

# FUCKED

*Nailed Part 2*



HOLLY DENISE





THIS. THIS WAS WHAT CAME TO MIND WHEN SOMEONE CALLED Spike *evil* these days. Not the century of carnage. Not the multiple attempts on her life. Not trading them to Adam. Not even that one time that he'd kidnapped an Initiative doctor and nearly gotten Riley killed in the process. No, all of Spike's past evilness had been wiped out, as far as she was concerned, for the only thing she could think of whenever pressed to enumerate on his less-than-soulful tendencies was how he swirled his tongue around her clit while fucking her with his fingers. The sounds he made, too. Deep and rumble and *yum*, very *yum*. Like he couldn't get enough but damned if he wouldn't try.

It was intoxicating, overwhelming, and sometimes embarrassing. She could be somewhere completely innocuous—neutral territory, even, like flipping through books or reshelving weapons she'd been trying out—and *boom*, sudden X-rated show going on behind her eyes. And Buffy's stomach would tighten, her heart would somersault, and if Spike was around, he'd smirk at her, wink, make some sort of lewd comment or gesture, do whatever he could to make sure she knew that *he* knew where her mind had gone.

She hated it. Right up until the time they closed the door to her bedroom and fell into each other, and he reminded her exactly why she'd been daydreaming about him in the first place by taking a tour down her body, stopping at all his favorite sites, before burying his face between her thighs and feasting to his heart's content. Encourage her to be as vocal as she pleased, test out that handy soundproofing charm Willow and Tara had added to her room, and indulge in things she hadn't done before. Things that weren't, actually, all that wild, just that she hadn't been with anyone that had encouraged exploration up until the spell that had sent her into Spike's bed.

Tonight, for example, Buffy had been adamant about giving him a blowjob (that was another thing that verified his evilness—sometimes, without provocation, she'd be overcome with the urge to suck his cock, an urge she'd never had with any past boyfriend, thanks) and Spike had been adamant about eating her out, and his solution had been why not the best of both worlds? So he'd flopped onto the bed, tugged her down onto his face, then given his hips a little wiggle to show her exactly where she could put her mouth.

And when she'd tensed up, uncertain, he'd sensed that too. Stroked his hands down her ass, kissed along her inner thigh, and murmured that they didn't have to if she didn't want, but god, having her mouth on his dick while he had his tongue up her cunt would be fucking heaven. At the very least, she could see for herself how hard she made him, how much he loved having her taste on his lips, and if she decided to show a man some mercy, that would be just swell. If she didn't, that would be fine, too. Would drive him crazy by upping the anticipation. Win-win for everyone.

Buffy hadn't known why she'd thought it'd be weird, though it was likely tied to some of what Spike called her *puritanical bangups* when it came to sex. Things that she had decided were bad or deviant at some point, maybe around the time Angel had lost his soul, and had kept categorized as such after the night she'd spent with Parker and nearly a year of what she now knew had been exceedingly mediocre sex with Riley. After all, if good, sturdy, dependable Riley hadn't been interested in sixty-nining, then Buffy was better off just never considering it at all.

"Riley wasn't interested in getting you off, either," Spike had grumbled when she'd mentioned this. "Bet the few times he managed were a bloody shock to the system."

Buffy hadn't wanted to encourage ex-bashing on the grounds that she knew Spike had a lot of ammo in his arsenal where Angel was concerned, but she hadn't rushed to disabuse him of the notion, either. Which had led to him telling her that if she tried it and didn't like it, they could stop, but he was banking on her being a fan.

And, well, the second she was dangling above his swollen shaft, quivering as he spread her open and started taking long, decadent laps of her slit, her lips parted and the head of his cock was right there, all slick with precum, and considering how good he was making her feel, giving him a little suck only seemed polite.

Spike responded immediately, rumbling a low part-moan, part-growl into her pussy, sending shockwaves and shivers along her skin and immediately filling her with the need, the drive to make him do that again. To respond to his every lick with one of her own. Slow at first, getting used to the angle, the sensation, the challenge of concentrating on him while he was doing whatever he could to drive her out

of her mind, then finally embracing that it was a game like everything else. A way to communicate, to compete, to fight (mostly) without words. If he chuckled when she whimpered and thrust herself against his face, she'd suck the smug right out of him. If she snickered when he whispered a throaty, "Please," into the air, he'd twist his fingers to rub her in that way that turned her muscles to jelly. He'd lap and she'd suck and he'd fuck her with his tongue as she fucked him with her mouth, both of them writhing and pushing and teetering and desperate to get the other there first.

But Buffy knew it'd be a while before she won that. For the most impatient guy on the planet, Spike's stamina and willpower were off-the-charts. The entire reason they were together at all was that time they'd fucked for an hour and he hadn't come until the end. And remembering that moment, the way he'd been pounding into her, desperate and hard and hungry, muttering into her ear while her neck throbbed with the echoes of his fangs, was all she needed to send her over the edge. She whimpered and ground herself against his mouth and stifled her scream by closing her mouth around his cock again, and then he growled and bucked so hard his balls slapped her nose, and he was coming too. His dick pulsing against her lips as he emptied himself down her throat, along her tongue, and he was still coming when the need for oxygen became too much for her. Spurting across her cheeks and chin as she gasped for air, pumping him with her fist to make up for the absence of her mouth. Watching his foreskin slide along his shaft, sticky white smeared across the head and leaking into the crevices, and it was another thing she figured she shouldn't like but did.

Or maybe it was okay that she did. She hoped it was because she didn't see that changing anytime soon.

"Bloody hell." Spike was also panting, and god, if that wasn't one of the headiest things she'd ever experienced. Making someone who had no functional need for lungs forget that using them was optional. "I'll never get enough of the way you suck me, baby."

The next thing she knew, the mattress was at her back, and Spike was above her, his hungry gaze roaming over her face. Then a low growl rumbled at his throat, and he was kissing her in that hard,

desperate way he always kissed her. With all the hunger of the first time and all the desperation of the last, lips roaming, teeth nipping, flooding her mouth with the taste of the juices still on his tongue. She trembled and he trembled too, muttering all the while about how hot she was, what seeing his cum on her face did to him, and then thrusting himself against her pussy, sliding his shaft along her slit, making his cock a different type of wet, restoking a fire she wouldn't have thought possible to light up again, but here they were. *God*, here they were, Spike still panting as he licked along her neck, lapping up his own spendings, her head dangling precariously close to the edge of the bed, Spike lifting himself on his elbow with one arm and reaching between them to tease the head of his cock against her trembling flesh, making a circuit between her clit and her opening, grinning when she mewled and mewling when she slapped his shoulder and told him to just do it already. To just *fuck her*.

And Spike's face was right above hers, his eyes so dark they looked near black, his stupid unnecessary breaths crashing against her lips. "You want it?" he asked. "Want my cock?"

"Yes."

"Where do you want it?"

"Inside."

"Awful vague, that." He smirked and nipped at the corner of her mouth. "You want me inside that pretty wet pussy?"

"Yes."

"Not the end of the world, is it?"

"It will be if you keep me waiting much longer."

He arched an eyebrow, grinning his villain grin, and rubbed against her clit with the spongy head of his cock just to get her to curse him, she was certain. "World ends unless I fuck you? Sounds familiar. Sure that's not something you just tell yourself so you can have your way with the Big Bad?"

Buffy glowered up at him and all his unrepentant evil, then did what she figured he'd been angling for. "World ends unless *I* fuck *you*," she snapped, trapped his hips between her strong thighs, and forced him over until he was the one on his back, nearly dangling over the bed, and she was the one doing the teasing, her hand wrapped around

his cock, stroking and pulling as she positioned him at the mouth of her pussy. Spike's eyes flashed with his grin as she lowered herself onto him.

"My hero," he cooed before blowing her a kiss.

"My vampire."

"You're bloody right I am."

She pressed her eyes closed, focused on the sensation of him inside of her. The length of him, the steel, how he groaned and bucked and chased her when she began dragging herself back along his cock and the hiss of victory when she slid back down. This part was easy, this part she knew how to handle. The other part, the part where he was hers, wasn't nearly as straightforward, and becoming harder to ignore, the more he said things like that.

The more she *wanted* him to say things like that.

Eventually she'd have to reckon with whatever this was. The relationship that should never have been, the monster in her bed who was starting to worm his way into her heart.

But eventually wasn't today.



IT WAS a strange sort of conflicted she felt these days. On one hand, Buffy had gone into this thing with Spike with her eyes wide open. She knew she wanted him, knew she had feelings that were complicated and messy, knew she wanted to explore those feelings and allow them the room to start making sense to her. He'd asked for a chance, and a chance was what she'd given him—given herself, too, because she'd figured she'd deserved it as much as he did. A chance to find the sort of normal that would work for the Slayer. To have someone who could truly help shoulder the awesome weight of her responsibilities in a way that made her feel supported rather than guilty and bedraggled.

The longer she was with him, though, the more Buffy realized that part of her had expected it to run its course. Expected Spike to get bored, realize that the fun in being with her had been the thrill of fucking the enemy, that life as the Slayer's boyfriend wasn't that exciting and to revert to the Spike she'd known before they'd sent

Glory back to her hellhole. Even worse now, though, because of the vulnerabilities she'd shared with him over the last few months. And Spike had way more ammunition than Angel had ever had; if he wanted, he could do ten times the damage, even before factoring in that the chip had been switched off.

But nothing had run its course. If anything, the course just seemed to be ramping up in intensity rather than evening out. There was the way he touched her—always desperate and hungry, often softly reverent. As though he couldn't believe his hand was on her skin, never mind his lips or his tongue or any other part of him. He pouted on the nights she insisted he go home, always trying—often succeeding—to coax his way into an invitation to stay. Then he would wrap himself up in her, her vampire-shaped barnacle, and fall asleep with his nose buried in her hair or the crook of her neck, all so he could enjoy waking her up in a way that had the Folger's method completely smoked. He set out with her on patrol each night, as well—eager to get in his nightly spot of violence, as he called it—before throwing her a purely sinful look and suggesting they find themselves a nice, secluded corner to work out any lingering tension.

And that was before she considered all the things he did that weren't related to sex at all. Sex and Spike, Buffy understood. He loved sex, and he seemed hungry for it—for her—all the time. He was a vampire, and satisfying those basic urges, overdosing on pleasure as much as he could, seemed as intrinsic a part of him as the need for blood. When it came to everything else, though, the less-pleasant parts of being Buffy, the *human* parts, she'd fully expected him to bail. After all, every other serious guy in her life had.

Like the day she'd come home and found her mom on the couch, staring into nothing. Buffy hadn't thought of Spike then. Hadn't even occurred to her to swing by Restfield, let him know she wasn't going to be home that night so there was no point in coming over. She'd just gone to tell Dawn, gone to the morgue, gone through the motions of navigating the pieces of death she didn't understand. Signing things. Making arrangements. Answering questions she'd never imagined she'd be tasked to ask at twenty years old. Did her mother have life insurance? Did her mother have a favorite dress? What sort of casket would

her mother like? Which of Sunnydale's many cemeteries was ideal for Joyce Summers's eternity?

It had hit her all at once. No time to breathe. No room to mourn. Just snap to it and start making decisions. Giles believed it wasn't like this in other parts of the country—that questions and arrangements weren't always discussed the same day as the loss. But Sunnydale was Sunnydale, and people had to move fast. Buffy had nodded as though she'd understood and plugged along as she always did. Signed here, initialed there, and at some point had gone back home to a house minus one heartbeat alongside a sister who had decided this was somehow her fault. Trying to feel through the numbness and getting nowhere.

And Spike had been there, waiting for her when she dragged herself back downstairs after seeing her sister to sleep. One look at him and she'd known he expected nothing. That he wasn't there to ask where she'd been or why he hadn't been told, to pressure her for explanations or conversations she wasn't ready to have. He hadn't even spoken, just sat with her grief, with her quiet, not telling her it was all right and she could cry, or grimacing when she did. All he'd done was offer his wonderful thereness, giving her the shoulder she'd needed, the time and the space. And that had stuck with her in the days that followed. The absolute misery of planning a funeral while negotiating her way around the yawning maw of grief just waiting to swallow her whole. Forcing herself to live minute to minute because any more was too much for her brain to handle. Then the funeral itself, and the parade of well-wishers, and Angel coming to town, and Dawn deciding that everything could be solved by necromancy (thankfully, she'd been stopped before she could get herself killed trying to grab the ingredients), and everything had been so much, too much. And through it all, the only person who never asked her how she was, who never designated themselves the Buffy cheerer-upper, who just let her exist with all her thoughts, was Spike.

*"I'd love you when you're soft, too," he'd said. "When you need to be soft. And you do, love, you need it. Just on your terms."*

That was it. The moment she'd realized that this thing they had, whatever it was, might have a lot more course to go before it was over.

That, in fact, perhaps there wouldn't be an over. That Spike's interest in her was more substantial, more *real* than she'd been prepared to grasp.

It was terrifying.

It was everything.

And she had no idea what happened next.

Not helping matters was the fact that, as together as she and Spike were, they weren't really in the open. None of this had been by design or intent—she and Spike hadn't sat down and decided who got to know what; rather she was erring on the side of caution because historically, dating vampires had not gone well, and it seemed gun-jumpy to immediately stress everyone out over something that might not last. She hadn't exactly said any of this out loud, but she was almost positive Spike understood that was the reason, and so far, he hadn't called her out on it. Which both made it easier to breathe and made her feel like a real scumbag.

It was hard, though, knowing exactly how to broach this conversation with the others, because while she and Spike weren't in the open, they weren't really in the dark, either. Like, Willow and Tara knew because they'd been the ones who had helped Buffy reach the decision to go for it. Anything that Giles had put together was owed to the fact that he had found the spell she and Spike had performed in the first place. It was possible Dawn knew from the amount of time Spike spent at the house, but if she did, she was being uncharacteristically quiet about it, which made Buffy think she was either clueless or waiting for the opportunity to blackmail her for something like NSYNC tickets. There was every chance Anya knew and just hadn't mentioned it and almost zero chance Xander knew because, well, Buffy hadn't gotten a lecture yet.

Oh, and Angel knew, and he'd been super gross about it.

She'd been walking through the cemetery alone the night they'd buried her mom. Needing some distance from everyone, vampire boyfriend included, to let her thoughts run rampant without feeling obligated to explain them with every facial change. Not that Spike had been like that but she'd insisted on space anyway, and he'd given it to her. Told her she knew where to find him if she changed her mind, that

he'd swing by later just to make sure she ate, but that he wouldn't impose. And god, he'd been understanding to the point it had almost pissed her off, because where in the world did he get off being understanding and sweet and everything she needed when he was a *vampire*? When her normal, human ex-boyfriend had made her feel like an inconvenience? It was brain warpy and confusing, almost to the point where it felt like a trap. Like he was setting her up to fail. Only that wasn't what Spike was doing at all and she knew that—she did—but knowing it and having these thoughts at the same time was a dangerous sort of trippy. It just made her feel worse.

And then, out of nowhere, that familiar Angel-specific ping had almost knocked her off her feet. Buffy had whipped around, surveyed the landscape of trees and headstones, and known even before she'd completed turning back in the direction she had been facing initially that he would be there when she did.

"Sorry," he'd said by way of greeting. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"Cloak and dagger act says otherwise, but okay. What are you doing here?"

"I heard about your mom."

It wasn't fair to say she'd experienced another ping there, as she felt she was pinging all over with the loss, but it had twinged regardless, the ache left by the Mom-shaped bruise on her heart. Buffy had shaken her head, though, looked at Angel, and arched an eyebrow. Waiting.

"All right, so, Giles calls sometimes just to tell me how you're doing. He..." And then he'd paused and his nostrils had flared—she'd watched them flare, too, thinking, *wow, those suckers are flarey*—and when she'd met his eyes again, something behind them had changed.

"Spike," Angel had said, his tone darker than Buffy had ever heard. Sharp. An accusation. He'd stormed forward and taken her by the arm, his grip strong enough to hurt. "Is there a reason I can smell him all over you?"

Buffy's heart had seized. All of her had seized, actually, with that old familiar yearning—one that blinked out everything going on in her life. Erased the fact that her mother's grave was just a few headstones away, that Buffy had spent the bulk of the day in this very cemetery, wandering among the graves she knew so well out of habit and some

deep, intense desire to hear the familiar rustling of earth. Knowing, of course, that her life would not be better if her mother rose from dirt but still stupidly holding out the hope that she'd be able to steal at least one more second with the woman she hadn't appreciated enough in life to tell her that she loved her. Even if she had to do it before killing her a second time.

No, all of that had fallen away and all she'd been left with was the feeling she used to get in high school when she'd been certain she was about to lose Angel for good. That low simmering dread that had contributed to some truly remarkable saves but also terrible, deadly decisions. And realizing it was *that* feeling had catapulted her out of dread and into resentment, because *god*, she did not deserve that. Not the day she'd buried her mother.

"You can smell Spike all over me because he's my boyfriend," Buffy had replied, forcibly jerking herself free of him. "Boyfriends tend to be all over their girlfriends at least part of the time, and vice versa."

Angel had ogled at her. "Your...boyfriend. Spike."

"Yeah."

"Spike as in...Spike."

"I don't know of another, do you?"

"Buffy, what happened? I don't..." He'd furrowed his brow. "Weren't you with that soldier?"

"I was. He's gone. I'm with Spike now."

"I can't wrap my head around this."

"Lucky for you, understanding your girlfriend's relationship decisions is not a requirement once that girlfriend is an ex," she'd replied. Then, as though she didn't have control of her mouth, she'd heard herself saying, "Spike and I... I don't know how to explain it, but we were both feeling something and I wanted to see where it would lead. It's...different. Everything with him is different. But it's the kind of different I need right now."

"And it doesn't bother you that he's a killer? A vampire?"

Buffy had bristled. "It didn't bother me with you, so why should it with him?"

"Please, you can't compare me to him!"

That was what she'd thought, too, the times Spike had broached

the subject, though he admittedly hadn't been heavy handed about it since the ritual sex that had kickstarted their relationship. Still, she remembered well the things he'd said then. How Angel was inherently selfish and destructive, that he enjoyed breaking people just to watch the way the pieces scattered. Spike had overplayed his hand, as she'd noticed he did from time to time when he was feeling exposed, and though he'd apologized for upsetting her, his apology hadn't erased the words from her memory. Hadn't made her not wonder how much of what he'd said had been true and how much just jealousy talking. She'd also found herself wondering a lot about the sanctity of a soul over a chip, because Spike had been without an active chip since the spell, and not once had he left dead loved ones for her friends to find.

And maybe she'd been a bit raw, a lot exhausted, and thoroughly done dancing around the feelings of others, for she'd said as much. Opened her mouth and channeled her inner Anya and let the truth roll out uninhibited.

"There is nothing to compare because, unlike you, he hasn't started killing the people I love."

"Well, of course not," Angel had argued. "He can't, or so you told me. Something about a chip. Don't tell me he's scoring points for something he has no control over."

"The chip is switched off."

"It's *what*? Why in the world—"

"Because Spike might be a lot of things, but he's not a liar. Have you seen him try to lie? He's terrible. And if you think I don't ask if my soulless, chipless vampire boyfriend is snacking on the locals *regularly*, then you don't know me at all."

"Are you listening to yourself? You seriously want to be with someone who you *have* to ask?"

"It's better than being with someone who can never be happy."

Angel had flinched as though she'd slapped him. "And you think this is happiness? Asking your boyfriend *regularly* if he's killed anyone? How did this happen? How did you become *this*?"

And that time, she hadn't had a clever comeback. She hadn't had anything—worn down and beaten, and desperate to be done with the conversation so she could head home to her morally ambiguous

boyfriend, who had *not* killed anyone recently, and let him rail against Angel uninterrupted for a few hours until she felt better. The truth had seemed the easiest way to end the conversation, so the truth was what she'd given him. Just enough to cover the basics—a spell with a very specific clause that she'd done to avoid facing a hellgod and that afterward, she'd been left with feelings she'd wanted to explore. That she didn't know what it was or if it would last, but it was what she wanted right then and she didn't owe him any explanations beyond that.

And Angel had gotten pissy all over again, though this time for a completely different reason. Apparently, one of his friends had gone missing. A friend not likely to go missing as he had a thriving karaoke business which, yes, was a bit to wrap her head around—a demon karaoke bar—but no one had had the first clue what might have happened to him until now. And it hadn't been any good trying to reason with Angel, claim that she hadn't known the larger consequences of the spell until it had been over, that Anya had already raked her over the coals for her oversight. She'd given him another reason to be disgusted with her, and he'd seized it with both hands.

At least Buffy had experienced an actual sense of finality when they'd finally parted ways. Like the next time Angel showed up out of the blue, or she had reason to make the trip to Los Angeles, it would be sans past-relationship residue. Without Angel looking at her like he still owned a piece of her, or thought he should, and definitely without Buffy reserving that piece for him.

Two years was all it had taken to finally make them true exes.

Buffy had waited until she was sure he wouldn't follow her, then cut her patrol short and headed over to Spike's crypt. Found him in his green chair reading a ratty old paperback, one he'd quickly placed aside once their eyes had met. She'd watched his nostrils flare the same as Angel's had, watched the shadow cross his face along with the doubt and uncertainty, and the relief that had come over him when she'd crawled into his lap and burrowed into him. Let him encompass her with his arms and just hold her as she shook and sighed and raged and cried, and finally looked up and kissed him, and kissed him, and kissed him, and asked him to help take it away for a

while, to love her the way he did best, and Spike had done just that. Laid her out on his bed downstairs and taken a slow, methodical tour down her body until the last few days had been thoroughly jettisoned, numbed with enough pleasure to chase away the pain, at least for a while, and finally fallen into a true deep sleep tucked up against his chest.

And she'd thought, if this was life with a soulless vampire, there were certainly worse things.



LIKE ALL GOOD SLEEPS, though, Buffy had had to wake up from hers. And when she had, Angel's words were still there, having no obligation to follow him home.

For the first few days, she'd managed to ignore them. Brush them aside whenever they reached up beyond the shallow waters of her psyche, dismiss them as the bitter rantings of an ex who somehow, every time, managed to make her feel like she was the one who had done the initial scorning.

But Angel had this way about him that made it impossible to fight off the doubts forever. And little by little, she'd found that despite her grief and her resolve, despite the calm spring she'd thought she had ahead of her, she couldn't shake what he'd left her with. It was there, every time she asked Spike the question and every time he gave her the answer, whispering that this wasn't sustainable, that she could never be happy in a relationship where she had to ask in the first place. And she *did* have to ask, even if she was confident that nothing had changed. It was the price of being with someone without a soul. The last time she'd let her guard down people had died, and she couldn't let that happen again.

And what she was doing now, fair or not, was acknowledging the possibility that the day would come when he would give her a different answer. That she was biding time until the inevitable betrayal. Playing chicken with the next human life Spike would eventually claim, and the responsibility that would be hers and hers alone. That whatever they had was temporary, despite how good it felt or how much she had

come to rely upon it, and eventually she would be forced to give it up. The way she was forced to give up everything.

But even knowing that, Buffy found she didn't want to stop.

Not until she absolutely had to.



EVEN AMID HER WORRIES, Buffy couldn't deny that there were definite perks to having a vampire boyfriend who could take a swing at her. Spike was a force of nature unto himself, unpredictable in the best ways, and that made every sparring match an adventure. Kept things from getting stale or routine—kept her thinking on her feet and improvising rather than relying on methods that had always been tried and true.

"Slayer's got strength us wee vampires do not," he was telling her today, smirking as he dodged her swinging fist and danced a few feet out of range. "First thing a bloke's gotta learn if he aims not to be stake fodder."

"And if he's nuts enough to seek the Slayer out," she shot back, her nerves ablaze with the thrill of the fight. "It's not like I can be everywhere at once."

"Well, you got me there." Spike smirked and dashed forward, dropped to the floor before she could blink to sweep her legs out from under her. Thankfully, Buffy knew how to fall with grace, lean into gravity in a way that best prepared her for the rebound. But Spike knew that too—knew to anticipate her next move, the way her mind responded, and while he wasn't always quick enough, he was this time and had her pinned beneath him in a flash. His eyes blazing, his chest heaving with those mystifying breaths he took, his lips tugged into the sort of smile that had her tingling in ways no slayer should tingle for the enemy.

"Imagine what a dull little life you'd be leading right now," he murmured, nudging her nose with his own, still grinning, "if yours truly hadn't been a thrill seeker. Better count your blessings, pet."

"You think you're that interesting?"

"I think I'm a lot to handle. And I know you like handling me." He

grabbed both her wrists in one hand, his skin cool against hers, and pressed her arms to the floor above her head. Then, *yes*, he was nipping at her lips with just enough hint of teeth to make her gasp before he thrust his hips so the hard ridge of his denim-clad erection was rubbing her exactly where she needed friction the most. “Or do you need a reminder?”

She had essentially two choices in moments like these—shove him off her and give him another rendition of the *we’re in public (kind of)* talk or answer his bluff. The good girl in Buffy knew what she should do, especially since literally everyone she knew was in the shop part of the Magic Box and could run in here at any minute. The part of her that had been steadily unleashed over the last few weeks, though, was not interested in being good. No, that part was interested in getting another lesson in how well Spike knew how to use his cock and other parts.

And if things hadn’t exploded into absolute chaos the next second, she might have thrown caution to the wind and gone for it.

But things had exploded. Someone had screamed for help, chaos had ensued, for that was what happened when you were Buffy Summers and were in danger of enjoying yourself a little too much.



THERE WERE three of them in the shop. Just three, but a whole legion waiting elsewhere. An army, a crusade that had descended upon Sunnydale with one objective.

They were called the Knights of Byzantium. And they were here for Dawn.

Of course, the others didn’t know that. No one knew that. No one except Spike and Giles, the latter of whom went sheet-white the second the knights made their intentions known. Her friends had started sputtering a bunch of things, mostly having to do with Glory being gone, and what exactly was up with the Renaissance getup, anyway? Not exactly stealthy.

“We are aware the Beast has been banished from this realm,” one of the knights said with a dismissive sneer. “But the Beast is not the

only entity that could command the powers of the Key. The only way to ensure the survival of this world is to see that it is destroyed.”

Then he fixed his eyes on Buffy, sending a hard shiver through her body—the sort that sank beneath the skin to the muscle and bone.

She’d been wrong. Whoever these knights were, they knew, too. They knew the Key was human. They knew the Key was *her sister*.

“That’s not happening,” she replied, crossing her arms. “The Key is protected. No one is getting to it because no one is getting through me.”

“You are flesh and blood,” said Knight Two. Were it not for the fact that his eyes had an intense laser quality to them, she would have thought he was bored. “You may have strength, but the Key is more than strength. In the right hands, it is death itself.”

“The only hands that matter are mine in this scenario.”

“You are truly so arrogant to believe yourself invincible?”

“Oi,” Spike barked, coming around to take his place at her left. “If it’s a fight you want, you’ll get one from the pair of us.”

“Watch it there, chip boy,” Xander observed from where he stood beside the checkout counter. “These guys look a little too human for you.” He also crossed his arms, planted his feet shoulder width apart, his focus intent on the knights. “But the sentiment isn’t wrong. If Buffy says you’re not touching this Key thing, then you’re not. You have all of us to get through.”

Though she wasn’t looking at him, Buffy felt Spike roll his eyes. She also caught the look Willow and Tara exchanged and the way Giles bristled, but no one seemed eager to disabuse Xander of the notion that Spike was fangless. Which was good, because now, with medieval fish to fry? So not the time.

“It matters not,” Knight Three intoned, setting his glare on Buffy. “Cut us down all you like; we will keep coming. There will be no rest until the Key is destroyed. We came here in good faith in the hopes of sparing your people unnecessary bloodshed. What happens next will be on you.”

“You think that scares me?”

“If you were as intelligent as it is boasted, you would not take our words lightly.”

"Get out," Buffy said, what was left of her patience evaporating. "Before I throw you out headfirst."

Knight One sighed as though she were a great disappointment but didn't argue. None of them did. Rather, they all turned as one and filed out of the Magic Box, harsh rays of sunshine striking the metal of their getup in a way that made even Buffy flinch. But she didn't look away until the door was closed. Didn't let herself relax until her nerves began to calm and her senses, so unaccustomed to flaring for enemies not of the preternatural variety, told her that the coast was clear.

"Giles," she said without moving.

"Yes, I know."

"What is this Key and why is everyone obsessed with it?" Xander asked, turning to Buffy. "Do you know? 'Cause this guy sure thinks you do."

Buffy held her breath. There were no breaks in her world, after all. The most she could expect with a win was a delay. Even after she'd done something as monumental as banish all non-native creatures from this world to their dimension of origin, the danger remained. If not Glory, then these Knights of Whatever. If not them, then something else. Something potentially worse. Something that would make it impossible for Dawn to be exactly what she deserved to be. Normal lives didn't exist if you were a Summers.

She glanced at Giles, not knowing why until he nodded, small to the point of being imperceptible, but she understood what it meant. The game had changed.

"All right," she said with a sigh, every inch of her body suddenly aching. "Fill them in while I'm gone."

"Where are you going?" Xander demanded.

"To pick up my sister."

He blinked at her, checked his watch. "Uhh, it's the middle of a school day, Buff."

"And she's unprotected."

"From math?"

"No," she replied. "Giles will explain. I have to get there before they do."



THE ONLY PART her friends didn't take well was the revelation that Dawn already knew.

"You told her before you told us?" was Xander's refrain. As though he had been personally betrayed. "Do you not trust us?"

"It's not a matter of trust," Buffy argued once she was back, her sister safely sequestered in the training room with Spike. She looked to Willow for support and found nothing but more hurt, only this time in the form of wounded puppy dog eyes. *Not even me?* those eyes demanded. *Not your best friend?*

And no, she wanted to say. Not even you. What exactly would have been the point of sharing this mind-altering revelation aside from changing the way everyone looked at Dawn? No longer viewed as a person but an anomaly, someone whose existence was even less explicable than Buffy's. Someone whose entire life had been fabricated and inserted into an ongoing narrative with such fluidity no one had noticed. Hell, Buffy had been on the fence about telling Dawn in the first place, probably never would have if she hadn't accidentally let it slip to Spike one night after he'd fucked away all her filters. But then, Spike felt a bit safer than her friends in that regard—less likely to stare or stammer or act in any way around Dawn that would make her feel like something other than human. Just another check in the plus column for Buffy's quasi-secret boyfriend.

"How'd the Bit take it?" Spike had asked after Buffy had finished with the bean spillage, resting his chin on her crown.

"You mean when I sat her down and explained that her entire life was imagined and implanted in our brains and she is actually not my sister but a glowy blob of energy meant to undo the world?"

A beat. "You didn't tell her."

"Of course I didn't tell her. How would you react?"

"Buffy..." It was possibly the first time she'd ever heard anything like disappointment in his voice, and she hadn't been prepared for how it hit her. "She deserves to know."

That had been it, all he'd said. Just the thesis statement without the accompanying argument to convince her that his conclusion was the

right one. But the way he'd said it, how his voice had molded the words, how his tone had remained even and kind, had broken through every one of the counterarguments she'd had at the ready, because he hadn't told her she was wrong—he hadn't said anything about her at all. All he'd done was support Dawn. It had been simple and effective, maybe even more so than it would have had Giles or Angel or anyone else said the same, specifically because Spike didn't have a soul, didn't have anything beyond his rather simplistic view of what was good and what was bad, and he'd understood that withholding information was bad, even when that information had the power to hurt.

And honestly, there was no telling what Dawn's Key status might mean for the future. Who might discover the truth and how that truth might be exploited. Telling her was a matter of respecting her, of giving her vital information about herself. Information that couldn't be weaponized if it was already out there. So the following night, Buffy had taken Dawn to a movie and dinner at her favorite restaurant, and then come home and told her the truth. It hadn't been pretty, but even with the tears and the screaming, she couldn't say it had been terrible. Actually, Buffy felt it had made them closer, brought them together as people who both shouldered terrible burdens they hadn't chosen.

When she saw Spike next, Buffy had pressed close and kissed him, perhaps more tenderly than she normally did, before whispering her thanks. He'd looked a little surprised but pleased and had promised to tell her any time he thought she was making a walloping mistake. She'd snickered and punched him in the shoulder, but ultimately felt really good about the whole thing. Like an actual grown-up.

Once everyone else was in the know—and no longer grumbly about the fact that they were the last—the conversation had shifted to research and solution mode. Who the Knights of Whatever were, how large a threat they posed, how they could be handled without crossing the killing-humans line.

"There's a memory spell we could try," Willow eventually volunteered. "It looks pretty straightforward, just calls for a lot of Lethe's Bramble."

"We have that in stock," Anya said. "Loads of it."

"Memory spells are really tricky, though," Tara argued. "Any magic

involving the mind like that... It's dangerous. You could do some serious damage."

"And we care why?" Xander asked.

"Because they are people," Tara replied. "And even if they're wrong about Dawn, that doesn't make them bad. Just...misguided."

Xander narrowed his eyes. "Did you not hear them? They want to kill her."

"Make that *really* misguided?"

"Well, sorry if they don't get a sympathy vote from me," he replied. "If it's these guys or Dawn, these guys are out of luck."

In situations past, Tara might have retreated. Buffy expected her to, in fact, and was surprised when she tightened her jaw and squared her shoulders, not breaking Xander's gaze. "I won't perform a spell that might hurt people," she said firmly. "And Willow won't, either."

"She won't?" Willow asked, sounding uncertain.

"No. That's not what magic is for. I'm all for protecting Dawnie, of course I am. I'll do whatever we need to do to make sure these guys don't get their hands on her. But I don't want to hurt anyone. Not if I can help it." Tara nodded as though to reassure herself it was the right decision. "Which means we need to do this spell right, if we're going to do it."

"Just for the record, I wasn't thinking you'd do it wrong," Xander retorted, and though it was very typical of him—that binary black and white view of the world set in place as always—Buffy felt her patience with him beginning to fray.

"I mean we're going to make sure the spell doesn't screw up their minds," Tara said. "We'll need to test it before we cast it on anyone."

"How can you test it without casting it?"

At that, Tara faltered, the conviction on her face melting into doubt. That was until Willow swooped in, suggested practicing on something small—like mice—which was definitely better than practicing on people, even if Tara was reluctant to do anything to bring potential harm on any creature. It did seem the most optimal solution—get a maze, some mice, work with them until they could seamlessly run it, then cast the spell and observe.

In the meantime, though, Willow had a different spell to consider

—the sort that would never work in the long-term but could buy them time to test ethical use of magic where memory was concerned. A spell that would provide a sort of shimmer, making Dawn blend into her surroundings, not turning her invisible exactly, but close enough that someone who didn't know for certain she was standing in front of them wouldn't see her. It would help ensure she couldn't be snagged at school or anywhere else where she was vulnerable, relaxing the need for Buffy or someone to be her constant shadow. And no skipping classes, either—the shimmer would fade when Dawn spoke but fall back into place once she stopped talking, so she could continue answering role call, taking tests, turning in homework. She just got a brief pass not to be called on class-participation style, and Dawn was more than happy with that.

“Any moral objections to this one?” Xander asked after Willow finished with her explanation. There hadn't been, for that spell was one of camouflage rather than plucking something right out of someone's brain. A temporary fix until the permanent one was ready. The best sort of solution.

And it worked great. Better than they could have hoped.

Until the day Spike went missing.



SPIKE WAS NOT the sort of person one would expect to be punctual, being very much a *go where I want, when I want it* kind of guy. The exception, as Buffy had learned, was when they had plans to see each other. Tell him she was going to be at Sunnydale Cemetery at ten o'clock and she'd find him waiting, having arrived early on the off chance he could sneak in a few more clandestine minutes before they set out for patrol. And she'd pretend not to be touched and he'd pretend not to be annoyed but then she'd kiss him and he'd do that growly thing she liked and things would be right with the world.

One of these days, Buffy swore she would work up to doing something less shop-specific—something less vampire and slayer and more boyfriend and girlfriend, like cuddling on the couch and watching bad movies. It was just a matter of graduating from *not sneaking around but*

*not making announcements, either to making announcements.* All she had to do was get over the fact that announcements about her love life, especially when that love life involved vampires, had historically gone down as *not great*.

And if she were being honest with herself, Angel's words had yet to fade. The doubt they'd stoked, the worry. She'd have to confront it sooner or later, figure out exactly what she wanted, but that was a problem for another day—something to reckon with after the knights were yesterday's news. Until then, Buffy would continue meeting Spike for patrols, continue training with him at the Magic Box, continue sneaking him up to her soundproofed room to steal as many minutes as she could steal—as many minutes as she could pretending they were normal.

Only Spike wasn't waiting for her when she started her patrols that night. The first thing Buffy felt was mild disappointment, followed by a surge of annoyance when he didn't show up over the next ten minutes. Or the ten minutes that followed. Eventually she gave up, set out on patrol by herself, her mind filling with images of him drunk at one of his poker games or causing problems at Willy's, perhaps launching into a brawl, since he couldn't seem to keep out of those. She resolved to swing by his crypt afterward, then hit those places he was most likely to haunt before heading home. Not admitting to herself, not willing to, that there was another possibility, because that possibility meant she'd let her love life overrule her once again. Committed the unthinkable, this time with her eyes wide open.

The fact that she could see it happening, understand how it wouldn't even be intentional, made matters worse. Spike wandering home drunk, accidentally bumping into some guy on the street. The guy takes it personally and gives him a shove. Spike grits his teeth and tries to continue on his way, but the guy doesn't let him. Perhaps he's had a shitty day at work, perhaps he's been laid off, perhaps his girlfriend has ended things; whatever the case, the guy decides Spike is his problem, so he ups the ante. Punches him in the back of the head, or throws him against the exterior of a building, and Spike is trying because of course he's trying. He's trying so hard, but he's drunk and this guy is in his face, and all he wants to do is get home so he can get

ready to meet Buffy. So he uses some force, breaks loose, and the guy, now with something to prove, storms forward and swings and swings, and finally Spike's patience snaps. He has better things to do than play punching bag. The next thing he knows, he's sent the man to the ground, or perhaps head-first into the nearest wall. There's a crack and a spatter of blood, and it's all over. A man is dead, and Spike is the one who killed him.

And what does Spike do in that scenario? Does he tell her? Does he try to hide what happened? Does he skip town? Any and all of it could so easily be true, and what did that mean for her? For them? That she could have these thoughts about someone who was sharing her bed? Could she ever love someone she never entirely trusted, and if not, what the hell were they doing? What was *she* doing, aside from setting herself up for guaranteed heartbreak?

Spike deserved better, too. He deserved someone who wouldn't have thoughts like this. Who wouldn't start assuming the worst on some level just because he was a no-show for patrol. Who wouldn't harbor doubts about the lifespan of their relationship. Who could just let go and love him as he was, because that person, somehow, was someone she liked. Someone she wanted to believe she might one day love.

Buffy's eyes started to burn, her vision to blur, and she shook her head and wiped at her cheeks. Wondering if she'd just broken up with him in her mind. Hoping she hadn't. Worried she had. And sick to her stomach about all of it.

Angel had said she couldn't have a relationship like this. And goddammit, she hated it when he was right.



BUFFY WOULD NEVER FORGIVE herself for not realizing it sooner, for not putting the pieces together, for having the thoughts she'd had—slayer thoughts—rather than what should have been the kneejerk girlfriend worry. In response, he'd tell her that she was bloody daft and it wasn't like he hadn't given her ample reason to suspect the worst of him over the years. But there would be something weak in the smile he

gave her, in the light in his eyes. A part of him she'd hurt without trying. Without totally appreciating how easy it was for her to land a blow like that.

To be fair, it didn't take her long to get over the worst of her bad thoughts. Not even a full hour before she caved and headed over to his crypt, ready to get whatever confrontation over with. What she found had her stomach dropping to her knees and her heart seizing with an awful combination of panic and guilt. It happened that fast—a quick flip and she'd known.

The fact that Spike's possessions were already few and far between made the damage look even more devastating. The duster draped over his chair, which was on its side, shattered glass on the stone floor in the middle of drying blood, lamps overturned, books and fragments of candles scattered in every which direction. And no vampire. No vampire anywhere. No vampire tinglies, either, and she had no idea how much time she'd already lost.

Either way, she wasn't going to lose any more. Buffy turned on her heel and darted back out into the night, her feet thundering along grass then pavement as wind whipped at her hair and blood pounded in her ears. It was early enough that the gang might still be at the Magic Box—Anya had taken to staying open after dark just to make sure she capitalized on the needs of the entire Sunnydale populace, including those who had sunlight allergies. Giles had protested at first, citing the already high mortality rate of magic shop purveyors in the area and arguing that this was inviting more trouble, but he'd promptly eaten crow when the profit and loss margins the following month reflected a healthy seventeen percent increase.

But Buffy didn't care about that—she didn't care why the shop was still open when she rounded the corner on Maple Court, just that it was. That when she burst through the door, nearly tearing the bell above it off its hinge, she found herself among her friends rather than in an empty room. Friends who immediately went on the alert because they were *her* friends. The Scoobies. The people who were always there when she needed them most.

“Buffy!” Willow tore herself away from the bookshelf where she

and Tara appeared to be reviewing spell ingredients. "What's happened? What's wrong?"

"Spike," Buffy gasped, staggering slightly as her legs broke out of their sprint. "Spike's gone."

A heavy silence crashed over the place, the type that usually followed a record scratch. Willow and Tara exchanging glances, Giles going unusually still, Dawn's eyes wide with concern, Xander blinking at her from the cash-wrap. The only person who didn't stop what they were doing was Anya, busy as she was thumbing through the day's receipts.

*Is this the moment?* the silence seemed to ask. But it already had its answer.

"And we care about this why?" Xander finally demanded. "The way you burst in here, I thought there was a problem or something."

"His place was trashed and he's gone," Buffy repeated, stronger now. "Like blood on the floor, no vampire in sight. And his coat—he never leaves without his coat. Ever."

"So?" Xander replied. "He probably just pissed off some big demon by cheating at cards or something. Not like it'd be the first time."

There had been no shortage of instances in Buffy's past where she'd had to quell the instinct to punch her friend in the face. This was no different. "Or it could be the knights. The knights who are looking for Dawn?"

"Dear lord..." This from Giles, whose stoic expression was slowly transforming into horror. "He *does* know, Buffy. If these knights have taken Spike, he *does* know."

And just like that, Xander changed his tune. Went rigid, all business, steely-eyed. "Then what's the plan?"

"The plan is I find him," Buffy replied coolly.

"And kill him?"

"What?" Dawn squawked.

"What?" Buffy echoed, her throat already sore.

"Well, it's like Giles said. He knows about Dawn. There's no way he's not spilling the beans."

The thought hadn't even occurred to her. Hadn't so much as blipped across her mind. But of course that's why the knights would

have taken him, believing him the most likely to crack under pressure. And why not? He was a vampire, after all. One whose loyalty had a price.

Except it didn't—Buffy knew that too. Knew it the same way she knew the sun would come up in the morning, the same way she knew water was wet and what colors were in style this year. She just knew.

Then, when Spike proved her right, when he refused to give up Dawn, the knights wouldn't see any value in keeping him around. They were on a holy quest, and he was an unholy creature. He wasn't getting out of there alive.

Not unless she went in and got him herself.

"Will," Buffy said, willing her voice not to shake, "the timetable for your memory spell is about up. How close are you?"

Willow exchanged a glance with Tara, the sort in which conversations were held. The sort Buffy and Spike had been sharing now for weeks in this room and so many others. Looking at each other and seeing each other and hearing each other even when they didn't say a word. And it hit her then, powerful and terrible and unforgiving, just how much losing Spike would hurt. Not a flesh wound kind of hurt, either, but a visceral, slice-it-open-and-scrape-the-insides-away kind of hurt. A hurt that would hit her like an amputation, the complete separation of a piece of herself that she needed to function. That she didn't want to live without.

And yeah, she was still looking at a lose-lose situation. The knowledge that she was falling a little more each day for someone she shouldn't fall for, could never fully trust, and would always suspect on some level despite how hard she tried not to. That was still true. But so was this. So was the knowledge that Spike was a part of her. A big part. A part she needed to save.

"We're close," Tara said, sounding uncertain at first but then squaring her shoulders. "Close enough. If it's him or them, Buffy, I understand. We can't afford to wait."

"I can do a location spell real fast," Willow added. "See where he's being kept."

"Am I missing something here?" Xander asked loudly. "Why the

hell are we rescuing Spike? Shouldn't the objective be shutting him up? Preferably with a stake?"

"Let's try shutting you up first," Buffy spat, flushing hot. Perhaps not the best move but she was beyond caring at this point. She'd already danced around Xander and Giles and everyone else's feelings on her love life long enough. "You shut up and Giles can shut up and Anya can shut up—"

"Buffy," Giles protested.

"Hey!" Anya chimed in. "I didn't do anything!"

"Well, keep not doing anything, because if one more person suggests that I stake my boyfriend, I'm going to start throwing things. Sharp things. Things with pointy edges. And no, I will not be careful."

Well, there it was. Out in the open. Boom goes the dynamite.

And Xander, being Xander, responded as only Xander would. "He's your boyfriend? Your *boyfriend*? Your boyfriend is Spike? Spike is your boyfriend?"

"I knew it," Dawn said, pumping her fist in the air. "You guys were spending way too much time together."

"He's your *boyfriend*?" Xander shouted.

Buffy narrowed her eyes. "Do you enjoy saying it or did a screw come loose? And don't answer. I don't have time to care." She turned to Willow, her nerves starting to fray. "You said something about a location spell? What do you need?"

"Something personal, if you have it? I can work it without it but it'll take longer and—"

But Buffy was already in motion, reaching under the collar of her shirt to tug out the chain there. More specifically, the skull head ring dangling off the chain. Her skin was hot with a mixture of embarrassment and shame and anger at feeling either embarrassed or ashamed, because she didn't deserve to feel anything but worry right now. "He gave it back to me," she said to Willow, knowing full well Xander was hanging onto every word. "The ring from our engagement. He gave it back to me. Not, like, to be engaged or anything, but that ever since the spell, he thought of it as mine so I should have it."

Willow made the sort of guttural whimpering sound she usually reserved for especially cute puppies but otherwise didn't comment.

“Okay,” she said, closing her hand around the ring. “Give me maybe fifteen minutes? Perk of being in a magic shop—all the stuff I need to do it is here.”

“Good.” Buffy nodded, her nerves buzzing, and turned to Tara, who stood at the ready. A loyal soldier waiting for orders. “Is there any chance we can do the memory spell today? I know you said you were close, but how close is close?”

“I can get it set up,” Tara said quickly. “It’s... It’s like Willow said when we were talking about it—really straightforward. I’ll need a crystal and the Lethe’s Bramble, but I think I can have the casting part done before you leave.”

“Good. That’s good.” Really good. It might be the difference between walking out of wherever the knights had Spike and fighting their way out, and Buffy really didn’t want to have to fight. One moral crisis at a time was her max.

“So you’re just breaking all the rules for this guy?” Xander asked once both Willow and Tara were otherwise occupied, his eyes hard and his jaw harder, and all of this was so unbelievably predictable yet all the more frustrating because of it. Buffy couldn’t afford to have this conversation now so of course now was when he would insist on having it.

“Xander,” she started, hearing and hating the note in her voice. How familiar it was, how awful. How that feeling she’d thought she’d left behind in her teenage body had somehow found its way home, and that Xander was the reason. After a prolonged beat, the weight of arguments already had and lost and had again on her shoulders, she released a breath and forced herself not to linger. There were more important things. “Can you stay with Dawn? Make sure she’s okay and keep her somewhere safe until I get back?”

“Oh, so now you remember Dawn.”

“Hey!” Dawn was full red in the face. “I want Spike saved too.”

“Because all Summers women are suckers, apparently.”

And that was it. The moment Buffy broke. “Would you stop?” she all but shouted. “If it was you or Anya or anyone else, I’d be doing exactly this.”

“You’re seriously comparing us to a vampire.”

"I'm comparing you to someone who is important to me," she snapped, heat surging anew across her skin. "I'm comparing you to someone who I want in my life. If you have a problem with that, it's *your* problem. Not mine. The only problem I have at the moment is my boyfriend is missing and apparently, I can't count on one of my best friends to do the bare minimum."

"I can't believe we're doing this *again!* With one that doesn't even have a soul this time."

Buffy sucked in her cheeks, the urge to lash out, strike back, just let out the pressure that was building with each poisonous word, as swallowing it would make her explode more than she already had. But Spike didn't have time for that—not if she was right. So instead, she turned to Anya, drew in a breath, and asked again. "Can you please stay with Dawn?"

She was prepared for more resistance, and almost crumbled in relief when Anya nodded. "We'll handle it."

"Thank you."

"There's no way he didn't tell them how to find her," Xander argued. "You have to know that, Buffy."

"He would never," Dawn shot back, her voice containing a very Spike-like edge to it. "Spike would never tell them."

"You're both delusional."

"If he told them, it'll be pretty damn obvious the second I get there," Buffy said before her sister or Giles or anyone else could weigh in. "And then you won't have to worry about me dating him or any other vampire again, because if he's not dead then I'll kill him myself." Something in her chest seized as she spoke but she let herself slow down to analyze it. "But he hasn't told them, Xan. I know he hasn't."

"How could you possibly?"

"Because he loves me."

The look he gave her was one-half incredulous, one-half pitying, and altogether, she figured it earned him that punch to the face once she got her vampire back safe and sound. But a different Buffy could worry about that—one who wasn't about to explode out of her own skin.

Everything else was on hold until she had Spike back.



AT FIRST, Buffy thought Willow's spell must have gone awry, but only at first. Then the shock had cleared and reason had set in, and even she had to admit it made a sort of sense. The mansion on Crawford Street, where she and Angel had once battled to the death, had sat empty, as far as she knew, in the years since her ex had left town—large and sterile and not exactly homey, with its concrete walls and floors and vaguely castle-like aesthetic. Plus, there were all those chains she assumed Angel had just left lying around, along with god knows what else. Really, taking everything into account, the mansion tied Dracula's castle for the most likely place to house a crusade.

It also settled something else for her. There was no way Spike would come to this place of his own volition—not now. If he was here, it was because someone had made him be here, and suddenly those images of knights bursting into his crypt armed with crosses, holy water, and perhaps other holy implements were no longer just murky maybes. No, these guys had swarmed in and overpowered him, the strongest vampire she'd ever encountered—yes, counting Angel—and even if he had managed to draw blood, it hadn't been enough to slow any of them down.

She paused outside of the mansion, trying to shake off how familiar this felt, approaching the place with a sword clutched in her hand and dread pooling in her belly. In retrospect, it was amazing she'd ever been able to come back here at all after Acatlha. She'd never thought to ask Angel how he'd braved living within these walls, remembering the things he'd done here. What he'd almost succeeded in doing. It had just been handy—an empty house for a vampire who had lost his apartment, or so she'd assumed. She hadn't stepped foot in there again after the morning he'd told her she'd been a real pro. Just another piece of Angel that had crumbled away, or maybe that she'd never understood in the first place.

Buffy worked her throat and pulled the crystal Tara had given her out of her pocket. Black meant the spell had been successfully cast and the memories of everyone under its influence muddled. Only it wasn't perfect, Tara had warned her, for they weren't sure just how far back

the spell would stretch. Perhaps enough just to remove Dawn but not enough to make them question why they were holding a man captive. It wasn't much of a reset button, but it was all they had and the best bet for Buffy to get in without having to think too hard about what she might be pressed to do if left without option.

"They're human, Buff," Xander had spat as she'd selected a sword from the training room. "Are you really gonna cut them down to save a vampire?"

Spike wasn't just a vampire, though. He wasn't *just* anything. He was her boyfriend. Her best enemy. The man she might not be able to keep, might never trust the way she needed to trust the person she shared her life with, but someone important to her. Someone she'd hated and tolerated and needed and liked and, if not loved, then as close as a person could get to love without falling the rest of the way. She couldn't leave him. And no, she didn't know what she'd do if she needed to swing the sword she'd brought along with her, but she'd figure it out. Wouldn't be the first time she'd been forced to come up with a plan on the fly, or even the first time she'd had to contend with human bad guys. The only difference here was the objective was to save a soulless, unrepentant vampire for no reason other than Buffy had feelings for him. It was personal. It wasn't the apocalypse.

And she wasn't going to let that stop her.

Especially not now that the crystal was black.

Buffy released a shaky breath, having not appreciated until right then how worried she'd been that it might not turn at all. But this much had gone right, at least, or as right as it could—right enough that she could shift her focus to the next part of her hasty plan. According to Tara, even a teeny crack to the crystal would compromise the integrity of the spell, if not obliterate it entirely, which made it the opposite of an ideal thing to have on hand when in combat. Her first thought had been to leave it behind for safekeeping, but the need to know if the spell had worked had been more important, and led to the second thought—finding a place to leave the crystal so it wasn't in danger of being damaged in whatever came next. She didn't have much time, but she also didn't need much time, just a minute or so and a rock with a flat edge to dig out a chunk of earth. Then in went the

crystal and on went the dirt and hopefully that would be enough because she'd waited as long as she thought she could without storming inside.

So she pulled back and gathered herself.

Then got to storming.



IF SHE LIVED A THOUSAND YEARS, she would never forget the way he looked at her as she approached the cross where he was mounted. A genuine cross, the sort she'd seen movie versions of Jesus haul up to his own crucifixion site, only Jesus's skin hadn't hissed and sizzled upon contact, and presumably hadn't filled the air with the stench of burning meat. Buffy had stood in a familiar space made unfamiliar, made downright profane, as the befuddled and mind-blanked knights wandered away from the scene of their crime. Some asking questions, some poking at the armor, some trying and failing not to stare at the vampire they had crucified with a mixture of open confusion and disgust, some looking at her as though desperate for reassurance that they weren't seeing what they were in fact seeing. That there was an explanation for all of this, including their missing memories, that she could help guide them toward.

Buffy would never forget the way Spike had looked at her then, but she would forget, and quickly, what she'd told the knights to get them to leave the premises. What lie she'd spun to keep them from panicking and making a bigger mess—making it impossible for her to collect her vampire and take him home. All she knew, after, was that it had worked. Whatever she'd said had been enough. She'd been able to approach the cross, place her hand on Spike's feet, and watch his face dissolve, watch all of him dissolve as he realized she was real.

It wasn't until she got him down, got him home, that she learned the knights had been playing with magicks of their own. Magicks they had conjured but only he had seen, all with the intent of ferreting out the location of the Key. His body was marred with burns and bruises, with splash patterns of holy water and the impression of small cruci-

fixes, and when torture hadn't worked, they'd turn to the thing they'd been sure would. And they'd been wrong.

Almost as wrong as Buffy had been.

Nothing had been certain at first. Buffy took Spike home—to *her* home, the one with doors and locks and weapons and her to get through if anyone intended to come and abduct him again. She made quick work of securing all the vulnerable points of entry, then called the Magic Box to let the others know the plan had worked and she had him back. That she needed some time to patch him up. That she didn't want Dawn to see him like this, knowing her sister would already be blaming herself and not wanting to make anything worse.

Once arrangements were made and she knew she'd have the house to herself for the rest of the night, Buffy coaxed Spike up the stairs and into the bathroom, where the unforgiving light made every welt, cut, and burn he'd suffered stand out in sharp relief.

"Not as bad as it looks, I expect," he told her with the worst attempt at a brave smile she'd ever seen. "Bloody unimaginative gits."

"Spike—"

"Truly, love. Had worse from your ex."

"That doesn't make it better!"

"Maybe not, but still the truth. I'll be right as rain in no time."

Buffy glared at him but figured arguing wouldn't do him any favors right now. "I'm going to run you a bath," she said instead. "And we'll see how bad it is."

"Gonna play nursemaid, too?"

"If it gets you to take this seriously, then yes."

He chuckled himself into a coughing fit but otherwise didn't reply, rather started stripping what little he'd been wearing when she'd pulled him off that cross, carrying tension still in a way he might have thought was invisible but Buffy saw clearly. Part of him still alert, not ready to relive the thing she'd just rescued him from, maybe convinced in a stupid guy way that his past with Angel should have immunized him against the effects of torture. But when he lowered himself into the tub a few minutes later, it was with shaking legs and a long whimper. For a few minutes, he continued with the jokes and the innuendos,

not flinching when she dragged a washcloth over the more serious wounds, but not relaxing either.

It wasn't until she stroked his hair away from his brow that he let go of everything else, and finally began to talk for real. As though he had been waiting, needing something from her that wasn't all business. That spoke of things that weren't Slayer and the person she'd saved, but the them that they had been building ever since the ritual.

And once he started, he didn't stop.

The worst part was she'd already guessed the bulk of it. The knights had come in with crosses and stakes. Said they knew he knew how to find the Key and while they were perplexed by his allegiance to the Slayer, they were also prepared to compensate him richly for his cooperation. When that hadn't worked, they'd put those crosses to use. Not that crosses really did much for Spike—he didn't care for them but was too used to flirting with fire to be intimidated at the prospect of sizzling a bit of skin—but paired with the stakes and their willingness to use them, he'd found himself cornered.

"More by myself than them, though," he said, and she understood without him having to go on, but he went on anyway. Explaining how he'd been distracted—no, worried. Hell, *terrified* that he might use too much muscle, send someone crashing into a wall with more energy than he'd intended. That he'd have to look Buffy in the eye and explain how it was there was a dead human in his crypt, one he'd killed, all while knowing how she'd take that news. Knowing she would blame both him and herself and that might be the end of it. The end of *them* altogether. It wasn't like he'd ever fought for his own life with anything other than lethal force, and he'd been too aware of how fragile humans—even humans done up in medieval armor—were in that moment. Spike had pulled his punches for her, and as a reward, he'd been captured and tortured, first with crosses and holy water and more of those fake stakes like what Riley had ("What?" she'd asked, and he'd shaken his head, and she'd let it go but was absolutely going to circle back to it in the future).

When it became clear he wouldn't blab even under those circumstances, though, the knights had upped the ante. Brought out the magicks. Made him hallucinate her, Buffy, standing there amid the

carnage begging him to stop being stubborn. To talk, to save himself. To save *her*, for they had her too, and were doing unspeakable things to her. Things they'd keep doing if he didn't speak now and stop it.

"Mighta worked if I hadn't lived with Dru all those years," Spike said, then laughed. Actually laughed. Not a happy sound, granted, but a sound that shouldn't exist at all. "Surface-level read's all they got on me. Dru, she'd dig deep when she wanted you to believe somethin'. Might've been outta her mind, but she knew how to do a job proper."

Buffy didn't know how to reply so she didn't try, her mind somehow both spinning and standing completely still, locked in the moment with him. With Spike covered in welts and ugly, purple bruises, patches of skin that had been seared or burned away, his chest a map of scars and one of his eyes swollen shut, never mind the holes in his hands and feet because the knights had indeed been that twisted. Enough to test her resolve to let them walk away once the extent of his wounds had been clear.

"Or if I didn't know you," he continued, oblivious. "If I didn't know you'd sooner skewer out your eyeballs before letting anything happen to Dawn."

"Spike..."

"It's all right now," he told her, placing a hand over hers as she tended to the last of the dried blood on his chest with a washcloth she doubted she'd ever want to use again. "She's safe, yeah? You did what you hero-types do. All without spilling a sodding drop." He paused at that, flashed her another grin—the sort that was genuine despite the pain behind it. "Next time, maybe let one of 'em bleed just long enough for me to have a nip. Human blood's better for healing bones."

"What about Slayer blood?"

Spike went still, looked at her with that open wonder that she doubted she'd ever get used to, truly. The bits of him he'd let her see since the hour they'd spent in his crypt together, entwined and connected, pulling and pushing at each other as only they could, until the façade had crumbled and it had just been him. Spike as she knew him now, unguarded and exposed, telling her how he saw her, changing her life and challenging everything she'd thought she'd understood

about him and herself. He opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again.

"Can't say it wouldn't do the job," he told her at last. "But Buffy—"

"No *but Buffy*. Now is so not the time to go noble on me."

"Not noble. Fuck, if you're offering..." Spike studied her for a moment longer, one of his rare, inscrutable expressions. It wasn't often he thought this much before talking. "Just that it's going to hurt if I do it like this. It won't be like last time."

"Funnily enough, I remember it hurting with the others." Buffy sucked in a breath, considered. "But maybe if I'm... Like the time Dracula bit me, we weren't fooling around or anything, but it also didn't *really* hurt. Just pinched a little."

Spike's expression shuttered but not entirely. Just enough to let her know he didn't care to be reminded that anyone else's fangs had ever been inside of her. Angel was bad enough but Dracula, as Spike put it, was a "sodding insult." More so than the Master, who hadn't been trying to seduce her when he'd captured her under his thrall. Really, the idea that Buffy had been marginally open to letting another vampire get close to her and she'd gone with, again as Spike put it, that "showy wanker" wounded his pride a bit.

"It didn't hurt because he had you hot," Spike said now, his voice pitched lower than usual. "Might not have been touching you, but you were warming up to him."

"I was not."

"Buffy, it's all right."

"Not to me. I don't get hot for vampires who aren't you or... Well, just *you*, now."

At that, he grinned, though it looked more like a grimace. "Thanks for that."

"The point stands. I was not hot for Dracula." Though her cheeks were certainly hot now, a mixture of embarrassment and shame at the lie. Not that she'd ever really wanted to bone Bram Stoker's poster boy, but he'd definitely awakened a sort of curiosity in her that she hadn't understood until very recently. "But maybe I was... Okay, so, I just need to be warmed up, then. We can do that."

"Fuck yes." Spike sat up then, water sluicing down his scarred,

burned chest in a way that shouldn't have been sexy, given the circumstances, but definitely was. That was kinda Spike all over—sexy despite the circumstances. “But only if I can watch.”



IT WAS RIDICULOUS, she knew, to be self-conscious about performing for Spike after all they had done together. Yet Buffy was nothing if not ridiculous with nerves that would make themselves known at the most inopportune times. Say, like now, when she was settling on Spike's thighs as he lay reclined on her bed. The rush from the bath to the bedroom had been a blur, Spike moving with speed she would have thought if not impossible, then certainly painful given the extent of his injuries. Hell, his feet had holes in them, but that didn't stop him from hobbling with enthusiasm through the door that led to her room and plopping onto the bed with gusto. He'd watched with hungry eyes as she'd stripped herself bare, then patted his thighs when she'd hesitated a moment too long trying to figure out how best to position herself.

Buffy knew better than to question Spike when he told her he wanted something, so even though it hadn't seemed intuitive to her—again because of his injuries—she'd straddled him anyway. Taken in the hunger in his eyes, the brightness, the intensity in spite of the bruises, and been swept away by an undeniable rush of power unlike anything she'd ever experienced. One tied to the parts of her that were not slayer at all. That were just her. Just Buffy.

That didn't make the nerves go away, though. If anything, it made them more pronounced.

But this was for him. And Spike, despite his many faults, would never make her feel self-conscious about this. He was the president of the Buffy Should Touch Herself Club. So when she sucked two fingers into her mouth and Spike answered with a low rumble, she kept going. Let her cheeks heat up, let her body warm, let herself trail her hand from her lips over her chest, pausing long enough to wet a nipple, then further down until she was there at her opening. Slipping between her folds, feeling the corresponding pull from deep inside herself, the knowledge that she had probably already done enough to keep his

fangs from hurting but the desire to keep going because as scary as this could be, it was addictive too.

Particularly when he started talking.

“Fuck, yes, baby, that’s it. That’s it.” Spike squeezed her ass with a long groan. “Spread that pussy open for me.”

With a shaky breath, she did as instructed, tapping her clit as she went. Not hard—just enough to send an electric jolt through her body, to catch his attention even though she already had it, to take in the hunger in his eyes, the slight dip of his chin as he nodded.

“Play nice, now,” he told her, slipping one hand around her hip then down along her inner thigh. For a moment, she thought he was going to take over, but he didn’t. Just stroked her skin, all soft encouragement. “That clit needs to be treated right.”

“Oh, does it?”

“Not wet enough for full contact just yet.”

Buffy arched an eyebrow at him. “Since when do you know my body better than I do?”

“You really want me to answer that?”

Well, that was just uncalled for, even if it was true. Another thing that was like Spike. All of it was like Spike. Spike coaxing her, telling her how to stroke herself, his voice velvet and his eyes liquid, everything about him so effortless despite all the roadblocks that should be there. The things she’d let herself believe—the things she knew she was smart to consider overall, just not-smart to consider as grounds for breaking up.

Spike might be evil at his core, but evil was fundamentally a choice. A choice Spike had not made, even when pressed. Even when it would have spared him the sort of torture that made him hard to look at right now. And that made him someone she could trust. It might not be a smooth ride all the way, but he would never stop trying. He would never stop putting her first.

It was then, when he raised himself off the mattress to start pressing kisses along the column of her throat, bruised lips and all, ignoring her protests and reprimands, brushing off her worry that he might hurt himself, that it hit her. Something just as large as the fear that she’d have to break up with him—larger, even, and far more devas-

tating. A revelation that started as a low purr, coaxed to a growl when he shifted and began teasing her with his teeth, and by the time he sank his fangs inside of her, exploded into an all-out roar.

The revelation that not only was she not going to break up with him, but he *was* someone she could love.

A vampire without a soul who, even wounded, pulled back after just a few pulls at her neck to make sure she was all right. To kiss her softly. To look into her eyes as his own began to heal and tell her he loved her. Then beg her to ride his cock because he was in new pain now and only she could save him. Make her feel wanted and needed and cherished all at the same time. All without effort.

When she'd made the leap into this relationship, she'd told him she didn't know how she felt, only that it was something. That it was real. And while she'd meant it, believed it, she somehow still hadn't been able to imagine where the journey would take her. This place where she knew she could love him.

"My hero," he whispered against her skin, and god, she could feel the love in the words—the love she wanted. The love that was hers.

And she had absolutely no idea what to do now, except, perhaps, surrender.

