

# REPRISE

*A Spike/Buffy Romance*



HOLLY DENISE







IF THIS WAS A MAGIC TRIP, SHE'D DEFINITELY HAD WORSE ONES.

One moment she'd been sitting at a bar, chatting with some demon who had reminded her so much of Anya she'd expected Xander to pop by at any moment and propose marriage; the next, Buffy had found herself sling-shotted into one hell of an orgasm, white-hot shots of pleasure scoring through her with bone-rattling intensity she'd thought was well behind her. And as more of her brain came online, other things shot into focus. Things like the rough grunts against her lips, the scrape of the floor against her back, and the sensation of a hard cock pounding into her. Buffy dug her fingers into a powerful set of biceps, tightening her legs around a slim, familiar waist on instinct, and gazed up into a cobalt stare she'd spent the past two years chasing in her dreams.

"Oh god," she gasped, a tangle of conflicting emotions seizing her chest—elation, confusion, fear, grief, and joy twisted so intimately she couldn't begin to pull all the threads apart. All she could do was hold onto him as he fucked her, and hope against hope that if she held on tight enough, she could pull him with her into the real world once this dream ended.

But this didn't feel like a dream. Even the most vivid dreams came

with tells—the edges were somewhat blurry, and finer details like his scent, the way he'd grinned, and the soft little gasps he'd fed her never crossed over.

Then he closed his eyes, and there was no mistaking that look. How he whimpered when he tensed and came, but more than that—how he seemed split between euphoria and despair. It was something she'd always noticed but tried to ignore during their tumultuous affair, the knowledge that he was holding off as long as he could to keep her with him. Because Spike had the script down—he knew what came next. The instant she climaxed he was on borrowed time. Just a matter of seconds before she shoved him off and made for the door, usual threats ringing behind her. So he'd keep going, keep fucking her as long as he could, until she flexed her muscles around him and he couldn't fight it any longer.

Buffy had never seen that look in a dream. Not once. Hell, until this moment, she'd forgotten about it.

Which meant this was real. Somehow, some way, this was real.

More than that, it was familiar. Oddly, specifically familiar. The next thing she knew, Spike had rolled away and lay panting beside her. Those intoxicating, lung-filling breaths that he didn't need to take but did anyway, and the scenery crystallized even further. The ceiling of a crypt buried under a town's worth of rubble, the foot of a bed that had more than one broken spring thanks to her, the rough sensation of a rug against her skin.

She knew this. She'd been here before. It was there at the edges of her memory. And before she could stop herself, Buffy opened her mouth and said, "We missed the bed again."

Spike grinned and looked at her with that goofy daze he often wore after they'd had tremendously good sex. "Lucky for the bed."

And that was it. Something within her snapped. Buffy found herself in motion the next second, straddling the still-panting Spike, seizing him by the shoulders and hauling him up so she could maul his lips with hers. He seemed stunned stupid for a second before he growled and tugged her closer, funneling his fingers through her hair to hold her mouth against him. This was another thing dreams couldn't get

right—the way Spike kissed. With his whole being, always. Hungry and desperate and needy. Like she was the thing that kept him from dust.

But in the end, that hadn't been enough. Nothing had.

That thought hit her with the impact of a battering ram. Buffy tensed against him, felt him tense in turn, and burst into hard, body-shaking tears.

God, this was real. Really real. All of it.

“Slayer,” Spike said, and the worry in his voice nearly did her in all over again. “Buffy, love, what’s wrong?” A pause. “Didn’t hurt you, did I?”

She shook her head, trying to focus on him but it was no use. “No. It’s...” A smile tried to take over her mouth but it felt more like a wince. “You’re here.”

He went still—that deathly still that she knew so well. The sort that told her he was weighing her mood, unsure whether or not she considered his being here a good thing. Because this was Spike as she’d known him before. Before the soul, before the Hellmouth had collapsed, before he’d been resurrected just to die again, the big jerk. This was the Spike she’d used and abused, the one who loved her unconditionally and gave himself freely whenever she asked. No matter how much she made it hurt.

“Yeah,” he said slowly. “Can’t turn me into a different bloke, love, no matter how hard you try.”

God, that voice too. Buffy cupped his cheeks and pulled him into her, desperate to taste him again. Feel him. Remember.

“It’s you,” she said against his mouth. “It’s really you.”

The tense muscles against her began to relax, then he was kissing her back with enthusiasm, lips and tongue and teeth in the heady combination that had always been just a bit too much for her. Too much yet not enough. “Course it’s me,” he said, and released a giddy laugh. Like he couldn’t believe it, either. “Reckon on sharin’ why you thought I might be someone else? Not that I’m complainin’...rather like that you seem so bloody chuffed about seein’ me. Just a bit lost on who you thought was shagging you just now.”

Buffy pressed her brow to his, running her fingertips along his

cheekbones, over his scarred eyebrow, then his lips. So much she'd denied herself.

"Slayer..." He favored her with a soft grin. "Enjoyin' the hell outta this, but better to know now if you got bit by some spell before a fella starts thinkin' things."

"Things?"

"Like how you might actually fancy me a bit after all." This he said without a flinch, though there was a somber undertone to the words that nothing could eradicate. Something she'd noticed more and more the longer their affair had gone on, though before he'd started talking about how she belonged in the dark with him. Like he couldn't quite dare himself to hope too much, but also couldn't stop himself from hoping at all.

"Spike..." Buffy looked around the crypt again, the cool air hitting her face and making her aware of her drying tears. "This... I'm sorry, I'm just trying to figure this out."

"Makes two of us."

"It's 2002, isn't it?"

At this, he narrowed his eyes, real concern leaking in there at last. "Uhh, yeah," he said, reaching up to tug on her hair in an affectionate way she hadn't let him get away with more than twice. "Been it for a couple of months now. Rang in the New Year at the Bronze with your chums. Fingered you in the broom-closet, if memory serves."

Heat tinged Buffy's cheeks. "Okay. And if you and I are still doing this, that means Riley hasn't shown up yet."

"The bleeding hell do you mean by that?"

"Spike, you need to listen—"

"Can't tell me you still miss that tosser. We both know Wonder Bread couldn't keep up with you on his best day. You're a sodding animal. Got the bite marks to prove it, if you'd like a peek."

"God, shut up." She rolled her head back and begged the cosmos for patience because with the extreme good also came the annoying. The annoying being his defensiveness and insecurities which, *yes*, she acknowledged she was more or less responsible for stoking, but that was *so* not the point now. "Spike, when I woke up this morning, it was 2004. May of 2004, to be exact."

Nothing for a moment. He just stared at her like she'd lost her marbles. Well, at first. Then, slowly, the doubt in his gaze began to wane, taking with it the hard edges that had been there.

"Right then," he said. "So who did it this time? Red go on a bloody bender? Guessin' her little rehab didn't take."

"What? No—well, no, it didn't, but that's...a whole different story." Buffy pressed her lips together, her heart hammering so hard her chest shook. The longer this stretched, the more certain she became that she was not going to be lampooned back. The world felt settled in a way she hadn't known to appreciate. "I was in a bar in Los Angeles. A demon bar, actually, celebrating with the girls. We'd arrived in time to stop..."

Stop the big evil that Angel had stupidly poked. Save the world yet again. And god, she didn't know if she'd ever stop being mad at Angel for the insanity that was the Circle of the Black Thorn nonsense—how he'd gone in alone, even knowing she had an army of slayers at the ready to tackle world-ending baddies. If it hadn't been for the Seer in Willow's new coven, none of them would have been any the wiser.

Except that Seer hadn't seen everything. Like that Spike was alive and in the thick of it. Like that Buffy would show up with said army just in time to help turn the tide for the good guys, but not in time to not watch the man she loved go up in a cloud of dust again.

Buffy's lower lip trembled, her eyes filling with tears once more. That had been just hours ago, and she'd been forced to shelve everything. Shove it all back—the pain, sorrow, outrage—until the fight was over and the day was won. Then she'd demanded the truth from a battle-worn Angel, who had seemed upset with her that his new humanness wasn't the headline news he'd expected. Because apparently, that was a thing vampires did. Turn human. If they had a soul and saved the world. There was a prophecy and everything.

And Buffy's first question?

*"Why didn't you tell me Spike was alive?"*

Angel had been somewhat crestfallen after that, but had told her the whole story while some healers with the new Watchers Council patched him up. Nineteen days after Sunnydale had collapsed on itself, Spike had shown up as a ghost at Wolfram and Hart. But he hadn't

stayed a ghost, and he hadn't called her. Hadn't written her. Hadn't dropped her a note or anything to let her know that he was back among the living, for some stupid reasons that sounded far more like Angel-logic than Spike-logic. Which led her to believe Angel had spent the time between Spike being a ghost and Spike being corporeal doing everything he could to infect Spike with doubt. Because that was what Angel did—make decisions for other people, convince them he had the right of it.

Also, Buffy had been cookie dough the last time they'd seen each other. Only she hadn't been—she just hadn't known it at the time. But she'd figured it out fast after Sunnydale collapsed. After Spike gave her the world.

Angel couldn't have known about the times she'd cried herself to sleep, only to be chased by endless nightmares. How she replayed those final seconds with Spike to the point she forgot to eat sometimes. How Xander had ultimately asked her to come with him to meet his therapist—someone Giles had found to help ease slayers into their new powers. Someone who also had some background in grief counseling and had been helping Xander navigate life post-Anya.

"He thought it'd be good if a friend came in with me," Xander had said—err, lied. "I need to become more comfortable with expressing myself and my emotions to the people who matter. Will's busy building Hogwarts, so tag, you're it."

And since that had seemed all kinds of reasonable, Buffy had bucked up and gone with him, watched as he talked about the mistakes he'd made, the things he'd like to redo, what he'd say to Anya now. Acknowledging his right to his grief, his regrets, and the myriad of emotions that came with both. Then the doctor had turned to Buffy and launched into a series of seemingly innocuous questions that quickly morphed into something personal and uncomfortable, until he had pushed her to do something she hadn't done since standing beside the crater that was now Sunnydale.

Say his name.

*"A lot changed that day. You lost your home but gained a new life for yourself. How did it happen? Can you walk me through it?"*



So she had. The whole plan to defeat the First, empowering the Slayers, saying goodbye, then mad dash to freedom—

*“Goodbye to who?”*

*“To him.”*

*“Who is him, Buffy?”*

She’d swallowed and glared at Xander, tears filling her eyes. *“Spike.”*

*“Abh. And who was Spike?”*

*“A vampire.”*

*“A vampire? Yet you are the Slayer.”*

*“He was different. He got a soul for me.”*

*“Incredible. Why?”*

*“He loved me.”*

*“Enough to get a soul?”*

*“Yes.”*

*“And did you love him?”*

Still glaring at Xander, tears spilling down her cheeks, she’d said, *“I told him I did. He didn’t believe me.”*

*“How does that make you feel?”*

She hadn’t been able to answer. Dissolving into sobs tended to make talking hard.

At the moment Sunnydale collapsed, when she’d laced her fingers through Spike’s and told him she loved him, she hadn’t known she meant it. And that, more than anything, was what had haunted her in the nights following. Spike had seen the doubt there, known it for what it was, and hadn’t let himself be fooled. Except they had both been fools—something she’d recognized only when it was too late. Something he’d never recognized at all, because she’d never given him a reason to.

“Slayer?” Spike gave her a little shake, jarring her back to the present. Well, his present, her past. “You were in Los Angeles?”

She swallowed and nodded. “Angel had screwed something up. We were there to fix it. And we did.”

It was impossible to miss the impact referencing Angel had on him—something that, the last time she’d been in his crypt, she’d brandished like a weapon. A tool to keep herself safe whenever she sensed Spike was edging too close to places she’d marked off-limits.

Had *kept* off-limits since the second her first great love had disappeared into the freaking shadows.

“Great sod’s always mucking something up,” Spike muttered, having gone rigid. “No short wonder you haven’t had to play the hero more than once.”

Laughter bubbled off her lips, and Spike reared his head back, staring at her like she’d grown a second head. “I know, right?” she replied. “And this was a big, big thing. Like end-of-the-world big, which apparently is something he does on the regular. I had this whole freaking army of slayers and—”

“What now?”

“Yeah, that’s... Long story.” Long story with possibly a different ending now. And holy crapola, did that thought ever make her dizzy. Buffy pressed her eyes shut to maintain her equilibrium, though she was shaking again as shock melted into understanding. She had really gone back in time—back to this. To him.

She had another chance.

“I’d wager everything’s gonna be a long story, love,” Spike said, tilting her head up so their eyes were locked again. “How many times you fancy tellin’ it?”

“Huh?”

“Or is this the sorta thing only a dead man can hear?”

His meaning became clear almost instantly.

“No.” She shook her head. “No, I’ll be telling... Well, everyone.” Everyone, which included Tara and Anya. Another wave crashed and she blinked eyes suddenly filled with new tears before looking back to Spike.

“I’ve missed you,” she said, then cupped his cheeks and pulled his mouth to hers before he could get in another word.

It was stupid, she knew. Reckless, even. Something that could move time was likely not a concern to put on the backburner, but Buffy had spent far too much time living for other people. For now, just for now, she wanted for herself.

And as Spike growled and pulled her to him, his cock thickening against her ass, she figured he’d be okay with postponing the big talk until later too.

THERE HAD BEEN A TIME, NOT TOO LONG AGO, WHEN BUFFY couldn't move without feeling Spike's eyes on her. She'd become aware of it shortly after Dawn had first dropped the *he's in love with you* bomb before their mother had died, and even more intently so following her own resurrection. But the soul had tempered Spike in more ways than she'd realized. He hadn't looked at her as much, and when he had, it was always tinged with this unspoken belief that he didn't have the right. The times she'd caught him staring had been few and far enough between that, until he'd spelled out that he still loved her, she hadn't really known if she could count on that to be true.

Not that she'd been Ms. Fortright in that whole mess. *Don't leave because I'm not ready for you to not be here?* Wordsmith Buffy was not. Granted, she figured that she'd been owed that bit of confusion. It wasn't like she and Spike had had a solid foundation to begin with.

Now Spike was staring at her again with the same reverent awe that had greeted her the night she'd walked down the stairs at Revello Drive, her hands still torn up from clawing her way to freedom. The power of his stare had always been unsettling, but it was different now—headier. Perhaps because she was no longer trying to pretend it didn't exist or that she didn't know what it meant. Didn't crave it.

Buffy swallowed and tore her gaze from his to focus on the phone number Giles had given her before he'd left for England. Again. It had taken a bit to find it, namely because the first time around she hadn't bothered reaching out at all when things started spiraling. He'd just—*poof*—shown up, the king of awesome timing.

Then she thought of the last year here, how he'd conspired with Robin over a grudge and a theory, never mind that she and Spike had actually started to become something then.

Maybe it wasn't fair to blame a guy for something he hadn't yet done, but Buffy couldn't help the way her gut twisted as she punched in the numbers.

"All right, love?" Spike asked, leaning forward on the kitchen island. He'd been oddly subdued since they'd left his crypt. Hadn't pressed her for more information about the time-travel mumbo jumbo, though she could tell he was brimming with questions, and hell, she couldn't blame him. Suddenly Depresso Buffy is all with the affection and telling him things that he'd only ever heard from the Buffybot? Yeah, skepticism earned big-time.

Buffy offered a small smile, shook herself out of her head, and nodded. "Yeah," she said, glancing around the kitchen. Being back here after the last year was just...weird. And made her chest do funny things. Not once had Buffy thought she'd ever miss the Hellmouth, but it was home. These walls where her mother had lived. Now she didn't even have a headstone to visit.

Except she did. Because this was Sunnydale and the clock had turned back.

"Sorry," she said, shaking her head again and punching in the remaining numbers. "I can't believe I'm back here."

He offered a soft smile. "Seems good though, yeah? You're..."

Buffy arched an eyebrow as the line began to ring. "I'm what?"

Spike shrugged, his shoulders moving in a manner so familiar she wanted to start crying again. No matter how hard she'd tried to keep hold of everything, the mind was only capable of retaining so much. The little mannerisms that made him—his grins, from sweet to lascivious, the way he tilted his head, waggled his eyebrows, ran his tongue across his teeth, bit his lip... So many things that made him *him*, and

some had started to fade from the edges of her memory without her notice.

"Guess I'm waitin' for the other shoe to drop," he said at last. "Never once featured a day like today. Where you show up and you..." He sighed and looked away, rubbing the back of his neck the way he did when he was self-conscious. Another thing she'd forgotten. "Always brilliant with you, pet. Can't bloody get enough. But it's brilliant then it's over, and you're back to hating me."

"I didn't hate you," Buffy said quickly, but then the line picked up and a familiar voice filled her ear.

"Whoever this is, I'm going to wallop you within an inch of your bloody life," a very grumpy and British voice slurred into her ear. "Do you have any idea what time it is?"

Buffy glanced to the clock on the microwave. Just past seven here. "Sorry. I think you skipped the whole time-zone chart before you left. So no, I plead ignorance."

Except she had enough experience living overseas now to do a quick mental calculation and, yeah, she'd earned the Watcher's wrath.

"Buffy?" The scold vanished from Giles's voice and she could visualize him sitting up in bed, going from sleepy and irate to alert and concerned. The way everyone in her life had been around her during this period of it. "What's wrong? Has something happened?"

"Oh, yeah. A big ole something." She twirled the cord around her finger out of habit, then caught herself doing it and experienced another one of those bittersweet nostalgia pains. "Long story short: this morning I woke up in LA with a team of super slayers ready to take on something called the Circle of the Black Thorn that Angel got himself mixed up with. Oh, and it was two years from now."

There was nothing but silence. For a moment, she thought the call had dropped.

"Giles? I know it's super early there but I need you to hear me—"

"I heard you," came the short reply. "I'm just... Either this is a very bizarre dream or you just told me you traveled through time."

"It's that second thing."

"Buffy... I'm not even sure it's possible—"

"Well, you don't need to be. I am." She swallowed and looked

around the kitchen again. At Spike, who offered her the same soft smile he'd given her every time their eyes met. "I haven't been here, home, in more than a year."

"Excuse me?"

"Do you remember the First?" She blew out a breath. "The ghostly thing that haunted Angel a few years back, tried to get him to dust himself?"

Spike snickered and rolled his eyes. "Big bloody loss that woulda been," he muttered.

"Big bloody loss that would have been," Giles muttered. The echo was enough to have Buffy snickering, which earned another one of those awed looks from Spike, only this one was tinged with something else—something like concern.

"I'm annoyed with him," Buffy told him after angling the phone away from her mouth. "Seriously. That's all. Will explain everything."

"Annoyed with who?" Giles chirped in her ear.

Buffy repositioned the phone again. "Angel. Sorry, you and Spike had the same reaction to my bringing him up and it made me laugh, which I think wiggled Spike out a little." She winged her eyebrows and favored the vampire with a look. "Did I call it right?"

He said nothing for a moment before barking a little laugh of his own. "Don't mind telling you, pet, if I wasn't bloody damn convinced there was no way for you to have swapped places with the real thing, I'd be checkin' you for wires."

"What the devil is *Spike* doing at your home?" Giles asked. "Is everything all right with Dawn?"

Dawn was a tangle of teenage melodrama and attitude, not to mention shoplifting, around this time, if memory served. So this going back through time thing had its drawbacks. She could deal. "No," Buffy replied, "but that's a whole other can of worms and of the more normal problems we have at the moment. This isn't about Dawn. Spike's here because we're dating."

This proclamation was met with the sort of hard silence she'd come to hate over the past two years. Silence that should not exist around Spike, for he was always fidgeting or making some sort of sound. The look in his eyes had graduated from concerned to down-

right petrified, though tinged with hope so bright it had her chest twisting.

God, how starved for affection he'd been that year. Well, and if she was being honest with herself, probably all the years leading up to that year. While she'd believed him wholeheartedly when he'd told her the night they'd spent in that abandoned house, just holding each other in the dark, had been the best of his life, she had wondered how the answer might have changed were the soul not part of the equation. The way Spike was looking at her now told her it wouldn't have changed one bit.

Buffy shook her head as sound returned—namely, sound in the form of Giles going bonkers on the other end of the line.

“—trauma can make you do irrational things, but honestly, Buffy, use your head. This is the same vampire who wanted to kill you not two bloody years ago! He—”

“Giles,” she said, her tone soft but authoritative, “I love you, but I didn't call to run my love life by you. I'm calling because I'm back from the future, here, and boy howdy, do we have a lot of problems coming up. Again, First Evil. Tried to get Angel to go all dusty. It's gonna make a move, try to take out the Slayer line, and we should throw in an apocalypse in there for good measure. This is all happening next year, so I need you to stop being Mr. Long Distance and get your watcher butt back to Sunnydale. If we're lucky, we might be able to stop the First from the damage it caused last time. Or—in the future.”

She glanced at Spike, who was still staring at her with that open, vulnerable expression of his, then looked away again. They hadn't had the chance to really talk about, well, anything. Okay, so that wasn't true—she hadn't *wanted* to talk about anything. She'd been thrilled simply to be with him again, and he'd been too startled, not to mention conditioned, to not bring up a subject that might have her bolting for the crypt door. The look he'd shot her when she'd asked him to come with her had been the first of many indications that the conversation they needed to have would be the record-setting type.

“I...” Giles made a bunch of sounds that were half-words but not comprehensible before composing himself. “Well, of course, I'll come right away. But Buffy, it is a very dangerous thing, knowing the future.

If that is indeed what has happened here.” A pause. She could practically hear him polishing his glasses. He’d probably gotten them off the nightstand just for that reason. “And I’m not sure it is wise to upset the natural progression of events—”

“Giles, the natural progression of events suck beyond the telling of it. Warren of Buffybot notoriety comes after me with a gun; I get shot and live. Tara isn’t so lucky. That makes Willow go evil. And then Spike—” She cut herself off before she could finish that thought, and mentally kicked herself for letting her mouth get that far to begin with. “It’s a big helping of bad topped with terrible. And yeah, there were some good things that came out of it, but I’m all about keeping the good and undoing the bad. So, as the Slayer—and she of the massive trauma—let’s just say this is my call and end it there. Let me know when you book your flight.”

Before Giles could get so much as another word out, Buffy slammed the phone on the receiver and took a step back from it, not aware she was shaking until she felt a brush of cool fingers along her arm.

“Slayer...”

“I know we need to talk,” she said thickly, wrapping her arms around herself. “I know all of this makes no sense to you. Especially... Well, especially with everything.”

“You told him we were dating.”

She rolled her eyes and turned to face him. “Really? All of that and *that’s* what you focus on?”

A sheepish grin tugged at Spike’s lips and he pulled back. “No, just seemed the safest at the mo’. When did you decide to start tellin’ your mates about us? Wagered even if it did last you’d never...”

He didn’t finish the sentence, and he didn’t need to. Her own memory had done its job filling in the gaps of the progression of events from that day’s sex marathon to what came next. There were immediate concerns, namely to keep Warren from killing Katrina. Well, really, to get Warren, Jonathan, and Andrew behind bars where at least one of them belonged for the foreseeable future. Hopefully, Jonathan and Andrew wouldn’t receive too much blowback, but even if they did, keeping Tara alive was worth the price of admission.



But this had also been when things had gone really bad between her and Spike. When he'd stopped being a refuge and had tried to drag her into the dark. They had discussed this, of course, and many other things during their last year together. Spike had told her, and she believed him, that he'd accepted on some level that she would never let him be with her in her world, so his recourse had been to try and pull her more solidly into his. That he'd been desperate and mad with love and yearning, as wrong as it had been, but her light was always what had drawn him to her.

This was also around the time she'd nearly pummeled him to dust for trying to help her, in his warped way. That was Spike all over—looking out for her, even when he didn't know how. When he didn't know what she needed or what was best or the line separating right from wrong. And was it any wonder he'd gotten his cues so confused that year? Before she'd died, Buffy had started accepting the idea that she might be Spike's conscience, like it or not, and that he would always do what he thought was necessary to help her out. Make her happy. After the resurrection spell, she hadn't been much of a conscience, and still, he'd taken his cues, though with a healthy amount of selfishness tossed in for good measure, because that was who he was.

She'd been given a gift—a huge gift. She was not going to squander it by repeating old mistakes, especially where he was concerned.

"Let's get one thing clear," Buffy said, fighting past the frog in her throat. "I don't belong in darkness, Spike. I have darkness in me but that's not all I am. It never has been and never will be. Okay?"

He balked, fear and recognition flashing across his face. "Buffy—"

"The last time we had this day, you asked what this was between you and me. If I even liked you." She braced herself. "I didn't like myself at all then. Actually, scratch that, I hated myself. What you and I had was...what I thought I needed to survive, but I did a world of bad to you, and you to me. We kinda sucked. But then...something happened and I've had a lot of time to think about it since then. Especially with...all the things that came after. So my answer today is yes, I like you. A lot. I'm actually pretty sure I love you, but that's a whole bucket of complicated. All I know for certain is I've missed you like

crazy. So yeah, consider us dating. But not in the dark. I'm more than that...and you are too."

This time, Buffy forced herself to hold his gaze as it fell into that awed place that both scared and invigorated her. It was important that he understood how serious she was. There was so much about this Spike, her pre-soul Spike, that she had taken for granted or outright ignored, the topmost being his capacity for change. How far he'd come on his own without anyone to guide him. Without anyone believing in him at all.

If they did it right this time, then...

"Can you..." he said, his voice thick. "Can you say that again, Slayer? Not sure I heard you right."

"Which part?"

"All of it. But—"

She sealed the space between them, cupped his cheeks, and drew him down for a soft, sweet kiss—the sort she'd never let him give her unless he thought she was asleep. And when she felt him trembling against her lips, she began to lose her grip on the composure that had guided her this far.

"I have a lot to figure out," she said as she pulled back. "Things... Well, things I didn't know I'd ever have the chance to figure out. A whole mess of a lot has happened and—"

"Slayer—"

"I loved you. Where I came from, in 2004, I loved you." She swallowed, her own eyes beginning to sting again. "I didn't know it really until it was too late. And...things were different. *You* were different but you were also *not* different. That screwed with my head in ways that I still don't really understand. I think in all the important ways, though, you weren't. Different, I mean. The ways I loved."

His lower lip began to tremble, and he seized her arms, anchoring her in place. "Buffy..."

The need, the hope, the *want* in his voice made her chest ache. "I'm pretty sure I love you now too. Not sure enough, because hey, it's me, but—"

That was as far as she got before he pulled her to his mouth, and god, this was so much better than talking. Talking Buffy had done

a *lot* of over the past two years. Hell, her last few months with Spike had been nothing but an ongoing conversation that had never been resolved. But that was what she'd needed, what *they'd* needed then, but she'd also needed this. Missed this. How much he told her when words wouldn't measure up.

But not even this could last—Spike broke away from her with a strangled sort of cry and pressed the heel of his palm against his brow. “God, I’m a wanker,” he said, laughing as tears spilled down his cheeks. “Thought about this a lot, love. Dreamed it. Craved so bloody deep it makes me wanna dust sometimes. There’s a hunger, see. And the longer it goes without bein’ fed, the weaker you get. The more it hurts.”

Dammit. She’d forgotten this, too. How he used to talk about how much he loved her. “Spike—”

“Just didn’t expect to be a blubberin’ git if you ever decided you...” He laughed again and wiped at his eyes, then spread his arms. “Some Big Bad, eh? Sodding ninny.”

Buffy offered a watery smile. “I think after the past few months, you’ve earned it.”

“Will you tell me?” Spike looked away, shuffling a bit with nerves she recognized. “Not all of it. Not even now, if you don’t like, but... What happened to make you feel like this? What’d I do to get you to love me?”

There was that chest pang again. And the urge, the first and most powerful, was to say no. Or make something up. Or change the subject. Or distract him with sex, which she doubted he’d mind very much, though he’d know what she was doing. And as attractive as all of those alternatives were, she dismissed them just as quickly.

Spike had sacrificed everything for her more than once. He’d risked everything for her more than once. He deserved to hear about it.

Except one part. A part she didn’t think she’d ever be able to talk about. A part she didn’t want him to know about. The hardest part.

“Okay,” she said.

He jerked a bit, more surprise flickering across his face. Though the intensity had started to fade, like he was adjusting. And that much made her flood with warmth.

“Yeah?”

Buffy nodded and gave him a soft smile. “Yeah. Let’s...order some food. I’m starved. And we can talk.”

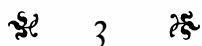
“Like a date, Slayer?”

“Well, assuming you still want to date me after I’m through.”

He gave her one of those *you’re off your bird* looks that she’d missed, his eyes narrowed and his brow furrowed. “Nothing you can do that makes me stop loving you, sweetheart.”

Yeah, she knew. Better than he did. Love she hadn’t earned and didn’t deserve.

But she’d fight like hell to keep this time around.



THE FIRST CALL WAS NOT FOR PIZZA—IT WAS TO THE MAGIC BOX ON the pretense of looking for Willow. And damn, hearing Anya's voice for the first time in a year was more earth-shattering than Buffy had expected. It wasn't like she lived in a normal world where the dead always stayed dead, but there were certain deaths she'd come to accept as permanent. Her mother, Jenny Calendar, Tara, Anya, and Spike all fell under that umbrella.

But Spike hadn't died *normally*. He hadn't even been gone three weeks. While she'd been making appointments to talk with a therapist, Spike had been alive—err, undead—and well in Los Angeles. It had only been a handful of hours since the explosion of this particular truth bomb, but Buffy could already tell that it would be the sort that would hurt for a good long time.

Anya had been bemused but not so much that she suspected anything was off. She'd reminded Buffy that Willow had a night class and informed her that, following her after-school regimen of studying at the Magic Box, Dawn had gone to the movies with Janice and her friends. Which was likely code for shoplifting, seeing as that was what Dawn had been up to at this time.

Which meant Buffy got to have *that* conversation with her sister again. Joy of joys.

"Thanks, Ahn," Buffy had said. Then paused, knowing that what she was about to say would be of the majorly weird yet unable to keep it down. "It's...it's really good to hear your voice."

A beat. "Thank you, Buffy. I do have a pleasant voice."

She'd still been laughing when she'd punched in the number to the only pizza provider in Sunnydale that was brave enough to deliver at night and placed an order. A medium vegetarian, a medium meat lovers, and an order of spicy buffalo wings. This last inclusion had been rewarded with another of those soft Spike looks, and she'd turned to him after hanging up with a small grin of her own.

"Dunno if they'll be as good as the ones at the Bronze," she said, rubbing her arms. "But I thought—"

"You ordered food for me? Know money's tight, pet."

Buffy blew out a breath, wincing. "Oh yeah. The piles of bills." She rubbed her brow. "You told me once you could get money. Can I assume that your version of *get* is totally above-board and not something that'd register on the evil-o-meter?"

"You've seen me play cards, haven't you?"

She poked an eye open, smirking. "Play or cheat at?"

He offered a sheepish grin and lifted a shoulder. "Does it count as evil if I'm swindlin' other demons?"

"Don't you guys play for kittens?"

"Depends on the game." He tilted his head, considering her. "You'd take my help, then? If I were to start gettin' you some spare dosh? Enough that you could quit that bloody awful job of yours?"

"Ehh, being of the employed is probably still a good. Though I will totally hit the classifieds because, yeah, I'm burgered out for the rest of forever." Buffy massaged her temples to warn off the impending headache. Was time travel jetlag a thing? If so, she saw a major crash in her future. "Maybe I can get a gig as a security guard somewhere until the school opens."

"School?"

"Sunnydale High. It's coming back. The principal's Nikki Wood's son." She spared him a glance and grinned at the astonishment on his

face. Being one step ahead of everyone was going to have its moments between now and when this timeline caught up with the one she'd left behind. "Let's just say he has baggage."

"She had a kid? Nikki did?" Spike shook his head, blinking several times before sinking into one of the living room sofas. "Fuck, I didn't know."

"Would it have made a difference?"

"I..."

But he didn't say—his voice trailed off along with his expression, hard shock fading into a frown. And whether he knew it or not, he'd just given his answer—an answer that told her enough that the lingering voices of doubt shut up for good. Spike might not have shown Nikki Wood mercy that night regardless, but he also might have, mama's boy that he'd been in both life and death. That it was even a matter of debate for him meant something.

"One of the best nights of my life, that was," Spike muttered, staring at the floor. "Rode the high for years. Dunno if it woulda made much of a difference, love, had I known." He paused. "But a tyke needs his mum."

A sour taste entered her mouth—with the good, you had to take the bad. And Spike had a whole lot of bad. "I know."

"Did he grow up okay, at least?"

And there it was. One of the reasons she'd fallen in love with him, on full display with or without the soul. Spike had always been a guy who cared. Always.

"Well, baggage, like I said," Buffy replied softly. "He's going to try to kill you."

Spike snorted. "Try meanin' he doesn't succeed. Or does he?" He lifted his gaze to hers. "You keep sayin' you've missed me, pet. Take it whatever happens doesn't have the best ending for yours truly."

Another question with a complicated answer. Heavy on the complicated, actually, because the look Spike had given her the night she'd told him he was her champion was one of those things that she kept coming back to in the months since Sunnydale fell. That was something she couldn't call bad, no matter how much the aftermath had hurt. What it had meant to him, her belief in him. In his soul. In

everything he'd tried to do, to become, since that awful night in the bathroom.

The same bathroom that was just up the stairs now. Buffy shivered and hugged herself tighter.

"It's...a lot," she said at last. "A lot of bad and good. But I guess it'd be better to start at the beginning. Or close to it." A pause. "Riley comes back."

"Yeah," he said—or really, growled. "Gathered as much back at the crypt."

"So you should also know that whatever stupid plan you have involving eggs blows up in your face."

At this, Spike tilted his head, frowning. "Eggs?"

"Some Suvolte eggs that are of the majorly bad. Like wipe-out-entire-towns bad. Riley comes and tracks them to your place."

"Suv... No, that..." He ran a hand through his hair, his jaw going hard, his eyes not too far behind. "That bloody *git*."

Okay, now was so not the time for a Spike versus Riley pissing contest. "Spike, I'm not—"

"The berk *lied* to me. I'll rip his bleeding spine out." He shook his head and looked at her, a hard, humorless laugh tearing off his lips. "Got this old chum, see, from my Europe days. Calls himself the Doctor. Took Dru to him before we came to SunnyD the first time, see if he could patch her up. Didn't take, of course. Turned out there was only the one cure for her, and you remember what that was, but the Doctor did help us get out of bloody Prague with our heads, even if he couldn't make her better. Thought nothin' of him until a few days ago, when the wanker turned up to cash in the favor. Said he had some stuff he needed to move and asked to use the crypt. I had a right mind to tell him to sodding stuff it until he said it was eggs, that the mum had been hunted and he was tryin' to get them to their bloody pap. Had never heard of a Suvolte before so I didn't think there'd be any harm..." Spike broke off with another curse, panting hard in a way that let Buffy know he was working, really working, to rein his demon in. At length, he pressed his eyes closed and turned back to her. "You thought it was me, then? That I'd doubled back, even after I've bloody told you I'd never do anything to hurt you. You think I don't know what that



means, Slayer? Think I don't know *exactly* what that means every time I say it?"

Well, that was... Buffy opened her mouth to say something—anything—but her voice refused to cooperate, her mind running circles around the new information he'd just dumped on her. Truth was, she hadn't given the eggs scheme too much thought the first time around, overloaded as her mind had been with other things. It had been convenient, Spike reestablished in her life as a guy who pulled stupid crap. Evil Spike, who hadn't done anything remotely evil in over a year by that point—not evil that she could quantify, at any rate. There had been micro bits of evil here and there, things that he couldn't ever truly escape, but...

A plan like that? A big, evil plan? The last one that she recalled had been when he'd kidnapped the Initiative doctor to have the chip removed. Everything he'd done leading up to the big fight with Glory and after, including this year she was suddenly reliving, had been in an effort to prove to her that he could be what she needed.

"I'm sorry," Buffy said, her voice hoarse. "I... I didn't think about it too much. And you never denied it."

Spike snorted and rolled his eyes. "Like you'd believe me."

No, she likely wouldn't have back then. Though it wasn't like Spike to just accept the blame for something. Granted, she hadn't given him much of a chance to before dropping the whole breakup on him. And how would that have gone?

She didn't know.

"I'm sorry," Buffy said again, stronger this time. "I never asked you about it—the eggs were just there and things went kablooeey and then..." She swallowed. "When I did come to you to talk about it after, it wasn't to talk about *that*. Riley left with his wife—he's married, by the way—and I came to break up with you."

A combination of pain and panic flashed across Spike's face. It was there and gone so quickly she would have missed it had she not known him as well as she did. More of him covering up just how badly this year had affected him—how much he tried to hide. After he'd been souled, Spike had told her that he understood their affair as he hadn't before, but she wondered now if he hadn't given his soulless self

enough credit. If he had known that when she'd beat him up and called him disgusting, she had really been talking to herself.

"Dunno how we could break up, pet," Spike said, not looking at her, his voice strained. "Have to be together first, right?"

"Right." Buffy swallowed hard. "And we weren't. Not really."

He nodded, still not looking at her. And she wanted to stop now—draw the line in the sand and move onto happier things, but she didn't have that luxury. If she wanted to do things right, and she really did, then she had to own what had gone wrong. This was not the Spike she'd lost, the Spike who had sacrificed himself for the good of the world after winning over his soul. This was the Spike she'd broken, and she couldn't heal the break by ignoring it. No matter how painful discussing this next bit would be.

"I was using you," she said before she lost her nerve. "You loved me and you were willing to be whatever I needed, and I took advantage of that." Buffy crossed her arms, wanting to fold in on herself. "That year—*this* year—I was my own worst enemy. But I was also yours. Your worst enemy, that is. I treated you like your feelings didn't matter. Hell, Spike, I wanted to believe they didn't. It made it easier to look at myself. And even though you could hurt me now, I knew you wouldn't. Except I kinda hoped you would." Her eyes stung again and a hard shudder ran through her body. Hard as these things were to admit, she knew they had to be said. God, she owed him this much. "I wanted you to hate me like you used to. There was a lot going on in my head—the Heaven stuff, self-hatred, hating my friends, hating Giles for leaving, hating Angel for not being here, Riley for taking off, and really hating that the one guy who actually stuck around was the one... Was you."

She watched him tighten his jaw, saw the shine of tears in his eyes.

"I didn't want to be loved the way you loved me. I didn't want to have been wrong about everything I... Well, everything." Buffy sighed and pressed her lips together to steel herself. "But I did start to get better after that. Not using you and reengaging with my life was the first step. I still don't think I made the wrong call then, but I didn't do everything I needed to, which included owning up to how awful I was to you and my friends this year. I hurt you and—"

“Hurt?” He whipped his head up and glared at her the way only he could. “Hurt, you say? Bloody hell, Buffy, just dust me. It’d be kinder.”

“Spike—”

“You think I don’t know all this already? That you hate yourself? That you hate *me*? It bloody guts me. Being with you is...” He tore his gaze away again. “Told Captain Cardboard that he had the better end of it when you were givin’ him the runaround last year. Having you but not having you. Getting to feel you at all rather than just rotting away with want. Didn’t know I was bein’ a bloody prophet, o’course. Didn’t get wonky visions like Dru—just thought what he had might be enough. Could be it mighta been had it even been that. You pretendin’ to like me in the space between, not just what I do to you. Pretendin’ to bloody care. He got the show and it wasn’t enough for him and I thought he was a git for wanting more. For not counting his blessings that he got as much of you as he did. I got the sodding stage rehearsal with the sodding understudy, and it was all I’d ever have, so I had to *make* it enough. Hoping if I fucked you hard enough, you’d—”

“I know.”

A hard laugh. “Slayer, you can’t.”

“I do know. And... That’s over. I meant what I said earlier. Everything I said earlier.” She paused, dropping her gaze to her hands. “If you still want it, that is. After I’m done—”

“You think I won’t?”

No, she really didn’t. That was the thing about Spike—the bad didn’t scare him. Even the truly awful bad. The stuff that should. He’d come back to her and come back to her and come back to her, except this last time when he hadn’t. Because she’d never given him a reason to keep coming back and he’d lost the part of himself that didn’t care about self-preservation so long as he was near her.

“I think if you want to walk away, no matter what, I need to let you,” she said. “I don’t want you to. I—”

“Slayer, told you this already. I’m not going anywhere. Bloody sucker for you. No matter what happens. Or what *happened* in your when.”

Buffy inhaled sharply, this time unable to keep from crying. The pain she’d experienced earlier—the hard, chest-cracking agony of

watching Spike crumble to dust only to be told later that he'd been back for months without contacting her—surged forward again with such potency it nearly knocked her over. Mourning him—what they'd had and what they *could* have had—had been the hardest thing she'd ever done. Even if everything did turn out good this time around, she wasn't sure she'd ever walk it off entirely. Because regardless, she'd still lost that Spike. The one she'd fallen in love with over their last year together, the pain and growth they'd shared. He was here and he was him in all the ways that mattered most, but he also wasn't. Shared experiences were what made relationships, the good and the bad. And they'd worked through a whole hell of a lot of bad to get to the good.

"Hey." Suddenly he was there, against her, reeling her to his chest and holding her to him, though he was shaking nearly as badly as she was. And hell, couldn't blame the guy. Not once had she allowed Spike to comfort her like this or in any way that wasn't sexual. She wondered how long it would take before he stopped second-guessing himself, or her. A while, probably. Almost certainly.

"Sorry, love," he said into her hair. "I'm a wanker. Didn't mean to make you cry."

Buffy barked a hard laugh. "You didn't. It's my fault."

"Slayer—"

"You didn't come back. Sucker for me or not." She pulled back and blinked up at him. "You die. May 20, 2003, you do something brave and stupid and you die. For nineteen days. Then you come back but you don't come to find me. You stay with *Angel* and don't even tell me you're alive. I show up just in time to watch you dust again."

It made her feel slightly better that Spike looked horrified. Only slightly.

"Angel?" he croaked. "What the bleeding hell am I doing with that git? No, Slayer, you musta got your wires crossed, 'cause there's no way I don't come find you in this or any other time, 'specially if you loved me. Fuck, maybe the jealous arse locked me up somewhere. Made it so I couldn't move or what all, 'cause I know me, pet. Can't get rid of me. I'd gnaw off my own bloody hand to—"

"That wasn't it. It was your choice." She paused. "Well, I'm ninety-

nine percent sure that Angel talked you into not coming to find me, but you'd never have gone along with it if I hadn't given you reasons."

"Sure this was me, then?"

"I am. Spike..." Buffy pressed her eyes closed and sighed again. They kept jumping all over the place; she'd meant to tell the story linearly, work up to the major hits, but she should have known this would go off the rails. It always did with them. "After we broke up, after Riley, you were... It was bad. You got really drunk and had sex with Anya. Who Xander had left, or will leave, at the altar because of stupid boy reasons."

He pulled a face that made her feel marginally better, though she doubted she'd ever stop seeing the live feed of that little tryst. "Bloody hell..."

"Then you come to me to talk about it because, yeah, it hurt. And..."

And she wasn't going to say what happened next. The thing that had changed her forever. Because she knew it would hurt him, and she also knew that while what he'd done was a bajillion shades of wrong, it had also been an accident.

Xander had scoffed when she'd first described it that way, and she got why, but the word *accident* had never stopped feeling true. If rape was something Buffy thought Spike was capable of, something he would ever consciously do, then she wouldn't be here now. But the Spike that had come into the bathroom that night, even the Spike that had pinned her to the ground, hadn't been an actual rapist. Yes, what he'd done or nearly done had left scars that would last forever. Yes, it was something she would never let herself forget. And yes, it had been a mistake—but one he hadn't made alone.

Therapy had included a bunch of required reading, listening to survivor stories. She *was* a survivor, but there had always been a disconnect from what she learned about rapists and what she knew of Spike. Rape, for one thing, was about power, not sex. Spike hadn't been attempting to overpower her that night, hadn't even realized what he was doing or how far he was taking it until after it was over. But their entire affair *had* been about overpowering and domination—just not on his end, and even when he'd said no, she'd twisted it into a yes.

Buffy had used and abused him to get what she wanted, regardless of his feelings or autonomy. So she couldn't look at the bathroom incident in a vacuum because of everything that had led up to it. He was responsible for his actions, yes, but so was she. He'd tried something terrible without realizing what he was doing. She'd succeeded at something terrible while knowing what she was doing and not caring enough to stop. In terms of the bad they'd lobbed at each other, she was pretty sure she was still ahead.

"The conversation didn't go well," she said, and told herself, when she mentally closed the door on that night this time, that it was forever. Then she closed her eyes and braced herself. She didn't want to say the next bit but knew she had to. She owed it to him, no matter how hard it was. "And...you left Sunnydale. To get a soul."

Cool air touched her skin where Spike had been just a half-second before. Though she'd been expecting him to pull away, there was a world of difference in anticipating the cold and being inside of it. Buffy kept her eyes shut, borrowing for courage. What scared her more, though, was she didn't hear him breathe. And Spike always breathed.

But she couldn't hide behind her eyelids forever. No matter how attractive that sounded. Buffy inhaled deeply and forced herself to look at him.

For a walking mood ring, Spike was freakishly closed down. Eyes narrowed, sparking with something that might have been anger or fear, shock or pain. Or maybe it was all of it, because that was Spike too. A contradiction of expression, bounding from one extreme to the next. Jaw clenched tight, cheekbones especially pronounced, nostrils flared. Like he was seconds from screaming at her or kissing her lips numb or laughing himself hoarse or throwing his fist through the wall.

"Say something," Buffy finally blurted. "I can't take it when you don't talk."

"There's a bloody first."

"Spike, please. I'm just telling you what happened. I don't expect..." She swallowed. "Just...*say* something."

He worked his throat and tilted his head. Then, just as he parted his lips, the doorbell rang. Their food had arrived.

For a moment, she thought he'd ignore it. She wanted him to. Her

stomach, though, had other ideas, giving a slayer-sized growl that all but made the walls shake.

At that, a soft smile touched his lips. "Let's get you fed, yeah?"

"Spike—"

"Not gonna give the Watcher a chance to put a stake in me on account of you bein' malnourished." He reached into his duster pocket and withdrew a wad of cash. "Reckon this'll cover it. Or I could flash some fang and get it on the house." He held up his free hand to ward off her protest. "Kidding, of course."

"Spike—"

"Nosh now. Then we can talk about this soul business."

“I BEAT YOU UP.”

Spike paused, hand halfway to his mouth, hot sauce dribbling down his fingers. “Say again, love?”

“Tomorrow, I think. Tomorrow or the next night. I beat you up.”

“Hate to break it to you, but we’ve been down that road before. Point of fact, we bruised each other up nice and good not too long ago. Brought the whole bloody building down, if memory serves. And I always like the way you make it hurt.” He wagged his brows and did that thing with his tongue that she’d never once consciously allowed herself to consider hot, dumb girl that she’d been. When this was met with a wiggle rather than the disgusted snort and eyeroll to which he was so accustomed, the look on his face melted seamlessly from suggestive to tender.

“Are you blushin’, pet?” Spike murmured before tearing off a strip of chicken meat from his wing. “If this is all it takes now, I’m gonna have myself a bit of fun.”

“I’m serious.”

“Me too.” He grinned and winked. “So I take it this next row doesn’t end as happily as the first? Wouldn’t mind a do-over of that, brilliant as it was. Wager it’d be even better if you actually—”



“Spike—”

He brought his hands up, sucked the hot sauce off his fingers. “Just throwin’ it out there. Lots still I haven’t done with you. Other things that I’m high to do over.”

It’d be easy to let him distract her from the things she needed to say, but there was an underlying of tension there—his reaction to the soul wasn’t something she was going to forget. And when it came to what happened between them the last time around, the business with Katrina and Warren, Buffy couldn’t smile or laugh. She remembered the way she’d felt when she’d come back to herself, straddling him, looking at the landscape of black and blue she’d made of his face. Remembering how he’d looked after Glory had damn near tortured him to dust and wondering just what the difference was between a hellgod who wanted information and a slayer who wanted to feel. There was nothing sexy about the way she’d pummeled him.

Yet still, Spike had shown up at her birthday party, smirk firmly in place, swagger set, love still in his eyes.

“You remember Warren. Buffybot Warren.”

At this, the cool sexual confidence in Spike’s eyes vanished, and he glanced down. “Uhh, right. Heard you mention him before. The wanker shoots you?” His jaw tightened. “Tell me he gets what’s comin’ to him.”

Her mind flashed to that awful scene in the woods, Warren strung up, the reds and pinks of his muscles exposed, the scent of blood thick in the air. “No one deserves what happens to him.”

“Agree to disagree there, pet.” Spike snorted and plucked another wing out of the carton. He paused then, and shot her a challenging look. “Not a souled prat just yet, so no bloody apologies. Anyone who tries to hurt you deserves whatever they get.”

Now she flashed to the bathroom again, Spike above her, desperate and in so much pain he didn’t realize what he was doing. Not hearing her screams and cries, not seeing her until she kicked him into the wall. That look in his eyes when realization set in. Knowing what he’d done after—the punishment he’d sought for himself. The gift he’d sought for her. He believed it, all right. Even if he was the one doing the hurting. Maybe especially.

“Slayer?”

“I’m jumping ahead again,” Buffy said, giving her head a shake. “Warren kills his ex-girlfriend. Andrew told me last year that it was an accident, but then they try to make me believe that I’m the one who killed her. You try to help in...well, your way.” She sighed, pressing her lips together. “I was in a bad place, Spike. I believed you were right—I’d come back wrong, and that’s... That was killing me.”

“Buffy, I—”

“I had a cosmic sunburn, is all. According to Tara. That’s the reason you can hit me now. And that was worse. I didn’t have an excuse. It was all me.”

Spike stared at her with that open, pained look that she felt down to the bone. “Bein’ with me was killing you?” he asked hoarsely. “That bad, was it?”

“It wasn’t you,” she said, doing her best to keep her voice level. “That’s important. It was all...me. I didn’t know how to handle being back here, being alive, and like I said, I was using you. I told you I couldn’t love you, made it clear the lack of a soul was the reason. The reason then was much more complicated than that—it’s hard to love anyone when you don’t love yourself, too. But after the breakup, you were hurting and I couldn’t help you... So you went to get a soul. The thing I said you needed to be loved.”

The silence that stretched between them was almost deafening. And for a moment, she worried he saw something else there—Spike was nothing if not freakishly observant. He’d always known her better than she knew herself, something that had at one point driven her crazy—something she’d relied on like nobody’s business during their last year together.

But if he saw there was something she wasn’t saying, he didn’t call her on it. Maybe he didn’t want to. Not that she could blame him.

“Is that somethin’ you’d like me to do, then?” Spike asked at last. “What I need to get you to love me the way you did?”

The pain in his voice hit her like a physical blow. “No.”

“Cause if that’s what did it... Not sayin’ I fancy the idea, pet, but—”

“I was wrong. About...well, a lot of things.” Things she’d only

started to touch upon visiting her demonic therapist but had carried with her longer than she wanted to admit. “I was fifteen when I met Angel. He was the first vampire who tried to get to know me before I discovered what he was. When he first went all fangy on me, it felt like a betrayal. Like he was playing some long game to get me to lower my guard—something Lothos had done, but never in a sexy way. It took a while to get over that...him being a vampire. And then the next year, when he lost his soul and I saw just how monstrous he was... It was a line in the sand. Soul good, no soul bad. Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Gone was boyfriend of Buffy and in his place was a psychopath. But it took me a while to accept that then—I thought maybe I could reach him, make him remember. Which is why I didn’t kill him any of the numerous times I should have.” She expelled a deep breath, keeping her gaze on the piece of pizza growing cold on her paper plate. “That has always been my litmus test—Angel and Angelus. So if you were like *this* without a soul, then you had to be super different with one. When you came back all souled up, I didn’t know at first. You tried to keep it from me. And...learning you had a soul changed everything. I mean, I know that’s why you did it, but I don’t think even you knew how much it would change things. But you knew what it was going to do to you—you’d seen it before and you *chose* it anyway. I still can’t wrap my mind around it, to be honest. It’s so...big. Bigger than anything with Angel ever was.”

Spike was quiet for a moment. Then he snickered. “Bigger than Angel, eh? Sounds familiar.”

Pure, bright affection stabbed her heart. She shot her head up and found him smirking at her, which had potent, life-giving relief sweeping through her so hard she thought she might lose her balance. “Pig,” she managed to say a moment later.

“Oink bloody oink, baby.” He winked at her.

And that was it. All she needed to know everything was going to be all right. That there would be an after for them once this conversation concluded.

Buffy released a sound somewhere between a cry and a laugh, then shook her head. “It’s because you weren’t all that different. It was still you underneath everything, just a bit more subdued. Like you were

watching everything you said around me. But it was *you*. The things that make you *you* are what I fell in love with. But those things are things you have now—that you’ve always had. It’s my own stupid fault for believing a soul is what made the difference. *You’re* what made the difference, Spike. And you always have been.”

This time, she wasn’t surprised to see the shine of tears in his eyes, nor to feel them in her own. She’d written him letters over the months, letters brimming with all the things she was saying now. Part of therapy—part she’d had to be strong-armed into doing, since it felt a whole helluva lot like homework, but once she’d started putting thought to paper, her hand had cramped from the task of keeping up. Spike wasn’t the only person she’d written to—she’d penned a few to Angel, a few she’d had to destroy almost immediately because the urge to send them had been damn near impossible to ignore. There had been some to Giles, too. Giles and her friends, her mom and dad, to Dawn, and to her younger self. Those were especially important—telling herself things she’d wished she’d known, but also trying to forgive the person she’d been, which was something she doubted she’d ever stop struggling with. The person she’d been had been shaped by experience and circumstance, and had paved the way for the person she was now, but there had been a lot of just bullheaded wrongness on her part that might have spared herself and others a buttload of pain had she allowed for the possibility that someone else in the room might know better.

“I’ve missed this,” she said, not aware she intended to speak until she heard her own voice. “The way you look at me without a soul.”

Spike kept silent for a moment longer, then swallowed audibly. “Didn’t look at you with one, then?”

“Not like this.” Buffy inhaled and wiped at her eyes, trying to move past the awkward. “I’m leaving a lot out. After you were back with a soul, you and I got close and it was...scary and intense but wonderful. I hadn’t felt anything like that...ever, and it took me a long time to really understand it. Even after you were gone again. Toward the end, Angel showed back up in town with a medallion thingy that was supposed to give us an edge in the fight with the First. To be worn by a Champion.” She snorted. “You and I were as close as we’d ever

been, and because that scared the crap out of me, I did something dumb.”

Nothing for a beat. Then, in a small, hurt voice, “You shag the git?”

“What? No. Not *that* dumb. But I did kiss him. And you saw it.”

She sighed. “It was a reflex. I think because I knew that if I went all-in with you, it was *really* saying goodbye to the girl who kept waiting for him to come to his senses. And that was scary too, because that girl was the last part of me to grow up. And growing up sucks. I told Angel to head out of town and be ready if we lost and that we already had a Champion. Then I gave the necklace thingy to you.” She felt her lower lip begin to wobble and knew she was seconds from losing it entirely, but dammit, like everything else tonight, he deserved to know this. “We spent the night together, then went into battle the next morning. We won because of you. But the thing Angel brought... He was never meant to walk out. I know that now. He got the necklace from Wolfram and Hart and they’ve only wanted him dust since forever, and just because they made him the big noise over there, he got stupid and forgot about that. We both knew it was going to kill you but you wouldn’t take the dumb thing off. So I told you I loved you and you didn’t believe me, and then you told me to leave.” Buffy rolled her head back, blinking at the ceiling. “I didn’t believe me, either. Not entirely. I said the words because they felt right. And they felt right because they *were* right, but I didn’t know it then because I didn’t know what grown-up love felt like. But I’ve known ever since then. Really ever since Xander dragged me to talk to this counselor of his—Anya died in the final battle, too, and he was having a hard time with it. I was, too, and it didn’t make any sense—you were the reason I had a life. We activated all the potential slayers so every girl who might be a slayer became one, which... Jury’s out on whether or not that was the best move. It certainly seemed like it at the time. But suddenly I wasn’t the only one anymore and I had a *life* and it was because you’d given it to me. It took going and listening to myself talk to realize one of the reasons I was struggling was you weren’t there to share it with.”

And that was all she could say before the weight dropped and the roller-coaster that had been the past few hours went completely off the rails. Buffy felt it coming but had no desire to stop it. Another thing

she'd accepted—sometimes there was nothing in the world that wouldn't feel better after a good cry. And hell, she'd earned it. So when she pitched forward and dropped her face into her waiting hands, she didn't bother trying to hold back. The sounds that tore through her throat were raw but honest, as was the shaking in her shoulders and the hollow place in her chest. The place that she felt could never truly heal. Much as she'd like it to be otherwise, the past was never truly past.

She didn't realize Spike had moved until he tugged her out of her chair and into his arms, and she wrapped herself around him without waiting for permission. Her head buried in his shoulder, her arms tucked under his, holding him to her as she'd tried to hold his memory. He murmured things into her ear and brushed his lips across her brow, but everything sounded jumbled and she couldn't make out individual words over the roaring in her head.

"And that's why," she cried into his shoulder. "That's why you didn't tell me when you were alive again. Someone shipped off the amulet thing to Angel nineteen days after you died. So you didn't believe me when I said I loved you, and why would you? After everything? Especially when I didn't know I meant it until after you were gone?"

"Buffy..." This word came through loud and clear, his voice pained.

"And Angel probably told you it was for the best to just let me live my life and made you think it would be better if you didn't come home. Come to *me*." She pulled back to look at him, blurred though her vision was. "But it wasn't better. It was awful. And then I see you when I take the girls to help Angel out and it's... I thought I was seeing things, but I didn't even get to touch you before you dusted again. All because—"

Spike seized her by the back of her head and brought her mouth to his with a sound that sounded somewhere between a groan and a growl, and the thing inside her combusted into need unlike anything she'd ever experienced. Buffy whimpered and cupped his face, determined to hold him there as long as she could. Or forever. Forever sounded awesome. Forever of Spike kissing her, nipping at her lips, chasing her tongue with his as he poured himself into her. It was so good and so familiar but not because his kisses had never tasted like

this. Needful and hungry, yes, but now flavored with something else. Something strong and wonderful and hers.

"I love you," she said between kisses. "I love you. Please believe me this time."

Spike shuddered hard, his grip on her tightening, his mouth growing more demanding, as though he wanted to swallow the words. When at last he pulled back, pressing his brow to hers, breathing in that special way of his, she saw the tears on his face weren't hers alone.

"I believe you," he murmured, his eyes closed. Like he was savoring the words. "Fuck, I believe you. Still think someone mighta dusted me but if that's the case, be a love and never tell me. Like it right here."

"Even...with everything? Everything about...what I've told you?"

He nodded, dragging her head along for the ride. "Think I can believe you 'cause what you said wasn't all pretty. Told you I imagined ways you'd tell me you love me and none of them included... Well, any of this." He paused. "You need to be sure, pet, so I gotta ask again. Do you want me to get a soul? Doesn't sound like too much fun but I'll do it for you."

Buffy started to tremble all over again. She knew he would. "You don't need one."

"No?"

"Spike, I meant what I said—everything. The soul didn't change you in any of the big ways. You were still you."

"Still me except I lost my bloody mind, apparently, and decided to camp it with sodding Angel rather than come to you." His eyes remained closed, but his mouth tugged upward as though he was trying to find the situation funny. "You tell me you love me, Slayer, and that's all that matters. Soul or not." He paused and opened his eyes, meeting her gaze with that relentless look of his. "Cept if I don't get it, that means I can't be your champion, right? Guessin' that's the way it works."

"It means you can't die on me."

"Way you talk, love, I'd pop right back on into existin' within a couple of weeks. And I might not know too much about this bleeding soul business, but I can guarantee that nothing would keep me away from you this go-round. 'Sides, you'd know where to find me."

In any eventuality that included Spike going up in flames again, there was no way she'd not be at Wolfram and Hart the day Angel received his special delivery. But that wasn't even the point.

"I know you'd do it if I asked you to," she said, and ran a hand through his hair, watching when he sighed and leaned into her touch. Like a big cat who'd gone too long without a leg to rub against. This was going to be the fun part, she decided. Giving Spike everything she hadn't given him the last time around. Surprise kisses and gentle caresses and handholding and all of it. She knew he was starved for touch and by god, she'd give it to him. "I know you'd do it," she said again, "and that's why you don't need to. That you would, that you *did*... It wasn't pretty, either. You were kinda crazy for a while."

Spike arched an eyebrow. "Oh yeah?"

"The guilt and the...guilt. You know the drill."

"Too bloody well. But if Angel could do it, I could do it better."

Buffy grinned and kissed him, enjoying the way he shuddered against her. "Duh," she said against his lips. "And there was... You were living at the high school, right above where the First started doing its Firsty thing. It... Well, it said things to you. Did other things."

"Problem solved, then. Won't shack up at the bloody school."

She went still, a new thought occurring to her—one that surprised her, though in retrospect she supposed it shouldn't. Because that was Spike all over. Defying convention whenever she turned around.

"Do you...*want* to get your soul?" The words alone had her pulse racing. "It's not easy, from what you told me. There were trials and they nearly killed you."

"*Nearly*. Got somethin' to live for, though." Spike pulled back, rubbing at his jaw, his gaze thoughtful. "Never thought about it, truth be told. But if it's what you need to love me—"

"Spike, I love you. Right now. You. I know I said earlier I wasn't sure, but that was me being one with the insecurities of Buffy. The soul's not what did it. The soul is...what made me realize that... Hell, the soul's what helped me realize that you already had the thing I thought you needed." This time when he turned to look at her, she couldn't meet his gaze and felt her cheeks go hot. "Or... There was a time before we started with the sexcapades where we were...just us,



and it was great. It was what kept me sane. That was you, not the soul. The times you tried to help me... Well, you made the wrong call a lot, but you did it for the right reasons. Again, you, not the soul. I don't need you to have a soul. I know it'll be a bit tricky, because again with the wrong-call making, but you changed this much all on your own. You won't be on your own anymore."

The space between them fell quiet—a hard quiet that made her ears ring. Another thing she'd missed after he'd died, after he'd disappeared the summer he sought his soul too, was how heavy his presence felt when she was in it. How aware of him she was at all times. It was the same awareness that she'd called upon initially when she'd come back from the dead, a security blanket that made her feel as close to whole as possible in a world that wasn't Heaven.

But she couldn't stare at the floor all night like a big chicken, and it wasn't like she feared what she'd see when she looked up. More that she felt that she wouldn't deserve it. That she couldn't. The sort of devotion Spike showed her was something outside of a fairytale, and after all the bad—the rights and the wrongs they'd committed against each other—that he could still look at her the way he did was something that would never stop shaking her to the core.

Still, she hesitated long enough, and Spike made the decision for her. "Look at me, pet," he said, his voice thick again as he tilted her chin up. And there it was, all of it. All of him, all for her. "You really mean that?"

"That you don't need a soul? Of course I—"

He pulled her to him, swallowing her words with his mouth before she could get the rest of them out, thank god, because she wasn't sure she'd be able to get through another long speech without breaking down. It seemed like hours had passed since she'd awakened in her body here, with the time between stretched over the past two years she'd relived. There was still so much more to tell him—to go over. So much to do before people here got hurt, but Buffy was officially tapped out for the day and just wanted this. Spike kissing her like he needed her more than blood, lips nipping, tongue exploring, little whimpers scratching at his throat. His arms around her, pulling her flush against his firm, lean body, his cock hard and rubbing her through his jeans. It

was like every time before but not, because there was so much there that she'd never explored. Buffy threw her arms around his neck and let him push her up against the dining room table. She parted her legs in welcome and he was there, pressing himself to her pussy, grinding against her in the way he knew she liked as he growled into her mouth.

Thankfully one of them remembered that she needed to breathe, and it wasn't her. He pulled away, panting hard, doing that brow-nudge thing she loved so much and shuddering as she gulped down bone-trembling breaths.

"Stay tonight?" she asked.

He went still. "Stay. Here?"

"Uh huh."

"You... You want me in your bed?"

"On my bed, on the floor, against the wall... There are plenty of places in my bedroom. Bonus points if you break the dresser. I've had that thing way too long."

Spike opened his eyes, so close to hers, and stared. "You really do love me. This isn't a dream."

"Believe me, if it's a dream, it's one I'm having. Also with the very vivid."

"Had vivid dreams about you before, love. Point of fact, that's what clued me in that I was lost for you." He began nibbling along her jaw. "Started off all right. You storm into the crypt, threaten to dust me, and we shag like bunnies. Except this time I told you I loved you."

Had she known that? She wasn't sure. "We can do a dramatic reenactment if you like."

Spike laughed. "Think I would. Shocked the bleeding hell outta me so much I woke up before we could get to the saucy bits."

"You cock-blocked yourself in your own dream." She must be slaphappy because this struck her as particularly hilarious. Buffy giggled, earned a bewildered look, then giggled again when Spike favored her with a dopey smile. "In so many ways," she said, "you are your own worst wingman."

He snickered, flicked his brows, and nodded. "You're tellin' me." Another chuckle, this one she felt all the way to her clit. "For now,

though, love... I've been dreamin' about your bed for over a year. What do you say we—"

A throat cleared. A throat belonging to neither one of them.

Buffy pressed her eyes shut and winced. "Oh, not now. Not now, not now, not—"

"Buffy?"

Spike pulled back far enough to look over his shoulder, his posture rigid and his jaw tight, a spark of panic flashing behind his eyes.

Willow stood in the doorway, her eyebrows arched and her arms crossed. "Umm... And how long has this been going on?"



GOD, SHE'D FORGOTTEN ABOUT WILLOW AND THE NIGHT CLASS. Night classes typically didn't go *all* night, convenient as that would be, and it had only been a matter of time before her roomie made it home. But dammit, Buffy was convo'd out. Hell, her throat was a little on the raw side from as much talking as she'd done, and what she wanted the most right now was to take Spike upstairs and explore him in all the ways she'd never let herself before. But being that a relationship with Spike was a dramatic shift for pretty much everyone else in the world, there was little to no hope that she'd be able to evade the explanations until morning.

Spike tossed her an uneasy look, and she saw immediately the reservation there. The question of whether or not she was ready to go public with this thing, which she understood. Or would have, had she not told Giles not two hours earlier that she and Spike were dating. This was one cat that was never going back into the bag.

"For a while," Buffy said at last, looking to Willow as she answered her question. "It's been going on almost since the resurrection spell."

While she didn't take her eyes off her friend, she couldn't help but feel it when the tension in Spike's shoulders eased.

"Since...the resurrection spell?" Willow's eyebrows winged skyward.

“Oh. Do the others know? Or is this something that I just missed on account of...well, recovery?”

“Well, as much as I love the idea of holding a press conference every time I get a boyfriend, no, we’ve been on the DL the past few months.”

The way Spike was studying her now was going to give the game up in a big way if he didn’t watch himself. She tried to communicate with her eyes that he needed to collect his jaw back off the floor if he wanted to get lucky tonight. If she had to have a meeting with the gang that not only went over her new relationship status but also the time travel stuff, she doubted she’d have energy left for anything more than over-the-shirt fondling.

Thankfully, Spike knew how to read her better than anyone, so it didn’t take much in the way of direction to get him on the same page. He nodded and aimed a grin in Willow’s direction, throwing an arm around Buffy’s shoulders. “Slayer didn’t want you lot to worry,” he said. “Or accuse her of havin’ gone soft in the head.”

Willow frowned, a somewhat wounded look flashing across her face. “I wouldn’t have thought that,” she muttered.

“Will, remember when you caught Spike fooling around with the Buffybot and thought it was me? You guys wanted to stage an intervention.”

Spike glanced down, sucking in his cheeks. For someone who had commissioned a sex toy based on her likeness, he was oddly bashful about the subject.

“Well, last year was... Things have changed.” Willow lifted a shoulder, her mouth forming a line. “There was Glory then this last summer, and... I know things have been hard for you here and if being with Spike makes it better, then I am the last person in the world to judge.” She plastered on a fake smile and gave a little wave. “Hi, I screwed up the best thing in my life because of magic. Not much with the judging of other people’s romantic decisions.” She shifted her attention to Spike. “I’ll tell you what I told Riley. You hurt her, there’s a shovel with your name on it. And I might be off the magic juice, but I’m pretty sure Amy could be bribed into cursing certain parts to fall off.”

Spike's eyes went wide. "Bloody hell, Red. Last thing in the world I wanna do is hurt her."

"Yeah. I know." Willow looked around the room as though buying for time. "So...I take it if you're making out here, you're ready to go public. Or do I need to keep this under my hat?"

"Don't tell anyone," Buffy said, "cause I kinda think that should be my job. But yeah, we're going public."

This time, Spike caught himself before he could give her another one of those stunned looks of his, but not before perhaps the goofiest grin she'd ever seen him wear, while not under the influence of a certain will-be-done spell, could sweep across his face. He used the arm he had around her shoulders to pull her into him and pressed a kiss to her temple. "Mind the noise, too," he said, flicking his eyes to the ceiling. "Not a secret anymore, so no need for her to—"

Buffy elbowed him. This just made him grin wider.

Willow flushed a bit, but her smirk was less the awkward teen that Buffy had first befriended and more the sexually liberated witch she'd become over the past couple of years. "I have homework to do. And a couple of lectures I want to listen to. Handy-dandy walkman to the rescue. Though I should remind you that we have impressionable youth in this house, too." She paused, seeming to consider this. "I can't imagine Dawnie knows. Think she'd be beside herself with the shrill."

Something in Buffy's chest tightened, grief and hope working in tandem. Her sister's relationship with Spike had never fully recovered after the bathroom incident, something she knew Dawn had regretted a lot after he'd been gone. It was a friendship Buffy hadn't really understood until she'd viewed it from a distance and realized that long before any of the others had given Dawn any credit, Spike had been there to validate her sister's feelings and treat her like something other than an overgrown toddler. That he'd spent a summer watching over her, living up to the promise he'd made to a dead woman, wasn't lost on her, either.

"We'll tell her," Buffy said with a nod. "Tomorrow. Much with the tomorrow."

*Or she'll come home, hear a bunch of rutting animal noises, and I'll have to have the most mortifying conversation with her in the history of talking.*

Did it make her a bad big sister to hope that Dawn's penchant for thievery kept her out at all hours? Probably. Most definitely. But it helped knowing that the last time around, Dawn had gotten through this period of teenage angst relatively unscathed, and had made amends with all the relevant shops in town. Hindsight with a bit of selfishness thrown in for good measure. Hell, she'd earned it.

"Well, I'll just..." Willow waved vaguely at the stairs and left them with one last smirk before disappearing to the upper level.

Buffy released a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. "That was a lot less awkward than I would've expected."

And made her feel...well, she didn't know what. Through every second she'd stolen with Spike, she'd been afraid of what would happen if her friends could see her. If they knew what she was doing with the gift of life they'd forced upon her. Then she'd told Tara and Tara had been, well, *understanding* wasn't quite the right word. Supportive, amazing, sweet? Maybe it shouldn't surprise Buffy that Willow followed in the same vein, especially during a period where she was wrestling with addiction issues and going through relationship drama of her own. Anya likely wouldn't care either way and Dawn, as Willow had said, would be beside herself with teenage joy. The only person whose reaction would be of the predictable was Xander. The same Xander who, in two short years, would be the one to strong-arm Buffy to see a mental health professional to help her process her grief.

"Made a bit of a mess here," Spike said, gesturing to the table of pizza and wings. "Guessin' I oughta be respectable like and spiffy the place up a bit."

Buffy arched an eyebrow. "You wanna clean?"

"No, I wanna take you upstairs and shag you raw." He waggled his brows at her. "But I'd hate all this good bloody will to go to waste if you woke up tomorrow and there were ants all over the place. Little buggers are enough of a menace at the crypt. And you call *me* evil."

She snickered and turned to the open pizza boxes. Chores were lame, but part of the adulthood package. And they were easier to manage now—in this home that she'd lost. "You're gonna be my live-in house vamp?" she asked, closing lids and gathering up plates. "Keep the place spic and span so after a hard day's slay, all I gotta do is show up?"

Spike didn't answer her at first, and she didn't bother to look at him. Her mind was of the one-track variety at the moment. Get stuff in the fridge, other stuff in the trash, wash up, then take Spike upstairs and really let herself celebrate the fact that he was alive. It wasn't until she was at the sink, washing her hands, that the weight of his silence really fell upon her, and she found herself working back whatever it was she'd said last to figure out where she might have misspoken.

She turned to find Spike right behind her, doing that staring thing again.

"What?" she asked, her voice pitched a bit higher than usual.

Nothing for a moment, then he swallowed. "Live-in?"

"Huh?"

"You..." He paused, shook his head and looked away. "Sod it. Musta been hearin' things. Or I'm a dolt readin' too much into every little thing. Just dunno how to take you at the mo', Slayer. Every time you open your mouth, you say things I... Just dull around the ears a bit, I think."

Buffy blinked, then the lightbulb above her head went on and she arrived at the answer. And there was no way Spike didn't hear how her heart started pounding faster because, yeah, that much seemed like a larger conversation than she wanted to have at the moment.

Except maybe it wasn't.

"You lived here that last year," she said. "After the school made you go all wonky. We didn't... I mean, we weren't sharing a bedroom or anything, but you were here."

Spike released one of those whole-body breaths. "I lived here?" he repeated. "With you?"

"Well, with me, Willow, Dawn, and about twenty potential slayers. We were kinda home base." She pressed her lips together, resisting the urge to wiggle. "Got used to you being here, I guess. In the basement. You lived in the basement."

"Right nice basement," he said in a rush. "Can think of worse places."

"But if you did live here, you wouldn't be in the basement. I hope you know that."



“Slayer—”

“Not that living here’s, like, mandatory or anything.” Great. Now she was babbling. “I mean, your crypt’s all kinds of cozy and it’s all yours. But if things go even a little like they did last time, it did help to have everyone close at hand.”

The next thing she knew, Spike had her against him again, his mouth doing all kinds of wicked things to hers. And thank *god*, because she didn’t know what stupid thing she might have said next. Kissing Spike was infinitely better than feeling like a moron. Which she did, for any number of reasons, not the least of which being her own damn uncertainty of what he’d want, even though she damn well *knew* what he wanted. There was no scenario in the world where she could imagine Spike saying he’d rather keep his own place than move in with her, yet that fear—birthed and nurtured by ghosts of boyfriends past, Spike included—remained persistent as ever.

Spike pulled away at last, panting, but he didn’t give her much time to recover. In a blink, they were on the move, her feet stumbling in an attempt to keep up with him. He tugged her up the stairs, hand clamped tight around hers, and pretty much dragged her across the threshold to her bedroom. There, he waited until she was safely inside, slammed the door shut, and hiked her back into his arms with a low, sensual growl.

“Only place I ever wanted to be, pet,” he said. “Right here. With you.”

“I know,” she said, because she did. “But—”

“No sodding butts. You want a live-in vamp, you got one.” Spike kicked off his shoes, turned his hands to his belt, then paused, apparently seeing something on her face. “You still... Not jumpin’ the gun here, am I?”

Buffy blinked and shook her head. “No. Much not with the gun-jumping.”

“Just...had a look there. Kind you get before you kick me in the head and run off.”

“There will be no more kicking of you,” she replied, her gaze locked on his jeans. More specifically, the bulge behind the zipper. And

at once, she was nervous—nervous in ways she hadn't been since, well, maybe the night she and Angel had made with the sex before he'd made with the homicidal. That had been life-changing and so was this. She'd given herself to someone then and now...

"Don't so much mind the pain, pet," Spike said, his voice rough. "Monster, and all."

"You're not a monster, Spike," Buffy said, trembling as she pushed herself forward. "I mean, I know you *can* be, but you're not one now. I'm all about the now."

He released a deep breath. "Now's bloody brilliant," he agreed, and when she reached for the hem of his tee, she found he was shaking too.

"Step back," she said, nodding at the bed. "That way."

"You got plans for me then?"

"All kinds of plans." Buffy inched the tee over his head and tossed it across the room blindly, fixing her gaze on the cool, taut flesh she'd unveiled. She ran her hand down his chest, concentrating on the feel of his skin. The way he shook. The air he gulped down. She paused at his belt, which remained half undone, and slowly pulled it free from the loops. "I've been selfish," she said, now turning her attention to his fly. "All with the take and hardly any with the give."

Spike made a sound somewhere between a whimper and a growl. "Seems I remember you givin' a bit."

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah. You tell me to leave and I try to change your mind with a blowjob. Real giving."

"There are worse tactics."

No, there really weren't. Buffy bit the inside of her cheek and inched his jeans down his legs. When they hit the knee, she shoved him back so that he fell to the mattress, his cock hard and stretching toward the ceiling. He sat up just as quickly, devouring her with eyes gone hungry.

"Think I'll be more game this time 'round, though," he rasped.

Buffy dropped to her knees between his spread legs and wrapped her hand around him. "What I did before was wrong."

"You bad girl, you."

"Spike, I'm serious." She waited until the mirth in his gaze faded before pressing on. "There's a word for people like that. People who

hear *no* and ignore it because what the other person wants doesn't matter."

At this, he snickered. "Yeah, I was real bloody unwilling."

"You wanted me gone. You told me to leave and you meant it. You were really clear on that."

Spike studied her for a moment, then cupped her cheek. "Not harborin' bad feelings here, pet. Far as I'm concerned—"

"And that wasn't the last time. You know that."

"Buffy—"

"What you want is important. What you tell me is important. That I hear you, that I respect what you want, is super important."

There was nothing for a beat, and she could see she'd thrown him off. It was so like him to not see the bad for what it had been. Evil, in his eyes, was relative. Bad was relative. When it came to the bad he could do, he understood it well enough. The bad she could do, had done, was something he struggled more with. Or perhaps he just didn't like to paint himself the victim.

"Never saw it as that, love," Spike said at last, running his thumb across her cheek. "For what it's worth. Got you in the end, didn't I?"

"But you didn't," she replied. "And the ends don't justify the means. I want you to know that when I touch you, when you touch *me*, it's because we both want it. Not because I'm trying to win or you're trying... That part of us is over. This is the new us. Okay?"

He nodded, and though she saw he meant it, she worried still he didn't entirely understand. And maybe he couldn't without knowing the full story—including the thing she didn't want to tell him. Spike had never called her out on her bad behavior as it pertained to sex. He'd wonder what they were, ask for a definition, get pissed when she wouldn't give him more, but he'd never called a spade a spade where consent was concerned. Not until he'd been the aggressor.

Buffy pushed that thought back. There was nothing to be gained from revisiting those places any more than she already had. What had happened that night was no longer her reality, and things between them would never get so bad that the lines she'd just drawn were in danger of being breached again.

And she trusted that Spike would call her out if she backslid—not

that she was worried that she would, but it was hard to pretend like it wasn't a possibility when she knew the capacity for that sort of thing lived inside her.

But she was tired of thinking, of talking, and she knew more of that awaited her tomorrow. So she gave her brain permission to take a hike and lowered her mouth to his cock. The sharp inhale that rattled through him at the contact made her tense with awareness. This was so unlike anything she'd experienced with her former lovers—the knowledge, the damn certainty, that she was doing something right. That the moan that colored the air was genuine, as was the reverence with which he said her name. Spike funneled his fingers through her hair, not holding her there, just holding her, as she closed her lips around the tip of his cock and laved the head with her tongue.

"Fuck," Spike hissed, arching a bit off the bed. "So sweet."

The times she'd done this for him had been few and far between. There hadn't been much point in pleasuring a walking vibrator when that was *its* job. Buffy closed her eyes and shoved back at the rush of self-recrimination that threaten to swell and focused on the now. Yes, the bad had happened and yes it couldn't be erased, but this time it was different, and Spike was letting her make it right. She inched him deeper into her mouth, her tongue swirling, and at his low moan, felt herself embolden.

That was another thing with Spike. She could do whatever she wanted without really worrying that it wasn't right. Especially a touch-starved Spike like the one with her now, who had taken anything she had to offer gratefully, never knowing when it might be the end.

"God, look at you," he whispered, and she opened her eyes to meet his stare, the open wonder on his face more intense than she could remember it ever being. "Suck me like that, Slayer. Oh yes. Fuck yes."

Buffy intensified her strokes, finding a steady rhythm. Pulling and tugging and licking and sucking, watching as Spike watched her, as the heat in his eyes darkened. She wanted him to watch her, to see that she was here with him, not mentally substituting him for anyone else, that when she moaned around his cock, it was for him alone.

"Fuck. *Fuck*. Buffy..."

Buffy drew back and let him slip out of her mouth with a wet *plop*, then kissed a path along the underside of his erection until she reached his balls.

“*Slayer*.” This he growled, the grip he had on her hair tightening at last. “Such a good girl. My girl. My *Buffy*.”

“Yes,” she agreed with a wink before drawing one of his testicles into her mouth. She grinned when he whimpered and took pity on him, fisting the base of his cock and giving it a squeeze. “I’m all yours, Spike.”

“Fuck yes.”

“And I think I like doing this.” She moved to his other testicle and kissed it. “You make all kinds of fun sounds.”

Spike released a huff of air that might have been a laugh, but it melted into another moan when she sucked his cock back between her lips. She tongued the dip at the head before drawing him as deep into her mouth as she could fit him comfortably, then back again. And again and again, more and more until she felt him brush the back of her throat. By that point, Spike was little more than a babbling mess.

“*Slayer*...”

Buffy met his eyes and held. And that seemed to be it for him—looking at her as she worked him in and out of her mouth. Something between pleasure and pain flashed across his face, but so far removed from what she was used to seeing there that she thought she might cry. He hissed and fisted her hair, then bucked and came, growling her name as he filled her mouth, then staring at her in open wonder when she swallowed.

That was something she’d never done the few times she’d gone down on him before. Swallowing had seemed like something you did for someone you loved. Or at the very least, weren’t using to feel alive. It was intimate in ways that regular sex wasn’t, and she’d wanted to make sure Spike recognized the line. He might be good enough to fuck but she wouldn’t take pleasure in giving him pleasure. That hadn’t been his purpose.

At last, Buffy pulled away, letting his cock slip out of her mouth. She barely had time to gather her thoughts before Spike growled and

pulled her up and into his lap. Then he was kissing her, hot and hard and with the kind of desperate intent that had her tingling in all the right places. It wasn't until he started pulling at her pants that she realized she was still dressed, and that was another first. She'd never been so singularly focused on his pleasure that she hadn't managed to strip before.

Thankfully, Spike was an Olympic champ at the sport of getting Buffy naked. And she was pretty sure he'd just set a new record. Bonus points for not tearing anything. In blissful seconds, she was straddling him, rubbing herself along the length of his cock and thanking her lucky stars that she'd been smart enough to fall for a vampire who could come as hard as he had and be ready to go again all in the span of ninety seconds.

"If I didn't know better," Spike drawled, dragging a finger up the seam of her drenched pussy, "I'd say doin' that got you hot."

Buffy nodded, clutching at his neck for balance. "Uh huh."

He lowered his mouth to her neck and nibbled softly. She felt him tense when her pulse jumped, then he began sucking on her skin in earnest, as though he could pull the taste of her blood from the inside out. Something else she'd never let him do—pay too much attention to her throat, both because she hadn't trusted his fangs there and because she hadn't wanted to explain what would inevitably be one hell of a hickey.

What would it be like to let Spike bite her? Buffy trembled and clutched at him to maintain her balance. The thought alone was intoxicating, and she made up her mind pretty much on the spot. Fangs were something they needed to bring into the bedroom—if only once to see if she liked it.

Though she was pretty sure she'd freaking love it.

"Your heart's poundin' harder, love," Spike murmured against her skin. He slipped a hand between them and gave her clit a good tap. "Thinkin' something naughty?"

She swallowed. "I was thinking about what it would feel like if you bit me."

Spike went ramrod still.

"I think... I think I want to find out."

There was nothing for a moment. Then he released a hard groan and clutched her to him. "Fuck, Slayer, you're gonna be the death of me."

"Didn't we decide we're skipping the death part this time around?"

"Oh, I dunno." He waggled his eyebrows before flipping her over so she was pressed against the mattress. He loomed above her, nipped at her lips. "A good *little death* never hurt anyone."

Buffy released a soft gasp and spread her legs in welcome. "Spike, please..."

"Mmm..." He nuzzled along her neck, and the thrill of having his fangs so close had her aware in ways she never had been before. Now that it was out there, that she'd offered, she found she wasn't just curious—she wanted it. Wanted it very badly. "What does my girl need?" he murmured before dropping a series of kisses across her collarbone. "Need to feel your Spike inside you?"

Yeah. That sounded good. Fantastic, even.

Buffy nodded. "Uh huh."

"Hard and fast? Like normal?"

"However you want it," she said. "I want all of it."

Spike paused to look at her, his mouth tugging into a sweet smile. "All of it? So if I fancy takin' my time to love you properly, you'll..."

"Go nuts, but love it."

He smirked. "Bloody right. And I will, Slayer, don't think I won't. Gonna spend hours worshipping this artwork you call a body. Wanna lick you all over. But right now, pet," he said, then drew his tongue around one beaded nipple. "Need to feel you around me."

Buffy arched her hips off the bed, rubbing herself against his cock. The slick slide of him along her drenched flesh had her trembling. "I'll take it."

"Fuck yeah, you will."

"Spike—"

"Buffy." He lifted his head to meet her eyes, all teasing gone. Instead, he regarded her with such fierce longing she thought she might crack and start to cry. "Buffy, sweet, can you say it now? Tell me now."

Perhaps if she'd been just a little less desperate, she might have played coy. Or perhaps not.

"I love you," she said, holding his gaze. "I love you, Spike."

He released a ragged breath, his eyes falling closed. Then open. "Again."

"I love you."

A hard swallow. His lower lip started to tremble. "Again."

"I love you. I love you. I—"

Spike began inching his cock inside of her, his jaw clenched, his arms shaking as though control were just a hair from slipping completely. He kept his gaze on her face and she stared right back, not blinking, not turning away, just looking at him as he looked at her, until he was as deep inside her as he could go. Then he released a breath and seemed to release something else as well. The tension that had been present blinked away as though it hadn't been, and he favored her with a broad, happy smile.

"Love you, Buffy," he told her as he started to move in slow, deep strokes. "Fuck, how I love you. My hot, sweet Slayer."

She linked her arms around his neck and pulled him down for a kiss, and god, that felt incredible. The sensation of Spike's mouth moving against hers as he pumped his cock in and out of her pussy was beyond definition. This was what she'd been missing those months, she realized—the moments that comprised true intimacy. She had kissed Spike plenty, but never like this. Never indulgently, and rarely while he was inside her. She hadn't let herself savor him.

And it hit her that that was why his kisses were so damn addictive. Every time he touched her, every time he took her mouth, every time he slipped inside her, he was savoring her. Taking as much of her as she'd allow him, and at the time, it hadn't been much at all. She'd had the thought before that Spike kissed with his whole self, but even she hadn't seen how right that was. That *his whole self* meant all the things he had inside him, the desires and drives she'd kept at arm's length and only given him in pieces.

Because the way he kissed her now as he drove his cock into her again and again was a step beyond anything she thought they could have touched. Like he was truly unleashed.



Buffy felt her eyes wet and pushed back slightly against his chest. Spike pulled his head back, his thrusts coming to a standstill as his brow furrowed in concern.

“All right, love?” he asked.

“Perfect,” Buffy replied before leveraging her strength to flip him under her. The move sent his cock deeper inside her and had them both groaning. Then she steadied her hands on his chest and began to ride him. Slow at first, then with increasing urgency.

“Fuck, you’re a vision,” Spike said, gripping her hips and rolling his own to meet her every time she sank onto him. “That pretty pussy of yours all stuffed with my cock. That’s it, love. Fuck me like that.” He threw his head back, clenched his jaw, then righted himself again, gaze fixed on where they were joined. “Just like that, Slayer.”

Buffy leaned forward to kiss him and reveled in the mewl that rumbled against her lips. And when she pulled back, it was to pepper soft kisses along his jaw and down his neck, the way he did with her. Over his chest, teasing his nipples, letting her hands wander as much as they liked. She couldn’t touch him enough.

“Buffy..”

At last, she drew back, shook her hair from her face, and began moving harder, chasing her orgasm and his. The wet smack of flesh filled the air, along with their mutual moans and Spike’s rambling commentary. Except even that had slowed. He had his head thrown back now, the muscles in his neck straining. She felt him growing harder inside her, felt the telltale shudders that typically preceded his orgasm, and knew he was holding back for her.

“Spike,” she whispered, “touch me.”

No need to tell him twice. Only he didn’t do what she expected. Instead, he seized her by the hips and lifted her completely off his cock, coaxing a hard whimper through her throat.

“Spike, *please*.”

“Always,” he murmured, and dragged her up his chest until her wet pussy hovered just above his mouth. He drew a line from her slit to her clit, then sucked it hard between his lips. And that was it—pressure she hadn’t even noticed build reached its crescendo, and she trembled hard. Spike growled into her soaked flesh, tongue moving, exploring,

then gently coaxed her back down to shove his cock back inside her pulsing cunt, and damn if that didn't set her off again.

Buffy threw her head back, clenching hard around him. "Oh god."

"Fuck yes."

"Spike, bite me."

The sound he made was somewhere between a cry and a growl. He sat up, pressed his chest to hers, and buried his face in her throat.

"Want this, Slayer?" he asked. "Gotta say please."

"Please."

"That's nice. Just a bit more. 'Please, Spike, I want your fangs inside me.'"

"Spike, I want your fangs in me. Like now. Please. I—"

He moaned again and shifted, and she barely had time to register the way her pulse jumped before she felt herself spiral into a whole different kind of euphoria. There was a pressure at her throat, a delicious combination of pain and pleasure, and every pull of Spike's mouth seemed to have a direct line to her clit. She sobbed and clung to him, her body trembling into another orgasm without warning, and he was with her this time, growling into her throat as his hips bucked and his cock jerked and spilled inside her. It seemed to go on forever but forever had never been so brief. All too soon, she felt him retract his fangs, then favor the wound he'd left with long, decadent swipes of his tongue.

Sometime later, maybe centuries, Buffy returned to herself. She was lying beside him, panting, every inch of skin tingling. The place at her neck throbbed, but it was a good throb. An amazing throb. A throb she wanted to keep forever.

"Fuck," Spike said, tucking her to his side. When she looked up, she found his eyes were filled with tears again. "Bloody hell, Buffy..."

"I know," she replied, her voice somewhat hoarse. She thought she should say something else, but couldn't find the words.

And maybe that was okay. She'd done a lot of talking for one day.

"Tell me again," he murmured. "Just one more time. Please."

Then again, she still had a lot of making up to do.

"I love you, Spike."

He relaxed and tugged her closer, kissed her temple.

And when she drifted off, it was into perhaps the deepest, best sleep of her life.

BUFFY WAS AWAKE FOR A LONG TIME BEFORE SHE TRUSTED HERSELF to open her eyes. And when she did, when she saw that she was indeed in the bed that had been hers on Revello Drive, that a naked Spike was curled up beside her, she let herself breathe.

It was easy to accept her new reality at face value when she was awake. True, everything that had happened yesterday from the moment she'd found herself back inside this younger body had lacked the soft edges that accompanied most dreams, but in those seconds between sleep and alert, she hadn't been confident she could trust it.

Buffy lifted her head to catch the time on the clock on her dresser. It was after ten, which meant Dawn had already taken off for school and Willow was probably back on campus. There was no telling what her impressionable teenage sister might have overheard last night, but given the lack of squeeing, Buffy had to assume that the lid was still on the whole relationship thing. Which was nice. She wasn't sure she wanted to explain it more than once.

Because, god, there was so much else to explain. Just thinking about it had her all kinds of exhausted.

Buffy turned her gaze to Spike, and her fatigue melted. He was curled on his side facing her, one hand on her hip and the other stuffed

under the pillow he'd stolen. His hair was rumpled in a way that betrayed its natural curl, and he looked about as peaceful as she had ever seen him.

As peaceful as he had the night they'd spent together in that abandoned house, not talking, just holding each other. The night that, before last night, had been the most intimate experience of her life. While there had remained plenty of things off the table in terms of what they'd needed to work through, she'd felt understood and loved in ways that still left her breathless. The way Spike loved was intense, soul or not. All or nothing, the good and the bad.

And as much fun as lounging in bed all day would be, there were things to do. She was pretty sure she hadn't been lampooned back in time just to do the wacky with her vampire.

Buffy inched away, though not as cautiously as she would have with pretty much anyone else. She knew firsthand just how hard he slept. The second her feet hit the floor, her mind began racing with all the things she needed to do. Find Warren and keep him from killing Katrina, or anyone else. That much should be simple—even if he wasn't in the phone book, she knew Spike knew where Warren lived because of the Buffybot. Warren might be a lost cause by this point, but she knew Jonathan wasn't. And Andrew...

Well, one thing at a time.

Then there was the money issue. Quitting Doublemeat Palace was another priority—not as high on the list, but still there. She needed the references to get another job until the school opened, with or without a generous grant from the William the Bloody Foundation—they hadn't arrived at any such understanding the night before but she knew he would come through.

Xander and Anya's wedding was also coming up, which meant Xander would get his head all twisted around by some stupid demon and do something that would be a constant subject of therapy in a couple of years. And Riley would show up in town—that was going to be all kinds of fun—and, well, if Buffy managed to stay ahead of everything else, that should be the bulk of the excitement until the school opened.

"You sneakin' off?"

She inhaled and whirled around, finding Spike sitting up, eyeing her warily.

"Was going to get ready so I can pretend to function as a responsible adult today," she replied, opening her top dresser drawer and drawing out a pair of panties. "And start trying to figure out how to break the news to the gang that they're dealing with a different Buffy."

Something in his gaze softened at that. "Still love me then?"

For some stupid reason, this caught her off guard, and the next second, her eyes were stinging. Buffy studied him for a moment, then approached the bed and dropped a tender kiss on his lips. "Still love you," she said. "I think if the DeLorean was going to shoot me back, it would've happened by now." Of course, there was no freaking way to know that, but maybe Anya could shed some light. This was more her area.

And once the thought nested, Buffy had a hard time shaking it. The idea that she might not wake up here tomorrow or the next day, if this tour back through time had a return trip on the books. She was navigating waters she'd never traversed before, and assuming anything seemed stupid.

"But Spike, if for some reason I do get zapped back to my time, please...just remember everything I've said, okay? And if you find yourself in Los Angeles being told by a certain ex to let me live my life, do me a favor and smack him."

Spike barked a laugh. "Slayer, anythin' zaps you back and I'm just gonna follow."

"I'll hold you to that."

"Bloody counting on it." He grinned, turned and stretched, giving her a much-appreciated view of his lickable abs. "What all's involved in *getting ready*?"

"Shower. Then to the Magic Box to face the music."

"Ohh, shower?" The look on his face turned lascivious and he bounded to his feet. "Haven't done that one, have we? What do you say, pet? Could make a game of it. You try to get clean and I try to keep you dirty."

Buffy's pulse jumped and she pressed her thighs together, and the immediate answer—*umm, yes please*—was right there until it occurred

to her that in order to take Spike up on his sexy offer, they'd both have to be in the bathroom. Alone. In that bathroom.

At once, her stomach dropped and a rush of panic hit her system. She inhaled sharply and stepped back, trying—and failing—not to notice the confusion in his eyes. Bad thing about dating vampires—they knew when your heart started pounding and when your adrenaline kicked in. Also, she was pretty sure they could smell fear.

This was stupid. She needed to get a handle on this. It was just a bathroom.

“What’s wrong?” Spike asked, edging toward her, his hands raised. “And don’t tell me *nothing*, because I won’t believe it.”

No, he wouldn’t. Dammit. Buffy blinked and was annoyed to discover that her eyes were watering again. This was so not the direction she needed this morning to go. So she blurted out the first thing that came to mind and hoped it stuck the landing. “A thing happened in a bathroom with a vampire. It... Sorry, I guess I just wasn’t ready for that. So...raincheck?”

Spike’s expression was inscrutable, which was damn unfair because she felt inches away from an actual panic attack. This much must have told him something, for his eyes darkened with fury and he clenched his jaw tight enough she heard his teeth grinding.

“A thing happened,” he replied. “A thing.”

She swallowed. “Right.” Damn, he needed more and she didn’t know how to give it without telling him everything. “This particular thing hadn’t happened to me before.”

“Oh, I know what we’re talking about,” Spike replied, visibly trying to maintain hold of his control. He closed his eyes, drew in a few deep breaths, then shook his head and refocused. “When’d this happen? And who was it? I’ll bloody kill them.”

“Hey, no, it’s fine,” Buffy replied, forcing a smile. “It won’t be a problem this time around.”

“So it was in the future. Reckoned as much. Some vamp cornered you in the loo and—”

“It’s okay. Forget about it.”

“Not bloody likely.” He broke off, and she saw his eyes flash gold. “Like I said, I know we’re talking more than a tussle, love. Give me

some sodding credit. Never seen you like this.” God, every inch of him was trembling. “Was it just the one? I don’t care if it hasn’t happened yet, I’ll stake the bastard. Enjoy it too. Not like this world would miss him, right?”

Buffy forced her feet forward and cupped his face, directing his eyes back to her. “Believe me when I say that is not necessary.”

“Buffy, if some sod tried to rape you, it’s more than bloody necessary.” He paused, and something new seemed to occur to him. “Was it Angel? That why you don’t wanna tell me?”

“What? No.”

“Fine, *Angelus*, then. You said you didn’t shag him but I wager there’s more than one way to take out a soul.” Spike pressed closer. “Said he was working for that law firm, right? I know them—they’re not the sorta gits you muck around with if you’re wearin’ a white hat.”

No, they weren’t, but that was a whole other can of worms that she’d get into later. Right now, Buffy needed him off this line of thought—needed him calm and in control. She took his face between her hands again and brought his mouth to hers. Spike resisted for a second before growling and hiking her up against him, kissing her with the sort of fervor she knew only came out when he was well and truly pissed. Angry kisses had always been something of a turn-on, but she didn’t like him like this.

She didn’t like him so close to the truth. And hell, she should have seen this coming. Should have had an answer for when Spike, if he was going to live with her, wanted to do coupley things like share showers. But then everything yesterday had happened at warp-speed and she had yet to catch her breath, much less reconcile that she actually was reliving this period of her life. That she had this second chance.

Buffy pulled away after a long moment, breathing hard as her mind raced. She needed to nip this in the bud now before it mushroomed any more than it had already.

“Spike,” she said, doing her best to keep her tone measured, “a lot happened in two years. There’s the stuff I’ve told you and a lot more, but I don’t want this time around to be based on *that* time around and I don’t want to waste time on things that aren’t going to happen when



there's plenty of stuff that *will* happen if we don't stop it. I'd rather just focus on the now for everything else."

He was trembling, but he nodded, running a hand down her arm. "Right," he said. "Whatever you want, Slayer. You know I'll give it." He paused, and when he spoke again, his voice broke a bit. "Just bloody guts me that anyone tried to hurt you like that."

"I know." And she did in ways he would never understand. "So... raincheck on sexy time in the shower?"

"You tell me when to cash it in, and I'm there with bells on."

Buffy nodded and kissed him again, nearly melting with relief. Honestly, she hadn't expected the subject to be this difficult to navigate around, but that had been foolish. It had defined so much of what had happened between her and Spike during their last year together, had been the catalyst for why he'd sought the soul in the first place. Any more slip-ups like this one and Spike was bound to start piecing things together, or at least asking questions that she wouldn't be able to navigate around.

Maybe she ought to see if there was another demon shrink in Sunnydale, just to get a handle on all this so she wasn't playing the balancing act herself. There was certainly no one in her friend circle she would trust with the information, and Dawn was absolutely out of the question.

If the last few months had taught her anything, it was that carrying the burden solo was a good way to crash and burn, and even the strongest people needed help some of the time.

Something to consider later, after she'd talked with the others. After they'd stopped Warren and had a plan in place for when the First made its move.

There were miles to go, and she'd barely started.



WALKING AROUND SUNNYDALE WAS BIZARRE. It was a place she dreamed about regularly, its corners and landmarks often exaggerated but always identifiable. Somewhat like the dreams she used to have of high school, where the halls were a bit off but she knew her way

around well enough. And when Spike opened the door for her to the Magic Box and gestured for her to precede him inside, she inhaled deeply and prepared for another trippy moment. She wasn't disappointed.

It was so familiar—all of it. The tinkling of the bell above the door, the shelves with their assorted knickknacks, the touristy stuff along the walls and the supplies for serious practitioners on full display—and when she saw Anya behind the register, she had to resist the urge to cry. That would just look weird.

Except a moment later when Tara came into view, Buffy's resistance melted. Spike must have smelled her tears, for he placed a hand at the small of her back, withdrew it almost at once, then touched her again, firmer this time. Like he was making a point.

"Uh, Buff?"

She turned to see Xander tucked in a corner by the register, and was momentarily shocked when he stared back with both eyes. Such a small change, but boy, it transformed his whole face.

He waved at her, his brow furrowed. "What's with the Evil Dead being all touchy-feely and you not being noseypunchy?"

Buffy looked over her shoulder at Spike, who offered a strained grin but didn't pull his hand back.

*Here we go.*

Only she didn't get a chance to start. Xander swore loudly and stormed over, seized her by the chin and tilted her head back to gawk at her throat.

"Oi," Spike snapped and tugged Buffy back against him. "Hands off."

It was likely a testament to his shock that Xander didn't smart back or do something stupid, like throw a punch. He just regarded Buffy like he'd never seen her before, shifting his gaze from her eyes to the mark and back again. At length, the astonishment faded, replaced with the more familiar righteous indignation that had defined him during this period of their lives. He aimed a glare at Spike, his lips twisting into a sneer, and barked, "What the hell did you do?"

"Nothin' she wasn't beggin' for, mate."

Buffy moaned inwardly. "All the ways you could have answered, and

you chose that one.”

“Callin’ me a liar, Slayer?”

“Calling you a moron.” She shook her head and, despite herself, tossed him a fond glance, warming when he just grinned unrepentantly. Awkward though this might be, she was glad to see some of his old swagger back—that he was owning what she’d told him yesterday and not treading on eggshells. Or, if he was, doing so with far heavier steps.

“It’s not true,” Xander said, shaking his head. “It can’t be true.” He looked back to her, silently imploring her to agree with him. “Buffy would never—”

“Buffy did. Buffy does. Buffy has for many months now,” Buffy replied. “And of all the things I have to tell you guys today, I cannot stress how very little this should matter to you.”

Xander blinked two—count ’em—horror-filled eyes. “Months? You’ve let that thing touch you for *months*? This is...” He shook his head again and threw a desperate look to Anya. “Did you know about this? Did *anyone* know about this?” Without waiting for an answer, he whipped back to Buffy. “Have you lost your mind? This is *Spike* we’re talking about. And you’re letting him *bite* you?”

“Well, to be fair,” Anya said, leaning on the counter, “vampire bites amplify the orgasms. It would be downright foolish to have sex with a vampire and not let them bite you.”

“That is *seriously* all you have to add to this?”

She furrowed her brow. “Am I supposed to add something else? I agree that Buffy fornicating with Spike is a new development but not too surprising.”

“Not too surprising?” Xander echoed shrilly. “How is this *not* surprising?”

“You thought she was boffing Spike as a result of Joyce’s death. It’s reasonable to assume that one’s own death and resurrection could cause a human to react just as poorly as the loss of a loved one.”

“Is that what’s happening here?” Xander turned back to Buffy. “We can get you help. Of the professional variety.”

The laugh tore from her lips before she had the chance to swallow it. “A couple of years early, Xan, but I appreciate the support.” She nodded at Anya. “She’s actually pretty on the money. But that’s only a

teeny part of an otherwise really long story, and it's not even valid anymore. I mean, yes, big with the trauma, but enough time has passed that I'm kind of... Well, not over it, but it's not driving my decisions anymore."

Tara had wandered forward, her brow furrowed. "Buffy?"

"All right," Buffy said, throwing up her hands. "One time for the class and then I am accepting a grand total of zero questions, comments, or suggestions on my love life. Yes, Spike and I are together. We have been for a while. I didn't tell you for reasons that are also no longer valid and I promise this is the smallest of the bombs I will be dropping today, so do yourselves a favor and get the hell over it. And if anyone wants to comment on my sanity or lack thereof, I promise I will make you regret it."

Xander just gaped at her like she was a pod person.

Anya shrugged and went back to tallying receipts.

Tara offered a small half-smile. "Are you happy?"

"More importantly, are you the Buffybot?" Xander asked, pressing his hands together. "Please tell me you're the Buffybot."

Spike swore and mumbled something she couldn't hear, but she could take a good guess.

"Yes to the happy, no to the Buffybot." She paused. "Well, we'll put an asterisk by the *happy*, too. I guess happy depends on how the next year or so goes. I'm definitely happier than I was yesterday and many days before that, but we have a lot to cover."

Xander stared at her for a moment, then started shaking his head again as he backed away. "I'm having a stroke," he muttered, rubbing his temples. "I'm having a stroke. I'm in the ambulance right now, on the way to the hospital, and this is my brain's way of trying to tell me something is wrong."

"All the abuse you give the thing, it's bloody bound to strike back one of these days," Spike drawled, rolling his eyes. "Tell you what, whelp, if this is some hallucination of yours, do us a favor and go right on havin' it. Workin' out swimmingly for me."

Xander made some sort of flailing motion and started toward Spike, his lips twisted into a sneer. "You evil—"

Buffy grabbed her friend by the collar and tugged hard enough to

rip his shirt. “Seriously with the knock it off,” she said shortly, then wheeled around to level a glare at Spike. “That means you too. Stop antagonizing him.”

“Sorry, pet. Can’t rightly help it. I’m an antagonist, after all.” He winked at her, still grinning, and though she was so incredibly serious and not in the mood to deal with the relationship-drama portion of today’s discussion, she knew he wouldn’t miss the way her lips twitched.

Apparently, Xander didn’t miss it, either. He looked between them, caught somewhere between disbelief and horror, before a long moan peeled off his lips and he dropped his face into his hands. “Can’t I please be having a stroke?”

Buffy snickered and released him, then went to stand beside Spike, who promptly started to preen. Eventually, the new would wear off and he’d go back to being his only mostly insufferable self, but hell, she guessed he’d earned this after all the abuse he’d been lobbed over the past couple of years. And she hadn’t really expected him to be on his best behavior to begin with. Wouldn’t be Spike if he wasn’t an ass most of the time.

So rather than chastise him again or roll her eyes at the stupid-satisfied smirk on his lips, Buffy turned to Tara and forced herself to focus. Because what she’d said was right—there were definitely more important things to discuss than her relationship status.

“I need everyone to hear this,” she said softly. “Things are coming and they are not good. I know you and Will are on the outs, but... Can you stay?”

Tara inhaled deeply but nodded. “Yes, of course.”

It would probably throw up all kinds of red flags if she started crying, not to mention get Xander all riled up all over again, so Buffy forced herself to fight through it. She really only wanted to tell this story the one time. Well, twice, counting when Giles arrived, but he had a head start, not to mention the Cliff’s Notes. And this was the important hurdle to cross, anyway. The world, not to mention the lives of three people standing in this room—and many more besides—depended on them understanding just exactly what was coming.

And she would take precisely zero chances.

BUFFY HAD KNOWN THIS WOULD BE HARD TO SWALLOW, BUT THE level of skepticism being aimed her way was totally uncalled for.

She had waited for Willow to get out of class, left to pick up Dawn from school and made tracks back, somewhat worried that Xander might come at Spike with a stake in her absence. She'd returned to find everything more or less as she'd left it—Xander glaring from his side of the shop and Spike goading him with smug looks, grins, and the occasional one-liner from the other.

Yeah, there had been really no chance that Spike would behave, but at least the big dope hadn't gotten himself dusted.

Once everyone was seated among the tables in the back of the Magic Box, though, it was time to get down to brass tacks and thankfully, Spike understood the seriousness of the situation well enough to shelve the obnoxious neener-neener mood. He gave Buffy a look of solid, always-have-your-back support, then parked on the staircase that led to the books of darker magic. Dawn joined him, all giggles and excitement, as Buffy had brought her up to speed on her relationship status the second they'd been alone. Since the last time Buffy had collected Dawn from school had come with the worst possible news, it

seemed only fair to lead with what she knew would be the only headline her sister would really care about.

Indeed, Dawn's pissy teenage angst attitude had vanished the second Buffy had shared that Spike was officially her boyfriend. And even though Buffy had evaded the approximately one billion questions Dawn had fired on the way to the Magic Box, her little sister had still been vibrating with glee when they arrived. And had promptly started firing off every one of those one billion questions to Spike, who had unexpectedly become rather demure from the attention, just grinning and winking whenever she tried to get him to talk.

Honestly, Dawn's reaction to this whole thing was the one bright side to this otherwise dumpster of a day. Except Buffy couldn't let Dawn's giddiness and schoolgirl romanticism distract her more than it already had—with everyone gathered, it was time to make with the reveal.

"All right, here's the deal." Buffy swallowed and steeled herself. "Yesterday for me was May 19, 2004. I'm kinda sorta from the future."

This announcement was greeted with a sea of blank, disbelieving stares paired with slack jaws. Still, even though she had expected it, she couldn't help but be a bit annoyed.

Buffy glanced at Spike. It had been his idea to be in the back—thought if he were out of sight, they'd focus more on what Buffy was saying and less on who she was doing. But hell, he was the only one who knew she wasn't out of her mind, and she could really use the moral support.

As though sensing the thought, Spike offered her a half-smile, and she felt herself calm.

Okay. She could do this. She could.

"Come on, guys," Buffy said, looking at them all in turn, "this really isn't that far out of the norm for us." She pinned her gaze on Anya who, to her credit, looked the least wigged of everyone present. "Would you tell them that time travel is possible?"

Anya lifted a shoulder. "It's possible. I'm just not sure how you managed it. Time travel is complicated and extraordinarily easy to mess up, especially for humans."

"Right, for humans," Buffy agreed, crossing her arms. "But not

demons. It's something that you could have done in your vengeance days."

"Well, yes. Make the right wish and anything is possible." Anya frowned. "Is that what happened? You made a wish? That can be very reckless, Buffy. Even for you. Most demons work an angle to benefit themselves in any wish they grant." A fond smile tugged at her lips. "It was the best part of the job."

Buffy snickered and shook her head, rubbing her brow. God, if she only knew. "Well, in my defense, I didn't know I was talking to a demon at the time."

"Ah, those are the best," Anya agreed wistfully. Xander threw her a somewhat nervous look, the kind he always wore whenever she danced a little too close to reminding him how she was only human by accident.

"Why don't you start from the beginning?" Willow offered. "Maybe it'll sound less crazy if we hear the full story."

"I wanna hear how you and Spike hook up!" Dawn said, then greeted the others with the patented-Summers *bring it* look when they shot her a series of glares.

God bless Dawn. And Buffy wouldn't deny her heart warmed when Spike grinned at her sister and patted her back fondly. Then he leaned over and whispered something that had the littlest Summers in a fit of giggles. Hopefully he'd shared nothing X-rated, or they'd have to have the boundaries talk.

"All right," Buffy said, hoping this time she could manage to tell the story linearly. "In a little more than two years, Angel is going to jump-start the apocalypse. Or *an* apocalypse, in our case. Actually, kinda on the vague whether or not it was just a stupid idea or an apocalypse—we didn't get a ton of time to do the post-fight breakdown. We show up—I show up with an army of slayers and bail him out. But not everyone makes it."

She swallowed and glanced at Spike, then away again.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Willow said, waving her hands. "An army of slayers? As in more than just you and Faith?"

"Yeah. As in an army. Let's come back to that." Well, this linear-storytelling thing was off to a great start. "At the post-war celebration,



there was a woman. She... I wasn't in the best mood and she seemed to just know it."

"You'd just saved the world for the umpteenth time and you weren't in a good mood?" Xander scowled and aimed a glare over his shoulder. "You had something to do with this, didn't you?" he snarled at Spike.

"Well, actually, yeah, he did, but not in the way you're thinking," Buffy said, straining to remain calm. "He'd died in front of me for the second time."

That stole the wind from Xander's sails. He whipped back, his brow furrowing. "Huh?"

Dawn scowled. "Spike is so not allowed to die." She turned and smacked his arm. "Don't do that."

"Oi!" Spike replied, though he was grinning broadly. "Not like I had it planned or what all."

"So you went back in time...for Spike?" Willow worried her lower lip between her teeth, shot a cautious glance to Tara before focusing again on Buffy. "Sorry," she said. "Just...a bit with the getting used to."

"You and me both, pidge," Spike muttered, though still grinning.

"Look, I'm not going to say this again," Buffy said, knowing full well that she would, in fact, say it again. Many times, likely, given how often it took her friends hearing something for it to sink in. "Two years is a lot of time and a lot can change. A lot *does* change. I'm sorry if that's weird for you, but I really don't want to be stuck repeating myself on this when there are actual problems and things we need to try to stop. In my timeline, Spike died next May. He did it while saving the world, so Xander, you can can-it with the happy dance. Nineteen days later, he's back...only in Los Angeles. Angel convinces him to stay there."

"Can we do that?" Xander asked brightly. "Ship him off to Angel? Why haven't we thought of that before?"

"Oi, you pillock," Spike barked, "sittin' right here, aren't I? And if you lot think you couldn't get rid of me before, just bloody try it now that the Slayer's told me she loves me."

Buffy felt her face go hot as everyone turned back to her, wearing identical looks of shock. Well, shock and horror, in Xander's case. He started rubbing his temples and muttering again about having a stroke.

“So it’s love?” Willow asked. “You didn’t mention that last night.”

“You knew about this last night?” Xander demanded. “Next time, Will, maybe give me some warning.”

Dawn practically vibrated with joy. Which was good—maybe she could ride this high long enough to not blow a gasket when Buffy brought the hammer down on her teenage thievery.

Ugh. More bad conversations. Buffy rolled her head back, begging the universe for patience. “Yes, I love Spike. Though at the moment I am trying very hard not to throw something at him because this meeting is *not* about us.”

“Slayer, hate to break it to you, but your chums aren’t gonna let you talk about anythin’ else until you have this out. Story was hard enough for me to swallow, and you know how bloody closed-minded some of your mates can be.” Spike aimed a meaningful glare at the back of Xander’s head, then looked back to her with a small shrug. “Sorry,” that shrug said. And she felt her irritation die almost immediately because of course he was right. There had been little to no hope that any of them, especially Xander, would roll with the punches just because she’d asked them to.

Buffy nodded to show she understood, and he offered her a soft smile.

“Closed-minded,” Xander repeated. “So it’s closed-minded to think my friend has lost her mind being involved with another vampire—one who was trying to kill us not too long ago?”

“Xander, I love you, but good god, do you even hear yourself?” Buffy waved to Anya, who blinked and gave her a befuddled wave back. “Need I remind you that you took your fiancé to the prom within weeks of her trying to get us all sucked into some universe where you and Willow were vampires?”

Xander went a bit purple in the face area. “That was different,” he said through clenched teeth.

“How?”

“It... She was human!”

“Yes, she was human. And she, as a human, tried to trick Willow into opening a portal to some hell world.”

"I would have done it on my own but I didn't have my powers," Anya replied defensively.

"This is not about Anya!" Xander snapped. "This is about you boinking the Evil Dead. Again!"

"It's not about Anya, you're right," Buffy replied, folding her arms. "It's about you having double standards when it comes to demons. All of us, actually, having double standards when it comes to demons. Spike has changed more in the last year than *you* have, Xander. If the only reason you're holding his past over him is because he's a demon, but you're willing to forgive and forget where others like Anya are concerned, that says more about you. Hell, in order to save the world, I had to forgive Faith for not only trying to kill me, but hijacking my body, screwing my boyfriend, trying to help the Mayor end the world, and that's not even getting into how she tried to kill Angel and succeeded in killing others."

"Faith?" Tara frowned. "Isn't she in prison? Was she a part of the slayer army?"

"Well, in the current *when*, she's in prison. In the *when* I'm from, no. She busts out because of Angel. Or rather, he goes soulless and she's needed to help hunt him down."

Spike stiffened at that and shot her a pointed look, one she didn't understand until her mind pulled her back to the conversation they'd had that morning. About the vampire who cornered her in the bathroom. How he'd asked if it had been Angelus. And had she replied? She couldn't remember. But she did know that she hadn't mentioned that, by the way, Angelus *had* made a reappearance. Mainly because she'd forgotten that he had. Since it hadn't involved her or dead teachers left as morbid love letters to her Watcher, it had been an easy thing to slip from her mind.

"Angel goes soulless? Is *that* why you're boinking Spike?"

Buffy wrinkled her nose, not wanting to know but knowing she needed to ask. "Xander, how in the world are those two things even remotely connected?"

He shrugged. "You have a thing for the undead. One of them goes homicidal when you have sex. The other *can't*."

“Oh for the love of... No, that is not what happened with Angel,” Buffy snapped. “I don’t even know the full story of what happened with Angel because we were kinda of the busy with our own crap. Something about a big baddie who knew Angel as Angelus, but Angel had no memory of him. So Wesley—of all people—decided that removing Angel’s soul might *improve* a situation where there was one unstoppable supervillain on the loose, which only goes to show you how very much not present he was the first time around. They tried to do it safely, which I still find hilarious, but in a big twist that everyone saw coming, Angelus got out and Faith was the best bet to wrangling him so Willow could shove his soul back up his ass.” She finished on a gasp, having run out of air. “Angel has nothing to do with Spike and me or why we’re together. But since you guys are so clearly not going to drop this, here’s the most I’ll say on the subject: getting pulled from Heaven was awful. I tried to hide how awful it was to spare your feelings, even after you found out, but I was not dealing well. Spike was the only person I could really stand to be around at all. That turned into something, which turned into something else. By the time he died the first time, we were as close to being in a real relationship as I’d ever thought we’d get. When he came back, though, Angel did what Angel *always* does and in his my-way-is-the-best-way convinced him that I deserved a normal life so I didn’t learn that Spike was back among the undead until about two seconds before I saw him dust during Angel’s stupid maybe-apocalypse. That’s why I was sad—well, pissed beyond the telling of it. This woman came up to me while the girls were celebrating, asked me why I wasn’t in a party-mood and somehow I ended up blurting the whole damn story. Last thing I remember was saying something to the effect of, ‘I just wish I’d had the chance to make things right’ and *poof*, next thing I knew, I was...”

Well, getting the daylights fucked out of her. Buffy shook her head, glanced at Spike who greeted her that damned sexy smirk of his and a wink. Thankfully, no one saw him...except Dawn, who wrinkled her nose and slapped his arm again.

“That does sound like a vengeance demon,” Anya said, nodding. “Even if the *vengeance* part is on the vague side, sometimes we take what we can get.” Then her eyes brightened. “Oh, it might have been a

friend of mine. A warzone would be perfect for Halfrek. Ample opportunity to strike bargains.”

“It wasn’t.”

Anya frowned. “Do you even know Hallie?”

“Not well, but we met a couple of times.” The first time being rather soon. “Actually, I think she might be in town.”

“She is,” Xander muttered. “Not really missable, that one.”

Anya scowled at him.

Buffy sighed and turned to Dawn. “While we’re on the subject, by the way, maybe not with the wishing things aloud?”

Dawn’s face fell. “Excuse me? She who literally just—”

“Yes, she who literally just. Just because this time seems to have gone hitchless doesn’t mean that they will in the future.”

“Hitchless so far as you know,” Anya added. “Like I said, most demons would work in an angle for themselves in granting a wish of any kind.”

“Plus, knowing the future? Are we sure that’s a good?” Willow asked, glancing at Tara, then quickly away. “I mean, sure, there are things we’d all like to change but... Buffy, we saw just how badly my magic screwed things up for me. I’m not sure trying to change things is the right answer.”

Yeah, she’d thought that argument might come up, if not now then definitely when Giles’s plane touched down and they had their face-to-face conversation about all this. Magic has consequences, the danger of messing with time, blah, blah, blah. Maybe she was being reckless or stupid, but given how very bad their lives were on track to get without divine intervention, she wasn’t too worried about making things worse.

“Will,” she said in a calm, measured tone, “in the future I came from, Sunnydale is gone. It’s a crater. And...certain people are dead.”

“Yes, Spike,” Anya agreed. “But—”

“Not just Spike,” Buffy said, and leveled her with the most intent-filled stare she could without outright saying the words.

It took a moment, but Anya straightened, her eyes going wide. “Xander? Is Xander dead in the future?” She grabbed Xander’s hand. “We have to save Xander.”

Xander, for his part, looked a bit chagrined but not unhappy about her concern. He patted her hand with his free one. "Ahn—"

"It wasn't Xander," Buffy said softly. "Not *Xander*. Though he does lose an eye."

Spike barked an uncharitable laugh at that, and this time earned a glare from everyone, even Dawn. "Sorry," he said, bringing up his hands, his lips twitching. "Not funny."

"It's me, then." Anya whirled back to Buffy. "I am dead in the future. And Xander loses an eye." She took a moment to study Xander as though one of his eyes would just mosey on out of his head while she was watching. "I'd like very much to avoid that future. I can't die right after I get married."

Willow shifted a bit, her brow still furrowed. "Just the fact that Buffy has traveled through time might have changed that, though. You know, the butterfly effect? We might not need to do anything to keep certain things from happening. It's better—"

"Not just Anya either," Buffy said. "The Buffybot guy, Warren? He..." She licked her lips and glanced at Tara. There was just no good way to prepare someone for the news that they'd been killed. And though she had a new appreciation for Anya—especially given the time she and Xander had spent bonding over their respective losses—she'd always been closer to Tara, and that hadn't changed. "Tonight or tomorrow, he's going to kill his girlfriend. I don't think it's on purpose, but she's definitely going to die. He goes from being a nuisance to dangerous and someone else dies. One of us."

Willow sat up a bit straighter. "Who?" she asked, though the tremble in her voice said she already knew.

Buffy tried not to, but she couldn't keep her eyes from going back to Tara, who looked somewhat startled but was otherwise taking the knowledge of her imminent death with the sort of grace only Tara could manage.

Would it matter, telling them the rest? That Willow would kill a man in cold blood before trying to end the world? Or was that like the bathroom incident, in which nothing good could come of it? Except maybe it *was* essential because Willow couldn't be cut off from magic, as Giles had explained some time ago. She needed to learn how to

manage it responsibly, especially if the only way to defeat the First was still by triggering the Potential in every would-be slayer on the globe.

No, she had to tell them this part. There really was no comparison between what Spike had done and what Willow had done—Willow's actions affected more than just herself. And in order for them to understand why it was important that Willow start practicing again, they'd have to know the hows and whys, as well as the dangers involved.

"Warren tries a lot of stuff. It culminates with a robbery that I bust up, which is apparently the final straw for him. He comes at me with a gun. I get shot." She held up a hand to stave off the horrified gasps that meet this pronouncement. "A bullet goes awry and hits someone else." Those damn tears were back. Buffy inhaled deeply and grasped at her throat. "Tara..."

"No!" Willow jumped to her feet, static flying off the ends of her hair. She apparently didn't notice. "No, no, no, no."

"Yeah," Buffy replied, wiping at her eyes. "And that's just the start. Willow, you kinda...go off the deep end. You do end up saving my life, but when you learn it was Warren who shot her, you... Well, you hunt him down and kill him."

The look in Willow's eyes spoke plainly that she didn't see the bad in this, which in itself was troubling.

"Then you decide to hunt down Jonathan and Andrew and kill them too. I try to get between you and them and, well... There's a lot that happens. Short version is, Giles has perhaps the best timing ever to keep you from killing me and Anya—"

"Buffy, I would never—"

"Will, I lived it. You did. You said specifically that nothing mattered after Tara died and if we were standing in the way of Warren's accomplices, we were collateral damage." Buffy crossed her arms, this time avoiding looking at Spike because she knew she hadn't shared this much with him. "Giles shows up—this coven in England got wind of what was going to happen, juiced him with magic and sent him to see if he could get you under control. He manages for a bit but, well, you're too strong. You drain him of that magic and it... It makes

you feel, everything. So much of everything that you decide to end the world.”

At this, Xander started to laugh. No, not just laugh. Outright cackle. He keeled forward, gripping his knees, hearty guffaws racking through his body. Willow looked at him for a moment before starting to laugh too, some of the shock in her eyes fading. Whatever the joke was, though, no one else seemed to get it. Anya just looked alarmed and somewhat wary of Willow, and Tara seemed torn between horror and heartbreak. It was a space Buffy knew well.

“Good Jiminy Christmas, Buff, you almost had me there,” Xander said when he drew upright again, his face red and his eyes shiny with tears. “Willow trying to end the world? Our Willow? Giles being a magic-wielding bad-ass? That’s... Oh man, that’s the funniest damn thing I’ve heard all month. Make that year.”

“I can’t tell you how much I am not kidding,” Buffy said. “Willow went off the deep end—she consumed the power from the black magic books and also went to that Rack guy to drain him as well. All she cared about was killing Jonathan and Andrew. If we were in the way, so be it.”

“Is that how I die?” Anya demanded, shooting to her feet. “Willow kills me?”

“No,” Buffy assured her quickly because though Anya had yet to get her vengeance back on, the look in her eyes screamed murder. “No. You die... Well, actually, saving Andrew’s life. The same Andrew but not from Willow.”

“I don’t like it,” Anya blurted.

“Who the hell is Andrew?” Willow demanded. “I don’t even know this guy!”

“Tucker’s brother,” Buffy replied. “Of hellhound fame. Remember prom night?”

“He had a brother?”

“Yes, and the brother is part of the trio that’s been screwing with us all year. Along with Jonathan.” She was still a moment, then brought up her hands. “Will, you went after Glory on a suicide mission after what she did to Tara. Are you telling me you can’t see yourself doing



the same thing to the person who kills her or anyone you think might be to blame?"

"I'm off magic now," Willow replied, her previous mirth having vanished outright. She looked to Tara, whose expression remained inscrutable. "I haven't touched it. Well, I touched it—Amy kinda dosed me with magic the other day because she knew I was trying to not use it and wanted to get back at me for not figuring out how to de-rat her before I did, but I didn't use it. I didn't. And I so could have—this was when all that happened at Doublemeat Palace. It was so hard but I didn't fall back on it. I didn't. And I wouldn't—"

"You don't until Tara is killed," Buffy said softly. "That's what tips you over. All you care about is revenge. Until Giles shows up and you steal his borrowed magic and then all you care about is ending the world."

Willow was shaking her head, tears skating down her cheeks. "No. *No*, that can't be right. I would never do that. I would *never*—"

"You do. Well, you try. The magic you steal from Giles is high on empathy. I said it makes you feel everything, and it does—all the pain of everyone in the world. That's why you decide to end it. You think it's a mercy."

"Buffy, please. No."

"This is insane," Xander announced, drawing to his feet. "And anyone who believes this is insane. I'm sorry, Buffy McFly, but I must call bullshit on pretty much everything. So you're screwing the undead again because you've clearly lost your mind and are trying to deflect by making *Willow* the bad guy? There's no way this is even remotely possible and that you'd try to get me or any of us to believe it—"

"I believe it," Anya said.

Well, that stole Xander righteous indignation. He blinked and glanced down at his fiancé. "What?"

"I believe it." Anya shrugged, and though she looked a bit uncomfortable at the way Xander was staring at her, she didn't back down. "I was a vengeance demon, so of course I can believe this. Live long enough and nothing seems out of the realm of possibility. We all know how much Willow loves Tara, how Tara being hurt has made her go on full magical benders in the past. It makes sense to me."

Xander gawked at her a moment longer, then broke away and shook his head. "Ahn, I love you, but shut up."

"Hey!" Tara snapped, aiming a glare at Xander. "I believe it too."

Willow reeled as though she'd been slapped. "Tara..."

"I'm sorry, but I do," she said, blinking and fixing her gaze on the floor, pointedly not meeting Willow's eyes. "Buffy has no reason to lie to us. And we know that vengeance demons can grant wishes like the one she said she made. And Willow..." She drew her lower lip between her teeth. "I can believe it. Believe that you'd...become so overwhelmed that you'd lose control. It hurts to think about but if something happened... Yes, I can see it. A-and I think you can, too." She drew in a breath before finally looking at Willow head-on. "I think you can."

Willow stood still for a long moment—well, still but trembling all the same. After a moment, she lowered her head and nodded. "Yeah," she said in a choked voice. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Buffy moved without thinking, throwing her arms around her friend and pulling her into a tight hug. "You haven't done anything to be sorry for," she said. "And you won't. Okay?"

It was like hugging a statue at first, and then, slowly, Willow softened and nodded.

"I still say this is nuts," Xander proclaimed, looking wildly around the room in search of an audience. "Willow would never—"

"Did I mention the part where you save the world, Xan?" Buffy asked, not breaking from the hug. "You were the only one who could. Got through to her by mentioning a yellow crayon she broke in kindergarten."

Willow choked a sob and hugged Buffy tighter. For his part, Xander looked floored.

"I wasn't there for the speech—kinda battling the undead at the time, but from your many, many retellings, it came down to you loved her no matter what. And if the world was gonna end, you were gonna be with her when it did." Buffy pulled back at last, taking in her friend's stunned expression. "It was quite the hero moment. Sorry I kinda cheated you out of that, but there are things I don't want to happen this time around, and you don't either."

Xander just blinked at her, floundering. At length, he nodded, and that seemed to be the end of that.

And something in Buffy sagged. *Thank god.*

"It won't happen," Willow agreed thickly before sniffing and turning her reddened eyes to Tara. "None of it will happen. None of it."

"Well, some of it will," Buffy said. "Unless we can figure out a way to stop the First from rising, but I think the ship has sailed on that."

"The First?" Willow echoed, wiping at her cheeks. "The First what?"

"The First Evil. It was around a few years back, tried to get Angel to dust himself after he got his soul back. Nearly succeeded." She blew out a deep breath. "It can assume the form of anyone who is dead or has died. And it gains power because, well... Because of the resurrection spell. There's an anomaly in the Slayer line because of me."

"Because of the resurrection?" Willow furrowed her brow. "But... Buffy, you died once before."

"And was brought back naturally. CPR to the rescue." She shook her head. "It's the unnatural resurrection that made it all wonky. But because of that, the First gets enough power to try and wipe out the entire Slayer line. We become home base for all Potential slayers, and in the end, use this weapon imbued with slayer-y goodness, to make any girl who has the potential to be a slayer into one. Hence why we had an army in Los Angeles. And...that's how Spike dies. Fighting the First Evil, care of a magical amulet on loan to us from Angel. Sunnydale collapses." Buffy frowned. "Well, the Scythe should be here already. I can grab that and have it from the get-go, which might help turn things in our favor. Especially when that Caleb guy shows up."

Willow frowned. "Caleb?"

There was too much—so much more to tell them, and Buffy needed time to recuperate. She shook her head to clear it, then turned back to the others.

"One thing at a time," she said, forcing a smile. "Giles will be here soon—I called him. He knows about the time travel and the First, though I gave him the extreme Cliff's Notes version. I'll need him to

do something once he gets here—and that’s a conversation for Willow and Tara.”

Tara offered a stoic nod, whereas Willow looked worried again, but Buffy didn’t want to get into that now. She wasn’t sure if it was still necessary for Willow to take her sojourn across the pond, but that might be for the best. If Tara went with her, there was little chance a stray gunshot could end her life prematurely.

And Tara would want to go, of that Buffy was certain. Because she loved Willow—loved her enough to know when to step back, when she was being her own worst enemy. She would continue to love her even knowing what came in the timeline they were now erasing, and she’d want to be there to lend her support.

“Right now,” Buffy continued, “the important thing is we have time to prepare, and time to stop some of the bad that happens between now and then.” Buffy turned to Tara again. “Starting with Warren. I know where he lives. This guy needs to be behind bars like *now*. If we can reach Jonathan, I’m pretty sure I can convince him to help us. Toward the end, he wanted out, saw that Warren needed to be stopped. Andrew is probably a lost cause still... He’s kinda in love with Warren.” She paused before aiming a grin at Spike. “Then you.”

Spike blinked at her before shaking his head, snickering. “Bloke’s got good taste at least, but turns out I’m a taken fella.”

“You bet your sweet bippy.”

He grinned widely at that, and Dawn broke into a fit of giggles.

Xander groaned, the bewildered look on his face fading back into disgust. “Seriously. Can’t it be a stroke? I really don’t think I can handle cutesy talk between those two.”

“Shut up. It’s sweet,” Dawn snapped.

“I can’t handle *sweet*. It’s still Spike we’re talking about.”

“Xander,” Buffy said, crossing her arms, “I really need you to get over this. Or at the very least, accept that it’s happening and that my personal life is not up for committee vote. Namely because you were one of the people who helped me realize that in the first place.”

This seemed to mystify him. “Huh?”

Buffy shrugged. “After Anya dies, you go to grief counseling.”

“As well he should,” Anya agreed somewhat shrilly. “I am not an

easy person to just let die. And I'm not dying this time." She glared around the room as though daring someone to defy her.

Buffy smirked, but it faded when she turned back to Xander. "You convince me to do the same. Grief counseling, because you know how much I miss him, even though I won't admit it." She blew out a breath. "One of the last conversations we had in my time was you apologizing to me for being extra with the judgmental. You thought a lot of things—this year specifically—might have gone differently if you hadn't, and not just for me."

Well, if she was looking for a way to break Xander, she thought she might have found it. He opened his mouth but no sound came out, and the animosity in his eyes faded for something she hadn't seen there much until this last year—the beginnings of introspection.

Might be hope for him after all.

"All right then," she said, and looked to Spike. "Time to bring the hammer down on Warren Mears."

TRACKING DOWN WARREN WAS BEYOND EASY. ALMOST TOO EASY.

After sending Dawn home with Willow, Buffy and Spike set out for the Trio's lair. According to what she'd been able to glean from Andrew about this night, the murder—or manslaughter, as Andrew had declared—had happened after Warren had used some device on Katrina to get her back to their lair with the intention of raping her. Though Andrew had been adamant that he would never have done such a thing, he hadn't looked too convinced of his own protestations. Regardless of his sexuality, Andrew had hung the moon on whatever Warren said or did. If Warren had wanted him to violate his ex-girlfriend, Andrew, at the time, would have been all too happy to oblige.

Spike picked the lock when no one answered. He hadn't been too chatty since they'd left the Magic Box, and Buffy was too singularly focused to ask. After the door was open, though, he stood aside and let Buffy in ahead of him, and she caught the look in his eyes. Something was definitely up.

"You've been here before," Buffy said. "Right? I don't need to find a family member to invite you in?"

He shook his head. "Not sure this is a home, pet. Rules don't apply to lairs like they did his home. Went by there a couple of times, actu-

ally. To place the order for your robo twin, and then a few months back, after I sussed out I could hit you. Needed someone to run some tests and this wanker came to mind." At her look, he shrugged and broke his gaze from hers. "Wagered somethin' was off with the chip. Tried to take a nibble of someone and—"

"You what?" She hadn't known this, and hearing it made her stomach plummet.

Spike rubbed the back of his neck. "Don't even know I wanted to, to be honest," he muttered. "You'd brassed me off, dodgin' me when I tried to talk about those kisses. Knocked me down, too, and when I hit you back and nothin' happened... I dunno, Slayer. Had to talk myself into even tryin' to take a bite of the bird. Wasn't sure what I was then. Bloody hell, not sure what I am now."

Buffy swallowed, pushing her apprehension aside and taking a step toward him. "You tried to kill someone this year, when the chip—"

"No," he said, his voice firm. "Or...fuck me, I don't know. I knew what I wanted and that was you. Knew if I hurt someone you'd stake me, but honestly, love, there were times I thought that might be far kinder. Bein' so close but not close enough. If the chip *had* shorted out, I at least had the option of movin' on. Gettin' away from Sunnyhell once and for all, back to my old self. Wasn't what I wanted, but the choice to do it..." Spike sighed and rolled his head back, his shoulders slumping. "That do it, then? You said I'm not a monster anymore just last night. Reckon you might wanna rethink that."

She was quiet for a moment, considering. Yeah, hearing that Spike had tried to bite someone—with or without knowing his own intentions—so close to the start of their affair left her a bit shaken. At the time, Spike hadn't known where he fit in anything, much less her life. And he hadn't had the support or understanding she was determined to give him now. He'd been robbed of the only life he'd known and denied the life he was trying to build. No small wonder an identity crisis had occurred in the midst of that.

But she also couldn't brush it off and pretend it hadn't happened, or that it wasn't anything to worry about. Next year, the chip *would* fail, and it'd fry his brain in the process. And though she hadn't given the matter much thought, Buffy somehow knew her go-to instinct would

have been to remove the damned thing once and for all, same as she had the last time.

But if Spike could hurt people and she and he, say, got into an argument, could she trust that he wouldn't go off and start munching on civilians? She wanted to believe so but wasn't certain, and she hated that she wasn't.

"Spike," she said softly, "what happens when the chip is out?"

He swung his head toward her, eyes wide and hopeful. "The chip comes out? When?"

"Next year. It starts short-circuiting and I give the okay to have it removed."

"Well, what happened last time?"

Buffy bit her lower lip, not wanting to say but knowing she had to. "You had a soul then."

The light she saw in his face faded a bit, but he nodded just the same. "Ah, so you didn't have to worry about me," he said. "Had other means to make sure ole Spike stays leashed."

"Spike—"

"What you're askin' is if I'm gonna go back on the good stuff. Start munchin' on townies, 'cause getting staked by the woman I love sounds like a rippin' fun time." He narrowed his eyes into a glare. "Are you off your bird?"

"No. No, but I *have* to ask that. You know I do."

"Said you loved me and I wasn't all that different from the version you knew with a soul. Would *he* go off and start picking off the locals?"

Great. She'd made him mad without even trying. Buffy exhaled slowly, willing herself not to embrace her own irritation. The last thing either of them needed was to start fighting now, as they waited for Warren and the dastardly duo to return from their evil outing. But damn, she'd forgotten just how effortlessly Spike got under her skin, especially like this. There were definitely things about him that she'd missed, things that had faded after he'd sought his soul, but this was not one of them. How he was always on the defensive, quick to anger when he sensed the conversation might swing toward territory he considered well and truly treaded.

"Spike," Buffy said in a forced calm, "these are things we have to



talk about. I'm sorry, but you know that. Especially going forward—you and me together, in a real relationship, where I'm not making all the calls and we're figuring things out together. But when it happens next year, when the chip starts misfiring, I don't want to tell the commando guys to fix it. I want to be able to tell them to take it out. But I'm the Slayer, and I *have* to think about these things."

He stared at her for a moment, his expression inscrutable. It was truly unfair how he could do that—be so easy to read one second and a closed book the next. After a long beat, he breathed out and looked away, some of the hard lines on his face softening.

"I'd never hurt you," he said in a small voice. "You think I don't know what would hurt you? Me hitting the good stuff, making you hunt me the way you did your ex honey-pot. Wouldn't ever put you in that place, love." He paused. "Can't promise I'll be perfect, 'cause we both know that's rubbish. Might get cornered—more super soldiers around aimin' to do science experiments on yours truly and the like. I went out that night to steal a bite because I didn't know whether I could or not, and fuck, Slayer, it's what I'm *supposed* to do, isn't it? Be a monster? A killer? All I was told I could be, even after the chip. Even after I realized I'd lost my head for you. If I can't be a monster and I'm not good enough to be anythin' else, what the bloody hell is there? I didn't know. That's why I had to talk myself up to even try."

Buffy closed the space between them, took his face between her hands and pulled him down for a kiss. A long, slow kiss—the type that did its own sort of talking. The situation in her own head was a little confused, but maybe she didn't need to have the answers just yet.

And he was right, of course. By this point in their relationship, Spike had been insistent for more than a year that he'd changed, and she hadn't allowed herself to consider that as a real possibility until after Glory had tried to torture the stuffing out of him. Even then, the allowances she'd given him had been rather minute. She'd trusted him to protect Dawn—she still did. She'd trusted him to fight with her, for her, be there whenever she needed him. And a lot of that had changed once she'd come back from the dead. She'd known he loved her, that he would do whatever he could for her, but even after she'd started giving in to her darker fantasies, she'd maintained the line that he

wasn't good enough. Things she'd said to him while truly speaking to herself. She'd denied his humanity every time he'd gotten too close. So yeah, if he'd thought for a second the thing keeping him from being the thing she said he was had stopped working...

"Spike, I want the chip out," she said. "For a lot of reasons, but the foremost being, it's not fair to you to keep it in. You need to know that my loving you isn't conditional on whether or not you have a chip or a soul or both. And...for us to work, there has to be trust, right?"

He didn't say anything, kept his gaze on the ground.

"And I know how you feel about trust. That it's for...old marrieds, or whatever it was you told me."

Spike swung his head upward. "When'd I say that?"

In the bathroom that night. Buffy crossed her arms and shivered. "Sometime after this when," she replied in a careful, neutral voice. "After I'd ended things. I told you I had feelings for you but they weren't love, and they never would be because I couldn't trust you."

He nodded and looked away again.

"You told me love was wild and passion, not trust. I'm telling you right now it's both. I *need* both. I can't have one without the other. Which means I *have* to trust you." She lowered her gaze to his chest, started playing her fingers along the collar of his T-shirt. "I do trust you. I trust you not to hurt me and I trust you to know what that means. And...whatever happened before... We don't know how things might have gone had I not kept pushing you away. If you'd learned the chip didn't work... Maybe you would have kept it from me even then—"

"Slayer—"

"It's possible. Maybe even probable, if you thought the chip was the only way you could have me, you'd try to pretend like it was still working." She met his eyes again. "Wouldn't you?"

He just looked at her, his jaw tight and the answer in his eyes.

"Things like that, things you think might mean the end of this, I need to know," Buffy said. "We will work out whatever hits us together, you and me. If you try to keep things from me... I'm going to find out. And it's going to hurt—hurt a whole lot worse than it would have if you'd just been upfront. I *want* this to work and I will fight for it, but I

need to know you'll fight for it too. That you'll believe in me—believe in us—enough to tell me everything, even the bad stuff.”

Spike was quiet, studying her again with that annoyingly inscrutable gaze. Then he cracked a small smile, huffed a laugh and shook his head.

“Gonna take some time, pet,” he said. “Knowin’ you won’t just melt away from me. Can’t promise I’ll make all the right calls, but I’ll try. Might make a right mess outta things still, and yeah, the thought that I could scares me stupid.”

“It scares me too,” Buffy said. “Hell, everything about being back here terrifies me. But it’s a good scared. A scared I think you and I can manage if you trust me with the big stuff.”

“Big stuff like what happened with a vamp in a bathroom?” Spike shot back, startling her so much she was surprised when her legs didn’t give out from under her. Maybe she was stupid or naïve or both, but she hadn’t seen this coming.

In all likelihood, it only took a second or so to recover, but it felt like an eternity. Buffy drew in a breath, trying for calm even though she knew he could tell she was anything but. Her racing heart would have given her away.

“Gonna trust me with that?” Spike asked, his voice a bit softer now. “Tell me who it was.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“So it is someone I know, then. Woulda been easy enough for you to say it wasn’t.”

Damn. Buffy swallowed and looked away. “Spike, it really doesn’t matter. Trust me when I say that.”

“Trust you when you can’t trust me with it? Afraid of what I might do?” He edged closer a step, and yeah, there was a dangerous glint in his eyes. “Noticed how you didn’t tell me when I asked if it was Angelus. And you left out that the soul got ripped away from the great wanker sometime down the line.”

At that, Buffy’s pulse jumped, and though she knew not to count her chickens just yet, she couldn’t help the welcoming wave of relief that washed through her at the question. That would definitely explain why he’d been so quiet on the walk here, if he were mulling over the

possibility that Angelus was the culprit and she was keeping quiet to protect Angel.

A decision cemented within her then, one that flew right past her internal filters and turned into action before she could rethink it.

“Yes,” she said. “Angelus. It was Angelus.”

Once the words were out, she found herself slammed with a potent wave of relief that it was over—that she wouldn’t have to dance around it so much—and guilt because, even though Angelus definitely would have tried to rape her, he hadn’t. She didn’t really care about saddling him with the crime—it wasn’t something Angel would find shocking were word to get back to him—but she knew she’d crossed some line just now that she might one day regret crossing. There wasn’t a trail for Spike to follow to find the truth, of course, but Buffy understood better now than she ever had how the small things became big things. And despite understanding how much the truth would have hurt him, she couldn’t help but feel like a hypocrite, especially after the lines she’d just drawn.

This would be the only transgression.

Spike stared at her for a long moment, breathing hard in that way of his, his jaw clenched and his eyes flashing gold. He balled his hands into fists, every inch of him positively vibrating.

“Spike—”

“That why you weren’t in it? The hunt to find him? Why you let the other Slayer take charge?”

No, but there was no explaining that Buffy hadn’t even learned about Angel’s soulless stint until it had been near its conclusion and Willow had left to perform the spell that had kicked off her witchy career. There had been too much going on here for her to be involved with whatever happened in LA, and it certainly wasn’t like she and Angel compared notes all that much. Seeing him had been too painful.

Well, that wasn’t the way it was now. Buffy nodded again. “Yeah. Umm, Wes called me first. I went to Los Angeles and...well, that happened.”

“And where was I?” Spike demanded. “I let you do that on your lonesome? Knowin’ how hard it was for the first time? Knowing *him* the way I do? Some bloody soul.”

*In for a penny.* As long as she was making stuff up...

"I needed you to stay here," she replied. "Earlier, what I said about the First? So wasn't kidding. I couldn't afford to let more people leave here, especially when I wasn't sure who all I trusted. So with me and Willow being gone, I needed someone I trusted here. I needed *you* here. You wanted to come but you understood that you couldn't."

Buffy turned away from him before he could see something more in her eyes—something that might give the game away. Her gut twisted and her chest ached, and even though she knew this was for the best, she hated herself a little bit. And that was something she hadn't done since the last time she'd been here. When she'd last told a convenient lie to spare the feelings of the people she loved.

What hurt more, though, was how easily this could have been true. If Wesley had called to tell her that Angel was running around sans soul and they needed help, she might have well dropped everything to go hunt him down. She would have definitely told Spike to stay put—soul or no soul—because he was the strongest one of them once she and Willow were out of the equation. And had she hunted down Angelus... Yeah, he might well have tried to rape her. Only he would have known what he was doing the entire time, relished in it, and wouldn't have stopped unless she'd stuck a stake in his chest. That could have just as easily been the story about the vampire in the bathroom.

"Slayer, that happens this time around, and I'm bloody killing him." He was behind her then, gripping her shoulders. "You say I don't need a soul and I'll trust you're speakin' true, but that means knowin' that I won't sit here knowin' he hurt you and bein' fine and dandy just stuffing a soul back up his arse. It means I kill him."

The immediate thing that came to mind was asinine since this whole history was made up to start with. "You're not killing anyone."

"Buffy—"

"You're not. The end. We're not talking about this anymore. What happened happened but it also *didn't*, okay? None of the things I've talked about have happened and none of them have to this time around."

Except she did think they needed Faith and wasn't sure what the deal with the baddie in Los Angeles had been, so it might be that Angelus would need to make an appearance after all. She'd just have to warn Wesley to be extra cautious. Though if Angelus didn't get loose, there was no need to bust Faith out of the big house, and a bunch of other stuff went up in the air.

God, her head hurt.

"I know he's your great big love," Spike said—or rather snarled, "but he hurts you like that, he gets close enough, I'm not gonna hold back. That brassy you off, fine, but I watched what he did to Dru and it'll be a cold bloody day in hell before I let that happen to you. If his sodding soul is so loose, might be better just to dust him and have it over with."

Buffy sighed, annoyance warring with understanding. Convenient lie that it had been, Spike already had plenty of reasons to hate Angel without bringing her into the mix. Add in assault and it was no small wonder he was being unreasonable.

"He's not my great big love," she replied. "If he was, I'd be in LA."

"He's not because the two of you can't shag."

"He's not because I'm in love with *you*, you moron." She gave him a little shove to emphasize the point. "You got yourself a soul without a curse or an escape clause. If I wanted Angel, I'd have told him that, asked him to do the same. At least brought it to his attention that it was possible, if we wanted to be together. And yeah, the me who you knew yesterday would have told you that Angel remained the standard by which all boyfriends, future, and past, would be judged. And she would have meant it. But I am not that version of me anymore and I'm here with you."

At this, he seemed somewhat mollified. Somewhat but not all the way, which, yes, major with the annoyance.

"Still mighty convenient, though, innit?" he asked in a small voice. "Got one vamp who doesn't care if you age on me. Who will love you until the bloody end of time and be grateful for every second we have together. Word is that Angel thought you might start to hate his broody arse if he stayed young and pretty forever."

“Spike, in the when I came from, right after you died, Angel wasn’t a vampire anymore.”

He blinked at her. “No? How’d he manage that?”

“Some kind of prophecy about the vampire with a soul who saves the world gets to turn human.” Buffy couldn’t help it—she snorted. “Never mind the fact that Angel *started* this stupid apocalypse on his own, but... God, when I heard that, I was mad.”

“You were?”

“A vampire with a soul who saves the world gets to be human? And *Angel* collects the prize?” It was impossible to keep the bitterness out of her voice so she didn’t try. “Angel, who was cursed with a soul, not once but twice? Make that three times? And you, who went out and won one on your own? Who *wanted* to be... And who helped saved the world—outright did the saving—on multiple occasions. And managed to do that without starting an apocalypse of your very own in the process? You dust and Angel gets the big reward. In what world is that fair?”

She caught herself before the rant could go on, not surprised to see a glimmer of glee in Spike’s eyes. He’d never heard her rail against Angel before. And though she hated to kill it, she knew she had to before he started getting the wrong idea.

“I’m not saying I’m sorry he turned human,” she said, “or that I hate him. I don’t. I’m annoyed with him, but he’ll always be in my heart. But I don’t understand why he was chosen and you weren’t. Why you didn’t immediately come back as human after closing the Hellmouth. You were a better vampire than he was and, in a lot of ways, a better man, too. You never tried to control me or crowd me or pin your redemption on me. You never even tried to get back together when you came back all souled up. You just wanted to be here, to help.”

Spike was breathing heavily, again wearing the look he’d worn all the previous night. She’d seen a few shades of it today, but not like this. And she understood. Part of Spike would likely always live in Angel’s shadow, mostly because that was where he’d been told he belonged by her and so many others. Hearing he was superior to Angel in any form,

and especially from her, might have topped the revelation that she was in love with him.

"So when I say there will be no dusting of Angel," Buffy went on, "I don't mean it because I want him or because I love him or because you're my Angel stand-in. When I say I love you, it isn't conditional. I'm standing here right now as someone who knows, if things go the same way, Angel will be human and all the reasons we had for breaking up would be nipped in the bud. But he's not the one I want. That doesn't mean I'm going to be okay with him being killed over something his soulless self does. Okay?"

He held her gaze a moment longer before ultimately nodding. "Right then," he said, his voice a bit thick. "But Slayer, if things don't go as differently—or not differently enough—and he manages... You don't fight him off? Can't make any promises then. Sorry, but I can't."

Part of her wanted to keep arguing. A lot of her did, actually, but that was easy for her. Arguing on hypotheticals that she knew would never come to pass versus Spike believing that something like this had happened and might well happen again. There was also the memory there of how utterly furious she'd been with Giles once she'd realized he was distracting her for the sole purpose of killing Spike. A souled vampire that she'd relied on, trusted, and at that point—though she hadn't known it—loved, all because of some old grudge match and his belief that it was for the best. Had Robin succeeded in staking Spike, how would she have reacted?

She didn't know. It was a question that had cost her sleep more than once, but she wasn't sure what the answer would be. And she didn't have the impulses of a vampire guiding her thoughts and feelings, only the ones she'd been brought up with.

If Angel had found out about what had happened in the bathroom—something she'd skimped on telling him on purpose—then how would he have reacted?

That answer came to her quickly.

"Okay," Buffy said, rubbing her arms. "Okay."

"Yeah?"

"Well, I don't agree with it but we're not going to agree on everything. And since that *didn't* and *won't* happen, it's hard to say how I'd



feel if it did. But right now, standing here, having lived what I did live, I don't agree with it. And I'd try to stop you. But I'd understand why." She favored him with a soft smile, one that turned into an all-out grin at the look he gave her. "You really gotta stop doing that."

"Doing what?"

"Going all slack-jawed on me. I'm getting it enough from my friends, and survey says that's going to get worse before it gets better."

He smirked at that. "Give a fella a break. Wasn't but yesterday you'd have staked me just for suggestin' I off your ex, no matter what the reason."

"I know, I know. But still, with the gawking. Not the best way to make me feel less like a freak."

"Happens I fancy your freaky parts," he replied, the smirk turning seductive in that special way of his. He hesitated, then bent to capture her lips in a kiss that started chaste but, damn, she was still fresh off a drought and he was right here. Teasing her with his tongue, dragging her against his chest and doing things with his mouth that were so good they were evil, but in the best possible way.

Making out in a would-be killer's basement was probably not the best use of their time, but Spike had a way of zapping the sense right out of her. That was something, at least, that hadn't changed since the last time she'd been here—only rather than resent the hell out of it, Buffy threw herself into it with full gusto. Somehow, her hands ended up tunneled through his hair and her legs around his hips, and the ground was moving and she just knew in the next second, the wall would be at her back and he'd be well on his way to screwing her brains out.

The only thing that could have stopped her at this point was the fumbling sound on the other side of the basement door, accompanied by a slew of voices that, while muffled, were all too familiar.

Spike pulled back at the same time, growling low in his throat, and panted against her lips. "Bugger," he muttered, and she agreed.

"Later. Tonight."

"Better bloody believe it." He pressed a kiss to the corner of her mouth, then on her lips again, before pulling back with a groan and turning toward the door just as it swung open.

"I have just the perfect outfit for you," Warren was saying, his arm around Katrina, an odd, disturbingly vacant expression on her face. "You've always wanted to be a French maid, haven't you?"

Behind him, Jonathan and Andrew broke into a slew of giggles.

"Yes, Master," Katrina replied.

"This is so cool," Jonathan hissed. "Like, we can get her to do anything."

"Anything at all, boys," Warren agreed, an ugly, chipper smile stretching his face.

The sparks that Spike had instigated a few seconds earlier died abruptly, and Buffy felt her gut clench before anger overrode her disgust.

This guy. This rapist *asshole*.

Then Warren saw her, and that sick grin of his disappeared in a flash.

"Hello, Warren," she said with a calm she didn't feel, crossing her arms. She glanced from him to Jonathan, who had gone pale, and Andrew, who looked like he might piss himself. "Want to introduce me to your friend?"

"Oh no," Jonathan said, holding his stomach. As though he hadn't been a hair away from aiding and abetting sexual assault. Or maybe he didn't realize that he had, which was somehow worse. "Oh no, oh no, oh no."

"Warren?" Andrew asked in a shrill. A loyal minion awaiting his barking orders.

"Yeah," Buffy said in a dry tone, tilting her head. "Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but this band is breaking up."

AS FAR AS THE TRIO WAS CONCERNED, THINGS WENT MORE OR LESS the way Buffy had expected. Or rather, hoped. She knew she was playing a bit fast and loose with all her foreknowledge, but over the years she'd learned to trust her instincts. While they weren't always on the money, they seemed to grow finer with age. Plus, they had saved her ass more than once.

The second she'd focused on Katrina—Spike posing and making with the usual threats, which seemed to work even though these guys knew about the chip—and pointed out that what they were planning to do to her was rape by any sane person's and legal definition, Jonathan had caved. Big time. And once blood was in the water, Buffy had gone in for the kill.

But that was nothing compared to what Katrina had done once her mind was her own again. She'd taken one look at her surroundings, at Warren, and started in on how she was going to press charges for kidnapping, and whatever else she could find that might stick. Andrew had burst into tears and Jonathan, pale and shaken, had agreed readily to cooperate. Fess up to everything Warren had done or planned on doing over the past few months, whatever it took to distance himself from the bomb that was about to go off in the Mears' household. At this, Warren

had attacked Jonathan outright, grabbing some geekazoid statue from a nearby bookcase with the intent of bashing him over the head with it.

A fool thing to do in the presence of the Slayer. Though Buffy was intent that no one need die, she had taken pleasure in watching her would-be assassin smash through his bookcase and be inundated in a shower of *Star Wars* action figures.

Buffy had perp-walked Warren to the Sunnydale Police Department, Katrina at her side, ready to give her statement. Spike had corralled Jonathan and Andrew well enough, the former all-too-willing to cooperate and the latter too terrified to object.

It wasn't over, though. Buffy wouldn't fool herself into thinking that all it would take to eliminate the threat that was the fragile male ego of Warren Mears was being arrested. Even with Katrina's statement and Jonathan's willingness to fork over all the dirt, there were things like bail and due process to worry about, and Buffy knew when cornered, Warren was at his most dangerous.

"We'll have to be careful," she said as she and Spike walked back to Revello Drive, having seen Katrina safely home. There was that, at least. Katrina would go to sleep in her own bed tonight, something the Katrina from Buffy's *when* would never do again. Or perhaps this was her *when* now. She wasn't sure how that worked—if the world she'd left was still turning, or if it had ceased to exist the second the vengeance demon had zapped her back. And she wasn't sure she wanted to know—it was easier to feel secure in the current *when* if she believed the other was gone for good.

"Hussat?"

"Warren's being arrested is a step in the right direction, but that doesn't mean he's going to be behind bars permanently. His parents might bail him out and he might come after me for payback." She lifted her shoulders in a shrug. "Or he might not. This Warren hasn't killed someone, and the way Andrew talked, that was what really changed him. Or made him go completely off the deep end."

Spike was quiet for a moment, keeping his gaze pinned on the ground. At length, he said, "Sure it wouldn't be better to off the prick?"

"We're not doing that."

“Slayer, I know he’s human and there are rules, but the way you talk about what happened, not sure he’s worth the distinction. What he aimed to do to his ex tonight, what he *would* do to you if you hadn’t mucked up his plans. Shootin’ you, killing Glinda the Good Witch— isn’t knowin’ he has that in him enough?”

“I don’t get to decide that. And I won’t kill in cold blood.” Granted, if Warren came at her with a gun and the only way to save herself and Tara was to snap his neck, Buffy doubted she’d feel too badly about that. If it came down to it.

Spike touched her arm and tugged her to a standstill. He held her gaze for a moment, blew out a breath, then firmed up his shoulders and seemed to brace himself.

“Get the chip out,” he said quietly, “and I’ll do it.”

“What?”

“If it’s a matter of who gets their hands dirty, mine are already plenty filthy. Won’t blip on my conscience, neither.” He looked at her, eyes serious. “Know you won’t. Know you might stake me for suggesting it, but love, not too wild about takin’ chances when it comes to you. You change things enough, maybe he does come at you with a gun again. Maybe this time his aim’s true. If I can stop that from happening, I’ll do it. It’ll be on me, not you. Hate me for a bit if you like, but I’ll sleep just fine knowin’ you’re safe.”

The offer shouldn’t have surprised her, but it did. Mainly because of how brave it was—how brave he was even suggesting it, him knowing what she would say. And while she couldn’t claim his calm didn’t trouble her, she also couldn’t help but appreciate the fact that he hadn’t tried to hide these thoughts from her. It meant that he was taking what she’d said earlier to heart.

It meant everything.

Buffy pressed close and brushed a kiss across his lips, not surprised to feel him shaking against her. That had, after all, been quite a large step.

“No one’s killing Warren,” she said. Then hedged, because she knew she needed to address what he’d just offered in a larger way. Her mind, however, refused to play along, and after tripping and stumbling

over a thousand false-starts and sentiments, she finally settled on something simple and true. "Thank you."

The surprised look he gave her was entirely expected.

"Almost afraid to ask, but what is it exactly you're thankin' me for, pet?"

"For not holding back. For saying that."

"For offerin' to be a monster, you mean."

"For not pretending you don't feel like that, that you don't have those thoughts. And for asking me rather than going off and trying to do it on your own." She placed a hand on his chest, studied her splayed fingers for a moment before meeting his gaze again. "This is going to be what makes or breaks us. Things like that. I know that wasn't easy for you."

He swallowed, the corner of his mouth twitching. "Still waitin' for you to pop me a good one. Might be yet for a while."

"I know. But I won't." She paused. "Not so long as we keep like this. With the honesty and the saying things we're thinking and feeling, even if the other one might not like it."

A mutinous voice in her head started cackling at that, and the sound was terrible. She knew why it was there, knew what she'd done to deserve it, and though she maintained that it was for the best, that no good could come of Spike knowing that particular truth, she couldn't help being swallowed in a tidal wave of shame. And for a moment, the urge was there to come clean, walk everything back. Tell him the truth of what had happened that night in the bathroom if only to be as good as her word. Assure him of the things she'd decided about it, how she'd come to think of it, and that she knew he would never do anything like that to hurt her. That even when he had, it hadn't been to hurt her. It had been the last resort of an abused animal—and one that had sought its own death once the dust had settled.

But she didn't tell him, because the other voice was there too. More persuasive with its logical arguments that Spike didn't need to carry the burden of something he hadn't done. Nothing good would come of it—all it would do was cause more pain and she was through with pain. At least where they were concerned.

"I love you," she said, forcing herself back to the present. "All of you, Spike. Even the bad."

He released a shaky breath, and she didn't miss the way his eyes glazed over. Then he hauled her against his chest and covered her mouth with his, and there was nothing brief about this. It was the sort of kiss she knew was going places, naked places, and suddenly she couldn't wait to be home where she could relive last night.

"We're going to have to be a little quiet when we get to my room," she said against his lips. "Don't want to scar Dawn for life."

He grinned, pulling her as close as he could so she could feel everything inch of him. His hard chest, the defined lines of his abdomen, and the thick, solid length of his cock. "Dunno if I can do that, love," he murmured. "Rather, not sure *you* can. Not for what I have planned for you."

"All right, well, you have to help me pay for her therapy."

This earned an outright chuckle. "Only fair, considerin' I'll be partly responsible."

"Umm, if you're doing evil things to me, you'll be *entirely* responsible."

"Only way to get my evil in these days." Spike kissed her again and growled softly into her mouth. "Fancy a race, Slayer?"

"Fancy losing a race, Vampire?"

He grinned, then shoved her hard enough to cost her her balance, and Buffy found herself sprawled against the pavement the next second, her butt whining in protest.

"Hey!"

"Evil, remember?" He winked, then took off at a hard sprint in the direction of home.

Stupid vampire. He was so going to get it. Buffy flipped herself to her feet and all but shot after him, her legs pumping hard, heart thumping, and a rush of excitement she couldn't quite kill shooting down her spine. It was easy enough to catch up to him, harder not to stop and gloat that she was faster. She released a high-pitched squeal when he roared behind her, picking up speed until she was almost certain there was a Buffy-shaped hole in the future of her front door. Somehow, though, she managed to pull the brakes in time to reclaim

control—though perhaps not quite fast enough, for Spike was right behind her, on top of her, and barreled her into the door with a hard thump that might have hurt had she not been laughing so hard. Then she wasn't laughing at all, for Spike yanked her into his arms and attacked her mouth.

And damn, she almost lost the feeling in her legs because nothing had been like this before. Sweet and hot and playful and *fun*. God, she'd missed fun. At some point in her life, she'd stopped having it, but she wasn't sure when. She'd been disconnected from everyone and everything for so long—first after Heaven, then in the long fight that followed, and this last year mourning all that she'd lost. And all that time there had been the possibility of this—of Spike chasing her home, making her laugh, sweeping her up and into him. Even with all the stuff that had come and what still lay ahead, she felt free in ways she hadn't since before her mother had died. Since before she'd learned what Glory was and the insurmountable odds that had awaited her.

Spike growled, rotating his hips so his cock nudged her sex, the sensation electric—lighting her up from the inside. Buffy clung to him, digging her fingers into his upper arms hard enough to make a normal guy cry out in pain, which made her thank her lucky stars that Spike was about as far from normal as one could get. And all she wanted right now was for him to tear her pants off and do bad things to her, though maybe they ought to go inside first on account of the neighbors.

Something that became imperative to tell him before he made with the clothes ripping.

"Spike," Buffy gasped when she yanked away from his mouth. "We...inside."

"Mhmm," he agreed, kissing a wet path down her neck and making her pulse jump. "Gonna be inside. All bloody night. Think you can handle it?"

"Oh god."

"That's not a no, Slayer." He blinked up at her impishly, dancing a hand between them to cup her pussy, which, yes, was drenched. Small sparks shot through her at the contact. "Bit hungry at the mo'. Got anything juicy for your Spike to eat?"



“No. I mean...yes, but inside.” She seized him by the ears and dragged him back up to her mouth for another long, delicious kiss. “Seriously,” she muttered against his lips. “We need to go in...now.”

It was as if the universe had heard her, and hell, maybe it had. For the next instant, the pressure against her back disappeared and she was falling, her vampire coming with her. Spike growled and tried to twist them so he’d take the brunt of the impact, but wasn’t quite fast enough, and they ended up crashing together on their sides.

When Buffy opened her eyes, she found her sister, looking entirely too smug, standing over them.

“Really with the example-setting,” Dawn drawled, crossing her arms. “What page does fornicating with the undead fall on in the parenting handbook?”

Buffy groaned and rolled her head back. “What are the odds you’ll just leave us alone and never mention this again?”

“I think you know the answer to that.”

“I’ll repay you with trauma,” Buffy replied, pushing herself off the floor. “Just for that, now I’m not going to ask Spike to be quiet tonight.”

“No?” Spike all but sprang to his feet before throwing an arm around her to steer her into him. “Oh, Nibblet,” he drawled, “hope you didn’t fancy gettin’ much rest. Slayer’s a bloody screamer. And she knows how to make it hurt in all the right places.”

Okay, that was going a bit far. Buffy wrinkled her nose and elbowed him, then caught sight of the living room over Dawn’s shoulder and froze. Because of course, her sister wasn’t alone—of course, Willow and Tara were in there, watching the whole exchange with mingled looks of amusement and disgust. And if that wasn’t enough—

“Giles!” The name came out a squeak through no fault of her own. She drew in a breath and moved forward. “Umm...there’s little to no chance you were suddenly struck deaf in the past ninety seconds, is there?”

Giles already had his glasses in hand, ready for a good polish. “Afraid not,” he murmured, and even Buffy could see the red in his cheeks. “Though believe me, I wish it very much.”

Willow now looked to be struggling to keep a straight face, which,

while embarrassing, was still loads better than the *eww* that had been there just a second ago. “Giles called when he landed. You said you had things to talk about with him...a-and us”—she glanced uncertainly to Tara—“so we decided to come here and wait.”

“Did you stop him?” Tara asked. “Warren? Is Katrina all right?”

And just like that, all thoughts of sexy times flew out the window and reality came back. Work first, then play.

Buffy nodded, then glanced over her shoulder to Spike. “Close the door. Dawn—”

“Don’t even *try* to tell me to go to my room.”

“I wasn’t going to,” Buffy replied.

“Because I am a part of this, too, and it’s not like sound doesn’t carry in this place and—wait.”

Buffy smirked. “I mean, carry on trying to persuade me if you want, but that’s just going to crowd in my nookie time.”

Spike snickered, taking his place at her side. “That one’s on you, pet,” he murmured. “I’ll get the next therapy session.”

“What about all the therapy for everyone in this room?” Giles asked dryly, scowling at them both, though more severely at her, like she’d let him down or something. Which she supposed she had.

All’s fair. He’d let her down massively when he’d partnered with Robin to dust her vampire. He could learn to live with disappointment.

But rather than take the bait, she turned back to Dawn. “I was going to ask if you’ve eaten. There’s some leftover pizza in the fridge, otherwise we can order something else.”

“Takeout two nights in a row?” Willow asked, her eyebrows winging upward. “Did you happen to come from the future with oodles of cash on you?”

Would have been hard, seeing as she’d been buck-naked when she’d slammed into her past body. Buffy ducked her head to hide her grin, knowing she’d just be asked to explain it and make things super awkward for everyone.

“Told the Slayer I’d start pitching in,” Spike said, throwing his arm around her shoulders again. She could feel how much he enjoyed doing that—it practically vibrated off him, and the sensation was addictive. “Seein’ as I’m gonna be livin’ here and all.”

There was a long pause. Then, all at once, the room exploded.

“What?” Giles jack-in-the-boxed to his feet.

“What?” Willow demanded shrilly at the same time.

“Really?” Dawn squealed, clapping her enthusiasm. “Oh, I like Future Buffy. A lot.”

“Somewhat partial to her, myself,” Spike agreed and pressed a kiss to her temple. “Though the Buffy I was with at the start definitely had her moments.”

Buffy rolled her eyes and elbowed him again—not enough to jar him from her side, but enough to let him know that comments like that were not helpful. Unsurprisingly, he just grinned at her and winked. The jerk.

“Buffy, this is insanity,” Giles sputtered, coming forward. “Dating him is one thing, but with Dawn in the house and child services breathing down your neck, do you really think it wise to move a vampire into your bedroom?”

Huh. Good, solid, actual point made with the child services comment. The lady hadn’t seemed too impressed with Spike the first time she’d seen him, and if memory served, he’d somewhat stuck his foot in it. Granted, all of that had somewhat vanished over the coming months—she’d always suspected Giles had had a hand in it, but had never talked to him about it, and now didn’t seem like the best time to ask if he’d bribed government workers to turn a blind eye.

“We’ll work it out,” she said, not having the foggiest idea of how, because oddly, the threat of losing Dawn didn’t seem very real. Not as real as it had the last time she’d been here. And that was probably dangerous—probably how the time travel mojo did its thing. Fix Problem A, create Problem AB. Buffy blew out a breath and glanced at Spike. “Maybe we oughta hold off for a bit. I mean, not forever because, well, this place will be Slayer Central in a few months and no one seemed to bat an eye at that. But just until the child services stuff is well and in the past. I’m sorry.”

She could tell this much disappointed him, but that he also understood. “Offer’s the same,” he said, then lifted his gaze to the others. “The lot of you might pitch in a bit too, you bloody leeches. Why’s it only Buffy who worries about the bloody mortgage around here?”

Buffy barked a laugh and pressed her hand to her mouth. At the looks she received, she tried for contrite but found she didn't have it in her. "I mean, he's kinda right," she said. "What were you all planning to do if the resurrection spell *didn't* work? Sell the place? You'd kinda moved in and made it your own."

Willow just stared at her as though the concept of paying for room and board was foreign to her. And hey, maybe it had been at this point in her life. Lucky witch.

"This is all beside the point," Giles said, crashing back to the sofa with a scowl. "We have a problem on our hands that we need to solve. Primarily, how to return you to your own time."

Well, that was sudden. Buffy felt her reasonably good mood plummet.

"Umm, what?" Dawn asked. "Did we vote on this? I don't remember voting on this."

Spike tightened his grip on Buffy's shoulder. "Not happenin', Rupert."

"Spike, playing with time is *extremely* dangerous!" Giles snapped. "We don't know what the repercussions might be. In talking with Willow and Tara, I learned we believe this to be the work of a vengeance demon. The sensible, *responsible* thing to do is to attempt to contact this demon and have her reverse the spell at once, preferably in such a way that erases all the time abnormalities that have arisen."

*Oh hell no.*

"Oh hell no," Willow said firmly. "That is *not* what we discussed, Giles."

"We didn't discuss anything at all," Giles replied, the ire having faded into his calm, I'm-clearly-the-only-adult-in-the-room voice, making Buffy want to punch his glasses right through his stupid eyes. "The less we know, the better."

"Well, tough, because we know quite a lot!" Willow shot back. "And yeah, I was on Team Time Travel Leads to Wonkiness at the start, but now I am firmly on Team Let's Change This Bitch. You send Buffy back to her time and make it so we forget everything we've learned about the future, and Tara dies. I go all evil and try to end the world."

Sunnydale is just...gone. So if you hopped the pond to tell me this is what needs to happen, I'm sorry, but *no*."

Some of the color had drained from Giles's face, providing Buffy with a savage thrill of satisfaction. "That is..." he said, his voice lacking the bite of just moments ago. "Pardon?"

"Yeah, and a whole bunch of other stuff," Willow said, gesturing at Buffy. "I repeat: big no on reversing anything because that *can't happen*, Giles. It just can't."

Tara took a step forward, ran a hand down Willow's arm. "Willow—"

"No," Willow said, jerking away. "I take no chances. Not with your life. Never with your life. And I am *off* magic, Giles, but the way Buffy tells it, threatening the woman I love is the best way you can put me on the fast track to falling off the wagon, and I'd really rather not turn into some evil megawitch, so alternatives *please*."

Dawn nodded and pointed at Willow. "I'm with her."

It was satisfying in a twisted way, watching the cold certainty on Giles's face melt into something else. Buffy released a deep breath to calm herself, otherwise she worried she might just start screaming at the top of her lungs, because this was *so Giles*. Giles and Angel and everyone else in her life who decided that it was hers to run.

When she was certain she'd keep from shouting, Buffy said, "Giles, I'm warning you right now. You send me back to the future—back to *that* future—and I will find a way to come back here. Willow's even more powerful then, and she more than has the resources to, if not shoot me back here, then help me find someone who can. Now that I know that time travel possible, just *try* to keep me out. And the next time it happens, the *only* person I'll tell is Spike. It would be easier to get through what comes next with everyone on board—easier, but not impossible for just the two of us. So take that idea, ball it up real nice, and shove it up your ass."

The look on Giles's face was one she was becoming more accustomed to—the type that suggested he doubted she even was Buffy. Or perhaps that he had never truly known her at all. "It's dangerous," he said at last, the words hoarse. "You have no conception of just how dangerous meddling with time can be."

“So tell me. Tell me what the big is and we’ll find a way to fight that too.”

“I... I don’t know.” This he said to the floor rather than to anyone directly. “There... To my knowledge, there has never been a documented case of time travel. All we have to go on are theories developed from what we know about the existence of other worlds and dimensions. The dimension Anya created a few years ago being the best example—that world didn’t exist before, but it continues to exist now, even after the wish that birthed it was retracted. The Watchers Council has some reading on the subject, but... No, we don’t know what might happen.”

For a moment, Buffy could do nothing but stare at him.

Then she started to laugh. It wasn’t a nice sound, either, rather a hard, ugly mimicry of the real thing. Willow’s brow furrowed and Tara looked downright worried, as did Dawn, but Spike reeled her closer to him, sensing as he always did what she needed.

“You—you don’t *know* what will happen, but you *know* it’s bad based on something completely unrelated from what happened now.” Buffy cackled again and wiped at her eyes. “And I’m sure—I’m *sure*—that I’m the first person in the history of people who has ever wished for the chance to redo something in the presence of a vengeance demon. Yeah, that’s not a common thing at all.”

“Buffy—”

“No,” she barked, sobering so quickly Dawn and Willow jumped. “You’re telling me that the whole *changing the future* thing is bad based on pulp science and *guessing*. So that other world exists—so what? I don’t care. Unless you can bring me something concrete, something that spells out just how badly I screwed up by doing this, something *worse* than what I’ve already lived, you can consider yourself fired.”

At this, Willow’s jaw dropped. “Buffy!”

“This is the second time I’ve had to do that,” Buffy went on, not looking away from a gob-smacked Giles. “Next year, when you try to dust Spike along with Robin Wood. I was angry then but this? No. This is the end of the line.” She nodded to Willow, who was also now looking at her as though she were a pod person. “Willow needs your

help. That's the extent of your usefulness at the moment. So be her Watcher for a while. Next year, if things go the same—and I bet they will—you can come here after the Council is blown to smithereens and help wrangle the Potentials. But that's it. After that, we're done. And if I wake up tomorrow and I'm in Los Angeles after the Circle of the Black Thorn has been dismantled, Angel's human, and Spike is dust *again*... Well, I don't know what I'll do, but I promise you won't see it coming."

There was a shine in Giles's eyes that she'd seen before. A shine that was hard to look at, much less acknowledge at all. Buffy swallowed and looked away, determined to keep hold of her anger for now, because if she let anyone see the hurt they'd have a chance to exploit it. Cutting Giles out of her life the first time had been difficult—not in the doing, but in what had followed. She hadn't felt the loss until the next day, when the anger had had time to weather appropriately. And over the last year, she'd tried to forgive him because hell, he was still the only father she cared to acknowledge, and losing him *and* Spike as she had had been devastating. That was not a pain she was eager to relive. It helped that the Giles of her when had apologized—too little too late, of course, but he had admitted he was wrong and expressed remorse for his actions. Sure, that might have been about mending bridges, but she'd been in a place to hear it. To think perhaps what he'd done had been an anomaly in judgment.

But this was also the man who had drugged her in preparation for a ritual that might have killed her. He was the man who, after learning she'd been ripped from Heaven, had decided that he should leave her to pick up the pieces of her life alone when she'd needed him most. He was the man who had attempted to kill Spike because he thought she relied on him too much. Now he was the man who wanted to rip away this second chance she'd been given because of scientific theory he'd stolen from *Back to the Future* and literally nothing else.

Buffy turned to Spike, forced a smile, and pressed a kiss against his lips. "Go check out the pizza situation," she said. "If it's gross or there's not enough, we can order something in. And if so, can you get it? I haven't checked the financials since I got back, but I remember the sitch being of the dire around this time."

He nodded stiffly, face not betraying a thing, though his eyes were a different story. "Whatever you like, Slayer."

"Thank you."

"Of course, anything." He kissed her temple, aimed one final glare at Giles for good measure, then disappeared into the kitchen.

"All right," Buffy said, swinging back to the room. "Now we're going to talk about magical rehab. Because Will? We need you using magic."

Willow's mouth dropped open again. "What?"

"Yeah. What I said about you being super-powerful in the future? That's one of the things that needs to stay the same. We just need to do it safely. In a non-addict type way that keeps you from going all veiny supervillain on us."

Fear and hope flashed in her eyes in equal measure. "How?"

Buffy waited until Spike had returned, claiming he'd placed a fresh order. She thanked him, kissed him again, then led him over to the sofa, her hand wrapped around his.

After she was situated, with a calm she didn't quite feel, she told them everything.



BUFFY PRESSED THE DOOR TO HER BEDROOM CLOSED, KEEPING HER hand against the wood for a moment. “You’re not mad, are you?”

“Might wanna be a bit more specific, pet. On any number of things, I’m bloody furious.”

Yeah, that much was predictable. The talk had gone relatively well, once she’d gotten into it, explaining about the coven in England and how Willow had learned that she couldn’t be cut off from magic, as it was too much a part of who she was. Like she’d expected, Tara had volunteered to go with her to lend support, which had eased Willow’s distress of needing help as badly as she did. Giles had agreed to facilitate arrangements, though he hadn’t said much beyond that, still reeling from everything she’d lobbed at him, no doubt.

And she couldn’t deny she was hurting about it, too, perhaps even more so because now she’d had to do it twice. Regret hadn’t sunk in just yet and she wasn’t sure if it would, but this felt final in ways it hadn’t the last time. Like once Willow was taken care of and the First was defeated, Giles might well be out of her life for good, and no matter how angry she was with him, that was painful, almost as painful as losing Mom had been. And why shouldn’t it be? He’d been, in all the ways that mattered, her father.

"I meant with me," Buffy said, then turned and found Spike sitting on the edge of the bed. "With the offering to have you move in and then reneging tonight."

"Figured more we were just postponin'," he replied with a shrug that told her he was more self-conscious than he wanted to let on. "Waitin' until we know the Bit's not gonna be turned over to the bloody state."

"That is the plan, but I still feel bad."

Spike shook his head, pushing to his feet and taking a few steps toward her. "Nothin' to feel bad about, kitten," he said. "Do I wanna be here now? Yeah. But I don't wanna do anything that'll make it harder for us to keep Dawn, do I?"

At that, Buffy felt herself relax. *Us* had a particularly nice ring to it.

"Savin' all my anger for Rupert, if you want the full of it," Spike went on, his gaze hardening. "Don't trust him not to try and undo what brought you here, even knowin' how you feel."

She didn't either, truth be told, and that much was enough to have her tensing all over again. "I meant what I said. If he does find a way to undo it and sends me back, I will make damn certain that I get here again. If it's possible once, it should be possible more than once, right?"

"Don't wanna take that gamble, pet."

"I don't either, but I have to keep it in mind. Because if he does and wipes the slate clean so that none of you remember any of what I've said, that means everything we did today was for all nothing. Tara still dies. Willow still tries to end the world." She swallowed. "You still dust closing the Hellmouth, and I still watch you dust *again*."

In truth, though she'd mentioned it once, Buffy hadn't really thought she had much to worry about regarding the future that no longer was. The demon could undo her spell at any time, sure, but why send her back at all if that was the intention? She'd granted her this wish for a reason—a self-serving one, if Anya was to be trusted, and on this she was.

Perhaps Buffy ought to ask Anya about how one would go about tracking down the demon who had granted such a wish. If it was even possible, considering the future that she'd come from shouldn't exist

anymore. If it *was* possible, she could figure out how to ensure Giles didn't pull a reversal as well as determine what the demon wanted for herself. Perhaps the demon had simply needed someone to wish themselves back in time so they, too, could fix something, or maybe there was something she needed Buffy to do—or not do. Anya hadn't mentioned wishes being granted conditionally, and given that the demon hadn't walked up and introduced herself in the thirty-six hours or so that had passed since she'd landed here, it was entirely possible that Buffy had just been a vehicle.

It was also entirely possible the demon had granted her wish to turn the clock back before the First had been defeated, or to change the outcome of that fight with the Black Thorn. There was a lot of badness that might have been unbottled, and while Buffy refused to apologize or regret anything, she also needed to be prepared.

"Not going to dust," Spike said, gripping her arms. "And if everything goes wonky, you'll just do like you said, yeah? Find your way back and we'll keep it to ourselves." He pulled her to him for what she thought was going to be a kiss, but found herself in a tight hug instead. The scent of cigarettes and leather flooded her nostrils—warm and comforting.

"I'm worried," she confessed into his shoulder. She suddenly felt about three seconds from losing it completely. "I shouldn't have told them anything. Any of them."

"It'll be all right, pet. Don't think Rupert fancies losin' you for good and he knows that's what'll happen."

"Spike—"

"But just in case I'm wrong on that score, let's set about givin' you some new memories, yeah?"

He didn't wait for her reply, rather pulled back and took her mouth in a kiss, and that was it. Immediate surrender. She'd shove aside all the things now on her mind, the awful sensation in the pit of her stomach that warned her she'd blown her second chance by trusting people she shouldn't. Instead, she focused on the way Spike's lips moved against hers, how he always seemed so possessed with need for her, how no matter how many times they'd had sex, he'd maintained a hunger for her that no mortal man could hope to match.

When he pulled back, she found he'd maneuvered her onto the bed so she was sitting at the edge the way he had been the night before. In a quick tug, her top was gone, then her bra. He took his time to explore the flesh he'd uncovered, first with soft nuzzles then with light, feathered kisses. He cupped her breasts, held them against his palms and favored her nipples with gentle, teasing flicks that had her going hot in all the right ways.

"Wanted to do this for so long," Spike whispered against her collarbone. "Savor you properly. Really feel you." He tongued one of her nipples and grinned when she hissed and clutched at his head. "Like that. Fuck, I love the way you touch me now."

"Now?"

"Mmm. Loved it before, too, but it's been different since yesterday."

"How?"

Spike looked up at her through hooded eyes. "Don't rightly know," he said, and gave her the secret, goofy smile he hadn't had much occasion to wear—the one she loved. "Can just feel it. You're softer. Sweeter." He kissed a path to her other breast and traced his tongue around her nipple. "Woulda been shovin' my head down to your cunt by now, I wager. And don't get me wrong, Slayer, I aim to spend a lot of time there, but I like it here too."

More of those soft kisses, this time as he shifted to his knees and positioned himself between her spread legs. He left no inch of skin untouched—explored her stomach, her naval, and, when he had her naked from the waist down, her pelvis, the inside of her thighs, her knees and lower. She'd never pegged Spike as a foot fetishist, but he ran his tongue over the arch of her foot with such gusto she almost didn't have the heart to tell him it tickled. He worked his way down one leg and up the other, until she had been reduced to little more than a trembling bundle of nerves.

It seemed like forever passed before he hiked one leg over his shoulder. "You're a vision," he whispered, looking up at her and smiling when he found her watching. That was another thing she hadn't done too often. Her eyes had more or less been closed when they had sex, made it easier to keep her emotional distance. The few times she had

watched him, followed the paths his tongue made when he was feasting on her, had been too intense—too intimate—and though it had made her come harder than she figured she ever had, the price had been too much. There were so many ways that sex could be anything but intimate and she'd been determined to exploit all of them. Watching Spike, moaning his name, holding his gaze—those had all been intimacies she'd decided she needed to do without. Invisible lines in the sand.

He must have been thinking the same thing, because, as he spread her open, he said, "Keep watchin' me, pet. Watch me love you like this."

Then he dragged his tongue down her soaked flesh and groaned. A hard, almost painful gasp rode off her lips—she tightened her grip on his head and arched slightly off the mattress.

"Oh god," she breathed. "Oh...*shit*."

"One little lick does it for you now?" Spike grinned up at her, and hell if it didn't make her hotter. "Feels like cheating to me."

"Just...more intense than I was expecting." Whether she was referring to the sensation, the visual, or watching him as he tasted her, she didn't know. Probably a combination of all those things among many others.

"Is this more intense too?" he asked before drawing a lap around her clit with his tongue.

"Shit!"

He chuckled, and the vibrations alone might have sent her over the edge. "Rather fancy you like this, love," he told her, dropping soft, almost chaste kisses across her soaked flesh. "Tell me you like what I'm doing."

"I love it," she blurted. "I love it."

"Have you always? You like my mouth on you?"

"Yes."

He dipped his tongue into her opening and groaned again. "You taste so sweet. So fucking sweet. Always have, but now you're mine, aren't you?" A pause. "Say it, Buffy. Tell me who this pussy belongs to."

"You. God, Spike."

"God Spike? Got myself a promotion, did I?"

Buffy tittered a hard laugh which melted into a moan when he flattened his tongue against her clit again.

“Love the sounds you make for me,” he murmured before wetting two fingers then pressing them against the mouth of her sex. “Love the way you clamp around me... Oh yeah, just like that, Slayer. How tight you always feel—always. How fucking warm you are. Burn me up, you do.”

It was becoming harder to breathe. Or rather, to not pant. Buffy watched his face, watched as he pumped his fingers in and out of her, as her body took him in again and again. Watched how his skin grew increasingly drenched and how that corresponded with the sensation of being filled. He skimmed his thumb over her clit once, twice, then lowered his head to tease her with his tongue.

“Spike... Spike... This... Oh god.”

He chuckled again. “Mmm?”

“More. Please. I need more.”

He plunged into her harder, faster in response, then closed his mouth over her clit and began to suck in earnest. That was almost too much—almost, yet not quite. And also somehow still not enough. Buffy curled her fingers in his hair and pulled, watched as his eyes widened then twinkled in such a way she knew he was smiling at her. Then he began making yummy noises, and that was what did it. What set her off. Buffy threw her head back, a hard moan tearing through her throat, louder than she’d intended but hell if she could keep it in. The sound, if anything, invigorated him, and he intensified the pressure, growling when her cunt tightened around his fingers and her body dissolved into a seemingly endless torrent of pure ecstasy.

“Fuck, I need you,” he whispered against her soaked flesh. “Need to feel you do that around my cock. Think you can manage?”

At the moment, her heart racing and every nerve alive, the honest answer was no. She didn’t think she could manage her own damn name, let alone sinking far enough off this high to mount it all over again. But that was one part of their affair that she could definitely recall fondly—how Spike hadn’t been content with just one orgasm, had been adamant he could have her hitting her happy place over and

over again. And when she'd snickered and told him *good luck*, he'd been more than eager to rise to the challenge.

Spike edged her farther back on the mattress, then began divesting himself of clothes with such hurried need that Buffy couldn't keep herself from moaning aloud. He answered with a whimper of his own as he shoved down his jeans, and before she could take a moment to appreciate the pretty, he was on her, kissing the wind out of her, overwhelming her tastebuds with the combined flavors of herself and pure Spike concentrate.

"Don't mind this?" he asked, parting her legs so he could fall between them.

The question made zero sense to her fuzzy brain. "What?"

"Love fucking you hard any way you'll let me have it, but I think I'm in the mood to be a bit old fashioned t'night." He took his cock in his hand and dragged the tip along her slit. "Missionary's a bit vanilla for us, but—"

"Spike, please."

He drew his head back, arching an eyebrow. "Please what, love?"

"Yes. Do whatever you want. Just do it inside me."

A slow smirk crossed his lips, and though she hadn't been truly concerned, that alone was enough to tell her that she'd have no trouble reaching orgasm again. God, but he did it for her when he was a cocky bastard.

"Do whatever?" he asked, rubbing her clit with the head of his cock. "Fancy a bit of that?"

"Inside me. Now."

"Bossy bitch." He lowered his mouth to her neck and began dropping soft kisses across the mark he'd left there the night before. And *shit*, had vampire marks always been that sensitive? Spike hadn't played much with the other marks there before, as though he'd feared—not without cause—that she'd shove him back and head for the door if he even hinted he was thinking with his fangs.

At last, he stopped teasing and positioned himself where she needed him most. Then yes, *yes*, he was sliding into her, inch by inch until he was buried to the hilt. He didn't allow her but a second to feel

him before he began moving, and the noise in Buffy's head went blissfully quiet.

"Gonna let me do this again?" he asked, and closed his blunt teeth over the mark. "Let me inside you here too?"

Buffy nodded without thinking, rolling her hips to keep pace. "Yes."

"Like my fangs inside you?"

"Yes. Yes."

"What about my cock, Slayer?"

"Yes, that too."

"Tell me." Spike dragged his mouth over her chin until he was right above her lips. "Tell me you love my cock."

"I love it. I love your cock."

He groaned, picking up the pace. "Fuck, Buffy. Love you like this. So hot. Hot for me." A pause, and he pressed his brow to hers. "Is for me, right? All for me? All of this? Say it."

Buffy curled a leg around his waist and leveraged her strength to draw him deeper. "All of it," she said hoarsely, clenching her muscles in that special way she knew drove him crazy. "All for you. My vampire."

"That's right. I'm yours. And you're mine."

"Uh huh."

"Say it, Buffy," he rasped, and despite what he'd told her earlier, it seemed slow and tender lovemaking wasn't on the menu tonight, which was more than fine with her. Familiar need—desperation, even—had filled his eyes, and he was seconds away from letting completely loose. "Tell me you're mine."

Buffy nodded hard, whimpering. "I'm yours."

He breathed a shuddering breath. "Gonna come again, sweet?" he asked, his voice barely audible over the hard smacks of their bodies slapping together again and again. The springs of her bed were whining in tempo as well, the spurring on a rhythmic cadence of the headboard against the wall. "Come all over my cock. Wanna feel you squeeze me to bloody oblivion. Drench me."

"Spike..."

"Do it, Slayer." He slid a hand between them as he began pressing kisses along her neck, and this time, the touch was more than a jolt—it



was lightning itself. Buffy gasped and clawed at his back, overcome with the almost animal impulse to sink her teeth into him in turn, more than just the little bite marks she'd given him in the past—the sort that had driven him wild and left her unable to feel her legs for as hard as he'd fuck her—but a real bite. The type he gave her—just as deep, just as visible.

Did that make her an animal? He'd called her one once and meant it, and yeah, she'd felt it a bit at the time, but mostly that had been because of everything she kept caged inside her around others. Spike was the first man she'd truly let loose with. The only man, actually—the only person who had ever known her at her best and her worst, and let her be both, even at the expense of himself.

Spike ducked his head to nip at her breast before sliding back up to her neck. The hand between them skimmed over her pussy, rubbing her exposed flesh before settling over her clit. He didn't press down, which might have sent her over, rather allowed his thrusts to jar his fingers over that bundle of nerves on their own. His breaths came faster, the blue in his eyes intensifying, and she felt him growing harder, more desperate. Felt how badly he needed to come.

"Close, aren't you? I can feel it. Fall over, love. I'll catch you."

"Spike—"

"Need to feel you drench me."

"Spike." She cupped his cheeks and dragged him to her mouth for a hot, bitey kiss, then directed him to her throat. "Do it again. Bite me."

"Fuck..."

"Do it."

He gave a sexy groan as the bones in his face shifted. "Beg me for it," he whispered. "Beg me for my fangs."

Buffy raked her nails through his hair. "Please, Spike. *Please*."

There was another growl, but still no fangs, though his thrusts were coming now at a bruising pace, small little grunts tearing off his lips every time he drove his cock inside. Spike nipped at her sweat-drenched flesh, then he danced his fangs up the column of her neck, stoking to life a series of sparks. She felt his velvety tongue take a long, decadent swipe, then—*oh yes*, there it was. That exquisite rush of pain, pain sweeter than anything that had come before, launching her from

terra firma and into the stratosphere. The sound that tore through her lips was barely human, but somehow she knew it was her. Her pussy spasmed and squeezed, and then he was emptying himself inside her, his hips still bucking as he indulged in long, hard pulls at her throat. The sensation was enough to push her over the edge a third time—a softer landing, but no less spectacular. The knowledge he was inside her in two places was apparently its own aphrodisiac because when she came back down, she found herself throbbing with renewed need. And the first thought that cracked her pleasure-hazed brain was how much recovery he'd need before he could do this again.

Then the giddy knowledge that the answer was a minute or so.

The rocking of the headboard against the wall slowed, then stopped altogether. Spike kept his fangs latched into her throat even though she no longer felt him drinking. Just staying with her, inside of her, as fully inside of her as he'd ever been. They lay together in the quiet for a beat, then, slowly, he pulled back and favored the new wound with a lavish lick.

Buffy let her hands roam over his back, shoulders, up his neck until she had her fingers tunneled through his hair again, taking in the way he trembled. It wasn't until she heard a sniff that she realized some of the wetness at her throat wasn't blood after all.

"Spike?"

He went momentarily rigid, then slowly dragged up his head to meet her eyes, tear tracks running down his cheeks.

Buffy frowned, her heart stuttering. She cupped his face. "What's wrong?"

He shook his head, blinding her with a brilliant smile. "Absolutely nothing," he replied, his voice low and earnest, then brushed a kiss across her lips. "Just happy."

Happy. Spike was happy. A familiar rush hit her sinuses, and suddenly she was crying too. Crying and smiling and trading wet, salty kisses with him, because that's what people did when they were happy, apparently. Cried themselves dry.

And yeah, she was happy too. The kind of happy that scared her stupid, because there were so many ways it could go wrong. So many

ways it could be taken from her—dangers she knew about and others she had no idea were lurking in the corners of the new future.

There was still so far to go and so much in the air, but for the moment—this moment, at least—all was quiet and well and good. And theirs.

## ❧ I I ❧

BUFFY AWOKE TO THE SENSATION OF KISSES BEING DROPPED ALONG her spine and a hand cupping her breast. Like yesterday, it took a moment for her current reality to catch up with her, but when it did, she relaxed almost immediately.

“Hey,” she said, thrusting her ass against him and earning a growl.

“Hello yourself,” Spike replied, pinching her nipple. “Hope you don’t mind.”

“Mind what?”

“Woke up wanting you.”

She snorted and parted her legs in welcome. “Oh, the horror.”

He chuckled, abandoning her breast and dragging his hand down the length of her stomach. “Woulda thought so just a couple of days back.”

“That Buffy was not this Buffy.”

“Think she was, pet,” Spike said, and nipped at her ear. “That Buffy got me this Buffy, yeah?”

It was such a simple thing, that sentiment, yet for whatever reason, it had her eyes suddenly blurring with tears. Buffy blinked hard to fight them back and whimpered when he shifted, the head of his cock rubbing against her opening. Perhaps it was because the Buffy she’d

been here had been her least favorite version of herself—broken and in pain, desperate to feel anything other than hollow. That Buffy had clawed out of a grave twice that year, but only once with the desire to really live.

That anyone could look at the mess she'd been and see anything good inside of it was nothing short of miraculous. Yet if anyone could do that, it would of course be Spike.

"Hey now," he murmured, moving his hand to her chin and turning her to face him. "All right, love?"

Buffy nodded, unable to keep one of those stupid tears from spilling down her cheek. "I just...love you."

The worry in his eyes darkened into passion. "Love you too," he murmured, and held her gaze as he pushed inside her. "Thought I couldn't love you any more than I did, but bein' the stubborn bitch you are, you set out to prove me wrong."

"I don't deserve the way you love me, Spike. I never have."

Well, she was certainly in a downer mood today, but maybe that was to be expected after the rush of everything that had happened yesterday and the uncertainty about where they were headed. She shook her head and silently berated herself for being a black cloud and focused instead on the sensation of him inside her.

"Nothin' to do with *deserve*, pet," he murmured, returning his hand to her center to draw lines up and down her slit as he pumped his cock in deep, lazy thrusts. "Love isn't brains. Think I told you as much once upon a time." He found her clit and began to tease. "But since you brought it up, I gotta disagree with you. If anyone deserves it—"

"Spike—"

"It's you. Deserve more than I or any man can give you, but that won't keep me from trying." He nipped at her neck, teeth precariously near one of the places he'd bitten her. And hell, it throbbed in time with her clit, and she suddenly wanted nothing as badly as she wanted his fangs inside her.

"Spike...bite me."

He growled and increased his pace. "Need my fangs, baby?"

"Need all of you." She reached between them to stroke his dick as it moved in and out of her, then lower still to cup his balls. "Please."

“Slayer—”

“Please.”

She trembled when he moaned, her skin heating in that familiar telling way. He pressed down on her clit at the same time he pierced her neck, and the cry that rode off her lips could have awoken the dead. The hand that had been at her center came back to her mouth, presumably to muffle the sound—though why worry about it after last night, she didn’t know—and something inside her snapped. She bit down on his palm hard enough to draw blood, and Spike roared.

The next thing she knew, she was on her back, her legs over his shoulders, and Spike was hammering into her pussy at a bruising pace, staring down at her with his yellow demon eyes, her blood smearing his lips, which were curled around his fangs.

“Fucking take it, Slayer,” he snarled. “Take every fucking inch of me.”

Buffy nodded and pulled him down for a bloody kiss that so shouldn’t have done it for her but did. Hot damn, how it did. Though it was nothing to how Spike reacted, whimpering into her. Sucking at her tongue as he did things with his hips that would likely kill anyone of lesser strength for how good it felt. Buffy began to tense all over again, watching him as pleasure chased the demon’s leer, as his eyes flickered as though he were struggling to keep his fangs on display. The war was lost when she began to tremble around him and melted back to his human face with a low moan. He slammed into her once, twice, three more times before finally tensing and spilling inside her.

Spike rested his brow against her shoulder, panting. “God, I love you.” He barked a short laugh and pressed his lips along her collarbone. “Can’t really believe I’m here.”

“*You* can’t. At least you’re still in your timeline.”

“Doesn’t feel like it.” Spike kissed his way up to her lips and proceeded to do things with his tongue that had her satiated bits feeling a lot less satiated. But, as she had the previous morning, she figured that spending the day in bed was not the mark of a responsible adult.

“I should visit the station,” Buffy said, making absolutely no move to actually get out of bed. It was hard convincing herself to hustle with

Spike inside of her, hardening all over again. And it had been so long since she'd had sex back in her world. It had been, well, two years and some change. "Make sure Warren's still there. And get with the others about planage. I don't think I'll actually believe Willow's on the mend until she gets on the plane."

"Thought you were keen on her and Glinda stayin' until after the nuptials."

"Yeah. Well, I need to talk to Xander about that, too."

Spike pulled back, his brow furrowed. "About his nuptials?"

"I'm pretty sure I told you he doesn't go through with them." Actually, she was one-hundred percent sure, because the face he'd made after being told he ended up in bed with Anya had gone a long way in making her feel better about that whole thing. Sure, neither one of them had done anything wrong, really, but that didn't mean watching the show hadn't hurt. "I need to talk to him about what happens at his wedding."

There was nothing for a moment. Spike just looked at her, his expression pensive.

"What?" she asked.

"Slayer..." Another beat, then he sighed and looked away. "There's no fixing everything. You know that, right? You're doin' what you can to change what happened to the lot of us you knew, but some things are gonna be outside of your control. If Harris is havin' second thoughts, don't reckon it's in either of their best interest to get hitched."

"You do realize how fast Anya will curse you if she finds out you said that. After Xander breaks her heart and she's a scorned woman, she gets her vengeance gig back."

The corners of his mouth twitched. "Serious, here. The stuff last night—makin' sure that Warren bloke's behind bars, savin' the girl you said he snuffed, gettin' your Watcher to take Red back home for help. It might still go sideways."

"I know. Believe me, one of the things we covered in therapy was how very little control I have over other people."

"Then—"

"I'm still going to talk to Xander," Buffy said, and pushed him so

they were laying side-by-side. "I owe it to him, at least. Not this Xander, maybe, but the Xander from my when. And yeah, you're right. It might be better for both of them if Xander doesn't go through with the wedding. I kinda... Well, in talking to him and my doctor, we kinda landed on the idea that when they were together, he didn't deserve her. Anya put up with a lot of stuff from him—same as you did with me. The way he thinks now, right now, is of the flawed, and I can say that because it was the same way I thought. Human good, demon bad. Soul good, no soul bad. If it's conditional, it's not real."

Spike swallowed, keeping his eyes on hers.

"But the Xander from my when isn't this Xander. And maybe this Xander needs to go through what he went through to get there—I don't know. All I know is that Xander had a lot of regrets where Anya was concerned. The way he ended things, how they danced around each other, how she died not knowing that he still loved her." She released a long breath. "But if it had been the other way around, and Xander had been flung back here instead of me, I'd like to think he'd try to talk to me about what I was doing with you at the time. Try to tell me about the Buffy from his when and how much I loved you, and how much I regretted...well, so much of what happened between us this year. It might not have been enough to get through to that Buffy, but I think I would've thought about it, at least. Handled a few things better...maybe to the point where when the crucial moment came and I told you I loved you for the first time, we both knew I meant it."

Spike was breathing hard now, his eyes darkening. The words were an aphrodisiac to him, she'd noticed, and hell if that wasn't all kinds of heady. That she could get him hard and ready to go just by telling him she loved him—well, it was certainly incentive to keep her saying it as often and as much as possible.

"Right then," he said hoarsely before leaning in to kiss her. "Then talk to him."

"I will." Buffy grinned and kissed him again. "I'll talk to him, then start looking for other jobs so I can quit the Doublemeat Palace... assuming that your offer to help out with finances wasn't contingent upon you living here just yet."

"What do you think?"



“Think you’d do pretty much anything for me.”

“You have no idea.”

Except, because of the soul, she really did. But she didn’t want to think about that right now—she didn’t want to spend more time in her head, reevaluating the future than she had to, and there was still so much to accomplish. Buffy sighed and sat up, then winced when the headboard smacked against the wall, another thought occurring to her.

“How much noise did we make?”

She glanced over her shoulder to find Spike preening, one arm thrown over his head, the other resting on his stomach, and damn he looked far too lickable. Even with that obnoxious cocky grin on his face.

“Enough so that everyone in the house’s gonna know what you sound like when you come.”

“Great.” There wouldn’t at all be an awkward talk with Dawn about this. Buffy wasn’t deluded anymore about her sister’s innocence—even though she knew full well Dawn, at this age, still had her V-card intact, she also knew the girl wasn’t a child. Hell, she wasn’t too much younger than Buffy had been the night Angel had popped her cherry, and damn if that wasn’t a cold wake-up call. Still, there was a difference between knowing about sex, even thinking about sex on the regular, and hearing it in surround-sound.

“Tell me you regret it,” Spike drawled, his eyes twinkling. “We both know better. And for the day I do move in all official-like, we won’t have to have a talk with the Bit about why big sis is constantly asking me to give her more and do it harder.”

Buffy snorted and threw off the blankets. “You know she can get back at us.”

“Hussat?”

“When she starts college. Whether it’s here or somewhere else—if the Hellmouth still goes kablooey. She can get back at us.”

She glanced over her shoulder and was nearly swallowed by a wave of pure affection at the dumbfounded look on Spike’s face.

“Sorry, pet,” he said, shaking his head. “I’m not followin’.”

At this, she couldn’t help herself. She laughed outright. “Spike, Dawn’s eighteen in my when. And she’s already had her first serious

relationship and first heartbreak. And since I'm the resident adult, it's my job to take out the trash and yeah, there have been used condoms in the bin in her room."

Spike's eyes went comically wide. He tossed off the covers with a growl and sprang to his feet. "Who the hell's been shagging the Bit? I'll kill them."

"His name was Michael and he was a nice kid."

"You just said he broke her heart!"

"Because we had to move. That's pretty much been my life since the Hellmouth collapsed—not sure where we're going to land, what's going to happen, who needs me where or why." Buffy turned to her dresser. It'd be better for both of them if they were dressed when talking—remove the temptation to fall back into bed. "The idea behind activating all the Potentials was a good one, I think. Or at least we had good intentions. I didn't have to shoulder everything on my own. Trouble is...well, some of the girls are just...bad. Like having-embraced-the-life-of-crime bad. Other girls don't know their strength. There have been a handful of accidental deaths—one girl tried to keep her boyfriend from being beat-up at school and ended up breaking the bully's neck when she tossed him into a locker. I don't get to stay in one place for very long because of things like that. And the ones who are with us are in training and that's going mostly well, but we're still building this thing from the ground-up. Giles is trying to find any watchers who might have been on assignment when the Council blew. Andrew is using his nerd powers for good—all the material he captured that last year goes to helping the new girls learn and train. Willow and Kennedy are—*were*—heading up the educational front, Willow with the informational and Kennedy with the practical. We had just decided that Dawn should stay in one place after I realized she wasn't going to get the chance to do anything normal at all unless I stopped dragging her across the globe. And because slayer activity is on the increase, so is demonic, and way too many people know who she is. A few even know *what* she is, and those aren't chances I'm willing to take. Right before everything with the Black Thorn went down, we'd officially set up an HQ in Cleveland, which became active almost as soon as

Sunnydale closed, and Dawn had enrolled at Baldwin Wallace. I think she had a date the night I left with a new guy she had high hopes for, but yes, to answer your question, Dawn is sexually active. At least she was. And she *will* be sometime in our future, assuming I don't get shot back to where I came from. And you, Mister, will have to deal."

Now Spike looked more than just dumbfounded—rather, outright railroaded. At last, he cleared his throat. "That's... Bugger, you hadn't told me all that."

"I know. And I didn't mean to just make with the word vomit. I feel guilty over what happened with Dawn and Michael because if I hadn't been selfish and insisted she go with me everywhere, they might not have had to break up." She blew out a breath. "Honestly, if it weren't for Xander and getting someone to help me sort through all my emotional hang-ups, I'm not sure how I would've survived this last year. I've been a wreck, making things up as I go."

And now she was looking at the prospect of doing that all again. Granted, she'd be better prepared this time, and maybe the advanced warning of the coming fight with the First would give them all a chance to come up with an alternative to the big triggering spell. Which, of course, presented its own set of problems, as it left Buffy holding the mantle of Slayer on her own all over again. For all the issues that had come up because of the activation spell, it had made certain things a lot easier. Like, say, going into battle in Los Angeles. The odds had felt decidedly more even, and that was nice. Also, the one or two slayer-related prophecies that Giles had uncovered since the closing of the Hellmouth hadn't made anyone panic too hard because it wasn't a lotto of one anymore.

A light touch to the arm brought Buffy back from her mental digression. Spike had closed the distance between them, his brow furrowed in concern.

"All right there, love?"

She forced a smile and nodded. "Yeah," she said. "I guess... Well, it had to hit me at some point. How much I'll have to do all over again. I guess I've been focusing so much on the things I want to change that I kinda forgot all the things that I *can't* change. The next two years are...

not all terrible but hard. And I might be introducing things that make them worse by changing other things... It just all caught up with me.”

“No regrets though, right?”

The flare of panic receded at the worry in his voice, and Buffy shook her head, burrowing into his arms. “No regrets,” she replied, her cheek against his chest. “Just a bit overwhelming all of a sudden. All that time.”

“What can I do?” he murmured into her hair.

“Not dust. That’s your number one priority.”

He chuckled and kissed her brow. He was doing that a lot, she noticed. Stealing small kisses that had nothing to do with sex and everything to do with comfort and support. Just being there for her the way he’d told her he’d wanted to be from the moment she’d clawed her way out of the grave. It was hard not to hate herself, considering all the things she’d missed the first time.

“Not plannin’ on dusting,” Spike replied. “Though it’d be a bloody lot easier to guarantee if you hadn’t shipped off the Gem of Amara to my grandpappy.”

Buffy groaned. Yeah, that had been a waste. Angel hadn’t even kept the damn thing. “Don’t remind me. Next time I go back in time, I’ll be more specific.” Then something that Giles had said the previous night came rushing in from the other noise in her head, making her stomach turn a bit. “Do you think the whole *time travel has consequences* thing is right?”

“Dunno. We’ll deal with them if it is.”

“Deal with them as in...”

“Same way we deal with everything, I’d wager.”

“But...you don’t think things are *meant* to happen, do you? That Willow is meant to go evil and you’re...you’re meant to dust on me twice?”

Spike snickered, took her by the shoulders and pushed her a pace away so he could look into her eyes. “No,” he said firmly. “If livin’ with Dru as long as I did convinced me of anything, it’s that *nothing* is written in the stars. She’d see something she didn’t fancy and ask me to change it. And I would and then she wouldn’t see it anymore. No sense givin’ people visions of the future if the

future is set, now is there? And it's like you said last night—as many demons as are in the vengeance business, we have no bloody idea how many times we've been reset 'cause someone else wished to do a thing right."

"And if we reset again? Like, not because of me, but because of someone else. Someone out there makes a wish to go back in time and suddenly we're *back* in time and doing it all over again?" God, the thought alone made her dizzy. She wasn't sure she could stomach it.

He smiled and kissed her brow again. "Only goes back for one person in that case. Didn't go back for me or your chums or anyone else, yeah? Rest of us keep movin' forward."

Yeah, that made sense. She released a deep breath and nodded, at once feeling a little silly. "Sorry," she said. "This sidebar was brought to you by Buffy's random existential crisis. Back to our regularly scheduled programming."

"Slayer, you've been at full bloody speed since you landed at my crypt. It's a bit of a wonder this is just your first. You just let me know when you need your Spike to keep you grounded, yeah?"

Buffy nodded, relaxing by increments. Though that didn't stop her from blurting, "Why do you love me?" almost like it was an accusation. "I mean, there are days when I'm too screwy even for me and I have no choice but to live in this head. You could walk away at any time."

He grinned and shook his head. "Sorry, that's wrong."

"It's wrong?"

"Not a choice here, Slayer. Believe me, I looked." Spike kissed her brow again, his lips lingering this time. "I love you because I don't know how to not. And it's been like that since the beginning."

"Well, if it's all the same to you, I'm glad you failed at choosing not to love me."

"Me too."

And damn, he really looked it. In his eyes was more of that happiness she'd seen the night before—happiness that both warmed and broke her heart. It had taken her too long, cost her too much, to appreciate the way Spike loved, and that was nothing to what it had cost Spike himself. He'd destroyed himself more than once for her and would keep doing it forever if he thought that was what it took to give

HOLLY DENISE

her what she wanted. And some version of her out there would have let him.

But that version was not this version, and that was what she needed to focus on.

That, and the many things yet to do to try for the future they both deserved.

THE MEMORY WAS OLD AND SURROUNDED BY TRAUMA, BUT BUFFY was reasonably certain that Xander's construction crew took a strict noon to one lunch hour. She'd debated calling first rather than just dropping in, but decided that she didn't want to give him time to compose what she was sure would be a lengthy diatribe against everything he'd learned the day before. Xander off-the-cuff was the most honest version she could hope for—even if the things he said at times made her want to throw him through walls. It was one of the things that came with being one of his best friends.

Buffy arrived with a few minutes to spare, armed with a sackful of grease from the Doublemeat Palace, which she'd ordered after giving Lorraine her official notice. It had been a while since she'd subjected her tastebuds to the not-quite-meat of the Palace, but they certainly remembered the indignity for the way they roiled just at the smell of the stuff. But Xander had been a fan and if nothing else, a well-fed Xander was a happy Xander.

At noon sharp, a loud bell sounded throughout the work area, and the buzz of machinery came to an abrupt end. Then the roar of chatter rose from the site as a horde of sweaty men approached and dispersed

amongst their things, those who had packed a lunch grabbing their grub while others made for their vehicles. The few who noticed her rolled their eyes and looked away quickly, their faces contorted into a scowl. It took a few minutes, but eventually the memory of her one day in a hard-hat clarified a bit more to the point when she remembered that, even before things had gone spectacularly bad, she'd made a bad impression by outperforming the men.

"Don't worry," she called after one of the workers who stopped long enough to glare. "Not here about a job."

No one bothered to reply. Probably for the best.

After a moment, Xander came into view, looking a bit rugged in a decidedly un-Xander like way, which briefly threw her for a loop. She hadn't spent too much time with Xander when he was in his element at places like this—mostly because construction and all things related to it was not of the fun as far as she was concerned—but looking at him here brought to stark light just how different her friends' lives had been from hers, even though they had been in the thick of all things slayer-related.

He'd go back to work and she'd go back to figuring out the ins and outs of this time-jump mumbo jumbo. Drop by the station, see if Warren was still behind bars and if a bail had been set. Maybe get a lead on the demon who had sent her back. Perhaps that had been a part of the divide between them—that all things demony were things he could switch off whenever he wanted and he resented the fact that she couldn't do the same.

Xander looked up and did a double-take when their eyes met, coming to an abrupt halt. Then he glanced around, tense, and sighed before making his way toward her, his steps now not quite as unhurried.

"Buffster," he said by way of greeting. "Making an unsolicited food delivery. You don't have more bad news to break, do you?"

"No bad news. Warren was booked last night, the girlfriend he killed in my when has lived a day longer than she was supposed to, and Giles is in town." Buffy thrust forward the Palace sack and nodded toward the work trailer. "Do you have time for lunch?"



“So everything’s okay?” This he asked while fixedly staring at the new marks on her throat, which she hadn’t bothered to cover up because, well, no one’s business but hers. That and she’d seen the way Spike had eyeballed the skin there and how pleased he’d been when she’d opted for a strappy camisole rather than anything with a high-neck.

“Yes. Stop looking for catastrophes where there are none.”

“Sorry. Force of habit.” A small smile broke across his face as he took the bag from her. “Not one to say no to free food and extra time with the Buff. My office is a bit cramped but you’re a tiny person so you should be able to fit in there fine.”

Cramped was being generous—as was the word *office*. Though Xander was steadily climbing up the ladder in terms of management, responsibilities, and salary, the place they kept him when he wasn’t on the worksite was roughly the size of a postage stamp and crammed with an overflowing desk and two tiny chairs.

“So the guys are still miffed about that time when I mopped the floor with their butts,” Buffy observed, squeezing into one of the chairs. “I didn’t get a single catcall while I was waiting for you.”

“Well, you know how to make an impression. And I’m pretty sure they’re all afraid you’ll manhandle them the way you did Tony.”

“I did not manhandle! There was no manhandling!”

Xander looked like he might argue, but then huffed a resigned sigh and crashed into the seat behind his desk. “So what’s up, Buff? More time travel wackiness?”

“Actually, yes.”

He nodded and dove a hand into the food sack. “Guessing it must be important. Or you really needed a reason to ditch Captain Peroxide which, by the way, no one would blame you for.”

“It’s not about Spike. It’s about you, actually.”

“Me.”

“Yeah. About the wedding.”

He unwrapped his burger, studied it for a second, then took a Xander-sized bite. “What about the wedding?” he asked around a mouthful of fake meat. Not that she’d tell him the *fake* part. This

might be the healthiest thing he'd had all week. "And please remember I have no veto power on the bridesmaid dresses. Ahn showed me what she was thinking and I'm sorry, but she's the bride—as she reminds me at least seventeen times a day—and what the bride wants goes."

"Is it...what you want?"

"For my health, yes. I want what the bride wants." He laughed and shook his head. "I am not stupid enough to say no to someone who has a gaggle of vengeance demons on speed dial."

It amazed her that the guy who let that sentence roll off his lips like it was nothing was the same guy who would knowingly leave Anya at the altar. But then, Buffy had never really talked with Xander about his relationship with Anya. Not in the way a friend should.

"In the future," she said slowly, "you...you told me that you had doubts. About marrying Anya."

Xander chewed loudly and just stared at her, his eyes unreadable. "What's this about?" he asked after a moment. "Is there something you know that I should know?"

"Maybe."

"Wow with the cryptic. The future didn't change you all that much." A small smile flirted with his lips. "Except for the whole banging of the undead, but I guess that's not a big change, is it?"

Well, at the very least, she could give him props for waiting as long as he had before circling back to the Spike issue. Buffy sighed and shifted her gaze to her lap. "Look, Xan, I'm not here about that. I know you don't get it. And because of the way things are going now, you might never. All you need to know about me and Spike is that he loves me, I love him, and he makes me happy. Is that something you can learn to live with?"

"I can live with it. I just..." Xander looked down, his expression twisted. "I can't wrap my head around it, Buff. He's a vampire. A *vampire*. And he doesn't even have a soul. I mean, Angel was a big pill to swallow, but at least he was kinda...you know...human."

Buffy drew in a tempered breath, willing herself not to do something stupid. Like, say, punch a hole in the wall. "Spike isn't anything like Angel and that's one of the reasons why I love him. You're right—he doesn't have a soul. This means that he, unlike Angel, is already as

evil as he's ever going to be. He loves me and you know that—you have to know that after he stuck around and helped while I was six feet under."

"The chip—"

"The chip is immaterial at this point. Spike loves me. I love him. If the chip comes out tomorrow, that's not going to change. *He* changed and that's what matters." She paused. "A long time ago, you and I were told that vampires were just demons walking around in the bodies of dead people. The person who told us this genuinely believed it. And then you lost your best friend and he pretty much confirmed it. I thought I got it then, but it wasn't until Angel lost his soul that it really hammered home for me. Because suddenly my boyfriend had become someone I thought was a completely different person."

"You thought?"

A sour smile pulled at her lips. "The thing we were told about vampires in the beginning? Giles was wrong—the Watchers Council is wrong. With or without a soul, Angel can be a manipulative jerk—the way he manipulates and his reasons for doing so are much of the different, but Angelus couldn't exist without Angel, and vice versa. And it took me a long time to realize it. Even longer to understand that one of the reasons I resented Spike so much was because he had what Angel didn't. Could you imagine soulless Angel hanging around all summer, watching Dawn, fighting alongside you and the others because he loved me?"

Xander didn't answer, but the frown that pulled at his mouth told her that he hadn't expected any of that...which was somewhat funny because a lot of what she'd just said had been first said by him to her. Perhaps that was cheating, using a bit of post-Sunnydale Xander's insight to warp her present Xander's mindset, but hell, she didn't care. Being here at all was a cheat if she really wanted to break it down.

"That's it," Buffy said a moment later. "That's all I'm going to say on the subject of Spike. I am here to talk about your wedding."

Xander blinked and gave his head a shake, pulling himself from wherever his mind had gone and meeting her eyes again. "Why?" he asked, his voice a bit rougher now. "What happens?"

"You're having second thoughts."

He sputtered a little laugh. "I love Anya."

"I know you do. But you are having second thoughts."

"Just tell me what you know. This whole cryptic mumbo jumbo is really head-trippy." He waved at her. "You're like the kid who stole the teacher's answers, so if I lie you'll know, if I tell you the truth you'll know. Why are you talking to me about things you already know?"

"Because I love you and I want you to be happy."

"And something happens to me where that's not the case," Xander said slowly. "You already told me Anya dies in your future and I can't begin to tell you how much I am not going to let that happen, but that can't be what you're talking about because I already know it."

"Just answer the question. You're having second thoughts."

He sputtered again, opened his mouth, closed it, and gave his head a shake, something like anger playing across his face. Or perhaps not anger—annoyed resignation at having been caught. "Well, yeah. Of course I am. I'm pretty sure that's of the normal—maybe the most normal thing that'll happen to me this year."

Buffy nodded. "I know." Another pause. "I do want you to be happy, Xan. I really do. You've been a huge part of my life for years now, but we... In the *when* I'm from, we were probably as close as we've ever been. You really got me—or didn't let me hide when it would've been easy to let me do either. Willow was all super busy with everything that happened after Sunnydale fell and I just kind of let things swallow me. But you paid attention in ways no one else did, and you did it because you knew how hard *this* year was on me. You wanted to make sure you didn't miss the signs again. That's why I'm here." She paused. "You're worried you'll become your dad with Anya. That's what you told me."

Xander's jaw fell slack and his eyes bugged. "Uhh... Damn, Buff, don't pull any punches."

"I can't."

In all honesty, Buffy hadn't decided how she would approach this conversation—not in telling Spike she intended to have it, not when she'd left the house, not as she'd stood in line at Doublemeat Palace after turning in her uniform, and not when she'd arrived on the work-

site. The straightforward approach she'd utilized the day before had its definite perks but her conversation with Giles left her a little gun-shy. On the other hand, dancing around the subject might just make things worse if Xander wasn't any good at parsing out what she was trying to tell him. And with Xander, it could go either way. Most of the time he was very dense—naked pushups dense. Other times, he caught everyone off guard with how observant and insightful he could be. This seemed large enough that rolling the dice was likely a bad idea.

And if it were her, she'd want whoever was talking to her to tell it straight.

"Xander," she said, steeling herself, "in my when, you leave Anya at the altar."

"I...what?"

"You leave her at the altar. Someone claiming to be you from the future shows up and convinces you that marrying Anya was a mistake."

Xander blinked. "So...someone...claiming to be me from the future...tries to convince me to *not* marry Ahn. And you, also claiming to be from the future—"

"Yeah, I know. Weird, huh?"

"Buffy, this is—"

"The guy pretending to be you is someone Anya turned into a demon when she was all vengeance-y. He does it specifically to get back at her, to hurt her, and he uses you to do it. The way you described it, he shows you a future where you are essentially your father, and that's enough to convince you to call off the wedding, even though it's all fake." Buffy edged forward and placed a hand on the desk. "I'm not here to tell you to marry Anya... I just wanted to give you the head's up for what to expect at your wedding. I mean, since I know that guy's gonna be there, Spike and I will put the kibosh on him quickly, but you deserve to know it's coming."

It took a moment, but the fight and incredulity leaked out of Xander's eyes. He lowered his chin in a nod, puffing out a long breath. A few beats of silence stretched between them, and she thought the conversation might be over, then he looked up again, his expression open. "Do you think I should marry Anya?"

“Do you love her?”

“Yes. More than anything. But...” He sighed and looked away again. “Sometimes I think I’m not good enough for her. Sometimes I think she’s...well, mostly human but still has some demon inside of her, and that wigs me out. But I do love her. I asked her to marry me before Glory, you know. She thought it was because we were going to die and I wouldn’t have to go through with it, but that wasn’t it at all. You stand on the edge of the world and know that you might fall off and you just... I dunno, *know* the things that are important.” He worked his throat. “I don’t want to be without her but I also know that Harris men aren’t exactly known for being upstanding citizens. And this whole conversation is making my feet extra cold.”

“Look, like I said, I’m not here to tell you to marry Anya...though, after what you just said, kinda leaning hard toward *do it*.” She offered him a smile and rose to her feet. “It’s something you regret, I can tell you that...how *everything* with Anya goes down, and that’s one of the reasons you and I became so close after Sunnydale. We both lost people we loved, only you were more open about it than I was. You’re the one who got me to talk to a doctor about everything that happened with Spike.”

“A doctor? What all happened—”

“That’s not important.”

“Well, hell, Buff, gotta agree to disagree here.” Xander leaned forward. “If something bad happened—”

“I started off this year loving and hating my friends in equal measure, hating myself more than anyone, and using Spike for sex to feel something,” Buffy replied flatly. “I knew he loved me and that he’d let me get away with pretty much anything, so I used him and hit him and made him take all my self-hate. Suffice to say, it screwed us up and by the time we were on the right track again, it was too late and he was gone. The rest is between us.”

Xander looked like he wanted to argue, but had the good sense—in this case—not to bother.

“For what it’s worth, Xan...you are nothing like your dad.”

His lips twitched with a wry grin. “You don’t even know my dad.”

“No, but I know you. You can be bullheaded and infuriating, but when push comes to shove, you make the right choices. You ask for help when you need it. It would’ve been easy for you to crawl inside a bottle after everything happened, but you didn’t.” A pause. “So if that’s what freaks you out on your wedding day, the thought that you might be like your dad...just know that the people who love you know better, okay?”

And that was it—all she had to say. The rest would be up to him. Buffy held his gaze for a moment before turning to make her way to the door. She had almost cleared the threshold when he spoke again.

“Spike’s what got you through this year? After Heaven?”

“Spike helped me survive. He messed up in some places but not as bad as I did. We never gave him a chance. Not the way we did Anya or Oz or Angel. And yeah, I know the soul’s what counts, but—”

“We did something terrible to you. We didn’t mean to, but we did. And none of us really wanted to think about it.”

Buffy turned at that and was somewhat surprised to see tears shining in Xander’s eyes.

“After we learned what happened, after our lives became a musical...” He released a long, shaky breath. “We talked about it—all of us. What we’d done to you. Bringing you out of Heaven. What that must be like even though there was no way we could know. But I didn’t wanna think about it. All I could think was my friend was back and that’s great. I couldn’t be sad. I couldn’t even really regret it.” A beat. “We were selfish and I’m sorry about that. And...as much as I hate the guy...if Spike is it for you, if he gave you what we couldn’t... I make no promises because old habits and all, but...I want you to be happy too. Especially if we made you live in this world again. So if that means Spike, I will do what I can to get on board with it.”

“Wow, Xan...that’s...a million miles from where you were yesterday.”

“I know.” He offered a somewhat sheepish smile. “Yay for personal growth, I guess. Ahn and I talked a lot last night and then I talked to Willow this morning and started thinking about what you said about future me and my head hurts so I’m gonna stop thinking about all that

and just say I'll try." He held her gaze for a moment longer before looking down at his half-eaten lunch. "All right, you better skedaddle. I have food to cram down my gullet and if I do any more of this touchy-feely stuff, I'll never hear the end of it from my guys."

Buffy grinned. "Enjoy the burger. That's the last free one I get."

"You quit?"

"Boy howdy. Don't know what I'll do yet, but I'll find something. Something very much not construction related."

He offered an appreciative snort, then waved her off, and that—seemingly—was that. Buffy negotiated her way back through the trailer and into the sunlight, deciding cautious optimism was the best place to land where this conversation was concerned. What Xander opted to do with the information she'd given him would, of course, be for him to decide, but she felt she had done what she could to change the trajectory he had been on. At the very least, he wouldn't be blindsided by what came ahead, and perhaps that would enable him to live with fewer regrets if things went this time the way they had the last.

Her other errands were of the mild. She did drag herself by the police station to check on Warren and the others. Jonathan had been as good as his word, it seemed, and the Mears household had been tossed for evidence of other petty crimes. While they hadn't uncovered a ton, the cops had found the notes Warren had made detailing his plans to take over Sunnydale, the diamond that had been stolen from the museum, as well as a number of gadgets he and the others had modified to realize these plans. Between that and Katrina's statement, the DA had been wise enough to set a high bail and label Warren a flight risk.

There was still a lot that could go wrong and Buffy definitely wasn't taking anything for granted, but for now, it seemed, she had some room to breathe.

One benefit of being a pedestrian was the ample time it gave her to think. She was nearing the forty-eight-hour mark being back in this time. If the way a butterfly flapped its wings could alter the course of history, how much history had she altered already? Would the world she'd come from even be recognizable anymore? The not-knowing thing was going to be hard to navigate, especially with as much as was



at stake. And while she had the luxury of time now—time to really think out what to do when the First became active in a few months, of how to manage the Potentials, and what life post-Sunnydale would look like—that time also scared her, because too much of it gave her brain room to second-guess her every decision.

*Miles to go*, she thought as she turned up the walkway to her house. But when she felt the familiar tingle that warned a vampire was near, she found herself relaxing.

There was a lot to work out, but she and Spike would manage. Where she overthought, he'd simplify. They'd traverse the uncertainty of the future together.

She let herself in the front and peered into the living room, which was empty. "Spike?"

"Kitchen, love," came the reply. "We got company."

God, there hadn't been a social services visit planned for today, had there? Buffy frowned and made her way down the hall, trying not to rush. If it was someone here about Dawn, the best thing she could do was appear calm and collected.

Yet as she turned the corner, her heart jumped. Spike was standing near the fridge, his arms crossed. Across the island was a woman with dark curly hair with a wrinkled, weathered face that didn't match her body in the slightest. She wore a medieval-style dress, the sort with long, wavy sleeves, and when her vivid eyes met Buffy's, a smile broke across her demon mouth.

"Buffy," the vengeance demon cooed. "I trust things are going well?"

Buffy flicked her gaze to Spike, who was staring at the demon with blatant dislike, his eyes narrowed and his jaw tight.

"Bird says she knows you," he said. "This the one, then? Only reason I didn't off her the moment she showed up."

"Oh, don't be like that," the demon went on. "We have a lot to talk about. Also..." The smile turned into a sneer. "It'd be a pity to have to kill the vampire you went back in time to save."

Buffy tossed Spike a worried glance, but his eyes didn't move off the demon.

The demon rumbled a short laugh and waved a hand as though all

of this were a joke. “Don’t worry, Slayer. I have no interest in your vampire. Just as long as he stays on his leash.”

Somehow, she managed to find her voice. “What do you want?”

“Now that is an excellent question.” The demon beamed. “But let’s do this right. I’m a guest, so be a dear and offer me a drink, then we can go sit down and talk like adults.”

"HOW LONG HAS SHE BEEN HERE?"

Spike tossed a glance in the direction of the living room. "Just a few minutes before you got home, really. Knocked on the front and when that didn't work, came around the back." He nodded at the door. "Saw me in here looking for some nosh and when I caught her face, put two and two together."

Buffy forced out a slow breath, doing her best not to panic, but she couldn't deny the sudden appearance of the demon she'd last seen in her *when* didn't have her of the freaked.

And what would have happened had Spike not been here? Both Willow and Dawn were at school and Giles had booked a room at the Sunnydale Inn after last night's awkwardness. Would the demon have just parked it on the street or come hunting for her at her workplace? And *why*?

"Can you make coffee?" she asked Spike. "Do you know how?"

He arched an eyebrow at her, and she felt herself relax. "Believe it or not, pet, I've been brewin' joe longer than you've been alive."

"Okay, well, brew some up now. I'll go talk to the demon."

"I have a name, you know," came from the front room. "It's Zipporah."

"And the ears of a dog," Buffy muttered. Then, louder, she called, "Do you take cream and sugar in your coffee?"

"When I said I wanted a drink, Slayer, I meant a real one."

Buffy gritted her teeth and turned her attention to the refrigerator. "I'm not sure what I have," she said, throwing the door open. There were a few beers that had to be Xander's doing, plus half a bottle of white wine. "I can do a Coors Light or some chardonnay."

"What foul thing drinks Coors?" This came from much closer, and when Buffy turned, she saw the demon hovering in the doorway, her arms crossed. "I'll take the chardonnay. And don't bother with a glass." She extended a hand. "The bottle will do me fine."

Not in a place to argue, Buffy pressed the bottle against the demon's palm. "Have at it."

Spike snorted. "Demanding little beastie, aren't you?"

Zipporah made a face at him before tossing back a mouthful of wine. "Now, come on," she said, nodding back to the living room. "Time is vengeance." She turned and strolled back to the couch as though she hadn't a care in the world—which Buffy supposed was true—and plopped down in the middle cushion with a dramatic flourish.

Buffy opted to remain standing and crossed her arms. For a moment, there was nothing—the demon took hearty gulps from the bottle and just stared at her expectantly, like this little visit had been on the books and she should have the agenda memorized by now. And though Buffy remained on edge, she couldn't help feeling a rush of irritation. This was her house, dammit, and she wasn't about to start a precedent for taking crap from strange demons under her own roof.

"Well?" she barked at last.

If bothered by her abruptness, Zipporah didn't show it. She waved the hand not occupied with the wine bottle. "I'm waiting."

"Waiting for what?"

"Umm, maybe a thank you?" She shifted her attention to Spike at Buffy's side. "Man oh man, was she torn up about you. Though now that I'm here, I can see why. You are all kinds of pretty."

It was probably a bad idea to try to slay the demon that had the power to send her back to a Spike-less world, but the urge was there all

the same. Still, somehow she managed a weak, “Thank you,” through teeth that refused to ungrit.

Zipporah just grinned. “I do hope you are enjoying yourself,” she said. “You’ve certainly been a busy little bee since you landed. Did you like that, by the way? Where I chose to place you? Thought that might be the best way to convince you fast that you weren’t losing your mind. It certainly looked like fun.”

God, she had seen that? *Urge to slay rising...* “You’re disgusting.”

“Relax. I didn’t stick around to watch.” She straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin. “I am a lady, after all.”

Spike rumbled a low growl. “And does the lady have a point?”

“Gotta say, love the ‘tude, dude.” She winked before meeting Buffy’s eyes again. “And yeah, I have a point. I just needed to make sure you were invested, Slayer. You never know how these gigs are going to run when you get a goody-two-shoes in the hot seat. I figured the odds were about fifty-fifty.”

“The odds...?”

“That you’d be smart enough to not check the teeth on this particular gift horse. I made a deal with a slayer back in the thirteenth century, right after her watcher had been turned. She wanted to go back, too, so I took her back.” Zipporah rolled her eyes and threw back another mouthful. “The little twit was convinced that something bad would happen if she changed things, and let the poor guy get himself vamped all over again. Either that or she was just a glutton for punishment.”

A shot of pure fear bolted down Buffy’s spine. “So there’s something you want.”

“Umm, duh. Aren’t you friends with Anyanka?” The demon snickered. “But you can wipe that doom-and-gloom off your pretty little face, Slayer. What I want is something you’ll be all too happy to do.”

Yeah. Odds of that being true. Buffy reached for Spike’s hand and squeezed—likely tighter than was comfortable for him, but he didn’t so much as flinch. “What happens if I don’t do it?”

“Wow. Rude.”

“Tell me.”

Zipporah narrowed her eyes, hissing out a breath. “Well, I suppose

that depends on what you do with the time between now and then. Going back in time is tricky—some things can be changed easily where others are, not going to lie to you, a downright bitch. Then there are the consequences of changing certain things. Sometimes it works out just fine and dandy; other times you end up making things worse for yourself and others. But if I were a betting gal—and wouldn't you know it, I am—I'd say that something bad will happen to someone in your little worldview within the next couple of years. Something bad enough to make them want to go back in time to fix things. And if that happens, well, we reset all over again, and I'm going to be a lot less charitable with the way things turn out for you if you don't get off that high horse I happened to have given you and do me this one solid."

Buffy inhaled sharply and squeezed Spike's hand again. "All right," she said, keeping her tone as measured as she could as she calculated how long it would take her to get to the weapons chest if it came down to it. "What is it you want?"

"Easy peasy lemon squeezy. I want you to stop the Old One Illyria from rising again."

Her heart gave a mad leap.

"Oh yeah," Spike drawled, snorting. "Is that all? Piece of bloody cake."

Zipporah flicked her gaze to him. "Unless my timing is off, sweet cheeks, you don't know who I'm talking about, and you won't for about two years. So maybe that 'tude of yours I mentioned could stand to be shelved while the grownups talk."

Buffy exhaled, gathering her bearings. Illyria would be the blue-haired demon thingy that had, among other things, bemoaned the loss of her pet in the aftermath of the Black Thorn battle. There hadn't been much time to powwow between winning the battle and bending the ear of the nice stranger who had taken the neighboring barstool, so Buffy hadn't gotten the full story as to who she was or why she'd considered Spike her *anything*.

"I know the name," she said slowly.

"You do?" Spike asked, his eyebrows shooting skyward. "Wanna share with the class, love?"

"That's it. That's what I know. That and she seemed partial to you."

“That a fact?”

In ways that had made a grief-stricken Buffy want to tempt fate by taking a swing at the sexy smurf. Hell, she might have had she not been waylaid in heartache, or if Illyria had not seemed even more cut up about having lost Wesley. The thought of Spike moving on had almost hurt more than his death, and she wasn't sure she liked what that said about her.

“I'm in a giving mood, so I'll make with the history lesson,” Zipporah said, leaning forward. “Once upon a time, there was a hell-bitch named Illyria. One of the Old Ones—meaning, for the slow learners in the class, she was one of the original pure demons that ruled during the Primordium Age. She did a lot of bad, and I mean a lot. Some of that bad included killing someone very near and dear to me, which, incidentally, is the reason D'Hoffryn decided to take me on. So I guess I do owe her one for that, but wouldn't you know it, I'm not one to forgive and forget.” The smile that crossed her face was flat and lifeless. “Yadda yadda yadda, insurrection, rebellion, betrayal, and hooray for the good guys. Except Illyria had a backup plan and, to make a long story short, the bitch was stuffed in a coffin that ends up in Los Angeles, at a certain law firm, and Illyria's essence goes into a poor, innocent girl, destroying her poor, innocent soul. All I'm asking you to do is to make sure she stays in the coffin where she belongs and the soul she consumes remains, well, unconsumed.”

There was a beat. Spike shuffled his feet and glanced at Buffy out of the corner of his eye. “Could be 'cause I'm evil, but that doesn't sound like a bad gig. What am I missing?”

“Nothing,” Zipporah said, drawing out the word. “Not a blessed thing. Or a damned thing. Or a thing of any kind. That's the long and short of it. I hate Illyria. I want her to stay right where she is—where she deserves to be. And sure, *it is written* that she will rise again, but who better to defy what is written than, well, *you*?”

Buffy worked her throat and nodded. “Keep one evil bitch from rising from her coffin. Yeah, Spike's right. That...sounds oddly reasonable.”

Zipporah blinked. “Seriously. Gift horse. Mouth. I could have gone for something really twisted, but I'm easy.” A beat, and the somewhat

combative smirk on her lips faded. “Look, Slayer, I know that the second I leave you’re going to hit your books or talk to your watcher or try to find some reason, some way that I am trying to pull one over on you. And I know telling you that I’m not is, well, not going to fly with you. So go ahead. Look up Illyria. Hell, look up little old me while you’re at it. Ask Anyanka about her old friend Zippy. I was never as close to her as Hallie because I didn’t play the game the way the other kids did since I’m really in this for just the one reason. Once upon a time, Illyria demanded that her followers sacrifice my little sister because she said something that offended the bitch. The reason I took this gig? Make sure that bitch never surfaces again. I was in that bar that night because I knew, I *knew* someone would have something they regretted enough to turn back the clock far enough to stop Illyria from rising again. Just my luck that the one with the sobbiest sob story happened to be the infamous Buffy the Vampire Slayer, the best person for the job. You do me this solid and we’ll never cross paths again.”

She was right, of course. The second she was gone, the first thing Buffy was doing was calling the Magic Box and getting the gang on the curious case of the Illyria the Old One. The second thing she was going to do would be to ask Anya what she knew about Zipporah and if she was on the level. And even if those things turned up aces, she would spend the next two years waiting for the next shoe to drop, because when push came to shove, she didn’t trust demons. If something sounded too good to be true, there was typically a reason behind it.

But at the same time... At the same time, what exactly was she willing to gamble? The lives of her friends? Spike? Potentially the world, if the things with the Black Thorn went the same way. How essential had Illyria been in that fight? Buffy didn’t remember her doing anything particularly noteworthy—there had been more than fifty slayers on the ground, along with Willow and her coven.

“Her powers were restrained and depleted,” Zipporah said as though reading her mind. “She wasn’t a pushover, but the dent she made in that fight wasn’t big enough to be missed.”

“You just have an answer for everything.”

“What can I say? I’ve done my Buffy Summers research. That’s why



it took me so long to read you the fine print.” The demon flashed another smile then, this one with some life in it, and rose gracefully to her feet. “That’s the full of it, Slayer. Can I count on you to prevent the rise of the Old One?”

“I’ll do it,” Spike volunteered, and shrugged at Buffy when she frowned at him. “Stop a megabitch from crawlin’ into a pulser. Sounds like the sorta white-hat heroics your lot would pull off anyway. And yeah, pet, if it keeps you here, there’s not much I’m not willing to do. Especially if you’re having doubts because of the source.”

*Especially if you’re having doubts because you made a deal with a demon.* The thing he didn’t need to say. Buffy was good at talking a big game when that was all it was, but she would never be able to pretend that her initial instinct wasn’t to do the opposite of whatever a demon asked of her. Even now, when literally everything she wanted was at her fingertips, when she’d gone head-to-head with people she loved for the right to stay where she was... It was easier to say those things and mean them when the potential consequences weren’t defined.

“If everything you’ve told me here today is on the level,” Buffy said slowly, “I will do what I can.”

“That doesn’t exactly fill me with confidence, I gotta tell you.”

“It’s the most I can give you now.”

Spike clenched her hand tighter. “Say we’re all in, but we’re unable to stop it?” he said to Zipporah. “We both give it our all and this bird rises anyway. What happens then?”

The demon arched an eyebrow and brought her hands up. “Hey, I know the best-laid plans don’t always go in your favor. Still, I would strongly urge you to *not* screw this up. This is literally the reason I got into the vengeance business, friends, which means I’m going to do whatever I can to ensure Illyria remains exactly where she is. And like I said, I can always find someone else to turn back the clock. I don’t care how long it takes.”

So that was it, then. The ultimate ultimatum. Buffy exhaled slowly, willing her racing heart to slow down before she worried Spike to death. Or undeath. She knew he’d have words with her once they were alone, and that was rather comforting. Even if his moral compass was on the skewed side, she knew just talking it out would make her feel

better, and she wasn't averse to being persuaded by a convincing argument.

And maybe that was it. What the demon wanted just sounded a little too not-catastrophic.

"Then we keep her in the bloody coffin," Spike told Zipporah solemnly. "I swear it."

"I'd feel better hearing it from the Slayer."

"You got what you're gonna get from the Slayer for now," he replied. "Said so yourself, she needs to check your story out. Give her time to do what she does and she'll come 'round." He threw her a look that told her he wasn't entirely convinced on that front, himself, and she felt herself soften.

This was worth fighting for. That was what she'd said when she'd arrived, what she'd decided and what she still believed. If the books made a compelling case for letting Illyria roam free, they would find another way to ensure the timeline they were creating remained intact. That was what they did, and she wouldn't accept anything less.

"My watcher doesn't trust this," Buffy blurted. "Or my ex-watcher." Whose help she might need in the immediate future, given what she'd learned today. "He's trying to find a way to cancel the wish and send me back to the *when* you pulled me from. Can he do that?"

A burst of laughter tore off Zipporah's lips. She slapped a hand to her mouth, shaking her head. "Sorry," she said, tittering. "I know it's not funny, but it's...well, hilarious. Short answer—no. Long answer—*hell* no. After Anyanka lost her power... Well, D'Hoffryn restructured the way our power centers operate. I'm not going to tell you how it works because, frankly, knowledge is power and that's something that we don't give over freely. But there is no way for anyone to undo your wish...unless they themselves make a wish to a vengeance demon, of course, but I have a vested interest in making sure your wish goes off without a hitch. And it's kind of code among vengeance demons not to set up shop in another demon's territory while they're working. If anything goes wrong, I will find you."

Well, there was that, at least. Buffy nodded, some of the tension in her shoulders relaxing. "Okay."

"Great." Zipporah clapped her hands. "All right, kids. I'm gonna

head out. But I will be checking in. Let's say, in about a month to see where we are on the whole *Illyria* thing. That gives you plenty of time to do all the research you need to do...and correct any of the other bad that you mentioned happened around here. If you need to reach me before then, Anyanka should know how to pull it off. Toodles!"

And without further fanfare, the demon abruptly disappeared.

IT WAS QUITE POSSIBLE THAT ZIPPORAH THE VENGEANCE DEMON had a point about Buffy and gift horses, for even after she had talked with Anya and verified the account of Illyria in all the available books, Buffy kept waiting for the bad news she just knew was coming. Everything seemed too easy, too clean, and the ability to get the thing she wanted more than anything without being forced into some sort of *Sophie's Choice* corner was just, well, weird. And hard to trust.

Yet that seemed to be the case. Not even Giles, who had promised in a detached sort of way to do as much research as possible, had been able to find any textual support for the argument that Illyria should be allowed a vessel, especially at the expense of an innocent soul. Between the Watchers Council's resources, Giles's personal library, and the volumes of text at the Magic Box, they had been able to verify that Zipporah's description of how Illyria was prophesied to return was on the money.

Buffy's concern over the matter eventually wore on Spike's nerves and led to their first real couple fight. And strangely, that had been nice, too. Fighting about something that mattered that was, more or less, outside of themselves. Not about her feelings or trauma or how she belonged in the dark, but about something real.

"It just seems too easy," had been her refrain whenever he got her alone. In front of others, she wanted to make like she was fearless, that there was no second-guessing or concern about what might happen down the line. With him, as had always been the case, she felt free to be herself. To be vulnerable and worried and admit that the choices she'd made might have been bad ones.

Except he didn't take that well, and she couldn't blame him.

"Easy?" he'd spat back during that fight. "It's bloody easy for you to live through all of this again? You really think I haven't been watchin' you? That I don't know just how much talking to your mates about *us*, never mind whatever rot they bring upon themselves, is eating you up? Hasn't been easy since you landed, but we've managed, you and I. And that's what we'll keep doing. We're gonna have to fight our way to the other side and I need to know you'll be there with me."

"Of course I'll be there. Why wouldn't—"

"Because suddenly you're talking like you wish you hadn't made a bloody wish, is why!" he'd roared, tears shining in his eyes, and suddenly everything had hit home in ways it hadn't before, and she'd understood. "Is this really all it takes to get you singing a different tune? Thought I had you and now—"

She'd thrown herself at him, tackling him back to the bed in a tangle of torn clothes and low moans. Spike had tried to fight her still—and she'd appreciated that; that he was taking this seriously enough to not allow himself to be distracted by sex—but had ended up pinning her to the mattress and fucking her hard enough they actually broke the bed. They'd tumbled to her bedroom floor in a bit of a daze, then had burst out laughing before he'd taken her mouth and proceeded to try to screw her right through the floorboards.

It felt a bit trite to say that was what had cleared her head, but it was true. The reminder of everything she stood to gain in the face of what she'd already lost had done the trick. Something she'd told him after he'd collapsed against her, burying his face in her throat as she combed her fingers through his hair.

Stopping some mad ancient demon from being hatched was worth keeping this. And if the vengeance demon who had issued the ask

decided to renege or add conditions when it was said and done, they'd find a way to beat her, too.

"Guess this means I'll be sticking close to Los Angeles after Sunnydale is kaput," Buffy had murmured later, her cheek resting against Spike's marble-like chest. He'd been drawing patterns on her back as they talked, the moment intimate and homey in ways she hadn't imagined things could be with him until it had been too late.

"Think you mean *we*, love."

"Well, obviously, I mean *we*." She'd tilted so her chin was pressed to his chest. "I wonder if Will might be able to track down the coffin, or whatever she's in. Or Giles." Though she didn't want to include him if she could help it—not with things strained between them. There was always the chance their relationship would improve over the next year, but Buffy wasn't going to hold her breath. "Or someone actually on the inside of Wolfram and Hart. I'm not sure when the coffin arrived or what any of those details were. We might just need to stick around and vet all of the shipments that come in."

"You said Angel is heading the place?"

"Yeah."

A downright mischievous grin had stretched across his face. He'd curled his tongue around his teeth in that way of his, practically vibrating bad intentions. "Could camp it up with him then, couldn't we?" he'd drawled. "See if the bloke can put us to work."

"You just want to have sex on his desk, don't you?"

"Well, yeah." He'd arched an eyebrow. "Are you telling me you don't?"

It was the sort of thing she knew she shouldn't encourage, but the amusement in Spike's eyes was infectious, and she was still annoyed with Angel for the whole Black Thorn plot, anyway—even if that Angel was part of a future that no longer existed.

The next few days, once the shock of Buffy's leap through time was well and behind them, were some of the most uneventful of her life. She fell into a routine of wake up, find places around town that were hiring to submit applications, researching time travel and vengeance demon stuff at the Magic Box before she and Spike hit the cemeteries to patrol. Every other day, she'd place a call to the police station to see

what the status was on Warren Mears, if a court date had been set and what was to be expected. She'd even touched base with Katrina to see how she was. Everything seemed calm in ways she couldn't really remember experiencing, and it was equal parts nice and boring. Nice because she had ample time with Spike—time to play, which she hadn't done in earnest since before Angel had lost his soul—but not having any fires to put out was unnatural. Even her birthday—a time-honored tradition of badness—lacked the zip it had the first time. With Dawn feeling more relevant and included, there had been no need for Halfrek to trap everyone inside 1630 Revello Drive. There had also been no Richard, friend of Xander's, to make Spike obnoxious and territorial.

Instead, they'd enjoyed a quiet night in. Buffy had even gone through the motions of pretending she hadn't known exactly what she was getting from everyone and had made sure to grin at Spike after unwrapping the portable back massager. Instead of a stolen jacket this time around, Dawn had opted for a much more legal and sentimental framed picture of them with their mother—the last photo they had taken as a family. And Spike had concluded the festivities by giving her two presents—one she could open in front of others—a railroad spike he insisted she'd find handy when fighting certain demons—and one that was just for them, involving handcuffs he'd sworn couldn't be broken no matter how hard you tried.

That things were going more or less smoothly kind of wiggled her out. While this year hadn't been all that eventful apart from Willow and the Trio, Buffy had expected more than one wrench to be thrown her way once she'd started making changes. But thus far, the consequences seemed...minor if not nonexistent, and that had her worried. Something she shared with Spike on patrol that night.

He snickered and gave her hand a soft squeeze. For whatever reason, Buffy hadn't imagined Spike being too big on PDA. Well, not the smaller, less in-your-face PDA like handholding. Sure, he'd held her hand when they'd been engaged that one time, but she'd thought that had been a byproduct of the spell. The first night they'd patrolled together and he'd threaded his fingers through hers, though, she'd gone warm in all the right places.

“Not happy unless your miserable, pet,” he said. “Theory I’ve been workin’ on for some time now.”

Yeah, she remembered that particular theory. “Gee, thanks.”

“Not sayin’ you didn’t throw my world for a bloody loop with this time hoppin’ business. It is a bit like you, though, to wonder when things are goin’ just a little too right.”

“Well, can you blame me? When have things for me ever gone right for any period of time?”

“Think that’s just life, Slayer. Periods of it bein’ topsy turvy. What you make of the bits in between is what matters.”

That was oddly philosophical for Spike.

“I just keep freaking myself out,” Buffy muttered. “The few years have been nonstop running, and yeah, this was the year where we arguably faced the lamest of the Big Bads—at least until he killed Tara and made Willow go all dark side, but it being quiet? I know nothing else massive happens until fall, when the First becomes active again, but I just keep waiting for the other shoe to drop. Whether that’s Warren’s back on the streets or Willow stubs her toe and decides to end the world or this thing with Zipporah blows up in my face.”

“Don’t worry, Buffy,” a new voice answered, startling her out of her thoughts. “Things aren’t going to be quiet for long.”

Spike snarled and dropped her hand, whirling around as his fangs descended. “Finn.”

Buffy groaned inwardly, her shoulders dropping. Somehow, over the past few days, she’d managed to forget that Riley was due to show up at any time. Call it a side effect of having been preoccupied with everything else that was going on.

“You two look awfully cozy,” Riley said when she turned to face him, his expression that inscrutable mask that used to drive her nuts.

“That’s because we are,” Buffy replied before Spike could interject with his trademark assery. As much as she loved him, if he started running his mouth, this already-awkward reunion was going to go down the crapper in a big ole way. “Let me save you some trouble—Spike’s already told the Doctor, or whoever, where he can shove his Suvolte eggs.” She’d actually been there for that conversation, more because Spike had wanted her to see it than out of necessity. He hadn’t



said as much at the time, but she knew he'd been out to confirm his version of events. "So yes, the Doctor was here. I think he still is, along with the eggs—if Willy is to be believed, anyway—but it's nowhere near us."

Riley just stared at her for a moment, his expression blank. "You... you're not surprised to see me."

"There isn't much that surprises me these days," she replied dryly. The temptation was there to launch into the whole sordid story—it was, if nothing else, convenient shorthand to explain her attitude. But Riley wasn't going to be in town long enough for that to matter, and she was more than a little tired of talking about the past. Still, even having told herself as much, she couldn't keep from being a little obnoxious. "Also, congrats."

Riley blinked.

"The missus? Sam? Any of this ringing a bell?"

"I... How do you know about Sam?"

Beside her, Spike snickered, his demon guise fading back to human. "Word to the wise," he said, "don't go around thinkin' you have any secrets from this one."

"There's no way you could've heard about Sam. It was a small ceremony. Only our—"

"Yeah, I know," Buffy said, waving a hand. "It's a long story that I really don't have the time or inclination to tell at the moment. But to the point—you and Sam are here hunting the Suvolte and think someone has black marketed its eggs into town. How am I doing so far?"

He just gaped at her. And yeah, she could admit, it was rather fun.

"The Doctor is like a demonic arms dealer, right?" She nodded at Spike. "He came to Spike to keep the eggs, call in an old favor with some sob story about the Suvolte in question. Long story short, the Doctor should have taken my advice and moved the hell out of the Hellmouth. I warned him that if I saw him around here again, I'd get my slay on...but that didn't seem to faze him. Not a big, seeing as I knew you'd be in town soon."

"You... You let the Doctor go?"

The accusation in his voice was not unlike what she'd heard from

him a thousand times before, if not about Spike then about Angel or Dracula. And it hit her just how much that pissed her off. In the past, this had left her feeling small and broken, like she had something to apologize for. Intentionally or not, Riley was a master at making her feel like something *less than*, and he'd wheeled out this specific power on more than one occasion until she'd boxed herself in so small she could barely breathe.

"He did Spike a favor back in Prague," she replied with forced calm. "I returned the favor by not killing him. And again, I knew you were on the case and I could point you in the right direction, so yeah, I let him go. Go check in with Willy. He keeps his ear to the ground about these sorts of things and if you manage to keep from threatening to kill his patrons, I bet he'd be willing to talk."

More of that awkward, blank staring. "What... Buffy, what happened to you?" Riley shot Spike a scathing look. "Are you really... I knew there was something going on with you two. Dammit, I knew it."

"Huh?"

"Soldier Boy cottoned on that I had a yen for you before anyone else," Spike muttered. "Showed up at the crypt to make sure I knew just how bloody unworthy I was."

Well, that was certainly new information. Buffy crossed her arms, her spine going ramrod straight. "You never told me that."

"Didn't figure it mattered much. You learned the truth not too long after, and we all know what happened then."

Buffy nodded, still a little stunned. That seemed like the sort of thing Spike or Riley might have mentioned, particularly with the way things had gone the last time. But whatever.

"What do you mean, you knew there was something going on with us?" she asked instead.

"Well, you refused to kill him, for one." He wrinkled his nose. "Never mind that he had a chip in his head, Buff. That didn't stop him from being a coldblooded killer. The *Scourge of Europe*, I think he was called at one time?"

"Oi, that wasn't just me," Spike replied. "There were four of us, you know."

Buffy snorted and rolled her eyes. "You got that there was some-

thing going on with us because I didn't kill him after he became fangless?"

"Oi!" her vampire barked again, this time glaring at her. "Easy on the pride, love. Already own more of it than I've given anyone else."

"Well, what the hell would you call it, Buffy?" Riley demanded, at last some anger flashing behind his eyes. "He tried to help Adam. He nearly got me killed with that Initiative doctor, *trying* to get the chip out so he could kill you. He proved to you over and over that even if he was *fangless*, he wasn't without his resources and he was definitely evil. But you still refused to kill him. So yeah, blame me for thinking that something was going on."

Huh. Well, put it that way, and Buffy didn't really have a good counterargument. It wasn't like people hadn't floated the idea of staking Spike by her in the past—they had, Xander especially, and with great relish. Every time he'd done something remotely evil, someone would bring up the obvious solution, and yeah, she'd shut it down again and again, not really stopping to consider the why.

If asked, Buffy would have insisted she hadn't started seeing Spike as a sexual being until after she'd been pulled back from the dead, but even thinking it, she knew that was a lie. After all, she'd been a hormone-addled teenager the first time she'd laid eyes on him, and while he hadn't really been the type of guy she normally went for—physically, at least—his presence had been rather unmistakable. Alluring in ways she still didn't quite understand, because truly, until Angel, she'd never found vampires attractive. And Angel's attractiveness had been somewhat steeped in the fact that he'd been a mysterious stranger and that had been so very romantic at the time.

Point was, first impressions were a bitch to undo. And her first impression of Spike had been *hello hottie*. If push came to shove, she'd have to admit that she'd really never made the full swap to seeing him as a thing to hunt. She'd wanted to more times than she could count, thought doing so would make her life easier. But that had never been the case. At no point had Spike ever been *just another vampire* to her.

"Maybe you're right," she said at last, shrugging. "Maybe that's why I never killed him. I definitely had reasons for keeping him around, even if I didn't know what they were."

“Thanks, pet,” Spike muttered.

Buffy ignored him, her gaze on Riley, whose face was a mask of stony indifference. Less warm than it had been the last time around, and given that he hadn’t been big on the warmth, that was saying something. Still, with as awkward as everything had been—him walking in on her and Spike during naked time—he hadn’t left here hating her. And he hadn’t come down too hard on her for screwing the undead, though she figured he’d probably wanted to. Then, the next year, he’d left the decision regarding the fate of Spike’s chip in her hands.

*The chip...*

“Riley, before you and Sam leave, I want you to arrange for Spike’s chip to be removed.”

Spike inhaled sharply, his head whipping in her direction. But Buffy didn’t look at him, staring firmly on the man in front of her so he’d know how serious she was.

“You want the chip out,” Riley said at length. “Buffy... I don’t even know where to begin.”

Despite knowing she should have expected it, Buffy couldn’t help the twinge of frustration at the disappointment in his voice. Maybe she and Riley did need to have this out just once.

“Okay then,” she said, crossing her arms. “We can begin with you. Specifically, your feelings of inadequacy and how somehow I got the blame for them. How after you gave me the third degree about Angel and Dracula and Spike, you were the one sneaking off and getting your rocks off with the undead. Let’s talk about how my mom was sick, dying, and my sister was being hunted by a hellgod, but Riley wasn’t getting enough attention and that was somehow my fault. Or maybe we could talk about how I literally died saving the world—again—went to Heaven, then got pulled out because my friends thought was in Hell for some stupid reason that quite frankly still makes no sense to me. We can talk about all of that if you want—that and more. Or you can just do this one thing I’m asking of you and trust that I know what I’m doing.”

There was nothing for a moment. Then Spike barked a laugh and rumbled, “God, I love you, Slayer.”

Buffy's mouth twitched and she glanced at him from the corner of her eye.

"Buffy..." Riley worked his throat, the color having drained from his face. "I... I'm not sure what you want me to say."

"Say you'll arrange for the chip to be removed."

"This is really you now."

"It is." She dropped her arms and took Spike's hand once more. "You don't need to like it or understand. I'd never ask that of you. But like I knew about your wife and the Doctor and everything else, I know this is the right move. The chip's going to start misfiring soon and this will just save me a phone call."

"And you trust him to not harm civilians?"

"Spike wouldn't do anything to hurt me."

"I didn't say you, Buffy, I said—"

"I know what you said, and again, Spike wouldn't do anything to hurt *me*. He knows what that means and so should you."

Riley was quiet for a moment, then swallowed again and nodded. "All right."

"All right?"

"I'll make a call." He sighed and straightened, staring at her as though he'd never seen her before. And it struck her that maybe he hadn't. For as much as had gone wrong in their relationship, it didn't seem outside the realm of possibility that neither of them had ever really gotten a good look at the other. Truly, she hadn't known she'd harbored as much resentment for the way things had ended between them until seeing him here. It was the sort of thing she'd be inclined to discuss in one of her therapy sessions if that was still an option—all the unresolved things from her last failed romance and the way she'd shouldered the blame for pretty much everything, both to herself and others.

"Thank you," she said, meaning it. "For that much."

Riley offered a numb nod, flicking his gaze to Spike before settling back on her again. "You died?"

"Yeah."

"What happened?"

"A lot. A lot of a lot, and I don't really want to go into it. Let's just say things around the Hellmouth are never dull."

He nodded again, his mouth a firm line. "And...you're happy? Whatever this is with you and assface... You're happy?"

"Git," Spike muttered.

Buffy pressed her lips together to fight a grin. "Yeah, I'm happy. About as happy as I've ever been, really." And terrified as a result of that, but she figured it'd be better if she didn't say as much. "There's a lot. A lot that's happened and a lot that won't make any sense to you... and there are things I am sorry for but, wow with the massive."

A final nod, and the look on his face became somewhat pained. "I'm glad you're happy," he said stoically. "I'm just sorry I couldn't be that for you."

Spike seemed to swell a bit, and Buffy acted on instinct, stomping down on his foot before he could start to crow. Her vampire released a low yowl and turned a glare on her, though there was enough light behind his eyes that she felt relatively certain she'd made the right call.

"Bleeding hell, Slayer. Forget your strength sometimes," he whined, hopping on one foot.

"Preemptive effort to keep you from being obnoxious."

"I hear a stake to the heart works wonders," Riley muttered.

"Soldier Boy's just a sore loser," Spike drawled, smirking and blowing her a kiss when she rolled her eyes. "No harm in pointing out the truth. Or that your girl traded up."

"And you really want me to arrange for his chip to be removed?"

Buffy shook her head, sighing and grinning in spite of herself. "I really want it removed," she said. "And again, thank you."

Riley tried for a smile but it didn't quite work. "If ever you need anything, just reach out." He paused, shifted somewhat awkwardly. "My wife—uhh, Sam—and I might be in touch if we can't find the Doctor. He really is a bad guy, Buffy. Not someone I'd advise letting go a second time."

"Don't worry. I'm not about second chances."

Riley flicked his gaze meaningfully at Spike one last time, shook his head. "Yes, you are," he muttered, then turned and stalked off before she could get in another word.

THEY DECIDED TOGETHER THAT IT WAS FOR THE BEST THE OTHERS didn't know that the chip was out. Not right now, at least, with everyone still walking on eggshells and neck-deep in Illyria-related research around preparing for the nuptials. If anyone noticed the extra spring in Spike's step or the extra glee in even the tamest threats he threw around, they didn't mention anything.

In fact, on the subject of Spike and—more importantly—his relationship with Buffy, pretty much everyone had gone more or less silent. Except Dawn, whose new favorite pastime was randomly mentioning just how loud her sister screamed when she came, preferably right after someone—namely Xander or Giles—had taken a drink of something. And yeah, even though it was extraordinarily obnoxious, Buffy decided it was better to just suffer through rather than draw more attention to it by berating her sister. She'd already navigated the shoplifting-is-bad conversation with aplomb—likely aided by the fact that Dawn had somewhat anticipated it.

Also, it wasn't like Dawn was lying. Though Buffy hadn't really intended to give her housemates a surround-sound example of just exactly what she sounded like in bed, thoughts like that were kind of hard to conjure when Spike was helping her break furniture in her

room. Before long, he was going to owe her a completely new bedroom suite. He'd already somewhat jury-rigged a repair on the bed they'd broken, but that quick fix was only going to get them so far.

The closer the day of the wedding grew, the more Buffy had to stifle the urge to follow-up with Xander and ask if he'd given any more thought to their conversation. In the time that had passed, neither one of them had so much as acknowledged it, though there was a new softness in Xander's voice every time he spoke to her, and he seemed to be making a genuine effort with Spike. He also hadn't done anything to indicate an intention to slow down or cancel his wedding, and had become a bit more affectionate with Anya—much to Anya's delight—when they were all together. He'd even delivered Buffy's bride's maid dress in person, looking a bit sheepish.

"You probably already know how terrible this is," he'd said, wrinkling his nose and thrusting the garment bag at her. "Unless you had someone erase your memory which, by the way, I so would not judge you for."

"Unfortunately this is one memory that refused to be erased," she'd replied and hugged him. And while the urge had been there to ask, she'd managed to bite it back. The fact that he had delivered her dress had in itself been a kind of answer.

Still, she wanted to be ready to take out the demon before he could get a chance to put his plan in action. Thus, on the day of the wedding, she forced herself out of bed well before she would have normally to get things in motion. Truthfully, she didn't remember too many details about the day itself before the wedding that wasn't, having been dragging herself out of a depression one agonizing inch at a time, but the smart move seemed to be to get ready and get to the church as early as possible to head-off potential party crashers.

Getting out of bed was admittedly easier without Spike in it. He'd stayed at the crypt the night before, something he only did now on occasion, and mostly just to maintain his claim on it and give the illusion that they weren't actually living together. But as she'd learned in the final days of Sunnydale, Buffy slept a thousand percent better when Spike was curled around her. Without his familiar weight depressing his side of the bed, finding sleep was



something of a chore, and the sleep she did manage was rather restless.

Buffy traipsed downstairs in a fog to put on the coffee. She wasn't too surprised to find Willow already up and at the stove, making pancakes and looking like she hadn't gotten more than a few winks, herself. Last night had been the last she'd spend at Revello Drive, per the agreement with Giles. After the wedding, she, Tara, and Giles were heading to the airport and getting on a plane to England.

It did kinda wig Buffy out that everyone she knew would essentially be MIA, but there was a bit of peace in that as well. Getting Tara away from the Hellmouth was the best way to assure that Warren, languishing behind bars as he awaited his trial, didn't get a chance to fire that bullet. And Xander and Anya would return within a week from their honeymoon—again assuming they made it that far. Still, Buffy wasn't sure she'd ever had the Hellmouth all to herself like this, and while she was confident in her and Spike's ability to handle whatever arose, the prospect did have her a little on edge.

That and wondering how much fate could be dodged. Spike had assured her that nothing was decided, citing his experience with changing whatever Drusilla saw in the stars and Buffy's own habit of defying prophecy as proof, but Buffy didn't think she'd really stop holding her breath until summer rolled around and everyone was still nice and alive.

Oh, hell, who was she kidding? Buffy would never be through holding her breath.

"Good morning," she said to Willow, trying for a normal smile. "Have you been up long?"

Willow looked up and fired back a forced smile of her own. "Couldn't sleep. Kept going over the itinerary and worrying that I forgot to pack something." She sighed, edged the spatula under one gooey flapjack and flipped it to the golden side. "Always wanted to go to England. Or travel abroad anywhere, really, but especially England. Never thought magical rehab would be the reason why I finally booked that flight."

Buffy held her breath for a moment, then gave her friend what she hoped was a suitably reassuring shoulder pat. "You're doing the right

thing, Will. I know it's...a lot. What I dumped on you and, well, everyone, but it is the right thing."

"I know it's the right thing," Willow replied, pressing the spatula against the flapjack, then flipping it over again. "I feel it. And...would I be a horrible person if I admitted that I'm excited to get to use magic again? I mean, I know I shouldn't, as out of control as I was...but I miss it. It's like a part of me was amputated, only it wasn't. Like a hand or something that is right there, working perfectly, but you can't use it anymore. And after a while you get used to not relying on it, working with your other hand and relying on other senses to get you through, but you just know how much simpler your life would be if you could just use your hand again." She blew out a breath, slid her finished pancake onto the plate beside the stove, then poured another serving of batter into the pan. "Does that make sense or am I just a crazy person, here?"

"It makes sense," Buffy assured her. "Actually, you told me something like this once."

"I did? Or, in the future? Your future?"

"After Sunnydale was gone and you'd done the spell that triggers all the Potentials. It was good magic, pure. Or that's how you described it." She shrugged. "And I get it—the way you feel now. It's how I felt when Giles did that Crucia-whatever when I turned eighteen. Like a part of me was missing."

She regretted mentioning Giles almost immediately for the way Willow whipped her head in her direction and regarded her with wide eyes that practically screamed a desire to broach what was more or less a verboten subject. Buffy had managed to dodge her friend's attempts to discuss what had happened the night Giles had arrived home, and though she knew she was fighting a losing battle, she wasn't sure now was the best time to get everything on the table.

Willow inhaled the next moment as though bracing herself. Apparently, she'd decided now *was* the moment. "Buffy...about Giles—"

"Probably not something we should talk about."

"No, it's definitely something we should talk about and I'm running out of time. It's *Giles*." She tore her gaze away long enough to flip the pancake. "I won't pretend to understand any of what you've been

through. Now or... Well, your then, my now." She hesitated. "Xander told me. About your talk with him."

"He did?"

"Yeah. He didn't really wanna overwhelm me with all the other things that are going on, but he needed someone to bounce some stuff off of and...well, sometimes you're a little intimidating. I think *really* intimidating now that you're Miss Hindsight." She flashed a brief smile as she transferred another flapjack to the plate. "I think I talked him into talking to Anya. Told him, at least, that I wish Tara and I had talked more—that I'd listened—when there was something that I could've done to keep her here. Really more that I had listened and not been so sure I was doing the right thing. Especially now, knowing what happened in the time you came from."

Buffy pressed her lips together but didn't say anything.

"I know things got bad with Giles. But nothing can be so bad that there's no getting around it, right?" Willow moved to the cabinet to retrieve the syrup and pulled out a fork. "I mean, if I tried to kill you and end the world and you're still friends with me, doesn't that mean Giles deserves a little forgiveness, too?"

There was little denying the logic there was sound. Buffy sighed, deflating a little. "I never expected it to go the way it did with him," she said softly. "He was the first person I told, aside from Spike, when I realized I was in Sunnydale again and the clock had been turned back. We weren't exactly on great terms in my when but I hadn't cut him out or anything. I wanted him here, obviously. But everything about sending me back... That it was based on *nothing* just...hit me raw. So much went wrong and hearing him essentially tell me that people I love aren't worth saving over an educated guess was kinda the end."

"No, totally. I get that," Willow said in a rush as she doused her breakfast stack in syrup. "That is one-hundred-percent gotten by me. There's no way I'm letting Tara die if I know what's coming. A-and I definitely don't want to become some megawitch who tries to end the world. Not on my to-do list, thank you very much. And maybe if I had these memories of other times Giles had been with the bad decisions, I'd feel differently. But people can just be wrong, you know? Giles can just be wrong."

Yeah, the problem was he was just wrong a lot—arrogantly wrong, in some cases. And there was a good chance she was being self-recriminating, as well, because that arrogance had been her arrogance, too. Leaving Sunnydale after sending Angel to Hell because of how the deed had affected her. God, if she could, she'd go back and shake some sense into that stupid girl who had missed more than three months she'd kill to have back with her mother. Forcing Giles to accept Angel back once he'd returned, even after everything that had happened the year before—even knowing Angel wasn't the same as Angelus, that didn't make it any easier to watch the guy who had killed your girlfriend traipse around scot-free. Pretty much everything with Spike she'd have done differently, and a lot with Faith, too. A bunch of decisions she'd made believing she was completely in the right only to reflect upon with age and experience under her belt.

When Giles had returned to fight Willow, she'd told him she understood why he'd left her to navigate her post-after life without him, and that it had been the right call. At the time, she'd believed it, and she had for a while after that, too. Believed that standing on her own was what made her strong and anything else was a sign of weakness. But in the time that had elapsed since then, she'd decided that was wrong—that asking for help was its own strength. There had to have been a middle ground between leaning on Giles too much and not having him there at all to catch her fall.

Maybe there was a middle ground now.

"I'll talk to him," Buffy said at last. "I can't promise anything beyond that, but I'll talk to him."

A smile broke across Willow's face just as she stuffed a bite of pancake into her mouth. "That's great!" she said around her mouthful. "I mean, good for you. I know he loves you a lot and these last few weeks—"

"I know. I love him too." She sighed and was somewhat startled to realize her eyes were stinging. "I think that's why it hurt so much. That someone who loves me, someone I love, can essentially think it's better for me to be in a place where I was just getting by. This chance... It's everything, Will. I thought for a minute there maybe I was wrong,

but even what Zipporah wants in exchange is something I'd call a good."

"Anya did speak very highly of her," Willow agreed with a slight frown. "And yeah, maybe a bit with the weird that you seem to have won the demon lottery. But I get it. Something like this happens and the last thing you expect is for the bad vibes to come from someone you love and not, say, the demon responsible."

"Exactly."

"And...Spike? How are things going there?"

The question shouldn't have caught her off guard, but it managed to anyway.

"Things are good," Buffy replied in a carefully neutral tone. She'd shift gears once she figured out just what Willow was hinting around.

"Just good?"

No, *not* just good. Great. Fantastic, even. Better than even she could have thought, which was both weird and completely not at the same time. Spike being domestic in any regard was something she'd always had difficulty envisioning, and while their version of domestic was hardly Martha Stewart Living, it was...nice. Carving out their own little bit of normal in the heat of everything else. He was still loud, bad, and rude, still got on her nerves every time he got a chance and said things at times that ruffled the feathers of her inner slayer, but it was all him. Spike as she'd never let herself experience him. There were the occasional missteps, but they were small and manageable, and they were navigating them together.

Buffy met Willow's eyes again, and it occurred to her just how long it'd been since she'd done the girl-talk thing and how much she missed it. After she and Riley had fallen into their routine, and especially after he'd left town, her life had been too chaotic to really make a dating effort. There had been flirtage with Ben, which had gone nowhere—thankfully, because how awful would it have been to have another boyfriend try to end the world? Then this year, she'd been so detached from her friends and more than content to stay that way, and Willow had been neck-deep in her own relationship issues to really pay much attention to Buffy. Not that Buffy had been in a place to let her.

Then the following year, Willow had voiced concern over Buffy's

growing relationship with Spike and...well, so had everyone else. There had been that brief flirtation with Wood but it had been doomed from the offset for obvious reasons.

*"Why does everybody in this house think I'm still in love with Spike?"*

Neither she nor Willow had ever mentioned that slip, but hell, she'd thought about it. A lot. Explained it away, done whatever she could to pretend it hadn't been the admission it was.

These were different circumstances and with a slightly different Willow. And since Willow was about to leave for an indeterminate amount of time, this might be the last chance Buffy got to do the girly thing for a while.

"I'm honestly not sure if I expected it to be as good as it is," Buffy found herself saying a moment later, mouth in a hurry to get ahead of her brain. "I was so hung up on this idea of normal. Or having normal—being normal. It...screwed me up romantically. I mean, when I found out Riley was in the Initiative, my first instinct was to run for the hills, remember?"

Willow offered a small smile. "Boyfriend in the job."

"Yeah, which... I know I obviously got over that, but he was your regular Joe kinda guy, you know? Plus I wouldn't have to explain that monsters are real to him, *and* he can take care of himself?" She sighed. "I think if I couldn't make normal work with Riley, there's no way it'd work with anyone. And that's what pushed him away, too. That and I was so closed off from him—I never loved him the way he loved me. Or the way I loved Angel. The way I love Spike now."

"Your love for Spike is Angel-level?"

Buffy snorted. "It's more than that, Will. It's...grown up. And equal. Angel and I were never equals—I was stronger but always felt inferior. I was also a kid in my first real relationship and Angel was, I think, too invested in this idea of me as his way to redeem himself. I'm not sure if we were ever real with each other. The relationship we had when he came back was nothing like the one we'd had before he went evil—we were good but... I don't know." A pause. She released a breath. "I don't think I ever really appreciated just how much that changed me, though. With Lothos and the Master, even though the Master managed to kill me, it wasn't personal. I was able to face it and then

party and the whole creature-of-the-night boyfriend angle seemed so exciting—forbidden and romantic, you know? But when Angel went bad, everything that he did to me after that was personal. It changed me and I didn't really realize how much until, well..."

"Therapy?"

"For starters," she agreed, nodding. "We kinda relitigated the entire relationship. I didn't want to at first, but my doctor said—and she was right—that it was the root of everything I felt with not just Spike but Riley and even Parker. I was reacting to Angel's leaving when I jumped into bed with Parker—he left so I could do stuff like that so that's what I did. And then Riley... I just never let him close enough. Spike, I never thought could get close enough so I wasn't really paying attention. And when we first started sleeping together and he would call me on stuff, I'd throw back that what we had wasn't normal. We would never read the paper together or go on normal dates. He spent time trying to convince me that normal wasn't what I wanted—what I wanted was to be in the dark with him, and to a degree he was right. When we were at our worst, I did want him to pull me down in the dark. I wanted to be swallowed up by it, but I knew if I stayed there I'd suffocate. And I resented him for it—for being what I needed, and I took it out on him." Buffy looked to the island, the scent of Willow's breakfast-making her tummy grumble. There better be enough batter left over for second helpings. "I told him, when I realized I was back here, that I couldn't do that anymore. That he couldn't try to pull me under and that's not where I belonged, but that he could come out with me. I had no idea what he'd be like in a real relationship but it's... Will, it's so nice."

Willow waggled her eyebrows and stuffed another bite of pancake into her mouth. "Nice, huh?"

Buffy bit the inside of her cheek to keep from grinning, though it was a wasted effort. "Some parts are admittedly nicer than others. It's not perfect—he bleached his hair here a few days ago and ruined one of Mom's good towels and I thought I might actually stake him there for a second, but then... I honestly don't even remember how that fight ended."

"My money's on with your legs in the air."

Well, that seemed reasonable. "Probably. Fighting turns him on."

"Just him?"

"I plead the fifth." Since their first actual couple's argument about Zipporah and the anticlimactic ask, there hadn't been much occasion to actually go at each other. The towel incident had been accompanied by a few others, namely the what-qualifies-as-an-ashtrey discussion and how it wasn't okay to leave blood-crusted dishes in the sink. That she was keeping bagged blood in her refrigerator for him was monumental enough, but explaining why the flatware looked like it had been used to stab someone to a social services representative was not on her to-do list. At least the bagged blood could be concealed in other containers.

"I'm happy for you," Willow said, and though she sounded exhausted, there was enough genuine warmth in her voice for Buffy to believe she meant it. "And...for what it's worth, I can see it, too. I mean, you've been different ever since the time-jump thing, and for obvious reasons, but... I don't remember you being like this with Riley. Or Angel, actually. You guys were always all with the serious. All work and no play kinda thing. You seem to play more with Spike."

Oh lord, she had no idea. Buffy felt her cheeks go a bit warm. "Thanks."

"I'm glad. Sincerely."

And there seemed nothing else to say on the subject. A few moments lapsed as Willow focused on her pancakes, the scrape of the fork against the plate a bruise in the air. After she was done, she gave everything a rinse, then wiped her hands and checked the time.

"Damn. I better go get Dawnie up," she said, heading for the hallway.

Buffy frowned. It was still early enough that, were she to try and get her sister out of bed, things would undoubtedly be thrown at her face. "We have time."

"I told her I'd take her to get her hair and makeup done for the wedding," Willow replied. "My little goodbye gift while I'm in... Well, while I'm away." She paused, then turned, nibbling on her lower lip. "I didn't overstep, did I? It seemed like a good thing to do but I should've



checked with you first. Make sure you didn't have any sister-stuff planned."

Again, Buffy bit the inside of her cheek, though this time to keep the first thing that had crossed her mind from escaping her lips. While Willow had definitely stepped up with a few of the household things—namely groceries and utilities—she hadn't made mention of helping out with other expenses since Spike had first made mention that Buffy was the one apparently expected to shoulder all financial responsibility. And yeah, Buffy understood that Willow was a student and without the reliable income, but honestly, she was getting money somewhere.

"Uh oh." Willow had gone a bit pink. "Did I step in it?"

Buffy forced herself to relax and shook her head. Getting Willow clean was the number one priority on the action-item list. They'd figure the money stuff out like they had before. "No," she said. "I think Dawn will enjoy some QT before you leave. She's all with the supportive, but... Well, abandonment issues."

Losing her mother and sister within a ninety-day span would do that.

Willow relaxed and nodded. "Okay. That's what I thought. Don't worry—I won't let her make horrible makeup choices."

A memory struck from nowhere—Dawn, four or five years old, lipstick streaked across her mouth and teeth, her cheeks ruby red and her eyes a disaster zone. Their mother had thrown a holy fit—apparently, the cosmetics she'd gotten into had been of the expensive variety, the sort their father bought and insisted Joyce wear whenever they went out anywhere as a family. The perfectly made-up trophy wife. Dawn had cried and darted between their mother's legs when Joyce had come at her with a wet rag, then crawled under her bed and refused to come out until assured she could wear the makeup consequence-free until Hank arrived home.

Buffy snickered in spite of herself. "I dunno. Sometimes her horrible makeup choices are laugh-worthy. And we don't know yet how today will go."

"I think we do." Willow offered a half-smile. "Thanks to you."

She didn't know how to take that, so she opted not to reply. Willow

seemed to take her non-response as a cue that the conversation was over, and headed down the hall.

Leaving Buffy to the list of things she needed to get done before heading to the church.



ONE OF THE things she'd insisted on was an actual suit. If Spike was going to be her date to this thing, he needed to dress the part. Tie. Jacket. No slayer-killing trophy. He'd put up a fight—or pretended to—rolled his eyes and muttered a few things along the lines of, "Dress me up like a bloody Ken doll," and, "Gonna look like a right git." Spike didn't do suits, apparently, except on very rare occasions. Rare occasions called the 1920s.

Granted, he hadn't put up too much of a genuine fight. Much. And she might have played a bit dirty, mentioning the time Angel had shown up at her prom looking like James Bond. Cheating? Sure, but it had had the desired outcome. Both of them, actually. Spike had agreed to monkey-up and he'd punished her soundly for using that tactic. So soundly she'd limped a little the following day.

Suffice to say, Buffy was looking forward to seeing him all fancied up. He'd brought the suit over after buying it—or stealing it; she hadn't asked questions—and shoved it in her closet. Better at her place than at the crypt, he'd said, and she'd agreed, especially since he was spending less and less time there. Not that it was what a scavenging demon would necessarily be drawn to, but better safe than sorry.

Spike barreled into the kitchen under his smoking blanket about an hour after Willow had traipsed upstairs to get Dawn out of bed, and just in time to help Buffy salvage the mess she'd made of the pancakes she'd been attempting to make.

"Thought we decided you're better off stayin' outta the kitchen, pet," he teased, managing to flip a flapjack before it turned to rubber.

"I really didn't think there was a way to mess these up." Buffy sighed and watched him make quick work of her almost-culinary disaster. "We're a bit behind schedule. Dawn, being on teenager-time, has taken approximately forever in the bathroom, so I haven't had a

shower yet. You better go first because I will probably be in there for a while, girling up.”

He turned to her, his brow wrinkled. “Go on, then. I’m all set. Had a wash at the crypt.”

“Spike, it’s a wedding. You’re going to need to shower like a people in a place with actual indoor plumbing.”

He rolled his eyes. “Bloody wench.”

“Yes, aren’t I a horrible person for wanting my boyfriend to smell good at a fancy event?”

That was all it took, apparently—calling him her boyfriend. Almost instantly, the scowl melted from his face and he favored her with that goofy-happy smile that never failed to make her knees shake in the best way. Spike cupped her cheeks and took her mouth in a soft kiss. “All you had to do was ask, love,” he murmured, then winked. “I’ll pick up the wet towels and everything.”

Buffy snickered and turned. “Lemme make this as easy for you as possible,” she said, leading him down the hall. “I’ll get your suit out of my closet. I assume you know where to find the towels?”

“What, you think I started knicking stuff from this place yesterday?”

“These are things a good slayer would not find endearing,” she said as she started up the stairs.

Spike apparently couldn’t resist the temptation that was her ass in his face and gave said ass a pinch. “Good thing there are no good slayers around then, right?” he teased, coming up so close behind her he was practically on top of her. “Just naughty ones.”

Yeah, this was so not the time for her libido to overtake her brain, but when he said things like that, her legs made with the wobbly and the rest of her just wanted to rub all over him. “Stop,” she hissed, turning to face him when she reached the landing. “Bad Spike.”

He just grinned unrepentantly and wagged his tongue. “Very, very bad. Can show you just how bad if you like.”

“Later. After the nuptials.”

“I’ll cart you over the threshold and everything. Ooh, that could be fun.” He rocked a bit on his heels. “Wanna play pop-the-cherry tonight, pet?”

“Bound to be better than the real thing. I am at least reasonably certain you won’t go evil and start murdering my teachers tomorrow.”

“No more evil than usual, at least,” he agreed and neared to kiss her. “Better get scrubbin’ before my evil instincts take over.” A pause. “Could join me, if you like.”

At that, she wilted, which she hated because it made the light in Spike’s eyes dim in response.

He took a step back, hands coming up, and plastered on a weak smile. “Sorry, pet. Didn’t mean to—”

“Spike—”

“No, I shouldn’t have. I know you’ll tell me when something changes.”

It was awful, that forced smile, more so because she knew just how beautiful the real one was. With Willow and Tara leaving town and Xander and Anya hopefully making their honeymoon this time, Buffy felt she might actually have the chance to process her remaining issues where the bathroom was concerned. She hadn’t had yet bothered to ask around for a new therapist—one skilled in all things otherworldly—but it was definitely still something she wanted to do. Something she felt would help her navigate whatever came next.

Buffy headed to her room on autopilot, grabbed the suit from her closet, and marched back to the bathroom. Spike was already in there, disrobing, and she forced herself not to tense up too much as she hung the suit on the back of the bathroom door, though she knew he could hear how hard her heart was pounding. She didn’t fully breathe again until she was safely back in the hallway, and spent the next few minutes waffling between berating herself and telling herself that it was okay, she was allowed to react like that.

Which was entirely true—it’d just be easier if Spike understood.

Easier on her. Hell on him. And she was in too deep now to walk it back. Far too deep.

Buffy occupied the next few minutes going through her room and collecting the things she’d need to get ready. The radioactive dress, for one, and the makeup she’d decided was not too horrific. There were the shoes she’d bought to complement said radioactive dress—as best they could, anyway—and the pieces she’d chosen to do her hair. In all

honesty, she didn't remember what all she'd done the last time around and figured that it wasn't necessary to follow the template precisely. All she needed to do was make sure she got there with enough time to spare before the demon claiming to be future Xander got anywhere near the real Xander. Also, bridesmaid stuff, though she'd more or less entrusted Willow and Tara with the bulk of it.

Spike thankfully took quick showers—she hadn't been sure that would be the case now, since her only other experience with it had been when he'd been one of a dozen or so housemates, most being teenage girls. In a few minutes, he'd tumbled out of the bathroom once more, a towel wrapped around his waist and his platinum curls looking extra cute all wet and rumpled. In fact, he looked so thoroughly delectable she wanted to weep that she didn't have time to enjoy the sexy in all its glory.

"You're staring, pet," he said as he moved to ease by her and into the bedroom. "Better roll up that tongue before you get me all dirty again."

"Wahh." She stuck out her lower lip. "Being a responsible adult is so not worth it."

"Coulda told you that." Spike neared and sucked her protruding lower lip between his teeth, which she would have found totally inappropriate if it weren't for the fact that this was the outcome she'd been hoping for. And hey, any excuse to press herself close to a wet and naked Spike was one she was going to take. Though as was common with them, one kiss led to two, which led to five, which led to them making out and her back pressed against the wall. The material at his waist began to tent, and in seconds, he was grinding his cock against her and growling little needy rumbles into her mouth.

At some point, perhaps when oxygen became a concern, Buffy planted her hands on his firm, marblesque chest and gave him a shove. Sure, it was a weak shove, but one he respected all the same. Damn him.

"My turn to destinkify," she said with a sigh, running her fingers over one of his nipples. "Then we better go make with the responsibility."

"I'm your armpiece. You're the responsible one."

“Phooey.” She kissed him again, then made her way to the bathroom, where the air was soupy and pleasant-smelling and the mirrors were still somewhat steamy.

It would be nice, sharing this space with him. Number one item on her to-do list following the wedding—getting her dysfunctional rear-end into therapy stat. She needed to tell someone about these things to help her work through to the other side.

Buffy fell into a quick rhythm, disrobing and starting up the shower as she began to, once again, mentally go through what she remembered of the first time she’d attended this wedding. There had been an unfortunate bit of stalling in front of the guests, and of course confronting Spike, who had shown up with a date he’d chosen to make her jealous.

Succeeded in making her jealous, and she’d been good enough to tell him that. Tell him that and not much else. While she maintained that she’d made the right call at the time, there was a lot more in what she could have said or done to have eased the blow. But then, she’d also been elbow-deep in sorting through her own issues, trying to do what was right for her and a bit tunnel-visioned.

Buffy was just about to climb under the spray when his voice cut through the air.

“Bugger, forgot the bleeding monkey suit,” Spike said, ducking his head inside and reaching around for the suit still hanging on the back of the bathroom door—the same she’d somehow not seen when she’d shut it. “Not used to—Slayer?”

She didn’t realize she’d crashed against the back wall until he turned his eyes on her—didn’t realize a lot of things. Like the fact that she couldn’t feel her legs, or that her lungs were having a hard time sucking in air. Her hands tingled and her chest ached, and all she could see was him stepping inside the bathroom and closing the door behind him. Telling her that they needed to talk.

Her throat tightened and her eyes watered, her heart jackhammering so hard against her ribs the thought *I’m dying* flooded through her head with such alarming certainty she expected the world to black out. Logically, in some distant, academic part of her mind, she understood exactly what was happening. A panic attack. Not her first, not even her first since she’d been back, but definitely the worst, because

suddenly she wasn't in this *when* anymore. She was there. It was that night. She was hurt and he was here and he was in so much pain and then he'd been on top of her, out of his mind and tearing at her robe and—

"Please don't," Buffy managed to choke out. "Please, Spike, please."

For a moment, the two Spikes—the one in her head and the one she'd spent the past weeks building something new with—merged and became one. Because that was the look on his face, slacken with horror and realization, with disbelief but understanding. And the panic resumed at full blast, knocking her to her ass even as her body tried desperately to reassert control.

Then he was gone, the door shut firmly behind him. And though she wanted to, needed to move, she couldn't. Buffy just sat there, shaking and crying and screaming at herself as the shower ran and the heat rose, sinking deeper into emotional quicksand.

It was all over now.

SPIKE DIDN'T SAY ANYTHING. HE DIDN'T DO MUCH AT ALL, actually. By the time Buffy managed to pull herself together—deciding to go ahead and shower to get it over with and to allow herself some space—she found him in the kitchen, nursing a mug of blood and staring at the island. He'd dressed, though clumsily, the shirt buttons askew and missing holes, the tie loose around his neck.

He'd jumped when she said his name but didn't respond. And one look at his face told her not to push him. Instead, she'd neared—tried not to wince when he recovered the step behind him—and pressed forward until she was close enough to start redoing the buttons.

"Guess it has been a long time," she'd said in a falsely cheery voice that had likely done more damage than good. "Think you forgot how to do this."

Spike had just blinked and looked at her, his expression still distant.

For a bit, she thought he might beg off the wedding entirely, but he didn't, though it might have gone better if he had. Sure, his absence would have had any number of people asking questions, but the withdrawn, haunted look on his face had her friends downright wigged, so much so that Xander was more absorbed with what was wrong with



Spike than he was the demon who tried to hoodwink him into believing he was his future counterpart.

“Uhh, don’t take this to mean I give a crap,” he’d told Buffy right after they’d dispatched the demon in question, “but is Spike okay? He looks... I don’t think I’ve ever seen him look like that, and I was there for the whole post-chip mopeyness.”

Buffy had plastered on a smile and might have replied, but if she had, she didn’t remember the story she’d trotted out. Whatever she’d said must have made sense, though, for Xander had switched gears with enviable ease back to the matter at hand, being that he was about to get himself hitched.

And this time, he did, looking far more poised than she’d ever seen him. He’d been calm, even suave, said all the right things and even got a little teary-eyed as he recited his vows. Anya’s vows were less heartfelt, rather blunt and functional, and she’d somehow worked in a reference to all the money she intended to make in between all the orgasms they would share for the rest of their lives. If she’d been in any other mood, Buffy imagined she would have had a hard time keeping a straight face, but as it turned out she was about as far from tickled as she’d ever been.

Spike had sat rigid the entire ceremony, his jaw tight and his eyes far away.

Somehow, though time seemed to crawl, Buffy made it through the day. She got to the other side of the hugs and congratulations, the handshakes and farewells and managed not to freak anyone out with the plastic smile she put on anytime someone said her name. When Dawn came up to her, Janice at her side, and asked if she could stay the night, she said yes. Though she almost instantly regretted it, as that would leave the house completely empty, but she wasn’t about to take it back. Using Dawn as a shield between her and the conversation she knew was coming with Spike wouldn’t be fair to anyone.

But still, the thought of going home was almost unbearable, so Buffy did what Buffy always did in situations like this—stalled. She stalled so much that by the time she’d changed out of the radioactive nightmare Anya had forced her into for the second time now, the church was empty.

Empty save the vampire sitting in one of the pews, that awful, haunted look on his face.

Buffy swallowed hard, folding the garment bag containing the awful dress of awfulness over her arm. "Ready to split?" she asked in a tone so forcibly casual it made her wince.

He didn't move, didn't so much as twitch. Then, just as she was gearing up to try again, he brought his head up and fixed those tormented eyes on her.

"You told me it was Angelus." This he said in a flat monotone. "Quite a yarn you spun there, Slayer. Managed it without so much as a stutter. Not easy to come up with somethin' like that on the fly. Oughta know, since I've always been rubbish at it. Here I thought that was something else we had in common, but old Spike's a bit slow on the uptake, it seems."

Her eyes prickled. "I didn't mean to lie to you."

"Didn't mean to?" He barked a hard, horrible laugh. "I'm evil and I might be slow, but I'm not that bloody slow. And after all that rot you fed me about bein' honest. About sharing the things that are hard. Turns out I was thick enough to buy it."

"What good would it have done?" Buffy shot back, louder than she'd intended. "What good would knowing that—"

"Shut your gob."

"Spike—"

"What good? What *bloody* good?" Spike sprang to his feet, his face a mask of rage and anguish. "Knowing that I have that in me. That I could ever do that to you. I'm a monster, pet, and I'll be the first to admit it, but I've never been *that* monster, and I..." He broke off, shaking his head as tears spilled down his cheeks. "Not that sort of monster. The kind that would hurt someone I love like I love you—who could..."

But the words were too much for him, it seemed. Again he broke off, this time with a sob, and sank back into the pew, his head in his hands and his shoulders shaking. And Buffy didn't know what to do—didn't know if she should stand where she was or go to him. The urge to just bolt for the door and hide from this conversation came upon

her so suddenly she'd actually taken a few steps in that direction before she caught herself.

No, she wouldn't run. She'd do what she should have done from the offset—she'd stay and fight.

Buffy drew in a shaky breath and forced her legs toward him. "I'm sorry," she said lamely, placing the garment bag over the back of a pew. "Spike..."

"You're sorry?" He drew his head up, fixing her with a glare, the sanctuary's soft lighting making his wet face shine. "I did this to you and *you're* sorry? How...how can you stand to have me touch you? Be near you? You say you love me and I... I..."

"It wasn't like that."

"Oh ho, was it not? You sayin' I didn't—"

"I'm saying that on the scale of sexual assault, it wasn't... It was different."

He just looked at her before huffing a tragic laugh. "Brilliant. Just brilliant."

"Look, I talked about this with my therapist a lot—"

"I'll just bet you did—"

"And—"

"And you sussed out that you have a hankering for men who cause you pain, is that it? Men who hurt you?"

Buffy inhaled again, hesitated, then took the seat beside him. "You...you told me that before."

"Just full of wisdom these days."

"No, after you...after you got your soul. You said that almost exactly. Trying to convince me to kill you."

Spike rolled his head back so he was staring at the pitched ceiling. "That much makes sense at least," he muttered. "All the pieces lined up in a neat little row, waitin' for me to open my bleeding eyes and put them together. Got me a soul for you. Some vamp corners you in the loo and I go off and get a soul. I shoulda seen it. Should have *bloody* seen it."

"But you didn't."

"Yeah, thanks. Spike's a right thick git."

"No, Spike, you didn't because you couldn't see yourself doing it.

Because...because you wouldn't." Buffy blanched at the incredulous look he shot her but was somewhat heartened that he'd looked at her at all. "I say it was different because it *was* different. Sexual assault is about power. About...about dominating someone else, and that's not what you were trying to do."

"So that makes it okay, then?"

"No, of course not. But what it does is make it something we could get past."

Another huffed laugh. "Bully for you. 'Cept you're not past it, are you? And why should you be? But *how can you* if you keep it all in? If you don't tell me that you're not afraid of just any vamp but *me*."

"I'm not afraid of you."

He bolted to his feet with a snarl. "Well, maybe you should be! Maybe you *should* just stake me and have it over with. If anything like that lives inside me—"

"I hurt you. I bruised you. I beat you up and I broke your heart."

"So you're sayin' you had it comin', then?"

"No, no, no, but—"

"But *what*?"

"But when you came into the bathroom that night, it was to talk! Just to talk." Buffy leaped to her feet too. Made her feel somewhat better, like they were standing on even ground. "Warren and his friends had cameras hooked up everywhere. After Xander ditched Anya at the altar, you were both in a lot of pain and...you went to her to find a spell to make yourself not feel it anymore. You guys ended up..." Ugh, she didn't want to say it. Could barely think it without feeling the urge to scream or throw something, especially now. "Well, you know about that. What you didn't know was what seeing that did to me. It was... I was a mess. Part of me was in love with you then, I think. I pretty much fessed up to Willow when she called me out on it, but seeing you with anyone else, with Anya, crushed me. And Dawn went to tell you that—tell you how hurt I was, which... If I didn't love you, as I kept saying, why would it hurt? So you came to talk. I was drawing a bath... I'd hurt my back and...and you came in."

Spike closed his eyes, but not quick enough to keep new tears from tumbling free. He didn't say anything.

“Do you remember the first night I was back when I told you that it was important that you want it when I touch you?”

If possible, Spike went even more rigid. “Yeah.”

“Our entire relationship up until that point was me saying no but meaning yes.”

He cracked an eye open. “Is that what you tell yourself to make it all better?”

“Spike, you were in the middle of an emotional breakdown. You’d heard me tell you I didn’t want this or you or any of it a thousand times. Hell, you’d even said *stop me* or *make me* when I said no, and I never did because I never wanted to. It was easier telling myself that it was all on you—that all the depraved things I wanted were your fault—if I put up a fight.” Buffy held up a hand. “What we were was really screwed up. My therapist threw around terms like BDSM that... Well, I looked into and with the consent thing? Yes, we were. And maybe a little with the bondage too, though I never let you get that far. And—”

“And all of this is how you justify it? I bloody well try to rape you and—”

“No, that’s not it at all.”

“Well, Slayer, if it walks like a duck and—”

“Are you listening? *I* was horrible to *you*. Everything was on my terms—even when you said no and meant it, I completely disregarded it and you and took what I wanted. And that *was* about power. I beat the snot out of you in an alley because I didn’t want you to be what I needed. And Spike? I’m stronger than you. A lot stronger. I used my strength and your feelings for me to get my way and broke you in the process. When you came into the bathroom that night, it wasn’t to get back at me or hurt me or anything. It was because you were broken and hurting.” Buffy stopped, and the ringing in the air once the echo of her words died was deafening. “I did that to you, all of it, knowing I was doing it and not caring enough to stop. Not considering your feelings—hell, *using* your feelings as a shield to keep myself from feeling too bad. Everything I did was intentional. What you did... What you did wasn’t intentional. You didn’t even realize you were doing it until it was over—until I kicked you off. And the look on your face...”

The look on his face had been one of those things that remained

with her long after—something in the days and weeks following Spike's disappearance that she'd summon at night. Xander had asked her once how she could have so easily sought Spike afterward for his help, agreed to let Dawn sit with him while the world ended around her. She hadn't had much time to process that decision in the midst of Willow's breakdown, but she had plenty in the time after. And the truth was, if she'd thought rape was something Spike would intentionally try to do to her, she'd have staked him. Happily. Should staking him not be an option for some reason, there was no way she'd let her sister in his company, chip or no chip, no matter how desperate she was for help.

"Then you left town. Got a soul. Came back and... I'd done that to you."

He made a sound like a wounded animal. "Buffy—"

"I'd done that to you." She forced out a shaky breath. "What happened in the bathroom that night changed me. And yeah, it's...it's hard to think about you and me in there, but I want to get past it. I tell myself I'm fine but then things like what happened earlier happen and—"

"No one could expect you to be past it," he said, voice barely a whisper. "That I did that... That I—"

"It's not any worse than anything I threw at you. I'm pretty sure I still come out ahead. I *knew* what I was doing. You didn't." Buffy worked her throat, brain scrambling. "And you're right. The second I told you that story about Angelus and... I make the wrong call a lot. And it is important, us being honest, but I knew that knowing this would hurt you and I didn't want to hurt you."

Spike offered a numb nod, wincing. "At the expense of what, Slayer? You carrying this all by your lonesome? Expectin' to just get over it someday? Might not be too hot on a lot of things, but I'm pretty sure that's not how this works."

"Yeah. I know." Buffy pressed the heel of her palm to her brow as if she could shove the pounding there deep enough inside her head that it wouldn't hurt anymore. "There was so much I wanted to fix when I realized I was here again. And I kinda just...started talking without thinking about things. I'm sorry for that." It was like falling over a tripwire, saying those words. A torrent of emotion crashed over her,

sending her shooting over the edge of control so that the next thing she knew, she was crying hot, messy tears. “I-I’m so sorry for everything. For *all of it*, Spike. For using you and hurting you and beating you and-and-and lying to you. I was just so tired of hurting you.”

He closed his hands around her forearms, but that was it. Didn’t bring her to his chest, didn’t kiss her temple, didn’t do any of the things she’d grown accustomed to him doing over the past few weeks. Rather held her there at arm’s length, like he was afraid to touch her.

“It’s not about me, though,” he said a moment later, his voice thick—the way it grew when he was struggling to keep his head. “Not *just* me. You expectin’ more from me than you’re willing to give. Thought that bit was over.”

Buffy fought through her tears to open her eyes. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I just... You hadn’t done anything. Not *you* you. And you weren’t—you would never—if I changed the way we got there.”

“You owe it to me to tell me somethin’ like that is inside me,” he replied. “Never thought I could do anything to hurt you—not like that. Fuck, especially not like that.” She opened her mouth, but he must have seen whatever she was going to say on her face, for he immediately snapped, “And don’t give me that rot about how I haven’t done anything. You keep on about things that you haven’t done to me, either. That alley incident—”

“But I *did* do it to you! I lived it!”

“You did it to some form of me that died. Not this Spike. Not *me*. So how’s it you can hold that against yourself but I can’t know—”

“Because the Buffy who did those things *is* me, this one. It is not the same for you.”

“Oh, so it’s a game of semantics, is it? Doesn’t change the fact that the thing that did that to you is inside me.” He thumped his chest. “And you say I didn’t know what I was doin’ until it was over—fuck, love, is that supposed to make it better? That I could hurt you not knowin’ that’s what I’m doing? Yeah, before you were blasted back, you were a real piece of work. Drove me outta my bloody mind and you mighta been a bitch most of the time, but you just said yourself you *knew* what you were doing. You knew it and you did what you needed to get...to get better. Even if it wasn’t with me.”

“Spike—”

“That I wouldn’t *know*? Doesn’t that mean something’s missing? If I can’t tell the difference between a woman wanting me and... Doesn’t that mean I need—”

“Stop.”

His eyebrows shot skyward. “Stop?”

“You don’t need it. You don’t.”

“Know what I’m gonna say, do you?”

“I told you that the difference between you with a soul and you without is negligible. You were just more restrained—”

“So you’re sayin’ ol’ Spike with a soul woulda done the same? Been too wounded or broken or whatever you wanna call it to tell that the girl didn’t want him? Or that he just wouldn’t have cared?”

“No, no, no. Of course not.”

“So you admit there’s a difference, then. That the difference matters.”

“Yes, there’s a difference. I never said there wasn’t. I just said it was so small it didn’t matter. The circumstances—”

“Bugger the circumstances, Slayer,” Spike said, voice clipped with finality. “There’s no sodding excuse for it. For hurting you. For ever doing that, and I... Fuck, every time I close my eyes, I see it happenin’ now. See me tearin’ at you like some bloody rabid dog. See myself hurting you in a way I...”

Dammit. She was not going to let him go down this rabbit-hole. Buffy pressed forward, taking his face in her hands. “That’s not us,” she said firmly. “Not anymore. And it wasn’t... We’re not other people, Spike. Things that are true for others aren’t true for us. What happened then couldn’t have happened if a bunch of other stuff hadn’t happened. And that stuff *isn’t* happening this time.”

There was nothing for a moment but Spike’s heavy breaths, his eyes remaining firmly shut. At length, though, he relaxed and opened them. “Wish I could see it the way you do,” he said, his tone strained but measured. “Never got that chance, though, did I? If you really believed all the rot you’re sayin’, you woulda trusted me with this. We woulda worked it out together.”

“Spike—”



“Cause whether this is somethin’ I did to you here or there, fact remains that it affected us, right? And we needed to be bloody *honest* with each other to make this work.” He closed his eyes again. “I believed you. Fuck, I ate everything up, so bloody chuffed to finally have a chance to try this for real. You and me together, all the bollocks behind us. Joke’s on me, right?”

A surge of panic hit her in the solar plexus, nearly knocking her to her knees. It was the height of conceit, she knew, but in no eventuality had she seen Spike, especially soulless Spike, possibly calling things off, no matter what she did or didn’t do. After all, if she hadn’t been able to chase him away the first time she’d lived this year, it seemed unlikely that anything could. But the way he was talking now had her more than rattled.

“Are you...”

But big coward that she was, she couldn’t say it. Even thinking it hurt. Buffy dropped her hands and took a step back.

Again, Spike opened his eyes. “Am I what?”

Of course he wouldn’t let that slide. Buffy pressed her trembling lips together. “Are you... Are you breaking up with me?”

For a long moment, there was nothing. He just stared at her, a thoroughly unreadable look on his face—well, unreadable insofar as she couldn’t tell if the astonishment was of the how-could-you-think-that or the do-you-really-need-to-ask variety. Like she was an idiot for needing an answer.

“Slayer,” he said in a way that provided zero reassurance, “you are the barmiest bird I’ve ever met.”

“For a guy who was with Drusilla for a century—”

“Couldn’t bloody leave you if I tried. Oughta know, right? I’ll love you until I’m dust.”

“But you can love me without being with me.”

“Yeah, I’ve tried that too. Turns out I’m rubbish at it.” He offered a weak smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “I’m mad enough to throttle you and bloody terrified of touching you. Terrified of myself, what I’m capable of. And I dunno, love. I dunno how to get past this.”

“Together,” Buffy said at once, stepping forward again. “We get past it together. You tell me—”

"Only works if you tell me. You gonna do that now? Tell me everything?"

"There's nothing else to tell you. That's it."

"And how am I supposed to believe that? Guess I have no choice, right? That you haven't hidden away something worse?"

"Spike, trust me—"

"I'd love to, pet, but you've given me no reason to."

Buffy snapped her mouth shut, tears welling again. It was no less than what she deserved, she knew, but the words packed a horrible punch.

"I know," she whispered. "I'm so sorry. For not... For everything. Then and now."

"You don't get to be sorry for what I did to you." Spike pressed his brow to hers, and at the contact, she lost her composure and started to cry in earnest. It was such a small thing, that patch of skin against hers, but at that moment it meant the world. "Buffy, I bloody swear, I won't—"

"I know."

"I hurt you like that and I'm staking myself."

"Oh, no you're not. I won't let you."

"Don't really get a say. Between me and a stake."

"No, Spike, listen to me." She pulled back just enough so that their eyes locked. "I owe it to you to be better than I was. That's what I've been trying to do since I came back—be better. Make better choices. Love you the way you deserve."

He choked another sob, digging the heel of his palm against one of his eyes. "Don't bloody deserve any of it. Not after—"

"Yes, you do. And I do too. We were bad together before—I was bad and you...you were a demon fighting your instincts, fighting nature, fighting everything you were with me, every second we were together. That's all." Buffy released a ragged breath. "But we can be good. These last few weeks have proven how good we can be. And Spike, it's so much better than even I thought. I was just telling Willow this morning how much better it is, how much I love it, love you. And we might screw up, probably will because we're us, but that doesn't mean we go staking ourselves."

"You love me." The trepidation in his voice about crushed her. "You... I do this to you and you love me. You touch me. Let me kiss you. Sleep next to you. Be inside you. You really love me even after what I did."

"It wasn't easy," Buffy said, or forced herself to say, because that much was true and if she was telling all, she needed to not skimp over the harder things. God, she owed him that much. "When you came back... It was slow, you and me. You tried to hide that you had a soul at first and...we danced around each other a lot. But you'd done this thing for me—this huge thing. That was too big for me to really wrap my head around. And it was you but a different you, and what we ended up having was the best relationship I've ever had until, well, now. It scared me, all of it scared me, and I held you at arm's length but I didn't want to. We started sleeping together again—just sleeping, holding each other—toward the end. And when I told you I loved you before you died..."

"I didn't believe it." He swallowed. "Probably couldn't, given what I'd done."

Neither had she. Not at that moment, at least. It had taken the Spike-less days and nights that had followed to hit home just exactly what she'd lost. "It was more than just that. We were always messy." Buffy ran her hands up the sides of his neck until she had his face cradled against her palms again. "When I got back, you asked me if I needed you to have a soul. Remember?"

A beat, then he nodded.

"I meant it when I said no. I still mean it. Believe me, you'd know if I didn't."

Another beat before he nodded again. "Say the word, Slayer. I'll do it. Wrangle up that demon bird and wish it upon myself, if you like. Or there's a legend I could chase—take me across the bloody world, probably, but it'd be worth it for you."

"I don't want you doing that, putting yourself through that, for me." She hesitated, then let her fingers wander southward, over his shoulder, down his arm, across his chest until her hand was resting over his unbeating heart. "We keep talking. Keep doing this. Anytime

you need to. I touch you when you want to be touched, and same goes. And...maybe we use a safe word?"

Spike stilled, studied her with one of his annoyingly inscrutable expressions, then arched his scarred eyebrow. "Safe word, eh?"

"Like...peanut brittle."

At that, he actually laughed. A genuine Spike laugh, and she could believe, if only for a second, that everything was going to be all right. "Peanut brittle?"

"I dunno..." Buffy made a face. "It was the first thing that came to mind."

"You're a wonder, Slayer."

"I try." She held fast for a second, then stepped back. "So...wanna go take advantage of the empty house? I can still play the trembling virgin."

Spike's grin faded almost immediately. "Dunno if I can. Tonight, at least. Might be a minute before I..." He looked away, sighing. "Just keep seeing it. Don't want that in my head when I'm with you, pet."

The slight high she'd experienced dive-bombed. "Oh. Of course, yes." A pause. "Will you...stay? Stay with me tonight? We don't have to do anything, I just... I don't really wanna be alone."

*I don't want you to be alone.* But she didn't say that.

Spike nodded and tried for another smile, this one weaker. "Don't much want to, myself."

It was firmer ground, what she stepped on when they finally left the chapel that night. Firmer yet also compromised, because she knew, despite however much she might have wished it, they weren't leaving the conversation in the pulpit. This wasn't something Spike was going to just get over—it was something that had changed who they were, who they had been on their way to becoming. There was no going back to where they'd been this morning or any time before.

And as much as she wanted to believe that was a good thing, the part of her that had been determined to keep her own past buried couldn't help but whisper that the worst was yet to come.

SHE AND SPIKE HAD DONE THE AWKWARD THING BEFORE—AFTER she'd ended things the first time, and especially after he'd returned with his soul. Neither, it seemed, had known how to act around the other, which had led to a lot of furtive glances and silent conversations. But this awkward was different than the others—different and far worse because of it.

Not once since she and Spike had kicked off a real relationship had he worn clothes to bed. The romantic cuddling thing she'd done with his soulful counterpart had been about comfort and companionship, and yeah, love too, but she hadn't realized as much until it was too late. Since she'd been back, the nights she'd spent with Spike had included them racing to get each other naked. They'd never hit a mattress with the intention of just snuggling under the blankets. In fact, the idea that Spike might have pajama bottoms made her want to giggle.

Except it also didn't because of what it meant.

After nearly tearing the house apart, Spike trudged his way up the stairs with a pair of sweats draped over his shoulder. He stalked right past the bathroom without looking toward it, but with body language wound so tight it didn't seem to matter. A wall separated them now, a

wall she'd put there, and despite what they'd said back at the church, she wasn't sure how to break through to the other side.

"You find something?" she asked, eyeing the sweats. They looked to be at least two sizes too big for him. "Guess I'll have to eat my stake after all."

Spike blinked at her.

"You know," Buffy pressed. "'Cause I said if we had something that would work, I'd eat my... Okay, never mind. Where were they?"

He swallowed and looked over, staring at the pants as though surprised to see them there. "Pile of laundry down there that hasn't been touched in weeks," he muttered a moment later. "Wager these belong to Harris or summat."

Buffy wrinkled her nose, trying to think of a reason Xander would have had to change pants over here. But then there were those one-hundred-and-forty-seven days that she'd been unaccounted for, so it was anyone's guess.

"You're voluntarily putting on the clothes of Xander?"

He gave her a look but didn't answer. Didn't even crack a grin. Not that anything about this was funny, of course. Instead, he tossed the sweats onto the bed and hesitated. "Shirt I wore over's probably filthy and I'm not sleepin' in this get-up." He glanced down at the suit he still wore from the wedding. "It's all right if I don't wear anything up top?"

"Spike, anything's all right. You don't have to be like this with me."

Another pause, this one accompanied by a glare. "Thanks ever so for the permission, Slayer. Let me know how you handle it when you find out you hurt the person you love more than this sodding world in a way as bloody unforgivable—"

"But it's not. I already told you—"

"Yeah, know what you told me. Doesn't change it, though, does it?" He glared at her a moment later, then sighed, his shoulders dropping. "Sorry, pet. Don't mean to... I just...don't know how to do this. How to be here now. How to be with you."

Buffy stopped herself before she could cross the room and make things worse by hugging him or something. Her extremely touchy-feely vampire was being stingy with the touchy-feelies and she knew that was

by design. No touching unless it was wanted by both of them—they'd decided that. Also, she wasn't exactly coasting through this easily, either. At the end of the day, she was the one this had happened to. By virtue of therapy and conversations with herself and that entire last year with Spike, she'd managed to properly categorize what had happened in her head and it felt all kinds of unfair that she had to shoulder the baggage of comforting the attacker, even if she believed it had been the accident she'd told him it was. That didn't make the feeling of violation go away, or the panic that had blown the top off her lie.

Part of her wondered if that hadn't also been one of the reasons she'd opted to withhold the truth.

"I don't know, either," Buffy said at last, her voice heavy. She sank onto the bed, defeated, and braced her hands on the edge of the mattress. "I'm sorry."

"Quit apologizin' for—"

"I'm sorry for lying to you." She pressed her eyes closed. "I said it was to protect you, but I also think it was to protect me. Because...this is new territory for me."

Spike didn't say anything. When she glanced up, she found his eyes fixed on her.

"I need to just...talk for a second. I have thoughts going around and I can't make sense of them when they're in there. They might not...be things you want to hear, but can I say them?"

He swallowed and nodded. "Anything."

Good, because she didn't think she could hold them back. "I meant everything I said back at the church," Buffy said in a rush. "Absolutely everything. I believe it was a mistake, an accident. I believe that because you would never intentionally hurt me. That's how I got past it. How I learned to understand what had happened, contextualize it." A breath. "I also knew that you'd be crushed if you ever found out and I wanted to spare you that because I know this is something that only happened because of other things that haven't or aren't going to happen. That's not a belief so much as it is hard fact." She looked away, her throat tightening. "So I lied to protect you. But also to avoid...this."

Another pause. At length, she heard him breathe and say, "What's *this*, pet?"

"This feeling bad for something I *didn't* do," she said. "There were a lot of things I did wrong that year, Spike. More than you—way more. More than this. We were all kinds of bad and it was pretty much all on me. Pretty much but not *entirely*. And the things that were bad that were on me put the things in motion for this to happen." She drew in another breath. "But now I'm stuck feeling guilty for something I didn't do. Like if you apologized to me for my beating you up in the alley. That was all on me, no matter if you'd been trying to drag me down into the dark. So now I have to walk this balance of comforting you over something that happened to *me*, but also know that part of that was on me and—"

"Buffy, stop."

She did, closing her mouth so hard her teeth clacked and her head hurt.

For a moment, Spike remained quiet, though the breaths he heaved were so heavy that he seemed to be everywhere at once. She kept her gaze on the floor, listening to those breaths and how they offset the mad thumping of her heart and the pounding at her temples. A swell of emotion warned that she was on the verge of tears again and she didn't think she'd be able to push them back, and she found herself wondering how badly it would hurt Spike if she started crying now.

"Do you want me to go?"

She jerked her head up so quickly she made herself dizzy, panic spearing her cold. "What? No. No, I don't want that. I told you—"

"Told me you didn't want to be alone, yeah, but when the option's alone or with me—"

"Spike, I love you. I want this to work. I want to get past it and I want it to be over. I just needed to... I don't think I can be sorry for everything. I don't think I *should* be."

"Never asked you to, Slayer."

"I know you didn't. Didn't mean to sound like I did." She paused. "But I don't want you to go. I've never wanted that."

Spike arched an eyebrow, looking so much more like his usual self that she almost lost the hold on the tears she was holding back. "Never."



er?" he echoed. "Seems I can recall quite a few times you told me to shuffle on off outta town. Or are we rememberin' things differently?"

"I meant after. After we started...with us." Buffy hesitated, considering. "Even after what happened in the bathroom, I didn't want you to leave town. I actually took Dawn over to your place to have you watch her when Willow went all Wicked Witch of the West Coast. Clem told me you'd left. I guess you bolted pretty fast after what happened."

He gaped at her. "You took the Bit to me after... After I..."

"Yeah. Which was clue one, by the way. I knew then it had been an accident. I knew immediately."

"An *accident*." Spike shook his head, huffing. "Still not sure how you can use that bloody word talking about it."

"It was."

"I get that you believe it, that you think it. Dunno how or why or... Like I said earlier, pet, I dunno how you can stand to touch me. That you can sit here and tell me you love me, that you did this time hop because I, the monster who attacked you, went up in a ball of dust."

"Because—"

"I know. I know what you said. Just..." He looked at the floor. "Told you I wanted to stake the bloke who'd hurt you. When I sussed out it was someone I knew, I about lost my mind tryin' to figure out who. Not like you and I have a ton of vamps in common. Even for a wild hair thought it mighta been Dru—that she'd come back and learned what we were and couldn't handle it. Didn't take to my loving you too well, after all. But that seemed too out there, even for her. Darla, as I hear it, snuffed it again. Done in by her own stake."

"She was pregnant," Buffy said. "With Angel's son."

A high-pitched titter tore off his lips. "Heard that much too, but wasn't sure I believed it. Poor little sprog has no bloody chance, does he?"

"There's a thing there too. Some demon hunter from Angel and Darla's past gets... I dunno, frozen in carbonite or something, kidnaps the kid, and takes him to this other dimension where he grows up hating Angel." She frowned at that. "Actually, I might put in a call to

him to give him a head's up. Maybe Angel won't be so stupid where Wolfram and Hart's concerned if he has a son to care for."

"Holtz? Holtz got mojo'd back?"

"Is that the demon hunter?"

Spike shrugged. "Before my time, but I heard tale or two." A beat. "I woulda killed her, you know. Dru. Said I'd do it for you once and I'd do it a thousand bloody times if I thought she'd hurt you in any way. But when you said Angelus came back, it just seemed to fit, right? Wanted to rip him limb from sodding limb."

"Not much has changed there."

"Did he even come back or was that a smokescreen?"

There was absolutely no cause for her to resent the question, but she did anyway. "I only lied about the one thing."

"It was a pretty big lie, pet. You gonna clutch your pearls over this?"

"Well, Angel *did* go all Angelus again—the reasons I said back when I first got back. Some creature-feature from his past knew him but Angel had no memory of it, so they decided to bring out the beast. He got loose, chaos ensued."

"And you and Will rushed off to put Daddy back in the cage?"

"No." Buffy pressed her lips together, her cheeks going a bit hot now. "No, that's where the lie started. Will went, but not before Faith busted out of jail to hunt Angelus down. He nearly killed her but they managed to put the soul back. And then Will brought Faith to Sunnydale to fight the First. And you met her for the first time."

And, even though Spike had since disabused her of the concern that he was at all interested in Faith, she couldn't help the surge of envy at the memory of them sitting all nice and cozy together in the basement, looking like they might have just taken the cot for a spin.

"Not the first time."

Buffy swung her head up. "Huh?"

"Met her once before, the other slayer." To her utter astonishment, Spike grinned. The jealous feeling exploded into near mania at the sight. "Didn't know it at the time, though. Bitch was wearing your skin."

And here Buffy had thought she already had a million and one

reasons to hate Faith. Doing her best to keep her tone nice and level, she forced out, “What happened?”

“Spoke a piece about how she could have me if she wanted me and would ruin me for other women.” The grin on his face broadened and he offered a one-shouldered shrug. “Turned out that much was prophetic, but she didn’t know it.”

Great. Now she felt she might actually be sick. Buffy pressed her hand to her stomach, trying and failing to keep the mental images of Spike entwined with Faith from overwhelming her already-overwhelmed brain, but the stupid thing had never once done something she’d told it to. And though she very much did *not* want to ask what she was about to ask, she knew she wouldn’t be able to move on until she did.

“And...you didn’t...”

Spike arched both eyebrows. “What? Steal a snog? Cop a feel? Shag her sideways? You really think if I’d had a taste of you then, whether or not I knew it was you, I woulda kept mum about it?”

Well, no. But the thought still didn’t rest well with her. “Were you tempted?”

“Of course I was tempted. If I thought I wouldn’t get a stake in the heart, I’d’ve shoved you—her—up against the nearest bloody wall.”

Sometimes, Spike’s tendency to tell the truth stretched a little too far. Buffy shuddered and wrapped her arms around herself, the sick feeling in her belly expanding. “Well, thanks. I’ll be having nightmares for approximately forever. She did Riley, you know. And she tried to get with Angel before. And you two were awfully cozy—not *you*, but the other you. Faith just has a thing about trying to get with people—”

“Slayer, it was you. *You*. At least that’s what I thought then.” He favored her with a soft smile when she looked up again. “Didn’t hear about the body swap until after. Not gonna say I’d’ve turn down a shag at the time, but it was *you* who got me goin’. It’s always been you.” Another pause, then the smile faded and the light that had sparked his eyes went with it. “Meant what I said. If you’d prefer it if I toddled on off—”

“I don’t want that. I told you I wanted you here. Ever since I came

back, I've wanted you here." She rubbed her arms. "I sleep better when you're here."

"Can't rightly wrap my mind around that one."

"Spike—"

He held up a hand. "I know. Know what you've told me, at least. Guess I gotta trust it, even if I don't trust myself much at the mo'."

She hesitated, considering, then decided she was through with the distance thing. There would be more conversations like this one over the coming days, she knew. More circular talking, more reassurance, more confusing thoughts and feelings, more guilt that she was owed and plenty that's she wasn't. Nothing with them had ever been cut and dry—the bad or the good—but they were worth fighting for so she was ready to do what needed to be done in order to get to the other side, so long as Spike was with her.

But part of that was putting the kibosh on distance. Buffy wanted her touchy-feely boyfriend back, and maybe to get there, she needed to be the initiator. Let him know that he could still touch her freely, that she wanted him to.

So she rose to her feet and closed the space between them—not all the way, but most—and stopped in front of him, breathing hard. "Kiss me."

"Sorry?"

"Kiss me." She rocked a bit on her heels. "I want you to."

Spike just looked at her for a long moment before lowering his gaze to her mouth. And there, right there, she saw it—the want, the need he seemed to radiate. That expression of hungry yearning that had once been an addiction she'd been desperate to shake. It was there—*he* was there, her Spike, buried under the hurt and anger. It might take a few days to clear the debris, but they would make it. They would get to the other side. The alternative was not an option.

It wasn't the hot, hungry kiss she knew or even the soft we-don't-have-time-for-more they'd started sneaking every now and then. It was hesitant, uncertain, and it was impossible to miss how hard he trembled, somewhat like a wounded animal that hadn't yet learned to trust. The urge to cry hit her again, harder and more terrible than before.

He sensed it and pulled back immediately, searching her face, panic

evident in his. That only deepened the cut. "What's the hurt?" he asked, his voice higher-pitched than normal. "Did I—"

"It's me," Buffy said, shaking her head. "It's me. I'm sorry."

"This again. You don't get to be sorry."

"I should have told you. From the start, I should have told you." She rested her brow against his shoulder, trying to stave off the oncoming storm and knowing it was impossible. "I should have told you everything. We could have worked through it, been past it. I just didn't want to hurt you, Spike. I knew it would hurt and I—"

"Didn't want to hurt me because I'd hurt you and you'd hurt me before that." He took her by the shoulders as he had at the church and steadied her as he stepped back. "It's different now, isn't it? A bit like everythin'... These last few weeks with you have been brilliant. The happiest of my unlife." He blinked hard, his own eyes shining now. "Just feels like a lie now. All of it. Not sure how a bloke is supposed to get past somethin' like that."

"You—"

"I want to, pet. Wouldn't be here if I didn't. Told you as much, right? I don't know how to not love you. And knowing you love me is... It's bloody everything." Spike sniffed and wiped at his eyes, making a sound like he was trying to hold back something heavier. "It's everything. But this is everything too. Everythin' I thought I knew about myself. About what we were now. About you. I'm over here drowning and worried I'm gonna do somethin' to hurt you. You ask me to kiss you and I want to—I wanna do what I woulda done yesterday. I want it to be like that and hell, I'm evil, so it should be that easy, right? You say you want somethin' and I give it. And don't care for shit if it hurts a little bit because we both know you like that just fine too." He braced balled fists on either side of his head, screwing up his face in a mask of pure torment. "But I just keep seeing it and wonderin' if that's the only time or if I'd done it before with you."

"You hadn't."

"Cept I wasn't too considerate of the times you did say no, was I? Was there pushing you, gettin' you to say yes. You said it yourself."

"I *wanted* to say yes, Spike. Every time you pushed, I wanted."

"I know that but that doesn't mean rot for what's goin' on in my

head. And how could I *really* know, Buffy? What kind of man are we pretending I am if that's something I can do on accident?" Now he did sob, a hard, horrible sound that tore off his lips and sent him to his knees. Buffy went with him—she didn't know what else to do—crying openly now, holding his wrists and trying to find words but knowing damn well there were none.

"I wanna stake myself," he managed between breaths. "Knowin'...knowin'..."

"Spike, you can't do that." Tears rolled down her cheeks, somehow icy cold and fiery hot at the same time. "You can't. I won't let you." A pause. "I love you, and it's more than I've loved anyone. *Anyone*, you hear me? The bad happened and I can't change it, but it should tell you just how much I love you that we came through it on the other side. That we could go through stuff we went through and still be this good. Because it is good—we're good. We're good now but it took us time to get there."

To this, he didn't respond, didn't even look up. Just stayed on his knees, shaking and crying, and she didn't know how to fix it. There was no blueprint this time, no way to artfully dodge what was coming next. This was a new thing, a thing she'd helped create.

What she wanted more than anything was for Spike to fold her in his arms and come to bed.

But this wasn't about what she wanted.

Buffy cleared her throat. "You don't have to stay here if you don't want."

That got a reaction. Spike whipped his head up, fixing her with those beautiful, agonized eyes. "Huss'at?"

"I told you I want you here, so you're here." There was no keeping the tremor out of her voice, but dammit, she tried. "And I do want you here. I want you and me. I want all of it...but if being here is too hard for you right now, then don't stay just because I want it. I don't want to make things worse."

He stared at her for a second, then snorted. "Not sure how it could get worse."

"But—"

"Only place I ever wanna be is with you. Told you as much." A beat.

Spike swallowed before climbing to his feet and wiping his eyes. “All of it’s true, what I said. Just dunno what it means. But you love me—”

“I do.”

“And you know I love you, so no, pet, I don’t wanna leave. Far as *I* can see, the only thing worse than knowing what I did is losing you.” He sniffed and dragged a hand under his eyes again. “As long as you want me here, here’s where I wanna be.” Another pause and his eyes dropped to her lips. “Might take a bit to...to trust myself to be with you.”

“I trust you.”

“I know. And I don’t get it.”

This time when he kissed her, it was all him. Not in intensity or passion, but in want. She felt it, tasted it along with the saltiness of his tears, and despite everything, managed to wrangle a bit of hope.

“So I’ll wear Harris’s pants, indignity that it is. If you want me in that bed with you—”

“I do.” She smiled against his lips. “I want you with me.”

“Then that’s where I’ll be.”

And for a moment, a truly glorious moment, she believed him.



BUFFY KNEW she was alone before she opened her eyes. For a few seconds, she sat still, listening, hoping to hear Spike rustling around down the hall or perhaps grabbing himself a drink downstairs, but there was nothing. The house was still as a tomb.

The dread she’d managed to coax into a spec before falling asleep swelled back to boulder-sized in an instant. Buffy swallowed, and forced herself to face the empty room, still cast in shadow. The sun wasn’t out and Spike wasn’t with her.

Okay. The thing to do in this situation was to not panic. Though, of course, telling herself not to panic had the opposite effect. After a series of endless good days, even best-of-her-life days, she’d had what could charitably be called an all-around shit-show of a day. What made it worse was she’d brought it all on herself, hindsight being what it was, and there was no walking it back. All she was left with was the rubble

and the hope that it was strong enough to rebuild upon. Spike taking her to bed, if only to hold her, had been a relief. Their combined strength should be more than enough to face anything.

Buffy jerked upright and swung her legs over the side of the bed. A glance at the clock told her it was nearing four in the morning.

“Spike?”

It was dumb. Her preternatural slayer senses told her plainly there was no vampire up here. Still, a girl could be wrong every now and then.

Well, if he had gone to his crypt, she was just going to have to follow. Avoiding each other wouldn't help. Buffy forced herself to her feet and shuffled over to her dresser for appropriate early-morning-trek-across-town clothing. Nothing fancy—a pair of shorts, a tank top, and Mr. Pointy for any fangers who were out looking for a last-minute bite before bedtime.

She still checked the other rooms before heading downstairs, just to be safe. Dawn's was Dawnless and Willow's—*Mom's*—was empty, too. The bathroom seemed unlikely but she poked her head in all the same. No Spike.

Buffy sighed and headed to the darkened downstairs, overly aware of how loud her steps sounded through the otherwise empty house. Things that she was sure had never creaked before were whining at full blast now. When she reached the bottom, she paused.

There was a light on behind her.

Buffy whirled around and made a beeline for the kitchen. “Spike?”

But Spike wasn't in the kitchen. It was empty.

And the backdoor was slightly ajar.

Buffy released a deep breath and neared the door, relief so potent she could taste it consuming her whole. It was ajar because Spike was out there. Having a smoke. Like he did on nights when he couldn't sleep, since nighttime hours were typically when he was most active. She pushed the door open a bit wider and, sure enough, there was her vampire, sitting on the small deck, cigarette dangling between his fingers.

“All right, pet?” he asked without turning around. “Heart's going a mile a minute.”



“When I woke up and you weren’t there, I...got worried.”

“Didn’t mean to worry you.”

There was something flat in his voice that she didn’t like—something that had the dread she’d just managed to banish surging back with a vengeance. Buffy swallowed and stepped forward. “Are you okay?”

He snorted and brought his cigarette to his lips. “Oh yeah,” he replied before taking a puff. “Right as bloody rain.”

“Spike—”

“I’ve been sittin’ here for a while now. Maybe an hour or so, just... goin’ over all of it. And I keep comin’ ’round to the same thing.”

Dread was a thing of the past. Now she was outright terrified. Buffy forced herself forward on trembling legs, her raw sinuses starting to burn with fresh tears. “Spike...”

“It’s in me, whatever it is. And I can’t do anythin’ about it.” He took another drag off his cigarette. “It’s what woke me up. Took for bloody ever to nod off... Wheels in the noggin wouldn’t slow down. Seen some right terrible things in my time, Slayer. Been the cause of a lot of them, too. All sorts that would haunt your dreams.” Keeping the cigarette wedged between his lips, Spike stretched out his arms so his hands were splayed, fingers spread apart. “If you knew what these were capable of...”

“I know, Spike. Believe me.”

“No, you don’t. Been kiddin’ myself on that. You too. ’Cause what I am at the core doesn’t change, does it?” He tossed the cigarette to the ground and stomped it out. “Once I was able to nod off, bloody brain still wouldn’t stop. And I saw you...in the loo upstairs. I was over you and you were screaming and kicking and I knew it but I couldn’t stop. I couldn’t stop, Buffy.”

Buffy was at his side the next moment, sinking to the empty part of deck beside him. “It was a dream—”

“Yeah, here,” he said, wiping at his wet cheeks. “A dream here. But not there—not somewhere else. And if you hadn’t crossed paths with that bloody demon, it woulda happened here just like that. All this time I was months away from doin’ something that’s not even the worst thing I’ve done, but I feel it. I feel it here.” He patted his chest.

“Wanna know the really twisted thing, Slayer? I woke up with a stiffy.”

For the first time since she'd stepped outside, he turned and met her gaze, his own a reflection of pain. “What's that say about me?”

The worst possible thing to say at that moment, she knew, would be nothing. Yet nothing was exactly what she had. Whatever else, Buffy hadn't expected that.

Spike nodded, his mouth twisted into a sneer. “Yeah, that's what I thought.”

“I... Isn't that normal, though? For guys? Waking up with erections? It's certainly normal for you.”

“After a dream like that?”

“After *anything*. I mean, Riley did and he said it wasn't always about sex. Maybe even not most of the time—just a guy thing. Hormones or blood circulation or whatever. And you've woken me up more than a few times because—”

“Bit different for vamps though, innit?”

“Is it different for vamps? You'd be in a better place to know than me.”

“Well, fuck if I know, Slayer. I never exactly made a science of it. All I know is when I wake up that hard, I'm typically aimin' to put it to use.” Spike bounded to his feet as though he'd been given a shock, and immediately fell into a hard pace. “Don't have all the bloody biological wires goin' on, that's for bloody sure. *Circulation* and hormones and all that rot. Can't explain it away too easily. Can't say for certain it's not somethin' *in me*.”

“In you?”

The look he tossed her was pure pain, and his answer came in a shout. “That gets off on the thought of hurting you!”

Buffy pressed her lips together and drew in a deep breath. “Spike,” she said, keeping her voice level, “you're a vampire. Pain is a thing you like. It's a thing you ask for. I'm not surprised or bothered by that.”

“Not that kinda pain, pet,” he replied thickly, more tears crystalizing in his eyes. “Not *that* kinda pain. There are times I'd love to have at you. Our first time? When we brought that buildin' down? Fuck, I still wank thinkin' about that. You makin' it hurt in all the right ways.

Yeah, I enjoyed roughin' you up but the thrill was in knowing you'd give back better than you got. You bein' stronger than me, full of that much passion... That's not what I'm talkin' about. I'm talkin' about things like *that*." He pointed at the upper level of the house, keeping his gaze on hers. "That brand of hurt... Always thought that wasn't me. Other vamps might fancy it, but... Not sayin' I've been a saint but I was never bloody Angelus. But if my dick is tellin' me that thinkin' of you like that is somethin' the monster likes—"

"Spike, you're over-thinking this. It was just—"

"I *can't* over-think this, you barmy bint. Knowin' what I know now, I can't think of anything else." He squeezed his eyes shut and banged a closed fist against his forehead like he was trying to knock the thoughts out. Hell, maybe he was. A beat passed, then another, before he lowered his hand to his side again and opened his eyes. "I wanna be what you need and I wanna be with you. But I don't think I can."

A jolt of pure panic zipped down her spine. Buffy sprang to her feet. "What?"

"Not like *this*, at least. Not with this inside me."

"What do you mean, 'not like this'?" Her heart hammered harder and everything seemed to spin. This couldn't be happening. "Spike—"

"You already know it, Slayer," Spike said softly. "Think you've known all along. Why you kept quiet, right? You knew what the answer was."

"Spike, no—"

"What I need is a soul."

THERE WAS NO TALKING HIM OUT OF IT.

Buffy had tugged Spike back into the house as the sun crested the horizon, determined that by the time it set again she would have convinced him that there was no sense going on a soul hunt. She'd talked herself blue in the face about the sequence of events that had led to the bathroom incident. Told him that she had something just as bad inside of her that she'd had to learn to live with, that it was hard and messy and uncomfortable and a bunch of other things, but that didn't mean she was undeserving or that she couldn't trust herself around him. Told him that she loved him, trusted him, and even if he couldn't trust himself right now, they could work on it together. Perhaps do some exposure therapy with the bathroom, things that would be good for both of them. Things that would help them heal together.

But Spike was unmoved. Yeah, she might have darkness inside her, might have led her to do things she thought were terrible, even unforgivable, but she'd known what she was doing the entire time, hadn't she? Even if she'd hated herself, she'd known why.

"I think when I beat you up in the alley, part of me didn't realize what I was doing," she'd replied, not sure whether or not this was true.

She remembered being horrified with herself when her logic kicked in, remembered staggering away in shock and fear, remembered the drive afterward to go to him and make sure he was all right. But she also remembered that she hadn't, that she'd reframed the incident for herself until she could live with it, and it had remained like that until after she'd started to climb her way out of her depression.

"Doesn't matter either way," Spike had replied. "Point is *you* stopped, right? Didn't need me to toss you off for it to sink in what was happening."

"Spike, you were out of your mind—"

"You keep sayin' that like it's some kinda excuse. It's not. If I could get like that once, I could get like that again."

"Not *now*."

"Yes, now, Buffy. Any time. No bloody better than a rabid dog."

"That is—"

"What? Little too close to home? And when you think about it, pet, I'm worse. Not a rabid mutt, but the kind that goes on the attack without bloody warning. Hear about it happenin' all the time. Some sweet thing gets nice and cozy around an animal and then acts surprised when it snaps its fangs."

"You're not an animal!"

And that had kicked everything off again, their arguments becoming increasingly cyclical until her throat ached and the skin around her eyes was rubbed raw from crying. At some point, Dawn had come home from Janice's—or tried to—caught them in mid-fight, and excused herself to the mall for the rest of the day, citing that they were giving her Joyce and Hank flashbacks. That had startled Spike so much that he'd broken down again, sunk into the chair across from the sofa, and held his head until Dawn was safely on the other side of the front door.

As the sun began its descent, Spike finally voiced the question she knew he'd been working up to all day. She knew he'd been working up to it because she'd been trying to figure out how exactly she'd answer if it came up.

"Why don't you want this?"

Buffy blew out a deep breath. "I don't know."

“Don’t believe that for a minute. All the talk you did about souls—”

“I told you that you didn’t need it. You are good without it.” She turned to look at him. He’d claimed the other end of the sofa now and was studying her with his annoyingly inscrutable expression. “I know you don’t believe that but I do. *I do*, Spike.”

He tightened his jaw, nodding. After a moment, he sighed and looked down. “It means a lot, you sayin’ that. Fuck, it means everything. But you’re right. I don’t believe it.”

“And—”

“And nothing, Slayer. Fact is I’m not gonna risk it. Not with you.” He worked his throat, staring fixedly at the floor. “Not for anything. Know a bloody soul might not be the answer, but—”

“People do terrible things with souls all the time. It’s *not* the answer.”

“But it’s *my* answer, see.” At this, he looked up again. “I know what kinda man I was before. Know that no matter what, I will love you until I’m dust. And you know it too, right? From your last go ’round, you know—”

“I know.” And she did. She also knew she was being selfish—that she’d gotten here by being selfish. By wanting to skip the part she knew would be hard and pretend like everything was fine, all the while telling him that he couldn’t do exactly that. She’d known it in the moment and every moment that had followed, and she knew it now. “I’m not worried about you not loving me.”

Spike’s eyes softened and he leaned forward. “Then what?”

“Then *everything*. Getting a soul isn’t just like...*easy* or anything. You spent the first few weeks going crazy in the school basement. And here’s the thing—I don’t know how much of that was the First and how much of it was the soul.” She forced past the lump in her throat. “I don’t know how much of it was you feeling...*all* of it. Not just what happened with us but... It’s everything, Spike. More than a hundred years of killing and being evil and suddenly feeling it. I don’t want you to go through that because of something that hasn’t happened and will never happen. You got a soul for me once—I don’t need you to do it again. The fact that you *did*, that you cared that much, that you already felt that deeply... Nothing of what happened in

the bathroom can change the fact that I was the real monster that year.”

Spike was quiet for a moment, and for the first time since she'd awakened alone in bed, she felt something inside of her jolt. Over the course of this exceptionally long conversation they insisted on having on repeat, Spike had eased back into his skin by increments. Sitting with her now, leaning toward her, holding her eyes, the parts of him that knew himself were reasserting control, little by little. Maybe all she needed to do was stall him long enough for the smoke to clear and him to see things from her side of the battlefield.

Then he sighed, his shoulders sagging. “Not just for you, pet.”

“What?”

“I do this—win back my soul... It's not just for you. It's for me too.” He did look down then. “It's for both of us.”

That left her feeling somewhat railroaded. “You...*want* your soul back? After everything... After—”

“Like I said, I know what kinda bloke I was before. Harmless, lovesick git, but someone who would never hurt you. Wouldn't hurt anyone, even the prats who deserved it.” His nostrils flared a bit, and some of the fire she loved so much leaked back into his eyes. “Thought I knew who I was now too. And yeah, Slayer, you probably have the right of it. I wanna believe it so bloody badly—circumstances and what all. But I don't think I'm ever gonna stop seein' it. Picturing it. Wonderin' and worryin' that something might let that part of me out. Never knew this particular perfect storm could happen so what else don't I know? What else *might* happen?”

“I—”

“I don't wanna be thinkin' about all this when I'm with you. When you're snogging me or I have you on your back. I don't want to think about any of it.”

And wanting not to think about something was a surefire way to think about nothing else. “We could try therapy,” she suggested softly. “You and me both. Not like...couple's counseling or anything, but just working through our stuff together.”

“Not the type to sit in a chair and prattle on about my problems.”

She tried not to take that statement personally, but that he

dismissed it so readily when he knew how much good it had done her couldn't help but smart a little. "I wasn't either until I did it. But it could help us without you having to do the soul thing."

"That's never gonna be me, Slayer. Sorry." He turned his attention to his hands and began picking at the chipped black polish. "Told you I'm not the type, and I got me enough enemies in this place as it is. I dunno who you found to talk to in your time, but I wouldn't be too keen to trust anyone on the bloody Hellmouth. I talk to you, tell you things, because I love you. Talkin' to anyone else about this... Just don't think I could do it."

Buffy opened her mouth to argue some more, but decided she'd be wasting her breath. It wasn't like Spike was voicing concerns she hadn't entertained herself, back when she'd started going to her therapist. It had taken a bunch of persuading from Xander and a binding magical contract reviewed and tested by Willow before Buffy had felt comfortable unloading her problems on a demon. Spike, who had never reliably enjoyed the support of friends and people who cared about him, would be even more gun-shy about airing his weaknesses, magical contract or not. It had been difficult enough imagining herself in a therapy session—still was, at times, despite all the growing she'd done in the interim. When she tried to conjure the image of Spike sitting in a recliner and discussing his struggle with his demon, she had to fight the urge to laugh.

But there was nothing funny about this. Nothing at all. Not with what Spike was set on doing.

"It'll be different this time," she said aloud, well aware she was speaking more for her own benefit than his. "Not easy but different. You won't be alone."

Spike glanced at her from the corner of his eye. "So you're on board, then. Me getting a soul."

"If it's...what you want."

"What I want is to know I won't hurt you, now or ever, no matter the bloody circumstances." He let the words sit a moment, then leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "I hate that you lied to me."

That much struck her like a blow to the chest. Buffy found herself floundering for air. "Spike—"



“Dunno if I’ll ever not be brassed about that, if you want the full of it. But I think I get it, too, why you did it, even if it was completely carrot-top. Thing like this isn’t somethin’ you can keep from a man. Not somethin’ you can just get over, right?”

“I wanted to.”

“Bloody unfair of you to expect that of yourself.”

“But I mean—”

“I know what you mean.” Another pause. “Wager there was a lot you left out about the soul business then, yeah? About us? How it was when I got back—how you...”

Buffy swallowed past the mass in her throat and leaned forward too, massaging her temples, though that did little to fight off the impending headache, and nothing for the way her gut had twisted itself into a knot. It had been a while since she’d felt this heartsick—a long while. It seemed part of her was mourning, and maybe that was right. Whatever else, soul or no soul, things couldn’t go back to the way they’d been before the wedding, before he’d known the truth. And of all the ways she’d thought she might lose it, this hadn’t been anywhere on the list.

“The way things were when you got back was...weird. I didn’t know how to handle it, you doing this for me,” she said, unable to keep the defeat from her voice. “You were crazy in the school basement. When I found you, your chest was all cut up. You told me you’d tried to cut it out. I had no idea what you were talking about at the time, but you worried me. The first time I’d seen you in months and you were just suddenly there in this place I didn’t know. You barely even looked like you—hair was all wild and you... You just looked broken.”

Spike was still a moment before letting out a long sigh. He didn’t speak.

“I was in the middle of whatever Dawn crisis was going on at the time, though, so I couldn’t stay with you, though I wanted to.” That much she hadn’t admitted even to herself until now—discovering that Spike had returned to Sunnydale had been both a source of great relief and terrific dread. Redefining their relationship was never going to be easy, but she’d wanted... God, she didn’t know what she’d wanted. She’d wanted him back and the second he’d arrived back, everything else had

floated out of her head. The reality of him being back, the realization of what he'd done, had dwarfed everything else. "I didn't find out about the soul until a day or so after. You managed to clean yourself up, fix the hair and get a more Spike-like wardrobe. And I think... I don't know, but it seemed to me like you would've been fine with me never learning about the soul. I told you that you tried to hide it or pretend like everything was normal, which really didn't work because the First was screwing with your head. And when I did find out..."

Buffy bit her lip, her tired eyes prickling. God, she was so sick of crying. "I didn't handle it well. I mean, I didn't know how to handle it—this huge thing you'd done for me. It was too much. Too big. The biggest thing anyone has ever done for me or probably ever will. That anyone could...could love me that much scared me. Hell, Spike, it still scares me, because you put yourself through so much—you fought so hard to be a better man when I had given you nothing. And I had to get to know you all over again—had to get to know *me* all over again. Wanting you scared me too, but I did...and we started to get close. It felt good. Natural, and that scared me too. It was the first time I'd felt like that since... Well, since Angel."

Another one of those full-body breaths followed this proclamation, but still Spike didn't speak.

"But it was different, too," she continued, voice barely a whisper. "There was so much with Angel that I didn't know when we were together—about him and myself. It was easier with him because I was light on baggage—though if you'd told me that then, I'd have punched you. I think relationships get harder as you get older because, well, you know more. You've experienced more. You know what it's like to hurt so much you want to die and how you want to protect yourself from going through that again. I was in love with you this year, but I didn't want to be. And then when... When it happened and then you were gone it... I spent a lot of time with Clem in your old crypt, waiting for you to come back."

"You did?" His voice was hoarse.

"Yeah." Buffy sniffed and wiped at her eyes again. "But when you were back, it was...having what I wanted but being afraid of it and overwhelmed with the whole soul thing. And you and I got closer—I

relied on you. I *needed* you. When the others kicked me out of the house—”

“When the others did what now?”

She snorted. “Faith and the others. And the Potentials. I’d made a call that got a couple of the girls killed and they decided I wasn’t fit to lead anymore.”

Spike inhaled sharply, going rigid once more. “Those ungrateful bloody—”

“Yeah. It’s been over a year and I’m still right there with you.”

“After everything you did?” He blinked at her, disbelieving. “Willow? The Nibbles? Harris?”

“All of them. They were all behind it.”

“Not me though, right? You said I was livin’ here at the time. I wouldn’t—”

“No. No, not you.” At that, Buffy actually grinned—something she’d never thought she would manage while thinking of that night. “Giles had sent you out on a job specifically because he knew you’d have my back. You were the only one who did. When you came back and found out what happened... Well, I dunno, I wasn’t there, but you told me there were words. That you smacked Faith around a little, then you came to find me. And you did. I was in this house and...”

And he’d said perhaps the most beautiful thing anyone had ever said to her. There on his knees, looking so earnest, love shining in his eyes, telling her she was the one. All the bad, all the good, and somehow all the terrible she’d ever done to him hadn’t changed how he felt. How much that had scared her, how much it meant, how badly she’d wanted to both leap at him and bolt out the door because that had been the moment.

“You were wonderful. You gave me strength. You...” She sniffed again. “But then I screwed it all up by kissing Angel when he came to town. I told you I was afraid of letting him go—not *him* him, but that idea of who I thought I’d been. And I think that’s true but I think it was also that I was scared of you. Of us. How intense it was, how...how big and *real* it felt.” She sighed, trembling all over. “That pushed you away. It was so stupid.”

“Buffy—”

"And when I first got back here, to *this* when, when I realized where I was...part of me was sad about that. Not about being back or being with you, but that the *you* I was with wasn't the *you* who had died. And the soul had nothing to do with it," she added before he could leap onto that. "It was more, we'd done all this healing and growing together and there was a whole chunk of *us* that you didn't know and I could never get back. And soul or no soul, that'll always be true. I hate not having that. I hate not telling you, the other you, all the things I'm telling you now. That you didn't need a soul to be a better man, you just needed people to have faith in you. You needed *me* to have faith in you. And actually talk about things the way we are now. I was never brave enough to do that." Another long, deep breath. "I will never think you need a soul to be a good man. Not after everything."

The silence that followed wasn't tense or uncomfortable, but that didn't make it any easier to bear.

"Bloody weird situation to be in," he said finally. "All these years, a soul's been the only thing a vamp could do to be in your good graces."

"I was dumb."

"There's somethin' else, though. A reason you don't want me to get one. Said you weren't worried about me not loving you anymore and more about what it did to my head, but there's more to it."

"Isn't that enough? I don't want you to go through the guilt of—"

"Maybe I *should*. Maybe I should feel all of it."

"To just, what, prove to yourself that you can?"

He narrowed his eyes at her. "To be the sorta man who would know the difference, no matter the circumstances."

"Spike—"

"But you're doin' a right good job of not answerin' the question. There's more to it. More you're worried about. Said you were gonna be honest, Slayer, so now's the time to prove it."

That cut, but she supposed she deserved it, and a lot more besides. "I'm worried about the First using you the way it did in my when," she said. "I'm afraid... I'm afraid that Angel will turn up again with the medallion thingy and you'll insist on closing the Hellmouth again, if we can't think of another way to fight the First. I'm afraid of watching you

dust again, and going through all of this just to end up where I started.”

Spike nodded and, to his credit, didn’t rush to dissuade her of these fears, rather seemed to take them in turn. “You know it’s comin’ this time,” he replied after a moment. “I start acting wonky and you know it’s the First. I will, too, yeah? Even if I’m a little off my nutter, I’ll remember what you told me. And if you still need a Champion to do the heroics at the end, yeah, love, I’ll be your man. But you’ll know where to go after that, won’t you? Just be in jolly old LA and we’ll get things sorted out. As for the last fight—”

“Spike—”

“We’ll be working together, won’t we? Might be able to stop your ex from settin’ off whatever it was in the first place. Wouldn’t need to—”

“I *am* worried.”

He blinked at her. “I know, pet, that’s why we’re talking.”

“About the love thing.”

“Huss’at?”

Well, now she felt like an idiot. Trouble was, feeling like an idiot didn’t make the sensation go away. And she hadn’t even realized she felt that way until she’d said it. Buffy sucked in her cheeks and looked down, trying to make sense of the jumble that was her head. “The soul changes you,” she began slowly. “You still love me and that’s...everything. But it’s a different kind of love. Less selfish, maybe, and that... I never thought, never, *ever* thought, that you’d not come for me. If you were in the world out there somewhere and knew I was too, even if I didn’t love you, it just seemed I was a Spike-magnet. And yeah, with how much that drove me crazy, because it did. But that was the selfish part—the part that kept you near me. That part goes away with the soul.”

“So...you think if I have a soul and totally am lost for you, I’ll—”

“Convince yourself that being with me isn’t good for me, the same way Angel did. Decide to break up for *my own good*. Tell me to try for normal—”

“Not bloody well built for normal and we both know that.”

“Yes, we *both* know that. Now. Right now. But the souled you, the

you who let Angel talk him into not finding me... Maybe he didn't know that. Maybe that was why he—"

"Buffy, I start prattling on like Angel, you bloody well put a stake in me. Said it yourself that I wasn't all that different, right?"

"Right," she repeated, nodding. "Not that different but still different. In those ways. I told you—I think I told you—that I missed the way you looked at me without a soul. I missed... I missed you being selfish where I was concerned. I missed knowing that you would always be there." A pause. "Spike, I'm terrified of losing you again and there's more than one way to do that. I believe you'll love me, just like Angel says he loves me, but...but that it won't be enough. *I* won't be enough to keep you. You've always been the one man who never left... until you did. Until you got a soul. And I know that's selfish of *me* and probably makes me a bad slayer but it's true. I don't want you to get a soul because I don't want to lose what we are right now. I don't want you to walk away for my own good. I just want *us*."

The weight on his side of the couch shifted, and then he was in front of her on his knees, rubbing his hands along her hips. And if she weren't about to lose her composure, she might have taken a moment to appreciate that he was touching her at all. This was certainly an improvement over the previous night.

"Buffy," he said in a low voice. "Look at me, love."

Blinking hard, she did as he asked, and almost immediately found herself lost in the ocean that was his eyes.

Only when he had her gaze, Spike didn't seem to know what to do with it. He opened and closed his mouth a few times before finally rumbling a short growl and saying, "Can't talk for what I don't know, but if you've been telling me the truth about how I was with a soul, that I wasn't all that different, then I can bloody well guarantee nothin' will keep me from you."

"But it did. It *did*, Spike. That's what I'm saying."

"That time's not this time."

"Exactly." And before she could help herself, Buffy had slid from the couch into the floor beside him so they were eye-to-eye. "That time is *not* this time. And that means all of it. What happened in the bathroom, too. That time's not this time."

Spike stared at her for a long moment, then looked down, dragging in more breaths he didn't need. It heartened her for a moment, that he hadn't immediately shut her down. For the first time since he'd mentioned needing a soul, she thought his mind might be somewhere other than made up. But she could see the answer coming before he landed on it, because damn, he was just like her in so many ways. The good and the bad. Or the stubborn.

"Can't chance it," he said, shaking his head. "All comes down to the same. It's still in me, what did that to you. Can't chance ever hurtin' you like that."

"The soul—"

"Buffy, you know I'm gonna love you till I'm dust. Can't bloody help it and I'm past the point of wantin' to." He released a long, trembling sigh. "Know what's comin' won't be easy but I don't... Don't think I'll be able to sleep beside you, touch you...be with you without it. I'll just keep thinkin' myself in circles. I need to do this."

They were at the start again, cycling through the argument like clockwork. She knew her lines, knew how the next hour would go if she launched into them. And the hour after that, and the hour after that. The thought alone had her bone-weary, all but melting into the floor as her muscles gave out and the rest of her waved a white flag.

"How will you do it?" she asked at last. "Zipporah or—"

"No. Don't want it wished on me. Needs to be somethin' I earn." He smiled flatly. "Gave it that much thought, at least."

So Africa again. "You mentioned Zipporah before, is all."

"Know I did. And yeah, it'd be nice and easy to ask, but... I don't wanna be like Angel. Don't want it somethin' done to me. Can't say why except I don't feel it'd mean as much."

Buffy nodded numbly. "Wait, at least. Until Xander and Anya get back from their honeymoon. We'll need someone to watch Dawn."

At that, Spike blinked. "Watch Dawn?"

"You're leaving, aren't you? Chasing a legend?"

He hesitated for a moment before giving her a nod.

"That's what you did last time," Buffy said. "And...this time is not that time. None of it is. If this is something you're doing, if this is that important to you, then I'll be there too."

Spike inhaled sharply, hitting her with that stare of his, the one she felt she would never deserve. The one that cemented her place as the center of his personal universe. And despite everything, despite how close they'd become over the past few weeks, the fact that he was surprised by her statement just hammered in how far she had to go before he understood that he wasn't in this alone.

"Buffy," he said at last, "you don't need—"

"I know. But I want to. And yeah, with the unfair, dumping a teenager on a couple of newlyweds, but seeing as I'm pretty much the reason there was a wedding at all, I think I can build my case just fine."

He looked at her a moment longer, fresh tears sparkling in his eyes. "I love you," he said. "That's never gonna change, you hear?"

She swallowed. "I know."

"You better." He hesitated a beat, dropped his gaze to her lips. "Buffy..."

The next instant, she had climbed onto his lap and tugged him down for a kiss, and *yes*, it was all him this time. Every bit of him. No more resistance or uncertainty, just pure Spike, battling with her, teeth and tongue and everything in between.

He was right. He had to be right. The thing she and Spike had been building toward that last year together had been something close to this, even if she'd managed to block her own progress at every turn. He'd told her that holding her itself had been the best night of his life, shown her vulnerability that had terrified him, and done it trusting that she wouldn't throw it in his face. That was what she'd meant to him. That Spike was this Spike—what came next would be hard, yes, but they had a solid foundation now. One they could use to build upon the weak *maybe* she'd given him in the kitchen that night.

The fears she had were baseless and selfish. Sure, her two *whens* were on a collision course, but there was still time and opportunity to change the outcome. Even so, if she couldn't stop the inevitable crash, the least she could do was help Spike make his way through the debris.

After all, it was no less than what he'd done for her.



BUFFY HAD NO IDEA HOW SPIKE HAD MADE IT TO AFRICA BEFORE, and no good idea on how she was going to make the trip, herself. The logistics of traveling with him hadn't really hit until she'd started thinking through what the next steps would be. Apparently, there were all sorts of inoculations she needed to get in order to book a flight, for one thing, to say nothing of the fact that a round trip cost a lot of money—that thing her bank account was currently hemorrhaging.

There was also Dawn to worry about—more specifically, what would happen if more child services visits occurred while Buffy was on the other side of the planet, helping her vampire lover recover something she would never believe he needed. To her memory, there hadn't been much concern over her guardianship regarding her sister following that first disastrous inspection, but Buffy knew better than to bank on that sort of luck. With as much as she'd changed, nothing was certain anymore.

Buffy was resolved on one thing—what happened with her and Spike was between them. The last time, she'd made the mistake of spreading news of Spike's soul to the others without any consideration for his views on the matter, which had felt like her right at the time. But things were different now—what happened, or didn't happen, on

this trip was his business to share or keep to himself. Part of her, admittedly, hoped that he'd change his mind over the course of the journey there—that he'd realize she was right and the soul wasn't something he needed after all. This seemed unlikely, both in knowing how stubborn he was and in how things had gone the last time, but on the off-chance that he came around to her way of thinking, she didn't want to come home to a bunch of people expecting Spike to act a certain way. She didn't want any expectations on him at all.

For her part, Dawn took the news that they would be leaving soon rather well. She'd been a bit subdued since she'd discovered them fighting, tense in the way she had been during their parents' more spectacular screaming matches. After a day or two, the strain had become so uncomfortable that Buffy had forced the issue to get everything out into the open if nothing else.

"You're not breaking up?" Dawn had demanded in a rush. "You guys seemed okay after but..."

"But?"

"Well..." She'd gone a little pink. "The sex noises have stopped. Like completely."

Perhaps it *was* a mark of her parenting that the lack of porn sounds from her bedroom had her little sister worried. Buffy had shaken her head, trying to find an artful way to navigate around his conversation without doing more damage than had already been done. "We're all with the good," she'd said. And that was more or less true. Sure, Spike was gun-shy about getting physical with her again, but he was slowly overcoming it. He'd stayed in her room ever since their conversation, and had even responded that morning with a little hip thrust so she could feel his erection rather than darting for the door. But when she'd moved to take things further, he'd pulled away with a sad smile and shaken his head. Said something about *after* and climbed to his feet.

God, she hoped there was an *after*. There certainly had been with his souled counterpart—at least the possibility of one. But the circumstances were different—everything was different, which meant nothing could be taken for granted.

"Things are fine," Buffy had replied. "We're not breaking up, but there's something we need to do. Together. So, when Xander and Anya

get back, we'll be heading out of town for a while. And you'll need to stay with them."

At this, she'd expected some resistance. A barrage of questions, of anger and accusations. At the very least a Dawn Summers pout. But her sister surprised her, nodding with enviable maturity.

"So I'm trading one house with icky sex noises for another," she'd said, shrugging. "And listening to Anya and Xander is at least eighty-five percent less awkward than listening to you and Spike."

Buffy had snorted and bumped her sister's shoulder, and that had been that.

The conversation with Dawn went so smoothly, in fact, that she'd expected all the other conversations to be well and truly terrible. For that reason, she avoided calling Giles as long as she could, certain that whatever he said would just exacerbate an already-tense situation. But there was no way she could not tell Giles—if something went wrong with Willow, or if Warren was paroled or acquitted, he needed to know she would be out of reach for an indeterminate amount of time.

So, on the day before Xander and Anya were slated to return, Buffy bit the proverbial bullet and dialed the number that Giles had given her after he'd made the necessary arrangements. She even did the appropriate mental calculations to double-check that she wasn't calling in the middle of the night.

"Hello?"

Buffy swallowed, unable to suppress the pang that hit her chest. "Hey, Giles. It's me."

A long pause. "Buffy, is everything all right?"

"Yeah, everything's fine. Good." Another pause. "How's Willow?"

"It's... Well, she's... I don't know what I expected, but she seems to be performing well. I do think having Tara here is a boon. She seems rather more focused than I would have thought." A few seconds' silence. "Buffy, I'm glad you called. There are things I've been meaning to tell you that I... Well, I haven't been able to pluck up the courage. But—"

"Look—"

"I was wrong," he said bluntly. "I was incredibly wrong. Learning that you had gone back in time was a shock and I reacted the exact

way I have been trained to react, but that is no excuse. I've spent quite a bit of time since our conversation to do more reading on the subject and... While I believe there are certain circumstances in which time travel could pose a threat to any number of things, you made a wish. It's nothing that hasn't been done before or won't be done again, something a wiser man would have taken into consideration at once. I was alarmed and irrational and I spoke from what I thought was a place of authority when it was in fact ignorance."

She couldn't have been more surprised if he'd reached through the line and slapped her. And for a moment, her mind blank on how to respond—she just stood there, gripping the phone tight enough that she heard the plastic crack in protest. "Oh," she managed eventually, her voice hoarse. "I... Thank you."

"I have also been talking with the Council," he went on. "Not about you or this or anything remotely related to it," he hastened to add just before she could swell with indignation. "Rather, about your circumstances. Yours and Dawn's."

That didn't sound much better. "What do you mean?"

"Well, to be blunt, your finances, and the matter of custody where Dawn is concerned." He cleared his throat. "I brought it to their attention that you are the only slayer they have, being that Faith is in prison and that you have already died twice to save the world, and in order for you to continue doing your job, it would be beneficial to eradicate the mundane concerns from your daily life."

Buffy's head was starting to spin. She knew what this sounded like but wasn't about to trust it. "Mundane concerns like..."

"A mortgage and your mother's medical expenses. Living expenses as a whole, actually. We haven't had many slayers who reached adulthood, therefore practical needs have rarely factored into the Council's consideration." There was a pause. "Buffy, the Council has agreed to pay off your home, settle any outstanding debts, ensure that Dawn remains in your custody, as well as provide you an annual salary so long as you agree to continue to, well, do what you're doing. I know how you feel about taking payment for saving others, but—"

Whatever he'd been about to say was lost to her, considering she'd burst into tears. It wasn't a stretch, given how raw she felt these days.

The burden of paying bills seemed incidental to the larger things going on, but the relief was so potent it made everything else seem small, if only for a moment. Buffy cried hard enough that, by the time she came back to herself, Giles was all but screaming her name into the phone, apologizing and demanding to know if she was all right.

It took a few beats to get herself under control, but eventually, she managed to croak a weak, "Thank you."

"You're all right?"

"Giles...this is... Thank you. So much."

There was a pause. "So...you're accepting it, then? The assistance? Because I had a whole speech prepared, you know. About how it's unfair for me to get paid while you languish away in debt and as altruistic as you are, you must survive. If that didn't work, I was going to mention that Angel opened his own bloody agency to accept payment for... But you're not arguing with me, are you?"

"No," Buffy replied, this time with a laugh. "No arguments from Buffy. Thank you."

"It's just... Anya mentioned at one point that you rejected her idea of charging individuals to save them."

"Well, yeah. That's different. That's saving someone and then expecting to be paid by the person themselves."

"You know that's exactly what Angel does, right?"

"I am not Angel, let me count the ways. The Council paying me? It coming out of their pocket? I'm super okay taking their money." She sniffed again, wiping her eyes. There was no way to know for sure, seeing as the version of Giles she wanted to ask no longer existed, but this pretty much confirmed her theory that Giles had had a hand in how some of her non-slayer burdens had vanished last time around. The money, no, but custody of Dawn? Almost certainly.

"I love you, Giles," she said, and dammit, her eyes began to well again. "Thank you. This is...everything."

"Ah, well, I wasn't sure you'd take it." He cleared his throat. "Though I suppose the difference is what makes all the difference. How are things there?"

Heavy. That's how they were. Heavy but getting better by increments. Buffy sighed, glanced at the doorway to see if Spike was lurking

about. He wasn't, which meant he likely wasn't back yet from whatever errand he'd claimed he had to run.

"Good," she said at last. "Good, but...that's actually the reason I called."

"So, in other words, terrible," Giles replied. "You wouldn't call because things are good."

"They're not bad, just of the complicated. Spike and I are... Well, we have a thing we need to do. A thing that will take us out of Sunnydale for a while. If all continues to go as it's gone, this shouldn't be a big in terms of the fighting evil stuff, but I needed you to know in case anything changed."

Another long beat. "What is this thing you *need* to do?"

"Private."

"I understand," he replied promptly. "I assume you have made arrangements..."

"In the process of. It's going to be a lot easier now, thanks to you."

"What about patrolling? Larger concerns may not arise, but if you leave, it's quite possible that vampires who were dusted in your time will remain active."

Great. She hadn't thought about that. Buffy pressed her palm to her forehead. The cost of being the one and only hadn't really settled on her since she'd been back—it'd felt familiar, especially as her situation in Sunnydale was concerned. But now would be a great time for a slayer that wasn't her to just pick up the mantle, because Giles was right.

"What about Faith?" she asked after a beat.

"What about her?"

"Could the Council...get her out of prison? So she can take over here for a while?"

Silence was her answer.

"Giles?"

"You *wish* me to see about Faith's release?"

"She's reformed," Buffy argued weakly. "And she busts out next year anyway to help us with the First. It'd just be a little early."

"You realize that Faith's incarceration was one of the points that helped support why you need financial assistance."

God, wasn't that typical? "Are you saying they'll take it back?"

"No, of course not."

"Not *of course not*, Giles. This is Travers we're talking about."

"I know, which is why I insisted on a magically binding contract that would protect not only you but any future slayer who survives past the age of eighteen," Giles said wryly. "They cannot opt to not give you what you are owed. They're just not going to be happy because, well, Faith being over eighteen and if she resumes active duty, they will be out even more money."

"I'll try really hard to feel sorry for them," Buffy deadpanned. "But can it be done?"

"Well...yes, I imagine it could. But Buffy, the Council won't approve of Faith being given carte blanche in Sunnydale. Their terms are likely to include the stipulation that you assume responsibility for her actions."

That wasn't terrifying at all. Buffy considered for a moment, focusing on the person she'd known in her original when. The Faith that had led when asked, supported her when asked, and fallen into line the second she assumed charge again. That Faith was just a year away from the one currently sitting in prison, but if Angel was to be believed—and in this case, she did trust him—the reformation had already taken place.

And Spike was worth the risk, above all else.

"I'll do it," she said. "If Faith screws up, I'm responsible."

"Buffy, that's—"

"I love him, Giles." A pause. "And you know what that means. Better than anyone, you know what that means."

A long sigh filled the line. "I know. I just hope he's worth it. I know he did a lot of good over the summer, and...whatever he's been for you. Whatever he *is* for you, I should say. But I don't know if I'll ever have the level of faith in him that you do."

"I'm not asking you to. Right now, at least. I might eventually because I think he deserves it." Especially with what he was about to do—again. And though he said it wasn't just for her, there was no question that he'd have never considered it otherwise. "So you'll talk to the

Council. Bust Faith out of jail. I need to give her the rundown before we leave town.”

“When do you plan on leaving town?”

“Soon. Spike would leave now if we weren’t waiting on Xander and Anya to get back.”

“This errand is... Time-sensitive?”

Not particularly, but she didn’t want him to know that. “I think we just both want it over with as soon as possible.”

Another sigh. “I imagine Faith’s release can be secured rather quickly. But Buffy, do be careful. The devil takes a hand in what is done in haste.”

“Okay, ye olde Giles.”

“It’s a Turkish proverb. It means—”

“Don’t hurry so much you screw up. Believe it or not, did not need a translation for that one.”

He chuckled. “There are times it is most obvious that you are from the future.”

“I’d be offended if that weren’t so true.” Buffy fell quiet again, racking her tired brain to make sure she hadn’t missed anything. For as quiet as things had been just a few days ago, everything had been pushed to full throttle. But worrying about fulfilling Zipporah’s ask seemed ages in the past, and—

“Zipporah,” Buffy blurted. “I haven’t heard from her. She said she’d be checking in and... Well, I dunno, but is there any way the Watchers Council could investigate this casket thing? Illyria? They’d have a better way of tracking stuff going to and from Wolfram and Hart, right?”

“Ahh, well, yes.” Giles cleared his throat. “That was actually the third thing I thought we needed to discuss, following Willow’s rehabilitation and addressing your financial situation. At the moment, they are exhausting a number of resources, both internal and external, to search for the sarcophagus.”

Her heart leaped. “What? How did you manage that? What did you tell them?”

“It wasn’t very difficult, actually,” Giles replied, sounding a bit pleased now. “She was prophesied to return and the witches in the



coven where Willow is receiving treatment excel at any number of things, including a dedicated seer.”

“You lied.”

“I did not lie, let me be very clear. I merely...planted the seed.” He cleared his throat again. “Mentioned the coven and their talented seer, brought up the prophecy of Illyria’s return and rumors about her sarcophagus being bound for Los Angeles within the next eighteen to twenty-four months and...well, the Watchers Council has no interest in the rise of any of the Old Ones so that was all the motivation they needed.”

Well, that was one less thing to worry about. Buffy released a long sigh, letting the weight that particular task had saddled on her shoulders roll away. At least for now. “Thank you.”

“Of course, Buffy. I will be in touch regarding Faith.”

“And thank you again.”

“Thank me by being careful on whatever this, err, errand is you and Spike are planning to go on.”

“As careful as can be reasonably managed.”

“You realize that offers me little comfort.”

“It’s the most I can give you without outright lying.”

“Then I shall take what I am given and be happy for it.”



HUMAN-REGULATED TRAVEL WAS, in Spike’s words, a bloody waste of time and an even larger waste of money. After assuring her that he wouldn’t do anything too illegal, Buffy agreed to let Spike handle the *how* part on getting to Africa, on the understanding that she would kick his pale, lickable booty if he tried to pull something.

“Somethin’ like what?”

“Like booking a ticket for one on your demon ship.”

“Does that sound like somethin’ I’d do?”

“If you thought it was dangerous, yes.”

“Like you can’t handle danger.”

“Danger involving you is a different kind of danger. You wouldn’t want me risking my life for you.”

“Not that noble, pet.”

She’d kissed him, tried not to cry when he kissed her back. While they hadn’t had sex since the truth had come out, he’d stopped tensing every time she made to touch him. Whether or not he would reciprocate depended on his mood—sometimes he seemed like himself, other times she found him staring off into space, his jaw set and tears in his eyes.

“It won’t be better immediately,” she’d told him later. “It’s not like... soul goes in and everything’s easy.”

He’d given her a look that managed to be both exasperated and loving and tormented all at the same time.

“But you already know that.”

“Had it figured, yeah.”

“But you won’t be alone this time. You’ll have me.”

At that, Spike had offered a soft smile. “I’ll be the luckiest bloke in the world then.”

Right now, Buffy was making the rounds at one of the cemeteries, killing time as Spike did whatever underworld thing he had in mind to secure their travel arrangements. She didn’t think she could wait at home—not in the state she was in. The past couple of days had been filled with too much worry and too little sleep, and it was only worse when Spike wasn’t around.

But Xander and Anya would be back tomorrow and the wait would be over. She wasn’t sure whether or not she’d feel better once she and Spike were on their way.

“Sigh. I knew it was going to happen eventually.”

Buffy paused in mid-step and jerked her head up, her heart leaping. “I was wondering when you’d show.”

Zipporah was leaning against the nearest mausoleum, a smirk twisting her lips. “I like to keep my people on their toes whenever I can. You make it to old age, Slayer, and you’ll discover just how boring it is to do exactly what others expect of you.” The demon pushed herself off the stone and gestured at her. “Like I was saying—*sigh*. I know that mope. Don’t worry, it happens to everyone.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Like you don’t know. Getting exactly what you want is sometimes a real son of a bitch.”

Buffy crossed her arms. “And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, defensive too. Don’t worry, Little Miss Buff, it happens to the best of them.” Zipporah spread her arms as though to indicate her surroundings. “It seems so simple when you look back, doesn’t it? Things you would have said if you’d only known. Decisions you would’ve made. Wisdom you would impart to your younger self—everyone dreams about changing the past and they all have the very best of intentions. But what people forget is just what made them screw the pooch in the first place.”

Though Buffy was certain she didn’t want the answer, she also knew the demon wouldn’t go anywhere until she’d finished her little speech. “And what’s that?”

“Be-ing them-sel-ves,” Zipporah drawled out, her eyes flashing. “Zebra can’t change its stripes and all that. So what was it? You and that leather-bound hottie break up?”

“Shut up.”

“Oh no, you did! That’s...” The demon frowned. “That’s actually kinda tragic. This was the vampire who went out and got a soul for you in the other time, right? And here I thought that was the kinda love that would last.”

“We didn’t break up,” Buffy spat, heat rising to her cheeks. “We’re fine. Everything’s fine.”

Zipporah offered what she clearly thought was a placating smile. “Yeah, sister, that ain’t gonna work on me. I don’t know how much you remember of the night we met, but you laid yourself out pretty raw. So you haven’t broken up, but there’s trouble in paradise. And if I were to hazard a guess—which I’m totally going to do—I’d say that...you weren’t able to change something that you wanted to change.”

Buffy drew in tighter on herself. She owed precisely zero explanations, thanks.

“Listen,” Zipporah said, sauntering forward a step. “Way I see it, you got no one else to confide in. I solemnly swear that whatever you say will not be used against you in any way, nor will I construe anything

as permission to grant another wish or to fuck up the one you already made. This is strictly girl talk. Off the clock and off the record.”

“What, like we’re friends?”

“Buffy, I literally gave you the key to unlocking everything you said you wanted. Friends? Girl, we’re BFFs.” She rocked a bit on her heels. “Speaking of, and before I forget, Illyria? I assume you’ve worked out whatever moral conundrum kept you from giving me your word during our last visit?”

She stared for a moment, not even sure why she was resisting. It wasn’t like she had any secrets from this demon, anyway. After a moment, Buffy sighed and glanced down. “Yeah. The Watchers Council is involved now, looking for the sarcophagus. My watcher was able to convince them he’d gotten information on her returning soon and apparently, that’s a thing they very much want to avoid.”

Zipporah offered a sage nod. “And if they fail?”

“I’ll be in LA when it arrives. Spike and I will both be. Maybe we’ll be able to keep Angel from doing the stupid Black Thorn thing too, though once he gets an idea in his head...” She rubbed her arms. “So yeah. I’m in.”

The smile that spread across the demon’s lips caught Buffy off guard for how grateful it was, but a second later she understood. Zipporah had said she’d lost her sister, that Illyria had been responsible for it. She’d essentially suffered through the fate Buffy had escaped when she’d jumped off the Tower. And yeah, if Illyria was this demon’s personal Glory, it made all too much sense why she’d be happy to keep the bitch locked up.

“Thanks.” Zipporah nodded and turned away, wiping at her eyes with a forced casualness that made Buffy feel a bit like a voyeur. “So, tell me. If you and the platinum hottie haven’t broken up, why the pout? Or did you realize that getting everything you wanted sometimes ain’t all it’s cracked up to be?”

“Spike learned why he went to go get his soul.”

Zipporah winced. “Oooh, ouch. And he didn’t care?”

“Huh? No, why would you think that?”

“Soulless vampire. Violence, particularly sexual violence, kinda

normal for them. You wouldn't be the first person to think she could tame a wild beast."

"That's not what happened at all," Buffy snapped. "He was horrified. He... He's decided he needs to go get a soul. *Again*."

A blink. "Well, I owe myself five bucks." When she earned another glare, Zipporah sighed and threw her hands up. "Sorry, honey, but yeah, I was banking on the hottie with a body being the exact sort of creep not worth going back in time for."

"I told you why he got a soul—"

"Yeah, and it seemed kind of like a *fuck you* to me. 'Whups, I accidentally almost raped the Slayer. Better go give her a reason not to stake me.'" The demon rolled her eyes. "Look, it's nothing personal. I've just not met too many vamps who were actually decent people. Or as decent as they can be, considering that he *did* try to rape you. Most would shrug that off as a fact of life. That this one didn't was commendable itself, but that he went out and got a soul for *you* and not out of selfish reasons is, well... I've never heard of that."

Buffy's scowl didn't fade, though she found it difficult to argue with that. That Spike had been an exception to the everyday monstrosity she saw in other vampires had been a point of contention well before their sexual affair had kicked off. Well before, even, she'd learned he had feelings for her. As Riley had said during his visit, she'd always been reluctant to stake Spike. Even before the chip.

"So Spike learned that in a different time he tried to rape you and has decided he needs that soul again." Zipporah tilted her head. "Why the frown, Slayer? Is he not as good a lay all souled up?"

"It has nothing to do with that. He just doesn't need one."

"Well, obviously he feels differently. And I can't imagine that was a fun conversation. 'Honey, I love you, but you need to know that in a different time period, you tried to rape me.' Not the best bomb to drop."

At that, Buffy pressed her lips together, the now-familiar stirrings of shame letting her know they hadn't gone anywhere. While it was none of the demon's business and the very last thing Buffy wanted to talk about, she also knew if she was *ever* to talk about it with anyone in a non-therapy setting, now was the time. She couldn't stomach the

thought of how her friends and Giles would look at Spike if they knew. How *Dawn* would look at Spike.

"I didn't tell him," she said softly. "He knew there was an incident that involved a vampire trying to rape me but not that it was him. It never even occurred to him that it might've been him. Then a couple of days ago, he came into the room where it happened while I was in there, just to grab something, and I had a panic attack. He put it together after that."

There was nothing for a moment, just the hard and—in her way of thinking—overly judgmental stare of the demon who had sent her back through time. Then, without warning, a laugh bubbled off Zipporah's lips. She covered her mouth as though to trap it but the damage was done, and there was more coming. In seconds, the demon was doubled over, laughing so hard she couldn't seem to catch her breath, her hands braced on her knees.

"What in the world can you find funny about this?" Buffy snapped, at once trembling with rage. "He—"

"Well, it's like I said, Slayer." Zipporah lost herself in another sea of cackles, folding her arms around her stomach now. When she drew up, tears were scaling down her ugly cheeks. "You got exactly what you wanted," she said at last. "A chance to start over—start again. And, *classic* human that you are, you made the exact same mistakes all over again."

"What the hell do you know? We're not friends. You don't know me."

"Aww, honey, I don't have to," Zipporah replied, wiping at her eyes. "You told me all the highlights, remember? Love affair with vampire gone wrong, *again*. Guy hurts you bad, goes out to get a soul, and you're so *overcome* with feelings for him that you decide to keep your teeth clamped down on that tongue of yours until literally the last second possible. Look what that cost you. Burying those feelings didn't send your fella running back to you with open arms, did it? And given the chance to do it over—you do it again!"

That was beyond the pale. While Buffy knew that her decision to withhold the truth from Spike had been a bad one, it was nothing like what she'd gone through that last year with him. Then she'd kept her

distance out of fear and heartache. Out of a deep drive to not be hurt again but an inability to push him away. This had been different.

*Was it really?* a mutinous little voice asked. *Or did you want to fail?*

"I did it to protect him!" Buffy spat, though at the demon or herself, she didn't know.

The look Zipporah gave her was almost pitying. "No, little slayer, you did it to protect yourself. Humans are *so predictable*. You know the definition of insanity, don't you?"

"Shut up."

"Doing the same thing over and over again and expecting the outcome to be different? Might not be the same song, but it's the same music. And while I can change any event you wish to be changed...I can't change people." Zipporah shook her head, huffed another laugh. "I'm starting to see why you're so hard to kill and keep dead, Buffy Summers. In a world full of enemies, the worst one you have is yourself."

Buffy had been dealt many blows over the years—some that had knocked her off her feet, some that had taken a few days to shake off, and most just minor annoyances she had no trouble rebounding from. But never had a blow hit her like that—seeing herself through the eyes of someone who didn't know her but somehow did at the same time.

She'd once told Spike she wasn't attainable. That she kept people at a distance. Had she really not grown since then? Had she learned nothing?

"Well," Zipporah said, either ignoring the punch she'd landed or choosing not to acknowledge it, "tell the vampire good luck on the soul quest. I have a feeling he'll need it."

And with that, the demon was gone again, the path ahead of her was clear once more.

Only Buffy wasn't sure what to do with it.

BUFFY HAD BEEN OUT OF THE COUNTRY PRECISELY ONCE—A FAMILY trip to Cancun that had almost immediately preceded her parents' divorce. As she'd gotten older, she'd wondered if the whole thing had been a last-ditch effort to save the marriage, for neither she nor Dawn remembered the trip fondly. Rather, it had been more of the same of what they got at home—parents fighting, belongings flying, Buffy urging Dawn out of the room and plastering on a fake smile, pretending all was well.

Strange that she would think of that now, trailing behind Spike through a nondescript village, ignoring the sensation of sand filling her shoes and trying like mad to keep the scream lodged in her throat from tearing free. The same one that had been there since Spike had announced he had finally landed a way of making the trip.

"How?"

"Bloke in Los Angeles," he'd said. "Warlock type. Can take me to a door that gets me where I need to go. Costs a pretty penny but sounds worth it."

"Us, you mean."

Spike had stiffened at that. "Look, Slayer, you don't—"



"I'm going," she'd insisted. "You did this alone once. You're not going to again."

"It'll be dangerous, these trials."

She'd narrowed her eyes at him. He'd huffed and looked away.

"It's on me, not you, right? What happens?"

"Spike, we're not going to argue about this because there's nothing to argue about. Everything is set. Dawn's with Xander and Anya, Faith has the Hellmouth. This is how we're doing it. Either I go with you or you don't go at all."

He'd arched an eyebrow. "That right?" Though the fight had all but left his voice, and his shoulders sagged again. "Means a lot that you wanna come. Makes it easier for me to believe you really do love me, even after..." But he hadn't finished that thought; he hadn't needed to.

And Buffy had thought of what Zipporah had said, about being her own worst enemy, and about the distance separating her and Spike right now. How she'd brought that on herself by withholding the truth. She wasn't certain she could believe that Spike wouldn't have sought out his soul either way—his belief that something inside of him was fundamentally rotten seemed rooted in more than just how he'd learned the truth. But if she'd told him from the start, he wouldn't doubt everything she *had* told him. He wouldn't doubt that she loved him or that she believed the soul didn't matter. Everything that had gone wrong hinged upon that first lie.

"Spike," she'd said as that unreleased scream began to form, "I'm so sorry. I know I can't make it better, but—"

"It's not *yours* to make better, you daft woman. It's on me, isn't it?"

"No, not that. I'm sorry for... I want you to believe me when I tell you I love you. And telling you the truth about that night would've been terrible for both of us, but the terrible happened anyway." She'd swallowed. "I'd rather you know and believe me about everything else than think... I came back in time for *you*."

There had been a beat, then another. Finally, Spike had tilted her chin up so their eyes were locked. "Not about believin' you, love," he'd said. "More like...not deservin' it."

"But—"

"But you're right, yeah? This much we do together."

And so they had. Spike had gotten his old Desoto out from wherever he'd stashed it and they'd been off for Los Angeles, to some demon karaoke bar called Caritas. Neutral territory, the warlock had said.

Once Spike had coughed up the payment—which turned out to be five dozen calico kittens, because nothing could be normal—the warlock had led them into the thankfully shaded alley outside the bar, then opened the door between California and Uganda. Day on this side, night on the other.

“What about when we’re done?” Spike had asked. “Paid for a round-trip.”

The warlock had tossed him a flat stone, either side etched with deliberate markings.

“Face west and turn that over three times in your left hand. A door will open.”

Spike had studied the stone for a long moment, then looked up, his eyebrows arched. “Realize, of course, if this doesn’t work, the Slayer and I’ll make sure our first order of business when we get back is to tear out your spine, right?”

The warlock had smiled, nodded, then gestured to them to proceed through the door he’d opened.

Now here they were, Spike marching with intent toward a cave, brushing off the concerns of a local who seemed to realize what his objective was. There was no hesitation in his stride, just firm certainty. And she saw then that there never had been a chance of talking him out of it, despite however close she might have felt she’d come to victory. Spike only moved this way when he was on the hunt, when he had a goal.

He didn’t so much as hesitate before disappearing inside the cave, whereas Buffy stalled at the mouth, her heart pounding so hard her chest ached.

Until now, she’d had nothing but her imagination to haunt her with exactly what he might have gone through. Entering that cave was kissing the phantom images goodbye and replacing them with the real thing—a scene from the past that was suddenly her present. She was

about to see what her first Spike had seen, experienced, and she'd never get to tell him that, either.

Her eyes stung. Ever since she'd realized that she'd been shot back through time, ever since that first night of endless conversation about the future that never would be, Buffy had shoved all thought of her first Spike to the back of her mind. There was no reaching him, no telling him any of what she understood about herself or their relationship. No telling him any of the things she should have told him when they'd had that year together. What she should have included in the note she'd left on the pillow by his head the first night they'd just held each other. Or whispered to him the night before the big fight, because she'd known not everyone would walk out alive.

There was nothing for that Spike, though. He was gone. Gone but not gone, because the man he'd been had just walked into a cave to see a demon about a soul. Same as her first Spike had. Both because they loved her and believed that wasn't enough. That she deserved more.

Buffy swallowed and stepped into the cave. She found Spike a ways down, studying the cavern walls, lighter in hand.

They were here. They were really doing this. The soul trials were officially going to become real for her—real in ways they hadn't been. She was about to see exactly the lengths Spike would go to in order to be the man he thought she needed.

The knowledge was humbling, especially since she wasn't sure she deserved it.

But this was for him, too. He'd said as much himself. And she'd promised both him and herself that she would be with him every step of the way.

So Buffy gathered her courage and closed the distance between them. There were drawings on the walls—not nice drawings, either. Though the images were crude, it was impossible to miss the ample use of red or the torment etched into the subject's faces. "Nice," Buffy muttered. "Real nice."

Spike glanced up, the blue of his eyes catching in the reflection of the flame. "Usual rot. Reckon this is to scare off unworthy blighters before they can get themselves nice and killed." He smirked. "If this is

all it takes to have them runnin' for the hills, it's a bloody wonder they had the stones to come in here at all."

Buffy looked around, taking advantage of the light, however minuscule, emanating from the flickering flame. There wasn't much to see beyond rock walls and a stone floor. "What did that guy out there say?"

"Some rot about how I hadn't gotten permission to come in."

"Is that something we need? Permission?" She took another look around. "What if the...whatever lives in here only talks to you if you have permission?"

Spike caught her eye again, his mouth curved into a small smirk. "If I didn't know better, Slayer, I'd say you were nervous."

Of course she was nervous. The man she loved was about to put himself through physical and mental anguish so that he could win something that would cause him more anguish. That he could be as calm as he was, tease her as he was now, was beyond her. "Spike—"

"You tell me I don't have to do this again and I'm bootin' you outta the cave. We're here. It's happening."

"I know, but—"

A deep voice boomed into the air in surround-sound, nearly knocking Buffy off her feet.

"I have slaughtered those who dare to seek me for trivial matters and petty squabbles."

The change in Spike was immediate. He straightened his spine, the smirk fading in place of the fierce determination he wore every time he was about to throw himself into a fight.

"Kind of you to show," Spike said, his voice firm as he turned to glare into the shadows. He seemed to know exactly where the voice had come from, though she still couldn't make anything out but darkness. Not too surprising—while they both had preternatural eyesight, his was miles better than hers. "Beginnin' to wonder if we'd booked a ticket to the wrong place."

"So you do seek me, vampire?"

"Ah huh. You the one who did the finger paintings? Seems you mighta skipped a day in art class."

Buffy's heart began to pound so loud she thought she might not hear what came next, surround-sound or no. She still couldn't see him

but part of her could feel him, and that was almost worse than the visual.

"Answer me," the demon replied.

"Yeah," Spike said, his tone a bit softer. "I seek you."

"Something about a woman. *That* woman. The Slayer." A pause. "You brought her here?"

"Slayer brings herself wherever she likes," Spike said in a calm, conversational voice that nevertheless had her nerves on edge. "Decided there was somethin' I needed and set out to get it. The lady wanted to come along."

There was a cold pause. "You wish to return to your former self."

"That's right."

Another stretch of silence, then the demon began to cackle. And now Buffy saw something glow in the shadows—eyes, maybe—but she wasn't sure. And she didn't move closer, already wondering if she'd made a mistake by following him inside the cave in the first place. The last thing Spike could afford was her distracting him while he fought for his soul.

If Spike was concerned, though, he didn't let it show. Rather, he moved away from her, a pace, two, then he was several feet away, still staring into the shadows. "Somethin' funny, mate?"

"Look what she's reduced you to," the demon goaded. "You were a legendary dark warrior, and you let yourself be castrated."

"Oi. Bit personal, aren't we?"

"And you have the audacity to crawl in here and demand restoration?"

"I'm still a warrior."

"You're a pathetic excuse for a demon."

That, at least, seemed to strike a nerve. Spike scoffed, going tense all over. "Yeah?" he spat at the shadow. "I'll show you pathetic. Give me your best shot."

"You'd never endure the trials required to grant your request."

At that, Buffy fought back a grin. It seemed wildly inappropriate, not to mention out of place, but she knew her vampire. The one sure way to get Spike to the finish line was to tell him he'd never make it. A Spike that knew he'd already done it once would be unstoppable.

“Oh no? We’ll see. And when I win, you’re givin’ me what I came for.” Spike turned to look at her at last. “I love you.”

The tears were back—there was no stopping them this time. “I love you, too.”

“How very touching,” the demon said, its voice shaking with either anger or mirth—it was impossible to tell which. “The Slayer and her vampire.”

Spike whipped back to face the shadows. “Buffy,” he said, “go on out, love.”

“I would rather her stay.”

At the words, the darkness was split with a burst of solid gold light. Buffy slammed her eyes shut, rocking back on feet that were suddenly unsure of themselves. She heard Spike scream her name again but held out a hand, palm-up to indicate she was all right, that he should stay where he was. Though she had no idea why, she had a feeling whatever had just happened was part of the demon’s test.

A few seconds passed absent of sound except for her own thundering heart and heavy breaths. Slowly, she coaxed her eyes open. The gold light was still there, forming a thin ring around the ground where she stood.

“What is this?” She looked up—Spike was where he’d been before, though, from the hard lines of his jaw and the tension stretching his arms and shoulders, he was a second away from sprinting toward her. But like her, he seemed to have understood that this was part of the test. Or at least wasn’t willing to risk it.

“You made yourself part of the trials, Slayer,” came the booming reply.

“Like hell!” Spike snapped. “This is between you and me. You’re not touchin’ the lady.”

“She will remain unharmed and unchallenged.” The demon sounded almost bored. “She will remain exactly within that ring as you undergo your trials. Should she attempt to come to your aid, step outside the boundary at her feet, the trials will be forfeit.”

Spike threw her another look, this one worried. “Let her wait outside. She’s not part of this.”

“She is the reason you are here, why you seek the prize you have the audacity to demand. She will watch. She will not interfere.”

Buffy released a slow breath, willing herself to calm. Okay, this wasn't that bad—might be better, even, than not knowing what was happening to him. Sitting outside and waiting, worrying about how the changes she'd made since she'd been back might affect the trials. Worrying that perhaps Spike's knowledge that he'd won his soul in her *when* wouldn't have the bolstering effect she hoped—that he might be overconfident and therefore sloppy. That he might fail because he believed this was in the bag.

But that was a lie. She felt it and he did too.

“I won't move,” Buffy said. “I swear it, Spike. I won't move.”

That rumbling sound tickled the air again, and this time there was no question that it was a laugh.

“We shall see.”

AT FIRST, BUFFY THOUGHT THE DEMON IN CHARGE OF THE TRIALS might just leave her where she was. The trials themselves were to take place deeper within the cave, where she could certainly hear everything that was going on if not see it. And she hadn't been sure whether or not that was what she'd hoped because the thought of not being able to watch as Spike fought his way through god-knows-what had both comforted and terrified her. As it was, though, the demon wanted to make sure she had a front-row seat. After disappearing with Spike for what felt like forever, the thing had returned, monstrous in size and with eyes that seemed to burn right through her. The ring of light in which she stood had flickered out, and with a claw-tipped hand, the monster had beckoned her forward.

They'd walked for what felt like forever, during which he—or it, or whatever—hadn't said a word. Whatever else, he seemed to be saving his taunts and jabs for Spike, though he had chuckled a bit while redrawing the circle around Buffy's feet. And despite herself, Buffy released a deep, relieved breath when Spike was in view again.

Being able to see him was better. Definitely better. At least she'd know what was happening. If he got knocked out or went quiet for any reason, the not knowing would almost surely kill her. She'd be like



that woman from Greek mythology—the one who just needed to keep her focus on whatever was ahead and not look back, lest she doom the man she loved. Buffy didn't remember the specifics—hell, it had been even longer since college now than it had been the last time she'd lived this year—but she did know that woman had failed. It had been a simple thing, or at least had seemed like one. But the silence had weighed down on her, not knowing for certain if her husband was still behind her or if she'd lost him forever. The cost of her uncertainty had been his eternity.

That the demon made sure she had a good view of Spike made her think that he wasn't up-to-date on his Greek mythology.

So Buffy watched as a shirtless and shoeless Spike talked himself up, pacing a line into the solid rock ground. Whether he knew she was close or not, she didn't know. He hadn't looked at her or said anything to her—seemed focused on whatever was about to come. Perhaps the demon had worked some voodoo that allowed her to watch him but not the other way around. And if that was the case, good, she decided. Better that he keep in the moment rather than outside of it.

"You understand, then," came the demon's booming voice. He spoke as though continuing a conversation.

"Yeah," Spike said. "Yeah, it's not like you haven't been clear about it, oh great mysterious one. This is a test. I don't get what I want unless I pass said test. That about the size and shape?"

"Yes."

Her vampire nodded, though more to himself, and made a show of glancing around. "And since your pad is decked out gladiator-style, and no number two pencils have been provided, I guess we're not starting with the written."

Buffy saw it before he did, but just a hair before, and her stomach dropped. She knew better than most that size was not an accurate measure of a person's fighting abilities, but holy god this guy was huge. Body-builder huge, in a way that more than dwarfed her lean, wiry vampire. Larger, even, than she could remember Adam being. The man looked human but she had her doubts—muscles or not, chip or not, human would give Spike the advantage.

Heart in her throat, Buffy pressed as close as she dared to the

boundary drawn in the rock, her focus now shifting to Spike. If he was troubled by what he saw, he hid it well, rather eyed his opponent the way he eyed any other. And that was enough to give her a boost of confidence. Spike had a history of taking out creatures bigger than he was—his size was one of the things that made him easy to underestimate.

“Here we go then,” he said, sounding—of all things—almost jaunty. “Just me and the walking action figure. I’m venturing this would be the kill-or-be-killed type of situation, then?”

“To the death,” the demon confirmed.

“Right.” Spike met Buffy’s eyes fleetingly, the first time he’d looked in her direction since she’d been placed here. Though brief, the contact seemed to invigorate him. He turned back to Mr. Muscles with his trademark defiance in place.

“Here we are now,” he said. “Entertain us.”

His stoic opponent raised both his fists and, with what sounded like an explosion, smacked his forearms together, and flames erupted around his hands.

Buffy slammed her teeth down onto her tongue hard enough that the coppery taste of blood filled her mouth. It was that or scream, and she couldn’t scream. Couldn’t do anything that might take Spike’s attention. She had no chance, however, of swallowing the gasp that tore from her throat when the thing—whatever it was—took a swing at Spike’s head and connected once, twice. Both times she expected to watch her vampire go up in flames, but both times he pulled away intact.

Now he was scrambling on the ground, doing what he could to put distance between himself and the thing mounting toward him.

Greek mythology had it wrong, she decided. The demon had been right to put her here. Every part of her screamed to move, to jump in, to do something, and of course that was the point—to render her immobile and not only strip her ability to help but punish Spike if she so much as tried. She knew it, knew that Spike would never forgive her if she cost him this, but knowing it and watching as the man she loved was pummeled by a creature with fiery hands were facts that seemed to exist worlds apart.

Buffy clapped a hand to her mouth and forced her feet as far away from the arena as she could go without violating the boundary on the other side. She waffled between watching and turning away, and ultimately decided that she'd drive herself mad if she didn't keep her gaze on her vampire. To prevent her legs from getting carried away, she plonked herself down on the stone floor, wrapped her arms around her knees and tracked the movements through half-lidded eyes, her heart in her throat.

In truth, the fight probably didn't last all that long, though it certainly felt like it did. Once Spike was on his feet again, he seemed to have a tactic decided—bouncing from place to place to mitigate the likelihood of being smacked into the walls. It was good but not entirely effective—over and over Buffy stifled screams and buried her face against her knees, vibrating with untapped energy and feeling worse than useless. Helpless to do anything but watch as the demon's fists found her vampire's face or chest, burning up his skin or coloring it with ugly, patchy bruises.

By the time the demon sent Spike crashing against the cavern wall, Buffy found she had sprung back to her feet and was again teetering on the border of the glowing line. Like he did, like he always did, Spike refused to show weakness. He braced himself against the rock floor, wiped at his bleeding mouth, favored his assailant with a cocky sneer and managed, "Had enough?" before pushing himself upright again.

The demon responded with another of those flying burning punches. And this time Buffy couldn't keep it contained—she screamed something that might have been his name or a suggestion before realizing that she was ready to sprint to his side and forcing herself back again. Whether Spike heard or acknowledged her, she didn't see, couldn't watch, terrified of the cost of distracting him.

"Bad move," she heard him say a moment later. "Bad move, bad move."

Buffy dared another look, and saw, with her heart in her throat, Spike had the demon on his stomach. And that was it, she knew it was it. Knew what came next, having only seen it a thousand times. Her vampire straddled Mr. Muscles from behind, took the thing's beefy

head between his hands, and twisted. An unmistakable *crack* filled the air and everything went still.

He'd won.

And Buffy felt herself lose it. Hot tears spilled down her cheeks, her shoulders shaking as hard, chest-crushing sobs tore through her throat. She'd be moving already if she could feel her legs, but they'd cried uncle and collapsed beneath her.

"Looks like local boy loses," Spike said between pants.

"So it would appear," the demon responded in that terrible, booming voice of his.

"Good on me, then. I get what I came for. I passed, right?"

But even as he said it, Buffy's elation began to recede. She knew the answer. *Trials*, Spike from her when had called them. *Trials*. And even if that weren't the case, now that they were on the other side, it seemed obvious that the one test would never be enough to grant something as monumental as a soul. More was coming.

"Indeed," the demon said. "You have passed the first stage of the test."

"Right, I get—" Spike paused. "Wait, first stage?"

There was no response, which was all the response he needed.

"This startin' right now or do I have a mo' to see my lady?"

"She can come to you. You cannot go to her."

Buffy was on her feet once more in an instant, desperate to touch him.

"Of course," the demon continued, "if she breaks the circle, the trials are forfeit. You may choose."

"How's she supposed to come to me, then?" Spike barked, at last looking at her, pain and longing reflected in his eyes. "If she can't move?"

"The Slayer can do whatever she likes. Choices, however, have consequences. All choices." A shadow moved then, and Buffy caught a flash of the creature's eyes, now fixed on her, cold and dispassionate.

And she understood what she hadn't before. The trials weren't just for Spike—they were for her, too. This was the consequence of the choice that had led them here. Even if Spike had come in alone, this

wasn't his burden alone to bear. The demon would have demanded her presence.

There was a choice in that. Walk over the line and the trials ended; Spike would go home as he was, soul-free. She could get what she wanted and might even be able to trick him into thinking it had been an accident—that her foot had slipped over the line or instinct had kicked in. He would be pissed, maybe even furious, but would he leave?

*No.* Not her Spike. Not her *soulless* Spike. He was hers forever, no matter what she did to him.

But that wasn't what he wanted. For better or worse, he wanted his soul. He *wanted* it for her, for himself—for the second time, he was doing what he thought he needed to do to be a better man, and to ruin that for him, especially intentionally, would make her the worst sort of person.

So Buffy steeled herself and met Spike's gaze. "I'll stay here until it's over."

The look he gave her, in turn, lit her up from the inside out.



THE SECOND TRIAL was almost worse than the first. For starters, there were two demons instead of one. Not odds that were impossible for Spike to surmount, but it doubled the worry and her sense of helplessness. And she thought Spike might have sensed this, for he seemed to go out of his way to keep out of her line of sight, leaving her with little more than the sound effect of a battle going bloody, peppered with Spike's anguished howls and harder grunts. The sounds the demons made seemed to vibrate through the cavern walls, screams and screeches and more besides. But then all sound came to a halt and Buffy, heart in her throat, again neared the edge of the border encasing her and waited.

She seemed to wait for a very long time.

Then, out of the darkness came a flying demon head, its pointed ears flapping as it crashed against the ground. A few seconds passed and then Spike was in view again, his chest a map of gouges and

bruises. One of his eyes had swollen nearly entirely shut, the way it had after Glory.

*After the alley.*

Buffy sucked in her cheeks. In his hand was the other demon head. It was over. He'd won. Again.

"Fancy we get these stuffed and mounted, love?" he called, wagging the demon head. "Good conversation piece for when your mates get mouthy. Just bloody point and show 'em how it goes when they won't shut their gobs."

He looked like he'd been trampled by a herd of elephants but was making jokes, smiling at her through the darkness. Here she was doing everything she could to tamp down the urge to sprint to him, see how badly he was injured up close. Offer him her throat to power up for whatever came next.

"There are less gross ways to leave your mark on the house," she replied. Though, she added to herself, it might make some of the Potentials less likely to spout off all kinds of attitude.

"No fun at all, this one," Spike muttered, tossing the demon head to the ground beside the other. And as though that simple action had zapped his strength, he collapsed to his knees.

"Spike!"

"All's good, sweet," he told the ground. "This ponce hasn't gotten it yet. Can throw any ruddy test he wants at me long as I get what I came here for. So go ahead!" This he screamed to the seemingly empty cavern. "Hit me with all you got! We'll see who's—"

Spike frowned, eyeing something on the ground. "The bugger..."

"What?" She couldn't see anything. "Spike?"

But then it seemed he had been swallowed. The patches of pale skin visible to her, bruises and all, started to black out, as though someone was erasing him. For a horrible second, she thought that was what was happening—Spike being removed from existence. But the darkness kept moving upward like a wave; it was only when he snarled that she realized it wasn't darkness at all, rather a swarm of some skittering critter. Mice or—

Spike threw his head back and released a scream unlike any she had ever heard before, guttural and terrified, ripping at the air like the

sound alone could slice it open. Buffy was moving before she could stop herself, all thought gone. But a flash of gold caught the corner of her eye just before she managed to cross the barrier, and startling her so much she tripped over her own feet and fell back into the circle. And Spike screamed louder than before, on his back now, writhing as ribbons of blood scaled down the slivers of skin she could see.

For long seconds, Buffy just stared, horrified and frozen until she understood.

He was being eaten alive. The demon meant to kill him.

*Stay where you are.*

Buffy panted, drawing in breaths so thick she felt she could choke on them. Every cell in her body seemed united against the Spike-like voice in her head, the one telling her to remain there, that this was it, that she would ruin everything. That Spike had survived before, she knew he had, so he had to survive this too.

But these trials weren't the trials her Spike had faced. At least, not entirely. There had been no Buffy standing by as he ran into the unknown—she had not been part of the tests at all. If that much had changed, it stood to reason that other things had changed as well.

Spike couldn't win a soul if he was dust. He needed her help.

Then, from nowhere, Zipporah's voice was in her head, ringing with condescending derision.

*"Doing the same thing over and over again and expecting the outcome to be different? Might not be the same song, but it's the same music. I can't change people."*

And that was the bulk of it, wasn't it? Buffy making decisions for other people, believing she knew best. Buffy keeping herself at arm's length, intentionally unattainable, Buffy's brand of protection that was at times entirely selfish.

*It has to be his choice.*

Gritting her teeth, she got to her knees and cupped her hands around her mouth. "Spike!"

That was all she got out—his name. The sound seemed to jolt through him, his own screams having faded. She watched as he turned his head toward her, as his eyes, vivid blue even through the dark, found hers.

She wanted to tell him to stop it, that he'd done enough. That no matter what the outcome, he'd proven the sort of man he was a hundredfold and nothing could ever take that away. That he had the soul he wanted just by being here, by asking for it. All these things she knew to be true, her truth, however he felt.

But when she spoke again, it wasn't to beg him to stop.

"I believe in you. I *believe* in you, Spike."

At that, his moans abruptly ceased—something that would have frightened her had she not been focused on his eyes. They were still so strong, even with the distance separating them and the things skittering across his body. Strong and fixed on her.

Then, slowly, Spike began to move. He drew himself up to his knees, sending a few of the bugs to the cavern floor. Blood ran down his chest and arms, poured from a cut in his cheek, but he seemed not to notice. Rather balled his hands into fists before finally tearing his gaze from hers to glare at the shadows ahead.

"That all you got, you overgrown sod? Is that *all you bloody got?*"

Her heart began hammering her ribcage again. She waited for a response she knew wasn't coming—the demon, or whatever he was, to this point had kept silent during the trials themselves and seemed immune to goading, which in many ways was more frightening than if he'd had a hairline trigger. It meant he knew he had nothing to prove. That what was happening here was impersonal and arbitrary.

She had no concept of how long she sat there watching Spike as he held himself firm on his knees, fists shaking, shoulders trembling, face contorting with pain but no sound escaping his lips. It seemed like forever, like the whole world outside of this cave might have evolved beyond recognition. Maybe time stood still in here, the way it had in that hell dimension she'd stumbled upon in Los Angeles forever ago. Maybe they'd been here for years. Certainly, anything was possible.

But eventually, the things crawling over her vampire began to fall away, revealing patches of bruised and bloody skin, punctuated with deep gouges of red here and there where, she guessed, the creatures had bitten him. This process, too, seemed to take forever. At last, all that was left was Spike, still on his knees, still with his fists clenched. He opened his eyes after a long beat. Strong. Resolved.



*Champion.*

He was already so full of soul.

"What's next, mate?" he asked in a deceptively calm voice.

There was no response.

Abruptly, the ring of gold at Buffy's feet blinked out of existence. One second there, gone the next. She started, staring at the suddenly empty space as though something might emerge from the shadows to bite her. She wasn't stupid enough to trust it—to trust anything. Even still, the urge to run to him slammed into her again, almost unbearable this time, a need that gnawed on her nerves and itched at her from under her skin.

Then the cavern walls again with the demon's voice.

"You have endured the required trials."

"Bloody right I have."

Buffy sucked in a deep breath. "Can I move now?" she called. "Am I—"

"You are free to go wherever you like."

Maybe she should clarify. "Are *my* trials done?"

At that, concern and fear flickered across Spike's face. He looked at her, wide-eyed. "Your trials?"

"The Slayer's tests are also complete," the demon replied, ignoring him.

And that was all she needed to know. Buffy broke into a hard run, every cell in her body screaming its relief at being in motion. She wasn't sure she breathed again until she was at Spike's side, and even then, oxygen seemed in short supply.

The up-close visual was always going to be worse than what she'd been able to see from across the cave, she knew, but she hadn't been prepared for just how much. The gouges in his skin weren't just bites—great patches of it were gone, as though it had been eaten away. His remaining skin was a map of color, purples and blues, blacks and sickly yellows. But he was looking at her with such love and gratitude, even through the swollen mess that was his face, that she might have believed he didn't feel any of it.

Somehow, she managed to keep from launching herself into his arms.

“Your tests?” he asked in a low undertone.

“Watching.” That was all she said. All she could say. For now.

Spike worked his throat and nodded. He glanced at her mouth, and for a second she thought he might kiss her, but he didn’t. He did take her hand, though, his own grip reassuringly strong despite everything. Then he turned back to the demon, who still remained obscured in shadow.

“So you’ll give me what I want,” Spike told the demon. “Make me what I was.”

There was a pause as the thing shuffled nearer. Buffy held her breath, her heart in her throat.

“Very well. We will return your soul.”

A hand came from nowhere, black and reaching, and before Buffy could react it had made contact with her vampire’s chest, which lit up as though someone had set his insides on fire. Then his head was thrown back, that same light flaring behind his eyes, and the air split with his scream.

AT SOME POINT IN THE COMING DAYS, SPIKE WOULD ASK HER WHAT had happened next. How she'd gone from sitting by his side, holding his hand, to helping him across the threshold into the room she'd booked for the night. Even after the debris settled and her thoughts cleared, though, Buffy wouldn't be able to provide an answer, because the time spanning between the cave and the hotel seemed nonexistent. She'd get flashes every now and then, images of herself hovering over Spike, sobbing his name again and again until he opened his eyes and looked at her. She'd contort her body in a certain way and remember how heavy he'd seemed even to her, his arm over her shoulder, his feet unsure and fumbling. Like she was carrying the weight of the soul he'd won on top of everything else.

The specifics, though, she would never remember. The same way she didn't remember the specifics around her mother's death and the funeral. Things had happened and she'd just been there, switched onto autopilot, doing what needed to be done to survive to the next moment. Then the moment after that. And the moment after that.

Buffy didn't fully come back online until she was in the hotel room she'd booked in Los Angeles, staring at the stone the demon had given Spike for the return trip from Africa, which had somehow made its

way into her hand. Behind her, Spike was moving about the room, seeming to be in a similar daze. If he'd spoken, she didn't recall, and she hoped he hadn't because, well, what was there to say to a man who had just voluntarily saddled himself with more than a century's worth of remorse? The one comfort she took now was that he didn't seem to be out of his mind, though maybe she wasn't the best judge of that, having spent the last however-long well outside of hers.

She released a shaky breath and placed the stone onto the dresser by the TV remote. An ordinary thing next to an extraordinary thing, in this room occupied by a vampire slayer and the vampire she loved, who had just done something that redefined extraordinary.

"Spike."

Buffy turned to look at him as he sat on the bed. She was aware of the tears filling her eyes but not knowing what she was crying over or why. Maybe it was just exhaustion.

There were a lot of things people could get away with on the Hellmouth without attracting attention, and showing up somewhere looking like the living dead was definitely on that list. While Los Angeles wasn't Sunnydale, it was a place where many people were accustomed to not seeing those around them. Spike didn't have a shirt—they'd apparently left that back in Africa. While the wounds that he'd sustained during the trials were already on the mend, he was still covered with dried blood and a collection of bruises that would make any rational person wonder how the hell he was still standing. Still, he'd barely received a glance from the kid at the check-in counter, so there'd been no need for a cover story, which was good because she wasn't sure she'd have been able to make one up.

It was a nice room. A bit on the expensive side, but given that her bank account was in the black thanks to the fat check the Council had written her, she could afford it. And Spike deserved better than some bumpy mattress and a lukewarm shower. After what she'd witnessed, she wasn't sure she'd ever be able to repay him for what he'd done.

"I'm going to call Cordelia," Buffy told him. "See if she can swing by some clothes. I don't know if you remember Cordelia—"

"I remember," he said, flicking his gaze to her. "Works with your ex nowadays, right?"

"I don't want Angel anywhere near us."

The corner of his mouth twitched. "Good thing. Can't say I do, either."

It was the most he'd said since the cave, and she was desperate to keep him talking. "How are you?" A pause. "Ugh, god, did I really just ask that?" Buffy sighed and smacked herself on the forehead. "Way to make with the awkward, Buffy."

"I'm all right, pet."

She frowned and glanced up. "You're huh?"

Spike swallowed and looked away, but only for a moment. That was one major difference between the Spike from her when and this one—that Spike hadn't been able to maintain eye contact for more than a few seconds at a time. The one sitting on the edge of the bed, though, had no such qualms.

"Bit noisy up here," he said, twirling a finger at his temple. "Guess I shoulda seen that much comin'. Like you said, though, right? Not like I expected a sodding picnic."

He sounded like himself—that much was heartening. Buffy exhaled deeply and took a step forward. There were a million things she wanted to ask, most pressing of which also being the most selfish. Did he still love her was at the top, followed by would he stay with her when the going got tough. Were all the things he'd told her before still true or had his soulless self been a bit too optimistic?

"Keep seein' things. Done boatloads of bad, but you already knew that." Spike shifted his gaze to his legs. "Can see how it might drive a man batty. You tell me I was barking the last time 'round and I believe it. There's so much." He pressed his eyes closed, dropping his head into his waiting hands. "It's so loud."

Buffy didn't realize she was moving until her knees hit the floor. She braced a hand on either of his thighs, desperate to touch him and be touched and also terrified of pushing him too hard too fast. "Is there anything I can do?"

Spike snickered and slowly raised his eyes to her. "Done it all already. Did your best to warn me, didn't you?"

"Spike—"

"Feel dirty all around. Also feel like I don't feel enough."

“Enough?”

“For all I’ve... Everythin’ I...” He shook his head. “Feels like it should be more, is all. Angel spent sodding decades on his hands and knees, didn’t he? Right monster, he was...but so was I. No matter what I tried to tell myself or you, point of fact. But...I expected it to be more. Knowing the way I was then and what you’ve told me about the last time ole Spike got himself a soul. Should be crushing me. And I feel it, Buffy. I feel all of it. It’s there—everything I did, everyone I hurt, and I feel it but I’m not bloody crushed. Maybe the crushing bit comes later, I dunno. But shouldn’t it be more?” He paused, then choked out the rest. “And what if it’s not? What’s that say about the kinda bloke you pulled outta that cave?”

Buffy released a deep breath, taking his hand. This seemed to startle him, but he didn’t jerk away, rather grasped at her like she was his only lifeline.

“It says that you have always had more soul. Always. You were feeling before we got there. You felt the entire time.” She pressed her lips together. “Angelus would never have done what you did. *Never*. And he didn’t see the soul coming either time. You did.”

“But—”

“Spike, you just went through hell to become a better man for the second time since I’ve known you. And you’re sitting here telling me that you’re worried that you don’t feel worse?”

“Everything I did—”

“The fact that you’re worried about that at all tells me everything I need to know.” A tear spilled down her cheek, warm against her cold skin. “What you did was...”

But there were no words for what he’d done—no way to convey just how wondrous he was. And yeah, the lack of crazy—so far, at least—was a welcome surprise but maybe she’d counted her chickens too soon. In a flash, she was back in a church, watching Spike as he massaged his temples and muttered about how Angel should have warned him. How he’d draped himself along a cross and let his flesh burn. That Spike and this one seemed lifetimes apart, and she wasn’t sure what to make of it.

Except there was one difference. One huge difference.

This Spike hadn't been alone. Not once since she'd come awake within her body inside his crypt. She'd been with him every step of the way.

"But...isn't it supposed to be more?" he asked, his voice small. A child asking for reassurance.

"It's not *supposed* to be anything." Buffy edged nearer, placed her free hand across his heart. "Do you feel different here?"

Spike looked at the hand she had pressed to his chest, then slowly reached up to run his fingers over her knuckles, the touch feather-light and hesitant. "Mind's all full, like I said. The things I've done... Buffy, I..."

"I know."

"Do you?"

"Yeah, Spike, I know." She released a breath and rested her cheek against his knee, shuddering when he shuddered. "I wasn't there for you the first time. Not like I should've been."

"Didn't owe me anythin'."

"Maybe not, but I—"

"No *maybe* about it. My head might be all bugged at the mo' but I'm not wrong about that. You never owed me anything."

That sounded more like the souled Spike she'd gotten so close to during the last year in Sunnydale—so much so her heart broke, mourning both the man she'd lost and the one who had marched with such fevered intent into that cave. As much as this Spike was both of those, the weight of what had just happened might never lift enough for her to get a good look at him. No matter that she was here with him now, everything was different. The circumstances had changed and she couldn't rely on what had happened before anymore. Not where they were concerned. These were uncharted waters.

"It's not about owing. It's about wanting. I was afraid and... Well, afraid kinda sums it up." She released a deep breath, then drew back, rose to her feet and reached for his hand again. "Come on."

Spike frowned, stared blankly at her outstretched hand. For a moment she thought he might ignore it, but he didn't, rather slowly slid his skin along hers until she had a good grip on him. "Where we goin'?"

"We need to wash off." Buffy tugged him until he had no choice but to stand, though his expression remained wary. "I am covered in yuck and I wasn't the one battling mad fire demons or being swarmed with bugs. Let's test the water pressure."

She started toward the bathroom, not surprised when his grip firmed and he tugged her back to him.

"You don't owe me *anything*," he said, his voice harder now. "You hear? Not a thing."

"I love you." It wasn't fair that he'd hear how hard her heart thundered at that—that she could be as impassive and strong as she wanted on the outside while the rest of her threatened to fall apart. Buffy swallowed and forced herself to maintain eye contact. "And like I said, it's not a matter of *owe* with us. It's want. I want to get clean and after today...I don't think I want to be away from you. In fact, I know I don't. So can you come with me?"

Spike blinked, some of the hardness in his gaze fading. "You love me."

"You knew that."

He didn't argue. "Slayer..."

A storm was brewing inside of her, rising. She felt it in her chest, pushing toward her throat, making her sinuses burn and her eyes water. "You promised you'd still love me with a soul. You promised."

"What?" He blinked again, this time confused. "Buffy, of course I love you. Can't do anything but, can I? Love you so much I feel full of it. Like I might burst." He released a short laugh. "Thought I did before. Thought I'd drown with it. Might still, actually. Burst or drown, sounds about right. That I love you, how much I love you, is all that bloody makes sense to me at the moment."

Maybe she was stupid, but the reassurance this gave her had her closer to tears than before. And before she could help herself, she'd launched herself against him, her arms under his to hug him to her. Spike swore and pulled her close, muttering things about barmy women and the daft notions that get lodged in their heads, but he couldn't hide the way he trembled when he wrapped his arms around her.



"You're completely off your bird, you know that?" he murmured into her hair. "Told you before I couldn't stop loving you if I tried."

"Yeah, well, that *was* before. I told you that the soul changed you. That the way you love me—"

"Some nonsense about it not bein' selfish anymore. Yeah, pet, I remember." He pulled back just a bit, just enough to grip her by the shoulders. "Can't speak to what happened before, can I? Things with us were right brilliant up until..."

Buffy pressed her eyes closed, nodding. "I know. I'm so sorry, Spike."

"I tell you, you keep apologizin' for that—"

"I'm not apologizing for that. I'm apologizing for not being honest about everything from the start."

"Yeah, and you've done a bit of that too already. Not hearing anything new here."

"Well, before we left Sunnydale, I ran into Zipporah."

Spike edged back just a hair more so that she could fully appreciate the bemused and somewhat exasperated way he looked at her, eyebrow arch and all. That was so refreshingly him she felt apt to start crying in earnest. The little things—the words he used, how he spoke, the way he looked—were making it easy to believe that there would be a *them* when all this was truly in the past. Despite his reassurances, Buffy hadn't been fool enough to trust that they'd be able to find their way back to each other with the rather spectacular mess she'd made of things.

"You ran into the demon bird who sent you back in time and thought this might not be somethin' I'd like to know?"

"It was mostly shop."

"Mostly."

"She wanted to make sure that the plans for Illyria were a go." She swallowed, glancing away. "She knew about the soul. From before—I apparently was Miss Chatty that night. I knew I'd told her a lot but had forgotten how much *a lot* was. Anyway, she knew I was... That something was wrong, and when I told her, she kinda threw it in my face that the common denominator in our relationship going south is me."

The frustration in his gaze didn't fade, but there was a subtle enough shift that she knew she wasn't the sole target anymore. "Bloody bitch is just beggin' for one of us to tear her head off, isn't she?"

"She's not wrong."

"Bugger that."

"Our relationship up until when I came back—all me. I told you I loved you then, but I just couldn't..." Buffy pressed her eyes closed, drew in a steady breath. "Then when you came back the first time, I kept you at arm's length."

"No one in their right bloody mind would have a hard time sussin' out why."

"I didn't tell you I loved you until the very end, which pretty much convinced you that I didn't mean it."

"Seems as I recall you weren't sure if you meant it either, what you've said."

"But I did. I *did* mean it. I might not have known it when I said it, but I meant it. It was... There was so much bad that mostly I had put there and—" Buffy broke off, shook her head. "Not the point. But when I got this chance—this amazing chance to make everything right... I made the same mistake. I kept things from you."

Spike studied her for a moment, then sighed, hanging his head. "You did. But you had your reasons."

"But—"

"Buffy, my head's loud right now, full of voices of people I haven't thought of in years. Things I did that I thought I'd forgotten and now bloody well wish I had." He stepped back, releasing her and pressing the heel of his palm to his brow. "Can see how it'd be easy for some twisted thing to make itself right at home in there. Especially if..." He met her gaze again. "If on top of bein' a regular sort of monster, I was one to you too. So far the soul hasn't made that any better."

"But—"

"But nothin'. You said I wasn't selfish like this—that's a load of bollocks. It's selfish to be here, to want you, to wanna hear you love me still. To wanna snog you and more than that. It's *all* selfish. But do you see me walkin' through that door?" Spike shook his head, squeezing his eyes shut. "All these bloody voices and I just keep comin' back to how

terrified I am you're gonna leave. That if you decide this is all too much, I'm pretty sure the whole world'll come crashin' down. After it happened back there, when I saw you were still there, everything rushing in... I just saw you. How's that for selfish?"

Buffy took his face between her hands and brought his mouth down to hers—it was either kiss him or start crying like mad. No in-between with them. There never had been. She recalled before, when he'd been in the basement at Sunnydale High, how he'd asked her to stay and she'd told him she thought she made the situation in his head worse. At the time, that had certainly seemed the case, but now she wanted to go back to that moment and give herself a good slap across the face.

"Not going anywhere," she said. "And you better not, either."

He released a high-pitched titter, the sound strained and somewhat mad. "Already told you."

She nodded, clasped his hand again and began pulling him toward the bathroom. "Then that's decided. Time to wash up."

"Buffy—"

"Spike, I'm tired and I know you have to be ten times that. I don't want to fight and I don't want to be away from you." Buffy released a fortifying breath. "Please, please come with me now."

For a moment there was nothing, then something that might have been a smile tugged at Spike's lips. "You mean it?"

"I do."

The thought of leaving him by himself scared her far more than the ghosts that might be lurking near the toilet. Perhaps it had taken seeing it, the price Spike had paid—more than the soul itself, but what he'd done to ensure the thing that had sent him across the world would never happen again. She'd known it, of course, in a detached, academic way. Easier to accept like that. And yeah, after the Hellmouth had fallen, she'd finally confronted those realities and what they meant while in a therapist's chair, but it had still remained distant—sort of like the Pyramids of Giza or the Great Wall of China. She knew they existed but only had a passing understanding of their grandeur. Spike had stood before her with a soul and she'd understood that he'd gotten one for her, that what he'd done to win it had been torture. But torture

with no context was just a word. Seeing it, being there, had reshaped her in the way no therapy session ever could.

“Lead the way then, pet.”

Something heavy rolled off her chest—something she hadn’t even realized had been there until it was gone. Perhaps she’d felt the weight at one point and it had just become a part of her. All she knew was when she started moving again and Spike followed, a sensation like true release went with her.

She stepped over the threshold and switched on the light, then turned, careful to brush as much of herself against him as she could in the motion. Holding his gaze, she stripped off her top. Then her slacks. When she reached around to unhook her bra, Spike stayed her with a gentle hand.

“Can I?”

Buffy nodded, not trusting her voice. She tried to keep from dissolving when she felt his fingers against her bare skin, when he pressed his lips to her temple as he flicked the clasp open. Then the straps were sliding down her arms and her bra was falling away. When it was no longer between them, Spike sighed and steadied his hands on her hips.

“These too?” he asked, plucking at the elastic of her panties.

This time she managed to croak a weak, “Yes.”

Spike inhaled and dropped to his knees, then tugged the flimsy fabric down. And she could see clearly what would happen next, were this any other day in any other circumstance. He’d growl and bury his face between her thighs and do things with his tongue that would have her lit up from the inside within seconds. But this wasn’t any other day and the circumstance hadn’t changed. He placed a chaste kiss to the curve of her hip before rising back to full height and turning his attention now to the tattered pants he’d worn in the cave.

This was no small step, though, for either of them. Standing in the bathroom—any bathroom—and disrobing. Looking at his bruised and battered body, the marks over his chest from where the insects had stripped away pieces of flesh, the burn near his eye where the first challenger’s flaming fists had connected, the cuts along his legs—the evidence of what he’d done to get where he was.

*The second time, Buffy reminded herself. The first time he had no one.*

She took his hand again and led him toward the shower, pausing only to grab a couple of washcloths and a few of the complimentary toiletries. The hotel she'd chosen being upper-scale, there was no awkward shuffle to climb over a tub. In seconds they were under the spray, warm and wet, and watching dirt and grime circle the drain at their feet.

There was only so much water could do, though, so after a moment, Buffy seized the soap bar and tore it out of its paper packaging.

"Buffy," Spike said, but only that. Only her name.

She lathered up one of the washcloths as well as she could, then, holding his gaze, brought it to his chest. Careful not to press too hard against the bruises that looked the angriest, the cuts the meanest, but enough so that within a handful of seconds, the formerly pristine white cloth had browned.

It happened while she was tending to his face. A harsh sob shattered the quiet and he tugged her to him, held her against his chest as he trembled and broke. And before she could stop herself, Buffy was crying too, holding onto him with the sort of desperation she hadn't felt since the reality of his death had first sunk in.

But there was something else, too. The way he grasped at her, how her name sounded tumbling off his lips, had her alight with what she might call hope. It was more than her first Spike had ever dared do after he'd returned, and she hadn't missed the way this Spike had looked at her, either. There was some reserve, some wariness, but in the second before he'd pulled into his arms, she'd seen the thing she'd worried she'd miss. That open awe combined with love and hunger. That look she'd previously only associated with his soulless self.

This time wasn't like the last time—she knew this, had told him a thousand times, but the reality of that statement hadn't been truly tangible until now. And that meant the future was unwritten.

Whatever came next, they would face as they never had before—together.

THAT FIRST DAY IN LOS ANGELES, AFTER SHE AND SPIKE HAD HELD each other in the shower, had almost been enough to make Buffy believe that things would be more or less normal when they returned to Sunnydale. That the easy routine they'd fallen into before the wedding would resume as though it had been left on pause, only without nuisance worries and distractions like finding a job and the looming threat of child services. Yeah, there was the lingering concern about the First and what it might try to do to Spike's head, but she felt ready for that too. On the way back to Sunnydale, she'd gone over—again—the things that the First had done. The kidnapping, the bleeding, the mind-control trigger stuff involving his mother—all of it.

"What about my mum?" Spike had asked, tossing her a worried look.

"That she was sick and you turned her."

"How the bleeding hell do you know that?"

Buffy had frowned, shifting to face him. Despite the fact that he had been through what anyone else would call hell, he'd insisted on taking the wheel, muttering something about how he hadn't just won his soul to be offed in a freak car accident. The fact that he'd felt well

enough to both drive and make fun of her driving skills—or lack thereof—had been promising.

“You told me about your mother after Robin tried to kill you for killing his.”

Spike had tightened his grip around the steering wheel, swallowed. “I told you I turned her.”

“You had to—the First was screwing with your head and making you kill.”

“Making me *what*?”

“I didn’t tell you this?”

“You told me the First had me all toys in the attic, speakin’ to spooks who weren’t there and the like. It had me *killing*?”

“Umm, yeah.”

At that, Spike had pulled over to both collect himself and demand the whole story.

“Seems you’ve been tellin’ me this in bits and pieces rather than the full thing. If I killed now...” He’d inhaled, shaking his head. “No more holding back on me. I need to know *everything*.”

So she’d told him again—starting from the top, all the conversations she could remember. How he’d draped himself over a cross, how she’d kept her distance from him in the days that followed, how she’d tried to go out with Robin Wood and how she’d Freudian slipped and admitted to Willow that she’d been in love with Spike during the previous year. She’d talked about the vampire who revealed Spike as his sire, how she’d confronted him over it and he’d thrown back in her face that she was jealous of the time he spent with other women. How a distraught Spike had led her to a place where he’d buried his kills, how after Buffy had dispatched them he’d bared his chest to her and told her to make it quick. How their relationship had progressed from there, Spike calling Buffy on her crap and turning into pretty much the only person she could count on. How he’d been kidnapped and bled by the First, how she’d fought to save him. That night in the house where they’d held each other, where she’d claimed she was unattainable and he’d told her she was the one. All of it.

And in true Spike form, he’d refused to let her bury the lede.

“So I killed half of Sunnyhell and you didn’t reckon that much deserved a mention?” he’d demanded heatedly.

“It was never going to happen again.”

“Slayer, I swear you use that bloody excuse one more time and I’ll rip your tongue out.”

The truth of the matter was Buffy wasn’t sure how or why this part of their history hadn’t made it into a conversation just yet, except that it felt incidental. A realization that in itself was a bit wiggly because it involved the lives of others, and something that deserved deeper reflection later. But this omission truly hadn’t been a conscious decision, rather a part she’d skipped because she simply didn’t hold Spike accountable for those things that had happened while he’d been under the First’s control. In her mind, there was no danger because she knew enough to expect the First to try to manipulate Spike the way it had before.

“You ever get your arse back into therapy, you better talk about this need of yours to shoulder everything on your lonesome,” he’d muttered, but hadn’t pulled away when she’d seized his hand. Rather, he’d favored her with a soft smile and given her a squeeze.

By the time they’d arrived at 1630 Revello Drive, Buffy had told him everything she remembered. After singing through “Early One Morning” until Buffy was certain the tune would never escape *her* head, they’d determined that the trigger the First had used was not cued up in his brain, which meant that it likely had been programmed there during the time he’d called the basement of Sunnydale High home.

“Seems the old noodle isn’t as vulnerable as it was the first time around,” Spike had said as he’d poured himself a glass of blood. And like before, he’d seemed troubled by this. “Reckon there’s something wrong with what they put in me? Maybe I didn’t get all of it—the soul, that is.”

“Spike, when you went for the soul the first time, it was right after you’d had a mental breakdown, been dehumanized for months, abused just as long, and done something that... Well...”

He’d looked at her sharply. “Tried to rape you. Gotta say the words, pet. No dancing around it like it didn’t happen. I need to hear it and know that you hear it, too.”



“But that’s not what you were trying—”

“All right, fine. It wasn’t what I set out to do and, accordin’ to you, I didn’t know what I’d done until after it was over.” The look on his face had told her plainly that he would never fully accept this as truth. “Bugger my *intent*—what happened to you *happened*. Tellin’ yourself it was an accident didn’t make the pain go away, did it? Didn’t make you any less afraid of me when I stumbled in there.”

“I’m not afraid—”

“Some part of you is or was. Maybe not up top but down deep. Tell yourself you’re not till you pass out and it won’t make a lick of difference.”

Buffy had released a deep breath and forced a nod. He was right, of course, and she hated it when he was right on things like this. Namely because it meant she was wrong. “Okay,” she’d said. “But my point remains the same. I think it’s different this time because you’re different—*we* were different. The reason you went was different, too.”

“How do you figure that?”

“It wasn’t about something you’d done but something you were afraid you were capable of doing.”

“Seems both times it was because I’d hurt you. Not sure how different—”

“It just is. This you didn’t have months of me telling you that you were an evil, disgusting thing. This you has a me that loves you and believes in you. That tried to tell you over and over again how much I don’t think you need the soul to be a good man. That makes it all different.”

Spike had looked down, nodded, and that had been that. More or less.

But that night, when Buffy had pushed him onto the bed that she had more or less decided was now *theirs*, Spike had claimed exhaustion, given her a kiss, and rolled over so she was presented with his back. The entire encounter had been so abrupt and bloodless that Buffy had sat there for a long moment on the edge of what she was sure was a panic attack. Eventually, she’d managed to calm herself down enough to ward off the worst of it, telling herself that it wasn’t shocking Spike needed time and she’d been insensitive to shove him back into sex.

That despite however different he seemed now when compared to the souled vampire she'd known before, she had no idea what was going on in his head. What he felt comfortable sharing, and that he deserved however much space he wanted before she jumped his bones. Her physical needs weren't as important as his comfort.

All of that sounded good in her head. Right, even. It was likely they needed to talk about their sex life before barreling back into it, anyway.

And it wasn't like there weren't other things to do or worry about. There were questions to dodge from Xander and Anya regarding the nature of hers and Spike's sudden but important trip, not to mention a whole host of new worried looks from Dawn. Plus the fact that Sunnydale was a two-slayer town again. A lot bunch of stuff to bring the other slayer up to speed on, too. In fact, Buffy wanted to discuss with Faith the possibility of returning to LA to keep an eye on Angel—and truthfully, it was where Faith would be most comfortable—but didn't know how to bring that up without getting into the talk about what the next stretch of months would look like for them. Faith herself hadn't helped—she knew about Buffy's trip through time and accepted it as only she could. By asking few to no questions and just rolling with the punches.

Things on the Warren front were also quiet, though apparently there had been some excitement while Buffy and Spike had been away. Warren had busted out of jail, gotten his hands on a firearm, and made tracks over to Buffy's house with the intent of gunning her down. Except no one had been there at the time—Dawn had been at school, Anya and Xander at work, and Faith sleeping off a late-night patrol at her hotel. The police had recaptured Warren, put a bullet in his leg when he'd tried to run, and added a slew of fun new charges to his rap sheet. Odds were he'd be going away a long, long time.

Actually, with Giles, Willow, and Tara still out of town, the Hellmouth more or less undisturbed, and no new Big Bad shuffling on the scene to take up the apocalypse that would have been Willow's, there *wasn't* much for Buffy to do aside from fixate on the not-quite-back-to-normal status of her relationship. And it was slowly driving her crazy.

After a week had passed and Spike had made no attempt to get into her pants, Buffy decided she couldn't remain mum on the subject any longer. If he needed more time, fine, but they needed to talk about it if nothing else. And preferably while they had the house to themselves to keep from worrying that Dawn might hear too much.

Wednesday morning, after Dawn had left for one of her few remaining school days of the year, Buffy busied herself downstairs, waiting for Spike to stir. The hours he kept these days were more human than vampire—a tacit accommodation to her own—and while they had been in the habit of waking up together, the past week had been outside the norm in more ways than one. Sometimes she thought he remained in bed just to avoid her and the conversation they needed to have. Anything seemed likely now that she had off-roaded.

Around noon, though, she heard his footsteps on the stairs and quickly switched off the soap opera she'd been pretending to watch. When he reached the ground floor and caught her staring at him, Spike pulled up short, straightened his posture.

"Mornin', pet."

Buffy forced a smile, aware that her heart was pounding and even more aware that he'd know it. "Hey."

"Anythin' interesting on the telly?"

"What? No." She tossed the remote onto the coffee table. "I was just... I was actually waiting for you."

"Oh?"

"Look...can we talk?"

As expected, the question had Spike tensing all over again. But he had never denied her anything she'd asked of him, so she wasn't surprised when he nodded and made his way into the living room. She also wasn't surprised when he didn't sit down.

There was a tactful way to do this and a Buffy way. She felt she'd done enough reasonable rehearsal to keep from just blurting things at him. That was until she opened her mouth and, "Do you not like sex anymore?" tumbled from her lips.

*Smooth, Summers. Real smooth.*

Spike blinked, and she was grateful to see, looked a bit taken aback by the suggestion. "Sorry?"

"You...haven't seemed interested, is all." Great, now her cheeks were going warm. "I thought... Well, before Africa, I thought it was just because of the, you know, massive omission and you being worried about... Except we've been back for a few days now and hey, soul trauma. I get it. I mean, I don't get it because I can't know what that feels like, but as much as anyone can get it, I do. But you seem okay otherwise. U-unless you're not okay and you're not telling me because you don't want me to know you're not okay, which I think you should because we did this together and it's a thing two people who love each other should do. And also I really miss being close to you like that." If her face got any hotter, it would melt right off. But hell, she'd come this far, hadn't she? If she wanted him to be open, she needed to put her money where her rambling mouth was. "I miss sex. With you. And I can wait as long as you need to wait if it's a matter of...you just not being in the mood, but we haven't talked about it at all and I just need to know that you're not just done having sex with me."

The silence that followed perhaps the most embarrassing speech in Buffy history made her wish that her world was one of those that came with readymade holes into which she could hide. Or perhaps just live for the rest of her life.

"Need to get this straight," Spike said a moment later, and damn, she couldn't even look at him. "You've been thinkin' this last bit has been about not wanting you?"

"Well, you told me once you always want me and that just hasn't seemed like the case."

"I do, pet. Fuck, I *always* want you. Not touchin' you makes the sodding trials seem like kiddy play."

"Then why—"

"You know why."

Yes, she supposed she did. It was the answer she'd dreaded hearing. It also made little sense because Spike in her original when had been more than willing to shed his clothes, even if they hadn't gotten that far. There had been a whispered *after*, and she'd thought—hoped—that after the First was defeated, they'd celebrate in style. Make love not because it might be their last chance, but because they had a new beginning.

Buffy swallowed, forcing aside thoughts of the past. Or the future that wasn't. "So...are you just planning to never...?"

Spike arched an eyebrow. It was such a simple motion, something she'd taken for granted too many times to count, but it was so strongly *him* that seeing it made her itch to move. Or rather, to pounce.

"Never shag you again?"

"Well, we haven't exactly done the talking thing since we got back and...and..."

"And you're feelin' neglected."

"No!" Buffy shot to her feet, alarmed. "It's not about *neglect* or needing sex or wanting to use you or—"

He held up a hand, the corner of his mouth twitching. "Buffy, it's all right. Wasn't the way I meant it."

"But it's not about feeling neglected. I just want to know that it'll happen again. That our being together, loving each other... That we can be together like *that*." She rubbed her arms, frustration balling in her stomach. She wasn't saying any of this the way it needed to be said. "I went through those trials too. Not like you did, of course, but...they were mine. And we won. *You* won. And I know you're going through something I can't understand, but—"

"Reckon you can though, love." Spike took a step toward her. "Been doin' a right amount of thinking on that too. How...maybe this is a bit how you felt, bein' ripped outta Heaven. In a place you shouldn't be, separate from everythin' else. Difference is I chose it." A beat. "Know that's not the perfect analogy but it's somethin' no one else has ever experienced, yeah? Apart from Angel, and he—"

"He didn't choose."

"Right." Another pause. "I was seein' it before. You know I was—seein' what I'd done to you. Dunno why I thought the soul'd make it better—make me stop seeing it, but it's still there. Sometimes I can't suss out if it's better or worse I didn't live it. Maybe if I knew what that felt like, the way you say I was that night, I'd know it'd never happen again. I just don't wanna hurt you, ever. The soul just made that... Made me feel that more than I did before."

Buffy released a steady breath. "You want certainty."

“Yeah. Guess that’s the long and short of it.”

“But...*nothing* is certain. Ever.” She edged nearer, feeling like she was on the cusp of something. That she might spook him if she made a sudden move or chose the wrong word, but also that they would finally be past what had happened in the other *when* if she was able to not screw this up. “You didn’t see me that night. You couldn’t. Not the way you had before. I have never once been afraid of you—afraid of that—since I’ve been back.”

Spike made a show of looking at the ceiling. “This again? I told you that—”

“I know what you told me and you were right. But also wrong.” This she was making up as she went along, but it sounded right so she decided not to question it. “It really *wasn’t* about you—that was a memory. And I might have more of them. It might happen again and I won’t see it coming. It might not even be in a bathroom. That sort of fear isn’t rational and all I can do is get through it. Wait until it passes.” Another step. “There might be times I need to be alone, too. But I need to be able to feel those things without worrying about how they affect you, otherwise I’m going to shove everything down and it’ll just explode.”

When Spike moved, she wasn’t sure whether or not he was aware of it. But in a second he was just a few inches away and looked almost ready to devour her. Almost. “I wanna be whatever you need,” he said. “Also wanna know I won’t hurt you. Couldn’t bloody bear it if I did.”

“Spike, you know the difference between rape and consent. You *know* it. Have I ever seemed like I didn’t want what we’ve done together? Even *when* I said I didn’t want it?”

He didn’t answer right away. Verbally, at least. The look he wore did more than enough talking for him, even though he clearly wanted to argue. Instead, he said, “No.”

“And that you’re this worried about it...” She was so close now, she swore she felt electricity buzzing along his skin. “I want you. Whenever you’re ready, whatever you need to get there. I just want to know that it’s going to happen because, well, we’re pretty damn good at it.”

At that, he cracked a grin. “Just good, pet?”

“No, not just good. Amazingly good.” And at the look he gave her,

a light bulb in Buffy's head flicked on. She killed a smile and dropped her voice. "I love everything you do to me. All of it."

Spike nodded, the motion almost imperceptible. "Is that right?"

"Uh huh."

"Mhmm." And she wasn't imagining it—his voice had dropped too. "Tell me more."

"The way you touch me. No one's ever touched me the way you do, Spike. Like...you can't get enough."

He nodded again. His breaths were coming harder, his eyes darkening the way they did when his control was being tested. "Can't. When I touch you... It's never enough. Not for me."

"And when you're inside me..." She swallowed, pressed her thighs together. Her breasts felt heavier all of a sudden and the ache she'd tried to ignore since before everything had fallen apart reared its head. "I love feeling you in me. The way you watch me. The way you look when you're close and you want me to get there first. I like trying to make you lose it, though, because you usually bite me then like a big cheater. And *god*, I love your fangs."

Spike growled low in his throat. "Sounds like the best you've ever had."

"Hands down."

The grin from before turned into a smirk—and it was *his* smirk. That lascivious, tongue-curling-over-teeth look of ego-driven assuredness that made her want to smack him and ride him. Maybe both at the same time. And when he sealed the rest of the distance between them and she felt him hard against her stomach, she could have sobbed her relief.

"Gotta know now," he said, gripping her hips. Then—*oh yes*—his hand slipped under the hem of her shirt, and his cool fingers danced along her skin. "You fancy it when I fuck you hard."

"Umm, duh."

"Hard enough to break furniture and the like. Got lots of nice things here."

"Maybe we keep the collateral damage to my bedroom."

"Where's the fun in that?"

"Well, not having to buy new furniture."

“Yeah, but that’s the kinda thing a girl on the Watchers Council’s payroll can afford to do.” Spike lowered his dark eyes to her mouth, and all of her trembled. “Remember your safe word, love?”

What? Huh? Safe word? Had they discussed a safe word? Buffy frowned and forced her thoughts out of the lusty haze they’d settled in and back over the past few weeks. Then it came to her, something she’d suggested the night of Xander and Anya’s wedding—something random and ridiculous.

“Peanut brittle,” Spike whispered against her ear.

It was a testament to how badly she’d missed him that hearing him mutter the most ridiculous of all would-be safe words had her knees threatening to give out. Buffy seized him by the biceps and squeezed. “Okay. Yes. Peanut brittle.”

He dropped a kiss against her throat, right over the place where he’d last sunk his fangs, and this time her knees *did* go out. Thankfully, he was there to hold her upright.

“Mean it, pet,” he said. “Been bloody miserable for wanting you, but if anything is ever not good, if ever you feel like you need me to give you space, you tell me that. I’ll hear it. I promise you I’ll hear it. Never be so outta my head that I don’t.”

“I know you won’t.”

“Say you’ll do it, Slayer. You’ll use those words to get me to stop.”

“I will. I will. Oh, I so will.” Except she didn’t think she would, because, at the moment, she couldn’t foresee a future in which she’d want him to stop. “Spike, please...”

He pressed a kiss higher on her neck, closer to her mouth. “Please what?”

She fully intended to say something sexy and needy, but also practical because, well, she hadn’t been lying about the furniture. But at the moment, her bedroom seemed a million miles away, and the intense throbbing between her legs was stronger than her pragmatism. So, after a brief but wasted battle with herself, Buffy wound her arms around Spike’s neck and pulled his mouth to hers.

He’d kissed her since finding out—softly and sweetly, and at times with enough hunger to make her think he was ready to be intimate again. Those times had driven her out of her mind, for he’d always



inevitably pulled back, put some distance between them, and gone somewhere to cool off. Not this time. The way he kissed her now was desperate, almost biting, like he'd unleashed something inside of himself that he'd been keeping all caged up. The force and power of the kiss made play with her equilibrium, and before she could follow what was happening, she was on the couch, Spike on top of her, growling and grinding his cock against her center as he drove her crazy with his hands.

*Do not cry, do not cry, do not cry...*

But dammit, her eyes filled anyway. She worried briefly that Spike might reel back when he scented her tears, but he didn't. The strokes of his mouth against her own slowed for a second, as though he were trying to decide something, but when she clutched at him tighter, he gave another little rumble and resumed doing things with his lips and tongue and teeth that would drive a nun to sin.

Then the world shifted, taking them with it. Buffy's stomach dropped and she released a surprised gasp to find he'd rolled them onto the floor, Spike on his back and she across his chest, looking down at him. She studied him, but only for a beat before attacking his mouth again, mewling into him when he answered her. His hands were back under her shirt, though not content just to stroke this time. The fabric inched up, up, until he had to break away from her lips to tug it the rest of the way off. And though there was a persistent killjoy in her head warning her that doing this here was asking for trouble, Buffy found she couldn't be bothered to care.

"Let me see you," Spike whispered, reaching around her to snap off her bra. The stupid thing was across the room the next second, and her breasts were in his hands, his fingers strumming her hard nipples. A sound between a gasp and a sob tore through her throat and she realized, belatedly, that she was rocking against him, her lower half on fire and desperate for friction. It hadn't been all that long since they'd last had sex, she knew, and she'd gone even longer without it back in her when, but these last couple of weeks seemed to have taken on the weight of every day that she had ever spent without him. He'd been there but not, with her but far away, and that ended now.

"How's it you're lovelier than you were the last time we were

together?" he asked softly before lifting himself off the floor to run his tongue around one of her nipples. He moaned against her skin, and she swore she felt the vibration straight to her clit. "Taste even better, too."

Buffy rubbed harder against him, torn between tangling her hands in his hair to hold him to her breast and freeing his cock. In the end, she opted for Door Number Three, dragging his shirt over his head so she could feel his flesh against hers, the hard lines of his chest and torso pressed close. Then it seemed they were racing—Spike fumbling with his belt and his fly while Buffy twisted and shimmied to get her leg free of her jeans and underwear. Somehow, she managed to strip without needing to shift off him, which was good because she was pretty sure she'd have cried. And together, they worked Spike's jeans down to mid-thigh before she was over him again, rubbing her aching flesh along his length, both elated and terrified that she'd wake up before she could feel him inside of her. This was, after all, where most of her dreams decided to end. Her brain was such a cock-blocker.

"Buffy, pet, look at me."

She swallowed and did as she was told, and something in her chest burst because Spike was there. Her Spike, as her dream-world never got quite right. Spike's eyes, dark with need and piercing into her. Spike's flared nostrils, the way his mouth was pulled into a marriage of a grin and a grimace. How he seemed to tremble against her.

"Tell me you love me," he said. "Need to hear it."

"I love you."

He nodded; this time she saw the slight wobble of his lower lip. And then she knew what he would say next—knew it with such certainty she would have been disappointed if he'd said anything else.

But he didn't. "Tell me you want me."

Buffy released a ragged breath, shifting so the head of his cock slid along her drenched flesh between her labia until he was pressing against her entrance. "I always want you," she said, and sank down.

Their first time together with a soul, she'd thought, would be slow and sweet, perhaps with an edge of desperation but more contained than before. There was no rhyme or reason for this that she could summon, except perhaps some lingering puritanical ideas of what it

meant to be with someone without a soul versus someone with one. Even if she and her first Spike had ever consummated their renewed relationship, she imagined the first few times together would have been tentative, as they had spent so much time being careful around each other. And if she was being completely honest, part of her had worried about that. Spike was a passionate creature, always had been, but that year that he'd been back, he'd purposefully kept that passion reined in. It would have come out eventually, she was sure, though it likely would have taken them a while to get there.

The second he was buried inside of her, deep as she could take him, Buffy knew this wouldn't be slow or sweet. Slow and sweet wasn't what she wanted or needed at the moment, and it wasn't what he needed either. So, watching him watch her, she settled her hands on his chest and began moving in swift strokes that had him striking that perfect place within her on repeat. She felt possessed in that instant, desperate and outside of herself, but somehow still more grounded than she ever had been.

"Buffy," Spike said, the word coming out a long moan. He seized her by the hips and held, like there was somewhere else she might sneak off to if he didn't keep her where she was. "My Buffy."

She nodded, blowing wayward strands of hair out of her faces, working the muscles she knew drove him nuts and digging her fingers into his chest. "Oh yes."

"You're a vision, you are." He trailed his gaze from her face to her breasts, lingered there a second, then continued down until he was staring where they were joined and groaning every time she lifted herself off his cock. "So pretty," he murmured. "Buffy..."

Buffy nodded, bouncing harder and falling into a rhythm she knew all too well. That sense of chasing him down even when he was right here inside of her. Of feeling him like he was in her veins, under her skin. He'd once told her he was drowning in her and she felt that too—felt choked with what he gave her and everything she'd thought she might have lost.

Because she might have. This could have easily—too easily—gone a different way. She'd managed to change a lot, change the circumstances, push and maneuver and get people where she thought they

needed to be. And she could tell herself it had been for the sake of others, and in some cases that was true, but her decisions had been self-serving as well. She'd somehow managed to fool herself into believing she could fix what she'd broken between her and Spike without learning the most fundamental lesson from it, and that had almost cost her everything.

"Buffy?" The concern in his voice had her forcing her eyes open. "Talk to me, baby."

Buffy shook her head, pried one of his hands off her hips and brought it to her mouth so she could kiss his palm. "I love you."

Spike groaned and hauled himself off the floor to claim her mouth. And when she started to cry, he did too, only it was a happy cry. They sat there, a tangle of limbs, Buffy still pumping his cock in and out of her pussy, relishing the feel of him against her skin, her mouth, inside her. How he grasped and held onto her, coaxed her back into a bruising pace out of a slow explosion of mutual need. His breath crashed against her lips, the air he didn't need but breathed anyway, and he held her gaze, his brow sliding against hers. He was cool where she was hot, steady where she was erratic, and kept kissing her when she thought the things swelling inside might overpower her entirely. That she might just burst here and never find her way back to herself.

"You're close, aren't you?" he rumbled against her lips, grinning through his tears. "This help?" He braced one hand at the small of her back, pushing her down every time she lifted up, and slid the other between them so that his knuckle grazed her clit on each downstroke. "Take what you need."

Sometimes it seemed he could will her body to do things simply through suggestion. She trembled and wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him again. Then the world went sideways and something crashed to the ground, but she didn't see what. And she didn't care what, because Spike was above her, pounding her hard into the floor and it was too much. All of it was too much.

"Spike," she gasped and turned her head to bare her neck to him. "Do it."

He growled. "Buffy—"

"Do it. Please."

In truth, she thought he wouldn't. That this was the boundary soulful Spike would not cross—that it was a taboo, or something, wanting the monster the way she wanted the man. But then she felt his tongue against her flesh, teasing the place he had marked before.

"You want my fangs?" he whispered, his voice somehow reaching her over the wet slap of their bodies coming together.

Buffy nodded, crossing her ankles over his ass to help him drive deeper into her pussy. "Please."

Another low groan and she knew it was all over. She felt him shift, felt his smooth forehead go bumpy, and then his fangs were in her throat and she hit orbit, shooting far out of the stratosphere with no care as to whether or not she'd ever come back.

A long time ago, after Angel had nearly killed her with his fangs but managed to get her off at the same time, Buffy had asked Giles if there were different types of vampire bites. She hadn't been quite brave enough to tell him what prompted the question, had workshopped what she intended to say well before voicing the actual question so she could best frame it as professional curiosity. But he'd seemed to know what she was really asking regardless, and had done some of that glasses polishing, gone a bit red in the cheeks, and sputtered very Britishly all over the place. The answer he'd given her had been on the side of vague and she'd considered the subject closed...up until she'd caught Riley getting suck jobs from vampires. Then Giles had admitted that there were degrees in vampire bites and intention—that pain could be pleasurable, and that was actually one of the more dangerous things about vampires. He'd also told her that the lore regarding the meaning behind bites was often at odds with reality—some vampires liked to think they could control or possess someone if the right combination of words were issued and accepted by the other party, but there was nothing in the books to support this.

Buffy hadn't thought of that conversation in years. But now, wrapped around Spike as he lapped at the mark he'd reopened, as he continued to thrust inside her—had he come or was this round two?—she found she wished the books had it wrong. That there was a way to link him to her beyond just the words they shared. Because what she was experiencing now was something she wanted him to feel, too. She

wanted him to feel how much this—he—meant to her. How relieved she was that they were still here.

“I love you,” she whispered into his shoulder. “I love you, Spike.”

He trembled hard and lifted his head to meet her eyes, and she wasn’t surprised to see the shine of renewed tears. He didn’t respond—didn’t need to—just smiled down at her. A true smile, the sort she’d worried might take years to truly earn.

Then he kissed her, bucked his hips, and they lost themselves in each other all over again.

Which was more than fine with her.

EVENTUALLY, THEY MADE IT UP TO THE BEDROOM. EVENTUALLY. ALL the things Buffy had put on her mental to-do list flew out the window, and she'd never been happier to shuck off her responsibilities. The past few weeks of abstinence had worked up Spike's appetite to levels she wasn't sure it had ever reached before. Every time she thought he might need a break, he'd roll her over and start doing things that took her body from sated to starving in a handful of seconds. In fact, it was possible that they would have both slipped into a sex coma toward nightfall if the air hadn't split with one of those ear-shattering screams that could only be ripped from the throat of a teenage girl.

Scrambling to get dressed—and not doing a very good job of it—Buffy and Spike tore down the staircase...just to find Dawn bouncing in the foyer and looking happier than she had any right to look.

"You made up!"

Buffy arched an eyebrow, or tried to—it was hard to look appropriately perplexed when her shirt was on inside out and she wasn't wearing pants. "What?"

"Ahem..." Dawn gestured to the living room which had not done the decent thing and miraculously righted itself in the hours since Spike had carted Buffy upstairs. The coffee table was overturned, a

collection of knickknacks were scattered across the floor, the couch was all askew, and a lamp lay on its side.

Spike started to chuckle because he was of no help whatsoever. "Weren't wrong about the furniture, love. Least doesn't look like we broke anything important."

Buffy crossed her arms and gave her sister an imperious look. "I don't suppose your glee over finding the house a disaster zone will extend to you picking this up, will it?"

Yeah, there had been little to no chance of that. Dawn rolled her eyes and barreled forward to hug both her and Spike with infectious enthusiasm.

"I was so worried," she said in her blunt, Dawn way.

"Were you?" Spike asked, frowning his confusion at Buffy. She hadn't mentioned the conversations she and Dawn had had over the last few days, not wanting to pressure Spike into anything because her sister was a big weirdo who took the safety of Buffy's bedroom furniture as a sign that there was trouble in paradise.

Granted, Dawn hadn't been wrong, but there was no need to tell her that.

"Well, yeah," Dawn stepped back, crossing her arms as well. "Ever since you and Buffy started being all lovey-dovey with each other, it has been hard to sleep because, well, you're both the opposite of subtle. And quiet."

Spike snickered, and though Buffy was certain Dawn wouldn't see it, she didn't miss the slightly chagrined nature of his smile. She wondered if that was the soul coming through, or if Spike would have always reacted to his surrogate little sister's feedback of his sex life with a degree of embarrassment. And she was glad to realize she didn't know. With Spike, it could go either way.

"Sorry to have bollixed your beauty rest, Bit. We'll try to keep it down."

"Uhh, no. Quiet means problems which means Dawn *really* doesn't sleep."

"Did you just seriously tell me to have loud sex so you can catch Zs?" Buffy demanded, unable to keep from laughing. She looked at Spike, nudged his shoulder. "Are you hearing this?"



“What?” Dawn replied, nonplussed. “It’s not like we were ever going to be a normal family.” She sobered, flicking her gaze between the two of them. “So...everything’s okay now? You’re not going to dump him?” She focused on Spike. “You’re not going to leave?”

“Was never gonna leave,” Spike said, furrowing his brow. “You know how much I love your sister.”

“Yeah, and I also know how not-easy she is to love at times.”

“Umm, hello.” Buffy scowled and waved a hand. “Standing right here.”

Dawn huffed and threw her a look of pure challenge. “Tell me I’m wrong. I dare you.”

But Spike spoke before Buffy had a chance, sliding his arm around her shoulders and pulling her into him. “You’re wrong,” he said and pressed a kiss to Buffy’s temple.

And yeah, Buffy melted on the spot. Or would have had Dawn not started making gagging noises.

“So,” Dawn said after her theatrics had run their course, “are you ever going to tell me what happened?”

Spike went a bit tense against her, and Buffy couldn’t blame him. She wasn’t sure where he’d fallen on telling the others about the soul since he’d only nodded when she’d assured him that she would leave it up to him. She thought it likely that he wouldn’t, though, unless outright asked because the circumstances around the soul would reinforce all the bad things her friends had ever thought about him, context be damned, and possibly ruin his relationship with Dawn as it had the first time. True, it wasn’t likely that they’d be able to hide the soul forever...but hell, maybe they would. As she’d told him, he wasn’t all that different—not where it mattered, at least.

“Learned some stuff about where big sis came from,” Spike said at last. “Just...threw me for a minute. Took me a bit to suss a few things out.”

Dawn sighed. “So...in other words...you’re *not* going to tell me.”

Spike chuckled and shook his head. “Maybe someday, Bit.”

“Fine.” But Dawn didn’t look too put-out. Perhaps her glee at having interrupted them during naked time would triumph over her curiosity, though Buffy wasn’t stupid enough to really hope for that.

Her sister could be nothing if not annoyingly persistent on the best of days.

"Well," Dawn continued, shoving her way between the two of them and further up the stairs, "I have some of my last homework of the school year to do because teachers, quite frankly, suck. So go back to doing whatever you were doing. Or better yet, save some energy for tonight—it'll be nice to get a full night's sleep."

Spike was still chuckling when Dawn's bedroom door closed.

"I guess she was right," Buffy muttered, absently fingering the bite mark on her throat. "We're never going to be normal."

"Ship sailed a long bloody time ago." Spike hooked an arm around Buffy's waist and dragged her to him for a long, indulgent kiss that both set her on fire and made her way too aware of how much time they'd spent in the bedroom since noon. No complaints or anything, but even slayer muscles got tired every now and then.

"Hold that thought," Spike said when they broke apart, and smirked when she felt her cheeks go hot. "Better pick up our mess, yeah?"

"You're abandoning sex for housework?" But Buffy trailed after him as he plodded down to the foyer. Give her a couple of hours and a good patrol and she'd be more than ready to resume.

"The way your mates drop by at the drop of a bloody pin, seems wiser not to give them too many reasons to ask questions," Spike said, picking up the fallen lamp. "Reckon you've already had a fair share of them as it is."

She nodded absently and began collecting the assortment of pictures, coasters, and other bits of debris off the floor. "Even Xander was worried about you."

"Say what now?"

"At the wedding."

"Harris took a mo' to ask about yours truly the day he got hitched?"

Buffy shrugged, smiling slightly at the shock on his face. "I think the talk I had with him turned him around. Not saying you guys will be besties anytime soon but he's definitely been making with the effort."

A vase near the fireplace hadn't survived their earlier romp. Looked

like a vacuum was in order. Buffy made to pluck up the largest pieces of broken glass, though without much care, so it wasn't too surprising when she sliced her palm open. Instantly, Spike was at her side, taking and dropping the shards she'd collected onto the newly righted coffee table before turning his attention to the cut.

"Clumsy, pet," he murmured, then lapped up the blood without awaiting permission—something that so should not have been sexy but was. Or maybe that was the feel of his tongue against her skin. Or both.

"Are you going to tell them?" Buffy found herself blurting without warning. "About what happened?"

Spike paused, raised his gaze to hers. "Are you?"

"No. I told you, it's not my thing to tell."

"Right." He released a breath, dropped a kiss against her already-healing wound, and let go of her wrist. "Dunno, to be honest. Hadn't thought that far ahead. They'd wonder why, wouldn't they?"

"Yeah, they would."

"Not sure if that's somethin' I'm keen on sharing. No matter..." Spike shook his head and sighed again. "You just told me Harris was worried. Reckon that's ever happened before? Wanna place a bet on it happening again if he learned the truth?"

"You want Xander to like you?"

"I could give a fuck if he likes me. Was just never an option before, yeah?" He shifted his gaze, and she saw plainly that it was more than that. Spike wanted to be liked—but more than that, he wanted to be trusted. And that was good because his world needed to be larger than just her. Things like having friends, being one of the gang, being valued for who he was... These were things he'd never had.

"Xander did get it, though," Buffy said after a moment. "He's the one who took me to therapy, remember? He knew what had happened and...maybe didn't understand it or anything, but he understood *me*. At least toward the end."

"You want me to tell them, is that it?"

"No. I just don't want you feeling like you need to keep this to yourself because of what they'll say. Sure, it'll be awkward and maybe

tense for a while, but that'll pass." Buffy tilted his chin up and brushed a kiss across his lips. "I'm with you, whatever you decide."

Spike was still for a moment, then grinned. "Yeah, I'm gettin' that."  
"Took you long enough."



THE FIRST TIME she'd lived this year, May had been an exceptionally bad month. Starting with the awful incident in the bathroom and escalating to perhaps the most devastating fight she'd ever been in. Those few weeks had redefined the way she viewed herself and her relationships because, hot mama, they'd all been screwed up.

Yeah, May of 2002 had just plain sucked.

This second time couldn't have been more different. She and Spike fell into an easy routine of patrol, sex, and sleep while spending the daylight hours in any number of ways. Finding things to do the first couple of weeks hadn't been too hard—with child services officially off Buffy's back, there had been no need to postpone Spike's moving in.

"And we're taking the big room," Buffy had declared as she situated the Scythe, which she and Spike had recovered on a particularly enjoyable patrol, onto the mantle above the fireplace. First order of business was cutting Caleb down to size when he came to town. Sexist jerk would never see it coming. "If Willow and Tara still want to live here when they get back, they can just deal with the fact that it's my house, my rules, my room."

Spike had chuckled, wrapped an arm around her and kissed her temple. "Bout bloody time."

Buffy had decided to buy a whole new bedroom set along with the move—something sturdier and not previously used. While she wasn't opposed to having shared a mattress with Willow and Tara, the idea of having raunchy sex on what used to be her mother's bed had filled her with all kinds of ick.

So while Dawn was counting down the days to academic freedom, Buffy and Spike busied themselves in moving things into her new room. Well, *their* new room. They also made a few trips to the crypt to see about anything Spike might want to keep—weapons and the like

were a given. The gross, past-its-drinking-date blood in his fridge was definitely not. Some of the bedding Buffy had decided to keep just for its sentimental value. Then there was the rug she'd admired forever ago. That was definitely for keeps.

"If we wanna keep the furniture posh, might as well get used to the view from under it," Spike had teased as they'd situated it in their room. "Never figured you'd ever want somethin' that used to be in my crypt in your home."

"Our home," Buffy had shot back. "And yeah, I want it here. Did you bring the other stuff I wanted?"

He'd winked. "Put them in the drawer on your side. Wagered you'd be the first to break 'em out."

And indeed he'd been right. Buffy had some very fond memories of those handcuffs and a desire to create a bunch of new ones.

After everything they wanted to keep had been moved out of the crypt and all of Buffy's things had found their place in the larger bedroom, she'd turned her attention to the rest of the house. It would be a while still before the place was teeming with Potentials, but being that she knew it was coming, it seemed only logical to start preparing as best she could.

While Faith had headed back to LA on Buffy's suggestion—she'd warned her about Angelus making a reappearance—she would be back within a few months. The basement seemed the most logical place to set up bedding, especially now that the resident vampire would be upstairs where he belonged.

It was toward the end of the month when Giles called to announce they would be coming home. As far as he and the coven could tell, Willow had embraced a new idea of magic. The instinct to use it at the smallest inconvenience had been more or less reined in.

"Part of her rehabilitation was attending a support group for people who are, more or less, magic addicts," Giles had explained. "I believe those were the discussions that frightened her the most. One of the attendees had accidentally killed their own child attempting to magically tend a scraped knee. Another had done something similar to what Willow did with the *tabula rasa* spell, only the result was far worse. His partner never recovered from what was done to him and is

currently living in another country with a new family. She was also made to listen to victim statements from various loved ones whose lives have been impacted by magic users, which was incredibly difficult but necessary.”

“Did Tara speak?”

“Yes, she did.” A sigh. “I wasn’t sure she would, to be honest, but she loves Willow a great deal and felt it was imperative that Willow understand just how badly hurt she’d been by the, ahh, incident.” Another pause. “It helps also that Willow was already of the mindset that she needed to recover, had taken steps on her own to get herself in check. You can get someone into the most effective program in the world but it won’t leave much of an impression if they aren’t in a place where they are willing to do the work.”

Buffy had nodded, thinking about all the times she’d caved to her inner desire to ride Spike into exhaustion, only to curse herself for her lack of willpower afterward. How her disgust with her own weakness had manifested into brutalizing the man she hadn’t been willing to admit she loved. That had only stopped once she’d stopped, but she’d been too caught up in her own problems to appreciate the amount of damage she’d done.

As though reading her thoughts, Giles had asked, “And...how are things there? With Dawn and...”

“I’m still with Spike.”

“That wasn’t what I was going to—”

“Yeah, it was. And I get it. You don’t know him like I do.”

“Buffy—”

“Giles, I’m going to need you to get used to the idea that this is not a fling. We’re doing this—we’re going to make it work.”

“Well, if anyone could, it would be you.” There had been a brief pause, then, “Our flight gets in Saturday evening. Do you think—”

“We’ll be there to pick you up.”



THE WILLOW who arrived in Sunnydale was a version of herself that Buffy hadn’t seen in years. Happy and bubbly, and arm-in-arm with

Tara—which made Dawn shriek and tear away from Spike’s side to bear-hug the both of them.

“All of my favorite people are back together!” she shouted, bouncing. “This is the best!”

Buffy decided to not reiterate what had become a mantra around the house, that she and Spike had technically *not* not been together at any time since she’d landed in her younger body, but that would have drawn too much attention to the statement itself.

“You guys *are* back together, right?” Dawn asked after she extracted herself from Willow’s arms. “I’m not misreading the vibes. You are all coupley again?”

The smile Willow gave Dawn was tired but happy, and she nodded. “Yeah, Dawnie. We...had a lot to work through, but we’re back together.”

Tara grinned and brushed a kiss across Willow’s cheek.

And Dawn started squealing again.

“Oi, Bit!” Spike grouched, nudging her hard in the shoulder. “How about you go easy on the bloke with superior hearin’, yeah? Bloody head’s gonna be ringing all night.”

“Oh please. Buffy screams much louder than that and *into* your ear.” Dawn pulled a face, fidgeted. “Not that I watch or anything. Because ew.”

It was a testament to how much Xander had grown—or perhaps how many times Dawn had made jokes along these lines—that he didn’t cringe or shiver. Spike just smirked and muttered something into Dawn’s ear that made her go beet-red and would likely merit a scolding later on. Also likely—this was exactly his intent.

“It’s a good thing child services is off the case,” Buffy drawled, looking to Giles. “Cause I’m pretty sure she would’ve become a ward of the state by now. As it is, she is free to a good home, if you know anyone in the market for a sixteen-year-old terrorist.”

“Our home is off-limits,” Anya said firmly as Xander greeted Willow with a hug. “Now that Willow has returned, you have someone else available to watch your sister in the event of mysterious, last-minute trips that no one can ask about.”

“Don’t reckon there’ll be another one of those,” Spike replied

before favoring Giles with a stoic nod. It was the most Buffy supposed she could hope for them, and that was good enough for now.

It wasn't until later, much later, after Giles had checked into a hotel for the evening—refusing to claim one of the makeshift beds now in the basement—and Xander and Anya had gone home that Buffy showed Willow and Tara to their room. She waffled over apologizing for essentially having booted them out of the largest space and acting like they should have expected nothing less, being that it was her house, after all. Last time, Willow had been moved into Buffy's old room without ceremony, but the circumstances now couldn't be more different.

"We'll have to get a bigger bed," Willow said, looking around the space. Buffy had decided not to do much in the way of decorating. "I mean, this is cozy but we're used to having a bit more room." She paused. "If you want us to stay here at all, that is. We don't have to."

"We talked about that in England," Tara said, edging into the room, wrapped in a towel. She had begged off for a shower after the others had called it a night. "That... Well, we were just here when you came back and never bothered to ask if that was what you wanted. It being your house and everything."

"We'd both like to reenroll next semester, and can get campus housing," Willow added. "If you and Dawn...and Spike...want the house to yourselves."

Buffy didn't know how to respond to that so she hadn't tried, just shook her head and told her friends she was glad they were back and they were welcome to stay as long as they wanted. The temptation had been there to be a dose of reality they needed, reminding them both of all the things that had followed Willow's evil bout the first time around. The Potentials and Caleb and the First Evil, and the massive fight they had on their hands. The discussion tonight hadn't revolved around anything remotely magicky, and aside from acknowledging that the Scythe was pretty damn cool, no one had seemed interested in talking shop.

Which was fine, but that conversation would have to happen sooner rather than later.

Though, Buffy supposed, it could be that the First, being a non-



corporeal pain in the ass, could sense that the perfect storm it had thought was on the horizon was in fact not. Maybe enough had changed that it wouldn't make a move this time around. Tara was here, alive, and Willow had gone through recovery. Spike was home, healthy, and not within the First's reach. And Buffy knew what was coming. If it was out there, listening and biding its time, it would know that it had failed once before. Perhaps, then, it wouldn't try.

But if it did—*when* it did—Buffy would be sure they were ready for anything. And they'd face it the way they'd faced everything else this time.

Together.

## EPILOGUE

THE POWERS HAD NO IDEA WHAT TO DO WITH SPIKE.

Vampire fights for his soul once—okay, well, that certainly hasn't happened before. Must be a one-off.

Vampire fights for his soul twice—well, didn't see that coming, especially sans that perfect storm of badness. Maybe it wasn't a one-off.

Vampire with a soul sacrifices himself to save the world once—noble, but not unexpected. After all, it wasn't like said vampire knew he had much to live for. Not like he knew the girl loved him back or that she'd spend the next year wishing for a do-over. Why should he, after having witnessed her laying a big lip-smacker on her ex?

Vampire with a soul sacrifices himself to save the world twice, even though he has the girl and his biggest rival for her affections is there and ready to take his place. Them Powers be stumped. That was what they'd told him, at least.

Buffy took a hesitant sip of the drink the bartender had shoved under her nose, not sure what she'd ordered. The taste wasn't bad, though. A little familiar. Like everything else had been these past two years.

And she did mean everything.

"There she is," Zipporah called, fighting her way through the throng, holding a martini high above her head. "The woman of the hour!"

Buffy plastered on a smile that was only somewhat forced. "Hey."

"Just thought I'd swing by. And oh! You're sitting at *our* stool." The demon slapped a hand across her chest, batted eyes that were suddenly saucer-sized and wobbled her lower lip. "I know, I know. I get nostalgic too."

"Nostalgic isn't exactly how I'd put it," Buffy said dryly. Just sitting here was enough to make the first version of this battle play on repeat. Again and again, Spike going up in a cloud of dust. Again and again, knowing she'd lost even as the others celebrated. "But it felt kinda right, coming here. Since it was the last place I was before... You know."

"Aww, you old softy." Zipporah rocked a bit on her heels. "I caught some of the show. Not a bad job, Slayer, I gotta hand it to you. Changed up the cast a bit but you came out all right on the other side." She paused, her eyes sparkling. "So how about it? Any regrets? Things you're just itching to redo this time around?"

"You wanna turn back the clock *again*?"

"With Illyria stuffed in that coffin? Hell no. But a polite demon asks."

Yeah, and Zipporah had always been the picture of politeness. However, being that Buffy wasn't in the mood to launch back into battle, she decided to play along instead. "Thanks but I'll pass this time. Think I'm ready to live a year I haven't lived yet. Actually, kinda excited to see a new movie or two, or maybe an episode of a TV show that isn't a rerun. Not that I have much TV watchage time or anything, but Spike is tired of the spoilers for the things I *do* know."

"Then I do believe my work here is down." Zipporah extended her hand. "It was a pleasure doing business. I've granted a lot of wishes over the years, girlfriend, but this one was the best."

"Because you got what you wanted."

"Well, obviously."

Buffy offered a wan smile but gave the demon's hand a shake. "Don't take this personally, but I hope I never see you again."

"Damn, baby, that's cold."

"No colder than what you told me two years ago."

"You still sour about that? Look how far you've come!" Zipporah waved her hand at her, her face a twist of mock outrage. Then she relaxed and shrugged. "But I get it. No one *wants* to need a vengeance demon. But never say never. You don't know what tomorrow will bring."

"And for the first time in a long time, that's actually true."

"Scared?"

"I'm not thinking that far ahead just yet."

"That's my girl." The demon nodded like a proud parent before giving her an exaggerated wink. "If that's all, m'dear, I'll be on my way. Don't drink and slay. It never ends well. And don't fuck up a good thing, 'cause when you *do* need me next time... Well, you might not have anything of value to give me in return. Girl's gotta look out for Number One."

*Like I'd expect anything else.*

But Buffy didn't say that—she didn't get the chance to. The demon vanished the next second, drink and all.

The visits from Zipporah over the last few months had been few and far between, thankfully, and had ended completely when the Council confirmed they had located the Old One's sarcophagus and buried it in a place so remote it wasn't likely to resurface for at least a century or two. And that had been that. Having gotten what she wanted, Zipporah had bowed out, though Buffy couldn't say she was too surprised the demon had shown up tonight. It was, after all, the end of the road.

For a moment, Buffy just stared at the place where Zipporah had stood, the woman who had reset the course of her life in ways no other being ever had or could. Here. Right here. In a scene that was so familiar it almost hurt. The girls high-fiving, exchanging battle stories, discussing the truly spectacular kills they'd landed in that final fight. Celebrating, because that's what you did after you'd won the big day.

Twice, in Buffy's case.

Some things weren't the same, of course. Willow wasn't huddled up with Kennedy, rather tending to a rather ugly but mostly superficial cut

on Tara's head. Some of the girls who had been here before weren't, being that the spell to activate all the Potentials had gone a bit differently during the redo.

The girls who were here now had chosen to be here, either in Sunnydale or in the months that had followed. *They* had chosen because Buffy had screwed the pooch the first time around.

It had been Tara who had brought it to her attention, just how unfair that spell was, forcing power and responsibility on a slew of girls without giving them the option that Buffy would have killed for. And for a while after that conversation, Buffy had sequestered herself away from the others, wondering at her own lack of insight. That it had taken Tara to point out just how messed up that plan was, especially after all the talks with Spike about consent, had made her question everything she'd thought she'd known about herself.

Spike had understood, of course. Tried to make her feel better. Assured her that it didn't matter now that everything had reset and she had a chance to do it properly. When she'd pointed out that this was the exact argument she'd presented him with regarding the soul quest, he'd bristled, muttered something about it not being the same, and she needed to get over herself. He'd then taken advantage of her sputtering indignation to shove her to the mattress and do things to her—things that the entire house had heard, given the Potentials' collective tendency to burst into giggles whenever Buffy and Spike walked into a room together.

But for as much as had gone differently in the fight against the First, some things had proven impossible to change. The Watchers Council hadn't taken the warning regarding their imminent destruction seriously, being that neither Buffy nor Giles had been forthright about where they'd gotten their information. The organization, Travers had said, had faced any number of threats over the years and took all the necessary precautions to ensure those threats were neutralized and not to worry.

The next day, they'd been blown to smithereens.

The First, lacking the lackeys it had used the first time around, made do with substitutes. Katrina playing the role of Andrew, and Andrew the role of Jonathan. When Buffy had sliced Caleb in half with

the Scythe about two seconds after meeting him, the First had turned to Amy, undoubtedly in the hopes of provoking Willow into some cosmic magical showdown that would trigger the darker power everyone knew was inside of her. Changing the variables meant squat for changing the outcome in many ways, especially against an enemy with a talent for manipulation.

So the meat of the original plan had remained the same. The Potentials who arrived in Sunnydale had been activated for the final fight, after assuring Willow that she had their full consent.

Then there had been the thing with Angel and the stupid amulet. More precisely, what to say to him when he inevitably turned up.

To Buffy's horror, it had been the whole soul argument all over again, only worse this time. Spike had insisted that they kick Angel to the curb, take the amulet and go about it the way they had in her original when. Only surefire way they knew it would end, and he'd pop back into existence in a couple of weeks anyway. No harm, no bloody foul.

It had been infuriating. No amount of protesting that they had changed things enough that this might not be a reality anymore had dissuaded him, not even when Buffy had fought particularly dirty, claiming his unsouled self would agree with her in a heartbeat.

"Right," Spike had fired back, "cause it's bleeding selfish, isn't it? It's selfish what you're asking me to do. You think I want to go up like a sodding firework? Think I want to chance it? If you do, you're off your rocker. The alternative is letting it win, Buffy."

"And what if it goes wrong this time? What if you don't come back?"

"Think you saw back in Africa what I'll do to come home to you. Death's not gonna stop me."

"It did the last time—"

"The last time's not this time, remember? I know you're here, know you love me, and no amount of whatever your ponce of an ex tries to feed me will convince me otherwise." He'd pressed his brow to hers, breathing hard. "I do this, you're in LA nineteen days later, yeah?"

Buffy had agreed, ultimately. Because what else was there to do? Spike was unmoved, determined. It couldn't be Angel because Angel

was not stealing Spike's big hero moment—also because they couldn't risk the amulet going wonky destroying Angel's soul. That, at least, had been a concession Spike had been happy to make—that he was less dangerous without a soul than Angel. That he would love her regardless.

So Angel had shown up—on Buffy's doorstep this time—and Spike had been there, demanding that he hand the amulet over.

"It has to be someone more than human, someone with a soul," Angel had argued.

"Lucky for me, I check both bloody boxes," Spike had shot back. "So toddle on off. The Slayer and I have a world to save."

Angel's stunned stupor had given Spike the time he needed to snatch the amulet and stalk upstairs before anyone could fire off any questions. Buffy had sputtered something—she didn't remember what—thanked Angel and told him there was a good chance she'd see him soon.

The second the door had closed on her ex's face, the house had exploded with noise.

"Buffy—Buffy, did you know?" Willow had demanded.

"She knew. She knew and she kept it from us." That from Xander.

The worst, however, had been from Dawn, her voice shaking with fury. "Did you make him get a soul, Buffy? Did you *make him do that*? That is so twisted."

The temptation had been there to use her considerable strength to shove everyone aside the hard way, but Buffy had managed to get to the staircase without breaking anyone's bones or giving them new bruises. She hadn't, however, been able to keep from exploding once she was on the upstairs landing.

"Yes, I knew. Of course I knew." She'd aimed a glare at her sister. "And *no*, I didn't make him get it. I begged him not to. It was his decision, though, and I respect the hell out of it, as all of you should. And the reason I didn't tell you was it was Spike's decision on whether or not he wanted to share." She'd leveled a glare at her friends and sister, at Giles, who had stood slackjawed by the door. "None of you noticed anything was different. Not *one* of you. Let that sink in."

"I knew something was different," Anya had volunteered, raising her hand. "I just didn't know what."

"He's been less evil," Xander had grumbled. "But come on, Buff, he'd been less evil for—"

"Exactly," Buffy had said using her in-no-mood-to-argue voice, the one increasingly met with eyerolls and muttered threats of mutiny. "Thank you. We'll be taking no questions."

She'd turned and climbed the stairs away without another word, prepared to let Spike have it for dropping that bomb and leaving her to clear through the debris. Except the second she'd crossed the threshold into their room, Spike had tossed her on the bed, barked that they could have it out later, they were doing this his way, and all he wanted was to feel her as though it might be the last time.

And that had been enough. Knowing that they were standing on the edge of forever and their time together might be at its end.

Then there had been the fight, so much of it the same, except her terror at what would happen at the end. The second Spike had lit up, Buffy had screamed at him to drop it and let it go, but the stupid, stubborn vampire hadn't listened. Had just told her he'd see her soon, that he loved her and knew she loved him, and to trust this wasn't the end for them while sounding not at all certain of it himself.

And that was when the Powers had ditched the script Buffy had memorized altogether.

Now, in the when that was theirs, standing on the edge of living entirely new moments and after the successful defeat of yet another apocalypse, Buffy turned her attention from the parts that were familiar to find the only face she wanted to see tonight.

Then there he was, the throng of people around him parting like water, his gaze glued to her face. When her shoulders dropped and she released a sigh, Spike answered with a grin.

"What's the worry, love?"

"Oh, don't get me started," Buffy replied, scowling and tugging him closer once he was within reach. "You know how wigged I was about this and you still make with the disappearing act?"

Spike shrugged and motioned to the bartender over her shoulder.



“Bein’ that you’re the one the dragon came after, think I’m in a better place to worry.”

“Are you?”

“Now? No. Then?” Some of the playfulness in his eyes faded. “Dunno if I’ve ever been so bloody worried in my life. Just figured that this time around it’d be you goin’ up in a blaze of glory and not me.”

“Yeah, let’s not do that anymore.”

“No promises, pet. Not in our line of work. Though if you could keep from givin’ me a bleeding heart attack, I’d appreciate it. Since that’s the sorta thing I gotta worry about these days.” Spike kissed her before she could protest, a tactic that he used rather liberally. She’d say it didn’t work but that would be a lie, especially after a night like this one. A night where everything that could have gone wrong somehow hadn’t—where they’d made it to the other side with the most important people in her life healthy, if not whole.

There had been losses, of course, and those losses would catch up with her after the adrenaline that had kept her moving finally faded. Girls she’d been training for over a year, girls who had been eager to the point of recklessness to go into battle, never guessing that it would be their last as well as their first. That was something that couldn’t be taught, the appreciation of one’s mortality. Teens were the worst, of course, especially those who had been raised in Council families, believing they had a leg-up on the cosmic scale. Believing they understood the power they’d been given.

Angel had lost people as well. Lorne was missing, as was Connor, Angel’s teenage son. Charles Gunn had gone down swinging; Wesley might have, too, had it not been for Faith, who had arrived with Wood and a couple of demon hunters she’d met on the road in time to save Wesley from being done in by a warlock. Fred had been taken to the field hospital with what they’d been assured were non-life threatening injuries.

Connor was the real concern, according to Angel. And if he hadn’t been found by morning, Buffy and Spike had agreed to help him comb the battlefield.

Though Angel, being newly human and still adjusting to his suddenly non-vampire body, might not be in the best place to look.

The battle had cost him an arm this time, amid a slew of other wounds that a regular person couldn't just walk off.

Lucky for Angel, Buffy and Spike weren't regular people. The cut on her leg already felt a few days old, and she knew that when she checked the stab wound Spike had received, it'd be the same.

Because the Powers hadn't had any idea of what to do with Spike.

In Sunnydale, in the moments before he would have gone up in flames, he'd collapsed to his knees instead, dragging in deep lungfuls of air and looking at her with such wide, uncertain eyes she was convinced he'd forgotten where they were. But it had only lasted a second—half a second. Spike had leaped to his feet, torn off the amulet, and commanded her to run.

Where this change of heart had come from, well, Buffy hadn't known and hadn't been about to ask. Then they'd been in motion as the rest of the town collapsed around them, dodging bits of falling rock and drywall, moving through the path the others had carved on the way out. It hadn't been until Buffy had seen a wall of sunlight that reason had caught up with her. But when she'd started to stall to consider alternative routes, Spike had shoved her forward and followed without so much as a sizzle.

And Buffy hadn't understood. Hadn't but had at the same time—understood that she couldn't stop and ask questions. That she had to keep on, had to run, had to get to safety before the ground crumbled away. The answer to why Spike could run in the sunlight was something that could wait until they were both safely on that school bus.

Just like last time, she'd arrived in time to watch the *Welcome to Sunnydale* sign fall into the crater that had been the Hellmouth. Unlike last time, though, she hadn't been alone. Spike had turned around, panting harder, bracing his hands on his knees and ignoring the startled cries that had sounded from around them.

"Shouldn't he be going *poof* about now?" Xander had demanded. "Or did you guys unlock the key to vampire-strength sunscreen?"

Spike had just shaken his head, still gulping down air...and the realization had hit her like the proverbial ton of bricks. Or more aptly, the town that had just crashed in on itself. Because Spike hadn't been doing his normal *breathing just to breathe* thing. His face had been red

and sweaty, two things Buffy had never seen on him before. And when he'd tried to talk, he'd coughed instead. Coughed and kept coughing, until Buffy had grabbed him by the arm and hauled him onto the school bus.

In the back of the bus, as far from the others as they could manage, she had only asked one question.

"How?"

Spike had met her eyes, and she'd never forget the way he'd looked then. Covered in dirt and darker stains she'd known to be blood, his breathing evening out but still labored, his eyes bright and full of life. "Choice," he'd managed between gulps. "Gave me one."

"What?"

"Went...white. All white." He'd rested his head against the window at his back, not breaking eye contact. "Then...this bloke. Said he was me." He'd paused, grinned. "The other me, the one...the one who did it the first time."

"What are you talking about?"

"We had a chat. Nice one. Gave me a choice."

"A chat? It was like a blip. One second you're all glowy and the next, it's run or become an artifact."

"Was that all?" Spike had shaken his head, offered another half-cough, half-laugh. "Well, you said it...didn't you? When your mates pulled you out. Longer for you than for me. Probably worked...the same way for me. All white, like I said... Then this bloke, this other me, started in. Said the bloody powers... No idea what to do with us." At this, he'd laughed again, the sound high-pitched. "Supposed to be Angel, see. One who...gets turned all human-like."

Everything in her had gone freakishly still.

"You...you got his prophecy?" But even as she'd said it, she'd known it was wrong. Impossible. A human couldn't have kept pace with her in the great escape. And while Spike looked a bit worse for wear, he'd definitely kept pace. That and then some.

"Not his. One of my own. One they worked up just for me." Spike had thumped his chest, resulting in another coughing fit. "Bloody hell," he'd muttered once he'd gotten hold of himself. "Never smoking a fag again. Gotta keep these lungs in good shape."

“Spike—”

“That’s just it, pet. *Spike*. Your Spike from before. Told me he knew what I’d want, ’cause it was what he’d’ve wanted. He was there to give it to me.”

“Give you what?”

“Make me like you.” Another brilliant smile. “Couldn’t give me whatever Angel ends up gettin’, ’cause that’s his destiny. Need him to work for it or what all. So they didn’t just make me human. Used some of the juice from Red’s spell to make me—”

“A slayer.”

And that had officially fried Buffy’s brain until later. Much later. Part of her had expected to fall asleep only to wake up and find she’d imagined all of it. Everything since Spike had gone all glow-stick on her—or hell, maybe every moment of the past year and a half, where she’d rebuilt the future, perhaps not perfectly, but with the most important people to her. The wrongs of the past fixed and Spike...

But Spike had been there when she’d opened her eyes. She’d awakened on the bus to the thrum of his beating heart, the warmth of his arms around her, his strong chest at her back. She’d turned and he’d been there, and before she could ask him, he’d reassured her that he was real. That it all was.

The others had either been too tired or too weirded out to ask. Or they had been uncharacteristically considerate, decided to give Buffy and Spike the space they’d needed. Hell, in this brave new world, anything had seemed possible. After renting out a hotel, the gang had dispersed, leaving them alone. Buffy had led Spike wordlessly into their room, past the bed and into the bathroom, where his reflection had caught in the mirror above her sink and, for whatever reason, that had had everything crashing down on her as nothing else could.

So Spike had gathered her in his arms, shepherded her into the shower—it was a safe place for them now—and started from the top. How everything had gone white. How he’d found himself staring at himself, only a version of him that was no longer around—an emissary for the Powers in some wonky way that made sense to neither of them. Buffy’s original timeline was gone, but the other Spike had dusted before that, therefore existed outside of time and space.

“Says they asked him if he wanted to help you,” Spike had told her, massaging shampoo into her scalp. “Wager they didn’t even get the question out properly before he said yes.”

Buffy had clung to him, hoping that in some way she was clinging to her first Spike, too. That she could touch him through the one holding her now. Loving her now.

The Powers hadn’t known how it would go down a second time, Spike had continued. But when he’d gone for the soul, there had been a bit of a panic. Because whatever else, the Shanshu Prophecy was supposed to be Angel’s. A vampire fighting for his own soul once had been unprecedented enough—twice was bloody pushing it. Then when Spike had insisted on wearing the amulet for the second time, knowing what it might cost him, well, something had to give.

“So they asked him,” Spike had said, dragging a washcloth between her breasts. “What would he want, what would *I* want, if not that... Answer was, of course—”

“To be a slayer?”

“Somethin’ more than human—something like you, best bloody person I know.”

“Spike...”

“Besides, never gonna stop fightin’ you, pet. Not for a second. Plus...” He’d smirked. “Gotta outdo Grandpap, don’t I? This way he gets his bloody prophecy but I get somethin’ better. And the fangs. Got to keep ’em.” At that, he’d opened his mouth and she’d watched as his incisors lengthened. It was the only part of his face that changed—no more bumpies, no yellow eyes, just those gleaming fangs. “Said to make sure to keep some monster in your man.”

Buffy had started crying again. She couldn’t help it.

“Another thing, too.” Spike had tipped her head back so she had to look at him. “This bit’s important. He said you had the right of it, why he didn’t come. Told me to apologize for being a bloody coward and that you were the last thing he thought about when he went to sleep, first thing he thought about when he woke up. And seein’ you there in the fight at the end made sure his last thought was a good one.”

Suffice to say, Buffy had been inconsolable after that. She’d let Spike take care of her, knowing that as the person used to breathing actual

air that this was unfair but unable to do more. He'd towed her off, run a brush through her hair, then made to leave to get some nosh—his words—before she'd hit the panic button and demanded he stay with her, convinced as she'd been that all of this was in her head.

They'd ordered in instead.

Sometimes, that thought would resurface. Typically in the early morning, when she was in that place between sleep and awake, she'd listen for the sound of Spike's rhythmic breathing, certain that it wouldn't come, that she wouldn't hear it. But it was always there, even if it took a moment to reach her ears.

On days when she had to refill her birth control, it was easier to accept her reality for what it was. Dreams wouldn't come with regular visits to the pharmacy. Buffy was still on Willow to find a longer-lasting magical solution to keep her uterus from getting any ideas anytime soon but thought she might be better off finding a straight witch. Lesbians didn't have to wonder about accidental oopsies.

And every time she'd wonder how her relationship with Spike had turned out to be the most normal and human of all of them, he'd flash the fangs he'd been allowed to keep and remind her that normal was relative. As was human.

Now, in this bar at the end of the apocalypse, Spike winked at her as though he knew what she was thinking. Odds were he did.

"So," he drawled before throwing back a mouthful of whatever the bartender had served him, "this is it, love."

"What's it?"

"End of the road, yeah? Tomorrow's the first day you'll have without a blessed idea of what to expect."

Buffy narrowed her eyes, though she couldn't keep from grinning. "There have been whole freaking weeks that I haven't seen coming this time around."

"Yeah, but you know what I mean, don't you?" Spike dipped his head to give her neck a quick love bite—the type that had her blood warming in a flash. He moaned low in his throat as though he could sense it. There were times she thought he still could, whatever else he said. "Blueprint's all used up."

That was certainly true. Whatever came next would be completely

new, not just familiar or different. A whole future laid out for them, yet to be determined. It was scary, that feeling, but also exhilarating. Because that future was the one each preceding day had been building toward. A promise she'd made to herself that she'd been fortunate enough to keep.

Tonight was victory. It was also the end. And tomorrow was whatever tomorrow was.

Like everything else, though, they'd face it together.

"Yeah." Buffy pulled him close so that, even with the celebration around them, he was all she saw. That look in his eyes that she loved so much burning there within the blue, more intense now, right now, than she'd ever seen it before. "Guess it's time to write a new one."

Spike favored her with his happy smile—her favorite smile. The one he gave her every day now. "Reckon that could be arranged," he murmured before taking her mouth in a kiss full of life and promise.

Just like the rest of him.





## AFTERWORD

When the Big Bads Challenge was announced, I went through the mental motions of cataloging the story ideas I'd had on the backburner since returning to fandom. None of them had an obvious Big Bad (except *Jump*, but that couldn't count). And I started thinking about Season 6, how the Big Bad was more ambiguous. There were obvious contenders, the Trio and Willow, but I found myself attracted to the idea that the Big Bad was the past and the self, which can be hard to fight and harder to face.

Aside from being the first fic I've started *and* finished since I returned to fandom, *Reprise* is one of the first stories I've written in years without a hard outline. When the idea first came to me, the thought process was something like this:

**Q:** Post-Chosen Buffy gets sent to Season 6. But when?

**A:** Mid-sex in *Dead Things*, obvs.

**Q:** How does she react?

**A:** Unbridled joy. She's done a lot of growth and realized what she had and lost.

**Q:** Does she tell Spike everything?

**A:** Yes.

## AFTERWORD

**Q:** Seriously? Even *that thing*?

**A:** Well, no. Not *that thing*. But everything else.

**Q:** Does he find out?

**A:** Yes, because no matter how much intellectual/emotional growth Buffy has gone through, she would definitely still have psychological scars from *that thing* that you, Holly, need to acknowledge and explore.

**Q:** How would Spike react to learning about *that thing*?

**A:** He'd want to get a soul.

**Q:** What then?

**A:** Well, I think Season 7 would go pretty much the way it did in canon, albeit with a few significant changes.

**Q:** Does Spike still sacrifice himself?

**A:** If he's souled, yes. He'd be more altruistic and there would be some of that innate competition with Angel—he wouldn't want Angel stealing his Big Hero moment. He'd know via Buffy that he would likely reemerge in 19 days, anyway.

**Q:** Would he be sure, though?

**A:** No. Things have changed enough that nothing is certain.

**Q:** What happens re: Shanshu? Do we really think Angel deserves it?

**A:** No. We don't. Joss wrote himself into a corner with it—even he knew it belonged to Spike, but since it was Angel's show and a point of fandom contention, he was a bit of a chicken-shit with awarding it to the worthy.

**Q:** We're fixing that, right?

**A:** Absolutely.

So that was the intention—Spike Shanshues at the end of *Chosen* after having proven *again* that he's the better man and vampire. But I'd written myself into a bit of a corner, too, since I had Angel Shanshuing in Buffy's original when. Also, as much fun as it is to award Spike with Angel's prizes, the closer I got to the end, the more I realized Shanshuing wasn't enough. Because Spike's journey in this story—a vampire who had fought and won a soul twice, saved the world twice—was more monumental, especially since the second time

he sacrificed himself, he was truly happy and fulfilled for the first time in his existence. Angel's reward wasn't enough. My boy needed something special.

Beyond that, I didn't know much of what would happen between the structure outlined in my mental Q&A, and the characters definitely surprised me along the way. Like I said in earlier notes, the closer I got to Spike seeking out his soul, the more reluctant I was to do it, but it always felt like the right move for the character and ultimately, I'm glad I listened to him. I am very happy with where he ended up.

Though I know it took turns that weren't always popular, I hope everyone enjoyed where this ride landed. Thank you all again.

