

# IT CAME UPON A MIDNIGHT CLEAR

*A Spike and Buffy Romance*



HOLLY DENISE







BUFFY SUMMERS WAS DEAD, to begin with.

There was no doubt about that. She'd been dead for three months, buried a good six feet below the soil. Life around her grave had gone on, as life always did. People mourned, people cried, but eventually, people moved on. She'd lain dead for over a hundred days. A hundred and forty-seven days, to be exact.

Buffy Summers was as dead as a doornail.

Only she was not dead now. Not on the outside. Instead, she was gazing out a rainy window pane as Tara helped Dawn decorate their Christmas tree, lost in an endless malaise. She'd slept all summer, but she couldn't overcome her fatigue. Every inch of her was numb.

She knew she should be thinking about Christmas presents or something to do with the holidays, but the impending loom of the most wonderful time of the year only furthered her depression. It didn't help that her mind was with someone it shouldn't be with, the one person that could make her feel anything but dead. The one person she couldn't see, because he was dead himself. And even in the wake of her delayed afterlife, her path was determined by a script that the Powers had pre-approved. She'd used her detour to rest-in-peace as an excuse for temporary insanity, but it couldn't be like that anymore.

Spike was dead, and so was she. Two dead people couldn't make life.

Especially with only her broken soul to guard them both.

"Hey, Buffy!" Dawn singsonged, giggling as Tara wrapped a gold rope of garland around her. "Wanna help us put the star on?"

Buffy offered a half-shrug, not tearing her eyes away from the rain-splattered window. "You guys have done all the work," she said. "Besides...height issues."

The giggling stopped immediately, as did the garland-wrapping. Buffy fought off a groan. Great. Just what she needed. More reasons to feel guilty for not being a beacon of seasonal bliss.

"Well," Dawn replied, sticking her nose in the air, "bah humbug to you, too."

Tara offered a shrill laugh at that, her attempt to relocate the fun making Buffy's heart ache.

"Any idiot who goes about with 'Merry Christmas' on his lips should be boiled with his own pudding and buried with a stake of holly through his heart," Tara quipped, then blushed and glanced down. "Sorry. I'm just in a festive mood."

"So you decided to quote Scrooge?" Buffy asked.

"She's just going off with what you give her," Dawn spat, snatching the gold star from the box of decorations. "Since you're too much of a Grinch to help out, I'm going to go get a chair to stand on. If I fall over and crack my head open, it's on your conscience."

The distress that filled Tara's eyes only made Buffy feel worse. Her lack of a Christmas spirit wasn't helping matters, and the witch was caught in the crossfire. Were it anyone but Tara, Buffy might not have minded. But it wasn't anyone but Tara. It was Tara. And of her friends, Tara was the only one that had personally apologized for the hell that she'd put her through—for her role in bringing her back. And while she assured Buffy that she definitely wasn't sad that she wasn't dead anymore, it gutted her to think about what she was going through.

The fact that she was going through a rather severe rough-patch with Willow, but still made sure to come over for quality time with Dawn, quickly elevated her to Buffy's new and improved list of best-friends. Tara was the only one who understood her.

*That's not true.*

She shivered and gazed longingly in the direction of Restfield Cemetery.

Spike.

Buffy bit her lip. Her body had a tendency to tremble when she thought of him. Especially now. Now that she knew how his hands felt on her skin, how wonderful his body felt against hers, how he fit inside her in a way that made her feel whole.

But it was wrong, and she was fooling herself to think otherwise. Spike made the hurt go away, yes, but that wasn't the way it was supposed to be. She wasn't supposed to crave his arms or his silky kisses. It wasn't who she was. And eventually—eventually—she would remember that, and she'd hate herself for what she'd done.

Right now, she hated herself for other reasons.

"I'm sorry," Buffy murmured. She didn't know who she was speaking to—the girls in the room, or the vampire half a town away. "I'm just not in the spirit this year."

Dawn snorted as she dragged a kitchen chair loudly across the hardwood floor in a way that was sure to leave a mark. She was doing it intentionally—hoping, undoubtedly, to raise some sort of a reaction from her less-than-emoting sister. Buffy wished she had the energy to care, but she didn't.

"Yeah," her sister snapped. "Not like there's, oh say, a reason to be happy this year."

"Dawnie," Tara pleaded, "let's just put the star on."

"Sure. Wouldn't want to interrupt the yuletide pity-party."

"Dawn—"

Buffy rolled to her feet at that, forcing herself away from the window. The bleak terrain only made her crave Spike more, and that was a road she could not go down again. She was too broken, and he was soulless. He could take the pain away temporarily, but she needed a soul. She needed a soul, else hers would never heal.

And that was that.

"I'm going to bed," she announced, heading toward the staircase without awaiting a response.

"Buffy—" Tara protested.

“I’m tired, and it’s not helping, my being down here. I’m just the rain on the parade.” She paused, her hand on the railing. “Have a good Christmas.”

She said it because she very much planned to sleep all through tomorrow.

If she thought about how happy she was supposed to be, she was sure she would break completely.



HER ROOM WAS DISTURBINGLY QUIET. WHEN LIFE EXISTED IN ANY space, there was usually sound. Usually breathing. Usually creaks and cricks and some indication to give away the fact that, yes, someone lived here. But there was none in her room. There was nothing. Buffy lay in bed, studying the ceiling, and listened to nothing.

She couldn’t even hear the rain.

Perhaps, had she cared more, she would have thought it strange that she could feel so fatigued after a summer of being dead. The mechanics of the human were wondrous at times. Before the Tower, before the jump, she’d lived on adrenaline. The threat of Glory had prevented exhaustion. If she succumbed to her physical limitations, Dawn would die. She’d known that then, thus, even tired, she hadn’t slept.

Now, though, now that she’d been dead, all she wanted to do was sleep.

And as always, sleep found her. Sleep didn’t care that it was Christmas Eve. Sleep didn’t care that her sister was angry or that her only measure of solace nowadays was a vampire that she could never really have. A vampire that couldn’t heal her the way she needed.

Sleep didn’t care about anything. It came to her without bias and took her away in a matter of minutes.

That was, until, her alarm clock shrilled three times. Just three.

One. Two. Three.

And Buffy shot awake.



THREE YEARS EARLIER, UNDER A DYING LOT OF CHRISTMAS TREES, Buffy had come face-to-face with the ghost of Jenny Calendar. Then calling herself the First Evil, the visage of Giles's dead girlfriend had launched into a James Bond-like explanation of her evil ambitions, leading to Buffy's tearful plea that Angel not dust himself.

The girl that had sobbed for her former love was dead. And while she would undoubtedly feel a pang if this version of Jenny Calendar warned her that Angel was about to dust himself, Buffy couldn't see herself sobbing over him ever again. The meeting with him had been uncomfortable enough. Sitting in a dingy café half between Sunnydale and Los Angeles, looking at Angel and wondering when she'd stopped loving him. When she'd become so jaded.

She hadn't thought of Angel at all until that phone call. She'd thought of Giles, her friends, Dawn, and Spike. She'd thought of Spike every day—ever since seeing him at the bottom of the stairs. Since he'd taken her hands in his and told her how long she'd been gone.

But she hadn't thought of Angel, and she didn't really think about him now. Oh, she pretended she did; she hid behind that doomed relationship to protect herself from Spike, but her mind and her heart were far away from Angel. Angel couldn't touch her anymore.

"What are you doing here?" Buffy asked the apparition, much calmer than she felt.

Jenny Calendar was very, very still. It was not the Jenny Calendar that she remembered—not in life, not even as the First Evil. There was softness about her that only those that had touched Heaven could recognize, and for a brief second, Buffy found herself overwhelmed by the most prominent wave of homesickness that she'd ever known.

"Is that it?" Jenny asked. "Ghost standing in the middle of your room and all I get is bored detachment."

"I'm surprised I could work up that much."

"I can't even get a little chill?"

"Ms. Calendar, you're a ghost. Ghosts are at the very bottom of my easily wigged list."

The apparition sighed and waved a hand. "I don't know what's worse," she mused. "Paralyzing fear or apathy."

Buffy shrugged, offering a half-smile. "Maybe if I wasn't the Slayer."

“Don’t try to make me feel better.”

“As it is, I’m not sure I can trust that you’re here at all.”

“Oh?”

“Well, disregarding the fact that the last time we talked, you were trying to talk me into letting my then-boyfriend dust, I am a recently non-dead girl and not prone to trust anyone.” Buffy shrugged again. “Or, my personal favorite, I’m dreaming.”

“You think you’re dreaming?”

“An overused excuse, maybe, but it makes sense. After all, anything can affect one’s senses. A slight disorder of the stomach makes them cheat. You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato.” She paused then with a frown. “There’s more of gravy than of grave about you.”

Silence consumed her. That line sounded too familiar to be random.

“Okay,” she said a minute later. “I don’t remember much from my English classes, but I’m pretty sure that I just quoted Dickens. And... mostly accurately.”

The ghost nodded.

“Okay. That’s kinda wigsome.”

“That’s just the beginning,” Jenny replied, “so you might want to improve your knee-knocking. Some of these guys are liable to get offended if their ethereal presence isn’t met with fear—or at the very least—a little awe.”

There was so much about that sentence that did not rest well with her. “These guys?” Buffy echoed, wide-eyed. “What are you talking about?”

“You will be haunted by three spirits tonight.”

“Haunted? I think I’ve had enough of that.”

“Oh, so the ghost thing is working on you now?” Jenny demanded, stifling a laugh. “Did quoting Dickens make you a believer?”

“I didn’t say I was afraid. I’ve just had enough.”

“Well, there’s little I can do about that,” the ghost replied. “They’ll be here soon. The first one will come when the clock tolls one...and the second at two...and so forth.”

Buffy frowned. “Where’s the originality in that?”



"It's not my job to come up with new methods. I'm just the messenger." She offered a small smile. "Buffy...tonight isn't about fault or blame. I know our methods are a little...well, derivative, but the Powers felt that you needed a kick."

Buffy snorted ineloquently. "As if I haven't been kicked repeatedly ever since my bestest buds mojo'd me back from the beyond. Sure. Fine. Bring on the kicking. I think I'm too numb now to feel anything as it is."

"You understand that I didn't mean an actual kicking, right?"

"I've been kicked pretty much every way there is to be kicked."

And she'd done some kicking, too.

Spike.

She hadn't seen him in days—not since the invisible aerobics in his crypt. He'd kicked her out because he couldn't have all of her. He couldn't be the guy she took to the Bronze or the one that accompanied her to parties. They couldn't hold hands or kiss in public or do anything that announced they were together.

Spike wanted her to be with him and she couldn't. And the more he pursued her, the more she kicked. She kicked until he bled.

He loved her, and he hadn't been by to see her since that day in his crypt. Where he'd made love to her as she tried hard just to fuck him, all the while loving the fact that she could see his face and he couldn't see hers. Patrols since then had been unsettlingly silent. Spike hadn't popped out from behind a crypt or barged into her house under a smoking blanket. He hadn't come to her at all.

Because he couldn't have her. Not all of her.

Buffy shivered and glanced up again, starting a bit when she realized that the apparition was still there.

"The Powers offer no sympathy for the way things are," Jenny said without prompt, giving her the unsettling feeling that her thoughts were on full display. "Human deeds are left in human hands. It's what one does with what's left that makes any difference." Then Jenny paused thoughtfully and added, "You're confused and hurt, but you're not alone."

It had been a long while since Buffy found herself overwhelmed with emotion, thus the sensation of stinging eyes went unnoticed for

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several long seconds. And before she could wipe her tears away, the ghost began to fade into the dark.

“Expect the first ghost when the bell tolls one,” Jenny reminded her, true to form.

Then she was gone.

And Buffy, once more, sat in silence.

BUFFY HADN'T THOUGHT that she'd be able to fall asleep again. After all, being told that she was going to be haunted by three spirits wasn't exactly the ideal note to go to bed on. Thus, when her alarm clock shrilled loudly at one in the morning, it scared her out of her skin and she matched its pitch with a shriek of her own.

Then her sleep-filled eyes landed on the short, dark-haired man in her room, and she screamed again. Screamed and tumbled to the ground, her legs tangled in a mass of blankets.

"No need for that, love," the man said in a vaguely familiar Irish accent. "Though I can't say I mind the view."

She scowled at him and climbed wearily to her feet, tugging the comforter up with her. She wasn't wearing anything too revealing, but having a man in her room that she didn't know made her feel, rather unsurprisingly, self-conscious. "What the hell is this?" she demanded, tucking the blanket up under her arms. "Who are you?"

The man spread his hands with a helpless grin. "The Ghost of Christmas Past," he retorted with a simple shrug. "Or something of the like. I'm here to show you Christmases of the past. Guess that qualifies me for the role."

Buffy blinked, recollection sweeping in. Oh yes. Jenny Calendar's

warning. Three ghosts. Bell tolls one, and all that jazz. Her own personalized version of *A Christmas Carol*, because the Powers didn't think her life was screwy enough. "Am I supposed to know you or what?" she asked. "I mean, I don't think Scrooge knew his ghosts."

"Yeah well, you're not Scrooge, darling," the man pointed out. "And I'm not here exactly because of a lack of Christmas spirit. If anything, I think the Powers could understand why you're not decking halls and singing carols at the top of your lungs."

"One would think," she agreed, doing her best to keep her chin up. "But you didn't answer my question...do I know you?"

"We met once," the ghost confirmed. "You were in love with a different vampire then."

Objection flared within her chest at the implication that she was in love with a vampire now, but the ghost was speaking again before she could correct him.

"I'm a halfling," he explained, grinning. "Half-human, half Brachen demon."

"You're a demon?"

"Only on my father's side." He took her hand and shook it hard. "Buffy Summers, right? I'm Doyle. Just Doyle."

"Doyle." The name was familiar, but she couldn't place the face. "I'm sorry...I don't—"

"Remember me? No hard feelings, love."

She smiled a half-smile. "Being dead...faces you don't know kinda mesh together. It took me a while to remember my own sister."

Not technically, but it'd felt like forever. She'd been ready to leap to her death on the Tower again before she'd fully recognized Dawn. Before she'd remembered who she was and that she loved her at all. That she had a sister. No, it hadn't been long.

It had been lifetimes.

"I died," Doyle offered, shrugging another half-shrug. "A while ago, actually. Saving the world."

Buffy smiled again, but there was no feeling behind it. Seemed she and Doyle had that much in common. "Saving the world?"

"Well...Los Angeles," he amended. "Eventually the world, I suppose. The Scourge wanted to take out everything. Their little

glowy-gizmo would've eventually been used to cleanse the world of... well, everything essentially non-demon. Vampires, halflings like yours truly...and, of course, the entire human race."

Wow. That was surprising. An apocalypse of sorts that she'd never heard of. In Los Angeles. How many potential apocalypses were there, at any given time? How were they all averted? Did the Watchers Council keep close watch of all the hellmouths or places of otherworldly activity? How many ends-of-the-world had Angel averted on his own?

How many times would she have to die before she got to rest?

"Enough about me, though," Doyle said, stepped forward. "You and me, missy, have a lot to do and only an hour in which to do it."

"An hour?"

He nodded. "If we're to follow format. Best be on our way. I don't want to keep the Ghost of Christmas Present waiting. Rumor has it, she packs a mean punch." As though feeling an imminent blow simply at the mention, Doyle frowned and rubbed his nose. "So, my dear Slayer, if you would so kindly take my arm, and we'll be on our way."

He held out said arm and with a timely gust of wind, the bedroom window blew open.

Buffy's eyes widened and she glanced down in horror, the blanket falling from her arms. "I gotta change," she objected. "I can't go out—"

"Now's not a time for vanity," Doyle retorted, much too merrily. "Sides, ghosts can't critique your wardrobe."

"So says you," she grumbled.

"Neither can shadows, and that's all you'll be seeing tonight. Come now, love. Time and tide wait for no man...or slayer."

Buffy sighed but decided not to argue. The sooner she got the show on the road, the sooner the morality play would end, and she would either wake up or get to resume the unwelcome-restart of her life with a new cheery outlook. Neither seemed particularly likely, but she wasn't looking to extend the evening any more than necessary. Thus, with a tired nod, she abandoned thought of changing and took Doyle's arm.

"Thatta girl," he commended, leading her to the open window. "Now...hold on tight."

She did. And she slammed her eyes closed for good measure.

Buffy honestly had no idea what to expect. The gut-clenching sensation of a long fall. The wind biting at her face as her body soared above a sleepy town. The pull of the past at her skin as the ghost turned back the hands of time and dragged her into a world so far behind her that it might as well have been lived by someone else. She didn't know, and all renditions of *A Christmas Carol* handled the time-jump differently. So whatever was to happen at the will of the Powers had to be large and flamboyant. They were, after all, self-absorbed higher beings.

"Buffy?" Doyle prodded, giving her arm a good nudge. "Open your eyes."

The air against her skin was cold. Not cold like a crypt—Buffy knew that sort of cold. Ever since she'd clawed her way through her coffin, the only place where she felt whole was inside a tomb. But she wasn't in a tomb now.

She peeled her eyes open slowly, and her heart about stopped.

She was in the factory. The one that had burned down.

Only it wasn't burned. It was very much in-working-order. There were vamps all over the place. Vamps she clearly remembered dusting—vamps that she'd encountered a dozen times. The small one with the glasses. Dalton. She remembered Dalton so well. He was years in the past—had dusted at some point, she could only imagine—and yet there he was. Standing in front of her as though not a day had gone by.

God, how jaded was she if she found herself pining for the vamps of the old days?

"Where are we?" Buffy asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"You know where we are."

"Yeah, but...why?" There wasn't anything here that she needed to see. The factory hadn't burned until after Jenny Calendar's death. Buffy remembered everything that happened that year in vivid detail, and there was nothing she particularly cared to relive. "If this is the Powers telling me to run after Angel, you can forget it. Been there, done that, got the t-shirt. Besides, I think Cordy has dibs."

Doyle winced but didn't say anything. Well, for a minute or two.

Like so many others in her life, the ghost really didn't have a mute button. "Love, do you see Angel around in this picture?"

"Well, no—"

"So let this be the first lesson. Don't be jumping to conclusions, you hear?" He grasped her wrist without warning and dragged her toward the nearest corridor. "And don't look so nervous. It's not like they can see you."

She knew that. She'd seen enough portrayals of *A Christmas Carol* to know how the game went. But knowing it and believing it were two very different things. For all intents and purposes, she was walking down a hallway, dressed in nothing but silk pajama bottoms and a camisole that made her look much perkier than she felt.

But the vamps didn't know that. They couldn't see her. They were memories. Nothing more.

Only they didn't look like memories. There was nothing to suggest that the vamps around her were mere shadows of the past. Everything looked so real.

"Where are we going?" she asked, even though she already knew the answer.

This was the factory. If she wasn't here to see Angelus, she was here to see Spike.

Doyle turned a sharp corner that opened to a flight of stairs she'd never before explored. Granted, she'd never had much time to snoop around the factory. Once or twice, sure, but too often it was crawling with vamps. The only time that she'd had unlimited access, she'd been in a hurry to stop Angelus and the Judge from wiping out all of Sunnydale. But she couldn't say, knowing Spike as she did now, that she was surprised. He had an affinity for underground chambers.

The way he looked at her now always begged the silent question: *wanna go downstairs?*

Buffy shivered, trailing Doyle tacitly as he pushed a door open.

Spike.

He was lounging in a recliner, his eyes glued to a television. He was shirtless—*drool*—and his left hand rested just at the waistband of his notoriously tight jeans, his fingertips just grazed his equally notorious bulge.

For whatever reason, her first reaction was one of astonishment. Vampires didn't age—they couldn't—but Spike, this Spike, looked... different. When she'd been seventeen, he'd seemed ancient. More so than his years would suggest—more so than she ever would have guessed. And to this day, she didn't know why. It wasn't like Spike acted like an old, decrepit vamp. If anything, his attitude concealed his age. He was the perpetual kid who refused to learn from his mistakes.

He'd seemed old to her then. And now...

God, how wrong she'd been. Just looking at his shadow, he was so young. That burden in his eyes was missing. The weight of his love that kept him trapped between living and dying was nowhere to be found. The part of him that she'd put there—the pain that she saw every time their gazes clashed in that split second before he hid himself behind a smirk and a comment that was sure to earn him a bloody nose. That wasn't there.

This Spike—his truly evil counterpart—was free. No remorse. No guilt. No suffering. No longing. No love.

This was a Spike that didn't love her.

Doyle snickered and rolled his eyes. "Women," he drawled.

Buffy almost jumped. She'd forgotten that she wasn't alone. "What?" she demanded.

"You're not as difficult to read as you'd like to think, doll."

"Hey!"

The ghost just rolled his eyes again, pointing. "That man," he said, a strange edge in his voice, "is head over heels, out of his mind, bleeding his non-soul out in love with you. Even there. Right there. Can't you tell?"

Buffy stared at Doyle for a long second, blinked, then looked back at Spike.

"Can't I tell?" she repeated dryly. "Oh yeah. It's so transparent."

"He's in love with you!"

"He's sitting in a rocker, Doyle. If he's in love with anyone, I think it's La-Z-Boy."

"You sure you're not a natural blonde?"

Buffy frowned, fisting a handful of hair. "Hey!"

"Have you even glanced at the telly?" Doyle gestured to the screen



that had Spike's undivided attention. "He's in denial now. Much like some other people in this room that shall remain incorporeal and nameless, but right there. Right from the beginning. Love doesn't start the way you think it does, girlie. Especially not love worth fightin' for."

She tried to do something other than stare numbly, but there was little else to reach for. "Are you implying," she began slowly, "that the Powers decided to make me visit my past—and presumably my present and future—a la Dickens because of Spike?"

Doyle frowned and shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "No," he said. "Not only because of him, no. You've got your head twisted 'round—doesn't hurt that a lot of what you're goin' through would ease if you took off your blinders. We know you're in pain, Buffy, but there's only so much of that that you can pin on the PTB. You're screwed up in a variety of ways."

A shrill laugh tore at her throat. "Fantastic," she said, tears stinging her eyes again. "Just what every girl wants to hear."

"You think that love means letting go," Doyle said softly. "It does... to romantics and poets and songwriters. To heroes and nobles and men of valor, and all that rot. But to friends? Letting go is hard. Yes, they messed up. They truly did." He paused, drew in a breath, and pointed at the phantom in the rocker. "He didn't. He and your sis, they're the ones you're punishing for what your chums did to you. Your friends with their souls, right? Spike and Dawn wouldn't've wanted this for you. That's not to say that your friends did, but Spike's been around and dead long enough to know what it feels like to come back from that. It isn't a trip, even for a vamp. A livin', breathing human?" Doyle whistled and shook his head. "He would've stopped Willow if he'd known what was happening. As much as he loves you, he would've stopped her."

"What?"

The ghost offered her nothing but a skeptical look. "That one you gotta figure out for yourself," he said. "Along with this..." He paused. "Forgiveness is harder than letting go, but it's worth the pain of burying resentment. Forgiveness is the ultimate godsend."

"You're saying I should forgive my friends?"

Doyle snickered. "More than the words, doll. Words are easy. And

you gotta forgive more than just your friends.” He nodded at Spike. “Him, for being what you need when you don’t want to need it. Yourself, for wanting something you think you shouldn’t want.”

Buffy shivered and rubbed her arms, her eyes landing again on the vampire in the recliner.

So different.

A trembling breath pressed against her lips, and she shivered again. Just standing there, watching him, made her body tighten with a familiar yearning that she was growing to both crave and resent. He was so beautiful, more so than she would ever admit aloud. More so than she’d allowed herself to think until that moment. Most thoughts like that were beaten down the second they surfaced, but she couldn’t deny it while staring down a memory.

Spike was beautiful, looking as he did now, so vibrant and full of life. He was gorgeous. Of course, he was beautiful in her world. In the present. He was beautiful but broken. She’d broken him. There was no life in his eyes, only sadness. Only things that she was sure he didn’t want her to see—things that he couldn’t hide.

Her Spike was haunted and she’d made him that way.

In that instant, she hated the Powers and the ghosts and every ethereal thing that was responsible for making her relive the past. This was something she’d wanted to ignore. Something she’d never wanted to see. Her vampire was broken, and it was because of her.

She’d robbed him of his light.

Spike shifted and sighed, dipping his hand closer to his erection. And she saw, for the first time, exactly what he was watching.

And her world stopped.

He was watching her.

Her thoughts must have been gifted the ability to breathe life, for the very next second, Spike arched his pelvis just slightly off the rocker. “Slayer,” he purred, his eyes widening as her on-screen counterpart threw a wicked punch at some vamp lackey. “Gotta give you credit... your moves are enough to drive a sane man to the sodding edge.”

“Why is he watching me?” Buffy asked, her voice barely a whisper. “Doyle?”

“Know thy enemy,” the ghost replied, shrugging.

“He...he taped me?” Her mind was suddenly a collage of memories—flashes to half a dozen grueling battles. How he seemed to anticipate her every move. How much fun fighting him was, because she never knew what to expect. He’d never fallen into the common traps that sent most vamps to dustville. He was innovative. Challenging.

She’d been his project, and he’d done his homework.

He was watching her.

“Slayer,” Spike purred again, though this time, his voice was tight with a familiar stirring of arousal. Buffy knew that voice well. Knew how he loved to make her shiver when she was under him, when those masterful hands of his were trailing hotly across her body. Spike-when-horny was dangerous and addictive. She loved the helplessness in his eyes whenever she touched him, or the way he’d gasp and thrust upward if she deigned to explore the territory south of the border.

He was hers. He belonged to her. And she’d broken him.

His fingers plucked deftly at the buttons of his jeans, and before she could gasp her surprise, his thick cock was in his hand.

“And here’s where it gets a little too graphic for my tastes,” Doyle said cheerfully, turning his back. “Don’t get me wrong, I encourage nudity wherever I go...female nudity. But watching a man beating the bishop doesn’t really turn my crank.” Then, to make his point about how much this didn’t appeal to him, he started whistling the Andy Griffith theme.

It didn’t matter. Buffy barely heard him; she was too enamored with what she was witnessing. Too enamored with the hunger that crashed over her vampire’s face as he tugged his length from base to tip. She licked her lips and pressed her thighs together. She’d never allowed herself to indulge in his body before—not because she didn’t want to, rather because she did. She wanted to know him as no woman had—as she’d known no man before him. And knowing that, knowing that she wanted it, solidified it as something wrong. Something that made their relationship too personal. Something she couldn’t have.

The night that they’d knocked the building down, Spike had done all the exploring. He’d teased her pussy with his tongue, manipulated her clit until she was sure it would stop working, and worshipped every inch of her skin with every inch of his. And he’d never asked her for

anything. Never fisted her hair and shoved her to her knees. Never asked her to suck him off, though she'd known from the way his eyes glazed over every time her mouth moved that he'd wanted it.

But he hadn't done anything about it. He'd made the night about her. That night, and the impromptu sexathon while she was invisio-girl. And she knew why.

It was the same reason that their morning-after had gone so poorly. Spike turned into an ass only after she turned into a bitch, and she hated knowing that. She hated being the one responsible.

And she hated that she hadn't explored him. That right now, watching him masturbate, was the most she'd ever allowed herself to indulge in his body, beyond using it to get off.

"So fucking hot," Spike moaned, fisting his cock. "Oh god, yeah."

"Oh god," she whimpered in agreement.

"Just tell me when it's over," Doyle singsonged, resuming his whistling.

"Bet you're nice and tight," Spike snarled, throwing his head back. "Like wet velvet." He whimpered and squeezed his balls once before curling his hand around his cock once more, taking a fast rhythm that nearly did her over. "Course you would, you dirty bitch. You'd burn me alive."

Somewhere in the back of her mind, Buffy knew that she should be mortified. The idea that Spike wanted her even then—evil as he was and hating her as he had—should have made her heave with disgust. Only it didn't. Instead, she was dripping with need. His every moan went straight to her clit, and she needed him like she never had. It was only by virtue of Doyle's presence that she wasn't rubbing herself in a frenzy to reach fruition along with Spike's shadow.

Spike's shadow, four years prior.

When he'd hated her. But hating her hadn't stopped him from wanting her. From stroking his cock in a way that belonged in a dirty *Playgirl* letter to the editor. It hadn't stopped him from watching her. Watching her until he screwed his eyes shut and bucked his hips, thick ropes of semen spurting from his cock as he roared in completion.

"Oh god."

"I'm guessing it's over," Doyle said. "Just tell me when he zips up."

The words were wasted. Buffy was somewhere else. Somewhere between the past and the present, watching a vampire that loved her—or would, eventually—come down from his high. She watched, fascinated, as he tucked his cock back behind the zipper and wiped his hands on his jeans. As he rose to his feet and hit the pause button on the television.

It paused on her face.

"Ahhh," Doyle said, suddenly at her side again. "Watch this."

Like she could do anything but.

Spike's expression was mesmerizing. There was life, still. Life unlike anything she'd ever seen. He looked more alive than her friends ever had, even when they had been young and idealistic. He looked so alive it made her insides ache.

And he looked it while looking at her likeness on the television. Her teenage face, flushed with exertion, smiling through a cloud of vamp dust.

"Slayer," he murmured, the reverence in his voice unmistakable. He touched the screen, running his fingers down her cheeks and across her mouth. Those vibrant eyes soaked her in completely.

For that instant, there was no hatred. Only respect.

Well, respect and desire.

The moment, however, couldn't last. Before Buffy could summon words to her lips, someone bounded into the room behind her.

"Master Spike, the mistress wanted me to remind you that the party's starting soon."

Sometime later, she would guffaw madly at the *master* part of his former moniker. Right now she was too enchanted with the way the light in his eyes faded into something painfully close to guilt and self-awareness. Spike growled at the intruder and barked something about Christmas being tomorrow, not today, and that Dru should try to get on American time for a change.

Then he looked even guiltier and agreed with a stoic nod to be upstairs shortly.

It was only after the lackey was gone that Spike snarled at the

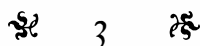
frozen image of Buffy's face and sent the television crashing to the floor.

"He doesn't want to want you," Doyle murmured, soaking the scene up like an avid movie-goer. "Sound familiar, love? Think that he'd be angry if he didn't feel something?"

Buffy didn't reply. She couldn't. She was staring at Spike as he stared at the ruined television.

He looked broken. Haunted.

And as always, past or present, it was because of her.



“THERE’S MORE?”

“Don’t sound so surprised, love. You two have a lot of history. Takes more than one stop to soak it all in.”

Buffy moaned. She didn’t know if she could survive another stop. Her legs were still trembling from the last, her heart sore and her mind unable to shake the image of Spike looking as he did. So hopeless. So alone. Even in a world where he was supposed to belong. A world before Angelus, where Drusilla had still been his queen.

He’d wanted her then. God, he’d wanted her from the start.

The knowledge had her completely thrown, and she didn’t know if she could take more than she’d already seen. And here Doyle was, dragging her forward two years from their last stop.

“Where are we going?”

“To another Christmas.”

Well, she could have told him that much. That was how this game was played, after all. She did the mystical hopscotch through her past, saw her present, and learned something terribly unpleasant about her future. Something sure to make her realize the error of her ways.

The trouble was, there was no scenario—no matter how gruesome or gut-wrenching—provided by her wonderfully overactive imagination

that did much to frighten her at all. There was a loom of sadness in her life as it was, and no amount of thinking or wishing could make it otherwise. If she died again, she died. And then Willow would raise her and Spike would be there for her and Dawn would still hate her and she'd find herself in a cycle of a life not lived.

*But then again, her rationale reasoned, there were worse things than dying.*

There was the pain of losing someone else. The pain of losing someone she cared about. Someone she loved.

Despite however much Dawn hated her right now, Buffy knew, in her heart of hearts, that she'd jump off the Tower for her sister again. And it had nothing to do with missing Heaven.

She loved her sister. To lose Dawn would be to lose herself.

But there was no one else. Not Xander or Willow or Anya or Giles or even Tara, who currently occupied the slot labeled best friend. If the future was that her friends would die, she would hurt, she would mourn, but she wouldn't break. Death was a part of life. She knew that now, and it wasn't something to fear.

Buffy's heart did the twitchy-ache thing again, and she tried desperately to ignore it. Instead, she glanced up and blinked in surprise.

"We're in town."

"Most of your life takes place in town," Doyle retorted. "Unless you and Spike took a road-trip that the Powers don't know about, you can bet most of what you'll see tonight takes place in Sunnydale."

Well, that settled at least one issue. Buffy sighed and rolled her shoulders. "So it is, then."

"Is what?"

"About him. About Spike. This whole night is about Spike."

Doyle grinned. "The night's about what you believe it's about," he replied. "We're following Spike because he's what consumes you right now. Your unbelievable bias against demons—"

"Hey! Slayer here!"

"Yeah, and half-demon here. Kinda glad I'm already dead, so's I don't have to worry about you axing my head off."

"That's different."

He perked his brows with interest. "So there's a difference in what



sort of demons you're dealin' with? Why, then, do you think that every vampire is the same?" Doyle paused, rocking on his heels. "They aren't. Angelus, per example? You think he'd've sat back passively if some army gents had shoved a chip up his righteous arse? You think you ever would've let your guard down as much as you have around your man there."

Buffy blinked and whirled around, soaking in the oddly soothing sight of Spike marching intently down one of Sunnydale's downtown sidewalks. And immediately, her gut clenched as her skin grew tight with excitement. There wasn't a thing about him that didn't ooze confident sex-appeal. The way he walked, the way his eyes surveyed those around him, the way his duster billowed in a way that most cinemas couldn't pull off. He was, in a word, delicious.

And just looking at him, she knew that Doyle was right. She'd started trusting Spike long before he'd fallen in love with her. She'd started trusting him after the spell—the spell that had first introduced her to his sensuous kisses. She remembered sitting on his lap, on his erection, her back pressed against his rumbling chest as his mouth worshipped her throat and lips and whatever else she let him explore.

She'd started trusting him after that. Not entirely, by any means, but she hadn't worried about him or what he was capable of. There was any number of ways that Spike could have killed her, chip or no chip. He was, after all, a master vampire, and he hadn't made it this far on luck alone. He hadn't hired demons or vamps to destroy her. He hadn't bargained with a warlock to render her powerless. He hadn't poisoned her food. And once, even though demons were on his could-kill list, he'd gone as far as to not harm or hurt Giles when the watcher came down with a case of the Fyarl.

Spike was different. He'd always been different.

"You're beatin' yourself up over bein' with someone that you don't think can feel," Doyle said. "Based on what, exactly? All the times that he hasn't saved your life? The tears he didn't shed over the summer? The way he didn't protect you and your kid sis from the bitch-from-hell last year?" He sighed and shook his head. "Vamps aren't all the same, love. The Powers oughta send a cosmic slap-upside-the-head of all the morons that allowed that stereotype to gain credence. If

vampires are the inverse of humans, then the logical argument would be that all souls are the same. There are good ones and there are bad ones. Same as demons.”

She swallowed a groan. “You talk like Spike’s been a saint for the past two hundred years. Hello! It’s not like my ‘he’s a killer’ observation fell out of the clear blue sky. He killed. He enjoyed it. No one held a stake to his chest to make him do it.”

“So no one deserves a second chance? This is a man who didn’t know better until you came along. He was taught to kill.”

“As all demons are.”

“No,” Doyle snapped, “all *vampires* are. It’s in their blood. It’s what’s natural to them. And he shut that out. Not just for you. You can’t remember this summer, of course, but...” He paused. “Ignoring what nature demands of you is damned hard. Angel’s doin’ it, yeah, but that bloke...your Spike, he does it without incentive. I can’t help but respect that. Take it from someone who’s been there. I ignored my demon side so long it got innocents killed. It’s not easy.”

Buffy offered a small nod. “That’s different,” she said softly. “You’re not a vampire.”

“No, but I am a demon. I think I have a bit more experience in all things demon than you.” Doyle pointed at the vampire, who had stopped his sexy-march down the sidewalk and was staring intently into a store window. “Do you think he’s evil?”

“He’s a vamp—”

“No, that’s not an answer. That’s what he is.”

“But what he is defines certain aspects of who he is. Yes, I think he’s evil.” Buffy paused, worrying a lip between her teeth. “But I don’t think he wants to be.”

Admitting that was big. More than big: it was huge. And she didn’t realize what she was confessing until the words left her mouth and touched the air. Until she crossed one of the many lines she’d established in her head. If Spike didn’t want to be evil, what did that mean for her? Even acknowledging that he had the faculties to care about that—to desire something so fundamentally against his nature—conceded something much larger.

At the same time, though, she knew it was true. And it felt wonderful to get the words out, despite what it meant.

Spike didn't want to be evil. He didn't want to be evil because he knew it hurt her—he knew, on some level, that their relationship hurt her because of what he was. It was another thing he tried to keep from her. Another thing that he hadn't buried deep enough.

Another thing that she'd ignored, because to credit him with such knowledge was dangerous, and he was already dangerous enough.

To her, anyway.

Buffy was grateful when Doyle let her admission slide without throwing it under the microscope. "Right," he said, shifting and taking her wrist. "Let's go see what the Big Bad Vamp's up to, yeah?"

She looked up just in time to hear a store-bell ring and the coat-tails of Spike's duster disappear. He'd gone into a shop.

Spike was...shopping?

"What the—"

"You'll never know unless we follow him," Doyle answered, and dragged her toward the shop before she could offer a reply.

The sensation of stepping through walls was something not even the most jaded of slayers could take lightly. Buffy blinked and shook her head and rubbed her arms, though she wasn't sure if her skin was actually tingling or if she was just imagining things. "You should warn people before you do that," she grumbled. "Those of us of the non-ghost nation are more accustomed to, oh say, doors."

Doyle didn't reply. Instead, he pressed his index finger to his lips. "You're missin' the show," he whispered, nodding at the cash-wrap.

Spike was hunched over the counter, studying something intently. "It's a mite pricey for a dangly, innit?" he asked.

Buffy shivered. The effect that his voice had on her couldn't be ignored.

"Emeralds, along with rubies and sapphires, are the three most valuable, most precious stones on earth," the shopkeeper objected, blinking as though he was personally affronted. "I assure you, that is a very generous price for such a rare jewel."

"Not sayin' it's not worth the cost, mate. Mighty fine rock."

"Yes," came the haughty retort. "Yes, it is."

"I'm more partial to blue or red myself, but the lady in question..." Spike paused, running his forefinger across the cut of the stone. "This would bring out her eyes."

"Your girlfriend has green eyes?"

That lent her vampire pause. He blinked and barked a laugh, stroking his chin with his free hand as though to smother the smirk that stretched his lips. "Not my girlfriend," he replied, shaking his head. "Not even close. Point of fact, I haven't the foggiest why I'm in here at all."

The clerk balked like a man whose next meal depended on the sale of this very item. "I'm sure the lady you're shopping for is worth it."

Spike snickered. "Not really. Bloody well guarantee you've never met a more holier-than-thou-stake-up-the-arse bitch in all your life." He paused again, tilting his head. "Though it really would bring out her eyes."

Buffy rolled her eyes, doing her best to conceal the nagging pain that struck her pride. She didn't know why the words hurt; she and Doyle were in the past, after all, and she'd heard worse from the vampire in question—spoken directly to her face. It had never hurt then. "Why do I get the feeling he's talking about me?" she asked dryly, doing her best to conceal the sting.

"You think that Spike would be shopping for a necklace for you?" Doyle retorted.

"Psycho obsession?"

"The year's 1999, love." When it was obvious that the math hadn't computed, the ghost sighed and shifted. "It's been two weeks since the Will Be Done spell. Three weeks since he came to you for help."

Buffy blinked. More blank staring.

"Oh, don't tell me you've forgotten about the Indian siege. That sucker gave me one bastard of a headache, and all I had to do was have the vision!" Doyle made a face and pressed a palm to his forehead, as though the reminder alone was enough to make the ache return. "You remember the siege, right?"

It took a few seconds for the realization to sink in, and even then, it was terribly hard to swallow. "This..." She turned back to Spike, her eyes going wide. "Oh my god."

"You're shopping for someone that does not return your affections?" the shopkeeper inquired cautiously.

"No affection to be returned," Spike replied. "Can't wait to get this bugging chip outta my skull so I can off the bint good and proper."

Buffy barely heard him. She'd managed to move far enough to the right so that her view of the counter was no longer impeded. And when her eyes landed on the emerald in question, she froze.

"Oh my god."

"Look familiar?" Doyle whispered in her ear, startling her out of her skin and earning himself a well-deserved whack on the shoulder.

"Don't do that!" she hissed.

"Talk?"

"Sneak!"

"I was right here!"

Buffy huffed and pointed. "You were over there two seconds ago! Just...make a sound or something if you're gonna be all with the moving. Got it?"

He favored her with an incredulous glance. "What part of ghost can't you get through your head?" he retorted. "And stop redirecting your frustration at me! You're upset 'cause of the necklace."

She whirled around again, pointing now at the emerald in question. "Riley told me that he bought me that necklace!"

"Well, obviously, he didn't."

The scene, of course, had no pause button, and Buffy's bickering with her Ghost of Christmas Past came at the price of the shopkeeper's reaction to Spike's rather blunt declaration. That being that he wanted to kill her—Buffy—but buy her pretty things in the meantime.

However, what the shopkeeper lacked in etiquette, he more than made up for in general Sunnydale knowledge. There was no mistaking the widening of his eyes, nor the way he kept glancing to the hanging mirror on the opposing wall. The hanging mirror that cast only his reflection. "Umm," he said. "E-emeralds are representative of...luck..."

"So the leprechaun on the cereal commercial tells me."

"—and hope. And...protection from evil."

That seemed to perk the vampire's interest. "Yeah?" he replied, arching a brow. "Fancy that."

“Are you interested...in protecting her?” The shopkeeper swallowed hard. “From evil?”

“Until I can off her myself, I suppose,” Spike agreed with a nod. “Yeah. Want the Slayer nice and squirming until her soldier boys undo whatever they did upstairs.” He tossed a careless glance upward, and grinned at the frightened look on the other man’s face. “Emeralds can’t warn me off, y’know. Sellin’ it to me’s not gonna make my skin burn or any of that rot. I expect the warding-off-evil bit’s in the superstition. Sapphires represent royalty, for example. And rubies...passion and lust.”

There was another pause, then, and Spike’s eyes fogged over then in a look that Buffy knew well. Very well. It was a look he’d given her a thousand times. A look that made her tremble, made her ache, made her painfully wet and incapable of doing anything but beg him to take her just a little harder. To keep her body in fiery motion so that her mind didn’t have a chance to catch up. Oh yes. Buffy knew that look well.

“You know about precious stones?” the shopkeeper asked timidly.

It took a minute for the hazy glaze to vacate Spike’s eyes. “Well, you gotta pass the time somehow. ‘Sides, I was with a woman who loved all things sparkly for well over a century. And when you’re at the side of a princess, you treat her royally.”

Buffy swallowed hard. That was so not a pang of jealousy. No, it was not. Next question please.

“A-and do you think that...that a ruby or a sapphire, then, would better fit the, umm, lady in question?”

Spike glanced up slowly. “Slayer’s definitely royal. Royal blood, and all that. Or somethin’ of the like. And red...” He began to drift back into a place of lusty goodness, but quickly snapped out of it. “Red... yeah, she’s a creature of passion, all right. Bloody gorgeous in her element.”

“W-would you prefer to look at a ruby, then?”

The vampire sighed and straightened, sliding his hands into the pockets of his duster. “It’d probably make more sense,” he conceded, though his eyes had wandered back to the emerald on the counter. “But the emerald... Her eyes...”

“Wards off evil,” the shopkeeper agreed.

“Yeah...”

If she lived a thousand years or more, she would never forget this. Never forget the moment she’d plucked from the past—the moment she’d relived—and the tender, excited look on Spike’s face. It was a look that was universal—something she’d know anywhere. Something she’d experienced more times than she could count.

The look that came with the knowledge that a perfect gift had been located. She’d never seen Spike look like that. So pleased. So excited.

And this was when he’d hated her.

“How many times do I have to tell you?” Doyle demanded, startling her once more with the random intrusion of his voice. “He loves you.”

Spike reached for a wallet—*Spike has a wallet?*—and fished out four one-hundred-dollar bills and two fifties. “Want it gift-wrapped,” he said, tossing the cash onto the counter. “Somethin’ nice.”

The shopkeeper nodded eagerly. “To and from?”

“I’ll take care of that part.”



BUFFY DIDN’T WANT TO SEE WHAT HAPPENED NEXT. SHE ALREADY knew, yet Doyle was going to force her to watch anyway. Not that she needed him to tell her that.

“Come on, doll. It’s not like you had reason to believe otherwise.”

The second after Spike made the purchase, the store around them had melted away, and she found herself standing in the living room of Giles’s old apartment. The one he’d lived in before.

The scene was already in progress. She saw herself sitting beside Giles’s very Charlie Brown-like Christmas tree, laughing at something Willow had said while making a face at Xander. Spike was sitting in a chair at the Watcher’s table, drinking pig’s blood from the novelty mug that had since become his.

Past-Buffy didn’t notice the way that Spike was staring at her. Past-Buffy had, for the most part, ignored the resident vampire all evening. Now they were seated around the Christmas tree in preparation for

the traditional holiday exchange, and while Buffy knew what was coming, Past-Buffy remained wondrously oblivious.

Of so many things.

"I don't want to see this," she announced. "Please, Doyle."

The look on her guide's face was grim with understanding. "I'm sorry, love," he replied. "This is a nonnegotiable deal."

Her insides twisted, but she nodded without complaint. There was nothing that could be done. Wishing it otherwise wouldn't change the past.

"This was before Riley," Buffy objected. "Actually, this was when Riley and I were in the early phases. Flirtage, no kissing. And he still wasn't convinced that I wasn't engaged or insane or a combination of the two." She paused. "And to be fair, he didn't really say that it was from him. I just...I assumed."

Doyle offered an encouraging nod. "But he didn't correct you."

"Maybe he didn't know how."

"Don't know about that. The words, 'that's not from me' come to mind."

Buffy scowled and sat back, turning to the unfolding scene. The sooner she got this over with, the better.

"I wanted to purchase Xander a Swedish-made penis enlarger," Anya was saying matter-of-factly. "Like the one they manufacture in that film about the ugly British spy with bad teeth."

Spike snickered at that. "What's this? Wonder Boy not fill you up properly?"

"Hey!" cried Xander. "Ahn! Do you have to say those things in front of the impotent one?"

"Least I don't need a penis enlarger."

Buffy watched Past-Buffy squirm at that. She knew exactly what she was thinking. Memories of sitting on Spike's lap just two weeks prior were more than enough to get her cheeks flushed and her pussy wet. She knew how large he was. He'd spent the evening with his erection nestled against her ass, thrusting upward every few seconds just because he loved the way she moaned.

The day following the faux-engagement, Buffy had mentioned the possibility of a memory-eraser spell to block everything out. It was



something she'd never done. Never could do. Every time she thought about not remembering how Spike felt against her, a small, sick part of her cried out in protest. She'd learned to ignore it after a while—after Riley—but it had remained with her just the same.

"I guess we'll just have to take your word on that, won't we?" There was a pause, and Xander held up a hand before Anya could make the inevitable suggestion. "And that's not an invitation, so keep it in your pants."

"It's a bloody wonder the lot of you have managed to live this long."

There were times, even then, that Buffy couldn't help but agree with him.

"Oh, there's another present!" Willow cried, snagging a small, meticulously wrapped box from under the tree. She inspected the tag, then turned to Past-Buffy with a grin. "For you."

It was gorgeous—it was the sort of thing that Buffy never received, so the astonishment on Past-Buffy's face was not at all feigned. The wrapping paper was green with streaks of red and silver, and the bow, rather than store-bought, was ribboned in a fashion that couldn't be anything but homemade.

"It doesn't say who it's from. Who...?" Past-Buffy wet her lips and glanced at Willow. "Did you...?"

"Not me."

She turned her eyes to Xander, who was similarly under Anya's hawk-like, borderline accusatory stare. "Me either," he said, shrugging. "Maybe—"

"I already gave her the crossbow, Xander," Giles murmured from where he was strewn across his sofa, a wet cloth pressed to his head. "A bloody expensive one at that. There's only so much a man can afford when he has no steady income."

No one bothered glancing to Spike, whose eyes were glued on Past-Buffy's face.

Past-Buffy shifted uncomfortably. "It has my name on it," she observed, pointing like a child. "So it really must be mine."

"I'd say so," the vampire drawled, leaning back. "No one else in the sodding world has a name as ridiculous as yours."

She smirked. "Bite me. Oh wait, that's right..."

“Shove it, you miserable tart.”

No one noticed the apprehension wrought through Spike’s body, of course, or the way his hands were shaking. He kept a watchful eye on her, trading glances between the package in her lap and her face.

“I want to slap her—me,” Buffy whispered, rubbing her arms. “I can’t believe I missed it.”

“It’ll be over in a few seconds, love,” Doyle said. Not that the knowledge made anything better.

Willow edged closer to Past-Buffy and whispered, “Maybe it’s from Riley.”

“Riley?” she repeated.

Spike’s head snapped up.

“Yeah. Like...‘hey, I like you but I’m too gosh-darned nervous to put my name on your present.’”

“When has Riley ever been here?” Buffy asked. “We had a picnic. That’s it. And I had to tell him that I wasn’t engaged. I’ve never brought him home to meet the Watcher or anything.”

“There are plenty of our high school alumni at UC Sunnydale,” Xander replied. “Maybe he asked around and they mentioned Giles. You know...’cause toward the end, there, your ‘I’m the Slayer’ thing was less a secret and more a way to keep a big snake from destroying the town.”

“Bleeding tragedy, that was,” Spike murmured, shifting noisily in his seat.

Past-Buffy ignored him, but Buffy didn’t. Buffy couldn’t tear her eyes away from him. The nervousness was still very much present, but it was slowly fading into hurt and disappointment. All because of her.

“I couldn’t have known,” she whispered, blinking as hot tears pricked at her eyes. “Doyle, I couldn’t have known. There’s no way I could’ve known. Why show me this?”

“It’s necessary,” he replied.

“What for? To make me feel like an even bigger bitch?”

Doyle shrugged. “There’s a price that comes with knowledge.”

That didn’t mean anything. Buffy watched helplessly as her past counterpart tore into the wrapping. As the room fell still at the small, unmistakable shape of a jewelry box.

"Oh my god," Past-Buffy murmured, gasping when she popped the lid open. "Oh my god!"

"What is it?" Anya demanded.

"Ohmigod, is that real?" Willow scooted over quickly, her eyes widening. "Holy moly, that's real!"

"You can tell just by looking?" Xander asked, quirking a brow. "And what is it we're looking at?"

"An emerald."

"A necklace," Past-Buffy said, numb with bewilderment. "Riley got me an...a real emerald necklace."

"Again, I say we know it's real...how?"

"It's real," Spike barked, but no one was paying attention to him.

No one but Buffy. The Buffy he couldn't see.

"Well, that's a little presumptuous," Anya snickered, sitting back when she was convinced that Xander wasn't trying to woo one of his female friends. "You're not even going out to previously assigned destinations at mutually agreed-upon times."

"Dating," the room corrected.

"Yes, that word."

"I can't believe it," Past-Buffy repeated, her eyes wide. "I-I can't believe it."

"And we know it's from Riley?" Xander asked.

"Who else would it be from?" Willow retorted. "Or..."

"What about the occasionally evil ex-boyfriend in Los Angeles?" Anya ventured. "The one that was here on Thanksgiving."

Buffy froze at that. Both of them—past and present.

So did Spike.

"A-Angel?" Past-Buffy squeaked. "Oh my god..."

And that was it for Spike. The proverbial last straw. Buffy watched helplessly as he leaped to his feet and stormed down the hall.

She followed him instinctively. She needed to be there. To see him. To touch him and let him know that she knew now, and she was so sorry for everything. For not knowing then, even if knowing was impossible. She needed to be with him like she needed nothing else.

"Don't follow me, Doyle," Buffy whispered, running through the closed door without thought.

This was personal.

The scene inside the bathroom broke her heart. Spike was hunched over the counter, gripping the ledge so hard she was surprised that it didn't crack. He was breathing hard, his whole body trembling, the pain in his eyes nearly doing her in. Every few seconds, he glanced up the empty mirror that hung above the sink, as though willing his image to appear so that he could have something to curse at.

"Wanker," he snarled, but the word choked on a sob.

Buffy didn't realize that she was crying until she gasped for breath. It was too much. Everything was too much. She was standing there and he was hurting—hurting because of her—and she couldn't do anything. She couldn't touch him or tell him how sorry she was. She couldn't tell him that everything would be all right, because she wasn't convinced that it would be. She could do nothing but watch him break. Because of her. Always and forever because of her.

She was the reason he grieved; no matter the cause, she was the symptom.

"You stupid, stupid wanker. What the fuck did you think was gonna happen?"

"Oh Spike..."

"Spike!"

The call of his name was followed by several rudely loud close-fisted pounds on the bathroom door. Buffy winced at the sound of her own voice. If anything, she'd like to be corporeal for just one second so she could pop herself in the nose for being so careless.

Spike didn't answer. He was too busy reining in control.

"Spike! For Pete's sake, open up."

"Fuck off, Slayer."

"Get out."

"Make me."

"I want to see how the necklace looks on. Will says it brings out my eyes—it'll take like two seconds, and then you can get back to whatever you're doing in there." She paused. "Presuming it's nothing nasty or falls under the 'I'll have to stake you for this' category."

Spike trembled and closed his eyes. "I'd wager the rock looks much

like any other piece of trash you wear around that dainty throat of yours," he spat. "Leave a vamp in peace."

"So help me, Spike, I'm gonna—"

That was it. Something within him broke. Buffy saw it—she knew it was coming, of course, but she could have identified that look on his face anywhere in any situation. Like all the other looks and glances singular to Spike, she knew them all, and she knew them well.

Past-Buffy's nagging continued on the other side of the door as Spike raised his arms and smashed his fists into the mirror with a ferocity unlike anything she'd ever seen. He cried out as he did it—whether in anger or pain, Buffy didn't know. All she knew was that she had driven him to this. She had made him miserable. His hands were bleeding and his eyes were red, and while Past-Buffy screamed on the other side of the door, Buffy stood and watched.

Watched Spike. Watched his face. Watched him until he ultimately snarled something nasty and pushed his way back into the hallway. Back into the hall where the Scoobies had crowded to investigate what the fuss was about. Where Past-Buffy began screaming anew when she saw the mess he'd made.

Where Doyle stood, waiting.

"Come on," he said softly. "We're almost done."

Almost. Almost.

Buffy turned her eyes to the bloody shards of mirror that littered the bathroom floor.

Almost.

"No more," she begged, her voice hoarse. When she glanced up, there was nothing but sympathy in Doyle's gaze, and somehow that made everything worse. "I can't watch anymore."

"Almost done," he said again.

The words provided little comfort.

DEATH HAD cost her the memory of little things. The way her mother hummed while making wassail. The way their Christmas tree was always a little lopsided. The way Buffy would tease Dawn with *I know what you're getting for Christmas* as the gifts piled in the living room. The way that they would gather on either side of their mother on Christmas Eve and listen to Joyce's always dramatic read of *'Twas the Night Before Christmas*.

She'd thought of none of these things earlier. Watching Tara and Dawn decorate the tree had left her feeling hollow and unmoved, rather than weepy and emotional. She hadn't stopped to consider that this was her first Christmas without Joyce. She hadn't even cried, and that bothered her.

Standing in the living room of her home, looking at the last Christmas tree that she and Dawn had decorated with their mother, and suddenly everything changed.

"Mom," she whispered, grief crushing her chest. Hot tears pricked at her eyes, her gut clenching.

"I'm sorry," Doyle said softly, patting her shoulder. "We won't be here long."

Buffy wiped her eyes and shook her head. "I want to go home."

"You are home."

"No, I mean...my room. My time. I can't take this, Doyle. Please."

He shook his head with a small sigh. "No can do, love," he replied. "I'm not the one that makes up the rules. And this stop is brief."

"And it's the last one, right?"

His answering silence was not inspiring.

Buffy's eyes narrowed, her heart sinking. There were no Christmases past this one. There was this, and then nothing. Nothing until the Ghost of Christmas Present arrived, ready and willing to rub salt in an open wound. "Where?" she demanded, her voice catching. "This is it. I died after this."

"It's not a Christmas," Doyle explained softly. "But the Powers want you to see it."

"If it's not a Christmas and this is a Christmas-themed haunting, can't I just blackball it?" She was bordering on whiny, and that bothered her, but she knew her limitations. After being bottled inside herself for so long, subjecting herself to a torrent of emotional hijacks had worn down her resolve. She was breaking, and Buffy hated breaking. "Please don't make me do anymore."

"If I could, kiddo, I would. You better believe it." Doyle sighed and patted her back. "This shouldn't take long."

It was then that her eyes landed on the girl curled on the sofa. Another mirror image of herself. Past-Buffy, wrapped in blanket, fast asleep in front of the family television.

"Good movie," Doyle observed, nodding at the screen.

Buffy snickered and shook her head. She was staring at the shadow of herself. The girl that had jumped. She remembered falling asleep on Christmas Eve, exhausted from a long cry and the swelling knowledge that she was fighting a losing battle. That her sister was something other than her sister, and that Glory was too powerful to defeat.

And even then, even remembering how miserable she'd been that Christmas, she found herself envying the memory. The misery she'd felt then had come from a place of wanting to fight, to experience, and live, death wish or not. The misery she felt now was something else entirely.

The singing on the television somehow made everything worse.

*"Buffalo gals, won't you come out tonight, won't you come out tonight, won't you come out tonight. Buffalo gals, won't you come out tonight. And dance by the light of the moon."*

"Always loved *It's a Wonderful Life*," the ghost at her side noted. "Seemed to put things in perspective."

Her vision blurred. She wasn't going to last. "Doyle—"

She didn't get the thought out, which was just as well because she didn't really know what she wanted to say. Instead, Buffy seized the out and whirled around just as the front door swung open. An irritable-looking Dawn paraded inward, making sure to be as noisy as possible so as to let the whole house know that she was in a temper.

"You didn't have to follow me," she grumbled. "I know the way to my own house."

"Forgive a bloke for walkin' a girl home," Spike replied, rolling his eyes as he stepped across the threshold. That much provided Buffy with a timeframe. The last year had been such a confusing jumble that she couldn't remember if she'd locked the vampire from her house before or after the holidays.

If Spike had access to her house, then this scene was before the entire 'love me or I'll feed you to my ex' incident. And it hit her from nowhere that she was looking, for the first time since the shadow-play had started, at a Spike that loved her.

Sorrow collided with relief. The burden in his eyes was suffocating. How she had ever missed it was beyond her comprehension.

"I can handle my own," Dawn retorted, crossing her arms. "I don't need a babysitter."

"Do I look like a sodding babysitter to you?"

"You sure do act like one most of the time."

Spike's eyes narrowed. "I find it unlikely that any ninny your mum would hire would tag-team in a game of larceny."

"So you're a lax babysitter. You still didn't let me do anything fun."

Buffy snickered. She tried to summon anger, she really did. Stealing was wrong in all forms, but her irritation was subdued by the knowledge that Spike had looked out for Dawn. There really wasn't any doubt in her mind of what she was witnessing. In the months before Dawn had discovered the truth behind her lineage, she'd done every-



thing she could to get herself into any and every jam feasible for a girl her age. It was a miracle that she hadn't managed to break a bone or land in the ICU.

Much of what Dawn had done was crying out for attention. Buffy wasn't so blind that she couldn't see that. And while she was a little peeved that Spike had evidently done nothing to dissuade the girl from getting into trouble, she couldn't help the way her heart warmed. Spike was looking out for Dawn.

"Look, Bite Size," Spike snapped, making an obvious strain not to be too loud. He hadn't so much as looked in Past-Buffy's direction, but from his body language, it was obvious that he knew she was present. "Big Sis has enough on her plate to worry about without you goin' movie-of-the-week on her with every sodding turn. You wanna get into trouble, I'm all for it. Just make sure you come to the Big Bad before landin' yourself in something you can't handle."

"Like what? The mall night-watchman?" Dawn had the audacity to roll her eyes at him. "You think I couldn't have handled that?"

"You think your mum would fancy a call from the police station?"

"Good shoplifters don't get caught," Dawn argued, crossing her arms and tossing her hair. She looked every bit the child trying to be an adult, and it made Buffy's chest hurt in ways she couldn't have predicted.

The carefree child had died the same night she did.

"Then, by your own admission, you're a bloody pathetic shoplifter."

"You're the one that got us caught! Who's pathetic now?"

Spike's eyes flashed the way they did when he was on his last nerve, and he held up a hand. "Look," he said slowly, "there's an arse-backwards violence-prone bint on the loose. One that doesn't particularly think fondly of the Slayer, yeah? Nabbing her kid sis would be just the thing that would make her holiday merry and bright."

Dawn suddenly found something about her shoes very interesting.

"You get the itch to do some bad," Spike continued, "you come to me. You got it?"

She mumbled something.

"Loud and clear. I can't hear you."

"That is such a crock. Vampire hearing much?"

“You want me to wake up Big Sis and let her know what you were up to?”

Dawn’s head shot up. “Y-you wouldn’t! You were there with me! You were...you were my accomplice!”

“Yeah, and I’m evil. The Slayer already hates me, so whatever threat she lobs is one I’d eventually get anyway. But you?” Spike’s eyes sparkled as he leaned back, stroking his chin. “I’d hate to be in your shoes if she ever wizened up to how you spend your evenings.”

The outrage on Dawn’s face was so vibrant that Buffy had to bite her lip to keep from laughing. “You ass!” her sister snapped.

“Evil,” he corrected cheerily, grinning when she huffed and rushed upstairs. There was nothing like watching him when he was enjoying himself. His grin was infectious—so much that Buffy often found herself feigning a coughing or sneezing fit to hide one of her own.

Just as quickly, though, he grew somber and turned his attention at last to the girl on the couch.

Buffy trembled. “Doyle,” she whispered, “I didn’t, like, punch him across the room or anything, did I?”

The ghost chuckled. “One would think that’d be something you’d remember.”

“I don’t know. A sleep-deprived slayer is a grumpy slayer, and occasionally happy with the swinging of fists.”

“I don’t think you have anything to worry about here.”

Spike stopped a few feet away from her, studying her with such intensity that, even now—standing as a bystander—sent shivers across her skin.

She’d seen it after kissing his bruised lips. She’d seen it when she’d welcomed him back into her home. She’d seen it when she’d walked down the stairs the night that he told her how long she’d been gone.

She hadn’t seen it since she’d first impaled herself on his cock, that look of love and awe. The look that made her feel like a fraud. She wasn’t someone who deserved such devotion.

He didn’t put her on a pedestal. He loved her as she was, and she hadn’t the first idea why.

Spike’s hands were balled into fists at his sides. There wasn’t an inch of him that didn’t tremble, and the pained conflict in his eyes

struck her hard. He was warring with himself—fighting a losing battle, and because of her.

She saw the same thing every time she looked in the mirror.

Behind him, the movie rolled on.

*"What is it you want, Mary? What do you want?"*

He exhaled slowly, a hand straying to her face to brush fallen tendrils of hair aside.

*"You-you want the moon? Just say the word and I'll throw a lasso around it and pull it down."*

A gentle smile tugged on his lips.

*"Hey, that's a pretty good idea. I'll give you the moon, Mary."*

Spike straightened and sighed, pulled on the quilt that was draped along the back of the sofa. "Happy Christmas, sweetheart," he murmured, dragging the coverlet over her body. Then he hesitated before gently caressing her brow with his lips.

Then he turned around and left.

And with tears streaming down her face, Buffy could only stare. "Doyle," she whispered. "Please..."

"It's almost over."

"It needs to be over now."

The ground shifted beneath her feet as the Powers prepared the final time-jump. It was a slow rotation, and in a blink, everything changed. The tree vanished, Past-Buffy melted into thin air, lights flickered off as others flickered on. People came and went at a speed she couldn't follow.

When the scene stilled again, Dawn was hunched over on the couch, her arms folded in her lap, a frighteningly blank look on her face. Tara was beside her, rubbing her back and murmuring words that Buffy couldn't hear.

Something was very wrong here.

"Doyle—"

The doorbell rang and her heart leaped.

"That's him," Willow announced, emerging from the kitchen, a dishrag in her hand. "I'll get it."

Buffy didn't realize she was holding her breath until Doyle clamped

a hand on her shoulder. "Be wary, love," he whispered. "This is gonna be hard for you."

As bruised as she felt, Buffy fought off a snicker. Like the evening had been a cakewalk up until this point.

The next second, though, she understood and appreciated his warning.

Spike's usually tight-fitting tee hung off his broken body. His eyes were large and hollow, his skin so pale that he was nearly invisible under the glow of the porch light. There was no life in him at all. He was just there, just existing. Had he been anything less than a vampire, the earth would have claimed him by now.

"Doyle..."

"Just watch."

As if she had a choice.

"Thank you for coming," Willow said softly. "I'm really, really sorry to bother you...but we didn't know what else to do."

Spike nodded without meeting her eyes. "Yeah. Where is she?"

Willow stepped aside, welcoming him in with a gesture. "In the living room."

He shoved past her without replying, and when he fully stepped into view, Buffy couldn't keep her gasp inside. Spike was a tower of strength—her tower of strength—and he was broken. She'd never seen him like this—so empty and defeated. He'd never personified the living dead; no vampire truly had. But now, in her home, with his ribcages poking through his tee when he moved, he was nothing but an animated corpse, and from the look on his face, he didn't know why he still moved at all.

"Tara, Willow," Spike said softly, sitting on the edge of the coffee table, "could you two bugger off for a bit?"

The girls agreed a bit too readily. Buffy had never seen them act that way around him. Like he was an ally. Like he was a friend. It certainly wasn't a courtesy that had extended beyond her resurrection. Willow hardly mentioned Spike, and if she did, it was usually something snide. Tara barely spoke at all, and never about vampires. Never about anything related to slaying or world-saveage—nothing that could remind Buffy of the world she'd been

brought back to save. A world that, evidently, couldn't survive if she died.

Resentment poisoned her stomach. Spike was good enough for them only if she was dead?

"Dawn," Spike said softly, his heavy eyes taking the girl in, "can you look at me?"

Dawn just sat, blank and numb with no response. She didn't even meet his gaze.

"Willow tells me you haven't been eating."

"Neither have you," she replied. There was no accusation in her voice. It was an observation and nothing more.

Spike blinked. "I know," he said after a long minute, sighing. "It hasn't been easy, has it?"

"I don't even know how you can look at me." Dawn shook hard, at last turning her tear-filled eyes to him. "She jumped because of me. If it weren't for me, she'd be here. She'd still be here."

The words obviously had him rattled, but Spike refused to take the bait. "You think so?"

"I know so!"

"You think Buffy would've been able to go on if she'd let you die?"

Dawn bristled, breaking eye-contact again. "You don't understand."

"I don't... No, stop it." Spike seized a handful of her hair and jerked her head back. "Don't fuck with me, Bit. I can't bloody take it. You think I don't know what you're goin' through? You don't think... It was me, too. I didn't get there fast enough. If I'd done something different, if I'd never gone to that bastard Doc to begin with... Even if I didn't make it, I could've saved her. Saved you. Saved you both. You think that doesn't haunt me every sodding second? I'm here and she's not."

"You weren't the Key," Dawn retorted, tears streaming down her cheeks. "She jumped—"

"She jumped because she's Buffy, and we all know how Buffy is." A painful smile split his lips. "She gets some zany idea lodged in that thick head of hers, and there's no turnin' her around from it. She said she wasn't losing anyone...and she didn't." He shivered, blinking rapidly. "We lost her."

"Because of me."

Anger sparked his eyes at that. Not much, but enough. "So you think that's it?" he demanded. "You think you can give up? I bloody well swore to protect you, Bit. And as long as I have to be around, you have to be around. Suck it up and deal."

And just like that, something in Dawn snapped. Something powerful. Something that, like so many things about her sister, Buffy had never seen before. "You don't get it!" the girl screamed. "It was supposed to be me. From the very beginning, it was supposed to be me. The monks made me. They didn't make you, Spike. You did your best—and what did I do? I got Buffy killed. She jumped because of me. And now you want me to... You want me to, what? Eat cereal that's supposed to be hers? Watch television in the place she used to sit? Do my homework, because Buffy won't ever get a chance to... How can you expect me to do the things she should be doing?"

"Stop it."

"She jumped and it's—"

"Stop it."

"Everything...all of it—"

"Stop it!" The roar that tore at Spike's throat shook the house to its foundation, his lithe, starving body bounding upward. Sorrow bled into fury, and the demon that he tried so hard to suppress—the one that he'd tamed for her—burst forward before he could pull the leash.

He was angry. He was furious. He was broken with grief, half-existing, and furious.

"How dare you?" he hissed. "How dare you?"

"Spike?"

"You're right. Okay? You're right. She did jump for you. She jumped in your place. She gave you something precious. It wasn't to save the world, Dawn. It was to save you. She jumped to save you. And how do you repay her? You mope. You sit here and feel sorry for yourself because you can't be dead. She died so that you could live, and you're killing yourself. Do you care so little for her that you're willing to—"

"You bastard!" Dawn was on her feet the next instant, her face a mess of tears. "How can you say that? How can...I loved her—"

He snickered. "You have a funny way of showin' it."

"How can you tell me to live when all you want to do is die?"

"Because she didn't jump for me," Spike ground out. "She jumped for you. You were her whole bloody world, and if you think I'm gonna disrespect her memory by letting you waste away, you have another think comin'. I love her too much to let you do this to yourself. To let you spit on what she gave you. You little ungrateful—"

"Spike?"

Dawn's voice had broken. And the next second, she launched into his arms, burying her face in his shoulder as she collapsed into tears. It was over then. Everything was over. In easy seconds, they were crying together. Holding each other as they sobbed.

Buffy's legs buckled and her knees hit the floor hard. This wasn't fair. None of this was fair. She needed to be there—she needed to go to them. She needed to be anywhere but caught in limbo. They were breaking—her sister, Spike—the ones she cared about were breaking, and she couldn't touch them. She couldn't reach for them and make it better.

"This is cruel," she managed through her tears, glaring at Doyle with spite she didn't feel. "How can the Powers show me this?"

"How can they not?" he replied. "You've been thinking all along that it was about you—and it has been, to a point. But bringing you back to life, as selfish as that was, it's no more selfish than what you're putting them through. And we needed you to see that." He gestured to her sister and the weeping vampire. "These are the shadows of the things that have been. They are what they are."

Buffy wiped at her eyes. The scene had calmed. Spike was now rocking Dawn in his arms, looking every bit the part of a protective brother. And despite his angry words—the things he'd shouted—it was impossible to miss the concern in his eyes. The part of him that loved Dawn as though she was his blood—as though she was just as much his sister as she was Buffy's.

He cared for her and there was no hiding from that.

"You can't give up now," Spike murmured into the girl's hair. "You're better than that, Sweet Bit. She wouldn't want this for you."

"Or for you," Dawn argued, wiping her nose on his shirt. "She wouldn't want you to starve yourself."

It was clear Spike didn't agree, but he nodded to pacify her.

“Right,” he said. “Then both of us should get our act together, yeah? Starting with...this bloody starving yourself bit needs to end.”

“I’ll stop if you stop.”

A weak grin spread across his lips. “You pull a rough deal, munchkin.”

A rough deal. A Summers’ deal.

That much remained unsaid.

The rest happened quickly. Spike led Dawn into the kitchen and watched as she ate a sandwich. He spoke briefly to Willow and Tara, letting them know what had transpired, even though he knew they’d heard every word. He promised to be by the next evening to make sure that Dawn ate, and to watch out for her if the Scoobies needed to get something done.

Willow thanked him profusely. Tara hugged him, tears in her eyes. And then he left.

And Buffy and Doyle followed. Wordlessly, side-by-side, they walked with Spike to the cemetery.

Doyle didn’t follow him inside the crypt, but Buffy did. And she said nothing. Not as Spike lit his candles. Not as he undressed. Not as he collapsed on his bed downstairs, holding his head in his hands.

Not even as he started crying.

She couldn’t say anything. Her tears wouldn’t let her.

So she stood. And watched. And somehow, without realizing it, she found herself alone. She watched Spike until he wasn’t there anymore. Until the crypt faded into shadows, and she found herself sitting on her bed.

She was home. She was finally home.

“Oh god,” Buffy whispered into her hands, breaking again. “Oh god.”

It was over. Her wounded heart sighed in relief. Finally, it was over. Then the alarm clock on her nightstand went off again.





IN A BLINK, the gut-clenching fear that had chased her all last year came storming back. The sleepless nights. The endless days. The never-ending panic over where Dawn was and who she was with. The way that she'd constantly mapped out the quickest route to the hospital wherever she went. Buffy had never faced a foe like Glory. Glory was the first being in years that had made her aware of her own mortality. An awareness had ended, truly, with The Master. How could she fear what she'd already experienced? What she'd walked away from with only the shadow of a scar to show for it? Angel had gone evil and she'd never doubted that she could defeat him. The Mayor had nearly wiped Sunnydale off the map, but she'd always known, deep down, that he wouldn't succeed. The Initiative had barely earned a shiver.

Then Glory had come along, and everything changed.

Glory had come along, and Buffy realized that she was mortal.

Glory had come along, and Buffy at last remembered how to fear.

Fear had nipped her heels all year, but similarly, fear had died with her. When Buffy had jumped, she'd taken her fear along for the ride. There was no fear in the fall. Not of breaking. Not of losing. Not even of death. And in the weeks since Willow and friends had torn her from

Heaven, fear had lived elsewhere. There was nothing but the complete dullness of her emotions.

Unless she was with Spike. Spike had a way of reviving her emotions—just not the ones he wanted. Not the ones he probably deserved.

A part of Buffy was certain that those emotions—love, compassion, kindness—remained dead. Perhaps Heaven had claimed her better angels before the fall. Perhaps she'd only taken with her what would be welcome in Hell.

It was Glory's fault, of course. Everything was Glory's fault. But Glory, like all others, had been defeated. She was dead. She was dead like the Master was dead. Like the Mayor was dead. Like Maggie Walsh was dead.

Only not, because she was standing in the middle of Buffy's room.

And with her, she'd returned the Slayer's fear.

Buffy was on her feet before she could blink, her chest tightening and a gasp clawing at her throat, her eyes still raw from crying. And Glory was in her room.

"Oh my god!" the hellgod drawled, wrinkling her nose. "I gotta tell you, honey, I've seen my share of dumps, but this one is really something special. You know? There are some decorators in Hell that could use a few pointers."

There was no room to think. Buffy rushed at the Beast before her mind could catch up with her. Panic was her master, and she wasn't about to let it down. If she could immobilize Glory, perhaps she had a shot of getting Dawn to safety.

Perhaps.

Of course, there was also the chance that Glory was incorporeal, and therefore couldn't be beaten to a pulp—at least as much of a pulp as a slayer could manage without a troll-god's hammer. Instead of tackling the bitch, Buffy ran right through her and smashed headfirst into her bedroom wall.

"Well," Glory drawled, rolling her eyes, "that was effective."

Buffy rolled miserably onto her back, clutching at her head. "Ow."

"Has anyone ever told you that you're really, really stupid? 'Cause you really need to get that memo."

“What the...”

Glory sighed impatiently and rolled her eyes. “Look, girly, I don’t have time for this. Get up off your useless ass. We got a lot of boring shit to get through and a painfully long hour in which to do it. You wanna run into walls? Do it on your own time.”

Realization struck her like a bullet. Buffy moaned. “Ghost of Christmas Present?”

“Can’t get anything past you, can we?”

“Do the Powers hate me this much?”

Glory admired her nails. “I’d say so, yeah.”

“You seem strangely...more together than the last time I kicked your ass.”

“You’d be amazed what not being trapped inside a meaty flesh-bag will do for you. You know, on top of being dead.” She threw her hands in the air and huffed. “Are you ready or what?”

“You know,” Buffy grunted, climbing to her feet, pressing a hand to her stomach. “I was *this close* to forgetting how much I hate you.”

“I’m just touched that you think of me at all.” Glory gave her a painfully familiar once-over, a condescending smirk tugging at her lips. “What the hell are you wearing?”

Buffy fought the urge to frown and jump to the defense of her yummy sushi pajama-bottoms. “Shut up,” she shot back.

“Were you this much of a clothing disaster last year? I remember it being rather pathetic, but not downright sad.”

“This is sleepwear!”

Glory rolled her eyes again. “And, what, that’s supposed to be an excuse? I had minions with more fashion sense.”

There was nothing worse, Buffy decided, than being provoked by a dead hellgod on Christmas Eve. She choked down the instinctive rebuttal, deciding to preserve her dignity. As long as people couldn’t see her yummy sushi pajama-bottoms and mismatched camisole, she didn’t give a good damn what the bitch thought.

“I remember that the Ghost of Christmas Present was the one I liked,” Buffy said. “That’s not gonna be you, is it?”

“It’s not looking that way.” Glory tossed her hair and waved at the bedroom door, which flew open in a pinch. “Outward we go.”

“Why you?”

“Why not me? I’m the one that killed you.”

“I killed me.”

The hellgod merely grinned and tapped her fingers against her hip. “Come on, precious,” she said. “The sooner we leave, the sooner it’s over for both of us. ’Cause really? Choosing between an eternity of hellfire and torment and hanging around your mopey, skinny ass all day? Not really much of a toss-up.”

Buffy swallowed a groan. “I can’t tell you how much I’m looking forward to this.”

Following Glory down the hallway of her own home was, perhaps, the strangest feeling in the world. More than watching the dark sky turn bright in a flash—more than watching her sister and Willow speed through the house as though someone had clicked fast-forward. More than knowing that she was walking in the present without being seen.

Buffy was following the creature that had caused her death. She was following the creature that had made her jump.

“This won’t take long, thank *me*,” Glory said, blowing her crimped hair out of her eyes. “Only two stops. And they’re both quick.”

Somehow, she doubted that. Doyle had only made her leap a few times, all for supposedly quick stops, and somehow it’d taken up the whole night.

“It took an hour, sweet-cheeks, and the hour would’ve gone a lot faster if you two hadn’t blabbed endlessly the whole fucking time.”

“I have this bad habit of saying things out loud,” Buffy moaned.

“When you’ve been dead for any length of time, you have trouble distinguishing between words and thoughts.”

“As you should know.”

Glory waved a dismissive hand and rolled her eyes for the umpteenth time in five minutes. “Doesn’t matter. We’re not going to take that long. Know why? It’s quite simple, actually. Somehow, I don’t see us being bosom buddies.”

“I can’t tell you how much I already miss Doyle.”

“You know what? Not my problem.” Glory gestured to the dining room, where the Scoobies were gathered around a strikingly pathetic

Christmas breakfast. "Now go in and learn something so I can get back to Hell."

Buffy bit her lip and counted to ten. She had a feeling that she was going to have to mentally replay the running-into-the-wall bit several times to keep herself from doing something rash and stupid. Stupid on the level of attempting to rip off Glory's non-corporeal arm and beat her with it until she became deader than she was already.

"My god," the hellgod drawled, wrinkling her nose. "What the hell is that and who lets him wear it?"

Buffy's eyes landed on Xander, who was passing Dawn a plateful of burnt bacon. He was dressed in one of his obnoxiously loud Hawaiian shirts, laughing at something way too hard, which led her to believe that he'd just cracked an uncomfortable joke. The entire gang was present. Even Tara, who was seated so far away from Willow that she practically required her own zip-code.

The table, though, was empty. Very empty. For the first time in years, there was no Giles. Hell, there was no Buffy.

There was no Spike, either.

"Where am I?" Buffy asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Well, gee golly, Slayer, I'm not sure. I know how much life you've brought to the party since they made a zombie out of you. I can't imagine where you might be."

"Hey, I—"

"You're upstairs, dumbass." Glory flashed a nasty grin. "You're hilarious as depressed-girl, I might add. Had I any choice, you'd be stuck in your perpetual hell as long as possible."

Buffy was about to ask why the bitch didn't have a choice but decided to bite her tongue. In the end, she didn't care enough to merit continuing a conversation with the beast. Instead, she turned her attention to the table.

To the people that had dragged her from paradise.

"Somehow," Willow was saying, digging into a sloppy pile of hastily made hashbrowns, "I'm not feeling one with the Christmas spirit this year."

"That might be the Jewish thing," Xander suggested. "You know... the worship of Santa never really—"

“What are you talking about?” Anya demanded. “Willow is obviously referring to the fact that we’re sitting at Buffy’s house, minus Buffy, who is upstairs wishing that we’d left her in her coffin. That and the fact that she and her lesbian lover have been without the orgasms lately doesn’t really put anyone into a festive spirit.” She paused. “Would it help if I told you that Santa Claus—”

“Is a demon. Who eviscerates children.” Xander laughed and patted his fiancée on the back. “We heard this heartwarming tale last year, Ahn.”

“I just thought I’d put things into perspective.”

“Oh, believe me,” Dawn chimed in, stabbing at a biscuit with her fork. “We’re up to our asses in perspective.”

“Dawn!” Tara chided. “Language.”

“Oh please. I’m sixteen years old. I think I can say *ass*.” Dawn rolled her eyes. “And it’s not like anyone’s here to tell me not to, right? I mean, Mom’s dead. Dad’s living up the cliché with his fourth or fifth secretary. And my sister is upstairs, wishing she were dead instead of down here.”

Buffy bit her lip, suddenly very glad she was invisible.

And wishing she were alone. The next second, Glory heaved a melodramatic gasp and clutched at her heart, staggering as though she’d been shot. “Oh my! Is the whiny one going to start whining?” She snickered and shook her head. “I really don’t know why you didn’t let me kill the brat. It would’ve saved you the trouble of dying and your friends the headache of putting up with your newly raised self.”

In the normal world, Glory would have a face-full of slayer-fist for that remark. Granted, in the normal world, Glory was dead as dead could be. They weren’t in the normal world. They were in a dreamlike limbo, and unlike Doyle, Glory couldn’t be touched.

The Powers had likely recognized that sending Glory to her would cause a problem. That would also explain why there were no leaps-of-faith out her bedroom window or anything that necessitated contact. Thus attempting to beat the hellgod for even looking at Dawn was a wasted effort.

“Buffy doesn’t wish she was dead,” Willow sputtered hurriedly. “The other day, wh-when she was all Inviso-Buffy, and we found out

that she might turn into Buffy-pudding. Remember? She said that she... Well, she insinuated, anyway, that dying wasn't on her Christmas list. Or being dead. Or—

"Stop," Dawn said, closing her eyes.

"And she's been better. Really! She—"

"Willow, stop."

"—is very much with the better. And—"

"Stop!"

There really was nothing comparable to the scream of an upset teenage-girl. No one in the room failed to flinch. It was a miracle that the shriek hadn't upset every dog within a ten-block radius.

"Buffy doesn't care," Dawn said slowly. "She doesn't."

"Dawn—"

"Don't argue." She glanced down and laughed miserably, shaking her head. "I mean, why should she? She didn't have to deal with her not being here this summer. She didn't have to wake up and think that things would be better if *I* had died. She didn't have to deal with any of it. And I'm sorry, but I won't be sorry that she's not dead. I won't wish with her that she'd never come back. She doesn't know what it was like for us. For me." She paused. "She doesn't care."

"You're wrong, sweetie," Tara replied softly. "It's just your sister's been through a lot. A whole lot. And what she does or doesn't do isn't intentional. We can't know what it was like for her, you know? And yeah, she's taking it out on... Well, all of us, but she—"

"I didn't bring her back," Dawn ground out. "You guys didn't say a word to me. Or Spike."

"Yeah," Xander said, muffling a snicker, "'cause Spike's the kinda guy we wanted in-the-know on this thing."

"Stop it."

"What? I don't see the problem of not telling Buffy's number one stalker that his favorite hobby might be back among the living."

Suddenly, all the anger Buffy had previously targeted at Glory found itself centered on one of her closest friends. How dare he? How dare he pass judgment like that? Especially given what she knew now. Especially given what Spike had done for them. For all of them.

Spike had saved Dawn all summer. Every night over the summer.

He'd gotten her to eat again. He'd gotten her to stop blaming herself. And this was how they repaid him?

"Not like you've been singing his praises, sister," Glory chided, studying her fingernails again. "Don't see what right you have to get upset."

Thankfully, Dawn wasn't afraid to say everything that Buffy couldn't. "So he was good enough to sit with me while you guys were out slaying demons with the Buffybot...not to mention raising my sister from the dead, but not to tell him about Buffy?" She leaned back and crossed her arms. "He's good enough to sit with the teenager but not to be told Scooby Gang secrets. Not even when he saved your asses...how many times this summer?"

"Language," Tara whispered again, though without bite.

"Yeah, and where has he been since she got back?" Xander spat. "Lurking. Following her around. Not giving a crap about the gang because, oh wait, he's a vampire, and his favorite obsession isn't so much with the dead anymore."

Anya stilled and rested a hand atop his. "Xander—"

"You have no right to talk about him like that." Dawn's eyes sparkled with tears. "He's the only one that cares."

"That's crap."

"Buffy wishes she was dead. You guys avoided me all summer like the plague unless Spike wasn't around to babysit." The girl shook her head, trembling hard. "He was the only one who could stand to be around me. Who told me the truth at all. And now that Buffy's back, you guys...you just don't care who you hurt as long as you get your way, do you?"

Tara looked about ready to cry, and she was the only one that Buffy could feel sorry for. The rest of them sat, open-mouthed, staring at Dawn as if she were a stranger. And Dawn, in true teenage form, chose that moment to excuse herself from the table and rush upstairs.

The painful part wasn't watching their faces. No, Buffy almost enjoyed that.

The painful part came with the knowledge that Dawn wasn't truly upset with the Scoobies. Not really. Not like that, anyway. Dawn was upset with her, and her friends had simply fallen in the crossfire.



Dawn wasn't to blame for anything; even if she were, Buffy couldn't be mad at her. She couldn't be mad at her sister for wanting her to be alive. That was asking too much. Especially knowing what Dawn had been through. Beyond the apocalypses. Beyond being the Key. Beyond the Tower. Buffy had never once seen her sister look as haunted as she had in the memory that Doyle had shown her. The vision of her sister—her young, once exuberant sister—looking so defeated was enough to cripple the toughest resolve.

"Come on," Glory said, nodding at the door. "We're out of here."

Buffy blinked and shook her head. "What?"

"Out. We're gonna go visit your vampire, and then I'm on my way."

"Really? This is really it?"

"Hard as it might be to believe, Whiny the Vampire Slayer, one day is surprisingly easier to cover than four years." She snapped her fingers and the front door flew open. And Buffy didn't let herself linger. She was too much in need of Spike. She needed to see him now—see how he'd be spending this Christmas, knowing now how he'd spent the Christmases in the past. How would this year be different?

How broken was he now that he'd touched her?

Every year had caused Spike pain in one form or another, and every year it had been because of her. And she needed to know how to stop it. So Buffy hurried over the threshold, not even bothering to blink when she landed directly in Spike's crypt.

No sense in walking, she supposed, when a ghost could warp from place-to-place.

"Ugh!" the hellgod complained, wiping her hands on her skank-wear. "The things I do..."

But Buffy wasn't listening. Her eyes were glued on Spike.

Despite how good he looked, there was nothing that could ever make her forget the image of him half-starved and weeping. Just a short while ago, she'd been with him downstairs, watching as he'd cried for her. What must he think now? Now that she'd let him into her body while keeping her heart out of reach?

He'd sat with her and told her that he'd saved her. Not when it counted, of course, but every night since the night she jumped.

Hundreds of times. Plenty of different ways. A new way every night. Every night, he said, he saved her.

And she'd believed him.

Spike was sitting on a sarcophagus, holding a book. He was talking to someone—that demon he hung out with—but his eyes were glued to his lap.

"He's such a pain in the ass," Glory grunted. "You have any idea how much I tortured that lunkhead? And I'm not talking that sissy stuff. I've seen much tougher men—family men—driven to kill their own children over this kind of torture. I mean, hello, god here."

Buffy shivered. She didn't need to be reminded of that. She'd been there for that.

For the look in his broken eyes as she brushed her lips across his. As she'd thanked him for giving her something real.

And here she was, not even a year later, denying that anything he gave her could ever be real.

"Never made sense to me," Glory continued, twirling a lock of hair around her index finger. "Still doesn't, really. What does he see in you, exactly?"

Buffy exhaled, tears stinging her eyes. She really had no idea. Perhaps she would someday. Perhaps. Right now, all she knew was that Spike was sitting on a coffin, holding a book, and talking with a demon.

About her.

"What'd you get her?" the demon asked.

Spike glanced up wearily, his eyes bathed with exhaustion. The emotional sort of exhaustion—the sort that eventually took a very physical toll. "Couple things," he said. "Not sure... Fuck, Clem, I'm such a git. I can't... It's not like she's gonna want it, right?"

The overly cheery demon companion slapped him hard on the back. Too hard not to hurt, but Spike didn't even flinch. "Oh, come on, big fella," he said. "I might not know much about human women, but I've seen every movie they've ever played on Lifetime."

"That's the sort of thing you might not wanna spread around, mate."

"Point being, from what I've seen, women love presents."

Spike laughed dryly. "Not from me, they don't. Never bloody fails."

"Well, what'd you get her?"

He hesitated, then waved the book in the air. "Not somethin' I got her," he said softly. "Somethin' I made."

"Oh my god," Buffy whispered, wiping at her eyes. "Oh my god."

"Yeah," Glory agreed. "How cheap is that?"

Spike flipped the book open. "It's nothin' special," he continued. "Well, won't be to her, anyway. I just... Over the years, I've been keepin'...this."

"What?"

"Poetry." He paused. "For her."

Clem blinked dumbly. "You write poetry?"

"I might mention that if word ever gets out, I'll strangle you with your own skin." Spike turned his eyes back to the book in question. "It's not like it's important, anyway," he said. "Just...something I've kept for some bleeding insane reason."

"That whole book?"

"I've known her for a while, mate. Bloke gets a lot to write about." Spike paused again, another long sigh rolling off his shoulders. "It's not a good idea. She'd read the first few an' stake me."

"Why?"

"Aside from the fact that they're rubbish? When I met her, I wasn't in love with her. And those poems aren't exactly romantic. More along the lines of 'want to shag but oughta kill.'" He laughed miserably and tossed the book onto the stone floor. "I'm off my rocker," he said. "It's not like the Slayer wants romance anyway, right? Even if she didn't choke on the first poems, she'd laugh her righteous ass off at the rest."

Clem's hands came up. "Dude. Hot chicks dig guys who write them poetry."

"You get this from watching Lifetime?"

"Well, that and *Shakespeare in Love*."

"She won't like it, mate. And even if she did..." Spike broke off, breathing hard. "She'll pop by sometime. I dunno when, but she will. And we'll shag, and it'll be brilliant. But that's all it'll be." He paused again, blinking back tears that he obviously didn't want Clem to see. "But I gotta get her somethin'. I don't care if she... Maybe I'll give her

my mum's ring. On a necklace. A long chain, yeah? I gotta get her something..."

Clem made a face. "Why?"

"Because I love her. And it's Christmas."

"Christmas is an excuse to act illogically?"

"I can't believe, with all the sodding flicks that you watch, that you don't understand Christmas."

"There are many, many things about you and Buffy that I don't get." Clem motioned to the book on the floor. "You're not gonna give her the poetry."

"I can't," Spike replied, his voice small. "I already had my heart stomped on by someone I thought I loved over poetry. Couldn't take it if the Slayer..."

Slowly, words faded into silence. The scene continued, of course, but there was no sound behind it. Buffy just watched her vampire. She couldn't look away if she tried. Not when his eyes were so haunted. Not when he was so broken. He never showed her this side of him—not when they were together. When they were together, he was always a pillar of strength and attitude. He was always prepared. He was never so shaken. So unsure. Not with her.

He hid himself when he was with her, and she knew why. Oh god, she knew why.

"So, you gonna run over when it's morning and give your guy a pity-fuck?"

Buffy whirled around. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?" she demanded.

Glory was seated atop another sarcophagus, her ankles crossed, a twisted smile on her lips. "Oh, come on," she drawled. "You don't think I'm falling for all this crap, are you? We show you a few scenes from your laughably pathetic life and, naturally, you find that you've been a whiny bitch with your head up your ass. So...what? You feel sorry for him? You've seen what he's been through, but obviously, that's not gonna change anything. Still a vampire, right?"

"Shut up."

"And he is rather pitiful. I mean, look at him. Have you seen a more pathetic vampire? Yeah, he definitely deserves the pity-fuck."

“Why the hell do you care?”

Glory made a face. “Umm, reality check? I got yanked out of a perfectly good eternity of torment with a side-order of fire and brimstone to teach you a valuable lesson. I don’t care. I’m here ’cause the Powers have me in some cosmic timeout. And while helping you out is just the punch my afterlife so does not need, I have to admit that it’s incredibly entertaining watching you go through the motions only to know the outcome.”

In all her life, Buffy was quite certain that she’d never felt so angry. Never. She was literally shaking from head-to-toe. Her blood was hot. Her skin was clammy. And Glory was sitting there. Glory was telling her that she knew Buffy better than Buffy knew herself. How dare she? How dare she presume to know anything about her?

“Uh oh,” the hellgod singsonged. “Struck a nerve.”

“I do not pity Spike.”

“Coulda fooled me.”

“I haven’t seen him before. I haven’t let myself see him. I see him now.”

“Oh!” Glory clutched her chest. “That’s so romantic, I almost forgot to gag.”

“I see him,” Buffy repeated. “And it’s not because of what you’ve shown me—my god, you arrogant maniac. You think Spike shedding a few tears would affect me at all if I didn’t care for him? If I didn’t... If I didn’t...” She broke off and shook her head. That line of thinking was dangerous. “Whatever’s happened, he’s suffered because of me.”

“Who hasn’t?”

“And if anything, I pity myself.”

“And gosh-golly, isn’t that surprising?”

“I didn’t see him before.”

“So you keep saying.” Glory rolled her head back. “Trying to convince me? ’Cause I gotta tell you, I couldn’t possibly care less. And either way, it’s not gonna work. What’s your plan? Rush over and tell him that you saw what a mean girl you’ve been to him and expect him to fall to his knees? I’ve tortured that bastard. He has more dignity than that.”

“I don’t pity him,” Buffy repeated, her voice growing hoarse, her

eyes welling with tears again. God, this was terrible. The last thing she wanted was to let Glory see her cry. But the words were clenching—haunting, and she couldn't get past them.

It wasn't pity. It wasn't. Buffy knew pity. She'd felt pity before, and what she was feeling right now was not it. There was no one way to describe what she was feeling. It was the same as wandering for years with her eyes and ears closed, only to have someone teach her how to open them. It was willingly looking in the other direction and trying so hard to convince herself of a lie so that she didn't have to stare down the truth.

She'd wanted so hard to ignore him as a man and know him only as a monster. It had been easier then. Easier to keep herself distanced. Easier to keep herself disgusted. Easier to hate herself for what she did with him, because if he was anything less than a demon, then she was the monster.

There was no hiding from the truth after tonight. She was the one who had run to him, teased him, and abused him. She'd taken advantage of his love to make herself feel, all the while swearing that it couldn't hurt him because vampires weren't capable of feelings. And in the process, she'd somehow managed to ignore the pain in his eyes or the strain in his voice. The way he'd touched her that first night after he thought she'd fallen asleep. The way he begged her wordlessly to be gentle with his heart but rough with his body. The way she'd ignored him because she didn't want to see the truth. Buffy didn't want him to be what she wanted, only what she needed. She didn't want to see him as anything but a vampire because then she might love him.

Spike wasn't a monster. She was.

She was the one that was killing them both.

And she was about to say it—to Glory, to whomever; she didn't care. She needed to get the words out there. Glory couldn't touch her. Not anymore. Glory was dead. And for the first time—for the first real time—Buffy was not.

*I am not dead.*

The words ached for life but fell just as quickly when Buffy looked up.

And found herself gazing into her own eyes.

“WHO ARE YOU?”

The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come spread her hands, a distant, numb look on her face. “I am No One,” she replied. “I am the Past. I am the Present. I am the Future.”

The woman in front of her was less than a shadow. Less than a ghost. She stood without standing and spoke without speaking. Her eyes were round and hollow, her skin pale and her hair near black. Her black slacks curtained her thin legs. Her black blouse concealed a starving stomach. There was blackness all around her. Yet somehow, she didn’t look old or sick. She didn’t look weak or frail. She looked stoic. Emotionless. She looked as though she’d walked through lifetimes, gaining wisdom while losing herself.

She was the most frightening thing that Buffy had ever seen.

“You’re...”

“I am what Was. I am what Is. I am what Will Be.”

“You’re...me.”

“I am the Slayer.” The Slayer paused at that, blinking her dark eyes. “I am what you will become.”

Buffy shook her head. She could do nothing else. “I can’t...you’re...”

“I am not Death,” the Slayer replied. “I am Life.”

“No.”

“I am Life Eternal.” The Slayer paused and inclined her head ever-so-slightly, her ethereal eyes flickering with interest. She turned then and pointed at the evolving scene. “I am to show you what is to come.”

The crypt around them melted slowly into a world of shadow. Into a place bleaker than a tomb. Whereas Spike’s crypt was usually candlelit and cozy, the room she stood in now was nothing but cold and dark. There was a window above a desk, half-concealed by blinds so that only slivers of moonlight peeled inward. A lamp with a torn lampshade sat atop a desk covered in sheets of notebook paper. In the corner was a single bed, the covers tangled.

She knew the way she tangled her blankets. That was definitely a Buffy-tangle special.

“What is this?” she asked, but she was terrified of the answer. In every single movie version of *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge’s visit to the future was punched with the knowledge of his imminent death, and how little the world would miss him. But she was not standing in a room that felt like death. No, this place was very much lived in. By her.

“This is what Will Be.”

“What will—”

And then she saw herself, and the world stopped.

Ostensibly, very little had changed. Unlike the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, the shadow of her future still possessed blonde hair. She wore a pair of dark-wash jeans and a gray tee. There was blood in her hair, and a cut above her lip. Her hands were dirty and mud splotted on her right thigh. Her eyes were distant and haunted, but not entirely without life. Rather, she looked hollow.

“She goes by Anne,” the Slayer said as the shadow moved across the floor, plopping into her desk-chair. “She has for a long while now.”

The name summoned memories of clinking plates and businessmen whose hobbies included pinching her ass and ignoring their wedding bands. Buffy shuddered. She’d sworn to herself, after leaving LA, that she would never go by Anne again.

“Where am I?” Buffy asked softly, swallowing. Her eyes were glued to the sad woman at the desk. “When is this?”

“It doesn’t matter,” the Slayer replied. “This is what Will Be.”



“But I—”

“She lives in England if that’s what you want to know.” The Slayer paused, and the silence that consumed them was thick enough to cut. “She has for decades. A few years back, she took up residence as a local cemetery caretaker. It keeps her closer to the obligation. To what she faces every time the sun falls. And every day is like this. It doesn’t matter that the day is Christmas. She has stopped looking at the calendar.”

“Decades?” Buffy echoed, her eyes widening. The girl didn’t look decades older. Aside from the aged wisdom in her eyes, her youthful features would place her no older than thirty—that much, even, was a stretch. “When...when is this?”

The Slayer ignored her, gesturing instead to the sheets of paper scattered across the desk. “This is what she does when she returns from the hunt,” she said. “She writes. She writes to him.”

Buffy was drenched in cold, her heart at once pounding and frozen in fear. She knew immediately to whom the Slayer referred, but she needed to hear it. She needed to hear it, and she dreaded it all the same. It wasn’t possible. If Spike was around, he wouldn’t let her be alone. He wouldn’t. He would fight heaven and earth for her.

Which meant...

“He’s gone,” Buffy gasped, her vision blurring as hot tears spilled down her cheeks. At once, her skin was burning and reality drowned out for the hysterical shrieking in her head.

Spike was forever. He was the only true constant in her life. And he was gone.

And it hit her then. It hit her out of nowhere. A dangerous truth that she’d fought with everything she was—a truth that she couldn’t escape.

Buffy loved him. Part of her had loved him last year, not as a lover but as a fighter, and that part had done nothing but soften since she’d returned. Since he’d proven himself to be the only one she could really depend on. The only one she wanted to be around. She’d wanted to call it something else, and had for a while, but the truth couldn’t be denied. She loved Spike.

She had for a long time.

And in the future, he was gone.

"How?" she demanded, the word choked out behind her hand as sobs seized her shoulders. "How?"

"He did not believe her. And when he came back, his love for her kept him away. He could not stand to be hurt again. He could not stand to be anything less than what he was in her eyes." The Slayer trembled when she sighed. It was the first inkling of emotion that she had shown, and it had the impact of an avalanche. "She waited too long. And by the time that she discovered that he'd come back, it was too late."

The only way it could have been too late was if Spike had fallen out of love with her. And for some reason, that struck her even harder than the thought of his death.

"Oh," Buffy whispered, numb. She didn't know what to say—if there was anything to say.

Then something happened. Something that hadn't happened on any stop before this.

The shadow turned around and spoke.

"I had these ideas in my head," she said softly—so softly that Buffy wasn't sure whether she was speaking to them or not. "Things I'd say to him. You know? What I could do to get him to believe me."

"What she could sacrifice," the Slayer agreed.

Anne nodded. "But it was too late. He was gone. The world gave him back and took him away before I knew. Before anyone told me. He was here and he could've... Had I known. Had he believed me."

Buffy was consumed with the duality of relief and shame. How could she be so happy that Spike hadn't fallen in love with someone else? Someone who would, undoubtedly, give him what he deserved. Everything that she hadn't.

Then she knew. Even as she asked, "What didn't he believe?" she knew the answer. She knew.

She hadn't thought it possible for Anne to look even more haunted, but she did. "The thing he wanted. The thing I didn't give him until it was too late. It wasn't like I didn't have a chance, right? I had every chance all that year. I could've told him when he draped himself over the cross for me. When he told me that it would always be about me.

When he begged me to stake him. When he told me that he loved me because I was the one. When... That last night..." Anne glanced down and shivered again. "I could have told him any number times. I didn't, though. I was too afraid to love again."

"Then he died," the Slayer supplied. "He died saving the world."

"And when he came back, he didn't come after me." Anne laughed shortly and shook her head. "He thought that I would never see him better than I did as he burned up in front of me. He didn't believe that I loved him."

The Slayer shrugged. "And why should he have?"

"I didn't tell him until it was too late." Anne paused. "Granted, that stupid The Immortal stunt that Andrew pulled didn't help matters much. I've never forgiven him for that. God, Andrew's been dead for years, and I've never forgiven him. He made Spike believe that... That I could...after what..." She shuddered, shaking her head again. "By the time I learned that Spike was alive, it was too late. There was an apocalypse, and no one ever heard from him again."

"We never found his ashes," the Slayer continued. "But we knew he was gone."

It wasn't the tears on Anne's face that broke Buffy's heart—it was the lack of tears. She was speaking with such fervor, but she wasn't crying. She was saying things that would tear anyone apart, and she wasn't crying. If this was the future she had, Buffy didn't think she'd ever stop crying. "Angel swore that he died loving me. That Spike would've come for me...had he made it."

The Slayer nodded. "But he didn't."

"He didn't," Anne agreed. "He died a hero's death, twice. Loving me."

"Loving me," the Slayer echoed.

"But not believing he was loved in turn." Anne sighed and leaned back, motioning to her desk. "I thought he'd come back for years. I had Willow search every known dimension for him. Hell, I even had her discover a few so that she could search those, too. And I had so many things to tell him. I was determined that he would never again have reason to doubt that I loved him. I had so many things..."

"Things that accumulated," the Slayer continued. "Things I revised.

Things I edited in my head a thousand times. I thought about it so much that I wrote everything down. And soon, those thoughts became letters. Letters to him.”

“My eternity has been spent writing letters and guarding what he twice sacrificed himself to save.” Anne smiled sadly, but there were still no tears. “I haven’t been alone. Not all the way. I had Dawn for a long time. I had Willow and Xander, too. I had Kennedy longer than I wanted her. And I’ve had lovers. A few. Men to pass the time. Men I tried to love but couldn’t.”

“I’ve spent eternity longing for him,” the Slayer whispered. “Loving him.”

“There is no one else.”

“Eternity?” Buffy whispered, hating the weakness in her voice. But the concept was too large to grasp. Juggling this talk of forever along with the revelation that Spike had died twice and hadn’t believe that she’d loved him—along with the revelation that she did. That she, right now, loved Spike. “God, what happened? Did... I can’t...”

The Slayer and Anne mirrored a small, sardonic smile.

“Well,” the latter said, her voice almost wistful. “It’s not like he didn’t warn me. He always told me that we were two sides of the same coin.”

At that, the Slayer tossed Buffy a nondescript coin.

“And we are. I slay vampires because that’s what I am. I am the slayer of vampires. Vampires first—I kill demons as well, but I am not called a demon slayer.” Anne shrugged again. “We are made of the same. Vampires have demons. I have a soul.”

“And since the spell that activated the Potentials, it has become harder to die,” the Slayer whispered. The words made no sense, but Buffy wasn’t listening to her. Her eyes were glued to the coin.

The faces on either side were different, of course, but at the core, there was little difference. They were the same. The same substance. The same essence.

There was a side for vampires and a side for slayers.

“Vampires only die if you kill them,” Anne said. “As it is for them, so it is for us.”

The Slayer nodded. "We are eternal. We are more than human but less than demon. Our power comes from them."

"And since there are so many of us now, dying becomes a choice rather than an obligation." Anne paused. "But I can't give up. Not when he died to protect this. This is my punishment, you see?"

"To live alone," the Slayer supplied.

"I become less human every day. I said once that being the Slayer meant losing the part of me that felt. That I was becoming harder every day. And then the First Slayer said that I was full of love." Anne nodded distantly, her eyes wide and sad. "And she was right. I was. I loved so much for such a long time."

"And then they died. One by one."

"I lost Giles first. And though I hadn't forgiven him, it still hurt."

"And the more I lost, the less I wanted to love. I had no interest in men after a certain point. Angel visited me from time to time, but he was so far removed from my heart that I barely recognized him." The Slayer sighed. "So I stopped loving. I kept Dawn and my friends in my heart. I still love Spike, of course, but he is gone, too."

"And I do find, without love, that I grow harder." Anne stiffened. "And death is my gift."

"But life is my curse. Without love, life is empty. Life becomes this."

"Had Spike believed me," Anne murmured.

"Had I not abused him," the Slayer echoed. "Had I not forced him away..."

"He sought a soul for me, you know." Anne wiped at her eyes then, but she was still not crying. The motion looked cold, almost out of habit. As though she'd lost the part of herself that could weep. "He sought a soul for me so that he wouldn't be a monster."

"It took me years, even beyond his second death, to understand that a man that seeks a soul as Spike did already has one." The Slayer blinked dark, unforgiving eyes. "Perhaps not the sort that I thought he needed, but it's there. In some form, it was there all along."

Without realizing it, Buffy had crashed to her knees in tears. She cried so hard that the ground shook. Thick, heavy sobs tore at her throat, her skin burning, her insides ripped to shreds. She couldn't hear

anymore. Not of what was to come. Not of this. Not of anything. Not of the soul Spike would one day win for her, only to turn around and die twice without believing that she loved him. She'd only just realized that she did. Only minutes before, and then they'd started speaking. The ghost at her side and the shadow at the desk. Buffy had embraced her love for Spike only to have it ripped away.

An eternity...of this.

"Please no," she sobbed, the words strung out and barely discernible. "I'll do anything."

The Slayer blinked at her dispassionately. "Do you see now?" she asked. "Do you see?"

Buffy nodded so hard her head hurt, her nails scratching at the wood floor. "Please no. Please." Desperation clawed at her throat. "I'm not who I was. I'm not. Why tell me this if it's past all hope?"

"Are you saying that you love him?" the Slayer asked.

"Yes!" The word rushed past her lips and she flushed cool with relief. It was out there now. It was out there. The world knew it, if nothing else. "I love him. And I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry for everything. For not believing him. For hurting him. Just tell me it's not too late. Please!"

"Are we certain that she truly loves him?" Anne asked, cocking her head. "Are we sure she is not only afraid of what is to come? Spike deserves more than desperation. I will not have her—myself—breaking his heart again."

"No," the Slayer replied. "She loved him before I showed her this. I felt her realize it."

Buffy barely heard them. Her mind was a blur, and suddenly, she understood what Doyle had meant when he'd spoken of forgiveness. It was more than a word. It was everything. And in order to be forgiven, she had to forgive.

And at that moment, she knew she already had. It was no great revelation, rather just a snippet of knowledge. She'd lived, died, suffered through a painful resurrection, and somehow she lived still. Now was a time for forgiveness.

In the end, life was precious. And a life without love wasn't worth living. A life without love became a curse.

She would never live a curse. Never. Not when she had the power to stop it. Buffy shook her head again, sniffing hard and wiped futilely at her eyes. "I love them, too. All of them. Dawnie. Willow. Tara. Xander. God, even Anya. I love them so much. And I know... Just tell me it's not too late to change this. God, please! Why show me this if I can't change it?" She slammed an open palm against the floor so hard that the wood splintered. "Damn you both if I can't change it."

There was nothing for a long minute but the harshness of her sobs as she collapsed onto her side, crying tears as thick as blood, every inch of her shaking.

"Please," she whispered. "I won't forget this. I just want to live again. God, please, let me live again."

There was no response. There was nothing at all. Silence settled around her.

Until she realized that the floor she'd been beating against was no longer a floor, but a mattress. That her face was buried in a tear-drenched pillow. That the cold around her had vanished, and she was, instead, buried under a mountain of blankets.

When Buffy glanced up, sunlight was streaming into her room. She choked back a grateful sob, light touching her skin.

Morning had come at last.

SHE STARED for a long time at the open window, basking in the sunlight that ribboned her skin. She stood perfectly still, worried beyond reason that if she blinked she would find herself in the cottage again. That she would find herself slowly chipping away as her insides hardened—as her heart became little more than granite and her soul withered into nothing.

The morning had actually come.

Pure, unadulterated bliss burst through every cell, and before she could stop herself, she'd whooped loud enough to signal the next apocalypse.

"It's morning!" she squealed, her chest tightening with excitement. "It's morning! It's morning!"

Then she was bouncing—quite literally—on her bed as unintelligible screams of glee peeled off her lips. She was giggling. She was smiling. She was as happy as she could ever remember being, even with tear-stained cheeks and eyes that were still sore from crying. None of that mattered now. It was morning. It was morning, and the future was hers.

It was Christmas morning, and she was alive. She was in love. She was—



"Bouncing."

Buffy froze and whirled around, her eyes going wide. A very jaw-on-floor Dawn stood beside Willow, who was much in the same state. They stared at her as though she had lobsters crawling out of her ears. Were Buffy a gambling woman, she'd put money on how long Dawn could refrain from bolting for the nearest phone to have men in white coats cart her off.

"Bouncing," Willow said again, trying to make the word fit in her mouth. "You're...bouncing."

Buffy couldn't be bothered with explanations right now. She was too happy to waste time. Instead, she bounded off the bed and ambushed her friend in a hug to end all hugs. "Willow!" she cried. "Merry Christmas!"

"I'm scared," Willow squeaked.

"Me too," Dawn echoed, then shrieked when Buffy yanked her into the hug. "What the hell has gotten into you?"

Buffy released them with a sheepish grin. "It's Christmas!" she said and left it at that to explain everything. "It's Christmas. And I'm here...I'm..."

The look on Dawn's face was a mixture of incredulity, anger, and hope. "You're here," she echoed, arching a brow. "You're...all alive. As in not dead."

"I know!" Buffy kissed her sister's cheek on a whim, then whirled around and began rifling through her belongings. "Listen, I was thinking we might postpone the big group thing till later."

"Buffy...you're scaring us," Willow said slowly. "Are you on drugs?"

"Are you messing with us?" Dawn countered. "'Cause I swear to god, I will never forgive you if you're just...that's cruel."

Buffy shook her head, not bothering to glance up. Not even her sister's contractual kill-the-mood attempts could ruin her day. "Not messing with you. I can't explain...well, anything. You wouldn't believe me if I tried. Just believe that you're gonna see a different Buffy around here from now on." She fished out a pair of faded jeans and a couple of pairs of panties. "What do you think? Green or red?"

"Green or red?" Willow echoed dazedly. "For what?"

"I'm gonna go see Spike," she replied.

Dawn froze. "You're seeing Spike?"

"Are you out of your mind?"

"Yes and no," Buffy replied calmly, wiggling into her jeans and not-so-discreetly shoving the panties into the front pocket. "I'm very much not out of my mind, Will. In fact, I'm thinking clearly for the first time in months. Red or green top?"

There was no response. They just stared at her blankly.

"Okay. I'm gonna go ahead and take your stunned silence as a vote for red. Excellent decision, by the way. Spike likes red." Buffy grinned, peeled off her sleep-cami and slid a red blouse over her shoulders. "Oh yes. Excellent decision. Besides, too much green might be overkill."

Still no response. Had she not known any better, she would have sworn that she had two living mannequins in her room. But that didn't bother her—nothing bothered her. She was so happy she could barely keep from laughing. Everything had vanished. Everything. The pain of resurrection. The endless, sinking sensation of loss. The guilt that had begun to gnaw her away—for wanting Spike, for being with Spike, and for hiding it from her friends. It was gone now. Everything was gone.

"Call the gang," Buffy said, stopping in front of the mirror to fluff out her hair. Her ridiculously short hair—the hair that she'd cut off because Spike liked it long. But there was no time to mull that over now. Time spent here was time wasted with the man she loved. "Let's make it...dinner, around eight?" She paused for a second to allow them a word in but rolled right along when they didn't lunge at the opportunity. "Fabulous. See you guys later."

She bounded out of the room too quickly for either of them to react, which was just as well. She only had time to do a quick walk-through the house and collect what she needed. Then she was gone.

There was someplace she needed to be.



AT FIRST, SHE'D INTENDED TO PLAY HER ROLE TO A FAULT. SHE would bang on the door, pretend to be angry, then completely floor him with a profession of love. However, by the time the crypt was within her line of vision, she'd pretty much dismissed that idea as

bogus and nearly cruel. It was, after all, too close to their current relationship. Her tendency to abuse him, then cover the abuse with kisses and riding his cock until they were both cross-eyed.

The best thing to do was tell him how she felt and pray he believed her.

Love made everything wonderful, but it also had the nasty habit of striking her with uncertainty. So much to the effect that, rather than kick in Spike's door as she normally did, she found herself knocking instead.

"It's open."

Buffy paused, then rolled her eyes. Of course Spike couldn't just open the door. Hello? Broad daylight, anyone? Apparently, love also made one forget little things like vampires and sun were nonmixy. She inhaled deeply and shook her head.

This was going to be difficult.

"It's me," she said softly, slipping through the doorway. Spike was standing in the small area that he'd molded into a kitchen, pouring himself a mugful of blood. She didn't miss the way he stiffened when he heard her voice, nor did she miss the way his nostrils flared and his shoulders slumped just slightly, as though preparing himself for a scolding.

He was both gorgeous and heartbreaking.

"Lo Buffy," he replied, not looking at her. "Gotta say...you showin' up while the sun's out..."

A small smile tugged at her lips. "I know. Of the massively weird. I just needed to see you." She swallowed hard, trying to ignore how hard her heart was pounding. "I needed...there's something I need..."

"Yeah?" Spike retorted shortly, his head snapping up. A spark of electricity shot to her core when their eyes met. "Imagine my surprise. Haven't been around in a few days and—"

"Spike? You know that talking thing you do that oftentimes results in your foot in your mouth? You might want to not do that for a few minutes." Buffy grinned slightly. "I guarantee you, this is something you'll want to hear. Okay? A-at least...that's what I'm hoping."

He arched a brow. "Yeah?" he repeated, swagger fading.

She nodded and licked her lips. "Yeah."

Then it was left to saying the words, and she found herself lost. She'd thought of everything on the way here—everything except how to announce that she was in love with him. How to make him believe it. She found herself, unwittingly, reaching for her throat, her fingers grazing the silver chain concealed beneath her blouse.

"God, I don't know why I thought this would be easy," she said, laughing shortly. "It's not. I can't do anything the easy way, can I?"

Spike sighed, his shoulders slumping. "Look, love, if you...you—"

"Let me start out with something...very much delayed." She smiled nervously and lifted the emerald from behind her blouse. "I haven't worn it often. It just didn't...feel right. It never felt right. And Riley never asked me to, obviously, and that bothered me. If he'd spent so much, you'd think he'd ask me to. But he didn't, and it never occurred to me why. I didn't know, you know?"

A mixture of heartache and awe flooded his eyes. Spike gasped a little and stepped back. "H-how..."

"I'm really, really stupid sometimes." Buffy licked her lips and shook her head. "I'm so sorry about that. I should have known. I should've known immediately."

Spike shook his head. "You couldn't... God, Slayer, how—"

"I saw it. I mean, I saw you. I saw everything." She glanced down the second the words left her lips, half-horrified and half-relieved. She wanted no more lies between them, and while technically omitting the part about her nightly excursion last night wasn't a deception, she owed him a full explanation. She just hadn't meant to blurt it out like that. "That is... Well... I've been only a little bit here since I got back. You know that more than anyone."

"Buffy—"

"And I've used you. In the first few days...after I was back, you were wonderful." She paused. "I'm the one who's screwed things up. I made with the mixed signals. I beat the crap out of you, then rode you like some sex-deprived...something." The silence between words was deafening. It was hard to maintain eye contact, but she managed. She needed him to see that she was serious. She needed him to see the truth in her words. The time for hiding was over. "I've been...trying to convince myself that what you feel for me isn't real—"

"Caught that." Spike's breathing hitched. She loved it that he breathed. He breathed for her. It was something he gave her without thinking, and she loved it. "Christ, don't you think I've tried to fight it? I love you. I love you so bleeding much, and if you're here just to—"

"I love you, too."

The look he gave her was nothing short of beautiful. He stared at her, chest heaving, peeling back layers without even trying. Then his eyes took on a shine she knew well. "What?" he gasped. "You...you love me?"

Unsurprisingly, her voice chose that moment to bow out completely, and all she could do was nod.

"You love me..."

"I do," she managed to squeeze out. "I love you, Spike. I just didn't...I didn't know it. And I'm so sorry. God, I'm so sorry for everything. I—"

Spike bounded forward and jerked her into his arms, swallowing her mouth in the sweetest kiss she'd ever known. He devoured and completed her in the same stroke, framing her face with his hands, caressing her cheeks with small, loving circles as his tongue slipped between her lips. And finally, Buffy collided headfirst with everything she'd thought she'd lost. Warmth split her at every turn. Spike was kissing her as he never had before—loving her without words. She tasted his tears and gave him her own in turn. This was everything. The feel of him against her. The small moans that rumbled through his chest. The way his kisses grew hard and desperate while maintaining the softness that told her in no uncertain terms how much he loved her.

"Tell me again," he whispered against her lips. "Buffy, tell me..."

"I love you."

"Again."

She pulled her lips from his and kissed his cheek. "I love you."

"How long?" he demanded, nipping at her earlobe. "How long have you loved me?"

"Since I got back, I think. Just didn't know it until this morning."

Spike's eyes fluttered shut. He was trembling hard, visibly trying to

rein in control. Long, heavy breaths crashed against his chest, and he was so gorgeous that she nearly burst into tears.

"Do you have any idea how long I've..." He shivered. "I've wanted nothin' more than..."

Buffy offered a watery smile and pressed a finger to his lips. "I know," she whispered. "Hard as it might seem...I know. Last night, I had... Well, let's just say I saw things."

Spike arched an eyebrow. "You saw things?"

"You. I..." She broke off and shook her head. "There's really no way to say this without sounding crazy, you know? But I need you to know I really love you. It's real. It just took what happened I saw to...open my eyes."

He nipped at her ear again, trembling. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"So, in essence, you're sayin' that you had some magical mystery tour that made you realize that you're in love with me?"

Buffy winced and forced a nod.

Spike paused, his brow furrowing. Then his eyes gaze to the emerald around her neck, and he shivered again. "And that's how you know about this?" he whispered, running his finger across the gem. "'Cause you saw it?"

"I saw this and a lot of other stuff."

"Yeah?"

Buffy inhaled sharply. "I saw... Well, pretty much everything. Well... everything Christmas-wise. I saw the necklace and the way you tucked me in last year after I'd fallen asleep to *It's a Wonderful Life*. It was... Well, you know Dickens? Yeah, that was pretty much it. I saw everything. I had guides and they showed me stuff and oh my god, do I really sound as crazy as I think I sound?"

"You forget that I have quite a bit of experience in dealin' with crazy," Spike replied before kissing her temple. "And sweetheart... that's the sanest crazy I've ever heard."

"You're just saying that." Buffy released a sigh. "I'm going to be honest. I need you to know everything. It was... Yeah, I think the Powers are really lacking in originality, 'cause it was very much A Buffy Christmas Carol."

"Past, present, and future?"

"Yeah-huh."

"Bet that was a treat."

"Like you wouldn't believe." Her heart ached as her mind jerked her back. The things the night had shown her would be with her forever, and while she wouldn't give up a single thing that she'd learned, remembering the pain she'd seen on Spike's face would hurt until the end of time. "I don't know if I'm going to be able to talk about it for a while," she said softly. "Not fair, I know, since you had to live it, but the things I saw...I've never felt anything like that. I've never..." She trailed off, tears stinging her eyes. There was little that she could say, but she wanted to try. It had been so long since she'd relied on words, and while she wasn't surprised that they were failing her now, she was disappointed. There was so much that he needed to know. "I love you, Spike. I know how it sounds, like *just* because of this, but it's not that. It just made me realize things—"

"I believe you."

That much nearly knocked her off her feet. "You do?"

"You might not have caught on, but I know you." Spike smiled, his eyes warm. There was such tenderness there—tenderness that she hadn't seen since she'd started abusing his body. Tenderness that she'd missed. He'd given her all of himself, and she'd spat on it. And ever since then, he'd hid behind a persona that was, in many ways, easy to vilify. She'd caused him to hide this part of himself, and for that, she should be shot. "I know you so bloody well that it drives me outta my mind. Those words aren't somethin' you just throw around. You don't say them unless you mean them."

"I know," she whispered, her eyes blurring. "I just... Glory, she told me that it was pity, and—"

"Glory?"

"Ghost of Christmas Present."

Spike blinked hard. "Glory was the Ghost of Christmas Present?"

"Have I mentioned the part where the Powers really hate me?" She offered a pitiful smile as her brow found his shoulder. "She said that I was just going to... 'cause I felt so horrible for all the things that she and Doyle showed me...she said that it was just pity. And god, Spike,

it's not. It's not. And I promise I don't just love you because I'm afraid. You're what I want."

"Buffy—"

"I love you. I'm gonna say it until you're sick of hearing it. A-and, you're right. I don't just throw those words around. I—"

The next thing she knew, he'd taken her face in his hands again and was kissing her nervous ramblings right off her lips. "You know I'm yours forever," he whispered against her mouth. "Love or not. You know that. You know you could've stormed in here and told me to drop my pants and I would've. Right brassed as I was, I would've... because I was so bleeding sure that that was as much as I was ever gonna get from you."

"That and you like sex."

His lips quirked. "That part doesn't hurt," he admitted. "But I told you, yeah? I told you I wanted all of you. Christ, I booted you from my sodding crypt. And I've been goin' outta my mind these last few days... tryin' to keep my distance, even though I've missed you so much that I about drove myself into a frenzy."

"You missed me?" she repeated slowly, the thought alone foreign. "The way I've been? Why?"

She didn't ask out of vanity; she truly wanted to know. With as terrible as she was, as horrible as she'd treated him, that he could miss her at all—her and, by implication, all the cruelty she dished out—was awe-inspiring.

"Because I love you," Spike replied, his voice soft, his eyes swallowing her whole. "God help me, Buffy, I've never loved anyone like I love you. And you can kick me and bruise me as much as you fancy, it's never gonna stop. You know that about me and that's why I believe you. I never thought...I told you once that I knew you'd never love me. But that didn't make me any less yours. I'm yours. I'm all yours. I've always been yours... God, since the moment I saw you, you stole me completely. It's what drove Dru away. Fuck, it's what drove *Harmony* away. It's always been you for me. Always. And even if it killed me, having you in any small way was gonna have to be enough. So if you tell me that you love me—"

"I do," she whispered. "I really do."



Spike nodded, brushing his lips against hers. "And I believe you."

"It sounds crazy—"

"Yes, and in our world, the fact that you were able to take a peek into the past doesn't really faze me." He cupped her cheeks and claimed her lips again, pouring every breath of himself into her. "You love me."

Buffy nodded. "I love you."

Spike's eyes fluttered shut. "An' you're sure I'm not dreaming?" he whispered before pressing a kiss to her throat. "I've had dreams like this before..."

"You're not dreaming."

She claimed his lips again, then broke away with a hysterical giggle as reality slammed into her and everything came crashing down. He believed her. She was in Spike's crypt, in his arms, and he believed her. He knew that she loved him. He was peppering her skin with soft, sweet kisses, his hands roaming over her body. She wasn't too late.

"I can't believe this," she whispered, tugging his head up and kissing him again. "I thought I'd be too late."

"Too late?" Spike pulled back, grinning like a maniac. "Too late for what, Slayer?"

"For you. I don't know... The future—"

"Doesn't bloody matter now."

"You weren't with me in the future."

He shrugged. "Just hadn't found you yet."

"Found me?"

"Figure if I wasn't with you, means I was lost or you were off hidin' somewhere." He grinned and kissed her. She loved the way he did that. The way he kissed her between sentences. The way he kept touching her—the way he had yet to let her go. She loved it almost as much as she loved the lightness in his eyes. The one that said everything she was struggling to put into words. He understood her. He was the first man to ever truly understand her as a woman.

Nevertheless, while the words were pretty and filled her with warmth, Buffy couldn't trust that he knew what he was talking about. He hadn't been there to see the future that the Slayer and Anne had shown her. He hadn't been there to hear all the horrible things that

would have come if the Powers hadn't intervened. Now that she had this chance, there was no way that she was going to throw it away.

"Don't let me mess this up," she pleaded. "Please."

"I won't if you won't."

"You weren't with me in the future because you didn't believe me. You didn't believe that I loved you."

"Buffy, I do believe you. Sod the future—or whatever it is you saw." His lips caressed her temple. "I love you, and I'm not going anywhere. Not now. God, especially not now. If you really love me..."

"I do."

"I'm not goin' anywhere."

"I'm a wreck," Buffy murmured, blinking hard. She hadn't cried this much in years. "I don't know if you've noticed this, but I'm a complete wreck."

"With everythin' you've been through—"

"That can only be an excuse for so long."

"It hasn't been all that long, love," Spike replied. "You still got a few free passes, far as I'm concerned."

If she lived a thousand years, she would never understand how she had made it through life those few short years between first meeting Spike and coming to know the man he was now without seeing him at all. She'd known him for so long and she'd never seen him. Not really. Not as he truly was.

His nature demanded darkness, but he fought so hard to give her light. He fought so hard...

She would never take him for granted again. Never again. Not for the future they had together now. The forever that she would spend in his arms.

Strange as it was, the reality of the eternity she had with him didn't scare her at all.

She actually found it rather comforting.

THEY TALKED FOREVER. They talked about everything. She asked him things she'd never thought to ask—things she wasn't sure she wanted answered. She listened to him as he spoke, relishing the way his eyes lit up when he was narrating a particularly interesting story. The way his voice pitched in moments of excitement and drop when things became intense. He answered every question honestly, even when she knew he didn't want to. And it wasn't all pretty—she asked some doozies. But she didn't flinch when he mentioned blood or admitted how much fun he'd had in the life that he'd lived before he fell in love with her. Instead, every word just made her love him more. The monster in his past was very much present in everything he said and did, but the monster had been tamed by the man inside.

And the man lived for her. She'd brought the man out. She didn't know how or why, and would never pretend to.

Eventually, as the day wore on, she told him of the night before, omitting very little. How Doyle had led her through the past, and how she'd felt like she'd lost a best friend when he left her. Buffy had watched, amused, as Spike had ducked his head in embarrassment when she described watching him masturbate. It was so bizarre because Spike was never embarrassed in anything. Seeing the change in

him only verified what she'd begun to suspect, that his confidence, while entirely Spike, often became exaggerated when he felt threatened. When his emotions were exposed. When he wanted to protect himself.

That first morning would have gone so differently had she not been the colossal bitch from hell. Had she rolled over, purred a good morning. Had she shown any amount of emotion aside from revulsion. Her actions had put him on the offensive, and he'd quickly reverted into the worst version of the male ego in order to guard his wounded pride.

That wasn't to say that Spike's ego was a fabrication of self-doubt. After all, she'd managed to wipe the embarrassed look off his face just by leaning in and telling him how wet she'd been watching him pump his cock.

No, Spike hadn't looked embarrassed then. He'd looked...hot. And aroused. His eyes darkened and a low growl reverberated through his chest.

"Fancy a repeat?" he'd purred. "Sometime...I'll show you mine if you show me yours."

Buffy knew without question that she was going to love this. She was going to love whispering dirty little things to him in public places just to see his eyes widen and his nostrils flare. She was going to love patrolling with him because he made the dance interesting. Because she wanted to see how hot she could make him by sparring before he shoved her against the nearest mausoleum wall. She found herself looking forward to teasing him as they averted apocalypse after apocalypse, and the earth-shattering make-up sex they'd have after each fight.

But right now, she wanted to do something she'd never done.

"Clem's gonna drop by this afternoon," Buffy whispered, wrapping her arms around his middle and her breasts pressed against his back. "You might wanna...write him a note."

"H-how do you know?" Spike replied, exhaling as her nails slowly slid down his arms.

"Hey, today I'm gonna be a step ahead of everyone."

"Enjoy it while you can, sweetheart."

"I intend to." She nipped at his neck. "And I don't want to be interrupted. Write him a note?"

Spike quickly obliged, though his work was cut out for him. The second he located a pad of paper and a pen, Buffy wound her arms around him again and lowered her mouth to his skin to nibble at his neck. The moan that tore through his lips was one of the most rewarding sounds she'd ever heard. She wanted to learn everything—she wanted him to make that little noise over and over and over again.

"Fuck, pet..."

Buffy giggled, dipping a hand to squeeze his erection through his jeans. "That's the idea," she replied. "We should...go downstairs." She paused then, words halting on her lips. The next bit was important, no matter how cheesy it sounded to her ears. He needed to hear it. He needed to hear it, and she needed to say it. They both needed to know what it was now. Therefore, after a few seconds of building her confidence, she released a steady breath and whispered, "Wanna make love with you."

It was, perhaps, the tamest language ever used in the bedroom, but the effect it had was beyond anything she'd ever imagined. Spike moaned aloud and twisted in her arms, gripping her thighs as his lips consumed hers. He devoured her completely, exploring every inch of her mouth with his hungry tongue. How they made it downstairs, she would never know. Their lips remained stubbornly fused together, which made for an interesting combination of balance and coordination. This naturally resulted in a good amount of inelegant stumbling flecked with laughter that made his eyes dance and her heart sing.

Once they reached the bed, though, Buffy's mood changed. She broke her lips from his with a whimper, running her hands down his chest as a nervous sigh trembled through her body. She wasn't good at this part. Hell, she wasn't good at any part. And while she knew that Spike would love whatever she did, a larger part of her knew that she would never be satisfied unless she was able to convey her feelings through touch as well as words. She needed him to know exactly how she felt, no holds barred.

"Thank you," she whispered before kissing him again. It was his fault, really. She couldn't be blamed if his lips were addictive.

“For what?” Spike murmured.

Buffy grinned and closed a hand around the emerald that hung between her breasts. “This. It’s two years too late, but thank you. I can’t tell you what it meant—means—to me.”

He smirked. “So much that you never wear it.”

“I told you that it never felt right.”

“Your fault for thinkin’ Captain Cardboard had taste.” The smirk stretched, and he kissed her again before she could retort. “Buffy, I love you too much to worry about the past. Bygones, and all that. The past is over. You’re here now. With me. And somehow you love me. I... I can’t ask for anything more than that.”

He was going to make her cry again, dammit. Buffy shook her head, fisting the soft cotton of his tee and dragging it over his head. And for the first time since she’d known him, she allowed her eyes to drag over his body, vowing to know every scar that time hadn’t let him forget. She wanted to show him love beyond anything he’d ever experienced—beyond anything *she’d* ever experienced. With him, she was determined to learn how to live again.

She grazed her fingers over his chest. There were simply no words for how gorgeous he was.

And yet, she tried. “Wow.”

Spike grinned, albeit a tad self-consciously, which only made her love him more. “Yeah?”

Buffy nodded, trailing her eyes upward until she was drowning in his gaze again. “Big...big wow.”

“Nothin’ you haven’t seen, Slayer.”

“Yes it is,” she replied, brushing a soft kiss over his left nipple.

His reaction was sharper than she’d imagined. Spike melted into a moan, jerking forward so that his erection was rubbing against her stomach. “Oh fuck,” he gasped. “You’re...you’re gonna drive me outta my mind.”

“I just started.”

“I know. And it’s gonna drive me outta my mind.” Spike rolled his head back when she lapped at him again, but to her disappointment, he reined in control long enough to capture her face in his hands. “Pet...look at me.”

She'd never stop looking. Whatever part of her brain that had been turned off those few times that they'd been naked together had finally switched on, and she was seeing everything for the first time. How she'd ever missed how gorgeous he was, she'd never know.

"Buffy?"

She blinked and met his eyes. "What?" she demanded, sounding like a child whose game had been interrupted.

"You don't have to do this."

"Ogle your naked goodness? Oh, yes. I really do. And how is it that I've gone this long without doing it before?"

Spike smirked. "You have a talent for hiding your blushing eyes, remember?"

"Stupid eyes with the non-blushing."

"Slayer..." He broke off with a sigh, shaking his head. "I know... Christ, I never thought I'd be saying this...I know you love me. I can... I can feel..." At that, his eyes grew misty and the breaths that wracked his shoulders became more pronounced. "I know...I can feel that you love me. And I've never had anythin' like it. Never."

She grinned and nipped playfully at his skin. "Good Christmas present, then?"

"The bloody best."

"I got more for you."

"You're all the present any man needs." Spike grinned and kissed her brow. "And you're mine. You're all mine."

"Totally and completely."

"I love you."

Buffy's blood positively hummed. She would never get over those words. Not now. Never again. Not now that she knew what they meant. To him—to her. To them, and the future they had together.

Nor would she get over the teary look in his eyes that when she whispered back, "I love you, too."

"God, Buffy..."

"I wanna show you how much." She dipped her head again, again teasing one of his nipples with her mouth and sliding between them to caress the hard outline of his cock. "And you can't stop me."

Spike laughed, and the sound was so strained he almost sounded nervous. "Point of fact, kitten—"

"Lie back on the bed."

No need asking him twice. He immediately flopped onto the mattress, his wide eyes taking her in with such blatant yearning that her knees nearly buckled. Buffy inhaled sharply, turning her hands to her blouse. She wasn't going to get completely naked, because she knew that if she did, he'd change the rules and make this all about her. But she'd had enough time in the spotlight. It was his turn now.

"I forgot to put a bra on," she said conversationally as her red blouse slid down her arms and to the floor. "Sorry. I was just in a hurry."

"That's um..." He swallowed, staring hard at her breasts. "Yeah."

"Spike?"

"God, you're gorgeous." He licked his lips, palming one of her breasts before she could stop him. "These are mine, right?" he purred, pebbling her nipple between his thumb and forefinger. "Your lovely little titties are mine."

Buffy nodded, biting back a moan. "Uh huh."

"Bring 'em here, then. Your Spike wants a taste."

She was *this* close to giving in. *This* close. Her breasts ached and her legs were wobbling and if she got any hotter or wetter, she'd lose the plot completely. He had the power to do that to her. He could reduce her to nothing more than a babbling mess of slayer goo simply by touching her. By raking those devilish eyes over her body and running that equally devilish tongue over his teeth.

But she needed to taste him. So instead of leaning in and giving him a mouthful, she flattened her palms against his chest and shoved him back to the mattress.

"Sorry, sweetie," she replied. "You're not gonna win that easily."

The yellow, lust-driven burn in his eyes was enough to set the crypt on fire. "You'd like to think so," he growled before licking his lips. Then he paused, blinked. "And...did you just call me sweetie?"

Buffy attempted a nonchalant shrug. "Just trying it on," she said, cupping her breasts. "These aren't going to distract you, are they?"

"Minx."



“Cause I could put a shirt on if—”

“Don’t you dare. Give ‘em here.”

She grinned and shook her head. Instead, she made quick work of his boots and dragged his jeans down his legs, her wide, hungry eyes popping as his erection sprang free. Last night’s memory, while it had given her plenty to drool over, hadn’t really done him justice. Perhaps that was because she hadn’t been able to touch the shadow as he’d masturbated to her image. Perhaps because there was forced distance between them. She of the present and he of the non-living past.

Now there was nothing between them at all. No hatred. No punches. No angry words or careless lies. He was not a shadow of the past, and she was not a broken slayer, bent on self-destruction. She was just Buffy, and she was in love. She’d forgotten what In Love Buffy felt like.

Perhaps that was because she’d never felt like this. Not once. Not with any man in her life. Her love for Spike was beyond the childish love she’d harbored for Angel—that first-love thing that was done and overdone, and in her past where it belonged. That love had taught her the line between fantasy and reality. Spike gave her something hard and real, and it was stronger than anything she’d ever experienced.

Buffy drew in a quivering breath and knelt on the floor, curling a hand around his cock. “I wanna taste you here,” she whispered, enjoying the widening of his eyes and the half-growl, half-moan that ripped through his throat. “You don’t mind, do you?”

“Mind?” Spike rasped, thrusting his hips upward. “God, pet, please...”

She grinned, hoping that her eyes reflected more confidence than she felt. It had been a long time since she tried pleasing a man with her mouth—really tried, and not just as means of getting her way, as she had the last time she’d been here. Her last real attempt hadn’t gone swimmingly, as her tendency to forget her own strength had a knack for catching her off guard. She’d never forget the way Riley had squealed and about hit the ceiling when she’d squeezed his sac just a hair too hard. Since then, she’d avoided oral exploration. Real oral exploration—not sexual blackmail.

The memory was enough to make her shudder. Buffy swallowed

hard. "If you don't like it, let me know," she said quickly, half-hoping he wouldn't hear, but needing it out there so that she could at least say that she'd warned him. "I'll stop."

Spike's eyes widened. "Not like it?" he repeated. "Slayer..."

"I haven't...ummm..."

He sat up on his elbows, his eyes swallowing her whole. "Seems I remember it differently."

"That didn't count. I was trying to get my way."

"Rather brilliantly. No normal bloke could resist."

"Except you did."

"Well, I'm not exactly normal." He swallowed at that, his expression somewhat fearful, like he'd reminded her of something. Except normal wasn't the order of the day anymore. She wasn't normal so why should her love life be any different?

"Not counting that time, I haven't done this too much. And I was never confident asking for pointers." Buffy paused and blinked hard. She couldn't believe she was actually talking about this. She was perched between his legs, stroking his cock and discussing the nature of her past experience in blowjobs. Just when she thought her life couldn't get any stranger. "And...ummm...well, it turns out that I don't know my own strength."

"You mean you hurt some poor chump."

"Yes."

"Wanker."

Buffy arched an eyebrow. "He's the wanker?"

"For makin' you feel any less than perfect, yes." Spike's eyes rolled up as she brushed her fingers along the head of his cock, and his hips thrust upward again. "B-Buffy...please..."

"What if you don't like it or I hurt you?"

"Impossible."

"But—"

"Just go with it, baby." He threaded his fingers through her hair, coaxing her head back until their eyes met. "I love you."

The words were all she needed. With Spike, there was no reason to fear. He did love her. He'd love her even if she gave the worst head in the world, and he'd teach her how to improve. What was there to lose?

And then it hit her from nowhere.

For the first time, the answer to that was nothing. Spike wasn't going anywhere. He loved her as she was, and he'd seen all of her—the good and the very bad. There was nothing to fear if she failed because there would be a tomorrow. Buffy exhaled, tension rolling off her shoulders, and lowered her mouth to his cock.

"I love you, too," she whispered before licking experimentally at his slick head. It nearly shocked her out of her skin when he gasped and flopped back onto the bed with the longest, sexiest moan she'd ever heard. She didn't know if he was reacting to the words or to her actions—all she knew was that she wanted to replicate that response as much as possible.

"You like this, then?" She sucked delicately at his cockhead with new confidence, pumping the length of him with her hand. "This is okay?"

"You're so fucking perfect, it drives me outta my mind." Spike wove his fingers through her hair once more. "Don't be afraid to hurt me, baby."

Buffy glanced up, trembling. While the notion was romantic, the words took on a completely different meaning. "I'm through hurting you," she whispered and drew him deeper into her mouth before he could reply, and giving his cock a good, hard suck.

"Oh fuck." Spike growled and jerked. "Slayer?"

"Yeah?"

"Do whatever you want. God, I'm yours."

The words were enough to boost her confidence further. Do whatever she wanted, huh? Okay, she would. She released him with a wet *plop*, dragged her lips down his length and increased the pressure of each squeeze of her hand. He trembled and sighed when she pressed his erection to his stomach, her mouth slowly taking to the underside of his cock with soft, heartfelt kisses. She wanted to start off slow; she wanted to give him plenty of time to tell her that she wasn't doing it right before she ended up hurting him, or worse. Not that Spike would hurt as easily as Riley did, or be as awkward about it. Rather, her first time with Spike had been enough evidence that he enjoyed pain mixed with pleasure. She

just wasn't sure if this was the sort of pain that would do it for him.

When her lips reached his sac, she hesitated for a beat, then went with her instincts and drew his tender skin between her lips.

"Buffy?"

"Mhmm?"

"Fuck, please." He closed his hand around her wrist, encouraging her to tighten her grip on his cock. "I love you. I love you so much. Such a hot little mouth. So fucking perfect and you don't even know it."

She released his balls and kissed her way back to the tip. "Am not," she replied, her skin heating as she drew his cock back into her mouth. God, she couldn't remember the last time she'd blushed, and knowing that she still could—that she was human enough to blush—made her so insanely happy that she drew him in so deep that his head bumped the back of her throat, causing her to swallow instinctively.

"Oh fuck!"

His enthusiasm only made her hotter. She slid back until the tip of him was at her lips once more, her hand dropping to his balls again and rolling them gently against her palm. "I'm improvising," she warned him.

"You're wonderful." He hissed in pleasure. "Fuck yeah, suck me. Take me all the way in, pet."

Buffy wasn't about to stop and question him. That was more direction than any man had ever given her. She nodded and licked his head again, then slid her lips around him, welcoming his cock deep into her mouth. It was, admittedly, a bizarre sensation—one she hadn't thought she'd experience beyond the one or two humiliating attempts in the past. However, despite her nervousness, she wasn't ashamed of her inexperience. There was a sort of exhilaration in learning with him.

She wanted him to teach her everything she'd been too shy or prudish to explore in the past.

"That's it, kitten," he purred. "Christ, your mouth is perfect. So warm."

"Mmm?"

The vibrations of her lips around him had Spike throwing his head

back and screwing his eyes shut. His fingers closed around her hand, his thumb caressing gentle circles against the inside of her wrist. She absorbed every little gasp. Every sigh. Every time his eyes met hers. Every time he smiled into her heated face. She mapped every inch of his length with her mouth, licking over his head and delving to taste his sensitive slit as she gripped and pumped him at the base. The murmurs and moans and purrs that rumbled through his chest slowly built up her confidence. Soon, she developed a rhythm that felt natural and comfortable. A rhythm that had him moaning and squirming and thrusting his cock deeper into her throat. She sucked and nibbled, licked and laved. She drew him in as far as she could, and squeezed what she couldn't take as her throat muscles contracted around him.

"You're perfect," he gasped when she pressed his cock to his stomach again, her tongue taking to the underside before welcoming him back into her mouth. "Fuck, Slayer, you're so perfect."

"Liar," she replied, grinning and suckling sweetly at his spongy head. "I suck."

"I'll say."

Buffy giggled and ran her tongue from the base of his cock to the tip. "I'll learn how to do this better."

Spike moaned. "Practice all you want, baby. I'm your willing guinea pig."

"Emphasis on *pig*."

"You like pigs," he countered. "Baby, please. Need to come. Need you." He reached for her, curling his hands around her upper arms to drag her up the length of his body. He paused and frowned at the presence of her jeans. "Why aren't you naked?"

"To avoid temptation," Buffy replied breathlessly. "Hold on..."

"Need you. Need your fantastic pussy strangling me."

She quirked an eyebrow and giggled again. "Fantastic, eh?" she retorted, kicking her shoes off as Spike pried at the clasp of her jeans and tore the offending material down her legs. "Oh, wait! I have a present for you."

Spike growled and ripped away the red lace that guarded her pussy, his eyes brightening with hunger. "Yeah, you do," he purred, exploring

her sopping flesh with cool expertise that drove her completely out of her mind. "Christ, you're so wet."

"Mhmm," she agreed, stifling a moan. He made it hard to remember the smallest things—like how to form words. "No, wait..."

"Wait?" Spike replied, dragging his lips down her neck and nipping with blunt teeth. "Don't wanna. Wanna be inside you now."

"I have...present."

"And I tell you again...you're all the present any man needs."

Buffy grinned and shook her head, sliding off his waist and reaching for her discarded jeans. "That may be," she replied cheekily, "but I have presents. For you."

"Presents better than shagging me all day?"

"I'll let you be the judge."

Spike seared her with a heated look. And while it wasn't all that different from the way he looked at her before, the dreary despair behind his gaze had vanished completely. He didn't avert his eyes to avoid being caught staring, and when she smirked at him, he smirked back and blew her a kiss.

"Perv," she teased.

"I'm a perv 'cause I like lookin' at my..." He paused, then frowned. "Is it...it's safe to call you my girlfriend, innit? That's not somethin' that's gonna have you...well, kickin' me in the head and runnin' for the door, right?"

Buffy stiffened, slammed with a mixture of excitement and shame. It was going to take a while, she knew, before Spike was comfortable with the change in their relationship. But she hated knowing that she'd given him a reason to doubt her in the first place.

But she was going to have a hell of a time helping him build his confidence.

"Sillyhead," she retorted, laughing at the look he gave her.

"Baby—"

"But to answer your question without the use of really, really stupid nicknames...I'm your girlfriend." She paused because she knew that one word would never be enough to describe what they were to each other. "I'm your lover." Buffy beamed at the dreamy look that stormed his eyes and couldn't keep herself from kissing his lips off. And then,

partly because it was true and partly because she knew how he'd react, she added, "I'm your...slayer."

Spike blinked, then grinned and brushed a kiss against her throat. "Say that part again."

"Which part?"

"You know which part."

This might turn into one of her favorite games if she wasn't careful. "I'm your girlfriend."

"Mmm." Spike grinned, sliding a hand up her inner thigh. "I like the sound of that."

"I thought you might."

"Now how about you tell me what I wanted to hear?"

"You didn't wanna hear that I'm your girlfriend?"

"Slayer..."

"I'm your that, too."

"Fuck yeah, you are." Spike slid his fingers over her clit, and she exploded with need. "You are so gorgeous," he whispered, brushing his lips against the pulse point of her throat. "Are you sure this is real?"

Buffy kissed him, melting at the feel of his tongue sliding against hers. "It's very real," she whispered. "I promise...it's so very real."

His eyes widened, blazing with amber. "You like it when I rub your clit, don't you?" he growled, pressing down on her button. "I can hear your heart racing. Your eyes...fuck. I love your eyes. And the way your breathing hitches when I touch you just...like...that."

"Unh..."

"You drive me wild. I'll never get enough of you. Never." He kissed her again as she shifted above him, wrapping a hand around his cock to position him at her opening, rubbing himself against her folds. "Never."

Her eyes watered again. She really needed to get over this crying thing before he realized how unstable an emotionally vulnerable Buffy was. "I love you," she whispered. She had nothing else to say, but from the look on his face, it was all that needed to be said.

"I love you too, baby," Spike whispered. "God, I love you so much."

She'd never felt it before as she did when he said it. Not once. Hell, Angel had told her that he'd loved her, and while her body had trem-

bled and her teenage heart had swooned, she'd never felt the words as she did now. As she did every time that Spike whispered them. She felt his voice licking her insides, warming every part of her that had ever been cold, and she'd never felt so cherished.

"I was so stupid," she sighed, sinking onto his cock with a moan of completion. A thousand years could pass and she would never get over how he felt inside her. He stretched her in ways she hadn't known she could stretch, filling all her empty places. How two people separated by generations could be so right for each other, she didn't know. She could only thank the Powers for bringing her this far. For sending her the cosmic wake-up call. For making her realize that there were worse things about living than being alive to begin with.

She wanted to tell him all that, but all she managed was a long, "Oh god."

"Fuck," he agreed, a long whimper tearing through his lips. "You always feel so good."

"Spike..."

His hands settled on her hips. "You're perfect," he gasped. "Bloody hell, you're so fucking perfect."

She flattened her palms against his chest, trembling hard. She didn't know why she was so nervous. It wasn't like they hadn't done this dance before. She'd ridden him hard their first night together, all the while murmuring little nasty words that would shame her in the light of day. Now with the words between them, high on the love she'd exhausted herself repressing, everything seemed different. And while she wanted to show him everything she couldn't yet trust with words, it seemed Buffy couldn't trust her body to speak for her, either.

But god, she was determined to try.

"Hold on," she whispered, lifting herself slowly off his cock before sinking back down again. The way his skin slid against hers turned her blood molten. She'd never let herself enjoy it before—not really. Not like this. While she'd always reached fruition, and had the sore throat to prove it by morning, she'd never allowed herself to meet Spike's eyes. To revel in the knowledge that he was giving her something that no one else could. Now, as she experimented, rocking her hips against him in search of the right rhythm, she wondered yet



again how she'd made it this far without tripping over her own stupidity.

"So full," Buffy whispered, her experimental thrusts gaining momentum. Slow and sweet could only get her so far. Just a few hours ago, she'd thought it possible that Spike wouldn't welcome her back into his bed. Now that she was with him—now with his cock sliding in and out of her, she needed to feel him as she never had. "Oh god..."

The words that fell from her lips had the right effect. "Christ, pet," he gasped, bucking into her. "More. Tell me more."

"More?"

"Tell me..."

"What?"

"How I feel." Spike's eyes glowed yellow and he squeezed her hips. "Just try."

Buffy's heart raced. The whole dirty-talk thing was another settlement in foreign territory. While she'd done her share that first night, everything was different now. She wasn't that sort of girl—at least she hadn't been in the past, and certainly not with men she cared about. Now that she was no longer fighting her feelings for Spike, she found she was fairly petrified of what he might say should she humiliate herself.

And yet, that didn't stop the words from coming. "You...you fill me up," she said, then winced. It had to be the tackiest line ever, but he didn't seem to mind. Rather, he tossed his head back again and screwed his eyes shut. There was no sound other than the harsh breaths tumbling from his lips and the wet smack of their bodies colliding. Buffy inhaled. Perhaps if she rode him hard enough, he wouldn't remember a thing. "You fill me...like no one else."

He dug his fingers deeper into her hips. "More."

"Hold my ass."

Spike's eyes flew open. "What?" he demanded, even as his hands slipped to where she wanted them. "Like this?"

"Uh huh."

"You like this?"

There was no sense answering with words what she could answer with a well-timed whimper. Buffy nodded hard and bounced on his

cock with renewed vigor. She loved the way he gripped as she rode him, almost as much as she loved that he showed her everything she needed to know just with his face—with the way he gritted his teeth and furrowed his brow. Like she was tormenting him but he'd scream louder if she stopped.

"What else do you like, pet?" he rumbled, squeezing her ass. "Tell me."

She tried to come up with words; she really did. But with his cock thrusting inside her, his hands on her skin, his eyes swallowing her heart, words became obsolete. She wanted to drive him as insane as he drove her—she wanted to drive him mad enough that the words he was so skilled at weaving failed him as well.

"Come on, Slayer," he coaxed, lifting his head to capture one of her nipples in that magical mouth of his. "Lemme know what you like. You like it when I lick your gorgeous little titties?"

Buffy tossed her head back and gasped, smashing her pussy against him. "Oh god, yes!"

"And I know you like it when I stroke your clit." His tongue flicked her nipple as his hand slipped over her thigh to pinch her clit with a rough growl. "Like this?"

"Oh god!"

He grinned and nipped at her skin. "Thought so."

Perhaps it was the arrogance in his voice that made her do it. Perhaps it was sheer curiosity. Or perhaps she had no reason whatsoever—in the end, Buffy didn't really know. And if she was completely honest, she didn't care, either. As it was, she had little time to think before she seized him by the shoulders and sank her teeth hard into the base of his neck.

"Bloody fuck," Spike gasped, bucking his hips and impaling her with his cock so hard it nearly jostled her mouth free. Nearly, but not quite. "My god."

His reaction was worth the taste of blood on her lips. "You like that?" she demanded harshly.

"Slayer. My Slayer. My Buffy. Mine. Mine. Mine." He arched off the bed with a strangled moan. "Fuck, you ride me so good. Drive me right outta my mind. My Slayer. Buffy..."

Every part of her that felt broken and shattered from her fall was slowly stitching back together. The world glowed and her skin hummed. She rode him with new desperation. With a need to send him spiraling so deep that he never forgot who he belonged to.

That he was hers, just as much as she was his.

"You're mine, too," she gasped, her eyes wide. "You're mine, Spike."

"Oh fuck, yes."

"You're mine," Buffy growled again, reaching for her discarded jeans. She did her best to ignore the way he swelled within her as she stretched, just as she did her best to ignore his tortured moan.

"Slayer—"

It took less than a second to find what she was looking for. "And you're gonna take your Christmas present now."

Spike frowned and quickly found himself with a mouthful of red panties.

"Part one, anyway," Buffy whispered, seizing his wrists and pinning his hands back to the mattress. She leaned forward until her nipples skated across his chest. "I thought it'd be...a nice...gesture," she managed to get out, pressing her lips to his neck and peppering a line of kisses across his skin until her mouth was wrapped around the mark that had immortalized him a century ago.

"Muffpphh," he growled, smashing upward so hard that she nearly saw stars.

"Oh god," she moaned into his throat. "Oh my god."

Spike snarled in agreement and flipped her over. The suddenness of the movement had his cock stabbing even deeper within her, and before Buffy could even squeak in surprise, the panties were gone and he was mauling her mouth with his. "My kinky little Slayer," he rumbled against her lips. "Gonna make you pay."

Then he slipped out of her and slid unceremoniously down her body until his face was buried in her pussy.

Buffy sat up. "What are you—"

Spike answered her with a stern tsk, parting her flesh and treating her pink, wet skin with a long lick. "I swear, baby," he berated before giving her clit a good tap with his tongue, "if you don't know by now..."

"Oh my god."

"That's it..." He grinned and drew her sensitive button between his lips for a few hearty sucks. "Not that I'm objecting, love," he purred when he released her, "but do you mind explaining the knickers?"

Before she could form an answer, he plunged his tongue inside of her and chased coherent thought out of the premises. Spike flashed another grin, settling his thumb over her clit as that way-too-talented organ in his mouth pushed deeper inside her.

"Present," she managed to gasp, thrusting against his mouth with a need that nearly drove her blind. "Yours."

"Yeah, I get that." He waggled his brows before delving his tongue deeper within her. "I don't need you to explain the stuff I...get."

"Unh..."

"Fuck, but you taste good. I could drink your honey all day." His teeth scraped gently against her soaked flesh. Blunt teeth, but the thought of what he could do made her stomach twist with the oddest sensation of exhilaration and fear that she'd ever experienced. And while she knew that he would never hurt her, the knowledge that he could made her fall apart at the seams.

As though he knew what she was thinking, Spike smirked at her, his tongue abandoning her opening as his mouth latched onto her clit. "So," he purred around her flesh, slipping his fingers inside. "Tell me."

"Ooooh..."

"You make the sexiest noises. You know that?"

"Spike..." Buffy was arched so far off the mattress that she could probably be detected by satellites. "Oh god. Panties...umm...thought you'd...ooohhh...like them."

"I like 'em better on you than on myself, kitten," he retorted before drawing a circle around her clit. "It's a bloody load more fun takin' them off you." His drenched fingers intensified their assault on her pussy. "What makes you think I'd fancy women's knickers?"

"Cause...they're...mine."

"That does give them a certain advantage."

"And...you...steal them..."

Spike arched a brow. "So you're gonna give me somethin' I steal?"

"It's a gesture!"

He chuckled and nipped at her affectionately. "It sure is."

“Hey!” Buffy scowled good-naturedly, grabbing his wrist. “Come up here.”

“I like it down here.”

“Yeah, I like you down there, too.” She giggled at the dirty look he burned her with, and while her pussy ached for him to finish what he’d started, that didn’t stop her from fisting a handful of his hair and dragging him back up her body. Until his cock was nudging her drenched folds. “I like you up here better.”

Spike smirked, wrapping a hand around his length and guiding it until the slick head was rubbing her clit. “I think you like me anywhere,” he teased before dropping a kiss against the corner of her mouth. “Isn’t that right?”

“Oh god, yes.” She seized his cheeks and brought his lips to hers, swallowing him in a long, desperate kiss. “Uhhh.”

“You like that?” he rasped, rotating his hips. “Christ...”

“Spike! Inside me!”

His eyes turned molten. “Never refuse a begging slayer,” he purred, pumping into her once more. “My favorite motto.”

“Oh, yes. Words to live by.”

Spike moaned and dropped his head to her shoulder. “You’re so warm,” he murmured, jerking his hips. “You’re so fucking warm. So hot. Burn me up, is what you do. Oh god, kitten, squeeze me.”

She did. She clenched her muscles tight around his cock and focused on the feel of him moving within her. On how hard she shook when his lips brushed every inch of skin that he could reach. On the intimacy of his brow pressed to hers, his eyes swallowing her with such intensity that objects around her blurred into meaningless shapes. Until all she could hear were their mingled pants, the slap of his balls against her ass and their bodies against a rickety mattress.

“I love you,” Spike growled, slipping his hand between their bodies to find her clit. “God, Buffy, I love you so much.”

And that was it. The words. The way he stroked her while taking her to the stars and back. Another hoarse gasp rolled through her and pleasure split every vein. Her blood boiled; her skin about melted off her bones. Spike rubbed her clit as his cock struck that perfect spot within her, sending her spiraling with ecstasy. His name peeled off her

lips as her cells exploded. And before she could stop herself, she lunged for him again, sinking her teeth into his shoulder as her pussy clenched hard around him.

The animalesque roar that tore through Spike's throat went straight to her center. She pulled back just as his eyes went yellow and his fangs descended. And before she could even manage a gasp, he dove forward and sank his incisors just above her breast.

"Oh my GOD!"

"Bloody hell," Spike panted, snapping his head back, thrusting madly as he spilled himself inside her. Her blood smeared his mouth, and somehow it was the hottest thing she'd ever seen.

And she'd tell him so once she remembered her name. As it was, she could barely muster the strength to hold him after he collapsed against her. She sighed when she felt his arms come up around her. When his lips brushed her brow. When he murmured how much he loved her into her hair, and again asked for reassurance that he wasn't dreaming.

He wasn't. And neither was she. Her skin was pricking and there wasn't an inch of her body that didn't ache in the best way. Spike was curled around her and Buffy knew that she'd regained everything she'd thought she'd lost. Turns out it wasn't lost at all—just misplaced, and she'd found it again.

She wasn't too late. Spike was with her. She was in the arms of the man she loved. The future was in her hands at last.

And she wasn't going to take him for granted.

IT DIDN'T SURPRISE her when Spike tightened the arm he had around her middle as she made the slow transition from half-asleep to awake. She knew what he was thinking. That the magic of their morning, now that day was rolling into night, would fade and they would be right back at the beginning. That she would resume her role of kicking him in the head and making a break for home.

The knowledge was only a little disheartening. While Buffy was a bit disappointed that her repeated declarations of love and the efforts she'd made to prove how she felt about him hadn't erased all of his misgivings, she'd expected this. Romantic as the idea was, a few hours in bed couldn't undo years full of hurt.

She still had a lot to make up to him, no matter what he said.

And an eternity in which to do it.

Buffy sighed and shivered, wrapping her fingers around the emerald that still hung around her neck.

Spike flattened his palm against her stomach, nuzzling her hair. "Sweetheart?" he murmured. "I know you're awake. No sense in playin' possum on me now."

There was a note of nervousness in his voice, and while it was buried under love and playfulness, it somehow rang the loudest in her

ears. "I'm awake," she replied, releasing the emerald. She dropped her to her belly to weave her fingers through his. "And I still love you."

Spike chuckled and kissed her shoulder. "Who's worried?" he purred, thrusting his swelling cock against her backside.

"Obviously not you."

"Obviously."

"Especially since you told me that you weren't worried before I could ask if you were." Buffy grinned and twisted in his arms then pulled him down to taste his lips. There simply was no better way to wake up. Spike's lips were surely on loan from the devil, but she didn't care. He made sure that she burned in all the right places. "Mmmm... Spike lips. Lips of Spike."

He smirked and brushed said lips across her temple. "Not sure if that sounds right if you're not screamin' it in disgust."

"I can't believe you remember that."

"Don't be throwin' stones, pet. You're the one that brought it up."

Buffy grinned and kissed him again. "I guess I am." She paused, her eyes fluttering shut. There were still matters to talk about. Things that she wanted on the table before they packed up and marched back into the belly of the beast. While they'd discussed pretty much everything upstairs, the matter of her immortality was something she'd omitted. And it wasn't like that was something she could ignore and hope he never noticed; something told her that by the time they'd buried the last Scooby and she still hadn't aged a day, he would have caught on that there was something slightly off.

"I need to talk to you about something," she said, pressing her index finger to his lips to warn off another make-out session that would undoubtedly lead to more rampant sinning of the extremely good kind. He'd managed to distract her enough with those lips and hands of his. Not to mention his cock. His cock was very good at distracting her. Hell, she'd had to give him part one of his Christmas present while bouncing on said cock. Spike and his powers of diversion weren't going to win this round.

Spike blinked, his good humor abandoning his eyes immediately. "You still love me, right?" he joked weakly. "Cause you just said that you still love me."



Buffy kissed him before she could stop herself. "I love you," she said. "I'll love you forever."

"But...?"

She shook her head. "There are no buts about that. Really, Spike, out of all the crazy crap I've gone through, that's the one thing I'm completely sure about."

"I'm the crazy crap you're sure about?"

"That didn't come out the way I wanted it to."

"Crazy crap rarely does."

She made a face and slapped his shoulder. "Okay, that was in such bad taste, it was...it was a Xander-joke."

"Low blow, pet."

"Your fault for resorting to potty humor." She stuck her tongue at him, then quickly retracted before he could snatch her up in another melt-worthy kiss. "What I have to tell you has nothing to do with... well, it does, but it doesn't change anything. At least, I don't think it will. But it is something you need to know."

Spike nodded, propping his cheek up on a closed fist. His eyes were bright with curiosity now, and while she hadn't successfully chased away every last of the doubt, it wasn't as potent as it had been just seconds before.

"Okay," he agreed.

There really wasn't a good way to segue into what she needed to say. To tell him that oh, by the way, she wasn't going to die anytime soon. Not if she played her cards right, anyway.

"Wow," she said, laughing nervously. "I have no idea how to tell you any of this."

"Sweetheart, when you begin like that..."

"I promise, it's not bad."

"Then your pitch is startin' on the wrong foot."

Buffy shook her head, holding up a hand. "Spike... When I was... When I was all with the mind-trippy, Buffy Summers: This Is Your Life thing...the future..."

Spike frowned. "I already told you that you have nothing to worry about," he said. "I don't bloody care what you saw. I'm not going anywhere. I'm yours."

"You weren't there."

"Things have changed."

"You'd died, Spike."

It was amazing how easily the words came out, considering how hard she choked on the sob that followed. Just thinking about the cottage made her skin cold. No matter how far they made it together, Buffy knew that there was no magic great enough to wipe that horrid place from her mind. And even so, she wouldn't want to. Remembering what the Slayer and Anne had told her would make her treasure the future that she had now all the more.

She felt Spike wiping her tears away, and didn't miss the way he trembled against her. "All this...for me?" he whispered. "Buffy..."

"You died! You'd up and died. Not once, mind you, but twice." Buffy wiped at her eyes. "The first time you didn't...you didn't believe me."

"I didn't—"

"You didn't believe that I loved you."

"But I do believe—"

"And then you died. You...you..." She forced herself to rein it in before her words became even more jumbled. "They didn't tell me everything, but bad things happened. Really bad things. Things that... at one point, you got a soul."

He blinked. "A what?"

"A soul. One you asked for."

"You're off your nutter."

Buffy shook her head, attempting a smile through her tears. "You wanted it for me," she said. "I was...I was the monster, and you wanted a soul because you thought that's what..."

It was impossible to talk about vampires and souls without thinking about the one and only souled-vamp around. Similarly, it wasn't hard to connect the dots. If Spike had sought a soul for Buffy, it would have been because he thought it was what she wanted, based on what she'd had with Angel.

"Angel wasn't dead." The words formed from nowhere, but it was important that Spike know this. "Angel wasn't dead... He was still

around. But—and I really can't stress this enough—I didn't want him. Not then. Not now."

Spike snickered. "Yeah. And even if you had, the great sod wouldn't do anythin' to muck up your perfectly normal life, yeah?"

"No, it's—"

"Buffy, drop it. That's...you love me." He smiled a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "That's all that matters. You don't owe me explanations for things that haven't happened."

"I do, though."

"No—"

Buffy shook her head hard. "Angel and I weren't together because I didn't want us together," she said. "It had nothing to do with how normal my life is not or...whatever. The sunlight thing? I told you, I was pretty much keeping vamp-hours. I was living in some shack in England, by the cemetery."

"Baby—"

"And all of this was about three hundred years from now."

Spike froze. Words formed and faded behind his eyes. Finally, just as the air started to agitate her skin, he blinked and shook his head. "What?"

"I'm...ummm..."

"You're...eternal?"

She pursed her lips and nodded. "Yeah."

"What happened? God, Buffy, you weren't..." He paused again, fluttering his eyes shut this time, a ragged breath squeezing through his lips. "You weren't...like me, were you?"

"That's actually the first thing I asked...me." She frowned. "I did mention that I was the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, right?"

"Yeah. And feel free to mention it again." He winked, though there was no light behind his eyes. "Two Buffys...yeah, that idea's bein' filed away for now."

"It was three, actually. There was me, ghost-me, and future-me."

"Saucy minx."

"Whatever you're imagining, I envy. This was no party."

Spike sobered immediately, nodding. "I know, kitten," he said. "So...if you weren't a vampire, then..."

Epiphanies were wondrous things, even if she wasn't the one experiencing it. She knew the second that he understood. The second that he got it. His vibrant eyes widened and he sat up. "Bloody hell."

"Spike—"

"Slayer, I'm..." He froze, his eyes falling shut again. "God, I'm..."

"Don't tell me you're sorry. I can't handle sorry." Buffy shook her head, sitting up as well and wrapping her arms around her legs. "The thing is, that's not what scares me. What scares me is...I was afraid that if you knew that part—"

"That I'd think you were lying to me."

She nodded. "Yes."

"Buffy...Buffy, look at me." He took her face in his hands before she could object, consuming her mouth with his. God, she could lose herself so easily in his kisses. The world could end around her and she wouldn't care. His tongue had a way of making the white noise fade into nothing. His kisses were his poetry, and where she sorely lacked the ability to pour her feelings into anything—be it words or caresses—Spike soared well above the curve.

"I told you," he murmured, pulling her into his lap. "I told you, Buffy. I'm completely yours. You...telling me that you love me... That's so bloody much more than I ever thought I'd have. And I do believe you. Point of fact, I'd wager that I believed you in the future the ghosties showed you, too."

She shook her head hard at that. "You didn't. If you'd believed me, you would've come for me, Spike."

"What?"

"You came back. In the future. There was the soul-getting and then an apocalypse and you stopped it. You stopped the apocalypse, but you died." God, she was crying again. All the tears that she hadn't shed over the past few weeks were catching up with her now. "Y-you didn't believe me. If you'd believed me, you would've come after me. I know you, Spike. You would've..."

He kissed her brow. "You know me, love. You don't know this souled wanker in a future that's never gonna happen now."

"Would you love me with a soul?"

"Should I answer that or just stare?"

“Something bad happened, Spike. Something bad enough to make you want to get a soul...” Buffy shivered, resting her brow against his chest. “Something I did to you.”

“You can’t know that.”

“Well, with the way our relationship’s gone these past few years, it’s always me hurting you.”

“And I’m still a vampire. Could’ve jus’ as easily been the other way around.”

“But I—”

Spike mimed her earlier actions, pressing a finger to her lips and smiling softly into her eyes. “Kitten, if you keep on this, tryin’ to figure out what happened in a future that’s no longer in motion, you’re gonna fall off your nutter. The future you saw is invalid because of what we’re doing right now.”

“But what about Anne?”

“Anne’s you, baby. So Anne is likely being shagged sideways by yours truly as we speak.” Spike paused, pressing his brow to hers. “Buffy...I can’t tell you much. I have no sodding idea why I—or wanker-souled-me—wouldn’t come after you in any circumstance. I really don’t. But there had to be a reason, ’cause I love you so damn much it’s physically painful at times. And this business about eternity...” He shivered. “You realize that you’ve given me...I’m gonna spend the next century half-convinced that I dreamt myself into paradise. You love me and now you’re telling me that you’re... That we won’t have to say goodbye?”

The light in his eyes was more than any woman could ever ask for. She bit her lip and shook her head. “Not unless you get yourself killed again.”

“Sweetheart, a man doesn’t get himself killed when he has this much to live for.”

“I swear if you die on me and then come back and don’t come after me, I’m going to make you beg for dust.”

“Therein defeating the purpose.” Spike grinned and kissed her. “Neither Heaven nor Hell could hope to keep me away from you now.”

“Really?”

“Do you really need me to answer that?”

A faint smile tickled her lips as she cast her eyes downward, gently caressing his chest. "I guess I just don't get it," she admitted. "With as terrible as I've been to you, how you can still..."

"I don't give up easy, love. And don't go off makin' me sound like I've been a saint. I'm not, Slayer. I'm a rude, crude bloke. I'm evil to the root, but I'll be good for you." There was a brief pause as he considered her. "You don't... Now that we're bein' so honest with each other, would you prefer me with a soul?"

Buffy trembled hard, trailing her gaze up his body until their eyes were locked again. "Would you get one for me?"

There was no mistaking the reluctance on his face just as there was similarly no mistaking his sincerity. She knew what his answer would be. Of course she knew what his answer would be. If nothing else, the night had taught her that Spike was willing to go through anything for her, whether he loved her or not. So when he said, "If that's what you want," she wasn't surprised. If she told him right now that she needed a soul in his body to love him completely, he'd be out the door in ten minutes.

Knowing that provided her with something that she couldn't have anticipated. She was in the arms of a soulless vampire, her legs wrapped around his waist, his cock nestled against her ass. He didn't hide anything from her. He waited for an answer with his heart in his eyes, willing to do whatever she asked.

"Ball's in your court, Slayer," Spike murmured, his hand finding hers where it rested against his chest.

"I know." Buffy shook her head. "And...I...no."

"No?"

"I told you...you're the one thing that I'm completely sure about. I know that I should want you to have one, but I don't. I love you now. And while I'm sure that I would love you in any incarnation..." She glanced up shyly and nearly broke when she saw the tears in his eyes. "I wouldn't know you if you got a soul. Not like I do now. And yeah, that leaves the window open for moral ambiguity. I'm sure you're gonna do things that make me wanna yank my hair out, and vice-versa...but I don't want you doing anything that takes away from who you are. Besides..." She inched her

hand northward until her palm was pressed against the silent cavern of his heart. "You would. Do you have any idea how huge that is? The fact that you *would* get a soul for me? That...in some alternate timeline, you did?"

Spike shrugged. "Just means I'm whipped."

"No...no, Spike, it's so much more than that."

"Buffy—"

"She... The Slayer said that any man who seeks a soul like you did already has one." She paused. "And she was right."

He nodded, exhaling hard. "I have yours. As long as you'll let me, Buffy."

"I want you to move in with me." The rapid change in subject left Spike visibly dazed, but he didn't pause to question her. "I know with the crazy fast, but I'm gonna want to wake up with you and go to bed with you and do all sorts of other coupley things with you. And no, I'm not gonna hide. Matter of fact, we need to get ready here soon so we can meet the gang for Christmas dinner."

"Buffy..."

"Is that okay? We can keep the crypt for like a really morbid but oddly cozy weekend getaway. I just...I want you with me."

"Fuck me."

His answer came in his kiss. The answer she'd had before the question breathed air but had needed all the same. There was no doubt when he kissed her like that. Buffy would wake up with his flavor in her mouth every morning and fall asleep in his arms every night. He caressed her lips with a passion she was still certain that she didn't deserve, dragging trembling hands across her body. He stroked her cheek, teased her breasts, trailed down her arms, massaged her hips, never breaking his mouth from hers.

"Do we have time?" he asked when his fingers finally found her pussy, parting her slick flesh to stroke her clit. "I need you so badly."

Even if they hadn't had time, she wasn't about to break away. Buffy nodded with a desperation that she barely recognized, dragging his mouth back to hers. She tangled her legs around his waist as he rolled her over, the head of his cock sliding up and down her slit for a few agonizing seconds before he finally sank inside her.

“So fucking perfect,” Spike gasped, finding and squeezing her hand. “I love you so much.”

The world faded away as he began pounding into her. As she clenched around him. As his lips caressed her skin. As shapes melted into colors, and as those colors spiraled and blurred.

The others could wait, as far as she was concerned.

Spike was with her. They were laughing and crying, kissing each other raw and loving each other exhaustion. This was time made up for the time taken for granted. There was no need to rush.

They had all the time in the world.



WHILE SHE WANTED NOTHING MORE THAN TO SIT IN SPIKE'S ARMS and listen to him recite poetry from the book he'd made for her, Buffy knew that if she didn't show up relatively close to eight o'clock, the Scoobies would knock down the crypt door, and she didn't think that being discovered in a tangle of naked goodness would do much to break the ice.

Not that Spike made getting dressed easy. He was all with the nude much longer than she was. He remained on the bed as she got ready, following her with his eyes while he lazily stroked his cock.

“You're making this very hard,” she said, flushing and wiggling into her jeans before she could toss responsibility out the window and bounce back into his lap.

“You're the one making it hard, love,” Spike retorted with a wink. “Y'know we're gonna have to go all the way through this sodding dinner of yours without touching each other. Think you can handle it?”

“We'll find out.” Buffy grinned and slid her blouse over her shoulders. “Come on. I wanna show off my ring.”

“Make your chums panic, you mean.”

She shrugged. “Let them panic.”

Spike smiled shyly and held up his left hand. “If that's the case, mind if I show off mine?”

His second Christmas present was a ring that had belonged to her great-grandfather. Upon his death, the ring was passed to her mother



and had since fallen to Buffy's ownership. She'd been surprised to find the ring untouched, especially since Revello Drive hadn't been her home for a hundred and forty-seven days. Either Willow hadn't discovered it in her mother's jewelry box or hadn't gotten around to passing the torch to Dawn.

There was little in her life that held any true value. She'd known what to expect from Spike, thanks to Glory, and had wanted to give him something meaningful in turn. And aside from her mother's jewelry, there was little in her house that could even begin to compare with a family heirloom. The ring on her finger was precious, and while the one she'd given him in turn couldn't hope to measure up in value, it had still rendered him speechless.

"I hope you do, 'cause everyone is gonna get an eyeful of this baby."

The walk to her house was made in companionable silence with frequent kissing breaks. Spike refused to let go of her hand, which was fine by her, because she refused to let go of his. And amazingly, though she knew it would take some getting used to for her friends, she wasn't worried. She knew that she was happy and that nothing worth having ever came easy. Spike was at her side and he always would be.

She loved him. He was her past, present, and future.

And her friends were her family. No matter what they did or had done, that would never change.

However, Buffy knew said friends well enough to know that they wouldn't take to the changes in her life with a smile and a nod. Thus, when she and Spike reached the front porch, she turned immediately and dragged him down for a hungry kiss. Something to remind him that she loved him, no matter what. No matter what happened after they were out in the open. And when tonight was over, she would be sleeping at his side.

Neither could have anticipated the door opening just as Spike moaned and slipped his hand beneath her blouse.

"Oh my god," a familiar voice deadpanned. "It's true."

Buffy and Spike broke apart reluctantly just as Xander fainted dead away in the doorway. And strangely enough, that much provided her with the hope that everything was going to be all right.

“Come on,” her vampire murmured into her hair. “Help me drag the boy inside.”

“You need help?” Buffy retorted, arching an eyebrow. “He doesn’t weigh that much.”

“Give a bloke a break, Slayer. You’re stronger than I am.”

“About time you admitted it.”

Spike smirked and nipped at her lips.

Then Dawn came squealing down the staircase, followed by a shy-but-grinning Tara, a still-astonished Willow, and a former vengeance demon who greeted them by congratulating them on their recent orgasms and wishing them many more in the future.

Buffy just grinned giddily as Spike hugged her into his side.

At long last, she was finally alive.