

RECLAIMED



HOLLY DENISE





THIS STRANGE ESTRANGEMENT

“I NEED TO SEE YOU.”

Buffy pressed her eyes closed and waited for her body to do the rest. The pounding heart. The racing pulse. The sweaty palms. And the thoughts. God, the thoughts. Once those floodgates opened, it would take nothing short of an apocalypse to close them again, and she'd spend the next few weeks replaying every syllable they'd shared in an attempt to discern hidden meaning. The unspoken *I love yous*. The implied *if things were different*s. The flat out false *if you need me, I'll be there*s. In short, the same old Angel song and dance she'd memorized what felt like a million years ago. It was the only thing in this world that was more of a certainty than death and taxes.

Especially death. Buffy couldn't even rely on that anymore.

“Did you hear me?” came his voice again, low and intimate and *Angel*. “Is everything all right?”

She shocked herself by laughing. Shocked him, too, if the answering silence was any indication. But honestly, what did he expect? *Yes, Angel, I'm fine. I clawed my way out of my grave and into a house that's hemorrhaging money. My friends are in the backyard throwing out my lamp and my coffee table. There's water in my shoes from the basement, and I*

just realized the only thing I want to do less than figure out my finances is see you.

Honestly, it might be worth saying all that just for the look on his face, even if she didn't get to see it. Someone hopefully would.

"Things aren't great around here," Buffy said instead. When in doubt, it was always better to opt for the path of least resistance. The fact was she *should* want to see Angel. Hell, she *should* be halfway out the door now, careless hand-wavy excuse made to Giles, who had been right in the middle of what she was sure he'd intended to be a very rousing speech about persevering through difficulty or some other bullshit. That she'd felt nothing but a vague *god, what now?* upon hearing Angel's voice through the line was worrying, to say the least. Buffy had never experienced that with him. Not once. Not even when she'd been with Riley and very not-single. Some part of her had always been carved out for Angel.

It probably meant something that she didn't feel it now. Something less than good. Just another way Buffy was broken.

"Can I help?" Angel asked. "What do you need?"

I need you to go back to thinking I'm dead.

But she didn't say that, either. This was Angel. The one person in this stupid world that should make her heart do something other than sink. Being alive might not have been her choice but if she was going to be here, she at least wanted to feel like herself. She wanted to be Buffy. The real Buffy. Not the Buffy who was standing here, holding the phone and listening to her ex-boyfriend ask her a variation of the same questions that had been hurled her way since the great un-deadening, and with the same hollow quality in his voice that told her he didn't expect an answer.

Everyone wanted to help without actually doing anything. Everyone wanted her to know that they were there for her so she couldn't look back at some future date and claim that they hadn't been.

Almost everyone.

In the end, Buffy decided "It's too much to say over the phone" was a suitable non-answer. It would at least give her time to think up something better.

"Look, I've... I've been there," Angel said in a tone she assumed

was supposed to be low and commiserative. “I’ve been to Hell. I know how hard it is trying to find your footing again.”

A hard laugh scratched at her throat for release but she managed to swallow it back, reasonably certain that the Buffy who had done the swan dive wouldn’t laugh at Angel when he was trying to be sensitive and helpful, even if he sounded like the world’s biggest tool.

For fuck’s sake, what was wrong with her?

“You know Turtle Cove?” he asked next.

“Huh?”

“Turtle Cove. It’s a stop between Sunnydale and LA. Not much there except for the turtles.”

“Why are we talking about turtles?”

“It’s a tourist spot. There’s a gas station and a restaurant and a wildlife preservation reserve—maybe a couple of other little shops, I don’t know. It’s not like I’ve ever stopped there.” Angel paused as though expecting her to leap in with an *a-ba* of comprehension, then sighed when she didn’t. Like she had forced him to bring up the subject of turtles. “I thought it might be a good place to meet. Somewhere that’s not here but not Sunnydale, either. Where it could be just the two of us.”

Ah, she got it now. Angel just had to see her but he couldn’t be bothered to drive the entire two and whatever hours to do it. Buffy released a deep breath, so deep it seemed to start in the soles of her feet, and lifted her free hand to pinch the bridge of her nose. “Okay,” she said. “Yeah. Turtle Cove. We should... That sounds good. When?”

“Now? Tonight?”

Buffy dragged her teeth over her lower lip and glanced toward the living room where Giles was waiting to finish his pep talk. “Not tonight. I’m in the middle of something.”

“Oh.” He didn’t bother to disguise his surprise. “Tomorrow, then?”

Tomorrow would arrive far too quickly. Still, she supposed it was better to get this over with. “Tomorrow, yeah,” she said, trying to affect some enthusiasm. “Tomorrow. Maybe at six?”

“Too early. The sun will—”

“Fine. Nine, then. Will that give you time?”

Another beat. She probably sounded too abrasive, but there wasn’t

much she could do about that without outright lying, and Buffy was doing enough lying these days. This was the most she could offer. Take it or leave it.

Angel took it. "Nine is good," he said. "I'll see you then."

"At the turtle place."

"Turtle Cove."

Buffy nodded, trusting that he could feel it even if he couldn't see it. "Okay. Yeah. Bye." She lowered the cordless and hit the *off* button before he could get in another word edgewise, her stomach in knots and the rest of her not far behind.

Hopefully, by tomorrow, she should come up with enough interest in seeing her ex to make the bus ride even a little worth it. But Buffy wasn't going to hold her breath. And not only because it made her think about those minutes she'd been trapped underground, choking on thinning air and trying to punch her way through the coffin to a freedom that had ended up being just another form of prison.

She didn't want to see Angel. There was no getting around that. She didn't want to see him, and yet, she was going to anyway.

The door behind her creaked and Xander and Willow's voices filled the air, both of them sounding jokey and light when Buffy could be neither of those things. Maybe it was good that she was getting out after all. Some time away from her so-called friends would be very much of the welcome. At least for a little while, she wouldn't have to pretend.

"Hey," Xander said, Anya at his side and looking her usual amount of interested, which was to say not very. "What's the hubbub, Buff?"

"Someone call?" Willow chimed in. "Was it the bank?"

Buffy blinked, glanced down to see she was still holding the phone. "What would the bank be calling me for?" she asked, returning it to its cradle.

"I dunno. Maybe that they reconsidered and were going to give you that loan after all."

More blinking. "I don't think it works that way, Will. I'd be lucky if he didn't decide that I'm to blame for his sprained elbow and here's a nice medical bill to put on top of the other bills. Like the angel on a bills-mas tree."

Willow's face fell, and Buffy experienced a kick of that guilt that she'd been living with ever since she'd returned to living. That reminder that any reasonable person would be thankful for the chance to not be dead anymore, and that her friend had gone to incredible lengths to save her from what she'd legitimately—for whatever reason—believed was a hell dimension, and that Buffy wasn't acting as grateful as she should.

"Well, who was it?" Xander asked, sounding all subdued and weird.

Buffy sucked in her cheeks and became aware of more people at her back. Giles and Dawn had evidently gotten tired of waiting for her to return. No getting out of it now. "It was Angel," she said. "I... I don't know how he found out that I'm all...not dead, but he did. And he wants to see me."

Willow's eyes brightened. "Oh, good! He got the message."

"Good?" Buffy echoed. "And...message?"

"Yeah. I left a message earlier today. You know, after everything that's happened and... Well, I was the one to break the news to Angel that you were dead so it seemed fitting that I'd be the one to..." But Willow trailed off—or rather seemed distracted by something behind Buffy and looked away, her pale skin flushing red. "Anyway, I called. And this is good news, right? Seeing Angel?"

Buffy just stared at her and was almost relieved when some of the anger she'd experienced while venting her frustration on the training room punching bag resurged. Yeah, that sounded about right. Willow running around trying to make everything better. Trying to make *Buffy* better, even if it was impossible. And now going directly to Angel because Angel *always* made Buffy happy, except all those times he'd made her miserable, which, come to think of it, had been *all* the time, and just why the hell had she gone out with him again?

But she could see it, too. How badly Willow wanted this Angel thing to be the miracle cure. And hell, maybe Buffy was being cynical. Maybe seeing Angel would do something to numb the pain of losing something as pure and safe as Heaven. Make her remember that for as much as her life had sucked, things could always be worse. She could always still be the girl who regarded souls as the ultimate band-aid for cosmic boo-boos. Who had let herself fall apart when Angel left rather

than realizing how his absence had helped her find some of that normal she'd been so vocal about claiming as her own.

Not Angel's brand of normal, though, because that didn't exist for her. Rather, a normal that didn't have her in constant pain because she was also in love. Which really, seemed less like a slayer thing and more like a them-specific thing, when she put it under the microscope.

"Yeah," Buffy said, trying for a smile that, if the look on Willow's face was anything to go off, was less than convincing. Oh well. Her fault. "It'll be good."

Giles cleared his throat from behind her. "Are you going now?"

She turned, grateful for a reason to not stare down her best friend another second. "No. Tomorrow. I told him now was too short notice."

That ostensibly threw everyone off. Even Xander, Angel's loud and proud number one hate-fan, looked confused. "Short notice for what?" he asked. "It's not exactly hopping in here, Buff."

"Well, I need to figure out how I'm getting there, for one thing," she replied. "Check the bus schedules."

"You could have Spike take you," Dawn piped up, looking vaguely mutinous when Buffy shifted her attention to her. Her sister might actually rival Xander in her Angel hatred. "He has a car and probably nothing better to do."

She said it like it was a dare. *Ha, Buffy. Put that piece of awkward in your pipe and smoke it.* Only the suggestion didn't hit Buffy like an impossible *yeah, right*. Instead, she found herself calming the way she did these days whenever Spike was around, for no real reason. At least no reason she had the time or energy to pick apart. There was just the absence of the weight that seemed to dog her everywhere else. All that expectation, spoken or otherwise, gone and allowing her to take breaths that didn't make her choke. Didn't make her anything except exactly what she was.

If she told Spike she wasn't all that excited to see Angel... Well, he'd probably have thoughts aplenty on the subject, but he wouldn't hound her for a why she couldn't provide. At most, he'd scoff and ask her why the hell they were going, then, if she wasn't hot to do it, but maybe he wouldn't ask that, either. Maybe he'd just understand that sense of obligation, of *trying*, that triumphed over her instincts. That need to

sing a song, play a role, see if she could trick herself into accidentally being Buffy again the way her friends had tricked themselves into thinking she already was.

“Good idea,” Buffy said, nodding at her sister and, for the first time since hearing Angel’s voice, feeling the urge to smile. It couldn’t be clearer that Dawn had not expected her to agree. “I’ll ask him tonight on patrol. We normally run into each other and—”

“Buffy, is that a good idea?” Xander asked. “Hanging out with... Spike? You know how he feels about you.”

She shrugged and looked away. She was trying very hard at the present *not* to think about how Spike felt about her these days, lest that sense of expectation filter back into their dynamic. Some part of her understood that she was probably not being very sensitive about his feelings and sending her own slew of mixed messages for good measure, but the larger part of her needed what he provided too much to let herself get hung up on what it all meant.

And she didn’t know what her own feelings were, either, except they were too messy to try to analyze right now. The most she could decide on was that however she’d felt about Spike toward the end of things before the race to stop Glory had been a whole whopping lot of not-loathing. That he’d calmed her down just by being around and made it a little easier to think about a world after that apocalypse, if only because she’d known that there would be someone who would care for Dawn the way she did. And that had been a lot.

More than a lot. It had been everything.

“Spike makes the most sense,” Buffy said, forcing herself to meet Xander’s gaze. “He doesn’t have a job or anything. And I won’t have to drive, which is really in the best interest of motorists everywhere. I also won’t be dependent on bus schedules. Good tidings all around.”

“You really think Spike’s gonna be okay sitting there watching you with Angel?” Willow chimed in, looking all worried. “That seems almost... I mean, it’s Spike and all, but that’s kinda mean, right?”

Apparently, her friends were under the impression that Buffy was going to launch herself at Angel the second she was within self-launching distance. Even stranger, none of them appeared all that concerned about it. Which...that *was* weird, right? After years of

recriminations about the whole Angel affair and suddenly it was like, oh yes, you should go see your ex, and make sure you have your privacy, too.

“He’ll deal,” Buffy replied, because that seemed like the best way to shut down the conversation she was tired of having. “And I, uhh, I better go. I’ll get an early start on patrol.”

“I’ll say it’s early,” Anya volunteered, speaking for the first time. Buffy hadn’t even known she was paying attention to the conversation. “The sun’s still out.”

It was on its way down, though, and that was all that mattered these days. Buffy waved dismissively as she headed for the back door, desperate to be outside. Or not outside—just away. Far away from here and this talk and every talk that might follow. All the worry about her well-being and if she was dealing and the pipes that were still broken downstairs and the money. Couldn’t forget the money, all needing to be sunk into a house that had somehow become her tomb more than her actual grave had ever been.

There was too much of it. And of them. Of everything.

“I’ll be late,” she said over her shoulder, pausing just long enough to catch Dawn’s eye before she disappeared out the door. What she saw there almost convinced her to hesitate, but only almost.

It wasn’t the same expectation that her friends regarded her with. A softer, more innocent expectation—a yearning that called to something inside Buffy in a primal sort of way, but still felt too heavy whenever she tried to wrap her arms around it. She just didn’t have the strength right now. Not with having to remind herself to breathe every second—or at the very least, remind herself why she should.

Maybe eventually she’d find a way to say that without hurting anyone’s feelings.

But that day was not today.



BEFORE SHE’D DIED, Buffy hadn’t bothered with courtesies like knocking to announce her presence at Spike’s place. It just felt weird, treating a crypt like it was something other than a crypt. Like it was an

actual home. Granted, she had stopped kicking the door in some time after Spike's stint as Glory's knife sharpener, figuring he had won the right to at least some courtesy, but she'd still walk in like she owned the place. Her right as the Slayer.

Now, post-death and resurrection, Buffy found herself wanting to knock. She ultimately didn't, because *weird*, but there was an understanding that she was about to encroach upon someone's personal space, and how presumptive that was. How intimate. She could stumble in and find him doing any number of things. Sometimes she thought she might like that—if she could step out of the real world and into the one where Spike lived. And if he happened to be doing something sexy, well, that wouldn't be horrible.

Maybe she did know what her feelings were. Maybe she was just waiting to be brave enough to act on them.

Or maybe she was a complete mess.

Either way, tonight, Buffy was gentle with the door. Not to sneak in, because there really was no way to sneak when the door clanked loud enough it could be heard three cemeteries over, but to establish the nature of this visit. She was not here to vent or to be reckless—she was here because she had to ask him for a favor.

A really big favor.

"Bit early yet, innit, Slayer?" Spike asked after the sunlight was quashed out behind her. He stood over by his makeshift kitchen area, fixing himself a drink. "Just need to get away?"

"Something like that," she agreed, already feeling more at ease just being in his space. His space which he had worked to make nice—or nicer—as she'd noted to herself on previous visits. The furniture wasn't great but also not terrible, considering the location was a literal graveyard, and from the couple of times she'd sunk into the armchair, on the comfy side. Then there were the lamps and the rugs, plus the candles he'd set around everywhere. Whatever he could do to disguise that he lived in a tomb.

When she'd asked why he'd gone to the trouble, he'd explained he'd had to, what with all the time Dawn had spent with him over the summer. He'd known Buffy wouldn't have approved and so had done

what he could to spruce things up. Make the tomb more hospitable for living visitors.

Now she was a living visitor. Kind of. More like an unliving one, only with a heartbeat.

"Asked around. Got a couple of mates who might be able to help with your flooding problem," Spike said offhandedly. He was studying the drink he was making when she turned her attention to him, though with a sort of heightened intensity that seemed staged. Like he was really more focused on her and trying not to let her see it. "Course, this hinges on you agreein' not to slay them should they set hoof on your property."

"They're demons?" She wondered what it said about her that the thought wasn't all that troubling. "Like...demons who would deserve slayings if I ran into them just willy-nilly?"

"You wouldn't just run into them. The peaceful types know how to steer clear of trouble. This lot's not gonna be cheap."

"Oh, so it's a matter of deciding to pay humans an exorbitant amount of money I don't have or demons. Choices, choices."

Spike finally looked up, his eyes narrowed. "Didn't say it was gonna cost *you*. Doubt you have their preferred currency on hand anyway."

"Do I even want to know?"

"It's nothin' that's gonna hurt a soul in this town."

Buffy didn't know what to say to that—she hadn't exactly anticipated walking in here to learn Spike had been giving any thought to her home repair problem. Her problems seemed to be just that—hers—even to the people who lived with her. A flooded basement meant nothing to Willow and Tara except lack of access to the washing machine, though there were on-campus workarounds for that, and since getting Dawn to do laundry was only a little simpler than unearthing the remains of Jimmy Hoffa, Buffy had assumed she would be the only one trying to hunt down solutions.

"Is it something I'd stake you over?" she asked. "If I were to find out?"

"No," he replied, and raised his drink to his lips. "Least I don't expect so."

What did it say about her that her immediate instinct was to

consider that good enough? Spike's view on what was and wasn't a stakeable offense was probably not the most reliable in the first place. Yet, god, the idea of removing this one worry from the stack of other worries piling on was too sweet to dismiss just because. "Do I need to have an answer right now?"

He shook his head and threw back a mouthful. "Take your time. Offer's yours."

Buffy relaxed a little—or a lot. That was until she remembered why she'd dropped by early, and her muscles tensed up in anticipation of... well, she wasn't exactly sure what, except that Willow had been right and asking Spike to run an Angel-adjacent errand was probably not the most sensitive thing in the world. And though she might not know exactly what it was she was feeling, she did know that she didn't want to hurt him. New territory for Buffy.

Against all odds, he'd become a friend. And she didn't like it when her friends hurt. Especially ones that had been her point of calm in the raging storm that was existence.

But she was still here, and she still had to ask.

"I need a favor. A not house-flood related favor."

"Do you now?"

"Yeah. If you're game."

His lips twitched. "All ears, Slayer," he said, his voice dropping into a purr. An honest-to-god purr. "What is it I can *do* for you?"

"There's a place called Turtle Cove about an hour south of here. I need to be there tomorrow by nine o'clock."

"Curiouser and curiouser. Don't suppose you can tell me why."

Here it was. The part that would hurt. Buffy wetted her lips, watched as his eyes dropped to follow the motion, dark with hunger he tried so hard to keep concealed these days, then cleared her throat. "It's Angel. He learned I'm alive again and he wants to see me."

Spike jerked his gaze so quickly it felt like a punch. He didn't reply at first, but she didn't miss the sudden tight pull of his mouth, all hint of playful interest gone. His eyes were darker too, harder, along with his jaw. Amazing thing to realize, after having known him as long as she had, that he truly had no poker face at all. Spike wore everything

openly, his heart on constant display, his feelings bare and unapologetic.

She'd hurt him just by asking. She hadn't meant to, but she had. And even so, even knowing that, she also knew what his answer would be.

"Course he does," Spike said at last. "Dunno if it's a good idea, though."

"You don't."

"Not if you're really keen on tryin' to find joy outside of your coffin."

Buffy snickered, which surprised him, and damn if that wasn't heady. "I'm going to tell you something," she said, "and I need you not to read too much into it."

There was almost no chance of that happening, but she had Spike's interest piqued and the tightness in his face had gone slack once more. "What's that?"

"I don't really want to go."

He arched an eyebrow, waited. When she didn't offer anything else, he drawled, "Right, so, bloody don't. Seems simple enough."

"It's not."

"And why's that?"

"Because it's... It's Angel. And I'm Buffy, aren't I?"

She hadn't meant for that to come out sounding so desperate, but it had. An honest question she wasn't sure she wanted answered. They hadn't talked about it much—the possibility that she was something other than Buffy Summers—mainly because Spike was so completely certain that she was that he wouldn't hear a word to the contrary. He had his whole list of reasons, too, that he'd given her when she'd asked him why Willow had kept him in the dark on the whole resurrection thing. That there was a chance something Buffy-shaped but not Buffy would be what clawed its way out of her grave, the same possibility that had been present just a few months earlier when Joyce had been the dead Summers woman in question. He'd even admitted his role in helping Dawn get the supplies she'd needed for the ritual, and how relieved he'd been when he'd learned she'd decided not to go through with it.

"Dunno why I did it in the first place," he'd said, unable to meet Buffy's eyes. They'd been in his crypt, sitting on a sarcophagus as though it were a couch, and closer to one another than was probably advisable. "Not one for foolin' with magic, if I can help it."

"Aren't you the guy who came back to town that one time because you wanted Willow to do a love spell on Drusilla?"

"No." Spike had sat up straighter, flexed his shoulders. "Came back to kill you, of course."

"Of course," she'd agreed with a slight smile. Which yes, had been weird. And still was weird. Talking with the guy who had once been her mortal enemy about the times he'd tried to defeat her in a wistful way was just the confusing cherry on top of the absolute shit-show that was her life these days.

"Magic bit didn't come until later," he'd gone on. "After I'd drunk myself out of a liver."

"Like you need your liver."

"Principle's the same, right?" He'd flashed a quick grin, but it hadn't lasted. "Guess with the Nibblet, I just knew what that felt like. What it was to do downright barmy things and hope they work out, bein' that desperate. Wasn't until later that it came to me what a thick prat I'd been. Good thing she didn't go through with it. The only thing worse thing than your mum comin' back would be your mum comin' back and not bein' your mum."

Then a strangely pained look had flitted across his face, made him tighten his jaw and look away as though trying to shuck off a memory he didn't like. It had been there in the air between them—the curiosity, the urge to ask, but she'd pushed it back. Not sure she could handle more at the moment than she had already, especially if there was pain involved. But then he'd snapped back to her and nodded, and said that was why Willow hadn't told him. He'd know if she wasn't wholly Buffy, and he'd give his life to protect the part of her that was.

For the next couple of nights, Buffy had lain awake thinking about everything Spike had revealed. About a night that now seemed decades in the past, when she'd stumbled upon Dawn performing a spell designed to bring their mother back to them. That rush of hope, of relief, of *not caring* what had climbed out of the grave so long as it

looked and sounded like Joyce. So long as she could have her mother back even for a few minutes to ease the massive pain in her chest, the hole of what her life should have been, and the realization that it could never be that again, if it had ever been in the first place. And wondering now if the trade-off would have been worth it in the end. Some of her mom but not all.

Then if she could live with being some of Buffy but not all. Joyce's resurrection might have been aborted but Buffy was very much not dead anymore. And she thought she was Buffy. She had Buffy's thoughts and feelings. She had Buffy's memories and fears and favorite foods and musical taste and fashion sense. She had everything Buffy had had in life and then some—this feeling she couldn't outrun. Worse than when she'd killed Angel, worse than when he'd come back and broken her heart, worse than walking into her home and expecting to see her mom only to be suddenly blasted with the reality that she would never see her mom again.

Could she really say she was Buffy if she felt like this?

Spike seemed to think so.

"You're Buffy," he said now, his voice thick and earnest, his eyes wide. "I bloody swear it."

"Even if I don't really want to see Angel?"

"Just means your taste's improvin'."

She cracked a grin and looked away, rubbing her arms. "Seeing Angel is the Buffy thing to do. And maybe... Maybe I do need to. Maybe it's all in my head." That sounded a bit desperate, but she didn't care. Now that the fears were out, the thoughts running rampant through her mind, she *was* a bit desperate. "Maybe I'll get there and I'll feel all the things I used to feel."

Spike scoffed. "Not exactly sellin' me on why I should play chaperone. Care to sweeten the pot?"

Buffy didn't know what to say for a moment, then sighed and glanced down. "Yeah, I... I guess that is with the massively insensitive. All things considered."

"*All things* being the fact that I'm in love with you."

Her heart somersaulted. It was the first time he'd said it since before Glory, and while she didn't need the words to know—that was

one of the most refreshing things about Spike, how he was so boldly unapologetic about the way he felt—she couldn't deny the rush of warmth she experienced at hearing them. How freely he gave them, and without any expectation. Just because he wanted, *needed* her to know. And with that look on his face, his heart in his eyes, hers to take if she wanted.

If she wanted...

"Yeah," she managed hoarsely. "Things like that."

Spike studied her for a long, quiet moment before sighing and bowing his head. "Yeah, Slayer, I'll do it. Cart you wherever you like."

"You will?"

He looked back up. Back at her. "You know I will."

She did. She knew that and so much more. And it was confusing—all of it—but in a way she didn't hate. Rather, the knowledge calmed some of the hurt she had yet to work through. Knowing that of everyone that surrounded her, there was someone who loved her without caveats. Just as she was.

Maybe this trip to see Angel would help clear her head. Maybe it wouldn't.

At the very least, she wouldn't have to make it alone.

NOTHING HERE IS RIGHT

HE SWORE HE WAS THE ONLY MAN IN THE WHOLE BLOODY WORLD sucker enough to escort the woman he loved for a rendezvous with her ex. Yet here he was, pulling the DeSoto into a mostly empty lot at a diner off an exit en route to Los Angeles—some rundown joint he'd probably passed a hundred times without ever fully seeing. Not that there was much to see. Seemed almost certain that the place had to be demon-run, for no self-respecting tourist would make the journey out here just to gawk at a bunch of bloody turtles. More likely it was one of the many enterprises demons had fashioned to blend in with the humans that fancied themselves the inheritors of the earth. Do a dance, sing a song, feed an endangered turtle, and look the other way while the real business is done.

Spike sighed as he killed the engine, and again when Buffy threw the door open and climbed out. She didn't exactly seem in a rush to put distance between them, but she didn't take her sweet time, either. And he was determined not to read anything into that. Or anything that had happened since she'd come to him with this. He'd drive himself nutty trying to figure her out.

"Should I wait out here, then?" he asked.

For a second, he wasn't sure if Buffy had heard him. She was staring

hard at the diner. Specifically, at the hulking figure standing just inside the entry, pale skin made paler courtesy of the burning fluorescents. Like everything else about her these days, Buffy's expression was impossible to read. Could have been dread. Could have been resignation. Could have been she was regretting that she'd asked for a chauffeur at all, as it would make it awkward when she greeted Captain Forehead with an especially wet snog. Though she'd told him she wasn't exactly looking forward to seeing the plonker, Spike had had the unique privilege of watching Angel charm his way back into a lady's good graces too many times to get his hopes up that this would be any different.

More like she'd take one look at him and feel a rush of all those girly jitters or whatever power it was that Angel commanded over the women in his life. She might have forgotten what she saw in him, but she'd remember in a big hurry.

As though hearing the thought, Buffy sighed and turned to meet Spike's eyes. "This is going to be excruciating, isn't it?"

For you or for me, Slayer?

"Most things involving Angel are," he said instead.

She snickered but didn't agree. Didn't argue, either, and he supposed that was something. "Don't wait out here," she said. "It'll just make me feel weird, and like I need to hurry."

"Part of the appeal, I'd think."

"Can you just... I don't know, grab something to drink and wait? In there?"

Sit in the diner within earshot of whatever sweet nothings she and Angel were sure to exchange? Sounded like torture, though not as much as whatever fiction his imagination would concoct without the privilege. Or maybe the Slayer wasn't thinking clearly—maybe she'd forgotten that vampires could hear across crowded rooms just fine, that she was essentially inviting him to be a silent third in their conversation. He considered reminding her, but for only a second. While neither option held any appeal, the one where he wouldn't have to agonize over what was being said would at least be more definitive.

"Right," he said, nodding and sliding his hands into his duster pockets. "He'll want a reason I'm here, though."

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll handle him.” And with that, Buffy turned and started across the sparse parking lot, leaving Spike nothing to do but trail after her.

This was going to be a bloody unbearable evening.

Though he had to admit, the look on Angel’s face the second Spike pushed open the diner door was worth almost anything. Like he’d been clobbered over the head with something heavy, his dull eyes wide and his mouth slack. Finally, he seemed to gather the one or two wits he had to spare, turning to favor Buffy with that wounded-puppy glower that had always worked wonders on Dru.

“Him?” he asked. “He’s who you got to give you a ride?”

Buffy flicked her gaze to Spike, and he could have sworn he saw a flash of wariness. “It’s not like I know a lot of people who can drop everything because I need a lift,” she said. “Xander has work and Willow has classes, and I haven’t tried operating a motor vehicle since coming back to life. Considering how not-great at it I was before, I didn’t think it was a good idea to try my skills out by myself on the highway. I’m one broken-down transmission away from being at the start of a horror movie.”

The shock had fallen off Angel’s face and he was nodding now as though Spike playing the role of cab driver had been his suggestion all along. “Yeah, you’re right. I get that,” he said, all magnanimous-like. “But he’s not sitting with us. I don’t know why he has to be in here at all.”

“Because I asked him to wait in here. I’d feel weirder with him outside.”

“Yeah. ’Cause then she might have to act like I’m not even here,” Spike drawled before he could help himself. “Good thing we dodged that bit of awkwardness.”

Angel glowered. Buffy looked somewhat abashed. “Spike,” she began, but he held up a hand.

“Don’t mind me, kiddies. Fancy a bit of something fried, so go on and take your time. You know where to find me.”

“Great. Sounds like a plan.” Angel offered a flat smile. “Now get lost.”

The sod was bloody fortunate Spike was in a mood to play nice—or

at least try for Buffy. If nothing else, this was a chance to show her he knew how and could, whenever he fancied. Even when provoked with something like the face of the man he loathed more than anyone else in this miserable world and the knowledge that, unlike with Riley, he could throw a punch without taking a zap to the noggin.

But no, wouldn't do to start a brawl. So he heaved a sigh and stalked over to a small, two-person table on the other side of the diner. Watched as Angel took Buffy by the arm and led her to a booth by the windows and helped her to her seat like she wasn't capable of finding the bloody thing herself. The joint's scattershot floorplan worked in his favor here, in that he could see them both in profile just fine. Like a bloody picture window. Nothing left to the imagination.

One less thing to torment him, at least.

The diner had one server—just one, though given that the place was empty aside from Spike and the star-crossed pair, he wagered even that much was overly optimistic of how much the management expected to clear tonight. He couldn't get a bead on whether the bloke who took his order was human or not—had enough of a mixed smell to fool the senses—but decided not to risk anything by ordering blood. While the food offerings were sparse, most of them were either fried or spicy, and a starter and a cup of coffee would do him just fine.

If only he'd thought to bring a book or sommat. Not that he'd be spending his time here reading but it would have been a little less conspicuous than staring at the Slayer and her ex as they made their small talk.

"I know you needed someone to drive you," Angel was saying, keeping his voice low, no doubt, to avoid being overheard. Too bloody bad Spike had packed his vamp ears for the trip. "Still, Spike is not who I would have picked."

"Again with the not having a ton of options."

"You know what I mean. I thought it was going to be special. Just us."

"He's all the way over there, Angel. I don't know what else you want. I didn't have a way of getting here and Spike was available. Are you really going to make me go through the list of reasons why I had no choice again?"

For a second, it looked like he might do just that, puffed up and irritated as he was. Certainly wouldn't have been the first time Angelus had been distracted well off purpose by an affront to his ego. Then, as though remembering that he'd gone to the trouble of making travel arrangements for this rendezvous, he settled into his booth seat and snatched a menu from between condiment jars. "Sorry," he said, not sounding sorry at all. "I just... I wasn't expecting it and it threw me off."

"Believe me, I noticed." Buffy also grabbed a menu, which consisted of a single-sided sheet with laminate curling at the corners. Unlike Angel, though, who had most likely gone for the menu just for want of something to do with his hands, she actually seemed interested in its contents. "What's good here?"

"Are you asking me?"

She glanced up. "Who else would I be asking?"

"I'm a vampire."

"And? You're the one who suggested this place. *And* you took a menu."

"That..." He looked down as though surprised to discover it in his hands, then hastily shoved it back. "Force of habit. Cordelia gives me a hard time when we're at a restaurant and I don't order."

"So you eat when you're out with Cordelia but not me?"

"I don't go *out* with Cordelia. We sometimes, as a group, go out after a case. I'll order something, and Wes or Gunn will finish it off for me. Usually Gunn." He fidgeted, something he only did when he was uncomfortable and rarely even then. The Slayer must have really gotten under his skin. "The point is *I* don't eat. And you know that."

"Do I?" Buffy wrinkled her brow as if in thought. It was a look Spike was beginning to know rather well—her *trying to remember* look. He'd caught her in it a few times now, most often when confronted with older memories. Those that had been fresh when she jumped, as well as the big moments, had survived the resurrection mostly intact, but she struggled to fish out the more aged but less significant recollections. "If I did, I forgot," she added. "Guess I just got used to Spike eating."

Angel rolled his eyes. "Of course."

“Why don’t you eat? I mean, if he can—”

“I can. I just choose not to. It doesn’t taste like much.”

Now Spike rolled his eyes. “Wanker,” he muttered, then grinned and lifted his coffee mug in a toast when Angel whipped his head toward him to pin him with a glare.

“You know he can hear everything we’re saying,” Angel informed a thoroughly disinterested Buffy, who was still studying the menu. “Why didn’t you want him outside again?”

“Because he’s doing me a favor and forcing him to wait in the car seems like a pretty shitty *thank you*,” Buffy replied without looking up. “Plus, looks like they serve onion rings.”

“And that matters?”

Sure as hell did to Spike. Both that they had them and that Buffy knew that was what he’d order. He had no idea she’d paid that much attention whenever he ate around her.

“He likes them,” she said. “It’ll give him something to do while we talk. Assuming you *do* want to talk about something other than my undead cabbie.”

Angel drew himself up and frowned. “Are you all right?” he asked softly, as though he hadn’t just been squabbling about bloody nonsense. “You seem... I don’t know, different.”

It was all Spike could do to keep from snorting again.

For her part, Buffy appeared to contemplate the question, still studying the menu, though in a way that it was clear she wasn’t actually reading it. “I don’t know how else I’m supposed to seem,” she said, her tone cautious, neutral. “It’s not like I come back from the dead every day. I mean, it’s *almost* like that, but this go round came with a bit of lag time.”

Angel nodded, all big eyes and sympathy. Made Spike want to heave. “I remember,” he said. “The disorientation, the not knowing if you were somewhere safe. Assuming that you aren’t because that’s all you’ve known for centuries.”

At that, Buffy looked up, vulnerable for the first time since they’d stepped inside, and Spike braced himself. Call him selfish—and he knew he was—but he couldn’t say he was wild about the thought of sharing a piece of Buffy with anyone, much less Angel, even if the big

oaf was more or less out of the picture. He never *truly* left—was always there in thought and memory, the golden bloody standard that no one else had a prayer of ever reaching. The fact that Buffy had trusted Spike with the truth she'd denied her friends had meant something to him, and he didn't want to share it. He didn't want to *not* be the only person in her life that she felt she could be herself around.

But before she could answer, the diner's single waiter finally shuffled over to ask if they'd decided on nosh. Angel ordered coffee—apparently liquids didn't count as people food—and Buffy asked for a plate of cheese fries plus a soft drink. Then the waiter was off again, taking his precious sweet time, heading back to the kitchen.

Angel reached across the table to take Buffy's hand, and while she didn't cringe or flinch away from him, Spike didn't miss the way she stiffened. "I might be the only person in the world who understands what you're going through," Angel went on, all very serious. "It's why I needed to see you like this. Let you know that...it does get better. I think, maybe, you feel that you should just snap back, or be immediately at peace with whatever you went through over there. I thought that too, when I came back. Like I had nothing to complain about because at least I wasn't stuck in that place anymore. But that doesn't take away the memories or the pain. If you need—"

"Yeah," Buffy said, snatching her hand back. "That's it. What it feels like. Everyone looking at me like I should be so grateful, and I am, but it's not as simple as just...knowing I will never go back there again."

Spike released a long, slow breath, the tightness in his chest starting to unwind. He kept his eyes on the pair of them, even as the waiter returned to finally serve him his plate of onion rings and refill his coffee. He was feeling a lot at the moment—relief and guilt over that relief, the urge to shove all the tables separating them aside so he could take Buffy into his arms and let her know she didn't have to pretend with him. The understanding that he was a selfish arse but the giddy gratitude that he didn't have to share this part of her with anyone. It was still his. Just his.

Meanwhile, Angel nodded and sat back, looking stupidly satisfied. Not seeing the lie, of course, because he didn't want to see it. But then,

Spike didn't wager he had ever really seen Buffy at all. Certainly didn't know her well enough to catch the way her eyes shifted, how she suddenly seemed not to know what to do with her hands. How she was looking at the table, toward the kitchen, really doing whatever she could to keep herself occupied. If her fries had arrived, she'd be shoveling them down at a pace. Knowing that the second she slowed down was when she became vulnerable again.

Spike turned his own attention to his cooling plate, mostly to hide the smirk he knew was there in case either of them stole a glance this way. He popped an onion ring into his mouth and chewed, wondering if he could be so bold as to hope that was it. Buffy would eat and Angel would stare and assume and then be on his merry way, and Spike would have the Slayer to himself again.

"So," Angel said when it became clear that Buffy wasn't going to fill the silence for him, "how have you been dealing?"

"With what?" Buffy asked, not looking up.

The question seemed to rattle him even further. He frowned. "With what we've been talking about. Being back from Hell."

"The house is falling apart."

"What?"

"That's how I'm dealing. The house is falling apart. Basement's flooded. Demons keep breaking my things. Mom's savings was pretty much sucked dry by medical bills, so I was brought back to life to deal with a bunch of things I can't really deal with because I have negative dollars in the bank and no one has come to me with an alternative that isn't morally dubious in some fashion." She sat back, sighing. "The closest anyone got was a thousand-year-old ex-vengeance demon who thinks I should start charging the people I save. Like that's an option. 'Hi, do you notice how I saved your life? That'll be seventy-five dollars.'"

Angel shifted as though uncomfortable, which was odd for him. Could say a lot of things about the wanker, and Spike definitely would, but he tended to be unflappable most of the time. "Well, if they come to you and ask for help..."

"Oh, that's supposed to make it better? 'Sure, you have this supernatural problem that only I can solve, but I can't be bothered unless

you whip out your checkbook.” Buffy screwed up her face like she’d tasted something sour, then sat back just in time for the waiter to place her plate of fries on the table before her, along with a diet soda. The coffee Angel had ordered was nowhere to be seen, but he didn’t seem bothered and didn’t ask about it before the waiter shuffled off again.

“I’m starving,” Buffy said and popped a chip into her mouth. “I mean, would my problems be less if I could collect a paycheck for slaying? Yes. Of course. But I’m not about to put a price on someone’s life. That’s just...icky. And no less than I would expect from a demon—or Anya’s version of human—but it just bums me out that I’ve been pulled back from the dead to a mess of financial instability that no one is prepared to help me solve.”

Angel had stopped squirming but looked unhappier than ever, which of course made Spike feel downright jolly. He sank his teeth into another onion ring, enjoying the grease and crumble of the fried bits, and how the flavor filled his mouth—the whole package, really. Hard to beat decent eats that came with a front-row seat to top-quality entertainment.

“Couldn’t you ask someone for help?” Angel asked. “I’m sure Giles would make sure you’re kept afloat.”

“Giles has already written me a check. He did last night, at least, but as far as long-term solutions go, that isn’t one.” Buffy stuffed another chip into her mouth before seizing her drink. “I have to show the state that I can provide Dawn with stability, and taking money from an older man who, on paper, is nothing more than my former high school librarian isn’t going to win me any votes.”

“But you’re alive, Buffy. Doesn’t that trump everything else?” He reached over and placed his hand on hers once more—the one that wasn’t occupied with her food. “Yes, this world has its problems, but it’s not Hell.”

“Glad to know we set the bar that high.” She again tugged her hand free in one fluid, effortless motion, not bothering to look up.

For a moment, Angel appeared stumped, and once again, Spike thought that might be the end of it. The disappointing epilogue on the Slayer’s once great romance. Then the git leaned forward once more, straightening his shoulders like he so often had before leaping into the

slaughter. "You have me worried," he said. "You don't seem like yourself."

Buffy glanced up before licking a drop of cheese off her lower lip. "I don't?"

"No. And I get it—that's what happens after you're in a hell dimension. You feel maybe a little rough around the edges. It's just a few months up here but centuries down there, and getting out of that... It's hard to see the good in just about anything because you're accustomed to fighting to survive."

She was back to considering her food, more dejected than before. "Yeah, I guess."

"But it gets easier. Every day is a little easier."

Buffy nodded dazedly and picked up her drink. "Good. I guess I just need to wait a little then. Keep doing what I'm doing."

"And what are you doing?"

"Not a lot," she admitted before taking a long pull of her straw. "Trying to...adjust. It's hard being around the others. Hard being around Dawn, too. After everything."

Angel wrinkled his oversized forehead. "I understand wanting distance, but I don't think it's a good idea to be by yourself. Especially after everything you went through. It won't get any easier to be around them if you isolate. Believe me, I know what I'm talking about."

"Yeah."

"Spent a hundred years avoiding others because I couldn't stand myself."

That was a load of bollocks, but this time Spike managed to swallow his snicker. Or rather stifle it by shoving three onion rings into his mouth. Someday, if she let him, he'd tell Buffy the story as he knew it. Fill in some of those gaps that Angel left conveniently unaddressed about the years he'd supposedly spent in a gutter, crying over what a bad boy he used to be. If nothing else, Angel definitely had at least one new vamp creation running around out there that Spike was certain had never once been brought up among those whose good opinions the sod wanted to preserve.

"I know," Buffy said, placing her glass back on the table. "And I don't... It's not like I don't *want* to be around my friends. But when I

am, it's just suffocating and I keep thinking about...things I know I shouldn't think about. There are things I can't tell them—things they just wouldn't get."

"Have you tried?"

"I can't. Just believe me on that."

Angel sighed, crossing his arms. "So you're spending all your time alone."

"Yeah. Or with Spike."

That did it. Angel's spine went ramrod straight once more as he again turned to scowl at Spike, who was ready with a little finger wave.

"Spike," he repeated, spitting the name as though it tasted foul, whirling back to aim the full of his indignation at the Slayer. "Why on earth would you spend time with Spike?"

Buffy favored her ex with a deer-in-the-headlights look that Spike couldn't help but find rather fetching. "Well, it's... We patrol together sometimes. And he doesn't... It's hard to explain."

"Try."

She furrowed her brow, some of the tension leaking away. "Well, for one thing, he doesn't put me on the spot."

"On the spot."

"Yeah, kinda like what you're doing."

"I'm putting you on the spot."

"By demanding to know why I'm spending my time the way I am? Yeah. That is a total spot-putter-onner move."

Angel's face twisted up in that way that made him look like a surprised howler monkey. "Well, excuse me for being a little thrown. I mean, we are talking about Spike here."

And then something rather glorious happened. Buffy went steely, focused, the same sort of calm that came over her before she threw herself into a skirmish. Even better, her eyes narrowed into a glare Spike knew intimately—the same one she flashed him every time he did something to remind her that he was a monster. The same he hadn't seen, really, since before her death. And now it was aimed at Prince Angel.

"Yes, we're talking about Spike," she repeated tersely. "Also known as the guy who let himself get shish kebabbed by a mad hellgod to

protect my sister. The guy who watched over her all summer while you were doing...what, exactly?"

Angel opened his mouth but that was as far as he got.

"Oh, and protected the Hellmouth along with my friends. I know he saved Xander's life at least twice, and Tara's once. And when the word got out that the Slayer in Sunnydale was six feet under and it was party city, he put himself between death and Dawn to make sure she was safe." Buffy crossed her arms. "And now that I'm alive again, he's the one who doesn't expect me just to bounce back and be okay like everyone else. So yes, Angel. I spend time with Spike. Not a lot and not every day, but when it gets to be a little too much and I don't want to be with people, but I also don't want to be alone, I know he can give me that." She glanced at her plate of half-eaten fries, then braced her hands on the table and pushed herself back. "And now he's going to give me something else. A ride home."

Angel couldn't have looked more surprised if she'd given him the nose punching he so richly deserved. He tripped over his over-large feet to head her off as she stood, and now Spike couldn't keep his chuckle in.

"Can you get this?" Buffy asked, waving at her fries. "And Spike's stuff too. As I told you, I'm kinda strapped for cash."

"Buffy, slow down—"

"I don't think this is what either of us thought it would be. It's okay. I've been disappointing people left and right since I came back. You get used to it."

Angel seized her arm and tugged her to face him. "I'm not disappointed," he said. "I'm worried. You're not... You're not yourself. This isn't you, Buffy."

"It's whatever crawled out of that grave, and that's the best I can do," she replied, and though her face didn't betray it, Spike caught a slight quiver in her voice and understood the words had landed a blow. "I'm sorry, Angel. Things are just...different now. Maybe they have been for a long time and I'm just now noticing. Or maybe..."

"Don't leave," Angel said. "Not like this."

She met his eyes and slowly, deliberately, pulled her arm free. "I think this is the best we can do." She breathed out before shifting her

attention to Spike. It might have been his imagination—his sheer bloody hope—but he thought something softened in her gaze. “Ready?”

Spike tried not to smirk—he really did—but, well, it was Angel. It was *Buffy* walking out on *Angel* at Spike’s side because she couldn’t stand the thick git anymore than he could.

Here he’d thought the night would be unbearable. Turned out to be the best he’d had since he’d seen her walking down those stairs.

“Your chariot awaits, m’lady,” he drawled, extending an arm and grinning madly at Angel, who couldn’t do a single thing about it. “Let’s get you home.”



WELL, that could have gone worse. Maybe.

Or probably not. If the utter one-eighty in Spike’s mood was anything to go by, the entire thing had been an unmitigated disaster, and it was her own damn fault. She was the one who had decided against her better judgment to meet Angel for this...whatever this was supposed to have been. A clandestine reunion so they could hold hands and gaze meaningfully into each other’s eyes and wax poetic on all the what-ifs and could-have-beens that had defined her life after his exit from it.

That had been the goal, at least. What Angel had expected. What everyone had expected, and why not? It would have been a Buffy thing to do. The Buffiest of Buffy things to do. Because if one thing about her first stint on this planet had been true, it had been her feelings for Angel. Those that had lingered to the point they’d eventually poisoned her relationship with Riley—or at least been a poison ingredient if not the full solution. And despite all her foot-dragging, that anchor that had dropped in her stomach the second she’d heard Angel’s voice over the phone, the mounting sense of doom that had tailed her as the hours to this meeting had lapsed, Buffy had sincerely expected something to happen the second she saw him. To feel relief. Heartache. The compulsion that had once defined her to throw herself into his arms and spill everything there was to know about her life, even the stuff

that didn't interest him, which had been—now that she thought about it—quite a lot.

Instead, she'd felt a whole lot of apprehension and unease, which had graduated to annoyance the more he tried to force out information she had no intention of sharing.

Like where she had spent her much-deserved retirement before being called back to the frontlines. It had been there, the truth—everything she had shared so freely with Spike and everything she'd thought she might share with Angel. All about Heaven and her post-resurrection malaise and why she wasn't doing cartwheels at the prospect of being alive again. Going from being burden-free to so strapped she couldn't breathe without her chest feeling tight, and how all of that seemed determined to drag her down to a place where she couldn't die but couldn't live, either. The world too large, too demanding, and her friends too clueless of just how much they had thrust upon her when she was supposed to be done.

"So," Spike drawled at last, having finally landed on a radio station that wasn't spurting pure static across the airwaves, "think that went well, all told."

Buffy somehow managed to keep her eyes from rolling all the way out of her head when she turned to glare at him, but it was a very narrow miss.

"That not the feeling you had, then?"

"You could gloat a little less."

"Where's the fun in that?" Spike favored her with a winning smile and shifted to drag his cigarettes out of his duster pocket. "I was wrong, you know. Had a right gay ol' time tonight. Didn't figure it possible, with you lovebirds reuniting—"

"Again with the gloating."

He shrugged before cranking down the window. "Just never wagered you for one who would ever pull back the wool. Not where he's concerned."

You're not yourself. This isn't you, Buffy.

Buffy folded her arms and tried to make herself smaller, hoping he wouldn't press if she didn't take the bait. In truth, she didn't know what she was thinking, only that there was a lot of noise and not much

of it made sense. It wasn't the first time she'd had the thought that she wasn't herself. That this—whatever *this* existence was—was nothing but a close approximation of the life she'd been living before. It was, however, the first time she'd heard someone else voice it. Until now, she'd just had the suspicion born on the back of muted conversations that had a way of halting the second she entered a room. Looks full of expectation and worse—concern—whenever she did something the others weren't expecting, or said something that wasn't, well, Buffy.

The thing was, Buffy didn't feel all that different. While her memories were a warzone of contradiction these days, she didn't struggle recalling things like how she'd felt. The cloying desperation of her last great battle, for example, the sickening fear that had informed every decision she'd made, were well within reach. They felt fresh, even if the memories themselves did not. She could reach for it and...perhaps not touch it, but recall perfectly what it had been like to be wrapped up inside. The same was true when she thought about the hollow sensation that had forced its way into the part of her heart once reserved for her mom. Or how it had felt in the days and weeks after her boyfriend had choppered his way into another life. Or the satisfied exhaustion that had consumed her after they had defeated Adam. The same as had been there after the mayor. The soul-deep pain of knowing Angel didn't want his future to have her in it, and the certainty that she couldn't move forward without him at her side.

All these things Buffy knew and felt—they didn't exist within her as experiences that belonged to someone else. Not like some of the memories did. But she also knew the girl who had experienced them felt far away, as though it had all happened a very long time ago and not just a few months, a year, two years, or more. Maybe she wasn't herself. Maybe she was whatever the others had brought back from Heaven. Spike had asked, after all, how long it had been for her there, and the answer had been *longer*. Time being without shape or weight, not existing in the way it did down here, where lives were ruled and defined by it. She had been somewhere else, *something* else, and bouncing back to the version of herself she'd been before dying... Well, it was like trying to go back to being a child. That Buffy Summers was gone and there was no getting her back. The one sitting here was the

one they had, and she was nothing if not a product of her experiences. All of them. Even the ones they wanted her to forget.

"Why didn't you tell him?" Spike asked, jarring her from her thoughts. She glanced at him and released a breath when she saw the smirk had faded.

It was stupid, she knew, but she liked this Spike. The one who was just with her, no demand or expectation. Maybe she was kidding herself—maybe he was doing all of this for show—but it felt honest when he was just this. Not posturing or trying to work an angle or make her see him as anything other than what he was, just letting her exist in the space he occupied. Alone without being alone. Together without being together.

Because she couldn't be together. Not with Spike.

Right?

"Tell him what?" she asked, doing her best to shove that thought into the deep where it belonged.

Spike lifted a shoulder and took a drag off his cigarette, a trail of smoke streaming out the open window. "You weren't in sodding Hell, Slayer. Just wonderin' why you let him think you were."

Buffy licked her lips. "I don't know. Just didn't... I didn't feel like that was safe with him."

"Safe," he repeated.

"He would want to talk about it. A lot. And I don't. Want to talk about it, that is. Not...not the way he would talk about it." She paused and unfolded her arms, then lowered them back to her sides. Felt the rush of warmth in her skin as blood flow evened out—or at least she imagined she could—and wondered if that was the sort of thing Spike could hear. Probably it was. Would go a long way in explaining how he always seemed so attuned to her, even on a micro scale. She couldn't remember Angel ever being like that, but maybe he had. Maybe that was just another one of those things she'd forgotten. "I don't really know him anymore, and it's not like there's anything he could do, I guess, except tell Willow or Giles and make everything worse. It just didn't feel right, telling him."

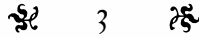
Spike didn't say anything, just thought loudly at her, and that was okay. She could handle loud thoughts.

They *were* loud, too. Louder than Angel's had ever been. Probably because Spike wanted her to know them—know him—the way she'd never known Angel. The way Angel never had *let* her know him. That much she'd gotten clarified tonight, if nothing else. Spike wasn't interested in fixing whatever was broken. He was fine just letting her be. Existing like that, cracked and imperfect, no pressure to piece herself together again. Not viewing her like a problem to be solved.

If she were normal Buffy, that would bother her. But she wasn't normal Buffy. She was the Buffy they had summoned from the ground—the only one who was here now. The only one she could be.

That Spike had no problem with that didn't bother her.

It was actually rather comforting.



JUST HOPING NO ONE KNOWS

THE MEETING WITH ANGEL HADN'T CHANGED ANYTHING, REALLY, but Buffy found she felt different over the coming days. A good different—not a *life is beautiful* different, but definitely a *things could suck worse than they do* different, which was a nice place to land. Sure, the house was still falling apart, and sure, Dawn didn't seem to appreciate just how tenuous their living situation was, and *sure*, trying to exist in this world was a chore, but Buffy had had an epiphany on the way back to Sunnydale. That while her life might be in shambles, there was no reason to make things harder on herself because of something like pride. So she had decided to let Spike call in that favor to help with her flooding problem, and when Giles had offered to cut her another sizable check, she hadn't protested or done any of the things she felt like an adult should do when another adult bailed them out. Instead, she'd thanked him, hugged him, and then hurried out to deposit that check before he could change his mind. The amount had been substantial, too. Not enough to keep her from worrying the house might be foreclosed upon a few months down the line, but enough that she at least had those few months.

While it was an admittedly low bar, it was the only one she had.

And one she'd reached through all the thinking she'd done on the way back from Turtle Cove.

Spike had dropped her off a little after midnight, first insisting they swing by her favorite Italian eatery to get what he called a proper meal. A few cheesy fries and sips of diet soda were not up to the evil vampire's nutritional standards, apparently, which was one of those things that had the capacity to perplex her if she let herself wonder things she shouldn't wonder about Spike. Or demons. Or at all. The path of least resistance entailed letting him have his way—not to mention, she'd kinda owed him for the trip. So she'd stumbled through her front door, loaded down with noodles and bread, relieved to find that the house was quiet and she didn't need to worry about giving anyone a lecture for staying up too late on a school night.

Buffy had considered taking her meal into the dining room like a good, role-model person would do, but had instead crashed in front of the television, grateful for the first time that Giles had opted for an extended-stay hotel over more nights on her couch. Eating in the dining room meant quiet, and quiet meant thinking—and probably about more than just how one of the unexpected perks of living on the Hellmouth was the ability to enjoy good, fresh pasta after midnight. Late night reruns of old sitcoms took up a lot less mental real estate than pondering her former-stalker-turned-friend mortal enemy. Not that it had been too late for a patrol, which she'd decided, after practically licking her to-go carton clean, was just what the doctor had ordered to get her brain into sleep mode. Otherwise, she might have been doomed to toss and turn all night, reliving the conversation—worse, *analyzing* the conversation—and trying to determine if Angel had been right, and if he had, what that meant for her.

Yeah, way better to patrol. Not that those thoughts wouldn't follow her, but at least she could vent her feelings about them. And maybe exhaust herself into falling asleep the second she got home.

Of course, going out had meant running into Spike again, because going out *always* meant running into Spike these days. He hadn't seemed surprised to see her—just asked if she'd enjoyed her dinner and if she wanted in on the nest of vamps he'd just learned had taken up

residence at the Keller mausoleum in Shady Hill, and yes, yes she had wanted in on that very much.

That fight had been a cathartic one, too. Not challenging in anything other than the number of vamps there had been to clear out of the place, all with someone at her back who responded instinctively to every step she took, every punch she threw, every subtle shift she made as she reacted and blocked and fought and dusted. It hadn't been the first time she'd noticed that—how in sync he was with her, like they had been fighting together like this for years and understood each other's flow to the point it might as well have been shared. The same force, the same beat thrumming through them, as though he were an extension of herself.

And that had been it—the moment everything clicked. Maybe she'd been running on empty so long that all the tried and true defenses had been too worn down to spring into action; maybe she'd finally just hit a wall with all the old arguments; maybe some switch had flipped and she'd decided she was tired of lying to herself. Whatever the answer, Buffy had realized then, in that moment, something that had been obvious for a long time. At least as long as she'd been back among the living.

Namely, that she liked Spike. She liked hanging out with him, kicking ass with him, trading jibes with him, sitting in silence with him. She liked all the parts of being with him—it was effortless, it was easy, it was everything she needed and everything she knew she shouldn't want. Everything she wanted anyway, *shoulds* be damned.

Whether or not this translated into a desire to pursue something more complex than friendship was still up in the air, but not off the table, and god, was that ever different from the way she remembered thinking about him before. Taking him out of that secret fantasy box and placing him somewhere much more within reach. It felt risky but right at the same time, like some part of her that had been resisting life again could finally relax.

At the same time, she didn't want to rush—didn't want to jump the gun on anything. Some part of her understood that she was in a vulnerable place, especially after that meeting with Angel, and that leaping into anything with Spike required more thought than just a coin flip. If

anything happened between them, it would mean something to him—something more than it would mean to her. And after everything he'd given her, all his patience and his willingness to be what she needed, she owed him at least enough consideration to figure out what he meant to her before she put herself in a place to break his heart.

It was hard to put the thought out of her mind, though, especially once she became aware of it. Even if it did make the next few days especially livable. Experiencing that butterfly sensation in her stomach the closer the sun came to setting, knowing when she left for patrol she was heading specifically in Spike's direction, grinning and flirting with him whenever they were together and trying to survive the hours when they were apart.

Something Angel wasn't making easy.

Buffy had foolishly assumed that everything would end after the meeting. It had been rather definitive, the whole *her leaving* thing, even if he'd had a time accepting that she hadn't wanted to stick around for a bunch of meaningless platitudes. But the day after she'd gotten back, he'd called to check in on her. A friendly message. Just making sure she'd gotten home all right, that there hadn't been any trouble. Buffy had assured him that while Spike hadn't strictly adhered to the speed limit, she'd arrived home in one piece and been in good enough condition to go out and slay demons later that very night. There had been a pause, and then he'd asked again if she was all right, not quite saying the words he'd said to her face but bringing them up so she'd had no choice but to consider them. And after a long beat, she'd reiterated that she was fine. That yeah, their conversation hadn't gone the way she'd thought it would but things between them had changed and she was going through a lot and maybe it hadn't been a good time for them to get together.

"You seriously expected me to not want to see you after you'd been rescued from a hell dimension," Angel had replied in that tone that had always made her feel like a child. "You were *gone*, Buffy. Dead. Of course, I wanted to see you when I learned you were back. I had to."

And that had seemed a perfectly fair point, one she could hardly argue with. Only it didn't change anything—didn't invalidate what she was feeling now, or how she'd felt at the diner. It certainly didn't make

her life any easier. Angel had needed to see her—fine. It just hadn't occurred to him that maybe the need had been one-sided. She hadn't exactly rushed to the phone the second she'd climbed out of the grave, and maybe he should ask himself why that was. Why it had taken someone else calling on her behalf to even make her think about Angel in the first place.

But Buffy had bitten her tongue, swallowed all the things she knew she shouldn't say, and found a reason to hang up before it could all come tumbling out, frustrated and embarrassed and annoyed, both with Angel and herself. It had never been this hard with him before—well, except back before they'd officially been together and he'd been doing the *pop up at random intervals with occasionally useful information* thing. Only then he'd seemed perfectly in control, even content with the non-status of their relationship. Everything he wasn't now, even after what she felt had been a clear conversation about what they were and weren't. And he was the one who had left in the first place, so where did he get off feeling put out now? It wasn't like any of the big moments of their romance had been her choice.

And she knew, she *knew*, that ranting to Spike about Angel was eight kinds of unfair and probably bear-pokey, especially when she wasn't sure how she felt about him, but it wasn't like she had other options. The phone kept ringing, and it kept being her ex's voice on the end of the line, and her friends weren't all that sympathetic. Willow would throw her weird looks whenever she groaned about yet another phone call from Angel; even Giles had taken to studying her like she was a pod person, which, hadn't Angel personally tortured him for information that one time, on top of murdering his girlfriend? Sure, her friends had made allowances—mostly at Buffy's behest—to separate souled and unsouled behavior but it was a bit much to be worried over her for not being in pieces over someone who had been her ex longer than he'd been her boyfriend. Like they *wanted* her to be pining girl.

Maybe they did. Pining-after-Angel Buffy was, after all, a Buffy they knew how to deal with. The Buffy that had been brought back from the dead was a different story.

Which left her with Spike. Who never looked at her like she had

grown another head or tried to change the subject, and yes, she knew the reasons for that, and yes, they were not good reasons, but she wasn't about to be a choosey beggar when it came to the one person in her life that helped it make sense.

"He called again," Buffy said by way of greeting the night that marked a week after the miserable meet-up. "I swear, I am this close to just changing my number."

Spike snickered and fell into place beside her without effort—she didn't even have to slow down. Just walk up to his crypt and by the time she passed, she'd had a vampire patrolling partner. One who matched her strides and her movements and seemed to read her mind quicker than she could talk some nights. It had never been this effortless with anyone before. Not once. When she and Riley had patrolled together, he'd constantly overcrowded her, tried to stay ahead, leaped into trouble before assessing the situation, then yelled at her for doing the same. He'd had something to prove and nothing but endless determination to do so. And before that... Well, when Angel had patrolled with her, it hadn't been so much patrolling as an excuse to make out, which had felt very exciting at the time but now just struck her as counterproductive. There had been very few fights where they'd been side-by-side. He'd more or less left the slaying up to her and her alone.

Not that Buffy had minded that, or really minded now. Slaying was, after all, *her* duty and not his. If he'd shown up on the regular, she might have wondered if he thought she couldn't handle herself. That was just the way with Angel—when he was around, she'd had a tendency to feel inadequate. Like he was looking at her and finding her lacking, but in ways even he didn't fully understand.

Really, anyone other than Spike patrolling with her might drive her out of her mind, and it was all because of what he *was not* there to do versus what he was. What Spike *was not* there to do was critique her form, fight her battles, ride to her rescue when the going got tough. He was there because he enjoyed fighting and he enjoyed watching her fight. He wasn't making her out to be a damsel he could charm once she realized she was in over her head or doubting the calls she made once she made them. It was just silent, constant support, and that was why it worked.

“Seriously,” she went on, unable to help herself, “Angel told me once that Drusilla was an obsession of his and I gotta say, I never saw him as the kind of guy who got obsessed until he decided to give my phone line a workout.”

“Bloke’s a bloody dog with a bone when there’s somethin’ around he can’t control,” Spike said, his voice not exactly dark but darker than usual. She supposed that was what she got for referencing his ex. “He fancies something and he has to have it. Hell, not have, but bloody beat it down. Make it so addicted to pain it doesn’t even know it’s being tortured anymore, it just likes the fun. What he’s not used to is his toys givin’ him the slip. Probably wagered you’d be on his hook forever and—”

“Whoa.” Buffy seized his arm and pulled him to a standstill. “Did you just call me Angel’s toy?”

Spike had the decency to look a little chagrined. Not nearly enough, but a little was better than nothing. “Not how I see you, pet.”

“Well, good, because I am no one’s toy. Even if you make a robot out of me.”

He brought up his hands, his eyes wide. “Oi, innocent party here. Thought it was Angel you were cross with.”

“Spike, when in your life have you ever been innocent?”

He lowered his hands, smirking now. That completely insufferable smirk that she wanted to both punch and kiss off his face in equal measure. “Wager I had a mo’ or so when I was a young lad.”

“Hard to imagine,” she replied dryly, but decided the safest course of action was to start walking again. The longer she looked at him the more difficult it became to remember why giving in to temptation was a bad idea. “Angel has just...not been interested in my life at all since he left it. We’re not phone call buddies. We’re more ‘swoop into town and screw everything up for each other and leave in a big mess’ buddies. Maybe ‘clandestine nighttime visit after a parent has died’ buddies, too, but I don’t call him and he doesn’t call me and that was his choice. Now he wants me to give him daily updates just because I didn’t act like he thought I should?”

Spike sucked in his cheeks and directed his gaze to the ground, which was probably the smartest thing he could have done in this situ-

ation, even if it drove her up the wall. He just wasn't the sort of guy to not tell you what he was thinking. Granted, she *was* doing the insensitive ranting-about-the-ex thing with him again so maybe his reticence wasn't all that weird. It wasn't like she wouldn't read a ton into whatever he said. She just wasn't used to Spike thinking before running his trap. The smart thing to do would be just to follow his lead and shut up.

But Buffy wasn't always smart. In fact, ask most anyone and they would tell you that Buffy Summers? Total airhead. No need to break precedent now. Not while she had a captive audience.

"I don't remember him being like this," she said. "When we were together, I mean. Well, I guess... There were times I tried to drive him crazy with other guys and stuff just because he drove *me* crazy and I wanted some payback. But not always! My sophomore year, I was really into this guy, Owen, who was totally normal and age-appropriate and into poetry. But pretty much the entire high school dating experience for Buffy revolved around Angel, and I was the chaser. He drove me crazy with the mysterious appearances and disappearances and then never telling me what he was thinking, keeping secrets about his past and even sometimes where he went at night. I saw him one night with Drusilla. They'd met in this playground and he straight up lied to my face about it when I asked him."

Spike looked thoroughly unsurprised at each of these revelations—though she thought she might have caught his mouth twitching when she'd mentioned Owen and his poetry, but that could have been her imagination. What was definitely not her imagination was the fact that she found her description of her relationship with Angel stranger than he did. It wasn't how she remembered thinking about him before, but at the same time, she knew she wasn't wrong. He had done all those things—made her crazy with the back and forth and the random disappearances after dropping the barest nuggets of much-needed information. Things had progressed hot and heavy between them despite the cloak and dagger bullshit, and as someone who was now twenty rather than sixteen, she thought she understood why.

Back then, the danger had been...exciting. She'd known she shouldn't go for Angel, which was exactly *why* she'd gone for Angel.

Even he'd thought it was a bad idea—telling her more than once that they could never be together, that it would never work...but he'd still made sure to drop by whenever possible and haunt her with long, lingering looks full of meaning, make her want the impossible just a little bit more until it was *all* she wanted. Until thoughts of being with him consumed her completely, even though she couldn't pinpoint exactly where her annoyance with him had switched all the way to love. Just that it had, and she'd rolled with it because she'd been sixteen and lovestruck.

Now, anyone who tried to pull that kind of crap would get an ass-kicking. A deserved one, too. And for the life of her, she couldn't figure out why she'd found it romantic in the first place. Why she'd let him dictate the terms of their relationship time and again, though she suspected the answer again began and ended with her age.

It was like all the things her mother had ever told her suddenly not only made sense but were right. Even the things she couldn't possibly have been right about because no matter how much her mom had rocked, she had never been the Slayer. She'd never known what it was like to balance monsters and apocalypses between homework and boys.

God, she'd been an idiot.

"Think you're overlooking something crucial, love," Spike said. "Something you're doin' that you didn't do before that's driving him bloody barmy."

"What's that?"

He smirked. "You're trying to give him the brush-off, aren't you? Get him to leave you be."

"And?"

"And he's not used to it, is he? Time was, all Angel had to do to get you to jump was give you one of those long, puppy-dog looks of his. Couldn't wait to play up for daddy then. None of his girls could."

Buffy wrinkled her nose. "Do *not* call him daddy. Holy cow, I need a shower just hearing that."

"That a fact?" There was too much smirk in his voice and she should totally punch him for it. He had not earned that smirk. "Could

lend a hand with those hard-to-reach places if you like. Think you'll find I'm very...thorough."

Her skin went hot—too hot. Something made worse by the fact that she knew he knew it. Was over there congratulating himself on getting under her skin and getting away with it. She wasn't even in the business of popping him in the nose anymore for worry over the signals that might send. Violence was foreplay for Spike—she'd known that a long time. It hadn't bothered her before because it had been *his* problem and his problem alone. Now it was her problem too.

Or maybe it had always been her problem, and she was just now realizing it. The more she considered Spike—all of him, the good, the bad, and especially the dangerous—the more it seemed her changing feelings for him weren't the result of anything new, rather the natural progression of where their relationship had been before she'd died. The only strange thing, really, was that it had taken her dying to notice it.

"I'll take a raincheck," Buffy said, trying for casual though she knew better than to assume success. Not reacting with violence was one thing—telling him *maybe* was downright dangerous. But hell, she was in the mood for *dangerous* these days.

It didn't hurt that she knew it would drive Angel crazy. Maybe not as crazy as he was driving her but enough that hopefully he'd get the hint.

Though Buffy wasn't going to hold her breath.



SOMETHING WAS WRONG WITH BUFFY.

Willow hadn't wanted to admit it—not to herself, not to anyone. Had, in fact, been doing just about anything she could to convince herself that what was happening was normal. The last thing she needed was to give Giles a reason to launch into another lecture on how careless she'd been. She wasn't stupid—though the fight had ended, the argument had not, and all it would take to get him going again was the smallest hint that something in the resurrection spell had gone amiss.

But the more she tried to pretend like everything was okay, the more she saw it wasn't.

And it all started with Angel.

Willow had accepted a long time ago that she would never fully understand about Angel or the connection he and Buffy shared, particularly how they remained in each other's orbits even after so much pain and heartache. Not even going their separate ways and living their separate lives could remove them from one another's sphere of influence. Angel had haunted Buffy ever since he'd broken her heart, had ultimately been one of the reasons Riley had left, even if Buffy had never said as much aloud. But of course Angel had been at the root of that. If not Angel himself, then certainly the knowledge that Buffy had just never been as *about* Riley as she had her ex. And that couldn't have been easy to live with, even if Willow knew in no uncertain terms that Buffy had been unaware of it throughout the duration of their relationship. Yet Angel had remained, the ghost that was always there, an ex who, if circumstances were even the slightest bit different, would no longer be an ex. If at any point Angel had told Buffy that he wanted her back, well, Willow couldn't see any eventuality in which that didn't happen. Buffy might not immediately rush off into his arms, but the history, the pull, the depth of everything they had been through would have ultimately won out over logical thinking. Because the heart was not logical. The heart wanted what it wanted.

Angel was It, proper noun and everything. Which was what made Buffy's behavior over the last few days some of the wackiest Willow had ever seen.

First, there was the way she'd been ever since she'd returned from their reunion meeting. Well, no, that wasn't right. *First* was the fact that Buffy had insisted on *Spike* as her escort to the reunion. That was weird on a level Willow couldn't begin to comprehend. And not the only weirdness that had happened since Buffy had returned—apparently, she'd been spending quite a bit of time with Spike. Heading over to his crypt around patrol time so they could set out and tackle the graveyards together which, well, wasn't the worst idea in the world except that it was probably sending out all kinds of signals that were

not great. Taking him along to a clandestine meeting with Angel was like something out of the Twilight Zone.

And if that hadn't been enough, then how Buffy talked about Angel ever since that meeting certainly would have been.

Willow hadn't wanted to pry. Well, okay, that wasn't true. She'd desperately wanted to pry. Quiz. Lock Buffy in a windowless room under the glare of a bright light and sweat her until she started blabbing. You know, the way friends do. But Buffy hadn't been in the girl talk mood at all since well before her death, and that didn't look to be changing anytime soon. Still, it didn't take interrogation tactics to deduce that the meeting hadn't been all hugs and puppies. Anytime Angel was mentioned—which wasn't historically all that often, but Willow kept trying to bring him up to test her theory—Buffy would roll her eyes or bristle or mutter something she'd conveniently forget when asked. Then there was the fact that Angel was calling the house on a daily basis, and Buffy was always making excuses as to why she couldn't come to the phone. She was in the shower, she was on patrol, she was about to head out for patrol, she was sleeping, she was somewhere remote where phones didn't exist. Willow, Tara, and Dawn were taking turns giving him increasingly unbelievable reasons why Buffy wasn't available.

The time for fooling herself was over. There *was* something wrong with Buffy. Nothing huge, nothing necessarily evil—goddess, she hoped—but enough that it needed to be acknowledged and addressed. And the most likely answer was the one Willow dreaded above all others.

There had been risks in the resurrection spell. She'd known that going in. Everyone had. Well, maybe not *all* the risks, but that it was a risky spell and things in the magical world sometimes went kablooeey. People were not raised from the dead just willy-nilly; if it was easy, everyone would do it. There had been a cost, sacrifices, not to mention the invocation of the darkest magicks Willow had ever accessed. But it had been worth it. *Buffy* had been worth it. And if something other than Buffy had crawled out of that grave, well, they would have dealt with it the way they dealt with everything else. It would have been pretty obvious from the word *go*. But nothing had been obvious. Yeah, there had been the mystical thaumogenesis, but as

far as Willow understood it, that was standard for any sort of spell of this nature.

Buffy wasn't evil as far as Willow could tell. She wasn't dangerous. But she wasn't Buffy. Not all the way, anyway.

And that thought was too terrifying to contemplate. If Willow was right, then she'd blown her only shot at getting her best friend back, and maybe...

But she needed to be certain. She also needed to *not* be alone on this. Whatever they decided to do, they would do together. It might be her mess but the whole gang had been in on the solution. She couldn't come as far as she had on her own.

First, though, she'd make her Hail Mary pass.

"Hey," she said with as much false cheer as she could reasonably muster as Buffy wandered into the kitchen. "You were out late. Long night of monster wrestling?"

Buffy wrinkled her nose and made her way to the coffee pot. "A few of your standard creature features," she replied, not glancing in Willow's direction. "Spike and I cleared them out pretty fast."

Just the name Willow hadn't wanted to hear. "Spike," she echoed, hoping she sounded nonchalant. Cool customer. Not worried about anyone or anything in particular. "You were with him again?"

"Yeah. He's way handy to have on patrol. Knows where all the good vampy hidey-holes are."

"He also thinks he's in love with you."

The Buffy of old would have had a reaction to this. Wrinkled her nose, rolled her eyes, made an *eww* sound—essentially reinforced just how laughable and hopeless Spike's infatuation with her really was.

The Buffy of old, however, was not here. This was New Buffy. A Buffy who poured herself a cup of coffee with nary a flinch at the suggestion of Spike's weird fixation. If anything, Willow thought she might be blushing. Buffy. Blushing over Spike like he was a guy she liked and not, well, *Spike*. Every alarm bell in Willow's head began to chime, and loudly. This was so much worse than she could have thought.

"It's not so bad," Buffy said a moment later. "I mean, he hasn't made a move or anything since I became living dead girl."

"That doesn't mean he won't."

"I didn't say it did. But even if he does, it's not like things are the way they were before." She replaced the coffee pot on its burner, seeming to take great care in not looking up. "I mean, I died. That kinda changed everything."

"It changed Spike?"

"Well, from what Dawn has told me, he was around here a lot while I was gone." Buffy finally looked up, giving Willow a look that seemed almost like a dare. *Tell me I'm wrong. Tell me it wasn't exactly the way Dawn said it was.*

Which, of course, Willow couldn't do without lying. Truth of the matter was they had relied on Spike, and it hadn't started with Buffy's death. He'd been looped in a good amount toward the end of the fight with Glory, but that had been out of necessity, not...not *wanting* to rely on him. And fine, yes, Spike *had* been handy over the summer when it came to looking after Dawn and letting Willow and the others focus on the business of rescuing their friend from the hell dimension in which she was trapped, but again, necessity. He'd been around and loyalish, and given that he had that chip in his head, there hadn't been any downsides to putting him in charge of Dawn.

But the circumstances they were living in now were not extenuating like the ones in the past. No hellgod bent on unmaking reality was on a Key-hunt, no resurrection spell was in the works. Buffy was back, and so should be the status quo. Otherwise, everything felt off. Not the way it was supposed to.

Which only reinforced the necessity of the Hail Mary pass.

"Buffy," Willow began, "I was thinking about maybe seeing if Angel could come to town for a while."

That did it. Buffy whipped her head up and pinned Willow with what looked suspiciously like a glare. "Come to *town*? Why?"

"Because he's running up a huge phone bill trying to get a hold of you, and obviously there's something he wants to talk about."

"I don't want to talk to him."

"But...why not?" The words tumbled out before she could stop them, equal parts honest and exasperated. And that little crack was enough to dismantle the floodgates. Everything came spilling out. "It's

strange. You have to see that. Angel wanting to talk to you like this, and you being all avoidy girl. And you never told us what happened between you two when you met him—”

“I wasn’t aware it was anyone’s business but mine,” Buffy replied coolly. Like, way coolly. Not Buffy coolly.

“Of course it’s not our business but we do care about you!”

“And that means I’m supposed to tell you everything just because you ask?”

“Because it’s obvious something happened and it’s bothering you!”

“No,” she retorted, her voice clipped, “*Angel* is bothering me by not taking the hint that I don’t want to talk to him. And your solution to this is to invite him to come to town so we can talk about *why* I don’t want to talk to him? I’ve spent the past two years trying to get over him and now that I have, you think something is wrong with me? Thanks, Will. Thanks a lot.”

“But it’s just weird!”

“It’s weird that I’m over someone who left town and told me to move on.”

“In your case, Buffy, yes. It’s not the way you were before you died. It’s making you different.”

Buffy narrowed her eyes. “Let me get this straight,” she said slowly. “You want me to be like I was before. Back when I *wasn’t* over Angel, because being over him makes me different. You’d rather I just stay in that post-breakup limbo for the rest of my life because it’s the version of me you’re more familiar with.”

“That’s not what I said—”

“I don’t get how this isn’t a good thing. Being hung up on Angel was bad for me. I could never move on without thinking *what if*. All I’m doing now is *not* thinking that. So maybe I might have a chance to be happy with someone else.” Buffy set her coffee on the counter, making a face like she didn’t want it anymore. “I’m sorry if this is confusing but...I just don’t feel the same way I did before I died. Not about Angel. Or Spike, for that matter. I don’t know if it’s because I was dead, if that just made things clearer.”

Willow swallowed hard, the pounding in her temples nearly unbearable. “You have feelings for Spike?”

Buffy didn't reply, which in itself was a reply. Instead, she picked up her mug, tossed the mostly untouched contents into the sink, then started for the door. "I'm going to hit April Fools," she said. "See if they're hiring. Someone's gotta start worrying about money around here."

And that was it—she was gone. Gone and creaking her way up the stairs before Willow could call after her. Not that she knew what she'd say. The only thought taking up any space was the one she'd been trying to outrun for days.

It was time to let the others know they had a problem.

Buffy had come back wrong.



FAKING IT SOMEHOW

CHRIST, SHE WAS IN A TEMPER WHEN SHE SWUNG BY THAT NIGHT. A glorious one that had her eyes ablaze and her skin all nice and flushed. Spike tried not to enjoy it when she was brassed, he really did, but she made it difficult. Especially knowing she'd saved all that fire for him. That he was the only one she trusted with it.

At least he warged as much—and had ever since the jaunt to that diner. Before then, Buffy had been present but distant. Showing up like clockwork, though not always with a sense of purpose. More like she had nowhere else to go where she could be with someone and alone at the same time, which was what she'd needed more days than others. Alone made her think of the grave, and companionship made her think of responsibilities, and neither made her happy to be alive. He'd known that—sensed it every time she was around. The death wish that had chased her off the tower and crawled with her out of her coffin, haunting her as she tried to relearn how to walk among the living all the while feeling more connected to the dead.

But ever since he'd taken her to see Angel, a switch had flipped. The distance she wore like a bloody shield had dropped, and when she'd show up, some of the Buffy he'd fallen in love with would be there with her. Teasing through the shadows in her eyes until they

burned away completely, until she was greeting him with nightly quips, grinning at her own puns after putting some beastie through his paces. Trusting Spike to know what she meant with every nod or wave or subtle motion, and often meeting his gaze with a smirk after they took down whatever it was that had needed taking down that night.

She was talking more, too. Sharing. Inviting him deeper into her world. Into her life. Making him a part of it. Listening when he spoke, relying on him even if she hadn't admitted that was what she was doing, though he didn't think she'd balk were he ever to point it out. It was Buffy being Buffy, only with him rather than against him.

Everything he'd wanted and then some. Almost.

Though Spike wagered he couldn't complain too much—not when he got to reap the benefits of whatever this thing was they had going between them. Nights like tonight especially, with Buffy in peak form, tearing her way through the bloody graveyards and making any fledgling foolish enough to poke his head out of his grave feel the full weight of her fury before she moved in for the kill.

"You gonna clue a fella in, Slayer?" Spike asked after watching her practically stomp some poor sod's dust into the mossy earth. "Not that I'm not enjoying the show."

Buffy snorted and flipped that golden mane of hers as she turned to meet his gaze. "Are all my friends idiots?"

"Yes. Just realizing that?"

"I caught Xander trying to summon a demon in the shop today." She let that sink in. "Intentionally. Like, he had the talisman and was halfway through the chant when I showed up. Thank god Giles wanted to have working lunch to go over financials or we might all be power ballading right now."

Spike snickered and delved a hand into his pocket. "Story oughta be good."

"No. It's not. I'm serious about the power ballading. The demon he was summoning? Apparently some Broadway reject that turns towns into living musicals." Buffy shook her head, her jaw tight and her eyes blazing. It was that same look Spike had recently admired when she'd aimed it at Angel. "Except instead of being all *Sound of Music*, this

particular demon makes it so you start singing about anything you've been keeping to yourself."

And he knew what that meant. "Think that much was intentional?"

"I don't know! That's the thing that's making me crazy. Xander said it was supposed to just be for laughs, but I see the way they look at me. Like I'm just this...broken thing. And I'm pretending so much, Spike, and I know they know, but they *can't* know why and trying to keep this inside is just..." Buffy shook her head, having apparently run out of words, and turned her gaze from him, though not before he caught the gleam of tears. She didn't cry much, his slayer, but every now and then he'd see a shine in her eyes, catch the scent of watery salt and know it was close. That *she* was close to shattering the rest of the way, and it made him want to roar. "I know I need to be better around them," she said. "That they didn't mean what they did—"

"And that matters, I suppose?"

"I can't be mad at them for wanting me alive."

"Sure you can." In a move bolder than anything he might have tried even a couple of weeks ago, Spike seized her by the arm and pulled her to a stop beside him. "Be mad at me, too, love. Give me the old what for."

"What?"

"All I wanted every night you were gone was for you to not be gone. And even knowing what it's doing to you now..." He paused, studied the place where he still had her gripped. She hadn't shoved him off yet, was still letting him touch her, feel all that warmth just beneath his fingertips. The hum of her blood rushing through veins, spreading through arteries, keeping the living wonder that was Buffy Summers alive and breathing air. Standing here with him and regarding him with those gemstone eyes. Letting him occupy these moments with her, share these miniscule intimacies. It meant so much and she didn't know. "I know you don't want to be here," he continued after a long moment, his voice thick. He fixed his gaze on her chin, not quite able to meet her eyes as he got this out. "Know it's causing you pain. Know I *can't* know, too, what it was you had when you were in that other place. But I also can't be sorry for what they did. Given the choice

between living in a world with you and living in one without, sweet heart, this'll win every time."

There was nothing for a moment. A long, damn near unbearable nothing. Then Buffy cleared her throat and shifted her weight between her feet in a way that made her shuffle closer. That couldn't be intentional but it felt like it. Felt enough that Spike's chest went tight with a sensation he didn't want to call hope but had no other name for.

"It's not like that," she said softly. "I'm not mad at you for liking the fact that I'm not dead."

"Why not?"

"Because that's... That's just insane." Buffy let out a short laugh. "And it's not like it is with them. You're happy I'm alive but you didn't rip me out of Heaven to do it."

"They don't know that's what they did." Why he was playing devil's advocate was anyone's guess, but that was what she'd turned him into. "You fed them some line, didn't you?"

"I suppose you're going to tell me I should've told them the truth."

Spike lifted a shoulder, feeling wild and reckless. "Maybe. Would take it off you, wouldn't it? Having to pretend for their sakes. You're exhausting yourself with the show you put on for them, and what have they done to deserve it, exactly?"

"They didn't mean to do this to me."

"So what? They still *did*." Not only that, they had used some pretty powerful magic to do it. Magic the likes of which he'd caught Dawn trying to do just a few months back, though to different results. Even now, Spike wasn't sure why he'd gone along with it—why he hadn't done exactly as he should have and seized Dawn by the arm to drag her back to the Slayer so she could explain just how careless she'd been. At the time, the Nibblet had accused him of helping so he could get into Buffy's good graces, and he'd snapped at her, rightfully, that Buffy could never know he'd played a part in any of it because she'd stake him.

Only now, he couldn't say that he'd believed it. Perhaps some part of him, the part that had never healed from the blow of losing his own mum, had taken over. Joyce had been one of his favorite people—someone who reminded him of what it was like to be cared for as a son, even if she'd never viewed him like that. Her presence, her

warmth, and her kindness had pulled him back to the parlor of a home he'd spent more than a century trying to forget. The smiling eyes belonging to the best woman he'd known looking up at him with open adoration as he recited some of the worst lines ever committed to parchment, and the hollow place she'd taken up in his chest since he'd tried to cure her of the illness that had consumed her body. There had been no cure then for her, and the cure they'd thought they'd gotten for Joyce hadn't taken. Maybe that was what had driven him to a decision he'd regretted ever since seeing Buffy walk down those stairs, for he'd known then that it was a one in a billion shot, magic like that working the way they wanted. Bringing someone back whole and as they had been in life, and even then the cost had been too much. If her mates weren't to feel the brunt of what they'd done through the magic backfiring, then Buffy certainly would. And did.

Spike might not have done that to her but he'd been complicit in something similar. He'd come damn close to cursing her with the memory of confronting a creature that wore her mother's face and spoke in her mother's voice but was nothing like the woman she'd buried. For as much as he and Buffy were alike—and Christ, they were, more than she would ever see, let alone admit—he didn't want her sharing the burden of slaying the thing that looked like the parent she'd lost. No matter what his intention had been then.

He'd told her this, of course, and he still didn't know how she'd managed to keep from staking him upon hearing the truth. How any of what they had built—this tentative thing they had—had been able to survive her learning about yet another of his failures. But she hadn't yelled at him, hadn't called him disgusting or monster or any of the other names he'd earned over the years. Instead, Buffy had somehow understood.

"They did," she said now, pulling him back to her. To the conversation about her chums and how their resurrection plans hadn't gone awry. "But they meant... They thought they were doing the right thing."

"Yeah? Do a lot of digging, did they, trying to suss out where you were before they decided to get chanty? Bit of a leap, believin' you were in a hell dimension."

Buffy didn't reply to that, and he felt like a prized git for having said anything at all. The fire she'd been blazing with just a few minutes ago had extinguished and it was his fault. Couldn't keep his mouth shut to save his bloody skin—he couldn't allow himself to become careless with hers, too.

Finally, though, she did speak. Her voice strong, not strained or broken. "It's just a lot and it's all the time. Xander with this demon. Willow with wanting Angel to come visit..."

"What's this?"

"Oh, just that bombarding the house with phone calls isn't enough. She thinks it's weird that I'm over him and wants me to be un-over him, apparently, because that would be more on-brand for Buffy." She kicked at a pebble with such force it clipped a nearby headstone. "It's like she doesn't know how to handle a version of me that isn't exactly like I was before I died. Like that doesn't change a person. Like I'm—"

"You're over Angel?"

Buffy paused and gave him a sideways glance. "How is this news to you, exactly? I've been on a nonstop bitch-a-thon about him ever since Turtle Cove."

Well, yeah, but that didn't mean she was over anyone. In Spike's experience, women didn't just get *over* the hulking sod, and even Buffy's recent ranting about him, enjoyable as it was, had struck him more as being preoccupied, Angel haunting her thoughts even more than usual. Didn't matter that the haunting wasn't pleasant—he was still there. The itch just under her skin that she couldn't ever scratch to satisfaction.

It was too sweet a thought, her being truly done with her unworthy ex. Even more so that she would feel up to sharing this information with him. Spike might be the keeper of her secrets these days, but ones like this were more charged than the others. Made all the casual touches, looks, and flirtations feel more substantial. Like she might mean them.

"Just took me by surprise, is all," Spike replied carefully. "Wagered you'd always have a soft spot for him."

"Yeah, well, the spot has grown hard and callusy." A beat. "Though

I've started to have the sort of thinky thoughts Buffy's brain does not want to think."

"Care to share?"

"Like...is it possible that Willow could be right?"

"Right about what?"

"The not-Buffyness that is me. Angel was a really big deal to me for a long time. I like not feeling that anymore, but it's also strange." She glanced down again, seeming to draw in on herself. Make herself smaller. "I don't know. It worries me that it doesn't worry me more. Like...maybe not all of me came back in the spell. Maybe there are parts of me that are still dead that I'm missing."

Spike's heart gave a mighty lurch. "You think you came back wrong?"

"I mean, it's not exactly out of the question, is it? Willow doing a spell that doesn't go right? Something going kablooeey? In this case, me."

"Buffy, look at me." It was an odd, heady thing, saying those words, telling her to do something, and watching as she did. No fighting. No hesitation. Just pure Buffy, listening to him, looking at him, asking him for help or reassurance and knowing she'd listen when he gave either. "You're you. I'd know it if you weren't."

"How?"

"Because I'm in love with you, that's bloody how."

"Spike, that's not... You don't think it's weird? The fact that I'm pretty much dating you when before I died, we were nowhere near—"

"We're dating?" He blinked, shock and hope and fear surging forward at once, so hard he thought his chest might just break entirely. "Is that what this is?"

Buffy stared at him, mouth hanging open, before tearing her gaze away again. "I... I don't know. I just know there's a reason I feel like I do."

Christ, she was killing him by inches. "And how is it you feel, love?"

Again, she didn't answer right away, but her eyes did find his mouth and linger there long enough for him to see what she'd been trying to hide. And she *had* been trying to hide it—he knew that, though he didn't know if he'd known it all along or if he was just smartening up

now, but he was sure it didn't matter. In a blink, the whole bloody world had changed. Buffy looking at him the way she was, leaning toward him rather than away, and he didn't know who moved first, if she pressed up or he dipped down, if her hands linked around his neck before his found her hips, if Buffy claimed his mouth or if he captured hers, and it didn't matter. Nothing mattered except Buffy in his arms, hot where he was cold, her lips fire and her tongue fire and all of her bloody fire. She didn't set him ablaze so much as bring him to life, for he was certain he had not lived before this moment. Before feeling Buffy against him, making those sweet little sounds and scratching her nails along his neck, letting go the way he'd never imagined she would.

And he needed more. Needed her hot beneath his hands, needed to wring more of those noises from her sweet mouth, needed to kiss and nibble and bite every inch of her succulent skin. The air was thick with the scent of her, making his mouth water and his cock harder and every part of him even more desperate to explore. And Buffy was just as hungry—he felt it in the strokes of her mouth, tongue teasing, teeth scraping, and apparently they had been moving because suddenly they stopped, and he realized he had her pressed against the outer wall of a mausoleum. She kept kissing him with frenzy, as though trying to outrun something, and her hands were on his duster, then his chest, learning him as he learned her, and when he nudged her with his leg, her thighs fell apart in welcome and he was there. Against her. His cock so hard it almost hurt, and the hurt was brilliant. Like all the other hurts she'd caused, all the pain, all the suffering, all the heartaches and heartbreaks that had led him to this moment, for no matter how much he'd bled before he would bleed again just for this. For her. For Buffy gasping and panting and clutching at him like he was something she wanted to keep hold of for always.

Spike had no concept of how long it lasted, only that when she finally broke from his lips, it was too soon. Far too soon. The places she'd touched him pained him with her absence. And he was terrified in those seconds, watching her gulp down air, her eyes wild and bright—terrified that this was all he'd ever have. A moment of weakness in the cemetery, Buffy surrendering just to see what surrendering felt like before rebuilding the wall they had just toppled together. But then

those wild eyes found his, and the spinning world around him went calm once more, for the regret he'd thought he'd see wasn't there at all. It was still her, still *this* Buffy, just with a kiss-stung mouth and eyes and cheeks darkened with arousal. Looking at him like he was something she wanted to swallow whole.

And amazingly, when she spoke, it was to apologize.

"Sorry."

"Sorry?"

She nodded, hands settling on his chest. "I... I kinda made with the lungey."

Spike laughed in spite of himself, pressed his brow to hers. "Dunno if you noticed, Slayer, but I didn't exactly mind." He rolled his hips so she could feel just how little, in fact, he minded.

Amazingly, she laughed too, curling her fingers into the fabric of his shirt. "I noticed," she agreed breathlessly before leaning forward to steal another little kiss, and if he hadn't been completely in love with her already, that would have done it. That shy little nudge forward, the brush of her lips against his, as though she were getting away with something and of course she was. She already had. "I just... I don't think I'm ready for...more than kisses."

Spike's throat tightened and his balls tightened and all of him tightened. "You're saying this might happen again?"

"I'm saying my life is really hard to understand if you're me."

"Can buy that."

"I don't even know who I am anymore."

He frowned and pulled back enough to catch her eyes. "You're Buffy. All of you is Buffy."

"Buffy doesn't do what we were just doing."

"Reasonably certain I've seen you snog blokes before."

"Not you."

"Done it a time or two. Seem to remember you wigglin' all over my lap once."

"A spell," she countered. "A spell that made me not-me."

And here it was—the other part of loving Buffy. The part where she drove him absolutely barmy. "You were you then," he argued. "Happier, more fulfilled, finally with the right sort of chap—"

"I seem to remember you wiggling the hell out when the spell ended."

"Would have kept on snogging you if you hadn't looked at me like you were about to lose your lunch."

Buffy rolled her eyes—a *yeah right, get real*, Spike look if he'd ever seen one—but it fell off her face when she got a look at his and saw he was serious. And honestly, it was more shocking to him that she needed to be told, because one of the sodding indignities of that spell had been how close it had come to giving him what he wanted most, even if he hadn't realized just then how lost he was for her. But Spike remembered the wanting, the disappointment when he'd seen how little it meant to her, and the nights spent wanking to the memory of her scent and her taste and the little stolen rendezvous they'd never had but had *nearly* had before everything else had gone to shite.

Wanting her had never been the problem.

"You... Even then?" she asked, breathless.

"Didn't know it was love, but yeah."

"Oh. Wow."

Spike couldn't help but grin at that, even if the rest of him felt suddenly on edge. "Yeah?"

"It's just a lot." Buffy released a deep breath and tipped her head back, gazing up at the stars. Her hands were still fisted around his T-shirt. "Everything right now is a lot. And maybe I didn't come back wrong, but I'm still not entirely me. I don't know who I am anymore."

"You're Buffy," he said again. He couldn't help it. It was immutable truth, the only kind he had.

"Then I don't know who Buffy is. Buffy definitely didn't make out with vampires."

"You used to."

"But it wasn't...this."

He snapped his mouth shut before it could run away with him. Something in her eyes bade him caution.

"I like this, though," she went on a moment later, at last loosening the grip she had on his shirt. But she didn't pull away. Didn't let him go. "I don't want the *this* part to be what's wrong with me. And I'm starting to think it is."

“It’s not.”

“And you can’t tell me that, really. You can’t say it’s not when we don’t know.” Buffy pressed her lips together, trembling. “You also can’t say you know nothing’s wrong with me. That I’m not wrong. I wasn’t like this before.”

Spike worked his throat, familiar frustration stealing through him in a way that was almost comforting. He did know how to do this with her—how to be the one who wanted and followed and begged for table scraps he wagered he’d never get. Yet these last few weeks, he’d felt on the cusp of something larger than himself, pushing forward just to see if she would push back, then doing it again when she didn’t. Feeling her want more than he ever had before—and he *had* before. It had been there last year, dead certainty that she felt something even if that certainty had run in tandem with the knowledge that it would never happen. Furthermore, he was pretty bloody sure he’d told her as much that night he’d made a real mess of things. Heat, desire, and all else. There beneath the surface, unacknowledged by both of them until it became too bloody explosive to keep ignoring. That was why the dream had come to him—he’d had her beneath him, warm and wiggling and inches from his fangs and the death they would bring, and even before the chip had kicked in, there had been a sense of impending loss. Once Buffy was gone, she’d be gone forever, and his life would be absent a song he hadn’t realized he loved until confronted with the possibility that he might never hear it again. In that way, learning the chip had been just as present and functional as ever had saved his bloody life. Kept him from making a mistake that would haunt him for eternity and beyond.

“Think there’s always been something there, Slayer,” he said at last, forcing himself to go slow. To choose his words with care rather than let his mouth run away. He might not get another chance at this. “Sure as hell didn’t just start feelin’ it when I realized I was in love with you. Or during that spell that had us pawin’ at each other. It was with me the first time I saw you.”

“That’s crazy,” she said, though it didn’t sound like she thought it was crazy. It sounded like she wanted to be convinced it wasn’t.

God, if he buggered this, he’d walk into the sun.

"Maybe," Spike agreed slowly. "Doesn't make it not true. Think you felt it, too."

"I did not," she protested.

"No? 'Do we really need weapons for this?'"

"I... When did I say that?"

"That night at the school. First time you and yours truly went head-to-head. Such a bloody tease, you were. Then again not too long after—the night you snapped my back in half."

"Oh yes, that was way romantic."

"You don't remember then, either?" Spike winged his eyebrows upward. "Didn't know you'd made it so there'd be two slayers going forward. Introduced me to that one that night."

"Her name was Kendra," Buffy said, "and I didn't...*make* it so there'd be two slayers. That sounds like I died on purpose."

"Even still, when push came to bloody shove, you weren't satisfied unless the bloke you were fighting was me. Kept happening like that, too. Over and over, till I got this sodding chip crammed up my cranium." He watched her remember, the subtle shift of her eyes as she took it all in. The numerous fights that had resulted in a draw for one reason or another, the times they'd come close to doing the other one in just to have some convenient excuse pop up, like neither of them had the skill or experience to navigate around the faintest of bloody obstacles. It was all there—their history a tapestry of close calls and near misses. Them coming together then bursting away with sparks that could raze this bloody town.

The only difference in her since her mates had brought her back was she didn't seem as bothered by it as she had before. Wasn't resisting with near the same ferocity. Like she'd given in, just as he had, once he'd realized that running from his feelings would do him no good. There was no outrunning Buffy Summers.

"I just want this to be me," she said at last, her voice hoarse. "All of it, Spike. If it's not, if I'm not entirely Buffy, then is this even real, what I'm feeling?"

"What are you feeling?"

"Like... I don't know. Just not the way I used to."

"About me?"

“Well, duh. Why do you think we’re having this conversation? I just grabbed you and kissed you and as pro-me-grabbing-and-kissing-you as you might be, that is just not something I did before. Or would have ever thought about.”

“No?”

He truly expected to get an eyeroll in return, or maybe a long groan with an accompanying protest, something to the tune of, ‘No, Spike, you might be a freak but I am not.’ Instead, Buffy colored a little in the cheeks and glanced away. “Well, not seriously,” she said. “More like I knew it’d be a good way to make you shut up.”

“Pity you never gave it a try.”

Her mouth twitched in the most enchanting way. “I’m serious, though. As in wiggling a serious amount that everything I’ve done or thought post-resurrection has been some other form of Buffy. Not the real one. How can I trust any of what I’m thinking when I don’t even know who I am?”

It took every bit of willpower he had and then some to keep from seizing her and pulling her close. This enemy she’d dredged up had no face or shape, except the one it might be borrowing, which made it bloody tricky to fight. He understood, too, in a way he wagered she wouldn’t conceive, because that had been his fear. That something that was Buffy but not had clawed its way out of her grave, and he’d be left to deal with what came after. The children and their bloody mojo reckoning with something beyond their comprehension and turning to him to clear away the debris.

Truth of the matter was, though, only Buffy could drive him as crazy as this girl did. A Buffy who happily seized him by the cock and took him out for a spin would be a lot of fun in the short term, but it wouldn’t be her, just another version of the bot. Perhaps a bit sweeter, more lifelike, less obviously artificial, but not the woman he loved. What made up Buffy Summers wasn’t something that could be captured or catalogued, and it certainly wasn’t a set of bullet points of criteria on some checklist. It was something grand, something felt in the gut and throat. It was her, asking infuriating questions that might never be answered satisfactorily, because she had to ask them. Because they would haunt her if she didn’t give them voice.

Finally, after the silence between them had crossed into strained, he swallowed and pressed his brow to hers. "Would you know Dawn?"

"What?"

"Say she starts liking some new band that she hated before. Really bloody hated. Then one day, she's listening to them like she aims to wear out the record. Nothin' else changed except she changed her mind. What would you think?"

Buffy pulled back to catch his eyes, her own narrowed and clearly confused. "I... I dunno."

"Would you think she was anyone other than Dawn?"

"No. I mean, tastes evolve as you get older, right? And things that happen to you can leave a mark. Like, there's already this movie that Mom used to love that Dawn groaned her way through every Christmas but now she's talking about doing as an annual rewatch. Popcorn with M&Ms, just the way she did it." Buffy blinked and glanced away, the look on her face the most *Buffy* thing he'd ever seen. That love and that pain, that longing and that heartache, that loss and strength combined into one. All he needed right now to show her she was Buffy was a mirror. "I'd probably make fun of her for caving and loving something she said she hated, but that doesn't seem weird or like something that couldn't happen. It's..."

He saw the exact moment she put together where this was leading. When she understood. And the exact moment she questioned whether anything could be that simple, especially when applied to her. Because in the world of Buffy Summers, nothing was ever simple. Even something as straightforward as fancying someone she used to loathe, never mind everything that had changed to get them where they were now. It wasn't flipping a switch—the path that had led him to this moment had been tenuous at best. Lots of missed steps and wrong calls, and he'd only started getting it right once he'd given up the idea that he could win her by some show of heroism.

Because what she saw wasn't what mattered, was it? It was all the moments in between. The stuff she didn't see. It was telling Glory that the Key was some old game show host because why the bloody hell not? Wasn't like he was going to live to see tomorrow, anyhow. It was leaping in front of danger whenever it flashed its gaze in her direction,

grabbing a sword aimed at her head with his bare hands to keep it from hitting its target. It was knowing he was going to go out in a fight, knowing he was living his last, but happy to do it because it was right, it was true, and it was in service of protecting the woman he loved and the sister she loved. The sister he loved, too, come to think of it, for Dawn was an extension of Buffy and therefore precious. It was counting the nights since he'd failed to live up to his promise and holding her secrets all the nights thereafter when she trusted him with the privilege.

At length, Buffy worked her throat, her eyes misting. She nodded and pulled away, and though she took her warmth with her, he somehow didn't feel bereft, for she truly wasn't going anywhere.

For the first time, he found he believed that.

"You think I might like you for the same reason that Dawn might suddenly like a band she hates?" Buffy asked, and he didn't have to strain his ears to hear the tease in her voice.

"Not the exact same, love. Just that—"

"Just that it's possible to like something you used to hate while not being an entirely different person." She grinned and pressed her palm to her brow. "I hope you're right. This just seems...bigger than a boy band."

"Never said it was a boy band."

"Come on. It's Dawn. Of course it's a boy band." She waited a moment, then smirked at whatever she saw on his face. "But I get your meaning, even if I don't know if I can believe it just yet."

"Then how about this," Spike said, his mind tripping over itself to fall on a new solution. "Does what *you* want matter?"

"Huh?"

"You're here, love. For better or bloody worse. This is the hand you were dealt. You gonna worry about what you think you should want if things were different, or what you *do* want with the way things actually are?"

Buffy frowned as though she hadn't considered the possibility. Knowing her, she probably hadn't. "What I want."

"Yeah. All things being equal. You're the one living here, aren't you?"

“Yeah...”

“So what do *you*, Buffy who’s in this body, want from this?”

“Is the answer supposed to be you?”

“It’s whatever it is, love. Forget me.”

“Trust me, I’m pretty sure that’s impossible, given how often I’ve tried.” She smiled, though it was clear she didn’t find much funny at the moment. “I wish it were simple for me, Spike. I really do. Because I’m pretty sure if I asked, you’d take me back to your place and make me forget pretty much everything for a few hours and that sounds... like something I wouldn’t hate.”

Spike grinned in spite of himself. “Could always give it a shot. I’m willing to chance bein’ wrong.”

Buffy nodded, but he wasn’t fool enough to mistake it for the sort of nod that meant yes. It didn’t mean no, either, though, and he needed to hold onto that as much as he was holding onto everything else. Even at his most blindingly optimistic, he didn’t think he would have fathomed the night carrying them where it had. That he would return to the crypt with her taste on his lips and the memory of her open, honest want to keep him warm until morning. Never mind the fact that he knew pushing could hurt her too—that everything with them now had become this delicate balancing act.

All he’d ever asked her for was a crumb, and that was what she’d given him.

“Can we go back to just being patrol friends for right now?” she asked, her voice soft. “Just until I figure some things out? Namely the whole *am I Buffy* thing?”

“Dunno how you’re gonna work that one out but yeah, love. We can do that.”

“I don’t know, either.” Buffy rubbed her arms and tipped her head back. “I do, though. I meant it. I want this to be me. I want to be able to just have the feelings and act on them without wondering if I’m losing my mind.”

Spike kicked at the ground, nodding again. The thought was there, brief and intense, to tell her the rest of it. That *only* Buffy Summers would question herself as much as she was now. *Only* Buffy Summers would take a look at her life and wonder if something were off because

things that made her miserable before weren't now, especially when she was surrounded by so much other misery. That was Buffy through and through. But it'd sound too much like an excuse—or an attempt to change her mind—if he brought it up. So he didn't. Maybe he would tomorrow if she were still on this kick, or when her mates did something else that inevitably made her feel less than what she was. She was already burdened by so much, holding everything else in except for what she let loose when he was around to help her carry it. And while he didn't mind the weight, that she had it to spare was part of the problem. Her friends expecting her to act, perform, be the Buffy that had died rather than the one who was alive now, and Buffy believing that she needed to keep up the charade to spare their feelings, never mind what it did to her in the process. Making her think that she could be anything other than exactly who she was.

And there was the rub. It was everything he'd said that first night when she'd been back, alive. The epiphany that had struck him as he'd leaned against the tree, mind spinning with the living girl who shouldn't be living. Knowing that Willow had kept him in the dark for fear that there might be a reason to undo the mojo. Put Buffy back where they had left her.

Knowing that he would stand between them and the Slayer and fight until he was dust to keep her right where she was.

"If any part of that was Buffy, I wouldn't let her."

If they knew that she was stealing snogs with Spike, that she was over Angel... It might not be enough to make them wish she were still in the ground, but they'd certainly question just exactly what had risen and where the rest of Buffy had been left.

Even if it was obvious.



EVERY SINGLE VERSE CAN MAKE IT THAT MUCH WORSE

BUFFY WAS DRIVING HERSELF CRAZY.

Friends. They had agreed to go back to patrol friends until she figured her crap out, however long that took. No matter how much part of her had yearned to just throw caution to the wind and finish what she'd started with that kiss, or how disappointed that part had been when he'd declined to press her for more. Backing off was something Spike had never once done in his life, until, of course, the exact moment she would have given in if he hadn't. And sure, it was ultimately good that they hadn't done more than they had, but that didn't mean she had to be rational about it in her own head. Everything had just stopped and she'd stopped with it—all of her, including her objections and common sense.

Then she'd told him she needed time to figure out who the hell she was, if she was even herself anymore, and the big idiot had listened to her. Which was also good—she knew it was good. Necessary, even, especially with the chaotic state that was the brain of Buffy. But still, when she awoke the next morning, all the tension that she'd hoped to release when she'd gone on patrol last night had still been there.

All because she'd worried about what would happen if, sometime

down the road, she opened her eyes one morning to find she was ready to be Buffy again.

If she wasn't Buffy now.

The result was a grumpy-as-hell slayer shoving her way into the Magic Box, not really sure what the hell had brought her there in the first place but having nowhere else to go in this weird facsimile that had become her life. It was where most everyone would be once class let out, at least, and she didn't feel up for another day spent alone. Especially since she was pretty sure she would get at least one call from Angel if she hung around the house and honestly, if she had to hear his voice today, she might end up throwing the whole phone out the window.

"Good morning, Buffy," Giles said as she stomped her way over to the tables in the back.

"Hi," she said without breaking stride or making an attempt at eye contact. She plopped into what she considered her usual chair, then looked up, not really sure what she'd planned on doing when she got here. Maybe stake out the upper level and watch for suspicious activity among her nearest and dearest. "Did you guys look through the inventory and stuff? Make sure Xander didn't take anything to summon a party demon or a board game demon or some other type of demon because apparently, he's lived somewhere *other* than the Hellmouth these last five years and hasn't gotten it through his head that things that need to be *summoned* are usually not things you want around?"

"I believe after last night, he was appropriately chastened, yes," her watcher replied, though in the sort of tone that warned his mind wasn't on what they were discussing. And immediately, Buffy's stomach began to twist. Giles had never, not once, thought Xander had ever been *appropriately chastened*. Especially not after doing something as monumentally reckless as attempting to conjure the sort of creature she was typically duty-bound to slay. If Giles was ready to mosey off the topic that was Xander's stupidity and shortsightedness, he was about to dump something else on her. Something she wasn't going to like.

"What's wrong?" she asked, sitting up straighter. "Did something else happen?"

Giles gave her a long, considering look that did nothing to steady her nerves. "In a manner of speaking, I suppose something did happen. I have a matter I had planned to discuss with you prior to yesterday's distraction. After what we discovered, it felt imprudent to pursue it last night, but we cannot put it off any longer."

"Okay, you are giving me a serious case of the wiggins."

He didn't crack a grin, and that scared her most of all. "You know Willow and I quarreled upon my return to Sunnydale. That, while I am elated to have you back in this world, her methods caused me great concern."

He was essentially confirming that he'd known she'd overheard that argument. Something they had all been great about pretending hadn't happened. The nerves dancing in her belly shifted up a degree or twenty.

"Yeah, I might have heard...things," Buffy said slowly, doing her best to remain calm. "But I thought you were better now. Or that things between you and Willow were maybe less strained."

Giles pulled a face that she didn't like at all. "I remain rather put off by her brazen disregard for the tenets that govern magical and natural law. She seems more taken with proving that she is powerful enough to accomplish feats that are remarkable, even impossible in most circumstances, than considering whether the power she has should be exercised in the first place."

"Like, just because she can doesn't mean she should."

He frowned. "Yes, precisely. That was rather succinct of you."

"That's because it's a line from *Jurassic Park*."

"Ah." The frown remained in place. Not the usual shock or discomfort that came with Giles realizing he'd come close to making a pop culture reference. "There was so much that could have gone wrong with that spell, Buffy. So much that Willow did not account for—or that she claims she did, but I frankly do not trust that she did in actuality. If she had, well, there's a good chance that you wouldn't be standing here now. She would have realized how very dangerous this pathway was and abandoned it."

Well, that was...certainly something. Buffy drew in a breath, not sure she trusted herself to find the right words to reply. Being back

from the dead had been in every sense a horror story, one somehow more terrible than anything Stephen King had ever put to paper. Yet still, knowing this, even appreciating the meat of what Giles was trying to say—for she thought she did—it was strange to hear someone who loved her tell her to her face that he'd be more comfortable with the state of the world if she were six feet under. All while not knowing just how much she had struggled to find her footing since being yanked out of the afterlife that should have been her reward, rather than reacclimating to an existence that didn't fit her anymore.

"Why are you telling me this?" she asked. "Cause, if we're being honest, hearing it isn't exactly my idea of a relaxing afternoon activity."

"I know, and I'm sorry. Truly, Buffy, you have no idea how sorry I am. I wouldn't be talking about any of this if it weren't necessary."

"What makes it necessary?"

Giles fell quiet for a moment, studying her. "How do you feel?"

"Right now? Not so great."

"I mean in general. Have you noticed anything peculiar since you returned?"

Her heart did another somersault before taking off at a frenzy, and before she could help herself, her mind was full of images from the previous night. All the Spike feelings she was having in Technicolor instead of the forcibly muted shades that she had previously been apt at pretending didn't exist. The strange hollowness that had once been filled with love and longing for a guy she didn't even want to talk to anymore. Hell, the conversation she'd had with Spike a few hours ago—all the concerns that maybe she wasn't actually Buffy, just someone walking around in Buffy skin and playacting with the right memories but not the right feelings. Someone whose identity was so wrapped up in Buffy that the thought that she might not be the person she looked like made everything about not being in Heaven anymore even worse.

"Peculiar as in..." she managed.

"For example," Giles started with what sounded like deliberate calm, "I have it on good authority that you have been spending a good amount of time with Spike ever since you, ahh, returned."

Now more than her heart somersaulted. It was like everything

holding up her insides had snapped and plummeted with a painful lurch. "I, uhh, I guess. He's been kind of...not bad to be around."

"I see." Clearly, he didn't or he wouldn't look so concerned. "And you think that is wise, knowing how he feels about you? I know that toward the end of the fight with Glory, you had come to appreciate his contributions as a warrior, and we certainly needed the strength."

She didn't remember him being all that understanding about that at the time. In fact, Buffy was pretty certain Giles had been the most vocal of all her friends in demanding just what the hell the vampire was doing there when she'd shown up in the Winnebago and hadn't shut up about Spike's presence until she'd snapped at him. Not exactly with the confidence boosting.

"He fought at your side all summer, didn't he?" she replied, also now with deliberate calm. Two could play at that game.

"He was helpful, I will allow."

"Oh, you will. How magnanimous."

"But you must know that he cannot be trusted. As a vampire, his actions are inherently self-serving. He lives to satisfy his base desires."

"And what base desire was he satisfying when I was dead?" So much for calm. It had left the building, though thankfully, it seemed to have taken her anxiety with it on its way out. Rather, Buffy folded her arms and straightened her shoulders. "I don't think a vampire of his reputation is getting any ya-yas by acting as a babysitter to a fifteen-year-old."

Giles didn't look amused. "I believe it is *this*"—he waved vaguely at her—"type of behavior that has the others concerned."

"Concern? The others are concerned?" Why was she only hearing about this now?

"Yes. Willow called a meeting last night."

"She did." It wasn't a question.

"Yes."

"The kind I'm not invited to?"

"It was about you, Buffy."

"Yeah, getting that." Also getting annoyed, which was still better than nervous. "So my closest friends and family decided to get together to talk behind my back."

She expected that to land and wasn't disappointed. Giles went

rigid, his eyes bugging out in a way that a different Buffy might find funny. But seeing as she was the Buffy he was stuck with, the most she could summon was a huff of annoyance.

"It wasn't like that," came the expected protest. "As I told you, Willow thought it best to talk because she has grown concerned enough to place ego aside and address the possibility that something went amiss in the spell that brought you back."

Meaning that while Buffy had been worrying that maybe some part of her wasn't actually Buffy, her friends had been thinking the same thing. Only they had discussed it in secret meetings rather than to her face, and then left the grownup to do the actual hard part. Come to think of it, the shop was on the empty side—looked like not even Anya had wanted to be around for this confrontation.

"This is because I'm spending time with Spike?" Buffy asked, trying to keep her tone even. Trying not to betray just how hard her heart was pounding, or that her hands had started to shake. She wasn't sure what was worse—that she'd been the topic of conversation among the people who had forced her back to the mortal plane or that none of what Giles had said thus far had been new to her. That she'd spent a good part of last night thinking more or less the same, drawing boundaries she hadn't wanted to draw out of a sense of loyalty for the version of herself that had swan dived off the tower in the first place. If it wasn't just inside her head, if her friends were thinking things along the same lines, then didn't that mean there had to be some truth behind the fear? That maybe she truly wasn't Buffy Anne Summers, rather some bastardized version of the girl she'd been before?

"That is a part of the concern, yes," Giles replied, not unkindly. "But also that your attitude toward Angel seems to have suffered a remarkable change. Is it true that you have not returned his calls?"

"You're lecturing me on not talking to my ex-boyfriend?"

"I am not lecturing you at all. I am simply trying to ascertain—"

"My ex-boyfriend who tortured you and murdered your girlfriend. Who tried to end the world. Who, now that I think about it, was kind of a creep?"

Giles blinked at her as though he'd never heard the word before but didn't say anything.

“Well, think about it!” Buffy went on, gathering steam. “I was, what, Dawn’s age when I was called? No, even younger. Fourteen on the cusp of fifteen, and Angel told me once that he fell in love with me the minute I was switched on as a slayer. I thought that was romantic and swoony at the time, but now I’m wondering why no one called the cops. I was *fourteen* and he fell in love with me. Isn’t that like a *Dateline* special in the making?”

“Buffy!”

“Am I wrong? Tell me I’m wrong.”

Giles opened his mouth as though to do just that, though he seemed to think the better of it and closed it again. “I believe this is what Willow was talking about,” he said after a beat, his voice strained. “These are not things that you would have thought before the incident with Glory.”

“‘Incident with Glory.’ Why not just say ‘death?’” She was getting really sick of all the eggshells everyone seemed intent on tromping around her, almost as sick as she was of the burning sensation just under her skin, that hot, acidic fear that everyone had a right to worry because, well, who the hell was she? It wasn’t like Giles was wrong in his assessment—all the thoughts she’d had of Angel recently were not standard Buffy thoughts, and definitely not the thoughts she’d had about Spike. “I just don’t get it,” she said after a long stretch, annoyed with both her watcher and herself for letting things get this out of hand. For not worrying enough when it might have felt less like she had something to lose by fixing whatever was broken. “I don’t get why feeling like maybe my ex isn’t the best guy in the world should wig anyone out. I mean, I know how I felt about Angel before. I remember that, and it wasn’t a good feeling. Nothing about how I felt about him was good. It was suffocating. Even in the maybe ten minutes of the relationship that weren’t all with the drama and heartache, I remember how intense it was. How I was always on edge for some reason because if I wasn’t, if I took a break for even a second, Angel would drop an emotional bomb that would leave me just wrecked. And now I finally get to a point where I don’t feel that way anymore, or even in danger of feeling that way ever again, and everyone acts like I’ve done something wrong.”

"You haven't done anything wrong," Giles rushed to assure her. "Nothing that has happened has been your fault."

"Yet I'm the one everyone's holding secret meetings about."

"Because none of this is like you, Buffy. That is the fear. That something might have gone wrong in Willow's spell." He hesitated the way he did when he had something he wished to say but worried how she would react. Then, in true Giles form, he continued anyway. "It's truly less likely that something *did not* go wrong. The sort of magic she was invoking is beyond powerful. To have succeeded the way it seemed to succeed is so remarkable it damn near defies logic."

Buffy didn't know how to respond to that—the words or the expression on Giles's face or the fear, that pulsing, pounding thing she'd wanted so desperately to be in vain. She swallowed and looked away, not wanting him to see her hurt or her anger or anything else that might give her away as being something other than Buffy. Not wanting to think about last night and how she'd kissed Spike—more than kissed him, had tried to devour him and wanted to be devoured in turn. And now, god, how the urge was there, now that the unspoken fear had been spoken by others, to just run back to him and tell him they had to hurry because the real Buffy might be back soon and the Imposter Buffy wanted one thing—just one goddamned thing—that was hers before that time came. Forget what she'd said last night and no thought to what might happen tomorrow. That they should just take what they were given and let the repercussions fall as they would.

Which was probably indicative of how not-Buffy she was, which just made her want to do it all the more.

"What happens?" she asked, forcing her voice to work. Some part of her ought to be functional. "If I'm not me, what happens? Do you kill me?"

Giles reeled, clearly mortified. "Kill you? Good heavens, Buffy, of course we wouldn't kill you."

"There is no *of course* about it. You're talking like I should know better. What exactly is going to happen if you decide I'm not Buffy?"

There was nothing for a long moment—nothing aside from Giles's thousand-yard stare. Buffy thought that might have been it, that asking what seemed like an obvious question might have settled the matter as

far as her watcher was concerned. No, Buffy, we wouldn't kill you if you turned out to not be *entirely* Buffy. Wherever would you get that idea? Forgetting, naturally, that Giles had been rather cavalier about ending Dawn's life just a few months earlier. And hey, that sounded like a good point.

"You told me that Dawn wasn't my sister," she said before she could lose her nerve. "You told me to kill her."

That snapped Giles out of his stupor. "Yes, to *save* the world. I didn't mean that she should be sacrificed simply on the grounds of how she came into being, as you full well ought to know."

"Okay," she said slowly, "then what? Is there a spell or something to make me whole? Fix whatever's not there?"

Giles frowned. "I'm not certain, actually. As I said, resurrections of the sort that Willow performed are exceedingly rare. I am actually not entirely convinced they have ever been successful in the past."

"Gee, thanks."

"What that means is there might not be a defined path forward if it turns out something did indeed go wrong with the spell." He paused, considering her with his familiar Giles eyes that she'd found so comforting just a few days ago. That swell, that assurance that the wrongness of the world could be made right again because he was there to help her make sense of the mess she'd found waiting for her outside of her coffin, had given her the hope that she might be able to survive being alive. It wasn't all *Lord of the Flies* in Sunnydale after all—some order had been restored and the inmates were, in fact, not running the asylum.

Instead, the inmates had recruited the guard and he was one of them, now.

"So you've told me that I might be broken Buffy but good news, there's maybe nothing you can do about it." Buffy pressed her lips together. "It sounds a lot like I'm not acting the way you and Willow want me to act. And that's fine, not my fault. Could be the spell done screwed up. Only if that's the case, what? Am I supposed to just start putting on a Buffy play? 'The Girl who Didn't Die?'"

"That is not what is being suggested."

"Then what *is* being suggested, Giles? What good would finding anything out even do if there's no way to fix this?"

"I said there might not be a defined path forward. We would simply need to keep looking."

"And if you look and there's nothing?" Buffy rose to her feet. Suddenly, she very much needed to move. "I don't know what's being asked of me here."

"Nothing," he replied, his voice somewhat gentler. "Buffy, you have done nothing wrong. Nothing whatsoever. By all accounts, you are a miracle. I misspoke when I said that no spell to raise the dead has been successful—what I meant was that no spell that I am aware of was ever *this* successful. Typically, what comes out of the grave only bears a cosmetic resemblance to the loved one lost. But you...you are remarkable."

She nodded numbly. "Just not remarkable enough."

"That is hardly what I am saying."

"Maybe not to you, but to me, it's all you're saying." Buffy dropped her head into her waiting hands, the energy zapped from her. She was too tired to have this discussion, and definitely too tired for anything resembling a fight. "I'm not moping around because of Angel for the first time in three years. I'm hanging out with a vampire none of you like. In the world according to Willow, Xander, and even you, Buffy Summers should act a certain way and because I'm not, something has to be wrong. *I* am wrong, and all I did was be raised from the dead when I didn't want to be."

That much spilled out of her mouth before she could help herself, and dammit, Giles was not the sort of person to just not notice. The frown on his face deepened, his expression going from concerned to alarmed in half a click.

"You didn't want to be raised from the dead," he repeated, the words trembling even as his tone remained even. "Is that true?"

She sighed, defeated, and sank back into her chair. "I didn't mean to say that."

"That is not what I asked."

"I know." A beat. "I wasn't in a hell dimension. I don't know why they

thought I was, but I wasn't. It was...nice. Peaceful. Calm. And I didn't want to leave that place. I didn't have a choice." Buffy hesitated, knowing what she would see when she looked up and also knowing there was no avoiding it—she'd said the thing and it was out there now. She couldn't unsay it. Couldn't stuff it back into a dark, confined place. "It was maybe... I thought it could've been Heaven. Or some kind of heaven, I guess. I don't know. I don't know much of anything these days."

"Good lord. Buffy..."

"And I knew that if I told them where I'd been, it would be that." She waved vaguely at Giles's face. "Only worse because they're the ones who did it. I know they didn't mean to hurt me but that's what happened. So, it's a little rich to hear that on top of everything else, I'm not Buffy enough for the people who couldn't just let Buffy be dead. I need to be forever heartbroken over Angel and can't change my mind about things like Spike. I have to be *their* version of Buffy on top of everything else, but it's okay and no one blames me except it feels very not okay and like a lot of people blame me."

Giles continued staring at her, that awful, horrified expression fixed into place, blinking at her as though his brain had disconnected from the rest of him. Finally, he swallowed, the sound loud and harsh against the otherwise still air of the shop. "I don't know quite what to say. I had no idea."

"I know. I didn't want you to. I didn't want any of you to."

"But this is not something you can face on your own, you do realize."

"I haven't been entirely on my own." She waited, then glanced down. "Spike knows. He's known pretty much ever since I was raised."

"Spike knows," Giles echoed, some of the shock on his face falling flat. "You trusted Spike with this information."

"Yeah. I don't know why. I guess I just needed to tell someone."

"And you chose...Spike."

Buffy sucked in her cheeks and turned her head, her eyes starting to burn anew. Hadn't taken them long to get back to the real problem. Spike being someone she allowed in her life was apparently the most troubling thing Giles had heard all day. "I didn't really mean to. I was just talking and he was there. But he's been... Giles, he's been so... It's

been so nice to have that. Someone who doesn't expect anything from me."

"Buffy, it's Spike. Of course, he expects something from you."

"Well, not to be okay!" she snapped. "Not to be a certain type of Buffy. I don't have to pretend for him. And honestly, if that's what the difference is, the thing that's wiggling you and Willow and everyone else out, that I'm hanging out with a vampire who has done nothing but help me when I needed it most and getting over one who broke my heart, then I'm not seeing why the hell I should care about going back to the Buffy I was before."

Giles's expression had shuttered when she looked at him again, the shock of her revelation apparently not enough to throw him off course. And that was it—when it hit exactly what Spike had been asking her last night. What she had been avoiding asking herself over the same amount of time. It wasn't like Giles and the others were thinking things she hadn't thought or already talked about with the vampire she shouldn't have feelings for but did. The reason she'd held back from doing what she wanted to do.

If she had come back wrong, did that really matter? Was she Buffy *enough* at her core? Because the only evidence anyone, herself included, had brought to her that something might be wrong was the answer to which vampire she wanted in her life had changed. If everything else was the same, then what exactly had she lost?

What *would* she lose if she let them try to make her right again?

"I am not going to suggest we do anything radical," Giles said as though hearing the thought, his voice carefully neutral. "But I do think it might be best to...to investigate the spell that restored you to life, as well as check for any abnormalities that might account for the inconsistencies that are causing concern. It's better to know, at any rate. And if it turns out that there are parts of you that remain...unwhole, we can start to look at ways to remedy the fact."

Whether or not she wanted it remedied. Whether or not she preferred this version of Buffy over the one the others had spent the summer mourning. Because the real thing had to be better than the thing they had now simply by the virtue that it was real.

But Buffy knew she wouldn't fight it. She couldn't. As long as the

question remained unanswered, it would haunt her, shadow every possible chance she had at being something like happy, if happy was even achievable in this world. Real mattered to her, too. Being Buffy mattered to her. Even if being Buffy meant giving something up that she had come to depend on. Something as freeing as what Spike gave her.

“Okay,” she said softly, the words thick in her throat. “Okay. We can see.”

Giles nodded, satisfied. Would that it were that easy for her.

In the meantime, though, all she could do was prepare for the worst.

And try not to think about what she might stand to lose.

THESE ENDLESS DAYS ARE FINALLY ENDING IN A BLAZE

BUFFY HAD NEVER BEEN BIG ON KNOCKING, BUT IT WASN'T OFTEN anymore she bloody well barged into Spike's crypt like all of hell was chasing her. They had settled into a routine of sorts—Buffy would head to the first cemetery on her list sometime after nightfall and he'd meet her there. It saved her the hustle of swinging by to see if he wanted to patrol because the answer to that was always yes, and generally gave them more time at the end of the night, the business of the day already addressed.

Not that Spike was daft enough to think she was angling for more time with him. Except maybe he was, especially after last night.

The fact that Buffy was storming over to him with fire blazing in her eyes also made a compelling argument.

"Sun's not dipped down yet," he said cautiously, rising from his armchair. "If you're aimin' for some spirits, I can see what I—"

But Buffy wasn't aiming for spirits. She was aiming for him, a point she made nicely by planting her hands on his chest and shoving him hard enough he went tumbling back into the chair he'd just vacated. And before he could do much more than blink up at her in surprise, she was on him, in his lap and tearing at his mouth with her mouth, with her tongue, with her *teeth*, and Spike surrendered. Moaning and

gripping her arms to haul her closer as he pushed back. Stroked and sucked and licked and kissed her, just kissed her, as she kissed him.

She was hot. She was bloody fire. She was going to reduce him to dust just from the heat rising off her skin and burning through her clothes, her sweet cunt, which she was thrusting shamelessly against the painful bulge in his jeans. There was need and hunger, pure bloody want that he'd always known lurked there beneath everything else they had between them, but most of all was desperation. Buffy's desperation. She was kissing him like she wanted to be consumed, like she was daring him to do just that, and he wanted to give. Fuck, how he wanted that, but some part of him—the part of him not controlled by his prick or his demon or anything but that sap he'd tried to leave in a London alley more than a century earlier—warned caution. Especially after everything they had talked about last night.

Especially since he was the one she was counting on to keep her from breaking.

So somehow, Spike pulled off the impossible and managed to drag his mouth away from hers long enough to gasp, "Buffy. *Slayer*. What's wrong?"

She replied much the way he'd expected—by kissing the question off his lips and dragging him along for the ride. And he wanted to be dragged, wanted so badly for the answer to be that there was nothing wrong except she'd realized she was tired of not shagging him. But he knew that wasn't it. Something had happened to upset her, and she was clawing at him like a sodding life preserver.

He would be whatever she needed, of course, but a fella had to ask.

"Buffy," he tried again once he managed to convince his mouth to pull away. At least she didn't lunge for him immediately this time, seemed to snap out of herself long enough to blink those emerald eyes of hers. Long enough for him to see they were full, almost brimming, and that whatever was swelling inside of her was about to break. "Not that I mind you storming in here and using me for my body, but if something's happened, I should probably know, yeah?"

Buffy blinked at him as though she didn't understand the words, but he didn't think that was it. More that it was taking her a minute to piece together what they meant. After a beat, she lowered her eyes and

shook her head, a long breath rattling through her trembling lips, the first tear threatening to spill over.

"I'll tell you," she promised softly. "After."

"After what?"

"After you make me feel better."

Spike's throat tightened, as did his jeans. This was one of those moments he'd told himself to watch for—the sort where there would be a clear right decision and a clear wrong decision, the wrong decision holding his heart because it was what he was wired for. Altruism was not a virtue shared among vampires, and he was smart enough to know that, to understand that a better man—a soul-having man—would recognize the wrong decision and steer away from it. Do what was right for her even at the cost of what that meant for him.

He knew it. He understood. And fuck, he didn't care.

"I'll make it better, sweetheart," he promised her roughly, digging his hands into her hips. "I'll make everything better."

Buffy nodded a nod that turned fast into a frown when he started to shift her off his lap. A question flashed in her eyes, but he moved too quickly for her to remain confused for long. Flipping her around so she was pressed against the cushion, and he was sliding to his knees in front of her, keeping his gaze on her face, his heart in his throat. He'd imagined having her here so many times the moment quickly took on a surreal quality, his brain stuttering at the thought that this was happening in a space outside his skull. There was so much he wanted to do—so much he wanted to show her, be for her, and at once it was all colliding. Idea and fantasy, impulse and care, and every other thing he'd ever thought or felt and it was too much.

One thing at a bloody time, you berk.

Spike released a gasping sort of breath and focused. This first time—their first time—he needed to show her that this, his feelings, everything meant more than getting his jollies off. That loving her wasn't about scratching one of his own itches, getting his cock wet—that he meant the words when he said them.

"Gonna take these off," he said, dragging his fingers over the toe of her boots. "That all right?"

"Are you going to narrate every part of this?"

He smirked and felt himself relax. "Could. All the better to make sure I don't cross any stakeable lines, yeah? Would hate to die over a misunderstanding."

"I think we're beyond me staking you."

"Until I get that in writing or sealed in blood, a fella can never be too sure." Spike met her eyes again and waited. "That an *all right*, then, on the footwear?"

"Consider it a blanket *all right* on all clothes of Buffy."

He sighed again, a fluttering sensation taking residence in his chest. "Right. Long as we have that settled," he replied as he tugged her feet free of boots and socks alike. Spike flicked his gaze back to her face, emboldened by the way she was watching him—her eyes dark with a mixture of hope and hunger that made his blood sing. He lifted one of her feet and pressed a kiss against the sole, grinned at her when she twitched, and began working his fingers over the arches and pressure points he knew from experience became the most tender.

And the Slayer went liquid, moaning low in her throat and nearly pouring out of the chair, managing to catch herself but only just. "What...what are you doing?"

"What does it feel like I'm doing?"

"I thought you were gonna..." She hissed when he touched what must have been a sensitive spot, the expression on her face almost indecent. Like his head was between her thighs. "I didn't think you were going to do that."

"All the tossers who have shared your bed," he murmured, pressing into the balls of her foot now, the place most likely to take the impact of a kick, "not one's given you a bloody foot rub?"

"No. That'd be ridiculous."

"Then what?"

"It's just been a long time, okay?" Buffy bit her lower lip. "A really...long time."

"Body like yours deserves extra care, all you put it through," he noted, working his way down the sides and toward her heel. "All you give. The fights you take on. The weight you carry. Can feel it here..." He ground his hand against the center then stroked toward her toes once more. "Even in your delicious little piggies."

He went on for a moment, feeling beneath his fingers the slackening of tight muscles, the slow but inevitable surrender. And when he let her foot go, he didn't miss the way her brow dipped or the pout of her lips, nor the way both eased the second he took up with the foot he'd neglected. And hoping—*god*, hoping—that she remembered this when whatever had brought her to him tonight was just a memory.

Buffy deserved to be cared for by someone who actually cared. The thought of being that someone, of her letting him do that, be what she needed more than just the rotten moments but for all of them, was the deepest wish he'd ever dared have.

"Could just do this if you like, pet," Spike said, pressing his fingers into her foot's tender curve. "Doesn't need to go any further. Call's yours."

She blinked for a moment, looking a little dazed—for which he took a lot of pride—before finding his face again. "Do you not want to?"

"Not want to touch you? Taste you? Feel you come apart on my tongue?"

A blush filled her cheeks but she didn't break her eyes from his. "Just I'm giving you all the go signals and you're being very cautious."

"Want to make sure you know what you're asking for."

"I'm sure," she said. "I'm very sure."

But that was all she said—nothing about what had brought her here, what had happened to break the uncertainty she'd expressed the night before, and he was only one man. One soulless man, at that, with the woman he loved beyond reason on a fucking platter for him to sample. It was there again, the knowledge of what a decent bloke would do in this situation, but he could only be the man he actually was. So Spike lowered her foot back to the ground, then slowly skidded his hands along her legs until his fingers were there at the waistband. If he did what he wanted, if he seized a handful of her trousers and pulled, something between them would change. This tentative, wonderful thing that both drove him out of his sodding head and made him feel like the richest man in the world would be over for good.

Only he couldn't stay in one place forever. He'd never been good at

that. Spike inhaled deeply, fisted the material of her trousers and knickers alike, then dragged both down her legs. Keeping his eyes on her all the while—her face, cheeks flushed and eyes dark and lips parted—and trying not to grin when she lifted her hips. When, after her clothing had been balled up and tossed aside, she parted her legs for him and let him look at her for the first time.

“Christ, pet,” Spike choked out, sliding his hands back up her legs, her skin bare and smooth and soft, so soft, and trembling slightly under his touch. “You’re a bloody vision.”

He felt rather than saw the way her blood heated but didn’t pull his gaze away from the apex of her thighs. The thatch of hair, neat and curly, that led to the most perfectly plump folds he’d ever seen, slick and wet, and waiting for him. At once, he wasn’t entirely sure where to begin, the reality of having Buffy under his hands beyond anything he could have imagined. Spike swallowed and slid his palms under her thighs to bring her closer, bring her to the edge of the chair, the movement sending a fresh burst of her heady scent into the air. She was everywhere—in his nose and eyes and in his hands, trusting him as he’d never thought she would and he had so much to show her.

“So beautiful,” he said again. He looked back to her face, and, when he found her gaze still on his, experienced a thrill at the realization that he was intimidated. That hadn’t happened in a long time. Hadn’t had cause, as none of the other women he had been with had been Buffy. Except this one was—this was Buffy giving herself to him and trusting that he wouldn’t let her down, and while Spike was confident he knew his way around a quim, he’d never been in a place where it meant as much as it did. Where it possibly meant everything.

But then if he stayed in his head, he’d ruin this for the both of them, and she needed it so badly. So he sighed and dropped a kiss along her slick inner thigh, relished the pulsing heat that met his lips, before dragging his tongue along her slit. Coating himself in her, that scent that teased his nostrils now in his mouth, and Buffy made a low sound that went straight to his balls, so he did it again. Slower this time, savoring the satiny feel of her skin, intimate in its warmth, and she whimpered, making him whimper right back. Rumble his answer right into the utter perfection of her pussy before taking another lap,

this one from her opening to her clit, already swollen and ready, and when he flirted with the underside, Buffy stopped being coy and bucked hard against his mouth. Hard enough she might have broken his jaw if he hadn't anticipated it, hadn't moved with her, and the sounds she was giving him abruptly graduated from soft and crooning to panting desperation.

"Spike, if you're trying to make a point...consider it made."

"Oh, Slayer, I'm just gettin' started."

"No, you've been driving me crazy a lot longer than this."

He chuckled, feathering his fingers along her leg until they reached the apex. Then he met her eyes again and held as he sucked those fingers into his mouth to ready them. "Got a bit of a head start on you, pet. You'll need to want it a bit longer to catch up."

"I don't have that kind of time. I just need—"

"I know what you need," he replied, then buried his face in her silky cunt and flattened his tongue along her clit. She jolted, her breath whooshing out of her, and answered with a hard, enthusiastic nod, so he began to lick in earnest. Starting slow until she was wet enough to take more pressure, more insistence, flicks that were bold rather than flirty, until she was thrusting up against his face, chasing his mouth every time he teased her with the possibility of pulling away. But Spike wasn't going anywhere, not for a long bloody time. He was following the rhythm of her body, the subtle shifts and twists the way he would in any good fight. Using that knowledge to know when to press for more, when to introduce his fingers, all the while trying not to groan when she clamped down around him and drew him in. Then trying not to laugh as her grip tightened on his hair or the not-so-subtle grunts of annoyance when he refused to yield and give her exactly what she wanted.

No fun in that—not for him, and especially not for her. Not when she needed to feel like she'd won.

"Spike," she mewled at last. "Spike, please."

"Oh, *please*. I like that. Say it again."

"Do you want me to stake you? I can change my mind on that."

"Mmm, like that too. Guess all flavors of you do it for me, Summers." Spike nipped at her, sliding back his fingers, and there was

no helping it this time—the growl that scratched at his throat as she clamped down around him, fighting as though to keep him from slipping free. Not that he had anywhere else he wanted to be in the whole sodding world, but the feel of her body resisting his withdrawal was intoxicating. As was the sight of his fingers, wet and shining with her, dipping in and out of her pussy. Fuck, it was *all* enough to make him worry he might shoot off in his trousers like some sodding schoolboy.

“You feel so good around me,” he whispered, transfixed. “Look so good too. Will you squeeze me like that when it’s my cock?”

Buffy’s breath rattled as she opened her eyes, looking first at him then at what he was doing. And he felt the shudder that wracked through her, felt it all the way to those fingers he was starting to curl within her. Reaching for a spot he knew—he *knew*—none of the past wankers had ever even attempted to find, if they cared enough to believe it existed in the first place. And when he touched it, pressing inside of her as his lips circled her clit, Buffy bloody howled. Craned her head back against the seat, her body bowed, and she cemented her grip on his hair once more, holding him there as she lifted and rubbed herself against his face, and he pressed again, again, and when he knew, sensed, *felt* she was about to go supernova on him, pulled back with a wet plop, mouth and fingers, to lick up the juice at the mouth of her pussy and let her experience how it felt to be fucked with a tongue.

“Spike,” she gasped into the deceptive stillness that surrounded them, the sound rawer than it had been before. “Oh god, you’re such an asshole.”

“How’s that, baby?” he replied, grinning, though, for he bloody well knew the answer.

“I was so close.”

“Think I can’t get you there again?”

“I think you’re an asshole.”

Well, that he couldn’t deny. No more than he could go on ignoring his prick. Spike kept his tongue rocking in and out of her at a rhythm, strumming her clit with wet fingers while he tore at his belt and popped open the buttons of his jeans with his free hand. Then, *yes*, the cool air of the crypt, air that smelled and tasted of Buffy, was caressing the skin of his shaft, and he wrapped that hand around his cock and

tugged. Experienced a corresponding rush of relief and heightened need, made all the more intense by the flavor searing his tongue and nostrils alike. Having her here, outside the confines of his imagination and most fevered fantasies, was the most potent aphrodisiac he had ever encountered. He felt both drunk and amazingly lucid, his senses bursting with life and greed, for getting a little meant wanting even more. More, even, than he'd wanted before she'd turned his world upside down again, and that had been everything.

With Buffy, it was always *everything*.

"Are you touching yourself?" she asked, craning her head to get a look at him.

Spike pulled away from her cunt just enough to breathe his answer, a strand of slayer juice connecting his lips to her opening. "Have to. You're driving me mad." He began pumping his cock harder so she could hear it, the sound of skin thumping against skin, not nearly as wet as she was but enough. "Wanna be inside you so badly."

"What's stopping you?"

"Want you to know I don't need you to give me anything to have me give you everything."

"That doesn't sound fair."

"Love's not fair, baby." Spike left her opening with a parting lick before stroking down her folds again, watching his fingers roll along her silky skin until they were at her opening once more. He inhaled a shaky breath and pushed into her, felt that way she gasped and clenched and drenched him, then pulled back to drop that hand to his cock. Needing to feel her wetness against his skin, encircling him. And Buffy whimpered and he was there, lapping a line up her cunt until her clit was beneath his lips, then closing his mouth around it. Around her. Teasing her with the balled end of his tongue as he sucked and pulled and stroked, his balls throbbing and the base of his spine tingling, and Buffy trembling and spasming and thrusting against his face. Filling the air of his crypt with a deep, throaty cry that would serve as the soundtrack to his fantasies for the rest of his days.

"Spike," she said hoarsely in the quiet that followed, all soft and sated, and that was it for him too. He groaned and forced his weight back onto his legs, rising above her just enough to enjoy the look on

her face when he began spurting cum along her perfect, swollen pussy. He groaned low in the back of his throat at the sight because fuck, there was nothing more beautiful in the world than Buffy wearing his spunk. Buffy with her flushed cheeks and her wide eyes and her heaving chest and best of all, the fact that it was real. That she was here and he wasn't jolting awake. The scent in his nostrils, in his throat, was all pure slayer.

And she wanted more. More he was dying to give her—*would* give her—but not without knowing first. Call it his fatal bloody flaw, but he'd waited too long for this to risk it being anything short of everything.

Still, he was only a man.

"I love you," he said in a rush. "Fuck, Buffy, I love you so much." He inhaled, brought his hand to the mess he'd shot over her pussy with the intention of helping her clean up, but as he'd never been any good with good bloody intentions, somehow, seconds later, he was rubbing his cum into her clit, watching her melt and croon and thrust up, and his cock was swelling anew, and it would be easy. So easy just to lift up and slide home, feel her hot and wet around him, clasp him into her, and he wanted that so much he could weep.

Instead, he cleaned her up as best he could with fingers alone, then pressed those fingers inside her pussy as his mouth closed over her clit a second time. And now, *yes*, he got to feel the way she squeezed when she came. How she contracted and pulsed and strangled and drenched, and it was the sweetest torture he'd ever known. And when he pulled his fingers free to lick them clean, it was *them* he tasted. Them together. Spike drowning in Buffy, as he had been since the first time he'd set eyes on her. Not knowing then that he'd gone out to meet his end and it would be the sweetest sodding death he could ever wish for.

"Is there any reason we haven't been doing this since we first met?" Buffy asked what felt like a lifetime later, her voice low and husky. He didn't realize, until he lifted his head, that he had fallen to his knees again, his cheek cradled against her pubic bone. Or that she had been running her fingers through his hair like a lover might.

Was that what they were now?

He swallowed that question, though, and asked instead, "You want that answered with the truth or a lie?"

"The truth is me, isn't it? I'm the reason."

"Reckon so, yeah."

"Hey, you weren't exactly Mr. Available then, either."

"Maybe not, but there are easy enough ways to persuade a bloke."

She arched an eyebrow and gave him the sort of look that made him feel the less-fun kind of naked. "Are you saying I need to worry about you being persuaded by someone else into—"

Spike bit her inner thigh.

"Hey! Ow!"

"Not ow." He met her gaze and grinned, pressing his knuckles against the seam of her pussy, his skin instantly soaked. "Like a bit of pain, you do. Imagine the fun we'll have sussing out just how much."

"That was an unwarranted bite. And why didn't the chip go off?"

"Very warranted, seeing as you thought I could ever want anyone else. And I wager it didn't go off because you liked it so much." Spike blew her a kiss in response to the glare she aimed at him, then slowly began making his way back up her body, despite the protesting throb of his cock. Maybe he was a dolt, but everything she was saying was enough to give him hope that he hadn't misread her before. What they had told each other, all those confessions and late nights together building toward something real, and having been teased with that, the possibility that she might want something with him that was more than just snogging and sex, that she wasn't afraid anymore wasn't something he took lightly.

"Truth of the matter is, love, I was yours from the moment I laid eyes on you," he said, wedging himself into the space beside her. The chair wasn't exactly roomy, but it fit them both comfortably enough. And being here, in a place where she could rest her cheek against his chest, let her fall into him as her body cooled, was what created actual intimacy. "Just took a while to realize it. Dunno if I ever would have had Dru not punted me to the bloody curb. Always been a one-woman vamp."

Buffy balled her hands into the material of his shirt. "That's reassuring, I guess. If we were ever going to date."

"You said we were last night."

"Were what?"

"Dating."

"Oh. Then it's *very* reassuring."

His fool heart lurched. "That official then? We're dating?"

"I would hope the coming here and the jumping of your bones would help answer the hard questions for me." She sighed, though, and with that sigh came everything else. The tension she'd been quick to brush aside in favor of...well, whatever this had been to her. And for a moment, she seemed content to let that be all of it. The most she gave him, no matter her earlier promise of full explanations. He thought about pushing because hell, he needed to know just for the sake of his own sanity, but maybe he didn't need to know just yet. Maybe tonight could be just for them before they had to settle up with the reality that waited beyond these walls.

Whatever had happened hadn't made her happy. That was why she'd come here. He was the one she shared her misery with—trusted to make it better.

"There's this test Giles wants to do," Buffy said, startling him out of his thoughts. First with her words, then with her wince. "Sorry."

"Sorry?"

"Sorry I brought up Giles. Sorry I started thinking. I thought I could get ahead of it. Just do, you know?" She peered at him, then at his still-hard cock bobbing between them. "Can I just dump for a second before we get back to me making Rubicon-crossing decisions about us?"

Spike smiled softly, pressed his lips to her brow, then reached between them to tuck himself back in. Not that tucking did much good, still hard as he was, but he wagered it was the thought that counted. "Your show here, Slayer," he said, then turned and stretched over the arm of the chair to pluck one of the blankets he used for daytime travel off the floor. No harm in getting her nice and cozy. Hopefully that'd make her reconsider leaving once she got everything out. "Just following your lead."

"That's dangerous."

"You make me hotter with that talk." He grinned when she

narrowed her eyes at him, then spread the blanket over them both, and she was curled against his chest again. Warm and soft, and Buffy most of all. "What's this test then that your watcher aims to do?"

"To see if I'm really Buffy," she said. "He thinks... I guess they all think that something might have gone wrong with the resurrection. So it's not just me who's worried anymore. It's all of them. And if they're right—"

"They're not," Spike barked, his good humor evaporating. The bloody gall of her friends, of her sodding watcher, after everything they had put her through, looking at her now and deciding maybe the job they'd done hadn't been as thorough as they'd thought—and for no reason he could see beyond the fact that she seemed more partial to Spike and less to Angel than she had been in the past. Because of course that was a problem. Of course, Buffy fancying Spike at all would have all her mates convinced some nasty thing had gotten hold of her. Better that explanation than anything else.

"I think they are, though," Buffy said hoarsely, and he heard them in her voice before he caught the salty tang of her tears in the air, and it took all the restraint he possessed to keep from answering with a frustrated roar. "Like if I'm thinking it and they're thinking it too then what are the odds were all wrong? Giles says resurrections just...don't go as well as mine did. That it's more likely something's off."

That might be the most ridiculous thing he'd ever heard, and he'd lived with Angel for two decades. "*That's* why? It went *too well*? They think you might not be entirely Buffy because Willow did too good a sodding job? Slayer..." Spike captured her chin and turned her face to his, needing to see her eyes. Needing her to see his. "I've told you this already, but I'd know it if you weren't you."

"And I've told you that the Buffy who died wouldn't be making out with you or dating you or coming to your crypt to demand sexual favors."

"You sure about that?"

"What? Yes, I—I think." She frowned suddenly, then shook her head so he dropped his hand. "I don't know. My thoughts about you toward the end of everything weren't... Well, they weren't *Spike's ooky* or

anything. Not like they were when I first found out about your...umm..."

"My undying love for you?"

"Is that undying or undead?" But she squirmed a little like she was embarrassed, and her cheeks darkened, even in the shadows of the crypt. "I admit, I pulled a massive wig after and might have overdone my solution."

"You mean kicking me out of your house."

"That made sense to me. It still does. Kind of."

Spike arched an eyebrow. He knew they were wandering from the central topic, but he couldn't help it—he was curious. "What's *kind of* about it?"

"Well, it wasn't like you could do anything to me," she muttered, tugging at his T-shirt in a way that was almost absent. "Except maybe steal more of my clothes and pictures and stuff. Though I didn't even know about that until I found the Buffy shrine. The Buffy shrine justified kicking you out. And everything after... I didn't take you seriously. Or I did but the wrong kind of seriously. After what you did for Dawn, my feelings were...not romantic feelings but softer. I felt softer toward you. And I stopped thinking about your saying you loved me like it was a problem. I felt... I felt grateful that you felt that way after I saw what that meant for you. It was nice having someone I knew I could depend on to have my back." Buffy hesitated, worked her throat. "And maybe, when I was trying to fall asleep, I'd wonder how different it was."

"How different what was?"

"Well, Angel had a soul and that's what made him stop killing. I thought I understood what that meant until he went evil." Another pause. "The chip's not the same thing as a soul, but maybe it was the wrong thing to compare."

It was impossible, but Spike felt his chest lurch all the same. "Yeah? How's that?"

"It all amounts to the same thing in the end, doesn't it? This thing happened to you, and because it did, you decided not to be a killer anymore." Buffy met his eyes again, her heart shining in her own in a way it never had before. Not, at least, when she'd been looking at him.

"I guess I don't know that you've decided that. Not to be a killer anymore. I know you *can't* kill because of the chip but—"

"Seems I recall telling you I'd sooner die than see you in pain. Decision was made a long time ago, pet."

She breathed out, some of the tension in her shoulders going with it. "Well. Okay. Then, like I was saying, it amounts to the same thing. Angel had a soul cursed on him and he decided after that not to be a killer anymore. You had...umm..."

"I fell in love with you."

"And you decided not to be a killer anymore."

"Wasn't quite that simple for either of us," he replied, thinking of China. Of what he'd learned when Angelus had scarpered off again. Darla hadn't been keen on sharing up until that point—embarrassed on his behalf, or what all—though she'd been chatty afterward. Going on about how the once great Angelus had sunk to the low of hunting out criminals to kill rather than the innocent like a proper vampire. "But to your point, yeah. Might not be a good boy but I won't be bad."

Buffy nodded. "It's not... I'm not saying it's perfect. If it were perfect, you would care about things I know you don't care about. Like other people. It wouldn't just be because of me. But it's a lot, Spike. I know it is. I've seen it. So... I guess I don't know what would've happened if I hadn't died. Maybe I would've eventually thought these things anyway." This did not cheer her up as he might have hoped, rather she dropped her face into her hands with a hard, trembling shudder, shaking her head. "But it's still so confusing and I don't want it to be. I want this to be the real me."

"It is."

"And I want you to say that because you believe it, not because you want it to be true."

"You think I don't know the real you?"

"I think if I'm not entirely Buffy, I'm close to being Buffy. Just one who comes over here and demands sex. Buffy-shaped and Buffy-sounding without being the actual Buffy."

Spike went still, which took a considerable amount of effort seeing as his mind was suddenly screaming and the rest of him was recoiling with resentment so pure his first instinct was to chuck her out the

door. It was such a simple thing to think, perhaps the most insulting bit of nonsense she'd thrown at him ever since coming back from the dead, but so completely *her* that even the existence of the words, let alone the sentiment, should have clued her in to how bloody futile this worry of her was. And this and more was clamoring at his insides, scraping at his skull and lungs and heart and making his muscles go so tight he wagered it wouldn't take much for them to just snap. Break cleanly, and maybe that would be better.

The only thing that kept him in check was the knowledge that she wasn't trying to hurt him. She wasn't trying to do anything, except express a fear that came from an honest place. If he started screaming, he'd just do more damage.

"I had that," he forced out instead. "I had a toy that was Buffy-shaped and Buffy-sounding without being the actual Buffy. Know how long it took me to suss out that it wasn't what I wanted?"

"Spike, that's not—"

"It was supposed to be a cure. Supposed to be something just for me that would give me what I wanted without the sodding strings. Wanna know what it was doing right before Glory's flunkies snatched me up? It was sucking me off. I had it on its knees, a mouth that looked like yours around my cock, and I could barely stand to look at the thing because I knew it wasn't you lookin' back." Despite his best efforts, he couldn't keep his voice steady. The more he spoke, the more he shook—the deeper the accusation settled in his bones and the more he needed her to understand exactly why what she'd said was wrong, and by how much. "Then you were gone, and Willow had patched that bloody abomination up to look and sound like you, play the role. Got a mite closer to the mark than that Warren bloke ever did, too, being that she knew you better. And no matter how hard she scrubbed it, she couldn't get the thing to stop making eyes at me. Suggesting we sneak off somewhere and have us a right old time. I couldn't stand it. Would've destroyed the sodding thing myself if we hadn't needed it to pull off the great con that you were still alive. So I want you to say it again, Slayer. Tell me that I only believe you're Buffy because you look and sound like her. If I wanted the packaging by itself, I could've had that. I *did* have it.

Made me nothing but miserable for wanting it to be exactly what it wasn't."

He stopped talking, and Buffy didn't start. She didn't do anything, just sat there, radiating heat and shame, not looking at him but not moving either. And like always, Spike felt a rush of regret for running his mouth, for letting any of his frustration out at all. Only that frustration remained, hot and resentful, burning beneath his skin and clawing at his insides to be expressed.

"Why did you come here?" he asked before he could help himself.

At that, he did get a response. Buffy frowned and met his eyes. "What?"

"You think you might not be Buffy. Last night that was reason enough to push me away. What changed between then and now?"

She hesitated, licked her lips. For a moment, he thought that might be it—he'd gotten as far as he could go with her. Might have done a bit more if he hadn't lost his temper but he couldn't well undo the things he'd said, and as much as he regretted that he'd raised his voice, he wasn't sure he'd take it back. One of these days, the Slayer would have to acknowledge that whatever she felt for him, he knew what it meant to love her.

But then she surprised him. Drew in a breath and answered.

"I think it's something you said last night. Or started to say, at least." She closed her eyes as though to fortify herself. "It's about what *I* want, not what I think I should want. Even if I'm not entirely me, *this* me is still here. I'm still here. And what I want should matter, right?"

Spike opened his mouth to agree with her, vehemently, but caught himself. Even appearing to entertain the thought that she was someone other than who she was would be more ammunition and she had plenty already.

"I don't know," she said softly. "I just...got scared that I'd lose my chance. If they do find something and I'm not all Buffy and they want to turn me back, then whatever you and I are to each other right now might go away with it. I didn't want that."

"You're barking, you know that?"

"If that's British for loony tunes, then yeah, I do know that, actual-

ly.” She sniffed and crossed her arms. “It’s just split down the middle, Spike. How I feel. Like I have Buffy thoughts and memories and I like all of my old favorite foods and music and I still can’t get through *The Old Man and the Sea* to save my life. All things that are me. I love my friends even if being around them is hard right now. I love Dawn even though part of me wants to follow through on the threat to ship her off to the Ringling Brothers.”

Spike arched an eyebrow.

“I was ten and she was annoying me so I told my parents she belonged in the circus.” Buffy didn’t smile, not entirely, but her mouth twitched in a way that told him she wanted to. “The only thing that’s different that I can tell is I don’t feel the same way about Angel, and that’s what’s making everyone wig out. I spent years trying to put him behind me and I suddenly do, and it’s like I can’t win. I just don’t feel the same way I did about him and that’s apparently a problem. The fact that I finally just...let him go.”

Yeah, that would be the bloody death knell, according to her mates. While Spike hadn’t exactly been initiated into their little friend group, he had been around long enough to know the subject of the Buffy and Angel saga was one that continued to haunt the lot of them. Something they discussed both openly and behind Buffy’s back. He’d heard it a lot over the summer, particularly after Willow returned from her field trip to Los Angeles to drop the news. How Angel had taken it and how bloody gutted he had to be and all that rot.

Except Spike knew better. He might not be an expert on what the ponce was like all soul-having, but there was enough of the other man still lurking deep down in there. The one who had driven Drusilla to madness because he’d been fascinated by her power; the one who would have done Buffy the same way, had in fact intended to before his ego had bollixed everything up. Destroying people, girls in particular, was his specialty, his trade, and when he hadn’t been able to do it the old-fashioned way with the Slayer, he’d gotten creative.

Did the Slayer even know about that? Had Angel been brave enough to tell her? Likely not, Spike thought, stroking her hair back from her face, watching the tendrils drag across her skin, over her collarbone. Fan around the pattern of marks on her neck, the places

she'd been tasted in the past. The sight stirred something inside him, pangs new and familiar alike. The vampires she'd let get this close to her, sink fangs into her skin and drink that rich, royal blood. Having her at their lips, her life briefly in their hands. Theirs to do with what they pleased.

And then, the thought was there, and before he could examine it, he heard himself asking, "You know what a claim is, love?"

Buffy lifted her head, pulling herself out of wherever her thoughts had led her to refocus on him. "Like an insurance claim? Way more now than I did last year."

"A vampire claim."

"Are vampires covered by insurance now? How did I not know this?"

"Not sodding insurance," he replied, not yet sure where he was going with this but following his instincts. Instinct rarely steered him wrong, even if he didn't know where it was trying to lead him. "It's a bit of mystical mojo. Not all that common anymore, but something old vamps like Batface liked to do. Tied people to him, kept them all blood-bound and in servitude. Made sure they never got too far away in thought, at least. He had one on Darla, I'm bloody convinced of it. The reason she never got too far from him, even when she was off gallivanting with Angel."

"And you're telling me all this why?" She paused, wrinkling her nose. "Also, Batface? Am I supposed to know who that is?"

He offered a small grin. "The Master. Never met him, myself, but I've heard tale."

"Oh." At that, she grinned too. Not so much that the worry faded from her eyes but at least enough to light them up. "Batface is a new one for me, but if memory serves, very fitting. So he had vampire insurance on Darla?"

Christ, he loved her. It hit him now as it often did—sudden and intense, warming him up from the inside in such a way he could almost feel it, the heat. Foreign and distant, remnants of what it had been like to be alive. That was what Buffy was—life in its purest form.

"Something like that, yeah. Bunch of ceremonial rot that never

appealed to me much, though Dru took a shine to it. Guess it was the Catholic in her.”

It could have been his imagination, but Spike thought Buffy’s eyes might have gone a tad darker at the mention of his old flame. God, he hoped so. Just the idea that she might be possessive, jealous, that she might want him that much was enough to get his head swimming. Hope was a mighty dangerous drug.

“Not that this isn’t all incredibly interesting,” she said, and there was no mistaking the edge in her voice, “but is there a reason we’re talking about vampire insurance?”

“Claims.”

“Whatever.”

“Dunno. Just a wild bloody hare, I suppose.”

“You’re a very weird vampire.”

“So I’ve been told.”

For a moment, that seemed like the end of it. Buffy sighed and settled her head against his chest, he settled his against the back of the chair, and they sank into the comfortable quiet. And it *was* comfortable—the silences with her always were. Those times when she wasn’t pushing and neither was he. There was no demand, no rush to explain or defend, just the comfort of not being alone. *Alone with you here*, as she’d said.

“So,” she said a moment later, “if you were going to take out a vampire insurance policy on me, how would you start?”

Spike lifted his head to look at her.

“What? You brought it up. Now I’m curious.”

He had at that, though he still wasn’t quite sure why, except those marks on her neck, and the fact that there was more than one. All old, and from what he could tell, one-offs. Not revisited and reopened later. All with their own stories. “There are stages to a claim, from what I’ve heard,” he said. “First stage is connection. Part of the connection’s physical but part of it’s not, way it was explained to me. Like once you’ve touched, you mutter a verse or two to get the magic working.”

“So...you touch, then you say something, and that starts a claim?”

“Touch has to be powerful. Has to mean something.”

“Like sex?”

"If the sex means something to the both of you, yeah."

"And then what? After all the meaningful touching?"

"Seal it in blood, what else?" He ran a finger down her neck. "Always about the blood. Especially for us."

"Is there any getting out of it?"

"I dunno, love."

"What, you never looked into it? Not even for you and Drusilla?"

The thought made him want to laugh, but he knew better. "No need for me and Dru. She knew I was hers—she'd always be in my head. I never strayed too far, either. And Dru was already Angel's. Even if I'd wanted to, I didn't stand a chance."

"Wait, *Angel* had claimed her?"

Her surprise was almost charming. "Likely from the start," he told her, relishing how the words didn't hurt the way they would have once. There was a pang, there always would be, but it felt distant now. Not a new distant—he'd let go of Dru a ways back—but still further than it had ever been. "I could've tried, I suppose. Challenge him. Wouldn't have worked and she would've bloody hated me for it, and I knew that, so I made a point not to learn much more about it. Hell, I never even learned what words you're supposed to say to kick it off. Didn't want to be tempted."

The look on her face was soft, almost tender. Like she heard everything he wasn't saying, saw beyond what he was letting her see. "Weird that Giles never told me any of this."

"It's not something I reckon happens enough to fuss over. Probably didn't want you fretting."

"Yeah. I might've wiggled. But I guess it's...you know, as long as the touchy part doesn't mean anything, it's okay." She paused, dragging her teeth over her lower lip, her brow furrowing. "And the blood. That's not like scraping your knee or something, right? Or do you know?"

This much he could answer with authority. "Has to be a bite. The vampire looking to be the owner drinks from the minion or what all he's claiming as his. Their blood is now their possession."

"Which means..." The furrow fell, replaced with sudden, wide-eyed horror. "Could the Master have claimed me? Or Dracula? I don't think there was meaningful touch with Dracula but with the Master... When

he touched me, it meant something to both of us. He was about to get free and I was, well, about to die for the first time. Could that—”

“No.”

“No? Why no?”

“Cause he bloody killed you, that’s why. No sense making a minion just to snuff it out.”

“But he didn’t kill me,” Buffy argued, her voice rising in octaves. “I mean, he bit me and threw me aside and I kinda drowned, but *he* didn’t do that. His bite didn’t do that. Maybe he meant for me to become minion Buffy.”

Spike shook his head again, his irritation with himself reaching a zenith. Things had been so pleasant just a few seconds ago—not perfect, given her questions about the bot, but that had passed and she’d been calm, with him—and he’d had to go and run his mouth. “Even if he did,” he told her, “it wouldn’t matter.”

“According to who?”

“Say he didn’t mean to kill you, fine. But you *did* kill him, yeah? Wasn’t here for that, but I heard plenty from that little annoying brat when I first rolled into town. Something about his bones being ground up, no chance of comin’ back?”

“And that means something?” she asked in a rush. “The dead thing?”

“Claim would’ve died with him if there’d been one. The owner dies, and it breaks. Same if the minion dies. No owner has any use for dead minions.”

There was nothing for a beat, then another, as though the air itself were waiting for her response. And then she sighed, a sigh that was more a moan, and went slack against him once more, collapsing into his chest, her thumping heart and racing pulse ringing in his ears, but Buffy soft in his arms. Still with him by some miracle, and not running out the bloody door. Bugger if he knew why, but he wasn’t about to ask.

“Sorry,” he said, and kissed her temple again. “Didn’t mean to—”

“I know. I just... I guess I’ve let too many vampires get up close and fangy.” She reached up and rubbed along her neck, then went still

again. "What if... You said you don't know the words. The starting off words. Are you sure?"

Again, he had the urge to laugh—not at her, though, and not because anything was funny. "Very sure. Would've had to ask Angel to know what they were, and I wasn't keen on giving him any more bloody ammo. He would've been right chuffed at me trying to take Dru from him. Christ, he would've loved that." Spike met her eyes again, and something inside of him shifted. There was worry there. New and different worry than there had been before. "Wager I can look it up, if you like. Or your watcher can. But it's not something—"

"He said something," Buffy blurted, her blood thundering anew. Coloring her face. "The night we... Angel said something. I thought it was sweet, like he really loved me and he wanted..." She swallowed, and for a second, the years melted off her. Enough so that he could see their impact, how far removed she was from the girl he'd come here to kill. A child all over again rather than the woman she'd become. "Does it have to be all at once?" she asked hollowly. "The steps?"

"For a claim?" he asked, not knowing why. It was the only thing she could mean.

"Yeah. Like...what if you start a claim and then, say, a year and a half later, do the bitey thing? Could that still work?" Buffy rubbed her neck again, sitting up this time. "You said it would die if I died."

Spike stared at her for a long beat, his head pounding again, harder now. A thump that seemed to reverberate down to his bones.

"Oh," he said after a beat, lacking anything else. "Bugger."

SO THAT'S MY REFRAIN

BUFFY ONLY HAD ONE THOUGHT—HURRY HOME AND HOPE THAT Giles would be there as promised, ready to get in-depth in discussing how they would test Buffy's Buffyness. He'd even said he'd try to keep the others out of the house to give her some space, as the Scoobies did love a good overcrowding. Had even gone to the trouble of triple-checking with Janice's mom that Dawn's plans for hanging out were real and would include adult supervision.

Which was good, all good, because the last thing Buffy wanted right now was to be around people with opinions. She didn't even know what she would say to *Giles*, where to start, how she would begin to translate the explosion of thought and outrage taking place between her ears.

Thankfully, when she and Spike barrelled inside Revello Drive, she could tell it was empty. Or mostly empty. The house had a pulse of its own when full of people—a heartbeat that resonated under her skin, the source of both comfort and pain, very noticeable in both its presence and its absence. The heartbeat was quiet now, and it was just Giles sitting at the dining room table, flipping through texts. Just Giles startling so hard at her abrupt entrance that he let out a shriek reminiscent of Dawn's more hysterical breakdowns. Just Giles being Giles,

which would have made Buffy slow down enough to crack out a quip on a normal night, but this was not a normal night and she was out of quips. All she had were questions and an increasing desire to run her ex through with something wooden and pointy.

God, Angel was lucky he lived hours away. If he were here, she might actually kill him before he could give her any answers.

"What do you know about vampire claims?" Buffy demanded as she stormed into the dining room.

Giles stared at her, a hand pressed against his chest and the other wrapped around the book he'd been reading all death-grip style. "Pardon?" he replied, glancing from her to Spike and back again. Then the words must have registered, for his face fell and his eyes went wide. "Dear god, tell me you didn't let Spike place a claim on you."

"Oi!" Spike snapped. "Do I look like a nutter?"

"Do you want an honest answer?"

"I'm the one asking questions here!" Buffy spat, striding over to her watcher and planting her hands on her hips. "Vampire claims. What do you know about them?"

He still looked uncertain. "What is this about?"

"Angel," Buffy said shortly. "Is there a way to know if he put a claim on me?"

"Angel?" Giles repeated, frowning. "I don't understand. What happened to make you ask me this?"

"I just need to know if there's a way to tell."

"If you're asking about a specific test or the like, I've certainly never heard of one." The worry lines deepened, as did his scowl when he looked back at Spike. "What has he been telling you?"

And that was it—the last of her patience, fragile thing that it already was, splintered and fell apart. Buffy threw her head back and screamed, actually screamed, loud enough that she felt Spike flinch, that Giles clapped his hands over his ears, that she only knew he yelled her name because she felt the vibrations in the air, as the only sound there was, the only sound that existed in the world, was the one making her throat raw and her eyes water and her muscles tense and everything hurt. She didn't know how long it lasted, just that it felt both forever and not nearly long enough by the time her lungs

protested and forced her back into herself long enough to breathe. Buffy staggered back, wind punched out of her, and would have possibly tripped over her own feet if Spike hadn't seized her by the shoulders to steady her.

But just as fast as it had come down upon her, the moment ended, her ears ringing and her throat throbbing and Giles staring at her as though she were some wild animal that had managed to escape captivity, which she might find funny down the line sometime but did not now. Right now, that instant, nothing was funny.

"I need you to listen to me," she said, her voice rough and hoarse but not weak. "And I need you to cut the crap. This stupid, frankly insulting idea that you and the others have that I'm not capable of knowing what is bullshit and what is fact. I need you to remember that even if you think I came back wrong, I did come back with a functioning brain full of Buffy Summers's memories, and that means I know when I'm being manipulated. That I know when *Spike* is the one doing the manipulating, mainly because—and I'm sorry, Spike, but it's true—he sucks at it."

The hands holding her upright tightened gave her a firm squeeze and she felt, more than heard, his answering huff, but he didn't insult either of their intelligence by trying to deny it.

For his part, Giles was doing a decent job intertwining condescension with concern, his eyes round and his mouth unable to decide whether it wanted to be open or closed. And that was just fine. He needed to keep quiet a moment longer.

"The night Angel lost his soul, he said something to me," Buffy said, balling her hands into such tight fists she worried her nails might break the skin of her palms. "I don't remember verbatim, but it was something about how I was his and how we were now bound. That he'd stay with me forever now. I thought it was romantic because we'd just had sex and I was still wiggling over the *he'd have to leave for months* scare, trying get rid of the Judge's body parts, plus then the Judge himself was all active and we didn't know what would happen so it just seemed...like even if we died, we'd be together. Could that have been a claim?"

Shock blanked out all the other emotions twisting Giles's features. "Good lord."

"I'll take that as a yes."

At that, Giles seemed to regain some of his composure. "If the wording was... Yes, it would have been a partial claim, at least. The start of one, assuming he didn't take any blood that night."

"Not *that* night."

Giles didn't seem to hear her. He'd instead refocused on Spike with a look that made absolutely zero sense. "This happened because of the Judge."

"Oi. Never wanted old blue to begin with. Was just trying to give my lady a decent birthday party."

"By building a creature that could bring forth Armageddon."

"Well, I had just had my back snapped in two. Was a bit keen for some payback."

"That's the exact sort of lazy, amoral reasoning that makes you a monster, Spike."

"No," Buffy snapped. "Don't change the subject. Don't make this about Spike having done something evil back when he was evil and way before he switched sides."

"Switched sides? Buffy, do you hear yourself?"

"When I *was* evil?" Spike protested at the same time, rounding so he was in her periphery, so she could see his eyes. "Stake to the heart's less cruel than that, love."

God, she so did not have the patience for this now, even if she knew—*felt*—he was trying to lighten the tension. Not the way to go about it. "Okay, for the last time," she said, scowling at him before turning her glare on Giles. "People who fight at my side, protect my sister, risk their lives to save the world, stick around after I'm dead to keep protecting my sister, and meet me every night to fight vampires, demons, and in general, the forces of darkness, are people I consider *on my side*. Spike started off on the other side; he's now on this one. I thought you were all book guy, Giles, do I really need to explain to you how language works?"

Her watcher reeled as though she'd leaped at him, hissing and

clawing at his face. Goody. More fodder for the *Buffy came back wrong* file. Whatever. Not like that took a lot these days.

"I need you to focus," she went on when he didn't reply. "If Angel did start to claim me that night, what does that mean? How would that impact me?"

For a second, she thought he might be too troubled by her outburst to give her an answer, but after a beat, Giles shook his head and seemed to gather himself. "Well, I suppose it... It would mean that he would always be able to feel you, in some capacity. Not much is known about vampiric claims, aside from the fact that they are rumored to exist, though there is some scholarship that argues only certain lines of vampire can manage it."

"Like the Order of Aurelius," Buffy said. "That's what the Master was. And Angel."

"Yes. It is thought that claims were a way of gathering power. The vampire who initiates the claim is able to feel those marked as his. I suppose this is what Angel intended to do." He seemed to be talking himself back down to a nice, soft landing. "Which, given the circumstances, I suppose makes a sort of sense. Not that it wasn't idiotic and reckless, but—"

"You're really going to make excuses for him."

Giles scowled. "That is not what I am doing."

Buffy sniffed and glanced at Spike, whose expression mirrored a combination of disbelief and exasperation.

"I am merely saying," Giles went on, "that a partial claim is perhaps not cause for alarm."

"Right," Spike replied. "Expect that's not the sort of lazy, amoral reasoning that makes *you* a monster, is it?"

"Guys." Buffy shifted forward to better put herself between them. "Focus. Now." She turned fully to Giles once more. "Spike says the way to seal a claim is with blood. Specifically, Angel would need to bite me to make it official. Does that sound right?"

"Yes, from what little I know."

"And that's it. Just the words, the bite, and congrats, you're now property of a vampire, no exchanges, no refunds?"

Giles furrowed his brow, which irritated her for reasons she

couldn't articulate. Like he shouldn't have to think about these things—that anything involving vampires should be knowledge he just had, presto manifesto, on hand to be coughed up and delivered whenever the occasion arose. He'd certainly been knowledge-guy when it came to most other things involving vampires, specifically what they were and how to kill them. Things like mystical bonds that vampires could force upon underlings—or slayers, as it turned out—should be in his immediate repertoire. Just there. Ready-made knowledge.

"I do not believe it is that simple," Giles said at last. "I believe that some measure of acceptance is necessary in order for the bond to take hold."

"Acceptance?"

"Again, I would have to revisit my books, but yes. The individual being claimed must allow it to happen. Or, rather, surrender to the person asserting ownership. Which you never did."

And here it was, for all the points. Buffy's heart was thundering so hard even she had no trouble hearing it. "Does it have to happen all at once?"

"Pardon?"

"Does the second part of the claiming thing, the blood part, have to happen immediately after the first part? Or can, say, a year go by? Or maybe more than a year?" When it was clear he was struggling to follow, she rolled her eyes and tugged on the neckline of her shirt. "Maybe the first part happened the night you decided to give it up to the vampire you thought you were in love with and the second part happened when that same vampire was hit with a poisoned arrow and you thought you were about to lose him forever, so you gave him your blood to keep him from dusting?"

At last, Giles seemed to understand the gravity of the situation. He'd paled and his eyes looked rounder than usual. There was nothing for a moment, then a sharp inhalation. "Dear lord."

Two *good lords* in five minutes. Might be a new record. "Hi, welcome to the panic party. Glad you could make it."

"But you... You did not accept it then, did you?"

"Would willingly offering it be the same as accepting?"

"Dunno if it would've mattered, either way," Spike muttered from

behind her. "Think all that would've mattered is if you'd said something before you coughed it up. Said no to the claim. No answer's as good as a yes in our world."

"What kind of twisted logic is that?" Buffy demanded, the words half-question, half-whine.

"No's the only word that matters a lick in this exchange, love. Like in weddings. All that rubbish about 'speak now or forever hold your peace'?"

"But weddings also have the whole 'do you take this man' and I definitely did not take that man. I didn't even know there was a claim to say no to!" Never mind that at the time, she definitely would have taken if he'd asked, which as far as she knew might have been the claim, too. Or at least related to it—that first part Angel had placed on her the night they'd had sex. Whatever it was meant to do, and whatever it had actually done.

"Fine, forget the wedding thing," Spike muttered. "Suppose it's less like that and more like Congress sending a bill up to the president. Even if he doesn't sign it, it becomes law after ten days anyway."

Buffy blinked and turned to meet his eyes, completely stunned for the second time in less than an hour. Her ex having stamped her with a mystical *property of Angel* was one thing, but Spike going all *Schoolhouse Rock* on her would be what sent her to the loony bin.

As though hearing the thought, or perhaps reading the look on her face, he shifted and glanced down. If she didn't know better, she'd swear he'd gone shy on her. "What?" he asked.

"Just didn't expect a civics lesson from the undead. How do you even know that?"

"Watch enough *West Wing* and some things stick, I suppose."

"*West Wing*? I thought you liked *Passions*."

"What can I say, Slayer, I've got range." Spike kept his gaze on the floor between them, swallowing in that manner she had come to associate with nerves. After a beat, though, he seemed to remember himself and looked up again, his trademark defiance back in place. "Does it matter? Comes down to the same thing, right? If you didn't tell him to stuff it when he took your blood, there's a good sodding chance the claim took hold."

"That is not certain," Giles said, though he didn't sound nearly as confident as Buffy would have liked. "It is conjecture at best."

"So is this crackpot theory that the girl's come back wrong," Spike retorted, this time with fire. "You filled her head with all that bunk based on nothing more than she's not falling over herself to fawn over the wanker anymore."

Giles's expression hardened. "Not just that, Spike."

"Right. It's that she's spending time with another creature of the night."

"Not just *any* creature."

"What, good enough to fight at your side all bloody summer long, to be left in charge of bitty Summers while the kiddies run around raising the dead, but the second Buffy's back among the living, that's when you decide I'm dirt." Spike made a sound that was like a scoff but thicker. The sort of sound he made when he was trying to disguise his feelings as anything but hurt. "So she's shucked her hero worship of someone who bugged all the way off out of town three years ago, and instead of treating me like something she means to stake, she's acting the way she would around any man who fought at her side and looked after her family. That's it, innit? There's nothing else to support your pet theory."

Giles didn't answer him, just glared instead.

"I wanna hear you say it, Watcher," Spike pressed. "Look at her and tell me you think there's a chance that she's anything other than Buffy."

"Spike, the day I take orders from you, I—"

But the air split with the trill of the phone before anyone could learn what would happen on the day Giles took orders from Spike, and it was like a spell had been broken. The house came back into focus, with its familiar walls and furniture and art selections, and the usual parade of interruptions. And somehow she knew, the way she sometimes just knew things, that if she went into the kitchen and picked up the phone that the man she least wanted to talk to in the world would be on the other end. There were so few people who called her these days who weren't bill collectors, and none with as much persistence. That was one of the reasons she made a point of being out of the

house each night—to avoid the questions she didn't know how to answer from the guy who had forgotten that he was her ex.

"Answer it," Buffy told Giles, crossing her arms. "Go on."

"I beg your pardon, this is *your* house."

"And I'm asking you to answer the phone."

Giles stared at her as though the request were something else, then turned and headed to grab the headset off its charger. It was the look he gave her that did it—made the lightbulb go off. Or maybe that was on. Yes, definitely on, for she was seeing things that had been obscured in the shadows. Things that Spike had been telling her were there and real but that light hadn't been on and she'd only had his word for it. The thoughts that had kept her rooted, kept her from pursuing what she wanted out of the worry that she might not be herself, except so much of the person she'd been before she'd died had hinged upon the lessons she'd taken from her failed relationship. The pain, the heartbreak, the not-so-subtle pining for what she could never have and the determination to make the best out of a situation that could never be perfect.

She'd taken all that with her, every bit of it, when she'd rushed to the edge of the tower and swan dived into oblivion.

But Spike was right—that was the root of it. The only things about her that felt off, that were causing alarm in others, were those attitudes she used to have about or because of Angel. The pining, the asking how high when he told her to jump, even the way she felt about other vampires, as that was wrapped up in him too, wasn't it? Her experience with him had informed the way she viewed vampires across the board. Unrepentantly evil, no exceptions. Even when the exceptions were blatant and smacking her in the face.

The problem wasn't that she wasn't Buffy. No, the problem was that for the first time in years—maybe since the night she'd lost her virginity—she was. The scars were there still but the way she felt about them had changed, and as a result, everything else had, too.

Buffy shook her head, her gaze trailing Giles as he came back into the room, his expression unreadable and the cordless held up to his ear.

"I understand your concern," he was saying. "In fact, Willow and

her partner, Tara, are researching methods by which to test the integrity of the spell that was used to return her to this world. However, some new information has come to light, the sort it appears you have the ability to answer.”

Buffy swallowed. So she’d been right and it was Angel. Right on schedule.

Giles held her eyes. “When you were involved, did you place a partial claim on Buffy?”

The immediate answer was staticky silence, which, to Buffy, spelled Y-E-S. Not that it mattered. What he owned up to doing wouldn’t be nearly as important as how much he revealed in the owning. She already knew the claim existed—or *had* existed. Maybe this situation wasn’t the kind they’d had in mind when they came up with Occam’s Razor, but it was still the simplest explanation. All things Buffy had come back to life when Willow had done that spell—everything but the claim she hadn’t known about.

Then, finally, Angel sighed, the sound loud enough to reach her ears. “Yeah. I did.”

Buffy didn’t miss the way Giles’s spine went ramrod straight or the sudden steel in his eyes. Theory graduated into fact as far as he was concerned. She would be annoyed if she hadn’t seen it coming. As it was, she was just tired.

“You...placed a claim on Buffy and you elected to never let me know?”

“You?” Buffy blurted before she could stop herself. “What about me?”

There was a pause, then another sigh. “She’s there?”

And that was all it took for fatigue to clear the way for anger. Buffy found herself marching forward and snatching the phone out of Giles’s hand. Enough was enough. No more men talking about her as though she were a science experiment. “She’s here,” she snapped into the receiver. “And she has one question for you. What the fuck?”

“Buffy—”

“No, seriously, Angel. What the *fuck* were you thinking?”

“It’s not a big deal, all right?” he had the audacity to say. “And at the time, if you remember, we were being hunted by Spike and that abomi-

nation he put together, and likely to be separated. I thought it would protect you.”

“Yeah? How’s that?”

“Just that I would be able to feel you. The same way vampires...”

But he didn’t finish the thought, and she knew why.

“The way vampires what?” Buffy snapped, her fingers digging perhaps a bit too firmly into the plastic. “The way vampires feel their underlings? Their *minions*? What the Master did to everyone he considered a possession?”

“That wasn’t... Okay, yes, that is how it’s been used before, but it’s not the way *I* used it. And it was never supposed to be completed anyway.”

“But it was, wasn’t it? It was completed.”

He fell silent again, though not nearly as long this time. She could almost feel him building his argument—his shock transforming into indignation and hurt and all manner of things designed to make her apologize for being angry over the violation. And sure enough, the counterattack came. The blame shift. Another installment of *Angel Knows Best*.

“I didn’t ask for your blood, Buffy. In fact, I tried pretty damn hard not to take it. You’re the one who insisted.”

“Because I felt compelled to save you no matter what. I almost killed a girl because of you.”

“Don’t start acting like you give a damn about Faith. We both know—”

“No, Angel, stop it. You don’t get to talk. You knew this partial claim existed. You knew what would happen if you took my blood.”

“I wasn’t exactly at my best when that happened.”

“Okay, sure, fine, I’ll buy that. But what about after?” Another pause. “After the transfusion and the Ascension... It never occurred to you that I might need to know what the hell you’d done to me?”

“And what would have been the point? It’s not like it mattered. Vampire claims are for *vampires*. You went ahead and had a relationship with someone else pretty much immediately so I’m pretty sure there was no—”

But Buffy didn’t hear the rest—she didn’t get a chance. Giles had

wrestled the phone back from her, his face a mask of fury she'd never seen before. She blinked her surprise and stumbled back into Spike's chest, her own fury calming, if only a little, when he closed his hands around her upper arms to keep her from falling over.

"That is a bloody load of bollocks, and you know it!" Giles snarled into the phone. "The sort of attachment you foisted upon her would be one she felt no matter how much time had passed or how much distance you had put between you. Part of her would always *belong* to you, Angel, and I do not believe for a second that you didn't know that when it happened. That you weren't attuned to it when you left town or anytime thereafter. It would have made her forging any meaningful relationship outside of this bond almost impossible. I—no, I don't care what happened when you were in sodding *Pylea*. Claims are of this dimension. They follow our rules and are governed by our magic. No—*no*, that you didn't feel that loss until you returned is hardly surprising. But you did not feel it when she returned, did you?" Giles glanced up, meeting her eyes, his own fire. "Thank god for that. It seems dying is what set her free of you for once and for all."

And apparently, that was all he had to say. Right now, at least. He seemed too disgusted to pursue anymore, rather held the receiver back out to her like he couldn't separate it from his skin fast enough. She took it, not sure exactly what she was supposed to do now, not sure she had anything in her that wasn't pure poison. Still, somehow, Buffy found herself lifting the receiver to her ear. Listening to the familiar nothing on the other end of the line, realizing how many times she'd been exactly where she was. Holding something, tangible or intangible, that was connected to Los Angeles, how many times Angel had been present without actually being present. How he had shown up at the start of the year out of nowhere. Really nowhere. She hadn't called to let him know about her mom and she knew Dawn hadn't, either. Instead, he'd just felt it and he'd come. Found her at her mother's graveside and offered the bare minimum as he always did before leaving again. Checking in on his possession. Responding to pain he felt her feel through the strength of the bond he'd forged without telling her.

Buffy wasn't naïve enough to think that Angel had ruined her

relationship with Riley—that had been choking on its own acid long before it had finally died—but here, standing where she stood with the knowledge she had, she could see the steps that had led her to think that Riley was the best choice for her. He was tall like Angel. Had an angular jaw like Angel. Was rigid on so many things like Angel. And the entire time they had been together, he'd been competing with Angel's ghost. She'd thought him insane, jealous, or maybe a combination, but he'd been more right than she could have known. For Angel had always been there, just beneath the surface, waiting to be discovered anew. He had dominated that relationship as much as he had dominated their own. And she was tired. So fucking tired of being dominated.

"Angel," Buffy said, her tone even but the rest of her not. The rest of her shaking hard enough she could drill a hole into the floor, "we're done. Completely. You understand?"

"Buffy—"

"No. I mean *we're done*. No more calls. No more check-ins. No more trips to Sunnydale because your friend had a vision. No more swooping in to steal kisses over the grave of someone I love. Nothing. We're through. If I see you again, I'm a slayer seeing a vampire. Do you understand me?"

"Buf—"

"I said, *do you understand me?*"

"It wasn't what you think it was."

"No, Angel. That's you. You aren't what I thought you were. You never have been." And because she understood that the only way to end this conversation was to leave it, Buffy pulled back the phone and punched the button that would disconnect the call. She handed the receiver back to Giles in a hand that shook, but also, somehow, felt lighter than she could ever remember being. A sort of light that contrasted brilliantly with the dark she'd been in since she'd opened her eyes inside her coffin, splitting the world in two.

Nothing was perfect and everything was broken, but some part of her now *was* at rest. And unlike the rest of her, it couldn't be resurrected.

"It seems," Giles said, fitting the antenna back inside the receiver, "I owe you a rather large apology."

Buffy didn't say anything, which was saying enough.

"It never occurred to me at any point during your courtship with Angel that he would do something so...permanent."

At that, a much welcome sound broke through the air. A scoff at her back, coinciding with the tightening of familiar hands around her shoulders. Spike had said remarkably little since she'd stormed into the place, but she knew—*understood*—the reason behind that in ways she wasn't sure she could ever articulate.

"Could it be because your lot has put so much stock in that sodding soul of his?" he drawled now. "To hear you all talk, there are two men sharing that body, one having nothing to do with the other."

"The soul does provide humanity the demon alone cannot," Giles replied, stiff but not unyielding, though his eyes narrowed and his jaw went rigid. "Much as it must pain you to hear, Spike, a vampire is nothing more than the shadow of the person who once lived. You might share the memories and the personality of the human you were before you were turned, but—"

"The memories and the personality," Spike echoed. "Christ, do you even hear yourself when you say this rot?"

"By all means, educate me on vampires."

"What the bleeding hell do you suppose a person is if not their memories and personality?" he retorted, releasing the grip he had on Buffy's shoulders and stepping around her to put himself directly in Giles's path. "I've known Angel longer than anyone here. Fuck, longer than either of you have been alive and then some. Learned everything I know about being a vampire at his knee, and sometimes on mine when he was feeling like I wasn't showing proper respect. And I can bloody well tell you that claiming things, particularly women, he sees as his is not something he'd have to talk himself into. The soul just changed the conversation is all. Had him telling himself he was doing it for her when it was for him. Angel lets others play with his toys just for the satisfaction of taking them away again."

Giles just glared at him, his expression hard and unimpressed. "And of course, your assessment of Angel's character comes from a place of

neutral observation and is in no way influenced by how you feel about Buffy.”

“It comes from what the plonker just told you. You never did your research.”

“I bloody well did!”

“Right, so you knew he came back to the family around the time I snuffed my first slayer, and bloody begged Darla to teach him how to be a monster again?” Spike shot back. “Or about how he did a job for the Allies and ended up turning some poor hapless sailor to save his own hide, and instead of dusting him after the job was done, set him loose?”

Buffy felt her mouth drop open. Forget Giles, *she* had never known any of that. “What?”

“You’re telling me you read about what he did to Drusilla,” Spike continued, keeping his gaze on Giles. “To her family, her sisters—got her addicted to pain, to torture, to rape and more besides, and even knowing that, you thought it safe to let him to sniff around the sixteen-year-old girl you were sent here to train to fight creatures like him? I underestimated you, Watcher. Could give some demons a run for their money.”

It happened fast, though not so fast that Buffy didn’t see it coming. That she couldn’t move when Giles did, put herself between him and the vampire, or seize her watcher’s arm before he could land a blow on Spike’s face. Turn at the same time, stop Spike from responding in kind, chip or no chip, because of course he would. The danger was there in Spike’s voice, in the tension strewn throughout his body, and he wouldn’t care about his own pain in that moment, too absorbed with all the things said and not said.

“That’s not going to help anyone,” Buffy said, breathing hard when she met Giles’s eyes. She held his gaze for a long moment until she trusted he had enough control over himself not to lash out again. “The fact is Angel did what he did. It happened. We deal with that. Or not, I guess, since it’s over and done and dead. There’s no point in fighting over it now.”

Giles looked like a fight was exactly what he wanted, and it probably was...just not with Spike. Not really. Spike was just a convenient

punching bag, the purveyor of uncomfortable truths. The person saying the things that should have been said years ago, even if Buffy, hardheaded and moony-eyed, would have ignored them at the time. And she would have. Probably. She'd spent the early days with Angel being enamored with him as often as she was annoyed with him. Forbidden love wrapped around constant portents of doom—perhaps crashing into him had been inevitable. Perhaps Angel doing what he'd done and with the excuse he'd given her had been inevitable too. That was just who he was and always had been. The person who swept into her life, turned it upside down, made a bunch of decisions without consulting her, and bounced in lieu of having an actual discussion.

She'd been young and stupid. And yes, Giles should have known better, but throw in an unknown like a vampire having a soul and, well, she could see how mistakes were made. None of his training had prepared him for that—everything he'd learned had been on the fly and as it happened. And Angel... Whatever else, Buffy trusted that Angel had always done what Angel had thought was right. That his conviction in his own rightness was part of the problem and probably always had been. It didn't make everything okay—didn't make *anything* okay, actually—but did make it at least understandable.

All she could do now was move on.

"All right, now that we're done with the blame game, I need to know something," Buffy said a moment later when she was reasonably certain fists wouldn't start flying the second she relaxed her guard. "I don't even know if this is something you can answer, but...is there a way to tell what else this claim Angel had over me might have influenced? Things that might've been different if it hadn't been in place? Because everything felt normal to me the entire time. If this affects something important then I'd rather know now than, say, in the middle of another fight."

For a moment it seemed neither had heard her speak, preoccupied as they were with glaring at each other. Then, finally, Spike pulled his gaze off Giles and returned it to her, the edge still there, the anger, but blunted as it hadn't been since before they'd left the crypt. "Turns you off other vamps, mostly," he said. "Way it's been explained to me. Keeps you from straying. Keeps you from betraying your master."

"Yes," Giles said, though his voice was strained. "Claims are a way of exerting and maintaining control and loyalty, especially as it pertains to other vampires. The further you get from *demon*, the more autonomy I suppose you have." He paused, narrowing his eyes. "Come to think of it, Angel's claim might be the reason you survived your encounter with Dracula. Beyond that, I'm not certain." When she looked at him, confused, the remaining tension in his face melted. "Dracula's powers, while ostentatious, were not unremarkable. The connection Angel maintained over you is perhaps why you were able to resist his hypnotic abilities as well as you did. Enough to gather information that could then be reported back to your master. Vampires cannot detect claims made by other vampires, to my understanding. It's what makes claimed minions particularly valuable. They can act entirely according to their natural responses, but ultimately will reject offers made by those who do not own them."

Well, she supposed she'd had to ask. "Is that all?"

"I believe it is. We will, of course, need to do more research. See what other changes you might expect."

Buffy nodded, glanced at Spike but away again. The look on his face was not very forgiving—at least enough to let her know he wasn't going to drop his indignation that her friends had thought something was wrong with her, or the fact that the catalyst to all this had to do with Angel. That the thing that had been wrong with her had been wrong for a long time, and its absence was what had caused alarm.

There was more to think about. God, so much to think about—to try to understand—and she didn't know where to start. She also didn't know where any of this left her and Spike, the decision she'd made just a little while ago that had felt so good in the middle of it and now... Well, maybe it was for the best. With everything she'd learned about vampires, starting something new with a different one might be the sort of decision that led to more conversations like this. More revelations, more surprises.

"I think I'm going to go lie down," Buffy said, breaking away from them, from Spike, and wandering toward the staircase. Half-hoping he'd stop her, knowing fully that he wouldn't.

That was the thing about Spike. Left to his own devices, he rarely

RECLAIMED

did the thing you wanted him to do. Maybe he sensed she needed some time away. Or maybe he felt he wouldn't be welcome. The end result was the same either way. Buffy stepped into her bedroom alone, stripped out of her clothes alone, pulled on her jammies alone, and climbed under her covers alone.

But she didn't sleep alone. No, she had her thoughts to keep her company.

And like always, those were loud.

IT'S ALL RIGHT IF SOME THINGS COME OUT WRONG

BUFFY TURNED OVER FOR THE UMPTEENTH TIME SINCE GOING TO bed, her mind awash with memories in the process of being reframed, of things she'd felt and thought that she wasn't sure she could trust anymore, of a whole, significant part of her life, experiences that had made her who she was, shrouded by a lie. Or if not a lie, a manipulation.

It was a hard thing to swallow. No wonder she couldn't sleep.

The truly maddening thing in all of it was how obvious it seemed on this side of the revelation. At one point, she knew she had truly been in love with Angel. That night they'd spent in his apartment, rain-soaked and afraid, had been heady and intense, and everything had felt so life-or-death because it actually had been life-or-death for them. Their love a beautiful, sacred thing that no one else could hope to understand because they were who they were and their story was more tragic, more poetic than any other pair of lovers to breathe air. Them against the world, literally. Everything heightened and all the more intoxicating because of it.

And how quickly they had gotten there. One second, Angel had been the occasionally helpful stranger who had a tendency to show up and vanish with the exact same amount of fanfare. She'd found him

annoying at first—gorgeous, yes, but annoying. Then he'd been the enigmatic older guy who was on her side of the fight, and who didn't love a hunk of mystery when they were sixteen years old? Just enough hint of danger to whet the appetite. She'd liked him, and she'd made it very obvious, and in return, he'd vamped out in her bedroom at the tail end of a kiss.

Then after dealing with Darla, radio silence. Right up until the time she'd learned that her fate was to face the Master and lose. Angel hadn't done much to help in that fight, either. Not the way he had after. Buffy had been at her most vulnerable, and he'd let her face all those things by herself.

And then just a few months later, Spike and Drusilla rolled into town. Angel had dropped in with his mystery and his dire warnings, but he hadn't given them anything of substance. Hadn't copped to Drusilla's existence or his role in it until Buffy cornered him several weeks later, and not because she was the Slayer. No, because she'd been a girl with a crush who had seen the guy she was crushing on talking with someone who made her feel outclassed in pretty much every respect.

Buffy remembered a lot of things from that period. More than she would have thought. Like, she remembered being anxious and insecure, believing Angel would forget about her if he succeeded in leaving town to scatter the Judge. Or he would find someone else—someone older, prettier, more experienced—and she wouldn't have any way to compete. Angel had told her he hated all the girls he'd grown up with, but he'd also said he'd been with a lot and, well, she had just been Buffy. Not-quite-seventeen Buffy who hadn't done much more than flirt with second base at that point. Definitely not whatever any of the other women Angel had been with had done.

So that night in his apartment, riding the high of their escape and the fear of what might next try to force them apart, Buffy had given into her hormones and, with that, her insecurities, and her virginity had been a thing of the past.

Everything that had come after... Well, that was a different story. Angel losing his soul was always going to be brutal, mystical partial claim bond or not. He'd been the first guy Buffy had really lost her

head over, all swept up in the romanticism and danger of being with a vampire, of doing something she knew she shouldn't because the world and everything else was against her, and she had loved him. Only the version of love she remembered feeling for him then hadn't been love as she knew it now. It had been a sort of intense infatuation that, today, made her roll her eyes whenever Dawn made a point to keep her updated on the sordid social lives of her friends. Not sustainable, and not realistic, either. Just heightened the way every other new sensation was heightened at that age, and sure, it hadn't been all that long ago, really, but Buffy figured slayer years were not like people years.

She'd always known she'd had to grow up fast, but even people who grew up fast could fall into the pitfalls of adolescence. Looking back, Buffy felt that was where Angel fit. Believing she was capable of handling a relationship like that because her circumstances were different, because those different circumstances made her the exception. Immune to the hazards that claimed the good senses of so many other people her age, not realizing that she was rationalizing in the same way any not-quite-seventeen-year-old would.

Then Angel had been gone. Killed and sent to hell, and Buffy had left the scene. Or not killed, she guessed, as the claim had survived. Only killed to her—kept alive and tortured in his hell dimension while she had left to do her healing, cope as best she could with the monumental thing that had been asked of her. That she had done because it was the right thing to do. Losing Angel had been hard—worse because she was the one who had to make the adult choices before she'd been ready. Except maybe that was every girl's journey at that age, minus the apocalypse. Getting to a point where she realized she'd been in over her head and made the wrong call, then been left with the cleanup.

Buffy had been on the road to realizing that when Angel had unceremoniously been dropped back into her world. Feral and possibly insane, knocking her off the healing path in no time flat. Blinking her back to the girl she'd been before sending him to hell. Awakening all sorts of conflicting urges within her—to run, to save herself, to embrace him, to help him, to reclaim that part of her that he had helped nurture, the part that, at the time, had seemed so essential. Head and heart at all-out war, logic and reason losing to love and that

connection, that deep sense of awareness that permeated her entire being when he was around. That made it impossible to not feel him as though he were a part of her, because he *was* a part of her. At that time, the most important part. And no matter what she did to forge distance, how much she tried to lie to him or herself, she hadn't been able to walk away entirely. Not even insisting on space with him, as she had after Spike's disastrous return senior year, had helped. She'd remained a slave to that connection, that sense of feeling him and needing to go to him. Of distance being unbearable, separation unthinkable, even when she knew it was better for her own preservation. Buffy could do a lot of things, but she refused to go through the nightmare that was soulless Angel a second time.

It had never felt over, though. No matter what she told him or herself; no matter that she'd tried to stay away, part of her had been waiting for him to make a convincing counterargument. To win her back, make it so being with him wasn't insane or stupid or selfish, but what she needed to do in order to achieve absolution. At some point, she'd stopped fighting, had just accepted that she was exhausting herself trying to come up with reasons to keep her distance, and they'd been together again. Aware of the lines they couldn't cross but also constantly flirting with those lines. A ticking time bomb of potentially apocalyptic proportions, or so she'd told herself afterward, when he had ended it. When it had been *his* decision, not hers, well-reasoned and echoing all the things she'd told herself for months. The arguments she'd made that he'd defeated and she'd accepted as defeated, only Angel's line hadn't been in the sand like hers, rather concrete, and not nearly as easily wiped away.

And that was it. The sum of their relationship. The tenuous beginning, the lack of trust, the little girl rush of emotion that barely felt like hers anymore, and then the full, absolute, utter and complete devotion that had nearly destroyed her when he'd been evil and come back to finish the job when he'd been good. And yeah, if claims worked the way Giles and Spike said they did, Buffy had only been half Angel's throughout the duration of their relationship. Wholly his by the time he'd left, spun her around and sent her out into the world to meet normal, human men and have normal, human romances while always

feeling the absence of the thing the rest of her craved. The connection he'd forged then made permanent, whether or not that had been his intent, keeping her from so many things.

Well, she knew now. What little good that did. On the far side of death, the claim back in the grave where it belonged.

Which left her...where, exactly? Lost, saving for a clear-eyed view of things for the first time in a long time, maybe ever. Somewhat comforted that the failures in her personal life hadn't just been a case of Buffy getting in her own way. Like maybe she should marvel at the fact that things with Riley had gone as well as they had for as long as they had when apparently part of her had been perpetually checked out of that relationship. Maybe she should even be a little grateful. With what Giles had told her, there was every chance that the reason she hadn't been completely seduced by Dracula was thanks to the part of her Angel had claimed. Her body, her mind, had rejected Count Famous's attempts to assert his will over her, remained loyal to the bond Angel had formed. If not for that, Dracula might have succeeded in turning her into a vampire after all. Making her first beg for the death she'd dreaded ever since she started slaying and then granting it.

But no, Angel's influence would have been there. Guiding her. Helping her fight against the effects of any rival's sales pitch. Giving her enough resistance to not only pull out of that thrall but punish the vampire who thought he could claim another man's territory.

And Spike?

Buffy sighed and flipped over onto her side for what had to be the hundredth time since she'd crawled into bed.

Before she'd died, the thought of starting anything with Spike had been out of the question, and not for reasons she could solely attribute to the claim. Her enemy turned colleague, her begrudging ally and resource, the pain in the ass that insisted on making her life more difficult simply by being in it. Then the horror that had consumed her when Dawn had dropped the love bomb. The rigidity, the fear, the need to not only reject him but make the rejection hurt. To punish him for daring to feel anything and how violated *she'd* managed to feel in return. As though Spike had done something more than develop a crush, but insulted her, wounded her, dared to assume...what, exactly?

And it wasn't like Buffy hadn't had the occasional—or, fine, frequent—naughty thought about Spike. She had. She just had compartmentalized it, after she'd managed to stop feeling so wretchedly guilty about having it in the first place. Like she was cheating on someone for allowing herself fantasies.

Like she was cheating on Angel. Even when Riley had been the one in her bed, Buffy had worried more about what Angel would do if he learned about her occasional-slash-frequent musings about Spike.

And those inches she'd allowed Spike toward the end had been hard-won. He'd nearly had to dust for her to start fighting back against the drive to keep him at a distance. She'd been conflicted but resigned, too desperate for help to worry about the strange devotion she still had to an ex who had been out of her life nearly as long as he'd been a part of it, and Spike had been there when Angel hadn't. Fighting gods and orchestrating getaway plans and telling her he would lay down his life to protect her sister, and she'd known he was telling the truth. She'd believed him.

Then, after she'd come back to life, she'd tried to remember why it was she couldn't pursue anything with Spike. She'd fought it because she'd known she had before and kept waiting for the reasoning to occur to her. Like her life was slowly rebooting, systems restoring to normal, and the part that had been so fervently anti-Spike was just taking longer than everything else to come back online.

Now this.

Now the truth.

How much of herself was a construct? How much of it had actually been Buffy?

And what the hell did she want now? For the first time in perhaps years, the choice was genuine, and it was hers to make, for better or worse. She could do whatever she liked with the information she'd finally been allowed—could shove everything into a box the way she had so many other things, tidy up some space in her head and bury this latest violation along with the others. Try to piece herself together based on the Buffy she was now, not the one that had been resurrected.

The Buffy she was now was someone she was still getting to know, but she was relatively certain of one thing—that Buffy really liked

Spike. The way she felt when she was with him, how the cold numbness that had come home with her from the grave seemed, well, less numb when they were together. He expected so little and gave so much, and god, no one kissed the way he kissed. No one had lit her on fire the way he did, either, and she loved that fire. She wanted more of it.

She wanted him, and there was no reason she shouldn't have him. It might be a bad choice but it was *her* choice to make. Independent of who anyone thought she was or should be.

Buffy released a sigh and threw off her blanket. No sense wasting time trying to sleep when her life was there, ready to be lived on her terms.

And now seemed a fantastic place to start.



THERE WERE certain things a girl never forgot how to do, and climbing out of her bedroom window was on that list. Despite the fact that it had been years—not counting time spent in Heaven—Buffy had no trouble finding the knots for her feet or the places where the bark was at its most grip-friendly on her way down the trunk to solid ground. She also pushed off and landed with a springy bounce that barely thumped against the grass, and for a split-second, she had the urge to glance up to see if the light in her room would go on, if her mother might stick her head out of the window, and wasn't prepared for the pang in her chest when she remembered that would never happen again. It seemed like a wound that should have stopped hurting by now.

But then again, so did many other things.

Buffy shook her head and turned before she could have more unpleasant thoughts and started beating the path toward Restfield. It was late, in that it was actually early in the morning, but she thought there was a decent chance she could catch Spike before he turned in, even if he was a weirdo vampire who increasingly kept people hours. By the time she was outside of his crypt, her skin was buzzing and her heart racing for reasons unrelated to her sprint, and though she knew

what she was going to say—and more, what *he* was going to say—it still seemed big. Gargantuan. Once she did this, there was no going back to the way things had been previously.

But then, she thought, pressing her thighs together at the memory of his mouth between them, it wasn't like this was a new decision. A new understanding, maybe, but the decision had already been made. She'd just taken the scenic route, and really, wasn't that like her anyway?

Buffy raised her hand, hesitated, then made the decision she hadn't made before, and lightly rapped her knuckles against the door. This time, knocking didn't seem optional, rather seemed important. Along the lines of everything else she'd been thinking since she'd first climbed the stairs after the phone call with Angel—after learning the truth. She wouldn't let herself be led by assumptions anymore.

The door gave a creak as it swung slowly open, revealing a somewhat bemused but not at all surprised Spike on the other side. From the look of things, he hadn't yet gone to bed—or if he had, he'd been about as successful as she had in trying to find sleep. His hair was all pleasantly mussed, free of the gel that usually had it warped into submission, and he wore only a pair of pants that weren't jeans but... were those sleep bottoms? Blue silk sleep bottoms? Did Spike have pajamas? For some reason, the thought made her want to laugh, and she bit down on the inside of her cheek out of fear that if she started laughing, she might lose what was left of her faculties and just never stop.

After blinking at her for a few long seconds, Spike sighed and shifted to allow her entrance. "Not one for knocking usually, Slayer. To what do I owe the courtesy?"

"I didn't know if you'd be awake still," she murmured, edging past him and into his space. His cozy, reassuring Spike space, complete with mismatched secondhand décor and the chair he'd guided her to earlier before exploring her with his mouth. All of that seemed long enough ago to be a dream, but it wasn't a dream. It had happened, and god, she wanted it to happen again. Over and over until her legs were numb and her heart was sore from pounding. Until all the bad things she'd thought or felt over the last few hours, days, weeks,

years melted into what it should have been all along. A new beginning.

"Not sure I could sleep if I wanted to." Spike huffed and rubbed along the back of his neck. "Sides...thought there was a chance you might be by."

"You did?" That explained the PJ bottoms, at least. Comfy without being naked, the latter being how she assumed Spike slept.

"Hoped it, at least. Didn't like the way we left things."

"I didn't like much of tonight."

Spike paused and favored her with a dark look. "That a fact?"

And that was all it took—those words paired with that look, thick with suggestion but not actually saying anything. The confusion and the anger, the frustration and the shock, all of it seemed to burn bright then burn out, leaving her with nothing but the naked truth of how she felt. How she had been feeling since she'd walked down the stairs that first night and seen his face, forgotten for a moment—a long moment—that he wasn't someone who was supposed to love her or hold her or comfort her, that she should button up her shirt and show some modesty because this was a man who would take advantage of her if given the chance. Warp her. Hurt her. Only he'd taken her hand and led her to the couch and nothing about him had been hard and bright and violent the way everything else was. Not his eyes, not his voice, not the feel of his skin along hers, and she'd struggled to remember and she'd been struggling every minute since, fighting against a wall that had been erected with a purpose once, that had meant something to her, but didn't anymore.

"You lived with him," Buffy said at last. "Maybe you do know what it's like."

"What's that, love?"

"Just this. Not knowing. I don't know anything anymore. Maybe I never did. Angel... From the moment I got to town, he was a part of my life. He made sure of it. Come to find out that it's six years and two deaths later and I don't know what parts of me are actually mine." She swallowed. "I can't say what decisions I've made were decisions *I* would have made. The second he left I stopped being able to tell people I loved them. Not just boyfriends but Dawn, my mom. I did that whole

spirit walk in the desert because I thought I was running out of love, that slaying was making me hard.”

He snorted. “Load of bollocks. No one loves the way you do, Slayer. You bloody glow with it.”

That sounded familiar in a way that was both sweet and bitter-sweet. “It didn’t feel like that, Spike. I felt apart from everyone. Closed off. The second he was gone, I just shut down. Maybe that had nothing to do with the claim, but it seems like it probably did. If I became distant and hard to touch the second he left and, yeah, I’m not exactly doing cartwheels about being alive now, but *that* part is gone and it was such a big part of me that my friends and Giles have had secret meetings to talk about how weird it is that I’m not interested in having my ex-boyfriend lurking on the edges of my life anymore.”

“Mmhmm. And what are you interested in, then?” Spike tilted his head, studying her, seeing her in that unique way of his. In that way only he ever did. “Why’d you come here? Not just to tell me this, surely.”

That was the question, wasn’t it? The only one that really mattered. Just exactly what she thought she was doing here. What she *wanted* to be doing here. What she wanted from him.

“Because I have made a decision—one that *is* mine. I think I made it a long time ago, or started to, at least.” Buffy swallowed again, then released a shaking breath and pressed forward into the space that wasn’t neutral, the space that was his. Where she could feel him shaking, feel the tension pulled tight beneath his skin, the measured control he exacted in every move he made, whether or not it was acknowledged. Whether or not he got the credit. “It might be the wrong decision, definitely not the one I should make, but it’s mine, Spike. I’m here because I’m ready to choose for me. And what I choose is you.”

A sound that was part moan, part sob, and part growl ripped through him, making the air vibrate, and then his mouth was on hers, and she was burning. Burning with him, burning with the weight she’d just thrust off herself, the sudden, giddy freedom that came with falling hard and fast toward an end she couldn’t see and might regret, but still it was hers. Hers like the vampire under her hands, against her

skin, pulling hot kisses from her mouth, teeth and tongue and lips and need, of his fingers at her neck, up her cheeks, in her hair, of the floor beneath her feet moving, moving, and Buffy moving with it. Buffy stumbling forward to follow Spike as he pulled her deeper into him. As he fell back into the chair they had occupied what felt like a lifetime ago, him beneath her now, Buffy in his lap, grinding herself against his erection, and full of so much so fast that it was all she could do to keep from laughing. That she *did* laugh, the sound free and light and slightly mad, and she thought Spike might growl or pull away and demand to know what the bleeding hell was so funny, except he already knew. The joke was his, too, and he laughed right with her. His chest rumbling beneath her touch, his lips shaking as he explored her cheeks, her chin, dragged his mouth down the line of her throat with nipping kisses and licks, and then growled when he reached the place her pulse pounded the strongest.

“Feel how powerful you are, Slayer?” he whispered against her skin, his voice doing that thing where it made her feel like a plucked string. “Feel how you have me? Have *all* of me?” He arched his hips and seized her wrist in the same movement, then guided her hand between them until her fingers were dancing over the fabric of his not-jeans pants, his cock hard and straining and seeming to jump against her palm. Then he was hissing in a breath and rolling his head back, and she had her hand around him. Squeezing and pulling on him, and feeling every shudder that claimed his body. Every groan guttural, visceral, for he was right. She *did* have all of him. Every bit of Spike there was to have, here under her, between her legs, shaking and cursing as she rubbed his dick through the strange sleep-time pants she never, not once, would have guessed he owned but was very glad he did, for it made this feel like even more of a tease than it already was.

But then the tease wasn't enough. She needed more than this over-the-clothes stuff—needed to know exactly how his cock felt against her skin. Needed to see it, this part of Spike that she had only recently let herself acknowledge. She needed to feel and stroke and see the way he filled her fist and her mouth and her pussy and maybe other places, because she was a brand-new Buffy and brand-new Buffy got to set brand-new rules. With a growl, she shoved her way under the waist-

band of his pants and then, *yes*, he was in her hand. Hard and thick and long and *god*, the sound he made when she touched him. When she squeezed him. When she began pumping along his shaft, slowly at first, and then faster when she realized she was making him do that—make those sounds. The grunts, the sighs, the whimpers, the *oh Buffys*, and *fuck* and *squeeze me* and *so hot* and *tighter*, and then her eyes got jealous so she jerked on his pants so hard the fabric ripped, and that just made him moan harder. Made her moan too, for now she could see him, study him as she'd studied no one maybe ever. Probably ever. The way he fit into her hand, the slide of his skin along with her strokes, the wetness there at the curved tip. She'd never been with any man with foreskin—at least, she didn't remember if she had. Angel had been all clandestine and under the covers, so no telling, but the others she was pretty sure had been, well, not this, which she liked because they also definitely had not been Spike. They hadn't made these sounds. They hadn't said her name like a gasp. They hadn't looked at her as though she'd fallen from the stars. They hadn't kissed her as though they would die if they stopped.

They hadn't loved her. Not Parker, at least, and not Riley. Not like this. Not the way Spike did, with his whole self, no reservations or caveats or one part of her more than another. She was on his lap and stroking his dick and he was calling her *Slayer* like it made her royalty, for in his eyes, it did. And it seemed at once outrageous that she had ever existed in a world where she hadn't had this—where she'd settled for anything other than being royalty. That she'd tried to make it work with men who wanted her to be smaller than she was, wanted her shelf-sized rather than Buffy-sized, and even if everything else with Spike blew up in her face, he would have given her this realization. The clarity that came with being completely herself.

"Fuck," Spike hissed again, his voice hoarse against the stillness of the crypt. His head thrown back, his throat working as he swallowed, this beautiful creature she had entirely at her mercy. "Fuck, Buffy, this is gonna kill me."

"What is?" she asked, dipping to nuzzle the crook of his neck. Feel the way he trembled against her lips, that amazing power he gave her without blinking. Without thinking, even. How it felt like all of him

but wasn't, for there was more there to take when she started nibbling at his skin, the guttural sound that broke from him, like he was in pain but also terrified of the pain ending. Of losing it. Of becoming better.

"You," he managed. "All you."

"I'm going to kill you?"

"Best death a bloke could ask for, but yeah." He shuddered and closed his eyes, then threw them open again, wide and fixed on her. Determined, she thought, not to miss a second. "You're so hot. So fucking hot."

"I'm hot?"

"God, yes, but talkin' about your hand." Spike rolled his hips and groaned once more when she gave his cock an answering stroke, dragging the foreskin along the tip before rolling it back again. "Your mouth," he said next, then whimpered when she licked his Adam's apple. "Your beautiful cunt." And even though he was the one who pressed his palm against her center, he was also the one who moaned. "You're gonna burn me up, Slayer. You're the sodding sun and you're in my lap. I'm never gonna survive you."

"You better be wrong," she replied breathily, then groaned and forced herself to pull back. As much fun as this over-the-clothes thing was, she wanted to feel him skin on skin, and was fast approaching the point where trusting her legs not to shake would be downright idiotic. So she slid off his lap, releasing his cock, spurred by his deep, guttural whimper and the almost desperate way he grabbed at her to pull her back.

And then she was standing before him, her heart thundering, her throat tight, and watching his expression melt from dismay to awe when she pulled off the T-shirt she had hastily put on before leaving the house. No bra underneath, her nipples already pebbled in response to the crypt's cold. Spike stared at her for a long second, then made quick work of the ruined scraps of his inexplicable sleep pants. And the next time he reached for her, he caught her, digging his fingers into her hips as she shifted and shimmied to slide sweats and panties alike down her legs, but the material didn't yield fast enough and he was there to help, to fist, to strip the fabric away as she toed off her sneakers, and then she was falling onto him again. Her breasts pressed

against his chest, her flesh warm where his was cold, her legs parting and the head of his cock leaving a trail of precum along her stomach. Spike swore deep in his throat before lowering his mouth to skim his teeth along the pulse-point of hers, and she shivered and he groaned again, seized her once more by the hips and then, *yes*, he was there. His cock parting her folds, slipping down the seam of her pussy until he was positioned at her opening, hovering there at the precipice. The world before and the world after, the chasm deep and uncertain but with more promise than anything she'd experienced before. Buffy nodding, the urge to laugh suddenly upon her again, for though the fall might kill her, she realized that she'd never felt anything close to as free as she did with Spike looking at her as though she *were* the sun, with his eyes full and then clouding as she lowered herself onto him. Took that plunge, entered the world after. Spike gasping her name and throwing his head back, nonsense spilling from his lips and he was so thick, so long, and with that curve that hit her just right that she couldn't help but think that Drusilla might have been the most lucid person she'd ever met.

"Buffy," Spike whispered, his breath hitting her lips right before his lips did. And whatever else he meant to say, she swallowed, the same way she swallowed him. Sliding down his cock until he was as deep a part of her as she could make him. And it was something too. Kissing him and feeling him and whimpering with him as her body took over and pulled back. Experienced that exquisite slide in reverse, her muscles clenching and Spike cursing and the more she drew away the emptier she felt, right up until she couldn't stand it anymore and slammed back onto him with a hard gasp and the wet, desperate smack of their flesh coming together.

And then it was all she could hear, that smack, punctuated by hard, fast breaths and low, deep groans, Spike's hands in her hair, cupping her cheeks, sliding down her neck, thumbs moving in almost absent circles until those thumbs were at her breasts, playing with her nipples as he nodded and mewled and bucked and she'd been wrong, she could hear more. Hear the tangle of words spilling from his lips, his running line of encouragement, of, "So hot, so hot, so fucking hot, Buffy. Take it. Take *me*. I'm yours. I'm all yours. Every bit of me, of my cock, my

heart, my bugging worthless soul if you can find it—it's all yours and Christ, you feel so good. So perfect. Squeezing me, oh fuck, pet, squeeze me like that. Squeeze me until I pop. Burn me up. Make it hurt. Make it hurt real nice, there's a good girl. Good Slayer. Fuck, how I love you." And then he tugged her down to rip his mouth across hers, hot and desperate as the rest of him, making them equal, somehow also drawing her as deep inside of him as he could before it was too much for one of them—maybe both of them—or maybe not enough, for the second she broke away, his lips were on her throat. Traveling the same path his hands had before. His hands which were now full of her ass, pulling her in increasingly desperate strokes up and down his cock, their combined effort making the chair whine and dip and she thought maybe it would just collapse, a necessary casualty, and then she didn't care because Spike's mouth had found her breasts and he was scraping his teeth along her nipples, growling into her skin in ways both possessive and predatory, but not like before, not like a claim, and she was the worst Slayer, the absolute worst, for she trusted that. Trusted that this was just them, that he wouldn't do what Angel had done. Hell, she trusted it enough that the sensation of him inside her just made her spark hotter, made her gush fresh along his cock to the point where she felt she should be embarrassed, what he did to her, but she didn't care. She couldn't care. She couldn't do anything but bounce and buck and squeeze and clench and think things like *why the hell haven't I been doing this the entire time?* while Spike sucked and pulled and nipped and did things that made her think he would have no trouble tying a cherry stem with his tongue alone, only she was the cherry and thank god for that, thank god he loved her, thank god he was the one who was here with her, giving her space, giving her breath, giving her life, encouraging her as she neared a precipice that shouldn't be new but somehow was, his teeth at her shoulder now, one hand still at her ass, pressing her down to grind her against his cock every time she speared him back inside, the other between them and, *god*, touching her. Touching her the way she'd only ever touched herself, too hard too fast at first but then just right, understanding her body, reading her face, her eyes, her everything, and she remembered his mouth there earlier, how that had catapulted her into realms of

ecstasy she was sure she hadn't experienced the first time she'd been alive. And the thought that this was hers, could be hers for always, that *Spike* was hers and always had been—and she cried out some combination of euphoria and his name, of falling into him, into this choice she'd made, feeling herself tighten, experience his answering groan, and then shooting off into the fucking stars that he'd placed there just for her. Buffy threw her head back and cried herself hoarse. Pulsing and throbbing and he was there too, fingers at her hips again, digging into her flesh deep enough to leave a mark, and god, she hoped it did because she'd need to carry this with her. The reminder of the moment she'd let go. Surrendered. The instant she'd taken her life into her own hands.

It wasn't enough to feel him spurting inside of her, though that was heady, too, for he made a sound that was like a prayer, and when she asked him about it, sweaty and limp and resting against his chest, he told her it *was* a prayer. She had tumbled down from Heaven, after all. A deity all of his own that he would worship again and again if she'd let him.

And Buffy had a feeling she would.

SOMETHING TO SING ABOUT

BLOODY HELL, THIS MIGHT BE THE BEST DREAM HE'D EVER HAD, AND he'd had some sweet ones. Though usually in dreams, sensation was muted—he'd feel the stirrings, the hunger, the pull of need so potent that he would inevitably emerge from sleep with a raging stiffy and, more and more of late, an empty bed—but nothing as visceral as the contours of a hot mouth around his cock, or the scent of a hot slayer in his nostrils. He wouldn't hear the wet slide of lips around skin, vague slurps or less vague moans, experience the silk of a tongue pushing back his foreskin before roaming over the head at leisure, the heat of a hand wrapped around the base stroking and squeezing in rhythm, or the faint thud of a heartbeat.

Only, rather than dulling as he surged toward consciousness, everything sharpened. The sounds. The smells. The feel. And then his mind caught up with him, his mind with its host of new delicious memories, and he peeked his eyes open to find the mouth he'd been dreaming about had followed him into reality. And Christ, that was a sight. Buffy sucking his cock, her eyes on him, the corner of her lips curling into a smile that he felt all the way down to his balls, because having her look at him like that when she had her mouth stuffed full of him was beyond dreams entirely. She was here and she was real, her hair tousled

and her body bare, stretched out along the bed they had eventually tumbled into just as the sun had started its upward climb. And he remembered, then, the last thing he'd thought before succumbing to sleep, was *god*, let her stay. Let her be here when he awoke; let everything she'd said to him still be true when the sun was up.

The sun was up now, according to his preternatural senses, and Buffy was not only here, she was between his legs, sucking his cock deep enough into her mouth that he brushed the back of her throat, one hand playing with his balls and the other resting hot against his inner thigh, and it was heaven, it was bliss, it was every dream he'd had put to bloody shame, it was his fingers twining in her hair and her cheeks hollowing as she pulled back and gave him the view of a lifetime or several. A sound he'd never heard himself make—and hell, that was saying something—scratched its way to freedom, somewhere between desperate and pitiful, and it made the slight smile on her face broaden, which made his heart fucking sing. Buffy was in his bed, on his sheets, working his dick in and out of her mouth and smiling at him. If he were smart, he'd ask her to stake him, as surely he'd reached his peak. Nowhere to go from here but a hard, unforgiving crash back to earth. At least his last memory would be a good one.

But he wasn't smart. He was a greedy wanker. This might be the best he got but that didn't mean he wouldn't risk whatever came next for the chance he might get to experience it again. Even just a sliver.

And it was as though she sensed this, as though his thoughts were broadcast, for Buffy's grin turned into a smirk—the sexiest smirk he'd ever seen, bar none—and she let his cock plop free of her mouth, but not before skimming the head with her teeth as her hand wrapped around him once more. “Hi,” she said, her voice thick, which made his heart swell to the point of bursting.

“Lo yourself.”

“You were, umm, pokey this morning. I decided to investigate.” Buffy nibbled her way down the side of his length, then back again until he was brushing up against her lips. “Anyone ever tell you it's dangerous to sleep with a stake in your bed?”

He barked a laugh. “Figured you'd know what to do with it.”

“I don't do this with my stakes. Mouth splinters are so not sexy.”

"I'll just count myself lucky, then." Spike released a rattling sort of breath, then threw his head back when she sucked him inside again. "Though you best know I'm gonna fill that mouth if you keep that up."

The look she gave him nearly had him blowing regardless. She was all flirt, this girl. Grinning and regarding him with dark, dancing eyes, plucked right out of the fantasies that had both tortured and sustained him. "Oh, Spike," Buffy said after releasing his cock with a wet, echoing *pop*. "You should really know better than to threaten me with a good time."

And Spike bloody crumpled, some wretched sound—a sound unlike anything he'd ever heard himself make in more than a century of living—punching its way out of his lungs and into the air. "Bloody hell, Slayer. Can we convince whatever's gotten into you to stay a while?"

"I think what's gotten into me is you. And yeah. I'm game." Her mouth descended again and he was the lucky bastard who got to watch, got to pair the visual with the sensation, his dick disappearing between her lips inch by inch, surrounded by wet heat as she stroked him with her tongue, and then the reverse, his skin slick, her eyes still dark, the pressure so sweet, and she was studying him as though waiting for him to answer a dare, and he wanted to answer. Almost as much as he wanted this to go on forever.

As much as he feared losing it once it was well and properly over.

But Buffy didn't pull back when he finally let himself go. Didn't flinch or pull a face or roll her eyes or do anything he might have expected, rather held his gaze as his cock pulsed and cum began to spurt, as she worked her throat around him, drinking from him the way he'd sipped from her yesterday. She didn't let him go after, either, rather kept her mouth around him, working up and down his shaft so he didn't get the chance to go soft. Maybe never would again. Being perpetually aroused around Buffy wasn't a new sensation, but leaning into it, embracing it, having her there to catch him definitely was. And catching him was apparently exactly what she had in mind, for the next thing he knew, she was prowling up the length of his body, dropping kisses as she went along his inner thigh, below his belly button, up his torso, little blissful whispers against his skin, his chest, his nipples, then—*Christ, yes*—his neck, and

higher, her pussy dancing along the head of his cock just as her mouth found his.

And it shouldn't have been this good. All those months—longer, if he were being honest—wanting this, wanting her, fantasy and desire and his extraordinarily vivid imagination commingling to create expectations impossible for anyone to meet, even the Slayer, yet she was so much better than imagination. Even the most depraved scenarios he'd wanked over had nothing on what it was like to experience Buffy in reality. Over him. Kissing him. Guiding him along her slit until he was there at her entrance, feeling her flesh clamp around him as he speared his way inside. And he knew what it was beyond the obvious, even if he couldn't fully believe that he had it. That Buffy was not only with him physically but in every other way as well. Touching him, stroking him, snogging him, fucking him like she felt something. That hot perfection that was Buffy Summers, exploring him with equal parts hunger and care, like she was savoring as much as he was. Like this could mean for her what it meant for him, bloody impossible as the notion was. Like she was here because she wanted to be with Spike—like no one else would do.

"I love you," he blurted before he could help himself. "Buffy..."

Her eyes went wide and she nodded, dragging herself back up his length with a sort of slow decadence that felt almost indecent. Striking him again out of bloody nowhere, the unreality that was this. Watching as she lifted herself up his cunt- and mouth-slick cock only to slide down again. Of the soft, sweet sound that tumbled from her lips, the sound that he'd wrung out of her, her gaze still fixed on his face, her cheeks flushed and her skin damp, her hair falling like ribbons over her shoulders, and it looked like she wanted to say something too, but she didn't. Just kept moving like that, taking her time with him. Rolling her hips, clenching her muscles, her hands flat against his chest, fingers curling into his skin, breathing in the air they were filling with the sounds of them.

And he knew he shouldn't—he did—but again, he couldn't help himself. It was just there at the surface, nudged every time her pussy took him in, wet and snug and all her, complete with the intensity of her attention, how he could feel just how present she was. How

present she'd been since last night, showing up like she had, full of intent and reason that had led to her kissing him, stroking him, riding him, sleeping curled at his side and waking him up the way she had. She hadn't said anything more than making a choice to be here, a choice she hadn't been free to make before, and it could be that was all it was. Buffy choosing him for the moment, for the break in what she'd always believed, and once she settled into the knowledge that her life was hers to live, she'd move on and live it somewhere else. With someone else. Spike a fond memory, perhaps, her companion on her journey to the truth and what it meant.

And all the while he was sick with love for her—love that she knew about, love he'd given her, and the rules being different didn't make his feelings any less intense or easy to swallow down or bottle up. If anything, he felt he was bursting with the need to scream it from the sodding rafters, and it would be so much worse when she left because she would have given him this first. This glance at how it might feel to truly be hers, to be loved by her.

But addicts didn't stop just because they knew their addiction wasn't good for them. Addicts surrendered to the pain in favor of the rush. And with the rush this sweet—with Buffy bouncing on his cock, squeezing him with her perfect cunt, filling the air with the soundtrack of her sighs and her gasps and her moans and her breaths, with her looking at him and saying his name—he didn't stand a chance. He didn't want to.

All he wanted right now was to feel her come. Feel her clench and drench and melt into him, against him, feel the thud of her heart and breathe in the scent of sweat and sex and Slayer. It would be worth it, he promised himself. Every part of being with her would be worth the pain when it was over.

But that was then. He had her now.

"I've got you, Slayer," Spike told her, dancing his fingers up her sides, relishing the way she trembled under his touch. And if they only had this, he wanted to make sure he had plenty to remember her by. Knew how she looked under him just as well as over him, so he seized her by the hips and rolled them hard to the left, then he was over her, taking in her surprised gasp and the flash of her eyes and capturing her

mouth with his to swallow the reproach he felt certain was coming. But Buffy didn't fight, rather melted into him with a low whimper, clasp and clenching and squeezing, and oh god, he was going to come again and he didn't want to yet. Wasn't ready for it to end, for any of this to end, her scent in his nostrils and around his head and her sighs coloring the air between them. Making it so he could do nothing but sink deeper into her, so deep he would never claw his way out and that was all right. He could live inside her. Snug and warm and right here, thrusting as she clawed, pounding as she scratched, wet and perfect and home. And when she spoke, her voice cracked like she was about to beg, and she didn't need to beg for he'd give her whatever she wanted and then some. Especially, oh yes, he'd stroke her however she liked. Touch her just like that. Slip a hand between them, feel where they were hot and wet and one, run his fingers over the length of his own shaft as he worked in and out of her beautiful, amazing, perfect cunt before slipping along her folds to tease her clit, and then she tumbled, her pussy clamping and strangling and spasming and it was so good because it was so Buffy. It was all Buffy. Buffy raking her nails down his arms and back, Buffy holding him to her, Buffy's cries in his ears, Buffy's skin against his skin, Buffy's warmth around him as he jetted into his own release, pulsing and euphoric, and Buffy's breast under his cheek when they stopped shuddering with aftershock, puddling together there on his bed in a tangle of limbs that had no beginning or end. A tangle that was just them.

This was it. He'd had it wrong before. *This* was the peak. The highest a man could go before plummeting back to earth. If only he could keep it for a little while.

But he was all too aware of time, the ticking seconds away from him, and each almost felt dangerous—like he was getting away with something. It was a bloody ridiculous thought but knowing that didn't make it go away. If anything, it made him all the more aware of the breaths she took, the sensation of her skin against his, her hair a tangle and spilling everywhere, and all of it so tenuous it would vanish if he tried to capture it between his hands. Hell, if he made any sudden move at all. Did anything to remind her of where she was.

Except when she lifted her head to look at him, there was no

reproach in her gaze, only more of what had been there ever since he'd opened his eyes to find his dick in her mouth. That softness that she had carried with her, that had somehow emerged from the bloody shit-show of the night before. Spike swallowed, then let out a long, slow breath that shook more than he intended, but hell. Wasn't like she wasn't used to seeing him thrown by the marvel that was her. That never-ending wonder had come to define his existence. And he knew this was the time—the moment he was expected to say something or do something, break out of the stupor she'd dropped him in and let time go back to the way it was supposed to flow, but when he opened his mouth, his voice refused to cooperate. Desperate to hold off, to wait, to let her set the terms and fall in line wherever she wanted him.

"I don't think you've ever been quiet this long," she said at last. "Even counting that time we all lost our voices."

Spike relaxed a bit. She sounded light. Lighter than she had in days, in fact, maybe longer. Maybe since he'd known her. "Just waiting."

"Waiting for what?"

"You to tell me what this is."

Buffy arched an eyebrow. "You don't know what this is?" She wiggled her hips, jostling them where they were joined as though in reminder. As though he could forget. "You've been around a while now, Spike, I'd hope I wouldn't have to explain the birds and the bees to you."

"Try the vampire and the Slayer, then."

Her smile wilted. Not in full, but still enough to make his chest lurch. "A little more complicated. But also sexier, so we've got that going for us."

"You said it was a choice, you bein' here. You making a choice."

Now the smile fell altogether, and her hands were there against his chest, pushing lightly but firmly too so that he rolled off her and to the stretch of mattress on her left, dislodged now from all that exquisite slayer warmth. He tried not to whimper.

"It is a choice," she told him. "It's all a choice. A choice I get to make. A choice I *wanted* to make after...after everything."

"Choice being what, exactly?"

She turned her head to him, her eyes narrow. "What's with the

third degree? I expected a little more pillow talk before I had to start thinking again.”

“Just tryin’ to figure out how much it’s gonna hurt.”

The poor darling frowned. “What’s going to hurt?”

“If I let myself think it’s more than just today. This morning. That you came here to scratch an itch, satisfy your curiosity—”

“You think that’s what this is?”

“I don’t know. That’s what I’m trying to tell you.” Spike stared at her for a long beat, watching as incredulity and hurt and anger battled across her face, all eventually beaten out by a sort of shameful acceptance that had the light in her eyes dimming too much for his comfort. “Not like I’m gonna say no, is it? Whatever the answer is. You’re gonna bloody trounce my heart no matter what I do. Can’t help that, but knowin’ just how much might give me enough—”

“Spike, stop. I’m not trouncing hearts, there is no heart trouncing. Not today.”

“Tomorrow then?”

She drew her brows together, studying him now with an intensity that probably ought to make him self-conscious, but it wasn’t like he had any secrets from her. At length, she swiped her tongue over her kiss-swollen lower lip and rolled onto her side so she could look at him directly. “Do I need to have this figured out right now?”

“Have what figured out?”

“What this is. You and me. Can’t it just be this?” Buffy held up a hand. “This being...this. You and me. Doing...doing exactly what we’ve been doing, only also now with the sexy fun part.”

Spike arched an eyebrow. “Like I’m your boyfriend.”

“I...I didn’t say that.”

“Would it be so awful?”

“No. I just didn’t *say* it.” She dropped her gaze, a shy smile tugging on her lips now. “I guess it didn’t occur to me that I was giving you the boyfriend definition which, yes, makes me about the stupidest girl on the planet.”

He waited, not trusting whatever might come out of his mouth right now.

“I don’t know what I want,” she said after a beat, sounding a

combination of flummoxed and defeated. "I don't even know how much of my life is mine."

"It's all yours, baby. All of it."

"Yeah. *Now*. But before, it... It just wasn't. Maybe it all would've gone the same anyway, but I'll never know that. I was never given the chance to know that." Buffy released a hard breath, the sort that trembled on its way out. "All I know right now is that I like this. I look forward to nights now because that means patrol time with Spike. I like that I can talk to you and say things I'm thinking without needing to worry too much about. I like that you drove me to stupid Turtle Cove even though I know it's the last thing in the world you wanted to do. I like that... I guess I just like you. Maybe I shouldn't—"

"You should," he blurted, unable to help himself. "You should like me. I'm a likeable sort of bloke."

"When you're not killing people."

"Even then, I try to make it fun for 'em." Spike didn't expect a grin but got one anyway, wonder of wonders. "But that's not me anymore, love. Killing, that is."

She gave him a *yeah right* look. "The chip won't last forever. I mean, maybe it will, but what if it doesn't?"

"Chip's not what keeps me on the straight and narrow, is it?"

"And these are the kinda thoughts I was hoping to wait a bit to have, because that? That right there scares me."

"What does?"

"Being what keeps you on the straight and narrow."

"Never said it was you."

She raised her gaze to his once more, her face fixed in another *yeah right* look. This one he knew he'd earned.

"Right," Spike said. No sense arguing. "Why's it scare you, then?"

"Besides the fact that it's really scary?" Buffy replied dryly. "I don't know, it just does. I haven't thought about it enough to really tell you why. I didn't *want* to think about it, just do it. Which, now that I say that out loud, is exactly how I got into trouble with Angel."

Oh, that was a low bloody blow. "I am nothing like—"

"I know that. Believe me, that is at the top of your plus column." She blew out a breath, looking somewhat haunted. "I know it wouldn't

be like that. If I thought it would, I wouldn't have snuck out of the house to carpe the vampire last night. But I literally just found out that my last vampire boyfriend majorly screwed up my judgment, and you're asking me for a definite answer right now, and I don't have one because the most I thought about it was 'want Spike.' I don't know what happens next, and I'm sorry if that's scary, but it's all I have now. All I know is don't want to not be here."

"Here?"

She nodded and placed a hand on his chest. "Here," she said again. "I like it here a lot. Of everything that's happened since I came back from the dead, the stuff with you is my favorite. I feel...free with you. And that is so important, Spike. It's what... I don't even know how to tell you how important that is."

He nodded as though he understood, but he didn't. Not really. And maybe that was his fault—the limitations of what a man without a soul could understand. She'd told him once the chip wasn't a soul, and he hadn't agreed—amounted to the same, didn't it?—except there was this part, too. The part where souls seemed to complicate matters that were otherwise simple. Buffy wanted to be with him, but she had doubts, and he wasn't so thick he couldn't understand that, especially with everything she'd learned the night before. Of course she would worry, and of course she would wonder. It could never be as straightforward as she wanted him, he wanted her, so the obvious choice was to be together. He knew that but he also didn't understand it. Didn't understand how something so clear to him could be anything but clear to her. How she could still have that uncertainty.

And if what was keeping him from understanding that was the thing he would always lack, then might be he should see about removing *always* from the equation. Didn't sound like a load of fun but if the alternative was causing her more worry once the bloom faded off this particular rose, he didn't think he could stomach that, either. In fact, he knew he couldn't.

Still, he had to ask—had to know before he made a decision, if this would change things for her. If it was even worth it.

"Do you think you could love me, Slayer?"

Buffy lifted her head, met his eyes, her own wide with surprise. "What?"

"If it were different, you and me. If you didn't have to worry about me goin' off the leash or—"

"Spike—"

"Or if it wasn't you at all. If I was someone you could trust, chip be damned. Do you think you could love me?" He swallowed. "Do you think you could want to?"

"Why are you asking me this?"

He shrugged, self-conscious but in too bloody deep to back out now. "Just need to know. If what's worrying is you need your monsters ensouled, reckon there are ways a fella can go about doing that."

"Ways to do what? What are you saying?"

"Do you need me to spell it out for you? You have a witch who's worked this brand of mojo before, don't you?" Not that he really fancied the thought of having anything cursed onto him—curses could be broken, after all, and living life trying to avoid perfect happiness sounded right miserable. "Or there's this legend I heard once, bloke lives in a cave on the other side of the world, dealing out souls for god knows what use. Not easily, mind, the person who's asking needs to be worthy or at least strong enough to jump through all the hoops—"

"Spike, be serious." Her voice was shaking almost as hard as she was. "Stop."

"What, you think I'm not serious?"

"You can't be suggesting that we give you a soul."

Well, now. That was rich. "Why the hell not?" he asked. "Fuck, Buffy, if that's what it takes to give you bloody peace of mind about us, if that's what you need to even think about loving me the way I love you, then of course I'd suggest it. Balls, I'd do more than bloody suggest. I'll do it. Just tell me that at the end of the day, it'll be worth it. Give you what you need, because—"

But that was as far as he got before she was on him—really on him. Over him, against him, hands at his face and mouth tearing kisses so hot from his mouth he was surprised to not go up in flames. Spike knew he should resist, knew that leaving this conversation unfinished might ruin him, but Christ, it was hard to think when she was moving

the way she was, when she was clutching and kissing him as though she intended to devour him whole. The next thing he knew, he had her under him again and he was cradled between her heavenly thighs, his cock sliding along her pussy as she scratched and pulled and tugged at his lip with her teeth as she rolled her hips and then, *yes*, she had a hand wrapped around his prick, stroking and tugging and teasing the head along her soaked flesh, scorching him with her heat and her fire, and he loved her so much he thought it might kill him.

"Spike," she whispered against his lips when they finally broke apart. "Spike, say it again."

He was too busy exploring her throat with his mouth to put together what she meant. "Say what?"

"Say you'd do it. You'd get a soul for me."

At that, he paused and pulled back, blinking. "Is this... Are you saying yes? You want that? You'll let me try?"

Buffy shook her head, staring up at him with eyes that looked even more like gemstones. "You don't need to try," she replied, giving his cock a long, slow pump. "You already..."

"I already what?"

"You'd do that to yourself. You'd get a soul for me."

"Not much I *wouldn't* do for you, love. If it means there's a chance you'll ever—"

"Love you. If there's a chance I'll love you. Spike..." She trailed off, her lower lip starting to tremble, her expression somehow both here and far away. "I don't know if I can love right now. Or if it's smart, you know? I just found out something kind of huge about myself and my relationships and I'm still trying to just be happy to be alive again. But you...you offering to give me something like that... That's so big. It's more than big. It's everything." Another pause. Buffy swallowed. "I think I need to figure out who I am outside of the claim. Who I want to be. And I don't know what that will look like...except I want you to be a part of it."

A harsh breath punched its way out of his chest. "You do?"

"Yeah."

"So that's a yes, then? On the soul?"

"No. It's not."

She was truly the most confusing woman he'd ever known. "Then I'm not following. Thought that was the reason you weren't keen on calling me your boyfriend."

"That was Five Minutes Ago Buffy. Five Minutes Ago Buffy, while well-intentioned, was kind of a dummy." Buffy ran one hand along the back of his neck until her fingers were funneling through his hair and resumed stroking his prick with the other. "A vampire who offers to get a soul for me isn't one I'm going to worry about. It's not that you should, Spike. It's that you would. That means... Look, I have some stuff to figure out. A lot of stuff, maybe. I don't know where I'm going to end up or what it's going to look like when I get out of it. All I know is exactly what I said. That I want you to be with me while I do this."

Well. Spike stared at her, a bit afraid to move lest he jostle something and make her change her mind. "I can do that. Christ, Buffy, let me do that."

"I can't promise you won't get hurt. That I'll want...*us* at the end."

"Will worry about that at the end." That might break him but not nearly as much as walking away now—of saying no. Of not being a part of whatever happened next. "What happens until then?"

"Until then," she replied slowly, arching her hips off the bed to rub herself along his cock again, "I'm thinking we do more of this."

Spike nodded, panting raggedly, and closed his eyes as she guided him to her entrance, as her cunt welcomed him inside. "Can live with that," he told her, dragging back with slow decadence that made his muscles quiver. But she was in his bed, under him, and he was swimming in her. Swimming and not drowning. He might not have forever with her, but he had right now, and that was enough. More than enough, it was everything he'd asked for a year ago. The most he could have ever expected.

After, when he lay spent in her arms, breathing her in as she hugged her to him, as her own breath tickled along his scalp and ruffling the strands of hair he hadn't gotten up to tame, he heard her murmur a soft, "If there's anyone I want to love, it's you."

He lifted his head to look at her, uncertain he could trust his ears.

But it was there in her eyes, too. The words and how much she meant them. How true they were for the moment, if not forever.

“For something that’s not a declaration of love,” he said softly, “that felt awfully close, Slayer.”

“It’s the best I can do for now.”

“It’s perfect.”

The first time ever, perhaps, that *perfect* was a bloody understatement.

THE POINT OF NO RETURN

IF THE FIRST EXPERIENCE WITH SPIKE'S MAKESHIFT SHOWER HAD left her wanting, the second pretty much turned her into a slayer-cicle, one that Spike had no chance of warming up on his own. Enthusiasm was nice but it couldn't generate body heat. Still, Buffy decided it was better to wash up at the crypt than walk-of-not-shame into her house, given the news she had to share with her friends was likely to be explosive enough without her looking and smelling like she'd been having sex in a graveyard all night.

Turned out she'd worried for no reason. It was late afternoon by the time they made it to Revello Drive, which meant everyone who lived there was off doing the student thing. At least they'd better be, in Dawn's case. Buffy so didn't want to have to have the whole they-might-take-you-away conversation with her again, but it often took more than once to get her sister to see sense.

And as nice as it would have been to just walk through the front door to find everyone who needed to hear what she had to say in a place ready to hear it, she supposed everything would go down a whole lot more smoothly if she looked more like herself and less like drowned-rat Buffy whose nighttime activities had prevented her from having a proper shower. One with hot water and steamed-up mirrors

and fluffy towels, and if her vampire lover just happened to help himself under the spray along with her, she wasn't going to complain.

Also, the house being empty gave her more time to figure out exactly what she meant to say. She had no idea how much Giles might have shared already—maybe all of it, maybe none—but hopefully enough to stop Willow from casting any spells that might shed light on what exactly had gone wrong with the resurrection.

Buffy was in the process of scrubbing the crypt off her skin when the shower curtain rattled the air, and a very naked Spike stepped into the shower behind her. “Don’t mind, do you?” he asked, closing them off again before she could respond. “Thought I might help you with those hard-to-reach places.”

She smirked and, in spite of herself, relaxed, letting her back fall against his chest and enjoying the slight way he held her. The way that was all Spike, loose but supportive, firm without being domineering. The arms around her waist a reassuring weight. “I don’t really have any hard-to-reach places. If you haven’t noticed, I am very bendy.”

He replied just the way she hoped he would—a low moan that unleashed a wildfire across her skin. “Believe me, baby, I’ve noticed.”

“And yet you still thought I’d need help.”

“What can I say? I’m a helpful sort of bloke.” He pressed his mouth to her neck, lips curved into a telling grin. “Just wanna make sure...”

“Make sure what?”

“Well, we’re goin’ into the lion’s den from here, yeah?” In a flash, Spike had her back against the shower wall and was regarding her with dark, hungry eyes. And god, while Buffy was definitely no longer trying to ignore the fact that the man was sex on legs, she still wasn’t prepared for what the sight of him, naked, wet, and with his blond hair plastered to his brow would do to her. Particularly when he smirked that Spike-smirk and dropped unceremoniously to his knees.

“What...” She slapped a hand against the wall, seeking purchase that wasn’t there as he situated one of her legs over his shoulder, nearing where she was already swollen and a bit sore from last night and that morning and later that morning and that afternoon and the shower at the crypt and now—

“Just want to give you a reminder,” Spike murmured, nuzzling close before licking a line from her opening to her clit. “This is what they’ll try to talk you out of. Every delicious thing I do to you. They’ll tell you it’s bad and evil—”

She threaded her fingers through his hair and thrust herself against his mouth, trembling when he groaned, the sound rippling across her, inside her, an inner echo. “They have a point. That thing you do with your tongue is definitely evil.”

“Guess I won’t do it then.”

Buffy mewled and tightened her grip on his hair, pressing her pussy more insistently against his lips. “You will if you love me.”

He grinned and winked at her—and god, no man should look that good while winking, or at all—then buried his face properly between her legs and got to showing her exactly how evil he was.

And she wondered if maybe she was closer to love than she’d previously thought. Not close enough to say the words to him, but to herself. She could say them to herself. Let them exist in her head, unchallenged, a fact she was granting space, acknowledging until it felt familiar. Felt comfortable. Felt like such an inherent piece of her that the threat of its absence was heavier than the reality of its presence.

A little beacon among a lot of dark thoughts and feelings. A point on the horizon for her to work toward.

Light her way home.



THE SUN HAD STARTED its descent by the time they arrived at the Magic Box, creating long shadows for Spike to seek out between intermittent patches of non-fatal-but-not-pleasant dying light. And that was good, because Buffy hadn’t been looking forward to another trip through the sewers, especially after having just dedicated herself to the art of getting clean. She thought, too, that it might throw her friends off the main points she hoped to hit if she showed up clearly having arrived at Spike’s side. Not that she wasn’t at Spike’s side—and not that she was going to hide that from them—but it would be nice to get the opportunity to say her piece before the others started litigating her

love life. Better to fool them into thinking Buffy and Spike had just happened by at the same time rather than had arrived together.

Of course, that much was probably wishful thinking. If Giles had looked for her this morning, he might well have put two and two together when she didn't come downstairs. Or hell, maybe all of them had. Hanging out with Spike was one of the reasons the others thought there might be something wrong with her, after all.

"Buffy," Willow said the second the bell over the Magic Box entrance heralded her arrival. She not only spoke but sprang to her feet from where she sat at the largest of the study tables, which was laden with thick tomes that were so ancient they could only be from Giles's library. "Hey, hi, hello. We were just, umm..."

Buffy paused, arching an eyebrow and glancing about the place. Okay. Everyone was staring at her, and not in the way they had taken to staring at her since the resurrection—more like they had after Riley had left. Or Angel. Or the immediate period following her mother's death, when no one had known what to do or say and been very awkward and obvious about it.

Which led her to one conclusion. She turned to Giles, who looked to have been busy reshelving inventory before she'd arrived. "You told them, I take it."

"I did," he agreed, placing the remaining items on the already-overcrowded table. "If only to nullify the search for a spell that would..."

"Tell you how much of me is Buffy?"

"Of course she's Buffy," Dawn piped up. She was seated at the rear of the table, her backpack barely visible over the mountain of books. "Why wouldn't she be Buffy?"

Tara favored Dawn with a soft smile. "It was just a question about the magic, Dawnie. Nothing major."

Well, if that wasn't one of the most obvious for-your-own-good lies Buffy had ever heard, it was certainly up there. At least Tara had the good sense to look abashed when she turned to meet Buffy's gaze again—a kid who'd been caught sneaking cookies after bedtime.

"Of course, we know you're Buff, Buff," Xander said. He was over at the cash wrap with Anya. "It was never a question of that."

"Except it was a question of that. Exactly that." Buffy crossed her

arms, finally looking back to Willow, who was still standing beside the table. "You thought there was a chance that the spell had gone so wrong that you brought something other than Buffy back from beyond the grave."

"I didn't!" Willow protested, flushing bright. "I mean, okay, it was possible. Like the hitchhiker, you know? I was—we were worried. You just haven't been you."

"And rather than talk to me about this, you decided to have secret meetings, make plans, essentially cut me out of the process entirely."

"Well, you can see why we would do that," Anya said with her characteristic—and, truth be told, refreshing—bluntness. "If you weren't Buffy, then telling you we knew you weren't Buffy would possibly put all of us at risk. Or if you weren't Buffy but didn't know you weren't Buffy... I mean, that would've been bad too, right? And we didn't know how much of you was Buffy versus the parts we might need to look for. It was all very complicated, though standard considerations to make when raising someone from the dead."

"Pillocks," Spike muttered, graciously assuming the weight of the shop's attention for at least a few seconds. "All of you. It's like I said, right? Harris?"

Xander had also gone pink in the face. "What?"

"The night you did it. I told you then, Willow knew there was a chance she'd come back wrong. That was why she didn't tell me what you lot were up to. She knew I'd stand between her and whatever she threw at the Slayer to put her back in the ground. Or I'd stop her before she got far enough to chant."

Willow straightened, her brow furrowing. "That's not why I didn't tell you."

"Oh no? Then why?"

"We needed you."

"Needed to make sure someone kept an eye on the Nibblet, you mean," he replied dryly. "Someone who wouldn't ask too many questions, trusting that the white hats were white-hatting and not mucking about with dark magic."

"Hey, man," Xander interjected, braver now, less red. "Why don't you back the hell off, okay? We already went over this. You wanna act

like seeing Buffy alive wasn't the best moment of your life, well, I guess I'd believe that because you are an evil vampire and all, but you still claim to love her so—"

"Stop it," Buffy said shortly. "Stop. This isn't about that. *It is* about you having a problem with me that you decided needed to be fixed in secret."

"It wasn't a secret!" Willow argued. "It was just something that we...we all got together to talk about when you weren't around." She pouted, her entire face scrunching with the effort. "We messed up, okay? I was just... I was worried, is all. If there was something wrong with the resurrection, I wanted to know how to fix it before I worried anyone else. If it was just some of you that was missing or, you know, all of you. I didn't want to alarm anyone."

"Except you told everyone," Buffy retorted. "Everyone but me, Dawn, and Spike. So what I'm hearing is you didn't want *me* knowing that you thought something was wrong with me. Me or the people who love me most."

"Love you most?" Xander scoffed—like literally opened his mouth and a scoff came out, one he paired with an incredulous sort of are-you-hearing-what-I'm-hearing look he cast to the others. "Okay, Buffy, see, this is exactly the sort of thing that had us worried in the first place."

"And that had to be because I came back wrong," she said coolly. "That was the only explanation. Not that I was recently back from the dead or fresh out of a hell dimension. Not that I had to claw my way out of my coffin and then through six feet of dirt, sure I was going to suffocate and die all over again before I even made it to actual air. You expected me to be exactly the way I was before Glory. Do you not realize how just absolutely insane that is?"

"Is this necessary?" Giles asked sharply. "Really, Buffy."

She blinked again. "Oh, I'm sorry. Quick show of hands, how many people in here have died before?" She thrust her hand in the air, tried not to grin when Spike did the same. "Guys," she said, lowering her hand again, "the last time I died, I was...not okay. For months I was not okay. So not okay that I came back and made a move on Xander, for crying out loud."

"You what?" Anya demanded, taking a step closer to Xander. "Well, you can't have him. He's mine."

"Trust me, not an issue this time around."

"Bloody hell, Slayer, never knew you were that low," Spike murmured, favoring her with a wicked grin that made her want to punch him and kiss him in equal measure. "Guess we oughta thank our lucky stars, yeah?"

"Shut up," she muttered back, though she felt her lips twitching like the twitchy little traitors they were. "But I think point well made either way. Death isn't... It's not something you can just sleep off over a long weekend. It wasn't four years ago, and it's still not. And the last time I was dead, it was for like a minute. This time was...not that. What I went through...you can't know."

"We can try," Willow said eagerly, stepping forward. "I want to know, Buffy. All I've wanted is for you to talk to me."

"But talking isn't what I want to do. You guys don't... You don't know how exhausting it is to get out of bed some mornings. To pretend to be happy when you're not." Buffy paused, swallowed, realizing belatedly that she'd tiptoed up to the edge of a precipice she hadn't realized was on the horizon until right now, stupid as it was. Spike had been telling her for weeks she would be better off not keeping Heaven a secret, and while she saw the wisdom in that, understood what he was saying and why it made sense, it still seemed borderline cruel. Letting the others know what they had done, what they had cost her, the price she'd been paying in some part ever since she'd clawed her way to open air.

The truth was she shouldn't need to offer this up as explanation. Even if she had been in hell, the act of dying and returning from death—whether after five seconds or five months—wasn't something a person could just rebound from. She had no memories of the soft, warm place from the first death, nothing to suggest she'd been prematurely torn from the eternal reward she'd been fighting her way toward. But it had still reshaped her, crossing that bridge. Dying and returning, experiencing nonexistence and existence, that gap between living her last and being reborn, stronger, wiser, but baby new all the same. Then going away from a world of monsters and violence and death and rumi-

nating over the fact that there had been a few minutes when Buffy Summers hadn't breathed, and she might never have breathed again had it not been for the timely arrival of a friend with working lungs. She'd always known she was putting her life on the line but the ordeal with the Master had shoved that from possibility into reality, and it had been too easy. Far too easy for the world to keep turning without her. Her name forgotten, her accomplishments relegated to a few lines in a watcher's diary. Standard. Expected. Unremarkable.

"I feel like you wanted me to come back and just be Buffy, and when I couldn't, when it was too hard after what I've been through, you started looking for ways to fix me without asking yourselves why I might be broken in the first place." Buffy licked her lips, aware Spike had gone still. Rigid. Aware of what he was thinking—that as far as moments went, this one didn't suck if she planned on letting the others know about Heaven. She had their attention and, for once, they were listening. And maybe she'd feel better having it all out there. No more need to pretend at all, all cards on the table.

It was what she should do, probably. But after last night, after learning everything she'd learned about claims and ex-boyfriends and the general uncertainty that was who *she* was now, the Heaven hurdle was one she wasn't quite ready to jump. That time would come, and she would know it when it arrived. It just wasn't now.

"I just," she said instead, doing her best not to look in Spike's direction, not wanting to see his disapproval. "Why would you think what I went through is something a person can just bounce back from? Why would you expect me to be the way I was before? You can't just get over something like that. I don't know anyone who can."

"Umm..." Xander raised his hand, looking a combination of sheepish and defiant. "Not to disagree with you, but Angel kinda did, didn't he?"

Spike huffed. "Wanker."

"Okay," Xander said. "He might be a wanker—whatever that means—but he still—"

"Not him," he barked. Then paused, shrugged, and nodded. "All right, him too, but was talkin' about you, mate, if you think it's the same."

“Well, why wouldn’t it be?”

This might be it. The moment she flew off the handle, never to return. Buffy went tense, indignation and astonishment warring with anger and that bone-deep need, primal in all the ways she’d never been comfortable accepting, to lash out in such a way no one would dare cross her again. Not interested in the reassurances that Xander had no idea what he was talking about, that he wasn’t asking to be argumentative but from a place of deep earnestness, because the question was genuine. Because he genuinely didn’t know.

Yet before she could begin to talk herself off the proverbial ledge, Anya was speaking again. “Because Angel’s not Buffy,” she said. “For one thing, Angel’s a vampire. Even if he had his soul at the time, he also had a demon. Hell for a demon isn’t what hell for a human would be. It’s much easier to survive.”

“Also,” Tara added, “it’s not like... People react to things in different ways. Even if Angel seemed like he was over it, that doesn’t mean he was.” She sighed and turned her attention to Buffy. “I’m sorry. You’re right. You’re absolutely right in everything you’re saying. We should have... We’ve been insensitive.”

“I can’t believe any of you thought she wasn’t Buffy,” Dawn muttered, crossing her arms and slouching into her seat. “Like yeah, she’s been a little weird, but not Buffy? I remember the way she was after she died the first time. Not the hitting on Xander stuff, but when we went to our dad’s. It was three months of her being miserable.”

“I got a lot of shoes out of the deal, though,” Buffy agreed with a soft smile. “Major score for retail therapy.”

“And she hasn’t even been able to do that because Dad doesn’t care and Mom...” Dawn snapped her mouth shut, her eyes taking on a brief however faraway look—like she was glimpsing emotion from a distance, seeing that it was still there—before she went on, “Mom’s gone and you guys have been way weird because she doesn’t want to fawn over Angel anymore.”

There was a silence, and an exchange of guilty looks.

“Well,” Willow said after a moment. “It *was* weird.”

“Weirder than you guys thinking that Buffy being over Angel is a bad idea?” Dawn retorted. “Really?”

“She has a point there,” Xander said with a grin. “Knew I was right to hate that guy.”

Buffy pushed down the response that wanted out at that, the one that was tied not to Angel, but to the old resentment that she’d ever had to spend time justifying her relationship choices to her friends. To the implication that Xander’s opinion of Angel had been because he’d seen what no one else had and not something a lot less nobler and a lot more human. Ultimately, it didn’t matter. She’d said what she’d needed to say, and while there was still more—while she knew she’d be parsing through all the things she was still keeping to herself until she knew how she wanted to handle them—this was a step in the right direction. A much-needed step.

Besides, there was no need to rehash old arguments over old boyfriends. Not when there were so many potential new ones.

“Well,” she said, to Xander, “that’s something you have in common with my new boyfriend.”

That got everyone’s attention in a big way. Even Anya, who had started retallying receipts. The only person who didn’t look surprised was Giles, whose expression was one of disappointment and grim acceptance that maybe should have hurt but didn’t. At least not as it once would have.

Vaguely, Buffy wondered if that was the claim’s doing, too.

“New boyfriend?” Willow asked. “You have a new boyfriend?”

Not looking at him, Buffy reached for Spike, knowing he would be there, that he was waiting for it, but experiencing a rush when their fingers intertwined all the same. “Honestly, I thought it was kind of obvious.”

The words hung in the air for what felt like a long time but was likely just the span of a heartbeat. And then, as one, everyone fell into the exact reactions that, thankfully, had defined Buffy’s best-case-scenario.

Anya shrugged and went back to her receipts.

Willow sat staring, her eyes saucer-sized. Same with Xander. He couldn’t seem to move beyond ogling, his mouth slack.

Tara blinked but offered a soft smile that teetered on the edge of uncertainty and encouragement.

And Dawn, bless her, was silent for a full five seconds before bursting to her feet with a loud squeal of delight. “Yes!” she cried, punching a fist into the air. “I knew it, I *so* knew it!”

“That makes one of us,” Xander said hoarsely. Apparently all he’d needed to get over the goggling was a reminder how voices worked. “Buffy—”

“Unless the next words out of your mouth are ‘I’m happy for you,’ my advice would be to remember that you’re in a glass house, and if you start throwing stones, not only will I throw back, but with slayer strength.”

Spike burst out laughing at that, a warm, chocolatey sound that lit her up from the inside out. “God, I love you.”

Buffy grinned, hesitated, then figured the hell with it. The others would have to get used to seeing her enjoying smoochies again anyway. No time like the present.

He must have seen it in her eyes, for his own darkened, and when she moved toward his mouth, he was there to meet her, swallowing her in a kiss that, despite everything, made her soul sing loud enough to drown out the sound of Xander sputtering, of Giles sighing, of Willow and Tara’s fevered whispers, and even Dawn’s excited squeals. Ground her in this moment before the world started spinning again.

She might not be okay, but she was better.

And better was all right.



IT WAS the first good day Buffy could remember having since before. So far before she wasn’t sure she could even measure the last time she’d been content. Not happy, but content. Granted, there were parts of her that were very happy; there were also parts that would remain wounded, perhaps scarred, all working against her in the struggle to piece herself together again. But at last, the bad parts were being shouted down by the good, and she could hold onto that. Keep it safe. She could live in a world where this feeling existed, even if it was sometimes hard to find.

There was still a lot to do, she knew. A lot to worry over. The

house. The money situation. The college career she'd abandoned the year before with a vague but mostly symbolic hope of returning. But right now, she had a moment to catch her breath. To exist in this space as the Buffy she was rather than the Buffy the others thought they'd lost.

And she wasn't alone, either. That night when Buffy set out from her house for patrol, Willow and Tara off to bed—likely to whisper about her until the early hours—and Dawn promising cross-her-heart-and-hope-to-die style that she had done her homework, Spike was at her side. With her because he'd been there after they'd moved from the Magic Box to Revello Drive, helped determine what to do for dinner and even made sure Dawn consumed something that wasn't loaded with carbs, jacked with sugar, or covered in cheese. He also started sorting through the mail that had been piling up, found a note from social services that there was a scheduled house visit soon, and helped keep Buffy calm as she considered everything that would entail. It wasn't much, what he did, but enough to make her realize just how suffocated even the small things made her feel. The delicate balancing act that was keeping everything just normal enough while the rest of her came back to life.

Even if some of his ideas were demonstrably eviler than others.

"Just sayin', love, can scout the place out," he was telling her as they helped themselves into Harper's—the last cemetery she planned to hit tonight, on account of it was dead out and she had a vampire she wanted to seduce in her own bedroom. "Find which car is hers, then the day of the visit—"

"Spike—"

"Just a wee incision in the brake line'll buy us some extra time."

"Or get her killed."

"Well yeah, with that attitude, probably will. The trick is you gotta think positive. More like *serious maiming*. Everybody wins."

Buffy rolled her eyes and bumped his shoulder with hers. "It's that kind of talk that's going to make it extra hard for you to win over my friends."

Spike scoffed and made a show of looking around. "Don't see them here, so unless you go tattling on me, I think we're safe," he replied,

then grinned at whatever he saw on her face and swooped in to steal a kiss. “You want me to stop?”

She pretended to consider for a moment, then seized a fistful of his shirt to drag him closer. Enjoying the way he submitted to her touch, leaning into her, following her direction, until he was pressed close enough that all she could see or breathe was him. It was beyond heady, and exactly what she thought would keep her in place when everything else started to spin out of control. “Never,” she told him, ready when he covered her lips again—ready to fall into him as far as she could let herself.

And she wanted to let herself. She wanted to fall and fall and fall and never stop.

“What the hell?”

Almost as much as she wanted to never hear that voice again.

Spike froze against her, her lower lip sucked between his teeth. For a moment they just stayed like that—as though like the T-Rex, Angel’s vision was based on movement and he might just lose them in the shadows if they played their cards right. But then the seconds ticked by, stretched out, dragging Buffy’s temper along for the ride. The rage and the betrayal and all the awful things she’d felt last night bursting through all her feel-good emotions, that content place she’d reached, until there was nothing for it but to break away from her boyfriend to meet the shocked scowl on her ex’s face.

Angel. Angel was here. Of course he was. She’d told him to stay away from her, so naturally he’d come running the first chance he got. Staying away was only on his agenda when he was the one who’d put it there.

“I have the distinct memory of telling you that the next time I saw you, it’d be me, the Slayer, seeing a vampire,” Buffy said coldly, crossing her arms. “I don’t think I stuttered.”

“Buffy.” He was staring at Spike still, his face slack. “I... I thought we needed to talk. After last night... What the hell are you doing out here with him?”

“Did you not get a good enough look before? We could go back to doing it.”

Spike snickered, bouncing a little on the balls of his feet. But he

didn't speak, didn't do more than grin that wicked, fuck-me grin that flooded her with more pure maybe-love, because while he wasn't perfect he knew how to be in certain situations.

"You're with him now?" Angel said. "I can't believe you."

"That would be your problem since I didn't ask you to," she retorted dryly, shifting her full attention to him for what she sincerely hoped was the last time. "Angel, you went to hell once, and I'm telling you right now you were safer there than you are with me right now. So if you value your parts and want to keep them undusty, now would be the time to leave."

"The claim wasn't what you think it was," he retorted. "I didn't mean it the way it happened, okay? It was—"

She didn't even register she was moving until the distance between them was gone, until after she'd swung, until the impact of the blow she'd smashed against his face had ricocheted across her knuckles, spread through her hand to her wrist and up her arm, and he was crashing into a mausoleum. And that felt so good she immediately wanted to do it again, watch the back of his head bounce off the concrete, scrape his skin and open it up and steal his blood as he'd stolen hers. Not as much and not enough but some. Put him at her mercy the way he'd had her at his.

And since he'd come here despite being warned not to, she saw no reason to temper her impulses.

"I don't care," Buffy snarled, punching him again. "I don't care that you didn't mean it or what you hoped would happen or anything. You did this to me, and you didn't tell me, and then you left me to deal with it."

"That's not—"

"Shut up."

He rolled his eyes. Blood was dribbling from his nose, and she had him against a wall, and yet he could still roll his eyes at her. And at that moment, she hated him. Hated him with every bit of the strength and passion she'd once put into loving him. Hated him so thoroughly she thought she might choke on it.

"If you would just listen—"

"I won't," she told him. "I've trusted you. I've loved you. I've made

excuses for you. I have done everything you ever asked of me and most of it without question. God, Angel, I have given you more of my time, more of *me*, than you ever deserved. You do not get to come here and demand more. Not after everything you've taken. I'm done. Goodbye."

She whirled around and forced herself away. Forced herself to put her back to him once and for all, let her legs carry her to the place she wanted to be. To Spike, who was watching with a look of utter devotion and barely contained glee all at once. He threw his arm around her the second she was close enough, then with his free hand, threw a mock wave in Angel's direction. "I'd tell you to stuff it, but the lady's already done that. Be a good lad and listen, yeah? Would be a right shame if she had to stake you. Even more of one if I had to watch."

"You think he won't do the same?" Angel called as she let Spike steer her along a stretch of graveyard that would take her away from this place—away from the temptation that was the stake in her pocket and the vampire begging for it at her back. "You know he will. It's just a matter of time. He'll want to own you in full."

"He doesn't need to," she shot back, not breaking her stride.

Spike chuckled and squeezed her to him. "You're brilliant," he murmured.

"I'm pissed."

"You're brilliant when you're pissed."

"You would think so."

"Yeah, I would." Spike waited until they were far enough from where they'd left Angel to look over his shoulder, letting her admire the curve of his Adam's apple in profile, the pull of his lips into that sexy smirk. "God, love, only way that could've been better is if you'd staked the wanker."

She offered a grim smile. "All with the tempted, but I'm pretty sure that's unethical. He is one of the good guys."

"Can really tell. He's a right role model."

"But if he tries that again, I can't be held accountable for my actions."

"Could always see about gettin' one of those falsies."

"Huh?"

Spike shifted his gaze to her. "Never told you about that, did I?"

“About what?”

“Your other ex and the visit he paid to my crypt before he left town.” He rubbed his chest over his heart without looking away from her. “Let’s just say there are ways to stake the bloke without killing him.”

Oh god. Buffy glanced at his heart, then back at him, her mind whirring in ways she didn’t want it to whir but it was too late to stop. “Why do I think this story is going to end with me wanting both my exes dead?”

He chuckled again, pressed his lips to her temple. “Cause it’s my lucky night.”

“Try enjoying this less.”

“Not a bloody chance.”



IF MY HEART COULD BEAT IT WOULD BREAK MY CHEST

THE THING ABOUT RECLAIMING ONE'S LIFE WASN'T THE ACT ITSELF; it was overcoming the resistance that stood in your way. As it was, Buffy figured she had been asking for too much in hoping that laying down the law would shut everyone up for good. That Xander would learn to keep his opinions to himself or that Willow would stop trying to find a quick fix to get everyone back to the place where she was the most comfortable.

Instead, the next few months involved Buffy making peace with the uneasy reality that her friends thought they had some ownership over her life. And her death. And all of it. There were days when she was tempted to just shut the door on all of them, but knew she never would. She still loved them, and they were still her family—imperfect and messy, but the only one she had.

And things had gotten better, a little, once she told them about Heaven. She hadn't particularly wanted to, but Willow had gotten a little creative with her attempts at a magical solution to help Buffy overcome the hell trauma and almost cost everyone their memories as a result. So after the crystal had been shattered and everything put to rights, Buffy had bitten the bullet and confessed the rest of it. And yeah, big with the trauma and the *I'm sorrys*, but the overall result had

been cathartic, just as Spike had told her it would be. No longer was Buffy responsible for carrying that burden or expected to pretend she was okay when she wasn't. It hadn't been sustainable. It never had. Eventually, that silence would have matured into bitterness or worse and hollowed her out until there was truly nothing of Buffy Summers left.

Well, Buffy Summers was not hollow now. She was fully in charge, taking back the parts of herself she'd twisted and rearranged for other people. Also finding answers to questions that no one else was volunteering to help with, like the whole lack of income situation. If the house was hemorrhaging money, then maybe it was time to rethink the necessity of the house. It was a lot of space for just two people—two being Buffy and Dawn, *not* Willow and Tara. And while the thought of parting with the home came with a boatload of mixed feelings, there was also something liberating in claiming a new space for her own. Of creating distance between the Buffy Summers who had died and the one who now lived. The adult in place of the child leaving behind a home of heartache and suffering. And once she'd crunched the numbers, she'd realized she'd be an idiot not to sell. There was the mortgage to pay off still, but property values in Sunnydale had actually increased since Joyce had bought the home—likely owing to the demon population being kept in line courtesy of having a slayer in town—which meant selling at the right time would pay off that outstanding debt and leave them with enough left over to live off until Buffy found steady work. Of all the options in front of her, it had made the most sense.

It had also caused the most distress.

"You're selling our house," Dawn had said in a deadpan voice. "The place where we lived with Mom. The place we've lived the longest of any house before it. That house."

It was also the place where Buffy had walked through the door and found her mother dead on the couch once and wasn't Dawn lucky not to have that particular memory. But Buffy hadn't said that—had somehow managed to swallow the defensive retort and explained that the house was just a place, and while she felt a certain sepia-toned sort of sentimentality toward said place, a better tribute to their mother

would be taking care of themselves. Plus, it wasn't like they'd be getting rid of Joyce's things. Whatever wouldn't fit into the new house would go into storage. Or maybe Spike could keep some stuff at his crypt, spruce it up a little to make it more inviting on the days they spent there.

Dawn hadn't been convinced, but ultimately (as Buffy had put it) while she wanted them to make decisions together, the final say would always be hers. That was her responsibility as the guardian—determining what was best for Dawn. And since being homeless due to bankruptcy was not best for Dawn, they would have to make some uncomfortable sacrifices to stay afloat.

So a sign had appeared in the yard and the house had gone on the market. And despite Dawn's not-so-subtle attempts to sabotage the few showings they had, an offer was made and accepted within a week. Buffy had worried her way through the process of closing, of searching for a new place to call home—a process Dawn blatantly refused to participate in—and dealing with mostly Willow's but also some of Tara's hangdog expressions. But there, she simply didn't know what she was expected to do. Both women had been living at Casa de Summers rent free, and neither had come up with an alternative that would allow all of them to stay at the house without the financial burden falling largely on Buffy's shoulders. They were unemployed students, after all. Moving to Revello Drive had been an act of altruism on their part in watching Dawn, yes, but also a way to save on housing. Where all that saved money had gone, Buffy didn't know, but seeing as no one was offering to fork over cash to help supplement the mortgage payment, she'd proceeded with the plan and found a single-story two-bedroom rental that would be more than efficient for two people.

Dawn had held onto her crappy attitude until the day she'd actually walked through the door of their new home. Or rather, the door of the bathroom that would be entirely hers, as the larger bedroom came with an ensuite Buffy had claimed for herself.

"It's mine?" she'd asked, bright eyed with wonder. "It's...all mine?"

"It's also the bathroom the others will use when they're over," Buffy had replied, "so it'll be up to you to keep it from being deemed a

disaster zone. Going out privileges may be revoked if I decide it's too gross."

"Nothing new there."

"But yes, it's yours. The dream of every teenage girl come to life."

Suffice it to say, Dawn's objections to the move had met a quick and sudden death. And just in the nick of time, too, as it had been close to closing and she'd done less than the bare minimum in terms of getting herself packed up.

It was a wonder what that girl could accomplish when motivated.

Dawn might have been the largest hurdle, but she was far from the last. There was the move itself, which turned out to be stressful when you were the one in charge and not a kid whose job was primarily to remain out of the way. Deciding what went where had been its own battle, never mind what wasn't going anywhere at all. A few things were obvious, like weapons and mementos and photos, with other things less certain. There was Mom's bedroom suite, which Buffy decided to give to Willow and Tara as a goodwill gesture since they had been using it for months, along with other select pieces from that room. The dining room table that served no practical function in the new place but had belonged to their grandparents, so there was a good chance they'd be visited by the spirits of unhappy relatives if they decided to get rid of it. Then the art pieces that had been Joyce's favorite were sorted through and categorized to determine what went with them, what went to Spike's, and what went into an actual storage unit. Also how to go about getting an actual storage unit, which wasn't complicated at all but seemed so when piled on with so many other responsibilities.

To Buffy's surprise, the gang had shown up on the day of the move wearing smiles and ratty clothes, with a truck Xander had borrowed from someone at work, there and ready to help. And in what seemed like no time at all, they managed to clear 1630 Revello Drive of the Summers footprint, leaving behind nothing but a few scuff marks and some shoddy patched up drywall that had been done on the quick between crises. It had been bittersweet, walking away from the house, but in a way that was also liberating. Like officially leaving the past in the past to accept that life couldn't stand still forever.

Or that moving forward didn't necessarily mean leaving everything behind. It was more cramped at the new place, but that didn't stop Buffy from asking everyone to stay for movies and pizza once everything was sorted. They'd watched some atrocity of a horror movie that Buffy and Spike had gabbed all the way through, criticizing fighting techniques and vampire lore, stealing nibbles off each other's pizza slices, and in general doing whatever they could to be the annoying couple everyone loved to hate. It hadn't been comfortable, necessarily, but it had been a step in the right direction. A way to bridge the divide between her friends and her boyfriend.

The boyfriend Buffy was increasingly convinced she was in love with, and probably had been for some time. A realization that had hit her both at once and in installments, giving her a foundation to reflect upon when the *aha* moment had arrived and clearly see the steps that had been taken to get her there. How he'd cared for her the night she'd clawed her way out of her coffin, the tenderness with which he'd held her hands and looked into her eyes. Then the next night, the way he'd let her occupy his crypt. Just sitting with her, talking but not expecting anything back. Giving her room to be still.

He'd give her whatever she needed. Even a soul.

How could you not love a guy like that?

Still, Buffy wanted to be sure before she put her feelings into more words than she had already. Especially those words. Those words were important. She also had never taken her time with this part—allowed herself to analyze what she felt, rather rushed headfirst into relationships that had ultimately been disasters. The truth was what she felt with Spike *wasn't* like anything she could remember feeling in the past. It wasn't the giddy rush she'd experienced with Angel, that tantalizing thrill of doing something she knew she shouldn't. It also wasn't the comfortable stability she'd eventually had with Riley, or the emotional tug-of-war that had defined them as they'd found their footing.

When she and Spike fought, it typically wasn't about *them*. It was about what movie to watch with Dawn on Wednesday nights or him leaving glasses crusted over with blood in the sink or her stealing the blankets the nights he stayed over (which she maintained was ridiculous considering he didn't feel the cold, thank you very much). The

relationshipy conversations they had weren't nonexistent, just absent the need to litigate every single second, which she'd just thought was par for the course in relationships. She and Angel had probably talked about things that weren't, well, *them*, but precisely zero of the non-them conversations had been interesting enough to remember. In fact, the more she thought about that time, the more convinced she became that what had brought them together initially was the lure of knowing it was wrong and their mutual inability to stop arguing about it. After all, what *else* could they have possibly talked about, aside from her sacred calling and the amount of math homework she was assigned on any given week? Which, now that she thought about it in those terms—especially in *I was Dawn's age* terms—made her feel especially icky.

It had been more of the same with Riley, particularly in the beginning. Him learning to deal with the reality that was her enhanced strength, trying to fold her into his world but resisting whenever she tried to fold him into hers. Saying all the right things but doing something else, like telling her was going to quit the military but calling them in secret whenever he ran into a problem he couldn't solve on his own. Or the one about how he liked how strong she was—liked it so much he nearly let himself die because the thought of getting a life-saving procedure that would have the unfortunate side-effect of making him a normal guy had been too much to bear. And let's not forget how that relationship had ended. She certainly wouldn't. And per what she'd learned regarding claims, some or all of that could have been because her heart hadn't been in it, but Buffy didn't think so. As much as her heart had been able to advocate for itself, she'd wanted things to work with Riley. If the suckhouse incident hadn't occurred, they might well still be together—or as together as a misplaced farm boy and a reanimated corpse could be in this crazy world.

Even still, she couldn't quite imagine Riley existing in this phase of her life. Like, she couldn't envision him understanding or supporting her decision to hound Willy the Snitch into giving her a job. Not respectable enough for the Slayer, never mind that it was good, reliable money that kept her ear to the ground and had already helped lead to the arrest of what he would call a civilian in what remained one of Buffy's highlights of her working experience so far.

It was that creep that had made the Buffybot. He'd come in to recruit some demon muscle for a job and blabbed just enough to warrant tipping off the authorities, which had proven rather illuminating in the end. Turned out he and his friends—including Jonathan Levinson, who had given Buffy her Class Protector award—were responsible for a number of misdemeanors in the area. Misdemeanors *and* one count of grand larceny once the police uncovered a diamond that had been stolen from the museum. The bust might not have been demon-related, but it had been useful, and likely not a lead Buffy would have gotten had she not been in Willy's back room to grab a fresh case of cinderslugs to put in a demonic martini that Willy claimed was what had initially put him on the map.

Spike had helped her with all things Willy's, too. She didn't know when he'd picked up bartending as a talent but he had over the years, and he'd been very eager to demonstrate the best way to mix drinks, how to slide orders down the bar without resulting in massive spills and broken shards of glass, and even helped her memorize the standard menu, from the mundane to the exceedingly gross. On more than one occasion, he'd also sat in as a test subject when she'd wanted to flex her budding mixology skills and invent drinks of her own, something he was adamant she could learn even if she was still a long way off.

It was the most support she'd ever had in a relationship. Everything, even the stuff that shouldn't be, was so easy she almost didn't trust it. Hence the waiting until she was certain. For the bubble to pop and reality to set in. Even now that she was almost convinced it wouldn't, the fear remained, but that was going to be true regardless of whether she said the words or not.

And Spike deserved the words. He deserved to know she was as in this as he was. That in a world where she had so little choice in anything that happened in her life, she still chose him.

The only question that remained was when to tell him. And how. Buffy had already decided it would be tonight—once she'd realized that what she felt was definitely the genuine article, she didn't want to sit on it. They lived in a dangerous world full of dangerous things that were often pointed specifically in her direction, and while being brave was scary, the thought of dying again without having said any of this

was scarier. So tonight it was, and tonight would be a good night to do it. They were heading to the Bronze once the sun went down to mingle with the others, to help continue to get them to see him as a part of the group rather than an outsider. It wasn't easy to predict how well it'd go—sometimes Xander was extra feisty and high on his demon-hating horse, and sometimes he was the definition of mellow. Telling Spike now would, if not just skyrocket him past a point of caring, at the very least take the edge off any particularly nasty barbs or insinuations that were thrown their way.

On the other hand, there was a very good chance neither of them would leave the bedroom if she did it before they headed out, and as much fun as that sounded, it would defeat the purpose of the Spike and Scoobies playdate. She'd just have to decide when she saw him.

Which should be anytime now. The sky wasn't entirely dark yet, and her bedroom in the new place was west-facing (lazy mornings were more important than early nights to them, those times he stayed over), but Spike still had a tendency to either tap on her window or materialize somewhere within the place within seconds of the sun's descent. If he'd managed to find sewer access, he was keeping quiet about it.

Maybe it'd be better if she weren't so conveniently close to a bed when he arrived. Then, at least, there'd be a fighting chance to make it out the door if it turned out she couldn't wait until later. Buffy nodded to herself, ran her hands down her sides for probably the umpteenth time—she was so self-conscious about how clammy she got, especially compared to his unchanging cool—and decided to give herself one last look in the floor length mirror that Spike had insisted she position at the wall opposite the bed for reasons he'd been very thorough in demonstrating.

The thought had her heart skipping and her pulse pounding in her ears. And god, for as much as she had to work through still, as hard as living could be, she did love this feeling. Almost as much as she loved the tingle along the back of her neck that told her he was near, that he was *here*, behind her, wrapping his arms around her and making all her good intentions fly out the window.

"Well, well," he all but purred into her ear before teasing the lobe with his teeth. "Aren't you looking edible?"

"How do you do that?"

"Mmm..." He made his way down the length of her neck, leaving behind nibbling little kisses. "Do what?"

"Get here so fast?"

"What can I say? I'm mighty incentivized." She felt his mouth curve into a grin against her skin. "Only so many hours in the day and all," he went on. "Fancy spending all I can with you."

"You should write Hallmark cards."

"That a fact?"

"I think you have real potential." Buffy let her eyes flutter closed even though she knew it was a bad idea, just as she knew leaning back into him was a bad idea. Rubbing her ass against his cock was the worst idea of all, but it didn't stop her even a little. "Unh...we should go," she said softly, but even she could hear how little she meant it. "We're gonna be late."

"And ain't that a crime?"

"*Spike.*" It came out as a long whine. "This is not the way to win friends."

"Only friend I care about is here." And now his hands were wandering, doing that voodoo they did so well. "But if you aim to have a night out, sweet, there's the door. No one's stopping you from walkin' through it."

"You're an evil, evil man."

"And you bloody love it."

Her heart skipped and then started to pound, and it was happening. It was happening now and she couldn't stop it. Didn't want to. It was just time.

"It being the evilness that is you...sometimes, yeah, I'll admit that I do love it. But I love *you* all the time, whether or not you're being very bad," she said, and Spike instantly went ramrod still, his body rigid, his hands freezing their drive-Buffy-batty pursuit. He let out a breath, the ragged sort, and for a beat, they just stood there like that. Spike with his arms around her, holding her to him, breathing with increasing urgency. Buffy listening, waiting, nervous for some reason she didn't understand.

Then, at last, the world started spinning again, or at least the room

did. And then she was facing him falling into his eyes, into equal parts hope and trepidation, and he whispered, "Say it again," and she did, and the floor fell out from under her, or she fell onto it, she didn't know. All she knew was she was surrounded by him, his mouth, his hands, his words, his everything, and she'd been silly to worry about being in her room because Spike would never let a little thing like the lack of a convenient bed stop him from tugging at her skirt and ruining her makeup.

"Spike," she gasped, once she managed to convince her lips to part ways with his neck. It was hard to do. He had a very nice neck. "We need to...go."

"Need to be inside you more," he replied, shoving her skirt over her hips now. "Need to feel what it's like to be inside you when you love me."

"You've felt it before!"

"Yeah, well, didn't know that, did I?"

Buffy lifted her head to glare at him as he dragged her panties down her legs—legs she parted in welcome, legs she found herself sliding over his shoulders and down his back, heels digging in when he closed his mouth over her. But then his tongue was in motion, swirling over her clit, and the Bronze could wait.

That was the other, better thing about reclaiming your life—you got to choose how you lived it, and with whom.

And Buffy had chosen this.

