

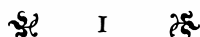
LOST

A Paraverse Story



HOLLY DENISE





THERE WILL BE NO GUARANTEE OF RETURN

OH GOD, WHAT NOW?

Heart in her throat, Buffy whirled around, blinking at the sudden all-consuming dark that surrounded her. Had the utility company finally decided to shut the power off? She'd wondered how that might work—one of the many random thoughts to dance across her brain these days—but hadn't allowed herself much time to worry because there was no shortage of things to worry about. At the end of the day, things like electricity for a closed-up magical supply store remained at the very bottom of the list.

Though if she had been thinking clearly, she might have thought to bring a flashlight with her. Or thrown caution to the wind and admitted to Spike that she could use his help in this after all. She'd had her reasons for telling him no, and they were good reasons. They were also reasons that assumed her friends might want to help her in her search, turn up without notice and start asking questions she couldn't answer, particularly why her tongue was down a certain vampire's throat when she had that sparkly ring on her finger.

But that had been optimistic. As in *way too*. Her friends were all occupied with college and jobs and getting married. They didn't have time to worry about a minor problem like her missing sister.

That settled it. Tomorrow, she'd bring Spike.

Buffy breathed out as her other senses kicked in—the sort that always went on alert whenever something unexpected happened. After a few seconds, the situation in her chest had calmed. No monsters in the dark. Just a crapload of junk she had to negotiate her way through without knocking over. Joy of joys.

Also, was she holding something?

She closed her eyes—not sure why she did because closing her eyes didn't accomplish anything—then opened them and glanced at her hand. That didn't accomplish anything, either. There was definitely something there, though, something small and furry that hadn't been there a second earlier. And then her heart was thundering again, because of course the one thing she couldn't be holding was the first thing that came to mind.

It can't be. I'm losing it.

But once the thought bloomed, it rooted. She had come here to find it, and something had happened—something that had caused the power to go off and...what, the paw to jump into her hand? Life didn't work like that, especially hers. Crazy was the only alternative that made sense. Thankfully, Spike had a thing for crazy girls.

A wry grin tugged on her lips. He was going to give her that pitying, tilted-head look when she told him about this later. *If* she got to see him later. She had promised the others she'd try to make it by the Bronze, and since she so frequently used them as alibis, she was likely better off putting in an appearance. And maybe Spike would show up, anyway. Scowl and snark his way through a few conversations before providing her a handy excuse to leave. That seemed possible.

No, not just possible. He *would* show up. It was Angel's poker night, for one, and Spike wasn't the sort to let that go uncelebrated. Add to the fact, he always knew when she needed him. And lately, she needed him all the time.

"All right, Buffy," she said, taking a tentative step forward and reaching out with her hand—the one *not* holding the thing that *couldn't* be the monkey's paw—to feel for the nearest shelf. "Let's not make a mess on our way out, okay?"

Her voice sounded weird against the quiet. Like it had farther to

travel, to breathe. Like *she* did. And she had yet to find a shelf. In fact, the space around her felt like actual space. Not at all like the cramped corner she'd managed to fight her way inside.

The rest of her slayer senses kicked fully online at that, telling her that it wasn't her imagination—there *was* space around her. A good amount of it. Whatever had killed the lights had also killed the obstacle course. Or maybe she had fallen and hit her head on something sharp enough to give her one very confusing and frustrating dream. That would at least explain how it was she was holding—

Buffy stumbled forward, her legs feeling heavy and awkward. The air shifted along her skin, which was damp with sweat, plastering wayward strands of hair to her cheeks and brow. Hair that, she just realized, was off her neck. Here she had been wishing for a hair-tie for the past three hours and suddenly not only did she have one, but she'd managed to put it to use without realizing that was what she was doing.

Yeah, that settled it. She *had* to be dreaming. Maybe exhaustion and stress had combined forces, turned her body against her. She had been abusing it rather mightily—hours of searching, ignoring the pain that was stepping inside the Magic Box, doing her best to keep her focus on the task at hand. Then, when night fell, she had no choice but to go home. Keep her anger and resentment below the boiling point, feeling it there always, every time she looked at her husband. The man for whom she had sacrificed so much of herself, the man who was the reason she was wasting her days poring through her dead watcher's belongings, looking for something she was increasingly certain he'd never owned.

Angel had offered to help her in her search, and though she knew she should have accepted—knew that any help was better than no help—the thought of being confined with him for hours on end made her skin itch and her chest hurt with the effort it took to not lash out. If it weren't for the moments she stole away, the ones she knew she would one day pay for like she'd paid for nothing else, Buffy imagined she would have lost her marbles a long time ago. As it was, she was lucky they had lasted this long.

Put that way, it wasn't all that odd that she'd landed in the sort of dream where solutions were literally handed to her.

But the dream seemed real—real enough that she knew she couldn't just wait in the dark to wake up. Standing still had never been her forte as it was. Thankfully, she had enough of her own natural intuition intact to guide her feet in the direction she knew led to the staircase. And though she knew now that the maze of shelves and carts had disappeared, she couldn't help but wince every time she took a step. There was still stuff down here—she felt that as well—but it seemed to be all in order. Not the unmanaged chaos that she'd been forced to turn the downstairs of the Magic Box into after being given the keys to the castle. Not that there had been a ton of space down here to spare to begin with, but enough. Enough to get her to the staircase without knocking over a stack of books or causing a cauldron-full of crystals to go smashing to the floor. Not enough to keep herself from doing something stupid like trying the light switch when it was abundantly clear that the lights weren't working, but—

But on the lights went. Just like that. Like someone had left her down here in the dark.

For the third time, Buffy's heart started pounding, and now she was well and truly freaked. The lights were on—she was blinking, and the lights *were on*—and the downstairs wasn't the downstairs anymore. At first she thought, half-hoped, that the sudden switch from dark to bright had confused her already-confused head, but the longer she stared, the more apparent it became that she was not seeing things. Also, any hope that she might be dreaming had died a quick death. Dreams mimicked reality—reality very rarely mimicked dreams. At least not to this degree.

“What the hell?” she said, realizing belatedly that her lungs were working overtime. Between her hard gasps for air and the pounding against her ribcage, her chest was starting to seriously hurt. And it only became worse when she remembered the thing she was holding—still holding—that *couldn't* be a monkey's paw but somehow she knew was, because once she fixed her gaze upon it, she saw there was little else it could be.

Something had happened here. Something beyond regular magic.

Also, Buffy was reasonably certain she hadn't dressed like she was applying for a bank loan to search through her dead watcher's affairs, yet the jeans and tee she'd slapped on had been exchanged for a skirt, a black sleeveless blouse, and a pair of very impractical shoes.

Through the panic came a cold sort of certainty. If this wasn't regular magic, there was only one explanation.

Willow.

What was a little mental mind-fuckery to a witch who had raised the dead?

Buffy stared hard at the paw as her body began to calm for what she hoped was the final time.

Was it possible that one of Willow's spells had finally gone wrong the right way? Her friend had known she was searching for the paw—hell, *everyone* knew she was searching for the paw. They also knew how important it was that she find it. That they hadn't solved a problem like her husband shipping her sister off to her father before bringing her back from the dead was perhaps the only thing they had apologized for thus far. And since Willow's go-to fix-it these days involved spell books and smelly herbs, she had probably only slowed down long enough to find the right combination of funny Latin words to chant.

Buffy let out another slow breath, letting the reality of what she was seeing settle. No jokes, no wires, no hidden cameras. The monkey's paw was in her hand. How didn't matter, nor did why. All that mattered was that Dawn could come home. And then...

Her heart skipped. Then the final hurdle would be crossed. The same hurdle she kept mentally rearranging. The one she had promised herself she would leap this time, no matter how much the prospect terrified her.

Buffy turned, tightened her grip on the paw. Maybe tonight. She could blow the gang off and Spike could drive her to Los Angeles. She wasn't even sure she cared enough to come up with an excuse for Angel's benefit. Not that he needed an excuse when he was off to lose money to his old bank friends, the few he'd managed to make before he'd been fired. He likely would be on his way out soon if he hadn't left already. What came after would come—she just needed this done first.

With a somewhat manic laugh, she shoved her way through the

door and into the shop proper, her mind racing. She only made it a pace, though, before her world crashed down around her for the second time in the span of five minutes.

"Oh, Buffy!" Giles took a step back, flashed her with his somewhat-distracted-but-always-fatherly smile, and made to remove his glasses. He glanced at the door she had just thrown open. "Do be careful when you leave the basement. I know the shop isn't busy at the moment, but that can change rather quickly, as I'm sure you'll find, and I have discovered that people are less inclined to spend money when we have knocked them unconscious." He paused, glancing at the space behind her. "Were you looking for something?"

Buffy didn't answer. She couldn't. All she could do was stare, a dull buzzing taking residence in the back of her head.

Something was wrong. Something was seriously wrong. Giles was standing in front of her. Giles, who was dead. Giles, whose funeral she had attended, whose casket she had watched lowered into the ground. Whose absence had been all-consuming, almost more horrible than her mother's for how it had caught her, how much she *hadn't* seen it coming. Her mother had been sick. Giles had been on a plane. Those two things weren't equal, yet the outcomes certainly had been.

Giles couldn't be here. He *couldn't*.

Yet here he was.

"Giles," she said, as though saying his name would magically make her understand. It didn't. "Giles. You're here."

Now he was frowning at her. "Are you feeling all right? You look a bit pale."

The ringing in her ears intensified. And then she didn't care—didn't care that it didn't make sense, didn't care what kind of magic this was, didn't care about any of that because Giles was the third most important person in her life and he was *here*, and what did it matter how? Buffy choked a sob and flung herself at him hard enough to send him stumbling back, his arms flailing and a bunch of very-British-sounding words spilling from his lips. But Buffy heard none of it, too focused on how real he felt, the texture of his suit jacket against her cheek, his warm scent of aged paper and schmancy booze that Spike

was always trying to steal. It was him. He was back. Somehow, he was back.

Back back back back back...

"Buffy," he wheezed, the sound coming out as a twisted half-laugh. "Again, your strength is...remarkable." A pause. "I'm finding it rather difficult to breathe."

"You're here," she whispered, clutching him tighter, her eyes burning. "You're here. Please don't let this be a dream. Please, I don't want to wake up. Please still be here."

Before he could reply, though, someone else snapped her name.

"Buffy! What the hell are you doing?"

The voice was enough to ground her—or at the very least, convince her that she could open her eyes. Still, prying herself off her bewildered watcher took effort. Buffy shook her head, wiped at her cheeks, not sure what to make of the expression on Giles's face. Not sure if she cared. She was looking at him and he wasn't disappearing. That was all that mattered.

"Anya," she said, sniffing and forcing herself to pull her gaze away. She didn't know how she did it, except it was one of those necessary things. "Oh, hey."

"Hey? I left you in charge of a customer," the former demon said with a fixed, pained smile. Her customer service smile, the one she worked to maintain in all circumstances, which sometimes resulted in her lips barely moving when she spoke. Like now. "She looks impatient—like she's *not* going to buy things. That is not the ideal outcome and I demand you rectify it immediately. And what is that?" Anya demanded, her attention now fixed on the thing Buffy still clutched in her hand.

Buffy followed her gaze and felt her chest give another lurch. Hell, all of her lurched, and in such a way she thought—however briefly—that she might just lose consciousness. The past few minutes had been an exercise in mental overload. The downstairs rearranging itself, the paw appearing in her hand, Giles alive, the shop back the way it should be. And Anya—Anya hadn't spoken to her like that since Giles's will had been read. Since she'd learned that the shop wasn't hers after all, and since Buffy hadn't been in a place to sell it, being that she herself was still legally dead.

But Anya was talking to her because Giles wasn't dead, and the shop wasn't closed.

It was obvious that something wiggy was going on—and again, she wondered if she'd had a psychotic break, but managed to shake her head without losing what remained of it, and some of her thoughts cleared. Not entirely, but enough to matter.

"I need this," Buffy replied, meeting Anya's gaze. "Sorry. I'll pay for it."

But Giles was staring at the paw now too, horror overshadowing the confusion out of his eyes. She didn't care. As long as he didn't disappear, he could gape at whatever he wanted.

"Good lord," he said. "Buffy, give that to me now."

"What? No, I need it. I've been looking for it for—"

"Just give it to me."

It was either shock or his tone. Maybe a combination. After all, denying her recently not-dead surrogate father what he asked for just seemed rude. So she found herself doing as he asked, watching a bit dumbly as Giles snatched up the paw as soon as it was within reach. He turned it over in his hands as though checking for a forgery, growing paler with every second. Then, at last, he looked up again, now wearing his super-serious watcher face. The one that always preceded a scolding.

"Where did you get this?" he asked.

"The basement," Buffy said. "It was... It was just there."

"Just there?" He stared at her, then finally turned his attention to Anya, who was watching the exchange with a frown. "The customer Buffy was helping," Giles said, "please see to her. I have to tend to this immediately."

"Doesn't that defeat the purpose of giving her hands-on experience?" Anya asked, not bothering to disguise her pout. "I thought she was learning how to be of value around the shop."

"Just do it, Anya. Please." Without awaiting a response, Giles seized Buffy by the arm and marched her toward the training room. The training room, which was also intact, as though she hadn't boxed up half of these weapons just a few days ago. "Stay here," he said quickly. "I must check something. This is very important."

“Giles—”

“Just...don’t move.”

She watched as he disappeared back into the shop, then heard the unmistakable swing of the basement door, followed by what sounded like a stampede down the stairs. And maybe it was her own shock settling in, but she decided that not moving was a swell idea. If she kept moving, the world might keep changing, and she wasn’t sure how many more bombshells she was equipped to handle.

Giles is alive. He’s alive. He said he’ll be right back.

That should have been impossible. Everything she was seeing now, experiencing now, should be impossible. But then, words like *impossible* hadn’t stopped her friends before. What was she if not living proof?

Willow had to be at the center. Sure, this felt too big for regular magic, but Willow, more than anyone, had never taken being told she couldn’t do something well. And there had been a whole conversation about this the night the plane had gone down. Buffy and the others, here at the Magic Box, surrounded by Giles’s books and various collections, sitting with the gaping maw that was his absence—Buffy feeling certain she would suffocate if she didn’t push her way outside—and Xander had asked about the resurrection spell. If there was a chance at bringing Giles back. Not a natural death, after all. Planes weren’t natural, so dying in a crash should make him eligible for a second chance at life.

Buffy remembered very little about the funeral and the aftermath—too lost in her own thoughts, focused on the piece of her that was missing. She remembered this, though, because she’d wanted to both take a swing at Xander for even considering such a thing and scream at Willow until she did it. Until she yanked someone else from Heaven, unfair as it was, because trying to do any of this without Giles was impossible.

But Tara had said no, that would be cruel. It wasn’t like when Buffy had died diving into a thousand hell dimensions. Giles, she’d said, would be somewhere good. Somewhere he could be happy.

That had broken her a different way, and Buffy had needed to employ every ounce of strength she had on reserve to keep from

screaming or laughing or both. For being so close to the obvious truth and not landing on it all the same, for forcing her back here, inside a world that seemed a bad joke. No Dawn. No Giles. She'd almost gotten a break where Angel was concerned, but no, he'd had to come back the second he heard she was alive again. Not with any answers or solutions, not even with a good excuse for what he'd done to Dawn. No, he'd returned, and her house had become a different kind of tomb—one marking a marriage that was dead but refused to stay buried. Misery truly loved company.

If it weren't for Spike, she knew she would have lost what little of herself she'd managed to hold on to. The safe place that was his place—their place. The home she couldn't claim.

A moment later, Giles reappeared in the doorway, gasping like he'd run a marathon, startling her out of her head. She hadn't gotten a chance to think of him as dead yet, the way she did her mother, still expected to see him at the usual places and still experienced that awful dive when memory caught up with her. Yet somehow, watching him move, breathe, be alive here was something beyond strange—like perhaps her post-resurrection brain had finally shorted out, like she'd been right earlier when she'd thought she was crazy.

Crazy made more sense than anything else at the moment.

Giles didn't give her time to think on it, though. Rather, he moved forward, clutching an ornate case to his chest with one hand and holding a small vial of something pearly in the other. "Buffy," he said between pants, "this is important. I need—ahh, to know how you opened this case."

"I didn't," she said, staring at it. Had she? Could she trust anything she saw or thought right now?

"I was very careful to ward this once it came into my possession." He rested the thing against the balance beam, still breathing heavily. "This is—do you know what this is?"

"Monkey's paw," she replied, and for perhaps the first time in their shared history, Giles looked horrified that she had an answer to one of his questions. "Grants wishes."

"Yes, it... Here." He uncorked the vial, dabbed some of its pearly contents onto his forefinger, then spread the substance across his brow.

"Anyone who sees the paw, handles it, becomes a victim of its extraordinary power," he explained, now hurrying over to her. He swiped a finger across her forehead before she could react—not that she would have, not that she would have known what to say. "The antidote should break the connection it forges with your mind. Buffy, I know your situation is... Well, a bit desperate, but we will handle it. Together. Trust me when I say the paw would only make things worse."

"I wasn't going to use it," Buffy protested. Her voice sounded weak to her own ears, but she and Spike had already had this conversation. Magic and its consequences—consequences she was living every day now, thanks to her friends. There wasn't much that genuinely frightened Spike, but Buffy had learned to be wary of the things that did. His concern that she might use the paw to wish herself into a better life had been part of the reason he wanted to search with her. Make sure he was there to stop her before she did something she couldn't take back.

"Then what the devil did you need it for?" Giles asked, now somewhere between exasperated and terrified.

"It's the only way to get her back."

"Get *who* back? What on earth are you talking about?"

"Dawn," Buffy blurted, noticing for the first time that she was burning up. "They have Dawn."

His eyes widened with alarm. "Who?" Giles demanded. "Who has Dawn? What has happened? Buffy—"

"He told me I could have Dawn back if I handed over the paw. I've been here looking for it." She blinked and refocused on the case. "That's it, isn't it? Give it back to me. I have to trade it—"

"What has happened to Dawn? Why didn't you say anything earlier?"

The room was starting to spin. She was going to be sick. Or pass out. Or both.

"Buffy," Giles pressed, "why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"Because," she said, "you were dead."

Sensation compounded, her racing thoughts competing with the heat consuming her from the inside as she struggled to maintain her balance on uneven ground. Giles. The Magic Box. Anya. The paw. The

lights. It was all different. Everything was different and someone had done a spell and she needed to get to Dawn. She finally had the thing, and she could get to Dawn.

"Don't let this be a dream," she told Giles, who was staring at her with something between confusion and worry. "Please still be here when I'm done."

"Buffy?"

But Buffy didn't hear him. She doubled over, folded her arms across her midsection, and vomited.



GILES WAS STILL THERE when the spinning stopped, pressing a damp cloth to her forehead, asking her how she felt. If she remembered where she was, what she had been saying. Reassuring her that Dawn was fine—"I called the school to check. She has been in her classes all day, Buffy. No one has her."—and asking, when she felt up to it, what exactly she'd meant about him being dead.

For a long moment, Buffy hadn't said anything. Couldn't. She just stared at the ceiling, turning over the events of the last few days as she remembered them. How a loud snore had jolted her out of sleep that morning, robbing her of the illusion that she was somewhere else and waking up with someone else. It wasn't often she got to stay with Spike, but the nights she did were the ones she treasured. His chest against her back, his voice at her ear as he slowly coaxed her to wakefulness with his mouth and hands and cock.

But no. That morning, it had been Angel. She'd pulled herself to her feet, desperate to put space between them, and stomped to the bathroom for her morning shower. By the time she'd finished, Angel had claimed his usual spot on the couch downstairs, ready and willing for a long day of channel surfing while she went out to resume the search that would fix his mistake. She remembered thinking that at least he had poker with the boys that night, so even if she wouldn't be able to cut her plans with her friends short, she would be able to see Spike and likely still get home before her husband did.

All of that was clear. So clear. As clear as Giles was now, his eyes full of worry.

Considering he was the one who was supposed to be dead, she found his concern kinda funny.

"Buffy," he said, jostling her shoulders a little. "Buffy, this is very important. Did you use the paw?"

"Huh?"

"The paw—the monkey's paw. Did you use it?"

She shook her head, then wished she hadn't. The motion made everything hurt. Even her teeth, weird as that was. "No," she said. "They wanted it. I was going to give it to them."

"They? Who are *they*, Buffy?"

"Lawyers," she choked out, rubbing her throat. "Wolfram and Hart."

The second the words were out, Giles was in motion. She hadn't known he could move like that, and watching it happen in real-time was a little head-trippy. Almost enough to make her rebelling stomach rebel some more or her brain drag those dream-shaped thoughts back to the surface. Not that they had gotten very far. All in all, the result was she felt a little drunk—watching something happen and knowing it was real, but distant from it all the same. A real-life filter for her real life.

"Bloody prats," Giles hissed, moving with determined strides. He didn't seem to know where he wanted to go but was in a hurry to get there. "It's not enough to harass me day and night for the damn thing, but to attack my slayer?"

"Attack?"

At the sound of her voice, Giles whipped around to face her, blinking like he'd forgotten she was there. He recovered quickly enough, though, and nodded. "What do you know about Wolfram and Hart?" he asked. "Who contacted you?"

"Uhh, a guy. Lindsey. He said... There was so much he said. All he wanted was the paw. Dawn, the shop, he would take care of everything if I got it for him."

"The shop?"

Buffy nodded, winced. She needed to stop moving her head as a

means of answering questions. Everything was still spinning. "You're dead," she said, pressing her palm to her brow. "You died and left me the shop."

"Being that I am standing right here, you do understand that that is not what happened, don't you?"

Did she? She squeezed her eyes shut, and again, the image came quick and clear as anything. The casket. The footage from the wreckage—a twisted tube of metal, covered in soot and dirt, pillars of smoke wafting upward in an unending stream. It was always on. Even when the news wasn't playing, somehow, that footage dominated every available screen. And the meeting here after the funeral. The funeral where Anya had also announced that she and Xander were engaged. It had seemed fitting to Buffy in a way that had damn near made her laugh—which in itself had almost wrecked her. Her marriage, after all, had been nothing but a long funeral, one she was tired of mourning.

That had to have happened. She couldn't have dreamed all that up.

"Buffy," Giles said, now in his kindly father-figure voice. "I think perhaps you should go home. Get some rest."

The thought seemed foreign to her. "What?"

"Wolfram and Hart is ruthless, and they have a vendetta against Angel. I'm not sure whether or not he mentioned that to you—"

Her heart lurched. "They do?"

"A rather sizeable one, from what I gather." Giles's mouth had formed a grim line. "Most of what I know is secondhand, mind you, and I know Wesley wasn't exactly a reliable source of information when he worked here, but by all accounts, he has become, well, *more* reliable in the intervening years."

Buffy pressed her lips together and thought back to the meeting. It hadn't been a long one, being that she hadn't had much of anything to bring to the table. She was legally dead, care of her husband, which made petitioning for custody of her sister impossible, among a bunch of other things. Wolfram and Hart had been hired by her father first to keep Spike away from Dawn. Her father, who had doubled down on maintaining his guardianship after the resurrection. No, "Hi, how are you? Glad to hear you're not dead." Just, "Dawn stays with me." Because living on the Hellmouth was too dangerous.

Wolfram and Hart's loyalty could be purchased, though. They would cease protecting Hank Summers and work with Buffy—not only to help her legally come back from the dead but ensure Dawn came home. All for the low, low price of a thing Giles had that she'd never heard of. She just had to find it and turn it over.

There had been questions, of course. She'd known, felt, *sensed* that the monkey's paw was dangerous, because why else would an evil law firm want it? Only she hadn't cared—it had been easier to not give a damn, place the blame for whatever happened as a result on Angel's shoulders, since he was the reason Dawn was lost to her in the first place. Since he had rushed to make sure California knew she'd died so he could collect on the insurance policy he'd taken out on her. Angel had Very Good Reasons for having done the things he'd done, and sure, he couldn't have known that her friends would break out the black magicks to ensure her eternal rest was a lot less eternal than had been advertised, but he also could have *tried*. At least where Dawn was concerned, he could have tried, and he hadn't.

So she'd talked to the lawyers. The lawyers Giles thought might have done something to her head.

Giles, who she'd buried.

"You died in a plane crash," Buffy muttered, barely aware she was speaking. "I was at your funeral. You were gone."

"Plane crash?" The frown on his face grew deeper. "There *was* a plane crash, Buffy. UA Flight 31. It's been all over the news."

"You were on it."

"I was not. I was here." He stepped closer, dipped his head a bit to study her eyes. He placed a hand on her shoulder, and it felt no different than any of the countless other times he'd done it. He looked like Giles, sounded like Giles, smelled and dressed like Giles. Even her slayer dreams weren't this vivid, and didn't that mean something?

Did it mean it had been all in her head? That Lindsey from Wolfram and Hart had done something to her during that meeting—made things different, made her believe...

"Dawn," Buffy repeated, her gaze falling back to the box. "Dawn is—"

"At school, as I said. She's quite well. I promise." Giles straight-

ened, still giving her the look. “With what happened on campus earlier—that disassociation with time—and the work-site demon attack, I can safely conclude that something is going on. Whether or not it has anything to do with that bloody paw is something I will take into consideration as I research. But please, get some rest. Whatever is going on, we’ll figure it out. Together, all right?”

God, she was going to cry. *All right* was the weather—having Giles back, having Giles here, having Giles saying these things to her at all was a step or twelve thousand beyond *all right*. It was everything she’d wanted, everything she’d been missing, everything, everything, *everything*, and she wanted it so much to be true the thought of leaving at all scared the crap out of her, because leaving meant not being where he was and giving the world a chance to reset things all over again.

But she couldn’t think of a reason to stay—not with Giles looking at her the way he was, not with the paw secure and apparently unnecessary. If Dawn really was home...

Maybe it was a test. A preview. A glimpse of what she could have. Wolfram and Hart had the resources to pull it off—that much she knew. They were a full law firm of witches and wizards—not self-taught witches who had graduated from impaling trees with pencils to raising the dead in three short years. No, they were the real deal. The sort that could wield the big guns without effort.

And that was truly terrifying, for if an organization like that wanted the paw, that it meant it could give them something they couldn’t get on their own. Something infinitely worse than the pain of living without her watcher, of not knowing where her sister was, of losing Heaven.

And she wasn’t sure she was strong enough to say no.

DID I MAKE ME UP OR MAKE THE FACE TILL IT STUCK?

TIME HAD A REDEFINED MEANING ON THIS SIDE OF LIVING. Wherever she'd been before—Heaven, as she'd told Spike—she'd lived for what felt like centuries. Most of it had faded now, like the remnants of an old dream, but that period of nonexistence—or ultimate existence, she hadn't decided—remained absolute. There had been life before and life after and the two were about as separate as they could get. That everything here seemed unreal, more distortions of the world she had left behind, made acclimating to her new reality damn near impossible. Buffy remembered clearly waking up in her coffin, confused and then not, for she had known exactly where she was. Then the dig to freedom, tearing at the fabric lining of her casket, prying at the wood that confined her with fingers that scraped and bled, nails that broke under the slightest pressure, until finally dirt had started pouring in and she'd had the thought that she'd been brought back to life just to die again. This time she would choke on the earth she had been called to save, and no one would know. No one would know that for a few minutes, Buffy had been alive again. That she'd died alone, unhinged, and terrified.

But then she'd felt it—felt *him*. A tingle along her neck she would know anywhere. One that felt so good, so familiar, she'd started

clawing at the sunken ground with a frenzy that sometimes still followed her into her nightmares. Only in those, he wasn't there waiting for her when she burst through the dirt. He didn't say her name, gasp it, crash to his knees in front of her, run his hands over her skin and through her hair, look at her in that desperate way of his and give her something to hold onto. No, in her nightmares he wasn't there at all, and she wandered through a town that was burning until the devils inside caught up with her and threw her on the pyre.

That wasn't what had happened, though. In actuality, Spike had taken her to the crypt, ushered her downstairs to the shower he'd had built for her, washed her off while murmuring comforting little nothings, then finally broken on a sob and fallen to his knees before her. He'd wrapped his arms around her middle and pressed his face against her belly, and she'd cried too. Sunk, eventually, so that she was beside him, and they'd clung to each other like that, both breaking together.

It had been hard, but she had been home. And she'd known it. If she hadn't then, then she certainly had when the news had come that Angel had returned to Sunnydale, and it was time to reunite with her husband.

Buffy had stood outside the house for a long time. And her thoughts then had been the same as they were now.

This wasn't her house.

Okay, so it *was* her house. Technically, in that it sat on Revello Drive and had the numbers 1-6-3-0 displayed on the front column. There was the trusty tree in the front yard, the one she'd shoved Spike behind one night to keep Angel from getting an eyeful when he'd opened the front door to investigate the noise. There was the bedroom window she had treated like a door throughout her high school career, the familiar cracks in the stone on the front porch stairs, and the three glass panels embedded in the front door. There were all of those things and more, yet it wasn't her house. If asked to point out the discrepancies, Buffy wasn't sure she could—they were there, just invisible, but an obvious invisible. Like in the movies, where a character or object suddenly blended in with the background, but with enough shape and definition that the eye had no trouble keeping up with it.

She was supposed to go inside and get some rest, but she didn't want to. Even standing on the porch felt too much like trespassing.

But she wouldn't get any answers if she lingered outside. And she needed answers.

That was one thing she had decided on the walk home, her mind overfull with a combination of hope and confusion, underscored always with that persistent beat of fear she had literally dived off a tower to escape forever. Only that hadn't been enough—nothing she did was ever enough—and she'd been torn from a place of rest and peace just to be shoved right back in the middle of a war that would never end.

Well, if this was her house, then Angel should be inside. Watching whatever was on television, chowing down on junk food and beer, and lazing in the knowledge that, thanks to her surrogate father's demise, the previous concerns regarding how to afford food and shelter had been answered. Except Giles was alive now. *Giles was alive*. And if Giles was alive, that changed everything, reset them to the place they'd been before his death. Before *hers*, too. Right after Angel had given up the pretense of looking for work and committed to being a full-time housegrump.

Right around the time she'd stopped fighting her feelings for Spike. When she'd concluded that she could be miserable and virtuous or happy and sinful, and her life was too short to willingly choose misery.

Buffy blew out a shaky breath and ran her hands down her sides. She didn't hear the television playing, and typically she could from the porch, so maybe that meant Angel *wasn't* home. In which case...

She tried the doorknob. Locked. So, she was right and no one was home. That was promising, at least. Or would have been if she hadn't left the Magic Box in too much of a hurry to worry about necessities like a purse or keys. But if this was her house—and again, all the right components were in place—then there should be a spare she could fish out of the potted plant by the doorway. The plant itself being one of those things she was mostly sure hadn't been there before but looked right enough that she couldn't say definitively. It wasn't like Buffy had given much thought to external décor since returning from the dead, and she certainly hadn't had a need to search given that Angel was almost always home.

Buffy knelt by the plant and started rooting around the soil. Sure enough, within seconds, her fingertips had brushed the fine metal edge of a key. Okay, so that was normal. Good enough sign. She rose to her full height again, shook out her arms in an effort to throw off the pins-and-needles sensation brought upon by nerves, though to little avail. Whatever waited for her on the other side—more of the wackiness back at the Magic Box, a trick played on her by a ruthless bunch of LA lawyers, or something else entirely—she would fight her way through, same as she always did.

Still, she couldn't ignore the way her heart thundered against her ribcage as she stuck the key in the lock and twisted, nor how her hand trembled as she pushed the door open. Her mind was suddenly flooded with the faces of other people who were supposed to be dead, and she found herself torn between hope and dread, not sure what she would do if she walked into the living room or kitchen and found her mother there, looking up and smiling at her and asking how her day had gone, if she could please make sure Dawn got home from school all right, and if she and Angel would like to join them for dinner. Buffy sucked her lower lip between her teeth, blinked eyes that were filling with preemptive tears, and stepped across the threshold.

That certainty she'd felt outside, that this was *not* her house, cemented as she looked around. It was like a glimpse into the past—or a close approximation of it. Not entirely the way Joyce had decorated the place, but close enough that Buffy had to catch herself before she did something stupid like call out to see if she was home. She didn't think she could stomach hearing silence in return. But this was not the house she had left that morning—that house with its cluttered corners and messy couches and crumb-covered floors and no trace left of the woman who had lived between its walls until the day she had lain down for a nap and never gotten up again. Buffy drew in a shaky breath, forcing one wobbly leg forward, then the next.

It was like stepping back in time. There were paintings she remembered her mother hanging—paintings that had disappeared following the funeral, boxed up and put in storage or otherwise replaced to make room for the things Angel had insisted on bringing with them when they had moved in. Vases and pieces of pottery her mother had oohed

and ahhed over when she'd set them out, remarking on the period they reflected or the style they were trying to emulate, earning little more than forced smiles and nods from her daughters, who hadn't known there would come a day where they would both give anything to hear her give another boring art lecture.

Whatever was going on here, whatever spell she was under, whatever Wolfram and Hart had done, Buffy wasn't sure she was strong enough to say no. And she knew that was what she should do. No magic this powerful could be good. Give her back her watcher, her mother, the house as it had been before. Even if this meant she had to go back to that mansion, back to worrying about how to pay for electricity and food and all the other stupid, stupid concerns that had seemed so large once upon a time. She could do it—she could do all of it if she got to keep this.

Then her gaze landed on a standing lamp in the living room, and everything in her froze.

"No," she said, almost startling herself with the sound of her own voice. But it didn't belong—that lamp was one Spike had seized in the great purge. He'd placed it in the alcove he'd carved into the lower level to accommodate a toilet, nice and out of sight to afford her privacy when her very human body needed to perform some of its very human functions. Then there was another lamp, one that was almost a twin of the first, that she knew damn well sat beside the sofa upstairs. The weapons chest that doubled as an end table—that was here too. The more she looked around, the more pieces from home—her real home—popped out at her, and Buffy found suddenly that she was panicking for new reasons altogether.

If all this stuff was here, what did that mean?

She nearly stumbled over her feet the next instant, infused with a shot of pure adrenaline that demanded she haul slayer booty to Restfield right the hell now. Tear into the crypt and make damn sure that Spike was there. That was the way magic like this worked, wasn't it? Give her something like her watcher, her sister—give her the parts she wanted so badly but demand the man she loved in exchange. She could have so much but not everything. Never everything. Not Buffy.

As palpable as the need was, Buffy forced herself not to make

tracks. Giles had said Dawn was in school and would be home that afternoon as always. Always. She had to be here for that—see with her own two eyes that her sister was fine, home, *here*. It had been hard enough to convince her feet to head home to begin with, rather than straight to the damn school to verify for herself that her sister was there. Hell, she still wasn't sure how she had managed, except her head hadn't stopped spinning since the lights had gone off at the Magic Box, and it seemed easier to do as directed rather than try to make decisions when she didn't know which rules had changed. Which facts were no longer facts.

For instance—that morning, it had been a fact that a large black and white photo captured on her wedding day hung on the living room wall nearest the entryway. That fact had changed along with the rest of the décor.

The front door swung open before she could give that too much thought. Buffy whirled around, her heart in her throat—and in her eyes, it seemed, for the way they were prickling and threatening to overflow—then sighed when Tara made her way across the threshold, a bookbag slung over one shoulder.

“Oh,” Buffy said, “hey.”

Tara started, apparently having not expected her here. Which was...weird, right? Also, with the knocking, or lack thereof? Why hadn't there been knocking?

“Buffy, hey,” Tara said warmly, letting the bookbag strap slide down her arm so the whole thing hit the floor with a hard thump. “Are you feeling any better? Time moving normally again?”

“Huh?”

“Well, like it's supposed to move. Not like what happened on campus. What you described sounded pretty intense.”

“What I described.” Buffy furrowed her brow. That sounded vaguely familiar—she thought Giles might have said something involving a recent experience with time before she'd left the shop, but she wasn't sure. She wasn't sure about most things. “I was on campus today?”

Tara frowned. “Err, yeah. For a bit. You and Willow went to a class and then we went to Art History, only you were a bit...out of it?”

At least one thing in her day was consistent. Her chest had started to hurt from how hard her heart pounded. So far, the only constant between here and the Magic Box was that she was the square peg in a world full of round holes. She shook her head with a bit too much gusto, making everything go topsy-turvy, making the confusion on Tara's face transition fully to concern.

"Buffy." Tara moved forward, touched her arm. "You don't look good."

"I... None of this makes sense." Even though it wasn't doing anything to help, she kept shaking her head. Maybe if she did it hard enough, she'd knock something loose. Get a synapse to fire the right way. "Why is all this here?"

"All...what?"

"This!" She waved at the weapons chest. The lamp. One of the paintings that Spike had told her had always been a personal favorite of her mother's collection. "These things—they shouldn't be here. And where are the wedding pictures? What the *hell* is going on?"

Forget concerned—Tara looked flat-out terrified now, and her fear was infuriating. She wasn't the one whose world had been overturned, who had come home to a place that was unrecognizable, who had spent the past hour with her dead father figure. No, everyone else was just fine. It was only Buffy who had lost the plot.

"What wedding pictures?" Tara asked, her voice a little wobbly. "Whose wedding?"

"Whose wedding? My wedding!"

"You got married?"

Buffy brought up her left hand to wave the massive stone in Tara's face in the hopes that would jog her memory, only it wasn't there. And that—more than anything—had the situation in her head screeching to a halt.

No ring. *No ring.*

"Buffy?" Tara edged forward, addressing her like she might a mental patient. "Should I call someone?"

Buffy didn't answer. Couldn't. She was staring too hard at the place where her engagement ring should sit—the one Angel had slid on her finger just days after becoming human. He'd never told her how he'd

gotten it, or from where, never mind how he could afford it—and she hadn't bothered to ask, hadn't cared enough. All that had mattered was that he'd given it to her, and she'd said yes, and that part of her life had been wrapped up in a bow. The one thing that had finally gone right.

Those thoughts seemed like the product of someone else's brain. She remembered feeling that way but at the same time couldn't imagine it. Not now, at least, at this end of the tunnel. Not having lived the months that had seen the ring's transformation from a symbol of unending love and devotion to an anchor determined to drag her all the way to the bottom of the sea.

Except it was gone. It was gone and she hadn't even noticed. Hadn't missed its weight.

Because you don't wear a ring now.

She didn't. Whatever had happened here—in that instant the lights had gone out back at the shop—had changed the rules. Things that had been simple and straightforward were suddenly not, and everyone was looking at her, *treating* her, like she was the one who was off, wrong. Worse yet, she was beginning to think they were right. Everyone couldn't be wrong in the same way, could they? Wasn't it more likely *she* was the one who was wrong?

Whatever was going on here, she couldn't assume anything was the way it had been this morning. So, with measured calm she didn't feel, Buffy expelled a deep breath and said, "Angel doesn't live here?"

"Angel?" Tara echoed, still all wide-eyed concern. "Your ex-boyfriend? The vampire?"

Ex-boyfriend?

Vampire?

And that was all it took to chase the semblance of calm away again. A wave of dizziness crashed over Buffy with such potency she nearly lost her footing. *Ex-boyfriend. Ex. Ex. Ex. Not husband. Not even ex-husband. Ex-boyfriend.*

Whatever had happened to her at the Magic Box had done more than just bring Giles back from the dead—done more than return Dawn to her without having to jump through all the hoops separating them. She'd already had the *real or dream* conversation with herself, too, and the answer there still hadn't budged, no matter how wonky things

seemed. Reality was the sort of thing that couldn't be mirrored by the subconscious—even the most realistic dreams still had an edge of strangeness to them. Holes in memory, things shifting from location to location, the absence of scent and texture, fuzzy lines around the faces of people she knew that always remained somewhat out of focus, present but not. Time didn't obey rules in dreams, either.

"Angel is my ex-boyfriend," Buffy said, trying the words on for size. "He doesn't live here."

Tara shook her head. "No. No, but you just saw him."

"I did. When?"

"Last night. You went to meet him—he learned you were back from the dead and wanted to see you."

"Is he at the Crawford house?"

More head shaking. More confused blinking. "I don't know what that is," Tara said. "Is that a place in LA?"

"LA?" But she understood the second she stopped talking. If Angel was her ex-boyfriend and a vampire, then he *would* be in LA, wouldn't he? That was where he'd lived before—where he'd moved to get away from her. Let her live her life without him crowding it. Do the right, responsible thing by breaking her heart.

The more she thought about it, the less certain she was that Wolfram and Hart had anything to do with any of this. It didn't make sense—they had nothing to sell her. The terms of the agreement had already been made and they knew how motivated she was to find the paw and make the exchange. Something else was going on—*bad* to be going on. And that brought her back to her first thought, that Willow might have done something. Perhaps not another resurrection spell—if Giles had been pulled from Heaven, she felt certain she'd know—but a time spell of some kind? Was that even possible?

And if it was... Buffy looked around, her heart skipping all over again, but not with fear.

"Did Willow do a spell?" she blurted before she could help herself, excitement starting to mount. "A spell to—to fix things?"

The question was met with a deepened frown. "Fix things?"

"Me. Fix *me*."

At that, Tara's eyes widened, and she blanched as though someone

had spat at her. “Fix you? Buffy, you’re not broken. It just takes time—we know it does. We actually can’t imagine... What you’ve been through, *where* you’ve been... No one thinks you’re broken just because you were trapped in some hell dimension. You did it to save all of us, save the world. We could never consider you broken.”

That would be just the nicest thing in the world to hear if it didn’t make her want to scream at the top of her lungs. But it answered one question, at least in part—Buffy didn’t think Tara was playing dumb. Maybe she didn’t know. Maybe whatever spell had been cast had been done without her knowledge. It certainly wouldn’t be the first time.

But she had to be sure. She could assume nothing, take nothing for granted. If she were wrong, and Wolfram and Hart *was* involved, she’d prefer to know now and avoid an unpleasant surprise down the line.

“I’m going to go lie down,” Buffy said, and made her way toward the stairs. “Head is all with the trippy.”

Tara’s expression softened, and she smiled, looking relieved. “That sounds like the best idea. You take it easy.”

“Are you...staying?” That seemed weird—kinda like Tara-walking-right-on-in-without-knocking-first-weird, but maybe it would be weirder to ask why, in these strange new circumstances.

“Don’t have any more classes today,” Tara agreed, picking up her bookbag and heading toward the dining room. “So, I’m home for the night. Plan on getting some of my reading done before the others get here. Willow mentioned something about the Bronze, but it might be nice to have a night in.”

Buffy stared at her longer than was probably advisable, the wheels in her head turning, albeit super slowly. She didn’t know how much time had passed before it clicked—before she understood that when Tara said *home*, she meant this home. As in she lived here. And from the sound of things, Willow did too.

Willow and Tara lived here. Angel did not. Angel lived in Los Angeles as a vampire. Dawn would be home from school soon, and Giles was alive.

And there was no ring on her finger.

A hysterical titter bubbled up her throat, but she managed to swallow it back before it could escape.

Maybe she *would* lie down, just to be safe. Give the day a chance to reset back to normal, almost dare it to. Let it think it had won and she believed—believed what, she didn't know, but something. That was when it would hurt the most. Losing something she knew was fake would suck, but if she thought there was a chance it could be real? Buffy was fairly certain the fall would crush her.

Better to keep holding her breath for now. Just in case.



BUFFY DIDN'T SLEEP. She couldn't.

First of all, there had been the shock of finding her room was not her room anymore. She'd stepped inside and been overwhelmed by the sensation of *other*, one she hadn't understood at all—not that she understood much at the moment—until she'd stumbled back out and gone to investigate the other rooms. Dawn's was in the right place, and not stripped down, rather messy and lived-in, the way it had been in Buffy's memory. The way it *hadn't* been when she'd forced herself to leave the crypt and come home.

There had been a room for her, though. Her old room, staged and decorated so close to the one in her memory—the one she'd lived in before college, before Angel, before marriage—that Buffy had been taken with such a wave of dizziness she was still not certain how she'd managed to remain upright. But she had, somehow, and she'd sat on the edge of her bed, soaking in the surroundings that spoke of a life she hadn't lived, still riding that place between utter elation and terror. Staring at the place on her finger where a ring had clearly never sat and wondering what the hell it all meant.

How many times had she considered pawning the ring over the last year? Ten? Twenty? Did it matter? The thought had always been there, whispering in her ear every time she'd made the excuse to drop in on her mom in the hopes of wrangling an invitation to stay for dinner. Or the nights she'd hit the Bronze, try to snag some appetizers off communal plates and call it good. When she'd swing by Giles's place on the off chance that he'd gotten wind of a prophecy, and hey, look at that, it's time to eat.

No one ever said anything, which made it worse. Not outright, at least. Instead, they'd exchange glances, start talking loudly, and make a point to look anywhere but at her. Once or twice, Buffy had caught Anya's gaze and nearly burned alive at the anger there. But Xander would put his hand on his girlfriend's and shake his head, mouth something like, "Not the time."

Somehow never talking about it meant always acknowledging it—the joke that was her home life, how the only thing of value that Angel had ever brought home was the rock on her finger. The rock she resented more than she resented the marriage. Almost.

Were it not for Spike, Buffy figured the ring would have been long gone by now. The internal rationalization for this was something she didn't even pretend to understand, only that it felt wrong to get rid of her engagement ring—the symbol tying her to Angel—when she was already betraying him on every conceivable level. Somehow, it had become a reminder of her own failings, and she felt she needed that reminder. Needed it bold, in-her-face, that she had become her own worst nightmare, made a mockery of the vows she'd spoken with such love and earnestness. Having the ring with her ensured she never fully gave herself over to the fantasy that she wasn't doing anything wrong—made it impossible for her to pretend.

Only there was no ring here. No Angel, either, according to Tara. And Giles was alive. And Dawn was at school. In a couple of hours, she would be home.

At that, Buffy had given up on trying to sleep. She couldn't. Not while she thought the rug might be pulled out from under her at any time. She'd decided that her current situation was probably not Wolfram and Hart, but she didn't know for sure, did she? And if it was Wolfram and Hart, then fine. Game over. Whatever. They'd proven their point. They were big and powerful and could reshape reality as they wanted. That this much could be true *and* they still wanted the monkey's paw was, yes, wigsome, but she officially didn't care. Or she did, just not enough to stop herself from grabbing the phone and punching in the number she had memorized after that first meeting with Lindsey McDonald.

She'd asked for Lindsey, sat there, prepared to tell him it was over,

that he could have whatever he wanted so long as it meant she got to keep this. Only he hadn't been there. At all. He'd left the firm a few months back. Buffy had sat on the edge of her bed, her head ringing, as she'd been transferred to a woman with a cool, take-no-shit voice who also hadn't had the faintest idea what Buffy was talking about.

"I love hearing that *we win*, Ms. Summers," the woman—*Lilah*—had said, "but what exactly have we won?"

Buffy hadn't answered, rather hung up to avoid the risk of piquing the woman's interest any more than she already had.

Then she'd sat alone in the quiet of her room, mulling over what she'd just learned.

Wolfram and Hart was not involved. That brought her back to Willow.

It was much more than just a run-of-the-mill resurrection, whatever Willow had done. Hell, maybe that had been the point. After the conversation they'd had where Tara had struck down the suggestion of returning Giles from the dead... Buffy knew Willow, knew that she wouldn't have stopped thinking on it, wouldn't listen to the advice given. Same way she hadn't listened to Buffy after Glory's attack on Tara. She'd needed to move, to do something, feel in control.

So fine. No resurrection spell. But what about a time spell?

And once that door opened, where else could it lead? Keep Giles from boarding that plane, but also keep Angel from shipping Dawn off to her father. Maybe even further back to keep Buffy from dying in the first place—or all the way to the start. Keep Buffy from changing Angel's mind about staying human. Erase the biggest mistake of her life, and all the humiliation and regret that had followed. Take those nights when Buffy had turned into a beggar and remove them from existence.

Only in the way of all of Willow's spells, something *had* gone wrong. Buffy remembered the world the way it was supposed to be, whereas everyone else had been afforded new memories. Maybe that had been by intent, though. Willow wouldn't be Willow without relishing in the knowledge of a spell well cast, and it was hard to do that if no one remembered what life had been like outside of it.

And if it wasn't a time spell? Well, something like the spell

Jonathan had cast years back. That had warped reality and solely at the price of keeping a demon alive. Buffy thought she could live with that.

And after she saw Dawn, she knew she could. Whatever remaining fight she'd had left had abandoned her in that instant—the questions and worries, the fear and dread, all of it vanished the second the front door opened and her sister walked across the threshold. No, *walked* was too tame a word—she'd stomped. All teenage attitude, her face fixed into a seemingly permanent scowl, her snide remark all lined up and read the second her eyes connected with Buffy's. As though no time had passed at all—hell, as though the entire thing with Glory had been nothing but a bad dream.

Dawn hadn't understood why Buffy had burst into tears or seized her in a bear hug to end all bear hugs, but the glower had blinked away almost at once, exchanged for bewildered sputtering, and then she'd been hugging her back. Squeezing tight and crying herself, asking why it had taken so long. What *it* was in this scenario, Buffy had no clue, so she hadn't tried to answer. Just kept hugging her sister until Dawn frantically slapped at her back and gasped something about bones being crunched, then Buffy had laughed and released her, wiping at her eyes and laughing some more. And Dawn had laughed too, and they'd gone from hugging and crying to laughing like idiots, all there in the foyer while a befuddled Xander watched from the porch, and a worried Tara crowded the doorway leading to the dining room.

"You're here," Buffy had managed to say once the laughter died. She'd stepped forward and cupped her little sister's face, fixed on that moment. Wanting it etched forever in her head as the time she'd officially come home. Forget what had happened before or the awfulness that had followed. She'd last seen Dawn while on the tower, when that knowledge had cemented inside her and she'd understood how death was her gift. That the people she loved were worth sacrificing herself to protect, that leaving them would be painful but not nearly as painful as losing them. And she'd known it would be hard—for Dawn and Spike especially, for they wouldn't understand the way she did. They wouldn't get that the best way she could love them as wholly as she did was by making that leap.

She'd had time with Spike since she'd come back. Time to explain

that to him, to relish in the warmth that was his love, soak it in as the only thing that gave her peace in this place that wasn't Heaven. But she hadn't had time with Dawn. Part of her, a very real part, had thought it possible that she would never see her sister again. Even if the paw had been found and surrendered, there would be a catch. Another ask. Things were never easy in this world, after all.

"I've been here," Dawn had replied, sniffing and wiping at her cheeks. "I've been here the whole time."

Buffy had shaken her head, knowing it was futile to argue the point. Whatever had happened—whatever spell Willow had done—she could read the fine print later.

And she'd wanted to wait. Knew it was important that she did before she confused or worried anyone else. She needed to know what all Willow had changed. But after the high of seeing her sister again had mellowed out, Buffy had found herself glancing around the living room, her gaze drawn to the lamps that should be at Spike's place, to the weapons chest that apparently wasn't at the end of his couch. She'd tried to ignore it at first, the questions bubbling inside, the fear of the answers, but the longer she went without seeking them out, the more impossible it had been to sit still. For her mind had chimed in with some truly unhelpful observations, such as the fact that Spike hadn't been mentioned by either Tara or Dawn, or by Xander in the few minutes he'd lingered after dropping off her sister. Not casually and certainly not as a fixture in her life, let alone her boyfriend. And he would be, right? If Angel hadn't been there, if she'd never had to own up to the mistake she'd made, then there would have been no barrier separating her from the man she loved.

But then Buffy had started thinking about that barrier—how it had been there, firm and resolute, but also the catalyst for how close they had gotten the previous year. If Angel hadn't been here, then Faith couldn't have slept with him when they swapped bodies—*if* they had swapped bodies. And that had been the thing, the start of her talking to Spike, confiding in him, eventually letting him become the keeper of her secrets. The only person she could talk to, the only person she felt comfortable enough with to give the truth, even as inadvisable as that had seemed at times.

No one had known about Spike, either, so whatever spell Willow had cast wouldn't include him, and that scared her most of all. If Buffy had truly exchanged all and lost him in the process, she didn't know what she would do. Only that it would be something.

Which was how, after assuring her sister that she would be home in time for dinner—and maybe to watch a movie, who cared if it was a school night?—that she had to leave.

"There's just something I gotta see," Buffy said, snatching a jacket off the coat rack. It wasn't one she recognized but one she assumed was hers, as it was her size and no one gave her a funny look when she claimed it. "I'll be back."

"Buffy," Tara said, not bothering to hide the concern in her voice. "With everything that's going on, maybe you should take it easy."

Everything being her weird behavior, of course. That was fine. Explanations were of the needed, but she couldn't wait on this.

"I'll be fine," Buffy replied, forcing what she hoped was a grateful smile. "I'm feeling better. Good, even. Fantastic."

"And you'll really be home tonight?" Dawn asked, all bright-eyed eagerness. "We'll do something, you and me?"

The urge to start crying again was upon her suddenly. Maybe she had it wrong, and Willow hadn't messed up the spell or left it so Buffy remembered in the hopes of earning an atta-girl. Maybe Willow had left her memories of the real world intact to keep her from taking her sister for granted. So that when Dawn got extra clingy or teenagery, Buffy would remember what it was like to not have her here.

She didn't know, but that was a question for later.

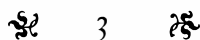
"You and me," Buffy said.

And hoped with everything she had that this was a promise she could keep. Not knowing if it was but not wanting to plan for failure.

If Spike wasn't there—if he didn't want her, if they weren't *anything*...

Well, she didn't know what.

And she hoped to god she didn't have to find out.



DON'T LEAVE ME BEHIND. DON'T
LEAVE ME BEHIND, LIKE I LEFT
YOU BEHIND

IT WAS HARD NOT TO RUN. AND BY THE TIME BUFFY BREACHED THE gates and crossed into Restfield, she decided to stop trying, too nervous about what she might find.

Which version of Spike lived here, if any lived here at all.

She kept searching for the memory of what things had been like before, back when they had wanted to kill each other in earnest. It ought to be simpler than it was, recalling how she'd felt then—what it was like to hate him—but those days seemed like a lifetime ago, and that could only be partially blamed on the gap between her death and resurrection. Their relationship had evolved both slowly and overnight, and even before she had realized what it was she felt for him, they had been *something*. If not friends, then a close cousin.

What would life have looked like after that Thanksgiving had Angel stayed in LA? Would Spike have remained in Sunnydale? He'd come to her, after all, pale and pissy and telling stories about commando boys who had locked him in a subterranean prison and conducted experiments. This had been before Angel and the Mohra demon, but *just* before, and while Spike had sought her help, he hadn't shied from the fact that he hated her and the Scoobies and resented the hell out of needing anything from her at all.

The parts of their relationship not tainted by Angel had ended there. After the attack launched by the Chumash—for reasons that, to be fair, had been pretty damn valid—Giles had name-dropped Angel, and Buffy had everything-dropped everything and fled to LA to give her ex-boyfriend a piece of her mind and maybe a piece of something else. Though she hadn't known that last thing at the time.

She'd returned to Sunnydale a completely changed woman, bursting with happiness that seemed so naïve now, with the benefit of hindsight. Angel was human—*human*—and he was coming back to Sunnydale. He just had a few things to do in Los Angeles. A whole life to box up and put away, a budding detective agency he was now leaving to a disgruntled Cordelia and her Irish friend. Buffy had spilled this with such bubbling joy that it hadn't even bothered her that her friends had seemed less than enthused. That Spike, who had been chained and in the bathroom at the time, kept yelling not-so-vague insults and begging someone to stake him so he didn't have to hear about how Angelus had gotten his merrily ever after.

Had that been the last time they had truly been enemies? Buffy didn't remember. The spell had come next—Willow's do-my-will spell, which she'd cast out of equal parts sorrow over Oz's complete exit from her life and bitterness that everything had turned out swimmingly for Buffy, though it had taken a lot of prodding to admit that last part. Regardless, Buffy and Spike had ended up magically engaged in the casting—something that had disgusted her beyond the telling of it after it was said and done. Something that, like it or not, had still opened a door in her mind that she hadn't realized was there.

In the months that had followed, Buffy had found herself wondering what might have happened had she and Spike done more than just play tonsil tennis all night. If he'd gotten to make good on any of the naughty things he'd whispered to her. In truth, had she and Spike done more than make out, his story likely would have ended with the business end of a stake. Still, something about it seemed almost prophetic. Or perhaps it had been a warning from the PTB or a sign that she should have fixed her sights on another vampire from the start.

Prior to the incident with Faith, she and Spike had more or less

reverted to mutual antipathy whenever they crossed paths. But if time had been reset, that hadn't happened at all. Nothing involving Angel had. And if nothing with Angel had happened, then perhaps there had never been a reason to start meeting Spike for patrols, which would mean all those conversations had never taken place. Those close calls and near misses, completely gone. The moment she'd realized how much trouble she was in, that it was too late to go back, and everything that had followed. The guilt of knowing she was doing something she shouldn't. The guilt *and* the thrill, because she would be lying if she said the latter hadn't been there, at least in part. And for the first bit, she'd worried about what that said about her—if she was more like Hank Summers than she'd thought. If any part of her could think about what she was doing behind her husband's back with anything other than self-loathing and disgust.

In those first few weeks, she'd played a game with herself. Swearing Spike off and making good on it for a little while before the need to see him broke and she hit the point where she just didn't care. She'd burst into his crypt, find him watching television or fixing himself a drink, and he'd look up and the second their eyes met, she'd *feel* again. There was no expectation or disappointment, no burden of choices made or promises broken. He'd look at her and all she'd see was love.

Of course, she hadn't known that was what it was at the time. Not until after Glory had nearly ripped him limb from limb. After she'd tried to end things—find her way back to the person she thought she was only to discover that girl didn't exist.

All of these memories, these shared moments, the hurt and longing, more conversations than she could count—all of it had happened because she'd married Angel. And if that wasn't true anymore, if Willow's spell had completely erased the past, then...

She stopped just outside of the crypt, her heart banging so hard it hurt. The place looked the same. Felt the same, too, if a place could have a feeling. There was the telling twinge, that innate knowledge that a vampire was nearby. And though she knew, on a gut level, that it wasn't just *any* vampire, she wouldn't be satisfied until she saw him with her own two eyes.

Which meant pushing onward, walking through the door.

Which meant facing the possibility that by setting this world right, Willow had taken away the only good thing in Buffy's life.

Buffy exhaled slowly. She'd learn nothing by standing out here. And whatever she found on the other side, she would survive. She knew that. No matter how much it hurt.

So, with a fortifying breath, she pushed herself forward on wobbly legs, flexing her hands to shake away her nerves—not that it did any good. Her temples had started to pound in tandem with her heart, and a thin layer of sweat had broken across her skin. Not a hot sweat, either—the sort that brought the cold with it. Somehow, though, she managed to push the crypt door open, relished in the familiar whine of hinges in desperate need of attention, then stepped inside.

Buffy couldn't help the whimper that tore from her lips any more than she could the stinging behind her eyes. She'd known to expect it to look different—after all, the lamps were at her house, as was the weapons chest—but the crypt was almost unrecognizable. The rug that had once been in her mom's gallery was gone, as were the art pieces he'd claimed as his own. The comfy living room set, with the couch she'd fallen asleep on more times than she could count, had been replaced by some tattered pieces with green upholstery. The weapons he'd mounted onto the walls were gone too, and the kitchen nook that he had spent so much time diligently setting up and stocking with her favorite foods had been stripped down to a single refrigerator and a selection of glasses.

It wasn't theirs anymore. The pounding in her ears intensified as did the pressure behind her eyes. Buffy tried to swallow, but her throat had gone dry.

Wrong. It was all *wrong*.

A metallic clank filled the air, and the next thing she knew, the latch that led to the lower level was in motion. And oh god, he was coming out. She'd know that crown of platinum hair anywhere. Buffy instinctively drew back, caught in an awful space that she hadn't occupied since she was a teenager. Like she was standing in Angel's apartment the night after they'd first had sex, only it was a thousand times worse because she *wasn't* a teenager and this, whatever else it was, was real in ways nothing else had been.

Spike slowed in his climb up, looked over his shoulder and met her eyes. There was no surprise at seeing her there—but nothing else, either. For a long stretch, they just looked at each other, and Buffy waited, all of her poised to break.

Then, amazingly, a soft smile flitted across his lips.

“Mite early tonight, pet,” he said, pulling himself the rest of the way out. “Everythin’ all right? Look a bit spooked.”

She didn’t reply. Couldn’t. She edged forward. It was dark in here—the lamps were gone, and he hadn’t lit any candles—but she thought she saw, in his eyes, something that made it easy to loosen the breath trapped in her lungs.

“Slayer.” He sounded firm now, perhaps a smidge concerned, and came closer to her, closer with those eyes that hid nothing from her. Never had. Even when he’d tried. “What’s happened?”

God, she had to know, so she blurted the first thing that came to mind. “Benedick?”

He paused again. He was close but not close enough. A respectable distance.

“Have I?” Spike seemed to consider something, his brow furrowing. “Likely, yeah, a time or two, but if I have of late, love, you’ll have to clue me in.”

None of that made sense. “Huh?”

“Wager if you talk to Harris, he’ll tell you I’ve been a dick about any number of things. You here to set me straight, is that it?”

It took way longer than it should have to understand what he was saying, and when she did, Buffy didn’t know whether to laugh or sob or both. He didn’t know Benedick—didn’t know that was his name, what she called him when she couldn’t call him Spike. There had been no notes, no letters, but maybe that didn’t mean anything. He was still looking at her the way he was supposed to, though perhaps with a smidge more reservation. As though he didn’t know why she was there or what she wanted.

“Not the kinda language I’m used to hearin’ from you, Slayer,” he said a moment later, edging a step closer. Close enough to be considered too close were he someone she was used to keeping out of her

bubble. "Unless you've got dicks on the mind. Spendin' some time thinkin' things you shouldn't lately?"

Buffy wet her lips, not sure what to say, but emboldened when he followed the movement with his eyes. Even more so at the flash of hunger she saw there, pure yearning that was so familiar to her she about burst into tears anyway for the cool, blessed relief that seized her insides.

The time might have changed but he was still Spike. Still *her* Spike.

"Oh, thank god," she said, unable to help herself, the words a tangled moan. "Spike..."

He flicked his gaze back to hers, breathing hard now, and she saw something click. Something that should have already been well and fully clicked, but her relief was so potent she didn't mind that it was happening now. It was there, *he* was there, and that was all that mattered.

She wasn't sure who moved first. In a flash, he had her gripped by the hips and pulled against him and she captured his face between her hands and dragged his mouth down to hers. Then everything else ceased to matter, because she was here, *home*. It was still home even if it didn't look like it, and Spike was with her, tearing blissful, sweet kisses from her lips and whimpering into her mouth in the way she loved so much. Nipping and sucking and pulling, tasting her like he was starved for her, like he needed her the way he needed blood. Home was the way Spike kissed, the way he breathed and gasped, how he felt. Mostly, it was how he loved, and that was here too. All of it.

But it wasn't enough. She needed more of him. After the day she'd had, the hope running roughshod with fear, the ecstasy of learning she truly hadn't lost everything, she needed everything. And Spike was always so ready to give, growling his approval when she began clawing at his shirt in her desperation to get rid of it. If he wasn't careful, she might do that thing where she ripped it down the middle—turnabout being fair and all, considering the fact that her clothes suffered far more casualties than his did. But either he was as desperate to be felt as she was to feel him or he was particularly fond of that shirt, for he whipped it off in a blink, somehow while barely breaking his mouth from hers. And when her hands found his chest, he shuddered hard,

moaned something that might have been her name, and began tugging at the jacket she'd never seen before today.

"So hot," he murmured against her lips. "So hot."

Being that their shared things were nowhere in sight, Buffy thought it a safe bet that she didn't have a change of clothes downstairs. So she pushed him back just long enough to shed the jacket and tear the blouse off, long enough to appreciate the gleam in his eyes and the deep, heady breaths ripping off his lips before he was on her again.

"Want you so much," he said, and she heard it in his voice. The depth of that want, its intensity, never failed to shake her, but there was something more now. Something deep and primal and hers.

"Me too." Buffy reached behind her to unhook her bra, tried hard not to grin when he gave another whimper.

But the whimper turned into a hungry growl, and the next thing she knew, her back was against the cool rock of the crypt wall and Spike's mouth was on her, teasing one of her nipples with nips and sucks that were almost too much. Buffy gasped, tangled a hand through his hair, raked her nails across his scalp and gasped again when he hummed his approval around her skin.

"Such pretty tits." He pulled back from the one he was teasing just slightly, dragging his teeth along her areola and even though her body knew him well—knew the dance, knew the tease—she couldn't help but jolt with a spark of awareness of what those teeth could do. Buffy glanced down, met his eyes in the shadows. That sea of endless cerulean that never failed to consume her, and now was no different.

Then she noticed the skin above her breast. It was smooth and creamy and had clearly not once been touched by vampire fangs. The sight made her heart twist all over again.

"Everything is wrong," she said in a rush, willing him to understand. "Everything is wrong here."

"Mmhm." He pressed a series of kisses down the slope of her breast and then up the other. "Want Spike to make it better, do you?"

That seemed a particularly tall order, but damn, if anyone could make it better, it would be him. "Uh-huh."

"I can do that, Slayer." He curled his tongue around her nipple, and they both moaned at the contact. "We can make it nice and right."

“Do that.”

He pulled back just enough for her to see his grin before he swallowed her in another kiss. And as always, he performed serious magic with that mouth, somehow balancing the calm she needed and the heat she craved. Kissing sense into and out of her in equal measure, his lips and tongue working in tandem to remind her where she belonged.

Then they were moving together again, engaged in a familiar race. Spike tugging her skirt up her hips, Buffy fumbling with his belt, Spike pressing his palm against her pussy and teasing her through the fabric of her panties, Buffy getting frustrated with his jeans for not cooperating and, in her hurry, deciding that she didn't care if she ruined his clothes, after all. She seized the offending button and pulled hard enough that it tore free from the denim, dragging bits of fabric along with it.

The move made him groan. It always did.

“That's it, pet. Take what you need. Take all of it.”

She nodded, trying to work his jeans down his narrow hips. “Let me go,” she said, slapping at the hand he still had between her legs.

“But I like it here so much.” He kissed her again before she could argue, pushing his fingers against the soaked material at her crotch. “So hot and juicy. And mine, Slayer. All mine.”

He raised an eyebrow as though to challenge her—as though expecting her to argue. Maybe she would on a different night. He liked it when he had to coax out her confessions too, liked making a game of it, see how long she could last before capitulating. But Buffy wasn't in a mood to play right now. She just wanted to feel.

“All yours,” she agreed, attacking his mouth again before he could distract her with it anymore. At last, she managed to shove his jeans down far enough. His cock was free, hard and straining toward her, and when she wrapped her hand around him, he fed her a little cry that could have lit her on fire all on its own.

“Oh, fuck, baby,” he panted, thrusting himself into her fist. “Like that. Stroke me like that.”

She was much more interested in wrapping her legs around his waist and getting to the good part, but something in his voice tugged at her, and she couldn't help but obey. Spike asked her for so little

while giving so much—it was innate, it seemed, on his part. He certainly wasn't shy about vocalizing his wants or feeding her visions from his filthiest fantasies, but even now, this far into their relationship, he had a way of making himself secondary. If pressed, he'd say he got as much out of giving, and he was enthusiastic enough in pursuing her pleasure to have her believing it. But then there were moments when she'd catch him like this, when he would slow down enough to ask for a touch or a squeeze or for her to take him just a little deeper. Suck on him a little harder. Roll his balls like that. Put her finger in places she'd never imagined putting it, but found she loved because of what it did to him. How he unwound for and around her. Gave her a part of him no one else got to see, or ever would.

So, with her pulse thundering and her body tingling with anticipation, Buffy squeezed her hand around his dick and pumped him in long, unhurried strokes. Watching first the way he seemed to battle with himself, his eyes falling shut and then wide open again, his breaths coming harder. She remembered thinking once, what felt like a long time ago, that pleasure on Spike often looked like pain. This was no different. He braced a hand on the wall behind her, the other keeping a firm grip around her waist as he sighed and rocked his hips. Watching, along with her, the flesh of his cock slide along with his movements, peek through the foreskin and disappear again. Then she shifted so that her thumb was there to caress the head, spread precum across his silky skin, and he fed her a growl that seemed to pull something from within her.

"Buffy. *Fuck*, Buffy..." His breathing was growing ragged. "God, yes. So good."

The way he said her name was a revelation unto itself. Buffy tore her gaze away from the strokes her hand made to his face and back again. "I'm even better like this," she said, pulled a kiss from his lips, then sank to her knees. "Or so I've been told. Repeatedly."

He gave another growl, this one sounding a bit possessive, but whatever he intended to say—if he intended to say anything—fell into a gasp when she sucked his cock into her mouth.

"Oh fuck." Spike threw his head back. "Slayer... Buffy... Not that I—you know I'm yours. Do with me what you will, but—"

But that was as far as he got before he lost himself again, tangling his fingers into her hair now, holding on as she found the rhythm she knew he favored. When he could feel how much she enjoyed doing this for him, when she seemed as desperate for him as he always was for her. She loved that, loved pushing herself there, loved when she could show him how she felt because sometimes she wasn't always so great with the words. They were there and she said them and she meant them, but there were times they felt inadequate.

They *were* inadequate. Words were only as good as action, after all, and her action had been to wait, wait, wait. Continuously put off the conversations she didn't want to have for a myriad of reasons that were all good, all sound, but also all crap. The time had been there after the resurrection, after Angel had been contacted, to tell him not to bother to come back. Take whatever he had left from that insurance policy and choke on it. Go ahead considering himself a widower because they both knew the marriage itself had died long before she had.

She hadn't done that, though. The thought alone of having that talk, of confronting the thing they had become masters of avoiding, had exhausted her. Everything exhausted her these days, and she knew Spike would wait until she was ready, until she felt she could do it, so she'd waited. What was time to a vampire?

Turned out, it was everything, especially when it had been reset. She could have lost this, lost him, and she hadn't. Somehow, despite whatever magic was going on, Spike was still hers.

Other times she might draw this out, tease him until he was begging for her to hurt him just a little, but Buffy didn't think she could now. She was too hungry for him. So she cupped a hand around his cock and squeezed along the base with every bob of her head, making sure to keep her tongue in motion the way he liked. Tracing veins, mapping his skin, sliding along the dip in the head, pushing under his foreskin, swirling, lapping while the rest of her pulled and sucked, and it happened fast. Something that might have been a warning tore through the air the second before the first taste of semen hit her tongue, but it was a wasted effort. Spike fisted her hair and roared, his cock pulsing as he emptied himself down her throat. He kept moving and so did she, chasing him every time he pulled away, her

cheeks hollowed, stroking and massaging as he trembled and whimpered her name like she was the answer to a prayer.

There was always a moment after he came, one where all seemed both still and anticipatory. When his cock would soften but he would remain tense, knowing what his body didn't yet. It only lasted a handful of seconds, but she loved those seconds. More than a hundred years and some pieces of his human sensibilities had yet to wane. It was always fleeting—his body would remember that he was indeed a vampire, and he would harden all over again, but she still liked the quiet, brief as it was. Liked to think of it as the bit of the man Spike had done everything he could to snuff out of existence, defiant as ever, asserting that he was still there buried under all the attitude and posturing.

"Bloody hell. Almost afraid to ask what this is." Spike tugged her off the stone floor, his eyes full of questions she didn't want him to ask yet. All of that could wait until after. They had time now, loads of it.

Plus, she really needed to feel him inside of her.

"Not yet," Buffy said, shaking her head and pressing a kiss to his lips, somehow swelling and melting simultaneously when he groaned into her mouth. "Just love me right now. Please."

Spike broke away from her with a swift nod, his eyes darkening. "Can do that, Slayer."

Then she was against the wall again, Spike once more tearing hot kisses off her lips. This time when he pressed his palm to her pussy, she didn't shove him back, rather bucked and rubbed along his hand, gasped at the drag of soaked fabric against her sensitive flesh and nearly sobbed in relief when he seized a handful of her panties and yanked. She'd never hear the end of it the next time she scolded him for ruining her underwear, but at the moment she well and truly didn't care. All she cared about was feeling him and thank god he was on the same page. For then he was there, the head of his cock slipping along her slit, teasing her the way she loved best.

"Fuck, how hot you are. All that heat just for me."

"Spike, please."

"Ooh, think I like that. Say it again." He pulled his head back just enough to smirk into her eyes. "Please what?"

“Spike, please, just fuck me.”

He rumbled his agreement and pressed his brow to hers, lifting her right leg to curl around his waist. “Since you asked so nicely,” he panted, then took her mouth as he thrust inside of her.

None of this had gone as she’d thought it would and there were still so many questions left needing answers. But all of that seemed incidental—unimportant, even—the second he had her impaled on his cock. The look he gave her now was singular and unforgettable. Or she’d thought it had been singular, but he’d given it to her before. That first night in the cemetery, when she’d finally hit her breaking point and launched herself at him. How he’d seemed to know but not know at the same time, desperate as she was, frantic and terrified that minds might be changed but also knowing that they had come too far to go back. He’d pressed her up against a mausoleum as she whispered, begged him to move faster, touch her, stroke her, be inside of her knowing that her thoughts were waiting to catch up with her and not wanting to give them the chance.

If it was strange for Spike to look at her now the way he had then, Buffy didn’t care. She didn’t care that the crypt wasn’t right or that he didn’t know he was Benedick or that his fang marks were missing. She didn’t even care that when he started fucking her, it wasn’t with one of the rhythms they had perfected together. Things were different now, but Spike was her constant, her solid thing in the midst of swarming chaos, and as long as that hadn’t changed then nothing else mattered. They could learn each other all over again. If the spell had fixed all the other things, then time could fix them. They had the chance she had never been brave enough to give them, and she wasn’t about to let that go.

“So hot,” he purred into her ear, voice strained, his mouth busy peppering kisses along her neck and collarbone. She knew when he felt her pulse jump, for he growled and ran his teeth over her flesh, then moaned again when she moaned, when she clawed at his back for purchase. “Fuck, baby, you’re so hot. Like that, do you? Like havin’ a vampire at your throat?”

Buffy dug her nails into his flesh, leveraged the leg she had wrapped

around his waist to pull him harder into her. “Yes. Yes. Spike, more. Please.”

“More what?”

“You. Fangs.”

He pulled his head back far enough that she couldn’t ignore the surprise that flickered across his face. And it was that, the surprise, that made the final penny drop, that confirmed the thing she’d known from the moment she’d stepped inside the crypt. Spike loved her—she felt it in every stroke, every caress, every sound he made when he thrust his cock inside her—but this was a first for them in the time that had been reset. For whatever reason, they hadn’t been together before now. The knowledge sent a sharp pang through her chest, one even he couldn’t chase away, but that was over. Whatever happened next would be the two of them. She wouldn’t be stupid about it a second time.

“Fangs,” she repeated and jerked his head down to her breasts. “Here. Right here.”

Spike growled again, sucked her nipple between his teeth, and shoved her harder against the stone wall, swirling his hips. “Slayer wants my fangs,” he murmured against her breast. “Never thought I’d get you to admit it.”

“Spike, *please*.”

“Can feel how much you want it. How wet it makes you.” He brushed a kiss along her shoulder. “Bet you grip me so good when it happens. Do that, pet. Squeeze me tight with this pretty pussy.”

He was pounding into her too hard for her breath to catch up, for the words forming in her mind to take shape on her tongue. Buffy screwed her eyes shut, her ears filling with his hard gasps, the wet suction of his cock pistoning in and out of her, their flesh slapping together at a tempo her heart couldn’t keep up with. Then his fingers were there, scaling down her stomach. He held her up with one hand and fairly drove her out of her mind with the other, a fire of cool against her burning skin. The first pass he took of her clit was nearly too much—*was* too much—and almost startled her out of the moment, but thankfully she was too deep in to lose her place. The second was gentler, more like she knew him to be, letting her do the work, set the

pace, nudge herself against him in the way she knew would get her there.

"God, I love you," he rasped, and hallelujah, she knew that rasp. Knew the way he spoke when his mouth was full of fang. "Love you so bloody much."

Then it happened—he sliced into the place that was his above her breast and everything went supernova. Buffy threw her head back hard enough that it slammed into the wall behind her but not so hard that she cared. She clenched and tightened and cried and mewled, and Spike answered with a roar of his own, tensing before he began to come. Every pull of his mouth initiated the same sense of pure euphoria, the same that had become her addiction, and she felt herself grow tight and explode all over again, her pussy spasming and clamping around him hard enough that she might have worried his answering mewl was one of pain if she didn't know him so well. Know how much he loved it when she made it hurt like that.

It would be new—it would be learning him all over again. The thought was the one that stuck with her when the high began to ebb, when everything began to spiral back down to earth. Whatever this was, she had to start from scratch. That was true all over, she supposed, given what she'd seen and experienced since the lights had gone out, but here was the only place it hurt. There hadn't been much of her life worth keeping the way things had played out—much except this. Spike and what they had, what they had managed to build together in spite of a world conspiring against them. It had been worth everything, there in the end. He'd rescued her from herself when no one else had even noticed she was drowning.

But even this hadn't been without its pain, that Buffy heaped on both him and herself. Herself in what she had become, him in what she refused to let them be. Not because she hadn't wanted it or because she didn't love him enough, but for everything that it meant. That she'd been wrong from the start, that she'd asked Angel, pleaded with him, to give up what had given his life meaning for her. She'd begged him to do that, and she'd hated what he'd become almost more than he did. That he'd made a sacrifice like that, even if he hadn't seen it as a sacrifice at the time, and it had been for nothing. The fear of letting

him down, owning that failure, had kept her in stasis where Spike was concerned. Even as her own bitterness and resentment had mounted, she'd wondered how much of it was exacerbated by the fact that she felt owed whatever pain Angel threw her way, intentionally or not. She was, after all, the one who had dealt the first blow.

Even through that uncertainty, though, Spike had remained with her. Resolute as ever. Loving her. Understanding what few could understand. And what they'd shared had been everything to her. Had she ever told him that?

Buffy wondered, as Spike wrapped his arms around her and tugged her to the stone floor, if this spell weren't a second chance all around. Not simple and clean, because that would be too easy, but full of promise and hope. The watcher she had taken for granted, the sister from whom she had kept herself emotionally distant, and the vampire whose love had been absolute and unwavering amid her own uncertainty and excuses.

If that were the case, perhaps it was worth the sacrifice of those memories. The promise upon which she could build new ones.

But damn, even knowing that didn't make the pain of loss any less.

I WONDER IF SHE KNOWS WHICH WAY IS DOWN

THERE WERE DEFINITELY MORE COMFORTABLE PLACES IN THE CRYPT than the floor. She ought to know—she and Spike had christened pretty much every inch of the damn place over the last year. They had discovered rather quickly that they could be hard on furniture, which was why they often attempted to make it at least to the lower level before things got serious. Still, at the moment, Buffy couldn't say she minded the scenery at all. Not with Spike's head between her legs, his lips around her clit as he fucked her with his fingers.

Nope. The floor of the crypt was A-okay with her.

"Better than I thought," he was saying between laps. "Fuck, like fire, you are."

She grinned, then gasped, arching her hips as he let loose a chuckle against her wet, swollen flesh. "Ahh," she said, seizing a fistful of his hair. That surprisingly soft hair that tickled when it danced along her inner thighs. It always occurred to her in moments like this—that was, when she was least likely to do it—to ask him how he managed to tame his curls without turning his head into a helmet. Maybe she would remember this time. Maybe, but probably not. "I am feeling extra burny."

"Yeah?" Spike flashed her a grin that was somehow lewd and loving

at the same time. He'd lit a few candles—she couldn't say when, as it seemed he hadn't stopped touching her since they'd collapsed into a tangle of limbs, but he had—and there was enough light that she caught the shine of her juices across his lips. "Anythin' I can do to help, love?"

"What you're doing is...all with the good."

He chuckled again—that deep, rich chuckle she loved so much—and dipped his head once more, drawing a line around her clit with his tongue before pulling it into his mouth. Then the chuckle became a moan, and he rolled his eyes back as though tasting something completely decadent. "Know how many times I've thought of doin' this to you?" he asked when he released her, his breaths coming harder. She loved how he did that too. So many pieces of Spike that she loved, and she wasn't sure she'd ever told him. She'd have to start a list or something, make sure she hit every highlight. This time, she was doing everything right.

"How many?" Buffy asked before she hissed a sigh and arched again, digging her heel into the small of his back, something she knew from experience he loved.

"Bugger if I know. Just always been there. Part of me that wanted a taste." Spike dragged his tongue down her slit, pulling his fingers out of her in a smooth wet slide, and dipped his tongue inside of her before she could complain. Again, he moaned into her, clutching at her hips to hold her to his mouth.

A raw, guttural sound tore through her throat and she squeezed her thighs closed, unintentionally at first, then very intentionally when her skin pressed against the smooth line of his jaw and cheekbones. Another thing he loved, begged her to do, was close her legs around his face whenever he was feasting on her pussy. Make it so she was the only thing he could see, smell, or breathe, he said. Do it nice and tight, enough to kill a regular man if she had a mind to. That turned him on like crazy, and being that she was the beneficiary, Buffy had stopped asking questions a long time ago.

Spike rewarded her with another whimper of his own, managed to lick his way from her opening back to her clit despite how much she clenched, and when his eyes found hers, they were positively dancing.

"Could kill a gent with these legs of yours, you know," he mused, then took another lap of her clit. "That what did it, pet? You realize you're too extraordinary for ordinary?"

Buffy nodded, not really knowing what she was agreeing to and really not caring at the moment. Seeing him there, as flushed as a vampire could get and bursting with what she could only call *happy*, had her precariously balanced and she wanted more.

"Anythin' in particular set you off?"

"Huh?"

Spike grinned up at her. "Just tryin' to suss out what brought you to me tonight. The sorta thing that happens just once or—"

"You really expect me to hold a conversation while you're doing that?" Not that she was surprised—he'd done that and more many times over.

"I'm sorry," he replied, now in a formal voice that did little but set her more aflame. He knew that, too. Or had at one time. On occasion, he'd bring out his true accent—the one he'd worked to banish—and marvel at how she reacted. "Does the Slayer want something?"

She lifted her hips and bit her lower lip to keep from smirking when his eyes darkened. "I am kinda girl-on-the-verge here," she whispered. "Please...talk later?"

He swallowed, lowered his gaze back to her pussy, the tease fading from his face. Then the look from before was back—the one she'd previously thought was singular but now knew wasn't. The mixed awe and longing, and having that aimed at her was something beyond heady. It made her heart sing and hurt at the same time.

The spell had given her so much but taken away something precious, and while she knew she could get it back—*would*—the idea that it was lost at all was devastating.

Thankfully, Spike was there to chase that thought away with his tongue. He lowered his head again, whispered a kiss across her clit. "Think I wanna hear you beg again," he whispered, teasing a line up and down her slit with his fingers. "You want my mouth here?"

"Oh yeah."

"Where, Slayer?"

If he thought she was going to be coy, well, too bad for him he'd

chased all of that out of her months ago. “Suck on my clit,” she breathed. “Softly, but...oh god.”

He let loose a low rumble that made her flesh quiver, applying just a bit more suction as he thrust his fingers back inside of her. And that was all the direction he seemed to want, for when he got started this time, he didn’t stop to ask questions or grin up at her with those dancing eyes. He sank into her with relish, his fingers finding a steady rhythm that she knew well as he alternated between flicking her clit with his tongue and feathering it with light kisses, then drawing it into his mouth for firm sucks that were somewhere between too much and too perfect.

“Fuck, you taste good,” he murmured. “So hot and sweet.”

Buffy rolled her hips again and had to choke back a sob when he responded with a growl, his strokes becoming more demanding, more boisterous, as he thrust and pumped and twisted—oh god, she loved it when he did that—and pressed his fingers up against her to rub her from the inside. And it was all so good, so good and hers and even if the spell had taken them away, it hadn’t taken *him* away and that was the most important thing.

“That’s it, pet. Come all over my tongue. Let me have it.”

It was the hunger in his voice that did it—that he could want her that much. Not the first time and not the last, but it never stopped surprising her. Buffy squeezed her eyes shut and gave herself over, her body jolting as Spike growled and moaned his encouragement into her pussy, his tongue in constant motion, each swipe bringing with it a shock of pleasure that was almost painful. She lost all concept of time in those moments and couldn’t say she cared all that much. Just that he was there and with her and things could be better than they had been before. Somehow, even with all the bits of them that she would have to find again, she’d make it better.

“Mmm.” Spike favored her clit with a parting kiss after the last waves had rolled back, then smiled up at her. “Could drink you all night, you know,” he said, kissing a line across her pelvic bone before slowly starting to make his way up. “Bloody swim in you.”

“That sounds...messy.”

“Very best kind of mess.” The smile widened—so free and happy—as his eyes aligned with hers. “Will you tell me now?”

“About messes?”

“You know I love you.” He was nibbling along her jaw, nudging the wet flesh of her sex with his cock, reigniting the fire inside her with that careless ease he possessed. “You know... Fuck, you have to know what this is for me. I gotta know what brought you here so I know what to do if you decide to scarper.”

“There will be no scarpering.” Buffy palmed his cheek, meeting his eyes again. Eyes that had always revealed so much, told her more than she had been ready to hear without saying a word. So many times he’d laid himself bare for her and she’d tried to ignore it—how much more she wanted because of how wrong it was. The *wrong* part had never gone away but it had stopped mattering so much. The thought of living outside of its shadow now was something beyond exhilarating. It was everything. But he did deserve to know the full truth. “Willow did a spell.”

No surprise when he went rigid at that. Undoubtedly, even with the time leap, he’d been on the receiving end of magic gone wrong.

However, she *was* surprised when, the next instant, the previously blissed-out look on his face faded into confusion, then comprehension before finally landing close to horror.

“Bollocks,” he swore, rolling away from her without warning. “That what this is? A spell?”

“I think so,” Buffy replied weakly, her heart starting to pound. She knew Spike hated magic but still, his reaction had thrown her. “I mean, I haven’t talked to her yet but it’s the only thing that makes sense.”

He nodded. “Right. So you’re gonna come to your senses and be back to loathing me once it wears off. Back to bloody status quo.”

What? “I don’t loathe you! There is no loathing!”

Spike huffed, studied her for a moment, then rose to his feet. “Not happenin’ like this,” he muttered, and to her astonishment began collecting her clothes off the floor. Then he started tossing them blindly in her direction, staying in motion. “Not after everythin’. Not gonna have you just to go back to what it was like to not. You finally tell her about Heaven, is that it? Couldn’t bloody handle the truth so

she decided to whip out the spell-book to make it all better? Shoulda known. Should've sensed somethin' was off the second you came in here, lookin' at me like that."

Buffy hadn't moved. She honestly didn't think moving was an option at this point. "Like what?" she asked in a voice that was smaller than she would have liked.

He didn't respond until he had his jeans pulled up his hips, his hands fast working his belt. And when he looked up again, those tell-all eyes were heartbroken—so much so she felt a piercing stab in her chest.

"Like you love me," he said, his voice cracked. "Like I could be somethin' to you. Like—"

That awful stabbing sensation intensified. "Spike, I do—"

"Don't you say it." And for the first time, he sounded angry. Like the pain in her chest, his anger was cutting-sharp. "Was torture enough to hear it from the bloody bot all summer, but hearin' it from you?"

"The what?" Buffy repeated. Then she blinked and glanced at the clothes he'd tossed at her, realizing this was a conversation—or argument? Were they arguing now?—she couldn't have while naked on the floor of the crypt. "This doesn't make sense. Why are you mad at me?"

At that, he paused, and the steel in his gaze softened a little. "Not mad at you, pet," he said. "Not for this. Not if she did a spell that made you... Made *this* happen. Ready to tear *her* limb from sodding limb, though. Right after she puts it back right."

"What? No!" She was on her feet the next second, trying to force her shaking hands to obey. On went the skirt, wrinkled and dirty but intact, so she'd call that a win. Her bra and panties were... Well, she didn't know where, and that didn't matter. She had the black blousey thing she'd worn over, and her jacket was somewhere. "Spike, please, I can't go back to what it was like before the spell. I know you don't remember—"

"I don't remember? Who came to a monster's crypt lookin' for a shag?"

"I wasn't looking for a *shag*, I was looking for *you*, you dummy."

This seemed to startle the indignation right out of him, but only for a moment. A moment in which he stared at her with that same

mixture of hope, despair, and longing from before, and she thought maybe, maybe... But then the moment passed, and when it did, the shadows returned, and his frown deepened. "The bitch's bloody spells always go wrong," he said, and barked a hard, tragic laugh. "What, she try her will again? Not enough the first time she nearly got us down the sodding aisle, but now she actually brings you over here havin' you believin' you lo—" He broke off, making a face as though even thinking the word pained him.

God, this was wrong. Everything was wrong. Way more than she'd thought. Somehow she'd come here and missed it, how wrong it was. How had she missed it?

Whatever she and Spike were now was far removed from what they had been. What they should be.

"I'm sorry," Buffy forced out, and it didn't matter that she didn't know what she was apologizing for, just that apologizing felt like the thing to do. Even if it did make the confusion behind his eyes more absolute, confusion that seemed to be on its way to worry, but she couldn't watch the progression. Couldn't, because suddenly the very act of breathing had become a struggle, and she had nowhere to land.

"Buffy?" He sounded small now. Small and far away. "Christ, Buffy."

The pounding in her chest intensified, bringing with it a rush she knew all too well, her insides cold but her skin suddenly damp with sweat, and everything in her body at once pulling her down, down, down. It was in her throat, too, the echo of her racing heart, in her veins and temples, and her lungs had transformed into bellows that exploded into action, but the air wasn't there. Only it was, she knew it was, it just wasn't doing what air was supposed to do and the crypt had started to spin around her and there was nothing to latch onto. She'd had a few panic attacks since the awful night she'd clawed her way to freedom, jolted herself out of nightmares and blinked hard at the dark that encompassed her in search for something familiar. On most nights, she found herself in her room—what had been her mother's room—and next to a man she couldn't even escape in death, though they both had tried. On good nights, Spike would encompass her feverish skin with his cool body, hold her as she rode it out. As she

remembered that she could breathe after all, that everything was working fine, and the dark had no monsters.

"Slayer." Then he was there, his hands around her upper arms, strong and firm and grounding. "Stay with me, love."

That was what she was trying to do. Couldn't he see that?

Buffy didn't know how long it lasted—time had a way of moving funny in the midst of those awful spirals. But eventually, the sensation began to recede the way it always did, and her lungs remembered that they worked just fine without needing to be told. The pounding waned and while she still felt on edge, there was a measure of calm that followed. Precarious and fragile, but there all the same.

She blinked. She was on the sofa—the ugly green one that wasn't the one from home. She didn't remember walking there but must have. Or maybe he'd carried her. And Spike was beside her, his eyes full of love and concern and just enough guilt to tell her that he thought he'd caused this. Also, he still wasn't wearing a shirt.

"Better?" he asked. His voice was still small, though a different kind of small. Not far away anymore but cautious.

Buffy nodded, swallowed with a throat gone dry. It was probably too much to hope he had anything but blood and booze here. This place that wasn't his place but was. She'd been so relieved to see him, to see the love in his eyes and know she hadn't lost it, that she hadn't let herself stop. She'd thrown herself at him with no reserve, no thought for what this might mean for him in a time where they hadn't been together. How he might interpret her revelation about a spell as something...like that. Something that would trick her into the love she'd felt for more than a year now.

That was the most important thing she needed him to know, so that was where she started. "The spell didn't make me feel anything." Buffy fixed her gaze on a crack that ran down the pillar. A crack she had stared at before, sitting on a couch in this crypt, wondering if she was responsible for it or if it had been there all along. That seemed to help, staring at that point. It, at least, was familiar. "I don't even know what she did. I thought it might have been a time spell but maybe it's something else. Like I said, I haven't talked to her yet."

He said nothing, though she saw his jaw had gone tight all over again like he was holding himself back. He probably was.

"All I know is nothing is the way it was this morning," she went on, trying to determine where to start. The urge was there just to start spewing all of it—beginning with her marriage, but she knew him well enough to know that once she mentioned her husband's name, it would be all he heard, and she'd probably lose him again. The relationship she'd had with Spike had been erased and somehow, she couldn't see him reacting well to her mentioning she'd woken up beside Angel that morning. So, for now, she skirted that revelation and went with what was really important. "Dawn is here," she said. "And Giles is alive."

Spike jolted, his brow furrowing, the hard line of anger that had seized his features relaxing. "Alive?" he said. "When was he dead, pet?"

"The plane crash. He died on his way back from England."

"Funny. You'd think I'd remember that."

"That's just it, Spike. *No one* seems to remember that. The spell must have been a time spell—something to undo...*that*. And Dawn."

"What about the Nibbles?"

"She was with my father."

"Your father?" He blinked as though he'd never considered the possibility that she might have had a non-Joyce parent. An easy mistake to make, granted, given that Giles had been more of a father to her than her own ever had. "He in town?"

"No," Buffy said. "He lives in Los Angeles. She was sent to him after Glory—after I died."

The last shadows of anger slipped away, and Spike was suddenly on his feet. "That's not what happened, Slayer. The Bit was here—right here with me all summer. Oughta know. I was the one with her, wasn't I?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you—that's *not* the way it is. Whatever spell Willow did must have gone all the way back to the beginning because that's what's different."

"The beginning of *what*?"

"Of when it went wrong."

Spike gave her the sort of look that belied just how frustrated he

was. Jaw clenched, cheekbones on prominent display, eyes hard but not unrelenting. He was trying—for her—to keep from exploding all over again. “When what went wrong?” he asked with forced calm.

“My life, for starters.”

But that meant nothing to him—or not nothing, but he didn’t know what she was talking about. “Right,” he said. “When’d this switch happen, then? You say the world’s all topsy-turvy. How long’s it been?”

There. At last. A question she could answer without reservation.

“A few hours,” she said, then broke off as another thought occurred to her. “It happened at the Magic Box. I was at the Magic Box. I was there to find the monkey’s paw. This law firm wanted it—Wolfram and Hart. They said they’d help me get Dawn back if I got it for them. Giles was supposed to have it, but I looked, Spike. I looked through all that stuff so many times and it was never there. It wasn’t. And then...”

And then, suddenly it had been. The lights had gone out—why had the lights gone out? And why would Willow’s spell bring her to that moment specifically? Wouldn’t it make more sense, if there had been a time spell, for Buffy to remember everything from the start? Or was that another example of how the magic had gone wrong—maybe that was what Willow had intended. For Buffy to remember her old life starting at the time she got to rewrite it, not after it had already been rewritten.

But why the paw? Why had it been *that* moment?

“Monkey’s paw,” Spike said in a low voice. “What, like the story?”

“Huh?”

“Old story. Bloke called Jacobs wrote it, I think. Been a minute since I read it, but it was about wishes. Like the kind Demon Girl used to traffic in.”

Wishes.

She’d known that. Spike had told her—hell, they’d had more than one conversation about what *not* to do if she found the damn thing. He’d been worried that she might get it in her head to use it, herself. Bypass the lawyers and all else and just wish her way to something better.

Her temples started to thrum again. Not like before, though. Her

thoughts were still a chaotic tumble, but something was there, trying to poke through above the noise. Wishes could go wrong, Spike had said, and hadn't she known that too? Wasn't that how Anya had come into their lives—a wish she'd granted had gone wrong, or right, and there had been two Willows as a result. One Willow who was Willow and one who was a vampire. Willows who looked alike but *weren't* alike?

And what would Buffy have wished had she found the paw and decided to use it? What would that world look like?

Giles is alive.

Dawn is here.

Angel is gone.

But she hadn't made three wishes. She hadn't even made one. She'd been swimming in Magic Box merchandise, desperate to find an item she'd stopped believing had ever been there. Using the paw hadn't been on her agenda—she'd promised Spike that she wouldn't, for one, and she wasn't an idiot, for another. Spike *had* told her about the story—read it to her, in fact—one night on patrol as they'd waited for that week's neck trauma to rise from his grave so she could get with the dusting already. The story had been horrible. True? She didn't know, but it plus her own aversion to magic had convinced her not to do anything that might make things worse, no matter how tempted she might be.

She hadn't. She hadn't made three wishes. She hadn't had the paw. And a long time ago, there had been two Willows. Two Willows from two worlds—one that was the real world and one created because someone had made a wish.

"Oh god," Buffy said, lurching forward. "Oh god, oh god, oh *god*."

"Slayer?" Spike knelt beside her, his voice gentle. She knew his voice so well, knew *him* so well, but not this place. This wasn't the crypt that he'd turned into her home. The couch was wrong, there were no lamps—Angel had never lived at Revello Drive and Giles was alive because he hadn't gotten on that plane.

"I need to talk to Giles," Buffy managed to croak out. Her skin had gone hot all over again. She hadn't waited, hadn't asked. What if the world wasn't what was wrong? What if *she* was? Wasn't that the more

likely solution? That the moment things had gone weird coincided with the lights going out and the paw finding its way into her hand—how had she overlooked that? “And Willow. I need to know if she did a spell.”

“Right.” Spike released a ragged breath, and when she met his gaze, there was so much confusion there. So many questions. How weird this must be for him—Buffy showing up out of the blue. Buffy leaping into his arms. Buffy sinking to her knees.

Two Willows. One was ours. One was not.

The things he’d said. Murmured. No marks on her breast. No ring on her finger.

She choked back a sob, burying her face in her hands.

God, please let this be a spell. Please.

It could be. It *could* be—she held onto that. *Had* to hold onto that. There were a thousand possibilities. Probably more than a thousand, actually, that would explain what had happened in the basement. But one of those possibilities was tied to the paw. Which she’d been holding. Which granted wishes. Wishes that might have the power to create a different world altogether.

One where she didn’t belong.



I WAS EAST WITH THEM AND WEST WITHIN

SHE DIDN'T SLOW DOWN, COULDN'T. NOT TO THINK OR SPEAK, EVEN when Spike barked his incredulity that she knew her way around the subterranean half of the crypt beyond just the highlights. She also didn't answer his concern when she whimpered as they passed the place the shower should have been. She'd known it would be different, after all, that the shower should be gone, but the implications had taken a dramatic shift, looked more menacing and foreign and *wrong* under this new light. And she needed someone to tell her she was off the mark, that the idea was insane, and that someone was definitely not Spike. If there were answers to be had, they would be with Giles.

That getting to Giles meant splishing and splashing all kinds of gross sewage water over the fancy shoes she'd found herself wearing after the lights had gone out at the Magic Box—also not a concern. The trek was one she'd made more times than she could count—lazing about in bed with her lover, losing track of the hour, then realizing she was late for a Scooby meeting and having to motor. Easier to make use of the tunnels than it was to climb to the surface. There were no traffic lights, no buildings as obstacles, and Spike had mapped out the sewers well enough that he had long since stopped hesitating at

various turns to make sure he was headed in the right direction. So had Buffy.

"Slayer," Spike called from behind her, the panic in his voice rising. "Will you just bloody talk to me?"

No. She wouldn't. Not when she was afraid she might be right. That he might not be her Spike after all. That none of this was actually hers.

Buffy didn't remove the cap that guarded the entrance to the Magic Box basement so much as she burst through it. And then she was back—back in the space that was too wide, too open, too much like it had been before the plane crash. She lost no time raking her gaze over the supply of objects stacked, if not tidily, then with purpose on the shelves, not stopping until she spied the case Giles had carried into the training room at the start of this. The one containing the monkey's paw.

It was unlike anything she had seen in the many hours she had spent combing through Magic Box inventory. Nothing she might have accidentally discovered or dismissed because she'd opened every single box she'd found, undone every bit of wrapping, peered into even the most unlikely corners. A packing case full of rat eyes. A rolling cart stacked high with various herbs and roots. Shelf upon shelf of books and books and more books, each of which she'd opened in the hopes of finding the pages hollowed out, the way they sometimes were in movies. A clever ruse to keep a thief from finding something valuable.

With her heart cadencing hard against her ribcage, Buffy approached the case. It was stuck on a shelf between a creepy doll and a naked demon lady with a Gene Simmons tongue—both of which were, themselves, familiar, as were the assorted items stacked above and below. But not the case, and definitely not what was inside of it.

She forced herself to swallow, though her throat was dry, and slid the thing off the shelf. "This is wrong," she said.

"What's wrong?" Spike crowded around her, flooding her senses with the comfort that came with familiarity. The way he smelled, the way he sounded, the tingle at the base of her neck that had become his and his alone. All things that spoke to him as Spike, that should have been completely remarkable, but she feared were not.

"This wasn't here this morning," Buffy said, her voice scratchy. "None of this was like this."

The silence that followed was thick with his confusion. "Reckon the shop gets all kinds of shipments in each day, pet," he said. "Could be Rupert—"

"No. No, something happened." She hovered a hand over the case. She shouldn't open it—she knew that. Giles had said something about the paw doing a mind-meldy thing that she really couldn't afford at the moment, but at the same time, she wanted to see it. Almost needed to, as though to convince herself she had it wrong—had everything wrong—and there was no way this severed animal hand could be responsible for the anomalies surrounding her. The paw was supposed to bring with it a terrible cost and so far, nothing terrible had happened. So far, all the changes had been good. Amazing, even, though she had lost something precious to her. Even still, she hadn't lost *Spike*. He was still there and he still loved her, and that meant they could still be them.

But not if it wasn't really him. Not if it wasn't...

Buffy was run-walking for the stairs before her brain had made the decision to move, desperate and determined for answers she knew—knew—Giles would have because he was Giles and he was here. Alive. Not dead and buried.

Not in this universe, anyway.

The thought had her teetering closer to a run, her chest growing tight. She seized the doorknob and, for the second time that day, threw open the door that led into the shop proper. Also for the second time that day, she nearly barreled straight into Giles.

"Buffy!" her watcher shouted, tossing his hands—and the thick tome he'd been carrying—in the air. He staggered back a few steps, panting, and winced when the book *thunked* hard on the floor beside him. "You, ahh, seem to have developed a rather bad habit of doing that."

"Sorry," Buffy said, bending to pick up the book. "But it's an emergency."

"That was a first edition, I'll have you know." Giles snatched back said first edition and began wiping the cover with some urgency. Then he paused and looked up again, his eyes clearing as though her words

had just registered. “An emergency? Did you recall something about the paw? Or was there another time aberration or demon att... What is *he* doing here?”

She turned just as Spike stepped out of the stairwell, looking just as run over, and the knot in her chest twisted again. God, what a mess she’d made of things without even trying. Spike spared her watcher a defiant glare before returning his attention to her in full force, all anger, confusion, and worry. Questions bursting at the seams—questions she couldn’t answer—and also on guard, as he always was when she pulled him into this part of her life. When compartmentalizing wasn’t an option and she had to merge the two worlds Buffy lived in and just hope it wasn’t obvious to everyone around her that she had tossed her marital vows into the shredder.

“I just counted our inventory of burba weed,” Giles said, tucking the book against his side and straightening his shoulders. “So should any go missing, I—”

“Giles, we’re not here about your weed,” she said in a rush. “I need to know what would happen if someone used the monkey’s paw.”

Giles paled, his eyes going saucer-sized. For a long beat, he said nothing, just stared at her with a slow-dawning horror that did nothing to quell the dread that had bloomed in her back at the crypt. “I thought you said you didn’t use it,” he managed at length. “Buffy, *did* you use the paw?”

“No,” she said. Or more screamed—she hadn’t, she *hadn’t* used the paw, and she needed to hold onto that knowledge. All she’d done was find herself holding the damn thing. Buffy forced out a breath, one that made her lungs hurt. “No. But what *would* happen? If someone used the paw?”

“Why do you want to know?” He studied her a moment longer. “Buffy, I know your circumstances aren’t ideal at the moment, but I assure you that using the paw would not—”

“I want to know because I don’t think I’m where I’m supposed to be.”

That stole the lecture from his mouth. Giles blinked at her, all familiar, paternal confusion. “What do you mean?”

Buffy inhaled sharply, her eyes starting to burn again. She knew she

had to say it—had to ask, had to forge ahead, but she didn't want to. She didn't want this crazy idea of a new reality to be right. She didn't want to discover that she was with versions of people who were her people but also weren't. She wanted it to be a spell—a wonderful, somewhat bittersweet spell, that allowed her to build upon this fresh start.

But she knew. She *knew*. That wasn't the way her life worked. And wanting didn't make it so.

"Could the paw create a different world?" she asked at last, doing her best to keep the tremor out of her voice. "A-and send you there?"

"It is certainly possible," Giles replied, still studying her with concern. Unaware that her heart was breaking. "I suppose it would depend on the nature of the wish in question."

"It would," said another voice. Buffy whirled around in time to see Anya coming around the cash wrap from where she'd evidently been listening in, her brow wrinkled. "Some wishes are small-scale or don't require much rearranging. Other wishes—particularly those wishing to undo past events or change their outcome—would create a new world altogether." She went quiet, considered. "Well, *create* is a bit of a misnomer. The world always existed and did so because it would be wished into existence. These things are symbiotic and..." She trailed off when she looked back to Buffy, her frown deepening. "What?"

What? God, she didn't know. Except she was breaking—all of her was breaking.

"Giles," Buffy said hoarsely. "Something is wrong. I don't know if it's other worlds or a spell. I thought it was a spell. God, I'd *hoped* it was a spell. Something that fixed everything that was wrong before. But...I was holding the paw. I was *holding* it and it grants wishes. Doesn't that mean something?"

Giles edged forward, the concern on his face almost unbearable. She might not have the answers but she knew all the same—knew that the man looking at her was not her Giles. Just as she knew that this wasn't the Magic Box she'd stepped into earlier today, that the vampire with her was not her Spike. She was far from home.

"Buffy," Giles began, and she heard the placating note in his voice. The one that accompanied the speeches he made when he wanted to

talk her down from a certainty he was convinced wasn't certain at all, and hearing it damn near made her sob. The note sounded right. Sounded like Giles. Everything about him was Giles. Giles as she remembered him from before—who she'd last seen on the night she'd died. It was him and it wasn't him, and she hated him for it.

"I woke up this morning in my bed at home," she said, meeting Not-Giles's eyes. "Next to my husband."

That did it. Whatever he'd been about to say died an abrupt death.

"Your *what*?" Spike demanded, seizing her arm and pulling. But she was ready for that, firmed her stance, and didn't budge. Saying the words aloud had been difficult enough without considering how it would sound to the man she'd thrown herself at just a couple of hours ago.

Out of her periphery, she saw Anya huff and cross her arms. "I was the one supposed to be getting married," she murmured.

Buffy held her breath and willed herself to keep her attention on Giles. "I'm married," she forced out. "To Angel. I have been for nearly two years now. He's human. There was a demon that made him human. He came back and we got married."

It was just as horrible admitting it as she'd known it would be. Spike had moved beside Giles, so even though she didn't take her gaze off her watcher, it was impossible to miss the way her vampire's face fell. No, she got all of that in excruciating detail. His jaw going slack, his eyes wide, screaming hurt and pain and confusion she knew she couldn't address at the moment. Not until she knew for certain where she was and what had brought her there. She'd been too careless with him already. Not questioning, knowing she should but also not wanting the answer. Thinking she could rationalize everything, trying to do just that, but also knowing at a gut level that her conclusions were wrong.

Because she *had* to have known that, right? Buffy might not be the brightest crayon in the box, but she wasn't an idiot. The *offness* that was this place went deeper than any spell ever could, right? Right?

"I think," Giles said after a long stretch, "it might be good for you to start at the beginning."

Buffy nodded miserably. "Yeah. Me too."



IT WASN'T A SPELL. They knew that now.

That was at least the working theory. It had taken a while to land there. A lot of discussion and more debate, often interjected with Anya's observations about how wish-magic worked, inevitably leading to more muttered curses and glares.

Buffy had lost track of the hour. Her ass was beginning to feel a bit tender, having been planted in the seat at the Magic Box for however long. Sitting, though, was better than standing. Standing led to walking and every time she moved, the eyes of her friends—the people who had the names and faces of the people in her world—would follow her. She couldn't stand that. Couldn't stand the confusion she saw there, confusion she thought might be resentment.

Dawn was the worst. The second it had all come out, she had sworn something under her breath and gone into cold-shoulder teenager mode. It was anger directed at the other Buffy, but Buffy being the closest approximation got the brunt of it. She couldn't even bring herself to be offended. If she were in Dawn's shoes, she'd be upset too.

In addition to the hour, Buffy had also lost track of Spike. He'd slipped out at some point during the big talk. Barked something about patrol, which she knew was code for *getting the fuck away from you lot*. She also knew he wouldn't stay away, that he'd want the truth—the full truth, not the truth she had kept from the others. Why it was that Buffy, married-to-Angel Buffy, had turned up at his crypt, dropped to her knees, then begged him to fuck her. She'd lived this once already, back when it hadn't been her. When it had been Faith and Spike had been pissed off at her for what he'd assumed was a spell. Knowing, as he'd told her, that she would never run around on her husband.

They'd both been wrong there.

It was good, though, that he was gone. She needed time to deconstruct her thoughts—all of them. Maybe especially the ones regarding him.

"And we really think Buffy—*our* Buffy—is in this other world?"

Willow asked for what had to be the tenth time. "That's how it works?"

Anya rolled her head back, letting out a long groan. Buffy didn't blame her. The former demon been in explanation-and-correction mode all night.

"It's the only thing that makes sense, Will," Xander said. He was seated on the table, his feet propped in a chair and his elbows resting on his knees. Every now and then, he'd throw Buffy a furtive look, as though he thought he could catch her doing something not-Buffyesque and unmask her as an imposter. No need there—she was well and truly unmasked. "Unless you have a confession to make."

Willow shook her head, perhaps a bit too forcibly but also with an earnestness that couldn't be easily faked. "No. I'm just...another world? Where Buffy's married to Angel?" She wrinkled her nose as though mentally tackling a complicated math problem, then turned back to Buffy. "What about Riley?"

"Who?"

"Initiative Riley. Your boyfriend Riley."

"I... Wait, *Finn*? I actually did date Riley Finn?" Buffy furrowed her brow, trying to see it. There had been a flirtation there at the start of the freshman year. A lukewarm flirtation—he'd been cute in an almost-Angel-if-you-squint kinda way. After she'd gotten back from Los Angeles, though, she'd let him know that the flirtation part was over—worked it into a phone message she'd left him, casually asking about makeup work she might have missed and dropping that she and her boyfriend had gotten back together. This part she *did* remember, because Spike had still been tied up at Giles's house and he'd let her have it for breaking some *poor sod's heart* over the phone.

Willow offered a smile—at least Buffy thought it was a smile. It looked more like a grimace. "Yeah? But he left. Right before your mom died, actually." A beat. "Oh god, did you not know that? Your mom—"

"I know about my mom." And she didn't want to talk about it. As in at all. Or Riley for that matter. Or anything that wasn't the paw and how this whole thing had happened. "So...your Buffy made a wish and we swapped places," she said, leveling her gaze on Anya once more. "And...she created my universe?"

Anya nodded, not necessarily friendly but not hostile either, which Buffy found a little jarring, even if the enmity she'd come to expect had only briefly been the status quo. Anya could pack a lifetime of resentment into just a handful of days. Maybe it was a demon thing or something. "The specific conditions for your world, yes," Anya agreed. "But like I've said—a lot—your universe has always existed because it was always going to be created. That's how these universes work. As for why you switched places, I'm not sure."

"I think I do," Giles said. It was the first time he'd spoken in a while, having retreated into a book sometime during Buffy's recounting of events as she remembered them, muttering a possibility that the time anomaly she had experienced and demon attacks earlier could be responsible for her current disorientation, though she could tell he hadn't really thought so. Every now and then, the flicker of a turning page—one wispy and brittle with age—would whisper through the air, a constant, comforting backdrop that only served to prick a wound that hadn't had a chance to scab over just yet. In understanding that this wasn't her world, Buffy had lost Giles all over again. It was an odd thought to have while sitting in the same room with him, listening to him talk and feeling that rush of familial comfort anytime he turned his attention her way. But it wasn't the real Giles—*her* Giles—and god, that hurt. "There is a balance between these worlds," he continued. "A delicate one. Disturb that balance and existence itself could be upset."

The gang exchanged the usual round of confused looks, but Buffy thought she might understand. "You can't take without adding," she said. "Or add without taking. Your Buffy couldn't just take my place because then this world would be missing a Buffy. Out of balance."

Giles sat back, his smile satisfied and proud, and all the more painful because of it. "Precisely."

Xander lifted a hand, frown still firmly in place. "Are we forgetting the five months when there was no Buffy of any kind? That wasn't very balancy."

"But Buffy *was* still in this world," the watcher replied, the smile having been replaced with the trademark exasperation he seemed to reserve for Xander. "You're thinking of this world as one defined plane of existence. In actuality, it is thousands. Millions, perhaps." When all

he earned was another dull look, Giles rolled his eyes and slammed shut the book he'd been flipping through. "Buffy sent Angel to Hell three years ago, yes?"

Xander nodded, though he still looked uncertain. As though there was possibly another answer to that question.

"Did you?" Giles asked, refocusing on Buffy.

"Yeah. Big stone demon tried to suck the world into Hell."

"Precisely." He shifted back to Xander. "The Hell to which our Buffy sent Angel would have been specific to our world. Not the same Hell as the one to which our...*visiting* Buffy sent Angel."

"Well, that sounds more like universes, then," Xander said, shifting. "Not worlds. A world is just..." He mimed something round in his arms. "But a universe is all kinds of worlds, isn't it? Not just the one."

That was an uncharacteristically astute observation.

Though when no one jumped in to verify Xander was correct, he looked around with growing alarm. "Did *Star Trek* lie to me?" he demanded. "Someone say something."

Willow reached over and patted his hand. "You're right, sweetie. I think it just took everyone by surprise."

Indeed, Giles had straightened and was readjusting his glasses on the bridge of his nose. "Yes, well, semantics aside—"

"Semantics schmantics, I was right." Xander pumped both fists in the air, grinning broadly. "Xan-Man for the win."

"Point being that removing one individual without replacing that individual would upset the balance that keeps all worlds—or *universes*, if you must—in motion." Giles's gaze was fixed on the floor, his cheeks a little red. That was the same, too. He hated being corrected, most especially when the person doing the correcting was Xander. "Rather like the domino effect. Once one universe is imbalanced, it may well topple over, and cause the others to follow suit, therein destroying reality as we know it."

Xander lowered his fists, sobering a bit and scratching his chin. "And this...evil monkey thing doesn't want to destroy reality?"

"The paw is empowered by the pain of its users," the watcher replied. "Without people to make wishes, the paw effectively becomes

useless. Ending all of existence would doom it as well. That is not in its best interest.”

“Well, that’s a cheery thought,” Willow interjected, slumping in her seat. “At least we know it doesn’t want to end the world.” She hesitated, then added, “Ssss,” as an afterthought.

“You laugh, but that there is a good bad guy.” Xander nodded at Giles when he narrowed his eyes. “Grand plan is *not* total annihilation because the alternative gives it more opportunity for pain and suffering? I never get why so many of our Big Bads are set on the apocalypse. Well, okay, there are your occasional religious zealots. And the complete nutjobs like Glory. But Angel? He knew that the Alpaca thing would kill *him* too, right?”

“Acathla,” Buffy and Giles corrected as one.

“Whatever. And the fact that our current bad guy not actually a bad guy so much as it is the severed limb of an evil monkey...” Xander tapped his temple, nodding sagely. “Gotta appreciate the subtlety.”

Buffy wasn’t sure she had to appreciate anything, especially not at the end of a day that seemed like it had stretched for centuries. A day that had aged her more than living and dying ever could. God, how stupid she’d been, not seeing it immediately. Not realizing when the lights went out that she’d literally had the answer as to what had happened in her hand. How she’d let herself believe any of this could be real, or even if it was real, hers. That anything worked like that—*blink* and everything’s better. The marriage she regretted, never happened. The father figure she’d lost, still alive. The sister who was in the wind, safe and sound at home. The man she loved, here and hers for the taking. A giant reset on the comedy of errors that had become her life. Sure, she remembered the pain of losing Heaven, the horror of her resurrection, felt the absence of her mother as acutely as she would any crippling injury, but these things were no longer weighed down by the consequences of her bad decisions. Or hadn’t been for a blessed handful of hours.

The selfish part of her had already shot forth its sales pitch. If this world’s Buffy had been careless enough to throw everything aside, then she didn’t deserve it. Any of it. That her sister had been waiting for her here and was *still* waiting to be seen, that she had a house shared with

friends and not a husband she felt shackled to, and a man who loved her—not only loved her but *knew* her—and hadn't been fulfilled was infuriating. Sure, things weren't easy but they weren't terrible. She had everything she needed to haul herself out of the dark place Buffy figured she'd been living in.

She could stay. Assume the place this world's Buffy had abandoned. It would be easy—so, so easy.

But she wouldn't. She'd known that even before the debate had started. These were people she loved, but they were not *her* people. Not her friends, her Giles, or her vampire. Her sister was still out there, still needed her. And Spike...

Buffy pressed her lips together and blinked hard against the sudden rush of tears. "So how do we undo it?" she asked. That was the one thing they hadn't discussed yet—the most important thing, as far as she was concerned. "How do we switch back?"

Giles must have been waiting for her to ask—perhaps see if she would—for he immediately flipped open the book again. "According to legend, destroying the paw will undo all of the wishes cast. However, I—ahh—haven't had any luck in actually destroying it. As is obvious, otherwise it wouldn't have been available for Buffy to find."

Anya nodded. "The Promethean Flame was the only known power capable of destroying it, and that went out eons ago. As far as I know, there are no other ways."

"Yeah, well, we once thought that a certain killing machine by the name of The Judge couldn't be destroyed," Xander piped in. "Buffy and I proved history wrong there." A beat. "Okay, fine, mostly Buffy."

"Great," Willow muttered. "All we need then is a rocket launcher. Anyone have a spare one of those lying around?"

Giles shook his head, removing his glasses to pinch the bridge of his nose. "I don't think it would work if we did," he replied. "The man I purchased the paw from claims to have made numerous attempts to destroy it, himself. It won't rip or tear or burn. I'm not sure whether to believe this, but he also claimed to have shot at it."

"Shot?" Tara, who had been quietly observing through most of the conversation, suddenly went rigid, her eyes wide with alarm. "Like, with a gun?"

"We didn't meet face-to-face, but, ahh, from the way he sounded on the phone, I would imagine he would be the type," the watcher said. The glasses had made the expected journey to the hem of his shirt. "I haven't tried many methods, myself, but I was able to confirm that the paw is resistant to burns or tears. And if there is another way to destroy it, we might be searching for a long time."

"Why are you even gonna bother?" came from the corner, making everyone jump as one. It was the first Dawn had spoken since they had agreed that Buffy—the Buffy who belonged here—had likely used the paw to wish herself somewhere else. Just hearing her voice hurt. "Buffy left for a reason. She wanted to get *away* from us. From me. At least this Buffy seems to care."

"Dawn!" Tara shouted.

"What? It's *true*."

Buffy didn't realize she'd pushed herself out of her seat until she was almost halfway across the room, then stumbled when she forced herself to stop. Comforting her sister, who was not her sister, might not be the best move. "I'm sure that's not what she was trying to do," she said instead, backing up a step. "It's...it's just been hard, being back."

"Hard?" The question was half-asked, half-shrieked. Dawn was shaking now, arms crossed, angry tears brimming in her eyes. "*Hard* was this summer. *Hard* was knowing it was supposed to be me who jumped. *Hard* is knowing that my sister would rather be dead than have anything to do with me."

"Dawn—"

"*Hard* is she left me here. She just left. And I'm supposed to feel sorry for her?"

Buffy forced out a slow breath, her temples beginning to pound. She didn't know what to say—knew there was probably nothing. Not that Dawn would understand. Hell, *she* barely understood, except that one of the wishes—if there had been more than one—had to have involved Angel. While she liked to think she would have eventually moved on, realized that life was larger than just one failed relationship, Buffy knew herself. Knew how broken she'd felt after he'd walked away, how seeing him in Los Angeles had taken the pieces

she'd managed to put back together and shattered them all over again. Hell, she knew how hard she'd begged Angel to stay human, to not be an idiot and throw away the best thing that had ever happened to either of them. How the thought that he was even contemplating going back to being a vampire had almost been worse than the breakup itself.

That pain was the sort that rooted deep. Such that, even as discouraged as she was to learn that this world's Buffy was still pining two years and one relationship later, she understood.

As for the rest of the wishes... God, she had no idea. Maybe it *had* been just the one and everything else was a ripple of that one bad choice. She hoped so. Hoped that there was no version of herself that would go to such dramatic lengths to get away from the sister she'd sacrificed herself to protect.

"Dawnie," Buffy said softly, "I'm so sorry."

"What's so wrong with this world, huh?" Dawn asked, her voice trembling. "Why don't *you* stay? Sounds like the place you're from sucks. A lot. She didn't wanna be here so fine. She can have your sucky world. You stay here. You are *my* sister."

"I can't," she replied, hating herself for the way the girl's face fell. Hating herself even more when it hardened all over again with that familiar rage—the refusal to be sad and determination to be pissed off instead. She *was* her sister. In every breath she took, this girl was Dawn Summers, and she was right. But that didn't change anything. "My Dawn needs me," she said, knowing it wouldn't make a dent but trying anyway. "Spike hasn't told me much—I'm not even sure what all he knew. Just that he'd tried to make off with her a handful of times before Dad got the lawyers involved. And—"

"Spike?" Xander asked, like he'd never heard the name before. "What does Spike have to do with anything?"

The question made zero sense and only served to piss her off. That had not been the moment to interrupt her and redirect the conversation. But now everyone was looking at her, waiting, so she had no choice but to address it. "What do you mean?" Buffy asked, dragging her fingers along her brow. "He's...one of the gang, right?"

When silence was her answer rather than the resounding chorus of,

"Yes," she'd expected, she stiffened and looked around, her hackles rising.

Everyone was still staring at her.

At last, Xander huffed a little laugh and made an exaggerated show of looking around. "Gee. Don't see him. And, may I add, since when?"

"Uhh, for a while now?" Buffy glanced back to Dawn. "He watched you all summer, didn't he?"

Dawn's glare had softened—not much but enough to show her that she'd also been thrown by the conversational turn, though something told Buffy not in the same way. "Yeah," she said. "Cause no one else could stand to be around me."

"Maybe Buffy doesn't know," Willow offered brightly. "About Spike, I mean. If she's with Angel in the other world, then maybe it didn't happen there."

"Know *what*?" Buffy demanded, jolting with fresh panic. She was reaching her maximum on the hits she'd be able to take and survive. "What don't I know? What *didn't* happen in my world? What the hell are you guys talking about?"

"Spike's in love with you," Anya said, lifting a shoulder. "It's kind of a thing."

It was? They knew? Buffy looked around again. "And?"

"Aaaaand *love* is so not the right word for whatever Spike is," Xander said, dragging out his words now as though that might help her better understand them. "It's more like a sick obsession. He made a Buffy sexbot and everything."

He made a what?

She had to admit, of all the things Xander could have said, she had not expected that. Though now that the concept was out there, hadn't Spike said something similar back at his crypt? Something about the way she looked at him? How it was like the bot and how little sense *that* had made? God, she'd known their relationship here was different. The crypt looking the way it did, Spike looking at *her* the way he did, how surprised he'd been when she'd thrown herself at him—surprised but more than willing to go along with it. The raw hunger with which he'd torn at her and his utter devastation when he'd thought she was under the influence.

And though thinking about that hurt, when she conjured the image of a Robot Buffy, all she wanted to do was laugh. In fact, she *did* laugh, the sound sharp and offensive against the quiet that had fallen. Buffy slapped a hand over her mouth, but too late. Everyone was looking at her like she'd grown an extra head. But hell, she couldn't help it. If she was supposed to be appalled or offended—and she knew she was—they would have to wait for the thought to stop being hilarious.

He'd seriously built a robot? A *robot*? Buffy giggled again, couldn't help it. Yeah, when she got home, she was *never* letting him live that one down.

She sobered then, speared through with a sudden jab of pain.

I have to get home.

"Not the reaction I would have expected," Willow said slowly. "But okay. And I really can't begrudge him the bot. It kept demons thinking the Hellmouth was guarded right up until we were able to get her out of that hell dimension."

"Will, it *so* doesn't count if the neighborhood creep is accidentally helpful." Xander rolled his eyes before fixing his attention back on Buffy. "So you're saying where you're from, Spike's one of our friends? Yeah, I gotta go with Dawn. Sounds like you traded way up with this wish thing and won the world lotto." He paused, then brought his hands up when he found himself the subject of several glares. "Not that we leave our Buffy over there! Just...things are making more sense."

"He's not a friend," Buffy said, still lingering on that last awful thought as pain hardened into something worse. As it became fear. And if her tone was edgier than she intended, well, she couldn't help herself. Somehow over the years, she'd forgotten just how judgmental Xander had been before Spike had been a staple at Scooby meetings. It had become natural, all of them together. First with the patrols, then with drop-ins, and suddenly he'd just been one of them. People had stopped questioning why he was there. It hadn't mattered.

They hadn't known, of course. None of them had. Though she'd wondered sometimes if they did, she'd stopped wondering when Willow had tracked down Angel to let him know she was alive again, knowing for certain that her worst and best secret was in fact a secret.

Angel wouldn't have been contacted at all, she was sure, if her friends had known the truth.

It was too late to tell her Scoobies. Not too late to tell these Scoobies. And she owed him that. She owed him so much.

So much she might never get to tell him.

"Well," Xander said, relaxing. "I think I speak for everyone when I say—"

"He's not a friend," Buffy asserted again. "Spike's my"—lover? Boyfriend? How could she begin to describe what he was to her?—"partner. We're...having an affair."

That did it. Now everyone was staring at her in shock. Even Dawn. Might as well bring it on home.

"And I'm in love with him."

OH NO, DID LOVE JUST LEAVE YOU SCREWED?

SHE DIDN'T TELL THEM THE WHOLE STORY. THE FIRST TIME SHE TOLD it, it would be to him.

Though there had been questions, and a lot of them. Some insulting, others just mildly curious, and some downright weird. As it turned out, Anya had never been with a vampire and wanted to know if other parts of the anatomy changed if he went into game face during mid-fuck, and, well, Buffy was never going to get that image out of her mind ever. She didn't even remember how she'd answered, only that there had been a lot of stammering that had probably resulted in all of them, her sister included, picturing things about Spike's penis that the world was better off not picturing.

Disturbing as the conversation had been, Xander, at least, had come out mildly placated.

"Guess this means you never did the deed with Dracula after all," he'd said, and visibly relaxed.

Anya had sniffed. "Dracula wasn't like other vampires."

"Meaning?"

"All accounts of Dracula indicate he preferred to be the hunter, not the prey," Giles had interjected. Why had been anyone's guess—including his own, from the way his face had fallen immediately after

he'd spoken—but by then he'd been committed. "He wanted to seduce, not to be seduced."

"Most men like it when I come on strong," Anya had whined. "Xander actually prefers it."

No one, not even Buffy, had been sad to leave that part of the discussion in the dust, even if it meant that her own tumultuous love life resumed center focus.

In the end, Buffy couldn't say where the entire convoluted talk fell on the bar of her expectations. She had contemplated how it might go, the others finding out, more times than she could count. On nights that contained particularly exhausting fights with Angel, she'd imagined the gang reacting with vindictive jubilation. Other times, like when Willow or Tara said something to the effect of how her love for Angel, even amid all their problems, was inspiring, the imagined reaction turned less flattering. Less Julia Roberts, more Hester Prynne.

Then there were the truly bad nights, the sort where one of her friends would make a comment about how good she was. How hard she worked. These had been more common before her death—back when she'd been running ragged trying to keep Dawn alive, caring for her sick mother, and juggling the hell that was her personal life on top of everything. Xander had even once given her a rousing pep talk about how she had all this power and could do anything with it—could go full want, take, have a la Faith—and she was just too good a person to even be tempted. The sort of person he looked up to, asked himself what she would do in any given situation, knowing that the answer would always be the right thing.

Those were the nights when she became certain that coming clean about her affair would do more than just shock her friends—it would change the way they looked at her. It would cost her their respect and their trust, and it would be right to.

None of her imagined scenarios had captured the reality of coming clean—but then she wasn't sure she could really call this the reality. This wasn't a version of Xander who made sure that there were extra jelly doughnuts for each Scooby meeting, lest Spike and Giles come to blows. This wasn't a version of Willow who had helped reinforce the DeSoto with wards in the event Glory determined the identity of the

Key and Buffy and Dawn needed to make a fast getaway. This wasn't the Giles who had engaged her vampire in a two-hour spirited debate over whether *Hamlet* was overrated. These were people who not only didn't include Spike—for reasons she still didn't understand—but seemed to dislike him, even after this summer with Dawn.

She didn't get it. And they didn't get her, or her relationship choices.

It was beyond late by the time Giles closed up the Magic Box. No more they could do just then. He'd promised to do more reading on the paw—admitted that it hadn't been much of a priority since he'd returned to the States, aside from purchasing it—to determine what other means might exist to ensure its destruction. If that didn't work, he thought he might call Wesley.

"Wesley?" she'd repeated dully. "Wesley as in Watcher Wesley? Was he more competent over here or am I missing a whole big something?"

Giles had offered a little chuckle. Like everything else he did—including breathing—it hurt to hear.

"Wesley works with Angel," he'd explained—and Buffy had gone rigid. "And I hear he has improved dramatically since he was here. Furthermore, he is educated in cursed relics, has access to texts that I do not, and is our best resource apart from going directly to the Council, something I rather think would be a mistake in this case."

She hadn't been able to argue with that. The Council was good for nothing but making bad situations exponentially worse.

"Okay," she'd said. "But make sure he doesn't tell Angel anything." Not that it would matter—the Angel who lived here was a vampire. One that had likely turned back the clock that day two years earlier, erasing it from the memory of this world's Buffy and everyone else. Even so, she didn't want any version of her husband near this. That would put her in dangerous proximity of having to answer questions she'd rather avoid being asked in the first place.

Giles thankfully hadn't argued, just nodded and agreed to keep it as quiet as possible. Though she'd been certain he'd been thinking the same thing she was—that regardless of how much Wesley might have *improved* since his brief stint as her watcher, it would be nothing short of a miracle if he managed to keep his mouth shut.

Well, if Angel caught wind and got curious, she'd deal. She was good at dealing.

By the time Buffy got home that night, she had reached new levels of exhaustion, ones not even death and resurrection could hope to match. Her head was a noisy mess, full of both self-recriminations and half-cocked ideas that were likely way more ridiculous than they sounded at the moment. She dragged herself onto the porch, shuffled forward until she could go no farther, then stopped and just stared at the doorknob. Not wanting to turn it. Not wanting to go inside, face more of what she'd experienced at the shop. There was no getting away from it, after all, since Willow and Tara were evidently her roommates. She also knew she should talk to Dawn, or try to, but what was the point? It wasn't as though any of this made sense to her. How could she hope to get her sister to understand what she didn't?

Buffy let out a shaky breath, leaning her brow against the door. If she were honest with herself, she just wanted Spike. Wanted to curl up with him on the sofa, throw some popcorn in the microwave and watch bad movies until she passed out against his shoulder. Craved the familiar weight of his arm around her, the rumble of his laughter under her cheek, and most of all that knowledge that she could close her eyes and all would be okay. The world would keep turning just fine.

Spike wasn't here, though. Not hers anyway. And she had no business seeking out the one who did live here. Never mind that she'd thrown herself at him before she'd had all the answers, that she'd purposefully ignored the part of her brain not convinced by the whole *spell* theory because that had been easier. In her desperation to be right she'd refused to slow down long enough to entertain the possibility that she wasn't.

The entire thing reminded her too much of the awful walk back to her house after she and Spike had fucked in the cemetery the first time, and she hated it. She'd done the same thing then, clung to Spike as he'd pressed her against a mausoleum, gasping and clawing and begging him to hurry, hurry, do it before she thought too much, before her better senses kicked in, before the fact that she was a married woman mattered to her once more. Knowing the fall would come, that

she would hate herself when it was over, but she'd already hated herself so why not give herself an actual reason?

The difference was, of course, that she'd been cheating on Angel then. Looking for an escape from the shit-show that was her life and tired of punishing herself for the bad choices she'd made. Tired of being alone in her marriage. Most of all, tired of fighting what she knew was love. What had happened that afternoon had been a different story. She hadn't been running from anything or anyone, rather desperate to prove that the only thing worth keeping in her world was still there. That she hadn't lost the man she loved.

And yeah, it was Spike. As far as explanations went, that one was pretty damn foolproof. But it wasn't *her* Spike and that made a difference. Hell, it made all the difference.

Once they figured this out, once she was back where she belonged, she would have to come clean about what had happened. She figured he would understand, but that didn't mean it wouldn't hurt.

It hurt *her* just to think about.

Buffy knew she couldn't stay outside all night without attracting the attention of some neighborhood creepy-crawly, and then she'd have to explain what she'd been doing wasting away on the porch rather than coming inside. And there was no good way to have that conversation—she didn't understand it herself. How, as awful as her home life was, the fact that there were lamps and people that shouldn't be in her house was worse than facing Angel at the end of a long day. That she could be in a place that was home but somehow still be as far from home as she'd ever been.

They would say they understood. They'd be wrong. But that was going to be true no matter what side of the door she was on. Wasn't like there was anywhere else to go.

The crypt flashed across her mind. Her home away from home—her *real* home, as it were—and Buffy forced herself to swallow the sob that wanted out. Maybe patrol would be a better idea. Give her something to hit, and hit, and hit to channel all this tension and frustration and, okay, rage. Because that's what it was, there beneath the surface, growing steadily the more she thought, the more she learned, the more she walked through what must have led this world's Buffy to make a

decision so unthinkingly selfish. And at herself, if she were being honest, for not seeing at once what was obvious the longer she looked around. For being stupid enough to believe that maybe the universe had decided to stop clobbering her for five seconds and give her a break.

If she ever met the Buffy who lived here, who had thrown away her life and picked up someone else's, she might just kill her. That wouldn't count as murder, would it? If she killed another version of herself?

Buffy lifted her head and dragged her hands under her eyes to wipe away any stray tears that might have escaped, then drew in a deep, fortifying breath and twisted the doorknob before she could think any more on the matter.

"Hey!" Willow practically shouted at her as she trudged her way over the threshold. She and Tara were hovering in the entry to the dining room in such a manner it was obvious they had been waiting for her to come inside. "Are you... Oh, Buffy, are you okay?"

What a stupid thing to ask.

"Yeah," Buffy lied, forcing her lips into a shape she thought might vaguely resemble a smile. "Just...with the tired. It's been a long, weird day." She glanced around for a sign of her sister, as Dawn was pretty much the only person she thought she might be able to be around right now. They could shovel down gallon tubs of ice cream and vent their frustrations on this world's Buffy together. Why not? It wasn't like she owed the usurper anything. Certainly not the loyalty of the sister she'd abandoned. But Dawn wasn't parked in front of the television and she could see from where she stood that the kitchen was dark. Buffy looked back to Willow, and the question must have been written across her face for the explanation came quickly.

"Upstairs. Said something about homework." Now it was Willow's turn to try for a smile. Hers didn't look any more convincing than Buffy's had felt. "We were gonna go up and see if we could tempt her with pizza if she didn't come down by eight. Don't worry," she added, "it's on us. Me and Tara."

Buffy furrowed her brow, her head beginning to throb. "Why would I worry?"

"Oh. *Oh*, sorry. Just..." Willow turned to Tara, her mouth opening

and closing. "I know with money being tight, you've been extra worried about not spending too much on, you know."

"Food?"

"Well, with takeout being more expensive? There might have been a whole lecture the other day about how chicken fried rice is good but having a roof is better. Especially with the damage to the basement."

Of course, there was damage. It was her house, after all.

The thought stirred something, though. Something Buffy wasn't sure she wanted stirred, as anger felt so much better than empathy at the moment. But if this world's Buffy had been worried about paying household bills and keeping food on the table for her sister, at least some of their experience hadn't been all that different.

And that had been before Mom died. Everything following the funeral had brought with it a host of new problems, including another mouth to feed and a house to manage. Angel had lobbied to list Revello Drive, but Dawn had been violently opposed to moving into the mansion and honestly, Buffy had just wanted to come home. She'd known it would be messy and complicated and more expensive—the house hadn't been anywhere near paid off—but she'd been depleted, weighed down with grief and the guilt of her affair with Spike, and she'd seen moving home as a chance at a fresh start. Leave the memories of the bad marriage on Crawford Street and give their whole relationship a massive reset. She'd been living in this house when she'd fallen in love with Angel, after all, and sure that didn't really mean anything but maybe it did. Maybe she could recover the girl she had been when she'd lived there before—the one who had thought Angel hung the moon.

That was during the period she'd broken it off with Spike, committed to recommitting. Haunted by thoughts of how disappointed her mother must be in her, if the afterlife was some dimension where all secrets were revealed. If she could see the full picture and not just the slivers Buffy had let her see. Joyce would never have condoned her affair with Spike, no matter how she felt about Angel. No matter that Buffy was in love with him and felt trapped by the marriage she'd been foolish enough to enter.

Her renewed dedication to her marriage hadn't lasted, though. It

had never had a chance. Spike had gotten himself vamp-napped and Glory had rearranged his face—more than his face—trying to get him to give up the Key. He hadn't. Buffy had known he hadn't, even if the others had their doubts. Spike might be a Scooby, but he was still a vampire, and vampires had only *numero uno* in mind. That he'd been forced by circumstance into donning a white hat had been more a survival instinct, as it ensured Buffy kept the demon community off his back.

Buffy had sat through their reasoning, knowing they were wrong, knowing Spike as they never would, but she'd used it as an excuse to go see him. Though she'd been chaperoned, Willow and Tara tagging along to fix up the crypt with a warning system that would hopefully be enough to give him a head start should Glory come knocking again. It hadn't occurred to her until she'd looked at him—really looked at him—that a man whose heart she'd broken had no reason to put her first, that there might actually be a need to ask. Not because she thought he'd given her up, but leave no stone unturned, right? Then she'd hoped one of the witches would do it so she didn't have to. They hadn't, and she hadn't had the nerve to do it in front of them—deep down knowing the answer, knowing how he'd look at her when she asked it, and knowing she wouldn't be able to keep hold of her composure. So after they were done, she'd walked with them out to the entrance of Restfield, then made up some excuse about patrolling so she could double back.

Hindsight, though, told the true story. It hadn't been just to ask about Dawn—Dawn had been a handy excuse. What she'd really wanted, what she'd wanted from the moment she'd seen what Glory had done to him, was the chance to take care of him the way he had her so many nights. Show him she loved him even if she couldn't say it. Even if nothing could come out of it.

Spike, true to form, hadn't let her get away with it. As she'd talked her way around the question that had an answer she already knew, he'd come at her in a fury.

"Why don't you just spit it out, Slayer?" he'd demanded, hauling himself up to a sitting position. The others had left him on a sarcopha-

gus, not knowing about the bed downstairs. “You wanna know if I gave up the kid.”

Buffy had released a long breath, her hands balled into fists, her nails biting into her palms to give herself something to focus on. Keep from launching forward and wrapping her arms around him, pressing kisses along his bruised body and telling him how the last weeks without him had been the longest and most miserable of her life. How she was sorry she wasn’t better at any of this—sorry that she was married and that she couldn’t stop being married, that she’d been stupid enough to believe in fairytale endings.

“Did you?”

To this day, she didn’t know how he’d done it—even with his vampire strength, he shouldn’t have been able to explode into motion as he had. Not just hours after Glory had tried to make abstract art by carving up his chest, breaking more than one rib in the process. Not with the bruises that had colored his arms and back. Not with one of his eyes swollen shut. But he had. Spike had leaped to his feet and closed the space between them in two hard strides. He’d banded his hands around her arms and hauled her to him, and she’d known it had to hurt, had to, but he’d betrayed nothing. He’d just glared at her with his good eye, his cut lips pulled into a sneer.

“You think I could do that?” he’d demanded thickly, shaking her once. “You think I’d give up Dawn to save my own skin? You think I’d hurt you like that? Look at me and say it then. Tell me you think I’m a monster. Tell me you don’t know I’m so bloody in love with you that there’s nothing I wouldn’t do to spare you a *second* of pain. Tell me, Buffy. Look at me and say it. You owe me that much.”

It had been all over for her. Part of her had known it the second she’d walked into the crypt—hell, the second she’d realized that Glory had him and she was the only one who stood a chance at getting him out alive. But she’d had a choice after the debrief and discussion, after Willow and Tara had departed from the Magic Box to perform the protection spell—she could have gone back to Revello Drive, where Angel was with Dawn, waiting for the phone to ring. For Buffy to tell him to get her sister the hell out of town. She could have returned to the

life she thought she was supposed to have, divorce herself of all things vampire and extramarital once and for all. Buffy could have left it to her friends to care for her former lover, but she hadn't. She'd called Angel to let him know she was going back to the crypt to make sure Spike hadn't spilled the beans, knowing even if she hadn't admitted it then that she'd made the choice. The final choice. To fight for the man she loved, choose the man she loved, over a life she didn't want anymore.

Hearing that Spike loved her too had solidified it. She'd sobbed and shaken her head, and he must have seen it in her eyes, for he'd sobbed too and then they'd been tangled in each other. Furious and desperate, hands grasping, mouths tearing, and she'd whimpered something about his injuries and he'd said he'd dust if she stopped and she'd called him a drama queen and he'd told her to bite her tongue—or better, his—and then they'd ended up on the stone floor, Spike whispering his love for her like it was a song or a poem with every slide of her flesh against his.

The days without him since her mother's death had been endless, bleaker, as though there was nothing left for her to do but wait for death. After all, the life she'd been fighting for wasn't one she particularly wanted to live. It was just the one she'd trapped herself inside.

"Buffy?"

Buffy jerked and shook her head, a bit startled to find herself still standing in the entryway. Even more startled to discover her cheeks were wet. She sniffed and met Willow's concerned gaze, then stumbled back, wiping away the tears that had fallen.

"Oh, Buffy, it's okay. It'll be okay." Willow gestured to Tara, her large eyes bright with worry. "We've been talking and there has to be a way to get this fixed. Buffy—*our* Buffy... I know she didn't mean for this to happen. She's just been a little overwhelmed. You know, with the returning from a hell dimension and all. And then whatever happened with Angel last night must've—"

Buffy held up a hand and thankfully the redhead stopped talking. She honestly didn't think she could stomach to hear how terrible their Buffy's life had been, or anything that might begin to resemble an excuse for what had happened. This glimpse of a life that might have been hers but wasn't, and the hard desperation to return to the one

that was. "You think you can fix it?" she asked instead. "Switch us back?"

Willow exchanged a glance with Tara, nodding with enthusiasm. "I mean, we did it before, didn't we? With Anya when it was, well, vampire me? We were able to open that door so this one? Should be easy peasy lemon-squeezy. I just need to find that spell—or a better one, less prone to accidental dimensional tourists. We'll get it done."

For the first time since leaving Spike's crypt, Buffy felt some of the tightness leave her shoulders. That was right. They *had* done this before—been here before. And if there was a way over, there had to be a way back. Her friends were nothing if not determined, and had certainly proven that there was little they'd let stand in their way when they were truly motivated. Even the laws of nature itself. Even death.

"Good," she said, edging another step back, a little weirded out when Willow just kept staring at her with open expectation. Maybe it was the novelty—meeting another version of her friend, but Buffy was a little tired of being treated like something to be studied. All she wanted to do was curl up in the room that *wasn't* her room and hope when she opened her eyes next, she'd find this had been just a really strange George Bailey-ish nightmare. "Just let me know when it's time to make with the magic. I think I'm—"

A tingle ran along her neck—familiar, comforting, *home*—and chased away her exhaustion. *Spike*. He was here. Outside. In the backyard, if the way her body seemed suddenly pulled toward the kitchen door could be trusted, and she knew it could. The world was different but she wasn't. All things Slayer seemed to be running just fine.

"You think you're what?"

She looked back at Willow, whose forehead was now all crinkled, and remembered that she'd been saying something before Spike had distracted her. She couldn't recall what that something had been, though, so she shrugged and started inching her way toward the hall.

"I'm gonna go get some air," Buffy said, turned and strode off without awaiting a response. Maybe it was rude to leave a conversation like that but she couldn't really say she cared. Not her world, not her people, not her problem. At least for now—she knew she would care again when she was running on something other than fumes.

But Spike... He might not be her Spike, but he was still Spike. And she owed him more than her time.

She wasn't prepared, though, for the hit her heart took the second their eyes met. He was standing in the backyard as she'd expected, hands in his duster pockets, every inch of his body stiff with tension she knew she had put there, his face a mask of confusion, anger, and heartbreak. It was everywhere—in his eyes, the furrow of his brow, the tightness of his jaw, the flare of his nostrils, the rigidity with which he held himself. And the urge to run to him, throw her arms around him, bury herself in his chest and let him take the world away hit her with such intensity that she found herself stumbling over her legs in an effort to close the distance between them before she remembered.

The pang that came with remembering was almost enough to knock her off balance.

"Hi," she said, teetering at the deck's top step.

He inclined his head, his expression not changing. "Evenin', Slayer."

Buffy rubbed her lips together to keep the lower one from wobbling too much. But there it went anyway, trembling with the effort of holding back the avalanche of things she needed to say to him. Now that he was here, now that they were looking at each other, she hadn't the faintest idea where to start. How she could begin to explain what had happened at the crypt earlier when she knew, or thought she did, what it had been for him.

Fortunately—or unfortunately—Spike took the lead before she could land on anything to say. "Angel, huh?"

It was more an accusation than a question. One she couldn't refute, much as she would like to. "Yeah," she said hoarsely. "Angel."

"And you're from another world."

"That's the working theory."

He nodded. "So what happened, pet? Decide that the human model didn't do it for you? Needed a bit of monster to scratch that itch of yours?"

Buffy inhaled sharply. It was similar to what he'd said earlier—that she was too extraordinary for ordinary—though the tone was cutting rather than loving, the words meant to wound and doing their job with

gusto. She deserved it, she knew she did, but it didn't make it hurt any less.

"I'm so sorry," she said, looking down. Deserved or not, the anger in his eyes was hard to bear, especially when she was so used to seeing love and warmth and all things *them*. "I thought I was out. That Willow had done a spell or something to take back everything."

"Yeah. Caught as much. What I don't get is why—"

"Because I'm in love with you."

It was his turn to inhale now, the sound piercing and pained. Another echo of earlier, the way his voice had cracked when she'd tried to say as much in the crypt. Buffy kept her gaze on the ground, the points of her shoes.

"It started before Mom died," she heard herself saying. "Angel and I... It's not been good. It was for a little bit, right at the beginning. After we were married and everything seemed like... It was good then. But then something happened—a spell switched my body with Faith. You know Faith?"

She did look up now, both needing and dreading to see how he'd react. Not that it made any difference—or any sense, really—but hungry to know if that name meant anything to him. If *Faith* meant anything to him. That he wasn't her Spike didn't matter just then.

He huffed. "Yeah. Heard of her after she pulled that routine here. Dressed up in your skin and spoke a piece to me. Told me a few things a fella's not likely to forget anytime soon."

"Is that all she did?" she blurted before she could help herself.

"Why, Slayer? Does it matter?"

"Yes."

He considered her for a moment, a long one, the wary hardness in his eyes beginning to melt. "You mean it, then," he said, softer. "You do... You love me."

God, this was unfair. It was all so unfair. The way he was looking at her, the wonder in his voice—the hope—was both familiar and not. While she'd loved him for months, that last fight with Glory had been the first time she'd said it.

They hadn't been seen and for the first time, she hadn't cared if they were. But the battle had raged around them, Angel knocked out

somewhere, Willow lobbing magic at whatever moved, driven with her need to fix the mess Glory had made of Tara's brain, Giles, Anya, and Xander doing whatever they could to push back the hellgod's forces. Buffy had stood at the base of the tower with Olaf's hammer in hand, Knowing Spike was with her, on her heels, that he would follow her until the world ended and probably beyond. Also knowing he couldn't. One of them had to survive.

She'd turned and kissed him, hard and passionate, and told him she loved him. But it hadn't been a surprise or much of a revelation. The look he'd given her had been overfull of warmth and love, and what she now knew had been the beginnings of grief, because he'd known too. Known that she wasn't coming back down—that that moment was all they'd ever have. Stolen in much the same way they'd stolen everything else.

Until the resurrection had proven them both wrong.

Regardless, what Buffy remembered about that moment was how bright Spike's eyes had been. How the words touched him, filled him, but also told him nothing he hadn't already known. Even if she hadn't been able to tell him before she'd made the dash to rescue Dawn, Spike would have walked away from the fight secure that Buffy had died loving him.

There was none of that security in this Spike's face, in his voice. Love, for him, was more an impossible dream. Something fantastical—more fantastical than anything else in their world. And all that did was drive home just how much damage she'd done that afternoon. How much she'd hurt him without meaning to, without even trying, all because she'd been stupid enough to believe.

"We became close," she said, heat rising to her cheeks. "After the thing with Faith. We started patrolling together and...talking. Then we were friends and there were feelings. Things with Angel kinda fell apart. The rose became less bloomy and we started fighting more. All the time, actually, about pretty much everything. I won't bore you with the details." Though she suspected she could. She could stand here and tell him all about her sad life as Mrs. Buffy O'Connor—the last name Angel had given himself when Willow had gotten around to getting him some actual paperwork—and Spike would listen. Maybe under-

stand. *Probably* understand, in fact, but she didn't think she could stand to go over everything, experience each personal failure afresh. The details of her marriage weren't important anyway.

Spike stared at the ground for a long beat, his eyes remaining in motion as though he were searching for something in her words. At last, he said, "Never pegged you for the type of woman who'd—"

"I know."

"You know?"

"You've told me that before."

"And today?"

She forced herself to swallow, blinking back the tears stinging her eyes. "I was at the Magic Box looking for the paw and suddenly it was there and everything was...back." She'd already gone through this—the intricacies of her world, being legally dead, the inheritance, all of it. Spike had been there for some of the talk, the stuff she'd been comfortable discussing as it hadn't gotten into issues like the sort of person she was. At any rate, even the thought of repeating all of that exhausted her, so she decided to skip it. That wasn't what Spike was asking, anyway. "I should've realized immediately what had happened, but I didn't. I just...thought it was magic. Regular old Willow magic. That she went back in time and made it so that Angel decided to stay a vampire but there was a mistake or something and I was the only one who remembered. When I came to see you, I was terrified. I thought if Angel and I hadn't been married, then maybe you and I wouldn't have happened. That I would have lost you."

Spike huffed out something that might have been a laugh but wasn't. "Sodding Angel has nothing to do with the way I—"

"I know," she said again.

"You do, do you?"

Buffy nodded and fixed her gaze on the ground once more. "Dru left you because you were in love with me. That's what you told me, anyway, after you said it the first time. But I didn't know if you would've stuck around or things would just be too different. You could've been with someone else for all I know. And I couldn't stand that. Everything that sucks in my life gets fixed but I lose the one thing that makes it good?"

She glanced up again but only long enough to see that he was looking at her with such wonder that she couldn't hold his gaze. Couldn't stand to see him regarding her like that—like she was someone else. Or maybe wishing she were, wishing she'd never said anything to begin with. Maybe ignorance was bliss.

Finally, he released a deep, shuddering breath. "Bloody hell."

She nodded again, sat on the steps for want of something to do—something to keep her busy—and clasped her hands around her knees. Then waited as Spike moved forward too, as she'd known he would. He claimed the space beside her, invading her senses with all things him. Confusing her already-confused brain, which urged her to sidle up to him, lean her head on his shoulder and let him take the world away. It happened often around him, granted, in those times when they were playing the part of forced allies around the others, and especially when Angel was in the mix. Buffy would find herself instinctively looking to Spike, reaching for him, wanting to respond with flirty sass whenever he made one of his cutting observations or said something even mildly suggestive.

"When I saw you, saw the way you were looking at me, I was just so...relieved." And stupid. She shifted so she was sitting on her hands. Maybe that would kill the urge to reach for him. "I'm sorry for that."

He made another one of those sounds that wasn't a laugh but wanted to be—or wanted her to think it was. But she knew him too well to be fooled.

"Yeah. That was torture, that was."

"Spike."

"Mean it, pet. Not sure there's anythin' worse than the woman you love showin' up at your place, suddenly hungry to suck you off." Spike sputtered again, dropping his head into his hands. "It's on me, right? Was too bloody thick to stop and ask what had changed. Didn't much care so long as you were with me."

"But it did matter. You *did* ask."

He snorted. "Yeah. After I'd already had you. Gotten to feel you around me. Had your blood..." He paused and looked up as though he'd only realized what he meant after the words were out. "Bloody hell, Slayer, you let me bite you."

Buffy reached up on instinct, fingering the healing fang mark through her clothes. Felt the thrill that shot through her body at the contact, lighting her up from the inside. "Yeah," she muttered. "After... after Heaven, I started asking for that. We'd talked about it before but...me being with Angel, there were things he'd notice."

Not that there had been a lot of opportunity for him to notice. Honestly, she couldn't recall the last time they'd had sex. Well before the tower. Maybe right after her mom died, when she'd made her last real effort to save her marriage. But the second Spike had told her he loved her had been the end of anything with Angel. As it was, the few times she'd performed her wifely duties after she and Spike had started having sex had been fueled by guilt—guilt that would compile because she'd known that Spike would know. Would be able to smell it on her, if not see it in her eyes. And that had been worse. Knowing that she was hurting Spike by being with her husband even if he'd never said anything.

"You were in Heaven then?" Spike asked, drawing her back to the present. "Like she was?"

"Yeah."

"Your mates know?"

"No. I just...couldn't do that to them." That had been the line at the time, at least. In the weeks since, juggling the lie along with trying to find Dawn had become almost intolerable. The only reason she hadn't come clean was how much easier it was to keep up the lie. She felt too deep into it now and had no energy reserved for handling their reaction to the truth. "And your Buffy told you?"

"Yeah. Just me, far as I know."

"And you two aren't..."

Spike turned his head toward her at last, a flat grin stretching his face, like he couldn't believe she was actually asking when it was so obvious.

"Why'd she tell you?"

"Dunno. Have to ask her, I'd wager." He released a slow breath. "Thought it might be because she knew she could. No one for me to tell. Knows I'm lost for her so I'll keep all her secrets anyway."

Buffy nodded once more, not sure she followed. Or maybe she did.

After all, wasn't that the way it had started for her? First with little things she needed off her chest—things she knew Spike would never mention, and would stake him for if he did—then with the bigger things. Everything she wasn't telling the others or felt like she couldn't. Maybe this world's Buffy had been lagging just a bit but would catch up in the end. Buffy was surprised to find herself hoping that was the case—that whatever her counterpart had wished had been a mad last-ditch effort at salvaging the unsalvageable only to open her eyes to what had been obvious. And if that *wasn't* the case, if the other Buffy wasn't all that smart, she hoped that Spike would move on. Find someone to make him happy.

Though she had to admit the thought of him with someone else—anyone else—made her slightly sick. Even in circumstances like these. God, that was a little twisted.

"She wished for Angel," Spike muttered, his low voice startling her back out of her head. Instantly making her wish she could get lost again once the words hit home, once she realized he was trembling, though with grief or fury, she didn't know. Either seemed possible. "Knew she lit outta town in a hurry to see him last night, like she couldn't bloody wait. Was hopin' whatever... She knows I love her. Made a big bloody spectacle of it last year. Bugged up a lot."

"I heard," she replied softly. Then, with a grin, "The robot?"

But Spike didn't grin. Just closed his eyes and shook his head as though thinking of the thing hurt him. "She's been different since she got back. With me. Lookin' at me like... Not like you, but like it could be somethin'. Told her I knew she'd never love me, but there's the rub, I suppose. She can love me after all. And she still wants him."

"Spike—"

"Stuck around long enough to get the highlights, Slayer. Know how things shook out for you. If she wished it, then she must've wished for him."

Yeah, there really was no getting around that. The other changes, she didn't know. Though the thought was there that money might have had something to do with it. Giles being gone and Buffy being flush with cash was a pretty big difference to miss. It was just hard ascribing these huge, life-changing events and devastating losses to something as

seemingly insignificant as a wish. To think that but for a few words the other Buffy had chosen, Giles might have taken another flight. He might have arrived safe and sound, the fate of UA Flight 31 an unfortunate headline in the news and nothing more.

As for Dawn... Well, the jury was still out there. Maybe the wish had been for Dawn to be with someone stable, who could provide. Her father was at least one of those things.

"If it makes any difference," Buffy said, "she's really, really not gonna like what she finds with Angel."

He didn't reply at first, and she didn't think there was much else to say. Nothing that wouldn't hurt were she to give it voice. That she loved him, that her mind was overflowing with all the things she hadn't told him—the choices she hadn't been brave enough to make. The conversation she knew she owed Angel and herself, and perhaps Spike most of all. So she could finally give him the pieces of herself she'd set aside, bring him into every part of her life and not just shoved into a box she kept beside her bed.

She wanted to be with him the way Xander was with Anya, Willow with Tara. She wanted to be able to dance with him at the Bronze and steal kisses at Scooby meetings and openly flirt with their own secret language. She wanted all of that—god, she wanted it so much. But there had always been a reason to keep things the way they were, and that reason, no matter what she called it—Mom, Glory, Dawn—came down to what she saw when she looked in the mirror.

It didn't escape her that Spike—her Spike and the one sitting next to her—hadn't yet asked why she hadn't just left Angel, like a rational person might. But maybe he didn't need to. Maybe he knew, as her Spike knew, how much she bore the weight of her mistakes. Or maybe he'd heard her describing the circumstances by which Angel had become human and pieced the rest together. Or maybe it didn't matter. Maybe whatever she gave him was enough.

But there was so much more she wanted. And now, stuck worlds away from him, even with the most powerful witches she'd ever encountered working on a solution, she had to admit she was terrified she might have lost her chance for good.

"Am I a complete bastard for hoping so?"

She started when he spoke, her heart leaping into her throat, her mind spinning. “What?”

Spike—the Spike who was not hers but was—grinned a little and nudged her with his shoulder. “She sees what it looks like, you and Angel livin’ the sodding dream. Realizes what’s in front of her. Makes her wanna come home to find me.”

It took a moment but Buffy’s brain caught up, remind her what she’d said last, even as images of what life might look like if she never got home lingering in the corners of her mind. “No, you’re not,” she whispered. “At least not for that reason.”

He gave her a low chuckle, and looked at her with such warmth and longing that she could hardly breathe for how much it hurt. How strange to be home yet also farther than she’d ever been from it.

She closed her eyes again, let out a deep breath, and succumbed to the urge to drop her head against his shoulder. Feeling it when he tensed and knowing immediately she should straighten and reestablish boundaries, yet he felt so good—so familiar—and she missed him so much. Missed a man who was right here with her.

It wasn’t fair. None of this was.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I know I shouldn’t.”

He hesitated, then brushed his lips across her brow. “Bugger shouldn’t. I’ll give you whatever you need, love. You know that.”

Yeah, she did.

And that was part of the problem.

NOW I'M HAUNTED BY THE LEFT UNSAID

Dear Benedick,

Do you remember the first time I wrote to you? I probably stared at the paper for a half hour before I knew how to start. Writing letters was not a Buffy trait and I'm still not sure how you managed to make it one. But there were a lot of things that weren't Buffy things that changed because of you, so maybe just chalk it up to the whole Spike experience.

Yeah, I'm using your name. Seems no point not to. Everyone here knows everything. We're finally out, you and me. The past few days, while we've been looking for ways to get me back, I've kind of spilled the beans about everything. Is it strange that I'm surprised at how they're taking it? Xander has finally stopped making comments that make me want to thump him over the head. I honestly had forgotten the way he can be. I mean, sure, you guys aren't bestest buds or anything but our Xander at least respects that you're one of us. I guess I thought maybe his being with Anya would loosen him up a little on the whole demon thing, but silly me for thinking anything could be that simple.

The differences here are like that. Small but big. Here's a for instance: Faith didn't sleep with Angel over here. She didn't keep it in her pants or anything but Angel wasn't part of the picture, just a different boyfriend of Buffy. I'm sure you remember Riley Finn. Well, I dated him. Or this Buffy dated him. And Faith decided to get busy with him when she was walking around in a Buffy suit. Not

fun times but no major heartbreak. I guess it's easier to forgive a guy you've been with for a few weeks than it is the guy you thought was your soul mate. Yes, I can practically hear you rolling your eyes, so go ahead and get it out of your system. Hardy har har.

Faith followed the script where you're concerned, too. I guess it just didn't wig you out as much over here because the guy I was with was on the new side and also not Angel. The Spike over here tells me that he never said a word about it to his Buffy. So they never talked about it. This huge, us-defining thing that happened to me didn't happen. It's so strange to think that. Take one situation and change it up just slightly and you and I don't start patrolling together. We're not us.



THE SMALL DIFFERENCES WERE THE THINGS SHE CLUNG TO. THE small differences being those that made *all* the difference, that made it impossible to forget she wasn't where she belonged. Though they weren't always obvious—sometimes she had to really look. This was especially true when it came to Spike, as the others had a tendency to regard her with a hard-to-define but still ever-present otherness that boldly reinforced she was the outsider. Spike didn't. He was always there with that reassuring smile, his eyes bright with things unsaid. He didn't scoff whenever she showed up at his crypt—which was more than she knew she should, but still the only place she felt she could breathe. He also didn't ask anything of her, even if she could feel his nervous energy. And she could. The past year had been highly educational in the art of reading Spike, particularly when he didn't want to be read.

But it wasn't like it was with her Spike. Every time she found this Spike looking at her, he'd tear himself away as though he'd been caught doing something he shouldn't. The same would happen if they fell into conversation that turned flirty, which all of them seemed to do. Second nature for her—second nature for him too, though he wasn't used to sparring with a Buffy who sparred back rather than called him names or swung for his nose.

It was dangerous, spending so much time with him. She knew that.

But the crypt was also home. Even if it wasn't.

"I still can't get over how different this place looks," she said as she stepped into the crypt that night. Spike had been waiting for her, standing near the door, his smile just a little too bright, his eyes just a little too eager. She tried her best to make like she didn't notice the way he looked at her but figured, like him, she failed miserably.

"How's it look where you're from, pet?" He asked this on his way to the fridge, all of him taut with the sort of energy he got whenever he had something he was excited to show her. Reminding her forcibly of the way he'd acted the first time he'd revealed the shelf of Buffy-themed snacks he'd stashed in the alcove that had become the kitchen.

"Grab yourself some nosh while you're here," he said, waving at an unopened box of Triscuits. "Otherwise the whole bloody cemetery's gonna hear you comin'."

"Hub?"

"Your stomach, pet. Makin' all sorts of rumblies. Doesn't bother me a bit, but if you aim to take out any vamps tonight—"

She crossed her arms and he stopped talking, giving her the sort of telling look that let her know, in no uncertain terms, exactly what he was up to. And here he thought he was all with the stealth. "Are you trying to feed me?"

Spike stared at her, his mouth open. "Am I what?"

"I told you I don't need help." And she had. They'd had this whole talk not that long ago that had included, among other things, Spike offering to pitch in since Angel had just lost his job and her being mortified at the thought. Mortified and touched and she might have realized she loved him that night, but that didn't make his offer any easier to accept. Worse, in fact, considering she'd also resolved to stay away from him. A married woman should not hang out with a man she knew she loved if he was not her husband.

Yet here she was.

"Bloody hell, Slayer, don't get your knickers in a twist. Have some to spare and thought I'd offer, is all."

"It's a brand new box."

"And?"

"And you haven't used any of it at all?"

"What the hell do you think 'to spare' means here?" He was getting upset—this clearly wasn't going the way he thought it would—and he didn't know how to handle it. In the end, he rolled his eyes and shook his head, stomping his way

toward the latch that led to the lower level of the crypt. "Do you want you want. Got to grab the tabby and we'll be on our way."

Funny thing about that tabby—it had eluded him until after Buffy had packed away the entire damn box. She hadn't meant to. Had only intended to sneak a cracker or two, and as far as healthy dinners went, it wasn't. But her aching stomach hadn't let her off the hook and after waiting what felt like a long time, she'd cracked and given in.

Spike had been in a nearly insufferable good mood the rest of the night.

"Much less like a crypt," she replied now, watching as he pulled a bottle of water from the fridge. A bottle of water that had absolutely no business being in that fridge but was anyway—for her. He'd had that in there for her. It was enough to make warning bells start sounding in her head. Warning bells that had been dingling and donging every now and then for the past couple of days but she'd been able to ignore.

"Oh?"

She nodded, tearing her gaze from his. The knowledge that he could hear her heart pounding just made it pound harder, thumping at a pace that damn near hurt. "I'm not a fan of the green," she said, waving a hand at his furniture. "The couches back home are comfier. There are rugs and lamps and things hanging on the walls. Stuff from the gallery that Mom liked and Angel didn't, so we got rid of it when we moved into the house. Well, some. I guess he got rid of more after I died."

"What a sodding prince."

Buffy snorted but opted not to take the bait. It was bad enough she vented as much to Spike as she did, given that it accomplished nothing other than pissing him off on her behalf. Then making him feel powerless as there was nothing he could do about it. Couldn't demand that Angel treat her right, couldn't say he'd make it better, couldn't *make* it better without it attracting attention. He was stuck in limbo waiting for her to say *go*. Say anything. Doing that again to another Spike was just cruel.

Almost as cruel as being here.

"There's also a bigger kitchen area," she said instead, gesturing at

the alcove. "Or I guess *fuller* is the right word. Same size, just more stuff in it. You have a shelf packed high with Buffy food and a couple of tables. A microwave, a toaster, and some dishes. A tub to wash them in."

"Sounds downright domestic."

"It is." All added piece by piece, like the rest of the place. Spike doing what he could to make it clear that this was her home as much as his. "There's more stuff downstairs. We keep a lot of my stuff here, actually. And the whole bathroom set up."

Spike blinked, tilting his head. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. It's down the tunnel just a bit. You had Xander put it in. I think you threatened to show up at his place to shower and hinted that Anya might catch a look at you and just not be able to help herself."

He grinned widely and rubbed at his jaw. "That's bloody brilliant."

"Much better than knocking a pipe loose every time you want to wash up," Buffy agreed. "There's tile and a sliding door and a sink and a little place for a toilet too." At his look, she felt her cheeks go hot and forced herself to tear her eyes away. The wise thing to do would be to stop talking, but her mouth rarely obeyed her and wasn't about to start now. "You did it for me. So the nights I stay over... We get more time in the morning. Before I have to go."

The second the words were out, she knew she had said too much. Painted too clear a picture in his head, one of them tangled in bed together, hands exploring, lips wandering, stealing moments as they had stolen everything else. And having lived it, she couldn't think of a damn thing to say because that picture was right. The times she got to wake up next to him weren't often, but they always went the same way. Spike pressing kisses along the back of her neck, half-asleep in many instances but still somehow sensing the second she began to stir from her dreams. Then he'd rock his hips so she could feel him, hard and desperate for her, before he'd hike one of her legs up and around him, rumble a good morning into her ear, then push into her for the best wakeup call a girl could ask for.

She saw all that and so did he. Spike's eyes were dark, the look on his face nothing short of famished. She didn't think she'd ever been so aware of the way air felt against her skin, like a silky, electric caress.

One that had her nipples hardening and her pulse quickening, her legs shaking with the effort it took to keep from pressing her thighs together.

"I should go," she said, her voice thicker than she'd intended.

Spike started forward, water bottle still in hand. For her. All for her. Just like it was back home. And he was looking at her like that. With those eyes she knew so well, full of yearning and promise and even better, possibility. Nothing keeping them apart here—no husband who would miss her. No need to hide from her friends. Just them.

It didn't matter, did it? Not really? He was Spike, after all, and Spike was the man she loved. He knew that, too. The knowledge that she loved him burned bright in his face every time they were together. He hadn't come out and said anything, though. Hadn't so much as tried to steal a kiss, even though his eyes frequently dropped to her lips. And somehow, they'd managed to avoid talking about what had happened the first day—she'd expected him to press her for more, as starved for her as he seemed, but he hadn't. It was just there, an undercurrent every time she sought him out. A question hanging in the air, unspoken but unavoidable all the same—would this be the time she gave in?

No. He was Spike but it *did* matter. Just as it mattered that she find her sister—*her* sister. There was one here in this world, one she could see and touch and easily call her own, but that didn't erase the need to track down Dawn and get her home. One wasn't as good as the other. For her, it never had been. Not now, and not when she'd been little, either, as she'd learned the hard way.

It had been a rare family vacation, either right before or right after Dawn had been born. At the time, Buffy had been particularly attached to a raincoat-wearing teddy bear she'd named Fizbee. Wherever she went so went Fizbee—to preschool, on playdates, to the doctor's office, and definitely on that trip, since sleeping without him had proven impossible. To this day, she didn't know how it was that she hadn't noticed Fizbee wasn't with her until the hotel was at least fifty miles behind them, but somehow she'd done the unthinkable and abandoned her favorite stuffed animal. And no amount of begging, crying, or screaming had persuaded her father to turn the car around.

Her father had, however, offered to buy her a new Fizbee. It hadn't been an empty offer, either, as toy aisles everywhere they went were teeming with Fizbee clones. Same tawny fur, same yellow raincoat, same obsidian eyes, same umbrella sewn to its left paw. On a logical level, Buffy had known that the Fizbees in the stores and the Fizbee she'd last seen cuddled up beside her were completely identical. She'd also known that, despite the little kid magic with which all stuffed animals were imbued, there was no consciousness behind those obsidian eyes. That the Fizbee she'd left behind wasn't sitting around waiting for her to come get him. That she could take any of these bears that looked like him and pretend that there had been no mishap—rewrite the ending to what had been a good vacation.

But Buffy's imagination hadn't stood a chance against reality. Fizbee was gone and couldn't be replaced. The one she'd loved, the one with whom she'd shared her naps, the one who had kept her safe during thunderstorms and from the monster in the closet—that one was gone. And it would have been wrong to pretend that it hadn't mattered. Inanimate as he'd been, he also *hadn't* been for the way she had looked at him. What he had meant to her. And she'd taken that knowledge with her when Mr. Gordo had come into her life, guarding him with all the ferocity experience had taught her was necessary.

A copy of Dawn was not Dawn. A copy of Giles was not Giles. And a copy of Spike could never be her Spike.

No matter how much she wished he could.

"I should go," Buffy said again, though her voice was different. Firmer, more decisive, and Spike heard it too. She saw that he did in the way his eyes dimmed. "I'll...see you, Spike."

He nodded, tried for a smile though it looked more like a wince. "See you, love," he replied.

She forced herself back out of the crypt before her mind could form a counterargument, knowing it would anyway, but also knowing it would be wrong. She couldn't, *wouldn't* betray Spike. She also couldn't use him. Not the one who was hers or the one who wasn't.

She'd already made too many mistakes where he was concerned.



That we're not "us" here makes me feel bad for her. And I don't want to feel bad for her, Spike. None of this is fair. She's the one without the stupid marriage. She's the one who still has Giles. She's the one who hasn't been going through the shop trying to find a way to get Dawn back. She has you, too. She has a version of you who loves her the way you love me. She has all of this and she still wanted more.

I'm not saying I don't understand her problems. The money situation is of the dire and you know I get that. There's not even the thought of someone else to try to make it better, though Angel never did much to do that. Then there's the whole Angel thing, which is a thing. Apparently, the night before this switcheroo took place, she went to go see him and I'm sure it was all with the drama and the star-crossed crap.

What really bothers me about this is how easily it could have been me. That I might be here two years later, still wallowing over a relationship that was never going to work. And that would mean so many things, including all things us. From what this Spike and Dawn tell me, their Buffy got out of her grave all by herself. She even almost did another swan dive before Dawn found her. It was Dawn here, not you. You were there and tried to help her but the others burst in before you could do too much, and of course they made sure you skedaddled. So she was alone through those first few awful nights. When the demon attacked and when the nightmares came. She told this Spike about Heaven (I'm not sure she meant to? I really don't get this) but not her friends. OK so that's the same as us but everything else? And then seeing Angel on top of all that and still think he's the guy?

Like I said, I feel bad for her. And I don't want to because she's stupid. She had everything but everything wasn't enough.

Though I am willing to concede I might be projecting a little.



"WHAT DO YOU MEAN, it might not be her fault?" Buffy felt herself tense, both needing and not wanting him to answer. The anger she harbored toward this world's Buffy was one of the only things that she had to hold on to, everything else playing the role of a moving target. Staring at the bills that had piled on for one—the plumbing issue that had eaten into whatever money had still been there following a parade

of leftover medical bills and more. Hearing all about this clandestine trip to meet the great love of her life that she had dropped everything to make happen. Angel says jump, Buffy starts jumping, and if she doesn't jump high enough, she'll continue to jump until she does. Won't even ask. Just over and over again until she gets it right.

The paw needed to be her fault. She *needed* this world's Buffy to have done something that *she* never would. And Buffy was certain that using the paw was that thing. Even without knowing the short story—even if she hadn't had Spike there to read it to her or tell her repeatedly how bad an idea using it would be—the paw was so obviously dark magic. Scary, life-changing magic, and hadn't she just gotten a lesson in how much damage that magic could do?

"I mean the way the paw works," Giles said, moving about the Magic Box as he talked, completely unaware he was tearing apart the comfortable story she'd crafted for herself. The last of her denial that she could have been this world's Buffy if the circumstances had been just right. "It wants to be used—that is its purpose, how it gains its power. It forges a connection between itself and whoever touches it and does not relent until the victim has given it what it wants."

Buffy scowled, but turned away before Giles could see it. She hadn't shared her frustration with this world's Buffy with him—or anyone, for that matter. Not even Spike, which felt something beyond unnatural. He was, after all, the person she told everything. Except not here. Everything was different here. And her frustration wasn't productive, no matter how righteous it felt.

"You make it sound like a virus or something," she said instead, keeping her gaze on the book she was trying to read. One of Giles's many texts on the powers of the monkey's paw, which said some variation of the same thing she'd read in the previous book and the book before that and the book before that. Nothing new. Very little useful. Nothing that would get her home anytime soon. "Like it's not a choice she made."

Giles paused by the bookshelf, his finger on yet another tome that would yield no answers. "Not quite a virus," he replied. "The wishes she made are the product of her own choices. And yes, there are people who have sought the paw precisely because of its power, either

not believing in the price it demands or assuming the negative consequences cannot outstrip the rewards. But I have to believe that someone told her what it was and that it grants wishes. That it ensnared her before she understood its *exact* nature, and it convinced her to give in.”

Someone, in this instance, being Anya, though he was careful not to come right out and say it. That had been another point of contention over the past couple of days—how Buffy had found the paw and known to use it. The options were pretty limited, in that only Giles and Anya had known about the paw’s existence outside of the man who had sold and shipped it to him. Granted, the law firm in Los Angeles definitely wanted the paw and knew Giles had it. Giles seemed to be holding onto the hope that Wolfram and Hart had reached out to Buffy, perhaps cut her some deal without spilling the details regarding the paw’s powers. That was better than it being Anya’s fault. Anya, who of course had denied everything and resented the implication that she might be to blame.

Trouble was, contacting Wolfram and Hart to find out put them in a lose-lose situation, no matter how they sliced it.

“We’ll know when we work this out,” Giles said, though it seemed he was speaking more to himself. Reassuring himself with another empty platitude. At least Buffy thought it was empty—his confidence in their ability to send her home seemed less each day that passed, each roadblock they encountered. And it wasn’t just him. Turned out, Willow’s belief in her ability to switch them back had been severely misplaced. This situation wasn’t the same as what had happened with Anya back during senior year—there wasn’t an anchor as there had been then. A thing that was unique to her world and not this one.

“There’s an engagement ring,” Buffy had said. “A whole wedding set. A band, mine and Angel’s. Wouldn’t that work? There’s definitely not that here.”

Willow had given her a look she knew far too well, one of self-recrimination and apology. “Those rings *do* exist, though,” she’d said. “They might not be yours but they exist over here. Someone bought them and they’re not unique. Not like Anya’s amulet was.”

“But your Buffy—”

"I know, I know! I looked. I'm still looking. But everything I've found about traveling between worlds, opening the kind of door we need opened—there has to be something specific. It's not exactly like it was with Anya. Close but no cigar." Her face had fallen, and Buffy had had to swallow the urge to meet it with her fist. As though Willow had any right to be disappointed—as though it was *her* life that had been up-ended and stolen. As though her inability to work this magic was just a personal disappointment—as though it wasn't devastating.

There had been more explanations. Things Willow had said that Buffy didn't understand. All about Anya's wish-magic and how it differed from the paw's wish-magic, but in the end, she hadn't needed to understand the *why* to get the *what*. It all boiled down to the same. Getting home wouldn't be easy. It might even be impossible.

Though Buffy refused to let herself think that. She couldn't.

There were always ways. This would be no different.



You never met Wesley, I don't think. You wouldn't have thought much of him. He is, I admit, the way I first pictured you when you told me the truth about your "Big Bad" past. Annoying, dweeby, glasses-wearing. These things sound familiar? Don't worry, I know now that the similarities were superficial. Wesley was never kind or considerate. Thinking of you as William makes me love you more (and I can say that because you're not here to roll your eyes at me). Thinking of Wesley only ever made me want to punch him. He was the worst kind of nerd. The superior kind.

Anyway, he's working with Angel in LA, and he might be who gets me home. It's on him and Giles now. They're almost always on the phone, and Giles has talked about driving there to meet in person, which will put me on Angel's radar, but I've honestly stopped caring. If he wants to know the truth, he can. Make him just as miserable as the rest of us.

I thought I would be home by now. I thought it would be easy. It's us, right? It should be easy. Willow and Tara should have solved this in like five seconds. But they told me that there are too many worlds, and since none are missing a Buffy, it's a crapshoot which one is mine.

I'm trying, Spike. I'm really, really trying not to give up hope here. But I've

started thinking things I don't want to think. Like the bills that are due and how I should get a job so I can pay them. Upcoming visits from social services and what I'll need to do to make sure they don't even think about taking Dawn away. I'm thinking in the long-term and it's getting harder to see myself anywhere but here.

It's getting harder to believe that I'll see you again.



SOMETIMES SPIKE HAD JUST KNOWN. He'd look at her, read her in a blink, then steer her toward the corner of the cemetery most likely to be overfull with vampires that night. They'd fall into motion together, effortless and fluid, and she'd pummel out whatever had happened at home, with Dawn, whatever miserable thing was going on with her mother, and for a brief moment all would be better.

It wasn't working tonight and she didn't know why. No matter how many times she smashed her fist into the vampire's face, punctuating the night air with hard, rhythmic *thwacks*, no matter the strain in her arm, her muscles begging for a break, she couldn't beat back the dread in her belly. The cold, unforgiving certainty waiting for her in a bed that felt wrong, situated in a room she hadn't called hers since tearfully agreeing to marry her former-vampire boyfriend. Knowing it was no good, no matter what new thing Giles wanted to try, she'd done this too many times. Gotten her hopes up only to have them crash down again, and she couldn't fool herself anymore.

Buffy had this fleeting memory of Faith going to town on some low-level flunky, desperate to outrun her past, or perhaps beat it into submission. She hadn't understood it then—she'd thought she had, thought she got loss on some level that made her an authority, above it all. Above the need to vent her frustration and fear and pain through her fists.

God, what a prissy little know-it-all she'd been. No wonder Faith had gone evil.

By the time Buffy decided to let the stake do its thing, the vampire's face was on its way to becoming a heretofore undiscovered Picasso masterpiece, and looking at it made everything worse. She

swallowed the sob that wanted out, weighed down by shame as well as despair. That was the other side of letting go, swinging without thinking, allowing those she hunted to become her punching bags—seeing the results. Most vampires had death coming for them but few deserved to be nearly pummeled to dust before the stake did the rest.

The thought didn't have time to settle, though, before another telling tingle ran down her neck. She didn't give herself time to analyze it, either, too glad for the distraction that was another enemy—one she could perhaps not beat quite as thoroughly as she had the last. Prove that she was the Slayer but not without mercy. Not an out-and-out full monster. Buffy whirled around, drawing back her arm—the wood of the stake biting into her skin—but that was as far as she got.

Spike backed up a step, his hands up. He didn't say anything. He didn't need to. He'd seen the whole thing. Every part of it.

And that was all it took. Buffy looking at him, him looking back, questions and concern and more flooding those eyes that she knew so well. Eyes she'd lost herself inside more times than she could count, that had grounded her on the days when she'd felt most detached from the world and everyone in it. The thing she'd come out here to run from, to defeat over and over again no matter how hard or often it came at her, caught her in its trap and tackled her to the ground.

Once she said it, it would be real. Everything would be real.

She hated it but she couldn't escape it. All she could do was fall forward and hope the fall didn't kill her. Or perhaps hope that it did.

"It's over." The words tore from her lips before she'd decided to let them go, the truth and all its ugliness wrenched out of her. "It's over and I'm stuck here. There is no way back."

Then she couldn't stand to look at him so she whirled around, presented him with her back. Spike who wasn't Spike in this place that wasn't her world—this world that she wanted so much but not at the expense of the people she loved. Wishing she could be the sort of person who didn't care, who could roll with the punches and accept things that were freely given, such as watchers who weren't dead or sisters who weren't missing or vampires who loved her and could be hers if she wanted. She wished that the past didn't matter, that people could be interchangeable. That she could cuddle up with a new Fizbee

and believe, truly, that there had never been any separation or loss. No replacements necessary because she was where she was meant to be and had been all along.

She heard him breathe—*why* did he have to breathe?—and step forward. Felt him the way she always did, the magnetic pull of her body toward his. The need to sink into his arms and let him do whatever Spike magic he did to chase the day away. Make it better, if only for a little while. Make *her* better. Make her believe.

“You’re sure?” he asked, his voice a low rumble.

Buffy sniffed and nodded, focusing on a cracked headstone. “Giles called from the road. He’ll be in soon and he’s coming straight to the house. He’s coming to tell me that it’s hopeless. I’m never getting home.”

“He said that?”

“He didn’t need to. I heard it.”

“So you don’t know—”

“I know. I *know*, Spike.” God, even saying his name hurt. “Wesley didn’t have anything. They can’t destroy the paw, either. He keeps trying and... It’s just done.”

He didn’t reply and she was glad. She didn’t think she had it in her to keep arguing. She could barely stand to look at him. All the pain he’d feel on her behalf, the love he had for a Buffy who wasn’t her but was—she knew this because he was Spike without being her Spike. It was him just as much as it was her, shaped by circumstance and a past they didn’t share. Close but no cigar.

He didn’t stop her when she started away from him. She didn’t know whether or not she wished he would.

It would be so much easier if he would just make the decision for her. Take it out of her hands. Try to kiss her, seize the love she had for him and make it his own.

But he knew he wasn’t the one she wanted just as well as she did. No matter what she told herself, no matter how much it sucked.



And I'll tell you the hardest thing. It's not seeing Giles or Dawn. Giles knew

how much he meant to me when he died. I know that. And I also know that Dawn will be OK. I know you'll find a way to get to her because you're you. You never, ever give up. Maybe Willow and Tara can help. Maybe even Angel can help. The Buffy who made the wishes, I hope she helps. If she's me then she will, right? She has to want her sister here, she has to know that Dad isn't the person who can take care of her.

I've been so angry with her. It's easy to be angry with the person who screwed everything up. But I think I'm done being angry with her, because I realized that the person I'm really angry with is myself (like, me me, not alternate universe me. I'm sure Freud would have all kinds of thoughts about this situation. Kind of makes me wish my Psych teacher wasn't a raving lunatic). The Buffy who made the wishes, I've decided I want her to be like me. For you, for Dawn. If you're stuck with that Buffy, let her be a good Buffy and everything that happened a big case of magic gone wrong. The more time I spend with this Spike the more I think she might've been on the same road I was. Just a little delayed. She didn't have a marriage to run away from, but she did have you. Or this world's version of you. Maybe it wouldn't have been the same, but maybe it would. Who knows?

The hardest thing (I know I got on a tangent there, but this is important) is knowing I might never get to do us right. I have been so afraid of myself and the others, wondering what they'd think about me if I left Angel or if they found out about us. I've been afraid of telling Angel that I don't love him and I want out. I've never broken up with anyone. Breaking up with Angel? After everything we went through and how much I wanted it and how much I tried, the thought just scared me, Spike. Not because I want to stay married to him. I don't. I just didn't want to fail. You know how much I hate failing. And there was always a reason to put it off, you know? Mom. Glory. Being dead. You'd really think I might've gotten away with it that time but I think Angel's as stubborn as I am sometimes. I could've told him to leave when he came back but I didn't. It was easier to put it off some more. Wait until we got Dawn home. But I think I might have just kept waiting. Kept pushing it back. Finding new excuses. And I know you would've let me and that is unfair.

The hardest thing is that. I hate thinking that I might never see you again and I left it the way I did. I hate thinking that you don't know just how much I love you because I was a coward. Buffy's supposed to be brave, right? With us, I wasn't brave.

I hate that, Spike.

Almost as much as I love you.



“TRY IT.”

“Not enough you have a hell of a right hook, you gotta torture blokes with migraines on top of it? The other me sure likes it rough.”

Buffy rolled her eyes, fought the urge to groan. Not that it would be a sexy sound, but she was sensitive to saying or doing anything even vaguely suggestive around Spike. Old habits were a bitch to break, especially when she didn’t want them broken. Despite every setback that had befallen her this week, she was determined to hold onto hope. It was all she had left. And hey, Rome hadn’t been built in a day.

That was what she told herself, at least. Particularly at night when she felt his absence the hardest.

Giles had one more potential Hail Mary pass, one he’d been hesitant to rely upon but felt all other possibilities had been exhausted. It was the mage guy who had performed the light show that convinced Faith that Angel’s soul had taken a permanent siesta. Said mage had told Giles not to contact him again, that the balance between them was restored and the debt had been paid, and he wasn’t the sort of magical guy to cross. However, if there was someone around capable of tapping into the deep magicks needed to follow the residual signature of the wishes, mage guy was their guy. If he would cooperate.

And he had to. He *had* to. It had only been a few days, sure, but Buffy couldn’t do this anymore. Couldn’t continue putting on a brave face when she felt anything but brave. Couldn’t stand being on the receiving end of the glares Dawn threw her or the subject of debate among the people who were supposed to be her friends. And she absolutely couldn’t keep coming to Spike when he was in love with her—her being Buffy—and she was in love with him—him being Spike. Even if he wasn’t the right Spike, he was still *Spike*, something that became harder and harder to ignore the more time they spent together.

Yet here she was, trying to spice up what had proven to be the

dullest patrol she'd been on in living memory by getting Spike to throw a punch her way.

She needed a fight, dammit. And he was the only one around capable of giving her one. Also capable of stopping her if she went all psycho on him and tried to follow-up her earlier Picasso piece with something else avant-garde. She hoped.

"Come on," she said, fully aware she was whining. "Just try it. Look how punchable I am!" She affected a scowl and gestured Vanna White-style at her own face, which only made him laugh. The jerk. "I'm serious, Spike. I *need* a good fight. I promise the chip won't fire. Spike and I spar all the time!" Typically as a prelude to truly amazing sex, but she didn't say that. "We figured out a way around it."

"I'm sure you did."

"Stop being a wuss. We both know you like pain."

He narrowed his eyes at that. "Different types of pain, love. Surely your boy's taught you that. Electrical shocks in my cranium not exactly on the level as—"

She shut him up the only way she knew how—or the only way she was willing to try at the moment—by smashing her fist into his jaw hard enough that he staggered back. Not hard enough that he went flying across the terrain or anything, as she needed him to react without thinking and stomping back to her would give him plenty of time to think. Unfortunately, he'd been prepared for that, and took his time shaking his head at the audacity that was her as he caressed the line of his jaw.

"So, that's it then? I either I get a head-full of pain or a head-full of pain."

Buffy shrugged, shifting her weight between her feet, knowing the regret would swarm up in a second and hoping she could trick it into settling somewhere else. She'd only hit Spike once since coming back from the dead—hell, since she'd realized in full just how in love with him she was. That was, of course, excluding the times she'd done it to save face in front of the others when they caught him leaning in a bit too close or looking a bit too happy with whatever she'd just muttered to him. And that time had been awful. Whatever else, Buffy did not

want to be the sort of person who hit the man she was with whenever things got rough.

Unless he could hit her back. Then it became foreplay.

"Spike," she said, that whine still in her voice, "please just trust me? If you don't *want* to hurt me, you won't. Even if you hurt me."

"Sure that's supposed to make sense."

"Will you just stop being difficult?"

"Not sure why I should," he replied, and now she saw the shine in his eyes—the one that complemented the smirk on his lips. The combination of which drove her crazy. He was such an *ass*. "Gets you all nice and riled."

"You want me riled, you gotta give me a fight."

It was absolutely the wrong thing to say—she knew it, he knew it, the tombstones knew it. Yet there it went anyway, tearing off her lips without waiting for her better angels to yank it back. Spike breathed out, somewhere between satisfaction and pain, the shine fading in his eyes into something darker. More primal.

"That a fact, Slayer? Well, why didn't you say so?"

And then it didn't matter that she'd said something stupid and cock-teasey and just plain cruel, for Spike's fist was bearing down upon her, knuckles connecting with her chin hard enough to send her tumbling back a few steps. There was a brilliant burst of pain, the sort that always got her blood pumping, and Buffy exploded into action. And bless him, he was right there with her, falling into a familiar dance, one so bittersweet she might just start crying if she let herself think about it too much. So she didn't let herself think—thinking was bad, especially compared to this. This had her heart racing for the right reasons, adrenaline doing its thing to shove away all she was trying to avoid so she could focus on the art that was surviving.

It didn't hurt that fighting Spike was a drug all on its own. Anticipating the way he'd feint, the blows he'd take just so he could dish out something meaner, chuckling and snarling all in the same breath, his lips pulled into a grin that had his fangs glinting in the moonlight. She didn't even know if he realized he'd slipped into game face, and she didn't care—it meant he was in it, fighting with everything he had,

coming at her with all that raw strength and energy, dancing with her the way they danced best.

They were too damn good at this and she couldn't get enough of it.

Couldn't get enough of him. Nor could he of her—if she hadn't known that already, she certainly would have when she had him pinned to the ground, straddled the way she knew got him the hottest. It hadn't been conscious on her part, just habit. Or instinct. The natural conclusion to all their fights—or at least the ones where she came out on top. They would wrestle for control on most nights, tumbling and flipping each other over and pushing until the other cried uncle. Sometimes it was her. Sometimes it was him. Always it was both of them.

Except that couldn't be tonight. There was a reason—a good one—but she couldn't remember it at the moment. Not while pressing down against the hardness straining at the zipper of his jeans, staring into those stormy eyes of his—human again—as he panted for air he didn't need and stared right back. As he looked at her like that—like she was both problem and answer. Like she was his.

There were reasons not to do this, she knew, and good ones, but they seemed distant at the moment and she was determined to keep them distant. Far away—some other girl's problems. Some other *world's* reality because this one sucked and she was done denying herself the parts of it that didn't. So Buffy slammed her mouth over his and let herself get lost in the only way that had ever worked. In the way he tasted, the silky feel of his lips moving against hers, the kiss all tongue and teeth, want and need. Spike groaned low in the back of his throat, curling his hands around her shoulders, nipping and pulling and sucking in that hot, desperate way he had. Holding onto her as though she were an anchor, not realizing he was the one keeping her tethered to the ground.

It was so good. So good. It was home. *Finally.*

And that was the thought that broke it. The thought of home. It managed to pierce its way through the fog she'd submerged herself in, find her in the twisty corridors of her mind and scream at her a reminder of where she was. More importantly, where she wasn't. That this was wrong. That she was wrong. That she loved him too much to pretend another Spike was just as good as the one she'd fallen in love

with. That she loved Spike too much to use him. That giving in now would be giving up, and she couldn't do that. Not yet.

He didn't fight her when she pulled away. He also didn't call after her when she ran. He let her do what she needed to do. Just like always.

No matter what world she was in.



I know you're never going to get this.

I think I hoped that maybe if I kept writing it... I don't even know. That I would remember everything I need to tell you when I get back? That I could maybe take it with me if we cracked the code? That I could make sense of everything that's going on in the head of Buffy? It's the only thing I have that makes me feel close to you and I'm screaming into the void. You're who I talk to. Who else am I going to share all this with? All the moments, Spike. The stupid ones and the frustrating ones and the good ones. I try to picture what you'd say if you could reply, what your letters might be like, and it's so confusing because you're also here. Only it's not you. I know that. No matter how many worlds there are, there's just one you.

But at the same time, he is you. He loves the way you do. Looks at me the way you do. Would do anything for me and Dawn. He might have been you, would have been you if we'd done things just a little different.

I'm not trying to rationalize or make excuses. Say that being with him is like being with you. It's not. I'll miss you for the rest of my life. I'll wonder what's going on in the world I was born in. Have you found Dawn? Was I right about the other Buffy? Can she make you happy? I hope she can. As mixed as my feelings are about her, I know better than anyone how much she'll need what you can give her. And she has to be me, right? If this Spike is as much you as he is, if Dawn is as much Dawn, and Giles and the others, then that Buffy has to be me. Hopefully. I hate the idea of you having to watch her with Angel, if she somehow managed to do what I never did. Though I doubt it. She doesn't want him. If she doesn't know that yet, she will soon.

Maybe it's too soon to say goodbye, but the mage was a dead end. So was Anya's old boss. This isn't like anything we've faced before. There aren't any

questions about what it is, how it works, or how to stop it. We have all the answers. All the answers just say the same thing.

I think I need to accept it. I think I need to look for a job. I think I need to prepare to call this place home.

I'll never stop writing to you or hoping that one day I'll hear your answer. But I think it might be OK if I love him too. I hope it is, because I do. How can I not? He's you.

I can't do it again. I can't keep making the wrong calls where you're concerned. And if I can't make it right with you, maybe I can with him.

Wish me luck.

All my love,

Beatrice



SEEING the notch in the tree was almost like seeing him. She hadn't expected that. Hadn't really expected the notch to be there, though she didn't realize as much until she was in the cemetery, until she saw it was indeed where it had always been. It threw her off balance. Unlike everything else in Sunnydale, this particular notch in this particular tree only held one set of memories. One tied to a version of the man she loved that she would never see again.

Buffy sucked in a trembling breath, bent, and stuffed the ink-covered pages of the longest letter she'd written to him into the place where he could find it. As she straightened, eyes glued to the papers flapping in the light wind, it occurred to her that this might be the last of their shared experiences. After all, Spike had written to her after she died, left those letters for her. Not knowing that she would actually find them—that despite all odds, Buffy would one day come to collect.

It seemed unlikely that Spike would manage that sort of miracle. Willow couldn't magic her way to a new world. And Buffy had to stop writing the letter, though she knew she wouldn't until she had sent it out into the world. Until it was final.

Buffy blinked away the sting in her eyes, turned on her heel, and forced herself to walk away. The sun overhead was bright and harsh, almost offensively so. As though determined to remind her that this

world mourned no one and nothing, that the decisions she made, anything she did, were neither permanent nor fleeting but somehow both.

The goodbye would never be official if she didn't let it go. She would keep clinging to the elusive hope of someday, which would only lead to more regrets. Looking backward rather than forward had cost her far too much already.

Especially where Spike was concerned. And if she was in a new world, she couldn't keep repeating old mistakes. Clinging to a past that she'd never relive.

That ended today.

WHILE I WORKED THROUGH ALL THIS SHIT HERE BY MYSELF

IT WOULDN'T BE LIKE THE FIRST TIME SHE'D BARRELED INTO HIS crypt—*their* first time, at least. Then, she'd been desperate to believe in something she'd already known was too good to be true. This time was about what she knew to be true. Not holding onto increasingly desperate what-ifs, a past that was beyond saving. That little hope was there, of course, as it had been throughout her marriage. That she could recapture the way she'd felt once upon a time, remember why she'd fallen in love with Angel in the first place. She'd tried and tried and tried some more until she'd given up any pretense of actually wanting anything saved. Wanting something and wanting to want something were not the same thing.

The hope tied to Spike felt similar, though only because she knew it was equally impossible—she couldn't get back to him anymore than she could have forced herself to want Angel again. And she knew that wasn't the right reason to be here. She also knew he wouldn't turn her away no matter what she said. That was just the way he was. The way he loved.

Buffy stared at the crypt door for a long moment, the glare of the sun in her eyes. She wasn't any good at this part—the talking stuff. She

was good at rambling and saying the wrong thing and occasionally shoving her foot so far down her throat she choked on it. That the situation in her head was jumbled didn't help matters at all. Part of her felt left back at the tree, itching to snatch up the letter she'd left Benedick and run with it. Marveling again at the insanity that was her life, being miserably in love with a man she couldn't have but could. Knowing what he would tell her if he had the chance, so well she could almost hear it. That he'd want her to be happy, and that no one would love her better than himself. That she wasn't betraying him or forgetting him or replacing him—she was loving him the only way she could.

She released a deep breath, shaking. The only fair thing to do here was be completely honest with him. Tell Spike all of this—show him her crazy—and let him decide what he wanted to do with it. Put the ball firmly in his court.

The door clanged its usual greeting when she pushed it open, though it sounded particularly harsh against the otherwise still afternoon. Buffy stepped inside into the comforting blanket of dark and endured a little pang when the barren state of the crypt failed to catch her off guard. It had only been a few days—not even a week, right?—since she'd stood in the place she considered home, but somehow the finer details were beginning to fade from her memory. Like she wasn't sure she remembered the pattern on the furniture. She knew she'd be able to identify it in a hot second were she to see it in a store window or something, but the image remained stubbornly elusive when she tried to conjure it up. Same with the kitchen configuration—little things like, did he keep the toaster by the fridge or was that the microwave? And when would thoughts like this not hurt so much?

“Lo, Slayer.”

Buffy turned toward the couch set-up, her heart choosing that second to start hammering. Spike was sprawled at the end farthest from the door, soaked in shadow and reclined in such a way he seemed like he could slip right off at the slightest provocation. There was a thickness in his voice that she knew well—the sort that told her he'd been drinking, and that he wasn't likely to stop anytime soon.

Another memory hit her, fast and unwanted. Spike after she'd broken up with him, when she'd decided to give her marriage another

shot after her mom had died. How right that choice had felt then, like she was reclaiming her life. How stupid she'd been for sacrificing weeks they could have had together—for thinking something like a move could solve the problems in her marriage. The few times she'd seen him between the breakup and Glory's penthouse, he'd been much like Spike was now. And like now, she'd known it had been her fault.

"Hey," she said thickly, moving forward. "Busy day?"

Spike made a sound that might have been a laugh, keeping his gaze set dead ahead. "Yeah. You interrupted happy hour." He lifted his right arm, the one dangling over the side of the couch, and clumsily affixed the mouth of the bottle he held to his lips.

"Your hour doesn't look too happy."

"It's a work in progress." He lowered his arm again. "Haven't been by in a tick. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

That wasn't entirely true—little more than a day had passed since the fight in the cemetery. The one that had ended with her mauling his lips off, or trying to, before remembering where she was, which Spike she was with. She'd trucked home in a big hurry, her head full of swirling, contradictory thoughts and longing so intense she'd felt it in her muscles and bones. Then she'd dug out the letter she'd been writing to him since the first night, when she'd been in the room that so resembled the one she'd had before marrying Angel, unable to sleep for thoughts of what was happening in a different world. And she'd thought of her Spike and this Spike, how they were the same without being the same. How, were it not for a fixed set of circumstances, their existence would have been linear. If it was just punishing herself unnecessarily when she was so certain there was no path home.

"I did everything wrong," she said. "I don't want to do that anymore."

That got his attention. Spike frowned at her and set the bottle back on the floor—she heard the glass clink when it met the concrete. "What's *everything*, then?"

"With you. With him."

"Ah." He nodded, sighed a little and sank back against the cushion. The first couple of days, he'd been curious about his counterpart—asking questions, seeming to relish in the answers. As though listening

to fantastic stories about himself in adventures he'd not experienced, which of course was exactly what they were. The novelty of that hadn't lasted, though. The more she talked about her Spike, the less interested he was. More withdrawn, no longer entertained by glimpses of a life he might have lived. "Seems to me he had everythin' a man might want. Wouldn't worry your head over it."

"He didn't, though. It was all secret."

"Bit of fun though, yeah? Havin' a secret like that? Sneaking around?"

The words made her stomach turn. "No."

"Oh, come on, Slayer. Can't tell me it wasn't any fun at all. Felt a little rush, didn't you? Gettin' away with all that right under Angel's nose? Even funnier considerin' he aimed to be a detective." Spike laughed, though the sound was hollow and stark. "Couldn't spot the signs in his own bloody house. I ever get the chance, you know—"

"No," she said again, louder this time. The knotting in her belly intensified, a sour taste taking residence in the back of her throat. It was hard, in that moment, to remember why she was here at all—that she in fact didn't hate him, that she thought she loved him just because he was Spike. Spike, whose heart she'd broken more than once because of the damn ring she'd refused to take off. Spike who had held her as she'd broken down after they'd first had sex, whispering kisses across her face and telling her she was beautiful and it was okay—they could be okay. That she could leave Angel, would never have to tell him a thing. And then, when he'd realized that she wouldn't, his vow to keep quiet about what had happened. How angry he'd gotten when she'd called herself weak and horrible. The rush of names that had tumbled from her lips, each worse than the last. All the awful things she'd ever thought about her father suddenly self-aimed.

But if this Spike could have thoughts like this, it meant her Spike had as well. They were the same, after all, the same man. And the idea that Spike might have even once entertained that notion, thought that the reason she hadn't left Angel was because she enjoyed the challenge of being together without tipping anyone off...

Even worse that she had enjoyed it a little. It had been nice, having a secret thing that was just hers. Only now she wasn't sure that was

what it had been at all. There hadn't been a thrill in doing something she shouldn't—there *had* been a thrill in not denying herself what she wanted. In simply being with the man she loved, even if it was wrong.

Had Spike known that? Had he wondered if that was the reason she'd kept things as they were?

"That's not the way it was," she said, and worried she might just lose her composure anyway. She looked at Spike—the Spike in front of her—who looked back with a sort of restrained impassivity. Something that might have been regret flickered behind his gaze but he said nothing to reassure her. And again, she wanted to hate him but knew she couldn't. If he thought that—if either of them had thought that—she only had herself to blame, right?

"I don't want him to have thought that," Buffy forced out a moment later, wincing when her voice broke. "That the only reason I... That I was in it for the thrill. That wasn't me—it wasn't *us*."

The hard lines in his face softened. "I know."

"You do?"

"Yeah. And so does he, I'd wager."

"Then why would you say—"

"Because I'm a jerk, all right? I'm a fucking git who's lookin' at everything he's ever wanted and so bloody jealous of myself I can hardly stand it." He leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees, and barked out a laugh. "Know how long I wanted this? How long I waited? Then I see it in you, since the first day you came in. The way you love... Only ever glimpsed it, haven't I? On the sodding sidelines. Angel. Captain Cardboard—"

"I never dated—"

"I know *you* didn't, but you did," he shot back, "I was there the whole bloody time, watched the song and dance you two put on, saw the way you looked at him. The way you'd never look at me. Wasn't what you had with Granddaddy Forehead but it was *something*." He rose to his feet the next instant—always needing motion, her vampire. Couldn't stand still for too long. "And toward the end there with Glory, something changed. You looked at me different. Wasn't love, not daft enough to believe it, but it mattered to me. And since you've been back, you show up here night after night, confiding in me, treating me

like a man still, and it's still there. Want to go after it but I can't. Need to do what's right by you. Need to let you set the pace, show me what I can have. No matter how much it bloody tortures me. I'll be whatever you need and you know that."

Buffy pressed her lips together to stave off the response that wanted out. She wasn't even sure what she'd say, her mind tugged in a thousand different directions.

"Then one day *you're* here and I reckon I see it." Spike stopped when he was just a step or so away. Close enough to breathe in, to touch, but still firmly adhering to the boundaries she'd set. "And it's somethin'. I want it so much I don't slow down enough to ask, just leap. Finding out what I thought I saw was real, but it's not mine? Not *her*, either? That matters, doesn't it? Matters that you're not her."

She nodded. Of course it mattered. It mattered to her, too. That was why she was here.

"What I see belongs to some other bloke wearing my face who has the life I want. Makes it so I know it's possible, that I can have it. That she could— That I'd had it wrong before. She could love me."

Another break. Buffy curled her hands into fists, digging her nails into her palms to keep herself from doing something stupid. She wanted to tell him that she was certain the other Buffy, screwed up as she was, had been on her way to love, because she knew that was part of what she was seeing now. It wasn't just that she was here, that he was listening to her tell him things about her Spike and resenting that there existed these, to him, idealized versions of themselves. It was the loss of what might have been—the chance to see if he could have it, himself.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I know how unfair this has been to you. I know I'm... It's hard, being around the person you love and knowing they love you but..."

She didn't know how to end that sentence so she didn't try. Spike sniggered.

"That's just it, isn't it?" he drawled. "Knowing they love you, *but*. Seein' how it could be. Got plenty used to wanting what another man has last year, pet. Bugger, story of my life, right?"

She licked her lips, her eyes suddenly stinging. She had no idea if he

knew—whether by guessing or otherwise—just how much she knew about his life pre-Sunnydale. What he'd say if she told him that her Spike had filled everything in, even the stuff she hadn't really wanted to know, over the last year, starting with the rejection that had sent him stumbling out of a snooty party and directly into the arms of the woman who would consume his next century. Until he met her.

It had been the story of his life. Whether it was Dru wanting Angel or Buffy being married to him—now, for this Spike, it was another version of himself. That would hurt. Of course it would.

And that was the reason she'd come here. She was sick of hurting. Sick of missing someone who wasn't really gone. Sick of punishing herself for a crime she hadn't committed—especially when there were so many she had actually committed that she had yet to own. But she couldn't go into whatever happened next with eyes halfway closed, either. She couldn't use the Spike in front of her as a replacement for the one she'd lost. Whatever happened between them, if they were to build anything here, it would have to be something new.

No matter how much the thought hurt. No matter how much *all* of her hurt.

"I'm not going back," she said hoarsely. "I realized that last night. Giles is... Well, Giles about it. Still looking, still trying to find something, but I know when he's pretending. The mage was a dead end. Anya even tried summoning her old demon boss."

Spike's expression shuttered. "So she's not comin' back, either."

Again, there was no question of who *she* was. No missing the pain there, either. It made her feel better, in an odd way.

"No. Unless she works out a way to do it over there. I don't see how, though. Giles is gone." Buffy breathed out slowly, every inch of her trembling. "I keep telling myself to be happy. Or see the half-full. That I have no reason to be sad because it's not like I lost anything, right? Everyone I love is still here. Even the parts that are bad aren't *that* bad. I have Giles and Dawn...and I have you."

He went rigid but didn't say anything, and she didn't wait to see if that changed.

"It's not the same, though. It'd be so much easier if I could believe it were. And there are all these things I'll never get to say to him—my

Spike. I tried writing them down.” A tear spilled down her cheek before she could catch it, hot in the path it made, almost burning. “I’ll also never get to try with him—try to do it right. The way I should have from the start.”

“You reckon tellin’ me’s as good as telling him, is that it?”

“No. I know it’s not. You’re not him and I’m not her.” Buffy wet her lips. “But I hope... It’s a weird thing to hope. On one hand, just thinking about it drives me crazy, him being with her. On the other... Well, there is no other. I can’t pretend to be happy about it. But maybe that’s how it works.”

Spike sucked in his cheeks and turned his head away, and she didn’t need to be an expert in reading him in order to do just that. The past few days with Spike had been an exercise in confusion for both of them. There were the looks she’d catch him throwing her way, that mingled longing mixed with something else—something that edged on resentment. He had been good about doing what he said, being there for her in all the moments in between. Whenever she showed up, whenever she wanted to talk, whenever she felt that she couldn’t stand still anymore. That he was keeping bottled water in his crypt for her now, expecting her without throwing that expectation on her, hadn’t escaped her notice either.

Through it all, though, even with the long looks and the casual amenities he kept on hand, Spike had been unusually reticent in what he offered her in turn. Always there to vent to, to be alone with, to provide the break she needed from the others. All this time she’d assumed he would jump if she told him she wanted more of what they had shared the first day, that she was the one who had taken it off the table, but now she wasn’t so sure. More than that, she was ashamed of her own presumption—at thinking that this must be easier on him because he hadn’t lost what she had. No, he’d just lost the promise of it. The possibility. The chance he might have had to experience any of this for himself, unencumbered by the past and focused solely on the here and now.

In her frenzy to get home, chasing down leads and spells and more than that, in sharing all the sordid details about her life with the other Spike—feeding him bits and pieces of a world he could

hardly imagine—she hadn't checked in with him. And he hadn't offered.

"I've been selfish," Buffy said softly. Spike did look up now, his nostrils flared and his eyes wide—neither rushing to agree or reassure her that it wasn't true. Just looking at her, somewhat guarded. She wasn't sure if that was the booze or what she'd said or both. "This entire time I've been so focused on getting back. And I've been mad at her—your Buffy. For doing this to me. For giving me a look at what I could... How it could be. For trying something as stupid as wishing her way out and thinking that it might work."

"I'm sure you're goin' somewhere with this, pet. Just not sure I'm keen to follow."

"You've been there for me, whatever I need, for days now. I haven't done that for you. I've just...needed. So I come here. And that's not fair."

"Nothin' much in this world is." He ran a hand over his head, down the back of his neck, his eyes falling closed but only for a second. "Wanna hear somethin' truly not fair? There are times I can't decide if I love you or hate you. You're her where it counts, so I love you. Been a sucker for her since the beginning, I expect. But you're also not her. You wave this bloody life in front of me—a life I can't touch. Now you aim to tell me that you think it's possible this wanker who already had the world at his bloody feet, who got more of Buffy than I ever will, might have won over my girl too?"

"No," she said, but it was a reflex. A desire to make something better. In truth, Buffy could see the sequence of events in her world unfolding like reels from an old movie. A girl who looked like herself stumbling into a home she didn't recognize, finding Angel—soft in the middle and sour everywhere else—sitting on the sofa, or maybe in the kitchen, drinking his weight in beer and throwing her nothing but scathing looks. And she saw Spike finding her on patrol. Or maybe she'd find him. As often as this world's Buffy had sought out Spike, maybe that would be her first stop once she realized the world she'd wished herself into was not the shiny wonderland she'd envisioned. Spike would know something was off but maybe not what. He'd try to reach her, try to get her to talk, and maybe once she realized the

nature of the relationship she'd stolen, she'd decide to try to steal some more.

Okay, those thoughts weren't exactly forgiving and she was trying to be better at this whole *forgiving* thing. Trying not to resent the other Buffy, hard as it was at times. But the fact remained that at some point, her Spike would find a Buffy that wasn't her but was. Maybe the other Buffy would tell him, maybe she wouldn't. Either way, there was little chance Spike would just let her go. And the more the other Buffy saw of the world, the more she realized how isolated she was from even her friends, the more she'd rely on Spike to help her understand. He was the only person she could talk to, after all. She'd already proven that with the Spike who was here.

Then, because she was Buffy, she wouldn't be able to not fall in love with him. Or more in love with him—the rest of the way from wherever she'd been before she'd made the wishes. And Spike...

Buffy didn't realize she was crying again until the Spike in front of her stepped forward, caught a tear as it rolled down her cheek.

"Sorry, pet," he said softly. "Not on you, is it? Any of this."

"It's not on you, either."

"Dunno about that." He shrugged when she looked up, shuddering as though trying to hold back tears of his own. "Coulda done more, yeah? Knew about Heaven. Knew—"

"You knew what she told you."

"And what'd I do with that? Tried to make her smile. Tried to just... Every time she showed up, just be what I thought she wanted. Bitch of the matter is I'd even started thinkin' that might be me. Then she ran off to meet *him* and—"

"Spike, I think she was in love with you," Buffy said in a rush, her pulse suddenly thundering. She was navigating here without a safety net, talking without thinking, thoughts racing in a desperate rush to break free and be heard. Maybe it was wishful thinking, but she *was* Buffy, wasn't she? She knew her own head. Knew the way this dance concluded, at least for her. Hadn't she been attempting to reconcile the reality that whatever she might have liked to have believed, she and Buffy had to be at least the same as the Scoobies were to their counterparts? Spike was to himself? "Or at least on her way to being in

love with you. I think that...that might be one of the reasons why she went to see him."

Spike stiffened again. "Don't say that," he said after a moment, his voice soft but shaky—the way he sounded when he was teetering between control and not control. "Can't bloody bear it."

"Did I ever tell you about the time I broke up with my Spike?" She knew she hadn't. "It was when Mom died. Dawn came home and found her...and it was a wake-up call for me. I told Spike that we couldn't anymore—that I was married and I needed to act like it. I told him to leave town, but of course he didn't. He stuck around. Wrote me notes...and I tried to ignore him. I hoped I would magically fall back in love with Angel, be the person I thought I should be. So I tried. And I failed."

Again, he fell quiet. His quiet was so loud they deafened, especially when he looked at her like that. Both inscrutable and not, so much want burning in his eyes. Want that wasn't pure or straightforward, though—want accompanied by plenty of conflict. How she knew, she couldn't say, except that there was something of how she felt in that look.

"When I tell you I think Buffy was in love with you, I'm not trying to be... I just think she was," she went on. "Maybe she didn't want to be or didn't know it or whatever, but her coming to see you? Telling you things she told no one else? You just being there—that's how it was with me and my Spike. How it started. I'm not saying that it would've gone the same way...but those feelings were there. I'm sure of it."

Spike breathed out in a rush, like his lungs had started to work and unloaded a backlog of more than a century's worth of air. "Suppose there's a reason to tell me this."

"It's what you said—that he might win her over." Buffy shifted a little, an unpleasant itch stretching across her skin. "I think if he does, it's because she was already won. Because of you."

"Cold bloody comfort that."

"I know." And she did because she felt it too. "Spike, if I'm going to be stuck here, I can't..." She bit her lip and glanced down. "There's so much I did wrong with us. I had reasons that I thought were good but

weren't. It all came down to the same thing. Just me being a big scaredy-Buffy. And this is just... There's so much here."

He closed a space between them. There hadn't been much to close and even less remaining. "Sounds like you're tryin' your best *not* to tell me somethin'."

"I don't know how to say it."

"Say what? You're stuck here so you're hopin' that I'll be your bloody stand-in? The way I was the other night?"

Buffy whipped her head up, her heart leaping. "What?"

"Think I don't know that's what that was, you wantin' to dance in the cemetery? Way you said you and he go at it. Think I just now sussed out that fightin' gets you hot? Christ, Summers, I've known that since the night we met." He gave a little laugh, shook his head. "Fuck, I knew the second you snogged me, it wasn't me you were with anymore. I don't hold it against you. Got a bit lost in it, myself. And yeah, can't say it hasn't crossed my mind. How easy it'd be—you bein' here, loving some version of me who's not. Lettin' you use me however you like. Sounds like fun until you clue in that all I am is another bloody bot with better programming. More lifelike, more real."

"Spike, that's *not*—"

"That you're her—that you sound and smell and look like her... It confuses things. Makes a man forget."

"I don't want to replace your Buffy."

"Right, and I *won't* replace your Spike." Another laugh, this one just as dry and humorless. "There's a lot I'd do for you, pet. Bugger, virtue of you bein' her, not much I *wouldn't*, and I wager any hard line I have is one you could sweet-talk me over. Knowing you love a bloke by my name, one who's me but not, that you're with me because of him—knowin' whenever you look at me, you're really lookin' at a man who's not here? Maybe once that would've been enough. But it's not now."

God, this was going all wrong. Buffy clenched her jaw, looked to the ceiling, fighting against the familiar pinpricks of tears. It hadn't been clear in her head, any of it—what to say or not say, how to talk to him. And despite however much she'd grown in the sharing department, all the conversations she'd had with him over the last year, putting voice

to her own feelings remained one of those things she wasn't good at. Angel had taken that part of her, too.

But she had to try.

"I don't want anyone to replace anyone," she said again, keeping her gaze on the ceiling. Might be easier this way, if she wasn't looking at him. "What I had with... I can't have that with anyone else. Not even you. And I don't want to. I love him too much to just... And it's different. The way we came together could never be the same way I'm with anyone else." She waited, bracing herself for another outburst. It didn't come. All that came was one those belly-deep breaths that told her he was listening. She still didn't think she could look at him, though, so swapped the upward view for the floor. "That's not what I want or why I'm here. I'm here because I know how I feel about you. And I know, *I think* I know, how you feel about me, even if I'm not the Buffy you fell in love with."

She paused again. Waited again. Again, nothing came.

"Those are the things I can't change. That I'm stuck here, that there's so much I didn't do right with him. But what we had... The parts that were good were *so good*. So I know it's possible. And all I know is I don't want to do any of this—this living here stuff—without you." Buffy breathed out and, finally, unable to take the silence, brought her eyes to his. The anger was gone. At least she thought it was. His face was strangely unreadable. "What I want is not to fix what I can't fix. I want the chance to do better. Love *better* than I did before. I understand if that's not enough for you. If—"

But that was as far as she got, *thank god*, for Spike exploded into motion. Closing the last bit of distance between them in a rush, cupping her cheeks and bringing her mouth to his. And Buffy's legs almost buckled—would have, maybe, if he hadn't been holding her to him—swept away in a monsoon of sensation. There was relief, of course, bright, brilliant, and blissful, running in tandem with the promise to do exactly as she said. But when she started crying again—stupid eyes never did what she wanted them to—she knew it was for him. The pang in her chest, wrapped inside the bittersweet hope of a new beginning, of saying goodbye while also saying hello.

"It's all right," Spike murmured against her lips before pressing kisses along her tear-stained cheeks. "It's all right, love. I've got you."

Buffy nodded, not trusting herself to speak, and claimed his mouth again. This time it was all him—all this Spike. All the potential of an uncharted future. She wouldn't delude herself that it would be easy—she knew it wouldn't be. Knew there would be more talks like this, confusion and heartache and complications truly unique to them, but the want in his kiss made all seem surmountable. That powerful, desperate want that echoed her own. That she felt when he closed his arms around her, bringing her weight against him to take her...where? It didn't matter. He would go and she would follow because most of the time it was the other way around. No questions now.

And Spike moved like liquid, quick and decisive, catching her in the undertow. One second upstairs, the next second down. One second clothed, the next second not. She didn't look around, didn't want to see more evidence of a room that was not *their* room, didn't want to be taken from this moment by thoughts of what wasn't. They would come and they would be painful, but there were so many more ahead. More of this, of him, a future they could pave together without forgetting the past or the people they'd lost.

Then he was over her, inside of her, kissing her still. Kissing her all over, every inch of skin he could reach as he pushed and thrust and gasped her name the way others might gasp a deity's. His body so familiar, the way he smelled and tasted too, how he looked at her, the love brimming in his eyes amid everything else. And she thought, as he lowered his head to nibble along her chin, that as long as she saw that there—saw the love they managed to share across dimensions—that whatever came next would be a cakewalk.

It was them in the end, wasn't it? That was all that mattered.

Buffy thought so, at least. She clung to that thought, clung to him, arched her hips to recapture his cock each time he pulled back, nibbled a path of her own along his neck and shoulders, making him groan and buck and push into her harder, faster, as he murmured in that mindless way of his, flooding her ears with more than just the smack of flesh meeting flesh and the groan of old bedsprings.

It was when she was there, at the edge, tearing kisses off his lips,

trembling under the force of his thrusts, the soft strokes against her clit, that it occurred to her to say it for real. Not in hypotheticals or in reference to other people—but to him, Spike. The Spike with her now. The Spike inside of her. The Spike who would love her today and for all their tomorrows.

She broke her mouth from his, found the endless stormy ocean blue of his eyes, and gasped, “I lo—”

And all went dark.

AND WHERE THE HELL I'VE
ENDED UP ON THIS GLARY,
RANDOM DAY

IT WAS THE TOWER ALL OVER AGAIN. THAT MAD DASH TO THE EDGE as golden rays of sunshine broke over the horizon, the world around her seconds from ripping apart. And Buffy was in the air, arms spread, wind against her face, bravely defiant of the ground below. Of gravity and death and everything else, full of love and hope and sorrow and pain, but knowing that her sister would be okay. So would the world. And she hadn't had enough time—had made some mistakes with the time she'd been given—but at least everyone knew. The people she loved knew she loved them.

He knew she loved him.

Only now she was falling again, and this time she hadn't meant to. The world had gone dark and pulled her down inside of it, and for a terrifying second, Buffy thought she would suffocate.

But that second passed quickly and the world returned. Only it wasn't the world she'd been in. The world she'd been in had been dark, and Spike had been above her. Looking at her with those endless blue eyes as he pumped inside of her, as he took the leap into the unknown, as they gasped and kissed and moved, and she had been about to tell him. She had. Hard as it was, knowing she did, knowing it was right, knowing that she needed to love him fully for

the Spike he was and not the Spike she would spend her life mourning.

That world was gone.

“Slayer?”

Buffy blinked, shook her head, which she immediately regretted doing, and took in her surroundings. Willing them to make sense. Willing any of this to make sense. There was a table—her hands were on it, flat and splayed—and a chair she had almost toppled out of. On the table was a sheet of paper, the sort with tiny print and lots of it, and at the bottom of the paper was her name. No, her signature. Definitely her signature.

“Damn lights,” a crisp, female voice said from her left. “What’s the point of telling Maintenance to be on the alert for mystical power surges if no one is going to do anything about it?”

“What?” Buffy said, resisting the urge to shake her head again. She turned in her chair—it was of the swivel variety—not sure what her intent was, only that she didn’t want to be sitting anymore, then froze.

She had no idea how long it lasted—how long she sat there, staring into the eyes she knew so well she could see them in her sleep. Had, in fact, for the past few days, and had assumed she would for all the days following. Line up a thousand Spikes, a million Spikes, and she would always be able to pick which one was hers. Each time. Every time.

But her Spike was gone—or she was gone from him. Gone and lost in a world like hers but not hers. That pain was still there, awful and consuming, and she had just decided to try to move on. Try to forge ahead, make something new. Love someone else. Someone who was him but also wasn’t and never could be.

Except except except...

This couldn’t be real. She knew that and she could never stop knowing that, but somehow the question came anyway. The one with the impossible answer. “Benedick?”

There was a half-second in which she prepared herself to be devastated all over again. A half-second that was more than a half-second—one that stretched and swelled in its effort to keep her inside. That impossible flicker of hope that she’d forced herself to bury, that she’d *had* to bury in order to move on. And she’d had to

move on, hadn't she? All avenues had been explored and come up dead ends. She'd been told by everyone that getting home was a pipe dream. That for better or worse, the world she'd been cast into was the one she now lived in, and where she would spend the rest of her days.

The half-second would end and she would crash back down to reality. The one worlds away from him.

But that's not what happened. The half-second stretched into a full one, and when he should have furrowed his brow and asked her if she was off her trolley—or mishear her as he had the first day—Spike's eyes flooded with joy, pure and unbridled.

"Lo, Beatrice," he said hoarsely. "Been a minute."

Buffy crashed—no other word for it. The floor rushed up and everything else came down, and she was out of the chair and against his chest, dissolving into a mess of harsh, ugly sobs. Burrowing into him and sobbing harder when she could. Because he was there. He was there and this was real.

"There she is," Spike murmured into her hair. She felt the tremble in his arms as they closed around her, in his voice too. In him all over. "Been lookin' everywhere for you. Glad you finally came home."

But he wouldn't be. He *wouldn't* be. If she told him what she'd been doing, who she'd been with, how she'd given up. That was what this meant, right? The half-second had stretched into a full one and Spike was here, holding her, and that meant he hadn't given up. It meant he'd kept looking and somehow he'd found a way. He'd found a way and she had not.

She'd tried to let him go. She'd given up.

How many times had she given up on him now? How many times would he let her?

"This is so heartwarming I might gag," the cool female voice intoned by the door, startling Buffy back to the moment. The one going on outside of herself. "We have business to discuss, Ms. Summers. And then I imagine you will want to see your sister."

It seemed to take a while for the words to reach her. When they did, they made no sense. "My sister?"

"Dawn's here," Spike said, and she whipped her head back to him,

sucked in a breath as he tucked her hair behind her ear. "Safe and sound. Saw her just a minute ago. She's comin' home."

Buffy's already-thundering heart began thundering harder, not helped by the way he was looking at her, his face stretched into a smile that she got to see so infrequently but cherished all the same.

When *had* been the last time? God, she didn't remember. It had been too long. Too long, too many excuses, too many reasons to say later, say now was not the time, to push the finish line and push it and push it until it was impossible to see. He would grin at her, smirk, chuckle when she wrinkled her nose at something he'd said or when he thought she was being particularly cute. He'd tell her he loved her and she would feel it, feel how deeply he meant it, but always with that distance she kept. Distance she hated and wanted rid of but was too damn scared to address. Too damn scared to look in the mirror and accept what she saw there.

Now he was smiling at her, full and bright and beautiful. He'd found her and Dawn and brought them back home.

And she'd been about to give another man her love.

"You did it," Buffy choked out.

"Not me, actually. None of this was me." He barked a laugh, his own eyes shining now. "All her. *You*. The other you. The one from the world—"

"The one who made the wishes."

He nodded again. "Found us a way back. A way to get you home. Fuck, baby, you have no idea how hard we—"

The woman by the door—the young, pretty brunette wearing a smart pantsuit and an overly bored expression—cleared her throat. "If you would put a sock in it for a second, we could get this over with so you can continue the soap opera elsewhere. Quite frankly, I don't want to watch you two blubber all over each other. I'm about to lose my lunch."

That blissful smile faded from Spike's face, and Buffy was almost glad because it was hard to look at. "Oh, shut your gob and give her a bloody second," he snarled at the woman.

"I think we've taken up all the time we need," the woman replied, keeping her gaze on Buffy before affecting a forced smile of her own.

"Ms. Summers. We haven't had the pleasure. At least, not while *you*—this world's true Buffy Summers—were inhabiting that body." She edged forward, the room's shadows forming somewhat unnerving patterns across her face, until she was close enough to extend a hand. "Lilah Morgan. I am happy to represent the Special Projects division here at Wolfram and Hart."

Lilah Morgan? The name was familiar without having any reason to be. The only person from Wolfram and Hart that Buffy had ever dealt with was Lindsey.

Then she remembered the phone call that first day. Lindsey hadn't been available. Gone, the woman had said. This woman.

"Yes," the lawyer said as though reading her mind. "I am the woman you spoke to on the phone. Only, well, not exactly. Our branches are fortunate enough to keep in contact when anomalies such as the one you experienced occur. That is part of the reason you're here. Our connections allowed us the opportunity to correct said anomaly. For a price, of course."

"A price..." Buffy's eyes widened as she twisted back to Spike, afraid to ask—afraid he'd already know the question and answer it anyway. But he didn't have a chance, as Lilah Morgan kept talking.

"Really, Ms. Summers, it's all very simple. If you would sit down, I'd be happy to go over the details."

The request was maddening in how reasonable it sounded. Sit down. Listen. Act as though any of this was normal. As though she hadn't been in another freaking world just five minutes ago, as though the past few days hadn't been the very definition of emotional hell. Buffy didn't want to sit—she didn't think she could. Every nerve in her body—and it was *her* body, wasn't it? Not the one she'd been forced inside—screamed at her to make a break for the door. Either that or throw a punch and see what happened. See how Miss Reasonable would react to something that was anything but.

But Buffy didn't try to run for it. She couldn't. For one thing, her sister was apparently nearby. *Her* sister. And Spike. She wouldn't leave him, either. Not for anything. Not again.

"I'd rather stand," she said instead, surprised at how even she sounded. "If it's all the same to you."

Lilah Morgan's business smile dimmed but only slightly. She wasn't, evidently, the sort of woman who easily tolerated others calling the shots, even over trivial matters. But she was also smart enough not to argue. "Suits me," she said, lowered her hand, and began to talk.

What seemed like forever ago, Buffy and Giles had sat down with the others to explain something she'd known would be hard to swallow. That, even in their world, there were beings with enough power to pull off something as cosmically huge as, say, fabricating a whole person. A whole person whom they had then implanted into the Scoobies' lives so seamlessly that the cracks between the true past and the fake one were almost impossible to see. Hell, no *almost* about it. Even now, those cracks remained invisible.

By the time Buffy had broken the news to the others, she had come to terms with what she'd discovered about Dawn. Or as close to *come-to-terms-y* as was possible for such a thing. But she remembered watching the faces of her friends as they grappled with what she was saying. The enormity of it—how it changed everything and nothing at the same time. This new piece of knowledge that simply was. A reality they didn't necessarily need to understand but had to accept as, well, reality.

Lilah wasn't nearly as delicate in her approach as Buffy had been. She explained rather bluntly that Wolfram and Hart had made a deal with the other Buffy—one designed to stop a prophecy and get both Buffys home in one fell swoop. As such, the terms of the deal would apply to both Buffys, and said terms were pretty straightforward. To put things simply, neither Buffy would be able to conceive children. This would hopefully prevent either from becoming something called the Mother Slayer and waging a hundred-year war on Wolfram and Hart. Oh, and by the way, that pesky husband of hers? No longer a problem. Angel was a vampire again. See, he'd made his own deal. That was the entire reason Dawn was coming home with her. Also why Buffy had been completely reinstated as a living citizen of California, allowing her to do what she wanted with the Magic Box and any of the other assets of Giles's that had been in limbo as a result of his actual death and her legal one. And that was it. Follow the nice intern down

the hall to collect her sister, and thank you very much for doing business with Wolfram and Hart.

And all Buffy could think about was the dumb look on Xander's face when he'd learned that Dawn wasn't a person. How he'd zoned out, then started rambling stories—recollections of things that had never happened. Dawn blushing when she'd seen him in his swim gear for the first time back in junior year. Dawn throwing herself in front of a bespelled mob of girls to try to give him time to get to safety. Dawn crying into her ice cream the summer Buffy had been gone. Dawn walking in on him and Anya one time when the gang had been researching something at Giles's—thankfully not doing anything too traumatizing, but traumatizing enough. All these things that had happened but not.

Her husband was no longer her husband. He was no longer human. She was no longer dead. Dawn was no longer gone. And everyone knew about her and Spike.

She didn't get much time to sit with any of this. The second Lilah stopped talking, Buffy was ushered out the door and into a drab hallway, managing to walk only by the mercy that she was too shocked to do anything else and Spike was there, his hand firmly around hers. Giving her something to hold onto when it seemed possible that the whole damn building might just detach and float off into space. At the moment, little would surprise her.

The intern stopped outside another room and didn't so much as give her time to catch her breath before opening the door. And there was Dawn. The real Dawn, the one she'd last seen before taking the dive off the tower, full of love and light and promise and regrets. The Dawn who had been missing from her life since she'd returned to it, packaged up and shipped off like everything else of Buffy's that Angel hadn't liked.

Dawn shouted her name—her booming voice bouncing off the walls—and practically tackled Buffy to the floor. Holding onto her, sobbing, sputtering a bunch of nonsense things that somehow made all the sense in the world. And that was all it took for Buffy to snap herself out of her stupor. Understanding could come later. Everything could come later. All that mattered in that instant was that

finally, *finally*, she had her sister back. Not a facsimile, not another version stuck in another world, but the actual, genuine Dawn Summers. The girl she'd carried with her in her heart as she'd made the leap off the tower, whose love and life had been worth the price of her own. Buffy threw her arms around her little sister—for Dawn *was* her sister, no matter what a bunch of monks had to say about it—and let herself unleash some of what was starting to build inside of her. But just some. If she let it all out, before she knew how big it was or what shape it would take, there was a chance she'd lose herself in it and she couldn't do that now.

But she could hug her sister. She could cry. She could bask in the feel of Dawn in her arms, the knowledge that she was home. She could do that much.

And wait for the rest to swallow her whole.



ONE BENEFIT of being the Slayer was rapid acclimation to the strange and unusual. Shock wasn't a luxury she could afford—she had to be able to adapt, think on her feet, adjust to changing situations as they changed without asking for a timeout. Her survival, the world's survival, depended on her ability to move on and keep moving on.

So as arrangements were made—the necessities to solidify Buffy as Dawn's guardian, along with the minutiae of how her sister's possessions that hadn't fit into a suitcase would be delivered back to Sunnydale—Buffy had shoved all her messy emotions to the back of her mind, to be dealt with later when dealing wouldn't leave her vulnerable among people she didn't trust. She'd already been knocked off her feet once today in front of them, and once was more than enough. Too much, actually, but she couldn't change what had happened any more than she could take back the thoughts that had plagued her mind over the last few days. She just had to deal.

She was good at just dealing.

"Where are we going?" she asked as Spike tugged her toward the glass front doors that separated them from the outside. The very

sunny outside. "You're still a vampire, right? You didn't change on me while I was gone?"

To her surprise, he favored her with a somewhat shy grin, and she worried for a second that maybe he had. Maybe he *was* human now, because why the hell not?

But then she flexed her fingers around his, felt the reassuring coolness of his skin. Remembered that he'd held her against his chest not too long ago and she'd definitely not caught a heartbeat and that was the sort of thing she would have noticed.

"Same as ever, Slayer," he replied. "Just had to make a run for it to get in here, is all. Me and... We cut it a bit fine makin' a last-minute stop."

She nodded as though she understood. "Oh." A new fount of questions pressed at the corners of her mind but again, she pushed them back. Now was not the time. "Any suggestions?"

"Yeah, same as we got in." Spike shucked off his duster as she'd seen him do a thousand times, his movements swift and familiar. "Ready to make a run for it?"

No, she wasn't. She wasn't ready for any of this. As much as she wanted to leave and put all things Wolfram and Hart behind her—hell, believe that everything that had happened over the past few days had been nothing but a really vivid, twisted dream—she knew that once she stepped outside she would have to stop *just dealing* and start thinking again. Process the massive overhaul her life had taken in her absence, how different everything looked now.

Worse, she'd have to think about the crypt and what she'd gone there to do. What she *had* done. That she was with a Spike she had, just a couple of hours earlier, tried to let go. In more than a year, she hadn't been able to let Angel go. Hadn't been able to take the steps that would shove him out of her life for good, and while the reasons had been sound, their existence—the fact that she had listened to them—had her stomach twisting in knots.

She hadn't let Angel go, but she had let go of Spike. She had given up.

And here he was, smiling at her, not knowing this. Not knowing

that the second before she'd come back into this world, she'd been with someone else. Another him. Prepared to start over. *Replace.*

Buffy blinked rapidly to stave off the rising tears, catching it when his face fell. Knowing he knew something was wrong. Probably that he had from the start—from the second she'd whispered his secret name and dissolved. The building-full of lawyers, combined with the presence of her kid sister, made asking impossible at the moment, though.

Just another reason to stay inside.

"Buffy," Spike said in a low undertone.

But staying inside wasn't an option—not only that, this was the last place she'd pick to stall for time.

She shook her head and again shoved the messy emotional knot to the back. Hoped it would stay there this time. "Would really mess up this big reunion if you went up in dust," she said. Her voice was steady even if the rest of her wasn't. "How about Dawn and I go get the car?"

Spike furrowed his brow. "You? Get the car?"

"Yeah. Why not?"

"Because I want to live?" Dawn piped up from beside her, resting her elbow on the extended handle of her suitcase. "I do."

Traitor.

"Come on," Buffy argued weakly. "I can manage from...wherever to here."

Her sister pressed her lips together, not quite succeeding in killing her smile. Though that was probably the point.

"So I come back from the dead *and* another dimension and you're not on my side for even ten minutes?"

"Buffy, I love you too much to lie to you," Dawn replied.

"There's a first." Buffy looked back to Spike, forced a smile she figured did more to emphasize just how all right she wasn't, and not for the reasons he would have assumed. "Promise you won't dust on me?"

He opened his mouth, closed it, and tossed Dawn a glance, which had him swallowing whatever he'd been about to say. Instead, he edged closer and muttered, "Slayer, I guarantee you, I'm not goin' anywhere."

No, she supposed he wasn't. Even if she didn't deserve it. Even if she broke his heart.

"All right, then," she said hoarsely. "Lead the way."



THE DAY HAD STARTED at Revello Drive in a faraway Sunnydale. It was ending in a hotel in LA, not too far from the offices of Angel Investigations. Apparently, despite the fact that Angel hadn't been the figurehead of the detective agency for more than five minutes, they had stuck with the name.

It took seeing the place for it to sink. For the things she'd been told to become more than funny sounds in the air, spewed from the lips of some lawyer in a pantsuit. Wesley had met them outside—outside because Buffy hadn't wanted to go in, not ready for that cavalcade of memories. He was rougher around the edges and less polished than she remembered. And she'd almost asked him about the research he'd done with Giles on the paw before her brain snapped on and her equilibrium righted itself all over again. It seemed strange that nearly three years could go by without her so much as thinking about Wesley Wyndam-Pryce, failed watcher extraordinaire, but somehow he'd been a part of her life in two separate worlds over the last few days. Not in person on the other side, no, but present. A voice at the other end of a phone that Giles had—

But Giles was gone. Dead. Buried some six feet under the nearest gulp of fresh air. She had seen him yesterday and he'd been alive, but not really. Not her Giles. Her Giles had died with a bunch of other people. Probably in pain. Definitely afraid. The sting of that loss was sharp and awful—lanced afresh by the fact that she hadn't known her last moments with Giles would be her last—though not as much as she might have thought. Right after he'd died, the possibility that she might see him again, only to *never* see him again would have been devastating. It still was, but a softer sort of devastation. The wound hadn't healed, she'd just gotten used to the pain. That it was a little agitated at the moment was to be expected. Perhaps the only normal reaction to an otherwise completely abnormal situation.

It helped that Giles's death—his re-death, or her reentry into a world where his death was definite—was just one of a handful of things vying for her attention at the moment. The confession she still had to give Spike remained most prominent, leading the charge and making it

hard to maintain eye contact for more than a few seconds at a time. This thing that she'd wanted so much was hers again—hers in ways it never had been before—and all she could think about was the letter she'd written him. How she'd given up and he hadn't. How she always did.

Buffy glanced at her sister, who was sawing logs in the bed beside her. She didn't blame her—it had been an exceptionally long day, and an emotionally draining one to boot. Dawn had only been slightly put out when Buffy had mentioned that they couldn't go back to Sunnydale just yet, that she needed to wait and talk to Angel in person. Or in vampire, as that was what he was again, or soon would be. Plus, they were Willow's ride home, and she couldn't go anywhere until everyone was certain that Angel wouldn't wake up as the worst version of himself.

The room they'd rented was on the small side and she doubted she'd get any sleep, especially with Spike so close and all the unspoken stuff still between them. She'd insisted he take the bed farthest from the windows, wishing she could curl up next to him but knowing it was a bad idea. Needing to get everything out first—out and behind her—and that was something she couldn't do until they got home and it was just them again. No Dawn to overhear, no lurking meeting with her estranged and now-former husband. Or she guessed that was how it worked. Their marriage had never been legal, so dissolving it should be as easy as Angel embracing death and moving to a different city. It had certainly worked the first time.

“Buffy.”

She started and twisted, her heart leaping into her throat. Spike was sitting on the edge of his bed, his elbows on his knees. He hadn't undressed—for starters, there had been nothing for him to put on. Both he and the other Buffy had evidently overlooked the obvious that she would need to stay in town until Angel awoke. Tell him to his face all the things she'd been swallowing back, otherwise it would always remain another woman's closure, not hers.

She couldn't start living in this world again without owning her mistakes, even if those mistakes had been resolved in her absence.

Which really grated, if she were being honest. Not that she'd come

back to a world where her greatest failures had been turned around—that was nothing short of miraculous—but that she hadn't been the one to do it. *She* hadn't had the conversation with Angel that ended their marriage. *She* hadn't been the one who outed her relationship with Spike to her friends. *She* hadn't been the one who hadn't given up, who had kept fighting and looking and searching and finally found a way home, because of course there had been a way. Why hadn't she trusted that?

"Beatrice," Spike said in a softer voice, his heart in his eyes. And god, she wanted to crawl over to him. Wanted to bury herself in his arms and hold on until none of the rest of it mattered. "You *are* happy to be back, right? It's what you wanted?"

Buffy drew in a shaky breath. "Spike..."

"Cause she said you did. That lawyer bitch. Told me and Buf—the other Buffy that you'd been lookin' for a way home." He worked his throat. "Thought that meant you wanted back."

"I wanted back," she whispered in a rush. "That's all I wanted."

"Yeah? Haven't looked too cheerful, is all. Fella begins to wonder..." Spike waited to see if she would say anything, sighed and looked down when she didn't. "Know the bloke over there was in love with you. Had your watcher, too. Angel was—"

"He wasn't you."

"Neither was she."

"But there are things I need to tell you..." She sucked in a breath, willing herself to hold it together. "Spike—"

The phone on the nightstand between the beds pierced the air with a shrill ring that had Dawn jerking upward and Spike wincing, pulling his gaze from hers and rising to his feet. Buffy stared at him long enough for the phone to wail again, then gave her head a shake and snatched it off the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Buffy." It was Willow, and there was triumph in her voice. "He's up."

"Already?"

"Yep. And the spell went off without a hitch."

"You're sure?"

“Way sure. Lorne—he’s this friend of Wesley’s—had Angel sing for him, which I know sounds weird but—”

But Buffy knew about Lorne. Spike had filled her in on just about everything. Or everything he could, at least, with an audience of Dawn. He’d just known, as he just knew everything, not to talk about things that would reveal the nature of their relationship. Even now.

He would forever be waiting for her.

“So it *is* him?” she cut in. “No wonky side-effect from doing business with Evil Incorporated? No now-you-see-it-now-you-don’t with the soul?”

“One hundred percent Angel.”

“Okay.” Buffy glanced at Spike, who was studying her again, his attention absolute. “Then we’re on our way.”



SHE’D AVOIDED GOING inside for a reason. The Angel Investigations office was much as she remembered—modest but kinda cozy, with three desks crammed on the first floor and a full basement apartment. The business part of the property looked more lived-in than it did in her memory, busy with paperwork and post-it notes and complete with an oversized corkboard that housed a large rendering of the city map. Certain areas were circled in red, notes written off to the side in black marker. Demon infestation here, poltergeist there, yadda yadda. Wesley explained that they liked to keep visual track of where their business took them, as patterns could be a portent to something large and unpleasant.

Buffy nodded as though she were interested, all the while trying not to think of the last time she’d been in this office. It had been right after Angel had turned human—they’d spent pretty much all of their time downstairs consummating their new happiness. That he had awoken as a vampire here was fitting—this was where their relationship had changed and where it would change back—but that didn’t make her comfortable. Memories, even happy ones, had a tendency to become sad with context.

“And you’re sure,” Buffy said, eyeing the staircase that led to what

was now Wesley's apartment. Standing in what was now Wesley's office, too, as he'd become the figurehead of the agency. She wasn't sure how that had happened—maybe Cordelia and Doyle just hadn't wanted the responsibility. "You're sure that your friend... He's not bad?"

Wesley offered a kind smile, not the patronizing sort she was used to getting from him. Rather than put her at ease, it made Buffy tense all over.

"Lorne is quite certain," he said. "And he read all of us for good measure. Just to make sure a gruesome death by fang was not in our future."

"Smart," Spike intoned from where he stood near the door. Dawn was at his side, craning her neck in every which direction but seemingly uninterested in doing any actual snooping. Then again, she was more than a little tired. They all were. "Where's the rest of your crew?"

"Cordelia and Doyle went home after the reading," Wesley replied. "They would have stayed but after the last few days, I couldn't ask. And Doyle might have killed me if I had. Cordelia's a little...high-strung about the wedding."

She should be, Buffy thought. In her experience, weddings weren't the start of anything good.

"Slayer?"

Buffy glanced over her shoulder and met her lover's gaze, saw all the things they still had to say. Wanting badly to just turn on her heel and go back out the door but knowing she couldn't. She had to do this much herself.

"I'll be fine," she said. "This won't take long. And then we can go."

She inhaled and turned before she could see his response, once again shoving back all the things she couldn't afford to think at the moment. Then she was moving, one step in front of the other, down a darkened stairwell and into the basement itself and toward the place where her slayer senses told her she would find a vampire waiting.

And indeed he was. Sitting at a table that he had thrown her onto once upon a time, nursing what she guessed was a mugful of warmed blood. Willow sat to his left, not talking, but studying him the way a younger Willow might have an interesting homework assignment. Or

perhaps she was just pleased with her handiwork. It had to have been simpler this time, what with her list of accomplishments.

What was one soul restoration to raising the dead?

As though the noise in her head was audible to those outside of it, Willow caught Buffy's eye and broke into a wide grin. "Buffy! You're here!"

Buffy forced a smile of her own as her friend scooted back her chair—the sound grating against the still—and hurried over to give her a hug. "Hey, Will."

Willow squeezed her tight, then pulled away and gripped her by the shoulders, her eyes suddenly serious. "I know I should've asked on the phone, but it *is* you, right? The real Buffy? Our Buffy? Not..."

"The real Buffy," Buffy agreed. "Present and accounted for."

"Oh, thank god. That other one..." Her friend pulled a face, and Buffy was surprised at the sudden anger that surged forward at the implication. Anger on behalf of the Buffy who had gotten her into this mess to begin with. It made no sense, except perhaps that Willow was the last person to pass judgment on someone who had messed with something beyond her understanding. And at least, unlike Willow, the other Buffy had done what she could to fix things. Had searched for a way back and found it.

But then, why wouldn't she? Her world had Giles and Dawn and—

Buffy shook her head, put her smile back on, and refocused on her friend. "I need a minute," she said, nodding at Angel. He hadn't stood or so much as looked her way, just sat with his hands around his mug. "Spike's upstairs with Dawn. When I'm done here, we'll head home."

Willow blinked as though surprised, then her eyes widened all over again, this time with that knowledge that hadn't been there before. Knowledge tied to all things Spike. And Buffy saw a thousand long conversations in her future, which she supposed was a fair trade-off, but the thought did little to ease her at the present.

Thankfully, Willow seemed to have enough tact to realize now was not the best time to start firing questions, and nodded.

"Yeah, okay," she said, then turned back to Angel. "See you, I guess."

Probably not, Buffy thought, but she didn't volunteer that, either.

Just stood and waited for the sound of Willow's footfalls to reach the top floor before finally turning her attention to her husband. Who was dead now. Guess that made her a widow.

Well, at least they'd both had a turn at the title.

Apparently, Angel was just as eager for this conversation to be over as she was, for he broke the silence before she could. "You're you again?"

"Yeah. Me again." Buffy released a deep breath. "And you're a vampire again."

"Back to being your type. I don't suppose that means anything."

All right, so they weren't dancing around this. That should make things pretty straightforward. "I guess I deserve that," she said.

"You guess."

"What do you want me to say? Sorry? You and I both know that our problems had nothing to do with Spike."

He turned to look at her then, a flat smile on his face. "You really don't have to do this. I've already had this conversation with the other you. Too bad you didn't get to meet her. Or did you? I don't know how these things work."

"I owe it to you to tell you myself."

At that, something like real surprise flashed across his face. "You *owe* it to me?"

"Yes. Believe me, the past few days, I've had a lot of time to think about the things I did wrong. All things *us* is at the top of that list." Buffy edged forward, that preternatural *vampire* sense flaring all over again. It was funny how quickly she'd gotten used to its absence around him. How the sense itself, which had once been so familiar, once more felt new and foreign. "I know you know everything so I won't... I just wanted to thank you for what you did for Dawn. For me. That Lilah Morgan woman told me you insisted that they stop standing in the way of...well, everything, as part of the deal you took."

He said nothing. Gave away nothing. Back to being inscrutable Angel, one who didn't betray a thought if he could help it.

"When I heard that," she went on, "I thought it sounded more like you. The Angel I knew before."

"The man you fell in love with."

"Yeah. That one."

Angel held her gaze, unblinking. "The vampire."

It took her longer than it should have, piecing together what he was really saying. What he was asking. Heat rushed her face and she staggered a step or two back toward the stairs, not consciously at first, then very consciously. "You didn't... So I'd..."

"No. Can't say the thought didn't cross my mind though. The lack of pulse thing seems to do it for you."

"The being a partner thing is what does it for me."

"And he really gives you that."

"He does."

He nodded and looked away again. For a second, she thought he might argue. Saw that he wanted to, at least in part, but there was nothing left to fight for where they were concerned. He truly had already had these discussions, said these things. This was an unnecessary relationship autopsy.

If that hadn't been clear before, it certainly was the next second.

"I was a shitty human and a shittier husband. Never thought it'd end like this, though."

Neither had she. But then, the finish line she'd seen on the marriage had been the sort that moved. Anytime she got close, it would edge further back, and back, and back, which made her a pretty shitty wife, too, without even taking her affair into account. In the end, it had been fair to no one.

Yet in all the arguments they'd ever had, Angel had never once come close to this sort of introspection. That another Buffy had gotten him there was another thing that would probably rankle forever.

"That's...that's all I wanted to say," she said, not sure if it was. Honestly, standing there, she couldn't think of a single thing she'd had in mind to tell him when she'd made the call to come by. Just that it had seemed necessary to do it herself. Reinforce the thing the other Buffy had told him so it wasn't just a thing he'd heard—so he knew it was the truth. "I guess. We have a long drive ahead of us, so..."

Angel nodded once more, batted a hand toward the stairwell. "Thanks for coming. And for not trying to explain."

And that was somehow that. The next thing she knew, she was climbing back up the stairs, her spinning head attempting to make some sort of sense of the exchange. She wasn't sure what she'd expected. Anger, yelling, outrage—any of the scenes from the dissolution of her parents' marriage had certainly seemed fair game. She and Angel were a lot of things, but neat and tidy? No. Every bit of their relationship had been a mess. That its end was...

Well, it wasn't the end, was it? It was after the end. The end had taken place when she'd been somewhere else. The credits were rolling now and she was catching up, asking those around her what she'd missed. She didn't know whether she was upset or relieved and figured the answer was somewhere in the middle.

Maybe things would make sense after she'd gotten some rest.

Buffy stepped back into the office. Willow, Dawn, and Wesley were in the front, from the sound of things, talking about a recent case the firm had cracked. Spike was hovering by the office door where she'd left him, though. She'd known he'd be close. She also knew, the second their eyes met, that she wouldn't be getting any rest. Not with this thing still left to tell him. The worry of what came next. Knowing that he would forgive her didn't make it any better—she wasn't sure she could forgive herself.

While she'd given up, the other Buffy had tidily cleaned up the mess that was her life, then given it back to her.

"Slayer?"

She released a breath. She had just a little further to go. Just a little further.

She had to get home.

"Yeah," Buffy said. "I'm ready."

And god, she hoped it was the truth.

I LOVE YOU MORE THAN I HAVE
EVER FOUND A WAY TO SAY
TO YOU

THOUGH IT WAS LATE BY THE TIME THEY GOT IN, EVEN BY VAMPIRE standards, the bone-deep exhaustion Buffy would have expected under normal circumstances wasn't there. If anything, the more miles the DeSoto gobbled up between LA and home, the more awake she became. That she kept stealing glances at Spike and catching him doing the same didn't help. Her breath would seize and her heart would leap, and he'd know because he was Spike and there was nothing she could keep from him.

First stop upon coming into town was dropping off Willow, who had spent the bulk of the car ride split between making passive-aggressive comments about Spike's driving and trying to get Buffy to spill about her adventures in a parallel universe. Buffy hadn't taken the bait, though, beyond a few one-word answers that she knew would satisfy no one. The whole talk would come later—the debriefing with the gang, recounting where she'd been and what she'd learned—and she didn't really want to have to do it more than once.

But that wasn't the full of it. The first person she gave the story to needed to be Spike. He was the one who deserved it.

Spike knew that, too, the way he knew everything else. He ignored Willow's attempts to get him to start speculating with her, rather kept

his focus on the road and occasionally jerked the car unnecessarily just to scare the witch. She'd yelp and he'd smirk and for a moment, all would be calm. Then she'd start up again and the cycle would repeat itself.

Annoyed as he was, though, Spike knew to wait until Willow made it safely into her dorm hall before tearing away from the curb. Knew that Buffy would watch the shadows to make sure nothing fangy was on the hunt on the UC Sunnydale campus. It was such a *him* thing to do, and without asking, without thought, because he knew her so well.

Buffy bit her lower lip, willed herself to hold on just a little longer. Just a little.

Of course, *a little longer* was a double-edged sword, with time working in that curious way it did when there was something both dreaded and anticipated on the horizon—crawling in parts and speeding in others. The shock to the system Buffy had taken was still absolute, all-consuming, so when she realized that Spike was pulling up outside Revello Drive, she experienced a rush of panic completely divorced from logic. Panic that Angel was inside, might peek through the window and catch her with her lover, and she'd have to come up with a story on the fly to address the questions that would surely come. Not that Angel had ever suspected anything, as she'd learned, or would need much convincing to believe whatever lie she spun. But he would ask. He would always ask.

Except he wasn't there. He would never be there again. Angel was a couple hundred miles away, and it was over. There was no reason for Spike to sneak off in a hurry, no reason why he shouldn't accompany them up the drive and inside the house. Her future was one that didn't include checking the clock or listening for a telltale jingle of keys; never again would she rush her lover to the basement so he could make a quick escape before her husband walked through the door. This thing that had been just them, closed and secret, was now wide open. Her life to redesign as she saw fit.

The sensation was heady, exhilarating. It also scared the crap out of her. For all the ways she'd thought it'd come, that ever-moving date on the calendar, she could never have prepared for the reality of what it looked like.

She'd never thought she'd have to have a conversation with Spike, too, that she'd have to tell him about her time with another man. She'd never thought that anyone but Angel would be hurt when all truths were revealed.

God, in many ways, she was still just a child.

"Home!" Dawn cried, abandoning her suitcase to twirl her way across the entry hall. "I have never been so happy to see you in my life."

Neither had Buffy, which was a particularly odd sensation as this was a place she had done everything she could to avoid. Just a few days ago, it would have seemed impossible that she would ever glance into the living room, where she was so accustomed to seeing Angel camped in front of the television, and feel the urge to cry in relief. But that urge was there, gathering in her throat and pressing upon her lungs. Still, she knew it wasn't the house itself. Not really. It was that this place she had grown to resent so much looked right again—the missing lamps and pieces of art, the slight shift in the way the furniture was positioned, all of it reinforced that the day's events had truly happened. She was back where she belonged.

And Spike was there behind her, grazing his fingers lightly at the small of her back. Always there to give her soft encouragement and strength.

"I love you, house," Dawn was saying when Buffy clued back into the present. She blinked and turned, saw her sister with her arms wrapped around the staircase banister in an awkward hug only a teen could pull off. "I get it now, I do. Dorothy had it right. There is no place like home."

In spite of the war inside, Buffy couldn't help but smile. "There's really not," she said, an image of the crypt flashing across her mind. "I'm so sorry it took so long to get you here."

Dawn met her eyes, and there was a lot in there. Happiness and relief, as well as the shadows of what she had been through. Things Buffy imagined they would be discussing for days, maybe even weeks. The times before, when she'd let herself think about this moment—all those hours spent in the basement of the Magic Box, searching for something that wasn't there—she'd viewed Dawn coming home as the

finish line. That had been short-sighted. Naïve, even. Home was just the start. From here, they had to rebuild.

"Just happy to be here." Dawn slowly unwound herself from the banister. "And *way* too tired to get into any of this now. Let's put a pin in the sappy sister stuff until I've slept for at least twelve hours."

That sounded good to her, especially since Buffy wasn't sure she had more than one heavy talk in her now. Though she couldn't help herself from drawling, "Says the only one of us who got any sleep in the car," anyway. Older sibling prerogative.

"Bitter much?" Dawn replied, walking back to the door to collect her suitcase. "Not my fault *you* didn't have a big sister whose social life forced you to become a heavy sleeper."

Also not her fault that Buffy had been too wired to sleep, but she decided to keep that to herself. "I suppose that's fair."

Dawn paused at the foot of the stairs, gave her a look, likely surprised that Buffy wasn't snarking back in kind. But then that glimmer of teenage defiance softened, and in a quieter tone, she said, "Thanks for not being dead. Or in a different dimension. Or married to Angel anymore."

Buffy grinned in spite of herself. "Tell me how you really feel."

"I will after I've slept. Here's the preview: try to pick someone who doesn't suck next time, okay?" She shot a rather pointed look at Spike. "Just sayin'."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Please do." Again, Dawn darted her eyes to Spike, probably thinking she was being sneaky—like the vampire wouldn't know exactly what she was inferring. "Okay, well, I'm going to bed. As in *my* bed in *my* room. Spike?" She drew herself up. "I know it's technically not my decision, but as one half of Casa de Summers, you should stay here tonight. Sun's coming up soon anyway. It's the *least* we can do."

Yeah, her sister was as subtle as an anvil to the face. Dawn knew Spike was in love with Buffy—had ever since he'd shown up to rescue her from their father with nothing more than "it's what big sis would've wanted" as a motive. In fact, one of the first things Spike had confided in Buffy following the resurrection was that Dawn had

guessed how he felt and he hadn't had the heart or desire to lie when asked, torn apart by grief as he had been at the time. He hadn't known how she'd taken it, though, as doing more than acknowledging it had been too painful.

The way she'd taken it was to apparently start daydreaming scenarios where Spike became a permanent fixture around Revello Drive. And she had no idea how badly Buffy wanted that too.

"He can stay if he wants," Buffy said, trying to sound casual—like she wasn't afraid that he might not want to after she came clean—and made her way toward the stairs. "But hold on there. I need to put sheets on your bed before you get into it."

"Does my bed really need sheets?"

"Tell me in the morning when you're dishing out extra attitude because mattresses were made to be covered." Buffy started the climb to the second floor, then paused and looked over her shoulder. Knew that Spike was watching her, waiting, but her chest tightened when their eyes met all the same. "Can you stay?" she asked softly. "I have... We need to talk about some stuff."

"Ooh, stuff. Sounds boring," Dawn said, though without conviction. "If you're going to chew him out because Dad now knows you're the Slayer, I just gotta say that he's not the one who—"

"Dawn."

"I'm going, I'm going." Her sister shot Spike a look of her own—either in warning or in solidarity or hope, Buffy wasn't certain—then plodded the rest of the way up the stairs, as always doing her best to make sure every step was the sort that made the house shake.

Buffy waited until she disappeared down the hall before turning her attention back to her vampire. "Stay?" This time the word was a plea, and she knew he heard it.

"Really need to ask me that, pet?"

No, she supposed she didn't, though nothing felt very certain at the moment. She offered a short nod, licked her lips, then turned and closed the distance between herself and the landing. Knowing that he could hear her heart pounding, could taste her nerves—knowing all this and wanting to just bury herself in his arms and ask him not to ask. Or hear him tell her that it didn't matter what had happened, that

they were them and nothing—not Angel, not being ripped from their world and plopped into another, not even confessions of love to another version of himself—mattered at all. That and wishing so much that she had the letter she’d written him because she was certain he’d understand if he read it. If he saw the chaotic tumble her thoughts had taken, how her hope had died, even if his never had.

She found Dawn already halfway through her extremely sloppy rendition of making the bed, but supposed that with the hour being what it was and after the day they’d had, it was good enough.

“Stupid fitted sheet,” her sister muttered. “Doesn’t fit at all.”

“They never do,” Buffy agreed, seizing the end that had just come uncurled and tucking it under. “I’m pretty sure it’s a demon thing.”

“Would explain a lot.” Dawn straightened, picked up the bedding she’d gathered from the closet and dumped it at the foot of the mattress. “I know,” she said before Buffy could comment. “But just let me sleep and I’ll do this for real. That I did this much should earn me some brownie points.”

“It does,” Buffy replied, bringing up her hands. “No fight here.”

Dawn relaxed at that, gave her one of those rare grateful looks that Buffy hadn’t cherished enough before. Then she broke away, glanced toward the empty closet. The empty *everything*, as the whole room had been stripped down, packed and shipped off along with the rest of her. That, even more than her absence, had haunted Buffy the most. No evidence of her sister left behind—no place for her if she came to visit. Just gone.

“My room feels so big,” Dawn said quietly. “And all my stuff...”

“It’ll be here soon,” Buffy replied. “There’s just a lot for them to send.”

“I don’t care if he does.” Dawn’s voice hardened. So did her eyes. And for the first time since they had reunited, Buffy caught a glimpse of how much the past five months had worn on her. Realized that she wasn’t the only one who had been wearing a mask all day, waiting for the right time to take it off. “He can keep it. Give him something to remember me by.”

“Dawn—”

“I told him I wanted to come home. That there had been a

mistake. I can't tell you how many times I told him. But he wouldn't listen. Even after Spike was there. He said..." Tears, both of anger and exhaustion—that lethal combination—brimmed and spilled. "Did Angel tell you I begged him not to send me? That I could stay with Giles or Willow and Tara? That he could have the house and I wouldn't bother him? He told me I was being a child and that I belonged with family. Didn't even care that the family that mattered—"

"I'm so sorry," Buffy said, not surprised when Dawn answered with a glare. Because that was what this came down to, wasn't it? Good or bad, Angel had always been her decision, and it was a decision that had impacted more than just herself. It had shaped every aspect of Dawn's life in one way or another. "I know Angel... I know he thought he was doing the right thing."

But Dawn clearly didn't give a damn what Angel had thought, and Buffy couldn't blame her. It didn't matter that Angel had been in a spiral of his own, that her death—no matter how much he'd prepared for it—had still managed to catch him off guard. It didn't matter that his entire identity had been wrapped in his role as the vampire Buffy Summers had redeemed. That without her there, he was just another nobody among six billion others, only without the friendships he needed to survive. All those bridges he'd burned, the goodwill he'd used up either as a vampire or as a lousy husband or both, more than irrelevant. There had been a brief moment where he and Giles had been more or less united on Dawn's expendability, but Buffy liked to think that her watcher had realized how wrong he was after she'd taken the swan dive. Angel never had—he'd always seen it as Buffy choosing Dawn, choosing death, over living with him.

"You're right. Screw whatever Angel thought," Buffy said at last, moving toward the door. "And as far as Dad's concerned? If you want new stuff, we can get you new stuff."

"Are you gonna make Spike leave?"

She paused in the doorway, turned and caught the worry on her sister's face. "No. I need to talk to him. About...well, everything, I guess."

"He's in love with you."

Okay, hadn't been expecting that. "You think so?"

"Buffy, you didn't see him while you were gone. The way he... He's in love with you. That's why he came after me. He knew you'd be seriously mad that Angel had sent me to Dad."

She considered what to say—if there was anything to say. If she could look her little sister in the eye and pretend like all of this was brand new information. Worse, that she was unaffected by it. That her greatest fear now *wasn't* going downstairs and having to own the fact that she'd been in the middle of leaving Spike behind when he'd found her. And not, whatever she told herself, because she thought he wouldn't understand or would walk out of her life. Those fears were there but she knew they were irrational. That simply wasn't *her* Spike.

No, she worried about how much it would hurt him to know she hadn't had the faith in them that he had. Or maybe he already did know. Maybe that was the reason he kept shooting those looks her way, as though waiting for a bomb to detonate.

"Don't be mean to him about it," Dawn said as she settled against her pillows. "I just... He loves you. A lot. I know he's a vampire but—"

"Dawn. Get some sleep."

"You're not gonna be mean, are you?"

Buffy tried to find a smile, but her lower lip was wobbling too much to trust it to hold. "I won't be mean," she said. "Thank you for telling me."

"He's better than Angel."

She knew better than to take that bait. "Good night, Dawn," she said instead, switched off the light and stepped back into the hall.

That was it. Just the two of them now. Buffy waited a beat, resting her back against her sister's closed bedroom door, listening to the cadence of her thundering heart. She didn't know how to do this part. The speech she'd prepared when she'd gone to see the other world's Spike had been off the cuff, unplanned and rambling, her thoughts a disjointed mess. That she *had* already poured her heart out to the Spike downstairs didn't matter, for he hadn't read those words and never could. She was starting from scratch and she had no script.

Which was just unfair. The things she had to tell him had been easy to organize in writing—there had been no uncertainty, no second-

guessing, just bleeding her truths onto paper. Now she had to do it all again, only while looking at him while she spoke.

The hardest thing in this world is to live in it, she'd said once, and damn if she hadn't been on the money. Dying was a breeze in comparison.

Buffy felt numb as her legs carried her down the stairs—or not numb, but a close cousin. Rather like the pins and needles sensation that accompanied a limb on its way to being awake again after having been sat on for too long. Combined with that lingering tightness in her chest, the pounding pulse at her neck and temples, it was a wonder she wasn't just a shaking tangle of nerves by the time she turned into the living room. Or maybe that was exactly what she was. The look Spike gave her, all concern and a healthy dose of fear, made her feel even more naked than she did already.

"Lo," he said. He'd made himself at home on the couch—notably a space away from the indentation Angel had left behind—and now sat forward, his arms braced on his knees. "All that taken care of?"

"Yeah," she replied, and again tried for a smile. And again she knew she fell short. It had been a long while since she'd felt this awkward, this aware of herself in his presence, and she didn't like it one iota. It made her feel like someone other than Buffy—made *them* feel like something other than them. "I, uhh, think she might actually sleep."

Spike nodded, careful. His expression annoyingly neutral. "Probably needs it, day she's had."

"Yeah," she said again, no less lamely.

God, when had they turned into this? How could they turn back?

Spike must have been thinking the same—had to have been—for at length, he sighed a whole body sigh, his shoulders dropping like he was giving up some fight. "Right then. Gonna finally tell me what's bothering you? Why you've... Fuck, Slayer, you've barely looked at me since you got back."

"Dawn told me you're in love with me."

He arched an eyebrow. "Not exactly the answer I was hopin' for. Sorry if my bein' in love with you is a bother."

"What? No, Spike. I—" Buffy caught herself and winced. "I just meant... I don't know what I meant. She warned me not to be mean."

"Well, best you listen. Wouldn't do to cross the Nibblet."

She wasn't sure what about the words did it. Hell, maybe it wasn't the words—maybe it was the whole thing. The soft chide in his voice, the half-starved, half-terrified gleam in his eyes, all packaged in black leather and attitude. Whatever the cause, a dam inside her cracked and everything began rushing forward. “I wrote to you, you know. While I was over there, because I couldn't talk to you and there was so much to say. It was the longest letter in the history of our letters. At least on my end. Obviously you'll never get it. It got erased, I guess. That's how it happened, right? The other Buffy went back to the moment she made the wishes, so everything that happened over there while I was there *didn't* happen. So all the things I wanted to say to you are there. I had them, I wrote them down. But they're gone now.”

Just as quickly as she had started blabbing, she stopped, and the air hung thick with the absence of that chatter. Not made better by the inscrutable look he was giving her—the one that told her his guard was still well and fully up, perhaps as it never had been before. Her vampire who was always such an open book had closed himself off to her, and the knowledge broke her heart.

Finally, he nodded, and when he spoke, his voice was hoarse. “What'd it say? Your letter?”

“Mostly... I missed you.” Her eyes began to burn. “There was a lot in there but it came down to that. I missed you so much.”

“You have no bloody idea how much I missed you.”

“But... It wasn't... I wasn't good, Spike.”

“Bollocks.”

“I wasn't. You and the other Buffy—you kept looking. You kept trying to find ways to come home and then you did. I didn't. I gave up. They told me that it wasn't possible and I believed them.”

Spike narrowed his eyes and tilted his head. “Not sure what story you've been tellin' yourself,” he said, “but love, I gave up too. The both of us did.”

“You...you did?”

He nodded again, his face falling—the façade cracking enough to betray a glimmer of pure misery. “Needed tellin' twice for it to sink in. We went by Harris's after tearin' apart the shop lookin' for it. The paw, that is. Found out she—she bein' Buffy—had let Anya make off with

some of the goods, thought she might've taken it herself. Tell you, pet, I was ready to bloody beat it out of her. But she didn't have it. Told us even if she did, even if we found it, the sodding thing can't be destroyed and... I lost my head." Spike let out a deep breath and rubbed along the nape of his neck. "Don't remember much, to tell you the truth. Only it was how they pieced together that you were something to me. Good news there is your mates were right chuffed, accordin' to what Buffy said. Tells you how popular your husband is."

"Ex-husband." The word came out automatically, as though she and Angel had been officially separated for years rather than a handful of hours. That probably meant something.

And of course, Spike noticed. He gave a little huff. "Right. Nice and tidy, that."

"You're upset?"

"Not at all. Just easy, wasn't it?"

She wasn't sure if he meant it as a dig, but it felt like one all the same. Even so, it wasn't exactly like she could argue. Ending her marriage to Angel had been one of the simplest things she'd ever done. Something she might have discovered for herself if she hadn't been such a coward.

Regardless of how he'd meant it, Spike didn't let her stew on the matter for long before he started talking again. "Well, I decided right quick I wasn't gonna just believe that the bloody thing couldn't be destroyed. Always a way, right? Just needed to find it to suss out what to do. So we hunted down the bloke Rupert meant to buy it from. Coughed up a pretty penny and brought it home." Another beat. "Then the witches told us even if we managed to find a way to destroy it, wouldn't matter a lick. Not the right paw. And Red had been goin' on about findin' the other world, seein' if she could just open a door or summat. And—"

"And there were too many."

"Yours too, eh?"

"Willow went from being all confident to, well, not," she replied. "And the entire time I was writing to you. Giles... *Her* Giles... He tried a few other things. There was this mage that he knew from way back in the day. And he got in touch with Wesley. And the entire time I was

thinking... God, I don't even know how to explain what I was thinking. Of all the things I did wrong."

"Buffy—"

"Mostly with you. With us. A year, Spike. I let it go on for a year. And you let me let it go on." A couple of the tears she could no longer hold back slid down her cheeks, burning hot. She relished the burn, the thrill that came with that pain. Anything was better than numb. "And look how easy it was. This thing I had built up and it was so easy. You would never have made me leave him, would you? Given me an ultimatum? You would've just..."

But she couldn't choke out the words, and he didn't rush to respond—something she found terrifying and reassuring in equal measure. Also not surprising. Spike didn't lie to her, not even when she hoped he would. It was one of the ways she knew that when he spoke, she was getting the truth as he saw it. No matter how ugly that truth might be.

"If what you're askin' is if I'd leave, answer's no," he said. "As far as ultimatums? Wouldn't do that to you. Wouldn't put that on you."

"You'd just let me continue having an affair with you and going home to sleep by my husband?"

"Yeah. Sounds about right."

"That's... God, Spike, don't you see how messed up that is?"

"Yeah. And?" Spike stared at her, all brash defiance, and she saw at last there was some anger in his eyes. She also saw it was not the anger she deserved—more anger that she'd even ask such a question to begin with. "Know you love me at least, don't I? That's more than I've had before. Dru... Bless her black little heart, she couldn't love me the way—"

"So you'd be okay with it because I love you?"

"Okay?" Now he rose to his feet, his nostrils flared, his legs spread, his hands balled into fists at his side. His battle pose whether or not he recognized it. "Of course I'm not okay with it! I've never been *okay*, Slayer. You think this is anythin' I haven't thought before? That I haven't bloody tormented myself picturin' the two of you together?"

"I—"

"Know it's been a minute since he last got in your knickers, but he gets to be here with you when I'm not. Gets to touch you whenever he likes. Snog you in front of your mates and more. Fact that he's been a right prat and lost sight of what he has doesn't matter a lick, 'cause he's *still here*." He broke off, his chest heaving with deep breaths that almost bruised the air. "Bein' with you like this is... I love it. I love *you*. I love that I have you the way you let me. I *hate* that it's not more than that. I always have. But if the choice is have you like this or not at all? Buffy, you know—"

"But that's not the choice. That's not. Angel's gone. He's gone. And I—"

"He's gone because *she* told him. The other you."

And there it was—the thing she'd hoped he wouldn't say but had known he would. The ugly truth, as it were. Angel was gone. They'd had this neat, tidy breakup and she hadn't been a part of it. That she and Spike were standing here in her living room, talking about their relationship within earshot of her sister, not worried that someone might come through the door and interrupt them at any time, was courtesy of someone else.

"I know." A fresh rush of tears spilled down her cheeks. It was all coming out now—every bit. The things she'd thought while living in the other world, her resentments and regrets. She felt all of it swelling from inside, pressing against her skin, and she couldn't stop it. "I know. Which means I'll never get to. You think I don't know I've been a coward? You think I *like* coming home to... Every second I was there, in that world, all I could think about was how bad I've messed up. How many chances I had to tell him it was over that I just didn't. That you might never know how much I... That I love you as much as I do because of it. All I wanted was to come back and do it right. And now I can't because she did it for me."

The anger in his eyes faded, the lines that defined his face relaxing—all of him relaxing. And she wasn't sure she wanted him to. That she was ready, or deserving, of the part where he would kiss her and hold her and tell her it was all right because it was the furthest thing from all right. All these things the other Buffy had done for him in her absence, could he ever trust that *she* would have been

more than talk? And could she blame him if the answer to that was no?

No, she couldn't.

"That was my biggest fear," Buffy said, shaking harder still. "More than never coming back. Even more than what happened to Dawn... I knew you'd take care of her. And I know she knows how much I love her. But you?"

"Buffy—"

"I never gave you the thing you wanted most. Someone else did."

Again, he didn't reply immediately, and this time it wasn't terror and reassurance. It was something much harder, less forgiving. Something like heartbreak.

"You're right. Someone else did give me what I wanted most." Spike stepped forward again, close enough to breathe in. "There was a choice, see. A choice to be made. Like I was tellin' you, Slayer, we *didn't* find a way back on our own. The bloody law firm came to us and made the deal. And that Buffy could've said no. Thought about it—I know she did. But she knew what I wanted more than anything, and she gave it to me." Spike inhaled. He was right against her now, almost touching her but not. Then, *yes*, touching her, his brow to her brow, and she felt how hard he shook. "If you need me to spell the rest out, gonna think that trip warped your pretty little noggin."

She heard what he was saying, felt it too. Felt how much he meant every word, but also still that terrible distance she wasn't sure how to bridge. That he could stand there against her, as close as he was and yet somehow also far away. It was within her, that distance. The rest that she needed to give him, confess. Beyond the failures he knew about and onto the ones he didn't. But that was a tall order, too, especially when he was there. Right there. When she could feel him and how easy it would be for the gap between them to grow.

Buffy shook her head as she stifled a sob, or tried to. "I'm so sorry."

"Not a thing to be sorry for." Spike kissed one cheek, then the other. "You're right here. And no, love, I don't think that you would've kept on with him forever. Never did. Just didn't know when it would break, you know?"

"But—"

"Bloke's just gotta be patient. Can't expect you to turn everythin' over all at once. Your mum was sick when we—"

"I know, but—"

"And there was a hellbitch huntin' down little sis. Then Joyce... She was gone. Does a funny thing to you, losin' your mum. Even if you go about it my way."

Buffy pressed her lips together, trembling so hard she felt it echo through him. That he would even mention his mother when she knew—

"Hurt like nothing's ever hurt when you went back to him," Spike went on, cupping the back of her head as though to keep her from moving away. "But I knew, Slayer. I knew you'd come back to me. Knew you loved me even if you didn't. And when you did, it was bloody bliss. That you couldn't cut him out then, I understood that too. Needed all your focus on the fight."

"Spike—"

"And then when you were gone..." He shuddered and closed his eyes, then opened them. "Gave me a taste of what life was like without you. Not somethin' I'm keen to do over. So if it meant waiting until we could bring the Bit home, then I'd sodding wait."

"You're just repeating my excuses."

"Doesn't mean they aren't right."

"But there would've always been an excuse. There's always a reason not to do something."

His mouth twitched. "Maybe. But it wouldn't have lasted, love. I know you. Eventually you would've wanted more. Would've wanted to be out of the dark. Wanted to do this proper."

Buffy drew in a breath that was all him—her Spike. Her Spike who had waited for her, and likely would have forever. Her Spike who she'd been desperate to return to just so she could share more moments like this, have a chance to make things right. Still on one side of a chasm she couldn't seem to close, held in place by the fear of what came next.

And he could tell she was holding something back. She knew it. Felt it in the way he shook, heard it in the gasp of her name, and when he took her mouth, she felt it there too. The brushes of his lips were tentative at first, soft and exploratory, as though he thought she might

shove him away. Not even the passion of the first kiss they'd shared, all hot and urgent and in a rush of more. This kiss almost seemed like a plea for permission, or maybe reassurance. More of what she couldn't quite give him but wasn't strong enough to deny, either.

But something happened when Spike kissed her—always did. The corners of her mind became blurry, making it damn near impossible to see the difference between want and duty. That she was just a few hours away from a time she'd thought she'd never be here again, never experience this again, forced aside everything else. And he felt that too, for he was suddenly kissing her for real—as only he could. All passion and longing, hunger and need, and even knowing she shouldn't, she melted into him, seizing his shoulders to hold herself steady. Trying not to dissolve at the feel of his lips against hers, his taste on her tongue again—the full Spike. *Her* Spike, and his frustration and anger and despair and fear and yes, there was relief as well. So much relief. It came through in every stroke, every small whimper that scratched at his throat, the way he pressed his fingers into her skin as though he could hold her here against him forever. She wished he could, wanted him to try. This was where she belonged.

But she couldn't have it—couldn't take it. Not until he knew. That while he and the other Buffy had been making a deal, she had been doing something else.

The thought didn't pack the punch it had wielded before, which lent her pause as she wasn't sure why at first. Buffy stilled, placed a hand on Spike's chest to push him back. Give her room to breathe. And once she did, it didn't take long for the answer to come to her.

"Mmm," he murmured, nearing again. He kissed the corner of her mouth and along her lower lip. "Was enjoyin' that."

"You said that the firm came to *us* with the deal. She—the other Buffy, she was with you? And there was a choice?"

Spike froze. Not long but long enough for all of her to seize. After a beat, he pulled away—not just from her mouth but from her. A full step, then two.

"What was the choice, Spike?"

There was nothing for another long moment. He just regarded her with another of those unreadable looks—the sort she was coming to

hate. Then he sighed, and the sigh was defeat. "I need to give you something," he said, reaching inside his duster pocket. "And you tell me, yeah?"

A bassline set up shop in her head, every thump making her temples pound. Buffy's throat ran dry, her gaze fixed on the progression of the tangle of folded pages that slid out of his pocket. For a wild second, she thought it might have been her letter—the one she'd written and left in a time that had been erased. The glimpses of handwriting she caught were familiar enough, and it wasn't like crazier things hadn't happened. But it wasn't her letter, and she knew it, knew before he handed it to her. Felt it the way she'd felt that deep, intrinsic tie to Dawn, that certainty that they were connected and meant to be so. It was an odd thing to feel about a few folded sheets of paper but no less true because of it. Much like Dawn, whatever was written there had the power to change her life.

Buffy licked her lips, which had chapped in the last few seconds. "What's it say?"

"Dunno," he replied, pushing the letter into her hands.

"You...you haven't read it?"

"Promised her I wouldn't. Not until after you."

And Spike kept his promises. Especially when made to people he loved.

She inhaled sharply, so much so she felt a corresponding jab in her lungs. Until now, the other Buffy had lived as a sort of phantom in her head. Someone whose presence was felt but never seen, and could therefore be ignored. Only there was no ignoring this. There was a letter and Spike couldn't tell her what it said. He hadn't read it because he'd promised. That other Buffy had been here and made him promise something to her, and he'd done it.

Buffy shoved back the noise in her head and forced herself to read.

Dear Beatrice,

I know you probably hate me. I don't blame you. Believe me, I am all with the self-hate. Not as much now as I was when I first got here, but enough. That's not to make you feel sorry for me, by the way. You shouldn't. I did a dumb thing and you paid the price.

I've been sitting here, trying to figure out how to tell you the things I need to tell you. The most important thing, though, is something you already know but should probably hear anyway.

He loves you. He loves you so much. He's missed you, cried for you, done everything he thought to bring you home. He's hated me because I took you from him. He threw me out when I tried to force him to love me too. I mean really force. I essentially—

"What?" Buffy blurted, the paper crinkling between her fingers.

"What?" Spike frowned, leaned forward to catch a peek. "What—"

"She *raped* you?"

To her utter bewilderment and growing horror, he groaned and slammed back on his heels, rolling his eyes like the whole thing was ridiculous. "Bloody hell, she had to include that?"

"What the *hell*, Spike?"

"Look, it wasn't like that. Bitch brassed me off, yeah. She was stayin' at the crypt—couldn't stay here so she came to me. Put her on one side of the bed and took the other. Knew she felt somethin' for me but that didn't matter. She'd made it bloody clear that Angel was her one and sodding only." Spike snickered and shook his head, still so cavalier her ears rang. "And more to the point, I wouldn't touch her. She didn't love me. She wasn't *you*. 'Cept when I woke up with you in our bed, your scent all around me, parts of me didn't clue in."

God, maybe she didn't want to hear this. But she couldn't do anything—say anything. Just stared at him and waited for the worst to come out.

"Once I remembered she wasn't you, I shoved off. She... Hell, love, she was goin' through a lot. Just wanted a bit of cold comfort and she knew how much I... Well, she was you, yeah? Knew I loved you. Loved *her* because she was you. Was Buffy." He exhaled, gave her a cautious look—if he wanted a reaction to that, he wasn't going to get one just yet—then said in a rush, "So she tried to suck me off. Thought she could change my mind if she did. Didn't get far but—"

"Oh my god."

"She got it in her head that she'd raped me and—"

"Spike, she *did* rape you."

"Look, I'll tell you what I told her. Been raped a time or two. Didn't feel anything like what she—"

"Tell me whatever you want. That doesn't change the fact that she raped you."

Something in him snapped, his eyes flashing yellow for a wild second—the way they did right before he lost his control for good. "Yeah, maybe she did. But it happened to *me*, didn't it? Wager I get to call it whatever the hell I feel like callin' it. And if you wanna dole out punishment, pet, it's a mite late for that. She got there first."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means I caught her just before she blew her bloody brains out."

Buffy stumbled, no less surprised than she would have been if he'd hit her. It felt like he had. "What?"

He nodded as though vindicated, as though delighting in her shock. "That's right. Tossed her out. Sent her home. Angel wasn't here—off in LA gettin' all this in motion, is what he told her. I came after her, knew she'd be thinkin'... Hell, I dunno what I thought, but I know *you*, don't I? Meant I knew her too. Also knew she couldn't stay here with him. That it was all a mistake and god knows I've done worse. Found her up in your bedroom with Angel's bloody shooter under her chin. I swear, love, if I'd waited a second..."

If he'd waited a second there might not have been a Buffy to come back to. Buffy might have died here in this house, just a few feet up. The thought of death itself was not one that frightened her—been there, done that—but not that way. Never *that* way. Not even at her lowest had that ever been an option. Death was rest but life was fighting and she was alive now, and that meant fight. No matter how hard it was, the days that seemed to last for months, the moments that threatened to drown her. But she'd drowned before, too.

The picture she'd constructed of this other Buffy over the past few days hadn't been flattering—had been downright hateful at times. Easier to think about her as a separate entity. That's what she was, after all, right? Only their paths had been so similar. By virtue of the one or two small variances, that might have been her life. And what would life have looked like now if she'd been convinced she was alone in a world that didn't want her? Where even Spike, whose devotion to

her had shone through bright and clear, had turned his back on her? She knew that the other Buffy had cut herself off from her friends as much as she had. That even Giles hadn't known about Heaven, and Dawn had felt sidelined and neglected.

She'd wished herself someplace better only to lose the few comforts she had. And Spike, being Spike, had worn that the same way he wore everything else he considered one of his failures. The same way she wore hers. It was clear he still did.

Buffy blinked, shaking herself out of those thoughts. She found herself stranded between wanting to step forward, touch him, get him to look at her, and wanting to keep reading. Bask in the evidence that the other Buffy *hadn't* killed herself, had found enough strength to keep moving forward. Also wanting to tear the damn letter up, say enough was enough. Declare she didn't care and it didn't matter, whatever nebulous *it* the letter was building toward. There were more important things, right? The here and now. This reality, the one where she was back and Angel was gone and Dawn was likely perched at the top of the stairs, listening to all this and drawing the sort of conclusions—the right conclusions—that Buffy had spent the last year hoping she'd never reach. She had enough of her own problems and no desire to carry the weight of anyone else's. Even another version of herself.

But that was selfish and cowardly, and she'd been that already. So Buffy lowered her gaze, searched until that hateful word—*rape*—jumped out at her, and started reading once more.

He doesn't see it that way (you know Spike, he's nothing if not stubborn) but that's what I did. I saw how much he loved you and I was you, so it should be easy, right? But I didn't feel that way for him, or I didn't know I did. I was trying to take advantage of how he loves you to be you. I really wanted to be you.

He made it clear. There is only one Buffy for him. Which is why he thinks there's a chance that you might hate him now.

"You think I hate you?" Buffy asked before she could stop herself, though she wasn't sure why. Being that she was neither an idiot nor particularly naïve—at least not anymore—she couldn't say she didn't

know where that nebulous *it* was heading after all. That she hadn't known from the start. Since the first *we* he'd uttered that hadn't referred to the two of them.

She'd written a letter to him meant to justify loving another Spike. It made sense that she would, in other circumstances, write a letter to herself to explain how it was Spike had come to love another Buffy.

"Dunno," Spike replied, his voice strained. He still had his back to her. "Do you?"

"Do you have to ask me that?"

"Reckon any man in my position would."

And that was it. The last bit of uncertainty fell away, and she saw everything clearly. The reticence in how Spike looked at her, the edge in his voice, in his gaze. The desperate way he'd kissed her just moments ago. Not her—not *her*, but him. Because he was terrified for the exact reason she was terrified.

Somehow, worlds apart, they'd managed to take the same steps. Make the same choices. And as a result, they had the same fear.

In any other circumstance, she might have laughed. She decided to read instead.

I didn't know I loved him when I got here. Obviously, I asked for your life and that was what the paw gave me, in the way only it could, I guess. I think I needed to see that, what it would be like if things had worked out with Angel. Spike told me stuff I didn't want to hear, didn't believe until Angel confirmed it. If you've been in my world, you know my Spike (maybe more than I want to think about) and you've probably guessed we're not together. That probably also makes no sense to you. There was just so much of him I didn't see before coming here and being around a Spike who loves me but wasn't trying to win me.

I know you'll hate to hear it, but I owe you. A lot. I got to fall in love all over again and it was so totally unlike anything I had before. But it was never mine. Not even after he believed there was no way to get you back and I told him I loved him. He loved me because I'm Buffy, but he never stopped wanting you. And I know that he's not going to miss me and I'm okay with that. Really. I like knowing how much he loves me, how deep that is and how it's just me, even if there are other me's around. What I love most is that I have that to make my own when I get back.

I can't tell you what to do, Other Buffy, but I can tell you what would be stupid to do, and that's to hold Spike's love for you, for us, against him.

But I don't think you will, because you're not stupid, and if that's a little self-serving to say then, well, fine. Spike has very definite ideas about what it is to be faithful to someone, and he was 100% faithful to Buffy. Most of the time that Buffy was you. It only wasn't you when he didn't think it could be anymore.

Well. That was certainly comforting.

The first time we were together, he didn't know anything had happened. I was at the Bronze and had just found out about Giles and he pulled me into the dark and helped me forget. I freaked out. Then he found out I wasn't you and freaked out even more.

Buffy lowered the letter again, scoffing before she could stop herself. They really had followed each other's lead. Him at the Bronze, she at his place. Neither slowing down long enough to ask—just going for it, taking. The way they always took each other.

The next time we were together was after we both thought there was no way back. I watched him break twice, learning that. The first time he refused to believe it. The second time he knew he had to. And in the time between those breaks was when I realized that I'm in love with him. But even then he never let go of you.

She was in another crypt, standing opposite a Spike who was and wasn't her Spike, her hand cramping from having finished the longest letter she'd written, her heart broken but desperate to mend all at the same time. Looking at him and trying hard to see the Spike who was in front of her, trying to fool herself into thinking something she knew she didn't. Despite everything, loving the other Spike all the same, for they *were* the same. The same but not. And she'd needed him so much. Needed to believe she could still have him.

I think he wanted to believe that you and me really are the same (and I know

we are but we also aren't and this is just all kinds of confusing) but there was just so much you that wasn't me that he couldn't ignore. Right before we made the deal with the lawyers, Spike found your notes. The ones he wrote you, that you kept in the nightstand (I busted the box, by the way. Sorry. Got nosy). I think he realized then just how much not you I am and that he couldn't pretend. And after we had the deal in place, we stopped being together. I'd say he stopped being mine, but he never really was. It was all about you.

If you've made it this far, thank you. I know that wasn't easy. I also know I'm the last person in the world to ask anything of you, but hey. I'm feeling all kinds of bold.

Please don't keep him in the dark. I know how much you love him. I don't think he does, though. And he deserves to.

Be good to him, Beatrice. And thank you for everything.

- Buffy

That was it. She'd reached the end. Buffy stared at the loopy scrawl of her own signature, not realizing she was crying until the words became blurry and distorted, the *B* dragging off to the left as her tear skated near the edge of the page.

Something had been building inside of her as she read—a surge of conflicting emotions pushing higher and higher until there was nowhere to go but down again, hard and fast, the resulting crash leaving her fragmented, stranded amid disjointed pieces of thought and reaction. It was never easy. Never had been for them. They'd discovered they weren't enemies anymore at the wrong time; learned that they actually liked each other at the wrong time. They had come together at the wrong time, broken up at the wrong time; she'd told him she loved him at the wrong time, and they'd both given up at the wrong time. Or maybe just the right time too. It was easier and harder, knowing that. Knowing that Spike had been no less lost than she had been. That he had come to the same conclusions she had. That while she'd been agonizing over her feelings for a man who was him but wasn't, he'd likely been doing the same. No, *had* been doing the same. She knew that. Aside from the fact that it was there, right there in the letter the other Buffy had left for her, she knew *him*.

Now all that was left was how to move forward.

"Can you..." Buffy stopped, cleared her throat and tried again. "Can you follow me please?"

Spike tensed even further, but he sighed and nodded, then turned. His eyes full, so full, and she saw what she hadn't seen before, too blinded by her own worry and fears to give it any consideration. As terrified as she'd been to tell him, he'd been even more so. He still was.

God, what a pair they were.

Buffy spun around and walked out of the family room, to the entry hall—not missing the hard *thud* of a door being forced shut, and filing a discussion with Dawn away on her to-do list because there would undoubtedly be questions—then to the basement door. She opened it and started down the stairs without a word, and he followed. There at her heel, closing the door behind them, encasing them in shadow.

She didn't wait. Just twisted back to face him and blurted, "You were with her."

"Buffy—"

"More than that, you loved her."

It was dark, but not so dark that she couldn't see his face, or the torment stretched across it. "She was you," he said. "And you were... I thought you were..."

Gone. The word hung between them, half-excuse and half-plea.

"I know what you thought," Buffy said, stepping toward him. "I thought... God, I don't know what I thought. The lights went off and the Magic Box looked right. Like it had before. Just...*poof*. And Giles... He was there. I thought it was magic. A spell or something. That everything was just fixed. Maybe I should've realized what happened right away but I didn't. Even though I was holding the damn paw. But I hadn't... I was never going to use it." A pause. "Except it does the whole Jedi mind trick which I guess you know about, so maybe I would have used it after all. But that was never my intent."

"Yeah. Learned about that the night after we tracked it down. Same night the witches told us it was useless. That I'd lost you." He breathed then, the sound uneven. "Have I lost you, love?"

There it was. The heart of the matter. The thing they had both been dancing around.

Buffy pressed her eyes closed and steeled herself. Hoping she could

get through this without losing her composure. "You didn't do anything I didn't do. The first thing I did when I saw you—the other you—was jump your bones. I didn't realize until after... Something just clicked in my head, that it was more than just regular magic. And every second after that I spent trying to get back."

For something she'd dreaded telling him, saying the words aloud felt strangely anticlimactic. But she didn't miss the pain that flashed across his face, the same that lingered as he tried to tug his mouth into a grin. "Good to know, that. Wasn't sure you'd want to come back."

"What?"

"Well, everyone kept pointin' out how cheery things were on the other side. No Angel, the Nibblet home safe and sound, your watcher. Even had a bloke over there off his top in love with you. No reason to—"

"You thought that? You thought I could just...step in? Take her place?"

"Situation like this, fella doesn't know what to think."

"Spike, I don't care how many worlds there are, there's only one you. Being with him... I *was* with him. Right before the switch happened, I was with him. But I wanted to come home so much. I was doing what I thought... I thought I'd never see you again."

The pain faded just as quickly, and he was stepping even closer, nodding, his eyes bright and eager. "Me too. Bloody gutted me."

"But you loved her."

He flinched. "I wanted to believe it could be... That she..."

"I wanted that too." They had spent so much time wanting each other, wanting the same thing, doing the same thing. If he didn't see the humor in the situation, she didn't know what to tell him.

But there was more to it than that.

"Had a big talk, me and her," he said before she could say more. "Was doin' all right, pretending for a bit. Like my bloody soaps, you know? Girl gets conked on the head, forgets all and starts over. Same person, just doesn't have the memories to match. Made it a couple days like that before I found bits of you and it came down again, that you were really gone." He pressed his eyes closed, his face a mask of pain. "We had it out. Or started to have it out. Thing of it was, pet, much as

I wanted to fool myself, she never did. Not once. You were here with us, between us, the whole bloody time. And when that lawyer slag showed up, said she could get you back... When she told me you'd been tryin' to find your way back, that you wanted home..."

Buffy blinked against the swelling sting in her own eyes, stepped forward and ran her hand along the back of his neck, needing to touch him. "You really thought I wouldn't?"

"Hoped you would. Hoped... Fuck, Slayer, much as it hurt, I hoped you'd do what made you happy. Knew if the bloke over there was anything like me, he'd cross oceans to do just that. Once it was out, though? Didn't much care what the price was. Wanted you back but I also..." Spike rattled off another breath, this one deep. "Can't say I wasn't a bloody coward."

She let her arm fall back to her side. There were a lot of ways to describe Spike—and not all of them good—but *coward* was something she'd have never put on the list.

He must have seen that on her face, for he nodded and continued. "First thought I had was you'd kick me to the curb. Would have to tell you, wouldn't I? That I'd been with another girl, no matter that the girl was you. That was how it started, yeah? You and me, 'cause of what happened with the other slayer and darling Angel."

"Spike, what happened with Faith is nothing like this. At all. You didn't think someone else was me—"

"I did, though. The first night. Shagged her in a bloody closet not realizin'—"

"But I did that too. And I had...*way* more reasons to think something was up than you did. And it wasn't like I switched bodies with someone who is clearly not me. And this?" She held up the letter, the pages crinkling. "She said that you turned her down. Repeatedly. That she *raped* you because you said no. That the only time you were with her was after she realized she loved you."

It was such a strange thing to say—stranger still to hear herself saying it. Buffy wasn't sure she would ever wrap her mind around how Spike could love someone who had done to him what the other Buffy had done. Cut and dried as he claimed the situation hadn't been, packed with all sorts of nuance she couldn't see because she hadn't

been there. Though it did drive home something that she'd already known—that Spike's love truly was unconditional in a way few others could claim. That knowledge was heady, more than a little intimidating...and a little bit scary.

He knew that she had that in her, the ability to do things like what the other Buffy had done. She had to, otherwise it wouldn't have happened. But then she heard his response to the thought, in her head if not aloud. That *she* knew what *he* was capable of, the crimes he *had* committed, and she loved him just the same. Put in those terms...

"She started lookin' at me different, after everything," Spike said, bringing her back to him. "More the way you do. Wagered she was feelin' something—told her as much. She even said if it turned out she was stuck here, she'd leave Angel. Didn't really believe it, truth be told. Whole reason she was here in the first place was she wished for him, right? Not the kinda thing you give up all that quick."

Buffy supposed it wasn't. That was, of course, unless one realized the thing they had wished for didn't really exist. Then things would happen quickly.

She still believed in what she'd told the other Spike—that the other Buffy had been in love with him, or close to it, even if she hadn't realized it. And without having lived through a bad marriage, it made sense, loath as Buffy was to admit it, the only thing holding her back would have been that dangling *what if* where Angel was concerned. Daydreaming about what might have been and living its reality could change a person's tune really fast. Add to the fact the other Buffy had only been a tourist in the marriage, and she'd probably felt a bit more empowered to ask for a refund. She had none of the baggage to carry, none of the excuses. Hell, she'd created a whole universe just by making a few wishes. There had to be a sense of nonreality along with the reality. A recipe she had thrown together that hadn't tasted the way she'd thought it would. Why not continue to tinker with the ingredients until the result was satisfying?

He must have taken her silence for something other than contemplation, for the next second he was talking again, the words coming fast. "Didn't have much time to wrap my lobes around what that bitch

had offered before you—before the other Buffy was draggin’ me downstairs to talk it out.” He barked a laugh, the pitch high, almost manic. “She told me she was gonna take it and I was...terrified.”

“Terrified?”

“At how...how much I wanted it. I’d talked a bloody good game, but the second I saw a way back to you, I wanted it. Made me realize everything I’d told her was rot.” He laughed again, tragic and broken, and pressed his palm against his brow. “She told me that I didn’t live in a world where Buffy didn’t love me, and I clung to that. Would’ve clung to it forever, I reckon.”

“And what would’ve happened if she’d decided to stay?”

That seemed to startle him out of whatever train of thought he’d lost himself inside. Spike shook his head and frowned. “What do you mean?”

“She loved you. She could’ve decided to stay.”

“Don’t reckon so. Virtue of her bein’ Buffy Summers, she was always gonna leave. Only choice she could’ve made.”

“But if—”

“What you’re askin’ is what *I* would’ve done. Probably would’ve mucked with my head a good bit. I *did* love her, Buffy. The fact that she was you meant I couldn’t help but love her. Same way you loved the other bloke, yeah?” Spike didn’t wait for a response—he didn’t need to. She had already told him. “But if I knew you were out there tryin’ to get home to me, there’s no bloody way I would’ve sat on that. No choosing her over you. Could never be for her what she deserves while devoted to you, no matter how much of her *was* you.”

“That is the most screwed-up sentence I’ve ever heard.”

He flashed her another of those tragic little grins. “All I have, love. So I guess you gotta tell me now if I fucked it up for good.”

The silence that followed was of the loud variety, as was often the case with silences involving Spike. Buffy just looked at him, not trying to figure out what he was saying—she knew what he was saying—but not understanding it all the same. Today had been an exercise in emotional torment, both in what she’d lost and what she’d decided to build, then the fear of what that decision might have cost her. Through it all, she had never believed that Spike would walk away from her if he

learned what she'd done. She'd known his love was the permanent kind, that hurt was something he'd come to expect from relationships and it hadn't once shaken his loyalty. And somewhere in the series of wrong turns she'd taken where he was concerned, she'd managed to take for granted the one turn she'd always thought she'd gotten right.

By the time they walked out of this basement, she promised herself, there would be no more of that doubt. None. That ended now.

"Spike," she said, stepping forward, into the circle of him, "I'm done doing the coward thing. This time yesterday, I would have given *anything* to be standing where I am right now. I never thought I would be again. You made the exact same choices as I did. Have *I* fucked up for good?"

He shook his head, as she'd known he would. "Can't say I love knowin' it, but I'd want that for you. If it couldn't be me, let it be some other me."

"Yes," Buffy said, holding his gaze. "If it can't be me. But...let's not do that again, okay? I don't ever want to do that again."

"Never," he breathed. Then his eyes were on hers. That open, wondrous look she loved so much. The one he'd given her the first time she'd surrendered and thrown herself at him—want and disbelief mingled with hope and the fear of hope. "This mean you're still mine? You forgive me?"

The space between them was scant. She closed what was left.

"As much as you forgive me."

"Nothin' to forgive, pet."

"Right," she said. "*Right*."

A sound between a moan and a sob burst off his lips, and she swallowed it—swallowed him—and he swallowed her right back.

Every moment they'd had before now had been stolen. Snippets she got to live outside of herself and the choices that had built the world she lived in. Existing but not—not entirely. And sure, she might not have been the one to have broken free of that but it was hers now. What happened here and tomorrow and the day after that and all the days after that.

Buffy tore her mouth from his with a gasp, rolling her head back as he began peppering her neck with biting kisses. And something inside

of her snapped—something inside of him, too. She barely had time to blink before her top was gone, pitched into the shadows on the far side of the basement. The uncertainty and fear inside of her had morphed into need, a thirst she hadn't felt in a long time. The sort that had sent her to him in the first place, that had started her on this journey she'd never thought she'd take. They clashed and tumbled over each other much as they had that first night, unable to touch and taste everything but trying all the same, all the while racing in the sport of seeing who could get who undressed the quickest. Spike tugging at her pants. Buffy pulling at his belt. Spike shoving her against a wall and yanking her slacks down her legs. Buffy kicking off her shoes and fumbling with his fly. Spike tearing off his own shirt before pulling at her bra. Not one of the better ones, thankfully—apparently the other Buffy had dressed today conscientious of what might happen to the clothes later on. But Spike surprised her, reaching around and working that quick magic with his fingers. Drawing the fabric along her arms, the cool basement air flirting with her nipples, then finally his fly was down and his jeans were bunched at his thighs, his cock hard and familiar in her hand.

"Fuck," Spike moaned, pressing his brow against hers. Cupping her, grinding the heel of his palm against her clit as he pushed his fingers inside her and moaning again. Muttering about heat and how wet she was, nearly choking with emotion and more than that. But there was a time for foreplay and this wasn't it. Not now. Not after what they'd been through.

He knew, of course, or maybe he felt it too. For he was there, teasing his dick up the soaking folds of her sex, growling when she whimpered and whimpering himself when she dug her nails into his arms. Nudging her clit with the head of his cock in that playful way of his, his gaze fixed on her face, eyes seeming to flare at every gasp that tore through her lips. Starved and addicted in equal measure, drinking her in as he always did.

"What do you want, baby?" he asked, his breath cool along her hot skin. "Be a love and tell me."

He kissed her again before she could begin to form a reply, hard and hungry, still teasing her with his cock, and that was it. All she could take. There would be time enough later to savor him fully.

Stretch him out on a bed—not the one upstairs, but their own—and work her mouth up and down the lines of his body. Revel that it was him, *her* Spike, that the goodbye she'd thought was forever had been nothing but a wink. Bring him close enough to the edge without giving, curl her tongue in places she knew drove him wild. But that time was not this time. This time, their need was even, so she would be a little selfish.

"I want you," Buffy whispered against his mouth before she caught his lower lip between her teeth. She nibbled, sucked, and tugged, and grinned when he whimpered. "Just like this." Then she arched, her back dragging up against the wall, and he was there, his cock nudging the mouth of her pussy, then inside of her, his flesh parting her flesh, filling her, bringing her home.

"Fuck yes," Spike gasped into her mouth and dropped his hands to her hips. Groaned when she wrapped her legs around his waist, her ankles crossed under his ass, helping her leverage her strength to pull him deeper into her, the air around them heavy with their mingled breaths and the wet slide of him burying himself to the hilt. She had a second to appreciate the sensation for what it was—Spike inside of her, a part of her, before he began to move. Shallow strokes at first, as though he were unwilling to pull too far away, but that didn't last. She needed more and thank god, so did he, for in seconds the tender thrusts had exploded into something hard and primal. Like he wanted to reclaim her—erase the presence of another Spike who, even if he hadn't been inside this body, had certainly been inside her heart. And that she understood because it was the same, wasn't it? The last Buffy he had loved like this hadn't been her, and at that instant, the thought drove her so completely out of her mind she wanted to punish him for it. So she did. She bit and scratched and tore and ripped and he gave it back to her—everything she fed him and more. Knocking her between the wall and himself as he plunged into her again and again, as he scraped his fangs over her lips and made her his all over again.

Fangs. She hadn't even noticed when his eyes had changed, when the smooth line of his brow had given way to the ridges of his vampire face. But then it didn't matter—she didn't care. It was all him, after all,

all Spike. Her monster and her man rolled into one. Loving her the same, loving her as only he could. As only he ever had.

"Take it, Slayer," he rasped into her ear.

"Give it to me, vampire," she rasped back, then he moaned and she moaned and he kissed her and she kissed him, tearing at his mouth, mindless of the fangs. Not caring if her skin split and blood spilled, not caring about where they were or how much time they had because they were together and time was now theirs as it never had been before. No more darkness, no more shadows or hiding. No more goodbyes at the end of the night or start of the day, sneaking around, exchanging the sort of looks that held whole conversations when they couldn't talk. Couldn't be together. Couldn't be *them*. All of that was over. It was over, over, over, and he was inside of her, muttering her name when he wasn't kissing her, telling her he loved her, loved her and he would never let her get lost again. Never.

"All mine." His voice at her ear, strained with pleasure and something more than pleasure. "All mine."

Buffy clutched at him, her hands fighting their way up his arms, along his shoulders, then finally linking around his neck. She pulled and he came, their mouths again clashing the same way their bodies did. Fury and fighting and fucking and she understood what he was saying. The joy in it, the liberation and freedom, because she was his and he was hers, all hers. Her vampire pounding into her. Her vampire skating his fangs along her throat. Her vampire sliding a hand between them to brush her clit every time he drove himself into her pussy. Her vampire growling into her mouth, whispering that litany of filth that had once made her burn but now made her beg. Bucking and fighting and they were slick with each other, messy and uncontrolled, and she loved it. Loved *him*. Loved him and would make sure he knew it now and tomorrow and every day that followed.

She felt him tracing his fangs down her throat, over her rabbiting pulse, then lower still. Down over her collarbone and between her breasts. Toward the mark that throbbed for him even when they were apart. The way she took him with her whenever they couldn't be together—but that time was over too. So she seized him by the hair and pulled his head back, shaking her own.

Not there anymore. Not above her breast. They had nothing to hide.

"Here," she said, tugging his mouth back to her throat. "Do it here."

Spike hesitated but only for a second. Then he groaned a growl, licked up her sweat, pressed a kiss to the hollow of her throat. She heard him murmur something but didn't know what, but it didn't matter because his fangs were inside of her and she was coming. Holding onto him, muffling her cry into his shoulder, her pussy clenching hard around him, her body seeming to pulse, torn apart by that familiar riptide of pleasure that still somehow always took her by surprise. And he was there, moaning around her flesh, sucking hungrily at her throat. Nudging her clit still with his knuckle, and it was almost too much, and she knew he knew, and that made her tighten all over again, which was, of course, exactly what he wanted. And when she began to shudder around his cock anew, he was there with her, moaning into her throat as he emptied inside her.

They ended up in a tangle on the floor, Buffy's head on his chest, her body tucked up into him, Spike panting in that uniquely human way he had about him—that way that was somehow not human at all. The air thick now with the scent of blood and sex and *them*, and oh god, they had finally made love in the house. Her house. A house she hoped would also be his. That she could rebuild this place into the happy home it had once been with him at her side.

She also wanted to keep the parts of them that were theirs. The crypt that had become home—their first place, the place where she could love him. The place where they had become *them*. Maybe she was greedy. Hell, she knew she was, but she'd earned it.

"Buffy?"

She lifted her head, which seemed to take a lot of effort, and found his eyes. Blue again, and swimming with love. "Hmm?"

He searched for a moment, his brow furrowed before a goofy-happy smile took over his face. "Bugger if I know. Just wanted to say your name, I suppose."

"The name you said was bloody stupid that one time?"

Spike's chest rumbled with his chuckle. "That's the one," he agreed,

trailing a finger from her lips to the new mark on her throat. "Mmm. Much as I fancy it, reckon this'll be hard to explain."

Maybe it would be, but she didn't think so. Not after everything they had been through. Coming clean with her friends that she had a biting fetish seemed pretty minimal as far as revelations went.

And even if it wasn't, she didn't care.

She knew how to put up a fight.

"Bring it," she said, and met his answering grin with a kiss.

I WAS ROBBED AND I WAS BLESSED

IT WAS A WEEK BEFORE SHE GOT BACK TO THE CRYPT. A WEEK FULL of emotionally draining conversations that were more than a year in the making, of dealing with hurt feelings and more than hurt feelings as she tried to explain to her friends the twisted logic that had informed every decision she'd made since she had exchanged her vows. The other Buffy might have already spilled all possible beans there were to spill, but Buffy had known that she couldn't just call that good and go on. The people she loved were owed an explanation from the horse's mouth, and she'd known—had she continued to evade them—that the boulder of nerve and fear she had been carrying ever since she had fallen in love with a man who was not her husband would be impossible to drop. Starting over meant truly starting over.

None of it had come easy, and she supposed that much was fair. There were certain things the other Buffy couldn't have sorted if she'd tried, like Willow's upset at having been replaced in the confidant category by a vampire. No matter how many times Buffy attempted to explain why it had been easier talking to Spike about her marriage, her reasons were personal, therefore hard to articulate. It was the same in trying to clarify to Dawn why she hadn't dumped Angel the second she'd realized she didn't love him anymore, only mixed with the frus-

trations of discussing an adult relationship with a not-adult who tended to believe there were simple solutions to complicated problems. Then Anya with her lingering bitterness regarding Giles's estate planning, even as Buffy made strides to reopen the shop while giving Anya as much control as possible without actually giving her control.

Of everyone in the gang, Xander and Tara alone hadn't brought forward any grievances—a minor miracle unto itself—but they had been caught in the crossfire, and therefore couldn't say they'd walked away unscathed.

That was without even getting into the whole Heaven discussion. Willow had likewise taken that news hard—apparently, though the other Buffy had dropped the bomb during her stint in their world, the witch had been clinging to hope that Buffy would reassure her that she had indeed been trapped in some hell dimension. Accepting the truth of the resurrection had been its own battle, concluding with Xander apologizing to Buffy that he *wasn't* sorry he didn't have to visit the cemetery to see her every day. That, while he regretted the pain he'd caused, he could never be sad that his friend wasn't dead, putting Buffy in the awkward position of telling him that it was okay to be glad she was alive.

That night, Buffy had crashed on the couch in the living room, assuring Spike through increasingly slurred speech that she'd be up for patrol any moment. The next thing she'd known, sunlight had been streaming through the window, and she'd opened her eyes to find herself tucked under a quilt, one of her nice pillows under her head. A note from Benedick had been waiting for her on the coffee table, letting her know she was adorable, that he'd taken care of the baddies for her, and he'd be by after the sun went down to do it all again.

It probably said a lot about her emotional state that she'd immediately burst into tears.

The night's rest had proven restorative, even if she'd spent the bulk of it snoozing on the indent Angel had left in the couch, courtesy of all the hours spent marathon channel flipping. And as soon as she had a cup of coffee in her, she'd tackled the next big to-do on her Buffy Reclaims Her Life list—purging the house of all things Angel and Buffy O'Connor. Unlike bearing her soul to her friends, this task was one she

had fantasized about with relish, always assuming she'd tear through the place like a hurricane, that the entire ordeal would involve a lot of broken glass and shredded fabric, nearly two years' worth of frustrations finally coming to a head. She'd never known what the tipping point would be—what argument would finally shove her over the threshold, or if it would even be an argument at all. Sometimes, the urge had hit her during moments of calm. She'd trudge through the door after another long night's patrol, her body still tingling from the orgasm Spike had given her, the rest of her torn apart with guilt, and she'd find Angel parked in front of the television. Sitting there with his eyes glazed and his jaw a bit slack, much as he had been before she'd left. Head pounding and frustration rising, she'd stand there and look at him and think, *I can't do this anymore* and the words would come, first in her head and then up her throat. And it would be real, suddenly. This idea that it was over, *could* be over if she had the courage to take the next step. Open her mouth and let everything out.

But then she'd think about the thing she'd have to say after admitting she didn't love him anymore. She'd think about begging him in Los Angeles not to be stupid and throw away this amazing gift they had been given, and she'd swallow and carry on.

Buffy knew Spike was right—it *wouldn't* have lasted forever. Eventually, something would have changed, shifted just enough that she wouldn't have been able to take a step forward without choking. Eventually, the reality that she was living for stolen moments would have threatened to crush her and she would have cracked. That didn't make it any easier, knowing she'd lived with it as long as she had.

A couple of things *had* gone the way she'd thought they would, though. For instance, the first thing she'd removed from the house had been the large black and white rendering of her and Angel on their wedding day. That hateful reminder of her biggest mistake—the one she'd stared at for what felt like hours after the first time she'd been with Spike, full of disgust and self-loathing, looking at her stupid smiling face and wondering how the girl in the photo could be so naïve. Buffy hadn't just taken it off the wall—she'd shredded it. First down the middle, then again and again until the material was so thickly stacked that even she, with her slayer strength, had trouble getting it

to yield. Then she'd turned her attention to the living room itself, throwing out the pieces of art that had never been her favorites, dumping his magazines into the trash, and boxing up his movie collection with half a mind to donate all of it to a thrift shop. Deciding instead to let Willow and Xander peruse the titles as a sort of peace offering. Once the living room had been thoroughly de-Angeled, Buffy had stalked to the kitchen, torn open cabinets, and done it all again. Even the stuff that she used to nibble on herself—out, gone, and permanently scratched off her grocery list. The clothes Angel had left behind *would* be donated, she'd decided, and the gun would be sold to a pawn shop, alongside her engagement ring and wedding band set. Whatever money she got would be given to Dawn, so her sister could start rebuilding her room on Angel's dime.

It had all been a blink. Two years of her life gone in a wave of the hand. Now you see it, now you don't. She didn't know how to feel about that.

The bedroom was the last place she'd tackled, mostly because she'd known it would be the easiest since *everything* needed to be replaced. There was no way Buffy would ask Spike to hold her in the bed she'd shared with her husband—hell, she didn't even like the idea of him in there with his sensitive sense of smell, no matter how many months had passed since she and Angel had last been intimate. In the end, the only things of hers she'd kept were her clothes and the various knick-knacks that had been part of her bedroom aesthetic prior to her marriage. Not that there had been many. Most everything that was *Buffy* had been taken over to Spike's at one point or another, to the bedroom she truly considered hers.

That much hadn't changed, and she was starting to think it never would. Getting Angel and his things out of the house hadn't quite had the flipped-switch effect she'd been hoping for. Even a week later, Buffy found herself yearning for the crypt. She'd moved back to her old room in the interim, but that felt wrong too. Like a step backward when forward was the only direction she had any interest in. If it hadn't been for Dawn, the house would likely already be on the market and Buffy would be searching for something new, fresh, devoid of the ghosts of her failures. There were times she thought her sister wouldn't

mind a move so much, anyway—this was the place, after all, where she had discovered their mother dead on the couch. Not exactly a bastion of happy memories. But then she'd remember the way Dawn had hugged the banister the first night home and resolve to make it work. Revello Drive hadn't been Angel's address all that long, after all. Cleansing the place of his presence shouldn't require too much effort.

Still, the second Dawn had asked if she could stay at Janice's, Buffy had jumped on it. No Dawn at Revello Drive meant no need for Buffy to be there, either. She could finally spend the night at the only place that actually felt like home.

It had been no less surreal stepping across the threshold into Spike's crypt here than it had in the other world. Again, she'd known what she would find—the cushy rugs, the weapons chest, the lamps and artwork and pieces of the life she and Spike had built together. The fully stocked kitchen with its assortment of her favorite snack foods, the refrigerator packed with blood, booze, bottled water and diet soda. Then downstairs in the space that was truly theirs, complete with additional bookshelves and dressers with drawers overflowing with her clothes. And down a stretch of tunnel, the bathroom he'd conned Xander into building for him—for *her*. Maybe it said something about her that she felt more home in a crypt than she did anywhere else, but for Buffy, the full reality that she was back where she belonged came when she woke to Spike planting kisses along the back of her neck. When she experienced the familiar way the mattress dipped and sagged under their weight, heard the faint drip of water coming from a pipe from somewhere in the tunnels. When he parted her thighs and began dragging the tip of his cock up and down the seam of her pussy, when he pulled her against his chest, his mouth at her neck as he pushed inside of her. When it was like every morning they had ever shared together but so much better because there was no hurried rush to the finish. No nagging worry that she had to make this quick, that she should say no even if the rest of her said yes. No mental math to time how long she could linger, how thorough a shower she could take before she had to make her way back to the stage so she could play her part.

It had been then, as Spike tugged on her earlobe with his teeth,

pumping into her, that all the anger and resentment she'd had for the other Buffy had gone up like smoke. For no matter her faith that she would have left Angel eventually, she also knew it *wouldn't* have been now. She would still be trapped in that house, in that marriage, play-acting her life instead of living it. She wouldn't have Spike as she did now, in private and in public. Just the other day, Xander had gotten onto them for making out when they were supposed to be helping prep for the Magic Box's grand reopening, and it had taken Buffy a moment to calm down, realize that she wasn't in trouble for having been caught macking on her secret lover, for she had no secret lover. Not anymore. After that realization had sunk in, she'd tugged Spike into the alley in the back, knowing full well that everyone knew what they were going to do and not giving a damn. She could kiss Spike whenever she wanted; she could hold his hand, laugh at his droll comments, grind up against him at the Bronze, and yes, even drag him outside for a quickie and it didn't matter. They didn't need to sneak or hide or steal moments. All moments from here on were entirely theirs.

That had been when she'd decided she had one more letter to write. Even if, like the last one she'd penned, it never made it to the intended recipient, there were things she couldn't keep bottled inside. Knowing she would never get the chance to talk to the other Buffy didn't make the thoughts she had any quieter—almost the opposite, actually, for reasons she wasn't sure she understood. Only that writing her thoughts out, whether in a diary or in a letter to her secret lover, had a way of clearing her head the way little else did.

Spike had just swallowed up the last of his lunch when Buffy announced she wanted to answer the letter the other Buffy had left. She hadn't built up to it or anything, and she hadn't needed to. Like all other things, he simply understood her. Turned to regard at her with eyes full of that warm understanding, no questions, no odd looks, just a nod to show he knew which way her thoughts had tracked.

"Sit tight," he said, rising to his feet, empty blood glass in hand. "I'll grab you some parchment. Got loads downstairs."

That was another thing she hadn't had to explain—that she meant *right now*.

"Thanks," Buffy replied, grinning a little. "Then...wanna share a shower?"

"Offended you need to ask." He favored her with a wink, then stalked over to the hatch that led to the lower level. In less than a minute, the plate covered in her sandwich crumbs had been swapped out for a battered spiral-bound notebook and a pen.

"This good?" Spike asked, running a hand along her shoulders.

"Better than."

"Mmm. This where she wrote to you, you know. Sittin' here."

"And then she didn't let you read it."

"As bloody stubborn as you are. Probably knew I'd strike out some of the rot."

Meaning the stuff about the rape. The other Buffy had it right there—he *was* stubborn in that regard, and she'd decided to stop arguing with him about it. It was, as he'd said, a thing that had happened to him, therefore he was owed the right to view it the way he liked. She also thought she might understand now what had driven the other Buffy to that point. It had taken listening to Spike's account of the way things had been and, admittedly, reading the letter so many times she practically had the damn thing memorized to get there, but she couldn't say she didn't understand that desperation. Not after reflecting upon how alone she'd felt on the other side—that deep ache that she would never make it back—and speculating what she might have done to seize even a little bit of certainty that the world she belonged to would be hers again. The situation hadn't been the same but the despair, very much so. And ultimately, it wasn't her crime to forgive. Spike had and that was all that mattered.

That first night, sitting together a naked tangle on the basement floor, she'd watched as he'd read the other Buffy's note for the first time, watched the subtle movements of his expressive face, guessing how far he was based on each reaction. At the end, he'd looked up, his eyes heavy, and said hoarsely, "She said she doesn't think I'll miss her. Bloody bitch doesn't get how much she changed things, does she?"

Buffy had sucked in a breath, not knowing if she wanted the answer to what she had to ask. "Will you? Miss her, that is?"

"Not like you're thinkin'. Not wishin' she was here. But her bein'

here changed things. Guess I just don't fancy her thinkin' it meant nothing to me." He'd paused, scrubbed a hand down his face. "Always wondered what it might've been like if you hadn't married the big sod, for instance. Times when it was hard goin' home knowin' you were goin' to him. She answered that for me." A tragic little smile had flirted with his lips, the kind that broke her heart and mended it in the same stroke. "Will always love her for giving me that. Just wish she'd known how much it meant. How much all of it meant."

That was her Spike through and through. She'd sat up, cupped his cheeks, and brought his mouth to hers. Spike had growled and seized control of the kiss almost immediately, rolling onto his back and taking her with him, and that had been all the talking they'd done for a while.

Buffy licked her lips, refocusing on the notebook. Thinking about the look in Spike's eyes that night, that want. How she wished there were a way she could satisfy it. Give him back some of the *everything* he'd given her, impossible though the task was. Hoping whatever she was about to write would be a start, if nothing else.

"Gonna bother you if I turn on *Passions*?" Spike asked, his voice a low rumble in her ear. "Could pop out for a bit, if you like."

"I am more than skilled at tuning out your crappy TV shows."

He snickered, and the fingers that had been massaging her neck disappeared. "Like I haven't gotten you hooked."

"I am not hooked," she shot back. Only that wasn't true. Spike would need to recap the episodes she'd missed. It wouldn't be the first time.

"Dunno why you bother lyin', Slayer," Spike replied, then kissed her temple and made his way to the sofa. "Just you and me here."

"Shut up."

"You love it."

"Tell yourself what you must," Buffy said, trying to sound haughty. Failing, if Spike's answering chuckle were anything to go by. She listened as he fired up his crappy old television, killed a grin when he tinkered with the volume so that it was at a decibel that made whatever was happening indiscernible to her human ears. That was her vampire. The one who could simultaneously be the rudest, vilest person she'd ever met and somehow also the most considerate.

It was that balance that made them work. Always had been.

Even knowing the letter would likely never leave the crypt, it took a moment for Buffy to find a place to start. She knew she wouldn't include everything—she couldn't; there was too much—but the important bits, the things she'd say to the other Buffy if she were standing here were pretty close to the surface. After a long beat, Buffy put pen to paper and started to write. And once the door in her mind opened, once the faucet switched on, it was all she could do to keep up with the flow of thought.

Dear Buffy,

To most people, writing a letter that will never be read by the person it's written to probably seems like a massive waste of time. But I took just enough Psych to guess that maybe this is just something I need to tell myself. Thing is, I keep thinking of things I want to tell you, too. You're pretty much the only person in the universe who would understand any of what's going on inside my head, and not just because you're me. Which, let's face it, is kind of wiggy. We had such an impact on each other's lives, it's weird to me that we never actually met.

I'll get the awkward out of the way first. Yes, I spent most of my time in your world hating you. There were a lot of reasons for this hate, the obvious ones being well, obvious. None of it was mine, which made all of it hard. Seeing Giles alive again, seeing Dawn for the first time since they brought me back from Heaven, having the chance to be with my guy without worrying about the others finding out. It was all there but it wasn't real. That much felt like a punishment.

It also showed me that while my life is far from perfect, it's the only one I want. Even with all the bad (and there is a lot of bad). In most cases, though, the bad gave me the good. Emphasis on most. I'd give anything to have Giles back, even if it meant going back to freaking out about money, but I'm sure you know that. I hope you also know that. That you know how lucky you are that you do have him. I hope you never take him for granted again. It was so easy to do, even after Mom died, and it shouldn't have been. Apocalypses I can handle, but managing without a real grownup is the hardest thing I've ever done. I feel like an orphan. Dawn does, too. So that's some bad I can't say gave me good. Sorry to be a downer.

The other bad, though, hard as it was, gave me my favorite thing. I might not have had that if the other bad hadn't happened.

You also taught me something I didn't know I didn't know. What I have with Spike is strong. Like, super strong. I know this seems like a massive DUH but I'm not sure I got just how strong it is before. Strong enough to still be there when nothing else is, when it's a different version of us. But also... I don't know how to say this, that he wanted me back even when he had you, that I wanted him back even though I had the Spike in your world, to me that says what we have is also just ours. That probably doesn't make sense but the more I think about it, the more right that seems. I hope that's what you get, in your world with your Spike. I hope that your time here helped you see him the way I do.

I guess this is my way of saying I don't hate you anymore. You gave me my life back. I mean that in two ways, the first being that you literally did all the hard work while you were here. All the things I've wanted to do but been too scared to start were all handled. I'll admit, I resented that at first too, but I don't anymore. It meant I got to spend my first night home with the people I love the most, no excuses or lying or anything. I had no idea how much I'd need that, but I really did. Getting that time with Dawn and Spike was invaluable.

The second way you gave me my life back was making me realize just how much I wanted it back. When I was in your world, I thought I'd never get a chance to take control again, leave Angel for good, admit to the others all the things that I haven't told them, and make sure Spike knew how much he meant to me. I promised myself that if I ever made it home, I would stop putting all things Buffy on hold. I know you did the legwork where the gang is concerned but being able to talk to them openly made me realize just how much of myself I'd kept locked away, not just all things me and Spike. Of course, none of it went easy, but it's out there now and it's over. The gang might take time to feel like the gang again, but we will. Eventually. Hell, even though Dawn doesn't get most it, she says she respects me more now that she knows I cheated on Angel, which I think means we'll need to have a serious talk so she gets that my way was not the best way. But even with as hard as it was on all counts, it could've been so much worse. You helped me see that there really isn't anything that would make me lose the most important people in my life, and just how much I was missing by living in the dark.

So thank you, Buffy. You said you owe me a lot. I think I owe you more. I'll be thankful for that every day.

And if I could have one wish for you, it would be this: Be brave. Live. You deserve it.

—Beatrice

Buffy sat back with a sigh, placed the pen beside the letter and flexed her hand as she let her eyes roam over what she'd written. It wasn't perfect, probably not even close, but at the same time, it felt right and complete. Around three pages in total, long enough that the writing had started to get a bit sloppy but not so much that the words were illegible. And it conveyed what she wanted it to convey—all the things she'd wanted out were out.

And if Buffy were to read this, she'd see all the things that weren't written too. She'd understand.

The thought made her grin, made her think about the other Buffy sitting right here, staring at another letter, likely wondering something similar. Even worlds apart, some of their stars were the same.

"Look happy, love," Spike said, and when she looked at him, she found he was smiling too. "All done?"

Buffy nodded, pushing back her chair, the air splitting with the familiar scrape of the legs across the floor. "Yeah," she said, tearing the pages free of the notebook. "I think I am."

"Yeah? Takin' it to the tree?"

"No. This is not a letter to Beatrice or Benedick." Buffy pressed her lips together, then made her way over to him, her heart thumping a bit harder than she would have liked. When she was standing right in front of him, in the space between his splayed legs, she licked her lips and extended the hand holding the note. "Will you read it?"

Spike blinked, sat up a bit straighter. "Course. Thought it was for her, though."

"I don't see her here." She lifted a shoulder and forced her throat to work. "She'll never get to read it, but someone should. Someone who loved her."

His expression shuttered, and she wasn't surprised. But he didn't argue, and she wasn't surprised at that, either.

She forced herself to step back after he started reading, but much like the first night with the other letter, she couldn't quite bring herself

to look away, mesmerized by how his eyes moved. The way his brow ruffled and smoothed and ruffled again. How his mouth twitched at places where he wanted to grin, and finally how everything softened. How much he revealed without trying to reveal anything.

At last, Spike swallowed and looked up, and there was so much there. All him. That bare vulnerability he kept from the world but had somehow decided to trust with her. The parts of him that were hers and hers alone.

It was moments like this that had Buffy falling in love with him all over again. Lucky her, she got to experience them frequently.

“So,” she said. “Thoughts?”

He didn’t say anything, rather placed the letter aside as one might a live bomb before rising to his feet, his gaze never leaving hers. And she knew what was coming but it made her breath catch and her heart skip all the same.

Her breath always caught when Spike kissed her.

Something told her it always would.