

IGNITE



HOLLY DENISE





SHE WASN'T EVEN THINKING ABOUT HIM WHEN IT HAPPENED. AS MUCH as he'd been on her mind, in her thoughts, haunting her dreams and more, her brain had decided to give her a rare five-minute timeout on all things Spike, distracted by Giles's tangent regarding (in his words) her latest abysmal decision.

That decision in question being the one to let Dawn pick where she went to school, decide what she studied, and set her own terms for success. And if Dawn came to the conclusion that regular school was a no-go because she wanted to go into the family business, Buffy would not interfere. It wasn't like either of them were going to be hurting for money ever again after they got access to the Council's bank accounts... which, granted, might have been part of the problem, according to Giles. It wasn't like every single watcher working for the Council had been in the building when it had exploded, so untangling the legalities around the Council's assets would take time, and there was no guarantee that Buffy would ever get to touch a shiny red penny of that money herself.

To which Buffy had replied, "There are more of us than there are of you now, so any watcher who wants to throw a hissy fit will be treated like anyone else who gets in our way."

The bureaucracy aspect of being in charge was, as it turned out, not Buffy's favorite thing. She wasn't sure why she'd thought it'd be different after the battle with the First was won. Maybe because part of her had expected not to survive—and still wasn't entirely sure how she had—and the other had thought, stupidly, impossibly, that if she did survive, she wouldn't be facing what came next alone.

Not that she was really alone. Like, Willow and Xander were there, but hardly in the same way they had been before. They didn't understand her thoughts better than she did, trust her judgment without subjecting it to peer review first, or let more than one group conversation go by without having meaningful eye contact that spoke of *other* conversations they were having. Ones she wasn't invited to. And based on what they telegraphed through word and action, neither trusted she was doing the right thing, or even understood what she was trying to do in the first place.

So, sure, Buffy wasn't alone, but she sure felt like she was when it came to dealing with this stuff, even with reports of new slayers hitting

her whatever-you-call-a-nonexistent-desk every day. There was apparently a lot left to decide once you switched the superpowers function to *on* in girls across the world, and seeing as she was the one who had made that call in the first place, people kept expecting her to have answers and arguing with the ones she managed to provide.

Even as they pertained to her own sister.

“I’m giving her exactly what I wanted at that age,” Buffy had been saying, refusing to back down or compromise on this point. Maybe it was important for Dawn to get a traditional education, but Dawn was the one who got to make that call. This was a new world for them—the establishment toppled, the paradigm shifted, dogs and cats living together, mass hysteria. And in this new world, girls got the power of autonomy. “I never got asked if I wanted to be in this fight. I never got to *choose* normal. If that’s what she chooses, then that’s what she chooses. But if she wants to be a part of what we’re building, then I am not going to stand in her way.”

“Buffy, this is just reckless,” Giles had fired back at her. “She is in no way mature enough to make the sort of decision that could impact her entire future. This is what it means to be her guardian. You are to help guide her as much as you can but step in before she acts in such a way that has the potential to jeopardize her future.”

Buffy hadn’t had a rebuttal to that, not because it didn’t exist but rather that her brain had been so dramatically overwhelmed with potential arguments that her temples had started to pound. This was not a new phenomenon, rather one that she’d noticed more and more in the days since she and the others had left the States to investigate what remained of the Council. There had been general camaraderie after the battle with the First, and for a little while there, Buffy had been wooed by her overwhelming gratitude and nostalgia into ignoring the little voice that kept insisting that nothing had really been addressed. At least not between herself and the core Scoobies, never mind Giles. After the high had receded and she’d crashed back to earth, after the enormity of what Spike had done had the chance to hit her with all its ugly reality, it had taken everything Buffy had to keep from marching up to her former watcher and demanding to know what his plan would have been if Wood had succeeded in killing Spike. Because clearly, the First had pegged him

as a threat for a reason and even more clearly, Buffy had been right. *Again.*

And that had been it. Not so much that realization but the awareness of how familiar it felt. Second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, why-even-keep-trackth verse, same as the first. Buffy had been the Slayer for eight years, had known Giles and the others for nearly that entire period, and yet time and again she'd been asked to prove herself. Justify her decisions, her actions, her personal life. She'd been stripped, scrutinized, analyzed, dictated, and constantly doubted, whether on the small things or the big things. Sometimes to the detriment of the world. Then when she did ask for help, it was either withheld or granted with conditions.

Giles had been ready to kill Spike because he'd believed he'd known better than she did. He'd never apologized for that, never admitted he was wrong. Even after Spike had proven instrumental in saving the world—even after Spike had sacrificed himself so that Giles and Xander and Willow and Dawn and all the Potentials could live. Giles owed his life to the vampire he'd been complicit in attempting to assassinate, and he hadn't even acknowledged it.

And Buffy knew why.

Despite everything that had happened, Giles still believed he'd been right. He still doubted her reasoning, convinced her feelings for Spike had compromised her ability to think. That she had been so overwhelmed by her emotions that she couldn't be trusted. And he was still doing it. Even now, fresh off the latest thing for which her judgment had been vindicated, Giles was insisting that he knew what was better for Dawn than she did.

This was the kind of thing that would only change if she forced it to change. She'd told him in Sunnydale that he had nothing left to teach her, and she'd been right, but there hadn't been anything to do about it then. Not with the war left to fight.

There was something to do about it now.

And that was what she was thinking when it happened—when her left hand suddenly went hot. Not a burning hot but a hot she associated with fire all the same. A hot she'd only felt once, nineteen days earlier while some two hundred feet under the earth, as she gazed into the eyes

of the man she loved and accepted that he wasn't going to leave the cavern with her.

Buffy dropped her eyes to the stretch of fire-kissed skin, and she knew. She *knew*.

"Buffy?" Giles asked from what seemed very far away. "Buffy, are you listening to me?"

"Sunnydale," she murmured.

"I beg your pardon?"

She breathed out, and for the first time since she'd stepped off the school bus that had ferried her and the others away from the crater of her former hometown, felt something that wasn't disappointment or fatigue, or a general sense of being overwhelmed.

It was hope.

"We have to go to Sunnydale," she said, her voice stronger this time. Her convictions too. "Right now. It can't wait."

Giles was looking at her the way she associated with doctors at institutions who believed she was a very sweet, albeit confused girl who just needed some help telling the difference between reality and fantasy. Whose parents had committed her because they were *very worried* about her and didn't know how else to help. "Buffy," he said softly, "Sunnydale is gone. There is nothing left."

That was where he was wrong. "There is."

"What?"

"He's there. I can feel it."

"Who is there?" he asked, but for the way his face had fallen, he already knew.

"Spike."



BUFFY DIDN'T CARE that Giles didn't believe her. Or that no one did. In the end, she didn't need them. The Council's assets might be tied up in all sorts of British legalities she didn't understand, but that wasn't about to stop her from using them. And it turned out if you had enough money, certain red tape could be navigated easily enough. It also turned out that one of her new slayers was a whiz at cracking the

combinations to safes. Like the safe Giles had recovered from Quentin Travers's private residence that had, among other things, more than five hundred thousand dollars in cash. American dollars, which perplexed Buffy to no end but she wasn't about to start asking for the dental records of her new gift horse. She'd tipped her new slayer student for her services as well as her silence, taken the cash, and made like a bandit.

Thanks to the quick forgery jobs committed in Los Angeles after the battle with the First, Buffy already had identification documents, including her passport and a credit card with a healthy spending limit, so there hadn't been any need to wait before booking a flight back to LAX. The only stop she'd made had been by the apartment she and Dawn were sharing now to let her sister know she had business to tend to back home.

"What business?"

"Slayer business," Buffy replied, hurriedly stuffing clothes into a duffle bag and hoping Dawn would just take the hint and let the matter go. Knowing, of course, that her sister would do no such thing, because she was a Summers and this was just how the Summers women worked. Vague non-answers were never good enough.

But despite her conviction, her absolute faith that she was right and Spike was in California, Buffy couldn't bring herself to say as much to the only other person in the world who would be happy at the news. She didn't want to be the one responsible for dashing Dawn's hopes on the off chance that she was wrong.

"What kind of slayer business?" Dawn asked, her arms crossed and a no-nonsense look on her face. "In my experience, that can mean a lot of things."

"It's complicated."

"I've got time."

"Well, I *don't*," Buffy zipped her bag closed and slung the strap over her shoulder. "I have a flight to catch, and you know what a pain it is getting through security. *And* I've never traveled out of the country back to the US, so there's probably a bunch of stuff I don't know that'll take up even more time."

"It's about a forty-five-minute cab ride to Heathrow from here so I'll

come with you and you can tell me all about it. If it takes more than that, I—”

“Dawn. I can’t tell you. Not now. Not until I’m sure.”

Dawn hurried to put herself between Buffy and the door, eyebrow firmly arched. “Sure about what?”

“About the thing I need to be sure about before I tell you!” She grunted and dodged around her sister. “I don’t know if I’m right and I don’t want to tell you what I think is happening before then, so please, for once, just trust that I know what I am doing and let me go.”

*“For once. Like that’s not been our entire lives.”*

Buffy decided to ignore that, sure she’d said too much already, and continued out the door. “I’ll call when I land,” she threw over her shoulder, and kept walking until she was in the hall that would lead her to the elevator.

She might pay for that later. Probably would, actually, especially if Giles discovered that Travers’s safe had been cracked and was missing several hundred thousand of its contents, but he could deal. She didn’t know how long she would be in the States, and if it turned out to be a long time, she needed to have the resources to fund her stay. A credit card was only as good as its last cleared payment and no one else would provide.

She’d figure out her next move once she landed. Until then, her focus had to be on getting out of the country and getting back home.

Back to Sunnydale.



THAT WAS, of course, easier said than done, and not just for the reasons she’d known to expect.

Her objective was rather straightforward after her plane touched down—get a rental car and drive until she arrived at the crater. And as far as getting through customs, securing her rental, and hitting the road, things went rather smoothly. Turned out security wasn’t all that concerned about twenty-something petite blonde women and didn’t so much as give her a once-over on either side of the ocean. Renting a



vehicle likewise was deceptively easy, the only hiccup being her age, but that was nothing a little more cash couldn't fix.

The hardest part had been familiarizing herself with the car and psyching herself up for the whole *driving* thing. Xander had given her a few lessons the summer before last, though he'd been in no way prepared to let her take his car for a spin on her own. The license she had was valid in that it had her name and all the markings of a legal piece of identification issued by the state of California, but it was, in fact, a forgery, along with all her other documents. Not her fault considering her entire life was buried several hundred feet below sea level. Still, Buffy had enough experience from the times she'd driven before to know the basics, even if it had been a while. Probably helped that everyone else was driving like they also didn't know how. Really, getting outside of the city seemed to take more time and patience than all parts of the international flight, but finally, competition for road space thinned out and she found herself making a very familiar journey home.

And trying very hard not to think about the fact that *home* wouldn't be there.

Buffy's throat tightened, as did her grip on the wheel. The past three-ish weeks had been so overfull, both with responsibilities and other people, that she'd typically only had the time right before bed to process just how radically her life had changed. Out here, zooming toward a town that no longer existed, there were no distractions to keep her mind from wandering back to the argument it kept making. That she hadn't known, couldn't have known, exactly what would happen when she'd led the Potentials who would become slayers to that final fight. That she wouldn't be coming back to Revello Drive, later or ever. That the last time she and Dawn had put flowers on their mother's grave had been the true *last time*. And while part of her felt stupid for mourning the loss of a town that had, more often than not, felt like a prison, the rest of her just desperately wanted to go home. Crawl up in her bed in her house and wake up to life as she'd known it before everything had become so complicated. Maybe not staying in one place—she had the opportunity now to see and explore the world, and she wasn't going to give that up—but it was hard to see it as an opportunity when it was mostly just

another choice she hadn't actually made. When she couldn't move at her pace but at a pace dictated by the needs of others.

She remembered standing there on the edge of the chasm, not knowing how hard reality would smack her in a few hours, thinking of Spike's sacrifice, how proud she was of him, how relieved she was that the fight was over, and her fellow survivors chiming in like what happened next wouldn't be decided for her.

*"What are you going to do, Buffy?"*

*"Yeah, Buffy, what are you going to do?"*

The answer—the same thing she always did. Let others tell her where she was needed and why. Compartmentalize all the pieces of her that were Buffy Summers and not the Slayer. Keep leading because she had to. Keep fighting because she had to. Not the one and only anymore but responsible for all the others the way no one had ever been responsible for her.

Buffy probably would have done it anyway. Probably would have demanded that she be a part of whatever the next phase was in the fight that never ended, but if left to her own devices, she wouldn't have started the very next day. She wouldn't have forced herself out of bed and under the spray of a shower, sore and aching in ways both new and familiar, the place where her gut had been split open remarkably healed for something the First had called a mortal wound. Unlike the hole in her chest, the one that Spike had filled bit by bit over the last few months. Where the rest of her had been focused on healing, that spot had caved in at some point over the night when it had finally hit her that he wasn't there with them. She couldn't meet his eyes in a crowded room anymore, would never again see that secret smirk or share grins at jokes only they could understand. The last few nights leading up to the fight had been spent in his arms, and she didn't have that, either. It was a lot to hit at once, what it meant to be so proud of him and so angry at him at the same time. They had talked about this, hadn't they? How it didn't have to mean anything but it *could*, and maybe when the apocalypse was over, they could figure out what.

But Spike wasn't here for that, or for anything. He'd had to be the big damn hero. The champion. And yes, god, she was so proud of him but honestly, for once, couldn't she catch a break? Couldn't she win without

also losing? Did the world have to take from her in order to keep spinning?

Was it too much to be able to just go home?

Apparently, it was. For Buffy never made it to the crater. About three miles outside of what would have been town, shapes that definitely shouldn't be there began popping up along the line of the horizon. In a minute, she realized what they were and pressed down harder on the gas, not knowing what she meant to do—if she'd just ram her rental through the military cordon and let them chase her all the way to the bottom of the Hellmouth, court martials and prison sentences and whatever else the government wanted to throw at her be damned. Because Spike was there and her hand was burning and she deserved one thing. Just one good thing to happen before she was told what to do with the rest of her life.

Buffy didn't ram down the barrier, though. Her better senses prevailed as other shapes came into view, though most she could see were a few military-grade tents behind a tall fence capped off with barbed wire. The fence itself was rather informative, plastered with official-looking signs and notices that warned against trespassers, vagrants, and wayward slayers, and declared the area beyond a disaster zone. The thing that really convinced her to ease up on the lead foot, though, was the man in militaryesque garb, walking John Wayne-style in her direction, cowboy hat and everything. He had a friendly smile, though it didn't reach his eyes, and it was all, *sorry little lady, you've gone as far as you can on this here road*. No, there's no way through, and sorry for the inconvenience, but the best thing she could do was turn her car around and head back the way she came from. No, he didn't know anything about any town that might've been down this way last month, but if she had any questions, he could direct her to a law firm in Los Angeles.

*Which law firm?* she asked.

*Wolfram and Hart*, he said, and even though she'd seen it coming the second the question left her lips, it managed to hit her like a suckerpunch.

Of course Wolfram and Hart would have cordoned off the Hellmouth. While she was the first to admit she knew remarkably little about this supposed hub of evil on earth, the fact that they had laid

claim to the debris of her hometown was only surprising in that she was surprised she hadn't seen it coming.

At least she knew exactly where to go next, even if it meant being face-to-face with the last person she wanted to see.



IF BUFFY HADN'T ALREADY KNOWN Wolfram and Hart was an evil law firm, the lobby would have given it away. She couldn't say why, exactly, just that from the second she walked in, the place felt heavy and oppressive, like gravity had a vendetta. She did everything she could to ignore it, wandered toward what she imagined was the information desk before ultimately deciding that she should probably not give Angel the heads-up that she was on the premises. The less time he had to come up with an excuse for the Sunnydale project, the better.

It seemed reasonable that being in charge meant his office would be on one of the higher-up floors, though something told her not to opt for the absolute top. Call it an inkling, a nudge, a bit of slayer intuition—whatever it was, it guided her to select a number two floors down from what she assumed was the penthouse, and when the doors slid open and she stepped out, she saw it hadn't led her astray. One of the people Angel had introduced her to after Sunnydale fell was leaning against a desk—Lorne, she thought, because of the *green*—chatting animatedly with a blonde who looked way too familiar for comfort.

What the hell was *Harmony* of all non-people doing here? Buffy worked her throat and started forward, hoping that some divine intervention might be at play and magically make everything she was seeing make sense, but no dice. The most that happened was she eventually got close enough to draw Harmony's attention, which was an experience in itself. Harmony stared at her as though Buffy was the one who didn't belong near Angel, all shock and annoyance and indignation, before she settled on a dramatic huff and flung herself in her seat with enough force it rolled into the wall at her back.

"Well, this was predictable," Harmony said, crossing her arms in such a way her breasts nearly spilled out of her blouse. "Surprised it took you this long to get here, actually. The way he goes *on* about you."

“Buffy.” For his part, Lorne looked a combination of surprised and concerned. “Well, no wonder the boss man’s in such a stinker of a mood today. Here I thought it was just his little ghost problem. Suddenly, everything makes sense.”

For one of them, maybe. Buffy hadn’t really known what to expect, but for anyone to act like they knew why she was there was a little wiggy. “Uhh, hello. I’m here to see—”

“We know who you’re here to see,” Harmony said dismissively.

“You do?”

Lorne’s eyebrows—or the space where eyebrows would be if he had them—shot skyward. “Well, I think so...unless you’re *not* here because of our very own blond bombshell.”

“Why would I be here for Harmony?”

Now Harmony and Lorne were looking at each other, and something about that look raised Buffy’s hackles all the way up to eleven. She stepped forward, canting her body toward them so she was right in Lorne’s path, unavoidable. Unmovable too because, well, let him try and see how well that turned out.

But then she looked over his shoulder and froze.

Everything froze.

“Oh god,” Buffy breathed out, and then promptly *unfroze*. In a blink, she was striding on trembling legs toward the closed door of Angel’s office, her heart pounding in her ears and her throat. Someone was saying her name, maybe screaming it, but if they were, they were miles away and it was too late to slow down.

He couldn’t be here. He *couldn’t*. She’d officially just started seeing things—or maybe that was the cruel magic of this place. Angel’s evil law firm. Maybe the glass in the window was bespelled to make clients see whatever it was they wanted most in the world so that, just for a moment, they would fool themselves into thinking Wolfram and Hart could deliver. As far as evil plans went, it was a pretty good one. Tease people with their heart’s desire and then have them sign over their souls just to touch it.

Buffy seized the doorknob and tugged, not sure what she would do when she was in the office itself and the flicker of hope that had lit up her insides was doused. Only the door didn’t open. She scowled, head

beginning to pound along with her heart, and pushed instead. Still nothing.

“Sweetums,” Lorne was saying at her back, “if Angel doesn’t know you’re here, maybe we should—”

*Fuck this.*

Buffy snapped her leg forward, knocking off the knob and the hinge with enough force the damn door cracked and swung open. And then everything in the whole world shuddered—a hard, grinding halt that made her feel like she was careening forward even while standing still.

The image hadn’t flickered. Instead, it was looking at her—looking at her as only *he* could. Those eyes, the pull of his mouth, the expression of mingled wonder and hope and reserve, his chest moving even though his lungs didn’t work, all the pieces that made up Spike. The vampire, the champion she’d left at the bottom of the Hellmouth, standing between her and oblivion, yelling at her to get out there. Run toward the sun. Live her life. *Live.*

It took a moment longer than it should have for Buffy to remember there was someone else in the room. A moment longer and that person saying her name.

“Buffy.”

She didn’t want to pull her eyes off Spike, terrified he might not be there when she turned back. But it wasn’t like she could stand in this office forever playing the staring game, so she forced herself to glance at Angel, who was also gaping at her, just not in the same way. Not with wonder or hope or any of those Spike things.

Rather, he looked worried.

“What are you doing here?” he asked. “How... How did you hear?”

“How did I hear what?” she asked. Spike remained there in her periphery, not fading. That meant he wasn’t a figment, right? It had to.

“About Spike.”

“What do you mean, how did I hear?” Buffy turned her gaze fully back to Spike. “I just got here.”

“He’s not the reason you’re here?”

No, that wasn’t right. She blinked, trying to force her very loud mind to quiet. “What... What the hell is this, Angel? How long has he been

here?” Buffy took a step toward Spike, realizing she hadn’t heard him speak. “How long have you been here? Spike?”

“Popped out a couple of days ago,” he replied, and she could have cried. It was his voice. His voice coming out of his mouth.

But something still wasn’t right.

“Popped out of what?”

“The amulet,” Angel explained. “The one I brought to Sunnydale. Someone sent it here.”

“And...Spike came out of it.” A couple of days ago? That would have been around the time she’d experienced the sensation of phantom fire. Some things were beginning to make sense. Some, not all. “Spike came out of the amulet and I am just hearing about this *now*?”

Angel didn’t try to hide his surprise, or his annoyance. It was nice to know this was what it took to be honest with each other. “Clearly, you’re not,” he replied tersely. “Because you’re here. Wanna explain why that is?”

“Right after you explain why you have *Spike* in your office three weeks after I watched him die.” Buffy started toward Spike, who regarded her with uncertainty that felt familiar but misplaced. The way he’d looked at her at the beginning, right after she’d learned about his soul. Not...now. Not after months of working side-by-side, of having each other’s back, of *I’m not ready for you to not be here*, of *you’re the one, Buffy*, and *I love you*.

He was close—he was so close, but something was wrong. She couldn’t feel him.

Buffy didn’t realize she’d reached for him until she was falling forward—falling *through* him, through the space where Spike stood, his body nothing more than an image on air. She managed to catch herself before she pitched all the way to the floor, though her heart wasn’t nearly as lucky, and everything that had started to swell inside her immediately poured over.

“What the hell?” The pounding in her chest intensified, spread to her temples, behind her eyes, to her lungs which immediately started to heave, compensating for the newly scored wound that was Spike’s absence from her life. She whipped around, half-convinced for that instant that the last two minutes had been completely fabricated, that maybe she’d just snapped somewhere on the road between Sunnydale

and Los Angeles and was imagining a reality that wasn't there, but no. Spike was still there, and his expression had changed. Gone from guarded and uncertain to pained, and that was more like him. More and not enough because she *couldn't touch him*.

"Stop using his face," she screamed before she could help himself. "You don't get to do that. You don't—"

"Buffy!" Angel yelled from somewhere, bewildered.

"You said this thing came out of the amulet. The amulet *Spike* used to destroy the First. And now that amulet is here and something wearing Spike's face but can't be touched just happens to—"

"Oi! I am not the sodding First, so get that outta your head," the Spike-colored air snapped, and his tone packed with so much raw fury and *fight* that the panic still shooting through her veins instantly calmed. "Far as anyone can tell me, whatever that amulet did buried Sunnyhell and the bloody first under a mountain of rubble. Didn't give it all up to be mistaken for what killed me."

Any lingering doubt faded. Evil as the First had been, it had also been straightforward. Never indignant in a way that *Spike* would be indignant, or anyone else, for that matter. When it wanted to bluster, it did so in its own voice.

Which could only mean one thing.

"You're not the First," Buffy echoed.

Spike shook his head, the ire in his eyes softening. Almost like he'd only then remembered who was standing in front of him. Who'd made the suggestion in the first place. "Can see why you'd think it, but I came outta that amulet no more evil than usual. Just a little more dead."

"Why can't I touch you? If you're not the First, shouldn't I be able to touch you?"

"Haven't worked that much out yet," he replied. Then, still looking at her, choked, "Christ, love, are *you* real? Are you really here?"

"I'm here."

"How? Know this one didn't phone you."

Somehow, Buffy managed to pull herself away from Spike's gaze long enough to aim a glare at Angel. "And why not?"

Angel splayed his hands. "Was I supposed to know you wanted me to?"



“Considering what I told you when I left here last, yes, you were supposed to know I wanted a phone call if Spike suddenly materialized in your office.” She turned her attention back to Spike. One thing at a time, and he was more important. “What’s the last thing you remember?”

Angel scoffed and started to say something, but thankfully Spike beat him to it.

“You. The world cavin’ in. Goin’ up in flames.” Spike swallowed—or appeared to. Could he do that? Imitate life with such precision, imitate *Spike*, his eyes and nose and face and expressions, speak in his voice, if he truly wasn’t there? How could she not be looking at him?

Maybe she wasn’t. Maybe he wasn’t the First but just a very vivid hallucination. And god, that thought was too much, too awful, and too likely after everything that had happened. The last thing she needed was to start crying like a lunatic in Angel’s office.

Which probably made asking “You remember what I told you?” a big mistake, but hey, Buffy had never been known for her brains. How much more could she hurt, really?

Spike, or the air that looked like Spike, drew in a breath that wasn’t breath and nodded.

“And do you remember what you told me?”

He hesitated but nodded again.

“So if this is really you, if you’re Spike and just extra go-throughable right now, you’ll know why you’re getting punched in the mouth the second you’re solid again.”

He blinked and it was back—that Spike look. Like he couldn’t believe what he was seeing, what he was feeling, trying to grapple with what was real and what was not. Like the fact that she wasn’t a mirage was a miracle in itself and life couldn’t get better than being looked at by Buffy Summers.

“You meant it, then?” he asked, his voice almost as much of an illusion as he was, but there was nothing fake about how it broke. Or the shine in his eyes. “Buffy...”

Something inside of her shattered.

He hadn’t believed her.

The thought had been there, that nagging, awful doubt waiting in the

dark. Soft amid her grief and resentment and general sense of being overwhelmed, but never silent. She'd told herself a thousand things, gorged herself on empty platitudes, before ultimately settling with the never-satisfied hope that his response to her declaration was his way of saying, "Live your life without mourning me," rather than, "Thanks for the pity, but I'd rather die with my pride."

Then she'd fuel these platitudes by reminding herself of the relationship they had built over their final months together. How they'd communicated more in the negative space than in the open, saving the out-loud moments for the things that really mattered. *I'm not ready for you to not be here. You're the one, Buffy. I love you.* Through that lens, it made sense that he'd just instinctively know that she hadn't realized she'd loved him until it was too late to do anything about it, other than give that love to him in the spare time they had left. That he would look at her and do his Spike thing where he just *got* her even when she didn't, that he'd hear her words and see them reflected on her face, in her eyes. And he'd known how much it would hurt her to race back into a world without him at her left but he hadn't wanted her swearing her loyalty to a dead man, even briefly. He'd wanted her to enjoy the world he'd saved for her—he'd wanted her to celebrate, laugh, and live.

But no. It had been the thing she'd feared after all. Spike hadn't believed her. He'd died not knowing he was loved.

As though hearing the thought—maybe he could, given the circumstances—Spike's face fell. "Bugger, I've been a dolt."

Buffy breathed out, doing what she could to fortify herself. What was past was past and couldn't be recovered. All she had was the future. "Some might say dolt, others might say raging moron. Do you at least believe me now?"

The shine in his eyes intensified in ways that shouldn't be possible for someone who wasn't truly there. "I believe you."

She nodded, forceful and shaky. There was more to say—she was beginning to think there always would be with them—but now was not the time to try. "Good. Well, now that we have that settled..." Buffy whirled around to Angel. "Why don't you start from the top? Particularly the part where I'm beginning to think that if I hadn't walked through that door just now, I never would've heard that Spike was back."

Angel didn't respond. He was good at that, not responding. Not calling. Not giving anything away. Unlike Spike, who had a tendency to brandish his emotions the way others might weapons.

"You weren't going to call, were you?" Buffy went on, crossing her arms. The shock was wearing off and a more manageable anger was settling in its place. "You were just going to go on letting me think he was dead."

He didn't flinch or break eye-contact or do anything that might betray shame. "You deserved a chance to move on. Live your life. Be—"

"If you say *normal*, Angel, I swear to god, I will kick your ass through that window."

"Well, yes, you should have a chance at something normal."

"You don't want me to have normal," she shot back, heat suffusing her skin as her heart started to thunder once more. And she shouldn't—she knew she shouldn't. Knew that whatever was about to come tumbling out of her mouth would be the sort of stuff she'd regret saying. But here she was, jetlagged beyond belief, about as emotionally frazzled as she'd ever been, fresh from the graveside of the home she'd lost, and standing next to what could only be called the ghost of the man she loved. And Angel. Angel hadn't told her. Angel had brought the thing to her town that had wiped it out, left to take over what was apparently a conduit of pure evil, and somehow, despite everything that had changed, *this* between them remained the same. Angel making unilateral decisions. Angel telling her how she should live her life, what she should want despite everything she actually did want.

Really, when put under the microscope, the answer was perfectly clear.

"You want me to want *you*. Want, but not have. Isn't that what this is about? You sweeping in at the eleventh hour with some mysterious doohickey that, oh yeah, was handed to you by the evil company you've decided to work for. But that wasn't enough. The second you realized I didn't want you in Sunnydale, you made it your business to know why. It can't be because I've moved on, and if it is, by gosh, there's something wrong with the way I've done it."

"I—"

"This is *my* time to talk," she snapped. "And do you tell me where you

get this miracle device? No. Do you tell me anything of value except to put into my head that the person who wears it needs to have a soul and be more than human? And lucky for you, you've already smelled Spike all over me. There's your more than human."

"I didn't know he had a soul!"

"No, but you knew he was important to me, and that bothered you."

A shadow crossed his face, his expression shifting from guilty to angry, which *fine*. Let him be angry. Let him start justifying all his bullshit because at least that would be honest. "It was supposed to be *me*. I came to Sunnydale to wear it myself. You're the one who told me to come back here, hold the line, that you would figure something else out. You had just as much information as I did about how that worked, and you chose to give it to your boyfriend. After telling me he's *not* your boyfriend and that you're cookie dough. So yeah, when he pops up in my office and can't immediately run off to mess up your life, I think *good*. I think at least Buffy will have a chance to do that baking she was so gung-ho about. I think maybe you'll have enough time to come to your senses and realize that whatever you were doing was insane. This is *Spike* we're talking about. Same guy who tried to kill you how many times?"

"And you're one to talk?"

"I didn't have a soul then!"

"Neither did he."

"But that's not when this started with you two. You told me that. He got the soul because you wouldn't love him without it."

That was a very bastardized version of the story Buffy had given him, even if the foundation was true. And it had only been half of what she'd shared following the fight with the First. "I was wrong about you," she replied. "You aren't twelve. Twelve-year-olds know better than this. Yeah, I know what I told you in Sunnydale. Here's the thing, though. I know what I told you *after* Sunnydale, too. Remember? You know, three weeks ago?"

Angel's expression had fallen impassive again. His default. "You were in shock."

"I wasn't in shock. I don't do shock anymore. I do *next*."

"You might think that—"

"But because you seem to be having trouble remembering, let me

recap the highlights. Item one—I distinctly remember telling you to give up on the baking thing. There was never any baking, and how the hell did you not pick up on that in the first place?”

“Excuse me?”

“It’s called *a line*, Angel. We were at war. You swooped in out of nowhere and yeah, I’ll admit, I temporarily lost my mind and became sixteen again.” Buffy hesitated, trying very hard not to flick her gaze in Spike’s direction. The kiss he’d witnessed had probably done the lion’s share of the convincing that she hadn’t meant what she’d told him as the world had come down. There had been more at play there—a lot more—but she didn’t have time to discuss it now, nor was it an explanation she wanted to give him with an audience. Especially since the whole *be’s alive, be’s standing right there* bombshell had yet to stop with the aftershocks. “And as though I hadn’t had enough mind-fuckery, you started acting like our not being together was my choice. Like if I wanted to be with you, all I had to do was say the word when we both know that was never true. So yeah, I gave you a line because I didn’t have time to think about you then, or what you do.”

He didn’t need blood pressure to betray that his temper was on the rise again. It was all over his face, in his eyes, in the tight lines of his mouth. “What, exactly, do I do?”

“You tend to come back into my life and let me know if I’m not living it exactly as you think I should.”

“That’s not fair.”

“No? The first time you met Riley, you beat him up.”

Spike scoffed, and though she knew she needed to avoid looking at him, she couldn’t help it. “Sorry,” he said, bringing up his hands, though his smirk remained in place. “Just wonder how much of that was Finn bein’ a tosser.”

“A lot,” Angel muttered.

“Okay, opinions of the ex notwithstanding, it was a shitty thing to do.” Buffy turned back to Angel. “You did it after I was brought back, too. Spewed all kinds of useless tips on how I needed to be grateful to my friends and how I had this new lease on life that you could understand. I was *hurt*, Angel. I was more hurt than I had ever been, and you gave me the kind of support you usually only ever get from fortune

cookies or Hallmark greeting cards. You were supposed to be the person who understood me better than anyone, who would just look at me and know. But you stared right through me.”

“That’s not fair, either.”

“You know what’s not fair? Being ripped out of Heaven. That’s not fair. Even less fair, going to see the person who you thought loved you more than anything and feeling like hey, I can’t tell him this. How could I when I was the one who sent you to Hell? Like that was my fault too?”

It was a mixture of satisfaction and dismay that rushed through her when Angel’s face fell. He just stared at her for a moment, dumbstruck, and didn’t recover until his gaze shifted to Spike. Then the shock dried up and all that was left was resentment. “You knew this, I’m guessing.”

“Not much of a secret these days,” Spike replied, and she could tell, just from the tremor in his voice, that he was doing his best to bite back something sharper.

“You know what’s fucked up?” Buffy went on in a rush. She needed to get this all out before she lost steam—her nerves, those damned never-grow-up nerves that had always been just Angel’s, had started doing their familiar dance. “What’s fucked up is I sat there for two hours trying to think of how I could tell you about Heaven. About even *any* of what I was feeling. And I couldn’t do it. Part of it was because I felt it was unfair to you. *To you*. Another part was... I knew what you would say. I could hear it. More platitudes. Probably some crap about how I couldn’t be mad at my friends for not knowing what they were doing. That I would get through this like I always did. And the thought of hearing any of that from you was worse than just letting you believe that I had been in Hell right along with them. But when I told Spike? I didn’t even... I didn’t know I was talking. Some part of me knew that he wouldn’t tell me to buck up or get over it or forgive anyone. I knew that I could tell him, and he would just hear it without trying to fix me or get me to fix myself. I had that with no one else. So yeah, when you showed up in Sunnydale three weeks ago, I was going through a lot. I had just been thrown out of my house by my closest friends. By my *sister*. I was facing an apocalypse those friends were responsible for, living in a house that had been overtaken by a bunch of teenagers, most of whom hated me because I was the only one there who had any sort of understanding of

what we were facing. I got the scythe that won the war for us because a man I promised myself I would never love gave me the strength to do it and then just blew me off when I suggested that after the apocalypse, we could figure out what we were.”

“I did no such bloody—”

“Leave it,” Buffy said, whipping back around to him. “We’ll go be heroes.”

Spike goggled at her, which was rich, but yeah, he was due some harsh truths too. “You just asked me if it had to mean anything,” he snapped. “What the sodding hell was I supposed to do?”

Buffy managed to bite back what she was sure would have been a crushing reply, mostly because—even if he’d earned it—she didn’t want to have it out with Spike with Angel standing ringside but also because she couldn’t deny that was exactly what she’d said. The last few days she’d had with him had been heightened and intense, and she’d been all up in her head about him and them and everything they were and weren’t saying to each other, and it had been so overwhelming that the last thing she’d wanted to do in the moment was try to define something that had been undefinable. But that hadn’t meant she’d wanted to just walk away, *never* revisit it—just that she’d had too many things on her plate to think about what anything meant beyond the present.

Plus, Buffy and talking? Not concepts that easily went together. Especially when she hadn’t had a chance to figure out how she actually felt, something she typically reserved for right after it was too late to make a difference.

“I know. I know I was crazy with the mixed signals. I wasn’t in any place to figure out what we were then.” Probably wasn’t now either, but too late. She’d seen him. And there was no way she was leaving here without him. “But it did...bother me when you said you wanted to just leave it.”

“Rather than get my heart stomped out again, you mean? Not that it did any good. You ran off and snogged him not twenty bloody minutes later.”

“I know. That’s... I know. And I shouldn’t have because it was very much not what I wanted. It just felt...familiar and less mind-trippy than everything that was us.” That was the roundabout haven’t-really-wanted-

to-think-about-it way of characterizing the tangle of confused feelings she still had yet to separate from one another, but it was the truth.

The Buffy that had loved Angel, had spent years pining after the relationship she'd been forced to sacrifice for the greater good, was a Buffy that she knew how to handle, for while life had certainly been difficult, it had also been straightforward. Classic star-crossed romance wherein the leading players were separated by circumstance rather than death, only also sometimes death, but so far not permanently. That Buffy made sense to her, much more so than the Buffy she'd become over the last year, with her baggage and her scars and her complicated feelings about someone for whom her feelings should be anything but complicated. The Buffy that had used and abused a man who loved her, then walked away from him and tried to pretend like doing so hadn't hurt. And after that man had hurt her in return, she'd stewed in a twist of rambling emotions that she hadn't tried to understand until he'd been back. Until he'd turned everything she'd ever known about the world on its head for having done something that should have been impossible. Spike had sought to destroy himself because of what he'd done to her and had come back and been so...just, well, whatever she needed. For the first time in her life, she'd had someone in her corner who hadn't questioned her decisions or her intuition, had believed wholeheartedly in her calls, had let her bounce ideas without dominating the conversation or steering her in the direction he preferred. He'd stood up to her friends and family—he'd stood up to her, too, when she'd pushed him too far. And despite all the ugliness from what had happened before, the things she'd done to him and him to her and everything about them that she'd thought was irrevocably fucked up, he'd still loved her. Without expectation or demand, just because he was Spike and Spike loved Buffy. The Buffy he saw, not the one he'd invented.

Compared to the simplicity of her teenage hormones, yeah, the Buffy she was right now was a complicated mess. And she'd kissed Angel because, damn, it would've been so much simpler if that had just solved all her problems and made up her mind for her.

But saying all that was a tall order. Especially now, all on-the-spotty. Ask her to deliver a speech on battle tactics or the importance of some upcoming fight, and she could go on for forty-five minutes without losing



steam. Ask her to parse what was going on inside her head, and she needed about two months of preparation and would still probably bungle it.

"The important thing is," she said, dragging her gaze from where it had landed on Spike and back to Angel, "that I *did* tell you the baking thing was bogus. And I told you how I really felt about Spike. That I did love him and I was so proud of him for what he'd done but so mad that he'd had to do it because of that amulet. I know you heard that. You broke a vase."

Angel just held her eyes, not blinking. "I remember. It was a nice vase."

"That's it? That's all you're going to say to me."

"I don't know what else you expect. I told you why I wasn't going to call you, and I stand by that. I will never think that wasn't the right choice, especially after everything you just went through. You deserve a chance at actual happiness, which we both know—"

"Oh, save it." Her own fault for expecting more, she was starting to think. Angel didn't make mistakes. He made the hard decisions no one else was grown up or mature enough to make, took on all the burdens of the world so no one else had to because, in the gospel according to Angel, he was always the only adult in the room. Unless Giles was nearby. And odds were Giles would have signed off on his reasoning here too. They were both so good at telling Buffy what was good for her while ignoring every word she actually said.

And Buffy had more pressing matters at hand than trying to get the pinheaded men in her life to stop being pinheaded, like the fact that Spike was here but she couldn't touch him. She inhaled a deep breath then forced it out by increments, willing the tension and hurt and anger and all things past that she couldn't change to wash away so she could focus on everything she could.

"Do we know why Spike's all go-through-y?" she asked, pleased to discover her tone was even—like she hadn't spent the past ten minutes fighting with the two vampires in her life. Like she had some measure of control. "And what have you done so far to try to make him solid?"

Angel didn't answer. Not that she'd really expected him to, but hey, worth a shot.

“Not a ghost, is about all I can tell you, love,” Spike said, and when she turned back to him, he’d grown closer. Close enough that they should have been touching. “Been a mite busy, trailin’ after your former and makin’ sure he doesn’t make more of a bloody mess of things than usual.”

“I would’ve handled Hainsley just fine on my own,” Angel said. Apparently, his pride was what to attack if you wanted him to engage in a conversation. Though Buffy figured she should’ve known that.

“Somethin’ else, too,” Spike went on, drawing her back to him. “Why I was up here, tryin’ to get this sod to up the resources Fred has in her little laboratory. She’s the only one around here who seems to give a damn that I keep flickering away.”

“And like I was telling you,” Angel said, his jaw having gone tight again, “that’s not how it works. Everything I do now has a process, and Fred doesn’t even know what sort of machinery she’d need because we still don’t know exactly what you are.”

“What do you mean by flickering?” Buffy demanded. It seemed a safe bet, sanity-wise, if she just ignored everything Angel said from this point on. “Why are you flickering?”

“They haven’t decided why it happens just yet,” Spike replied, having kept his gaze on her the whole time. “Not like it keeps to a bloody schedule.”

“Or triggers when you want it to,” Angel said. He’d gone back to muttering.

Buffy was sticking to the *ignoring him* thing, though—maybe forever—and had already skipped ahead to problem solving. Unfortunately, the immediate thought that sprang to mind, the best shot, involved facing the music and getting in touch with Willow and, by extension, Giles. Then persuading the pair of them that they had an obligation to help save a vampire neither one of them particularly cared for, regardless of what he’d done for the world.

Well, that wasn’t true. Willow might not be Spike’s number one fan but she would probably be game to help. It was just the *everything else* involved with getting said help and the potential fallout Buffy might face after it was over. Not that she knew what shape that would take but if the past three weeks were anything to go by, it would be intense and

painful and possibly the last thing she did before her makeshift family fractured for good.

But it was Spike. She lifted her head to meet his eyes, wondering what he saw in hers, and if it was anything like what he'd given her that night they'd stolen in the house. That utter, complete faith, wrapped in both self-awareness and selflessness. Everything she'd done her best to beat out of him the previous year but hadn't, because that was just how Spike loved. Stupid and with his whole self, willing to risk anything.

"I'll call Willow," she said hoarsely. "Err, *we'll* call Willow. They're probably wondering where I am anyway, seeing as I kinda just took off. And I haven't checked in with Dawn yet and I promised her an update. But we'll fix this, Spike. You and me."

His eyes softened even more, making it beyond cruel that she couldn't just leap into his arms. "Slayer," he began, but that was as far as he got before he popped out of existence. One second there, the next second gone. And even though they had just told her it was possible, Buffy couldn't stop the fissure of panic or the cry that erupted from her throat. She tumbled on feet that didn't seem to want to work toward the space that he had just occupied, feeling around the empty air as though she could reach through into wherever he'd gone and pull him back.

"Buffy, it's fine," Angel said from what seemed like far away. "He'll turn up."

"He was here. He was *here*."

"Yeah, we told you, it's a thing he does. Trust me, I haven't found a way to get rid of him. If I had—"

Whether it was the power of her glare or a delayed sense of self-preservation, Angel had enough forethought to snap his mouth shut. And had she had the luxury, she would have laid into him, because something was seriously wrong here. The amulet just turned up, presto, like that, and Spike had come out of it. But not all of him, not all the essential pieces. Not enough to keep him tethered here where he belonged. And something out there was pulling him away, dragging him back, but it was okay because according to Angel *it's a thing he does*.

It was hard to conceive, in that moment, that she'd ever known Angel at all. How he could stand there in his stupid fancy clothes in his ridiculously fancy office, everything she'd told him still in his head and not give

a crap about where the man she'd loved and lost and regained had blipped off to was...

"Whatever you're doing here stops," Buffy said in a cool, deadly voice. Her general voice. "I mean it, Angel. You've been here for less than a month and you're already this...this..."

"What?"

"I don't even know. And that scares me."

"It scares you," he replied, deadpan. "Don't you think you're being a little dramatic?"

"Dramatic. Dramatic because my occasionally homicidal ex decided to take a job at a place that has one specialty, and that specialty is evil."

"To change it from the inside! You don't know what it's been like here. You have no idea what we've been through or what we've tried, the people we've lost. So yes, when the opportunity was presented to work from within the belly of the beast, I told the beast to open up."

"Right. The old 'if you can't beat 'em, become them' gag."

"This *is* how I beat them!" Angel snapped, and that actually surprised her. Buffy could count on one hand the number of times she'd seen him worked up enough to yell, and none of those were exactly happy fun memories. "I beat them in here. I'm the one in charge of making the calls. I'm closer to them than I've ever been before. I have more resources and can do more good here than I can out there. Do you really think I haven't thought this through?"

Buffy stared at him for a long moment, trying to find her voice. "I think that you're smart enough to know that when they offered you this gig, they knew exactly how you would justify it to other people and yourself."

Some of the fire left his eyes, but not all.

"And I think you told yourself that since you knew that, it would be fine. You were going in with your eyes open so you wouldn't miss when they tried to pull out the wool. That's the problem, Angel. The wool was over your eyes before you got here. You showed up gift wrapped and blindfolded."

"That is not true."

"I hope it's not. It would really suck to have to kill you again but hey,

practice makes perfect.” Buffy stepped away, ready to be done with this conversation and Angel altogether. He wasn’t her problem and wouldn’t be until he decided to change that. “I assume there’s some reason Spike is still here. I can’t imagine he would’ve stuck around if it were his choice.”

Angel held her gaze for a long stretch, his expression back to that inscrutable mask that she had once found equal parts fascinating and irritating. The big, broody, mysterious man who never shared his feelings and left you guessing as to his thoughts. After years of Spike word-vomiting all over the place—when he wasn’t wearing his heart on his sleeve—Buffy found Angel’s quiet game had graduated from a nuisance to downright infuriating.

Finally, he nodded. “He tried to leave. We think he’s stuck to the amulet.”

“And I don’t suppose you’ll give over the amulet.”

“I can’t.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“Right now, both. It’s Wolfram and Hart property. We have the right to it.”

“Well, I’m not going anywhere without Spike,” Buffy replied, crossing her arms. “So I guess I’ll just have to draw up a chair and make myself comfy.”

“You can afford to do that?”

“In the sense of do I have time or do I have the resources? Doesn’t matter. The answer to both is yes.”

“I thought you were trying to restart the Watchers Council. Help all the new slayers who are just coming into their power.”

“Good thing about there being so many slayers is there’s someone to pick up the slack.”

“But it’s your responsibility, isn’t it?”

God, had he always been so Giles-y? Though, actually, on second thought, that was probably a door best left closed. She didn’t need more reason to be wigged. “You know, I think I’m done with people telling me what I’m responsible for. Just like I’m done with people trying to tell me what’s good for me or making decisions that affect me behind my back. Right now, I’ve got nothing but time, and nothing better to do until

Spike's fully Spike again than keep an eye on you. Unless you want to give me that amulet."

"Again, I can't. We don't know who sent it and—"

"And it's Wolfram and Hart property."

He nodded.

"You'd think that'd mean you already know how it works." Also that he might have asked these incredibly salient questions before he'd handed over a volatile artifact of unknown origin and power, but those arguments were counterproductive. "I guess I'll hang out here until Spike pops back. Then I'll start looking for apartments or something."

"Apartments?"

"I'm going to need somewhere to stay until he's solid."

"You're really going nowhere, are you?"

Buffy arched her eyebrows. "Did you think I was lying? Truly, Angel, I have nothing but time now. And you know better than most how stubborn I can be when I love someone."

"Yeah." He worked his throat, dropping his gaze. For the first time since she'd barreled into his office, he seemed to fully understand exactly what she was talking about. Not whatever he'd convinced himself she'd said, but the actual words. "I just never expected it to be..."

"For someone that wasn't you?"

"Or something that sounds less self-involved, yeah."

Buffy's lips twitched but she felt no inclination to offer reassurances. In truth, she suspected a lot of what Angel had done up to this point—including the whole *was never going to tell her* thing about Spike—had to do with his ideas of what they were, which were, of course, based on what they had been and were now no longer. And she could understand that to a point—that it was hard to let go. She should know. Holding onto that ideal had nearly cost her everything. Hell, until about thirty minutes ago, she thought it had.

And there was still more to do. More to say to Spike himself. More to figure out, and all that *more* was just hanging on hopes, because she had no clue if he even wanted that at all.

A quick rap on the door thankfully threw water on that less-than-chipper thought, and Buffy and Angel turned as one as some twenty-

something definitely evil blonde chick strolled into the room with an air that made clear she thought she was in charge.

"Eve," Angel said, sounding exhausted, "now is not—"

"No, it's exactly the right time," the woman whose name was apparently Eve replied, not taking her eyes off Buffy. "I just got an incredibly interesting call. One I should have gotten from you. Something about the vampire slayer being here to collect her vampire."

"Who the hell are you?" Buffy demanded.

"I am Angel's liaison to the Senior Partners," Definitely Evil Eve replied with a smile befitting her name—the kind Buffy's fist was just aching to punch off her smug face. "And right now, your best friend."

"I find that hard to believe."

"Oh, so you're not interested in turning your boyfriend back into flesh and blood? My mistake. I'll just show myself—"

Buffy wasn't even aware of what she'd grabbed to throw until the potted plant—an ugly thing, anyway, *you're welcome, Angel*—smashed into the wall just behind Eve's overly coiffed head. And to the evil bitch's credit, she didn't so much as flinch, only not to her credit because who the hell cared?

"Talk," Buffy said. "Now."

Eve responded with the sort of smile that should have no trouble convincing anyone, least of all Angel, that all deals with Wolfram and Hart could only ever end one way. Yet when she opened her mouth and started talking, Buffy didn't blanch. She listened.

And found herself wondering if it might just be worth it to make a bargain with the devil.



BUFFY WASN'T STUPID. She'd been manipulated too many times by people she trusted to let someone she absolutely didn't trust get away with anything, but that didn't mean she would turn her nose up at solutions offered on golden platters. Sure, while the strings attached weren't the stringiest strings she'd ever encountered, they were still there and she hadn't gotten as far as she had by ignoring her intuition.

She wouldn't share her suspicions, though. Not until she was off

Wolfram and Hart property. And definitely not before she had what she wanted.

Which, according to Eve, was very achievable. All they had to do to restore Spike to his vampire body was take a little trip to someplace called the White Room.

“What’s the catch?” Buffy had demanded.

“There is no catch,” Eve had replied. “Consider this an act of good faith on part of Wolfram and Hart. We know how important you are to Angel, and we have no desire to be on the bad side of one of the most successful slayers in history, especially after everything that happened in Sunnydale. There’s so much more good we could accomplish together than apart, and since we have entered a new way of doing business, the Senior Partners believe it’s in our best interest to be as accommodating as possible.”

Translation: a restless slayer was one who could cause all kinds of trouble and they couldn’t have that.

“I’d hate for you to think that just because I didn’t know about Wolfram and Hart a month ago that I haven’t done my homework,” Buffy had said, which was perfectly true. After learning where the amulet had come from, and especially after seeing Giles’s reaction to learning about Angel’s new legal aspirations, she had decided it would behoove her to know as much about Wolfram and Hart as possible. The resulting avalanche of information could have given Jeffrey Dahmer nightmares. While she and Giles might not see eye to eye on everything these days, one of the areas in which they remained in firm agreement was that Wolfram and Hart could not be trusted.

“We wouldn’t expect anything less,” Eve had assured her. “But in this case, there will be no contract signed. Nothing tying you or Spike back to us at all—unless, of course, you and your new Watchers Council would like to open negotiations for a mutual partnership. Consider this a gift basket. Only instead of fruit, you get a vampire. What you do with it is entirely up to you.”

Maybe it had been foolish on her part, but Buffy had decided those were terms she could live with. More than live with.

And so that’s what they’d done. Once Spike had rematerialized and found his way back to Angel’s office, he and Buffy had followed Eve up to



the appropriately named White Room and let whatever magic was in there do its thing to give Spike shape. One not-quite-ghost had gone in, one vampire had come out. A vampire Buffy could touch and feel, which she'd only just barely managed to keep from doing while they'd been at the law firm itself.

It wasn't until they'd left the place entirely that she realized she didn't really know what to do now. Hell, she didn't even know if Spike really wanted to go with her or if he was simply doing what he was told. Not that he'd ever been great at that, either, but even when he'd been defiant, it had been an outward defiance. The sort that came with heated arguments and snide asides and endless snark that made her want to rip out her hair almost as much as she wanted to rip *off* his clothes. He had always been her eternal contrarian, except now.

It wasn't until she was on the road—he didn't even crack wise at her being behind the wheel—that Buffy's patience snapped.

"This is what you want, right?"

"What's that, love?"

"I'm just saying, if I forced you out of an afterlife you were enjoying, you could've told me."

Spike shifted in his seat and scoffed. "What was there to enjoy? I was stuck in one place with your honey. Couldn't touch anything, feel anything. 'Cept for those times I was pulled into a bloody hellscape I was thick enough to think I might have championed my way out of."

"A hellscape?"

He lifted a shoulder as though it didn't matter and turned to gaze out the window. "Reckon that's what it was. Definitely wasn't what you described, when it was you who'd done the hero bit."

"Okay, then I guess you're welcome."

He snorted. "Thanks ever so."

And that was it. After the day she'd had, Buffy didn't think she could handle any more ambiguity or screwed-up vampire crap. Without bothering to check the rearview mirror, she lurched the car into the right lane and just kept lurching amid the squealing tires and blaring horns and indignant rush of Britishisms she didn't understand alike until she was parked on the freeway shoulder. Not exactly the ideal place for a conversation but, well, just call her a choosey beggar because she'd hit her limit.

"I need to know right now," she said sharply. "I know we said a lot back there and...it's all a lot, but I came across the world for you, Spike. I dropped everything. I took hundreds of thousands of dollars that weren't mine to come back to Sunnydale because two days ago, my hand started to burn."

He blinked at her. "Your hand."

"Yeah. This hand." She held up her left hand—the hand she'd used to reach for him, because that was always where she found him. On her left, covering her where she was the most vulnerable. Steadfast and *there* as no one ever had been or could ever be. No one but Spike. "I held your hand and told you I love you. And then you told me I didn't and died. Nineteen days later my hand burned, and I knew it was you. You're the reason I came here. I drove out to Sunnydale to find you, and when that was a bust, I went to see Angel."

Spike was giving her that look once more—like she was too good to be real. Something that eclipsed belief itself, even after more than a century of redefining what was possible. And it hit her again, the fact that he'd thought the words she'd given him had been nothing more than her whispering what this particular dead man wanted to hear before he died for good. He hadn't known, and still didn't know, about the nights she'd spent after. The aimlessness and the regret, missing this fundamental piece of herself that she hadn't realized was so fundamental or so *herself* until it was taken from her.

"You came here for me?" he asked at last, his voice shaking. "Buffy..."

"Yes. So if there's somewhere else you'd rather be, then the time to tell me is now. I've already—"

"Somewhere else? Are you off your bloody bird?"

Was she? She was beginning to wonder. None of this trip had gone the way she thought it would. First making like a bandit with the contents of Travers's private safe, then Sunnydale, and finally everything that had happened the second she'd stormed into Angel's office. One surprise had been enough, but she'd had multiple shocks to the system in rapid succession. Finding Spike there but not there, his face when he'd seen her, all the knowledge snowballing into the sort of chaotic momentum that ended up with her parked on the side of the road in Los Angeles on the verge of either hysterical laughter or tears.

But she couldn't lose it now. Now after she'd fought so hard to keep it.

"I'm sorry, love."

She jolted and whipped her head to him. "What?"

"Only thought I've had since I sprang back into the mortal coil was you. Just a coward, is all." He released a breath, the sound strangely intimate in the scant space that separated them. "Was something, goin' out like that. Knowin' I'd finally done a bit of good. My way of thinkin', it was enough to get you to pretend for me."

"I was not pretending. I meant it."

"I know that now."

"But you didn't when I said it." Buffy felt her lower lip starting to wobble but fought back the emotional rush. "I... I guess I didn't know exactly how *much* I meant it when I said it, but I did mean it. And you thought that was what, charity?"

He lifted a shoulder but, to his credit, didn't look away. "Nice way to go, and all."

"You really think I'd say *I love you* as a reward? Do you know me at all?"

"It's not you I've not been sure of, Slayer. Never once. Think I told you as much not too long ago." Spike exhaled again, this time closing his eyes as though to brace himself. "Didn't think I was worth it. That I'd done enough to deserve it."

"Love isn't about deserving. It's about how I feel. If I'd wanted to let you know I was grateful, I would've said that. If I'd wanted to let you know I was proud, well, there are words for that too. And I was grateful and proud and so many things, but the biggest thing I was was in love with you, and I'd run out of time."

He kept his eyes closed, his brow furrowing and his cheeks going hollow with the breath he took, the sound deep, like he had reached further into himself than just his lungs to pull it out. The air between them seemed almost electric in that moment, making her skin buzz along with the thrum of her pulse, breaking with a thrill when her senses snapped into place and she realized what was about to happen. Then he was reaching for her and she for him, and they came together over the console, his fingers in her hair, curling into fists to hold her against him

as he took her mouth for the first time in too long. And Buffy sobbed, her face wet and slick against his, and his lips were pulling and desperate and hungry, drawing her into the magnetic force that had always been Spike. The thing she'd spent years trying to outrun but had never managed to escape because, on a bone-deep level, she'd never truly wanted to.

The car lurched and rocked as she climbed over, some axle or something whining its complaint. Outside the windows, traffic zoomed along the highway, headlights flashing and horns honking and Buffy was in Spike's lap, straddling him against the passenger seat, pushing herself into his kiss with her lips and tongue and teeth as she fumbled with his belt, following the pulse of the heat he ignited, the hand that had caught fire when he died and burned again when he'd come back, and he was there too. Murmuring her name like a song, a prayer, fingers flying over her slacks, then knuckles against her pussy, teasing her through the fabric that separated them. And she gave up on his belt because her own pants were the problem, batted his hand away to fist the poly-cotton blend and use every bit of her strength to tear open a hole at the crotch.

"God, I missed this," Spike said, his voice low and rumbling and light, so light, as though he were battling a laugh and his own amazement at the same time. "Missed you so much."

"What did you miss?"

"How bloody wild you are." He began trailing little biting kisses along her throat, one hand at her center again, pressing through her panties into her own wetness to tease her clit, the other hand working feverishly to finish the job she'd started at his belt. "Never thought I'd feel it again."

"That would've been your own fault for dying on me."

He snorted, but the sound melted into a groan for he'd succeeded in freeing his cock and she'd wasted no time wrapping her hand around it. Stroking at that rhythm he liked, squeezing just a little too hard but not hard enough, the way he'd shown her forever ago, dragging his foreskin around the head before rolling it back, her thumb swirling through the precum she knew she'd find. "Excuse a bloke for savin' the world," he managed at last, the words an argument but his voice a concession, a surrender, and she decided she could tell him the rest later. That she was

talking about how he'd told her to leave it and how much that had hurt. That the night before the fight, she'd wanted to feel him inside of her again but had worried too much it would seem to him like goodbye. That some part of her had known it needed to be anything but the eve of the apocalypse for him to hear her and take her seriously, and that fucking because you might die was nothing like fucking because you were going to live, and that was what she'd wanted. The first time with Spike again, their new first time, to be a start and not an end.

She could tell him all that later. Right now, she just wanted to sink onto him. Hold onto this particular moment, Spike under her hands and against her mouth, on her tongue and loving her in that way no one else ever had or could, even if he hadn't said it.

Except he did say it. She bunched her panties to the side and dragged the head of his cock down the seam of her soaked pussy, and the second she pressed him into her and began inching her way down his shaft, Spike threw his head back and worked his throat, digging his fingers into her hips and saying, "I love you, I love you, I love you. Fuck, Buffy, I love you so much. Please, fuck, let this be real." And she began rolling her hips, taking him deeper inside, spearing herself on his cock again and again, the air thick with the wet sounds they made, with his whispers and whimpers and prayers, with her breaths and gasps and even, yes, the thundering of her heart because she could feel all of that. Hear it. Her skin hot, her hands on his shoulders, her eyes on his eyes, watching his face as she stroked onto him, her body remembering what her brain did not. The way to clench those inner muscles if she wanted him to howl, squeezing along his cock as though trying to lock him in place. And Spike snarled, his grip on her bruising and wonderful, then slid one hand over the curve of her thigh so he could tease her clit on each downstroke, all the while he whispered how beautiful she was, how good she felt, how he'd missed being inside of her so much, how he'd been an idiot and he'd make it up to her. Bloody swore he would. No matter how long it took. And then asking her to come, because he loved watching her come. Loved feeling her cunt spasm around his cock and *please* come, Buffy, because he didn't think he could hold on much longer.

It was when he caught her mouth again, Buffy taking him in to the hilt, grinding herself against his knuckle, that she let go, gave herself

over to euphoria both foreign and familiar, white-hot pleasure wringing through her body and Spike there, growling, whimpering, then bucking his hips and spurting into his own release. Thrusting up even as he began to soften, though in that telling way that reassured her he would swell inside her within seconds, because they were them and once was never enough. Once was just getting started.

Only Buffy thought, as she rested her head against his chest, dragging in deep breaths of air that tasted of them, that she might like the quiet too. A nice mixture of the versions of themselves. Their last year together along with their first. The sex and the snuggling. They could have it all now. Every bit of it.

Even amid the stuff that would always be there, trying to get in the way.

“Why do you think the Senior Partners really made you solid?” she asked. Not the best post-coital conversation but her brain was her brain and thankfully he loved her for that.

Spike was still for a moment, then ran a hand down her back. “Not complainin’, are you?”

“Of course I’m not. Just seems like, you know, too good to be true.” She shifted so she could see his eyes. “Do you think they would’ve jumped in with the solution if I hadn’t been there?”

“Considerin’ how quiet they were on the matter until you showed up, not likely.” He tucked her hair, slightly damp from sweat, behind her ear. “Reckon they’re up to somethin’ they don’t want the Slayer sniffin’ around.”

“So, they just give me what I want most in the world and send me on my way. That’s what I thought, too.”

“Most in the world, eh?”

Buffy slapped his chest but didn’t argue. She couldn’t. It was the truth.

“You got anywhere to be, Slayer?” he asked. “Cause we could stick around if you’re worried.”

“You’d be okay with that?”

“Course. Why not?”

“Just... I don’t want to mess this up.” She wet her lips and played absently with the collar of his tee. “I’m done messing us up, Spike.”

“You think stayin’ would?”

She hesitated, not sure how to respond. It was just so new, and precious in that newness. But the thought was there and not likely to go anywhere anytime soon. Buffy had never been the sort of person who could put the man she loved over the world, and she’d learned firsthand that her instincts were typically on the money. Right now, those instincts were screaming that Wolfram and Hart wanted her as far from what they were doing with Angel as possible, and that the direction she’d been searching for since Sunnydale fell was right here. Not back with the other slayers who, push came to shove, didn’t really need her, but with the world that did.

“I think I love you. Well, no, I know I love you. I also know that being around...certain people can make us both stupid sometimes.” Buffy wet her lips and met his eyes again. “But not as stupid as what my ex is doing in that office. And that if they want me *out* of Los Angeles enough to give me exactly what I want, then *in* Los Angeles is probably where I need to be.”

Spike just held her gaze before moving in to kiss her brow, her cheek, then finally her lips. “Not goin’ anywhere, love. You wanna take on the big sod, I’m in the fight as always, right beside you.”

“So you won’t be stupid?”

“Can’t promise that. Can promise I’ll always come home at the end of the day. And that home is you. Besides...” A grin tugged at the corner of his mouth. “Teamin’ up to muck up whatever he has planned is how I fell in love with you in the first place.”

“You run out or dust on me this time and I will kick your ass to hell and back.”

“Like I don’t know that.” The grin bloomed into a smirk, and he took her cheek in his hand. “What do you say, love? Call’s all yours to make.”

Put like that, there really wasn’t a question of what to do next. Whatever was coming would get here whether she stood still or started moving. It always would. But her hand had started to burn and that had brought her home, directed her where she needed to be to find the person who would stand with her. Who had always been there at her side. And if they were very lucky and maybe just a little less stupid, always would be.

The calls were theirs to make. All she had to do was make them.

"I think they're up to something they don't want us to know about," she said. "I think it started with that amulet."

"You aim to go back for it."

"Let's just say my interest is of the piqued." Buffy leaned forward to touch her brow to his. "And I'm sick of being told what to do or what I should or shouldn't worry about. If the next fight is here, then here is where we should be."

"So by makin' strides to get rid of you..."

"You know me so well."

He grinned. "Whatever they get, they have comin' by my count. They lit the bloody fire."

She held up her hand, the one that had brought her across the world, and curled her fingers around the lapels of his duster. Spike, her spark. "And didn't count on me to feel it."

He nudged her nose with his, gripped her by the hips and shifted her on his hardening cock. "You feel that?"

"Uh huh." Buffy kissed him but broke away with a laugh, even as she started to move. "I *also* feel like we're gonna get a ticket or something. We pressed our luck once."

"That mean you want me to stop?"

"Not on your life."

"Good. 'Cause baby, you're burning me up."

That was them all over. They were fire. And theirs never went out.

She tightened her grip on his duster, whispered, "Mutual," and touched her lips again to the flame.