

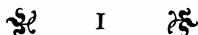
LAID

*Nailed Part 3*



HOLLY DENISE





## AND WHAT HE KNOWS YOU AIN'T HAD TIME TO LEARN

SPIKE HAD BEEN ACTING STRANGE EVER SINCE THEY'D ARRIVED IN Los Angeles, and while Buffy knew part of that was to be expected, he was seriously beginning to get on her nerves. Especially now that the whole thing was done—Angel's friend recovered, round-trip complete, and time to start thinking about the journey home. Not that she was looking forward to being in a car with a moody boyfriend for the next couple of hours, but it was better than being at the Hyperion and all the not-so-subtle looks everyone kept throwing her way.

And, okay, it wasn't that Buffy couldn't fathom *why* Spike was all bad-moody, but he so didn't need to take it out on her. She was just here doing what she'd promised she'd do once she'd discovered that Glory's expulsion spell had done more than simply remove Buffy's regularly scheduled spring apocalypse from the calendar. No matter that she and Angel weren't exactly friends at the moment, she'd felt she'd owed him the courtesy of helping recover the colleague that had been caught in the crossfire. And if Spike had a problem with that, well, that was *his* problem. No one had dragged him along for the ride.

Except, again, she actually wasn't a crazy person and knew perfectly well why Spike had insisted on coming along. It was just one of those

things they hadn't yet talked about. The last thing they hadn't yet talked about.

Now, Buffy was left staring at the elaborate staircase that led to the second-floor rooms—more specifically, *their* room—as Spike's duster swished around a corner before disappearing entirely from sight. He'd muttered something about needing a smoke and *so help her*, if he was making their room stinky and unfriendly to human lungs, she was going to lose what little part of her patience this trip hadn't already cost her. As it was, she had plenty of other things to focus on and busied herself trying to do just that. Angel's friend, for instance, was on his hands and knees, planting wet kisses on the floor of the hotel lobby.

"Oh, mama, I will never take you for granted again," he was sputtering. "My beautiful, music-having, culture-tolerating, gun-obsessed adopted home-world. You are so, so beautiful to me."

"Gross, Lorne," Cordelia said, seizing the green demon by the scruff of the neck. "Do you have any idea how covered in demon entrails that is?"

Lorne pulled a face and climbed to his feet, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "Would it kill you guys to whip out the Pine-Sol every now and then?"

"Sorry we didn't anticipate you Frenching the floors."

"Well, you should have, quite frankly, and it's not my fault that you didn't." Lorne wiped his mouth again and glanced around the lobby. "Friends," he said, looking at each of them in turn. "I know you all aren't the touchy-feely type, but if you can pardon some mush, I just need to say *thank you*, from the bottom of my heart—which, yes, is in my buttocks, but that doesn't change the sentiment one iota."

"Well, it was kind of our fault," Buffy said with a forced grin. Her PR grin, as Spike called it. "Happy to help you find your way home."

"You saved my life, little darling," he said, setting his gaze on her. It was an unnerving gaze, being all red and all, not to mention set within the face of a green-horned demon, but the past couple of days had done a lot to endear Lorne to her in ways she truly couldn't have predicted. Enough to make her feel a fresh ripple of shame for the pain

she had caused, however inadvertently, by completing a ritual that had sent him to Backwards-Land.

If anyone had told her ahead of time that would be the *only* shame she felt from having completed that ritual, well, Buffy probably would have done something drastic. The version of herself who had agreed to the sex-a-thon magic was almost foreign to the person she had become in the time since, but not so much so that she didn't remember how it felt. The things she'd thought, believed with the sort of intensity typically reserved for the worst sort of zealot.

Instead, she was here. Gazing into the red eyes of a demon she had just dimension-hopped to rescue, along with her vampire lover, who was upstairs probably working himself into a jealous rage and getting cigarette smells into the carpet and bedspread because he didn't know the most important thing. Because she hadn't told him the most important thing. Because she was a coward.

But a coward with good reason, she thought, all too aware of who was watching her at the moment. Not Cordelia and Gunn, who couldn't care less about her love life, or former watcher Wesley, who, though appalled at the start, had quickly become more focused on the whole rescue mission than the social life of a slayer he hadn't been responsible for in nearly three years. Not their other Pylean rescue—the human cave-dweller who had MacGyvered some pretty ingenious contraptions on the other side of the portal. Not Willow and Tara, either, who had tagged along to help open said portal. The only looks they were giving her were of the *what now* variety.

No, as all things seemed to, the story began and ended with Angel. The reason Spike had stomped upstairs, the reason he was in a crappy mood, and the reason he'd been riding her nerves ever since she'd volunteered to make this trip. Spike was secure in pretty much all the ways that mattered, except those involving Angel, and as much as that bothered her, she knew he'd earned it. She also knew she hadn't done anything to make things better; not too long ago, Angel had swooped in and seeded her with enough doubt that she'd nearly broken up with Spike over literally nothing.

Maybe she shouldn't have told Spike as much. Even now, she didn't know what had possessed her...except perhaps the intense, gnawing

guilt that she had let Angel into her head at all. That she had been ready to throw away what they had over the possibility that Spike might decide to get back on the murder wagon someday. Like anything could be that simple. But she'd felt she owed him her honesty. Felt that he deserved to know the thoughts that had run through her head when she'd discovered his crypt vacant. After everything they had been through, the pieces of himself he'd given over without hesitation, how he'd surrendered to her wholly in his determination to prove he could be someone she trusted, it was only right that he know what it meant to be her vampire boyfriend. That he could radiate love, drown her in it, and some part of her would always doubt. Would hold her back from surrendering in kind. Would wonder when the other shoe would drop. Would wait for the day when he proved she'd been right to keep a part of herself walled off, unscalable.

She'd told him, knowing how it would hurt and hating it would hurt, might even end them, but believing wholeheartedly that lying to him, even by omission, would only do more damage in the end. After all, he'd proven himself willing to be tortured to death, nailed to a literal cross by a bunch of holy knights who had been trying to provoke him to monstrosity, and he'd held back, proving he had the sort of faith in her that she hadn't had in him. He'd chosen an excruciating death over ripping his way to freedom. He'd chosen *Buffy*—chosen to show her yet again what it meant to be loved by him.

And after he'd recovered enough to start patrolling with her again, first with a limp owing to the healing holes in his feet, Buffy hadn't been able to shove her remorse for the bad thoughts down far enough to keep them from bubbling up. Tainting every smile, every kiss, every tender tuck of her hair behind her ear. Making her wonder what he would do, how he would react, if he knew what the person he loved most in the world had thought he was doing when he'd been earning those wounds.

So no, Buffy couldn't be surprised that Spike had invited himself along, knowing what he knew. It had only taken Angel ten minutes during the last visit to poison her thoughts about their relationship—no way was Spike going to sit at home, twiddling his thumbs while she took off on a journey that could last weeks, alone with the man who

had been the love of her life with nothing to do between rescue missions but listen to more reasons why Spike was a bad idea. Of course he wouldn't have allowed that. There was no reason why he should.

It was over now at least. Job done. Demon rescued from his home-world dimension, though not without casualties.

She just didn't know what those casualties were yet. If the last one had been her relationship.

"Little Miss Buffet," Lorne said, snapping her back to herself as he moved forward to sweep her into a hug, "I cannot thank you enough for coming to my rescue."

"It was nothing," Buffy replied, because that was how Buffy was expected to reply. All manners and grace, but Lorne had a way of making it easy, something she couldn't have anticipated. "I've always wanted to go to a renaissance faire. Just never having the time or, you know, opportunity."

"If that was a ren faire, I think someone goofed," Gunn drawled, favoring her with the same I-guess-you're-all-right look he'd been giving her ever since she and Spike had rolled into town. "Or maybe I was right the first time, and it's just a white folk thing I ain't ever gonna get."

"I don't know," Cordelia replied almost wistfully. "Up until the end when they wanted me to com-shuck the hunky not-quite-human-but-human-in-all-the-ways-that-matter guy to take my visions and stuff, I was having a pretty good time."

"You know you were just a figurehead. They were using you."

"Whatever. I still abolished slavery."

Gunn rolled his eyes, but in the sort of way that telegraphed how unbothered he was. And more than that—how much he loved Cordelia. It wasn't a big thing but still something Buffy couldn't help but note with wonder. The girl she'd survived high school with was very much not the same person as the woman standing beside her in Princess Leia skankwear.

"Yeah, whatever, Mr. Lincoln," Gunn drawled, clapping her on the shoulder as he passed. "But next ren faire, the brothers better be in charge or I ain't gonna bother showing up."

“And if it takes place in Pylea, wild horses couldn’t drag me back,” Lorne agreed loudly, looking at Buffy still with open fondness that almost made her uncomfortable. “Seriously, doll-face, if there’s anything you ever need, well, ask Angel first ’cause I’m guessing slayer-sized favors are going to be more his specialty than mine. Unless the favor you want is the secret to pouring a perfect sea breeze. Then, strudel, you can come straight to Uncle Lorne and he’ll set you up.”

But then there were worse things than being hero-worshiped by a demon who could help see the future. Buffy grinned, allowing herself to relax. “And you’re welcome to Sunnydale at any time. Especially when we’re about to fight to the death. It’d be useful having an inkling of what plans are worse than others.”

“I’ll have to make a day trip at least,” he agreed. “But first priority now—shower. Hot. Extra. And maybe sleeping for the next forty-eight hours. I cannot tell you how much I’ve missed running water and lumbar support.” He offered a wink, but was gone before she could reply, moving with speed that shouldn’t be surprising to the staircase. Not that she blamed him—she wasn’t even an empath demon but could sense the pending explosion. She just didn’t know whose it would be.

“So, Buffy,” Willow said in a forcibly bright tone, tugging on her attention next. “Now that the, you know, ren faire is over and we’re back on this side of reality, are we heading back tonight?”

And that was all it took to have her tumbling back to earth. Buffy very much wanted to leave. The past couple of days had been a different kind of hell—sometimes exhilarating, some terrifying, and some downright funny. If she lived a thousand years, she doubted she’d forget the joyous expression that had bloomed across Spike’s face once he’d realized the Pylean sun wasn’t lethal to him...or the blows he’d nearly come to with Angel when her ex had also gotten wistful about the sunlight he no longer enjoyed. Why no longer? Because Angel had decided the Gem of Amara was too easy a solution to the whole how-to-solve-a-problem-like-daylight conundrum.

And that had just been the first of many disappointing revelations she’d had to contend with over the last few days. Now she was back and her debt fulfilled, and yes, god, she wanted to rush to the car and

tuck into the backseat and just sleep until sometime next week. Or better yet, she wanted to have never come here at all, because her ex was a giant vampire-shaped baby she let get to her when she shouldn't. Unfortunately, that didn't magically make this her decision. "Your car," she said softly. "Your call."

"That's why I was asking you. 'Cause if you wanna go to sleep in your own bed, you'll need someone who's not completely wiped from portal magic voting on when we leave." Willow offered a weak smile, the sort that betrayed just how exhausted she was. And she had a right to be—she and Tara had been the stars of this dimension and the one they had just traveled from, first opening the door there and then grappling with the variations in the rules that governed the worlds to find the correct ingredients to bring everyone home. That was in addition to being hunted by Pyleans who were in the market for fresh human cows and then helping overturn the system that encouraged slavery. Put like that, it had been a busy couple of days.

"You guys can stay," Cordelia said, not bothering to so much as throw a look in Angel's direction to verify. "Really, you probably should. I'm beat and I didn't even do anything except be worshiped like the goddess I am."

"Yeah, looked like real hard work," Gunn agreed as he strode past her. "I'm out for now, y'all. Been real but I need some space and some sleep." He turned and locked eyes with Buffy, grinning a little. "You're all right, sis. Wish I'd known slayers were a thing when I was a kid. Felt like we were out there fighting on our lonesome this entire time."

Buffy didn't know what to say to that, so she settled for a tired smile and a nod, which was apparently all he expected, for he was gone the next second. Gunn and Cordelia had been two unexpected bright spots over the past couple of days, the former eager for information on all things slayer and the latter almost unrecognizable from her former sort of frenemy. It had also been eye-opening, watching Angel around people that weren't *her* people. Getting a glimpse of the life he'd built for himself outside of Buffy—the relationships he had and how they differed so radically from the context she was used to seeing him in. It made him seem less imposing in a way that surprised her, for she hadn't realized she thought of him as imposing until that thought had crossed

her mind. But it made a twisted sort of sense; the entire time she'd known him, he'd been this larger-than-life figure, a fount of knowledge and experience, wise and authoritative, and perceived only through Buffy's lens. He hadn't had friends in Sunnydale, so she'd been his connection to humanity. Except now he had all these other connections, and none of them seemed to regard him as Buffy had. Hell, he wasn't even the boss of the company that bore his name. No one did what he said just because he was the one who had said it.

"I think I'm going to head out, too," Cordelia said, making her way toward the hotel's rather opulent front door. "I promised Dennis it'd just be a couple of nights, and I don't wanna worry him. Guessing you'll be here tomorrow, though? Hard to drive home in the daylight with a vampire."

Crap. Buffy hadn't thought that far ahead. "Give Spike a blanket and he should be fine."

"Well, if you change your mind, we should do something non-slayage or search-and-rescue related before you head back."

She nodded even if she wasn't fully sold on the whole *staying* thing—not until she glanced back at Willow, saw her eyes drooping, and admitted defeat. It would be better for everyone if they didn't rush back, but that didn't magically make the solution of bunking at the Hyperion any easier.

As though sensing her reticence, Tara offered a soft, "Spike could drive if you want to leave tonight, couldn't he?"

"He can drive but I don't think—"

"I've seen his car," Willow argued with a scowl. "I am not letting him drive mine."

"Spike has a car?" Tara asked. "I didn't know Spike has a car."

"It's not in the best condition," Buffy agreed, hazarding a glance in Angel's direction just in case her ex felt the need to contribute to the conversation. Thankfully, he seemed to be doing what he could to ignore the fact that they were still there. "But good to have around, especially when it's time for Dawn to start driving lessons. If it gets beat up, you won't notice."

There were also the private driving lessons he'd been giving her for the last few weeks, but she thought it might be best not to bring those

up, as they tended to bicker so much that the only recourse was to climb onto each other's laps and work out their differences in ways that would definitely be frowned upon by highway patrol. Buffy could say she had improved since taking on those lessons, but not enough to brave a multi-hour drive home, especially when the first part of that drive would be getting out of Los Angeles. She was just as tired as everyone else. She only wished she weren't.

"Oh my god, stay," Cordelia said, waving a hand. "It won't kill you."

Easy for her to say. She had a place that was not here to retreat for the night. Still, Buffy didn't have an argument that wouldn't sound stupid or selfish.

"It is okay if we stay, right?" Tara asked once Cordelia had left, her gaze fixed on Angel, who hadn't done more than glower at all of them since they'd hopped through the portal. "I didn't—we didn't ask. If you'd rather us go—"

"No, it's fine," Angel said in a very *it's not fine* voice, but he wasn't looking at Tara. He was looking at Buffy now, a look she knew both well and not at all, for somehow she understood what it meant despite the fact that she didn't think she'd ever had the sort of conversation with him that she was about to have. "We have the room, and there's no need to hurry when you're tired."

Willow offered a flat smile as thanks, then rubbed a hand along Tara's shoulders and they were heading toward the stairs the next second. And with Wesley off making their Pylean refugee comfortable, that left Buffy alone with Angel for the first true time since he'd come to visit following her mother's funeral.

Since she'd allowed him to do the sort of damage that had nearly ended her relationship. And that's what this all came down to, ultimately. That she'd almost let Angel have the final say in who she dated. Who she loved. As though his opinion mattered as much as what she had actually experienced for herself—as though he could tell her who Spike was when she saw every day with her own two eyes who Spike was. When Spike was there regardless, even when she hurt him the way she knew she had, showing her over and over again that he was someone who didn't believe in empty promises. Who didn't give up.

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Who still had something to prove. Who still loved her, despite that hurt.

And even if she had done the sort damage that was irreparable, that didn't change what she had to do now. For herself if no one else.

But hopefully for both of them.

## TO LIVE MY LIFE THE WAY I WANT

He was going to drive himself out of his sodding mind.

It was his own fault, too, which didn't make anything better. He was the one who had insisted on hitching along for the ride, on going where Buffy went even if it meant subjecting himself to days of Angel's company. He was the one who had promised he would be all right—that he could swallow all the rot and the resentment and play like none of it mattered. That he didn't care about the poison Angel had filled Buffy's head with or the fact that she'd let her head get so full in the first place. No, he was the wanker who had sworn all that mattered was she'd decided it *was* rot. Never mind that convincing her had involved Spike letting a bunch of holy wankers string him up on a cross while trying to carve Dawn's location out of him. Put like that, he was a lucky bloke. All that had stood between him and being kicked to the curb by the woman he loved was a matter of self-sacrifice. She'd needed a demonstration.

Spike cursed, turning again to stride back up the strip of carpet he was going to have worn down to its fibers by the time they left. He just barely managed to keep from aiming a kick at the dresser, too, if only because he knew what she'd say when she finally stopped gabbing down there, making nice with the bastard who had gotten her all

twisted up in the first place. Safe money was on the bet that a lecture was coming either way he sliced it—it wasn't exactly like he'd been on his best behavior while hitching along that rescue mission. They were likely to have it out and then...

And then what?

*Then it might be over.*

He stopped pacing.

It wasn't the first time he'd thought it, but the punch it landed was always the same. Abrupt, brutal, a fist flying toward his face from out of true nowhere the way nothing else had ever struck. For that was what it had felt like when she'd told him. Spike still bearing the scars of what had ultimately been unimaginative, however agonizing torture, his bones creaking when he bent certain ways, the holes that had been driven through his hands and feet on their way to healing, but covered in skin that was too thin, pink, and tender. She'd sped along the recovery process nicely by volunteering her blood, and he'd been grateful. Less so after he'd sussed out that much had been out of guilt. Something about learning what she'd thought him capable of, what she'd been planning to do, had made the gesture less meaningful. Go bloody figure.

She hadn't wanted to, she'd promised. The thought had been cutting her up. But if it was inevitable, and it had seemed like it might be, then oughtn't she do it now before their relationship became even more serious? Before she had a chance to forget what he was altogether, give him the opportunity to blindsight her with the monstrosity that would always be there below the surface, waiting to be let out? At least that was the reasoning Angel had left her with—that Spike was a bloody ticking time bomb she could never fully trust. And she knew it, too, on some level. Otherwise, why would she bother with things like regular reassurances he wasn't getting his eats fresh off the tap? What kind of example was she setting for Dawn if she remained with someone who might one day prove what a mistake it was thinking monsters could be tamed?

It made a sort of terrible sense. A logic he could follow, if only because he knew her and how logic in the world of Buffy worked. In the end, he'd been saved from certain heartache through his ability to

withstand torture and pull his punches, to restrain his inner demon even when cornered by a bunch of holy wankers who fancied putting holes in him. That had demonstrated to her that Angel had been wrong, and wasn't that just swell? A load off. Never mind the bit of gambling Buffy had done, the things she'd been thinking and considering and damn near doing without involving him in the conversation at any point. What consideration was there for the monster whose heart you were about to break?

Spike glanced at the mirror that hung above the dresser, saw the empty room it reflected back. Felt the stir in his gut, in his chest, the anticipation of pain and more than pain. The certainty of what was going to happen tonight, tomorrow, the next day, sometime next week, maybe in a year, maybe longer, but *would* happen, and there was fuck all he could do about it. He could let himself be strung up, could go on rescue missions to save the chum of a man he hated, could be a part of a bloody revolution and come back no worse for wear, but there would always be something missing. Something lacking. And that something was him.

He swallowed back a familiar burn, the sting of tears, then swore and rolled his head back because yeah, he was a pathetic git. It was all he ever had been. And he'd had a good run the last few months—thought he might have actually done some good, too. Not in the grand sense, because he was too deficient to care about that, but for Buffy. He'd been there for her in ways that had made a difference. Been there when her mum died, done his best to do all the things he would have liked himself, back in the day. All the things he'd never gotten because, well, that was the monster again. A crime he'd committed against them both.

But still, despite his woeful lack of capacity and experience, Spike liked to think that he'd made something better for Buffy when the loss had been at its rawest, its freshest, while she'd been in that fog that followed, the upturning of her world into something else, and just when she'd started to breathe freely. That he'd given her enough to not survive it, because she didn't need him for that, but to keep pushing forward. To allow herself some grace while the world reshaped itself around the void Joyce Summers had left behind.

Hopefully she'd remember that when it was all over. Enough not to think she'd been barmy for trying this out at all. Giving him a shot to prove to her that he could love just as well without a soul as others could with one.

Because that's what it came down to, wasn't it? The thing he was missing and would always be missing, unless he decided to hit up the witches for a curse. Or see if any of the legends of soul quests had any merit to them. There was rumored to be a bloke in Uganda that would put seekers through their bloody paces to see if they had what it took to win back a soul they had lost. Even closer was another set of trials he'd heard about, though his source had been Dru so he wasn't sure how reliable that was—something about how *Daddy* had tried to save *grandmum* and hadn't been able because she'd already won her second life and that was why the big bad lawyers had recruited Dru for the job. If neither of those yielded results, he could pursue something even more nebulous—a poker game in Vegas with a bloody big buy-in but Spike hadn't given that one too much thought. If he had to saddle himself with a soul, he'd do it in a way that came down to proving his worth rather than his gambling skills, and *bugger all*, the fact that his thoughts had led him here again just pissed him off.

Not that that was anything new. These things had been living in his head, bloody haunting him, ever since Buffy had confessed the truth. Quietly at first, as he'd done what he could to put all else behind him and pretend that her distrust was reasonable or something other than gut-wrenching. Tried to talk himself into understanding why she'd felt the way she had, why she'd been ready to put an end to everything on a sodding *maybe*. The fact that he knew for certain what would make her understand just how much he loved her and what that love meant—that he could do it, pull it off, turn himself into the sort of person she didn't have to worry about trusting—had smarted as well, because he'd already sacrificed his inner monster. Had already harnessed himself better than any sodding soul ever could simply on the merit of his word, and why the bleeding hell wasn't that enough?

Only, he knew the answer. Of course he did.

So yeah, when Angel had called and told Buffy to jump and she'd asked how high, Spike had decided to go along for the ride. Mostly just

because he didn't think he could stomach the not knowing, but also because it would put him here. In a place where there might be a way to prove to her once and for all what it meant to be loved by him. Just how much of Spike he was willing to give up—what he was willing to do to show her the words, what he felt, that none of it was window dressing. Worse case scenario. The bloody nuclear option—the thing she and Angel and the whole sodding world would have no choice but to accept.

Christ, he never would have thought he'd end up here. Still wasn't sure how that had happened. But at the same time, by the same bloody token, he wondered why he was surprised at all. Why he hadn't seen it as inevitable from the moment Buffy had come into his crypt, shared her plan to expel a hellgod from this world and what it would involve. There was no way he'd ever had a chance of walking out of that unscathed; the fact that he'd been allowed as much of her as he had, gotten this time with her, been at her side, in her bed, in her heart if not in possession of it, was more than a creature like him should dare to hope.

Yet that was who he was and always had been. Someone who bloody dared.

And now he'd be someone who dared to do the impossible. Now as in *now*, before Buffy had a chance to come up here and shatter his heart for good after she finished hearing the piece he knew Angel had to say to her before he let her out of his sight. The next twist of convenient argument that would have her turned around on him again. Angel could make a case against a demon but not against a soul.

Spike sighed, cast another look at the mirror and its empty reflection. Much as he'd like to just throw himself out the bloody window and scale the building to avoid the nonsense downstairs, the part of him that wasn't rubbish at coming up with plans understood that he couldn't well go on a soul quest on an empty stomach. And with time running against him, the best bet was to pilfer the fridge, hope that the blood there was still good, which meant perhaps putting himself in the line of fire before he had his soul to use as a shield. Risky, yeah, but worth that risk just to know he'd succeeded in taking at least one thing from Angel.

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And perhaps luck would be on his side just this once. Perhaps he'd go downstairs and find Buffy and Angel too involved with each other to pay him any notice at all.

That was how Spike ever got his way, after all. He had to lose to win.



For a girl who was about to have an argument with someone whose track record included regularly shattering her heart, Buffy felt oddly calm. She had arrived at the last rush. The final hurdle. Spike might be upstairs stinking up their room with his cigarettes, cursing her and Angel both, furious that she'd lingered behind, believing that when she walked through the door, it would be to end things for good. One more lecture from the great arbiter of her life to sound the death knell in the relationship she'd let him believe they could have. Hurting himself with the possibility of what might be coming.

She'd let that happen and let that happen and let that happen. It would only stop if she stopped.

*So what will it be, Buffy? Are you ready to stop?*

She was more than ready. And the world was about to find out.

“Thanks,” Angel said at last. He'd shifted on his feet, the movement both casual and deliberate, so he was angled toward her while still maintaining a distance. “For helping us get Lorne back.”

Buffy nodded, all politeness. “Least we could do.”

“There we disagree. The least you could do was not bring *him* along.”

The fact that she'd seen it coming didn't make it any easier to swallow. “Do we really have to do this again? Hasn't it already all been said?”

“You mean can you waltz in here with your evil boyfriend and expect me to keep my mouth shut? No, turns out you can't.”

“Angel—”

“Except I did, Buffy. I kept my mouth shut the entire time we were there.”

“That's bullshit.” Anger was starting to burn through the calm, an

anger she welcomed. Less uncomfortable than all the other feelings she'd been living with, and definitely something she could mold into a weapon. "Come on, if we're going to do this, let's do it for real. *No bullshit.*"

"Just a wonderful influence he's been on you."

"Are you kidding me right now?"

"I am not. You never used to talk like this."

"You're seriously going to lecture me on my language." She might have laughed if she weren't holding in a scream. "You know what? Maybe I was wrong and I don't need to do this."

"Do what?"

"The closure thing."

"Closure."

"Why else do you think I'm down here?"

"I don't know, Buffy. I stopped getting you a long time ago."

"I'm not sure you ever got me," she shot back, her cheeks burning. "But hey. Look on the bright side. We'll both be out of your hair gel by tomorrow night."

Angel rolled his eyes. "Are you going to stop channeling your boyfriend anytime soon? If we *are* going to do this, I'd rather do it you and me."

"It was a joke."

"A joke *he* would make."

"He *is* my boyfriend, Angel. Couples tend to rub off on each other." Something she'd only recently discovered was true for other people, not just her, and damn if that wasn't eye-opening. That while she'd accepted Angel's ideas as her own—mirrored the conclusions he'd reached about their relationship without ever fully understanding them—Angel had never done the same for her, consciously or subconsciously. Her language had never become his language. In fact, she was fairly certain she would have passed out from shock if he'd ever used the word *wiggins*. And the same for Riley—she'd absorbed military terms into her vocabulary and he hadn't been able to separate her from her calling. The most she could say was that being with her had gotten him out of the army, only no, it hadn't. He'd gone right back, and the part of him okay with capturing, exper-

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imenting on, and torturing sentient beings had never gone away. It had just gone quiet.

Then there was Spike. Redefining her everything.

“Great,” Angel intoned. “Great. Spike’s rubbing off on you. What the world absolutely needs is more of that.”

Buffy’s patience, which had already been teetering, abruptly fell off the ledge. “He showed up, didn’t he? And despite all the crap you threw at him, he didn’t hesitate in going all in while trying to save *your* friend.”

“All the crap *I* threw at him?”

“Don’t even pretend like you were on your best behavior. You started sniping at him the second we got here.”

“Again, he’s the one who chose to come.”

“I wanted him to,” Buffy shot back. “He’s strong, he’s reliable, and he has my back. If I’m going into an unknown situation, you’re damn right I want Spike with me.”

“I just don’t get it.”

“That much is way clear.”

“Not just that, Buffy, I don’t get this. And believe me, I’ve tried.”

“Yeah, you’re all about the effort-making.”

“It’s just that after what happened with us,” he said, speaking as though she had not, “I never thought you would be this...this careless. The Buffy I know would never try another relationship with a vampire, let alone one as...volatile as Spike. Someone without a soul—”

“Oh good, can we talk about this a lot more? I am really iffy on where you stand on the whole *soul* thing.”

“How can you make light of it?” Angel snapped, his eyes flashing. “I don’t get you.”

“I know you don’t, and not just because it’s the second time you’ve said it in the last two minutes.” And the umpteenth time he’d said it over the course of their knowing each other, but no sense bringing that up.

“Then—”

“Because I can’t keep basing the choices I make in my relationships on what you want for me.” Buffy crossed her arms, her heart thumping. She hadn’t meant to say that—hadn’t meant to say any of it, actually—

but now that it was out, it felt good. Right. The natural culmination of her resentment and uncertainty, the way he'd played on those vulnerabilities and nearly cost her something she knew damn well she didn't want to live without. That she had almost sabotaged herself because of the Angel who lived in her head rather than anything Spike had done to prove his monstrosity.

And that was the crux. Months after the ritual that had convinced her to give Spike a chance, and the obstacles she'd expected to confront, the ones she'd believed wholeheartedly would make themselves known the more she relaxed into the relationship, simply weren't there. In fact, the only obstacles that existed were the ones she'd invented in anticipation of their arrival. That was not lost on her. Nothing was.

"I left you so you could have a normal life," Angel said, his voice low and strained. As though speaking the words cost him something. "Do you have any idea how hard that was for me? It went against... It was the last thing I wanted to do, but it was the right call. The call I had to make in order to give you what you deserved."

"Oh good. More bullshit."

"Buffy—"

"You left because you didn't want to be with me," she retorted, then shrugged at the hurt look he shot at her. "What? It's the truth. If you wanted to be with me, you would have found a way. You would have listened to me when I told you what I wanted. You would have stayed and fought."

"He's convinced you that love is being selfish, then. That's fantastic."

"How? How is it selfish?"

"Because you're more than this." He was animated again—his expression cracking, his anger shining through the way it had only once before to her memory. Only then he'd been furious with her for coming to his town and asserting how great her new life was while balancing the latest in a series of violations committed by someone who had previously shot Angel with an arrow tipped with a very specific and deadly poison. He'd told her to get out, that they weren't supposed to see each other anymore, and had somehow managed to

make her feel like shit for having had the audacity to worry about him in the first place. “You deserve better than to be some vampire’s chew toy between apocalypses, and what’s more, that’s what you wanted. You wanted a life outside of slaying, something more than someone who couldn’t go with you into the sunlight. Who—”

“And whose fault is that?”

“What?”

“The whole sunlight thing. I seem to remember sending you something that would’ve made that section of the What’s Best for Buffy speech moot.” Buffy took a step forward, her pulse pounding so hard she could feel the beat in her throat. “I sent that to you, but you haven’t been using it. Clearly. You were way too happy frolicking in the Pylean sun for someone who’s catching plenty of rays on this side of the portal.”

He stared at her for a long, hard moment, then swallowed. “I destroyed it.”

“You destroyed it.”

“Yes.”

“Why on earth would you destroy it?”

“Why on earth would you give it to me?”

“That’s the first reasonable thing I’ve heard you ask in over a year, you know that? What the hell was I thinking?” She barked out the sort of hard laugh that made her chest ache. “One moment of happiness and you’re an unkillable psychopath who, last chance you got, nearly sucked the world into hell. So yeah, chalk one up to idiot Buffy being an idiot putting Angel first. Kinda like that time I nearly killed a slayer to save your life.”

“That’s not fair. I didn’t ask for that.”

“No, and that’s the point, isn’t it?”

Angel blinked at her. “The point is that with Spike, you have all the reasons it didn’t work with us in addition to the reason of *it’s Spike*. Evil vampire with impulse control issues who will inevitably cause you pain of some sort. Could you live with yourself if he got someone hurt? Killed? Can you really trust him around your sister or—”

“Stop assuming that Spike is *you*, Angel.”

“Well, no, he’s very clearly not. And—”

“And that’s why it’s working,” she snapped, her temper reaching critical levels, but the words rushed out and they felt good—hard and righteous—and given the stunned expression on Angel’s face, had landed their punch just as well. “It’s working because he’s *not* you. He doesn’t keep things from me. Doesn’t leave me guessing what he’s thinking or feeling. He’s already as evil as he’s going to get so no worries that I’m going to wake up some morning to a version of him I’ve never met before. He gets me, unlike Riley and as we’ve established, way unlike you. He understands about being the Slayer—”

“And I didn’t?”

“The way Spike does?” The fire in her chest began to rise, scratching along her lungs and up her throat, making her skin burn, but a good burn. A burn that she usually felt on the battlefield, the sort that drove her to victory. “No, you didn’t. It’s not... I’m not *performing* for him when we’re together. I’m just me. All me. With my crazy and my girly stuff and my rambling and I can talk to him about pretty much anything without boring him to death. When I ran out of tampons last month, guess who volunteered to make the emergency run to the store?”

Somehow, she was both surprised and woefully unsurprised when Angel flinched—like yeah, guys didn’t like hearing about periods, but he was a vampire, for crying out loud. Being reminded that she bled once a month should not invoke that reaction. No two vampires were the same, granted, but as Spike was extra invested in when she had her period, confronting the idea that anyone else might not be was just...weird.

But she decided not to dwell. There were other points to make. “He takes me to movies he thinks I’ll like,” she went on. “He’s even started making book recommendations and holy moly, Angel, I like to read. I never knew that. Like actual books, not magazine articles or fashion tips—but *also* magazine articles and fashion tips because why the hell not? But you know what I like to read?”

“What does this have to do with anything?”

“Me. It all has to do with *me*, that’s what. And what I like to read is romance. Guaranteed happy ending where all the bad guys are caught

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or stopped and the girls get sex and love and men who understand them.”

“I don’t see what your taste in literature has to do with Spike.”

“Of course you don’t. Because much in the same way you don’t get me, you don’t get Spike, either.” She held up a hand before he could sputter a response. “And that’s why we wouldn’t work. You left because you couldn’t go in the sunlight, because I’d age and you wouldn’t, because we couldn’t be physical—you left for a lot of reasons and you told me they were for me. Maybe even you believed it. I know I did when you said it. But the real reason we won’t work is *this*. It’s you assuming what I should think or believe or do and making me responsible for those assumptions. It’s you deciding what I want without considering or even asking me to weigh in. I’m with Spike because with Spike, I don’t have to be anything but me. Because he asked me to give him a chance to show me what it’s like to be loved by him, and that’s what he’s done. That’s all he’s done every day since I said yes, and the only people who have ever made me doubt this relationship were people who aren’t in it.”

“Don’t do that.”

“What?”

Angel narrowed his eyes. “You have doubts about you and Spike, they’re *your* doubts. If they didn’t exist, there’s nothing I could say that would—”

“Stop.”

“Stop what? Telling you what you already know?”

“No, stop pretending like you had nothing to do with what *you* did to me. That you had no part in making me like this.”

“You can’t keep blaming me, Buffy. At some point, you have to accept responsibility for yourself.”

Buffy’s mouth fell open but the words had been punched out of her, leaving her to gag on air and indignation. It probably only lasted a second or two, but it felt longer—standing there, agog, staring at Angel and willing him to hear the insult, if not the hypocrisy. But if he did, he didn’t let it show, just gazed back at her as though daring her to contradict him.

Despite what he’d put her through, the pain and the heartache and

the guilt and everything else she'd ever felt or thought about him or herself as a result of loving him, Buffy had only truly hated Angel once. It hadn't lasted—had just taken understanding that what she'd walked in on hadn't been what it seemed. That Angel hadn't attacked her mother after she'd invited him into her home, trusted him in her private space. Even fleeting as it had been, though, she remembered the potency of that hate. How it had consumed her inside out, bolstered by her feelings of complicity. The horror that she had allowed it to happen at all, knowing what she knew about the world she lived in. That she'd been manipulated, lied to, that her good faith had been taken for granted hadn't crossed her mind then. Whatever happened to her mom would be her fault, and she could put all her self-hatred on Angel, too. Hope that staking him would help make up for her short-sightedness.

That had been then, though. And what she felt now was not the fury of a child who had been lied to. It was the fury of a woman who had grown up believing that lie, staring down the person who had packaged and sold it in the first place. Made a convincing enough argument that she had let it go unchallenged for years.

Not anymore.

And somehow, when she managed to find her words again, she didn't scream them. She found her calm. "What exactly do I have to take responsibility for?"

"Exactly what I said," Angel replied in his Angel way. "If you have doubts about your relationship, maybe you should stop blaming others for making you face them and ask yourself why they exist in the first place."

"Doubts like what? Like that my vampire boyfriend might hide things from me? Sanitize huge swaths of his past and gloss over others? Or maybe that I'll wake up one day and he'll have decided to get back on the people diet, with an extra side of torture Buffy as a treat." She crossed her arms. "That I'll do something, say something, in a relationship I'm already incredibly insecure about because I'm just a kid and he's had *all* this experience and maybe, sure, I'm not like other girls but I'm also not *not* like other girls. I bleed the same, and when I break, I break the same too. And maybe sometimes I

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actually *want* to be like other girls. Just like them, actually. I want to share things that aren't shop talk. Maybe I just want to complain about something boring and normal, and I want the person I'm with not to look like he's bored with me because I'm not always about the next apocalypse."

"You're still doing it. You're still making it about me."

"Because it is about you, Angel. Every thought I've had, every doubt, every time I've wondered when the other shoe will drop with Spike, it's not because of anything he's done or said or made me think he might do—it's because I already lived through it once with you." Buffy stepped forward, not taking her eyes off him. Wanting, *needing* this done. Needing him to understand even a little, despite however much she knew he never would. "I was young with you. Hell, I'm still young, but not so much in slayer years. The things I think to worry about now aren't things I thought of then because I didn't know. Because you made it so I *had* to know. But the thing is, Angel, I've been doing this apples to apples thing with you and Spike when that is supremely unfair to him."

Angel blinked. "To him," he repeated.

"Yes, to him," she said. "See, because you had a soul to lose. Spike doesn't. It was a soul that was forced upon you by magic, and magic? Not the most reliable thing out there. Even Willow, who has gotten pretty damn powerful, still has spectacular flubs. I never thought to ask about your curse, to wonder if it was like every curse in the history of fairy tales in that it could be broken. And yeah, that was my bad. It was also Giles's bad. Most of all, though, it was yours. You had more than a century to learn everything you could about the curse and its conditions—"

"You've got to be kidding me."

"By expecting you to take some responsibility of your own? I can see how you'd feel that way."

"All I *do* is take responsibility, Buffy! That's why I left in the first place. To take responsibility. To *be* responsible. You have no idea what I gave up—"

"You keep saying that."

"Because it's true!" he snapped. "I gave up... God, I gave up

being *human* for you. The chance to be together, really, because I knew that I would get you killed. That you were—”

But that was it. Buffy wasn't listening anymore. She couldn't, not with her ears ringing the way they were. Not with her heart thumping so hard she thought it might burst free of her chest a la Ridley Scott, her blood pounding her temples at a rhythm that made her head feel like it might just give up and cave in on itself.

She didn't know how long it lasted—ten seconds, a minute, five and a half hours—before she flexed her fingers just to reassure herself they were still there, even if they felt distant and numb. Slowly, sound began to filter back through the shrill, take the form of a voice she knew and, at this moment, was pretty sure she hated as it molded around words meant to explain the awful thing he'd just said. Something about blood and a prophecy and he'd been human for a whole day and Buffy had been with him and there had been ice cream but then no, he'd had to take it back for her own good. Another decision made without her knowledge, this time without even her memory of having had the chance to know it was being made. A burden Angel carried all on his own because he was so *responsible*.

And then came another thought—not a new one, not a revelation in the making, but something she'd known for a while now. Something she'd been holding onto, clutching close to her chest, unwilling to let anyone else see, all because it scared the crap out of her. Because *this* was what she was risking in admitting it. The sort of pain that, even if it didn't break her, didn't shatter her, could be felt through the echoes of time regardless. Angel was three years in her rearview window and he could still do this. Still make her feel this. Giving that power to anyone was terrifying in its own right, especially knowing how it had been used before.

But Spike wasn't Angel, and she knew that. Among other things, Spike would never have done this to her.

It was one of the many reasons why she loved him.

Angel was still talking. Or his mouth was moving, at least, so Buffy assumed that meant sound was spilling out of it, but she wasn't paying attention to the shape it took. It didn't matter. None of it mattered. She was through standing here trying to justify herself—of letting him

have this much of her mental real estate, of arguing with him at all. They would never be on even footing so long as she kept adhering to the lines he'd drawn. Kept playing by his rules. Waiting around to have a conversation that honestly, she didn't owe him at all. Owing was something that happened between couples and that stopped when those couples became exes.

The only person she owed right now was upstairs, and she'd let him be there by himself long enough.

So Buffy turned, Angel still in mid-whatever, and started toward the staircase. It took him a few seconds of continued whatevering to notice she was moving away, and then a clipped, "Buffy, we're not finished here," that she figured she only heard because the cadence of the original whatever had been interrupted.

"I am," she replied without slowing down.

"You're not going to say anything?"

"Oh, I'm going to say a lot of things," she retorted, still not breaking her stride. "Just not to you."

"You can't just—"

"And yet here I go. Watch me as I *just*." Buffy did stop once she reached the stairs, though. Not wanting to but figuring this was one of those things she had to do to make sure he understood how over this was. "Let me put this as plainly as possible so there isn't any confusion. I'm done. I'm done with you, with this, with *us*, this play you've been putting on ever since *you* broke up with *me* where I owe you anything for having the foresight to get out of my life before you could do more damage. You were right in the sewer—not for the right reasons, but right overall. I do deserve more than a freakshow. I deserve to be with someone I love who loves me so much he'd put up with all this"—she gestured at the lobby, at him, at the whole everything that encapsulated whatever her relationship with Angel had become—"just because I insisted on a makegood *for you* after I did what was needed to save the world for the thousandth time. And *he* deserves not to be punished because once upon a time, when I was young and very stupid, I fell in love with someone I let control way too much of my life. Spike and I will find somewhere else to sleep tonight. If you have any decency,

you'll let Willow and Tara get the rest they need. We'll be by tomorrow night to pick them up and head home."

And without awaiting a response, without bothering to see exactly how those words landed, Buffy continued up the stairs at a pace. Not breathing until she was on the landing. Not smiling until she had turned a corner.

And doing her best not to gasp in surprise when she crashed, quite literally, into her very stunned boyfriend.

## TRY TO SET THE NIGHT ON FIRE

LISTENING IN ON CONVERSATIONS WAS THE SORT OF THING A soulless creature such as himself would find acceptable, even if that hadn't been what he'd set out to do. The fact that the only reason he'd left their room at all to grab some nosh before setting out on a soul quest was incidental. He'd stopped the second he'd realized that Buffy was having a go at her ex and lingered there, evil prick, and listened as it unfolded.

And Christ, Spike couldn't will himself to be sorry. Not after everything she'd said. Everything he'd heard. Hell, he hadn't even been able to convince his legs to carry him somewhere else as Buffy moved to the staircase. He'd stood stock still, knowing full bloody well she'd turn the corner and run right into him, that she'd know he knew, knew everything, and as much fun as it would have been to watch her try to say it all over again, that wasn't them and it never had been. They had gotten this far being honest, hadn't they? Even when it would've been easier, less painful, to swallow down truths or pretend those truths didn't exist.

Buffy loved him. She'd said it—he'd heard her say it. She loved him and he didn't want to pretend he didn't know. Or hell, that he was anyone other than the exact sort of bloke that would stop and soak in

the soundtrack of the woman he loved taking the mickey out of Angel's righteous arse. Especially now, practically vibrating as he was with a renewed sense of being and purpose. Gone was the anger and resentment; gone was the bloody certainty that he should sacrifice what was left of himself out of a means of avoiding heartbreak. Now, Spike felt faintly like he had detached from his body. That his feet were just barely skimming the floor of the hallway, his head blessedly absent the pressure that had been building steadily ever since Buffy had told him about Angel's cemetery-side visit.

And she was staring at him and he was staring at her, his ears ringing with the thundering of her heart and the rush of her pulse, Buffy on full display for him as she never had been. All cards on the table, all secrets out, true equals at last.

Spike had no concept of how long they stood like that, staring each other down, listening, waiting, but finally Buffy moved. Tried for a smile, nervous and sweet and so full he thought he might just start sobbing like an infant.

“So,” she said hoarsely, that grin still in place, “how much of that did you hear?”

“How much do you want to say again?”

“All of it, then? You heard all of it?”

Christ, she was nervous. Buffy was *nervous*, and she never had been before. Not because of him. Not even when she'd stormed into his crypt all those months ago to ask him to shag her out of an apocalypse. She'd been indignant, brassed, all but daring him to run his mouth—which, of course, he had—but not nervous. Just resigned to do whatever was needed in order to secure her win. To save the day. Be the hero.

She was nervous now, though, and the only reason he could fathom was because she knew he knew that she loved him.

“Didn’t plan on it,” he replied softly, speaking the way he had once to a horse he’d been told spooked easily. “Was popping down for a bite, actually. Then I heard you two and, well...” He swallowed, considered, then decided *fuck it* and hazarded a step forward. “Not sorry, if that’s what you’re waiting for.”

“I’m not. I can’t...” Buffy licked her lips and—with difficulty, it

seemed—glanced down. “Sorry, my brain is going *abbb*, like, all over the place right now. I should’ve guessed you’d be up here waiting for me after that, but I didn’t because, well. *Abbb* brain. And... god, Spike, there’s just so much I need to—”

But that was as far as she got—as far as he could let her get, anyway. At least for now. There were things to say and things to hear and things to know, but right then, all that mattered to him was being with her in this moment. Fighting the doubt away from her face, the tension from her body, and doing whatever he needed to assure her that he wouldn’t take anything for granted. Not her, not what she’d said downstairs, and certainly not the fact that she’d said it. He’d been ready to seek out a soul for her and as it turned out, she’d had it all along.

So he took her face in his hands and brought her up to him, swallowing her words, her doubts, taking all of that into him and hoping, bloody hoping, that she understood. That she felt it in the strokes of his mouth, tasted it on his tongue, surely as he tasted it on hers.

And either he’d done something very right or Buffy just needed an out, for the next second, she was all but crawling over him, melting into him, against his chest, chasing kisses, doing what she could to consume him whole, and he was very okay being consumed. She tasted of sunshine and sweat, of wild berries and Pylean rain, and most of all like the Slayer. Like Buffy. The woman he loved who, *god yes*, loved him back. Who was trembling and doing her bloody best not to cry which was making it almost impossible for him not to, and then they were moving. Stumbling back on legs that were somehow both sure and unsteady, into the room that had been theirs since they’d arrived in Los Angeles.

“I told him we were leaving,” Buffy whispered in a frenzy against his lips, shoving Spike’s duster off his shoulders so that it puddled to the floor behind him. “That’s what I was coming up here to do—get you so we can leave.”

“Well, you got me,” Spike replied, tugging her shirt over her head. It was a little worse for wear, given what it had been through the last few days, but he wagered it’d go down as one of his favorites. The

thing she'd been wearing when she'd said she loved him. "And we're on our way out."

"Are we?" Buffy reached behind her to unsnap her bra before bloody well attacking his belt with a fury, fumbling over the leather while he stripped off his tee and still fumbling, his Slayer, his Buffy, with her shaking warrior's hands, stumbling into him when he shifted to kick off his boots, cursing and laughing and then giving up to kiss him and keep kissing him, and he loved her so much it almost hurt, the sensation stretching his chest. Like being so full of that love would make him burst from the inside, pierce through his skin until he was nothing left but a pillar of light. Only it would be hers—her light. The light she had given him, the light she made possible.

"Is this a new belt?" she asked a moment later, her voice somewhere between a laugh and a snarl as her fingers continued to miss the landing. "Does it not work like other belts? Is it Pylean? Do they do belts differently than we do?"

Spike laughed. She was too bloody cute when frustrated. "Same belt as always, love."

"I refuse to believe that."

"Fuck, I love you."

"Spike." His name came out as two distinct syllables, separated by a whine. "Less with the loving and more with the helping so we can get to the loving."

"Someone's eager."

"Are you not someone?" Buffy raised her eyes to his, arching one of those perfect eyebrows, then ran her hand down along the length of his cock, teasing him through the denim, and suddenly nothing was funny anymore. Suddenly, Spike felt every second of the last few days in that other world—hell, and the few weeks before that, when she'd cracked his heart with her little confession—and he realized it had been long, too fucking long, since he'd touched her without pretense or guard or anything other than the simple joy of touching her. And yeah, put like that, he was more than eager. He was bloody well starved.

"Bugger it," he cursed, batting her hands away. Worried for a second that his own would have the same problem, and then they'd be

a pair—vampire and slayer alike, done in by a bloody belt—but no, thank god, he knew how to do this, and then the thing was off. Off and tossed to some far recess of the room for Angel to find, maybe, if karma was a thing that actually existed in this world. Then they were fighting with his jeans until he was hopping on one foot, completely undignified, in the loose direction of the bed but ended up pressed against the dresser instead—the one he'd nearly kicked less than a half hour ago and how was that? How had his life changed so radically so fast? And when would he stop being surprised when she did just that, swirled in with cyclone fury to up-end everything he thought he knew?

Never, he hoped, as Buffy boxed him where she wanted him, her hands braced at his sides. Fuck, he hoped she never stopped doing this—making him crazy, making him whimper, making him hers over and over again, in ways new and familiar. Words and action and all else combined. In the way she kissed him, the sounds she rumbled while she kissed him, while she took and gave and fought and surrendered all in one go, making him struggle to keep up with her where he'd never struggled before. But that was them all over, wasn't it? Buffy in the lead, challenging him in ways he hadn't realized he could still be challenged until he'd met her. And, he thought as he seized her hips to flip her around, position himself between her legs, feel her slick heat teasing his cock as he rubbed and stroked and did his bloody damnedest to drive them both out of their heads, that was what made them work. What made them make *sense* when they shouldn't. He hadn't lost sight of how buggered all this was, hadn't lost a damn thing, but he'd given up trying to parse it through because they were beyond explanation. They were legends, both of them, and legends didn't need to explain themselves. Legends simply were.

“Spike,” his glorious legend whispered against his lips now, making a prayer out of his name as she locked her ankles around his waist to bring him into her. “Tease later. Want now.”

He grinned and kissed her, reaching between them to take hold of his cock. “But I like teasing you,” he replied, dragging the head along her soaked folds, feeling her heat and her fire and her need all in one. “Like the way you feel. How you tremble.”

She pulled him in tighter, or tried, and whimpered when his dick

slid along her slit. Nudging her the way she liked and loathed being nudged, for it was never enough. “I don’t tremble,” she argued, clearly trembling. “Just fucking fuck me, already.”

“So naughty. Who taught you to talk like that?” He smirked at her scowl, then dipped his head to nibble at her lower lip and groaned when she responded in kind. There was nothing quite like being bitten by the Slayer, especially while she was wet and wriggling and desperate for your cock. Especially when you knew she loved you.

And at that, the memory of that perfect confession reverberating through the hotel’s airy acoustics, the swell of something beyond words, beyond bliss or relief or sodding exultation, he was done teasing. He needed to feel her, this girl who loved him, who had argued her freedom away from someone who had been a captor to them both. Spike dragged his dick back down until he was there, pressing into her where she was hottest, and letting that heat swallow him whole. An inferno of her, clamping and squeezing and dragging him in deeper, and she was trembling harder now, but a good tremble, and it was okay because he was, too. He was lost and found and hers all at once, and for the first time—the first true time—he knew he wasn’t alone in that.

He wasn’t alone at all.

Spike released a breath that shook more than he wanted to admit, pressed his brow to hers and drank her in. “Being inside of you is a revelation.”

Buffy slid her hands up his arms, scratched along the back of his neck as she brought them together. “Can it be a fast revelation this time?” she asked, wiggling her hips a bit and working those muscles she knew drove him out of his head. “Slow revelation later?”

“Was hoping you’d say that.” He took her mouth as he started to move, but broke away just as quickly, for he hadn’t been kidding—the way he felt, he wouldn’t be able to hold onto her for long. So instead he buried his face against her shoulder and found the rhythm he wanted, let himself sink into sensation, into the decadence that was her pussy wrapped around him, the sounds she made, the sounds they made together, and the way they reverberated across his skin. The jostle of the dresser, subtle at first but not for long, then thumping hard against

the wall at its back in time with the wet slap of flesh striking flesh, the mirror shifting in and out of focus, and there she was. Buffy with her head thrown back. Buffy panting at the ceiling, entangled around nothing at all but not nothing for even if the reflection was empty, she wasn't. She was full. Full of him. He was the one doing that to her, the one brushing her hair from her face and cupping her cheeks and making her mewl so loud there was no way the whole bloody block didn't hear it. He was the one she loved and even if she hadn't said it to him, even if he'd only overheard it when he oughtn't, he felt it all the same. In the fact that she was up here, that she was with him, that he was inside of her, that she was clawing at his arms as though to anchor herself home. The home she'd chosen.

And then more of those sounds, those little twists of syllables that were words but not. Buffy pulling him closer so he was flush against her, letting his mouth wander the curve of her exquisite neck, over the place where he'd twice tasted her now, the scars that were so much more than scars. Letting him coat his lips and tongue in the sweet, hot salt of her sweat, driving into her with enough force to hurt and bloody well demanding he give her more.

Her hands were in his hair, tangling through locks untamed by gel, making his scalp tingle and his balls tighten, and he wanted more. Wanted everything. Buffy scratching at him, stealing little bites across whatever skin she could reach, her pussy vising around his cock at a rhythm, as though she was as desperate to keep him as he was desperate to be kept, and he was swimming in it, swimming in her, and everything was perfect because she was here, because she was with him, because she had chosen him after all. She had chosen this.

“Spike,” Buffy whimpered into his ear, her hot breath making him shiver. “I need...”

“I know what you need, baby,” he rumbled in response, and slipped a hand between their warring bodies, pulling back just enough to admire the view. Her cunt swallowing his juice-slick prick, her sweet clit hard and pink and waiting for him. “Spike’ll take care of you.”

“That’s not...” She rolled her head back, releasing another whimper that turned into a hiss the second his fingers slid over her. “I need...to say it.”

Spike whipped his gaze to face, would have sworn his dead heart jostled. “Say what?”

But he knew. He knew and he didn’t. Felt it there in the air between them, which seemed to pulse with its own anticipation. He hadn’t expected this—even after hearing what he’d heard, the idea of Buffy’s love being given to him, a thing he could know for himself absent of anyone else, touch and hold and have with his own hands, had seemed distant. Just knowing it existed, that she felt it, that she had embraced it rather than run from it, was more than he could have ever hoped. And maybe it wasn’t that, but he knew it was. Her eyes were dark and full, and she was looking at him as she never had, slick and sweet and warrior and girl all rolled into one.

Then she parted her lips again, and her words washed over him.

“I love you. I love you, Spike. I—”

He choked out a sob and bloody burst, both in his chest and inside of her, everything in him burning with something more than pleasure or ecstasy, a whole new sodding stratosphere of light. A sound unlike any he’d ever heard himself make scratched free of his throat as he dropped his head, finding her shoulder once more. His eyes stinging and his chest tight and her arms were around him, and she was hugging him to her, letting him feel the cadence of her heart against his breastbone, and saying it again. Saying it like a prayer, the same way she’d said his name before. Filling the air with that, with her love, and nothing but that.

“Fuck,” he said at last, the word riding out on a laugh. “Sorry.”

“Sorry isn’t exactly the thing a girl wants to hear at a time like this,” she teased, tickling her fingers along the back of his neck. “Why are you sorry?”

“Wager you expect more from the bloke who lasted an hour without popping his top.”

“Actually, I think I’m going to put it on my resume.”

Spike chuckled, nudging her brow with his once more. “Nothing more powerful than your love, Slayer,” he murmured, and leaned in for a kiss. But she was too fast for him, pulling back, blinking in that doe-eyed innocent way that completely unmade him.

“You... Did you just come because I said I love you?”

There it was again. He groaned low in his throat, his cock nearly returned to full mast. “Looks like.”

“Oh my god.”

He peeked an eye open. “Bad?”

“No. Just...oh my god, Spike, really?”

“Are you really surprised?”

“I just...” She blinked some more, her eyes taking on a watery sheen, and he didn’t want that. Not now. There would be time enough to talk about all this later—all the time in the world, it seemed—and she was still hot and pulsing around him, and that wasn’t something a man took for granted. So, after pressing a kiss to her lips, he pulled back, slipped out of her, and was on his knees almost before she seemed to realize that he had moved at all.

“Spike—”

“Only thing that tastes better than you, Slayer, is *us* together,” he whispered, fitting one of her legs over his shoulder. “Don’t mind, do you?”

“Oh god.”

“And if you feel the need to hold onto anything...” He took one of her hands and placed it on his head, then winked at her, the picture she presented. Looking down at him, breathing hard, her breasts slick, her hair tumbling around her shoulders, her eyes wide and her lips parted, and then her cunt, all pink and wet and swollen, dripping with him and her alike. And he hadn’t been lying—tasting himself inside of her was one of his favorite things, and he was in a mood to indulge.

She gave another little “Oh god!” as he began to lick. Soft, exploratory laps at first, then bolder, hungrier, up and along her slit, then inside of her, deep and thrusting and drinking her into him, their combined flavors bursting inside his mouth, down his throat. He didn’t waste much time teasing, his cock was throbbing again, hard enough that he might not have believed he’d just blown his load if he didn’t have it on his lips. And Buffy did hold on, seized him by the hair and pulled hard enough to hurt, making him moan, making him rumble, and making her scream. He fucked and sucked and licked and slurped and she trembled and gasped and bloody well rubbed his face into her pussy, begging him—sweetly at first, then not so sweetly—to give her

what he knew she wanted. To touch her, lick her, in the way that would have her tumbling in earnest. And he would, of course. He'd give her anything she wanted. Everything.

"I've got you," he told her, dragging his mouth from her opening to her clit as he filled her with his fingers. Wrist-up so he could press against that spot that made her go wild, and he was licking and rubbing at the same time. His face drenched, his hand coated in her, and her clit between his lips, under his tongue, and Buffy's voice, hoarse and raw, filling in the air at a volume that was both music and too much for his sensitive ears. A cry to disturb the sodding dead, or in his case, bring them back to life entirely. And she was spasming and wiggling and clutching at him hard enough to hurt, needing to feel that, feel her, more than anything in the world, Spike rose back to his feet, took his cock in hand, and thrust inside her just in time to enjoy the last of the waves. But that wasn't enough, and thank fuck it wasn't for her, either, for she was clutching at him tightly the next instant. Clasping him by the face and kissing his Buffy-smeared lips and whimpering anew, either at the sensation or the taste or him or all of it, and neither of them would last long like this, which was just fine as they didn't need to. They already had lasted where it counted.

Still, he was a selfish sort of bloke, and he wanted badly to feel her clench and lose herself on his cock, and decided to gamble it. Slide his hand between them again, see if she was too sensitive to be stroked, see if he could get her there anyway, for sometimes she liked it when it was too much. When she was a bloody live wire that jumped under the softest caress. But before he could give her clit a soft, experimental nudge, Buffy had her hands around his neck and was tugging him down, kissing reason right off his lips but not stopping there. Not stopping until his mouth was over that perfect patch of scarred skin that he'd claimed before, until he felt her blood as well as heard it, the rush humming against his lips and making his fangs ache and his balls tighten and everything amplified.

And despite this, despite everything, despite the need pounding through his own veins, the instant hunger, the bits of him that were monster through and through, the man nothing but a pleasant thought, he found the strength to choke out her name. "Buffy."

“I want it,” she told him, locking her ankles at his arse again, as though to prevent him from tearing away. “I want it, Spike.”

“But...”

But he didn’t even know what he meant to say, pleasure and desire running roughshod through his head, determined to chase hesitation aside in favor of instinct. *But* they didn’t do this, unless there was a spell that needed an ingredient. Or a vampire who needed healing. *But* this was too much, too great, too perfect for the likes of him. *But* she had nothing to prove. *But* he understood already.

In the end, none of that came out. The only thing that came out was his fangs, bursting into his mouth, and then into her, and then she was screaming for real. Screaming with a mind to shake the walls to dust, crumble the floor and structure down to its foundation, and her pussy was fistng him into new life and her blood was in his mouth and she was still screaming, the best bloody scream he’d ever heard, and he was a bomb, and he was exploding, filling and taking, and she had her hands in his hair again, her mouth at his ear, and she was saying something. Words. His name. Perhaps nothing at all, just falling apart with him, pulsing and pure and Buffy, and it was the best moment of his life. Buffy tangled around him, sobbing and loving him, trusting him to catch her when she fell.

He did, of course, even if it meant falling ahead of her. That was the thing. If Buffy fell, he fell, too. Odds were he had been from the start. A never-ending state of freefall, so he was always there when she landed.

“Say it again,” he whispered when it was over, when they were cuddled on the floor, a messy tangle of parts that was neither her nor him but *them*. Her sweat his sweat. Her blood his blood.

Buffy lifted her head from where it had fallen against his shoulder, found his eyes without blinking, and gave him a dopey, happy smile that would have stolen his soul had he had it on him. How beautiful she looked like that. Flush and bright and alive, his bite mark stark against her skin.

“I love you,” she said, and kissed him. “And I love that hearing it makes you come.”

Spike barked a laugh at that, reclined his head against the floor.  
“Think I’ll have more control next time. Be expectin’ it.”

“Is that a challenge?”

“Oh god, yes.”

Buffy snickered and began nibbling along his jaw. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

## STOP AND SMELL THE SMOKE

IT TOOK BUFFY AN EMBARRASSINGLY LONG TIME TO REALIZE SHE AND Spike were probably not, actually, going anywhere that night. Almost as long as it took her to realize just how gross she probably was, having spent the last few days in pre-indoor plumbing land. Her plans for seducing her boyfriend had been in the early development stages as she'd made her way upstairs to fulfill her promise of a dramatic exit, but they had definitely included a shower, a chance to shave her legs, brush her teeth, and look like something other than Jane of the Jungle by the time she pushed him into bed. As it was, she'd still been in the same clothes she'd been wearing since before they'd left, and considering all the places his mouth had gone since then, well, maybe she was better off *not* thinking about it, otherwise she might become the definition of self-conscious.

Not that Spike seemed to mind. Or hell, notice, which she would definitely be grilling him over when LA and Pylea were distant enough in the past to feel less like an errand and more like the closest thing to a vacation she was likely to ever get. Of course, for every finger she pointed at him, she had three pointed right back at herself, even if the vampire equivalent of roughing it didn't leave said vampires in nearly as stinky state as it did humans. Not being able to sweat was a compelling

sales pitch in the undead arsenal. Like, she wasn't and would never be tempted, but there had been times over the last few days, particularly when bathing had been a thing done in creeks and rivers, where she'd been able to concede that particular attribute as one that almost made the whole blood-drinking-monster thing worth it. Throw in lack of morning breath and yeah, humanity had definitely been handed the fuzzy end of the bodily function lollipop.

By the time Buffy successfully extricated herself from the sex vortex that had apparently opened up in the center of the room, she was aching in new and exciting ways and probably filthier than she had ever been in her life, and that counted that one time she'd been covered in innards after killing the momma of the egg creatures that had turned her classmates into pod people. She wasn't surprised when Spike followed her into the bathroom, or when he invited himself along to her shower, but she did slap his hand when he started to reach for her in a way that would not promote cleanliness.

“What?” he asked, grinning. “Though I’d help you with those hard-to-reach spots.”

“You know what you were doing.”

“And you knew I was gonna do it. Could’ve stopped me from following you in but you didn’t.”

He had her there, and she knew it, so she didn’t try to summon a counterargument. The truth was that despite the fact that all her intentions had gone to hell the second she’d stepped into that hallway, this wasn’t the sort of hell she minded. Actually, of all the hells out there—and she had it on good authority that it wasn’t a conservative number—her intentions-hell might be the best. The strain, the awkwardness, the tension she’d let live between them since she’d unburdened herself had been a slow-moving poison, one she felt she could only see clearly now that she’d doused it in antidote. All it had taken was...well, a cross-dimensional road trip and observing what her own reticence had wrought. What it had been on the verge of claiming for good.

So Buffy didn’t mind at all when Spike gathered her in his arms and pressed her against the shower wall, kissing her and stroking her and entering her, bracing his hands under her hips, fucking her slowly at

first, then not-so-slowly, then leaving *slowly* behind in the dust and pounding into her so hard the shower tiles imprinted on her wet skin. All the while muttering all the things he always made sure to tell her. How good she felt, how hot she was, how wet, how she squeezed and teased and commanded, how he was hers, all hers, how he loved her. And even though she was definitely sore and more than a little light-headed, she tugged his head back to her neck, back to the still-tingling place his fangs had opened up, and she didn't have to ask this time. He knew. He licked. He praised. He bit. And she hit the stratosphere.

Things after that became a little murky. The next thing Buffy was aware of was being in bed, draped in clothes that she didn't remember packing, and Spike beside her, wearing jeans and nothing else, a glass of orange juice in one hand and a pack of Oreos in the other.

"What happened?" she asked hoarsely, fighting against her protesting muscles to sit up. "Where'd you get all that?"

"Went a little faint on me," Spike replied, smiling in a way that told her he'd been more worried than he wanted to let on. "Took it as a compliment. Always wanted to shag you so good you blacked out."

Buffy frowned and, without thinking, reached up to rub along her neck. It was warm to the touch, not to mention tender. And also made parts of her that were still waking up instantly alert. "Oh."

He sat on the edge of the bed, handed her the Oreos. "Don't know much about this, except you're supposed to eat after blood loss. Think I heard that somewhere."

"It wasn't that much blood loss."

"Twice in one day's a bit much, even for you, love."

She arched an eyebrow at that, hesitated, then ultimately decided it probably wasn't worth arguing over. Also, she could eat. There had been a feast of sorts before they'd departed Pylea, but she'd missed living in a world with butter and spice. And while Oreos might not be the dinner of champions she'd choose for herself, she couldn't deny they sounded good. "All right," she said, handing the Oreos back to him before swinging her legs over the side of the bed. "Except you need to learn how to cookie. Milk, not orange juice."

"Where are you going?" Spike asked, all wide-eyed and alarmed.

"Well, I know it's just the one night, and you wouldn't kick me out,

but I'd really prefer not to sleep on a crumby mattress." She blinked at him as he stared at her. "You know, for eating cookies in bed?"

"What's that?"

"You've never heard that saying? Sometimes it's crackers. Does it make more sense with crackers?" Buffy waited a beat, then snorted when the look on his face didn't clear up. "Nice to know that even though you're way ancient, there are things I know that you don't." She rose to her feet and started to make her way toward the table and chairs set up. Perk of this being a hotel—there was all kinds of furniture.

She didn't get far, though. "Spike? Why is the carpet wet? And...twinkly?"

Spike followed her gaze and snorted, the confusion and concern on his face being edged out by an unmistakable grin. "Seems there was one of those globe what's-its in the dresser," he said, and yeah, he was definitely amused. "We knocked it around a bit. Started to leak."

It took a moment for the pieces in Buffy's mind to align. "A snow globe?"

Spike ignored her, though. Apparently not even glittery carpet could distract him from being all mother hen when he put his mind to it. "Come on, Slayer, if you mean to sit, then bloody sit. And eat something, for god's sake."

Buffy rolled her eyes but nodded, strode the rest of the way to the table, and helped herself into one of the chairs. No sooner had she sat than Spike was hovering over her, peeling open the Oreos before pushing the package over to her.

"I still say orange juice and Oreos don't go together."

"I'll keep that in mind the next time you go all damsel on me."

"I did not go all damsel."

Spike gave her a narrow look that served as argument aplenty, then sank into his own seat. He didn't relax until she'd dutifully plucked a cookie from the tray and taken a nibble.

"So...snow globe?" Buffy glanced pointedly to the spot on the carpet. "Explain."

At that, the lines in his face relaxed again. "Reckon it's a safe bet Angel didn't do more than poke through these rooms before he and his

lot moved in,” Spike said, the laugh in his voice intensifying without breaking. “Lots of rot got left behind by past tenants and the like.”

“Why are you so giggly?”

At that, he raised his dancing eyes to hers. “You know he heard everything, right?”

Buffy could have played dumb but decided not to. She, in fact, had suspected that their sexcapades had been of the loud but had also tried very hard not to think about it—not only because of the ick factor, but also because she just didn’t want Angel taking up space in her relationship anymore, and worrying about what he might have overheard when it was none of his business certainly counted. “What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Just seems like just desserts, is all.” Spike was full-on grinning now. “He can scrub this room top to bottom all he fancies to get the stink of us outta here, but that?” He pointed at the decidedly glittery floor. “That’s gonna be there for a long bloody time. And he’ll know why.”

*Oh god.* Buffy looked down again, horror and humor wrestling it out. Done with Angel as she was, she understood there was a difference between saying goodbye and being a brat about the fact that she had moved on. Or maybe that was all in her head, there because she thought it should be rather than because it actually was. She *should be* a mature adult-type person who scolded her decidedly immature vampire boyfriend for his pettiness, but, well, Angel had said that Spike had rubbed off on her, and she couldn’t deny that was true.

Also, the thought of Angel wandering in here, even years down the line, and catching even the mildest hint of a twinkle, all the while knowing what put it there, was kind of karmically perfect after the absolute shit-show of the last few days. Or months. Or years.

“Maybe we can have Willow and Tara do some... I don’t know, anti-glitter spell,” she said in an effort to be the mature adult-type person.

“Would be a trip, especially if Red’s mojo went wonky in the doing. Maybe turn the whole bloody room into a disco ball.” Spike grinned for a second, clearly relishing the thought, before eyeing the still-untouched helping of OJ. “Slayer, drink up.”

Buffy wrinkled her nose but reached for the glass anyway. It was easier than arguing.

Easier than talking, too. Too bad there was no getting around that.

Or rather, there was. She just didn't want there to be. He would let her get away with pretty much anything, including the last few weeks, and while there was comfort in that, there was imbalance too. Imbalance that she didn't want, no matter how uneasy addressing it felt, because imbalance was ultimately what had led to Riley taking a hike. Not the same sort of imbalance, sure, but still there. Still all...out of balance. And beyond the mistakes of relationships past, Buffy just didn't want that with Spike. She remembered all too well what it had felt like being the one always on edge when the players had been her and Angel, and that was not something she would wish upon anyone, especially not the man she loved.

And to that end, there were things she had to say—things she owed it to him to say, that he needed to hear, even if he already knew the most important thing. Things that would be hard for her to get out because talking about her feelings was a skill she'd lost two heartbreaks ago.

But Spike wasn't Angel in any respect. If she gave this part of herself to him, he would treasure it.

"I'm sorry," she said before her nerves could overpower her will. "About...well, everything."

Spike raised his gaze to her, not quick enough to hide his surprise. "Huss'at?"

"You know what I mean." Buffy bit the inside of her cheek. That wasn't good enough. "I'm not good at this. Any of it."

At that, the corner of his mouth quirked, and some of that playfulness she loved so much leaked into his eyes. "Dunno. Seemed all right when you were screamin' it at His Forehighness."

"Well, I don't want to have to be someone who only says things that matter when screaming. Every big conversation Riley and I had about us was because we were fighting."

"And so will we if you compare me to Captain Cardboard again."

"I'm not comparing you."

"Or try to fall on the sword for that wanker."

Buffy blew out a breath, her nerves fading in favor of different nerves. Nerves that were used to being triggered when Spike was in

the vicinity, talking. "I mean it," she said. "We've been in this...I don't know...trial period since the spell, right?"

He blinked, frowning now. "It was never a trial," he said, not bothering to disguise the hurt in his voice. "Not for me."

"I know. But..."

"It was for you."

Buffy licked her lips, her eyes suddenly hot and prickly, her mind and heart screaming at her to pull the emergency brake, backtrack, change the subject. "I didn't know how I felt," she said hoarsely. "Spike, this...*everything*... It was scary. And big. And scary. You wanted a chance and that's...that's all I could get my head around then. I don't think that's news to you."

Spike didn't answer for a moment, just sat there, staring at her with those eyes that always seemed to read her more than they saw her—like she was a book he'd reached for so many times the spine had cracked. That his favorite pages were dog-eared, the passages he found most relevant underlined or highlighted, and the margins were full of notes he'd taken in an effort to thoroughly understand the material so that he didn't see the cover anymore at all. She was the sum of the inside, not the out.

Finally, though, he broke his gaze from hers and jerked his chin in a nod, which he immediately followed up with a firm shake of the head. "I knew it, yeah," he said, not trying to disguise the edge in his voice. "At the start. But it's been a minute since the start, hasn't it? Reckoned we'd become more than a sodding test run."

Her chest lurched. "We did—we are."

"Yeah? Seems you need to get your story straight, Slayer."

"I know—I know what I said was... I didn't mean it like that."

"Like what?"

"Like...how it sounded." Great, now her temples were starting to pound. "Or god, maybe I did. We just never talked about it—that's what I'm trying to say. We did the spell and after that, we... I showed up and I told you I wanted to try and that maybe it would work and maybe it wouldn't, that we would define it later. But we never did define it. We just kept on going. And that was fine with me because then I didn't have to think about it. It wasn't...really real." She

cringed and lurched forward, dropping her head in her hands, not wanting to see how those words landed because if it was at all like how they sounded, then they had to cut deep. “*God*, that came out wrong. I just mean that really real relationships and Buffy have been the opposite of mixy. Real could hurt me. Real *does* hurt me. I’ve never not been in a real relationship that didn’t end with hurt, and I didn’t want us to hurt. Whatever happened—and I’m not saying it’s right or good or that it makes sense, because we *are* real, Spike, we’re so real, but the longer I put it off, the longer I felt safe from that hurt. Like if I never followed-up on what I told you when I came to see you that night, then I could hide in what I said then and pretend that it wasn’t as bad when it went wrong.”

Buffy paused, breathing hard, still not looking up but knowing she needed to, at least, give him a chance to throw a few names her way. Maybe all the names. Find some barbs that would cut especially deep, as was his specialty, and hurl them where she was softest, most vulnerable. Make her bleed without bleeding.

Except he didn’t. He didn’t say a thing, didn’t move, didn’t even breathe. And that was worse.

But she had to keep going.

“So because I was a scaredy Buffy, I kept us in this...place. And then Angel showed up after Mom died, and losing her was terrible. More than terrible. It hurt so much—hurt like I didn’t think I could hurt. And Angel... What he said was wrong, but it scared me. Not so much the *you* part as the thought of having to lose again. Lose someone I love.” Her throat grew tight, dry, and she forced down a swallow. The weight of his gaze was a physical thing, one with a gravity all its own that she knew she wouldn’t be able to resist much longer. “So yeah, I thought it might be good to walk away while the hurt would be less. When I thought I could get through it without it just... But then the knights came. And you were gone. And I realized... It took me about half a second to realize that the whole hurt thing? Too late. The only way to avoid it would’ve been to have never tried.”

There was a beat. Then another, the silence between them fast becoming oppressive in a way that made the echo of her own words seem feeble and hollow. Like there was an explanation out there good

enough to justify what she knew had been a hellish few weeks for him, and an even more hellish last few days. Still, Buffy didn't know what else to say. Not right then, at least, and she was pretty sure rambling wouldn't do her any favors. So she waited. And stared at the table. And thought about eating another Oreo, but also afraid to move. Afraid of the other side of this silence.

And when Spike finally shifted in his seat, she thought her heart might catapult out of her chest.

"I thought it was what he told you that did it," he said softly. "The bit about not bein' able to trust me, and all else you threw back at him down there."

Buffy steeled herself then raised her eyes to his again. "It was that, too. That was the part that made me worry about the eventual bad. How much... But then the knights—"

He held up a hand, his expression annoyingly unreadable. Her walking mood ring had closed up shop. "I know this story, love. Did a bit of heroics and spared myself from being shunted to the sodding curb. Least those wankers had good timing, eh?"

It was no less than what she deserved, but it still hurt to hear. Hurt even more knowing the hurt she had caused in all this. Hurt that Spike definitely didn't deserve.

"I meant what I said," she whispered, lacking anything else. "I'm in love with you. I have been since then. *Before* then. Before Mom died. Hell, probably before I even came over that night to tell you I wanted to give us a try. That's when she said it. I was getting ready to go hang out with the gang at the Bronze and she came in and... Well. She said it then, that she thought maybe I was in love. And she was right. I didn't know it until the knights, but she was right."

There was more she wanted to say, more just waiting to spill from her lips now that she had finally started, all of it desperate and probably more than a little selfish. Regardless of what she'd felt and when, it had been her own issues that had led them to this particular place. Trying to talk Spike out of feeling whatever he was feeling as a result wasn't fair to him, and she was done not being fair. All she could do was give him the truth and hope that was enough.

"Past little bit, I've felt it," Spike said at last, his voice low and

even. "The trial bit. Felt it in ways I hadn't since you showed up to sweep me off my feet."

A white-hot pain lanced across her chest, radiated upward until it was pressing at the backs of her eyes, threatening to spill down her cheeks. "I'm sorry. That was... I never should've let that happen."

"Wasn't just on you though, was it? Could've pressed the issue myself if I wasn't so bloody terrified of losing you."

Buffy released one of those chest-rattling breaths. "I hid behind that."

"I know you did." A beat. "Told you when you came upstairs that I was on my way to find some nosh because I was peckish, and I was aimin' to pilfer any blood Gramps had on ice."

She frowned when he didn't continue. "Was that...not true?"

"It was mostly true."

"Define mostly."

Spike held her gaze for a long moment, then slid his own away. "Heard a rumor there might be a place in town a fella could go if he aimed to win something of real value."

Her heart started hammering again, her pulse making her temples pound. "You were going to try to *win* me? Like with magic?"

"Balls." He rolled his eyes and, the next second, was on his feet, shaking his head hard. His *I can't fucking believe you* head shake. "You think that? Really? Think that I'd want some bloody wrap-up prize that has your face? That if it was as easy as going to a warlock or what all to get you to bloody see me—"

"Spike, I don't know what I think. You just said you were going to go try to win something—"

"Yeah, Slayer," he snapped, whirling back around to glare at her, his nostrils flared, his everything flared, as though she had lit him on fire from the inside. "*My soul*. That's what I was out to win. My own stupid, sodding soul so that you would see—would finally see what I've apparently been absolute rubbish at trying to tell you these last months. Can't even give me that, can you? Make your big bloody apology while still thinking I'm a monster—"

"Oh my god."

"But joke's on me, right? Never gonna be the sort of man you take

at his word. Always looking for an angle, even now.” Spike shook his head again, a tragic laugh tearing off his lips. “Juiced up now on slayer blood. Maybe I ought to still—”

Buffy didn’t realize she’d stood until she was against him, didn’t realize she’d moved at all until she had her arms around him, had pulled him into something between a hug and a plea. Her face buried in his neck, her body trembling under the weight of her own stupid expectations, of her shock that was more than shock, but also somehow not shock at all because *of course* that was what he’d meant. *Of course* that was what he’d been ready to set out to do. *Of course* Spike would leave here to seek a soul, because that was who he was. Who he had been ever since he’d barreled into her life, turned her world upside down.

And there was nothing she could tell him. Nothing he would believe, and why should he? After everything he’d given up...

“I’m stupid,” Buffy sputtered into his skin, her own going red-hot. “I’m so stupid.”

“Christ,” Spike muttered, and then his arms were around her, and he was holding her to him, kissing her temple and shaking his head. It was unfair, how quickly his anger melted. How fast he was to forgive. Someone without a soul shouldn’t have that, but he did. He always had. “You’re not stupid, love. Bloody brilliant, you are.”

“For a brilliant person, I am really stupid.” She shuddered, clutched him tighter. “I don’t know why I keep doing that. I love you. I *do* love you. And I just keep assuming the worst.”

“Ever think it could be because love’s done you no favors?” he replied, pulling back just enough to catch her eyes, or catch her in his, pulling at her center of gravity in a way that used to scare her, maybe still should, but didn’t, because she knew he’d be there when she landed. “That you’re used to love being hurt?”

“That’s no excuse—”

“Not tryin’ for an excuse here.” Spike pulled back more, not enough to dislodge her but enough so that more of his face came into focus. The skin around those eyes, the ridge of his nose, his cheekbones, his brow, and the bow that made up his mouth. “And it’s not like I haven’t given you plenty of reason to think the worst of me, either.”

“Not since we became a thing.”

“Doesn’t erase all that came before. I *am* evil, Slayer. But I’m yours. Everything I am is yours. And if you need me to get a sodding soul to prove that—”

“No.” Buffy shook her head hard, gripping his shoulders to steady herself. “I don’t.”

“No? Might spare the pair of us a lot of frustration going forward.”

“Spike, if we’re doing this, we’re really doing it. It’ll be...hard sometimes. Messy. I’ll get mad or you’ll get mad and...that’s okay. That’s the way it’s supposed to be.” Buffy released a deep breath, trying to find her center. “I love you. And that you’d even... The fact that you were going to go fight for your soul at all is just...too big for my brain right now, but that’s what I want to stop. With both of us.”

“Not sure I follow you there,” he said, though he looked lighter than before. Lighter than he had since she’d started talking.

“This.” She gestured between them. “I got us here by not talking. Because this part scares me. Because *all* things relationshipy scare me. I made you think... Well, you know what I made you think. And I’m not saying I’m going to be great at being talky girl because I’m so not, but...things that are worth it are worth the hard. We’re worth it.”

Then his mouth was on her mouth, and all thought flitted right out of her head, stealing her wind and her brain and her heart, stealing everything that wasn’t nailed down, and that was okay. She tasted it in his kiss, in the hunger and relief, the love that none of her crazy or her cruel seemed capable of chasing off completely. There was more to say—lots more—and things to define, but maybe for now they had said enough, done enough, that the foundation of what they would leave with would be made of the sort of stuff that lasted.

And then she was on her back again, on the bed, and he was over her, and all that *more* became *later*; and she thought of the glitter on the floor, between the strands of carpet, thought about the screams she’d let tear through her throat, about Spike venturing downstairs in next-to-nothing to bring her cookies and juice, and the impossible way that he loved her. The torture he’d suffer, the lengths he’d go to in order to prove himself, and how even now, even after everything she’d thrown at him, every reason she’d given him to do what everyone else had done

and walk out, he was kissing her with love, stroking her with love, looking down at her with love and more than love, with an intensity that she had never experienced until him.

And hey, look at that. They were both naked again.

“This all right?” he asked, bracing himself on one hand, the other teasing his cock along the seam of her pussy. “You feeling—”

Buffy locked her legs around his waist and pulled him down, into her, a part of her, and swallowed his groan with her mouth, tangled her arms around him, and told him she loved him.

More than that, she knew he loved her.

And that he was just getting started showing her exactly what that meant.

## SHE'S IN LOVE WITH ME AND I FEEL FINE

“Who ate my Oreos?”

Spike smirked and threw a pointed look at the Slayer, whose cheeks pinked in that way he found extremely fetching. “Sorry, pet,” he told Cordelia, who, in contrast, was frowning a storm and glaring at the lot of them in turn—him and Buffy, and the witches who had finally stumbled all bag-eyed down the stairs to be seen off all proper like—as though she could sniff out the biscuit thief. “Didn’t know those were yours.”

“What, and you thought they were Angel’s?” Cordelia huffed and crossed her arms. “He doesn’t eat solid foods.”

“Because he’s a wanker.”

“I’m not touching that one, and not only because I’m not sure what that means.” She huffed again, though there wasn’t much bite behind her bark. Some, sure—Spike wasn’t daft enough to think she was anything near a wallflower—but not the kind that had real teeth to it. “Am I to understand you plundered my snack drawer? Why do you eat real food?”

He lifted a shoulder. “Tastes good, doesn’t it?”

“So good you had to eat the entire package? Who are you, Gunn?”

“It was me,” Buffy blurted at last, shifting in place of a proper

squirm. "Well, Spike decimated about half, so not entirely me, but he got them for me because I, umm, there was blood. My blood. In that I lost it. Or not lost like *whoops, where'd it go*, but it was gone and because he's a weirdo, he knew to get me stuff with sugar in it."

"Uh huh." Cordelia arched an eyebrow, her shrewd gaze trailing down Buffy's neck. "This is some weird vampire sex thing, huh?"

"Don't ask questions you don't want the answer to," Buffy replied, her face redder still.

Willow cleared her throat. "Considering that I should've been dead to the world last night but didn't get any rest because of the noise someone was making, I...second Buffy's suggestion of not asking. Ignorance is bliss."

Cordelia snorted and took a look around the otherwise empty lobby. "Well, that explains why Mr. Broodypants called me over here to see you off. You'd think being a monarch even for a few days would have some lingering benefits, but nope. Back to being beck-and-call girl."

"He called you?" Buffy asked, her tone neutral.

"Said something about how it'd be better if you two weren't in the same room for a while. I thought he was being a drama queen as per usual, but if you and Mr. Soulless really were with the loud, bitey sex, I'm guessing it has more to do with that." Cordelia flicked her gaze to Spike, not long enough to linger but enough for him to read what she wasn't saying. To suss out that there might be more to how far she was willing to go for the git than was usually present within the parameters of a friendship. Enough concern to be more than concern. "Whatever," she said a moment later, waving a hand. "Gives me a chance to thank you guys again for helping us get our friend back before you head out."

"Anytime," Willow replied, taking Tara's hand. "Except, well, the immediate future. I need time to recover."

"I think our hands are gonna be full for a while, anyway, getting Fred all used to being in the real world again," Cordelia replied, shrugging. "But same goes. I'm all for tag-teaming in the name of saving the world. Or fighting evil. Might be good to remember we're not alone in this."

Spike glanced at Buffy again, warming in spite of himself at the

look on her face. Knowing how much that meant, and damn more than Cordelia could understand. It wasn't something they talked about, but also something that didn't really need saying for him to get it—the weight she carried, how alone she felt, right or wrong. Even with all her mates and the like ready to join the fight, the world was still a big, ugly place and the whole of it often rested on her shoulders. The reminder that there were others outside of the bubble that was Sunnyhell might seem like a small thing, but it was everything to her. And therefore to him, because he was a smitten, sentimental sort of sap whom she had slain, if not in whole then where it counted.

"Thanks, Cordy," Willow said with an edge in her voice that hinted at her fading patience. "But we're gonna run. No offense, I just really want to get home before anyone here finds something else for us to do."

"Are you just gonna ride all the way back to Sunnydale under a blanket or...?" Cordelia arched an eyebrow, looking pointedly at Spike.

"Big one in the backseat," Buffy confirmed, grinning wryly. "Extra roomy for stretching."

"And nothing else," Willow said sternly. "Seriously, you two got enough nookie last night. You can keep your hands off for a few hours. Right, baby?"

This last she directed to Tara, who hadn't said a word since they all had come down. Who was, point of fact, focusing intently on the floor that Lorne bloke had been so bloody fond of when they'd come back in through the portal, though Spike was certain he caught the ghost of a smirk on her lips.

"Right, baby?" Willow asked again, less patient this time.

Tara raised her head at that as though snapping back to herself and nodded, mock-stern. "Right. No fooling around." She paused, then added in a lower voice, "Sorry, she's extra cranky."

"Well, you would be too if your first night back in a real bed had been ruined because of what you mistakenly thought was an earthquake but ended up being people having way more fun than you one room over."

"Could've done a bit of quaking yourself," Spike felt obligated to point out. "Don't blame us if you missed the opportunity to uncork."

“Spike!”

Willow made a slightly scandalized face but didn’t back down. “I did mention the exhausted part, right? No amount of earthquaking made that any less true.”

“Seriously, an earthquake?” Cordelia looked Spike up and down at that, then shifted her attention to Buffy. “Good for you. No wonder you’re so much less uptight now. I was wondering.”

“Thanks,” Buffy muttered, her face now so red Spike couldn’t help but buss her cheek. Nice and innocent but full of feeling.

“Though the more you tell me, the clearer this vision gets,” Cordelia added a moment later. “Not a vision from the Powers or whatever likes to send me visions, but one that’s probably going to come with just as much headache. And if Angel is in a funk that lasts for days or—god forbid—turns him into asshole Angel again, I will demand compensation.”

“Can you tell the difference?” Spike asked, all innocence, and was ready when Buffy smacked his shoulder.

“Stop,” she muttered harshly. Then, turning to Cordelia, said, “If he *is* in a bad mood, I don’t think it’s because of...anything earthquakey. After you all cleared out, Angel and I talked. Or...yelled, to be more accurate. Voices were raised and lines were drawn, and I think we understand each other now, but I also think he might need some time to adjust.”

At that, Cordelia sighed. Hard. “Hurricane Buffy couldn’t help but make landfall, could it? And we were so close, too.”

“Hurricane Buffy?”

“That’s what happens when you come to town, screw with Angel’s head, and I get stuck with the vampire funk cleanup.” She spoke plainly, somehow not accusatory despite the words themselves, and sighed again. “Yeah, it might be better if you guys don’t put us on your Christmas card list. We’ll save the team-ups for real emergencies.”

“Screw with his head?” Buffy echoed, her own voice not nearly as neutral. “*I* screw with *his* head?”

“Are you telling me you don’t?” Cordelia shot back.

“Danger, Will Robinson,” Willow muttered, then hurried forward and snatched Buffy by the wrist. “Let’s not get into a blame game. I’d

rather leave here as friends who have each other on apocalypse speed-dial."

Spike scoffed and rolled his eyes. "Well, you're no bloody fun, are you?"

"If you really love her, you'll get her out of here without rendering all IOUs null and void," the witch shot back.

"No, I get it," Cordelia said, bringing her hands up. "Breakups are messy. And Buffy and Angel have never been not messy." She paused and favored Spike with an appraising look. "Good luck."

"And on that note," Buffy said, jerking her arm free of Willow and plastering on a bright, phony smile. "You're right, we should get going before things get...*extra* messy." She paused, and the smile grew wider and much more genuine. "Apologize to Angel for us, will you, Cor? Hurricane Buffy got a little extra windy last night, and a few things didn't survive. Sorry about the glitter."

Cordelia didn't bother hiding her confusion. "Glitter? What the hell?"

"Just tell Angel. He'll figure out what it means."



The dramatic exit was tempered slightly by the fact that the second they stepped outside, Spike was sun-stranded and had to wait for the witches to pull the car around. Fortunately, that didn't take but a few uncomfortable moments. Then he was safely sequestered in the shadows of the backseat, the Slayer at his side, and they were heading out of sodding LA and back to the Hellmouth, the space that was his and Buffy's, where they would start something new and brilliant and *theirs* most of all. Away from the stink of the past and heading toward a future that he'd never thought he'd have.

Spike spent the first stint of the drive entirely under the blanket, as there were a few twists and turns through traffic that kept ping-ponging streams of daylight to all sides of the vehicle. Once they were on the highway, though, the sun was firmly on the car's right, giving him the freedom to tuck the blanket into that window and create a cozy nest in the back. It'd require adjusting as the road changed, of

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course, but for the moment, he had the pleasure of sitting with his lady like any other bloke, hand in hers, thinking about the Spike who had come on this trip and the Spike he was now. The Spike who had thought it likely he was staring down inevitable heartbreak replaced by this new version who knew Buffy loved him. Who had her smiles and her strength alike, not to mention her whispered promise that she'd vent her all her daily frustrations on him tonight, and the next night, and all the nights to follow.

This woman for whom he'd earn himself a soul if she hadn't assured him that she believed wholeheartedly that he didn't need one.

This woman who owned it anyway. His soul, his heart, his fealty, his life, and anything else she decided to claim.

This woman who was positioning a bit of the blanket so that it draped across his lap, giving him a wicked grin that had him tumbling head-first into love as though for the first time, then diving a hand under the blanket to show him that as much of her good as had rubbed off on him, she'd also claimed some of his evil.

“Everything okay back there?” Tara asked over her shoulder. “I can turn the air up if you want.”

“Air’s good but the music?” Buffy suggested, pulling his cock out of his jeans and giving it a squeeze. “Could turn that up a bit. Unless Willow’s planning to doze.”

“I very much am,” Willow said, patting Tara on the shoulder. “But I also live on campus and am very much accustomed to tuning out music and stuff.”

“Not fucking, though,” Spike muttered. “More’s the pity.”

“Yeah, they’re not going to let that go for a while,” Buffy agreed.

“Or,” Tara said, flicking her gaze to the rearview mirror, “you two were just that loud.”

Spike smirked, even knowing she couldn’t see it—bird was too conscientious about not taking her eyes off the road while she drove—but he liked to think she felt it nonetheless. At least he wouldn’t have to worry about either one of them catching wise on what was going on back here, provided he didn’t growl too loudly over the next few minutes.

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The music volume went up. "That good?" Willow asked. "I can doze through this, no problem."

"Try not to doze through it," Buffy murmured in his ear a moment later.

Yeah, he was a lucky bloke.

Luckiest in the whole sodding world.

