

LIVING THE DREAM

A Paraverse Story



HOLLY DENISE



HE WAS WAITING FOR HER. OF COURSE HE WAS WAITING FOR HER. There were few things in this world she could count on, but somehow Spike had become one of them. No matter what happened, no matter the chaos at home—the arguments, the excuses, the pleas for understanding and patience—her unpredictable world became predictable for a few stolen moments each night. The calm outside of the never-ending frustration that was the exercise of getting to tomorrow with her sanity intact.

She could hate him for it if she didn't need it so much.

What made it worse was she knew he looked forward to these meetings just as much as she did. She would wait for it, the way his eyes lit up whenever they landed on her, how his mouth twitched—tonight around a cigarette—as though he were fighting off a grin. How or when that had started, Buffy didn't know. It had simply been there one night and once she started noticing it, she couldn't stop, even though she knew she should.

Because that was another thing—these meetings were beginning to feel like something other than what they were. She'd entertain a guilty rush whenever she thought about leaving the house, when—in the middle of yet another fight—she'd think about how she was just a few hours away from fresh air and *him*. That look on his face, that pull of his lips, and the knowledge that he was genuinely pleased to see her.

That *someone* was.

“Oh, if looks could stake,” Spike drawled as she came up beside him. “More trouble in paradise, is there?”

Buffy stared at him for a second, willing herself not to give in, just as she did every night. Complaining about her husband to another man was not the best habit, particularly when the man in question was a vampire who hated said husband and didn't hesitate to enumerate why. But there was also no one else. She couldn't unload around Willow or Xander for different yet similar reasons; her mother had never been a fan of Angel's and Dawn could hardly stand to say his name without rolling her eyes. Then there was Giles, who was polite to Angel in a forced-proximity sort of way, but more than that was pushing it. The fact that Angel was no longer a vampire had done nothing to make

Giles forget the time he'd tortured him for hours, never mind that he'd killed his girlfriend.

Spike was hardly the ideal sounding board when it came to venting the woes of her marriage, but she also knew that what she said to him would stay with him. Which, yeah, was a weird confidence to have in an evil bloodsucking fiend from beyond the grave, but since when had her life been normal?

"He did it again," she said before she could think the better of it. "Strike three."

Spike rolled his eyes, stepped into pace beside her when she made to cross into the cemetery. "Coulda told you that was coming, Slayer."

"Yes. Thank you. That is oh so helpful."

He chuckled, and she tried not to appreciate the sound—she really did—but it was deep and rumbly, and she liked hearing it. "So what happens after strike three?" he asked, flicking away his cigarette butt. "Get a good talkin' to from the boys upstairs?"

"No." Buffy practically snarled the word, all the anger and indignation she'd been trying to ignore surfacing all over again. The things she'd been yelling earlier, this feeling of betrayal that didn't even make sense but festered there anyway. "No, it's over. He was fired."

At that, Spike looked at her sharply. "Bugger."

"Yeah." She balled her hands into fists, her lower lip going into a tremble that she knew meant nothing good. The fight she'd left had been a bad one, and odds were swell it would pick up the second she walked back through the door. There would be apologies and pleas for understanding and promises to do better, and he would mean them when he said them, and she would nod and fool herself into thinking that was enough. Then they would go to bed and sometime before his breathing evened out, reality would set in, with its memories of other nights and other fights and other promises that led to fresh disappointments.

This one, though, would be hard to walk off.

"It was the same damn thing," Buffy heard herself blurt in a rush, her eyes burning in that familiar way, and god, she did not want to cry tonight. Not over Angel and definitely not in front of Spike. Yet wanting not to cry always seemed to have the opposite effect and soon

hot tears were spilling down her cheeks, somehow making her feel worse than she did already. “A woman came in with a check drawn off another bank. She wanted to cash it. There wasn’t enough money in her account to hold against the amount in case it bounced. She gave Angel some sob story and he cashed it anyway. It bounced.”

Spike nodded as though he understood. He didn’t. She knew. The intricacies of the American banking system weren’t of interest to him—hadn’t been of interest to her at all until Giles had mentioned that he thought he might be able to get Angel a job working as a teller at the Sunnydale Bank—he had a good relationship with a lender who had helped him finance his new sporty midlife-crisis-mobile and there had been an opening on the teller line. There had been hoops to jump through, loose ends to tie up, not the least of which was the fact that Angel had little in the way of personal identification. It had languished on the to-do list forever—something they knew they needed to cross off, but there had always been something more pressing to tackle first. Like body-snatching slayers, secret government organizations, mad scientist projects gone really wrong, hellgods and Keys, or diagnoses for which no one was prepared.

The entire ordeal of hooking Angel up with the right paperwork had been daunting and complicated, and Buffy had enough of that in her day-to-day. Besides, there was plenty of work to be done under the table. Willy’s, for instance, didn’t exactly report earnings to the IRS. But Angel hadn’t lasted at Willy’s, or any of the less-than-reputable jobs that he’d tried in the interim. A bank, though, was something more, something real, and definitely worth the effort to make him legitimate on paper.

And once they had started the process, Buffy had realized just how many doors could open to her in the real world. Things they had been dancing around ever since he’d slid that ring onto her finger. She and Angel were married but not legally—he wasn’t legally a person—which made it hard to do things like open a joint checking account or put his name on important documents. Married people stuff. Willow had pitched in, hacked into the banking system and plugged in some bogus numbers that established an Angel paper trail and added him as a signatory on her accounts. She’d even helped Buffy piece together

enough forged identification documents to pass the smell test, though Willow had conceded most would be useless outside of Sunnydale, where standards were higher. On the actual Hellmouth, where the needs weren't many and the people in charge had a habit of looking in the other direction? They were golden.

So Angel had landed himself a respectable job. Not mixing drinks for vampires or other half-breed demons. Not picking up trash or cleaning toilets, or any of the other jobs he'd tried to find that paid cash and asked few questions. A good job. One where he got to wear a suit and necktie, got a lunch break, had a retirement account and a steady, reliable paycheck to back up his steady, reliable hours.

And he'd gone and gotten himself fired.

What was worse, he maintained he was in the right.

"It comes down to him not being able to accept he's not in control," Buffy said, wiping at her eyes, annoyed that she had to—that he could upset her like this. Annoyed that these were problems she had to contend with at all when there were so many other things pressing upon her time. Her mother's upcoming operation, her sister's continued safety, and the regular stressors that came with her sacred duty. Patrolling. Slaying. Saving people from monsters, when she wasn't busy running laundry from the mansion back to Revello Drive because they didn't have enough money for appliances. God, last week Dawn had caught her looking under the couch cushions for spare change, and the sting of that embarrassment had yet to ease.

"Course it does. Wanker could never stand it when someone else was callin' the shots."

"This isn't helpful."

"Not tryin' to be helpful. Just sayin' what's true."

"Well, I need it to *not* be true!" Buffy snapped. She had hit that awful level of exhausted where she was certain she would either start laughing or sobbing, and it really wouldn't matter which because it meant the same thing. "I need him to be *helpful*, Spike! I need to be able to focus on my job without worrying about him doing his. I need to be able to be out here, saving the world, protecting my sister and not thinking about how I'm not sure we'll have electricity when I get home. Or what's in the fridge, or who took the trash out. I need to

know that he can handle the home stuff while I handle *everything* else. He has a choice of what to do—I don't."

When she was brave enough to look at Spike, what she saw in his eyes had the inner gauge shifting more decidedly to *cry*. Her mortal enemy pitied her. How the mighty had fallen.

"What I don't get," she continued a moment later, her voice a bit rougher as she fought back the tide of *everything* that wanted out, "is how he managed before. He had an apartment before he had our house. He had *our house*—it's not like it's even a new place! There were lights there, too. Maybe he didn't need food, but electric? He had that. He had a whole place in Los Angeles—an office and an apartment to boot. How is it that he just forgot how to keep those things just because he turned human?"

Spike's face contorted in such a way she knew he had an answer in mind, just wasn't sharing.

"What?" she demanded. "Spill it."

He didn't want to—that much was clear. And strange, all things considered. Spike wasn't the sort to swallow information that made Angel look bad. If anything, he seemed to revel in it. Except, she'd started to notice, when he thought what he had to share might cause her distress. Also not like the Spike she knew, or had known once upon a time, but she supposed that wasn't a very fair barometer. So much had changed in such a short period. The guy who had named himself the bringer of her death had somehow become the person who carried all her secrets, ones she gave with intent and others that tumbled out of her mouth without her brain's permission.

She wasn't an idiot, though. She knew when the change had occurred because it hadn't been just him. Faith had hijacked her body, gotten horizontal with her husband and tried—*tried*—to make something happen with Spike as well. Only he hadn't nibbled. Had known enough to see something was off, that either Buffy had been whammed by some damn powerful magic or... Well, she didn't know. All he'd told her was it hadn't made sense to him, Buffy being married to stalwart Angel, love of her life, and coming onto the local undead. She wasn't the type to fool around on her husband.

And that bit of truth had stuck with her. No, Buffy was *not* the type

to fool around on her husband. Not that she was even tempted, not that she would ever want to. Her husband was Angel—Angel as in *Angel*—and after everything they had been through to get where they were... It just wasn't something she would throw away. No matter what happened or how hard it was, making this marriage work. This marriage she'd thought would be the easiest and best thing in her life.

Yet here she was venting to the undead. The undead who knew something and didn't want to tell her because at some point, yes, she had become *that* pathetic.

"Spike, seriously, talk," Buffy said, crossing her arms. "The last thing I need is more men keeping secrets from me."

Spike released a deep breath, rubbed a hand along the back of his neck. "Not like vamps are in the habit of payin' rent, Slayer. Someone has somethin' they want, we bloody take it. Angel wanted the mansion."

"Right." This was all stuff she already knew. Not enough that she was living in the place where she had once run her husband through with a sword. Nope, definitely room for more baggage. How about the fact that her home had probably once been the home of some nice, kindly individual...a nice, kindly individual whose neck had been torn out by, guess who, that same husband. It was something she could never forget, even if she tried not to think about it all that much, but even with that being the case, it didn't explain how Angel had kept the lights on the entire year following his return from Hell, and it didn't even begin to touch the apartment he'd kept before that.

"Town like this, vamps bein' the bloody open secret we are, not hard to keep a good thing goin', I'd wager," Spike went on. "Your dearly devoted husband made damn sure to let the civvies know just what would happen if he had to pay them a visit. Seems likely the power never got shut off until word got around that he'd left for keeps."

Buffy frowned. Well, great. So the place had not only been paid for in blood, but also maintained with threats of more of the same. She wasn't sure how she felt about that—Angel using the reputation he'd established here during the former worst period of her life to keep himself comfortable. Seemed too opportunistic. Or maybe he just

hadn't bothered to let anyone know he wasn't bad anymore after he'd returned from Hell. Not sure that made it better, but...

"What about the apartment? He had a place—a small place before the factory and before he lost his soul. He wouldn't have killed for it."

Again, Spike looked uncomfortable. Buffy's stomach plummeted.

"Oh god, *did* he kill for it?"

"Not the story he told me, no."

"He told you about it?"

Spike let out a deep breath, sliding his hands into his duster pockets. "First little bit after he came back, all the wanker could do was gab about the life he'd been livin' courtesy of that bloody soul. Eatin' rats, doin' government work back in the forties—"

"Huh?"

"Then bein' told you were the key to his salvation and joinin' up with the higher up do-gooder types. Somethin' about a short bloke in a bad hat who pointed you out to him one day and helped him become your friendly neighborhood stalker."

She wasn't sure what it was specifically, but something in the words sparked a memory. It took a moment to chase the memory down, contextualize it, but then it was there. That guy who had been in Giles's apartment when she'd gone to look for him after learning he'd been watcher-napped. He'd said a lot, that guy, and Buffy had only halfway been paying attention, but the parts that had stuck had really stuck. Angel was supposed to be on the good side and she'd turned him bad.

"Whistler," she muttered, then shook her head, deflated. "He had help." Help he'd never mentioned before, ever. At least she understood now.

"Not sure why he wouldn't have said as much," Spike said, still wincing like he expected to receive the brunt of her frustration for having been the one to demystify Angel's living pre-human arrangements. And she understood that, too. It was easier to rail and rage and be mad at Spike than it was to aim it at Angel, something she had done more than once and always felt bad about afterward.

And even if he'd never held it against her, he always seemed to understand.

She hated that about him, too, almost as much as she loved it. And *that* she really hated—how easily the I-word surfaced in her mind when she was around him these days, particularly when she had to struggle to find it when with anyone else. It didn't mean anything; she just happened to be more relaxed around Spike, which made it easier to reach all the thoughts and things she repressed throughout the rest of the day.

"I don't know what we're going to do," Buffy said, and even she heard the defeat in her voice. The exhaustion. "Mom's going in for her operation soon and I have to be there for her and Dawn. Even if I wanted to get a job right now, I don't think I could. Not when I might need to take off literally any time for her or slayage or Glory or something else."

A shadow crossed Spike's face, and he stepped closer to her. Close enough that suddenly she was swimming in his scent—tobacco and leather and earth, a combination she had never expected to like but did. Sort of like Spike himself. And it had been a struggle to get there, too, at least in her head.

It had started that night when he'd found her beating up some newbie vamp who had had the bad luck to cross her path right after she'd had it out with her husband for the first time since they'd swapped vows. Her husband, who had greeted her with a hug when she came through the doorway, then immediately started gushing about the amazing sex they'd had the night before, and how he'd missed her that morning, had been hoping for more. She'd been on fire, unleashed, wild and he'd loved every second.

Too bad all of that had happened when she'd been in someone else's body.

Spike had stumbled upon her as she'd exorcised the sense of betrayal and violation, as she'd scrambled to find explanations and excuses. There were plenty of them, too, and she'd been eager to try them all on. After all, no one could have reasonably known that Buffy wasn't behind the wheel. Even by hellmouth standards, asking for ID before boinking one's wife was a little over the top.

But knowing that hadn't made her hurt any less. She'd whaled on the newbie vamp until it would have been crueler not to stake him,

and as soon as the dust cloud had gone up, Spike had been there, all up in her space, asking if the spell had worn off or if she was still a massive bitch.

“What spell?” she’d snapped.

“Don’t give me that, Slayer. You know bloody well what I’m talkin’ about.”

She’d shaken her head, stepped back, needing to be away from this. Feeling too damn exposed and remembering what his response had been the last time. How he’d beaten her down both physically and verbally, rubbed her own stupidity in her face for the night she’d shared with Parker—she’d known she couldn’t go through that again.

Hell, even the thought had been too much. An overload in the brain of Buffy. And to her horror, her eyes had welled with tears and she’d been on the verge of losing all her shit in front of the one person who could make it all worse.

“Oh, don’t bother turnin’ on the waterworks,” he’d drawled, staring at her with anger that hadn’t made sense. Like crying was offensive or something, and she’d wanted to punch him—would have, but she had been all punched out. Tired of being the Slayer, ready to be a girl. A girl hurting because the man who was supposed to love her hadn’t loved her enough. “That rot doesn’t work on me. In fact—”

But the silent tears had turned into sobs—awful, embarrassing sobs, and she’d just known she would have to stake him, as there was no way he would let her live it down, and the thought had made her cry harder. She’d never staked a vampire she knew before, and no matter how much she threatened it, she didn’t want to. Not Spike, anyway. He’d managed to go from potential prey to person-in-her-life, and even if she wouldn’t miss him when he was gone, the thought of being the one to kill him had hit her as all kinds of wrong.

To this day, she didn’t know what had possessed him to do it. Why, when she’d been standing there, all vulnerability and no bite, he’d decided to tug her to him rather than go in for the kill. Self-preservation, perhaps, the knowledge that if she wanted to dust him there was little he could do about it. Or maybe she’d just broken him and he hadn’t known what else to do. After all, he’d never seen her cry before.

She’d never asked him, and he’d never told. All she knew was what

had happened—that Spike had cursed and dragged her to him, pressed her face against his shoulder and told her to have some bloody dignity and not make such a racket. No vamp in this town would fear her again if they saw her blubbering like that.

The words hadn't exactly been comforting, but he hadn't been making fun of her, either. Hadn't taken an easy jab. He'd stood there, his arms awkwardly around her and his body rigid, as she'd dampened his T-shirt with tears and probably more snot than she wanted to consider, grumbling and muttering all the while but letting her do it. A few times, he'd barked at her to see if she was about done, then sighed and slapped her back with a series of awkward pats when all he'd earned was a louder wail. Even still, nothing about it had been unkind. More resigned, like he had been there before.

After unloading a good amount of gross onto his sleeve, Buffy had figured that she owed him an explanation. So, her temples pulsing and her stomach all knotted, she'd spilled the whole story. Watched as his eyes darkened, his jaw grew tighter—and then, in a blur of movement, he'd smashed his fist into the nearest headstone, hard enough that it had cracked beneath his knuckles.

That was when she'd learned about Faith's exploits prior to showing up for the fuck she'd always thought Angel owed her. Why Spike was there at all, why he'd thought she'd been under a spell. How it had been obvious that something was wrong but even if that hadn't been her fault, he'd wanted to punish her for it anyway. For teasing him like that, screwing with his head. Spending too much time around her husband, he'd said, and he'd be bloody well damned if he let Angelus turn her into another version of himself the way he had with Drusilla.

And that had been the start. They had talked—really talked, as they never had before. And at the end of the night, they'd parted as something other than enemies. Spike's words that Angel had been off his rocker to miss the obvious had followed her all the way home, lighting within her when she'd seen her husband again, and though she had taken strides to put the whole mess behind them, she'd never forgotten what Spike had said. How he'd made her feel something other than stupid when she'd felt like the biggest idiot in the world for being as upset as she was. For having lost it as she had. For feeling

betrayed when most reasonable people wouldn't. That had been the start, and when he'd found her the following night, they had been different.

Buffy didn't know what they were now. Friends, maybe, though she didn't want to say the word in case he threw it back at her. If he didn't consider her a friend, she wasn't sure she wanted to know.

"What you're gonna do," he said now, "is let him suss it out."

There was steel in his voice—steel she recognized. It was the same that, once upon a time, had been aimed at her, found in snide remarks or outright insults. But it had been a long while since Spike had spoken to her like that. These days his ire seemed solely reserved for Angel. Or, more specifically, when Angel had done something to upset her.

That he cared that much—that he cared *at all*—was one of those things that meant way more than it should. Everyone else just seemed to think she would manage. Find a way. Make it work. And true, some of that was her own damn fault for letting them believe it. Not wanting to cop to what her life had become, how much time she spent worrying. How much time she spent trying to make it seem like there was nothing to worry about.

"I can't," she said, her lower lip trembling. "If I don't do something... The house we have. That's huge. More than huge, but the money—"

"Bugger that. I'll get you money."

Her chest seized. "Spike, no."

"Don't need all that on your shoulders, Summers. Plenty of ways to make a dime around here." He paused, brought his hands up. "And no, nothin' you'd have to stake me over, so don't bloody ask. Know my way around a hand of cards. Can get you nice and—"

"No. Do you hear yourself? That's crazy."

He rolled his eyes again, huffing like she was being unreasonable. And maybe she was, because she certainly couldn't explain why her heart was suddenly thundering like she was being chased by something big and nasty. Why the aggravation stretching his face had her blood pumping so hard even she could hear it rushing. But no, this was nuts. Spike as her patrol buddy was pushing the line enough as it was—playing the part of her confidant and friend? Yeah, full on cuckoo for

Cocoa Puffs. Spike volunteering to—what, get her money? Step into the role of provider in the dismal play that was her everyday life? What in the world was this? What were they doing?

What was *she* doing?

Buffy blinked and jolted away from him as though the thought itself had burned her. In that second, it felt like it had. She knew what she was doing. That was the problem. Every time she left the house, hoping she would see him and knowing she would. How the day's tension seemed to roll away the second she caught a whiff of cigarettes or thought she might have spied a blond head while out in public. Sometimes even in broad daylight, where she knew it was impossible for him to be, she'd still somehow trick herself into thinking he was there, and the thought would bring her comfort. If something happened, she wouldn't be left on her own to figure out how to handle it. He'd swoop in, and his plans might suck beyond the telling of it, but he'd provide them anyway right before deferring to her to make the final choice.

She came out here every night to do her job. She *wanted* to come out here every night so she could see him. Be with him.

And it was wrong—all of it was so wrong. She was a married woman. Married to *Angel*, the man for whom she would have and had risked everything. The man she'd nearly died to save, whose absence from her life had sent her into the deepest depression she had ever known, and whose return had filled her with such hope and bliss and longing for at least a part of the life she felt she was owed. If hers was to be a violent, tragic death, let everything up until that moment be good at least. Angel was everything she had ever thought she wanted, the reward from a grateful world for everything she had sacrificed, and it was supposed to be easy now. No more star-crossed anything. No more pining for what she didn't have, could never have, no more worrying over what might happen if it all went wrong again. If it was her fault.

"I need to go," Buffy blurted, suddenly terrified she might start crying again. Over him, the situation, the thing she feared she was becoming—any and all of it. And Spike would know. He always did. Always saw more than she wanted to show, more of her than anyone

else ever had. It was so unfair that he could do that, make her feel like that, and she hated him so much she wondered if it might be worth the pain of staking him just so she wouldn't have to deal with this confusion anymore.

Except then he would be gone and that would cripple her.

"Buffy." His voice was low and, like the rest of him, bad for her. Bad for the way the sound of it had texture, how it tickled her from the inside. How good it felt, hearing him say her name like that. Hearing him say it at all. How he put so much feeling in those two syllables. "Nothin' wrong in takin' help when it's offered."

"I can't. Not from you."

At last, something like anger flashed across his face. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I can't let you subsidize my life, Spike! Do you have any idea how screwed up that is?" She stepped back on wobbly legs. Legs that wanted very much to take her toward him rather than away. "You're a vampire. I'm the Slayer. You're supposed to want me dead, not... not...*whatever* this is."

His eyebrows shot skyward. "*This?*"

"This! Meeting me for patrols. Talking like—like we're talking buddies who talk. You haven't even tried to get the chip out in months."

Spike stared at her, his jaw tight and his nostrils in full flare mode. "You want the chip out?"

"No, *you* do. Or you should! Why haven't you tried?"

"Oi, I've tried plenty. Just didn't take, is all. And those government gits didn't exactly stick around after you and your little slayerettes stormed the castle. Don't have a load of options, do I?"

"Then why stay here?" Buffy shot back, her cheeks burning. All of her burning. "You hate this place. You hate me and my friends, you—"

"No, I don't."

"You don't what?" she blurted before she could stop herself. But she knew. She knew and he knew she knew.

He said it anyway.

"I don't hate you, Summers." There was a beat, then he stepped forward, his eyes still intent on her. Burning through her so she felt the

power of that look all over. On the inside, even. "Haven't for a long bloody while. You know it, too. We're somethin', you and I."

God, no. He couldn't do that. He could *not* say things like that. Buffy glared at him for a handful of seconds, painfully aware of the way every muscle in her body had gone tight and how her pulse was racing and that he could hear it because he was a vampire.

"We're not," she replied, barely above a whisper. Even she could hear the tremble in her voice. The knowledge of the lie. "Mortal enemies, maybe—"

"Haven't been that for a minute now." He was grinning as though this were funny. "When's the last time you took a swing at me?"

Maybe he said it so she would do it—take a swing. He certainly seemed to know it was coming, ducking at just the right moment to avoid contact with her knuckles. Whether or not he intended for gravity to direct her fist into the nearest tomb, she didn't know, only that was what had happened. Buffy swung, stumbled, and smashed her hand against the rough stone wall of one of Restfield's many mausoleums. The cry that tore from her lips was half-surprise, half-pain at the sensation of skin being scraped away, and then she had staggered back, cradling her stinging hand and applying every other ounce of willpower toward keeping herself from doing something truly embarrassing, like bursting into tears all over again.

Spike couldn't leave well enough alone, though. Of course he couldn't. That would be the easy thing—the right thing. Leave her with the shredded remains of her dignity for the night so she could lick her wounds and at least pretend that she hadn't become some caricature of herself. No, he had to be there, right there. Always with her, even when he wasn't.

"Let's see it," Spike said, closing his hand around her wrist. "Feel better now?"

"Stop. Leave me alone."

"You're bleedin'. Wanna attract the attention of every vamp in town?"

"Don't pretend like you care."

He snickered and shook his head, tugging at her arm with enough force that she knew he wouldn't relent before she did. With a hard

sigh, Buffy stopped fighting him, let him take her hand into his own so he could assess the damage.

It was the sort of injury that felt just as bad as it looked—that was, it hurt like a mother and had left her hand looking a bit mangled. Not so much that it wouldn't be mostly healed by tomorrow but enough that she was preemptively wincing at the thought of running it under water, could already feel how badly it would sting. The wound itself was a mix of blood and torn strips of skin that would hurt to remove but wouldn't kill her. All in all, another night on the job.

"Mmm." Spike frowned, running a thumb down the uninjured curve of her palm. "Might try to keep from attackin' poor, defenseless crypts in the future, pet. Reckon this is gonna leave a bruise."

"I was aiming for *you*, jackass."

"All because I said we weren't enemies anymore?"

"We are so enemies."

The corner of his mouth twitched and he raised his gaze to hers. "Let all your enemies tend to your wounds, Slayer? Wonder you're still here to throw punches."

"Hey—you wouldn't let go."

"And there's nothin' you could do to make me, is there?" The asshole's eyes were dancing now, all bold daring. Inviting her to do it again, try it again, take another swing and see if her luck improved this time. But she didn't want to hit him and he knew it. The only person she was really trying to fool here was herself.

"Spike," Buffy said, and fought a wince at the note in her voice. "This isn't normal. You know that, right?"

"What's not normal?"

"Hanging around the Slayer and not trying to kill her. You shouldn't *want* to be my friend."

He furrowed his brow as though the thought had never occurred to him, then relaxed and lifted a shoulder with that careless disregard she both envied and resented. How he could act like major paradigm shifts were anything other than what they were. Pretend any of this was normal and challenge her to do the same while also goading her to fight him on it. Knowing, perhaps, that no matter which path she

chose, she would end up at the same destination. She just didn't know what that was yet.

Or she did, and the thought of actually arriving left her something more than terrified.

"Good thing I'm a rebel," Spike replied. He held her gaze as he swiped a drop of her blood onto his forefinger, not saying a word but daring her to look away all the same.

Then that pink tongue poked out from between his pale lips and lapped it up. Spike's eyes fluttered shut and he rumbled a low moan, looking lost somewhere between pleasure and pain. And it shouldn't have done anything for her—shouldn't have done anything at all, but Buffy heard the way her breath hitched, felt the flush in her cheeks, the sparks alighting across her skin. In that handful of seconds, she became aware of herself as she hadn't been in what seemed like forever, her nipples straining against the material of her bra—*thank god she'd worn a bra*—her legs trembling and a heaviness in her center that made her feel strong and weak at the same time. Desire was one of those things she'd assumed faded in most marriages, sex becoming more about maintenance than genuine want. Only she'd thought, hoped, she and Angel would be the exception to the rule. That the passion that had brought them together would be the sort that lasted well beyond the honeymoon, make them ravenous for each other so that every time felt like the first, in a way.

That hadn't happened. And right now, this instant, she knew why.

At some point over the last few months, she had stopped wanting Angel. He'd reach for her and she'd sigh and go through the motions, and it was all very tidy, almost businesslike. A thing they did to keep the peace, and perhaps in the hopes of one day finding what they had managed to lose when they hadn't been paying attention. Buffy had thought perhaps she was simply no longer interested in sex—been there, done that, not all it was cracked up to be.

She'd been kidding herself, because damn, she wanted. She wanted with desperation that would have scared her had she the liberty of being scared. She wanted hard and fast and passionate and dangerous and love. Mostly the love—the sort that didn't fizzle and die. The sort that lasted and lasted and lasted.

She wanted Spike.

And she couldn't have him.

"I gotta go," Buffy said, stumbling back so hard she nearly tripped over her own feet. "I'll...see you later."

"Buffy—"

"No." She held up a hand, the injured hand, saw his eyes darken and his nostrils flare, and felt a corresponding tingle in places that should not—*could not*—tingle for Spike. But there it was, where it had been for weeks and weeks and she had pretended not to notice but she had. When it came to Spike, she couldn't help but notice. "We're good. I'm sorry for... Just sorry."

She turned on her heel and put her leg muscles to the test before he could say anything else, and the dark of the cemetery around her melted into a blur.



AS EXPECTED, Angel had been waiting for her so he could launch into the second half of the argument. More justifications, protests against an unfair system that kept people impoverished, and was he supposed to just accept that he was a part of it now? If he saw someone who needed help, he would do whatever was in his power to provide that help. The woman had needed the money to buy formula for her baby and what sort of monster would have turned her away because of something like bank policy?

But Buffy hadn't had the strength to fight. Tell him that he was a sucker for believing every sob story he was fed, that *they* were impoverished, that his job had been a relief from the other worries that kept her up at night. These were points she'd made before and would undoubtedly make again, and again, and again, but not that night. Not on top of the guilt she had carried home with her, that awful sensation that she had done something wrong. That *she* had no grounds upon which to be angry with him at all when she was feeling things for someone else. When the only thing that had kept her from launching herself at Spike had been the way the engagement ring she still wore

had rubbed along her finger, reminding her that she didn't have that luxury.

And she was lying to herself where that was concerned as well. She didn't feel her engagement ring anymore, not even when the massive stone slid sideways and wound up on the wrong side. Like her marriage itself, it had become something she kept needing to correct, not feeling it unless there was a problem.

Then there was the knowledge that hurt the most. The understanding, bone-deep, that this thing with Spike had to stop. It wasn't nothing and it never had been, but she hadn't realized just how dangerous it was until tonight. She'd been like Angel, making excuses and justifications to keep doing something she wanted to do, never mind if it was right. Never mind what it made her.

Buffy lay awake long after Angel's breathing evened out, forcing herself to sit with her decision. Battling back tears, pushing against the heaviness in her chest, wanting so badly just to not care what kind of person she was, what it would make her if she went for it. Wishing, not for the first time, that she could turn back the clock, the way the Oracles had offered once, slap some sense into her stupid, idealistic self for not realizing that Angel had been wrong. She *couldn't* do normal. At least not this kind of normal—a normal with him.

Also not for the first time, the thought arose, whispered that people bowed out of unhappy marriages every day. It wouldn't be like she'd be breaking new ground were she to bring it up. They could do that, admit the mistake they had made, and go their separate ways. Go back to life the way she was meant to live it, not the production it had become.

The relief that came with this was so bright and absolute it almost hurt—*did* hurt when the penny dropped. Reminding her that Angel had nowhere to go because of her. He'd given up being a vampire, and while that hadn't seemed like an actual sacrifice at the time, she wasn't so naïve anymore. Being a vampire was how he had survived, what had given him the tools he needed to make it in this world. More than that, it had been his entire damn identity. Provided him with a sense of purpose that being human did not, one that she alone could not compensate for. One she didn't *want* to compensate for but had to

anyway, because she was the reason he was here. He'd given up everything he hadn't known mattered to him for her.

And here she was pining for someone else. A vampire, one without a soul or a mission.

One she was terrified she might love.

Buffy bit her lower lip, a few hot tears escaping down her cheeks despite her efforts to hold them back. Her mind took her back to that moment in the cemetery, Spike swiping up a drop of blood, bringing it to his mouth. How his eyes had burned, how *she* had burned, how much she'd wanted. And before she could stop herself, her hand was between her legs, fingers surfing over her wet flesh, parting her folds and finding her clit. It didn't take long—it barely took any time at all. Imagining herself back there under the stars, Spike's lips on her skin, his body pressed against hers, stone at her back and her legs around his waist as she tugged on his ear with her teeth and begged him to do it, love her, no matter how wrong it was. How crazy. No matter what it made her. Just please love her and never stop.

The orgasm that swept over her was both pleasure and pain. Like the look Spike had given her when he'd sucked her blood into his mouth. That thought made her cry harder. Particularly as, beside her, Angel gave a loud snore, grounding her into the reality that was her life. The one she had chosen.

Buffy pressed her eyes closed, digging her teeth harder into the skin of her lip to keep it inside. All of it. The sob that wanted free, that awful pressure in her chest, and these thoughts that could never be more than thoughts.

Sleep would come. Eventually. It always did. And so would morning, bringing with it another day just like this one.

Such was life.

