

# JUMP

*A Spike/Buffy Romance*



HOLLY DENISE





# ❧ I ❧

EVERY TIME HIS CRYPT DOOR CRASHED OPEN, A SMALL PART OF HIM was certain it was her. After all, kicking down his door had been her thing for two years. Bust in, hips swaying, hair bouncy and flawless, eyes alight with irritation, stake, if not in hand, then certainly close by. With little exception, Buffy had been his most frequent visitor.

A part of him would always expect her.

Then that same part would crash headfirst into reality and shatter. In those moments, she died all over again.

He lost her all over again.

Spike pressed his eyes together, willing the witch to turn tail and hit the bloody road. He was in no mood to be sociable with anything except the bottle of whiskey resting on his lap.

“Spike.”

Fuck. Bloody pity vamps couldn’t play dead.

“What do you want?” he asked without opening his eyes.

“I... Gods, you reek. When was the last time you took a shower?”

He snorted. “If you’ve come to scold me about my hygiene, mum, you can go on and show yourself out.”

“She wouldn’t want this. You know she wouldn’t want this.”

There was that pang again—the one that came anytime he pictured

Buffy, wondered what she might be thinking were she not six sodding feet under. Not that it ever went away, but it chose moments to scream at him—really scream—so that he thought he might dust simply from the awful ache in his chest.

“Don’t figure the Slayer much cared what became of yours truly,” he replied before bringing the bottle to his lips. “So if it’s all the same to you, I’m gonna drink until I pass out or I run outta sauce. Thanks ever so for dropping by, and don’t let the door hit you on your way out.”

A still beat settled through the air, filled only by her heavy breaths and her racing heart. Well hell, if she was going to disrupt his evening plans, the least she could do was open a vein and make it worth his while. Or maybe then one of the Scoobies would do right by him and put him out of his misery.

“Spike.”

This was the no-nonsense tone. He grunted and finally peeked an eye open. But it hurt looking at her too—it hurt looking at all of them, even Harris. They were all extensions of her.

“What?” he barked at last. “Get on with it if you’re not gonna leave a man in peace.”

Willow crossed her arms, looking thoroughly unsympathetic. “I already said it. Just because you’re too stubborn to accept it doesn’t make it any less the truth.”

“The Slayer could give two pisses about me.”

It felt good to say—good to dwell on how much Buffy had hated him. Much easier than remembering the way she’d brushed her lips across his after his stint as Glory’s plaything. Or how she’d brought Dawn to him in the days after, knowing he’d die before he let the girl get hurt. How she’d snapped at her friends when they threatened to kick him out of that sodding Winnebago.

How she’d welcomed him into her home that night, the way she’d looked at him when he’d told her the way she made him feel. The disgust absent from her eyes.

Yeah, he didn’t want to remember that. Any of it.

“What about Dawn?” Willow asked, her voice a note softer but no less firm.

And there it was. The only hand that could beat any of his. Spike

wincing and looked away, sucking down another hard drag of whiskey. Yeah, he was doing a shit job of fulfilling his promise to her, but the way he figured it, the Bit was all right. The witches had all but moved into the Summers' residence in the week that had passed since Buffy had taken her dive off the Tower, and smart money was on the bet they'd make it official by the weekend. Dawn had all sorts of muscle around her and no deranged hellgod looking to make her a pincushion. If the day came when that wasn't true anymore, he'd be between her and whatever big nasty wanted to make her a snack.

"What about her?" he said at last, fixing his gaze on a point on the far wall.

"Are you serious? Spike, she just lost her sister."

"Do I look like I need to be reminded?"

"And she had zero time to process losing her mom," Willow continued heatedly. "She needs people she trusts around her. That means you too."

He snorted. "Shouldn't you be more concerned that I'm on that list in the first place?"

"No, because Buffy wasn't."

Though he thought it a million times a day, it still hurt to hear her name spoken aloud.

"And hell, Spike, if not for Dawn—"

"You know bloody well I'll do anything for Dawn," he replied, whipping his head back to look at her, his eyes narrowing. "Ever figure she might just need some sodding time without people hoverin' about? What good's my being around gonna do, exactly? I show up and suddenly big sis isn't in a sodding hole?"

Something softened in Willow's expression. "Spike—"

"I can hardly take care of myself right now—I'm in no state to try and comfort a teenager."

"Well, you need to get it together."

He blinked at her, irritation racing with incredulity. Then he huffed a laugh and gave his head a shake. "Yeah, thanks. Sorry if I can't bounce back like the rest of you."

"What in the world makes you think there's been any bouncing of any kind?"

“The fact that you’re standing here cold sober, for one.”

“Well, what do you expect us to do, exactly?” A tremor entered Willow’s voice—one that plainly informed she was close to losing her control. Which, all things considered, could be very bad for him.

Or very good, depending on whether or not he really wanted to taste dust. At the moment he couldn’t tell.

“The world didn’t stop turning because Buffy’s not here,” she continued, that tremor becoming more pronounced. “Sooner or later, the local demon population is gonna figure out the Hellmouth is a slayer short. Buffy’s been gone before, so it hasn’t happened yet, but there’s already been more trouble than is usual for this time of year. You know the Bronze was hit a few days ago by a bunch of Glory loyalists. Twelve people died.”

That wasn’t anything new. The Bronze was constantly under construction due to the local creepy crawlies. And forgive him, but Spike couldn’t be bothered to care that anyone had snuffed it. Wasn’t like the sodding town had deserved her in the first place.

“And?” he drawled.

“And this is exactly what I’m talking about. The Hellmouth didn’t stop being under constant threat of whatever Big Bad is out there to kick-start the next apocalypse. Buffy died so we wouldn’t and I’m not interested in making that sacrifice all for nothing.”

Those words hit him square in the chest. “What is it you want me to do, then?”

Willow released a long breath, her shoulders slumping. “We have a couple things in mind. Nothing in stone just yet, but we’re getting there. And we know we’re going to need your help. So we’re fixing up the Buffybot—”

“You’re what?”

“That Warren guy might be a sicko, but he builds a decent robot.”

“You think I want that thing?” Spike snapped, hot anger bubbling inside, and fuck, that felt good. Too good. Anger was familiar, natural. Infinitely superior over the vacuous nothing that his life had been the last week. And the thought, the bloody notion that the Scoobies figured they could persuade him with it made his fangs ache.

The Buffybot had been a mistake from the beginning—a piss poor

substitute for the thing he wanted. A nicotine patch solution to an addiction he'd stopped wanting to cure. That anyone would dangle a toy bearing the face of the woman he loved after he'd seen her lying broken and still on the ground was enough to make him want to say sod it and attack until the chip fried his brain permanently. At least he wouldn't have to live with the knowledge that he'd failed her anymore.

The only thing stopping him from snapping at the witch and putting that plan into motion was the bewildered look on her face. "None of us want it," Willow said slowly, cautiously. "But it's the best solution. For now. Until we think of something else."

"So that's the big plan, is it? Keep bribing me into doing your bidding and hope I don't just—"

"What are you talking about?"

He gestured to her. "That bloody bot is... It's not her. It never was."

The confused look didn't go anywhere. "I...know that."

"And just the thought of touching it now..." He winced and felt a familiar sting prick his eyes, and didn't know whether roaring or screaming was the better option. "Just leave me to do what the dead do in tombs, all right?"

"Spike...we're not giving you the bot, if that's what you think." Willow's tone had gone from bemused to somewhat incredulous with a hint of disgust. "We're fixing it up so it can go on patrols."

He snorted. That plan was even zanier than the other. "You're off your bird."

"It was good enough to fool Glory, so we think it'll help stave off rumors that Buffy's dead."

"Rumors bein' the truth, you mean. Nasty secret to keep goin'. Sooner or later, the sodding bot's gonna get into a scrape and lose a wire or two."

"Yeah," Willow agreed, "but this will at least buy us time to figure something else out."

"What is there to figure out?" Spike demanded. "Nothing can bring her back. And nothing can defend good ole Sunnyhell like the Slayer. Just as well to let the place burn."

Something strange flickered across Willow's face—something he wasn't sure he would have caught had he not been looking at her. Like

she had something in her back pocket, some grand solution to the problem at hand, but she wasn't sharing and he didn't much care to hear it anyway.

"If you loved Buffy at all," she said after a considerable pause, "this is the way you show it. This is the way you keep her alive."

He barked a laugh. "Do you pulsers really fall for that rot?"

Willow sighed again, but this time, the sound carried a finality to it—one that smarted more than he wanted to admit. Because a part of him really wanted her to give him a reason, a purpose.

Anything.

"If you change your mind," Willow said, heading toward the door, "you know where to find us."

Spike turned away, words lodged in his throat. He waited until the sound of his crypt being sealed shut clamored through the air before letting himself move.

Not that moving was in his best interest. The world seemed to tilt every time he blinked. Fucking globe didn't have the common decency to stop turning, as Willow had so keenly pointed out. Everywhere he looked, it was business as bloody usual, and fuck if that wasn't what hurt the most. That the sun did continue to come up, that people who had no clue how close they'd come to the end of the world got to live their lives as though nothing had changed.

Living felt like an insult—why should a dead man live but the most alive person he'd ever known be gone?—but it was all he had left. Because when it came to brass tacks, and as much as he hated to admit it, the witch was on the money. He'd do no good to Buffy's memory as a drunk. It might feel better in the moment, but there wasn't enough booze in the world to completely drown the pain. After all, it hadn't worked much when Dru had tossed him out and this pain was a breed apart from that. That had been a paper-cut—this was emotional disembowelment. And it kept getting worse.

Like today with the Buffybot. The thing should be rotting in a scrap yard; the fact that it could be pieced together again after falling off Humpty Dumpty's wall when the real thing was gone from this world forever was its own kind of sick.

But maybe it was what he deserved—maybe this was his penance



for failing her. Staying behind when she couldn't, fighting the good fight in her place. While Buffy might not have cared two figs for him in life, she had trusted him in some way. Trusted him with the things that mattered, at least, and wallowing at the bottom of a bottle wasn't the best way to honor that. To keep deserving it, if he ever had to begin with.

This was typically the point in his reflections when he'd drink until the deep thoughts became fuzzy and intangible again. Spike eyed the neck of the bottle still in his hands and considered downing it in one terrific gulp, but a voice—one sounding so much like hers it made his heart want to explode—convinced him to set it aside.

He hadn't saved Buffy, but the reason Buffy had died was still alive. And knowing the littlest Summers, she wouldn't keep her nose out of trouble for long.

He hadn't pulled through when it mattered, but he would every night thereafter.

If he could figure out a way to live without feeling the hole she'd left behind with every sodding move he made. Liquor wasn't going to cut it, fun as it was. He needed something stronger. More permanent.

Spike eyed the bottle again, sighed, and scooped it up.

Starting tomorrow.

SPIKE DIDN'T NEED A REFLECTION TO KNOW HE LOOKED LIKE HELL. He didn't much need the sideways looks the Sunnyhell locals kept shooting in his direction, either. He felt the way his shirt hung off his body as well as the sag in his jeans, and at most he'd only skipped two or three days' worth of meals. He'd expected his stomach to start making rumbles, but the thought of eating only made the gnawing pain in his gut worse.

Still, today was a new day, and all that. And if he was going to do right by Buffy—the *memory* of Buffy—he needed to get his head on straight.

"Spike!" Willy called as he pushed the bar door open. "Long time."

A handful of demons shot him the usual round of glares, but he ignored them. Figured if any of the tossers wanted to make good on their threat of tearing his head off, they were welcome to try.

Spike didn't say anything, just stalked to the bartender. He didn't bother to sit; he wasn't staying.

"What can I get for you? You'll forgive me if you have to remind me of your usual."

"Need something a bit stronger than what you keep on tap, mate."

Willy perked his eyebrows and leaned forward, fidgeting with the

same mixture of nervous energy and false bravado that had more or less become his trademark. But like any other lowlife, he had a tendency to become a lot braver when a large payload was on the line.

"What do you have in mind, buddy?"

"What do you got that'll dull pain?"

Willy blinked at him. "Well...that doesn't really narrow it down."

"Need my faculties about me so I can't get good and sloshed," Spike continued. "Booze won't cut it."

"So...this pain... Is it existential? Physical? Help me out here."

His patience was already threadbare and this conversation would consume whatever was left of it. Spike growled, dropping his fangs. "You wanna taste?"

Willy stepped back, his hands going up. "No need for that, friend. Just gotta know which way to point you. You and Drusilla break up again?"

Spike balked. The question was so unexpected he nearly laughed. "Have to be back together to split," he replied, "but...say I had tossed the bitch out and was feelin' sore about it. What would you recommend that's not available in a bottle?"

Willy's brow creased, his eyes widening. "Really? Jeez, man, what happened?"

"Just. Talk."

There was a brief pause. "I...I don't think I can help you. The stuff here's strong but not *black*, if you catch my meaning. Don't need that kinda trouble in my bar."

Spike expelled a deep breath and rolled his head back. "Of course."

"But if you have some cash to spare, I think I can point you in the right direction."

He looked back at the wormy bartender, arching an eyebrow. "Yeah? Talk."

Willy made a show of looking around to ensure their conversation wasn't of interest to others before leaning in, his mouth twitching. "You hear of a warlock named Rack?"

The name sounded familiar, but he couldn't immediately place it. And there was a good chance he was still drunk from the night before. Spike shook his head. "Say I haven't."

“He deals with the dark stuff. Real dark stuff, if you catch my drift.”

“Yeah, got it. How does that help me?”

“Well, if you wanna cut off whatever it is you’re feeling, the kinda fix you need’s gonna be on the darker side, my friend. Removing any emotion takes a helluva lot of juice and if it’s not done right, it can leave you well and truly screwed.” Willy rocked back on his heels, looking very pleased with himself. “But if there’s a way to do it, Rack’ll be able to set you up.”

He knew this was one of those situations he should consider for more than a handful of seconds, given his impulse control issues. But at the moment, he also had something bordering on a death-wish, which made the part of him that should care flip him the bird. Spike nodded and leaned forward. “How do I find this bloke, then?”

“He changes location to keep off the fuzz’s radar.”

“The fuzz?”

Willy rolled his eyes. “That’d be the Slayer and pals.”

That sentiment was so familiar it had the impact of a physical blow to the chest. For one awful second, Spike was afraid he’d start bawling. The sting was back behind his eyes, and parts of him that were already raw from crying tensed for another round. Somehow, though, he managed to bite back instinct and seize control again.

“Yeah?” Spike asked, his voice rougher than he would have liked. But he didn’t sob, so that was progress.

“Little Miss Buff gets word that a powerhouse like Rack is in town and no one gets to have fun anymore.”

The urge came again, but was easier to fight this time. Instead of focusing on not losing his shit, he imagined smashing Willy nose-first into the bar. That helped.

And it wasn’t as though he hadn’t known to expect this, but it was still bloody hard to listen to anyone refer to Buffy in the present tense. Far as anyone outside him and the Scoobies knew, the Slayer was alive and well. Never mind that the world was wrong—all of it. The sodding air tasted different than it had this time last week. That anyone could miss it was beyond him.

Willy was staring at him, a twist of confusion and fear in his eyes. “Did I say somethin’?”

Spike shook his head, managed to twist his mouth into a mockery of a grin, and puffed out a sound that no one in their right mind would mistake for a laugh. "Slayer likes to ruin everyone's fun, doesn't she?" he said. "So if the magical sod sets up shop in a different place each night, how's he get any business?"

There was another pause as Willy seemed to consider him, and for a moment, Spike wondered if the little git was more perceptive than he'd thought. But the stupid-cocky look returned the next instant, the showman's smile back in place. "You just gotta know to feel for it," Willy said. "Be a witch or a demon yourself. Take a stroll and you'll find it in no time."

"Right." Sounded simple enough.

"Right." Willy nodded. "So, what's this information worth?"

Spike blinked. "Huh?"

"Valuable intel, my friend. That don't come for free, if you catch my drift."

It took a moment for the words to make sense, but when they did, Spike found himself laughing in earnest for the first time since seeing Buffy's body. "The intel you already gave me, you mean. Yeah, woulda been worth a penny, but I got what I need, didn't I?"

Willy frowned, then cursed and kicked the back of the bar. "Dammit. I know better than that."

"Clearly."

"Not even for old time's sake?"

Spike snickered and shook his head, backing up a step. "Can't say the old times were much to write home about in the first place," he replied. "But thanks ever so. You were a real help. Now I'm off to find me a warlock."

And, he thought as he turned and headed out the door, hopefully a permanent fix.

Otherwise, mourning Buffy might just kill him.



FINDING RACK's proved as simple as Willy had indicated. Once Spike had started to pay attention, the bloke's power signature was bloody

hard to ignore. A few screwy turns and an unsettling trip through a solid brick wall later and he found himself in a waiting room filled with a load of pathetic tossers who kept gazing at the door with a mixture of loathing and desperation. Not that he figured he was in much of a place to judge these folks, mind. The prospect of not feeling this awful grief anymore had him as antsy as anyone else.

At long last, that blessed door swung open and a tall, lanky bloke with scraggly shoulder-length hair stepped across the threshold. He looked an oddly familiar, but Spike couldn't figure out where he knew him. But his presence meant something, because all mumbling in the room stopped.

The new bloke surveyed the crowd of hopeful bastards until his gaze landed on Spike. The corner of his mouth twitched.

"You."

Spike blinked. "Got a problem, mate?"

"Join me now."

A disgruntled ripple ran through the room, and a horned Braxus demon leapt to its feet. "I've been waiting eleven hours!"

The scraggly git, whom Spike could only assume was Rack, gave the demon a withering look, but didn't say anything. He didn't need to. The power rippling off him did what words could not. Instead, he turned back to Spike and offered a short nod. "Join me."

Spike rose to his feet. For the first time in what felt like an age, he was nervous. And he didn't like it. Spells and that rot had never been his thing—he'd seen what that kind of power could do in the wrong hands and, save for a few times at Dru's behest, he'd given the whole magical community a wide berth. He had no desire to have a soul stuffed inside him and the darker stuff—the stuff Willy had referred to—always came at a steep price.

Except at the present he didn't have much in the way to lose. Buffy was gone. The worst had already happened. Whatever payment Rack wanted would be fine with him, consequences be damned.

Still, the fact that the bloke had picked him out of a room full of magic-doers had him on edge. Nothing good could come from being singled out.

A few seconds later, Spike found himself in an empty room much

like the one he'd left. Rack stood in the middle, his back to him. The second the door behind him closed, the grumbling voices in the waiting room went stone silent.

Spike released a deep breath.

"I don't get vampires often."

He didn't know what to say to that. "Got your name from—"

"I don't care how you got my name." Rack turned to face him. Absurdly, it occurred to Spike why the fella looked familiar. He had a likeness to Willem Dafoe, if Willem Dafoe was fond of crystal meth. "I know why you're here."

Well, bugger.

"I—"

"The Slayer is dead."

Spike inhaled sharply and took a step back. Despite whatever else, this was not information a man like Rack should have. "No, she's not," he replied, though his throat felt tight. "Bloody Slayer's right as rain. Just got through kickin' me across town. It's what she does on Tuesdays."

"Lie." Rack's expression didn't change. "The Slayer is dead. I know this. An event like that can't happen without my feeling it."

He swallowed, grateful for his lack of a heartbeat. Sodding thing would have leapt right out of his throat had it still been working properly. "Who else knows?"

"It is in my interest to ensure this remains secret," Rack said. "But her absence will become noticeable soon. You can't expect to keep the Slayer's death quiet for long."

Spike curled his hands into fists, torn between asking more and making a break for the door. He hadn't known what to expect in coming here, but it hadn't been this and he didn't like it. This wasn't a bloke he wanted in his head, or in any other parts of his body.

"Right you are," he said, taking a step back. "Word'll get out sooner or later. I'll just—"

"Stay."

"Think not. Took a bit of a wrong turn coming here."

"You came to cure your grief."

Was this wanker a mind reader? All the more reason to bolt. “Well, I think I’ve decided to keep it after all. It’s grown on me.”

“I can cure your grief,” Rack said calmly as though he hadn’t spoken. “But there is a better solution. One that would benefit both of us...equally.”

Yeah, that couldn’t be good. “Thanks but no thanks. I’ll—”

“You can stop it. Her death.”

Every molecule in his body froze. “What?”

“I will help you prevent the Slayer’s death.”

“But she—”

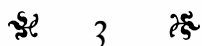
“I will send you back,” Rack said. “Back to the moment you see in your dreams. You can stop it from happening. You can stop her before she jumps.”

Spike stared at him, barely daring to hope. It wasn’t possible. It couldn’t be.

Fuck, could it?

A smile tugged at the corners of the warlock’s mouth. The sort of smile reserved for laying out the winning hand. “You can prevent her from dying.”





HE COULDN'T HAVE HEARD RIGHT. OR MAYBE HE'D FINALLY GONE all toys-in-the-attic and was imagining things. Spike swallowed, not daring to drag his gaze off Rack, and took a fortifying breath.

"Say that again?"

The warlock's mouth twitched. "It is very simple," he replied, closing a space between them. "Time is the product of choice and action. It is the human world that considers it a line, when reality is, of course, much more interesting. I can bend time around you. Place you where you wish to be. The rest is up to you."

Spike stared a moment longer, blinked. The scene before him remained unchanged. It sounded almost simple—too bloody simple. Too bloody good to be true, at that. As though all it took to get him back to the Tower before the Doc could slice Dawn open was a bit of fancy footwork. Spike had never heard of someone who could manipulate time beyond basic theory, plus a load of films that warned against doing anything to muck with the way things happened.

But he could almost see it. Fuck, he *could* see it. All of it. He had over and over again since she'd jumped. Thought about how he should have gone straight up the Tower the first chance he got. If he had...

"Why?"

It was a good question—a needed question. If Spike were to consider the offer at all, he needed to know the answer.

He needed to know right now if there was anything out there that could be worse than living in a world without Buffy. He figured the answer was no, but he wasn't an idiot. Black magic always had a price.

Rack blinked but the odd smile on his face didn't change. "Why?" he repeated calmly.

"Man like you offerin' to put the Slayer back in action. Girl can't be good for business."

At that, Rack looked downright amused, which in itself was rather chilling. "In life, Buffy Summers never once heard my name," he said. "*Her* name, however, became the thing of legend. I have lived many lives, seen many slayers come and go. But none that came before were like her."

That pang that he had grown so accustomed to struck again, only it wasn't quite as sharp this time, dulled with possibility. With light. With hope. "Yeah," Spike agreed. "Can say the same. Doesn't figure, though, that you'd want her back."

"Anymore than it does that a vampire, particularly one who has made a name for himself by killing slayers, would mourn her death."

At that, he straightened his spine. "Reckon you know why, don't you?"

"Of course." Rack spread his hands, strings of static red dancing between his fingers. "Others feared her. Many wished to end her. The curious life of a slayer—the longer they live, the more difficult they become to kill, and the more creatures such as you try. But this slayer was not killed by a creature. She was slain by the only being that had the power to do so—herself."

The thought hit him square in the chest with all the subtlety of a two by four. Spike tightened his hands into fists. "That's all well and good, but you still haven't told me why you have a yen for makin' sure she stays alive."

Rack tilted his head and lifted his shoulders almost indiscernibly. "The Hellmouth draws those who are hungry for power. The Slayer draws those who are hungry for fame. Those are the creatures that sit in my room, waiting to let me inside their heads just for a taste of what

I can give them. They feed me...and she, simply by existing, brings them to my door. She is a beacon to those who wish to be more than they are. They leave here believing they can destroy her. They come back when they realize they cannot."

Spike blinked. "That's it? You want the Slayer alive and kickin' because she's...good for business?"

Rack grinned, and it wasn't a nice grin. "An overly simple way of looking at it. There will be other slayers eventually, perhaps even one to rival Buffy Summers. But I do not wish to wait to see which future unfolds. You know that another slayer was not called when she died."

He swallowed again, the motion almost painful. "Cause of the other one, right?"

Another nod.

Yeah. Spike had already figured as much. With the other bird rotting away behind a jail cell, the Slayer line more or less stopped moving. Buffy had passed the mantle when she'd died the first time; it hadn't been hers to give up again. And given that the most dangerous person in the prison that housed Faith was Faith herself, it figured she wasn't due to die anytime soon.

The logic was there—he could see it, understand it, even if he didn't quite believe it. Buffy had been a bloody demon magnet, both for blokes like him and tourists who wanted to get a look at the Slayer in action. Hell, Dracula had made the trip just because of her. The Hellmouth enticed demons to come, but Buffy was what made them want to stay. And a bloke like Rack, who got his jollies from other magical folk, would have an easy time of finding people to keep them full.

But this was too simple.

*Do I care?*

That was the real question. With nothing but the inside of a bottle to live for, with this horrible pain consuming his every waking thought, with the image of her broken, lifeless body seared against the inside of his eyes, what did the cost matter, really? If he could go back and do it properly, the past few days wouldn't exist. None of this would. Point of fact, Rack himself wouldn't exist, either—at least, not this version of Rack. The one who knew him too well for

his liking. It would be a big bloody do over. Life would go on as normal.

With Buffy in it.

And wasn't that the best way he could do right by his promise to her? Nothing better to protect Dawn than big sis, after all.

"Say I want to," Spike said, his voice rough. "What happens next?"

Rack just smiled.



IT SEEMED like it should have been harder than it was. That time itself should have been more difficult to manipulate than sprinkling some herbs and chanting some mystical rot. Seemed too bloody easy for anyone, especially a man like Rack. That the power itself was literally at the bloke's fingertips left him uneasy.

Yet that was what happened. Rack pressed his hands together and the world sparked to life between them. Between his palms was a pulsing sphere of color without shape or reason, growing by the second until Spike could see the things inside it. Cars stacked on cars, burned out streetlights. The lumbering silhouette of the Tower against a darkened sky, the ground and everything else littered with those scurrying goblins and—

Fuck. It was her. Buffy was in the strange ball between Rack's hands, and she was smashing Glory to bits with the troll's hammer.

The pain he had grown so accustomed to blossomed into something that was almost worse, because he knew the crash would kill him if he didn't make it out in time.

"This is where you wish to be," Rack said, his voice distant.

Spike forced his throat to work, almost convinced for a moment that his heart had started pounding. His head definitely was. "Yeah," he said. "What do I do? Just jump in?"

"You must first agree to my terms."

He blinked. "Terms?"

"I do not work for free, vampire. You should know this."

"Yeah, well, thought your payment was in getting back your bloody cash cow." A paradox that still didn't make much sense,

despite how it had been explained, but Spike didn't much care about the particulars behind Rack's reasoning. Now that he'd seen her—now that he knew it was possible and not just lip service—there wasn't much he wouldn't give to leap into that world. The one with her still in it.

"Accurate but inadequate. The Slayer's continued existence is *why* I am willing to help. It is not the price."

Spike dragged his gaze away from the sphere. Even if time was relative, he could feel the countdown to the Doc's grand entrance and he was determined to get there first. "What's the price, then?"

"Simple. A human soul."

The words seemed to echo. "A soul."

"One pure soul."

"Pure?" He barked a laugh. "Where you figure I can find one, then? Have you seen the—"

"An untouched soul is not so difficult to come by," Rack said, unfazed. "I know you know a witch who has bartered with souls in the past."

"Yeah. Feature that conversation goin' over really well."

"I will permit you time to collect." The warlock spoke as though Spike had not. "I will allow you to save your slayer. Call it good faith. But should you fail to provide payment, all this..." He spread his hands, and the image of Buffy in mid-hammer swing faded like so much smoke. "Will cease to be."

This was one of those things he needed to think about. *Should* think about. Bugger that—he should sock the guy and head back to Willy's, impossible quest be damned. A part of him knew this, accepted it. Knew that it was counter to everything he believed to be standing here at all, to be flirting with the idea of engaging in black magic. While he had spent most of his existence going out of his way to avoid it, the few times he had mucked with it had taught him well and good that whatever sat on the other side wasn't worth the price. He'd be lucky not to end up dust.

And a soul wasn't something one could just barter. A soul had the power to make or break demons. He ought to know. And giving one to Rack—*any* soul to Rack—was essentially damning it to a fate worse

than being fried in Hell. Even if he could get his hands on one, he'd be trading much more than a life for a life.

He needed to think about it. He did.

Except there was nothing to think about. He knew what his answer would be tomorrow and the next day and the day after that. So long as what waited on the other side was Buffy—Buffy as she'd been, so full of life she could almost make his dead lungs work—he'd think any price worth it.

Fuck, if all went well, she'd never be any the wiser. She'd never have to know this bleak reality had ever existed.

All he had to do was find a soul. A pure one, and preferably one the world wouldn't miss.

The answer came to him from nowhere—beautiful and simplistic.

"Any soul, so long as it's pure?"

Rack nodded, and for the first time, Spike saw the greed in his eyes. It should have made him pause and reconsider, but it didn't.

His mind was made up.

"Reckon I can make that work," he said.

"I thought you might." Rack gestured for him to come forward, then lifted his hands again. The sphere reappeared just as the hammer found its victim. No time had passed there. "When the time in your past"—he nodded at the sphere—"matches the time in our present, your payment is due. If you do not provide it by midnight on this date, time will continue as though our deal was not made."

Spike hesitated but nodded, his mind spinning. Right. Eight days ago, Buffy jumped. So he had eight days from the moment he saved her to pay up.

As powerful as Willow was now, she could summon up a soul in a blink. Then the world would be right again.

It was almost too easy.

"At the count of three, jump." The warlock spread his arms farther apart so the scene before him transformed from a sphere into a gaping maw—one large enough to climb into. The images on the other side were so clear he could almost smell them. Taste them.

*Gonna do it right this time, Slayer. I bloody swear it.*

"One..."

And he would. He'd be quicker. More clever.

He'd stop the Doc. He'd keep Dawn from bleeding.

"Two."

He'd stop Buffy from taking that dive. Nothing mattered but that.

He'd keep her alive.

"Three."

Spike jumped.

HE REMEMBERED THE WAY THE AIR HAD SMELLED THAT NIGHT, AND it hit him now like some sort of waking nightmare. Spike dragged in a lungful, every nerve in his body firing with life. But he didn't have the luxury of sightseeing. Each second he spent here was one she didn't have.

He had to *move*.

Spike scrambled to his feet, looking to the lumbering structure that was the Tower. He caught a glimpse of platinum in a blur of movement and nearly tripped before he realized he was seeing himself.

Well, this was off to a swimming start. He hadn't given much thought to his younger self. Or any thought. It wasn't a normal thought to have, after all. How to convince yourself not to stake you on sight.

For now, at least, he had the advantage. He knew exactly every step his former self was going to take. And neither he nor the Doc would see this coming.

"Spike!"

He whirled around and met Willow's fiery glare.

"Stop standing around and *get moving*! Buffy needs you!"

He snarled in disgust and broke into a run, angry both with himself for wasting time and Willow for thinking he didn't know that...



painfully. But seeing as he couldn't very well explain any of this, he turned and focused ahead.

Scaling the Tower was in every sense retracing the steps of his personal hell. In most things, memory distorted reality, but not this time. He knew every bloody turn. Every crack. Every sodding wobble. The past week had been filled with nothing but liquor and regret, and in the heat of that, reliving this journey again and again until it chased him into his dreams.

Then a voice broke the air—his voice. It was time. Now or bloody never.

"You don't go near the girl, Doc."

And *he* answered. That filthy maggot. Spike snarled again, the bones in his face shifting.

*This is your shot, mate. Don't throw it away.*

"I don't smell a soul anywhere on you. Why do you even care?"

"I made a promise to a lady."

Spike reached the top with a burst of triumph, and somehow managed to keep his idiot legs from going a step farther. It occurred to him in a flash of brilliance that, had he seen himself charging down the landing, he'd have thought he'd lost his bloody marbles and things might have gone even worse.

"Well, I'll send the lady your regrets."

*Could throw the Doc off, too. Catch 'em all unawares.*

Spike gripped the railing, forcing himself to stay in place. He knew the way it would go if he didn't move now—he couldn't vouch for the other. And since he didn't much figure there was gonna be another shot for a do-over, he wasn't taking any bloody chances. He needed to surprise the Doc. Couldn't right do that if his past self began blubbering and gave the game away.

So he waited as the Doc made his attack. As the Tower whined and swayed under the weight of their scuffle. Waited for the motion to end—for the Doc to grab him and haul him over the side.

*Now.*

Spike launched forward, legs finding the landing in that horrible second that had punctuated each nightmare. The second he'd looked at Dawn, and she'd looked back, and they'd known it was over.

Except that's not what happened this time.

Because Dawn saw him. And in the flash before the Doc hurled past-Spike over the side, the other version of himself saw him too.

Spike gave his head a shake and pressed onward. The instant the Doc let go, he exploded into motion. The platform thundered under the stomps of his feet, and then the git was turning. Spike didn't have much time to savor the moment, but he couldn't deny the rush of pure pleasure at the shock that crossed the Doc's face the instant their eyes made contact.

"What—"

That was it. That breath of a word was what did the Doc in. Spike snarled, threw all his strength into his arms, and shoved. The Doc wobbled backward, confusion melting into determination, but it was too late. Spike shoved again and watched, feeling like his heart might jumpstart as the git bent backward over the railing.

"Not this time," he spat through fangs.

There was a long beat during which everything seemed to slow down. The weak light casting a glow on the Doc's face, mapping his transition from shocked to outraged to determined. And in that second, the doors in Spike's mind aligned, and he saw what was going to happen next.

When the Doc's slimy tongue shot out of his mouth like a bloody lasso, he was ready. A roar tickling the back of his throat, Spike closed his fangs around flailing organ and chomped like he had never chomped before.

And then it was over. A horrible, mangled scream rent through the air as tissue stretched and tore, and the Doc went full Hans Gruber, flailing arms, wide eyed disbelief as gravity pulled him down to a fate too bloody good for him. Spike kept his fangs locked on the slip of tongue until the muscle gave and split, blood spurting in a bubbly arc. It wasn't until he saw dust swirling around the Doc's body that he spat the slimy thing out.

It was a slow crawl back to the present from there. Spike panting, dragging his gaze to Dawn, who was looking at him through doubtful, tear-filled eyes. It didn't hit him until she said his name that it was over—*it was over*—and he'd done it.

He'd bloody *done it*.

"Spike?"

He held her eyes for a moment longer, filling his lungs with more of that familiar-smelling air, then cracked a small grin. "Got you now, Bit," he said, stumbling forward on legs that wanted to collapse. "It's all over."

"H-how...how did you get up here again? I saw him throw you over."

She'd seen more than that—she'd seen him in two places at once. But he wagered he'd be rationalizing if he were in her position, too.

"Bit of a story, that." He forced himself nearer and began working at the ties holding her in place. "Glad to fill you in when we're both on solid ground, yeah?"

The uncertainty didn't leave Dawn's face, and he couldn't blame her. Clever girl, his Nibblet. He puffed out another breath, seizing hold of her shoulder to keep her from wobbling the wrong way when she was finally free. It wasn't until she took her first step toward the makeshift staircase that she seemed to realize the worst was behind her and dissolved into messy, sloppy tears.

"I'm so sorry, Spike."

His heart gave a lurch. "Stop that. You got nothin' to be sorry for."

"I thought... I thought..."

"It's all over now."

Maybe if he said that enough, he'd believe it, but with his veins pumping full of adrenaline, it was a mite difficult to convince his brain. Every step they took closer to terra firma, he was on edge, waiting for something to leap out of the shadows. His logical brain knew what came next, but this was a different script and he was now on the same page as everyone else.

*And Buffy.*

Every step he took got him closer to seeing the woman he loved. And he wasn't sure if he could keep from making an absolute prat out of himself.

The second his feet met the ground, something inside him cemented. No sooner had he looked around did Willow all but tackle

Dawn into a hard hug. Xander was quick behind her, and Anya and Tara.

The warning burn of sunrise itched along his skin. In the other world, these were Buffy's final seconds.

Spike's gaze fell to the beam where Buffy's body had lain the last time. It was empty.

This was about the time he typically woke up.

"How did you get back up there so quickly?"

He jerked his head up and met Giles's eyes. "Have to see it to believe it, mate," he replied before looking in the direction where he knew his other self had crashed. It would be a couple minutes before he woke.

Then her scent hit his nose and whatever it was that had kept him standing on two bloody legs began to give. Spike inhaled, pulling that scent inside him, warming places that had been left hollow and cold. He swallowed and turned just as she burst into view, looking worn and determined, terrified but focused. And alive. So alive he had to work to keep himself from bursting into those loud, messy tears that no one would understand.

Spike didn't realize he was in motion until Buffy's eyes met his, the worry there melting into relief first, confusion second, and then she was in his arms, pulled tight to his chest before he could stop himself. Remind himself that this might be a staking violation, but even then, he couldn't be bothered to care. Every dead cell in his body burned with renewed life, the manic high he'd been riding since Rack had mentioned turning back the clock refusing to slow down. Her hair under his nose, her somewhat trembling body pressed against him—*this*. This was worth being staked over. He could die a happy bloke with this alone.

It couldn't have lasted more than a second or two, and likely only that long because Buffy would be thrown off by being drawn into a hug. Just as the elation began to coast and survival instinct reared up again, the air split with a roar he knew all too bloody well.

"Get your grubby mitts off her!"

A strong pair of hands seized Spike by the shoulders, jerked him from Buffy, who—he saw in a flash, was somewhere between annoyed

and bewildered—and swung him around so he was standing in the middle of a circle of stunned stupid Scoobies, a Giles who looked ready to break out the stakes, and a wide-eyed, dazed Dawn.

And right across from him, fangs out, yellow eyes blazing with an odd combination of jealousy, fear, and confusion, was himself.

Spike had seen some bloody weird things in his long life, but there was nothing weirder than this.

“Did...did Buffy make a Spike bot?” Xander stage-whispered. “And...*why*?”

“Buffy?” Willow asked, her voice at an odd pitch.

“I...”

The sound of her voice filled him with renewed warmth. Spike looked over his younger self’s shoulder and met Buffy’s eyes. And smiled.

Right before his younger self howled in fury and landed a wicked punch against his jaw, sending him staggering back until his legs wobbled and his spine met concrete. And if the following roar was anything to judge by, his doppelganger was just getting started.

*Bloody hell.*



THERE HAD BEEN TIMES WHEN BUFFY HAD DOUBTED HER intelligence, but she'd rarely considered herself slow. At the moment, though, she felt about as dumb as she ever had. Because there were two Spikes. Two of them. And they looked about ready to kill each other.

"Giles?" She didn't even flinch at the panic in her voice. She'd been prepared to die tonight. Losing her mind hadn't been a major consideration, even with Glory's penchant for brain suckage. And yet.

"I don't know," her watcher replied, exasperated. "One crisis at a time. Ben?"

Buffy motioned vaguely over her shoulder, keeping her eyes on the double platinum surprise in front of her. She barely registered Giles taking off, muttering very Britishly under his breath. She couldn't look away from what was happening in front of her.

"Don't know what your bloody game is," Spike—she didn't know which one—was screaming around his fangs, "but I'm gonna tear your head off."

"Use your sodding nose!" the other Spike snarled. "Smell familiar?"

"Listen, you—"

"I'm *you*, you thick git! Fancy some proof? Your mum's name was

Anne. She snuffed it shortly after Dru dragged you outta that hole.” He paused, swallowing hard, something indefinable crossing his eyes.

It was a look Buffy had grown more accustomed to seeing him wear over the past few months, and she still didn’t know what to do with it, or the fact that she knew what it meant—that he didn’t want to say something, but would if push came to shove.

“Wanna hear how? You vamped her,” he continued, his voice a bit rougher now. “Right brilliant plan, that. And then you had to put her down.”

“Shut your bloody gob!” the first Spike—her Spike? God, she didn’t know—screamed, his face a study in anguish. “Don’t say it like it was nothin’. Like it didn’t tear me up.”

“I *know* it tore you up, you idiot. I’m *you*.”

“Like bloody hell you are!”

The other Spike looked over his doppelganger’s shoulder and met her gaze, and the look he gave her now was like a physical caress. Almost like the one he’d given her after she invited him back into her home only a couple of hours ago, only...deeper. She didn’t know how, but she felt it all the same. Right down to her bones.

It seemed like it lasted forever, but it must have been only seconds. He snapped his attention back to the Spike in front of him, his jaw tight, and spat out a single word.

“Effulgent.”

Which, contextually, made zero sense...but it seemed to do what talking about his mother hadn’t. The other Spike—the one she thought might be the real one—sagged as though he’d been sucker-punched, the rage warping his face melting into disbelief, and taking the demonic visage along for the ride. Then they were standing there, panting, one apparently stunned stupid and the other throwing her more of those looks that made her legs feel weird.

Giles took that moment to return from wherever he’d run off to, his expression somewhat resigned. He stopped short when he saw the twin Spikes, as though he’d managed to forget about them in the span of ninety seconds. “So this hasn’t resolved itself,” he said.

Perhaps the most unhelpful observation in the history of his Gilesness.

“Buff...” Xander’s voice shook a little. “Tell me you didn’t make a Spike bot.”

Buffy tore her gaze away from the British double-threat to favor Xander with a much-deserved glare. “Of course I didn’t. What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Well, you didn’t answer me the first time. I got...worried.”

She rolled her eyes and gestured at the Spikes. “I’m sorry, I was a bit busy trying to understand this to make you feel better about my sex life. Also—gross.” She shook her head and turned to Giles. “So...any theories?”

“Maybe they’re both Spike,” Willow offered. “Like when Xander became two Xanders?”

“Don’t be thick,” one of the Spikes snapped.

“You’re half-right, Red,” the other replied. He kept his gaze on Buffy. “Didn’t expect to do this with a bloody audience, but here it goes. I... I’m from the future.”

There was a long beat.

Then Xander started cackling. And though Buffy could appreciate the sentiment—she kinda felt like laughing too—she didn’t so much as crack a grin. At once, all of the adrenaline and fear that had kept her in motion abruptly caught the memo that the danger was over, and she thought she might collapse into a pile of exhaustion.

There wasn’t enough room in her head for time-traveling vampires.

Glory was gone. Dawn was safe. The world hadn’t ended. Somehow they’d made it to the other side alive.

From the explosion of voices around her, though, the same exhaustion had yet to catch up to everyone else. Xander’s gigglefest had turned into heated yelling, Willow was trying to calm everyone down, Tara looked dazed, Dawn close to tears, and Giles like he had enough thoughts about this to polish an entire LensCrafters.

“Happy to explain,” the time-travel Spike was saying, his hands in the air. “But not here, ‘less you fancy interrogatin’ a pile of dust.” He turned back to Buffy. “Back to Revello, then? Slayer looks dead on her feet. She needs her beddy-bye.”

Xander scoffed. “You’re locked out, remember? She’s not gonna let you—”



"I did already," Buffy said, avoiding what she knew would be a peak-judgmental look. "Yeah, we better move. He's right. I'm about to drop."

The Spikes regarded her with mirrored concern, which just made her head hurt more.

"Though I think," she said after a moment, "I'm gonna need to stay awake to hear the rest of this."



FOR SOME REASON, Buffy thought things might seem less weird once she was in her living room. Or, like Giles had suggested, the double-Spike situation would have resolved itself on its own, having been some residual wonkiness from the world almost going kablooey. But no such luck. Now she was on her couch between Willow and Xander, staring at one Spike while the other wore a hole in the hardwood behind him.

Dawn and Tara had both been too exhausted to remain up. Buffy wasn't sure Dawn had even fully grasped what had happened, shaken as she was for having come so close to seeing her Key power unlocked. However, she had made a point, before disappearing upstairs, to take both Spikes into a good Summers'-sized hug and thanked them for saving her life.

Which reminded Buffy that she needed to do the same. She still wasn't a hundred-percent on what exactly had happened, but she knew Spike had been at the center. One of them, at least.

God, her head hurt. Usually, after an apocalypse, she had time to at least catch a catnap before a new crisis announced itself. It would figure that the aftermath of Glory's attempt at world-endage would be as stressful as the event itself.

"Time travel isn't possible," Giles was saying.

"You lot ever get tired of being wrong? I'm livin' proof."

"Unliving," Willow corrected, then squirmed when he arched an eyebrow at her. "Well, just saying. You're not...living. And Giles, have you done all the reading in those books? Because there are time-travel spells. I've seen them. Granted, they're super complicated and eight

kinds of scary.” She paused, looked at Buffy, and somewhat stage-whispered, “I thought about using one last year to retake an exam.”

Giles flashed his patented look of fatherly disapproval. “Do you have any idea how dang—”

“Yes! That’s why I didn’t do it.” She wiggled some more. “It’s dark magic. Way dark. And about a million and a half things can go wrong.”

“He isn’t from the future,” Anya, who sat on the floor between Xander’s legs, offered.

Spike narrowed his eyes at her. “How you figure that? Vamps have a habit of going double on the regular?”

“You’re not,” Anya replied bluntly. “You are from an undetermined possible future. The second you went back, you created an alternate timeline. Otherwise, the normal Spike would have—”

“I’m bloody well normal!” time-traveler Spike snapped.

The other Spike and Xander snickered at the same time and looked equally discomfited when they realized they’d agreed on something.

Anya didn’t look bothered, and twisted around so she could meet Buffy’s eyes. “It’s not unlike the spell I performed that created the universe where the Master rose,” she stated matter-of-factly. “Spike going back in time changed the course of events, which created a new timeline. It’s rather simple.”

For something that was rather simple, it sure made Buffy’s head hurt. She pressed her eyes closed to gather her bearings, then looked again to Spike. “So...how far back did you go?”

He held her gaze in a way that felt downright intimate. “Eight days.”

“Eight...days?” That seemed oddly anticlimactic. “Why?”

But she knew. The answer was there in his eyes, in those open, raw looks he kept giving her. In every single move he made, the reason shone through. And it was too big—the weight of what he’d done left her with a mix of awe and gratitude and downright fear.

The other Spike had stopped pacing, and the frustration that had been fixed on his face vanished. He understood, too.

“Well...” Xander said, making the universal *go-on* motion with his hand. “We’re waiting.”

“The Doc,” Spike said, finally tearing his gaze from Buffy’s. “Turns

out we didn't leave him properly dead. While the Slayer was givin' Glory the old one-two, he was up on that bloody tower." He paused, his eyes falling shut. "I got up there. But he..."

Words seemed to fail him then, but the other Spike picked up the thread, taking a step closer. "Tossed me off," he said. "I wasn't quick enough."

Buffy shivered and hugged herself. The two Spikes thing was too wiggly for her tired brain. Wiggier, for some reason, than it had been to see two Xanders or to run across a robot wearing her face and speaking in her voice. Perhaps it was because she'd just only gotten used to the way Spike looked at her these days, and it had suddenly been ratcheted up a hundred percent and doubled.

"Not that time," time-traveler Spike agreed. "But every night after, you were. We were. Doc started carvin' up the Bit. Glory never made it up there, but..." He broke, a watery shine now invading those distracting eyes of his. He barked a laugh and pressed his fist to his forehead. "Bloody hell, you're sitting right there. It's dumb, innit? I mean I can see you. You're right there. But the first time around, that's not what happened. Dawn bled. Seems you decided that since she was made from you, you could double as the Key. So you jumped. Saved the bloody world, big hero." Spike wiped at his eyes and laughed again as though dumbfounded by his own sentimentality. "Crawled inside a bottle after that. Then Will burst into my crypt. Witch isn't much of a motivational speaker, but I knew I had to get back to it. The promise I made you."

The other Spike swallowed audibly. Buffy knew they both could hear her heart thundering.

"Popped by Willy's to see if he had anythin' potent enough to get my head back where it needed to be. He pointed me to a warlock who set up shop here."

Willow jerked at that. "A warlock? There's a warlock in Sunnydale?"

Spike nodded. "Has been for a time, from what I learned. Flies under the radar. Has himself a right nice little business, juicin' up demons and magical folk who take their holidays on the Hellmouth. Slayer's good for business, he said. Went to see him to find a way to

keep goin' after and he asked me if I'd rather have another chance. Do it right this time. So that's what I did."

The room fell into the loudest silence Buffy had ever known. Her skin felt numb, her hands clammy, and she was acutely aware that everyone in the room was now staring at her. But she couldn't think. Couldn't find her voice. Hell, breathing was becoming an issue. If anyone expected her to open her mouth and say anything, they'd be waiting a long time.

How in the world did someone possibly begin to sort through this? God, she hurt just thinking about it. And before she knew it, tears were prickling her eyes. She wasn't sure if they were the product of exhaustion or shock or gratitude or relief or what, and she was way too past the point of overwhelmed to analyze.

"Spike," Giles said, his voice low and steely, "what you've done is beyond reckless—"

Spike held up a hand. "Look, mate, it's been a long bloody day for me. I know you wanna scream your piece and you'll get your chance, but first, I'm gonna pop downstairs for a bit of kip. The Slayer should the same."

Well, that was abrupt. Buffy shook her head and looked up again, surprised...then not. Spike had always been weirdly attuned to her, even in the early days. Seemed to understand her limitations even when she refused to admit she had any. The urge was there to fight through her exhaustion until the things he was saying made sense, but that would be counterproductive. He'd just need to go through all of it again.

So instead of arguing, Buffy offered a tired smile and nodded.

"What do you mean, *downstairs*?" Xander snapped. "You think Buffy will let you stay—"

"Sun's out," the other Spike snarled. "What do you suggest we do?"

Xander shrugged. "I'm sure there's a blanket handy."

"He can stay," Buffy said, and though she hadn't raised her voice, the words seemed to ring around the room. "They both can."

That took the wind out of Xander's sails. He turned to her and screwed up his face. "You can't be serious—"

"I am. I'm also seriously drained and seriously not having this

stupid fight right now.” She rose to her feet, hoping the others would take the tremble in her legs for exhaustion and not in response to anything she’d just heard. “Everyone can stay at Hotel de Summers. My house rules are: no staking, no biting, no fighting, no noise.” She glanced at Willow. “Tara’s in my mom’s room, I think. The Spikes can take the basement. Xander, Ahn, if you wanna stay—”

“I want my bed,” Anya said. “No offense, but after all that, I want my bed.”

For a second, Buffy was sure Xander would protest, but somehow he managed to keep his mouth shut. And part of her sagged when he nodded in agreement. The others she could trust to be civil, and though Xander’s hostility toward Spike had diminished somewhat over the last few weeks, she knew him well enough to know it wouldn’t take much to bring it back to full force. The ensuing screaming match would ensure no one slept.

“Then I guess Giles gets the couch,” she said.

Her former watcher cleared his throat. “Buffy—”

“No. That’s all I have the energy for. I need sleep.”

She left the room without looking at anyone, Spike in particular. Either of them. She knew if she met either of their eyes again, the emotional tsunami that had yet to be defined would hit, and she wasn’t sure what the outcome would be.

Because damn, the conversation she’d left was absolutely terrifying. Even by Sunnydale standards.

OKAY, SO, APPARENTLY IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO SLEEP KNOWING THAT, in some alternative world, you had kicked the bucket. No matter how tired you were, no matter how much your body begged for it, no matter how much you deserved it after kicking some major hellgod ass, sleep would remain evasive. Because sleep was an asshole.

Buffy humphed and rolled over for what had to be the twelve-thousandth time since she'd climbed into bed. The sun peeked in around her closed blinds, and though the house was still, she could practically feel the vibration of life going on outside this room. People on their way to work. Students bitching about finals. Someone honking at someone else at a traffic stop. It was all happening outside of these walls, and she...

Well, had someone not decided to bend the laws of time and space, she wouldn't be here.

It wasn't as though the concept of death was foreign or anything. Buffy had lived and breathed death since she was Dawn's age—*younger*, even. And this year had brought with it some pretty hard and fast lessons about the slayer's relationship with life. Or rather, her duty to die when the world needed her to. But even when she'd faced death, some part of her had known there was an escape hatch with her name

on it. Death itself remained intangible. Hell, the closest she'd come since the Master had left her to drown was that nobody vamp who'd stuck her with her own stake. And that had left her with a large enough case of the wiggins that she'd sought advice on how to avoid it happening again.

From Spike.

From Spike who had gone through freaking time to save her life. To keep her from cashing in on the death wish he'd insisted she had.

Gah. Stupid brain and its stupid thoughts.

Buffy rolled over again, this time giving into the allure of the clock on her nightstand. It was barely past eight in the morning. She'd lived now several hours she shouldn't have.

Thanks to Spike.

All right. So sleep was a no-go. Fine. She drew in a breath and kicked her legs over the side of the bed, ignoring the whine of muscles that really ought to know better by now. If she wasn't going to sleep, she needed to talk this out. Giles was probably in a coma on the couch, but she imagined she could rouse him if she tried.

Also, Spike was downstairs. Both of them.

This world had two Spikes in it and they were both under her roof. Good lord, her life could not possibly get any weirder.

When she landed on the bottom step, Buffy immediately cut her gaze to the living room, and frowned when she found it empty. No watcher. No vampire. The couch wasn't even made up like someone had slept there. Which made no sense because there wasn't a world in which her overly protective father figure would leave her alone in the house with not one, but two soulless vampires who claimed to be in love with her.

*Claimed.* Buffy bit the inside of her cheek. *Think we're well past claimed, Summers. If you needed any more proof...*

The sound of a door creaking open snapped her from her thoughts, and then she was moving. She turned the corner just in time to see Spike emerge from the basement. He stopped short when their eyes met.

The air between them practically had its own heartbeat.

"Which one are you?" Okay, that sounded a lot more callous than

she'd intended. She winced. "Sorry. Tact has taken a vacation from the brain of Buffy."

A small smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. She tried not to follow the movement with her eyes and failed.

"Think you can cut yourself a bit of slack on that, love. Not like I've been here before, either." He slid his hands into his duster pockets. "I'm the one that didn't get to play hero last night."

Buffy hesitated, then edged a step forward. "Did you leave yourself undusted down there?"

"He's still undead. Out like a sodding light, the lucky wanker. Couldn't get a wink in, myself."

She nodded. "Too weird?"

He snickered appreciatively and shook his head. "Think we left *weird* back a few turns. How about you? Thought you'd sleep until nightfall."

"Were that my body would do what my brain commands. As it turns out, sleep isn't a priority when you learn you're supposed to be dead." Buffy paused and looked away, feeling a bit like she'd just admitted to something shameful, though she could hardly say what. "I'm going to make some coffee. Do you want any?"

There was no response. She forced her gaze back to him, and found him staring at her as though she'd just proposed marriage.

"You offerin', love? That hellbitch didn't kick you in the head before you took her out, did she?"

She found herself smirking. "Maybe. It's kind of a blur. I'll be able to answer that once I get some caffeine in my system."

He turned and gestured toward the kitchen. "After you, Slayer."

Ever since Spike had tied her up and declared his undying love for her, the dynamic around him had been charged. On some level, Buffy had always been aware of him as a woman—kind of hard not to be because, well, he was pretty much sex on legs. That part had been beaten, gagged, and thrown into a mental closet, because going there? Not an option. She hadn't had to fake her revulsion when he'd gone and offered to kill his ex for her—if anything, his lack of humanity in that moment had driven home the reasons why he was and would forever be a monster. Which she'd been fine with. Comfortable, even.



Spike being permanently consigned to the monster file meant that she didn't have to do any soul-searching or mental legwork. It kept him from threatening the status quo she'd known and accepted ever since Angel walked in and subsequently out of her life.

The weeks that had followed hadn't been as easy to negotiate, particularly after Glory and her hobbit-men had captured and tortured the unliving snot out of her vampire. And now that Glory was in another footnote of slayer history, Buffy found herself revisiting the thought that she'd managed to previously shove deep in the recesses of her mind. The one that had occurred to her the night following his escape, after he'd confessed to her that he'd rather die than see her hurt.

That thought was, *He isn't like Angel at all.*

This, granted, was something Buffy had told herself repeatedly over the years. Spike was nothing like Angel and that was that. Only that time, she hadn't been thinking about Angel her boyfriend, but rather the thing that had worn his face, murdered her watcher's girlfriend, and tried to end the world. Because comparing Spike to souled-Angel didn't tell her much. When she thought of the unsouled version and tried to imagine him doing half the things Spike had done after the chip, she knew it was a wasted effort. Unsouled and chipped Angel would have found another way to torment her. Hell, though he'd be pissed that he couldn't make her bleed personally, he'd likely get some thrill out of the challenge of trying.

He'd have given Dawn to Glory in a heartbeat *because* it'd hurt. Spike had put himself between a demented god and her sister to spare her.

This knowledge shook the foundation upon which her ideology about vampires and souls had been founded. And now, without the apocalypse nipping at her heels, she had no excuse but to confront the fact that what she'd thought she'd known was wrong. Maybe only where it came to Spike, but maybe not.

Buffy busied herself at the coffee machine, way too aware of Spike's eyes on her. She felt a bit like every cell was pulling toward him—the space he took up seemed to have a magnetic draw. At last, when she ran out of menial tasks, she let herself turn to him fully.

“What do you think?”

Spike inhaled slowly, considering. “Bout your boarder downstairs?”

“Is he the real deal?”

A pause, then he nodded. “Reckon so. Can’t figure how a demon could get the smell right.”

She wrinkled her nose. “So...you smell yourself often?”

“How else is a bloke supposed to know when to shower?”

“Do you only shower when you smell particularly ripe?”

The corner of his mouth kicked up again. Again, her eyes followed the movement. “Didn’t figure you one to be so interested in my bathing habits, Slayer.”

At that, Buffy felt a sting of heat in her cheeks. “Don’t be gross.”

If anything, he seemed more amused. “You’re the one who brought up showering, love. Just answering your questions. But if you’re aimin’ to get my take... Yeah. What he said checks out. The Doc *did* throw me off that tower.” He stopped and shook his head. “Knew I’d failed you then. Promised to protect Dawn till the end of the world and I couldn’t manage even a few sodding seconds.”

“Spike, that wasn’t your fault.”

“But it would’ve been, wouldn’t it? I saw the ground comin’ at me and all I could think was how I’d bollixed up. If I’d had a bit longer, I mighta figured you’d do what he said you did—take the dive in kid sis’s place.” He swallowed audibly. “But then the lights went out and the next thing I know, a bloke wearin’ my face is hanging on you and I wagered I’d lost whatever marbles I had left.”

Buffy crossed her arms as the coffeemaker released a particularly loud hiss. She’d forgotten the hug the other Spike had all but tackled her with. How he’d trembled around her, his breath ragged in her ear, and the look on his face after he’d been pulled away.

“Sounds like something I’d do,” Spike continued a moment later, his voice lower still. “If I knew my fuck-up was what cost you your life. That I could change it...”

The coffeemaker finished its brew, and the noise in the kitchen abruptly fell away. The instinct to bolt settled in Buffy’s veins with such potency she almost let her feet carry her to the door, but that was her cowardice talking and she had no use for it now. Whatever else had

happened, Spike—this one, the other one, it didn't matter—had saved her life and then some. The least she could give him was her honesty.

Even if it scared the crap out of her.

"What you said before," she began slowly, forcing her legs to carry her a step toward him. "About you being a monster... I don't know if I believe that anymore."

Buffy paused long enough to steal a look of his face, but wished she hadn't almost at once. That deep-seated awe was something no girl could get used to, superpowers or not.

But she'd made it this far—she couldn't backtrack now.

"I'm not... Whatever it might look like, I'm not unaware of how you've changed this last year. It scares the crap out of me that's it was for me, but that...doesn't make it any less real." Big breath. "You were right. I didn't understand what it meant when you said you love me. I didn't take that or you seriously, because it wigged me out and, let's face it, you've always been kinda weird."

He didn't reply when she stopped talking, forcing her to look up again. This time, she was met by a small smile and eyes that beckoned her to continue.

"And now I have to wrap my mind around this idea that you—or some version of you—decided to pull a Marty McFly, and I know Giles is going to start in on how stupid that was or some other stuff and he's probably right, but..." Buffy paused, scrunching up her nose. "Where is he, anyway?"

"Went home," Spike said, not looking away from her. "Somethin' about the couch not being cushy enough or some rot."

"Well, he is old. And god knows I'm all kinds of achy even with slayer strength." She rolled her shoulders, entertaining a stab of pity for her friends who didn't have the luxury of rapid healing. Well, except Willow and Tara likely had a magical remedy for after-slayage aches. "Anyway, I know when we do the big debrief, things will be said, but right now, standing right here, I want you to know that I am very grateful to not be dead. And I don't really care what Giles says." A pause. She frowned. "Well, I guess I better say that to the other Spike, since—"

But before she could word-vomit anything else, Spike's hands were

cupping her face and his mouth was on hers. And the freaking world stopped turning because, holy crap, he was kissing her. Gently at first, giving her time to pull back or pop him in the nose or both, but apparently her brain was still on strike because she did neither. She stood there, teetering between resistance and surrender, willing her instincts to wake up enough to help her figure out how to react.

A door opened somewhere. Upstairs, feet thumped against the floor. The house was waking up. Spike was kissing her. In her kitchen. And she was letting him.

She opened her eyes and froze. Spike was standing in the kitchen doorway, his expression somewhat slack. Only that couldn't be right because he was pressed against her, his mouth on hers, tongue probing her lips, and—

Buffy placed her hands on Spike's chest and pushed. He went without fight, pulling in those lung-deep breaths he didn't need, his eyes taking in her face.

"I...uhh...outside."

She threw the other Spike a look before practically bolting for the back door, not sure what had just happened but certain it wasn't good. Because wonky time-travel logic aside...that had been odd. And uncomfortable. And...

And, well, she wasn't sure. Buffy pulled the back door closed, stepped into the sunshine she should have never seen again, and parked her ass on the porch step, mind spinning.

The rational part of her knew the most appropriate response would be anger since hey, she'd certainly not given Spike permission to kiss her. She also hadn't shoved him off or anything and she wasn't sure she'd wanted to. Her brain was in a tizzy, torn between reliving those few stolen seconds and punishing her for hurting the person who had actually just saved her life.

Which, yes, officially made this the most confusing morning she could remember having. She felt guilty for kissing Spike because Spike had seen it.

Good lord, what a freaking mess.

PART OF HIM HAD KNOWN TO EXPECT THIS, BUT SPIKE STILL somehow managed to muster up a bit of surprise at the fact that something like saving the Slayer's life warranted a bloody inquisition. Yet here he was, sitting at a table at the Magic Box, surrounded by a pack of solemn-faced Scoobies and a yammering watcher who seemed determined to not be happy Buffy was still breathing today.

He could single-handedly bring peace to the bloody Middle East and Rupert would have words about it.

From what Spike could piece together, though, the jury was still out among the others. The witches seemed suitably concerned—something about the Powers That Be or what all—but not unhappy. Xander had calmed too, though he wasn't too keen to admit it. The only people in proximity who appeared unbothered were the Summers sisters.

Except Buffy was apparently doing everything in her power to keep from looking at him.

Bloody well figured.

Spike tore his gaze from the Slayer in question and found his doppelganger glaring daggers at him. As though *he* was the one with a

sodding bone to pick here. Like he'd done something wrong by waking up on a morning he'd already lived once, just in a bleaker world.

Like he *badn't* just bargained more than his stupid life to save a girl who was suddenly very keen on snogging blokes that looked like him. Just not him.

It was beyond ridiculous, feeling jealous of himself, but knowing it didn't make the constant replay in his mind any better.

Spike heaved a sigh, becoming only belatedly aware that the yammering had ceased. He gave his head a shake and redirected his focus on Rupert, who regarded him with that watcherly scowl.

"Sorry, mate," he drawled, not sorry at all. "Drifted off there."

It looked like it was taking every ounce of Giles's energy not to start screaming, which was, Spike had to admit, a mighty fine bit of thanks when all was said and done. The longer he had to stew on this, the more it brassed him off. Probably didn't help that he'd been in a right foul mood since watching a version of himself steal kisses that weren't his, but sod all, no one aside from the Nibblet had managed to toss a bloody thank you in his direction, which really didn't seem like too much to ask.

Damned if you do, damned if you bloody don't. These ungrateful fuckers didn't know the hell he had spared them—the bleak version of the world he'd left behind. Empty and cold—like he imagined Hell would truly be.

At last, Giles seemed to rein in his temper long enough to speak without too much of an edge to his voice. "I was saying that I can't locate any documented case of time travel, so the repercussions of your actions might take some time to fully grasp. Needless to say, the reading I did this morning confirmed what I told you. What you did was most irresponsible. A thousand things might have gone wrong."

Spike rolled his eyes, and was slightly mollified when, over the Watcher's shoulder, he saw Buffy do the same. "But they didn't go wrong, did they?" he snapped, diving a hand into his pocket and drawing out a pack of smokes. He took a moment to appreciate it might well be the same pack his younger counterpart had in his pocket, which somewhat made his head hurt. "Glory bit the big one, the Slayer's still breathing, and kid sis didn't play the part of a wonky

Key. You can't tell me that wasn't what we wanted, 'cause I was there both times, Rupes."

"Wait..." Buffy shifted, her brow furrowing. "I told Ben to tell her it was over. I didn't kill him."

Spike managed to suppress a smirk, but only just. "No, you didn't." He nodded at Giles. "He did."

This revelation was met with a round of stunned looks. Rupert, however, didn't so much as blink, rather held Spike's gaze, not betraying a thing.

"You...killed Ben?" Buffy asked, her voice shaking. "When?" She didn't wait for a response—her eyes went wide. "Oh god. There were two Spikes in front of us and you suddenly had places to be. I thought that was weird, but you *killed* Ben?"

At that, Giles turned to his slayer. "It was the only way to ensure Glory never returned. I knew you couldn't do it, but I wasn't willing to chance your life, Dawn's, or the world that Ben's other half wouldn't one day rally. Yes, I killed him and I don't regret it. Though I would have appreciated"—he shifted back to Spike—"the opportunity to share as much at a different time."

Spike shrugged. "Sorry if I went off-script, mate. In my timeline, we'd already had this conversation. And for the record, good sodding riddance." He glanced to Dawn. "Chose himself over you, didn't he? Had the chance to play the hero and decided his own hide was worth more."

That was as much as Dawn had told him, at least, back in the world where Buffy was dead. He remembered telling Rupert he'd done the right thing, and Rupert saying something to the effect of regretting that he only got to kill the wanker the once.

Dawn looked shaken, but that didn't keep her from nodding. "He said it was him or me," she whispered. "He tried to get me out first—let me go—but then Glory came and..." Her eyes filled with tears that made Spike want to off the prat all over again. "He decided to let her do it."

"Oh, honey," Tara said, and drew Dawn into a hug. The girl promptly dissolved into a bout of shuddering sobs.

Whatever horror had been on Buffy's face abruptly dissolved, and

her expression became unreadable. When she spoke, her words carried the ring of the empty platitude rather than something stemming from belief. "We're not executioners, Giles."

"Under the right circumstances, I find I can be just about anything," Giles replied. "And do not let Spike derail this conversation. The choice I made regarding Ben is not what this meeting is about."

"That's right," drawled the other Spike loudly. Xander and Willow jumped like they'd forgotten he was there. "You're here 'cause ole Spike broke the rules again. Can we get a show of hands on how many of you sorry sods woulda rather seen the Slayer put in the ground?"

"That is not the point," Giles all but snarled. "Of course we're happy Buffy is still with us, but we have no idea what the long-term effects might be."

"Gonna wager a guess that she'll keep offin' my kith," Spike said, lighting his cigarette. "Popping me in the nose every chance she gets in between ruinin' some honest demon's idea of a good time."

The other Spike snickered.

Willow frowned and leaned close to Xander. "Is that a weird reason to keep someone around, or has hetero dating changed since I became gay?"

"Definitely weird," Xander replied.

"Not for a vampire," Anya said. "Violence is kind of like foreplay."

"So he saved her for foreplay."

Buffy wrinkled her nose and glared at all three of them. "Could you guys maybe...not?"

"No sodding tact," the other Spike agreed, and smirked when Buffy turned that glare on him.

And despite himself, Spike felt himself tightening with more of that maddening jealousy from before. He inhaled a long drag of his cigarette before continuing as though there had been no interruption or side conversation. "What Buffy won't do is leave the Hellmouth a slayer short. Y'think the world'll hurt because of what I've done? How about a world where the only slayer is serving twenty-five to life? The lot of you have an apocalypse every other bloody year. You really think you can muscle through without the Slayer to do the grunt work?"

"You're forgetting that another slayer would be called," Xander



said. Then winced and held up his hands. "No offense, Buff. Believe me, I am super stoked that you're alive."

"I'm feeling it," Buffy replied dryly, crossing her arms.

"We all are," Willow said. "But...he's right. We already know that killing a slayer will call another one."

"Something I'd have thought the self-proclaimed slayer of slayers might remember," Xander said with a smug grin that just begged to be smacked off his stupid face.

"Haven't forgotten anythin' mate, but it seems you have." Spike took a prolonged puff of his fag. "Way I heard it, you were there when it happened the first time. Gave her the breath of life yourself. Mantle's already been given to the next in line. You want new blood and you have to snuff the jailbird."

Buffy's eyes went wide. She whipped her head to Giles. "Is that true?"

"I... That is to say, I'm not sure. In terms of the Slayer line, we're in uncharted waters. Have been, ever since Kendra was called." Rupert sighed, dragging his glasses off his nose, but not before aiming a glare at Spike, as though he somehow had a hand in who was Chosen and who wasn't. "However, it stands to reason that another slayer wouldn't be called under those circumstances. The line continues with Faith."

"That Rack bloke said as much," Spike continued.

"Yes, and he wouldn't have had an ulterior motive in getting you to do something profoundly stupid and dangerous," Giles drawled. "Are you trying to convince us that you acted on behalf of humankind?"

And that was it—his patience snapped, and he didn't feel like playing anymore. Spike jumped to his feet, moving fast enough that it seemed to take the lot of them by surprise. Everyone but the Slayer and his counterpart edged back, as though to get out of the way.

"Never said that, did I?" Spike roared. "I did it because I'm in love with her, is that what you wanna hear? Do you hear me denying it? Yeah, that's the reason. The only person in this stupid bleeding world that made me give a damn about anything was gone and I had a way to get her back. No one else is on the hook for the deal but me. What is the bloody point in going over what mighta gone wrong? Planet's still turning, innit? Sun's still up. You live to fight another day, the whole

merry crew, but that can't be enough. No, 'cause ole Spike's the one who made it possible."

The other Spike rolled his eyes and turned away. "Bloody typical..."

"You acted without thinking," Giles said. The surprise that had stormed his face at Spike's outburst was no longer there, and his voice had gone steely. "You struck a bargain with a being of immense power and influence, and all we have is your word that there will be no underlying consequences."

"All right, that's enough."

Spike swung to face the Slayer, his throat tightening, and this time, he allowed himself to soak her in as he'd avoided doing all bloody day. The fact that she was there, just feet from him, her scent in his nostrils and her breaths in the air—that she was alive—still seemed like an impossible dream. She'd only been gone a few days back in his world, but those days had redefined him. Even if she lived until the sun burned out, and he was fortunate enough to remain by her side, those eight long days without her would never dull.

"We can go twenty rounds on who did what and why it was reckless," she was saying. "But, for the record? I'm glad to not be dead. And I gotta say, kinda weird to stand here and listen while my friends essentially argue that the thing that kept me alive shouldn't have happened."

The reaction was instant—at once, everyone was all wide-eyes and blubbering reassurances. Buffy tolerated the onslaught of apologies and declarations of love and relief for a few seconds before screwing up her face and holding up her hand again.

"Look—I get it. I do. Wonky spell used by a way-powerful wonky magic guy we don't know—there's probably a catch or something." She turned her gaze back to Spike, and he swore he felt his chest warm. "But if the past five years haven't proven that we can handle whatever, then I don't know what will. Spike, you'll fill the guys in with what you know about this Rack person?"

"Not sure what there is to 'fill in', love. Bloke made an offer and told me his price. I agreed to it."

"And what was his price?"

Spike opened his mouth, fully intending to tell her the truth—grand gesture, and all that rot—but then he experienced another one

of those unnerving moments where he met his own gaze, and the words stalled in his throat. At once, he was standing back in the kitchen doorway on Revello Drive, watching this other version of himself kiss the lips he'd been fantasizing about since, if he were being honest, the moment he'd first seen her on that dance floor.

Souls weren't something to be bargained in the Gospel According to Buffy, no matter whose they were. If he showed all his cards now... Well, part of him couldn't help but wonder if she'd been so amenable to snogging his twin because of his leap through time. Maybe she saw him differently now. A guy could hope, right? As far as gestures went, they didn't get much grander than breaking the sodding laws of physics. And if he told her the price was a soul no one was using at the moment, would that change things? Or would she go back to seeing him as she had before—as a thing so evil it couldn't fathom the significance of the cost of doing business? In all the ways he'd attempted to show her his love over the past year, none had gone according to plan. She'd been horrified at every turn—it was only when he'd stopped trying that he'd made any headway.

Granted, it wasn't like Spike had time to suss this out. If he didn't pay up by the time this new world merged times with the one he'd left, everything that had happened since he'd jumped back would blink out of existence. Not telling Buffy today just meant doing it tomorrow or the next day. But bugger it, he wanted those days. Just a little more with her looking at him like a man before she discovered what he'd done.

"I'll tell you," he said a moment later. "Just not now."

Buffy frowned, her brow wrinkling. "Spike..."

"Yeah." Willow drew out the word. "That's not suspicious or anything."

"Only person it affects is me," he said, keeping his tone even. "Just...not somethin' I'm keen on talking about right here. All right?"

Xander scowled. "No, not all right," he said.

But Buffy said, "Okay," at the same time, and though her voice was softer, it landed a firmer blow. Those two little syllables stole the wind from Xander's sails and erased the censure on Giles and Willow's faces.

Rather than glaring holes at Spike, they were now gawking at Buffy as though she were a bloody pod person.

Buffy didn't look at them, though. Her eyes remained on Spike. "It won't hurt Dawn, or my friends, or anyone, or the world."

"That's right."

"Then okay. I can wait."

This shouldn't seem as momentous as it did. Or maybe it should. Either way, Spike didn't think he could manage to stand still much longer. His demon was itching under his skin, bursting with energy he wagered had to be left over from the jump. Also, while he didn't much mind the Slayer looking at him the way she was now, being among a bunch of blokes who still didn't trust him wasn't his idea of a good time.

He needed to hit something. Hard. He needed *out*.

"Right. So. Kids, as fun as this is, think I'm gonna pop out." Spike directed his gaze back to Rupert's, then deliberately dropped what remained of his cigarette to the floor and stomped it out. "See if there's some ooglies out there needing to be put down."

Giles started forward. "Now wait here—"

"We still have questions!" Willow said.

"Yeah, well, we got time." Spike pushed forward, and was again shocked when Buffy stood aside for him. "Thanks, pet."

She nodded. "Thanks."

He wasn't sure if she was repeating him or offering her own, and didn't want to chance being disappointed by asking. Instead, he paused beside his doppelganger. "You gonna be a proper host or are we gonna flip for the bed?"

The other Spike blinked, tossed Buffy a furtive glance that said plainly he was thinking about the stolen kiss, then straightened. "Not flippin' for anything. It's my bed, innit?"

"Been mine a mite longer, mate."

"Not here, it hasn't. My timeline. My crypt. My rules. Find your own hidey-hole."

Spike shook his head and snickered. "Just try to keep me out."

"God, this is confusing," Buffy muttered, and out of the corner of

his eye, he caught her rubbing her temples. "Is there a way to merge these guys like we did the Xanders?"

"I'm not merging with anyone," the other Spike said.

"It wouldn't work, anyway," Willow said. "With Xander, it was two halves of the whole. This would be just... I dunno, but I'm afraid to try."

"You're not gonna," Spike informed her. No way he was letting Red and her wonky magic anywhere near his noggin. If his stint in this timeline looked to be permanent, he'd solve the problem of his double with a nice stake.

Of course, he'd better keep an eye out, because if he'd had that thought, the other Spike almost certainly had too.

Just another thing to worry about.

Still, as he set out of the Magic Box and on the familiar route home, Spike couldn't help but thank his lucky stars that these were the problems that would keep his mind occupied.

Infinitely better than going to sleep in a world without Buffy.

“SO, WHAT WAS IT?”

Spike rolled his eyes, not breaking his stride. Being that he knew himself rather well, he'd been prepared to be assaulted with questions the second he left the Magic Box. And lucky for him, his other self wasn't in the mood to disappoint.

“Oi!” the other Spike snapped, rushing up to take the space beside him. “Wanker, I'm talking to you.”

“Yeah, and I'm ignoring you.”

“Oh, that's real nice. You're in a temper. Never mind that whatever it is you bargained off is going to affect me too, right?”

Spike hesitated, considering, and his head began to pound again. It was easy to think of the other Spike as completely other—someone who happened to look like him wandering around, taking up space, snogging certain blondes who ought to be snogging the person who actually did the bit of rescuing. Attempting to rationalize that it actually *was* him was a different beast, and though he'd seen some mighty odd things over the last century, having a chat with himself redefined bizarre.

But the git was right, unfortunately.

That didn't mean he was in a mood to place nice.

He whirled around and met his own eyes. "I saw you this morning," he snapped.

The other Spike arched an eyebrow. "Yeah, I saw you, too. What of it?"

"She kissed you." He balled his hands into fists, fighting back the urge to take a swing at the doppelganger. "She kissed *you*."

A snide grin spread across the other Spike's face, and at once, his eyes were dancing. "Oh, is that it? Caught the Slayer and me havin' a moment and you can't handle it."

"Last I checked, the lady wasn't too keen on snogging either of us."

"Yeah, well, save a girl's life and some things change."

He couldn't hold back his punch if he tried. Unfortunately, the other Spike seemed to know it was coming and dodged away with a laugh.

"You saved rot," Spike snarled, and for a second he thought he might actually dust the bastard. If he'd had a proper stake on him, he might have done just that. "Took Doc all of, what, twenty seconds to make you eat pavement?"

The other Spike's mirth vanished instantly. "Don't."

But he couldn't stop. He'd opened the door and reached for the only weapon he had at the moment. Yeah, it would hurt worse than anything else he could have grabbed—they both, but what did he have to lose?

This arrogant wanker didn't understand. Maybe he couldn't.

But dammit all, Spike would try to make him.

"You wanna taste of what it woulda been like had I not made the deal?" he asked. "Wanna know what today woulda been like for you? You'd come to on the pavement, head pounding. You smell blood and death and you know. You *know* but you won't believe it. Can't. Maybe the fall dulled your senses. So you get up and make yourself go toward it. You see them there...and then you see her. Just lying there where she fell. Not moving. Not breathing. And you still just look because it can't be bloody true. You've seen death before and contrary to what other wankers say to make themselves feel better, you know there's nothing peaceful about it. But somehow she does look just that. Peaceful. You stare until it sinks in that she's not going to move, and then..."

The memory hit him hard, a physical blow. He blinked and looked away, willing himself not to lose it. The image of Buffy lying in repose would haunt him until the day he dusted properly. No matter that he'd left her side not ten minutes earlier. In the world where he belonged, she was still dead. Nothing could change that.

Spike sniffed and swiped at his eyes. "And the sun's coming out. You think *fine*. Good. Figure you'll just stay where you are and go with her. Then you hear the Nibblet and you remember that you made a promise. You failed when it counted but you can't bloody fail again. She invited you in, didn't she? She's counting on you. But you fall to pieces anyway, and someone else drags you off your sorry arse and tells you to get before you dust. You make yourself do it, as the rest of them stay with her. Where you can't. And the next time you see her, she's in a pretty box about to go into the ground forever. There's no proper service. Can't let the demons know she's dead, right? But her mates chip in and get her a headstone and gather at the Summers' place. Angel's there. They don't warn you—he's just there. And you hate him for being what he is and for not being there when she needed him, hate him for being what you couldn't be, hate them for not tellin' you the ponce is comin' down. You hate everyone but not as much as you hate yourself. You sit there and listen as they talk about her. You're thinkin' over and over about the moves you shoulda made. The way it ought to have gone. The load of awful things you've said and done to her, whether you knew you loved her or not, and bloody marvel that she let you into her life at all at the end. And look where it got you." Spike shook his head and forced himself to meet the other Spike's gaze again. He allowed himself a moment of sadistic pleasure at what he saw shining back at him. "You crawl into a bottle and stay there. Waking up every night after dreamin' things that aren't real. Doing it right. And for a second, every time you open your eyes, you don't remember that that's not how it happened. You expect to hear her kick your door down any second. Dawn's in trouble or some new ugly's in town or, bloody hell, she hasn't punched anything in a while and wants to make sure her swing's still packs enough heat to break a bloke's nose. You manage to think of all of this before you remember. And then you lose her all over again. Every day. Every time



you wake up. It never gets better. No matter how much you drink. No matter...”

“I get it,” the other Spike said, his voice thick and his eyes bright with tears.

“No. You don’t. And you will never.” Spike snarled and whirled around to resume his hard stride. “You’re welcome for that.”

It took his twin just a few seconds to catch up. His pace was more subdued, the balls and swagger from before having vanished. After a moment, he cleared his throat and said, tone soft, “I kissed her. Caught her off guard. Reckon she’s still a bit turned around about this time travel business, which is why she didn’t slug me. Safe bet that she will, though, once the shock wears off.”

Spike snorted. “That supposed to make me feel better?”

“Don’t really care if it does.” A pause. “You know what she said to me—to us before the big fight. Guess seein’ what I’d do for her made her warm up a bit more. All went to my head, I think. That she’d nearly kicked it. That it woulda been my fault. Lettin’ me stay in her house, that she...” He released a long breath and shook his head. “It’s like I say—I snogged her. She was speakin’ a piece that she meant to say to you. ’Bout how she could see I’d really changed, that I mean it when I tell her I love her. Bloke gets carried away, you know.”

Spike swallowed but didn’t say anything. He didn’t think the other Spike meant to rub salt in the wound—wasn’t sure how *he’d* react if roles had been reversed, but that didn’t keep the words from stinging any less. So not only had Buffy let herself be kissed by him, she’d opened up too. Said the things he’d dreamed of her telling him, or at least close enough to hurt, deep. He did all the bloody work and someone else got the reward. Sounded about right.

Not that he’d taken the dive through time thinking Buffy would give him anything more than a thank you, if that. Hell, he wouldn’t have thought it possible. Having her back was all he’d wanted.

Still, he couldn’t help the way it smarted.

“So what was it?” the other Spike asked again. “What’d you bargain? What did we give up to save her?”

Spike bit back the urge to scream at his stupid other self that he hadn’t done rot, but managed to choke it back. The fact was his

twin *would* have done what he'd done, given the right circumstance. And he couldn't exactly blame the git for seizing the chance to taste what he wanted. Plus, he'd likely dust the wanker before too long—no harm in bearing all.

"Didn't mean to bargain anything," he said. "Ended up at Rack's by accident."

"Yeah, you said that. That you went to Glinda's first."

He nodded. "Lookin' for somethin' to dull the pain so I could be there for the Nibblet. Prove I wasn't entirely worthless. The bottle wasn't cuttin' it, thought he might have somethin' stronger. Wound up at Rack's. Warlock told me he could send me back to the moment where it mattered if I handed over a shiny, pure human soul. Just so happens I got one of those that's not gettin' much use at the moment."

The other Spike stumbled in his footing. "Our soul?"

"Tell me it wasn't worth it."

"Of course it's worth it. How you figure you're gonna swing that, though?"

"If I recall correctly, Glinda the First got her start stuffing souls into blokes. Can't be much to just keep one in one place long enough to hand it over."

"Well, hell." The other Spike shook his head. "No wonder you didn't 'fess up back there. The Slayer'd have a bloody conniption. You know how precious this lot is about their souls."

Spike nodded, making the final turn that would lead to his crypt. "Reckon I'll just appeal to logic. This soul of mine or the Slayer. Don't figure it'll take much to persuade Red."

He pushed the door to his crypt open. It was only after he stepped over the threshold that he felt the tension he'd carried with him all day begin to subside. Grief could reshape more than just a person, he'd learned. None of the many bottles of liquor he'd powered through over the past few days littered the ground. The air didn't stink of tears, either. It was as it had been every other night that Buffy had been alive.

"You're fine in the chair, right?" Spike asked, pushing toward the fridge. He couldn't recall when last he'd eaten and his stomach chose that moment to remind him it needed attention.

“Mate, you’re lucky I’m not tossin’ you out on your head. Don’t bloody push me.”

Spike rolled his eyes. “You got to snog the Slayer,” he said, bending over to see what it was he’d had on ice a week ago. A few bottles of alcohol he’d put to good use in his timeline, and a couple rations of blood. Enough to get them both through the night, at least. “Figure the least you can do is let me have the comfy bed.”

“Why the hell are you still on that? It’s not like either one of us has a chance with her.” The other Spike stomped over, his face twisted into a scowl. He threw the fridge door open and grabbed the first bottle on the shelf. “Like I said, I just caught her unawares. Once all this sinks in and she’s back to her bitchy self, I imagine she’ll kick me around a few times to make sure I know to never do that again.”

Spike snorted. “Long as she doesn’t mistake you for yours truly.”

“Right. It’s not like we’re both gonna be around long enough for her to make that mistake.” The other Spike tipped back a healthy mouthful of whiskey, then tossed him the bottle. He met Spike’s eyes and smirked. “Come on. I know you thought about it. One of us is gonna do in the other, right?”

“Probably,” he replied, then downed a gulp himself, relishing the burn. “But as the bloke who actually signed up for this magical mystery tour and the reason you’re in such bloody good spirits tonight rather than tryin’ to drown yourself in this”—he held up the bottle—“I’m gonna take the bed. You’re welcome to fight me over it if you’re really eager to dust.”

“Wanker.”

“Git,” he shot back. Then, without further ado, reached in and grabbed the topmost bag of blood. “We’ll need more of this.”

“You’re a right awful houseguest, you know?”

“Funny,” Spike replied as the bones in his face shifted. He lifted his cold dinner to his mouth, met his twin’s exasperated expression, and sneered. “Was gonna say the same thing about you.”

HONESTLY, BUFFY WAS FED UP WITH HERSELF.

It wasn't like she hadn't had close calls before. Hell, she'd actually died once already, dammit. There was no reason why this particular time should bother her more than the untold others that had come before it. Yet here she was, living the second day that she shouldn't have, on patrol like it was any other night, unable to shake off the feeling of...well, she didn't know what. But it was persistent and annoying and she didn't know who to see about it.

Because her friends had moved on—or at least it seemed like they had. After Spike's departure—well, both Spikes' departures—the day before, there had been maybe a good thirty minutes of follow-up, with Giles saying something about needing to study time travel and Willow mentioning the possibility of doing a spell to determine if the universe was out of balance. Business as freaking usual. But after the shop talk ended, Willow and Xander had launched into plans to celebrate having defeated the apocalypse again, which involved drinks and dancing at the Bronze. A perfectly ordinary ritual for a situation that was anything but.

On some level, Buffy supposed she could understand. For five years, Willow and Xander had watched her navigate dangerous situations and

come out on the other side with maybe a bruise or two. This time had been different—anticlimactic, even, because everything had been over before it had a chance to become really dangerous. That this particular near-death experience had involved Spike breaking time and space to keep her alive was wiggly, sure, but it wouldn't be the first impossible save one of them had pulled off and odds were good it wouldn't be the last.

And maybe that was the way she should be, too. Just accept that the wacky had happened and move on like everyone else. Except every time she tried, she thought about the bone-crushing hug Spike had given her when he'd seen her alive. The way he choked up when talking about her death, even when she was sitting two feet away from him. The extraordinary lengths to which he'd gone to prevent that fate.

Then she'd remember the kiss her Spike—or present Spike, however that worked out—had swept her inside when she'd done the bare minimum in acknowledging the obvious. The Buffy of three days ago would have slugged him for doing that. The Buffy of right now didn't know what to do or think, because the Buffy of right now should be in a box somewhere, waiting to be buried.

God, she missed her mom. These were things she couldn't discuss with anyone else. Definitely not Giles, who was still waiting for the other cosmic shoe to drop, or Willow or Xander, who had way too much Spike baggage to unpack. Dawn was a teenager, and much too much of a Spike fangirl to be completely neutral. There was Tara, whom Buffy liked a lot but still didn't know all that well. And Anya...

Buffy stopped short, frowning. Anya. Now there was a thought. Someone with a perspective beyond the human variety who definitely wouldn't hold back for the sake of her feelings. If she could trust Anya with nothing else, it was to tell her exactly what she thought in blunt words.

*What she thinks about what, exactly?*

Buffy drew her lower lip between her teeth and nibbled. That was the other question—the thing she'd been dancing around since her world had expanded to include a soulless vampire who was in love with her.

There were things in the world of Buffy that made sense to her—

the law, as it had been laid out, regarding what made an evil thing. Once again, her thoughts turned to Angel, as he'd pretty much been her personal litmus test on monstrosity. Souls were good. Anything without a soul was evil. Humans were good. Anything that wasn't human was bad, and hence slayable. Sure, there were the odd Charles Mansons of the world, but they were the exception.

This was how she'd navigated life since coming to Sunnydale. Roommate is a demon? She must be killed. Demon turns into a human? She's one of us now. Vampire has a soul? He's a biologically challenged homo sapien. Vampire doesn't have a soul? Evil, unfeeling monster.

Spike had been challenging that last bit for a while now, loathe as she was to admit it. It was hard believing he was evil or unfeeling when he did confusing things like help her Fyarl-turned Watcher or allowed himself to be tortured nearly to dust by a deranged hellgod.

She'd believed, blindly and happily, that all soulless demons were the same. She'd believed it so readily she hadn't wanted to accept any of the signs that she had it wrong. Because every moment soulless Spike spent being anything but soulless was a moment in which she had to reconcile that not only was he nothing like Angel, which she'd always known...but he was better.

The only reason a soulless Angel would go back through time to save her life would be so he could torture and kill her himself.

Angel had had goodness thrust upon him. Spike had chosen it.

And if Spike had a soul? What would change? Yes, he had his hard edges. He made the wrong call a lot of the time, but since he'd professed his love for her, the times he'd gotten it wrong had been when he was left to his own devices. He'd received no support from her and definitely none from her friends.

Not like Anya had as she'd gone through pretty much the exact same thing. Anya, who was responsible for as many deaths as Spike, if not more, and hadn't once shown a smidgeon of remorse for any of it. Anya, who had nearly ripped this dimension apart trying to get back to her demon self. Anya, who had acclimated to human life out of necessity, not choice.

Spike had gone through the same motions and reached the same

conclusions, only he hadn't had the support and understanding, because he lacked a pulse.

*How is Anya any better than Spike?*

Buffy had no idea. And yeah, that thought hurt. A lot. Why wouldn't it? It shifted everything she'd believed about herself and her world from defined and understood to murky and uncertain.

Somehow, Buffy had made her way to Spike's crypt. She blinked when she realized where she stood, then swallowed. It seemed her legs had done the thinking for her.

Though what the hell she'd say to him—either of them—she had no idea.

She hesitated before raising her fist to the stone and knocking. It didn't occur to her how odd that was, knocking, until she'd lowered her hand again. Because Buffy the Vampire Slayer kicked crypts open. She didn't wait for an invitation. The things that lived inside didn't deserve the courtesy.

The crypt door opened before she could lose herself down another rabbit-hole of introspection, and she was glad because her temples were already throbbing. Spike didn't bother to hide his surprise at seeing her, his impossibly blue eyes going wide.

"Slayer," he greeted, looking around before his gaze settled on her. "Did you...did you just knock?"

Holy moly, he wasn't wearing a shirt. And Spike without a shirt... Had she ever seen him in any state of undress before? Definitely not, because this? Not something a girl could forget. He looked like he'd been cut from marble with his wiry, defined muscles and oh-so-smooth chest. At the moment, it seemed downright criminal that he'd ever so much as looked at a shirt, much less pulled one on.

It wasn't that she hadn't known he was strong, because memo received on that. It was more that she hadn't ever put thought into what that strength might look like once you took the leather and the T-shirts away. Probably a good thing she hadn't, because...damn.

Buffy had never been with anyone who didn't dwarf her physically. And it hadn't occurred to her, until that moment, that she might actually like it.

“Slayer?” Spike repeated, ducking to catch her eyes. “Anyone home?”

She started and gave her head a shake, heat flooding her cheeks. “I, umm, sorry. Yes, to answer your question, I did knock. Apparently, that’s a thing I do now.” Buffy pressed her lips together, her heart beginning to thunder. “I... I don’t really know what I’m doing here.”

Yeah, that was lame.

However, Spike was good enough not to call her on it. He stepped aside. “Come on in if you like.”

She didn’t know what she liked. Still, she found her feet carried her over the threshold all the same. Like the previous morning, she felt overly attuned to his presence. “I guess I couldn’t stop thinking,” she said, her tone pitched in what she recognized as the start of the Buffy ramble. Because that wasn’t embarrassing at all. “About—wait. Which one are you?”

Spike closed the door behind her, the sound like an exclamation point. The air seemed to thicken when the outside world was shut out. “The one who came through time,” he said, turning to face her. “If you’re lookin’ for the other one, he’s still dead to the world.”

“I wasn’t looking for—I mean, I...” Buffy shook her head, the ache there intensifying. “Okay, how weird is this for you? I mean, really. It was wiggly enough for me with the Bot, but I knew it wasn’t real.”

The second the words were out, she wished she could swallow them back. Talking about the Bot was dangerous, if for nothing else than the fact that she was now thinking of what Spike had done with the Bot while wearing even fewer clothes than he did currently. That and not knowing if the funky feeling in her chest was jealousy over a scrap-heap reject or the more familiar disgust that the thing had ever existed in the first place.

“You live long enough and nothing surprises you anymore,” Spike replied in an annoyingly calm voice. “Plus, I heard you thought the Bot wasn’t much of a likeness. Seemed to fool Glory all right.”

“When you’re only used to seeing yourself in a mirror, anything that’s not, well, a mirror looks weird to you.”

He offered a flat smile. “Wouldn’t know.”

Right. Of course, he wouldn’t.



Buffy inhaled, searching her brain for a safe topic, but none occurred to her. At length, she dropped her shoulders and mentally threw in the towel. "Look...I'm working through some stuff here. With having almost been dead and all. Or the...*being* dead. Back in your timeline. I mean, yes, I've died once before but that was for like twenty seconds. It messed me up then, too. You think a lot of kooky things when you die saving the world and there's not really a support group that would *get* that. I kinda took it out on my friends then and I really want to *not* do that again."

Spike arched an eyebrow. "So you came to take it out on me, then? The reason you're still alive?"

"No, that's not what I meant. This is different." She paused. "This was real. I was actually dead. Like buried dead, I'm guessing."

He went somewhat rigid but nodded. "Didn't get to attend the funeral, myself. Wasn't much of one to begin with. The Scoobies were tryin' to keep the fact that you'd snuffed it from spreading. Think Willow was aimin' to have the Bot repaired to keep 'em fooled a bit longer."

She furrowed her brow. "I'm not sure how I feel about it."

"Know how I did. Made fuck all sense to me. Like a bloody robot could ever replace—" He caught himself, swallowed. "Well, it'd never last. Sooner or later some big ugly would make it short-circuit and then it'd be a bloody free-for-all."

"Every time I close my eyes, I think about the fact that I should be dead," Buffy blurted in a rush. "And I think about Dawn, what would've happened to her. Mom's gone and my dad is useless. I don't have anything set up in terms of a will or anything, but I'd want her to stay with Giles, I think. Or Willow and Tara. I don't know. I mean, having an expiration date—I've always understood that. Well, on paper...as you pretty much threw in my face earlier this year. Part of me had started to feel invincible. Physically. I knew I could lose and big, but that the *big* would involve a world without Buffy was this thing I hadn't really sat with." She clamped her mouth shut before she could reach peak mortification, though, for the way Spike was staring at her, she was damn close. After forcing out a deep breath, she went on. "I think I'm just talking myself in circles. This is essentially the sequel to

what I told the other you. Only with fifty-percent more rambling. It probably doesn't make sense." She glanced away, then back again. "I don't suppose he told you what I said yesterday? Back when my mind marginally clearer?"

Spike didn't answer at first, studying her still with that unerring scrutiny that, a week ago, would have earned him an eye-roll at best and a punch in the nose at worst. She forced herself to sit with it.

"Didn't say much, actually," he replied at last. "Just that you said you reckoned I had changed after all. That when I tell you that I love you, you know I'm speaking true."

Buffy bit her tongue to keep herself from groaning aloud. Had she really said all that? She knew she'd thought it, but yesterday had been a whirlwind of crazy. Truth be told, she'd been a bit fuzzy on the things she'd meant to say to Spike and what she'd actually managed to get out. And now she'd asked and given him essentially no choice but to bring up the *love* thing. Not that she could ever forget it—elephant in the room it was—but hearing him say it now did funny things to her.

Those words had weight now that she hadn't given them before.

"You kissed him. Caught the end of that, myself."

Oh great. They were going to talk about that, too.

"I... Actually, he kissed me. I just kind of stood there."

Spike arched an eyebrow. "Couldn't help but notice his nose looked more or less intact. Unless you aim to give him a good pop while you're here."

"No." For reasons she didn't want to examine too closely at the moment, striking Spike—either of them—felt, well, wrong.

"That a fact?" he replied, and suddenly he seemed closer. "Wasn't too long ago that a shiner was the least a bloke could expect for sneaking a snog. Something else change, love?"

Buffy tried hard to ignore the thudding in her chest, but it was impossible, especially when she knew he could hear it. "It seemed rude."

"Rude?"

"Not the best way to say thanks for saving my life."

Spike studied her for a second before huffing out a laugh. "Does

that mean you meant it for me, then? Along with the other things you told him?”

There was no denying it—the distance separating them was shrinking. She hadn’t even seen him move, but he was there, in her space, overwhelming her senses and making it hard to think. The instinct came to shove him back but she didn’t bother to chase it. Like everything else, it didn’t seem right at the moment.

“Do you mind if I take it? If it was supposed to be mine anyway. Seems fair.”

Buffy forced herself to meet his gaze. He looked so open then, vulnerable and soft, his blue eyes wary but somehow also shining with hope. Hope she shouldn’t encourage but couldn’t find the will to dismiss. She parted her lips, watched those freakishly expressive eyes of his follow the movement, and searched for words.

“Spike—”

But then his mouth was on hers, and whatever she’d been about to say evaporated. It was strange how familiar this felt—familiar, yet different at the same time. Some of the disgust she’d felt last year, after coming out of the Will Be Done spell, had been centered on the fact that kissing him had seemed natural. Like all the fighting and bickering and truces and thwarted plans had been building toward this all along. Kissing Spike shouldn’t have lit her up inside but it had. At the time, she’d been able to write it off as a byproduct of Willow’s spell and more or less forced herself never to revisit it. If anyone had asked her, she would have sworn sideways she didn’t remember much because of the ick factor.

That would have been a lie.

She hadn’t had much time to process the kiss from yesterday, mostly because it had caught her so off guard and been so damn confusing she hadn’t had the mental bandwidth to deal with it on top of everything else. But it had felt like this—soft, hesitant, and somewhat desperate. That was one thing she hadn’t been able to forget about the Will Be Done spell—how Spike kissed with his whole damn being, with passion that could be mistaken for anger if one didn’t know better.

It wasn’t until the air split with the whine of old hinges that Buffy

realized she'd been kissing him back. That she'd had his tongue in her mouth, that her arms were around his neck and her body was practically plastered to his. That she could feel him hard against her stomach.

That she realized that yes, she was in fact turned on.

She pulled back with a gasp, blinking hard through the fog clouding her mind. "Oh no," she murmured, hesitated, and met the astonished, hurt eyes of the Spike that now stood by the open door that led to the crypt's lower level.

Really. *Really*. How could she have let this happen twice?

"I... Ahh..." She stumbled back a step, her temples starting to pound. The headache was back. She looked between them, from the Spike who was still panting, his eyes glazed over with hope and want, to the other, who looked about ready to rip the time-traveler's head off.

Her instincts were of no help. Part of her wanted to get as far from here as possible; part wanted to apologize to the other Spike, and the result screamed at her to kick both their asses and tell them in no uncertain terms how this was never happening again and they'd both be dust if they mentioned it.

Only that last thing felt more like habit.

"God, this is too weird for me," Buffy said at last, barking a hard laugh that did nothing to ease the tension in the room. "I'm gonna go patrol. You two...work whatever out."

The Spike closest to her stepped forward. "Slayer—"

"No. No, no. No."

"No what, love?"

"Any of it. This. Right now." She turned and headed for the door, but paused once she got there. "Umm...tonight. The gang's going to the Bronze to celebrate. I'm gonna finish up patrol then head that way." A beat. "You—both of you—should come. Since... Well, you know."

Dead silence met this statement, and she wasn't brave enough to chance a glance back. She mentally counted to ten, then burst back into the cemetery as though something was chasing her.

And for the way she felt then, something *was* chasing her. Had

been chasing her since she'd awakened that morning, and she didn't know how to handle it.



SPIKE STARED at the space the Slayer had just vacated, his lips still tingling and her scent still clouding his senses. He was aware of his other self standing behind him, knew the outburst was coming, but couldn't be bothered to care a lick.

Buffy had kissed him. Really kissed him. Yesterday might have been a fluke, but this sure as bloody hell hadn't been. Not only had she kissed him, she'd grinded those hips of hers into him, rubbed herself against his cock and given him a pure, unadulterated whiff of slayer arousal.

She'd wanted him. *Buffy* had wanted him.

What might have happened if his sodding doppelganger hadn't ruined the moment?

"Oi."

Spike stiffened and turned around, but found he was grinning like a lunatic.

Right up until the other Spike smashed his fist against his face.

"You had it right," the wanker growled as Spike's knees hit the ground. "I get it now. You best find another place to sleep tonight or I really will dust you."

For his part, Spike couldn't be bothered to care. He just grinned up at the sorry loser, even as the taste of his own blood filled his mouth. His mouth that Buffy had explored with her tongue.

"Worse ways for a man to go," he said, feeling stupid and giddy and a bunch of other things he'd never thought possible.

The other Spike hit him again.

HE WASN'T SURE WHAT WAS WORSE—BEING JEALOUS OR COMING IN second place. To himself.

Yeah, that was a new one. Never mind all the years playing second fiddle to Angelus, the pain of watching Dru fawn over the giant sod the second he'd become interesting again, and the knowledge that no matter what he did, he'd always come up looking small compared to someone else. No, that wasn't enough for old Spike. Turned out the unlife could get more intolerable—all it took was a version of himself doing what any self-respecting vamp who loved her would have and suddenly the things that had been so bloody improbable just a few days ago seemed almost inevitable.

The image of Buffy snogging the wanker wouldn't go away. And it had been a hell of a snog, this time with her full and enthusiastic participation. And here he'd been on Cloud bloody Nine because she hadn't popped him in the nose for stealing a smooch the day before. Seemed she wasn't so averse to the idea, after all, only she wanted the one who'd done the bit of heroics.

What was even worse, was Spike couldn't even blame her. Put them side-by-side, and who wouldn't want the bloke who'd defied the laws of

physics to save the girl's life? Never mind that these were actions he'd never get to replicate.

Not that he wanted to visit his doppelganger's reality. Just listening to what the other Spike had gone through was enough to convince him no corner of Hell could be worse than a world without Buffy. But yeah, his feelings on the matter were complicated at best.

Spike tossed back a healthy swig of whiskey before resuming his glower at the sea of bodies undulating on the dance floor beneath him. He wasn't even sure what he was doing at the Bronze, except for the fact that Buffy had made a point to invite him to the victory shindig and since that wasn't something that had ever happened, he'd been hopeless but to follow.

The other Spike was down with the others, making eyes at the Slayer, whose body language spoke plainly that she was hyperaware of him, even if she was trying to play it cool. She was seated with her mates, as always, nodding dutifully at an animated Xander who either didn't realize she wasn't interested in what he was prattling on about or didn't care. She kept flicking her gaze to the other Spike and looking away quickly whenever she saw him watching. Like they were in sodding secondary school, waiting to see who'd ask who to the bloody social first.

Fuck, he needed a smoke. Or to get sloshed. Or both.

It would come to a head soon, he knew. The other Spike knew it, too. They'd already discussed how this was likely to end between them. Hell, he'd considered ending the other git's life half a dozen times while they'd been holed up in his crypt, but there remained that nagging voice that warned killing the competition was not the best way to win the girl's heart. Especially when the competition was her bloody hero. Spike knew he could be petty, but this had to be a new low.

These were the sort of musings, the moral quandaries, that wouldn't have plagued him before Buffy. Before that dream, he'd relied on instinct, pure and simple. No time for second thoughts or intense deliberation. He identified the easiest and most effective course of action and seized it. If it didn't work, get up, brush off, and go on down the list.

Loving the Slayer made the unlife bloody complicated.

Especially now. Spike had never harbored any delusions of getting the girl, but in those fantastic *what-ifs* in which the impossible happened, he was always the lucky bastard who got to reap the rewards.

Next time he sent a wish out into the universe, he'd remember to be a bit more specific.



THIS WAS REDEFINING WEIRD.

Buffy pulled her lips back into a tighter smile, nodding when she realized she hadn't done that in a while, and wondered, for the fifth or sixth time in ninety seconds, just how essential her presence was to this world-didn't-end jam. When Willow had first mentioned it, Buffy had hoped that the festivities would propel her out of her funk, at least for the night. As it turned out, she was just left with her jumbled thoughts in a louder setting. Thinking about earlier, about how Spike had kissed her—really kissed her—and she hadn't only *not* punched him in the nose, but had kissed him back. With enthusiasm.

With *tongue*.

A week ago, that would've been a staking offense. Then again, a week ago, Spike hadn't inhabited the part of her brain reserved for romantic prospects. And yeah, it freaked her out how quickly that had changed. And it *had* changed. No sense denying that—not after today.

One kiss she could brush off—it had been fast and impulsive and she hadn't had much time to react, much less punch him. Also, mitigating circumstances, the largest being that Spike had walked in on them and the situation had been too weird for her.

The second kiss, though...

Spike had gone from mortal enemy to repulsive stalker to tentative confidant to person-she-trusted to someone she could see herself kissing a lot more. And she knew more was coming—the looks Spike kept shooting her spoke plainly that he wasn't about to let her forget that moment. Never mind that the other Spike, the one from her timeline, was lurking on the balcony and shooting his twin death glares.



Because there were two of them. Two incarnations of the same soulless vampire who loved her, and her feelings about him, about the nature of their relationship, had gone from rock-solid to topsy-turvy in a handful of hours.

Not even the crap the Bronze was playing tonight could drown out this mental tantrum.

Her friends were being no help. Willow and Xander had seemingly decided, after giving her the side-eye when she mentioned both Spikes were coming, that topics involving the platinum double-threat were verboten for the night. Also verboten—the fact that in another timeline, this Bronze party had been minus one slayer.

Had her friends partied in the time-traveling Spike's universe? Had they considered the saved-world a victory even at the expense of her life? Probably not, but these were the sort of questions an inquisitive brain couldn't help but fire. Especially when everyone was trying to be so damn normal.

And Buffy was letting them. She was sitting at a table with Xander, who was using Anya's trip to the bar to give Buffy the hard-sell on a guy he wanted to set her up with, and pushing her fake smile muscles to the ultimate limit.

"I've been thinking about him for you for a while," Xander was saying. "But, you know, world saveage takes priority. I think you'd really like him. Assuming you're ready to start dating again, of course."

Buffy flicked her gaze to Spike, who stood far enough away that he wouldn't be able to hear the conversation were he a nice, normal human. But being that he wasn't, and judging from the rapt interest on his face, she had to guess he was listening. Evil eavesdropper that he was.

That should annoy her but it didn't. Maybe in a few days, after the novelty of Spike's leap through time had worn off, her world would right itself again and she'd be back to status quo where he—where *both* of them were concerned. And as much as that would simple up the situation in her head, she wasn't sure that was what she wanted. This new feeling where Spike was concerned was scary, sure, and it'd be easy to pretend it didn't exist, but wasn't that the coward's way out?

Spike was seriously in love with her and that meant something. She couldn't pretend it didn't anymore.

An aggravated sigh tore her from her thoughts as Anya rejoined them, setting a new round of beers on the table. "Xander!" The former vengeance demon rolled her eyes. "You said you weren't going to mention it."

"I said I wouldn't force the subject! We were just talking!"

"Really? Buffy mentioned to you that she is in need of a new orgasm provider while I was away?"

Buffy glanced back to Xander, who at least had the decency to look sheepish.

"Okay, not as such, no. But Ahn, there's no harm in seeing if she's interested," he replied. He met Buffy's gaze again. "No pressure or anything. I haven't, ahh, told Jeffrey too much about you. Just that I have a friend who's single and might possibly be ready to mingle. Possibly. Emphasis on possibly."

Again, Buffy felt compelled to look at Spike. Maybe going on a date with a nice human guy would help her clear up her head where he was concerned—see if these new squishy feelings were reactionary or permanent. Because if she did more lip-locking with Spike, they'd eventually cross a threshold that couldn't be uncrossed, and that was not the sort of life-changing decision anyone should go into without absolute certainty.

"Single and flirting with the idea of mingling," she said a moment later. "I'm open to trying if this guy gets the Xander seal of approval. Set it up."

Xander sat back, blinked his surprise, then favored Anya with a neener-neener smile.

But Buffy was only kind of paying attention to Xander. She was more interested in what was going on in her periphery, and she couldn't help but feel a stab of regret when she saw Spike swear, turn, and disappear into a throng of partiers. The urge was there to go after him, explain her line of thinking, but that would just muddy things up even more. Even if she did decide that these new, complicated Spike feelings were worth exploring, he wasn't like other guys, and that was something she could never, ever forget.

She glanced up just in time to see Spike join his doppelganger on the balcony. Bonus—they both looked mooney now.

And that was another thing—if she did decide to pursue something with Spike... Well, being that there were two of them, that could get incredibly confusing and complicated and—

*Porny.*

Buffy felt her cheeks go hot and tore her gaze from the vampires.

Yeah, definitely needed to think things through before she had any more thoughts along those lines.

“All right, I was wrong,” Anya said, jarring Buffy back to the present. “Buffy is certainly thinking about orgasms. Let’s just hope Jeffrey has the stamina to provide them. We both know Riley didn’t.”

Xander sputtered into his beer rather uselessly before flashing Buffy an apologetic look. The *it’s the way it is* look. Or the *I know it’s weird, but I actually do love her* look. Or the *don’t judge the ex-demon too harshly* look.

The ex-demon who was part of their lives now, despite the fact that she still had difficulty navigating human culture and ethics and basic conversations.

Buffy pressed her lips together. She definitely needed to talk to Anya. Preferably in a way that seemed innocuous and not like she was trying to justify suddenly having feelings for a soulless killer. There was no way Anya would keep quiet if she knew the truth, and Buffy didn’t want her friends wiggling until there was something to wig about.

She gulped down a mouthful of beer. Good god, she could use a distraction right about now.

As though the universe had heard her, the air cracked with the hard slam of the Bronze door crashing against the wall. Buffy jumped; so did Xander and Anya, but she had barely time to whirl around, to think, before a harsh, guttural shout shook the building.

“We shall never stop serving the Beast!”

The thing at the door was bulky and gray, with two tusks winding from its leering mouth. In one hand was a battle-ax, in the other, a sword.

And he’d brought friends.

“Glory to Glorificus!” it screamed, and plunged its sword through

the throat of the person who had the misfortune of standing the closest.

“Shit!” Xander yelled, falling off his seat.

And then—demons. Way too many demons began pouring inward, some brandishing weapons, others who clearly didn’t need any. A chorus of screams joined the delighted battle cry of the attacking parties, and the Bronze descended into chaos.



“NEVER CATCH A BREAK, DO THEY?” Spike said to his doppelganger—the first thing he’d said since the berk had joined him on the balcony, sulking like he actually had something to sulk about. He straightened to head for the stairs. This was more his kind of party, anyway.

“Bloody hell,” the other Spike muttered. “Forgot what night that was.”

“What night what was?”

“Red made mention of this when she popped by to give me her bloody pep-talk.” The time-traveler shook his head and let his fangs descend. “Big attack and loads kicked it. Wasn’t in the right mind at the time, but I shoulda remembered.”

“Bloody right,” Spike shot back, glad to have found a chink in Super Spike’s armor. “Slayer won’t be too keen that you let—”

“Oh, shove off. We got demons to kill.”

That much was true, and no matter how sour the Slayer would be that Super Spike had withheld intel that might have saved a life or two, she’d be downright livid if either of them wasted this opportunity to fight the good fight because they were exchanging barbs. Spike shook out his fangs and leaped into the fray with a roar, and bloody hell, that did feel good. He had more than twenty-four hours of tension and worry to exorcise, compounded with the elation that had accompanied the things Buffy had told him yesterday and the raw pain that had been stumbling onto her snogging someone else. And this crew knew how to brawl. Just what a bloke needed.

The Bronze regulars knew the drill by now—find a hidey-hole and let the resident heroes clean up the mess. Given the carnage the

demons were causing, it wasn't difficult to see why the other Spike's version of this attack would come with a steep body count. Unlikely, he wagered, that any of the Scoobies who had the power to actually do a demon damage had been present, being that they'd been mourning. Because the Slayer had been...

Spike looked around wildly, suddenly desperate to find Buffy. Make sure she was alive and kicking, that the bloody cosmos hadn't decided to fix what the other Spike had broken. It didn't take long to locate her, thing of perpetual destruction that she was. And from the look of things, she was handling herself just fine.

Not that this gave him much comfort. Spike had accused Buffy of getting so good at what she did that she was overconfident. But fuck, that ran both ways. He'd gotten used to thinking of her as invincible too, and she wasn't. She was a slayer, and like thousands before her, she would one day meet her end in a fight like this.

The thought made him shudder.

*Till the end of the world*, he'd told her. Well, the world wasn't ending tonight, and neither was Buffy. Or any of her friends or anyone else for that matter. She couldn't sacrifice herself to save the innocents if he beat her to the punch.

And at that thought, for the first time since he'd learned what the other wanker had prevented, Spike found himself grateful there was another one of him around. No matter how much he hated the sight of him, no matter how much he wanted to stomp the prat back to his own bloody timeline, he knew no one would have higher motivation to keep the Slayer alive than the bloke who'd risked everything to undo her death. He'd fight like he knew what it was to lose.

*Stay alive for now. I'll do you in proper later.*

Numerous and gnarly as they were in appearance, these were the sort of demons that Spike had made sport of killing the past two years. They went down and, unlike the ole Doc, stayed down. Would have been a bloody breeze, except these gits were fanatics who were likely not planning on walking out of here alive. People with nothing to lose were unhinged and, at times, unstoppable.

He and the other Spike were pulling through all right, and Buffy was doing what Buffy did bloody best. Her mates were making the

regular effort, too—Big Red throwing around spells with more recklessness than Spike had come to expect of her, which was effective but upped the chances for friendly fire.

“Oi!” he snapped as a blaze of light went soaring past his head. “Watch where you’re aimin’ that!”

“Might help to remember whose side we’re on!” the other Spike yelled in agreement.

They caught each other’s eyes, the spans of the Bronze separating them, and Spike grinned. The other Spike flashed a smirk.

*Great bloody minds.*

“Uhh, little help here?”

Spike snapped back to himself, his gaze finding Xander. Harris, being Harris, had fought himself into a corner, sandwiched between two big uglies. Fortunate for him, the Slayer was on the other side of the one nearest the stage and, at his plea, whirled around to smash her leg into the demon’s side. The force behind her own kick sent her sprawling to the floor, but she’d done what she meant to. The ugly thing went flying toward one of the walls, where it crashed with a grunt.

Xander paused to throw Buffy a grateful smile, and that’s what did it. The demon at his back, armed with the broken-off leg from a nearby chair, seized the opportunity and lunged. Spike caught the moment Buffy’s face split from fierce concentration to horror and experienced the familiar plunge of pain—the knowledge that she was about to hurt, and badly. And the familiar helplessness. Even at full vamp-speed, he’d never make it there on time.

*The pavement was suddenly rushing up at him, wind ripping his face, and he’d failed. He’d failed and Dawn was going to die. Buffy was going to die. He’d lose one or both of them and it’d be his fault. All his fault.*

Except the other Spike saw it too, knew it too, and he was closer. Close enough to matter for Harris.

*But not close enough to—*

Spike watched himself make the mad dive to shove Xander out of the way, and when the wooden end of the broken chair leg pierced through his chest, he would have sworn he felt it too. Everything in him seemed to come to a stop.

“Spike!” Buffy screamed, still on the ground. Lying there as though paralyzed. “Oh god.”

The other Spike, the bloke who had sold their soul to save the Slayer, studied the piece of protruding wood, dazed, as though not seeing it. Funny how sometimes they went right off, other times seemed to linger. This time, it lingered—lingered long enough for him to catch Buffy’s eyes when he looked up. The horror on her face, her mouth twisted in a scream.

Lingered long enough for him to give her a soft smile before he showered her with his dust.

## II

HER FIRST THOUGHT WAS, *JUST LIKE ANY OTHER VAMPIRE.*

Once last year, Professor Walsh had asked her how many vampires she had eliminated, and thus kicked off the inferiority complex that would spell doom for her relationship with Riley. Buffy had truly stopped counting by that point, the task so mundane it barely blipped on her radar. Vampires were easy, especially when compared to the horde of other creatures that made the night go bump. Aside from the Master, Spike, and eventually Angel, all of the major baddies she'd faced had been something else. Something worse.

So many vampires she'd watched dissolve into nothing. But not like this. Never someone she knew. Someone who wasn't just a vampire in her eyes. Not anymore. If ever she'd needed proof, it was there in his dust. The dust now coating her, on her skin and in her hair. The dust that had been Spike.

Spike was gone.

*Gone.*

Everything went on autopilot. Buffy reached blindly for something, not knowing what she was looking for until she found it. A turned-over glass. Even then, she wasn't sure what she intended to do with it. Her own movements made no sense to her, but they felt right all the same.



Because no matter how easily he'd dusted, no matter that it hadn't been any different than any of the vampires she'd slain over the years... Well, it *had* been different. Spike wasn't just anyone to her and she couldn't stomach the thought of brushing off his dust as she would any other vamp's remains. It meant something. He meant something.

And he was gone.

"Slayer, your legs stop working? Not the time to take a sodding time-out!"

Buffy whipped her head around, and for a long second, thought she was losing her mind because Spike was staring at her with a mixture of irritation and concern.

And then it came back to her. The time travel. Two Spikes. Two of them, and one was dust.

But one was not.

Buffy hastily wiped as much of Spike's dust into the empty glass as possible then flipped to her feet.

"Spike! Duck!"

The order was automatic, but she needn't have worried. Spike had already dispatched the demon by the time she spoke, and had time to shoot her a confused look. Because, yeah, Buffy the Vampire Slayer didn't scream out warnings to mortal enemies, whether or not said mortal enemy was neutered. And typically, neutered moral enemies didn't need a warning, being more than capable of taking care of themselves.

Neutered mortal enemies didn't shove aside Buffy's friends to save them from certain death, especially at the cost of their own life.

Tears she didn't understand filled her eyes, and Buffy shook her head, forcing herself to focus. She'd think on what had just happened later. After these demons were in the ground.

Only it wasn't as simple as that—not as it should have been. Not the fighting part, because these demons weren't big on the threat scale, but they had been lucky. Lucky enough to get Spike killed in a fight he should have been able to dominate. And if it had happened once, it could happen again. Which was how Buffy found herself whipping around every few seconds to keep certain the other Spike hadn't dusted. This, unfortunately, meant more than a

few demons landed shots that a fully on-her-game Buffy would have been able to deflect with a yawn. By the time it was all said and done, Spike—the remaining Spike—had gone from being somewhat annoyed with her to a sort of fury that she knew was tied to being terrified. Knew because that was how she'd felt with every reckless thing Dawn had done this year, before and after discovering she was the Key.

After he slaughtered the last demon, who had seized advantage of her distracted state and gotten close enough to land a solid punch against her temple, Spike turned his angry demon eyes on her and took her by the shoulders.

"Might have a bleeding death wish, Slayer, but you're not gonna cash it in while I'm around, you hear me?"

She nodded without thought, just so relieved that he—that one of them—had made it to the other side she didn't have it in her to be pissed about the manhandling. "Okay."

Spike frowned, clearly having expected more of a fight. Then he glanced down and seemed to realize how tightly he was gripping her. "Sorry," he said, releasing her and taking a step back. "Just...after. Lost my head there a bit."

She nodded again and turned to scour the debris that made up the Bronze dance floor. The glass filled with the other Spike's dust was, amazingly, right where she'd left it. A foreign pain flared in her chest at the sight—this visual proof that the strongest vampire she'd ever known had blinked out of existence without ceremony. No matter that he was also standing right in front of her because she knew now just how fragile that was. How quickly he could become a little pile of dust as well. For all the threats she'd lobbed his way over the years, the possibility of a Spike-less world had never been as real as it was in that moment.

But the moment didn't last, of course. As soon as it became clear to the Scoobies that the threat was behind them, they began to crowd around her again, looking a bit haggard but victorious. One more battle for the books.

"Now, if that isn't a way to end a celebration, I don't know what is," Xander said, throwing an arm around Anya. "Even the demon popula-

tion wanted to party with the Buffster tonight.” The lazy grin on his face disappeared the second he met her eyes. “What?”

“What? Did you miss what happened?”

At that, Xander went a little pink and glanced to Spike, who stood a few feet away, looking at the ground. “I...ahh...”

“What happened?” Willow asked, wincing a bit as she and Tara hobbled up to join them. Something had taken a chunk out of her left leg, from the look of things. “Everyone okay?”

Buffy felt a scream well inside her—one she feared might actually level the damn place if she let it out. Rather than answer, she made her way over to the glass and scooped it up. She had no idea what she intended to do with it but she knew she couldn’t leave it here to be cleaned up along with all the other remains. If nothing else, Spike deserved more than that from her.

She wasn’t sure she could keep her voice from shaking, but again, she owed it to him to try. “Spike saved Xander’s life,” she said, her back to them. “He didn’t make it.”

Silence met this proclamation. When she turned, she found her friends staring blatantly at the remaining Spike, who looked perhaps more uncomfortable than she’d ever seen him. Ever. He had his gaze trained on the ground and kept shuffling his feet as though fighting the urge to make a break for the door.

“Well,” Xander said a moment later, his voice strained, “on the bright side, if you can call it that, we happen to have a spare.”

Spike jerked his head up then, hurt and anger playing across his face. And Xander, dunce that he was, seemed to realize he’d said something he shouldn’t have—though whether because he owed his life to Spike or out of some sense of actual awareness, Buffy didn’t know. But when he opened his mouth to speak, nothing came out, and Spike apparently decided not to waste time waiting.

“All the same to you lot, think I’m gonna bow out.” He flicked his gaze to Buffy. “Sure know how to show a fella a good time, Slayer. Ta.”

Buffy didn’t realize she was following him until Willow called after her. She whirled around at what was left of the Bronze entry, clutching the glass to her chest. “He saved my life and now he’s saved Xander’s. So yeah, I’m gonna go make sure he’s okay after seeing himself die.

Guess that is way up there on the trippy scale. Does anyone have a problem with that?"

No one did. Or if they did, they were smart enough not to say so until after she was gone.

It took longer than normal to catch up with the vampire—he knew how to make tracks when he was motivated. She did too, but she was also super aware of the glass in her hand and determined to not lose a speck of dust, which, combined with being vertically challenged, gave her quite the handicap. Still, she managed to close the distance between them just before he barreled into Restfield, at least enough that he stiffened in that familiar way that told her he knew she was there. He stopped then but didn't turn, and given she wasn't sure where his head might be at the moment, she stopped too. And for a long beat, they were still, each waiting for the other to move.

There were a thousand things she wanted to say and even more she wanted to ask. The confusion over where to start overwhelmed her, and, grasping for anything, she ended up blurting, "Which one are you?"

Of course, it was only after the words were out that she realized that question might have been the worst of all possible choices and asked in the worst possible way.

A beat. "The less heroic of the two," he said at last. "Woulda jumped through time for you if I'd had the chance, love. Still would if you asked it. Though I can't say I'd've let myself get offed saving bloody Harris, but who knows, yeah? Maybe a snog like the one you gave him earlier made him lose his senses. Definitely woulda made me lose mine."

And just like that, she slipped from the weird emotional place she'd discovered after Spike had dusted into the more familiar and therefore comfortable irritation. "You're seriously jealous of *yourself*. You've got to be kidding me."

But he wasn't and she knew better. And just an hour ago, she'd been watching them both sulk on the balcony, knowing she was the cause. Still, that seemed so freaking insignificant—which Spike she'd let kiss her—compared to the wigginess that had to be watching your own freaking death. Or watching a vampire she'd known for years dust

like every other vampire she'd ever come across. Spike had been larger than life to her and he—or a version of him—was gone.

But that was Spike—reacting like a vampire, not like a man. Focusing on the wrong stupid thing when she was here because she...

Well, she didn't know. Her emotions where Spike was concerned were all over the map and hadn't slowed down enough for her to take stock of whatever she was feeling now.

"Nope," Spike said, whirling around now, an unpleasant smile on his face. "Turns out I'm not above it. Turns out that it guts me seeing you with any bloke, even if the bloke happens to be me. Knowin' that it means something to you and that I can't bloody well measure up. Wanker just had to play the sodding hero again." He paused. "Though he was in a right foul mood before the party got interestin'. Maybe I have it wrong and he didn't go all soft in the head because of your mouth, Slayer. Maybe he cottoned on to the fact that no matter what either of us do, we don't stop being monsters, yeah? Figured he'd go out on a high note, and you don't get much higher than that snog."

Her eyes stung which just plain pissed her off because she didn't know why. She hated him more right then than she ever had—only she also didn't, and that somehow made it worse. "You watch yourself die tonight and all you can do is jump down my throat for kissing you? It was still *you*, Spike."

"But it wasn't. Not where it counted."

Buffy tightened her grip on the glass enough to hear it crack in warning. She was somewhat terrified she might explode on him. And despite however cathartic that might feel in the moment, despite every instinct screaming at her to just let loose, she wasn't ready to go back to hitting him just yet. Ass or not, that didn't change what he'd done for her. For Xander. Hell, for Dawn.

But he would not make her feel bad for not knowing how to react to two versions of the same vampire—versions that weren't even different. Eight measly days separated them, and no matter what this Spike thought or said, she knew he was the same guy who had—would have—done something monumentally stupid to save her life. He was eight days removed from the version that had dusted tonight. How the idiot couldn't see it, she didn't know.

“Thank you,” Buffy said, pleased when her voice didn’t shake. “Thank you for reminding me that you’re an ass. Kinda lost sight of that the past couple of days, so the refresher course? Very much appreciated. Don’t worry—that’s one mistake this slayer’s only making the once.”

That blow landed. The jealousy contorting his features faded into something heartbreakingly human—regret and shame, things she’d have denied him capable of not that long ago. And for the millionth time in two days, the weirdness of this situation nearly knocked her off her feet. The Buffybot notwithstanding, she didn’t know what it was like to have another version of herself running around out there. A true Buffy replica with all the right feelings, thoughts, memories, and personality. Watching that Buffy mack on someone she loved would be icky. Watching that Buffy die...

Well, maybe it was easier for Spike to focus on the macking. Or maybe that was just the way Spike was, soulless vampire and all.

Nothing good could come of continuing this conversation, either way. She needed to process what had happened and why it mattered so much to her before she got in the middle of Spike’s soap-opera crisis.

So she met his eyes again, then turned and walked away without another word, the glass containing the other Spike’s dust still clutched to her chest.



HE WAS A BLOODY FOOL. Unfortunately, knowing as much did not make it better. Point of fact, it seemed to go the other way these days. He saw himself being a git, heard the words, but couldn’t get enough control to hold his tongue. While Spike would have loved to have blamed that on the Slayer, the situation, or some combination of the two, he knew he couldn’t. The truth was less charitable.

Also a bit murky at the moment.

He grabbed a bottle and a bag of blood from the fridge, trying not to think about how roomy the crypt felt all of a sudden—trying not to picture his other self helping himself to his blood supply, his beer, his telly, his bed, or his slayer. Or the shudder that had run through him

tonight when he'd realized he wouldn't have to stake the wanker after all. Bloke had made it easy for him, he supposed. Owed him his thanks.

Except now, standing here in his empty crypt, with the blood and booze that was entirely his again, he wasn't certain he'd ever been serious about dusting him. Felt more like the half-hearted promises he'd made to himself over the past year that he'd put the Slayer in the ground once the chip was out. Or maybe that was just the shock talking. No matter how you sliced it, it was bloody strange watching yourself crumble to ash and knowing it wasn't a dream.

Buffy had followed him home tonight, shaking and on the verge of tears—over *him*—and all he could do was mouth off at her for daring to give a fig that some other version of him had died when the sodding miracle should've been that she cared at *all*.

Yeah, he was an idiot. And he might've cost himself the chance at something bloody brilliant because of it.

Sounded about right.

Spike drained the bag of blood without ceremony, not bothering to heat it up or mix in any of the additives that spiced up the flavor. Blood was out of necessity—the booze he planned on swimming in would be what got him through the next few hours. Hopefully, he had enough on hand that he could black out properly and not worry about the Slayer chasing him into his dreams.

A hard knock cut through the silence of the crypt. He froze, bottle raised halfway to his lips, not daring to hope the Slayer had decided their chat wasn't over after all. She didn't knock normally, but then she had this afternoon, hadn't she? It was possible. Hell, in this world, anything was.

Yet as he crossed the distance to answer and her scent failed to strike his nostrils, he deflated.

No such luck.

"Not much in the mood for company tonight," he said as he tossed the door open. "So why don't you..."

The bloke standing on the other side wore a small, unnerving smile on his scarred face, and looked at him with eyes that seemed ageless. Power, raw and dark, practically rolled off his shoulders.

“Hello, Spike,” the man said calmly. “I am here about your debt. Circumstances have changed, and we must talk.”

“You’re the warlock.” No sense playing dumb. “Didn’t make a deal with you, mate.”

“I have a contract that says otherwise.”

“Bully for you. The Spike who signed it snuffed it tonight, in case you hadn’t heard. Sorry and all, but toddle on off. The one who’s left plans on getting good and sloshed.”

“Time has no meaning to those of us who live outside of it.” The unnerving smile widened. “And if you do not wish this reality to cease existing, vampire, I would welcome me inside so we can discuss what I am owed.”



HE SUPPOSED HE WAS FORTUNATE THE BLOKE HAD BEEN THOUGHTFUL enough to bloody knock. That put him one leg up from everyone else who made it their business to burst in whenever they pleased. Still, as the warlock prowled past Spike, he couldn't help but imagining ripping the tosser's head off on principle alone. Fuck knew he had to do something about this awful bout of energy, and a good thrashing almost always did the trick.

But he'd already been to that kind of party tonight. The image of himself crumbling to dust wasn't something he wagered he'd stop seeing for some time. How quickly it had all been over—how easily. Spike had never thought of himself as particularly vulnerable but tonight had opened his eyes in more ways than one.

"Make it quick," he muttered to the warlock, shoving the door closed hard enough that the foundation seemed to vibrate. "Not really in the mood for guests at the mo'."

"Yes," the warlock—couldn't remember the git's name, though he was certain the other Spike had mentioned it—drawled as he gazed around the crypt with open disinterest. "I am here about the soul I am owed. Two days are gone now, vampire. Six more remain."

"Six days?" Had the other Spike mentioned the ticking clock?

Bloody hell, he couldn't recall. The little they'd discussed on the issue had revolved around the *what*, not the *when*. Still, he supposed it didn't matter. Whether it was tomorrow or at the end of the week, he'd cough up the payment, even if he was getting the raw end of this deal.

"Six days," the warlock agreed, inclining his head so slightly that had Spike been anything but a vampire, he would have missed it. "Six days to bring me the girl's soul."

Spike went rigid, his chest immediately tight. While nancy William had been teased a lot back in the day, that sort of slight seemed a bit juvenile for a man capable of opening holes in time.

"Think you mighta got me confused with a different client, mate," he said carefully. "Way I was told, the soul I owe you is mine."

The warlock's face remained unreadable, save for the small tick near his mouth. Like he was fighting off a smile. "What use would I have of a vampire's discarded soul?" he said a moment later. "The soul we bartered belongs to the Key."

For a long moment, Spike didn't move, didn't blink, not trusting that he'd heard correctly and waiting for his brain to kick in with what the bloke had actually said. But the translation didn't come, and the warlock's expression didn't change. He just stared and Spike stared back.

Finally, at a loss for other options, Spike shook his head and edged a step closer. "Care to repeat that?"

"Dawn Summers," the warlock intoned. "The Key. This is the soul we bargained."

Well, there was no hope that he'd misheard this time. Spike staggered back a step, his chest heaving and panic beginning to singe his insides. How the bloody hell did this bastard know about Dawn?

The answer to that came quickly enough—once Glory had nabbed the girl, her secret identity had gone up in smoke. And as the Doc had told him, there were plenty of creatures out there who served the Beast. While he didn't figure this warlock to be among them, if what the other Spike had said was at all reliable, he'd had his ear to the ground for years and news traveled. Especially where it concerned the Slayer.

But then, the *how* didn't matter for rot, did it?

“There is no sodding way,” Spike said, his voice a low snarl, “in this world or any other that I’d make the Bit part of any deal. So sorry, I’m not buyin’ it. Try again.”

The warlock smiled. Not a wide smile, not even a smug one—more like he’d made a bet with himself and won, and found that charming.

“I know not much time separated you from the vampire who made the bargain, but given the right circumstances, and anyone can be convinced of about anything. It’s not like you have a soul to anchor you.”

That was the second time this week that some sick bastard had made a show of pointing out his lack of a conscience like it was a bloody marvel.

And his answer remained the same.

“Made a promise to a lady.”

“Yes, and then that lady died. Come now, vampire. Can you truly—”

“Why the *fuck* would I offer up the Slayer’s kid sis as payment for anythin’ knowing that as soon as the Slayer finds out, she’d shove a stake in me?” Spike snapped, and before he could help it, he felt his fangs burst through his gums, his demon roaring for justice. He hadn’t realized how tense he was until that moment, how close to the edge, but decided *sod all* and embraced it. If he had to find out just how much human was left in this warlock by frying his own noggin, it’d be well worth the effort.

The warlock didn’t so much as flinch. “Killing me will not nullify your bargain, vampire. Whether or not I am alive in six days does not matter. The result remains the same. This timeline will cease to exist, as will you, and the world will continue to turn without Buffy Summers.”

“I don’t believe you.”

A shrug. “Very well. If you are willing to gamble—”

“He—he said it was my soul. Our soul. He was bloody certain.”

“His misunderstanding, then.” Without taking his gaze off Spike, the warlock reached into his back pocket and withdrew a piece of parchment that looked like it might’ve been torn from the bible’s first printing. “The signature is yours, is it not?”

Fuck, he was afraid to look, but what choice did he have? Spike swallowed and edged as close as he dared before letting his gaze fall to the autograph at the bottom of what had to be a demon contract. Not that he'd seen a demon contract before, but there wasn't much else it could be. Warlocks, particularly those loaded up on dark juice, had to have friends in even lower places.

Either way, there it was. More than a century had passed since he'd signed anything like this, but the handwriting was his.

*William Pratt*

"No," he whispered, trailing a finger along the familiar lines of the name. "I never would have bargained Dawn. *Never.*"

"And yet your signature—"

"I dunno what the bloody hell this is or where you got it. I..." He paused, something occurring to him. "You knew. You knew the other me would snuff it, didn't you? Figured you could pull the wool over my eyes, get me to agree to—"

"I have no time for this," the warlock said, stepping back. For the first time, he sounded something other than politely accommodating. "Bring me the girl's soul or lose everything. Those are your choices." He quirked his head, those beetle-eyes of his narrowing, then a nasty smile took his face. "Why don't you spend a few hours thinking it over?"

The warlock waved his hand and Spike felt the ground move. No, that wasn't right—*he* moved. The scene around him tilted sideways and a black fog began creeping in the edges of his brain. By the time he realized what was happening, it was too late—his arms were stiff and his legs wouldn't so much as twitch, and his mind came alive with images of a life he hadn't lived. Conversations he'd never had. Deals he'd never struck.

In them, he saw himself standing in a room with Rack—*that was the sod's name*—looking at a window of time spread between the git's gnarly hands. The play at the Tower repeating itself over and over, and there went the Slayer. Diving off the end to save her sister, the bloody world. He watched it happen and knew he could stop it, and the price wasn't very much. All he had to do was sacrifice Dawn.

*No. No, no, no, I'd never—*

But he watched himself as he did. As the Spike who had dusted earlier tonight signed the parchment that the warlock had waved at him, looking grim but determined.

*Not right. That's not right. This is not how it happened!*

*"But how would you know?"* the warlock answered from somewhere in the dark. Somewhere he couldn't see. *"You weren't there, were you?"*

No, he hadn't been. But fuck, Spike knew himself. He bloody well knew this was not how it would have happened. In no world would he have bargained Dawn. Not when the price was a soul.

*"He dusted, didn't he? The other you. Didn't you wonder why he was willing to sacrifice himself to save the whelp? He knew what was coming."*

The thought was dark and twisted—something his demon whispered sounded plausible but still rejected on a level fundamental to everything he was.

And the last thing that flickered through his mind was the thing that stayed with him as seconds became minutes, and minutes stretched into hours.

He had to tell the Slayer. Had to warn her that Rack wanted Dawn. Had to hope she listened. That she believed him.

But then the lights went out, and Spike knew no more.



BUFFY WAS STILL ANNOYED when she awoke the next morning. This was nothing new—in fact, it was so familiar she found it rather comforting, knowing that Spike could irritate her so much she wanted to punch him in the stupid face. Because what kind of person was jealous of themselves? In what world did that make sense?

A stupid world, that's what. And a stupid person, that's who. No, a stupid vampire. A very stupid vampire who was stupidly in love with her for some stupid reason—so much so that he'd done a stupid thing just to make sure she didn't stupid die.

She guessed the joke was on her. Spike had stopped making sense in her world almost a year ago, and her expecting that to suddenly not be the case was a fool's errand. Because the Spike she'd thought she'd

known had been many things, and nowhere on the list was *willing to sacrifice self for Scoobies*.

Yet when she glanced over at her dresser, the glass she'd filled with the other Spike's dust was still there, reminding her that the nightmare that had been last night had actually happened. She'd really watched Spike crumble to ash in front of her, just hours after they'd made out in his crypt. The man who had leaped through time to save her life had been gone in an instant.

Buffy groaned and forced herself to her feet. There was a lot to do today and none of it fun. Now that Glory was officially in the rearview mirror, she had responsible-adult duties crowding her plate. Things like figuring out what to do with the house—something she'd put off worrying about on account of imminent apocalypse. There was a mountain of paperwork from insurance companies and bill collectors looking to score a dime off her mother's death, as Giles had been so good to remind her of last night after she'd called to give him the breakdown of what had happened at the Bronze.

He hadn't seemed surprised or particularly bothered that Spike had dusted, which she'd known to expect but still managed to find aggravating. It was the universe correcting the aberration he'd caused when he'd broken the laws of time, Giles had said. And honestly, he'd been expecting something like this to occur. All they could hope was that the terms of Spike's bargain had died with him, though if the warlock who had sent him back had any kind of sense, he would have anticipated this outcome and planned contingencies. Perhaps even counted on it. So they had to be careful, cognizant, blah blah blah.

A bunch of ways to say it didn't matter that the vampire who had saved her life was gone. Or, more bluntly, good riddance.

Giles was not the easiest person to love sometimes.

After showering and cramming down a piece of toast, Buffy decided to skip the to-do list of doom and take advantage of the fact that Willow and Tara were out doing witchy and/or girlfriendy things, Dawn was still at her friend's, and Xander was probably on a work-site because life had, indeed, gone on. This meant there was a good chance that Anya was by herself at the Magic Box, and even if she wasn't, getting her away from Giles likely wouldn't be too much of a challenge.

Irritated though she was with Spike, the feelings she'd discovered she had for him hadn't taken a hit last night. If anything, watching him dust for her friend, a soft smile on his face, had just made the situation in her head all the more confusing. Because even if the Spike who was left wasn't the Spike who had made with the gesture, the fact remained that he would have. The other Spike had been proof enough of that.

And, she conceded as she left the house, maybe she could understand being jealous of himself.

If another Buffy had shown up and started making out with the guy she loved, she would be jealous. As in very. Because whatever else, Buffy and logic had never really been friends when it came to her romantic relationships. Hell, Riley had slept with Faith while she was wearing a Buffy-suit and that had unnerved her for weeks—still did, when she thought about it. Everyone had acted like she had been the one with the problem for having the problem because what guy would look at his girlfriend and think that maybe someone else was behind the wheel? It wasn't a conclusion any rational person could arrive at on their own.

Or maybe this was just another one of those weird ways where she and Spike were more similar than she'd been willing to admit a week ago.

The Magic Box was thankfully empty when she entered late that morning. Anya was counting down the register—seemingly just for the fun of it—and Giles was nowhere in sight. Drawing in a deep breath and doing her best to look pleasantly nonchalant, Buffy approached the gathering of tables near the back where so many Scooby meetings took place these days and dropped her purse. This was mostly out of habit—as far as she knew, the Scoobies had no plans to convene tonight.

Unless Giles insisted on some time-travel related emergency meeting of the minds, which was always possible.

"Hey, Anya," Buffy said in what she hoped passed for a breezy, casual voice.

Anya looked at her over the edge of the cash in her hand then resumed counting. "Giles isn't here," she replied as though she'd been asked. "We received a call this morning from a potential new supplier

of crystal balls. He has gone to Los Angeles to inspect the product. I maintain this would have been a better use of *my* time, seeing as Giles wouldn't know a good crystal ball if it smashed over his head, but he insisted."

Buffy's throat went tight. Los Angeles meant Angel. It was quite possible Giles had decided to visit her ex to speak on this time-travel business. Still, she shoved thought down, along with the irritation the thought inspired, and clung to the laidback façade she'd decided was necessary for this talk. "Crystal balls?" she asked.

"They are among our best-sellers and this new supplier might help us save money on the wholesale price." At that, Anya groaned and dropped her hands. "You made me lose count."

"I'm sorry. Did you not balance right?"

"No. I have balanced perfectly." Anya looked insulted by the suggestion that anything else was possible. "But counting the money relaxes me, especially on days when I have only had one customer."

"So I'm the first customer of the day."

"No. You never buy anything so you don't count. I sold an amethyst crystal to a low-level Wicca thirty-seven minutes ago." She rolled her eyes. "Not that it's going to do her any good. Her pronunciation was all wrong."

"Did you tell her?"

"Of course I told her. She didn't wish to listen." Anya gave a loud sigh and looked pointedly at the cash register. "I will tell Giles you came by."

"Actually, I am here to buy something." She hadn't been until three seconds ago, but why the hell not? Anya would be a lot more affable if she made a small effort.

Which kind of confirmed everything Buffy had been thinking yesterday, but she still needed to ask.

As expected, Anya became a completely different person at the prospect of a sale. The irritation in her eyes vanished, shoved aside by a winning, if not fake smile. "Oh. Why didn't you say so? How may I be of assistance?"

"I'm looking for something..." She scoured the Magic Box for something she could possibly need, and her gaze landed on a collection



of empty bottles that had been arranged to give the interested buyer the illusion of magic potions. The blood-red one caught her attention, and she realized she actually had need of something after all.

The glass she'd stolen from the Bronze wasn't exactly the most dignified resting place for Spike's dust. Not for what he'd done.

"This," Buffy said, approaching the display. "I have some, umm, stuff I'd like to put into a pretty container."

Anya's warmth faded a bit, which Buffy took to mean the thing she'd pointed out wasn't among the shop's more expensive wares. "Oh. There's nothing special about that one," she said, gesturing to the red bottle. "If you're looking for something enhanced by a protection spell, we have a much better product in the back. It arrived last week. Sometimes I take it out just to look at the price-tag."

"I think this will be fine," Buffy said, gingerly taking the bottle off the display shelf. "It's just some...herbs."

Anya blinked, her expression not changing. "Cannabis?"

"No, I..."

"I truly do not understand the prejudice against cannabis," Anya muttered, rolling her eyes. "I remember when mothers would use it to calm their annoying offspring. Don't get me wrong, I am proud to be an American in the good ole US of A, but some of the rules are so backward."

Buffy stared at her for a moment. There it was. Her perfect opening. Asketh the universe and the universe delivered. Well, this one time. Were that everything could be that simple.

"I imagine there are a lot of things that have been hard to get used to," she said in her best sympathetic-Buffy voice. "From being a demon to then not, and all."

There was nothing for a beat—a beat long enough to get her worrying that she'd overshot her hand. Anya looked at her as though trying to determine if she'd heard right, then she beamed a wide smile. "It *is* hard, Buffy," she said, her voice ringing with almost foreign gratitude. "And thank you for saying so. Honestly, I don't think Xander realizes half the time just how much I've sacrificed for him. But that's when he'll say—*ask* me things that make me think he might." At this, she lifted her left hand in her right and stared at it as though willing it

to do something. "Not that I am allowed just yet to share what he asked me, though I don't know why. It's not like the world ended."

Tangent territory. Time to backtrack. "I'm sorry," Buffy said quickly, "that I...never asked you about how it was. Going from demon to human."

"Humans are incredibly self-centered creatures, I have come to learn," Anya replied, dropping her hand and looking up again.

"So...what was it like?"

A blink. "What was what like?"

"Going from...demon to human. Did you ever resent it?"

Another pause, this one paired with a narrowed look. And again, Buffy was certain Anya was going to call her on her unprompted interest because, yes, out of the blue. But once more she was wrong. Rather, after an unsettling silence, the former demon lit up like a Christmas tree.

"Yes," Anya said bluntly. "Very much. But then I found Xander and the orgasms have been a suitable trade-off for the power."

"And if you could...go back to being a demon, would you?"

"There are things I miss about it, but no. Logical or not, I love Xander. If I were a demon, I wouldn't have Xander. Ergo I wouldn't have orgasms. I am satisfied with the way things are now."

For whatever reason, this surprised Buffy more than anything Anya had said thus far, namely because there wasn't a pause involved. No need to think it over—the answer was just there.

But then, she wondered why this was surprising at all. Some part of her could hear Spike saying the same thing. And more than that, she believed it.

*Chip or not, love, I'm yours. Do with me what you will.*

"And...the people you hurt?" she asked, because she had to. "Do you...feel bad?"

"About what?"

"Well...hurting them. When you were a demon."

Anya frowned. "Why would I feel bad about that? I was a demon. My job was to seek vengeance. It was the natural order of the world." She offered an airy sigh and waved a hand. "This is what I mean when I say humans are self-centered. The world doesn't just belong to you—or

us. It never has.” A pause, then she seemed to remember who she was with and straightened at once. “But since I am firmly on team human now,” she continued in her typical someone-caught-me-being-demonic voice, “I say, kill those evil demons. All of them. They are very bad and deserve to die.”

Buffy forced a smile and nodded, then dropped her gaze back to the bottle in her hand. That was certainly a different way of looking at the world, one she was somewhat ashamed she hadn’t stumbled upon on her own. That holding demons to human standards could never be fair because demons were inherently inhuman. Only Anya had enough human in her to become the marginally well-adjusted person she was now and Spike...

Well, Spike had made some serious missteps along the way, but he’d changed too. Not as much but without any incentive.

Which meant maybe the things she felt weren’t wrong at all—and if they were wrong, by whose standards? Who was in charge of deciding what was right and wrong, who deserved a second chance and who didn’t? Whose nature could be redefined when it should have been impossible? If it all came down to who was human, then Anya was right. That was a very self-centered view of the world. Only humans were deserving of that chance.

Granted, it wasn’t like Buffy had come to her former conclusions on her own. She’d had plenty of help from Giles but even more from Angel, who had been her vampire litmus test. Vampires didn’t change unless there was a soul involved—that was what he’d taught her. But perhaps that had just been a comfortable lie he’d told himself because without his soul, *he* was incapable of change.

Hell, she didn’t know. All she did know at the moment was this thing with Spike, these feelings she had, suddenly seemed a lot more straightforward and a lot less wrong. And damn if that didn’t scare the crap out of her.

“Thanks,” Buffy said hoarsely and held up the bottle. “I’ll take this.”

Anya blinked once. If she was thrown off by the change in subject, she didn’t let it show. Instead, she nodded and plucked the bottle from Buffy’s hands. “I still say the product in the back would be a better

choice for your cannabis,” she replied, but twirled on her feet and strutted toward the check-out counter.

Buffy made to follow, but the next second, the air cracked with a hard bang, the desperate tinkle of the shop’s entry bell, and the front door went flying open. Inside stumbled a blanket-covered Spike, smoke sizzling off his back—smoke that turned to fire just as he cleared the entrance. The vampire cursed loudly, slammed the door shut, tossed the blanket to the ground and stomped on it until the flames extinguished. But even through this, he was preoccupied, head jerking and eyes wild as he scoured the Magic Box, seemingly looking for something.

Then he saw her, and the look on his face had everything inside her plummeting. There was desperation there—desperation and worry and something else. Something that made her chest ache.

“Slayer,” he said, panting. “We gotta problem.”

IN ALL HONESTY, SPIKE HAD EXPECTED BUFFY TO STAKE HIM outright the second he stopped talking. The fact that she hadn't left him on the edge and uncertain, not thick enough to be hopeful but perhaps enough to wonder if he'd at least have time to help save the Bit's life before the Slayer shoved something wooden into his chest.

As it was, Buffy didn't react at all. Not at first. Whatever light had been in her eyes dimmed and seemed to take something else with it. Something he hadn't known was there until it vanished, and missed almost immediately. She worked her throat and released a deep breath before pulling her shoulders tight.

"Spike—"

"It can't be right, Slayer," he blurted before he could help himself. Even with his mind spinning with images of the deal the other Spike had made, he couldn't fathom that such a world existed. The other version of himself had been an annoying git, sure, but that he'd loved Buffy with every fiber of his unlife had never been in question. And what the bloody hell good would hiding the truth of such a deal gained him, except a brassed off slayer and a thoroughly kicked arse?

"It can't be," she repeated, her tone annoyingly neutral. She could be agreeing with him or seconds from ending his sorry existence.

"I swear it," Spike said. He had nothing more to lose.

Anya perked her head up from behind the cash-wrap, looking somewhat bemused. "But you can't know, can you?" she asked unhelpfully. "The version of you that signed the contract dusted last night."

"I know that berk was me," Spike fired back, not taking his eyes off the Slayer. "Whatever else. The smell was right. The things he said. How..." He blinked and swallowed, looked away and back again. Buffy's expression remained unchanged. "How he talked about you, love. The way things were in his time. How he felt... And I bloody well guarantee that if he was, there's no sodding way he'd have offered up the Nibblet. That warlock wanker mucked with my head, coulda put anything there. Wager this is the way he wanted it—send Super Spike to dust and see if he can change the bloody terms with the one who wasn't there."

More silence.

Anya cleared her throat. "Super Spike?"

He rolled his eyes. "What I took to calling the git and his sodding heroics, all right?" A beat, and he forced himself to meet Buffy's gaze again. "In your hands, Slayer. Knew comin' here might be the last of my merry jaunts, but you had to know. And if it is true..."

"If it's true, then this timeline ceases to exist, because we're not handing over anything of my sister to anyone," Buffy said coldly, then turned to Anya. "Can you call the others? We have things to talk about."

Anya heaved a sigh. "Giles won't be back from Los Angeles until this evening, if all goes well."

"Call Angel. Tell him I know Giles is there and to send him back. That we have a situation."

The former demon's frown deepened. "What good is calling Angel? Giles went to meet with a supplier."

"Yeah," Buffy said, her tone dry, "and this is just a hunch, but I think Giles chose to deliver the message of Spike's Excellent Adventure himself, so the two of them could powwow over all things time travel."

"Stupid British shop-owners," Anya muttered, pulling a phone book out from behind the desk. "If that's true, I am going to need to

find some creative methods by which to exact vengeance. You don't play with a girl's emotions like that."

"Emotions?" Spike asked.

"Anya was a bit invested in this cheaper magic balls thing," Buffy said.

"Crystal balls," Anya replied tersely, flipping through the pages, a somewhat mad gleam in her eye. "I should have known there was something hinky about that story. Giles doesn't even know what we pay for crystal balls now."

So the watcher had concocted a cover story to visit Angel. Spike tried to tamp down the surge of irritation this much inspired and didn't get very far. Bloody hell, he could do no right by any of them. This time the actual doing hadn't been done by him—though, granted, as he'd said last night, he would have in a heartbeat—but that was still enough to question his motives or focus more on the *how* than the sodding *why*. Reckoned if Willow had done a bit of magic to turn back the clock, there'd be back-slaps and *atta-girls* all the way around. But no, Rupert just had to run to *Daddy*.

"I know. Figures," Buffy said with a short laugh.

He found her looking at him with a mixture of ire and amusement, and was so surprised by this that he might have toppled over if his legs hadn't hardened to lead the second he'd started blathering about the warlock.

Whatever else, the Slayer did not chat with him like they were friends. Was it possible he *hadn't* fucked up whatever had been happening between them last night? Seemed rather unlikely now that the warlock had given them all reason to doubt his altruism, but maybe she believed that Spike was speaking the truth. At least insofar as how he'd never give up Dawn to anyone, let alone a bloke like Rack.

And then it occurred to him just how bloody absurd he was being. That Buffy would be thinking about things like the snogs they'd shared when kid sis was on the line. Just because she hadn't popped him one in the nose didn't mean she was going soft for him. That mileage was probably all but gone, used up by this morning's bad news. She'd shake herself to her senses and stake him soon, just on the off-chance some other version of himself had made a deal with the devil.

Getting hopeful for things that would never happen would just make reality harder to bear. Even if he only had a handful of hours left, he'd rather not spend them lying to himself. Instead, he watched as Buffy made her way to the check-out counter, where she placed a small red bottle. Anya, who had gotten Cordelia on the line, was currently exchanging barbs with the cheerleader, having introduced herself as the woman currently receiving many orgasms from Xander Harris and letting her know in no uncertain terms that any window of opportunity she thought she might have had to re-win the wanker's heart would be obsolete. It wasn't until Buffy cleared her throat that Anya thought to mention Giles.

"Cordelia, we will have to resume discussing your many inadequacies at a later time. Is Giles there? That bastard. Put him on."

Buffy sucked in her cheek, her shoulders tight. Anya, now a seasoned customer service professional, handled both the reaming of Rupert a new one and ringing up a sale without batting an eye.

"What's the bauble for, Slayer?" Spike asked, if only to take his mind off the rising urge to rip the phone from the former demon's hands and do some yelling of his own.

"It's... Nothing." She met his gaze, and there was something sad there. Sad and a touch resigned, like she'd been let down. While he'd love to believe it was aimed at the Watcher for sneaking off behind her back, the gnawing in his gut said it was far more likely she felt let down by him.

And if that was true, then he might as well take a stroll in the sun. For Spike to have let the Slayer down, she would have had to have been thinking he was something other than dirt under her shoe. *Him*, not the wanker she'd snogged yesterday. The one standing in front of her right now.

"I need to run home," Buffy said, curling her fist around her recent purchase. She met his gaze. "See if Dawn got home okay, and find her if she didn't. You'll stay here."

"Yeah. Of course."

"Good." She glanced at Anya, who was still on the phone, having launched into a lecture on proper employer etiquette after she'd told



Giles to head back to Sunnyhell. "When she gets off, tell her to call Xander, Will, and Tara. We'll need everyone here."

Spike nodded, his throat tight. "Slayer, I—"

She held up her free hand, and he was grateful because he had bugger all idea what he'd been about to say. Only that he'd needed to say something.

"Save it for the meeting. We need to figure out what to do."

And before he could respond, Buffy had brushed past him and barreled into the sunlight where he couldn't follow, leaving Spike helpless to do anything else but watch as the door closed behind her.



IT WASN'T that long ago that Buffy would have believed it wholeheartedly. After all, Spike was a soulless, selfish creature. When cornered, he'd talk out of both sides of his mouth to save his own pasty skin. If there was something blocking the path to a thing he wanted and he had the means of getting around it, he'd leave no stone unturned. He was evil, therefore capable of any horrible thing she could imagine. Case closed.

That had been before Glory had turned him into a pin-cushion. Before she'd strolled into his crypt wearing clothes she'd peeled off a robotic likeness of herself and insisted on giving Glory the Key's identity to keep Spike from suffering additional damage. When, hunched over and broken, he'd yelled at her to stay put.

*"Anything happened to Dawn, it'd destroy her. I couldn't live, her bein' in that much pain. Let Glory kill me first. Nearly bloody did."*

The Spike who had told her that, sitting on a coffin, looking like he'd lost a fight with a lawnmower... No. Buffy didn't believe Spike would ever use Dawn as a bargaining chip. But for a second after he'd told her what the warlock had said, that certainty had taken a major hit. Old habits were hard to break. And she felt...bad for that. Bad and terrified all at the same time, because she'd just gotten Dawn out of danger and now another powerful creature wanted a piece of her. A piece of the Key.

Was this what life would be like from now on? All the baddies

vying for a chance to harness the mystical green energy that made up her sister?

One thing at a time.

"All right," Buffy said, leveling her gaze at Spike, who sat at the round table at the back of the Magic Box as he had two nights back when the others had debated what the long-term consequences of his dive through time might be. Only it hadn't been this Spike—this Spike had been part of the crowd. This Spike didn't have the answers the other one had. "Start from the beginning."

Spike tapped his fingers along the table surface and nodded, releasing a long breath. "Got in last night," he said, keeping his gaze on her. "Was makin' myself a drink and there was a knock. Thought it might be—" At this, he broke off and looked away. "Was this wanker I'd never seen before. Ugly git. Looked like someone'd taken a knife to his face. Or Willem bloody Dafoe really let himself go. Said my debt was up for collection here in a few days and that just because the other me had kicked it didn't mean I was off the bloody hook."

"And you knew what the price was," Giles said. Buffy tried not to wince or glare at him—once this was settled, there would be words about Watchers who snuck off to Los Angeles to consult her ex-boyfriend on matters that didn't concern him. "The other Spike was reluctant to share what it was he'd bargained."

"Cause he knew how you lot would take it," Spike growled. "The Slayer especially."

"Well," Xander said in his the-only-good-vamp-is-a-dusty-vamp voice, "considering he sold out Dawn, I'd say he was exercising some rare foresight."

"That wasn't the bloody price," Spike snapped, now gripping the edge of the table hard enough that the wood whined in complaint. "It was a soul, yeah, a pure soul, but it was *mine*. Knew where to get one of those and we have a bloody witch who's trafficked one or two in her day. Figure he thought it'd be easy enough to make the trade."

Xander snorted. "A pure soul. *Pure*. You think yours qualifies?"

"A far sight more than yours would, yeah."

"Hey!"

Spike rolled his eyes and looked to Giles. “Would you tell this git what *pure* means when it comes to souls?”

Giles blinked, having clearly not anticipated being part of the vampire’s defense plan. “Purity in these matters typically means in the biblical sense,” he said, his voice a degree softer than it had been before. “A pure soul would be one that has not been marred by sin, most notably murder or sexual congress.”

“I was a nancy-boy poet when Dru found me,” Spike said with that air of defiance that had come to define him over the years. “Hadn’t so much as sniffed a bird’s knickers. Damn sure hadn’t killed anyone. So yeah, my soul woulda fit the bill just fine.”

He glared at Xander, then all of them as though daring someone to crack a joke.

While Buffy hadn’t been too interested in Spike’s human past the night she’d asked him to tell her how he’d killed his two slayers, she’d seen enough to know it was a sore spot. He hadn’t gone into vivid detail about who he’d been, rather deftly sidestepped the particulars while driving home that Dru had been his salvation. Admitting the truth now had to be uncomfortable, especially among people who wouldn’t hesitate to use his history as ammunition.

“So the other Spike bargained your soul,” Buffy said. “And you were okay with this?”

Spike frowned as though he didn’t understand the question. “Course I was, love. Wagered you wouldn’t like it much, which was why he was coy about sharin’. But he told you it was on him—didn’t affect anyone else. Well, besides yours truly, but it seemed a small price to pay to keep you here.”

A soul. His soul was a small price to pay. Buffy didn’t know how to feel about that and chose to ignore it for the moment.

“And when you mentioned this to this Rack person, he...”

“Said I had it twisted wrong.” He shifted a bit in his seat. “Filled my head with a bunch of rubbish and left me bloody well paralyzed until this mornin’.”

“What sort of rubbish?” Giles asked.

“Pictures, images of me signing away the Bit.”

“You mean memories,” Xander said bluntly. He blinked and turned

to Buffy. "Even *Spike* says he saw himself do this stuff. Case freaking closed."

"No, you git, not *memories*. Figure that's what the wanker wanted me to think but he coulda put whatever he wanted in my sodding head, couldn't he?"

"And how convenient for you that we won't be able to know the truth," Xander shot back. He shrugged off Anya, who had tried to take him by the upper arm. "Not until either Dawn dies or this timeline goes boom."

"Dawn's not going anywhere," Buffy said in a tone that brokered no argument. She looked back to Spike, her heart thundering. "There was something else, wasn't there? You brought it?"

He hesitated, then nodded and shifted to pull something out of his back pocket. "This," he said, withdrawing a battered piece of parchment. "Not sayin' it doesn't look bad, Slayer. But I bloody swear it, I never would have... You believe me at least, right?"

Buffy plucked the document off the table and unfolded it. She'd asked Spike to go back for this once he'd told her that Rack had left him with a signed contract. And though she knew what to expect when she unfolded the thing, she couldn't keep her hands from shaking.

It was all there. One live Slayer for the price of one Key. Time travel, the eight days, and a signature at the bottom. *William Pratt*.

The beast called doubt reared its head again, roaring its challenge at the softer feelings she'd been mulling over the past couple of days. Mocking her for being gullible enough to buy it. The evidence, as he said, was pretty cut and dry, and the simplest explanations were typically the right ones.

But when she lifted her eyes from the parchment and met his again, her doubt shrank.

"This doesn't look right," Tara said.

"It's a demon contract," Xander retorted, reading over Buffy's shoulder. "How's it supposed to look?"

"No, she's right," Anya said, elbowing Xander out of the way to get a better look at the parchment. "And it's not a demon contract, unless things have changed since I got out of the business. We never required

anything in writing in my time. Once intent was expressed in the presence of a demon, it was just as binding as any signature." She shrugged. "Heck, all anyone had to say for me to consider them under a demon bargain were the words, 'I wish.' I doubt D'Hoffryn would have been in favor of any system that added paperwork. We were busy enough as it was. Granted, D'Hoffryn would only oversee Vengeance business, but the rules were rather universal."

"I meant that it's shrouded in dark magic," Tara said, turning to Buffy. "And...I wasn't sure, but there's something surrounding Spike's head as well. It looks like the same energy."

At this, Spike jerked forward and began batting at the air around him. "There is? What is it? Still there? Did I get it?"

Tara offered a kind smile. "It's not the sort of thing you can...well, shoo away. It's something like an aura, but not quite. Like magical residue." She looked to Willow. "Can you see it?"

"No," she replied, somewhat sheepish. And Buffy got it—it was always a bit humbling to admit that, while you might be the big noise, there were areas where others had you completely outshone. "But you're the aura reader in the family."

"It's dark, whatever it is," Tara said. "Dark and heavy."

"Perhaps a signature of the magic it took to bend time, then?" Giles said as neutrally as someone could without breaking into the "I told you so" dance.

"I don't think so. I didn't see it there yesterday on either Spike. I haven't seen any kind of aura that isn't, well, Spike's."

Spike looked a bit surprised at the news that he had an aura at all. Perhaps he'd thought it was like his reflection—empty space.

"Whatever this warlock did to you last night, I think that's what put it there," Tara said. "Which, to me, would indicate that Spike's telling the truth."

"Course I'm tellin' the bloody truth," Spike practically shouted. "It's not like the git who dusted left me a sodding script. Don't wager he figured he'd go out like that." He peered around Tara to Xander. "Savin' your ungrateful arse, if memory serves."

Xander turned a bit red but the fire in his eyes didn't fade. "The

other Spike could have just as easily given you enough information to try and—”

“Stop,” Buffy said shortly, her patience having reached its peak. “If this was an evil plan, do you really think he’d come here and share it with us?”

“I think it’s wise to never underestimate the resident soulless undead, is all I’m saying.”

“And I’m saying...” She broke off, shook her head, and fixed Spike with her best if-looks-could-stake glare to show she meant business. “Would you have ever considered bargaining anyone to bring me back?”

He held her gaze for a moment, and though she saw the discomfort there, she also saw the thing she was looking for—the truth. “Reckon I would, yeah,” he muttered after a moment. “Torn up as he said he was, hard as it was hearin’ it... Figure I’d’ve done just about anything. Suppose if I wasn’t being an impatient git, I might cotton on to the fact that you’d stake me in a bloody blink the second you found out.” He sighed, then shrugged. “Hard to say what I woulda done in a thing I haven’t bloody lived. And hell, maybe I *wouldn’t* have. Figure a pure soul isn’t too hard to come by if you’re an evil bastard. Wouldn’t have to be anyone special, just young enough, right? But it was *my soul* he wagered. Never mentioned considering anything else. Went straight for somethin’ that wouldn’t be a staking offense. So bugger, I don’t know. Satisfied?”

Buffy bit the inside of her cheek to stop her instinctive response from knowing air. The truth was she wasn’t entirely sure how comfortable she was knowing that a simple moral quandary had such a convoluted answer, but it did *mean* something. It meant he was trying. And it meant she could trust him not to lie to her. This was more of the same she’d come to expect from him after what had happened with Glory—not trying to impress, just trying to *be*, best he knew how, without anyone there to guide him.

The fact that he hadn’t taken the opportunity to make himself look better had something else sliding into place.

*I know I’m a monster, but you treat me like a man.*

"Okay, then. Not just anyone. Would you have ever considered bargaining Dawn?"

"Fuck no." This Spike didn't say so much as bark, somehow managing to look offended, even after the morally dubious answer he'd provided to her last question. "Told you once, Slayer, can't bloody live with you bein' in that much pain. And yeah, I wager that counts for more than just kid sis, but her especially. You think I'd jump through hoops just to have you wish yourself dead all over again? Stake me on sight? I made you a promise, didn't I? I'd protect her until the end of the sodding world. I don't welsh on my promises."

He held her gaze, not blinking, his jaw set and his nostrils flared. And Buffy knew.

"I believe you," she said, and watched as the fight in him first intensified, then faded altogether. That soft look he reserved for her and her alone. It was easier to bear in private. Buffy turned to the others. "This Rack person is lying and he's after Dawn. I'm a big fan of not having another apocalypse a week after we averted the last one, so I need ideas and I need them now."

A sea of blank faces answered her.

"Guys," Buffy snapped, clapping her hands, "focus."

"Buffy..." Giles said, removing his glasses for his scheduled mid-lecture polish, "I'm not sure what we're dealing with. A warlock who can bend time made an arrangement with someone who is no longer here. We only have Spike's word to go on that his counterpart intended to bargain his own soul, but we don't know what else he might not have thought to share with Spike. Your faith in him is...admirable, if not misguided, but—"

"So we find out," Buffy said shortly. "Find out what *really* happened at that meeting with Rack."

Xander looked bewildered. "How? It happened in the future in someone else's timeline."

"Guys, we blew up the mayor. Took down a branch of the military. Hell, we just defeated a hellgod. Spike found a way to get here from his time, so there has to be—"

"There is," Anya offered, raising her hand. She gave Xander the cautious side-eye, then cleared her throat and navigated around him.

"The sort of magic the warlock used to bring the other Spike into our time would leave a residue. Or a signature. That's what Tara sees around Spike now." She released a deep breath. "We could tap into that signature and"—she gestured in the direction of Willow—"using the handy trick Willow learned thanks to Glory's mind diet, try to unite that Spike's memories with this Spike."

"So, more dark magic, then," Giles muttered. "Brilliant. Just brilliant."

"No," Anya said in a tone that indicated her own patience was being tested. "The *same* dark magic. We would be using Rack's magic to access the other timeline." She turned to face Willow. "Similar to the spell I asked you to perform two years ago to get me to another timeline. The one that produced your doppelganger. The ingredients may take a day or so to compile, but the principle should be the same. And you should be able to do it in your sleep."

Willow blinked, not bothering to hide her surprise. "Umm, thank you."

"You're welcome. I would very much like not to die in five days and I am happy to provide as many compliments as necessary to remain alive."

Buffy glanced at Spike, who looked uncomfortable. "This okay with you? If we find a way?"

She could tell he was touched, if not a bit uncertain, on being asked. "Course, love. Anything."

The answer didn't surprise her, but she felt her heart warm all the same. She gave him a small nod, decision made, and put her back to him to face the others. Or put herself between the others and him—she wasn't sure. All she knew was this felt right.

"Anya," she said, experiencing a wave of affection for the former demon that she doubted she'd ever be able to vocalize, "you and Willow get the spell together." She paused, thinking about the bottle she'd taken home—something she'd intended to keep to herself, but hell, it might help. "I have some of Spike's dust—the other Spike's. I don't know anything about spells but... If you think it could be helpful, I'll bring it by."



She didn't have to turn to feel the weight of Spike's startled stare. It practically burned her alive.

Once they had this thing figured out, she'd have to sit down and talk with him. Really talk. Because if what she'd learned today hadn't put her off Spike for good, she didn't think anything would. Hell, at the moment, she felt more confident about the thoughts and feelings she'd been entertaining since visiting his crypt yesterday. Or watching the other Spike crumble to dust.

The easy thing to do would have been to play dumb. To tell her what she wanted to hear. To hold down and hope that his instinct was right, and Rack was lying.

He'd sold his soul to keep her alive. And when that hadn't been enough, he'd risked everything by coming to her with this warlock's story, even with what it meant.

And Buffy couldn't pretend these things didn't mean anything anymore, when she was starting to suspect they actually meant everything.

THE GUY HAD SAID HER NAME SO HE KNEW WHO SHE WAS, WHICH definitely gave him the advantage. Because for the life of her, Buffy couldn't place him. Too old to be a classmate of Dawn's, too young to be a teacher, and too familiar with her to make either one of those possibilities the desired answer.

After an uncomfortably long beat, the hopeful smile on his face faded. "Xander...didn't tell you about me at all, did he? I'm just a weirdo who showed up on your doorstep, aren't I? Ooh, that's good for the ego. If you'll just erase the last thirty seconds from your mind, I'll collect my pride and be on my way."

The clouds fogging her head parted and she remembered. Xander's friend. The one who worked with him. That Xander thought might be a good guy for her to date now that the apocalypse was behind them.

That had been last night. The last thing the other Spike had heard her do was agree to go out with this guy just hours after she'd mauled him with her lips. Had Xander mentioned that a date was set? That he'd told this guy to show up at her house tonight? Honestly, in the explosion of what had followed that conversation and especially since learning that yet another mystical baddie had its sights set on Dawn, dating was the last thing on her mind. She'd only

agreed to this last night because she'd wanted to better understand her changing feelings for Spike, anyway. Suffice to say, she was not in the mood to be wined and dined, or with someone who didn't know her.

"No, I'm sorry. Xander did tell me but today was...well, crazy is being charitable." Buffy offered a placating smile and looked down at the opposite-of-date-night attire she'd slipped on for her nightly patrol. A pair of ratty sweats and a tank top she was fairly certain she hadn't washed since last week. Shower-time wouldn't come until after she'd gotten home—it made no sense to get clean right before going to wrestle with the undead. "Unless you want to wait around for me to get ready, we should probably take a rain-check."

A normal person would hear that and make plans to reschedule. Maybe this time involving phone numbers so they could better coordinate. Actually talk before seeing each other. Certainly confirm with one another that the date was on to avoid future misunderstandings.

Apparently, the guy Xander had picked for Buffy wasn't normal. Nor was he the sort of abnormal that seemed to do it for her these days. He was just plain socially awkward.

"I wouldn't mind," he said, his grin renewing. "Not at all."

Oh. Goody.

Buffy stood still for a long, awkward moment, trying to work out now how to signal that she wasn't in the right mind-frame to go out and that she'd only made that suggestion to be nice. Ultimately, though, her overwhelmed brain could think of nothing, and she found herself moving aside to let this stranger into her home.

Stranger. There's a word she hadn't thought since she'd been Called. Not that she was worried about being attacked or anything—she could more than handle a human creep if it came down to it. And Dawn was staying with Willow and Tara tonight, though they hadn't told the girl why. Group consensus had been that if Rack decided to make a move, it was better to have her with someone powerful enough to lob magic back at him.

Also, Xander might have pushed for that extra hard because he knew Buffy had a date tonight. Would be nice if he'd shared that nugget of information with, oh say, Buffy.

"I'm just going to run upstairs and...uhh...get ready," Buffy said. "Please..."

What? *Make yourself at home?* No, she didn't need some rando going through her stuff. Then again... She did a quick mental inventory of the downstairs and decided that if he did stumble across a battle-ax or case of holy water, it might clue him in that she was not like other girls in ways that very few men could handle.

"Make yourself at home," she said, then turned and all but bolted up the stairs.

First order of business was not to change or shower. Slayer or not, she was not about to get naked and vulnerable with an unknown guy in her house. Instead, Buffy made a beeline for her mom's room, believing wholeheartedly for a moment that she'd find Joyce in bed or reading beside the window and be able to pick her mom's brain on how to politely give a guy the shove-off.

The thought alone didn't last long—only a second or two—but it was enough to make the full weight of her mother's absence crash down on her as hard as it had those first few days after the funeral. And at possibly the worst time. Buffy found herself sitting against her mom's untouched bed, trying hard not to bawl. The rush to defeat Glory, protect Dawn, had consumed her so thoroughly that things like grief and loss had been shoved to the backburner. Life in her mind hadn't existed beyond Glory's countdown, therefore she hadn't needed to acclimate to a world without Joyce. Everything beyond the fight had been black. Like she'd known...

*Like she'd had a death wish.*

Another tally for Spike on the things he'd gotten right. Damn if that wasn't nerve-shattering. She had fully intended to die just a couple of nights ago. Had expected it, even welcomed it on a level she hadn't known existed.

But that had been fleeting because her gratitude at being here was just as potent. Perhaps that was why Spike's dive through time had knocked her off her feet so much—she'd realized that this other world existed where she'd cashed in the death wish and gotten a hard dose of reality. Because Glory had been defeated just like all the other Big Bads, when all was said and done. Life had gotten harder, realer, than

ever before this last year, but that didn't mean she didn't find it worth living.

Ugh. This was so not the mental discussion to have while a guy she didn't know waited for her to get ready for a date she didn't want to go on. Buffy blinked and shook her head, then glanced around her mom's room, certain she'd come in here for a reason beyond momentarily thinking Joyce might actually be around to offer advice.

Her gaze landed on the phone perched on the nightstand. And before she could stop herself, she'd marched over and punched in the number to Xander's apartment.

One ring became two, then three. Just as she was wracking her brain to recall whether or not he owned an answering machine, a familiar voice picked up.

"Yello?"

"Xander," Buffy hissed, "is there something you want to tell me?"

"Uhh...I feel like the answer should be *yes*, but I'm drawing a blank."

"I'll give you a hint. It rhymes with skate and it's downstairs right now."

Another long hum. "Plate? Gate? Schmate? I don't know, Buff, help me out."

"Date! A date. I assume this is the Josh—"

"Jeffrey—"

"Oh, who cares? What is he doing at my house and *why* didn't I know about this?"

The answering silence stretched long enough she began to wonder if the call had dropped. Buffy pulled back to examine the phone as though it would have the answer.

"I did tell you about this. I *asked* you last night, if memory serves, if you were ready. Single and ready to mingle were your exact words, I believe."

Ugh. "You didn't say it would be *tonight*! Or that anything was set up!"

"I didn't? 'Cause I'm pretty sure I did. And if I didn't, I definitely meant to." Another pause. "How bad is it?"

"Answered the door looking like a skank who hasn't showered bad."

“Ouch. Well, I’m sure if you explain—”

“I did explain. He’s decided to wait for me to get ready.”

“Oh!” Xander sounded much brighter now. “Well, then. Sorry for the mix-up, but it sounds like it all worked out well for the Buffster.”

“That’s so not even the point!”

“Then what is the point? I’m confused.”

Well, she supposed that was a good question. The point being that she hadn’t really meant what she’d told Xander last night and she definitely didn’t mean it now. Especially with the whole new world of bad that was potentially unraveling where Dawn was concerned.

“Dawn. Dawn is the point,” she said, because that was safe and had the added benefit of being right. “Dawn’s in trouble and—”

“Buff, Dawn’s fine. She’s got super witchy protection tonight and—and yes, I am about to say this, but bear with me—if *Spike* is to be believed, then he’ll cough up his soul and everything will go back to normal.”

How Xander could sound so blasé about this was beyond her. Never mind the fact that coughing up a soul, even one that hadn’t been in use for over a century, was no small matter, he just seemed to be taking for granted that Rack would accept anything other than Dawn, especially when he’d gone to such lengths to make Spike believe hers was the soul he’d sold.

“This guy has the ability to unmake a timeline, Xan. Might not be a bad idea to not underestimate him.”

“Yeah, I know, I know...but...after Glory... There’s always a decent lag time between Big Bads after we save the world. We find a way to kill him or strip his powers or something. It can’t be harder than Glory.” A pause. “So...you should go get ready for your date before Jeffrey gets the idea that you’re not interested. Let me know how it goes!”

“Are you—”

But it was too late. The jerk had hung up on her.

For a long moment, Buffy stared at the phone. It was a good thing telekinesis wasn’t on the list of slayer powers because she was definitely killing Xander with her mind at the moment. And realizing she had been up here for nearly ten minutes without doing a damn thing

toward getting ready. Releasing a deep breath, she forced herself to her feet and plodded toward her room to investigate the clothing situation and see if she remembered how to dress like a girl for these things.

The urge was strong—way strong—to just march her butt downstairs and tell Jason or whatever his name was that she had a headache and needed a rain-check, but she didn't want it getting to Xander that she'd been a frigid bitch on top of a forgetful one. Assuming he'd even told her that the date he'd set up was for *tonight*, because she was all but certain he hadn't. A lot had happened yesterday, granted, so she might be remembering wrong, but her memory of the conversation was that Xander had been floating the idea of a potential new Buffy boyfriend, not that there was already something in motion, and why the hell did she care again?

"Damn good question, Buffy," she told her reflection as she gave herself a once-over. This was definitely the least care she'd ever given to what she looked like when going out. But now that she'd actually gone to the effort—light makeup, a loose ponytail, and a dress that had been fashionable last spring—she figured it was better to just get this over with so she could at least tell Xander she'd tried.

She found Justin sitting on the couch at the very edge of the cushion, rocking back and forth and looking so excited it made her irritation die a bit. The guy *was* cute. Not in a way that Buffy really found attractive—more in an *awww, puppy* kind of way. And there were worse things out there than dining with puppies. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad.

A knock at the door shattered her thoughts and shoved her back into the moment. Dear god, how many dates had Xander set her up on?

Jeremiah's head swooped upward and he gave her a dazzling smile when he saw her. "Oh, wow. You look—"

She held up a hand and motioned to the door. "Hold that thought," she said, rather hoping he didn't, and moved to see what else could possibly go wrong tonight.

Two seconds later, she could have knocked herself out for sending that thought into the universe. Spike was on the other side, because *of course* Spike was on the other side. He looked nice, too. Kind of like he

had when he'd tried to trick her into going on a date that one time. He favored her with a smile when their eyes met, rocked a bit on his heels.

"Evenin', Slayer," he said, looking a combination of happy and shy that she'd never seen on him, and damn, that did something to her chest. "Just...thought I'd see if you might wanna take a turn around the usual places tonight. Been a mite quiet the past two nights, but I reckon there are a few baddies who need to be put down. How about it?"

Buffy tried to find her voice, but her throat had gone dry. Her heart hammered and her pulse rushed and *god*, going on patrol sounded so much better than doing anything with Jared. "Spike, I—"

"Buffy? Who is it?"

Who the hell asked that kind of question on a first date?

The light in Spike's eyes extinguished almost immediately, the smile on his face fading. He was still for a moment, swallowed. "Ahh, didn't know you had company."

Buffy flicked a glance to the driveway, where sat a car that definitely wasn't hers. She didn't really know how he could have missed it, unless he'd had such tunnel vision on the way to the door, psyching himself up. And she realized then that must have been exactly what had happened, for Spike turned and favored the vehicle with a somewhat surprised look before kicking at the porch step.

"Oh. Got it. I'll be off."

"Spike, it's not..." Not what? A date. Except that was exactly what it was. A date with someone whose name she couldn't even remember and hell, didn't want to. Buffy looked down at herself, the bubble of nerves and uncertainty that had lived in her chest the past couple of days resurfacing. And it was too much—all of it was too much. Almost dying, two Spikes, realizing she felt certain things, Spike dusting, and now this mess with a warlock and her sister, what the hell was she doing going on a date?

As though reading that this moment would be the absolute worst to show his face, Jackson slid into the space beside Buffy and appraised Spike like he had a right to. Which made his puppyish-shine dull even further.



“Oh,” Jameson said, looking from her to Spike and back again. “Did you...have other plans tonight?”

“No. I mean—I told you, day got all wonky.” She flitted a hand by her head as though the gesture itself was an explanation. “Spike was just checking in on something.”

Where the hell had those words come from? She didn’t remember giving them permission to exist. It felt like someone had reached up her backside and manipulated the right levers, channeling the Buffy of pre-Tower and forcing her thoughts through the voice-box of the Buffy that lived in this more complicated world. But there was no taking them back, and no missing the way Spike’s face fell, or the scowl that curled lips that had been smiling just seconds ago.

“Right then,” he said with a stiff nod. “I’ll see you around, Slayer.”

He took off at a hard pace, duster billowing behind him. The urge to follow was overwhelming—so much so it scared her. Hell, there wasn’t much about the way she felt right now that didn’t terrify her. And wasn’t that why she’d agreed to this stupid date in the first place?

“Everything all right?” Jensen asked, his hand at the small of her back.

“Yeah,” Buffy said thickly. “Let’s...let’s go.”



YEAH, she was done. Done, done, done, done.

Granted, her instinct had been telling her that from the moment Xander had mentioned introducing her to someone, but Buffy couldn’t learn any lesson the easy way, it seemed. Or maybe that was residual Angel-ness from when he’d left for LA, feeding her some idea that she needed a nice, normal guy. And if she wanted normal, she couldn’t go wrong with Jeremy.

He was perfectly nice, if not a little socially awkward. The kind of socially awkward that she’d fought to find charming in Riley but never had. Their appetizer hadn’t arrived yet and she’d already asked him to repeat his question three times.

All she could think about was how much more fun she’d be having

on patrol. Trading jibes with her favorite vampire, unleashing some of the day's tension, discussing her fears about what would come next and trust him to not give her some canned it'll-be-okay answer. Sure, that wasn't normal—not normal people's normal, but it was *her* normal. And normal dates were overrated.

She and Angel hadn't done the *traditional date* scene too often. Sure, they'd hit the occasional movie, but he hadn't wanted to watch it the way she had. Buffy was one with the color-commentary, especially when it came to martial arts flicks or monster bashes, which were admittedly her favorites. Not the artsy crap Angel had dragged her to. But then she would talk his ear off, laughing at stupid fighting techniques or how wrong Hollywood had gotten that particular part of vamp lore.

She pictured herself in a theater next to Spike, fighting over pieces of buttered popcorn and giggling over something ridiculous happening on-screen. Getting shushed by the people around them and finding that funny as all hell, to the point where an employee would ask them to leave. Spike would posture and threaten to eat the guy, Buffy would roll her eyes, grab him by the upper arm and steer him outside, where they would both burst up about what had happened inside before recounting the movie's highlights. This daydream seemed so ordinary, so...

"I gotta go."

Jeffrey broke off, having been in mid-ramble. He regarded her with large, wounded eyes. "I... You do?"

"Yeah." Buffy took a long drink of her water, stood, and tossed her cloth napkin into her vacated chair. "I'm sorry. I just... Xander told you I'm single and I... I don't know that that's true anymore."

He arched an eyebrow. "Since we sat down you suddenly became not single?"

"Well... I don't know. But I need to know. And I gotta do it now, so, I'm sorry. This was—well, it was this." She grabbed her purse off the back of the chair. "But I gotta go."

Perhaps later she would feel a bit guilty for how this had gone down. Buffy hated being rude, but she also knew herself too well to

give herself a chance to talk her out of what seemed to be the only way forward.

This whole test date thing had been practiced on the wrong person.

If things went wrong and this timeline was erased from existence, she wanted to go out at least having given this a try. She wanted to *know*.

And that meant going to the man himself.

THE BEST WAY TO DO THIS, BUFFY DECIDED, WAS JUST TO DO IT. Grab the bull by the horns—or the vampire by the lips. Or something. Make sure her stupid brain didn't throw up any additional road-blocks, because she was tapped out.

Still, part of her was certain that she'd change her mind before she hit Restfield. That she'd full-on stop, turn her butt around, and march back home without doing any grabbing of any sort, and tomorrow would be another day of more of the same. More dancing around these confusing Spike-shaped feelings in conflict with everything she'd learned over the past couple of days. But the closer her feet brought her to his crypt, the more something inside of her cemented. Such that she didn't allow herself to slow down, much less knock, once she arrived at her destination. Instead, she did what she did best—made with the entrance.

The door swung open with such force, it smashed against the wall and the structure gave an uneasy shake. Spike, who had been lounging in front of his television, shot to his feet and whirled to face her, eyes wide and chest moving with the weight of gulps of unneeded air.

Nothing about this vampire was conventional. Not one damn thing.

“Slayer—”

“Shut up.” She marched forward, her heart in her throat, and didn’t stop until she was standing right in front of him. The dark lighting in the crypt played across his face, emphasizing the deep blue of his eyes—eyes that seemed to see right through her no matter how hard she tried to pretend otherwise. The way he looked at her now was guarded, as she’d come to expect, tinged with some of the pain she’d seen earlier, frustration, and...

“I need you to not move,” Buffy said.

Spike inhaled deeply but didn’t question her. Just gave a short nod and went rigid.

Buffy took a step forward and peered into his eyes, watching as he watched her with growing confusion and uncertainty. There had never been a guy with more expressive eyes, she decided. If ever she had a question about what he was thinking or feeling, all she had to do was look. He bore everything openly—always had. He wasn’t as tall as the other men in her life, nor as bulky, but lean and wiry. Deceptively strong, kind of like she was to anyone who didn’t know her. When she reached out and dragged her hands from his wrists to his shoulders, she was met with nothing but hard muscle. Muscle that trembled under her touch. All of him was trembling. There was a question on his face but he didn’t voice it, just stared at her, shaking, as she traced her fingers over the column of his throat until she had his face cupped between her palms.

It was only then that she tore her eyes from his and lowered them to his mouth.

*Here we go.*

Buffy inhaled deeply, then pressed forward so that their lips were touching. One could hardly call it a kiss, but it did send a shiver of something down her spine—a *something* that did more for her in a sliver of a second than every moment spent with what’s-his-face tonight. Spike remained still, though she could feel the tension in his body and the strain in his muscles as if it were her own. And though this mouth-mashing thing had confirmed at least one of her theories, she was satisfied for maybe three seconds because, well, she knew Spike could give it to her better than that. So Buffy pressed forward, doing what she

could to indicate she was ready for him to take the lead and start with the ravaging. There was no doubt he was good for said ravaging—the kiss he'd, or the other him, had given her yesterday left very little to the imagination. It had been sex with clothes on.

Only he didn't make with anything. If he weren't trembling, she might have thought he'd turned into a statue.

Buffy sighed and pulled back. "Okay, what gives?"

The look he gave her was inscrutable. "Sorry?"

"You're not gonna do anything?"

"You told me not to move." His voice was scratchy, like he had something in his throat, and somehow small.

"Well, obviously I want you to kiss me. So—"

And that was as far as she got. Spike seized her by the forearms and dragged her to him, and *yes*, that was what she'd been looking for. Gone was statue man and in his place was Spike in the flesh, just as she knew him. Growling hotly against her mouth as he stroked and sucked and plundered and *oh*, that was a creative use of tongue. Buffy released a whimper without meaning to, and felt her knees go a bit wobbly when he fed it back to her. Somehow her arms ended up around his neck and the lower part of her body started acting independently of her brain, but the hardness she suddenly found pressed against her belly made all the right parts of her come to life. Parts that had been dormant for a long time—too long, if she was being honest. Parts that hadn't bothered to rev in more than a year, since the bloom faded off the Riley-rose. Not that it had lasted all that long to begin with.

"Slayer," Spike murmured against her lips and started walking back. He covered her mouth again before her brain could so much as blip a reply. The ground dragged under her feet and her head swam with the vague sensation of movement, but she really didn't care where he was taking her so long as he kept doing that thing with his tongue. And Spike seemed all too happy to oblige, licking and caressing and tracing and moaning his enthusiasm into her. The movement stopped as rapidly as it had begun and the next thing she knew, she'd toppled forward and into his lap.

"Oh," she said, pulling back to blink at him. They were on the sofa, her legs on either side of his. The skirt she'd chosen had ridden up to

her thighs and hell, *she* could smell how turned on she was. Were she with anyone else, she might have been embarrassed—but she wasn't with anyone else. It was Spike, and he was staring up at her with questioning, hopeful eyes.

Spike ran his hands up her legs, still trembling. "Oh?"

"I didn't know where we were going."

"This all right?"

It seemed such an odd question. Maybe because it was normal and that was something Spike definitely wasn't.

Buffy fought a grin and nodded. "It's good."

"Brilliant," he agreed, and sucked her lower lip between his teeth, dragging her back into the delicious push-and-pull that was making out with William the Bloody.

And hell, she was. She was making out with Spike—she was *making out*, which she hadn't done in earnest with anyone since Angel. She and Riley had exchanged their fair share of kisses, but she'd stopped wanting to do this with him at some point and hadn't missed it. There hadn't been any fire or need or pull. The stuff she'd associated with her first real boyfriend, and therefore with love itself. Part of her—a very real part—had thought she'd never feel it again. That Buffy's passionate days were behind her, had ridden out of her life a few minutes after she'd blown up Sunnydale High, never to return. Slayers had a short lifespan after all, so it seemed reasonable that her love life would peak before she went quietly into that good night.

But hell, with the way Spike was growling against her lips, sucking on her tongue, thrusting himself against the hot apex of her thighs, she had to concede that maybe it had never been an issue of having peaked at all, rather having been forcing something with someone who wasn't right for her. Because right now, she was wondering why the hell she'd stopped getting drunk off kisses. When she felt herself grinding against his cock, though, the answer split through the fog like a silver bullet.

This was as far as she'd been able to take it with Angel. Hell, even this much had been dangerous. Stupidly so. And Riley just hadn't inspired the drive.

Spike did more than inspire the drive. With just his mouth and the

little noises he was making, she felt about three seconds away from crossing the Rubicon—unzipping him and taking that steely hardness for a true ride.

The thought was enough to shoo the fog away completely. Buffy broke away with a hard gasp, throwing her head back and focusing on the crypt's ceiling. This much didn't deter Spike—he immediately began nibbling on her neck, his growls growing more pronounced. He gripped her by the hips and thrust himself against her, moaning when his cock hit her sex. And hell, she moaned too. She didn't remember heavy petting feeling anywhere in the neighborhood near this good.

"Oh god," she said, trying to focus. "Spike..."

He murmured his response, low and throaty, but didn't pull his mouth from her skin. Instead, one of the hands at her hips slid up her side until he was just grazing the swell of her breast. And the almost-touch was nearly enough on its own to send her the rest of the way out of her mind.

But no. They needed to talk first. She gripped him by the shoulders and shoved him back hard enough that the couch rocked a bit. He blinked at her, panting, his eyes glazed over.

It took a moment—and several hard, deep breaths—but the fog clouding her head cleared and she found the thread she'd dropped the second he'd kissed her for real.

"Well," she said, her skin heating, "that...certainly answers that."

He stared at her with that frank openness that made her insides do the tango. "If you say so, love," he replied, lowering his gaze to her lips. "Though we could try a bit more to be sure."

"Aren't you even going to ask?"

"No." He leaned forward to nibble at her chin. "Wager you'll come to your senses here in a tick and be on your way. Would rather spend my time doin' this."

Well, that was nice. And annoying. Buffy pushed him back against the couch. "You're seriously not going to ask why I showed up here and made with the kissage? You don't want to know?"

"Course I want to know. Just don't want you to talk yourself out of it."



“Spike, I am literally straddling you right now.”

A smirk tugged at those oh so sinful—and slightly swollen, she was pleased to see—lips of his. “Believe me, baby, I noticed.” He was quiet for a moment, then released a deep breath, his shoulders dropping and his head hitting the upholstery. “Right then. So you got an answer. What was the question?”

At the abrupt turn, Buffy found herself going hot for completely different reasons. “I needed to see something,” she said, playing with the collar of his shirt. A shirt that could come off anytime it wanted to, really, but she decided not to add that. “I had a date tonight.”

The hand still at her hip tightened its grip, and she watched his jaw go tense. Just his jaw, because she wasn’t looking any higher than that at the moment.

“Yeah,” Spike said. “Caught that. Didn’t realize you were in the market for a new ex.”

Buffy narrowed her eyes and met his again. “You might wanna chill with the running commentary on my love life, considering the fact that we were making out thirty seconds ago.”

A somewhat dopey smile stretched across his lips, and he released a sound that—on anyone else—she would have called a giggle. No, scratch that. It was a giggle. Spike had freaking giggled.

“Oh right,” he said, looking a bit slaphappy. “Carry on then.”

“First of all, I need you to know something.” She drew in a deep breath. “I didn’t actually want to go on the date.”

He blinked, his grin fading. “Then I guess we’re a bit confused, pet,” he replied slowly. “Seems if you don’t wanna go out with a bloke, you can tell him so.”

“The other you heard Xander asking if I wanted to be set-up, now that the whole Glory thing is over. A-and I was on the side of wigged because we’d made out earlier that day and that really wasn’t the reason I’d come over here.”

The grin was all the way gone now, having been replaced with a scowl. “Yeah. Caught that show, myself.”

“Are you seriously going to be jealous of *you*?”

“You were snogging someone who wasn’t me, Slayer. *This* me. The

only me that matters, in my opinion. And I bloody well know you understand that, too. Heard about the little jaunt your evil twin took in your body last year.” He raised his brows as if daring her to contradict him. “Didn’t she shack up with Captain Cardboard while wearin’ your face?”

Buffy ground her teeth together and fought back her first instinct, which was to pop him in the nose. If they were going to try this thing, she needed to get used to not hitting him. While they might never be *normal*, she wanted to limit the bruises to those he got while fighting the good fight.

Also, she’d already admitted that she could understand Spike’s jealousy because of her own experience with the body swap incident. That didn’t mean she wanted her face rubbed in it.

“Well, I need you to stop being jealous of yourself,” she said matter-of-factly. “Because that Spike is the reason I’m with *this* Spike. Otherwise I’d be in a box somewhere, waiting to be buried. I think you can forgive me for a little making out.”

At this, Spike’s face fell, his eyes taking on that burdened look she’d grown so accustomed to over the last few weeks. The same way he’d looked at her when he’d made her realize there was no way Willow wouldn’t go after Glory, given what she’d done to Tara.

“Fair point,” he said a bit thickly. “So the whelp set you up. Didn’t mean you had to accept.”

“I’m glad he did.” She didn’t realize the truth behind this until the words were out. “Spike, I said yes to the stupid date because I was suddenly feeling things for you that wiggled me out. And I wasn’t sure if I could trust they were real or not because, hey, defying the laws of time to save my life is swoon-worthy all on its own.”

A small smile tugged at his lips and rapidly grew into his trademark smirk. “Swoon away, baby. I’ll catch you.”

“It... I wasn’t sure I could trust it. So when Xander offered to set me up, I agreed. I didn’t mean for the other you to overhear, but he did.”

“Certainly explains why he was a moody wanker when he came back up,” Spike agreed.

“Yeah, well. With the dustage and everything that happened today

about the deal you made and worrying about Dawn—because apparently that’s my life now—I completely forgot about the date.” She furrowed her brow. “Also, kinda still think Xander never mentioned it was *tonight*, but that doesn’t matter. What matters is I decided to go... and then I decided to leave.”

He nodded, though he still looked confused. She couldn’t blame him. Now that she was telling him all this, it did seem a little insane. Or a lot insane. But hey, he’d dated insane for over a century, so he could take his confusion and shove it up his patootie.

“I guess the point is that going out with this guy and being bored out of my mind kinda...” Ugh. She so sucked at the talking thing. Buffy rolled her head back, begging her brain to start making sense of its own stupid thought process. “Look,” she said, refocusing on him, “I kinda think I might be done with what passes for normal.”

Spike huffed. “Reckon you missed the boat on that altogether, didn’t you, love? You’re not cut out for it.”

“I’m not cut out for other people’s normal,” she agreed with a nod. “I started thinking about all the things I’d have to do to make anything work with someone Xander set me up with. Or Willow or Tara or anyone. I can’t exactly hide the fact that I’m the Slayer because, well, it’s a big part of who I am. And normal guys aren’t going to be able to handle it. I mean, maybe that’s not fair, but Riley sure as hell minded that I was stronger than him.”

“Riley was a tosser.”

She decided to ignore that slight on her ex. Yes, there had been many things wrong in that relationship—things she hadn’t really let herself see until recently—but Riley wasn’t to blame for all of them. Maybe not even most of them.

“I haven’t been the easiest person to date since Angel,” she said softly. “I think you know that.”

Spike tensed slightly but nodded, his eyes wide and vulnerable.

“And that’s what I’ve been thinking over the past... Well, since the other you decided to turn back time. I decided that making romantic decisions based on my ex’s expectations is dumb. The only expectations that matter are mine.” Buffy blew out a breath. “I have a thing

for you and I want to see where it goes. I can't promise it'll be what you want but it will be me trying."

He stared at her long enough to give a girl a complex.

"Spike—"

He growled and dragged her back to him, and when his mouth touched hers, the urge to explain everything went up like so much smoke. Seemed he had the better idea, after all. Kissing was vastly superior to talking, and he was so damn good at it. Like crazy good. Buffy let herself melt a little, resistance slipping as the right parts went tingly and the pressure between her legs became its own entity. She whimpered and cupped his face, and when she felt the ridge of his cock press against her clit, she gasped and tore her head back again.

"Drive me outta my mind," Spike murmured as he slipped a hand between them. "Fuck, Slayer, you're drenched."

"I...uhhh... Yes, that appears to be the case."

He chuckled, drawing a finger up the seam of her pussy, teasing her through her panties. Every part of her lit up—god, she'd missed this. The excitement of sex rather than the dull expectation, which she had to admit, had a lot to do with the fact that Riley seemed to lose the edge on how to get her off. Part of that had been her fault, not wanting to hurt his fragile feelings and tell him that he'd missed the mark, and once she'd faked one orgasm, faking the next one had been a lot easier. Then it had settled into habit.

"Been fantasizin' about this pussy for months, pet. Gonna let me have a taste?"

This was the equivalent to putting out on the first date, wasn't it? Buffy bit her lower lip, unable to keep from grinding against his hand. "I...uhh...I don't know if I'm ready for sex."

Spike lowered his head and drew in a deep breath. "Smell plenty ready to me," he replied, a low, hungry growl in his voice.

"Yeah, that's not disturbing or anything."

He flashed her an unrepentant grin and gave a tongue wiggle that had certain parts of her anatomy breaking out into a happy dance. "I always know when you're hot," he said, teasing his fingers along the crotch of her panties. "Drove me batty before, but now I can put that knowledge to good use."

Oh, that was the best idea. Buffy arched her hips again and gasped when she felt him nudge her clit through the cotton. Still, dating Spike was a gigantic shift in her paradigm—sex would be even more so and she'd already made one life-changing decision tonight. She worked her throat and placed her hands on his shoulders, determined to push him back so she could think without his hands getting her all muddled.

"Spike, really with the rushing. I don't want to regret this."

At that, he pulled his hand back and the tease in his eyes faded. "Don't want that either," he said with a soft smile, then pressed a kiss to the corner of her mouth. "But know, Slayer, anytime, whatever you want, I'm yours."

Guh. Seriously with the not fair. Because her brain knew that was her cue to get up, give Spike a kiss, and try and figure out what this dating thing meant with them. Or tell him that they'd figure it out later so she could run home and have some quality time with her vibrator. But despite knowing the line she'd drawn was a good one, she couldn't help but feel a bit frustrated that he hadn't put up more of a fight to get her naked. Which should probably weird her out a bit, but at the moment, she was too pent up to care too much.

"Spike," she murmured, and rolled her hips again, knowing she was being crazy with the mixed signals but feeling a bit stranded. "You could..."

"Could what, sweet?"

Heat seared her cheeks. She'd never really vocalized a want like this—hadn't had the chance with anyone but Riley and they'd more or less been on the same page throughout their relationship. Well, in terms of what was expected sexually, save the whole giving-of-orgasms thing. And was it really fair to ask a guy to go down on her when she'd already drawn a line in the sand?

Spike leaned forward, his eyes boring into hers. "Something you want?" he asked softly. "Something I can give you?"

"It's not fair. Never mind."

"Never mind?" He arched an eyebrow. "No bloody chance of that. Come on, talk to Daddy." A pause. "Ask me, love. Just ask me."

She swallowed. "You mentioned, a moment ago, that you wanted to taste."

A soft moan sounded off his lips. "Bloody yes, I wanna taste. Wanna lick every inch of you. Is that what you want?"

"It's not fair. I said no sex and—"

"Believe me, we'll both get somethin' outta this. But you gotta say the words." Breathing hard, he nudged her brow with his. "Say, 'Spike, please eat my pretty pussy.'"

"That's not going to happen."

"It will if you say it."

"I can't say it. It's ridiculous."

Spike pulled back enough to favor her with an arched eyebrow. "Ridiculous?" he echoed, and then his hand was there again, cupping her through her panties, teasing her through the fabric, his fingers alone doing more for her than maybe anything else ever had. "Pussy like this just begs to be eaten, pet. More ridiculous that you'd deny yourself what you want."

"I am not good with the sexy talk." Or being sexually assertive, for that matter, though a girl could learn. "Isn't it enough that I do want it? That I can admit."

He shook his head. "Gotta hear the words. Gotta know exactly what you want so I know what to give you."

"You're doing this to torture me, aren't you?"

"I'll admit it's bit of a perk."

Buffy poked her tongue out at him and immediately found it sucked into his mouth as he pulled her into another one of those religion-finding kisses. Little desperate mewls scratched at her throat, and she would have been embarrassed had he not answered in kind. God, he was fun to kiss. She remembered thinking so before—back during the spell that had nearly had them exchanging vows—but had figured that had been part of the magic. She'd believed herself in love with him then so all the touches and caresses and fondles had been part of the package, and she'd relished every second.

At last, Spike pulled back, panting. "Do it," he said softly. "Ask me to fuck you with my mouth. Wanna hear how much you want it."

"Guh," she replied ineloquently. "Spike, please. Put your mouth on me. I'm burning up."

He groaned, shuddered, then gave a nod. "Right then. Close enough."

And without warning, he seized her around the waist and flipped her so she was pressed to the couch. She barely had time to register the change in scenery before he stole another kiss then began making his way down her body, sliding to his knees before her with liquid grace she forgot he was capable of. He pushed the skirt of her dress all the way up her thighs and growled low in his throat when his gaze fell on her clothed pussy.

"Fuck me," he murmured, pressing a finger against the damp fabric of her crotch and between her folds. "All this honey and I get to lick it up."

"Yes. Yes with the licking. Do all the licking."

Spike flashed her a grin that should have had the power to melt her panties right off. "Oh, Slayer, I plan to," he promised heatedly before hooking his fingers around the elastic. Then he tugged the fabric down her legs, and the cool crypt air hit her wet flesh. He growled and stuffed the scrap of cotton into his pocket. Smart money said she was never seeing that pair again.

"Look at you," he whispered, bracing a hand on either thigh to spread her wider for him. "Fuck, you're gorgeous. Knew you would be. And you smell..." He lowered his head and inhaled with a deep, throaty groan. "Bloody hell, Buffy, you smell delicious."

Her heart was pounding so hard her bones hurt and knowing he could hear it just made the sensation more intense. No one had ever studied her like this—or at all, really. Not like she was something truly special. It was heady and unnerving all at the same time, making her aware of herself in ways she never had been before.

In reality, only a moment or so passed, but it seemed much longer, his eyes roaming her exposed flesh, growing darker by the second. Then, at last, he neared her with his mouth and dragged his tongue from the mouth of her sex to her clit. And the touch was freaking electric.

"Oh god!"

Buffy held her breath when Spike met her eyes again.

"Got yourself an addict here," he said in a low voice, almost a whis-

per. "Figured I'd be hopeless after just one taste, but thought you oughta know. I go dry too long after tonight and I'll need to get a fix. Could bloody well dust happy right between your thighs."

"Spike—"

"Yeah, that's right. Say my name." He nuzzled her curls, worked his throat. "Get used to it. 'Cause you're gonna be screamin' it here in a mo'."

Then his mouth was on her again, and the thoughts vying for attention died an abrupt death. "Oh god," she said again, then blinked, hardly recognizing the voice as her own. "Oh god."

"Oh baby," he replied, sliding his hands under her ass. "Put your legs over my shoulders, kitten. Yes, good girl. Just like that." He swirled his tongue around her clit as though to reward her, then leveraged his grip on her to pull her pussy closer to his mouth. "Need to grab onto something, grab onto me. Pull as hard as you want—I'll love every fucking second."

Hell, she was already trembling like there would be no tomorrow, her clit throbbing to the tune of its own heartbeat. Buffy couldn't have swallowed her gasp if she tried, because when Spike started swirling his tongue over her again she promptly lost control of her motor skills. Her body was no longer her own, it seemed—it was his. And damn, he could have it. He growled into her wet flesh, digging his fingers into her ass, rolling her clit between his lips between the long swipes of his tongue. It seemed he was everywhere at once—inside her, licking at her inner walls, growling and sucking and doing whatever he could to drive her the rest of the way out of her mind. Then he was teasing her clit with little licks and pulls, drawing circles around it before pressing down hard enough to jolt her out of her skin. And god, her body had never been this alive or this trembly. Like every touch whispered an echo in her fingers and toes and belly, until those echoes joined forces and crescendoed.

"Give it to me, Slayer," he rasped against her flesh, the words themselves wet, though she didn't know how. "Fuck my mouth."

"Oh god."

"Do it."

Buffy didn't know what happened. One second she was on the



couch, her legs splayed over Spike's shoulders, and the next he was on his back and she was over him, straddling his face, and rolling her hips as he worked his tongue in and out of her at a rhythm, growling his encouragement. She'd lost control of her body and she didn't care. Her mind was too crowded, too singularly focused to give much of a damn about anything at the moment. Anything but how he felt, how it was too much and not nearly enough and how she needed him to return his attention to her clit but if he stopped what he was doing she would just combust.

Then one of the hands on her hips dragged across her skin until it was between her legs. She rubbed herself against him, without thinking, shook when he growled again, and then—*oh yes*—he'd filled her with two strong fingers.

"Yes," she said, thrusting down hard on him. "Yes, yes, yes."

The sound of a belt being undone reached her from far away, followed by the unmistakable metallic hiss of a zipper, and she realized he wasn't holding her in place at all anymore, that she was moving again of her own accord, but to a rhythm he had established. He'd taken out his cock, she was sure of it, and the knowledge sent a heady rush through her that had her shoving aside her earlier misgivings because, *yes*, that was the only thing that could make this better.

Spike sighed and rumbled into her again, and she became aware of movement behind her. Movement punctuated with rhythmic strokes. And holy cannoli, he was jerking himself off. Spike was enjoying this so much he needed to touch himself—she didn't know why, but that knowledge shook her to her core.

Except she did know why. The idea that he could get off on getting her off was its own aphrodisiac, making her burn hotter than she could ever remember burning.

"Oh god." The words were inadequate but her brain refused to provide anything better.

Spike murmured something low in response before licking his way back up her slit. He swirled his tongue around her clit once, twice, then pulled it between his lips and sucked hard.

And that was it. The steady pulls of his mouth at her clit combined with the sensation of being filled and the encouraging grunts he made

against her flesh, worked together until the pressure wasn't just in her belly but spreading, bringing fire along with it. Buffy arched her neck, her back, and promptly exploded. Her pussy clenched around his fingers, her legs shaking with the effort to keep her upright, white-hot sparks setting her ablaze. She fisted his hair without thinking, leveraging him against her as her pussy spasmed, and then she was in it. Drinking it. Riding it. And still chasing it, because even when it was too much it was still not enough. Spike moaned and growled and gasped into her, then arched himself. She felt something hit the small of her back, and hell, knowing he'd come too nearly sent her into orbit all over again.

Buffy had no idea how much time had passed by the time her brain decided to start working again for real, after a few half-hearted false starts. She blinked and shook her head, which felt both empty and weighted down. Like she could float away at any moment even if moving was out of the question.

Spike had apparently carted her back to the couch, she saw, and she was in the crook of his arm. His jeans, she saw with mild disappointment, were zipped up again, though the button remained undone.

He'd respected the boundary she'd drawn and she was annoyed by it. Because she was a crazy person.

"You know," she said, and was startled to hear how breathless she sounded, "if you'd used your mouth like that the first time we met rather than running it, there's a very good chance I'd be dead right now."

Spike chuckled, ran a hand down her arm and nuzzled her hair. "Then I'll count my lucky stars I was a taken bloke at the time, 'cause I woulda done it in a sodding heartbeat. Though, knowin' me, I'd have fallen head over in the doin' and just decided to keep you instead. Why give the Slayer one death when you can give her multiple small deaths every bloody night?"

That much surprised her. "You would have done it...even then? This?"

He turned, and when their eyes locked, she would have sworn something inside her locked too. "From the first sodding second," he

said, and she felt it to the bone. “I was a bloody goner for you from the first sodding second.”

Buffy inhaled, shaking for entirely different reasons now, and aware that she was experiencing a moment that would stay with her forever. One that changed everything.

Because it was then she knew that Spike was someone she could love.

And holy hell, that was terrifying.

WHILE SHE'D BEEN BLITZED OUT OF HER MIND, RIDING THE WAVES of one whopper of an orgasm, Buffy had managed to maintain the wherewithal to have at least one more important conversation with Spike before leaving his crypt. A process that in itself had been somewhat difficult, as every time she'd made for the door, he'd grabbed and kissed all sense of purpose right out of her head. Part of her knew he'd been worried she'd change her mind the second she put some distance between them—a not unreasonable fear, she admitted, though one she felt was unlikely. The other part of her hadn't cared enough and just waved a white flag whenever it looked like he was about to make more magic with his mouth.

The important conversation, thankfully, had taken place before he could do too much irreversible damage to her brain cells.

"Can we keep this just between you and me?" she'd asked. "For right now?"

Spike had looked down at her, the happy light in his eyes fading somewhat, and damn, she'd hated that she was the reason. And she was the reason—she'd known exactly how that request had sounded.

Still, he'd offered a smile and nodded, brushing stray strands of blonde out of her eyes. "Course, pet. Whatever you want."

"It's not because I'm ashamed or anything. I just... I know how they get about things and I so do not want their attention on this you-and-me thing when I need it on the warlock who wants my sister." Buffy had rested her head on the back of the couch, frustration swelling in her stomach because it shouldn't *be* like this at all with her friends but it was. "I also don't know what this is yet and I don't want them to put me on the spot to define it."

Spike had swallowed, that strained smile twitching a bit. "Whatever you want," he'd said again.

"That's just it. It's about what *I* want—not them. And if I tell them, they'll make it about them." She'd paused, touched Spike's cheek and guided him around until their eyes were locked. "I want you and me to be about you and me. When we decide what that means, we'll tell them. If we do the relationship thing through and through, you won't be a secret. I just... I need time."

He'd studied her for another long beat before the shadows in his eyes had cleared. When he'd nodded a second time, it was with more vigor and understanding. "Might be better off for both of us," he'd murmured, dragging his fingertips down her cheek. "Wager the second they do find out, they'll start remindin' you of all the bad I've done, try to shake you to your senses."

"I haven't forgotten the bad, Spike. I'm just not convinced that's all there is to you. Not anymore."

The smile had turned sincere, and he'd kissed her and that had been the end of that. The rest of the evening had been spent slowly inching her way toward the door and letting herself become happily distracted with every step.

Buffy hadn't truly appreciated how difficult it would be to keep all of this on the DL, though—for her. Because the moment Spike barreled into the Magic Box behind her the next day, under the cover of the smoking blanket, her first instinct was to turn around, make sure nothing important was on fire, then greet him with more of those habit-forming kisses. Maybe see if he had plans for the night and if not, make some. Preferably the sort that involved little clothing and a lot of touching.

Yeah, the whole *no-sex* thing was going to die an abrupt death. Her

body started humming in all the right ways just at his proximity, and when he met her eyes and flashed her that devastating smile, she inwardly waved a white flag.

"Afternoon all," he said brightly, tossing his blanket to the ground without taking his gaze off her. "Slayer."

"Spike," she replied, doing her best to keep her tone prim and proper. Not at all like she'd ridden his face the night before and was thinking about how much she wanted to do it again. That and then some.

"Buffy's here?" Xander asked, popping up from the back, his expression a twist of confusion. "Buffy, Jeffrey said you bailed on him last night. What the hell gives?"

Oh right. The blind date that hadn't been. Buffy worked her throat, shifted her weight from one foot to the next, and summoned all the willpower she had to keep from looking at Spike, whom she assumed would be sporting a grin of the shit-eating variety.

"Well, sometimes you just know. You know?" Buffy shrugged and took a careful, measured pace away from her secret boyfriend. "And I knew. Everything was off. We just didn't click."

"He said you didn't even wait for the appetizers to come out. Also..." He frowned. "That you weren't single after all?"

Crap, she had said that, hadn't she? Buffy felt her cheeks go the sort of hot that might rival the sun and edged farther away from Spike. "Just don't know if I'm all up for dating. I know I said I was but...well, with everything that's going on with Dawn and this racquetball guy, I'm no longer ready to mingle."

"Racquetball?" Spike murmured, his voice brimming with amusement.

"Shut up," she whispered back, ignoring the puzzled look Xander shot her.

"Speaking of," Willow said, also popping up, "it's spell time." She glanced at Spike. "If you're ready, that is."

Right. The spell. The spell to unite two Spikes' minds and confirm the thing the other Spike had bargained had been his own soul. And it occurred to her, belatedly, just how much she had to trust the Spike standing next to her right now. Not once on the way to Restfield the

previous night had she had the thought that she might be going to the guy who had gambled her sister, despite whatever piece of scroll had his name scrawled at the bottom. Between what Tara had seen aura-wise and Anya's account of how demon bargains were struck, Buffy believed him. This whole spell thing was a formality in that regard—necessary in others, but not to answer the question of would Spike bargain Dawn's soul for anything. That matter, as far as Buffy was concerned, was settled.

"Where's Dawn? And Giles?" she asked, forcing her thoughts back to the present. She could ruminate over just what this surprising amount of faith in Spike meant later. Preferably after the warlock was a footnote and the next apocalypse not due to arrive for at least a good solid year.

"Dawnie's fine," Tara assured her, coming up next to Willow. "Anya sent her downstairs to do some inventorying. I think she knows we're keeping something from her, though, so you might need to have a talk with her later."

Buffy nodded, sighing. Yeah, as much as she hated the thought, the last thing they needed was a repeat of when Dawn had discovered she was the Key. "Yeah, I'll sit her down tonight. She'll want to know why she's staying at your place, anyway. One night was easy enough but more than that and she'll start making with the questions."

"She already is, just fair warning," Willow replied. "As for Giles, he got in late last night—like super late."

"In as in..." A thought occurred to her, one just crazy enough to be true. "He went *back* to LA? Are you serious?"

Spike snickered, then shrugged when she met his gaze and muttered, "Pillock."

Buffy exhaled deeply, turned her attention back to Willow and felt her stomach drop when she saw the look on her friend's face. It was all the confirmation she needed.

"The new information..." Willow shifted her weight between her feet. "He and Angel decided it would be better to powwow in person. Apparently, he stayed to cross-reference some of the books Angel has. Well, Angel and Wes, I think. He called me to give me an update. Woke us up, actually, and Dawn started in with *more* questions.

She knows something's up. Especially when Giles said that he couldn't get a hold of you."

"Giles tried to get a hold of me?"

"Earlier, before he left LA," Willow said. "Just to check in. Then I remembered Xander had told us you had a date, so we figured you were out on that. Probably why he didn't try again."

So Xander had told everyone *but* her that the date was scheduled for last night. That seemed about right.

Buffy sucked in her cheeks, combating an interesting marriage of emotions. Irritation at Giles for not immediately heading back the second she'd called him out on his clandestine visit, anger that he'd gone in the first place, worry that someone would ask her why she hadn't been home when her date had been a bust, guilt for having taken a night to tend to her ever-complicated personal life rather than do something productive, then irritation again at the fact that she felt she had to make those calls.

"He couldn't get a hold of you?" Xander echoed, his eyebrows winging upward. Because of course, he wasn't going to just hear that and let it slide. No, Xander had to have a comment about everything. Personal life? What personal life? "Did you go somewhere after you bailed on Jeffrey?"

Again, Buffy fought the urge to look at Spike. She could practically feel him bursting with giddiness, and while that much was kind of contagious, she maintained that now was not the time to reveal that she'd decided to get involved with another vampire.

"I had things to do last night," she replied instead, because that sounded very plausible and not at all like she was keeping secrets. Sexy secrets. "Is Giles coming in at all today?"

"I think he's going to do some more time-travel research," Willow said, then waved at Spike. "But we don't need him here for the spell. So, if you're ready..."

At last, Buffy gave herself permission to look directly at her vampire, and while there remained a definite gleam in his eyes, he sobered appropriately and took a step forward. "Right," he said, and inhaled. "Gonna stick your hand in my noggin, then? That how this works?"



Willow turned a bit red but didn't deny it. Instead, she gestured at one of the tables at the back. "Tara's going to help me find the rip in time. The signature should be similar to the aura she sees around your head and that contract. Once she finds it, I'll be able to see it through her and...well, we'll open the door." She glanced at Buffy. "I did take some of the other Spike's dust—not a lot, but some. Might help us find the signature faster."

"Is it going to hurt?" Buffy asked before she could stop herself. Because Spike sure as hell hadn't asked that before he'd agreed to it, and he deserved to know what he was getting himself in to.

If anyone thought this question was bizarre, they didn't show it. Well, maybe Xander, but she wasn't looking at him. Instead, she kept her gaze on Willow as her friend gave a small wiggle.

"I... Yeah, I think it will. B-but not bad. Not like it did when Glory did it because I won't be taking anything out, but putting something in. Still, fingers-in-head sounds opposite of fun, so..." She made a face and shifted her attention to Spike. "I'm sorry."

Spike, for his part, blinked as though not sure he was the guy she was apologizing to. "No worries, pidge," he said. "Little pain never hurt anyone, yeah?"

Willow winced. "It might not be a *little* pain."

"Can't be helped, I reckon. Even if we know the wanker's lyin' about the Nibblet, might learn somethin' that'll help us work out how to fight if my coughin' up a soul isn't good enough."

"I don't want you doing that," Buffy said shortly, not meaning to speak but not backing down once she realized she had. Instead, she straightened her shoulders. "Your soul... Even if you're not using it, it's not something that should just be gambled away."

"Other option is that you're dead, love," he replied. "Bloody kiddin' yourself if you think I'm gonna let that happen. Especially after—"

But he caught himself before he could say any more, sucked in his cheeks and looked away. And something pinged in Buffy's chest because she had a pretty good idea how that sentence would have gone if she hadn't established boundaries the previous night.

"Especially after what?" Xander asked, frowning. "Did I miss something?"

“Specially after goin’ to so much bloody trouble to save her arse in the first place, right?” Spike shifted and nodded at Willow. “Say we get on with it. Just as soon not drag it out, if it’s all the same to you.”

“Of course,” Willow said and gestured for him to follow.

Spike met Buffy’s eyes, released a deep breath, then trailed after the redhead. And she felt like she needed to say something—thank him, squeeze his hand, give him a kiss for good luck. A bunch of impulses that hadn’t been second nature just a few hours ago, but hey, things changed. And apparently, where Spike was concerned, they changed fast. At least for her.

Buffy pressed her lips together. At the very least, she would be nearby in case something went wrong. Not that she knew what she’d do in any such scenario, but that wouldn’t stop her from trying to help.

Willow sat at the end of a table, Spike on one side and Tara on the other. On the surface before her was a bowl of mixed ingredients—witchy herbs and the like. The small bottle she’d used to store the other Spike’s ashes sat to the side, and Buffy couldn’t help but stare at it, especially with Spike sitting right there. The visual juxtaposition made her shudder.

So quickly. It had happened so damn quickly.

“All right,” Willow said, straightening her shoulders. “I’m going to make with the chanting. Tara and I will first try to focus in on the signature from the initial spell.” She glanced at Spike. “It’ll probably be quick when it happens and I’m not sure I’ll be able to warn you. So... sorry. Again.”

He shrugged. “Whatever we need to do, just do it.” Then he looked to Buffy, and the seriousness she saw there had her dangerously close to tears.

He would, too. He’d do whatever she needed.

Damn.

Willow nodded then closed her eyes. Nothing for a moment, then she inhaled deeply, furrowed her brow, and began reciting something in a language Buffy wouldn’t even pretend to recognize, let alone understand. She and Tara had their hands pressed together, and after a moment, Tara joined in on the chanting.

For a few long, seemingly endless seconds, there was nothing. Just

the sound of the two witches' voices molding around the same funny words, their palms pressed together. Spike fidgeted somewhat and tossed Buffy an uncertain look. Then something did change—something small enough that she might have missed it had she not been watching the scene like the proverbial hawk. The space beside Willow and Tara's joined hands crackled, a fissure of electricity dancing along their fingers. Rather than dying, the fissure grew in size and sound, until it spider-webbed out, hairline fractures split against the otherwise empty canvas of air.

Willow had said it'd be quick, and boy, she hadn't been kidding. Her hand didn't move so much as it darted, a blur of motion too fast to visually track. There was no warning, either, before the witch dug her fingers into the side of Spike's head, as though, rather than skin and bone, he was made up of something soft and malleable. Light leaked from around her fingers, bright and terrible, but not as terrible as the hard cry that tore from Spike's throat.

Buffy didn't realize she'd started forward until she was practically on top of them, but by that time, it was over. Willow lurched forward, grasping the table and dragging in deep, lung-bruising gasps, her eyes shooting open and tears spilling down her cheeks. She blinked a few times as though to get hold of herself, but rather than calm, began shaking and crying harder.

"Willow!" Tara said, falling to her knees beside her. "Willow, what is it? What did you see?"

"What did he do to her?" Xander demanded, hurrying toward them and glaring stakes at Spike. "What did you do?"

But Spike was moving too, faster than Buffy had ever seen him move. Not so fast, though, that she missed the shine of tears in his own eyes, or how he looked just seconds from losing composure completely. He threw open the door to the training room, then seemed to catch himself and paused long enough to glance over his shoulder and look at her directly.

And god, Buffy didn't know what to make of that look or anything that had just happened. She'd seen Spike devastated before—or she thought she had. The time he'd come back in search of a love spell after Dru had kicked him to the curb. He'd spent most of the evening

drunk, only coming to life when the Mayor had sent in his goons and he'd been forced to fight. Yet even during the moments that night where he'd appeared truly miserable, it had been nothing like this. He'd had his spirit if nothing else—this Spike looked robbed of all of it.

What the hell had just happened?

Buffy glanced at Willow, who was slowly gathering control of herself, and in the half-second her attention was diverted, Spike disappeared completely into the training room. She'd just have to hope he hadn't gone far.

"Will?" Buffy said, rushing to her friend's side. "What just happened?"

Willow shook her head, releasing another sob. "Sorry," she said as she wiped at her eyes. "Sorry."

"Sorry? What are you sorry for?"

"This isn't mine," she said, sniffing. "It's..." She took several deep breaths before finally lifting her head. "God, Buffy, he really loves you."

"Who?" Xander asked. "Captain Peroxide? Come on, Will—"

"No, Xander, I was in his head. I felt...everything." Her lower lip started to wobble again but she managed to get herself under control before she could make with another emotional outburst. "A-and he really, really loves Buffy. I felt that too. Felt how he felt after you died, and god, I've never felt pain like that. It was crushing." She shook her head and wiped at her eyes. "He wanted to kill himself. Thought about it. The only thing that kept him from doing it was a promise he made to you before you died. A promise to keep watch over Dawnie."

Buffy was vaguely aware she was shaking all over and didn't know how to stop. She needed to know what else Willow had seen but she wasn't sure she wanted to all the same. That anyone could love her like that, feel like that, kinda wiggled her out. It was too big, too intense. Too...everything.

But then she thought about last night, how Spike had kissed her when she'd asked him to, how he'd feasted on her and encouraged her to ride his face. That had been intense, too. Way intense. Perhaps—no, definitely—the *most* intense sexual experience she'd ever had, including the night the ghosts at the frat house had made her and Riley have

marathon sex. And Spike was definitely the reason for that intensity. There was no getting around it. How much he felt came through in every move he made. In every stroke of his tongue, every soft caress, hell, even in the naughty words he'd fed her. It had made her feel empowered to the point of being invincible, though also a bit unworthy. Afraid she couldn't feel like that, to that degree, for anyone though she desperately wanted to.

Buffy swallowed and forced her thoughts back to the present. "What about the deal?" she asked. "Did you see that?"

Willow nodded. "Yeah. I saw everything."

"How?" Xander asked, his brow furrowed. "Sorry, but it was like three seconds of contact. And you saw everything?"

"Magic," Willow replied, lifting a shoulder. "And it felt...longer inside there. Everything the other Spike told us, though, was true. He went to Willy's, who turned him onto Rack. And this Rack guy is... yeesh. So don't want to meet him, but I'm guessing we won't have much choice. I saw the deal—there was no contract. Spike didn't sign anything. Dawn wasn't mentioned once. All Rack said was a pure soul, like Spike told us, and Spike... Yeah, he intended to get me to help him get his own here to make with the trade. There wasn't anything else. After Spike agreed, Rack split open a hole in time and Spike dove through to get here. That's where the instant replay ended." She released a deep breath and glanced at Tara. "We need to find out where the contract came from, because it's bogus. And research bargains like this—since there was no contract, if the verbal is strong enough to counteract whatever Rack tries to throw at us. Since we know the truth and he changed the terms after the other Spike was dust."

"The terms of the original agreement should be enough," Anya said. "It's not uncommon for deals to be vague on specifics, though, or to manipulate circumstances like this. But perhaps the rules are different when it comes to warlocks."

"We should have something here to verify it," Tara said, climbing to her feet. "The dark magic books. Willow?"

"Right behind you," Willow agreed. She started toward the staircase that led to the selection of texts Giles kept for reference, then paused and looked over her shoulder. "Buffy?"

Buffy realized belatedly she'd been staring at the door through which Spike had disappeared. She jerked back to herself and offered a nod, her heart galloping. "Research party," she agreed. "I'll put on my thinking cap and join you here in a sec. I just..."

A frown marred Willow's brow, then understanding brightened her eyes. "Oh. *Oh*." She stared a moment longer, her mouth twitching, then continued up the stairs. "We'll be here when you get back."

"Get back from where?" Xander asked. "Buff?"

"Just going to go check on Spike," she said, moving with intent toward the door to the training room. "He has two sets of memories now and that can't be comfortable."

She didn't bother to wait for a response, as she was pretty sure whatever Xander had to say would just annoy her. And she needed to make sure Spike was all right—if what Willow had seen had shaken her that badly, Buffy didn't want to think of the state she'd find her vampire in.

She didn't release the breath she was holding until she was in the training room, until she saw Spike sitting on the floor by the wall, his eyes distant and haunted, tears still rolling down his cheeks.

Buffy swallowed, steeled herself, closed the door behind her, and started toward him.

SPIKE HADN'T KNOWN WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN HE'D AGREED TO this, hadn't really thought through the implications of going through with the spell to unite his mind with his other self's memories. All he'd known, all he'd needed to know, was that doing it would help protect Dawn in some way or another. It'd help clear his name, too, and eradicate any thought that he might have done the unthinkable where the Bit was concerned. Not that Buffy had needed it—everything that had happened last night confirmed as much. Bleeding hell, had it not been for the fact that her scent was still rich in his crypt, he might have chalked up what she'd told him, what they'd done together, as a very vivid dream. Wasn't too far off the dreams he'd had of her, anyway.

The other Spike—who he guessed was him now, in a twisted sort of fashion—had told him what living in a world without Buffy had been like. The horror of seeing her lying on the ground, peaceful as though asleep, even if he'd known, even from a distance, that she was dead. He'd thought he'd known pain before. Staking his mum. Watching Dru fawn all over Angelus. Losing Dru for good. The utter humiliation of being defanged by a bunch of government wankers. All of that had hurt more than he reckoned a human bloke could hurt and keep on living, but he'd been a fool. Losing Buffy had redefined his

understanding of pain, catapulted him to a place where he honestly didn't give a bugger what happened next. Hoping blindly that some demon would have themselves a good day and finish him off, release him of the promise he'd made to the Slayer to protect her sister so it wasn't his fault that he wasn't around anymore. Anything to stop feeling the things he felt, to stop living in a world that didn't have her in it.

Bloody hard to reconcile those memories with the ones he had now. There were more days separating the Tower from the present on the other side. He'd lived through a week after she'd died, and that week had lasted centuries. It was no sodding wonder he'd leaped at the chance to undo it—not that he'd had a rough time knowing why before these memories had become his own. He'd known, but he hadn't been able to appreciate it, feel it the way he did now.

Still, as hard as this was, Spike somewhat wished that hadn't been the end of it. That Red had been able to give him all pieces of the other Spike's memories, not just the ones from the other side. He'd have liked to feel that relief, the realization that he hadn't failed after all and had managed to save her and Dawn. Of seeing her again after living a week without her, and knowing that she wasn't a figment of his imagination. But the magic didn't work like that and despite how powerful the want, Spike wasn't fool enough to let the witch play with his head more than she had already. Way he saw it, he was fortunate that she hadn't addled his brains too much in uniting what had been with what now was.

The door to the training room opened, and her scent hit the air. Familiar and warm and intertwined with his now. She'd showered that morning but he still smelled them together, and that was part of this world too. Something he'd thought impossible, more so than leaping through time, had come to fruition.

Buffy didn't say anything as she approached, nor when she reached him. Instead, she stopped beside him, pressed her back to the wall, and slid down slowly so that they were sitting side-by-side. Bit more than he'd have wagered she'd be open to in a public place, given the way they'd left things last night, but he wasn't about to complain. Not now when he needed her warmth more than ever.



They simply sat like that for a few minutes, then Buffy sighed and rested her head against the wall. “You okay?”

Such a simple question.

Spike dragged a hand through his hair and across his cheeks—which he realized belatedly were wet—before risking a glance at her. “Truthfully, Slayer? Don’t rightly know. Bit of a trip, yeah? Seein’ things both ways all of a sudden.”

“Yeah.” She seemed uncertain of herself and he didn’t know what to make of that. Then, slowly, she extended a hand and placed it on his knee. The heat of her skin burned him even through the denim of his jeans. “Willow... She said she felt the things you felt. Saw the things you saw.”

Great. Not enough that he had these bloody awful memories to contend with, but he had no secrets, either. Which, granted, had been the point of this rotten exercise, but smarted all the same.

“She said that you...*really* love me.”

Spike looked at her at last, his brow furrowing. “Uh, yeah,” he said, drawing the words out. “Not exactly headline news there.”

“No, but... I dunno. I guess hearing it from someone else kinda made my brain go all with the fuzzy.” She rested her head against his shoulder, nearly startling him out of her skin. Assuming they went ahead with their relationship, he reckoned it’d be a minute before he got used to small gestures of affection, but fuck if they didn’t warm him up from the inside out. “Do you need to talk about it?”

“About my loving you? Do you need to hear it?”

“I meant about what you saw. What you experienced.” She lifted her head to meet his eyes again. “Because suddenly you are with the two sets of memories, which kind of makes you both versions of Spike, I guess.”

“Still don’t remember snogging you the way he—I did,” he muttered. “Or what the two of you mighta whispered about when I wasn’t around.”

She snickered. “It wasn’t anything sordid. Nothing I haven’t talked with you about. And really, can you blame me anymore?”

No, he really couldn’t. Not like he’d had much of a reason to in the first place, but having experienced now what this doppelganger had

experienced, having the memories of that awful, bone-deep pain that wasn't merciful enough to kill him, the fact that the other Spike had stolen a kiss didn't matter at all. Because it had been him—it *had* been. In all the ways that mattered. He remembered sitting in his crypt the night Willow had come in to tell them about patching up the Buffybot, remembered how he'd given her the boot and promised himself that he'd start doing what he could to keep his word to Buffy. How closed off he'd been in the arrangements after, because what had he ever been to her beyond a reluctant ally? The bloke who stole her knickers and lounged around outside her window? The stupid git that had chained her up and threatened to feed her to Dru if she didn't admit she felt something for him? The vampire deluded enough to believe he was in love with her to let himself be turned into a hellgod's plaything? None of her friends had taken him into consideration at all in the days that followed her death—except when it came to Dawn or patrolling or anything they could tie back to the phrase *this is the way Buffy would have wanted it*. Like they had any clue.

"Don't blame you a bit," he replied a moment later and was happy to mean it. "And you did a right number on him, too. He was mighty sore I snogged you that first morning."

Buffy grinned and rolled her eyes. "You were both jealous of yourself."

"Well, yeah. Didn't matter if you wanted to be with one of us so long as you chose me." He smiled back, the sensation unnatural but brilliant all the same. Being with her like this, trading secrets, knowing that she'd come after him—all of it drove home everything she'd told him last night in ways words couldn't. Because following him out here, asking these questions, talking to him the way she was, was something Buffy only did for people who mattered to her.

Well, maybe she would have done this a couple of weeks back, just because she'd needed him. But it would have been for Dawn's welfare and not his own—make sure he was prepared to do what was needed, not emotionally compromised.

"You're kinda adorable," Buffy said, nudging his shoulder with hers. "That's what I've decided about this whole self-jealousy thing. It's adorable."

There was a word he'd never heard associated with himself and were it not for the shine in her eyes, he wasn't sure he'd much care for it. Well, no, that was a load of rot. Buffy finding him anything but disgusting and evil was a bloody revelation and what she'd let him do to her last night defied belief. When he'd stirred that morning—reluctantly at first, then with keen interest once the fog of sleep dissipated and his memory kicked in—it had taken going to the crypt's upper level before he'd truly accepted that she'd come by. And that was with the Slayer there in the flesh, blushing hard and making eyes at him. She'd swung by to wake him up—no small feat, bless her—and tell him that the spell was ready and the sooner they got this over with, the sooner they'd be able to go public.

Being with her was going to be brilliant. If he could keep from mucking it up.

"So we know now for sure that you bargained your soul and there was no magical contract involved," Buffy said a moment later. "Willow and Tara are researching whether or not the deal is binding without a contract. Anya says it would be if a demon were involved, but since the warlock isn't technically a demon... I dunno." She was quiet a moment. "What I do know is you're not giving up your soul."

At that, his heart gave a pitiful twinge. "Funny," he replied, "seein' as I didn't reckon that was your call to make."

"I know you're not using it and, after much—pardon the pun—*soul*-searching of my own the past couple of days, I've arrived at the conclusion that you don't need one."

"That a fact?"

"Yes. That you're sitting here with me right now and not trying to kill me isn't due to the chip."

Well, there was an admission he'd thought she'd never make, even in his most optimistic fantasies. Spike released a long breath. "Everythin' changed for me when I fell in love with you, pet," he said, hesitating before placing a hand on her knee and giving it a squeeze. Relishing the fact that he could—that she let him. That touching Buffy was a pleasure he could look forward to every sodding day if he played his cards right. "From that first mo', like I told you last night. Just took a bit for my brain to catch up to my heart. Even a bit longer then,

'cause I sure as hell didn't *want* to love you. Knew it wouldn't end well for me."

"A few years back, you said you were love's bitch."

"Bloody right I am." He slung an arm over her shoulder and tucked her into him, overjoyed when she went willingly. Even more so when he inhaled the air that was hers, that smelled of her, and pressed a kiss to her temple. They'd snogged a bit after she'd managed to get him awake, but she'd been there on a mission and wouldn't be deterred. "Love's bitch meaning there's no price too high to keep you alive and this world turning. Besides, since the other bloke bit the dust, my own neck's on the line too. Doesn't seem that this Rack wanker is the type that would let my other self keep livin'." He paused, frowned. "Not that I'd want to. If this goes south and I lose you again, I'd be just as happy being dust."

"Don't say things like that."

"Why not? It's true. I remember now." Spike swallowed and hugged her closer. "Remember all of it. Losing you... Don't think I'd survive it again. Point of fact, know I wouldn't. Especially now."

"Yeah, you kinda said that already. That or something like it. Almost blew the lid off this whole secret relationship thing."

"Was true then too, whatever I said."

"But regardless, your soul doesn't deserve whatever Rack will do to it," Buffy said. "It won't be good. You have to know that."

"Know it. Don't much care. Won't be able to feel it, will I?"

"But it's your *soul*, Spike. Whether or not it's in you, it's a part of you. Or who you were."

And thanks to that night at the Bronze, the Slayer had a clearer idea of who he'd been before Dru had found him than he'd ever wanted anyone to have. Turned out that being around her made all sense vacate his head. Tell a girl he's always been bad before spilling a story about a wanker poet whose heart had proved easily crushable.

"It's my soul," he agreed in a low, measured voice. "My soul, my decision. Comes down to you or me, love, and I know every sodding second the way my ax is swingin'. So do you. Told you as much not too long ago, point of fact. The me of old would agree in a heartbeat, too."

Buffy sighed, closed her eyes and rested her head against the wall. "I don't like it."

"Not wild about it, myself, but it's loads better than the alternative."

"And there's an alternative out there too. An alternative to your alternative. We'll find it."

"Awfully sodding protective of somethin' you swear you don't think I need," Spike said.

"It's not about you needing it or not needing it—it's about what will happen to it. No part of you deserves that." Buffy thumped her head against the wall as if to drive her point home, then peeked an eye open. "As your secret girlfriend, I feel like what I want should matter, especially as it pertains to you."

*Secret girlfriend.* Bloody hell if hearing her say that didn't have him grinning like a sodding loon. Even as much as he didn't fancy the *secret* part of the equation, he understood why that had been important to her. And while he couldn't quite say he wasn't worried the *secret* might have a shelf-life beyond whatever Rack threw at them, he was also oddly confident that it wouldn't, because this Buffy wasn't the Buffy of a few days ago. Not even the one who had let him into her house the night of the apocalypse that wasn't. That Buffy had started to trust him, maybe even like him a bit, but she'd still been miles apart from the girl sitting with him now.

Spike nudged her head with his, suddenly desperate to taste her. "Kiss me."

Buffy arched an eyebrow. "Kiss you?"

"Mhmm." He dropped his gaze to her lips. "Know you wanna."

"We're talking about something serious here."

"And I seriously need your mouth on mine. Right now." He dragged his teeth over his lower lip and grinned when her eyes darkened. "Come on."

"Why don't you kiss me?"

"Cause I wanna know you want it too. Like last night. Wanna feel it." Spike glanced at her mouth again. "Course, if you leave me hanging too much longer, I'll do just that."

She was still for a moment, then a playful light entered her eyes.

Had his heart been the beating sort, it would have thundered like mad. As it was, his chest did tighten, and his body came to life in ways he hadn't reckoned it could until he'd discovered he'd managed to find himself in love with the Slayer. A different kind of love from any that had become before, lighting him up from the inside out, hard and consuming.

"What if I want to know if you want it?" she asked, her voice a soft tease.

At that, he barked a laugh, and it felt bloody good. The second those memories had hit him, he'd found himself avalanched by grief so intense it would suffocate someone who actually needed to breathe. But that reality wasn't the one he was in right now, and if he had anything to say about it, never would be again.

"Guess you'll just have to take a chance, pet," he replied. "Though I think askin' you to give me a snog makes my feelings on the matter pretty clear, from where I'm sitting."

She narrowed her eyes, though that did rot to hide how amused she looked. "From where you're sitting," she echoed in that patented unimpressed Summers' voice of hers.

"Yeah. Fancy a look?" Spike didn't wait for a response, rather seized her about the waist and hauled her into his lap, unable to keep from grinning like mad when she went willingly. Then she was astride him, the hot center of her pressed against his swelling cock, and it was everything. *She* was everything.

And she was with him because she wanted to be.

"See?" he asked, bracing his hands against her back, tugging her closer. "View's clearer from here."

Buffy sucked her lower lip between her teeth, and he bit back a groan. "It does seem a bit less foggy," she mused.

"Thought so." Spike pressed his brow to hers, focusing on the steady thumps of her heart. Her warmth. Her scent. All of it, all Buffy, and all for him. At last, all for him. "Buffy, kiss me."

He thought she might play coy a bit longer, but she didn't. Thank *fuck*. And the second that pretty little mouth of hers brushed against his, he was a bloody goner. He growled and pulled her closer—as close as he could, drinking her in with eager, fervent strokes of his

tongue. It was insane, what this woman could do to him—had been from the bloody start. And how the hell he'd gone so long without seeing what was obvious, he'd never know. Perhaps that had been his subconscious trying to protect him, keep him from the sort of heartache that could drown a man because there was no way the Slayer would ever feel the same for him.

Except here he was, Buffy in his lap, her tongue in his mouth, her arms curled around his neck, holding him to her as she drove him out of his sodding head. As she flooded his senses with everything warm and pure and *Buffy*. He figured he could do this, just snog her forever, and be a happy bloke.

"You," Buffy said between kisses, "are way too good at this."

"Mhmm. Am I?" He began nibbling a path down her throat, his gums tingling at the hint of ripe Slayer blood just under her skin.

Would she let him bite her one day? Fuck, the thought alone had the situation in his jeans going from uncomfortable to bloody painful, but in the best possible way.

"Very, very good," Buffy agreed, cupping his cheeks and dragging him back to her mouth. She whimpered when he thrust his tongue between her lips, then sucked on it hard enough to have him whimpering in turn. If the girl wasn't careful, her mates were prone to find out right quick about the change in their relationship, because the sounds she was making, combined with the way she moved against his cock, had him balancing on the edge of losing whatever control he pretended to have. Fine with him—he didn't give a fuck who knew what was going on. No, scratch that. He wanted everyone to know—wanted to have the same liberties Captain Cardboard had enjoyed during that yearlong song and dance. Touching her whenever he wanted, dropping kisses before he left, standing near her—all of it. He wanted all of it.

But that wasn't what she wanted yet, and since this was still so bloody new it could break with the first stiff wind, he wasn't about to push the issue. Just take what he could get and be thrilled with it until the day came that they could come out of the shadows.

Then, as though he'd made it happen by wishing it, the sound of the door to the training room swinging open hit his ears, and the

isolated world they'd created suddenly became a whole lot less isolated. Spike groaned and tore his mouth from Buffy's, certain for a second that his heart had started up again. "Fuck," he murmured.

"Buffy, is everyth—oh."

Spike drew in a deep breath before turning his attention to Willow, trying very hard not to look like the Slayer had just been kissing his mouth off. Not that it made much difference, considering Buffy was in his lap, entwined around him, her lips swollen and her cheeks flushed. But hell, at least he'd tried.

Buffy winced and glanced to her right, where Willow stood staring at them. Well, gawking was more like it, slack-jawed and wide-eyed. Nothing happened for a long moment. Red stared at them and they stared right back, like it was some sodding game of chicken to see who'd crack first. A slew of things, most of them insulting, crowded Spike's throat, begging for release, but he knew better than to stick his foot in it.

"I, umm..." Willow backtracked back into the shop proper, dragging the door with her. "I'll just...go away. And be...somewhere that's away."

Buffy rolled her head back, groaning. "Will—"

"No. Away. Is where I'm going. Right now."

The door closed with finality, leaving them in a room that suddenly seemed a lot less warm than it had a moment ago. Spike went rigid, every muscle in his body—which had been ready and primed to roll them both to the ground—now painfully strained.

There were two ways this could go and two ways only. The next few seconds would determine the course of the rest of his bloody life.

"Well," Buffy said at last, her shoulders dropping, "I guess it was too much to hope that we could keep this under the radar until after we'd dealt with Rack."

He released a short breath, not quite daring himself to hope. "Slayer?"

"Yeah, I know. Time to go do damage control." She grumbled and shuffled off him, then to her feet. "I hate damage control."

"So...you're not gonna knock me in the head, then?"



She arched an eyebrow, her lips twitching. "Because Willow has the worst timing ever?"

"Just thought... You said you wanted to keep mum about us. Thought that'd mean you'd be a bit brassed with me for getting caught like that."

Buffy stared at him a moment longer before breaking off in a short laugh. "Pretty sure it takes two to make out," she replied, extending a hand, which he took. "Though you *did* pull me into your lap. Not with the fair."

"I—"

She tugged him to his feet, studied his face, then offered a small grin and stole a quick kiss off his lips. "It was a matter of time," she said. "Is this the ideal way? No. Is it the ideal time? A world of no. But I told you I don't intend on keeping us secret. I just wanted to avoid the major wig the rest of them are going to throw until after the latest monster of the week was defeated. But because the PTB have something against me, I guess we're due to face the firing squad now."

Spike had thought it was impossible to be any more lost for her than he was already. As per usual, he'd been wrong. "Fuck, I love you."

She glanced away, a delightful blush rising to her cheeks. "I—ahh..."

The thought remained unfinished, the Slayer looking anywhere but at him. This had him right confused for a moment until the clouds in his mind parted.

Saying that now was different than it had been before. Before he'd been pissing in the wind—now there was something real between them. Something that had the chance to be something, and he'd gone and mentioned love.

"Not a moron. Don't expect to hear it just yet, if ever. Just like sayin' it and not having you throw it in my face, is all." He leaned in and brushed his mouth against hers because he bloody well could. "That all right?"

"I... Yeah. It's all right." But she still wouldn't look at him, and at once he felt a bit like a prat. No sense pressuring the girl just because he had several months' head start on where his heart had landed. He needed to give her time—bloody hell, she'd just last night decided she

wanted to try anything at all. No sense running his mouth about how he felt about her.

But that she was still standing here with him, that she was ready to face the music—especially with everything else going on... Fuck, that meant something.

And though he wasn't the most patient bloke, there were definitely things in this world worth waiting for.

THERE HAD BEEN LITTLE TO NO HOPE THAT WILLOW WOULD KEEP her pie-hole shut about what she'd caught them doing, but Buffy couldn't help feeling a rush of disappointment when she and Spike stepped back into the store proper and found that no one—except Anya, of course—could quite look at either one of them.

Granted, they wouldn't be her friends if they weren't all up in her business. The silent treatment lasted for all of thirty seconds. Then Xander, who looked like he'd been psyching himself up, stepped forward with his I-have-an-opinion face.

"That's why you bailed on Jeffrey?" he asked in what he likely thought was a calm, measured tone but was actually brimming with hostility. "To make out with *Spike*?"

Buffy's heart skipped. And even though she'd known to expect it, she couldn't help but feel lampooned back to the sixteen-year-old who had gone blue in the face defending her relationship with Angel. Not so much in the beginning, but definitely after he'd taken the trip to whatever hell dimension following his soulless stint. Xander had come at her hard and fast then, too—not like she hadn't had the weight of the world on her shoulders or anything.

But things were different now. *She* was different. And Spike was definitely not Angel.

So she squared her shoulders and let go of her fear. “Yes,” she said.

Xander opened his mouth, then blinked and gawked at her. “Y-yes?”

“Yes. I went out with your friend—and I maintain that you did not tell me that was going to be *last night*, but whatever—and realized he wasn’t who I wanted to be with.” She held up a hand before he could start in again. “And Xander—*all* of you, really—this isn’t up for debate. I don’t know what this is yet and I don’t need to. That’s what dating is for. And the only reason I didn’t open with that when we got here earlier is we have *so* much bigger crap to deal with than who I might be sleeping with.”

“You’re sleeping with him?” Xander blinked at her like the thought itself had never occurred to him, whether or not she and Spike were suddenly making out.

“Things filed under: none of your business,” Buffy replied, and glanced to Spike to see if he had anything to add, hoping against hope that he didn’t because she had a feeling he’d just make things worse, intent aside.

He held her gaze, swallowed and nodded. And though she saw the sparks of his trademark mischief dancing in his eyes, he seemed to understand that spouting off at the mouth would do neither of them any favors at the moment.

“Anyone else have anything they want to get off their chest?” Buffy asked, turning back to the room with more bravado than she felt. “Questions, comments from the peanut gallery? We don’t have time but I know how you guys are.”

Xander stood there for a moment, opening and closing his mouth. At length, he seemed to concede the battle—color her stunned—and turned and walked off toward the back.

“I-I didn’t mean to spill the beans,” Willow said from behind her. Buffy turned to find her friend on the upper level, a thick tome in her outstretched arms. “I...I think I just had a zombie look when I came back in and I wasn’t quick enough to come up with anything. For the record...”

She glanced at Spike quickly before turning her attention back to Buffy. “As the only person in this room who has been in Spike’s head other than Spike... Well, I felt what he felt and it’s pretty damn powerful.”

Beside her, Spike shuffled a bit. “Thanks ever so, Red.”

“So...with it being weird? Yeah, maybe a little. But I get it.”

Buffy released a long breath, nodding. “Thanks, Will,” she said, meaning it, though she couldn’t quite let go of her irritation. Sure, walking in on her and Spike playing tonsil hockey was probably a bit wigsome, but still, there was a best friend clause she was pretty sure Willow had violated.

“Can we not talk about Buffy’s love life?” Anya asked from behind the counter. “It seems like we spend way too much time on the subject.”

“And to that, a very enthusiastic *hell yes*,” Buffy agreed, then made her way toward the stairs that would take her to the dark magic books. “In terms of things that are actually worth discussing, I don’t suppose anyone found anything that will let us know whether or not Rack is bound by the initial terms of the agreement?”

At that, Willow brightened. “Actually, yes,” she said and held up the book currently cradled in her arms. “We’re cross-referencing a few of these, but pretty much all of them say the same thing. Verbal contracts are much, much more binding in the magical world than real contracts. Many practitioners will make deals intentionally vague to essentially do what Rack did to Spike—try and trick them into thinking they agreed to something they didn’t or change the terms to better favor themselves. And a lot of the time, the people who made the deals are so desperate to keep them in place that they just believe it. The brain can convince itself of just about anything, and as time goes on—not too much time but enough to let the brain do its thing—the more likely it is that the thing you once thought you would never do becomes something that you can see yourself doing in the right set of circumstances. Rack just didn’t count on the fact that we could piggyback off his signature to see the deal as it was.”

“Which is really rare,” Tara chimed in.

“Super rare. Most people who seek out these practitioners don’t

know any other practitioners.” Willow waved at Spike. “Spike does, in the form of the two of us.”

“And even if they do know practitioners,” Tara went on, “they might not have the means or ability to do what Willow and I did. Aura readers are pretty common, but...the level of power Willow has is not. Combine the two and—”

“We are essentially your Wiccan Dream Team,” Willow said happily, and closed the heavy book as though punctuating the thought. “So we should be able to do the spell for Spike’s soul, hand that over, and that will be the end of that.”

That anyone could say that last thing with a smile on their face was chilling. “There’s just one problem—we’re not giving this guy Spike’s soul.”

Spike dropped his shoulders, sighing hard. “Slayer—”

“No, there has to be another way.”

He glared at her as though that would have any effect. Buffy almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

*Welcome to being the boyfriend of Buffy.*

“We talked about this,” he said tersely, his teeth clenched. “My soul. My bargain. My choice. Felt that way before I had the memories and I feel like it even more now.”

“Except, as I told you not ten minutes ago, it’s also my choice. Welcome to being in a real relationship with someone who is *not* a crazy person. This is what happens.”

“Bloody hell...” While his tone didn’t lighten any, the if-looks-could-bite glare lost some of its edge. She could tell he was at least somewhat moved by this, even though he didn’t want to be. Probably especially because he didn’t want to be.

“Can we take a vote on the crazy person thing?” Xander asked. He brought his hands up when she pinned him with a glare of her own. “Not about the dating thing, but... Well, yeah, about the dating thing, but specifically, in this case, letting Spike do his bargain. Kinda on his side here. It’s his soul and it’s not like he’s using it.”

“See, pet? Even Harris is on board.”

Did no one else appreciate what a big deal this was? Was it because it was Spike’s soul that they were so freaking cavalier about making

with the sacrifice? Or was it that the soul was out there in limbo somewhere, not doing anything, so they might as well put it on the chopping block? Spike's willingness to pony up the price was one thing—he didn't see things in a human way. But Xander and especially Willow were big ole disappointments in this regard.

"It's a human soul," Buffy said, trying to press back on the irritation rising in her chest.

"Yeah," Spike shot back. "And it's your life. *Your* life, Buffy. I'm not lettin' you pull your heroics for yours truly, especially over something that's not in bloody use!"

"Tara," Buffy called without looking at her, seeing as she was now in a stare-down with her vampire. "Can you please look up all the things that a bad guy like Rack can do with a pure soul?"

"I-I don't need to," Tara replied. "The answer is a lot and none of it is good. He can torture it indefinitely, rip it apart, even put it in someone else for dark purposes." She paused and gathered her breath before looking to Xander, then Willow. "I'm sorry, I'm with Buffy on this. Spike, it was a very... That you'd offer it is big and I can understand why it seemed like the best solution, but it's condemning the person you were before to something worse than Hell."

At last, the voice of reason. Buffy let out a long breath. "Thank you," she said, favoring the witch with a soft smile. Then she turned back to Spike, armed with arched eyebrows and the truth. "You can't tell me that your soul deserves that."

There was no reply for a moment—he just looked at her, opening and closing his mouth as he struggled to find an argument. The longer the silence, the more agitated he looked, until finally he barked, "What else is there for it, pet? You really think I'm gonna let you die when I bloody well have the means to stop it? I'm not going through that. Not again. And it's right that it's on me, isn't it? Was my fault you jumped in the first place. I didn't get there fast enough, didn't make it to Dawn, let the sodding Doc toss me off the bloody Tower. You asked me to do one thing, one simple thing, and I failed."

Buffy grabbed his wrist. "You didn't fail. I didn't die."

"Yes, you did! That's the point. The whole reason we're here." Spike gestured at Willow, who had gone exceptionally pale. "She saw it.

I lived it. I know what it's like and I know what went wrong the first time around. I'm not doing that again. Even if it..." He inhaled deeply, every line of his face marked with pain. "Even if it means you and me go no further, if this is it. I'd rather have you in the world hating me than not in it at all."

"Wow," Willow breathed.

And again, Buffy was left unable to do anything beyond stare at him, trying to absorb this—understand it. This thing that made him love her so much, made him look at her like the way he was now, like he was in physical pain. She wanted to kiss him and slap him upside the head and scream at him and then kiss him some more. Preferably somewhere private, where the kissing could lead somewhere. It was an odd sensation, being torn between anger and heartbreak and lust all at the same time. Both Angel and Riley had done stupid things, but nothing like this, and she didn't know how to handle it.

A door creaked open before she could gather her thoughts, and then Dawn was in the room, her wide eyes betraying that she'd overheard things she probably shouldn't have.

Because apparently, they were doing *everything* now.

"There was screaming," her sister said by way of greeting. "And... Well, screaming. Will someone please tell me what's going on?"

Buffy blinked eyes that were suddenly stinging. "Spike offered his soul to Rack in exchange for coming back through time," she said hoarsely. "I'm trying to get it through to him that it's not worth it."

"And I'm tryin' to get Big Sis to see that it's not her choice."

"Spike—"

"You want Willow to stick the soul in me first so you can hear me say it then, too? I will."

"So, we definitely know it was his soul and not mine?" Dawn asked.

Well, that was enough to steal her retort from her lips. Buffy jerked to her sister, her heart in her throat. "Dawn—"

But Dawn had her hands up as if in surrender. "Willow and Tara don't exactly whisper," she said. "I was able to pretty much put all of it together. Plus, with the me staying with them thing when Glory's all, you know, dead." She looked at Spike. "For the record, *obviously* you didn't bargain my soul. It was dumb anyone thought you did."



Spike, who had looked mildly panicked when Dawn started speaking, relaxed with a slight smirk. “Thanks, Bit.”

“There were reasons,” Xander objected, apparently having found his voice. “A contract.”

“Yeah, because a big magical baddie having the power to open a hole in time can’t manage a simple forgery.” Dawn rolled her eyes and snickered as though this were the most obvious thing in the world. “I mean, *dub*.”

At that, Spike actually laughed.

“And, yeah,” she went on, “I’m on board with my big sis not dying, so I say pony up that soul and let’s be done with it.”

Of course she was on board with this. Of course she would say that. There were times when Dawn demonstrated a surprising amount of forethought and maturity, and other times when her age couldn’t be more apparent. This was the latter of those times.

“Dawn—”

She brought her hands up again. “I’m not saying it’s the best solution,” she argued, and now her lower lip started with the trademark Summers wobble. “But the alternative? I can’t lose you too, Buffy.”

Buffy expelled a deep breath. “We have two days, right? Two days to see if there’s a way out of everything—out of me dying, out of Spike trading his soul... There has to be a loophole somewhere.”

“I doubt it,” came from behind the cash-wrap. Buffy jumped, having forgotten Anya was there. She turned to face the demon, who also brought her hands up. “It’s common for the asking party to back out of the terms of payment after they get what they want,” she said. “Demons got burned way too many times that way, which is why we simplified the rules. I doubt even killing Rack would negate the terms of the agreement. Contracts forged in magic outlast the people who make them. So...it’s either Spike coughs up the soul he’s not using or this timeline ceases to exist. And I very much do not want to cease to exist.”

Great. Outnumbered on all sides. That was a dangerous place to be in—for her and for anyone in her path.

“We have two days,” she said again. “We spend those two days looking for another way. I don’t care if you say it’s impossible—I know

us, and I know we've managed the impossible before. So we keep looking." She glanced at Dawn. "You're going to stay with Willow and Tara again tonight. Rack is still interested in you and if he comes at me with magic, my options are of the limited. I need to know you're safe so I can focus on the bargain stuff. Okay?"

She expected Dawn to protest at this, but she didn't. Instead, she asked, "Can I help look for a loophole? If there is a way to save Spike's soul *and* keep you from dying, then I want to help find it. And don't give me the *you're too young* stuff, because you were sneaking out to hunt vampires and make out with Angel when you were my age and that was just as *grown-up* as looking through books. More grown-up, in fact. Who knows what you two got up to in those cemeteries?"

Spike let out a little growl, one he probably couldn't help. Just like she couldn't help finding it a bit cute.

What a difference a day made. Still, Buffy managed to keep her focus on her sister.

"Dawn, you were kidnapped by a hellgod who intended to jam you into some mystical lock so she could rule some demonic hellworld. Before that, we were literally chased down by a bunch of D&D rejects and... I could go on, but my point is, I'm officially un-momming on the content supervision. Just don't get anything sticky, smelly, or greasy on Willow and Tara's books and do whatever they say—even if it means leave the room. Okay?"

The fight drained from Dawn's face so quickly she almost looked disappointed, like she'd had an argument all squared up and ready to be fired. That didn't last long—the realization that Buffy had agreed with her seemed to prove the more powerful force. She beamed a brilliant smile that highlighted just how young she still was—an age not too far behind Buffy, though it felt like a thousand years had passed since then—and barreled into her arms.

"You mean it?" Dawn asked, her voice likely more shrill than she had intended.

"As long as you don't bust out my eardrums, yes," Buffy replied. "Also..." She pulled back, gripping her sister by the shoulders. "Since everyone in here knows already, I'll go ahead and tell you so you don't get it through the grapevine. Spike and I are kinda dating now."

If Buffy had thought Dawn had maxed out on the decibels she could hit before, she'd lacked a true appreciation for her sister's vocals.

"Bloody hell," Spike grouched, thumping the side of his head, though he wore a brilliant smile. "Some of us have sensitive ears, Bit."

There was no telling if Dawn even heard him, bouncing as she was, looking even younger than before. She turned and launched herself against him, though, with enough force he nearly toppled over. "You're already my favorite of my sister's boyfriends," she told him. "Just don't be stupid and mess it up."

"Oi! Why's it me who's bein' stupid here?"

"Precedent?" Buffy volunteered, and poked her tongue out at him when he shot her a glare. "All right, Dawn. Ease off the vampire. We have things to do—researchy things. Let's save the hugs for after we've figured out how to save Spike's soul."

It took a moment, but Dawn eventually lessened her grip on Spike and put some space between them, her cheeks flushed and a perma-smile seemingly affixed to her face. "Research time," she said, then gave a little whoop and rushed over toward the staircase that led to the reference books.

"I... I so do not get it," Xander muttered. "Any of it." He looked like he had taken a bite of something gross—like the mystery sludge Anya had served that one time she'd insisted on hosting a dinner party. He'd grimaced his way through the meal with a pained smile, torn between letting her down and abusing his tastebuds. "I'll... Buffy, on this whole you and Spike thing... I'll try. Apparently it's a Summers weakness."

That was perhaps the best she could have expected from Xander, and though she appreciated the sentiment, she could help being annoyed all the same. "I'm not asking for anyone's approval," she said, crossing her arms. "Or permission. And there's no telling if it'll work out or not. The only thing I want from anyone is for you to understand that it's my life and my decision and even if it is a mistake, it's mine to make. Okay?"

Spike huffed. "Way to sweep a bloke off his feet, Slayer," he murmured, but greeted her with a wink when she turned to glare at him.

"I can do that," Xander said valiantly, lifting his chin. "I think I can do that."

"Somehow we're talking about Buffy's love life again," Anya muttered. "Some people have better things to do."

"Yes, better things like research." Buffy hesitated, glanced around the room, then thought *to hell with it* and seized Spike's hand. Everyone was in the know now, except Giles, and was it wrong of her to look forward to telling him? It'd serve him right to hit the roof after he'd sneaked off to talk to Angel behind her back. Though announcing she and Spike were a couple might have him sprinting back to LA for an entirely new reason.

Spike exhaled slowly, and when she turned to look at him, she found him staring at where their fingers were woven together. He swallowed hard before dragging his gaze back up to hers, and the wealth of what she saw there, all the things he was saying with his eyes, had sparks of a different sort shooting through her body. There was the heat she'd experienced before. Heat and something else. Something she hesitated to name.

"Come on, then," Buffy said, giving him a little squeeze. "Let's see about saving your soul."

THERE WAS NO OTHER WAY OUT.

Spike knew that, knew it just as surely as the Slayer did. Every sodding book they selected said the same. Black magic deals were a different breed of stupid, one of the reasons he'd always been so bent on avoiding mojo of any kind. He might not be as old as dirt like Anyanka, but he'd seen enough go wonky to give the stuff a wide berth. Seemed the best way to keep his nose clean and the rest of him out of the sights of dangerous practitioners, because magic always had consequences.

He knew that—had known it the second he'd gone to Willy's in search of something to dull his pain, and he'd definitely known it when Willy had informed him about Rack. The despair he'd felt then, just a few days ago, had been all-consuming. In his bones, in his throat, in the very air he didn't need to breathe. He didn't know what he'd expected when he'd showed up for his magical cure, but the antidote to grief, the answer he'd been given, was worth anything he might lose.

Something that Buffy couldn't seem to get through her gorgeously thick skull. Spike didn't know what he'd thought after making the jump—that was where the new memories ended—but he wagered his plan, if he'd had one, had been to handle everything as discreetly as

possible. He *did* know he hadn't expected another Spike—in this case, himself—to be waiting on the other side of the time tear. Granted, he hadn't had much room to make any guesses. Rack had opened the fabric of reality and given him a glimpse at something he'd wanted beyond recognition. There hadn't been much to think about.

But he did remember what the other him had said the night they'd walked back to the crypt. That Buffy wouldn't be too keen on anyone forking over a soul, so best they keep it quiet as long as they could. Somehow, even knowing that, he hadn't seen this much coming. That Buffy would care enough to try to find ways to keep any part of him whole. That she felt for the soul at all, especially as strongly as she did.

But he should have because that was Buffy all over. Caring when she shouldn't, brilliantly headstrong and opinionated. That was the woman he'd fallen in love with, and exasperating as it was, he wouldn't change a sodding thing.

"We keep looking tomorrow," Buffy said, placing the last of the texts back on the bookshelf. "And we talk to Giles."

Willow nodded, though she didn't look particularly hopeful. Nor did Tara. Still, it didn't stop either of them from offering encouraging smiles, even if those smiles didn't reach their eyes.

Though she wasn't looking at either one of them, Buffy seemed to sense their skepticism. When she whirled around, she was wearing that face of prideful stubbornness that had driven Spike batty on more than one occasion. "I'm not giving up," she said firmly. "We will find an answer."

Willow nodded again. "If anyone can, it's us."

"I still say it's a lost cause," came from below. Anya had just bid a customer goodbye and was performing one of her many drawer counts. "We want to live? We get Spike's soul out of the ether and ready to trade."

"No. I am not giving up."

"Fine, don't give up." Anya shrugged, keeping her gaze on the register tape. "Just be prepared to hand over the soul when we don't find any alternatives, is all I'm saying."

Xander, who sat at the table near the back beside Dawn, gave a heavy sigh and closed the book he'd been trying not to fall asleep on.

"Gotta say, Buff, I'm inclined to agree. These books disagree on a lot of things, but the terms of a black magic deal isn't one of them. And if it's Captain Peroxide's soul or the world, I'm gonna vote soul."

"I don't understand half the words I'm reading," Dawn chimed in, "but that sounds about right."

Spike was ready when Buffy swung a glare his way. "Wouldn't hurt nothing," he murmured, and handed her the tome he'd been pretending to read for the past half hour. "Just gettin' it ready, is all. Wager Red could work up somethin' to keep it nice and safe until we find the answer you want."

"No pressure, or anything," Willow muttered.

He rolled his eyes. "Oh, come off it. We all know you can manage it just fine."

"I transferred one soul from the ether to a vampire. There wasn't any keeping of said soul in the interim."

"Right, but it can be done," Anya said. "The Orb of Thesulah is a conduit but also a vault. As long as you have one, you can hold onto a soul indefinitely."

"Yeah, but they're really freaking fragile." Willow went a bit pink, avoiding Buffy's gaze. "I might have, umm, broken the one we used to reensoul Angel. By accident. It was really Giles's fault—he went right back to using it as a paperweight."

Anya scoffed. "I run a magic shop on the Hellmouth. Do you really not think I don't keep these things in stock?"

"Can everyone just shut up!" Buffy snapped. "We don't need an orb and we don't need a soul because we're going to find a way out of this—all of us. Whole, intact, not giving over anything that could be destroyed." Again, she glared at Spike as though daring him to challenge her, but he knew better. When no one else spoke up, she brought up her hands and started for the staircase. "I'm going to patrol."

His first instinct was to tear off after her, but he somehow managed to keep his feet from moving. There were things that needed to be done, things she wouldn't consider until it was too late. Spike stared at the door, then turned to Willow. "Get it ready," he said. "We keep lookin', like the Slayer wants, but we have the soul ready to give to the wanker when the clock runs out, yeah?"

Willow released a long breath, her expression troubled. She glanced from Spike to the door then to Spike again. "She's not gonna like it," she said.

"No shit, she's not gonna like it," Xander barked. "But I'd rather it not come down to the world tearing itself apart because we don't have a soul at the ready."

"For once, the boy's talkin' sense," Spike drawled. "Yeah, the Slayer'll be right sour about it for a bit. Might be enough to kick yours truly to the curb but that's a gamble I'm willing to take. Didn't make the leap through time just to lose her over this."

"You say *over this* like it's something small," Tara said softly, coming up beside Willow and leaning her elbows on the railing. "Your soul is not a small thing. It's a big thing. A huge thing, even. And as people who care about you—"

Xander coughed loudly. Dawn rolled her eyes and smacked his shoulder.

Tara went a little pink in the cheeks, as though only then realizing what she'd said. "W-well, we do, don't we?" she asked, glancing at Willow. "He helped us with Glory, let me burn his hands up when I was out of my mind. A-and he's Buffy's boyfriend, so—"

"Never going to get used to hearing that," Xander mused, though without any venom.

"After having been in his head, yeah, I'll say Spike has made my list of people I don't want to see die," Willow said.

"Thanks ever so, pidge."

"I never *wanted* you to die, to be fair," she went on. Then paused. "Except that time you kidnapped me and Xander. Or, and when you had trouble performing last year. But only because I thought *I* was going to die there for a moment."

Spike snickered. "Right. Look, I know the soul's no small thing. Meant it when I said I'm not wild about handin' it over to the ponce, but when it comes down to it or her, there is no bloody discussion. Think the lot of you can at least agree on that. So do whatever it is you need to do so it's here when that git comes to collect."

He didn't bother waiting for a response, just turned and walked toward the door, intent on catching up with Buffy so he could get a



better picture of where they stood after everything that had happened today. Since she hadn't told him off in front of her mates, he thought it likely that what they'd started the night before hadn't taken a serious blow, but he knew he couldn't take anything on faith. When Buffy thought she was right, she'd bloody well mow over anyone who stood in her way.

Which was why he was a mite surprised to step outside the shop and find the Slayer lounging against the wall, hands in her pockets. When she swung her head up and their eyes met, a soft smile tugged at her mouth, and every inch of him sparked alight with new warmth.

Spike released a shaky breath. "Oh. Thought you'd be on the hunt by now."

"I figured you'd be along in a few and we could go on a patrol date."

Parts of him he hadn't realized were wound up tight rolled with relief. So he hadn't blundered everything this afternoon. Still, even though she'd just said the word, he couldn't keep himself from pushing it. "Date?"

"Kinda like the one you tricked me into going on that one time," she agreed, her smile having turned impish. "It'll be more fun because we'll both be in the know this time, and chances of a good night kiss are pretty damn high."

It took restraint he wouldn't have previously accredited himself with not to shove her against the nearest flat surface and skip right to the snogging. If he played his cards right, he might get her to move like she had in the training room—roll her hips and rub herself against him in all the right ways. Granted, since they weren't shagging just yet, that much might be tantamount to torture. Good thing he liked certain kinds of torture. He bet she knew how to make it hurt in all the right ways.

Buffy smirked and sauntered up to him. "You have this dopey look on your face," she said, placing her hands on his chest. "Just so you know. It's kinda cute. The Big Bad going all sappy because he might get a kiss good night."

At that, his restraint vanished. Spike growled and seized her about the waist to pull her closer to him. Close enough that she could feel

him, hard and ready for her. "Call me that again," he purred, lowering his mouth to her neck. "What am I?"

"Hopeless." She snickered, but the sound died on a whimper when he began to nibble on her flesh. "Unh...really with the patrol. We should...patrol. Evil's out there."

"Evil's right here," he shot back. "Got your hands full of him, Slayer. How do you aim to keep him in line?"

"In ways definitely not sanctioned by the Watchers Council." She ceased the playful caresses she'd been giving him through his shirt and pushed him back. "Let me get the lesser vamps in line first. I have a feeling the Big Bad will require all my focus, and we don't want any interruptions."

It took a second, but the lusty fog that had settled over his head began to dissipate. Right. Likely not the best idea to be caught necking with the girl so soon, especially not when Harris was within reach of so many pointy wood objects. But knowing that didn't prevent a thrill from running down his spine at the heat in her eyes and the promise in her words. He couldn't hide his grin if he tried. "Ooh, aren't we feelin' naughty tonight?"

"That's the plan," she agreed. And, wonder of wonders, the girl reached out for his hand. Then paused with a frown, and pulled back. "I... Well, we didn't discuss PDA. Not sure how big you are into it. Riley was all about being Mr. Soldier Tough Guy and Angel—"

Spike seized her wrist and tugged her to him. "Any second you're not touching me is a second wasted, far as I'm concerned," he said, and kissed her. Reveling in the freedom to do so, in the happy sound she made and the knowledge that he'd put that there. "That wanker who shared your bed all year really didn't want to hold onto you like this?" he asked after breaking away, lacing his fingers through hers. "He really was dull as cardboard, wasn't he?"

Buffy narrowed her eyes at him but didn't try to pull away, rather tugged at him to fall into step beside her. And then they were off, like it was the most ordinary thing in the bloody word. Two people who were fond of snogging one another taking a stroll through the Hellmouth—a date, like she'd said.

"Riley was probably a mistake," she said, "but you don't have to be mean about it."

"Well, when a bloke shows up at your place and sticks a stake in your chest, you tend to get a bit sore about it."

"Huh?"

"Oh, he didn't tell you?"

"Riley...staked you?"

It was probably wrong to enjoy the horror in her voice, but that didn't stop him. "Didn't know that bit, did you? Yeah, after I told you about his little side-gig. He dropped by for a chat."

"And staked you."

"Wasn't real wood, apparently. Though he damn sure wanted me to think it was."

There was nothing for a moment—a long enough moment that the high of tattling on her ex plateaued and he started wondering what the hell he'd been trying to prove by sharing it in the first place. Finn was long gone and good bloody riddance, and the Slayer was with him now. At his side, holding his hand, for fuck's sake. He couldn't really ask for more than that.

But hell, Spike couldn't pretend he'd ever not be bitter about that arse for all the things he'd said and done.

"There were things about him I didn't know," Buffy said. "We were never...open, him and I. I thought I was—I was trying to be, at least. I wanted it to work and I did care—*do* care about him. And I hope that he's happy, wherever he landed." A beat. "But things like that, what you just told me... Well, they make me wonder if I ever really knew him at all. If he kept things like that bottled up. And no, I can't really fault you for hating someone who tried to make you think you were going to be dust, no matter what your motives were in showing me his fang whores."

Spike couldn't think of a response to that—tell himself all he liked that he'd had her best interest at heart, he knew he was a selfish bastard. Finding the thing that would kill Finn's relationship with Buffy had been a rush, enough of one that he hadn't thought about how much the learning of it would hurt her. All that had mattered was having dirt on the soldier and making sure the right people knew.

"I think that's been my problem, actually," Buffy went on with a sort of wistfulness that made him wonder if she was aware he was still there at all. "Not opening up. Not...letting myself open up. Because opening up leads to badness and badness is, well, bad. There are so many ways for me to get hurt doing what I do that guarding this one place seemed just, smart. Especially after what happened with Angel."

The high he'd ridden earlier plummeted further south still. Spike released a long breath, knowing he was tensing all over and having fuck all idea what to do about it. How the hell had they gotten on this subject, anyway? Weren't there better things to talk about?

"I know you stayed behind to tell Willow to get your soul ready."

Things like that. The other worst possible subject to broach. But hell, he wasn't going to start things off by lying to her, and this was at least an easier minefield to navigate than the one littered with the ghosts of romances past.

"Gotta be ready, no matter what happens," he said. "We keep looking, but we have it just case the clock runs out." Another beat of silence. He worked his throat. "This soul business gonna be the thing that decides us, Slayer? Won't lie, I'm a bit on edge waitin' for you to throw the bloody book at me."

"I don't like it."

"I know." He also knew they were talking themselves in circles on the matter—Buffy didn't want him giving up his soul because of her soft, human rationale. He didn't mind so long as it kept her alive. It wasn't a matter of not understanding the other person's point, rather not finding it a compelling enough reason to switch sides.

"But...if what you're asking is if I'll decide to not try this whole *dating you* thing if it comes to that?" Buffy pressed her lips together. "It's not a small thing, what you bargained, and I can't just pretend to be okay with it. But...that's part of what we're trying to do here, right? Couples don't agree on all the things all the time. And I can't say I haven't been the person who's been ready to make the big sacrifice to save someone. Hell, I was ready to kill Faith to save Angel. I *tried* to kill Faith and nearly succeeded. So yeah, I've drawn lines before."

Well, bugger. He wasn't sure he'd known all that and petty as it

might be, Spike couldn't keep the words from hitting him in a way that physically hurt, because fuck, he wanted her to love him like that. Enough to toss every pretty little principle right out the sodding window if it came down to it. That made him a selfish git, sure, but he couldn't help himself.

Knowing Buffy could love like that, as fiercely as that, Spike couldn't bear the thought of not touching it.

She stopped shortly, tugging him to a halt beside her. "Wow."

"What's that, love?"

"I...I just heard everything I said out loud and...I think I was dumb." Her eyes went comically wide. "Like seriously dumb."

He swallowed. "Yeah?"

Buffy didn't answer right away, just frowned and shook her head. "My mind has been a circus these last few days. Ever since...well, ever since your double showed up. Like I seriously keep going over my entire romantic history trying to figure out why I'm so confused. Before Angel went bad, we were majorly with the hot and cold. Like not together at all and then suddenly he was my boyfriend, and that was well and fine for being sixteen but...I honestly can't imagine how that'd go now. And we weren't, like... Well, *this*." She gestured between them. "Every time I opened my mouth around him, I was nervous, terrified I'd say the wrong thing. I was never really just *me*, which, hey, wow with the not healthy."

Spike felt the corner of his mouth kick up. "Well, didn't wanna say so myself, love."

Buffy snickered and rolled her eyes, tugging on his hand to get them moving again. "It's not like you've got the market cornered on healthy, Spike."

"Oi!"

"Your past two relationships were with a literal madwoman and Harmony."

"I'd never lower myself to call whatever I did with Harm a relationship," he replied. "Give me some sodding credit."

The little bitch flashed him another impish grin. "You were banging Harmony. No credit deserved."

"Managed to do it without tearin' my own ears off. And we weren't

talkin' about me, were we?" He tugged his hand free so he could slide his arm around her shoulder. "You were about to tell me all the ways I'm superior to your wanker of an ex."

This time, she outright laughed. "Oh really?"

"You just said you never talked to him like you do me. Don't tell me that doesn't mean anything."

"Look, I'm not going to get into a whole thing where I trash my exes. I know you don't like Angel and I know you have reasons. Same goes for Riley." A pause. "But part of what you said was right. Ever since you—whichever you—made with the time jump, I've been thinking about how I drew these lines in my head based on Angel. Like, solely on Angel. I don't think he would have tried to kill Faith for me and I know he wouldn't have gone through time, for all the reasons I'm sure Giles will fill me in on later. But those are things I *would* do—did do, in one case. And then I started thinking about the soul stuff and wondering what you'd be like with one—"

"Brilliant," he muttered. Just what every bloke wanted to hear.

"But that's the point—I wasn't sure. Like, the difference between souled Angel and soulless Angel was night and day—"

"Believe that if you want, pet."

"Well, one version wanted to kiss me and the other wanted to kill me. What would you call it?"

"One version had a conscience and the other didn't," he fired back. "I dunno what rot they teach slayers about vamps—never gave it much thought. And it didn't matter, did it? Your job is to off us, off anyone who doesn't have a pulse, no matter what, yeah? Reckon it's a mite easier if they feed you some line about how the person inside is gone forever. Make you hesitate a bit less before stakin' your own granny if it came down to it." Spike forced himself to take a breath, if only to slow down. "Not gonna pretend to be the expert, here, but I didn't die one night one bloke and wake up a new one. Woulda been easier if that had been the case—if I could've buried pathetic ole William and everything he was with the name, but I didn't. I tried but I can't outrun him. He's with me no matter what I do."

Buffy looked taken aback at that, and hell, he couldn't blame her. He hadn't meant for any of that to come out. Not exactly the sort of

discussion he'd intended to have on their first official date, if that's what this was. Fuck, if he were being honest, it wasn't the sort of conversation he'd intended to have ever. Measuring himself against Angel was one of those things he knew was bad for him but couldn't stop anyway. The results would never swing in his favor, and maybe that wouldn't smart so much if he didn't know just exactly what Buffy so helplessly in love with a bloke looked like. If he hadn't had a front-row seat that entire time before and after she'd shagged the wanker and brought out the part of him that had a personality, rotten one as it was.

When she spoke again a moment later, her voice was soft. "Tell me."

"Tell you what?"

"How Angel is the same," she said. "With or without a soul."

Well, that knocked him off his feet. Spike arched an eyebrow. "You want me to rail against your ex. Seems like a good way to get into a fight."

"Spike, it's you and me. We're going to fight."

That much was true. Together or not, fighting was in their genes. If she kicked him to the curb, they'd fight. If they spent the rest of her years together, they'd fight. They'd shag a lot in between and, hopefully, love each other through all of it, but fighting would always be who they were. It was one of the things that made her perfect for him.

"I just got you," he said, kicking the pavement. "Dunno if I wanna bollocks it up just yet. Know how you feel about the git."

Buffy squeezed his hand and pulled him to another stop. When it became apparent she wasn't going to drop the issue, he heaved a sigh and met her eyes.

"Not talking about me and Angel was a mistake with Riley," she said. "I think that's part of doing the grown-up, adult relationship thing. Even if you don't like hearing about it, the exes are a part of who I am. Like Dru is part of who you are—and even Harmony."

Spike snorted. "Harm's not—"

"You might not have had feelings for her, but there was a reason you kept her around, right?"

Yeah, and it had been quick access to a decent shag. Not something

he wanted to say, though he suspected Buffy had that much figured already. And if her narrowed eyes were anything to go by, she didn't much care for it.

The thought that the Slayer could be jealous of anyone in his life, jealous of *Harm*, was intoxicating.

"The point is," she continued a moment later, perhaps a bit stiffly, "I thought I could just gloss over everything Angel with Riley, but that whole experience was the baseline of who I am in relationships. And I don't know if I want it to be. Like I said, I've been thinking a lot since the Tower. I was thinking a lot before then, too. About how I'm closed off from everyone and don't *feel* love the way I used to. When Riley left, it hurt but...it also didn't, and that hurt worse. I never really missed him. I missed the idea of him, which is a stupid line I've heard in movies and never really got until right now." Buffy released a long breath. "And the way I was with Riley was pretty much because of Angel. Because I needed to prove something to myself or to him, and I really want to hear how you think he's the same soulless. I think I need to."

He just looked at her, jaw clenched, words pressing against his lips. But there was no use, no denying her anything, especially when she said things like that. Even more especially when it was an opening he'd been waiting for forever. There was more than a century of resentment there, some buried but most fresh within reach, and he wasn't the sort to just ignore it.

"It's all about the head games with him," he blurted. "Always has been. Did it to Dru first, and god knows how many birds in between. Then he set his sights on you. Dunno what it was like before I showed up, 'cept bits and pieces of things I've picked up over the years. How he'd show up and pop off so you never knew when to expect him or who the hell he was, if he was tryin' to help you or not. It's the same thing, Slayer. How bleeding hard is it to walk up to a girl and speak plainly? I'll tell you—it's not. Done with you more times than I can count, haven't I? He kept you guessin' and in doin' that, kept the power. He knew he could show up whenever he fancied and you'd bend an ear for him and that got him off."

Buffy released a long breath, her jaw somewhat clenched, but didn't



back down or start in with the excuses. Instead, she squared her shoulders and nodded. "Okay. Tell me more."

He managed to swallow a snicker. *Be careful what you wish for, pet.*

"I'm willin' to wager it was Angel who drew the lines when you two started getting more serious," he went on. "If you went too far or too fast, he'd pull the brakes, maybe give you just enough room to breathe where you could start thinkin' without him clogging up your head before he pulled you right back down with him. Couldn't make a bloody move he didn't want you to make. Fuck, Slayer, when he ended things, he even told you the sorta bloke you oughta be with. Everything was always on his terms. Tell me I'm wrong."

"You're wrong," she said immediately. "There were times I drew the line. I told him we couldn't see each other anymore after your whole *you're not really friends* speech a few years ago. That was all me."

Spike snickered. "Yeah. How'd that go?"

"Well, yes, we got back together. Later. Also my decision. But the point is I drew the line."

"In pencil, not pen. There's the difference. And he knew he could erase it anytime he liked."

"That is so not true. I just said getting back together was my decision."

"Oh ho. And how'd that come about?" He arched an eyebrow. "Tell a fella it's over and he sticks around for...what? His health?"

"You're saying he should've left."

"For starters."

A pretty frown pulled on the Slayer's lips. "Why would he have? You never did."

"Yeah, well, that was never about control, pet. Necessary at first, with the sodding chip. Needed to stick close so those government wankers could get it out. Then that fell apart and where was I gonna go?" He shrugged. "Got a steady stream of demons that need to be offed to keep me full-on violence, enough locals who know me to keep me fed, and if I find myself in a pinch, there's always you lot."

"Uh huh," Buffy drawled, her voice tinged with amusement. "Those are the only reasons."

Spike snorted. "Didn't say that, did I? Yeah, Slayer, after I fell for

you, leavin' this pit is the last thing I wanted to do. But it's not like I had any hope of anything happenin', or that I had any control over what you did."

"Damn skippy."

"Right, love, and I don't want control. No fun if one party's calling all the shots. Bleeding hell, the fact that you're so unpredictable is one of the things I love most about you." At that, he paused, remembering the way she'd withdrawn earlier after he'd told her he loved her. He waited a moment to see if there would be a repeat and didn't know how to take it when she didn't respond at all. "Point about your ex, though, is that you told him there was no reason for him to stay, but he did because he knew it wasn't over so long as he wasn't the one walking away. He could keep in your head if nothing else, make it impossible for you to move on while he's lurkin' in the background. Whether it was with you or Dru or any other girl out there, he wanted to be bloody sure he was the only bloke you ever thought about. Worked on her and it worked on you, too. So well that he even got you to think about him when it came to tryin' to move on, 'cause you went for the sorta bloke that old Grandpappy would approve of. Didn't hurt that Finn looked a bit like the old sod, either. He gets in a girl's head, makes himself comfy, and takes up every bit of her until there's nothing left. Then he moves on and starts over, knowin' he can come back anytime he likes."

There was nothing for a moment, then Buffy pulled her hand from his to rub her arms as the frown from earlier deepened. And Spike didn't know how to take it—the frown or her silence, or when she didn't move to retake his hand when her arms dropped to her sides. Something in his chest gave a painful twist. Painful but not new—familiar in all the worst ways. Ways he figured would tail him from here to eternity, particularly where Angel was concerned. The perpetual blind-spot when it came to the women he loved.

"*You enjoy fucking my cast-offs, Spike?*" the Angelus that lived in his head whispered. "*More table scraps for the runt.*"

Then her hand was around his again and she laced their fingers together.

"I'm not saying you're a hundred percent right, but you might not be wrong."

Spike released a long, steady breath, not quite brave enough to look at her. "Yeah?"

"I... Well, I've just never thought about it like that." She swallowed. "And I'm not saying I buy that he did all those things because he was trying to be manipulative or controlling, but if he's like that with a soul, then yeah...all of those things would become more true without. I never thought... Well, like I said, night and day. I thought so anyway." Buffy lifted her head and met his gaze. "I'd already done this mental exercise where I pictured what Angel sans a soul would have done in your place if he'd gotten a chip."

"He'd have found a way to kill you by now." The words were out before he could stop them, and he silently cursed himself.

*Could never learn to keep your yap shut, could you, mate?*

"Yeah," Buffy said without missing a beat, "that's where I landed, too. And he never would've helped us. Ever."

"Fuck no."

They walked in silence for a few more minutes—long enough to cross into the Restfield and start navigating their way around headstones and the like. The longer it stretched, though, the more he didn't know what to think. About this or anything else, how they'd managed to start talking about any of it and what it might possibly mean for wherever they were going. Where she wanted them to go, what she hoped to suss out with this little exercise. She was saying things, or rather open to hearing things, he'd never in his wildest thought she might consider. Didn't mean she'd agree with him—bloody hell, she might resent him once the wheels in her head stopped turning.

"Spike."

"Mmm?"

"I said what messed me and Riley up was not talking about Angel. I think that's true." She tightened her grip on his hand. "But...I think maybe even more than that might have been everything you just said. And I don't want it to be like that anymore."

"Like what, love?"

"Like... I don't want him in my head telling me who to be with or

what to do or any of it. I might need your help to keep that in check because I honestly don't think I knew he was still there at all." Buffy wrinkled her nose. "Okay, that's not entirely true because, well, I've already gone down that particular rabbit hole on my own. See above, re: personal aha moment. But this is all still pretty new for me. I don't need him haunting my love life. I know you didn't sign up to be psychologist of Buffy, but you know me freakishly well and you know Angel too and—"

Spike tugged her against him and covered her mouth with his, nearly melting when she fed him a happy little sigh and wrapped her arms around his neck. Fuck, he'd never get tired of snogging her. She was all light and playfulness, but with just enough temptress to drive a man out of his mind. That she wanted any of this, that she was open to it, that she was trying...

That this was his life at all, when just yesterday it hadn't been.

"Slayer," he murmured when they pulled apart, "I'll be whatever you want me to be. Think you know that."

"I just thought it fair to tell you that there's a high probability of self-sabotage on my end," she said. "Cause that's kinda what I do."

"Yeah, well, what I do's stick around. You give me this and I..." There was no good way to end that sentence without drawing more attention to things she might not be ready to hear—or be reminded of just yet. Best to let her set the pace. It had worked out brilliantly thus far. "Just...means a lot, is all."

Buffy grinned, and bloody hell, he worried for a beat he might completely lose the plot and start sobbing. How many times had he watched her light up from across the room while she was looking at someone else? That she might ever turn that radiance onto him had been a pipe dream, something to fuel his fantasies alongside those of her pummeling the stuffing out of him before deciding to take his dick for a spin. His imagination was not short on ways he wanted her—this part and the other, the part he already had. All of it.

It was probably a good thing that the next second the unmistakable snarl of a vampire tore through the air because he might have started babbling in verses.

"Ugh." Buffy rolled her eyes and spun away from him in a kick

that smashed the little fledgling into the nearest tombstone. “Another thing about dating the Slayer, Spike—we get interrupted a lot.”

Seeing as it wasn’t too long ago he had been the one doing the interrupting, he didn’t think it was fair to complain.

“Good thing about dating yours truly, pet,” he replied, letting his fangs descend. “I don’t mind a good brawl. Bloody foreplay.”

“Weirdo.”

“You’re forgetting, Slayer, I can—”

“Don’t,” Buffy said, turning to meet the flying leap of a second vamp that had literally sprung out of nowhere, “say anything about smelling me because, gross. That means these guys can too.”

Spike just grinned. “Wouldn’t dream of it,” he said around his fangs, then launched himself into the fray.

Fighting with Buffy, alongside Buffy, had always been one of his favorite pastimes. Long before he’d realized he was in love with her, he’d find himself stealing away some nights when he knew she was near, just for the privilege of watching her in action. It’d been easy to convince himself of the why behind this. One day the chip would be out, he needed to make sure he didn’t get too bloody complacent living around the Slayer, let her refine her technique too much so he couldn’t keep up anymore. Granted, the fact that he’d go back to the crypt to have a wank likely should have clued him in to how he felt long before the dream had, but sometimes it took being hit over the head with the obvious before it sank in.

The only thing better than fighting alongside Buffy would be to fight Buffy herself—to have all of that raw passion and energy focused on him, and only on him. And yeah, odds were in his favor that he’d get her passion, energy, and focus in other ways here soon, but hell, to get to taste her out in her element, fight her until there was nothing left to do but fuck... Yeah, he might be twisted, but that particular fantasy had been a repeat for a reason.

“Spike!”

He whirled around just in time to see the flash of Buffy’s eyes before a foot smashed into the back of his cranium and his vision exploded with stars. Spike barked a curse and crashed to his knees.

“Sorry, pet,” he said, tucking and rolling when his assailant came at him again. “Started daydreamin’. Won’t happen again.”

The scene around him focused just in time for him to catch the artful way Buffy twisted that magnificent body of hers right before plunging a stake into the chest of an oncoming attacker. It was hard not to laugh at these tossers—any of them. Baby fledges fresh from the grave trying to take on the Slayer like they had a chance in hell. Like she hadn’t just beaten the stuffing out of a hellgod a few nights back.

His own little attacker came at him again—a tiny scrap of a thing with her fangs out and eyes blazing, ribbons of red hair all over the place. Chit might have been cute once, but all she was now was a bloody obstacle. Spike ducked as she swung at him, sidestepped to the left and thrust her face-first into the headstone at his back.

“Sorry, lamb,” he said cheerfully, practically skipping over as he drew a stake from his duster pocket. “Picked the wrong bloody fight.”

The girl didn’t have time to do much more than glare at him before she was a little pile of dust. Then the air split again with another scream of his name from the Slayer, but this one was different—it was downright terrified.

Spike whirled around just in time to see some troll-sized ugly wanker charging at him at full speed, murder in his eyes. And Buffy was hot on his heels.

“Spike!” she screamed again. “Move!”

But he couldn’t, for some reason. He didn’t really understand what was happening or why Buffy looked so worried. It wasn’t like he hadn’t taken out big gits like this before. Took a bit more muscle, yeah, but that was half the fun. And it didn’t look like Ugly had a stake on him, so unless he aimed to rip his head off with his bare hands...

And then it occurred to him that that was exactly what he planned to do.

“Fuck.”

The big burly vamp leaped into the air with grace he shouldn’t have, his fangs bared and his meaty hands outstretched and ready. Then he grunted and those murder-filled eyes of his went comically wide before they and every other part of him exploded into a cloud of dust, through which came Buffy. She met Spike’s gaze through the

debris, squeaked when she saw she was about to crash onto him and pitched her stake off somewhere to the left before she literally toppled into his arms.

Spike stared up at her, breathing hard and puzzled by what he saw on her face. Something like fear—real fear, the sort he'd rarely seen her wear. There was that night on the back porch when she'd told him about her mum and a few times recently, all involving Dawn. And then a couple of nights back when—

When the other Spike had crumbled to dust by her feet. There had been fear in her eyes then, too. Fear and something else.

"All right, Slayer?" he asked, his voice low. "Your heart's racing."

"I...uhh..." She wet her lips, which was all the invitation he needed to shift his attention to them. So near his, wet and warm and welcoming and...

"I thought he was going to kill you," she said a moment later, and this was enough to surprise him out of thinking just what he'd like to do to that mouth and drag his attention back up again. "That I was going to have to watch that all over again."

"Not going anywhere."

"You say that but I saw it happen, Spike. So did you. One second you were there and the next...poof! It was—"

"A fluke is what it was. Not happening again."

"Flukes happen all the time," she said, her voice trembling, the scent of tears suddenly tickling his nose. "It could happen anytime."

"Buffy."

"What?"

Spike cupped the back of her head and dragged her down, and then her mouth was on him and he didn't care about anything else. Only the feel of her, the taste of her, his Buffy—his Slayer—hot and desperate and worried about him, like she actually cared. Like he really meant something to her. Because he *did* mean something to her, something that had been brewing there for some time—something even he hadn't seen until she'd literally burst down his front door and snogged him silly. This girl had kept his dust and wanted to fight to save his soul, even if she didn't intend to ask him to wear it again. She'd stared down her friends when they'd grilled her on what was

happening here and she'd made no excuses. She was a marvel—*his* marvel. And fuck...

"Spike," she whispered into his mouth, her hands in his hair, her hips rolling against his. "Spike...I think..."

"Don't think," he replied, unable to keep himself from arching off the ground so she could feel how hard he was. "Please, Buffy, don't think tonight."

Buffy pulled back, though, because asking her to do something pretty much guaranteed she'd do the opposite.

But then her eyes were on him again, dark and molten.

"I want... You know what I said last night? About needing to go slow?"

He nodded, not trusting his voice.

"I think twenty-four hours was slow enough." She kissed him again, then pushed to her feet on legs which, he was happy to see, were shaking a bit. Then she held out her hand to him. "Is that okay with you?"

Spike stared at her hand for a second. "Just to be clear, Slayer. You're asking if it's all right if, instead of going our separate ways and having nothing but a wank to look forward to when I get home, I get to have you instead?"

"This has an obvious answer, doesn't it?"

He grinned, seized her hand and let her pull him to his feet. Then he shoved her against the nearest mausoleum and swallowed her in a hungry kiss. In seconds, they were fighting in the best bloody way there was to fight, lips and teeth and hungry little growls. The scent of her, warm and fiery, reached him now, and though he wanted to maintain his composure, he couldn't help but tremble.

This was really happening.

Spike pulled back, grinned at the way she gulped for air, then dropped a kiss against the pulse at her throat.

"Think I can manage to get you home before I have my way with you," he murmured into her skin.

"You think?"

"Well, it'll be fun to try."



IT WAS A THOUGHT SHE DOUBTED SHE'D STOP HAVING BECAUSE IT just kept being true—no one in the world kissed like Spike. Like the night before—and like earlier at the Magic Box—the outside world just kinda blipped away when his mouth was on hers, and Buffy was quite content to let it blip. Being here with him, savoring the feel of his lips and tongue, had something lighting inside of her that she hadn't felt since the first time she'd filled her evening patrols with stolen smoochies from her creature-of-the-night boyfriend. Something she'd thought had died the moment she'd realized Angel had turned bad on her because fun and sex had never really been synonymous in the times since. She'd thought she'd had fun with Riley, and maybe she had at first, but even so, it hadn't been like this.

It hadn't been an all-consuming need that was just this side of desperate, rather warm and familiar. Comfortable. Like an old shoe.

But sex was not supposed to be like an old shoe or old *anything*. At least she didn't think so. And even when she and Riley had been at the new, fun stage of relationshipdom, she didn't remember feeling hunger on this level. The sort that made the scenery melt away and took rational thought along for the ride. Because there was nothing rational about the way they'd gotten to Spike's crypt.

At least she assumed so, seeing as Buffy didn't really remember actually walking to the crypt. One second they'd been making out on the ground, and the next, her back had been against a mausoleum. He'd said something, she'd said something, then there'd been more kissing and the world had moved but she hadn't. Except she apparently had, because when she opened her eyes, she found she was no longer outside, rather back in the space where her sexual world had been redefined the night before.

Oh, and Spike had lost his shirt. Something she felt compelled to tell him in case he hadn't noticed.

"Your shirt's gone."

Spike grinned against her lips. "I know. Was standin' right here when you pulled it off me."

"I did?" Buffy pressed her hands to his chest and a downright indecent sound escaped her lips. Cool, fleshy marble. Lickable fleshy marble. And all hers. "I don't remember doing that."

"Was just about to ask if I could return the favor." He tugged at the hem of her tee, arching an eyebrow. "There's so much more of you to taste."

Oh god. The thought alone had Buffy's legs shaking. "Like last night?"

"Just like last night, except you can ride my cock instead of my face. How about it?"

"I think that'd be okay."

"You sure?"

"Yes. I've given it some thought and that sounds like a plan."

"Brilliant." The next second, her shirt was gone and Spike's hands were on her bare skin. Not just on but everywhere, exploring her arms and shoulders, trailing the length of her spine, drawing circles around her belly-button, tickling her sides and doing everything, basically, except the thing she wanted him to do.

When he bypassed her breasts for the third time, she couldn't keep it in anymore. "Spike."

"Slayer?"

"Touch me."

"Here I coulda sworn that was exactly what I was doing."

"I mean touch me for real." She seized him by the wrists and dragged his hands up until her breasts were pressed against his palms. "Here. Or down there. I'm burning up."

"Mmm." He drummed his fingers along the side of her bra, the light in his eyes darkening. "Where's *down there*, love?"

"You know where."

"As it turns out, I'm not a mind reader. Would hate to make an assumption and—"

"Gah!" Buffy fisted his hair and jerked his head so his eyes met hers. "You are very evil."

He smirked, waggled his brows. "You know just what to say to get me hot," he replied and rolled his hips, his erection striking her in exactly the right way.

Buffy hissed a soft moan and thrust right back at him, desperate for more. This earned her a little growl, and the next thing she knew, Spike was walking her back again, and she was letting him. She thought he might take her downstairs—there was a bed there, she knew, as well as some other things that she'd never thought she'd be the sort of girl to be curious about, but Spike was definitely a bad influence on good intentions. There were things like, say, the chains he'd had her in when he'd first made with the love declaration. Chains that suddenly seemed a lot less creepy and a lot more enticing.

Her imagination was quite the dirty place, apparently. And for the way her sex throbbed in response, she needed to explore that more.

"Ooh," Spike cooed before capturing her earlobe between his teeth and giving it a good tug. "Someone's thinkin' naughty thoughts, love."

"You bring it out in me." The thoughts, not the activity. Buffy frowned at that, her heart stuttering. "Spike?"

"Hmm?" His mouth was on her neck now and he'd unhooked her bra. The material remained where it was, now loosely covering her breasts, his cool fingers caressing her bare skin beneath the cups. For whatever reason, this did more for her than it would have if he'd ripped the damn thing off and started sucking on her nipples, and she felt her legs go a little weak.

"I... I'm not...kinky."

He abruptly went rigid. "Huss'at?"

Buffy's face flamed but she forced herself to say it again. "I'm not kinky. I've never been kinky. I'm pretty boring, actually. In bed. And there's a good chance I'm bad at it."

Spike pulled back, regarding her with a furrowed brow. Like she was speaking a different language or something, which she was reasonably certain she was not. "What is it you think I'm expecting, sweet?"

"Well...there are chains downstairs. I remember those."

"Yeah..." He arched an eyebrow. "That bother you?"

"No. I just... Spike, you made a Buffy robot to have kinky sex with. That thing has more experience than me and yes, I realize how sad that is." She wiggled a bit, crossed her arms, and her bra slid down about an inch. "Willow had to deprogram a lot of gross to get the Buffybot Glory-ready, and being that boundaries are a thing we don't do, she told me about pretty much all of it. I've never done anal. Hell, I've never even sixty-nined. Riley wasn't a big fan of blowjobs—apparently, I squeeze too hard—and—"

Spike seized her by the cheeks and drew her mouth to his, thank god, cutting her off before she could say something really embarrassing. Like how, until last night, she hadn't been sure she even liked oral. Once he'd mentioned tasting her, it had been all she could think about, but that in itself had been something of an anomaly because Riley—try though he had—just hadn't been able to find the right combination of tongue, lips, and fingers to do it for her. She'd lie there, getting bored, and then feel guilty for being bored while someone was trying to show her the stars. And after she'd stopped having reliable orgasms with him, things had deteriorated even further.

It seemed only fair to Spike to warn him, especially if he'd spent the past few months daydreaming what she'd be like between the sheets. Would be her luck to find a guy willing to dive through time to save her life only to be such a disappointment in the bedroom that he found himself second-guessing those decisions.

Though from the sounds he made when he kissed her, when she dropped a hand between them to caress the bulge in his jeans, she could almost believe that the amount of experience she had was just right.

"Buffy," Spike said when he pulled back, nudging her brow with his.

"Need you to hear this. Only thing I want is you. You want whips and chains and I'm happy to deliver. Decide you'd rather go for soft and sweet and I'll give you that, too. Want me to get you on all fours and fuck you raw from behind, I'm your bloody man. Do you hear?"

"But what about what you want? Come on, I know there have to be things you've thought about."

A completely filthy grin spread across his lips. "All sorts of nasty things, love."

"And that's what I mean. I'm not kinky—"

"Slayer, don't take this the wrong way, but I don't think you know what you are or aren't." He smiled, and it wasn't a cocky smile, which somewhat threw her off her game as she was more than accustomed to Spike pulling no punches when it came to discussing her sex life. "Gonna wager Captain Cardboard wasn't too adventurous in the sack."

"Well, there was that time that ghosts made us screw for, like, hours." But even that entire experience had been on the tame side, ghostly interference notwithstanding. Riley had been a bit too conservative to try anything really wild or out there. Hell, getting him to have sex with the lights on had been its own little battle, and eventually she'd given up. It just figured that she'd find the one buttoned-up, straight-laced guy who was just as buttoned-up and straight-laced in the bedroom as he was anywhere else. Kind of went against Faith's theory from forever ago, that the more reserved a guy was in public, the wilder he was when he had you under him. Or maybe Riley was just the exception to that rule.

"Anyone ever ask what you like?" Spike asked, running his hands up and down her arms. "Do you even know what you like?"

Well, when he put it like that, the answer was somewhat embarrassing. Buffy released a shaky breath. "I liked last night," she murmured before she could stop herself. "I liked that a lot."

And there it was. That cocky smile. She knew he couldn't keep it locked up forever.

"Good, 'cause I fucking loved it." Spike tugged on her bra so that it fell away completely. He inhaled deeply when he lowered his gaze to her breasts, which she knew damn well were nothing special, but the way he studied them could convince a girl of just about anything.

“Love your tits, too,” he said, bringing his hands up to cup them again. An electric shock jolted through her at the feel of his thumbs against her nipples, and she pressed her thighs together in anticipation of the answering gush. God, she didn’t think she’d felt this self-conscious since the night she’d lost her virginity, which was ridiculous because it was just Spike but it was also *Spike* and that made all the difference in the world.

“Let’s play a game,” Spike said, palming her ass and walking her backward again.

“A game?”

He nodded and twisted around when her legs hit the couch, then tugged her so she fell back with him. Like last night, she found herself straddling him, only the stakes were so much higher now. Tonight it was going somewhere and everything was out. Her friends knew, her sister knew, and odds were someone would have told Giles by the end of the night. She was here and people knew she was here because she was dating Spike. The words sounded funny in her head, but a giddy sort of funny. Kind of like the dreams she’d had of him, guilty and raunchy as hell, and the sort she’d always lamented waking up from. Except this was no dream and there would be no waking up.

“Hot and Cold, yeah?” Spike said. “Rules are simple. I do something you like, you say *hot*. You want more, say *hotter*. If I’m on the right path—”

“I say *warm*.”

“Got the idea.”

“Yeah. It’s a game we played in kindergarten.”

There was that smirk again. “Doubt you played it like this.”

“Well, that’d certainly explain why we never saw Mrs. Pritchett after the cops took her away that one time.”

He barked a laugh, his eyes bright with both shock and amusement. “Didn’t think you had those kinda jokes inside you, pet.”

“You put them there. You’re a very bad influence.”

He wagged his brows. “Couldn’t have. Haven’t been inside you yet.”

“Your tongue has.”

At that, the tease in his eyes heated and a soft whimper scratched

at his throat. "Oh, you're gettin' it, Slayer," he growled, tugging her closer. "So if we'd been playin' last night, would you have called that *hot* or *cold*?"

"Umm, what is my-bones-are-melting-hot?"

He chuckled and dipped his head to tongue one of her nipples. "What about this?" he asked against her breast. "Warm?"

"Ohh, very warm." She wrapped her arms around his neck, her hips wiggling somewhat of their own volition. "Could be warmer."

He licked her again, then scraped her lightly with his teeth, shocking the hell out of her, mostly because of how much she liked it. Teeth near her sensitive parts was something she'd never have put in the plus column, but damn, there it was.

"Hot, hot, hot."

Spike groaned low in his throat and took her breast into his mouth as he edged a hand between them. He pulled and sucked and in general made her mind go completely and utterly blank. In truth, Buffy hadn't been much of a fan of boob play—so much so that Riley had taken to avoiding the area altogether. She didn't remember much of her night with Parker, and for good reason, and had been too damn nervous to really register much in the way of sensation when Angel had taken her virginity. Her nipples had always felt a bit too sensitive to be given too much attention, but for whatever reason, the feel of Spike's mouth there, his tongue making laps, and all her old hang-ups flew out the proverbial window. Hell, even the wet *plop* that filled the air when he released her had her squirming in the right way. In the otherwise still of the crypt, the sound was especially illicit.

"Could do this all bloody night," Spike murmured, dropping a series of kisses in the valley between her breasts until he was nuzzling the other one. "The sounds you make..."

"I make sounds?"

"Mhmm. Listen."

He flicked her nipple with his tongue, and yeah, she heard it. A hard gasp that sounded like it belonged to someone else, followed by a low mewl when he nipped at her flesh. It seemed strange that she was panting as hard as she was, but she couldn't stop herself. And when she registered that he had slipped his hand under the waistband of her

slacks, the breaths crashing against her chest became damn near painful.

“Bloody hell, you’re soaked.”

Yes, she was. Buffy jolted a bit when she felt him slip between her folds, his fingers cool and skilled and dear god, she was going to burn alive. There was more she wanted to do—experience. It felt like he’d barely touched her and she was about to claw out of her skin. She also wanted to explore him, too, since he’d been so graciously giving and hey, she was curious. But all the good intentions in the world couldn’t compete with the feel of him rubbing along her slit.

“Want you in my mouth again,” he growled. “Is that what you want? Am I warm?”

“Hot.” As though to spite her, a shiver ran down her spine. “I want you in my mouth, too.”

Spike groaned. “Fuck, Slayer...”

“Don’t get too excited. I don’t think I’m very good at it.”

“You’re off your nutter, is what you are.” He pulled back and bit at her lips playfully. “Just the thought of this delicious mouth around my cock...”

Her skin flushed hot, and he noticed. Of course he noticed. He grinned. “You like it when I talk dirty?”

“Warm.”

“Just warm?” He pressed his palm against her slick flesh so the heel abraded her clit every time he moved, and dipped two fingers inside her pussy. “So if I told you that the way you grip me with your pretty little cunt makes me go cross-eyed, you fancy it but—”

“Okay. Hot.”

The grin stretched into the leer she was coming to love. “Anyone ever whisper little dirties to you before, pet?”

The thought alone was laughable. Buffy shook her head. “N-no.”

“Wanna hear more?”

“I think that’d be okay.”

“Right then.” Spike sat up and sucked her lower lip between his teeth. “Then I can tell you I’m about to burst just thinking about being inside you. That I’m tryin’ like hell to hold on but your scent’s driving me wild.”



“Oooh...hot.”

“Fuck yes, you are.” He dropped a line of kisses across her cheek and down her neck, where he paused over her racing pulse. And god, that about had her vibrating right out of her skin. The knowledge that his fangs were so close, feeling the way he tensed against her, his firm muscles going somehow firmer. It was a dangerous line, she knew, something she should push back against, but she couldn’t.

When Angel had bitten her forever ago, the pain had nearly split her in two. She remembered that. But she also remembered how, toward the end, her body had spiraled into an orgasm so intense and unexpected she’d almost convinced herself it *hadn’t* happened. That the blood loss had tricked her into thinking the thing that might kill her had been better than the night he’d actually made love to her. Whether or not she was remembering correctly didn’t seem to matter, though, for her body was sending her all the right signs. She wanted Spike’s fangs in her throat, depraved and dangerous as that was, and the knowledge that he wouldn’t be able to do that without triggering the chip was almost tragic.

“Taste so good here,” he murmured, sucking hard at the skin above her jugular. “Bloody hell, I know I shouldn’t...”

“Spike?”

He hesitated before pulling back, familiar wariness edging into his eyes. “Won’t head for the hills if I tell you I’ve thought about biting you, will you?”

“Being that you’re a vampire, I’d be more surprised if you hadn’t.”

He shook his head. “Not that kinda bite, love. The best kind.” He anchored an arm around her waist, then pulled out the fingers he’d had buried in her pussy to run along the column of her neck. Her own heady scent hit her nostrils and made her go weak all over. “Fangs inside you when I’m inside you, in you in two places. Nothing more intimate than that.”

Oh god. Now she really wanted it. “So...not about making your girlfriend your snack?”

“Won’t say I wouldn’t bloody love a few mouthfuls, but no. Just about...having you. Entirely.” He released a shaky breath. “Fuck, I need you. Sorry, love, but I can’t—”

But she was three steps ahead of him, having bolted from his lap to tear her pants and underwear down her legs. And that was all the encouragement he needed. Spike practically ripped his belt in his frenzy to free himself. Then he was lowering his zipper and taking out his cock, and holy hell, he was going to be inside of her. Thick and hard, straining in a curve toward the crypt's ceiling, his dick was a thing of beauty, the head swollen and dotted with beads of precum. Buffy swallowed and stared, the synapses in her brain threatening to short out.

This was really happening. She was about to have sex with Spike.

"Slayer—"

Buffy gave her head a shake and all but leaped back on him, rubbing herself along his length and earning a hard growl for her efforts. Spike seized her by the hips, then tugged her down so his cock was parting her flesh, nudging her opening, and then he was there, a part of her, inside her, whispering her name in a rushed babble as she inched her way down the full length of him.

"Oh my god," Buffy gasped, grasping the back of the couch to steady herself. "So full."

"Bloody hell, you're gonna kill me."

"Not yet." She rolled her hips, adjusting to the size and feel of him. "Stick around for a while."

Spike rumbled a little growl at her ear, which melted into a moan when she began to move. She wasn't entirely sure what she was doing—while she'd done some steering with Riley, she'd more or less let him take control of things in the bedroom, especially as their relationship had become more strained. As though a part of her had known he needed to feel in control of something—or like she hadn't robbed him of every traditional male role. Which, yes, had likely contributed to the rather spectacular dive their sex-life had taken, but she hadn't been in a place where she'd wanted to admit the time that it had been the best between them had involved sexually repressed ghosts.

"God, how you feel," Spike groaned, digging his fingers into her hips. "So tight. My sweet Slayer. Bloody wonder, you are. Grip me so good."

"Spike..."

He swallowed, and she watched his Adam's apple bob, entranced by the motion. The first few strokes were slow and exploratory so she could focus on the sensation of him inside her. She hadn't known, hadn't really let herself think about, the difference between human men and vampires since her one and only night with Angel. What she'd experienced with him had been singular, not only because it had been her first time but for everything that had followed. She'd been thinking about that night when she'd agreed to sleep with Parker, and then carried that subsequent humiliation on top of all the others into Riley's bed. There had been fear each time she was with someone new—fear that she'd be made a fool, that she'd do something wrong, that she'd wake up the next morning to find herself in a world of hurt.

That fear wasn't present now—all she felt was exhilarated. Need and want. And yeah, liberation too. For the first time, she was with someone whose feelings for her were completely transparent. Someone who wanted her, full-stop, just exactly as she was.

"You're so hot," he growled, sliding his hands up her sides to play with her breasts. "Burning me up with that tight pussy of yours. Drivin' me outta my mind." He flicked his thumbs over her nipples. "Feel how hard you make me, pet? Always been that way. From the second I saw you, I wanted to fuck you into the sodding ground. I've been yours from the bloody beginning."

Oh yeah, words definitely did it for her. Something else she was discovering courtesy of her vampire. Buffy threw her head back, a sound that might have been a moan or a gasp clawing its way to freedom. She was done going slow, as much as she enjoyed it. There would be time to explore him later—a lot of time, hopefully. Right now she just needed.

So she swirled her hips and slammed onto his cock with intent, sending his head back against the sofa and making those beautiful blue eyes of his go wide. Then he grinned and bared his teeth, rocketing his hips up to meet her as she came down again and again. "Thatta girl, Slayer," he snarled. "Ride me like that. Strangle my dick and I'll just beg for more."

She whimpered. "Spike..."

"Love the way you say my name." He dragged his gaze down her

body until he was staring at where they were joined, and the hunger that flashed across his face had her tightening in ways that would have frightened her had she been with anyone else. “Look at us together.”

She glanced down just in time to see his cock dip back inside of her and out again. “Oh god,” she said, somewhat startled because, well, this was new too. She’d never watched before and seeing it elevated sensation. Along with the heady smacks of their bodies coming together, the air filled with Spike’s hard grunts and her sighs, the visual drove home what was happening the way little else could.

Buffy gripped the back of the couch on either side of Spike’s head, pressing her brow to his as she began bouncing in earnest. His hands were back at her ass now, squeezing and caressing and guiding without taking control. She nudged his brow with hers and practically melted when he seized her lips in a soft, almost sweet kiss that seemed to contradict how hard she was riding him. Then he started to growl into her mouth and something inside of her snapped. The couch gave a whine of warning before the material under her hands cried uncle, and then the world beneath her vanished, reappeared, rolled, and righted itself again with a particularly deep thrust.

“Oh fuck,” Spike said, above her now, the crypt floor at her back. She didn’t know what had happened and didn’t care, so long as he kept fucking her. And *oh*, he did. So hard the stone at her spine sent a tingle of pain through her body, but it felt so good she didn’t care. He stared down at her, braced on his elbows, his expression almost pained as he thrust and dipped and stroked. “Buffy. *Buffy*.”

Buffy scratched at his chest, his shoulders, trying to gain leverage. It just seemed to drive him wilder.

“Do it, pet,” he whispered. “Do what you said.”

“What?”

“Those muscles of yours? Squeeze me until I pop.”

She didn’t know what he was talking about—except then she did, because hadn’t she always held something back? The entire last year and a half had been a testament to holding back because she’d always known no one would be able to take her at full strength. As it was in the sparring room so it was in the bedroom. But it wasn’t that way now, and Spike was asking her to unleash.

So she did. Every time he drove his cock into her, she clenched around him, and *hot damn*, Spike went wild. A hard growl tore through his throat, unlike all the growls that had come before, and suddenly she was gazing into the yellow eyes of his demon. He bucked and swore and pounded into her like he was angry with her and this was the best way to get it out. And that was enough. That was going to get her there like little else could.

Then she felt his fingers between them, sliding over her belly and down to her swollen sex. He flicked her clit once, twice, and just as she was certain she was about to go over the rainbow, his weight disappeared as he pulled out of her entirely.

“What?” Buffy tried to sit up, blinking sweat from her eyes, but he shoved her back against the stone floor.

“Greedy bastard,” he said around his fangs. “Wanna have it both ways.”

Then he had her ass in his hands again and was lifting her off the ground to plunge his tongue inside her cunt. Buffy arched and sobbed, scrambling to find something she could grip but the couch—or whatever was left of it—was too far away, leaving her to claw at the floor instead. Spike growled in response, then licked his way to her clit and sucked her hard between his lips.

And that was it. Something within her exploded, taking her along with it. White-hot pleasure blistering her veins apart over and over until she thought she might just go up in smoke. Then he was there again, his cock inside of her, thrusting madly as her pussy clenched and squeezed and all of her came undone. She clawed at his neck and shoulders, sure she’d fall somewhere if he didn’t provide her leverage, and tugged his head down so his mouth was against her throat.

“Slayer,” she heard him rumble above the noise in her head. He licked at her throat and her heart skipped. Then he sank his teeth into her—teeth, not fangs. Human teeth. She hadn’t even noticed him shift back, but he had, and now he was biting her and it was *so good* she almost begged him to do it for real. Almost, but didn’t quite get the chance, because by the time the thought had formed, Spike had tensed and then bucked, pulsing inside of her as he came.

It would be a while before the feeling returned to her legs—a long

while, but that was okay. For the moment, she was perfectly content where she was, even if it happened to be on the cold crypt floor, a panting vampire lying on top of her. A panting vampire whose cock was beginning to swell within her like he hadn't just made the walls shake for how hard he'd come. And hey, she wasn't one to judge, because she felt something stir inside her as well. Something that should be stuffed and satisfied and ready to hibernate for the winter.

"Buffy."

"Yeah?" she replied in a hoarse, throaty voice that sounded nothing like her own.

"Didn't hurt you, did I?"

"No. Why, the chip didn't go off, did it?"

"No. But wasn't aimin' to make it hurt." He pulled back a bit, studying her throat. "Sorry for the bite. Couldn't help it. Didn't break the skin, but—"

"I loved it."

Spike met her eyes, not bothering to hide his astonishment. "Yeah?"

"Uh huh." Enough that she wanted to try it again with fangs, if he was up for possibly adding a very unsexy headache to their lovemaking, but she decided not to broach the subject just yet. "It was hot."

"Hot."

"Oh yeah." She grinned, and something in her chest lightened. "As opposed to cold. Like in our game."

A slow smile spread across Spike's face, and he nudged his hips forward. "Fuck yes." He paused. "Anythin' cold about what we just did? Now's the time to tell me."

Buffy glanced to the right, where the remains of the couch lay, and fought the urge to laugh. "Umm, yeah. Just one thing."

He tensed. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. I really, really should have taken advantage of having two of you here when I had the chance."

Spike stared at her for a moment, his expression blank, then a delicious grin spread across his lips. He pulled back entirely this time before thrusting his cock back inside her. "You couldn't handle more than one of me," he replied.

Yeah, that was probably true, but a girl was allowed her regrets. Buffy linked her hands around his neck to pull him down for a kiss.

"But if my lady has complaints," he murmured against her lips, picking up his pace, "I'll just have to do the work of two."

"Oh god."

"Name's Spike, pet. Might as well use it, since you'll be screaming it here in a mo'."

Buffy panted, blinked sweat from her eyes and met his challenging gaze with her own. "Make me."

And he did, just like she'd known he would.

BY THE TIME BUFFY CRASHED INTO SLEEP IN SPIKE'S BED, SHE WAS thoroughly worn out, and that was a thing that had never happened, not even once. Not even when Riley had been all amped on his super-soldier kick and determined to prove he had stamina that could outstrip whatever a stevedore was. Hell, when he'd been his strongest, she'd still been sneaking out to get in a good slay after making sure he was sawing logs.

Spike barely gave her time to catch her breath, much less think about things she could be doing that didn't involve him and a lot of nudity. And there was no rhyme or reason to what set him off—the way she wrinkled her nose or rolled her eyes, how she grinned or laughed, or when they'd started bickering about whether or not *Die Hard* was a Christmas movie. Somehow, everything resulted in him pouncing on top of her or rolling her over so she was astride his hips, and they'd be off to the races.

It was a little frightening, how similar the real experience with Spike was proving to be to the brief daydream she'd had while on her date with J-what's-his-face. Something she'd told him as the night had crept closer to morning.

"I thought about what it would be like," she'd said, running her



hands through his hair; he'd been resting his cheek against her belly at the time. "You and me dating."

She'd felt his mouth curl into a grin as he'd tightened his arms around her. "Yeah?"

"Essentially a lot of us being obnoxious with each other and then making out."

"Sounds brilliant." He'd turned his head so that she could see that smile before pressing a kiss just above her belly-button. "Anything in particular?"

"Any what?"

"Said you thought about us. What did you think?" He'd nipped at her belly. "Were you a good girl or very, very bad?"

Her little movie-date fantasy was so tame she'd almost been embarrassed to reference it at all, especially after he'd spent the past few minutes exploring her pussy with his mouth for the literally-have-forgotten-the-number-of-times time that night. Spike was a guy with an unapologetic oral fixation, and once he'd learned she hadn't been a big fan of being eaten out before him, he'd set about on some unspoken mission to catch her up on all the years she'd missed.

"It was lame," she'd replied, wiggling.

"Tell me."

"We went to the movies."

Spike had arched an eyebrow. "Yeah, and?"

"And... Well, I started doing the mental comparison thing with you and Angel."

There was a surefire way to kill the mood. "Just what every bloke loves to hear, pet."

"Hey, you asked."

"You coulda warned me."

"You would've asked anyway."

He'd grinned at that. "Probably right. So you gonna tell me how I fared against Captain Forehead or leave me in suspense?"

"Well, it was..." She'd sucked her lower lip between her teeth. "I think where I landed is I'd have more fun with you."

"Yeah?"

"Angel always wanted to go to these artsy movies. I mean, we didn't

go to too many movies or anything on account of, well, him being evil and me having a night job, but the times we did do the regular date stuff, I felt...well..."

"Bored?"

She'd pouted. "You don't have to sound so happy."

"Oh no, pet, I think I do." He'd dropped another kiss against her skin, this one south of her belly-button, and encouraging her hormones to do a happy dance in response. "Bloke's as dull as a sodding table lamp."

This had made her giggle, though she'd told him it was patently false.

"I imagined you and me at a movie. Some really bad monster flick or something."

He'd snickered, lifting one of her legs to position it over his shoulder. "Wager we'd get chucked out right quick," he'd replied, spreading her open. "Pointing out all the rot they got wrong."

"Yes, that's actually exactly what happened. In the fantasy."

"Not sure what it says that in your Spike dream date, we don't make it all the way through to the credits."

"It was more we were having fun," she'd said. "Making fun of stupid things and throwing popcorn at each other and getting shushed by everyone. It sounded...fun. Like the opposite of a lot of dates I'd been on."

"And that's what brought you to me?"

She'd nodded, and he'd grinned, then lowered his mouth to her pussy and driven thoughts of anything else promptly out of her head.

At some point, despite however much she appreciated him keeping her occupied with his mouth and hands, Buffy had conceded that she needed to get going. There was still research to do, rocks to look under for ways to save his soul. Spike had tugged her back to him, hooked his chin over her shoulder, and told her to get some shut-eye instead. She hadn't intended to fall asleep, rather just enjoy a few seconds of cuddling before making her way out of bed, but her eyes hadn't gotten the memo and turned out to be highly suggestible. Once she'd shut them, they'd stayed that way, and she'd drifted off into dreamland.

It was her bladder that awoke her. Buffy came to, her body urging her to find a toilet and pronto. And once her brain clued her into where she was, she'd hit the panic button. Basic bodily functions weren't the sorts of things that a vampire worried about, were they? No reason for Spike to have a bathroom set-up. She groaned low in her throat, tossed off the blankets, and planted her feet on the cold stone floor, shivering.

"Sneakin' off, are you?"

Buffy started and looked over her shoulder. "You're awake."

"Couldn't sleep, more like."

"You couldn't sleep?"

"You were here, in my bed. Bloody hard to think about kip under those conditions." Spike turned at that and stretched his arms over his head, giving her a much-appreciated view of his slab-like chest. He was under a sheet that rode low on his hips—low enough to give her a tantalizing peek at what lay beneath, but high enough that the view wasn't pornographic. "So are you?"

"Am I what?"

"Sneaking off on me."

He asked the question levelly enough, though she felt the apprehension behind it.

"Uhh, insofar as I need to pee. And get back to research with the gang."

Spike sat up, resting his elbows on bended knees. "Gotta shower. Not much, but I managed to jury-rig it well enough so it works. There's a drain in there." He paused, then winced as though he'd heard himself, and dragged a hand down his face. "Not exactly posh, is it? Bloody hell..."

"Spike, I didn't expect you to have a bathroom in a crypt. It's kinda weird enough that you have a bed in here."

"Didn't hear any complaints last night."

Well, no, because she'd had none. Hard to complain when a vampire completely devoted to you insisted on giving you as many orgasms as demonly possible.

"Last night? As in, yesterday? What time is it?"

Spike shifted a bit on his elbows and gave the ceiling a speculative

look. "Can't say within any degree of certainty, but the sun's up. I'd wager close to ten or so."

"Ten?" Holy moly, was she ever in for it. Buffy's heart somersaulted. "I gotta go." She scoured the ground for her clothes, then remembered that the actual disrobing had happened upstairs. Her bladder gave another whine of protest, but she had her boundaries and popping a squat atop a drain was way on the other side.

"Gotta say, pet, not exactly what I wanted to hear the mornin' after." Spike threw his feet over the side of the bed and rose to his feet, the sheet dropping away and melting her brain at the visual of what he was packing between his legs. Despite herself, Buffy felt her skin warm. He had done a lot with that particular appendage last night—enough that she was actually a little on the sore side, which hadn't happened in forever. She would have thought to be sexed out for a while, but that was not the case. If anything...

His cock, which had been had half-mast, thickened and swelled under her scrutiny. "Though you keep eye-ballin' me like that, love, and all's forgiven," he said, the words a low growl.

*Dammit.* Buffy tore her gaze from his erection before she could do something stupid—like jump his sexy bones and let more time slip through her fingers. "We're on a timetable here," she said, staring steadily at the stone wall. "It's day six. We have today and tomorrow to figure out how to save your soul from Rack, and I slept in. As in *way* in."

He sighed at that. "Slayer—"

"I'm not going to stop looking, so you can just drop it."

"Didn't reckon you would, stubborn bint that you are." He offered a flat smile. "But we gotta be ready, yeah? Make sure that when the clock runs out, we have what this wanker wants if there's not another way."

"Spike—"

"If it comes down to it, we do this my way. It was my bargain."

Buffy released a long breath and crossed her arms, realizing belatedly that she was just as naked as he was and her nipples were all kinds of salutey at the moment, courtesy of both the cold and the eye-candy.

She really needed her clothes. "I'm never going to be okay with that," she said softly. "You know that."

"Not askin' you to be okay with it. Just askin' that you respect—"

"Respect?"

"Yeah, respect that it's my decision." He looked at her a moment longer before huffing and dragging a hand down his face. "Said as much last night, didn't you? That this is the sorta thing you woulda done for someone you love?"

"I would never bargain a soul."

"Right, well, I would. Especially since it's mine to bargain and you're on the chopping block." There was a still beat. Spike sighed and raised his gaze back to hers. "I love you. And I bloody well guarantee that if I had that sodding thing stuffed up my arse, that'd be the same. Always been a soft touch, especially for the women I love. And... Buffy, I watched you die once. I am not gonna do it again."

"I watched you die too. That excuse doesn't really fly."

"Yeah, well—"

"And that's what this will be, whatever else you think. Some part of you will die if Rack gets his hands on it. It might not be a part I know or a part I'll ever see, but it's still a *part*." Buffy released a long breath, curling and uncurling her hands into fists. "Let me try to find another way. *Help* me try to find another way. I'm not sure what will happen or how I'll feel if the clock runs out, but I need to try and I need you to want it, too. Please."

The edge in his eyes softened. He swallowed audibly before offering a nod. "Right. I can do that."

"Good." It was a small concession, a place to pause an ongoing conversation, because despite her big talk, everything they'd uncovered the previous night more or less had her convinced that there would be no magic solution, and she'd be forced to decide just how *okay* she was with Spike's soul being on the chopping block. But that was a problem for Future Buffy. Present Buffy needed to hold onto her hope. "Now I gotta go get dressed before my bladder bursts."

Spike favored her with a soft grin, then nodded at something behind her. "Use the drain. I'll pop upstairs and get things gathered for you."

Buffy wrinkled her nose. With or without an audience, the prospect of using a drain to do her business was not her favorite thing. But, she thought as she turned to find the shower he'd indicated, she suspected beggars couldn't be choosers, and she really did have to go. This was the downside to dating the undead—though Angel had always made sure the place on Crawford Street was Buffy-friendly. Something she definitely would *not* be mentioning to her new vampire boyfriend, especially since she'd kinda sprung the whole relationship on him without warning. And it was easier to make an actual mansion hospitable for human residents than a literal graveyard crypt. Still, she figured future sleepovers were something they should plan on doing at her place rather than his.

A few minutes later, though, and Buffy felt about a thousand percent better, if not in serious need of a shower. After acrobatics in the cemetery and the sexcapades, she figured she was a walking disaster zone. Not that she could say she regretted it because, well, she didn't. The only thing she regretted at the moment was that she had to head out. She swore she'd never picked a worse time for starting a new relationship.

Climbing up to the first floor naked was a whole lot less fun than tumbling downstairs naked had been. The air was warmer, but only slightly. She found Spike in the alcove he'd made his kitchen, wearing nothing but his jeans and fixing himself a glass of blood. Her clothes were in a neat stack on the sofa she'd broken the night before, and the sight of them—of it—had her cheeks going hot.

"Slayer."

Buffy started and whirled around to find Spike had moved so he was just a pace away, his expression guarded. "Jeez. Bell, neck. We're getting you one of those."

A grin tugged at his lips. "I'd wear it for you," he replied, raking his eyes down her still very naked body. "Such a bloody vision, you are." He leaned in and pressed his cheek to hers, inhaling. "Smell like me now. Like *us*. Gotta say I find that rather fetching."

Buffy curled her hands into fists and rested them against his chest. "I'm self-conscious enough as it is."

He pulled back with a frown. "Why's that?"

“Well...naked in a cemetery. Kinda something I thought I’d never do.” She turned before he could distract her again and started working her way back into her clothes. “The place isn’t bad, though. For a hole in the ground, at least.”

“Slayer...” He was right behind her again, trailing a hand down her spine. “You goin’ skittish on me now?”

“No. Not skittish.”

“So you don’t regret it, then.”

Oh damn. Did he think that? Buffy fastened her bra and started pulling on her slacks, minus her underwear, and turned to meet his gaze again. “No,” she said. “No, I don’t regret anything. Except maybe that I gotta take off.”

Spike nodded, released a ragged breath, and pressed his brow to hers. “You want me to move? Find a new place? Somethin’ a bit more posh?”

“What?”

“This place is made for my kind, not yours.” He swallowed. “Like I said, got a shower that suits me just fine, but not somethin’ you’d fancy, I’d wager. Other things, too. Might get cold on you, or too bloody hot in the summer. Would rather have it so you’re not thinkin’ about taking off every mornin’ just because I live like I’m dead.”

Well, apparently she’d been a bit too transparent. Buffy offered a low, deep sigh, her shoulders slumping. “You don’t need to do that just for me.”

“Need has nothin’ to do with it.”

For him, she supposed it didn’t. “How would you pay for a place?”

“Bit of this and that.”

“Because *that* doesn’t sound evil.”

He smirked, pulling back just slightly. “Always was to get money. I play a mean hand of cards, for one. Got a regular game in town with a bunch of gnarly blokes who love to lose to me, and more where that came from. Most of my dosh now goes to coverin’ blood and smokes but I could start pinchin’ away here and there until I find a way to make it more reliable.”

“Like...a job?”

“Wouldn’t go that far.” Spike offered a weak smile. “Might be a tamed monster but I’m still a monster.”

Buffy released a long breath, linking her hands around his neck, begging her brain to cooperate by finding the words she needed. “I didn’t mean to make you feel all self-conscious about this place, Spike,” she said, holding his gaze. “I really do think it’s cozy, and the things you’ve done with it...make a girl forget that it’s in the middle of a cemetery. And believe me, the digs weren’t at all what I was thinking about until, well, I had to be all human this morning with the bathroom run and whatnot.”

“Guess that’s the point, pet. If we’re makin’ a go of it, gotta think about those things now, don’t I? Don’t want you runnin’ off before you have to.”

This was so a conversation for later—maybe much later, after they’d been together for more than thirty-six hours. Everything that was happening now was so new and untried, and they were in the middle of a fight with their current resident baddie. But Buffy couldn’t deny that his concern touched her—that he was even thinking these things. She wasn’t surprised, *per se*, but she hadn’t expected it, either. For someone who practically breathed insults, Spike was proving to be one of the more considerate people she knew.

How differently the past couple of years might have gone had she allowed for the possibility that this version of him existed.

“More on this later?” She turned back to grab her top. “Will you be by the house?”

“Could pop on over now.”

“How about when there’s less chance of Spike dustiness? Not wild about the way you get around town during the day.”

His eyebrows shot skyward. “No? Since when?”

“Well, never been wild about it,” Buffy said as she pulled her shirt back over her head. “Your timing’s of the awful and it always smells a bit like burned hair when you rush in. But since you’re officially my boyfriend now, I’d prefer it if you didn’t play fast and loose with your life.”

“Why’s it you didn’t mention how you felt about this yesterday?”

Good question with a couple of answers. The first being that it



hadn't really occurred to her until they'd left his crypt side-by-side that he'd be making the journey under a blanket because apparently all rational thought had vacated her head sometime after the first orgasm. The second being that she and Spike had intended to not acknowledge the change in their relationship until after everything with Rack was over and it'd be weird to appear concerned. But since the cat had clawed its way out of the bag, there was no longer a reason to play it cool.

"I'm mentioning it now," she told him, stuffing her feet into her shoes, sans socks. God, she was about to walk-of-shame her way out of a cemetery. This whole *married to the job* thing had come full circle. "I don't like it."

"So you just expect me to wait around here then? Sorry, Slayer, but that's not gonna happen."

"Don't you need to use the daylight to, you know, sleep? Creature of the night?"

Spike sighed and rolled his head back. "This is gonna be a row, innit? Didn't reckon our first would be over something this bloody silly."

"It's not silly to not want you to dust. And no, I'm not *rowing* or fighting or anything else right now, so put the conversation on pause and we'll continue not rowing later." Buffy straightened, scowled at the dirt and grime staining her clothes. She started to dust herself off but realized fast it was a losing battle, and it wasn't like she planned on wearing this beyond just getting home. So she turned back to Spike and neared to press a kiss against his lips. "I'm sorry for running out now, but I really do need to check in with the others."

"I'll be by later."

"Spike—"

"Not about to spend all my days cooped up in here. You'll just have to bloody deal."

"This is not how we don't fight, you know."

Spike narrowed his eyes. "Slayer, you're extra skittish right now 'cause of the soul and the warlock. Probably doesn't help matters that you saw a bloke who looked just like me go up a few days back. Not sayin' I don't love it that you're worried, 'cause I do, but I'm not about

to go up in flames now. Spent a good long time dodging the sun before I showed up here.”

Ugh. Whatever. She pulled back and turned for the door. “Fine. Get yourself dusted,” she said. “See what I care.”

The sound of his chuckle, which should annoy her more than it did, chased her into the sunshine.

“Love you too, sweetheart,” he called after her.

She replied by slamming the door shut, hoping the clang masked the sound of her pounding heart. Because for some reason, those words hit close to home. A bit too close.

And she was so not ready to go there just yet.



“BUFFY!”

Buffy jerked her head up, and therefore out of her Spike-shaped daydreams, to find that the living room she’d assumed was unoccupied was, in fact, occupied. She looked from Willow’s somewhat apologetic face to Giles’s rather serious one, and gathered that, as was her luck, she was about to be thrust into a conversation she was nowhere near prepared to have just yet. Not while wearing yesterday’s clothes and smelling of sweat and sex.

“Hi,” she said, closing the door behind her. “Have... How long have you been here?”

“Giles came over last night to talk about some time travel stuff,” Willow said in a rush.

Giles was already polishing his glasses, which was the opposite of a good sign. “I tried to come here first, but you were out. Again.”

“Uhh, yeah.” She glanced at Willow, who offered her the helpless best friend shrug, then looked back again. “I had a date. Dawn was staying with Will and Tara so...well—”

“I would hardly call whatever you were out doing with Spike *dating*,” Giles said in a manner that couldn’t have conveyed his disapproval any clearer than if he’d outright started yelling. “That is where you were, isn’t it? You have decided to, err—”

"Giles? We are so not talking about my relationship status. It's not up for discussion."

"Buffy—"

"I didn't just rush into anything. This is something I thought about. A lot."

"Are you forgetting that this is the same Spike who, but a few weeks ago, commissioned a robot in your likeness specifically for the purpose of defiling it?"

That was a very British way for him to put it. "Hey, remember a second ago when I said this isn't up for discussion? Still very much true."

"This entire thing is irrational and dangerous," Giles practically barked. "I hope you realize that."

"And I hope you realize that it's not your business. And unless you have some reason for being here that isn't discussing my love life, I'm going to—"

"Buffy." Willow stepped forward, her expression somber. "I'm sorry, but...yeah, there are things we need to talk about. Time travel stuff."

"And the fact that you are sleeping with a vampire who has so thoughtlessly put this world in peril," Giles said. "I honestly expected better from you."

Buffy frowned, her head beginning to pound. "The world is in peril? Didn't it just get out of being in peril?"

At last, the fire seemed to fade from Giles's eyes, the hard lines of his face softening as something closer to heartbreak taking over. He held her gaze for a long moment during which he seemed to deflate by increments. Then he released a deep breath and sank onto the sofa, defeated.

"I know I haven't seemed myself since the night we defeated Glory," he said, speaking now to the coffee table. "I am sorry for that. For whatever it might have looked like. In truth, Buffy, I was convinced the only way to save the world was to kill Dawn if it came down to it. You know it because I, well, I told you as much. When Spike arrived—the other Spike—with his story that you had stopped the portal from opening by jumping in yourself... It's no less than I would have expected from you." He paused, inhaled sharply. "Losing

you was always going to be the final chapter of my story. I've prepared for it from the beginning. All watchers do. It is our privilege and our burden. And you better believe that if the choice were mine, I would have stood between you and all of Hell to keep you and Dawn alive."

He was really scaring her now. The fight had left her, replaced with a sort of solemn cold that began to feel like dread. Argumentative Giles was a Giles she could handle. This Giles just sounded defeated, and not the same sort of defeated as before the fight with Glory when he'd said she would fail and everyone would die. That Giles had been fighting for something, at least. This one wasn't fighting at all.

"What's wrong?" she said, looking back to Willow. "I'm going to guess you found something. You and Angel—"

"The magics used to tear a hole in time were unnatural," Giles said, speaking still to the coffee table. "I have conferred with the Watchers Council as well as Angel, being that he has considerable experience in this area, particularly given his proximity to Wolfram and Hart."

"Wolfram and What?"

"Too large to get in to, so here is the extremely short version—an ancient, primordial and powerful evil that disguises itself every generation as something so mundane as to blend in with society. Right now, Wolfram and Hart exists as a law firm."

"Evil lawyers," Willow muttered, offering a weak smile. "Kinda hitting that nail on the head, right?"

Normally, a comment like that would have at least earned a Giles head shake, or maybe one of those lip twitches that indicated he was fighting off a grin. Not now, though.

"So what are you saying?" Buffy asked at last. "That...the world would be better off if I'd died?"

He released a deep breath, some of the pain from earlier flashing across his face again. "That is the position the Council has arrived at, yes," he said softly. "They are of the opinion that the bargain shouldn't be fulfilled and this timeline effectively eradicated."

Buffy swallowed around the lump that had settled in her throat, a jolt of fear nearly knocking her off her feet. It was unlike the thing that had consumed her in the weeks leading up to Glory, but no less terrify-

ing. More intimate—personal as nothing had been before. The whole of existence boiled down to her continued survival.

“And you called the Council because?” she asked.

“Because these events are not insignificant. They are the sort that will ripple out, possibly for years.” Giles sighed and broke his gaze from hers. “I told you I swore to protect the world. Every instinct in me demands that I protect you instead, but I cannot afford to be selfish. The lives of billions are potentially at stake here and...I have to be strong.”

“You’re talking like things like this have never happened before,” Buffy said, her voice climbing in pitch. She looked to Willow for support, but her friend had none to offer. “But we know it has. That time when Vampire Willow broke through to our world—that was because of Anya’s spell, right? She even mentioned it the other day, that this timeline was an offshoot like that one, based on a what-if.”

“Yes,” Giles agreed. He kept his eyes on the ground. “The difference comes down to the execution. Anya’s magic was natural, inherent to vengeance demons. The sort of power that it would take to open a hole in time without innate abilities like those possessed by certain demons goes against the natural laws of magic. This is true for all dark magics, and why the consequences for such spells are always so severe. And were that the consequences were only ours to deal with, perhaps that would be enough. But we don’t know what these consequences might be, only that they are very likely lead to...terrible things.”

Buffy didn’t know when she’d started shaking, only that she was. She rubbed her arms in a bid for warmth, her eyes swelling with tears. Logically, she knew what Giles was saying—understood where he was leading her. Not too unlike that night in the library of Sunnydale High where she’d heard the prophecy of her death for the first time. She’d been terrified then, too, and mad as hell, but this was different.

This was more than just her life. It was everything.

“Say it,” she whispered after a beat. “Just say it.”

Giles’s cheeks were wet. He still didn’t look at her. “We have to let this timeline die, not just for this world but for all of them.”

“You went to Angel and you went to the Watchers Council and you all agree on this? Presto, no more world, no more Buffy?”

“For the world, Buffy. The real one—the one that Spike endangered by defying the natural order. That world is not this one.”

“Glad to know where you stand.”

“It’s not like that,” he told the ground. “No one wants this. I would give anything to be able to tell you something else—anything else. The thought of losing you...”

“Well, you won’t *lose* me at all, will you? You’ll get to skip that part—you and everyone else. Just pop on back to the other timeline where I’m already lost.” Buffy shook her head, tears coming harder now, that terrible pressure in her chest threatening to explode. “You won’t even know this happened. I’ll just be gone. Spike, too, because he gave his life for this. No one will ever know.”

Seemed about right. Have one of the best nights of her life only to wake up in a world that no longer made sense. Only this was a thousand times worse because last night had been more than just one of the best. It had been revolutionary, eye-opening and grown-up. For the first time, the first real time, she felt like she’d done some legwork in being a functioning adult, come to realizations about herself that made her future seem brighter than it had since before Angel had tried to suck the world into Hell. Like she had actually taken a step to becoming the person she was meant to be, woman and slayer combined.

This was...

“I gotta go shower,” Buffy said dully, turning toward the stairs.

Willow released a somewhat strangled sound. “Buffy—”

But she didn’t stick around to listen. Couldn’t. If she stayed, if she looked at these people who loved her but thought the world would literally be better off without her—whatever their reasons—she might just scream herself hoarse.

What she needed was time.

And that was the one thing she didn’t have.

SOMETIMES IT JUST TOOK TIME TO REFRAME WHAT APPEARED TO BE A really bad situation. A hot shower could turn what had previously sounded like the worst of all possible ideas into something brilliant. And naps. Naps were great for restarting the old noodle. Today, however, Buffy didn't have time for a nap. She was supposed to be at the Magic Box, poring through books and coming up with alternatives to save her new boyfriend's soul from becoming warlock fodder. That had been her one and only plan today that hadn't involved more fun naked time. Sure, it had been a tall order to fill, but she'd been ready to give it the old college try.

Instead, everyone had gathered at her house. Anya had even closed the shop early, reasoning it didn't make much sense to continue selling her wares if she wouldn't benefit in this timeline. Indeed, the realization that all of the money she had scrimped and saved in this world would go up like smoke had moved her to order food for lunch for the group, all the while loudly bemoaning her fate.

"Can we, just for the sake of argument, go over it again?" Xander asked after he'd polished off his carton of kung pao chicken. "From the top, using very small words."

Buffy groaned and dropped her head into her hands. She hadn't had

much of an appetite and had barely touched the chicken fried rice Dawn had insisted they order for her. Not that it mattered—her garbage disposal of a sister was eyeballing it like she hadn't eaten a good hearty meal in weeks. "Bad magic make timeline," Buffy said in a dry monotone. "Bad magic has bad consequences. Bad magic needs to be stopped by making Buffy go boom."

"Not just you, Buffy," Anya said, plucking an egg roll from the bag. "Spike's thoughtless actions mean that *all* of us are going to die."

"No, you aren't," she shot back, already exhausted with this argument. "You and everyone else will be just fine in the other timeline."

"Except it won't be *this* me," Anya argued. "That other me isn't this me. This me doesn't want to die. This me was looking forward to her wedding."

Buffy froze. So did the others. Well—almost all the others. Xander had started choking. As one, Buffy, Willow, Tara, Dawn, and Giles all turned to Anya, who rolled her eyes and waved a hand.

"Xander asked me to marry him before the fight with Glory. I said yes. We were waiting for the optimal time to share our joyous news." She scowled. "Which apparently is now because I will never have a wedding!"

There was nothing for a moment but Anya's angry huffs.

"Surprise, everyone," Xander said after he stopped coughing. "I'd say your invitations are in the mail, but there's not going to be mail very soon."

"I still don't see why we can't just figure out this thing with Rack," Dawn said, her voice steely. "So some big bad thing is going to happen if this timeline continues—so what? Isn't some big bad thing *always* going to happen, and isn't it *always* going to happen to us? Why give up here when we were all about fighting Glory just a few days ago?"

This was something Buffy was struggling with, herself. The idea that Giles's solution to the problem was just to let the world end. Well, not the world, but this version of it—this time aberration that had been spun the second Spike had made the agreement. On some level she understood it wasn't the same, but that didn't keep it from feeling the



same. Certainly didn't bring any comfort to her knowing that her sister sitting beside her now would soon be nonexistent, even if her sister would continue to draw breath in some other version of this world.

"The powers Rack used to tear through time are fundamentally unnatural," Giles said, sounding as exhausted as she felt. "Time is meant to run in one direction and always has."

"But there are demons who can manipulate time," Anya interjected. "I know. I was one."

"Yes and that magic is *not* fundamentally unnatural, as I have explained now, I believe, nine times," Giles went on. "Demons such as Anya have ingrained abilities. This is why they do not need to rip a hole in reality. They simply make one reality another one."

"To be clear, I am *not* a demon anymore," Anya said, glaring around the room as though she had been challenged. "I am a mortal human being whose life is now going to end because of Spike."

"Your life isn't going to end," Giles repeated, though without any fire. If anything, he seemed annoyed. "This life—these lives we've been living since Glory's Tower—are temporal aberrations. The version of you that was meant to survive in fact will continue to live in the unaltered timeline."

"I don't understand why you keep saying that," Anya replied. "My thoughts and feelings will end here and now. And you are asking me to be okay with that. Well, I am *not* okay with it."

"Believe me, we got that memo," Willow muttered, flashing Buffy a somewhat apologetic look. "But I don't think Spike should be blamed for this. All he was doing was trying to save Buffy. A-and if you'd taken a glimpse in his head like I did, it'd be pretty clear why. He was devastated."

"I imagine we all were," Giles said in a dry, unimpressed tone. "And if any of you believe I genuinely want to reverse course into a world where Buffy is no longer with us, then you truly don't know me at all." He met Buffy's gaze, swallowed and glanced away again. "If it had been anything else—*anything*... But it wasn't. The very nature of Spike's reappearance here indicated unnatural magic was at hand or the spell had gone badly, either of which could be catastrophic. And because of that,

I couldn't let myself celebrate our success or relish in Spike's actions. I so badly wanted to be wrong."

"What do you mean, *the nature of his appearance?*" Buffy asked. "What did his appearance have to do with anything?"

He sighed, removed his glasses, then put them back on again. "It was that there were two of them," he said. "For however long a time—two of the same being existed in the same world. Not," he added, looking at Xander, who had raised his hand, "like a being that had been split by magical means, but two complete beings that individually made up the vampire Spike. True time travel would have had the future Spike's consciousness transferred to his younger body. It is physically impossible to be in two places at once, and the fact that Spike was able to do it was an indicator that the magics that brought him back were darker and more dangerous than any of us could have anticipated. Time, of course, rectified this by eliminating the aberration, but the damage done by the spell couldn't be erased." Another long beat. Giles looked back to Buffy. "I know your relationship with him has changed dramatically over the past few days, but this sort of thing is patently demonstrative of—"

"Don't." Buffy shot her chair back before springing to her feet.

"Don't?"

"Don't start in on Spike like this is something none of us would have considered or even done."

"I damn well wouldn't have let one of you meddle with magic like this."

"Except how can you stop us, exactly?" She pointed at Willow. "When Oz left, Willow tried to magic her way to feeling better. When Cordy dumped Xander, he tried to magic her into liking him again. I died and Spike tried to magic a way to make it so that didn't happen. After I killed Angel, if I'd thought there was something out there that could have sent me back, I would have left no stone unturned to do just that. And hell, not even that... Do you know how many times I've wondered what might have happened if I'd come home just an hour before Mom died? We've all had these thoughts—we've all done things that were stupid because we loved someone. So don't start in on how this is just proof he's dangerous or evil."

"He *is* dangerous and evil, Buffy!" Giles snapped. "And if you were thinking clearly, you would never have involved yourself with such a creature."

"Why the hell does it even matter to you?" she shot back. "When the clock runs out, Spike and I will both be dead and gone. What does it matter if he's who I'm with when that happens?"

At this, pain flashed across Giles's face, the sort that told her she'd landed a hit he wouldn't walk off easily. Which was fine—good, even. If these were to be the last two days of her life, she didn't want to spend them debating her relationship.

After she was reasonably certain she wasn't going to start yelling again, Buffy released a deep breath and turned to Willow. "From everything Spike's told me about the night he made the deal, he wasn't even going to Rack looking for a fix."

Willow nodded. "He was going to see if Rack could take his feelings away," she agreed. "Or make the grief go, at least."

"Right. And Rack did what bad guys do—took that and exploited it to get what he wanted." She swallowed and glanced to her sister. "Whether that was Dawn or not. Or maybe it was just to mess up the natural order. Maybe it was all of the above—he thought he could convince Spike that Dawn was what he had bargained, get her power, and be ready for whatever the consequences of his spell were. I don't know and I don't care. But Spike didn't do anything I wouldn't have considered doing if given the same chance. He didn't do anything that people in this room haven't done—you too, Giles. So yes, it went badly—these spells always go badly. But that's not his fault. All he did was love me and I'm not going to blame him for that."

The prickle at her neck came a second too late.

"Glad to hear it," Spike drawled. She whirled around to find him lounging in the doorway, looking a little confused and a lot annoyed. There was no telling just how much of the conversation he'd heard, though given the timing of that prickle, she was going guess just the last bit. "Seein' as it's still my soul and all." A pause, and he offered her a slight smile. "No hope at keepin' me away, love. But I took the scenic route just to put your mind at ease. Guess the search hasn't gone well?"

At that, Giles huffed and looked away. Willow went slightly red and

directed her gaze to the table. Xander opened his mouth to say something but lost either the words or his nerve. Tara grabbed Willow's hand and Dawn tried for a weak smile.

"The deal you made with Rack was stupid and dangerous, and now Giles thinks we need to let this timeline end," Anya said with her characteristic bluntness. "Apparently, the consequences are worse than all of us ceasing to exist."

Spike's eyes went wide. He looked to Buffy sharply, his nostrils flaring. "No," he said. "We're givin' the sod my soul and that's final. Whatever happens we'll deal with."

"It's precisely that sort of thinking that led to this in the first place," Giles muttered.

Buffy shook her head, which felt much too full at the moment. The information turns had come hard and fast and she didn't know what to make of any of this, much less what to say. "It's this sort of thinking that protected Dawn from Glory," she argued. "Even while he was being tortured."

"And while uncharacteristically noble, that situation has precisely nothing in common with this one."

"Bugger that," Spike spat. "It was all for her, wasn't it? Everything I bloody do—"

"Without thought for yourself or the consequences, yes," Giles agreed, his eyes hard. "It worked then because the only thing to lose was yourself. You never stopped to think about what might happen to this world beyond saving Buffy. Were that the rest of us were so blissfully ignorant."

"Or have some bloody faith in your own slayer, you useless old git. You think this world can throw anything at your girl that she can't handle?"

"I think that a vampire as old as you should know not to ask foolish questions."

Spike stared at him for a long moment before breaking away, shaking his head. "Thought I'd have to come in here ready to fight for the privilege of sacrificing my own soul and it turns out this lot has lost its bleeding mind, never mind its backbone." He fixed his gaze on Buffy, sending a hard shiver down her spine. "But not you, Slayer. With

you to the end. When I go out, it'll be swinging and standing between you and whatever's comin'."

The certainty in his voice alone was nearly enough to sway her. There wasn't any doubt, just resolve. Promise. More of what he'd given her when he'd told her that Dawn's secret would die with him, that he'd protect her until the end of the world, however long it took to get there. With Spike at her side, she could almost believe that even the worst of what might come could be conquered. In the end, she couldn't say where she landed—what she wanted had collided headfirst with doubt. The most she could manage was a weak, "I don't know."

Though she would have given anything to swallow those words at the way his face fell.

"What the bloody hell do you mean, you don't know?" Spike stormed forward and seized her by the upper arms. "Slayer, I'm not gonna let you off yourself again for anything and I sure as hell am not goin' back to a world without you in it."

"You wouldn't," Anya added, sounding strangely far away. "You would die here with the rest of us."

Spike didn't so much as blink at that, keeping his eyes on Buffy, eyes so full of life and heart that they were sometimes hard to gaze in to. Just like no one kissed like Spike, no one had ever looked at her the way he did, either. And it was unfair. Nothing about this was fair.

"There's that, then," he said at last. "Small mercy."

Her sinuses gave a warning sting right before her eyes flooded. "I don't want anyone to die," she whispered. "I don't want to die."

"And you won't," Spike swore softly. "Give my soul to the prat and have it over with."

"That action could well lead to the deaths of billions of people across numerous realities," Giles said. "But I wouldn't expect you to understand."

Spike swung his head around, fixing the Watcher with a hard glare and tightening the hold he had on Buffy as though afraid she'd melt away. "Could. *Could*. Know what *could* means? Means there's a fair chance that *nothing* will happen. And you wanna doom your slayer just on a sodding *could*?"

"You arrogant little wanker." Giles was in motion the next second

—motion too fast for Buffy’s eyes to keep up with. She was certain she’d never seen Giles move like that. One second Spike was holding onto her, the next he was pressed against the wall, her watcher’s hand at his throat. “Do you think I would even *think* to suggest such a thing if I believed there was another way?”

“Dunno,” Spike replied, not without his trademark smirk. “Seems I recall you were hot to kill Dawn for the world. What’s big sis really matter to you?”

Giles leveraged his grip on the vampire to smack his head into the wall in response.

“Wait—what?” Dawn’s eyes had gone saucer-sized, and Buffy hissed out a small groan. She’d never intended her sister to find out that much. “I... Okay, wow.”

Spike shoved Giles back with a snarl of his own, pushing hard enough that the Watcher collided with the dining room table.

“Hey!” Xander bolted from his seat and started forward—to what end, Buffy didn’t know, because he seemed to lose steam after about three steps. “Why didn’t your chip go off?”

“Why? Aimin’ to test it out?”

Xander swung around and glared at Buffy. “And this is the guy? Really? This is who you spent last night boinking?”

Buffy flexed her hands into fists and tried for a patient smile, though from the way her friend blanched and backed up, it shared more qualities with Spike’s snarl. “Things that are none of your business.” She glanced to Spike. “And maybe less with the threats and the watcher tossing?”

Spike huffed out a breath and juttet his chin toward the Watcher in question. “He started it.”

“More than willing to end it, too,” Giles replied, not taking his eyes off the vampire.

“Willing but not gonna happen,” Buffy said, sliding in front of Spike and facing her watcher. “I’d appreciate it if you didn’t manhandle my boyfriend. Or really, anyone whose only crime here is not wanting me dead.”

“Only crime.” He blinked as though he couldn’t see her. “*Only* crime? Good lord—”

"In this case, yes. We are not here to litigate his past, especially if you're telling me that we—and here I mean the royal *we*—have no future. So do me and everyone here a favor and get over it." Buffy straightened her shoulders, her heart thundering harder. It was weird, being on this side of the argument where Spike was concerned, though not as weird as she would have thought. The past few days had been revolutionary in many ways—the mental pathways she'd traversed while negotiating the moral landscape that made up her vampire had unveiled things she knew she'd have never considered before. And standing here, between him and the others, even with everything else weighing on her, the steps she'd taken weren't ones she wanted to recover.

She'd spent the night with a version of Spike she'd denied existed. Now that she knew he did, this was the only place to stand.

And they were out of time. Out before they'd started.

It was so unfair.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," Buffy said a moment later, now addressing the floor. "This time travel stuff... I don't get it. I don't get what there being two Spikes would have done to make it obvious something went wrong. I know what you said and I don't *get it*. That or how the warlock's magic is somehow darker than a demon's. More things I don't *get*."

"I know you don't," Giles said, sounding slightly more under control. "But I do. I dabbled in more than enough magic in my youth to know the hallmarks of a dark spell."

Willow raised her hand behind him, her brow furrowed. "If I may?" she said. "I... I literally stuck my hand in the signature of this spell and, yeah, I felt that it was super powerful, but I'm not getting the dark vibes you're talking about. Maybe a little smoky, but...possibly world-ending black? Not so much."

"Might explain also how's it that you consider ending the world savin' it," Spike muttered.

That was a damn good point. Buffy frowned, crossed her arms. "I'd like to hear more on that, too."

"It's not ending the world," Giles snapped. "This world we're standing in is one that shouldn't exist at all."

“But again,” Willow said, pressing on, “with the not-dark vibes from the signature. And—”

“And just how the bloody blazes do you suppose practitioners become seduced to using dark magic?” Giles demanded, whirling to face her. The look in his eyes was unlike anything Buffy had seen before—wide, almost mad, and if she hadn’t been on the side of wiggled before, she definitely was now. Whatever else, Giles truly believed what he was saying. “Good people don’t start meddling with forces like these on a bloody whim. The dark magic relies on your inability to tell the difference between it and lighter magic in order to draw you in deeper, so that when you begin crossing boundaries, when you begin doing the things you swore to yourself you never would, you have become so engrossed, so beholden to it that your rational mind makes sense of whatever excuse is most convenient. It is how people become addicted.” He paused, some of the fire leaving his face. “While Ethan and I never created any alternate universes, there were enough experiments with this sort of magic—not as powerful but equally dark—that I know the consequences of this world’s existence could be catastrophic. You have ripped a hole in natural law, one that cannot be mended, only grow larger until this world and all others surrounding it are compromised.”

The words rode into thick silence, hung in the air a moment, then died, taking the spark of her argument with it. Her mind kept racing, of course, unable to slow down. Eager—desperate, even—to find the flaw in his logic. To uncover the thing he’d overlooked or the reason why the situation they were in now was the exception to natural law or whatever it was that had Giles, Angel, and a bunch of other know-it-alls convinced that the world was beyond saving. Because Buffy didn’t know how to not fight, how to hang it up and call it a day, especially after months of preparing to sacrifice anything up to and including herself to save that which she was now being asked to let die.

Let the world, its people, and herself die because that was the way it was meant to be. Because she never should have survived.

“You act so bloody high and mighty,” Spike said in a low snarl. He looked Giles up and down, his face curling into a sneer. “Wanna tell me, *Ripper*, with all you’ve done on your own, the mess you and your



boy used to get in to, that you wouldn't have done the exact same as me."

"Once, yes," Giles said without hesitating. "When I was young and much more foolish than I am now, when I had no respect for magic beyond what it could do for me, I would have done just about anything to save the people I love. Those are lessons, if you are fortunate enough to survive, that you needn't learn more than once. Nothing of what I am saying now is because I want this timeline to end. But I know magic, especially magic like this, has consequences."

A shadow fell over Spike's face, and little by little, the fight seemed to leave him. At least until he looked back to Buffy, until their gazes locked. Then he seemed to remember himself and straightened once more, his jaw hardening.

"One world with her in it is better than any of them without," he said. "No matter what comes. The bloke wants a pure soul and he can have mine. Gonna wager the plans to find an alternative got shucked aside because this wanker is ready to give the world the kiss-off." He didn't bother waiting for a response, rather turned to Willow. "So get back to whatever you were doin' last night when I told you to get my soul ready to toss to Rack."

Willow glanced to Giles, swallowed. "Umm, if this isn't the right move... There's still time to find another way. I know I—" But she stopped, either at the look on Giles's face or at something else.

"I need a minute," Buffy said, and started for the kitchen without awaiting a reply.

Except she didn't need a minute—she needed all the minutes. She needed something she couldn't have, and likely never would. What Giles said, horrible as it was, made a sort of sense she felt she'd known was there from the second the number of Spikes in her world had doubled. Things she'd been all too happy to ignore in favor of the rush and thrill of being alive and everything that came with it. The excitement that accompanied the discovery of new feelings for someone, even someone as complicated to be with as a vampire without a soul. That there had been a price to pay for what he'd done had been a given, one he'd never hidden from her even if he'd asked for time in deciding how to tell her. She'd asked him then if the cost would hurt

anyone she cared about and he'd said no, believing it. Then they'd thought it was Dawn, then him, and now this...

That Spike hadn't thought that he ranked among the people she cared about spoke volumes, as did the fact that he'd been wrong. A single pure soul seemed payment enough for something as significant as turning back the clock, but she had no experience with these things. Not like Giles did. And Giles advocating the end of this line of existence over a fight meant that whatever was waiting for them down the line was bad.

But it also made sense to her to fight. To keep fighting. To not let Rack or the laws of time or whatever else win. Hell, standing down wasn't in her nature, especially after everything they'd been through to save the world. That the world *had* been saved but this wasn't the one that was meant to survive was something she simply couldn't get her head around, nor was the concept that she was living a life that fell secondary to some other reality. Because this? This felt pretty damn real to her.

And Spike had come all this way for her. To save her. He'd died because of a *temporal aberration*, or whatever Giles was calling this. He'd died, he'd trusted her, he'd come to her, he'd allowed Willow to put her fingers into his head to access memories from another life, and he was willing to fight now. Not to live, but so she could live.

Her sister, her friends, everyone would continue the lives they'd lived as though none of these last few days had happened. The only real losers here were her and Spike, and he only because he'd tried.

"Buffy?"

Buffy sniffed and wiped at her eyes, not bothering to turn. "Will, can you please just give me another minute? This is all... My head hurts. No, my everything hurts and I...I just need to think."

"I know." But Willow did not retreat, rather stood, shifting her weight from foot to foot. "Buffy, I know Giles is all with the...thinking this is the only way to do it. But for what it's worth... Well, I'm willing to facilitate the deal. Anya pulled out an Orb of Thesulah yesterday after you two left and I have the spell handy. Whatever happens afterward, we can handle. I know we can."

*But how are these our options?* In order to stay in a world that might

be doomed anyway, she had to hand over a soul? Didn't that sort of reinforce how bad this world was? How could anything good come out of it if that was the only way to live?

"Willow." Buffy swallowed hard, and this time when she felt the burn of tears, she didn't fight them. "Willow, do you think it's... If we decide to let this timeline die, would it be possible to send Spike back?"

"What?"

"The Spike that jumped is dust. Everything would reset except him. Would it be possible to connect with Rack's whatever, like you did for his memories, to send him back? The same magic so there are no funky consequences, the full shebang."

"I don't think he'd want to go back."

She was sure he wouldn't, but if she asked him to, for Dawn...

"But," Willow continued a moment later, "I think I could...oh. *Oh*."

*Oh?* That sounded like a good *oh*. Buffy whirled around. "What?"

A familiar light had sparked behind Willow's eyes. "It's obvious, isn't it?" she asked. "Buffy, if we can send *Spike* back to that time, what's to stop us from sending you, too?"

"Rack—"

"Will end this timeline. But if you're not in it..."

There was nothing for a long beat. Then she understood. And, in spite of herself, her heart leap-frogged.

"*Oh*."

THE SECOND SHE STEPPED BACK OUT OF THE KITCHEN, HE KNEW something had changed. Her shoulders weren't hunched anymore, rather ramrod straight. The hopelessness was gone, too. Whatever Red had said to her in there had given her back her spark, and Spike nearly bit clean through his tongue to keep from asking for details.

The talk didn't go much further than that—Buffy muttered a thing or two about needing time and refused to engage in the greater conversation when the Watcher attempted to drag her back into it. Ultimately, Giles had read the room and decided to give his slayer the space she said she needed.

"I know I've given you a lot to think about," he said as he moved toward the door, steps sluggish. "And it's not what I *want*, Buffy. You must understand this."

"Uh huh," she replied.

"If there were any other way—"

"I know. Major with the not wanting me dead." Buffy crossed her arms as she drew to a stop by the door. "Just...let me think on it." She swallowed and met Spike's gaze. "I just don't feel done, Giles. I did for a while, before Glory, but..." A beat. She shook her head and refocused. "Not anymore. I'm only twenty years old."

"It's not about what you feel. It's about what's right for the world."

"That's easy for you to say."

"No, Buffy, it's...it's the hardest thing I've ever said."

On some level, Spike wagered that much was true, though he couldn't conceive of any circumstance where he'd just lie back and accept the only way to move forward was without the person he loved more than this world was worth. Maybe that was the lack of a soul talking, or maybe he just loved deeper than Giles did. Maybe he was a stupid, selfish git who couldn't see the whole bloody picture. He didn't know, and he didn't much care. If it weren't for his suspicion that Buffy had something else on her mind, that she and the witch might have come up with an alternative she wasn't sharing with her old man, Spike was fairly certain he might have taken a hearty swing at the bloke. Staking offense for some, sure, but the pain was worth it.

"So what's the plan?" Dawn asked the second the door closed behind the Watcher. She stood on the staircase, her arms folded, her eyes hard and resolved. "There's a plan, right?"

Xander and Anya, who had been making their way toward the door as well, stopped as a unit.

Buffy glanced at Willow. "We need to talk about it."

"Talk?" Xander echoed. "You just let Giles leave."

"I know but... I think it's better if we talk about this just us. The way he is right now, I think he might react before listening and that's not going to help." The Slayer rubbed her arms. "He's still in Glory-mode, which I get. That's hard to turn off, especially since all of this happened literally seconds after we thought we were in the clear. We were all so certain something would go wrong there...on some level, at least." She glanced around as though daring someone to contradict her, but no one did. "I think learning that I died, that we didn't all come out on the other side, has him all super with the conclusion-jumping."

"Still doesn't figure into why he'd be keen to let it all go," Spike muttered.

"He's not. At least... From the things he said before the fight, he just... Ends justify the means."

Her expression hardened, and he knew she was thinking about what Giles had said regarding Dawn. How killing her might be the

only way to save the world and that she would fail as the Slayer if she put her sister above humanity.

"Needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few," Xander opined with a nod. Then shifted when Buffy and Willow shot him pointed looks. "*Star Trek*? Come on, guys..."

"So there is an idea?" Tara piped in before anyone could respond. "If it involves dark magic—"

"It doesn't," Willow said quickly—a mite too quickly, Spike thought, but he wasn't about to object. "At least, not *new* dark magic."

Xander blinked. "*New* dark magic? What does that mean?"

Buffy sighed and gestured toward the living room. "Let's do this in here."

Like good tin soldiers, the Scoobies did as their general commanded, even if Harris couldn't resist informing Anya that, "This sounds like the opposite of good," in a loud stage-whisper.

For his part, Spike found himself wound with such energy it was difficult remaining in one place. He wanted to bound to Buffy and demand she spill what was on her mind, take the lifeline he thought might exist and twist it until the uncertainty was gone and she was ready to move forward. Anything was better than just crying bloody uncle.

Once everyone was situated, Buffy turned to Willow and nodded. "Tell them what you told me."

Willow pressed her lips together, seeming to bolster her courage. Or maybe she was trying to find the right words. Then, after releasing a breath, she said, "Okay, well... We were talking. Buffy and me. She asked me if I could send Spike back to the other timeline if this one ended—"

"What?" Spike blurted. "Sorry?"

"I wanted to make sure everyone would survive who was meant to," Buffy said. She didn't meet his eyes. "A-and the Spike who actually made the deal is gone, so..."

"Slayer, already told you I'm not going anywhere you don't follow. Not livin' like that again."

"I think you would if I asked."

"Not on your—"

"For Dawn," the little bitch said, stealing his argument. "If I'm gone over there, she needs you."

Spike could do nothing but glare at that.

"It's true," Dawn volunteered from behind him. Of course she'd bloody weigh in. "Just saying, if I'd lost Mom and Buffy like that... Well, losing you would be the cherry on that crap sundae."

She said it like it was nothing, though Spike knew his Bit. Heard the way her voice roughened, saw the shine in her eyes. The girl was just barely keeping it together—a hair from breaking, if he had it right, and he knew he did. The past few days, all told, might have been the hardest on Dawn. And now she was staring down the barrel of nonexistence.

"That actually brings us to the point," Willow said, drawing his attention back to her. She looked at everyone in turn. "If I can tap into Rack's original spell again enough to open the door to send Spike back, there's no reason to think we couldn't send Buffy, too."

A long pause. Dawn cleared her throat. "What does that mean?"

"It means this world still ends but Buffy and Spike get to live in the other timeline," Anya offered flatly. "The one where she died."

"And...this wouldn't mess up the natural order, or whatever?" Xander asked. "Didn't we just get a lecture on why dark magic is bad magic?"

Willow inhaled, shaking her head. "I don't think so. We wouldn't be creating new magic, but using the echo of what Rack did—essentially reopening the tear he made. It'd still be his magic, but we'd be piggybacking off it to send Buffy and Spike back to that time."

"That's a for certain thing?" Xander's eyebrows winged upward. "Because you don't exactly sound like Ms. Confidence over there, Will."

Again, the little witch pressed her lips together and glanced at Tara, who had nothing to offer but a shrug. "This timeline is the aberration," she said a moment later. "That's what Giles said—and apparently what the Council and everyone else said. The other timeline is the way things are supposed to be."

"Right, but that Buffy died," Anya offered matter-of-factly.

“Yes,” Willow said slowly, now frowning, “but that wasn’t what caused the aberration. The new timeline was.”

“And again,” Xander said, “do we know this? Because I don’t hate what you’re suggesting here, but it’d kinda defeat the purpose if we send our Buff over and doom that timeline too. Assuming, of course, that this timeline is doomed and Giles isn’t being Mr. Sunshine for no reason.” He hesitated, then slid his gaze to Anya. “What do you think?”

Anya blinked at him. “I think I would very much like this timeline to continue. I do not want to die, Xander.”

He grabbed her hand and squeezed it. “I know, but...using your knowledge of all things demony, does he have a point?”

She didn’t answer right away, but then she didn’t need to. The look on her face did plenty of talking for her. After a beat, though, she sighed and dipped her head in a nod. “Nothing is concrete. A sacrifice is typically needed when invoking dark magic. In this case, Spike’s soul.”

“So if we cough up the soul—”

“Our odds would be better but not firm.”

“And we’re not giving up anyone’s soul,” Buffy said softly.

Spike groaned and rolled his head back. Bloody hell, how many times were they going to have this out? “Slayer—”

“No, we’re not. That’s officially off the table, thank you.” She looked back at Willow. “Is there any way to use Rack’s spell signature that would... I dunno, stabilize this timeline? Turn the dark stuff into light stuff?”

“I don’t think so,” she replied. “At least, if there is, it’d take a lot more time than we have to find a way to do it. And even then... I dunno, I’ve never heard of that sort of spell before.”

Xander tugged free of Anya’s grip and clapped his hands together. “Okay, so we’re essentially looking at either all of us blinking out of existence forever—in this timeline, at least—or Willow pulling a hail mary that saves Buffy and Spike, but in the original timeline.”

“But not us,” Anya muttered. “Why not us?”

“Well, because *us*—err, *we*, are already alive over there,” Willow



replied. "If we all go through, we'd all be doubled up and that'd...just be weird."

The former demon gave a little huff. "I could at least fulfill my double Xander fantasy."

All right. There was a word picture Spike had never asked for or wanted. He grimaced and shook his head, hoping to dislodge that thought for the rest of his miserable life, even if it only happened to last another handful of hours. Then he met Buffy's gaze and couldn't help his grin when he saw she'd wrinkled her nose in that adorable way of hers. The same way she had last night when he'd mentioned he'd fancy spending some extra time between her thighs when she was on her monthlies.

"Ugh, that's disgusting," she'd said, swatting at his head. In return, he'd only laughed, which had made her moan, seeing as his mouth had been well and occupied at the moment.

"Don't knock it 'til *I've* tried it," he'd whispered against her soaked flesh. "Just once. If you don't care for it, I'll stop and never mention it again."

"That...seems likely."

"Never say anythin' I don't mean, pet. Now, if you don't mind, I'm gonna go back to eating."

Last night had been the best of his life. Just being with her was a bloody rush and sure, he'd always known they'd be explosive together, but there was the knowing that came from theory and the knowing that came from having. He should have figured something would come around to muck it up—had foolishly thought that he already had an inkling of what to expect with all of this sodding soul business. That he and the Slayer would have it out over how they satisfied the terms of his deal had been a bloody certainty.

But that she'd consider letting the timeline end just because of her paranoid watcher... That he hadn't seen coming.

And he damn sure hadn't seen her entertaining the possibility of making a runner for the other timeline.

"So how would this work?" Buffy asked, jarring him back to the present. "Theoretically...if we were to do it. Spike and I just hop through the hole and turn up in the other Sunnydale?"

"Yeah. If we can stabilize the portal long enough, that should do it," Willow replied.

"But we're still not sure if this would solve anything or just doom another version of us," Xander said. "Not that I am not on board with this plan."

"You would be," Anya huffed, crossing her arms. "Even if you're not going to remember this because the Xander in that timeline isn't you. Shouldn't we be focused on saving all of us and not just two of us?"

"Again," Willow said, and this time her voice sounded a mite strained, "because we already exist in that timeline."

"But so does Buffy. Granted, she's a corpse, but she technically exists in that timeline. According to Giles, that in itself would be another temporal aberration."

"So we send Spike alone," Buffy said. "He doesn't exist over there anymore and—"

"Forget it, Slayer. Not budging an inch without you."

She turned those green eyes on him again and he felt his chest lurch in response. "For Dawn," she repeated softly, with the sort of solemnity that let him know she thought she had an ace in the hole. "You'd do it for Dawn. You told me you'd protect her until the end of the world."

Spike released a long breath. "Right. From where I'm standin', that's about now, isn't it?"

A hint of pleading hit her voice. "Spike, you can't—"

"You're right. I can't. Not without you. Not again. Not now. Don't ask me to do it." He glanced at Dawn and offered a half-smile. "I'll be with her, with you both, when this world goes up if that's the way this plays out. Only place I'd wanna be."

"Wait!" Willow jerked forward, clapping once. "Wait, wait, wait. We *did* this once before. We did it with *me*." A wide grin spread across her face and she pointed at Anya. "Vampire me, remember?"

Red as a vamp? There was a thought. Not a very pleasant one, either. The little witch had too much bloody power as it was.

Anya was frowning. "That *did* happen."

"Not sure this is helping your case, Will," Xander said. "I mean, the

other Spike was here longer than Vamp Willow and this timeline *is* doomed, right?”

“It comes down to what Giles said about there being natural magic and unnatural magic,” Willow replied. “Two Spikes were here because of unnatural magic. Two *Willows* were here because of natural magic—Anya’s magic. When there were two Willows wandering around at the same time, nothing terrible happened. Well, a few people got bitten, but nothing world-endy. And we were able to send her back presto neato.”

“Right,” Harris agreed, “*before* any timeline wonkiness could occur. Maybe things would’ve gone all world-endy if we hadn’t done that.”

Anya nodded, her brow furrowed. “Maybe...but I don’t think so.”

“You don’t *think* so?”

“No.” The frown deepened. “Because it has happened before. In other deals I’ve made over the years. Obviously, most tended to go wrong for a number of reasons, the most prevalent being the lack of concise wording on part of the askee, but certain vengeance jobs did lend themselves to, well, doubling up.”

Xander blinked. “And you didn’t think to mention this *before*?”

Anya rolled her eyes and threw her hands in the air. “I’ve been alive for a long freaking time, Xander. You barely remember what you did last Tuesday and you expect me to remember the details of every case I’ve ever worked over a millennia on the fly? Not all of them were big and interesting. Some were just...dull.” She released a long sigh and turned back to Willow. “Upon further reflection, I believe magic is what matters, not the byproduct. Giles was speaking from his own experience as a practitioner of the dark arts, in which case the consequences he described would be accurate.”

“Meaning...?”

“Meaning Buffy is a small part of the timeline Rack created—the consequences will be to the source of the magic, not the byproducts. The source of the magic is the timeline itself.” She frowned again—if possible, sulkier than before. “But this solves nothing. We are still destined to die once the timeline ends. And don’t say a word about living in the other timeline, because I am *me* and I do not want to die. I want to get married and make money! A lot of money, Xander.”

And that was all she managed to get out before bursting into tears—the first tears Spike could remember seeing the former demon cry. He glanced around, uncomfortable, and wavered from the bewildered, even frightened looks on the others' faces that he wasn't alone in this. Which was right brilliant, because all this talk about dying and letting the world end would almost certainly convince the Slayer that saving her own skin wasn't worth the cost.

If that was what happened, he'd do what he said and go down with the bloody ship. Yeah, something in his chest ached at the thought of leaving the Nibblet alone, but it was nothing to imagining the stretch of eternity at his feet without Buffy at his side. Especially now. Loving her from afar and mourning her as the bloke she'd eventually come to trust had been unbearable enough—mourning her *now* would surely kill him, anyway. Unless Willow decided to blank his slate before shoving him through that gateway, which would almost be worse than death.

And that was it. He knew it. No bloody doubt, that was exactly what the Slayer would do if it occurred to her. Wipe his memory clean and give him the boot to save his life and give her sister the ally she needed in a world where she was dead. She'd kiss him goodbye, cry over everything they hadn't had a chance to have together, and die thinking of him fondly, and he'd have none of this to carry with him.

Spike inhaled sharply, pain spearing his insides. He didn't want to look at her, at anyone. It'd give the game away too readily and he couldn't abide it.

"I need to think," Buffy said at last. He hazarded a glance at her and found her hugging herself. "And I know I don't have time, Willow, but—"

"That's fine," Willow said in a rush. Like she'd expected it, which she likely had, being the Slayer's best mate and all. "But Buff, I'm going to start putting together the ingredients we'd need for this spell, okay?"

"Yeah. Do that. For Spike, at least."

She flicked her gaze to him and he looked away just as quickly, sucking in his cheeks and willing everything inside him not to react, as he was pretty sure the only thing he had in him at the moment was a roar.

“Spike.”

Except it was bleeding hard to ignore her when she addressed him directly. He swallowed and met her eyes.

“Will you stay?” Even though she was across the room, he could pick apart her heartbeat from all the others, and it was going at a pace. “Stay here. Tonight.”

*Fuck.*

Everything in the world he’d ever wanted was right in front of him. Everything.

If this was all he’d get, he’d be a fool not to take it.

“Yeah, love, I’ll stay.” Balls, he felt close to tears, and blinked rapidly to force the sensation back. “But you gotta agree to something.”

That was rot. He’d stay no matter what. What’s more, she knew it.

Still, she was a good lamb and humored him. “What?”

“Let Willow get my soul too.” Spike raised a hand before she could bark her objection. “I get some say in this. You’re askin’ her to get ready to shove me through to the other side whether I want it or not, yeah? If we manage to make it past tomorrow, I need to make sure you don’t get it in your head that you’ll call the shots every time we row. Let a man hold onto the stones he has.”

She was quiet as she considered him, those eyes of hers sharp and inscrutable. When it seemed a small eternity had passed, she conceded with a small nod. “Okay. But—”

“I know.”

Buffy nodded again. “Good.” She drew herself up and looked back at Willow. “Back here tomorrow morning.”

“I’ll need to go by the Magic Box, most likely. More supplies there for the dimension spell.”

Anya huffed and waved a hand. “Just break the door down. Might as well raid the shop, seeing as none of this is going to matter.” She paused. “No. As long as I live, I want payment for the goods I provide. Besides, you owe me for the Chinese takeout.”

Xander jumped in before anyone could respond. “Donuts? I’ll bring the donuts. Kinda my thing.”

“Magic Box for supplies, donuts, then here.” Willow nodded, turning back to Buffy. “And...what do we tell Giles?”

“Until there’s something to tell him? Nothing. We’re all talk right now.”

Somehow, Spike doubted that. Seemed just as likely that Buffy had already set the next steps in motion in her head and the rest was just getting there. The bint was beautiful, bossy, brash, and bullheaded as any woman he’d ever met. Once her mind was made up, there was little hope swinging her the other way.

Which meant the hours he had ahead with her would be the most important of his life if he hoped to keep her.

BY THE TIME BUFFY DRAGGED HERSELF OVER THE THRESHOLD TO her bedroom, she had a new appreciation for the phrase *bone-weary*. Here she'd thought the run-up to fighting Glory had been exhausting, but there had at least been hope then. The choice of saving the world or saving Dawn hadn't been ambiguous to her at all, and part of her had left her home that last night armed with certainty that she wouldn't be coming back.

Of everyone, though, Dawn seemed to be taking the possibility of the world's imminent demise rather well. Or perhaps *well* wasn't the right word—she seemed more or less resigned. They'd talked a long time, just her and Dawn. Buffy had sent Spike upstairs after everyone left so she could spend some alone-time with her sister to discuss the mess of everything they had to wade through. Dawn had asked the relevant questions—why Giles would rather give up than fight, why Giles had gone to the Watchers Council in the first place, was it true that Giles had volunteered her to die before everything that had happened at the Tower. And since Buffy had promised to take off the kid gloves where Dawn was concerned, she didn't hold anything back. Rather discussed at length her own disappointments regarding her watcher—that Giles had sneaked off to Los Angeles to discuss all of

this with Angel, of all people. That he'd hopped back on the Council train as readily as he had, especially considering how easily they'd thrown him off before.

And Angel's role in all of this... Buffy couldn't deny that it hurt. Angel knew that there was a world where she'd died and had agreed with Giles that that world was the one that should be saved. It was like the nail in the coffin that was their relationship, the last strains she'd held onto since watching him disappear into the shadows all over again, only this time not as a heartbroken teenager but someone who had, even more than most slayers, had been forced to grow up super fast.

She thought more about what Spike had told her last night, about Angel being inherently manipulative and how that had played out in their relationship. And yeah, she saw it. She still wasn't convinced he'd intended to do any or most of it, though she wouldn't say for sure, but that it was just the way he was. His terms were the ones he considered firm, not hers. That he'd just agree with Giles that Buffy ought to be dead, whatever the reasons, just reinforced something she'd never had the guts to admit to herself until recently.

Angel hadn't loved her the way she'd loved him. Not then, not now.

Spike had once told her that love was blood, not brains, and she'd felt that. She'd felt it when she'd hunted Faith down to feed to Angel and when she'd offered him her neck when Faith had managed to escape. That had been the opposite of brains. She would have done anything to save him, and Angel couldn't even be bothered to, what, come to Sunnydale and tell her to her face that she ought to have died?

It was kinda nice, being in the moment, realizing it for what it was, when she let go of Angel for good. Turned out that the version of him she'd been hanging onto hadn't existed to begin with. More than just having different tastes in movies, they were just...different people. Different in how they valued those they loved and what they were willing to do for them.

Spike, though... Spike was willing to do just about anything. And he had.

And Buffy thought it possible, if not likely, that what she felt for



Spike could be love one day. Love unlike anything she'd experienced before because they'd always be on even footing.

It wasn't fair that she might never get the chance to find out. Beyond unfair.

Of course, there was Willow's solution—the one that had filled her with a rush of hope right up until she'd realized that she'd still be leaving everyone behind. Except she wouldn't be, because they'd be there on the other side. This *real version* of what her world was supposed to look like right now, sans Buffy.

Willow had promised to do some more digging before tomorrow's meeting, though Buffy was honestly not sure what that even meant anymore. Was there a point in research when the moral gray areas would solidify and present a clear, definitive map of the right path to take? That hadn't been her experience, but then research had never really been her forte.

Something had occurred to her before the others had left, though. Something that made her feel about three inches tall. Part of Spike's reluctance to return to the main timeline had to do not only with her but how their relationship had progressed over the past couple of days. Everything from the moment she'd ditched her date with Jenkins and blown into his crypt—the sexy times, the talks, the long, stolen kisses. Asking him to go back after having shared that, asking him to just be okay with it, was more than a little cruel.

Might be easier if he didn't remember at all.

Willow hadn't been too thrilled with the extra assignment, but she'd nodded and said she'd look into some memory spells. Just in case.

There was nothing about this that didn't feel skeezy as hell.

Spike was waiting for her in her room, sitting on her bed, his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. She took a moment to appreciate the flecked black of his nail polish, how it contrasted with his platinum hair. The duster—the one he'd told her he'd won off the last slayer he'd killed—was draped over the chair in the corner, leaving his arms more or less bare for her visual appraisal. At least until her eyes reached the sleeve of his T-shirt, but then, the way the fabric hugged his biceps was pretty nice, too.

"You'll do it."

Spike swung his head up, blinking at her. "Hussat?"

Well, damn. She hadn't meant to speak, but as so often happened, her mouth had run ahead of her brain. Stupid mouth. "You'll do it. Go through the portal thingy back to your time."

"You say *back* like I'm not in my sodding time. Got the other bloke's memories, pet, but I'm not the one who made the leap."

"But you might as well be."

"But I'm *not*. And I'm not going anywhere unless you decide you're coming with me."

Buffy sighed and crossed her arms. "Spike, you can't—"

"But I *can*, see. Turns out all the calls are mine. My soul. My unlife. And yeah, I have firsthand knowledge how bloody miserable I was over there without you, and I'm not doin' it. Especially not after...after last night. After everything."

That just brought to mind the thing she'd asked Willow. Buffy turned her gaze to the ground and tried not to look too guilty.

Apparently, she failed miserably.

"You're planning to ask Red to scrub my noggin clean, aren't you?"

Buffy jumped and looked up at him. "I thought...maybe if you didn't remember—"

"Already stuck her fingers in my head. Now she's gonna take some stuff out, is that it?"

"Spike—"

"Only thing worse than losing you, pet, is losing the memory of this. Of us. You think I wanna go the rest of my sorry days seeing you as you were on that concrete slab?" He rose to his feet and prowled toward her. "You'd let me know what it's like to kiss you, taste you, be inside you—how it feels when you bloody *smile* at me, and take it away again? Might as well stake me now, Slayer. It'd be kinder."

The look he gave her told her in no uncertain terms that he was dead serious. It was no less than she'd expected, but still somehow managed to knock her off her feet. "I'd never stake you, Spike."

He winged his eyebrows upward. "Never, huh? What made you change your tune?"

"You really think I could stake you after...after last night? After everything?"

"You tell me. Reckoned it'd always be on the table, bein' a monster and all."

Buffy closed the space between them, aware of herself in ways she'd rarely been. Of how her hands shook when she placed them on his stomach, what her breaths sounded like crashing against the otherwise still air. She trailed her fingers up his chest, then along the sides of his neck until she was cupping his face. And when she met his eyes again, she could have drowned in them. "But you're my monster, right?"

"All yours, baby," he said hoarsely. "Until the day I dust."

"That's the good thing about you. You're already as bad as you're going to get." She grinned and lifted her mouth to his, trembling when he fed her a small whimper. "Don't have to worry about sex turning you any eviler."

Spike grinned right back at her, dragging his tongue over his teeth in that way that made her legs wobbly. "Not in any way you'd complain about, that much I can promise."

Yeah, given recent experience, she'd say that much was an understatement. "So no on the dustage."

"Then you gotta promise me that whatever happens, I'll remember this." Then he was touching her, trembling too. Hands across her shoulders, down her arms, then her sides and hips until he had them cupped around her ass. "You shove me through a door and I take the memory of this with me." Spike rested his chin against her crown, blowing out a shaky breath. "But love, if this world's gonna end, let me end with it. Please."

"Spike—"

"Or let's do it. Make the jump. Got us a lot of livin' we can do on the other side."

That rush she'd experienced before in the kitchen surged forward again—the one that begged her to just say yes blindly and make the leap that would define her future. If this world was slated to end anyway, who said she needed to stay in it? The life she had, the people she loved, everyone was waiting for her in an alternate version of the world she lived in now. She wouldn't be losing anything and would be gaining pretty much everything. That it seemed so simple freaked her out, but not as much as the thought that in order to

seize that world and step into that life, she'd need to leave this one behind.

And while her sister and her friends were waiting for her at the end of the tunnel, they were also here. Embracing them meant abandoning them. Anya was right, in that sense. There was an Anya Jenkins out there who might be engaged to Xander Harris, but the one who had left her house tonight would cease to exist, as would Xander, Willow, Tara, Giles and Dawn. Everyone would cease except Buffy.

"Spike..."

He tensed against her. "Then let *me* do it," he whispered. "Sod what Rupert says, what your git of an ex says. Let me give the warlock my soul and whatever happens, you and I will face it. Same as always, yeah?"

"What comes next might be worse than Glory."

"Runnin' that risk anyway, aren't we? Always some Big Bad out there wantin' to outdo what came before."

"It's still your soul. I'm still not okay with sacrificing your soul. For all the reasons I said this morning."

Spike deflated with a long sigh. "Buffy..."

"I don't want to die." The words escaped her in a rush, chased by a sob that had stolen away somewhere deep inside. But once it was out, she couldn't hope to contain it. Buffy buried herself in his arms and hugged him to her. "You told me I had a death wish. I didn't want to hear it then—I thought you were... I dunno, trying to get me to doubt myself. And then the First Slayer, playing the role of my spirit guide, told me death was my gift. I know what she meant now—that I was supposed to die instead of Dawn. And that I did, I guess. And I was tired, Spike. I was so tired by the end. Tired of being afraid and worried and dreading waking up each day because I had no idea how I was going to get to the other side of the fight. I didn't know if I could, and I was terrified that Dawn was at the end of it, that she was the price of my getting to go back to sleep. That part of me was *relieved* thinking about what that world would look like—without Glory but also without Dawn, and I could finally get some rest and not be so worried all the time. A part of me wanted to die then and all of me was okay with it." She swallowed, shaking her head. "But not now. I

want to keep waking up and fighting. I want to see Dawn go to college and maybe have kids. I want to go to Xander's wedding. I wanna know what Big Bad thinks they can outdo Glory. I want to live my life and I want to have you in it. I want to see if what I feel for you could be love one day. I want to do all of that and now they're telling me I *can't*."

"Bollocks. You can have whatever you want." He tunneled his fingers through her hair and pulled her back just enough so that she was staring into his eyes. "All of it, you hear? I want to give that to you. Let me give it to you, Buffy."

She'd never wanted to say *yes* to anything so fiercely in her life. "I can't choose me over the world. That's never going to be who I am."

"It's not choosin' yourself if you opt not to go down with the bloody ship. What does your death here accomplish?"

"Righting fate, I guess?"

"Well, bugger fate. Your mates want you to live, don't they?"

"But how can I do that? How can I leave them here to *go down with the ship* and just...be okay with that?"

"They're there waitin' for you on the other side!"

"I still have to kill one version of them to get there. One version of my *sister*, Spike. And yeah, my dying here isn't going to make that not true, but I wouldn't have to live with it." She dragged a hand under her eyes, shaking harder still. "I wouldn't have to live knowing I'd chosen one version of my sister over the other."

The look in his eyes told her plainly he didn't get it, and as frustrating as that was, she knew she couldn't expect more. There were things she and Spike would never agree on, even if they had all the time in the world to present their cases. They were too similar in that regard, and as much as he tried, as much as he wanted to understand, his lack of a soul would always skew his perspective just as much as having a soul skewed hers.

"I want to be selfish," Buffy whispered. "I want to see things the way you see them because I want to live. But that's...that's not me."

"Then please... Buffy, *please*, let me give the warlock my soul." He choked back a sob of his own and crushed her to his chest, burying his face in her hair. "Don't make me go back to that. We'll fight, you and me. Whatever comes, yeah?"

“Spike—”

“I’m bloody begging you.”

She knew he was. She also knew what her answer would be—what it would always be when it came to things like this. And there was no point saying it again, no point spending what might be one of their last nights together going in circles around each other. This world was on a fast path to destruction, and if that was the case, she wanted to make the most of their remaining time together.

So instead of starting up again, she pulled back and kissed him. Not one of the fiery, playful kisses they’d shared last night when his lips had curled against hers in a smile that he hadn’t been able to fight back. This was all desperation, need, like if she tried hard enough she could just lose herself inside him and not have to worry about things like the world not being here anymore or the weight of what was being asked of her. And she knew he knew what she was doing for the way he growled into her mouth, the harsh strokes his tongue made against hers and how he seemed just as determined to swallow her as she was to be swallowed.

Buffy began walking him back toward the bed, and despite herself, she wasn’t able to keep from marveling at the thought that he—Spike—was about to be naked in her room. That he’d be under or over her, inside of her here, this place she’d never thought she’d want him. And more besides, there were months to account for between them. How things might have gone had she discovered any of these things about herself just a little sooner. If she’d given him a crumb when he’d asked for it.

Granted, that entire thing was still heavy on the skeezy side, but she saw where it had come from now. That and so much more.

Spike fell back against the mattress with a little gasp that tickled her in all the right ways. He sat up on his elbows, those endless, telling eyes of his flicking between her face and her hands, which were busy tearing off his belt.

“Slayer—”

“I want.” Buffy whipped the length of leather free and tossed it blindly over her shoulder, her gaze glued on the bulge straining against the denim. “I want, Spike. I want you. I want us.”

"God yes," he said on a low moan, arching his hips. "Take anything you want."

"I want you to tell me you love me."

He opened his eyes just as she lowered the zipper to his jeans. "I love you," he said, his voice firm, the words even more so. "I love you, Buffy."

"I want..." She swallowed. "I want to love you too."

Buffy wasn't sure if the gasp that rode off his lips was due to her words or the fact that she'd pulled out his cock. Maybe a combination of the two. It didn't matter, though. She had moved to her knees the next instant, tugging off his shoes and socks before pulling his jeans down his legs. At some point, Spike seemed to remember he could move, for he whipped off his T-shirt and pitched it to join his belt. Then he was naked—Spike, in her room, on her bed, a lethal combination of lean muscle and hard edges and just plain *yum*.

"Slayer," he said in a low growl, threading his fingers through her hair as she settled on her knees between his legs. "Fuck, please tell me you're gonna do what I think you're gonna do."

She grinned and wrapped her hand around his cock, watching as his expression shuttered. He pushed out a deep breath, every inch of him going rigid.

"I dunno," she replied a moment later, edging a bit closer. "What do you think I'm gonna do?"

The previous night had definitely been All About Buffy in every way imaginable, which she had so appreciated but recognized now as unfair. Spike had been very insistent on eradicating her self-consciousness when it came to sex, in particular, the fear that she wouldn't be good enough for him in bed. Their Hot and Cold game had fizzled out at some point, Spike taking to trusting her nonverbal cues to determine what she liked, but he'd been very considerate and encouraging as she'd broadened her horizons.

"Fuck..." He tightened his grip on her hair just slightly and pulled her forward. "Don't make me beg."

"And here I thought you weren't the begging kind."

A grin split his lips and he peeked an eye at her. "Said the same

about you once upon a time. We proved that wrong last night, didn't we?"

Heat flushed her face but she refused to look away. "Every slayer has her breaking point."

"And yours just happens to be when my face is buried between those pretty thighs of yours." He paused and the grin broadened. "Or when you're riding my cock."

The burn in her cheeks deepened. Her appreciation for Spike's exceptionally dirty mouth had been confirmed last night—he'd enjoyed making her blush all over just whispering things he wanted to do to her, or things he wanted her to do to him. She was sure she'd never come quite as hard as she had when he'd been murmuring how good she felt, how her pussy was *a bloody work of art* and that he loved it when she squeezed him *just like that*.

He'd told her last night that he'd love anything they did—anything she did. That hadn't bolstered her confidence in the head-giving department too much because of less-than-stellar previous experience, of which he assured her was the fault of the *sodding berks* who had been fortunate enough to have her in their beds before him. That there was no such thing, as far as he was concerned, of squeezing too much or too hard. Even if she did forget her own strength, he'd said, he'd still love it, because vampires were naturally twisted like that.

"Even when it comes to..." She'd looked meaningfully at his prick.

"There's good pain and bad pain. Anything you do to me will be good pain."

"How do you know?"

He'd winked. "Always has been."

That was worth exploring at a later time. But not now.

"Spike," she said now, squeezing his erection again—just a little, still gun-shy as she was. "Tell me what you want."

A low groan sounded through the air. "Your mouth on me. Wanna watch my cock slide between those pouty pink lips of yours. Wanna watch your eyes as you suck me off and then I wanna come down your pretty little throat."

There it was—another rush of heat, this one zinging straight to her clit, which seemed to have developed its own heartbeat. Buffy leaned



closer to him, keeping her gaze on his face, watching as his eyes darkened, his nostrils flared and his cheeks sucked in. A prettier man there had never been, she decided.

She opened her mouth and he groaned.

“Fuck, you’re trying to kill me. Do it, Slayer.”

Buffy grinned up at him and darted out her tongue, taking a long lap of his silky head. Spike hissed, the grip on her hair growing tighter still, and bucked just slightly off the mattress. And before he had the chance to say anything else, she had closed her mouth around him and drawn him in deep.

“Christ!” Spike threw his head back, panting, but refocused on her in quick seconds just as she pulled back. Then she took him in again, as far as she could, and his answering groan could have melted the Arctic. “Oh, baby, yeah. Just like that. So hot.”

Yeah, hot. That was an apt way to describe her face at the moment, which was burning so fiercely she thought it might just start to melt. Because Spike was super generous with the verbal praise, babbling an endless stream of things that would be promptly censored on network television.

“So good,” he panted, rubbing his fingertips along her scalp, his eyes on hers. “Such a hot little mouth. Feel so good. Fuck, Buffy, lick me just like that. *Yés*...make that sound again.”

She didn’t realize she’d made a sound until he asked for a repeat, and when she gave it to him—a rumbly sort of hum—he swore again and arched his hips off the bed.

Whatever else, Buffy hadn’t anticipated this doing much for her. The few times she and Riley had done this, he hadn’t done much more than twitch and groan on occasion—that was when he wasn’t tensing up. Squeeze a guy too hard *one time* and he lost all the trust. Still, it had been part of the girlfriend gig and something she’d wanted to—pardon the pun—not suck at, so she’d given her fair share of head. Not much, since Riley had never gotten over his fears of his balls being smushed and she hadn’t been big on him returning the favor, so sticking with the classic P-in-the-V had seemed the best bet.

Just as he had last night, Spike was redefining her understanding of what she liked. Because she liked this a lot—a lot a lot. She liked the

string of babbling nonsense spilling from his lips, how he stared at her with those fathomless eyes of his. She liked the sounds he made, the little gasps and growls and how he told her he wanted it *harder*, *Slayer*, *don't be afraid to break me*. Hell, she even liked it when the grip he had on her hair tightened and his thrusts became rougher—the way he sucked in his cheeks and flared his nostrils and became focused.

“God, baby, you’re killing me,” he said, cupping her cheek with his free hand. “Can smell how hot you are. Like sucking my dick, do you?”

The flush spread. Her nipples tingled, her skin prickled, and the pulse between her legs answered with a fresh wave of wetness. Her knees were beginning to shake but she did her best to ignore that. Instead, she focused on the sensation of him sliding in and out of her mouth, what to do with her tongue, with her hands, what amount of pressure he seemed to like the most and how to give it to him every time he slipped back inside.

“Bloody dream come bloody true.” Spike rolled his head back before fixing his gaze on hers again. “My Slayer. My Buffy. Can you take it deeper, love? Just...*fuck*.”

The next thing she knew, he’d struck the back of her throat—something that had never happened before. She was caught so off-guard she did the only thing that made sense at the moment and swallowed around him.

And Spike went nuts, arching his hips and fisting her hair tighter, so much so her eyes nearly watered but it didn’t hurt—thank god—and didn’t make the chip go off. If anything, feeling how much he wanted her, needed her at that moment, had her trembling all over. She wanted to touch herself but also not because that would mean splitting her focus and Spike definitely deserved all the attention.

“Again, Slayer. Do that again. Oh fuck. *Fuck*. Buffy.”

The muscles in his legs tensed. Buffy fisted one hand around the base of his cock and cupped his balls with the other. Squeeze, roll, suck, all at once, again and again until he was hitting the back of her throat on repeat. And every time he did, every time she could catch him, she worked those throat muscles around him. He gripped her hair tighter still, and she loved it, but not as much as when he gasped her name and flooded her mouth. It was like its own little religious

experience, watching him tip over, tortured bliss coloring his face, his mouth curled into a happy grin she so rarely got to see, his eyes somewhat dazed but fixed on hers, watching her as he tumbled down. Watching her watch him as he was overcome with that Spike-patented awe.

“Fuck, you’re incredible,” he murmured, hooking his hands under her arms and dragging her up so her mouth was within kissing distance. “Buffy...”

She grinned somewhat shyly and wrapped her arms around his neck. It was heady, sitting on Spike’s lap, dressed when he was naked knowing she’d put that look on his face. “So...hot?”

He blinked.

“In the game of Hot and Cold,” she elaborated. “That was hot?”

More staring. Then he rumbled an exceptionally sexy laugh and leaned in to nibble on her lips. “Any hotter and I’d be dust.”

“No dusting.” Buffy shook her head, making their noses bump. “I do not allow it.”

But that was all it took for the reality looming beyond her door to shove forward in her mind. This was potentially the eve of her last night on earth. Both of their last nights, if Spike got his way. And just like that the heady rush she’d experienced drained away, leaving her feeling more hollow than before.

“I meant what I said,” she whispered. “I want to know if this can be love.”

Spike sobered as well, tightening his grip on her and shuddering. “Slayer...”

“I don’t want to waste any more time fighting about our options tonight. Just...I needed you to know that.”

The flare was there in his eyes, the sort that told her plaintively he wanted to disagree, to go back and start up again. Try to find a new way to persuade her that dying in this world served no purpose. It was a good argument, a tempting one, but acknowledging that didn’t make her concerns any less true. Wouldn’t make leaving Dawn and the others any easier, at least not on her conscience.

“What do you want then?” he asked, slipping a hand under her shirt. “Anything I can give you?”

She swallowed and allowed him to draw her shirt over her head. "Love me?" she whispered. "Can you just love me tonight?"

Spike growled and, aided by his preternatural speed, flipped her around so she was lying on her back.

"Tonight and every night," he promised, curling his fingers around the waistband of her slacks. "I'll love you until the stars wink out."

"We don't have that kind of time."

"Then I'll just have to give it to you. Find a way." He began dropping hot kisses along her collarbone. "Been in tight spots before, haven't we?"

"Spike—"

"Shh. Gonna love you now."

Buffy sighed, running her fingers through his hair, and let him take the world away.

IT WAS BLOODY BIZARRE WAKING UP IN THE PLACE HE'D BEEN dreaming about for a year, both content like he'd never been and terrified out of his sodding mind. But when he felt Buffy's fluttering lips across his brow, inhaled a lungful of air that smelled like her—like *them* together—the reality waiting outside her door didn't do the decent thing and take a few seconds to filter in. Instead, he was left with the sinking awareness that he was living what would be his last full day if the Watcher got his way.

"Spiiiiiiiike," Buffy singsonged in his ear. "I have ways of making you wake up."

A grin tugged at his lips but he was able to force it away. Baby was in a playful mood, it seemed. Would be a right shame to muck that up by bringing up the end of the world. And he wanted to find out what ways she had in mind.

"You're totally awake now, aren't you?"

*Balls.* Busted. Spike shifted, letting his mouth do what it wanted. "You can prove nothing," he murmured.

"Uh huh." She pinched one of his nipples hard enough to both hurt and make his dick take notice. Not really telling, though, considering his dick noticed every time she so much as twitched. But as long as he

was here, in her bed, it seemed a waste not to bring his erection to her attention.

"Are you freaking kidding me?" she asked in a tone that was half exasperation, half bewilderment and entirely affectionate. "Is there an off switch on that thing?"

"Believe me, wish there was. Know how hard it is to fight you while sportin' a stiffy?"

Buffy wrinkled that exceptionally adorable nose of hers. "That a thing that happened often?"

"Will the truthful answer get me staked?"

"Spike, if I'm not staking you for that exceptionally evil thing you do with your tongue, suffice to say you're not getting staked ever." A saucy little smirk, one that did nothing to discourage his cock's enthusiasm, spread across her lips. "Also, pretty sure I already told you this much last night."

"Fella just needs to be sure." Spike stretched his arms above his head and tried not to preen too much when the Slayer's gaze wandered down his body, a somewhat glazed look on her face. "Like somethin' you see?"

"I spent way too much time not ogling the sexy that is you." She sighed and trailed a hand over his stomach, making his skin tingle. "Why is that again?"

"Always were a bit soft in the head."

Buffy scowled and pinched his nipple again, harder this time. Which made something else harder, because he was a bad, rude man and every time she touched him it was all he could do to keep from begging for more. "Also, chaining a girl up and threatening to feed her to the ex is not the best way to score a date."

"Right, 'cause you were so bloody receptive to me before then."

"I'm just saying, things might have gone a different way if you hadn't been so *Spike* about it."

That much should have him mounting a defense, but it was difficult remembering what he had to be sour about when she was fisting his dick. Spike sighed and arched. "Fuck, the way you touch me. Fella could get used to this."

Buffy leaned over him and pressed a soft kiss to his lips. "I have a problem."

"Whassat?"

"I was supposed to just wake you up and now..." She gestured to his cock, which she was still stroking. "Things have happened."

"Supposed to wake me up?"

She nodded, then frowned and loosened her hold on him. The second her hand fell away he thought he might actually start crying.

"Dawn knocked. Will called and is on her way over. Xander, too. There are world-endy things to discuss." Buffy released a long sigh, her pretty eyes heavy now. "This just feels unreal. All of it. Like, I've never done the whole one-last-round-of-booty before the apocalypse thing, though I'm pretty sure everyone who's coming over has. And I'm supposed to go down there and hold my head high and be all at peace with everything just ending when I just fought tooth and nail to save it."

Well, that was enough to wilt his morning wood. Spike sat up, took her arm. He knew it was useless—they'd gone around enough times last night to convince him of that, but he also couldn't stop. Needed to keep trying until the world was over and he'd run out of chances. "There are other worlds than these, pet," he said.

She sighed so hard the bed whined beneath her, and tears filled her eyes.

"I want to," she said. "I really want to. For all the reasons I told you last night and more. But..."

But she was the Slayer. Buffy bloody Summers. The love of his unlife and more besides. Nothing with her ever came easy.

"Anyway, we should get up and dressed." She swallowed and swung her legs over the side of the bed. "And Spike—"

"No."

"I didn't even say anything."

"More rot about me goin' without you. I'll tell you again, it's not happening."

She twisted and fixed him a pleading look that made everything hurt. "But Dawn—"

"Needs her big sis more than she needs her vamp babysitter, and if

that's not enough to make you decide to jump, then it sure as fuck isn't gonna be enough for me."

He regretted the words the second they were out—not because they weren't true, but because he saw them land. He'd punched Buffy in the face enough times to know what she looked like recovering from a blow, but she'd never managed to really seem hurt. Banged up, cut up, bruised, pissed and fiery as hell, yeah, but not wounded. What he'd just lobbed at her had hurt, and not the kind of hurt that was easy to walk off.

No matter that every sodding syllable was true.

Buffy's lower lip trembled when she spoke. "That's so not fair."

That was apparently all it took to shelve his regret. "Not fair is expectin' me to fall in line like I won't be losin' everything you'd lose, only more because there is no bloody Buffy waitin' on the other side. Why's it okay for me but not you?"

She swallowed and shook her head, climbing in something of a numb daze to her feet. Spike kept his gaze on the comforter as she flitted about the room, pulling on clothes and breathing so hard the sound about made his head pound. When he saw her slip on a tank top out of his periphery—the last piece to becoming presentable—he gave in and tossed the blankets off to get ready, himself.

Buffy didn't wait for him, didn't even look at him. Just headed for the hallway. While she didn't outright slam the door, she closed it with enough force that it delivered the intended message—Spike had stepped in it.

Well, it was only a matter of time, really. Even if they weren't staring down bloody Armageddon, they were too hot-tempered to not explode every now and again. Never mind that he didn't much want her last memory of him to be that he'd brassed her off trying to get her to save herself, and he sure as fuck didn't want his last memory of her to be that closed door.

If he was about to go out, he wanted to do it right. With the image of Buffy telling him she wanted to know if she could love him. Buffy being a playful minx and pinching his nipples, taking his cock in her hand and stroking him like she couldn't help herself.



Probably too late to ask for a do-over or even to apologize, and knowing his bossy bitch, she wouldn't listen to a bloody word, anyway.

Spike clomped downstairs making more noise than was necessary, but bugger it, wasn't like it was news, him being a rude prat. His nose told him the Slayer was in the kitchen and, after debating whether or not it was wiser to give her space, he headed in that direction. Might as well put himself in the line of fire now and have it over with.

Buffy didn't so much as twitch when he walked in, rather kept her gaze on the toaster where she was preparing some nosh. The silent treatment likely meant the next few minutes wouldn't bode well for him—felt a bit too much like a step back, considering how close they'd been just minutes ago. On the other hand, the silent treatment was better than being given the boot, so maybe there was some hope after all.

Spike glanced at the coffee, which she had yet to put on, hesitated, then figured he had nothing left to lose by revealing he knew just exactly where everything in this kitchen was. And as long as Buffy wasn't tossing him out, he'd make himself nice and at home.

The plan had been to let her come to him, broach the elephant in the room, do all the talking. It was a good plan, the right one, but after a moment or so, the quiet started to get to him. And she could hold out on quiet—didn't need noise the way he did. Could stand tension a bit longer, too. He ran through the gauntlet of emotions—irritation, regret, frustration, and panic being the most prevalent—before landing on the knowledge that, if the world were to end, he'd rather it not be with the Slayer not speaking to him. Seemed about right, anyway. The dizzy bint always got her way where he was concerned.

Spike sighed and approached Buffy. She'd kept her back to him and was staring at the toaster, but was rigid in a way that told him she was more than aware of both his presence and his proximity. He could practically hear her thinking at him.

"Love, I'm...I'm sorry. I cocked up upstairs. Let my mouth run off with me." He hesitated, then skimmed a hand down her arm. "Guess I'll never get the chance to kick that particular habit, right?"

She was still a moment longer before her shoulders dropped. At least she hadn't punched him across the room.

"You're not, though," she said. "Sorry, that is."

Spike swallowed. "Doesn't matter. Don't want us to go out like this."

"It *does* matter." Buffy inhaled deeply, then turned to face him. "And...I'm sorry too."

Well, color him stunned. "You are?"

"Yeah. It's just... I don't know how to do this."

"What, apologize?"

She narrowed her eyes at him, which went a long way in assuring him that she wasn't too raw from earlier. "Ass."

"Gotta say, there's a technique I've never tried. Insulting while apologizing."

"I'm saying that I'm thinking about it. About...that other world. Trying to, at least." Buffy closed her eyes as though to will herself strength. "And I don't know how to do it."

If he'd had a heartbeat, this was about the time it would have started to pound. "What's that, sweet?"

"Just...pick up in the middle of someone else's story. Even if that someone else is me." She folded her arms, seeming to shrink in on herself. "I don't know how to leave Dawn here to die, even if there is a Dawn over there who is just as much my sister as my Dawn is. I don't know how to be okay with getting to live when everyone else doesn't. I don't know how to be okay with any of this."

The argument from before reared up again, stronger than before as it sensed weakness. Somehow, though, Spike managed to bite his tongue before he made a larger mess of things than he already had. Because Buffy wasn't arguing at all—she was asking for help.

But fuck, he wasn't the right bloke to ask. The whole thing seemed black and white to him. Say the wrong thing and he was bound to come off looking like the soulless thing he was, out for the self and sod the rest. All this about there being two different Dawns didn't make much sense—perhaps because he could see both of them, knew both of them, and in his mind, they were one and the same. No difference to be had, except one had been fortunate enough to live in a world where her sister hadn't died.

"Reckon we do it the way we do anythin' else," he said at last. "Take

it as it comes. But I got them all up here.” He pressed two fingers to his temple. “Nibblet, the witches, Harris and the demon-bird. They’re not different versions, pet. They’re them.”

Buffy nodded, though she looked rather miserable about it. “I just can’t wrap my mind around it. How they can be there and here.” She heaved out a deep breath. “But there were two of you, too. And you were very much the same.”

“I’m better looking than that wanker.”

“Spike—”

“When he got over here, that is. Somethin’ musta happened in the goin’. Made his nose all off-center and wonky. Surprised you didn’t notice.”

That got the reaction he was looking for, at least. Buffy snorted and folded her arms. “Well, I might get my chance. And I gotta admit, I’m kinda curious to see what constitutes *crooked* in the mind of Spike.”

“Sorry, won’t take if we make the leap. Return trip is hassle-free.”

The grin she wore broadened a bit. “Oh, is it?”

“I don’t make up the rules, pet. Just follow them.”

“Yeah. You’re a model citizen.”

“Shut your gob.” He smirked, dropping his gaze to her mouth. The lady kept saying staking offenses were off the table, but that didn’t mean she’d welcome a snog here where anyone could see. But fuck if he didn’t want to kiss her. The fact that Buffy was bickering with him like normal was enough to make any bloke cautiously optimistic. Also helped that she seemed to have taken what he’d said upstairs to heart.

“You look like you want to kiss me,” she said, her eyes dancing.

“Always wanna kiss you.”

“So why don’t you do it?”

Spike made a show of looking around. Though the kitchen was empty, Dawn was in the house and liable to walk in at any second. And the others would be popping by here soon, too. Not that catching them in mid-snog would be a shock to anyone anymore, but it might drive home just how serious Buffy had been when she’d announced they were whatever passed for dating in her world.

“Kid sis might see,” he said after a moment.

"She's seen me make out with Riley and Angel. I think the cat is out of the bag that Buffy has kissed before."

At that, he glowered. Couldn't help it. "Not helpin' the mood, pet."

"Well, you had to go and say something silly. Plus, we're running out of time, if things go south." Buffy stepped right into his space and linked her hands around his neck in that way of hers she seemed to fancy. Which was just fine with him—he was over the bloody moon whenever she decided to touch him. "So kiss—"

He growled and took her mouth with his, knees about buckling when she whimpered against his lips and threw her arms around him. If these were the last hours of his life, they were also the most brilliant. The most frustrating too, sure, but at least he was going out on one hell of a high note. To think he might have wasted away the rest of his miserable years not knowing how sweet she tasted, how she felt in his arms. Yeah, there had been a spell one time that had given him a hint, but even as glorious as it had been having her wiggle around on his lap, it was nothing to this. To being fully aware of himself as well as her, to knowing that when he touched her, when she touched him, it was with their past and present intertwined.

She sucked his lower lip between her teeth and nibbled, earning another groan and a thrust of his hips. If she wasn't careful, he'd bend her over the island and give her exactly what it was she was begging for.

"Ugh! Gross!"

The next second, he'd been shoved away from her exquisite warmth and back against that island. Spike gulped in air he didn't need, blinking at Buffy, who was glassy-eyed and had a mouth that was a bit on the swollen side. Then he registered Dawn standing in the doorway that led to the living room, scowling at them both.

"Maybe we should have known the world was going to end," the girl deadpanned. "Buffy being all with the PDA with Spike is a pretty strong clue."

Buffy rolled her eyes, straightening a bit. "This is hardly public. And no one asked you to come snooping."

"You were taking too long with the Poptarts," Dawn replied with her typical teenage insolence. "I'm hungry."

With a scowl, Buffy whirled around, plucked the pastries out of the toaster, and all but shoved them into Dawn's hands. "I still say that's not an actual breakfast," she muttered.

"I still say if the world's going to end tomorrow, I don't give a rat's patootie," Dawn replied, and took a mammoth-sized bite out of one of the pastries. "So are you gonna do it?" she asked, making herself perfectly comfortable against the island. "Jump into the real timeline?"

Spike released a ragged breath, glanced furtively to Buffy, his heart in his throat.

Buffy's face remained impassive. "How much did you hear?"

"Enough to know that you're thinking about it."

"Lurk much?"

"Hey, it's not like you were whispering, or that the kitchen is a fortress." Dawn arched her eyebrows. "Or your bedroom, for that matter. Which is way, way, way too close to mine."

Spike snickered at that and quickly found himself on the receiving end of dual Summers' death glares. "What?" he asked. "Girl has a point."

Buffy scowled at him a moment longer before returning her attention to her sister. Only then did the light in her eyes soften. "What do you think?"

"About loud sex or about you two diving through to the other side?"

"Dawn—"

"I think you should do it. If Willow's found a way, I think you should both just make with the escape and have that be it." She looked down, took another bite of pastry, and kept focused on the floor as she chewed. It was only after she swallowed that she brought her head up again. "I know what it means. I spent pretty much all last night thinking about it. Anya said that we'll die in this timeline...but we won't, really. We'll just...stop existing. That's not the same thing as dying."

If anything, hearing her sister talk about death seemed to have the opposite effect on Buffy. The wavering that had been there before, the indecision, became harder to see. "Dawn—"

"And I know what you're going to say. But Buffy... If we're going to do what Giles thinks we should and let this timeline just...stop, then

that means I'm going to just *not exist* anyway. But there's a me out there who *does* exist. Who doesn't have a sister or a mom and might not have a Spike soon too." She looked away again. "I don't think you should stay just to stay. You'd be staying for me but this me would be gone. Over there, you could *live* for me. She'll need you more than I do."

Buffy didn't say anything, apparently rendered speechless. For a long moment, she just looked at her sister, as though trying to catch her in a lie. When she didn't find one, she made a sound somewhere between a sigh and a sob and seized the girl in a hug.

"Ouch!" Dawn squeaked, her Poptart tumbling onto the counter. "Super strong sister alert!"

"Sorry, sorry." Buffy pulled back, wiping her hand under her eyes. "I just... I love you."

"I know."

"I mean I really love you, Dawn."

"Are we doing this again? It's still weird."

The Slayer laughed and shook her head before pulling her sister back into a hug. "I don't know how I'm going to leave you. Or anyone. I don't know if I can."

"You can," Dawn replied. Seemed she'd resigned herself to getting the stuffing hugged out of her. "If I have to push you, I will."

There were times Spike wondered if he genuinely loved the Bit or if his affection for her was born out of her relationship to Buffy. At first, it had been that. False memories though they were, he could recall thinking her a bothersome little thing who would be lucky not to meet some beastie in a dark alley one day, and wondering idly if he'd be that beastie. But he'd always liked Joyce and it seemed Dawn was included in that—in that he'd protect her if only to keep her mum from losing sleep. At some point, though, he'd stopped seeing her as an extension of Joyce or Buffy and more as her own person. Annoying tyke at times, yeah, and prone to getting herself into all kinds of trouble, but someone he'd decided he'd get himself bruised trying to protect. Then he'd realized he was in love with Buffy and everything had changed. Protecting her family had been about protecting her, yes, but also them. Because they mattered.

Now, looking at the girl, he realized fully that he did love her. Not

just because she was as good as his sister too, but because of moments like this one. Wagered staring down eternity, knowing you weren't supposed to exist was enough to make her insightful beyond her years. Anyanka was going on about dying in this timeline and the Nibblet, the youngest of all of them, spoke about it with reserved calm.

"This all might be moot," Buffy said when she pulled free once more. "I just asked Willow to look into it—see if she thought she could make with a door to the other timeline. It might be that she can't."

"But she was able to give Spike the other Spike's memories." Dawn flicked her gaze to him then back again. "It can't be much harder than that, can it?"

"We don't know," Buffy replied, glancing over her shoulder and meeting his eyes. "Magic is not my forte."

He didn't rightly know, either, except it seemed like it ought to be simple enough. Same principle as what had happened two days ago, only this time without the witch's fingers squirming around his noggin. But he didn't say that because he didn't know and he wasn't thick enough to hazard a guess. To hope that maybe things could be that easy, because if the Slayer was on board now—if Dawn had managed to sway her—then he had reason to hope.

Before he could mull on it more, the sound of the front door crashing open reverberated throughout the house and the air filled with voices.

"Buffy!" Willow called, sounding breathless and excited. "Buffy, I did it!"

"Who's making Poptarts?" There was Harris, thinking with his stomach as per bloody usual. "If it's cinnamon sugar, dibs!"

"You can tell that's Poptarts from here?" Tara asked. From her tone, she was genuinely impressed or a good enough sport to play the part.

"My friend, there were months when I lived on them and nothing else." Heavy footsteps plonked toward the kitchen, and the next second, it was bloody Scooby overload. All of them sans the Watcher.

Xander, with parts of breakfast still clinging to his mouth, glanced at the half-eaten pastries on the counter. "There are more of those, right?"

"I thought you were bringing donuts," Buffy replied with a frown.

"There might have been a donut catastrophe on the way here that involved the box tipping over in the car and sugary goodness going, well, everywhere."

"More like he ate the whole bloody box," Spike retorted, pointing at Harris's face. "Gotta bit left over there, mate."

"Dammit." He immediately began prodding at the spot with his tongue.

Buffy blinked. "You ate all the donuts?"

"No." Xander shuffled a bit. "I mean, maybe five. The rest very definitely met with a catastrophe."

"As he was reaching for another donut," Anya said.

Harris winced but nodded. "That may or may not be true."

"Six donuts?" Buffy looked between them. "Are you trying to give yourself diabetes?"

"Even if I am, who cares?"

"He's excited about leaving this body," Anya agreed before shoving a bank bag into Buffy's hand. "As am I. Please give this to me when you arrive. I counted it seven times so I will know if any is missing."

Spike leaned forward with interest, sniffing. "Giving the Slayer all your dosh, are you?"

"No. I am giving *me* all of my dosh."

"Wait." Buffy's eyes widened and she pressed her fingers along the bag. "This is...cash?"

"Yes," Anya replied. "I emptied the register at the Magic Box, as well as mine and Xander's wallets. The bank doesn't open for another hour and if the spell isn't ready by then, we will just have to wait until I return. And have time to count."

Buffy looked to Spike as though expecting him to understand any of what was going on, but it made bugger all sense to him. All he could offer was a shrug.

"Okay, obviously I've missed something," she said, turning back to her friends. "Like why Anya is handing me money and Xander's trying to eat himself to death. So how about we go into the living room and start at the beginning?"



WILLOW BARELY GAVE HERSELF ENOUGH TIME TO FIND A SEAT before bursting into an explanation. “I found it last night,” she said, her eyes sparkling in a way Buffy knew well by now. “You wanted me to look into wiping Spike’s memories.”

Yeah, she had. And though they had talked about it—and he’d punished her soundly for it the previous night—Buffy couldn’t help but wince at her friend’s tactlessness. “Uhh, yeah. That’s the kinda thing you should definitely shout to everyone.”

Spike scoffed and flung himself into the red armchair across from the couch. “Not like I didn’t know.” He looked to Willow and gestured at Buffy with his head. “Easy to read, that one. No sodding subtlety.”

“You’re hardly the one to be talking about subtle, Spike.”

“You both suck in the subtle department,” Dawn said, sitting next to Willow. “I have never heard Buffy make noises like the ones she made last night. If I weren’t about to die anyway, I’d be scarred for life.”

Xander pulled a face, crowding the doorway. “Things I could have lived happily never knowing, Dawn. Thanks for that.”

“Buffy is fornicating with someone capable of withstanding her at

full strength for the first time,” Anya argued. “It’s understandable that her enjoyment would have increased.”

“Not the first time!” Buffy said, though *why* she said it was anyone’s guess. She could already feel how red her cheeks were. Still, that didn’t keep her from digging that grave deeper. “Angel—”

“Was *your* first, and first times are typically not very pleasurable, even if your partner is especially gifted and retains his soul after coitus.” Anya shrugged, also crashing onto the sofa. “Am I wrong?”

No, but there was no way in hell Buffy was saying that. Except apparently she didn’t need to—when she glanced at him, she found Spike sporting that smug, unrepentant smirk that she should so not find sexy but did anyway.

Better to change the topic to something relevant. Like what they were doing here.

“So—Will? The spell?”

“Yes!” Willow clapped, brightening. “So, there are several memory spells—some on the small side and a few on the *whoa nelly*. All use this.” She held up what looked like a small, flowered weed, something Buffy would pull out of the lawn. “It’s called Lethe’s Bramble and it packs a major magical punch.”

She spoke as though any of this meant anything to people who weren’t witches. “Does that punch have a *line*?” Buffy asked, glancing between her and Tara. “I’m not getting it.”

“One of the spells I found would essentially wipe out our memories. Specifically, our *recent* memories.” Willow shifted and pulled something out of her jeans pocket. She held the thing up—it looked like a crystal—still practically vibrating with excitement. “Burn the Bramble. When the crystal turns black, the memories are locked inside. And if you want to set them free again, well, that I can do.”

All those words made sense but the logic part was still missing. Lost, Buffy looked back to Tara. “Help?”

“When you and Spike rejoin the other timeline, you will take the crystal with you,” Anya said.

“And when you see us—the other us,” Tara added, “and smash the crystal, well, the memories will have to go to their original person. In that case...”

"I think smashing the crystal should be the last-ditch effort, personally," Willow said. She shifted again and pulled something else out of her pocket—a small scrap of paper. "Give this to the other me and she—I—should know what to do."

It took a moment too long for Buffy to realize Willow meant for her to take the paper, still trying to work out what exactly was being discussed. Now she was holding a crystal, a note from Willow to Willow, and a bank bag full of cash. "Okay..."

"Oh, and something else." Tara turned and opened the tie-die crossbody shoulder bag that rested against her hip. Only the second she did, pure, radiant light shot into the room. It brightened Tara's face, putting her features into sharp relief, before consuming every viable inch of viewable space. It was as though someone had opened the door and let the sun inside.

"Turn it off!" Xander said. "Or down, at least!"

"Sorry." That was Tara. "It fell out of the pouch. I... Here it is."

The next instant, the room came into focus again, though it took a few moments for the spots dancing in front of Buffy's eyes to fade.

"Bloody hell, you tryin' to off me?" Spike grumbled and aimed a glare at the witch between long blinks. "Easier ways to go about it, Glinda."

"Yeah, what the heck was that?" Dawn asked, also blinking hard. "And why no warning?"

"Sorry," Tara said again. She rubbed at her eyes with one hand, the motion awkward, and with the other, held up a bulging, black velvety pouch by its drawstring. "We... Well, we did the other spell, too. Just in case." Cheeks a bit pink, she moved toward a dazed-looking Spike and placed the pouch in his hand. "Willow put a charm on the orb itself to keep it from breaking, but still, be careful with it."

Spike shook his head as though trying to concentrate on the thing, his expression slack. "This it, then? This is my soul?" He sighed and transferred it to his other hand. "Bloody blinding to look at, innit? Thought I might dust there for a mo'."

"The purer the brighter, apparently," Willow agreed. "And...Angel's was only in the orb for like a second, but it wasn't that bright. By, like, a lot."

Spike snorted. "Wouldn't be, would he? Marked it up plenty before the Romani stuffed it back in him." He glanced at Buffy before looking back to Tara. "Thanks for this, pet. Now all I gotta do is see a bloke about—"

"That's *just in case*," Tara said again, her tone firm. "And under protest, I might add." She shifted her gaze to Willow. "If all goes well, you'll give that to me or Willow when you get to the other timeline and we'll send it back to the ether. It's your *soul*, Spike. And...aside from what that means for you, the amount of damage a creature like Rack could do with *that* firepower is... It would be bad. Maybe apocalypse-bad."

"And lord knows we've met our quota on those for this year," Xander chimed in.

They were talking like the course of action ahead of them had been decided, which was both annoying and starting to make Buffy's head hurt. She held up a hand. "Someone please tell me what's going on."

"Well, we're sending you to the other timeline," Willow said slowly, her brow furrowed. "I thought that was obvious."

"And I thought that was a decision we were *going* to make based on whether or not you thought you could do it and—"

"Oh, I can do it," her friend replied, waving a hand. "The spell we did at the Magic Box is pretty much all we'll need. Instead of splitting my attention between maintaining the link to the other timeline and Spike, I'll be fully focused on the other timeline. That should widen the door enough for you and Spike to get through." The grin she sported now was familiar—the same she wore anytime she was particularly pleased with herself. "That was actually the easiest thing to do. Summoning Spike's soul the second. Once I started looking at memory spells though... Well, *wow*."

The grin turned a bit manic, which was more than a little disconcerting. Buffy swallowed and forced herself not to dwell on it. "So... you're going to put a memory spell..."

"On us," Willow said with a happy nod. "It's like what we did with Spike—or will be, once you get over there. You give the other me that crystal and that note and we'll be able to merge our this-timeline selves with our other selves."

"I don't have to die," Anya added. "And increase the balance of my bank account. Please remember I have counted the contents of that bag seven times and will know if it's off."

Buffy rolled her eyes. "I'm not going to steal—"

"I am talking to Spike."

"Spike's not going to—" But she caught herself before she could say something stupid, paused, and turned to regard her unrepentantly evil boyfriend, who had somehow managed to confiscate the bank bag and was currently flicking through a stack of green. "Spike!"

He jolted a bit, swinging up his head. "Quite a bit of dosh here. No sense carting it over if there's nothin' in it for me."

Anya shot him a glare that said plainly he'd be a pile of dust were she still in possession of her vengeance powers. When this did nothing, she whirled to face her would-be fiancé. "Xander, he's stealing my money."

Spike just snickered and offered a two-finger salute with one hand as he continued thumbing through the cash with the other. "Just think the Slayer and I should pocket some of this if you're hirin' us out as delivery folk."

Buffy sighed and snatched the bank bag back up, earning a scowl that doubled as a pout. "So," she said, turning back to Willow. "You can open a door to get me and Spike to the other timeline. And the memory spell you looked up is now for you guys. You do realize how screwy this sounds, right?"

"It'll work," Willow said. "Xander let me practice a few times on him last night and we're in the clear."

"Wait, what?" Buffy rounded on Xander now, agog. "You let her do magical dry-runs on your head? Are you insane?"

Spike snorted. "Are you just now askin' that question, pet?"

Xander shifted his weight between his feet, looking a little abashed. "I mean, since the timeline is ending anyway, what's a little Russian roulette with the old noodle?" He rapped his knuckles against his skull. "I was her willing guinea pig. And yeah, with the weird. I passed out for a minute, then woke up and was surrounded by three hot strangers. Which, incidentally, is also the title of my favorite—" He caught himself, shook his head, and continued on before Anya

could scold him. “Anywho, Willow asked me a bunch of questions to which I had precisely zero answers, and then presto with the magic-o and I was me again.”

That sounded all kinds of terrifying. Like seriously terrifying. Not that Buffy didn’t have faith in Willow’s magic capabilities—because she did, all kinds of faith—but they weren’t all that far removed from the days when even the simplest spells had gone haywire. The progress Willow had made in just a year, particularly since the spell that had led to Adam’s downfall, was of the wiggly. She’d gone from pencil-floaty girl to the only person really strong enough to hurt a hellgod without the help of a giant troll hammer.

Hell, Buffy hadn’t even let Willow do the forgetting spell she’d hinted at last year after the madness that had been Will Be Done. The prospect of putting her mind and all the parts that made her *Buffy* under her friend’s control had been... Well, after seeing how simple spells could go awry, she hadn’t been willing to sacrifice her brain.

Which, she realized now, was all with the hypocritical since she’d asked Willow to look up memory spells for Spike.

“How many times did you test it?” Buffy asked. “And...was it the same each time? Xander sans memories?”

“Yes,” Xander said dully. “Complete blank slate which, by the way, got really annoying after a while.”

“How could it get annoying if you couldn’t remember?” Dawn asked.

“Well, I’d remember after I remembered, and when I did, it was all the things I’d forgotten.” He grinned. “We stopped when Tara pointed out that doing that a time too many might cause permanent memory loss. But I’m willing to risk it—mainly because it’s me over there. But it’s good, Buff. All with the good.”

“So what do you say?” Willow asked, her eyes alight. “I don’t think we’re going to come up with a better plan, unless we let Spike give Rack his soul—”

“Which, for I believe the seven hundred and sixty-first time, we *aren’t* doing.” Buffy met Spike’s defiant glare with one of her own—honestly, she was sick of having this conversation. “I don’t even under-

stand why you went to the trouble of getting the soul in the first place if this other spell is going to work.”

“Like Tara said, it’s just in case.” Willow brought up her hands when Buffy turned that glare on her. “Look, I am one thousand percent confident that this spell will do the trick—well, both of them. After the reading last night and the testing and the many incarnations of Xander and everything else... But what we don’t know is how Rack will react to finding out we pulled a fast one on him. This timeline is one he created so he has a certain measure of control over it. But the real timeline, if that’s what it is, will be a different thing altogether and when he finds out... Well, I don’t know this guy, but yeesh. Could be of the bad.”

Yeah, none of that made Buffy feel any better. “And your answer is to hand over Spike’s soul to, what? Calm him down?”

“Slayer, I told her to get the soul ready and she did.”

“Yeah, and I’ve told you—”

“Fancy havin’ this chat *again*, do you?” He rolled to his feet, fixing her with a narrow-eyed stare. “We’ll just have everythin’ ready in case the worst happens.”

“The worst being the timeline ends, which it’s going to anyway.”

The look Spike gave her was half-exasperated, half-adoring, and entirely him. There were few people in the world capable of communicating so much with one simple look, but damn if Spike was ever on that list. And yeah, she understood. This was one argument they’d been having for just a little over two days and she was already sick of it, but that didn’t mean for an instant she was going to budge because, well, no, and she knew he knew it.

Just as she knew that if Rack showed up and said he’d exact his revenge on having been played for a fool by targeting Buffy or Dawn, Spike would cough up the orb in a blink, knowing full well there would be words and a lot of them would be of the four-lettered variety.

But that was how Spike loved—with all of himself. No holds barred, no asterisks, no exceptions. Anything that he had was worth the price of keeping those he loved safe. Two days ago, he’d said he’d do it even if it cost him their new relationship, if that was her line in the sand. She believed him.

“So how’s this work, then?” Spike asked, shifting his attention back to Willow. “We jump through and...what?”

“And you’ll end up wherever you were when you jumped the first time.”

Spike nodded, his jaw tightening. “So with Rack, then. Outta the fryin’ pan.” He bounced the pouch containing the orb with a lot less care than it deserved. “Might need this sooner than we thought.”

“Spike—”

“We actually thought of that,” Tara interjected quickly, digging into her bag again. “So I whipped something up.” She pulled out a baggie of what looked like ground-up parsley, then held it at arm’s reach as though it were an explosive device. “One of you should have this ready to throw in his face. It’ll disorient him and enable you to make a getaway.” A pause, then she stretched her arm out even farther, a hint of desperation leaking into her voice. “Someone take it, please.”

Xander shot Anya a worried look and motioned for her to join him on the other side of the room.

Buffy hesitated, too. Call her crazy, but the sales pitch could use some work.

When it became apparent that no one else was going to budge, Spike sighed and marched over dutifully. “What’s the story, then?” he asked, snatching the bag from the blonde’s hand and holding it up to eye-level. Much too close to his pretty face for something that Tara had treated like a bomb.

Buffy had the urge to smack it out of his hand then run for cover.

“It’s a recipe that specifically hurts magic users,” Willow said. “Like really hurts. This should put Rack out of commission for at least a day. Maybe longer. The stronger the practitioner, the stronger the impact.”

“You guys must be into some pretty kinky sexplay,” Xander said, edging toward Spike to squint at the baggie’s contents. “If this is the kinda stuff you just have on hand, at least. Why would you ever buy it?”

“We didn’t buy it. I made it,” Tara said, her tone trembling a bit. “It’s a family thing—my family, at least. A way to subdue those of us with magic.”

“The same family who tried to convince you you’re a demon?”



Spike asked, arching an eyebrow. “Not the most reliable sort, are they? You even sure this works? Could be another bit of rubbish meant to keep the women in line.”

A shadow crossed Tara’s face and she favored the baggie with a surprisingly stern glare. “N-no,” she said, slipping almost indiscernibly into the stutter that had been so prevalent when they’d first met her. “This I’m sure works. If I went with them that night, they w-would have used it on me.” She looked at Willow, and something in her eyes softened. “My dad would make me make it, then rub it all over me. It kept my magic suppressed.”

Willow looked horrified—and rightfully so. “I... You didn’t tell me that part. We are so cursing every member of your family.”

“Just a guess, but that might be why she didn’t tell you,” Xander offered, though he’d paled too. “And... Tara, you are so much better adjusted than you have any right to be.”

Spike snorted and nodded, stuffing the baggie in his pocket. “So we throw this at the bloke and are able to make our getaway. What happens if we shove it down the berk’s throat? Will that cut him off for keeps?”

“No. And I honestly don’t know how it’ll work on him,” Tara said with an apologetic shrug. “On one hand, he’s super powerful. On the other hand, this was only ever used on the women in my family. It *should* keep him off your—our—backs for at least a day, especially if you hit him in the eyes, but I’ve never seen it used on a man before.”

“Yeah, I’m seconding Willow,” Buffy said, staring now at the lump in Spike’s pocket. “Not usually one to condone cursing humans, but damn, Tara.” She exhaled deeply. “Thank you for making that. I can’t imagine it was of the fun, that particular trip down memory lane.”

Tara offered another shrug, this one with a grin. “It’d kinda defeat the purpose of going to all this trouble if this warlock just decided to zap you or something after you jump through.”

The certainty in her voice had Buffy’s heart skipping, something she knew Spike sensed when he turned to look at her, a question in his eyes. The same one he’d been asking since last night.

Buffy shivered and turned her attention to the others, all of whom were looking at her now.

The past few days had been nothing but one endless brain-warp. Every time she thought she'd caught up enough to understand the rules and the stakes, both went and changed on her. But this—this felt final in ways nothing else had, which made her think they'd arrived at the end.

"So," she said, trying to gather her bearings, "just so I'm sure I understand. Willow does a memory spell on all of you...except then how could you open the door to the other timeline?"

"The memory spell isn't instant," Willow said. "Remember, the crystal needs to turn black. So yes, I'll do the memory spell first, then Tara and I will open the door to the other timeline, same as we did when we united the two Spikes' minds. You go through, throw that stuff at Rack, then come find us."

"And bring me my money," Anya said with a nod. "That's very important."

Buffy didn't bother acknowledging this. Her mind was on other things. "And this will work? You're positive this will work?"

"It's just like sending Vamp Willow back wherever she came from," Willow agreed. "And Xander's proof the memory spell works."

"Yes, and the bump on the back of my head thanks you," Xander said wryly.

Another pause. Buffy glanced around the room one last time, her heart at a full gallop now. The certainty she'd experienced the night before, the dread and grief over what she would be giving up, broke just slightly. Not enough to rebound entirely but enough to matter.

And maybe she could stand to be a little selfish for once. Maybe this would work because she wanted it to—because all the things she'd told Spike last night were true. She wanted to live. And her friends did, too.

"Okay," Buffy said at last, her voice scratchy. She cleared her throat and tried again. "Okay. Then let's do it."

HE WAS AT THE MOMENT WHEN HIS MEMORIES OF THE OTHER timeline ended and it was a bloody weird sensation. What had happened after he'd torn from this world into the other was something he would only know as a spectator, but he imagined his thoughts hadn't been on what could go wrong. At that end of this week, nothing could have made his life worse. All that mattered was what went ahead. The chance he'd been given, the impossible chance to make a change. To turn the world right. To see Buffy, hear her voice, inhale her scent, live again for the fact that she lived.

Now Spike found himself where he'd started, standing opposite Rack. Only this time Buffy was at his side.

And he needed to fight his way out.

"Well," Rack said in that dry tone of his, "this is...unexpected."

Spike released Buffy's hand long enough to whip out the bag Glinda the Good had given him, fist a handful of the concoction, and chuck it square in the warlock's eyes. The reaction was immediate. Rack threw his head back and released an inhuman howl that made the bloody walls rattle as he pawed at his face.

"I will have your dust, vampire!" he snarled. "Yours and—"

But Buffy had seized his wrist and they were moving, back through

the door that led to the waiting room full of the sorry tossers he'd passed by a week ago. Several perked up when they emerged, blinking expectantly, but Spike didn't take the time to slow down and survey the masses, and neither did the Slayer. As one, they bolted through the main entrance and tumbled onto the street, Spike panting needlessly, his head ringing with the pounding of Buffy's heart.

Her strong, warrior's heart pumping her strong, warrior's blood through her very alive body. He was back where he'd started and she was with him. Buffy was with him.

The urge was there to laugh but he didn't have time. His lady wasn't slowing down and neither was he. The second she started running again, he was right behind her, nipping at her heels and watching, mesmerized, as her hair swung back and forth across her back. Knowing that he was back in a world where Buffy was six-feet under was one of those bits of mind fuckery he doubted he'd get over anytime soon, along with the knowledge that the feet currently slapping against the pavement had never touched ground in this version of Sunnydale, regardless of what memories occupied his head now. The air he was dragging needlessly into his dead lungs tasted the same as the air in the other world, but it was different. It was all different. This was a reality where everyone who loved Buffy thought she was dead. Everyone except him.

At last, Buffy seemed to decide they had put enough distance between themselves and Rack and darted into the gap between two buildings in downtown Sunnydale. She slumped against the exterior wall, gulping down air, her hands braced against her knees.

"All right, pet?"

She didn't respond immediately, rather drew herself up and turned her attention to the multicolored purse she'd fitted across herself before they'd made the leap—the one that had been Tara's up until a few minutes ago. Between the soul, the crystal, the instructions, the bottle containing the other Spike's ashes, and the dosh, they'd had quite a bit to carry.

"Crystal's black," she said. "I guess that means it worked."

Spike nodded, as there was nothing else for it. He knew he ought to say something reassuring, but his mind had yet to catch up with

where he'd landed. Up until the moment had been upon them, he'd been convinced Buffy would manage to talk herself out of it. That she wouldn't trust the spell to work properly and decide it was better to go down with the bloody ship after all.

But no, she was here. Right in front of him, cheeks flushed from the run, hair a mess, and his. She'd chosen this, chosen him. She might not love him, might never, but she'd given him more than he'd ever thought possible just by trusting him. Trusting *them*.

"Buffy."

She looked up, blinked as though surprised to see him there. "We did it. This...this is really that other timeline?"

"Home sweet home."

"I'm dead here."

"No, sweetheart." Spike stepped close, cupping her cheek and reveling in the feel of her skin beneath his fingertips. Warm and vibrant, like the rest of her. Whole and his. "You're alive."

He captured her mouth before she could reply, and was instantly a bloody goner. He always had been when it came to her, and that looked to be something that would never change. Especially now, when she did things like sigh and wrap her hands around his upper arms to hold him to her, as though there was anywhere else in the world he wanted to be. And for a few blissful seconds, it was just them. Stranded in some dark alley, fighting with tongues and lips and teeth—his Slayer as he'd never thought he'd have her. They'd made it to the other side.

They were going to live. All the things she'd mentioned last night, what she wanted to experience, the things she'd hoped for a future she'd been uncertain they'd have—all that and more was at his fingertips. Distantly, Spike knew they had things to do. Places to be and memories to return, but he was standing at the precipice of something that would define the rest of his unlife and the only steps he wanted to take were those that brought him closer to her. With a growl, Spike slid his hands under her thighs and coaxed her legs around his waist so he could thrust against her center, let her feel how hard he was for her, how badly he needed her. If he could just—

Buffy fisted a handful of his hair and tugged hard enough on his head that his mouth dislodged from hers. "We need to go."

“Go?” He nibbled on her chin, grinning when she hissed and dug her nails into his scalp. “Got nowhere we need to be, far as I can recall. Everyone here thinks you’re six feet under.”

“Spike, this is one of those times where your evil is really obvious.”

“Glad to know it hasn’t all been snuffed out.”

“We have no idea how long that concoction or whatever will work on Rack. He could be after us.”

“Got more where that came from.”

“Spike...” Her grip tightened enough that he knew she meant business. All work and no play, his Buffy.

With a much put-upon sigh, he pulled back and lowered her to her feet, not sparing her a pout. “Know we’re not gonna get any time to ourselves tonight,” he said, unable to pull his gaze from her plump, swollen lips. “Once they see you’re alive—”

“We’ll do the memory spell and hopefully that’ll be that.”

Spike gave her a look. “How many spells has Red done in as many days without one of them goin’ wonky? Seems we’re due for a backfire.”

The second the words were out, he could have staked himself. The playful, delightfully flushed look she’d worn faded into a severe frown. “Spike, this *can’t* have gone wrong. It can’t. I just left my sister in a world that’s going to die now, thanks to me, on the promise that she’ll be just fine on this side. If you thought something bad would happen—”

“I didn’t. I don’t.” He sighed and took a step back, fighting the urge to thunk his head against the nearest wall. *Git.* “Just... Fancy keepin’ you to myself is all.”

“What?”

“Memories or not, you know what the next bit is gonna be like, yeah? ‘Specially once your watcher realizes what we did. It’ll be a small bloody mercy if he doesn’t come at me with a stake on principle.”

Buffy studied him for a moment, then sighed as well, though not without a small smile. “I imagine they’ll make with the inquisition and Giles will probably say a bunch of very British things and might blow a gasket. It’ll be probably the weirdest night I’ve ever had. But unless you’re planning on taking off for the crypt—which, by the way,

you're *not* because it'll be the first place Rack looks for you—you can keep me to yourself after everyone's gone home."

He grinned in spite of himself. "Invitin' me to stay the night again, Slayer?"

"Maybe." Buffy pressed a quick kiss to his lips. "But for now, we have some friends to traumatize."

"Your friends. My general annoyances."

"That's the spirit." She threaded their fingers together as she had the night before last when they'd left the Magic Box. Holding hands like a couple, a regular couple, taking a stroll through the Hellmouth and pity the creepy crawly that decided to take them on. "Come on. The sooner we make with the trauma, the sooner we can shower and go to bed."

"Shower?"

"Oh yes. Shower. I have a whole timeline to wash off me."

"This a coed shower, pet?"

"Let's get through the inquisition and then we'll talk."



HONESTLY, Spike didn't know what to expect when he and the Slayer arrived at 1630 Revello Drive. He'd gone out of his way to avoid this place since the Tower, and especially since the arrangements had been made for her funeral. Sure, he'd hung around some out of necessity, out of a need to be in a place where the air still smelled like her, but that had also been too painful, and the second the headstone had gone up, he'd decided the best place for him was the bottom of a bottle.

It didn't surprise him when he saw Xander's car in the driveway. Seemed a fair assumption that most of the Scoobies would be here these days, taking turns watching Dawn, trying to suss out where the girl would live and with whom. If the Summers' place was worth keeping or if it'd be better to put it up for sale. What passed for normal in the world of humans following a death—the things he'd never been too fussed over needing to consider.

"This is gonna be weird, isn't it?"

Spike started a bit and turned to Buffy, who was staring at her front door like it was a particularly nasty demon in need of a good slay.

"After I killed Angel, I took off for a while," she said softly. "Just... couldn't be here anymore, you know? My mom had kicked me out of the house and, well, you were there for the cop who thought I'd killed Kendra." She paused, glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. "I never thanked you for that, by the way."

"Huss'at?"

"Keeping the cop from arresting me. Or shooting me. Or both. The night Angel died."

He inhaled a deep breath, unsure what she expected him to say. So he tried for a grin, like he wasn't on tenterhooks himself. "Couldn't well save the world if you were behind bars, could you?"

"You've been there for the biggest moments. Mom finding out I'm the Slayer. Dawn. When it occurred to me how sick Mom was and that she might not... That she might not make it." Buffy swallowed and seemed to fortify herself. "Thank you for that. For being there."

Well, hell, he didn't know what to say to that. "*No problem, Slayer. As it turned out I was in the area with a mind of putting a hole in your head, but seeing you in tears made me wanna give you a cuddle instead.*"

He shifted a bit, self-conscious. "Was nothin'."

If she heard, she gave no indication. Rather kept her gaze on the front door. "I was gone for months after I killed Angel. It was...bad when I got back. They were mad—all of them, but none more so than my mom. I guess it's not going to be like that this time. They knew where I was." She snickered slightly, then met his gaze. "It's... I'm about to walk in and see people who think I'm dead—because I *am* dead. The Buffy they knew which, yes, makes the brain of Buffy hurt quite a lot."

Spike threw an arm around her shoulders, reeled her into him and kissed her temple. "It'll be all right, pet," he said, not sure if what he felt was certainty or hope. Assuming the Scoobies kept from yammering their fool heads right off, they should be able to suss through the confusion right quick-like, get Red to restore their memories so they didn't have to go through the motions of explaining what all had happened.



“Well, no time like the present.” Buffy gave him a small smile, kissed him again, then squared her shoulders, every bit the Valkyrie about to soar onto the battlefield. “And maybe exnay the PDA until after their memories are back. Otherwise, they might think I’m a demon or something. Or that you rebuilt the Buffybot.”

Spike snorted and drew his arm back. “Fair point,” he said, sliding his hands into his duster pockets. “Right then. Let’s get this bloody show on the bloody road.”

That sentiment took them as far as her front porch, where Buffy stopped again and debated whether or not she ought to ring the bell. It was her house, after all, but she was the one who wasn’t technically supposed to be here. Would it be more or less traumatic for her to walk in like everything was normal or act like the interloper? This little debate went on until Spike muttered that he wasn’t above kicking the bloody door down and having it over with, at which point she rolled her eyes, fished out her keys—handily kept in her pocket—and pushed inside her own home.

The air smelled heavily of pizza—fresh, if he wasn’t mistaken, though both the living room and the dining room were empty. Voices carried from the kitchen, and four heartbeats among them. He frowned and, before Buffy could open her mouth to announce their presence, pressed a finger to his lips. There was something about the muttering that seemed off. Dawn wasn’t in the house, he knew that right away. Dawn wasn’t but the others were.

“—checked every other spell there is,” Willow was saying in an undertone. “This is the best one. The ingredients are mostly legal and Anya thinks she can get the ones that aren’t.”

“Emphasis on *thinks*, let’s be clear,” chimed in the demon bird.

“The sacrifice is of the minimal,” Willow went on, “and it doesn’t specify it needs to be human. All the others do. And yeah, not excited about killing Bambi, but it’s better than the alternative.”

“I never thought we’d get to a point where telling bad spells from not-so-bad spells depended on whether or not we’re having to kill someone,” Xander replied in a falsely chipper voice. “Go team.”

There was a scoff. “This could still go poorly in about a thousand

different ways, you know. These magicks require a larger sacrifice. It might not say *human*, but it is certainly implied.”

“Well, worst comes to worst, that spell doesn’t take.”

“No, worst comes to worst, and the forces you awaken will punish you for disturbing them and not making it worth their while.”

“Ahn,” Xander said with forced patience, “it’s Buffy. We all agreed—”

“I know.” A long sigh sounded. “I know. And of course, I’ll help with whatever we decide. But it is important to note that I have seen many spells like this over the years and unless they are executed exactly, the consequences can be... Well, let’s just say George Romero got his ideas somewhere.”

Spike went ramrod still, not certain he could trust his ears. Whatever was being discussed in the kitchen was not business as bloody usual, unless the kiddies got into black mojo on the regular. There had been that brief stint when Red had powered herself up to take on Glory, but that had been a one-off, he’d thought. Revenge for what had been done to her girl.

But this was different. He knew what it sounded like and it was barking.

He glanced at Buffy, unsure how much she’d overheard. Apparently enough that her eyes were wide and her jaw set in the way that typically preceded her *my way or the highway* speeches. She met his gaze and her nostrils flared.

Spike nodded. He didn’t know what else to do. And at his nod, Buffy whirled around and slammed the door shut with such fervor that the walls seemed to tremble. The resounding *crack* split the air like a pull from a shotgun, earning a series of gasps.

“Dammit,” Willow hissed. “She’s not supposed to be back for another hour.”

“The movie must have been a bust,” Anya muttered. “Or she gave Giles the slip. I told you it was a bad idea. Spike would have been a much better option.”

“For the millionth time, he wasn’t home,” Willow shot back as she appeared in the doorway. She froze so quickly Xander all but knocked her over. “He’s... Buffy?”

Buffy inhaled sharply, glancing to Spike again. Just a glance—one full of trepidation and uncertainty, but both those things were gone by the time she turned back to Willow. And now Willow wasn't the only one staring—Xander had spied her, too, and Anya and Tara had crowded behind him. For a long moment, all they did was stare.

Spike couldn't blame them. He remembered well how his doppel-ganger hadn't been able to take his eyes off the Slayer for more than a second or two. Having lived the other bloke's memories, he knew why.

Xander was the first one who snapped back to himself. He gave his head a shake, then croaked out, "Willow, just how effective *was* that resurrection spell? Or are we all sharing the same hallucination?"

That much was enough to knock Spike for a six. Even in his bloody wildest, he hadn't thought the conversation they'd overheard could have been anything what it sounded like. But here it was, confirmation. And at once, every inch of him tightened with rage. Enough rage that he wagered he could bring the whole bloody house down if he let it out.

"So we heard right?" he said, trying for measured calm and not getting very far. "Are the lot of you insane?"

Willow ignored him completely, her focus on the Slayer. She took a step forward, hope and disbelief warring behind her eyes. "Buffy? I... How?"

"It's not her," Xander announced, looking now to Spike. "It's the Bot. He must've taken it to that Warren guy to get her all fixed."

Spike scoffed, brought his hands up. "Not even touchin' you and that's where they leap. Yeah, wanker, I got my sex toy back and decided the lot of you could do with a show. Bloody miracle you've managed to survive this long, Harris."

"And again with you guys not being able to tell me apart from a robot," Buffy said dryly, giving her mates a start. "Not much with the flattering."

That much stole the wind from Xander's sails. The accusation in his eyes faded and his expression went slack again. "Holy guacamole."

"That sounds appropriate." Buffy met Spike's gaze, giving him one of those soft smiles. "It's a bit of a story. But, Willow—"

"*How?*" Willow demanded, tears now spilling down her cheeks.

"Spike," Buffy said simply as she reached into the bag slung across her chest. "I have something for you—"

"I... Isn't that mine?" Tara was studying the bag, bewildered. Then, as though catching herself, she looked up and said, "N-not that that's the question that needs to be answered. But it looks like my purse."

Spike fought a snicker at this. As much as he liked Glinda, he thought she might have done a smidge better at seeing the Slayer in the flesh than focusing on her accessories. But what the hell did he know?

"It is," Buffy replied. If she was thrown or offended, she didn't let it show. Instead, she pushed the blackened crystal, as well as the instructions the other witch had scribbled down, into her stunned friend's hand. "Willow, you told me to give this to you."

"I did what now?"

"How?" Xander was staring at Spike again, this time his expression somewhat awed. "You did this? How?"

It had been a bloody pipe dream that they'd skip the long-winded explanations, but one Spike had held onto anyway. "Made a deal with a warlock," he said, keeping his tone clipped to discourage further questions. "Went back to last week, back to the night she... Was able to do it this time. Save her. Kept the Doc from openin' up the Bit and everyone came down right as rain at the end."

As though sharing a brain, the Scoobies collectively lost control of their jaws. It would have been right amusing if he wasn't keen on hurrying to the punchline so he and the Slayer could get some well-earned kip. Preferably with a lot of shagging beforehand. After the last few days of not knowing what to expect, with Rack hanging over his head, and the uncertainty of the future, he was more than ready to get on to better things.

Except Rack still had to be dealt with, he knew. The bloke would be put off for a minute, maybe a few days if they were lucky, but eventually, he'd come knocking and they'd need to be prepared.

"I don't remember that," Anya said after a moment.

Spike blinked. "Don't remember what?"

"Buffy not dying. I have a distinct memory of Buffy lying dead on the ground." She looked to the others, who were slowly collecting

themselves. “Does anyone else remember Buffy not dying?” Anya didn’t bother waiting for someone else to chime in—her face lit up and she seemed to answer her own question. “Unless a new timeline was created. That’s what happened, isn’t it? This Buffy isn’t our Buffy.”

“I am your Buffy,” Buffy replied, looking somewhat wounded. “Just a not-dead version of your Buffy.” She nodded again at the crystal now in Willow’s hands. “You’ll understand if you do that.”

Willow, still trying to gather her jaw from where it had hit the floor, slowly turned her gaze downward. “What...” Her eyes went wide when she unfurled the note. “Hi Willow, it’s you. I mean me. If you’re reading this, Buffy and Spike have made it safely to the master timeline. Inside this crystal are our memories—everything you need to know about the wonkiness you’re seeing. Just...” But she didn’t go on, rather looked up again. “You got this from *me*?”

“The one and only Wills.”

“Our memories?” Tara echoed, now studying the crystal. “Memories of...what?”

“Look, you lot, this isn’t bleeding complicated.” Spike pointed at Buffy. “I leaped through time to keep the Slayer from offin’ herself. Turns out the magic used to do it wasn’t all that stable—at least, that was the goin’ theory—so Red here”—he rounded on Willow—“decided to send us over. Keep Buffy alive where it counts.”

Tara’s frown didn’t soften. “And we need memories to do it?”

“They’re *your* memories. Demon Girl made a big fuss about how leavin’ that timeline was bloody murder and Buffy wouldn’t come unless everyone could.” When no one looked any more the wiser, Spike huffed his impatience. “Right then. We can do this the fun way.”

In a flash, he’d snatched the crystal from Willow’s hand, and pulled back his arm to hurl it against the wall.

“Spike, no!” Buffy pulled on his arm, but it was too late. The sodding thing went pelting through the air before meeting the wall and shattering on impact, shiny black shards skittering across the hallway floor.

Spike turned back to Buffy, furrowing his brow. “She said to smash it, didn’t she?”

Buffy was staring at the scattered crystal fragments, her mouth

agape. "Tara did," she said numbly before raising her gaze to her friends, all of whom looked more or less fine, if not a bit dizzy. "Willow said to have her do it."

Right, well, the little witch hadn't exactly seemed too keen to jump to the doing, and though he wouldn't say it, he was more apt to trust Tara's judgment. Whatever her power might be, Red seemed to have a special talent for making things go wrong.

A few long seconds ticked by as her chums oriented themselves. Then Willow gasped and spun around as though to verify everyone was where they were supposed to be. Xander spread his hands in front of him and released a shrill laugh while Tara turned to her girlfriend, presumably to make sure she was all right.

It wasn't until Anya moved forward and pulled the tie-die monstrosity toward her to rummage for her bank bag that Spike relaxed.

"I'll be taking this," she said before giving them both a good glare. "And I will *know* if anything's missing."

Buffy hesitated. "So..." She glanced at each of the others in turn, tension leaving her body by increments. "Guessing that means it worked?"

"This is so weird." Xander was still studying his hands. "Like...two sets of memories. It's trippy." He blinked and looked up, a lopsided grin on his face. "I'm gonna have to write a list of everything I remember and figure out what goes where. Will, you didn't mention this spell came with homework."

Willow had Tara's cheeks between her hands. "All good, baby?"

"Little crowded in my head but, yeah. And you?"

"Crowded doesn't begin to cover it, but it's me. Both mes. This won't get confusing or anything." Willow glanced at the crystal's remains. "Someone got a little antsy."

"Sorry," Spike replied, not sorry at all. "Didn't fancy explainin' a bunch of rot you already knew."

"That was careless," Buffy said, slapping his arm. "We didn't know if that would work."

"Didn't know if any of this would work, Slayer. Seems to have done so anyway."

The look she gave him told him this conversation wasn't over, but she didn't push the issue. And she wouldn't have had the chance to, because the grins had faded off her mates' faces, and all were looking at her now with the sort of solemnity Spike had come to associate with her death.

Buffy blinked and looked at them all in turn. "What? Everything is okay, isn't it?"

No response for a long moment, then as one, Willow and Xander tugged her into a hug.

"Sorry," Willow sniffed into her shoulder, tears spilling down her cheeks. "Just... I just saw you but you were also just dead."

"Yeah, you're never doing that again, Buff." Xander rested his cheek against her crown. "Cause I don't think Spike will be able to finagle a return trip next time and this resurrection thing was giving me all kinds of *Night of the Living Buffy* nightmares."

At the reminder, Spike felt everything inside of him go very still. "The lot of you had lost your bloody marbles, then. A *resurrection* spell?" He snorted and shook his head, meeting Buffy's confused gaze. "It's all right to go against the natural bloody order if you have a pulse, is that it? If Rupert gave you his blessing, I'm gonna take a chunk out of his throat."

"He didn't," Willow said as she and Xander broke away from the hug. "He didn't know. It was just us."

"So...you guys were planning to bring me back from the dead?" He was pleased to see the Slayer looked stricken. "That... Is that a thing we can do?"

"The person who comes back is rarely the person you buried," Spike said shortly. "Doc told me that when it was the Nibblet lookin' to bring back your mum. Might look like her, sound like her, but—"

"Wait, you what?" Buffy rounded on him, her eyes on fire. "That was you?"

"Oi. I'm evil, aren't I? And I thought..." He cleared his throat and looked away. It had been too much to hope that he'd never see that level of disgust on her face again, now that they were together, but fuck if it didn't smart. "Know what it's like to lose a mum," he said after a moment, keeping his gaze on the floor. "And try and do what-

ever you can to bring her back, even if it goes wrong. The slightest chance that it'll swing right, though... Dawn wanted to try and I didn't stop her. Took her where she needed to go. But she didn't go through with it, did she?"

Silence was his answer.

"Look, I—"

"We'll talk later," Buffy said. Then kissed him—not a hot kiss, but a reassuring one. He barely had time to appreciate the warmth of her lips before she'd turned back to the others. "We'll also talk more about this resurrection stuff later, 'cause guys, that's of the massively wiggy."

"It would have worked!" Willow protested. "There's nothing we can't do when we work together. I mean, there was a chance this whole memory spell thing might have made all of us go crazy, but—"

"Excuse me, what?" Buffy demanded.

"Uhh, yeah, Will," Xander said slowly. "You didn't read us that part of the warning label."

She offered a dismissive scoff. "I was mostly sure it would be fine. I mean, it worked on Spike and it was the same principle."

"He's a vampire," Xander shot back, his voice slightly higher than it had been a moment ago. "Not quite the same thing."

"But—"

The door smashed open behind them the next second, stealing whatever defense the little witch had been about to lay out for herself. Spike barely had time to turn before a pint-sized Summers barreled into her sister, a crying, shaking mess.

"It wasn't a dream!" Dawn sobbed into Buffy's shoulder. "You're here! You're really here! You're not dead!"

Buffy looked a bit thunderstruck at first but softened and wrapped her arms around her sister. "Not dead. And neither are you." She pulled back to inspect her sister's face. "Memories intact? You do remember—"

"That there were two Spikes, two timelines, you're dating him now, and the other world was scheduled to end." Dawn nodded. "But you were dead, Buffy. I saw you. I..."

"I'm here. And I'm not going anywhere."

Dawn shook harder and broke with pain Spike knew she would



never fully walk off. Knew because it was the same for him. No matter how much time had passed, it always would be.

But if nothing else, Dawn's reaction seemed to chase away the last of Buffy's reservations. She closed her eyes and hugged her sister to her. After a few minutes, she was crying too, and fuck, he couldn't blame her. Especially not when he recalled the last time he'd been in this house—*this* house in this timeline, and how empty it'd been.

A home without Buffy.

The past few days had been a right cluster. The happiest and most bloody nerve-wracking of his life. But standing here, now, watching the Bit sob all over the sister he'd managed to get back to her... Well, Spike would have made the leap again and again in any regard, but it meant something to others he loved.

And when Buffy opened her eyes to look at him, it was the sort of warmth that could have lesser men going up like dust.

If he accomplished nothing else but keeping her looking like that for the rest of his days, he'd die a happy bloke.

BUFFY SPRANG TO HER FEET THE INSTANT THE DOOR OPENED, NOT bothering to school her features as she knew her pounding heart would give her away. When Spike met her gaze and offered a small smile, she answered with an eye-roll.

“Told you I’d be all right, pet,” he said, sauntering into the living room with a touch more swagger than the situation merited, and waggling something stashed inside a tall brown paper sack. “Where’s the trust?”

Giles, who had taken a break from rubbing his forehead at the sound of Spike’s return, promptly resumed massaging his brow, glasses dangling from his other hand. “In your case, Spike, far, far from here.”

“Ungrateful sod,” her vampire murmured, dragging out a bottle of gross. “Next time I won’t bother knicking top-shelf spirits. Bloody piss water for you.”

Buffy wrinkled her nose. “Thank you for that mental image, Spike.”

He smirked, wrapped an arm around her waist and pressed a kiss to her temple. “You know you love me,” he murmured in a low undertone that so did *not* have her heart sprinting off to the races again. Nope. The heart of Buffy was just...thriving on excess adrenaline from the nonstop wonkiness.

"Please," Giles said, snatching the bottle with cat-like reflexes that seemed so out of place on a man of his age. "I understand I can do nothing to dissuade you from the monumental mistake that is involving yourself with another vampire, but I would appreciate it if you kept the..."

"Snogging?" Spike asked helpfully.

"*Touching* to a minimum when in my company." He made to twist the top off the bottle, then gave a pitiful whimper when it refused to budge. "Buffy—"

"Here." Spike swiped the bottle back and started toward the kitchen. "I'll get us a couple of glasses."

"Us?"

"Well, yeah, Rupert. Seein' as I did the stealing and all."

Giles sagged forward again, meeting Buffy's eyes. Despite the annoyance there—the annoyance she knew wasn't entirely on Spike, whatever he might say—there glowed a soft warmth that she couldn't help but bask inside. "And you and he are really.. You know what you're doing?"

Buffy tried for a smile as she sank into the sofa again. "I never got to have this talk with the other Giles," she said, not quite able to keep the bitterness from her voice. "He was all with the judgy and the running off to Los Angeles to discuss with my ex how much better it would be for everyone if I just died."

Giles huffed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I want to say that I would never, but it appears that I *did*. I can see the logic there, I suppose. Fortunate for that Rupert Giles, he didn't have to live with losing you as I did."

Buffy rubbed her arms, not sure what to say.

They had been in his car, Giles and Dawn, having stopped for ice cream on the way home. The movie he'd taken her to had been a bust—neither of them remembered the plot or who was in it. The entire exercise had been a time-filler, a Band-Aid on the gaping wound that was the loss of Buffy. Apparently, the second Dawn's memories of the other timeline had been restored, the girl had screamed so shrilly she'd sent Giles head-on into a streetlight. He hadn't had time to cough, much less ask her what was wrong before she'd kicked the door open

and sprinted at full teenage-speed for Revello Drive. Understandably of the wigged, Giles had abandoned his car to follow on foot, though, as he'd pointed out, he had nothing on a determined fourteen-year-old. Still, he'd somehow managed to drag himself up the walkway to the Summers' residence, only to almost suffer a heart attack when he found Dawn entangled in the arms of someone who was most definitely not the Buffybot.

"Buffy," he'd gasped, clutching at his chest. "Buffy... I... Am I dreaming?"

Buffy had pulled away from her sobbing sister and turned to him with a smile. "I know you must have questions, but—"

But she hadn't gotten around to explaining the spell Willow had cast to make this possible, for Giles had abruptly burst into tears. Because this Giles only had memories of a lifeless Buffy lying on the concrete. This Giles had no memories of a world where a second Spike had hurdled through time and space to save her from making the leap. This Giles was not the Giles she'd left behind. That Giles was gone.

Willow had insisted this was an oversight, an honest mistake, that the spell should have encompassed all of them, Giles included, even if he hadn't known what they'd planned.

But it was hard to mourn someone when he was sitting right in front of you, being all Gilesy, and thinking about it made Buffy's head hurt. It might hit at some point that *her* Giles was gone...though she wasn't sure he was, because, as Spike had been saying all along, this Giles was that Giles. Just a Giles who'd walked away from the final battle with Glory with a little less to celebrate.

Spike announced himself with heavy steps as he made his way back into the living room, two glasses in one hand and the bottle in the other. He plopped a glass down on the coffee table in front of Giles before helping himself to the seat beside Buffy. "Miss anything?" he asked before throwing back the entirety of his own serving in one swallow.

Buffy didn't miss the hard look her watcher threw her boyfriend. Booze runs aside, it would be a while before Giles—any Giles—accepted her decision to give the resident soulless vampire the chance to prove what kind of man he could be if the right people believed in

him. Probably didn't help that Spike rather gleefully admitted to things like petty larceny and she didn't so much as make with the threats, but that was a discussion for some time down the line. And on the scale of evil—or at least, things she should be worried about—it didn't so much as blip.

Not when compared to other things. Things they would discuss later.

"Buffy was rather adamant that we wait for you, for some bloody reason," Giles muttered, plucking his glass off the coffee table and frowning at the contents. "I presume this is safe to drink."

Spike scoffed, stretched an arm across the back of the couch so that his hand fell none-too-subtly on Buffy's shoulder, which he favored with a soft caress. "Saw me take a swig, didn't you?"

"You're already dead."

"Yeah, and the way I aim to keep the girl is by offin' the bloke who might as well be her old man, right in front of her, no less."

"I'm not saying it's a foolproof plan, but I also wouldn't put it past you." Giles gave the liquid a surreptitious sniff before muttering, "Oh, what the hell?" and downed the contents in one swallow.

"There you go, Rupert." Spike leaned forward to refill both glasses. "Cheers," he said, raising his in a toast before settling back against the sofa again, arm once more in a prime position to play with the shoulder of Buffy in a way that was almost more intimate than if he'd stripped her down and fucked her on the coffee table.

As though knowing exactly where her thoughts had gone, Spike grinned and winked at her. Buffy did her best to look stern—both because right now was so not the time and because she was a little annoyed with him—but it was hard when he dug his fingers into muscles she hadn't realized were sore like that.

"If it is all the same to you, I think I would prefer to start at the beginning," Giles muttered into his glass. "Spike went back in time. Tonight."

More facts that made her head hurt. When it came to the movies, Buffy understood the way time travel worked, in that it made sense even when it didn't. At the very least, she was able to suspend her disbelief long enough to enjoy the cinematic experience. Time travel

was one of those things she'd never thought she'd have to contextualize in the real world, even with her line of work, so she supposed a certain allowance could be made for the confusion.

"Yes," Buffy said. "He went back to the Tower. Spike—this Spike fell off the Tower and the other Spike managed to kill the Doc before he could cut Dawn."

"Two of them." Giles scoffed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Bloody hell, I am quite glad I do not remember that."

Spike firmed his grip on Buffy's shoulder. "Oil!"

"That there were two of them was what made my Giles—well, you *are* my Giles but that version of my Giles, pull a massive wig. Something about how it's impossible to be in two places at once."

Giles nodded and took another sip of whatever Spike had poured him. "Without having done extensive reading on the subject, I would say yes, that is true. Especially if the means to do so were dark." He leveled a glare at the vampire. "Now would be a good time to tell me about this warlock you bargained with."

Buffy sat back and let Spike cover this part, trying and failing not to focus on the fact that she was telling Giles things he should already know. Also trying to not stare at Giles too hard as though she could catch him looking like something other than himself. With the others in full possession of their memories, she had no trouble shifting her way of thinking where they were concerned. Sure, the Dawn that had eventually been coaxed into going to sleep had a week's worth of memories of holing up in Buffy's room while Willow and Tara tried to persuade her to eat, but she also remembered Buffy being there after the world hadn't ended, two Spikes at each other's throats and the confusing conversation that had followed. Dawn remembered telling her just a few hours ago that she should save herself if only to live for the sister who had lost her. There wasn't anything wrong or missing. It was her sister.

This Giles wasn't the Giles she'd left behind. There was no hardness in his eyes or despair. When he looked at her, it was with warmth and reverence, a sort of disbelieving happiness that he couldn't seem to keep inside. And while he certainly seemed apprehensive of the events

that had led to her turning up here, he had yet to sound off about the irreparable damage done to the natural order.

"Near as we can figure, Rack hoped he could fool me into thinkin' I'd signed over the Bit to take her power," Spike was saying when Buffy clued back into the conversation. "Bloke seemed to know a lot about the Slayer, but not so much that he accounted for us bein' able to check his cock-n-bull story. Red did a bit of mojo and put the other Spike's memories in my head, up until the point where he crossed over. Sussed out that I really had bargained my own soul."

"And I was..."

"In LA. With Angel," Buffy said, crossing her arms. "Deciding that the timeline was doomed and we should let it die."

Once again he looked appropriately stricken but had enough sense not to object to it. Rather, he swallowed and hung his head, rattling off a long sigh. "I can't begin to understand why I would have gone to Angel," he said. "Wesley is there, of course, but he was a bit of a useless twat when he was here. I'm sure I had a reason—some logic behind it. And I trust that the conclusions we came to were sound. Buffy, I would never suggest letting the world die for anything so trivial."

At that, Buffy pursed her lips. A thought had been floating in the back of her head for the past couple of days, one she hadn't really wanted to chase and had therefore been mostly able to ignore. But now that he'd brought it up, she didn't really have a choice but to stare it down.

"I think it's because Angel left," she said. "Made the choice you thought was the right one even if he didn't want to. Or something. He loved me but was able to see the bigger picture. You trusted his judgment on this because you know how he feels about me—or how he felt—and that if he also said the timeline was in trouble, then it must be true." She released a shuddering breath. It would be a while before this stopped hurting—less because it was Angel and more because the past couple of days had more or less shattered her worldview of what that relationship had been and what it had meant. "Angel wouldn't dive through time to save me. I mean, maybe if the circumstances were different, but he would never have made a deal with someone like Rack. That made him a Buffy authority you thought you could trust."

She was aware of Spike staring at her, breathing hard. It took everything in her not to meet his eyes. Whatever happened between them, she needed to keep all things Angel separate from Spike.

Giles furrowed his brow and looked away as though to consider this. "That's...quite possible, Buffy. I can't say for certain, having not lived it, what might have informed my perspective. But there are few people I would trust to be levelheaded where you are concerned." He glanced at Spike. "Though I must say, loathe you as I do, I find I am rather glad that you are not levelheaded."

Spike shifted as though uncomfortable, then snickered. "Guess it's all well and good for you now, Rupes. Figure the timeline's all right, then?"

"I would like to refer to my books and the other diaries, but...utilizing an existing dimensional tear is not quite the same thing as creating a completely different dimension." His lips twitched. "I believe we can take our cues from what happened when the vampire Willow came into this world from an alternative one created."

"Even though that magic was *natural* and Rack's wasn't?"

"I assume that was the conclusion I arrived at in this other timeline?"

Buffy nodded.

"Well, the rip is going to exist regardless of the outcome. The degree to which it is open is, I would assume, rather negligible. But it should be closed now for good."

She rubbed her arms. "Can... Is there a way to check?"

"Check what?"

"That the other timeline is really kaput. That...everyone is really gone."

Again she felt Spike's eyes on her and again she ignored the impulse to look back. While she believed wholeheartedly that she'd made the right choice—more so now that she was here—she also knew she wouldn't be able to sink into a routine without knowing for certain she hadn't just absconded with her friends' memories and left them and her sister defenseless on the Hellmouth. The other Giles might be able to put together what had happened and help, but she doubted there would be any rehabilitation for them.



"I assume so, yes," Giles said a moment later. "Rather the same process as what Willow did before when she united this world's Spike's memories with that one. We can ask her tomorrow."

Buffy nodded, her stomach twisting. "And...on the subject of Willow... I'm kinda worried."

"Worried?" Spike echoed. "What for?"

"Her power," Giles supplied, and she was so grateful that he was on the same page she could have cried. Given the vast amount that Willow had done for her in a short period of time, Buffy had wondered if she wasn't overreacting or worrying without cause—Giles was a good measure for that.

"She did this memory spell on everyone to get their memories over here without bothering to tell anyone that doing it might make them go crazy," she said in a rush. "I mean, we probably would've done it anyway—if the reward outweighed the risk—but she didn't mention it at all. And then, when Spike and I got here, she and the others were talking about a resurrection spell."

The color drained from Giles's face. "What?"

Spike offered a single nod, having apparently caught on. "Yeah, that's right. Discussin' sacrifices and the like. Wager if I hadn't come through with the Slayer, they would've gone through with it, and bugger *natural law*."

Giles sat back, looking like he'd been sucker-punched. "My god. That is... We will have to talk with her." He pressed his lips together. "Though she might not hear it, Buffy. This could become a real problem."

Yeah, pretty much the reason she was telling him now. After everything they'd been through, Buffy would very much prefer it if Willow did *not* become a real problem. She didn't even know what that would look like, except that as the only person who had been able to hurt Glory without the aid of a troll god's hammer, an ultra-charged Willow, out of control of her magic, would be a nightmare and a half to stop. Never mind the complication that Willow was her best friend.

"I will speak with her," Giles said decisively. "Perhaps Tara can help."

"Maybe it would be better to talk to Tara first," Buffy suggested. Of

the two of them, Tara was less likely to blow a gasket. At least she hoped. “See if this is an overreaction or not. Because we could be wrong.”

Spike snorted.

Buffy released a long breath, fighting back the urge to snap. There were times when it seemed he went out of his way to be unhelpful. “Do you have something you want to add?” she asked, turning to him.

“Oh, no, pet, seems like you have it handled,” he replied in that sarcastic undertone she both loved and hated. “Mega powerful super-witch decided to muck with kid sis’s head without botherin’ to tell you it might leave the girl fried and that’s not even the barmiest thing she’s done today.”

“Need I remind you that it was *your* undead ass that made a deal with a warlock who wants your soul as payment?”

Spike blinked. “Need I remind *you* that I’m a selfish, evil git? Red’s supposed to have a soul, right? Some bloody sense of right and wrong? There are a lot of things I’d do for you, Slayer, but I’d never sign on to anyone trying to mojo you from the other side. There’s a line.”

“So time travel is okay but resurrection—”

“Never heard of a time travel spell gone wonky outside of pulp fiction,” Spike shot back. “Been around a minute longer than you, too. There’s a reason why raising people from the dead is considered *dark* magic.”

“And that’s your excuse? You’d never heard of a time travel spell going bad? When none of us, you included, had ever done time travel at *all* before eight days ago?”

“Principle’s the same, innit? Load of stories about bollixing up a resurrection. Why most demons, even *evil* blokes like yours truly, know not to muck with it. Same can’t be said for time-hoppin’.”

“Spike, you don’t need a cautionary tale to tell you how it can go wrong. Need I remind you that we had to vacate an entire timeline to keep your time travel spell from screwing us over?”

Spike rose to his feet, his eyes flashing. “Sorry to have inconvenienced you, pet. Now I know you prefer it six bloody feet under, I won’t bloody bother to stand in the way the next time some big nasty tries to take a piece outta you.”

And without waiting for her retort, he stalked for the front door, which slammed behind him a second later.

Buffy held her breath, staring at the place where Spike had been, pushing back against the swell of emotion threatening to bubble over. She hadn't meant for that to happen—hadn't realized how hot her temper was until it was too late, but damn, blame a girl for being a bit raw after literally jumping from one dimension to the next. And she knew Spike was on edge, too. Like her, it'd take him time to come down, especially since they'd spent the past day thinking they were living their last hours. Plus she was still annoyed with him for having lost his patience and smashed the crystal before Willow could work her magic—for reasons she knew wouldn't make sense to him.

"He'll be back."

Buffy turned back to Giles, who looked a mixture of certain and dejected over the fact.

"What?"

"Spike." Her watcher nodded at the door. "You know how he gets. Unless, of course, what I just witnessed was tantamount to a breakup fight, in which case, I'm more than happy to hold him down while you stake the little wanker."

A grin tugged on her mouth. "I kinda promised him there would be no staking."

Also, she was pretty sure she was in love with him, hotheaded pest that he was. And she really didn't want to become the girl who killed all of her vampire boyfriends.

"We need to be ready," Buffy went on.

"For Spike's return? Believe me, after Dawn's account of your—ahh, well let's just say there are things a man never needs to know about the girl he views as a daughter."

Ugh. Yeah, Dawn had purchased herself a front-row seat for a good old fashioned talking to. The topic? What constituted appropriate conversational material with her friends and family. That Spike could make Buffy reach whole new octaves was so not anywhere on the list.

"I mean Rack," Buffy said, trying to ignore the way her skin heated. "Yes with the talking to Willow and seeing about getting her and her wild spell-casting under control, preferably before something goes

kablooey in our faces, but we need to have an action plan on how to deal with our own demented Doc Brown first.”

“You think he will come after you.”

“Giles, he wanted *a* soul at the very least, Dawn at the most. Instead, he got royally screwed and a faceful of homemade time-out herbs courtesy of Tara.” Buffy glanced toward the entryway, telling herself it was to make sure Dawn wasn’t lurking on the stairs and had nothing at all to do with the vampire who had just stormed out. Who was out there, wandering the streets after having pissed off one of the most powerful magic-users in town. The urge to go after him crashed over her like a tsunami and might have had her shooting to her feet were it not for the fact that the only thing Rack wanted more than a dusted Spike was sleeping upstairs. “We need to be ready for him when he comes to collect. I am giving him no one’s soul and if he lays a finger on Dawn...”

She didn’t need to finish that thought. Giles knew better than anyone the lengths she’d go to in order to protect her sister.

“Despite everything we just talked about, I rather think Willow is the best person for that particular job.”

“She is,” Buffy agreed. “So, extra yay. I get to thank Willow for finding a way to keep most everyone alive, ask her to make sure the other timeline is actually dead, get her to help me fight a warlock with the power to create entire dimensions...then tell her that she’s crossing boundaries we think might be bad and maybe slow down a little.”

Silence for a moment, then Giles released a long sigh. “We will have to handle this delicately.”

“Gee, ya think?”

The eyeroll she expected in response never came. Instead, he just favored her with a warm, somewhat watery smile. “I am not willing to say that there will be no consequences, but Buffy... Having you here after this past week... I will do whatever is asked of me to keep you here. Watching you die once nearly broke me. I don’t think I can survive it a second time.”

“Would be third, technically,” Buffy offered weakly. “But you’ll be happy to know that I no longer have a death wish. I have a life wish.”

“You had a death wish?”

“Theory of Spike’s that I thought was crap. Turned out to be true.” At the horror that fell across his face, Buffy raised a hand and shook her head. “Didn’t want to die, necessarily. I just...wanted it to be over. All of it. Everything with Glory, not having the time to process that Mom’s gone, worrying about Dawn... It was too much. I wanted to be done with it, even liked the idea that everything might just end so I wouldn’t have to worry about what was coming anymore. Spike saw that. He’s the only one who could.”

A pause. Then, “It’s more serious than you want me to know, isn’t it? Whatever is happening between you and Spike.”

Go big or go home. Lying served no purpose here.

“I’m pretty sure I love him.”

“Just pretty sure?”

She offered a half-shrug. “It’s different. I actually kinda feel like I can be me around him and...so did not realize how much that was not the case with Riley. Or Angel, even. Spike already knows all the bad and doesn’t seem to care. And...this is really weird for you, isn’t it?”

“I’ll do my best to get over it, but do give me some time.”

That seemed simple enough. Thanks to Spike, she now had all the time in the world.

Assuming, of course, that he came back to her in one piece and not a whole pile of them.

HE WAS STALLING. WHAT'S MORE, HE KNEW IT.

The second he'd stormed out of the house, he'd felt like a prat, but pride and a lingering sense of justification had kept his feet moving forward. Wasn't like he didn't know what was going on or anything—the events of the day crashing hard around the Slayer, who was acclimating to the thought of being in a different timeline even if everything looked, tasted, and smelled the same. The blow that the other version of the watcher hadn't made it over here—that would be hard for her to shake off, even if there was another Giles to make sure she didn't go too long without a good talking down. Buffy was on the fast lane to surpassing the need for the old man, if she wasn't there already. And like all men staring down the barrel of irrelevance, he was fighting to maintain his worth.

But the man was as good as Buffy's father, and Spike knew he needed to make nice. That this version seemed a bit less keen on tossing all of existence away because of a spell one bloke had cast was only slightly heartening.

It was like the Slayer to lash out when she was scared—mostly because she didn't do scared all that well. Not natural on her, especially

when the thing she was scared of wasn't the sort of beastie that could be conquered with violence. They'd been running on nerves and guesses the past couple of days—hell, the girl hadn't even had the time to properly come down from the last attempt to end the world before being thrust back in the thick of things. It was a bloody wonder anything had happened between them when her focus was everywhere else.

Spike knew this but that didn't make the fact that she'd decided to make him the target of her anger any easier to swallow. Seemed old habits were gonna be harder to kick than he'd thought.

But she wasn't the only one who had habits to kick. His instincts at the moment were screaming at him to go find a target of his own, pummel out his annoyance at the situation and himself on some fresh-faced fledgling before heading home to get himself nice and sloshed. Wasn't exactly the way he'd planned on spending the night, but that was the way of things. Especially things involving Buffy Summers.

Except Spike knew he couldn't go home. Not tonight, anyway. Not until they'd dealt with Rack, and since both the grand and the consolation prizes were at the Summers' residence, odds were high that was where he'd go first. So, after making a circuit around Restfield and unfortunately finding nothing to kill, Spike turned around and headed fast in the other direction.

Then came to an abrupt halt when he realized exactly where he was.

It was the tree. The way the lower branch dipped toward the ground—a live oak, he thought he'd heard Giles call it. He remembered standing right here and staring at the shadow the tree cast, the way even the branches seemed to be reaching for her, as though they could go where others couldn't. He'd stared at that branch and its shadow for a long bloody time because acknowledging the headstone to his right had been too bloody painful.

Spike inhaled, then forced himself to look.

It was there, of course. Right where he'd left it.

*Buffy Anne Summers*

*1981-2001*

*Beloved Sister. Devoted Friend.*

*She Saved the World a Lot*

Spike's throat went tight and his eyes were suddenly overfull. The anger that had sent him marching out of the house went up like smoke. At once, he needed to be with her, near her, needed to breathe her scent into his lungs and hold it, remind himself that she was alive and whole and in this world. If she wanted to row, they'd row, and he'd be bloody glad for the privilege.

Spike broke off into a run toward Revello Drive, never more grateful to not need oxygen than he was at that moment. Or that this pissant town was roughly the size of a postage stamp because less than a minute later, he was tearing up the familiar drive and crashing onto the porch. And before he could suss out whether he should just kick the door down or give Buffy the option of tossing him out on his arse, the door swung open and she was there.

"Oh, thank god," she said.

And that was all the encouragement he needed. Spike tugged her to him and brought his mouth crashing down on hers. Whatever they'd quarreled about earlier could wait—it was all bloody nonsense, anyway. What mattered was the here and now, Buffy warm and alive and kissing him with a hunger that could rival his own. Buffy relieved to see him, wanting him, pulling him back into her home, into her.

"You. Stupid. Vampire," she muttered between kisses. "Leaving here like that."

"Complete moron," he agreed, hiking her into his arms and whirling her around to both kick the door closed and press her against it. Her legs went around his waist and then he was there, right where he wanted to be, thrusting against her warmth and about to go cross-eyed just at the memory of how bloody tight she was around him.

"I'm serious." She sucked his earlobe between her teeth and bit hard enough to leave a mark. Fuck, kitty liked to play dirty. "You realize that you're on Rack's most wanted list, right? I almost asked Giles to go look for you on his way home, since there was no way I was leaving Dawn."

He snorted at that and took her mouth again before she could scold him further. Not that he didn't love the fact that she'd been



worried—fuck, it drove home everything she'd told him last night and then some—but he didn't much want to talk about Rack or her watcher or kid sis or anything that involved them staying clothed longer than necessary.

Thankfully, it seemed the Slayer was on the same page, for she didn't try to bring up her watcher or sister again. Instead, she threw all of herself into answering his kiss, pull for pull, swipe for swipe, doing things with her tongue that had his cock so hard he thought he might actually burst out of his trousers. Not the place for it, he knew—the upstanding, responsible sort of man would remind the lady that though Dawn was sawing logs upstairs, that didn't mean she might not pop her too-curious-for-her-own-good head out and follow the sounds of her sister getting well and thoroughly shagged against the front door. But hell, he didn't want to stop—didn't want to pull away, lest Buffy decide that what they needed to do right now was have a nice long chat about what had happened earlier. That was coming, he knew, because he knew Buffy, and he reckoned they ought to have it out. Just not now. She could tell him how he was wrong tomorrow. Right now he just wanted to bury himself in the heaven that was her body and stay there.

"Spike," Buffy gasped, pulling her mouth from his. If she hoped to slow him down, she went about it the wrong way—what else was a vamp to do when the most succulent thing he'd ever had tipped her head back to expose that masterpiece of a throat? He growled and began nibbling up and down her smooth skin, lingered a moment longer than was necessary over the fang marks leftover from the grand old sod and wondering if he would ever be so lucky as to eradicate the memory of any other vamp from her body forever. She'd let him bite her the other night; sure, it had been with his human teeth rather than fangs, but even that had been more than he'd ever thought he'd get with her. The possibility of more...

"Spike!" Her hands were on his chest now, pushing until he obliged and stepped back a step. Then another, forcing his mouth to break from her skin.

Fuck. Seemed they were going to have that talk tonight after all. Spike sighed and looked down, trying to hide his frustration as he knew it'd score him no points.

“Spike, we can’t do this now.”

“Right.” He glanced up again. Maybe if they hurried through the talk, they could get back to snogging. “I smarted off about Willow. Just don’t think you see clearly where your mates are concerned, is all. It’s bloody Glory all over again. Knew the witch would go after the bitch the second you shared what happened to Tara and you didn’t, did you? What she was talkin’ about mucking with tonight would make whatever I did look like sodding—”

“I meant we can’t make with the sexcapades downstairs,” Buffy said, her eyes narrowed. “Was going to suggest we grab that shower we talked about earlier.”

Oh. Spike stood there for a second, not sure whether or not it was safe to move and almost certain he’d just talked himself out of her bed for the night.

Buffy took a step toward him, cupped his cheeks to bring their gazes level. “I really didn’t want to have *this* conversation tonight but let’s get it out now—I was annoyed from earlier and kinda overreacted.”

Earlier? What the bleeding hell did that mean? “Earlier bein’, what? When I started snogging you after we made the great bloody escape? Or is this about the soul again?”

“It’s about you smashing the crystal.”

The words made no sense. “I did what now?”

“The crystal. With their memories. You got impatient and threw it at the wall.”

Spike blinked at her dumbly, still not seeing it. Yeah, he remembered chucking the sodding thing at the wall, just as he remembered Glinda the Good telling the both of them that that was one way to get everyone’s memories out and in the open. Seemed a better use of time than explaining everything, which was how that would’ve gone.

And, now that she mentioned it, he also remembered thinking this might be something she’d bring up with him. It seemed so bloody insignificant, though, in the face of everything else they’d done. After the long chat with her mates and the watcher, after the conversation about the witch and her powers. The crystal smashing hadn’t hurt

anything so other than the Slayer being a bit annoyed, he wasn't sure what the hurt was.

Which, hell, if they were trying this for real, he ought to tell her.

"Not seein' what I did wrong there," he admitted. "Your mates were gonna talk themselves in circles about things they already knew. Saved you havin' to chat it out."

"Right, but Willow said she wasn't sure about smashing it. Anything could've happened."

"Seems Red wasn't sure about a few things, more she kept to herself."

"I know and I'm mad at her too because of that, but—"

"Oh, so you're *mad* at me? Not just annoyed?" Spike stared at her for a moment before breaking off with a forced laugh, shaking his head. "Can't win for losin' around here. Tara said that smashing the crystal would work, didn't she? It's not like I came up with that from nothin'."

"But Willow's the one who did the spell. It's just—" Buffy cut herself off, though it looked like it took effort, then breathed in deeply as though fighting for patience. "I need you to not...do that."

"Do what?"

"Just *react* without thinking. It's the same thing as jumping through time. Jump first, see what happens later."

"We're back on that? You decide—"

"Spike, I'm trying to be honest here and not lose my temper because if you storm out of here again, I'm not going to be able to follow you and then I'll spend all night worrying and being mad at you and I really don't want to be mad at you. I want to go upstairs, shower, have some of that awesome sex and sleep for about a year."

He opened his mouth, ready to shoot back with another readymade argument, when what she'd said managed to penetrate the fog in his head. "Not kickin' me outta your bed, then?"

Buffy snorted. "Were you *not* here ten seconds ago when we almost did it against the door?"

"I thought—"

"I know. And no, not kicking you anywhere." She paused and took a step forward. "It's not just that either, Spike. It's what you said about

helping Dawn raise my mom from the dead. It's all those decisions that you make without thinking, and—"

"She was gonna go through with it one way or another. Thought it'd be better if I was there to help." Only that wasn't entirely true—the way Dawn had been going about resurrecting Joyce had been bound to fail. He was the one who had taken her to the Doc, given the bastard her scent, clued him into what she was. How things might have been different had he not dangled the Bit under his nose? He couldn't say. And from the look Buffy was giving him, he didn't need to. Spike heaved a sigh and hung his head. "Right. Bit of that was me hurtin', too. Your mum was a special lady. Didn't seem right that she was gone. And—"

And he hadn't gotten to say goodbye. It sounded trite but it was the truth. The last he'd known of Joyce, she'd given the witches the okay to bar him from the house. Likely thought all sorts of things about him, given how south his declaration to Buffy had gone. All that without getting into all the bad memories that her illness and passing had brought to the surface. How a hasty decision had decided his own mum's fate for the worst.

Put his own irritation with Willow under a light he didn't care for, considering that. He hadn't stopped Dawn from trying to raise her mum but raising Buffy had never been a consideration. Because as much as it'd hurt to kill a Joyce who'd come back wrong, he'd be unable to bury Buffy twice.

"I think you have good intentions," Buffy said a moment later, jarring him out of his thoughts. "Or...you're trying to have good intentions. With helping Dawn, with coming back through time, with smashing the crystal...and so far so good in terms of the results. But those intentions were also selfish."

That had him rearing to go again. "Selfish? They—"

"You missed my mom. You wanted the pain to go away. You wanted *me* back because of how much you were hurting. You wanted to skip to the end with the others so that we could have alone-time." There was no condemnation in her voice, which somehow made him feel worse than if she had been shouting. "And that's natural for you, Spike. To be selfish. I get that."

“I—”

“And I’m selfish too,” she went on. “When I found out that Dawn had done a spell to bring Mom back, I was furious but...I wanted her back, too. I came here, to this timeline, because I wanted to keep living, and I’m not sure I’m ever going to be a hundred percent okay with that decision, no matter what we did to help make it right. That Giles is gone. So’s that Angel—the one who knew about the time travel. These are things I will keep thinking about forever. That’s just the way I am.” Buffy glanced down, sighed. “I don’t even know what I’m saying. You told me you’d changed and you have—on your own, entirely. Your reasons were selfish but also kinda beautiful. And I don’t want you to not be you anymore, I just need to know that I can count on you to not be impulsive like that when it comes to the big things. When it comes to the lives of my friends or the world or anything else. Because the next time we might not be lucky, and whatever you do, no matter what your intentions are, could cost me the people I love or worse. And that would...kill me all over again.”

There was nothing to say to that—nothing he could think of, at least. Might have been better, easier to swallow, if she had been miffed. An angry Buffy was, in many ways, less frightening than one intent on being so open and honest with him. Spike had never had that, the open and honest thing. He could see clearly the way this thing between them could go tits-up, the choices he made that led to some rather brilliant mistakes—the sort she’d never be able to forgive.

All along, all he’d ever wanted was a chance to prove he could be the kind of man she needed, assuming all he needed to do was show up.

“Lot in me that’s just hardwired, pet,” he said at last. “Dunno how to be any other way.”

“I know. And like I said, I’m not asking you to not be you. It’s *you* I want to be with, after all.” She worked her throat. “We’re in new territory for both of us so there’s going to be some things we don’t know how to do or that we get wrong. But I know you love me and that... Whatever else, what you do is because of that. I don’t expect you to get it right all the time, either, or for me to. We both have habits that are probably better broken. I just need to know that you’ll try.”

Spike nodded so hard his head swam. "Anything you ask, pet. Don't wanna muck this up for anything."

"I know." She grinned. "I don't, either."

"You don't?"

"I don't typically go into relationships looking forward to the breakup, no." The tone was dry, but her eyes were dancing. "I know that we started this up at maybe the weirdest time with all kinds of craziness going on, but it... I dunno, it feels good."

That had his brain switching gears entirely. "Good, huh?" he repeated, smirking when her cheeks went that pretty pink he so fancied. "What all about me feels *good*?"

"You *would* make that dirty."

"Ohh, did I make it dirty? Good thing that you had plans on cleanin' me up." Spike pressed forward, dropping his gaze to her mouth. "That still in the cards?"

"Bad Spike."

"No, good Spike. You just said it." He dipped to kiss her, swallowing a groan when the scent of renewed arousal flooded his nostrils. She was so easy to turn on, this girl. And yeah, he'd known that for a while now but had never been able to really revel in it. Knowing that she was reacting to him, that she *wanted* to react to him like this, was its own aphrodisiac.

It was Buffy who made the move to close the gap between them, and that did him in too. There was a world of difference in being given what you wanted and being wanted in return. When she kissed him, he could taste her want—open and deep, hungry and carnal. She threw herself at him the way she did everything else, unbottled passion and brightness. In seconds, he was moving backward, determined to navigate all the way up the bloody stairs without breaking from her lips. If he weren't worried about getting a lecture, he'd start dragging off her clothes now. Save valuable time once they were in the loo.

Buffy being Buffy, though, did what she did best and mucked up his plan by pulling back. "Broken necks being not sexy, maybe we should—"

"You think I'd let you break your neck?" Spike scoffed and lowered

his mouth to the neck in question. “Got so much more I’d rather do here.”

“Bitey stuff?”

He groaned and thrust his hips forward so she could feel just how hard the thought alone made him. “Told you as much, didn’t I? Being inside you here and”—he slipped a hand between them to palm her pussy—“here. Fuck, just thinkin’ about it makes me go cross-eyed.”

She swallowed, and her heartbeat kicked up a notch. “Would it hurt?”

Bloody hell, was she considering it? Truly? He swallowed and tried to temper his excitement. “Done the right way, not at all.”

“I mean you. Would it hurt you?”

That made no sense. Spike reeled back to find her eyes. “Hurt...?”

“Unless you have something to tell me, your chip prevents you from—”

“I know what it prevents me from. Has bugger all to do with anything we do together.”

Either he was deluding himself or her scent had just intensified. Like the thought of his fangs in her throat alone was enough to get her dripping for him.

“It wouldn’t trigger the chip?”

Spike shook his head, careful not to appear too eager. “Chip keeps me from hurtin’ you,” he said in a low, gravelly voice. “Don’t wanna hurt you, pet. Remember that night in the alley?”

“You said that you weren’t actually trying to—”

“It’s all the same. Biting you wouldn’t hurt either of us. Point of fact, I reckon it’d make you come harder than you have in your life.” And now he couldn’t help himself—he slid a hand into her jeans, desperate to feel her heat against his skin, and gasped when she gasped, his fingers gliding over her drenched flesh. “You want it, don’t you, Slayer? Wanna feel the Big Bad’s fangs in your throat. Have as much of me inside you as possible.”

Buffy seized him by the shoulders. “Spike, not here.”

“Up there, then.” With great reluctance, he pulled away, then seized her around the waist and threw her so she was draped across his shoulder. “Not gonna make it at this rate.”

She let out a surprised squeal that made both his cock throb and his heart swell. “Spike!”

“Hush or you’ll wake up kid sis.” He twisted and hurried the rest of the way up the stairs, moving faster than he wagered he had in his whole bloody life to get her to the bathroom. The second the door was closed, he set her on the edge of the sink and began tugging at her clothes.

“I don’t know what you’ve done to me,” Buffy said, sounding somewhat drunk as he jerked her shirt over her head. “It’s like a drug or something.”

“Sayin’ you’re addicted to me, pet?”

“Something like that. I should be zonked out but I want...”

But she didn’t say what she wanted because Spike had ripped her pajama bottoms all the way off and was right at his favorite place in the whole sodding world—perched between the Slayer’s legs, eyeing her juicy cunt. So pink and pretty, slick and burning up. All his.

“Now, let’s see if I remember this properly. You said this was hot, right?” And before she could reply, he’d sucked her swollen clit into his mouth and plunged two fingers inside of her.

Buffy worked her hand through his hair, nails scratching at his scalp as though to hold him to her. As though anything could pull him away. It boggled his mind that the tossers she’d shared herself with before had left her with the impression that she didn’t like being eaten. Not by any fault of their own, she’d assured him, which was right ridiculous but he wouldn’t argue the point that he was the one who had opened her world to it. Maybe it was a vamp thing—or that he’d always been an orally fixated bloke—but any man lucky enough to have been where he was now ought to be gutted for not worshipping her properly.

“Spike!”

Fuck, he loved it when she said his name like that. When she was riding his tongue or his cock, when he could pretend that the world full of people had blinked away and it was just the two of them.

“Spike.” Buffy tugged on his head this time, and he, being a good boy, accepted the cue for what it was, even if it took his tongue away from her pussy. He met her gaze, bit back a moan at the hunger there, and waited.



“Shower,” she said.

He blinked. “Shower?”

“I’ve...” Her cheeks darkened and she looked away. “Never mind. It’s stupid.”

“Nuh uh uh uh uh, none of that.” He rose to his feet. “Talk to me, pet.”

“I just...” She frowned, wiggled a bit—he did his best not to stare at the way her small but succulent tits swayed with the movement—then sighed. “Forget it.”

“Slayer—”

“Shower sex.”

Spike arched his brows. “What about it?”

“I’ve... Riley and I tried but it’s not like it is in the movies, you know? It’s actually all kinds of...uncomfortable. At least it was for us—slippery and not in the fun way, but I thought maybe—”

“Buffy.”

She blinked up at him, those gorgeous green eyes of hers so open and honest. And it struck him again out of nowhere just how bloody lucky he was. How fortunate. Even at his most optimistic, he’d never really thought he’d ever get the Slayer looking at him like that—like she trusted him. Heat and want were easy to come by, but this was something else entirely. And it was what made him foolish enough to hope that the thing they were building was something that actually had a chance of lasting. That she was really in it with him all the way.

That she could love him—if not now, then maybe one day.

“There’s loads movies get wrong,” he said, then stripped off his shirt. “You know it better than most. And that’s one of the things you wanted me to do, right? Take you out nice and proper to some monster flick so we could pick it apart. Wasn’t that your Spike dream date?”

“Well, it was either that or something beach-side, but one of those things doesn’t have a dusty ending.”

He smirked, turning his hands to his jeans. “Beach is better at night, anyway. Point is, love...” He started to drag down the zipper but then she was on her feet too, shooing him away from his fly to do the honors herself. And hell, he was a bloody goner—feeling her there, pressing against his erection, the heat of her skin reaching him even

through the denim. Spike released a shaky breath and watched, transfixed, as she unzipped him, then gasped when she shifted so she was on her knees, tugging his jeans down his legs.

And wasn't that was a pretty sight. Buffy kneeling before him, staring at his straining cock with the same hunger she'd shown him just a moment ago. Last night, when she'd put her mouth on him for the first time, had been a revelation. There was a world of difference between wanting something so badly the not-having could break a man and finally touching it, and part of that world was stark disbelief. Somehow, though, this was better than even he'd thought possible. Maybe because it was real.

Buffy leaned in and brushed a soft kiss across the head of his cock. "I like the way you taste here," she said. "I didn't think I would, but I do."

"Fuck, pet..." Spike threaded his fingers through her hair, trembling. "Supposed to be shagging you in the shower right about now."

"No one's stopping you," she replied before sucking him entirely into her mouth, rumbling a little whimper that had his balls tensing.

She'd gained confidence since last night—he felt it in the way she touched him. More certainty, less hesitation, like she'd stepped into the knowledge of what she did to him rather than view it as an obstacle. And Christ, having the woman he loved sucking on his cock while making sounds that could convince a bloke she was enjoying herself was about as close to perfection as he reckoned he could hope to get.

Perfection was knowing that she trusted him with these pieces of herself, even if they embarrassed her. Things like wanting a cinematic shower shag but not knowing if she'd get it, or any of the other bits she'd given him since crashing into his crypt the night of her failed date with her latest attempt at Joe Normal. She told him these things because she believed he could help her overcome them—whether she knew it or not.

It took willpower beyond belief, but Spike managed to tug her back to her feet. "Hot and Cold," he murmured as he pulled her close. "Know the rules, don't you?"

Buffy nodded, staring at his mouth. Which in turn made him stare

at hers, the perfect, swollen thing that it was. "It's hot when you kiss me."

"Bloody right it is." He took her lips, walking backward toward the shower, not quite willing to break from her. He'd never been in the Summers' shower, though he'd stolen in here once or twice to sniff her shampoo, so he wasn't sure which levers to pull or what knobs to turn to get the water working properly. With a small whimper, he pulled back. "Wanna do the honors, pet?"

Buffy pouted. "Cold."

"Cold? You're cold?"

"Cold, you stopped kissing me."

*Minx.* He growled and nipped at her lips. "Get the water goin' and I promise my mouth won't leave your skin until you've come at least twice."

"Twice?"

"All right, three times."

She blinked at him, then laughed and shook her head. "This one for hot water," she said, twisting the knob on the left. "All the way for scalding. Pull on this to switch the shower on. I know you don't have one in your crypt, but you have actually seen one before, right?"

"Enough to know they don't all work alike," he said. "Didn't fancy pullin' the wrong thing and freezin' you to death. Can offer you a lot, pet, but body heat's not on the list."

The smirk in her eyes softened a bit as she considered him. Then the shower was running, and she was guiding him under the spray.

"I have enough body heat for both of us," Buffy said before wrapping her arms around his neck and dragging him down for a kiss.

The past couple of days had been overrun with what Spike would consider perfect moments, but he thought, as he hiked her into his arms, the head of his cock slipping along her soaked flesh until he was notched at her opening, that this might be the most perfect. Buffy gasping into his mouth as he pushed inside of her. Buffy offering him her warmth. Buffy offering him everything.

He'd never felt anything like this, though had been fool enough to assume he had once or twice. But in thinking about everything that had come before, the steps he'd taken that had led him here, the things

he'd mistaken for something real, he couldn't say he regretted any of it. Not the heartache or the pain, or anything else that had made the unlife miserable over the last two years. Buffy had always been there, waiting at the end.

He might be teaching her what she liked, but she was teaching him too.

He hoped she never stopped.

ONE WOULD THINK, GIVEN EVERYTHING THAT BUFFY HAD BEEN through as of late, that sleeping in the morning after she'd jumped into a new timeline would have been a given. There was no more ticking clock to beat, no more apocalypse just around the corner, and yes, while a certain warlock was set to make an appearance anytime now, it didn't seem much to hope that the Powers would—just this once—do her a solid. Especially since she had yet to have an actual *morning after* with the naked vamp in her bed, which seemed, the more she looked at him, like a crime against sex.

But the phone wouldn't stop ringing and given that neither her sleeps-like-the-dead-because-he-is-dead boyfriend nor her sleeps-like-the-dead-because-she's-a-brat-teenager sister did the decent thing and picked it up, Buffy was left being the adult. Again.

"Hello?" she croaked, not sure why she was going to the trouble of keeping her voice down when Spike had just proven he could sleep through an atomic blast.

"Buffy!"

That level of shrill had to be illegal. "Willow," Buffy replied, wincing. "Wow with the loud. And the early."

“Early? It’s nearly ten.”

Ten? Buffy scowled and craned her neck to get a better look at the clock on her dresser. “Can admit I didn’t see that coming.”

Her friend let loose a giggle. “It’s the sex, isn’t it? You were late to the house the other day too, all walk-of-shamey.”

Probably better not to dignify that with an answer. Buffy rubbed at her neck and shivered when her fingers brushed the spot where Spike had clamped his blunt teeth. She’d managed to wuss out spectacularly on him bringing fangs into things, and then spent the rest of the night feeling like the biggest fang-tease. He’d said he didn’t mind waiting but she was pretty sure he’d just been trying to placate her after she’d started with the babbling apologies.

*“Want it to be perfect, pet, for both of us. So you’ll let me do it again.”*

Still, as sweet as he’d been, he hadn’t been able to completely hide his disappointment. Something she’d tried to chase away with her mouth.

Needless to say, yeah, last night had been a long one. First with shower sex—infinately better with someone who could hold her up without getting tired—then with bathroom-floor sex, then just for fun, a break-in-the-other-Buffy’s-bed sex.

She hated to say it, but Anya had been right with a capital R. There was a huge difference between regular men and vampires. Or rather, in this case, Spike. Because yeah, Angel had been soft and tender their night together, like she might break—and honestly, as nervous as she’d been, it hadn’t been an unreasonable fear. But somehow, Spike managed to be soft and tender while also making her appreciate the good kind of hurt. Not every time—sometimes he was all about taking his time to really savor the sensation of being inside her, as he said—but even when he was making the walls shake, he managed to do it while making her feel like... Well, Buffy didn’t know what. Except there was something in his eyes each time they were together that reminded her of the way he’d looked at her the night they’d fought Glory. The wonder when she’d invited him into her house again, the resolve he’d given her as he’d told her that he knew he’d never have her love but the way she treated him was all that mattered.

"Buffy? Earth to Buffy!"

Buffy shook her head, forcing her thoughts back to the present and not down the winding path of how to tell her vampire boyfriend that she was pretty sure she did love him after all. "What?"

Willow laughed. "I'm pretty sure all the Spike sex has fried your brain."

"Either that or my body hasn't caught up to the new time zone."

"Err, time zone?"

"Humor me, Will. I did jump through time yesterday."

"I'm still saying it's the Spike sex."

Buffy pulled the phone away from her ear to give it a good scowl and therefore was unable to miss the very not-asleep vampire in her bed, who was preening with the most ridiculously sexy-smug look on his face.

"You're awake?" she hissed, jerking the pillow from under his head so she might whack him with it.

"Course I'm awake. Bloody phone wouldn't stop ringing."

"And *you* couldn't have answered it?"

He offered a one-shouldered shrug. "Not my house, not my phone, not my place to announce to the world you got your brains shagged out by yours truly well into the mornin', now is it?"

*Ugh.* "I take it back. Staking is so on the table."

Spike favored her with a rather obnoxious wink. "Much better things to do with me, love. Need a refresher?"

"Uhh," came Willow's tinny voice from the receiver, "you two do know I can hear everything, right? 'Cause I'm not even there and I'm feeling very third-wheely."

Buffy moaned, dropped the pillow, and gave her head a good *thwack* against the wall at her back. "You both suck. And not a damn word," she added, glaring at her vampire, who brought his hands up in a *who me* gesture that fooled precisely no one. "So, what's the buzz, Will?"

"Rack."

She went ramrod straight, annoyance forgotten. "What about him? Did something happen?"

“No,” Willow said quickly. “No. We’re guessing that the Maclay special recipe hit him the way we hoped it would, and put him out of commission for a night. Two if we’re lucky. But that’s not so much a long-term plan, so Tara and I stayed up last night thinking of alternatives.”

Alternatives meaning more magic. That thing that she and Giles had decided Willow was doing too much of. And yeah, she’d also conceded that Willow’s help would be of the necessary for dealing with the warlock, but that didn’t make the queasy feeling in her stomach go away at the thought of what was coming. It just seemed all kinds of back-stabby to ask her friend to use magic right before telling her she had a problem.

Especially since Rack was only one loose end needing to be tied up.

“Is this another stroke of Willow-genius like the crystal?”

“Mostly Tara-genius, actually. We think there’s a way to use the aforementioned Maclay recipe to depower Rack for good.” A pause. “But we’ll need help since handling it isn’t really an option for us.”

“We’re there. Whatever you need.”

“Giles has more experience with black arts stuff, so he should be in the talk too.”

“There’s black arts involved?” Buffy glanced at Spike, who rolled his eyes in a way that all but screamed *I bloody told you so*. “Is that...smart? Black arts being, you know, black and all.”

“We’d only be using one dark spell,” Willow replied, not bothering to disguise the defensiveness in her voice. “Just one. And for a good reason, so it all evens out. This Rack guy isn’t someone we want juiced with power, running around Sunnydale with a vendetta against you, Spike, and Dawn. Remember how we were all anti-apocalypse? This spell will drain his battery and keep it drained.”

All right, so that didn’t sound so bad. But after yesterday—after the memory spell that might have cost her friends and sister their sanity and discovering a resurrection plan in the process—Buffy was hesitant to jump on any wagon.

Still, hard to explain that when a good point was being made. Willow’s growing abilities might be scary, but she was a friend and one of the good guys. Two things no one could say about Rack.



And Giles would be there, overseeing everything. So in essence, it'd be like that time her mother had let her drink a whole glass of wine when she'd been seventeen. Doing a bad thing with adult supervision. Granted, her mother hadn't known that she'd started drinking illegally rather a lot after that—considering she wasn't yet twenty-one—but it was the thought that counted.

*Maybe not the best analogy, brain.*

"All right," Buffy said, forcing her worries aside, at least for the time being. "I'll call Giles and see if he's up to a Scooby meeting after the emotional mess that was last night. He's certainly more on board with all of this than, well, the other Giles."

*The one you left behind.* But she didn't say that.

And apparently she didn't need to, for when Willow spoke next, her voice was soft. "Buffy...I am sorry about that. I was scrambling to get everything done and it just... He wasn't in the room so it just... When I cast the spell, I forgot to include him. You have no idea how sorry I am. But we do have Giles here and he is *our* Giles. I have memories with both and they are very much the same former-librarian we know and love."

The words were good but there was something in her friend's tone that Buffy didn't trust. But that brought forth a thought she very much did not want to have, so she gave her head a shake and shoved the damn thing back. "Before you and Tara head to the Magic Box, can you do something for me?"

"Sure."

"Tap into the signature from the spell one more time—Rack's spell. I need to know that the other timeline is well and truly gone."

"Buffy, I—"

"The deadline to turn in a soul has passed, so if what Rack told Spike was true, then the timeline should be gone, I know. But I have to know I didn't just leave a version of my sister and my friends with no memories and no ways to defend themselves on the Hellmouth."

"I already did that," Willow said. "Actually, Tara did. It was her idea to check last night. We went through the whole thing—trying to access it like we did for the memory spell and there was just nothing

there. A very warm nothing, which was of the wiggy because *nothing* should be neutral.”

“Huh?”

“It was like when someone gets out of a chair and the seat’s still toasty. I could feel where there had been something and it was gone.” A pause. “You made the right decision, Buffy. This saved all of us.”

Buffy thought of Giles. “Not all of us,” she muttered. Then, anticipating a fight, started in before Willow could protest more. “I’m calling Giles. If you don’t hear back from me, just be there in an hour.”

“Buff—”

She slammed the phone on the receiver, perhaps a bit harder than she’d intended to, and released a long sigh. The day had only just started and already she felt drained, and not for the fun reasons.

It seemed a pipe dream that she and Spike would ever get their deserved morning after.

And still, that thought that had pushed at her earlier grew louder in the silence. More intrusive, such to the point that she couldn’t fight it back more for than a moment or so before it nested in her conscious mind, flashy and demanding to be seen.

Spike pressed a hand to her back, as though sensing it. “What’s wrong, sweet?”

“I think Willow might have *forgotten* Giles on purpose.” Buffy covered her mouth the second the words escaped. She hadn’t meant to say them, hadn’t meant to give the theory voice, but it was out there now and she couldn’t shove it back. Swallowing, she turned and met Spike’s questioning gaze. “Forget I said that. Don’t mention it to anyone.”

He arched an eyebrow. “She say somethin’ to give the game up or did you just figure this out?”

“Figure... Wait, did you *know*?”

“Thought it last night when Rupes came around. Seemed a bloody big oversight for the little witch to make, right? All the planning she said she did? Nice and convenient to leave in the dark the bloke most likely to stop her.”

Buffy released a shaky breath, seizing a fistful of bedding to ground her. The world felt lopsided all over again and she wasn’t sure she could

trust her feet to support her should she try to stand. “Why...didn’t you tell me?”

“What, tell you that I thought your closest chum mighta done somethin’ you saw as murder to the person you trust most in the world? You forgettin’ that when we were chatting about the serious dark mojo she’d have to work to bring you back from the dead, you were ready to chalk it up to an accident?” He released a hard laugh. “Wasn’t keen to row with you about the witch again, pet. But you have a bloody blind spot when it comes to your mates.”

Annoyance collided headfirst with understanding, leaving her feeling even more imbalanced. She wasn’t sure she had any room to start yelling at him because, well, he had a point. Tempers had been all over the place last night and she wasn’t sure she would’ve been in a place to listen—hell, she probably would have accused him of trying to make Willow look bad so he’d look better by comparison, since she’d thrown in the whole time travel thing as an example of his acting without consequences. She hated it when people other than her had a point.

“So what do I do?”

He studied her for a moment, then laughed, his eyebrows shooting upward. “You’re askin’ the bloke who carved a bloody path through Europe what to do about a witch who mighta cast a spell that, in your eyes, killed someone.”

She swallowed, wiggled a bit. Part of being with him was accepting his past—and appreciating how far removed he was from it. “I’m asking my boyfriend, who I trust to give me the plain and honest truth as he sees it, what he thinks I should do in this situation.”

The snark faded from his eyes, replaced with that patented-Spike softness that had her convinced that she was indeed in love with him. And it was a warm love, different from the love she’d felt as a teenager—stronger and better because she wasn’t ignoring the things about him that drove her nuts or made her worry about the inevitable relationship-challenging situations they would find themselves in over the next few weeks, months, years and beyond. Those fears were there, but acknowledging them made them seem smaller, more surmountable. It also made her feel like she knew him as she’d never known anyone else

—Angel and certainly Riley, who had kept things so bottled that the bottle had eventually exploded. Furthermore, she was convinced Spike knew her better than anyone had ever tried. Somehow, he always had.

Something he further proved when he took what she was telling him seriously.

“Wager you oughta tell Rupert, yeah?”

“Tell him that Willow might’ve let his other self go down with the ship and that the magic problem might be more serious than we thought?”

“Well, yeah.” Spike frowned. “Is that not...what you think you oughta do?”

“It’s one hundred percent what I don’t *want* to do, which means it probably is something we need to do.” Buffy sighed and rolled her head back. “But for now, let’s focus on one thing at a time. Rack is the more clear and present danger.”

God, she hoped.

Spike rolled to his feet and started scouring the floor for the clothes that she’d made him haul in here, lest they be discovered by Dawn, who they had already likely traumatized again with loud sex. And yeah, Buffy allowed herself a moment to appreciate his nakedness, which he wore with enviable comfort. There truly had never been a prettier man.

She glanced at the dresser, where sat the bag that was now a double in this world. In it were the other Spike’s dust and the orb containing Spike’s soul. It was strange, having so much of him in her room when a few days ago, the thought of him being in here, strutting around with a semi and casually plucking clothes from the ground, would have freaked her out. Stranger still knowing how easily she might have missed this had things gone any other way. There were things to do—once Rack was well and truly handled, her number one priority was sending Spike’s soul back where it belonged, but even as weird as it was, she couldn’t deny that she liked having all of him here. His dust, his soul, and himself, doing his best with the chance she’d given him.

“Slayer,” he said, tugging a shirt over his lickable abs, “you fancy leavin’, you might wanna put something on. You can make a good dog break its leash, and we both know I’m not a good dog.”

And he made her feel beautiful just by looking at her.

Yeah, she loved him, which was huge and scary but warm and wonderful at the same time.

Second order of business after Rack was handled was finding a way to tell her vampire that he could have all the crumbs in the bakery.

APPARENTLY, BUFFY HAD BEEN THE LAST PERSON TO ARRIVE AT THE conclusion that Willow might have forgotten the other Giles on purpose. After the Scooby meeting dispersed, plan in motion, she and Spike had lingered behind to broach the subject, but the subject had already been broached. Demonstrating insight and courage beyond herself, Tara had evidently called Giles early that morning to voice some similar concerns.

“It was that she was so cavalier with the memories, I think,” Giles had said. “Tara was...disturbed, to say the least, to learn that Willow’s spell might have resulted in insanity.”

Given that Tara’s mind had just recently been mush itself, Buffy could see why.

That had been the catalyst, as Giles said—as Tara had worked alongside Willow to come up with the plan to handle Rack, she’d become increasingly apprehensive of the plan’s outcome. It wasn’t the use of dark magic, though that had her wiggled too, but if everything went as it should, Willow stood to gain access to a crapload of power that, among other things, had the potential to shape realities. The rate at which Willow was growing was already worrisome, but give her the

ability to access magic on Rack's level and, well, worries skyrocketed from persistent to dire.

The plan itself was on the simple side. Again castrate Rack with the Maclay family recipe—the how was a bit iffy since he'd be expecting it, but there were a few options—and seize the advantage to steal his power. Or rather, transfer it to an object capable of storing power of that magnitude. That Willow had first suggested herself had only furthered Tara's distress; thankfully, she'd been able to convince the redhead that, as there was no knowing just how much power Rack had, absorbing it could be suicide. They'd decided on a vase at the Magic Box, one that Anya had stored away after she'd first inventoried the place and removed those things used in dark spells from average-customer access.

"Modeled after Pandora's Box," Anya had explained as she'd lifted the vase from the storage container it had been tucked away in. "The real Pandora, that is. There were only a hundred or fifty or so of these in circulation. Virtually indestructible and capable of holding, well, you name it. And Giles had it marked at seventy-five dollars before he hired me. Thankfully, the thing is so hideous that no one in their right mind would buy it unless they knew what it was."

That much was certainly true. It looked less like a piece of demonic antiquity and more like a pottery class attempt gone super wrong. That anyone would have paid seventy-five cents, let alone seventy-five dollars, for the warped gray thing had been the very definition of optimistic, in Buffy's opinion. Giles had evidently purchased it along with a number of other obscure dark objects the seller had claimed had once belonged to Aleister Crowley—a name that meant bupkis to Buffy but was apparently gasp-worthy if you were a witch.

"Just seventy-five dollars?" Willow had demanded, seizing the vase and looking over it with open greed. "How is it you still have this at all?"

"Well, I rather assumed the seller had ripped me off, to be completely honest. The last thing I needed was some snot-nosed twenty-something spreading news that I was selling rubbish forgeries as authentic Crowley possessions."

The vase was as simple in execution as it was in design. If it was

holding anything, its lid could only be removed by the person who had filled it. Rack's power would need to be funneled through a conduit if not offered freely, which meant Willow or Tara would need to channel the power from one source to the next. Tara had volunteered herself before Willow could open her mouth, claiming that Willow's power level was better suited for conducting the spell itself.

The *where* and the *when* of the plan had been a bit harder to figure out. Buffy's instinct was just to mount up and march in, much like she and the others had done when Glory had been torturing Spike for information. Trouble was, Rack had an advantage that Glory hadn't claimed—he knew Dawn was the Key, which meant leaving her alone was tantamount to handing her over. There was no telling whether or not Rack would even be at his place of business, particularly since he had to know they were coming for him. And there was no way in this timeline or any other, as Buffy had been quick to tell Dawn, that she would let her sister walk into Rack's lair knowing that she was what he considered to be the ultimate prize.

"You said you weren't momming me anymore!" Dawn had protested. "I thought we decided I could handle stuff like this after Glory."

"There's a difference between sheltering you and waving you in front of a powerful warlock who wants to tear out your soul," Buffy had shot back. "No way, no how, nuh uh. End of story."

"But—"

"Dawn, I so much as catch a whiff of you anywhere near that wanker's place and I'll rip your throat out myself," Spike had snapped. "Don't care how much it hurts or how long, I will put you in the bloody ground, you hear?"

It was nice, if not a little bizarre, to have someone to shoulder the job of parenting her sister. Even if they needed to work on ways to lay down the law without resorting to empty threats of violence.

"Wanna see how empty it is, Bit?" Spike had asked when Dawn voiced this obvious flaw in his technique. "Go ahead and bloody try me."

So storming the castle was out—Dawn could not be left alone and she wasn't coming with. But the alternative was to wait for Rack to



come to them, to do this on his terms and therein give him the advantage. Also not an option Buffy loved.

After about an hour of back and forth argument, Willow had interjected with, “Why don’t we just send her to Angel?”

This had rendered everyone speechless.

“Angel?” Dawn had made a face. “If I wanted a ticket to Dullsville, maybe...”

“Well, think about it,” Willow had continued, this time with her characteristic obstinacy. “He’s in LA, so, there’s that. And he has this whole detective agency-type thing with others who could help, too. Plus, I kinda told him that Buffy was dead and he doesn’t know that that’s not true anymore, so we have to get in touch with him anyway.”

“Do we?” Spike had asked. “Ponce might leave us be if he thinks—”

“Spike,” Buffy had said in a tone she’d hoped conveyed exasperation and not amusement.

“What?” He’d arched an eyebrow. “You think Grandpap is gonna take hearin’ that you’re back and we’re shagging every free moment we have with—”

“Spike!”

“He’s gonna come up here and try to shake some sense into you. You know he is.”

Buffy had glared, though she’d known there was no denying it. Much like she’d known Spike’s real concern was that he’d be successful. That all Buffy would have to do was set eyes on Angel and everything she and Spike had shared would be over in a blink.

She’d wanted to tell him she loved him then, but the words had refused to come for some stupid reason. So instead, she’d released a sigh, pinched the bridge of her nose, and managed, “I’m sure Angel will have an opinion on us since *everybody* does. And just like the opinion of *everybody*, it’s none of his business. But Willow has a point—for what we’re doing, that would be a good option for Dawn.”

Dawn, naturally, hadn’t agreed. “Buffy!”

“Dawnie, I need to keep you safe. If Rack wasn’t after you specifically, it’d be a different thing.” A thing in which she would undeniably pull a massive wig, thinking of Dawn on the battlefield, but there was no denying she was a part of this life whether Buffy wanted her to be

or not. Plus, Dawn was now the same age Buffy had been when she'd started slaying and barely younger than Willow and Xander had been when they'd joined the fight. She couldn't be coddled forever—she needed to know how to defend herself. "But once this is over, you and me will start training together. Okay?"

And that was that. So floored by the prospect of learning how to fight alongside her sister, Dawn had ceased her protestations almost at once, and arrangements were made. Xander and Anya had volunteered to do the driving this time—though Anya made Xander swear that he wouldn't mention her demonic heritage to anyone who might have at one time been a demon hunter—and that was that.

"When are we doing this?" Tara had asked.

"Now. Tonight," Buffy had replied. "My house for supplies. Xan, you get—"

"Already on it." And indeed, Xander had been shepherding Dawn toward the door, a resigned Anya in tow. "First one to the car gets an extra scoop of ice cream. Did I mention we're getting ice cream on our way out of town?"

This had Anya all but barreling over Dawn to get to the car, and Xander reassuring a surly Dawn that he would, of course, make sure she got an extra scoop as well.

About an hour before sundown, Buffy let Willow and Tara into the house, where they had planned to meet up before heading to Rack's. Or trying to head to Rack's, as Spike said that the place moved around a bit and the seeker had to be otherworldly to find it. And there was nothing to do but wait.

Until Willow suggested that she and Tara might kill time by trying their hand at warding the house.

"Whatting the house?"

"Warding," Willow replied brightly. "To keep the wrong kind of magical person from getting in here. I mean, we didn't even know about Rack until Spike came through the portal, so he might not be the only or even the biggest magical baddie in town. There's a super simple spell I've been looking at that could let us know when people with bad magical intent are nearby."

Buffy exchanged a look with Tara, certain they were thinking the

same thing from the worry in the other witch's eyes. Had Willow always been like this? So antsy she couldn't sit still for an hour without trying her hand at something? If so, how had Buffy missed it?

Probably by seeing the logic in whatever Willow suggested, because an all-over house ward sounded all kinds of fine to her, at least in theory. Vampires already had the whole invite-only policy but she'd sleep better knowing that the home was as fortified as possible.

*Hypocrite, thy name is Buffy.*

And there was no good reason she could think of to say no—at least not right now. She couldn't well tell Willow that she, Giles, Spike, and Tara all thought she had a magic problem while relying on her to use magic to get them out of a mess. So Buffy nodded, Willow beamed, and Tara gave a sort of resigned sigh.

"It'll be better if we do it from the highest level of the house," Willow said. "Full top-to-bottom protection. So...attic?"

So, attic. Buffy led the witches upstairs to point out the door they'd need to pull down, trying not to think about the fact that she was a lousy enabler who was hours away from stabbing her friend in the back. Instead, she focused on the attic itself, picturing the space there and wondering where the witches might sit...right up until it occurred to her that the last time she'd been in that attic, she'd been grumbling at her mother for making her haul down the Christmas tree just because she was the *Slayer* and the strongest member of the household.

"We'll be down in a flash!" Willow said as she began the climb up the ladder. Tara flashed Buffy another worried look, then made to follow.

Now *she* was left alone, thinking thoughts that were not conducive to the fight ahead. Buffy sighed, crossed her arms, and glanced in the direction of her mother's room since her mom was on the mind. She hadn't ventured over the threshold there since the night of her failed date with Jay. Though she supposed, eventually, it would make sense for her to claim that room as her own. It was the largest and she was now the head of the household and deserved things like more closet space and an attached bath.

*Plus, it's big enough for two.*

Buffy shifted her weight between her feet. Not that she needed

space for *two* or anything. That was just...nonsense, that was. She'd been in a relationship with Spike for less than a week and the entirety of that relationship had been spent chasing their tails. But she couldn't deny that part of her enjoyed having Rack as an excuse to keep Spike close, that she was getting used to his being around. And this place was so much more practical for overnight stays than his crypt. No awkward pee-pee dance in the morning or brutal awareness of just how cold it could get in southern California. A proper morning after was in their future and she didn't see it happening comfortably anywhere but here.

God, she wasn't really considering asking Spike to move in with her, was she? That was fast—like *way* fast. Just a few days ago she'd stressed to him the importance of baby steps in their relationship, after all, and... Well, that had lasted all of a day before she'd caved and had the best sex of her life. A decision she did not regret in the slightest. But they were still ironing out the kinks of being together and wouldn't having him around *all the time* feel a little intrusive and cramped? Claustrophobic, even?

But maybe it was okay to think about the future in terms of *eventually*. She knew she was in love with him and she knew what that meant for her—for him, too. They weren't people who did the leaving in relationships, even when love *wasn't* involved. Or not as involved as it should be. So it seemed reasonable that, down the line, she would want Spike here in a full-time capacity.

Buffy strode over to the door to her room to give the space a look. It was a bit small—not as small as Dawn's but not the room the adult in the house should claim. Perhaps that would be the third priority after Rack was dealt with—start the process of moving her stuff into the room that had been Joyce's. Put the rest of her mother's things in storage as part of the business side of death that she'd been forced to put aside while focusing on Glory. They needed to figure out how to keep afloat, after all.

Her gaze landed on the tie-dyed bag that was now hers, shoving her off the contemplative route her thoughts had taken and back to the present. Right. The herb recipe. Something to handle while Willow and Tara were otherwise occupied. Buffy strode over to her dresser, fished out the plastic baggie and stuffed it into her jeans pocket.

The sound of a door slamming shut downstairs broke the otherwise stillness of the home, and Buffy's heart seized, right up until she remembered that Spike had been forced to take the less-than-scenic route to get to Revello Drive.

"You don't have to slam the basement door you know," she said as she came down the stairs. She found him in the kitchen, surveying the contents of the refrigerator as though they had repopulated in the time since they'd left the house that morning.

"Prefer makin' an entrance."

"I prefer the walls not to rattle."

Spike looked at her over the open refrigerator door, smirk firmly in place. "That so? Seems a pity, especially since we're so good at rattling them." He pulled something out—a bottle of beer—and shoved the door closed again.

A second later, Buffy wondered if the universe had heard him and decided to answer the call, for the walls *did* start to rattle. Except, she realized as she glanced around, it wasn't just the walls, and it wasn't an ordinary rattle. It was everywhere, making the cabinets whine and the china clink, the pictures on the walls go lopsided and one of the chairs in the living room vibrate across the floor. And stupidly, her first coherent thought was of Willow and Tara, and whatever they were doing to the place—if at last one of Willow's spells had misfired and this was the result. That the house would simply crumble in on itself.

"The bugger—"

Then sound like a shotgun blast exploded through the air and the outside noise became inside noise. Howling wind at odds with the sun shining through the windows, and something else. Something like the roar of a freight train. And she knew.

*Oh god.*

Buffy was in motion before she could stop herself, Spike shouting her name as he tore after her.

The man standing in the doorway didn't look the way she'd pictured him. The long stringy hair, the hard lines in his expressive face—Spike had compared him to an actor, but at the moment, Buffy couldn't remember who. Only that she'd never seen an actor who looked like him. Black-eyed and hovering a good three inches off the

ground, his hands outstretched as though he were conducting an invisible symphony while his black shirt billowed around him. Most terrifying, though, was his expression, which was dispassionate, almost bored.

The second he saw her, the warlock raised his arm and Buffy went airborne, seized by the throat by a pressure she couldn't see. She gasped—or tried to—and started clawing at the nothing holding her in place, but only managing to scratch her own throat because there was *nothing* there to fight.

"No!" came the outraged roar behind her, and Spike barreled into view, his yellow eyes blazing. "No, that's not—"

"I am owed a debt," Rack said in a voice that seemed to pulse. His expression didn't change. "I warned you, vampire, that I would collect your dust."

"So take it!" Spike screamed and pounced. Or tried to. He hit an invisible barrier and was thrown back onto the staircase. He sprang back to his feet, fanged mouth twisted into something between a snarl and a cry. "You stupid sod, I'm standin' *right here!*"

"Dust is fleeting. Pain is eternal. You thought you could best me. Hubris has a price." Rack made a fist with the hand he had stretched toward Buffy, and she could no longer breathe. "I will take the price in the Slayer's blood."

"My soul!" Spike shouted. "It's upstairs."

The warlock snorted. "Your soul. That was not the bargain."

"A *pure* soul was the bargain, you sodding wanker!" Spike roared, tears streaming down his demon face. "Just didn't figure mine'd be in the running. Figured I'd cough up the girl. You lost that, but you can still have *my soul* if you let the Slayer go."

*No.* Buffy shook her head, or tried to. But the edges of her vision were blackening and unconsciousness had a much stronger hold. Breathing was so hard—the few wisps of oxygen she managed to suck into her mouth almost hurt more than they were worth and her eyes were so heavy. If she just rested them for a moment...

It couldn't happen like this. It just couldn't. In the distance, she heard Spike screaming. He sounded so far away. Like he might be underwater or upstairs. The foggy image of him storming to her room filled her mind, but even if he managed to get the soul...

No, he couldn't. She wasn't worth his or anyone else's soul. She still didn't know why Willow and Tara had pulled it out of the ether. They shouldn't have done that. They...

A stab of clarity pierced through the fog. *Willow. Tara.*

They were upstairs. In the attic.

And Buffy had something in her pocket.

Something heavy crashed from somewhere nearby, and suddenly she could hear Spike again. Screaming and demanding and in so much pain it about broke her. Buffy tried to move her hand but it seemed weighed down with lead. She couldn't feel her fingers anymore, couldn't feel much of anything, and wasn't sure what she needed in her pocket, only that she did need it. It took a few tries but eventually, she managed to get her hand in there, felt hot, thin plastic against her palm, which was also starting to lose sensation. She fumbled blindly to get the thing open, the blackness from before all-consuming. She wasn't even sure this would work, or what she was about to attempt, but she had to try.

The plastic tore and spilled flecks of something. And she remembered.

Buffy fisted as much of the herbs as she could and forced her eyes open again. The scene before her was blurry but she saw enough. Rack standing in the doorway, one hand still outstretched to her, the other raised as though to fend off an attack. Spike at her side, holding out the bag that she knew contained the Orb of Thesulah, begging through his tears to take the bloody thing and have it over. Willow and Tara on the stairs, and colors swirling in the air.

She drew into herself for the strength that she had come to treasure—a strange thing to realize at such a moment—and pitched her hand forward, letting the herbs fly. And the next second, the ground was rushing toward her and her lungs filled with air, a hard gasp forced between her lips as her body collided with the hardwood.

Then Spike was there at her side, screaming her name, hauling her against his shaking chest. Behind him, something swirled and roared, but Buffy couldn't make out what. There was a cry, a bruise on the air, guttural and bone-deep—a sound that hurt her throat. It seemed to swell until she could imagine it was cracking her skull, trying to get

into her head that way, and she grabbed onto Spike to keep herself grounded lest gravity defy her again.

And then it was over. Abrupt, quick. And Buffy could move, though it seemed a long time before she did.

When she managed to lift her head, still dragging in painful breaths, the place where Rack had stood was empty. Tara was on the ground, conscious but bleeding, and cradled in a sobbing Willow's arms. Beside her friend was the vase, its lid firmly shut.

Buffy turned to Spike, whose face was a mess of tears and not-quite abated terror.

"He's gone?"

Spike nodded and began peppering kisses along her brow, her cheeks, her chin, her name a mantra on his lips.

"Tara?"

"She's fine," he sputtered. "Fine. Just like you."

Buffy sighed and let herself go limp. "You'll tell me what happened."

She wasn't sure if he replied or not. The exhaustion from earlier had settled over her again, and she didn't fight it this time, rather let herself fall into a warm, comforting, living black.



NOT BEING DEAD WAS EXHAUSTING.

Everything after realizing Rack had exploded her door open was a bit blurry, the memories themselves soft and out-of-focus—like she was seeing them through a layer of tape, or maybe one of those windows with the distorted panes. There had been panic and despair and soul-crushing fear, but the movements of the players involved were shadows on the periphery.

Somehow she'd managed to summon enough strength to chuck a handful of Maclay herb into the asshole's face. Spike had been there—had he had the soul with him when he'd come in through the basement? No, it had been on her dresser. He must have torn upstairs to grab it because when she'd come to, it had been on the coffee table beside her, light piercing from the loosened end of the velvet bag.

"It's still there," she'd said, clutching Spike's arms as she'd fought to a sitting position. Her throat had felt off—scratchy and raw. It hurt to talk. But talk she did, because she'd needed answers. "You didn't give it to him."

Spike had gasped her name and crushed her to his chest, trembling hard and clutching at her as though he meant to absorb her whole. "You're never doing that again, you hear me?" he'd whispered into her

hair. "Thought it was the bloody Tower all over again. 'Cept it really would be my fault this time. Can't do it, pet. Just can't stand it. So no more, you hear?"

Buffy had pulled back, a hand going to her throat. "What happened? Rack?"

"Gone," Spike had answered before pressing his lips to her brow. "He's gone."

"How?"

And that had, apparently, been quite the story. A story she'd been forced to hear at least three more times following Spike's initial hasty recount. Turned out she'd only been out for a few minutes, though it seemed like hours had passed, and there were several people not in the know about what had happened. After learning that Willow had taken Tara home, Buffy had forced herself to her feet, ignoring Spike's protests, and made her way to the phone in the kitchen. She'd called the Magic Box to give Giles a quick rundown of what had happened and agreed to meet him there after sundown.

"The bleeding hell you will!" Spike had snapped, snatching the phone from her hand. "You have any idea how close you came to kicking it? You're not leaving this house until—"

"Spike, I say this with love, zip it," Buffy had replied before seizing the phone back. She'd kept her glare on him as she'd resumed her conversation with her panicking watcher. "No, Giles, I'm fine. Slayer healing is doing its thing. My throat's a little on the sore side, but that'll be cleared up here in a couple of hours or so."

Spike had opened his mouth to protest, and she'd debated where punching one's boyfriend across the room fell in the dysfunction handbook. Though she'd known it came from a place of love and fear, which had been a little with the wind-stealy where her sails were concerned.

"I'm going to shower and then we'll be over," Buffy had said. "You should call Willow and check on Tara. I think whatever happened, she got the worst of it. We'll see you soon. Also, if Xander calls, tell him to turn around and come home. I so do not have the patience for Angel right now."

That was an understatement. In the calm that was the post-fight

shuffle, Buffy could admit she had little to no clue what had made her think that sending Dawn to her ex without explanation made sense. Well, that wasn't quite true—she could see the logic if she squinted, and maybe a bit like the fight with Glory, she hadn't been willing to look toward the *after*. Only this time it hadn't been because of a death wish, rather blind fear that something would go wrong.

At any rate, involving Angel by dropping a Dawn-bomb on him would have been both unfair and complicated, seeing as he'd probably rush up here to verify with his own two eyes that she was alive and then do something creepy like smell Spike all over her and want to have The Talk.

Which she so wasn't in the mood for. And he didn't deserve, considering the other version of him had been peachy keen with letting her die.

Okay, so that probably wasn't fair, but Buffy doubted she'd be able to walk off the realization that Angel had never loved her the way she'd loved him—even if the way she'd loved him had been fraught with its own issues that she had only realized in the past few days. And she had no mental real estate for him at the moment. She wanted to know what the hell had happened.

The second retelling occurred at the Magic Box, this time linearly rather than coughed out between threats and curses. Willow and Tara had known what was happening the second it started happening, it seemed, and had launched into motion with extreme care, not wanting to clue Rack into the fact that he'd brought a knife to a gunfight. When they'd joined the fray, Spike had been pleading with Rack to take his soul, sobbing and screaming as Buffy turned increasingly pale, her kicks slowing down and her arms going slack by her sides.

Rack hadn't been interested in anyone's soul. He'd been out for revenge. Or, more likely, after killing Buffy in front of Spike, he would have dusted the vampire and taken the soul. Or maybe he'd have left Spike alive with the knowledge that everything had been his fault.

The more she thought about it, the more certain Buffy was that that had been the warlock's intention. Because regardless of the outcome, Spike definitely felt responsible. It was all over him—the way he moved, how he snapped at others, how he glowered at her like she'd

done something to offend him. He was pissed beyond pissed, only the target was himself.

Something they would have to discuss later. Hopefully a lot later. She didn't think she had the energy for it tonight.

Buffy had managed to toss enough of the Maclay magical timeout treatment into Rack's face to save her own life, but there had been a cost. Some had blown back and hit Tara, who had lost her footing and tumbled the rest of the way down the stairs, which explained why she'd been bleeding and why she wasn't at the Scooby meeting recap.

Willow had apparently gone off the rails then, channeled some of the rage that had taken her to Glory's doorstep, and rather than siphoning Rack's powers off and into the vase, she'd stuffed Rack in there wholesale. She'd said she hadn't had a choice, Tara being injured and unable to serve as the conduit for his abilities, but Buffy wasn't so sure. She also wasn't sure she cared all that much. The end result was Rack was gone, contained, and they had won the day. Big damn hero moment.

There were things to do, she knew. Willow to talk to, for one. Though Giles hadn't said anything, and Tara hadn't been there to offer her two cents, Buffy had a feeling that the way Willow had dispatched Rack was cause for more concern. Apparently, she hadn't had to rely on a spell at all—everything that had happened after Tara hit the ground had been raw and innate, which Buffy was sure would be truly terrifying once she had a moment to process what that meant. In so many ways, Tara seemed to be Willow's restraint, which was a lot to put on a person—especially in a world where they were constantly dodging death and apocalypses.

But Buffy didn't want to worry about Willow and magic tonight. She wanted to go home, curl up with her vampire, and sleep for the next week.

About midway through the Scooby meeting, Xander and Anya had burst through the doors, a very irate but relieved Dawn in tow. Then she'd gotten an earful about how she didn't get to send away her sister when it was convenient, and especially not after having up and died on everyone like a week ago. Spike had been a big growly no-help, and in

general, everyone had been more or less ready to be done with each other by the end of the night.

As soon as the meeting let out, Spike had snarled something about going on patrol and had been out the door before Buffy could offer to join him. And as annoying as that was, she'd understood and understanding was nice. She also somewhat pitied the fledglings that rose tonight—Spike had some things to work out.

So Buffy had walked Dawn home and done the sister thing. She'd listened to the list of grievances without much interruption, reiterated her truth that Dawn was her line in the sand and even if Dawn became an expert demon fighter, Buffy would always stand between her and death. Yes, even if that meant sending her to Angel. Even if it meant Dawn stayed mad at her until the end of time—cost of doing business, thank you, next please.

Dawn had protested this, of course, but ultimately conceded that she knew there would be no changing her mind.

"I will be super mad at you if you die again," she said after Buffy placed an order for pizza. They were in the kitchen and, after a depressing review of the refrigerator's contents, had concluded that dinner would be delivery.

"Well, I have no plans to die anytime soon," Buffy replied as she wrote out the check. She hadn't written too many checks in her time and kept squinting at the way her name looked on the signature line. This was a mom thing to do and there was no Mom in this house. "But I will definitely keep this under consideration when in future life and death situations."

"I mean it, Buffy."

"I know." Buffy raised her head, which seemed heavy. The place on her throat where Rack had tried to choke the life out of her throbbed, though not with pain—more a sense of violation, of propriety. He'd taken that strip of her body and had tried to use it against her. While the bruise already looked a few days old, she worried it might be a long time before she didn't feel the pressure that had nearly taken her life. "I don't want to die, Dawn. Believe me, after everything I went through to get here, to this timeline, I want to live. Major with the living."

Dawn relaxed at that, seemingly placated. Then she glanced toward the front room. "Will Spike be by tonight?"

"I don't know."

"He seemed...really mad."

"He is mad. He thinks it's his fault."

Dawn's eyes shot open wide. "It wasn't, though. Was it? His fault?"

Buffy paused, sighed and glanced down. "No. It wasn't. Whatever happened, he was trying to save me. Save all of us. I think it just wiggled him out and he thinks that Rack coming after me... Well, like I said. He's mad at himself."

"You're not going to break up with him, are you?"

That had her head snapping up. "Huh? No, Dawn. Why would you—"

"Oh, don't even. You know why. 'Spike's evil. He made a deal with evil. Evil, evil, evil, blah, blah, blah.'"

Not too long ago, the girl might have had a point. It had been easy to look at Spike through a binary lens, even if she refused to do the same with anyone else. There was literally no one in her circle of friends and loved ones whose recklessness hadn't put them all in mortal danger at least once, and in most cases, many times.

"I'm not breaking up with Spike," Buffy said. "If we break up, it'll be because of something larger than him trying to save my life and it not going according to plan. That's just a Tuesday for us."

Dawn relaxed even further, now grinning. "You like him."

"Well, duh."

"No, I mean you *really* like him. In fact, I think you loooooove—"

"Watch it."

"Nothing wrong with loving him, Buffy."

She narrowed her eyes. "You're fifteen. You are not to give me lectures on my love life."

"Fine." Dawn sniffed. "It's just... Spike loves you so much. Like *so much*. It's kinda gross and a thousand percent swoon-worthy, how much he loves you. And I know you think the soul's important and stuff, but—"

"Dawn—"

"I'm just saying, as his friend, I don't want him to get hurt."

"As *his* friend? I'm your sister!"

"Yeah, and between the two of you, you hold all the cards where he's concerned." Dawn sobered, looking like she had yesterday morning, standing in this kitchen and telling Buffy to abandon her if it meant another Dawn had her sister. "He'll never leave. Never. You know that. Dru was crazy and cruel and cheated on him a bunch, but he never left her. When he loves, it's permanent."

That uncomfortable insight made even more uncomfortable by the knowledge that Buffy found it reassuring. Because that was how she loved, too. It was how she'd loved Angel, who hadn't deserved it. And even though she'd never really loved Riley—not the way she should have, at least—she wasn't sure she would have ever broken up with him. She hadn't known that she had the kind of grand love left in her that she felt now, had worried—in fact—that she hadn't. Love was exhausting and terrifying and being inside of it made it so easy to get hurt. Keeping closed off to it had been the best way to protect herself, even if, at the end of the day, love was what she wanted more than anything.

"I have no plans to hurt Spike," Buffy said a moment later, choosing her words carefully. "I don't *want* to hurt him, even when he drives me crazy and does stupid stuff. It...happened fast with us. Well, fast for me. This entire week has been beyond grueling and packed full of badness no one here saw coming."

"Maybe, but the badness was a thousand times worse in this timeline," Dawn said, then looked away quickly as though embarrassed to be caught crying. "The two Spikes timeline might have been wacky but it was... Believe me, the better of the two."

There was nothing to say to that, so Buffy didn't try, just pulled her sister into a hug. "I love you."

"I know. If watching you kill yourself for me didn't hammer that home, I don't think anything would have."

"Well, I'll still try to say it more." A pause. "To you and other people."

Dawn pulled back, her eyes bright. "People like Spike?"

"This again?"

"Oh, come *on*, Buffy. All of the people in your life know that you

love them—all of them except him. Are you going to tell him you're in love with him anytime soon?"

"If I was, I definitely wouldn't tell you before I told him," Buffy replied dryly. "That's the kinda thing the guy should hear firsthand, don't you think?"

A knowing grin split Dawn's lips and she clapped her hands together, squealing.

"What?" Buffy demanded. "What?"

"You do! You loooove him!"

"Dawn—"

"No, I won't tell. Lips are sealed. Double—no, triple-sealed!" Now Dawn was bouncing in place, like that wouldn't give anything away. "Are you going to tell him tonight? Tell him tonight. I'll wear my best set of headphones and turn the music up to full blast. Or I could go to Janice's. Do you want me to go to Janice's?"

"I just ordered food!"

"Yeah, but I'll eat super-fast and then be out of your hair." She bolted around Buffy without awaiting a response. "I'll call her and pack an overnight bag."

"Dawn, you don't even—"

"No. You love him. I know your *love* face and he needs to know. You know I'm right."

No sense in saying anything else, as Dawn's heavy steps were plonking up the staircase the next second. Buffy expelled a deep breath, trying and failing not to notice how her heart had suddenly launched into overtime.

Yeah, she'd planned on telling Spike she loved him after everything was over with Rack, but his mood tonight had made her wonder if tonight was the right time. Seemed that decision had been taken from her because there was no way Dawn *wouldn't* blab what she knew—or thought she knew—the second Spike was within earshot.

Seemed tonight was the night after all.

God, she needed to practice this. Words and Buffy were nonmixy things—especially when it came to feelings. She wanted to get this just right.

Though the hour had grown late enough she wondered if Spike



would show up after all, or if he needed more time to figure out how he felt about what had happened—or nearly happened. Part of her wanted to make the trek to his crypt to check on him—okay, most of her wanted to do that—but she figured if Spike was staying away, there was a good reason.

She just hoped he did come by tonight. If nothing else, Buffy had grown very used to the weight of him in her bed and she didn't think she wanted to be alone just hours after nearly having been killed.

BUFFY STOOD IN THE CENTER OF THE ROOM, TAKING IN HER surroundings. Still so strange to think that this floor wasn't the one that she'd lived on since first coming to Sunnydale, that this room had belonged to a version of this house that no longer existed. Yet, aside from a few subtle dissimilarities, it felt very much like hers. The room she'd left in the other timeline had contained a mounting pile of laundry in one corner—a pile that was missing here. One of her dresses was also missing—she guessed that was the one she'd been buried in, along with a few choice pieces of jewelry that she'd never worn but somehow knew to miss all the same.

The version of her that had lived in this world was gone. A version that had died for her sister, as Buffy would, but not knowing or understanding or appreciating just how special Spike's love was. The lengths he would go to for her. The way she'd felt about Spike a little more than a week ago hadn't been bad—if anything, she'd come to rely on him in ways she'd never relied on anyone, knowing and trusting that he meant what he said when he told her he loved her. Knowing that if she died, Dawn would be okay. And yeah, there was something to be said for knowing that, but something even more for feeling it. Being inside

of Spike's love was heady, intoxicating. Something she never wanted to be without again.

Perhaps if they had walked away from the Tower intact, she would have eventually come to this realization. Perhaps. She liked to think so.

Buffy shifted her attention to the velvet bag sitting on her dresser. The soul Spike had been so ready to give up for her. She'd have to talk to Tara about sending it back to the ether—Tara, not Willow, as that conversation was still forthcoming. She sighed and moved forward, her feet acting independently of her head. The next thing she knew, she had the soul cradled between her hands, the velvety bag tickling her palm, and was heading toward the bed.

"Hi, Spike's soul," she said, running a finger along the swell of the orb. "I'd take you out but, well, you're kinda blinding."

She situated herself in the middle of her mattress, studying the package. Strange how something so small could be so large at the same time.

"I was never going to let him give you up, for the record," she continued after a moment. "He'll probably dust thinking that I'm wrong about that, but I'm not. Spike thinks I'm worth pretty much anything and wow with the scary." A pause. "He told me about you, you know. I think more than he meant to. All I wanted was advice on slayers and how he'd managed to kill two and suddenly he's telling me about some poetry snob who broke his heart?" Buffy frowned, dragging her teeth along her bottom lip. "I still don't know why he started with you—or who he was when you two were the same person. Maybe he thought I'd understand more."

*Maybe he just wanted you to know him, all of it.*

Still, even if that was the case, sharing his William past seemed like something Spike would go to lengths to avoid. Unless it had been his way of bonding with her, understanding that she'd come to him because she felt vulnerable and attempting to put her at ease.

*"What can I tell you, baby? I've always been bad." He favored her with a leer, then broken off, snickering. "Actually, that's a load of rubbish. Wanna know how far I've come, Slayer? Pitiful, nancy boy William wouldn't be able to look you in the eyes without popping his top."*

*"That's disgusting."*

*Spike shrugged. "Just a sign of the times. Victorians were bloody funny when it came to sex. One of the reasons I made ditching who I was the first order of business the second I was turned. I ever tell you about that?"*

Buffy released a steady breath, rolling the curved velvet against her palm. "A long time ago, Giles told me that the vampire was completely separate from the person they once were. I'll have to ask him if he still believes that. I don't think I do." She paused. "Actually, I know I don't. Or maybe it's just an anomaly thing, happens every hundred thousand vamps or so and Spike was just the lucky winner. I dunno. I went through this mental exercise about a week ago after the other Spike came through time and..." She lifted the bag to eye level, the back of her neck tingling. Part of her felt ridiculous, talking to an inanimate object, but she wasn't so sure it *was* inanimate—that it couldn't hear her—so she went on, "I don't think you're still in him, for the record. I'm just not convinced that you *aren't* him. Or a version of him. When Angel first told me about the soul, he worded it like he just woke up one day and cared about what he'd done. He didn't start thinking about himself and Angelus as a separate entity until later. Maybe because of me, because yeah, easier to consider a guy your boyfriend if you pretend it was just his evil twin running around. Spike told me a couple of nights ago that Angel isn't too different without a soul and... well, that sounded wrong, but I keep thinking about it. It and all the other things he said. Because if he believes that, then he believes he's still you, too. Which is super frustrating, I gotta say, since he was so willing to just let you go off and get tortured forever."

"Wager we can stop having this argument anytime soon, pet? The bloke is locked away, after all."

Buffy jumped, sending the soul airborne. She squeaked and made to catch it, but Spike was too quick for her, snatching it out of the air before it could collide with anything too hard.

"Don't *do* that!" she snapped, climbing off the bed and snatching the orb out of his hand. "I could have smashed it."

"Didn't Red say they worked some mojo to make it shatterproof?"

Had she? She didn't remember and she didn't want to dignify the question with a response. Instead, Buffy marched back over to her

dresser and placed the soul in between Mr. Gordo, her faithful protector, and Mr. Pointy. Better.

"You need to stop being so careless with this thing," Buffy replied, deciding to ignore Spike's question. Easier to not be seen as a crazy person. "I swear, Spike..."

Spike rolled his eyes, shedding his duster and tossing it into the corner that was fast becoming its home. "Oi! Not my fault those senses of yours didn't go off. Aren't slayers supposed to be able to feel it when a predator is near?"

Buffy rubbed the back of her neck, which—yes—*was* tingling, but again decided to ignore the question. "You crept. You were creepy."

"Now you're just makin' excuses."

"You don't do *anything* quietly, Spike. You never have."

"Well, aren't we in a temper?" He arched his eyebrows. "Could be on my merry way if you're ready to give me the shove-off. No bloody warlock to waitin' at the crypt, after all."

She sighed, fighting an eyeroll of her own. "And now with the drama."

"Just thought there might be a bit of a warmer welcome for yours truly."

"You stormed off without saying goodbye earlier," she replied, "or letting me know when you'd be in."

"Oh, so now I have run my schedule by you. Make sure I get my permission slip signed."

"Why are you hurting for a fight?" she asked, crossing her arms. "Seriously, Spike, if this is about what happened earlier—"

"That wanker nearly killed you!" And now his face broke—all of him seemed to break. The anger brimming in his eyes bled into grief and regret and a long growl tore from his lips. He looked away, trembling hard, his jaw clenched. "'Cause of me. All of it woulda happened because of me."

"Spike—"

"I shoulda given him my soul right off. The second they shoved it into that orb, I should've just had it over with. "

"What? No!" Buffy ate the distance between them, taking his face

between her hands. "Do you have any idea how hard I would have kicked your ass if you'd done that?"

"Might not have those marks on your throat." Spike glanced about the room, as though trying to find an argument that would beat hers. "Only bloody saving grace of before was I didn't have to watch it. Didn't have to see you die, seein' as I was just coming to. Watching him nearly choke the life outta you was..." He gave up his argument search, shuddering a hard sob instead. "And it would've been my fault. I brought him here. Was my deal, wasn't it?"

"Spike, do I really have to remind you that your deal is also the reason I would've been alive to choke in the first place?" God, he was aggravating at times. Buffy sighed and tightened her hold on him so he couldn't look away again. "Yeah, Rack was here because of you. But so am I. So just take the damn win."

"If I'd given the prat my soul, he never would have—"

"We don't know that! We don't know what he would have done. And I was never going to let you give him your soul. Everything's fine. We won!"

"Why the fuck do you care so much about that bleeding soul in the first place?" Spike snapped, and it was good to see him come back to anger even if it made no sense. An angry Spike she could deal with—a Spike mourning the actions he hadn't taken was something else entirely. Especially since they would never agree on those actions. "Is it 'cause you need it in your back pocket? Your way to fix me if I—"

"Oh, shut up."

"What? Too close to home?"

"I care about that stupid soul because it's *you*, Spike." Buffy just barely kept herself from screaming. Every inch of her was on fire, building toward a crescendo she wasn't sure her body could take. Nearly dying—again—after the most confusing week in the history of confusing weeks had finally taken its toll, and if Spike wasn't careful, the resulting explosion would have casualties. "I care about the soul because I'm stupid in love with you, and it's a part of you, whether you want to admit it or not. It *gave* me you. Made you who you are. And if you think for a second I was going to sit by and let you—"

But that was as far as she got before the explosion happened. Well,

an explosion of a sort. The next thing she knew, Buffy was pressed against a hard, firm chest, strong hands banded around her arms and her mouth warring with his. The ground beneath her feet was moving but in reverse, then the backs of her legs hit the mattress and she tumbled back, her vampire going with her. Somewhere, in the recesses of her mind, she reasoned that shouting she was in love with him in mid-argument hadn't been anywhere on her list of ways to make with the declaration, but it somehow felt kinda perfect.

Apparently, Spike thought so too, for she felt his mouth curve into a grin against hers, his tongue still doing things that she swore reverberated all the way down to her clit. After a moment, though, he must have remembered she needed to breathe, for he pulled his lips from hers and began pressing heated kisses along her throat.

"You love me." *Kiss*. "Can't take it back." *Kiss*. "Heard you say it." *Lick*. "Buffy loves Spike." The last bit he singsonged, his voice trembling.

It was the tremble that did it—if any part of her had been uncertain, that part was gone. In the same way Spike kissed with his whole self, he poured himself into his voice, too. Had for some time now, at least in her company—a secret part of him no one else got to touch. Property of Buffy only. A part that she'd first glimpsed three years ago when he'd come to her to help her defeat Angel, how defeated he'd been regarding Drusilla, yet still adamant about saving her regardless of what she'd done to him.

There was a whole list of things no one else in the world did like Spike, she realized. And at the top of the list, above everything else, was love.

"I do," Buffy agreed, hurrying when he pulled back to whip her top off her head to unbuckle his belt. "I love you, Spike."

A moan tore from his lips and then he was kissing her again, the space between their bodies gone. One of the prongs of his belt jabbed into her thigh and the underwire from her bra was giving all kinds of signs that it was about to retire for good, but she didn't care. Not with Spike doing things with his lips and tongue and teeth that had her entirely abuzz.

Again, he broke away from her lips when he sensed she needed to

breathe, chuckling as he dropped kisses down her collarbone and over her breasts. "Heart's rabbitting, Slayer," he teased before kissing her there. "Is it that scary, loving me?"

"No. Yes. Both?" Buffy hissed in relief when he snapped her bra in half. "Thanks. I was gonna throw that away, anyway."

He laughed again, then swirled his tongue over one of her peaked nipples. "Anything I can do to get you naked faster."

"Spike—"

"What's so scary about loving me?" This he asked as he made his way across her chest and to her other breast, which he drew into his mouth before treating the nipple he'd abandoned to a hard pinch that had all of her jerking.

"Ooh!" The slight pain morphed into something she didn't recognize. "Ooh."

"Ooh? That a hot or cold *ooh*?"

"Warm."

"Just warm?"

"Could be warmer."

"Like this?" He scraped his teeth over her nipple, a soft tease, before adding just the slightest bit of pressure. Again, there was a flash of pain, but only a flash. Buffy gasped and arched, then gasped again when he chuckled around her skin. Damn, the things this vampire could do with his mouth.

"Baby likes to be bitten," Spike cooed before swirling his tongue around her still-throbbing nipple. "Good thing I love to bite."

*Bite.* The place on her throat where Rack's invisible hand had nearly crushed her windpipe seemed to burn at that, and some inner barrier came crashing down. She wanted his fangs there, wanted to see if it was as good as he said it'd be. She wanted him to reclaim that part of her, erase the warlock from her body entirely. Mostly, she wanted to show him that she trusted him with the part of her that was most vulnerable, because she did. She trusted him with everything.

Spike was making his way further down her body now, continuing the assault with that magical mouth of his. Never before would she have considered her belly a particularly sexy place to kiss, but damn, he was hellbent on redefining her idea of sexy. He swirled his tongue



around her bellybutton, flashed her a wicked smirk when she jolted, then tugged her pajama bottoms and panties down her legs in one fluid motion.

Spike spread her legs apart, his eyes darkening and his breaths coming quicker. He stared for what seemed like an obscene amount of time before slowly raising his gaze to hers again. God, she hoped he never stopped looking at her like that.

"You are the most delectable thing I've ever seen," he said, his voice low and rough. "And you're all mine."

Buffy's heart jumped. Growly and possessive was another thing she'd never thought she'd find sexy. And yet.

"You like being mine, don't you?" Spike skimmed his hand up her leg, parted her slick folds and ran his finger from her opening to her clit. "Who makes you wet, Slayer?"

As hot as it was, Buffy thought it might be best to reassert control, lest she let him get too full of himself. "Spike—"

"Good girl."

And his face was between her legs before she could clarify that she hadn't been answering. The second his tongue started performing its magic, she decided maybe it was okay for him to be a little full of himself. Or a lot full of himself. Buffy arched and rolled her hips on instinct, gasping when he responded by sucking her clit between his lips. It was unfair, how good at this he was, how effortlessly he could play her body when she barely understood this part of herself, even now, though she felt she was on the fast-track to learning.

The other night, he'd told her that he didn't think she knew what she liked. That had seemed a little absurd at the moment because she and Riley had hardly been abstinent, but the more Spike took her to the edge, the more she realized just how little she'd known about herself. How little she'd been encouraged to know.

"Wonder how many times I could get you to come on my tongue," Spike said matter-of-factly, pressing two fingers against the mouth of her sex. "If you'd grip me just as tight every time." He released a low moan as he pushed inside of her and she clenched on reflex, drawing him in deep. "Bloody hell, but you weren't kidding. If I'd known that

night, you might not have walked away without getting nice and shagged.”

Huh?

Buffy lifted her head. “What—what night?”

“Don’t play coy. Year or so back, at the Bronze. You rubbed yourself all over me and told me you could ride me until—”

“I so did not.”

Spike arched an eyebrow. “Know you were just havin’ me on, pet, but considering where we ended up, seems a bit late to clutch those pearls of yours.”

“Spike, I’m pretty sure that was Faith.” Buffy closed her eyes, willing herself patience. Though she couldn’t help but remember something he’d whispered that night in his crypt—something about *doing what she’d said* while she was riding his cock. It hadn’t made sense at the time and she hadn’t given herself much opportunity to think about it, but now...

“What’s that?”

“Faith. The evil slayer. She swapped bodies with me last year, remember? And slept with Riley?” And now there was another reason to hate the skank—she’d come onto Spike. *Buffy’s* Spike. Sure, he hadn’t been hers at the time, but was nothing sacred?

Spike paused, tilting his head as he considered her. Then he shrugged and resumed pumping his fingers in and out of her pussy. “Well, that makes more sense, gotta say,” he said, staring at what he was doing, his eyes a shade darker than normal. “Wasn’t like she was wrong, either, though I am glad I know. Been kickin’ myself this last year for not trying something that night. Didn’t know I was in love with you then, of course, but I’ve always wondered if it could’ve gone somewhere.”

She released a ragged breath, not sure if she wanted to move on from this yet or not. On one hand, the part of her that would always be insecure in matters involving Faith felt raw and exposed. On the other hand, Spike’s under-reaction was kind of refreshing.

“Spike—”

“Reckon that’s why I didn’t do it,” Spike said, meeting her gaze again and holding it as he tongued her clit. “Somethin’ seemed off that

night. Wasn't sure what but you weren't you and nothin' but the real thing would ever be enough for me. Even then."

And that was all it took for those insecurities to melt away. She couldn't say they wouldn't return—for she was Buffy of the endless insecurities—but the certainty in Spike's voice was unlike any reassurance she'd heard before, mostly because she hadn't asked for it. Heck, she wasn't even sure he'd been talking to her and not himself, working out what he might have done had he known the truth.

That he'd resisted because he'd known, on some level, what no one else had?

"Come up here," Buffy said, tangling her fingers through his hair.

Spike replied by flicking his tongue over her clit again as he twisted his wrist and pressed down on some secret spot inside of her she was sure hadn't existed before now. A long mewl tore from her throat and she thrust her hips up, needing more and getting more but still not enough.

"You sure?" he asked, smirking. "Quite happy where I am at the moment. My favorite place, point of fact."

"Spike, please. I want you."

"You got me."

"You know what I mean. Inside." She swallowed, trembling. "Both places."

At that, he froze, which might have been funny had his lips not been wrapped around her clit. Slowly, he raised his head, favoring her with that awed look of his. The one she felt in her blood and beyond that. The one that had convinced her that what he felt for her was love after all, and therein challenged everything she thought she knew about vampires.

After a moment, he released a deep breath and pulled back so he was on his knees. He licked his fingers, not breaking his gaze from hers, rather staring at her with such naked hunger she couldn't help but feel a little unworthy of it.

"You mean it?" Spike asked, finishing the job she'd started on his belt and shoving his jeans down his legs. How he managed to kick everything off without pulling his eyes from her was one of those vampire things—it had to be. "Be sure, love."

“You said I’d like it, right?”

He nodded hard, his breaths coming harder now. “If you don’t, I’ll stop. I bloody swear it.”

“I trust you.”

Another long moan tumbled from his lips, and the next thing she knew, Spike was over her, pressing her into the mattress, his cock slipping against her drenched sex, his mouth wrestling hot kisses from hers. Nothing with this man was done in half measures—he threw everything he had into every move he made, and the result was a man who seemed starved for touch, for affection, for anything, while more than willing to give all of himself away. Buffy kept this in mind, drawing a hand up his stomach and over his chest, reveling in the way he trembled under her fingers, the looks he gave her and the sounds he made.

“Buffy,” he said, pressing his brow to hers, “tell me you love me. Please.”

She released a shaky breath, dragging a foot along his calf muscle until she had her leg anchored around his waist. “I love you, Spike.”

Spike flashed his eyes open and smiled, and it was so broad and happy that something told her this would be the moment for him—if he had a soul to lose, this was when it would happen.

He kissed her as he began easing his cock inside her, going so damn slow she thought she might cry. When she dug her nails into his upper arms, rolled her hips, and tightened the hold her leg had on him, Spike tsked and shook his head, the happy smile turning smug. “Not just yet, kitten. Wanna memorize every second of this.”

“Of what?”

“How you feel. How it feels to be inside you knowing you love me.”

Buffy threw her head back with a grunt. “Memorize faster.”

“Anyone ever tell you patience is a virtue?”

“Says the most impatient guy ever.”

“I have my moments,” he replied, the words riding off on a groan when he was seated fully inside her. “You’re so warm. Never knew it could be so warm. Burning me up from the inside, you are.”

“Spike, slow and tender later. Need you now.”

He arched an eyebrow, the smirk returning. “That a fact? What’s it you need me to do, Slayer?” He pulled back, but just a bit, then pushed

back inside her. Then again, and again. Shallow thrusts that did little more than stoke the fire he'd started but not so much the flames took over. A flash of heat, a hint of what she wanted, but not the full thing.

Buffy tugged him down so she could nibble on his earlobe. "I need you," she said in her lowest voice, "to fuck me like you mean it."

He stopped moving long enough to favor her with an incredulous look. Then his smirk was back, all sex and sin, and he grabbed her hands.

"Hold on, pet," he said, swirling his hips and plunging his cock into her hard. "And be a good girl and remember that you asked for this."

She nodded, fisting the bedding, and almost dissolved on the spot when he began thrusting in earnest, and at speeds that had the bed springs whining in complaint, had the headboard thundering against the wall—the wall which seemed to shake with the rest of the room. The sounds erupting from her throat might have been human but certainly didn't sound like it, and she was suddenly so thankful for Dawn's decision to vacate the premises she might have laughed had he not had her mind going blissfully blank to anything beyond sensation.

"Fuck yes," Spike gasped into her ear. "Fuck, Buffy. Love you. Love you so much."

Buffy nodded, the motion desperate. "Love. Love you. Love you, Spike."

His answering growl might have been the sexiest thing she'd ever heard, and it seemed to unleash whatever part of him he'd been holding back. At once, it was all she could do to keep up. To move as he moved, lift her hips along with him, fight him as he was fighting her in the best way possible. It was as though he was everywhere, inside her pussy, in her blood, under her skin, in her gut and her throat, and she could appreciate how someone might feel like they were drowning with it. She kept her gaze on Spike's face, fixated by the tightening of his jaw, the flaring of his nostrils, how intently he stared at her as he thrust into her again and again.

"So hot," he whispered, his voice somehow audible over the smacks of their bodies and groans of the bed. "So hot. My Buffy."

"Spike—"

He dipped his head to kiss her, and his kiss was like his fucking—

desperate and passionate and a little violent, but in ways that sent her soaring.

"Buffy, Buffy, Buffy." Spike pressed his eyes closed, his arms shaking. "Fuck *yes*."

He was pounding a Buffy-shaped hole into the mattress, she was sure of it, his cock striking that perfect place inside her on every thrust. All the while, he kept up a cool litany of praise, murmuring how good she felt around him, how tight she was, how she was a sodding dream come true, how much he loved her, loved *it* when she tightened her cunt around him just like that, how hard she made him, how much he needed this, needed her, needed to feel her come. How when her muscles squeezed him, he could dust a happy bloke. And she felt it in her belly, the flickers of a fire that would consume her whole. She just needed something else—something more.

"Spike, please."

When he answered, his voice was at her ear, the low timbre seeming to vibrate through her whole body. "Please what, baby?"

"Touch me. Need—"

Spike released her hands and drew out of her instead, and she might have cried had he not instantly pressed the head of his cock against her aching clit and directed it in tight, perfect circles into her swollen flesh. The fire from before roared and expanded, and Buffy sobbed, not knowing if she wanted more or less. Desperate to feel him inside of her again but not sure she could stand it if he left her stranded like this.

"Open up for me."

It took a moment, but Buffy forced her eyes open and found Spike gazing down at her with fierce intensity.

"Here, love." Spike dragged a finger along her lower lip. "Open up here."

She answered by sucking that finger into her mouth, watching as his eyes went wide and dark.

"Good girl," he said, a bit choked this time, before swallowing her in one of those intoxicating kisses again. Then she felt his hand between them, the finger slick with her saliva settling over her clit as he slid his cock back down her slit and pushed into her again.

"Are you ready for me?" he asked, pressing down on her clit every time he thrust home now, sparking a sensation that was somewhere between too much and not enough. "Sure this is what you want?"

"Huh?"

Spike pulled his head back so she could see him—see *him*, the demon staring down at her with those predator's eyes and fangs on full display. The mask he'd worn the night he'd told her he wouldn't make it hurt a bit, and the night he'd told her he'd rather be fighting her anyway, and the day on campus when he'd been in the sun, so ready to bathe in her blood.

That monster was her monster. And he was asking for her throat.

And Buffy let him have it. She stole a kiss, mindless of the fangs, then seized him by the cheeks and directed his mouth where she wanted it. A ragged breath rocked against her flesh, then another, then a pinch of pain before the fire inside went supernova, blistering her veins with something on the other side of pleasure because that was such a tame word for whatever this was. Buffy made a noise, or tried—her mouth was open and air was going in and out and maybe that sound was her, she couldn't tell. She was holding onto him, clutching him there and trembling as her pussy squeezed and spasmed around his cock. Then Spike either growled or moaned into her throat—she couldn't tell which—and began bucking like mad, and it was over for him too. She felt his release as though it were her own, and wondered idly if she could feel him through the bite that or if it was in her head. She didn't know and didn't care to know, because she liked the idea of being able to feel what he felt, even if she was only imagining it.

They lay there for what seemed like forever, tangled together and panting, the coppery scent of blood mingling with sweat and sex.

"I love you," Buffy said a moment later, tunneling her fingers through his hair. The words came out hoarse and raw, like her voice was about to give. "Spike, I love you."

For a long beat, there was nothing. So long she had the absurd thought that he'd fallen asleep. But then he stirred and pulled back, his tear-filled eyes meeting hers, the smile on his face a mirror of the one before—the one where she'd thought, if he had a soul to lose, it'd be gone now.

And when he kissed her, she found she was smiling too. For the first time in a long time, everything in the world felt right. She'd forgotten it could feel like this.

Something she'd tell him just as soon as her voice started working again.



“SPIKE.”

It wasn’t uncommon to hear her voice in his dreams—odder to not, these days. Hell, all the days. Every single bloody second he’d lived after seeing her that first night at the Bronze, watching her shake that gorgeous ass while telling himself his interest in her was purely academic. Predator to prey, and all that.

“Spike.”

Soft. Imploring. Somewhat teasing. He loved it when she sounded like that in his dreams, could imagine more clearly that she might actually fancy him back one of these days.

“Spike, come *on*.”

There was some knowledge there on the periphery, though, that kept edging at the corners of his mind, telling him that he wasn’t dreaming and to open his eyes. Telling him that the real thing was in his arms, warm and vibrant and alive and... Something else.

Right. And she loved him.

“Okay, now I know you’re awake,” she said, her tone dry. “Come on. You owe me a morning after.”

Spike couldn’t stop his grin if he tried, so he didn’t. Instead, he shifted a bit so that the sheet that had been around his waist rode

down just enough to give the Slayer a nice peek of the goods. His cock had long been trained to respond to her on every conceivable level, and these days he was swimming in it. Her scent, her warmth, her voice, her nearness, all of it had him on bloody overdrive, half-convinced he'd managed to get himself nice and dusted somewhere along the way because the fact that his waking life was better than the dreaming one went against pretty much everything he knew about himself.

"Spike..." The weight beside him disappeared before settling over his thighs, the sheet gone now. Then her hot little hand wrapped around his cock and he couldn't help himself—his eyes flew open, because there was nothing in this world he enjoyed watching more than Buffy when she was touching him.

"Finally," she said when their eyes met, her own dancing. "Anyone ever tell you that you sleep like the dead?"

"Regular laugh riot, you are," Spike replied, nodding at his prick, which was hard and straining, the curve that made her scream so much on full display. He watched her hungrily as she stared at it, licking those perfect lips.

"Gonna put it to use or what?"

Buffy flushed and jerked her gaze back to him. "You kinda suck at pillow talk."

"That what you want right now?" he countered, bracing his hands on her hips as she lifted herself above him. "Pillow talk?"

Buffy smirked and rolled her hips so that he slid up and down the length of her slit. Her fiery flesh caressing the head of his cock, bathing him in her wetness, was another of those sensations that felt too good to be real. Christ, she could burn him alive, hot as she was. *Hot* wasn't even the right word. She was molten.

"Morning after," Buffy replied. "That's what I want. You owe me."

He arched and hissed when he slid between her slick, swollen lips. "Take it. Me. Whatever you want, you can have."

"Dangerous thing for a vampire to tell the Slayer, don't you think?"

"Rather fancy living on the edge, pet. Got me this far." Spike seized her hips, watching as his cockhead nudged her clit and reveling in the tremor that seemed to take command of her. Fuck, she got so wet for him, so ready, at just a touch. How any mortal bloke could have

thought to have kept up with her was beyond him, but no more so than the idea that she'd tried so hard to make anything else work when it was clearly not what she wanted or needed. He flicked his gaze to her face, grinning broader still. "Dangerous vampire here at your mercy," he said, shifting her so he was notched at her opening. "How do you plan on dealin' with him?"

"Hmm..." Buffy seized his wrists and, using that marvelous strength of hers, slammed them onto the mattress on either side of his head as she impaled herself onto his cock. "I'm thinking...about shackling him to my bed."

Spike groaned and thrust upward, deeper inside of her. There were no words for the way her heat enveloped him, how tight she was, how *right* she fit around him, but he found himself searching for them anyway. The inner poet never stopped searching, he supposed. And Buffy was a woman whose very existence was the thing of poetic legend. That she was here, riding him, looking at him with love in her eyes, letting him watch as her cheeks went pink with exertion, as sweat gathered at her temples and between her pert breasts. She rolled and arched and bucked; she gasped and whimpered and moaned; she squeezed him so tight with her pussy that blubbering felt like a distinct possibility. She did everything and more and he'd never get enough.

Most of all, she loved him. She'd told him last night in the most spectacular way he could have imagined.

"Got news for you," Spike muttered, tugging her down so her breasts were against his chest. He kissed her—couldn't bloody not—then began nibbling his way down her neck. When he reached the place she'd let him mark her, he broke away with a strangled mewl that sounded desperate even to his ears. "This particular vamp's gonna like bein' shackled."

"You think so?"

He nipped at the mark and was rewarded with a particularly tight squeeze around his cock. Too much more of that and he'd leave the party without her. "Felt that. You like my fangs, baby?"

Buffy trembled, dragging her hands along his arms until she was braced against his chest. "Maybe."

A smirk tugged at his lips. "Maybe? Here I think I had the right of it—being bitten made you come harder than you ever have, didn't it?"

Buffy planted her hands on his chest and straightened, giving him a much-appreciated view of her rosy tits. How lovely they looked like this, within reach of his hands and mouth. He couldn't get over how hot she was in every bloody sense of the word—a type of heat he'd never considered before. How he felt it radiating off her, hot to match his cold, heat so sweet that to not touch her became painful. And suddenly he had to, needed to feel her everywhere. Spike lifted off the mattress and wrapped his mouth around one of her breasts, cradling the other in his hand. He dragged his tongue over and around her nipple, then just to see what she'd do, scraped his teeth against her.

"Oh, I like that." Buffy threw her head back, baring her throat to him again. The sight of his fang marks marring her creamy skin was intoxicating in itself, knowing she'd allowed it. Knowing she'd wanted it. Remembering how she'd clutched at him, tightened her legs around him and drenched his cock, that she'd made herself as vulnerable with him as she could and had come as hard as she had made him desperate to give her more. Because when he gave she gave, and having something as precious as Buffy's trust was something he'd never take for granted.

Spike rolled his hips to meet her thrusts, and about went cross-eyed with pleasure when she started clenching around his cock each time he buried himself to the hilt. Her strokes came faster, increasingly sloppy with an edge of desperation. He kissed his way up her sweat-drenched chest, over her collarbone, one hand pressed to her ass to help ground her against him on her downstrokes and the other between them to nudge her clit. She became tighter and wetter with every second, and when he danced his lips across her neck, the air thickened with a sense of excitement she couldn't hope to hide.

"Spike...do it."

He growled against her skin. While he'd love nothing better than to sink his fangs inside, he knew from experience that the only thing that might be better for her right now was the tease. So he clamped his blunt teeth on the mark and applied just enough pressure that she mewled and sobbed and asked him for more.

"That hot, pet?"

"Warm. Could be warmer."

"Tell me."

"Yes, god help me, I love your fangs. Now bite me."

*My bloody pleasure.* Spike licked the mark, allowing the bones in his face to make the needed shift. He reveled in her tight shudder—the part of her that would always be the Slayer reacting to the part of him that would always be the monster—then sliced his fangs into her throat and that was it. Buffy gasped and hugged him to her, applying all that wonderful strength as her pussy spasmed around his cock, and the second her blood hit his tongue he was following her, growling and sucking and bucking and it wasn't enough. Could never be enough... though at the same time, it was everything. *She* was everything.

They ended up in a tangle of arms and legs, Buffy panting against his chest, Spike drawing her damp hair over her shoulder and fighting to remember that he didn't need to breathe. And that it was impossible for him to feel his heart thundering even if he could have sworn the thing was at a gallop.

It was the best bloody morning he'd had in ages. Probably ever. Definitely ever.

"That what you wanted, love?" he asked a moment later, his voice somewhat hoarse. "Good morning after?"

There was a pause, then Buffy giggled.

She bloody *giggled*.

"Something like that," she agreed. "Though...maybe we ought to try again. Just to make sure I have this whole *morning after* thing down." Buffy lifted her head, smiling the sort of smile a bloke would go to the end of the world to keep on her face. "I mean, if you're up for it."

Spike arched an eyebrow. His cock hadn't even had time to deflate. Around her, it never did. "That a challenge?"

"I mean, you go on and on about stamina. Less tell. More show."

"You saying last night wasn't show enough? Or the night before? Or—"

"Do you *not* want to have your wicked way with me or something?"

He growled and flipped her over, plunging into her pussy in one

seamless stroke. “You want the Big Bad, Slayer, and that’s what you’ll get,” he ground out before biting at her lips as he assumed a hard, bruising rhythm. “Plenty of other places to bite you, you know.”

He felt her pulse jump and her pussy tighten and fell in love with her all over again. Bloody hell, she was the perfect woman.

Buffy’s eyes positively shone. “Show me.”

So he did.



WHEN HE’D ALLOWED himself to fantasize about what life would be like if the Slayer ever let him in, he’d left out the parts like this. After all, having Buffy and keeping Buffy were two different things. Spike had, admittedly, dedicated a lot of thought to what it’d be like when it was just the two of them. Patrolling, fighting, sniping at each other the way they did and shagging out all their differences in a blaze of bloody passion. The other parts of being the Slayer’s steady fella hadn’t really merited much thought. He hadn’t appreciated what it meant to be truly with her—what that meant for him, for them.

Moments like this one, where Buffy ushered him into the Magic Box ahead of her, then helped him stamp out the fire that had sprung up on the smoking blanket like it was nothing.

“There has to be a better way to do this,” she said once the flames were smothered. “Or you could just stick to nighttime hours like a regular vampire.”

Spike favored her with a soft snicker. “Pretty sure you’re the one who insisted I tag along, pet.”

“Well, yes. But my point still stands. You could way too easily go all *poof* on me.”

“I bloody well guarantee that I will never go *poof* on you.” He watched as she bent over to collect the blanket from the floor, enjoying the rather gratuitous view down her shirt. Bless her, she wasn’t wearing a bra. How brassed would she be if he seized her and hauled her into the back for a quickie? “Specially from this angle.”

Buffy eyed the gap in her tank then gave him a scowl and straightened. Spike just grinned rather unrepentantly.

"Buffy! Is that..." Xander was suddenly there, crowding into her space, staring at her neck. More specifically, the marks on her neck that were still a bit pink from earlier. He whirled on Spike, his face a mask of outrage. "What did you do to her?"

Buffy frowned, clutching the blanket to her chest with one hand as she reached to feel at the place with the other. The second her fingertips brushed the bite, she jumped a bit and her eyes went wide. "Xander—"

"No, I knew this would happen. I knew Spike would—"

"Oi, pipe down," Spike snapped, seizing the blanket from Buffy to free up her hands, should she decide to pop certain gits in the nose. "You mean to tell me you still think I'd do anything to hurt her?"

Xander pointed a shaky finger. "Exhibit A!"

"Xander, he *can't* hurt me, remember?" Buffy rolled her eyes and edged past him. "And wouldn't if he could, so see someone about cooling those jets of yours."

"If Spike was able to bite her, my money's on it being during sex," Anya said from behind the counter, not bothering to look up from the receipts she was tallying. "In which case, it was likely very enjoyable."

"Enjoyable?" Xander squeaked.

"You enjoy it when I bite you, don't you? It's much like that, only with actual fangs." At that, Anya frowned and met the boy's stare. "I don't see why this is surprising to you. Riley seemed to enjoy being bitten quite a bit. If Buffy and Spike are having sex, it stands to reason—"

"Thank you, Anya," Giles said, climbing down the stairs from the upper floor, a couple of books tucked under his arm. "May we cease and desist? There are some things we should discuss before Willow and Tara arrive."

Xander shook his head, apparently whiplashed. "What the what? I thought we talked everything out last night. Remember, massive meeting, took place about where Buffy is standing? Big bad evil we managed to cap—that's nearly two in one week."

Buffy exchanged a look with her watcher. "It's Willow," she said after a moment. "We need to talk to her about her magic use."

"As in...thanks for saving the day yet again, Wills?"

"As in there might be a problem." Buffy drew in a deep breath. "We think there's a good chance that Willow didn't forget the other Giles so accidentally. That she knew he'd pull a wig and decided it'd just be easier not to tell him about the plan to timeline hop."

"What?" Xander glanced between her and Giles, then whirled around to face Anya. "What? No, that's not right. She was under a lot of pressure. Odds are she just—"

"Willow *doesn't* forget things like that," Buffy argued.

"Well, maybe the spell went wrong. Not unheard of, right?"

"Xander, she already said she forgot him," Anya said, shutting the register. "Besides, if it was a matter of the spell going bad, there would be other indicators. Like, for instance, the insanity she mentioned as a possible side-effect. Or perhaps someone's memories merging with the wrong person and causing them to go insane. Spells performed incorrectly don't have minor hiccups—they have major ones." She sighed. "Giles, the money Buffy brought me from the other timeline has the same serial numbers as the bills in the register. Is that going to be a problem? Do humans actually look at the serial numbers?"

The watcher cleared his throat. "That is an issue for another time, Anya. Buffy is quite right."

"But come on. It all worked out, right?" Xander went back to volleying his attention between the Slayer and the old man, the race of his pulse steadily increasing. "Right? And she just pulled some massive magic to get Rack off our backs—who wouldn't have been there if it weren't for Spike, by the way—so we're going to thank her by putting her in magic jail?"

"What's the alternative then, do you reckon?" Spike asked, coming up again so he was beside his lady. He tried not to grin when he felt *her* pulse pick up too, but it was a hard thing to ignore. Mostly because he was pretty bloody sure it was in response to his nearness and not to what they were discussing. "The lot of you were planning to raise the Slayer from the *dead*. Yeah, you're right. Rack started sniffin' around the Bit because of me. Know who *is* here 'cause of me?"

"Which is exactly what we were doing with the resurrection spell," Xander fired back, his nostrils flaring. "So now Evil Dead is gonna lecture me on black magic? This is—"



"Xander," Buffy said softly, "I need you to think about this. The black magic that Rack used to tear a hole in time was bad enough that Giles *and* Angel thought the entire timeline needed to die. And... raising people from the dead..."

"The consequences could have been irreparable," Giles jumped in. "It's more than that, too, where Willow is concerned. An isolated incident here and there, perhaps... But these incidents aren't isolated. Regardless of her reasoning—and I maintain that whatever this other version of me believed, I am not sad with the way events turned out—but deliberately leaving those memories in a doomed timeline, neglecting to mention the things that might have gone wrong, and the ease of which using dark magic to dispose of Rack came to her... When people become cavalier about magic, the consequences can be devastating. Believe me. It's better to talk to her now before things have a chance to get worse."

Xander gaped at both of them, and Spike had to suppress another snicker, the look on the whelp's face par for the bloody course. Then his expression hardened into that righteous indignation that he wore so well. "Worse?" he said and pointed at Buffy. "Worse like Spike using Buffy as a chew toy?"

It was no less than he expected, but Spike found himself swelling with rage anyway. That moment with Buffy, all of those moments, had been beautiful and life-changing. He would not let the whelp or anyone else cheapen them like this.

But before he could snarl his usual threats—or give himself a headache by taking a swing at the git—Buffy had moved forward, and when she spoke, there was steel in her voice.

"Xander, I know you don't approve. Believe me, memo gotten. But you're gonna just have to get used to it. Spike and I are together. Hell, I'm trying to convince myself that he shouldn't just move in."

Spike's heart gave a lurch that shouldn't have been possible. What was this?

"Buffy!" Giles looked thunderstruck.

"Also seriously thinking about getting his chip deactivated or removed," she went on, and bloody hell, if she didn't watch herself, he'd bend her over the counter and shag her until her legs turned all

jelly-like. Audience be damned. “Because it’s... Well, Riley tried to stake Spike before he left town and it’s not right that he can’t defend himself against stuff like that. Particularly with some of my friends making stake-eyes at my boyfriend.” Buffy planed her hands on her hips. “So on the subject of Spike and me, well, consider it closed.”

Xander just gawked at her. Then, slowly, he turned to Giles. “Are we *sure* she isn’t the Buffybot? I mean, have we seen them together in the same room?”

Spike came up behind Buffy, snaked an arm around her waist. “Bot’s got nothin’ on the real thing,” he murmured, staring at the marvel who let him do this. Touch her, pull her against him, nuzzle her throat in full view of her mates. “Think we oughta melt down that bloody piece of rubbish.”

“I dunno,” Buffy replied, a bit breathier than usual. “It was useful in the Glory fight. Might be worth keeping around in the likely event that someone else tries to end the world and we need to make with the distraction.”

“What I’m hearin’ is I was right to make myself a sex doll.” Spike hesitated, then decided, *sod it*. He wasn’t going to be shy when it came to kissing his girl even with witnesses around, especially after she’d gone and made him fall even more madly in love with her than he was already. So he lowered his head and brushed a kiss over the mark on her throat. “Apology accepted, Slayer.”

She tensed before giving him a small snicker. “You are so gross.”

“Yeah, well, you love me anyway.”

Buffy paused and met his eyes. And for a moment, the world didn’t breathe.

Then she smiled *that* smile—the one he’d thought he’d never get to touch. Her *I’m happy* smile.

“Well,” she said, “when you’re right, you’re right.”

If Harris had anything to say to that, Spike didn’t hear it. He was too busy snogging his slayer to care.



IT WAS A WEIRD SENSATION, standing on one’s own grave. Even

weirder knowing that six feet below was another version of herself. In fact, it might have been the weirdest thing she'd ever experienced, and given that she was the Slayer, that was saying something.

Buffy tightened her grip on Spike's hand, staring at the lettering on her headstone. It was kind of perfect, all told. Would it be weird to request that they use the same epitaph if she died again? Or how would that even work, being that Buffy Summers had already been buried once?

The talk with Willow had gone over about as well as could be expected. Shock at first, then anger. Lots of anger, and some of it—a lot of it—deserved. Because, yes, it had been crappy of them to spring this on Willow after the last few days. Still, Buffy was more convinced now than she had been before that the conversation was essential, especially since Willow had gotten so worked up that she'd stolen their voices for a good ten minutes, following a shouted command that they all *shut up*. It had been like the incident with the Gentlemen all over again. As soon as she'd realized what she'd done, Willow had panicked and spent the duration looking for spells to reverse it.

As difficult as the talk had been, though, they had parted on a cautiously optimistic, if not outright positive note. Buffy wasn't sure that Willow was entirely on board with the idea of curbing her magical use, but she was at least aware that it could be a problem. It seemed likely that it would take more than one conversation to get to the desired outcome, but with Giles and Tara there to help—and with Xander in agreement post the whole stolen-voice thing—Buffy thought it possible they had just dodged a major magical bullet.

Of course, time would be the ultimate judge.

*Beloved Sister. Devoted Friend.*

"Angel called," Buffy said, the words tumbling out of her mouth as though they'd been shoved. "While you were on the blood run. He called to check on me. Said he heard I was alive again."

Spike stiffened. "Did he?"

"Yeah." Buffy swallowed. "I guess Xander called him yesterday from the road to let him know what was going on and just forgot to tell me. He seemed a bit miffed that I hadn't called, myself. And that Xander

just never showed up. He also said he tried to call yesterday, but we must've been at the Magic Box."

"Wanker learns you're alive and all he can do is pick up the bloody phone," Spike muttered, kicking along the ground. While his tone was carefully casual, she'd have to be blind not to miss the tension in his jaw and shoulders. "Shame it didn't work out between you two. What a sodding prince."

"Are you ever going to not be like this when I mention Angel?"

"Doesn't seem likely." He released a long, steady breath. "Anything else of note? Guessin' you didn't mention us, seein' as he hasn't shown up here thinkin' to defend your honor or what all. Or are you afraid I'll just stake the bastard on sight?"

Buffy bit the inside of her cheek. It probably wasn't the responsible adult thing to do to encourage this behavior, but she had to admit it was kind of nice not being the perpetually insecure one. Not that she wasn't insecure—she had oodles of insecurity where Spike was concerned, not the least of which was his considerable sexual experience. But it was easy enough to disregard those fears when he was inside of her since he had a way of making her feel like the only woman in the world.

"Actually," she said after a moment, doing her best to keep her tone carefully neutral, "I told him everything."

Spike started and looked at her sharply. "You what?"

"All of it. You going through time to save me, there being two of you, one dusting to save Xander—"

"Can we never mention that again, please?"

"—and that we were together." Buffy blew out a breath, inwardly cringing as she replayed the highlights of that conversation. "There were words. And yelling. I can't remember if I've ever heard Angel yell before, but... Well, long story short, I told him that my decisions weren't up for a vote and the reason I told him at all was I thought it'd be easier hearing it from me than through the grapevine. It was pretty much what you'd expect. Blah blah, left you for your own good, blah blah, normal relationship, blah blah, evil vampire."

"Git." There was no anger in Spike's voice now, rather a low undercurrent of excitement. "Pet—"

"And I listened for it. The thing you mentioned the other day. The whole...manipulation thing." She cleared her throat, going for casual. "Whatever else, I don't think it's something he does intentionally."

"You wouldn't, would you?"

"But I did hear it. This whole talking-down-to-me thing like he knows what's best. Giles does it, too, but it's way more annoying when coming from someone who's supposed to...not view me as a kid. Giles is like my father, and parental disapproval is kind of a given." She paused. "Anyway, I told him that while I would always love him and I understood his reasons for leaving, that didn't make me obligated to honor his wishes. He lost his vote on what I do when he left."

There was nothing for a moment, Spike's fire having died a bit. Then, softly, he murmured, "Always love him, huh?"

Buffy rolled her eyes and rested her chin on his shoulder. "That's what you decided to focus on?"

Spike didn't reply, just kicked at the ground again like a man-sized toddler in the middle of a good sulk.

"You'll always love Dru, right?"

"That's different. She's my maker, isn't she? Saved me from dyin' some nameless prat remembered for scribbling bloody awful verse. Owe her my entire existence. Not *in* love with the crazy bitch. Not since you got into my head." He kept his gaze on the headstone. "She knew it too. Knew I wasn't hers anymore. Drove her even battier than usual."

"Can't Angel be that for me, then? Someone I love but not someone I'm *in* love with?"

Another long stretch of nothing in which Spike just stared at her, his eyes shining with something both hesitant and fragile. It was so strange being with someone as easy to read as Spike, someone who didn't so much share his thoughts and feelings as scream them with a single glance. Now that she'd had this she didn't think she could ever go back to the endless guesswork and doubt that had comprised her previous relationships. And she wouldn't have to, because Spike was nothing if not the long-haul guy.

At last, he released a shuddering breath and asked in a small voice,

"Is that what he is, then? Say he decides to come round and make an honest go of things again and you'd—"

Buffy cut him off with a kiss, her heart clenching at the way he trembled against her lips. "At one time, that was all I wanted," she said when she pulled away. "And maybe even up until recently, I thought so too." She paused and leaned her head against his shoulder, tightening the grip she had on his hand. "I closed myself off after Angel left because his leaving crushed me—I'd given so much of myself and it hadn't been enough. That's what it felt like, no matter what his reasons were. And that was part of the reason it didn't work with Riley. I didn't give as much of myself, didn't love him like I should have. I appreciated him, liked him just fine, but it didn't kill me when he left. You know, I don't even know if I even *said* the words *I love you* to him, to his face? I think I told Angel once that I loved Riley but honestly? I'm pretty sure that was more to piss Angel off. Rub it in that I'd done the thing he wanted me to do." A pause. "I wasn't going to tell him I'm in love with you."

Spike didn't say anything, just inhaled and flexed his fingers around hers.

"I knew that would *really* piss him off, but my loving you isn't about getting back at Angel. It's, frankly, none of his business." Another beat. "At least, that was my plan. I thought... I dunno, just *telling* him would kinda cheapen it. Using what I feel for you as a weapon against him, when how I feel about you isn't about *him* at all. But then he asked point-blank and I wasn't going to lie."

"You...you did, then? Told him?"

Buffy fought a grin at the note in his voice, soldiering on. She'd forgotten this part of herself—the part that had once been so open about who she was and what she wanted and how she felt. When Angel had left town, he'd taken that part with him too. Spike had given it back. "What you did for me changed the way I think about that relationship—what it was and what I thought it was. So yeah, Spike, part of me will always love Angel because he taught me how fiercely I *can* love. He also taught me how I want to be loved in return in all the ways he *didn't* love me. I thought that part of me was done, I guess, on some level. That my one chance at epic love was gone. You're the

one who taught me that I was wrong. So, to answer your question, I'm with the man I want to be with, no matter what."

Spike twisted so he was facing her and caught her face in his hands. Then he was kissing her in that wholly *Spike* way—all passion and want, but full of enough love to drown a person if they didn't learn how to swim first. And she wondered what he tasted, what he felt, when she kissed him, if he could sense anything in the way she touched him at all. Maybe she would ask one day.

They broke apart some time later, and Buffy was surprised to find the scenery hadn't changed. Was it bad luck to make out with your boyfriend while standing on your own grave? She'd have to ask Giles. That seemed like the kind of thing he'd know.

"Dunno about you, pet, but I think I've seen enough of this grave for a bloody lifetime," Spike said after a moment. "Fancy a patrol before we head in?"

"We?"

He looked away at that, and if she didn't know better, she'd say she had him flustered. "Was hopin' I'd get an invite. Your bed's a lot more comfortable than mine."

"Why's that?"

"Yours has a Buffy in it."

Her heart jumped in spite of herself. There was a world of things yet to decide—she wasn't sure where she'd landed on the whole *Spike moving in* thing or even what she wanted to do for dinner. Her post-Rack to-do list had consisted of three things and she'd managed to knock out two of them. The larger things were for after—when they finally stepped into their *after*.

"You can come with, I guess," Buffy said in a would-be airy voice. "I think that would be okay."

The flustered look vanished, which was a shame, only to be replaced with his leer, which was not. "Okay?"

"Yes. After much consideration, I have decided to allow it."

"Right generous you are."

"I am. And more people should know that about me." Buffy grinned and kissed him again. "We still have to deal with your soul, you know. Send it back where it belongs. Really hoping that's something

Tara can handle because I think I should refrain from asking Will for anything magic-related for a while.”

Spike grew still again, almost rigid. “Could always put it in me.”

“What?”

“Don’t tell me you haven’t thought it. Make things nice and tidy for you, right? Get your mates off your back ’bout me bein’ evil and you might sleep a bit better too, if you ever do decide to help me get this chip outta my cranium. Unless that was a bunch of hot air.”

Buffy just stared at him, willing her brain to catch up so she could begin to parse apart what he’d said because it made no sense. “Spike... do you *want* your soul?”

“Would do it for you if it’s what you needed...but no. Don’t much fancy spendin’ the next however-long on my hands and knees comin’ to grips with the load of bad I’ve done.” He looked away, and for the first time in as long as she could remember, his expression was thoroughly unreadable. “But if it means keepin’ this, keeping you, fixin’ those things about me that you don’t like—”

“Spike, no. Stop.” It was her turn now, seizing him by the face to pull his gaze to hers again. There was an odd pressure in her chest, somewhere between pain and exhilaration, and her thoughts were a confused tangle all over again. “I just told you I loved you and what that meant for me. Why would you think you need to be fixed?”

“I don’t. I mean I don’t want it. But there’s the stuff we talked about, yeah? Couple nights ago, makin’ decisions based on more than just what I want.” He paused, seemed to search for words. “Wager that’d be enough to—”

Buffy slapped a hand over his mouth before he could get any more out. “I don’t want to *fix* you. I don’t want... Spike, we have no idea what you’d be like with a soul. Maybe not all that different but... I love *you*. This version of you. The stuff we talked about, yeah, it’s stuff we’ll have to work on, but that’s what a relationship is. You’ve already done so much just on your own to be a better man and that you’d even think to offer this? Do you have any idea how huge that is?”

At this, he shifted his weight between his feet, looking away again. Her hand fell to her side.

“And you’d do it, wouldn’t you? If I said I needed you to.”



A small smirk lifted his lips. "Not much I wouldn't do for you, Buffy."

Yeah, she knew that. If nothing else, the past stretch, going back to when he'd allowed Glory to torture the stuffing out of him rather than give Dawn up, had taught her as much. That perhaps hadn't been the first clue but it had been the first time she'd noticed and kept noticing. Everything that had followed had just reinforced the things he'd been trying to tell her since, well, he'd made the tremendous lapse in judgment to chain her up and declare his love for her. Granted, even that she could see the reasoning behind—she'd bolted the second he'd tried to do it the normal way and odds had been high she wouldn't have stayed still long enough to listen otherwise.

Not that she was letting him off the hook for that, because no. On the hook he would stay.

"We work on stuff together, just like this," she said softly, smiling when he met her eyes once more. "That's how you'll keep me. And how I'll keep you."

"You'll keep me 'cause there's no getting rid of me, pet. Don't leave the ones I love."

The odd sensation in her chest pulsed and expanded, and it *was* exhilaration, she realized, because everything about Spike was exhilarating. The part that was pain wasn't all bad, either, rather a sweet ache that came with understanding, or a sense of feeling complete in some small way—or more like the return of a piece she'd forgotten she'd lost.

Buffy seized onto both feelings and held as she wrapped her arms around Spike's neck to pull him down for another kiss. "Silly vampire. Neither do I."

## EPILOGUE

“AND...YOU'RE SURE YOU CAN GET IT BACK TO THE ETHER?”

It was perhaps the twelfth time the Slayer had asked this question since Tara had arrived, something Spike tried not to find endearing. Mite strange, having someone care about something of his so much. A few times he could have sworn he caught her talking to the bloody orb like it could hear her. Bugger, maybe it could. Wasn't like he knew much about how these things worked.

If Buffy had been chatting up the sodding thing, it would be the most attention paid to old William by any woman who wasn't his mum. In life, the poor sap would have jizzed all over himself.

Tara, bless her, entertained Buffy's question with the same patient smile she'd offered the first time she'd been asked. “It seemed pretty basic. Well, I guess as basic as returning a soul can be...which, I don't mean to make light of.”

“Slayer, if Red could pull this off before she floated her first bloody pencil, I think you ought not to worry.”

Buffy frowned, sinking onto the sofa with the orb—still in its pouch—clasped between her hands. “I just...don't want it to get lost. We don't know what's out there. It could get hurt.”

“I won't let anything happen to Spike's soul,” Tara said solemnly. “I

wouldn't even try this if I didn't think I could do it. But Willow and I talked and we agreed that..."

But Glinda didn't finish the sentence. Didn't really have to. Right after everyone had given their speeches about how worried they were about Willow—and after that spellwork that had turned them all mute—the witch had gone off and tried to pull some mass-forgetting spell that had been right entertaining up until Buffy had rolled over on the crystal. The same type of crystal that had been used to transfer the memories between timelines, he might add, and breaking it had brought everyone back to earth right quick.

Well, most everyone. Being that Buffy had been in the process of getting well shagged at the moment—seemed their blank selves couldn't get enough of each other, either—she hadn't pieced together what had happened until after he'd let up his mouth's assault on her pussy and they'd discovered the scattered shards lying beside them.

Still, as much of a bloody fiasco as that had been, Spike believed he and the Slayer had whiled away the hours better than the rest. One second he'd been eating out the most gorgeous woman he'd ever seen, even if he couldn't recall what she'd called herself, listening as she panted and moaned under his tongue—the next, everything had come back and suddenly Buffy was spasming and gasping his name. And though the amnesiac Buffy had been more than eager to get naked with him, the Buffy who knew him, who remembered him, had clutched at him tighter, moaned more enthusiastically, and closed her thighs around his face so snugly he might have suffocated were he a normal man.

Bloody difficult to think about that without his jeans getting tight.

"All right," Tara said, nodding to the orb. "First, we'll need to take it out."

"And how do we do that without blinding ourselves?" Buffy asked, making no move to turn the thing over.

"I have an incantation that should work." Tara held out her hand. "Buffy, I promise I won't let anything happen to it."

Buffy waffled a second longer, flicked a glance at Spike, then nodded and handed Tara the small bundle. "Okay," she said under her breath. "Goodbye, Spike's soul."

No bloody reason for that to have his chest acting funny, but it did. Spike reached for her hand. "All right, pet?"

"I'm fine."

That was *woman* for *not fine*. Didn't need to be a century and some change old to make that translation. Again, his chest gave a lurch. There were so many ways she told him she loved him now—through action and words—and he treasured every one of them.

Tara did some sort of chanty thing, waving her hand over the orb. "Shield your eyes. We need to see if that worked."

When the inside of Spike's lids didn't go all white, he wagered that meant it had. "All good, then?"

"Yes," Tara said. "Still pretty bright, though."

That was an understatement. While the edge had definitely been taken off, Spike couldn't fight a wince when he opened his eyes. Bit like staring straight at a light bulb after someone had made off with the lampshade. Hell, if the Slayer decided to keep the damn thing around, she might be able to cut back on whatever she paid to keep the lights on. Seemed like a fitting service for his soul. It'd prove more useful than he'd been in life, anyway.

"All right." Tara positioned the orb on the coffee table and drew in a deep breath. "Willow said we needed to form more of a triangle. So..."

Buffy rose to her feet before Spike could and negotiated her way to the other side of the coffee table, where she lowered herself to her knees. All the while, her gaze didn't leave the glow of the soul, even if he knew it had to be burning her retinas.

"Buffy?"

She met his eyes and smiled her reassurance. "I'm good."

"Good." Tara swallowed. "Then I think we're ready."

The next bit was one of the languages Spike had never bothered to pick up, though it was pleasant on the ears so he might have a go at it one of these days. Always fun to learn a new dialect. He alternated his attention between the Slayer and the orb, though he could stare at the latter for only a few seconds before being forced to look away. It was probably his imagination, but the sodding thing seemed to be growing

in brightness again, waxing and waning in time with a heartbeat no one could hear.

Then everything stopped. Buffy lurched forward, a raw, painful gasp tearing off her lips—the sort of sound that assaulted the senses. One hand caught the edge of the coffee table before she could collide with it, the other clutching at her chest, and then he was moving—shouting her name and bounding over the wood surface to pull her into his arms. Focusing on the hard beats of her heart, the thundering rush of her pulse—the things that told him she was alive, she was unhurt, even if she was shaking and pale, her skin cold and clammy.

“You’re fine,” he whispered into her hair, not knowing who he was trying to reassure. “You’re fine. You’re fine. Bleeding hell, love...”

“Buffy, what’s wrong?” Tara fell at the Slayer’s other side, braced a hand on her shoulder. “Are you okay? What happened?”

Buffy shook her head and breathed out a little laugh that was likely meant to put them at ease but had the opposite bloody effect. Something made worse when she leaned into Spike because this was one brassy bitch who didn’t lean on anyone.

“I don’t know,” she said, the strength in her voice belied by the way she trembled against him. “I just... Suddenly, there was this...pulling.”

“Pulling?” Spike snapped his gaze to Tara, battling back every innate instinct that had him prime to attack. Logic aside, all he knew at the moment was that his girl was hurting and it was the witch’s fault. “Did you know it would do that?”

“What?” The witch looked stricken. “N-no, of course not.”

“What was it, then?”

“I don’t know!”

“Spike, she didn’t do anything, so maybe less with the throat-jumpy.” Buffy drew in a deep breath and pushed herself up to her knees, though he didn’t miss the tremor in her arms when she gripped the coffee table. Like she was afraid she might keel over again. “So...any ideas?”

Tara was shaking too. “What?”

“Was that the spell going wonky or something else?”

“I... Buffy, I don’t know.” Tara flicked a glance toward the ball of soul sitting in the middle of the table. “It felt like it was working,

though. Willow told me what to expect and... Well, I guess if you don't use magic, it's hard to explain, but it *felt* right. But it definitely shouldn't have done that. Whatever that was."

Spike placed a hand on Buffy's back. "Wasn't enough you were a joke in life, you useless git," he snarled at the orb. "Can't do anything right, can you?"

"Spike, that's enough." Buffy dragged in a few more breaths, seeming to center herself. Then, after a moment, she straightened. "Okay. So are we ready to try again?"

Bloody hell, the woman would be the end of him. "Bugger that!"

"No, I don't think we should," Tara said at the same time, springing to her feet. "We don't know what happened so trying again is probably not the best idea. Maybe the spell was wrong or something."

Buffy furrowed her brow. "You just said it felt right."

"And it did—whatever spell I was doing was working the way it should. But..."

But that's all the witch could get out, it seemed. Her eyes went distant and the furrow in her brow more pronounced. An especially weighty *but*, considering the reasons it was Tara standing here and not Red. Reasons that Spike knew no one needed him to voice, and though he wasn't the best at biting his tongue, he managed to do just that. Granted, the daggered look Buffy shot him did its part to convince him that it was better to keep mum.

"I'll...do some research." Tara made quick work of gathering up her things. "Talk to Giles. But until I know more... Buffy, I'm sorry. I know you want the soul to go back where it belongs but I just don't think it's worth risking now when we don't know what just happened. I'll call later."

And then she was gone, the door slammed shut behind her.

Well, bugger.



TURNED out William Pratt was going to have the last laugh after all.

Tara returned later that night, all a fluster, talking about some rot

that made fuck all sense to Spike and even less to Buffy but speaking with such authority he'd had no choice but to believe what he heard.

Seemed in the time since the soul had been called up to do business, it had gone and gotten itself attached to Buffy. Which was honestly just like the pathetic thing—clinging to any chit who showed him any bit of affection, not realizing when he'd overstayed his welcome, intent on doing whatever he could to remain put.

Spike supposed one of the reasons he resented it so much was because not a bloody lot had changed where that was concerned.

"Have you ever heard of a married couple dying together? Or close together?" Tara had asked. They'd gone back to the living room, the soul still on the coffee table, though stuffed back in its pouch. "Like the husband dies on a Tuesday and by Friday, the wife is gone too? Couples who just...are so tied to each other they don't want to stick around when the other passes away?"

The Slayer had heard of it—it was the sort of rot that made for feel-good headlines in between stories of blowing apart dusty countries. The old marrieds who followed each other everywhere, even in death. Apparently, that was something called a soul bond, and, by all accounts, it should've been impossible for William to have managed it in the amount of time he'd been stuffed inside that orb. But manage it he had, and as long as Buffy was on this plane of existence, the soul wouldn't go anywhere.

"And I don't know what that means," Tara had prattled on. "That the soul is Spike's so it's tied to him, and Spike is technically dead but not, and death is one of the only things that I can find that will sever the ties with a bonded soul."

"One of, meaning there are more?" Buffy had asked.

"Yeah, well..." At this, the witch had gone a bit red. "One that I know of—and that's destroying the bond entirely."

And for reasons he both didn't understand and understood all too well, Spike's ire with the soul had vanished almost at once, only to be replaced by something heavier.

"Destroying the bond," Buffy had echoed. "What...what does that mean?"

It meant some things never changed, that's what it meant.

"It means..." Tara had trailed off hopelessly and flashed Spike a look that made him wonder if she couldn't see right through him.

Which was how Spike had found himself telling Buffy what he thought—what he knew was right. He'd done a right good job, in his opinion. Made sure to keep his voice neutral, to not waver when he talked about rejecting the thing, telling the soul to sod off and that no one would give a lick if it withered and faded. Tried not to shake too much because it was bloody ridiculous, wasn't it? Wasn't like the Slayer would be giving *him* the old heave-ho, but fuck if saying the words hadn't made it feel just like that. And that had smarted a lot—more than it had a right to.

Buffy had told him that she wasn't sure he was too far removed from who he'd been in life. Truth of the matter was, Spike knew he wasn't. It was one of the reasons he resented the soul so much—it might be in the orb but it wasn't entirely. There were certain things a man couldn't outrun.

After he'd explained how to break the poor sod's bond, they'd sat there for a while, every sound in the sodding house seeming to ring through his head. Quiet had never been his strong suit.

A few minutes later, though, with a voice as firm as he'd ever heard, Buffy had said, "I won't."

"You won't?" Tara had echoed.

"No. I won't." Then Buffy's hand had been on him, her fingers lacing through his. "If the soul is bonded to me, then it's staying with me. But we'll need to find a way to keep it safe. Make sure that the orb never breaks—I know you or Will said you made it shatterproof but we need to reinforce it. Just...just make sure no matter what happens, it won't get hurt."

"Buffy, are you sure?"

Spike hadn't asked the question, but he was the one she looked at when she answered.

"I'm positive."

So that was how it was. No clue what it meant—what any of it meant—or how it'd play out in the long run. It seemed a good bet that there'd be more talk about it, probably more than he could stand, but oddly, the prospect didn't bother him.



Ole William had finally found the one woman who wouldn't turn him away. Spike didn't know if Buffy could ever understand just how much that meant to him.

But maybe she did. Stranger things had happened.

"It's sweet," Buffy told him that night when she placed the soul on the dresser, back beside the vial containing the other Spike's dust. Seemed right bizarre that she insisted on keeping that around, too, but he wasn't about to tell her to ditch it. Which drove home, more than anything, that the poet inside the orb was also inside him and always had been.

"Kinda...big," Buffy went on, "but also sweet. I like the idea that all of you loves me. Even this part—the part that doesn't know me."

Spike wrapped his arm around her waist, not sure what to say. He thought about telling her there wasn't any part of him that didn't know her, but that sounded a bit too nancyish even to his ears. As it was, when he caught her studying him, her lips quirked into a saucy little smile that just begged to be kissed off, he wagered she knew it anyway.

If she did, though, she didn't rub it in. Just rested her head against his chest and let him hold her. And he wondered perhaps if he didn't like the quiet after all, so long as she was the one to share it with him.

"I want to keep all of you here, I've decided."

"All of me?"

"Yeah. You're staying here. With me. We'll move into the big room and Dawn can have this one."

His throat went tight. "Makin' it official, then? Me moving in?"

"Otherwise my Spike collection won't be complete," Buffy agreed with a nod.

"Mhmm. Not much point in bein' a collector if you don't have the whole set."

"This is what I'm saying." She twisted in his arms and looked up at him, her eyes shining. "This okay with you?"

Spike stared down at her, taking in every line and curve. "It's bloody perfect," he replied hoarsely.

"We don't know what this soul-bonding thing means."

"Right."

"But...if it's tied to you and bonded to me...do you think maybe..."

Buffy inhaled deeply, not finishing the thought but not needing to. He saw it all over her face. The same question that had surfaced in his mind when Glinda had brought it up—one he wouldn't voice before the Slayer did. One that gave him more hope for the future to come than the sum of all the time before it.

The only thing better than having Buffy was keeping her for always—not just a few years, but for the whole of whatever was to come. The possibility that he'd never have to know the pain of losing her again if they played their cards right—if they fought the way they had this week, nothing could slow her down.

There was every chance he had it wrong, of course, but somehow, Spike knew he didn't. And that was something they'd talk about later—when she was ready.

For now, all he said was, "Forever and ever, love. That's how long you have me. However long that is."

A beat. Then another. Then Buffy gave him the sort of smile a bloke would break the universe to protect. "In the game of Hot and Cold," she murmured, "that's off-the-scales the hot."

He grinned. "Yeah?"

She nodded and tugged him down for a kiss. "The hottest," she said against his lips.

And he couldn't help but agree.