

CRASH

A Spike/Buffy Romance



HOLLY DENISE



A BLINK. THAT WAS ALL IT TOOK.

“You gonna do this for us, or what?” the little weasel known as Whistler had asked, careful—she was sure—to phrase it like she actually had a choice. But Buffy had seen this movie before and she knew how it would end. World in the balance, only one way to put it right, and surprise surprise, she was the lucky duck tapped to take up the mantle. Been there, done that, owned the T-shirt shop.

It wouldn’t be easy, Whistler had been careful to include. Going back, changing things, reliving some of the most terrible parts of her personal history. Everyone thought time travel was a laugh until they found themselves in the driver’s seat and realized just how *much* life actually filled the time between the big moments.

Buffy had nodded, the decision made. Again, not like she had much of a choice.

The weasel hadn’t mentioned where she’d land, though. Just that she’d be disoriented, as the best cases of time travel involved inserting her consciousness into a dormant brain. Dormant beyond just *sleeping*, which to Buffy meant *knocked out*. When she’d pressed for more information, he’d waved her off and assured her it was better to not go in too prepared.

And then it had happened—that blink. The world had gone out from under her.

Now here she was. Her head still spinning—everything spinning, actually. But that wasn’t the worst part. No, the worst part was she was strung up somewhere, arms spread, wrists shackled, and she had done this scene a time or a thousand and was *so* over it.

Why did bad guys insist on chaining her up? And couldn’t Whistler have given her at least a courtesy head’s up that she might immediately need to fight her way to safety? Emissary from the Powers or not, that guy was a real tool.

As Buffy entertained herself with images of Whistler being beaten bloody, the blobs of color swimming across her vision separated and began to solidify, filtering in alongside other observations.

Such as it was chilly wherever she was. A specific sort of chilly. An *underground* chilly.

On top of that, the air smelled somewhat familiar. A scent she asso-

ciated with both comfort and sadness, which was weird—though not terribly weird, being that it was her life and all. Then she realized she was staring at a wall. The shape of a woman. Not just any woman, Drusilla. Drusilla as in *Drusilla*.

What the hell?

“There she is,” said a low voice. “Beginning to think you’d sleep the night away.”

Everything in her seized. That voice. It had been so long since she’d heard it, heard *him*, she’d started to wonder how much him she actually remembered. If his eyes had really been that blue, if his cheekbones that sharp, if she’d made up the way his mouth quirked or just how expressive he was. How she could look at him and know, always know, if not what he was thinking then certainly how he felt.

Buffy hadn’t let herself think this far ahead—consider the people she’d see, the people she’d lost, when she took a tour through the past. That Spike would be there had been one of those things she’d known but couldn’t dwell too much, because Spike wasn’t the mission. He wasn’t. No, Spike was just the vampire who had loved her, died on her, gotten resurrected, then died again before she could kick his ass for not letting her know he was back among the living. Or the unliving.

It just figured Whistler would send her back to this moment of all moments. Jerk probably thought he was being funny. Or romantic. She couldn’t get a read on that guy. Not that she wanted to.

But hell, she was here now, wasn’t she? Right in front of Spike, who was looking at her with a mixture of adoration and concern—likely because by this point in the original timeline, she’d done more than stare at him like an idiot.

There were rules about this. Probably. Time travel was one of those things that had a buttload of rules in the movies. Something about not changing the past... Except that was what she was here to do. Correct a massive wrong. Aside from that, her instructions had been on the side of vague.

Hell, this was her new reality. Might as well start it off with a bang.

So, Buffy looked into the eyes of the man she loved—the man she hadn’t seen in more than a year, since he’d gone all self-sacrifice on the Hellmouth—and smiled. “Hello, cutie.”

For the way his face fell slack with shock, that alone was worth it. She had to bite back a giggle.

To his credit, Spike recovered rather quickly, straightening and fixing his own smirk back into place. God, she'd missed that smirk, infuriating as it was.

"Must have hit your head harder than I thought, Slayer." He raised his hand as though to stroke her cheek, then hesitated, seemingly thinking the better of it. "I can't say I mind. 'Bout time you took note of my devilish good looks." He stepped back, still favoring her with that smirk, though it was impossible to miss the softness in his eyes. The same softness that had been there the night he'd held her scraped hands and told her how many days she'd been gone. "Bet you're wonderin' why I got you all trussed up like—"

"No, I know why, so if we can skip to the part where you undo these cuffs, that'd be great."

"Don't think so. Gotta piece to say to you and you're bloody well gonna hear it."

"I've already heard it, that's what I'm trying to tell you. You want to convince me that you love me with some big gesture. Like, say, killing your ex." Buffy wrinkled her nose, though once again, she couldn't deny the rush of satisfaction at the way he gawked at her. Something Whistler *hadn't* mentioned—that this whole *Back to the Future* thing would be fun.

"Ah, well, yeah." Spike furrowed his brow. "That's the long and short of it, I suppose." Then he paused, tilting his head. "What happened?"

"What do you mean?"

"Last I saw you, you'd told me to shove off."

She was almost certain the words she'd used had been more varied, and likely colorful, but she wasn't about to get into an argument over semantics. "First," Buffy said, jerking her chin in Dru's direction, "you didn't tie her up tight enough, so you might wanna deal with Ms. Looney Tunes before we have our heart-to-heart. Oh, and if memory serves, Harmony is going to waltz in here in about three minutes with a crossbow."

He blinked. "What are you on about?"

"I'm just saying, in the history of love declarations, this is probably the one the books have listed under *unmitigated disaster*." She leaned as far forward as the chains would allow. "Seriously, Spike. Getting a girl to like you by offering to kill the ex is...even for you, creepy."

And there it was—the fire, the indignation. The same he'd kept hidden from her, more or less, after he'd returned to her with a soul. And as much as she'd loved him then, she'd also missed this. The Spike who snapped and lashed and wasn't afraid to let her see just how much she pissed him off. The Spike who didn't walk on eggshells around her, who wasn't always a second away from apologizing if he stepped out of bounds.

The soul he'd won for her had shown her the man he'd always been, but at the cost of a part of him she'd always admired, even when it drove her out of her mind.

"It wasn't about that!" Spike snapped, staggering back from her. "It was—symbolic, all right? Man I was, man I was made to be, the man *she* made me to be." This he emphasized by pointing at his sire without taking his gaze off Buffy. "Everythin' I've been for a sodding century and I'm givin' it up because of you. Because you, you bloody infuriating bint, got into my head and you won't *bloody* leave!"

"I can dig her out, my dearest," Drusilla cooed, batting her eyelashes and giving him a come-hither look that, considering he didn't so much as twitch in her direction, was entirely wasted. "Carve out all those nasty worms."

"You think I want this?" Spike continued, unblinking. "Think I'm havin' a good time? Worst bloody moment of my life was realizin' I was in love with you." He shook his head, releasing a somewhat manic titter. "You better bloody believe me, if I could rip these feelings out, I would. But I can't so the most I can do is get you to see that it's real. Wrong or not, it's—"

"Spike." She didn't yell—she wanted to, but she didn't. Call her crazy, but hearing the man she loved whine about the fact that he loved her too was not her favorite thing in the world. "Spike, really, we can talk later—"

"No, we're havin' this out right fucking now."

"But Harmony—"

“What about bloody Harm?”

“I already told you—she’s about to come in here and kebob you and as much fun as it was watching that the first time, we’re kind of on a timetable here.” Buffy nodded at Drusilla, who was tugging more firmly at her bindings. “And unless you want Morticia making my trip back here a very moot point, you might want to give me my hands back.”

Spike stared at her a moment longer, his brow furrowed. She knew that look too. It was his weighing-the-odds-of-being-staked look—or some close approximation. That she hadn’t kicked off her return to consciousness by threatening him with pointy objects had likely thrown him off his game. One thing Spike was definitely not used to—any version of him—was an easily agreeable Buffy, particularly when she had more than enough reason to kick his pale ass from one end of this town to the other.

“What’s goin’ on here?” he asked instead, taking a slow step toward her. “Talkin’ like you can see the future, pet. Last I checked, that wasn’t your gig.”

“I can’t *see* the future. I am *from* the future. So this? Been here already.” Buffy darted a glance toward the space that Harmony would fill in just seconds—she couldn’t remember how long she and Spike had snarked back and forth the first time around and really didn’t want to gamble the possibility that this time, Harmony’s aim would be true, if even by accident. It would *so* be her luck to get her vampire back just to watch him go *poof* again.

Though if that happened, she was seriously demanding a refund. Whistler could not have chosen a more inopportune moment for her grand return. If Spike dusted and Dru got free, this was going to be a real short trip.

“You’re from the future?” An eyebrow—the scarred one—went up. “Expect me to believe that, pet? Had my eye on you since you hit the ground. Haven’t had much of a chance to pull a switch on me.”

“He said it’d be my *mind*, you idiot, not my body. Two Buffys running around would make things even screwier than they are now.” Not to mention confusing. Her younger self would likely come at her with lethal force and then they’d all be in trouble. “And seriously,”

Buffy went on, “if you let Harmony dust your ass, I will bring you back myself just so I can kick it while doing my ‘I told you so’ dance.” She jostled the chains again. “Spike, seriously, work with me here.”

He edged closer, now regarding her with eyes that seemed in motion. Suspicion remained, and likely would for a while, and because her brain had time-travel jetlag, she was having trouble thinking up something that might convince him she hadn’t lost her marbles when Drusilla had hit her with the cattle prod. Everything that might work seemed situational. He hadn’t yet been pummeled by Glory, hadn’t watched Buffy swan dive off the tower, hadn’t counted the days between her death and resurrection. Looking forward did no good and she knew so little of his past that would count.

Except one thing, she realized with a start. One thing he definitely hadn’t shared with her by this point in their relationship.

So Buffy drew in a breath, chased down the tune that had lived in her head a year earlier, and started to sing.

“Early one morning, just as the sun was rising, I heard a maid sing in the valley below,” she began, watching—to her immense relief—as the doubt in Spike’s eyes faded into confusion, then shock. It was that, the shock, that gave her the courage to press on. *“Oh, don’t deceive me, oh never leave me. How could you use a poor maiden so?”* The silence that followed the song was one of the heaviest she could remember, made even more so with the weight of that stare. Buffy swallowed and pressed on. “Your mom sang that to you back when you were human. Anne. Her name was Anne.”

“Bloody hell...”

But he didn’t get out more than that, because the three minutes were up and it was time for his jilted girlfriend to give him a send-off he wouldn’t forget. Thankfully, Harmony’s aim turned out to be just as craptastic as it had the first time around, though Spike did crash to his knees with a grunt.

“Hate to interrupt such a *sweet* moment,” Harmony snapped, and this time Buffy noticed the vacant look on her face—complete lack of surprise at what she’d found, resignation, even. Never had she thought she’d feel a pang of anything for Harmony, but there her heart went,

pinging away. "But if you think you can break up with me just because your ho is back and I'll just...just take that lying down, think again."

Harmony punctuated this by slamming the end of the crossbow into Spike's skull, loud enough that the crack made Buffy wince but thankfully not hard enough that it knocked him out of commission. He just grunted and planted his hands on the ground to hold himself steady, a low but very audible growl rumbling through his throat.

"That's right, little girl," Drusilla said approvingly. "Teach our naughty boy a lesson."

"Dammit, Spike, I told you this was going to happen!" Buffy turned her attention to the chains holding her. "Unlock these damn cuffs!"

Spike was still on the ground, panting in that odd, human way of his. "Bit busy at the mo'," he gritted out, somehow managing not to look ridiculous with an arrow protruding from his back. He didn't look at her, too busy staring down the crossbow in Harmony's arms. "Oooh, someone's feelin' big in her britches."

"I gave you the best...bunch of months of my life. Do you have *any* idea how many guys were begging me to go out with them in high school? Like, a whole lot. And I chose *you*, you big bully." Harmony sniffed and walked back to what looked like a weapon's chest, likely in search of another arrow. "I just thought that if I gave and I gave and I gave, you'd realize what a good thing you had. Be a little nicer. Stop treating me like a dog. But it's you," the scorned blonde continued, resetting the crossbow. "You're the dog. Who needs to be put—"

She made the mistake of looking away to grab an arrow, same as she had the first time, and Spike, ever the opportunist, made his move. In a flash he was on his feet and sinking his fist into Harmony's face, throwing her off balance enough to seize the crossbow and toss it out of reach. And just like last time, Drusilla fixed her attention on Buffy, twisting and pulling and managing to free herself for the attack.

But Buffy was ready—her arms might be compromised but the rest of her was in fighting shape. She greeted Dru's rush with a headbutt, buying herself a few seconds but only a few. One thing she hadn't appreciated about Drusilla enough was her age and strength—Buffy had never faced off against Spike's ex when she was in perfect health

and at the top of her game. Chain her up and leave her at the mercy of any other vampire, and she could likely dust them with her eyes closed. Not this vampire.

The urge to yell for Spike came and went—that was not a move 2000 Buffy would have made, and distracting him now was the sort of clumsy mistake that could give an airhead like Harmony an opening. Instead, she kept her attention fixed on Dru, pretending that nothing was happening in her periphery. She was ready when the vampire rushed her again, ducking to avoid a swinging fist, then leveraging her position to land a kick in the psycho's midsection that sent her across the stretch of the underground.

When Dru came back, though, she had tired of playing with her food and seized Buffy by the throat.

That could have been it—the combination of the vampire's viselike grip and the hypnotic pull of her eyes. But then Spike was there, knocking Dru in the jaw before tossing her aside like she were one of those dolls she carted around. Like she didn't matter. He didn't so much as flinch, never mind hesitate as he unlocked the cuffs restraining Buffy's arms. It was just a given, the two of them. That this was what he would choose.

Buffy had taken that for granted the first time. She wouldn't again.

"Poor Spike," she heard Drusilla coo, and when she turned to get what she hoped would be her last look at the psychopath, she didn't miss the sorrow in her eyes. Deep and genuine. "So lost. Even I can't help you now."

And creepy fade-out exit. At least Dru had stuck to the script.

"Oh Spikey..."

Ugh. Now for the other ex.

"No," Buffy said, whirling around to face Harmony, who was all prepared to do her big exit speech and walk herself out of Spike's life, backwards if need be. "I'm not listening to this again. Harmony, just... get out of here."

Harmony's jaw went slack, her eyes bugging out. "I—how... You don't get to talk to me like that!"

"As she who is willing to let you walk out of here on two legs rather than carried out by a stiff breeze, I think I get to talk to you however I

want.” Buffy planted her hands on her hips. “Seriously, get moving before my stake hand gets twitchy.”

At least there were some vampires around who took her threats seriously. Harmony’s bluster drained almost at once, the indignation in her eyes turning into fear. Then she threw up her arms and squeaked and bolted into the shadows at her back, making sure to make as much noise as possible in her exit.

Then Buffy was alone. Alone with Spike. Spike, whom she’d last seen a year earlier, refusing to follow her, not hearing or believing her when she’d begged him to escape with her. When she’d taken his hand and embraced the thing she’d been running from since...well, this moment. This moment right here, the precipice of what had become the hardest but best relationship of her life.

He’d come back after that, she’d been told. Nineteen days after, first as a ghost at Wolfram and Hart and then as a flesh-and-blood vampire who, for some reason, had decided to cave to Angel’s line of non-logic and keep his distance just long enough to get himself dusted *again* in the name of world savage. But Buffy had been up to her eyeballs in dealing with not only a legion of unmanageable slayers but also the First. Because apparently fixing a screw-up in the Slayer line by removing the Slayer line had not been an advisable strategy. It had taken them a few months and a lot of subterfuge—necessitating the body double that had apparently been so convincing as Buffy Summers that even Spike had been fooled—but Buffy and Giles had ultimately uncovered evidence that the First had gone nowhere and was simply biding its time by sowing dissent among the new slayers. After all, there was no greater weapon against Buffy Summers than her own sisters.

And by the time they had been desperate enough to turn to Angel and his now-infinite resources, the situation at Wolfram and Hart had imploded, and Spike was dust again.

Buffy hadn’t had time to process that—not much, anyway. Enough to know that he’d been back and something had kept him from seeking her out. The loneliest, hardest year of her life without the one person who always had her back. Without the man she’d realized she loved way too late.

There was a lot to talk about and even more to do, but right now—this moment—with Drusilla and Harmony in the wind and her future laid out in front of her once more, the *should* in her head was shoved aside by pure relief. Relief informed by more than a year of mourning and that awful, sinking feeling that had consumed her when she'd realized that Spike hadn't trusted in her enough to come find her.

Before she could stop herself—not wanting to, anyway—Buffy launched herself at Spike hard enough that he went staggering back toward the post where he'd tied up Drusilla. His eyes widened with a mixture of shock and confusion, but that didn't last. He must have seen something on her face, must have understood, for surprise became awe and then none of it mattered because his mouth was right there and suddenly talking seemed like the worst use for it.

So she kissed him.

Actually, she attacked him. And *yes please*, he responded by attacking her right back.

One of the many, many good things about Spike was his willingness—enthusiasm, even—to go with the flow. Also his ability to both melt and harden at the same time, the former with the way he kissed, how he pushed and stroked and sank into her with the same urgency and zeal that she had experienced every time she'd gone to him. That rush of absolute life, a thing he shouldn't have yet had practically burst with all the same. His touch had been almost as intoxicating as it was suffocating, as something that was dead shouldn't be so much better at living than she was.

But Buffy wasn't that girl anymore. If she was lucky, really lucky, Spike would never need to know that girl had existed at all.

And at that thought, she couldn't hold back the rush of emotion—the reality of her situation hitting her as it couldn't before. Her eyes started to sting and her skin burn, and she kept kissing him even after he tensed, kept tugging at his lips with hers, pulling more of him into her and trying her damndest to scare off his hesitation. Questions could wait—all of it could wait. Right now, she needed.

"Later," Buffy said when he pulled back, seizing the advantage to shove his duster off his shoulders. "I'll tell you anything you wanna know. But please fuck me first."

Spike stared at her for a moment, that thunderstruck look on his face again, his eyes soft and his mouth open and the weight of unspoken questions rushing between his lips in hard, heavy gasps. But then he nodded and kissed her again, sweet and bruising at the same time. And thank god, he seemed to understand just how much she meant it, feel the urgency in her words, for he exploded into motion.

“God, yes,” he muttered, whirling her around so that she was facing the post and tugging her pants down her hips. “Want you. Fuck, I want you so much.”

She would have snapped at him for wasting time talking, except he seemed to speak and move simultaneously. Nipping at her shoulder, kissing his way down her spine, and finally yanking her feet free with such force that her shoes flew in opposite directions. Then she was naked from the waist down and he was scaling his fingers up her legs, his touch feather-light and electric. It had been so long, and the last time they’d come together had been all about sweet restraint and tenderness, establishing what might have been a new beginning had he not gone and gotten himself all dead the next day.

For two and a half weeks.

No. Not thinking about that now. Buffy pressed her head against the beam, choking back a sob when he skimmed his way over her inner thighs and pressed against the damp crotch of her panties. He released a low, encouraging growl, said something about how wet she was and then his fingers slipped under the elastic and he was touching her for real. Spreading her open, running along her drenched folds, giving her clit a playful nudge before going back again. She heard the way his breath caught, the sound that he would forever deny as purring tumbling freely between those oh so kissable lips of his, brimming with all the things still left unsaid.

“Knew it,” he whispered before ghosting his teeth over the globe of her ass. “Knew it was there, Slayer. Knew I couldn’t be the only one.”

“Spike—”

“Hush now. Gonna get me a taste of this puss.”

He gripped her by the hips and pulled her back with a growl before shoving his tongue inside of her without ceremony. Buffy whimpered and Spike sighed and she pushed back and he pushed forward and god, she’d

missed him. Missed the sounds he made when his head was between her legs, the way he licked and sucked and plunged and plundered, how his tongue could feel so long and all the things he could do with it. After a moment, he released the death grip he had on her hip—her left one, anyway—and curled his hand around to tease her clit, the strokes still impossibly soft. As though he knew she was tippy-tapping on the edge and wanted to give her just enough to drive her out of her head.

“That’s a good girl, so sweet,” he murmured when he pulled back, and smacked his lips. “So hot. Gonna burn me up, you are.”

He’d said that before, murmured into her ear that first night in the house after they’d fallen through the floor. The memory was bitter-sweet, and she didn’t want to be thinking bittersweet thoughts right now. The only thoughts she wanted were *Spike* and *more*, which he seemed to understand without needing to be told, for the next instant he had pushed two fingers inside her and whimpered when she instinctively clamped down around him.

“Gotta feel that.” Spike pumped into her a couple of times, then shuddered and pulled his fingers free. She would have whimpered but didn’t because she knew what was coming, and that was what she wanted. Spike on his feet again, the air thick with their combined breaths and the unmistakable clank of a belt being jostled and a zipper lowering. Then he was there, the blunt head of his cock dancing a line up and down her slit as he coated himself with her slickness.

“You ready for me, baby?”

“Spike, for the love of—”

He slammed into her hard enough the wood beam cracked—slammed in and held, much as he had the first time. As they both had. She remembered his face then, the way he’d looked at her, with such wonder and vulnerability, eyes shining with disbelief and something more. She wondered if that was how he looked now, if he needed that second to adjust, to realize this was happening.

After more than a year of being without him—of having let go of the hope of what might have been—she sure as hell did.

“Fuck, Slayer,” he murmured at last, pressing his face into her shoulder. “I love you.”

Again the urge came to sob; again she shoved it back down. Now was not the time for tears.

"I love you too."

There was a pause, then Spike moaned. A low, guttural sound almost like a cry, as he dragged his cock back at a torturous pace so that she felt the pull of every inch.

"Say it again," he whispered. "Say it."

That was *so* much better than the last response he'd given her to those words. Buffy nodded, trembling. "I love you, Spike. Now fucking fuck me."

He answered with a snarl and one of those artful thrusts of his hips that used to drive her wild, and the time for talking was over. All Buffy could focus on was this—Spike unleashed, unrestrained, as she remembered him from before he'd felt the need to make every stroke, every look, every kiss an apology. It was just him and her as it had been during those first months, only this was so much better. Free and uninhibited, and for the first time not bookended with dread or loathing or some combination of the two. Spike thrusting into her at a bruising pace, whispering his praises into her shoulder as his belt whipped against her hips and his balls slapped her flesh. She tightened and thrust back against him, squeezing those muscles she knew drove him out of his mind every time he plunged back inside, and above all, reveling in the sensation alone. Spike's hands gripping her, Spike's mouth dancing along her neck, Spike's voice rumbling in her ear, Spike's fingers pressed against her pussy, toying with her clit as he pushed into her again and again and again.

"God, your pussy is fire," he whispered into her neck, teasing her with his teeth. "So good. Never felt anything so bloody good. That's it, love. Squeeze me just like that. Squeeze me till I pop."

"Spike," Buffy managed to pant. "Need...see... you..."

Had he been anything but a vampire, he wouldn't have heard, she was sure. The words were barely words at all, more breaths with shape and sound. But he did hear her, and the next thing she knew, he'd pulled out of her, whirled her back around, then slammed his cock back inside before she had the chance to really miss him.

"Then see me," he rumbled against her lips. "See who it is that's fucking you, Slayer."

She whimpered and wrapped her arms around his neck, pulled his mouth down to hers, and whimpered once more when he answered her with another moan, his thrusts picking up speed again. In a flash, he tugged on her hips, encouraging her legs to go around his waist, and growled into her mouth when she complied. And this was good, so good, better. Kissing was one of those things she'd done less and less with Spike over the course of their doomed affair—the more her feelings had grown, the more dangerous it had seemed. And it had been because Spike could write poetry with his kisses alone. He poured all of himself into everything he did, and being loved then had been unbearable.

Being loved now was everything.

The force of his thrusts intensified until she knew the beam wouldn't hold, but not giving a damn. When it did finally splinter and snap, Spike was ready, taking her to the ground with a hard thud and somehow managing not to break the pace. Then he was over her, staring down at her with his impossibly expressive eyes as he nipped and swirled and pounded into her so hard her eyes watered, her name a litany on his lips, one hand braced on the ground beside her head and the other going between them. When she felt his fingertips skim her clit, Buffy threw her head back, white-hot sparks growing hotter and hotter, and then she was there, gasping and bucking and clenching so hard around him she wasn't sure if the sound he made was pleased or pained, but he kept moving, kept thrusting, as her pussy spasmed and squeezed, before a roar tore through him and she felt him let go. Felt his cock pulse as he began to spill, her name becoming more a sob or a prayer, and it was right. Everything was right. She was home.

There was no fall this time. No downward spiral, just a giddy rush. Spike rested his brow against hers, gulping for air, and staring down at her with a mix of open wonder and reserve. Like even now, he couldn't fully trust what had happened—or perhaps what was going to happen next. She couldn't blame him. Beyond getting the fast-pass back here, beyond the one thing she knew she needed to do—or not do—everything else was up in the air.

"You love me," he said at last, still looking like he didn't believe it. "Buffy, you... Didn't imagine that, did I?"

She shook her head, her throat tightening. "I love you. And I've missed you so much."

"Missed me?"

"I'm time travel girl. Told you." Buffy pressed her eyes closed, then open again so she could get a look—upside down or not—at the alcove where he'd had her chained up. And before she could help herself, a giggle burst off her lips. "And, not for nothing, this is going a *lot* better for you than it did the first time we did this."

"So that was real, then? All that talk?" He paused, shook his head as though the words themselves were too wild for him to utter.

"About being from the future? That's a big yes."

"How far in the future?"

"Three years."

He nodded, still clearly dazed but apparently willing to go along with it. "And in three years, you love me?"

"In three years, I want to kick your ass. You died on me. Twice. Both times in service of world saveage, granted, but still, does not for a happy slayer make."

This was a much larger conversation than one to have while in a chilly crypt, particularly one where she was on the ground, half-naked, and distracted by the feel of him still inside of her. Also, something was digging into her ass, and not in a fun way. And since she had seen this play before—starred in it, actually—she knew the longer they sat like that, the more likely they were to just have sex again. Which she was on board for, but a bed would be nice. Warmer, and more hygienic.

"Spike, can we move this somewhere that's else? I know you can't feel the cold, but—"

He nodded, braced himself on his arms as though to move, then hesitated. "Just gotta do one thing first," he said, and kissed her. Slow and sweet, and with enough need that it took serious restraint not to just melt under him—and into him—again. It wasn't the fire from before but it wasn't without fire, either. It tasted like hope.

"Had to," he said when he broke away, a shy grin tugging at his lips. "Just in case."

"In case what?"

"You suddenly remember that you're Buffy and I'm Spike."

She grinned in spite of herself, raised her hand to his cheek. "I remember."

"Gonna hold you to that, you know."

"I'm gonna let you."



IT HIT HER, as she sat on Spike's bed—the same one that would be blown to smithereens in a year or so by her ex—just how many people she'd lost that she'd get to see again. Get a second chance at saving, too. Anya and Tara were a given, but the thought of looking her mom in the eye, getting to hug her, breathe her in, had Buffy momentarily suspended in some world between grief and joy, the sensations not good enough to cancel each other out. And the urge was there, as Whistler had told her it would be, to just take off and save the big explanation for later. Time travel could be overwhelming, he'd told her. People constantly wished they could go back and make different decisions, not realizing just how much burden came with knowing what the future would entail or how acting too rashly could usher in changes that made everything worse. Not that *worse* was really a fear where she came from, but she'd been around too long, seen too much, *lost* too much to not take that into consideration.

"Buffy?"

She blinked and shook her head, again meeting the gaze of a man who was supposed to be dead.

One thing was already in motion—something she refused to walk back, couldn't even if she wanted to. Tell Spike *no* and he'd see it as a challenge. Tell Spike *yes* and he'd spend the rest of his days by your side. She'd already said *yes*, and for that, she was glad. The burden of choice was removed—it had all been instinct.

"I die," she said simply. "Glory is going to win. Or she's almost going to win. And I die to stop it. Stop her."

Spike's eyes went wide, first with shock then dismay. He looked away, swallowed, and she watched as he worked through it. As horror

hardened into resolve. When he met her gaze again, it was with the same steely determination that had made him her best enemy, and she loved him for it. “Well,” he said, “just gonna have to kill the bitch first, then, aren’t we?”

“Ideally, yes, because my death sets off a chain of events that lead to even more badness.”

“Hard to top in terms of badness, your death.”

“I come back. From the dead.” Buffy pressed her lips together, ready this time for his shock. “Willow... She and the others bring me back. And she shouldn’t. It messes with the natural order. I needed to stay dead.”

He stared at her a moment longer before huffing and shaking his head. “Come to me for a good night’s death, pet, you’re gonna need to do a smarter job of convincin’ me to off you than shagging me into oblivion and telling me you love me.”

“Spike, I know you think I have a death wish—and you’re right. The Buffy you met earlier today? Very much with the death wish, even if she didn’t want to admit it. But I am not that Buffy. It took me a long time to want to be alive again—and it’s messy and complicated and I don’t wanna get into it, but I’m here now *because* I want to be alive.” She paused. “Whistler said it was up to me what happened.”

“Whistler?”

“This...neutral agent of the Powers guy.” She waved a hand. “I met him before, when Angel was bad and about to suck the world into Hell. He only gets involved if things go way off course from how they were supposed to. And lucky me, I took things way off course.”

Spike didn’t say anything for a moment, just looked at her as though weighing his words. At length, he worked his throat and nodded. “All ears, Slayer,” he said.

“Do you really wanna hear the whole thing?”

“If it involves you loving me, then yeah. Wanna know how that goes.”

“No. Sorry. Not going to get into that. It’s not a pretty story.” When he responded by raising his eyebrows, she sighed and rolled her eyes. “It’s not. And Spike, I really don’t want to relive it. I just want to be happy that you’re here and I’m here and we have a second chance to

do this right. The other part of the story goes like this—Willow broke natural law when she raised me from the dead. So much so that the whole balance was knocked out of whack, and the First Evil had the chance to turn the tide for Team Apocalypse. Its plan was to wipe out the Slayer line for good—all the Potentials in the world, then me and Faith to make it official. We stopped it.” She paused, not wanting to but having no choice but to go there anyway—the place she’d left behind, or what had become of it. “We *thought* we stopped it.”

“Not that I’m understandin’ a lick of this, mind, but the First Evil sounds a bit primordial to yours truly. Not the sorta thing that can be killed,” Spike said, wandering forward and taking the seat next to her as he had so many times before. Especially when she’d needed it the most—his silent support, his strength. The months since his death had been filled with numerous conversations she’d never had the chance to have, things she hadn’t even realized she’d wanted to say. Apologies he needed to hear, healing they both needed to do in order to move on. But that Spike was gone, and this one, if she was very lucky, would never know that pain.

“It’s not,” Buffy agreed, pulling herself out of her thoughts, though not easily. “It wasn’t about killing it—it was about stopping it from wiping out the Slayer line. So we...activated all the Potentials all over the world.”

Spike stopped breathing. “You did *what*?”

“Any girl who could be a slayer became one.”

“Bloody hell. There’s one way to take the sport outta huntin’ them down.”

Buffy slapped his thigh. “Not the first thing that should pop into the mind of the boyfriend of the Slayer, just so you know. And it definitely shouldn’t be the first thing the boyfriend of the Slayer *says*.”

It was exactly the right thing to say—and he reacted just as she would have expected, by going rigid beside her and abruptly started breathing again. Long, deep Spike breaths. “Boyfriend?” he managed at last, sounding a bit choked. “That what I am, pet?”

“If I am remembering the order of events correctly, I believe the job does have an opening.”

“The fuck it does.” Spike seized her hand and gripped it tight

enough to almost hurt, panting. “Just...bit much to wrap my head around, yeah? Was just a couple hours ago you were tellin’ me I was a nutter, loving you.”

“Well, you’re not *not* a nutter.” She leaned her cheek against his shoulder and took another moment to absorb it—the fact that he was here, that she was, and everything that lay ahead. Everything she had to do to keep this. This and so much more. “But yeah, Spike. It’s you and me. If I’m getting a do-over on everything, you’re definitely a part of it.”

He inhaled sharply, nudged her head with his. “You wanna proper do-over? Eager to know how you sound when you come all over my face.”

It was impossible to hide her reaction, she knew, so trying seemed a fool’s errand. Her body had long-since been conditioned to view sex with Spike as a marathon, not a singular event, and being here—in this crypt, on this bed—made all the not-Slayer parts of her want to throw him down and put their previous marathons to shame. Make that most of the not-Slayer parts. There was the little girl part that was chomping at the bit to see her mom again.

But Buffy didn’t know who all she would share this with—what needed to be done in order to keep order. The gang, much as she loved them, had stopped being her confidants a long time ago. Spike never had.

“A proper do-over sounds...nice.” Buffy pressed back against his brow with her own. “But first...”

“Gotta do what you hero types do,” Spike agreed, then kissed her, making her mind go blank for a handful of truly spectacular seconds. God, the things this man did with his tongue. It would have been easy to get lost in him again and right then she really wanted to, but this was important. More important. So much rode on it.

To his credit, Spike broke away first, though with reluctance she felt down to her bones. When she met his eyes, she found them dark. He was also breathing hard again. And just plain *hard* again, judging by the straining bulge in his jeans.

“Can’t believe you’re here,” he said with a soft smile.

“You’d think after all I’ve seen, I’d be all with going with the flow,

but I'm not." She let out a little laugh and, unable to stop herself, ran her fingers down his cheek, trembling when he leaned into her. "Being here is...strange."

Spike exhaled slowly, clenching his jaw and glancing at her mouth. It was something she'd seen a thousand times, probably more, and she knew exactly what it meant. So when he swallowed and pulled back, even though that was for the best, she couldn't help but feel a teeny bit disappointed.

"So you turned the tables and made all the little girls the world over into every Big Bad's nightmare," he said. "Mite harder to erase the line when the line's bloody everywhere, yeah?"

Buffy nodded, blinking. "Yeah. That was the idea. And it worked. The world kept spinning. Only Sunnydale was destroyed."

"Right loss, that."

"And you died."

She didn't know why, but she was surprised at how nonplussed Spike seemed at the news of his eventual demise. The first time she'd been told she was going to die, she'd fallen to pieces. Granted, she'd also been sixteen and, while not a novice slayer, without the experience that had hardened her into who she was today. Maybe it was a vampire thing—more likely, it was a Spike thing. He looked almost bored with the information.

"You came back," she added, wondering if that would get a result. "As a ghost. Then as a vampire, but first as a ghost."

Spike snorted. "Vampire ghost. There's somethin' you don't see every day."

"And you were working with Angel."

That did it. He bolted from his seat and rounded on her, eyes wide with horror. "I *what*? What the bleeding hell was I doing with Angel?"

"My guess was bad buddy cop movie." Buffy offered a shaky grin. "I'm foggy on the details. Suffice to say, shenanigans were had."

He shook his head, dragged a hand down his face. "Barmy future you got there, pet. World full of slayers and me workin' with King Forehead. Dunno how that adds up to you loving me." He paused as though to give her a chance to enlighten him, then scowled when she remained silent. She knew Spike could be persistent to the point

of annoying, but on this subject, he'd met his match. He could just deal.

"Right," he said, somewhat sulkily. "Well, what happened then to have you sent back here to make it right?"

"It was switching on the slayers," Buffy said, her throat tightening. "It won the battle but the war... There were things we didn't know when we did that. For starters...that slayers don't age the way normal humans age."

He arched an eyebrow. "That so?"

"Very very. Apparently, once we are at our physical peak, that's where we stay." She lifted a shoulder. "Assuming we live that long, at least. No slayer has. But with so many slayers out there to fight the bad guys, we were looking at a whole new race of girl who might never die."

Now he was staring at her again, this time dumbstruck, and she didn't blame him. The prospect was still a bit too large for her, hadn't really had the time to sink in the way it needed to in order to feel real. A thing to dissect someday, maybe, if she got to the other side of this particular crisis. Granted, the fact that she was here meant undoing all the Potentials she'd activated, which would shuffle her right back into the most-likely-to-die-before-thirty category, but Buffy had gotten pretty good at not dying unless it was her choice.

"This was something the First exploited," Buffy continued, lowering her gaze to the stone floor. "When every girl in the world is made a slayer, you're bound to get some people in there who... Well, let's just say that the First's first army was a race of uber vampires called the Turok-Han. They dust as well as the normal kind once they die, but they're stronger and more primal. Still definitely killable."

Then she fell quiet again.

"Next army was an army of slayers, wasn't it?"

Of course Spike knew. Spike was freakishly intuitive. He always knew. It was one of the things she'd missed the most, because not only would he know, he'd say it. Whatever he was thinking, regardless of whether or not she wanted to hear it.

He'd been quiet in the lead-up to the brawl with the First. Hadn't weighed in on her plan. But then, no one had. No one had seen the bad coming—seen the obvious flaw. They couldn't have, being that no

slayer had lived long enough to qualify for social security, let alone document that the aging process would grind to a halt sometime in her twenties.

The battle had been ongoing for months now—almost from the moment Sunnydale had collapsed. The First pulling the strings, whispering its lies and its truths, and swaying the vulnerable to its side. One became three, then ten, then fifty, then a hundred, and soon they had a full-blown revolt on their hands. One that necessitated body doubles and elaborate cover stories and no small amount of magic to keep the rest of the world in the dark about what was going on. Small, isolated attacks became bolder, until it had been apparent that the only possible outcome was outright war. A war in which Buffy would be forced to cut down the enemy she herself had created.

Then entered Whistler.

“Yeah,” Buffy said, forcing herself to meet Spike’s gaze. “It was my mess—all of it, so when the Powers decided to intervene, they came to me with a solution. They’d send me back to prevent the thing that caused nature to get all out of whack in the first place. Either survive Glory or stay dead. Those are my options.”

Spike ate the space separating them and crashed hard to his knees in front of her. “You survive,” he said thickly. “No other option, you hear?”

“Well, that’s the plan.”

“Buffy—”

“Spike, I know how to survive. I know how to beat Glory. I have the unique pleasure of having done it once before. And while the Buffy who you were with earlier tonight would have had a rousing speech as to why she would never, in a million years, condone the thing that this Buffy is going to do...this Buffy is more realistic now.” She squared her shoulders. “I just gotta kill an intern.”



THE PLAN WAS one she was making up as she went. Not that she had much choice in the matter, given the lack of head's up she'd received before Whistler had turned back the clock. Granted, a part of her had

known this already, which was why arriving at the conclusion that Ben Wilkinson had to die was so easy. All of the moral wrestling she'd expected from herself didn't surface, not even as she filled Spike in on the reasoning why Ben needed to bite the big one and how they needed to handle it. He'd been stunned, of course, said something about her being lily-white, but Buffy had been a general now for far longer, and generals made hard choices.

"This isn't something I do lightly," she'd said. "It's not something I *want* to do. I'm not going to enjoy it and I hope to never have to do it again. But it's him or the world—him or giving Glory another chance to go after my sister, my friends. You, too. She made a piñata out of you the last time around."

His eyebrows had gone upward. "Yeah? That death number one?"

"No. We do this right and there will be no death number one." Or any death to follow. Angel would still likely do his stupid Wolfram and Hart experiment but Buffy would be there when it all went to crap this time. She wouldn't have a brewing war among slayers or numerous death threats to dodge. She'd have Willow and Tara, god-willing, and a plan. But that was a problem a few years down the line. She'd shaken her head to clear those thoughts away and refocused on Spike. "What happened with Glory... That was when I knew you loved me, though. Really loved me. She wanted to know who the Key was. You didn't talk. She nearly killed you for that information and you didn't talk."

A wry grin had flirted with his lips then. "Sounds about right."

"Well, it surprised the crap out of me."

"Forgettin' who it was that showed me the ropes, pet? Can bloody well guarantee that whatever she threw at me, your ex-honey threw first. And better, too."

"But you had no reason to not talk. That was the difference."

He'd given her a look she knew well. The *you're off your rocker* look.

"You're all the reason a man needs," he'd said.

The urge had been there to just say *screw it* and tackle him back onto his bed. They had time, after all. The tower Glory's crazies would put together was still a ways down the line—add to the fact that Buffy just plain wasn't looking forward to what she knew she had to do. But the sooner it was over, the better. "Well, all that to say, I know the

moves Glory makes,” she’d gone on, “but I don’t know what she’ll do when I change what *I* do. It could make things worse, make her more unpredictable. Make it so she hurts people in new, terrible ways. Or hey, if I get too cocky thinking I know how it’ll go, she might be able to hit me where I don’t see it coming. There are too many ways it can go bad, and one way I know I can keep it from going bad. So if it’s Ben or the world, I come down on the side of the world.”

In the end, Whistler’s decision to send Buffy straight to Spike made all kinds of sense. There was literally no one else who could help her with this. There would be a debate among the Scoobies—Xander and Anya she could see voting for what had to be done, but Willow and Tara would be all kinds of against it. And Dawn, her sister who was still just a child, needn’t know any of it. Nor her mother. The only person she could reasonably see confiding in was Giles, since he’d been the one to actually do the deed the first time. But then, having to explain everything to all of the Scoobies, to Giles, felt unnecessary. She was here for one reason. Once that was settled, the future was hers to rewrite.

She didn’t feel anything, really, except relieved when Ben smiled and told her he’d be happy to see her after his shift. If there were any nerves, they were only that his scarier half might take over before she had a chance to enact her plan. But an hour later, he headed out the staff entrance and cut down an alley that, as a resident of Sunnydale and a front-line worker at their only hospital, he ought to have known better than to take. Buffy nodded at Spike, who fell into stride beside her as he had so many times. And that felt right.

It was quick. She was sure to make it so. All it took was a little muscle and Ben went to the pavement, his neck bent at an unnatural angle. He hadn’t known what was happening, hadn’t known it was her. She’d made sure to stick to the shadows, keep out of sight. When she’d landed behind him, she’d acted before he had the chance to whirl around and catch her face.

“Gotta say, Slayer,” Spike said, coming to stand beside her. “Was wonderin’ if you were havin’ me on for a mo’ there. Didn’t think you had it in you.”

“It’s either him or stabbing a bunch of knights later,” she said,

forcing herself to look at what she'd done, not sure what it meant that she wasn't bothered by it. Perhaps it helped that, to her, Ben had been dead for years. Perhaps it would hit her later that this was the present now, and the years she'd lived since Glory had been erased. Perhaps, but somehow she didn't think so. Generals made tough calls all the time. While she wouldn't let this harden her, she also wouldn't let herself regret it. "So. You do your thing."

Spike favored her with another suspicious look, and she didn't blame him. As trippy as today had been for her, it had to be a thousand times that for him. He'd tricked her into going on a date with him, been courted by his psycho ex, shot in the back by his other psycho ex, and was now not only Buffy's boyfriend, but accomplice. He'd already agreed to take this secret to dust, and his word was something Spike didn't give unless he meant it.

"Second time tonight my lady has snapped a neck and expected me to take a sip."

Buffy arched an eyebrow, crossing her arms. "Dru?"

"Hit the Bronze earlier. Was tryin' to suss out what I aimed to do with her. She decided to give me a snack." He had the decency to look chagrined, even ashamed, rubbing the back of his neck. "Buffy, about that—"

"You didn't try to stop her."

"No."

"Spike, can I trust you?"

He looked up again at that, his eyes wide as saucers. "Everything I am, Slayer, is yours. Completely yours. Only said it 'cause... Well, figure you oughta know, yeah? Thought you might already, bein' you're from the future and all."

"I didn't," she replied, holding his gaze. "But what I do know is... you're Spike. Everything I thought I knew about you at this time was wrong. You screw up. You make mistakes. You make the wrong call. But you came this far on your own. I'll be there the rest of the way."

Spike didn't say anything for a long moment, but he didn't need to. She saw everything she wanted to see in his eyes.

"You can trust me," he said at last, voice hoarse. "I swear it, Buffy, you can."

She smiled, stepped closer to brush a kiss across his mouth, reveling in the way he trembled. In the way he loved. “I know I can,” she whispered. “That’s why I love you.”

He nodded and seized the back of her head to draw her to him again, his mouth more insistent this time, as though he thought he could kiss away any second thoughts or reservations if he worked quickly enough. When he pulled back, he put a step between them, then nodded at the vessel of the dead hellgod. “Turn away when I do it.”

Buffy shook her head. He looked like he might argue, but he didn’t. Instead, he shifted his attention to the body.

And did what he needed to do to make it look like a vampire attack.



TIME TRAVEL WAS one of those things the movies made look easy. Even fun, sometimes with accompanying rock numbers and anachronistic references that the audience got but the poor suckers on-screen did not.

The truth about time travel was it was messy, both in terms of logistics—what the hell did she do now?—and in the head. Arriving where she had, *when* she had, had given her something to focus on. Something specific. Something *Spike*. One of many people she loved who she’d lost and thought she’d never see again—someone with whom she had a whole world of right to make. But he wasn’t the only one, and in true Spike fashion, he’d helped her get through the musts on her to-do list without protest. And also in true Spike fashion, he was immediately there when the rest of it hit her. That she was about to see her mother, alive and presumably happy, thinking she was on the other side of a medical scare. It was right as they started up the driveway, when the realness of being in Sunnydale crashed down again. Seeing this place as often as she did in dreams gave the whole thing a surreal feel, like she might jolt awake at any moment. She would have worried about that had the scene before her not included some of the details time eventually eroded away,

like the color of the front door, or the paint along the window trim, or the looming tree in the front yard that Spike had, once upon a time, held her against as he'd fucked her. The way the grass smelled, or how, on certain days, the wind would hit a pitch as it passed through the yard.

Everything that had happened since she'd opened her eyes was real. Spike was really with her, rubbing her back and cooing little nonsense words as she wiped at her face and tried to get herself under control. Not telling her it was all right or that she'd do fine or giving her any of the number of platitudes she could always expect from anyone else. Just letting her be, understanding that she couldn't do anything else right now. Understanding this was what she needed.

There were other people, too. Other moments she would have where the only human thing to do would be to cry and hold onto the people she loved. The thought of seeing Tara or Anya again had her heart doing all kinds of acrobatics, but along with Spike, Mom was the big one. Both of them weren't just people she'd lost—they were *her* people. And having them back was everything.

Buffy mopped away the last of her tears and flashed Spike a small smile. Navigating the next little bit would be difficult, particularly since she'd made the decision—for the time being, at least—not to share with the others that she was Future Girl. There would be too many questions, too much prodding, and too much relived pain. Buffy might not know jack about time travel beyond what the movies claimed, but she was learning as she went, and just the questions she'd dodged from Spike had been enough to convince her that it was better to pretend the future wasn't mapped out, because it wasn't. Change one thing and everything else changed with it.

Granted, there was a terrific chance she'd lose her cool and spill the beans sometime down the line. If that happened, she'd deal then. Right now she just wanted to bask in what she'd been given back.

"She's gone," Spike said softly, knowing. Of course knowing. "Where you're from, your mum..."

"Aneurysm. One of the risks of the surgery she had." Buffy drew in a deep breath, willing herself not to lose it again. "I came home one day and found her on the couch. They said it was fast, likely no pain. I

don't know if they were lying. I never looked it up. I didn't want to know. It was better just to...believe they were right."

He released a trembling breath, keeping his gaze on her so that she saw everything. Grief at what was coming as well as determination to keep it from coming. To spare her pain, spare Dawn pain. Hell, spare himself.

"That's a thing we can change," he said. "Aneurysm, right?"

"I dunno. Is it?"

"Guess we'll find out, you and me. Start by gettin' her to the doctor, yeah?"

Buffy nodded, forcing a smile. He was right. If there was a way, they would find it. They *would*.

"Okay," she said, drawing herself up and fixing her gaze on the door. "Here goes nothing."

In movies and TV, the human memory was a wondrous thing—a veritable steel trap, cataloging years' worth of not just the big events, but also the minutiae. All the little moments that linked the big events together. But this was the real world, with her real brain, and Buffy didn't remember what had happened after she'd gotten home the night of Spike's disastrous love declaration. There had likely been a conversation with her mom, who had always liked Spike for some reason, and probably one with Dawn, too. Possibly an SOS trip to the Bronze so she could dance until she forgot the look on Spike's face when she'd shut the door on him—something her bastard memory *wasn't* good enough to gloss over.

Now she was about to announce that, hey, as it turned out she was in fact in love with Spike and he might be around a lot more. If that about-face wasn't enough, she'd have to navigate it while somehow managing not to lose her head when she saw her mother again.

It wasn't going to get any easier on this side of the door, though, so Buffy shook out her hands, inhaled, and pushed herself inside. And again, she was hit by a wave of unreality, the soft, blurry lines of her memory solidifying right in front of her, assaulting her with details she hadn't even realized she'd lost.

After a year of trying to find her place in the world—of managing

the disaster that was switching on all the Potentials, dodging death threats, and tracking down rogue slayers—she'd finally come home.

"Oh my god," Buffy whispered, wandering a few steps in. Goosebumps raced up and down her arms and along her neck. "Oh god."

"Uhh...Slayer?"

She turned, frowned when she saw Spike standing on the other side of the door, his expression somewhere between amusement and hurt. Then she remembered the other part of closing the door on his face that night and immediately felt like an idiot.

"Sorry," she muttered, glad for the distraction. "I forgot I asked Willow to do that."

Spike scoffed, raising a hand to the invisible barrier. "Weren't kidding when you said it didn't go well, were you?"

"No. I was wiggled. And with good reason." Buffy shrugged, trying for a grin. "You got the invite back, though, and never lost it again."

"Guess that's somethin', then." He sighed and tilted his head back, studying the doorframe as though it were a puzzle he aimed to solve. "So are you holdin' out for a proper redo or are you gonna leave a fella hanging?"

This time, she didn't need to look too hard to find her grin, ushering away the sensations that had threatened to overwhelm her just a second ago. That was Spike, through and through. Providing her outs, distractions, even when she didn't realize she needed them. Buffy took a step toward him. "I dunno. This could be fun. How many hoops can I get you to jump through?"

"If you're from the future, reckon you already know the answer to that."

"Well, it's going to be a trip trying to explain this to the others," she said. "Going from Spike-disgusts-me to being all with the bone-jumpy."

His eyebrows winged up. "Plannin' to jump my bones, are you?"

"Unless you have a problem with that."

"Fuck no. Though might be a mite difficult if you aim to stay on that side of the door."

Buffy nodded to acknowledge the point, stepping closer. "So why don't you come in already?"

There was no reason for him to look as touched as he did, especially since he'd only known about the disinvite for about thirty seconds, but Spike couldn't hide anything from her. He hadn't been able to then and he had no chance now. And when he stepped over the threshold, holding her gaze, a soft smile on his face, she couldn't help but flash back to another night from her past. Another night time had not been successful in eroding away, even with a death and a resurrection marking the distance between then and now. How he'd looked at her with so much love and warmth the night she'd jumped, like she'd given him something more than just renewed access to her house.

She had, of course. Only she hadn't known it then. She might have realized it if she hadn't died. As it was, Buffy had been forced to take the long way to her Spike-related epiphanies. Yet here she was all over again.

"Presto," he said, moving close. "No barrier."

Buffy worked her throat, her mind throwing her another bone. "You...said that the last time too."

"Did I?" Spike kicked the door closed behind him without looking away. Then something shifted behind his eyes and he let out a sigh. "Buffy... Slayer, I shoulda said this out there, or before we left the crypt. Been tryin' to wrap my lobes around how to say it and, bollocks, never been good at gettin' anything to come out the way I'd like."

Now he did glance down, rubbing the back of his head the way he did when he was feeling particularly vulnerable, and the nerves she'd been riding began to quiet. For as much as had changed for her over the course of the last few hours, just as much had changed for Spike. It felt good, knowing she wasn't the only one navigating a strange new reality.

"It was a dream," he said a moment later, his voice going somewhat raspy. He met her gaze again and held. "A wild bloody dream. How I knew I loved you. And it turned me on my head. Fought it with everythin' I am, you know. Didn't want to give in. Didn't want it to be right. But there comes a time a man stops fightin' himself and starts fightin' for what he loves. Even if it was impossible, you and me, I had to try. Had to, 'cause it was you. But I never thought any of this would actually happen. Was outta my noggin earlier, tryin' to get you to admit—"

"We've already established the chaining-up-of-me as not the best way to profess one's feelings."

"Dunno. Seems it worked out all right for yours truly."

Buffy narrowed her eyes. "Spike, it took three years and two deaths, and a whole lotta bad in between. Trust me—there are easier ways."

"Right." He grinned, managing to look sheepish and giddy at the same time. "Just wanted to say that. Needed to, I think. Still not convinced today actually happened."

"Well, it did. It actually happened twice. You're just living what I hope is the better version." Buffy stole a glance of her surroundings for signs of life—she knew people were home, could feel them in that weird slayer-y way of hers, but instinct told her they were upstairs. When she was certain they wouldn't be interrupted, she edged forward until she was right up against him. "It's not gonna be easy, you and me. You know that, right?"

Spike snorted. "Easy'd be right boring. Me? I prefer a challenge."

"Good. I can be kinda challenging."

"Can take anythin' you got, Slayer."

"I know you can," she replied, and rose up on her toes to brush her lips against his.

She meant it to be a brief, sweet kiss, really. A *bold that thought* kiss that they could pick up after the conversations were had and the relevant cats were unbagged. But when Spike's lips touched hers, something in her brain went off and took her good senses along with it. All that was left was that awful sense of yearning, of loss, that had taken residence inside her over the last year, a cruel mind that wouldn't forget the things she'd like it to—conversations they'd never had, understandings they'd never reached, words she'd never said. Or had said, just not until it was too late. Until the moment when he might have believed her had come and gone.

But this Spike believed her. She knew he did, could feel it with every brush of his lips, every swipe of his tongue. How he moaned low in his throat and pulled her to him, his mouth growing bolder, hungrier, tugging and nibbling and just in general making it difficult to think. More difficult when he tunneled his fingers through her hair to

cup the back of her head, snaked an arm around her waist, and reeled her in so she was right up against his erection.

There had been a lot wrong between them during those months when he'd been her dirty little secret, but the way he could make the world blink out of existence and replace her good senses with something needy and primal wasn't one of them. As much as she'd missed Spike, she'd missed this too. The sensation of getting lost, of falling into him, of being consumed and so much more.

A throat cleared and the bubble popped.

Buffy tore herself away from Spike with a hard gasp, swaying a bit on her feet as her spinning head attempted to anchor itself once again. When it registered that the sound had come from behind her, she whirled around, though perhaps a bit more harshly than she should have, as her suddenly wobbly legs had her stumbling back into Spike's chest. So preoccupied was she with not falling over that the shock of seeing her mother and sister on the stairs, arms crossed and identical *explain yourself* looks on their faces, was a blip of its full potential. It was perhaps the best way it could have happened—off the cuff while her mind was pleasantly distracted. Buffy didn't have time to dwell on the significance of the moment, on how it felt to see her mother, alive and well and just a few feet away. It made her first instinct something other than a burst of emotion.

"So," her mother said, her eyebrows raised, "I will guess he took it well."

Spike wrapped his arm around her middle, pulling her flush against him, a low chuckle rumbling right near her ear, which wasn't distracting or anything. The jerk.

"Umm," Buffy said, her mind racing, "yes? Really, super well?"

Dawn was smirking, and for some reason, seeing her was almost more jarring than seeing her mother. She'd been a woman just a few hours ago—now she was a kid again.

A kid who was mouthing, "You. Are. So. Busted," with barely repressed glee.

"Honestly, Buffy," Joyce said, sighing and shaking her head in that fond *Mom* way. "What was the point of having Willow do that disinvent spell if you were just going to maul him in the foyer?"

"It's a long, long story." That she would need to invent. For the moment, Buffy just straightened and stepped to the side so she was no longer literally entangled in Spike, though she did make sure to grab his hand. "One I'll be happy to tell you tomorrow."

Spike rocked on his heels, beaming. "Decided she couldn't live without me, this one."

Buffy rolled her eyes. "Yeah. That's believable."

"Just tell me..." Her mother paused until they both looked at her. "This isn't another spell that has you thinking you're getting married, is it? I know Willow's grown a lot stronger over the last year, but—"

"No! We are absolutely not getting married," Buffy blurted, perhaps a bit too loudly for the wounded look Spike threw her. The same that about made her eyes roll out of her head. "I mean there's no spell. This isn't something Willow did. It's just regular hormones at work here. Regular hormones and no wedding bells."

"Yet," Spike murmured, leaning in to nip at her ear.

She rolled her eyes, planted her hand against his face and gave him a good shove. "Behave," she hissed.

"Never," he whispered back before doing that thing where he dragged his tongue over his teeth, and being that it had been a damn good while since she'd been on the receiving end of that look, Buffy couldn't help it when her knees went weak.

"I just had to ask," her mother said, drawing Buffy's attention back to her. To the miracle that was seeing her alive again. To be standing in this home again. To any of it. "No offense to Spike, of course, but you were just so...*set* earlier."

"I know I was." Another thing she had no trouble remembering. "And I know it must look all kinds of weird—"

Joyce's mouth twitched. "Looks like several things to me."

Yeah, and if either she or Dawn had waited any longer before doing the throat-clearing thing, it would probably look like a whole lot more. But Buffy didn't let her mind go there, rather plowed on. "But believe me, I'm making this decision with a clear head. The clearest of heads."

"Uh huh."

Her mother sounded somewhat placated but not necessarily convinced—at least not enough, and Buffy knew she wouldn't be able

to babble her way out. While she didn't remember exactly what had happened before she'd left for Spike's, she did remember the way she'd felt. It wasn't surprising in the slightest for her turnaround to be greeted with skepticism.

"Slayer." She glanced back at Spike, whose expression had gone from lascivious to soft again—the sort that told her that there was still soul in him, even if that soul wasn't literal. "Doubt your mum's gonna be too keen on us until she's satisfied your head's on straight. Can head back to the crypt, give you two the night to sort everythin' out."

That sounded well and fine, except she didn't want him to go. "Spike—"

"Know better than to get between the Summers women," he replied. "Might be thick at times, but I see clearly most others."

"No, I—you. All right, okay. You're probably right." Buffy pulled away from him with a low, muttered, "Thanks."

Spike gave her a wink. "I have my moments, you know," he said before turning his attention to her mother and Dawn. "Nibblet, Joyce. Thanks for not comin' at me with an ax."

"You know I didn't like her with Angel," Joyce replied, her brow furrowed. The words came out rushed, almost guilty, like she felt bad for saying them but had no choice in the matter. They were followed by a long pause, her cheeks going pink. "Nothing personal, Spike, just... I didn't."

"Just shows you got good taste."

"Hey," Buffy muttered, though it was half-hearted. "Be nice."

"I'm not nice. That's what you love about me." He snickered and kissed her again before she could protest, then began to backtrack toward the door. "Evenin' all."

It wasn't until he'd disappeared on the other side of the door that it hit Buffy just *how* very much she didn't want him to leave. Panic rushed her without warning—panic that this was it, that she wouldn't see him again, that perhaps he would spontaneously burst into flames on the walk between here and Restfield or be called to another apocalypse. The urge to run after him was intense, so much so she actually found herself striding toward the door before her brain caught up with her.

“Buffy?”

She turned slowly and met her mother’s gaze, which was warm with both confusion and concern, and did what little else could—grounded her in the moment. This impossible moment somehow made possible. This second chance to do things right.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Joyce said, coming down the stairs now, her eyes wide. “This is all just...so sudden.”

“Yeah,” Buffy said, forcing herself to relax. “I know. But yeah, Mom. I’m fine. I’m...better than I have been in a long time.”

And that was as much as she was able to get out before the rest hit her again. Then she barreled into her mother’s arms, nearly taking them both to the floor, and though she knew this would merit a longer conversation—one she would have to navigate with care—she couldn’t help herself. The fact was her mother was here, real, and that hadn’t been her life in so long that remaining dignified was something she didn’t have in her right then. No matter if there were questions to answer or stories to come up with. That she was here, that she had the chance—any chance—was all that mattered.

“You are so weird,” Dawn grouched, plonking down the stairs. “What is going on?”

“Nothing,” Buffy replied, pulling back and wiping at her stupid eyes. “It’s just been a really good day.”



TWO HOURS PASSED before Joyce was satisfied with the yarn Buffy had spun. And it was quite a yarn, pieced together with enough truth to pass the smell test and enough exaggeration to fill in the rest. By the time they were all talked out, it was nearing midnight, which meant time for a late-night patrol and for certain teenage sisters to hit the sack.

When Joyce asked if Buffy would be swinging by Spike’s crypt, it was in a carefully neutral yet entirely knowing tone, so knowing she might as well have said, “See you tomorrow.”

Patrol through cemeteries that, just that morning, had been long gone was another exercise in strange. Though her mind didn’t

remember the terrain beyond a few notable landmarks, her feet had no trouble covering the usual territory. She even caught herself searching for headstones that had always stood out to her, little hallmarks of Sunnydale that had been, before today, lost to time.

And no, when she found herself traipsing the familiar path to Spike's crypt, she wasn't surprised. That whole *see you tomorrow* bit had felt staged, anyway.

"The talk go well, then?" Spike asked the second she stepped inside. He was by the fridge, fixing himself a drink, his tone casual—a sort of forced nonchalance. Like her presence was something he could give or take. The tone didn't match his grin, though, or the look on his face when he met her gaze. That *thank bloody fuck* look. "Or did you pop by to give me a snog before your mum lops off my head?"

Buffy grinned in spite of herself, shedding her jacket and enjoying the way his eyes followed the movement. "Your head is safe from all things my mother," she said. "I think I managed to convince her that all this is real."

"You think? That might be enough for you, but it's my noggin we're talking about, isn't it?" But the grin remained where it was. "How'd you manage that?"

"Little of this, little of that. A lot of it was the truth, only sped up a few years." Buffy breathed out. "I told her that learning you were in love with me had thrown me for the mother of all loops but forced me to confront feelings I didn't know I had. I think I borrowed some of my explanation from what I told Riley when he found me ogling wedding dresses when we were under the spell."

"Yeah? And what was that?"

"I dunno. Something-something fighting to hide our real feelings, something-something woman doth protesting too much." Buffy stopped at the pillar and leaned against it, taking in the sight of him. This particular version of him, this version that would never know the pain of the Spike she'd fallen in love with first. "I also threw in that the reason Riley left was he felt I didn't need him enough. And he thought I might have a thing for you."

At that, Spike swelled up. "Poor lad. No wonder he was in such a state."

“What? What state?”

“When he swung by here, right before he caught the midnight train to Georgia.” He paused, the glass he’d prepared for himself halfway to his lips. “Right. Probably not the sorta story he’d share. Not much to it, though. He was sour I’d shown you his extra-curriculars and sussed out that I was hot for you, so he came ’round and tried to make an example outta me. Didn’t get him very far, did it?”

Buffy blinked, not sure how to take this information or what she should do with it—if there *was* anything to do with it. Not once had she ever suspected that Riley had known about Spike’s feelings for her, though it went a long way in explaining why hadn’t seemed surprised when he’d found them naked together. Also meant that there were at least two people in her life who had seen what was apparently obvious before she had.

At least the others had been thrown. If she had truly been the last to know, she’d feel like a moron.

“Well,” she said, gathering her bearings, “like I said, I think we’re okay where my mom is concerned. And Dawn, though she did get on my case for having made the soul versus the chip argument to her the other night.”

Spike stiffened a bit at that, suddenly finding the bottom of his glass fascinating. “Did you?”

“I must have. It sounds vaguely familiar. Dawn’s argument was the chip and the soul were the same.”

“Ah huh. Seems I recall you sayin’ otherwise.”

Buffy arched her eyebrows. “And here I thought *you’d* be the first to bellow that you don’t have anything like a soul.”

“Right, well, yeah. I know that.” There was something tense in his voice—something that hadn’t been there before. “Made the case to you myself, didn’t I? I’d changed, could be a better person. Better man. The sorta man you could love. Might never be good but I can be somethin’ other than bad, can’t I? And—”

“Spike.”

He paused, looked up at her, and whatever she’d been about to say fittted away without ceremony. She hadn’t let herself think about it too much, the Spike she’d known, the one who had sought out his soul, the

difference between the two of them—if it existed at all. And for the first time, she thought maybe it didn't. While this Spike didn't have a soul, that potential was in him. The thing, the need to be good, for both her and himself, was just buried under all that bad boy posturing. It hadn't grown by itself. It hadn't even grown because of her. It had grown in spite of her, in spite of all the times she'd told him no, that he was lesser, that he wasn't a man, that he couldn't be.

"I love you. Right here, right now. Everything else..." Buffy pushed herself off the column so she could close the space between them. "Tomorrow and the next day... I don't know what happens then. How much I've changed just by... I don't know. But I know that I love you."

His eyes went stormy. "I love you too."

"And right now? I don't want to worry. I just want you to just take me downstairs."

"Yeah? What happens downstairs?"

"I'm thinking things that will make it hard for me to walk tomorrow."

The leer he gave her was slow and seductive, the sort that had once upon a time made her want to punch him for his presumption. The sort that now had her pressing her thighs together. "Careful what you ask for, love," he drawled. "Meant what I said earlier. Gotta know how you'll look and sound when you come apart in my mouth. The taste I got left me bloody famished for more." He trailed a finger down her cheek. "Wanna map every part of your juicy cunt with my tongue. And believe me, baby, I love takin' my time."

Buffy released a shaky breath, trembling. She knew he did—knew that and more. These wouldn't be her firsts...but in a way, they would be. There was so much she hadn't done right before, so much she could now. In particular, she was looking forward to how *he'd* look when she sucked his cock into her mouth for the first time. How now, unlike before, she'd lean into him when he inevitably fisted her hair and shoved himself deeper down her throat.

"So get to tasting already," she whispered.

The glass he'd been holding smashed against the stone floor, and then she was in his arms, against his chest, his mouth covering hers with all the passion he lived and breathed. Everything that made him

who he was, made him the man she'd loved. And whatever came next—the future she had rewritten and all the things that might or might never come to be, she had this.

They had this.

And *this* was everything.

