

EPILOGUE

A story following The Writing on the Wall



HOLLY DENISE



EPILOGUE

HE HADN'T VISITED the crypt but once since returning. Everything looked mostly the same. Broken furniture, scattered weapons, a sarcophagus or two—nothing worth keeping, from the looks of it, but Clem insisted that Spike ensure he had everything he wanted before the move was final.

Once, perhaps, Spike would have reflected on the years spent within these stony walls with nostalgia and affection. There was the chair he used to call home as he'd watched *Passions*. Near the back sat the coffin in which he'd hidden as the Initiative scoured the tomb for their lost Hostile. The Slayer had kicked his sorry ass from one wall to the other more times than he could count, but even though Buffy kept insisting he need not let it go, the crypt was no longer home. Moreover, his most recent recollections remained the strongest, and likewise those he wished to banish.

Blood hadn't sat in his fridge since Buffy had jumped. Once he'd ran out, he hadn't cared to replenish. Downstairs was the bed where he'd lain for hours, staring at the ceiling and waiting for night to fall so he could rush to the Summers' home. No, the last memories of the crypt weren't happy ones and symbolized a closed chapter of his life.

"The weapons could come in useful," Buffy said, forcing him out of

his head. "They're not as nice as the ones at the house, but more is always better."

Spike turned to her with a smile. "Suppose that's right."

"You're sure there's nothing else?"

He shook his head slowly, doing a mental recalculation of everything they'd taken home on their last trip. The photos he'd stolen were back where they belonged, as was an assortment of clothing Buffy didn't remember but was still grateful to have recovered. He'd lifted his old telly as a present for Dawn, though she hadn't seemed too impressed since it was old as grit and didn't have the right parts for cable. All of the important items had already been relocated.

"Nothing I can see, love," he replied. "Unless you fancy one of the coffins as a conversation piece."

Buffy wrinkled her nose, looking bloody adorable. "No thanks."

"We could always put it in the basement so Angel has a place to stay when he visits."

"That's what hotels are for," she said. "And I don't think Angel's going to visit anytime soon."

"Pity."

Buffy tossed him a loving grin, and Spike warmed from the inside out. She seemed more beautiful by the day, though he assumed he was biased as he was the one who got to wake up next to her. In the months that had followed since crawling out of the Hellmouth, she had put on a few pounds but still had a ways to go before she looked like the Buffy of before. Her hair remained long and dark, only slightly styled from the trim he'd given her after finding her again. When pressed as to whether or not she'd returned to being blonde, she would shrug and say, "If it ever seems important."

As for Spike, his original intention of returning to bleach had vanished the second Buffy had run her fingers through his hair and said, "Goodbye, sexy brown curls. I'll miss you most of all."

He really had no resistance where she was concerned.

"You're really sure you don't want to keep this place?" Buffy asked, running her hand across the top of his old recliner. "We might use it on nights we..."

Spike arched a brow. "What?"

“Well, you know...fool around.”

A smirk played with his lips. “This cemetery’s at no loss for crypts, pet,” he replied. “Neither are the seven hundred other cemeteries in town. I’d wager we’ll have them all christened before too long.”

It wasn’t that he didn’t appreciate the sentiment, because he did. He just didn’t feel at home here, and that seemed the only good reason to keep a place like this around.

“Have you gotten your tux yet?”

Spike raised his gaze to hers. “What’s that?”

“For the wedding. Have you gotten it?”

The question was perfectly ordinary. They could have been anyone, anywhere, rather than two people standing in the middle of a tomb. Never in his life had Spike figured he would have anything regarding a normal conversation—at least, normal by humanity’s standards. As it was, adjusting to a world where people walked the streets and those with whom he regularly conversed weren’t in his head had proven a tad more trying than he’d expected. He couldn’t imagine what was going through Buffy’s head half the time.

“Do I need a tux?”

“Yeah. I’m pretty sure formal wear is not optional.”

“What are you wearing?”

“The puke dress of death.” She did that nose wrinkle thing again. “It’s like a bit of Hell that followed me here.”

Spike grinned flatly. “So Harris doesn’t spring for the tuxes, eh?”

She shrugged. “Guess you’re on your own. I can go with you if you want.”

“I don’t do well in suits.”

“Something tells me that’s a load of crap.” Buffy sighed, giving the crypt one last look over. “You’re sure about this place?”

“Unless you’re telling me you’re kicking my delectable ass to the curb, I’m as bloody sure as sure can get.” Spike trailed across the floor between them until she was within reach, his hands finding her shoulders as his lips brushed her forehead. He loved the way she melted into him, how his head swam in the air that belonged to her. No matter how much time past, he doubted he would grow immune to the way he relaxed whenever she was near.

With his brow against hers, he murmured, "You wanna give it a proper send-off?"

"Strangely, wouldn't be the nastiest place we've had sex."

He smirked, darting a hand under the hemline of her shirt. "That a yes, Slayer?"

Buffy raised her lips to his in a soft, sweet kiss. "Clem will be back any minute," she said.

"Race to the finish, eh?"

"Not exactly romantic." She kissed him again, this time playfully, and then stepped back. "Also the reason I love having a bed at home."

"Every party needs a pooper."

"That's why you invited me."

Spike's grin broadened, and he snaked an arm around her waist to draw her sweet body against his. He nuzzled her hair with a contented purr. "Whaddya say we blow this popsicle stand, go kill things, then run home for a nice shag?"

"If you're sure you don't want anything..."

"The only thing I want in this crypt is you, and I already have you."

Buffy made a face. "You're so sweet."

"Aren't I?"

They fell into sync side by side, their fingers interlacing. Spike tugged gently on her hand and led her to the door. Patrol had turned into a spectator sport for her friends—even more so than it was before—therefore the nights belonged solely to Spike, Buffy, and whatever uglies decided to get in the way. Though he shed his fair share of demon blood and vamp dust, Spike had the sinking suspicion Buffy let some of her opponents slip through her fingers to appease his need for violence. When she unleashed her powers to the maximum, she was truly a force to be reckoned with. Centuries of warthog hunting had her senses damn near impeccable.

His weren't too shabby, either, even if he'd spent most of his time hanging in one place.

Yet for their advantages, neither were prepared for who stood on the other side of the crypt door. Spike's nose hadn't even twitched with the hint of an unfamiliar scent. Therefore, when he pulled the

massive stone slab open, the last face he expected to see was Riley Finn's.

"Bloody hell!" he said, stumbling back. "Give a bloke a heart-attack, will you?"

Riley didn't blink or crack a grin, rather shifted from staring down Spike to staring down Buffy, his brow furrowed with disappointment. The initial surprise of this random visit waned after a few seconds, leaving Spike with nothing but an imprint of a man he hadn't seen in three hundred years.

Details seeped in slowly, filling in the blank spots of his suffering memory. The man remained very much the way Spike remembered. Stoic and dull, his brown hair cut military-style and his posture non-nonsense. He stood tall, broad-shouldered, dressed in commando-boy garb and cradling an impressively sized gun in his arms. Spike wagered the only reason he recognized Finn at all was his supreme dislike for the boy—other faces were far harder to place these days, and often took an embarrassing amount of time. Those who had left little-to-no impression on him before he'd dived into the beyond were left behind, and often never recovered.

Dalton, for example. Willow kept insisting he'd once known a vamp named Dalton. A lackey, from the telling of it. For all the blood in China, Spike couldn't place the bloke's face.

Finn was different. Finn he recognized instantly.

"Hello," Buffy said. Her tone remained neutral.

"Buffy," Finn replied. "Your hair is different."

"Okay," she said uncertainly. "Thanks."

Spike's mouth tugged into a smirk. He knew that tone. He heard it at least three times a week now, depending on where they went and whoever crossed their path. Once upon a time, he would have sold his nonexistent soul for an opportunity like this. Buffy standing at his side, face-to-face with the man who rivaled Angel for Spike's least favorite sod...though admittedly, Angel hadn't pissed him off so terribly as of late. Neither had Riley, if he wanted to be fair, but fairness wasn't a virtue Spike often practiced.

"We were just leaving," Buffy said, her tone still blissfully lost. "Are

you meeting Clem here? He mentioned he might be throwing a housewarming party."

Riley blinked. "What?"

"I just... This isn't Spike's place anymore. We're here picking up his stuff."

"Not that I have much to pick up," Spike put in.

Buffy shrugged, turning her eyes to him. "I thought he might be a friend of Clem's."

He finally broke at that, a laugh bubbling off his lips. "No, love," he said. "He's not one of Clem's mates. He's here to see us. Isn't that right, White Bread?"

"What have you done to her?"

"What has who done to who?" Buffy asked. "Did I miss something?"

"This some kind of sick memory spell?" Riley demanded, his nostrils flaring. "That the only way you could get in her pants?"

Spike's mirth hardened into anger almost instantly. "Watch it."

Buffy recoiled. "Hey!"

"Sweetheart," he said slowly, "this is your ex. Remember?"

"My ex what?"

Riley just stood there dumbly, nearly shaking with outrage. "What the hell did you do to her?"

Spike shook his head. "Finn," he said to Buffy. "Riley. You dated this tosser for over a year, remember?"

Watching her remember was always difficult. The way her eyes melted from confusion to understanding before landing ultimately on shame. It had happened a handful of times over the last few months. There were always people who remembered her—the bouncer at the Bronze, Dawn's teachers, certain demons and the like—but only a few people she truly regretted letting slip along the wayside of time. She hadn't remembered Cordelia right off, and it had taken the other watcher, Wesley, actually visiting to exchange notes with Giles about some big LA evil before he'd registered in her memory. A guy like Finn, though, was due to stir guilt she didn't need.

"Oh."

"Oh?" Riley repeated. "That's it? *Oh?*"

"Back off, you lousy sod."

"I don't—"

"She doesn't owe you rot."

"I'm sorry," Buffy said, her voice cracking. "It's nothing personal."

"Buffy—"

"Look, mate, you wanna toss the place? Be my bloody guest. We're heading home, anyway." Spike tucked an arm around Buffy's shoulders and anchored her to his side. "Come on, love."

"No, not *come on*." Riley moved to block their path. Like he could. "You've done something to her and I damn well won't just stand here and—"

"He hasn't," Buffy said. "He hasn't done anything to me. I'm sorry I don't remember you, but my mind it's... It's not what it once was." She licked her lips and smiled sadly. "Like I said, it's nothing personal. It just happens."

"What just happens?"

"You weren't here for it," Spike said, hugging Buffy closer. "And we were just leaving."

He half-expected Buffy to object, but she didn't say a word. Instead, she nodded and leaned into him, and while Spike would have enjoyed rubbing it in Finn's nose once upon a time, those things seemed inconsequential now. He just needed to get her home.

Thankfully, Finn didn't object as they passed.



SINCE RETURNING TO THE WORLD, SPIKE HADN'T ENCOUNTERED A situation where someone knew about Buffy, knew about her nightly excursions in cemeteries and accompanying super strength, but didn't know she had jumped into Hell. The teachers and bouncers and bartenders they encountered on a periodic basis weren't people typically entwined in their lives to begin with, therefore taking a few minutes to place someone didn't seem as offensive. He worried that seeing Riley had triggered something neither of them had been prepared for.

Buffy didn't say much on the way home. Upon walking through the

front door, she'd promptly ventured upstairs, saying she was checking on Dawn, apparently having forgotten Dawn was staying the night at Janice's. Since Spike and Buffy had climbed out of Hell, the littlest Summers hadn't wanted to stray too far from home in fear she would return to an empty house. Tonight's sleepover was a step on the road back to normal.

Spike opted not to follow Buffy, knowing better than to play shadow. She went through moods where she needed her solitude, though they didn't typically last long—a thousand years of loneliness made her starved for company. Even still, when it happened, he did his best not to interfere. Living with Buffy in the real world was like a waking dream. Things he'd known about her before had exploded into being, and each day brought new discoveries. Many he knew were a result of acclimatizing to life once again, others were extensions of things he'd observed in her before but had never been close enough to experience.

Domestic bliss was something foreign, though he wouldn't question it. He was a lucky bloke and wasn't foolish enough to check his gift horse for flaws.

A fierce knock sounded against the door. Spike dragged his eyes away from the stairwell, the demon in his chest growling. He didn't need to be told who it was. Riley couldn't be stunned into immobility long and if he was in town there had to be a reason. He'd obviously had cause to visit the crypt even if they hadn't made it that far in their conversation.

There ought to be a way to disinvite humans from residences. It didn't seem right that vampires were the only ones physically barred if they didn't have permission.

He better make it quick. Buffy didn't need another scolding for something she couldn't help. No sense dancing around the issue.

Spike threw open the door and said, "It's been a thousand years since she saw you, mate. That's why she doesn't remember you. Like the lady said, it's not personal."

It was gratifying, he would admit, watching anger and resentment melt from Riley's face. Somehow, Spike managed to hide his satisfaction.

“What?” Finn demanded.

“There are things I don’t remember, either,” he replied. “Of before, that is. I don’t know if you were around when the she-bitch was tearing all up and I don’t bloody care. All you need to know is whatever you’re here for has gone. Buffy jumped into Hell to save the lot of us. She was there for a thousand years and I brought her back.”

Riley’s astonishment was short-lived. His expression turned skeptical. “You did?” he repeated. “*You* brought her back?”

Spike shrugged. “Things have changed.”

“You—”

“Look, much as I’d love to rub your nose in the fact that the girl’s mine, it’s not about that. Whatever you’re here for is gone.”

“I’m here for the Initiative,” Riley said. “Not for you, not for Buffy. Point of fact, the missus is with me.”

Spike arched an eyebrow. “Missus?”

Riley held up his left hand, showing off the gold wedding band wrapped around his ring finger. “She’s here following a different lead,” he said. “But my sources led me to you.”

Of course they had. “Wishful thinking, I’d wager. You’d just love to stick me with something. I haven’t lived at the sodding crypt in months. Fuck all, I haven’t even visited but one other time since Buffy and I climbed outta Hell. So thanks for keeping yours truly in your thoughts, but kindly stuff it. Whatever it is you’re looking for, I’m not involved.”

“You expect me to believe that?”

“Buffy and I haven’t been apart since we got back. You wanna sniff around her, too? See if she’s caught up in your demon conspiracy?” He huffed. “Not like you gotta believe me, either. Ask around if you want. Harris, Giles, the witches, anyone. Whatever piece you have to say to me—to her—is over. Now, are you gonna move your arse or do I have to move it for you?”

“Go ahead and try,” Riley shot back. “And enjoy your headache.”

Spike tapped his cranium. “Chip’s long gone, mate. But as much as I’d love to thrash you good and proper, it isn’t about me. It’s about her. I’m not gonna school you all bloody night, and fuck if I let you make her feel worse than she does for something she can’t help. She didn’t

remember me, either. Not at first. Or the watcher, her friends, Joyce. She didn't remember her kid sis, not until she remembered herself. You're the one who left. Why the bloody hell *should* she remember you?"

The pause that followed wasn't long, but long enough to let Spike know Riley wanted to laugh him off. There must have been something in his eyes, though, for whatever snappy comeback the boy had prepared never met the air.

Then Buffy appeared behind him, her warmth consuming him whole, and Spike understood. Riley's silence had nothing to do with him—it was her. It always was. It was the way she wrapped an arm around Spike's middle and hooked her chin over his shoulder. The way she touched him with the casual intimacy of lovers. And apparently seeing her again was all Finn needed to know what he'd learned was true. He stared blankly for a few seconds, then gathered his bearings and offered a sharp nod.

"I didn't know," he said.

"I know," Buffy replied. "It's okay."

Riley hazarded a quick glance to Spike before looking back. "You're okay?" he whispered. "You're happy?"

The arm around his middle tightened. "I'm happy," she said, and he heard it in her voice. "After everything... I didn't think it could happen. But it did. It's hard some days and better others, but we love each other and we make it work."

Riley swallowed. "I'm glad." And Spike suspected he was—at least for her.

"Thank you," she said.

The conversation became stilted and awkward after that, but it didn't last long. Riley was quick to make an excuse to leave, though not without wishing them well. It was more than Spike had expected but he didn't question it. He remained civil until the boy was out of sight, and by the time he turned around, any sense of resentment had faded.

Buffy pressed a solemn, grateful kiss against Spike's lips. "Thank you," she said again, though this time the words were packed with more emotion than the human voice was capable of expressing. She

trembled hard and held onto him, and he pulled her closer when he smelled her tears.

There were times he was surprised how wonderfully she had adjusted to living in the world again. This was one of them.

And fuck, if it didn't make him love her more.



IT WAS STRANGE HOW SHE COULD STRUGGLE SO MUCH WITH A memory or a face, but other things—things that otherwise served no practical use in everyday life—she picked up with ease. Spike wagered it was just the way the human mind worked—mysteriously, if not miraculously. Where Buffy had first learned to tie a tie, he didn't know, but he was grateful. Surprisingly enough, Dru hadn't been much for formalwear in her men. As long as she had pretty things to wear, that was all that had mattered to her.

"The rabbit runs around the log once," Buffy murmured, twisting the fabric in some fancy way his eyes couldn't follow. "Twice." She flipped it again. "The rabbit dives into his rabbit hole..." She looped the end and straightened it, her brows furrowed in concentration. "Safe and sound."

Spike glanced down. "Dunno how you did that."

"I went through the steps. The rabbit outsmarted the fox."

"Figure that's a parable, you think? For us?" He wagged his brows. "Big bad fox chasing down the pure lily-white rabbit?"

"I don't think I was ever lily-white."

He chuckled. "Think again, love. As chaste as they come, you were. Didn't want anything to do with the mean ole fox."

Buffy's lips twitched, laughter reaching her eyes. "The rabbit found out eventually that being eaten by the fox is a lot sexier than it sounds."

"Oh, you're asking for it."

"You want me even like this?" She glanced down to her dress with a wince. "This dress is the color of snot."

"Radioactive snot at that." Spike pressed a kiss to her brow. "Is there nothing you don't wear well?"

"I'm choosing to take that as a compliment." Buffy smiled, seemingly unable to keep from straightening the masterpiece she'd woven around his neck. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

"I really do. It... The words don't seem enough sometimes, you know?" A long sigh rattled off her shoulders. "I remember before. I told Giles that saying *I love you* felt weird. Strange coming from me. And now, god, everything just feels so..." She trailed off, smiling though she blinked back tears. "I've survived being alive here because of you. You make me strong, Spike. And I love you more than... You rearrange me till I'm sane, and I tell you how much that means to me."

He smiled softly, his skin burning with her fire. "Think that's from a song."

"Doesn't matter. It's true."

She touched her lips to his, and he lost himself. Tasting her would always feel like the first time. She stroked him so softly, kissed him so tentatively, made love to his mouth and tongue in such a way his dead heart clenched and everything around him melted into some more perfect reality. Only when he opened his eyes she didn't disappear, and he had to remind himself again and again the dream wouldn't end.

"Ahem."

They broke apart guiltily. Buffy blushed and buried her face against Spike's shoulder.

"Sorry to bust up the make-out session," Xander said, waving a hand. "But it just occurred to me I'm running out of time to do this."

Spike glanced up, his lips still tingling. "Whass'at?"

"I need you to do something."

"Which one of us?" Buffy asked.

"Spike." Xander stepped forward, wringing his hands. "Honestly, I'd hoped you'd just figure it out when I made you go get a tux. Or that Buffy would tell you that just people in the wedding party need to get fitted for things like that."

Spike glanced to Buffy, who shrugged. "I haven't been to a wedding, I don't think," she replied. "And if I have, must be one of those memories that wasn't important enough to carry with me for a millennia."

"It's okay, Buff. Ignorance on account of thousand-year trauma is allowed." Xander looked back to Spike. "You're my best man."

"Your best what?"

"Man. You stand up with me when I get married."

Spike blinked dumbly. "Errr, isn't that something... That mean you like me, Harris?"

"Think the cat's out of the bag on that one," Xander retorted. "Come on, man. You saved my best friend from Hell. It might take a lot for the Xan-man to bury the hatchet, but I know when to let go of a grudge. Face it, Bleach Boy, you're one of us, now."

Spike pointedly ran a hand through his dark curls. "Don't think that name applies anymore."

"Sorry. I tried to give it up, but it turns out that while hairstyles come and go, nicknames last forever."

"You really want me to do this?"

Xander shrugged. "Well, I'd ask Willow, but Anya already claimed her. Besides, she's not butch enough. And Giles is... Well, let's just say his idea of a bachelor party put him out of the running."

Buffy placed a hand on Spike's shoulder and squeezed. "He'll do it."

"I will?"

"Damn skippy you will," Xander agreed. "I know where you live."

Spike grinned. "Who are you kidding?"

"You're right. I'm a pansy. But you'll do it, 'cause even though you're not showing it, you're secretly touched that I asked. Not to mention you'll do anything to impress the Buffster."

Damn. He had him there. "Right then."

"Good! Now that that's settled, you better bust a move. Gotta get myself hitched." Xander turned, reconsidered, and tossed a final glance to woman at Spike's side. "That dress is awful, but on you, Buff... No, it's still hideous. See you in the chapel!"

He was gone in a flash, but his parting words left Spike in stitches. Buffy chastised him, of course, but he couldn't help himself. The strange homey feeling in his chest had a way of beating back his better senses.

Perhaps one day he would accept that he was part of the group.

Perhaps. Until then, though, he would enjoy the ride and the surprises that greeted him each day.

As long as Buffy was at his side, he didn't care what came. Nothing was too big to tear them down.

And anything that tried was in for one hell of a fight.