problem.”

“I took that into account, and I don’t think so,” Willow said. “Giles... Before he left, he requested research from the Council on

everything that's known about the slayers that have been turned. There aren't many, granted, since most vamps are afraid to do it, thinking the turned slayer will do exactly what you did to Sunday. But there have been enough that the Council has a formula to calculate the added strength a slayer gets once sired and even though it's considerable, it's still not punch-through-Adam's-chestable."

"Still, that seems like the best way, doesn't it? Getting to that uranium core? Maybe I can't do it by myself but with some added strength..." She glanced at Spike. "So not just me. But the two of us?"

"And how do you expect to get close enough for that to work?" Xander asked, for once without a sneer in his voice. "We've seen him dust vamps by tearing off their heads. Like they were dolls and he was a kid throwing a tantrum. Even if you two together is enough, you're going to need to do the punching without ending up dead in the process."

Another good point, unfortunately. Buffy slumped, dragging her teeth over her lower lip. For everything else it did for them, she had no idea if the Gem of Amara would provide protection against excessive force like that. It had been designed to prevent death from the sun, stakes, and holy relics, and while beheading was another tried and true method of vampire slayage, it was also hardly vampire exclusive. Whoever had made the gem would have had to have thought of every possible eventuality, and Buffy wasn't sure how much she liked those odds.

Even less sure how she'd feel about attacking Adam in tandem if there was just one ring between them. They would fight over who wore it and likely be so distracted with worry for the other that it would ultimately provide no protection at all.

What they needed, at minimum, was two gems.

And that was it. Buffy's chest lurched with the phantom echo of a heartbeat. The dip, the rush, the realization, all of it there except not, her vampire body remembering what it was like to be human. To be a human who had experienced an *aha* moment and the euphoric explosion of hormones that came in its wake. She sprang to her feet without meaning to, was already on the verge of reaching into her pocket and pulling out the gem before reason caught up with her,

screaming its reminder that this wasn't only her ring, and therefore only her choice. And then she was whirling around, looking at Spike and hoping he was there with her, that he'd read her mind without needing her to haul him away and debate the pros and cons of revealing their greatest weakness to a bunch of people they hadn't exactly shown up here expecting to trust. She'd understand if the answer was no—if he thought she was *daft* or *barmy* or one of those things she often caught him mumbling after she'd made a suggestion he didn't like—but she was also ready to argue the point until she emerged the victor.

Spike was on his feet too, though, his eyes fixed on hers. No fight there, just understanding. And an answer.

"Uhh, don't take this the wrong way," Xander said, his voice having grown very tense. "But you two are kind of scaring the shit out of me. What's with the dramatic standing?"

Buffy turned back the others, worked her throat and slid her hand into her pocket. "Will," she said, "this might be the tallest of tall orders, but could you make another one of these?" She pulled her hand back out and unfurled her fingers. "This is...a really valuable tool."

"A ring?" Willow asked, furrowing her brow. Then the penny dropped. "Wait, wait, I remember this. It was with the stuff at the Initiative, right? Is this what you were looking for when..." Her eyes went wide. "Riley staked you. And then Spike went into the sun. And you, with the sun just earlier today. All with the non-burny. Is this how you did it?"

"You found the Gem of Amara?" Anya asked, sounding seriously impressed. "It's been lost for... Well, I remember the crusades. The vampire crusades, I mean. Or, both crusades, actually, but specifically the vampire crusades. When no one found it then, I figured it was just gone."

"Or gone just until the right vampire came along and figured out what the valley of the sun meant," Buffy said, and regarded Spike with a proud grin.

Xander leaned forward, glaring at the ring. "So it's a piece of jewelry that turns you into super vamp?"

"Essentially, yes. Whichever one of us is wearing it becomes

unstake- or flambé-able. Maybe even unbeheadable, but we haven't put that one to the test yet."

"Seems like the sort of thing we ought to know, too," Spike observed. "If this git they're on about is tearing off heads left and right."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Buffy said, once more looking at Willow. "I might not be able to punch my way through Adam's chest by myself, but I was already strong before I was turned and even stronger now. Add in Spike's strength and the Occam's Razor answer to 'how do you solve a problem like Adam' might actually be in play. But that only works if you can make us another one of these."

"Another...famed piece of antiquity?" Willow replied, her voice light. "Buffy, even for a really skilled witch, that's... Like I don't even know where we would start."

At that, the blonde who was Willow's girlfriend slid closer, studying the ring with a soft frown. "I... I could have a look. I-if that's okay. M-my mother and I used to..." Once again, she seemed to realize she was speaking in real-time, for she whipped her head up and looked around with wide eyes. "Sorry, I shouldn't have—"

"No, Tara, it's good." Willow favored her with a warm, loving grin. "It's really good. What about your mom?"

There was a beat. Tara glanced down, a blush staining her cheeks and Buffy had a feeling this would take a while to get out. So, apparently, did Spike, for she could feel him starting to get antsy and resisted the urge to throw him a warning look. Her vampire was a lot of things, but patient very much did not make the list.

"M-my mom did magic. It r-runs in the girls in our family. Before she—when she was still here, one of the things we'd do was look at old magic. Old spells. N-nothing big like..." Tara gestured at the ring. "But if we found something that was s-supposed to have magical properties, we'd try to figure out how it worked. How all the magic just—"

"You reverse-engineered spells for fun?" Willow asked breathlessly, all heart eyes and swoony. "Tara, that's... That is so cool. *You* are so cool. You're amazing. And you think you can do this with the ring?"

Tara's blush spread, turning her roughly the shade of a ripe tomato. "I can try," she said, her voice still shaking but somehow firmer at the

same time. Willow's confidence in her, it seemed, had given her confidence in herself. "But the ingredients aren't enough for a spell like this. We would need to cross-reference them with texts. Old texts, I think. See how the ingredients are supposed to work in concert with the magic."

Buffy's heart sank. With their number one book guy living the good life in England, that put them back at square one. "I don't suppose anyone knows how to get ahold of Giles?" Or if Giles would even help with something like this. The terms they'd left on hadn't been bad, but not necessarily 'help create a ring that makes vampires unkillable' good. "Or have another stuffy British guy with more books than friends hiding somewhere?"

"Well, I am neither stuffy nor British, but I can help," Anya said, now springing to her feet. "Being that I was around when a lot of the old texts were written, there's a lot about them that I might know that you don't. Like, which ones are about ensuring a bountiful harvest and which ones contain secrets of the darkest arts."

Buffy didn't bother hiding her surprise. Gone for a few months and suddenly both her former best friends had partnered up with people who were more than just potential cannon fodder. Which, she knew, not all that fair to Oz or Cordelia, but not being fair didn't make it not true. "You think you can help figure out which books to look at?"

Anya nodded brightly. "I think I know where to start, too. At least the texts you should be looking at."

"How?"

"Because of the ring." Anya closed the gap between them and plucked the ring out of Buffy's hand, then held it up to the light. "The casing here, see it? It's reminiscent of a scarab. Scarabs were sacred in ancient Egypt, where you'll also find the god Khepri, who was believed to roll the sun across the sky every morning."

"Are you getting ready to audition for *Jeopardy*, Ahn, or is this going somewhere?" Xander asked.

She rolled her eyes at him. "I'm saying I think the Gem of Amara might have Egyptian origin."

"Because of the casing?"

"No, not *just* the casing," Willow said, her voice taking that pitch it

so often did whenever she'd stumbled upon a brainwave. "But factor in that some beetles within this family also use their legs to roll dung into balls just like Khepri rolled the sun across the sky, and scarabs were seen as a reflection of the heavenly cycle, representing rebirth and regeneration. And that's what happens when someone stakes you, right? When you're wearing this? You regenerate?"

Buffy blinked, surprised in spite of herself, and exchanged a look with Spike. "Yeah, that's exactly what happens. The skin heals itself once the stake is removed."

"And," Anya added, looking triumphant, "the Egyptian sun god is Ra. Amun was the creator god, and they were eventually merged into one god, Amun-Ra. Which isn't all that far off from *Amara*. Dollars to doughnuts, the Gem of Amara originated in Egypt as a way for Egyptian vampires to defy Ra. Those are the texts I'd start with."

Well, that was certainly a hell of a lot more to go on than Buffy would have expected. Forget Giles—Anya was a step up. A nonjudgmental step, too, given her complete lack of concern about being in a room with vampires.

Maybe all of Buffy's friends going forward should be demons, or at least demon-adjacent. Like Doyle. And Cordelia, kind of, who wasn't demon-adjacent but was dating a demon so like a demon once removed or something. Before she and Spike left town, Buffy would have to ask Anya on a friend date. Establish a relationship outside of their association with Xander. That way, when Xander inevitably messed this relationship up, she didn't lose a valuable connection.

"So this ring," Joyce said, breaking into Buffy's thoughts. She had that look on her face that she'd worn the night she'd discovered the truth about vampires—like her brain might be on the verge of overloading. "If it *is* Egyptian in origin, does that mean ancient Egyptian deities exist? That this... Whatever this ring does for vampires, uses the power of those gods?"

Anya didn't even flinch before shaking her head. "Of course not. Existence is not a requirement of belief. Personally, I can't tell you whether the Egyptian gods are real or not—I've never met them. What matters is the people. If the people believed in them, and people

become vampires, then it stands to reason that Egyptian vampires believed in them too, and that could have led to the creation of the Gem of Amara. Something that allows them to defy Ra and death itself.”

Yeah, she definitely needed a friend date with Anya once all this was over. “Wow,” Buffy said, sincerely humbled. “You’re all kinds of handy to have around, you know that?”

Anya straightened her shoulders and preened. “Thank you. I think I am very helpful as well.”

“We should definitely start with texts originating from that part of the world, then.” Willow nodded, though it seemed her excitement had ebbed. The smile and sparkle from a moment ago was gone, and she was suddenly all business. Like she knew Buffy was thinking of making a new friend and felt threatened, as though anything between them had been normal at all this year. “But make it fast,” she added. “If the ring isn’t Egyptian, we’ll need to go back to the drawing board pretty darn fast.”

“I’ll make a list,” Anya replied.

“Good. And in the meantime, Tara and I can work on the ingredients part.” She paused, drew in a breath, and said, “We also don’t have a lot of time. The glamor protecting us is good but it’d be a mistake to consider it perfect. And Adam’s going to know Buffy’s in town, probably. It’s too big to keep under wraps. He might be able to access files that I don’t know about and put together that there’s supposed to be a house here.”

“I can work fast,” Tara said unsteadily. Not exactly confidence-inspiring, but it was becoming apparent that was just a personality thing. “A-and if Anya gets the right book—”

Xander shook his head. “That’s a lot of ifs. I don’t love it. And it’s all assuming that going to all this trouble is enough for the wonder twins to actually take Adam down with a couple of punches. We’re just taking that on faith?”

Buffy jolted, the words spears to the brain. *On faith...*

“Doesn’t look like you lot have another choice,” Spike drawled, hooking a hand around her waist. “Unless you’ve been sitting on a better idea you haven’t yet shared with the class.”

Xander's expression went slack but he didn't offer a reply. Just glared. And still, Buffy's mind was reeling.

On faith. On Faith.

Just where the hell was Faith in all this? Was she still in the hospital? Had she been killed? Just lying there, a ready banquet for whatever creature slaughtered their way to her wing? Or had she woken up? That last thing sounded unlikely, otherwise Willow would have mentioned it. Or maybe, if she had woken up, Faith had taken in the scene and used her brains for once to get out of Dodge without causing trouble.

But if she was still there, if she hadn't woken up, then...

"All right, well, everyone has their marching orders." Buffy snaked her arm around her vampire's waist in kind. "I think Spike and I will get some more rest. We'll need to go hunting tonight."

"Hunting? As in leaving the house?" Joyce was shaking her head, her eyes wide. "Buffy, it's chaos out there."

"Our kind of party," Spike said, smirking.

"And we'll need blood," Buffy added. "I know the butcher shops are probably trashed, but there's bound to be good blood out there somewhere. At least enough to get us through to the fight. Not to mention, we have an experiment of our own to run."

It would have been funny, and it was, kind of, the unease that dropped on the humans the second the words were out. As though they had only just remembered exactly what Buffy was, what Spike was, after having lulled themselves into forgetting. Perhaps imagining what two vampires in a town overrun with demons would have to do in order to get blood without adding to the body count—or, more likely, wondering if the Riley Finn exception clause was in order. If it came down to starve or kill, what side of the line Buffy would fall on. The monsters they had invited in to help protect them from other monsters.

Finally, Willow asked, "What experiment?" in a way that invited further discussion.

But Buffy was all discussed out for the moment. There was too much she needed to consider. Too much to share with Spike and Spike alone, as the others would never understand. "For starters," she said,

and nodded to the ring, “if that’s enough to keep us from losing our heads, should someone try to rip it off.”

“And how are you going to do that?”

“Simple.” She glanced at Spike, who nodded and grinned. “Time to catch ourselves a vampire.”



CATCHING a vampire in Sunnydale hadn’t been much of a challenge even before the demon uprising. Now, it was as simple as stepping outside.

“Well, that’s bloody handy, is what that is,” Spike muttered, tugging the front door closed with one hand, tossing Buffy the sword with the other. The glamour protecting the house would keep them concealed while on the porch, according to Willow, but the second their feet touched the ground, they were in the open. Which meant the vampire lurking by the tree in the front couldn’t see them no matter how hard he glared in their direction. Couldn’t hear them, either, courtesy of one of Tara’s magical augmentations. In fact, the only remaining sense the magical precautions hadn’t covered for was smell, and that didn’t even matter as smell was less reliable than the others when it came to situations like this. With loads of competing odors out there, it was easy to overwhelm the nose, Spike had explained once, and hard to separate the individual scents beyond the obvious. As a result, most vampires didn’t bother trying to hone that skill as far as it could be honed. Sniffing out blood and avoiding predators was the most they reckoned they needed it for.

“So, what do we think?” Buffy asked, throwing Spike a worried glance. “Kinda wiggy to step outside and there be a vampire at our doorstep. Is it bait?”

“Don’t think so. Could be this one’s on a scouting party. Red did say Adam might know there’s supposed to be a house here.”

“And just one to scout?”

“That’s the thing about minions, love. They’re expendable. He lives to report that there’s nothing to report, nothing’s wasted. He doesn’t

show at sunup, and Adam knows something stopped him. Maybe here, maybe somewhere else.”

“Or maybe he ran for it.”

“Possible, but I doubt it. Not with the inmates in charge of the asylum.” Spike paused and glanced at Buffy. *Your move*, that look said. Either use this vamp to run their little experiment and potentially give up ground in the doing or go hunting somewhere else.

Buffy didn’t want to hunt somewhere else. She had a larger question that needed answering.

“I’ll go from behind,” she said, and handed the sword back to him. “Grab him by the arms. You got it from there?”

Spike smirked and nodded, bouncing the blade with careless grace in his hand. “I got it.”

Under different circumstances, Buffy might have experienced a pang of guilt. This little vampire, whether he was a scout or bait or just decided to lounge against the wrong tree, was about to be trampled. And while sometimes it felt good to let loose and do a little—or a lot—of low-effort annihilation, Buffy tended to avoid trivial little nobodies that could be done in by a stiff breeze. Barfuls of demons were more her jam, or any of the big bruiser monsters out there that regarded vampires as evolutionary mistakes. Humbling those creatures that thought themselves above her, showing them just how fragile they were, provided the sort of rush that never got old.

Little piddly vampire guy didn’t stand a chance. She was behind him almost the second she launched herself off the porch, yanking his arms hard enough behind him that she was certain she dislocated at least one of his shoulders in the doing. He barely had time to yelp before Spike was there, and it was time. Buffy twisted to provide Spike the access he needed and firmed up her grip as she felt the shift, the pressure of a ring being shoved onto their victim’s finger.

“Don’t get used to it,” Spike growled at the still-screaming vampire. “And sweetheart, it’s time to duck.”

Their volunteer was tall enough she wasn’t worried about accidental decapitation, but Buffy obliged just the same. There was a rush of air, the meaty thunk of the sword connecting with flesh, a bloom of blood and the hack of metal through bone, but nothing after the blade

had completed its journey. Nothing except the now-familiar sound of flesh knitting and closing, and then it was over. The vampire still in her clutches, shaking and confused, his shouts having faded to sputtering whimpers and wordless pleas for understanding. But he didn't have enough time to understand—he didn't have enough time for anything. His time had come to an end.

"Thanks, mate," Spike said as Buffy ripped the gem back off the vamp's finger and shoved it onto her own. "Appreciate the help."

The poor piddly vampire gave a whimper, and then he was gone. Disintegrating into dust courtesy of the stake she embedded in his back. Buffy sighed and ran a hand through her hair, lifted her gaze to Spike's before sliding her stake back where it belonged—tonight, in the rear pocket of her jeans.

"I kinda feel bad about that," she said, staring at the dust as it drifted into the shadows. "Wrong place, wrong time guy."

"My girl, the soft touch."

Buffy lifted her eyes to Spike's, thought about arguing, but then shrugged and let herself fall into pace beside him toward the sidewalk. It wasn't that she was opposed to killing vampires. They were fair game, as far as she was concerned, especially the lurky-outside-her-house-to-report-to-big-bad types. But the Gem of Amara already tipped so much in hers and Spike's favor, in addition to the fact that she was pretty much an unstoppable killing machine, that killing one-off vamps like this felt a lot like going out of your way to knock over an anthill. No reason to it except casual cruelty, and soulless or not, she didn't like being casually cruel.

That was one of the things Spike said he loved most about her.

But she was also strategic, and not above making certain concessions when in a larger fight. Whatever this was with Adam was almost certain to be a larger fight, and for that, they needed certain questions answered. The first and most pressing one had been sufficiently crossed off the list—the other wasn't likely to be nearly as easy to satisfy, but still essential, especially if their bad guy was as strong as the others claimed.

"Tell me about this girl," Spike said once they were a safe distance away from the house. "You put her in a coma?"

Buffy nodded and snatched his hand to ground herself. “She poisoned Angel. I was pissed. And in need of an antidote. A rare antidote that she happened to have.”

“What’s that, then?”

“Her blood. Slayer blood.”

“Mmhmm.” He slid a glance at her. “Gonna guess this is the story behind the wanker’s fang marks on your throat?”

“Which are going to heal when? I’m a vampire now. I thought I had extra healing on top of all that slayer healing. The marks should be way with the gone.”

He snickered and tugged her closer to kiss her brow. “Might do faster if I didn’t keep opening them up. Can always stop biting you there.”

“Don’t you dare.”

Spike chuckled again, the sort of chuckle that sank into her skin and made her bones vibrate. “So this bird decided to spare the lot of us by offing Angel and for some reason, you decided that was a rotten idea and tossed her off a building.”

“That’s not exactly how it happened, but yeah. Close enough.” There was a beat, and then she decided, what the hell. She’d already come this far. “If you didn’t wake up with human blood, after Denver, I had it in my back pocket to find Faith and see if that’d do it.”

He went tense enough that she could tell she’d surprised him. “That a fact?”

“Not ideal or anything, because if I do ever take her out, I’d like it to be a fair fight, but I was willing to kill her for my boyfriend back when I had a soul.” Buffy sighed and burrowed herself deeper into his side. Even thinking about that stretch of hours when she hadn’t been sure she’d ever hear his voice again, be on the receiving end of one of his smirks or eyerolls, would never feel his lips against her or be able to tell him all the things she’d been holding back, triggered some inner mechanism that she figured would always be trapped there. When that happened, she craved the comfort of contact. His heart might not beat and he might not need to breathe, but when he was awake, Spike was always in motion. The reassurance of those muscles being worked, of his legs moving of their own accord, his lips near her ear, his voice,

helped her from spiraling into a vortex of what-ifs that shouldn't still haunt her but did.

He always seemed to sense it, too. The times when she was back in that black, pushed far enough that the thought of becoming the devil her mom and her friends had all thought she was hadn't frightened her. Had felt like actual justice in the wake of what Angel had nearly made happen. What all of them had made happen. Particularly the Initiative, so set on controlling monsters that they had created one of their own. And now they were reaping the reward.

"If this bird is alive still," Spike said now, pulling her fully back as only he could, "what's the plan? Don't reckon you'd be up for draining her just to give us a boost."

"No," Buffy agreed, relieved that he understood, and knowing he wouldn't argue even if he didn't feel the same way. "First, I want to make sure she's okay. It's weird but I feel a little like...like no one can kill her but me. Like the day she dies is the day *I* decide she dies because *I'm* the one doing it. Everyone else can just back the hell off. That probably doesn't make sense."

"Does," Spike replied. "Way I felt about you since the start."

There was that warming feeling again. The utter completion that came with being utterly understood. "Second, if she's there... No draining, but maybe a nibble?"

Spike stopped and appraised her with undisguised surprise. "That so?"

"Well, it's smart, right? They keep saying how strong Adam is and while I like the two-on-one odds, I also know that if this doesn't work, the next plan will probably compensate for all the effort we're not putting in now. Give us gems *and* slayer blood? That's an advantage I like."

He nodded but didn't reply. He didn't need to. She knew what he was thinking. Confirming that the Gem of Amara did indeed work against decapitations had been a lucky break, and one they really hadn't had to work for. The idea that a bedbound slayer might still be alive in a monster-run town was almost certifiable. A waste of perfectly good time they could be using elsewhere.

It would be helpful, though, if she were still alive. Buffy had yet to

find a foe she couldn't topple, but part of that was being smart, and part of being smart was not overestimating her own strength. She was more powerful than she ever had been before—more powerful maybe than any slayer had been before—and as much comfort as she found in that knowledge, history was littered with the corpses of humans and demons alike that thought they were too big to fail.

Adam might not be the strongest thing she'd ever faced, but then he also *might* be. And if he was, she needed to have capitalized on every conceivable advantage.

There was no gambling with life when life was finally good.



BUFFY DIDN'T SAY a word on the way back from the hospital—she didn't trust herself to open her lips without screaming. The fact that she had gotten out of that place at all, that she'd managed to hold herself together without tearing doors off their hinges or punching holes into walls, had required power and restraint she hadn't had to call upon in what felt like a long time. Another component of that *being smart* thing that she'd just been patting herself on the back for pulling off as though it were some victory.

She didn't feel smart now, though. Or particularly strong. Just a blind rage that she knew couldn't end anywhere good. And thankfully, Spike knew it too, or at least knew enough not to try to get her to talk until they were back under the glamour's protection.

"Buffy!" Willow started the second she and Spike stomped through the door, but that was as far as she got, as Buffy had no intention of slowing down. Instead, she made a beeline toward the basement and didn't stop until there was a door and another vampire between her and the rest of the house.

"What...?" she heard from the other side of the door. "Is she okay?"

"Not after what she saw," Spike replied without hesitation. "Best give her a minute. She's likely to punch a hole through anyone fool enough to give her the chance right now."

"What did I do?" Willow asked, hurt. And just as she'd known it would, Buffy's temper inched closer to boiling. Yeah, she definitely

needed a timeout, at least until she no longer had the urge to tear out the throats responsible for asking grating, whining questions.

"It's not personal, pet. She'd take a swing at me too, state she's in. Only I could take it."

"She'd... You guys... That doesn't sound normal."

"Sometimes you gotta let loose. And she was thinkin' enough to give me the ring to keep me from getting too bruised should she decide to knock me around."

Buffy didn't know how he did that—how he managed to not only succinctly defuse a potential meltdown but in a way that had her own bright fury hitting a peak that hadn't existed a second ago. For that was how it was with vampires. Body chemistry didn't keep you in check the way it did when you were alive; bad feelings and emotions had no ceiling, no natural stopping point. Left unaddressed, they could fester and grow until there was nothing left but the need to rage and tear and destroy. But Spike understood her without her needing to say a damn word, and she had no idea when that would stop being a surprise.

"—transfusion ward first. Was a stretch, but there were a few packs of blood there to nick," he was saying when she clued back into the conversation. "Bloody awful security in that place. Only had to kill two vamps of them to get there. And after, we went off to see if the other one was still alive."

"The other one?"

"The other slayer. Faith?"

There was a sharp intake of breath. "I... Oh my god, I completely forgot about Faith."

Buffy gritted her teeth and squeezed her eyes shut, every nerve in her body suddenly alive and pulsing with that monstrous need that lived just beneath her skin. The one ready, desperate, for another excuse to tear into people the way she had the Initiative. The one whispering at her to jump on Willow and rip out her throat for her thoughtlessness, for her willingness to leave someone behind the way she and everyone had left Faith—Buffy too, for she knew she was just as guilty, but at least she hadn't been here. Nor had she strapped Faith to a hospital bed, left her lying there all purple and blue and yellow

with bruises, a readymade incentive for Adam to offer the creatures who would do practically anything to get a sip of her blood.

That was the likely story, at least. The one that made sense to her. Faith was still in a hospital bed, only she was chained there now, bite marks stretching along her arms and neck, possibly other places Buffy hadn't been eager to investigate. And yeah, on the surface, this was a good thing with notable caveats. Faith was alive. Good. Faith was in a state where it was remarkably easy to take her blood. Also good. Faith was hooked up to a bunch of machines that might be keeping her alive. Bad. Taking her and getting her safely out of the hospital was probably impossible. Also bad. Even if they did get her safely out, Adam would know. He'd be ready. Very bad. In the end, the best bet had been to leave. Hope she wasn't moved between now and when they were ready to test out their 'beat Adam' strategy.

So that was the plan, even if it left her feeling sick with the world and herself. How it was girls like her were used, if not by the men who had created her then by the things that had made her creation necessary in the first place. Useful and expendable. A prize to be dangled. A resource to be drained. And how, yes, she was planning to do exactly that, use Faith exactly as she had been used by Adam. How this was one of those times when her own lack of a soul came in handy but somehow still didn't mean she didn't feel it. The knowledge that she was going to do an evil thing for a good reason, and she was the one who was deciding what was good and what wasn't.

Eventually, once Spike had explained to Willow what they had found and what they were planning, he headed down to the basement with a couple of mugs of blood in tow. And the scent hit her right in the solar plexus—heady and human, unlike the spoils they normally settled for. Buffy made a grab for it almost before Spike was within reach and threw back the blood with a hunger that almost felt foreign, trying to chase away the fury, wash it down or satisfy it the way she would any craving. Except that wasn't the way vampires worked. Blood did nothing but amplify what was already there, scratching beneath the surface and desperate to rip and snarl and beat and hurt until finally the bad thoughts receded and she was able to experience some modicum of calm. So when she lowered the mug, still riddled with rage

that she needed to exorcise, she was ready for what came next. She couldn't rip or tear or bite or claw her way through her feelings, but she could throw herself at Spike and let him exhaust her in other ways.

And thank god he knew that. It meant he was ready when she launched herself at him, all fangs and fury and desperation. There meeting her with biting, bruising kisses that managed to both weaken her knees and strengthen the fire at the same time, shoving her when she needed to be shoved and letting her do the same in turn, until they were wrestling from one end of the basement to the next, knocking into walls, smashing against the floor, clawing and fighting and pitching clothes into darkened corners. His hand around her throat in that way that wasn't dangerous but did a near perfect mimicry, made her feel the rush, the threat, of what could come next if she weren't exactly who she was. Feigning resistance when he tossed her to the floor, her knees scraping against the cement, and then he was behind her, breathing ragged, fisting her hair as he teased the tip of his cock along the slit of her pussy, and she was wet and angry and she wanted it wet and angry, and knew he knew it, knew the second he speared inside of her that he was going to make it hurt just right.

"Take it, Slayer. Gonna make you take every inch of me."

Buffy braced herself on her elbows, the tips of her fangs skimming her tongue, and she nodded, growled, gasped and—when she thought she might howl—bit into her forearm to stifle the sound. Rocking instead to the brutal rhythm Spike set, his thrusts hard and unrelenting, a pounding tempo that somehow soothed the parts clinging to that toxic rage. All the while Spike muttered in that way of his, words his trade as much as blood and violence and more so. She needed it, he told her. Needed to be reminded of how the world chewed up slayers like her. How she'd been chewed up too, how she was here now, fucking the enemy because the world had let it happen. And she could accept it or she could fight, and she *would* fight, he knew she would, because Buffy always fought. She fought the wankers out there and the voices in here, she fought him and herself, and through all that fighting she hadn't given them what they expected from all heroes who fell—she'd remained Buffy. And Buffy always saved the bloody day. Always.

Then he banded an arm around her waist and tugged her back until

she was falling backward, landing with a particularly hard slam onto his cock—hard enough the sound that burst from her lips surprised her in its intensity. Spike shifted with effortless grace that always made her feel especially clumsy, but hey, Buffy was not about to complain because he was still inside of her, moving until she was astride him in full, in reverse, and he was pushing into her, dragging her onto him, meeting her with the savagery she needed, and blunting the hurt as only he could. Stroking his hand down her stomach with feather-light softness that belied how hard she was riding him until his fingers were there at her clit, moving with her and brushing against her with just enough pressure to make her tighten with something other than rage. With his other hand, he captured the arm she'd bitten into, pulled it back so he could lick up her blood with long, decadent laps of his tongue, and it was all good, it was all bliss, it was all coalescing—Spike inside of her, Spike touching her, Spike licking her, Spike whispering and teasing and loving, always loving, in that unique, entirely *her* way she needed to be loved, reminding her that whatever had happened to her, she had happened too. She might have died but she was truly living because of it, and he was right there with her, reminding her when she needed reminding. Keeping her close to the ground when she was in danger of floating right off.

And when she tightened with all that exquisite pressure, ready to send it off for good, Spike lifted his head from her arm and presented her with his own, and she didn't hesitate. She latched her fangs into him and released a muffled roar into his ripped flesh, blood hitting her tongue, setting her ablaze, setting her free.

She was ready, too, for his fangs when they came, and the shuddering aftershock, that ripple of singular pleasure that was as primal as it was sensual. Buffy tipped back with a soft cry, reaching to wrap her arm around Spike's neck as he drank from hers, falling with him until the world went sideways, collapsing into a tangle of limbs against the floor, the roar gone. All of it gone. All of it except everything that mattered most.

Buffy had no idea how long they remained like that. Just that, eventually, Spike brushed his lips over the place where he'd bitten her and murmured a low, "You with me, baby?" against her skin.

And that was it. All it took for her to fall the rest of the way. A soft place after all the sharp edges. “I’m with you.”

More importantly, though, he was with her through the good and the bad.

Death had given her that, too.



FOR A CREATION OF ANCIENT MAGIC, the Gem of Amara ended up being almost scarily easy to replicate. Granted, not all vampires had access to witches who reverse engineered complicated magic for fun or old-as-dirt former demons to help piece together origins or read through texts that were written in almost-dead languages by entirely dead people, and as Anya pointed out, the vampires who had fabricated the first Gem of Amara likely hadn’t been too keen on how-to manuals for all their friends. A tool of invulnerability that everyone had was a lot less impressive than being the biggest badass on the block.

“Of course, it would’ve also put a target on their back,” she had conceded. “But that’s only if they were exceedingly stupid and decided to advertise what had made them impervious to sunlight in the first place.”

“Which they clearly did,” Buffy had retorted. “I mean, it has a name and everything.”

“Yes, well, most vampires *are* exceedingly stupid.”

She’d felt a rush of what might have been indignation, but it didn’t last. It wasn’t like Anya was wrong.

Also preventing most vampires from creating their very own gems of invincibility was the fact that a few of the ingredients needed to complete the spell were harder to come by than what could be sourced at a local magic shop. Such as sand from the Valley of the Kings as well as a very specific type of scarab leg. Not just any beetle body part would do. That had been some cause for concern for a couple of days until Giles overnighted a package of contraband using means that Buffy still wasn’t sure she understood. In fact, she didn’t understand the entire US Postal Service being in operation in a demon-run Sunny-

dale until someone—she forgot who—explained that Adam was operating as though everything was normal up until such time as he felt he had garnered enough power to start making the sort of noise that attracted attention. The package hadn't come to Revello Drive, either, as Revello Drive didn't appear to exist to the outside world; Tara had received it on campus, voted unanimously as the ideal recipient, as Adam had least reason to have intel on her, in case he was watching the mail.

Once the ingredients had been gathered and the spell deciphered, all that was left was the wait for the next new moon to bring it all together, then after to test the results. And it turned out that yes, apparently it was just that easy to create a second Gem of Amara, as evidenced by Buffy's (Spike had tried to be the guinea pig, but she'd won the coin toss) unburned hand and then fully unburned self as she stepped into the daylight, then how she'd managed to both juggle the crucifixes her friends had thrown at her and gargle holy water without suffering serious mouth and throat burns. The remainder of the tests were put on hold until that night, as even though all signs pointed to the duplicate being as effective as the original, neither Buffy nor Spike were willing to test stakes or decapitation on each other. For that, they needed to voluntell the next bloodsucker they found who happened to be at the wrong place at the right time.

Then it was done. All tests exhausted and all potential hurdles jumped. There was just one thing to do before taking the fight to Adam, and all that stood between them and that was a sunny stroll back to the hospital with the hope that Faith was right where they'd left her two weeks earlier.

They took it hand-in-hand.



BEING that it was broad daylight, Buffy had thought the hospital would be crawling with vampires. It just seemed like the sensible place to hole up, being that it was vast, centrally located, and home of the town's largest blood supply. But none of her slayer senses—or her vampire senses, for that matter—so much as twitched with warning as

she and Spike walked through the front doors. Rather, it seemed like the building had emptied overnight.

Even if her preternatural instincts weren't sounding the alarm bells, that didn't stop her from contracting a grade-A case of the wiggins. The brain kicked in where instincts fell short, and right now, her brain was now screaming that something was wrong.

"Faith," she said, and that was all the warning she gave before breaking into a run. Also the only warning Spike needed, too, for he was right on her heels, heavy steps thumping in tandem with hers as she peeled down hallways, negotiated corners, and wound her way deeper into the labyrinth that was Sunnydale Memorial Hospital until she was upon the place where Faith had been fashioned into a living drinking fountain. And though she didn't have a heartbeat or a racing pulse, Buffy still felt physical weight of relief all the same when she pushed inside and found that the other slayer hadn't been moved or worse. She was still there, still hooked up to machines keeping her alive, still breathing, and still full of all that blood.

"So," Buffy said, calmer now, "empty building, clear path to our destination... Is it just me or does this have all the hallmarks of a trap?"

Spike snorted his agreement. "So, what are you thinkin'?"

"A whole bunch of things. The foremost being, I really want to get this over with. If that blood is dosed with something, it could knock us out, which would conveniently get us where we need to go a lot faster." It could also be full of the poison that had almost claimed Angel's life, though Buffy didn't say that part aloud. She thought it likely that Adam had surveillance equipment set up through the relevant parts of town and didn't want to give him any ideas. The poison was one thing the gem had not been tested against; there was no telling if the original fabricator had even known about it.

Even still, Buffy thought it reasonable to conclude, based on everything she'd been told, that Adam didn't want her dead. At least not yet. That much might be a gamble but, considering the alternatives, she decided it was one she was willing to make.

"I think we go for it. Or I do, at least."

"Anything you're drinking, I'm also drinking, Slayer."

"That's ridiculous. If it does something—"

“It does it to both of us.”

Buffy squared her shoulders, gearing up for an argument, but the fight sapped out of her the second her eyes met his. There was no point. If Faith’s blood was drugged, it couldn’t be used as the antidote. They’d die one way or another. At least this way, it was together.

Seconds later, she was at the side of the girl she’d put into a coma in a desperate bid to save a vampire she was sure she’d have to one day kill herself, watching Spike lift a lifeless right hand to his mouth as Buffy took the left. They met each other’s eyes and held there before freeing their fangs, and kept looking at each other as they sliced into Faith’s skin and began to drink.

She’d asked once what it was like, the taste of slayer blood, never truly imagining she’d be in a place to see for herself. Sure, there was the odd chance that the Council might decide she was too dangerous to be kept alive and she’d have to negotiate the precarious position of being hunted the way she’d once hunted; she’d also entertained the thought that Faith might just decide to come after her on her own if she ever awoke. Dish out some revenge for the whole Angel incident. But in the end, Buffy couldn’t wrap her mind around draining the life out of another slayer, even if she were pushed to kill. There was a very arbitrary but still very real line in her head separating her from true monstrosity.

But then, life and death had taught her to never say never. And now here she was, swallowing down pure ambrosia that did more than just warm her insides—that spread through her dead body and filled it with life. With fire. With purpose. With a sort of stirring that she felt in her fangs and her fingers and between the strands of her hair, made headier by the dark, hungry way Spike looked at her as he drank. That familiar craving that was never fully satisfied, that had her reaching for him again and again, desperate to never drop from those immeasurable highs. It was wrong, she knew, but it was also innate. The urge to drop Faith’s wrist and follow what her body wanted. Chase her id and fuck the rest.

“Interesting,” came a booming voice from her right, doing what Buffy had thought was impossible and startling her out of her skin. “You’re not drinking to kill.”

She and Spike moved as one, retracting their fangs and twisting to the hospital door, where stood a hulking monstrosity with mismatched eyes and a pleased, slightly insane smile on its patchwork face.

Here it was. The trap part.

Willow had described Adam in such a way that Buffy hadn't been able to truly picture him, but even so, he was almost exactly what she would have expected him to look like. The mismatched skin, the metal plates, the pieces that were human and the ones that definitely weren't. But while he was definitely large, he somehow wasn't as mountainous as she'd been expecting. Just another oversized man who thought he was in control of the situation and was about to learn how very wrong he was.

For that the other thing—something Buffy felt the way she'd felt little else. The hum beneath her skin, the blood working its way through her body, made her something more than strong. Something that gave her the knowledge, the certainty, that whatever was coming was going to be over before it started.

"As popular as this restaurant is, I thought we might need a reservation, but it was no trouble getting in," Buffy said, stepping toward him. "Do we have you to thank for that?"

Adam didn't so much as blink. "I was curious if you would sample her, as she is what you once were. Curiouser still if her blood would affect you, the way it does other vampires."

"So you just made sure the place was clear in case we swung by for a pick-me-up?"

"They do as I command. It wasn't difficult." Adam smirked—or she thought he smirked. "The demons in this town know not to interfere with my experiments."

"And how would you rate this experiment? One to ten? Is your curiosity satisfied?"

"Not quite. I haven't determined if there has been a noticeable change."

The Franken-thing stomped into the room—not out of anger, just that he was so large that stomping seemed to be his default factory setting, which again made her wonder how he'd managed to materialize in the doorway without detection. But then, her senses had been

on slayer-blood overload, the inside of her head pounding all on its own. He could have done a tap-dance and she might not have noticed until he'd said something.

Adam stopped when he was towering just in front of her in a way Buffy knew well. The way *all* men did whenever they wanted to intimidate her, make her feel every inch of her five-foot-might-as-well-be-nothing since the men in her life, with few exceptions, were skyscrapers. Only Buffy had stopped blanching and backing up well before she'd been turned—always enjoying the confusion, even annoyance, that resulted from her refusal to be unsettled. To his credit, Adam seemed more intrigued than bothered by her lack of fear. Nice to know he was a progressive monster.

"I would like you to hit me," he intoned.

Music to her ears. "Oh, would you?"

"It seems the most reliable way to test what, if any, impact the blood had on you. I know what it is like to be struck by a vampire. Once the blood is out of your system, I will test what it is like to be struck by a turned slayer."

"Oh, you will? You just expect me to hang around?"

There was another smirk. "Did I not mention? I'm afraid you will not be leaving. I would have thought that much obvious. Now..." He spread his arms like he was the demon messiah and favored her with what would be the last smug look he gave anyone. "Please. It is better to cooperate."

Buffy glanced at Spike, who looked like he might bust up laughing at any moment. It really was going to be this easy. The gem, the experiments, every precaution they'd taken, and Adam was going to just stand there and let them do what they'd set out to do—see if he could be felled with a punch.

"Well," she told him sweetly. "Okay. For science."



IN THE END, it had taken them both. A slayer turned vampire and a vampire who hunted slayers, both juiced up on the most potent blood on the market, both punching their fists through the flesh of a Mary

Shelley creation, both there to watch the moment Adam's confidence flickered before disappearing completely. Before he became nothing more than a useless lump on the floor, his core torn out, his systems shut down forever. Another monster who had assumed he was the exception to the rule and had died learning the truth.

Buffy was glad it had taken both her and Spike to do it. The thought of having the strength on her own, even under unique and unlikely-to-be-recreated circumstances, was a bit too heady. She was stronger than any other vampire out there but not truly invincible, and that was all right. The world was more interesting when her enemies had a fighting chance.

She didn't know how much she and Spike would wear the rings, then, though she was very glad to have them. It'd certainly make traveling a lot less dangerous. And the next time there was an apocalypse to stop or an Adam to humble, she'd feel better having the extra insurance. Knowing that even if the world was lost, the man she loved wouldn't be.

But there was certainly no sense staying on the Hellmouth if things were going to be nice and safe. Safe was nice. Alive was better. And fighting was what gave her life.

It hadn't been the plan—the staying part. Not long-term, at least. Buffy had been antsy after the showdown, desperate to get back on the road, back to the life lived in hotels and between bar fights, of doing whatever she wanted whenever she wanted, not a care in the world. But then Willow had asked her to stay—not forever, but killing Adam wasn't enough. They had a whole town to reclaim as theirs. Demons who had gotten used to running the show, and as much fun as that sounded, Buffy had been to demon-run towns and she hadn't liked the idea of Sunnydale joining their ranks. Not with all that chaotic hellmouth energy for the taking. So she and Spike had talked and they'd agreed to a couple of weeks. They'd stick around to get things back status-quo-like. Make it clear to any of Adam's potential successors that they would meet the same fate as their toppled king if they got too big for their britches.

And so they had, and what had followed had been an undertaking with a difficulty set firmly on medium. There hadn't been any trouble

from Adam's creations, as they had—as Willow had predicted—gone down with the ship that was Adam himself. Just switched off, batteries removed, the second the signal to their creator blinked out. A few demons hadn't wanted to accept the reversion to the way things had been before and had required a practical demonstration, which Buffy had been all too willing to deliver. Things hadn't gotten tense again until the military started poking in around the remains of whatever it was they'd been trying to do build in Sunnydale, eventually shouldering their way back to the top of the chain of command. But even that had been a let-down, as they had just stuck around long enough to grab their shit and make tracks again, more concerned with destroying evidence they had been there at all than lending a hand.

All the while, everything else had slowly gone back to normal. The Summers house had emptied with everyone available to return to their homes or dorms or parents' basements; Buffy had taken to patrolling out of habit, always with Spike at her side, ready to make mincemeat out of any creature that decided to try its luck. Faith was given priority status at the hospital when the medical staff returned, and Buffy learned there was a good chance she'd awakened in the middle of Adam's reign but been clobbered hard enough to fall back under. Whether she'd ever open her eyes again for real remained a big question mark, but the doctors thought it possible. Maybe even likely. Her recovery had already been on the side of remarkable.

One day, Buffy realized they had no more reasons to stay. Her friends were returning to their lives, her mom had reopened the gallery, people were once again walking the streets as though the entire demonic siege had been a fever-dream. Yet she and Spike were still at 1630 Revello Drive, still in the basement, but the urge she'd had to hit the road had dwindled to... Well, a tickle.

When she'd mentioned it to Spike, he'd given her a soft smile, kissed her brow, and said, "Was wonderin' when you'd notice."

There hadn't been much to discuss, it turned out. The Hellmouth kept them busy, and Buffy was rebuilding the bridges that mattered most to her. The world remained out there—the world she wanted to see, explore—but the world would always be there so long as she was around to protect it. The same couldn't be said for her

friends or her mom. One day, the sun would come up on a world without them in it, and Spike was happy to let Buffy have the time she needed to be with those she loved while they were here. He was also happy to grab her and blow on out of town if things went pear-shaped with her mates, but the choice should be hers. She'd had so little of it before.

So the plan had gone from leave, to stay for a little bit, to stay for a little longer, to stay long enough that they'd need their own place. One where they could be loud if they wanted without worrying about giving anyone nightmares. A crypt, maybe, but done up. Posh. Nice. Right next to the heart of the action in these parts. She was considering it. She was considering all sorts of things, and enjoying the liberty that came with not needing to have all the answers at the ready. Living as she never had. Getting to apply her attention to the really crucial questions—like what she ought to wear to the Bronze's grand reopening. Something sexy but practical. There was almost no chance there wouldn't be trouble.

God, she hoped there was trouble. Life was so boring when there wasn't.

In the end, she decided on a red camisole and sleek black pants, with her hair done up so the bite mark on her throat would be on full display. A reminder to some, a warning to others.

"Ready to go, pet?"

Buffy turned around, met Spike's sparkling blue eyes and grinned. To him, it would always be an invitation.

"Don't you look delectable?" he purred, crossing the basement floor to wrap his arms around her, his gaze pinned exactly where she wanted it pinned. Let him look at that all night—or until he could pull her into a dark corner and convince her to be just a little bad because it felt so good.

And she'd let him. She was evil, after all.

"Could skip out, you know," he went on, pressing his brow to hers. "Enjoy having the house to ourselves for a change. Know there are some high notes I know I've missed helping you hit."

"Behave."

"Where's the fun in that?"

Buffy smirked and pressed up to kiss him. "We'll make our own fun."

"Promises, promises."

"Hey, don't we always?"

Spike smirked, considering her lips. "Do at that."

"So come on, Barbie. Let's go party."

His eyes darkened. "And later?"

"Ah, ah, ah, yeah."

"I'll hold you to it."

And because she was the luckiest girl in the world, she knew he would.