

# CRUMBS

*An Alternate Season 6*



HOLLY DENISE







## SPEAK TO ME

“CAN WE TALK?”

Buffy swallowed, flexing her fingers around the stake she had raised. In truth, she should have known it was him. Just as, forever ago, she had been able to sense Angel inside the chaos that usually just screamed *vampire*, she'd become attuned enough to Spike to feel him apart from her average slayee.

Part of her had known he'd seek her out tonight. All of her had hoped he wouldn't. But she'd gone and confused things—that was on her. And so was this.

“Yeah,” she said, lowering her stake. “I think we should.”

Spike blinked, clearly not having expected that. “We should?”

Buffy found herself fighting a grin, which surprised the hell out of her. One thing she'd noticed since crawling her way out of the grave was that Spike was ridiculously easy to throw off his game. He also didn't have much of a poker face—or anything *resembling* a poker face when it came to her—so she always knew when she'd thrown him for a loop.

“Yes, we should. Isn't that what you just said?”

“Well, yeah. Just didn't expect you to agree.” Spike shifted his weight and looked away. “So...what was that? You kissed me.”

Yeah, she had. She really had. Music swelling, heart in her throat, her body pulling her toward him as though it had a will of its own—all of that and then some. She'd stared at his lips and known it was coming, felt her every nerve telegraphing her intent to kiss him like nothing else could. And it had been a while coming, especially given the fact that she spent pretty much every waking minute in his company. Those that she didn't spend in his company were usually spent wishing that she were.

"I know," Buffy replied at last, because, well, there was really nothing else to say. "And—"

Before she could get another word out, though, Spike's eyes went wide and he became a blur of movement. The next thing she knew, she was on her back, her vampire on top of her, pinning her to the ground, which was really freaking presumptuous of him, considering the talk had just started.

Then she heard it—a sound she could have identified anywhere. A stake had just embedded itself in a tree.

"Easy, boys," said a steady, smarmy voice. "No need to get physical-like. Wasn't aiming for the lady, anyway."

Buffy turned her head, sure her eyes were deceiving her. She blinked once. Yup. There was a shark wearing a business suit.

Because *of course* there was a shark wearing a business suit. Honestly, at this point in her life, why wouldn't there be?

Spike's weight was gone the next second—Buffy would take the time *later* to analyze why that bothered her—and then he'd offered her his hand. Something he'd done rather a lot over the last year. Something that had, at some point, become familiar rather than downright wiggly. Before Spike, the only vampire she'd ever touched in a nonviolent way had been Angel and that had been...natural. Understandable. Accepted.

Buffy didn't know what it said about her that touching Spike called to both the woman and the Slayer in her, and she was fast running out of opportunities to avoid finding an answer.

"What do you want?" Spike was asking the shark man when Buffy snapped back to the present.

Another major non-shock. Spike was friendly with the local

monsters. Because that was what he was—a monster. Something that had been, admittedly, on the side of hard when it came to remembering these days, but no less true because of it.

“You know me,” Shark Man replied, doing his best impression of a mob boss. “Uh... There are a lot of things I would like, Mr. Spike.” He walked around them both and made a big show about pulling the stake his cronies had launched at her out of the tree. “A house in Bel Air...” Now he was walking toward them, going full-on menace. It would work on anyone who hadn’t seen the classic SNL skit at least once. “With a generously sized swimming pool... And of course”—Shark Man threw an arm around Spike’s shoulder—“the forty Siamese that you owe me.”

“Take it easy,” Spike said, looking more irritated than concerned—no surprises there. “You’ll get your kittens.”

“Oh, I trust you, Mr. Spike,” cooed the Shark Man.

Buffy couldn’t keep from rolling her eyes this time. “Oh god, what is it with you guys? Why kittens? Why can’t you just use money like everybody else?”

Of course this involved kittens. The hottest currency she’d never known about. If only it carried the same clout with actual bill collectors that it did with shark people.

“She’s funny,” said the shark to the vampire. “I like funny in a girl.”

Great. Just what she needed. More creature-of-the-night admirers.

“I just need a little more time,” Spike replied.

“Time, time, time...is what turns kittens into cats,” hissed Shark Man. “Look, I don’t wanna see anyone get hurt.” He turned away, allowing his goons to take a step forward. “Boys.”

Honestly, would demons in this town never get the hint? Buffy leaped up, seizing the branch above her head and using it to leverage her weight so she could plant both feet on the first advancing vamp in a hard kick. The lackey landed conveniently at Shark Man’s feet.

“Then you’d better close your eyes,” she said before turning to shove Spike a safe distance away. The second vampire, apparently still having not gotten the memo, kept pushing toward her, so he had really no one to blame but himself when she greeted him with a couple of well-aimed punches and likewise sent him airborne.

"I said she was the Slayer, boss," grumbled the first vamp.

"Ahh, good for you. The Vampire Slayer." Shark Man looked her up and down hungrily. "Have you ever given any thought to, uh, freelance work? A little debt collecting, perhaps?"

"No, thank you," Buffy replied, her arms folded.

"Right." Spike was back by her side, practically vibrating with energy. "You want the sodding kittens, mate, and I'll deliver. Might throw in a spare or two—interest, and all that. But it's not gonna be tonight, so if you could toddle off now, the lady and I were in the middle of something."

Buffy rolled her eyes again, though she was trying like mad to keep from smirking. Life with Spike around was a lot of things, but dull wasn't anywhere on the list.

"I collect my debts, Mr. Spike," Shark Man warned as he and his goons began backing away. "The next collection call won't be so amicable. You remember that."

They kept walking backward until they were a safe distance away, reminding Buffy forcibly of the time Harmony had backed herself out of Spike's crypt to keep his eyes from landing on her ass ever again. And before she could help herself, a laugh bubbled off her lips. A good one, because damn, she had not appreciated the comedic gold of that moment enough when it had happened, too busy being skeeved out and pissed off.

"Somethin' funny, love?" Spike asked, jarring her back to the present. The present where they had been seconds away from actually discussing what had happened outside of the Bronze the other night. That much was enough to sober her up fast.

"Oh, just this thing that is my life." Buffy looked again to where Shark Man and friends had disappeared, though she knew she was stalling. The only tinglies she felt now were those courtesy of the vampire to her right. After a moment, she conceded defeat, released a long sigh, then turned to face him entirely. "Look, Spike... About the other night... I shouldn't have done that."

Spike stared at her with that annoyingly penetrative gaze of his, not without the odd flash of irritation. "No?"

"No. I was taking advantage of how you feel about me." That was part one of the truth. "And maybe feeling bad about...you know."

Some of the frustration melted off his face. "What's that?"

"Well, what you said. Err, sang. You aren't responsible for my problems and, yeah, I might've been drunk out of my mind, but I do remember telling you that you're the only person I can stand to be around right now and that is major with the head-trippy at the moment." Buffy laughed again, though there was nothing funny this time. "I didn't want to lose whatever it is that you give me that makes living not so hard, so I... I dunno, I went after you and gave you what you wanted. And hoo boy, with the bad idea."

Spike was still for a moment, his head tilted, expression unreadable. Then he stepped forward, right into her personal space, and though she knew she should, she didn't back up a step. Just let him be close.

"You sayin' that's all that was?" he asked in a low, seductive purr. "What I wanted? Tellin' me you didn't want it, too? Forget I can smell you, pet. I know when you're hot."

Now she *did* plant her hands on his chest to force him back a couple of steps. "One, gross. Two, respect the personal bubble, and three... No, that's not all that was but it's all it can be. For now, okay?"

"For now? Meaning—"

"Meaning I don't know. I don't know anything anymore. The world, the rules, the things I feel at any given moment... Nothing makes sense to me right now. And it's about getting through this moment to get to the next one and..."

Buffy sighed, turning away from him now, wishing—not for the first time—that she had the ability to simplify things the way Xander did, or be blunt about them, like Anya. But then thinking about either of them—all of them—at the present was something beyond difficult. When they were together, all she wanted to do was scream and rage at them for their carelessness, their callousness, for not bothering to check and see where she was before deciding that it had to be Hell because...why? Why would her friends think she was in Hell?

Oh, sure, she knew the reasons they'd given her. Same thing had happened to Angel once upon a time. Yeah, it had, only *all* of Angel had disappeared when Acatlha sucked him in. Maybe if she hadn't been

there all dead-like, she could follow the line of thinking that had led them to resurrecting her. Maybe. If she squinted.

"I can't be...*that* for you. And I am too screwed up right now to even figure out what *that* means," she heard herself saying. "I'll stay away from you if that's what you want—"

"But it's not." Suddenly, Spike was in front of her again, again in her bubble but not oppressively so. He took her shoulders into his grip and squeezed. "Spent all bloody summer wishin' for this. For you. Having you here is more... More than I wagered I'd ever get." He studied her before dropping his hands to his sides. "What I want is you. However I can get you."

Buffy licked her lips. When he said things like that, looked at her the way he was looking at her now, it was hard to remember the reasons why leaping into his arms was a bad idea. "But you want more."

"Never said I didn't. And if you're offering, I'll take it." A pause. "But you're not. Right now."

The *right now* thing was going to be one of those things that haunted her, wasn't it? *Not right now* had never been in the cards where she and Spike were concerned. Not before, at least. Not even after he'd made it more complicated to remember why. She hadn't had time to worry about what signals she was giving Spike when she'd started relying on him toward the end with Glory, and he hadn't questioned it, either. Spike had known the score then and loved her anyway. Fought beside her anyway. And if Dawn was to be believed, continued that fight all summer. Continued living up to the promise he'd thought he'd failed at keeping.

Buffy nodded and looked down. "No. But I don't want to...lose anything, either. You're pretty much the only person keeping me sane at the moment, and I know that's not fair to you and you didn't ask for it, so—"

The next thing she knew, Spike had seized her arms and pulled her to him. For a moment she thought he was going right for the kissage again, which she probably would have let him do because it was nice to not think. Nice to focus on the way her belly tingled and her heart fluttered when his mouth was on hers. But he didn't kiss her. Instead, he wrapped his arms around her and held her to his chest in a hug.



A hug. Spike was *bugging* her.

God, just when she'd thought her life couldn't get any weirder.

"Dunno how to do this either," he said thickly. "How to be what you need. But I wanna try, Slayer. If you'll let me."

Buffy closed her eyes, forced herself to relax. It didn't feel natural—none of this did. And then it all felt too natural. The way seeking out Spike had felt natural from the start. From the moment she'd walked down those steps, captured in the way he'd looked at her. How gentle he'd been, how...*everything*.

"I am sorry," she murmured into his shoulder. "For being crazy mixed-signal girl."

A pleasant rumbling sensation rolled against her chest, and she realized the next second that he was chuckling. Good. At least all of this was funny to someone.

"I meant everythin' I said that night. The part I did right and the part I bollixed up," Spike said a moment later. "Told you as much. Made you a promise. Swore to you to protect her."

"That wasn't your fault."

"Wasn't it? The bloody Doc was there 'cause of me. 'Cause I..." He pulled back the next instant, his eyes overfull with something she couldn't name. "You know the Bit wanted your mum back. Know she was workin' some mojo to make it happen. Maybe didn't know—"

"She told me," Buffy said flatly. "Dawn did. A couple of days, maybe, after Willow brought me back. She was talking—just talking nonstop. Had her own issues to work through about what happened. Probably still does. But she told me then, who he was. How she knew him and who made with the introductions."

Spike's nostrils flared. "Brilliant. Just bloody brilliant. So you just bidin' your time, tryin' to catch me unawares, or are you gonna make a big production out of it?"

"Out of what?"

"Figure I got a stake comin', yeah?"

Buffy snorted a laugh, this one somewhat bitter. The past few days, she'd lived for sunset so she could show up at Spike's crypt, spend time with someone who didn't look at her expectantly, didn't mind if she just sat with her thoughts, let her ramble about her so-called afterlife,

didn't try to fix her. A bit of evil he'd committed months ago might as well have been a lifetime in the past. "Pre-Mortem Buffy, yeah, probably. Post-Mortem Buffy isn't doing cartwheels or anything. Yeah, you did a dumb thing. Dawn did a dumb thing, too. Hell, when I thought it might work, even I was all on board, which, dumb. But I also know why you did it. Same as I know why my friends brought me back. But it didn't happen. Dawn wised up and this is the kind of thing to expect from you, right?"

"Thanks ever so."

"But it is, Spike. Doing something like that is stupid and all kinds of gray on the morality scale, but you don't have a soul." She swallowed, a futile attempt to staunch her swelling bitterness. "You don't, but all my friends do. You didn't do anything they weren't willing to do. And, unlike *them*, nothing came of it. Like I said, no cartwheels, but also... I just don't have it in me to care about that right now. Maybe when I start to feel things again I'll change my mind."

When she met his eyes, she wanted to laugh again. Seemed she'd stunned the vampire stupid. It took a second, but he came back to himself, shuffling in that self-conscious way of his, lowering his gaze to the ground. "Even still, you know. You know it was me who put the bloody Doc on the scent in the first place. That hadn't happened and you wouldn't have had to jump."

"Maybe," Buffy said, shrugging a shoulder. "But the jump wasn't the problem."

"For you, maybe."

"It wasn't. Dying is easy. It's everything else that's complicated." She paused, licked her lips. "So...are we okay? I want to be okay with you."

The corners of his mouth twitched. A mouth she so shouldn't be looking at, given that she was asking for space. Essentially walking back everything that had happened the other night, knowing full well it wasn't what he wanted. Remembering the frustration in his eyes, in his body, as he'd stalked toward her in song. Then later, when he'd tried to storm off and she'd rushed out to stop him, because remaining in that room with the people who loved her, feeling the weight of their

useless regret might have choked what little life she'd managed to recover right on out.

"That's what I was gettin' at," Spike said. "Remember everythin' I said that night. 'Bout bein' there for her. And about you never loving me. Got it in my head maybe I was wrong on that score. You comin' around, treatin' me like a man and not...what I am. Bloke thinks things, yeah?"

Buffy swallowed. She'd thought of it often, too. Especially at night, surrounded by nothing but the sounds of others sleeping and her own tumultuous thoughts. Picturing the lid of her coffin and the weight of the dirt on top, remembering that awful sensation of waking up and not knowing where she was, then knowing *exactly* where she was. And how charged she'd felt when she'd seen Spike, how calm and okay it had been until her friends had exploded into the house with their bright and their loud and their imploring eyes and their wanting her so badly to be okay without stopping to question just how in the world she *could* be okay after what she'd been through.

There had been numerous moments like that, where being around them would make her see the inside of her coffin, while being with Spike reminded her of the stretch before it. No expectation, no dressing up, no putting on a mask and pretending. How she'd thought it might be a vampire thing—hoped it was, in fact—and had taken that hope along with her confused Spike-shaped feelings with her to meet Angel.

And how Angel had brought the loud with him. How he hadn't known how to talk to her, what to say or not say. How he'd marveled the way Spike had but also *not* the way Spike had, because there was so much weight in the way he looked at her. How she'd wanted to tell him about Heaven the way she'd told Spike, but then remembered that she'd sent Angel to Hell and there was no way he could understand. How it had struck her then, in ways it never had before her death, just how far apart they were, and how that sense of disconnect with him had depressed her almost more than anything else.

It meant the girl who had loved him, waited and hoped that he would return to her life just as easily as he'd walked out of it, had stayed six feet under.

It also meant that the quiet wasn't a vampire thing at all.

It was a Spike thing.

Telling Spike she wasn't sure that she couldn't love him now was probably a bad idea, because he'd chase it like a bloodhound. The way he would have chased her like a bloodhound about kissing him if she hadn't, well, faced the music.

But maybe she didn't need to tell him that.

"So we're good?" she asked instead. "You didn't...really tell me."

Again, Spike's lips twitched. "We're good."

"And spending time with you these last—"

He held up a hand. "Bugger what I sang. If it helps you... Anything, love."

And then she did want to kiss him. She wanted to kiss him, and she wanted to cry. She wanted to throw herself in his arms and get more of that hug, just feel him, strong and holding her up, not asking for anything. Wanting, yes, but not asking. How long he would have let her go along with it had Sweet not forced the truth out of him was beyond her. Maybe forever. It had been, after all, the first time he'd told her how he felt since she returned.

Not that she'd needed to be told. The way he looked at her was enough.

At least for the moment, though, the chasm that his forced honesty had caused seemed crossable if not mended. She'd built a little bridge tonight. It was shaky, missing planks, and almost sure to bow under pressure, but maybe she could build onto it over the coming days. Make it what it had been.

And when it was finished, who knew what would be on the other side?

## WISH YOU WERE HERE

IT WAS A NEAT DIVIDE. IN ONE SECOND, HE'D HAD THIS IDENTITY he'd made for himself. Randy the Soulful Vampire—the noble good guy, the bloke who was hopelessly besotted with Joan the Superhero and hoped he might be lucky enough to steal a snog before the night was over. The next, he was William the Bloody again—Spike—trading blows with vamps, watching some low-level lackey smash his foot into the Slayer's gut.

“Buffy! Buff—”

The bloke he was fighting launched another fist, cutting him off, and bugger it, he needed to deal with this now. Buffy had been knocked for a six and seemed too lost within herself, with the memories that hurt, to come back out. That bloody terrified him. Hell, there wasn't much about her that didn't terrify him these days. The Slayer in her element was a sight to behold, like a living sonnet, moving to a rhythm of pure otherworldly grace.

This Buffy had never been further from her element. The way she moved nowadays practically begged for death.

Not on his bloody watch.

Spike seized two vamps by the scruff and smashed them together so they landed at a heap at his feet. “From dust,” he muttered, reaching

into his pocket and seizing a stake. Some fancy wrist action and the vamp at his right went up in an explosion of fine powder. "To dust." He turned and favored the other one with the same treatment.

Now, to see to the Slayer.

"You're an odd duck, Mr. Spike," came a voice from behind him. "Fighting your own kind, palling around with a slayer..."

Bugger this. Spike rolled his eyes and turned to look the bloke directly.

"And whoa, that suit! *Chutzpah* must be your middle name." The oversized shark let loose a weak laugh. "Uh, hey, look, um...about our little debt problem, it's okay. I don't need the kittens."

This town had taken a seriously bloody decline in its monster bosses. Used to be the big muscle hired on lackeys just to keep a step ahead of the Slayer, not to avoid getting into a decent brawl themselves. The shark had been all eager to bite when he had his staff on hand—now he seemed seconds away from pissing himself, or whatever it was sharks did when they caught sight of a true predator.

As far as Big Bads went, Spike had been the last of the greats.

*The last. Had been.* Bugger. He was even muzzled in his own bloody head, which he shook when he made to snatch the demon by the front of his ugly suit. "You'll get paid," he snarled into the beast's gaping maw of a mouth. "I'm no welsher."

Another nervous laugh. "Right, sure," the shark replied shakily, relaxing when Spike let him go. "You're good for it. I know that. I'm just going to, uh...yeah." He cleared his throat—did the bloody thing even have a throat?—and, blessedly, made tracks. Or whatever it was fish-folk made on dry land.

The mini crime-boss looked a lot smaller without his fang crew. Likely couldn't throw a bloody punch, all fin-fisted and all. But without the knowledge behind the instincts, and dressed up like a prat, Spike reckoned he might have taken a blow or two if the sod had gotten lucky. That would have been a kick had Red's mojo not chosen the right time to stop working.

Not that he and his trusty ally, Joan, hadn't had the situation covered. Even with a clean slate, they'd known how to move together. Still, if it had gotten out that he'd had any trouble with a lot of would-

be debt-collectors, he doubted he'd be able to look any of his poker mates in the face again.

Spike heaved a sigh and trudged over to Buffy. "You all right?" he asked, extending a hand.

For a moment she didn't move at all, just lay there blinking. Then she seemed to register his presence, stirred enough that their eyes met and he saw recognition flare inside.

"Most of me says yes," Buffy said, taking his hand and letting him pull her to her feet. Small bloody graces. He wasn't sure whether to expect a hug or a handshake or a stake to the heart from her these days. "The rest of me is...confused. And head-spinny."

She sighed and brushed herself off. He didn't miss the way her hands shook.

"Willow did this," Buffy muttered, and now it wasn't just her hands that were shaking. The tremor in her voice was dangerously close to a crack. "She...she just can't help herself, can she?"

Spike swallowed. He had thoughts on the witch, a whole host of them, but didn't reckon they'd be welcome or particularly helpful at the moment. "Seems not," he said, keeping his voice carefully neutral. "Not missin' any chunks, are you? It's all there?"

The look on her face was answer enough, but she nodded anyway. "Yeah. It's all... All of it." A beat, then her eyes took on a shine and the scent of tears hit the air.

Fuck, but he hated it when she cried.

"Twice now," she said in a hoarse whisper. "Twice when I've been... God, how sad is that?" Buffy sniffed and dragged a hand under her eyes. "She made me happy by making me forget who I am. And I don't even get to keep it."

Spike seized her by the shoulders, steadying her so she had no choice but to meet his gaze. "We'll get it back for you, yeah? You and me. We'll get it back."

She favored him with that dry Buffy look he both loved and loathed. Before her, he'd never met a woman so adept at cutting him down to size—not even those haughty debutantes from back in his William days. That bitch Cecily had nothing on the Slayer when she had a piece to speak, or worse, was in a temper.

"We'll get back my amnesia? Thanks, Spike, but insofar as fixes go, that one kinda sucks."

"Not the bloody amnesia, you daft twig, the happiness. We can do that."

Buffy inhaled deeply, her eyes going distant and her lower lip wobbling. "How?" she asked, and this time her voice did break. "Everything's wrong. All of it. Giles is leaving. Apparently he thinks that now is a good time for me to stand on my own when I can barely get through the day. When I'm afraid to go to sleep because I'm terrified of dreaming about being inside that coffin—and everything that came with it. The money. The house. Dawn. I was *finished*, Spike. I was *finished* and now I can't breathe."

The familiar pulse of rage edged along his skin, an itch he was desperate to unleash. Throw a punch into a mailbox, find a convenient demon to bloody up, go and scream at Willow until his lungs, dead and useless as they were, started to hurt. The indignity of the past few weeks reared up again, that sense of helplessness and betrayal at realizing the people he'd fought alongside all summer had kept him out of the loop where their grand plans were concerned. Then, on the other side, the utter amazement that was having Buffy back in his life. How he'd felt the moment he'd realized the vision walking down the stairs wasn't the bot, that the woman he loved was standing mere feet away from him when she should be six feet under.

Spike wasn't unaccustomed to contradictory feelings—he was a vampire, after all. But never had he thought it possible to be both outraged and jubilant over the same thing.

"Like I said the other night—reckon it takes livin'. Not something that happens all at once." It had sounded good then and it sounded good now. Like something a human might say. Might be he could do this helpful chum thing after all. If nothing else, it was loads better than anything that they'd had before.

Except that kiss the other night... That had felt like the start of something. She hadn't just snogged him—she'd tried to consume him. Everything about it had set him on fire from the inside, but he hadn't minded the burn at all. Feeling her against him, her heat, her need, had been enough to make a regular bloke combust.



It was bloody hard not thinking about it when she was near. Harder still to keep his gaze from wandering to her lips, or his mind from spinning off and wondering what might happen if he moved just a little closer. If he touched her just right or managed to say the right thing. That part of him, the part he'd spent the last three months trying to smother under the philosophy of *What Would Buffy Do*, remained wild and untamed. Selfish, too, because he'd meant everything he'd told her during his musical number. That being near her like this was its own torture, but that shouldn't matter because *What Would Buffy Do* had become *What Does Buffy Need*, and what she needed was for him to not crowd her. Not demand, not be in love with her.

If only there was a way to stop that part.

But there wasn't. If there were, he'd have found it by now. Haunted by her as he'd been all last year, and especially over that horrible span of days when she hadn't been here at all. No liquor strong enough to drown out his pain and drive to lose himself in the nearest willing woman. Everything had lost meaning except the fight.

"And like *I* said last night," Buffy intoned, her voice flat, "living is the hard part."

"I know."

"How can you know? You're dead."

Spike huffed. "Yeah, but I wasn't always, was I? Was a man once—bloody miserable one at that. Living was more torture than anything Dru or your ex-honey ever put me through. All pain all the bloody time."

She frowned and met his eyes. "It was?"

"Had a sickly mum. Every day had to watch her die just a little more." He swallowed, cursing himself for going there but also unable to stop it. What seemed like a lifetime ago, he'd told the Slayer bits of his past—this, that, and the other—but he'd managed to keep from going into too much detail regarding life before Drusilla. "Plus I was right pathetic. Sniveling after some high and mighty bint who thought she was better than me."

Buffy arched an eyebrow, some of the fog in her eyes fading. "Is that what I am? A high and mighty...whatever that means?"

“Only on your good days, Slayer,” he replied, offering a grin. “We’ll get you back to them, yeah?”

The look she gave him was almost worth the whole sorry story—everything he’d withheld that night at the Bronze, or from anyone at any given time. How he’d wasted hours of his life trying to find the right pair of rhyming words, how he’d been so head over for bleeding Cecily that he’d made a fool of himself just on the chance she might fancy him back, how he’d gone to his mum with what he’d believed was the cure for her disease and ended up losing her in ways that still hurt to think about. Buffy believing in him, even just a little, even for a second, was worth all the pride in the world.

If he could make good on half of what he’d said, maybe that snog the other night wouldn’t be the end of whatever they had. He needed to show her he could be what she needed. That he could be a man.

“So,” he said a moment later, “back to the shop, then? See what your mates are up to?”

The warmth in her gaze blinked out immediately. “No. I...I think between Willow and Giles, if I go in there, I might just start screaming and never stop.” She shifted her weight between her feet. “Could... Is it okay if I chill at your place for a while?”

Fuck, he loved her. “Course, pet.”

“And it’s... With what we talked about last night—”

Spike brought his hands up. “Won’t touch you. Can’t promise not to look, but I won’t touch.”

The smile she gave him was small. It was also what was going to make every excruciating second with her worth it. “Thank you.”

He nodded, tried for a smile back, then fell into step beside her when she started down the street. Close but not too close, yet somehow closer than he reckoned he’d ever been.



EVEN AS OFTEN AS she’d been around as of late, Spike didn’t think he’d ever get accustomed to the sight of Buffy in his crypt. At least like this—wandering around, looking at things in the confined space, her expression pensive rather than brassed. She’d only ever come here

before for help, information, or when she'd needed something to punch and patrol hadn't scratched the itch. His crypt wasn't a place a person went to be entertained. Well, unless they fancied catching a show on one of the telly's three fuzzy channels.

Though Buffy wasn't asking him to entertain her. She wasn't asking much of anything, except the thing they'd talked about last night.

"You don't have a lot to do here, do you?" she asked as he climbed up from the lower level. First order of business upon returning had been to ditch the awful suit. Now he was himself again and damn happy for it. If Red decided to get creative with the mind mojo again, at least he wasn't in any danger of giving the Watcher a sodding hug.

"Sorry. Wasn't expecting company."

"So...what *do* you do here?" Buffy turned to him, her arms folded.

Spike arched an eyebrow. "You want the honest answer, pet?"

He couldn't keep from grinning when her cheeks went rosy. Getting the Slayer to blush was one of his favorite new hobbies. Especially like this—without the eye-roll or the quip or the punch to the nose. This Buffy didn't mind being soft with him. Didn't mind being *Buffy*.

"No answers rated above PG-13," she replied with a somewhat strained smile.

"You're no fun." He snickered and edged a step toward her. "Right then. I read. Watch the telly. Wait around for the Bit to go missing so I can play the hero."

"It is of the regular."

"And that's about the full of it, pet, if you're sticking to your rating system. Go out for a spot of violence when I can, play cards with the boys, make sure your chums haven't gotten themselves into a tight spot." He paused. "At least that's how it was when..."

Buffy nodded, studying the stone floor, her expression unreadable. She was like that more often than not these days, which was right aggravating, considering he used to know exactly how she was feeling just by looking at her. But that was the punchline, wasn't it? The Slayer wasn't feeling much of anything where it counted.

*This isn't real, but I just wanna feel.*

Bugger. He should have known whatever they might have had was doomed the second she'd sung that.

"You stayed and helped all summer." It wasn't a question.

"I did."

"For her."

"For you." A pause. "And her. Nibbles is an extension of you, isn't she?"

So much so it'd hurt to look at her those long hundred and forty-seven days. It'd hurt being near her because she was a reminder of his failure, but it also hurt not being near her because if he left her alone, something worse could happen. It had hurt watching her mourn and it had hurt hiding his own grief, when he could. Everything about being around Dawn had hurt this summer.

Buffy nodded again. "You... Back there, when you were Randy, you said you didn't want to bite me."

"Don't need to rub it in that I'm toothless."

"But...isn't that weird? I mean, we were all blank slate-y and you didn't want to bite me?"

Spike swallowed, not sure exactly what she was asking. The events seemed pretty straightforward to him and further confirmed just how fucking lost he was. Even stripped of his bloody identity, left to nothing but instinct and in a room full of people with pulsing jugulars and thumping hearts, it hadn't occurred to him that he could be anything other than human. The hunger hadn't been there, perhaps thanks to the rather large helping of pig's blood he'd downed before his midday outing. No, all he'd thought about was how his old man had given him a poncy name and was apparently robbing the bloody cradle, and wondering just how friendly of terms he and Joan had been on before.

"Isn't it weird?" Buffy pressed, apparently determined to get him to cough up whatever was left of his pride.

Bugger. He drew in a deep breath and looked at her head-on. "Maybe. Once."

"Once, meaning..."

"What do you wanna hear? That I'm muzzled? Broken? That you got me so domesticated that a witch can strip away everything I am, all

I know, and even with all these animal urges all I can think about is—” But he cut himself off there, thankfully, because he didn’t much fancy sticking his foot in it. Buffy knew the score, knew how he felt, and had drawn a rather straight line the night before. He wasn’t about to muck it up by going into detail.

Buffy, though, was either bound and determined to test him or too curious for her own good. Could be a bit of both. “So...not even a little. Room full of tasty humans and your go-to is Giles is your dad and the rest of us are...what?”

“I don’t know what to tell you. Doesn’t make too much sense to me, either.”

“Well, is it normal, do you think?”

“Normal to not want to bite the lot of you?”

“No, I mean...any vampire in that situation, mind-wiped and all...” She looked so adorably confused, which somewhat helped curb his ire. Then she sighed, her shoulders dropping. “Forget it. I don’t even know what I’m asking.”

Bugger.

“I think what it means, love, is you take away everything I know about myself and even then all I can see is you.” Spike waited as she looked up, determined not to blink or look away, to hold her gaze as she searched his own. “Know you don’t wanna hear it, but that’s the most I can figure. Only thing that makes sense to me.”

Nothing for a moment. A very heavy nothing—the sort of nothing that made the air seem to pulse.

“It doesn’t make sense to me.” Her voice was barely above a whisper. Had he been anything but a vampire, he would have missed it. “You stopped making sense to me sometime last year.”

“Seems about right. It’s when I stopped making sense to myself.” That was partially true—the full truth, of course, was that once he’d realized the obvious, everything in his world had shifted and he’d realized he’d been looking at the painting wrong the whole bloody time. Trying to suss out what Dru meant by being covered in the Slayer, taking it from the context that he knew and applying it to the one only she was loony enough to see.

Then everything had made sense—a terrible sort of sense. His

understanding of himself had taken a hit, but not his understanding of what had happened to him. How he'd gone from the Big Bad, Slayer of Slayers to somehow being unable to turn his back on Buffy Summers without giving in to the temptation to glance over his shoulder.

But Spike wasn't sure what she wanted to hear—and at the same time somewhat convinced he was *all* too sure what she wanted to hear. Something about how it had been a fluke or a cosmic joke. Because life would be simpler for Buffy if she could deny that he loved her. If she could convince herself it was anything other than what it was, since accepting that it was love meant reevaluating everything she'd thought she'd known and that was no bloody picnic.

And that was speaking from experience—Spike had had months to get used to the idea that he was a traitor to his kind, that everything he knew about himself was topsy-turvy. Buffy hadn't had months—or she'd been holed up in her belief that it couldn't be real until close to the end, had only started seeing things for the way they were after Glory had tried to turn him into a pin-cushion. Then, between the race to the end of the world and her resurrection, she'd had larger mysteries to unravel.

Still, Spike didn't know whether to be relieved or frustrated when she didn't push the subject further. Ask him why he'd thought he'd had a soul, why once he'd known he was a vampire he'd looked within himself and found nothing of the violence and rage his kind thrived upon. Ask him so she could ask herself, move by inches into the understanding that he and Angel, as much as they hated each other, had made the same choice, only Spike had done so because he'd wanted to, whereas Angel had been guilted into it.

They both had bloody pasts they couldn't make up for and they both had changed. The *why* simply didn't matter.

"Giles is gone," Buffy said instead, moving deeper into the crypt. He watched as she found and sank into the sofa. "Or he will be. He's leaving."

"Yeah, you mentioned that." Though Spike didn't understand it at all—the Watcher had taken off because the Slayer was dead. Slayer wasn't dead anymore and needed more help than he wagered she ever

had. Made fuck all sense for Rupert to decide to ship back to merry old England.

Then, realizing she'd brought it up because she wanted to talk about it, Spike swallowed and refocused. "Any reason why?"

Buffy didn't say anything at first, just stared off in that absent, haunted way of hers for a long stretch. So long that he wondered if she was still there behind her eyes or not—if he bent down to look at her properly, would he see her at all.

"I need to stand on my own," she said in a dull monotone. "Learn how to be strong without relying on him."

Spike blinked. "Sorry, what?"

"I know. Yet another thing that makes no sense to me. Buffy's sense-o-meter must be broken."

"Bugger sense, pet, that's downright barmy. What the bleeding hell is he thinking?"

"I was hoping you'd know." Her voice cracked and the scent of tears once again filled his nostrils. And Spike wanted to rage, wanted to storm off to the airport or the Mother Country itself so he could put the sodding chip to the test, thrash Rupert good and thorough and demand how he could be so bloody selfish when the girl needed him. "He seemed so certain," Buffy continued. "Said it was better this way. For me. Stand on my own, learn how to be a grown-up. And I don't know how. I can't breathe, Spike."

And then she crumpled, the strongest warrior he'd ever known, disintegrating within herself into a tangled mess of sobs.

"Fuck." He was at her side the next minute, pulling her against him like he had the night before. Only not like the night before, because having her in his arms then, brilliant as it had been, hadn't felt natural. Natural to want her there, to feel her there, but not to act on it. The entire previous year had been him doing his bloody best to keep from acting on those urges.

Though similar, this was different. It felt normal and he knew it better. Caring for the woman he loved while the world went to pieces around her—this he'd been doing all his sorry existence, and would continue to do until the day he tasted dust.

"I can't breathe," she said again, this time into his shirt. "How can I be strong when I can't breathe?"

"Strong's not somethin' you put on, pet. Strong's what got you to this moment here and what'll get you to the next one. It's what you are." He paused, wanting to bury his face in her hair and inhale so deeply he drew her inside him—somewhere he knew he could keep her safe. But that wasn't his job or his right, and it wasn't something Buffy would want, anyway. Even now, broken and piecing herself together, she didn't know how to lean on others.

Or maybe that wasn't it. Maybe it was the others—her friends, her sister, and that daft Watcher of hers—who didn't know how to do the heavy lifting. Didn't know how to be the people relied upon instead of the ones doing the relying. She'd carried them so long they'd forgotten how to walk themselves.

"I don't feel strong." Buffy pulled back and looked at him, her eyes shining in the weak crypt light. "I've never felt weaker."

He swallowed. "Don't feel much like a vampire these days. Doesn't change the fact that I am."

"I wish you weren't."

Spike winced—couldn't help it.

"I'm sorry, that came out wrong."

"Came out honest, I expect."

"It's just... It would make things easier for me. If you weren't."

Yeah, right. Like he didn't know that was the problem. Spike blew out a breath, forcing every muscle in his body to behave, keep from pushing her away or snarling his pain and outrage. That sting—so familiar yet no less terrible because of it—of understanding that because of what he *wasn't*, he would always come up lacking. That sense of never being enough for the people who mattered most to him, that nothing he did could make up for his shortcomings.

There was a pause, a long one during which Buffy seemed to come out of herself, realize she was practically in his lap, that she had her hands all over him. And just like that, she was gone, on her feet again. Guard up. Back to business as usual.

Maybe it was better, the line she'd drawn last night. Spike wasn't sure he had it in him to go through this dance again. The *during* would



be good but the *after* would be what did him in. All the suffering Dru had heaped upon him would pale in comparison. He could survive losing Dru—had, point of fact. He wasn't sure he could survive losing Buffy again, especially like this.

"I should...go," Buffy said, skittish now, her walls up. "The longer I put it off, the more..."

"Yeah."

"And Dawn—"

"I know. Go on."

But she didn't. She stood there, looking so lost he couldn't be angry with her. He couldn't be anything but hers.

"Spike..." Buffy drew her lower lip between her teeth, twisted her hands. "I..." A beat. "Thank you."

She didn't stick around long enough for him to ask what she was thanking him for, which was also probably for the best.

## US AND THEM

BUFFY REGRETTED LEAVING SPIKE'S CRYPT ALMOST FROM THE moment she stepped outside, and not just because it meant going home. She was fairly certain she'd done that thing where she opened her mouth to make room for her foot and hurt his feelings. Something that, in the past, wouldn't have blipped on her radar. But this wasn't the past—it was a strange new world, one where her words haunted her all the way to her front door.

The truth was, though, that her life would be a thousand times easier if Spike were human. If the feelings she had to sort through where he was concerned didn't have the added *vampire* complication. That much had been easy to remember, to keep front and center, when he'd been doing stupid things like chaining her up in order to profess his undying love and making robot sex-toys in her likeness. When he did things like let a hellgod torture the stuffing out of him rather than give up her sister, when he promised her to watch said sister as long as the world turned and actually *did* just that... Those were not the actions of a vampire. At least not a soulless one.

*I must be a noble vampire. A good guy. On a mission of redemption. I help the hopeless. I'm a vampire with a soul.*

All those things had just tumbled off his lips like it was a given. Not

like they'd all woken up in a magic shop and had gotten the score wrong where *Randy* was concerned.

It made the desire to melt into Spike and let him take the world away even harder to ignore, never mind all the things she'd told him the previous night.

Giles was leaving her for her own good, despite the fact that he'd just learned she'd been in Heaven. Dawn barely looked at her anymore. Xander was going to be a grownup and get married. Willow thought she could magic away everyone's problems. Buffy could barely stand to be in the same room as Angel, the great love of her life. And Spike, stripped of his memories and left only to instinct, had still been on her side.

This world could take a hike.

A thought which cemented as she climbed the front porch steps to find Tara standing there with a box full of her belongings, looking as lost and miserable as Buffy felt.

Buffy crossed her arms, leaning against one of the front porch pillars. "What's going on?"

Tara, who had been staring at the open front door, pulled her gaze away and met Buffy's. "We had a deal. Willow and me. We had a *deal*. No magic for a week." She paused, her lower lip trembling, but she didn't cry. "A week. She couldn't even go a week, Buffy."

"She was trying to help," Buffy replied in a small voice. "I'm guessing that was the point of the funny amnesia, right? Get me to forget about Heaven?"

"And me. She's been playing with my memories, too. Took away the memory of a fight and now this..." Tara sniffed, shaking her head. "I love her, Buffy, I do. And...I love you and Dawn and this life. I love it all so much, but..."

There was a lot riding on that *but*. A lot that a stronger, more-together Buffy might have been able to chase down. But for a Buffy whose every breath was a struggle, summoning anything more than a sympathetic nod took herculean effort. The weight of anyone else's pain right now might cripple her.

People messed up. People broke up. People let you down. It was the way of things. That Willow couldn't even implode her own rela-

tionship without dragging Buffy into the mix just seemed par for the course.

Tomorrow she'd try the whole compassionate friend thing. That would give her a whole sleep to put behind her the indignity of being punished for not being overjoyed that she'd been ripped out of paradise. Because that was what was expected of Buffy. Snap, crackle, and ready to slay. Ready to be the hero. Ready to be the definition of *okay* with everything that had happened. Everything she'd lost.

"Buffy."

Buffy looked up, found Tara still standing there, still staring at her.

"Whatever you're going through, I know it's because of us, and I *am* sorry about that."

Yeah, everyone was. Not exactly headline news there. Buffy felt, again, the stirrings of the angry speech she'd been prepared to make at the Magic Box before the lights had gone out—but just the stirrings. The rest of the outburst remained tucked away. Tara wasn't the one who needed to hear it, anyway.

"I know you are," she said instead. "I know you all are."

"But knowing doesn't make it better."

No sense lying. "No, it doesn't. I'm not sure there's anything that does." Buffy was still for a moment, staring at a spot on the ground. Then she forced herself to meet Tara's eyes, and was glad—relieved—when that was the end of it.

"Tell Dawnie I love her," Tara said, then she was moving, box in arms, down the steps and toward the waiting vehicle in the driveway.

And for a moment, Buffy envied her so much she thought she might cry. That Tara had the ability, the agency, to make that sort of decision. That she could pack up and leave the bad behind, no matter how much it hurt, with nothing but the hope that there was a path back to normal, or at least something better than where she'd landed. The courage to leave the people she loved—to draw those boundaries and stick to them, when it seemed a stiff breeze was all it would take to knock Buffy off her feet these days.

Buffy watched the car back out, then forced herself back to the present.

There were things to do inside—people to take care of. Her sister

would be hurting right now. Hurting a lot, actually, and this was the sort of thing that required the love and guidance of a parental figure. Trouble was Buffy was the only one around and she was so far removed from the feelings that would provide the script she needed to follow, she was almost certain trying to talk to Dawn would make things worse. Then there was Willow, who had to be falling apart. Whose life had just been up-ended, and boy howdy, did Buffy ever know what that was like.

But thinking about Willow just brought it all back. The hell that was being here, made worse by the fact that she'd felt like someone else tonight and, for a few blissful hours, had been happy.

Buffy couldn't go there. Not right now. Maybe tomorrow she'd be up to assume the role of actual functioning adult.

For now, all she wanted was sleep.



IT *WOULD* BE EASIER if Spike weren't a vampire.

The damn thought wouldn't go away. It was the first thing that struck her when she opened her eyes that morning. Like it had been sitting there at the edge of her subconscious, waiting for recognition, for analysis, for her to dive into the mental push and pull that was trying to make sense of last night. And like any good worry, it didn't scuttle off when she wanted it to, rather tailed her like a dog throughout the day, begging for attention and never satisfied with what it received.

If Spike weren't a vampire, then the feelings that had been bubbling ever since he'd taken her hand that first night and told her how long she'd been gone wouldn't wig her out so much. The fact that he kept her head quiet, that he just let her be, would be easier to accept as the gift it was rather than feeling like there was something wrong with her. The Buffy who had jumped off that tower hadn't made a habit of hanging around the local chipped menace and she certainly hadn't ever entertained the thought of kissing him beyond the occasional dirty fantasy. And even those, she'd managed to ignore or explain away so they had never seemed inappropriate.

But everything about Spike was inappropriate. Every part of him, from the endlessly annoying to the spookily attentive, no matter how being around him made her feel. This line of thinking felt right, felt like the thoughts Buffy Summers should have about the resident undead. But it also felt false, like she was reciting something she'd memorized long ago without any feeling. Like the Pledge of Allegiance, something she'd been saying since before she knew what half the words in the damn thing meant. Those thoughts were there because they were supposed to be, not because she put any stock in them.

And that terrified her more than anything because if she didn't believe those things, was she even Buffy? Buffy Summers had definitely believed those things. Sure, Spike had muddled things up for her toward the end, what with his being all self-sacrificial and willing to put himself through what could only be called hellish torture to spare her pain. That had confused her, and maybe if the world hadn't been spinning on its way to annihilation, she would have taken more time to figure out how to feel about it.

Then there was what had come after. Spike had stayed with her sister to fulfill his promise to a dead woman. He'd fought alongside people who didn't care for him and were not shy about letting him know. He'd done all of that and more that she knew Dawn wasn't telling her because he loved her. He hadn't, say, gone off to Tibet like some other vampires who would remain nameless. Some other vampires who had seemed more confused about seeing her in the flesh again than elated, like they were trying to work out some complex math problem and she was the train racing down the tracks at eighty miles per hour.

All of this would be easier to swallow if Spike were human. But he wasn't.

He was just...Spike.

And she owed him an apology.

The time to think these thoughts, though, was not while she was on patrol. Thinking thinky thoughts on patrol was how a mugger managed to catch her off guard and knock the wind out of her. Buffy

doubled over, gasping as the couple she'd just rescued collected their things and made a break for the mouth of the alley.

"Good old-fashioned mugging," she muttered, straightening in time to dodge the fist that came swinging toward her head, then leveraged a kick that sent her attacker soaring into the wall of the building at his back. "Right. The punches can still hurt, just not as much."

The other mugger rushed at her, but this time she was ready—ready and tending to an ego she'd managed to get all bruised. Buffy seized the guy by the scruff of his jacket, whirled, and then he was airborne too, landing haphazardly on a pile of garbage.

Well, that seemed fitting.

The first mugger had managed to climb to his feet, though he was limping a bit. He looked from her to his friend to her again, his face contorting in a way that would be funny if it weren't so offensive.

"What *are* you, lady?" he demanded.

"Right now? Pissed off. Do you want me to throw you around some more, or would you rather make it out with your dignity?" Buffy spread her arms in welcome. "Your choice."

The mugger stared at her a moment longer—long enough for his friend to gather his bearings. The two exchanged a look, then took off together.

"Yeah, that's what I thought." Buffy winced and rubbed the back of her neck, glad that no one had been around to witness the embarrassment that was getting sucker-punched by a run-of-the-mill guy.

And since patrol in town had been a bust, she supposed she'd done the avoidy thing as long as she could. It was time to face the music and hit the cemeteries. And if she happened across Spike, she might be able to wrestle that apology she owed him for the night before. No matter how true it was, hearing that something he couldn't control was the main thing keeping the woman he loved from going all mushy for him had to hurt.

Whatever else, she did not owe Spike pain. Not now, anyway. Not after all he'd done for her and Dawn.

Not when he was the only one in her life that made it easy to breathe.

Still, Buffy did what she always did when dreading a conversation—bought herself time. After all, Sunnydale had no shortage of cemeteries and she was but an army of one. So she stalled, made the rounds, half-hoping to stumble across a large demon with an ax to grind so she'd have a reason to be too exhausted to think about approaching Spike until tomorrow. Unfortunately, the Hellmouth seemed to be conspiring against her because things were dead out here too. Deader than dead. Super dead.

Or, more likely, Spike had already gone through the normal patrol route himself and cleared away anything that might have put up a decent fight. Stupid vampire.

Buffy released a loud sigh as she finally turned her feet toward the place she'd been avoiding. Maybe it wouldn't be too bad, this apologizing thing. She'd done a decent job of it a couple of nights ago when he'd come to chat about the kiss she'd been desperate to ignore, and managed to navigate them back to a place where things weren't so terribly awkward. For, like, a day.

How was she even supposed to apologize? *Sorry for letting my mouth run away with me? Sorry for telling the truth? Sorry for wanting the impossible?* She wouldn't lie to him—that wasn't fair—but she also needed to make sure he knew she was serious. There were certain blows Spike was rather adept at brushing off. Call him a monster, punch him in the nose, remind him that he was evil—this all seemed to roll off him like water.

But what she'd said last night had been personal in ways nothing else was—a touch beyond the same old song and dance she'd been giving him for the last few years. Whatever abuse she'd lobbed his way before had been at least somewhat deserved, more to keep him in his place than to outright hurt him.

And though she hadn't meant to hurt him last night, she knew she had. That made it worse.

Buffy sighed again, trekking almost blindly toward the crypt in question, still tumbling over her thoughts and trying on words that didn't even begin to feel right. It wasn't until she was close enough to see Spike's front door that the unmistakable sounds of a struggle reached her ears, and then she was running, nearly trembling with relief at the distraction.



There were four of them—two on the lanky side, one downright huge, and one built like a slightly thicker Angel—and they were all circling Spike, whose lip was split. He was in full fang mode, snarling and turning to keep all of them within his sights, his shoulders tight and all of him tense in that way that normally preceded him launching into motion.

“What?” Buffy asked as she neared. “Who’d you piss off this time?”

That earned the attention of the mountain-built vamp. He set his yellow eyes on her, his lips curling around his fangs which, like the rest of him, seemed oversized. “Slayer,” he said, spittle flying from his mouth. “This don’t concern you.”

“And yet, here I am. All concerned.”

“Buffy, I can handle—”

The beefier version of Angel aimed a kick at the back of Spike’s legs that sent him to his knees. And that was it. Talking apparently was off the table and Buffy didn’t really think these guys had much going on conversation-wise, so she pulled her stake out from its hiding place in the waistband of her sweats and leaped into action.

That was all the incentive Spike needed, apparently. Once he saw her in motion, he became a blur of rage and leather. The same kind that told Buffy plainly that he’d been telling the truth—he *could* handle himself just fine. These vamps, like so many who had come before them, underestimated him due to his size. Spike did not take up a lot of space, even if it seemed like he did when one factored in his presence and personality, and those vamps who relied more on intimidation to get out of scrapes were almost always caught off guard when he started to move.

Buffy had never underestimated him like that. She knew all too well what it was like to be seen as non-threatening because of how she looked. It was one of the reasons she figured the fights with Spike had always been close to draws, if not draws outright. He didn’t assume anything when it came to her. He never had.

The vamp who had knocked him down was the first to dust. The two lanky flunkies and the mountain-sized vamp had all focused on her, either assuming their friend could handle himself or uncaring if he

couldn't. Buffy made quick work of the two regular-shaped vamps before turning her attention to the big guy.

There had been times since Spike had been chipped, when he'd been fighting with her instead of just fighting her, that between choreography and intent, they had struck perfect harmony. Times when she could see the moves he made before he made them and knew, simply by virtue of knowing him, that Spike felt the same. As though they had transcended verbal communication and operated on a plane of their own. This was one of those times because she knew when he was going to duck and when he was going to throw a punch, when he was going to kick and when he was going to leap. And it was nothing to fall into step with him, execute her part of the dance. No one had ever matched her the way Spike did—not ever.

Not Faith. Not even Angel.

The thought jarred something inside her, knocking her off balance, so when Spike threw a punch that she was supposed to duck—*would* have ducked had she not gotten tripped up by her own stupid brain—he ended up clocking her instead. And just like that, they lost that perfect harmony. All it took was one wrench to throw everything off, and the Initiative chip was nothing but a big ole wrench.

Except, even though Spike flinched and seized his head, the scream that typically accompanied the chip's firing didn't come. Instead, his eyes went wide, and he looked at her, stunned.

That much was enough that the extra-large vamp landed another punch of his own, one that sent Buffy to the ground. And though her jaw throbbed, something else hurt far worse.

*The chip. The chip didn't fire. Oh god, the chip didn't fire.*

Spike roared and leaped onto the vamp's back. "Buffy!"

*The chip didn't fire. It doesn't work anymore. Spike can kill. He can go back to what he was before.*

The pain in her chest escalated, pushing her toward an edge, and she knew she wouldn't survive the fall. Because she'd been here before and it had nearly destroyed her—back when she'd been whole, when she'd been in her prime. But she wasn't whole now and the only thing that kept her from breaking entirely was Spike, and now Spike could be a monster again.

Spike could be the monster he'd been trying to be for two years and she'd have no choice.

*Oh god, I don't want to kill him.*

Buffy blinked eyes that were suddenly swimming in tears. Somehow, though the world had gone sideways, she managed to fight to her feet.

"Little help would be nice here, if you're still offering!" Spike called, clinging to the back of the trollish vampire as it swung its massive form this way and that in an effort to shuck him off. "Anytime you fancy!"

Right. One thing at a time. Buffy lunged at the pair of them, stake in a perfect arc heading for the vamp's chest. Then there was a cloud of dust separating her and Spike, and they were alone again. And nothing was right, everything was wrong, and she knew what she had to do but couldn't.

"Your head," she said instead, begging for time. "It didn't hurt, did it? When you hit me."

He could lie. She wanted him to. She wanted this to not be real.

Spike shook his head. "No."

"How long... How long has the chip not been working?"

"You're asking me? Bugger, far as I knew, it was workin' just fine," he replied, prodding at his brow as though he could feel out the difference. "Maybe got confused in the scuffle. Was aimin' for the vamp, wasn't I?"

"And that matters?"

"Could. Maybe." But the look on his face told her plainly he didn't believe it.

Buffy nodded, blinking hard, funneling every bit of energy into not just losing the tenuous hold she had on her control. If she started crying now, she wouldn't stop. "So...what now?"

Spike tilted his head, frowning.

"If the chip's not working—"

A fist came flying at her and connected before her instincts could catch up. Buffy stumbled back a step but didn't lose her balance, keeping her gaze locked on the vampire, her heart thundering.

Like before, there was no reaction—no flinch, no scream, no pain. Spike rubbed his palm against his brow, his frown deepening, but only

for a second. Then his lips tugged in the other direction, a blaze of pure delight overpowering the confusion in his eyes.

“Well,” he said, grinning broadly now. “Isn’t that neat?”

“Spike—”

“No more chip.” Oblivious to her mounting horror, Spike rocked back on his heels, practically vibrating excitement. “Wondered what would happen if it shorted out one day. Got me my fangs back, Slayer. How about that?”

“Spike...” Buffy somehow managed to swallow around the lump now lodged in her throat. “I need to know now, right now.”

“Know what?”

“Are you going to make me kill you?”

That seemed to steal the wind from his sails, at least, and send him out of the clouds and back to terra firma. The unbridled glee on his face softened into confusion. “What?”

“If the chip doesn’t work, then—”

“What? I’m gonna start munchin’ on townies again?”

“Well—”

“I bloody well told you I’d changed, didn’t I?”

“It’s a lot easier to say you’ve changed when the other option isn’t exactly an option anymore.”

Spike’s eyes hardened at that and he took a step forward. “You really think that? Think if I wanted it bad enough, I wouldn’t have found a way to do you in and all your little chums years ago? Chip kept me from hittin’ things, yeah, but not from bein’ a monster if I fancied. Lots of ways to kill someone, pet. Believe me, I learned from the bloody best.”

He was baiting her, she knew, but she also knew he was right. Angel had done plenty of terrorizing in Sunnydale that had nothing to do with killing. And there was the list—the one she and Giles had made shortly after Spike had first come to them with news that he’d been muzzled. The one detailing the many ways a vampire could kill without snapping fangs or breaking necks. Once it had become clear that Spike wasn’t going to uproot from Sunnydale anytime soon, and that, despite the vampire’s protestations, he *would* be a fixture in their lives, Giles

had insisted on reviewing the possible dangers of getting in the habit of opening the door for him.

"He could poison us, set my flat on fire, cut the brake lines to my car," Giles had said. "If nothing else, he could certainly hire out the Order of Taraka again. Angel said that once Spike sets his sights on something, he doesn't stop until everything in his path is dead. And being that Angel is, err, *was* largely responsible for developing Spike into the killer he is today, we have to exercise every caution."

But Spike hadn't done any of those things or any of the other possibilities that made it on the list. The vilest things he'd done since getting the chip had revolved around the chip's removal. And even those attempts had stopped sometime the previous year.

The anger in Spike's eyes grew fainter the longer she held her tongue. After a moment, it had bled entirely into desperation. "Buffy," he said, taking another step closer. "You really think I'd hurt you now? Think I have that in me?"

"I know you have it in you," she replied. "That's something I can't ever, ever forget." A pause. "But I don't think you want to. *Please* don't want to, Spike."

Before he could respond, she threw herself against him, burrowing into his arms and putting her throat right under his mouth. She knew he could hear how hard her heart was pounding because she thought her ribcage might crack. *If my heart could beat, it would break my chest*, he'd sung, and she felt it. That clawing terror, the near-certainty that she might suffocate at any second, even though she was above water and there was plenty of air.

"Please don't make me kill you," she whispered against his chest. "I don't want to have to kill you."

There was a second's hesitation, then he wrapped his arms around her as he had the other night. "Won't," he murmured. "I promise, Buffy, I won't."

Buffy nodded, unable to do anything else, knowing he meant what he said but terrified all the same.

People broke their promises every day, didn't they? People with souls and consciences, and not always by intention. There was so much that could go wrong with an unharnessed Spike in her town—so much

that was begging for trouble. If any of her friends knew the chip was kaput, they would pretty much demand his head.

“We can’t tell them.”

“What’s that?”

“The others. None of them can know the chip’s not working.”

Spike released a trembling breath, nodded. “All right, pet. It’ll be our little secret.”

Buffy disentangled herself from his arms and almost immediately wished she hadn’t. The closer she was to him, the easier the world seemed. But that was an illusion, a trick of the light, and she couldn’t fall into it. Especially now that the serial killer had been officially let out of prison.

That was one lesson she didn’t ever want to have to relearn.

## THE THIN ICE

TRUSTING SPIKE WHEN HE SAID HE WOULDN'T HURT ANYONE WAS A lot easier when she was standing right there beside him. When she could see his eyes, read the earnestness there, hear the promise in his voice. Spike wouldn't do anything to hurt her, he'd said, and he'd meant it. She knew he'd meant it, but intentions were not a guarantee, and Spike was nothing if not volatile on a good day. Leaving him alone when she knew he could hurt people was perhaps one of the most irresponsible things she could have done, but the alternative was unthinkable.

And hell, it wasn't like she had a watcher around to take orders from. Giles couldn't very well scold her from an ocean away. This was what he'd wanted, right? For Buffy to make her own choices, be her own person, live with the consequences of her grown-up mistakes. Well, that was what she was doing, and Buffy the Adult had made the possibly cataclysmic mistake of letting one of the world's most dangerous vampires walk away freely with nothing more than a promise that he'd remain on the wagon.

A bitter, twisted voice in her head whispered that maybe it would be better if Spike *did* slip up, just so she could rub it in Giles's face how wrong leaving her had been.

*See what happens when you're not around? Is this what you had in mind?*

The thought surprised her for how vicious it was and how much a part of her meant it.

Buffy sighed as she trudged over the threshold to her home, the now-familiar weight of the face she was supposed to wear damn near pulling her to the ground. She gave a cursory look around, saw that Dawn wasn't camped in front of the television or doing her homework in the dining room, which meant she was likely channeling her inner mooney teenager and holed up in her room.

Perhaps she *should* tell someone about Spike's chip—someone who was thinking a little more clearly than herself at the moment. Once upon a time, this would have been the sort of thing Buffy would have discussed with Willow. It seemed best friend-adjacent. And yeah, she and Willow hadn't exactly been on friendly terms since the whole resurrection thing, but maybe now was as good a time as any to try to fix that. Find her way back to normal, as it were.

With that in mind, Buffy trudged up the stairs and made a left. "Willow?" She edged into the room that had once been her mother's, not surprised to her friend Willow reclining against the headboard, looking about as blah as Buffy felt.

Some of the steel in her went soft at that. It had been a long time since Buffy had mourned a relationship, but she remembered the stages well. And whatever else, even with a head full of dark, unforgiving thoughts, she didn't wish this sort of pain on anyone.

"Hey," Buffy said, forcing a smile when Willow's gaze met hers. "How are you doing?"

Willow straightened a bit. "Oh, well. Okay."

"Yeah?" She moved closer, claimed a seat on the bed.

"Yeah," her friend replied. "Not parades and cotton candy, but...okay."

That was probably the most Buffy could hope for, so she decided to press on. "There's something...that happened tonight and I think maybe you should know about it."

The transition from depressed witch to concerned Scooby was instant. Willow frowned, the self-pity in her eyes taking a back seat to curiosity. "What's up?"



"Well, I was out tonight and... You know I've been hanging out with Spike a lot."

From the look on Willow's face, she in fact had not known that. Which seemed weird to Buffy, given that Willow had gone to the trouble of bringing her back to life and all and had, for a while at least, been hypervigilant of Buffy's every sneeze. That she could have missed that Buffy was essentially spending every free moment with the resident undead just spoke to how off everything had been.

"Is...is that a good idea?" Willow asked at length. "I mean, with the whole him thinking he's in love with you thing. Could be a bad."

Then again, maybe Buffy had been an idiot to bring it up at all.

Now Willow was worried about bad ideas? *Now*? When it came to Buffy trying to make living in this world tolerable—the world she'd been shoved back inside against her will—Willow was suddenly Little Miss Cautious? Fiery hot anger blistered Buffy's insides, sudden and overwhelming. She curled the hand in the most immediate danger of punching a hole through her friend's skull into a fist and swallowed back the first couple of quips that occurred to her.

"I'm not worried about that," she said instead, keeping her voice calm.

"You're not?"

"No. I told him it can't...be that." Buffy thought about adding the *not right now* part, then decided it didn't matter. If *not right now* ever became *right now*, she'd deal with it then. And woe betide the friend who tried to tell her how wrong it was. "He gets it. That it can't be that."

"He does. Spike."

Another surge of anger, not as potent as the last but no less present, and again she bit it back. Could be that she was irrational—which was a pretty good bet, considering that she'd let a dangerous, unleashed vampire walk away earlier tonight—but after everything Spike had done for her since Glory, and especially since the resurrection, Buffy couldn't help but be peeved on his behalf. Willow should know better than anyone what Spike was willing to do for her. After all, he'd hung around after her death to take care of Dawn because of a promise he'd made to a dead woman. Something no one would expect

of a soulless thing, but somehow nobody had questioned it once in the three months that Buffy had been six feet under.

But she didn't say any of that. She didn't get a chance to. The door to the bathroom opened and a woman walked through.

"Oh, Tara, hey," Buffy said on instinct, then caught herself and did a double-take. *Whoa. Not Tara.* "Amy?"

Amy acknowledged Buffy with a glance before turning to Willow. "The whole school?"

Willow offered a solemn nod.

"By a giant snake thing." When this earned another nod, Amy released a deep breath. "Okay. Still adjusting. Hi, Buffy."

"Hi." Buffy worked her throat, searching for words. What did you say to someone who had spent the past three years in a cage? "How've you been?"

"Rat. You?"

"Dead."

"Oh." Amy's face didn't change much, but enough that Buffy caught the flare of surprise.

Well, that was mildly comforting. Still the most traumatized person in the room. Go her.

Buffy glanced at Willow. "Well, I should...let you catch up. I can—"

"No, no, no," Amy said, shaking her head. "Stay." Pause. "Do you have any cookies?"

"Uh, yeah." Probably. "What kind?"

"Any kind. Not cheese."

Were cheese cookies a thing? Buffy decided not to ask. "Um, sure, in the kitchen. I'll just get 'em—"

She started to rise to her feet, but Amy moved toward the door, shaking her head again. "Oh no, I'll grab 'em."

All right. Sure. Let the former rat rummage around the kitchen unsupervised. That sounded like a way to not rack up a monster grocery bill on top of all the other living expenses that had been dumped on her recently non-decaying shoulders.

"Okay," Buffy said. "Well, at least, you know, let me make up the couch for you. It's late. You should stay here. Everybody does."

"Thank you," Amy replied, sounding somewhat absent, and disappeared through the door.

Buffy waited until the former rat had scampered, then turned to Willow. "Wow."

Willow was smiling, and since that was the first time that had happened since Tara had packed up her things, Buffy relaxed and decided to view Amy's return to the bipedal as a good thing.

Not that she'd wanted Amy to remain all rodent-like, but, nonetheless, it was a bit wigsome to return home and find someone she hadn't seen in three years just walking around and helping herself to the cookie stash.

"I know," Willow said.

"Is...she gonna be okay?"

"Don't know. She's kinda freaked out. I mean, I would be too."

"Wow."

"I...I just realized I could," Willow said in answer to the question Buffy figured was blazed across her face. "Thought of the right thing and... It's nice, having another magically inclined friend around."

Yeah. One whose last magical foray had backfired so spectacularly she'd spent the next few years as a pet. One who likely wouldn't pull the brakes on any spellcasting that went on, no matter how reckless it became.

"So...you and Spike? And he just is...okay with the friend thing? He *understands* it's a friend thing and there's nothing else going on?"

Right. They had been talking about that. Or rather, Willow had been judging about that, and Buffy had been trying to keep from throwing a fist through something breakable. The good news was the anger was gone, stolen by the bombshell that was a suddenly people-shaped Amy.

"Buffy," Willow pressed. "He knows that nothing can happen, right?"

The easy thing to do would be to lie, but dammit, she'd done enough of that. Instead, Buffy bit her tongue and dropped her gaze to the bedspread.

"Oh." Her friend leaned forward. "Is there something else going on?"

"I kissed him."

"You...kissed Spike?"

"Yeah. When everything was a musical. We kissed. Big production—there was music and it was just..." Romantic. That was a word she'd never before associated with Spike, but as much as she wanted to deny it, the kiss outside of the Bronze had been the very definition of romantic. More than that, it had lit her up from the inside, made her feel alive for the first time since she'd clawed her way out of her coffin. Somehow, she didn't think sharing this would make the look on Willow's face go away. "But I told him...after. I told him it couldn't be anything."

"You kissed Spike and you told him it couldn't be anything and...he's just okay with that? This is *Spike* we're talking about."

"Will, I can't explain it. I don't even know if I should, but...being around Spike has...helped a lot." Understatement. "He hasn't... I mean, he isn't...asking anything from me or expecting anything. I know he wants... I know what he wants, but he just lets me...be."

There was a pause. "He lets you be," Willow said a moment later. "And we don't."

"It's like I escape from my life when I'm with him. Everything goes away. The bills that are piling up. The complete absence of any kind of income. Worrying about what will happen if social services decide I'm not parent-material for Dawn..." Buffy shook her head. "It goes away with him and I can just...exist. He doesn't tell me what to do or what's wrong with me or try to fix me. He just... Well, like I said."

"Lets you be." The smile on Willow's face was sad but supportive, which went a long way in relieving the pressure in Buffy's chest. "I get it. And the kissage, I guess? I mean, it's been a while since I was into guys, but man, he does have some killer cheekbones."

Buffy snorted. "It's not like that," she replied, fiddling with a stray yarn on the comforter. "There will be no more kissage."

"Why?"

Well, that was a rapid turnaround from the girl who had been just seconds away from giving her the third degree. Buffy's eyebrows winged upward. "Why? Is that a question that really needs answering?"

Willow frowned. "Well... All those things you just said? That he

helps you with? I dunno, Buffy, maybe I'm just wallowing in the despair of the recently dumped, but...that sounds like boyfriend material to me. And it's not like Spike's been...well, Spike-like for a while."

"You were just telling me how dangerous it'd be for us to—"

"Dangerous for him to be all obsess-o boy again, yeah. Or maybe not so much dangerous as *annoying*."

Right. Because Spike was chipped and therefore couldn't be dangerous, except that wasn't so much the truth anymore. Buffy sighed, the drive to share this recent revelation there but not quite there enough.

"I don't think it's a good idea for me to be with anyone like that," Buffy said a moment later. "And especially not with Spike...or anyone who loves me."

"So, you believe he loves you? 'Cause that's new."

"Well, I'm not sure what else you'd call it now. All the...Dawn watchage and fighting alongside you guys all summer. Really ever since Glory, I've kinda just stopped fighting that it's love, for him. I'm not sure I get to define what love is, anyway. It's not like everyone loves the same way, right? I mean, in my dad's case, love means never showing up, apparently. For Riley, it meant being needed or leaned upon. And in Angel's case, love means walking away." Where that had come from, she didn't know, but it sounded right—felt right—so she decided not to examine it too closely. "For me, love means staying. Fighting. Sacrificing. And I guess that's what it means for Spike, too."

Buffy furrowed her brow, not sure she'd meant to say that last thing aloud, or even think it at all. But it was out there—both in her head and in the air between her and Willow. Something she'd released that could never be caged again. She and Spike loved in the same way.

"Buffy," Willow said, jarring her back to the present, "if it's a Scooby thing, that's keeping you from being all *yay Spike*... I mean, Xander's gonna totally wig but I'm pretty sure we could whip out the old you're-marrying-a-demon-who's-slaughtered-entire-continents-so-maybe-keep-them-stones-unthrown card. If it's me, then... Well, weird, yeah, but hello, again with the Anya adjustment. I got there eventually. And I'm pretty sure Dawn will be ecstatic."

Huh. A knot loosened in her chest. "Oh."

"Anya herself won't care very much," Willow went on. "And Tara—"

But she didn't finish that sentence, and Buffy didn't push her. Whether or not Tara would remain in the inner circle was one of those questions that had yet to be explored. It was a situation they hadn't been in before, breakup wise. Cordelia had only begrudgingly joined Team Scooby, and Oz had promptly taken off once the relationship was over. Tara was still in town, and she was everyone's friend.

"I better go check on Amy," Willow said, moving to get off the bed. "But...Buffy, this Spike thing? Thanks for telling me about it." She offered a soft smile. "Kinda makes me think about...you know, old times."

"Old times?"

"Talking about boys you like."

Buffy huffed a laugh, her heart suddenly thundering, though she didn't know why. Almost like she'd been caught doing something she shouldn't. "The Spike thing is...not a thing. I mean, I might have him over more. Maybe. But it's not a relationship thing. It wouldn't be fair to him to do that right now anyway." At the look this comment received, Buffy sighed and made a rolling motion with her hand. "I'm kinda empty. If he didn't love me, maybe. But he does, so that means he goes into anything we do with a ton more to lose than I do, and I don't think I can handle worrying about hurting him on top of...well, just trying to get through the day."

The somewhat rosy glow that had taken residence in Willow's cheeks paled and Buffy could have kicked herself. While she did think a talk with Willow about what exactly she was going through was probably for the best, she also knew that she didn't have the capacity to deal with her friend's guilt or apologies. Willow's emotional burdens were too much for Buffy to shoulder at the moment.

"I should go to bed," Buffy muttered, though she didn't feel particularly tired. "Umm...that bed I said I'd make for Amy downstairs. Could you—"

Willow nodded. "Yeah. I can." She looked like she wanted to say more, chase the tail of the conversation Buffy had abandoned, but thankfully opted not to.

Later, Buffy would mull over how that small allowance was perhaps

the first non-selfish thing Willow had done where Buffy was concerned since the resurrection. And while the sleep she fell into that night was fitful, it was somewhat less so than the nights previous.

Even with the worry about the chip nipping at her heels, chasing her into dreamland.



TRUTHFULLY, Spike had expected the Slayer to show up promptly at sundown the following day, ready to sniff out evidence of his misdoings. That was just the way of it with her. Hell, he was still somewhat mystified that she'd left with only his promise that he wouldn't swap out the swine swill for long pig the second her back was turned. Hoped it meant she trusted him a smidge, that she knew he understood what could hurt her, that he understood what exactly he had to do—to not do—to keep her from that kind of hurt.

And so she had. Shown up, that was, asking if he had information about a museum robbery gone awry and security guards turned all frozen-popsicle. Spike had heard of the theft, of course. Gossip got around in a small town, even among demons, but thus far those contacts he kept friendly with hadn't turned up any information worth pursuing.

"Think this bout of evil's all on your side, Slayer," Spike had told her as they'd taken a sweep of the cemeteries. When that had become habit, he didn't know. Well, he knew he'd been patrolling for some time, but it was a nightly thing now, him and Buffy, scouring freshly dug graves for signs of life. Or unlife, as the case was. Like a standing date neither acknowledged but always made a point to make. "Some ne'er-do-well pulser got a yen for a diamond and decided to take it for a spin. Had to happen sometime. Not like the lot of you are bloody saints, is it?"

He'd expected her to roll her eyes and smart off about human superiority, but she hadn't. Instead, she'd sucked her delectable lower lip between her teeth and frowned. "There was a mugging last night and a museum robbery tonight. All my bad guys are human these days."

"Not all of them," Spike had replied, giving her shoulder a nudge

with his own. "Might be on your leash, but that doesn't exactly make me a white hat."

That had been it, he'd known it. The opening she'd been waiting for—the chance to jump down his throat and demand to know just what he'd been up to since she'd left him. If any of the new graves were thanks to him and his fangs.

He hadn't been sure whether or not to be disappointed when she didn't ask. If it was worse to be brassed that she didn't trust him or concerned that she did. All he'd wanted from Buffy was trust, after all, but trust was tenuous and easy to shatter, and if he had it, it meant he could lose it. Every move he made would require thinking like nothing he'd done before.

Before had been about *can't*. This *won't* thing would be harder to manage. Meant wrangling his natural instincts, not having the safety net ready to inflict pain the second he made a move over the line. Never would Spike have reckoned he'd miss the sodding chip, and he wasn't about to go so far as to say he did, but for the first time, he wondered about himself without it. He wanted to be what Buffy needed more than anything, not only because of the promise of *maybe* she'd fed him, but also because he couldn't stand the thought that he might do something to add to her pain.

Buffy hadn't asked if he'd gone people hunting and he hadn't volunteered an account of his whereabouts. Not that there had been anything too exciting to report, anyhow. After they'd parted ways, he'd headed back to the crypt, poured himself a nice glass of blood, plucked *Slaughterhouse-Five* off his bookshelf, and lost himself in another world until his eyes had gotten heavy.

That had been the previous night, calm and quiet, despite the racing in his brain about the chip and what it meant. The monster whispering at him that he could sneak out and have himself a right good night as only a vampire could.

But then he'd thought of Buffy asking him why he hadn't wanted to bite her and her mates, asking if it was just him or if any vamp would have done the same, and the answer he'd given her.

Truth was, he wasn't that demon anymore, and not because of the chip—because of her.



Buffy's arrival tonight wasn't as subdued as had become the norm. Rather than leisurely letting herself into the crypt, she kicked the door in like old times. So much so that Spike leaped to his feet, ready to defend himself and his nose if need be, and his brain racing through the events of the last twelve hours to suss out if he'd done anything stake-worthy.

But no. He'd been here, catching up on sleep, watching *Passions*, and debating whether or not his blood supply could last another day or if he ought to go stock up now. If something fanged had taken a bite outta someone, Buffy was barking up the wrong tree.

"What's all this?" he demanded, bounding to his feet. "Know you're not one for knocking, pet, but I thought the dramatic entrances were behind us."

"It's Dawn," Buffy said, talking like he hadn't. "She's missing."

"Again? You ever think about gettin' a lo-jack for the girl?"

"It's on the top of my to-do list. Right after I murder Willow."

Well, that was unexpected. Spike arched his eyebrows. "Little witch just keeps adding to her rap sheet. What's the story now?"

"She's mixed up in something. Been seeing someone called Rack."

"Rack?" Spike straightened, biting back a snarl. "Is she completely off her nutter?"

"You know him?"

"By reputation, yeah. Deals in the real dark mojo." Though now that he thought about it, given the resurrection spell and all, maybe Rack *was* right up the little witch's alley. "You say Willow has Dawn tangled up in this?"

"They were going to go to a movie or something." Buffy dragged a hand down her face, then made a gesture toward the door. "Can we walk and talk? I can't stand still. I've been all over downtown and turned up nothing. If she's gotten Dawn involved in this, I will need a place to help hide her body."

"Come to the right bloke for that."

To his astonishment, she didn't glare at him. "Good to know. Do you think you can find this place? Sniff it out?"

"Should be able to, yeah," Spike said, falling in pace beside her.

"Rack's place moves. Gotta be somethin' otherworldly, like a demon or a vamp, to sense it."

"Now you tell me."

Let no one say the Slayer couldn't move when properly motivated. It was a bloody good thing all his breathing was voluntary in nature, otherwise he would have been panting while trying to keep up.

Over the next few minutes, he managed to get the whole story. How Willow had sussed out how to undo some wonky spell that had turned one of her chums into a rat a few years back, how the witches had been out until all hours the previous night and hadn't shown up until after the sun had risen. Then how Buffy had found the former rat-girl skulking around Willow's room and gotten the name Rack. One missing sister plus one magically strung-out friend and smart money was on the bet that Willow was going to finally experience the Slayer's signature nose-punch for herself, at the very least.

"It's my fault," Buffy went on as they turned yet another corner. "I let my guard down."

"Piffle."

"No. The other night, Willow and I... We talked. Really talked about...well, a lot of things. And it was normal. It *felt* normal. Like how we used to talk, before..." She broke off, shaking her head. "I got home and Amy was suddenly *Amy* again and Will and I talked and I *forgot*. I forgot that she'd done the whole forget-me-not spell and how angry I was with her. I *defended* her today at the Magic Box when Xander and Anya started going in on her magic use." Buffy huffed one of those tragic laughs that made him want to roar. "I even convinced myself that maybe getting out with Amy was *just* what she needed after Tara and so what if she didn't come home until after the sun was up? She was going through something."

"It's not your fault—"

"But it is!" Buffy twisted to face him, her eyes wide, her face all twisted up the way it got before she launched into one of her tirades. "Anything happens to Dawn and it's my fault. Willow's been spiraling for weeks and I've been so blind to it I didn't even talk to her about it when she wiped our memories to make me forget the *other* magic she's done! I—"

“Bleeding hell, pet, Red’s actions are hers. You’re not responsible for the whole sodding world.”

“Yes I *am*!” she fired back. “That’s just it, Spike. I’m responsible for Dawn, for my friends, for the world, and I was done. I was done and it wasn’t my responsibility anymore but now it is. There’s no one else here to do it. No one else to be the grownup or to stop the next apocalypse because it’s me and it’s always me. Xander and Anya can talk about larva bridesmaid dresses and Willow can go around turning rats into people but I’m always the Slayer. And Dawn is always my sister. And when something goes wrong, it’s always on me to fix it. Always.”

Fuck. Him and his big stupid mouth. Spike heaved a sigh and looked away, fighting for patience. Fighting to not blow up because that was not what she needed right now. She needed him to keep his calm, which would be funny if it weren’t so serious because *calm* was an art Spike had never mastered.

It had been a laugh to him when he’d first heard the tale—a bunch of righteous wankers sitting up in their ivory tower, imbuing a single girl with enough strength to dodge death for a few years before she met the wrong sort of creature and was replaced with the next model. And yeah, he’d immediately set out to be the wrong sort of creature, because the fight was what made the unlife worth living. Seeking her out, hunting her down, knowing he was staring down death and welcoming it because in the end, she wanted it just a little bit more. And bloody hell, why shouldn’t she? Why shouldn’t any of them, if this was what they bore every day? If the Slayer couldn’t even let her mates shoulder the responsibility of their own failings without assuming the weight, herself?

When he next saw Rupert, he was going to rip the old man’s head clean off. Willow had gone and tampered with serious mojo, then done it again right under his nose, and the wanker had still taken off. Still thought that Buffy, who was living her death wish as she never had before, was better without anyone to lean on except, her kid sister, him, and the people who had mucked it up for her in the first place.

“Sorry,” Buffy said a moment later. “I shouldn’t have gone off like that.”

Spike huffed. "Seems you should go off more, not less. Just maybe aim those little speeches at the berks who need to hear them."

"They mean well."

Oh, for fuck's sake.

He grabbed her shoulder and spun her around to face him, temper flaring again to dangerous levels. "So what?"

"What?"

"So they mean well. That makes it okay? What they've done to you? What they *still* do to you?" He gestured at the sidewalk, the street, the sky above them. "You're out here worried sick over kid sis when she's with someone you oughta be able to trust more than you trust yourself. But Red *means well*, so that's it? You'll save the speeches for yours truly but bite your tongue when—"

"I never said that!"

"You've been lettin' them get away with it ever since you got back! Told me about Heaven but no one else. Puttin' on a show, pretending to be okay for their sakes when they're the ones who did this to you. Even now that they know, you keep making excuses." Spike pulled her nearer, knowing he was pushing it, knowing he was asking to be punched or screamed at or worse, but these past couple of days watching her struggle had been some of the hardest of his existence. "You don't owe them rot."

Buffy stared at him, her lower lip trembling in what had become a terribly familiar way, and he felt like the world's biggest jerk and pissed off all over again. She was the most frustrating person to be in love with at times—so determined to see the best in everyone but him...or herself. Ready to launch into a fight but not the right one, rather the one that was easy to justify, less sticky and complicated than the ones she needed to have.

But when she spoke, it wasn't to yell. Her voice was soft and fragile. "What would you have me do?"

"Buffy—"

"Making them feel bad doesn't make me feel better. What they did...they can't just undo it. And even if they could..." She swallowed and looked away, crossing her arms. "There's nothing to be gained by unleashing on them."

"Cept it's honest."

She directed her gaze to the ground but didn't reply.

"How about this, then." Spike edged closer still, fighting the urge to pull her all the way into his arms as he did so frequently these days. She didn't want to snog him, didn't want to go down that road—fine. The comfort he had to offer that she'd take would have to do. "You stop pretending to be okay."

Buffy whipped her head up. "What?"

"Just...let them deal with the fact that you're not all right. They want you to bounce back, be the bloody Slayer, be happy just to make themselves feel better about what they did. Don't hide from them how hard it is for you."

"What does that accomplish?"

"Takes it off you, doesn't it? You can't fool yourself into bein' happy again, love. Sometimes you gotta just give yourself permission to be miserable and get through it."

When she looked at him again, it was with that narrow-eyed glare that drove him nuts. "A vampire telling me to embrace the misery. How original."

"I don't want you to be miserable, you infuriating chit, I want you to be *honest*. With yourself. With them. 'Cause tryin' to be something else is what does this to you." He stared at her. Willing her to just this once—this *one time*—hear what he was saying and not argue with it. "You told me yourself, didn't you? That you put so much into not worryin' them that it just worries them more. Well, bugger, Slayer, *let* them worry. Let them stew. Let them sit with what they did, live with it. Bloody well told them that magic has consequences and they need to feel that at some point, don't they? Don't kill yourself tryin' to be okay. You don't owe them that. Fuck, you don't owe them anything."

A long, heavy silence followed this, her looking at him, him looking right back, the look on her face annoyingly inscrutable. Some of the fire that had defined her before the jump had begun leaking back here and now, but there were times—like this one—where she was impossible to read. She could throw a punch or leap into his arms and demand a good shagging, and neither would really surprise

him. Well, all right, that second thing was more wishful thinking, but with the way she sought him out these days, from everything she'd shared with him and continued to share, it seemed more like an inevitability.

And just when it looked like she might have decided on how to react, a scream rent the air—a scream that Spike knew well. Panic sliced through his frustration and then he was running, running alongside Buffy, who had realized it at the same moment.

The scene they stumbled upon had Spike's blood boiling. It was only by virtue of the fact that Buffy was the Slayer that she reached the demon first. He watched from his periphery as she tackled it, every bit of him aching to join in the fight, to hurt and tear at the thing that had been at the Nibblet. Somehow, though, he managed to shift his focus to Dawn, who was on the ground, cradling one of her arms and crying buckets.

The witch was near—he could smell her. Near enough that she could have stopped this.

"Now you're scared?" he heard Buffy bark at the demon. "Better late than never."

Whatever happened, Spike didn't know. He was trying to bat Dawn's hand away from her injury to get a better look. The girl was bleeding, he knew that much. By scent, he wagered it wasn't serious, but he wasn't about to take that on faith.

"Lemme see," he said in his most soothing voice. "Dawn, I need to—"

"No! No!" Dawn jerked away from him, hot tears scaling down her cheeks. "Don't touch it."

Then the Slayer was there, beside him. "What happened?" she asked, frazzled and smelling of sweat and dirt from the tussle she'd just been in. "Are you okay?"

Dawn seemed to swell up just a bit, the way she always did whenever Buffy was around. Spike wasn't sure anyone but him had ever noticed. It seemed big sis's presence was all she needed to gather her thoughts.

"Uh... He was after Willow," Dawn managed between her tremors. "She made the car drive. Don't!"

Buffy jerked her head up from where she'd been attempting to size up the injury before reaching for it again.

"No, don't!" the Bit cried again.

"I need to see," Buffy replied in a low calm that Spike knew she wasn't feeling. His Slayer was practically vibrating rage but managed to rein it in. "Okay? Let me see your arm."

A rush of footsteps and Willow pulled to a stop just behind Spike, her heart pounding hard enough to make his head throb.

"Dawn? Oh god, there's blood."

And that was about all Spike could take. Sod whatever the Slayer threw at him later, the fact that the chip had stopped working meant he didn't need to keep it bottled in anymore. He whirled around and landed a punch against the witch's face that had her staggering back in shock—but not before that awful, blinding pain ratcheted through his head, splitting his skull in half and sending him to his knees, a scream tearing off his lips.

"Spike!"

He wasn't sure if that was concern or anger in Buffy's voice. "Bloody hell," he muttered, pressing the heel of his palm to his head.

So, the bugging chip was still active after all. Must have short-circuited or something.

"Spike, can you stand up?"

He gave a shaky nod and rose to his feet. "Sorry, pet," he muttered, not quite willing to look at her. "Just...look at what she did."

"I know. We need to get her to a doctor."

Given the fact that Buffy hadn't so much as spared a glance in Willow's direction, Spike figured he might be off the hook for the moment. In any case, he opted not to question it, rather hurrying to Dawn's good side to help her to her feet.

"What..." And Willow was there again, her mouth a bit swollen from where Spike's fist had connected, her eyes somewhat glassy. "Is she okay? Is Dawn okay?"

"Back off, Will," Buffy snapped. "I got her."

"No, Dawnie!" Willow made a mad grab forward like she intended to drag the girl from the Slayer's arms.

"I mean it, stay away from her."

And if the witch didn't hear the threat in Buffy's voice, she'd truly lost her head.

Either way, Willow seemed desperate to absolve herself. In a blink, she was standing in front of them, her face a mess of tears. "Dawnie! Dawnie, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. It was an accident! I didn't see—I'm so, so sorry."

Spike tightened his jaw and waited, then about whooped his joy when Dawn slapped the bitch across her self-righteous face. The fact that Buffy looked seconds away from doing the same had him thinking he might not get a talking-to later on at all.

The slap had been a weak one, but it seemed to bowl Willow right over. Far more than him socking her in the jaw had, at least. Her eyes went wide, spilling fresh tears. "Dawnie! Dawnie, don't!"

*Too late. It's done.*

Spike followed Buffy's lead, maneuvering around the witch as though she weren't there. They made it a few more paces before the sound of a body hitting the ground reached his ears, and Willow was on her knees, sobbing harder than she had at any point since Buffy had sacrificed herself, screaming her sorrys to anyone who would hear her.

He glanced over Dawn's head, met the Slayer's eyes. Saw a hardness there that he knew intimately, only, perhaps for the first time, one not aimed at him.

He also saw what would come next because that was who she was. No matter what.

And now was not the time to argue about it. Instead, Spike offered a nod to show that he understood. A flicker of gratitude sparked in her eyes, then she turned around and walked back to the sobbing mess of a witch, leaving him to steer Dawn in the direction of the hospital.

"What...what's happening?" Dawn asked a moment later.

"Buffy'll catch up," he muttered. "Just needs to take care of business."

"You hit her." It came out neutrally, an observation, not a question or a condemnation. Spike took heart that, though the girl was still shaking, her tears seemed to have dried up.

"So did you," he replied.

"Do you think it hurt?"



“I bloody well hope so.”

A beat. “Me too.”

And despite himself, he couldn’t help but snicker. “Think big sis makes three.”

The grin the comment earned was a small one, but fuck if it didn’t make him feel invincible.



## ANY COLOUR YOU LIKE

SHE HADN'T ASKED HIM TO STAY, BUT HE DIDN'T FEEL RIGHT LEAVING just yet, and it wasn't like he was unaccustomed to lurking around outside. So, after watching Buffy usher her sister across the threshold, Spike wandered around the house to the back porch, grabbed a seat, lit up a smoke, and waited.

Granted, he didn't know what he was waiting for. Could be Buffy would just hit the sack after she was all chatted out with the Bit and the witch. But if she felt him here, as she was wont to do, she might join him so they could have out the things he knew they needed to discuss. The chip, for one, and the fact that it wasn't quite as dysfunctional as they'd thought. Something that had become even more apparent in the time it had taken him to escort Dawn to the emergency room. He'd squeezed her arm a bit too tight when she'd started trembling again and been rewarded with that blinding pain for his efforts.

The chip was bloody temperamental. No intent to hurt and it wouldn't activate—except when it did. Near as he could reckon, he had to be aware of the fact that he was in a position that could trigger the chip in order for it to not trigger, if the intent wasn't there. How the

bloody government boys had managed to make it so specific, he had no clue.

And here he'd enjoyed a couple glorious days thinking that the leash was off. True, he hadn't gone out to test drive it, but just knowing that he could throw a punch if need be, that the choice of the man he wanted to be was fully back in his hands, had been intoxicating.

Instead, Spike was left with the knowledge that the only person in the world the chip didn't work on was the woman he loved beyond reason, and all the things that could mean.

*Had she come back wrong?*

The thought hadn't occurred to him since that first night when he'd seen her walking down the stairs, when he'd put together what had happened and that the others hadn't trusted him with it. Every day since that one, though, the thought that she might not be entirely the Buffy who had taken the leap had seemed remote. Girl looked and smelled the same, acted the same—perhaps a bit softer toward him, but he wasn't about to complain. Speech patterns, body language, confusing-as-hell mixed signals, martyr complex, all of it screamed *Buffy*.

The self-serving voice, the one he associated with his demon, whispered that if Buffy thought she'd come back wrong, she might be more open to continuing what they'd started in the alley outside of the Bronze. She'd said, after all, it'd be easier if he wasn't a vampire. Wouldn't it reckon that it'd be just as easy if she wasn't entirely human?

The thought was mighty tempting, but he knew, as he listened to her moving around upstairs, that he couldn't go through with it. Not after these last few days, which, despite being confusing and frustrating and a bunch of other things, had also been some of the most hopeful he could remember. Buffy hugging him, letting him hug her, listening when he spoke rather than rolling her eyes or smarting off, coming to him as a friend. A bloody friend. Trusting him when she'd thought the chip had stopped working, begging him not to give her a reason to kill him, knowing without question that he'd get Dawn to the hospital without needing to be chaperoned...

All of that meant something. Meant more to him than he wagered he could tell her—at least now. And then there was the promise of

someday. A promise that might never come to fruition but it felt real, and real from Buffy was better than anything else he might be able to talk himself into. No matter how much he wanted her.

Spike had just finished his fag when he felt her behind him. The next second, the door opened and she stepped onto the porch. She sighed one of those full-body sighs, then started toward him, her soft footfalls somehow deafening against the quiet.

“You stayed.”

Spike inhaled, flicked his cigarette butt to the ground and stomped it out. “The Bit okay?”

“Mad. Mostly at me.”

“At you?” He glanced over his shoulder, taking her in. She looked exhausted, smaller, her arms crossed and her hair falling out of the twist she’d had it in. Buffy scuffed her booted feet along the deck before sighing again and edging forward so she was beside him.

“I wasn’t around,” she said as though that explained everything. “Haven’t been around much at all lately and... Well, she wouldn’t have gone with Will tonight if I’d been home.”

Spike tightened his jaw, forcibly reminding himself that Dawn was a teenager, one who had just been through the wringer, herself. That he understood the girl wanting to be near her sister now—especially now—given the misery that had been this last summer. But hell, it was hard to cap his frustration when he knew what it was doing to Buffy. That Dawn’s blame and disappointment were just more unneeded burdens that would keep Buffy shackled to the parts of living that hurt the most right now.

Maybe he ought to have a chat with her, just the two of them. It had been just them most of the summer, after all. Could be that he’d be able to get through to her, make her see reason. Make her understand that the last thing Buffy needed was a teenage guilt-trip over things she couldn’t change.

“So,” Buffy said a moment later, turning her head slightly toward him, “your chip is working after all.”

“Seems like, yeah.”

“Any idea why it didn’t hurt when you hit me?”

The demon practically roared its delight at the opening, urging him

to proceed with his theory. She'd come back wrong, she was wrong, and that meant that they together could be right.

But no. *No*. That would hurt, and he was through hurting her. Especially now when things were...well, maybe not what he wanted, exactly, but something closer to it.

"Coulda been a fluke," he offered lamely. "Dunno, do we?"

"You could try to hit me now."

"Not much in the mood for a migraine. Thanks for the invitation, though."

"You don't think you'll get a migraine." It wasn't a question. "If the chip is still working, but not on me...maybe that means I—"

"No."

Buffy turned to him fully now, and the fear in her eyes was enough to do him in. Seemed he hadn't had to bring up the possibility at all—it was all there, right there. Of course it was. Of course she'd think it, too.

"No?" Her voice shook on the word. "You don't think there's a chance that I... That when Willow did the spell, I came back a little less than human?"

"No," Spike said again, fiercer. "I'd know if you were off, Slayer. You came back you. Just as you were. Look and smell and taste human, too."

"Taste?"

He dropped his gaze to her lips. "Well, from what I remember."

Either subconsciously or to torture him, seeing as she was good at that, Buffy licked her lips, and he couldn't keep from groaning. Almost instantly, a light blush flooded her creamy skin and she looked away again, fidgeting.

"Do...humans taste different then?" she asked, her tone now almost forcibly neutral. "When you kiss them?"

"Dunno. Haven't had much occasion to go around snogging humans."

Those delicious lips of hers quirked into what might have been a grin. "Then what do you know?"

"I know you're Buffy Summers, that's what I know. Beautiful, bossy, bloody infuriating—"

"You think I'm beautiful?"

That shot him right out of the start of a rather promising rant. Spike shook his head, blinking at her dumbly. "Of course I think you're beautiful. Are you off your rocker?"

The rouge in her cheeks deepened. "I... I guess I'd never thought about it," she muttered, studying her clasped hands. "But...seems like that might be part of the whole, you know, being in love thing."

This woman would be the death of him, one way or another. "Also a part of the whole *having eyes* thing," he drawled. "You didn't just become gorgeous the day I realized I was a sucker for you. I've always thought so."

"You have?"

He would have laughed had she not sounded so earnest. "Yeah. From the start."

"Oh."

If he didn't know better, he'd think she was pleased. And for a moment, he let his mind run away with him down a path that was all too easy to follow these days. One where she'd lean her head against his shoulder, let him draw her into him. Where they'd sit in the quiet, and then maybe she'd nuzzle his throat before exploring it with her lips, press a series of kisses along his skin until their mouths were fused together and she was in his lap, undulating against his cock. She'd wrap her arms around his neck to anchor him to her—like there was anywhere else he'd ever want to be—and kiss him with such desperate hunger it'd be all he could do to keep from throwing her against the nearest flat surface. She'd want him to, of course, but that was part of the dance. Tease and nip and nibble and suck until she was so frantic for him that she'd gasp and beg for his cock. And once he was inside of her, once she felt him, felt the things he could do to her, felt how much he loved her, she'd be his forever.

"You hit Willow," Buffy said, shattering the quiet.

Ah. Here it came.

"I did at that."

A pause. "What were you... If the chip hadn't gone off, what would've happened?"

"You're askin' if I'd've offed the witch?"

Buffy turned to look at him head-on, her expression maddeningly unreadable. "Would you have?"

"Goddammit, Slayer, you *really* gotta ask me that?"

"I just—"

Spike exploded into motion, whirling around so he could glare down at her, rage pushing against his skin so hard he thought he might burst. "She made Dawn cry!" he snarled. "Hurt her arm. Made her bleed. I wanted to pay a bit of that back, so yeah, I took a swing. That's it. Even if the government's insurance policy hadn't kicked in, I'm not thick enough to bollix up whatever you and I might have for a quick nibble. And even if I was, it wouldn't be your best chum and it sure as hell wouldn't be *right in front of you*. I don't hurt you, pet. Gave it up a long bloody time ago. What's it gonna take for you to believe that?"

Buffy didn't flinch under his scrutiny, though something in her eyes softened. "I believe it," she said.

"Do you? Funny way of showin' a fella."

"These are things I have to ask, Spike."

"Yeah? Regularly go around askin' your mates if they're feelin' homicidal or am I special?"

He heard it as he said it, the casual definition he'd thrown on whatever their relationship was nowadays. Heard it and braced himself for the inevitable disappointment—the carrot dangled there just within his reach, but not quite close enough to wrap his hand around. The knowledge that Buffy saw him as good enough to trust with her deepest and darkest but not quite enough to let him into any of the other parts of her life. That she could kiss him as she had, feeding him back the same hunger and desperation that lived inside him, then push him away, away, away until the distance was broad enough that she could make her excuses.

"It's different with you," Buffy said at length, dropping her gaze. "You're not just a...*mate*. And you know that."

Spike was aware of a distant ringing in his ears, the fury that had weighed him down just seconds ago disappearing without fanfare. "I... What?"

She squirmed, twisting her hands together. "Well, you're not. And

yes, I'd have to... With any of my friends, if they had a history of being all fangy and...stuff. I'd have to ask."

"You're callin' us friends, pet?"

At that, Buffy shot her head up, her eyes narrowing. "Huh?"

"Friends. You're sayin' that's what we are?"

"Well, you just did!"

"Yeah, but I say a lot, don't I?"

"That's an understatement."

"Just..." Well, bugger. Now he felt like a fool. Should have just taken the small allowance for what he'd hoped it was and not make a thing out of it. Spike ducked his head and ran a hand over his crown, grappling for words—any words—that could come to his rescue. "I didn't reckon you'd...admit it. That we're...whatever we are."

"Whatever we are?"

Now she sounded amused—not a malicious kind of amused, but fuck, he couldn't help but wilt anyway. This territory was far too close to the place where he'd had his heart stomped on a time or two hundred.

"You know what you mean to me," he said carefully, still not looking up. "Know what... How I feel. And we had this out the other night, right? Just...didn't figure you'd..."

He felt rather than saw her move, and his body reacted as it always did when she was close. Torn at the seams between action and stillness, needing to touch her but knowing he couldn't. Not unless she touched him first.

"Spike," she said softly. "This...whatever it is... I told Willow you might be around more."

That did it. He jerked his head up, frowning. "You did what?"

"Last night, I told her that I'd been spending time with you. That... you make it easier." She swallowed, fidgeted, and crossed her arms. Nervous, he realized. The Slayer was nervous. "I was going to tell her about the chip not working—I know what I said but I thought it might be important for someone to know. Just in case..."

Fuck, being around this girl was like being on one of those carnival rides. The twists and turns, dips and flips were almost impossible to keep up with. "In case I did the thing I said I wouldn't."



"I have to be prepared, Spike—"

"Prepared to kill me."

"Yes!" Buffy met his eyes again, her own burning. "I have to be prepared for *anything*."

"I promised you—"

"I know. And I know you meant it. But Willow just *promised* Tara she'd go a week without magic. Giles *promised* me that his leaving was for the best. Dawn *promised* to empty the dishwasher. And I'm sure they all meant it when they said it but look how they turned out." She was panting now, flushed, lost somewhere between frustration and desperation, and so tragically beautiful he could cry. "Everyone breaks promises. Intentional or not. I believed you when you said you'd never because I believe you believe you'd never. But I can't just...be stupid about it. When I get stupid, other people get dead."

"Forgettin' one thing there, love." Spike pressed forward a step, grateful when she didn't take one back in the other direction. "Never once gone back on my word to you."

Buffy stared at him. "Are you kidding? Spike, if you hadn't gone back on your word, you wouldn't be sitting here right now."

"What?"

"You don't remember telling me that you'd take Dru and hit the road and I'd never see you again?"

He rolled his eyes, pushing back on his swelling exasperation. "Are you joking? You're sayin' you wished I'd—"

"No, that's not what I'm saying. But that happened."

"A promise I mean, then! To someone I love." He slapped his chest right over his unbeating heart. "Wasn't tellin' you that because I loved you—was doing what I could to save this miserable world and the only person in it that I cared about." Well, *that* was a lie—or had been at the time, even if he hadn't known it, but he wasn't fool enough to elaborate on the how or why. "Promises I made to *you*, Buffy. To protect Dawn. To keep my gob shut. Let that hell bitch try to rip out my insides because I'd rather be dust than cause you pain. The promises I make to the people I love, I never go back on. So yeah, chip or no chip, I'm yours. I've never been anything but yours."

The incredulity that had burned in her gaze a moment earlier was

gone now, replaced by something softer. After a moment, she cleared her throat, trembling. "I'm... Spike, I can't say I'm sorry for thinking the things I do. I have to think them. I have to know, to be ready. I told you earlier, it's all on me. Everything is *always* on me. When Angel—"

"I'm nothing like—"

"I know you're not!" Now there was fire behind her eyes, fire that did little else but stoke his own. "Believe me, I got that memo loud and clear."

Of course she had. Of bleeding course. And that was the rub, wasn't it?

"I thought it might be a vampire thing, you know," she went on. "Whatever I get from spending time with you, that maybe it was... feeling dead and hanging around the dead or something like that. So when Angel called and wanted to see me I was out the door. It just made sense. At one point, he was the only thing in my world that made sense."

Bloody hell, he was going to heave. "Not that I don't love listening to all the ways I fail to measure up to that git, but—"

"But when I got there, it was...suffocating." Buffy blinked, focusing on the ground separating them. "He just wanted to know everything. And he was different. Or maybe I was different. He asked what was wrong and I was going to tell him. About Heaven and how happy I'd been. How...awful it is. How days now feel like they'll never end and I'm putting all my energy into getting through this moment because I know the next one will be just as bad. I wanted to tell him all of it. But I didn't." A tear spilled down her cheek, but she didn't react to it. "I thought I'd get there and things would be clear, that I'd be able to tell him everything I told you. But he...couldn't understand it. I sent him to Hell so there was no way he could understand it. And so I stayed, and I stayed, and I waited for it to get better but it didn't. Then I left. And he left. And it... He's supposed to be *it* and I couldn't stand being there. It was worse than it was when I'm here and I still don't know why. Why it's only you that I can be around without feeling like that."

Spike didn't move, didn't blink, not sure if he was really there at all. Standing in front of her, hearing those words, feeling how much she

meant them—meant them and resented them, he wasn't a bleeding idiot. That, along with his lack of a heartbeat or a sparkly soul, was the problem with him—him and any other bloke who would ever try to get close to Buffy. No amount of soul or demon would ever balance out the missing piece that was sodding Angelus.

"So," Buffy went on after a time, her voice softer, "when I say I know you're nothing like Angel, that's what I mean. If he were here, everything would be...worse. A lot worse. It wouldn't just be *them* anymore, it'd be *him* too, and I can't do that. But I also can't ever forget what happened with Angel. The last time I let a vampire close, people died. People I knew and cared about. My friends got hurt. The world nearly ended. I *can't* forget what happened because I had to kill him, and I don't want to ever have to kill you. That's why the chip matters."

The burning resentment that had been piping hot just a second ago fizzled out as though it had never been. "The chip matters because you believe it matters," he replied. "Because you think it's what keeps me from hurting you."

"Not me. *People*."

"And you're still not gettin' it. That *I* get it. If I hurt people, I hurt you. That loving you, not hurting you, means...what it means." Spike held her gaze, imploring her to hear what he was saying. Not just her take on what he said, the full thing. "The chip *isn't* a soul, Buffy."

She blinked, furrowing her brow. "Believe me, I—"

"Which means that if I lose it, *nothing* changes. I'm still me. Still the vamp who's head over for you. Not about to go make your life miserable just for kicks. Only thing I want in this world, I'm looking at." He was breathing harder now, couldn't help it. "The bloodlust? The violence? It's already here. Already in me. And believe me, if I didn't have it under control, you'd see me grabbin' my head more than I already do."

"But you *do* set your chip off, Spike! I've seen it! And if it's not there to stop you...don't you think it's *possible* that you could do something without meaning to? On instinct?"

He opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again. "Yeah. Suppose it could."

“And that—”

“No different from you, pet. Or sodding *Angel*. That drive is in you and it’s sure as fuck is in your sweetie bear.”

“But—”

“I know. You two have souls. I got somethin’ better.” When the barmy girl looked at him askance, true confusion blazing in her eyes, he almost growled at her again for not understanding. “I’ve got *you*. Believe me, pet, you’re not a girl that crawls out of a bloke’s head once you’re in there. You’re what’ll keep me from doin’ anything you’d have to stake me over. *You*. Knowin’ not only what it would do to you if I... But what it’d do to the way you look at me. Feel about me. You told me *maybe* and that’s all I can think of. Took long enough to get here and I’m bloody well not throwing that away. That’s all I need.” He paused. “*You’re* all I need.”

The next stretch of quiet was the longest he could remember sitting through, and there had been some contenders. But none like this, where everything hinged upon whatever Buffy said next. He wasn’t sure he could put it any more plainly than he had already, if there was another combination of words out there that might do the job better, and even less sure that, even if she *did* understand, it would be enough for her. Mostly convinced it wouldn’t, but so bloody hopeful all the same. More hopeful than he’d been since discovering he was in love with her—even since the snog outside of the Bronze.

“That...” Buffy cleared her throat. He thought she’d look away but she didn’t. She kept her gaze fixed on his. “That’s...a lot to put on me. You’re asking me to be your soul.”

“Not askin’. I’m telling you that you are.”

“But...that makes me responsible, don’t you get it? Anything bad happens—if you... It’d be a failing on my end.”

“Rot.”

“I can barely hold it together for a day. How am I supposed to be your...your *role model* when I can barely stand myself?”

“That’s not what I meant—”

“But that’s what it feels like. That’s what all of it feels like. I’m responsible. For the world, my friends, for you.” Buffy pressed her eyes shut, a tear making its way down her cheek. “I’m responsible for all of

it. And I don't want to be. It just... Don't you see how this makes everything harder?"

He didn't. For the life of him, he couldn't understand how telling Buffy that she was his line in the sand, the standard by which he'd make his decisions, would make things worse. He knew her inside and out, and it wasn't like that was about to change. She was who she was, and that's all that mattered.

Maybe this was something he couldn't understand because he lacked a soul. Probably was. And that thought hurt more than he could stand it.

"Find another way, then," Spike said hoarsely.

Buffy's eyes flew open. "What?"

"The chip ever stops working, we'll find another way. Magic, or what all. Maybe a decent shock-collar. Some way to keep me from hurtin' others. Can't tell me the Initiative docs are the only wankers who ever thought of it. There has to be something else."

"Spike, be serious."

"I bloody well am." He clenched his jaw, trying to swallow the scream that was suddenly clawing at his throat. "Won't be on you. But it'll be a choice—my choice—to keep muzzled."

Buffy was still staring at him, her eyes shining, her lower lip wobbling. Bugger, she looked about three seconds from sobbing her fool little heart out, which just went to prove he had no idea how to do this. Any of it. Every time he opened his mouth, he managed to say the wrong thing.

"You...you would do that?"

"Course I would," he muttered, kicking at the ground. "Not anything I wouldn't do for you, pet. Told me you can't breathe unless you're around me. Don't wanna muck that up for anything—don't wanna be a bloody *responsibility*."

She winced. "Spike—"

"And it's not like we need to worry about that now, anyhow. Turns out the chip works just fine." He forced a smile that felt more like a grimace—looked like one, too, if Buffy's reaction was anything to go off. "But if that's ever not the case, we'll figure it out. Is that...better?"

Another long stretch of silence, then Buffy slowly closed the

remaining distance between them. She stopped just a breath away, her sweet scent flooding his nostrils, her tear-tracked face open, her eyes searching. Then she lowered her gaze to his mouth and everything in him tightened.

"It means... You have no idea what that means. To me." She looked up again. "That you'd offer, even consider..."

"Like I said, nothing I won't do for you." Though he couldn't help the resentment that she'd need it, even after hearing everything else he'd told her. That his word couldn't be enough, but damn, he wouldn't push it. Wouldn't push *her any more* than he already had. Better to stop while he was ahead. "Buffy..."

She lifted herself up and caressed his mouth with hers. The touch was brief but blistering—not a passionate kiss, but something.

"I better check on Dawn," she said when she pulled back. "Will I... see you tomorrow?"

"Do you want to?"

Buffy nodded, holding his gaze. And that was something, too.

"Then you will."

She nodded again, then smiled. A soft smile, but one that reached her eyes, touched the corners of her face—one he felt as fully as he'd felt her kiss.

It was that smile that made everything worth it. The bruises to his pride, the frustration with the situation, Buffy's uncertainty about him, about them—everything. Getting Buffy to snog him was one thing, but for her to smile at him? Look at him like he mattered?

That was something worth dying for.

And he'd do whatever he could, including dust, to keep it.

## ONE OF THESE DAYS

LIFE COULD START GETTING EASIER ANY DAY NOW. SERIOUSLY, any day.

“This makes what?” Buffy asked, hovering over Willow’s shoulder to get a better look at the computer screen. “Three?”

“Four,” her friend replied. “Same as the others. Money was taken, threats were made, and bickering was had, but according to the victim, they saw nothing.”

Buffy straightened and sighed, running a hand through her hair. Invisible muggers—only on the Hellmouth. “And unless Anya has expanded our demon suspect pool, we are sitting at square one in terms of what the hell this is.”

“Tacky,” Willow grumbled, then blinked and looked up. “The attackers, not you. Or Anya. Except yes to Anya, but in a totally not judgmental way. More in an endearing, ‘That’s our Anya,’ kinda way.”

Buffy offered a small snort. Since the incident with Dawn, the car, and the demon, Willow had been more or less on her best behavior. The house had been purged of all things magicky—much to Dawn’s disapproval—and all magic activities had ceased. And though the first few days had been a little rough, Willow’s cold turkey approach seemed

to be working. She wasn't nauseous or shaking all over anymore, at least, and the initial bout of withdrawal-crabbiness had passed as well. This morning, she'd even managed to crawl out of bed before Buffy and was already at her work station in the dining room by the time Buffy had forced herself downstairs.

"I still think this might be tied to that museum robbery," Buffy said, taking a step toward the kitchen. It was too early to be thinking without the aid of coffee. "If that security guard would just come out of his coma..."

"Inconsiderate jerk," Willow agreed with a huff. "I did cross-reference invisible demons with ice-shooting demons and got diddly with a side of squat, so there's that." She paused, looked up. "Though I've been thinking... We've just kinda made the assumption these were demon-y occurrences. Maybe we're thinking too inside the box here."

Truth be told, Buffy had started to wonder the same thing, and not only because Spike had been rather insistent that the museum robbery had been committed by run-of-the-mill humans. The streak of mugging committed by invisible perpetrators just didn't fit any demon's MO, particularly when factoring in the victims' statements—the ones not known by the general public but known to the Scoobies, thanks to Willow's computer hacking. Everyone who had been mugged had mentioned that there had been more than one invisible assailant and that the unseen goons had spent a good part of the mugging bickering amongst themselves.

Not very demonic behavior.

"Spike's been telling me that the museum robbery wasn't demon-done for the past couple of weeks," Buffy said, forfeiting her quest for coffee and sliding into a seat across from Willow. "Really ever since it happened, but especially since no one has 'fessed up yet. Demons tend to not be shy when it comes to claiming credit for general evilness."

As she had for the last several days, Willow straightened at the mention of Spike, smirking a little and looking at Buffy out of the corner of her eye. "Speaking of platinum hotties..."

"It kinda wigs me out to hear you talk about Spike in the context of hottie."



“Because he’s a vampire?”

“No, because you’re gay.”

Willow rolled her eyes. “I wasn’t always! And hello, gay does not mean blind. I mean, still getting used to thinking about Spike and you as...well, Spike and *you*, but I’ll get there. Slow and steady wins the race.”

Buffy snickered and leaned back in her chair. “There is no me and Spike,” she said, though something in her chest twisted. All things *Spike* had been on the side of confusing lately, really ever since he’d told her he would volunteer for another chip-like solution should the chip go out for good. The magnitude of that offer, and that he’d meant it, that he would do it, kept striking her when she least expected it. Grabbing groceries, shelving books at the Magic Box, flipping through channels before bed, cutting through the fog of sleep just before it claimed her for good, and she’d think it. Remember the way he’d looked, how earnest he’d been, and her heart would leap, her throat would tighten, and she’d experience a sensation like she was falling.

That he knew just how important it was to keep her from shouldering any further burdens, that he’d make that sacrifice... She still didn’t know how to wrap her head around it.

Well, it wasn’t like Spike hadn’t been confusing before that. And, even though it remained intense, the confusion had ceased being a source of worry, becoming more comfortable.

“Uh huh,” Willow said, crossing her arms and favoring her with a knowing, annoying grin. “And just who were you out with so late, missy?”

“I told you, we... We’re just hanging out.” And, in yesterday’s case, hanging out had included ranting about that horrible Doris Kroger from Social Services and her *surprise* inspection which, okay, hadn’t been so much a surprise as it had been scheduled. But seeing as Buffy was dealing with a moody teenager, a detoxing best friend, and the hangover from Heaven, she couldn’t help but feel that some allowances should be made.

Instead, Doris had arrived just in time to hear Dawn—who, of

course, had been running late to school—mouth off about the accident that had landed her with a sprained arm. And if that hadn't been enough, there had been baggies filled with magical herbs that looked a whole lot like something else just out and ready for the only person in Sunnydale who didn't know about magic and demons to arrive at the wrong conclusion. To top everything off, Doris had made a potshot about Buffy's lack of a job and hinted strongly that her guardianship over her sister was tenuous at best.

The entire ordeal had left her feeling so frustrated, so *helpless*, she'd almost done something drastic to her hair just to feel in control of her own life again. But as she'd stood in front of the mirror, golden tresses in one hand and scissors in the other, she'd remembered the way Spike had tugged a twig loose the previous night after a tussle with a vamp, muttered something about keeping her hair *bloody perfect*, then given her a shy sort of grin that should have looked out of place on him but somehow hadn't.

As an alternative, Buffy had opted for retail therapy, which likely hadn't been the best course of action, given her hemorrhaging bank account, but it had either been that or an at-home beauty experiment gone wrong, which was how she'd ended up perusing the used CD selection at the indie record shop downtown. She truly hadn't gone out with the intention of buying anything, but a poster in the front window had caught her eye—really, more shouted at her, demanding her attention. It looked like a watercolor—or something similar, Buffy didn't know her painting styles very well—and depicted a screaming face against a blue backdrop. She'd stared at the poster until someone had bumped into her shoulder and brought her back to terra firma.

The face in the poster looked the way she felt, she'd realized. Not angry, just desperate and in pain, and out of control but also trapped. If asked, Buffy would have said it was impossible to capture her feelings, her mood, to understand them at all. But the artwork made her think that maybe someone did. So she'd gone inside and asked about it. Turned out it was from an 80s film, based off a popular album by one of her father's favorite bands. That alone had nearly been enough to convince her to skip it, but the screaming poster had persuaded her to overcome her kneejerk negative association and search out the music

itself, see if it spoke to her the way the artwork did. And yes, the store had had the album in stock for the low low price of fourteen ninety-nine.

She'd gone home, listened to the album through—both discs, as it was a twofer. The music was so far from her usual style she almost didn't make it through the first track, but something had told her to keep listening, and she had, lying on her bed, staring at her ceiling, and contemplating what to do about Doris Kroger. About the mortgage and the utility bill and all the other expenses piling on. About Willow and the magical contraband downstairs. About the way she felt about Spike these days.

That night, on patrol with Spike, she had let the vampire humor her with a bunch of what-ifs involving Doris Kroger that had all been twisted and dark in a way she'd found endlessly entertaining. Joking with a mass murderer about how she wished a certain person would just disappear had likely not been a good idea, but it had also felt good at the time. Cathartic.

Tonight she'd ask him for some actual thoughts on how to handle the situation. Solutions not involving dump sites and alibis, at the very least. Spike was ancient; he should have some insight.

"So?" Willow nudged her arm, forcing Buffy back to the present, that small, conspiratorial smile still on her lips. "What all do you do when *hanging out* with Spike? Has there been more kissage?"

Buffy opened her mouth to lie but somehow found herself telling the truth. "I kissed him again the other night."

"Whoa, what? I was just kidding! You've been holding out on me."

"It was...a thank you."

"A thank you," Willow repeated flatly.

Buffy nodded, staring at the table, figuring she'd gone this far so a bit further wouldn't hurt. "The night of the accident. With Dawn?"

"Oh."

"Yeah. Spike hit you."

"As the bruise on my mouth can attest, I do remember." Her friend released a long sigh. "But with the causing of injury to Dawn and being magically stoned, I really can't say I blame him. And apparently you didn't either, if you rewarded him with smoochies."

That last part came out somewhat bitterly, which Buffy supposed was deserved.

"I didn't reward him for hitting you with smoochies," she clarified calmly. "Long story short, up until he hit you, we both thought the chip had stopped working."

Willow's eyes went wide. "What? Oh god, how? Why? Buffy, that's—"

"He can hit me. We found out by accident that he can hit me. So we just assumed the chip was kaput." Buffy worked her throat. "Turns out it's just kaput for me."

"So...you're telling me when Spike hit me that night, he thought he was doing it as a regular unharnessed vampire?"

"He was reacting on instinct because you hurt Dawn."

"And you—"

"Look, I'm not saying violence is the answer, but yeah, Will, I understood. I wanted to take a swing at you too." Buffy looked up, daring herself not to break eye contact, even when Willow's eyes filled with tears. "The point is Spike found out *that* night that the chip was still working, which means he hadn't gone out and tried to bite anyone between us thinking it had stopped and then we ended up talking that night and he ended up saying that if the chip ever actually stopped working for good that he'd be okay with us finding another way to keep him from hurting others. Not because he wants to, but because he knows it'd be easier on me. I wouldn't have to worry about him hurting someone." She lifted a shoulder. "It...it was big, what he offered. So I kissed him. Not like the kiss after the musical, but it was..."

There were so many things that kiss had been. She wasn't sure where to start or what she wanted to share. Hell, just saying everything aloud had her going over the hugeness that was Spike's offer all over again. She knew how much he hated the chip, how much he resented it. That he would willingly surrender such a large part of himself, the part that allowed him to define who he was, meant...more than a lot. It was the biggest thing anyone had ever offered to do for her. On the sacrifice meter, it was right there at the top. And she had no doubt

that, if it came down to it, he'd go through with whatever she felt was necessary.

The way Spike loved was unlike any other force she'd ever encountered. Except that which she'd been willing to give, herself, once upon a time.

*Staying, fighting, sacrificing*, as she'd said the other day.

"And you're still not ready to say you're dating him?" Willow prodded gently. "Cause...wow with the huge, Buffy. That is slightly enormous."

Buffy shook her head, cleared her throat. "I dunno. There are...feelings. Lots and lots of feelings."

"Well, that's more than you were willing to say before. Go you."

"I just need to be sure. Careful."

"Cause it's Spike?"

"Because it's me and Spike. He's not exactly Mr. Stability, but... I dunno, Will. He loves me, which means we wouldn't be starting something on the same page." She blew out a breath, rose to her feet. "For now, I just need time."

Willow nodded, refocusing on the computer in front of her. "Well, if there are any more smoochies, I call dibs on girl-talk. It's a good way to keep my mind off things. Vicarious living is so underrated."

"Have you talked to Tara recently?"

"By talk, I assume you mean in a face-to-face capacity, not in a vaguely stalkerish way." Willow winced and shook her head. "I see her on campus, but I think the best bet is just to give her space. Prove that my magical rehab is a serious thing. And even then..."

Buffy nodded. Even then, there were no guarantees. Sometimes things just didn't work out.

And other times... Well, there was a wedding coming up.

"I better get ready to split," Buffy said. "Need to hit the Magic Box and see if Xander and Anya have any new info, then see who all is hiring. Someone around here has to make the big bucks."

*And apparently, that someone is me.*

But she didn't say that. She knew she should—try her hand at that honesty thing Spike had pressured her to do, but she thought it

possible she'd already maxed out her truthfulness capacity for the day where Willow was concerned.

Besides, that was a larger conversation, one she did not have the energy to get into just now. Not when there were applications to be filled out and invisible thieves to find.

Some progress was better than none.



"I KINDA FEEL GUILTY, using you as a bloodhound."

Spike favored her with his signature smirk, lifting his scarred eyebrow. "Doesn't stop you, though, does it?"

Buffy scowled and rubbed her arms. Despite whatever she'd told herself, much less Willow, it had been harder to look at him following that second kiss. The second kiss hadn't been anything like the first—that had been all passion and rhythm and, in some way, orchestrated. Like she'd been meeting the beats to a story, concluding the musical in a way that was expected—in other words, like Sweet had still been pulling the strings, dramatic exit or not.

This kiss hadn't been passionate, but it hadn't...well, *not* been, either. She'd known what she was doing, made the decision to press herself against him. It had been a thank you, yes, but on a scale far beyond the thank-you kiss she'd given him after Glory.

It had also been for her. Because she'd wanted to. Because, even if the kiss outside of the Bronze had been magically aided, it had still set her on fire and she'd loved every second.

"You getting anything?" she asked, gesturing to the scene in front of them. Not that there was much to gesture at. It looked like any other alley and smelled like one too. If Spike were able to pick up anything of use, she'd eat her stake.

"Spoiled milk, rotted meat, loads of vermin. Someone took a piss here not too long ago, too."

"Okay, anything *not* disgusting?"

"Dunno, pet. Bit of an overload on the old nose. Would be better if I had something to compare it to." Spike offered her a flat smile. *Sorry,*

that smile said. "Still reckon we oughta hit the museum. See if anythin' there is familiar."

"Would you be able to tell if something you smelled there was the same as something you smelled here?"

"Yeah. Could at that, but gotta keep in mind that this town is bloody small and it's possible that the same blokes who take out the trash here have visited there. Could pick up a trail that dead-ends."

Buffy sighed, dropping her shoulders. "Then what's the point of going to the museum?"

Spike shrugged. "Could also be that it doesn't. You wanna find these gits, don't you?"

"I don't even know what I'm looking for." She strode over to the opposite wall and leaned against it, hands in her pockets. "Invisible demons that also steal diamonds? Except no, we think these guys might be human. But who has the kind of technology to turn completely invisible?"

"You really asking that?"

She brought her head up. "Tell me you have an idea."

He was still looking at her like she'd lost the plot.

"Spike, talk now, judge later. Who do—"

"The sodding Initiative."

Oh. Well, now that he said it like that, Buffy felt like a moron. "Ah. Right. You mean that well-funded secret-ops group that Frankensteined their own creature feature from spare demon parts and operates under the cover of darkness. Granted, they're not supposed to exist anymore, but... Well, we know Riley went somewhere, don't we?"

When she looked up, Spike's gaze was on the ground, his expression guarded.

"It's a good thought," Buffy offered. "And one I'm dumb for having not had myself. But no, I don't think it's them."

He shot his head up. "No? How you reckon?"

"Each of the victims said that their invisible assailants were bickering amongst themselves. That, to me, screams civilian loud and clear." She released another sigh, dragging her foot along the concrete so it made an awkward scuffling sound. "Whatever their faults, and

they were aplenty, the Initiative knew how to keep a low profile. If they were playing with invis-tech, no one would know it."

"Yeah. Suppose you're right."

She knew she was. Wished she wasn't, because if the Initiative *was* back in town, that would at least give her somewhere to aim her frustration. "I'm pretty sure the universe made a promise that nothing can be easy right now," she muttered. "Not fair. It's not like I asked to be brought back to life."

A pained look flashed across Spike's face, there just long enough for her to know she hadn't imagined it before it was gone again. And though she knew she shouldn't, she couldn't help but warm slightly in response. Not that she'd brought Spike pain, but that he felt so deeply even throwaway comments like that one had hurt. In the not-so-distant past, she'd accused him of not knowing what feelings were, and boy howdy had that been off the mark. Sometimes—a lot of the time, actually, especially of late—she wondered if Spike didn't have a better grasp of what feelings were than anyone she knew. He certainly wore his more than any of her friends did.

"Something else happen?" he asked. "Hear anything from that bitch from Social Services?"

Buffy winced as her heart did the plummet-y thing it did anytime her thoughts took her too far into the future. "Not yet, but soon. And I still don't have a job. I must have filled out a bajillion applications today alone but it could be weeks before I get a paycheck, even if I do get an offer soon. We have negative money—"

"I can get money."

She snickered. "You can get kittens. And don't you *owe* kittens to that fishy mob boss guy?"

"I made good on it. And I wasn't talking about kittens. Actual dosh, pet. I can get that."

"Oh yeah. 'Hi, Mr. Bank Man. Here's enough to pay off the mortgage. Oh no, I didn't hear about the robbery the other day. How weird, and not at all suspiciously timed.'"

"Do you really think I can't do *anything* above-board?"

"Well, can you?"

He scowled. "That a challenge, Slayer?"



"I'm just saying, if you *can* get money, then you've done a good job making us think that you live off payment for the occasional good deed."

"I haven't taken a bloody cent from you in over a year. And never said that I *needed* it, did I? Was just incentive. I can play a mean hand of cards."

Buffy couldn't help it—she laughed. "Oh, because that's so very above-board."

"Gambling's not illegal, is it?"

"Your kind is in California."

He looked genuinely puzzled. "It is? That's... Bloody hell, your entire country is backwards."

"Pretty sure it's your country too." When Spike just gaped at her, she shrugged. "What? You in danger of deciding to leave me for my own good and head back to the motherland anytime soon?"

That seemed to catch him off guard and she didn't know why—that was until she rewound the words she'd just rattled off and realized exactly what she'd said. And though, yeah, she was slightly embarrassed at the way the words had come out, she was more taken with the knowledge that she'd pretty much meant what she'd said. Spike wouldn't be leaving Sunnydale if he decided to hit the road—he'd be leaving her. That's how she'd view it, for better or worse.

"Only way I'm leaving is if you ask me to," Spike said at length.

Buffy offered a small smile. "That's crap. I've asked you to before, yet here you stand."

"Well, I wagered you didn't really mean it."

"Oh, believe me, I meant it."

"Wish I'd done it, then? Scarpered when you told me to?"

If Spike had taken off and never come back any of the numerous times she'd told him to do just that, then Buffy wasn't sure what her world would look like. Over the past couple of years, he'd become a fixture of Sunnydale, someone she could rely on when everything else went to crap. Just trying to imagine how her life would have looked since the resurrection in a town minus Spike was enough to have her flush cold with panic. No Spike to take patrol if she couldn't make it. No Spike to watch over Dawn. No Spike to be there for *her*.

"No," Buffy said a moment later, the word somewhat choked for how fiercely she meant it. "No, I don't wish that at all."

The smile that touched his lips was soft and curious. Not unlike other smiles he'd given her, but also not one she saw often. And the urge to chase that smile with her mouth came upon her so suddenly she found herself stepping forward before her brain caught up with the rest of her.

Something else flickered across his face, like he knew what she'd been thinking. His gaze dropped to her lips and grew stormy with hunger. For a moment, she thought he might push, might see just how far she'd let him in if he pressed her to the wall. Test how much she really wanted him at a distance to get her to buckle. Part of her wanted him to because it would be so much easier if Spike were the one making the decisions. If she could just close her eyes and let him distract her for a few mindless hours with nothing but his mouth and hands and body. The temptation to give in had been persistent but manageable over the last few weeks, but it seemed to become less so with every second.

It struck her then, out of nowhere, something she'd known for a while but hadn't acknowledged.

The *not right now* she'd given him would eventually become *right now*. That was the path she was on.

The path she *wanted* to be on.

Only she wasn't ready. Not now, and for all the reasons she'd told Willow earlier. Even if she was feeling warm fuzzies for Spike, warm fuzzies were a long ways off from love, and it wouldn't be fair to either of them to start with such an imbalance between them. Also, Buffy wasn't one hundred percent certain the warm fuzzies were in fact warm fuzzies and not just...transference or something else. Could be she was feeling this way right now because Willow had put the idea in her head with her incessant asking.

And, well, she just wasn't ready. Not yet.

"It'd be easier to get a job if I was qualified for, well, anything," she said, determinately steering them back on topic. "Like...I could be a receptionist. Answering phones is definitely on my list of skills. And

while I haven't always been the most diligent note-taker, I did okay in college."

"You'd be bored outta your head."

"But making a steady paycheck." Buffy sighed, rolled her head back. "Right now I think the only place that will hire me and get me on payroll this week rather than next is the Doublemeat Palace."

"You're joking." His voice was sharper than she'd expected, like he was seriously disappointed in her. "Buffy, that place'll kill you."

"Correction—it would try. And if it succeeded, Willow would just bring me back."

Spike gave a small growl. "You'd seriously flip burgers for a bloody living before asking me for help? Don't want me breaking any sodding *state* law, fine. Gimme a weekend in Vegas and I'll get you all the dosh you need, all tidy like."

"They kick you out for cheating there."

"So I won't cheat."

Buffy arched an eyebrow. "Then how will you win?"

"Oh, someone thinks she's funny." He favored her with a dry look. "Fine. Lookin' for something more up your alley, what about old Teeth's offer?"

"I'm sorry, was that sentence supposed to make sense?"

"Bloke I owed the kittens to. Fella who looks like a shark?" Spike withered somewhat under her stare, then shrugged defensively. "Just thinkin' if you need fast cash, I'd wager he'd still love to have you on payroll."

"The...shark guy who you owed kittens to?"

"Right." He ran a hand down the back of his neck. "Think about it, Slayer. Giving demons and other baddies the old one-two and earning while you go."

"Again with the bank not taking payments in kittens."

"You really think a bloke like Teeth gets to where he is dealin' in just one sodding currency?" Spike retorted. "Look, I might not like the berk, but it'd be honest work."

"Honest. Beating up demons."

"How is it different from what you're doing now?"

"I'm not on some *demon's* payroll, for one thing."

"So you're giving it away. Look at it like this—Teeth's a bloody bastard, sure, but he's harmless to your lot."

"My lot," she repeated numbly.

"Yeah. Violence against demons strictly, or anyone daft enough to owe him. And you'd keep on top of the big brewin' evil. Demons talk, especially when they're afraid they're gonna lose a limb. Anything major's going down in Sunnyhell, you'll be the first to know." When she answered with a stare, Spike grumbled and held his hands up. "Wouldn't suggest anything you'd have to stake me over, yeah? Just sayin' it'd work. Get the money you need by doing what you're good at, and staying on top of the comings and goings of the Hellmouth. Tell me this is a bad idea."

Buffy opened her mouth to do just that—because working for a demon? In no way could it be considered a *good* idea. Demons were bad. Not exactly breaking news. But she hesitated a second too long, giving her mind the chance to swoop in and start whispering things like *he has a point*. The one thing she was most qualified to do was bust demon butt. It would fold nicely into her actual job of slaying, too, and she wouldn't have to come up with a creative story to tell her boss in the event of apocalypse.

"This... Is his name really Teeth?"

Spike grinned, relaxing just enough to let her know he'd been prepared for a fight. Possibly with fists. "Easier to remember than Bro'os. Also more intimidating. Sharks are known for their chompers, yeah?"

She supposed that made sense. "Is he really... Is it just against demons?"

"Far as I know, yeah. And, Slayer, if he puts a fin outta line, you could just do what you do best. No worse for the wear and you'll have earned some cash in the meantime. Beating up demons who owe other demons money and gettin' paid for it." He shrugged. "What've you got to lose?"

Yeah, the more she thought about it, the more sense it made. Which meant either she definitely had come back wrong from Heaven or being dead had really screwed with her scruples. "I'd need paper work," Buffy muttered. "Employment stuff to give to Social Services

that doesn't look like I'm working for demons. Tax forms and...and stuff."

"Reckon that could be arranged."

"And if I'm caught, then there goes Dawn."

"So don't get caught."

And then there were times when Spike's eviler tendencies were almost impossible to ignore. She scowled at him. "Don't get caught? Thanks. I'm sure no criminal has ever tried that."

Spike rolled his eyes. "Buffy, it comes down to it, we fight to keep Dawn. Get your good-for-nothing Watcher on the phone so those Council wankers can step in. Not sure why you haven't done that to begin with, mind. Seems to me if Rupert was getting paid to manage you, you oughta get somethin' for being the bloody Slayer. If that doesn't work, we try somethin' else. But I promise you, as long as I'm not dust, the Bit's going nowhere."

Well, that was certainly a way to look at things—a way that had never occurred to her before. And maybe it was careless, but she found she was comforted by Spike's use of *we*. Like it was a given—like she and he were a package deal, and her battles were his too. It wasn't just talk, either. If Spike had convinced her of anything, it was that he was in it with her, whatever that meant. She wouldn't have to worry about facing whatever came next alone.

That was something she didn't think she'd had before in any of her relationships. Both Angel and Riley had been supportive, sure, but when it came down to her problems, it was all, "*You'll figure something out. You always do. You're the Slayer.*" Their confidence in her had been heady, but also overwhelming. It had left her feeling smothered and unheard, like her concerns were incidental because her triumphing over them was just a given. Suddenly, whatever she was tasked with facing wasn't just a matter of coming out on the other side, but proving herself again so she didn't let anyone down.

Maybe that was why she hadn't been able to breathe around Angel. More than just the awkwardness of bemoaning being alive to the guy she'd once sent to Hell, but knowing that part of him would just expect her to be okay. Believe that something as traumatic as having been ripped from Paradise was something she could compartmentalize

and overcome, the way she did everything else because Buffy wasn't just Buffy, she was also the Slayer.

"Buffy?"

She blinked and shook her head, meeting Spike's concerned eyes. "Huh?"

"You went off just then."

"Oh. I was just...thinking." Buffy straightened, brushing along her hips to give her hands something to do. "We should hit a few other places, then maybe take a sweep of the cemeteries."

"Yeah," Spike replied hesitantly, taking his spot beside her. "All right."

"And...you can get me a meeting with Shark Guy? Teeth?"

Once again, she felt the tension melt off him. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. You're right. I'm not saying there's not a possibility I'll be slaying him in the future, but...beating up demons is what I'm best at. And keeping an ear to the ground about everything else sounds... smart." She swallowed, hesitated, then reached out and grabbed his hand. Like it was nothing, normal. Just walking around downtown Sunnydale holding hands with the vampire she wasn't dating but wanted to date someday.

Spike didn't say anything for a moment, but she heard him breathing hard. Felt his surprise, his confusion, as he looked from her face to their joined hands and back again. The question was there, burning in the air between them, but he didn't voice it. Just accepted what was happening and gave her hand a gentle squeeze.

"If Teeth can't get me legitimate paperwork, then I'll get Willow on it," Buffy continued in her best everything-is-normal-nothing-is-changing voice. "All those computer hackery skills gotta be good for something. And if that blows up in my face, then..." She turned her head to meet his gaze, her heart somersaulting at what she saw burning there. "We'll fight to keep Dawn."

Spike still didn't say anything, and the longer he remained silent, the harder her pulse raced. But then he didn't have to say anything—it was all on his face. And yeah, whoever it was that had first sold the line that vampires couldn't feel anything but rage and bloodlust had a lot of

explaining to do. No one had ever looked at her the way Spike did, soul or otherwise.

Then, at last, he grinned.

“Bloody right, we will. It comes down to it, those wankers at Social Services won’t know what hit ’em.”

She had nothing to say to that, so she settled for squeezing his hand again, and trying not to cry when he squeezed right back.

## MONEY

*Grab that cash with both hands and make a stash*

HE WAS MAN ENOUGH TO ADMIT THAT HE WAS BLOODY TERRIFIED. Talk a good game all he liked, but Spike left the Slayer the night she asked him to put her in touch with Teeth berating himself for having suggested it in the first place. He'd never had much success with the brain-to-mouth filter, which seemed especially dangerous now that he and Buffy were...

Well, whatever they were.

And they *were* something. They hadn't talked about the kiss she'd given him the night of Dawn's accident, and he hadn't asked when she'd slid her hand into his on patrol, though everything in him had been pushing for an explanation. Part of him worried that she'd withdraw if he brought it up, tell him it meant nothing, and then the soft touches and stolen glances would stop altogether. Buffy had been nothing if not forthright about what she needed right now; she also knew what he wanted, acknowledged it openly if not often, so all the power was hers. Whatever it was he'd been doing thus far had worked, so it wasn't the time to get greedy.

But bollocks, hearing her worry about money, about whether or



not the State would take her sister away, had triggered his own innate need to care for and tend to the woman he loved. Solve her problems, if he could, or give her a way to solve them herself. Like when Dru had been sick and he'd hired out those assassins to take care of the Slayer while he searched for her cure. It hadn't been what he'd wanted—had seemed a bloody cop-out—but it had been *necessary* at the time. So when Buffy had shot down his offer to get dosh for her, he'd blurted out the one suggestion he could think of that she was suited for and likely paid well enough to keep her floating just fine. Having a slayer on payroll would make Teeth the baddest boss on the West Coast, and he'd pay out the bloody nose to keep it that way.

So Spike had made the suggestion, and it had sounded all well and good. Logical, even, the more he'd talked. But later that night, the second and third thoughts had come storming in. How it could all go tits-up, how Buffy might end up hurt or worse. How easy it'd be to make a wrong move and have the world come down on her and the Little Bit.

But once Buffy was set on something, not even the apocalypse could get in her way. So it was on Spike to seek out the bloke. See if the offer was still good, *make* it good if it wasn't, then put the fear in him of whatever it was shark demons feared to do things right by his girl.

"You put her in danger, do something squirrely, get her in trouble with the local lads or so much as sniff around a human, you'll have us both to answer to," Spike had snarled, gripping Teeth by the lapels of a suit that made the Randy get-up look right posh. "You don't want that, mate. Not from me and *especially* not from her. You hear me?"

"I hear you, I hear you!" Teeth had whined, flailing rather uselessly and looking, dismayed, at the piles of dust that had been his vampire security force. "Can you stop staking my guys? They're hell to replace."

Spike had eyed the dust piles warily, thinking fast and hard. Then, with a shake of his head, he'd raised his gaze to the shark again. "We're a package deal, the Slayer and me."

"Believe me, pal, I'm gettin' that."

"I mean you want her on the payroll, I go too."

At that, Teeth had regained some of his composure. "You on the payroll? Spike, I never make a habit of paying demons that owe me."

"Don't owe you anymore, do I?"

"It's only a matter of time."

"Won't be so hard up for dosh if you're lining my pockets, will I?" Plus, it'd give him a chance to keep *his* ear to the ground. While Buffy would be looking for indicators of the next big evil, Spike could look out for indicators that Teeth was about to land the Slayer in a heap of trouble and put a stop to it before the bastard could make waves. "What do you say?"

Teeth had huffed a little laugh, shoving himself free by virtue of the fact that Spike wasn't holding onto him quite so fiercely anymore. He'd shaken his enormous head and dusted himself off. "I've got the Slayer, don't I? Why would I need you?"

There had been times—a lot of them, truth be told—where Spike had only survived conversations by bluffing through his fangs. There was a rush in that, a thrill in knowing that the penalty for being caught in a lie was death, which made the victory of making it to the other side all the sweeter. Yet there was also something in knowing that he actually had the ace.

"Because," Spike had said slowly, "I'm the one who bloody talked the Slayer into hearin' you out in the first place. Could just as easily talk her out of it."

"You have that much power over her?"

"No. But she listens to me."

Once upon a time, that would have been a bluff, too. But not now. Buffy did listen to him, trusted him at least a little, and he would hold onto that as long as he could.

Either way, the assertion had done the trick. Teeth had agreed, begrudgingly or otherwise, to let Spike take up the mantle of debt collector right alongside his lady, though Spike had a few ground rules of his own. The first being that Buffy remain none the wiser that Spike was helping out. While he wasn't sure how to smuggle his earnings into her bank account just yet—minus the price for smokes, blood, and booze—he trusted he could. Anya was decent enough with money so it could be she'd have a solution.

The second being that if Teeth ever started bragging that he had the Slayer or Spike under his control, Buffy got to choose the terms of the severance package.

Spike had no intention of letting slip that he was also working for Teeth, though in a town like Sunnyhell and with so much bloody overlap in their roles, it was only a matter of time before Buffy found out. Thus, when she helped herself into his crypt that night, eyebrows already arched and a somewhat exasperated look on her face, he was prepared.

"So, I was beating up a demon at work today," Buffy said by way of greeting as the door swung shut behind her, "and you'll never guess what he told me."

Spike snorted, fishing out his ciggies. "Probably somethin' along the lines of 'Ow,' and 'Please stop.'"

"Well, there was that, but the oddest thing was he kept insisting he'd already paid up. Some Billy Idol wannabe had thrashed him for payment last night."

"I swear, the chip stops workin', first thing I'm gonna do is off that look-thievin' git before we look into getting me harnessed again. That's fair, right? I'm volunteering to go back on the leash, I oughta get at least one freebie kill."

Buffy crossed her arms and tried for stern. He could tell her heart wasn't in it—her lips were twitching too much. "You want to explain?"

"Explain what?"

"What the Big Bad is doing being some demon's lackey?"

Fuck, Buffy referring to him as the *Big Bad* was verbal foreplay. While he certainly didn't miss the Buffybot, he'd programmed the thing to call him that for a reason. "I'm no one's lackey," he managed to say, hoping she'd take the edge in his voice as irritation rather than lust. And to be fair, with her there was an even balance of both at any given time. "Makin' an honest living, same as you."

"Yeah." She snorted. "That sounds likely."

"What? Got the cash to prove it."

"Since when do you *work*?"

"Since I told you I could get money and you laughed me off." He shifted his weight between his feet, suddenly nervous and not sure

why. While he hadn't intended Buffy to find out about his new vocation, he hadn't really anticipated her being more than bemused at the discovery. Unfortunately, the bird was still bloody difficult to read.

"So, you decided to join the workforce to prove a point?"

"No, I wanted to help." The words were out before he could stop them, and bugger, even *he* heard how ridiculous they sounded. Never mind it was the truth. When Buffy did little more than blink her confusion at him, Spike heaved a sigh and waved a hand. "Got a lot on your plate, don't you? Thought I could..."

"What?"

He shrugged, feeling twitchy and defensive and resenting the hell out of it. "Give you more. Knew you wouldn't take it if it wasn't an honest living—or at least as honest as what you're doing."

"You..." Now she looked confused. "You're working to help *me*?"

"Well, yeah." He glared at her. "Don't sound so surprised."

"And you're getting paid in actual US dollars, not kittens?"

Spike huffed, shook his head. "Wouldn't be much help if that wasn't the case, now would it?"

"I... This is crazy. In what world did you see me taking your money?"

"In the world of me not giving you a choice. It's my money, as you said. Can do with it as I see fit." He held her gaze, refusing to blink when she just stared at him. This was one fight Buffy was not going to win. "I want to do this."

"Spike—"

"I'm takin' my share. Not going without. Need a way to pay for the essentials, don't I?"

"The essentials being?"

"Blood, smokes, and booze. 'Bout all I need, anyway."

Another long moment in which she did nothing but stare at him, but he could have sworn he felt it when the tension began to drain from her. After a beat, the corner of her mouth kicked up and he realized she was fighting a grin. "Here I thought you just stole those things," she said in a softer tone. "I have you paying for goods and services now, too?"

"Oi. Don't go spreadin' that around. I have a reputation, you know."

"Spike, you spend all of your nights hanging out with the Slayer and not trying to kill her." Now he knew he wasn't imagining it—she *was* amused. "This was after you dedicated your summer to hunting down your own kind and babysitting a fifteen-year-old. I think it's safe to say your rep is shot."

"Don't have to sound so bloody happy about it," he grumbled. "And it's not like I've given up filching things altogether. Lifted a twenty from Harris's wallet while he was makin' a fool of himself at the Bronze the other night."

Buffy's eyebrows shot skyward. "That's how you paid for my Sex on the Beach? Wait—no. Plausible deniability." Her face had fallen back into a scowl, but her eyes were still twinkling. Like she found things like petty theft adorable rather than an indication that the monster was still very much inside the man. "So you're keeping cash for the necessities but not necessarily using it on the necessities."

"Yeah, that's about the long and short of it."

"And the rest is for me."

"For you and the Bit. Can't have the Summers girls starving on my account."

He thought she would argue with him some more, and though she didn't, he could tell that at least part of her wanted to. And watching her straddle the line the way she was, knowing exactly what she would have said a few weeks back and understanding that things had changed in the interim, was nothing short of fascinating. Spoke louder than the devil on his shoulder ever could about how right the decisions he'd made of late had been. While he and Buffy might be moving at a snail's pace, they were moving, and she kept giving him nibbles of something that tasted infinitely better than the fantasy ever could.

"Buffy." He stepped forward. "Let me help."

"It feels wrong."

God, this woman was insufferable. "Why?"

"Because it's easy. Because I want to." She swallowed and looked down, tucking a fallen chunk of hair behind her ear. "So far, this gig is... really good. But between the plumbing catastrophe of Not Too Long

Ago, the mortgage, utilities, Mom's outstanding medical bills, Dawn's school things, and keeping food in the fridge, it goes away really fast."

The words made sense but the meaning was lost on him. "Your problem with taking money from me is that it's easy."

Buffy frowned, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Don't say it like that."

"Like what?"

"Like I'm out of my mind or something."

"You mean you aren't?" When she threw him a dirty look, Spike swallowed a chuckle and took a step closer to her. "No reason not to trust something just because it's easy."

"Easy in my world means evil."

Of course it did. He rolled his eyes, clenching his jaw tight. "If it were comin' from Rupert, would you take it?"

"What?"

"If your Watcher decided to clue in and realize that you're drownin', you'd take whatever he threw you, yeah?"

The crypt wasn't so dark that he missed it when she flushed.

"So it's taking money from *me*," Spike continued flatly. "Not just from anyone."

"It's not... Okay, maybe it is." Buffy looked down, shifting her weight from foot to foot. "It's more than that, though. If Giles gives me money, it's because he thinks of me like a daughter. Not because..."

"He's in love with you."

"Yes, that is exactly the kind of *gross* I was trying to avoid saying."

"You're afraid you'll feel like you owe me." Some of the tightness in him unwound—some but not all. Truth be told, Spike couldn't say the thought hadn't occurred to him. He was evil, after all, and it hadn't been that long since he'd looked to score points with her in shallow ways that had only reinforced the divide between them. That particular idea hadn't taken root, though, rather remained quiet, and he'd done his best to bury it under intention. Like that night at her house when he'd wondered briefly if telling Buffy she'd come back wrong would hurry her into his bed, knowing that he could push her buttons but also that those words would cause her pain, aside from being a flat lie.

"So how do we get around this, then?" Spike asked when Buffy failed to speak up. "The only reason I took the bloody job was to help you, love. But if it's gonna make things worse—"

"No. It's not. It's my stupid brain that's making things worse."

He offered a flat grin. "Not like there's not precedent, yeah? Can't say I didn't picture ways you might feel inclined to pay me back." And before she could answer that with the nose punch he knew was coming, Spike brought his hands up. "I know. No need to say it."

When he looked up, the disgust he'd imagined he'd see in her eyes wasn't there. Well, that was something.

"Spike, if anything happens with you and me, it has to be even. Because I want it and not because I—"

"I know. Wouldn't fancy you that way, anyway."

Buffy arched an eyebrow.

"Fine," Spike spat, rolling his eyes again. "I'd fancy you any way I can get you. Just bein' near you is torture some nights. Having you so close, talkin' to me like a person. And I know how hot you get when we're fighting, which doesn't make anything easier."

"That's—"

"I know what it is. Or what you think it is." He pressed his eyes closed, drew a breath, then opened them again. "This is what I do, all right? Someone I love needs help and I wanna help them. Not sayin' I've made the right calls—made loads of bad ones. Things that haunt me even now." He paused, trying like hell to keep the image of his mother shoved back in the shadows of his memory where it belonged. "You don't want the help, I won't make a thing out of it. But if you take it... Buffy, what you and I have right now is real. If it ever becomes anything more, I want that to be real, too. Take the money or don't. That's not gonna change."

Buffy studied him for a moment, her gaze narrowed before she released a sigh and dropped her shoulders, a short laugh riding off her lips. "Do you have any idea how much easier life was when you were trying to kill me?"

He couldn't help but grin at that. "For me, too, pet."

"Too bad you had to go and fall in love with me."

"Right."

Buffy sucked on the inside of her cheek, then nodded. "So, if you're going to help me, I think that means you come around the house more. Maybe we can meet there for patrol rather than in your crypt."

"So you want me to leave the graveyard where you work to meet you for work? Not a lot of sense in that plan, is there?" But Spike was grinning broadly now, warmth flooding his chest. "Here I thought you didn't like it when I dropped by."

"And here I thought *you* knew that I'd already told Willow you might be around more."

"Yeah, that swept me right off my feet."

"Do you work to be this big a pain in the ass?"

"Comes naturally."

This felt good. Comfortable and right. Only thing righter would be if she let him steal a kiss off her sweet lips—or better yet, pull her against him so he could feel all her warmth and softness and she could feel exactly what she did to him. But this was something—a whole lot of something. The more she gave, the more he wanted—the more he could see himself having.

Buffy was making room in her life for him. More than that, she wanted him to know he was welcome to it.

"So, when do you feature I should drop by, then?" Spike asked, nodding to the door. And without needing anything else, Buffy fell into place beside him, and they stepped into the cool night air, ready to take on the world's baddies and then some.

"What do you want to help pay for?"

He frowned. "What's that? Not followin'."

"I think that's how we do this," Buffy explained. "I set up a budget based on what Teeth pays me. I can get Anya to help me make one."

"Anya?"

"She who likes numbers and was the first person to suggest I take a paycheck for slayage? I kinda think this'll be up her alley." She blew out a breath. "Not that I've told her or Willow or anyone what I'm doing for money. I somehow think it might be hard to explain the whole *working for the demon that tried to kill us* thing. Hell, I'm still all up in my head as to whether or not that was the right call."

"Has Teeth made you do anythin' you didn't want?"



"No. In fact, every time he asks me to settle a problem of his, he makes a point of giving me a rap sheet of the demon's many, many indiscretions." He caught her peeking at him from the corner of her eye. "I don't suppose you had anything to do with that."

"Haven't the foggiest what you mean." Spike winked at her and nearly tumbled over his own bloody feet when Buffy grinned and rolled her eyes back at him. "You could always point out that Teeth was there to kill me, not you."

"Something that would score some massive points if Willow didn't know we're...friends now." She paused. "Also, I don't think that's true—that Teeth was only there to kill you. I seem to recall them asking for the Slayer."

"Well, just goes to show the bloke has good taste if he was after the both of us." He was ready with a smirk when she tossed him one of her less-than-amused looks this time. "So you get the former demon to help you sort out the financials. What then?"

"Then we figure out how much extra I need, and that's where you come in."

A frown tugged at his lips. "Hold on—thought I was just giving you the dosh."

"Well, you thought wrong, Mister. If I'm taking your money, I'm doing it my way."

Spike scoffed, both irritated and amused. Everything with her had to be an argument, one way or another. "All right. So what's your way?"

"Once I have an idea of my cash flow sitch, you and I will decide which specific bills you're going to help with. Preferably ones that you also benefit from."

"So you don't feel like you owe me."

"Exactly. So if you're at the house, you get to enjoy all that electricity too. Or we keep Spike-friendly food in the fridge."

He chuckled, shaking his head. "You're a strange bird, Slayer."

"Says the strangest vampire on the planet."

"Well-matched then, yeah?"

That slipped out with a little more careless regard than he'd intended, but hell, it was out there now and he couldn't swallow it back.

"Looks like," Buffy replied.

And hell, either he was fooling himself, or the prospect truly didn't bother her. The disgust he'd gotten used to hearing in her voice was absent. If anything, she sounded... Well, he didn't know, but he wanted to think she was all right with it. Maybe even a little more than all right.

Moments like this one were the ones he was fighting for—the ones worth all the patience in the world. Buffy had kissed him, called him a friend, taken his hand the other night, and each of those things wouldn't have happened if he'd let his mouth run away with him. If he'd succumbed to his darker urges, his demon's impatience, to demand more from her than she was willing to give, he wouldn't be here. Neither would she.

All of this was worth it. And more than that—she was worth it. The fact that she kept coming to him, kept seeking him out, meant he was doing something right. Something to make her life easier. This was a Buffy who smiled more, who seemed less trapped inside her own head, and a bit happier to be alive every time he saw her.

"We still have invisible ice demons to find," Buffy said a moment later, breaking the silence. "There was another mugging last night, apparently. I thought getting to beat up on demons would get someone to talk but..."

"The gits are human."

"I know. I have accepted that as fact and not conjecture."

"Took you long enough."

She snickered. "Did I ever really argue with you on that?"

No, she hadn't, but that didn't mean he was going to pass up an opportunity to tease her. "Summers, I reckon you'd argue with a spring day if you had a mind to."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Means you're a headstrong bitch when you wanna be."

Buffy sighed, shaking her head. But she was still smiling. "I honestly can't tell if you're more annoying when you're wrong off your ass or when you hit the lottery and are right for once."

"Thanks ever so."

“And since your super nose was a big ole bust, do you have any other strokes of brilliance that might help us find these idiots?”

Spike smirked, placed a hand at the small of her back, and nearly purred when she didn’t shuck him off. “Got plenty of other senses to test out, pet. Lead the way.”

## LET THERE BE MORE LIGHT

IT WAS AMAZING HOW MUCH AN INDEBTED DEMON WOULD TALK.

Not that this particular demon was indebted to anyone that Buffy worked for. She'd just dropped by Willy's to make an unexpected collection call on a chaos demon—not *the* chaos demon, she'd checked—and lo and behold, a spindly little twerp had started shaking and confessing to, well, everything from the stick of gum he'd lifted from a convenience store to the big bad boss guy to whom he apparently owed a dozen Sphinx kittens. The big bad boss guy who was not Teeth, apparently, but some mobster from the east coast the skittish little demon had made tracks to ditch.

That wasn't the impressive part, though Buffy would dutifully let her employer know—both as a courtesy and as a not-so-veiled warning that she wouldn't tolerate any turf wars. No, the rest was what the twerp, whose name was Harvey, had blurted in the midst of begging for his limbs.

That a few weeks back, a human someone had been in Willy's shopping for mystical mind control abilities.

"He said something about their gang wanting a bunch of sex slaves!" Harvey had yelped, flailing his arms—having been upside down

at the time, suspended in midair by his ankles. "They were working on a doo-hickey but it wasn't working."

"Define doo-hickey," Buffy had snapped, tightening her grip, "or I start breaking off parts."

Harvey had acquiesced without hesitation. Some sort of device that, when clamped on the neck, would make the subject essentially a robot. And it was funny that he should say *robot* because that made Buffy remember a certain perky blonde who had worn her face and called her friends by the wrong names. And while Harvey had been adamant that the guy asking for mind control powers hadn't been Warren Mears, his description had left little to the imagination. Short, nasal, perpetually nervous, and attempting to cut a more imposing figure than he did.

And a quick trip to the Levinson household confirmed that Jonathan was still in town. Yes, he'd moved back in with his parents after deciding to drop out of UC Sunnydale, though he wasn't home much anymore. Not since he'd met that nice Mears boy. They and a third guy—the Levinsons hadn't known his name—were thick as thieves these days. In fact, Mrs. Levinson had been pretty certain that Jonathan intended to move in with them, and wasn't it great that her little boy finally had friends?

"Of course it's Warren," Buffy muttered, digging through her weapons chest. "I'm such an idiot."

"Buffy," Willow said from her place at the desk, undoubtedly wearing the same frown she'd had on ever since Buffy had exploded through the front door, "we don't even know if this demon was telling the truth."

Buffy paused to throw an annoyed look over her shoulder. "Who do we know who raises demons, Will? Who do we know who has the tech-savviness to create something as sophisticated as a robot that can fool a vampire but has the social skills of a nine-year-old?"

The tingles on the back of her neck were all the warning she got. She hadn't even heard the front door open.

"Who's foolin' me now?" Spike asked as he stepped into the room, an unlit cigarette dangling between his lips. He took a moment, arched

an eyebrow, and nodded at the weapons chest. "Take it someone had a good day at work?"

"Finally got a lead on our invisible diamond thieves," Buffy replied, tossing him a battle-ax somewhat blindly. "Remember your buddy Warren?"

"Can't say I do," he replied, catching the weapon without missing a beat.

"Yeah, because you have so many friends it's hard to keep up with."

That arched eyebrow just kept stretching higher until he finally blinked and removed the cigarette, giving her an unimpeded look at his mouth. "My, my, someone's in a temper tonight." Spike glanced at Willow. "Be a love and tell me now if it's somethin' I did or if I'm just in the crosshairs as per usual."

Willow made a face. "Kinda both?"

He huffed. "Figures. Well, what's it you think I've done now, Slayer? And if it's about nicking the hooch again, you might as well just stake me now. It's the only evil I can get in anymore."

Buffy growled—yeah, she heard it, and it was a growl. Or whatever humans did that approximated growls. She plucked up one of her more menacing blades, dimly aware that her selections for tonight's intimidation visit were heavy on the lethal and, in Spike's case, useless, but if all went well, nothing would have to be swung. "You're making your own money now," she said, popping to her feet and slamming the chest shut. "You couldn't spare a twenty?"

He just grinned that annoying Spike grin that did absolutely nothing for her—that was her story and she was sticking to it—and rocked on his heels. "More fun my way."

"Maybe not now," Willow suggested in a loud whisper, though she looked closer to amused than worried now that Spike was there. "Buffy cranky."

"Yeah, but she's so cute when she's cranky."

Buffy raised her blade. "I will take your head off."

Spike snorted and brought up the battle-ax she'd tossed him. "Could have a right go of it here if you like. Or we could find this Warren bloke who's got your knickers in a twist. And maybe you could fill a fella in while you're at it?"

One of the things she'd discovered over the last few weeks was that Spike could still push her buttons just fine—get her hackles raised, and have her ready to pummel him into next Thursday with the right combination of words and attitude. He could still do all of that, yet there was a playful undercurrent to verbally sparring with him that hadn't been there before. Or if it had been, she'd ignored it. Because even though Buffy was humming with what she knew was genuine irritation, part of her was sparking with something else—something close to exhilaration. He could get under her skin like no one she'd ever met and did whenever the opportunity presented itself, but there was no malice in it. Spike just liked the back-and-forth. He liked being challenged on any level, and he especially liked being challenged by her.

He'd once told her that dancing was all they'd ever done. It hadn't made much sense at the time, but it did now. She saw the steps clearly—the aggressive strides she made, the ones he met with fluidity and grace that she once wouldn't have thought him capable of. Even when they were fighting for real, there was a sense of order to it that she'd taken for granted before. Like she knew she could channel the worst parts of herself and lob everything she had at him, and he'd give just as good as he got, but still be there to help her pick up the pieces.

"Warren," Buffy said, forcing her thoughts back to the present, "is the skeezoid who made your sex doll."

Spike's eyes widened. "My sex—ahh. Right." He hummed as though in thought, tilting his head. She couldn't say she'd known what to expect, though the odds seemed evenly distributed between embarrassment, an apology, and a chagrined shrug. What she got was a snicker and a nod. "So, we gonna go bust some heads, Slayer? Or are you gonna glare at me all night?"

Annoyingly sexy jerk. "I can do both."

"Believe me, I know." He winked and gestured at the door. "The night awaits, then."

Buffy glowered at him a moment longer, not daring herself to glance in Willow's direction, as she was certain her friend was fighting a losing battle with a gigglefit. Holding her head high, fist tight around her blade, she stomped past Spike and out the door.

"Ta, Red. Don't wait up," Spike called from behind her before using

that preternatural speed of his to land by her side. “You know where you’re goin’, love?”

“Shut up.”

To her annoyance, all he offered was a low chuckle. “You really are in a temper tonight, aren’t you? What’s the hurt? Thought findin’ your jewel thieves would put you in better spirits.”

Yeah, so had she. In truth, Buffy wasn’t altogether certain what about this bothered her so much, except that it had taken a stupidly long time to put all the pieces together. Sunnydale wasn’t a large town and its super tech-savvy residents were in short supply. The only other person she could picture having enough gadgetry smarts to make something that could turn someone invisible was Willow. Willow, who had rebuilt the robot *Warren* had made.

But it wasn’t even that. For some reason, some reason she couldn’t identify but *felt* deep within her bones, she was mad at Spike.

“Gonna toss me a clue anytime tonight, Slayer?”

“Shut up,” she spat again. “Any reason why it didn’t occur to *you* that the mastermind we were looking for was someone you’d already done business with?”

To her utter annoyance, Spike shrugged. Or at least she thought he did, seeing as she was trying to keep her eyes forward and nowhere near him. “Wouldn’t call what we did *business*,” he said. “And he did seem intent to leave town. Point of fact, kitten, once I was a satisfied customer, I didn’t give the berk any—”

And that was it. Before Buffy could stop herself, she’d balled her free hand into a fist and landed a satisfying punch against Spike’s all-too-punchable nose. It was over in a flash—one second he was standing beside her, the next he was on the ground, a mixture of hurt and confusion dancing across his face, along with some of that good old-fashioned anger that kept vampires like Spike in perpetual motion. It had been a long time since she’d hit him, so long that she was surprised the move felt as natural as it had.

Surprised and...ashamed. At once, all of that tension that had chased her from Willy’s to now simply faded, its job done.

Buffy swallowed and stepped forward, extending a hand. “I’m sorry.”



Spike blinked at her, glaring, and wiped away the blood dribbling down his chin. "Care to tell me what that was for?"

"I was...mad."

"Yeah. Got that. Seems only right you clue a fella into what he did." He was still a moment, then took her hand and let her pull him to his feet, though he released her straight away and started dusting himself off. A job made awkward given he was still holding the battle-ax she'd handed him earlier. Never had Spike ever responded to a punch to the face with anything but a snarl or a sneer, but things were different now and the rules had changed.

And if they hadn't, she wanted them to.

"It's Warren," Buffy muttered.

"Warren made you slug me?"

"Warren made you a Buffybot!"

Well, there it was. Random and confusing but earnest, because damn, she really meant it. The aimless anger from before solidified, and she knew she'd chosen the right words. On a level she hadn't known she had, Buffy was inexorably pissed off about Spike's sex toy.

For his part, Spike just blinked dumbly. "Yeah, going on a year ago. Already taken my lumps for that, if memory serves, and it's not like I still have the thing around. Far as I know, it bit the dust the same night you were mojo'd back."

"And that somehow makes it *less* gross? *Less* of a violation?"

"Buffy—"

"It's just... It wasn't me!"

At this, Spike's eyes darkened and a snarl twisted his lips. "Don't you think I know that?"

"But—"

"But nothing. Every sodding second I spent with that thing just hammered home that it wasn't you. Bit of wrapping paper was all it was, 'cept there was nothing inside of it." Spike glared at her a beat longer before breaking off with something between a huff and a laugh. "Had fun with it, won't lie. Mighta been a bit sore when you took it away if I hadn't been so bloody chuffed at not being Glory's chew toy anymore. And I figured you'd stake me right off, anyway, if you ever

found about it. But the only one I was foolin' with that thing was myself."

Buffy swallowed, some of her ire fading, though she wasn't sure she wanted it to just yet. "How?"

"Thought it'd scratch the itch. Make the unbearable reality of never havin' you a little easier to get through." He shook his head, laughed again. "Accomplished none of the above. At the end of the day, made knowing I'd never have the real thing even worse. And why the bleeding hell are you brassed about it now?"

"Hey! I was mad then, too."

"Yeah, I reckon, but—"

"But nothing. It was sick and wrong and—and..." She was floundering here, even holding the moral high ground. Because he was right—no matter how sick and wrong the Buffybot had been, it was in the past and had no bearing on whatever was going on now.

Except suddenly she couldn't stop picturing him with it.

"And what?" Spike demanded. "Done plenty for you to be pissed about, pet, but this just seems—"

"It cheapens it," she blurted.

The indignation in Spike's eyes faded, confusion storming in again. "Cheapens what?"

That there was a real good question. It seemed Buffy had talked herself into a verbal corner and now she had no way out. In truth, she hadn't spared the Buffybot much of any thought since she'd come back from the dead, and even the thoughts she had spared hadn't been plenty. More a sense of general displacement that she'd owned up to a weird dream involving a demon bicycle gang—or maybe that had really happened. But for something she hadn't thought about much at all over the past few months, it was suddenly there in her head and bothering her a whole lot more than it had the first time around.

Maybe because the first time around, she hadn't been emotionally invested in Spike at all. That wasn't the case anymore.

"Us," Buffy said at last, feeling her cheeks go hot. She fixed her gaze on the ground. "If there's... If we..."

It wasn't fair that she could still feel the weight of his stare even if

she wasn't looking at him. But that was Spike all over, doing nothing in half-measures.

"You think that's possible?" he asked after a stretch, his voice rougher than it had been a moment ago. "That if I ever get to have you it won't mean as much to me because I had a doll for twelve hours once upon a time?"

"That was way more than a doll, Spike. It was... You had it programmed to do all kinds of gross things."

"Gross, eh?"

"Yes." Dammit, her face was getting warmer rather than cooling off. "A lot of...gross things that I've never done and don't think I wanna do. But apparently, a piece of plastic with my face on it will work just as fine."

The air between them felt thick enough to choke on, which also wasn't fair because she was the only one in danger of choking. Then Spike exhaled, long and slow, and took a step toward her, then another when she didn't move, and another and another. His boots came into view, the lapels of his duster, and then he was as close to her as he could get without touching her, overwhelming her with his presence. It was hard to think when every breath she took in tasted like leather and cigarettes, when her damn traitor mind reminded her of how good he'd tasted, how he'd kissed her like she was the source of life—or unlife, as it were. How she'd felt needed and wanted and powerful and beautiful in those moments. Moments she'd been trying to recreate with no luck for weeks now.

"Buffy." He tilted her chin, and god, just the touch of his finger against her skin had all of her warming. "Look at me."

She did, inhaling deeply when her eyes clashed with the deep blue of his. He was so close.

"I felt more those times you kissed me than I ever did with the bloody bot." Spike arched his eyebrows, practically daring her to look away. She didn't. "Including the first time, when I was all banged up and thick enough not to realize you were there to see if I'd given you to Glory. There was something behind it—every time you've kissed me, there's been something behind it. And that's what I want. Not something that looks like you, but *you*. You hear?"

She pressed her lips together and breathed out again. "Buffy sans personality might have a better chance of making something work long-term."

"Only with complete wankers. Buffy without the fight? Without the fire? That's not Buffy. Pale bloody imitation." He stared at her a beat, dropped his gaze to her mouth and she thought he might do it then—make the decision for her, the way part of her desperately wanted him to. Take the world away, absolve her of the responsibility of choice, so that if things did go bad she wouldn't have herself to blame.

But he didn't kiss her. He wanted to—she saw how badly he wanted to, and she knew he saw how badly she wanted him to. Still, he didn't.

"I tried, you know," he said instead, his voice low. "Asked Warren to program her to be you—just as you are, except a version that loved me."

"Really?" she asked, then winced at how weak and needy her voice sounded.

"Really. Did your mates never tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"Why they thought it was you in the first place."

No, they hadn't. Everything that had happened around the Buffybot had become a blur in her head. All she knew was she'd returned home from what she'd thought had been a pointless vision quest to a roomful of people looking at her like she was crazy. Then the robot had strutted in and they'd had to move. Move to get to Glory, to stake Spike, to make sure the secret of who Dawn really was remained a secret. Following that, the Buffybot had become a piece of junk to be discarded, then ultimately repurposed as a weapon in their arsenal. The hows and whys of where the others had seen the Buffybot and Spike had never been discussed.

Apparently seeing this on her face, Spike grinned and nodded. "She had to go out and patrol, of course."

"You...programmed her to patrol."

"Needed her to be you. As close as I could get it. Wanted her to fight me, too. Come at me hard. Do all the things that you'd do."

He was still holding her chin. She should do something about that.

"And when you were gone..." Spike's eyes darkened the way they did whenever her death was mentioned, but he didn't look away. "Willow programmed the thing to be you, best she could. Better than bloody Warren. 'Cept she couldn't quite get everything out of it—the part of it that wanted me. So I had a fancy toy with your face makin' eyes at me for over three bloody months and it... I couldn't stand it. Bein' around it, hearing it talk with your voice, having it here at all... It wasn't you."

That was it. Something within her snapped, and she let her blade hit the soft ground, unable to bear not touching him one more second. Buffy captured his face between her hands and pulled him down to her mouth, nearly whimpering her relief when he moaned, dropped the battle-ax, and pulled her flush against him. His hard chest pressed to her breasts, her legs suddenly swept up from under her and locked around his waist. And it was nothing like the last time, or the time before that because she was fully in the moment and she knew what she wanted.

She wanted to be devoured.

The earth beneath her shifted, something solid landing at her back. Something solid pressed at her front, too. Solid and cool and growly and male—all male. All Spike, pressing her against a tree and kissing her with such desperation and hunger it was like being kissed for the first time. He attacked her with tongue and lips and teeth, scraping and thrusting and sucking, and it was so good. Beyond good, beyond anything she'd ever experienced. And what's more, she felt her own power—her power over him, how she made him feel, how she made him want. It was a pure, animal kind of want she'd never experienced, roaming free now because she'd unleashed it.

Eventually, of course, the need to breathe caught up with her. Buffy pulled away with a gasp, drawing in deep breaths that seemed to light her lungs on fire. Spike panted too, nudging her forehead with his, like he couldn't bear to not touch her.

"Bloody hell, I love you," he murmured, thrusting his hips against her. And holy hell, how in the world had she missed that? Buffy whimpered and he answered with a growl, rubbing his erection against her center again and it was a damn good thing she'd wrapped her legs

around his waist because she wasn't sure she could trust them at the moment.

"Buffy..." He nudged her brow again. "Want you so badly. Always."

"Spike—"

"But you're gonna tell me not now, aren't you?"

She released a deep breath. "If it makes you feel better, I really wish I weren't."

Spike grinned, kissed the corner of her mouth. "Does, actually. This mean you fancy me a bit, love?"

"I...I'm not sure what it means. I just kinda did it." And would likely over-think it to death between now and whenever she actually had time to just be Buffy. Hell, she could already feel those second and third thoughts clamoring at the prospect of taking a swing at her. This needed to be handled delicately. She needed to be sure she was ready before things went any further. "We'll...talk about it later?"

She thought he might scowl or sigh or roll his eyes. He did none of those things, rather fed her a low chuckle and stole one last all-too-brief kiss before encouraging her to lower her legs to the ground.

"All right then," Spike replied, bending to scoop up his battle-ax. "Let's go bag us a bad guy."



WHILE BUFFY HAD ABSOLUTELY no problem with kicking in demon doors, she found herself hesitating outside the basement entrance to the Mears home. She'd questioned Spike's insistence until remembering he'd been here before and if anyone would know where Warren had set up his evil lair, it would be the vampire whose kisses had made her knees a bit wobbly.

Because such was her life.

It had been a good gamble, though. As soon as she and Spike had rounded the back, they'd been greeted by the sound of heavy and very nerdy bickering, over, of all things, *Star Wars* and whether or not it was a crime to watch the version where Han shot reflexively rather than first since they had a copy of each.

Buffy had groaned and rolled her neck. “You have got to be kidding me.”

Spike had just chuckled, then gestured for her to do the kicking-in honors.

And that was where she’d stalled because on this side of the door, it was hard to imagine the increasingly high-pitched voices as belonging to anyone but overgrown children—children who couldn’t possibly be responsible for the random mayhem going on around town because of their sheer incompetence, not to mention overall nerdiness. This alone made the prospect of barging in seem almost cruel. And knocking would just ruin the whole vibe. Who knocked then bashed in skulls?

“Not the time to get dainty, love,” Spike said, his voice shaking with laughter. He reached past her, pounded hard on the door, then tried the knob.

Wonder of wonders, the thing was unlocked.

“What kind of secret lair is this?” Buffy asked in a loud whisper.

“One run by morons,” Spike replied, not bothering to whisper. There was no point, anyway. Apparently no one had heard the knock or the sound of the door opening—their targets were still arguing amongst themselves. Warren, Jonathan, and a lanky guy with sandy blond hair that Buffy didn’t recognize were all on their feet in the middle of a cluttered space, red in the face and spittle flying everywhere.

The fact that their entrance went unnoticed gave Buffy the opportunity to get a look around, and her sympathies—as well as her patience—immediately hardened into something else. Yes, there was an assortment of geek memorabilia and random toys. There was also a big ray gun thing ripped right from the pages of a science fiction magazine sitting on a card table, a slew of other spy-like gadgetry, and a giant whiteboard with the words *TO DO* emblazoned across the top.

Well, that was handy. Buffy didn’t think she’d ever met a big bad courteous enough to write out their entire scheme. Granted, the big bads she encountered tended to aim higher. This group’s evil plan involved controlling the weather, conjuring fake IDs, a shrink ray, girls (listed twice), and at the top—

"Hypnotize me?" Buffy blurted, crossing her arms. "Oh, you three are just begging for a beatdown."

Spike snickered, swinging the battle-ax back and forth. "My, my, aren't *we* in trouble?"

The nerds in the middle of the room gasped and turned as one, which would have been funny in any other context.

"Slayer!" Jonathan shouted.

"Oh no, it's happened!" the little blond guy squeaked before promptly diving behind a rolling desk chair that drifted lazily a few inches to his right.

Warren, for his part, just grinned like a big psycho. "Well, it certainly took you long enough. Boys!"

Apparently, this was some sort of signal, only it seemed Jonathan and the guy cowering behind the drifting chair weren't on the same page.

The smug grin on Warren's face contorted into a snarl. "Come on, guys, we practiced this!"

"She has the vampire with her!" Jonathan stage-whispered, his eyes never leaving her.

"Oi! Have a name, you know."

"So distract him while I take care of the Slayer," Warren snapped.

Oh, that was so it. "Take care of the Slayer?" Buffy spat back, marching forward to pluck the sci-fi looking gun thing off the card table. The three nerd boys had just enough time to draw in a sharp, collective gasp before she busted it over her knee. It crumbled like an overgrown Lego model, pieces scattering across the floor and sparks flying off the wires she'd managed to split. And *hello* stolen museum diamond, which hit the floor with a hard *thunk*.

"No!" cried the blond guy in a surprisingly high-pitched voice.

Warren flicked his gaze from her to the wreckage, then back again. "You'll pay for that, bitch."

And before she could roll her eyes again or say something punny, Warren had whipped out a small gun-type thing and had it aimed at her chest. The air lit with a hard crack, there was an explosion of light, and Buffy's spine hit the floor, strings of electricity tearing up her arms and legs



as the rest of her shook and her skin blazed so hot she thought it might melt off. She opened her mouth, not knowing whether she intended to call for Spike or just scream, but nothing came out. And as though from a distance, she heard the roar of an outraged vampire over a squeal of cries and protests. Then the floor was trembling under the thunder of hurried footsteps, and someone was laughing, the sound harsh and insane.

When at last the pain subsided and the tremors ripping through her rocked to a halt, the world seemed to still right along with her. Except for the sound of Warren, still cackling like a lunatic, and the hard thumps of something firm smacking into something else. Buffy didn't want to look but forced herself, and saw that Spike was on the ground just a few feet from her, vamped out and clutching his head. Warren loomed over him, swinging the battle-ax in one hand and stomping his foot into Spike's belly again and again.

"Thanks for this," Warren said, brandishing the stolen weapon. "Not really my style, but I will look badass taking your girlfriend's head off. Oh, don't worry." He punctuated this with another kick. "I'll do you after. Though I gotta say, I am pretty damn intrigued about whatever's going on in that head of yours."

Spike snarled and crawled to his knees, his yellow eyes fierce and determined and full rage purer than anything Buffy had ever seen on his face.

And it clicked—an understanding of what would happen next. Spike would attack again and this time, he'd ignore whatever the chip dished out. He'd latch his fangs into Warren's neck and rip and tear until there was nothing left of either one of them. Pain be damned. That was a vampire looking to kill.

Adrenaline came to her rescue. The next second, Buffy flipped back to her feet and kicked the battle-ax out of Warren's hands. The boy stood there a second too long, blinking dumbly before she grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and tossed him through a shelf of action figures. He collapsed among the wreckage, but only for a second. And Buffy had a choice—follow Warren as he scampered toward freedom or see to her vampire.

She knew what she should do. She also knew what she would do.

"Spike." Buffy cupped his face, ran her fingers across his forehead. "How bad?"

It took a moment for the animal in control to take a step back, and another for the yellow eyes to fade back into blue. But she watched it happen and offered a small, relieved grin when he looked at her.

"Head's gonna throb for a bloody week, I'd wager," he said hoarsely, letting her help him to his feet. "Thought for a second he'd killed you, Slayer."

"I'm kinda tough."

"Bloody right." Spike pressed the heel of his palm to his brow. "Everything's swimming. The little gits make their getaway, then?"

"Yeah. It's okay. Town this size, only so many places to hide." Plus she imagined that Warren would have to return here at some point. Buffy slid her arm under Spike's shoulders and started for the doorway. "Why did you bring a battle-ax?"

"Dunno. Was your idea."

"Was not."

"You tossed it to me, pet. I just take what I'm given and do what I'm told."

Buffy frowned. "Well, it was dumb. What were we gonna do with it?"

"Bugger if I know." Spike paused, leaned over, and picked the discarded weapon up just the same, pulling Buffy with him as he moved. "Wager you wanted to make the wankers piss themselves. Next time, though, maybe hold onto it yourself. Can't do much with it against humans."

She didn't know if she believed that. Not anymore. Not after seeing the way Spike had glared at Warren.

But that was a question for another day.

"Come on," she said, tightening her hold on him. "We're going home."

## A PILLOW OF WINDS

“UHH, BUFFY?”

“Hmm?”

“Did you notice you have a dead guy in your living room?”

Usually, Spike was a sound sleeper, especially after the sort of night he’d had. Add in the fact that it was damn near daybreak and it was a sodding miracle any voice could pierce through the fog. But as it was, Spike hadn’t had much—if any—occasion to catch his kip around humans and hadn’t been prepared for the stomping of teenage feet up and down the stairs, or the sound of pots and pans being fumbled in the kitchen, or any of the other noises that came with an ordinary morning routine. Throw in a visit from one of his least favorite people on the planet, and there was damn little he could do to fall back asleep.

“Being that I made up the couch for him, yes,” Buffy replied. “Toast?”

“*Why* is there a dead guy in your living room?” Xander pressed. “Don’t tell me he’s getting the crypt fumigated. He doesn’t need to *breathe* so if that’s the case, you fell for the oldest line in the book.”

“He’s here because I asked him to stay last night.”

“Why?”

“Why do you care?”

There was sputtering—quite a bit of it—before the boy seemed to find his words. “Why do I... Do I really need to remind you that that’s *Spike* we’re talking about? As in, evil, soulless, has-a-crush-on-you Spike?”

“The same Spike that you trusted to watch over my sister while I was dead?”

“But that’s... He... He thinks he’s in love with you, Buffy!”

“No,” Buffy said, her voice low and firm. “He *is* in love with me, *Xander*. And we’re...”

Spike tensed, his chest clenching. They hadn’t talked much at all last night after she’d won the argument about where he’d be staying. Not that Spike had put up too much of a fight—Buffy telling him point-blank that it wasn’t safe for him to stay in his crypt when Warren knew where he was and that he could hurt him had made all the pain he’d endured at the little wanker’s hideout more than worth it.

He’d wanted to press her, of course. Every instinct had been rearing at him to see if they could continue that glorious kiss, see if she’d rub up against him some more. But one look at her face and he’d known it was no good—not this Buffy. She’d gone about the task of setting him up with some spare linens, made sure the curtains were closed tight, then muttered something about making a blood run in the morning. There hadn’t been a good night snog, either.

What they were was yet to be defined.

“Oh god,” Xander whimpered. “Oh *god*, don’t tell me you two are...are...”

“What?”

“Buffy, he’s a vampire.”

“Believe it or not, I did notice.”

“Have you lost your marbles?”

“Not so far as I know.”

The sound of clinking plates followed this. He could just picture her, determinedly not looking at her friend, trying to get everything ready for the Nibblet before school. And maybe he was being a prat, but Spike wanted to hear more of the way Buffy talked about him when she thought he wasn’t listening, so he stayed where he was.

Xander groaned loudly. “It’s going to be Angel all over again.”

This was followed by the firm sound of something, perhaps a glass, hitting the counter with a loud, decisive thud. "No," Buffy said shortly. "If Spike and I start anything, it won't be anything like Angel."

"He doesn't have a soul."

"Exactly. Which means he's already as evil as he's going to be, which, if you haven't noticed, hasn't been very over the past year or so."

It was the same argument he'd fed her a while back when they'd been discussing the chip, which made him swell with pride. Enough so that her own assertions that he wasn't all that evil anymore didn't smart too much. God, he was a sucker.

"You can't be serious," Xander said, not without some edge to his voice. "Buffy, think about what you're saying here. It's Captain Peroxide. The same guy who, oh yeah, stalked you all of last year and made with the gross life-size sex toy."

"That you guys then turned around and used while I was dead to keep the demonic community under control."

"Are you defend—"

"No, I'm not. Spike and I actually talked about that last night."

Yeah, and it had somehow led her to jumping into his arms and all but kissing his lips off. She'd been so hot, too. Hot and uninhibited—none of that hesitation or uncertainty from when she'd come after him following the sing-off, all of the passion she'd held back the night they'd discussed what would happen if the chip failed. It had been pure Buffy—pure, unadulterated want, and she'd been present the entire time. She'd wanted *him*.

Spike sighed and shifted just a bit, though not enough to really bring his aching cock any relief.

"—aren't like they were last year," Buffy was saying when he clued back into the conversation. "Can you look me in the eye and tell me Spike hasn't changed? Forget the why. It doesn't matter. I just want to hear you say the words. Because if you *can* say that, then what the hell were you thinking, leaving my *fifteen-year-old sister* with someone you consider so dangerous?"

There was some more classic Harris sputtering. "I... We... Dammit,

Buffy, we knew he'd never hurt Dawn. We trusted him with her because you did."

"Exactly." A pause, then a sigh that Spike could feel down to his bones. "Look...I don't know what's happening with us. I know that I enjoy hanging out with him. That since I've been back from the dead, he's been the only person I can really be around. No, don't give me that look. It's been hard and I've been pretending it's not to spare you guys the worry and the guilt and that's just made it worse. Spike was the only person I told about Heaven—the only person I *would* have told had I not been forced to... He's never expected anything from me."

"And we do?"

"I love you, Xan, but you know you do. Look at how badly wigged you are because I let the guy crash on my couch."

"Because he—" Xander exhaled. "It's just not a good idea. You have to know that. If you start up with Spike and things don't work out—which, let's face it, they won't—how do you see that going down?"

A beat. "I dunno," Buffy said, sounding tired and defeated. "I'm not sure about much of anything right now. It's still... It's hard, but it's getting better. All I know right now is that he's part of the getting better. I've told him what I want, what I need, what I can and can't give and he's been...*good* about that. Better than good."

"Oh, well, that makes sense. He thinks there might be a reward at the end of the tunnel. What happens when you take that away?"

Bloody hell. Spike threw off the blanket the Slayer had tucked around him and rose to his feet. There was only so much of this he could take and he'd met his threshold.

"We'll cross that bridge when and if we get to it," Buffy was saying as he stepped into the kitchen. She caught his eyes over her friend's shoulder and almost immediately, he heard her heartbeat kick up, a slight flush flooding her cheeks. "Ahh. Did we wake you up?"

Xander whirled around, looked him up and down as though he'd never seen him before, and took a step back against the island.

"Yeah," Spike said, decided, *fuck it*, and glared at the boy full-on. "Usually a mite quieter this time of morning at the crypt."

Harris plastered on a big fake smile. "Well, feel free to head on back to the crypt anytime, Bleach Boy."

Buffy rolled her eyes and mouthed a *sorry* at him before turning her attention to the mess of bread spread on the counter behind her. "Spike, do you want some toast?"

And fuck, he hadn't thought it possible to love her anymore. She seemed hell-bent on proving him wrong.

Before he could summon a response, though, Dawn blustered her way into the room, then stopped short and gave her head a shake. "Whoa," she said, bemused, "more people in the kitchen than I'm used to at this hour." She glanced at Spike and arched an eyebrow. "See you're finally up, Sleeping Beauty."

"Finally? Have several hours of kip left in me." Spike tossed her a wink before turning his attention to Harris. "Oughta be gettin' her off to school, then, right?"

There were many things Xander Harris did not possess, foremost being a poker face. He glowered at Spike for a moment, his left eye twitching and his lips wobbling like biting back the words was causing him physical pain. When it became clear that Spike wasn't going to blink first, he offered a clipped nod and turned his attention to the younger Summers. "Yeah, Dawnster, let's hit the road."

Dawn rolled her eyes, grabbed the sack lunch Buffy had ready on the island, then turned and marched off toward the front door. "About time. We've managed not to be late for two weeks. Don't wanna give Doris the Dingbat something to write about, do we?"

Spike didn't fully allow himself to relax until he heard the front door shut. When he looked up, he found Buffy busy wiping down the counter, a plate of uneaten toast situated on the island in front of him, next to a jar of blood.

"Thought you might want some gross on your toast instead of jam," Buffy said when he caught her eye. "Told you I'd be keeping more stuff here."

So she had, but he hadn't really prepared for it in practice. "You just had this? Thought you needed to go on a blood run."

"Apparently, Willow took me seriously when I put pig's blood on the shopping list."

"Well, that's right thoughtful of you both." Spike unscrewed the jar lid and poured a helping onto his toast, trying like hell to reconcile the fact that the Slayer had made him breakfast, such as it was. He waited until her back was turned to pop the plate into the microwave. "Didn't need to go to the fuss, you know."

"You're helping with the grocery bill, you're going to get stuff kept here. That was the deal."

"Right. Didn't figure that'd mean you'd turn bloody Betty Crocker on me."

Buffy snorted, and when he looked over his shoulder, she wore a slight grin that he couldn't help but want to snog right off. "Toast is pretty much the extent of my culinary prowess. I'm never going to be a domestic goddess."

"Just settle for bein' a regular one then."

The smirk in her eyes softened, and the air between them seemed to thicken with the weight of all the things they'd left unsaid the night before.

"So," Buffy said, nodding when the microwave beeped, as though concerned he'd miss it, "how much of that did you overhear?"

"Enough." He slid the plate onto the counter again. "Not surprised by any of it, if that's your worry. Not particularly bothered, either. The day I give a toss what Harris thinks of me is the day I decide to work on my bloody suntan."

"I actually thought it went okay."

"Do you?" He wasn't sure how to take that, which was par for the bloody course, seeing as he didn't know how to take Buffy on most days as it was. Whether or not he'd be pressing his luck to get her to talk about what had happened between them the previous night before they'd cornered the human miscreants in their basement lair. Like all things right now, there was what he wanted to do and what he felt he should do, the latter being let Buffy set the terms, take the lead, show him through words and action what she wanted and needed at the moment.

"Considering the last time I was involved with a vampire, there was much yelling."



Fuck, she couldn't say stuff like that and not expect him to take the bait. "That what we are, then?" he asked. "Involved?"

He thought she might protest or playact, but she didn't. Instead, she flushed and looked down, self-conscious for the first time since he'd entered the room. "I... Well, I dunno."

"You don't."

"It's still a little fuzzy for me."

Of course it was. Spike wanted to sigh or growl or roar, and so stuffed a bite of blood toast into his mouth. He took his time chewing, too. Appreciate the gesture for what it'd been—this sign that Buffy wanted him near, in her space, in her home. Take what he was given with a nod and smile and be bloody grateful for it. Which he was—everything he'd said the previous night about needing whatever happened between them to be more of this, real and honest and *them*, had been true. Could be that another time or place he might not have noticed the difference, or paid it enough mind to really say he cared—been satisfied with whatever she gave him, no matter how small. But ever since Buffy had changed the script on him, let him in instead of pushing him away, he'd been privy to a side of her that he'd thought he'd never touch. The warmth and understanding, the want, all of it was too good to surrender for anything less than everything she had to give.

"Look, I'm... I'm sorry." When he looked at her again, he found her hugging herself, her gaze on the floor. "I didn't mean to make things even more confusing with the kissage last night."

"Confusing's not quite the word I'd use, pet." Spike placed his half-eaten toast back on the plate and heaved a sigh. "Trying not to be a prat here—don't wanna push you for something you're not ready to give, no matter how badly I want it."

"I know. You've been all with the patient."

"Not patient. Not what I'd call it. Tryin' not to read too much into anything, which is easier when you don't go around snogging me or taking my hand or makin' me feel like I'm important to you."

"You are important, Spike."

His lips twitched. "And I know you want me. Can't turn those senses off."

Buffy swallowed audibly. "The wanting isn't the problem. It's what comes next. Everything that comes next. And not even knowing if I have it in me to give you what *you* want."

Well, that was something. Spike waited a beat then met her gaze. "What do you think I need that's not already here?"

"One of us is in love, for starters. I don't know if I can even feel love anymore. It's not exactly the best footing to start a relationship on."

He blinked, his mind racing. "You're afraid of bein' with me because I love you."

"Because I don't know if I can love you too. You or anyone." She crossed her arms, walking backward until her arse hit the kitchen wall. "It's getting better. The...numb, hollowed-out feeling. But I was feeling bits of this before Glory. I kept myself walled away from Riley and it became hard for me to even say the word *love*. I was told I was full of love and that was nice but I couldn't feel it, really feel it, until right before I realized what I had to do to save Dawn and stop Glory." She sniffed, and her eyes were suddenly bright with tears that had every bit of him threatening to fall apart. "Sometimes, a lot of the time, I think they took that away, too, when they brought me back. I feel it here and there, but it doesn't last and then it's gone again. I feel like I'm always chasing it."

Any steam he might have had a moment ago had evaporated. "You want to love me."

"I want to be able to, yeah. If we are ever anything more than what we are now, I want it to be because I feel it, too. What you feel. Or that I think I can someday." Buffy blew out a long breath, wiped under her eyes, then looked at him straight-on. "Anything else right now would be me using you because I know I can get without giving, and I really don't want to do that."

"Wouldn't be the worst thing," he said quickly, then cursed himself. No, it wouldn't be the worst, but it also wouldn't be what he wanted. What he wanted was more of what they had right now—more of that, and eventually something else. Tossing sex into the mix, as brilliant as it sounded, as much as he wanted her, might undo everything he'd been working toward since she'd opened up to him. He'd

gotten this far by listening, giving what she said she needed, and waiting.

And it seemed there was a right brilliant chance that Buffy was selling herself short. That she wanted to love, that she cared enough to draw those lines, to worry about it—all of that had to mean something.

“Spike—”

He held up a hand. “I take it back. Off the table.”

“Off?”

“Yeah. Until you know for sure.”

There were still tears in her eyes, but when she smiled, it was wide and genuine, and it hit him right in the chest. Made him want to blubber, and wouldn’t that make them quite the pair? But that smile was worth everything—told him everything. That he’d made the right choice—that he was *still* making the right choices. Even when she waved what he wanted right in front of him, knowingly or not.

It would have been easy, too. If things had been different, if he hadn’t gotten this far with her by following her cues—or if she’d never given them at all. Buffy even teasing the possibility of sex would have sent him over, had him thinking with his cock rather than his head, or trying whatever he could to touch a softer part of her and hope that would be enough, that he could convince her it *was* enough.

That Buffy wanted to love—wanted to be able to love him—made all the difference in the bloody world.

“I think I need to start trying with my friends,” Buffy said a moment later, with a bit more composure. “Doing what you said, at least. Being honest with them. I tried earlier with Xander and I’ve been doing okay with Willow, but...it’s hard.”

The change in subject threw him, but only for a second. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. I think...part of that is going to be trying to hang out with them more. Which will be easier if you’re there.” She looked down again, her cheeks turning pink. “And if you’re there, it’ll be easier for them to be on board if things change.”

Spike arched an eyebrow. “You think? Tried hangin’ out with your chums not too long ago. Harris—”

“If this is when you stole from him to buy me a drink, then we can agree that was probably not the best start.”

Well, bugger. She had him there.

"And I'm not thinking one outing will do it," Buffy continued. "They need to see you as one of the gang."

"One of the... Bloody hell, woman, just how whipped do you think I am?"

"I think you know my friends are important to me."

That was the sodding understatement of the year. Buffy's friends were so important to her she'd sacrifice her own happiness and well-being to make them think everything was aces in her world. And by that token, she was right. If anything were to happen between them, her mates would need to be in the know if he had any hope of it lasting beyond a few brilliant shags.

This was more of her trying. He took another bite of his blood toast, then tossed back a gulp straight from the jar itself and nodded. "Reckon it won't be the sodding Inquisition on all sides if you have Red keepin' this on stock for me." He nudged the jar.

"Willow knows pretty much everything."

Spike arched an eyebrow. "That a fact?"

"Well, when I told her you might be hanging around more, there were questions that went along with it." Buffy paused, screwed up her face. "I wasn't going to tell her everything, but then she asked, and I didn't feel like lying. So she knows."

A grin tugged on his lips. "So, if we're at the Bronze and I aim to take you for a spin, I'll only have the one Scooby threatenin' to stake me?"

"A spin?"

"Get you on the dance floor, love."

The pink in her cheeks deepened to a soft red. "You'd wanna dance with me?"

"That a serious question? Pretty sure I told you once that's all we've ever done. Might as well do it to music."

Buffy didn't reply, but she didn't need to. He had his answer from the way her heartbeat picked up and her eyes darkened. She was picturing it—picturing them—rubbing close together, arms entwined, beat thumping along with her pulse, and it was turning her on.

*Fuck.*

Spike stuffed the last of his toast into his mouth to keep from saying something daft, turned his back on her to wash the plate off. He kept his back to her as he downed the rest of the blood in the jar, then washed that out as well. Being near Buffy when he knew she was excited, or thinking about him like that, was more torture than anything Angelus had ever thrown at him, even if it was the sort he didn't mind so much.

"I better pop off," he said, still at the sink. "Get outta your hair for a bit."

He heard her inhale. "Oh. Umm, but Warren—"

"I'll be fine, Slayer."

"It's daylight now and you're probably going to go back to sleep."

The concern in her voice had him gripping the counter. Buffy might think she was numb, closed off to feeling things, but the way she talked to him told him the better of it.

"I'll keep downstairs. Not too many people know about that."

"But—"

"Buffy." He turned to face her, crossing his arms. "Tryin' to do this right by you, but all I can think about is how bloody good you tasted last night and how good you smell right now. Just need to clear my head a bit and it's never clear around you."

"Oh." She glanced down, pressed her lips together. "Guess I'm trying to do that thing where you both have and eat the cake."

"Well, if it makes you feel better, you can eat me any time you fancy." She went a shade darker and he chuckled. "Sorta thing a man who's giving you space ought not to say, right? Best be off."

Buffy nodded, though her frown remained. "Okay. Well...later?"

"Definitely." He rounded the island, intending to head straight for the living room to collect one of the blankets for the run home. Somehow, though, he found himself beside her, breathing her in, again tuned to the steady thump of her heart, which picked up with his proximity. He could so clearly see himself pushing her up against the wall and giving her the kind of goodbye that'd guarantee she'd spend every waking hour between now and when they saw each other again thinking about nothing but him, but managed to shove it back.

Instead, he dipped his head near hers and brushed his lips across her brow, trembling when she trembled.

“See you, love,” he whispered, then pushed away from her before his demon nature could overrule him.



BUFFY MADE her first priority that day, after she had showered and dressed and was ready to face the world, to swing by the Mears household, though she wasn't optimistic she'd find anything. And indeed, the basement that had been so full the night before was stripped bare, which would have seemed impossible anywhere but on the Hellmouth, but it *was* the Hellmouth and that's just how things rolled here. If you gave the bad guy the opportunity to run, you'd have to hunt him down again. Even bad guys like Warren and Jonathan and whoever their third was, apparently. While they lacked finesse and demon sensibilities, they apparently knew how to hustle when push came to shove.

Buffy stood for a while in the basement, empty as it was, going over what she remembered from the night before. In movies and TV shows, there was always some kind of handy clue to be found in memory—an address written on a piece of paper clumsily situated where anyone could see. An overheard conversation, perhaps complete with a street name-drop or a time in which the villains planned to meet up.

But life wasn't like the movies. If she'd seen a rogue piece of paper with writing on it, she couldn't recall. All she remembered for certain was the gun-type thing Warren had aimed at her, the pain that had followed, and the damn near certainty that Spike would tear Warren's very human head off, chip or not.

She still didn't know how she felt about that last thing, and not for the reasons she would have assumed. Over the past year, she'd seen nothing to make her think that Spike would just suffer through the pain in order to kill, but she had seen how much physical abuse he would take in order to protect. It wasn't the same sort of pain, granted, but when Spike was motivated, that much seemed incidental.

Had he killed Warren last night... Well, that thought didn't inspire as much revulsion as she knew it should. Maybe because, if she substi-

tuted Spike in that scenario with anyone she knew with a soul, she wasn't sure the outcome would be different. And she also wasn't sure, if the tables were reversed, that she would have been able to stop herself if someone, human or not, hurt the person she loved. She'd been ready to kill indiscriminately for Dawn before the jump, and while the emotions that powered that mindset seemed muted, she knew they were still there, and she'd still do it.

No, what bothered her more from last night was the knowledge that Warren could hurt Spike and Spike might be in too much pain to stop him. Or simply not try knowing that he couldn't, as she'd seen before.

The rest of the day went smoothly, compared to the charged morning she'd had. After leaving the Mears' abandoned basement, Buffy made her way across town for an appointment with Social Services to go over her financials, work plan, Dawn's schedule, and a few other things that Doris had hounded her on upon the last visit. This concluded with a new tour of Revello Drive, sans magical weed or any other questionable contraband, and ended with a somewhat flustered Doris admitting that things were looking much better.

Buffy resisted the urge to gloat, but she did indulge in a quick victory dance once Doris was on the other side of the door. Then she stripped off her functional-adult outfit, changed into slay-gear, and set off to meet Teeth and get that day's list of dead-beats to beat up.

"Not too many today," Teeth had said, grinning. Or she'd thought he was grinning. It was hard to tell, what with the shark-head. "Word has gotten out that I am not a guy to stiff. Business is good, Slayer. Really good."

And as long as that was true, she supposed she still had a job.

By slayer standards, Buffy got home from work early. It was dark out but had only just turned so, which left her plenty of time to decompress before heading out for patrol. Maybe she'd even be able to squeeze in a hot bubble bath.

God, that sounded good. Buffy rolled her head in anticipation, then pressed the front door open and walked inside.

And immediately stopped.

Something had happened to the living room—or rather, the people

in it. Willow and Anya were perched on the sofa, their expressions serene—even happy—as they watched Xander spin Dawn around in what could only be called a dance move. It was then Buffy registered that there was music playing from somewhere, and suddenly the scene looked all too familiar.

“Is there singing?” she demanded. “Are we singing again?”

Xander barely acknowledged her, never breaking stride. “Nope, just dancing.”

“We’re teaching Dawn perfectly synchronized dance steps for the wedding reception,” Anya said as though that made any kind of sense.

But heck, Dawn looked happy as Xander, somewhat masterfully, whirled her into a dip. In fact, her sister burst into a series of delighted giggles, which was something that Buffy realized, with a ping of guilt, she hadn’t heard in a long time. Between work and patrol and hanging out with Spike, home time had been hard to squeeze in.

Well, that wasn’t strictly true. There was always time for it, but the crushing weight of responsibility and expectation made skipping out the easier choice.

Xander whirled around and pinned Buffy with a look. “Wanna go for a spin?”

“Uh, think I’m heading more towards an ungainly collapse,” she replied, then made her way over to the couch and dropped into the empty space between Anya and Willow.

“Aww, rough day?” Willow asked.

Buffy shrugged. Nothing about the day had been particularly rough, especially since the rather intense breakfast conversations, but that didn’t stop her from feeling run down. “Busy, more like it.”

“You’ve been going at it too hard, Buffy,” Xander said. “We hardly see you, what with all the work and stuff and apparently hanging out with Spike every free minute you get.”

Willow threw him a look that clearly communicated that this had been a top of conversation, then turned to Buffy with a smile. “Well, Dawn’s staying at Janice’s tonight—I checked it out and everything, parents are fully involved and her mom’s picking her up just about any time now—and we’re headed to the Bronze. Wanna blow off some steam?” She paused meaningfully, glanced at Xander again, then



continued in a tone that sounded carefully neutral. “You could ask Spike to come, too.”

Xander bristled but didn’t object, and Buffy found herself awash in tidal waves of affection for her best friend and whatever Willow had told her other best friend about keeping his mouth shut. It wasn’t like Buffy didn’t get it—Spike being around and not as a resented source of help or general nuisance would take time for her friends to get used to. Xander especially, who had a tendency to hate all things demonic, except for the ex-demon he was marrying. But this was how it would be done. Small steps. Begrudging allowances.

Even if a hot bubble bath *did* sound nice to her slightly strained muscles, this was likely a better use of her time—help bridge the gap between her friends and the vampire she was starting to have feelings for. And since she and Spike had literally just had this conversation, the timing was kinda perfect.

Plus, it’d be worth it—the look on Spike’s face when she swung by his crypt and essentially asked him on a date.

Buffy favored Willow with a grin that she hoped conveyed all of the above because she wasn’t sure she could put it into words. “Let me change into my boogie shoes, and then we can boogie.”

## SET THE CONTROLS FOR THE HEART OF THE SUN

THE LAST TIME SPIKE HAD HUNG OUT WITH EVERYONE AT THE Bronze hadn't been a big thing, mostly because Buffy hadn't made a point of swinging by his crypt with an invitation. The gang had been there and then he'd shown up, and the others had more or less tolerated his presence after a few snide remarks and dubious glances. Buffy had also made a point to be friendly to Spike without drawing attention to herself because she'd known that her friends would zero in on any sort of signal that her feelings toward him had changed, and she hadn't been ready for that to happen at the time.

Truth be told, she wasn't sure she was ready for that to happen now, though only because Xander could be exhausting when he was riding his high horse. But Buffy was through explaining or apologizing or pretending—Spike was right on that score, and had been since the moment he'd first brought it up. So when she stepped into the Bronze with the leather-clad vampire at her side, she did her best to pretend everything was normal. Move along, folks. Nothing to see here.

Though she couldn't help but tense just a bit when Spike drew near enough that his scent overwhelmed her senses.

"You sure about this, pet?" he asked, his voice a low rumble that so

did *not* have her erupting into shivers. "Thought tonight was about blowin' off steam. You're wound tighter now than when you swung by."

"I'm fine," Buffy replied, not bothering to gut-check and see whether or not that was true. "Everything's good."

Spike chuckled, then pressed a hand to the small of her back. "Say the word if you need me to scarper."

"You'll bolt if I tell you to? There's a first."

"Didn't say that," he teased, pushing her forward. "But I could put on a good show. Get everythin' back to status quo right quick."

Status quo being Buffy hates Spike, as far as anyone else knew, and there was no chance of anything happening between them. Well, that was dumb. The entire point of him being here was to get the others used to seeing him around in contexts other than needing extra muscle.

"Our status needs a new quo," Buffy told him as she negotiated her way between throngs of people and crowded tables to get to the one the gang had staked out. "Like we said this morning."

He didn't reply except to increase the pressure of the guiding hand he had against her. And then they were at the table, the focal point of everyone's attention. Willow, at least, wore an encouraging smile and greeted Spike with a little wave. Anya looked nonplussed, and Xander annoyed but resigned.

"Lo all," Spike said.

"Hi Spike!" Willow replied, perhaps a bit too eagerly. "Glad you could make it. Wasn't sure if you were busy tonight or—or..." She trailed off and shot Buffy a rather hopeless look. "Help?"

He rumbled a little laugh, one that Buffy somehow felt more than the thumping beat of the music from tonight's visiting band.

"Thanks ever so." He still had his hand on the small of her back and had started drawing little patterns, either to help her relax or keep her insanely aware of him, she didn't know. Though it wasn't like she could become more aware of him, as Spike seemed to dominate any space he occupied.

After a moment, Spike shifted and thrust his other hand into his duster pocket. "Thought it might be good to start fresh," he said, and

slapped a twenty dollar bill in front of Xander. "Borrowed that from you last time we were here."

Xander stared at the money as though it might bite him. "What?"

Spike shrugged. "Slayer was thirsty. Decided to get her a drink, only I was light on dosh that night."

"Believe me, I've stopped questioning where my extra money goes when you're around. My *what* was more aimed at the unsolicited giving of money back to me." Xander's hand shook as he extended it toward the bill, as though he were worried the portrait of Andrew Jackson might burst into flames on contact. "I don't trust this," he said.

Spike sighed and rolled his eyes. "Well, if you're gonna be a sodding ninny about it..." And he made to grab it back, though not in earnest, Buffy thought, as Xander snatched the bill away before Spike's fingers could get close to it.

"No more free rides, pal," Xander said, stuffing the twenty into his wallet.

"It's no fault of mine if you're an easy mark."

"It's reasons like this that I am going to insist we keep our finances separate," Anya said, nodding and patting Xander's hand. "That and men just tend to spend more frivolously than women."

"Huh?" her fiancé asked, looking well and truly lost. "That's...that's just not right."

"Between the two of us, who has the most substantial savings?"

"Who pays the bulk of the bills?"

"Who has the more important occupation?"

"What? Buildings are important, Ahn."

"Yes, but anyone can build them," she replied with a shrug. "In our world, magic plays a larger factor in our daily lives, and is much more likely to be the solution to a crisis or apocalypse. Ergo, as the proprietor of the Magic Box, I am performing the most useful service."

Xander flailed a bit, opening his mouth, closing it, and opening it again. "Yeah, when windows are smashed and walls come down, you'll be *just* as helpful as a guy with a tool-belt."

"This can go on a while," Willow told a smirking Spike. "Especially the closer we get to the exchange of the vows. They seem to be extra with the lovers' quarrels."

And indeed, it looked as though Xander and Anya were well on their way to bickering the entire night, which Buffy wasn't sure she could stand, especially when her alternative had been soaking in the tub. Something that Spike must have sensed, because the next second, his mouth was at her ear.

"Fancy a drink, pet?"

*Yes, please.* "We're gonna go scope out the bar," she told Willow. "Come with?"

One look at Xander and Anya—who hadn't yet come up for air and not for the typical almost-newlywed reasons—and Willow nodded hard, sliding off her barstool. "Oh yes. Very yes."

In all honesty, Buffy hadn't been sure how much tonight would feel like a date, intentions aside, since she and Spike had been spending so much time together. And yeah, on occasion he'd appear here if she'd mentioned she and the gang were planning to get their Bronze on, but those times, her friends had just assumed Spike had been there as her standard creature-of-the-night stalker. That Buffy had gone out of her way to invite him made her feel more than a little aware of herself, and curious as to what his expectations were for the evening.

What she wanted them to be.

God, her head was all over the place where Spike was concerned. Just last night, when he'd had her up against that tree, she'd wanted so many things. Mostly things that would keep his mouth busy. Perhaps things that would have her rethinking her position on learning some of the tricks the Buffybot had been programmed to do. But there was always that voice—the one that sounded vaguely like a combination of Giles and Angel, urging caution. Sometimes doing more than urging caution—sometimes demanding just what the hell she'd gotten herself into and if she'd lost her mind.

Thing was, Buffy was pretty damn certain her mind remained exactly where she'd left it. The old arguments where Spike was concerned had started feeling just that—old. Worries and concerns she would have tossed out before her death, before these last few weeks with him, didn't feel like they applied anymore. That wasn't to say she was unconcerned about how bad everything could turn if it didn't work out, but at some point she'd stopped seeing the line separating Spike

from other men. She knew he wasn't like other men, that his lack of a soul was something she could never forget, that there were a million and a half reasons they would never work and so on and so on and so on.

But there was also the way she felt when she was with him. And that way, she was coming to realize, was like Buffy.

"Slayer?"

Buffy shook her head. "Sorry?"

Spike grinned and nudged her shoulder. "Asked what you wanted. Have a hankering for anything special?"

Oh right. Drinks.

"I like Sex on the Beach."

"I'll keep that in mind," Spike muttered and nodded at the bartender. "Sex on the Beach for the lady. Old Foghorn for me."

Buffy blinked. "A what for you?"

He smirked and handed over a ten. "Beer, pet."

"That didn't sound like any kind of beer I've had."

"Still on the search for the ever-elusive drinkable American draft."

"And you went with something called Foghorn? I think you're setting yourself up for failure, my friend."

"Oh ho, and I'd be better off guzzling down somethin' like *Sex on the Beach*, I suppose?"

It was her turn to smirk. "At least mine has sex in it."

She knew what she was doing, saying that. Knew it as well as she knew to expect the way his eyes darkened with hunger. What she hadn't known to expect was her own response—how she suddenly felt hot, an all-consuming type of heat that lit her insides as well as her skin. No one had ever looked at her the way Spike did, or with even a degree of his intensity. And things were different now, charged in a way they hadn't been before. Even if they'd been on this path for a while, last night had shifted the balance.

He made her feel more desirable than anyone ever had. Maybe because it was unrestrained with Spike, whereas Angel had always been careful and Riley just, well, human. She didn't know.

Then Spike was nearing, and his voice was at her ear again. "If sex is what you want, pet, you know I'm your man."

He was ready when her legs did the wobbly thing, catching her by the elbow, chuckling low in his throat.

"I think I'm okay with this," Willow announced.

Buffy shook her head to clear it and threw her friend a look, all the while trying hard to ignore how good Spike's hand felt on her arm and not succeeding even a little. "Okay with what?"

"You two," Willow said, gesturing between them. "I mean, I've had some time to get used to the idea and it's less wiggly now." She settled her gaze on Spike and fixed him with a frown. "Though I don't think I need to tell you that if you hurt her, I will have to make you suffer. Best friend's prerogative. Riley got the same talk."

*Hoo boy.* Buffy went hot then for completely new reasons. "Will, we're not... I mean, we haven't—"

Willow waved a hand. "Yeah, yeah. You're not but you're all coupley anyway. I don't need magic powers to see where this is going. And hey, if listening to really un-Buffy like music, forging employment papers, and dating the undead again is your way of being happy to be alive, then this former witch is all for it. And Xander'll catch up one of these days."

Spike arched an eyebrow, accepting the drinks he was handed by the bartender and pressing Buffy's into her hand without taking his eyes off Willow. "What's this about music?"

"She's been listening to this CD or something every night." Willow turned back to Buffy. "Thin walls, which you two might keep in mind if you ever—"

"Will!"

Spike snickered and tossed Buffy a wink, and it was unfair, what that wink did to her legs. Though it had help, considering this was a conversation she'd seen coming from literally nowhere.

Willow at least had the good sense to look chagrined when their eyes met again. "I'm...overstepping, aren't I?"

"I cannot tell you how much *yes*."

"I'm enjoyin' myself," Spike replied cheerily before bringing up his beer mug and throwing back a mouthful. "Do go on."

But Willow shook her head, powering into what Buffy identified as damage control. "I'll just... Hey, over there." And she bolted, darting

and weaving between people to fight her way back to the table, where Xander and Anya seemed to still be locked in deep debate.

Buffy would have laughed were she not frozen in place. Not knowing where she was internally where Spike was concerned was enough of a thing, but to have her friend—well-intentioned or otherwise—bring it up made everything real. Which was good. Real was good. Real was standing here, holding a drink with a suggestive name, standing next to the most suggestive man on the face of the planet because she'd invited him. Because he was her date.

Holy crap, Spike was her date. She was really on a date with Spike. Which, yes, a realization that should have been anticlimactic since she'd already thought the word *date* a few times and wondered how it would feel to actually be on one with him, but still, somehow, all with the climactic.

A date who was now looking at her somewhat speculatively, as though he sensed the conclusion she'd reached and worried about what that might mean for him.

She hoped he didn't ask. Then again, she very much wanted him to. If Spike pushed hard enough, she sensed she'd cave, and there was relief in that. The same kind she experienced any time she imagined Spike taking the decision out of her hands, making whatever she did reaction rather than action. The temptation to hand over control of her mind and body to someone else, experience life consequence-free for once, was damn near overwhelming whenever he was around.

Spike didn't push, though. Instead, he polished off his beer, holding her gaze as he did so, then jerked his head toward the dance floor. "Wanna show 'em how it's done, Slayer?"

Buffy swallowed hard, her heart suddenly pounding like mad, and took a quick sip of her Sex on the Beach. Well, it started as a quick sip—she ended up draining it, which of course went straight to her head, but that had been the point. Somewhat woozily, she set the empty glass on the nearest table—ignoring the grunts from the people occupying said table—and nodded at her vampire date.

Spike smirked. "Need the liquid courage?"

"It's a big deal," Buffy replied, perhaps with slightly more volume behind her voice than she'd consider normal. "You and me. Dancing.



We've never done that." She paused and held up a finger. "Like *that*," she added. "To music. And all...grindy."

The smirk broadened and her chest went tight in response, though she'd blame it on the booze.

"Come on, then," he said, steering her forward. "Time to get grindy."

Yeah, if he hadn't had his hand on her back, there was every chance she would have just bolted for the door. But she didn't. She put one foot in front of the other, turned when she needed to squeeze between other patrons, and let Spike whirl her around once they reached the dance floor.

"This doesn't feel weird to you?" she asked in what she hoped was a light, breezy tone as he took her hands and brought them up so they were linked behind his neck.

"Dancin' with you?" Spike grinned and shook his head, then started swaying with her to the tempo coming from the stage. "Most natural thing in the world, love."

It didn't feel natural to Buffy, though, and she kinda hated that it didn't. Everything thus far with Spike had been just the two of them, far from scrutiny, where they were allowed to just be themselves. As much as she'd wanted this, as much as she'd meant everything she'd said that morning, she couldn't help but feel exposed. Her friends would be watching every step, just waiting for one of them to slip. How could anyone start a relationship like that?

Then Spike lowered his mouth to her ear, and once more, his voice sounded over the music.

"Just you and me here," he murmured. "Only ones that matter, yeah? You and me."

"They're watching."

"Let 'em watch, then." A beat. "What do *you* want?"

The clouds in her mind parted then, and she drew in a breath of fresh air. What *she* wanted. Not what they wanted. Not what would make them happy. Not how they were going to react to the person she was now. She wasn't living for them, no matter that they were the ones who had brought her back. This life was still hers and these were her decisions to make. Hers and no one else's.

What she wanted was to dance with Spike and not worry about Xander or Willow or what any of them thought. So, with a slight grin, she threw herself into the moment and let everything else fall away.

"I want to have fun," Buffy said, not without a hint of challenge. "So, vampire, show me a good time."

Spike's face split with a wild smile and he dipped her back without warning. "All you had to do was ask," he replied, then twirled her around as she'd seen Xander twirl Dawn earlier that night, and by the time he pulled her close to him again, she had all but dissolved into giggles. "I'm the bloke you come to for a good time."

"Put up or shut up."

Spike seemed delighted for the chance to oblige. And it occurred to her, over the next couple of minutes, that perhaps challenging him hadn't been the best bet if her intention was to both have fun *and* not turn into a raging mass of hormones.

After her laughter died, though, Buffy realized she was as close to Spike as she'd been, excluding last night when they'd been grinding against each other, and the kiss outside of the Bronze. But this was different, and that did somewhat have the rest of the world zeroing out on her. Sex was one thing—something she'd considered *a lot* over the past few weeks, and especially after last night—but this felt more intimate, even in her own messed up head. Moving with him to music, watching his face as she rolled her hips to the beat thrumming through the air. Feeling him move with her, pushing forward so every hard inch of him was pressed against her, his eyes darkening with hunger.

When he bent his head toward her again, she thought it might be to kiss her, and again that rush came—the relief that Spike was crossing lines, calling the shots, taking her decision away. But he veered away from her mouth at the last moment, and then his voice was at her ear again, low and intimate.

"First time I saw you was right here. Dancin' with your chums." He tightened his grip on her waist, pulling her so close they were practically on top of each other. "You were enchanting."

Buffy released a ragged breath and pressed her thighs together. While she had long since stopped denying the physical impact Spike had on her, it was all a bit much at the moment. Her head felt slightly

fuzzy from the drink she'd shot back, her skin hot and prickly, and the rest of her torn between the knowledge that she was doing this with Spike in front of her friends and the deep need to shove the rest of her reservations aside. The lives she'd been living—the one for them and the one for her—had collided, and were so tangled now she knew she'd never be able to separate them again. There was relief in that, in being in the open, and also a crap-ton of fear. It made everything she'd been doing with Spike real.

"You kill all the enchanting girls, then?" she replied in a voice that didn't sound like hers.

He chuckled, and the sound seemed to resonate through her with its own heartbeat. "You're still standing, aren't you?"

"You threatened to kill me that night."

"I threatened to kill you lots of nights." Spike nipped at her earlobe, and the brief hint of his teeth had her clutching him tighter. "And I seem to recall you giving as good as you got."

Flirting over mutual death threats—something else she suspected they'd done before, but never so openly. It felt like the sort of thing she should shut down, or at the very least take as the reminder of the man he'd been not so long ago. Because it *hadn't* been all that long ago.

But she'd been in Heaven, and everything that had come before that seemed separated by more than lifetimes.

She wasn't that girl anymore. And Spike wasn't the vampire who had come here to kill her, regardless of whether or not he'd found her *enchanting*. He was her friend now. Hell, he was more than her friend—he was the one from whom she held nothing back. Somehow, ever since she'd clawed to freedom, he'd taken Willow's place as her number one confidant.

"Spike—"

"I know," he said, though she didn't think he did, for he pulled back, put some space between them, and favored her with a somewhat chagrined smile. "We're just dancing, pet."

Buffy supposed that was the moment to tell him she didn't think that was what they were doing at all, but her voice stuck in her throat, and she nodded instead.

If she and Spike ever officially moved beyond dancing, she owed it

to him to make that decision with a clear head, and that was something she did not have right now. Right now she was riding the influence of hormones and alcohol—and yeah, it had been just one drink, but with Buffy, it didn't take much. As it was, the way she was feeling, she couldn't tell if it was him or the moment or her own selfish wants or all of it or none of it.

And amid all that uncertainty, keeping what they were doing to *just dancing* seemed safer.



NEITHER ONE OF them called it a date, at least not out loud. But sod it, that's what it had been. The Slayer had come 'round and asked him out, let him buy her drinks all night, cozied up to him on the dance floor, and refused the offers from other blokes who wanted to cut in. They'd gone on a quick patrol after, and while there hadn't been a torrid goodnight kiss, she had seemed skittish by the time they parted ways. Not a bad skittish, either—just aware of herself. Rambling, the way he'd seen her ramble a time or a thousand when she was interested in a man.

Being on the receiving end of that was almost better than the snogs they'd shared. Like everything else that had come thus far, it was real.

All of this made being around her both intoxicating and nerve-racking, worried as he was that he'd do something to bugger everything up. Every step she took toward him made the temptation to eat the remaining distance almost painful. Spike was not accustomed to checking his impulses—there had never been the need before. Not like there was now. Sure, he'd look back on past mistakes and recognize the path he ought to have taken, but the past was smoke and couldn't be changed. Now he was painfully aware of everything he did or said, and how she reacted to it, reading her cues on when to step back and when to ramp up. When she wanted him to push her and when she needed him to stick to the script they'd been going by.

The next night, Buffy was already blushing when she opened the door and invited him in for a quick nibble before patrol. Dawn was finishing up her homework in the dining room, Willow acting as tutor,

and the girls exchanged giddy glances when Spike traipsed through to grab a helping of the spaghetti simmering on the stove. Buffy handed him a jar of blood—she'd explained that transferring blood from bags to jars made her refrigerator look less like a prop from a horror movie—and invited him to mix it in with the marinara without so much as a nose wrinkle.

How far they had come from those days at the Watcher's flat, Buffy looking at him with open disgust as he sipped blood from a coffee mug.

And it wasn't his imagination—Buffy stuck closer to him when they set out than normal. Such that her arm kept brushing his, making him wish he could ditch the duster for perhaps the only time since he'd first slid it on. He toyed with the idea of taking her hand but couldn't muster up the nerve, lest he lose the ground he'd made, which made him feel a bit ridiculous but he couldn't say he minded.

Then something went wonky.

A horde of demons appeared from nowhere on what had been, up until that moment, a rather uneventful patrol. The demons themselves were dispatched easily enough, but something threw Buffy off her footing. This by itself wouldn't have worried him—easy enough to get turned around out here—but when she started swinging at thin air, he knew something was wrong.

"Spike?" Her voice shook as she stumbled, whirling around and not seeming to see the demons at all. "Where are—what's happening?"

"Slayer, duck!"

Whether she saw the demon swinging at her or just trusted that he was looking out for her, Spike didn't know, but she ducked, and the demon went tumbling over her. The next second, she seemed to see them again and took a running dive at one of the blighters circling him, but then looked up again in utter confusion.

Something had hit her, he realized. A spell or summat. She fought to her feet once more, wincing and bracing her hands on either side of her head, then whirled and swung again at nothing. The demons' movements seemed coordinated—Spike wasn't sure exactly what breed these gits were but he was fairly certain that they weren't the magic-

wielding sort. The ones not wrestling with him kept circling the Slayer, poking and prodding her to get her to swing.

Then a girl was there, also appearing out of thin air and heading directly for the fray.

Spike's gut tightened. And he saw what would happen. He had no sodding idea why but he knew he was right. The next second, he'd launched himself into motion, every instinct in him screaming at him to get there first. The girl reached out, trembling and worried, and Buffy was in mid-swing when he caught her and reeled her into him.

"Not a demon," Spike panted into her ear. "That's not a demon."

The girl's eyes went wide and she stumbled back a step. "I... I..."

He caught a whiff of her then, and a snarl scratched at his throat. "Who the bloody hell are you?"

"My head is spinning," Buffy moaned, pressing her brow against his chest. "The demons?"

"Distraction," Spike spat, not taking his eyes off the girl who wasn't a girl. He waited until Buffy had lifted her head and regained her footing enough to pull back from him before growling a low, threatening, "Talk."

The girl didn't talk. She took a step back, then another, then turned and ran full tilt the other direction. Though there wasn't far to run, given the row of trees and the steep incline that led to a deeper section of woods, so Spike wasn't sure what the plan was. That was, until, the bird threw herself over the edge of the incline and disappeared from view.

"Well, that's one way to handle confrontation," Spike muttered.

"The hell is going on?" Buffy demanded and broke into a jog toward the tree line. She paused when she reached the edge, and he heard her harsh intake of breath as well as the leap in her pulse. "Oh my god."

And before he could ask, Buffy was out of sight, skidding down the hill.

Spike headed over to follow, taking a moment, now that the danger had passed, to temper his anger and frustration at the situation. Wouldn't be a good show if he started punching every person who mucked with the Slayer, warranted or not. But something about the bird nagged at him—the scent had been all off, for one. Type didn't

match the face, and he could have sworn he'd encountered it before. Recently, even. It was human—that much he knew for certain—but didn't match Warren.

Except, he realized, a hint of Warren had been there. Faint but present.

A few seconds later, he was at Buffy's side again, staring at something that didn't make sense.

The girl was on the ground, lifeless.

"What happened?" Buffy asked, her voice surprisingly steady. "Did she just...fall over dead?"

Spike glanced at the Slayer. Once upon a time, he would have hesitated before approaching a dead body. Wondered how it might look, worried that the Slayer would think he was going in for a nibble. The thought arose but faded just as quickly. That wasn't his reality anymore.

So he knelt beside the dead girl and inhaled.

"There's blood," he said. "Dried up, though."

"Dried up as in..."

"Didn't happen if she took a tumble." Spike thought about turning the girl's head to investigate further but decided against it. He'd learned what he needed to know. "Also, the smell's wrong."

"What?"

"This isn't the bird who tried to grab you." He rose to his feet. "Think that was a bloke. One of the other blokes from the other night. One of Warren's mates." Though he couldn't say for certain, because between the chip nearly frying his brains out and his worry that Warren had managed to do Buffy serious harm, he didn't recall all that much. "She smells like Warren, though," he added, nodding at the girl. "He's all over her."

Buffy said nothing for a long moment, though he could practically hear her wheels turning.

"Katrina," she said. "She's... This is Warren's ex-girlfriend. I met her last year. She..." Buffy turned to him, eyes wide and shining. "God, Spike, what happened? I was... It was like a loop. Like the mummy hand or what happened on campus, but all at once and then there were demons, only they disappeared and came back and then Katrina—"

"Wasn't her," Spike growled. "Wager you were meant to think it was, though."

"What?"

"Slayer, you were swinging at air back there. Not always, but enough. The bloody demons disappeared the second this girl showed up. Time started running normal again, right?"

Buffy's eyes were wide, the thumping of her heart coming harder. "So..."

He saw when the penny dropped, when she reached the conclusion he had.

"They wanted me to think I killed her." Buffy took a step back, as though trying to distance herself from the thought. As though it could come true if she stood close enough to the girl's body. "Why?"

Again, Spike waited. The answer was obvious enough to him.

"Oh god." She covered her mouth, stumbling back another step. "Oh god."

"Slayer, you didn't—"

"I know, but..." She closed her eyes and shook her head, but her heartbeat didn't slow at all. "Spike, I would've..."

Yeah, he knew what she would have done. Just as well as he knew what he would have done. Some staking offense, most likely. Either tear a bite out of the girl's throat so that it looked like any other demon attack and couldn't possibly be blamed on the Slayer, or try to dump the body somewhere where it wouldn't be found. Afterward, he'd have bloody tied himself to Buffy to make sure she didn't do something stupid.

*Wouldn't be stupid to her, though.*

Spike might not have understood the burden she'd carry in thinking she'd taken a human life, but he knew full well she'd carry it anyway. Even if she *had* killed the girl by accident, it wouldn't have mattered when weighed against the good she did by living on the outside. The people she saved simply by existing. But it would have mattered to Buffy, and she would have been bound and determined to take her licks, deserved or not.

"We need to find Warren," Buffy said, jarring him back to himself. There was steel in her voice that he recognized. Knew intimately,



point of fact. "If he wants to be the Big Bad, then he's gonna get everything that comes with it."

"No argument from me, pet." He paused, then nodded at the body again. "What about her?"

"We go home, call the police, say we found her while taking a walk."

"Through the bloody graveyard?"

Buffy shrugged, met his eyes. "This is Sunnydale, where it's weirder to *not* go on walks through graveyards."

He didn't like it—didn't like Buffy being associated at all with this girl's death, even if it was just to call it in. The urge to argue, tell her it would just be a matter of time before she was discovered by someone else, swelled so rapidly he was somewhat astonished when it didn't just burst out of him. It was the thought of where they were now, how far they'd come, and how the suggestion would sound to her, that managed to hold his tongue. He could see clearly how that conversation would play out—the way she'd look at him, more demon than man. How easily she'd be reminded of just how monstrous he could be when he let his wants override all else.

Being with Buffy meant doing things her way, trusting that it was right even when her logic didn't make sense to him. She was the one with the soul, after all.

"Right then," he said, and jutted his chin in the direction of Revello Drive. "Lead the way."

# FEARLESS

WARREN HAD KILLED A PERSON. NOT JUST A PERSON, THE WOMAN he'd claimed to love. It wasn't like Buffy needed to be convinced that he was dangerous, but even she hadn't seen that one coming. And knowing just how dangerous he was made her all the more concerned about Spike staying solo at his crypt when Warren knew he couldn't defend himself.

Still, there wasn't an alternative that wasn't gun-jumpy or mixed-signally. Or confusing. It was way too soon in their kinda-relationship to talk about cohabitation. Not that it would be permanent or anything, Spike staying at Revello Drive, but Buffy wasn't ready for that much togetherness. She still needed time to sort through just what it was she was feeling for him, and him being there all the time would mess with her head.

Which was why, the day after Katrina's body had been found, Buffy asked Tara to meet her at Spike's crypt with some basic stuff to do a protection charm.

"Or something," she'd said. "Maybe like the spell we did warning us that Glory was near? Just so he'll have enough time to make with the getaway if someone not-good decides to show up."

Granted, this meant parsing what *not good* entailed, considering

Spike had a number of demon friends. Clem, for one, whom he hung out with on the semi-regular and who wasn't evil, but wasn't entirely *good*, either. Ultimately, they just decided on non-Scooby human visitors, since any of the demon variety Spike could handle without risking a headache.

Buffy hadn't bothered to tell Spike she was swinging by with a witch in tow—figured he'd mouth off about being able to take care of himself and make a big fuss over it. When they'd arrived, he'd been lounging in one of those ratty green chairs, shirtless and with the top button of his jeans undone, watching some fuzzy show on his ancient television and nursing a drink.

And Buffy had stopped dead the moment she saw him in all his half-naked glory and openly ogled him for a good ten seconds before remembering why she was there in the first place. This wasn't her fault, she maintained, because *holy marble chest, Batman*. Over the years, she'd caught Spike in various stages of undress, and she'd been pressed up against him enough times to appreciate that, yes, he was rather built. But she'd never, to her memory, gotten a look at him like this before. All ropy muscles and wiry strength and toned abs and could anyone blame her for staring?

"Eyes are up here, Slayer," Spike had drawled in that low, husky voice somewhere between a murmur and a purr. When she'd finally managed to convince her gaze to move up his body—not an easy feat, mind—she'd found him looking positively delighted and more than just a little full of himself. Which, hey, he'd earned. Both because he had *that* body, and she'd been drooling without care.

That didn't mean she hadn't blushed up a storm because she had.

*All of that is mine if I want it.*

And it was—he was. All of Spike was hers and ready for the taking. Desperate for the taking, if the way he looked at her was any indication, and while she'd known this for about a year now, the knowledge hit her hard again. The way the realization that they'd been on a date had hit her—obvious but *holy cow*.

"Suppose there's a point to this little field trip other than gawking at the local undead," Spike had said, still smirking. "Maybe Glinda can clear it up?"

At which point, Buffy had seized hold of her faculties—whatever synapses were left, that was—and launched into the reason they were there. Spike had crossed his arms—which made his muscles shift in ways that were way too distracting—and favored her with a furrowed brow and an expression torn between amused and annoyed. However, when she'd started to babble, he'd taken pity on her, given her that soft smile that did her in every time he flashed it, and agreed to let Tara do whatever Buffy thought was necessary.

An hour later, the crypt was heavy with the scent of herbs and buzzing with magic. And Buffy tried not to worry that it had been too easy, or dwell on the fact that Tara wasn't the witch she would have chosen to perform this task if circumstances were different. Not that she doubted Tara's abilities—she had no reason to—but Buffy couldn't help but feel they'd all been a bit spoiled with Willow.

Of course, Willow's spells had the occasional—err, frequent—tendency to go wonky, so maybe that wasn't the best bar to measure by.

"So...we're sure this is gonna do the trick?" Buffy asked, trying not to fidget too much. "No uninvited human guests?"

Tara looked up from where she was gathering her supplies. "We really won't know until someone tries something. I'd love to be able to test it out, but doing so would mean finding someone to drop in and then explaining what we're doing. But everything reacted the way it should," she added hastily, perhaps in response to Buffy's widening eyes. "The flame turned green and we all felt the power surge."

"Buffy, it's fine," Spike said, still with that soft smile. At least he'd put a shirt on—that smile combined with the eye-candy and she might have melted. "Bit overkill, if you ask me, seein' as we don't even know that Warren has the first clue where I hang my fangs at night."

"Jonathan does," Buffy shot back. This had occurred to her the other night when she'd been unable to sleep. "From that stint when he was Mr. Sunnydale and your sworn enemy?"

Spike rolled his eyes and huffed a laugh. "That little git? You think he—"

"I don't know. Up until a few nights ago, I wouldn't have thought Warren capable of *murder*."

"Even after the way he came after you?"

"This is different. As screwed up as he was, he loved Katrina."

"You always hurt the one you love, pet."

She looked at him levelly, crossed her arms. "*You* don't."

He drew in a sharp breath, seemingly taken aback. Then the smile returned, sweet and vulnerable, and he edged a step forward. "Caught on, have you?"

Yeah, but that was hardly breaking news. Something she might have been able to shoot back at him had Tara not cleared her throat and reminded her that they weren't alone at present.

"Are you two...? I guess I've missed a lot," the witch said. "With the...not being around and stuff."

"Ah." Buffy whirled around, her face going hot, and rubbed her hands along her hips for want of something to do with them. "We're... It's new."

"For her," Spike said, sounding amused. He tossed her a wink when she turned back to him. "Been longer for me."

"Yeah, the cat has been out of that particular bag for a while," Tara agreed with a grin. "How have the others taken it? Not that it matters what they think—or me, for that matter, but—"

"Very new," Buffy repeated. "Very, very new. And we're still figuring things out. But Spike was my date the other night at the Bronze, and Xander managed not to come at him with a stake, which I call progress. Then all this stuff with Warren happened and it... Well, very new. And going very slow. Heavy on the slow. Snails have lapped us at the pace we're—"

"Slayer, you're rambling," Spike teased in a low voice. Then he was close—so close she could damn near feel her cells reaching for him—and pressing his hand to the small of her back in wordless support. He'd started doing that a lot. Soft, innocent touches as though he was eager to let her know he was there if she needed him.

"Sorry," Buffy said, wincing. "Just...with the newness."

So new she wasn't even sure what they were yet, which she thought she might need to explain, but stopped short when she caught the widening grin on Tara's face and realized that this news wasn't exactly headline-worthy.

But then, that was Tara. Quiet and reserved, though imbued with compassion and understanding her other friends seemed to have in short supply. Always had been. And it struck Buffy out of nowhere just how much she'd missed the witch, and how much had changed since the last time she'd seen her.

It seemed both a blink and forever ago, that night at the house when she'd come home to find Tara moving out. To say Buffy had been at a not-great place then would be an understatement; she'd been fresh off the latest spell-gone-wrong and her own twisted thoughts about her feelings about Spike and life and pretty much everything. On the outside, not that much had changed—that emptiness that had chased her then wasn't gone, but it wasn't as large and terrifying as it'd been then. At some point, she'd stopped experiencing that sinking feeling every morning she awoke. She'd stopped begrudging her existence.

Hell, she'd started to enjoy it.

As though she'd plucked the thought right out of her head, Tara offered, "You seem happy. Or...at least happier than you did."

"I am," Buffy replied, dazed, then shook her head to clear it. "Happier than I was."

"That's good. Really good, Buffy. I-it doesn't make up for what we did, of course, but... I'm glad. And I'm sure the others will understand." Tara paused, the grin on her face fading. "Though it might take some time."

Yeah, time Buffy was prepared for. More than prepared. And while the pushback she'd gotten from Xander hadn't been surprising, she had decided to take off the kid gloves when it came to answering it in the likely event he took up arms again. The life she had was hers, regardless of how unwanted it had been when she'd first opened her eyes in that coffin. She'd live it her way.

And her way included Spike. The vampire who loved her, soul or not. Who had offered to keep himself on a leash if the chip in his head ever went out.

The chip that didn't work on her.

"What you did," Buffy blurted, latching onto the thought before it could flit away again. "Tara, there's something else I'd like you to look into."

Spike must have had the same revelation, for the hand at the small of her back was suddenly wrapped around her wrist. "Buffy—"

"What is it?" Tara asked. "Is something wrong?"

"No," Spike said firmly.

"Spike can hit me," Buffy said at the same time. She threw her vampire a narrow look and pulled her wrist free. "Me and only me. The chip works on everyone else."

Tara furrowed her brow. "Oh."

"Not that there's been any hitting," Buffy rushed to add. "We found out by accident one night—*patrolling*, not doing...other things." Great, now she was blushing again. "I didn't duck or something and he hit me and it didn't hurt. Him. Me, it hurt a little. But not much."

"Bloody hell, the things you do to a man's ego," Spike muttered.

"But we found out it's just me. We thought it might be, you know, the chip just being toast but then Willow had that accident with Dawn—it occurred to Buffy mid-ramble that mentioning Tara's ex and the magic problem that had driven them apart might not be the best tactic, but her mouth wouldn't stop running—"and Spike kinda lost his temper for what happened to Dawn and hit her. Willow, not Dawn. And it hurt. Him. And Willow, I'm guessing, but the chip went off, so it's definitely working. And Willow's fine, too. She was just a bit banged up a couple of days—which might've been due to the car crash, and not Spike."

By the time Buffy managed to stop blabbing, all the warmth that had lit Tara's face had faded, replaced with an expression Buffy couldn't read.

Then, slowly, Tara turned her gaze to Spike. "You hit Willow?"

Spike swallowed, clenched and unclenched his fists. He flicked his gaze once to Buffy but didn't give her enough time to apologize, verbally or no. "She hurt Dawn. Lost my head for a minute, but as the Slayer said, paid the price."

Tara nodded, her expression not changing. Then she looked back to Buffy. "And you think there might be something wrong with the chip?"

"No. With me."

“Fuck.” Spike hung his head, shoulders slumping. “Buffy, pet, there’s nothing wrong with you. We talked about this.”

“We did. And...I hope you’re right.” She forced her throat to work. “But we don’t know. And I *need* to know.”

“Need to know if there’s somethin’ wrong with you for suddenly fancying me, is that it?”

Ugh. Buffy screwed up her face and pinched the bridge of her nose, willing for patience. “No, that’s not it, you big baby, so please, can the passive-aggressiveness. I need to know for *me*.” She forced out a slow breath, counted to five, and met Tara’s gaze again. “Can you help?”

Honestly, it would be her sort of luck if, after all that, the answer was no. But amazingly, Tara nodded, and Buffy realized the look on her face wasn’t blankness, rather calm consideration. She got so little of it these days she supposed it was easy to mistake the two—or just not know it when she saw it.

“I’ll do what I can,” Tara agreed with a nod and a small smile. “Anything I can. You deserve answers, Buffy.”

Relief hit her hard and fast—both at Tara’s willingness to help and at the knowledge that there might be a way to determine what, if anything, might have gone wrong with the resurrection. The rush was so potent it nearly swept her up in the current. And at once, Buffy felt she hadn’t appreciated Tara nearly as much as she should have even when she’d been a normal fixture in her life. Willow had been all with the supportive and everything, but it had taken explanations and justifications to get there. Also while walking the delicate balance of not upsetting her by bringing up the massive trauma that was being newly not-dead, as that was both a sore subject and adjacent to the magical addiction that had cost Willow her relationship. Tara just seemed to get it without needing a ninety-minute presentation.

No, it was more than that. Tara trusted her to be a grown-up and make her own decisions, and god, how Buffy needed that.

“Come to my birthday party,” Buffy said in a rush.

Tara blinked, clearly taken aback. “Your party?”

“Yeah, at the house. The gang kinda insisted. Xander’s even trying to make a big deal about how I’m turning one and how he’s going to card me if I go near the booze.” Granted, he’d stopped doing that the



second she'd threatened to smash a corkscrew through his eye socket, but it had taken a few oh-so-funny jokes to get there. "I mean, I know Willow will be there and I understand if you don't wanna, but I'd love it if—"

"I'll be there." Apparently, Tara had only needed a moment to recover, for she gave her a warm smile. "It would be good to see...*everyone* again. I miss *everyone*. When is it?"

Buffy rattled off the details in a rush, as it occurred to her belatedly that Spike had been quiet a minute too long—hadn't responded at all after she'd snapped at him. Tara seemed to arrive at the same conclusion, or perhaps her natural intuition had just kicked in, for she made her way in a hurry for the door, claiming she needed to motor if she hoped to make her midday class. Then the witch was gone, and it was just Buffy and her vampire again.

Her possibly sulky, definitely overreact-y vampire.

"Didn't know you were havin' a party, pet."

Who had apparently decided to drop the subject of the did-Buffy-come-back-wrong test without a fight just to mess with her head.

"Huh?" Buffy turned to find Spike in his kitchen alcove, pouring himself a drink.

"Just didn't mention it, is all."

Okay, so he was still sulky. Just about other things now. Goody.

"Hey, Mr. Crabby Pants, did it not occur to you that today's very special crypt visit might be multi-purpose?"

Spike looked up, his expression guarded. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. You are invited to the party. Also, *dub*."

He arched an eyebrow. "'Cause that's just a given?"

"In what world is it not?"

"Wasn't sure, is all. Didn't know until just now that you still thought there might be something wrong with you."

So he *hadn't* dropped that, either. Even better. "Spike, I just need to know. I'm the one this spell was done to, and I think I deserve to know if there were any very special side-effects that I can look forward to experiencing someday. Whatever Tara finds out won't change anything, but it might give me a leg up in the preparation department."

At that, something shifted behind his eyes, and he dropped his

shoulders with a long breath. "Right," he muttered. "'Course. That's... I get it."

"Then why with the sudden attack of insecurities?"

"Cause I'm closer than I've ever been to you and that bloody terrifies me." A thin smile stretched his lips. "Closer I get, the more terrified I am."

"Of what?"

But she knew. Of course she did.

"Of messin' up. Doin' something that reminds you... Bugger." Spike rolled his head back, now appearing irritated with himself. "The other night, when we found the girl and you wanted to call it in... Just kept thinkin' about how it coulda gone, you know? If you'd thought you had done her in."

Buffy would be lying if she said she hadn't lost a certain amount of sleep over that, as well. Given the mind-trippyness that was the time loop, she could have easily lost her footing and believed she'd caused the blow that had resulted in Katrina's death. Maybe she would have remembered she'd met the woman at some point, but odds were good she wouldn't have without prompting. That had been a stint in Heaven ago, and after a while, the faces of the people she encountered while on the slaying gig started to blur. Particularly those faces belonging to bystanders and not evildoers. Bystanders she could afford to forget.

"I don't know what I would've done," Buffy replied honestly, crossing her arms. "Faith, the other slayer, accidentally slayed a human on a patrol once and... God, that tore me up and all I did was stand there and watch it happen. Giles told me then that the Council can help in situations like that and... I dunno, maybe I would've remembered that. Or maybe—"

"You woulda done a barmy thing like turn yourself in."

She couldn't say it wasn't a possibility. The slew of thoughts she'd had three years ago when it had been Faith had been all over the place. She'd lied to the police to cover her tracks and protect her friend, but doing so had nearly suffocated her with guilt. In a different headspace, with the experience she had now... Yeah, Buffy could easily see herself walking into a precinct and confessing to manslaughter. If anyone would believe it was manslaughter.

"Maybe," Buffy said softly.

"And I woulda done anything to keep you from doing it."

She looked up sharply, not surprised by this, but somewhat taken aback at what she heard in his voice.

"And that'd be it, right?" Spike asked, stepping toward her. "I look at you and see someone who kills herself to save others, and with everything you give, you'd still give more even if the scales tipped just a hair. You'd give all of you until there was nothing left. And I wouldn't let you. You'd have to dust me before I'd let you offer yourself up like that."

"Spike—"

"I keep waitin' for you to see that or remember it. And am terrified that you will." He released a somewhat manic titter and tore his hand through his hair. "Dunno why I even brought it up. Been tryin' to hide it, keep it away—"

"Spike, I don't forget. I can't ever forget."

He paused, met her eyes with caution that looked downright wiggy on him, but intensity that was all trademark Spike. The bone-rattling intensity that she had somehow never gotten used to, no matter how many times he regarded her with it.

"Sometimes, you do make it hard to remember," Buffy said, keeping her tone calm and measured, like he was a horse that could be easily spooked. "But I don't forget. You don't feel anything for Katrina...or anyone you've hurt."

It wasn't a question, and he didn't treat it like one. "Not the way you want me to, no."

"You didn't think about Katrina's family and friends, or the life she had ahead of her. You thought—"

"Of you. What it'd do to you. How somethin' like that could make you..." But he didn't finish the thought, rather looked off, his jaw hardening. "Can't be anythin' but selfish when it comes to you, pet. Know what that makes me."

Once upon a time, not even all that long ago, Buffy would have too. She would have heard the things he was saying, the things he was careful *not* to say, and filled in the gaps with the badness he couldn't ever really hide. And it wasn't lost on her that the easiest thing for Spike to

do would have been to ignore all this, chalk what had happened to Katrina a close call where his lack of humanity was concerned, and hope that nothing like that ever happened again. Not for Buffy's sake or the sake of a future faceless victim, but for his own.

But he hadn't left it alone, because what he said was true. He *was* terrified. She had him terrified.

"And you think that if Tara's research into the resurrection spell comes up with something..."

"I don't think it will," Spike said, and she heard the truth there, too. Whatever else, Spike fully believed she was Buffy Anne Summers, just as she'd always been. "But yeah, pet, I worry. Anything even a little off and suddenly you have reason to think you're giving a monster crumbs because you're one, too. Couldn't bear that. This last stretch with you has been... Fuck, Slayer, it's been the best time of my life. Having you like this has been everything. Want more, of course, and I always will, but having it also means I could lose it. Say the wrong thing, do the wrong thing, let you in on the thoughts I have and—"

"Spike, I don't want you on eggshells around me. I want you to be you."

He laughed again and shook his head. "No, don't think you do. Not all of me—monster and all."

"I told you I can't forget the monster part. There's no sense in hiding it." Buffy chewed on the inside of her cheek, trying to sort through the barrage of thoughts hitting her at once. She couldn't say the conversation hadn't unsettled her—it had, but for reasons beyond her understanding. All she knew for sure was Spike wasn't the only one terrified of losing the thing they had or the promise of what it could become, and ignoring these fundamental differences between them would only lead to disaster. "Can you promise me something?"

"Anything," he said instantly.

"Talk to me."

Spike frowned, furrowing his brow. "Color a fella confused. Thought that's what we were doing."

"Yeah, we're talking. About things that scare you—things you're afraid of me knowing." She gestured, as though she could encapsulate all that entailed when she knew full well she couldn't. "We're going to

fight, Spike. Whether or not we're together, we're going to fight. There are things you can't understand and things I... Things that will bother me because of that. Like about Katrina—and yes, that does bother me but standing here, right now, it's not a deal-breaker because I know you're trying. You're talking to me about it right now and that's *trying*. Don't pretend to be someone else—be you. Be you and talk to me and we'll figure things out. Or we won't. But holding stuff back, not saying the things you're thinking, hoping it goes away—that killed me and Riley. And probably me and Angel. I don't want that relationship again. Either of them."

Spike tilted his head in that way of his. "You want me to start spoutin' off everything I'm thinkin'?"

"Uhh, no. Big no on that. Think that's a good way for me to be grossed out and never want to kiss you again."

A hint of a smile flickered across his face. "Can't have that, can we?" He hesitated before taking a step forward. "So when I think somethin' monstrous, I oughta share it?"

"Well, no. I mean, not just anything. I really don't need to become your confessional."

"Not makin' things any clearer, pet."

"I know." Buffy groaned and rolled her head back, blinking at the crypt ceiling for a moment. "Things like this. Like what happened with Katrina. Or just what we're doing *now*. I'm not saying I'm going to be Miss Congeniality about everything, but...it's important to me that we try." She pressed her lips together, shifted her weight between her feet. "What I told Tara was true, by the way. I am...*happier* now. Can't say it's all sunshine and lollipops in the world of Buffy because, well, it's not. But this... Being able to just *be* and know it's okay and there's no expectation or anything, it's been...really nice having you as a friend."

*Friend* was probably not what he wanted to hear, but he didn't wince or look away or do anything to indicate she should have chosen a different word. And that was good because *friendship* was something she thought she would always want from him—no matter where they went from here.

A long time ago—what felt like a lifetime ago, actually—Spike had told her that she and Angel could never be friends. At the time, she'd

taken that to heart. Now, though, she wasn't sure he'd succeeded in making the point he'd thought he was making. When the time came that she was ready to throw herself all in with Spike, she didn't want whatever they could have to come at the expense of what they had now. She wanted the friend and the lover both.

Considering how quickly she'd moved with Angel, perhaps the reason they could never be friends was they had never given themselves the chance. It had been all romantic and teenage hormone-y and *forbidden*, which made the aforementioned teenage hormone-y part explode all over itself. In fact, Buffy wasn't sure she could conjure up a single conversation she and Angel had had before they'd started making out all the time that hadn't involved slayage, prophecies, or anything in between. Hell, she hadn't even made it for their coffee date at the Bronze.

There was something to think about. How many conversations had she *ever* had with Angel that didn't involve work or drama about their relationship? When had they ever just *talked*?

Certainly not at the clandestine meeting that had been less with the clandestine and more with the awkward silence.

"Well," Spike said, jarring her back to herself, "as one *friend* to another, can I ask a favor?"

Buffy arched an eyebrow. "Depends on the favor."

"Has Teeth asked you about huntin' down a Suvolte demon?"

"Since I've never heard of a soup vault demon, I'll say no."

"Suvolte," Spike corrected, though not without that tender smile of his—the one she was pretty sure meant he thought she was the good kind of adorable. "Good, then. If he does ask, be a love and let me know."

"Why, they do you wrong? You calling slay dibs?"

"No. By all bloody means, you run into one, take its sodding head off. Don't reckon that's too likely, though."

"Huh? You're making the kind of sense that's not."

"Suvolte aren't from around here. But I wager Teeth might put you on the hunt anyway to find the eggs."

"Eggs? There are eggs now?" Hopefully, not mind-controllingly eggs. She'd already done that once, and it had had a decidedly icky ending.

"Suvolte are nasty buggers," Spike said, rubbing the back of his neck. "Tear bloody villages apart, cause all kinda fun. But what I hear, eggs fetch a pretty price if you know the right dealer. Just so happens I know the right dealer." He brought his hands up as though anticipating her glare, which at least demonstrated he hadn't completely lost his mind. "Clem's uncle."

"Clem's...uncle."

He nodded. "He's a chef. Got some gig in Vegas and Suvolte eggs are a sodding delicacy, from what I hear. Clem's splittin' the take with me, seein' as I told him I'd keep the eggs here until he can smuggle 'em outta town, so we both get a nice chunk of change and the eggs get fried and served up to a bunch of high-rollers. Teeth keeps his chompers off 'em, too. Winners all around."

"Except now there's a Suvolte who's mad as hell," Buffy said dryly. "Bringing all that rampagey goodness here."

"Don't reckon so. Like I said, they're not from around here."

"Define *here*."

"This continent," Spike replied. "Look, Slayer, I asked all the right questions. Clem won these in a hand of poker—"

"Fresh out of kittens that day?"

"Wouldn't know. Wasn't there, on account of bein' at the bloody Bronze with you." He waited as though to see if she'd smart off again, then sighed when she didn't and went on, "Way Clem tells it, the bloke who lost 'em was a bit sore 'cause he had some deal with a demon called the Doctor—"

"The Doctor?" At once, she flashed back to the tower, the eerie guy digging a blade into Dawn's skin. "As in—"

"No. Bloody hell, give me *some* credit. That was the first thing I checked." Spike scowled at her, and what she saw in his eyes more than screamed the truth of that. "Clem reckons the sore loser might turn up to do him some hurt to get the eggs back, so he asked me to keep an eye on them until he can move 'em out of town. Just wanna know if anyone's sniffin' around for them, is all."

"So...they're here. These eggs."

He nodded. "Downstairs."

"And not many people know you have a downstairs."

“Just love it when you worry over me, Summers.” He was grinning now. “No, I don’t exactly do a lot of blabbing about the layout of my pad when I’m out. And even if someone starts poking around, I got them tucked off in a dark corner, away from anything anyone would be down there to see until moving day. So that’s all—just want to know if you hear anything. Not askin’ you to get your dainty hands dirty.”

Buffy arched an eyebrow and stretched out her hands, fingers splayed. “These aren’t so much with the dainty. Dainty doesn’t rip out demon guts.”

He rumbled that low chuckle that never failed to make her shiver, then took a step toward her, and another until he was close enough to take one of her hands in his own. “Hmm,” he said, making a show of looking her hand over, lightly caressing the back before twisting her wrist so he could run a finger over her palm. Every stroke of his skin against hers seemed to reverberate somewhere deep inside her, licking the flames to a fire that he kept stoking. Time was that fire would fade with distance—he’d bring it to life with his presence, but take it with him when they went their separate ways. Not so anymore. Now, it was always there, a not-so-subtle reminder at times of what she was moving toward.

The fire had frozen her not so long ago. All she’d wanted was to feel.

And she did now.

“I dunno, Slayer,” Spike said, his voice low, still stroking her palm. “Look mighty dainty to me.”

He met her eyes, and god, he was close. Close and looking at her with the question she couldn’t answer yet, even if all of her screamed at her hesitation. The thing was, as much as she wanted what came next—and god, she did—she was also scared out of her mind. More so, maybe, than he claimed to be. There were so many things that could go wrong, so many ways *they* could go wrong. And while that was true for any new relationship, she wasn’t sure she could survive losing the friendship part with Spike when it had more or less brought her back to life. A part of her also worried he’d change—or rather, revert to some version she’d known before. That everything he’d given her up until now had been by design and would go away the second she caved.



That fear wasn't loud, but it was present. All of her fears were.

"I...better go," Buffy said, reluctantly pulling her hand from his. "Have a few payments to chase down before I'm done for the day."

She thought he might protest, maybe grab her and pull her back to recapture the moment, but he didn't. Rather, Spike stepped back and nodded. "Course. Got some business needing tending to, myself. Seems I'm the shark's go-to for sewer-dwelling demons."

"Makes sense," she replied, hoping she sounded at least somewhat casual. "With the...daylight restrictions."

"Right."

The thought was there to tackle their respective to-do lists as a team, but Buffy kept from voicing it. As much time as they spent together, some time apart was good too. Gave her head a chance to clear.

After a stretch of silence that went on just a smidge too long, Spike smiled and slid his hands into his pockets. "Your place for patrol tonight?"

"Yes. I might actually spring for pizza."

"Do it. And get those garlic parm wings. My treat."

"You know vampires aren't supposed to like garlic."

Spike looked her up and down. "Lots of things vampires aren't supposed to like, pet. Not about to start listening now."

And in a flash, he'd pressed a kiss to her lips—so quick she didn't realize what had happened until it was over—then marched with intent toward the access door to the lower level and dropped out of sight before she could summon a reaction.

## TIME

TARA HAD ASKED IF SHE COULD SWING BY EARLY TO DISCUSS something, and since that something was likely the results of her resurrection-related research, Buffy was all about ensuring that no one—particularly her best friend—made it to the door ahead of her. There would be plenty of time for awkwardness during the actual party.

Which was how Buffy found herself loitering near the front of the house the closer it grew to party hour. And despite herself, she was also on alert for a fiery entrance from the vampire on the invite list, not entirely trusting him to keep his promise to come through the sewers rather than make with the blanket. Just for today, she'd said, because of the precedence of birthday badness. Spike had rolled his eyes and grumbled about bossy women who thought they could get him to do their bidding with a crook of their finger before he'd agreed. Which, in Spike-lingo, meant *maybe*.

Either way, Buffy knew he was touched by her concern, and his own attempt to play it off was rather comforting. Part of her had thought it possible that admitting her feelings to Spike, or allowing them to be shown through action, would result in him becoming the worst version of himself and lording it over her until she got so fed up she had to stake him. However, the closer they got, the less guarded he seemed.

Even more now, following their conversation at the crypt. While she suspected he was still being cautious about what he said, he seemed to have more of his swagger back, and she'd be a lying liar if she said she didn't find that sexy.

Though really, there was little about Spike she didn't find sexy these days.

Buffy's plan to head Willow off at the pass regarding Tara's arrival went hitchless. She threw the door open before Tara could ring or knock and ushered her in a hurry over the threshold.

"I don't want to be a naggy nagger person," Buffy said as she followed the witch into the living room, "but seeing as it's my birthday, I'm going to give myself a break."

Tara offered her a somewhat lopsided grin and settled onto the couch. "I promise this isn't your present," she said. "And I didn't just sit on the information for dramatic birthday effect."

Buffy didn't reply, rather twisted her hands together and rocked on the balls of her feet, waiting for the verdict.

"You're you, Buffy," Tara said with a soft, understanding smile. "The best I can figure, you have something like a cellular sunburn, which is probably enough to fool Spike's chip. But there's nothing wrong with you."

The tidal wave of relief that crashed over her was nearly enough to knock her to the floor. Until that moment, Buffy hadn't realized just how worried she'd been. The fear that something might be wrong hadn't been all-consuming, but it had been there, lingering and persistent—a piece of gum on the bottom of her shoe that no amount of scraping could remove. Easy to ignore most of the time, because there really wasn't anything she could do about it even if it were true, but there all the same.

"Thank you," Buffy said, her lower lip wobbling. "That... Thank you." She swallowed and fought for composure. It would not do to be all weepy girl for her own birthday party. Better to change the topic and fast. "So, umm, on a scale of one to yikes, how awkward is it for you to be here with... You know?"

Tara pressed her lips together, the warm look on her face fading abruptly, and making Buffy want to kick herself for her sloppy segue. "I

am only mildly terrified,” the witch replied, flashing a nervous smile. “I know... Dawn’s been very vocal about how good Willow is doing.”

“She is,” Buffy agreed quickly. “Doing good. I don’t have the exact day count, but she’s been magic-free since the whole car crash incident. It wasn’t easy but she’s super with the committed.”

“I’m glad.” Another nervous smile. “That’s really good.”

“You really don’t want to talk about this, do you?”

Tara sighed, her shoulders slumping. “It’s not that. It’s just...difficult. I wanted Willow to get help more than anything and it’s wonderful that she’s doing so well. But there’s, you know, a lot that happened and a lot to work through and...as much as I love her, there’s so much to rebuild. I’m not even sure where to start.”

“But you want to? Start, that is?”

Tara’s eyes went wide, like she’d just found herself in the path of an oncoming vehicle, and Buffy’s urge to kick herself resurfaced. The art of shutting up was one thing she had never mastered.

Thankfully, before the silence became too strained, the front door swung open and Xander and Anya spilled inward, both laden with groceries. Apparently, Tara’s early arrival had been just early enough.

“Party people are here,” Xander announced, kicking the door shut. “Who’s ready to let out their inner funky monkey?”

“Less talking, more taking things to the kitchen,” Anya decreed. She paused long enough to favor Buffy with a short nod. “Happy birthing day. I hope you appreciate the gift of manual labor.”

“It’s sentiment like that that lets me know in no uncertain terms I am going to be in charge of the *thank you* cards,” Xander said with a forced smile before navigating his way around his fiancée. “I just hope all our guests enjoy handwriting that looks like a cross between a five-year-old and a serial killer.”

“Or a five-year-old serial killer,” Tara offered with a bright smile.

“I so do *not* need those sort of nightmares.” Xander paused and grinned at her. “Good to see you, Tara. How’s the witchy life treating you?”

“If you’re going to answer that, do it while walking,” Anya urged, nodding in the direction of the kitchen. “We have a party to be underappreciated for putting together and Buffy is not going to help.”

"It's her birthday, Ahn."

"Yes, and I understand that the anniversary of one's liberation from their mother's vagina is something celebrated among humans, which is why I am not going to complain." With that, she again took the lead and marched with intent out of sight, leaving Xander behind, somewhat red-faced, and wearing his typical what-can-you-do look.

"Boy," he said, "I'd really hate to see what *complaining* would look like, wouldn't you?"

He was gone before Buffy could come up with a suitable reply. Which was probably for the best, considering she had no idea what to say to any of that.

"Are they okay?" Tara asked, frowning. "With the not being around and all, I haven't missed any, umm, updates about the wedding, right? I mean, he said *thank you* cards so I assume everything's still on."

Buffy shrugged a shoulder, then, realizing that likely didn't instill a lot of confidence, plastered on a smile. "All's good. Just the pre-vows jitters. I've never had them myself but I hear they can be a major stressor."

And speaking of stressors... A certain redheaded stressor came down the stairs the next instant, swinging her arms with great exaggeration and pointedly not directing her gaze anywhere near the living room. Buffy bit the inside of her cheek to keep from letting loose a giggle. From the look of things, Willow had been torn between the breezy/nonchalant vibe and one that was more accidentally-dressed-like-a-demure-sex-kitten. She wore the earthy tones that complemented her—deep brown pants and an emerald, cleavage-y top with just a hint of bra showing. Her hair also had a tousled look and she'd gone heavy on the eye shadow.

"Oh!" Willow said, plastering on a wide gosh-didn't-see-you-there smile. "Buffy. And Tara. Hi. I thought I heard Xander and Anya and, well, you know them and their shenanigans. Adult supervision being a good." She beamed for a second that turned awkward in a big ole hurry, then flashed Buffy a look universally understood between best friends as *get lost*.

"Adult supervision," Buffy agreed, offering an exaggerated nod and walking backward. "I'll go...make with the adult super—coming!"

It was probably not the best way to repay Tara after the work she'd done to put Buffy's mind at ease. But hey, call her romantic, she wanted things to work out for Willow. And Tara. And the first steps toward healing the divide couldn't happen without some one-on-one time.

Plus, Buffy was reasonably certain it'd be less awkward with the couple in the kitchen.

Five minutes later, though, she was cursing herself for having sent a dare into the universe. Honestly, she knew better.

"You what?" she asked Anya, hoping against hope she'd heard wrong.

"We invited a guy," Anya replied.

Dammit. She'd heard right.

And of course Dawn would choose that moment to join the party in the kitchen. And of course she would have overheard that last part.

"A guy?" her sister echoed, her brow wrinkling. "But...I thought you and Spike—"

"And please do not finish that sentence on account of I want to actually eat some of the tasty goodness we're preparing," Xander said, waving to the spread on the island. They had, in fact, made rather fast work, considering how long they'd been back here. Or more accurately, how long they *hadn't*. "And don't worry. It's not a setup."

Anya nodded, beaming. "Right. No. Just an attractive, single man with whom we hope you find much in common."

Yeah, apparently dying did squat to nullify the jinx that was the Buffy birthday celebration. Granted, if she'd been pressed for a prediction, Buffy wouldn't have put the possibility of killing her friends on the list.

"You invited someone over here without telling me," she said, deadpan. "Not even considering whether or not I might have a date to my own birthday party."

Xander's eye twitched, taking half his face along for the ride. "I... Well, I wasn't... Are you really *set* on Spike, Buffy?"

"I'm not set on anything." Only that wasn't true. "You realize he's coming tonight, right? And once he hears you brought me a date, the odds of him playing nice are slim to none."

"And that doesn't bother you? That's not...all with the red flag waving?"

"Xander, *I'm* having to use all of my restraint to keep from throwing you out the nearest window, and only succeeding because I know you'll be the one to patch it back up." Buffy crossed her arms, narrowing her eyes. "How nice would you expect Anya to play if I brought a date for you?"

"That's different—I love her. We're getting married."

"Oh, but before you popped the question, it would have been hunky-dory?"

He rubbed the back of his neck, directing his gaze to the floor and muttering something under his breath.

"What was that?" Buffy asked. "And maybe try with the eye contact?"

To his credit, Xander whipped his head up without hesitating. "I said I just don't get it. This whole thing with Spike... And I know, I know it's not my place to tell you what to do or anything. But he's not a good guy, Buff. You're just so...awesome and he's such a bad guy and you deserve more."

*Not a good guy* and *such a bad guy* weren't the same things. The first thing, Buffy could agree with. Whatever else Spike was, he wasn't good. Not by himself—not without help. Last year, he'd tried to argue that the chip had forced his hand, made him change to be good; now, especially as close as they were getting, he seemed more intent that she remember how good he *wasn't*. Something between that first disastrous love declaration and where they were now had changed his mind, and she was willing to bet that *something* was the inches she'd given him since the ordeal with Glory and the Buffybot.

Spike was a reactionary creature, perhaps more so than anyone else she knew. What he said or did depended entirely on what was expected of him, or what allowances others made. The more pushback he received, the nastier he'd be, the more he'd lash out, angry and frustrated that his word wasn't good enough. Given the chance to prove that it was, and, well, she got what they had now. Add in the conversation they'd had the day Tara had warded his crypt, and Buffy knew Spike was as worried about messing up their relationship by being

himself as she had been that she'd come back wrong. But that worry told her everything she needed to know about him.

"I deserve what I want," Buffy said at last. "And...right now, this is what I want. Can you accept that?" She spared a glance at Anya, who looked politely bewildered. "Both of you?"

Anya blinked, shrugged, and nodded. "I just want another couple to hang out with, and Spike is highly entertaining. It would be nice to have another non-human perspective."

Xander looked pained at that. "I am not sure I can stomach us on a double date with you and Captain Peroxide, and I'm never gonna like the guy. Not after everything. And I might wonder just how much trauma we inflicted on you to make you forget what he is."

"There better be a *but* coming," Buffy said tersely.

"*But* I'm... I love you and I want you to be happy, so I will put on my party face and make with the festive cheer and try not to set your boyfriend on fire."

That was perhaps the most she could ask from Xander, so she decided to drop it. "And you'll call to cancel Mr. Mystery Date?"

Xander's eyes widened. "Oh. Yeah, that'll be all kinds of awkward. Uhh, phone."

He disappeared the next second, though Buffy wasn't sure why, considering there was a phone within sight. Though perhaps he thought the situation required more care than he'd be able to give in a roomful of people staring at him.

"For the record, I don't care who you date or sleep with," Anya said, going back to her party-arranging. "I asked Xander about his choice in prospective mates before he invited Richard, and he seemed intent on providing you with a suitable alternative." She lifted her thumb into her mouth to suck off a smudge of cheese, then continued without so much as glancing up, "Even when we first thought you were boinking Spike, I wasn't sure what the big deal was, though it certainly bothered Xander, so I thought it safest to feign interest and/or concern."

Buffy wasn't sure how to take that, so she went with, "Thanks." And to busy herself—as well as get as far from this conversation as



possible—she plucked up a platter of party food. “I’ll just...take this to the dining room.”

Anya shrugged, still not looking up, allowing Buffy to make her escape as quickly as she could without putting the hors d'oeuvres in jeopardy.

“So you didn’t correct him,” Dawn said, practically on her heels. “Xander. When he called Spike your boyfriend, you didn’t correct him.”

Buffy set the plate on the table, rolled her head back, and fought the urge to scream. Trying to define her relationship with Spike in her own mind was confusing at the best of times—she so didn’t need the third degree from all angles.

“It was easier,” she said, not looking at her sister. “If I corrected him, he’d jump all over it and set me up with more guys I’m not interested in.”

“So Spike’s *not* your boyfriend?” Dawn demanded, and out of her periphery, Buffy saw her cross her arms and jut out her hip in full teenage production flare. “Because even *I’m* getting mixed signals on that one. You’re always hanging around him and he’s all...giddy when he’s here.”

Buffy wrinkled her brow. “He is?”

“Oh, tell me you haven’t noticed.”

“I haven’t. We’re just...” But hell, she didn’t even know what they were *just* anymore. “Okay, there’s something going on.”

“Uhh, duh.”

There was a reason Buffy didn’t confide in her little sister when it came to all things her love life, and not just because of the fifteen years worth of memories featuring her blabbing to anyone who would listen. She wasn’t sure how everything had happened in the world without Dawn, but Buffy still had the memory of the brat tattling to their mom about Angel being in her room after hours.

“But we’re going slow,” she said. “And nothing’s been...decided.”

“Except apparently you’re turning down dates with nice, Xander-approved human boys.” Dawn waited for her reply, but when she had none to give, rolled her eyes, and heaved a dramatic sigh. “You guys

could, you know, spend some time here *not* dating with me. It wouldn't kill you."

"We don't *not* spend time here," Buffy argued. "He swings by before patrol."

"For like two minutes and then you're out the door."

"Dawn, I *have* to patrol. It's kinda my job?"

"But you're not *just* patrolling, are you? You're hanging out, doing whatever it is slayers and vamps who aren't dating do?"

For that, she had no answer, because Dawn was right. While Buffy had gotten Spike in the habit of coming by so she could ply him with enough home comforts to justify the money he was giving her, they typically ended their evenings at the cemetery. Not at his crypt and not at her house, because confined quarters when she was tired and less clear-minded was a whole lot of temptation. It was easier keeping to neutral territory, especially now that they'd gone on a date and everything.

"I get it," Dawn said a moment later, terse. "You just don't want to be here with me."

*Ugh.* "Dawn, that is—"

But she didn't get a chance to rebut exactly what that was. Dawn huffed, whipped around with more of that teen-drama attitude, and disappeared before Buffy could even begin to decide what she might have said to appease her.

All right. First thing on the to-do list after the birthday extravaganza was talk with Dawn. The thought alone was exhausting, but Buffy could admit she hadn't been the most reliable fixture around the house these last few months. And while that had been essential to keep herself from losing her mind, she'd apparently done some damage on the home front without realizing it.

Before she could follow those thoughts down a path she really didn't want to travel at the moment, the sound of something crashing rang out from the kitchen.

"Spike!" Anya yelled. "You nearly made me cut my finger off!"

"Too bad you didn't," came the deep reply, followed by the slamming of a door. "Special occasion and all. Would do well to have something to sip other than the pig swill."

Buffy sighed and started back for the kitchen, then frowned and hurried her paces when the smell of slightly charred leather reached her nose. At the doorway, she found him snagging a bite of green pepper, smoke still rising off his duster.

"You were supposed to go through the sewers," she said shortly, glaring at the blanket tucked under his arm. "Hello, no messing with the birthday jinx?"

The asshole had the audacity to smirk at her. "Just love it when you get yourself all in a worry for yours truly." He grinned a moment longer, clearly expecting her to cave and find him adorable. When she didn't, he sighed and rolled his head back like she was the one being unreasonable. "Well, I thought about it, Slayer, and I didn't much fancy showin' up to your big party *smelling* like a bloody sewer. Didn't know what sort of party you were throwin', but if given the chance, I didn't want you turnin' down a dance with me on account that I reek."

Anya nodded, apparently completely over the near-finger-severing incident. "Very considerate," she said. "Though you could have come early and showered upstairs."

Spike arched both eyebrows. "Yeah? Suppose I could have at that."

At once, Buffy's brain flooded with images of slick, pale skin, marble-like muscles, and water rolling down a flat stomach, then lower, lower, and she felt her face go hot. She turned away before Spike could catch her eye, but from the rumbling chuckle he released, he knew exactly the path her mind had taken.

"Granted, you don't have any clothes here that I am aware of," Anya continued in her frank, unaffected tone, "and that's where the smell would have really set in. Buffy, have you considered keeping some of Spike's things here since you two are now officially dating?"

Buffy whirled back around. "Anya, we're not—" But then she broke off, met Spike's gaze, and lost her nerve.

Were they dating? They had been on a date—one, yes, but that had very much been a date, even if neither of them had labeled it. She was refusing dates with other men, berating Xander for attempting to set her up, and having conversations with Spike that pretty much amounted to relationship talk. Plus, there was the way her mind had

leaped immediately into a gratuitous slideshow of naked Spike just ten seconds ago and...

Anya was looking at her quizzically when Buffy returned to herself. "You're not dating?" she asked, her brow furrowed. "Then why is Xander sending Richard away?"

"Who's Richard?" Spike asked in a rush.

"A man we thought would be good for Buffy but she, rather forcefully, told Xander to cancel because of you." Anya stared at Buffy a moment longer, then looked to Spike and back again. Something seemed to dawn on her, for her eyes widened and she set down the knife she'd been using to slice up party food. "I might not be fluent in human social cues, but I think the appropriate thing would be for me to excuse myself so that you two can figure out what the hell you're doing."

She turned and stalked off without another word, seeming to take all of the air in the room with her. Buffy tried to draw in a breath and failed. The burn in her cheeks had spread and now she was warm everywhere. Sweaty-warm, not comfortable-warm, and her heart was thundering and Spike was staring at her, head tilted and eyes piercing and *god*, she wasn't sure what she was supposed to do now.

"Buffy." Spike stepped forward, dropping the blanket to the ground. "Don't go all skittish on me."

"Who's skittish?" she replied, sounding braver than she felt. And because she needed to move, needed to do *something*, she pushed herself from where she stood and rounded the island to take up Anya's station in front of the sink. Only she was trembling so hard she didn't really trust herself with a knife just now, so she ended up just staring at the assortment of dippable veggies, cheese, and crackers, hoping the world would swallow her.

"You're shaking all over, pet." Spike moved closer—of course he did. And she was boxed in. If she darted around the island he could head her off at the pass. She supposed the back door was an option if she was truly desperate, out into the sun where he definitely couldn't follow unless he grabbed that stupid blanket, but eventually, she'd have to face this. Avoiding Spike forever was not an option.

Because she didn't want to. She wanted this moment to be over,

yes, but she wasn't sure what she wanted on the other side of it, except that he needed to be there.

"What are you so afraid of, Slayer?" He was close again, his scent overwhelming her—that comforting mixture of leather and smoke that she had come to rely on over the past few months.

"Everything," Buffy blurted before she could help herself. "I don't want to lose this."

He blinked, furrowing his brow. "Lose what?"

"This. What we have right now."

"Neither do I, but—"

"But relationship stuff and Buffy are... It just goes badly. Like way bad. Guys-leave-the-town bad."

Great. Now Spike was staring at her like she'd started speaking Fyarl or something. Like it wasn't a thing that had happened time and time again. Hell, she hadn't even gotten Giles to stick around.

"You think I'd skip town?" Spike demanded, seeming to wrestle with the words. "Are you completely off your trolley? One thing I never do, bloody *never*, is run out on the woman I love. For god's sake, Dru shagged her way through Europe and I still didn't leave her until she gave me the old heave-ho."

"It's not just that, though. It's everything."

"Everything being what, exactly?"

"Spike, there's no reason we *should* work," Buffy said hotly, at once torn between a desperation to make him understand and the hope that he'd be able to wave a hand and make all these fears go away. "You vampire, me slayer. And I know I've been there before, but this is different. I *rely* on you more than I ever relied on Angel."

He scoffed, rolled his eyes. "Just what every bloke wants to hear."

"No, that's not what I—"

"So what was the other night, then? At the Bronze. Why's it you're turnin' away the blokes your mates wanna set you up with?" There was anger now, and dammit, she couldn't blame him. Nothing was coming out the way it should. "Why the hell did you *snog* me that night we tracked down Robot Boy? What has any of this been?"

*Everything.* It had been everything. And she wanted more—wanted it so much she could barely stand it. So much that standing there,

seeing the hurt and confusion in his eyes, had her own stinging. Spike was so good with words, at least in conveying the way he felt at any given time. And maybe Buffy had been too, once upon a time. She fairly remembered pouring her heart and soul out for Angel, but when he'd left, he'd taken that part of her with him and she'd closed up shop. Now there was a tangled mess inside of her, one she knew she should be able to sort through easily, but intent and action weren't always the same; throw words into the mix and she might as well be drowning.

Even still, she owed it to him to try.

"I don't want to *not* be your friend anymore."

That much at least chased away the frustration that had contorted his face. "What?"

"We've been friends, haven't we? These past... And it's been... I can't tell you what it's been. And yeah, I want...more. But I don't want to lose the way things are now, either." She forced herself to swallow. "And if it ended, which it probably would because... I'd lose twice and I am so tired of losing."

The silence that followed was one of the loudest Buffy could remember, and she'd was no stranger to loud silences. It seemed all the most pivotal moments of her life had been spent in the quiet—even if that quiet was only in her mind.

When he spoke again, his tone was gentler, the anger gone.

"Buffy..." Spike looked down, then up again, then cupped the back of her head—tunneling his fingers through her hair—and brought her forward so her brow was pressed to his. For a moment, he just held her there like that, pressed to him but not, his cool skin against hers, as though he sensed she needed some grounding. Maybe he had. "Can't say anything for certain about whether we'd last," he said, his voice lower still, "but you're off your rocker if you think, given the chance, I wouldn't fight for you with everything I got. Every bloody inch of me."

With him so close, shaking as he was, it was impossible not to feel just how much he meant what he said.

"Can you wait a little longer?"

Spike pulled back then, fixing her with his gaze. "You tellin' me there's somethin' to wait for?"

"I hope so, but I'm too—"

He cut her off with a kiss—not the demanding, needy, make-my-decisions kiss she'd expected half a dozen times, but firm and reassuring. And it would have been easy, so easy, to sink into him and let him take the lead. Part her lips or feed him a moan that would hand the reins over to him completely, let him try to convince her with his mouth and hands that the things she worried about were not worth the brain space. She wanted to. Desperately.

But she wanted something else more.

When he broke away from her, it was with a soft smile. "Wait until the end of time, I reckon, so long as you're at the end of the road."

"And if I'm not? If I get there and it's just...*blah*, what then?"

The light in his eyes faded but only by a sliver. "Was headin' that way, anyway," he said, and tucked her hair behind her ear. He glanced at her mouth again, and she saw the hunger he'd shoved back flare there, desperate as she felt but also somehow restrained. "I'll take my chances."

Something inside her dropped hard and fast, too hard, too fast, and the crash was sure to kill her. Then, Spike stepped back, which seemed to slow her descent. Not enough that she knew she wouldn't hit pavement but enough that she felt she could catch her air on the way down.

Too many thoughts for one birthday, especially while in a houseful of people who were likely doing their best to overhear every word.

Thankfully, Spike seemed to be on the same page. "Fancy a legal drink, then? Bein' twenty-one and all?"

"A world of yes," she replied, flashing him a relieved smile and warming all over when he gave one back to her.

Whatever that falling sensation had been, she could worry about it later.



HONESTLY, insofar as her birthdays went, Buffy supposed this was one of the better ones. On a roster that included such notable hits as "Boyfriend Goes Homicidal" and "Betrayal by Father Figure," being stuck in her own home was pretty low on the list. Discovering that Dawn had been taking extreme advantage of the five-finger discount

was admittedly a big ole downer, but it was also among the most normal challenges Buffy had ever been presented with. Throw in random demon slayage and the revelation that one of Anya's wedding guests had attempted to lock all of them in an eternal purgatory of being homebound, the party ended being more or less another day on the job—only with hors d'oeuvres, cake, and presents.

And hey, as opposed to being relationship-damaging, this birthday looked to be on the side of love. Willow's insistence that she wouldn't use magic to break whatever had been keeping them inside the house, and Tara's steadfast defense of her when Anya had pressed, had Buffy wondering if the road to reconciliation was truly as long as she'd thought.

Of course, though, there was the bad, including the long conversation with Dawn in her future, one that she was exhausted just thinking about, but also one she felt fairly equipped to handle. At the very least, she was in a much better place than she would have been just a couple of weeks ago. The prospect of being the parental figure was still all kinds of daunting—something that she admitted to Spike, as she walked him out, was a result of that death wish he'd been so certain she'd had. Joyce had died and Buffy hadn't had time to process, and part of her had seen Glory as the end of the road—which it had been, *would* have been if she'd been left underground.

"Don't feel that way now, do you?" Spike paused in the front doorway, tilting his head. "Death wish, and all?"

"I thought you said every slayer had one."

"Well, yeah, reckon so, but that's what does her in, see. Gets her killed."

Buffy licked her lips, fighting back a grin. "I don't want to die, Spike. I actually haven't for a while now. Heaven was... Well, it was Heaven, and it's nice to know it's there. But I'm...better."

He smiled, the corners of his eyes creasing. He had such pretty eyes for a man. "Gonna fight to keep you here, Slayer," he said. "Next big nasty comes after you, they gotta go through me first. Hope you know that."

She did. It was so different, though, with Spike than it had been with Angel, because she knew when he said it, he was envisioning



them fighting side-by-side, the cards still fully hers. If that hadn't been apparent before, he'd certainly made it so with the gift he'd given her for her birthday.

A stake with his name carved down the side. After she'd unwrapped it—the packaging itself had been endearingly sloppy—she'd lifted her gaze to Spike's across the room with an eyebrow raised.

"Case I get outta line," he'd said with a shrug, smirking. "Wanted to let you know where that'd get me."

That falling sensation had struck her again with such intensity her head had spun, but she hadn't had time to process it before Xander had coughed something that sounded like, "Kinky," into his closed fist. Then Tara had hurriedly shoved Dawn's present into Buffy's lap, and the moment had passed.

"I know that," she told Spike now. "Also know that you're going to tell me just where exactly you knew Anya's vengeance buddy from."

Spike stiffened. "Uh, right," he said, rubbing at the back of his neck and casting a longing glance over his shoulder. "Another night, then."

"Just tell me you two didn't eviscerate an orphanage or something."

"I bloody wish." A beat, and he flashed her an apologetic half-smile, half-wince. "Not to mean I'd rather have done—oh, bloody hell."

At what point had she started to find him adorable? So much so that even the stark reminders of his inherent monstrosity didn't bother her as she knew they should? Maybe that said something about her—that no matter what Tara said, she had come back wrong. Or maybe it was the shift in her assessment of Spike—the slow but now fervent belief that the life he had now, that being at her side, was the choice he'd make and keep on making, chip or no chip. In that way, Spike's past crimes felt more or less like Angel's always had—a part of who he had been but not who he was anymore.

She thought of the conversation they'd had a few months back, where Spike had volunteered to be restrained again should the chip ever die for good. How earnest he'd been to make sure she knew he wasn't someone she ever had to worry about, even if he hated the outcome. When she tried to imagine that conversation with Angel, even as a precaution against his soulless counterpart, she couldn't see it ending in any way but a fight, and a nasty one at that.

"I have a sister to reprimand," Buffy said, fighting back a laugh when Spike visibly deflated. "And you have..."

"Still egg-sittin'. Clem wagers he'll be able to move 'em in a couple of days."

The sooner the better, as far as Buffy was concerned. She'd taken a look at the eggs, which were as he'd said—large and ugly, and tucked aside in a rather chilly part of the downstairs of his crypt. The space was away from the living area, if one could call it that, and oddly both out-of-sight and in-plain-sight that so most uninvited guests would likely look right over them.

Not that Buffy was in much of a position to say what intruders might be looking for if they visited Spike's place. Her attention had been mostly dominated by the bed—made up with what looked like silk sheets—and wondering if Spike owned PJs. Somehow, she didn't think so.

"It was good, though?"

Buffy shook her head, pulling her thoughts out of a place they really shouldn't go right now. "Huh?"

"Your birthday."

"There was cake and presents and the threat of imminent death. All in all, a banner birthday for Buffy."

Spike grinned, nodded. "Good then. Well, I'll be off. Don't go too hard on the Nibblet."

"Don't think I don't know who taught her how to avoid getting caught."

He bristled, sliding his hands into his leather pockets and backing up a step. "Haven't the faintest what you mean, Slayer," he said, then his expression softened and he gave her a wink before striding down the walkway.

And there it was again—that falling sensation, like the ground had been knocked from under her feet. Her stomach pitched and her heart started thundering the way it did when she was in a particularly gnarly fight. Fear flared inside of her but she didn't know at what, because the street was quiet and the night had gone about as well as could be expected.

It wasn't until she closed the door that she tied the feeling to the

conversation she and Spike had had in the kitchen. To what he'd told her before they'd rejoined the party. And maybe she was slow, but Buffy didn't know what to make of that.

Still, with everything she had left to do before she called it a night, this seemed a problem best saved for another day.

## BRING THE BOYS BACK HOME

WELL, OF ALL THE WAYS FOR HER AFTERNOON TO GO, BUFFY COULD certainly say she hadn't had this on her bingo card. No, today she was supposed to beat up some low-lives, meet Spike at the house, order dinner, and curl up on the couch to watch whatever movie Dawn had selected as part of their spending-more-time-at-home approach to teenage hormones.

The universe, it seemed had other ideas. Because while she was fulfilling her day job requirements—clutching a reprobate demon by the throat and threatening to shove something pointy between his eyes unless he coughed up what he owed her morally ambiguous boss—the day she had planned had not featured an appearance by her ex-boyfriend.

Yet there he was, in the doorway of Willy's pub, staring at her like she was the one who didn't belong.

"Riley," Buffy said stupidly, blinking.

"Sorry to just drop in on you like this, Buffy," he replied as though she weren't holding a weaselly demon three feet off the floor.

"It's you," she said.

"It's me," he agreed.

"You're here."

"I know."

"Uhh..." The demon in her grasp cast her a somewhat reproachful look, and she couldn't really blame him. This part of the interrogation process usually came with more howls of pain and promises to pay up before Buffy had to make a repeat visit. "I'm not interrupting anything, am I?"

Buffy shook her head to clear it, not that it did much good. Because, nope, when she dared another look to her left, Riley was still there, all combat-gearred up. The ex who hadn't just left town, but left the country, from what she'd been able to gather. Had that been just last year? It was hard to tell with the Heaven jet-lag.

What in the world was he doing? And here?

"Buffy," Riley said, indicating her demon in her grip, then the bar of patrons who were all glued to the exchange with open interest. "Do you wanna maybe..."

Right. Probably shouldn't have a reunion chat with her ex while in a sea of demons who could and would use whatever they heard against her.

"Uhh, yeah." She lowered her arm, feeling as though she were watching herself from a distance. The demon—a yellowish-green thing with beady red eyes, horns, and an overbite—shuffled his cloven feet the second they touched the floor. She forced herself to focus on him. "Umm, he says he wants the full payment by Friday. Twenty-five percent interest, and if you don't show, he'll ice the poodle."

Turned out beady eyes could round out nicely when properly motivated. "No! Slayer, you can't. Not my Fifi! She didn't do anything!"

"Hey, you're the one who used your dog as collateral, buddy." Buffy wrinkled her nose and stepped back, wondering just how odd this scene must look to the guy who had taken off in a helicopter rather than work out their relationship issues. "Which, by the way, worst dog owner ever."

The demon gave a pathetic whine. "I didn't have a choice, lady. It was either that or—"

"There's always a choice." She crossed her arms, determined to at least get the posturing part of her job right, and narrowed her eyes. "Friday. Payment in full plus twenty-five percent. You got it?"

She almost felt bad for the demon—almost. It seemed, whatever else, he really did love his pooch. Not enough to not put her little doggie life on the line, but enough to sniffle and shed real tears while surrounded by burly demons who could finish knocking the stuffing out of him. He released a pathetic little whine and nodded, but didn't hesitate to run for the back door the second he felt brave enough to risk it.

"You've, uhh, changed," Riley said, much closer than he'd been a second ago. Buffy started and whirled around, almost smacking her head against his chest which was, she had to say, higher up than she remembered it. As was his head. Had he always been this tall? "Used to be you'd slay the demons rather than go down the psychological torture route."

Huh? Buffy frowned, looked again in the direction the demon had gone, then it clicked. "Oh. The dog. Empty threat. My boss knows I'd add him to the menu at Long John Silver's before I'd let him kill a puppy."

"Your...boss?"

She shrugged. "Girl's gotta make a living. And again with the *you're here and hub?*"

Riley flattened his mouth into a line. She wasn't sure but she thought that might mean he was worried. Or maybe pissed off. Or both. Had she known how to read him before?

"Look," he said conspiratorially, "this isn't the way I wanted it."

"What isn't?"

"This. You, me, seeing each other again. But something's come up. Something big. We don't have much time. You understand?"

Right, because that had been all with the forthright. "Not a word you've said so far."

"Right. I should have known, anticipated. You're..." Riley frowned and made a show of looking around as though he'd never seen the inside of Willy's before. "You work here? Beating up demons?"

"That's kinda accurate," Buffy replied. "The job brings me here a lot because there are only so many places in Sunnydale for demon lowlives to congregate."

"What is your job—wait. Never mind. Doesn't matter."

Well, that was nice and condescending. “Thanks?”

“Look, I’ve been up for forty-eight hours straight tracking something bad, and now it’s come to Sunnydale.” He sighed and shook his head. “I...don’t really know what you’re doing—what this job is—but I need the best, and the best means you. Can you help?”

Put like that, she really didn’t have much of a choice. *Bad* and *in Sunnydale* were pretty much the only checks she needed to place a demon on her slay list. “Uhh, sure. I have a rh’nark demon to threaten later but I can probably punt that to tomorrow.” Or toss it to Spike, but she wouldn’t say that. The fact that Riley was here at all had disrupted the flow of her day in head-spinny ways she didn’t appreciate. “So, consider me one slayer reporting for duty.”

The next thing she knew, Buffy was hurrying toward a military-model SUV while still trying to determine if this was really happening or if her subconscious had thrown her a particularly unfunny dream just for the hell of it.

“Look,” Riley said, “I’m sorry this is all so sudden. You know, if we get a minute, I’d really like to sit down—”

His little beeper thingy started going off before he could finish that thought, much to her relief. Just the suggestion of doing anything non-slay-related with him had her close to something she’d call panic.

“What is it?” she asked for want of something to say.

“Suvolte demon. Rare, lethal...nearly extinct, but not nearly enough.” He met her gaze. “It’s close.”

Buffy’s eyes bugged so wide she could feel the cool evening air against them. “Suvolte?”

“You know about them?”

“Uhh, kind of. Not from around here?”

“Right.” He frowned again, though this time it seemed to be a shocked frown. Like somehow her having that knowledge was surprising. “We chased it through Paraguay and even though we keep putting them down, these things breed like mad, so they keep popping up all over the place.”

Crap. Buffy’s heart started to pound. “Are there eggs?”

Again, Riley favored her with a look so surprised she would have been offended if she’d had the time to take it personally. “Eggs?”

"I just heard that... Someone might have said something about some eggs. Maybe."

He studied her for a long moment. "Uhh, yeah. We're also on the hunt for Suvolte eggs. They fall into the wrong hands, and we're talking the devastation of whole cities from the moment they hatch. These things aren't pretty. And yeah, the eggs are in high demand on the black market."

"Would the Suvolte go to where their eggs are? I mean, if they were stolen or something, is there some kind of homing beacon demon trick that could lead them to the person who has them?"

Riley narrowed his eyes now, crossing his arms. "What do you know?"

"Nothing!" Buffy replied quickly. There was no way she was bringing Spike into this. Hell, she didn't even know what *this* was, except a head-trip of the highest order. In truth, Buffy hadn't given much thought to Riley one way or another since she'd clawed her way to freedom. He had been a part of her life, an important part, but a part in the past, likely never to surface again.

Except he was here now and she didn't know what to do with this information. All the times before Glory's tower when she'd thought, wondered, *hoped* that he'd drop her a postcard, pick up the phone, or hell, just show up again on her doorstep, ready to try things for real, and now all she could think was *why*?

Buffy didn't want Riley here—she didn't want him anywhere near this new life she'd started to build for herself. The girl he'd loved had jumped to her death.

"Buffy," Riley said, giving her that stern military-cut glare of his. "People's lives are at stake here. If you know something, anything, now is the time to talk."

She hesitated a moment, mind racing, and decided her best bet was to lie as much as possible without actually lying. "Look, I work for... It's complicated, but I hear things, okay? Some things are just bogus—demon posturing. You know, 'I'm gonna end the world next week' stuff. Which I check out," she hastened to add, "but around here, talk like that you need to take with a grain of salt. So...eggs?"

Riley studied her a beat longer, his brow still furrowed, and even



when he continued, it was with skepticism he couldn't disguise. "Yeah," he said. "Eggs. We've gotten word that a known arms dealer intends to operate out of Sunnydale. Some eggs were stolen and we're tracking them, but odds are good the Suvolte will find them first unless you know something—"

"I don't," Buffy said, and started toward the SUV again to escape his scrutiny. "But we need to go after this thing? This is what you need my help for?"

"Ah...yes." Riley speed-walked to catch up with her. "Before it can do any damage."

"Then I'm in."

And with any luck, she'd be able to slay the Suvolte before it got anywhere near Spike, and also preferably before Riley thought to beat him up for information.

One thing was for certain—those eggs needed to be scrambled or smashed. Like most things demon, they were more trouble than they were worth.



THEY WERE APPARENTLY JUST a few minutes too late to catch the Suvolte in action. While Buffy had been dancing around the issue of eggs, the demon had been tearing apart downtown Sunnydale. Fortunately, no one had been injured—small miracles, and all that—and one of Riley's teammates had managed to get it tagged, so they had a *where* on the thing. A *where* that was thankfully nowhere near Spike's crypt.

"Nice wheels," Buffy said dully as the SUV trucked down the road. The silence between them was killing her by inches, awkward as it was.

"Came with the car," Riley replied.

Right. She inhaled and looked out the window, drumming her fingers on her legs. "So...we know where this thing is."

"Yeah, Sam tagged it. We'll find it before it does any major damage."

Buffy nodded but didn't reply, again thinking about the eggs, about Spike who had no idea the mama Suvolte was in town and potentially

looking to put the hurt on whoever it thought was responsible for separating it from its unborn children. She'd already questioned the choice she'd made half a dozen times—go with Riley to find the demon or go to Spike so he knew he might have unplanned houseguests. Again, she came down on the side that going with Riley had been the better move, as hopefully she wouldn't have to brief Spike on Riley's being in town until after the danger had passed, and she had no idea how Spike would react to that news.

Things since her birthday had been a bit strained. Not a lot, but enough that she was itching to move back to normal. Whatever was normal between them.

"How you doin'?" Riley asked, jarring her out of her head. "Look like you're having some deep thoughts."

"Oh. Yeah." Buffy turned to flash him the patented *I'm-surviving* smile that had gotten so much use this year. "Just... It's kinda weird, you being here and all."

"Good weird or bad weird?"

Did he want the honest answer to that? "Weird weird, I guess. A lot has happened since you left."

Riley nodded like he understood. She didn't know how he could. "Yeah," he agreed a second later. "Got some stories to tell you. If we get the time, that is."

That Riley thought he might have stories for *her* struck her as absurdly funny, but she somehow managed to choke back the laugh that wanted out. "Did you die?" she asked instead.

"No."

"I'm gonna win."

The look he threw her made the offhand comment worth it. "There was death? You died?"

"Not just me. My mom died too. Two resurrection spells later, I'm the only one who came back."

Riley opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again. Then he reached into the back seat and deposited something into her lap.

Apparently, there would be no more questions about Buffy's death or resurrection. Seemed fair. It did make people uncomfortable.

"What's this?"

“Uhh, lightweight Kevlar. State-of-the-art.”

Buffy wrinkled her nose and gave her own get-up a look. She was wearing standard slayer-wear—jeans, long-sleeved tee, and her favorite coat. Not military-grade, sure, but nothing had killed her yet. “Something wrong with what I’m wearing?”

“Put it on, thank me later.”

Yeah, because what Buffy wanted to do more than anything was get naked with her ex. Never mind that he’d seen everything before—this was different. Things had changed. Majorly changed and Buffy in the buff was something reserved for someone else.

A thought that made her pulse tick up. “I’ll just pop in the back,” she said, and unbuckled her seatbelt. Then sat back and buckled it again. “Actually, no. I’m good. I’ve slain many demons in these jeans and come out just fine.”

“You just said you died.”

“That was my decision.”

“You decided to die?”

“Well, it was either that or the end of reality as we know it. I chose option A.” Buffy twisted and tossed the black ops stuff blindly into the back. “Plus, we know military slayage was never my thing. I don’t take orders well.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” Riley replied dryly. He was silent for a moment, possibly fuming, possibly kicking himself for dragging her into this, or maybe a combination of the two. Well, that was fine. But when he spoke next, it wasn’t with acidity. Rather, he sounded tempered. “There’s not many people I’d ask to risk their life for me, Buffy. And hearing that you’ve already been dead once—”

“Twice,” Buffy corrected.

“That doesn’t help.”

“I was young.”

“You’re *still* young. Didn’t you just turn twenty-one?”

“By Slayer standards, I’m geriatric.”

“I’m not judging you by Slayer standards.”

No, and that summarized their relationship pretty well, didn’t it? She released a long sigh, rolled her head back. If she hadn’t been prepared to see Riley again, she certainly wasn’t prepared to have the

fight they'd danced around throughout the duration of their relationship.

"I can't *not* be judged by Slayer standards," she said, again fixing her gaze out the window. Not that it helped. The muddled assortment of her thoughts remained well and muddled.

All that time spent agonizing over what had gone wrong between them, what she might have said or done to convince him to stay. How she might have opened up, been the vulnerable girly girl he'd seemed to want—all that and more that had tumbled into her psyche as a result of the big speech Xander had given her the night Riley had left. But just being with him in this car was suffocating. Nothing had changed. He still wanted her to do what he asked, dress the part, be the girl, look at the world through the eyes of someone she'd never been.

There had been a lot of truth in what Xander had said—that she'd treated Riley like the rebound guy, hadn't opened up, hadn't let him in. None of that had been conscious on her part. She'd had no idea how to be in a healthy relationship then—wasn't sure she did now, come to think of it. But she knew what she didn't want, and that was more of what she'd had in the past. Buffy doing the chasing, Buffy nursing fragile egos, Buffy bleeding over and over again but getting nothing back of what she gave. Buffy being held to standards that she couldn't meet, or told what was good for her without letting her figure it out for herself.

In all the ways Riley's departure hadn't broken her heart had more or less solidified that her heart had never really been in it.

*Maybe that's what happens when you let your ex tell you who to date.*

The next thing she knew, the SUV was screeching to a halt on what looked to be one of Sunnydale's many outlying side roads. The scenery was mostly rock, rock, and more rock, with a few scraggly trees sprinkled here and there to give it some color. Buffy hopped out before Riley could shift the vehicle into *park*, desperate to escape their shared air.

God, she should have just gone to Spike's place, told him what was up, and tag-teamed it with him. At least then there would have been no awkward silence.

Well, maybe a little, but not as thick or heavy—not weighted with as much expectation. And if Spike wanted to talk about things—their relationship and the holding pattern she couldn't seem to break—Buffy was down for that. More than a little game. At the end of the day, whatever they were to each other, she knew he'd be there. He'd understand.

"Over here," Riley said, snapping her out of her thoughts again.

Right. The time to think about her future boyfriend was probably not while hunting a demon with her former.

He took the lead, and she was happy to follow at a pace. No side-by-side business. A moment later, they were looking over the drop-off of a dam Buffy had somehow managed to miss in all her years in Sunnydale. Given the intent look in Riley's eyes, there seemed little sense in questioning the next move.

"We need to get down there, don't we?" she asked.

"Looks that way," he replied, and started fiddling with his commando equipment. Then he was attaching one end of a rappelling line to the fence and turning to her again with eyes full of expectation. "This test line's built for one, so if we go together, we're not hauling any gear. Just be you and me."

That was going to be more his problem than hers. Buffy had never been the one reliant on toys. "All right."

"You hold onto me?"

At once, a memory struck—sitting in Spike's car, listening to him hum some punk song she had no interest in while offering her a sip from his flask. How he'd thrown together a whole bogus stakeout just to spend time with her. That didn't seem like the sort of thing Riley would do—especially out of nowhere, having been incommunicado for a year—but the thought was there and she didn't like it.

If he hadn't specifically mentioned a Suvolte demon...

But he had, and Buffy didn't believe in coincidences. Which was how she found herself pressed up against him in ways that made her downright uncomfortable. He was so big and bulky—had he always been like this? Or was she just so accustomed to lean and wiry these days that Riley's physical presence seemed likely to smother her? Then there was the heat—body heat. Like the rest of him, it seemed to over-

power her, to the point that when they reached the stone platform below, Buffy couldn't push away from him fast enough.

"Buffy—"

She shook her head, staggering back a bit. "Let's just get this done, okay."

"You're really, really not happy to see me, are you?"

Buffy froze, unsure she'd heard right. Then *absolutely* sure she'd heard right and pissed the hell off. She swung around. "What should I be happy about, exactly? You left. You took off after giving me an ultimatum. Do you have any idea how screwed up that is?"

Something in Riley's face shuttered. "This isn't the time—"

"No, it's not, but you made it the time. I'm just trying to do my job so I can go back to my life—the life you skipped out on, by the way, because my mother being sick and me being the Slayer meant no time for Riley."

"I'm not here about that at all," Riley shot back, angry now. Like he had any damn right. "Believe me, if I could have avoided involving you, I would have. It was the last thing I wanted to do."

"So why did you?"

"I told you—this thing is serious and you're the best."

"Though I'm going to go out on a limb and say *stealth* is not one of your strengths," came a voice that didn't belong there. Buffy blinked at Riley for a few seconds, trying to reconcile why her ex suddenly sounded like a woman, then realized said ex was looking at something over her shoulder, and rather chagrined at that. By the time she put the pieces together and turned around, Buffy felt more than a little foolish and a whole lot self-conscious.

The woman standing behind her was tall, athletic, and rather pretty with dark hair pulled back from her face. And she was aiming something between a fond and exasperated smile at Riley. "Really, Finn, is this the time for an argument? I thought you were on the hunt."

"Uhh," Buffy said, taking a step back from the woman. Though everything about her screamed *friendly*, experience cautioned Buffy not to take anything for granted. "And who are you?"

If the woman was threatened, she didn't betray it. "I'm Sam."

"Sam who?"

“Sam...” The woman paused as though something had occurred to her, then raised her gaze to Riley, her brow furrowed. “Did you seriously not tell her that you were traveling with your wife?”

“Huh?” Buffy whipped her head back to her ex. “There’s a wife? You have a *wife*?”

Riley opened his mouth, closed it, then sighed, his shoulders dropping.

Sam clucked her tongue and shook her head, her eyes positively sparkling. “You are *so* busted.”



THIS, Buffy decided, was the weirdest day she’d had since coming back from the dead. And considering one of those days had involved actual singing and dancing, that was saying something.

The Suvolte had amscrayed while she and Riley had been arguing—and yes, point to Mrs. Finn for calling out their less-than-furtive behavior. Though Buffy maintained that was not her fault—secret ops had never been her thing, anyway. She wasn’t one for understated anything. Never had been, much to the chagrin of both her Watchers.

Sam, clearly being the brains of the operation, decided it was best if Riley and Buffy didn’t work together. Plus, she had fifty dollars and dinner riding on the bet that she’d find the demon first and he’d gone and *cheated*—her words—by recruiting his super-powered ex. And it all seemed very genuine, getting Buffy away from Riley, not at all like the actions of a woman who felt threatened by the impossibly high bar Buffy had set for Riley’s future prospective partners. Which made it clear that, whatever else, the signals she could have sworn Riley had been throwing at her since he’d stumbled back into her life had all been in her head. Flattering.

But also, hello to the relief. Buffy hadn’t exactly been looking forward to letting him down gently.

Now she and Sam were tag-teaming one of the cemeteries, and it wasn’t until they neared Restfield that Buffy realized just how thrown Riley’s presence had left her.

“Oh crap.”

Sam stopped shortly, concerned. "What? You see something?"

"No. *Dammit*, no. I've been all..." She made a gesture to attempt to encapsulate the mess that was her mind at the moment, but suspected she didn't succeed. "My...friend, we patrol together at night. Tonight we were going to catch a movie with my sister—she's having some... It's not important. Anyway, he's probably at my house wondering where the hell I am."

"Ah, yes," Sam said with a slight smile, nodding. "Riley told me you patrol with civilians."

"I wouldn't call Spike a civilian," Buffy replied.

"Then what would you call him?"

For some reason, this question surprised her. Maybe because some part of her had expected Riley to have filled his little missus in on everything Sunnydale, including the resident undead. But then, why would he? It wasn't like he and Spike had been besties or anything. Hell, for all she knew, Riley might have been holding out on the hope that Spike was a little pile of dust by now.

"Ahh, a friend, like I said," Buffy forced out when it occurred to her that she'd been quiet a beat too long. She wasn't sure where Sam fell on vampires and didn't feel up to defending her relationship at the moment.

"A friend who isn't a civilian?"

"Spike can hold his own in a fight. And he's got my back."

And she had his, she realized. Why else would she have kept mum about the eggs or worried about the Suvolte sniffing its way to his crypt? She'd steered Sam toward the cemeteries for a reason—one part being she thought it likely the demon would be here, but the other part... She'd wanted to be close in case Spike was in trouble.

"This guy sounds like more than a friend," Sam said in what might have been a casual tone, though Buffy caught the interest beneath it. "Of course, I could be over-relating."

"Over-relating?"

"Yeah, that's how Finn and I started." Sam threw her a look, as though to gauge whether or not hearing about her ex's romance was a sore spot, then continued. "He wasn't in any place to start dating



someone when he arrived, you know. And I know it must seem fast to you—all of this.”

It did, but Buffy didn’t want to voice that. The revelation that she didn’t really care about Riley being married to someone else—that she was in fact relieved—was one she hadn’t had time to unpack just yet. Because then she’d have to get into what that meant for her, and the dreams of normal she’d had once upon a time and everything Spike.

“You guys started as friends?” Buffy asked. “Were you...afraid of what might happen to the friendship if the whole dating thing went up in flames?”

“A little, maybe,” Sam replied as they rounded one of the larger crypts. “But that’s life, right? The risk is what makes it worth it.”

Her heart started thumping a little harder. “It is?”

“Are you telling me it’s not?” Sam stopped and looked at her again, all genuine surprise. “You’re the Slayer—risk is what you do every day, isn’t it?”

Sure, but there was fight-or-die risk and heartbreak risk, and Buffy knew which one she was built to survive. Neither of her deaths could come close to the complete devastation she’d felt when Angel had walked out on her, even if she’d done all the mental gymnastics she’d needed to see his point and tell others she agreed with him. Dying was easy in comparison because at least dying had an end. That Riley’s departure hadn’t ruined her like that... Well, she’d already had her epiphany where that was concerned.

But the thought of not having Spike in her life made the ground beneath her feet feel fragile, and like the wall around her heart she’d spent so many years building and fortifying was made of straw. And she knew if it didn’t work out for any reason—him being evil, for starters—the pain wouldn’t be one she’d just walk off the way she had with Riley. She’d shared more of herself with Spike than she had with anyone. He felt like he was a piece of her, the way Angel had, but different as well. The burdens she shouldered now were heavier, more complicated than they’d been a few years ago, and she wasn’t the same person, either. The very fact that Spike was her friend was what made the leap to *something more* terrifying. After all, if Angel could break her without having ever been her friend, then what could Spike do?

"I just don't want to lose him," Buffy muttered. "If it didn't work out..."

"Yeah, I get that," Sam replied, and they started walking again. "But again, life and risk? I figured that I was running the chance of losing Riley, anyway. If it wasn't me, it'd be someone else."

"Someone else?"

"Yeah." She waved a hand. "I don't believe that bull that men and women can't be friends, but when there are feelings involved? It would have hurt a lot to have just been his friend, then watch him go gaga over someone else, you know? And it was just too good. We clicked on every level. Trust me, in this line of work, there are plenty of men who think it's their job to be the hero. Riley always trusts me to take care of myself, and I think I have you to thank for that, having set the bar for kick-ass chicks who don't need a man to rescue them."

Buffy offered a small grin. "Glad to be of help."

"And when I need to have a good cry, he's there for that too." Sam released a long breath, her shoulders dropping. "He's my equal. And that was going to be true whether or not we were together, so why not be together?"

It was a lightning crash of the mind—one of those eureka moments she only ever saw on television where the clouds parted, the pieces came together, and everything just clicked. She was so taken aback by this that Buffy didn't realize she had stopped walking until Sam turned around, favoring her with an arched eyebrow and a half-smile.

"Buffy?"

"I..." She worked her throat, her heart taking off once again. And there was that falling sensation she kept experiencing, like the ground had vanished, leaving her to scramble for safety, but there was nothing to grab. Nothing to hold onto except for Spike.

*Holy cow.*

"I think I need to talk to him," Buffy said, her voice amazingly steady considering the turn her world had just taken.

Sam just grinned wider, then looked around and shrugged. "Well, if you're used to patrolling with this guy, could be you two would be better off paired together. Why don't you go see if he's able to help? You said he'd probably be worried."

"But...the Suvolte? Aren't we on a timetable here?" And then there were the eggs to contend with, but that meant Spike anyway.

"Hell yes, we're on a timetable," Sam replied with an enthusiastic nod. "Which means the more manpower, the better. Honestly, Buffy, you should have grabbed your guy from the start." She finished with a wink, then turned around and started off again at a pace that made sure Buffy was alone within a handful of seconds.

Buffy released a deep breath and turned her feet toward Restfield. She had no idea if Spike would have just gone home after discovering she wasn't at the house, or if he would have tried to find her, but it was the closest stop and good place to start.

Plus, she could check on the eggs, and perhaps cut the Suvolte off at the pass.

And maybe, if he was there, find the courage to tell the vampire she was pretty sure she was in love with him.



LIFE WAS A BLOODY LAUGH RIOT.

Spike threw back the last of the blood he'd readied upon returning to the crypt, then stared at the empty, red-smeared glass for a second before figuring, bugged it, and marching back to his fridge to fish out something harder. Might as well get drunk off his arse—wasn't like there was anything worth staying sober for.

Certainly not the Slayer. God knows where she was now. What she was doing.

*Or who.*

Spike growled, tightening his grasp on the bottle he'd pulled from the fridge to the point the glass gave a low, whining crack of warning.

He hadn't been worried—not really. The work she did was bound to get her into some after-hours trouble, especially if Teeth had started setting her on his more problem associates. Nothing the girl couldn't handle, of course, but considering the time he spent with her was the highlight of his day, Spike had figured he could help her dispatch the sorry sod right quick so they could get on with their evening. And yeah, it had been a bit awkward the last few nights—strained after the

discussion at her birthday party, but the sort of strained he knew was heading somewhere. She hadn't stopped coming to him, after all. Hadn't stopped telling him everything. Hadn't stopped the *friend* routine.

So he'd gone to Willy's to find his Slayer and had found a bit of unpleasant news instead.

Buffy had taken off with a bloke who mightily matched the description of one Riley Finn. The git had swooped right on in and Buffy had dropped everything to run off with her former honey. Hours ago, from the sound of things.

On their movie night. Dawn all bright-eyed and eager, bloody beside herself at the chance to spend time with her two favorite people. Fuck, he should've gone back to her, at least, but in the temper he was in, being around the Nibblet was the worst idea.

Getting pissed, on the other hand, sounded about right.

Spike had just poured himself a nice helping of whiskey when the air exploded with a pulsing shriek—the sort that could wake the dead. It took a second but then he knew, and dropped both bottle and glass and was halfway across the crypt to seize one of the blades he kept handy before he heard them shatter. The unmistakable crash of the door being kicked open came next, and the piercing wail of Tara's warning system reached new decibels.

Bloody hell, he was going to have to tell her to fix this. It'd be a wonder if his ears ever stopped ringing.

"Thanks ever so, pidge," he muttered, curling his fist around the first blade he found, then whirling around to greet whoever had decided to drop by.

Then froze.

It was Finn. Of course it was. Stake in one hand and gun in the other, the latter pointed squarely at Spike's chest.

And somehow, even above the caterwauling, Spike heard the dry, cool greeting of "Hello, Doctor," loud and clear.

## ANOTHER BRICK IN THE WALL

IF THE SHRILL FILLING HIS EARS DIDN'T DO HIM IN, THE STAKES Riley Finn was glaring at him almost certainly would. And fuck, wasn't that just the way of things. After more than hundred years of surviving, carving a bloody swath through the world and making damn sure that his name was one that would be remembered long after he tasted dust, Spike would be done in by a wannabe soldier in a one-sided brawl that no one would know about, much less remember. Hell, the only solace he had at the moment was that the big sod didn't smell of sex. Sure, he'd brought a whiff of Buffy into the crypt—a whiff that said plainly they'd been all kinds of close—but the telltale scents of fucking were absent.

Small bit of cold comfort, that. At least she hadn't thrown her knickers at the big oaf.

And, curiously, there was another scent that was more dominant than the Slayer's—decidedly female and the sort of thick that spoke of a deeper sort of intimacy. Poor bird, whoever she was. Wasn't like any man could ever rightly get over Buffy Summers.

Riley's mouth was moving again, forming words Spike couldn't hear and didn't much care to try and read.

"What?" he attempted to yell over the ongoing racket. Not that it

mattered a lick with Tara's warning system still screaming its fool head off. And that was it. He could and had suffered many indignities since first rolling into this town, but hell if he would die without being able to hear his own sodding voice. With a growl, Spike yelled at the ceiling, "Will you knock it the fuck off?"

He hadn't expected that to do anything—not really—so he was shocked off his arse when it did. The next second, the piercing wail was nothing more than an echo, though it took a moment before the pulsing in his head quieted enough for him to suss out words beyond his own thoughts.

"What the hell was that?" Finn had the gall to ask, looking around as though he was the one being inconvenienced.

"Intruder spell Glinda worked up for yours truly," Spike replied, eyeing the stake in the sod's hand. "Supposed to give me fair warnin' so I can scarper if anyone I'd rather not see pops in for a visit."

Now that his noggin wasn't in danger of exploding, Spike could think a bit more clearly. Clear enough to shelve thoughts of these minutes being his last, and thank fuck for that. Chip or not, he would not let the likes of Riley Finn be his downfall.

"Where are the eggs, Doctor?"

Spike blinked. So he *had* heard that much right, sirens or not—the git thought he was the Doctor. "I'm sorry, what?"

"You wanna play that way? Okay. We can play." Riley tucked the stake back into his utility belt, not looking away. "Glad to be back in Sunnydale. The locals all speak English, and I know who to beat for information. It's all brought me here."

Well, that was just terrific. One of the regulars at poker had opened their trap—likely the bloke who had lost the bloody eggs in the first place. The second Spike shook the ought-to-be-deadweight that was Riley Finn, he was going to throttle whoever had blabbed, and they'd be right fortunate if that were all he did.

Supposed it could have been worse, though. Could have been Buffy who had spilled.

"Eggs?" Spike scoffed, edging a bit to the right to put the door to his crypt in center view, just in case running for it was his best bet.

"You're off your nut. It must be those drugs they were keeping you on. I did warn you."

Something that might have been a smirk crossed Riley's face. "Okay," he said, holstering the gun now and taking a step forward. "We can do this the hard way, or we can do this the fun way."

"Fun way being?"

"I kick your ass."

He snickered. "Oooh, big government man, gettin' his jollies thrashing creatures that can't fight back. Always wondered if you were compensating for somethin'."

Riley shrugged, raising his fists. "I'd say it's not personal, but we both know better, don't we?"

Before Spike could begin to untangle that, the crypt door burst open with its customary whine and in came the Slayer, looking a bit nervous—which made no bloody sense—but otherwise unbothered.

"Spike? Oh, good. You're here. I need to talk—" Buffy made it a handful of steps before she seemed to realize what she'd stumbled upon. Spike watched a range of emotions flash across her face—surprise, confusion, concern, then anger. All there and gone in a blink, but he'd studied her enough to know what he'd seen. Whatever else, the Slayer hadn't expected to run into anyone but him at the crypt. "What the hell are you doing here?" she demanded of her ex, her vivid eyes fixed now into a glare.

"My job," Riley replied without so much as glancing at her. "All my sources led me here. He's trafficking Suvolte eggs." He paused then, a frown marring his brow, then he *did* turn to look at Buffy with something like open astonishment. "You knew. From the moment I got into town, you knew it was Spike I was looking for."

Well, now. This *was* interesting.

Buffy didn't so much as flinch. "You're looking for a Suvolte. There's not one here."

"There's a Suvolte in town?" Spike blurted before he could stop himself. That seemed like the sorta news a fella should lead with. "Can't be makin' too much noise, or the whole bloody Hellmouth would be in tatters by now."

"We've been hunting it for a couple of hours," Buffy said, not taking her gaze off Riley. "He showed up at Willy's looking for it."

"Lookin' for you, more like."

Now Buffy did glance at him, and what he saw there was annoyance and resignation, like she'd come to the same conclusion and wasn't happy about it.

The girl chose the oddest times to delve into the art of mixed signals.

"You knew I was looking for eggs," Riley said hotly. "You brought them up. You asked me about them because you knew where they were and you wanted to protect *him*."

"Because he has nothing to do with why you're here!" Buffy shot back.

"If he has Suvolte eggs, then he damn sure does have a lot to do with what I'm doing here."

"He's holding the eggs for a friend until they can be moved out of town. Now can we please go find this Suvolte thing before it—"

"What the *hell* has happened to you?" Finn demanded, and at last, that impenetrable façade of his cracked. His voice was more a roar. "This is *Spike* we're talking about. Deadly. Amoral. Opportunistic. These eggs make a killing on the black market and every lead I had in town points to him being the arms dealer I've been looking for."

Spike barked a laugh. "Oh please—"

"Spike, shut up," Buffy snapped at him before turning back to Riley, squaring her shoulders and saying, "Oh, please."

Finn fairly gaped at her. "You don't know what these things can do, Buffy. I do. I've seen it. I've cleaned up the messes, buried the bodies, and you're going to stand there and tell me that Spike wouldn't just love to set something like that on Sunnydale?"

Buffy crossed her arms. "So, which is it?" she asked. "Is he some big-time arms dealer or is he going to set these things loose on the city?"

"Does it *matter*?"

"Does it matter that you came here armed to the teeth on bad information ready to stake someone who can't defend himself? Yeah,



Riley, it matters a lot.” Buffy whirled to face Spike fully at last, her eyes wide with what he could only call concern. “You’re okay?”

In spite of himself, Spike felt his chest warm. “Right as rain, love.”

“Okay, what the hell is going on here? You have been freezing me out all night,” Riley said like a big brooding toddler. Then something seemed to penetrate that thick skull of his and his jaw dropped. “Are you... Buffy, are you sleeping with Spike?”

Buffy held Spike’s gaze a moment longer before she shifted her attention back to the soldier. “Would it be any of your business if I were?”

Riley just stared at her, and she stared back, unblinking. At length, though, he managed to collect himself, closed his mouth, and tightened his jaw so hard it was a wonder the damn thing didn’t shatter. “I knew it.”

“You knew it?”

“There was a reason. A reason you couldn’t kill him, even with everything he’s done to others. To *you*. He nearly got me killed trying to get that chip out of his head and you still let him walk.” He stepped toward her, nostrils flared. “So, when you were asking about the eggs earlier, it was to see if I knew your boyfriend was a kingpin.”

“I swear I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about. The eggs were won in a game of poker.”

“Is that what he told you?”

“Yes.”

“And you believe him.” It wasn’t a question.

“Why would he lie?”

“Because he’s *Spike*, Buffy,” Finn replied with a scoff. “That’s what he does. He lies. He manipulates, in case you’ve forgotten. Do you have any idea how much these eggs are worth? How much he’s making off this deal?”

Buffy held her ex’s glare. “Spike, how much are you making?”

God, he loved her so much. “Wager enough to cover your next mortgage payment with enough spare change to spring for supper.”

“That much, huh?”

“Sodding delicacy, from the way Clem tells it.”

And that was it. The killing blow. The righteous anger in Finn’s

eyes faded into outright horror. "Oh my god." The big oaf staggered back a step as though he'd been shot. "You're in on it."

Buffy made a sound of disbelief and pinched the bridge of her nose. "There is no *it*, Riley. Spike is holding the eggs for a friend of his until he can get them out of town."

"You seriously believe that. And what do you think is gonna happen once they leave town?"

"The lot'll be poached or devilled," Spike said loudly. "Or, hell, maybe scrambled. However Clem's uncle serves 'em up." He waited, then snickered when the boy just looked at him dumbly. "Gonna stuff 'em down the throats of some high rollers and charge a bloody arm and a leg. Point of fact, just moved 'em tonight for transport. Clem's finally got himself some wheels to cart the goods off to Vegas. Get the bloke he won 'em from and Soldier Boy's *Doctor* off his heels."

Finn was working himself up to a right explosion, his face contorted and skin flushed red, and it was delicious. More delicious than Spike could have ever dreamt, even with his own particular flair for the dramatic. Hell, the only thing that would make this moment sweeter was if Buffy sauntered his way and gave him a nice, thorough snog, as she almost assuredly would in the many times he knew he'd replay this exchange after all was said and done.

"Riley," Buffy said a moment later, "we need to get that Suvolte in the ground before—"

"The Suvolte's been tagged," Riley said, not looking at her. "Sam radioed in. Right after you abandoned her—"

"I didn't abandon anyone! She told me to come get my partner for the hunt."

"Your *partner*."

Buffy sighed and rolled her head back, some of the fight seeming to seep out of her. "Look, things have changed since you left. A lot has changed."

"Believe me, I noticed."

"But yeah, Spike and I patrol every night."

"All the better to smuggle contraband out of the city."

"My god, do you really think I'd do that?"

"I don't know!" Riley snapped and rounded on her, trembling hard all over. "Once, no. But now? Buffy, I don't know you anymore."

"Then maybe you should pack up and get the hell out of my town."

It was the sort of victory he knew he shouldn't relish, but fuck, Spike couldn't keep himself from grinning like an idiot. In a thousand years, even at his most optimistic and lovesick, he doubted he would have believed he'd live to witness a scene like this. And it was all so... delicious. The shock and hurt on Riley's face, the brilliant fire blazing in Buffy's eyes, the determined way she held herself, and the knowledge that she had the strength to not only kick her former bedmate to the curb, but make it hurt in more ways than one.

Right then, it seemed illogical to Spike that he'd been brassed off at all earlier because it wasn't Riley's Buffy that had shown up tonight—it was his.

And Spike could have watched her verbally dress down her ex all bloody night—happily—but the next second, a muffled squeal pierced through the lull in the argument, one that seemed to come from below.

The next thing he knew, Riley had swung back to him. "You didn't freeze them, did you?"

"Freeze?" he echoed, head still swimming in the glory of the previous moment.

But Riley didn't answer that, instead ran over to the hatch that guarded the lower level, Buffy right behind him, the anger on her face having been replaced by wide-eyed concern.

"What's going on?" she asked, bopping around to get a look over Finn's shoulder once he had the door open. "What happened?"

"Your boyfriend is an idiot, is what happened," Finn replied. "These things need to be kept frozen or they'll hatch prematurely."

Spike started toward them as well, not knowing exactly what he aimed to do, but then stopped when he caught Buffy's expression. Anything that made her eyes go that big couldn't be a good thing.

"Oh god," she muttered, staring at horror at whatever was going on below. "Oh my god."

Riley hesitated a fraction of a second before pulling something off his utility belt—something Spike didn't get a good look at until the pin

had been plucked from the end. Finn spared him a quick, victorious glance, muttered a completely insincere, "Sorry," and dropped the grenade through the opening.

"Not enough," Buffy said, shaking her head. She twisted on Finn and tore the entire sodding belt off his waist with shaking fingers. Another screech rent the air as the first explosion rocketed the downstairs. Buffy paused long enough to throw Spike an apologetic look, then pulled a pin, and gave Riley a decent enough shove that the little tin soldier went flying into the nearest wall.

Spike barely had time to enjoy the view before he found himself tackled by an armful of Slayer, flat on his back and Buffy spread out over him. She pressed herself against him and braced her hands on either side of his head, though to what end, he doubted even she knew. The floor rocked the next second with what sounded like one bloody good time below, and though he knew there were a thousand things he ought to be thinking at the moment, he couldn't take his gaze off her face. Her jaw was clenched, her brow furrowed and her eyes wide, though she wasn't looking at him. Rather, she seemed to be looking at everything else—the walls, his assortment of furniture and the other rubbish he'd collected over the last two years, and once over her shoulder at Finn.

But she was with him—she'd thrown herself at *him*.

The explosions below seemed to go on a long time, but not rightly long enough. In a flash, Buffy had pulled back, taking all that wonderful warmth with her, and risen to her feet.

"You okay, Riley?" she asked, blindly extending a hand toward Spike. One he didn't hesitate to grasp.

There was a low grumble and the scuffle of boots against the stone floor. "Uhh, yeah. I forgot how, uhh, much of a creative problem-solver you are."

"Git," Spike muttered and began slapping at the muck staining his duster. Buffy flicked her gaze to him, and he expected to see reproach there, but she just rolled her eyes as if in commiseration.

"Okay, well, I think this situation is pretty much wrapped up," she said. "Unless you have any other surprises you'd like to mention."

Riley, who had been in the process of stumbling back toward them,

stopped suddenly, blinked, then shook his head and gave a short laugh. "You're lecturing me on surprises."

"You're the one who showed up from out of nowhere with a demon to bust and a wife you didn't mention."

"Wife?" Spike tilted his head, inhaled again. Guessed that explained the scent. "Someone sure works fast. My condolences to the missus."

"Shut up," Riley spat, flushing brighter still. He glared a moment longer before dragging his gaze back to Buffy. "This is the guy. Really?"

"Again with it being none of your business."

He opened his mouth as though to argue but seemed to think the better of it and shut it again. In fact, all of the hostility he'd been teeming with when he'd first stomped in abruptly leaked away, leaving him looking more than a little deflated. "It's none of my business," he repeated, nodding. "I just... Buffy, I wanted more for you."

"Thing about leaving my life is what you want no longer matters," Buffy said softly. "And you don't get to decide what's best."

He nodded again, keeping his gaze on the ground. "You need me, ever..." Then he looked up, looked at her, glanced at Spike and back once more, and something seemed to cement for him. "Have a good life, Buffy."

And without further ceremony, Riley stalked toward the door of the crypt, head held high. Then he was gone.

Buffy stared at the door for a long moment, and Spike watched the fight leave her too. The steely determination that had hardened her eyes faded and she dropped her shoulders as though ready to collapse in on herself. And he didn't know what to think about that—that or anything that had happened since Finn had let himself in. Buffy rushing to his defense, Buffy throwing herself in the line of fire, Buffy treating him the way he'd seen her treat Captain Cardboard when they were still all over each other. Another thing to add to the pile of evidence that was becoming more difficult to ignore.

"I'm sorry," Buffy said, somewhat hoarse.

He shook his head to clear it. "Sorry?"

"I'm pretty sure your downstairs is toast." She sighed, turned to face him straight-on. "Did Tara's spell not work?"

"What?"

“Riley shouldn’t have been able to get in here without you knowing.”

“Ah.” Spike nodded and moved toward the fridge for want of something to do. In an instant, everything had changed again and he was back on familiar terrain, not sure how he’d gotten there but damn sure it was where he ought to stay. Easy enough to have revelations when in the presence of others, with Finn here acting as the anomaly in the two-person play they’d been putting on for months now, but the dynamic had shifted back and it was status bloody quo all over again. Not sure why he’d thought it’d be any different, even for a handful of seconds. There was Buffy as she was with others and Buffy as she was with him, and the two seemed unlikely to ever cross paths. Buffy telling Finn to sod off, not correcting his assumptions about their relationship—all brilliant in the heat of the moment, but no clearer when they were out of it.

Better to swallow it—swallow everything. All the questions flooding his head now, the hows and whys of what had just happened, what it meant—if anything—and if they were still standing at the place they’d been at the start of the day.

He had to trust that she’d tell him if things had changed. If she’d reached the end of the road and had any brilliant epiphanies.

“Spike.”

He opened the fridge, made a show of scouring the contents for blood. “Yeah?”

“You...can’t stay here tonight.”

“No?”

“No. With the...literal warzone that is your downstairs. It’s not safe. Especially if Tara’s spell didn’t work—”

“It worked,” Spike said, turning to her. “Warning bells came, loud and bloody clear. Nearly tore my head off.”

“Oh.” Her face fell. “And you...didn’t try to leave?”

“Any reason why I should? My bloody home, isn’t it?”

“He had a stake and he thought you were a big-time arms dealer or something.”

Yeah, Spike wasn’t sure how much of that story he bought. Wouldn’t take much for anyone to suss out who the Doctor was, which

he knew because he had. Shortly after Clem had brought him the eggs, Spike had decided to sniff out the bloke for himself, see if he was a threat big enough that Buffy might like to put an end to him. The Doctor, whoever he was, had decided to close up shop right quick once he'd learned there was a slayer guarding this particular Hellmouth. Bad for business, and all that. Any ninny worth his salt could have learned the same, and call Riley whatever he liked, the boy was right. He *did* know who to beat up for information around here.

More likely he'd just gotten an earful of who was watching the eggs and decided that Spike looked like a mighty convenient scapegoat.

'Course, there was no telling Buffy this. She might not be sweet on the soldier anymore, but Spike wasn't so thick he didn't know how it'd sound. Petulant and opportunistic—a ploy he would have used at some point, he knew, but not now.

"Not the first time Finn's come in here armed and lookin' to put the hurt on yours truly. Nothing to fret over."

"What?"

Spike snickered and shut the fridge without taking anything out. "You really think you're the only one who used to give me a good thrash just for the hell of it?"

"Well, that's..." Buffy sighed and looked away. "Still...you can't stay here with the downstairs all kablooey."

"You don't think?"

"Are you really gonna fight me on this?"

He grinned at that. "Rather fancy fighting you on just about anything, pet."

"Come *on*. You're paying half my mortgage—the least I can do is give you a place to sleep when your place has been bombed. Literally." Then the vixen sucked her lower lip between her teeth. "Besides, we promised Dawn a movie night."

"I'm not the one who didn't bloody show, am I?"

"Hello! Ex-boyfriend randomly turns up hunting a monster—a monster that might have a mighty big vendetta against you since you had its eggs on layaway." She gestured vaguely. "I was trying to get ahead of the problem."

"By keepin' me in the dark, is that it?"

Buffy threw back her head, giving him a lovely view of her neck, and rumbled the kind of groan that went straight to his cock. “I wanted to get the situation handled so that we could enjoy our evening. A Riley-shaped bomb seemed a good way to do the opposite.”

Spike nodded. That all sounded well and good—reasonable, even. But with the dust having settled, the air still vibrating with the aftermath of the explosion, and Buffy stinking to high heaven of her ex, he found he’d landed at the start. Learning that Buffy had gone off with Finn had shot him back more than a year, resurrecting old jealousies he’d truly thought were behind him. But the path had been there in his mind, so clear he could still follow it, from how the Slayer could see herself back on Captain Cardboard’s arm. Or worse, be reminded of all the things Spike wasn’t and could never be—human, wholesome, and safe topping the list.

It was ridiculous, having witnessed her throwing the boy out on his arse, but the feeling remained, and he wasn’t sure how to force it away again. This knowledge, deep down, that were he anything other than what he was, the final hurdles separating them would have already been surmounted.

It would be easier if he weren’t a vampire, she’d told him months ago. And god, if he wasn’t feeling that now.

“So...you’ll come with?” Buffy looked uncertain, even worried, which had him cursing himself for being a wanker. The fact remained that she had come here after him, had thrown herself at him, not Riley, when the bomb had gone off. Had, by her account, run herself ragged trying to keep her ex from sniffing out that Spike had anything of interest at the crypt.

Hell, she’d asked for time. That she hadn’t shut him out meant something, didn’t it?

“Dunno about stayin’,” Spike said, nodding at the door, “but yeah, love. Let’s get some nosh in you. Wager the Nibblet still has her heart set on that teen comedy of hers?”

“Probably, being that she’s a teen.” Buffy offered a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “It’s the least we can do.”

“The booze still where I left it?”

“Hey, you can’t get drunk if I can’t get drunk.”



"I made no such bloody promise."

"No fair."

"Life's not fair, sweet," Spike said, crowding in behind her. He hesitated, then placed his hand at the small of her back. One of those touches he couldn't help but claim and tried not to read too much into the fact that she relaxed under it.

There were moments when she seemed so far away from him; others where he could swear she felt something like what he felt. Very few moments were both. Everything that had happened since he'd come home made this moment one of them.

And it wasn't like he was going anywhere she wasn't, so he might as well try to enjoy the journey.

## ECLIPSE

MANY THINGS HAD CHANGED SINCE SHE'D DIED AND BEEN resurrected, but her struggle with saying the words "I love you" was not among them. Especially in saying them for the first time to someone she had—not all that long ago, all things considered—believed she'd rather be skinned alive than be intimate with in any way. Buffy wasn't sure what would have happened if she'd made it to Spike's crypt and found him alone—if she would have had the courage to just blurt out how she felt or if she would have danced around it while trying to pluck up her nerve.

The entire night had been a tangled mess of emotions as it was. While realizing she was in love with Spike was definitely a highlight, Buffy couldn't help but notice that the tension she had stoked on her birthday seemed more intense now. Maybe that was all Riley's fault. In retrospect, taking off with her ex was likely not the best signal to send to the guy you liked, even if her intentions had been all with the good. And that she'd followed this up by destroying Spike's bedroom likely hadn't helped things, even if it had been the only option at the time.

At least the mystery of the conveniently hatching eggs had been addressed. Willow had been happy to don the research hat and found that the ideal climate for Suvolte eggs was somewhere between chilly

and frozen, with frozen being the preference for extended storage uses but chilly working in the short-term.

"So you moved the eggs tonight?" Willow had asked, looking over the top of her laptop at a rather subdued Spike. "Where were they before?"

"Dark little corner, outta view," Spike had replied.

"Near where the pipes go through," Buffy had agreed, nodding. She'd stood over Willow's shoulder, skimming the article on a website entitled, appropriately enough, *Demons, Demons, Demons*. Where had this resource been all her life? "And it was definitely cold."

Spike had looked surprised. "Was it?"

"You don't feel the cold like normal people do," Buffy had replied in what she hoped was a light, teasing tone. From the way he'd frowned, she'd missed the mark.

"Yeah, I'm betting the moving them is what did it," Willow had piped in before the quiet could become too awkward. Then winced. "Sorry about your crypt, though."

Spike had shrugged as though it didn't matter, muttered something about there being plenty of tombs to choose from, and wandered into the living room where Dawn was cueing up their *10 Things I Hate About You* rental and gushing over the hotness that was Heath Ledger.

Willow had given Buffy a worried look. "He okay? He seems extra cranky."

"Well, you'd be cranky, too, if your girlfriend's ex-boyfriend swooped into town, accused you of badness, and blew up your house for good measure," Buffy had muttered.

"Girlfriend?" Willow's eyebrows had winged upward. "Ooh, is it official now?"

"Not yet. As you said, he seems to be extra with the crab at the moment, so I haven't exactly had the chance to break it to him that we are in a Relationship, capital R and everything."

"And I bet there's *no way* to cheer him up," her friend had replied dryly. "No way whatsoever."

"I'm gonna tell him," Buffy had protested, though even she had heard the defensive whine in her voice. "Just...with the big. And the everything changing."

“What is going to change? You spend every spare minute with him already,” Willow had pointed out. “He’s almost here more often than you are. Pretty sure the biggest change has already happened—you’ll just start getting smoochies out of the deal.”

Personally, Buffy was hoping for a whole lot more than smoochies, but Willow had raised a fantastic point. A point that she felt like an idiot for having to have literally spelled out for her, granted, but a fantastic point, nonetheless.

In almost every other respect, she and Spike were already a couple, and they had been for a while now.

“I’m going to ask him to stay the night,” Buffy had said determinately. “Well, I already kinda did, but I mean in my room, not on the couch.”

Willow had favored her with a downright dirty smirk. “If Tara and I get back together, please return the favor of pretending you heard nothing the next morning, okay? Dawn will sleep through anything. Me? Not so much.”

“Things with Tara looking that good?”

Her friend had given her a look, snapped and motioned toward the living room. “No more stalling. Go be with your soon-to-be-vampire boyfriend and figure out how you’re gonna tell him the soon-to-be part is over.” She had paused, then grinned. “Also, maybe? I dunno, but we’ll talk later. Girl stuff.”

So that was what Buffy had done. Marched back into the living room, scored herself a slice of pizza, and settled onto the couch beside Spike, close enough that she brushed up against him anytime she shifted but not so much that she was in his lap. This meant she caught every muttered curse he let loose, the loudest being when Buffy had voiced her agreement with Dawn that Heath Ledger was indeed downright lickable.

Once the credits rolled, Dawn had taken full advantage of the fact that Buffy had been the absentee parent over the last few months and convinced her to feed the VCR another movie. This time, less teenybopper romance, though Buffy wasn’t sure that had been Dawn’s intention. *Pleasantville* was less her sister’s speed—more on the heavy themes than Dawn tended to like in her media. In fact, by the time

Reese Witherspoon discovered she liked to read, Dawn was sawing logs, sprawled on the floor amid a sea of popcorn kernels, using the leftover pizza box as a pillow.

"Better call it a night," Buffy said, aiming the remote at the television to switch it off. She stole a glance at Spike from the corner of her eye. "What?"

He shook his head and rose to his feet, apparently still in full-grump mode. For some reason, he'd gotten extra crabby with the second movie, particularly the jocks representing the idealized 1950s love interests. She thought she might have heard him mutter something about Riley, but had figured that was leftover badness from his crypt having been destroyed.

Now that she thought about it, though, there had been a character that much resembled her ex in both looks and personality. Maybe that was the sore spot.

"If she asks why we don't do this more often, remind her of who will get the job of cleaning up this mess," Buffy said as Spike crunched his way over discarded snacks to regard the sleeping teenager. "And you could try to be a little less with the obnoxious, yourself."

Spike swung his head up, then looked down again at the mess he'd made with his heavy boots. Pieces of popcorn that had been more or less intact, if not in the bowl, were now crumbs of white against the carpet. At least he had the decency to look chagrined, rubbing at the back of his neck. "Don't worry with it. I'll pick up on my way out."

"Your way out? I thought we were clear that you were staying here tonight on account of your bed being extra-crispy."

"I'll be fine," he said, kneeling over and, with care, collecting Dawn into his arms. The effect was rather startling; Dawn being a bit on the gangly side in terms of her recent growth spurts would have made Buffy think Spike, with his lithe frame and lean build, would look a little lopsided, but somehow the picture they presented was kind of perfect.

"Taking her with you?" Buffy whispered loudly.

Spike rolled his eyes and nodded at the staircase. Somewhat bemused, Buffy rushed up first, age and experience informing her movements. She knew just where to set her feet, how much pressure to

apply, and how long to linger on each step to avoid making too much noise—not that Dawn seemed in any danger of waking up prematurely, but Willow had headed up more than an hour earlier and, by her own admission, was a light sleeper.

Spike took his time, his strides slow and deliberate, like he had the same innate knowledge of where not to step, which he probably did. And Buffy stood on the landing, watching numbly before it occurred to her that she could be of some help. She hurried to Dawn's bedroom to make sure the path to the bed was clear, fixed the sheets so they looked a little less chaotic, and waited there until Spike cleared the doorway and tucked her sister into bed.

If there had been any doubt left that she was indeed in love with him, it vanished at that moment. Neither Riley nor Angel had ever had much patience for Dawn—neither had Buffy, come to think of it, but she was her sister and a part of the Buffy Summers package. And yeah, maybe judging Angel harshly for things he'd never done in her catalog of false memories wasn't exactly fair, but it had never rung untrue to her. Not once. For whatever reason, though, Spike had always fit with her family—all parts of it. He'd never treated her mother or Dawn as obstacles. Point of fact, Spike was the only guy Buffy had ever had feelings for that her mother had just...liked. Even with the whole disinviting him from the house thing from last year, there had seemed to be an even amount of concern for both Buffy's safety and Spike's feelings.

Not to say Joyce hadn't liked Riley, but she'd never really warmed up to him. Not the way she had Spike.

Buffy followed Spike back into the hallway, her heart in her throat, though she didn't know why. It wasn't like she was putting herself out there or anything—she knew damn well what Spike's answer would be, what it would mean, and that it was what she wanted. But it was still of the huge, taking this step. Going after what she wanted.

"Right then," Spike said quietly. "I'll be off."

"No!" Buffy winced. That had been a bit louder than she intended. Softer, she said, "I want you to stay here."

"Well, love, we don't always get what we want, do we?"

She rolled her eyes, took his wrist, and half-dragged him down the

hallway closer to her bedroom. Closer, but not inside. She needed to clear something up first.

"Why are you fighting me on this?" she asked, whirling to face him, arms crossed.

"On what?"

"On staying here. Your home is a battleground, complete with scattered demon parts."

"Yeah? And whose fault is that?"

Was he serious? God, he could be so frustrating. "If you'd seen the things that hatched outta those eggs, trust me, you'd—"

"But that's just it, Slayer. I do trust you. Been trustin' you for a minute now, haven't I? It's all I have—all I can do." Spike drew nearer, helping himself right into her bubble, which would be annoying if that wasn't where she wanted him. "I trust you, but you can't trust me."

"What? Don't be ridiculous."

"I told you I'd wait for sodding ever, and I meant it. Wait for you until there's nothin' to me but dust. You, on the other hand, are keen to take off with Captain Cardboard the second he sends you the doe eyes."

Buffy blinked. "What? Is *that* what this is about? You were there when I told him to get lost, weren't you?"

"Not before you disappeared with him for hours."

"You're kidding me with this. You have to be." When Spike held her stare with a rather bold, unrepentant one of his own, it took everything in her power to keep from screaming or hitting him or both. "It's not exactly like you have an answering machine, Spike. What would you have had me do?"

"Right, 'cause ringing home woulda taken too long. Nowhere I could've gotten the message."

"You really expect me to check in anytime I have to go on a hunt?"

"No, you dizzy bint, but a fella thinks things when he hears the woman he loves drops everything to..." But he didn't finish the thought, broke away with a growl and put a step between them. "Bugger, *this* is why I don't need to stay here tonight. I heard you were off with him and it was bloody torture, picturin' you two. All cozy up somewhere. Gettin' reacquainted. And I made a promise to you—a

promise I'm bloody well killin' myself to keep, so I better just be off until I get my head on straight."

"You thought I'd just...go and be with Riley? After everything?" Buffy blinked at him, something in her chest plummeting. Yeah, she'd known that Spike wouldn't be happy to learn she'd taken off with Riley, but not for this—more due to the mutual enmity between them, the same she thought she might understand better now than she ever had before. It was obvious Riley had seen something that she hadn't—something that went back to even before she'd known how Spike felt about her, that had perhaps been there from the beginning. Whatever this was between them, it didn't feel new, more the place every decision they'd made the last four years had been driving them toward.

"Said it yourself, didn't you?" Spike replied, looking at the floor now, his tone low. "Be a sight easier if I wasn't a vampire. Finn's bloody flavorless but that's what made it easy, isn't it?"

It was. As much as the thought hurt, mostly for what it said about her.

Easy was something she'd never had. And maybe she wasn't meant to. Maybe none of them were. Easy gave a false sense of comfort, but not excitement. Not passion and god knows there had never been passion with Riley. Never this itching under her skin—this pull between them that made standing beside him and not touching him something close to agony. She'd never had to pace herself with him, worried about getting lost. If anything, she'd dived in and kept diving, desperate to feel that rush again, the pang in her chest that made it hard to breathe but, unlike the pressure that had tailed her since her resurrection, for all the best reasons. There was suffocating in life and drowning in love, and the latter had been something she'd both been terrified and desperate to feel again, so much so she'd convinced herself she had.

The *terrified* came with the man standing with her now. So terrified that she hadn't realized until tonight that she'd been submerged for a long damn time and had no desire to come up for air. That the fall she'd been experiencing around him wasn't scary at all—not nearly as much as the thought of standing still.

"I don't want easy," Buffy said, stepping forward and fisting the



material of his T-shirt tight enough to pull him to her. And god, the surprise that chased away his sneer made every second from that first meeting to this moment more than worth it. "I want you."

She thought he'd ask questions, perhaps if he had heard right, if she meant it the way he thought she did, or if she was sure—but that wasn't what happened. In a flash, Spike had growled and tugged her to him, crashing his mouth over hers with hungry desperation only matched by the unleashed energy clawing her insides. His kiss was just like she remembered, the way they had come together outside of the Bronze after the big sing-along, and again the night they'd gone on a nerd hunt. Hard and fervent, like he wanted to pull her inside of him, like the taste of her was something he needed the way he needed blood. For better or worse, Spike did nothing in half-measures, including and especially when it came to driving her out of her mind.

Yeah, Angel had taken credit for Dru's insanity, but it seemed just as likely to Buffy, at that moment, that Spike had simply devoured her sanity with the power of his mouth.

"Slayer," he whispered against her lips before curling his tongue around hers again. He stumbled back, taking her with him, whimpering like he couldn't get enough of her. Thankfully, he seemed to know where he was going because at the moment, the house's floor plan had flitted right out of her head. One second she was in the hallway—the next she was flinging the door to her darkened bedroom closed before practically leaping at her vampire to shove the stupid duster he'd stubbornly refused to shed earlier off his shoulders.

Spike released one of those ragged breaths that never failed to set her nerves on fire, staring at her now with a combination of hunger and open vulnerability, like he couldn't quite trust what he was seeing. And now she thought he might ask, might say something, and she didn't want him to. They needed to talk—that much was obvious—and clear up the confusion that had kept them separated as long as it had, but talking was something they'd gotten rather good at doing over the last few months and she was eager to learn something else.

So, holding his eyes, she crisscrossed her hands at the hem of her T-shirt and pulled the thing off, leaving her in her battle-worn jeans and probably one of the least sexy bras in her wardrobe. Had she

known she'd be staging a seduction tonight, she might have tried to dress the part. On the other hand, the way Spike devoured her with his gaze made it clear he didn't mind the scenery in the slightest.

"Buffy," he said, his voice thick. "Fuck..."

"I blew up your bed."

He managed to pull his attention away from her breasts and favored her with an arched eyebrow. "You did at that."

"I mean, insofar as the signal sending, it's not my most subtle work."

The corner of his mouth ticked up. "All a part of the grand plan to get in my trousers, was it?"

"Well, I had to improvise." Buffy inhaled a fortifying breath, then stepped toward him, watching how his eyes went both bright and soft at the same time. It reminded her of that night forever ago, when he'd told her that she treated him like a man, and of a night in their more recent history, when she'd walked down the stairs and he'd realized she was alive again. There had been love so intense it had terrified her, then open awe, and now both those things were there again, only with a part he hadn't let her see often—how deeply his yearning went, and exactly what this meant for him.

"Better ways to catch a fella's attention," Spike said, trailing his gaze down her throat. He moved a step closer.

"Subtle's not really my style."

He grinned, lifting a hand and hovering it just over her breasts, close enough that she could almost feel him—almost, but not quite. "You gotta tell me now what you want," he said, nearly grazing one of her hardened nipples with his palm. "What the rules here are."

"Rules?"

Spike nodded and looked up. "Is this just tonight? Your way of sayin' sorry?"

Okay, that hurt.

"I wouldn't do that to you."

He offered a slight grin, relaxing. "Not like I'd say no. But fuck, Buffy, you know how much I—"

"I know how much," she agreed, taking his hand in hers. She pressed his palm against the swell of her breast and his thumb over her

nipple, trembling when he trembled. "I'm done waiting, done thinking. That's what I was there to tell you when I walked in on you and Riley. I'm ready."

Spike worked his throat, and she watched his Adam's apple bob. "You're ready."

"Uh huh."

"You came to tell me that you're ready for...me?"

"For us, Spike." Buffy pressed closer, so close she knew he could feel her heart pounding against his own chest, just as sure as she could feel the hard length of him against her stomach. "I'm ready for there to be an us."

There were times it was hard to remember that Spike was a vampire—other times when he made it more than a little obvious. When he moved next, it was with the preternatural speed of an otherworldly predator, and she was in his arms, gasping into his mouth as he plunged and pulled and devoured, all lips and tongue and teeth. A slight snarl rent the air along with the unmistakable tear of fabric. Her bra fell in useless scraps to the floor, which would have annoyed her had Spike given her time to think about it, but he didn't. He left her mouth with a moan and kissed a line down her throat, then over her collarbone, and lower still until he had a nipple drawn between his lips.

"Oh god." Buffy rolled her head back, tunneling her fingers through Spike's hair. It was surprisingly soft, that hair, which made it easier to grab. He rumbled a growl against her skin and tugged her closer, lifting her off her feet while still doing things with his tongue that had every bit of her shaking. In that instant, it seemed lifetimes had passed since she'd last had sex, which, given the Heaven hangover, might have been on the money. She knew the steps, knew the part she typically played, but suddenly felt completely off her game. All he'd done was suck on her nipple and her body seemed close to total meltdown.

Did she typically shake this much? Was that normal?

In a flash, Spike had dropped her unceremoniously on the bed and was on his knees before her, jerking her jeans down her legs and taking her panties along for the ride. No shoes to remove—she'd kicked those off downstairs before the movie marathon—which meant in half a

second, she was spread naked before her vampire, still shaking like it was her job.

God, Spike was going to think she was a nutcase. Or crash down to earth real fast when he realized just how much he had overestimated her bedroom skills in building that robot of his. Never mind that he'd said before that just kissing her had been more stimulating than the Bot—Buffy knew full well that the Bot had at least been programmed to do things other than shake.

"Bloody hell, Slayer," Spike said thickly, hands braced on her thighs.

She pressed her eyes closed—would have pressed her legs closed but didn't have the strength at that moment. "I'm sorry."

"What?" He dug his fingers into her flesh, the question sharp. "Fuck, baby, look at me."

That she could do. And holy crap, if it wasn't a head trip. Spike kneeling before her, perched between her spread legs, his eyes so dark they were almost black.

"Talk to me," he said and lowered his mouth to nibble at her inner thigh. "What are you sorry for?"

"I'm... I'm... I can't stop shaking."

A grin flickered across his face. "Mhmm. Bloody intoxicating," he replied, licking a path over her skin until his tongue was dancing over her slit. Another hard tremor seized her body and she bucked without warning, as though she had lost control completely.

"What if it's not good?" she forced out, panting. "What if *I'm* not good?"

Spike didn't reply at first, working his tongue into her with a long moan. He pushed inside once, twice, then curled it back and dragged it over her soaked flesh and to her clit. "You're perfect. All this for me."

"I mean, you have, like, all the experience here. Plus a Bot—"

The crack of flesh striking flesh bit off the rest of whatever she'd been about to say, and by the time she realized he'd smacked her hip, he had her clit under his tongue and two fingers inside of her, and groaned into her when she gasped and tensed.

"Fuck, you're tight," he whispered, pulling back just a bit and then pushing back into her. "Gonna squeeze me so good. So good. Buffy..."

His mouth was on her again before she could think to reply,

hungrier, more demanding this time. And everything inside of her unraveled, her muscles relaxing, her shaking subsided, and she let herself listen to what he was telling her. *Everything* he was telling her. Spike was nothing if not a skilled communicator—one who seemed to understand the things she needed to hear, or not hear, better than herself. The way he moaned into her was not the mark of someone who found her lacking. Rather, he attacked her flesh like a man starved, tongue exploring, pulling, sucking and moaning, all the while he maintained a steady pace with his fingers, reading her body and following cues she didn't even realize she was giving him until he acted. Two fingers became three, and she sighed and bucked and clenched, the room around her becoming hazy.

"Taste so good," he whispered against her before circling his tongue around her clit. "Been dreamin' about this taste, you know. Those times you get close enough, when I know you want it, when I can smell it on you. Know how bloody hard it is to walk away when I know you're wet for me, sweet?"

"I...unh..." Was there a question? "Spike...*please*."

"Yeah, that's it. Ask me nicely." He nipped at her inner thigh, groaning. "Fuck, you drive me outta my bloody mind."

He fastened his mouth over her clit before she could begin to respond—not that she would have gotten far, anyway. Buffy arched again, her world zeroing in on what he was doing between her legs. The swipes of his tongue, the steady thrusts of his fingers, how even the sounds he made seemed a physical caress. She didn't remember sex being like this and wondered vaguely if her memory had been damaged in the resurrection, but then she didn't care because she got to discover it all over again. Hot pinpricks dancing over and inside of her, building toward something she wasn't sure she could contain. And then she stopped trying, because giving in was so much better, and surrendered. Spike hummed his approval when she began to thrash, steadied a hand on her belly but didn't let pause in his mouth's assault, kept licking and pressing into her until the embers of her orgasm became a roaring fire once more.

"Spike—*Spike*—"

He twisted his hand, rubbing against something inside of her that

she was damn certain no one had ever touched. That, combined with the attention he lavished on her clit, shoved her over an edge she hadn't realized she was standing so close to. The sound that ripped from her throat was raw and hoarse, and unlike any noise she'd heard herself make before. She tightened and trembled and felt herself convulsing around his fingers, his answering moan hitting her ears. Sweat dribbled into her eyes but she didn't mind the sting. Wasn't sure she could even feel it with as blissed out as she was, gently floating back to earth, back to this bed, from whatever orbit Spike had launched her into.

When the clouds parted and the roaring in her head became a little less deafening, Buffy became aware of two things. One—she was panting like she'd just completed a triathlon. Two—Spike was grinning up at her, his chin resting against her pelvis, his mouth shiny and slick, even in the relative dark of the room.

"Did..." She forced her throat to work. "Did I black out?"

He chuckled, ran his fingers over her pussy in a way that was almost affectionate rather than sexy. "Tell me you'll squeeze me like that," he said in a low, husky voice, "when it's my cock."

"I...didn't do anything. You were just pressing the right buttons."

Spike laughed again and dropped a kiss on her belly. "Tease." Slowly, he rose to his feet, keeping his eyes trained on her. "Now, Slayer, you gotta tell me..." He ran a hand over the prominent bulge in his jeans, making it impossible not to follow the movement with her gaze. "How far you wantin' this to go?"

"What?" She forced her attention back to his face. It wasn't easy. "What... Are there options?"

"If you like, I can spend the night eating that juicy cunt of yours. God knows I'll never get enough of it."

He smirked again, and hell, just the suggestion sent a thrill through her. It wasn't that she'd never experienced, well, *that* before, but to her memory, Riley had never been eager to go down on her. Hell, he'd struggled even with the word *pussy* that one time they'd tried dirty talk. And before Riley? Angel had offered but she'd been too mortified at the suggestion to say yes, and the subject hadn't come up again for obvious reasons.

Well, they'd seemed obvious at the time, at least. There was an observation to file away for later. But Buffy shook her head, not wanting Angel anywhere near her room or thoughts right now.

"I'm not saying I hate the idea," Buffy replied slowly, letting her gaze drop to the pronounced outline of his cock again. "But...don't you want to..."

Spike answered that question by dragging his shirt over his head and pitching it to the side without breaking eye-contact. And this time there was no reason to not look her fill—all that pale perfect skin, stretched across wiry muscles and a flat, Adonis-like stomach. He truly was a work of art, her vampire. And he was all hers.

*All mine.*

"Keep looking at me like that, love, and I'll give you exactly what you're asking for."

Buffy offered a half-smile and scooted toward the edge of the mattress. "Maybe that's what I want," she replied, hooking her fingers through his belt loops and dragging him closer. Her grin widened when she noted she wasn't the only one shaking now—though admittedly, Spike wore it a lot better. Hardly noticeable, except when she let her fingers wander over the straining denim at his crotch.

"Buffy..."

She fixed her gaze with his again and held it as she began undoing his belt. There was something heady in watching him watch her—taking in the way his nostrils flared and his jaw hardened, how she could practically feel the energy radiating off him, begging to be unleashed. She'd never felt wanted like this, like she was someone's addiction—every time Spike had given her glimpses, she'd either looked away or forced herself to ignore it, because there was responsibility in that. Huge responsibility, not to mention a whole hell of a lot to live up to. The thought that she could disappoint him hadn't entirely left her, but the way he seemed to drink in her every movement made her wonder if just being *Buffy* was enough.

There was certainly a first time for everything.

Buffy's patience abandoned her right around the time she slid his belt free, and it must have been catching, for suddenly Spike was in motion, kicking off his boots and fumbling with the fly to his jeans.

When she went to fight him to lower his zipper, he snatched her wrist, brought her hand to his mouth, and licked her palm.

"Touch me and I'm gonna burst."

She arched an eyebrow. "Is vampire stamina not a thing? 'Cause I thought it was a thing."

The look he gave her was downright devilish. "Oh, baby, it's a thing. Just want the first time to be when I'm inside you."

Then his hands were moving again, and in a flash, the jeans were gone, and Spike was standing nude in her room, illuminated only by the streetlights outside. And maybe it wasn't polite to stare, but *boo boy*, not staring wasn't an option just then. He was beautiful—a word that she'd never before associated with men, but it seemed so fitting, so right, and incredibly unavoidable. Also made her wonder just how it was she'd known him for nearing on seven years without making this realization before. Okay, so she'd identified him as a hottie when he'd first stepped out of the shadows at the Bronze, but that had been secondary to predator, and once he'd made it clear they were enemies, noticing him as anything but something to be staked had been an excellent way to wind up dead.

Suffice to say, *Spike* and *naked* had lived as two separate concepts in her head for so long that adjusting to them occupying the same space had taken some time, even after she had started registering her changing feelings for him. But now, here he stood, smooth and pale and muscular and, *okay*, so she was looking at his cock. There wasn't a soul in the world who would blame her for that. He was long and thick, curved a bit toward the tip, the head looking almost swollen and slick from his own excitement. And almost immediately, Buffy wanted him in her mouth, which was definitely not a thought she'd had about a penis before, even if she wasn't a novice to oral sex.

A hard sigh tore through the air. "Fuck," Spike said, and the next thing she knew, he was on her, over her, pressing her against the mattress and seizing her mouth in a desperate kiss. *Desperate* wasn't even the right word—he poured everything into her, all of it. Everything she suspected he'd been holding back over the last year, want and desire and need meshing with reality and acceptance. Just as no one



had ever looked at her the way he did, no one had kissed her like he did, either. And it was intoxicating.

"You're a naughty girl," he rasped against her lips when they broke apart. "Gawkin' at me like that." Before she could reply, he slipped a hand between them, and then the head of his cock was nudging her clit, rubbing against it. Had she not caught his grin, she would have thought it was an accident, but there was his telltale smirk, and then he was nibbling along her jaw to her throat and dragging himself up and down the seam of her pussy as though determined to send them both out of their minds.

"Buffy," he murmured into her throat, "tell me you want me. Ask me nicely."

She clutched his forearms, the shaking starting all over again, but she didn't care now. "I want you, Spike."

He pressed his eyes shut, his jaw clenching again as though he were fighting for control, like he didn't trust himself. Then his eyes were open and locked with hers again. "Keep looking at me," he said, and then he was slipping inside of her at a pace that had her torn between frustrated and overwhelmed. Too much too fast, not enough and too slow, but she kept her gaze on his, watching him as he became part of her, watching as his lower lip trembled and his nostrils flared, and then he was inside. Buried to the root, hard and thick and she wanted to weep.

That was until he reared back and slammed into her. Then she wanted to scream. He covered her mouth with his hand, braced his weight on his other arm, and that was it.

The only tender and slow moment was the beginning. After that, it seemed something had snapped. *Spike* had snapped. And then he was pumping into her, hard and fast and with as much desperation as anything that had come before. Like he was chasing her down, like time would run out on them and he needed to get every bit of her that he could. The bed whined beneath the force of his thrusts, the headboard starting a cadence against the wall that, distantly, Buffy knew was too loud but was too consumed in him to care. All she saw was Spike—all she felt was Spike. Spike over her, looking at her, saying her

name again and again as though in prayer, driving into her with such raw hunger she thought she might lose her sense of self.

And he seemed everywhere at once. Tugging on her nipples with his fingers, then his mouth. Kissing her throat, lapping up her sweat, holding her wrists, and then covering her mouth again. When she took this as permission to nibble on his fingers, he gave a little growl, swirled his hips, and fucked her harder. She sucked his index finger between her lips and rolled her tongue around it, then grinned when he growled again and pulled back to crash his mouth over hers.

"Naughty girl," he muttered, his voice somehow reaching her over the noise in her head and the bed's rhythmic rocking. "Naughty Slayer."

Buffy grinned and shoved him hard enough that he was forced out of her and onto his back. She hadn't meant to do that—she didn't think—but she decided to roll with it. For once, she was in bed with someone who could take her at full strength.

She was in bed with someone who *wanted* her to be the Slayer.

And god, if that wasn't a revelation. Buffy all but pounced on him, straddling his waist and impaling herself onto his cock again before he could look too offended.

"That's right, Spike," she replied and began riding him at a gallop, determined to show him that she could give as hard as he could, if not harder. "Slayer. Remember that."

He launched off his back and claimed her mouth again, shifting so she was bouncing on his cock, thrusting down as he thrust up and creating illicit, wet suctioning sounds that just drove her harder.

Then his voice was at her ear, low and raspy. "Oh, fuck yes, Slayer. Fuck *yes*. Such a good girl. Such a tight pussy. Squeeze me—oh bloody hell, more. *More*. I can take it. Give it to me, Buffy. Give me all of it. Give it to the Big Bad."

"You can take it?" she whispered back, pumping her hips and clenching her muscles around him again.

"Take everything you got."

Buffy sank her teeth into his shoulder, not really thinking, and Spike howled. The world seemed to tumble around them and then she was thumping hard to the floor, Spike on top of her, not breaking pace,

pounding into her so hard she was thankful for the change of scenery, as her bed would not have survived.

"Squeeze me like that, baby," Spike growled. "Do it again and don't stop."

"Spike..."

"Don't bloody stop and don't hold back."

Then his fingers were there between them, sliding over her slick flesh and pressing down on her clit, and it was too much. Too much and not enough and she needed more but if he gave her more she was going to pass out. Buffy's head hit the floor and her world began to zero in again—this time taking everything with it. The sounds he made, the need in his eyes, the words he was feeding her, the sensation of his cock plunging inside of her again and again and now the fire he'd built and fanned and roared to explosion was rising once more. White-hot sparks of pure ecstasy lighting her from the inside and pushing, pushing until there was nowhere to go but over the rainbow. Buffy seized him by the shoulders and bit him again, needing somewhere to release this scream and knowing the air wasn't an option. Only Spike responded with a roar—a pure vamp roar—bucking and pulsing and she felt him surrender. His gasps and moans in her ear, harsher for the fangs—or maybe that was in her head—and he kept pumping long after the waves had subsided, so long she thought he might just start all over again and not knowing if she could survive it, but thinking if she had to die again, there were far worse ways.

At last, though, he stilled with a purr, nuzzling her throat, his face still fixed in those harsh, vampiric ridges. And knowing that, knowing he could bite her at any time, had her pussy clenching around him anew and she knew that she *would* survive more. She had to, because she was going to ask for it.

At the thought, inexplicably, she started to giggle. The second the sound pierced the air she knew it was inappropriate, but that just made her laugh harder. And soon she was trembling all over from it, tears stinging her eyes and her lungs working overtime, and when Spike lifted his head to give her a bemused look, everything became ten times funnier and she dissolved.

“Not the most flattering reaction,” he said dryly, the bones in his face shifting back to human. “Gonna let the class in on the joke?”

Buffy wiped at her eyes, willing herself to calm down. Somehow, between giggles, she managed, “Just...that was awesome.” Which wasn’t funny, but it was, because it shouldn’t be.

She lifted her head to meet his gaze, knowing he didn’t understand—except he was grinning at her, so maybe he did.

And when he kissed her, she *knew* he did. Spike was the only one who seemed to understand her without struggle.

“Fuck, I love you,” he said when he pulled away and held her gaze as he started moving again.

And she loved him back, so much she could burst with it.

Seemed safer, then, to keep the words inside. Not risk the badness that happened when Buffy loved, or mull over how best to tell him—that was an issue for another day. Right now, all she needed was what she had.

And it was everything.

## BREATH

“HOW DID WE WIND UP ON THE FLOOR AGAIN?”

Spike lifted his head from Buffy’s sweat-soaked breast, unable to hold back his grin. Every time he met her eyes, it hit him all over. That this was real. Everything that had happened since he’d tucked Dawn into bed—the conversation in the hallway, Buffy pulling him to her by his shirt, the way she’d come around his fingers and against his mouth, and then how she’d unleashed on him when he’d finally pushed inside of her. All of it was real. He’d had some bloody wild fantasies, thought about all the ways they might shag themselves into a frenzy, but even his vivid imagination hadn’t been able to capture just how glorious being with her was. All parts of it.

For starters, he’d learned Buffy wasn’t averse to a good cuddle. Which was a bloody relief, considering he doubted he’d ever let her go.

“Think you knocked me there, pet,” he said, and kissed the swell of her breast. “Or I knocked you.”

“That would explain the mild back pain.” She giggled, pressed the back of her hand to her mouth. “You might be the first guy to give me a sex bruise.”

“Means we’re doin’ it right.”

“Right equals pain for you, huh?”

Spike arched an eyebrow. "Pain for you too. Tell me that wasn't the hardest you've ever come."

She looked like she very much wanted to—at least for a second, before she darted her eyes away again and broke with a grin. "Guess that's part of the Slayer package all around. Get your freak on."

"Not a freak. Nothin' wrong with fancyin' a bit of pain now and then."

"Pretty sure there's a word for that."

"Yeah. *Normal*."

"Funnily enough, not the image I had in mind when I said I wanted normal."

There was no inflection in her voice, but the playful edge had disappeared. Not in such a way he immediately worried—she didn't sound disappointed, rather wistful—though it did help reduce the brilliant fog that had settled around his brain, keeping him from thinking too much about anything that wasn't the moment. And maybe now wasn't the time to ask how everything had happened, why tonight the switch had flipped for her and she'd decided she was ready. A wiser man would hold his tongue.

But Spike had never claimed to be a wiser man.

He settled his cheek against her breast again, inhaled a lungful of air that tasted of them and sex. "What changed?"

"Hmm?" She sounded close to sleep, which wouldn't do. The floor was fine for shagging her against, but his Slayer deserved a better place to catch her winks.

"What made you ready?"

"For what?"

"For this." He looked up, wondering if he should just quit now. If the girl was about to fall off to sleep... But her eyes were open and alert, so he added, "For us. What made..."

*Does this mean for you what it means for me? Am I a pit-stop? Are you gonna bloody break me?*

He didn't say as much, couldn't force himself to choke it out, but he didn't need to. Buffy seemed to understand.

"It was talking to Sam."

"Sam?"

"Riley's wife." Buffy offered a small smile and began running her fingers over his nape, making it bloody hard to focus when all he wanted to do was curl up into her. "She said some stuff that just... What they have is good. The way he has her back and she can count on him for stuff and... I dunno, she said it a lot better than I can. But it just kinda made everything click that that's what I want—what I *have*. And it's something I've never had, really. With anyone."

Spike nodded like he understood, not sure he did but sure as fuck willing to try. It would be simpler to let the matter rest there, save him from hearing things he'd rather not. Hell, Buffy knew how in it he was. What this meant to him. And given how much time she'd taken to mull things over, it seemed likely that she had an answer for the questions he was suddenly keen to ask.

"This mean you're not worried anymore?"

A pause. "Wanna be more specific? At any point, I'm worried about all kinds of things."

"I love you, Buffy. Not likely to stop sayin' that anytime soon. Not gonna stop feelin' it, either." He lifted his head to meet her eyes, not sure what he'd find there but knowing what he wanted. "Not too long ago, you told me that you were afraid you couldn't love anymore and that it..."

The look she gave him was a little deer-in-headlights, and he winced and tore his gaze away, feeling like a git. Hell, the girl had just let him into her bed, for fuck's sake. Pushing for a definition of what they were was a brilliant way to find himself kicked out right quick.

"I don't feel like that now."

The words came so softly that he would have missed them were he human. Also, were he human, he was fairly certain his heart would have started to thunder right about now. Slowly, Spike turned his head back to her, swallowing. "No?"

"No." Buffy offered him a tremulous smile and ran her hand through his hair. "It's... It's been both slow and not, you know? The way I feel—*have* felt—since I was brought back. Just *breathing* a few months ago was too much for me. All the things the others expected, the bills, the world, all of it. But you were there, and you helped me breathe again. I didn't notice when it started to become easier around

them, too. When I started feeling more like Buffy rather than a thing they had dug up. But you were... I can't tell you how much your just being here helped. And I can feel again. That's another thing I realized tonight—I was worried I couldn't feel at all, but these last few weeks, I've been scared by *everything* I feel. The whole messy thing."

Spike's lips twitched. "Messy, is it?"

"Getting involved with another vampire? All with the messy." Buffy offered a wry grin before her expression sobered. "I'm not saying I'm not scared anymore. I might be more scared now than before because you and me is a big thing."

He smirked and wiggled his hips. "Bloody big thing, if you don't mind my—"

"Spike!"

At least he'd made her blush. Spike winked and blew her a kiss. "What's got you scared, then?"

"The million and a half things that can go wrong, for starters," she replied dryly. "All things I've been worried about and mentioned before. There's stuff you've done that I'll never... But that was Angel, too."

Somehow, he managed to keep from snarling at the name. He did not, however, keep from rolling his eyes. "Told you, Slayer, I'm not—"

"No, you're not. But you both had a thing happen to you—something against your will that made you stop. And I know that's not the same thing. A soul isn't a chip. Believe me, I had this argument with Dawn last year."

"That right?"

"When I found her hanging out in certain crypts, yes." Buffy was still stroking his hair—he'd take that as a good sign. "But you did change. Not...not as much as you'd probably like me to think, but... Spike, you volunteered to get another chip if something goes kablooeey with the one now. So what it comes down to is you are *not* the vampire who introduced himself by threatening to kill me. And as you've said, you're already as evil as you're ever going to be."

He nodded and pressed a kiss between her breasts. "Can keep my evil reined in," he said. "Stick to the kinda evil I can do with my tongue."



"Which is *very* evil."

"You're welcome."

And maybe that was all the serious talk they needed for now. Not all questions answered, but then he shouldn't have expected an answer for everything to begin with. The bits of Buffy he had now had been hard-won. All that mattered, really mattered, was she was with him. That he'd wake up with her tomorrow, and if he was very lucky, the day after tomorrow, and the next day, and the next. Wasn't like he had anywhere to go, anyway.

"Mmm..." Spike lifted himself onto his arms to inch up the distance to her mouth. "Fancy some of that evil about now?"

Buffy favored him with a saucy smirk and pulled him down to her kiss, and it was glorious, tasting her like this. Feeling her soften and warm, her legs spread as she took him between those heavenly thighs of hers, her heat drawing him home.

"I'm okay with this evil," she said against his lips as he nudged her opening with his cock. "This evil is totally allowed."

"Keep me on a short leash." He paused, notched at her entrance, breathing her in. And then he couldn't help himself—one last thought broke through the haze and demanded to be voiced. Thankfully, it was a simple question. "You're still afraid but you're here. With me."

She nodded, rolling her hips and feeding him the sexiest little gasp when he started sliding into her. "Only thing that scared me more than the idea of us was there never being us," she said, fisted his hair, and dragged him back to her mouth for another fiery kiss. "So I decided I was done. You wouldn't wait forever."

God, he loved her. "Yes, I would."

"Spike? How about less with the waiting now?"

He chuckled, took her mouth again, and thrust all the way home. "As my lady commands."



"COME ON, GIVE IT A TRY."

"It's cold!"

"You'll like it."

"I'm already all goosebumpy!" She stretched her arms out as evidence, which pressed her gloriously naked breasts forward, and no one could blame a fella for getting a mite distracted. When she noticed, she pulled an adorable face and smacked his shoulder. "Spike, seriously. I'm already cold. And you *can't* warm me up."

Spike arched both brows, a grin splitting his lips. "That a challenge, love?" he asked, trailing a path around one particularly pert nipple. "You think I can't get you hot?"

Buffy rolled her eyes and dropped her arms. "That's not what I said. You vampire—colder than the average bear. Ice plus skin of Buffy equals *brrr* and no amount of room-temperature cuddling is going to make that not true."

"Just let me try," he replied. "If you don't like it, I'll make it up to you."

"How?"

"I'm very inventive with my tongue."

"Thought we agreed the adjective of choice was *evil*." At that, she turned her gaze to the bed between them, likely under the delusion doing so would hide her blush. It was well into the night, so late it was bordering on early, and though sunrise was still a good ways off, he could feel the pull of morning almost as well as he could feel her. But though it was still dark, he had no trouble picking out the way she flushed. It was bloody intoxicating.

And somehow, right now, it was his.

"Buffy..." He pitched his voice an octave lower. "Don't you trust me?"

If he lived another thousand years, he would never forget this. The look in her eyes, the somewhat shy smile on her face, how she relaxed and ultimately leaned into him, her skin almost blistering hot.

"Fine," Buffy decided, relaxing against the mattress and clutching a pillow to her chest. "Turn me into an icicle."

"Now there's an idea." Spike leaned over her, smirking, and stole a kiss off her lips before she could reply. "Stick your tongue to ice and it might get stuck. Anywhere you'd like my tongue stuck, Slayer?"

"You are gross."

"Didn't seem to think so when I was eating this puss," he replied,

sliding a deft hand over her stomach and down until he had her slick sex pressed against his palm. "Point of fact, think I recall a certain slayer threatenin' to stake me if I stopped *doing evil with my tongue*."

Buffy gave a soft sigh, the pillow falling slack in her arms. "I can't be held accountable for things I say when you're doing that."

"No?" He leaned over and favored her clit with a quick tap of his tongue, chuckling when she gasped and arched and made to grab his head. "Ah, ah, ah," he said, pulling back and sliding to his feet. "Ice first. Don't wanna be responsible for the Slayer's little achies."

"Since when?" Buffy asked, her voice somewhere between a whine and a growl. "And don't even *think* about leaving this room naked."

Spike arched an eyebrow at her, then turned his gaze to the jeans crumpled on the floor amid the mess they'd made of their clothes. "Bit's not gonna be up for hours, pet. And not like Willow—"

A pillow smacked into his head before he could finish the thought, hard enough to hurt were he anything but a vampire.

"No. We're not running the risk of scarring my teenage sister—and don't even pretend like you wouldn't be mortified."

He shrugged, fighting back a grin, and leaned over to pluck the pillow off the floor. "Bloody puritans," he said, tossing it back to her and turning his attention to the other corners of her room—the ones he hadn't explored just yet on account of being lost in the Slayer's cunt. He'd never spent so much time up here and standing in her room, surrounded by all things *Buffy*, as the girl chided him with her tits out, he was perhaps the happiest he could ever remember being, and hell if it wasn't a rush.

"How's this, then?" he asked, holding up a towel that had been tossed into a corner. "Covers the goods just right, right? Also, you *ever* pick up in here, Slayer?"

She shifted, which made her breasts sway and again command his attention, then added insult to injury by sticking out that glorious lower lip of hers. "You caught me between cleanings," she said. "And really, I expected that by the time I got you up here, you'd be too distracted to notice that I can be a slob."

Spike fixed the towel around his waist, though standing there, he saw a flaw in this plan. His cock had never behaved when he was

around Buffy, and with his senses overwhelmed with her scent, their combined scents, heavy on sex and renewed arousal, the towel would do bloody little to preserve this supposed modesty he had should he run into anyone between here and the fridge.

“Don’t bloody care how you live, pet,” Spike replied, stalking over to her. “Long as you’re here with me.”

It would take a while, he knew, to get used to having the freedom to cup her cheek and turn her to him to meet his kiss. But he did, and she did, and suddenly he didn’t want to go get the sodding ice at all.

“Mmm,” Buffy mused against his lips, hers curling into a smile that had his heart doing all kinds of nancy things. “Make with the haste.”

He nodded, fighting the urge to just tackle her to the bed. Fact remained that he’d knocked her around pretty good earlier—in all the best ways—and he did not want to be the reason her back was sore in a few hours. Slayer or not, getting fucked right off your own bed would probably leave a mark. “Back in a blink,” he promised, then kissed her again and made for the door with enough speed that he felt firsthand just how useless the bloody towel would be if it came down to it.

Moving through the Summers’ house under cover of night was nothing new to him. He’d stalked these halls more than once, nicking things for the fun of it, making sure Dawn was getting her rest, trying not to think about how Buffy’s bedroom would smell to high heaven of the soldier boy and his pathetic attempts to keep a woman satisfied. There had been times, especially over this last summer, when his presence had been expected, even welcome. Nights he now knew the others had dedicated to their little raising ceremony, trusting Nanny Spike to keep kid sis out of harm’s way because he’d made a promise to a lady.

Yet he’d never stalked these halls wearing nothing but a scrap of terrycloth. Nor had he expected to. That was something new.

Once in the kitchen, he helped himself to a glass from the cupboard before moving toward the fridge. He opened the wrong compartment, though, and got an eyeful of the blood Buffy now kept stocked on her shelves before pulling the freezer open. And it hit him, as he cracked cubes of ice into the glass that this was really happening. Not just the shagging, which had been beyond anything he could have

imagined, but all of it. Standing in her kitchen, getting ready to tend to her because he wanted to, because she was his to worry over. He'd asked her if it was just tonight and she'd said no—that she was ready for something more. Something *them*.

"You look happy."

Spike started and jerked his head up, the smile he hadn't even realized he'd sported fading away in favor of surprise.

Willow stood in the doorway that led to the living room, and though her features were obscured by shadow, he had no trouble seeing the little smirk on her face.

"Lo Red," Spike muttered, cursing his bloody luck. "Ahh, long night?"

"I'd ask you the same thing, but I have gotten precisely zero sleep and it's all your fault." She crossed her arms. "First thing I'm gonna do tomorrow is buy some earplugs."

At that, there was nothing he could do but smirk and offer a one-shouldered shrug. "Would say *sorry* but I'm tryin' to cut back on evil, and lying counts, I expect."

"It does, but points for effort."

It grew quiet again—quiet enough that Spike began to wonder what the witch was after, if it wasn't to chide him for proving the Slayer was a screamer when properly motivated.

"You'll need to keep some decent pajamas here if you're angling for more co-ed sleepovers," Willow said, then pushed off the wall and started toward the coffee pot. "Dawn does sleep like the dead, as you know, but she also has a problem with knocking, and I don't think a towel's gonna do you much good."

He glanced down as if needing to verify that he did indeed still have a towel wrapped around his middle, then up again, grinning once more. "Not really the pajamas type, pet."

"Well, become the type for the sake of everyone in the house."

"Slayer likes me just fine all starkers." But he saw her point and understood what she was really trying to say. While Willow had been privy to a lot of what had been going on between him and Buffy, she hadn't attempted to talk with him one-on-one, or do much more than give her blessing, as it were, that night at the Bronze.

Willow wandered toward him, grabbed a mug from the cupboard he'd just raided, then met his gaze with an arched eyebrow. "You gonna be evil with her?"

"Not unless she wants me to be."

"Good answer." She turned her attention back to the coffee maker, her expression blank, and in a carefully neutral voice, said, "You hurt her, and I'll make you suffer. Not magically, of course, but I am rather brainy and, as such, can be very creative."

Spike dipped his head in a nod, scooped up the glass-full of ice and started toward the hallway. "Know better than to put anything past you," he agreed. "But if I hurt her, think it should be her who gets to do the honors of staking me."

"At least you've thought that far ahead." Willow sniffed. "Now, if you'll excuse me, since sleep isn't on the menu tonight, I believe I'll get a head start on that project for my anthropology class."

Spike held his tongue—though she was off the magical juice, he had the feeling that telling her he wasn't sorry in the slightest might put a premature end to what was undoubtedly the best night of his life, and he wasn't ready for that yet. He might not always lead with his noggin, but he could use it just fine.

"Did you go to the Arctic to get that ice?" Buffy asked when he stepped back across the threshold and closed the door behind him. "I could swear the downstairs is where I left it."

He offered her a smirk and dropped the towel without ceremony, enjoying the way her eyes widened, as well as the detour they took down his body. Buffy looking at him like he was a right nummy treat was something of which he doubted he'd ever get his fill.

"Sorry, pet, didn't mean to leave you high and dry." Spike waggled the glass in his hand, the ice tinkling as it collided, and made his way around the bed. "Ran into your mate. Seems we've kept her up. Now, on your side, Slayer. Hair over your shoulder."

It would also take a while to get used to her doing what he said without a fight, though he wasn't daft enough to think that would become the new normal. There had been times, he knew, when Buffy had been contrary just for the hell of it—because the alternative had been to agree with him, and that wasn't in her wiring.

Seemed all he had to do to get the Slayer off his back was to get her onto hers. Though he thought it best not to say this aloud—not while they were still so new.

“That’s a weird way to say, ‘Buffy, turns out you were right and it’s a good thing I didn’t leave this room in my birthday suit,’” she observed as she lowered herself to the bed, dragging those golden tresses over her shoulder and baring her peachy skin to him.

His grin widened as he slid in behind her, ran his free right hand over the smooth curve of her shoulder before chasing it with his mouth. “You wanna be right or do you wanna be shagged?”

She made a little mewling sound that went straight to his cock and thrust her arse against him, all warmth and goodness and light. “Umm...yes?”

Spike chuckled. “I can be right, too,” he said, then plucked a piece of ice from the glass he had balanced in his other hand. “Now tell me this doesn’t feel good.” He dragged the little cube from one shoulder blade to the next, watching, fascinated, as she shivered and a trail of gooseflesh followed the path. But she didn’t twist away or complain, rather sighed and relaxed, and pressed back into him again, which he decided to reward by tugging at her ear with his teeth.

“Gonna say it, Slayer?” he asked, skating the melting cube across her skin again, this time pausing at her neck to draw little circles.

“Say what?”

“That I was right.”

“I find that...hard to believe...” She gasped and tipped her head back when he nudged her hairline. “Oh, that’s...different.”

“See? Almost worth getting shagged right off the bloody bed.”

“Did you hear me complaining?”

“Said I was the first bloke who was gonna leave you with a bruise. Also the first bloke who knows you don’t really care about that, and how much fun it can be to patch you up again.” The cube had almost completely dissolved now, but he wasn’t about to let it go to waste, dragging his fingers back over her shoulder so he could tease her nipple with the rest of it. Again, she gasped and thrust back once more, rubbing her pert little arse along his cock, the scent of her renewed arousal filling his lungs. She was so responsive, the Slayer. He hadn’t

known what he'd expected—hell, his brain had always been overfull with speculation of what she might be like between the sheets, and his fantasies rather robust after he'd discovered he was in love with her—but for a girl who kept herself guarded and wound extra tight, she was a creature of pure passion.

He'd always known she was capable of it—as much as she threw herself and her body into everything she did, into every bloody scrape she found herself in—but having it under his fingers was something else entirely. This was Buffy trusting him with more than just her body and he wasn't daft enough not to understand what that meant, rather just bloody awed that this was where he'd landed.

"Buffy hot," she said, thrusting her breast now into his hand, the ice gone. "More cold."

He chuckled and nibbled along the back of her neck. "Thought you were goosebumpy. Wasn't that what you said before I popped off downstairs?"

"Mmm. Gotta love Hellmouth temperature fluxes."

"Uh huh." Spike left her breast with a playful pinch, then selected another cube of ice from the glass and retraced the path he'd taken earlier. Grinning when she cooed and shivered, and even more when she began to fidget. "Need something, baby?"

"Yeah, some sleep. It's been a long day and I have a whole list of demons to threaten tomorrow." She sighed and lifted her leg to curl around his, then pressed back again so that the head of his cock was nudging her wet, silky skin. "So do me so I can get some rest."

Spike laughed outright and twisted to place the glass on the floor, his heart bloody melting when she mewled her disappointment. As though he was going to leave her dangling. "Sure know how to romance a fella, Slayer. Thought you were all tuckered out."

"That was before you made with the sexy ice."

"Sexy, huh?" he rumbled into her ear as he settled behind her again, hooking her leg around his once more. "Mean I can do it more in the future?"

"Uh huh. I have a new appreciation for cold therapy."

"Fair's fair, I suppose. You're burnin' me up."

"It's your fault."



"Mhmm. And I feel right terrible about it." He teased a line up and down her slit with his cock, biting back a moan as she coated him with her excitement. "Love how you feel, baby. So hot and wet. Always knew I did it for you but had no idea you would be this bloody soaked."

"Spike..."

"Not too sore, are you?"

"I laugh at you with my slayer stamina."

"That's not nice."

She twisted to catch his eyes, her own positively dancing. "Then punish me."

Spike held her gaze, stunned by her cheek, her challenge, and the flare he saw in her eyes. He growled, covering her mouth with his to swallow her moan when he drove inside of her and muffled his own when her molten cunt began clenching around his cock almost at once.

There were people trying to sleep. It was the least he could do.



WHEN HE AWOKE, weak sunlight was streaming through the window, and Buffy's mouth was around his cock.

Spike sat suspended for a few seconds in a place between dream and reality, his body more alert than his mind and rather eager for him to catch up. Because if there was one thing he wanted to be awake for, it was this.

When Buffy looked up and saw he was awake, she released him with a wet pop and wrapped a hand around his shaft in absence of her mouth. "So you're *not* going to sleep all the way through it," she said conversationally as she began stroking him. "Not going to lie—I was beginning to feel like this might not have been the best idea."

Spike shook his head so fast the room went sideways, his chest rising and falling with hard, uneven breaths. "Bloody hell," he said and fought to keep himself from wincing because that sounded asinine even to him. Though it hardly seemed fair that he was expected to hold a conversation like this, with Buffy's lips, wet and a bit swollen, so near his cock and that gleam in her eyes. "Anytime you wanna get my

attention with your mouth is fine with me. Just sorry I missed the start.”

“Anytime?” She poked out her tongue and, keeping her gaze on him, treated his crown to a few teasing licks.

A hard shudder seized him. “Fuck yes. Best way to wake up.”

“You mentioned this last night. Just...kinda woke up wanting to do it,” she said, turning her attention to the strokes her hand made, which invited him to do the same.

“Did you?” Spike asked, breathing hard. He wasn’t sure how long this morning greeting would last if she kept looking at him like that—like he was something tasty to be devoured, or better yet, savored.

God, no one had looked at him like that. Not ever. Bloody good show it’d make if he started blubbering halfway through the first blowie Buffy ever gave him. But god help him, he could imagine he saw something in her eyes. Something that another man might confuse for love.

“Yeah. Yeah. Would have last night, but then you distracted me and kind of wore me out.”

Spike grinned. “Wore you out, did I?”

“To your detriment.”

“Believe me, love, nothin’ that happened last night could ever be considered a detriment.” He gave his hips a little wiggle. “But if you feel like I missed out, you’re more than welcome to make it up to me.”

“Pig.”

“Fuck, Slayer, you gonna tease or are you gonna suck?”

Buffy dipped her head and licked a long line up his erection, and he was chuffed when he saw her skin go a shade darker. Every incarnation of Buffy was precious—the wanton sex-goddess he’d met the night before and the demure kitten that went rosy whenever he said something suggestive. That she could embody both at the same time was downright delicious.

“Could be bad,” she muttered, pointedly not looking at him. “I... Well, let’s just say, you squeeze a guy a little too hard once and you get really self-conscious about your strength.”

Bugger. Good thing Finn had been kicked outta town or Spike

might have been driven to give himself one bastard of a headache for daring to let the Slayer think there was anything wrong with her.

"You make it hurt, I'll just come harder," he told her, cupping her cheek and running his thumb over her swollen lips. "Squeeze me, lick me, suck me, hurt me, you have yourself an addict. Bloody dream come bloody true."

"You've dreamed of me doing this?"

"Tell me that surprises you."

He watched as she went pink, which in itself was one hell of a rush. "I...guess not. It's just... Anyone wanting *me* that much is still a little hard to believe."

And again came the impulse to dole out damage to the men who had hurt her, stronger this time. Angel's soul had popped right out of his body as a result of this divine creature, but whatever he'd said to her in the after had done a number on her. There was that—but Captain Cardboard had had this goddess in his bed for over a year without once making her feel wanted? That any man could be in anything less than awe over Buffy Summers was beyond his comprehension.

Before he could find the right combination of words about the sorry excuses for men she'd had before, her mouth was on him again and he threw his head back against the pillow with a loud thump, thanking his lucky stars that he hadn't babbled himself out of this.

Because, *fuck*, he had never known heat like hers—like she was made of it, this endless source of life and pleasure and all things good. This marvel of a girl squeezing his shaft as she drew random patterns across the head of his cock with her tongue, licking and swirling, sucking slightly and it was too much and not enough and he needed more. So much more. Needed her pulling him hard, all around him, needed to hold her hair and buck and fuck but the girl was shy, and a sudden move might ruin this. As it was, she didn't do any one thing for more than a beat or so, either trying to find her rhythm or gauging him for reaction, and he felt it—the hesitation in her strokes, her own uncertainty, despite whatever brassy thing she'd said before.

Then she closed her mouth around his tip and pulled, dragging his foreskin up and back again.

"Fuck," Spike gasped, bucking on instinct. "*Fuck.*"

"That's good?"

"Oh baby, it's better than good."

"Well, let me know if I do something you don't like."

At that, he nearly laughed. Then Buffy sucked his tip a few times before rolling back his foreskin completely and licking around the outer ridge of the head, and nothing was funny anymore. He hissed in a deep breath, thrusting his hips again to chase the sensation, and wasn't sure if he was relieved or devastated when she lifted her tongue.

"Tease," he said, gasping.

Buffy laughed lightly, lapping at the underside of his erection. "I'm exploring. That's okay, right?"

"Drivin' me outta my mind, is what you're doing."

"I'm learning what you like."

"I like it all. Love it all. Love you. Love you so much, Buffy. So fucking much."

Her skin reddened further, like she was embarrassed by this, or surprised. But before he could think to question it, she took him fully into her mouth, replacing the pulls of her hand with long, hard sucks, and his mind went blissfully blank.

"Oh yes," Spike panted, barely aware he was speaking. He opened his eyes, hungry for visuals, and he wasn't disappointed. Buffy was watching him with fixed intensity, her cheeks hollowed out as she drew his wet cock into her mouth again and again, and damn, just the sight of her lips around him had his balls tightening. Balls that she cupped the following moment to roll against her palm.

The next thing he knew, he had tunneled his fingers through her golden strands and was guiding her. He thought she might balk, but she didn't seem to mind.

"Do it," she said a moment later. "Fuck my mouth. I won't break."

At the words, sudden and unexpected and perhaps the hottest thing he'd ever heard, something in him snapped. He thrust himself into her mouth, slowly at first, then harder. Faster. Tension danced along his spine and his arms began to shake, but he couldn't let go or pull away. He seemed trapped in a window of pure ecstasy, focused on the way she looked with his cock pushing between her lips. The way

her eyes darkened, how she kept pace with him. How, when he struck the back of her throat by accident, she didn't wince or pull away, but rather started working those muscles to swallow around him. It was too much and not enough and so much better than he could have ever thought.

It was her. It was Buffy. Buffy making those sounds, Buffy's tongue working over him, Buffy's scent in his nostrils, Buffy's bed beneath him and Buffy's room around him. All Buffy. Not a mirage or an illusion. All her.

By the time he realized he was on the edge of bursting, it was too late to warn her if she didn't intend to see this through. Spike tightened his grip on her hair, threw his head back, and roared loud enough the bloody walls shook as he spilled down her throat. And Buffy didn't balk, didn't pull back and wrinkle her nose or call him disgusting. She swallowed and swallowed and swallowed, and he wanted to roar again or cry or beg her to marry him or any number of things that were daft or downright poncy, like he was a sodding virgin popping his top for the first time. Like he'd never been sucked off before. But, he thought, panting needlessly and enjoying the pleasant hum settling over his body, no experience in his rather considerable history had a chance of competing with that. That sensation of being treasured—almost loved.

It was enough to make a man hope.

He watched hungrily as Buffy pulled her lips off his cock, which was stirring again by the time she reached the tip and released it. She gave it a rather dubious look, then shook her head almost fondly and ran her tongue over the head.

"This thing never sleeps," she said, circling a hand around the base and giving it a squeeze.

"All you, baby. It's all yours."

"Mmm. Good. I know we're new to the whole relationship thing, but I am kinda on the possessive side."

Fuck, the idea of Buffy possessive over him bloody well ensured his stiffy was going nowhere. And she didn't seem to mind, leaning in like she was happy to suck him off again, but as much as he loved her mouth, he loved her pussy even more. So he sat up and hooked his

hands under her shoulders to drag her up him until she was hovering over him.

Buffy grinned, not missing a beat and straddling his waist so that the wonderful wet heat of hers cradled his cock. "Hello."

"Mornin'." He kissed her before she could respond, dropped his hands to her arse to lift her where he wanted her.

"I have things to do today, you know," Buffy said against his lips, gripping his shoulders and rubbing her cunt against him like the saucy minx she was. "There's a demon I didn't get around to threatening yesterday, and I'm sure plenty more where that came from."

Spike smirked, nipped at her mouth. "Dangerous demon right here."

"Not indebted."

"Not at the mo', but I can fix that right quick."

"This would be the same demon who kept me up all night."

"Like you didn't love it."

"Mmm." She closed her eyes and pressed her brow to his, then sank onto him with a sigh. "My boss... Let's just say, he lets me do what I want."

"Mhmm. And what's that you wanna do, love?"

Buffy opened her eyes and held his gaze as she started rolling her hips and squeezing those muscles around him. "At the moment? You."

Spike growled and flipped her over. "Think it's my turn now."

"Oh, we're taking turns?"

"You want control—fight me for it."

She favored him with a look that went straight to his balls, and again it struck him that this was all Buffy. Buffy with everything he loved most about her. The challenge, the obstinacy, the Slayer. It was all here, and right now, it was all his.

"You wanna fight?" she asked, her voice deepening as he began pumping inside her. "I'll give you one."

Fuck. A shiver ran down his spine and he picked up his pace. "Give me all you got, Slayer."

And bless her, that was exactly what she did.

## GOODBYE BLUE SKY

BUFFY SLAMMED THE BACK OF HER HEAD HARD ENOUGH AGAINST THE wall that the entire closet seemed to shake. Or maybe that was just one more side-effect of Spike's mouth—loss of equilibrium. Either way, there was little chance that the bang had gone unnoticed by the attendants filling the sanctuary or wandering the halls, even with the chitchat going on. But hell, she didn't care. Spike had gotten her to the point where things like modesty seemed just dumb.

Which was exactly his evil plan, of course. Get her to lose her marbles so he could have his wicked way with her.

"Fuck, I love you," he whispered against her pussy as he pushed a third finger inside of her. "How you move. How you sound. How hot you get for me."

She would have replied, probably, had he not sucked her clit between his lips and made all the sense-talking parts of her brain go on vacation again. "Ohh...oh god."

"That's it, pet. Give it to me." He drew a circle around her clit with his tongue then closed his mouth around it again. "Want you all over my face."

"Spike—"

"But try to keep it down, yeah? Wouldn't want someone to see what's makin' all those delicious sounds, would we?"

There had been a reason to come in here—a plan. A plan that might have involved giving Spike a scolding for approaching one of the wedding guests and demanding they cough up some sort of demon currency owed to Teeth. Not the place, she'd told him. Weddings were happy occasions and happy occasions didn't involve roughing up the invitees prior to the ceremony. Spike had tried to argue, said something about how this particular debtor had been dodging him for a few weeks and *not* roughing him up was a matter of pride. Buffy had sighed, Spike had attempted to circle her, and she'd decided the best way to get him to drop the subject altogether was to have a nice, non-shouty conversation somewhere quiet.

Hence the coat closet. Only the second she'd shoved him inside, her mouth had cut off ties with her brain and lunged for his. Hands had roamed, things had been said, then Spike had dropped to his knees, hiked the skirt of her god-awful dress around her hips and...

Well, at least he wasn't thinking about work anymore.

"Know you're close, Slayer," Spike rasped, turning his wrist and pressing down on the spot she hadn't known existed until he'd shown it to her. Her insides turned molten, her knees threatened to buckle, and there was a damn good chance that by the time the ceremony kicked off, she was going to be a useless puddle of slayer goo, but it was damn hard to care when he stroked her like that. "Fuck, you grip me so good."

Buffy banged her head against the wall again and seized a handful of his hair for leverage, thrusting herself against his mouth. "Just...*please*..."

"Need something, baby?"

"I... Oh..."

"Think all you need is a little...nudge." He pressed down inside her and sucked her clit into his mouth again, and Buffy went supernova. Shaking and whimpering and unable to stop either, so she didn't bother to try.

She'd thought she'd had good sex before. If pressed, she would have denied there was anything wrong with what Riley did for her—she



hadn't come every time, granted, but that was fairly standard. And while he hadn't been enthusiastic about things like putting his mouth south of her navel, he'd done it without complaint...even if they'd stopped doing oral after the unfortunate squeezing incident. But he'd known where the clit was and more or less how to touch her so that she'd hit her happy place. It hadn't been perfect but it had been fine.

There was nothing *fine* about the way Spike fucked. Every time seemed like a new conquest to him, like he was discovering her all over again and enthusiastic as hell about it. Hungry for it and for her, and determined to show her just how much.

By the time her shudders began to subside, clearing away the lusty fog that had settled over her mind, Spike had risen to his feet and was doing what he could to straighten the glow-in-the-dark number that was her bridesmaid's dress. The fabric looked a bit rumpled—like it had recently spent some time bunched up or something—but hopefully people would be too blinded by the radioactive shine to notice any wrinkles.

"Never get tired of how you taste, love," Spike said, sucking on the fingers that had just been inside her, which of course made her legs start going all wobbly again. "So sweet."

"Uh...we shouldn't have done that."

"Gonna tell me you didn't enjoy yourself?"

Buffy shook her head. "The whole church probably just heard me enjoying myself. That is *not* why I brought you in here."

"Right. So it's my fault the second the door closed, you had your tongue down my throat."

"No, but you should have stopped me."

He gave her a look, and unfortunately, the closet wasn't so dark that she couldn't see it. "Between the two of us, you're the one with a soul. Figured if getting shagged was what you wanted, it'd be down-right diabolical not to give it to you."

"You are so just making things up now."

"Right. So next time you throw yourself at me, I oughta just spin you around and send you on your merry way then." He chuckled and curled his tongue around his index finger, widening his eyes before giving it a deliberate, suggestive suck. "Whatever my lady fancies."

Yeah, Buffy was perfectly aware she had no leg to stand on here—at least not one not already compromised by post-orgasmic bliss. But her motives had been good. Save the wedding, spare a bloodbath among the bride's guest-list. There ought to be some leeway for that.

Great. Now she was bargaining with herself. "You are a bad influence," she said, forcing herself a step forward, which was not the best idea, considering he smelled exactly like what he'd just been eating, and that just bombarded her brain with all sorts of images she did not need right now. "I used to be a good girl."

"That's just it, baby. All good girls are achin' to be bad." He winked, pulled her close for a kiss. "Now, best get back to the party, yeah? People might start to talk."

Buffy glanced between their bodies. She couldn't quite see the strain against the black jeans he'd donned for the day—all black was the closest they could compromise on formalwear for the occasion—but she knew it was there. "You...uhh..."

"You *really* gonna lecture me and then offer to suck me off? Master in the art of mixed signals, you are."

No, but she was a bit surprised he hadn't asked. "Just thought you might not be entirely...comfortable."

"Buffy, bein' hard around you isn't exactly a novelty. Got loads of experience gettin' myself under control."

She met his gaze and arched an eyebrow. "*That* I find hard to believe."

"Minx," he replied, smirking. Then he nodded at the door behind him and stepped aside. "You go on ahead. I'll follow in a few."

"Spike, please tell me you're not going to..." She gestured emphatically. "In here."

"What? Good enough for you, but not me?"

"It's *messier* for you."

"Tell that to my face." He kissed her again before she could claim offense, and chuckled against her lips. "Go. I'll be a good boy. You'll just make it up to me later."

Buffy hesitated, not sure she believed him, but then very sure she really didn't have a choice. Between the two of them, she was the one with the wedding duties. All he had to do was behave for the next

ninety minutes or so until the ceremony and post-ceremony mingling were behind them. So she left him with a parting glare, hoping that conveyed just how much trouble he'd be in if he decided to leave his mark on any of the guests' outerwear, then cracked the door open. After she confirmed that the coast was clear, Buffy straightened her shoulders and slid back into the hall.

*All right. Bathroom. Nowish.*

Once she was a suitable distance away from the closet, the nerves that had taken residence in her belly gave way to a fit of the giggles. Sneaking off for a quick rush was something she'd never thought she'd do, but Buffy couldn't deny it made her feel alive in ways she hadn't known to miss. The closest she'd come to being in a can't-stop-touching relationship had been that brief stint when she and Riley had just started having sex, but that had been less about him and more about the sex-having and the fact that her only other experiences with sex had been disasters. Having sex without the downward plunge of misery had been a novel, wonderful thing and she'd embraced it with full enthusiasm.

But that hadn't been like this. Nothing had been like this. Ever since the first night when she'd finally thrown herself at Spike, Buffy had occupied a plane of existence that still sometimes seemed like a really long, involved, and heavily detailed dream for as intense and just, well, *good* as it had been. Including the snide looks and pointed barbs she'd entertained from her sister and best friend.

The morning following their first night together, Dawn had stomped moodily into the kitchen, not even blinking at catching Spike cuddled up behind Buffy, nibbling on her ear as she attempted to work the toaster. Dawn had poured herself a cup of coffee—something she rarely did—and snapped something to the effect of, “If I weren't so freakin' happy you two are finally together, I might just dump this over both your heads. I have a trig test first thing this morning and I don't think it'd look good for either of us if the reason I fail is ‘my sister screams like a banshee and her boyfriend does, too.’”

Then she'd stomped right back out of the kitchen and run almost headfirst into Xander, there to pick her up for school, as per usual.

"Don't even start with me today," she'd practically snarled before taking off down the hallway.

And that was how Buffy had learned there were apparently limits on what Dawn could sleep through.

Xander had stood there for a long moment, taking in the scene as only he could. Spike wearing nothing but jeans, his arm around Buffy's middle and teeth still clamped to her earlobe, and Buffy wearing Spike's T-shirt, which thankfully covered most of her important stuff, looking exactly like they had spent the evening going at it like bunnies.

Then he'd cleared his throat, plastered on the phoniest of phony smiles, and said, "So, can we expect you two at the Bronze tonight? Think we've convinced Tara to go so could be there are no third or fifth wheels left in the Scooby gang."

Buffy had mouthed a *thank you* and favored her friend with a big smile, and that had been that. The best possible outcome, when all the alternatives were up for consideration. Xander might never be best friends with Spike, but at least he'd come around to accepting that the vampire was now a permanent fixture in Buffy's life.

Though she had a feeling that if Xander were to run into her now, she'd get an earful over how fooling around with the undead was something she could do on her time—not his. Then maybe he'd mumble something about how Spike was a bad influence.

Buffy bit the inside of her cheek to keep from grinning too broadly, negotiating her way toward the restroom. That was until the first notes of a string quartet began ringing through the air and brought her to a quick halt.

*Oh. Crap.* How long had she and Spike been in that closet?

Buffy whirled around, desperate for some indication of the time—surely Willow and Tara would have come looking for her if she'd missed her big cue?—and breathed out in relief when caught sight of an elegant clock hanging near the main entrance. Granted, the relief lasted only half a beat, and then she was panicking again.

Yeah, there was no time for the bathroom. While she hadn't missed the vows, she might have had she cut it any closer. Buffy began speed-walking toward the room where Tara and Willow had holed up with

the bride, hoping against hope her absence hadn't been as conspicuous as she knew it was.

The door was still closed and Anya's voice was definitely on the other side of it. Buffy paused, hand on the doorknob, puffed out a deep breath, then pushed inside, wearing what she hoped was the smile of a responsible adult.

It was just the bride and Tara, and from the expressions they wore, Buffy was fooling precisely no one.

"You ready to go get hitched?" she asked.

Anya, from her regal perch in front of the mirror, eyed her up and down, looking decidedly fab in her wedding dress, anxious and eager and also somewhat miffed. "Buffy," she said, scowling, "don't you know it's bad luck to orgasm before the bride on her wedding day?"

Buffy made a face and looked hopelessly to Tara, who was trying hard not to laugh. "Is it that obvious?"

Tara motioned vaguely at her head. "Your hair is a little... But maybe that's just the style these days. I was never very fashion-forward."

Maybe there would be time once the bride was in place to salvage the hair. Or maybe she would just stand in front of a congregation of Harrises and demons with the hairdo of the freshly fucked, which would just tickle Spike to pieces. She'd have to work to avoid making eye-contact.

But before her brain let her explore that potential disaster, a hand gripped her arm and pulled her hard enough that she stumbled out of the doorway completely and back into the hall.

It was Willow, paler than usual and stricken. "He's gone. Xander's disappeared."

Buffy's stomach plummeted, taking her heart right along for the ride. "What? Xander's gone?" Suddenly her state of general dishevelment didn't seem like quite the crisis. "Wha-what should we do?"

Willow swallowed, fidgeting. "I'm gonna go look for him. I'm gonna find him. A-and you're going to stall. And..." She blinked, looked Buffy up and down. "Maybe do something about..."

Buffy scoffed, the last of her guilt fading. On the big list of Bad Things that included *fooling around* and *ditching your own wedding* as

possible character marks, she felt she came out ahead. "Eyes on the crisis, Will. We'll deal with me once we find the groom."

"You and Spike *really* have a problem with discretion, don't you?"

"Willow!"

Willow mimed zipping her lips and hurried off down the hallway, leaving Buffy to wonder how the hell to stall a wedding. This was one of those things that happened in the movies, not real life, and while she was known for thinking on her feet, that was typically when a demon was involved.

First things first—Anya was getting ready to walk down the aisle. Buffy whirled and opened the door to the bridal staging area once again and plastered on a smile so fake it hurt.

"Uh, heh, sorry about that." She helped herself into the room, closed the door behind her, and tried to avoid looking directly at either Anya or Tara, sure the truth was written across her face. "Umm, there's gonna be a little bit of a delay."

"Why? What's wrong?" Anya asked, and it was impossible not to look at her. "Is the minister also having sex at my wedding? I thought there was a commandment or something to prevent this sort of behavior."

"No!" Buffy said, turning to Tara, who had neared with a look of pure concern—and a bit less gullibility. "Nothing's wrong," she continued, begging her brain to come up with a plausible excuse. "It's just, um, the minister. He had, uh, to go...and perform an emergency C-section."

Anya blinked. "A C-section?"

"Yeah!" Buffy said with full, phony enthusiasm. "You know, he's, uh, not—not *just* a minister. He's also a—a doctor. You know, he's half-minister, half-doctor. He's a-a mini-tor. Not, of course, to be confused with a minotaur. Because he's all, you know, man. This doctor-minister man. No, no bull parts whatsoever."

The next second, the bride had turned back to the mirror to resume her primping, once again nonplussed. "Uh huh."

It was the small mercy of Anya being less than engaged with all aspects of humanity that saved the moment, Buffy was certain. When

she glanced at Tara, she saw something of the actual truth reflecting back at her and just hoped that Anya didn't pick up on it.

"So it'll just be a couple of minutes," Buffy said.

"Okay," Anya replied airily.

Before her stupid mouth could come up with any more nonsense, Buffy bolted for the door, her heart hammering and her unhelpful mind spinning its wheels. Willow was on the groom-hunt and stalling meant stalling more than just the bride—also possibly telling the minister the cover story in case Anya threw a fit after the vows had been exchanged and refused to pay him for doctoring while ministering.

God, this was so convoluted. Buffy picked up the pace and turned the final corner into the sanctuary, nearly plowing down Spike in the process.

"Oh, you really need a bell for that neck of yours," she snapped, trying to dart around him. "I gotta—"

But he grabbed her wrist—of course he did—and spun her around to face him. "Where are you off to, lookin' so fetching?"

"So not the time," she hissed, snagging her hand back and shoving past him once more. If there was a way to make all of this his fault, she was so going to find it. As it was, Spike was totally to blame for the fact that she had to hurry up the aisle in a wrinkled dress and less-than-perfect hair. And now *everyone* would know exactly what she'd been getting up to prior to the ceremony.

The minister favored her with a dubious frown as she stepped onto the main platform, but quickly sobered once she began explaining what was going on—and thankfully took the C-section cover story in stride. It wasn't until Buffy turned and realized she was the focal point of everyone's attention that she decided that skipping the coifing trip to the bathroom might have been the biggest mistake of her life. Now an auditorium-full of demons and Harrises was leering at her and *god*, why couldn't she have been born with a normal person's hormones?

With another fake smile, Buffy darted down the aisle—briefly debating slaying the string quartet, who took her leave as an excuse to play the wedding march—and stopped beside Spike, whose eyebrow was well and fully cocked by now.

“Problem, pet?”

“Aside from the fact that everyone here knows what we were doing in that closet? Yes.” Buffy reached up to pat down her hair. “Xander’s missing.”

Spike sighed. “Prat.”

“I...am inclined to agree with that, assuming it means person-whose-ass-Buffy-will-kick,” she said. “Willow’s looking for him but I need help.”

“I can try to sniff him out, but if he made a run for it, can’t say I fancy the idea of headin’ outside. Dunno how much those rain clouds’ll—”

“No. You have to stay here and watch the crowd as I go and undo whatever you did to me in that closet.”

At that, the smirk returned. “Seems a shame. You look downright edible.”

Buffy flushed and smacked his chest. “Spike, I swear.”

“What do you want me to do, then? Crew like this will get restless right quick. Besides”—he nodded at Xander’s father, who had apparently decided now was the right time to hit the bar—“you gotta bunch of Harrises packed in with demons, some of them already loaded. Without somethin’ to watch, I reckon they’ll start takin’ swings at each other.”

Ugh. He was right. Buffy scanned the guests, who were already fidgeting and turning to chat amongst themselves. With the Harris inclination toward inebriation, it was only a matter of time before one of them said something about the less-human-resembling guests on the bride’s invite list.

Then her gaze landed on the string quartet, and inspiration struck.

“Sing,” she said. “You’ll sing.”

“Excuse me, I’ll *what*?”

Buffy whirled to face him again, and whatever was in her eyes stole the objection from his lips. “I know you can sing. I’ve heard you—hell, you sang *to me* the night of the epic musical. So you’ll sing.” She seized his wrist and started dragging him toward the string quartet.

“Slayer, I am not a bloody crowd-warmer.”

“No,” she said, releasing him, “you’re my boyfriend, which makes



you part of the gang. And considering everyone knows exactly what we were doing thanks to you—”

“Thanks to me? Pretty sure you’re the one who lunged, pet. And don’t pretend like you didn’t love every sodding second. Wiggled all over my face, you did.”

A few heads turned. More than one offered a snicker. If she wasn’t so upside-down crazy about the vampire, this was about the time she’d be reaching for something pointy to shove through his chest.

“Spike,” Buffy said through her teeth, “you’ll do this for me because you love me.”

He gave her a look like she’d slapped him, stung and hurt all at once. “You do not play fair.”

“Never claimed to.” She whirled back around and closed the remaining distance between them and the quartet, pulling Spike along for the ride. Once there, she plastered on her fake smile and said in a way-too-chipper voice, “So, what all can you guys play? Like, the classics, for sure, but do you know more modern stuff? Like, love ballads and things like that?”

“Sodding love ballads?” Spike hissed in her ear. “You’re off your nut.”

The nearest violinist looked her up and down and sniffed. “With these instruments, we can play anything.”

“Anything?” Buffy echoed.

“The bride requested the premium package,” said the cellist with a friendly smile. “Enchanted instruments—can play anything without missing a note or your money back. She was, ahh, *very* insistent on that last thing.”

The other two fiddle players nodded their agreement.

Buffy beamed. “Perfect. We’re going to do some pre-wedding singing. And by *we*, I mean Spike here.” She twisted around to give him something she hoped was only half death-glare. “Spike, wedding-appropriate songs *only*. No Ramones. No Sex Pistols. Just classic love songs. Can you do that?”

“I’ll have you know, the Ramones actually—”

“Spike! No.”

He opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again, seemingly torn

between his inherent need to do whatever she asked and his pride. "There are blokes I know in here!" he said in a loud whisper, edging closer to her. "Blokes who are gonna be a sight harder to intimidate once they've heard me bellow bleedin' Celine Dion. Buffy, I love you, but—"

"Just think how grateful I'll be tonight," she said. "How *very* grateful. My guy, swooping in, saving the day like that."

He paused, his brow furrowing. "Yeah?"

"Super-duper grateful. And you know how bad I am at showing gratitude. It might take a while."

Someone behind her—one of the fiddle players—snickered loudly, but hell, it wasn't like she had any remaining face to save. Besides, the Harrises would be too tanked to remember anything, and if the demons tried to give her a hard time, she'd just slay them.

"You think I don't know what you're doin', pet," Spike said, stepping closer. "Think you have me that wrapped around your dainty little finger?"

Buffy didn't reply, just held his gaze.

And it worked.

"Bloody hell, you're a vixen." But he grinned and kissed her, the sort of kiss that packed all kinds of promise into what she could expect later. "And you call me evil."

"With good reason," Buffy replied, but she smiled, too. "Thank you."

"Worse things, you know, than playin' the part of your hero." He kissed her again, then spun her around and gave her a playful shove. "Go get posh, pet. Need somethin' to mess up later."

All right. Maybe things wouldn't be so completely terrible after all. Love songs were wedding-y, right? And Spike had a very nice singing voice. And yeah, leaving him in charge of making sure mayhem *didn't* erupt among the wedding guests might come back to bite her in the butt, but she trusted him to at least try for her. The past few months had shown her there was little Spike *wasn't* willing to do to make her happy.

Buffy had almost reached the hallway before Spike's voice hit her again, this time amplified by the microphone. And though time was so

completely not on her side, she couldn't help but slow down out of sheer curiosity. He looked more than just a little out of place, not to mention self-conscious, which was something that, before today, she'd figured only she got to see. But he had everyone's attention just by clearing his throat.

"Right," he said, before wincing and lowering the microphone a couple of inches. "Been asked to... Oh, bollocks, let's just do it, yeah?" Then he looked right at her and winked as the string quartet started playing. "This one goes out to my lady by special request. Better late than never, eh, love?"

It took her maybe a second longer than it should have to realize the song he'd selected, and a second after that to decide she might just murder him anyway.

That stupid song suggestion had been the influence of a spell and, not to mention, *two years ago*. Just her luck her vampire had a long memory.

Oh, he was so going to get it later. And since he looked more pleased with himself the longer Buffy glared at him, he would probably enjoy every second.

Just her luck to fall for a guy with a punishment kink.



THERE WAS NO WEDDING.

Part of her had known it was no good the second Willow had told her Xander was missing, but oh, she'd hoped. In the movies and on TV, anytime a groom ran away from his bride, he almost always ended up getting his head on straight, overcoming his crisis of faith, and embracing the future he'd chosen for himself. But maybe that's what they—whoever *they* were—meant when they said life wasn't like the movies. Even after the dire future that Xander had been shown had been unmasked as lies, he'd believed in the possibility enough to walk away from the woman he loved.

Maybe it had been foolish, but Buffy had always assumed Xander would be a guy to stick around, see a challenge and do whatever he could to conquer it. Granted, she also hadn't seen Giles abandoning

her at the drop of a pin, especially after major trauma, but he'd taken off across the ocean and Xander had taken off to god-knows-where and she just didn't get it.

"Is this what guys do?" she asked Spike later that night, curled naked against his chest as he ran his hand up and down her arm. "Just... 'Ooh, there's trouble. Bye!'"

He made a rumbling sound and kissed her brow. "Not this guy. Never, Slayer."

Buffy grinned in spite of herself. "You are hard to get rid of when I *don't* want you around. Now that I do..."

"Gonna have to stake me."

"Don't think I wasn't tempted after your Bette Midler tribute."

His chest vibrated against her cheek with his chuckle. "Thought I was bein' romantic. We were at a wedding, and you said—"

Buffy pinched his nipple, earning a yelp, much to her satisfaction. "You are impossible."

The next thing she knew, she was on her back and he was over her, sneering and rubbing his cock against her sex. And her body responded immediately, because of course it did. Being with someone who reacted to pain the way Spike did was more than just liberating—it was hot. She hadn't realized just how much she'd needed it until she had it—the freedom to use all of her strength without wounding an ego or something worse. Now that she knew what that was like, there was no going back.

"Know what happens when you play with fire, don't you?" Spike asked before nipping at her lips.

"I know what happens when *you* play with fire."

He smirked. "Get the shag of a lifetime?"

"Of a lifetime?"

"Mhmm." He buried his face in her throat as he began to push into her pussy, growling when she sighed and wrapped her arms around his neck. "A thousand lifetimes. Nothing better than being inside of you. Squeeze me like that. Christ, *yes*. Again..."

She had to admit, it was difficult to feel jaded about love and romance and happily-ever-afters with Spike whispering in her ear, telling her how good she felt and how much he loved her. And more

than that—feeling it in every stroke, every time their eyes met, how he kissed her and touched her and, hell, even the way he said her name. The sounds he made when she clenched her muscles around his cock or ran her lips across his skin. Any touch seemed to invigorate him, drive him harder and deeper, make him more a part of her than anyone else ever had been.

It seemed wrong to be this content while her friend was somewhere out there hurting. And also a bit like looking in a funhouse mirror, because not too long ago, she had been the one drowning in misery and despair while everyone else seemed at their best. At their happiest. Only that had been an illusion. Tara had left. Now Xander had, too. Though maybe Xander and Anya could work things out, the way it seemed Willow and Tara might.

God, she hoped so.

Everyone deserved to be loved like this.

## BRAIN DAMAGE

BUFFY HAD NOT EXPERIENCED DIVORCE THE WAY HER PEERS HAD. The dissolution of Hank and Joyce Summers' marriage had coincided with her being landed with a shiny set of superpowers she hadn't asked for, as well as a sacred calling that would let her live to the ripe old age of seventeen if she was lucky. While arguments were being had and possessions being divided, Buffy had applied her focus to surviving until sunup and then counting the hours until nightfall. Dodging the man who had introduced himself as her Watcher, attempting to convince him that he'd given the Publisher's Clearing House Check of Doom to the wrong fifteen-year-old, and hoping against hope she'd wake up one morning and find that the freak show that was her life had been nothing more than an elaborate dream.

While Buffy had channeled her anger and resentment into pummeling fledgling vampires and doing whatever she could to keep her neck all unbitten, Dawn had been at home, witnessing the turmoil firsthand. Only she hadn't—she hadn't been there, hadn't seen anything, but memories of her parents screaming at each other about infidelities and dividing up household appliances were, according to some ancient monks, the sort of thing that every newly minted human needed on hand.

Buffy might not have been there for the bulk of it, but she well remembered what it had been like in the house those days. The tension. The stress. The sleepless nights.

Somehow, though, despite all the negative associations she had with that period of her personal history, Xander and Anya's split felt worse. Maybe because she had been one-hundred-percent present this time around, had experienced it as it happened, or maybe because her life now was much more solid than her life had been when she was fifteen. The weight of depression that she'd dragged out of her coffin had faded when she hadn't been paying attention, and while some circumstances remained the same—she was still the Slayer, the Chosen One, the One Girl, yadda yadda—she wasn't who she'd been then. Despite being overrun with her typical hardships, life had somehow become...good.

Which made the fissure in her world all the more heartbreaking.

Thankfully, there were plenty of things in Sunnydale to keep her attention. Things including the hunt for Warren and the others, and with the handy-dandy list Willow had provided of recent rentals, Buffy could at least start narrowing down the options of where they might have set up their new evil lair.

Another thing about Sunnydale—there were no shortage of demons to mess things up for her when she was on a hunt.

Buffy couldn't quite say what happened. One second, she was in mid-battle with some tentacled creature-feature and the next...

Well, she was waking up in a driveway, head still spinning with images of a mental ward. The demon was nowhere to be seen, her arm was sore, and going home had seemed the best option. She was running late on Spike, anyway.

"Hey," he said when she rounded the corner to the living room half an hour later, a soft smile on his face but his eyes troubled. "That Fyarl give you trouble, pet?"

Buffy shook her head—which did not help with the spinny sensation at all, but she tried to grin her way through it. He was seated on the couch, sprawled out like he belonged there, and as per usual, looking very yummy. Since the duster was folded across the stairway banister, odds were good he'd been waiting for a while.

"Got that tied up in three minutes," she said, stumbling her way toward him. Whatever that demon had hit her with had been potent. She might be asking Spike to take patrol solo tonight. "When he learned I'd stabbed my own Fyarl demon Watcher, he was eager to pay up, plus interest."

Spike chuckled, but it didn't quite banish the worry from his eyes. "Guess you didn't mention the bit where the Watcher's still kickin'?"

"Somehow, it didn't come up." Buffy gave up on gravity, confident he'd catch her and was not disappointed. She grinned at him, brushed a kiss across his lips, then turned her attention to survey the rest of the room. Namely, her sister who was parked on the floor at the far end of the couch, staring at the television with serious intent.

"Finish your homework already?" Buffy asked, glancing at the screen. She was watching *Pleasantville* again. "Keep in mind that the answer to that question better be an enthusiastic yes or you'll be grounded until senior prom. You know the rules."

Dawn heaved a hard sigh and shot her a death glare. "I *am* doing my homework," she said and gestured to the open notebook on the coffee table. "But thanks so much for the vote of confidence."

"Your homework is a movie?"

"It was Spike's idea."

Of course it was. Buffy sighed, trying to summon enough energy to give him the appropriate sort of glare this behavior warranted.

"Oi, that's nice," Spike snapped, tightening his arm around her waist. "Hang me out to dry."

"Shh!" Dawn waved at the screen. "I'm trying to study!"

Spike muttered something about studying the color of her blood once he tore her head off, then turned his attention to Buffy. "She's studyin' Plato," he said. "Needs to write an essay or some such about the bloody allegory of the cave. Wasn't gettin' it so I thought this might help."

"A movie might help?"

"Well, yeah. You do know the allegory of the cave, don't you, love?"

"Nope," Dawn said, drawing the word out and popping the *p*. She didn't even bother looking away from the screen. "College dropout, remember?"



Buffy groaned and rolled her head back. "I really wish I remembered what it was like to be the only child. It must have been nice."

"Look, I'm no sodding philosopher, but the gist is that if you learn your world's a lie, you can't go back to the lie." Spike motioned at the television. "Woulda had Willow explain it properly, but think she's off meetin' with Glinda. Figured this was the next best thing."

"A movie."

"The movie's the sodding alleg—you know what? Forget it. Try to do a good thing—"

Buffy captured his cheeks between her hands and drew him down for a kiss, which, she decided, was the best way to shut him up. If only she'd arrived at this conclusion sooner.

Except the way it had happened seemed the way it *should* have happened. Any time sooner would have had more than its fair share of complications, not the least of which being her emotional gas tank had stalled on empty for so long that she hadn't noticed when it'd started to refill. She found herself thinking often of that first night when Willow had told her that she and Spike were already a couple, sans benefits, and how that had clicked everything into place. And though not a ton of time had passed since then, the time that *had* had more or less confirmed Willow's initial assessment. There was work, there was patrol, there was home time, and there was Buffy time. Spike had been a part of all of that almost from the offset.

Granted, that wasn't to say there hadn't been the odd mishap here or there. A day or so after the wedding-that-wasn't, Buffy had been gathering clothes for laundry and realized that Spike had been in her bed every night since the big kaboom at his crypt. Not entirely surprising, considering she'd extended the invitation after blowing up his bed, but she hadn't been sure whether or not Spike had put any effort into making alternative arrangements.

"Mean you don't fancy me bein' here all the time?" he'd replied when she'd asked about it on patrol that night. "Your bed's awful big, Slayer. Seems it'd be easy for a girl to get lonely."

"Spike...were you trying to move in all stealth-like?"

He'd given her a look that she'd learned was the Spike-equivalent of

deer-in-headlights, rattled off a slightly high-pitched titter, and shaken his head. "Move in?" he'd repeated with a scoff. "You're off your bird."

"Oh my god, you were. You were so totally trying to just move in without telling me."

"Was not! Just tryin' to take advantage of the home comforts, yeah? You've been on me to spend more time there since I'm helpin' out and the like."

Buffy had stared at him until he'd done the awkward foot-shuffling thing that she shouldn't have found adorable but did.

"All right," he'd growled when the silence had lasted longer than a minute. "Haven't been home much and haven't missed the place. Not much to miss when I have you. Didn't figure it as moving in, though. Just...so long as you didn't tell me to scarper, I'd stick around."

"Spike, you have clothes at my house now."

"What? You wanna keep some at the crypt, be my bloody guest."

"That's not the point."

"Imagine you have one, then?"

She'd opened her mouth to say something brilliant, but her brain hadn't cooperated by providing the script. In truth, it had only been an accident, realizing that Spike had become an even more permanent fixture at Revello Drive than he had been before. And it was pretty even. After work, they'd meet there, grab dinner, spend some time with Dawn, then patrol. Patrols would lead to kissing, which led to fondling, which led to Buffy racing him back home so they could fall into bed.

"You can't just move in," she'd said at last. "That's a whole big step that I have yet to do with any boyfriend, and we've only been together for, like, three weeks."

"Yeah, but you like havin' me around, love," he'd replied, slinking up to her with that ever-present smirk on his annoyingly gorgeous face. "Can protest all you like, but I know the better of it."

"We should spend a night apart."

Spike had stuck out his lower lip like the big cheater he was. "Why?"

"Because you don't actually live with me and I think we both need to remember that." She'd waited a moment for the pout to fade. Then

another. Then she'd blown out a breath and rolled her head back. "You know the saying, absence makes the heart grow fonder? How can my heart grow any fonder if you're always around?"

He'd reeled a bit at that, eyebrows shooting skyward. "Got a few ideas I wouldn't mind givin' a go."

"Spike!"

"Fine. Have it your way. Just remember that when you roll over to cop a cuddle, the reason I'm *not* there because you told me to bugger off."

"I'm not telling you to bugger anything—"

"Pity."

"I'm just telling you that so *much* togetherness is going to end up with one of us staked"—she'd held up a hand—"in the permanent, non-sexy, not-a-euphemism-for-anything way."

Spike had snickered but, surprisingly enough, dropped it. Though he had put on quite the show about leaving that night, announcing when he had his jeans fastened, when his shirt was on, that he was about to slip into his boots and if any slayers in the area were in the market for a good snogging, it was a sodding tragedy that he had to leave.

And yeah, to her consternation, Buffy found that sleeping without Spike curled around her was surprisingly difficult, though she wasn't sure if that was the case because she'd already gotten used to him or because he'd put the idea in her head.

She'd fully expected him to rub her nose in it the next day—the bags under her eyes had been all kinds of noticeable—but he hadn't mentioned it once. Nor had he attempted to wrangle an invite for a sleepover after that night's sexcapades. Rather, he'd held her for a while, nuzzling her hair and whispering things that had her heart thumping extra hard, then kissed her brow, told her to get some sleep and slipped out of bed. She'd been so surprised by this she hadn't thought to protest until well after he'd left her room.

When he'd made to repeat this the following night, Buffy had thrown a pillow at his head, snapped at him for not playing fair, and tugged him back into bed with her.

"Not *every* night," she'd grumbled against his chest, which had been rumbling with his soft chuckles. "You jerk."

That had only made him laugh harder, which had inspired her to pinch his nipple—something she found she enjoyed doing, as it typically resulted in him rolling her over and setting out to prove just how much of a jerk he could be when properly motivated.

"Ugh," Dawn groaned now, her voice somehow penetrating the fog that always seemed to settle over Buffy's mind once Spike started kissing her. "Could you two, like, *not* for a night?"

It took a second longer than it should have, but Buffy managed to pull her lips away from her very lickable vampire. "Don't you have a movie to be watching?"

"I'm trying," Dawn replied with full teenage exasperation. "But the smacking is kinda gross."

"Says you," Spike muttered, then nipped at Buffy's ear. She fought a smirk but slid off his lap all the same. Part of being the responsible adult in the house was drawing healthy boundaries, and mauling her boyfriend in front of her sister was probably not the sort of remark she wanted showing up on Doris Kroger's next report.

"What was it, then?" Spike asked a moment later, once Dawn seemed completely absorbed in the film once more. "What kept you?"

Buffy pulled her gaze off the television and turned to unload about everything—the nerd hunt, the freaky tentacle-demon that had poked her in the arm, and then skedaddled before it could do any damage—only Spike wasn't there when her neck swiveled. Neither was the couch, or the room, or anything in it.

She was in a chair in a white, sterile room, dressed in a hospital gown. A man, presumably a doctor, was seated beside her, looking at her with what could only be called polite interest.

Buffy's heart jumped—hell, *all* of her jumped. Or tried to. A pair of surprisingly strong hands slammed onto her shoulders before she could leap into action.

"Not now, Barney," the doctor said with some urgency before leaning forward. "Buffy, are you back with us?"

Okay, something was seriously wrong here. Beyond wrong, and more than a little familiar. Buffy swallowed, horrified to discover she

was trembling and tore her gaze around the room—*hospital room*—in search of anything that might clue her in to whatever was going on. It wasn't normal to fall back into dreams while wide awake, was it?

"Spike?" A beat. "Dawn? What's going on?"

The doctor released a sigh. "Buffy, we've been over this. Spike's not real. Dawn's not real. It's time for you to let them go."

"What?" Buffy jerked back to the doctor, but he wasn't there.

Instead, she met Spike's eyes and about melted with relief. The room had returned. The room and everything in it—the couch, coffee table, the annoyed-with-PDAs sister. Only Dawn didn't look annoyed now, rather afraid, and the television was off.

"Sorry," Buffy said, shaking her head. "I..." She frowned at the worry on Dawn's face. "What?"

"What?" Dawn echoed, glancing at Spike. "You were just calling for us."

"I what?"

"Buffy..." Spike brushed his fingers along her chin, applying gentle pressure until she turned and met his eyes again. "What happened tonight? Why were you late gettin' home?"

She stared at him for a long beat, willing her spiraling head to slow down long enough for her to take stock of what had just happened. But that wasn't what he'd asked, so she focused on filling him in on what she'd been up to before she'd come home. That she'd skipped out of work early to tackle a list of recent rentals that Willow had provided as the possible new headquarters for the resident nerds, and that, at her last stop, a demon had popped up from nowhere. The more she talked, the more Spike's expression closed off until those cerulean eyes of his were narrowed into a glare.

"It stuck something in my arm and I kinda just...flashed somewhere else," Buffy said, her pulse coming harder the longer Spike gave her the stink eye. "I thought I'd passed out, that it was a dream or something, but it just happened again."

Spike scowled at her a moment longer, his nostrils flared and his jaw clenched and every inch of him practically radiating outrage, before he finally snarled and launched himself off the couch. And really, that was it. Concerned boyfriend was one thing—moody

boyfriend was something she could do without tonight, especially given the way her surroundings still seemed off-kilter.

"What is up with you?" Buffy asked, wrapping her arms around her middle. "It's not like I went out and tried to get myself poked or stabbed or whatever that demon did to me."

"Right," Spike replied, his voice a low growl—the sort that usually made her happy bits extra happy, but right now just pissed her off. "You just decided to go out hunting these wankers who tried to kill you without lettin' anyone know where you were."

"Oh, for Pete's sake..." She leaned forward, scrubbed a hand down her face. "I had a thing I could bump to tomorrow and I wanted to check out the list before it got dark out." Granted, by the time she'd hit that last house, the sun had definitely set and night had been upon Sunnydale, but that was beside the point. "And really, being growly and...like *this* is not going to work for me. I'm the Slayer. I was doing my job."

"Warren nearly bloody killed you last time."

"Hey! Pot, meet kettle. How many times have *you* nearly killed me?"

A guttural roar tore at his throat. "*Vampire*," he snapped, waving at himself. "These tossers aren't. Any reason you haven't sent the sodding bobbies after them?"

"They're after me because I'm the Slayer. Ergo, *my* problem."

"All the more reason to give them what they want, then?" Spike tore away again and paced a length up the living room, up, down, up again, then practically exploded. "Fuck, Slayer, you coulda been killed. That demon got the best of you and it's sheer bloody luck it didn't do more once the lights went out."

"Yeah, and how is that different from *every* other night?"

"Because I wasn't with you, you daft bint."

*Excuse me, what?*

"News flash," Buffy spat back, "you *can't* be with me every time I go out. And these guys are human, so unless you were going to clutch-your-head-at-them to death, your presence wasn't going to do much."

"It comes down to it, pet, the chip won't stop me from keepin' you alive."

“What is *up* with you?” She sprang to her feet now, the muscles that had been on their way to relaxing at full tension once more. Hell, she was practically vibrating. “Just because we’re dating now, you think you can micromanage how I patrol?”

“Dating?” Spike sputtered back, and he looked honestly surprised, like that *wasn’t* what they’d been doing these last few weeks. But then he spoke again and, in classic Spike form, stole the wind right out from her sails. “I’m not bloody *dating* you, Buffy. I’m in love with you. I’m in love with you and I’ve already had to bury you once. I’m *not* like your tosser of an ex who couldn’t hold his own, either. I have your bloody back—have since the moment you clawed out of the sodding coffin. So yeah, hearin’ you ran into a spot of trouble with a demon that left you knocked out is gonna brass me off, seein’ as I coulda done something to stop it. You take it all on by yourself, but you don’t have to.”

For a long beat, neither of them said anything, just stood there, exchanging glares and breathing hard. And she didn’t know what to do—what to say. She was exhausted and pissed off, felt guilty on top of all that, and resentful of all of the above. Spike being the one guy in the world who actually got her was supposed to be one of the perks of this relationship. He’d never not trusted her to hold her own in a fight before and that he doubted her now...

Except that demon had gotten the better of her, had stuck her with whatever it had stuck her with and left her unconscious and vulnerable after dark in Sunnydale. And unless random flashes of a mental ward were a common byproduct of having been knocked out, it had also done something to her head.

Still, he was being unreasonable.

“This is me, Spike,” she said finally. “This is what you signed up for. If you can’t handle that—”

“I can handle it just fine, Slayer,” he shot back, stepping toward her, his eyes blazing. “Seems you’re the one who can’t handle it.”

“Handle what? Being me?”

“That at some point, goin’ at it alone is a choice you make.” He dropped his gaze to her mouth, and for a moment, she thought that was the end—that he’d just kiss her and she’d fall into him and this stupid argument would be tabled until the next time one of them did

something to piss the other off. It certainly seemed like the path he wanted to take. Even at his angriest, Spike couldn't keep from radiating love and longing.

"You're not alone, Buffy," he said, his voice low. "Not unless you want to be."

And before she could begin to summon a response, Spike brushed past her, seized his duster off the banister, and was out the door, which he made sure to slam.

The air suddenly seemed thick enough to choke on. How in the world had that conversation spiraled out of control so quickly? One second, she'd been making out with her boyfriend, the next he was storming out. All because she'd decided to check out some rentals?

"Wow," Dawn said slowly, nearly startling Buffy out of her skin. "That was...intense."

"Yeah, Spike can get that way," she replied, turning to give her sister what she hoped passed for an I'm-all-right smile. "He'll be back after he cools off."

"And then you can apologize?"

She blinked. "Huh? What do I have to apologize for?"

"Well, he was right, for starters..."

Ugh. No. She was not going to spend her evening this way. Buffy shook her head and started toward the kitchen. "I'm the—"

"Yeah, she who had the sacred birthright forced upon her. No choice in the matter. We all know that. But also she who chooses to be alone when she has friends and people who love her who can help?"

"Help with *what*?" Buffy shot back, whirling around again. "I was checking out *rentals*. What exactly should I have expected to happen? It's not like I knew a demon would jump me, and also not like that's never happened before. Hell—" But she cut herself off here and looked away. While she wasn't exactly ashamed of what she did to keep the lights on, telling Dawn was as good as taking out an ad in the paper. She still wasn't sure how her friends would react to learning the truth. The side-eye Willow had favored her with when she'd asked to forge some paperwork to appease social services had been awkward enough.

But that was just more to the point. She and Spike did the same job



but hardly ever worked together. That, for some reason, wasn't a problem, but her taking off early was?

"You were checking out rentals," Dawn repeated, nodding and crossing her arms. "Did anyone know that?"

"I'm sorry if I didn't leave my itinerary on the refrigerator. I'm the Slayer. I was doing my job."

"Your job that gets you killed? Has *twice* now? Didn't realize that worrying about you was such a crime."

"Dawn, I patrol every night—"

"Yeah, and we know where to look if you don't come home." Dawn stomped forward, and Buffy was alarmed to see she was close to tears. "Which you didn't, you know. All summer you didn't come home. Because you were dead. And I know you didn't want to come back, but—"

"This is way outside the point."

"Point being, what, exactly? How hard is it to check-in?" Her sister stared at her a moment longer, then huffed and looked away. "It was the same thing with Riley showing up. At least then Spike knew enough to figure out where you'd gone so the rest of us didn't worry."

"This is—"

"And speaking as someone who was here when you weren't, it sucked. A lot. Spike worrying about you, getting mad at not knowing where you are... If that's something you think is a problem, then it's no wonder every other guy you've dated has ditched town."

Buffy was too stunned to react to that, so she didn't. She just stood, numb, and watched as her sister stomped off toward the staircase. A door slammed, the crack an exclamation point, followed by a deafening silence.

Sisters fought. It was just a fact of life—one the monks responsible for Dawn had been sure to get right. Buffy's memory was a patchwork of nasty screaming matches she and Dawn had had over the years, complete with a list of unforgivable insults they'd hurled at each other when in the heat of the moment. But the barb Dawn had just lobbed might just be the worst thing her sister had ever said to her.

God, what a mess. Now her head was spinning again. No, make that throbbing. A sort of pulse that started at the temples and slowly

spread until her entire skull felt compromised. Buffy squeezed her eyes shut, instinct warring with desire. Go talk to Dawn to smooth this out. Go follow Spike to... Well, either stake him or punch him or demand he apologize or apologize herself or some other option that hadn't occurred to her yet.

He wouldn't leave, she knew that. Dawn's parting insult had been well chosen, but Spike wouldn't leave. Not like that. Not after one measly fight. Not when they were together.

"Buffy?" came from behind her.

And now she'd have to explain herself to Willow. Even better.

Except when she turned, the eyes that met hers didn't belong to Willow.

They were her mother's.

## ONE OF MY TURNS

“WHAT THE BLEEDING HELL IS THIS?”

Xander shot to his feet, sending the collection of snack wrappers that had been on his lap to the floor. “Uhh, hi. Didn’t expect to see you back.”

Spike blinked and shook his head, then took a look around to verify he was in fact in the right place. The green furniture, the familiar stonework, the fridge in the alcove... Yeah, everything was where it was supposed to be. Except the last time he’d checked, he wasn’t sodding flatmates with Xander Harris.

“Right then,” Spike said, shutting the door behind him and stalking further into the crypt. There was Cheeto dust on his sofa and a small pile of empty cans on the floor by the telly, which was on. And if he wasn’t mistaken, that was a sleeping bag curled in the corner. “So you just, what, decided to move in?”

“Yeah, I... It’s just for a few days.” Xander rubbed the back of his neck, his expression somewhere between defiant and sheepish. “After the wedding... It was just the last place anyone would think to look for me. There are only so many motels in Sunnydale, and you haven’t exactly been here either, mister.”

No, he hadn’t. Even on the nights when Buffy had insisted she’d

needed her space, Spike had grabbed his kip at one of those motels Xander had apparently been keen to avoid. Bloke got used to sleeping in a bed, after all, and since his was still charred, he'd decided to camp elsewhere.

In truth, he'd been considering a move from the crypt entirely, now that he and Buffy were together. Some place she wouldn't mind staying over, if the mood took them and they wanted something close to real privacy. While it was likely the Slayer wouldn't want to be away from Dawn too many nights, he thought she might like the option. Also might come in handy if Red needed Buffy out of the house or the like to do some romancing of her own, since it seemed she and Glinda were on the path to reconciliation.

Which promptly reminded him of the fact that he'd likely just blown it with the Slayer by not keeping his trap shut.

Spike stalked toward the fridge. "If my bourbon is gone, you're on the menu."

There was a shuffle behind him, then the sound of the television being switched off. "So...ahh, are you staying?"

"What's it to you?"

"Well, I was gonna flip you for the couch. The sleeping bag is not the best for the Xan-Man's lower back pain. Granted, the couch isn't a huge step up, but—"

"Last I checked, mate, you're the bloody squatter," Spike shot back, snagging the thankfully untouched bottle of bourbon and kicking the refrigerator door shut. "Any reason I shouldn't just ring up the Slayer or the demon girl you jilted and let them know where to find you?"

Xander shuffled forward, which had the unfortunate side-effect of assailing Spike's nose with the evidence of just how long it had been since the man had showered. He smelled of sweat and tears, along with stale beer and staler chips. "Please don't," he said in a rush. "I can't... I can't see Anya just yet. Or any of them. You're right—I'll take the sleeping bag."

Spike rolled his eyes, unscrewed the bourbon, and took a gulp straight from the bottle. "Thanks ever so," he muttered, brushing past him to head for his makeshift living area. Or what was left of it. He hadn't spent more than a few minutes here since the night Finn had

dropped in, and only to grab some spare clothes that hadn't been destroyed in the downstairs explosion and whatever blood he'd had handy. He spent good money on it, after all, and he hadn't wanted it to go to waste.

The only reason he'd come here tonight was out of the hope that Buffy might come after him so he could apologize or she could apologize or they could argue some more before deciding to shag out their differences. This was the only place she'd know to look, after all. He hadn't mentioned his recent stints at Sunnydale Inn—there hadn't been a need.

He threw a glance at the crypt door. Maybe he ought to just go back. He'd calmed—somewhat, at least—and reckoned he might be able to talk with her without losing his head. Unless she ran that fabulous trap of hers. Which she would. Of course she would. And then they'd be right at the start again, and he wouldn't be able to make her see. Understand.

“Uhh...you okay, man?”

Spike looked back at Xander, who still stood by the refrigerator, his eyes wide. “What?”

“Nothing. Just...” Xander shifted his attention to the door then back again. “You and Buffy fight?”

“Yeah, you'd love that, wouldn't you?”

“Well, that depends. What was it about?”

Fuck, this was so not the way he wanted to spend his night. Or any night. He was supposed to be with her, watching her shovel something into that glorious gob of hers before they set out on their nightly patrol. Tonight, he'd planned on seeing if she was up to take him in a brawl. It had been a good long time since they'd let loose on each other that way and he wagered he could get her hot by calling her names and dodging her blows, perhaps so hot that she'd shove him to the ground and take his cock for a ride before either one of them thought of heading home.

“Slayer went lookin' for those human blokes that have been givin' her trouble,” Spike muttered.

Xander blinked at him. “And...?”

“On her own.”

The silence that followed was perhaps the most annoying silence he'd ever sat through.

"Uhh, that's what Buffy does," Harris replied. "I guess I'm not... What?"

"Last time, that Warren bloke nearly killed her," Spike said hotly, his temper rearing again. He would not stand here in his own home and be judged by bloody Harris. "And he offed his ex, too. Got a taste for it now."

Xander was quiet a moment longer, then shook his head as though coming out of a trance. "I gotta say, Spike, I'm not seeing the big. Buffy does what Buffy does, often by herself. And given that nearly being killed is not the same thing as being killed—"

"You are one thick knob, you know?"

"Hey, it's—"

"Was I the only one who noticed when she was gone all summer?" Spike snapped, somewhere between a shout and a growl. The tension from earlier had returned—that frustration, that helplessness, that utter defeat. He wasn't thick, knew he ran his mouth more than he ought and was wrong a good chunk of the time. But not *this* time. "Or maybe you lot started plannin' right off what you were gonna do so there was no sense mournin'. The girl's gone out and gotten herself killed twice, hasn't she? Stand to reason that it might be a good idea to tell the suckers who love her when she's goin' off, even if she's sniffin' out some tosser like Warren. Fuck, *especially* then. 'Cause the Slayer I know *doesn't* kill humans. Not even when one's stuffed inside a hellgod costume and offerin' her kid sis up to save his own bloody neck. Warren has it out for her—tried to get her to take the fall for a girl *he* put in the ground. Bloody shot her with some gadget or what all when we tracked him down last. The bird he killed was someone he loved, according to the Slayer. How much do you wanna wager he aims to take Buffy out now?"

The bemusement in Xander's eyes had faded—or rather, hardened into something else. Something closer to understanding. "He... Yeah. Okay. See, that I get." He smacked his lips together. "Guessing she didn't."

No, because Spike hadn't spelled it out for her in so many words.

He'd been too hot, too furious to do more than sneer at her for being careless. But he knew himself—all too bloody well. When he was in a temper, he was not the sort of bloke to be around. Not around people he loved, at least, the way he loved her. And Buffy wasn't Dru—she wouldn't find those outbursts endearing, wouldn't relish being hurt just a little, or a lot, as punishment. If he lashed out, the question over whether or not it was over wouldn't be a sodding question anymore, but cold reality.

"You didn't tell her, did you?"

There was a little too much knowing in Xander's tone—enough that the growl that had started to die in Spike's throat reared up again.

"Bitch brassed me off too much," Spike muttered before tossing back another hearty mouthful of bourbon. "Reckoned it was better to walk away than get into a screamer, 'specially with the Bit right there."

"That was either really smart or really dumb," Harris said, moving back toward the couch. "I'll let you know when I figure out which."

"Comin' from a man who left a former demon at the altar, that's a right comfort."

Xander stiffened, and for a second, Spike thought their tentative truce might have reached its end. But then the boy deflated, sinking back into the cushions with a long, tired sigh. "How... Have you seen her?"

"Not of late. Seems she shut down the shop. Right state you left her in, mate. For some reason, that bird... No accountin' for her taste, but she seems to really fancy you for some reason. You walkin' out on her—"

"I did it *for* her," came the reply, half-defensive, half-whine. "What that demon showed me—"

"You're a bloody coward."

That earned a glare, though a short one. Harris didn't seem to have it in him to fight tonight. Rather, he sighed and looked away, running a hand through hair that was probably several days past its last wash. "You saw my family, man," he muttered. "That's in me. I try to pretend like it's not but...no man in my family has ever done anything but bring the woman in his life misery. I couldn't do that to Anya."

"So to spare her misery, you made her miserable. Brilliant logic, that."

"What would you know?" Xander shot back, a little more fire this time. "You're a vampire. Isn't misery kinda your thing? The more misery, the better?"

Spike snickered. "Would think that, wouldn't you? Spend as much time around vamps as you do and still manage not to know a sodding thing about them."

"I know enough."

"Like you know your almost-missus? Really think a bird like Anya—as old as she is, as much as she's seen and done—would let *you* have the run of things if you two ever did manage to swap vows?" He laughed again, shaking his head. "Honestly don't know how she managed to put up with you long as she did."

"Yeah, okay, I get it."

"Apparently not, 'cause you're still here, you thick git." Spike threw back another mouthful of bourbon, relishing the burn as it went down and lit him up from the inside. "You act like you're the first bloke around who had somethin' inside him he didn't like—somethin' he needed to keep buried. Way I figure it, you either cower and let it win or you find the stones to put up a decent brawl. Me? I choose to go down swinging every time."

For a second, he thought Harris would smart-off again—the boy certainly wanted to, the way he tensed and his eyes narrowed. But then something changed and he sat back once more, his features softening, that fire from before slowly fading until it was extinguished altogether.

"You really love her, huh?"

Spike blinked. "What's that?"

"Buffy. You really love her."

"What? You just now catchin' on?"

Xander breathed out, dragged a hand down his face. "I mean it's... Maybe, yeah. I'm not saying I get it or anything, because I really, really don't. How you went from creepy stalker guy to the guy she wants around."

"Thanks ever so," Spike replied dryly.



"But that's what you do, isn't it? Keep that thing in you down. I mean, Buffy wouldn't be with you if you didn't."

Spike grumbled and looked away, his mind flashing him back to that night outside her house, the night Dawn had been injured and Willow had sworn off the magic juice for good. They had had many conversations over the last few months, all of them neatly moving things forward, even when they'd felt at a bloody standstill. It was something he'd come back to more than once—the monster inside him, the one he would always be reining in, chip or no chip. The one he'd volunteered to have harnessed again if it came down to it—if she needed something other than his word that he would never intentionally hurt her.

But there were times when he wondered how good that word was. Times like tonight, when he thought of what he might have done had Warren stumbled across her after that demon had knocked her out. The night they'd kicked in the wanker's basement door and Warren had taken aim at Buffy, Spike had nearly torn his throat out. Had the Slayer actually been killed that night, he reckoned he'd already be dust. He'd have killed the bloke and the chip would have fired and never stopped.

"Keep it down some days," Spike replied at last. "The Slayer feels responsible for all of us—you lot, the Nibbles, the whole bleeding world. She never stops carrying it." He hesitated, then figured *what the hell*. Wasn't like Harris was in a state to do anything about it. "Found out earlier this year that the chip doesn't work on her."

Xander's eyes shot open wide. "Excuse me, huh?"

"Glinda says it's 'cause of the spell that brought her back. Least that's how Buffy tells it." He blew out a breath. "Thought for a day or so that the chip might just have shorted out entirely. Reckon it will one of these days. No gadget lasts forever, yeah? Government issue or not." Spike balled his hands into fists then looked straight at him. "That day ever comes, nothin' changes for me. Told her that."

"And she believed you?"

"Believes I mean it, at least."

"Even...without a soul. She believes that you, Spike, he who tried to kill us more times than—"

“Oi! Things are different now, aren’t they?”

“Right, but at the end of the day, you’re still a vampire.” Xander’s voice held no note of accusation, which was a novelty in itself, but he sounded far from convinced. A second later, he brought his hands up. “Look, I’m just trying to understand. All of this happened and I was somewhere else. Up to my ass in wedding stuff and my own issues, plus the metric ton of vampire-shaped baggage I’ve been lugging around for six years. Sorry if every single time I’ve been asked to trust a vampire, it’s bitten me in the keister.”

“No one’s askin’ you to trust me, mate. You shouldn’t. Don’t trust you a lick, myself.”

“Right. But I do trust *her*. And she... I guess she trusts you.” A beat. “Because you love her. It might be sick, it’s definitely twisted, but you love her.”

Spike snickered. “Yeah. I love her. Love her enough that I told her I’d get myself wired up again if it made her sleep better at night, the day comes the chip fails for good.”

He looked away, not needing to see the astonishment on Harris’s face to feel it. Hell, he wasn’t even sure why he’d brought it up. Seemed he’d had a point but had lost it somewhere along the way of trying to get there. Something to do with Anya and the wedding, but if he were entirely truthful, he didn’t much care about that right now. Nor about the pain Xander had brought upon himself by leaving the girl stranded.

If the Slayer wasn’t coming to him, he needed to go to her. Storming off had been the wrong bloody call, no matter how right it’d seemed at the time. He’d promised her he’d never run out on her, never leave, and while he trusted she knew what he meant by that, taking off the way he had was a terrible way of showing it. His head had been a mess of things he still wasn’t sure he could articulate well, but he owed it to her to try.

And she owed it to him, too. Owed it to him to trust him like she would any other bloke who was sharing her bed—like she had Angel, once upon a time, even if he knew she’d never love him like that, if she could ever love him at all. Most of all, she owed it to herself—realizing that she didn’t have to go at anything alone. That as long as he was alive, alone was the last thing she’d ever be.

"Right," Spike said, taking a step away from Harris. "Gonna head back now. See if I can talk some sense into her. Stick around if you want. Bloody awful reception on that telly."

"You are really going to get another chip if yours fails?"

He paused, but just for a second. "Yeah. Anythin' to make it work, right? Keep her happy."

*Keep me from bein' another thing she worries about.*

But that he didn't say—he didn't owe it to Xander.

Everything he had to get out was for her alone. If she'd hear it.



THE SCENE that greeted him when he pushed the door open at Revello Drive was a far cry from the one he'd expected, and immediately, everything in him seemed to drop.

Buffy was on the couch, a blanket around her shoulders and a cup of hot something in her hands. Willow sat across from her on the coffee table, her expression fraught with concern. When the redhead looked up and met his eyes, the relief that shone there was enough to make any man freeze with worry.

"He's here," Willow said, nudging Buffy's shoulder. "He came back."

It took a moment too long for Buffy to look up, and when she did, her gaze was foggy. The way Dru's had sometimes been after a particularly intense vision. Nothing of what he saw brought much comfort.

"What's wrong?" He stripped his duster and blindly tossed it over the banister. "What's happened?"

"I don't know," Willow said, scooting over so he could sit beside her. "She... When I got home, she was standing in the middle of the room...talking to Joyce."

Spike fell into the space beside Buffy rather than take the witch's offer, both alarmed and relieved when she folded herself into him. "It's all right, baby," he whispered and pressed a kiss against her temple. "I've got you."

Buffy sniffed, and the salty scent of tears hit his nostrils. But she didn't say anything.

He turned his attention back to Willow. "What do you mean, she was talkin' to Joyce?"

"I mean she was looking right at me and calling me Mom," Willow replied. "It didn't last long—maybe a couple of minutes, I think? But when she... When it was over, she said her head hurt and that she didn't want to go back."

"Back where?"

"An asylum," Buffy said softly, her voice rough like she'd been crying. "It's an asylum. I think."

"What asylum, pet?"

"This place... I thought it was a dream." She looked up at him then, her lower lip wobbling. "That demon, it poked me. I told you. Didn't I tell you?"

Spike nodded and kissed her temple again, doing his damndest to keep himself in check. The demon. That whole stint before he'd blown up earlier, when she'd asked after him and Dawn like they weren't in the room—god, he was a dolt. So brassed at the thought of her hunting a tosser who wouldn't hesitate to put her in the ground that he'd managed to completely shrug that off. Hell, had he even gotten the full story before he'd left?

No, he hadn't.

"I'm sorry," he whispered against her skin. "I'm so sorry. I was a thoughtless git when I was here before."

Buffy offered a weak smile. "For what it's worth, Dawn is totally on your side. And boy, did she ever let me know it." She blinked and shifted her attention back to Willow. "Is she still—"

"Upstairs, headphones on," Willow replied, nodding. She looked at Spike. "We don't want to worry her unless we have to. And apparently there were words said after you left."

"Very shouty words," the Slayer agreed, tucking into him again. "Can you take patrol tonight? I think maybe I should...not."

"Course, pet. Anything you want."

"I want you to not go away again. Can you do that?"

Fuck, it would not do to start blubbering like a sodding infant, but Buffy asking him that—leaning against him the way she was now, wanting him here... How long had he waited for this? How

long *would* he have waited for this? That he'd lost his temper earlier and stormed out when she needed him was something he doubted he'd ever forgive himself for. Bloody miracle she hadn't tossed him out on his head the second he'd crossed the threshold.

"Won't ever," he promised. "Never, Buffy."

"Though we should probably talk about what happened. Just...not now." She glanced at the mug in her hands. "Is there sleepy stuff in this? Because I'm having trouble keeping my eyes open."

"No sleepy stuff. Maybe you're just extra tired because of the demon guy. And *your* demon guy." Willow offered a somewhat cheeky smirk. "He does keep you up at all hours."

Buffy turned back to him at that. "Not really feeling all that sexy tonight. I hope that's okay."

Considering he'd taken care of Dru for years when sex had been completely off the table, he wasn't sure whether or not to be offended that she even had to say as much. The sex was brilliant, the best he'd ever had, but the simple joy of being with Buffy was all he needed to sustain him.

"Don't need anything but you, sweetheart."

"Even if I'm not all mentally here?"

"Uhh, hello," Willow said with a slight smirk. "Are we forgetting Drusilla?"

"Readin' my thoughts, Red," Spike replied, tightening his hold on Buffy. "And you, Slayer, have a few screws left to lose before you're even half as barmy as she was."

She offered a strained, sad little smile that damn near broke his heart. "Let's not let me get halfway there, okay?"

"Could never." He glanced back at Willow, who offered a nod of encouragement. "Right then. Let's get you tucked up in your beddy-by. I'll do a sweep, keep the ne'er-do-wells from ne'er-do-wellin'."

"And you'll come back here?"

"In a flash."

"And in the meantime," Willow said, rising her feet, "I'll hit the books. See what tentacle, pokey monster thing we're dealing with and how we can get you back to being whole and fully present Buffy. That *Demons, Demons, Demons* website might be a good place to start."

Buffy also rose to her feet, the blanket she'd had tucked around her falling back to the couch. "Maybe I just need to sleep it off." She paused, pressed her lips together. "Let's not tell Dawn until we have more information. I don't want her to worry."

Seemed that keeping things from kid sis was a brilliant way to make things tenser between them, but Spike wouldn't argue. At least not now. Maybe later, when he didn't feel so miserable for having left her in the first place. Instead, he followed Buffy up the stairs, shadowed her as she went through her nightly ritual of teeth brushing and face washing, taking note of the unsure way she moved, how she seemed withdrawn and uncertain, and felt his heart break all over again.

"Could just skip the patrol," he said as she climbed into bed. "Hell-mouth'll keep, I'd wager."

For a moment, she looked well and truly tempted by that, but shook her head and dragged the blankets up to her chin. "If something were to happen..."

"I know." And he did. Every loss was one she carried, deserved or not. "Anythin' before I leave?"

"Mr. Gordo?"

He fought a smile and grabbed the stuffed pig off her dresser. "This here is a valiant protector," he said, walking over to the bed. "Would be threatened, but seems to me it works in my favor that you're a girl who fancies herself a nice pig every now and then."

Buffy grinned and clutched the soft toy to her chest. "Just the good ones."

"Also works in my favor that I take a shine to girls who are attached to dollies."

At that, the grin faded and she favored him with a scowl. "Did you just seriously compare me to Drusilla *again*?"

Spike chuckled, leaned forward, and brushed a kiss over her temple. "Like I told you, you have a ways to go before you're that daft."

"Somehow not as reassuring as it was downstairs," Buffy replied dryly. "And considering how much you hate it when I compare you to Angel, I'd think you'd know better than—"

He growled, cupped the back of her neck, and tilted her head back

so he could kiss her properly. It seemed a lifetime had passed since she'd been cozied up on his lap downstairs, snogging him out of his mind while the Bit protested in the background.

"Mmm," Buffy said when she pulled away. "You *are* coming back, right?"

"Nowhere else I wanna be."

"Except you left earlier."

Yeah, he had. Spike straightened, his jaw tightening. "Was brassed off earlier."

"I really don't get why. This is me, Spike. I thought you knew that."

He exhaled, looked away to give himself a moment to shove down the instinctive drive to launch into a fight. Not twenty minutes ago, she'd said she was too tired to have this talk and he didn't want to risk running his mouth without having first sorted through his thoughts. "Later," he said at length and nodded at her pillow. "Catch your winks. I'll be back soon."

She nodded, though there was hesitation there that hadn't been there before, then reclined on the bed and closed her eyes.

Downstairs, Spike found Willow punching at the keyboard of her computer, apparently on the trail of something. She made a noncommittal sound when he stalked out, which he found rather heartening. If he knew anything about the Scoobies, and having been on the receiving end of their collective prowess more than once, she'd have the mystery solved in a snap and they'd know what to do to get the Slayer back to herself.

It didn't take long to go through the cemeteries, thankfully, dull night that it was. Still, Spike forced himself to take his time, knowing full well that if Buffy caught wind of something that she'd grill him backward and forward to suss out whether or not he'd done the job proper. Staked the baddies he came across—the very few he came across—and didn't leave any vulnerable damsels stranded without a knight nearby. Once he was satisfied he'd been thorough, he headed back to Revello Drive, almost certain he'd find the whole house asleep by now.

The second he crossed the threshold, though, he knew that was no good. Buffy's soft, troubled voice reached him almost at once. Sounded

still like she was upstairs, which meant either Willow or Dawn had decided to pester his lady while she was trying to get her kip.

So either Willow or Dawn would get a bloody earful before he chucked them into the hallway, Spike swore, shucked off his duster for the third time that night and tore up the staircase. Even if the Nibbler didn't know about the demon muck that had gotten into the Slayer's system, she ought to know better than to stir her sis out of a sleep.

Only when he made it to the landing, he realized the only voice he heard was Buffy's.

"No, she's my sister. Stop saying that! She's real. I died for her. I..." The scent of tears hit him hard and his heart lurched. "I do have a sister. I do! Dawn is real, *stop*."

"Buffy..." Spike forced his feet forward, half-terrified of what he might find. This felt familiar, this worry—instant and all-consuming, the woman he loved a prisoner of her own bloody mind with no means of escape, and him with few resources to help. On her bad days, Dru's tantrums had resulted in her pulling her hair out or scratching her nails down the sides of her face. On the *really* bad days, he'd been forced to tie her up to keep her from open windows and doors.

*"Why can't I play in the sunshine, my Spike? It's where I will find you, after all."*

Of course, a lot—if not all—of those tantrums had been something other than genuine. It had taken time to learn the difference between a true meltdown and one put on for kicks because Dru enjoyed seeing him worked up and beside himself, enjoyed knowing that he'd fall apart if he lost her.

Sadistic bitch, Dru was.

Buffy was nothing like Dru, which was one of the reasons he loved her so much. But it made experiencing that same terror with her its own sort of hell.

"Spike?"

That lit a fire under his arse. He shoved images of the past aside and commanded his feet to move. He'd do her no bloody good lingering in the hallway. "I'm here, baby," he said, tearing into her room. "You're fine. You're all right."

The sight that awaited him had every part of him threatening to



shatter. The blankets he had tucked her under were now bunched on the floor at the foot of the bed; the pillows had been shoved aside as well, and Buffy sat in the center of the mattress, her arms wrapped around her legs. She was staring at some point on the wall across from her, crying and shaking her head, and didn't so much as flinch when he spoke.

"No, he said he'd come back," she told no one, her voice trembling. "This isn't real. He promised me."

"Buffy." Spike swallowed the distance between them, climbed onto the bed, and seized her by the shoulders. "Buffy, look at me, love. I'm right here. You see me?"

She didn't. Her face began to crumble, fresh tears spilling down her cheeks.

"You're lying. This isn't real."

"That's right, sweet. It's not real. Whatever you're seeing—"

"I didn't tell him. I didn't tell him."

Again, he experienced that awful lurching in his chest, like his heart was trying to escape. "Slayer, I'm right here. You can tell me anything. You know that."

"We fought and then he left and I still haven't told him." Buffy shook her head harder. "Has to be real. Has to be. Dawn's real. My sister is *real*. Willow's real. All of them. Spike. Why would I—"

"What do you need to tell me?"

"—be in love with him if he wasn't real?"

Spike went rigid, digging his fingers into her shoulders. He opened his mouth, closed it, felt his own bloody eyes stinging now, his head spinning, every bloody bit of him fighting back against an explosion.

Bloody hell. Buffy loved him. She *loved* him.

*Not important at the moment, mate.*

Only of course it was. He couldn't pretend otherwise—couldn't shove back what he'd heard. What it meant. *Everything* it meant.

*Buffy.*

"Buffy." Spike squeezed her shoulders again, gave her a little shake. "Come back to me now, pet."

He'd like to think it was his voice, that he'd somehow reached through the fog of wherever she was, the prison set up for her in her

mind, and she'd latched onto it to come back out. Realize what it was she'd said and then go red in the cheeks, hide her face from him and mutter something about that not having been the way she'd intended him to find out. But when it became clear she was refocusing, returning, the confusion on her face said plainly that she didn't have the first sodding clue what she'd said. She blinked, wiped her eyes, then looked at him directly.

"Spike?"

He released a long sigh, cupped her face, and kissed her. "That's right, pet."

"You... You came back."

"Promised I would, didn't I?"

Buffy nodded numbly. "It happened again. I was asleep. I think I was asleep, anyway, and then I wasn't. I was in a room with this doctor telling me..." She frowned and pressed her palm to her brow as though to stave off a headache. "It's so real. That place. That...room. They're telling me I'm crazy. That I've been, I don't know, committed for years. That there is no Sunnydale and—"

Spike took her hand in his. "Right here, love. You feel me? Feel this?" He brushed a kiss across her knuckles. "Feel me right here?"

She didn't reply at once, staring at the place their hands were joined. "I feel you," she said after a moment, her voice scratchy. "But I feel it there, too. The bed. The orderlies when they... Spike, it *smells* like those places. When I'm there it's nothing but real."

"And what's the story, then? All this is in your head?"

"Everyone. You, Dawn, Willow, and Xander. Everyone is just a figment of my imagination. Something I created." Her lower lip began to wobble. "Why would I create this? Mom dying, Glory, going to Heaven and then... Who would do that to themselves?"

"Buffy, listen to me." He edged closer, seizing her face again. "You didn't do anythin'. This here, right here, this is real. Your sis is sawin' logs down the hall and Red's probably got what sort of demon it is already sussed out. You'll be right as bloody rain this time tomorrow, you hear?"

Buffy nodded again, though he could tell she wasn't sure she believed him. She seemed just seconds from going to pieces on him,

her eyes shining with new tears. "Spike, I haven't told you something that I need to tell you. Even if you're not real—"

"Save it for when you know I am." Over the past two years, he'd dreamt up any number of ways Buffy might profess her love for him. In the middle of a fight was his favorite, he thought. Them trading blows like they used to, and she'd bark it out before jumping at him at full strength, ready to turn their fight into the best kind of dance.

Knowing that she loved him was revolutionary, but he didn't want the first time she told him—really told him—to be associated with whatever was going on now.

"But what if you're not?" she whispered. "What if you're not, and I never tell you?"

"If I'm not real, then I'm in your head. Which means I already know what it is you wanna tell me, yeah?"

She held his gaze a long beat, then nodded. "Okay."

"That's my girl."

"Will you... You're staying, right? Will you just hold me tonight?"

Spike nodded, turned and kicked off his boots. He wasn't too keen on sleeping in his clothes, but he didn't much fancy the idea of leaving the bed right yet. Seemed Buffy might need something more solid to keep her tethered to him, and he aimed to provide it. It and whatever else she needed.

A few minutes later, he had her against his chest, and though he could still hear her heart pounding harder than it should, she seemed to be calming down. Enough that he relaxed, shoved back the questions suddenly swarming around his head, leaving behind only the warmth, the bloody euphoria, of what he'd learned.

Buffy loved him. *Fuck.*

"Spike?"

"Yeah?"

"I want this to be real." She hesitated, then turned her eyes up to him. "I want this world to be the real world. I want them to be wrong."

"It is, love."

"I want to live in a world where there's a Dawn and Willow and Xander. And a Spike. Even if it comes with monsters."

She held his gaze for a stretch, something in her eyes almost

begging to be given voice. And he understood—both it and what she meant. That Buffy would choose a world where she was the Slayer over a world where the need for slayers didn't exist was no small thing. Might be that was what it was like in her head right now, a decision between a lie and the truth, where the lie was not comforting and the truth was not pretty, but still somehow the better choice.

There was a lot in what she wasn't saying but even more in what she was.

And he heard every word.



IT TOOK VERY little to hunt down the beastie that had infected the Slayer, and even less to make up the concoction that would put her head right again. There were conversations to be had and apologies to make—Buffy might have let slip during one of her episodes that Dawn didn't exist in the fantasy world the demon had created, something the Nibblet was still a bit sore about—but within a day, Buffy was back knowing what was real and what wasn't. Back to teasing him and rolling her eyes whenever he said something to get under her skin. Back to herself.

"What are the odds that Teeth fired me for being a no-show today?" Buffy asked when they set out for the night's patrol. The concoction had only just kicked in an hour or so ago, but she was determined to take the past couple day's frustrations out on something. "Or do demon bosses allow sick days on account of demon illness?"

"Teeth doesn't have the bloody spine to give you the sack," Spike replied, lighting up a fag. "Ultimate job security, pet."

"Does he really think I'd slay him if he canned me?"

"I mighta planted the idea, now that you mention it."

Buffy snickered in that way that told him she was mostly amused and only a little annoyed. "Evil."

"Always, baby."

They walked in companionable silence for a few minutes, Buffy gazing off as though in deep thought—but not troubled thought. He

wasn't sure how he knew, except the signs he knew to look for were absent. No frown or furrowed brow, no tension in her shoulders. There was a lot for them to talk about, things they'd left unfinished. The rest of the argument that had sent him storming out of the house, for one—he wasn't daft enough to think they wouldn't come back to it. He still had more to say on it and reckoned she did too. A load of stuff they hadn't gotten to throw at each other on account of demon poisoning.

Whether or not she would bring up the thing she'd meant to tell him was another issue altogether. And if he were being honest with himself, that was all he wanted. All he'd wanted since they'd poured the demon remedy down her throat and watched her eyes clear. That selfish, almost crushing need to rip the words from her now that he knew they were there, that they were his. That he could have them and her and everything he'd thought would never be his.

Only he wasn't sure Buffy remembered saying much of anything. That she would know what the bloody hell he was talking about if he asked her to continue what she'd started to tell him the night before.

Except that wasn't quite true either. The words had been there close enough to the surface for her to pull them out when she'd thought her world was falling apart. That meant she'd been thinking this for a time, had realized what she felt was love and had made the choice to keep mum for whatever reason. Buffy did things her way at her pace, and if this year had taught him anything, it was that the wait, excruciating as it was, was more than worth it.

He'd waited on nothing more than a maybe to get to where he was now. For the thing she'd meant to tell him, he could wait as long it took.

"Spike?"

He pulled the cigarette from his lips and blew out a line of smoke. "Yeah?"

She met his gaze, her own bright. "Can we...skip the big talk until tomorrow? About why you made with the dramatic exit and all? I kinda want tonight to be all about just...being here."

"Sounds brilliant."

"And maybe we can have makeup sex?"

He chuckled. "Like you need to talk me into gettin' you naked, pet."

"I had a plan if I did."

"Oh, did you now?"

"I can be quite the seductress when I put my mind to it."

Spike pitched his cigarette to the ground and stomped it out, then seized her around the waist and pulled her to him. "Well then," he murmured, studying her mouth. "Might just have to put up a fight."

She grinned, toying with the hairs at the nape of his neck. "I'm gonna win."

"Matter of opinion, that is. Think I won already."

"You're a sap."

"Yeah, and you love it."

At that, the smile faded from her face—the smile but not the warmth. It lit him up from the inside, burned in the best way.

"I do," Buffy agreed. "I do, Spike."

He released a long breath, unashamed when it shook a little.

"Well, that's all right then."

## IN THE FLESH

BUFFY SO DID NOT WANT TO CRAWL OUT OF BED THE NEXT MORNING. For one, she was way behind on monster shakedown—so behind that she figured she might be filing unemployment, whatever Spike said to the contrary. Teeth was a gracious boss, more or less, and scared enough of her that he gave her free rein of her schedule. But there were deadlines to meet, payments to collect, and if his pockets weren't lined, the guy could get a little crabby. Or extra sharky. Whatever made more sense.

The fact that she hadn't shown up for her daily list of deadbeats was one thing—the fact that she hadn't called in or whatever the equivalent was for this type of work would merit a serious conversation. Most likely.

Then again, working for a mob shark wasn't exactly the standard nine-to-five anyway.

Buffy rubbed at her eyes and forced herself to sit up, somewhat surprised to find the space beside her already empty. Most mornings she climbed out of bed well before Spike, whose schedule was becoming more human-friendly than it had been already, given that he'd spent the bulk of his evenings with her since Riley had blown into and subsequently out of town. If Spike was already up, that likely

meant she'd slept longer than was advisable for someone who had a boss to apologize to.

Still, when she finally turned her gaze to the clock atop her dresser, Buffy went from groggy to wide awake. Holy crap, it was nearly noon. *Noon*. Yeah, there was no way Teeth would let her off the hook. She was one unemployed slayer.

And Spike was so totally getting his ass kicked for having let her sleep so long. She'd just need to find a way to do it that wouldn't turn him on, the big freak.

Just add that to the list of things she'd need to talk to him about. The past two days had been a mental trip in ways she didn't really want to spend too much time dwelling on—the constant volleying between the real world and the world her mind had created. The one she'd been terrified might be the actual thing, the more time she'd been sucked there. A standard symptom, Willow had assured her, and sure enough, the moment she'd thrown back the antidote, the clouds in her head had dissipated and she'd landed on solid ground. But Buffy couldn't say that the alternative of what might have happened didn't have her wigged. The way the scene at the fake asylum had been going... Well, things had been well on their way to becoming messy, the line between reality and make-believe blurring. The main doctor had started saying things like, "Confront and eliminate your delusions," which, according to Willow—and based on other accounts she'd been able to dig up—likely meant literal elimination. Like, kill-her-family kinda thing.

But focusing on the fake world only got her so far. The real world, with its real consequences, was a bit more complicated. She and Spike needed to talk about the other night, and she wasn't looking forward to that. While slaying hadn't been exactly what had ruined her relationship with Riley, what it did to her, how it hardened her, had forged a distance that had turned out to be insurmountable. The thought that the same could happen with Spike...

God, she didn't want to think about it. And she was wrong. Had to be. He had overreacted the other night and odds were that had been what he'd come back to tell her when he'd learned about the head trip. Spike wasn't threatened by her strength—he loved it. *Relished* it. If he thought she might be holding back on him,



he'd goad her until she snapped and hit him harder, which just *made* him harder, which led to inappropriate daydreams while she was supposed to be shaking loose change out of deadbeat demons.

Buffy made quick work of getting ready, skipped the morning shower, and wiggled into her favorite pair of jeans plus a mildly see-through camisole. On the off-chance she wasn't fired, she needed to bring her A-game to today's list and flashing skin had not failed her yet. The house was quiet, though that didn't surprise her too much, given Willow would be on campus and Dawn likely headed to the cafeteria sometime soon for the questionable gruel spooned out for today's youth. And Spike would be either watching soaps or out to knock off his own targets—presuming, of course, that he was still gainfully employed.

And if it turned out they were both out of a job? Well, Buffy would worry about that when she knew it was an actual problem and not just a scary maybe.

She was at the top of the stairs when she heard it—a voice undeniably belonging to Dawn, coming from the direction of the kitchen.

*So. Busted.* Buffy bit back a curse and started moving quicker, avoiding the noisy spots on principle because she so wanted to see her sister's face when she realized just how much trouble she was in. Skipping school was a big no-no and Dawn knew better. How many times had they had this conversation?

So preoccupied was she in composing the lecture she was about to lay down, it wasn't until she was halfway down the stairs that she clued into what her sister was saying.

“—make sense to me. It never has. She says one thing and acts another way. Any time she's given any help in the slayage department, she acts like it's a curse or something. When Kendra showed up? Massive jealousy right off the bat. She went on and on about how much Giles preferred *te new gyurl* over *his* slayer. When *all* she ever talked about was the woe of being the Chosen One and how she just wanted to be normal.”

Buffy came to a halt, her stomach plummeting.

Dawn was...talking about her? With someone here?

"Don't think big sis would know what to do with normal if it bit her in her admittedly biteable arse," came the reply.

*Spike?* More than anyone else, including Willow, Spike knew just how important it was that Dawn show up for class. It had been the subject of many a rant over the past few months, and even if Doris Kroeger had backed down a bit, that was no excuse to encourage truancy. Buffy didn't know whether to be annoyed, disappointed, heartbroken or all of the above.

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that last part," Dawn sniped, cutting into her thoughts.

"Well, bit like the bloody cave, right?" A pause. "For fuck's sake, don't tell me you still—"

"No, I totally followed you. Had you going there for a second, didn't I?"

Spike grumbled and muttered something unintelligible, but if Buffy knew him at all, likely involved some overly gruesome, however empty threat. And even if she was suddenly at battle with a slew of conflicting emotions where he was concerned—not to mention a healthy amount of anger—she couldn't find the will to move.

Not when she knew they were talking about her.

"Not really somethin' she can walk away from," he said a moment later. "Even if her strength left her for good. World still has monsters in it, right? Say she couldn't fight them as a slayer, she'd still be keen to fight. Not about the power at all—it's about bein' her. Could hand the girl *normal* on a platter and she'd be bored bloody stiff with it in less than a week and lookin' for ruckuses to throw herself into because she can't help it. That fight's part of who she is—has nothing to do with bein' the Slayer." He paused, then snickered. "Trust me. Known more than my fair share of slayers over the years. More than just the two I offed, too."

"Huh? Say what?"

"What, you think in a bloody century, three's the best I could manage?"

"Three? I thought it was two."

"I meant in terms of trackin' down," Spike replied, his tone dry. "The bird in China and the one in New York, they cared. Were full of

fight and passion and wanted to save the bloody world. Threw themselves into everythin', the way Buffy does. Ran into a number that couldn't be bothered."

"What?"

"Not all girls who get the call actually take it." He gave a short laugh. "Think there's some out there the Council tracks, or what all. Line of little Potential birds who might be tapped next. But sometimes they make the wrong gamble—sometimes it goes to someone else. And sometimes, the girl who's picked decides she has better things to do."

Buffy pressed her lips together, vaguely aware of how hard her heart was pounding. This was something she'd never heard before—from anyone. Not Merrick, her short-lived first Watcher, and certainly not Giles. The idea that a girl, any girl, who had been selected by the cosmos to fight the baddies could have walked away was foreign to her, and god knows she'd tried more than once. *Quit* more than once. But somehow, she always found her way back.

But then she thought of Faith, who had been calling her own shots almost since the beginning. Who had approached slaying as a party she could opt to be late for, if she bothered showing up at all. And how the Council had been prepared to handle her—what they might have done had they gotten her back to England.

"—for the girl I ran into in '62," Spike was saying when she clued back in. "Not sure what happened to her, mind, though I'd wager Rupert would have a good idea. Seems likely the Wankers Council has ways of dealin' with slayers who don't fall in line. Findin' one who cares, who throws in and feels the way big sis does... That's somethin' you can't teach. Reckon it's why they let her have the run of them, too. They could hope the next girl would give a damn, but there's no telling."

There was a slight, however heavy pause. "So...are you not mad anymore? About the other night?" Dawn asked.

Spike huffed. "What, you wantin' to play couple's counselor?"

"Like she'd let me do that."

"Like *I* would."

"Oh, you so would. You know I'm a genius."

"Right. So brilliant it took you watchin' a bloody film to grasp a simple allegory."

"Okay, *nerd*, then I'll just keep my amazing insight to myself and watch you wallow as Buffy walks all over you."

Buffy bit down on the inside of her cheek to keep from doing something stupid, like announcing her presence. She was well beyond the point when a normal, well-adjusted person might have interjected or coughed politely to let people know she was within earshot. Or stormed in and started screaming at her sister for ditching school and her boyfriend for encouraging it. Knowing this didn't stop her from lowering herself to the staircase to get comfortable. Might as well. It seemed she could be here for a while.

"The Slayer walks all over the lot of us," Spike replied in a tone that was half dry amusement, half something else. "Don't think there's much that'll twist her around on that score."

"She so does *not* walk all over me. I totally stood up to her the other night."

"Right. In such a way she understood right off why you were brassed and said she'd never do it again?"

"Well... Those *exact* words weren't used, but..." A pause. "Okay, fine. So are you going to talk to her or am I?"

"Don't know if it's an either/or thing, Bit. And some of that goes back to what her mates did to her, yankin' her out and all."

There was a slight huff—a very *Dawn* huff. "Well, if I'm supposed to be sorry she's alive, I'm not. I know it's been hard for her and everything, but she's my *sister*. How am I—"

"Hasn't just been *hard*," Spike said, his voice firmer than it had been a second ago. "Right time your sis had, tryin' to adjust to bein' back. Has nothin' to do with you or me, or any of the sodding Scoobies. Bloody hell, you know she loves you. She died for you—gave you the world."

"Yeah, I know, but—"

"Fact of the matter is, not one of us knows what it was like for her, comin' back." He blew out a breath. "Though she told me a bit, when it was fresh. About how she felt done. And that's the thing, a slayer's never done. Even if they don't throw all in the way she does, you got

every kinda dark thing slitherin' outta the shadows tryin' to do you in. The fight's never over—not until you've kicked it. So that's what she came back to. More of the fight."

"But—"

"I know." This he said with some authority, like he'd already lived through this argument and knew its cues. "But she came back and was thrown right into that, wasn't she? Bloody hellscape the night they raised her, demons runnin' around. Dunno that anyone ever sat her down and told her that the reason we were miserable this summer was because she was gone."

Another pause, though this one came with another huff. "Okay, that might be the dumbest thing I've ever heard."

"I mean *Buffy*, you nit," Spike shot back. "*Buffy*. Not the Slayer who's supposed to fix everythin', be the hero, put her life on the line every night so that you and all her chums can get your kip. All of them take her for granted, accept that she's throwin' herself out there again and again, and even though she's bloody *died*, they still don't get it, 'cause it's only ever been on her. She carries all of that with her every day, so you're askin' if I'm still angry? Answer's *of course I am*. She's bloody cavalier with her life but so is everyone else around here. Even after havin' lost her. Wager you and I feel differently 'cause we were the only ones at all who mourned her when she was gone. Only ones who thought we'd have to live with it. To them, she was still alive, just waitin' to be found. Even after learnin' the truth, have any of them owned up to it? They were able to walk it off—she wasn't. Happy to go on livin' their lives, not carin' that she was out there riskin' hers all over again."

The silence that followed was a long one—so long Buffy was almost certain Dawn had left the kitchen, except she hadn't heard her sister's heavy footsteps or Spike swear or stalk off on his own. So she waited. And waited, her mind churning and her heart thumping harder than it had a right to, but god, could anyone blame her? She had never, not once, heard anyone put her life in those terms before, give voice to feelings that she hadn't even been sure still existed. Spike had always seen her more than anyone else—something that had once been a point of contention—and truthfully, Buffy wasn't sure how wild she

was about how readily those words had rolled off his tongue. As much as they had shared over the past few months, and especially these last three weeks, this sort of insight almost felt too intimate. Too close. Too...*something*, like he had unearthed a nerve she hadn't realized she had, or had managed to ignore so long she'd forgotten about it, and hadn't hesitated to give it a good prod.

"Buffy's gotten so used to bein' the only one 'cause it's not a choice for her," Spike said a moment later. "She just hasn't sussed out that it's not a choice for me, either. Not when it comes to her. Or you, Nibblet."

"But... Willow and Xander, it's not like they haven't been there," Dawn said, some urgency in her voice. "I mean, yes, I think I know what you're saying but it's *not* like that. Every big fight, they're with her."

He scoffed. "Right. Just not always the big fights that matter, is it? Like what happened the other night. Coulda gone sideways, nearly bloody did." Another silence, this one thankfully short, then he sighed again. "Look, I'm gonna have this out with her. All of it. Don't have any choice, do I? But I don't think she needs it from you too."

"Right, because my opinion matters *so* much."

"You're daft if you think it doesn't," he said. "Way I see it, the Slayer cares more what you think than anyone else."

"Yeah, that's why she told me that I wasn't there in her loony-bin world. Or how about the fact that she was getting those visions in the first place. Feeling very important."

"Dawn—"

"Don't worry. I'll keep my mouth shut. That does seem to be the way she prefers it."

Buffy rose to her feet at that, thinking she'd heard just about enough. There were some problems that boyfriends, vampire or not, couldn't fix, even if said boyfriend was as adored by the younger sister as Spike was. She started down the stairs again and was almost at the ground floor when the sound of the back door swinging open then shut reached her ears.

"Dawn?" Seconds later, she burst into the kitchen and discovered it absent one moody teenager.

Spike stood by the sink, looking not in the least surprised to see her up, nursing what was likely a mug of blood. "Seems I recall you tellin' me once or twice it wasn't nice to eavesdrop, pet."

"Where's Dawn?"

"Think she said somethin' about meetin' one of her chums to catch a show this afternoon or what all."

"Why isn't she in school? Why didn't you *make* her go to school?"

Spike arched an eyebrow and she felt like an idiot, all the annoyance and anger from earlier evaporating.

"It's Saturday, isn't it?" Buffy asked, defeated.

"Last I checked. Though if you were worried about the girl's education, it's a small wonder you stayed on those stairs as long as you did."

Buffy stared at the backdoor a moment longer, then sighed and dropped her shoulders. "So you knew I was there the whole time. You could have said something."

"Not sure why I would. Needed to get it all out, didn't I? Figure it was easier listenin' to me say it to her than to you." Spike set his mug on the counter before turning back to her, his arms crossed. "And there's the whole evil thing."

"Can't forget that." Buffy pressed her lips together. "So...Saturday. Not a workday."

"Weekends are for debauchery. Get a tidy list of poor sods to hassle come Monday."

"I missed a whole day. He's—"

"Buffy, it's handled." She stared at him long enough that he suddenly appeared self-conscious, directing his gaze to the floor and shifting weight between his feet. "Knew you'd worry about it. Also knew it'd be better for you to catch your winks and recover. Made a run this mornin' before the sun was up to let him know you'd come down with a bug. From what I gathered, he was just relieved he hadn't run you off—thought you mighta rethought the whole arrangement and decided to try for a proper job. Long as you show up on Monday, reckon all's fine."

Buffy didn't say anything for a long moment, just kept staring at him.

"What?" he barked finally.

"I... Thank you." The words seemed stupidly inadequate, but they were the only ones she had. "I've gotten used to having electricity and food in the fridge and not waking up in a cold sweat because I don't know how I'm going to make next month's mortgage payment. So... thank you for making sure that's all still true."

His expression softened. "Of course, Slayer. Anything."

Yeah. Anything. That was Spike all over. He'd do *anything*—anything that occurred to him to do, anything asked of him, anything he might to anticipate whatever need she'd have. At some point, this had to stop surprising her. Not only had she seen firsthand just how much of himself he'd give, those years spent caring for Drusilla had to have involved some measure of anticipation, as unpredictable as she'd been. Spike took care of the people he loved. It was just what he did.

And with her job worries placated for the moment, and the righteous indignation Buffy had felt when she'd first heard Dawn's voice and assumed she was skipping school—aided and abetted by her sister's amoral vampire—were gone now. All that remained was the thing they still had to discuss, plus the new knowledge of how Spike saw her. All of her. And yeah, it was unnerving, being seen utterly and completely, even by someone she loved. Maybe especially by someone she loved, or by someone who loved as fiercely as Spike did. There were parts of her no one else had ever seen, parts she hadn't even realized were there, that she now knew were on display. That knowledge was humbling.

There were two ways to go about this. Buffy could either dance around all she'd heard or be direct. Given that he knew she'd been listening, dancing around the issue seemed a waste of time.

"When you jumped down my throat the other night about not checking in, I didn't get it," she said at length, her gaze on the island. It was easier saying those words to it rather than to him. "I don't know if I get it now. Except I just heard you say...what you said to Dawn."

Spike didn't move, but he did release a long breath.

"You told me last year that I had a death wish. Do you still think I do?"

"Think it's natural for slayers to crave the quiet, yeah," he replied softly. "Been tryin' not to think too hard on whether or not you'd rather be dead than where you are now, though."



"I don't. Wish I was dead, that is." And she hadn't for a while. A long while. "I like where I am."

"Small mercy, that."

"You think they take me for granted. My friends."

"Not a matter of *think* there at all." He waited until she looked up, held her gaze for a few long seconds, then sighed and turned his own away. "Meant what I told her. I dunno if they slowed down a lick while you were gone. Seems likely they started muckin' around with tryin' how to bring you back straight off, before you were even cold in the ground. Didn't share that with me or with the Bit, or your Watcher."

Buffy nodded, not entirely sure she was ready to agree just yet, though it was hard to argue with the facts as he'd laid them out. For so many years, Willow and Xander had trusted in her ability to keep herself, them, and the world alive. The sport of patrol had become mundane, routine, a thing that filled the time between Big Bads and apocalypses.

If they did take her for granted, it wasn't out of a lack of love—of that she was certain. Love was the reason she'd been torn out of Heaven, after all, twisted as that was. A selfish love, sure, and one that had few boundaries, but love nonetheless. But stations weren't mounted and weapons weren't grabbed unless there was something other than the Sunnydale standard to stare down. Willow and Xander had long ceased going on patrols with her; part of that was their lives had become more complicated, part was they had started slowing her down, and the rest was likely their own complacency that anything she encountered could be dealt with rather easily. And if not dealt with, she'd make a clean enough getaway that they could regroup and tackle whatever problem as a united front.

"You know I can handle myself," Buffy said, meeting Spike's eyes again. "Help isn't something I need on most nights."

"Yeah, I know that. Doesn't mean I'm not gonna wanna wring your gorgeous neck if you toddle off somewhere without lettin' us know." He held her gaze now, not blinking. "There's always that one time. All it takes. Told you that before, didn't I? After some nameless vamp stuck your own stake in your belly. Just has to happen once."

She swallowed but didn't reply. There was nothing to say.

"And these rentals you were lookin' after... Robot Boy pulled the trigger on his honey, didn't he? Was cold enough about it to try to pin it on you, too. He sees you again and it's likely he'll be aimin' to kill." Spike took a step forward, braced his knuckles against the island. "But you won't, will you? Boy's human, which means he's off the slay list."

"Spike—"

"So yeah, you goin' off after a bloke who won't hesitate to put you in the ground, knowin' you won't fight back with everything you are, is not somethin' I'm gonna like."

"I can't just let Warren get away with what he's done, though. You know that."

He nodded, sucked in his cheeks. "I know it. Still don't know why you haven't turned it over to the dibbles, though."

"The huh?"

"Police."

"Why don't you just say that?"

"Believe I just did."

Buffy rolled her eyes, though she couldn't keep herself from grinning. This felt better—felt right. Arguing with Spike about *dibbles* or any of his substitutions for speaking actual English. It worked to take her mind off the growing certainty that she'd been in the wrong the other night—if not entirely then certainly wrong enough.

"You and I both know Warren's into things that go beyond standard police jurisdiction."

"Gettin' him locked up for murder seems a decent way to put an end to those things."

She sighed, unable to argue with that. Though there were a few things working against them. "I can't tell the police that Katrina smelled like Warren, so we know he's the one who killed her. If there was anything hard enough to lead back to him, they would have made an arrest."

"Loads of faith you have in your boys in blue."

"Think about it. The police in this town are all kinds of hopeless when it comes to *most* stuff, but human-on-human crime? That's the kind of thing they're actually equipped to handle. And whatever else, Warren wouldn't be stupid about it. He wanted me to believe that I

had killed Katrina, so he would have made sure there was nothing to link her back to him. The most sending the cops after him would do is make him more dangerous, and possibly get other people killed.” Buffy pinched the bridge of her nose. “But you’re right. About the other night. I do still kinda consider myself invincible. Which, given I’ve died twice and am here to tell you about it, I think is not totally unearned.”

Spike looked down at that, worked his throat. “Aim to keep you around for a while, Slayer, if it’s all the same to you. Take nothing for granted. Had to live without you once and it about killed me. Dunno if I could do it again. No, I know I couldn’t. Especially not now. Now that you—”

He cut himself off without finishing the thought, looking pensive.

“Now that I what?”

“That you’re with me.”

The words sounded right, but for some reason, she didn’t think that was what he had meant to say. And she might have called him on it had she not been sitting on a few things herself—a very big thing that left her both invigorated and terrified.

There was every chance what she had experienced as a result of that demon’s stinger would haunt her for the rest of her life. It had taken months of work, of talking, of breathing above ground to get even adjacent to where she’d been before her mind had betrayed her. And in a snap, the isolation, loneliness, and despair that had dogged her out of the grave had not only soared back to life but managed to morph into something so much worse than even the darkest thoughts she’d entertained.

A life without her friends—these people who were her family. Without knowing who she was in the world, without the sister she’d sacrificed her life for, without the vampire she knew she loved.

Worse, without telling him. She remembered that, crying to the fake doctor and her fake parents about how she hadn’t given Spike her love, and how awful that was. Remembered thinking that if she got out, it’d be the first thing she’d do. And truthfully, Buffy didn’t know what was holding her back now—just that whenever the thought occurred to her, whenever she felt the words pressed against her lips,

the sensation that came with them was fear. Not of Spike or their relationship, but of whatever came next. The thing after love that had, in the past, always been pain.

It wasn't fair to judge him based on those standards, yet knowing that didn't make the fear go away.

"So that it?" Spike asked a minute later. "Got through our first fight, yeah?"

"*That* was our first fight?" Buffy asked, giving her head a shake and wrinkling her nose. "I must have imagined all the others."

"Meant as... Oh, bollocks, never mind."

In spite of herself, she grinned and made her way around the island. "I know what you meant," she said, wrapping her arms around his middle. "And...yeah. I guess so. So long as you know I'm not always going to wait for you to go on patrol. I understand knowing where I am, what I'm doing, if I'm going to be late, but I don't need a babysitter."

Spike snorted and kissed her temple. "Wouldn't dream of it."

The heavy weight that had taken residence in her chest when she'd first started down the stairs rolled away for good. "I thought that was what that was, the other night. Riley used to get mad if I went by myself. Which, I got mad when *he* went by himself, but my thing at least made more sense."

"Isn't it enough that you compare me to Angel? You really need to toss in Captain Cardboard, too?"

"Well, I was surprised. I thought you dug that I'm the Slayer."

He rumbled the sort of growl that had her heart performing acrobatics. "Believe me, baby. I knew the only thing better than killing a slayer would be—"

"If you ever want to have sex with me again, you will not finish that sentence."

Spike smirked and pulled back, wagging his brows. "Wouldn't throw stones, pet. You're quite the groupie yourself."

"I don't want to know what that means and don't take that as a request to explain."

"Well, can I just say that your taste has dramatically improved since I've known you?"

Buffy rolled her eyes and slapped his chest—not so hard he kneeled over, but hard enough that she knew he got the message. Whether he chose to listen was up to him. “Pretty sure *he* wouldn’t be this obnoxious.”

“Pretty sure you never had half as much fun with *him* as you do with me,” Spike shot back, his eyes bright, as if he were daring her to disagree with him. Which she intended to do, just as soon as she found the right combination of words.

Except finding those words required getting out of the mindset of sniping with Spike and doing a quick inventory of all the fun things she and Angel had done together. There had been the movies that one time, which hadn’t been as much fun as it had been awkward. Prom... but that had been right after he’d shattered her heart and, despite the fact that the evening itself had been rather picturesque, she wasn’t sure she could call it fun.

Good god, could she call *any* of that fun? The mystique behind his random appearances in the beginning had been a little exciting, but also unnerving and annoying as hell. Not knowing who he was, why he was there, why he *wasn’t* there other times—all of it had culminated in what was arguably the most memorable first kiss of her life, but likely not for reasons that would make Angel proud. Then drama, then death, more drama, tension, that suffocating feeling... He’d tried to take her ice skating once and that hadn’t gone well.

“Uh oh,” Spike said, jarring her back to the present, his voice light but packed with enough tension she couldn’t miss it. “Did I break you, sweetheart?”

Buffy frowned and shook her head. She and Angel had had fun at some point—she was sure of it. But it had always been heavy, so heavy she’d been sure it would crush her, whether or not they were together. That feeling was so far removed from where she was now, it might as well have belonged to someone else. And wasn’t that part of the reason sneaking off to meet Angel earlier this year had been such a disappointment? All the things she’d wanted to tell him, share with him, had stalled in her throat because she knew what came next. Silent support. A few words here or there. Platitudes about how she would overcome. A nice, lingering hug before they returned to their respective lives. The

same thing she'd gotten after her mother had died—a half-hearted offer that she was sure he'd see through if she asked it of him, but only made in the first place because he'd known she wouldn't.

And what had she done immediately after washing off the meeting with Angel?

Gone to Spike's. Gotten drunk. Busted up a game of kitten poker.

Yeah, she hadn't been in the best mood that night, but looking back, she couldn't deny that it had been fun. He'd at least tried.

"Buffy?" Spike tilted her head back until she was looking directly at him again, his expression worried now. "Not back in the nuthouse, are you?"

At that, she couldn't help herself. She laughed. Then laughed harder when the worry in his eyes intensified.

"Gonna let me in on the joke anytime soon, pet?"

"Not back in the nuthouse," she choked out, trying to get a hold of herself. "I just... I need to tell you something."

Spike just looked at her, though if she weren't mistaken, something flared behind his eyes. At once, she found it impossible to keep looking at him, hot and aware of herself as she was, brimming with excitement and nerve and some of that raw fear that kept nagging at her. Though it didn't feel as heavy as it normally did, and she knew it wouldn't be too long before she was able to toss it aside completely.

"Need isn't... Well, yes, there's need. But it's more than that. It's something I *want* to tell you. A lot. A lot a lot. I'm just...having trouble getting there." Buffy laughed again, more self-conscious this time. "Historically when I've said...what I want to tell you, things have gone very, very bad. Which, not expecting that to happen this time, but, well, it's a big thing. This thing I want to tell you. Big for me, at least. Well, big for you. For *us* but—"

"Buffy."

Her heart in her throat, she forced herself to stop rambling and met his gaze.

Spike was smiling—a soft smile. One that hit her with the subtlety of a sucker-punch but also, somehow, made her feel lighter than air itself. "Not goin' anywhere, love. Whenever you're ready, I'll be here to hear it."

God, how was it the most insufferable man on the planet could turn around and be Mr. Understanding? If she didn't know him the way she did now, she might have accused him of screwing with her head. But, as it turned out, Spike was actually kind of a sap when it came to love and romance. Something he only really ever let out when he was around her.

"I'm a complete mess," Buffy whispered. "It shouldn't be so hard for me to say."

The smile on his face grew wider, lighting up his eyes. And she knew, then. Knew that he knew.

"Reckon if you ever manage to get the words out, it's because you know you really mean it. Until then, I'll just mean it enough for the both of us, yeah?"

That Spike could tell her something like that so effortlessly, when she couldn't even manage to choke out three little words, was the height of unfair. But she supposed she was fortunate—she'd never been with anyone who understood the things about herself that she didn't. Who made sense of the nonsense in her head, or wasn't threatened by the indefinable fears that kept her rooted in place.

All of this made loving him easier, even if she couldn't say it just yet.

## THE GREAT GIG IN THE SKY

“OH MY GOD, I LOVE YOUR HANDS.”

Spike couldn't stop his grin if he tried. “That a fact?” he replied, sliding said hands over her slick back, pausing to knead here and there when instinct told him to. The angry, somewhat purple area near her tailbone he avoided, but wagered he could talk her into some ice therapy before she called it a night. It had become one of her favorite remedies and he loved being the one to administer it.

Buffy nodded, humming a little and leaning forward even more, the water sloshing with her movement. “Mhmm. Good touchies.”

“No one ever give you a back rub before, pet?”

She paused, turned to look at him over her shoulder—or tried to, much as she could, sitting between his legs. “There have been back rubs,” she said, her voice pitched in that slightly defensive tone she took on whenever he was about to point out that the tossers she'd let share her bed before hadn't been worth the dust on her shoes. “Very.. nice back rubs.”

“Uh huh.”

“You just seem to know where the achies are.”

Spike smirked, dug his knuckles into a particularly tight knot at her shoulder, and chuckled when she gasped and let out a breathy little



moan that would put a fella in mind of something else entirely. "Know the way you fight," he murmured, mesmerized by the drops of water gathering at her nape. "The way you move. Doesn't take much to figure. Just pay attention."

"Yeah, yeah. Here it comes." She cleared her throat and affected a horrible accent. "Know just how to touch you, luv. No one's ever done it as good as me."

He growled and wrapped his arms around her middle to haul her back against his chest. "Tell me it's not true and make me believe it," he murmured, then lowered his mouth to her neck. "Tell me this isn't the best you've ever had."

"You so do not need your ego stroked." That might have been more believable had she not rolled her hips back with enough force that it sent some water careening over the side of the tub. "I'm pretty sure I do enough of that."

"No such thing."

Nearly four weeks in, and the way she responded to him was still like something out of a dream. All of the fantasies Spike had entertained come to life, somehow better than even he could have imagined. The way she trembled when he nibbled up the column of her throat, how she swished and swayed and thrust herself back against his cock, the soft way she said his name, like she was getting away with something. All of it and then some. He couldn't get enough.

Things since the talk they'd had following her mind-trip had been aces—at least as far as they were concerned, him and the Slayer. The Hellmouth remained as active as ever, of course, and there was plenty of Scooby drama to keep Buffy twisted up about something or another. Not to mention that bastard Warren was still out there and doing his bloody damndest to cause as much grief as possible.

Like the other night. They had been stumbling in from a patrol—well and truly stumbling, seeing as she'd been hot in all the best ways—when Buffy had stumbled over something else. A little garden gnome with a big, unwelcome surprise inside.

The discovery of the camera had led to the discovery of the *other* cameras. Apparently, Warren and his lackeys had strung up quite the surveillance system and managed not to catch any of them

the wiser. Something that really bloody smarted because Spike should have been able to pick out Warren's scent if he'd planted the device himself. Then there had been the ones at the Bronze, campus, Harris's worksite, even an external view of the crypt. Only bloody solace was the wankers hadn't been able to suss out the Slayer's work schedule—either that or they'd gotten a whiff of it and backed off. Trying to surveil demons was a mite harder than humans.

Which made the existence of a camera anywhere near the crypt smart all the more. But they hadn't been able to get in, some cold comfort that was. Either because they'd been too bloody cowardly to try or because of the mojo Glinda had set up, Spike didn't know.

The cameras had been uncovered right as Harris had fumbled his attempt to reconcile with his jilted bride. After the talk had gone south, Xander had turned up at the Summers place, whingeing about how Anya didn't want to see him and how he'd made a right mess of everything. Spike had agreed with him, which had earned a scowl from the boy and a slap upside the head from his lady, and that might have gone on had Willow not had her bloody eureka moment and sussed out just how many feeds Warren was using to keep tabs on the Slayer. Once Harris had grabbed an eyeful of the Magic Box interior and realized that the gits had Anya under observation, he'd stormed off in a right fury, leaving the lot of them to watch the show courtesy of the witch's computer screen. Amid the protests of *invasion of privacy* and *wrong*, both Buffy and Willow had fallen quiet the second Harris exploded onto the scene. He'd stormed over to the shelf where the camera was hidden, Anya at his back, screaming things and hitting him over the shoulder—that was, until she saw what he was doing. The last frame before the feed went out had seen Xander and Anya looking down at the camera, both fuming, but not at each other, which Willow had reckoned was progress.

Granted, there had been a lot to keep them busy. Just that morning, Buffy had taken a jaunt to where they now knew Warren and the others were holed up, thanks to all bloody technology being traceable these days. She needed to go solo, she'd said, since they knew Spike couldn't hurt anyone and were liable to use that against her. So fixed on this idea that she'd gotten herself all worked up, ready to argue her fool

little head off, before realizing that Spike had agreed it was the better move.

Not that he'd liked it. He'd bloody hated it. But it was right—Warren had seen firsthand just how ineffective Spike was in a fight, and he'd exploit that in a big hurry if he thought it'd throw the Slayer off her game.

Still, as he'd watched her flit about her room, getting ready for a bright and early showdown, he hadn't been able to keep his trap shut. "He's aimin' to kill you, pet."

"I know."

"You gonna be ready to fight that? A bloke who won't stop?"

She'd blown out a breath, shrugging into a red leather jacket for what turned out to be its last outing in this world. "There are ways of incapacitating a guy that don't involve killing him," she'd replied. "I'll... I dunno, hit him over the head with something heavy. Make him see little tweety birds." Buffy had paused, met his gaze, then crossed the room to where he still lay in bed and taken his mouth in a soft kiss. "I'll be careful. Believe me, the next time I die, it's not going to be Warren dancing on my grave. I deserve a better death than that."

Once upon a time, that death had been his to give. Knowing that didn't make him feel better.

"You should get a jump on Teeth's list for the day," she'd told him on her way out the door.

Yeah, he'd reckoned he should. While the shark was more than happy to grant Buffy all the leniency in the world, his satisfaction with Spike's job performance was on less stable ground. Vampires were a dime a dozen according to Teeth, even ones as old, intimidating, and good at surviving he was.

Here soon, Spike would have to remind the fish stick that he and the Slayer were a package deal. But not that day. He'd wait until she came back, and sod the rest.

And come back she had, looking only slightly worse for wear. Turned out the place had been abandoned and booby-trapped like something out of a bloody Warner Brothers' cartoon. She'd managed to escape with minimal damage and grab books and literature for the reunited lover witches to mull over in the interim.

That had been that, more or less. Without a location to hit, Buffy was back at square bloody one where Warren was concerned. At least until Willow or Glinda made any headway with what she'd smuggled out of the nerd lair. There had been some talk of tracking down Harris, but he hadn't been at his flat and the Magic Box was again closed to the public. Buffy thought that might mean Xander and Anya had finally managed to work out whatever had gone wrong and were off together making up somewhere. Spike thought that might mean the former demon had finally wised up enough to realize that Xander was a waste of air, sought some old school vengeance, and was now tasked with finding the right place to dump the body. He didn't volunteer as much, though, seeing as he aimed to keep things between him and the Slayer like *this* as long as possible.

And hell, Spike loved *this*. The quiet moments he got to steal with her between running around to find these human wannabe Big Bads and patrols, even when patrols, like tonight's, featured a bit more pain than his lady was used to receiving. Loved the opportunity to take care of her, the one girl in the world who needed no looking after. The vamp who had sent her flying into a headstone had been a bloody blip, dust in the wind the second after it happened, but the damage had been done by then. She'd let herself lean on Spike a bit as they'd negotiated their way back, and when she'd suggested a hot bath to chase away the aches, he'd all but leaped at the chance to fill the role of caretaker he'd occupied so frequently in the past.

It was that she didn't need it—didn't need him—that made being here so bloody intoxicating. Never before had he given much thought to the difference between being needed and being wanted, had just assumed one was as good as the other, thick git. Knowing that Buffy wanted him was its own aphrodisiac. He couldn't get enough.

"Mmm," Buffy said, relaxing back against him with a sigh. "Water's getting cold."

"Can't have that."

"You could...heat it up a bit."

Seeing as the dials were on the other end of the tub, it seemed likely the type of heat she was talking about had little to do with water temperature. Which was just fine with him—not like Spike needed

incentive to touch her. He captured her earlobe between his teeth and tugged just hard enough to wrangle free a gasp, bringing his hands to her breasts.

"Can get you real nice and hot this way," he murmured, kissing a line down her neck, doing his best not to growl at the feel of her racing pulse. One of these days he was going to ask just how far that vamp fetish of hers went—the same she'd been reluctant to outright admit, though he wasn't sure who she thought she was kidding. Worked out well in his favor, either way, his girl's need for a little monster in her man. But he didn't know how much monster was too much—if he hinted about bringing his fangs into the bedroom, there seemed a fair chance she'd shut down and give him the boot for a few days.

There were times when she seemed close to asking for it, though. When he could hear her heart pick up and she'd flood his senses with the scent of thick, potent arousal. The thought was there, dangling in the air between them, waiting to be acknowledged, to be given voice.

*One of these days.*

"I like this way," Buffy said, thrusting her tits against his hands and, intentionally or not, grinding her pert little arse against his cock. Oh, who the hell was he kidding? It was definitely intentional. He didn't need to see that self-satisfied little smirk to know she was having a bloody ball. "This way is a good way."

"Yeah?"

She nodded, hissed a little when he tugged at her nipples. "Oh..."

"Here's the thing, love," Spike murmured, dragging his fingers down the flat line of her belly. "You got all the heat you need. Right here..."

He slid his hand over her pussy and groaned, couldn't help it. She burned him up with every bloody touch.

"Spike..."

"Yeah?"

"Can you... Please?"

"Please what?"

Buffy arched her hips. "You know."

"Fraid I need the words, pet." Because there were few things on

this earth sweeter than hearing the Slayer ask him to pretty please touch her. “Don’t be shy now.”

Granted, he loved her shy. Loved her bold and brassy, too. Loved whenever she couldn’t find the words and when she couldn’t stop saying them—all incarnations of her were glorious. Really, as long as she kept grinding her cunt against his hand like that, he was a happy bloke.

“You are mean,” Buffy breathed a moment later, rolling her hips against his hand. “So mean.”

“You love it.” He sucked her earlobe between his teeth again and gave it a good tug. “Don’t even try to deny it, Slayer.”

“You don’t have to be mean all the time. Sometimes you can be good.”

“Oh, I can be *very* good.” Something he decided to prove when she arched beneath him next, sliding a finger between her plump lips to toy with her clit. “Feel how good I can be?”

“Uh huh.” She nodded, her eyes squeezed closed. “Keep doing that.”

“If you insist...” Not that he was in a hurry to stop, now that he’d started, unapologetic addict that he was to every little sound she made. The way she moved and twisted, the subtle arches and less subtle thrusts as she tried to guide him where she wanted him. Spike drew slow circles around her clit, teasing her with the pad of his thumb and stretching his index and middle finger to her opening, nibbling harder up and down her throat, trying to ignore the tingle in his mouth that spoke to a deeper hunger.

God, he wanted that. Not only because he was certain he’d never tasted anything as sweet as her, but he also thought—*knew*—it’d send her over like nothing else could and *fuck*. She was already a bloody hellcat in bed—reading him, leading him, following him and matching him in ways no one ever had, or even tried—but to taste her like that as she clamped down around his cock would transcend anything he’d ever experienced with anyone.

“Unh...” Buffy reached behind her, linking her arm around his neck. “That...”

“You like that?” he murmured, sinking his fingers inside of her,

nearly hissing when she clamped around him. Liquid heat, she was, and he couldn't get enough. "Love the way you grip me, pet. Just like that."

"Ooh, good."

"Fuck, Slayer..."

"Mmm, I could get on board with that." And in a flash, she had twisted so she was facing him, practically lying across his chest, her eyes dark with lust and that other thing—the thing he knew was love, even if she hadn't said as much aloud just yet. "Though it could get splashy in here," she said, wrapping her small, lethal hand around his cock. "Really, really splashy."

Then her mouth was on his and god, he loved this too. The way she kissed him now, so different from before. That time outside of the Bronze had been pure bloody fire all right, and it had given him plenty to wank to over the coming weeks, but ever since she'd tugged on his shirt and taken him into her room, her kisses had become something beyond just heat.

He hadn't known then, though. That she loved him.

Buffy pulled away with a sharp gasp, the same way she did whenever she forgot that she needed air, and lifted herself so that she was poised above his cock. And she had just started inching her way down when the thunder of several hard knocks exploded against the bathroom door.

"Bloody *occupied!*" Spike snarled, digging his fingers into her hips. "For the next few hours at least, so sod off!"

There was a shuffle and a cough. "Hey, uhh, Buffy? You in there?"

"Umm, *really* not a good time, Xan," Buffy said after a moment, sinking all the way onto him. "I'm, uhh, in the middle of...a thing. But...I want to hear all about...uhhh, Anya. And stuff. Just...later."

Spike chuckled and started doting small kisses across her collarbone.

"Buffy, it's about Warren. I found him."

Well, that did it. Buffy froze, her brow furrowing and her eyes going wide.

"And...Willow and Tara think they might have found something in the stuff you got from the Fortress of Geekitude." A pause. "Sounds like you had quite the day. Sorry I missed it."

Wanker was going to be a whole lot sorrier if he didn't bugger off. Only the damage was done—he knew it. There was no way Buffy would steal away for a nice bathtub shag when there was an aspirant Big Bad needing to be put down.

Something she confirmed the next second, giving him a look of wide-eyed apology as she lifted herself off his cock and started to fumble her way out of the tub.

"Give us five," Buffy said, and he was pleased to hear she sounded as sour as he felt at having been interrupted. "We'll be down."

A beat, then there was another cough and the sound of heavy footsteps carrying away from the loo. Buffy, pout in full swing, started picking up the clothes he'd helped her shed upon arriving home.

"Seriously rethinking that no-killing-humans thing," she grumbled as Spike rose out of the water.

He decided not to take that bait. With his balls aching and not likely to get any relief anytime soon, he wagered whatever he had to say on the subject of the wankers responsible for ruining his evening would get him in more trouble.

"You gonna need a minute?" Buffy asked once she was dressed, her damp hair pulled over her shoulder and bleeding through the top she'd thrown on in a hurry. Her gaze was fixed on his erection, which had yet to deflate.

Spike glanced down and huffed. "Think it hasn't gotten the memo yet."

Something not aided when she reached out and gave his cock a long squeeze. "Well, hold that thought, okay?"

"Tease."

"Hey, I'm good for it." She beamed up at him with such an ornery little smirk he couldn't help but kiss it right off. "See you downstairs," she murmured against his lips, then turned and was gone before he could think to grab her back.

Which, he supposed, was just as well, no matter how his body complained. The sooner they put that wanker away—or, preferably, in the ground—the sooner he could stop worrying that Warren might muster up the courage to come at the Slayer with the sort of force that even she couldn't dodge. Then she could go back to focusing solely on



the otherworldly beasts that went bump in the night—those she wouldn't hesitate to put down for good if it came down to it.

Fuck, he hoped.



ALL THE GADGETRY and demon summoning prowess Warren had at his disposal, and he was seriously going for a bank robbery. Though, according to Xander, he was super powered now, which was one thing Buffy was fairly certain hadn't been in the plus column for Bonnie or Clyde.

Willow and Tara had stayed behind with Dawn, but Xander had insisted on coming with, though Buffy didn't know why, except he was agitated in a sort of telling way—like he needed to move, lest he just explode. And Spike, of course, had refused to sit out either, arguing that if Warren had superhuman strength now, it might be that he could hit him.

Buffy wasn't sure about that, but she also didn't have a ton of time to argue the point with him. If push came to shove, she would shove—hard—and apologize later.

According to Tara's information, Warren intended to hit an amusement park tonight. An amusement park Buffy hadn't been aware Sunnydale had or needed, given its miniscule population and sparse lodging options, but that wasn't her call to make. As it was, the second they stumbled on the scene, it became clear that Tara's intuition had been on the money. Buffy, Spike, and Xander rounded the corner to the main entrance just in time to watch Warren use his borrowed power to tip over an armored truck like it was a Hot Wheel or something.

Okay, so that was the level of strength he was playing with. All the better. She'd throw it back at him.

"I got Warren," she told Spike. "You and Xander, help those guys out of the truck."

She didn't wait for a response—didn't have time. Warren was literally tearing the door off the back, stacks of cash tumbling to the pavement. She launched herself onto the top of the overturned truck,

planted her hands on her hips, and aimed her patented Slayer glare down at the weasel.

"Hey. Is this your bank?"

Warren jerked back and looked up at her, gaping openmouthed. She couldn't wait to punch that mouth closed.

"Cause if not, there's gonna be a fee for that."

Leaping first and asking questions later was a tactic that had served Buffy well, if not flawlessly, over the last seven years. Warren might have super strength but he didn't have super instincts, so it seemed throwing herself at him was the best gamble to knock him off his footing. But he caught her with ease, surprising the crap out of her, and before she could gather her bearings, Buffy had been lobbed a good ten yards down the pavement.

*Okay. Oww.*

Flung about like a ragdoll. Spike was so going to give her crap later.

"I was wondering when Super Bitch would show up," Warren said with barely restrained glee, striding toward her.

"You really got a problem with strong women, don't you?" Buffy said, having pulled herself back to her feet.

"Nothing I can't handle."

She ducked the first swing that Warren threw her way but caught a faceful of fist with the second. And then they were trading blows like he was any other bad guy, and she fell into a rhythm her body knew well. A rhythm *he* shouldn't know but did. Every move she made seemed preempted in the same annoying way Spike once had forever ago. Block here, punch there, followed by a kick. But whatever Warren had learned from watching her these last few months had left him a little too cocky, and a cocky bad guy was her favorite kind.

"That all you got?" Warren screamed after she smacked him into the stone archway that led into the amusement park, either not hearing or not registering the crumbling sounds above him until a moment too late. He looked up just in time to greet the falling stone and rubble with his face before the rest of the debris collapsed and took him down with it.

"No!" came a melodramatic scream from across the lot. Buffy turned, catching Jonathan and the other guy staring at her in disbelief.

Good. Just enough time to show that being a lackey didn't pay.

"There's two ways this can end," Buffy said, walking toward them. "And right now? I'm thinking they're both gonna hurt."

The blond one gaped at her for a second before shifting his attention over her shoulder, the horror on his face turning into something a little less confidence-inspiring. "I think you're right."

Buffy whirled around just as Warren emerged from the rubble, looking a bit winded but otherwise unharmed.

"What's the matter, baby? You never fight a real man before?"

Then Spike was there, materializing from around the truck. Buffy barely had time to appreciate his appearance before he threw himself into the fray.

"You're a lot of things, mate," Spike snarled, chucking a fist into Warren's jaw. For a second, she thought the chip hadn't gone off and had a breath to wonder just what the hell that meant, but then realized Spike's head was twitching. The chip *was* going off—he was just ignoring it. She hadn't even known he could do that to that degree. "*Real man* doesn't make the list."

"Spike!" Buffy was moving the next instant, eating the distance separating her and Warren. "The drivers?"

"Out. Little banged up, but no worse for wear. Harris is playin' babysitter." Spike threw her a grin before punching Warren again. Again, she saw a jostle that told her the chip had triggered, and again he kept upright, no screams of pain or head clutching. "Thought you could use a hand."

She hesitated a beat too long, her mind stalling on the knowledge that Spike could fight through the pain with apparently no effort whatsoever, and Warren rebounded. The next second, Warren had Spike by the lapels of his duster and catapulted him toward the nearest wall by a row of abandoned concession vendors. There was the resonant *crack* of Spike's head meeting brick, and then he rebounded and collapsed into a corndog stand, which heaved a groan and toppled over, burying him in an avalanche of stainless steel.

Buffy's heart somersaulted and she let out a half-strangled cry.

"I hate it when he comes between us." Warren winked at her and blew her a kiss when she favored him with her attention once more.

"I'm a one-woman-man kinda guy, you know? It'd be nice if you'd respect that."

Then he was coming at her again, and one thing became clear—something she should have seen from the start. Hell, something Spike had been screaming at her for over a week now, even if she hadn't wanted to hear it. Buffy had to disregard the notion that Warren was human at all. He wasn't aiming to hurt, though the hurt was something he'd relish. He wanted her dead. Not just dead, but he wanted to be the one who put her back in the ground, and he thought he could. So much so he was enjoying himself. Every time he swung, bobbed, or weaved, his eyes blazed with the sort of crazed intent she'd seen a thousand times before. Either this ended with him dead or her.

*Not me. Not this time.*

The thought was a lifeline and she seized it, forcing everything else to the back to keep her focus clear. Not this time. This was not how her story ended. She'd faced hellgods, dammit—she would not be bested by the like of Warren Mears.

When she threw herself at him again, it was with everything she had. The spot on her back where she'd smashed into the headstone earlier roared its pain, but she ignored it. Ignored it and the ache in her lungs, the pounding in her head, the part of her desperate to rush over to make sure Spike was all right, something her brain refused to accept at face value even though she knew he was. If Jonathan or the other one had any wits about them, now would be the time to bring out the stakes and hit her where it would really hurt.

She just had to get Warren *down*.

But he shook off whatever she threw at him. Like Glory had been a warm-up act.

"Wow," Warren said, pulling himself to his feet after she kicked him into the armored truck. "That almost hurt, kitten."

Buffy somehow managed to swallow the scream that wanted out. If nothing else, she was going to rip out his tongue. The only person who got to call her obnoxious pet names was her vampire.

Only the swings she took at him seemed ineffective. The blows landed with the smack of flesh striking flesh, and she felt him flinch under each punch, but that was all it was. A flinch. And she was

quickly tiring, her muscles screaming for relief. That spot on her back might as well have been on fire, and Warren wasn't losing steam. He kept coming. Grabbing her, slamming her this way and that, rallied on by his crew of loyal toadies. Meanwhile Spike was still out of commission and Xander was... God, she didn't know where Xander was. Only hopefully somewhere far from here.

Her hands scraped the pavement when Warren knocked her down again, the back of her knee throbbing from the impact of his kick.

"You know who I am?" he screamed at her. "Huh, Slayer?"

"You're a murderer," Buffy replied, forcing herself up.

"Well, that too, but more to the point," Warren said, catching her next punch and repaying her with a backhand. "I'm the guy that beat you."

*Oh, fuck no.* Buffy charged at him again, but he was ready. Hell, he was almost Zen-calm. Like she was a gnat or something equally insignificant, dealing with the minor annoyance that was the Slayer attempting to smash his face in. And she had never felt anger like this. Not once. A burning, consuming thing with a life of its own, pulsing and rearing and desperate for release, only every time she clenched her fists, every time she made to let go, he caught her and threw her own strength back at her.

"And it's not the muscles, baby," Warren said before knocking her back with another kick. "It's the brains."

"I'll remember that when I knock 'em clean out of your—"

But something fell on her before she could get the rest of the threat out—something heavy and hot and squirmy enough to nearly send her to her knees.

"Whoa, Sparky!" Warren jeered from somewhere behind her. "I didn't think you had it in you!"

It was a testament to how much energy she'd expelled that she couldn't throw him off. That it took as long as it did for her to realize that, while Jonathan was clinging to her, that was all he was doing.

Then she heard it—his voice, low in her ear.

"The orbs. Smash his orbs."

She didn't give herself time to think, to wonder why. The next

second, she'd shucked Jonathan to the pavement and whirled around in time to catch Warren's next punch.

*Orbs? What orbs?* All she could see was the fist he had aimed at her face.

Then the ground went sideways, and she crashed into a park bench with such force it shattered into two pieces. And Warren was there, hovering over her, his eyes manic with victory.

"Say good night, bitch," he said, raising his fist for what she knew would be the final punch.

But the move pulled his jacket back, and Buffy's eyes followed the shift. Followed and settled onto a pouch attached to his waist. Whether or not it contained the orbs in question, she had no idea, but she didn't have time to look anywhere else. Buffy lunged forward, closed her fingers around the pouch, then smashed the thing to the pavement in a brilliant flash of blue light.

And just like that, it was over. She knew it and he knew it too. Warren stumbled back a step as though he'd lost his balance, giving Buffy the time she needed to pull herself to her feet.

"Good night, bitch," she said before forcing her aching muscles into one last brilliant spin-kick that had Warren flying back like a rag doll. She watched, releasing a satisfied sigh as he came crashing down with enough force to hopefully leave a serious bruise, and at last let herself relax.

*It's over. It has to be.*

These twerps were officially at the end of the road.

"Buffy!"

Buffy pressed her lips together, the lingering tension in her shoulders rolling off. Though she'd known Spike would be okay, it was damn good to hear his voice. She turned slightly toward him, not quite willing to take her eyes off her quarry. "You okay?" she asked.

"Nothin' damaged but my pride," Spike answered, sounding a bit sullen but more or less like himself. "Caught enough of the show, though."

"Xander?"

"Waitin' on the bobbies with the drivers." Spike took her elbow and squeezed. "You all right, pet?"

"Oh, I'm better than," she said. "Just about to finish up here."

She felt rather than saw him nod. There was one more squeeze to her elbow, then he let her go. And though it so wasn't the time, Buffy found herself swelling with love so potent her eyes were suddenly prickling. How he managed to pack so much into a simple squeeze was beyond her, but it was enough. The reassurance she felt there, the support. The silent acknowledgment that she had the situation handled but also the promise that he'd start swinging the second she asked him to.

Whether or not it hurt. He'd fight through it if he needed to. Perhaps that ought to unsettle her, but right then, with him at her side and her body screaming under the strain of the beating she'd taken, it did not. Love was about trust and she trusted. Hell, she had for a long time now.

Tonight, she decided. Tonight was the night Spike got the words.

But first, she had a worm to smush.

"You're nothing but a sad little boy, Warren," Buffy said, prowling toward the man-child whose fantasy had ended. "But it's time you grow up and pay for what you've done."

Warren shuffled backward, that manic look still in his eyes. "Get away from me," he said, shredding his jacket. Though to what end she had no clue. It seemed an odd move to make at a time like this. "I swear to god, I'm gonna take you down. You piece of—"

But the last word was swallowed by a roar and a burst of smoke, and Warren was gone. More precisely—up. Flying straight up into the Sunnydale night sky, care of the honest-to-god *jetpack* strapped to his back.

"Oh, come *on*," she whined.

"What the *bloody* hell." Spike thundered to her side, his head thrown back. "Son of a bitch."

"The words. You took them out of my mouth," Buffy agreed, her neck beginning to cramp. "That's just not fair."

"Well played, Slayer," said someone in front of her.

She leveled her head again. The blond lackey, standing next to Jonathan, was looking at her with calm assuredness that seemed out of

place on him. That was until he stripped off his jacket and she caught a glimpse of the jetpack strapped to his back.

"Why didn't I get one of those?" Jonathan had the audacity to moan.

"This round to you," the blond continued coolly. "But the game is far from over."

That undoubtedly would have been a killer closing line had the roof overhang not been directly above the little twerp's head. As it was, Buffy watched as the epic liftoff getaway culminated in the lackey's crash back to planet earth, apparently with enough force to knock him out.

Beside her, Spike snickered. She didn't blame him, torn between needing to scream her frustration and laugh this whole thing off. In the end, she did neither, rather locked her gaze on Jonathan. The henchman without a jetpack, and apparently without a leader anymore.

"You're not gonna run, are you?" she asked, and nearly melted with relief when the distant wail of sirens reached her ears.

"This wasn't the way it was supposed to be, Buffy," Jonathan replied in an urgent whisper. "I didn't want this."

"Yet here you are." She crossed her arms. "Crime doesn't pay."

"Specially not the way you lot go about it," Spike added. When Buffy turned her glare to him, he flashed her an unrepentant grin. "Just sayin', this one's too baby soft for a good night's villainy."

That might be true, but it was hardly the point. Only she didn't have energy to care too much right now. Every muscle Spike had worked out earlier was bunched up and tense again. She saw the world's longest bubble bath in her future. If she wanted to be in any kind of shape to beat up deadbeats tomorrow, the rest of the night had to be heavy on the rest and relaxation.

The roar of sirens drew nearer, red and blue lights flickering off the storefronts and walls that surrounded them. She turned to greet them and was just in time to see Xander keel over in front of her, his hands on his knees as he caught his breath.

"So," he said, panting like he had run a marathon. "What all did I miss?"



"Big fight. Warren rocket-boyed away." Buffy threw a glance over her shoulder to make sure the blond hadn't stirred, and that Jonathan was where she'd left him. To think, tonight had had all the hallmarks of a quiet, tranquil evening not all that long ago.

Still, this was good. Really good. Warren might still be on the lam, but his support staff would soon be behind bars. All she had to do was hunt him down and make sure the next time she had him cornered, he wasn't wearing anything sci-fi looking. All of that was worth the destruction of one of her favorite jackets. Probably. She hoped.

Buffy shook her head, and, despite herself, smiled a bit when she felt Spike's arm wrap around her middle. "This calls for ice," she told him, and warmed when he chuckled.

"I'll do you head to toe," he promised in a low voice.

And just like that, it seemed entirely possible that the relaxing night at home, cuddled up with her supernatural honey, might be salvageable after all.

If anyone could pull off that kind of rescue, it was Spike.



IT TURNED out the reason Xander had insisted on tagging along on the excursion to corner Warren and friends was so he could talk to Spike. He'd wanted *Spike's* input on something relationship-related. This revelation nearly succeeded in finishing the job of knocking Buffy off her feet. It would have, maybe, had Spike not had his arm firm around her waist on the walk back to Revello Drive.

She knew Xander had been squatting at Spike's crypt, something that also boggled her mind as her friend was more than a little vocal in his hatred of all things vampire-y. Though, she reasoned, it had been a decent place to hide, seeing as literally no one would have thought to look for him there. Apparently, though, at some point during Xander's self-imposed exile, there had been words between him and the vampire. Perhaps an attempt at male bonding, though she was careful not to say as much to Spike. Or Xander, for that matter, on suspicion that he would immediately put a kibosh on further such attempts.

But he still wanted Spike's opinion on something. Just Spike's—no other Scoobies need apply.

Buffy didn't have it in her to protest or pry. Well, she wanted to pry. Wanted to poke and prod and pester until her curiosity was satiated, but she managed to bite her tongue and keep biting it as Xander asked Spike—as in *Spike*, her vampire boyfriend—if he could grab a beer or something.

"Now?" Spike demanded once they reached the front porch, shooting Buffy a bewildered look. "Slayer's all banged up. I was gonna—"

"Spike," Buffy replied with a soft smile, "it's okay. Go. Have fun."

Now the look was less bewildered and more *are you off your tree?* "But—"

"No. Go. I'm just gonna take some aspirin and hit the sack."

He stared at her a moment longer, glanced at Xander, then stepped forward to invade her bubble. "Thought you wanted the ice treatment, pet."

"Ice treatment can wait," she replied. "Go play nice with my friend."

"Would rather play nice with you," he said in a low undertone.

"Do you have any idea how big a deal it is that Xander asked you out on a man-date?"

Xander cleared his throat. "It's not a man-date, and if it's gonna be a big thing, I'll just—"

"No," Buffy said quickly, giving Spike a little shove. "No, it's good. We're good. Spike?"

The look on Spike's face said clearly that it was not good. It also said that he would do as she asked, even if he didn't like it. After a beat, he released a sigh and nodded. "Right," he said. "Guess we'll keep holdin' that thought, then."

"It's the kinda thought that'll keep," Buffy agreed, then inched forward to give him a kiss. "But when you get back, I have a thing to tell you too."

"Yeah?"

"That thing I keep meaning to tell you but don't. I want to tell you now. Well, not now-now. Later-now. When it's just us."

At that, the clouds in his eyes blinked away, chased off by a smile so bright her knees threatened to go out. Over the years, she'd seen him smirk or grin or sneer any number of times, but a bona fide smile was something he'd rarely shared with her. That was until now. And it was a good thing, too. Had he whipped it out at any other point in their relationship, she wasn't sure she would have appreciated it for what it was. What it meant.

"I love you," he said before kissing her again. "Now and later and always."

It would have been easy, so easy, to just say it then. Say it with him giving her that radiant smile, so that he could take it with him when he left. After all, he knew what she wanted to tell him, and had known for a few days now. The words themselves were just a formality at this point.

But it was an important formality. A milestone formality, even. And call her selfish, but Buffy wanted the moment to be one she made special. Not blurted after a fight during which she'd nearly gotten her ass handed to her. So she didn't say it, not then, just nodded and watched as her vampire boyfriend and her friend who hated vampires strolled back up the driveway side-by-side like it was the most normal thing in the world.



SLIGHTLY AFTER ONE in the morning, Spike called to let her know he doubted he'd be back before sunup. The thing Xander wanted to talk to him about was Anya. He needed, according to Spike, a man's perspective. *Specifically* the perspective of a man *demon*. Even more specifically, the perspective of a man demon *who had tried to change*. Because Anya was a demon again.

"Happened right after the wedding, he said," Spike had told her. "Guess that was somethin' we all shoulda seen coming."

Yeah. If Anya had been the patron demon of scorned women, leaving her stranded at the altar right in front of her old demon boss had pretty much guaranteed that she'd get an offer she couldn't refuse.

Spike was right—they *should* have seen it coming.

That was where Xander had been since yesterday, with Anya. Buffy had suspected as much—the last they’d seen of him until he’d shown up with news about Warren was the glare he’d aimed the camera before shutting off the feed. Somehow, the discovery of that camera, and Xander’s rush to stop it, had led to him and Anya having an actual conversation. She’d been taken with his gallantry, with how much he cared—or so he’d told Spike. So much so that she hadn’t chased him away after he’d disposed of the camera. So they’d talked themselves blue all night. About them, Xander’s fears, how badly he’d bungled things, how he wanted them to work, and was willing to do whatever it took to make it up to her.

And over the course of that, she’d dropped the demon bomb.

“Boy’s tryin’ to come to grips with it,” Spike had said. “Havin’ a right old time, far as I can tell.”

“Stay with him. Be a good friend.”

“Bite your tongue. We are *not* friends. Just as soon eat the wanker.”

Buffy had sighed. “Do it for me, then.”

“Why the bloody hell do you think I’m here?” There had been a pause, filled with background noise at the Bronze. “Looks like he found his way outta the loo. Get some kip, sweet. I’ll pop by tomorrow.”

“All right. And then I’ll tell you. You know, the thing.”

When he spoke again, it was impossible to miss the grin in his voice. “Can’t wait to hear it.”

Knowing that she wasn’t going to have any nighttime knockers on her window helped Buffy find sleep a bit easier, though she did have some trouble getting comfortable without her vampire body pillow. It was still a bit unnerving, just how accustomed she’d gotten to having Spike with her at all times. Already she had a clear divide—her side of the bed and his—and though this didn’t stop her from spreading out on the nights she was alone, she did feel a little strange about it. Likewise, while waking up without him curled around her might make it easier to start her morning, she found she wasn’t in as good a mood as she was whenever he was there to tease her with his hands and mouth before she fought her way to the shower.

She was also, as Spike had observed, a bit on the banged-up side,

which made the sleep she was able to chase down restless and uncomfortable. When her alarm went off the next morning, she smacked it a few more times than she would have normally, her body begging for a break that wouldn't come. Whatever power boost Warren had given himself had made him the sort of baddie that would take a couple of days to walk off. That she hadn't gotten the ice therapy or any of the perks of having a touchy-feely boyfriend the night before didn't help matters, either.

Alas, there were bills to pay, and being too sore from a fight sounded like a really great way to lose face in front of her demon boss. So, after the fifth *snooze* had run its course, Buffy pulled herself to her feet and started the slow process of getting ready. She had just gathered her things for a shower when she heard the front door slam below, then heavy footsteps coming up the stairs.

*Spike.*

Well, tease a guy so many times about a love confession and it was no wonder he'd bolt over first thing, even if it was a particularly flammable time of day.

Buffy blew out a breath, her nerves suddenly all over the place. Okay, this was the moment. Now, right now, before she went to work. No chickening out this time. No—

The door exploded inward and everything inside of her dropped.

It wasn't Spike.

Warren hadn't changed from the night before—had gotten even less sleep than she, from the looks of it. His hair was mussed, his eyes frenzied and wild, and fixed on her with something blacker than hate.

"You think you can just do that to me? You think I'd let you get away with that?" he demanded, his voice strangled between a laugh and a scream. "Think again."

He raised his hand, bringing her eye level with the barrel of a gun. And fired.

## NOBODY HOME

HER HEAD THROBBED—NOT JUST THROBBED, POUNDED. LIKE something was lodged on the inside, beating against her skull in the hopes the bone would eventually crack, which seemed entirely possible at the moment. It wasn't just her head, either. Her neck ached, radiating pain across her shoulders and down her spine. The muscles in her arms felt more like limp noodles—noodles that had been steamrolled, backed over, and steamrolled again. There was a stone in her belly and she could have sworn she felt her heart wheeze as it pumped. As though the task of keeping her alive had become something other than natural.

Everything hurt.

*Everything.*

A blank space existed where the previous gap of seconds should have been—white static betraying a lost signal. A few observations eventually breached the hammering inside her head, and even those hurt. Thoughts themselves had developed sentience and were anything but happy about it.

Fact one: she was on the floor.

Fact two: there was blood. The scent overwhelmed her senses and

being that she wasn't a vampire or an otherworldly creature, being able to smell it like this meant there was a lot.

Fact three: she was pretty sure she was going to throw up.

Buffy remained still, half-hoping unconsciousness would claim her again and let her tap out until she felt up to the task of dealing with whatever had happened. The thought of moving, never mind opening her eyes, had bile bubbling up her throat. Still, some part of her—the slayer part—knew that she had to move. Because if she felt this bad, then odds were fantastic someone else was worse off.

*Dawn? Where's Dawn? Is today a school day?*

God, she really couldn't remember.

*What is the last thing you do remember?*

Last thing she remembered was...fight. There had been a fight. Warren and his super strength. And then...a jetpack? Was that right?

Memory was a blade, slicing into her brain with enough force she couldn't help but cry out. But the black nothing that filled the moments after Warren's flight to freedom suddenly burst with new information. Walking home. Standing on the porch with Spike. A phone call later. He wouldn't be home. Xander needed advice. Then waking up that morning in an empty bed, hearing the front door slam and thinking it was her vampire. Opening her bedroom door and—

*Warren.*

Warren. A gun. An explosion.

Buffy's eyes flew open of their own accord, the light in her room a physical thing that had the situation in her head nearing the border of unbearable. But it *was* her room—she knew that ceiling. Knew the contours of her walls, the position of her dresser, the color of her bedspread. Whatever had happened hadn't killed her.

The stench of blood assailed her nostrils again, harsher and more horrible than before. And though the thought of moving was painful, she had no choice. Something had happened and she couldn't wait to feel better to find out what. So Buffy did what she always did. She shoved everything back, all of it, and forced herself to sit up.

The room threatened to tip over the second she was upright, swimming and winking at the edges and *god help me*. But she didn't collapse

again, managed to fight back the renewed rush of sick before it could broach her mouth. Instead, Buffy took a deep breath, then another, and looked.

Blood was splattered along the floor where her head had been, darkened with age but undeniably blood. It was also on her bedspread, stark against the white, and flecked elsewhere around the room. Buffy sucked in a deep breath, winced when her lungs complained, then lifted a hand to survey the damage. While she hurt all over, the pain wasn't the sort likely to kill her. More like she had been through the Cruciamentum, only instead of one vampire, she'd faced every significant Big Bad she'd ever put down, then gotten absolutely hammered before the drugs could wear off. Nothing to indicate that she'd lost a wig-worthy amount of blood and should be racing to call an ambulance.

She swallowed something that tasted awful, her gaze landing on a small speck of gray lying near the place her head had been just a moment ago. Something that, more than the blood, didn't belong.

*What?*

She knew what it was before she reached for it, before she ran her fingers over the grooves in the warped metal. There had been a gun so a bullet made sense. But this wasn't just a bullet—it was a bullet that had been fired. At least she thought so. Buffy wasn't exactly a firearms expert, but she was pretty sure bullets that hadn't been fired were less misshapen than the thing on her carpet.

Blood plus bullet plus pain. Had she been shot? She jerked her hand from the thing and started feeling her face. Dried blood had crusted against her brow and not just a little. Her heart gave another painful lurch, and then she was moving for real. Climbing to her feet, ignoring her body's protests, and taking in the whole view.

"Oh god."

The splatter went as far back as the opposite wall. Her bedding was ruined, her pillows too. God, some had even landed on Mr. Gordo. The heaviest concentration was where she'd been on the floor, but every corner of the room seemed tainted. Touched. And when she turned to meet her own gaze in the mirror, the thing that blinked back



at her was like something out of a horror movie, except it was wearing her face.

That was what disturbed her most of all—her eyes, ears, nose, and mouth were all where they were supposed to be. Her hair was saturated in rusted red but attached. There was no broken skin that she could see, no bone peeking through anywhere. No mark at all. She looked like Carrie after the prom but there was nothing wrong with her. If not for the way her head pounded, she would have no reason to think any of the blood caking her face and neck belonged to her. But somehow she knew it did.

Warren had shot her. At point-blank range. He'd shot her in the face.

And she was standing up. Somehow she was standing up. Breathing air. Looking around at her crime scene of a bedroom. Experiencing the horrible impact of...of what?

*Of having been dead. Again.*

The thought was too big for her over-full mind. Buffy couldn't handle it. Never mind that it couldn't be true. There had been no white light, no feeling of peace and finality, nothing but a vast, endless void of black. She knew intimately what dying felt like.

Didn't she?

No, if she'd been dead, she'd know it, right? Both times she'd died, there hadn't been any question about what had happened. If anyone was going to be the expert on what dying felt like, it was Buffy Anne Summers.

She couldn't have died again. That made no sense.

Which meant whatever had happened in here hadn't been the worst of it. The answers she needed were outside her bedroom.

Her legs were wobbly but Buffy convinced them to move, staggering toward the door and doing what she could to force those impossible thoughts to the back of her mind. She needed to see the others—make sure Dawn was okay. Make sure—

She made it to her door and stopped short, and this time she couldn't keep her stomach from rebelling. Buffy stumbled, not quite falling over, as whatever she'd last eaten came rushing up her esophagus and spewing onto the carpet.

There wasn't as much blood in the hall as there was in her room. For whatever reason, she thought that might mean that the bullet Tara had taken had been less direct, or at least not fired with the same fixed intent as the one Warren had shot at her. But the result was the same—or what should have been the same. Tara was on her side, a look of shock and fear frozen on her face, her eyes wide and unblinking, and the front of her sweater drenched in red.

"No," Buffy moaned, raising a trembling hand to her mouth. "No, no, no. Tara?"

Adrenaline charged inward and did its thing, shoving all of her bodily aches aside like they hadn't existed. In a blink, Buffy was at her friend's side, hand on her shoulder, shaking even though she knew it was no good. She had been here before, shaking someone she loved and trying to bring them out of death, and she knew what happened next.

*Except I'm here. I'm alive. He shot me—didn't he?—and I'm alive.*

But Tara wasn't alive and jostling her wouldn't bring her back.

Buffy couldn't say what happened next, the seconds spanning the upstairs hall to the downstairs phone blank, as though they hadn't existed. That fugue was familiar too, how the time following discovery became a blur of meaningless shapes and colors, thoughts running in all directions without guidance or logic. She raised the phone to her ear, not sure who she'd meant to call, but somehow unsurprised when Xander picked up after an endless series of rings.

"I said I'd be in by noon," he answered, his voice draggy in a way that told her he was half-asleep. "If this stomach bug doesn't—"

"Xander."

A pause. "Buff? Hey, Buff. Sorry. I... I called in this morning and thought you might be... Anyway, what's up?"

"Tara. She's been shot."

"Whoa, wait, what? Shot? What do you mean, shot?"

"Warren."

"Buffy, where are you?"

"I'm at the house." She looked around to verify this. It wouldn't have surprised her to discover she had managed to change scenery

again without her notice. "Dawn's not here. Willow, either. I can't find them."

"I'm on my way." Another pause. "*We're* on our way."

"Anya?"

"Spike."

Buffy pressed her eyes closed, trembling. "Spike. He's there?"

"Yeah. It was...way late when I stopped drinking and... Christ, Buffy, have you called an ambulance?"

"Ambulance?"

"For Tara. You said she was shot."

It was becoming too hard to keep her grip on the phone. Her eyes stung and her throat felt tight. "It's too late," she said. "She's gone."

And before Xander could get anything else out, ask anything else, Buffy hung up.



"BUFFY? BUFFY!"

She blinked and snapped back to herself—back to the present, from wherever else she'd been. Spike was in front of her, gripping her upper arms, his eyes wide and full of something she had never seen there before. When she looked at him, a weight rolled away from somewhere inside of her. A weight that had been hard and immovable, so much so she hadn't realized it was there, suffocating her until it disappeared. But now she could breathe again and the noise inside her head took a back seat.

"I think I died," she managed to choke out before launching herself at him with such force the coffee table went soaring across the living room from where his back hit it. She thought he might topple back but he didn't. Instead, his arms went around her, firm and comforting, and she buried her face in the crook of his neck, submerging herself in the familiar scent of leather and smoke. The things that had kept her grounded this last year, following her death and resurrection. That had helped her breathe again.

"Fuck," he murmured, wrapping himself around her as she crumbled. "Fuck."

"It was Warren. He showed up. Came in the house. I thought it was you." She tightened her hold on him. "I opened the door. He had a gun. He shot me. I think. I *think*. I don't know. I can't remember. But if he shot me, shouldn't I be dead? How am I not dead?"

A low growling sound rumbled through Spike's throat but he didn't speak. Just let her continue.

"And...and I woke up. In my room. There's blood. It's everywhere." She forced her throat to work. "A bullet too. But I don't... I'm not hurt." Patches of foggy memory started leaking in again and she remembered the hallway. "Tara! Tara's—"

"She's gone." That voice came from her right. Buffy blinked and turned, not sure why she was startled to find Xander standing there. She had called him—she remembered that. She had called him and then come and sat on the sofa. How long ago had that been?

Xander looked every bit as defeated as she felt, like he had aged a hundred years, except only around the eyes. Everything else was the same. He knelt beside her, beside them, and began running his hand over her neck and through her hair. "Your room is a bloodbath. Are you sure you weren't shot?"

"I was shot." She thought. "There's a bullet in there. He shot me. I think I died. And...then I woke up."

He blinked, his face falling slack, and she wasn't sure he believed her. Or maybe he did and that was why.

"Dawn?" Buffy asked hoarsely. "Dawn and Willow...?"

"Dawn's at school. I called to check. She caught a ride this morning with Janice," Xander said after clearing his throat. "It's Tuesday."

Buffy nodded, though she didn't know why until she was halfway through the motion. Tuesdays were the days Janice's mom had her early networking meeting—the day she was available to drive her daughter to school, and by extension her daughter's best friend. Not a Chauffeur Xander day. Dawn must have missed Warren by minutes.

"Willow?"

Xander shook his head. "I... No sign of her upstairs. I got noth—"

The phone began to ring, harsh and awful. Buffy screwed up her face, unwinding enough from Spike to bring her fingers to her temples. The pounding that had been there since she'd awakened remained

stubbornly persistent, though it had faded somewhat between the phone call she'd placed and Spike and Xander's arrival. Whether that was slayer healing doing its thing or she was just getting used to it, she didn't know, though it seemed likely that her natural gifts were rushing to her aid. After all, it always took her a bit to recover fully after being on the receiving end of a good beating—a bit, but not much. Rebounding after being dead?

*You don't know you were dead.*

But she felt, on some bone-deep level, she did know. Warren had murdered her and she'd come back.

Where else had all the blood come from? What else could explain the bullet in her room?

*If you were dead, how are you okay now?*

"That was Anya," Xander said in a rush, before her mind could let her go down that particular labyrinth. "It's...Willow. We have a problem."



THERE WASN'T time to think or argue. They had to move. But they also had to stay. Buffy wouldn't let Dawn come home and find Tara crumpled in the hallway, abandoned and forgotten while her big sister rushed to head off a bad situation before it got worse. And she couldn't leave Tara in the hall, either. Tara deserved better. They all did.

"What will you tell them?"

Spike didn't so much as glance up. He hadn't taken his eyes off the mess of blood in her room since accompanying her upstairs. It was as she remembered and worse, somehow, seeing it was still there. It along with the body of her dead friend just a few feet away. The entire upstairs stank of death.

"Spike?"

He shook his head as though being pulled out of somewhere deep and met her eyes. "Don't rightly know," he said, his gaze now traveling down the length of her throat. "Still reckon it ought to be Harris who stays here, talks to the bobbies."

"No. If Willow is off the wagon, she needs her friends."

It was nice having something to focus on, something to do. That Willow was in crisis provided a neat, almost tidy distraction from the horror show that was her home at the moment. Kept her brain busy, moving forward, always forward. Not focusing on the fact that she should be on the floor amid all that dried blood, that there should be two bodies for the coroner to pick up. For the police to question the household over.

“Still not seein’ the worry here,” Spike said, his voice harder than it had been before. “Way Anya talks, she only aims to give that bastard what he has comin’ to him.”

And there was that, too. The divide between her and Spike—too large to think about right now, especially with a head that had yet to completely stop aching. Anya had said that Willow was in deep pain, horrific pain, and radiating so much vengeful intent that in any other situation, she would be compelled to go to her and answer the call. But Willow didn’t want help—Willow had blown her way into the Magic Box, sucked the juice out of the darkest texts, and left without so much as glancing in Anya’s direction.

Willow had chosen the path Spike would have taken—would still take if given the option. The way he’d gone quiet when he’d escorted her into her bedroom hadn’t escaped her notice. The more she moved, the more she accepted that this was her reality, the clearer her thinking became. This, after all, was what she did best. Compartmentalize, regroup, and fight. She could do that. She could wait until later to break down. To unravel the horror that had become her world.

“You know I can’t let her do that,” she said, shrugging on a T-shirt. The tank top and pajama bottoms she’d worn to bed were on the floor. Evidence for the cops, though they wouldn’t understand what had happened up here. There was too much blood for just one person. But hey, they were old pros at looking the other way when necessary, when the evidence didn’t line up with a crime scene and eyewitness accounts contradicted natural law. That the homeowner wouldn’t be the one to make the call, give the report was just another thing the local authorities would have to swallow. Buffy didn’t have time to wait, and neither did Willow.

*Neither did Warren.*

"Know you want to," Spike countered, his voice shaking. "Somewhere deep down, you want him to squirm and squeal and feel every bit of what he did here. To you. To *her*."

Buffy couldn't examine that too closely. "I can't right now."

"Slayer—"

"Spike, I know you don't get it. I know this *isn't* complicated to you, but it is to me and if you love me, you need to help me now." Her eyes prickled again and her sinuses burned, but before he could reply, she was pressed up against him, shaking and dancing so near the edge she wasn't sure how she remained upright but managed all the same. "Please. Please. I *can't* do this with you. I can't. I need you to be... I need you to be what I need you to be. *Please*."

There was a pause. A long one. She heard him sigh, heard him swallow, and when she pulled back to catch his eyes, what she saw there had her heart—*her still-beating heart*—doing things it shouldn't.

Though she'd always promised herself she'd never lose sight of what he was, she realized at that moment that she had done just that. It was easy to forget Spike was a vampire when he walked and acted like a man on most occasions, superhuman strength and all. The cold disregard, the black hate, shining through his eyes was not unfamiliar to her, but it had been a damn long time since she'd seen him wear it.

"He deserves to bloody pay for what he did," he said in a low, trembling undertone. "To you. Her too. He *shot* you."

"I'm right here."

"Buffy—" His voice cracked.

She cupped his cheeks and kissed him, not knowing what else to do. But also needing it herself—knowing that she was leaving her house in the hands of the man who loved her, not the monster he had been once, even if he could never fully outrun its shadow. And when he sighed and chased her tongue with his, the hardness lining his muscles relaxing under her fingers, she knew she'd found him.

"Please," she said again. "Can you handle this?"

Spike blinked at her, then nodded. "Right. Yeah. I'll make the call."

"Thank you." Buffy kissed him again. "We need to go."

"I know."

"And Tara... You'll..."

"Downstairs." He nodded again. "Better for me downstairs. Away from..." He gestured broadly at the room. "Demon's a bit closer to the surface up here."

Buffy dropped her gaze to the blood-covered carpet, feeling like an idiot. "Is it weird that didn't even occur to me? It must smell like lunch in here."

Apparently, that had been the wrong thing to say. Spike whipped his head toward her again, his jaw tight and his nostrils flared. The glare he pinned her under could have frozen an open flame. "Smells like *you*, pet," he snapped. "Smells like death. Like the woman I love had her bloody head blown off and where was I, eh? With *Harris*?"

"Spike—"

"And yeah, now that you mention it, 'cause I am a sodding monster, it also smells like a ripe old time for Spike. Kinda mess I aimed to make of you once upon a time. Wanna know how that makes me feel? How any of this makes me feel?"

God, she was close to crying again and she couldn't. She didn't have time. Not right now.

"Buffy!" sounded from downstairs. "Everything okay up there?"

No. Nothing was okay. Could be that nothing would be okay ever again. Which really sucked because things had been on the path to close to perfect.

"I gotta go," Buffy said, dropping her gaze from her vampire's. "I... I gotta..."

She made to move past him, around him, out the door, and down the stairs to focus on the emergency she was equipped to handle. Not the confusing mess that was her relationship status at the moment.

But Spike caught her wrist, whirled her back to him before she could clear the doorway.

"Spike, I don't have time—"

"I know." He kissed her hard, fast. "Sorry, pet. Didn't mean..." He looked away, frustration tightening his features. "Don't have the words for what I mean. Only words I have are, I love you."

Buffy softened, offered him a smile to show she understood and



hoped the smile wasn't a lie. She didn't think it was, but there wasn't time to filter through her thoughts. Of which there were a lot and not all of them clear. She supposed dying again—*did I?*—could do that to a person.

The only thing that mattered right now was that she had a friend to save.

Assuming, of course, that she wasn't too late.



"Do you know what you're going to say?" Xander asked as they hurried toward the open door that led to Willy's. "Cause I sure as hell don't."

Buffy shook her head. She hadn't let herself think that far forward. Nothing that had happened from the moment she'd braved the pain of opening her eyes had been planned more than five minutes in advance. Willow likely thought she was dead. And why shouldn't she? Odds were, the last time she'd seen her, Buffy had been very dead.

So far, that was all she had going for her. The chance of startling Willow out of whatever she was doing to Warren.

"Here I'm thinking, 'Hey, how 'bout them Razorbacks?' isn't going to cut it," Xander continued. "And she was never into sports."

"Xander."

"I know, I'm rambling." He paused, took her arm. "And you... Buffy..."

No time to think. If she stopped long enough, she'd dissolve, and dissolving was not an option right now. "Keep moving."

Since Buffy hadn't been thinking far ahead, she had no concept of what to expect when she and Xander finally broached the threshold of the bar. Anya had said this was where to find Willow, the place the signature of her rage burned the hottest. Why Willy's, Buffy didn't know...only part of her did. Clearly Warren had been able to make a clean getaway following the bloodshed at Revello Drive. And where would a guy like him go after killing the Slayer?

Somewhere he could be lauded. Boast loudly about what he'd done. Somewhere he could be the hero.

If Warren had had an audience at any point prior to this one, it

was long gone. The place was a mess—tables overturned, puddles of spilled drink splotching the floor, napkins and crumbs and plates scattered here, there, and everywhere. The assortment of booze behind the bar had shattered, the stools in front of it fractured into pieces. Something very clearly had torn its way through here—something with the impact of a hurricane, leaving behind a field of destruction and debris. Willy's had been the scene of many bar fights, some nasty and others deadly, but Buffy had never seen it like this.

There was no blood, though. That was something. Wasn't it?

Xander stood beside her, breathing heavily. "Buffy, where?"

But his guess was as good as hers. "I—"

"Help!"

The scream, deep and guttural, had her running before her brain could catch up. There was an area, she knew. The place Kendra had shown her a lifetime ago as where she'd trapped Angel. Away from the front-facing business, better suited for whatever deal Willy had managed to broker that week.

And when Buffy crashed through that doorway, she found what she'd come for.

Warren was strung up inside the cage, or what was left of it. His arms were stretched wide to either side, thin metal twined around each wrist, holding him taut above the floor. That metal was around his ankles too, scraps of the destroyed fence, the skeleton of which seemed to curve in around him like a cocoon. His eyes were wide, bloodshot, and his skin was shining with a sheen of sweat, and when he saw her—saw Buffy—his mouth gaped open and another scream wrenched loose.

"Stop it!" he shouted, jerking his gaze back to the figure in front of him. The figure Buffy didn't realize was Willow until she was far enough into the room to see her face.

But there was nothing of Willow left in that face—none of the bright vivaciousness or the way she seemed to burn with life, even when she was in pain. Whatever had been Willow had taken leave, leaving behind something warped and almost unrecognizable. Something with cold unblinking eyes and curtains of black hair that made

Willow's otherwise pale skin look even paler. Something so completely *not* Willow that Buffy could do nothing but stare.

"Stop it!" Warren screamed again, spittle flying, his lower lip trembling. "I don't wanna see her!"

The thing wearing Willow's face turned at that, not much—just a small nudge of her head until her eyes were on Buffy. There was a blink, and maybe a flicker of surprise, but nothing else.

"Oh," she said in a dull voice that only barely resembled her own. "It's you."

"It's me," Buffy agreed, her heart jackhammering so hard she could barely hear herself. "Willow...what are you doing?"

She blinked before slowly returning her attention to her captive. "I am solving a problem."

"Oh god," Xander breathed out. He seemed to have nothing else.

"Willow—"

"He is a problem, Buffy. You understand that, don't you?" She stepped forward—not much, care of the scraps of the cage, but enough that Warren jerked, or tried to, and let out another whimper. "He's been a problem for months. A problem you let run unchecked around Sunnydale."

"I didn't *let* anything," Buffy shot back, ice flooding her veins. "What happened this morning—"

"What *did* happen this morning?" Willow turned to face her fully now. "I'll tell you what I remember. Then you can tell me what you remember. We'll compare."

"That can't be her," Warren sputtered, his eyes wild. He was staring at Buffy now in open fascination, though not without a healthy dose of fear. "I killed you, bitch! I killed you!"

While she'd known it, *felt* it, hearing it was still a blow—one that nearly had her knees buckling. A thousand possibilities exploded in her head, each less likely than the last, but still all the more likely because in a world where this was possible, *anything* was possible.

"Well, it didn't take," Buffy spat. "And since I'm here to save your pathetic life, maybe less with the talking before I change my mind."

Willow snorted, her black lips twitching. "You're here to save his life."

"If it makes you feel better, I'm not wild about it, either." She took a breath. "You haven't done anything yet. We can stop this now before anyone else gets hurt."

"Oh, but Buffy, I want someone to get hurt." The witch looked back to Warren, who immediately began to whimper and struggle against his restraints once more. "I want him to hurt the way he hurt her. The way he hurt you."

"I'm fine."

A snicker. "You're fine," Willow replied dully. "You're fine. I do one little ritual and you mope about it for months. This waste of skin and air tries to send you back to the place I pulled you from, and lookee here, I saved you again." She turned to meet Buffy's gaze. "Not meaning to, of course. Sorry about that."

Once again her heart stuttered. "What?"

Willow shrugged, then smiled—a smile that suffused Buffy in cold. "Only thing that makes sense, isn't it? Why else would you be here? Anyone else you know dabble in resurrection magic? But it didn't go the way it was supposed to. The Urn of Osiris broke. Do you remember that, Xander? Do you remember when the urn broke?"

The cold began to spread—a frozen sort of cold that made it so Buffy could do little more than twist to Xander, whose mouth was agape, his eyes filled with horror.

"You were dead," Willow went on, sounding now as though from a distance. "This...thing...this *insect*, he shot you in the head, Buffy. Then he shot Tara. She was out the door first, you see. If I had been quicker..." A pause. Buffy looked back to the shell of her friend just as Willow reaffixed her gaze on Warren. "But I wasn't. He shot me too." She unfurled her hand, and even in the weak light, Buffy could see a glimmer of metal there. "Not in a place that mattered, though. If he'd had his way, he would have killed the whole household."

"All I wanted was her," Warren said, pulling harder still against his makeshift manacles. "All I wanted was the Slayer. It wasn't personal. If your little girlfriend hadn't gotten in the way—"

"Uhh, Warren?" Xander waved at him. "You might wanna read the room, buddy."

"So you killed my best friend and my girlfriend and tried to kill me," Willow said, her voice still dull. "But Tara wasn't personal. I wasn't personal. Just in the way. Do I have that right?"

Warren rolled his eyes. "Oh, shut up!"

"And she wasn't the first. Not Buffy. Not Tara."

The feeling in Buffy's legs started to return. Again that sense of preternatural calm that had kept her alive all these years—the thing that allowed her to close off whatever was going on around her to focus on the bigger picture. And right now, that bigger picture was getting Willow to back off without doing something that would stay with her for the rest of her life. However long that might be.

She had to try.

"Willow. He's done a horrible thing. What he's done... I know how much you loved her."

Willow jerked her head back, for the first time, something dangerous glinting in her eyes. "Stop it."

"But killing him? Would Tara want that?"

"I don't know, Buffy..." She raised her hand, the one not holding the bullet, and whatever Buffy had been about to say stole off her tongue—the words gone, along with her voice. "I'd love to check in with her," Willow continued, "but hey. She's dead. She's dead and Osiris won't give her back to me, but he'll give me *you*, over and over again, it looks like. You'll just keep coming, you little Energizer Bunny. Turns out when I rip someone out of Heaven, I do a *really* thorough job. Which means Warren"—she flashed back to her prey with speed she shouldn't possess—"was never gonna get the big O he was after. You came back wrong. He killed her for nothing."

"That's enough," Xander said, his voice cracking. "Willow, this has to stop."

"Oh, I'll stop. When I'm done." She shifted her attention back to Warren. "And I'm almost done."

Willow waved again and Warren's shirt ripped open, the tear of fabric almost unbearable.

"What, what are you doing?" Warren demanded, looking down at his own chest and up once more. "What is this?"

Willow shook her head. "Shhh..."

Xander stumbled a few steps toward her. "Willow—"

And the next second, he was rigid, feet firmly planted on the floor, his upper body flailing forward in such a way it should have been funny. Buffy tried moving next, but it was no good. Her legs were locked in place.

"Willow, think about what you're doing!" Xander screamed. "This isn't you!"

"I *have* thought, and I think I'm tired of hearing other people talk," Willow said.

Xander's voice cut off then and it was over. Buffy knew it was over. And all she could was watch.

Willow inspected the bullet for a long, still beat, then held it out to Warren, just above his heart.

"I think Warren wants to know what a bullet feels like," she said, dropping her hand back to her side. The bullet remained as it was, suspended in the air at Warren's chest. "A real one. Since he was so liberal in the giving of bullets this morning."

"No." Warren shook his head hard, his eyes bright with tears. "No, please."

"It's not like the comics," Willow said.

And, to Buffy's horror, the bullet began to move with slow deliberation. An inch away from skin, then pressed against it, and then burrowing its way inside. Her ears were spared the sound only by virtue of Warren's screams, but that wasn't better. Not when she couldn't do anything to stop it.

"It's not going to make a neat little hole," the witch continued. "First, it'll obliterate your internal organs. Your lung will collapse. Feels like drowning."

Warren whimpered and threw his head back, his lower lip caught under his teeth, his expression contorted.

"When it finally hits your spine, it'll blow your central nervous system."

"Oh please! Stop! God, please, I—"

"I'm talking!" Willow swiped at the air again, and a neat row of stitches broke out across Warren's mouth, sewing it closed.

Xander turned as best he could and threw Buffy a look of utter hopelessness.

"The pain will be unbearable, but you won't be able to move. Bullets usually travel faster than this, of course. But the dying? It'll seem like it takes forever."

At that, she paused, as though only then hearing her own words. And for a second—one fleeting second—Buffy thought it might be over. That the real Willow had returned, screaming at the thing that was controlling her now from whatever chamber she'd been shoved inside. But the second passed and that didn't happen. Instead, Willow just stared at Warren's chest, ignoring his grunts and whimpers, ignoring everything else.

"Something, isn't it?" she muttered at length. "One tiny piece of metal destroys everything." A pause. "It ripped her insides out...took her light away. From me. From the world."

Warren didn't answer, of course. Couldn't. He just screamed again—as much as he could.

"Now the one person who should be here is gone," Willow said, "and a waste like you gets to live." She stepped forward again, for what Buffy knew would be the last time. "Tiny piece of metal. Can you feel it?"

Another voiceless scream.

"I said, can you feel it?"

The stitches keeping Warren's mouth closed vanished as though they never were, and he was talking. Sputtering uselessly, not realizing he was already dead.

"Please! I did wrong. I was wrong and I see that now. I need—I need jail! I need..." He seemed to lose steam, shook his head, and tried again. "But you, you don't want this. You're not a bad person. Not like me. Your friends—you're really going to do this in front of your friends? They won't let you get away with this. They won't—"

"Bored now."

Buffy didn't look. Call her a coward, but when Willow raised her hand a final time, she squeezed her eyes shut. She didn't look, but she heard it—an awful tearing, like a zipper trapped in mud, only so much

worse because she knew when she opened her eyes that the world would have changed again, and it would never change back.

“One down,” she heard Willow say.

Then Buffy toppled forward, her lungs filling with a hard, horrible gasp. And Xander was on the floor, panting, then sobbing.

And when Buffy looked up and saw what Willow had done, she started sobbing too.



## EMPTY SPACES

SPIKE HAD BEEN IN THE BUSINESS OF DEATH FOR A CENTURY AND some change. He'd washed blood off his hands—whatever he couldn't lap up, mind—so many times it had become mundane. And not just his hands. Dru had dribbled blood over every extremity just for the pleasure of licking it off, and he'd repaid the favor in kind. Hell, he'd done it over and over and over again. Any time there was fun to be had, hell to be raised, Spike had rushed in with no thought but for the carnage. The messes he could make. How many screams he could rip free before silencing them forever.

He'd never stuck around for this part. Opening the door to let in one of the boys in blue, trying to summon answers for the slew of questions lobbed his direction—bloody grateful for Anya, who at least had enough wits about her to not stumble her way through the interview. When the bobbies asked why there was so much blood in the Slayer's room and no source for it, Spike had shaken his head and muttered something he couldn't even remember. There had been talk of fingerprinting and interviews down at the station, some rot about gun powder residue to eliminate them as suspects, and eventually, Anya had decided it was better to whip out her demon face.

"Guys, you know who lives here," she'd said, sounding exhausted.

"And if Spike had something to do with Tara's death, you would know because of the fang marks." She'd paused, sighed, and gestured at him. "Go ahead. Show them your fangs."

Spike had stared at her, wondering when she'd lost her marbles, but shrugged and done as the lady asked. The second the bones in his face had shifted, the coppers had changed their tune, made their reports, and called in the coroner. One of them asked if the Slayer was handling business or if they needed to get involved, and again Spike hadn't known what to tell them. Just last night he would have leaped at the chance to shuffle off this Warren business to blokes with guns and badges and less of a quandary when it came to using lethal force.

But the game had changed in just a handful of seconds—a handful of seconds where he'd been somewhere else. Been with bloody *Harris*, of all walking insults. Giving the useless sod advice on wooing his jilted ex and talking him through the litany of fears that had bubbled off his lips at lightning speed, trying not to nod off out of sheer bloody boredom and cursing every second he wasn't with Buffy. Because that was where he should have been, where he always wanted to be. Giving her the rub-down she'd need after a fight like the one she'd been in, ice and all, and possibly hearing her say the words he'd once thought he'd only hear in his dreams.

If he'd been there this morning, the way he was damn near every morning, there would be no need to flash fang to anyone. No need to show the buggers with the body bags where to find Sunnydale's freshest corpse. He wasn't exactly sure the way it had gone, Warren's rampage through Revello Drive, but he wagered he could piece enough together.

Buffy opening the bedroom door and Warren firing the gun. The witches stumbling down the hall at the ruckus, Tara in the lead. Warren raising the gun again and shooting again. At least once, maybe twice. Maybe three times—who was to say? The only other people in the house had been dead.

Tara had hit the ground and Willow had gone with her, only Tara hadn't gotten up again. And then, some time later, Buffy had opened her eyes and found herself in a pool of her own blood in a house with no one in it.

Fuck, Spike didn't know if he'd ever stop shaking. He'd never felt anger like this—blind, searing hate that made his skin feel tight, like the demon might just roar itself free and leave whatever was left of the human shell behind. Like he could climb the sodding walls and scream until his throat hurt—or beat someone not just bloody, but to dust, vamp or not, with nothing more than his fists. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw her there, lying as she would have looked. Cold, dead, a sodding afterthought. Even when he'd been on about Warren, worried out of his head that the wanker would do something meant to off the Slayer for good, he hadn't let his mind wander down the path littered with things like bloody firearms. It wasn't enough that he had to worry about demons and apocalypses, but *guns* now, too?

Except he didn't have to worry, did he? Buffy had been dead by her account, and he believed her. Her bedroom smelled of it—that thing he'd once reveled in. Death had its own smell, far and apart from anything else. A distinct smell, too, because no two deaths were ever alike, no matter what the circumstances. There was the way Tara's death stank and the way Buffy's did. Buffy had taken a bullet to the bloody head and walked away from it.

Death was much more complicated, standing on this side of it, more than he could have ever appreciated. It had been a fairly straightforward business, back in his human days. People catching sick all over the place or creeping around dark corners and running into the sort of nasties he hadn't known existed back then. For William, though, death had been a phantom—a thing that lurked, a threat that lingered, but still something somewhat distant and foreign. He'd worried over his mum, cried himself to sleep thinking of all the ways he might lose her, but when the time for losing her rolled around, his perspective on death had shifted so dramatically it hadn't hit him the way it would have in another life. He hadn't had to make arrangements for her or walk the halls of his home with her ghost nipping his heels. He hadn't had to do anything but grab a few keepsakes and meet his dark princess, ready and more than willing to put the sting of bad memories behind him.

But even if that hadn't been the case, it wouldn't have been anything like this. Dawn coming home just in time to see the coroners

loading the back of their van with Tara's body, her eyes going wide instantly and filling with tears. How her voice had shaken when she'd come inside, how she'd torn upstairs without bothering to wait for an explanation and screamed at the top of her lungs when she'd seen the mess inside Buffy's room. She'd screamed and screamed and cried and screamed some more, and Spike hadn't known what to do. How to tell her that Big Sis was all right, as much as she could be. To give her that relief, knowing full bloody well just how much she needed it, only to rip it away from her all over again.

"Where is everyone?" Dawn demanded once she got herself under control—or as reasonably close as she could muster. "Willow. Tara. Xander. Why isn't *anyone* here? Or are they going to do it again?"

That was it, his opening.

"Buffy's alive, Bit," Spike told her. The words rang false to him, despite however true they were. "What I was tryin' to tell you. She's not dead."

*Anymore.*

Dawn reeled at that as though slapped, blinked, turned her attention to the bloodbath that was the Slayer's bedroom, then back to him again.

"It's hers," he went on. No sense lying to the girl. "But she's not dead. Dunno what happened—how. Wasn't here this morning, was I?"

That didn't do much good, not that Spike had thought it would. Dawn just stared at the bloodstained carpet, her expression slack, though the wheels behind her eyes remained in constant motion. At length, she worked her throat, nodded like she understood, and managed, "Who?"

"Warren," Anya said, edging up the stairs now, looking worn and drawn. "We don't know everything, but what we do know is it was Warren. He came here this morning to kill Buffy. She was shot."

Most days Spike appreciated Anya's signature candor. This was not such a day.

"She's fine now," Spike growled through his teeth, seizing Dawn's arm when she tensed up again. "Out with Harris, tryin' to get ahead of Willow before she goes bloody atomic."

Dawn's eyes went wide, first with confusion and then with compre-

hension. It was a kick to the gut, that look, knowing the second she understood just who had been in that body bag. The second her astonishment gave way to pain, crumbling her face and sending fresh tears down her cheeks. He'd seen Dawn cry plenty over the last year, despite her best efforts—her desire to be seen as more adult, less emotional, particularly when she was around him. But Dawn wasn't an adult and she couldn't pretend to be, and even so, adults came with a slew of their own messes. In particular, messy human emotions—the same that he'd been able to ignore for years, until Buffy had made herself at home under his skin.

That wasn't entirely true, he knew. He'd felt, hurt, cried, raged, and more over the years, though it seemed like it had been easier before. Or maybe it was that his world had centered on one person and now it involved so many. The pang he felt for Tara was there, raw and strong, similar to what he'd felt when Joyce had died.

It would be so much easier to not feel these things—to not experience a sting in his eyes when Dawn started sobbing, or feel a hollow place in his chest. Even more so the guilt at his relief that it had been Tara, if someone in this house had to die. That something out there had looked out for the Slayer, kept her with him, even if he didn't know what yet, or how. And the selfish part of him, the part that would always be there, that rejoiced at what Buffy's continued living might mean for them in the long run.

Because it was selfish, he knew. The same selfishness that he'd spent the better part of a year trying to smother out of existence but had never quite managed. What he'd wanted from her, spelled out in song at one point, and how he'd forced it back, forced himself to ignore it and listen to what she needed because her need superseded his want. How unfair it was, if he was right about what had happened earlier, and how he should be anything other than glad.

But fuck, he couldn't help himself. That Buffy had apparently taken a shot to the face and didn't have a scratch on her was something he doubted he'd ever see as anything other than a blessing.

"Warren killed Tara?" Dawn said a moment later, her voice wobbling though not without its Summers steel.

Spike looked at Anya for help, though wasn't sure why he did.

Neither one of them were the ideal candidates for this conversation, what with instinct and bloodlust in full competition with the knowledge that he needed to do this right by Buffy. But how was a man who was responsible for the deaths of so many supposed to be a source of comfort at a time like this?

"We don't know exactly what happened," Anya said. "But yes, that is the consensus. Willow blew into the Magic Box, reeking of vengeance and drained the juice from the blackest magic books. And then she went after Warren."

Dawn nodded, her eyes harder now, her jaw firm. "Good. I hope she kills him. And I hope it hurts."

That was the sort of thing the Slayer would put the kibosh on right quick, but Spike didn't have the heart to berate the girl. Not when he felt the same.

The phone rang, piercing through the fog of bad thoughts.

"That might be Xander," Anya said, tearing down the hall without awaiting a response. Spike and Dawn followed, breaching the threshold to Willow's room just as Anya pressed the phone to her ear. "Xander?"

Buffy's voice, faint and defeated, reached his ears over the line. "He's here. He's fine. But Willow's not. She killed Warren."

*Good*, thought the cold-hearted killer. *Good bloody riddance.*

Bloody good thing Buffy couldn't read thoughts. She wouldn't much like the ones he had right now.

"She's after the others," Buffy continued. "Jonathan and Andrew. Anya, can you head her off at the station? Xander and I are on our way, but you have demon mojo you can work, right? We need to get those guys out of there. Warren was... I can understand Warren, but neither of the others had anything to do with what happened to Tara."

Anya was nodding. "I'm on my way. Tell Xander to be careful."

"Is Spike still there?"

The phone was in his hand almost before she got the full question out.

There had been many times over the years that he'd known her that he'd felt out of his element, but none quite so richly as right now. Standing in her house, holding a phone to his ear, listening to the

sound of her breathing after having explained to her sister that someone she loved was dead. Spike rarely found himself at a loss for words, but right then, that moment, words wouldn't come.

"Spike? You there?"

He swallowed. "Here, love."

"You heard all of that, right?"

"Yeah. Got the gist."

"Is... Is Dawn there?"

He glanced at the Nibblet, as though his brain needed the reassurance. "Yeah. Bobbies have been by, too. Was bloody useless, myself, but Anya spoke a piece and they didn't ask too many questions."

A pause. "And...Tara?"

"Gone. All that's left is the mess."

Fuck, he was a soulless demon and even he heard how callous that sounded. Spike tensed, prepared for a good tongue-lashing, but it never came. Instead, the line filled with the weight of Buffy's sigh, which somehow made him feel worse.

"It's bad," she said, sounding small. "What Willow did to Warren... I might never sleep again. She's... Spike, it's like she's someone else. She doesn't even look like herself. Her hair's all black. Her clothes, too. Willow doesn't own that much black. It's like she's been... I don't even know."

But he did, *bloody hell*. He had this image of how Willow had reacted before—back after Glory had sucked Tara's senses right out of her skull. Granted, he hadn't been there to catch the show, but he'd been around enough—had enough run-ins with magic types—to know the score. Eyes like fathomless pits, hair moving on its own, levitation and the like. Willow had been a powerhouse for a minute now, one he knew better than to underestimate, especially after she'd gone and ripped the Slayer from Heaven. That had taken powerful dark stuff. The sort that could fast-track a practitioner into a full-blown addict, as it nearly had her.

Even still, there was a fine line between addictive magic and the sort that could physically transform a person the way Buffy had described.

"What can I do?" he asked at last, helpless. "Tell me."

"Stay with Dawn," Buffy replied. "Actually, can you take her to your place? Xander and I are on our way to the station. We'll need somewhere to take Jonathan and Andrew after we get them."

"And you think the crypt's a good option to keep 'em safe from a pissed-off witch? Seems like they're better off headin' for the bloody border."

"You're probably right, but I can't think that far ahead right now. The warning system that Tara"—Buffy choked on the name—"set up for you might come in handy until we decide our next move."

In other words, until they decided how best to defuse Willow—or take her down. That much Buffy hadn't said, but she didn't need to. Whatever she'd seen had blown apart any expectations she'd had when she and Harris had left the house. Then, it had been to see to a friend in crisis. Whether or not she even knew it, Buffy had adopted the tone she usually did when about to go into battle.

And again, he felt fucking useless. Useless and terrified in ways the Big Bad just didn't get. The sort of magic Willow was on was the sort few had ever walked away from. The sort that burned and consumed until there was nothing left of the person wielding it. He thought back to the night she had crashed the car with Dawn inside, how out of her sodding head she'd been then—not caring until someone got hurt.

Seemed likely she wouldn't care this time at all.

"Right," Spike managed. "Be careful, love."

"Not sure there's a point. I don't think I can die, anyway." She chased this with a shrill laugh. "But no time to worry about that now."

"Buffy—"

"You be careful. I don't think she'll come after you but if she does—"

"I got the Bit. Till the end of the world, yeah?"

"Don't jinx us."

"I love you."

There was a pause—a pause in which he thought she might buckle and say it, sod the timing and the like. This situation was the sort where things like that were said, sometimes for the first time. He didn't know whether or not to be disappointed, though, when she didn't.



"Continue to hold that thought, okay?" Buffy said instead. "Give me something to look forward to."

And the line clicked off before he could reply. Probably for the best. He wagered he'd run out of words.



BEST-LAID PLANS, and all that.

Dawn tried to sweet-talk him into taking her to Rack's den rather than hunkering down at the crypt. Bitch of it was, Spike seriously considered it. Lying in wait had never been his style, but he knew he could kiss anything he had with the Slayer goodbye if he took the Nibblet into a place like that, especially considering it seemed a likely joint for Willow to rejuice.

He did, however, let the girl sweet-talk him into taking her to the Magic Box.

Perhaps *sweet-talk* was a misnomer. Dawn had bloody well threatened him. Spoken a piece about how Anya had said all the books were drained, so Willow would have no reason to go back there. When that ploy hadn't worked, she'd resorted to downright underhanded tactics that would have made him burst with pride in any other circumstance.

"You used to be cool, you know," she'd snapped. "If I'd known you'd become totally lame the second Buffy made you her boyfriend, I would have never been okay with it."

Low bloody blow, that had been.

"You want cool? Fine. I'll rip your sodding skin off," Spike had thrown back. "That cool enough for you?"

"Used to be you'd go along with these things!"

"Used to be it wasn't bloody *Willow* tearin' up Sunnyhell. You know damn well that the Slayer'd tan my hide and yours if you went snoopin' around."

"So that's it? 'I can't because my girlfriend will beat me up?'" Dawn had crossed her arms, face pinched into a scowl. "You know you can't stop me from going on my own, right?"

"The hell I can't!" Spike had sputtered back.

"What are you going to do? Restrain me? Try and I'll put up a fight.

I might get hurt. And if I get hurt, you get *really* hurt.” She’d arched her eyebrows, looking rather pleased with herself, and hell, he hadn’t been able to blame her. “So the way I see it? You want to keep me safe, you’re just gonna have to come with me.”

And that had been that. Girl had been right, after all. If he’d used any sort of force to keep her in place, his head would throb, and while that was the sort of thing he’d survive, it seemed better to just go along with her. Too much triggering of the chip could leave him with one bastard of a headache, which was a complication he didn’t need if it came down to standing between Dawn and Willow. Never mind that making the chip go off would mean hurting Dawn, and that he wouldn’t risk.

So off to the Magic Box they’d gone, searching for spare bits of magic they might be able to throw at a wicked witch if it came down to it. Not that it did any bloody good, of course. Because Anya had been right—all the magic had been sucked right on out of the whole shop.

“Not seein’ much of use,” Spike muttered, tossing another worthless title over his shoulder.

“There has to be something,” Dawn replied. “Like...how do you drain all the magic?”

By being a bloody powerful witch, but he didn’t say as much.

The next second, the bell over the door gave its warning tinkle, spurring him to drop the last useless book he’d grabbed in favor of the blade he’d seized before leaving Revello Drive. He whirled around, heart in his throat, ready to fight to the dust. Fuck, he’d known better than to let Dawn talk him into coming here.

But it wasn’t Willow who came through the door.

“This isn’t the crypt,” the Slayer said as she and Xander herded the two nerdlings into the shop, Anya trailing behind. “Do you ever do what you’re told?”

Spike hesitated, torn between needing to scoop her up in his arms—not putting up a fight when she’d gone off solo, when he knew bloody well that she was hurting hard, had been damn near intolerable—and rising to the defense. He glanced at Dawn for help, but she was bloody useless, wearing her customary *caught* expression.

*Right. Thanks, Bit.*

Spike turned back to Buffy. "All good, pet? You grabbed the little gits, looks like. Thought you were headin' to the crypt, yourself."

"Yeah, well, we had some stuff to pick up," she said. "That was our next stop."

"And *good's* pushing it," Harris added, stomping toward them. "Like, what's the opposite of good? Oh right. *Bad*. All bad. Very, very bad."

Buffy pinched the bridge of her nose, folding her arms and resting her arse against the check-out counter, looking haunted.

"Ahn," Xander said, "can you still sense Willow? Knowing her location'd be a real big comfort right about now."

There was a good chunk of information Spike didn't have—that was bloody clear. Whatever had happened between the precinct and now had them all looking more than battle-worn. Rather, the lot of them seemed defeated.

And that was something Spike had never seen.

"No, I can't," Anya answered, her tone glum. "Which means whatever she's feeling, it's gone way beyond simple vengeance."

"Did I mention me needing the comfort?" Xander replied.

"Whatever we've got, better grab it fast," Buffy said, pushing herself toward the table of open books. "This is one of the first places she's gonna think to look for us."

The blond wanker, the one who had crashed his jetpack into an overhang the night before, went all wide-eyed with worry. "Then what are we doing here?"

"Grabbing things," Dawn replied. "Haven't you been paying attention?"

The little git threw her a dirty look. "You know, I could summon a demon that would kill Willow. No need to grab anything."

"And I could smack you so hard your eyeballs would switch sockets," Xander shot back.

"No one is getting killed," Buffy said, thumbing through blank pages. "We need to find some sort of magicks that'll stop Willow. Or at least slow her down."

"That's what I thought," Dawn agreed, nodding. "That's why we're here."

"You're here because neither you or Spike know how to listen to me."

That was a low bloody blow. "Oi!" Spike snapped. "The Bit bloody well blackmailed me."

"You were blackmailed by a fifteen-year-old?" Buffy replied dryly.

At that, he sucked in his cheeks and turned his gaze to the floor. "Not my finest moment, I'll admit. But Dawn wagered we might find somethin' that could help, and since Red has already been here, I thought it might be a tad safer than goin' with her first idea."

She gave him a long, slow blink. "Which was?"

"Find Rack."

Buffy went ramrod straight, her eyes bugging a bit. "You didn't—"

"Of course I didn't." He kept himself from growling, but just barely. "So I reckon comin' here to do some good's a step up."

"Yeah, except Willow drained the place," Harris said, turning over one of the barren books. He heaved a sigh and met Spike's gaze. "Guessing you two haven't found anything?"

Spike shook his head. "Not a lick."

"Because they didn't know where to look," came from behind the cash-wrap. Anya ducked to unlock some cupboard, then rose again with a wooden box in tow. "Willow wasn't in the market for magic that couldn't be used for destruction. This"—she pulled an old book from the box—"is a book of protection spells. Anti-magic, our last resort."

"I knew there'd be something here!" Dawn chirped before fixing Spike with a victorious grin. "See? I was right."

"Right or not, this isn't your fight," Buffy said.

"Willow's my friend, too."

"It's more than that." And then she shifted her attention to Spike, her eyes flashing with a combination of anger and disappointment. "I still can't believe you brought her here."

"I asked him to," Dawn said quickly. "Well, threatened. Like he said. I was coming one way or another and if he wanted to stop me, I'd put up such a struggle that the chip would go off."

The Slayer's fire seemed to douse at that—at least the fire aimed at him. When, after a moment, Buffy turned to Spike for confirmation, he offered a shrug and a slight grin. "Regular menace, she is."

The corner of her mouth twitched like she wanted to smile but didn't have the energy. Instead, Buffy released a long, slow breath and shifted her attention back to her sister. "First of all—threaten Spike like that again and you'll be grounded until graduation, and that's if you're lucky. Second of all—Spike is taking you to the crypt. Now. And you're going to go and stay there."

"Am not," Dawn replied, nearly shaking with the force of her own insubordination. "Not unless that's where you're going. Are you still going there?"

"That was the plan," Buffy said, looking around. "But it's an evolving plan."

"Then I'll go when you go."

"Again with it not being your fight."

"Again with her being my friend. It's Willow."

"It's not, though," said the other one—the dark-haired lackey who had seemed keen on surrendering the night before. "Not Willow like you knew her. She—she tried to kill us at the jailhouse. Andrew and I, we'd be dead if it wasn't for..." He waved at Buffy and Anya.

Dawn paled a bit at that, before shaking her head with that customary shine of teenage defiance. "I can help."

"You can't," Buffy barked. "Spike, get her out of here."

Right. He moved forward to grab Dawn, but the girl—stubborn as ever—jerked away and scowled at him like he'd turned traitor on her.

"If Willow wants more magic, she might come after me," Dawn said quickly. "You want me protected? It's better that I stay with you."

"Why would she come after you?" the blond, Andrew, asked with a sneer, crossing his arms and trying to look bigger than he was. "You're, what, twelve?"

Dawn mimicked his pose, giving him a derisive once-over. "I'm fifteen and I'm the Key."

"Shut up and no, you're not." Buffy stalked over, all Slayer now, and seized her sister by the arm. "You're going with Spike and you're going to hunker down."

"Who says I stopped being the Key?" Dawn fired back, once again jerking herself to freedom. "Just because Glory's dead doesn't mean I'm not the Key anymore. And if Willow is as *gone* as you say

she is, then she might come after me no matter what. Let me *fight*, Buffy."

"I can't do this and worry about you too."

"Well, you're just going to have to. Because I'm not going. I'll just ditch Spike the first chance I get."

"I can track you pretty good, Bit," Spike retorted. "Come on. Big Sis is right. Shoulda never brought you here in the first place."

Dawn aimed another if-looks-could-stake scowl his way. "I'm not going anywhere without everyone else. Buffy wants to go to the crypt—fine. I'll go then. But if everyone else is staying, then I am staying too. I am just as old as Buffy was when she started slaying and I care just as much about Willow as everyone else here. So I'm going to stay and help Anya with the spells in that book, and if *Buffy* wants me anywhere else, she'll just have to take me there herself."

"Wow, this is really intense," Andrew said, breathless and practically vibrating with excitement. "Like an episode of *Gilmore Girls*."

For a long moment, the lot of them seemed to be an impasse. Buffy glowering at Dawn, Dawn glowering right back, Xander throwing harried looks at the door, Anya flipping through the pages of her book, the dark-haired nerd-boy staring at the floor, and Andrew watching everything with rapt fascination.

Finally, Buffy released a long, slow exhale, and Spike knew she was going to cave. He'd had too many rows with her, verbal and physical, not to know her tells.

"All right, fine," Buffy said, her jaw clenched tight. "Not because you're right, but because I don't have time to tell you all the ways you're wrong. And there's more than one way out of here, which is more than I can say for the crypt. But stay out of everyone's way, and if something happens, you run."

Dawn softened a bit at that, her arms falling to her sides. "Do you really think Willow would hurt me?"

"I think I don't know. And I don't like not knowing." The Slayer heaved another sigh and turned to Anya, who was still thumbing through the book she'd uncovered. "Anything useful in there?"

"Uhh, define useful," Anya said uneasily. "The text is intact, which, good. Except it's in ancient Sumerian. One of the only ancient

languages I never bothered to learn. I knew I shouldn't have wasted time learning Coptic with Halfrek." She pitched her voice slightly higher. "Egypt's where it's at, Anyanka.' Yeah. Next time, *I* choose the ancient civilization."

"So, the protection spells are a no-go." Xander huffed, half collapsing on top of the pile of drained books. "The good news keeps coming."

The dark-haired lackey, meanwhile, was almost tripping over himself to get to the counter. "Could I get a look at that?"

Buffy stayed him with a glare. "Shut up."

The boy froze, deflated, and was in mid-turn before he apparently decided to grow a spine and address the Slayer directly. "I just thought... Since you're protecting us, the least I could do is—"

"I am *not* protecting you, Jonathan," Buffy snapped. "The reason we busted you out of that cell before Willow could flay you alive is for her, not you. She's already... What she did to Warren was terrible, but he was a killer. He killed Tara—as twisted as that was, there was a reason for her to do what she did to him. There is no reason for her to kill you. If she does, she crosses a line she can't uncross and I lose a friend. And Jonathan?" She took a step toward him. "I really, *really* hate losing."

Not to mention how badly she'd already lost. That she hadn't had any time to mull over what had happened earlier. Buffy was nearing the close of yet another day she shouldn't have been around to see, only this time with a fresh death in her rearview. The fact that she was still in the fight at all after what she'd been through was nothing short of miraculous. But then again, that was the Slayer. Always out to do the impossible—push herself beyond any reasonable limit.

"I get that," the twerp called Jonathan replied. "It's just...you know she's running out of power, right? I can practically feel it." He looked down, shuffled a bit. "I've dabbled in the magicks."

Xander snorted. "I think Willow's in a league of her own about now, dabble-boy."

"But still, running that hot for that long, it's just a matter of time before you gotta recharge, no matter how juiced up you are."

Which was nice and all, but nothing the others hadn't figured for

themselves. Hell, it was the reason Dawn had seized Spike by the proverbial short and curlies to drag him to the Magic Box.

"Thank you," Buffy said to the boy. "Now remember that thing we talked about?"

Jonathan offered a weak smile. "About me shutting up?"

When she answered with a nod, he mimed zipping his lips shut, then turned and made his way around the table where his mate had camped his useless arse.

Spike nudged Dawn. "You wanna make yourself useful, pidge, you watch those two," he said, then handed her the blade he still held, the one he'd grabbed when the others had arrived. "Either one of 'em gives you trouble, you give them the old what-for, yeah?"

"Silly as it sounds, we didn't save these guys just so Dawn could kill them," Xander said. "One homicidal Scooby at a time, please."

"She doesn't have to off anyone," Spike replied, closing the distance between him and Buffy. Couldn't help it—he needed to touch her. Feel that she was as warm and alive as she had been earlier, regardless of how improbable it was. "But if one of 'em were to lose a pinky, I doubt anyone here would shed any tears."

Buffy offered him a flat smile. "Wonderful example you're setting, dear."

"All right, I know I just watched my best friend kill a guy, but if you start going all cutesy with the pet names, I'm going to go ahead and put this down as one *really* bad day," Xander said, though he looked somewhat amused as well. It didn't last long, though. The light in his eyes faded as he looked to Buffy. "For shits and giggles, let's say any of this works. We stop Willow from working the hoodoo. What then? What's our plan?"

"I talk to her," Buffy replied.

Spike fought the urge to roll his eyes—succeeded only out of blind love and loyalty, not to mention worry that wouldn't be soothed anytime soon, but fuck if it wasn't sodding Glory all over again. Buffy's faith in her friends was one of those things he wagered he'd never understand—how she thought a rousing speech could save the day when someone was hurting the way he reckoned Willow was hurting right now. His own need to rip and tear into Warren for firing at Buffy



had yet to be satiated, even knowing the bastard was dead, even knowing that Buffy wasn't.

Whatever Willow was going through was something that couldn't be reasoned with. Hard to care about things like lines when one's whole bloody world had been ripped away.

"Look, I know it's different," Buffy said a moment later, looking between him and Xander. "What she did to Warren... I can understand it, no matter how horrible it was. But those two are the line she can't cross. And if she's running low on magicks, then she's probably somewhere trying to get it all back."

"Which means we're on borrowed time," Xander muttered, raking a hand through his hair.

Buffy nodded, blew out a breath, then turned her attention to Spike. "Dawn wanted you to take her to see Rack?"

Balls, he knew where this was going. "Yeah. That's right."

"Right idea. Wrong Summers sister." She shifted back to Xander. "You stay here. See if you can help Anya decode that book. Watch over the nerds. Make sure Dawn doesn't actually sever anything important."

"And you?" he asked, as though it weren't bloody obvious. But then again, some people needed things spelled out. Harris had never been too quick on the uptake.

Buffy threaded her fingers through Spike's and gave his hand a squeeze.

"Looks like we're off to see the wizard," she said.

## WAITING FOR THE WORMS

THERE WERE DEFINITE PERKS ABOUT RUNNING AT A HUNDRED-AND-fifty percent. Perks like not having to think about the fact that she was upright and walking when she shouldn't be. That when she got home, it would be to a bedroom still covered in her own blood.

Except it was always there, pulsing in the back of her head. Tailing her through every step, every thought, every time she closed her eyes. There hadn't been time to address it between waking up and now, even if the loss of equilibrium she had experienced from the second she'd started breathing again had yet to fully fade.

But Buffy had been breathing free with Spike since she'd walked down the stairs after her first resurrection. All of the thoughts that had almost driven her mad then, the emptiness she'd nearly choked on, had been easier to shoulder because of him—because telling him had relieved the weight rather than added to it. She hadn't had to pretend.

She still didn't.

So as they scoured the streets, waiting for Spike to feel the presence of Rack's domain, she let everything she'd been shoving back flood upward and out.

"Willow.. When she saw me..." She swallowed. "I wasn't sure. I

mean I was pretty sure, but not really sure, you know? That Warren killed me. But she said he did. Before he killed Tara. He killed me.”

One of the things she’d noticed in those early days with Spike was he knew how to read her cues. At some point, she’d stopped dreading the spaces between her breaths, stopped worrying he’d either run his mouth or let the silence spread until it consumed. When she wanted him to say something or needed him to remain quiet, it simply was. No trying about it.

Now he pressed his hand to the small of her back. The place he always touched her when he wanted to give her silent encouragement. Just like she’d known he would.

“There was some other stuff. I guess the ritual to resurrect me didn’t go as they planned. I got some of it out of Xander, but not a lot. There was an urn that got smashed and Willow thought that meant it didn’t work—that since the ritual was interrupted, I’d stay dead. Obviously, that’s not what happened.” Buffy exhaled deeply. “Willow’s spells have always been a bit iffy. Not as much as they used to—”

Spike snorted at that and threw her a look, and for a second, everything felt normal. Not just normal, but right. Patrolling alongside her vampire, telling him the things she could tell no one, knowing he’d give her exactly what she needed because he knew her better than anyone. Because he loved her.

The moment was fleeting—a blip of light in the middle of endless dark. But it was enough to make her believe the way she felt right now—the turmoil of her recent discovery—would become something conquerable, the way everything else was.

The way Spike seemed to make everything else.

Buffy blinked hard and seized his hand, wondering if it would be weird to blurt out she loved him right now. Then wondering why it *would* be weird, and wondering further why she wasn’t leaping at the chance. By the time she’d finished wondering, though, the moment had passed, dragging her thoughts back down the darkened path they’d been on before.

“The short story is that I can’t die,” she said, unable to help the way her voice trembled at the words. Saying them made everything real in ways experiencing it alone couldn’t. “At least I think so. Perma-

nently. Because I was dead today. I was dead and then I wasn't. And it wasn't like before. No peace. No warmth. There was just nothing." Her eyes prickled their warning. "I might never get to go back to Heaven."

"Rot."

Buffy sniffed. "Spike—"

"Slayer, you know better than anyone never to say never. Never met a woman as bloody stubborn as you."

"Gee, thanks."

"You'll find a way. You always do." He paused and tugged her to a standstill they didn't have time for. This wasn't a Buffy therapy session and they couldn't afford to treat it like one.

"And if you don't," he said thickly, "you know where I'll be. Where I'll always be."

She did. Questions swarmed her mind—questions too large and complicated and perhaps premature to be tackled right now. Since she hadn't gotten a chance to slow down since waking up in a pool of her own blood, nearly all of her conclusions barely qualified as anything above speculation. But even in the midst of that, the worst-case-scenarios her brain seemed intent to drag her down, one truth managed to be louder than the other noise. That was that no matter what happened, what came next, what they learned or what it meant, Spike would remain with her. Her constant in the middle of chaos—something she doubted she'd ever fully understand, given that chaos was what Spike loved best. How he could be so resolute and firm when everything else was falling apart didn't make sense, but somehow made all the sense in the world. To believe anything else of him was to not know him, and Buffy did know him. After these last few months, she felt she knew him better than she'd known any man she'd been with. There were no secrets there, nothing kept buried due to shame or fear of discovery. Since they'd started down this path, there had been nothing but honesty—even when his honesty hurt.

"I know," Buffy said, and kissed him to show she did. It wasn't the long kiss she wanted—they didn't have time enough for that—and her thoughts were still all over the place. But there was some calm, too. An underlying sense of certainty that no matter what happened or what

they learned, she'd manage to get through it just fine. Not because of Spike, necessarily, but also not *not* because of him.

Spike offered her a soft grin that said a lot of things, then tugged on her hand and prompted her to continue walking.

A few minutes later, the grip he had on her tightened and he drew up short. "Here," he said, reaching out with his free hand. "Right here, love. You ready?"

The honest answer was no, but she didn't exactly have an option. Buffy nodded. "Lead the way."

Spike nudged her forward, and together they spilled inside what looked to be the waiting room from hell. Bland, brown walls, scattered chairs here and there, a few filled with the odd junkie, and a door across from where they stood.

"Keep your eyes open," she told Spike as she pulled her hand from his. She needed to say something, even if the words felt asinine. "And be ready."

She felt rather than heard his assent, then pushed her way through the door.

The room on the other side was empty at first glance, but Buffy knew better than to trust her eyes. There were too many dark corners and places to hide. The whole set-up—with its antique-looking couch, the fancy light fixtures, abstract artwork, carefully positioned mirrors, and the heavily shaded lamps—looked like a Sting music video gone wrong, though oddly complemented the mental image she'd had about what a magicks dealer's lair would look like. Seedy and familiar but also *not* in a way that would clearly separate this place from the average supplier. Buffy took a hesitant step forward, aware suddenly that her heart was hammering extra hard, like it wanted to pound its way to freedom. She pressed her lips together, sweeping her gaze from one corner of the room to the next. The air in here didn't feel right—more like it was alive and crackling, making the hair on her arms stand at attention and something in her belly hum. She felt she might get an electric shock or a thousand just by breathing too quickly.

"Slayer," Spike said suddenly. "Watch it."

"Huh?"

"Somethin' in here's dead."

*Dead* wasn't the word she'd use, but maybe it should have been. If nothing else, Buffy had learned just how very alive dead things could be.

"Do you know where?"

"Can just feel it, is all," Spike replied. "Recent, too. And she's here."

How Willow could be hiding in the open was another mystery with answers Buffy wasn't sure she wanted to explore. She'd just turned to give the space she'd crossed a thorough look when the sense of utter certainty that had always kept her alive—kept her moving when she knew she was being hunted—flared to life across the back of her neck. Buffy whirled back around and came face-to-face with a corpse. A corpse suspended in mid-air, hanging upside down in the middle of the room. It was a man with a worn, weathered face and dark scraggly hair. And he wasn't just dead—he looked hollowed out. Like something had leeches him dry.

*Not something.*

Spike grabbed her hand suddenly, and she felt it too. The shift in the air, the movement of things unseen. As one, they turned toward the door, and there stood Willow. Somehow, she looked even worse than she did in Buffy's memory—her eyes almost completely gone, consumed by black, and a series of dark, scrawling veins spiderwebbing across her face. Most unsettling of all, Willow was grinning. Like this was funny. Like any of it was.

"Buffy," she said in a light, almost drunk tone. "And with Spike. Of course. Can't go anywhere on your own anymore, can ya? Why? It's not like you're in any real danger here. If a bullet to the head isn't enough to put you down..."

Buffy inhaled and released Spike's hand. She had a feeling she'd need both of hers.

This was different, whatever this was. Not like back at Willy's, where Willow had been single-focused on reaping her vengeance. It was *beyond* vengeance, Anya had said, whatever she felt now. Reasoning might not work but dammit, she had to try.

"Your handiwork?" Buffy asked, inclining her head toward the dead warlock without taking her gaze off her friend.

"It's an improvement," Willow replied, "believe me." She blinked

and looked around as though only then taking stock of their surroundings. "So. Is this another intervention? 'Cause I gotta tell you, your timing needs work."

"I'm here to help."

The witch snorted and rolled her eyes. "Right. Help. Do I look like I need your help?"

"Do you really want me to answer that?"

"Well, if I need someone to bitch and moan about how unfair it is that people want you around, I know exactly who to call first."

At that, Spike let out a snarl and tore forward, swinging wildly at Willow's face. Except her face—along with the rest of her—disappeared in a blink, only to reappear behind him the next second. Buffy barked a warning though it came too late. Willow seized Spike by the shoulders and threw him with apparently no effort at all against one of the room's many mirrors. The scream of broken glass punctuated the air, then both vampire and mirror were falling to the floor.

"Seriously, Buffy," Willow said, facing her again, that smile still affixed to her lips, "I don't know *what* you see in him."

"You need to back down a minute and think," Buffy shot back, ignoring the instincts that were yelling at her at full volume to go and check on her vampire. "You're attacking the people who love you now?"

Willow wrinkled her nose, glanced over to Spike—who was pulling himself off the floor—and snickered. "You call that love? Well, I guess you would. And as much as I'd like to take credit for it, I don't think you can blame your fang fetish on me. You've been addicted to death since I met you. How is it any different from this?" She spread her arms and threw her head back. "We both have our vices, don't we? I supported yours. Why can't you support mine?"

"Spike is not a vice. And what you're doing is getting people killed."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Wanna know what I think, *Slayer*? I think as long as you're letting that thing fuck your brains out, you've kinda lost the moral high ground on anything *I* do." Willow glanced over to Spike, now on his feet again, harried and furious. "No offense."

"This is not about Spike," Buffy said, moving so she was once more standing between them. "It's about you. You need help."

"Yeah, so you said. But I'm doing just fine on my own, thanks."

"Doing *what* just fine? Falling off the wagon? Killing Warren... As wrong as that was, I get it. After what he did to Tara, believe me, I get it." Buffy paused to gather her thoughts, willing herself to keep from shaking too much. And Spike was there, his hand at her back in that quiet, reassuring way of his. "But this? I know the forces inside you are powerful. But you are *more* powerful. Willow, my best friend? She doesn't hunt down nerdlings for sport. And deep down you're still Willow. I know you are."

Willow blinked, tilted her head. "Am I?"

"Of course you are."

"I think you're remembering things wrong, Buff. Can't really be helped, you know. Who knows what that bullet did to your brain before you patched yourself up again?" She took a step forward, that awful smile returning to her face. "How did it feel, by the way? I didn't get to ask you that before. When I peeked in your room... Let's just say, my money would not have been on you doing much in the way of standing, walking, talking...annoying. But then I'd forgotten, hadn't I? How powerful I can be when I really put my mind to it. If you're going to do something, do it right, and *Willow* always got extra credit on her homework. Always went *above and beyond*, academically speaking, of course."

Something lurched in Buffy's chest, powerful enough it was a struggle to pull free. All the questions she'd managed to shove back were suddenly screaming for freedom. Willow had known pretty much immediately what it meant that Buffy was alive and well again, had barely flickered in surprise when she'd seen her standing there at Willy's. The conclusion had been immediate and confident, which meant...what, exactly? That Willow had somehow known this was possible? How had she known any of it?

But god, Buffy couldn't go down that path—not now. Whatever else this was, it wasn't about her. And there was no reason to believe Willow's answers would be the right ones.

"There is still time to stop," Buffy said, forcing herself forward. "You haven't done anything you can't come back from. I know... God, Will, I know how much pain you're in."



"Oh, do you?"

"Of course I do. You're not the first person to lose someone."

"The way I loved Tara, you mean? Who do you have to compare?" Willow curled her lip, flicked her gaze to Spike and back again. "Right, there was Angel. That one time. Devastated you so much that you had to motor right on out of town. Is that what you're talking about, Buffy?"

Buffy didn't answer. It was another ploy, this one aimed at her vampire. "Stop it."

"Or do you mean when Angel decided you were better off without him? Or maybe he was better off without you. Say, you wanna ask him?" That sneer faded. "Because you *can* ask him if you wanted to. The universe decided he was worthy enough to be popped back into existence. Do you think there's a loophole for bullet wounds? Don't bother answering. I already tried that. And *she* was the only thing *Willow* was ever good for."

"That is not true. If you let this control you then the world goes away. And all of us with it. There's too much to live for to—"

"Just because *you* found another vampire to ride doesn't mean there's anything out there for me," Willow spat, for the first time looking angry, and god if that wasn't terrifying. "The world goes away. Boo freakin' hoo. What good has this world done me, anyway? What has it done *you*? It's just going to keep killing you...over and over and over again. So why bother protecting it? What exactly are you trying to save, *Buffy*?"

Spike snarled and lunged forward, only the floor started to move and he crashed into the space where Willow had been standing. The walls themselves seemed to revolve, taking Buffy's gut with them and throwing her sense of balance off-kilter. The scents that dominated Rack's dealer room faded, becoming less intrusive, more familiar, and somehow light. That electric feeling in the air also shifted, made it easier to breathe—easier and harder at the same time. A wave of dizziness had Buffy collapsing to her knees, her stomach churning with the need to empty again. She looked to Spike, who was panting, his hands braced on his lower thighs, and realized with a start that their surroundings had changed.

Somehow, they were in the Magic Box.

"Oh, sorry," Willow said as though from a distance. "The trip can be kind of rough. If, you know, you're not me."

"Slayer..." Spike staggered forward a step, swaying as though drunk and pressing his palm against his brow. "All right, love?"

She didn't feel all right. She felt seconds away from collapsing, but collapsing was not an option. If they were in the Magic Box, then—

Buffy looked up to the cash-wrap, where Xander stood horror-struck, his arms around Dawn, who was something beyond terrified. Her stomach, already roiling, abruptly plummeted. There had been many times over the years where she'd wished Dawn could just *see* what it was like to be on the frontlines, if only so she could appreciate just how much was at stake. If only to shut her up about how unfair her life was for five minutes. Last year had seen that with Glory, but this was something beyond Glory.

Glory hadn't been a friend that she might need to...

*No, don't think that.*

"Get Dawn," Buffy said in a low undertone, trusting her vampire to hear her. "Get her and get out. Do it."

"No," Willow replied, waving Spike aside—literally—so that he crashed against the check-out counter. "Stay a while. We're all friends here, aren't we?" She turned slowly until she was staring at Jonathan and Andrew, who remained seated at the table overflowing with drained books, much as they had been when Buffy had left. "Except these two. I don't remember sharing the secret handshake with them."

"Oh god," Jonathan whimpered, his eyes wide and bright. "Willow..."

"But hey, it's okay," Willow continued. "You boys wanna see a magic trick?"

She thrust her hands forward, and twisted torrents of blinding black and purple magic spilled from her palms like it was nothing. The air crackled, carried on wind that appeared from nowhere, blowing ribbons of black hair away from the witch's face. A roar filled Buffy's ears, drowning out everything else, even the screaming inside of her own damn head, and she couldn't do anything but stand there and watch. She had no idea what to expect when Willow lowered her arms

again, though her brain was quick to provide her with a slideshow of possibilities.

Except when it was over, Jonathan and Andrew stood unharmed. Huddled together, terrified, but just fine.

*What the hell?*

“Okay,” Willow said with a slight huff, somewhere between frustrated and intrigued. “Didn’t see that coming.”

“W-what was that?” Andrew stuttered.

Jonathan was staring at his hands in open wonder. “We’re alive.”

“You boys wanna take it slow? I can do slow.” Willow grinned and took a step forward. “Just ask Warren.”

The air split and the magic came again, harder than before. And this time, Buffy managed to move while her friend’s attention was focused elsewhere. She skittered toward Spike, who was still on the floor by the check-out desk, blinking blearily and looking at her with that same sense of disorientation that had overtaken her with Willow’s teleportation trick.

“You okay?” she asked. “Can you move?”

He opened his mouth and said something but his words were lost in the blow of magic around them. When he realized she couldn’t hear him, he nodded and motioned to his head.

She understood. Her own had yet to stop spinning entirely. But that didn’t matter. They had to move and move *now*.

Buffy wrapped an arm around his waist and hauled him to his feet just as Xander tugged Dawn around the cash-wrap. “I’m guessing Anya got that book working?” she asked, not knowing why. There was no other explanation, and it wasn’t like Xander could hear her anyway.

But Xander nodded, then grinned when he saw her confused frown. “I work in construction,” he yelled. “This is nothing.”

The wail of magic stopped suddenly, leaving Buffy with ears ringing so loudly she wasn’t sure she’d ever hear anything right again. She turned in time to see Jonathan say something to Andrew—what, she wasn’t sure—before the pair of them bolted for the back door. But Willow was ahead of them, striding forward at an unhurried pace and slamming the door shut with a wave of her hand.

Then the howl started anew. Willow would either exhaust herself

or try something else. She seemed amused right now but that wouldn't last, and Buffy had to make the most of the time she had. She nodded to Dawn and motioned to Jonathan and Andrew, who had managed to grab a couple of swords and were in the midst of making the most pathetic stand in the history of stands, then looked back to Xander, hoping once more that he understood.

*Grab the nerds, Dawn, and get the hell out of Dodge.*

Again, Xander nodded, then pinned her with a look of his own—one she interpreted as, “What will you do?”

That was a brilliant question. Buffy had once told Willow she was the most powerful person on the team, and though she'd meant it then—more than meant it—she hadn't really appreciated just how true that was until right now. Magic was something she had very little experience with, and had never fought like this. If Willow kept throwing magic at her... Well, it wouldn't kill her—not permanently, at least—but it would slow her down.

All she could do was hope to slow Willow down in the process.

“What I can,” Buffy replied, and looked to Spike, torn. She'd wanted him with Dawn earlier just to keep her sister safe and somewhere off the witch's radar, but things were different now. There wasn't much Spike could do if it came down to a fight with Willow—not to help her or protect Dawn, not without triggering the chip—but she knew telling him as much would be as effective as scolding a brick wall. No matter what he'd thrown in before, no matter how hard he'd worked to ignore the chip when Warren had been the target—this was something new. This was Willow. Willow, who couldn't kill her. Not really. The game had changed since they'd last played. Reset. Perhaps Spike *would* push through the pain if it came down to it, let the chip fire and fry his brain, let loose some of the rage she knew he'd shoved down deep for her—rage at Willow, at the situation, even at Buffy. She couldn't say what would happen if he stayed.

And she couldn't make the call for him any more than he could for her. That wasn't the way they did things.

Buffy held his gaze, exhaled slowly. “Up to you,” she said, trusting he'd understand her meaning.

He did. And he gave his answer with a look.

And there it was again. That urge to tell him, surging, strong, and bolstered by the knowledge that she might not get another chance. While she didn't think Willow would aim to kill, she didn't know that she wouldn't. Nothing Buffy thought she'd known about Willow mattered right now. The girl who had giggled and gossiped and shoved her toward the vampire she knew she loved was gone, replaced with endless black rage that seemed determined to consume until there was nothing of the world left.

That endless black rage wouldn't hesitate to walk through a vampire's dust, even if only to make a point.

"Spike," Buffy said suddenly, and waited until his gaze was on her. "I lo—"

But then the wail of magic stopped again, and Willow's voice filled the void.

"Damn, that is one effective counter-spell," the witch said, now sounding less amused. "Won't keep you alive though."

Right. No time for declarations. Buffy whirled back around to face her friend, gulping air with lungs that should have stopped hours ago, riddled with adrenaline and fear and fight. She had no idea what she was going to throw at Willow, except perhaps herself. And hope that her friend wasn't so far gone that she would mow through the people who loved her to get what she wanted.

But hope was all she had.

"I get it," Willow was saying. "You boys put a spell on yourselves, didn't you? Protecting you from harm...from magicks. That's cute."

"Willow," Buffy said, edging forward, "back off before someone gets hurt."

Willow didn't so much as glance in her direction. "How about I back off right after?" she replied, keeping her focus on the nerds by the door. "So, which one of you boys worked the mojo?"

Neither Jonathan nor Andrew moved. Hell, they looked frozen solid.

"Doesn't really matter," Willow continued. "Just because I can't do magicks to you, doesn't mean I can't do them on myself."

She bent her head and began to mutter, and though she had no idea how she knew, Buffy was struck with the realization of what was about

to happen. If Willow couldn't magic the boys to their graves, she'd go an alternative route.

One that made this a fight Buffy could participate in.

*Keep that spell going, Anya.*

"Now," Willow said when she lifted her head, "I'm pretty sure I'm strong enough to beat you to death."

Jonathan and Andrew tried to run again, moving as though they shared a mind, though one making the sort of choices that got a person killed. They darted behind the book table once more, only to flinch when Willow tossed it aside like an old tissue box. And Buffy saw her opening and seized it, sliding in front of the boys before Willow could close the gap.

"I don't want to hurt you," she said.

Willow shrugged and lobbed her fist into Buffy's jaw, and the floor went out from under her, air whipping her face as she soared across the room. The wounds that her most recent resurrection hadn't managed to heal exploded in fresh pain when she collided with something hard, then gravity sent her crashing down.

"Not a problem," Willow replied.

There was a roar. *Spike.*

Buffy scrambled back to her feet just in time to watch her vampire go sailing over the check-in desk, and everything in her hardened. Once more, she moved so she was between Willow and the boys, and this time she wouldn't give a warning.

"I said I didn't *want* to," Buffy said, and backhanded Willow into a display case. "Didn't say I wouldn't."

The blow was enough—gave the others the opening they had been waiting for. Buffy watched, heart in her throat, as Xander ushered her sister and the boys toward the exit. He paused when he was close, talking in low tones to someone who she couldn't see, someone Buffy knew was Anya. Tucked away, safely out of sight.

Okay. She just needed to keep Willow from that corner of the shop. As long as Anya kept working that spell, Buffy and Willow were evenly matched. She could knock the witch unconscious at least—buy them some time to figure out their next move. See if there was

anything in that book that would drain Willow of her magicks the way she'd drained Rack and the texts.

"No!" Willow shouted when she caught the closing door. She pushed herself upward and started to scramble forward, only for Spike to fly in front of her with a snarl. He didn't hesitate, backhanding her much the way Buffy had, as though to volley her back. Like they were playing some deranged game of catch.

Only the second the blow made its impact, Spike reeled back, howling with pain and clutching his head, and the sight made everything in her fall. Buffy rushed toward him, not sure what she meant to do but needing to do *something*. Make sure he was okay or encourage him to get the hell out while he could—he couldn't do her any good if she was worried about him, too, no matter what she'd thought before.

"All right, Slayer," he said, wincing when she halted beside him. "Just wasn't prepared for it, is all. Forgot."

A low, rumbling laugh stole her attention before she could think to respond. Buffy turned toward where Willow had collapsed. Her friend was sitting back, weight balanced on her palms, and studying her with a wry grin.

"He *forgot*," she practically cackled, crossing her legs at the ankle. As though she were sunbathing somewhere rather than on the floor of a magic shop, surrounded by broken pieces of glass and splinters of wood. "Guess I don't look so human now, do I?" Willow's smile fell. "But I *am* human. More human than he is. Or will ever be."

"Willow, this has to sto—"

"Willow, Willow, Willow," the witch replied in an exaggerated falsetto, rising slowly to her feet. "You're right, Buffy, just *stop*. Stop and look at yourself. The kind of world you're sworn to protect—is this worth it?" She spread her arms, gesturing to the wreckage they'd made of the Magic Box. "A world that would punish someone as good and pure as Tara but *reward* something twisted and soulless. Why should your boyfriend get to be happy when she's gone? Why should *any* of you?"

Buffy edged over so she was in front of Spike. "You don't mean that."

"Don't I? He walks like a man. Talks like one too. But he's not a man. Isn't that, like, Slayer 101?"

"Just think about this, okay? You like Spike. Whatever your fight is, it isn't—"

"I think the word you're looking for is *forgot*," Willow replied, taking slow, sauntering steps nearer. "I forgot. Like you forgot. And why did we forget? We forgot because the chip made it easy to forget." She shifted her attention to Spike, raising a hand. "I think it's time we remember, don't you?"

"Willow—"

Buffy didn't know what to expect—wasn't even sure anything would happen, yet at the same time was certain it would. That whatever magic Anya was working to keep Willow from harming others wouldn't kick in. And it didn't. Willow snapped her fingers and a light above them burst, and Buffy whipped to Spike to catch him, hold him, grab him before whatever it was the witch had done to him could leave its mark. Only Spike was fine, standing there with a frown, a hand at his head, that cerulean gaze swimming with confusion.

"What the bugger?" he rasped, and when he turned back to Willow, it was with a glare. "What the bleeding hell did you do to me?"

Willow shrugged. "I didn't do anything to you. The Initiative did, remember? Made you a good wittle boy. All I've done is turn the status back to quo. You know, the way nature intended."

Buffy's heart stopped. She was sure of it. She looked to Spike, who was still feeling along his brow, though when their eyes met she knew that he knew. There was nothing there to feel, nothing to find.

"So," Willow said, rocking on her heels. "Wanna try to hit me again? Let's see what happens."

Spike dropped his hand. "No."

"Oh, come on, you know you want to." When the vampire answered only with a defiant stare, Willow heaved a sigh and rolled her head back. "All I want is a little demonstration. But hey, maybe you need to be properly motivated."

In a blink, Willow had her hand around Buffy's throat, fingers digging into her skin with viselike intensity, such that the corners of her vision immediately began to blur and blacken.



"Wonder how it works," the witch mused, her voice far away. "If I snap your neck, will your body just fix it? Will—"

There was a roar, and the pressure around Buffy's throat vanished as the floor rushed up. Once more, it seemed her every muscle screamed when she collided with the surface, but she couldn't think about that. Couldn't focus, because Spike was tearing at Willow, swinging his fists and launching his fangs and nothing was stopping him because the chip was gone.

*The chip was gone.*

"All right," Willow said, smacking Spike hard enough that he went crashing into the nearest wall. "I think I've proven my point. Now heel."

Spike pulled himself to his feet, his yellow eyes blazing. He snarled again and made as though to charge across the shop, but collided with a barrier Buffy couldn't see. The air crackled and he staggered back, frowning, then lifted a hand and explored the space before him. He didn't get far before he encountered a place he couldn't push against. Then he roared and began throwing himself against it, ricocheting off nothing at all.

"Now then..." Willow turned her attention back to Buffy, that smile back in place. "You see, don't you? It's good that you see. The monster you think you tamed? It's still there. Give it half a chance and it'll snap my neck. You *are* my friend, Buffy. It's only right that you know the truth."

"You call this being a friend?" she spat back, her vision blurring again, only this time with an accompanying sting that told her she was close to losing control entirely. "Willow..."

"He doesn't deserve it. You know he doesn't." There was a pause, and though it was hard to tell, Willow's expression turned thoughtful. "But you do. You are, after all, the warrior of the people. And if you're going to live as long as I think you are..."

She strolled forward, toward the place where Buffy had yet to climb back to her feet.

"Relax," the witch said when she tensed. "I'm not going to hurt you."

"Forgive me if I don't find that very reassuring," Buffy replied, but

for some reason, her legs wouldn't obey the commands she sent them, and she remained on the floor, watching as Willow drew nearer, her gaze unblinking and unnatural.

"Buffy!" Spike screamed, beating his fists against the invisible static prison he was trapped inside. "Buffy!"

"I don't think anyone needs to worry about *Buffy* anymore," Willow muttered. And when she was close enough, she reached over and plucked one of Buffy's hairs off her head.

"Ow."

"Oh, you big baby. I just need to see something." Willow snickered and raised the strand to the light, the way she might a letter or something that she didn't want to liberate from its envelope. She cocked her head, her eyes narrowing. No, not narrowing. *Reading*. Willow was somehow *reading* her hair. Was that a thing?

God, Buffy didn't know. She didn't know anything anymore.

"Hmm," the witch drawled after a moment, lowering her arms and letting the strand fall to the floor. "Good news or bad news? I'll start with the good since we'd already guessed the bad. The good? Turns out *this* witch unlocked the mystery of how to keep young and pretty forever. Congrats, Buffy. Gray hairs are not something you'll have to worry about. The bad—well, it's like I said. I just did *way* too thorough a job on that resurrection spell. What doesn't kill ya will indeed make you stronger. But not as strong as what *does* kill you." A drunken laugh bubbled off her lips. "Hey, you'll be like Kenny! Maybe we can make that our next Scooby catchphrase. 'You killed Buffy, bastards!'"

Buffy expelled a gulp of air as though punched, that awful, sick feeling she'd experienced earlier coming over her once again. The future sprawled before her, an endless stretch of nothing, nothing, and more nothing. The rest she'd found, the place she'd been... Sometime over the last few months, the ache of homesickness she'd felt for Heaven had started to fade. She'd navigated her way through the black only to discover there was life and love on the other side. She'd remembered not only how to breathe, but how much she enjoyed the air. How much she enjoyed the miracle that was life. Things that had seemed impossible when she'd crawled out of her grave had, at some time, become not just possible, but her new reality. The fight was never

over, sure, but the moments between the battles could be wonderful if she trusted in herself and the people she loved enough.

But now?

"And hey, I can recognize when I made a booboo," Willow said, sounding thousands of miles away. "I tell you what, Buffy. As a personal favor from me to you. I took you out of Heaven, which, not cool. Not, not cool. But it doesn't have to be *all* bad, right? I can give you the vampire you want now."

Buffy whipped her head up, her heart skipping. "What?"

"Well, come on. You're not exactly fooling anyone with him." She rolled her eyes and motioned to Spike, who had ceased his beatings against the invisible prison she'd trapped him inside, and was now staring at both of them with wide-eyed horror. "But Angel?" Willow continued. "I can pluck that little curse away in a snap. Kinda like how I plucked Spike's chip away. So you and your true immortal honey can get as grindy as you want without having to worry about homicide as a side-effect. I mean, that'd make it perfect, wouldn't it? You live forever, but with the vamp you actually love. No more substitutes."

Buffy understood the words in an academic sense, understood that they were in English and, when strung together, gave voice to a suggestion. An offer. Something that so resembled a recurring dream she'd had that she doubted her own reality for a second.

Angel? Willow could...give her Angel? Was she really saying that?

She was.

*Oh my god.*

And Buffy's brain blanked out. No, not blanked. Not the right word. It rather *exploded* with thought—thoughts both new and old, those she'd entertained forever ago, lifetimes ago, after Angel had made his big speech about what she deserved and what he couldn't give her. The things that had been impossible then, up to and including moving on—how she'd once collapsed in Willow's lap, sobbing about how Angel's leaving felt, in itself, like dying. How in many ways dying had been easier, because dying had an end, and for so long she'd thought that what she felt for Angel never would.

It had been so strong, that love. It had motivated her to do some downright stupid things. It had cost her and her friends so much, and

she'd been willing to give up everything to keep it. Even after the heartbreak and pain, she would have sacrificed her entire self, her future, if it meant Angel stayed in her life.

It was possible. It was *possible*.

But then she looked up and met Spike's eyes. The devastation there, coupled with the certainty. The absolute belief that he knew what her answer would be. And she thought of that meeting with Angel after her resurrection, how she'd wanted to tell him all the things she'd told Spike up till that point but hadn't because part of her had known how it would go. Platitudes and promises he'd keep, but make only out of a sense of duty. Then everything that had come after—the nights she'd spent unloading herself on Spike. Fighting alongside him, sometimes bickering, sometimes laughing. Their first date at the Bronze, when he'd teased her over her choice of drink, spun her around on the dance floor, and let her set the pace. Taking what she gave and wanting more but not pushing, except *sometimes* pushing but always deferring to her. How he'd told her at her birthday party that he'd wait forever, even if she never got where he was. The realization that she loved him when she'd been out with Riley's new wife and how she'd pulled him into her that night at her house, given in to something part of her had known for a long time. The ice treatment he'd introduced her to, messing around at the failed wedding, him singing "Wind Beneath My Wings" in front of a bunch of demons because he'd known it'd irk her. Even their fight, their first *couple* fight, and how he'd described her to Dawn as no one ever had—*seen* her as no one had. His own assertion that she'd never had as much fun with anyone as she had with him and how she'd realized almost immediately that he was right about that, even if she hadn't admitted it.

The past was an anchor, designed to keep her in place and underwater even when she wanted to swim up. The intensity with which she'd loved Angel had been almost painful, though for reasons she had been too young to understand. Perhaps that was why it had taken so long to make that plunge with Spike. She'd never once taken a risk with her heart with the faith that maybe it *wouldn't* shatter—maybe things would work. What this was, what she felt now, was no less intense than what she'd felt before, just less painful and less lonely.

Drowning in him wouldn't kill her because she *wouldn't* drown. Spike was there to help her breathe, as he had been since the start.

What exactly that meant hadn't been clear before—not until right now. Not until this moment. And Buffy smiled, hot tears streaming down her face. She didn't even know when she'd started crying, but she was, and it was a good cry. A cry for letting go and grabbing on at the same time. She'd been looking, waiting for the right moment to tell Spike she loved him since that first night they'd come together and she understood now why the words had been hard for her.

She'd known she felt it but hadn't trusted it. But she did now, like she'd trusted nothing.

Buffy swallowed, holding Spike's gaze, and said, "I love you."

The change was both slow and instantaneous. His mouth fell open, the despair on his face softening until it wasn't despair at all, rather something closer to disbelief—a good disbelief that gave way to pure awe. His eyes grew round and shiny, and then he was smiling at her. That brilliant smile she loved so much.

He'd known, she knew he'd known—the fact that she loved him had been an open secret for the last few days. Ever since the demon had poisoned her brain, in fact, and she'd come to the other side. But he'd felt it too, that second where she'd considered Willow's offer. Where she'd *had* to consider it because of what it meant for her, for them, and in that second he'd thought he'd lost.

"Well," Willow said, forcing Buffy to break eye contact with her vampire. "I really didn't know how that would go. Gotta say, bit surprised." She crossed her arms. "But you get it now, don't you? You choose Spike. I choose to kill a couple of dweebs that aided and abetted the man who killed the woman I love. We both choose *death*, Buffy. Just in different forms. You can't say you're any better than I am. So if you'll excuse me—"

Buffy was on her feet the next second. "Willow—"

"I mean, I'd love to stay and beat you up some more, but I have things to do."

But then she stopped short. So did Buffy, for the door to the Magic Box had swung open and perhaps the last person either of them expected to see stood in the threshold.

*Giles?*

It looked like Giles—it also didn't, but it couldn't be anyone else. His expression was somber and determined, and he only had eyes for Willow.

"I think you'll find that you are going nowhere," he said.

## SHINE ON YOU CRAZY DIAMOND

PERFECT BLOODY TIMING OR NOT, RUPERT OUGHT TO BE throttled. And for Spike, knowing that he could deliver such a throttling without experiencing any pain himself was its own special sort of torment, especially in watching the way Buffy glommed onto the man. Seemed all certain blokes had to do around here to be forgiven was make an entrance.

The immediate events following Rupert's surprise return were a bit of a blur. Anya had dropped the book she'd been chanting from, giving away her position and brassing Willow off enough just by existing that Spike wagered they'd have been picking up little bits of vengeance demon had Giles not lobbed some powerful mojo of his own to restrain her. That much had been enough to free Spike from the invisible box the witch had shoved him inside, and then he'd been across the room, arms around Buffy.

It hadn't quite been the scene he'd imagined. Ever since the Slayer had let slip that she loved him and all her coy little hints about how she might tell him properly, Spike had entertained himself by dreaming up any number of scenarios that might fit the *perfect* bill. In almost all of them, he got to celebrate by taking her to bed and showing her exactly what it meant to be loved by him—in none of them had it been

after her best mate made an offer that even he'd thought Buffy wouldn't be able to refuse.

But she had. He'd watched it happen. As the reality of what Willow was suggesting had settled over her, Buffy had taken on that far-off look she wore when confronted with something larger than herself. The look he'd seen on her face the night she'd first realized her mum might not be there much longer, how helpless and overwhelmed she'd been, sitting with something she didn't know how to fight. Seeing it again, in this new context, had damn near broken him. In those seconds he'd thought he'd lost her, and it had been like dying all over again, only death had never been so bloody cruel.

Then something had shifted, her eyes growing bright, fixed on some point in the distance, tears spilling down her cheeks, and she'd smiled. And she'd looked at him then like she never had before. Like he could light up from the inside, the shine there had been so blinding. It was the look that sold it, before she said the words themselves. He'd seen something in her eyes and known, and it had been the best moment of his life.

The bigger talk would come later, like everything else. Right now, he had to be content with the way she'd thrown herself at him and damn near mauled his lips. The kiss had been all fire and passion, born of that delicious Slayer heat, but much too brief because there were other concerns. Like the witch caught in a web of magic that Spike hadn't known the old man could wield, and what the bloody hell was to be done with her.

So, after leaving Anya in charge of Willow, Buffy and Giles made their way to the training room, Spike trailing behind.

Giles scowled when he turned to close the door. "This doesn't concern you."

"Bugger that," Spike spat, shouldering his way past the git. "If you don't mind, not gonna take my cues from a wanker who up and left the girl he thinks of as a daughter when she needed him most."

Buffy was at his side almost at once, tugging on his arm. "Spike, not now—"

"No. Now." He didn't so much as glance her way, holding Rupert's



gaze and pointing toward the retail area of the shop. "Take a good long look, mate. That's your mess out there."

"Oh, is it?" Giles replied with cold, almost passive indifference.

"Bloody right it is. Saw as much when you came back, didn't you? And don't bother denyin' it, we heard you. The Slayer and me. First night you got back." He stepped forward, still not looking away. "You saw the witch was spiralin', playin' with mojo bigger than her. She took your sodding *memories* away and the next thing you do is hop a bloody plane."

"I am no more responsible for Willow's actions than you are," Giles retorted, a bit red in the face now. "I warned her—"

"Yeah. You warned her. Big man, you are." He paused, grinding his teeth and straining for the same patience that had been his ally all year. But he wouldn't lie—it was hard. Especially knowing that he had the ability to thrash the wanker properly. Wouldn't kill him, of course—wouldn't kill anyone—but the urge was there. Peel back Rupert's eyelids until he was forced to confront the damage he'd done. "But that wasn't even the worst. You left the Slayer when she needed you the most with some rubbish about standin' on her own. Y'know I'm a demon, right? Evil through and through. But I never run out on the people I love when they need me."

Giles stared at him as though waiting to see if he was finished, then huffed a sigh and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Fortunately, Spike, I don't believe anyone around here *has* ever needed you, so if it's all the same to you, I—"

"Giles, that's crap."

Spike paused, looked over his shoulder. While not loud or forceful, Buffy's voice had still managed to cut through the air with unquestionable authority.

"I... There's a lot," Buffy stepped forward, looking more than a little resigned but determined all the same. "And while talking about this now would *not* have been my choice... You left me when I needed you the most. I will never understand that. These last few months have been..." She swallowed, looked at Spike and grinned before affixing her attention on the Watcher once more. "Not terrible. But it took me a long time to

feel like I could breathe on my own again. I've been up to my eyeballs in things that I never had to worry about before, Slayer or not. Bills. Putting food on the table. Fixing the house when things break. Keeping social services from taking Dawn away. I never got a chance to learn how to do any of this, and when was I supposed to? Between apocalypses?"

"Buffy—"

"This huge *thing* had happened to me—being torn from Heaven? It's not exactly something that's easy to get over. I felt like I was drowning and even though you saw me there, struggling and trying to keep above water, you decided to walk away anyway." Her lower lip was trembling now, her eyes shining with new tears. "I know what you were trying to do. It took me a while to get it, but I do now. You wanted me to learn how to swim, get fixed by myself. But Giles, the way you did it? I could have easily sunk instead. I might have. There were times I came close. I have never needed you more than I needed you this year and you left."

Giles opened his mouth, closed it, and opened it again. It wasn't often Spike saw the man at a loss and he couldn't say he wasn't chuffed. There was more he wanted to bark at him, more barbs to mold into weapons just because he could, but he managed to shove all that aside. Buffy had said all that needed to be said, and besides, hearing it from her was ten times more impactful than hearing it from someone else.

But then the old sod had to go and ruin it by taking his lumps with dignity and aplomb.

"You're right," Giles said softly, his gaze never leaving the Slayer's. "Leaving you the way I did was... I thought it was for the best. It *seemed* for the best. I thought, I truly thought, that you needed to learn to stand on your own, and that my being here was little more than a crutch."

"When someone's hurt, they need crutches," Buffy replied, also with a cool calm. "Just until they can walk again."

"I know." He paused, then looked back to Spike, something in his expression hardening. "But if the, ahh, display back there was anything to go off, I assume you found alternative means of coping."

Spike bit back a snarl, though the implication—the words buried under what had actually been said—was enough to make a normal man

roar, never mind a vampire who had nearly had everything he loved ripped away from him less than twenty bloody minutes ago.

"I'm not a sodding nicotine patch," Spike spat instead. "I'm in love with her."

"Giles, we're not going to argue about me and Spike. You don't know the way things have been here since you left and, quite frankly, it's none of your business." Buffy's voice was also firm and rather unfor-giving. "We've been together for a few weeks. Well, *officially* a few weeks. Really ever since I came back."

Spike arched his eyebrows and looked at her. "Yeah?"

The girl went a bit pink in the cheeks. "Well, that's how I think about it. Even if...it wasn't official until—"

"I quite get the picture," Giles said, waving as though to brush aside the entire conversation. "Buffy...this is... What the devil has happened since I've been gone?"

"A lot," Buffy replied, crossing her arms and stepping back, back until she was close enough to touch. Spike wondered if she was aware she did that, moved toward him until he could reach her, caress the small of her back in that way he knew she fancied. If she knew just how much she reached for him without doing any sort of actual reach-ing. It was something unlike anything he'd had with Dru, who had demanded attention and affection whenever she felt she was lacking either and had been overt with her desire to touch and be touched. "The thing with me and Spike started before you left, though. It started...almost immediately after Willow resurrected me. He was the only person I could stand to be around, who I didn't need to lie to or pretend to be okay. I wasn't sure what it was, and it took a long time to get there, but it's where we are now. And I love him."

Spike swallowed thickly, blinked and directed his gaze to the floor before he could do something nancyish like burst into bloody tears. God, if they got to the end of whatever this was with the witch...

"But that's just part of it," Buffy went on. "Xander left Anya at the altar. She's a demon again. I've been fighting these human geeks who... I underestimated way more than I should have. One of them killed a woman and tried to pin it on me, even going so far as to try to get me to believe it, too. I've been working for a demon mob boss just to keep

the roof over our heads—Spike’s been helping, too. No one knows that’s what I do, but it’s kept food on the table and social services from taking Dawn away. Dawn who, by the way, has been stealing anything that’s not nailed down. Willow was doing okay with magical rehab until this morning, when the guy I underestimated showed up at the house and killed Tara.” She paused, trembling, and the scent of tears hit the air, hard and intense. “He killed me too. Warren. He shot me in the head.”

Rupert made a sound like he’d been gut-punched. Good. Maybe then he’d bloody appreciate just exactly how much he’d managed to bugger things.

“He shot you...” The Watcher took a step forward, his eyes now roaming Buffy’s face. “Buffy... How?”

Buffy wrapped her arms around herself. “Willow. The spell she did to bring me back to life last fall, apparently it came satisfaction guaranteed. I died this morning. Again. And I woke up. Again. Before you got here, Willow pretty much confirmed everything. She...*read* me. Or my hair or something. Told me that this is pretty much my life from here on.” Her lower lip started trembling. “I’ll keep dying and keep dying and keep dying but I won’t stay dead.”

Spike’s throat tightened. “Slayer—”

“I don’t want to be dead, Spike. I don’t. As of yesterday, life was actually pretty great.” She sniffed, wiped at her eyes. “But it’s never going to stop. I’ll be the Slayer every day for the rest of forever, and no matter how many times I die, I won’t ever get to go back to Heaven. I won’t get to see my mom. I’ll have to watch Dawn get old and die. I’ll have to watch *all* of the people I love—”

“Buffy, pet—”

“And don’t tell me it’s all right because it’s *not*,” she said, this time choking back a sob. “I know I can’t stop and think about that right now, but I just keep coming back to it. It’s just... It’s so big. I *can’t*...”

Spike swore and tugged her to him, worried for a second that she’d resist and nearly melting when she didn’t. Then she was in his arms, hugging him to her and sobbing against his shoulder, and he had no idea what to do—what to do with any of this. How to be sorry that Buffy got forever, that he’d never have to worry about facing a world

without her in it, when it was the most relieved he'd been about anything in his sodding life, even knowing how she felt. Knowing how much that same knowledge hurt her, which in itself fed the demon's need to rage and tear and destroy anything that caused her this much pain. This called for a brand of selflessness he didn't possess and reckoned he never would.

He worried she could hear those thoughts, monstrous things that they were. That she didn't want him to talk because she knew even the platitudes he'd offer would be empty. But she was still here, wasn't she? She was still here, still with him, knowing these things about him and somehow loving him anyway. Letting him hold her as she got out what she needed to get out. While she mourned a thing he could never mourn.

"I'm sorry, love," he murmured into her hair. And he was—he was so sorry that he couldn't help with this.

Buffy calmed after what seemed like forever, leaving his T-shirt soaked through, and his heart all twisted up, the weight of her hurt damn near crushing.

"Thanks," she said, inhaling and pulling back. "I just... I needed that. I've been going a million miles a second since this morning and... I had to get it out." She sniffed again. "Though there's a lot more. Be warned. Once this Willow sitch is wrapped up, eighty percent chance of extended meltdown."

"Whatever you need," he replied before kissing her temple. "Anything you need, Buffy. I'm sorry."

She nodded in a numb, detached sort of way and met his eyes, her own seeing far too much of him. But when she smiled, it was soft and sincere, as was the kiss she pressed to his lips.

"Buffy," Rupert said, drawing her attention back to him. "Buffy, I... I don't know what to say. What she's done... It's..." He struggled for a moment, not seeming to find the right words, and irritated though Spike was with the git, he understood that feeling all too well. At last, he said, "The coven in Devon—that's how I knew about all this. They may be able to help."

Buffy leaned her cheek against Spike's shoulder. "Help?"

"Emphasis on *may*. I don't know exactly what their capabilities are

in terms of magicks like these. They were powerful enough to sense the rise of a dangerous magical force here in Sunnydale." Giles cleared his throat. "A dark force, powered by grief."

"Willow," Buffy said, sounding somewhat vacant, and that alone made Spike's heart twist in ways he would have once thought impossible.

The simple acknowledgment there was so different from what he'd heard that morning—the hope, the certainty that she'd be able to get through to her friend. In a handful of hours, everything Buffy knew about her world had been upended. All by a bloody bullet.

"I'd so hoped it wasn't her," Giles said, though in such a way Spike knew there had never really been any question. "And then a seer in the coven told me about Tara."

"Wait a tick," Spike interjected, frowning. "You knew that was comin', then? And you didn't even bother to pick up a bloody phone?"

"There was hardly time."

"Oh, but there was time to fly across the sodding Atlantic."

"I didn't fly, you ignorant little prat, the coven teleported me," Giles shot back, flushing. "And no, there wasn't time to—"

Buffy was between them in a flash, holding up her hands. "Guys, on the list of things to argue about, this is at the very bottom. Right now, we need to focus on how to bring Willow back." She lowered her arms. "I'm guessing the magic you used out there will come into play."

Giles glared at Spike a moment longer—a glare Spike was all too willing to return—before shifting his attention to Buffy. "The coven imbued me with their powers," he said. "It won't be enough to overtake her, but it might provide enough of a stall to allow them to determine how they can extract her powers without...killing her."

Buffy drew in a sharp breath but didn't otherwise react.

"Should she survive," Giles went on, watching her, "there is no guarantee that she'll be the Willow we know. The things she's done... She's killed a human being. That changes you."

He heard it a second too late—the sound of movement on the other side of the training room's door. Spike had time to whirl around, time to meet Willow's fathomless black eyes, and catch the twisted smile on her face.

"I wouldn't worry about that," Willow said. She held Anya up in one hand like a limp doll. "Willow doesn't live here anymore."



EITHER THAT COVEN from Devon was rubbish or Rupert was not the person to wield their power.

The next few minutes were a blur. Spike throwing himself on Buffy as the first blast tore through the room, staying low to the ground when that blast was returned in kind. He'd never had the misfortune of being caught in the middle of whatever the bloody hell this was, and the way the air buzzed had every one of his natural instincts settled on protection and survival.

Not that Willow seemed too interested in him or the Slayer at the moment. She was focused entirely on Giles, lobbing bursts of color at him, shouting spells, and repelling whatever he threw back with careless ease.

One thing had become startlingly clear—Willow had well and truly stopped giving a bloody damn who she hurt. Even before when she'd been trading punches with the Slayer, there had been some resignation there—not necessarily a desire to hurt her, but an acknowledgment that Buffy wouldn't let her go off on a rampage. The part of the girl that had cared had winked out and she was looking to draw blood. Either by the knives she enchanted to fly at the Watcher or the various blobs of magic she kept hurtling through the air.

Spike had to give the old man props, though. He tried. Every time Willow attacked, Rupert was there to meet or counter, tossing out magic like Spike had never seen. But then Spike hadn't seen *anything* like a wizard's duel before—if *duel* was even right for what was looking more to be a slow-motion slaughter. In a matter of minutes, the Magic Box had become bloody unrecognizable. The lights were all out, some dangling from the ceiling, the bookshelves toppled over, splintered, and scattered. A variety of potion ingredients littered the floor among shards of broken glass. It looked like a bomb had gone off, which struck Spike as apt enough comparison, considering the magical explosions kept coming.

The only good news, far as he could see, was that Willow had also lost all her interest in Buffy, though he wasn't brave enough to guess why. There wasn't much the Slayer could throw at her, aside from punches. To her credit, Buffy seemed to realize this, and hung back to allow Giles his chance.

That didn't mean she wasn't ready. She lingered behind, watching and waiting, searching for an opening as her best friend and her watcher traded insults. Willow boasting that she couldn't be hurt, Giles trying to get under her skin by wondering what Tara would think of her lover's new resolve that people in her life no longer mattered. Pricking and poking at an open wound, though Spike could have told him that was useless now. Willow was too eager to dole out pain—she wasn't interested in stopping and focusing on her own.

Something she proved the next second.

"You can ask her yourself," Willow snapped at Giles before lobbing another surge of magic. And Buffy was in motion, shooting forward to shove her watcher to safety before the power could hit. Just in time, too, for that was the last bit the loft could take, and the whole thing came raining down in a shower of books, dust, and debris.

"You're always saving everyone," Willow observed. "It's kinda pesky."

Buffy winced, climbing back to her feet. Ever the warrior. Ever ready to fight.

But the witch wasn't looking at her now. She'd glanced down at the burning rubbish beside her—one of the many little fires scattered throughout the premises—and scooped up a handful of flame like it was bloody nothing.

Spike's throat tightened. All of him did. And he must have telegraphed his intent, for Buffy gave her head a scant shake. So slight, in fact, he reckoned he would have missed it if he didn't know her as well as he did.

"You probably even think you're buying escape time for Jonathan and the other one. Well, I gotta little secret for you." Willow paused as though waiting for input, then continued with a little smirk, "I can kill them from anywhere I want with this." She waved her free hand over



the flaming sphere, which instantly began to grow. "It'll find them. It'll bury them. Along with anyone helping those dead men walking."

*Bloody fuck.* Dawn. Now Spike shot a panicked look to Buffy, but she didn't look back. Her gaze was locked on the fire dancing across Willow's hand.

"Don't," Buffy said, though it was already done.

And so was Spike. If the witch cost the Nibbles her life, he was snapping her neck. Sod the rest—sod bloody everything. If he offed her former chum, Buffy would hurt. Yeah, he knew that, but not nearly as much as losing her sister would. Hell, the second he got an opening, he would take it. Rupert had had his shot and it hadn't worked. None of it had. And since it was Willow neither Buffy nor the Watcher had the stones to do what needed to be done.

But Spike did. And the bitch had given him his fangs back.

"Unless," Willow continued in a light, mocking tone, "somebody, somehow, can get there in time to save them." A beat. "Oh well."

Then the ball was in the air, bursting through the ceiling like there was nothing there at all, and tearing across the night sky.

"Fly, my pretty, fly," she practically cackled before lowering her gaze to Buffy. "See what I did there?"

Buffy was shaking so hard she practically vibrated. She glanced down to Giles, who had yet to pull himself to his feet, then to Spike.

"I got this, Slayer," Spike told her solemnly. "Go."

"That's right, he's got this." Willow looked positively delighted at the prospect. "Run, run, run as fast as you can," she chirped after Buffy, who darted past her without hesitating. That the witch didn't seem concerned about this was in itself concerning, but Spike didn't have time to wonder after it.

The magic would die if the witch died. All he had to do was get close enough.

"You think you can do it?" Willow asked, still all grins and apparently reading his thoughts. "Get close enough to me to sink in those fangs? Or no, that's not how you'd do it, is it? Spike, the Slayer of Slayers, Scourge of Europe, slaughterer of innocents, is afraid of magic. Wouldn't risk the contact high." She made a face and spat out in a horrible approximation of his accent, "*Magic always has consequences.*"

Even after we brought her back, you had to act like we'd pissed in your Wheaties when *all* of us knew better. Hell, Spike, you owe me a big thank you. If it weren't for me, you'd have never gotten a chance to cross *fuck a slayer* off your to-do list. You're welcome for that."

Spike firmed his jaw, not willing to chance taking his eyes off the witch. She was circling around now, edging toward the place where Rupert was still attempting to rise to his feet. Whatever move he made would be his only shot, so he had to choose it carefully.

"You know I was the big hurdle," Willow continued. "Xander—well, we all knew how Xander would react, didn't we? And sure, he came around. The way he came around with Angel. But the bestie? If you don't get her, you don't get past first base, never mind *all* the way to home plate. That's a baseball metaphor, by the way. If I hadn't given her that first little shove, she never would have taken a swing."

Giles had managed to stand, though he looked like a stiff breeze might knock him over. At the moment, the witch's back was to him, but Spike wasn't daft enough to think she didn't have ways of knowing every move either of them made. Neither was Rupert, from his expression.

"And I just keep *giving*, don't I? Took care of that little chip problem for you. Even got Buffy to choose you over Angel—hell, that one still surprises me. Was that the first time she told you she loved you?" At his silence, the witch's grin widened. "It was, wasn't it? Wow, another thing you owe me. So when you say you've *got this*, I think what you mean is—"

Giles opened his mouth, though whatever he'd been about to say—or lob—was lost the next second. Willow whirled around with speed unnatural even to creatures of the night and flicked up a hand. Then the Watcher was in the air, smashing against the remnants of the ceiling hard enough to make the walls shudder and send a light rain of dust to the floor.

"Not nice. I was talking," Willow snapped, not even bothering to turn around. "Besides, it's not your turn. William the Bloody wants his shot. Don't you, Willy?"

Bloody right he did. Spike balled his hands into fists, his chest heaving with the weight of breaths he couldn't help but take. He

wanted to look at the Watcher but didn't dare, rather trusted what his senses told him—heartbeat and pulse were still going, even if not as strongly as they should—that Rupert wasn't yet on death's threshold. The second he moved, Spike knew he'd be on borrowed time. That Willow would throw something at him with the intent of putting him down for good.

"Come on," she said. "My neck isn't gonna snap itself."

He waited for another beat, then another, then decided there was bugged-all sense waiting anymore. Willow wasn't going to budge—unless she got bored with him, and there was no bloody telling what she'd do then. Snap her fingers and light him up from the inside or toss another one of those fireballs at his head.

He couldn't think of everything that was riding on this next move. He'd promised Buffy he'd be with her every step of the way as she stared down eternity and he bloody well meant it. Today was not a good day to die.

Good thing then that Spike had never been much of a thinker, at least when it came to action. Half the time he didn't know what he intended to do once he started moving, which worked for him and against him in equal measure. In this case, it worked for him. Some might call it a feint, but in reality, it was a change of mind. He thought he'd go left, as was natural for him, but decided at the last second that right might work better at taking her off balance. The gamble paid off—Willow arced a ball of magic to his left; it exploded when it smashed into the wall, the blowback intense and through a combination of quick thinking and dumb luck, he used it to his favor. Spike snarled and twisted in mid-air, managing to direct the trajectory of his fall so that when he landed, it was on the bitch herself. A triumphant roar tore through his throat as he delivered the first punch.

Spike had been in enough fistfights with human and demon alike to appreciate the subtle differences in skin, muscle, and resistance. For a normal human, taking a hit like the one he'd leveled against Willow might well lead to eating through a feeding tube the rest of their days. Only Willow was not a normal human—not anymore. She'd juiced up enough earlier to take on the Slayer without batting an eye and he felt it still beneath his fists. One blow wouldn't do it and it wasn't likely

two would, either. If he could get her off her legs, though, he could thrash her skull against the floor until she lost consciousness. That might do it just as well—knock the bitch out so that the mojo stopped and he didn't have to look the Slayer in the eye later and tell her that he'd killed her friend. He didn't think Buffy would hate him for it, was pretty sure she'd understand, but also not thick enough to believe that nothing would change between them.

But then her hands were against him, fire against his skin, and the roar in his throat choked as white-hot pain tore through his insides. Spike screamed and scurried back, flames spreading up his arms, and it was over. He'd lost by not going for the kill. Willow was screaming too, lobbing more at him, more that he couldn't see but could feel everywhere. Like he was melting from the inside out.

The only good thing was it didn't last. The edges of his vision darkened, beckoning him with the promise of nothingness. He didn't go willingly, fought to maintain the here and now, fought to stay because this world was the one with Buffy and he wasn't sure if he'd open his eyes again once they were closed.

Then the decision was taken from him, cool, neutral black dousing the flames, and he knew no more.



ALL IN ALL, it wasn't his best showing as far as apocalypses went. Even worse than that time he'd bailed on Buffy during the big fight with Angelus. Not that he'd regretted it at the time, but in retrospect, leaving when she might have been done in hadn't exactly been the best way to prove his love for the world. The big Manchester United speech that had sold her on an unlikely partnership probably hadn't left much of a dent after he'd swept up his lady and made for the exit.

Not worse than last year, though. While Spike didn't much like the fact that he'd been knocked off his arse for the bulk of this one, there wasn't anything to endlessly loop in his head. No list of regrets of actions not taken or moves not made fast enough. Something Rupert was good enough to tell him with his own form of grudging gratitude.

Willow had hit him with something beyond flame, to hear the

Watcher tell it. Enough of a blast that his skin was blackened and half his hair singed off, but thanks to some quick spellcasting on Rupert's part, Spike hadn't crumbled to dust. Instead, he'd just hit the floor, cocooned in a protective magical bubble that Willow hadn't been able to penetrate. Not that she'd tried too hard—once Rupert had snagged her attention properly, she'd lost all interest in Spike.

Spike had come to just in time to catch that Willow had made off with the bulk of Rupert's borrowed power with the intention of ending the world for good. Anya, who had also regained consciousness, popped off long enough to confirm Buffy and Dawn were all right, though they'd been knocked into a grave; Harris was with them, looking for ways to get them out, and the two little wankers who had been at the heart of this had taken off. And Rupert was dying.

"Take me to 'em," he'd asked Anya. "To Buffy and the Bit. World goes out, that's where I wanna be."

But Anya's powers didn't work that way. She'd seemed genuinely sorry when she'd told him so.

In the end, though, it *hadn't* been the end. The ground stopped shaking, the walls stopped trembling, and through his connection or what all with Willow, Rupert had watched as Harris, of all bloody people, talked her down from an apocalypse.

What happened now was up in the bloody air. No two apocalypses were alike, but this one had taken more than those prior, and in ways Spike didn't fully understand, considering his worst memories were still firmly with Glory and that tower. Perhaps because this one had been personal—not a baddie who snuffed it and they never had to see or hear from again. Bugger, he didn't know. He reckoned he wouldn't for some time.

About a half-hour after the world didn't end, Buffy and Dawn hobbled into the Magic Box, or what was left of it, looking a bit worse for wear but otherwise in one piece. When Buffy saw Spike, she screamed his name and launched herself at him with enough force to hurt, though she favored his good side—the left where the flames hadn't done as much damage and left his skin more the color it ought to be. Pain or not, he didn't have the heart to ask her to ease up, too relieved to have her against him. To be standing at all,

to have a tomorrow to look forward to with the woman who loved him.

"I don't want to go back to the house," Dawn said after the chatter had died down. "Not...not yet."

Buffy lifted her head from Spike's shoulder long enough to mutter an agreement. And considering her blood was still splattered about her room, Spike couldn't say he was too keen on going back, either.

"Well, you can't stay with me," Anya said. "Not all of you, anyway. I might have room for one but not a watcher, a slayer, her sister, and a vampire. The apartment is nice but—"

"Don't worry. I don't think we want to be apart," Buffy replied, not bothering to lift her head this time. "Giles?"

"Sunnydale's lodging accommodations leave much to be desired, but under the circumstances..."

Under the circumstances, just about anything would do.

"Who wants to make the call?" Buffy asked.

"One, two, three, not it," Dawn sing-songed, then blushed when Spike arched an eyebrow at her. The remaining eyebrow, that was. The other one would have to grow back. "I mean, I'll do it. If we can have a big pizza waiting for us when we get there."

Buffy lifted her head again, now with that same steely reserve that she relied on when anyone else would have called it quits. She'd crash soon enough, Spike knew, but until then, she'd keep pushing herself. Moving forward. It was what she always did.

"I need to run home and grab some clothes for all of us," Buffy said. "And blood for Spike. Anya, can you help Dawn make the reservations? Three rooms. Giles will need one too."

Anya nodded. "Can do."

"What about Willow?" Dawn asked. "I mean... What's going to happen to her?"

No one said anything for a long moment. Buffy turned her gaze to her watcher and the two shared a long look, the sort in which whole conversations could fit inside. And though a number of things would be left unanswered, Spike could see at once the choices Buffy would make. That they would all make. How whatever came next, Willow would remain in their lives.

He'd grumble about them being too bloody forgiving, but all things considered, that was a trait that seemed to work in his favor.

"We don't know yet," Buffy said when the silence had stretched just a hair past comfortable. "Whatever happens, we'll be here for her."

"We will?" Dawn replied.

Anya snorted and gave the ruins of her shop a long, mournful look. "Speak for yourself."

The Slayer ignored her, kept her attention on her sister. "One thing I've realized this year is...even if it doesn't seem like it, there's nothing you can't survive when you have the people you love in your corner. We'll give her what she needs." Buffy sighed and rested her head on Spike's shoulder again. "Trust me on this, Dawnie. I learned from the best."

And like so many things when it came to the Slayer, that was the end of that. No one had anything else to offer.

It gave him heart that after the day she'd had, all she'd learned and lost, Buffy could still be optimistic about anything. Even here amid blood and carnage, knowing what lay ahead and not blinking—no, his girl didn't blink. Instead, she stood as strong as she ever had.

But then, she was Buffy, so Spike wasn't sure why he was surprised. That was just what she did. Even when at her darkest, she shone. Always had, always would.

Guiding him along the way.

## THE SHOW MUST GO ON

“YOU STILL LOOK BAD.”

Spike fought off a grin, mostly because moving much of anything hurt, including his lips. He’d managed the shower all right, though he’d never been more grateful for his natural indifference to cold water. Anything hot on the right side of his body, where his skin was little more than an angry purple scab, sounded bloody awful. He’d managed to wash off most of the soot, dirt, and blood, but hadn’t been too keen on giving himself a good scrub.

He ran a towel over his head and shuffled his way toward the stack of clothes Buffy had placed on the privy. She’d been fussing over him since she’d arrived, first forcing him to down three bags of blood, then asking if he needed help washing up. If that wasn’t enough, she’d also stopped by the drug store to snag some burn cream and kept taunting him with promises of a full-body rubdown.

No one had worried over him like this since his human days. He’d forgotten what it felt like, being loved.

“Doesn’t happen overnight, Slayer,” he said as he tossed his towel into the corner. “Will take a few more bags of that pig swill, anyway.”

Buffy pressed her lips together, pushing herself off the bathroom doorframe, her brow furrowed. “Human would be better, wouldn’t it?”



Was that a trick question? He hesitated, reaching for his T-shirt. "Yeah," he said slowly. "A bit, I reckon."

"And slayer blood?"

This time he outright froze, his throat suddenly tight. "Not the way I wanted to do it."

"What?"

"Bite you."

"You wanted to bite me?"

"Is that really all that shocking?" he replied, and started attempting to wrangle his shirt over his head. In a blink, Buffy had moved from the doorway to the space before him and was helping him poke his bad arm through the appropriate sleeve-hole. And though he loved her attention, her worry, it annoyed him as well. Her acting like he couldn't do anything on his own, that he needed help to dress and tie his bloody shoes or whatever else she threw at him. Willow might have tried to flambeau him but she hadn't succeeded. The fact that he was still moving around was proof enough that he would recover just fine.

"I... I guess not," Buffy murmured, her hand on his good shoulder. "Though I'm not sure how I feel about being food."

Spike sighed, rolling his head back. "You're not sodding food, love. Never wanted to make a meal out of you."

She arched an eyebrow.

"Well, maybe at the start when I hated you," he amended. Then thought a beat and smirked—to hell with the pain. "And can't say I haven't enjoyed eating you when given the chance."

Buffy rolled her eyes and smacked his shoulder. "Pig."

"What? Seems I recall you enjoyin' yourself, too." He winked when she looked down and raised his good hand to caress the milky column of her throat. "I've wanted to bite you every time we've shagged. Nothin' to do with food, though your blood would be..." God, just the thought had his cock, which had no business showing any interest in anything at the moment, coming to life. "Decadent."

"Decadent?"

"Perhaps not as decadent as you lettin' me tend to you during your monthlies, but a close second."

There it was—the flush he loved so much. Buffy wrinkled her nose

and smacked his shoulder again, a mite harder this time. "I don't even know how you can talk about things like *that* after the day you've had."

"Day *we've* had, yeah?"

"I'm still here all unscorched-like, at least. Willow tried to burn you alive." She paused, resting a hand on his chest, the slight shine in her eyes fading as the rest of the world crept back in. He knew that look, had seen it time and again over the last few months, the moment when Buffy remembered the things she was trying to not think about and came crashing back to earth. Then her lower lip began to tremble. "She nearly killed you," she whispered.

"Didn't though. Takes more than that to put me down."

"Not too much more." Buffy swallowed and raised her gaze to his, a tear scaling down her cheek. "I'm so sorry."

"What? Why?"

"The list is pretty long, but let's start with my best friend nearly killed you." She sniffed. "And then there's the whole... That's not how I wanted to tell you, Spike. Everything that happened—"

He swore and swung his good arm around her shoulders to reel her into him. It had only been a matter of time before Buffy began to crumble, he'd known, after everything. The world had nearly ended and she hadn't been there to stop it, and that was perhaps the least disturbing thing that had happened all day. Buffy had been pushing herself for hours and she wouldn't stop just yet, not when there were conversations to have and the like. Rupert was at Harris's, talking to a subdued Willow and, from the sound of things, making arrangements to fly her overseas. Dawn was catching some much-needed kip in the room they'd rented for her—adjoining, so she couldn't get away with just anything and could reach big sis if needed. Though Spike suspected Buffy had insisted on that provision so that she could split her attention between him and the Nibblet, be everywhere for everyone at once.

"Got nothin' to apologize for," he murmured into her hair. "Nothin', you hear?"

"Willow nearly killed you."

"Yeah, well, I've nearly done her in a time or two. Just evenin' the odds, I expect."

Buffy didn't reply to that, just released a shuddering breath and stood still for a moment. When she looked up at him, her eyes were clear and determined but unreadable, which threw him off a bit. Looked a mite too similar to the way she had right after her first resurrection, things going on behind the scenes but not in such a way he could tell what they were. Disconcerting when Buffy had been a bloody open book to him through most of their relationship, and there was no shortage of things that might have darkened her mind. The chip, or the fact that it was gone, at the forefront there. It was only a matter of time.

"I want you to bite me," she said at last, nearly knocking him off his feet.

Still, he managed to recover quickly enough. "Anytime you fancy, pet."

"I mean now. It'll help, right?"

Everything in him started howling at full bloody volume—his gums tingling as his fangs itched to slide down, the monster salivating over the thought. Spike dropped his gaze to the pulse-point of her throat, forcing himself to swallow. "Not the way I wanted to do it," he said, well aware he was repeating himself but unable to keep from doing so. The first time he'd said it had been informational—this was a reminder. "Wanted you hot and wanting it too. Wanted you to beg me for it."

Buffy arched an eyebrow, though she was grinning. "You thought I would?"

"Someday, yeah. Know you've thought of it." He met her eyes and ran his finger over her neck once more. "Think I don't feel it when I have my mouth on you there? The way your breath catches and your blood pumps harder? Even if you don't know you want it yet, your body does."

"Have I mentioned recently how unfair it is that you have this superpower and I don't? 'Cause massive with the unfair."

Spike tried to keep from smirking again. "So you're not gonna deny it, then?"

"I mean, why even bother?"

"To be you, I'd wager."

Buffy rolled her eyes but her grin remained in place, and was joined with that delicate blush once more. "I can beg if it'll get your fangs in me any faster."

The girl just didn't know how to play fair. "I bite you here, pet, and it's gonna hurt."

"Uhh, you bite me *anywhere* and it's gonna hurt."

"Not the way I planned on it." He lowered his lips to the mark his wanker of a grandsire had left on her skin however-long ago. "The tossers you let nibble on you here in the past didn't do right by you."

"Is that a fact?" she replied somewhat dryly, though the hitch in her voice gave her away.

"Is at that, and I think you know it, too." Spike gave her a little nibble of his own, slight and with blunt teeth, but a nibble nonetheless. He couldn't help himself—her throat was right there, the sweet hum of her blood a siren song to his fangs, and she was oh-so-willing. The fact that she'd come to him with this before even mentioning the chip was something, as well. She was more concerned with him being at full bloody strength than she was the prospect of him seeking out townies to munch on. "That's why you're hot for me to do it, see," he said when he pulled back. "Why I'd get you to beg one of these days..."

Buffy favored him with a small grin, the sort that he'd taken to mean *I love you* before she'd managed the words themselves. And at once, he felt a bit of a dolt for ever doubting what her answer would be when the wicked witch had offered up Angel. For weeks, Spike had been on the receiving end of those grins and soft looks and softer touches that had all but screamed what she hadn't been able to voice. Love wasn't something Buffy did half-cocked—she either felt it or she didn't, and he'd known she'd felt it. She'd just told him in a million other ways first before turning to the words.

But there was something about the words, too. He was a poet and words were his currency. Having them meant the world.

"Don't want you to be put off of it," he continued. "My fangs inside of you when I'm inside you. Want you to keep wanting it so you beg me one day. If that means taking the long way around healin' up—"

"Spike, some things are more important than sex."

"That's a filthy lie they tell you Yanks, bloody puritans."

She gave him a short, lyrical laugh, but sobered almost instantly. "This will help, so you're going to do it." Buffy hesitated then lifted her wrist to his mouth, the scent of her skin and the rich, liquid ecstasy pumping through her veins overwhelming his senses. "Like this. We can save the neck for when you're better."

Spike blinked hard, at once much too close to tears. Fuck, he loved this woman. "You're sure?"

"I'm sure I want my boyfriend back in tip-top shape." She hesitated. "I trust you, Spike."

Well, bugger, now he was certain he *would* cry. Those words were almost more precious than the ones she'd been teasing him with. Maybe they were more, because he knew what this was for her.

Spike took her hand, ran a finger over the prominent vein in her wrist, then gently encouraged her to take it back.

"Spike—"

"Other arm, pet. Left, not right."

She frowned for a second before understanding flooded her eyes and nodded, then gave him her left hand. He spent a good minute caressing her wrist again, relishing the rush beneath his fingertips, how she responded to even the slightest caress. The urge was there to just bite and tear, as he'd known it would be, but he shoved that back and focused on breathing her in instead. He'd love to do this all proper-like, get Buffy wet and wiggling and aching and needing, and he wanted to tell her to play with herself, or at least let him play with her to warm her up, but there was no bloody telling when Dawn might stir or when Rupert might pop on back and he knew Buffy wouldn't be happy until he'd taken what he needed.

"You bloody shove me off if it's too much, you hear?"

"Duh."

"I love you."

That warm light that had taken her over before flooded her eyes again. "I love you, too. And I'm so sorry it took me so long to actually say it."

He didn't need her apologies—didn't want them. The way she'd told him had been perfect, far as he was concerned. And the best way

he could get that across was to drop his fangs and sink them into the ivory flesh of her wrist.

Buffy hissed and jerked, pain flashing across her face. Not a lot but enough that his heart twisted all the same, but then her blood was filling his mouth and his brain bloody well checked out. He'd thought he'd tasted it before, the best blood he'd ever have—the best blood any vamp could hope to taste. Strong and life-affirming, the blood of a slayer, especially that won in battle. But bugger, he'd been wrong. It was this—having the woman he loved, the woman dedicated to hunting down his kind, trusting him with the most precious part of her. The part she knew he'd killed for in the past and with great relish. Watching him as he swallowed mouthful after mouthful, her gaze firm, absent any doubt or misgiving.

*Fuck.*

He wouldn't say pulling away was easy, because it wasn't, but he sighed with relief the second his fangs were free from her skin again, then lapped at the wound he'd made. "That's enough," he whispered against her wrist. "Thank you, love."

"Are you sure? You didn't take much."

"Took enough."

"You know I have an endless supply, right? Kill me and I'll come back."

Spike shook his head, which swam a bit, buzzing with the high bought by her blood. "If it's all the same to you, that's not how I do in slayers."

"Ah. And here I thought I was special."

He grinned and pressed a kiss to her brow. "Only kinda death I'm keen to give you is the kind you beg for, baby. Over and over again."

Buffy offered a weak smile, some of the light in her eyes dimming, and he knew she was thinking of the stretch of forever she had at her feet. The same stretch that provided him with a rush of giddy, if not guilty relief, easing the memories of those awful hundred-and-forty-seven days he'd spent without her, reliving the actions he should have taken to spare her the choice she'd been forced to make. And there was some of that still—if he'd done what she'd asked, she never would have jumped, and she wouldn't be facing an eternity now thanks to a

spell gone wrong. There was no telling how things might have been different, but fuck, he couldn't wish them different. While he'd do about anything to keep her from hurting, his own need to have her, have her with him the way she was now, overpowered the senses he'd been working to tame.

"I should go check on Dawn," Buffy said a moment later. "Then hop in the shower. Wash off the apocalypse."

"What do you need me to do?"

She smiled again. "Rest. You're not as much fun to beat up if you're not at a hundred percent."

"You know I don't mind it rough."

"I mind it for you." Buffy arched up to brush a kiss across his unblemished cheek, then moved back into the room proper. "Besides," she called over her shoulder, "Once Giles gets here, I imagine we'll have a lot to talk about. You should try to be alert for that."

Something told him he'd need to be more than alert. Rupert might have saved his skin but that didn't mean the man liked him at all, or wouldn't be a wanker about the things he'd learned since blasting his way into town. And there was still the matter of the chip—or what to do now. If Buffy would insist on alternative means to keeping him leashed, as he suspected she would. He had promised, after all.

Part of him couldn't help but hope, though, that things had changed where that was concerned. That her trusting him with her blood just now had been about more than just her knowledge that she was unkillable. That she perhaps believed what he'd been saying from the start—believed enough to trust him with more than just her, but with the whole bloody world.

But if she didn't... Well, it'd smart, but he'd get it. As it was, he had time to prove he meant it when he said she'd changed him beyond the chip. He had forever.

Forever with Buffy.

Never had an apocalypse given him the bloody world, but somehow, that was exactly what had happened.

And that was one thing he'd never take for granted.



WILLOW WASN'T TALKING MUCH, Giles said, though he didn't seem particularly surprised. Xander had lent her some of his pajamas and was, apparently, doing everything in his power to pretend like what had happened on Kingman's Bluff *hadn't* happened. That they were teenagers again, renting bad movies and gorging themselves on pizza and gummy bears and whatever else he could convince her to eat. Buffy wasn't sure whether or not that was a good idea but since Giles wasn't worried, and he was the one Willow had nearly killed, she'd decided she wouldn't be worried, either.

Well, much.

"So...what happens next?" Buffy asked, pushing her own piece of pizza around on the paper plate in lieu of eating it. They had congregated in Giles's rented room following his return—Buffy, Dawn, and Spike sitting on the spare bed and Giles at the table by the window. Spike looked a lot better than he had earlier, though not as much as she would have liked. Maybe she could convince him to take more blood later, once they'd talked everything out.

"I've made arrangements with the coven," Giles said. He also wasn't eating much. "Willow and I will fly out the day after tomorrow. And then... Well, from there, we'll see."

"We'll see?"

"What happens when we arrive will be up to her, mostly. How committed she is to learning how to control her abilities." He released a sigh. "Recovery is something that takes a lot of time and patience, and the low she hit is one not everyone walks away from. She has to want to get better, Buffy."

Buffy swallowed, nudging her pizza slice back to the left side of her plate. "So she might never get better."

"I believe she will, if it matters."

She wasn't sure if it did. She wanted it to, but her faith in Giles had taken a hit as well. Or maybe that was her own fatigue talking. Right now, the only people she had utmost faith in were on the bed with her, one shoving as many slices of pizza down her throat as she could and the other glaring at Buffy for not doing the same. To be fair, Xander and Anya were high on her trust list, too. After all, they'd been here the whole time.



And while Buffy would forever be grateful to Giles for returning when he had, for giving Willow what she needed to walk back from the brink, part of her couldn't help but think that Spike had been right earlier when he'd said Giles was responsible for this mess. It was a thought she wasn't sure she would have had on her own, but ever since he'd voiced it, she kept coming back to it. Wondering how her life might have gone had Giles not fled the country when he had. If he'd been there to help her, shoulder some of the responsibility that came with everyday living. Guided Willow through the ups and downs of magical rehab, leaning on his own experiences to help her regain her footing. Hell, maybe they would have nabbed Warren earlier—Giles seeing things, making connections, with his big grown-up brain that Buffy couldn't because she was too close to it.

But then, it was entirely possible Buffy wouldn't be where she was with Spike if Giles had been there to support her, and she didn't much like the thought of that, either.

"Buffy," Giles said, waiting until she looked up again before continuing, "I spoke with the coven about your circumstances, as well. The sort of magicks Willow harnessed... It's a bit beyond them."

Yeah, that sounded about right too. Buffy glanced to her plate again, picked up her cooling pizza and took a large bite to give her mouth something to do.

"They will keep looking, of course," Giles went on. "But dark magic such as this—"

"What dark magic?" Dawn asked, looking from Buffy to the Watcher and back again. "Did Willow do something else?"

A day ago, this might have been the sort of thing Buffy decided to keep to herself, but so much had changed in the last few hours. This world was a different one, its rules still being defined, though it had been ushered in on a wave of epiphanies. First those she'd experienced at the Magic Box, then the one that had rushed over her after the corpses she and Dawn had been battling had vanished along with Willow's apocalyptic rage.

Dawn deserved to know everything, so that was what Buffy told her. She started with what had happened yesterday morning, waking up as she had in her blood-spattered room. How she'd been confused

and disoriented, and how Willow had later confirmed that she had indeed been dead. It was odd, hearing herself tell the story as though it had happened a long time ago, yet knowing that it hadn't. Knowing that her blood had dried on the carpet of her bedroom—she'd seen it when she'd gone for clothes—and would be there until she could stomach the task of cleaning it up.

Buffy kept her gaze on her plate as she spoke, certain if she locked eyes with anyone that she would lose her composure, and that wasn't an option right now. And when she finished, Dawn shoved the pizza box aside with such force it nearly went onto the floor—would have, were it not for Spike's reflexes—and swooped her into a big hug.

"It'll be okay," Dawn whispered, her voice shaking with both emotion and that somehow eternally optimistic quality found only in teenagers. "We'll be okay, Buffy."

Buffy trembled and hugged her sister back, her sinuses burning. "We will. We're together."



SHE KNEW him well enough to read the signs. There was something else Giles wanted to talk to her about, privately, and no amount of "whatever you have to say in front of me" protests would do any good. So after Dawn shuffled back to crash in front of the television for the rest of the evening, Buffy told Spike to go back to their room and see about downing more pig's blood.

"Bloody hell, Slayer, I'm already about to burst," he said as he moved toward the door.

"Well, that'll learn ya." She gave him an exasperated smile when he turned to scowl at her. "You shouldn't stuff your face full of pizza when you have healing to do."

Spike rolled his eyes, though she could tell he loved it, being fussed over. "The juice is gonna run out the way you keep shovin' it down my throat," he replied.

"Heal up already and I'll stop shoving."

He snickered and shook his head. "Wench."

"Uh huh."

Giles cleared his throat loudly as though to remind them that they had an audience. Not that Buffy was in any danger of forgetting. Spike threw him a dirty look for his efforts but didn't do more than that. It was likely he knew just as well as Buffy did just what Giles wanted to talk to her about. He wouldn't be her watcher if he didn't.

Still, Buffy didn't have the patience to wait for Giles to segue his way into his lecture, being rather exhausted herself and ready to sleep for about a decade. The second Spike closed the door behind him, she turned to the man she thought of as her father and said, "All right, let's hear it."

He held her gaze for a moment before sighing and removing his glasses. "I wanted to ask you about... Ahh, well, this job of yours."

Buffy blinked. "Huh?"

"You mentioned, among many other things, that you're working for a demon." He paused. "Actually, I believe the exact words were *demon mob boss*."

It took a moment for her brain to stop skipping at the words and switch over from *boyfriend lecture* to *vocation lecture* mode. She'd completely forgotten she'd mentioned anything about what she did for a living. "Uhh, yeah," she said, gathering herself. "Well, I think I might have exaggerated a bit. He's more a loan shark."

"A loan shark?"

"In a big ole literal way." She rubbed her lips together, suddenly feeling like a kid all over again—the girl who used to make excuses as to why she couldn't train after school because she had more important things to do. For so long now Buffy had answered to no one but herself, but the sting of parental disapproval was, apparently, something even death couldn't cure. "It's actually the guy who came after us that one night—when Willow did the forgetting spell."

Now Giles was gaping at her. To his credit, he recovered admirably, sliding his glasses back up his nose. "Just how many demons who have attempted to kill us all at one point or another are you now friendly with?"

"That was more a Spike-debt situation with really terrible timing," Buffy replied. "And he made good on it, so no more shakedowns or unsolicited visits."

“Buffy, how can you—”

“Because I needed money. I needed a job. This particular job happened to fall in my lap and the pay is...really good.” She sighed when her watcher’s expression didn’t change, anger and shame warring with each other for dominance. “It was this or flipping burgers at Doublemeat Palace. My boss is a demon, yeah, but he’s also scared of me. There were like a million conditions I made him—or Spike made him agree to—”

“Spike,” Giles muttered, rolling his head back. “Of course. So he got you involved in this?”

*Ugh.* “No, I got me involved in this. Teeth—that’s my boss—made me an offer and... Yeah, it was a hard sell, but when it came down to beating up demons—which I was already doing for free—or being homeless, I went with the option that kept a roof over mine and Dawn’s heads.” She crossed her arms, shoving that guilty feeling back because, hey, she’d done what she’d needed to do. “It also helped me keep an ear to the ground about any wackiness going on around here. It’s how I found the Trio.”

Giles looked very much like he wanted to argue but didn’t. Instead, he fixed his gaze on some point on the floor. “And...Spike has been helping you? With your work?”

“Yeah. What I make is good but there are so many bills. Hospital stuff from Mom, the mortgage. The electric company insists on being paid every month, too, and did you know food doesn’t magically appear in the refrigerator?” Buffy straightened her shoulders. “Spike decided to work for Teeth. He helps out. We have a system.”

“A system.”

“I don’t just take money from him. Whatever home amenities he gets to enjoy, like food and electricity, are those he helps with.”

“Is he...living with you?”

“No.” Despite his best efforts to sneakily move in and the fact that Spike hadn’t spent a night away from Revello Drive since the mind-fuck demon had screwed with her reality, he didn’t technically live there. Though, now that she thought about it, Buffy wasn’t sure why the hell he shouldn’t. The concerns she’d had before suddenly seemed dumb. How quickly things had progressed between them, that they

had only been officially together for a few weeks... While that was true, what she'd told Giles earlier today was also true. Spike had been her partner for months now—the amount of time he'd spent in her bed was incidental. Heck, Willow had been the one to first tell her that, and look how right she'd been.

The thought had Buffy squeezing her eyes shut to gather her bearings. She wasn't sure she'd ever be able to reconcile the two Willows. The one who had giggled and gossiped with her about Spike and the one who had removed Spike's chip and waved Angel in front of her—it didn't seem possible they were the same person.

"I think I'll ask him, though," Buffy went on a moment later. "To move in. The house is going to be all kinds of empty, and him helping out—"

"Buffy—"

"I'm not going to argue my relationship with you, okay? I love him."

"I know," Giles said, holding up a hand. "I'm... Whatever you might think, I am not going to litigate your love life. While I can't possibly understand what it is that persuaded you to...think of him this way, I know you well enough to know that anything I might have to say on the matter will only strengthen your resolve. It's also highly unlikely that you haven't given this a great deal of thought, so I doubt I would have any arguments you yourself haven't already considered."

"Oh." She hadn't expected that. "Good."

"Though on the subject of Spike... There is the issue about the chip." Giles waited until she looked at him again before continuing. "My understanding is that Willow removed it."

Buffy licked her lips, nodding. "She seemed to have it out for him today. Something about how he gets to be happy and Tara..."

*God*, but she didn't want to think about Tara. Or anything, really. She wanted to be done with this conversation and curled up next to her vampire. Let everything else wait until morning.

But, of course, she didn't have that luxury.

"What do you intend to do?" Giles asked.

"I don't know," she said, and it was perfectly true. "But I'm not worried if that's what you're asking."

"You're not worried that Spike, the Slayer of Slayers, who has attempted to end our lives—"

"I know who he is, Giles. I thought you said you were gonna skip the lecture."

At that, he went a bit pink. "Yes, quite right," he said, somewhat abashed. "Old habit."

Buffy snickered, though she really couldn't fault him. All things considered, he'd taken the news that she and Spike were now together pretty well. And god, it wasn't like he didn't have his reasons.

What seemed like a lifetime ago, Spike had told her that nothing would change if the chip ever came out. He was as evil as he was going to get, after all, which made the chip better than a soul. She hadn't known how to take that at the time—the concept being too large for her—but it seemed clearer with the months they'd spent building what they had now.

Still, she doubted she could convince Giles of that and she knew better than to try. The last time she'd been involved with a vampire, his girlfriend had been murdered and he'd nearly been tortured to death. A lot had happened since then, granted, and Buffy had done a lot of growing up in the interim, but she had a long memory and she knew Giles did, too. They had to, living in this world.

As though hearing her thoughts, Giles released a long breath and met her gaze again. "Whatever you decide, regarding Spike and...his newfound ability to kill without prejudice, I trust that you know what you are doing. I cannot say I will ever trust *him*, but I do trust you. Implicitly."

And with that, the anger and resentment that Spike's earlier observations had spawned blinked out completely.

"I know," she said. That seemed the ideal note to end the evening on—before either of them said something to ruin it—so she drew to her feet. "Okay. I'm going to check in on Dawn and then... It's been a day."

Giles cleared his throat, breaking his gaze from hers and nodding. "Yes, quite."

"Good night. And...thanks for coming back."

"I couldn't very well let the world end, could I?"

"Considering that would make you the absolute worst at your job, I'd think not." Buffy neared to give him a hug. "I imagine you'll be with Willow tomorrow," she said when she stepped back.

"For a good part of the day, yes, though I trust Xander with her." He paused, his brow furrowing. "Buffy, if an alternative means of supporting yourself and Dawn were to make itself available, is that something you would accept?"

The change in subject gave her whiplash. "What do you mean?"

"I'd like to explore the possibility of the Council offering you a salary." He held up a hand before she could respond. "I am not, by any means, guaranteeing anything, but circumstances being what they are, I believe the case could be made that your ability to serve as the Slayer is tied directly to the ability to, well, not worry about the sort of concerns that plague normal citizens. That they have a duty to you to ensure your health and well-being, just as you have a duty to the world."

Buffy's head was suddenly full of white noise. "Is... What?"

"Like I said, I cannot guarantee anything, but would you consider—"

"Of course I would."

"You would?"

"Umm, yeah." Why did this surprise him? "Though I think they owe me a lot of back-pay, considering I've died twice—three times now—and will be on call for the rest of forever."

Giles looked for a moment like he wanted to argue the point but she was grateful when he didn't. The future was uncertain, *her* future even more so, and she didn't need to go to bed with a head full of empty hope and platitudes. It could be they'd figure something out, find some way to break the death loop. It could also be that Willow's specific brand of magic superseded anything that had come before, and undoing the loop would have catastrophic consequences.

Right now, Buffy just needed to focus on the moment—get to tomorrow before she worried about the day after that and all the days to follow.

"I can make no guarantees," Giles said again. "But I would feel better knowing you weren't working for a demon. There are any

number of ways that can go wrong, no matter what your experience has been to this point.”

“Hey, not arguing. You get me on the Council’s payroll and I’ll tell Teeth where he can shove his fins. And his kittens.”

“Kittens?”

She rolled her eyes, making her way toward the door. “If you don’t know, don’t ask. There are certain things you can never unhear.” And she didn’t think it would endear Spike to her watcher any if she explained that, on occasion, he liked to sink his fangs into delicate kitty flesh. “Good night, for real this time.”

Once on the other side of the door and under a canopy of stars, Buffy let herself pause, resting her back against the motel exterior. She didn’t want to sit with her thoughts for too long—didn’t want to give herself a chance to fall down the rabbit-hole—but she needed a minute, and she hadn’t had many of those to herself since Warren had shoved a gun in her face.

God, that already felt like years ago. And still, there were miles to go before she slept—a whole host of things to consider, conversations to have, mountains to climb. Things like the house that waited for her with its blood-stained floors. The vampire she loved beyond reason, who had promised her so much, and now had the chance to prove those promises to her. Also, she hadn’t checked in with her employer today and odds were good she wouldn’t tomorrow, either. He’d have to forgive her on account of apocalypse.

And beneath that, the very real possibility that she would never know true and final rest.

She flashed back to the night before, standing on a sidewalk beside Spike, telling him this and more—sputtering out whatever was in her head. Sharing those fears, as she so often had this year. Unburdening herself so that she could fight the good fight. Keep fighting, if necessary, forever.

*“You know where I’ll be,” he’d told her. “Where I’ll always be.”*

The pressure in her chest lifted. Not by a lot, but by enough.

Yes, there were miles to go.

But no one said she had to walk them alone.



## DON'T LEAVE ME NOW

SPIKE MANAGED TO PUT AWAY ANOTHER BAG OF PIG'S BLOOD WHEN he returned to the room, but couldn't quite force himself to choke down much more. Between the bags he'd already drained and the few swallows of slayer blood he'd been gifted, not to mention the solids he'd stuffed down his throat, his stomach felt full to bursting. He also wasn't convinced that more swill would do much for him. It had taken a minute to heal after Glory had made him her personal pincushion, after all, and he'd had nothing but swine to rely on then.

The healing he'd done thus far was courtesy of slayer blood, and fuck, he'd forgotten how potent it was. Already, the right half of his face felt more or less normal, if a little tender. He wagered he'd be right as bloody rain if he managed to score another sample, but in this state, he wasn't sure he trusted himself. The last thing Buffy needed was to get another death under her belt.

He listened to the muffled sounds of the Slayer and Rupert's conversation—with Dawn's room between them, picking apart distinct words came down to concentrating on their voices, which he did for a few minutes before deciding that he didn't much care. At least not beyond hearing Buffy reassure the Watcher that she did in fact love Spike and that she couldn't be talked out of it. And damn if hearing her

say it to someone else wasn't just as good as the way she'd looked at him back at the shop.

Spike listened to Buffy bid Rupert goodnight then step outside, where she waited for a long moment before gently knocking on Dawn's door. This time, the voices were far clearer, though he was less inclined to listen in. He didn't much care for Giles, which made it easier not to give a damn about privacy there, but being in the unique position of the Slayer's steady fella had changed the dynamic. The days of begging for scraps of attention, hoping he'd overhear something promising, were in the past.

So Spike turned on the telly and hit the volume increase, and did his best to focus on whatever program he'd landed on, which might have been easier had anything worth watching been traversing the airwaves tonight. It took some doing but he managed to get mildly interested in an old *Cheers* rerun, right up until Dawn let out a shriek that would have made a banshee jealous. Then he was off the bed and in motion, halfway to the door that connected the adjoining rooms before he realized the Bit's fit was one of giddy laughter. But by then, it was too late to stop his legs from moving so he didn't try. He kicked the door open without ceremony and aimed a glare the girl's way.

"What the sodding hell are you screamin' at?"

Dawn was on her knees on the bed, her face flushed and her eyes bright and happy. "Buffy just told me you're moving in!"

He was? Spike looked at Buffy for confirmation, bemused when she ducked her head, her cheeks pink.

"I told you I was going to *ask* him," she said through her teeth. "We hadn't actually talked about it yet, *Darwinie*."

Dawn rolled her eyes in that exaggerated teenage manner of hers. "Oh, whatever. He's totally moving in. Do you think there's even the *slightest* chance that Spike would say no?"

"Dunno, Nibblet," Spike said, crossing his arms and leaning against the doorway with a smirk. "Big sis is a bit of a cover hog."

That did it. The somewhat scandalized look on Buffy's face disappeared as her jaw dropped and her eyes went wide with shock. Then she was on her feet, snagging a pillow from the bed and throwing it at

him with a bit more muscle than the comment warranted. "You don't even feel the cold!" she shot back. "Call *me* a cover hog?"

"Oi." Spike held up the fluffy projectile. "Mind the wounded, yeah?"

"If it bothers you so much, then please feel free to *not* spend every night at our house," Dawn replied sweetly. "I wouldn't have to go through as many batteries on my walkman if it was quieter, anyway." She gave him an exaggerated wink, which had him swelling with both affection and pride.

So much so it was difficult to muster up even a slight quiver when Buffy marched over, scowling, and wrenched the pillow from his arms to toss it back to the bed.

"Dawn," she said, not taking her gaze off him, "Spike and I have things to talk about. Are you good if we...?"

Dawn nodded, still beaming. "Yes. Just mind the thin, thin walls."

Buffy rolled her eyes and crossed her arms. "As inappropriate as it is for you to be making those comments in the first place, I don't think you'll have anything to blame your teenage hormones on tomorrow aside from yourself. Spike is still half a crispy critter."

"Yeah, we'll see," her sister replied, situating the pillow that Buffy had thrown and returned it behind her on the bed. "I mean, in movies and stuff, the couple always does it right after a near-death experience. Pretty sure today counts. For *all* of us."

Buffy sobered almost at once and turned back to her sister. "You—"

"I'm good," Dawn assured her. "As good as I can be, I guess. But you two..." She nodded at the both of them. "You should talk."

There were times when the Nibblet seemed as young as she had when he'd first set eyes on her—*younger*, even—and others when she made his mind boggle at how grown up she was, reminded him that she grew further and further away from the kid who used to sneak over to his crypt to listen to ghost stories of the old days. This moment was the latter.

He wondered if Buffy was thinking the same thing, for her expression remained pensive as she neared to give her sister one last hug. "Knock if you need anything," she said, nodding toward the shared wall. "You'll be okay by yourself?"

"As okay as I would be at home," Dawn replied with a half-smile. "Come on, I went up against zombies today. Anything wants to mess with me, it's gonna have a fight."

"A big one," Buffy agreed before brushing a kiss across her sister's brow. "All right. Try to get some sleep."

"You too," Dawn called after her.

Once they were on the other side of the door and alone, Buffy deflated. It was something he'd seen a hundred times—a thousand times—over the last few months. Buffy putting on a brave face, the perpetual warrior who others leaned against but never did any leaning herself. Not unless she was with him. She was still for a moment, her back pressed against the door and her gaze on the worn, stained carpet.

"That was *not* the way I wanted to ask you to move in," she said eventually, bringing her head up. "But asking Dawn was always going to be a gamble."

"Asking, eh?"

"Well, yeah. It's her house too." The corner of her mouth quirked like she was fighting off a smile. "Granted, it was more of a heads-up. I wanted to make sure she'd be okay with it. One of the things I decided earlier, after the world didn't end, was to make Dawn more a part of, well, everything. You should've seen her today, when those things were coming after us. She wielded a sword and everything."

Another thrill of pride shot through him. "Good on her."

"And that despite the fact that I've tried to keep her sheltered ever since Mom died. But she's right—she's the age I was when I first started slaying and even though she is short one sacred calling, I can't keep her from the fight." Buffy furrowed her brow. "I don't want to. This world is hard to live in, but since it's the only one we have, I want her to be as prepared as possible for the day that she is ready to leave and... I dunno, be a grownup."

Spike nodded. "Imagine she was over the bloody moon at that."

"I think the over-the-moon stuff will come once it's real and she's not in shock over, well, everything." Buffy rubbed her brow then dropped her hand and met his eyes. Her own softened, along with the

rest of her, as though she'd just now realized where she was. "You look better."

"I'll be right as rain here in a day or two, pet."

"Sooner if you take more of my blood."

Yeah, he'd thought that'd come up, though he wasn't sure he wanted to have that conversation right now. Just the suggestion had his fangs aching to come out and play, and he didn't much care for the fact that the monster in him was so near the surface. Though he *also* wasn't sure what his problem was, really. Buffy offering him her blood was something out of a dream—a really good one at that. There was everything he'd said earlier, which had been perfectly true, but it hadn't felt like the whole sum of the matter at the time and it didn't now, either. He'd been too preoccupied to dwell on it much and not strong enough to put up a good fight.

Though now that he was staring down the same offer with a bit more resilience in him, he had to wonder. And when he prodded the thought, the other answer came up easily, aided by the fragments of what he'd heard her and the Watcher discussing.

It was the degree to which he wanted it, how badly even talking about it made his demon tremble with delight. After everything that had happened, the thought of showing her that part of him, being with her like that, made him feel like the ground he stood on was something less than stable.

Buffy hadn't mentioned it, the chip. Not once. Not to him, at least. Granted, she'd been a mite preoccupied, but for him, its absence and her silence on the matter was all-consuming. A lot had changed since the night in her backyard, when they'd discussed what might happen if the chip ever stopped working. How Buffy felt responsible for everything, even and including the actions of others, and how the chip's very existence gave her peace of mind because it made it so Spike was one thing she'd never have to worry about. Being his soul hadn't been enough—or had been too much to ask of her.

Apparently, he'd hesitated too long, for Buffy sighed and pressed forward until she was right up against him. "Hey," she said softly, "what gives?"

"What's that?"

"You were like this earlier when I mentioned a helping of Buffy blood. And then you barely took any."

"Told you why, didn't I?"

"About it not being under sexy circumstances, ergo you'll never get a chance to bite me again." She tilted her head, narrowing her eyes. "And why do I feel like that's not the full story?"

"If it's any consolation, pet, I just now figured out the other part of it, myself."

"So it's *not* the full story?"

Spike sighed and stepped back toward the bed. The urge was there to bury the thought and everything that came with it, shove it down until she was the one to bring it up, go on pretending that the only thing that had changed between them today was that she'd said the words. But fuck, they had gotten this far by being honest with each other. And after the gift she'd just trusted with him, being anything less seemed downright criminal, even to a monster like him. So, exhaling, he decided to get it out. He wasn't sure he had it in him to pretend, anyway.

"The chip's gone," he said, sinking onto the mattress and looking steadily at the floor, listening to the reassuring thump of her heart. Waiting for it to start pounding a bit harder, the way it did whenever they broached a subject she wasn't comfortable with. "Earlier today... Slayer, I had the chance to kill her. Nearly bloody did."

Out of his periphery, he saw her moving toward him, then the bed dipped, and she was there at his left, his good side, taking his hand into her own.

"But you didn't," she said, running her thumb over his. "You didn't kill her."

"Yeah, I didn't. But I wanted to. Thinkin' about you and the Nibblet, that bloody ball of fire she sent after her. Wagered if I could snap her neck, the magic would stop and you'd be all right, yeah?"

"So why didn't you do it?"

Spike sucked in his cheeks. In truth, he still wasn't sure what had gone through his mind in those seconds. Those seconds which had lasted forever but been over in a flash, moving through the air and crashing into the bitch, slamming his fists into her face again and

again, and how he'd thought he might be able to knock her out. Seize her by the shoulders and crack her skull hard enough against the floor that everything she was connected to just snap off. It was a thought that wouldn't have existed before the chip and this wide world of alternatives. Survival had been the driving force behind all his actions then—survival and protecting those he loved. He'd killed plenty of creatures Dru had wanted to keep as pets or dollies, lackeys or blokes she'd sired thinking about expanding their happy family, and he'd been soundly punished each time he'd taken the decision away from her. Hadn't made a lick of difference—preserving their way of life had been all that mattered.

"Dunno," he said at last. "Just somethin' in me told me to find another way. For you." He worked his throat. "Though I didn't figure you'd stake me for killin' her then, or kick me to the curb."

"I wouldn't have," Buffy agreed. "It would've been hard but I would've understood. The way she was..."

"That was it. Knowin' it'd be hard. If there was a way to end it without offin' anyone, that's what you'd do. What you'd want." Spike paused and was heartened when she squeezed his hand again. Now that he'd started talking, it wasn't all that tricky, this honesty business. Even if he was learning things about himself in the moment that he wasn't sure how to interpret. "Meant more to me to try it your way than mine. Keep you from hurtin' the way you would if she was gone."

For a long beat, they simply sat with the words, Buffy still caressing his thumb with hers, her breaths even and her heartbeat steady. Then she turned, not too much but enough so she was looking at him properly, their hands still connected. When he sensed she was waiting for him to look at her before speaking her piece, Spike turned as well, met her eyes and huffed out a sigh.

"You almost died today because of that decision," Buffy said. "She would've killed you."

"Yeah, reckon so." Which reminded him of the unpleasant reality that he owed his life to Rupert. At some point he was going to have to swallow his pride and thank the git for intervening when he had, even if he wasn't sure why he'd bothered.

"Spike...in situations like that, when it's you die or someone else dies, you know I don't expect you to—"

"Weren't you listenin'? I *do* know that."

"Were *you* listening? You did this thing—this amazing, stupid thing that..." She broke off, squeezing his hand tighter and shaking her head. "If Willow had died...and if you had been the one to kill her, that would have hurt. A lot. But not more than losing you would have hurt. When I saw what she had done to you, I was... God, I was so pissed off. She was ready to kill you, me, Dawn...*all* of us to get to those two. Then the world. Giles said that she might never be our Willow again and... I dunno, Spike. Sitting here, right now... I'm really, really glad she's not dead, that there's hope for her, but it kinda feels like she *is* dead. I don't know what will happen with her—if she's ever coming back from Devon or if the witches there will lock her up to make sure she can't ever go apocalyptic again. That any of *us* have that much power scares the crap out of me."

Spike nodded, waited.

"I guess what I'm getting at is Willow is a big ole question mark in the mind of Buffy. We'll just have to see what happens." A beat. "What you did—that you didn't kill her, even though you could, even though no one would have blamed you... That was a lot. It was more than a lot, it... It tells me just exactly how much the chip matters."

"Buffy—"

"And how much a soul matters, actually. Or doesn't matter." She offered a wry, tired grin. "The decision you were able to make in that moment versus the decisions she made... I don't know if that makes sense or not."

He knew what it sounded like she was saying but wasn't daft enough to take it at face value. "Told you as much, pet," he said, "whatever happens is your call."

"I really don't like that responsibility."

"Thought that was the point of the chip, yeah? Take the responsibility off you."

"It's still a responsibility, though, no matter how you look at it. Either I'm responsible for what happens to you or responsible for what you do."



Bugger. Maybe it wasn't what it sounded like. Spike sighed and rolled his head back. "Slayer, just fit me for a new shock collar and be done with it, all right? If you think I can't control myself—"

"No. I don't want to do that." She squeezed his hand again. "And I don't think that you can't control yourself. I think the opposite, actually."

Then fuck, he had no bloody clue what she was saying.

"But I also know that sometimes things happen," she went on, her lower lip wobbling a bit. "Neither one of us can just say you'll never hurt anyone and accept that as true because life isn't like that—up and down, black and white. There might be situations where you have to kill to save your life, or you *do* lose control and it's an accident. That happened once before—to Faith, the other slayer. She was in the heat of the moment and accidentally staked a man. I want to think that would never happen with me or with you or with anyone, but I can't just believe that because I want to."

Spike nodded like he understood, though his mind was still bloody spinning. "Just tell me what you want," he said hoarsely. "Anything you want, pet. That's what I'll do."

Those were either the wrong words to say or very much the right ones, for Buffy blinked hard enough that tears filled her eyes. Then she looked at him and he had his answer.

"I believe you when you say you'd never do anything to hurt me," she said, her voice somehow straddling the line between wobbly and firm. "And that you know what that means—you told me so yourself and I believe that. Believe *you*. I just need you to promise me that if something does happen, if you *do* lose control and it's an accident or if you have to kill to save your life, you'll trust *me* enough to tell me about it so that we can figure it out together. That you won't hide it from me because you think that you'll lose me over it. Because you won't. I'm not saying it'll be easy or I'll be just A-okay with it right off the bat, but you won't lose me. The only way you'll lose me is if you're not honest. I have to have that."

Well, that was a lot he hadn't expected. Spike opened his mouth to reply, closed it, and kept it closed, his mind whirring both with what she had said and what she hadn't. Bugger, that she'd thought this far

ahead meant it was more than just a whim on her part—she'd had a plan in place, or the makings of one, at least.

"I promise, love," he said, his own eyes welling. Maybe one day he would stop being surprised at how much faith she had in him. Maybe, though he sort of hoped he didn't. "Are you sure that's enough?"

"You don't back out of promises." She paused, her lips quirking. "Well, not to people you love. As you've established."

"Bloody right I don't."

"Then there's no need for a chip. Or something else." Buffy shuddered and shook her head. "I don't think I could ever watch you fight someone else like Warren ever again. That he could hit you and you couldn't just..."

"Seems I recall I got in a few licks. Even if they hurt."

"But that's just it. I don't want you to ever be in a place where you have to choose between fighting back and frying your brain or just taking it. That's...inhumane."

At that, he shrugged, grinning like a bloody loon and not giving a damn. "Not human."

"No, but I am. And it's wrong."

"When did you decide this?"

Buffy wiggled, pulling a face, and fuck, she was the most gorgeous thing he'd ever seen. "I always knew it was wrong," she said in a low undertone. "But it was convenient, you having a chip and not being able to hurt anyone and then, whoops, accidentally falling in love with me as a result and deciding that the evil gig might not have the benefits package that donning a white hat would."

His story through her eyes was something else. Someday, she would have to tell it to him in full. "Hate it break it to you, pet, but I was in love with you way before the bloody chip."

"You...you were?"

"I ever tell you why Dru gave me the boot?"

"I... No? I don't think it's come up." Buffy screwed up her face again. "Though I think I have this memory of someone telling me it was because of the truce to take down Angel."

"Yeah, that's what I thought too, at the time."

"Meaning it wasn't?"

It was hard to reconcile that what had been the most painful moment of his life—up till then, at least—was one he could look back on now almost fondly. But hell, he couldn't help himself. In her own, twisted way, Dru had been trying to tell him what he should have known from the start—he'd just been too blind to the possibility of there ever being anyone else for him.

"She told me I was covered in you," Spike replied, still grinning. "Drove her right batty, that did."

Buffy arched an eyebrow. "Battier, you mean."

"Figured that was implied."

"So...you're saying since Acatla, you've been in love with me."

"Yeah, think so." He shrugged when she just gawked at him. "What? You were already the best slayer I'd ever come across then—fiery and passionate, and you cared. Never saw anyone who loved like you do."

"How I love?"

"Bloody right, how you love. Saw that right off, the lengths you were willing to go to. How much you were willing to give. But it didn't really cinch it for me till I came back. Everything he'd done to you and you could still look at him like that." Not that that was a particularly happy memory, but it was true. He'd always seen it in her—the part of her that reminded him of himself—but had figured it to be a fluke. That Buffy could have forgiven Angel all his crimes, love him in spite of everything, had driven home just how false his life with Dru had been. Or not false, not necessarily, because Dru had never lied to him—she just hadn't loved. Not the way he wanted, at least. The way he needed. Her heart had never been his to have.

"I don't know about that," Buffy said with a little laugh. Like the suggestion itself was ridiculous. "The way I love has been... Well, distant. Last year I thought I was losing my ability to love and—"

"Bollocks."

"It shouldn't have taken me as long to tell you as it did."

"Bloody drop it, love. Was never in any hurry."

"No, but you wanted to hear it."

That much was true—he had wanted to hear it, her clear-eyed and looking at him the way she had at the shop. But that Buffy had wanted

the circumstances to be ideal, do a big production, set the stage and all, had meant something too. She'd wanted it to be perfect for him—for both of them. That was more than he'd ever thought he'd have with anyone, let alone her.

"I wanted to hear it when you were ready to say it," he said a moment later. "But I knew. Had known for a stretch."

Buffy snorted. "Yeah, well, teasing you by saying I have something big to tell you isn't exactly the same as saying the actual words. For all you knew, I could've been discussing a move to Vancouver."

He chuckled and kissed her brow. "Wasn't worried. You had told me once already."

"I what?"

"When that demon had you thinkin' we were all figments of your imagination," he said, enjoying the somewhat dumbstruck look on her face, which was quickly chased by a blush. "Came home from patrol and you were chattin' to yourself, tellin' the doc in your head that I had to be real because you were in love with me."

Buffy stared at him for a long second. "No."

"Fraid so."

"I said that?" When he nodded, she squeezed her eyes shut and buried her face in her hands. "Oh god," she whined into her skin. "I can't believe *that* was the first time I told you I loved you. God, that's even worse than today. That's..." She lifted her head and smacked his shoulder. "How could you not tell me that?"

"Oi! What'd I do?"

"You let me string you along with, 'I have something to tell you,' for weeks! Like it was—"

"Bloody adorable? 'Cause that's what it was."

"Gee, that's not patronizing at all."

Spike rolled his eyes and seized her wrist before she could slap his shoulder again, then her other one for good measure, even if his grip in his right hand was a mite weaker than he would have liked. "Knew it was important to you, didn't I? The way you said it. And like I told you earlier, you crazy bint, hearin' it then was perfect. Mighta known it since the mind-trip demon but dunno if it woulda hit the way it did today."

Buffy's scowl softened along with the rest of her. "Yeah," she said, glancing at her lap. "I didn't see that coming, either. All of that..."

In the midst of everything else that had happened, the numerous revelations they were balancing and their various ways forward, revisiting the span of seconds in the shop when Willow had offered up Angel on a silver platter could be seen as a mite petty. Still, Spike couldn't help himself. That moment had been more than terrifying—it had been revolutionary. Even knowing Buffy loved him, which he did, part of him had always expected to come in second to her first great love. And while the notion hadn't exactly thrilled him, he'd thought he'd been all right with it. Playing second fiddle to Angel had been his whole bloody existence, after all. Even when he had the girl, he didn't really have her. Not if Daddy wanted her back.

Buffy looking at him with tears in her eyes and a smile on her face, telling him that she loved him, choosing him... Well, that had been a whole lot more than a simple love confession. It had been *everything*. And he wasn't sure how to tell her that—how to describe more than a century of pain and acceptance, of understanding his place in the world when it came to the women he loved, even if it hurt, and then having that place redefined for him. Redefined for him by *her*, no less. Even at his most optimistic, he'd never been able to really believe Buffy could love him the way he loved her. That she would choose him the way he'd chosen her. He'd told her once that he would stake Dru to prove what he felt, and he'd meant it at the time. Buffy staring down the possibility of a future with Angel and turning away from it—looking at Spike, choosing Spike—was the same bloody thing.

"Thought that was it there for a second," he heard himself say. "Even knowing you love me, I thought—"

"I know you did and I'm sorry. I just...started thinking."

"You had to, right? Offer like that on the table."

"No, Spike, it's not like that." Buffy pulled back to meet his eyes once more, and he saw she didn't see—not the way he did, at least. But she started talking before he could assure her that he understood. "I don't think I ever actually wanted it, her offer. It's more... Ever since he left, that door has been closed. It was hard to close, too, that door. The hardest door. At one point, I thought closing it would kill me. But

then...there were all these other doors, and maybe they weren't *that* door, but I could open them just fine, so I did, even if part of me kept thinking about the closed door. Wondering if maybe I could ever find a way to open it again, sometime down the line. But after seeing him a few months ago... I dunno, it's like when you see a movie as a kid and you love it so much, but then you watch it again as a grown-up and realize that you can see the strings on all the puppets and the story is lame."

Spike's mouth twitched as he fought off another grin. All right, this was better. Hearing her voice his thoughts in that uniquely Buffy way of hers. "So, Angel's both a door and a flick. Metaphors really aren't your thing, are they?"

"Oh, shut up." But she was smiling now, too. At least her eyes were. "You still have warm, fuzzy feelings for the movie because it meant so much to you as a kid, but the magic is just gone. Still, some part of you thinks of that as one of your favorite movies because it *always* has been. Then someone tells you *that's* the movie you're going to watch for the rest of forever? Turns out, I did not want that door opened after all."

"And now he's a door again."

"I am really regretting telling you any of this." But she rested her head against his shoulder all the same, making a little happy sound that went straight to his heart. "The movies we see as grownups are way better, anyway. They have adult content."

Spike sighed and closed his eyes. This right here, this was perfect. "Bloody right."

"Which you can give to me sooner if you bite me again."

He swore the bloody woman had more conversational turns in her than anyone he'd ever met. The next second, Buffy swung herself onto his lap and had her arms linked behind his neck—gently on his right side—her eyes intent on his.

"So, we got all that settled? The chip? The Angel thing? That I love and trust and want you, Spike, to get better so that we can officially stop *holding* that thought?" She did a little hip swirl that ought to have been illegal. "Because Dawn wasn't entirely wrong about the whole near-death experience. And since I had an actual death experience—"

That had his heart twisting all over again. "Buffy—"

"Not now. Don't want to think. Just want my vampire."

Buffy would claim she wasn't good with words but she somehow managed to find all the right ones when it really mattered. Hell, the perfect words, because he *was* hers. Christ, he was hers all over. And she was his, right here in his lap, his personal ball of sunshine that he got to hold and touch and admire without turning to dust.

"Am I hurting you?" she asked, dropping the arm wound around his bad side. "Tell me if I am."

"Not a bit," he replied, and kissed the corner of her mouth. "Might not be able to give it to you the way you're used to, pet."

"I don't need you to *give* me anything. I want to give *you* my blood."

Spike shuddered. Bloody poetry, that was. "You drive me outta my sodding head, you know?" he murmured, dragging his good hand over her hip and around so he could cup her arse. "Naughty Slayer."

"A naughty slayer you're stuck with forever, so you better just get used to it." Buffy whipped her head so her hair did that shampoo-commercial thing that drove him wild, baring her throat to him. "Come on. Bite me. You know you want to."

He watched the pulse in her throat jump and *fuck yes*, he did. The bones in his face shifted, fangs descending, and he felt her shiver against him, but not in fear, and Christ if that wasn't a kick. But he'd meant what he'd said earlier—as much as he wanted to sink into her neck, this wasn't the image he wanted her to conjure up when he asked if he could bite her properly. So he reached behind him to take her wrist, the one he'd bitten into earlier, and bring it around to his mouth.

"We do this, we're doin' it my way," he told her before laving over the mark he'd left with his tongue. "So you be a good girl and do as you're told."

Buffy's breathing hitched. "Okay..."

"Slip your hand into your knickers, pet."

As much as he loved it when she played contrarian, when she just had to fight and push back and drive him out of his head, having her do as she was told without complaint was just as heady. He watched as she dove her fingers under the waistband of her slacks and waited for her little telltale gasp.

"Tell me what you feel."

"Uhh, weird, at the moment."

Spike rumbled a laugh and turned his attention back to her wrist. "I'll tell you what I'd like to feel, then," he said, and brushed a kiss across her pulse point. "You, soft and hot. Have I ever told you how hot you are, Buffy?"

"Umm..." Her heart had started thumping harder, her voice coming out a squeak. "A time or two."

Sometime, in this suddenly endless future at his feet, he would ask her to do this for real—let him watch her touch herself, stroke and explore and play and discover, so he could experience everything from her eyes. He'd give, too, if that was what she wanted. Hell, the thought of her gaze on him as he wanked was enough to have his cock hardening and the rest of him lamenting that fucking her all night was likely not in the cards for him until he did some more healing. But he'd hardly call watching her now a consolation prize. The slow bloom of heat across her cheeks, how her breathing became steadily more labored, the way her eyes darkened, and that mouthwatering scent that was pure Buffy combining forces to drive him out of his mind. In seconds, he heard it, too, her fingers sliding over slick flesh, the sounds illicit and wet.

"That's it, baby," Spike murmured, and began dropping kisses along her inner wrist. Buffy gasped and shuddered at the contact. "That's it."

"Spike..."

"Gonna feel so good. So bloody good. You'll be begging me for my fangs."

Her heart jumped and her hips jerked and she gasped again. He kept his mouth on her skin, nipping and licking at the mark from earlier, everything in him humming as her blood pumped harder.

"In the best fantasies, you always beg," he said. "Wanna hear my favorite?"

He barely got the question out before she nodded her enthusiasm. God, he loved her.

"We're goin' at it the way we used to. All fists and fangs—full-on bloody brawl. Like that day in the sun, you remember?" He waited for her to nod again, then grinned and continued. "Nothin' ever made me



hotter than fighting you, baby. The way you move. Those little grunts of yours. How you make it hurt in all the right places..."

Buffy giggled a little at that, the sound light and somewhat drunk. "You are sooo weird," she breathed, thrusting her hips forward and pushing her wrist harder against his mouth.

"Bite your tongue." He swallowed her up in a kiss before she could reply, his cock now almost painfully hard but he managed to ignore it—had a load of practice where she was concerned. She pushed and he pulled and she sighed and he growled and god, he could snog her all night. Kissing Buffy was one of unlife's most underrated pleasures—having her taste in his mouth, on his tongue, so deep inside him part of her was with him always. That she didn't balk at his fangs just further solidified his fall. Hell, the bitch ran her tongue along one sharp incisor with the sort of slow care that let him know she understood exactly what that did to him. "You get hot, too," he continued thickly, his voice shaking a bit. "Don't think I don't know it."

"You're gonna say something gross about smelling—"

"Nothing *gross* about this smell," he replied, and decided to tease them both by pressing his palm against her center. He felt her hand there, under the fabric, moving and delving and stroking and he wanted it to be his so badly he nearly seized her wrist so he could take over. But he didn't. If he touched her, he wouldn't want to stop.

"What else happens?" Buffy asked a moment later. "In...in your fantasy?"

Spike grinned and kissed a line down her throat. "You keep comin' at me, but it's not like any other fight, see. You feel it too, everything I do, but you don't know what to do with it. So you start hitting me with an aim to get me where you want me. Rubbing up against me like the glorious little tease you are."

Buffy scowled at him, though her dancing eyes gave her away. "I am not a tease," she replied.

"Oh baby, I beg to differ." He dropped his mouth to her shoulder, then lower still, making his way toward her wrist once more. "The more you hit me, the harder I come at you, and you know I won't stop. It'll just go like this forever. You'll have to kill me."

"This better get good."

"It's already good." He threw her a fangy grin, relishing the way her heart jumped. "But see, here's the thing, love...you don't wanna kill me."

"Oh?"

"Never had so much fun with any other bloke as you do me."

"You've said that before." Buffy let out a little moan, and he could tell she was close—and that she was surprised she was close. The wet sounds intensified, as did those heady little breaths. God, she was gorgeous like this—on the precipice, quivering, hot and needy. Almost as gorgeous as when she came.

"Was true then. True now. Whether we're fighting or fucking, doesn't matter." He skimmed one of his fangs along her wrist. "So you shove up against me, hot and wild, and decide if you're gonna kill me, it'll be by fucking me to death." He released a ragged breath. "That's how it happens—you tearin' at me and me tearin' at you, and you're so hot you could make me dust just by lookin' at me, but you don't. I spin you around and press you up against the wall, and before you can let one more quip outta that brassy mouth of yours, I'm inside you."

She gasped as though he'd surprised her, as though he'd actually buried himself inside of her. "Spike..."

"And you're magnificent." He licked her wrist again, trembling now, lust and need scoring through him in tandem. There was pain still, not nearly as much as there had been earlier, but enough for him to know his own bloody limitations—this type of pain wasn't the fun sort, the sort that added to pleasure. But between the sounds she was making, how delicious and ripe she smelled, and watching her expressions as she touched herself, it was difficult giving much of a damn. "Tightest, hottest cunt I've ever been in. Best part is we're still fighting, but like this now, with you all around my cock and squeezing me so tight it hurts. No one's ever fucked you the way I fuck you. You want it harder and I give it—Christ, the way you feel, I'll give you anything. You need a little more. Just a little more. A push and you'll be there."

He scraped his fangs against her wrist again.

"Dunno what you're thinkin'—maybe you're not. You grab my head and pull me down to your neck and beg me to do it. Give you what

you've been askin' for all these years." Spike dragged his tongue up her flesh one last time. "And when I do, you—"

"Spike," Buffy panted, "do it. Now. Do it now."

He surrendered with a moan, sinking his fangs into her wrist again, and god, it was better than before. Better than ever before, because it was her and she was hot and crying out and writhing in his lap, her blood filling his mouth and coating his throat, heated by the taste of her arousal and garnished by the rush of her orgasm. He felt it, too, how her pulse ticked up and her heart began racing and she was shaking so hard and whimpering so much, bucking her hips and pressing down at the same time. And while he didn't mean to spill in his jeans like a sodding schoolboy, the heady combination of slayer musk and blood and *Buffy* overrode all the careful years of control and he couldn't help himself. Spike tumbled back, taking her with him, and hit the mattress with a satisfied growl, his fangs still firmly lodged in her wrist. He drank and drank, hard desperate pulls that seemed to have a corresponding tug around his cock, for he was hard again before the last spasms of his own release stopped jolting through him.

It was her. It was all her. Always had been, and she tasted like heaven.

How out of his head he felt at that moment might have worried him if he'd been present enough to give a damn. As it was, some primal understanding cued in that he needed to stop before he took too much. Didn't make pulling his fangs free of her any easier, but he sighed in both relief and loss when he returned to himself. Her heart was still soundly thumping, nice and healthy, and when she looked at him, it was with the familiar, slightly buzzed grin he'd been on the receiving end of too many times to count. Only he'd never felt so good as he did now, Buffy flushed and smiling and looking at him with so much love a normal bloke could drown in it.

A hard *bang* against the wall snapped the moment in half.

"Told ya so!" Dawn bellowed.

Buffy's pleasantly pink skin went pale and the smile on her face disappeared. "Oh god," she moaned, rolling onto her back and pressing her palms against her eyes. "I am the worst mom ever."

Spike chuckled, shifting so he was on his side. Easier to nuzzle her

and breathe her in that way. Yeah, there were things to do—getting out of his soiled trousers, for one—but for the moment, he wasn't too keen to move. "Nothin' she hasn't heard before."

"Yeah, sure. That makes it better." She dropped her arms and peeked her eyes open as though expecting Dawn to explode into the room at any minute. When no such explosion occurred, she relaxed by increments, the somewhat goofy expression from before returning. "Hey," she said with a little grin.

"Hey yourself."

"Is it supposed to work that fast?" Buffy lifted a hand to his right arm, where bits of pale skin were visible now under the burned flesh from earlier. "Holy wow."

"It's all you, sweet. Not much I reckon slayer blood can't cure."

She nodded, looking dumbstruck. "I guess I knew that. Angel was on the brink of dustage and I got him back in fighting condition in a snap. But seeing it is just...wow." Buffy paused for a moment, dropping her gaze to the bedspread. "Almost died then. When he..."

Yeah, he knew that. The last time Buffy had offered herself up as an antidote for someone she loved, she'd nearly been killed—a thought that still had the power to brass him off, even if he hadn't been around to catch that show and the incident was several years behind her. That Angelus had come as close as he had to robbing Spike of the woman he loved would never not sting, perhaps especially because Spike himself hadn't known it just then. If Buffy had snuffed it, he might never have admitted to himself what should have been obvious since he first laid eyes on her, and that would have been worse. Knowing he loved Buffy was revolutionary in more ways than one—it might have been easier to live in ignorance, but easier wasn't better. Especially not where she was concerned. The fight was what made everything worth it.

That she'd come that close to death before he'd had a chance to know her, to know himself, would never not haunt him. And all for Angel, who had tortured her and nearly sacrificed the world.

But then that was Buffy through and through. Her amazing capacity to forgive and see beyond the monster was exactly the reason Spike was where he was now.

"Well," Buffy said with a falsely bright smile, looking up again, "we

now know that if you need to drain me to live, that's the sort of thing I'll survive too. Between my never-dying thing and your having slayer blood handy anytime you get way with the hurt, anyone who comes to the Hellmouth looking to start the apocalypse is going to be in for even more of a fight than they bargained for."

"Always," Spike replied. And maybe a smarter man would have stopped there—read the bloody room, or sommat, but he again thought of how he'd promised her his honesty, and he couldn't keep quiet. Especially not now—not after everything she'd given him. All of the pieces of herself that she'd shared. "Need to tell you somethin' I hope you don't stake me over."

She blinked, then snorted and shook her head. "There goes my nice, soft landing."

"Oi!"

"What? 'Honey, please don't kill me' is not exactly the sort of relaxing post-coital chitchat."

"Oh, but mentioning that time your ex nearly did you in is?"

Buffy opened her mouth to fire back, but then seemed to realize she had no ammunition. Instead, she hiccupped a small giggle. "All right. Point. What am I not staking you over?"

God, now he felt like a wanker. She'd said earlier she didn't want to talk about this, and teasing aside, it wasn't the sort of pillow-talk he'd have chosen after what they'd just experienced, but he didn't know that he'd have the stones to say what needed saying if he put it off now. And maybe it was in his head, that it *needed* saying, but that it was the sort of thing he *wanted* to keep to himself made him think that she needed to know. More of that honesty he'd given her that she'd asked for. Even if she didn't like what she heard.

"I know I should be sorry," he said before he could talk himself out of it, his tone low enough, different enough, he knew she'd be instantly on alert. "Know I should want what you want. Know it's bloody unfair and I'm a monster." Spike dropped his gaze, not sure he could say this while looking into her eyes. "No one deserves Heaven more than you, love, and bein' here wasn't your choice. If you'd had it your way, you'd have never—"

"Spike—"

"I also know you're happy now—or you were—and that's... Fuck, Buffy, that's all I ever wanted." He paused. "I hate that this hurts you. God, I hate anything that hurts you. But as much as I love you, knowing I might never have to live in a world without you in it ever again is not somethin' I can be sad about. No matter how unfair it is. No matter how much it..."

Well, that was the most he could get out. She could figure the rest. Decide what she wanted to do with it, if anything.

Was just right, was all. She should know the sort of man he was.

It felt like a long time passed before she spoke. A stretch of seconds in which he lived and died and did it all over. At last, though, she cleared her throat and sat up, and when he felt up to it, he let himself meet her eyes again.

"Spike," she said calmly, "do you think that makes me mad?"

"Doesn't it?"

"No. I mean... I've barely been with this knowledge for two days and I haven't really processed it yet. It's big and scary and I'm so mad at Willow I could... And you're right, it's not fair." Buffy licked her lips. "But that you see this as a good thing... It's nice."

Of all possible reactions to this, that one was the one he'd expected the least. "It is?"

"Yeah." She offered a slight smile, tilting her head. "I don't know what this is going to mean or how I'll feel tomorrow or the next day, but I like that you see it the way you do. It makes it a little less scary. And I think I'd feel the same way if I was immortal and my very mortal honey went all Tuck Everlasting on me." She paused. "Granted, I'd be very conflicted about it, but the selfish part of me? I'd be doing mental cartwheels. I think that's just human."

Well, there was something he never would have figured the Slayer to accuse him of being. Spike let himself relax, though not entirely. This was all way too good to be the full of it. "Just seemed like a thing a soulless creature would think, yeah?" he went on. "Somethin' that causes you pain—"

"Spike, you're not happy about the pain. You just said that." Buffy studied him for a moment, then sighed and lowered herself to the bed once more, cuddling up beside him. "I have better things to be mad

about than the fact that the guy who loves me wants me with him forever.”

He breathed out a little laugh, the weight on his chest evaporating at last. “You’re amazing, Slayer.”

“You’re not so bad yourself,” she murmured, and kissed the hollow of his throat. “That’s why I love you.”

Spike closed his eyes. Those words were pure bloody bliss.

There were things he needed to do. Another shower was in order, for one, wash off more of what her blood had healed, not to mention his jeans were becoming right uncomfortable from the mess she’d help him make earlier. Maybe he would be in enough shape to make a mess they’d both enjoy later that night, the way he felt his body righting the remaining wrongs. Show her exactly what everything she’d said and done and given to him meant—or try, because it seemed likely that was a goal he’d spend the rest of eternity chasing. And he was fine with that.

As for what came next, Spike knew there was no telling what would happen tomorrow or the day after, and he wasn’t daft enough to believe any of it would be easy or painless. Few things ever were where she was concerned.

Still, he had something now he hadn’t had before. Something he’d never had. And after more than a century spent in perpetual motion, he was okay being still.

Odds were brilliant their future would be short on quiet moments. All the better to cherish the ones they got.

## OUTSIDE THE WALL

“LET’S HEAR IT FOR BUFFY!” XANDER SAID—OR RATHER SCREAMED loud enough to be heard over the might-be-music coming from the stage. “It only took seven years and three deaths, but she’s finally on the Council’s payroll and sticking it to the man!”

In an impressive combination of slayer grace and coordination, Buffy managed to simultaneously clink her glass with those held up by remaining members of the Sunnydale Scoobies—minus one underage sister, obviously—and elbow her vampire before he could make a snide remark. The latter of which did not go unnoticed by anyone at the table.

“Thank you,” Xander said after he’d swallowed down his mouthful. “It took saying it to hear what it sounded like, and I really didn’t need another visual on what you two do in your special alone-time.”

“After the vivid word pictures your bird has painted over the years, Harris, don’t think you have much room to talk,” Spike replied dryly before throwing back a drink of his own.

Xander flushed and glanced at Anya in the time-honored manner of a guy checking out his crush and trying to play it cool. When Anya replied with a smirk of her own and an eyebrow waggle, Buffy sighed



and mentally kissed away the twenty-dollar bill she'd sacrificed to the friendly wager Spike had put forth two weeks ago.

"End of the month," he'd said when she'd asked about how he thought Xander and Anya were getting along now. "Sooner, more like. They'll be joined at the bloody lips again and makin' us all wish we could bleach our eyeballs."

"No, come on," Buffy had replied. "Give them the summer, at least. There's a lot to rebuild. He really hurt her."

"And the world really nearly ended. Has a way of puttin' things in perspective."

"For some people—not us. An apocalypse is just a Tuesday for us."

Spike had shaken his head, called her a word she was sure meant *stupid* in British, then told her to put her money where her mouth was—though he had made it sound way dirtier.

And now here she was, twenty bucks short of where she'd been at the start of the night, because of course Spike was right about this. He had some weird vamp weathervane when it came to relationships.

"So, Buff," Xander said once he remembered there were people other than his ex-fiancé at the table. "It happened. The check cleared and everything. Are you finally going to ditch the demon boss?"

This he asked with total sincerity—no wince or judgment, which Buffy still wasn't used to, but appreciated nonetheless. Something about his best friend having nearly ended the world had altered Xander's worldview, to the point he seemed like a different person on some days. The explosion she'd expected upon fessing up to him and Dawn about how she'd kept the lights on this year hadn't come. In fact, Anya had seemed more upset about it than anyone, claiming that she'd given Buffy the idea in the first place, therefore she deserved the credit. Then she'd suggested something about collecting royalties off the idea, now that the Magic Box was closed indefinitely, but Xander swore she'd only been kidding. Mostly.

Buffy played with the straw in her drink. "I actually told him today when I came in to collect my last payment. He, ah, didn't take it well."

Xander arched an eyebrow. "Define *not well*. The kind of *not well* that made him a kid's meal at Long John Silver's or...?"

"Well...let's just say that before today, I didn't know sharks could actually cry."

Spike snickered and shook his head. "He's just sour the Slayer's givin' the rest of us working stiffs a shot at bein' Employee of the Month or what all."

"Wait, so you *didn't* quit?" Xander asked. "I thought your only leverage with this Fang guy—"

"Teeth," Buffy corrected. "His name is Teeth."

"Whatever. Anyway, I thought Buffy was your only leverage."

The corner of Spike's mouth kicked up as he picked at the label on his beer bottle. "Told the git where he could shove it," he said, not looking up. "Not much a working bloke, anyway."

Xander snorted, glanced at Buffy, then back again. "So, what, you're gonna be a kept vamp? What happened to pulling your weight?"

Buffy pressed her lips together and also looked at her vampire, whose gaze remained fixed on the table. She'd told him earlier that this was his news to share—his goodwill to spread—only to find herself on the receiving end of one of his glares. There were certain lines, according to Spike, no self-respecting vampire ever crossed. Being nice to Xander Harris was at the top of that list...even if he'd already been nice to him a bunch of times, up to and including being his demon sounding board when it came to all things Anya. That hadn't actually cost him anything—this had.

When it became obvious that Spike *wasn't* going to share the good news, Buffy sighed and rolled her eyes. "God, you big baby."

Spike huffed and continued picking on the label.

"Fine, I'll do it." Buffy met her friend's gaze and squared her shoulders. "Last week, we hit Spike's old crypt to see if there was anything salvageable after the big bug bomb. The downstairs is pretty much toast like we thought, but we did find a few things there. Including an old tiara."

Xander blinked. "I...okay? Because of that time Spike placed third in the Miss Teen Sunnydale Pageant?"

"Oh, get stuffed," Spike snapped, shuffling a bit on his seat and, in Buffy's opinion, looking seriously cute. "It was Harm's, wasn't it? No accounting for her taste."

"Well," Buffy said, trying and—she suspected—failing to keep the laughter out of her voice, "as you can imagine, I had...questions. Okay, mostly insults. But the tiara thingy hadn't melted so it wasn't something she picked up at Claire's. When I pointed that out, Spike said she must have gotten it from the treasure room."

At that, Anya, who had been doing a seriously good imitation of someone not listening to a word of the conversation, perked up. "I don't know what that is, but I do like the way it sounds."

Buffy nodded. "It was from when he was looking for the Gem of Amara...what, three years ago?"

Once again, Spike shifted a bit on his seat. "Not quite that long," he mumbled.

"There was a *room* of treasure?" Anya was practically vibrating her excitement now. "Where is it? Can we go right now? How much treasure are we talking?"

"It's gone now," Buffy said, holding up a hand. And again, she had to swallow a laugh, though this time because of the way Anya's face fell. "We sold it. To the Watchers Council. Or rather..." She elbowed Spike, who grunted in acknowledgment and did nothing else. "Spike sold it."

"Spike?" Xander asked, like he had never heard of him before.

"Well, it was his find and everything." Buffy paused and decided to skip the next part—the real reason she suspected Spike was pouting about this. Apparently, it had never occurred to him that an actual, literal treasure sat under their feet and he was having serious guilt over the fact. Had already muttered about all the good the money could have done before now—paid off the last of her mom's medical bills, maybe even pay off the entire house, and a bunch of other stuff.

To Buffy, though, Spike's forgetting about the treasure weirdly made sense. He was so single-minded, her vampire, and he hadn't been after riches when he'd uncovered the vault. He'd found what he'd wanted and everything else had been debris. Hell, she was *more* surprised that Harmony hadn't raided the place and made off with the full haul, though Spike reckoned that might have been because the actual pieces of value hadn't been shiny or sparkly enough

for her. Or, fortunately, for any other scavenger that had stumbled across it over the last couple of years.

"Anyway," Buffy continued when it became obvious that Spike wasn't going to volunteer information, "since the treasure was associated with the Gem of Amara, the Watchers Council was super eager to get their hands on it and look up whatever was left of it. They threatened to come here to take it by force, but being that no one but the two of us knew where it was and could move it before then... We played hardball. Or Spike did. And long story short, between my new salary and what they forked over, we have enough to not worry about bills for a long time."

"Way to go, Buffster," Xander said, raising his hand for a high-five. After she'd given it, he hesitated, then turned to Spike, hand still outstretched. "And Blood Breath, too, I guess."

Spike stared at him in that cool, unaffected-by-anything vampire way of his. "Really?"

To his credit, Xander remained nonplussed. "Hey, this is what we do now. We don't have to like it but we should at least acknowledge it. Victory high-fives after major windfalls are just a part of what it is to be a Scooby."

Buffy grinned and nudged Spike's shoulder. "Loads of money is a pretty big windfall. Suck it up, buttercup."

The look he gave her was something between mutinous and smoldering, and he kept his gaze on her as he swatted his hand in the general direction of Xander's, which Buffy would have to accept as good enough. He wouldn't be Spike if he wasn't a stubborn ass.

"In fact," Xander continued a moment later, lifting his beer bottle once more, "I think that calls for another toast. To buried treasure and—"

"Ugh!" The sound rather exploded from Anya as though she had been struggling to keep it down. She aimed a glare around the table and took a defiant gulp of her beer. "No. No more toasts. We get it, okay? 'Oh, I have a job! Oh, I have treasure! Oh, I'm rolling in it!' Meanwhile, no one here seems to have any consideration for *my* feelings."

There was a pause. Xander hesitated, then lowered his bottle back

to the table, going a bit red around the ears. He huffed out his telltale *please excuse my demon* laugh and swung an arm around her. "Honey, we're happy for Buffy. You know how hard it's been—"

"Oh, yes. Beating up demons is real hard work for the Slayer." Anya sniffed. "Meanwhile, my shop is in ruins and since stupid British Giles let the stupid insurance lapse, I am now unemployed and destitute. Not to mention on the hook for outstanding supply orders for a shop that no longer exists. But sure, let's hear it for Buffy." She twisted her mouth into something between a grin and a sneer and raised her bottle. "Congratulations on having everything handed to you."

At one time, that little rant would have pissed Buffy off. A lot. Or at the least, hit her in a place where she'd feel the hurt for a while. But really, after the last few days, nothing could spoil her good mood. Not even self-centered demons. "Anya," she said, "Spike asked me what I wanted to do with the money. I'd like to invest it in the Magic Box."

Anya sucked in her cheeks, not meeting her eyes. Not getting it. "Well, *sorry* to inconvenience you," she said stiffly, placing her bottle back on the table. "I didn't destroy my own shop, you know. I had plenty of help."

"Right. But I know a carpenter who works on the cheap. And a teenager who really needs her first job. Plus, two handy day-laborers who can do the work of an entire construction crew in half the time." Buffy placed her hand on Spike's thigh and squeezed before he could object at being volunteered. "Besides, Dawn needs a place to start training to be a warrior-woman. I like the training room for that. Much less likelihood of her destroying the house."

"Ahn." Xander seized her by the shoulders and gave her a little shake. "Buffy is going to *invest* in the Magic Box. As in, money to get you up and running again. That's what she's trying to tell you."

Watching the realization take hold of her was, in itself, somewhat magical. The sour expression faded and Anya's eyes went bright, her lips stretching into a wide smile. With a little squeal, she slid off her stool and circled the table to tug Buffy into a crushing hug.

"Buffy! I knew there was a reason I tolerated your relationship with Xander!" Anya patted Buffy's head before wrapping her arms around her again to rock her back and forth in a makeshift dance. Then she

pulled back, beaming. “This *is* a joyous occasion. I am very thankful for you and your money.”

Buffy grinned, though made a point of extricating herself from the embrace. It wasn’t fair to hog all the glory, after all. She turned and nudged her vampire’s shoulder. “It was Spike, too. His money.”

“Oi, leave me outta it,” Spike replied, and rolled his eyes when Anya launched herself at him. He sat there and let himself be hugged, looking thoroughly annoyed with the whole thing but in such a way Buffy suspected he was really tickled. “That’s the last time I let my lady weigh in on spendin’ my dosh.”

Anya pulled back, gripping him by the shoulders. “I believe you should allow Buffy to manage your money from here on out,” she said. “Especially if she decides to give more of it to me.”

“Invest,” Buffy said, stressing the word. “I’m *investing*. Not giving.”

“Same thing.” Anya practically skipped back to her seat, looking almost drunk with happiness now. “Besides, since you are now living with her and jobless, whatever income you do contribute should go to her directly.”

Buffy met Spike’s gaze and bit the inside of her cheek to keep from giggling. There had been several discussions over the past few days about money—how they would approach it now that neither of them were working for Teeth and were officially cohabitating. Granted, Spike had volunteered to stay on for a stretch—the money the Watchers Council had coughed up for the remains of the Amara treasure was considerable, but finite, and living expenses were things that never went away. But Buffy hadn’t liked the idea of Spike working for Teeth by himself. He’d never been the shark’s favorite grunt, and without the leverage Buffy had provided, there was every chance Spike would find himself on the receiving end of more beatdowns than he had the chance to dole out. And while Buffy knew very well that Spike could take care of himself, she also knew Teeth liked to play dirty, and wasn’t thrilled leaving that up to chance.

So instead, they had discussed a few of the old standbys—namely gambling, which she *also* didn’t love because of the whole *gamble* part of the equation, not to mention the trouble he could get in if discovered cheating—but there was time to come up with something else. It was

enough that Spike wanted to help, even if her paycheck was now decent enough that money no longer had a starring role on her list of daily concerns.

"Right," Spike said, sliding off the barstool and giving her a look that said plainly he'd had enough of other people's scrutiny for a while. It would take time for him to become completely comfortable being one of the gang. "Fancy a spin on the dance floor, pet?"

"Always." She took his hand and let him tug her off her stool. "Then we better patrol. No rest for the wicked."

That delicious smirk of his flickered across his face—the sort that told her exactly what he was thinking. Spike made a show of looking her up and down, ran his tongue over his teeth. "With the house to ourselves tonight?" he replied, pulling her against his chest. "No rest for the virtuous, either."

Xander gagged. "Really, in front of me?"

Her vampire's gaze never left her face. "Not the way I planned it, mate, but if that's your thing—"

Xander stuck his fingers in his ears before Spike could complete the thought, though now he was grinning in the way that let Buffy know he was playacting. Just as it would be a while for Spike to find his footing as a certified Scooby member, Xander needed time before he could openly admit he kinda liked the newest addition.

"Come on," Anya said, pulling on Xander's wrist. "We should dance as well. It will put me in the mood to have sex."

That lit a fire under his ass. Xander hit the floor hard enough their small table wobbled. "Then, by all means, we have a groove thing to shake."

"Really?" Buffy drawled, unable to help herself. "In front of me?"

Her friend met her eyes and shrugged. "Call it even?"

She pretended to think it over before answering with a nod. "That works."



"I'M TELLIN' you, there's nothin' here," Spike grouched as she all but shoved him across the threshold into the abandoned house. "But sure,

don't listen to me. Not like I have a keen sense of smell or anythin'. Not like I can hear scuffles happenin' half a mile away, either. By all means, let's piss away a night we have the place to ourselves to go rodent hunting."

"Just trying to be thorough," Buffy replied, doing her best to keep the laughter from her voice. "The house will still be empty when we get home. And it's not like you're big with the discretion either way."

He threw her a dirty look, sidestepping a fallen plank-board. "I'm not the one who gets all dainty about it in the mornin', now am I?"

That much was true. While Spike didn't necessarily love the fact that Dawn could give them both a play-by-play of what she'd heard them doing, he was more likely to snicker and roll his eyes than let her see him all ruffled. It wasn't as easy for Buffy to laugh off, though things had improved ever since they'd moved into the big bedroom. Not by much but enough, and she was somewhat hopeful that Dawn's own move into her old room would do the rest. After all, her mother hadn't heard her comings and goings out of that room for two years. It was only fair that it went both ways.

They were still finding their groove at home, the three of them, which both surprised Buffy and didn't. Surprised her in that Spike's constant presence *felt* constant in ways it hadn't before, even if he'd been all but moved in for weeks. Knowing that she'd wake up and find him next to her, that they could steal away for showers or quick patrols anytime they liked, that there was another adult—for better or worse—around to really parent Dawn, all added up to one happy Buffy. And sure, it wasn't all wine and roses. Spike had a habit of leaving wet towels on the floor, had used one of her mother's prized vases as an ashtray, and his choice in daytime programming was super lame. On her end, Buffy had discovered she had a dirty dish problem—or Spike had a problem with her not immediately rinsing and putting the dishes in the dishwasher. That and her approach to laundry apparently left much to be desired. This from the man who owned four sets of the same outfit and had called a graveyard home, but whatever.

Still, the small squabbles were almost worth it for the ways they made up. Buffy hadn't known laundry could be fun until Spike had bent her over the dryer and worked out his frustrations.



And despite whatever Dawn might claim to the contrary, they were trying to keep the sex noises to a minimum. It was just...hard. Especially since volume had never been a big concern before. Hell, in the past, she'd been more focused on making as much noise as possible to make sure no one walked away with a bruised ego. So, yes, that Dawn was staying the night at Janice's, therein giving them license to be as loud as the neighbors could tolerate, was definitely worth celebrating.

Only Buffy had something else in mind. Actually, something Spike had put *in* her mind that she hadn't been able to shake loose. It had started small, the odd thought here and there, a flash or feeling. Just going about her day and—*bam*—without warning, she'd find herself thinking about the way they used to fight. *Really* fight. How he'd been almost impossible to beat, it had seemed, the brawls she *had* won either by luck or the skin of her teeth. No other vampire fight, save perhaps Angel, had ever taken as much out of her as those times she'd squared off with Spike. There had been a rush, both of adrenaline and fear, knowing how well matched she was. Knowing it was the sort of battle she might not walk away from.

Those thoughts had inevitably tumbled into less-conventional thoughts. Like that day when he'd had the ring, how intimate the entire thing seemed in retrospect. And she found herself wondering what might have happened had she thrown him against one of the buildings and attempted to kiss the snarl off his face. If he would have shoved her back or pulled her closer, if they would have started ripping at each other in new ways altogether.

It was his fault, the freak. While some part of her had accepted long ago that she needed violence on a primal level that need had never translated to fighting-as-a-kink in her head. The more the thoughts lingered, the more she liked them, and the more freaked out she became. What sort of person was she if she wanted to pummel the man she loved before riding him to oblivion?

This was the sort of thing she'd have once upon a time discussed with Willow, but Willow wasn't here and there was no telling if she'd ever be back. So Buffy had forced herself to sit with her thoughts, work through exactly what it was about the scenario Spike had

described that did it for her. And every time she went through it, the answer was the same, and pain had nothing to do with it.

In those fantasies, she had the unbridled permission to *be* herself. Embrace the part of her that relished the fight and unite it with all the things that made her Buffy Summers. In other words, things Spike had been telling her for months—if not longer—that she'd chosen to dismiss or ignore. And while she knew he'd meant it, that the slayer part of her wasn't something she needed to bury or hide, old habits were tough to break and she had a lot of mileage in trying to suppress her inner warrior.

It meant something that Spike's favorite fantasy involved the whole Buffy. That fighting her, feeling her use her strength against him, was a turn-on.

And, yeah, maybe it was time to allow for the possibility that Faith had been right, too. After all, Buffy had spent the latter months of her last relationship getting her satisfaction by hunting down vampires rather than canoodling with her boyfriend. Being the Slayer where it was allowed and trying to suffocate her everywhere else.

With Spike, being the Slayer was allowed everywhere.

"Really, love," Spike said, stopping short and giving their rather desolate surroundings a good glare. "Think you mighta found the one hole in Sunnyhell too foul even for sewer-dwellers. Now can we please... What?"

Buffy smirked. For an amazingly perceptive vampire, he could be really slow on the uptake sometimes.

"What?" he asked again. Then he paused, narrowing his eyes. "What are you up to, Slayer?"

She'd debated how to do this—was it better to tell him what she had in mind or just go for it? Most healthy relationships didn't bring violence into the bedroom without at least one conversation and maybe a safe word, but she and Spike weren't other people and never would be. And, she realized, she didn't *want* them to be. What worked for others wouldn't work for them. Theirs were rules they would define as they went.

So she did what felt natural and punched him.

It had been over a year since she'd done that—punched Spike on

purpose with an aim to make it hurt. While she pulled it enough to keep him from flying across the room, the blow was hard enough that he stumbled back, caught off guard and nearly knocked off balance, though he rebounded quickly. In a blink, he had whirled back to her, his eyes wide with hurt and confusion, which in itself landed a double-punch back to her gut and infected her with a good dose of doubt.

"The bleeding hell was that for?" he demanded, patting his chin. "You all right?"

"Nope," Buffy replied, willing herself not to lose her nerve. "You know what I see? I see an empty building and a very, very dangerous vampire. He can't be up to anything good."

He was still staring at her like she'd lost the plot. Too much more of that and she'd cave. But dammit, if he'd just clue in, the payoff would be spectacular.

"In fact," she continued, putting a little sway in her hips as she stepped forward, "I'd go so far as to say whatever he's doing here is downright *naughty*."

Another beat. Then another. And then, *yes*, there it was—understanding flashed behind his gaze, and a smirk tugged on his lips. Slowly, much too slowly, the tension in his body drained and he took a measured step toward her. "That a fact?" he drawled, eyeing her up and down. "Seems like somethin' the Slayer oughta handle then."

A thrill raced down her spine and her throat tightened. Buffy released a ragged breath and pressed her thighs together—something she knew he didn't miss—before nodding. "That's the plan," she said, surprised to hear how husky she sounded.

Spike closed another space between them. "Really doin' this, pet?"

"Hey—it was your idea."

"Mmm. Was it now?"

"O-or you just told me something I couldn't get out of my head."

The smirk grew wider. She wanted to both kiss and punch it off.

"So that was your plan. Lure me here to rough me up? Wager we could bring the whole bloody building down if we really let go."

God, could they? The thought alone had her heart thundering double-time. "I thought it'd be better than fighting in a graveyard," she said, resisting the urge to step back as Spike grew nearer still. "You

know, fewer distractions and less potential for interruption on account of actual slayage.”

A low growl rumbled through her vampire’s lips. His gaze was still downturned, like he worried he might lose control if he looked at her directly. The way he was grinning and prowling toward her had every inner slayer alarm screeching its warning, and the rest of her preparing—subconsciously or otherwise—for what her body knew came next.

“Gave this a lot of thought, did you?”

“I... Yeah, I guess.”

“Mhmm.” At last, Spike met her eyes, yellow flashing behind the blue. “Gonna hold your punches?”

“Not unless you want me to.”

“Don’t you bloody dare.” Then the bones in his face shifted, and he let the demon loose, the smirk twisting from sexy to dangerous but somehow still sexy because of it. And later, she would have to ask herself if it had always been that way—if her body had always reacted like this—but right now all that mattered was that it did. “I know I won’t.”

He punctuated that statement with a backhand that sent her soaring across the room and crashing against the far wall, and god, every part of her was into this. The brilliant burst of pain, the rush of the air against her cheeks and whipping through her hair, even the crunch of drywall when her spine made contact with it. Buffy flipped to her feet and he came swinging again, all snarls and fangs and *enemy*. Only she was ready now, and captured his wrist and leveraged her hold on him to land a kick into his side that forced him to the floor with a hard grunt.

“Oh, yeah.” Spike rebounded almost instantly, practically vibrating with energy. “That’s it, love. Give it to me.”

So she did, and it felt fantastic. It all felt fantastic. The way he rushed her, the raw, unchecked strength he harnessed to aim punches at her face, and how quickly he recovered—improvised—when she thwarted his next attack. He was artful in the way he moved, always had been, but with more unpredictability than she remembered. Or perhaps he’d just gotten to know her better since the chip, relegated to the sidelines as he’d been, for he seemed to anticipate what she’d do

before she'd made a decision. She'd feint but he'd catch her, grip her and slam her against whatever surface was nearest. She'd duck but he'd drop to the floor and knock her off her feet, roll her until she had to buck him off. She'd kick but he'd catch her leg and use his hold on her to send her to the dirt-covered floor. All around them, the building groaned and whined, sawdust and debris sprinkling down from the levels above, and she realized he was right. They could bring the whole place down if they kept up at this pace.

The thought was tantalizing.

"Think you're holding back, Slayer," Spike practically purred, pressing her up against an abandoned wardrobe. He was a wall of muscle, hard and immovable. "Is there somethin' you want from the Big Bad?"

There were any number of things she wanted at the moment. Her heart pounding so hard she knew he felt it, her skin flushed and the rest of her trembling with unspent energy. And he was there, pressed against her, teasing her with swirls of his hips that let her feel just how much he was enjoying this, if the sparkle in his yellow gaze didn't give it away. Whatever was coming would be delicious, but she wasn't ready for it just yet. She needed just a little more.

"I want," Buffy managed to ground out, "you to beg."

Then she slammed her head forward, cracking her brow against his, and the grip he had on her vanished. She was in motion before he could gather his bearings, shoving and kicking him back until he crashed against the opposing wall next to the staircase, so hard the plaster split, and the floorboards gave a loud, threatening whine.

"Gonna have to hit me a lot harder than that, baby," Spike shot back, grinning again like a big idiot. "Think you'll be begging first."

"Try me."

"Plan on it."

He shot out his foot to knock her off balance, but she was ready this time, leaping over it and smacking him so that he collapsed against the staircase on his back. And she was on him before he could recover, one leg planted on either side of his head to make sure he had no means of escape, ready to rain down punches until he cried uncle.

But Spike was unpredictable—always had been. Unpredictable and

adaptive. He didn't go into fights with the path to victory in mind, only victory itself. That was why he'd been such a fierce opponent. Why going head-to-head with him had always left her winded and a little closer to death than she had been before. Spike trusted himself to land the blows that would get him to his goal—the how was incidental, and would reveal itself along the way.

Now, he brought his arms up in a rush, jerking them against the backs of her calves and sweeping her forward at an angle that had the skirt she'd worn tonight ripping at the seams as her legs shot out from under her. Then everything went sideways and Buffy was falling, the stairs and Spike rushing up as she came crashing down on his chest. The impact of her landing tore through her like a gunshot, and not for the ordinary reasons. Somehow, he'd managed to make her fall in such a way that her crotch was damn near smashed against his face.

"Oh god," Buffy breathed out before she could help herself.

"Mmm, knew you were enjoyin' this," Spike all but purred, nudging his nose along the fabric covering her soaked pussy. "Fuck, you're so hot."

Then the world tipped once more and he was up, bracing her hips and rushing them back down the stairs. Her back hit another wall hard enough to knock out her wind, but she didn't care, because Spike's face was still between her legs and he was shoving his tongue against the thin, drenched cotton at her center.

"God, I love you," he said, the words muffled. "So perfect. My Slayer."

For a handful of seconds, she thought that was it—they were done with the fighting-as-foreplay stuff and he was going to take out his cock and they'd start fighting the other way. But then that wonderful pressure at her sex disappeared—all of him did—and Buffy found herself dropping to the floor once again. The flare of pain that followed was like an endorphin shot straight to the heart, and she bounded to her feet before he could land another blow.

"Ready to beg me yet?" Spike asked, wagging his tongue at her through his wide, grinning mouth. The addition of fangs should not have had her trembling with anything but anger but she'd be lying if she said it didn't.

"Ready to beg *me*?" Buffy ran at him before he had a chance to answer, and had slammed him to the floor the next instant. He snarled and wrapped his arms around her, rolling to pin her beneath him—and likely perform more of those ought-to-be-illegal hip moves of his—but she was not without a few tricks of her own. Buffy clamped her legs around his and applied enough force that they kept rolling, pushing and shoving at one another until she managed to break free of the band of his arms, anchoring her own strength to flip him onto his back.

And there was something heady about this, too—being astride Spike, panting and staring down at him. His eyes glimmered in the weak light, his chest rising and falling with the inexplicable breaths he felt the need to take, and he was so beautiful at that moment she thought she could cry.

"Slayer," Spike rasped, his voice thick around his fangs.

Were this any other fight, Buffy would be reaching for her stake right about now, ready to call it a night. But she still wasn't ready to stop and didn't think he was either, so she decided on the next best thing. She slammed his hands on either side of his head, holding him down by the wrists, before taking his mouth in a kiss that lit her up inside. The response was immediate—something between a snarl and a moan, Spike nipping at her tongue and chasing it with his own. Kissing her the way he fought her, all passion and fury and wrestling for dominance though he was quite content to give it to her. Desperate, even, if the way he thrust up at her was any indication.

Buffy sucked his lower lip between her teeth, then pushed her tongue back inside his mouth to tease his fangs. Spike gasped and rolled his hips so that his cock struck her just where she needed to be struck, where she was hot and desperate for him, so much so the sensation of the bulging denim against her clothed pussy was almost, in itself, too much. She hummed a low mewl and ground down on him harder, jolts of pure ecstasy racing now alongside the rush of the fight and the thrum of her adrenaline. And she had to touch him everywhere—touch and be touched. Feel his skin against hers, sink into that needy, ravenous way he stroked and explored. Buffy released her hold on his wrists to skim her hands down his arms and over his chest,

shifting to add pressure against her clit, and it was so good. Everything about this was just—

Spike seized her by the shoulders, squeezed, and pitched her forward until she was literally flying over his head and into the wall behind him. Buffy barely had time to appreciate the splinter of pain that ricocheted through her body before he was on her again, having leaped to his feet in a freaking blink.

“Wha—” Buffy gasped as he dragged her off the floor, lifting her to him so they were eye-level. The lusty fog that had settled over her head took a few seconds too long to dissipate; by the time she clued back into the moment, Spike had her hauled against him and looked more than just a little pleased with himself.

“Somethin’ you need, precious?” he asked, winking, before twirling her around and smashing her into the side of the staircase hard enough that the banister cracked. He leaned in, that insufferable smirk back, though now shining through his human face. His much-too-pretty human face, which was alight with glee and triumph, though underscored, always, with that softer Spike quality that she loved so much. Even when he was being an ass. “Somethin’ I can give you?”

“You first,” Buffy shot back, tearing one of her arms free. And though it hadn’t been her intention, she hooked that arm back around his neck and pulled his mouth down to hers. Ready when he moaned and pressed into her again, hungry and desperate and all things good. The second his hold on her went slack, though, the warrior shoved the woman aside, seizing control once more. He gasped when she pulled back, lust and frustration playing across his face in equal measure, and she saw that he saw. She had nothing to hide from him—he knew every part of her, all of her, and that was why he was here. They could push and punch and shove and kick and yeah, the building might well come down in the interim, but there was nothing she could do, no amount of force she could use, that would be too much.

Spike would always want more.

He wanted more right now.

*More* was exactly what he would get.

She felt it, the intensity of her own surrender, pure and powerful—its own kind of strength. Buffy twisted so that he was the one pinned



to the staircase, curled her hands in the leather of his duster, and tugged him down to her mouth again. And yeah, the fight continued—he'd told her it would—but it was a sweeter fight, one waged on even ground.

"Tell me," he whispered against her mouth, helping her as she hiked her skirt up around her hips. "Need to hear it."

Buffy grinned, though it melted into a gasp when he fisted the material of her panties and gave it a good yank. She swore she was going to need to start an underwear fund for as often as he ripped them off. "Which *it* do you need to hear?"

Spike chuckled and kissed a line down her neck until his mouth was poised just above her pulse point. "Whichever you wanna give. I'm yours either way," he said before dragging his tongue over her flesh. "You want it here, pet? Want me to do it proper? Give me the full experience?"

"Oh, you think this is for you?"

"No." He scraped his blunt teeth along her skin, laughing again when she whimpered. "Think it's for *us*. You know you want it as bad as I do."

That was very true. As often as Buffy had thought of the fantasy fight over the last couple of weeks, she'd thought about his fangs, too. There were times the place on her wrist throbbed so hard she would swear she felt a corresponding tug in her pussy. Hell, it was enough to make her understand a whole host of things she hadn't before—how people could become addicted to the rush. How it was as intimate as sex in many ways, and more so in others. For Spike, it would be the ultimate offer of trust, and she did want to give that to him.

But not yet.

"I love you," she said, every inch of her melting at the way he brightened. Even now, in this dark and not-so-romantic place, roughed up from the blows they'd exchanged, the words worked their magic. She'd seen it there every time since she'd first said it—how he looked at her, soft and awestruck, and always with so much love she could drown in it. Over the past couple of weeks, she hadn't exactly been shy. Saying it had become one of her favorite things—there was freedom in knowing it, embracing it, and finding reasons to tell him if

not just inventing a few of her own. There was time to make up for, after all.

"God, I love you, too," Spike replied, still holding her up with one arm as he dived for his belt with the other. She was there too, helping him, dragging down the zipper of his jeans as he loosened the buckle. Then she had her hand around him, squeezing and pumping and she loved how he felt. Loved the sounds he made when she tugged a little too hard—but *not hard enough*, he'd tell her, and beg her to give him more.

"Fuck, baby," he rasped against her lips. She shifted just a bit so she could play, dragging the head of his cock through her drenched folds, there at the mouth of her pussy to her clit and back again, growing wetter with every stroke and damn near trembling with the need to feel him but also enjoying the tease too much to give it up just yet. Spike's breaths cadenced out in a rush, his eyes darkening with intent, so much so she could see the need reflected there almost as fiercely as she felt it.

"Gonna just tease us both or put it to good use, Slayer?"

"Gonna give me a reason to?"

"Bitch," he snapped, scraping his teeth along her jaw.

Buffy dragged his cock back down the seam of her pussy until he was notched at her opening. "Ass."

"Ready to beg me, baby?"

"Ready for you try and make me."

Spike flashed her a grin that she would have been happy to smack off if he hadn't thrust his hips and tugged her down, spearing her flesh with his, cool and slick where she was hot and burning, burying himself all the way home. And it was so good—all of it. Here, her body still shaking with the aftermath of their fight, tugged in a thousand different directions but somehow all aimed at the same destination. She clamped around him hard as though in punishment, but he rewarded her with a whimper and a swirl of his hips, somehow pushing deeper than he had been a second ago, a part of her as no one had ever been.

"Fuck, you're perfect," Spike said, pressing kisses into her neck once more.

The next few minutes were a blur of push and pull, the heat from their fight transforming into something else—something different but no less brutal. He'd wanted her to bruise him, fuck him until it hurt, until he begged for mercy or dust or something in the middle. It was easy to find that fury now, the passion that made her want to punch him some of the time and ride him until they were both out of their mind with pleasure the rest of it. With him looking at her the way he was, doing that thing with his tongue that drove her out of her head, pushing and thrusting and using his grip on her to drive her onto his cock at a hard, bruising rhythm.

"Come on, baby. Give it to me."

"Oh, shut up," Buffy snapped, then scraped at his lips with her teeth and gripped the banister behind him for purchase as she took command, pumping herself up and down the length of his cock at her own damn pace. His insufferable grin remained where it was, infuriating and sexy all at the same time, and she thought of how he loved to tell her that she'd never had as much fun with anyone as she had with him, how right that was. She couldn't imagine doing this with anyone else, working herself up into a frenzy until there was no recourse except to kill him or do this, and this was so much more fun. Using muscles she had only ever relied upon to keep her alive to clench and squeeze and hold on. Watching him as he watched her, that open, adoring look on his face that made her feel more like a woman than anything else ever had.

In a swift move, Spike whirled her around, slamming her back against the side of the staircase with enough force that her chest jolted. Then his mouth was on her again, sucking and pulling and scraping and teasing as he bucked his hips.

"Keep holdin' on, baby," he said, guiding her hands back up to the banister. "Gonna need it."

She flashed him her teeth. "Bring it."

He answered with something between a growl and a moan before burying his face between her breasts and bucking up into her hard, so hard she jostled against the staircase, the grooves in the molding biting into her back and shoulders and the banister whining its warning that it was about to go. Buffy sucked her lower lip between her teeth to

keep from crying out—no need to give him the satisfaction—but sound escaped anyway, shaken free by the force of his thrusts.

There was something in discovering this—feeling this. She felt she was learning things about herself that she would never have thought possible, and it was because of him.

“Fuck, Slayer,” Spike rasped, burying his head in her shoulder, pounding into her now. The air was thick with the sound of his heavy breaths, chased by her own, and the rustle of fabric and the metal and still, somehow over all of it, the unmistakable wet slap of him coming into her again and again. Behind her, the stairs groaned another low warning and the banister shook like it might knock loose, but she didn’t care and neither did he. She just wanted more—more he was ready to give. “Love this. Love this pussy. Love how you feel. Love the way you squeeze me. Love you, love you, *love you*.”

And then, for no reason whatsoever, it wasn’t enough. She felt the denim of his jeans abrading her clit with every thrust, the metal of his belt buckle clinging and slapping against her both harshly and somewhat lazily, and she needed more. So she planted her hands on his shoulders and shoved hard enough that he lost his rhythm and crashed on his back, skidding a few feet across the dusty floorboards.

She expected him to bark or snarl at her, demand an explanation, but he didn’t. Instead, he grinned dazedly and lifted himself on his elbows, eyes shimmering with delight as she strode toward him. “Knew you’d like it rough, pet,” he said thickly, wrapping a hand around his cock. Even in the darkness, she could see how slick he was from having been inside of her, even hear it when he began to stroke. “Baby wanna play?”

Buffy strode forward on legs she didn’t want to admit were wobbling, though she knew he could see it when her steps faltered. Somehow, though, she closed the distance between them without stumbling and cast herself astride him.

“You want me to beg for your fangs,” she said, batting his hand away from his cock so she could position him where she wanted him. “Now’s your chance.”

A low moan tumbled from his lips as she impaled herself on him again. “Fuck, yes,” he gasped, throwing back his head as the muscles in

his throat visibly jumped. "That's it, Slayer. It's all yours. All for you. Ride me till I pop."

Everything began to coalesce. The feel of him inside of her, the rush from before, the adrenaline still pounding through her veins, the wild beats of her heart and that raw energy that kept her alive night after night, swelling and building into something greater than anything she'd felt before—like she was balanced on top of a tidal wave just seconds from hitting land, but the ride there would make any crash worth it.

And Spike was there, keeping pace with her, holding her, pursuing her through every move and edging her closer with his voice and eyes and those hands that seemed to touch her everywhere at once. Cupping her breasts and running his fingers over her nipples but also gripping her hips and pulling her onto his cock with increasing urgency. God, he was always in motion, moving and stroking and strumming, never settling on one place as though desperate to have all of her at once. And all the while he kept the litany going, the same she wasn't even sure he knew he fed her. Babbling incessantly about how good she felt, about how tight she was, how he could stay buried in her pussy until the next apocalypse and it still wouldn't be enough, because she was so wet and hot and perfect and this was what she was made for. Begging her to squeeze him a little bit harder as she chased sensation, the individual sparks he had flickered to life becoming one as the rest of her started to throb. She opened her mouth to ask but he was there before she could, his hand positioned so he struck her clit on every upstroke.

That giddy warmth began spreading, lighting her up from the inside and it was good, so good, but it could be better. She knew it, knew what would send her there, not just over the edge but skyrocketing toward something truly spectacular. And he knew it too—he was ready.

"Spike. Now. Do it now. Bite me. Bite me, *please*."

He moaned and shifted, pushing himself off the floor and wrapping his arms around her tight. Then he was there at her throat, kissing and sucking at her sweaty skin with teasing intent before she felt the change course through him. Her pulse jumped, the inner slayer blaring

its warning at having a predator so close, but the rest of her too desperate for it to care.

And when he sank his fangs into her, pain and pleasure combining forces to go supernova, Buffy lost sense of herself, catapulted into pure fucking bliss. She was dimly aware of crying out, more so of clutching Spike's head to her neck as she trembled and spasmed hard around his cock, the air cold against her burning skin, her hair whipping her cheeks and Spike growling and thrusting and holding and then tensing and emptying himself inside of her. A sound unlike anything she'd heard herself make tore through her mouth, and the good kept coming. God, it felt like the pulls he took at her neck had a direct line to her clit, so every time the trembles started to subside he stoked them again to a peak that should have been impossible. She gasped and clawed and clung to him, her eyes stinging and her skin prickling and everything so good the fall back down seemed sure to hurt, but that was okay too, because he was there to catch her.

When Buffy came back to herself, she found Spike nuzzling and licking her somewhat-tender throat, though each pass of his tongue had her clenching her pussy around him tight enough that it'd only be seconds before he had her on her back. Which was more than all right with her. Hell, she might never want to move again. Or he could carry her home. Or whatever. They'd figure it out later. They always did.

But Spike didn't throw her onto her back. Instead, he lifted his head to meet her eyes, his own bright and happy and full of that promise he made every day. "All right?"

Words seemed beyond her, but damn, she was willing to try. Buffy parted her lips and a giggle tumbled out. Then another, and another, until he was laughing too, pulling her back so that when he crashed against the floor, she was sprawled on top of him. Her comfy place. The place she felt the safest, and had for a long time. Would for longer still. Whatever came next, the uncertainty that lay ahead, the long road to search for answers she might never find, these were the moments that would make it worth it. That would keep her moving forward, fighting and loving and laughing in between.

"Perfect," she said at last.

And right then, she'd never meant anything more.