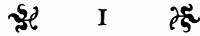


SEVEN



HOLLY DENISE





YOU DON'T LOOK DIFFERENT, BUT YOU HAVE CHANGED

BUFFY WOULD SWEAR IT WASN'T A HABIT. HELL, IT WASN'T EVEN SOMETHING SHE set out to do each night. Should anyone somehow obtain the privilege of reviewing one of her many mental checklists—through witchcraft or demon hijinks or any of the millions of mystical flukes that came hazard of living on the Hellmouth—she was dead certain that they wouldn't find any to-do that could be interpreted as *swing by Spike's crypt*.

Yet here she was again. Another night down, another handful of vampires slain, another demon ritual stopped in its tracks, and another swing through Restfield. She couldn't even lie to herself, say that she was doing a final sweep. Buffy had swept. She had dusted. She had lemon-Pledged her way through Sunnydale's most active cemeteries. There was absolutely no need to go back through Restfield specifically. But it was the only one she ever made a point to revisit, and there was only one reason why.

She let out a deep breath, tucking her stake into the waistband of her sweats, and wondered if Clem would have any of that party mix on hand. The handful she'd gotten last night had been surprisingly tasty—and, he'd assured her, free of cinder slugs. Asking might give her a chance to look around the place, see if there was any more evidence that Clem's extended stay was becoming something more permanent. If he'd replaced any of Spike's things, rearranged any of the furniture. While more time had already passed than either she or Clem had expected, Buffy had held fast to the belief that she couldn't consider Spike permanently gone before his closest friend did. There were undoubtedly things that Clem knew about Spike that she did not, things he would have confided that he'd never have thought about telling her. Or maybe things he had told her that she'd made a point to not hear. Point being, if Clem thought Spike was gone for good, then it would be safe for Buffy to think that as well. And she didn't know whether she wanted to or not.

Though there were times when she did. She'd catch herself holding her breath if the door downstairs opened while she was running a bath. Going still and listening for footsteps on the stairs or in the hall. Then she'd realize what she was doing and roll her eyes at herself, hate herself a little and him a lot, and try to think about anything else while she got squeaky clean. Try but fail, because trying not to think about something was an exercise in futility.

And she didn't like thinking about it. Hated it, in fact. And in those moments, she would hate him too. Hate him for making these thoughts a part of her, making it impossible for her to do something as mundane as take a shower without picturing him in her space. Watching him close that door behind him. Hearing the low lull of his voice, asking her to talk. Saying he was sorry. Looking at her with those eyes and telling her all he wanted was for the feeling to stop. That he hadn't meant what had happened and he hated that it had hurt her, but unwilling to accept that just because it *had* hurt didn't mean what he wanted it to mean. Then, finally, trying to convince her that it did.

Buffy bit the inside of her cheek, wiped her suddenly sweaty hands along her hips. This leg of the journey was more than a little familiar. The highs and lows of talking through what had happened as she closed the distance between herself and the man who had done it. Symbolically, of course, since he wasn't around to do anything anymore. There was the burn of anger, the flash of horror and hurt, the inability to truly grasp, even months later, the truth of what had happened in that bathroom. That stretch of days—starting with what she had seen on the hidden camera feed and ending when she'd crawled out of a grave—were a jumbled mess that she had yet to thoroughly sort through. She hadn't had time to process anything *Spike* before she'd been on a gurney, staring upward as panels of ceiling interchanged with the bright, unforgiving fluorescence of hospital lighting. And everything after that had been a rush to the end of the world.

Then there was what came after those thoughts. There was the truth.

"Ask me again why I could never love you."

Spike is staring at her, light coming back to his eyes. Light and something else—something worse. Something like recognition. "Buffy, my god, I didn't—"

"Because I stopped you. Something I should have done a long time ago."

He's hard to look at, but she has to. She must. She keeps her gaze on him, every part of her buzzing. Screaming at her to hit him again, hit him and never stop. Also to burrow against the wall. Try to claw her way to the other side, as far from him as she can get. Her heart racing, the taste of acid in her mouth. She's going to be sick, and she doesn't want him to see. But she also does. She wants him to see exactly how repulsed she is. That this is how she'll remember him.

He's on his feet now, walking backward. Staggering. Still looking at her, his face a mask of horror, and she can't take his horror. Can't take his sorries or his explanations or his excuses. He's still there and he needs to not be. She doesn't want to have to kill him—god, even now, she doesn't—but she will. If he comes near her again, she will.

He opens the door. The sound is loud, even with the water running. Even with her pulse pounding in her ears. It's loud and so is he.

"Fuck," he chokes out, clapping a hand across his mouth. Tears spill down his cheeks, and he's shaking his head. Shaking and shaking and backing away, but not enough. "God."

And then finally something snaps in him, and he moves. No, he flees. She hears him on the landing, then the clobber of his boots against the steps. The door being wrenched open. The door being slammed shut. And she's still there in the bathroom. The water is still running. Her legs are shaking. Her hands are, too. All of her shakes and shakes and she's crying and she can't stop. At some point, she turns the water off. She doesn't remember doing it. She just remembers shaking. Staring at the place on her leg where Spike had gripped her, watching the bruises as they form. She's on the floor now, willing her body to calm down. Wanting the calm. Wanting the quiet. Wanting to think and wanting to never think again.

Wanting, absurdly, to go after him. Maybe to kill him. Maybe to scream at him. Maybe to just make him watch her as she shatters. In the end she does none of it, just sits there and waits for Xander. Not knowing that she is waiting for Xander, of course. Not knowing that she's waiting for anything at all because her world doesn't make sense.

Because the man she couldn't love and didn't trust had just broken her heart, and she hadn't known he could do that.

Buffy pressed her lips together. The crypt was in view. Sitting there as it did every night, waiting for her to come by, poke her head in, see that there was nothing to see, let out a breath and go home. Put this out of her mind as best she could until tomorrow night, when the thing that was absolutely *not* a habit would drag her back. When she'd get to do this all over again.

And in the time between, she'd get to think about what she'd say if ever she walked into his crypt and it wasn't Clem who greeted her. Or if Clem had news, say that Spike had been by and collected what mattered to him before taking off again, this time for good. She'd run through every possible scenario now more times than she could count, and she still had no idea which version of her, "You're back," speech would make it past her lips if the day ever came. Some of them were quiet. Some were screamers. In some she apologized and in others, she demanded an apology of her own. In none of them did she say anything stupid like, "I've missed you," because that wouldn't have been true. It wouldn't have been strictly untrue, sure, but it wouldn't be true either.

Nothing with Spike was ever easy.

But perhaps if she played her cards right tonight, she'd score another handful of that party mix. Maybe the recipe, too. Give her a new domain to tackle, now that she had finally conquered the driver's test. And it wasn't like she'd be starting from scratch if she decided to try to find her inner Betty Crocker. She could slap together a mean peanut butter and jelly sandwich. And that one time she'd made Thanksgiving dinner hadn't gone horribly. Or if it had, it hadn't been her fault. She'd like to see a Michelin star chef pull off something even half as tasty while also under siege.

Yeah, expanding her culinary prowess was definitely next on the list. It'd also give her another thing to share with Willow when she came home in a few days—a thing that had nothing to do with the Magic Box or slaying or apocalypses or that time her best friend had tried to kill her sister.

Maybe that was why she kept coming by Spike's crypt. She knew there was at

least one super awkward conversation in her future, and one she wasn't even remotely sure how to have. Somehow, having theoretical talks with her ex-lover about what had been, at the time it had happened, the largest sense of betrayal she'd ever felt was still easier than thinking about what she'd say to her best friend. And what that came down to, she knew, was intent.

The person she had trusted had intended to hurt her. The one she hadn't trusted had not. That was hard to walk off and harder to reconcile.

Buffy shook her head and pushed inside the crypt, the familiar whine of the door hinges marking her entrance. Those were thoughts better saved for another day.

"Hey, Clem," she said. "You don't happen to have any of that—"

But that was as far as she got before it happened, the tingle in her neck registering a second too late. Her breath caught and her heart slammed into her ribcage hard enough to hurt, and the space between her ears became dwarfed in sound.

And through it all, there he stood. His mouth slightly open, his eyes wide with what she knew had to be shock. His chest rising and falling, which was so *stupid* because of the many things he needed to do in order to survive, breathing was not on the list. Somehow, in the months that had passed since she'd last seen him, she'd managed to forget how he did that. Breathed. Also how he looked at her—open wonder, like she was something more than flesh and blood. Like she was...

Only he was looking at her now as he never had before. Or *almost* as he never had before. The bits of him that were definitely Spike were still there, still on display, but shadowed by something else. Or hell, maybe that was her imagination. The shock of seeing him here when she'd come to stop expecting it. Not knowing right then if she was happy or furious or *okay* or any of the other million options available on the Buffy color wheel. Finally, after what felt like a very long staring contest, Buffy closed her mouth, swallowed, then forced herself to take in the rest of the crypt.

The candles were lit. That should have been her first clue as Clem typically didn't bother. Spike's duster was nowhere to be seen. Of course it wasn't. She'd hung it in her own closet months ago, not knowing why she had and having not let herself think about it too much in the time since. There was no evidence of a travel bag or anything to suggest he had just now returned—not that Spike would necessarily have a travel bag. In fact, trying to picture him with one left her with the awful urge to laugh, and she couldn't laugh because nothing about this was funny.

At length, she turned her gaze back to him. Part of her expected him to have vanished, a ghost of a memory that had simply taken form. She didn't know whether or not she wished it, and therefore wasn't sure if she could call what she felt relief or disappointment when she saw he was still there.

Spike stood in the kitchen nook—or what she'd come to consider the kitchen nook. As kitchen-y a vampire could make it, what with the fridge and all. The fridge he had spent all summer not using but was suddenly there to open. Draw out a bag of blood—bagged. That was good, right?—and a bottle, set both on the little ledge so he could fix his drink. Had Clem kept fresh blood stocked all this time? If so, that there was a good friend. Prepared for any eventuality. When's Spike coming back? No

one knows, but better make sure he has something to eat waiting for him when he arrives.

Oh god, she was still just standing there. And so was he. She thought about turning and walking out, pretending this entire thing hadn't happened. That she hadn't seen him and he hadn't seen her and she could try again tomorrow. Only no, she couldn't do that. He would follow her. Wouldn't he? That was a Spike thing to do. Or it had been. Once.

"Where's Clem?" Buffy finally blurted, her voice much rawer than she would have liked.

Spike didn't say anything. Not for a long moment, at least. Long enough that she began to wonder if she had actually just cracked the rest of the way and started seeing things. At last, though, he let out a deep breath—deeper than the ones he'd been taking—and pulled a mug from the alcove where he kept his housewares. The oddly human touches he'd made on this inhuman place.

"Left," he said. "Told him he didn't have to, but he insisted. Was a good bloke, watchin' the place for me while I was gone."

"While you were gone."

He hesitated, his eyes flashing up to hers again. They seemed darker than they had before. The blue more vivid, more startling, and that was saying something. "That's right," he replied. "Back now, though. He said I could have it."

"Just like that."

A somewhat pained smile tugged on Spike's lips, the first flicker of anything beyond shock to cross his face. "Like I said, he's a good bloke. Did you need somethin'? Can ask him when I see him next."

Buffy's brain just wasn't cooperating. This didn't make sense. None of it made sense. Spike had been gone for months. Nothing about tonight's patrol had indicated it would end in any way outside the norm. Go through the cemeteries, stake vampires, save the people stupid enough to wander alone in the dark in this town—lather, rinse, repeat. And yes, pop into Spike's crypt because it was no longer Spike's crypt. Because seeing that Spike was still gone was part of the routine. She realized now, standing there like a prized moron, that part of her—a big, real part—had never expected to see him again. At some point, there had been a day too many without him, and an invisible line had been crossed. On one side lived the possibility that Spike would return. On the other, the hard certainty that he would never come back.

He wasn't supposed to be here.

"Slayer?"

When she looked up, she saw Spike had started forward—started, then caught himself, which just made everything feel even more surreal. She wasn't used to a Spike who exhibited restraint or studied her like she was a bomb about to explode. He'd always been forthright with her, almost to a fault. It was one of the reasons she'd been so drawn to him in those early days following the resurrection. No eggshells to walk on, no potential conversational landmines. Just a chance for Buffy to be Buffy, the Buffy she was and not the one the others had hoped to drag out of the grave.

Something inside of her snapped at the thought, shoving her out of her stupor and back to a place where she was in charge. Buffy cleared her throat and crossed her arms. "Where have you been?"

If the shift caught him off guard, he hid it well. He actually seemed to relax. "Had some business to tend to," he replied.

"Business."

Spike nodded but offered nothing else.

"Must've come up suddenly, that business."

"Call me crazy, Slayer, but I figured you wouldn't miss me all that much. Don't tell me you've been pining away for yours truly all this time."

The blow was instant and hard, almost as though he'd followed it up with an actual punch—one so powerful she thought she might be sick. Just upchuck that day's meals across the stone floor. In the million-plus mental variations of this conversation that she'd had over the summer, she'd somehow never expected Spike to be anything other than the picture of contrition. Always, in the mind of Buffy, if Spike saw her, if he *did* come back, it would be because he had to tell her what a colossal mistake he'd made. Assure her of something she already knew—that he hadn't meant what happened—and convince her that his time away had led to growth heretofore never experienced by any other vampire. That he was a changed man. If not one she could love, then certainly one she could forgive.

And why *shouldn't* she have thought that, with the way he'd left things? That look in his eyes, those tears raking down his cheeks? Their relationship had been a lot of things over a lot of years, but never anything that would help her understand how to navigate a conversation with him following an attack like that.

Perhaps it shouldn't have surprised her that he could be cavalier about it, but somehow she was. After months of wondering, waiting, and finally believing he was a closed chapter, she'd thought...

Well, it didn't really matter what she'd thought. Clearly, she'd been wrong.

Buffy blinked and glanced down, rubbed her lips together. Where Spike was concerned, she'd never been anything but wrong.

"You're right," she said, looking up again. Reaching for the part of her that never let her down—the part that was pure survivor. "In fact, why didn't you stay gone?"

Spike was still for a moment, everywhere except the eyes. Maybe if she hadn't known him as well as she did—or as well as she'd thought she did—she would have missed it. But she didn't miss it, and it seriously screwed with her equilibrium. Spike was typically reactionary, ready to fight whether verbally or physically, and while his moves often appeared calculated, she knew they were instinct more than anything else. That he seemed to be considering his words rather than just letting his mouth do his thinking for him had her nerves on edge in ways he hadn't managed in a long time.

Finally, he shrugged and glanced away. "Just didn't. Home sweet home, yeah?"

"Home sweet home," she echoed, hoping the sentiment would make sense upon repetition. It didn't.

And of course Spike was no help. He just shrugged again, still not meeting her

eyes, all of the bluster that he had hurled at her just seconds ago having faded so fast she could have fooled herself into thinking she'd imagined it. But she hadn't imagined it, nor was she imagining this. And she didn't know what to do, what to say or how to react. If it would be better to just leave, act as if she hadn't seen him, pretend—like she had been pretending all summer. Pretending not to care, not to wonder, not to have these questions demanding answers. That whether Spike was here or somewhere else didn't matter to her, except for in as much as it interfered with her work.

"And here I'd just started to get used to the idea of never seeing you again," she muttered.

He huffed a small laugh. "So used to it you decided to swing by my crypt?"

She had no response to that. She'd have to explain it to herself first, and god knows she hadn't had much luck in trying.

"You've thrown me for a loop yourself. Wagered the next time I saw you, you'd be keen to put a stake in me. So while we're sharing, care to tell me why you haven't tried?" He tilted his head, and it was strange and awful at the same time. Seeing Spike be Spike, with all his familiar gestures and the smooth lull of his voice and those eyes that always seemed to see more of her than anyone else ever had. "Not goin' soft on me, Slayer, are you?"

"Soft?"

"Or is it that you like your men with a bit of bite? Did you just figure that out after I scarpered? Here I thought shagging down whole buildings would've clued you in."

Again, Buffy tried to keep her expression impassive, tried not to react, but she knew she'd failed when a nasty smirk stretched across his face. A nasty smirk she knew well. It had been a long time since Spike had come at her with an intent to hurt, an intent to cut her down, but she remembered the hallmarks. That was the sort of thing not even the trauma of resurrection could erase—how it felt to be on the receiving end of her mortal enemy's blows and barbs in equal measure, to watch as he reveled in her hurt.

Only something wasn't right.

Nothing about this is right.

No, it wasn't. The staging was there, in place and effective. The way he held himself, the way he regarded her, that cruel smirk and the crueler words. She had been here before—not *here* here but a close enough approximation. In the days of old, Spike would never have held back if he knew what would make her bleed. He'd embrace her pain with relish, and it had looked a lot like this. Almost exactly like this. Words molded into weapons, delivered with casual cruelty. He'd waggle his tongue, slide his hands down his body to frame certain parts of his anatomy, thrust his hips, all the while regarding her with triumphant, dancing eyes that betrayed his utter delight.

She exhaled. That was it. That was what was different. What was *wrong*.

There was no delight in his eyes. They were flat, almost impassive. Closer to pained than anything she'd consider wicked glee.

What the hell is going on?

"What the hell is going on?" she asked before she could help herself. "What are you trying to pull?"

Spike snickered, his smirk deepening. His eyes stayed the same. "You're the one who invited herself in, ducks. I was just about to make myself a drink—"

"Cut this bull. This isn't you."

He made a show of looking around. "Doesn't seem to be anyone else nearby. Or could it be, Slayer, that you never really knew me at all?"

Yes. "No. You disappear for months after... After *that*, and then *bam*, show up and everything's fine? Like it was all nothing?"

Another shrug. "Why not? You always said it could never be love. Maybe I took that to heart. Got myself an attitude adjustment. Bloody big world out there, all kinds of magicians ready to pull a trick to earn some dosh. Presto, new outlook on life. Simple as can be."

At one time she would have disagreed, but that had been before the last apocalypse. Before she'd seen her best friend lose herself in ways Buffy would have never thought possible. She was older now, though, if not wiser, and she knew things she couldn't unknow—things about her friends and herself. That Spike might have fled Sunnydale and, in his desperation, sought some magical means to alter his mind and heart wasn't completely absurd. In the right circumstances, anyone could be pushed to do just about anything.

Except that Spike wasn't a fan of magic, particularly when he was the guinea pig.

But would he care? After what happened, would he even care anymore?

"So, if the love's gone, does that mean you came back to kill me?" she asked, braver than she felt. "Finally do in your third slayer?"

"Pretty sure I've already *done* my third slayer, Slayer."

Her stomach roiled and she backed up another step, and another, not realizing she was moving toward the door until the step leading out scraped at the back of her heel. "You're disgusting."

"Ah. There she is. Knew I could get her to come out." The smirk was gone, and if not for what was left behind, Buffy might have turned and run. Not for long, probably not even all the way home. Just far enough that she could have room to breathe. Think. And prepare for what came next. After all, if Spike was in town to settle unfinished business, he had the means to. He could hit her where it hurt and that was something she could never let herself forget. Never again.

But it was there, the thing the smirk had been hiding, and she saw it. A flash, a flicker, but it was enough.

"No," Buffy said, firmer than before. "No, I do know you, Spike. I know you well enough to know that mind games are really more an Angel thing."

"You think so, eh?"

"I know so. And so do you."

The stillness that fell over the crypt was absolute—the sort of still reserved for the dead, except there were no dead things here, and damn if that wasn't a revelation. But it was true, and standing here now, she could admit it. Even at his worst, despite

whatever she'd told herself, Spike had been nothing but alive. Dead things didn't breathe hard. They didn't breathe at all. They also didn't glare at her with manufactured indifference, and if they did, they definitely didn't begin to break.

Spike did break, though. Those fissures and cracks became gaping crevices, and she stood there and watched as it happened. As his eyes, which had never lied to her, went soft, as the tension in his body released and he seemed to cave in on himself. The shadow of his former smirk fell away too, though it was the last to vanish, and left him looking oddly naked for a guy who was fully clothed.

"Why are you here?" he asked at last, his voice rough where it hadn't been before. "Never woulda thought you'd drop in. Not after..."

Not after.

She wasn't ready for that question. God, she wasn't ready for any of this. For tonight to be the night when she'd need to know things she'd been trying to figure out all summer. But that was life, wasn't it? Nothing ever went to plan, and maybe sometime she'd stop being surprised by that, or stop lying to herself.

"I don't know," she said. "I just... I just did. Do, I guess."

"Do?" He regarded her with eyes that seemed to shine, even though she knew it was just a trick of the flickering candlelight. "You swing by often, then?"

Buffy rubbed her arms. "I don't know," she replied lamely. But she heard the confession there and knew he heard it too. The past year had taught her a lot about Spike, especially the hungry way he prowled for bits and pieces of whatever vulnerability she showed him, for things he might be able to use to convince her that the thing they shared was love.

She waited for him to lunge, as he always did. Exploit her softness, get her to yield some more.

"You should go," he said instead. "I'll tell Clem you were lookin' for him. He'll be right chuffed."

"Are you staying?" she asked, not knowing she meant to until the question was out. "Or is this... Are you staying?"

There was a pause. "Plan was to stay. Plan was also not to be a bastard when you showed up but..." Spike tore his gaze away again, his chin giving the slightest wobble—so slight she might have missed it if she hadn't been watching him like a hawk. "Wasn't sure what the reception would be, yeah?"

"So you decided to be an ass."

He rattled off a high-pitched titter that sounded just this side of insane. "Just seemed safer. If you had a mind to stake me, didn't want you feelin' conflicted about it."

"Suicide by slayer doesn't seem very you."

"Well, if one was going to take me out, I know who I'd pick." He glanced down, released a long, trembling sigh that seemed to echo through her. "This wasn't the way I wanted to do it," he said hoarsely. "If it matters. Hadn't really thought about it, what I'd say to you. Figured I'd have time. Never would've guessed you'd come through that door tonight. Or any night."

Buffy waited, though for what, she didn't know. Tonight was a night where it

seemed like she didn't know much of anything. She could feel herself rationalizing, feel her own stubborn disbelief that he was here, that she was standing in this crypt that had been without a vampire for so long and he had just waltzed right back into town without her knowing. Without a fuss or a grand entrance or anything that might have at least prepared her.

"Okay," Buffy said, because there was nothing else to say. Or do, for that matter. She knew Spike well enough to know that her one small victory was the only one she'd win tonight. "I'll... I guess I'll see you."

"Buffy."

She waited and met his eyes again. And here it was. She knew it, felt it. Felt *them*. The words in the air, pressing against the stillness with their awfulness and their weight, somehow keeping her both anchored and in freefall. She saw them coming like others might an approaching storm, packed full of powerful gales and electricity and thunder and no accounting for the damage it would leave behind. And in that second before he breathed the words, she wasn't sure she wanted them. Their existence in her head was terrible enough—infuriating in their inadequacy but desperately needed at the same time.

The seconds ticked by, though, and were filled with nothing. Spike stood there with his lips parted, and she could see them in his head, in his eyes, which were well and truly his again. Everything about him screaming *I'm sorry* without screaming anything at all.

In the end, the words didn't come. She would have to decide later if that bothered her. She figured it probably would.

Most things about Spike did.

PERHAPS IT'S JUST IMAGINATION

SHE DIDN'T TELL THEM.

She knew she should. It wasn't like she could indefinitely keep a lid on Spike's return to Sunnydale. Even if he didn't come around anymore, they were bound to run into each other at some point. Probably. Right? Yes, right. Except he was totally going to come around and it was stupid to even entertain any other alternative. If reintegrating into her life wasn't his intention, Buffy could think of no reason for him to have come back at all.

He looks at her, his eyes wide with horror. With knowing. "Buffy, my god, I didn't—"

She scowled, both at the unwelcome flash of memory and at the shelf plank that had just cracked between her hands. Seriously, she hadn't squeezed it all *that* tight. What sort of discount material was Xander relying on?

"Did I hear something crack?" Anya asked, bustling around the cash-wrap. "Xander! They're breaking my new things!"

"He left to go get lunch, remember?" Dawn said from where she sat on the floor, her own assembly job spread in scattered pieces around her and an open book sitting in her lap. "And I am not breaking anything!"

Didn't look like she was getting much in the way of work done, either. Buffy would have scolded her, but she didn't really have a leg to stand on, having also been working at turtle-speed since they'd arrived. But seeing as the finish line would be crossed before they closed up and went home tonight, she felt she could take the scenic route to getting there.

Though she found herself wishing her to-do list were a few more miles long. Having a full day's work of rebuilding at the Magic Box would give Buffy's brain something constructive to focus on rather than the whole Spike-shaped bombshell. Alas, the end-of-summer deadline she, Dawn, and Xander had agreed to when they'd

told Anya they would lend their muscles to rebuilding the shop had been of the firm, and they'd all taken it seriously. As in, Dawn *seriously* had to start school in the morning and Buffy *seriously* needed a studio that wasn't their basement. Which might have been why she'd spent more time in the repurposed training room than anywhere else in the store, getting it ready for the day she made the transition. That being tomorrow.

Buffy still wasn't sure how it had happened, the whole *studio* thing. One day she'd been teaching her little sister how to kick ass and take names, and the next she had a bona fide pack of teenage girls who wanted to learn basic self-defense, motivated by the town's massive mortality rate and the open secret that was the existence of monsters. Very good reasons to want to learn self-defense, Buffy knew, but her gut reaction had been to decline. Training Dawn was enough work, and she still had her job at the Doublemeat Palace to consider, not to mention rebuilding the Magic Box. Also the slight fact that the way she fought wasn't really a recognizable style, more instinct and experience.

Instinct and experience that the girls valued, as tales of the legendary Buffy Summers had survived the destruction of the original Sunnydale High—a fact alone that had almost choked her up as much as had receiving the Class Protector award. But Buffy had held firm to her no...that was until Janice's mom had approached her, said she'd pay for regular sessions. Style didn't matter—results did. And once she'd named *what* exactly she'd pay, well, Buffy's protests had become a lot less protesty. One yes had turned into two, and just like that, she'd had a business. And an hourly rate. And a reason to tender her resignation and say goodbye to the world of burger flipping forever. Halle-freakin'-lujah. It hadn't occurred to her that space for these lessons might be an issue until after she'd found herself with twelve girls in one session, but they'd made it work up until now.

Having the training room back, though, would be a major improvement. Though it also made the whole career thing real in a way it just hadn't felt when confined to Revello Drive. And Buffy could fail at real things. Especially real things that were also on the *life* side of the Buffy Summers equation, rather than firmly in Slayerland. Not that a change of scenery should have a dramatic impact on something she'd accidentally started to build, but this was the Hellmouth, the place where Murphy's Law reigned supreme, so she wasn't going to count her chickens just yet.

"Told you," Dawn was saying when Buffy clued back into the conversation.

She glanced over to find Anya hovering above her sister, inspecting the shelving that Dawn had insisted she had the wherewithal to put together without supervision. Anya was in frown-mode, skeptical—and reasonably so—but apparently she couldn't find anything about the project's craftsmanship to criticize, for she stepped away the next second.

"I could have sworn I heard something break," she muttered.

Buffy looked guiltily at the board in her hand, and the small, however very visible hairline-fracture that split the plank. Hopefully the structural integrity would hold and no one would notice. And Buffy wouldn't have to cop to having let her mind wander or exactly where it had wandered. Thinking about Spike, about that night,

was something she tried to avoid as much as possible when she was around others, as things tended to be squeezed too tightly or bent in ways they weren't supposed to bend. It had also become something of a tell—walk in on Buffy standing amid some small act of carnage and the fact that her thoughts had strayed into Spike territory would be common knowledge, and then they would want to *talk* and never stop talking about the thing she had been through.

They, in this instance, being Xander mostly. Anya wasn't indifferent to what had happened, but she was, well, Anya. Other than asking Buffy if she'd wanted vengeance, she hadn't had much to offer aside from a patented awkward smile and some vaguely terrifying advice. And Dawn was a no-go. Anytime the subject of Spike came up, Dawn would channel every bad teenager mood she'd ever been in all at once and start talking about how she planned to make him the first vampire she officially slayed as part of her new training regimen, though her voice would grow thick and she wouldn't be able to detail her plan in full without needing to excuse herself, trembling with fury and heartbreak in equal measure.

For his part, Xander would just want to talk. Do temperature checks. Make sure that Buffy was okay, that there wasn't anything she needed. And assure her that time and distance from the matter would help Dawn come to terms with the truth. They had been sloppy with her, in his estimation. Let her hang around Spike way too much during the summer of Buffy's Heavenly vacation, and she'd gotten herself all attached as a result. Learning the truth had, therefore, hit her the hardest, but she would be okay. The older she got, the more she'd *get* it.

Which was all well and good in theory. In practice, it was something else entirely, mostly because Buffy's feelings on the matter were a moving target. Though Xander was more than comfortable using the word *rape* in discussing the attack in the bathroom, she just couldn't convince herself to do the same. There was no reason for her reticence on the issue—she had no delusions of what would have happened if she hadn't seized control and kicked him off her, but *rape* was one of those things that happened to other women. Other people. People who weren't the Slayer. And she supposed some of her shame lived there, too. That Spike had gotten as close as he had, that she *had* trusted him—whatever she'd told herself—and kept trusting him even after he'd shown her she couldn't. She'd find herself wondering if that was why it had taken her so long to kick him off, if she'd been waiting for him to realize what he was doing and pull back on his own. And then she'd wonder when, exactly, she would have had time for that particular mental conversation while pleading and struggling beneath him. Everything that had happened had been immediate, overwhelming, so that all of her had been screaming, and not coherently. No time for rationalization or insane games of chicken, but even knowing that didn't make the thought go away. This irrational certainty that Spike would have returned to himself at some point, would have realized what he was doing and...

And what, Buffy? How do you think this ends? Are you really that stupid?

Thinking things like this left her confused and pissed her off. If dealing with what had happened wasn't enough, she had to figure out how she felt about it versus how

she was *supposed* to feel about it, which more often than not left her in a tangle of self-doubt and recriminations when hate seemed further out of reach than it should.

None of this was helped at all by the show Spike had put on last night. The things he'd said, the way he'd looked at her. Very much like he wanted her to view him as the villain, and that was something he hadn't sought since before Glory.

Buffy scowled at the plank in her hands and the hairline crack dividing it. No wonder she was breaking things. This was a lot. Too much. More than that, it was big news. Spike being back in town. Spike being all weird and evasive. Spike picking at the scabs he'd left behind without reservation. Spike looking at her the way he had last night.

She should tell the others. Prepare them. But she didn't want to.

"Though it doesn't look like you've made much progress," Anya was saying to Dawn when Buffy clued back into the conversation. "Are you having trouble with the instructions? I assume you can read, seeing as you have my *Divine Feminine Orgasm* book open."

That was enough to shove all Spike-related thoughts to the back of her head for good. Buffy straightened and craned her neck in her sister's direction. "I'm sorry, *what* are you reading?"

"God, you snitch." Dawn went beet-red and snapped the book closed. "I was just...taking a break. It's almost time for lunch."

"*Almost* doesn't get me my display stand any sooner. Especially if you're breaking things. And Xander isn't back yet, so you should still be working."

"You just admitted I haven't broken anything."

"Well, I heard *something* crack."

Buffy placed the board she'd maybe-broken onto the floor in what she hoped was a suitably not-guilty manner, then made her way over to her sister, who was blushing up a storm and making a concerted effort not to look at her. But Buffy was not a new parent anymore and was not to be deterred. She held out her hand. "Book, please."

"Oh, don't worry," Anya said, barely sparing her a glance. "It has little to do with actual orgasms. It discusses the feminine counterpart to the male-dominated worship structures of modern religion, and how women's spiritual appetite can be fulfilled outside of these structures by connecting with all aspects of their personal energy." She paused, wrinkling her nose. "Bunch of hooley, if you ask me. Willow's the one who talked me into stocking it, and I wouldn't have ordered a new shipment if it didn't sell like myloch larvae after the harvest moon."

At that, Dawn looked a little crestfallen. She relaxed her grip on the book. "It's not sexy?"

"Not unless you think it's sexy to dismantle archaic religious customs." Anya paused, considered. "Actually, right circumstances, that could be very sexy."

"Not the kind of sexy Dawn was looking for," Buffy volunteered, and plucked the book out of her sister's loose grasp without a fight. "Also, Dawn? Time and place for... well, this stuff. And it's not here. If there's...anything you need to know or tell me, it can wait until we get home."

"Yeah." Dawn snorted, her disappointment turning into teenage attitude, eye-roll

included. "It only took you *how* many years to start training me in your slaying stuff? You are so not the person I'd ask about sex stuff."

"I can tell you about sex stuff," Anya said brightly. "I have all kinds of knowledge I'm not putting to good use anymore. Not for lack of trying, either, let me tell you. What questions do you have?"

"See?" Dawn aimed a particularly smug grin at Buffy. "I have Anya."

Oy, there was a can of worms she had no interest in opening. Buffy shook her head, tightened her grip on the book, and stepped back and *out* of the conversation. Part of parenting, she'd learned, was to identify the moments when arguing wouldn't do anyone any favors. This seemed like one of those moments. She could wait until later to disabuse her sister of the notion that Anya was the person to ask about sex and then hopefully convince her to check out a local convent so she could secure her future as a nun.

Dealing with Dawn as a prepubescent had been difficult enough. Buffy was *so* not ready to worry about things like sex. It was hard enough looking at her and seeing that she was no longer the sloppy kid who tended to get more food on her face than in her mouth. Harder still to consider that she was just a couple of years shy of the age Buffy had been when she'd let Angel take her virginity, something she really didn't want to think about more than she had to. Or preferably at all.

Thankfully, before her mind could take her even further down a path she would just as soon never travel, the bell over the door gave its tinkle as Xander shouldered it open. "Did someone order pizza?" he called. "I hope so, or I just stole some guy's lunch."

"Food!" Dawn exploded into motion, nearly trampling over the display stand she had yet to complete. And Buffy was glad for the distraction from thoughts of her growing-up-too-fast sister and the vampire ex whose return had thrown her seriously off-kilter. A good slice of cheesy, doughy goodness was just what the doctor ordered.

The Magic Box 2.0 was almost identical to the shop's first iteration, with the differences so minute Buffy had a hard time identifying them. There were some books that had been moved to another wall, and a new section devoted to locally sourced ingredients, courtesy of one of Anya's new suppliers. The items she kept in the display case by the register had changed as well, though Buffy couldn't say she remembered what had been there before. And of course, there were no dark arts texts anymore. At least none that Anya was keeping on the sales floor, and anyone interested in them, as Buffy had been told numerous times now, had to pay an upfront hazard fee and sign a waiver.

"Do you know how fortunate I am that the shop was empty the day Willow destroyed it?" Anya had said when Buffy had been naïve enough to question this new policy. "Frivolous lawsuits in which heartless patrons target poor entrepreneurs and take their hard-earned money. Makes me mad just thinking about it."

Buffy had snapped her mouth shut before volunteering that a lawsuit involving the sort of dark mojo that Willow had been throwing around could hardly be considered frivolous. She just hadn't had the energy for that discussion.

And, truthfully, some of the post-evil Willow policies were likely just good

common sense. The objects that could cause serious damage were no longer strewn throughout the shop where they could be picked up and examined by the average customer. A handful of items that had mostly innocuous uses but could be easily modified for more nefarious purposes were now being treated the way other stores might treat their cigarettes or nudie magazines. Anya had also upped her insurance policy, as she mentioned every five minutes to anyone who might be listening. Preparing for the worst while hoping for the best was her new motto—and one she repeated with increasing frequency the closer they got to Willow's homecoming.

Which in itself was something they really needed to discuss as a group, considering it was pretty much now.

Buffy had become really, really good at not thinking about things that made her nervous, and seeing Willow again? Top of the list.

"So," Xander said, plopping the pizza box onto one of the back tables. "This place looks ready to open, Ahn. You nervous?"

"Nervous that someone might walk in and destroy it? Yes, I am very nervous." Anya flipped open the lid of the box and drew out an extra-cheesy slice without bothering with formalities like a paper plate or napkin. Since she'd become a demon again, her metabolism had increased by a lot, making her something of a bottomless pit. "But at least we'll get a couple of days before Willow blows back into town and destroys it again."

"There's that sunny optimism," Xander replied, rolling his eyes. "Can you maybe try to cut her a little bit of slack?"

"I'm sorry, the last time I cut her some slack she hijacked my mind and nearly killed my business partner."

Buffy and Dawn exchanged a look, then simultaneously gathered up plates from the stack leftover from yesterday's lunch break and began piling on the slices. Some variation of this argument was had at least twice a day, which Buffy supposed was the best she could expect from a couple of exes who had been in close proximity for extended periods of time without actually talking about any of their issues. Willow was a convenient lightning rod in their case—Xander firmly in camp rehab and Anya resenting the fact that he could forgive and forget so easily when all it had cost her was, well, everything. Inevitably, one of them would look at Buffy, ask her to weigh in and she'd find herself grappling with which version of the truth was truthier for her that day.

Much like the thing with Spike, though, Buffy found herself volleying between extremes at any given moment. Reminded that Willow was her best friend, had been almost from the second she'd set foot in Sunnydale, and that she'd lost the woman she loved. Not only that, it had happened at home, in her room, in the place she should have felt the safest. There hadn't been an apocalyptic battle going on—hell, they hadn't even been on patrol or taking down a demon hideout or doing any of the actually dangerous things that occupied their nights on any given week. Warren had blown her world apart without even trying. Tara had been nothing but collateral damage. In those terms, revenge had been understandable, if not justified.

But then Buffy would think about Dawn. What might have happened at Rack's

place if she hadn't gotten there when she had. Willow, newly buzzed on the dark stuff, stalking toward her sister, feeding her lies wrapped in truths, looking at Dawn like she were a human-shaped upper. And that, more than anything—more than the apocalypse that had followed—was hardest to shake off. The absolute certainty that if Buffy hadn't been there to step between them, Willow would have tried to crack her sister open and suck all the Key juice right out of her. That Willow hadn't been in her right mind at the time was incidental—the fact remained that it had happened. And Buffy couldn't unknow that it had happened, never mind forget it.

She didn't know how to go back to being what they had been—if it was even possible, or if she was kidding herself. Willow had killed. She'd considered Dawn and Xander acceptable casualties in trying to complete her vengeance against Jonathan and Andrew. Everything she'd done had been deliberate.

Not like Spike.

Buffy scowled, though she didn't realize it until she looked up and caught Dawn staring at her. "Nothing," she said in answer to the unspoken question. "All good."

"Yeah, 'cause that's convincing," Dawn said, arching an eyebrow. Thankfully, she didn't push the subject, rather settled into the chair beside her and picked up a slice of pizza, which she studied with a frown. "Can we *please* sometime order one with anchovies?"

"Literally no one likes them but you," Buffy replied.

"You can pick them off."

"And taint my pizza with anchovy juice?" Xander made a *blegh* face as he sank into his seat. "Tell you what, Dawnie. When you buy lunch for everyone, we'll eat whatever you bring home."

"Umm, let it be known that Xander does not speak for me," Buffy said, and threw her friend a narrow look. "Seriously. You are the tip of the gross food combination pyramid. She put chocolate sauce on a cheeseburger once."

Dawn rolled her eyes, slouching against the chair. "Yes, I was once four years old. This is true."

Xander laughed, tried to catch a string of melting cheese with his mouth and missed. "So," he said, taking a look around the shop. "Ahn, have you settled on how you're celebrating the big reopen?"

"I was thinking I would charge customers for my goods and services."

"No, like, sale or anything?"

"Sale?" Anya frowned. "I lost an entire summer of profit. The last thing I want to do is sell my wares at a discount. My PNL margins this year are going to be a nightmare as it is."

"Right, but having a big sale usually means people spend more, thinking they're getting a deal."

"They are getting a deal. The shop is open again. That is the deal."

Xander opened his mouth to reply, closed it, opened it again before ultimately giving up and shaking his head. "You know what, I know nothing about the world of retail. You do what you think is best."

"I believe I just told you what is best."

Buffy stuffed a bite of food into her mouth to keep from grinning, or reacting in any way. Maybe she should feel bad, but watching these two interact had become the best and most cost-effective form of entertainment she could have dreamt up. Granted, Buffy wasn't sure what Xander's endgame was, aside from getting Anya to talk to him for real. He'd spent a good amount of time at Revello Drive in the days following Willow's departure, going on about all things Anya, how to process her being a demon again. If it changed the way he felt about her at all and what would happen if she started getting her vengeance on in a way that Buffy found herself duty-bound to stop. Listening to all of this had required a good amount of tongue-biting on Buffy's part, her head full of ghosts of lectures past when the subject had been Angel. Or how, in the depths of her self-loathing, part of what she'd feared the most had been her friends learning about her relationship with Spike. How that had become something the vampire had held over her head, knowing how much it would hurt. How much the Scoobies would care.

She tried not to reflect on that with too much bitterness but hey, bitterness was there.

As a result of those talks—which had been less *talks* on Buffy's part and more noncommittal sounds during conversational lulls—Xander had come up with the brilliant plan of rebuilding the Magic Box. And to Buffy's knowledge, he hadn't even asked, just shown up one day with some tools and leftover material from his most recent jobsite and started cleaning up the debris. Anya had been on the premises, bemused, and when he'd made his intention clear, that the shop would reopen by the end of summer, she'd snorted and wished him good luck.

Xander hadn't needed luck, though. All he'd needed was a little muscle. Muscle in the form of Buffy, who could do all the heavy lifting and was—in his words—more efficient than his whole twelve-man crew down at the construction site. Then Dawn had wanted in, part of her repayment to the shop for all the things she'd stolen over the year, and what had started as a grand gesture to Xander's ex-fiancée had become something of a massive therapy session. Putting the pieces of the shop back together as a group, reconnecting as a group, healing as a group. Slowly, Xander and Anya had started talking more, and yes, while a lot of that talking bore a closer resemblance to *bickering*, it was progress.

Whether they would ever bicker about anything of substance pertaining to their relationship was up in the air. But they were closer now than they had been in the spring. Close enough that Anya hadn't really blinked when the prospect of converting the training room into a studio had been raised, saving Buffy the need to have an argument she'd rather avoid. Or—worst case scenario—appeal to the silent overseas partner who still owned more than half the company.

Honestly, as tense as things had been at the start of the summer, Buffy thought the progress they'd made was rather remarkable. The fact that they were able to gather like this, share food and crack jokes about anchovies was the sort of thing that she took with her when she needed to remember that though her darkness remained with her, she was the one who controlled it. She was its master—not the other way around. Never again the other way around.

That was another reason why she couldn't summon the willpower to mention who she'd seen the previous night. Not with Willow's return imminent. There was enough uncertainty in the air without adding to it, especially after the stretch of unexpected calm that had followed the last attempt of world endage.

As though hearing the thought, Dawn turned to her, waving a piece of crust. "Have you figured out what you're going to say to Willow yet?"

"Something along the lines of, you break it, you buy it," Anya muttered. "Even if I have to do some dark magic of my own to collect."

"I meant Buffy."

"The policy applies to everyone."

"I *mean*," Dawn said, now with an edge that warned her supply of patience had reached its end, "what *Buffy* is going to say to Willow."

Anya shrugged, not bothering to look up. "She doesn't have a store to worry about."

"No," Buffy agreed. "I don't. I just have the world to worry about."

"Pretty sure the world's gonna be fine," Xander interjected. "Giles wouldn't sign off on Will coming home if he thought she was still, you know, apocalypse now-ish. And if she decides to go all black and veiny again, we have a secret weapon."

Dawn narrowed her eyes in the perfect picture of teenage incredulity. "Your yellow crayon speech?"

"It saved the world, didn't it?" He raised his chin, glanced around the table as though waiting for someone to call bullshit. And Buffy couldn't blame him, no matter how many times he retold the story. No matter how tiring it became. "Might not be as flashy as diving into a bajillion portals or fighting the actual Hellmouth," he went on, "but it got the job done all right."

Maybe she could blame him just a little bit. "You just referenced two things that literally killed me," Buffy said dryly.

"Hey, the Hellmouth didn't kill you. It just happened to open the day you died. Completely different events."

She rolled her eyes but decided not to argue, mostly because she didn't want to be boxed in to answering Dawn's initial question. In truth, Buffy suspected she wouldn't know how she felt until she was face-to-face with Willow again. If she would be able to look her friend in the eye without picturing the green irises turning black or hear her voice without remembering the taunts about the grave. If she'd be able to leave Dawn and Willow alone together and not spend every second worrying about what might happen in her absence. If she was getting a friend back at all—if rebuilding that relationship was even likely.

These thoughts were not happy thoughts, which was why she'd avoided thinking them as much as she could. Everything that had happened last spring had been personal on levels she'd been dumb enough to believe impossible. Buffy had forgotten what they felt like—the fights that were more than just her versus a bad guy. She hadn't had to wage any since Angel, and had somehow convinced herself that she never would again.

After all, everyone else she loved had souls.

Her throat tightened and she shook her head. *Not going there.*

And thankfully she didn't have to. Either forgetting her question or sensing this wasn't the place to ask, Dawn started babbling about her nerves regarding her first day as a high school sophomore, and Xander swooped in with a slew of stories from his sophomore year all likely designed to make her feel better. Though, if the look on Dawn's face was any indication, the tactic was backfiring spectacularly. But even this was good, seeing her sister angsty over things that girls her age *should* be angsty over. That even after everything that had happened, she was still enough of a kid to have the typical teenage worries.

Buffy could only hope that lasted. Though with Willow coming back and Spike in town once more, she knew it wouldn't. Change beget change.

And even if that wasn't true, things never stayed the same on the Hellmouth for long.



IT WAS WEIRD, setting out for patrol and knowing unequivocally that she would not end the night at Restfield. Habits were stupid easy to form and difficult to break, even with the hearty campaign waged by her logical brain. No need to go to Spike's crypt to see if he was there because she had her answer. Even if the further she got from the previous night, the more it felt like a dream. She'd had dreams like those, after all. It wasn't outside of the realm of possibility.

Except she knew the difference between dreams and reality. Seeing Spike last night had been real, no matter how much she might or might not wish otherwise. With that in mind, she decided to make Restfield her first stop—get it out of the way, eliminate the possibility of running into Spike so she could focus on the remainder of her rounds with a clear head.

At least, that was the intent.

Nothing in her head was clear, though. Not a damn thing.

Still, by the time Buffy had concluded the night's patrol, she did manage to set her feet in the right direction and ignore the almost magnetic pull toward his crypt as she focused on the path back to the house. Her heart skipped and her stomach dived—perhaps because she had been playing chicken with herself and she knew it—but she ignored it. Just kept walking forward, picturing the house and the bath she intended to draw when she arrived. See if she could get her chatty mind to cut her some slack in the thinking department.

Of course, the image of a bath brought along its own set of baggage. Spike telling her they needed to talk, closing the door behind him. The pain in his voice and his eyes that had morphed while she stood there and watched, until she hadn't been standing anymore.

The meaty *thwack* of flesh colliding with flesh punctured the air before that particular thought could drag her into the shadows. Buffy started back to the present, and then she was running. Over familiar terrain, dodging headstones and uneven patches of earth, and following the sound of a scuffle as voices became

distinct. A guy and a girl, she thought, on a date and gone through the cemetery to shave off time. Apparently no one in this town would ever learn just how bad an idea that was.

Buffy snatched her stake from her jacket pocket, her fingers finding their grooves as seamlessly as if it were another part of her. There was a slight incline and a copse of trees that she knew well—almost as well as she knew what she'd see when she breached it. A kid and his girlfriend about to be someone's lunch, and that was best case scenario. She inhaled a deep breath, every inch of her tightening and preparing for launch.

But then there was a roar, followed by a sound as familiar to her as her own damn name—that of a vampire exploding into dust. Her heart gave a mad lurch and she wasn't sure why. Except she was.

By the time she crested the hill, still under the cover of a line of trees, both kids—almost exactly as she had pictured them—were on their feet. The girl was shaking, her arms wrapped around herself, and the guy staring blankly at the place Buffy imagined had just been occupied by a vampire. Or rather, *another* vampire, as Spike stood beside them, tucking a stake into the back pocket of his jeans and looking furious.

"Lesson the first," he snapped, glowering at the boy. "You want to impress a lady, try bein' impressive."

The kid's lower lip was in full tremble mode. "I-I just thought we'd take a shortcut home."

"Through a graveyard. At this hour." These weren't questions. "Tell us the truth now, mate. You've heard a tale or two of what goes on after sundown, yeah?"

"They're just stories—"

"And what better way to end a night than scarin' the wits outta your girl. Be the big man. A real bloody thrill for the both of you. You know, tossers like you take the sport outta hunting." He shook his head, started to stalk off, then doubled back in a fury. "Next time you fancy gettin' a girl scared so you can play the sodding hero, remember that it helps to *be* one. And you." He turned to the girl, who shrank under his scrutiny. "You let this pillock into your knickers after what he pulled, I'll drain you dry myself."

The girl, who Buffy would guarantee hadn't heard a word he'd said, slowly pulled her gaze from the ground and looked up, her eyes wide and glassy. She stared at Spike for a second as though just noticing him, blinked once, twice, and finally gave her head a shake.

"I mean it," Spike went on. "Do yourself a favor and find a nice bloke who doesn't try to bleeding scare you into givin' it up, all right? Now bugger off, the both of you."

That part, at least, both kids seemed to understand. The guy grabbed his girlfriend's hand and they were both off in a blur, disappearing into the shadows. Though neither went quietly—in fact, the racket they made tramping through the underbrush was, in itself, likely enough to wake the dead.

Spike stared after them for a long moment, and Buffy stared at him, desperately trying to make sense of what she had just seen. That he would patrol wasn't exactly headline news—it was the only way he could get his licks in, as he'd so often told her.

Fed the monster, satisfied his innate need for violence. But even then, he wasn't one to swoop in and rescue anyone. His philosophy—if someone was stupid enough to go wandering through graveyards after dark, they had whatever they got coming to them, especially in this town.

Not that he'd stayed on the sidelines whenever there were bystanders. He hadn't. But then, he'd so often been with her that it had been compulsory. Pretend to care about humans for the sake of the human woman he claimed to love. Hope that she caught him doing something noble—a performance piece to keep her placated. Keep her coming back to his bed. And at the cost of her screaming conscience, it had worked.

Maybe that's what this was.

At length, Spike huffed and reached into his jeans for his cigarettes. His jeans, because he didn't have his duster, and she wanted to believe that was the reason he looked so different, that it could be so easily explained. But she knew that wasn't it. Just as she knew what she'd seen hadn't been staged for her benefit. There was no reason behind her certainty, only that it *was* certainty.

The only certainty she had at the moment where Spike was concerned.

He turned, cigarette now dangling between his lips, his silver lighter in hand. And as he brought the flame to his face, his eyes found hers, and everything inside of her seized, the questions she'd been asking herself ever since leaving his crypt the night before answered in one swelling voice.

It was real. He was here. She hadn't dreamt him up. Last night had happened just as surely as this moment was happening. Spike was back and something had changed. She didn't know what or how—and hell, maybe she was fooling herself, but she didn't think so, and the prospect was rather terrifying.

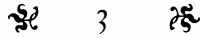
For his part, Spike wasn't quite quick enough to mask his surprise at seeing her there. And it *was* surprise, she knew. Still, he tamed it almost at once. Made an effort to relax as though seeing her was of no consequence. Two people in the workplace on the same shift—nothing more.

She expected him to say her name, start heading her way. He did neither. He just looked at her and puffed on his cigarette.

And Buffy didn't breathe again until she had her back to him, until her feet were eating the distance between the cemetery and home. It was reckless, probably, but there was too much on her mind to add Spike to the mix just yet. Even if he'd been there the whole damn time.

She needed to get through Willow's return to Sunnydale. Hers was the homecoming Buffy had spent all summer preparing for. Not Spike's. She couldn't afford to get distracted now.

As it was, since she had no idea what was going on with him, distance seemed a safer bet.



IF I COULD START AGAIN, A MILLION MILES AWAY

DEEP BREATH IN AND OUT. SHE COULD DO THIS. SHE COULD *SO* DO THIS.

Summer's end had seemed so far away when she'd arrived. A long stretch of time to be spent in isolation, sequestered from the outside world and, in particular, from the friends she'd left behind. The same friends she'd tried to kill. Now that the end of her time was here, though, Willow wasn't sure she was ready. No, scratch that, she *knew* she wasn't ready. She'd only recently pulled herself out of the cycle of self-hatred the others had claimed was so detrimental to her rehabilitation, and it had taken forever to get there. It followed, then, that the next stage should have taken just as long, if not longer. Recovery wasn't a sprint. It happened every day in increments, one victory at a time—some small, many practically invisible. The only person keeping score was you.

But time had moved on anyway, and here she was. Sitting in the meeting room, staring at the circle of faces that had become familiar over the last few months and wishing so badly she could picture herself sitting right here this time next Tuesday, ready to share the milestones and setbacks of another week survived. Listen to the anecdotes of the others who had made the journey with her, celebrate and commiserate in equal fashion. These people who were the only ones to know her, really know her. But she wouldn't be here next Tuesday. Next Tuesday, she would be an ocean away.

The knowledge was only entirely terrifying.

"Willow," Callista said, flashing an encouraging smile. "I know this is a big day for you. Do you want to share now or at the end of group?"

Willow would miss Callista most of all, she thought. With her long hair in varying shades of blue and aqua, her cute little nose ring, the sweet lilt of her accent, and the assortment of bangles that adorned either wrist, the witch had become a splash of

color in Willow's otherwise drab world. Hers had been the first connection made after arriving in England, when the prospect of facing anyone, talking to *anyone*, had been something worse than terrifying.

Now here she was, leaving her friends to return to her family. Not sure if any of them would be happy to see her. Almost certain that they wouldn't.

"I'll go now," she said. "Just apologies in advance if I start to ramble. I have a feeling I'm going to ramble."

"More than welcome to ramble away," Callista replied, prompting a round of muttered agreement from the others in the circle. "Change is hard. We all understand that. But it's better to let it out rather than let it fester."

Willow nodded. She knew this. It had been one of the first things drilled into her head—sitting and listening was invaluable, but sharing was where the healing really took place. Confession being good for the soul and all—something a lot easier to believe when you weren't the one confessing.

Talking about this, at least, wouldn't be as hard as *that* had been. The day she'd admitted that were it not for a well-timed emotional plea, these meetings wouldn't exist. None of them would. She would have killed them, their friends and families, their dogs and cats and fish, their landlords and dentists and everyone in between, and she would have done it believing she was saving the world from the pains of its own tortured existence.

Yeah, that had been awkward. Discussing her concerns about returning to the scene of the crime was a little less dramatic than admitting she'd nearly committed mass genocide.

A hysterical laugh bubbled off Willow's lips, one she immediately wished she'd swallowed. Even if the people around her were all in the same water—if not the exact same boat—as she was, the image of the cackling witch was one she wanted to avoid. She rubbed her sweaty palms along her skirt, drew in a deep breath, and forced herself to find her voice.

"Well, the time I knew was coming is finally here," she began slowly. "I won't be here next week. I'll be in California. And that's... Well, that's just...with the big scary."

"It is," Callista agreed. "Is there anything in particular you're afraid of?"

"You mean aside from all of it?" Now Willow *did* try to laugh but it came out sounding more like a bark. At least it wasn't a cackle. "I haven't talked to any of my friends since... Well, *since*. Giles thought it was better that way. Let me focus on me, on healing, rather than angst over what was being said and thought about me on the other side of the planet. And I get it, I do. They needed time, too. But not knowing what I'm walking into is just a little nerve-wracking."

"Does that make you want to use?"

Everything makes me want to use. Hazard of being a witch, she guessed. Or at least the sort of witch she'd managed to become over the past year—the magicks so much a part of her that they couldn't be separated. That had been the first lesson she'd learned upon arriving in England and meeting with the coven Giles had partnered with to save the world from the evil that was Willow. Some magic abusers could be

weaned off the good stuff through herbs, exercises, and meditations until it was safe to make the final cut. Siphon their power from their body and repurpose it into something pure. This was the preferred treatment for those who hadn't gotten so far into the practice that it fundamentally changed their biological makeup. Give up the dependence, learn to function without it, and then when ready, reenter the regular world and live a meaningful life.

Then there were abusers like Willow, those who were so entwined with their magicks that removing their power would be like trying to remove their lungs or their liver. Her only recourse was to identify the triggers that had made her turn to black magic—easy enough there—and learn how to channel her power into something less self-serving. No more whispering spells whenever convenient, like at the DMV or at the grocery store when she forgot a coupon. Selfish magic was the worst sort, for it became easier to separate the self from those around you. Come up with quick fixes to human problems, like, say, an argument with your partner or the trauma you had unwittingly thrust upon your best friend. Willow hadn't wanted to see it that way, of course—it was kinder to Buffy if she didn't remember Heaven, right? How was that selfish?

Well, she knew the answer to that now. And truth be told, there were times she wished she didn't. Times when she wished she could go back to the cave, keep staring at the shadow puppets, and remain ignorant of the reality waiting outside.

"Oh yeah," Willow said finally, deciding to go for absolute truth. That hadn't been easy at first, either, but she'd learned. She was *still* learning. The desire to minimize and excuse remained powerful and persuasive. "Most of the time it's something small. Like a calming spell or a good fortune enchantment."

"Most of the time?"

She nodded, dragging her teeth across her lower lip. "Other times I think about finding some Leth's bramble and just starting over. Blank slate Willow. No world-*endage* here. A-and they couldn't be mad at me for doing that because, well, I'd have no memory of it."

Another murmur went through the group, this one a bit pointed. That was fine. Willow had expected it. Though these people were her friends—they had to be if they'd taken her whole almost-apocalypse in stride—there was also a disconnect that was sometimes impossible to ignore. That Devon even had an MAA chapter was thanks to the coven, but the bulk of its members—perhaps also thanks to the coven—could no longer practice. In fact, the only other person in the group whose magic hadn't been removed was Callista. And being that she was the coordinator, this point of difference didn't come up often. She was there to facilitate, relate, and share when appropriate. Talking about using magic in a literal way, rather than symbolic, wasn't something she did.

This typically wasn't an issue that created any friction, though Willow would sometimes catch a sneer or an eyeroll, a muttered conversation with people glancing pointedly in her direction, and she'd know. For the people here, the question about whether a stressful situation made them feel like using was figurative—they could *feel* like using all they wanted, but without their magic, that was as far as they

got. Their presence at MAA centered on managing that craving in a healthy way, commiserating with others over their shared experience, and owning the damage caused by their addiction.

Callista knew this, of course. She had talked to Willow at the start of the summer about some of the adversity she might face in the group, and to try to understand that it wasn't personal. And it wasn't, truly. The people at MAA were some of the best she knew, and all acknowledged rather openly when the green-eyed monster was in a particularly bad mood.

"Do you think you will?" Callista asked now, her tone level. "Use, that is?"

"No, I won't." Willow laced her fingers together, a habit she'd fallen into whenever asked this question. Even though most spells didn't require fancy hand gestures to work, there was something about clasping them that gave her the illusion of self-control. "Not for this. I know it needs to be... It needs to be just me, no magic when I see them again."

"And you have a plan in place?"

She nodded, relaxing a bit. "There's an MAA meeting in LA," she said. "Once a week. It's a bit of a drive, but one I know I'll need to make." And that meeting would be other magic users like her, which might change the dynamics. She decided not to add that, though. "I'm also going to keep in touch with the coven."

Callista favored her with a brilliant smile. "Well, I'm certainly glad to hear that. And you know that this group is here for you whenever you need us."

"Not if I'm kipped down for the night, thanks," a redhead named Andy interjected, raising his hand and throwing Willow a conspiratorial wink. He earned a rumble of laughter and leaned into it eagerly. "Not even for a fellow ginge, sorry to say. Just keep the time difference in mind, will ya?"

Willow grinned because she knew she was supposed to, laughed because she knew she was supposed to, and when order was restored, it was someone else's turn to share. That was how group worked, after all. She couldn't use the entire time slot to ramble endlessly about her misgivings about returning to the States. Not only would that not be fair to the others, but it ultimately wouldn't do any good. No one here could tell her that Buffy and Xander would be happy to see her and make her believe it. Or that she would even have a room waiting for her at Revello Drive. That Buffy *badn't* kicked her out of the house the previous year was miraculous all on its own, especially after the accident that had landed Dawn in the ER.

And then there was the whole issue of Dawn.

Willow forced herself out of her head long enough to nod encouragement at the young warlock who was sharing about a trying argument he'd had with his brother—how he'd wished so badly that he could wield a curse that his inability to do so had rendered him briefly suicidal. But it was hard focusing on the stories people had to share today, knowing she wouldn't be here in a week to hear the follow-ups, to check in at all. The people in Devon would go about their lives, have their meetings, and she would very likely never see any of them again. Just remember them as the first group that had helped her sort through the why behind her addiction, even if they couldn't cure it altogether. An addict was an addict for life.

She wondered if any of them knew just how much she envied them. How, most of the time, she wished that her magic was the sort that could be removed. Sure, it wouldn't undo the harm she'd caused, but it would make it easier for her to trust herself. For others to feel like they were safe when she was around—even if she lost her temper. Or threatened to turn them back into green blobs of energy because the idea happened to sound really nifty when you were stoned out of your mind on the dark stuff.

Only that wasn't where the suggestion had come from. There toward the end, as she'd given herself over to her rage and her grief and started consuming as much power as she could, she'd looked at Dawn as a resource to be tapped. If the person had never existed in the first place, could it really be considered murder? Sure, Buffy would whine but whining was *all* Buffy did—which explained why Dawn mimicked her so well—and it wasn't like Willow couldn't just undo the mojo that had made them believe the girl was a real-life human being when she was anything but. And wouldn't that make *everyone* feel better? No more worrying about Dawn being taken away by Social Services. No more weight of having to raise a teenager *period*. Hell, with Dawn gone, maybe the entire memory of Glory would fade too. Buffy wouldn't remember the rush to the apocalypse or her sacrifice or any of it, and that would just be *swell*, right?

Willow didn't remember how much of this she'd monologued in her evilness, as there had been a lot of monologuing. She *did* remember being at Rack's, nearing a terrified Dawn and ready—so, so ready—to zap her back to her primordial form. And if some of that primordial power just so happen to siphon into her, then hey. All the better. Keys to different worlds provided untold possibilities. Like, say, maybe there was another Tara waiting behind a dimensional door. Willow wouldn't know until she looked.

She would have, too. Looked. In that state, there had been little she wouldn't have done. Dawn was alive today by virtue of the fact that Buffy had burst in at the right time. The knowledge was equal parts humbling and terrifying, and part of what Willow had to carry with her every step she took from now on. Especially this first one. Bungle this and she'd bungle everything moving forward.

After the group adjourned—for what would be forever for Willow and a week for everyone else—Willow hung around to give the expected personal goodbyes to those she'd miss the most. Callista made a point to stuff her contact information in Willow's hand before tugging her close for one last hug and a whispered promise that she would always be available to talk, no matter what.

It was nice to know that when all was said and done, she'd at least have one friend left in the world, but Willow didn't tell her that. Nor did she accept the lift Callista offered to give her back to the cottage she'd called home for the last five months, opting instead to take a leisurely stroll through Chulmleigh. Stalling, she knew, for the second she arrived, she'd have to reconcile with the fact that she'd said goodbye to the last group of people who would know to miss her. There wasn't much of anything left to do aside from pack and wait out the next couple of days before they made the trip to the airport, and she found she didn't do well when left to only her

thoughts. Not knowing what came next, having no control over it, infused her with the sort of nerves that she'd once turned to magic to quell. Thus the urge to *use*, as Callista had so astutely observed. And the best way Willow had found to avoid caving to that temptation was to keep in constant motion—something she wouldn't be able to do once she boarded that plane.

Granted, she couldn't walk around forever. Time was cruel like that—always moving forward, never still. When the sky began to purple in the absence of the sun, Willow forced herself to stop wandering and head home. Giles would be waiting for her. Just waiting, she trusted. Despite everything that had come before, they had managed to build a sort of understanding. He didn't ask where she went when she wasn't at the cottage, and with little exception, she didn't volunteer it. That had surprised her at first. Well, everything had surprised her, but nothing so much as the amount of independence she'd been afforded. Yes, she'd continued her magical education and understanding, and yes, she'd embraced the healing power of confession and admission of addiction, but few people seemed interested in where she spent the time not claimed by the coven or MAA. There was no reason for today to be any different.

And it wasn't. Willow found Giles in the room he'd commandeered as his study, his back to her, poring over some old book propped on his makeshift desk—really more a table he'd stuffed into a corner. What he had to be researching, she didn't know, but he'd never really needed an excuse to deep-dive inside an old book. Such was Giles, and it was nice to know some things never changed.

"Hey," she said softly. "I'm back."

He didn't stiffen at the sound of her voice, telling her he'd known she was there. That was one thing that *had* changed. With very little exception, Giles wasn't the sort of guy someone could just sneak up on anymore. She didn't know if he'd fine-tuned his senses as a result of sharing a temporary home with her—she who had tried to kill him—or something else, but figured the truth was somewhere in the middle. In all the months that had passed since their duel at the Magic Box, since she'd left him for dead, he hadn't once done or said anything that would indicate he was even remotely concerned about his well-being while in her presence, but one thing recovery had taught Willow was not to take anything at face value. People were scary good at hiding what was going on behind the eyes.

"How was your session?" Giles asked without turning around, the question lightly punctuated with the sound of an old page being flipped.

"Hard."

"I thought it might be. Never easy, saying goodbye."

Willow huffed and dropped her purse to the floor without looking at it, and she could feel it coming. The conversation they'd already had ad nauseum—the same one she'd promised herself she would retire because rehashing it did nothing but make her feel even less in control than she was already, but there it was. Rushing forward with little care for anything else other than being heard. And Giles felt it coming too, for he dropped his shoulders with a low sigh and rose from his chair so he could face her head-on when it landed.

"It would be easier if I weren't doing it alone," she said. "If you were coming with me."

"Willow—"

"I mean, I'm going to see a bunch of people I love who I also tried to kill. Having someone there who knows what that feels like might be of some help. Take the pressure off me."

Giles gave her his patented patient father look, which just irked her more because whatever else, their relationship had never been paternalistic. "We have discussed this," he said in an irritatingly calm, rational voice, speaking as though he were making a revelation and not telling her something she already knew. "It's important that the others see you. My presence would distract them."

"But—"

"Hiding behind me will not make this easier, Willow. They need to see *you* as you are, not as I tell them you are."

She knew this. She knew all of it. It even made sense—the fire approach rather than the frying pan. But knowing something and accepting it were two different things. Separate things that had stretched further and further apart the closer she'd gotten to the return date. Once that point on the calendar had stopped being so far in the future she could avoid thinking about it; once it had become more or less *now*.

"I don't think I've ever been so scared in my life," she said, and winced when her voice cracked.

"Scared is good," Giles said. Of course he did. It was such a Giles-y thing to say in a situation like this. "I imagine Buffy and Xander are scared as well."

"If this is a pep talk, you might want to get yourself some more pep, mister."

He huffed out a little laugh. "I take your point, my own being that it's only human to be scared. After what happened, I would be more concerned if you had no misgivings about returning to Sunnydale. Rebuilding will not be easy, but it can be done. All it takes is willingness on both sides, which is already there."

She knew this, too. She knew every line of his rebuttal. Hell, she was practically his understudy in this particular debate. And every part of his argument sounded right. It all made sense. But that didn't make the reality of returning any easier to face. Nothing did. Nothing *could*. She could hide out here for another month. Maybe even a year. A whole decade could fly by and the prospect of looking the people she loved in the eye would be no less terrifying.

Willow let out a slow breath and nodded to show she was done revisiting their greatest conversational hits, trying not to wince when he favored her with the soft, understanding smile—again the one he typically reserved for Buffy. Wondering again why it bothered her so much. "So," she said in an effort to distract herself, gestured at the book he'd left on the table, "any upcoming prophecies we should know about? Might be a good icebreaker with the others if there are, so..." She lifted her hands to show off her crossed fingers.

"Ah, not as far as I am aware," Giles replied, sliding his hands into his pockets. "No, I have been asked by the Council to research the last known sighting of the third staff of the Shadowmen."

She furrowed her brow, both confused and grateful for the excuse to think of something else. “Uhh, might just be me, but *Shadowmen* sounds like something that could be vaguely apocalyptic.”

“The Shadowmen were those believed to have imbued the Slayer with her powers.” He sighed and looked down. “There were three staffs—two rather conventional, and one curved and marked with ancient binding symbols that allowed the bearer tremendous power over the shadow demon. Two of the staffs are reported to be in the Council’s possession, though it’s impossible to tell because they only work if united with the third.”

“And the Council wants you to find the third?”

This time, Giles’s smile was flat. “No. They want to let me know they have no use for me, but because of my relationship with Buffy, they cannot afford to let me go either. Not without losing contact with her all over again. Instead, they are tasking me to chase fairytales.”

“I’m not following.”

“The third staff doesn’t exist. It’s a myth. They might as well have asked me to find Excalibur or the Holy Grail.” He removed his glasses and caressed the bridge of his nose as if to stave off an impending headache. “Really, we have no idea what the ritual entailed, or if indeed there was a ritual at all. Written records weren’t something strictly kept in those days. There are oral traditions and legends, passed down as all stories are, that eventually made it to scroll, but those aren’t reliable either. The oldest surviving texts are tremendously deteriorated and there are at least seven different interpretations regarding their contents, according to those who have seen them. Only the most senior members have access. I was never one of them.”

Willow frowned and glanced at the book again. “Then...what are you looking for?”

“Rubbish to put into a report that will never be read but is necessary in order to maintain my salary. Show them I am indeed singing for my supper.” Giles fitted on his glasses again, and she realized how tired he looked. Every bit as tired as she felt, if not more so. “I would tell the lot of them to sod off, but as history has proven, it is to our benefit to remain on decent terms with the Council, I will do as they ask and continue to collect my paychecks.”

Willow nodded, a pang that might have been pity striking her chest, and that was a feeling she never thought she would have associated with Giles. She didn’t like it. “Well, maybe you’ll actually find it,” she said, trying not to wince at the placatory note in her voice. “I mean, there was the whole Gem of Amara thing that was supposed to not exist, and it just happened to be under Sunnydale the whole time. Maybe this staff thing is the same. Just...hiding in plain sight or something.”

He favored her with another flat smile, the sort that told her he knew exactly what she was doing and appreciated the sentiment. “Perhaps,” he said. “Have you started packing?”

“That’s the plan for tonight, and figure out what I’ll need to keep out until we head to the airport. But I don’t think it’ll take long.” She hadn’t come to England with many possessions as it was, just a few outfits, a pendant that Tara had cherished,

and a strip of photos taken at a mall photo booth during happier times. Anything she'd needed had been provided for her upon arrival and she hadn't done much in the way of souvenir shopping. The things this trip had given her weren't the sort that could be packed away, anyway.

Though maybe she should rectify that before she flew out in a couple of days, as it wasn't like she could cookie-bake her way through making amends with the others. Now that she thought about it, the fact that she hadn't done any shopping for her friends while she'd been here seemed a huge oversight—and one that would help keep her occupied before she left. There were any number of little shops here Buffy would have liked, full of kitschy jewelry and fun clothes. She definitely remembered seeing a handbag that her best friend would have coveted, one that would look especially good with Buffy's favorite pair of boots. It had just never occurred to her to buy anything when obviously, that was exactly what she should have done, and not just for Buffy. Dawn had eclectic taste and a fondness for history that could have been easily satisfied at any number of local shops. And there had been that ugly little garden gnome outside the general store that had looked like a teacher Willow and Xander had mutually loathed in elementary. The perfect kinda-kooky gift for the guy who had stopped her from ending the world.

Why was she just thinking of this?

Willow shook her head, let out a breath. No matter. She had time to find little pieces of Chulmleigh to take back with her, so that was what she'd do. And hey, it'd keep her occupied until it was time to fly out, so small miracles and all. She wouldn't check this gift horse's teeth.

There was already way too much that could go wrong for her to take chances on the stuff she could control. She wasn't about to risk it.



HE WAS OUT OF BLOOD, and staring at the empty refrigerator was doing sod all to rectify the fact. If he wanted to eat tonight, he'd have to hit the butcher. And not the one on Main, with its rot about *regular business hours*, but the bloke who had set up shop on Maple Court. The place stayed open past sundown at a premium, courtesy of its sanctuary spell, and while the goods weren't exactly cheap, keeping off the Slayer's radar was worth a pretty penny to some bloodsuckers. Anyone who was hungry enough and didn't want to create a crime scene would cough up the dosh right quick. Spike had used them more than once in a pinch.

Trouble was, Maple Court also happened to be home of the Magic Box, and venturing anywhere near a place Buffy was likely to be was the last thing he wanted to do.

Spike sighed at the thought, let the door to the fridge swing shut. Not like it mattered anymore, right? She knew he was here. She'd barreled right on in, same as she always did, like it was nothing. Like it could ever be nothing. Buffy here, in the place where he lived, seeking him out still, even after what he'd done.

It had taken a bit to gather himself after she'd left, right mess she'd turned him

into. He'd known facing her would be hard, but he hadn't known it would be *that* hard. That she'd scare him out of his bloody wits so much that he'd duck behind the first disguise he could find to keep her from seeing it. Or maybe to *make* her see it. That was the sort of sorry insight that came with the soul. Knowing what he ought to do and doing the opposite. Understanding on a level he hadn't before that caving to the urge to be near Buffy was catering to his own selfishness, but being too much of a lovesick sap to do anything else.

What do you think, Slayer? Got me a soul and it turns out it's broken. Doesn't that bloody figure?

Spike snorted as he headed out, hoping not to run into any pimply-faced tossers this go round. Not sure he could stomach another stare-down with Buffy. He'd thought—hoped—it'd get easier, seeing her. *Being* seen by her. Both times she'd caught him unawares, though, which was just bad bloody luck. But he couldn't have known she'd come by, right? That he'd look up and there she'd be, standing there and staring at him as though he were the one who didn't belong. Here he'd thought he'd have time. Not a lot, sure, but time enough to suss out what exactly he planned to tell her.

Since then, he'd gotten a confession out of Clem. The Slayer hadn't just dropped by that night, but she dropped by most. The first time she'd asked about him—the second and third time, too. The fourth she'd just chatted, though while taking a poke around, and it had spiraled after that. Buffy coming by the crypt after she finished her rounds, talking with Clem about nothing and everything. Sometimes she asked about Spike, but always in a passing, casual way that Clem had taken to mean she'd decided to give them another shot. Hence why he'd been so keen to make himself scarce after Spike had shown up—he'd known Buffy would likely be by and, having watched *The Parent Trap* a time too many, wagered that the shock of seeing each other might just have them falling into one another's arms as the orchestra swelled and the credits rolled.

Spike couldn't think too hard on that—the fact that Buffy had made it part of her routine to swing by the crypt. The first and most obvious explanation was that she'd come by to kill him. Only no, Clem had said the first time had been just a few hours after Spike had taken off and that she'd had Dawn in tow, looking for help like all was status bloody quo. And once the crisis had been averted—the details of which Clem hadn't known exactly, only that it involved Willow—Buffy had kept coming back. And kept coming back. And kept coming back. And Spike couldn't begin to understand why.

He'd had no chance. Something made worse by the fact that when she'd shown up, she'd seen him. *Really* seen him—noticed something was off. And she couldn't know. Not yet. Maybe not ever. The grand aspirations he'd had for his tarnished soul had died almost the second ol' Lloyd had lit him up from the inside. All the things he'd told himself, the righteous fury that had carried him across the sodding globe had been snuffed out, unmasked as nothing more than a child's temper tantrum. He'd been so certain of himself, so bloody cocksure. This thing he'd done—this horrible,

unforgivable thing—he could make right. He could make sure it never happened again. He could give Buffy what she *deserved*.

Turned out what she deserved was not being saddled with his guilt or his amends. What had he expected? *“Oh, Spike, you got a soul, so it’s all okay now.”* Absolved for the unthinkable because he’d taken his licks like a good little boy?

No. That wasn’t how it worked. He knew better now. Forcing her to deal with his soul was just another way of burdening her. She hadn’t asked for what he’d nearly done to her, and she definitely hadn’t asked for what he’d succeeded in doing to himself. How did one make the other better? And what would the end game be, exactly? Buffy forgives Spike. But does Spike deserve to be forgiven?

He knew the answer to that—it had nearly convinced him to steer clear of Sunnyhell for good. But he couldn’t, sucker for her that he was, no more than he could dump the soul on her as his solution for what he’d done. So when she’d seen him two nights ago, when she’d realized something was different, he’d decided to be the worst version of himself to keep hidden. Be the monster she expected, the one she wouldn’t mind staking, make sure she didn’t have any reason to suspect he might have done something as barmy as strap himself down with a human conscience.

Not that she would. No vampire would willingly assume the burden of a soul.

Still, he needed to be careful. No more heroics in front of her, if he could manage. Just business as bloody usual until he either figured out what, if anything, he wanted to tell her, or worked up the nerve to walk away for good.

Forgiveness wasn’t something that could be bought—it was something to be earned. His having a fuller understanding of just how badly he’d buggered things up didn’t entitle him to jack.

When Spike reached Maple Court, he went out of his way to give the Magic Box a wide berth. The Slayer had been working there all summer, according to Clem, to help with a grand reopen following some mess the previous spring. What exactly had happened, he still didn’t know, only there was a score of rumors flying around, the wildest of which involved Willow. Those might be just mad enough to be true, and that was something he didn’t want to dwell on very much. Would mean that when Buffy’s best mate turned villain on her, he’d been on another bloody continent.

Not that he could have done much good here. Doubtful that Buffy would seek aid from her would-be rapist.

He stopped short at the thought, pressed his eyes closed and forced himself to move on. Thankfully, it appeared the late-night butcher was indeed still in business. The light was on, at least, and a few vamps milled about outside. Swapping stories that sounded familiar even if the players didn’t match the lineup in Spike’s memory. Despite himself, he fought off a grin. At least some things stayed the same.

None of the new bloods appeared to recognize him, thankfully, as the chatty ones liked hearing tall tales as much as they did spinning them. Stories they could polish up to make their own whenever they wanted to inflate their credentials among people who didn’t know better. This much Spike had experienced firsthand—his own slayer-killing stories had been stolen and circulated by fledges who hadn’t even been

born at the time, much less dead. They hadn't lasted long, either, finding out the hard way he didn't much care for vamps who tried to claim another man's victories.

But that had been before when he'd been all about showboating. He had no desire to socialize now and even less desire at the moment to whip out a stake. Not this close to the Magic Box. The next time he saw Buffy, he wanted it to be on his terms.

The entire transaction took only a minute or so once he was on the right side of the door. In and out, easy peasy, and then he was on his way home with a brown paper sack full of enough blood to get him through the rest of the week. The loiterers gave him a long look, the sort that let him know they were considering fighting him for his purchase, but something on his face must have warned them off for they turned back to their bullshitting in a hurry. And Spike directed his attention to the shadows that would lead home.

Only the street wasn't exactly as he'd left it. The light that had been on inside the Magic Box was off, and someone was fiddling with the door. Locking up.

And idiot that he was, he stopped and watched. He could skate on by without being spotted if he moved, but he didn't move. He couldn't. One thing they never told you about going off to get your soul was how different everyone looked when you got back. Not in obvious ways, of course, but in ways enough. That sort of paradigm shift caught a bloke off guard—it certainly had with Buffy the other night, and now, in watching Anya secure the Magic Shop. If asked point-blank, Spike doubted he'd be able to articulate what that difference was, exactly, only that he knew it was there. Sort of like when he'd gone back to London a good fifty years following his mum's death. Walked by the house that had once been home to the Pratts, marveled at how it was different but the same, made so in that way only truly managed by time. Not a ton of time had passed since he'd been in Sunnydale, but for what had happened in the period he'd been gone, it might as well have been centuries.

Then she turned, Anya, and looked at him directly as though she'd known he was there. And he couldn't move or turn away, only watch as she started forward, his brain screaming that he didn't want to do this, that he wasn't ready, but he'd been too bloody slow and now there was no choice in the matter.

"Spike," she said simply, blinking. Her voice wasn't loud, but it didn't need to be—he heard her all the same.

Spike drew in a breath, bracing himself. The last time he'd seen her had been on this street, following the tryst that never should have happened. When Buffy had looked at him, that hurt in her eyes, and he'd been fool enough to believe the hurt was anything more than what she'd told him it was. Anya was in no way responsible for anything that had happened between him and the Slayer, but even knowing that, he couldn't help associating her with all of it. If he hadn't gone to the shop looking for a magical cure-all for a broken heart, he never would have shagged her. If he'd never shagged her, Xander wouldn't have charged in to stake him. If Xander hadn't charged in to stake him, Buffy wouldn't have come to save his miserable arse. And even if Spike eventually had let the cat out of the bag, even if the pain of losing her

eventually made it impossible to keep the truth of their relationship a buried secret, it wouldn't have been then. It wouldn't have been *that night*. And maybe Dawn wouldn't have swung by to give him the scolding he'd so richly deserved, and he wouldn't have paired what she'd said with what he'd seen on Buffy's face and gotten it in his head that all they needed to do was have it out, good and proper. That he could talk her into loving him. That he could make her—

He shook his head, shoving down the familiar surge of self-loathing that always accompanied thoughts like these. Instead, he focused on her—Anya. On acting his part, pretending that the last time she'd seen him he hadn't been a heartsick sod. That nothing of note had happened at all. That all was bloody normal.

"It is you," Anya said, hurrying to close the space between them. Or as much as she felt comfortable—close enough for him to smell she wasn't quite human anymore—but not so close that it felt too intimate.

Had he known she'd gone back to being a demon? He honestly couldn't say.

"Yeah, rumors are true," he said, forcing a smile. "Big Bad's back in town."

"Well, I am certainly the last to know everything," she replied, crossing her arms and furrowing her brow. "When did you return?"

"Who wants to know?"

"I do. This is a big week for my shop, and I don't need any unexpected surprises distracting certain people from the objective."

There was another thing that had stayed the same. Spike relaxed in spite of himself. "Think I heard about that. Somethin' about a grand reopening?"

"Yes. It was stressful enough with Willow flying back. I wish I'd known you were coming."

"Not like I dropped anyone a postcard, pet."

Anya pursed her lips, narrowing her eyes. "Where *did* you go? You seem different."

Spike did his best to keep his expression blank, to look like a man who would find this amusing more than anything else. Just his sorry luck that Anya was the perceptive sort.

"Here and there," he said at length. "Had some stuff to do."

"And you came back even knowing that Buffy will probably kick your ass for what you did to her. Gotta say, that's brave."

He stiffened at that, caught truly off guard. It had been painful enough hearing Buffy refer to what had happened in such bold terms—for it to live in the air, in words, rather than only on the constant loop that existed in his head. But it belonged to Buffy too, more than it did to him, and she was more than free to do with it what she saw fit.

And apparently she'd seen fit to share it. This awful, private thing, this ugliest part of himself. And Anya being Anya, mentioning it like this—so matter-of-fact, so bloody cavalier—made him feel perhaps more exposed than he ever had been.

But these were not the thoughts a man without a soul would have. "You know about that?"

"It's not exactly a secret."

Spike nodded, trying hard not to picture how Dawn must have looked when she'd found out. There wasn't much in the world that could make him hate himself more than he already did, but her disappointment, her horror in realizing what a monster he truly was, was certainly on the list.

"Just so you know," Anya continued, her voice a degree softer now—or maybe that was his imagination, "I offered to seek vengeance upon you on Buffy's behalf. She declined. However, the fact that you're back might change that, so in the event I do have to eviscerate you, please understand that it isn't something I will enjoy."

Spike forced his throat to work, nodding. "Got the vengeance gig back, then?"

"Right after Xander left me at the altar."

"Wanker."

"There we can agree." She offered him a little smile, then frowned almost immediately as though realizing it wasn't proper to smile at the bloke who had nearly raped one of your chums, no matter your history with him. "But I have to admit, I am not unimpressed with the effort he put forth to help me reopen the Magic Box."

"Harris did? He know you're a demon again?"

A shadow crossed her face. "He does. Among other things, he is attempting to be more accepting and less prejudiced."

Well. Good for him. "And the Slayer?" Spike asked, his voice calm and neutral. Like the answer didn't matter a lick. "Thought you two were on opposite sides, back in the day."

Anya stuck her chin out a little. "My time as a human was not without its educational benefits. After much consideration, I decided that maintaining a cordial relationship with Buffy and her various associates challenges me to be more creative in my vengeance endeavors."

He grinned but glanced down before she could see, suddenly reminded of an evening at the Bronze. Dru twisting some poor girl's neck to put her on the menu for him, serving up a helping of warm human blood after he'd gone without for more than a year. How Buffy's face had flashed across his mind, this goodness he was working to convince her and himself he had inside, and how he'd sunk his fangs in anyway. Tried on the old Spike just to see if he still fit, despite knowing the answer already. Seemed Anya had arrived at the same conclusion, only without needing to put it to the test.

Might be her story with Harris would have a happier ending than Spike's had with Buffy. He hoped so. She was certainly using better judgment.

"Always liked a good challenge, myself," he replied, meeting her eyes again. "I can respect that."

Anya beamed. "Thank you."

Spike nodded in return but didn't reply. There was nowhere for the conversation to go from here, and he wagered she knew it too. Neither one of them were much for idle chitchat or any of the other methods humans relied on to talk around the questions they really wanted to ask. That was one of the things he admired most about her—that she didn't dally with niceties just for the sake of it. Soul or not, he wasn't too keen on wasting time.

"Well," Anya said loudly. "I am going to go now. I hope the next time I see you isn't because you're being eviscerated."

He bit back another grin and inclined his head. "Won't hold it against you if it is."

"I appreciate that."

All in all, he supposed, as he made his way back to the crypt, it could have gone worse. A whole lot worse. And he'd managed to snag a few pieces of information he hadn't had before he'd left, namely that Buffy had evidently kept mum about the fact that she had seen him. He wasn't sure what to make of that—if there *was* anything to make of it, or if she was holding to the tradition of remaining tightlipped where all things personal were concerned. The part of him that would forever be a lovesick sap, eternally if not naively optimistic, whispered the thought that would have occurred to him before—that keeping quiet meant protecting him, and there could be no greater proof that she was indeed deeply in love with him. The rest of him knew better, though that didn't make the existence of that other thought any less a blow. How easy it had been for him to fall for it, convince himself of it, even if he believed he'd never have her in whole.

At some point, he was going to have to create a story to tell her. Something that would explain his lengthy absence and answer any questions that might arise between now and when he saw fit to give her the truth. Probably should have worked that out before he'd come back, but it had all seemed so unlikely. Even after he'd crossed the town line back into Sunnyhell, the thought that he might actually see Buffy again had seemed farfetched. The version of him who got to share her space had died in a cave in Africa, and ne'er the two should meet.

But he was here now, wasn't he? Proving that wrong. Buffy had found him almost immediately, stumbled into his crypt asking after Clem and gawking at him like he was the one who hadn't belonged. Then more than gawking, *talking* to him. She hadn't reached for her stake once. Hadn't yelled or screamed or done any of the things his imagination had summoned as a likelihood.

Perhaps that was why he had come back. Death by slayer had a nice ring to it. The fitting, poetic end of William the Bloody, done in by the bloody best.

Spike drew to a stop just outside his crypt, thankful for the quiet walk back, the lack of wankers just begging to be dust tonight. Might be he'd do a sweep after his stomach was full, but priorities were priorities. He could mull over the particulars of his own bloody death wish later.

With a huff, he pushed open the crypt door and dragged himself across the threshold. Then immediately stopped short.

The empty tomb he'd left behind was no longer empty.

"Hello, Spike," a cool female voice called out in greeting, followed by the unmistakable pull of several crossbows cocking in succession. "Nice to see you again."

If they'd meant to surprise him, they'd given up the game a bit quick. Spike had walked into surprise ambushes before, and it had never ended well for the ambushee. The chip in his head might make that a bit of a chore, but not so much that he was too concerned. After a beat, he inhaled, glanced behind him just as the crypt door slammed shut under its own weight, then turned back to the blonde bookish bint

who stood flanked by a couple of leather-clad clowns, all of whom had arrows aimed at his chest.

The fact that he wasn't dust meant they didn't want him dead. He could use that to his advantage.

"Well," he said, letting his groceries drop to the floor by his boots. "I'd tell you to make yourselves at home, but it seems I'd be wastin' air."

"Quite the concern for someone who doesn't breathe," the blonde replied. And he realized belatedly that he recognized her—both her pretty round face and her crisp accented voice. The doe-eyes appraising him from behind her spectacles looked familiar as well. The whole bloody package did.

"I know you," Spike murmured, tilting his head.

"We have met," the woman confirmed, stepping forward. She was more confident than she had been in his memory, less schoolgirl, more businesswoman. The little lackey all grown up. "Though it has been a while. My name is Lydia Chalmers. I am here on behalf of the Watchers Council, and we have a proposition for you."

BUT WHAT'S PUZZLING YOU IS THE NATURE OF MY GAME

THE LAST TIME THE COUNCIL HAD MADE AN IN-PERSON VISIT, IT HAD BEEN IN service of reviewing the Slayer, seeing if she was up to snuff, worthy of fighting the battle that no one else could even begin to fight. It had amused him then, the whole song and dance. The bloody gall that they were playing like they had a choice in the matter. If the world needed saving, then Buffy would do it. That was just who she was—who she'd been since he'd first laid eyes on her. A child warrior sent out to protect the world from everything that would just as soon swallow it whole. And there was no one better for the job.

Spike hadn't been in the inner circle then—that was, of course, assuming he could claim he'd *ever* been in the inner circle. That particular visit had come before the entire love-confession-gone-wrong debacle, and definitely before Glory had turned him into her personal bloody pincushion, so what he knew of the aftermath was all word of mouth. Something about Buffy throwing a sword and nearly impaling some pillock who was lucky to breathe her air. How she'd correctly assumed that the Council was there to grovel their way back into her good graces all the while prancing about like they held even the barest scrap of power.

He'd have paid good money to catch that show. She was marvelous when in her element, and he'd seen so little of that since before she'd jumped.

Already, though, he could tell that this visit from the Wankers Council had nothing on that first one. The players were the same, the staging as well, but a predator knew when it was being admired just as surely as it knew when it was being appraised. The admiration had been a bit thicker the first time. Now, the bird studying him from behind her spectacles was all cool calculation. Not information gathering to see how the Slayer was doing, then. *He* was the one being judged.

"A proposition?" Spike drawled, arching an eyebrow. If memory served, the chit

had had a thing for him. At the very least, she'd blushed and blustered when he'd turned on the old charm and tried to butter her up. While he was hardly in the mood to flirt, it might speed things along. Make her relax so she talked faster. So he affected a smirk—the same he knew from experience wetted the knickers—and continued in a lower voice, "Here? In front of the kiddies?"

The rouge that filled her cheeks was familiar, as was the somewhat husky laugh and the way she shifted her weight from one foot to the other. "An offer, actually," she replied in a similarly low tone. "For a business arrangement that we believe will be mutually beneficial."

"Uh huh." He bent to retrieve the bag of blood at his feet then took a careful step toward the refrigerator. If they were going to chat, he was going to eat, and they'd just have to accept that. "Gonna fix me a drink. Sorry to say I don't have anythin' to offer, pet. Been out of town, you see."

"We are aware," Lydia said, still a bit breathless. It was nice to know he hadn't lost his touch. "To have the chip removed, is that right?"

The words lent him pause, made his chest go tight briefly the way it sometimes did when he forgot his lungs were fancy decoration rather than something that needed use. "Yeah? Where'd you hear that?"

He moved forward again, and the wankers holding the crossbows moved with him as though in a dance.

"We are not without our resources," the bird said, fighting a smile as though they were sharing a private joke. "We also know that the effort was unsuccessful."

He set the paper sack on the ledge by the fridge. That his disappearance might have had something to do with the chip wasn't complete rubbish—he had been rather vocal about wanting it removed for going on three years now. But she was speaking with certainty that left him unnerved, like someone had been snooping around in his head, stealing bits of thought here and there and trying to make the pieces fit.

The only person he'd confided in before leaving had been Clem, and even then, Clem hadn't known the full of it. Spike couldn't even say he recalled what all he'd told him. It had happened so fast. Buffy kicking him into the door, the screaming in his head going suddenly silent and the awful details settling in. Reminding him where they were—the *bathroom*—and what they'd been talking about—that *she loves me*—and how his brain had shifted to the gear of proving it to her, as it so often had over the last few months. Proving through touch what she didn't want to hear in words. Only the fight hadn't gone the way it was supposed to. He'd jumped right from the thumping to trying to untie her bathrobe, the bathrobe that she had clutched to her chest when he came back to himself. They'd been on the floor and she'd been pleading with him, not to fuck her, not to love her, but to—

He'd snapped out of himself and seen what he'd done. Taken it all in. The harsh splatter of the water still running in the tub. Buffy looking at him like she didn't recognize him—or worse, that she did. Something had broken inside him then that he hadn't known was fragile. That he hadn't known could bloody break. He'd done a lot of unforgivable things, killed and tortured a lot of people, but there were lines a

man didn't cross. Spike had never hurt the one he loved—not like that. Never like that. Only he had, and in realizing it, everything he'd thought he'd known about himself had shattered.

But then, he was a monster, wasn't he? He'd killed his mum. Twice, point of fact. What was one more unforgivable crime in a series of so many? Why should this be the line he didn't cross?

And what kind of man did that make him? Or was he any kind of man at all?

Clem had been there as he'd had this discussion with himself. And knowing him, he'd listened as Spike had prattled on about right and wrong, what made a vampire a vampire, that monsters were to behave in certain ways—that it had all been clear once. So bloody clear before he'd come back and gotten himself effectively neutered and had his existence redefined for him. The chip had forced that and yeah, he'd probably railed against it a good bit. What it had obliged him to become, or unbecome, how it had robbed him of the luxury of choice. But then he'd always been in love with the Slayer. The chip hadn't done that. The chip had just made him slow down long enough to realize it.

At length, Spike forced himself back to the present and met Lydia's gaze again. "Well," he drawled slowly, "can't blame a bloke for trying, can you?"

"No, we cannot," she replied, affecting a prim, business-like smile. "The Council is in fact prepared to lend its resources in the service of having your chip removed."

He jolted with shock he was too slow to hide and hated that he knew she saw it. That they all did. But fuck, he couldn't help himself. The chit had managed to surprise him and that wasn't something he experienced in earnest all that much anymore. But he couldn't let himself get carried away by that surprise, either. The Council didn't give without taking, and if they were here making deals with creatures in the dark, it had to involve Buffy. All roads led back to her, after all, and that made what he had to do perfectly bloody clear.

He needed to see what was on that road, what was coming for her. Do what he could to make sure she was prepared. So he tempered his annoyance at what he'd already betrayed and nodded as though what she'd said hadn't thrown him for a bloody loop. "That right?"

"Quite. As early as this week, in fact, should you find our terms agreeable."

Spike huffed and glanced down, then unpacked one of the bags of blood he'd purchased and dug out a mug from the collection he kept by the ledge. The mug's interior was a bit dusty, but so was every other bloody thing in this place, and there was that saying about beggars and choosers, and he was neither. He took his time making his drink—went to none of the lengths he'd once employed when the human in residence had been the Slayer and his objective had been to keep the more monstrous parts of himself away from her blushing eyes. If these people really wanted to release the beast, he had no business being dainty. Instead, he lifted his gaze to meet the stare of one of the crossbow-wielding wankers, held it as blood trickled from the plastic bag into the waiting ceramic, then grinned when the other man grumbled in his discomfort and looked away.

"Color me confused, pet," Spike said, turning back to Lydia as he raised his mug

to his mouth. "Settin' loose a vamp seems a little shortsighted of the Council. You lot are afraid enough of me now." He nodded to the muscle she'd dragged along for this little trip. "How many men do you reckon it'll take you to feel comfortable walkin' into a vampire's den when you know I can bite back?"

The odd smile on the bird's face didn't so much as flicker. "This is a little extreme," she admitted, and also nodded at her gofers. "But it made Quentin feel better in sending me."

"So why send you at all?"

"Because I am the foremost expert on William the Bloody. And we are acquainted."

Spike didn't bother hiding his snort, nor his eyeroll, and set his mug of blood back on the stone ledge. "Oh yeah. You're a regular scholar. Suppose I have you to thank for this little offer? You fancy a ride on the wild side and thought it wouldn't be as much fun if I was muzzled?"

"Oi!" one of the crossbow-wielding goons spat at him. "You aren't fit to wipe her bloody boots, ya filth."

"Doesn't mean the lady doesn't wanna get dirty, mate."

That did it—killed Lydia's smile and brought back the blush. At some other point, perhaps any other point, Spike might have been charmed by it, this notion that he had a groupie. One who was definitely interested in making sure her research was extremely thorough. Hell, he might have given her what she was too bloody coy to ask for, too. Once.

But *once* was not now and he was anything but charmed. In fact, the longer she stood there, making eyes at him, the more brassed he became. The urge arose to let his fangs out, let her take a gander at what sort of devil waited behind his oh so pretty face. Give her and the lot of them a nice dose of reality. Send them screaming for the hills as they fired off shots from crossbows they couldn't even aim properly.

"Nothing of the sort, I assure you," Lydia replied once she'd recovered, though she seemed to have lost the nerve to look him in the eye. "Our interest in you is purely transactional. Once our business concludes, so would our association, and the next time you came across any of our watchers, these"—she indicated the weapons her men held with another nod—"would be more than just for show."

"Still doesn't account for why the bloody Watchers Council would want a bloke known for killin' slayers off the leash."

At this, the smile returned, a bit nastier than it had been before, and Spike's stomach lurched. "I believe you just answered your own question," she said.

Bloody fortunate thing he'd put down the mug, otherwise it would have shattered against the stone floor. The shock from before reared and exploded, making him go slack with it, his body rebelling in ways he hadn't known it could. His feet walking him back a step, his eyes widening and his chest going tight and a dull but very present ringing filling his ears. And for half a second, he wondered if his senses were failing him all around—that he'd imagined he'd heard something she hadn't said—but then that second ended and he knew they weren't. The answer was there on the bitch's face, the satisfied twist of her lips and the predatory gleam in her eye. Not

dissimilar from the way Angel had looked at him once upon a time when he had something to gloat about. Send Spike into a stupor, get a prize. Same game with different players.

He'd wondered, not long after crawling out of a cave across the world, if he'd ever feel it again—the genuine desire to rip someone's throat out. More than just the need for blood or the thrill of the hunt, but because some bastard really deserved it. At the time, he'd thought not. The guilt he carried for the lives he'd claimed wasn't insignificant, but it was bearable. An understanding he'd come to much quicker than he would have thought, that he was a vampire and humans were food and that was the way the game was played. Had he done more than just kill to survive? Yeah, he had. He'd killed out of fury, for revenge, to keep himself entertained, and sometimes because he'd tracked down the one girl in all the world and he wanted to chance spitting in death's face. All of that was also being a vampire. But he was more than a vampire now—he'd gone and made himself more. The *want* to kill, separate from the urges he'd never be able to eradicate, was something he'd thought permanently behind him.

Then this tart had strolled in.

Spike wasn't sure how long he stood there like a ponce, grappling with his thoughts and trying to rein in the sudden rush of bloodlust. Once the idea had time to settle, the path ahead presented itself. He had the *what*. Now he needed the *why*.

"I've seen a lot in my time," he said slowly, nearing the ledge again to reclaim his mug. Needing to occupy his hands before he did something truly daft, like try to throttle the bint. "The Council switchin' sides? That's one for the bloody books."

Some of the smug went out of Lydia's face. "We are not *switching* sides. We are righting a wrong."

"By killing the bird who's saved your skin more times than any one of you realize. Brilliant plan, that."

"Interesting choice of words, considering she quite literally failed to save the skin of a man named Warren Mears."

Spike frowned, then grunted and shook his head. "So robot boy kicked it and you're lookin' for someone to blame? Didn't realize the Slayer was responsible for every sodding death she wasn't quick enough to stop."

"Not *stop*. In the case of Warren Mears, Buffy Summers was directly responsible."

He didn't need a moment to gather himself this time—the reaction was instant. He laughed. "Buffy Summers is a lot of bloody things," he said, "but believe me, she'd sacrifice herself before she'd off a human. Even one who deserved it. You know what kinda bloke Warren was? He nearly had her confessin' to a murder *he* committed all because she thought she swung a bit too hard one night."

"I said she was responsible, not that she killed him." Lydia sniffed. "Everything that happened last spring is a result of Buffy's questionable influence, and her blatant disregard for precedent. It would have been bad enough if involving civilians in her sacred quest had gotten someone killed; in her case, she allowed a volatile and very powerful witch to not only practice magic freely, but in such ways that the natural

balance—what keeps all of us in motion—could have been irrevocably damaged. And that was before the girl attempted to end the world.”

Wait, what?

“Willow tried to end the world?” Spike echoed, his stomach sinking. When he’d left Sunnydale, the witch had been on the mend. Cold turkey, as they called it, refusing to whip out the light show even when Cecily—or whatever her name really was—had had them all under house arrest. But people fell off the wagon every day, didn’t they? He would know better than most, all the bits of good he’d tried to do in between the snippets of evil that he couldn’t suppress despite his best efforts. And sometimes not his best efforts. Willow succumbing wasn’t much of a shock, but ending the world?

And Buffy...

God, things were falling into place. Things he bloody well wished would stay put. What Clem had told him, the wild rumors involving Willow and the Magic Box, that Buffy had been working there all summer for its grand reopening, that Anya would be rattled that Willow was coming home. All of it made an awful sort of sense and he didn’t want to believe it. Didn’t want to think about what it meant—that it confirmed all the things he’d been trying not to entertain as genuine possibilities. That after being attacked in her own bloody bathroom, Buffy had been forced to go to battle against someone she loved and trusted. That Willow had ripped her from paradise, back to this unforgiving rock just so she could kill her herself.

And where had he been? In a cave, no doubt. Duking it out with enormous lunks and their fiery fists to win a soul he didn’t deserve to impress a girl he deserved even less. Buffy might not have wanted him around then but she’d needed him. Not *him*, but his muscle, at least. Whatever he could have spared her. She’d needed him and he’d been gone.

Can’t win for losing.

“Mr. Giles has been rather reticent on the matter, no doubt attempting to keep it quiet, but we have a good grasp of what happened,” Lydia continued, her voice thousands of miles away. “Willow was *set off* when Warren Mears killed her lover. She—”

“Tara’s dead?” Fuck, the blows just kept coming. Spike pressed his eyes closed, pinched the bridge of his nose with his free hand and drew in a deep breath. He was showing off more humanity than he cared to, but hell, no one had prepared him for this. Or any of it. Of the lot of them, Tara had always treated him best. Not without prejudice but with more patience and understanding than he’d been owed. He hadn’t been prepared to hear she was gone.

The soul amplified everything. Made every ache worse.

“Yes, that was her name. Tara.” The hesitation in Lydia’s voice, like she wasn’t quite sure what to make of a vampire on the verge of tears over the death of a human, was enough to force Spike back to the present. Back to the crypt-full of watchers all just itching for an excuse to put a bolt in him. To the blonde bitch who had come to solicit his help in murdering the Slayer.

There was nothing he could do for Tara now.

He had to focus on Buffy.

“So, let me get this straight,” he said, pleased when it came out nice and steady—not the slightest warble of emotion to be heard. “You lot reckon that the Slayer’s to blame because of somethin’ her mate did when she was mighty pissed off and had a reason to be.”

“The sort of power that it requires to even begin to attempt what Willow Rosenberg nearly accomplished last spring isn’t something that just spontaneously manifests,” Lydia replied, narrowing her eyes. “The Slayer’s mission is quite clear—she is to stand between the vampires, the demons, and the forces of darkness. Darkness the likes of which matured under her nose, without her intervention. For god’s sake, the witch bloody well bragged to the Council not two years ago how powerful she was, unregistered and undisciplined.”

“Did she? Doesn’t that mean *you* turned a blind eye when it was convenient? The lot of you on the hit list too?”

Lydia looked away and tugged at the bottom of her blouse as though chagrined. “We made the best call we could at the time. The threat presented by Glorificus was far larger and more immediate, and as a tool of the Council, the Slayer was our best hope. Our error came in not overseeing what became of the mess Buffy Summers left behind following her death, and the world nearly ended as a result. The fact is she is a liability, allying herself with witches and vampires.”

He smirked and threw back another mouthful of blood. “None taken.”

To his utter delight, that seemed to throw her off rhythm. Not much but enough that her spine went ramrod straight and she fumbled a bit with her wording. “As it... H-her involvement with the vampire Angel also led to an apocalyptic event.”

“Yeah, and her involvement with another vampire—*me*—stopped it.”

Lydia’s cheeks darkened again but she soldiered on, undeterred. “The fact of the matter remains that without Buffy Summers, Acatla would never have been in danger of awakening and Willow Rosenberg would never have started dabbling in the dark arts.”

“And the world would’ve ended a time or twelve already, but sure, while you’re keeping score.”

“You keep talking as though you admire her.” There was a question now in the woman’s voice, or maybe that was a dare. She tilted her head and favored him with a long, assessing look. “I admit I didn’t foresee the need to present an argument to you. You do want that chip out, don’t you?”

“Course I do. Just fancy knowin’ who I’m doin’ business with and why.” Spike lifted his blood mug back to his lips, shifted his gaze to the lackeys just in case either of them were thinking about doing something they’d consider heroic. “And you’re bloody right I admire her. Admirin’ your enemy’s one way to keep from becoming dead. Means you’re payin’ attention, that you appreciate exactly what they’re capable of. I *know* what the Slayer’s capable of. Don’t know rot about the lot of you.”

He wasn’t sure that would be enough to satisfy her, but it was the best he could come up with on the fly. And thankfully, it appeared to work. Lydia relaxed a bit. “We understand what we’re suggesting is unorthodox, but the situation is unprecedented. It’s not a decision the Council reached lightly, but under the circumstances, we

cannot allow Buffy Summers to live. She is too much of a threat. And, as far as natural law is concerned, an abomination. One that needs correcting.”

Spike clenched his jaw and thunked his mug a mite too hard against the ledge once more, swallowing and glancing down before he did something daft. The bitch had seen too much of him already—he couldn’t give her reason to stop blabbing, or to have her cronies get trigger happy. Except that animal urge was there again, tearing at his insides, raging at him to show these ungrateful traitors what a real abomination looked like.

Lydia was still talking, though, and he forced himself to focus on that rather than fantasies of ripping out her pretty little throat.

“Natural and magical law is very clear about the rules regarding life and death,” the woman was saying. “Rules that were not only bent but snapped in half last fall when Willow Rosenberg brought Buffy back from the dead. The consequences of that act are far-reaching.”

“What? It rainin’ frogs somewhere or summat? And here you’d think that’d be the sorta thing I’d remember hearing about.”

“That nothing has demonstrably happened since her resurrection doesn’t mean that nothing *will*.”

“Ah. Now that’s nice and convenient. You take her out and nothin’ happens, you did the right thing. Let her live and the next big ugly decides to take its turn at endin’ the world, you got yourselves a nice little scapegoat.” Spike shook his head, smiling a smile that he knew was more wince than anything else, but it was the best he could offer. “Know some demons that could take pointers from you lot.”

Again, Lydia narrowed her eyes. “The Council is not unsympathetic in what happened to Miss Summers. We understand quite perfectly that she did not ask to be resurrected, but the fact remains that she was, and the means by which she was resurrected broke everything established about natural and magical law.”

“And this was such a large concern that you decided to wait a sodding year before swooping in.”

“A year in which the witch responsible cultivated enough power to attempt to end the world and forced us to consider what measures are necessary to keep this from happening again.”

“Yeah? So why not off Red? Sounds like she’s the one you’re cross with.”

“For the reasons I’ve already shared with you. Buffy Summers’ influence and judgment has proven to be a significant threat. We cannot afford to let it continue.” At that, something in the woman’s eyes went soft, and she took a step forward, looking at him as though they were more than passing acquaintances. Not lovers or anything quite so intimate, but something enough that she could see what he didn’t want seen. “Buffy is supposed to be dead,” she said. “She was to have died seven years ago at the hands of the Master. The accident of her survival upset a balance that has held for all of living memory, and that upset was only exacerbated by the violations committed against nature by an ally she allowed to grow powerful without consequence. The long-term repercussions are those that might not be felt for a long time, might take generations to unravel. What we do know is there was never supposed to be more

than one slayer, that no new slayer was called when Buffy died a second time, and the unnatural circumstances of her resurrection could have a lasting impact on the balance that keeps us from tumbling into chaos. The decisions we've made reflect what we believe is best for the world, which *I* believe you understand. The world's survival was, after all, one of the reasons you forged that initial alliance, wasn't it? We are merely asking you to do it again."

Yeah, that was all they were asking. Just kill the woman he loved because she had a soft spot for people and creatures that didn't deserve it. Like that was a failing, like Buffy wasn't better than the two of them, the watcher cronies, or every other miserable sod who called this planet home.

Except, he realized a moment later, that *wasn't* all. The bitch still wasn't telling him everything. There was any number of ways to take a slayer out—he ought to know. If they really wanted the Slayer removed from the picture, they need not approach him. Buffy had no shortlist of enemies she'd made, nor demons who'd like to come at her just for kicks. Demons she knew, demons she didn't, demons she'd never heard of who wanted to bag her for the bragging rights. Not just that they'd killed a slayer, but that they'd managed to do in Buffy Summers. The best there was or ever had been, forever and ever amen.

"Tell me this, pet," Spike said, dropping his voice again to a low timbre to try to reclaim the sense of intimacy that had been working before. "What's in it for you?"

Lydia frowned. "Me?"

"Or the Council, whatever you like. You want the Slayer gone—fine. Say I'm interested."

"Are you interested?"

"Of course I'm bloody interested. But I'm not an idiot, am I? There's a reason you came to me."

She blinked a few times too many, then straightened her spine and favored him with an imperious look. "Yes, there's a reason. You're the Slayer of Slayers. We also know—"

"I know what I am. Also know there are easier ways to skin a slayer than to get yours truly involved," Spike retorted, crossing his arms. "Now, don't get me wrong. You want me to kill her, I'm game. I just want to know why you'd go to the trouble of makin' sure I can be a menace to society again to have it done."

The crypt fell silent, Lydia still frowning at him as though she didn't understand the question. But she did. He saw it in her eyes, the movement there, the cunning. He saw her weighing what exactly she should reveal, trying to decide if the risk was worth it. Unsure, as she should be, if she could trust him, but also not sure why she shouldn't on this particular point. He was, after all, the legendary hunter of slayers, the one she'd dedicated so many precious hours to studying once upon a time. That he hadn't immediately asked how high to jump might have lent her pause, except she understood him, didn't she? More than done her homework on all things Spike.

Finally, she reached a decision. And he saw before she started talking what that decision was.

"The Council has at its disposal a vast network of resources," she began, then

hesitated to glower at the disapproving looks being thrown at her by her flunkies. They didn't matter, that glower said. They didn't know Spike the way she did. They didn't know it was all right to share. They also must not have been as high up in the organization as she was, for both folded rather quickly, going from censure to accepting in half a blink. Once satisfied, Lydia turned back to Spike, cleared her throat and pressed on. "These resources allow us to operate as we do today, and are largely funded through substantial, private donations made by members of prominent slayer and watcher families. Publicly declaring war on our slayer, especially with her numerous celebrated accomplishments, would put us in a difficult position."

Spike nodded, turning that over. He'd never given much thought to how the Council operated, all told. Never been of interest to him. Bunch of bloody stuffed shirts making calls they thought were difficult from an ivory tower, often continents away from where their girl was doing the actual grunt work. The way they kept operating, given they had no product or service to sell to the public, and that they needed to work in the shadows made all of the world's funniest conspiracy theories about secret organizations more credible than even the truest of believers would conceive.

"So you get a vampire to do your dirty work for you," he surmised. "No questions asked if she goes down in the line of duty."

"Not just that," Lydia replied, looking smug again. "A vampire the Slayer in question allowed to live in the first place."

Spike barked out an incredulous laugh, the whole picture coming into view. So that was the role they wanted him to play—give them a nice and tidy slayer death wrapped in a ribbon of confirmation bias. Turn Buffy into the bloody poster child for what went wrong when the Slayer slipped out of the Council's control. It made a twisted sort of sense—the wankers were tired of being on the outside looking in and this was their way of reclaiming power. Buffy had changed the rules on them, kicked them out of the process they were used to masterminding, left them begging for scraps and otherwise in the dark, save for the glimpses she'd allowed. Whatever came next, they wouldn't let that happen again.

"Well," he drawled a moment later, "got everythin' nice and planned out, don't you?"

"As I said, this is not a decision we came to lightly."

"Right." He dragged a finger around the rim of the blood mug. "How long do I got?"

The Council bitch furrowed her brow. "Pardon?"

"To decide if I'm keen to play. Be your little assassin."

"You...you need time to think?"

Spike tilted his head, a slow grin spreading across his lips. "What? Did you think that's all it took to buy me?"

"I just assumed that... Well, the chip's removal having been your primary goal for the past few years—"

"You're not the first pretty face to make the offer, ducks. Been down this road a time or two with beasties who thought they could take the Slayer out." This much, at least, was true. Mostly. It had only happened once. "Typically ends with Buffy

catchin' wise and throwin' a big bloody wrench into things. Then I'm stuck tryin' to convince her to let me live another day so I can work up to doin' it all over again. Been gettin' by on goodwill. You're askin' me to risk it all for a bunch of stuffed shirts who are aimin' to off their own girl—trust that you'll actually hold up your end of the bargain. For all I know, you could program the chip to explode or summat the second I've done your dirty work. You don't live long as I have without learnin' that an offer that sounds too good to be true typically is."

One of the crossbow wielders grunted. "Hmm. Not the worst idea I've heard, that whole...explosion thing."

"You have my word," Lydia said, sparing her lackey another glare, "that our business with you would be straightforward."

"Oh really? That makes me feel ever so much better."

"What *would* make you feel better?"

"Dunno," Spike replied bluntly. "Won't until I think of it. All of it, mind. If I'm gonna play the part of your hitman, need to decide how I'd go about bringing the bitch down."

"That's something you have to consider?" asked the other crossbow-wielding watcher. "With all the time you've had at your disposal since you've been leashed, I would have thought you'd have any number of plans devised."

"Yeah? All right, quick poll. Who here has done in a slayer before?" Spike thrust his hand in the air and tried not to snicker when the watchers directed their gazes downward, having suddenly gone bashful on him. "Yeah. About what I reckoned. Thing about hunting slayers, *mate*, is you save the plan until the end. Any number of things can change between now and then. Not takin' that into account's how lesser vamps end up dead."

That was a load of bollocks, of course, or mostly a load of bollocks. The fights that had earned him his reputation had been all fist and fang and instinct. He'd planned a little, but since he usually blew off his plans, he hadn't seen the point in dedicating too much preparation for a battle in which survival hinged upon instinct and daring and a desire to live more than skill. But that was something only the person who had lived to tell the tale would know. Not even his groupie. Hell, not even the Slayer herself, whom he'd regaled with both stories on a night that now seemed forever ago.

"Three days," Lydia said a moment later, lifting her gaze to his once more. "Allow me three days to confer with the Council about the additional preparations we could make to provide reasonable reassurance that the terms of the offer are sound. A binding magical contract, perhaps. The sort that would mean my head and the heads of other high ranking Council members should our part of the bargain fall through."

Spike tilted his head. Three days was more time than he'd expected. More than enough time to take this to Buffy—let her know what was coming. No telling if she'd believe him, but a man had to try. "Think you could?" he asked. "Get somethin' like that worked up?"

"It will take some arranging, but we are committed to doing this properly."

Oh yes. Properly killing their own slayer. That was an enormous comfort.

“Then come see me in three days and I’ll let you know my answer.” He grinned and jerked his head toward her bodyguards a final time. “And see if you can ditch the chaperones while you’re at it.”

Her heart started to rabbit and her cheeks went red again, but she didn’t argue. That was good. Might be when she came back, he could seduce some more information out of her. Whatever she might be daft enough to let spill if she let her guard down, if she stopped putting on a show for the chaps she’d brought along on this little field trip.

Because there was more than what she’d told him. There had to be.

And even if Buffy didn’t believe him when he brought this to her, even if she threw him out on his arse where he belonged, at least she’d be warned something was coming.

He’d be there to fight for her either way.



FORGET ME NOTS, SECOND THOUGHTS LIVE IN ISOLATION

THERE WERE CERTAIN UNIVERSAL TRUTHS IN THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO XANDER Harris. Truths that he'd been forced to reconcile on the fly one night six some odd years ago when he'd looked his friend, his best friend, in the eye and watched as he disintegrated. He didn't think the others knew just how often he thought of that, how much Jesse McNally still haunted him. There had been nightmares for a while—a long while, actually—made worse by the fact that Jesse seemed to just vanish from the collective conscious not long after his death.

Somehow, it had taken Buffy Summers arriving in Sunnydale for Xander to notice just how many kids went missing in the gap between the first and last days of school. And it had always been like that, only in an unspoken way. The thing everyone knew but just didn't acknowledge, and he did mean *everyone*. After all, he was Sunnydale stock, born and raised, which meant he'd been no stranger to the ever-revolving faces of dead or missing teenagers that haunted the nightly news. It was normal for new businesses to pop up, do really well for a while, then disappear after a grisly murder that would remain forever unsolved. Hell, more than normal—it was like clockwork. Every six months, something new came and something old went, and that was just life. That was just Sunnydale. Move along, folks. Nothing to see here.

Then Buffy had shown up and put a face to the boogeyman, and his life had changed forever. And one of the ways that change had manifested was in how he saw the world. Before, Sunnydale's oddness had been something he just accepted at face value. Having lived nowhere else, there really hadn't been an issue there. So teenagers didn't routinely turn up drained of blood and with severe neck trauma in other cities, big whup. That was just the way things were here, no rhyme or reason to it. Except there were rhymes—particularly one with *umpires*—and there were reasons—particularly of the demonic persuasion—and good was good and bad was bad and you could

tell who the good guys were because they didn't have fangs, screwed up faces, or blazing yellow eyes.

But then there had entered all this icky gray area, screwing with his newly canonized gospel and forcing him to make allowances for things that really shouldn't get allowances. Like, say, vampires with souls, Incan mummy girls who just wanted a chance to live the life they had been denied, and former Vengeance Demons who asked him to prom. He hadn't warmed up to Anya overnight and his decision to entertain her desire to go to the dance with him, then to have sex with him, then to keep having sex with him until he'd found himself in a relationship, had been a little murky. Just one day he'd woken up and Anya had been in his life, smiling and perky and making with the inappropriate comments and willing to essentially fulfill every fantasy he'd ever had. And a little ways down the road, he'd realized, by golly, he loved that girl. Every bit of her, from her voracious sexual appetite—okay, he really loved that part—to her strange but oddly endearing bunny phobia. Then the world had been about to end, and he'd realized that if life were to continue, he didn't want to spend it with anyone else. Cue proposal, which he still thought he'd knocked out of the park.

The thing about the world not ending? All the second thoughts he'd fooled himself into thinking he could skip had been waiting on the other side. Easy to ignore at first, due to intense grief and resurrection preparations, but once that had been behind them, Xander hadn't had anywhere to hide from his own stupid head. And it had been stupid—he'd known that before, and he'd known it after, but knowing something was stupid didn't magically make the worry go away. It had been there, wearing his father's face—like the demon had worn Jesse's—just waiting for a moment of weakness to swoop in for the kill.

The aftermath of the failed wedding should have been straightforward. Anya had gone from being human to being a demon again, and that made her off-limits. There were good people and there were demons, and demons should never be trusted. Even the ones that *seemed* like they might be good weren't good, because souls were tricky things that could get easily lost and then people would die. Lots and lots of people.

Only part of him had known it would be different. Anya might be a demon, but she was still Anya. She hadn't changed, hadn't come after him—beyond what she'd confessed she'd tried to do, anyway—and she'd been... Well, *there* at the end. She could have used Willow's grief to have a party of her own, but she hadn't. She'd thrown in with the good guys without needing to be asked, because at some point over the last few years, that had just become who she was.

And Xander still loved who she was, gospel be damned. He'd half-hoped the summer working on rebuilding the Magic Box would snap him out of it. That she'd do something undeniably demonic and force him to accept that the woman he'd proposed to had left the building. But that hadn't happened. She'd just been Anya. Bossy and opinionated and sometimes a bit too forthright, and it had made him think things he'd never think before.

There hadn't been much occasion for them to be alone together, either. In fact,

Anya seemed to go out of her way to avoid situations where she thought they might run that danger.

Except tonight they were alone. The shop would officially reopen for business tomorrow, and he knew, without needing to be told, that Anya's nerves were all over the place. She kept moving the fertility statue, for one thing. So far it had been beside the cash register, on a stand by the door, beside a bunch of magical marital aids, and once in the employee bathroom. Why the fertility statue, he had no idea, only she was fixated on it to a point he'd find annoying if he weren't glad for the reason to lag behind.

Right now, the fertility statue was standing guard over a selection of crystals that she had painstakingly arranged to her satisfaction, but he thought it likely the thing would continue its tour of the Magic Box after Anya concluded her fourth count of the register to make sure all was ready for tomorrow. He knew better than to interrupt her. Counting money was one of her favorite methods of relaxation. Her favorite method of relaxation just happened to be his favorite, too, but it seemed unlikely she'd opt for that tonight.

"It looks good, Ahn," Xander said the second she'd slammed the till back into place. "Everything looks good."

Anya sniffed and marched with intent around the cash wrap and toward the fertility statue with a single-minded focus. "Good isn't enough. Everything has to be perfect," she said, and began a new prowl across the store before ultimately stalking toward another table display of various charms and talismans. "I provide a valuable service, combining my knowledge of the occult with my many centuries of experience, which they sure as hell don't get anywhere else. But you know what they say—out of sight, out of mind, and I've been out of sight for far too long."

"Anya."

She started and gave him the sort of glassy-eyed look that told him she'd forgotten he was there. "Well," she said, straightening her shoulders and lifting her chin in that *born survivor* way of hers, "I have. No thanks to Willow."

Xander glanced down, nodding. "I know."

"It feels like bad luck, her coming home now. I don't need any more bad luck."

He knew that, just as sure as he knew not to say that Willow being back in Sunnydale wasn't anything to worry about. Anya and Willow's relationship had never been exactly rock-solid, and it would take more than good faith on his part to convince his former fiancée that whatever came next wouldn't be a repeat of last spring. That Willow was better, had gotten the help she needed, even if he believed she was and she had. Even if he was the only one who believed it.

"Well," he said at length, rocking a little on his heels, "if she does make everything go kablooeey again, I'll be here with my tools and my construction brain to help get everything back the way it should be."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better? Because it doesn't." Anya worried her lower lip between her teeth, the gesture so vulnerable and human he caught his breath. It was stuff like that—exactly that—that made it hard for Xander to

remember the whole *demon* thing, or even try to apply such an ugly word to a person he loved as much as he loved her.

Added a bit too much gray to a world that was increasingly full of it. He missed the days when things had been simple—when *demon equals bad* had been enough in his book.

And that brought him around to the thing he'd been trying to find a way to ask all summer. The thing he wasn't sure he wanted an answer to, except now his time was up. Unless she wanted him here—or unless there was another carpentry-related disaster that required his expertise—Xander would have little to no reason to come into the Magic Box. Well, he supposed that wasn't entirely true, with Buffy's studio being attached and everything. But then Buffy had her own key to the back entrance, and he couldn't see Anya spending a lot of time there when her focus was the retail portion of the shop. Plus, if he dragged it out any longer, too much time would have gone by and the question would seem really out of place—like when you're in a group of people and you want to contribute to the conversation but the topic changes so fast that when a lull finally rolls around, there's really no point in saying anything at all.

That was of course, assuming, that he wasn't already on the other side of that lull. He definitely would be if he waited much longer.

Still, knowing all this, Xander couldn't deny being startled when he heard himself asking the question that had been living in his mind for the past few months. "How is this going to work, anyway?"

Anya scooped up the fertility statue again, not sparing him a glance. "How is what going to work?"

"You...being a demon and a small business owner at the same time. One of these things is not like the other."

She huffed, still not looking at him, rather scouring the shop afresh. "According to you, maybe."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning your understanding of demons is about as comprehensive as your understanding of the G-spot."

Well, that seemed uncalled for. Especially since, G-spot notwithstanding, she'd never had any complaints about him in the sack. "Ahn, for the last time, that doesn't exist. We tried."

"Not enough, and reports that it doesn't exist are typically from stupid men who don't want to look hard enough." Anya paused, gave the statue in her hands a long, searching look. "Where do you go?"

"I assume you've already tried wherever you keep your books on mystical procreation?"

"Of course. I am not a moron. I just don't get why anyone would want to bring small, screaming versions of themselves into this world and wreck their bodies and their sex lives in the process." She frowned a moment longer before, finally, her eyes lit up. "Oh! It's so obvious. In the section about familiars."

"Familiars?"

"They're pets with psychic connections to their masters, usually witches. They have their own magical powers that can add an *oomph* to spellcasting." Anya made her way across the shop and slid the statue between two sets of books—one with an older spine and the other that looked like it might have come from a Barnes and Noble. "Whether traditional or homegrown." She slapped her hands together in a *job well done* gesture, then whirled around, her hands on her hips. "Now, what were you saying?"

For a question he'd been mulling over for some time now, it had slipped out of his head with alarming rapidity. Thankfully, he was able to tackle it and beat it back into submission before it could get too far. "I was just wondering how this is going to work. You being all vengeance again. I thought you might just pack up and move on."

"I am more than my job, you know."

"I guess it's just... How is it working?" He waved around again at this place he'd dedicated untold resources, time, and money to bring back to life, aware—also again—that the question was a few months too late, but oh well. He was committed. "Three years and many stories later, I have a pretty good idea of how murder-y your job can get."

"And you're just now asking me this."

"I honestly didn't want to know the answer."

Anya considered him for a long beat, her eyes narrowed. "I'm not stupid, Xander."

"I never said you were."

"You think I don't know that Buffy would come after me if she thought I was out killing? More importantly, do you think I'd be dumb enough to let her use the back room as studio space if I *were* out killing?"

Xander frowned. "I thought Giles made you—"

"Do you think we haven't talked about it, me and Buffy? Because we have." She looked down again, her expression self-conscious in a way Anya just didn't get—not around other people, anyway. This look had always been his and his alone. The thing she shared with him behind closed doors. He hadn't seen it in months, since before the disaster that had been their wedding. And like everything else about her, he missed it. "Buffy knows that it's good to have an ally in the demon world. Someone who can keep their ear to the ground. You don't think she kept Spike around just for the sex, did you?"

Now there was a mental image Xander could have really done without, and one he assumed she'd put there as some sort of punishment. "Was that really necessary?"

"Granted," Anya went on, continuing as though he hadn't, "I could certainly see why she would keep him around him for sex. The man certainly knew how to use his—"

"Seriously, can we stop with the drooling over my best friend's would-be rapist? I think I threw up a little in my mouth."

At that, Anya released a long sigh, her shoulders sagging. "Yes, that would be a deal-breaker in most cases. And Buffy wants to cash in that vengeance wish, I'm her girl."

God, he wished she would. Not that Xander was enthusiastic about the prospect of Anya using her vengeance powers at all—he wasn't—but in the service of dishing out some much-deserved payback at the vampire who had nearly done the unthinkable to the Buffster? He could put moral judgments on hold. No one did that to Buffy and got away with it.

No one except you, a traitorous little voice whispered in the back of his mind. The same voice he'd gotten so good at ignoring over the last few months, especially whenever the subject of Spike came up. It wasn't fair, how this thing that he'd been more or less able to forget was suddenly taking up mental real estate as though it had just happened and wasn't years in the past. Not that the situations had anything in common, really. He'd been possessed by an animal spirit—Spike had been possessed by an inability to hear the word *no*. Two completely different scenarios and Buffy had never mentioned the hyena incident. Never as in *never ever*. Not once in the whole of their friendship, and if it bothered her, she'd mention it, right?

Right, because Buffy is so forthcoming about the things that bother her. Open book, she is, as Yoda would say. She never hides things from her friends, especially if she thinks the truth might upset them.

Xander scowled and shook the thought off. Or tried to. The thought had duct tape attached to it and would resurface when he was least expecting it. Make him wish he could hop into a time machine—and just why *weren't* there such things as time machines? How were time machines any more improbable than giant trolls or worlds without shrimp?—so he could go back and kick his own ass.

“—I really hope I don't have to,” Anya was saying when he clued back into the conversation, “but a promise is a promise, and I have certainly done a lot worse to men for a lot less. It just gets weird with someone you know, and especially someone you've had sex with. But at least he has been warned so if it does come down to it, he'll know it's nothing personal.”

Whoa, wait. Back up. Hold the phone and say *huh*?

“You warned Spike you might have to curse him?” Xander demanded, his heart skipping. “Meaning you saw him. You saw Spike.”

Anya turned from where she had been admiring the new placement for the fertility statue to favor him with a frown. “Yes, last night. I just told you. He'd just hit the after-hours butcher across the street. He looked a bit different, but maybe he was tired. He—”

“Anya, *Spike is back in town?*”

“I know.” She paused again, furrowing her brow. “Wait, did you *not* know?”

Xander shook his head and pointed at his head before squeaking, “Is this the face of a man who was in the know?”

“Huh.” Anya seemed to consider this for a second, then shrugged and beamed a little smile. “I *wasn't* the last to know.”

“Wait—*Buffy* knows?” And she hadn't told him? He'd been here all day, putting the final-final finishing touches on the shop, and Buffy had been in the back, making sure her self-defense students truly valued the full range of her new studio space. He'd even popped his head back there to see how things were going, which she

hadn't appreciated—something about respecting the fact that when the door was closed, that meant a lesson was in session—and to ask what she wanted for lunch, which she *bad* appreciated because slayers gotta eat. She'd also hung around to help him do the last bit of truly heavy lifting after her last girl had gone home for the night. At no point had she so much as hinted that a certain peroxide pest was back, and that was the sort of thing Buffy would absolutely, one-hundred-percent tell him.

Right. And maybe tomorrow he'd win the lottery and be named the Duke of Luxembourg.

"I just assumed she did," Anya said, wrinkling her nose. "Though, now that you mention it, Spike didn't say anything one way or another. Not surprised. It took impressive *cojones* to come back here in the first place."

"Which means she might not know." Xander's pulse had started thundering. "Spike, the guy who *attacked her* is back in town and she might not know it."

Anya blinked at him.

"You see, this is the part where someone who's really her friend would be worried," he snapped, grabbing his jacket from where he'd strewn it across the cash wrap and storming toward the door. The second the words were out, he knew he'd regret them—later, when he had time to slow down enough to reflect. When he wasn't in a hurry to make sure Buffy knew their least-favorite vampire had come back to town so she wasn't taken completely off guard if...if...well, if she ran into him on patrol or something. Just going about her business, ordinary vampire, slay slay, then *bam!* Her personal stalker turned attempted rapist popping out of the shadows to knock her off balance. That was the sort of thing that could get Buffy killed.

And if Spike was back, there had to be a reason. A reason that probably involved Buffy—getting back into her good graces, like that was even possible. Maybe he'd try to corner her, feed her some cock-and-bull story about how everything had been a mistake and that he really loved her in his sick, sick vampire way and not to kill him, pretty please, because there was a chip in his head that kept him from hurting people who *weren't* Buffy. And Buffy, being Buffy, wouldn't kill him because... Well, she was Buffy and that was just who she was. Even when the vampire in question was someone who had hurt her the way Spike had.

"Xander," Anya said, hurrying after him. He was almost to the door when she seized him by the shoulder, and her strength being considerably more than his these days—he kept forgetting that—she managed to pull him back before he could barrel out into the night. "What are you going to do? Burst into her house?"

"If necessary, yeah." He jerked away from her, and she let him. "The last thing she needs is to be surprised with this. Believe me."

"This is exactly what you did when we were dating. I'm here, needing your help, and you drop everything to rush off to *Buffy*."

And there it was—the elephant in the room. Or in their relationship, at least. The thing that would likely never improve, no matter how much he wanted to make things right between them, or what he did to show her that he loved her. Every part of her. Even the selfish part. "Ahn?" he said, not turning around. "A store opening is less important than the wellbeing of a friend whose attacker is back in town. And

considering the only reason the Magic Box is opening again is because of me, I think you ought to cut me a little slack.”

It was perhaps the most daring thing he’d ever said to a demon that he had his back to—one he knew had entertained multiple fantasies about ripping him into tiny pieces—which he thought said a lot about his personal growth. Or maybe that was just stupidity. Either way, he slowed down long enough to know that if Anya wanted to tear his head off for that remark, she’d had more than enough time to do just that. The fact that she couldn’t *wish* her way to vengeance on him didn’t mean she couldn’t just take it the old-fashioned way.

“She is the Slayer, you know,” she said, a bit of sulk in her voice.

“Yeah, and he already hurt her once. That’s not happening again.”

He heard her sigh behind him—a sigh of the long and suffering variety. “All right, all right,” Anya said, and the sound of jingling keys followed. “Just let me lock up.”

That was enough to convince him to pause, turn and look at her over his shoulder. “You’re coming?”

“Well, Buffy being my tenant, anything that happens to her affects me.” She sniffed and ushered him out the door. “And I might not want anything bad to happen to her. But not because I like her or you.”

Xander’s lips twitched but he forced himself not to smile. “Of course not.”

“Good,” she said. “As long as we understand each other.”

It was more than he had expected. Like, a lot more than he’d expected. For Anya to volunteer to leave the store without inspecting every corner three or four times was downright selfless. And maybe it was dumb to read any more into this than her protecting a steady source of rental income, but Xander rarely let a little thing like logic stop him.

After all, a guy could hope.



IT WAS DUMB. Buffy knew it was dumb, but still she’d managed to have the thought all the same. The thought in question? *Spike doesn’t knock*. She’d clung to that knowledge, to the certainty with which the thought had manifested. No second-guessing, all bold confidence. *Spike doesn’t knock* so obviously, every single one of her slayer senses, which had started going haywire just before the knock had sounded, were wrong. Spike doesn’t knock and neither do any other vampires. Not unless they really don’t understand how the whole *vampire* thing works, have just found Jesus and are dying to share, or are Harmony.

But when she opened the door, that bubble of hard certainty popped without a fight. For there stood Spike on her porch, his hands in his pockets—still no duster, of course—and a look that was somewhere between anticipatory and nervous on his face.

And because that was the exact minute her brain decided to disengage from the rest of her, Buffy was left with nothing to say except his name. “Spike.”

He nodded, darting his gaze away from hers. “Evenin’, Slayer.”

For a moment, that was all that happened. She said his name, he said *evenin'*, and then they just stood there as though daring the other to strike. Finally, Spike shuffled his feet—and since when had Spike been a guy who got all feet-shuffley?—then said, “Look, don’t mean to darken your doorway or the like. I wouldn’t bloody be here if it weren’t important, the kinda thing you need to know.”

“What?”

Instead of answering, he cast a furtive look over his shoulder, pulling his hands from his pockets. “Don’t really fancy doin’ this here, if it’s all the same to you. Not sure if they’re watchin’, and me droppin’ by might—”

“Spike, what are you talking about?”

“The bloody Council,” he said, snapping back to her with such sudden intensity it nearly knocked her off balance. “Had to go out and get some blood last night. When I came back, there were a couple of goons waitin’ to make an offer. An offer you’re gonna wanna hear.”

Buffy’s ears filled with a dull buzzing. None of what he was saying making any sense. “The Council?”

Spike looked around again, his impatience showing through now. It was almost a relief seeing it—impatient Spike being a Spike she recognized. “Look, can we meet around back or summat? Not tryin’ to wrangle myself another invite here. I’m not that thick. Just really don’t think we should—”

“*Another* invite?” What the hell had happened to the first one?

He paused at that, frowned. “Well, yeah,” he said, and then, *god*, those eyes were on her again. Piercing and blue, too damn blue. It was a thought she’d had many times. On her back, her legs wrapped around his waist, his jaw tight and his lips parted and those *too damn blue* eyes staring into her as he pounded into her. And she’d look away—she’d have to, because gazing into Spike’s eyes as he fucked her was too damn intimate. Let him inside her, let him kiss her, let him explore her with his tongue, but looking at him? Seeing him when they were close like that? That had been too much. And he’d known it, too, as he knew everything. He’d known it so he would tangle her hair in his fist, anchor her in place and push and thrust and buck with all the love she didn’t want and couldn’t take.

“Your invite was never revoked,” Buffy said at last, moving back before she could tell her feet to stop. Everything seemed distant from her, like she was watching from some other place. An audience member screaming at the screen in dull disbelief of the main character’s dubious choices. Because letting the guy who had attacked you into your house? This was not a decision a smart person made. Even if super-strength were a consideration—even if she knew she could more than fight him off again. He’d had the element of surprise the first time; he didn’t now.

Spike was staring at her—she could feel the weight of it, his uncertainty and his awe. That damned awe that never did anyone any good. “You’re sure?”

She knew what he was asking—was she sure she wanted to let him inside, invitation or no?—but decided to play dumb anyway. It seemed safer. “See for yourself. Unless invites have an expiration date or must be used a certain number of times per month in order to remain active.”

He shook his head and edged a step forward, one she regained in the other direction at once. And though she didn't let herself glance at his face, she heard the way he sighed when an invisible wall failed to spring into place, bar him entry, and she knew it was more of that Spike-branded wonderment. That special way he looked at her that made her feel so singular and beautiful, the same she had resented so much last year when she'd been too broken to think of herself as anything other than ugly.

"Thanks," Spike said thickly, and turned to close the door behind him. Making her think of another door he'd closed the last time he'd been here, prompting her to stumble a few more paces away just to assure herself that she could. That there was room to move—room to fight if need be. And not because she thought she needed it, because she was worried Spike would attack her. While her nerves were doing the tango, the rest of her was firm in the absolute certainty that Spike would never do anything like that again. It wasn't a question or a feeling, just something she knew and understood to be fact.

But there was that other part of her, the part that he'd created last spring, whispering that she'd never have believed it of him then, either. In a thousand years, maybe a million. Maybe more than that. Spike was a lot of things, and a lot of those things were bad, but he'd never been *that*. Not with her, at least, and she didn't want to consider the likelihood that he had with anyone else.

This time when she met Spike's gaze, she found him regarding her with resignation and understanding, which confused her to hell all over again. The thought from the other night resurfaced without effort—not surprising, as it hadn't been too far out of reach since she'd walked back inside that crypt. The thought that something was different. Way, way different. She didn't know how or what, couldn't begin to put it in words, and maybe it was all in her head except she knew it wasn't.

But that wasn't important. It wasn't why he was here.

"The Council," she said, shaking her head to refocus on the matter at hand. "You said you're here about the Council."

Spike nodded, looking a little relieved. "Yeah. There were three of them. Two blokes and... Wait, is Dawn here?"

The question threw her, but only a little. "No. Dawn's at some movie called *Triple X*, which *I* triple and quadruple checked was not a porno." Why the hell had she mentioned porn? She felt her face go hot. "But it has that *Fast and Furious* guy in it and apparently, he's all the rage. She had to promise me to get all her homework done in order to go. It being the start of a new school year, not much in the way of homework just yet."

God, she was still talking. All of that had just rolled right off her tongue without provocation. But if he thought it was odd, he didn't say so, rather let the tension in his shoulders loose again. "Right. Good, then," he said, then—before she could ask why he'd inquired about Dawn—he went on, "It was the same bint who was here the last time, tryin' to dig up some dirt on you. Came to see me to ask if I'd gotten the chip out while I was away."

"Did you?"

"No."

Well, of course that's what he'd say. And it wasn't like she could ask for a demonstration, now was it? She inhaled deeply, trying to ignore the flare of remembered pain. If it came down to it, killing Spike wouldn't be like killing Angel had been. The circumstances couldn't be more different.

But it would hurt, and she hated that it would hurt. She hated what it said about her. About them. After all, it *shouldn't* be difficult to kill the man who had done what he'd done. Or almost done it, as it were.

"Not the bloody point, in either regard," Spike said. "The bitch offered to remove it herself."

"She what?"

"That's right. All I had to do was agree to kill you."

Buffy's throat went tight. "Kill me."

"Yeah. They've gotten it in their heads that you're a danger to the world. Spoke a piece about how Willow nearly gave us all curtain call last spring and made it up like the real crime there was lettin' her get that powerful in the first place." He paused, his face falling a bit. "It true, then? Red really went all wicked witch on you?"

She heard the question but couldn't focus on it, her ears now full of a dull but persistent hum as the rest of her tried to grapple with the bomb he had dropped. Because that was what it was—a bomb brought to her house and detonated without warning. But what else could she expect from Spike? When had he ever brought her anything other than complete chaos?

You know when, a small part answered, and that part was loud enough to jar her back to herself. Buffy shook her head just in time to see Spike edging toward her, looking concerned, and again she backed up without thought. "Why should I believe you?"

He stopped short, visibly thrown, and arched an eyebrow. "Come again?"

"You show up here, telling me the Council wants me dead and I'm, what, supposed to just trust that?"

"The alternative being...?"

"That you're full of it."

He stared at her as though waiting for her to elaborate, then huffed a short laugh, the sort that didn't reach his eyes, when she didn't. "You're serious. You think I'm makin' this up?"

"I think it's weird that you show up after having been gone for months and then this just *suddenly* happens."

"Look, I didn't have to come here, all right? Thick git that I am, I thought you might be keen to know that there's a price on your head. But no, you're right. Won't bother next time."

"I don't know why you bothered *this* time!" she shot back, not even sure why she was arguing except that it felt like the thing to do. It felt *better* than standing there in all their mutual awkwardness, not discussing what they weren't discussing. "Even if it were true, why tell me?"

"*Why* tell you?" he echoed, his face going slack with shock.

"Yes. That's a thing I just asked." Buffy nodded, trying to ignore the quiver in her

voice and how it seemed to correspond with a new blast of nerves—one she didn't want and had no idea what to do with. "It's everything you want, right? The chip out. The Slayer dead."

"You've gone round the bloody bend."

"Tell me where I'm wrong."

"Well, for starters, *Slayer*," he snarled, and this time when he prowled forward, she didn't move. Didn't flinch. Made herself stand firm because this was Spike, not someone else, and she *was* the goddamn Slayer and whatever he threw at her, she could take. The pain, the hurt, all of it would come and she'd just turn it into more strength. That was what she did. That was how she survived. "If I wanted you dead, believe me, you'd've been back in that grave you miss so much *months* ago. Care to guess how many times you fell asleep while lyin' next to me? Couldn't tell you, myself. I lost bloody count."

Heat stormed up her neck and filled her cheeks and she would not cry, she *would not*. "What's your point?"

"That I don't need the chip to hurt you."

"Well, finally, something we can agree on."

Spike's face fell. Hell, all of him seemed to fall, as though for a second there he'd forgotten and remembering was pain itself. He let his eyes flutter shut as he stumbled back a step, and Buffy had to press her lips together to keep from screaming or crying or both. It was strange, seeing him wear that hurt, and somehow, she hadn't known to expect it. And it seemed like she should have. She'd seen him that night, seen it the second he'd realized what he'd done—what he'd come so close to doing. He'd slapped a hand across his mouth, tears spilling down his cheeks as he'd looked at her, what he'd done to her, and tried to understand it, and she'd been there the entire time. Watched that play across his face, that awful knowledge cementing into comprehension, and how it had left him wrecked. How it had wrecked them both.

They stood there, living in the memory of the same awful moment for...well, she didn't know. Only it felt like a small eternity, one she hadn't the foggiest of how to navigate. Part of her wanting to apologize and the rest of her furious with herself that she would even consider it—hell, that it would even occur to her to be concerned that she'd made her attacker uncomfortable. It wasn't like she had asked for any of this and just what the hell had he expected?

"Buffy, my god, I didn't—"

"Buffy," Spike said, not knowing he was interrupting an echo. Not knowing how hard her head was spinning or how much he was wiggling her out, how much his presence threatened her understanding of herself—not knowing any of that because there was no way he could. It took a moment to refocus on him, and when she did, her stomach dropped and her heart started to thunder, for she saw the intent on his face and knew what it meant.

He was going to talk about it. Maybe complete that apology he'd started in his crypt that she still didn't think she could stomach, even if she was also starved for it. Desperate to put that night in its proper context rather than let it continue to run

loose in her head, spurred on by her confusion and heartbreak. The awful limbo she'd been left inside and the extremes she experienced in trying to find her way back out.

It was necessary, she knew. If Spike was going to be in Sunnydale, this was a conversation they would have to have at some point. But now?

He seemed to be weighing the same, his own uncertainty on display, which just fucked with her head more. Better when he was annoyed and angry, when he was brash and acting out and being the vampire she knew rather than this new, reserved version who was enough like Spike to be Spike but *not*, and how the hell did that work? He reached some decision, though, something in his eyes solidifying, and he opened his mouth to tell her, and she would have to stand here and hear it, whatever it was.

"Know it won't mean anythin'," he began, and she shook her head without thought. "Know there's nothin' I can say, but—"

The front door exploded inward without warning, Xander spilling into the entryway, his eyes so wide and wild they looked in serious jeopardy of popping right out of their sockets. "Buffy!" he screamed. "Spike's in town! He's—" He finally wheeled to his left and saw them standing there in the living room. "Here. He's right here. Spike is in your house."

Spike studied him for a second. "Nothin' gets past you, does it, Harris?"

Xander didn't say anything, just held the vampire's stare, his chest heaving and the flush in his face slowly fading back to normal. "So," he said, finally turning to Buffy, "I take it you already knew that Spike was back, and I just played the part of the town crier for no good reason. Also judging by the lack of shouting from people *aren't* me, as well as the absence of signs of struggle, you have this under control."

Anya, who had walked through the still-open door just in time to catch the last part of that, rolled her eyes. "I told you," she muttered. "Even if Buffy *didn't* know he was back, I told you she could handle him just fine. You never listen to me and that is one of the many reasons I'm glad we avoided what was sure to have been a very frustrating marriage."

"You knew he was back?" Buffy asked before she could help herself. "Since when?"

Anya frowned at her. "Since last night, when I ran into him outside the butcher as I was closing up the shop."

"And you didn't say anything to me?"

The frown turned into a scowl. "You didn't say anything to *me*."

"Do I even need to be here for this conversation?" Spike asked, then brought his hands up before anyone could fire off the obvious retort and moved toward the door. "Right. Slayer, you know where to find me if you clue in that I'm not havin' you on about the Council. Preferably before they put you back in the ground, yeah?"

He didn't wait for a response, nor did he look at her as he spoke. Just strolled out the open door without another word, leaving her staring after him and all too aware that Xander and Anya were watching her like she was a ticking bomb. Joke was on them. She'd already done all her exploding. They just couldn't tell because all the debris was in her head.

What the hell just happened?

There was no answer, obviously. That wasn't the way her world worked.

After a few long beats, Xander cleared his throat and edged toward her. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," she replied, not sure if it was a lie. Assuming it probably was.

"What did he mean about the Council?"

Buffy finally pulled her attention from the open door, met her friend's gaze and tried for a smile. It felt more like a grimace and, from the worry on Xander's face, probably looked like one too. "I don't know," she replied. When it came to Spike, she was completely in the dark on so many things and she wasn't sure how to climb out. There was every chance she'd had it right, that he'd just made something up as a pretense for reestablishing their relationship. To what end, she didn't know, but Spike's motives didn't always align with his actions, and he'd certainly used the threat of danger as a red herring to ingratiate himself before.

But the operative word there was *before*. This new Spike who was hard to read and harder to be around wasn't something she could try to predict. And given what was at stake if he hadn't been spinning yarns, Buffy couldn't afford to be caught off guard.

The Council might or might not want her dead. She needed to figure out which.

"Buffy." Xander's voice was a bit higher than before.

"I need to call Giles," she said.

"Why? What'd he say?"

"That the Council wants me dead and asked him to do it."

Xander blinked. A lot.

"So...we should probably figure out if that's just Spike pulling some scheme to get close to me." Buffy tried for a smile again and was relieved when this one felt a bit more genuine. "We'll get to the bottom of it one way or another."

She watched the tension fade from Xander's shoulders and knew he was feeling that warm rush of welcome familiar, and she understood. Plans were very comforting.

Especially plans that would keep her too busy to think about Spike or *that night* or anything that dragged her toward territory she wasn't sure she'd ever be ready to explore. Keep her from wondering about the second half of the sentence that Xander had interrupted. If she could have seriously stood there and listened to Spike tell her what had happened. If she could have believed him.

And, above all, if she wanted to.

IN DISGUISES NO ONE KNOWS

EVEN THOUGH SHE'D SPENT HER LIFE AS THE PROVERBIAL EARLY BIRD, WILLOW had worried she'd oversleep and miss her flight. Or perhaps she'd hoped she would. While her nerves weren't as jumpy as they had been a couple of days ago, they were still very much there and very much insistent upon sharing headspace with her, flashing bright, Technicolor images of the sort of homecoming she could expect. That it just so happened to be the same one she deserved didn't help matters, either.

But she needn't have worried. Giles had woken up five minutes ahead of his alarm clock and started bustling around so they'd be on the road with time to spare to make it to the airport. All of this she'd known because rather than oversleeping, Willow hadn't slept at all, having failed to get her brain to settle down long enough for sleep to sneak in and take the world away. And a half-hour after climbing out of bed, she was freshly showered, had already thrown back two cups of coffee, and was pacing by the door, running over her mental inventory for the umpteenth time to make sure she hadn't forgotten anything.

"If you did, I can get it to you," Giles assured her when she voiced this concern. She had to hand it him—he hadn't once lost his patience with her, no matter how often he had to reassure her that the thing he'd told her five minutes ago, five minutes before that, and seventy some-odd times yesterday hadn't changed. She'd worried about that, especially considering she'd been there when he'd snapped at Xander for his inattention on more than one occasion. But then, Giles had never assumed the role of mentor for Xander in any capacity, and certainly not surrogate father.

She still wasn't sure how to feel about that last one. Maybe with some time and distance, they could go back to the old status quo. Though it might be hard for him to see her like that anymore—she doubted she'd ever forget how it had felt to lose his

trust as the one person he could depend on to keep a level head. And that had been before she'd gone off the deep end.

The hardest part of the journey was the one just ahead of her now, waiting down a road that would, for her, end at the airport. She thought she might relax a bit when she got to her terminal—nothing to do there but pull out a book and get in some quality reading time for the next ten or eleven hours. It was the *getting there* part that worried her. Easy enough to do what she was told when she knew Giles was close, but Giles wouldn't be able to go through the airport with her or see her off at her gate. Once she started going through security, that was that. She was on her own until Sunnydale, left to her own devices, which was something that hadn't been true since she'd tried to end the world.

And that was a scary thought, that she wasn't sure she trusted herself not to lose command of herself during the brief period she wouldn't be supervised. The illusion of control was just that—she knew it, knew that Giles didn't have the power to harness her if she decided to go all vein-face on him or the world again, but *damn*, the illusion had been a powerful placebo. Allowing herself to think, believe, that the grownups were in charge and would be able to step in should she wander too far in the wrong direction, help her get back on course.

But then there was the Callista that had taken residence in her head, the one there to remind her that part of recovery was accepting that no one controlled your life but you, no matter how much it sucked. Personal accountability was one of the cornerstones of not only addiction management but magic itself—it was what made her worthy to use it, what would keep her in check so that what had happened before would never happen again. That Giles wouldn't be there to hold her hand while she dove head-first into a high-stress situation was just one of the many hurdles she had to clear in moving forward.

Still, she had him for at least the next hour, and she'd spend every second of it leaning on him until it was time to walk on her own.

"My palms are sweaty. Is it normal for palms to be this sweaty?" She rubbed said palms along her thighs, casting Giles a glance out of the corner of her eye. "Or maybe I'm getting sick, and we should postpone for a few more days."

The corner of his mouth twitched but he didn't take his eyes off the road. Which was good. Even all these months later, Willow was still a little wiggled to be on the wrong side of the car while it was in motion. She trusted Giles knew how to handle the funky British way of driving, but her nerves were less easy to convince.

"I don't believe anxiety is catching," he replied.

"What if it's not anxiety, though? I could have a fever. The flu. I could have that bird flu."

"Ah, yes, from all the chicken wrangling you have done in your spare time."

"Hey, you don't know what all I got up to when you weren't around."

That at least earned a chuckle, one that made the eye she could see crinkle at the corner. It was a nice sound, Giles's laugh. She'd always thought so and had once been obsessed with saying things clever or witty enough to earn it—first as a schoolgirl with a crush and then as a woman who regarded him with a deep, abiding respect.

The respect was still there, had grown so much it was almost painful, but the woman who had first nurtured it had become someone else. Someone who could never be as carefree as she'd been then ever again. And it hurt thinking about that, the versions of herself she'd buried along with Tara. Who she hadn't even gotten to bury due to the thing she'd become.

There was that, too. The knowledge that aside from facing her friends and owning up to the damage she'd caused, she was returning to a Sunnydale where the love of her life was tucked six feet under the earth. In a handful of hours, she'd be surrounded by places that they had made theirs in ways small and big. The Bronze where they'd slow danced. The sidewalks where they'd walked hand-in-hand. The bridge where Tara had sung to her, her own Disney princess come to life. The room they had made theirs, where Tara had asked if they could just be done with the rebuilding and the pain and just be *together* again. And that spot where she'd fallen, dead before she hit the floor, taking a part of Willow with her. The best part. The part that had been hers.

Tara had lain in her arms the last time Willow had been with her. The next time she was with her, it wouldn't be Tara at all, rather a headstone bearing her name. A little dash wedged between her birth and death date encompassing all the living this amazing, beautiful woman had done and brought to others in the few years the world had been lucky enough to have her. And Willow wouldn't be able to push back that pain anymore—the pain that had driven her mad with the need to punish the world for what it had taken from her. Or the pain that came with thinking about Tara in the Heaven that they had collectively torn Buffy from, watching in horror as Willow embraced everything that Tara had rejected.

There hadn't been time enough to get into that at MAA. Or if there had, she'd avoided it. Tara had started off as something she kept to herself, something that was hers and hers alone, and grieving her felt much the same way. To make people understand how much it hurt, she'd first have to make them understand Tara, and where could she start? How could she hope to put to words everything Tara had been—everything she *could* have been? And even if she succeeded, if Willow somehow managed to make people feel just how unlucky they were to have never known her, how could she own up to the reality that *she* had known her. *She* had been loved by her. And it had taken less than a second for her to betray Tara's memory. No, not just betray. *Desecrate*. That was what she'd done. That was what she had to live with.

"Willow." She looked up, felt a tear that had been making its way down her cheek change course with the movement. Giles had pulled his eyes off the road but shifted back to it almost the second their gazes connected. "I know this is hard," he said. "But you know Buffy as well as anyone. You know how forgiving she is."

It took her a minute to align what he was saying with the weight of the grief brought on by thoughts she could not make better, then she understood. And she didn't bother to correct him. Hard as it was, talking about Buffy was easier than sitting with the gaping maw that was Tara's absence.

"I know," she agreed thickly, and wiped at her cheeks. Buffy was forgiving—the very picture of forgiveness, even to people who had tried to kill her. Tried to kill her

family. Tried to end the world. Only Angel's excuse had been a bit better. In the end, Angel hadn't been behind the wheel. Willow couldn't blame any of what she'd done on the lack of a soul, though goddess, she'd tried to at first. In those initial days of attempting to justify the enormity of her crimes, she'd called Tara her soul. But as romantic as the notion had seemed, Willow had been quick to realize that putting that on her dead girlfriend was an insult to her memory. And to herself.

The fact was that no one had ever betrayed Buffy the way Willow had—first by tearing her out of Heaven and then by trying to end the world she'd given her life to protect. There was no curse with an inconvenient escape clause that could assume the blame, no amount of bargaining that would change the reality that Willow had been completely in control of her faculties the entire time.

And still, Buffy *would* forgive her. She'd forgive her for all of it, including what had nearly become of Dawn. Knowing that didn't make the prospect of facing her or any of the others any easier to bear. Anger and disappointment or outright animosity would allow Willow the ability to assume the defensive; forgiveness left her exposed, with no target for her hatred but herself.

She had a little over thirteen hours to stew on that before she had to face it.

Willow couldn't think of any other way to fill the silence following Giles's reassurance, so she didn't try. There was little they hadn't already said to one another at some point over the last few months, and she didn't have the energy or inclination to revisit any debates that were moot now anyway. So she sank into her seat, redirected her gaze out the window—not ahead, still too wiggy—and started yet another mental composition of what she might say after the plane touched down and she was on home soil again.

Just because the right combination of words hadn't hit her all summer didn't mean she'd give up trying to find them.



HE COULDN'T SAY he didn't have concerns. He did, some more considerable than others. After what had happened last spring, there were a whole host of things Rupert would never again take for granted—lessons he'd been foolish enough to think he had mastered many years ago. But life didn't function like that, which was a lesson unto itself, and sometimes the hardest lessons to learn were those that needed to be repeated to truly sink in.

If someone had told him twenty-five years ago that he'd need a reeducation in the dangers of magic, he likely would have socked them. Yet here he was, staring at the back of Willow's head as she disappeared among a throng of travelers, at the end of a period of months that had easily been some of the hardest he'd ever experienced. Still, Rupert wouldn't have signed off on Willow's return to the States if he didn't think she was ready. He hadn't brought her to Devon with any sort of timeframe in mind. The healing that Willow needed to do couldn't be quantified; he had relied on his own observations as well as reports from his contacts within the coven and Willow herself before making any arrangements. And even though Willow was

understandably nervous about what came next, he also knew that she knew she had to do it. Once a stage of recovery started to feel repetitive, it was time to move on.

But he did not envy her. Even during his darkest, when he had been raising hell on his own, he had only flirted with the sort of magicks that Willow had since made part of her. The taste he'd gotten then had been enough to scare him off the arts dark enough to get people killed, if not the stuff altogether. Living with his own brand of regret had been difficult enough, even before the past had come to collect. Willow's darkness was the sort from which she could never truly be free—she would live it as he did and more so, and quite likely remain afraid of herself for some time yet to come.

There was nothing more he could do for her, though, and callous as it might sound, nothing he *would* were it possible. Willow needed to live with her fear of self, recognition and respect for the magicks she wielded, as well as the weight of what giving into them had cost her and nearly the people she loved the most. Even if a lesson needed to be repeated every now and then, there was no educator as effective as the past.

Rupert waited until he could no longer tell which redhead was Willow, then turned and made his way out of the airport to his waiting car. It was appallingly early, such that only the most dedicated travelers were out and about, and he hoped to avoid heavier traffic on his way into London. As much as he'd enjoyed Chulmleigh, he was very much looking forward to the comforts of the home he'd been in the process of building before the crisis had arisen.

Though in their world, crises never really ended, rather evolved or rolled into the next one. He hadn't even buckled his safety belt before his mobile started to ring, and given that only a handful of people had the number associated with it, Rupert couldn't help the way his stomach tightened as he withdrew it from his pocket. Nor the skip in his chest when he saw the name emblazoned across the small screen.

It wasn't uncharacteristic of Buffy to call at all hours, but something told him this wouldn't be as simple as reminding her of the time Willow's flight was scheduled to land.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Giles. It's not too early, is it? I didn't do the math in my head until the phone was already ringing."

He glanced at the clock on his dash, though he didn't know why. It was *still* appallingly early. Or would have been on any other day. "Lucky for you, I just dropped Willow off at the airport, so I am no more indisposed than I would have been otherwise."

"Huh?"

He blinked, fighting off a tired grin. "What seems to be the trouble?"

"It's Spike."

Well, that was certainly enough to banish musings over Willow's situation or what he planned to do upon arriving home. Buffy had been rather tight-lipped surrounding the circumstances of Spike's departure, not giving him more than a brief overview of their relationship up until she'd broken it off with him. Xander was the one who had

filled in the rest—how he had found her sitting by the tub upstairs, her cheeks puffy and bruises forming along her legs, and the conclusions he'd leaped to as a result. And Rupert had surprised himself by being surprised. He'd known Spike was a monster, of course, and someone that could never be trusted in any circumstance... which was why he'd been startled to learn that some small part of him *had* trusted Spike. Not a great deal and not with anything substantial, but that his feelings for Buffy were in fact as real as they could be. That whatever else, the man truly believed himself in love with her, and he had stuck around for five months loving her in absentia.

Then he had tried to violate her in ways that made the father in Rupert want more than a pound of dust. It had taken him a while to talk himself down from doing something particularly rash, like cursing the little berk's prick off. The only reason he hadn't was his magic, which hadn't really been his at all, had been depleted by the battle with Willow. Yes, he had natural abilities, but those were somewhat stunted from disuse, and he hadn't thought it a very good example to hone them for the purpose of curse-casting while trying to mentor a recovering addict.

He suddenly found himself very much wishing he had made an exception. "Spike has...returned to town?"

"Yeah. And he's... I dunno, Giles. He's different."

"Different."

"Don't even ask me to explain it. He's not sharing where he went or what he's been up to, either."

That was more than a little worrisome. "Well, if you're asking me if it's ethical to slay a vampire with his particular handicap, I rather think—"

"No, it's not that. He says the Council wants me dead."

Rupert barked a laugh, not meaning to but not able to stop himself. "He said what?"

"He said he was visited by some Council people, one of which spoke to him back when they were in town trying to decide if I was their pick to fight Glory." She paused, and there was enough in her voice to chase away the biting retort he had at the ready. Whatever Spike had told her had her concerned, perhaps even more than she knew or was willing to yet admit. She might not be saying as much but Rupert knew his slayer too well to not hear it. "Giles," she said a moment later, "he says they offered to take his chip out if he's the one to do it."

"That's absurd."

"Is it, though?"

"Yes, Buffy, it absolutely is absurd. You know my feelings regarding the Council, and our current relationship can hardly be called cordial, but to suggest they would attempt to kill you is beyond preposterous." He shook his head, laughing again. "And it wouldn't be unlike Spike to fabricate reasons to endear himself to you, now, would it?"

The silence that followed was difficult to interpret, especially with an ocean between them. Rupert would never assume he knew the way Buffy's mind worked—if he did, he'd have a good number fewer gray hairs and likely another ten or fifteen

years added to his life—but he had grown rather adept at determining the trajectory of her thoughts simply through observation. She had the desire to see the best in people, even and especially when they didn't deserve it, and that had extended to Spike as long as he had been a reliable fixture in her world. While she had never forgotten what he was, she had depended on him a bit too much for Rupert's liking, though never with much allowance and almost always as hired muscle. At least, that had been the case until Spike had decided he was in love with her, and especially following the vampire's inexplicable selflessness when he had been Glory's prisoner. Then Buffy had started to soften, let her guard down. She would never use the word *trust* to describe how she had viewed Spike, but Rupert knew better. He could have only gotten close to her if she had trusted him, at least on some level.

And though he wished he could say that he believed whatever trust she had placed in Spike had died the day the vampire had attacked her, Rupert knew better there, too. Knew all too well just how large that forgiving heart of hers was, the very same Willow was relying on.

"Buffy," he said after a beat. He thought he heard her swallow. "You know Spike can't be trusted."

"Yeah."

She didn't sound nearly as convinced as he'd hoped. He drew in a breath to steel himself. "You also know," he said, "that he would say anything to get close to you. To perhaps view him as an ally rather than a vampire. Or worse, someone who...*hurt* you the way he did. Suggesting that the Council means to kill you invites you to assume that you are isolated from resources and would have to rely on him and his brand of *help* in order to survive. More to the point, don't you think I would have heard something if there was a shred of truth to this?"

Even as he said it, though, some doubts of his own flared to life, and he resented that rather a lot. Just the other day, he'd told Willow that the Council kept him around only as a courtesy and due to his proximity to Buffy. His reinstatement meant very little in terms of actual power. Yes, he was on the payroll, and yes, he had his share of assignments, but he wasn't consulted on much anything of actual interest or value these days. He'd lost their confidence when he'd failed to see the Cruciamentum through in full. There was no reason to believe they would consult him on a matter as personal to him as *killing his slayer*. In fact, he was rather certain he would have heard nothing at all.

For the first time since he'd answered the phone, a thread of misgiving began to unravel in his head. And bloody hell, he resented that, for it meant he was actually giving this ridiculous matter serious consideration when he knew full well it was just a ploy. A pretense Spike had concocted to force Buffy to let him close once more, despite what he had nearly done to her in the spring.

"I know you're probably right," Buffy said at last, this time letting her exhaustion leak through. "I just... Spike mentioned Willow. Or Willow going all Big Bad on us. He said that was the reason—that the Council thought it was my fault because I let it happen. And yeah, it's probably just what you said, but we should be certain, right? I mean, it's not like the Council *hasn't* tried to kill me before."

Rupert sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “You know that was only because they thought you were Faith.”

“Giles, what do you think *would* have happened if I hadn’t been able to beat that insane-o vamp when I turned eighteen? Pretty sure they knew who I was then.”

That was a fair point but not one he much wanted to consider. The consequences surrounding the Cruciamentum—particularly what happened to the slayers who didn’t pass the test—were something he had never let himself dwell on, else his own self-hatred over his complicity in that would resurface. Buffy had more than earned her distrust in the Council and he wouldn’t attempt to talk her out of it, particularly when he didn’t trust them all that much, either. But given the choice between them and Spike?

“I will see what I can find,” he replied. “They have me researching the third staff of the Shadowmen at the moment, which just so happens to tie directly into the Slayer’s origins. I’ll use what I can there to see if I can uncover anything.”

“Anything like, ‘say, you aren’t planning to murder my slayer, are you?’”

“Perhaps not quite so blunt.” He smiled, swelling with familiar affection. “In the meantime, be very careful around Spike.”

Buffy offered a dry, mirthless laugh that made every parental bone in his body ache with the need to see her. Hug her. Put himself between her and whatever meant to do her harm, and especially those creatures that had already made her bleed both inside and out. “Don’t worry,” she said. “I can handle Spike.”

That wasn’t quite the reassurance he wanted, as he already had every belief that she could handle Spike. The question was whether she *would*. Still, Rupert decided not to push the issue. He knew her well enough to know that pressuring her wouldn’t do him any favors. In the end, all he could offer was another, “Be careful,” and hope that she heard everything he wasn’t saying. More importantly, that she listened.

Though he also knew it was a lot to ask.



SHE’D THOUGHT she’d feel better after having talked to Giles, but she didn’t, and that bothered her. Enough so that Buffy caught herself staring at the phone long after she had replaced it on its cradle, her mind spinning and spinning and trying to find somewhere soft to land with no luck. Going over everything that had happened after she’d opened the door, all the things Spike had told her, the way he’d looked and sounded—the words he’d used and those he hadn’t. Looking for a reason he might have come up with a story like this one beyond the obvious. Because it was obvious, right? Like Giles had said—hell, like *she* had said—Spike inventing reasons to be near her wasn’t exactly out of the norm. And a story like this was a damn good excuse. Just bypass all the awkward that came from talking about the thing they weren’t talking about and *ploop*, he’d be right back in her life under the guise of trying to save it. Prove himself to her again or try to get her to forget what had happened the last time he’d gotten close.

All of that sounded better, more reasonable than the Council having decided that

they were tired of Buffy being the Slayer. And *now*, of all times. Even if they did blame her for everything that had happened with Willow, that had been months ago, and there were easier ways to kill a slayer than wait for a vampire with a reputation for doing just that to show up. Hell, Warren Mears had tried to make that very point with a gun.

Buffy frowned, rubbing absently at the place the bullet had entered her chest, but forced her thoughts away from that particular rabbit-hole before they could drag her down. There were other things to worry about now.

That was why she'd called Giles, and Giles had given her the answer she'd known he would. The one that made sense to her—the one she wanted to believe. Even with no love lost between him and the Council, he would be hard pressed to take anything Spike said about them at face value, especially a story as crazy as this one.

And it was crazy. Buffy knew it was crazy. The Council wanting her dead? Brokering a deal with Spike to make it happen? It was bonkers. Certifiably insane.

Maybe that was what was bothering her. Insane as it was, it was the sort of insane that was insane enough to be true.

"Well?" came from the living room, where she'd left Xander and Anya. Buffy gave her head a shake and forced herself to take a step back from the phone and return to where her friends were waiting, one more anxious than the other.

And there was the other part of that, too. The shoe waiting to drop that was Xander's inevitable wig-out that Spike was back in town, that she'd known it for a couple of days now and hadn't so much as hinted about it. Things with Xander had been good this last summer—really good, actually, considering how fractured their relationship had become since the resurrection, and how he'd taken not only discovering that Anya had slept with Spike, but that Buffy had been screwing him for months. Part of that was knowing that the affair was over; the other part was the kind of thing they'd never talk about—that Xander felt a sense of righteousness over what had happened in the bathroom. No need to rub in what a colossal mistake Buffy had made when Spike had demonstrated in full just what an idiot she'd been.

This stasis on the subject was all well and good so long as Spike was in the past. But now Spike was all *present* again and that meant unpausing a conversation neither had intended to unpace. One that could so easily become an argument, the air itself felt like a fragile thing.

If they were going to fight about it, Buffy just hoped Xander would wait. She needed time to decompress, figure out how she felt about Spike before being asked to argue her position.

So maybe sometime in the next decade or so.

"Giles says it's ridiculous," she said as she lowered herself into the lounge chair across from the sofa. "Some story Spike made up so that... Well, so that I'd let him close again."

Xander nodded, his expression thoughtful. "It does sound kinda out there," he said, exchanging a glance with Anya. "Even for Spike. Especially with how easy it'd be to disprove."

Buffy hoped she didn't look as surprised as she felt but had a feeling she did. That

was much mellower than she'd expected. "I guess," she said. "He didn't say anything about it when I saw him the other night."

"The other night." The lack of accusation in Xander's voice was beginning to freak her out. "When...you saw him?"

"Yeah. I dropped by his crypt—I do that sometimes, just to see if he's...if he's back. Better to know than be surprised." She pressed her lips together, ran her hands along her legs. That was mostly the truth, at least. "He was there. I wasn't expecting it. We didn't talk much, and I didn't stay long. Just long enough to get that he was back and he's not planning on going anywhere. He didn't try anything," she felt compelled to add, mostly because it seemed like the sort of question Xander would ask even if he wasn't. "It was weird but not..."

And there was where she ran out of words. Not what? Tense? Awkward? Confusing as hell? All of the above? There had been a reason beyond the obvious one why Buffy had decided not to talk about Spike's return with the others just yet—she didn't know how she felt about it. Or him. Or any of it. And she was certain that his being back meant that she *should* know, that others would look to her expecting one reaction and judging her when they didn't get it.

"Let's not forget I saw him, too," Anya said when Buffy failed to finish her thought. "He was picking up blood from the after-hours butcher when I was closing up the shop."

Buffy hadn't forgotten—she just hadn't circled back to that yet. Though now that things were calmer, she understood why Xander had burst in the way he had. "Did he say anything?" she asked.

"He told me he wouldn't hold it against me if I had to eviscerate him in answer to a vengeance wish, which I appreciated." Anya shrugged. "He was a little surprised that I knew about what he did to you. And that you're not out to kill me just because I'm a demon again."

Buffy nodded as though she understood, trying to picture Spike and Anya catching up the way people did when they ran into each other in public. Making small talk. Or not-so-small talk. And she tried to keep from wondering, unsuccessfully, how much their tryst had informed the conversation. If either he or Anya had mentioned it—the fact that they'd fucked in the Magic Box right before things had gone to hell. If either one of them had made plans to see the other, or thought about it, free agents that they were these days. And why the hell it even mattered—why she should even think such things, never mind experience the sort of twisted-gut response she'd only ever had when jealousy was rearing its ugly head at the prospect.

God, how could all these thoughts exist at the same time? How could she be jealous at just the thought of Spike and Anya getting together while counterbalancing the hurt that she'd carried with her all summer? How could she be both relieved and disappointed he'd come back at all? How could she want any of what he'd told her to be true because it would mean...what, exactly? The Council wanted her dead, but Spike hadn't lied to her, so yay?

Why wasn't this black and white? Why couldn't she just hate him the way she should?

Buffy became aware that Xander was staring at her like she was a bomb ready to go off, which at that moment, felt distinctly possible. At least she'd realized he wasn't going to break into an I-told-you-so dance anytime soon, enough so to feel a little guilty that she'd thought he'd might in the first place. That wasn't who they were. Maybe once but not anymore. Everything that had happened with Spike in the spring, with Willow, had left them fundamentally altered. No friendships taken for granted anymore, even when one of them was an idiot. Hell, especially when one of them was an idiot. That was when they needed each other most.

"So you see Spike the other night and that's it?" Xander asked in what sounded like a carefully neutral tone. "He didn't mention any of the Council stuff until he showed up tonight?"

"He said they dropped by last night," Buffy replied, glancing again at Anya. "After he'd gotten back from a blood run."

She nodded. "I can vouch for that much. He had just left the butcher when I saw him."

"And he didn't say anything to you about the Council then?"

"No. It wasn't exactly the longest conversation. And, well, mostly about you."

Buffy flinched without meaning to and looked away, feeling awkward and exposed and resenting both things very much. "Well, so far the story tracks," she muttered. "But it's Spike so that doesn't mean anything. Giles says he's going to look into it on his end. I guess there's not much to do until then."

Out of her periphery, she saw Xander lean forward, balance his arms on his knees. He didn't speak until she'd met his eyes. "Spike's been gone all summer," he said. "Do we know where?"

"No. He's being tight-lipped on that."

"And he says the Council offered to dechip him if he agreed to kill you." A beat, and Xander winged his eyebrows. "Buff, we gotta consider the possibility that he did that himself."

Even though she'd known to expect it, Buffy couldn't help but react viscerally to hearing the suggestion voiced aloud, and damn if she knew why. It wasn't like she hadn't wondered the same—hadn't *asked* the same when he'd been here in person. It also wasn't like she could trust the answer he'd given her, because if Spike *had* managed to get the chip removed, what exactly was his incentive for sharing the news? Not only would he be the man who had attacked her now, but also the man who could attack others. *Kill* others. Edge himself into first place on her to-slay list.

But then, if he had gotten the chip out, why return to Sunnydale at all? She'd been right in what she'd said the first night, that mind games weren't a Spike forte. The times he'd tried to assume a certain role had been rather obvious, and the only reason he'd gotten away with anything came down more to dumb luck than anything else. Pull on the thread and the whole lie unraveled. She could see a soulless Angel playing the long con, trying to get her comfortable and off her guard, make her think she understood the score just so he could relish in her despair when he pulled the rug out from under her. But that wasn't Spike. It never had been. And whatever else had

gone wrong between them, Buffy believed fully that he did love her. Or he had before, at least. Maybe she was fooling herself to think he still did.

Then there was what she'd seen a couple of nights ago, Spike swooping in to the rescue before some other vamp could make a couple of kids their evening meal. The anger in his eyes, the frustration in his voice, and what he'd said—the veiled threats that might have fooled other people but couldn't fool her.

"Maybe," Buffy said at length, only because she knew she had to respond. She cleared her throat. "The only thing I'm sure of right now is something is going on with Spike. And I need to know what that is."

Xander nodded, again calmer than she would have thought. "You need me to do anything?"

Yes. No. The list of things Buffy needed right then was around ten miles long and growing. And lucky her, she had no idea where to begin—except the next moment she did, for the front door jostled its warning before the youngest member of the household pushed into the foyer.

"Don't worry," Dawn said as though they were picking up mid-argument, shucking off her jacket and hanging it on the coatrack by the door. "I didn't walk. Janice drove. And before you blow your lid, I made her go the speed limit and everything. She—"

Dawn looked up as she rounded into the living room, then stopped short, her eyes going wide. "Uh oh," she said, looking from Xander and Anya to Buffy. "It's not another apocalypse, is it?"

Buffy worked a throat that had gone tight, her heart beginning to hammer all over again, for she knew what came next. What had to come now that Xander, Anya, and Giles all knew. But god, she didn't want to do this. She didn't want to watch the light in her sister's eyes go dim at the mention of the vampire who had once been her closest friend, who had been the first to treat her with something other than kid gloves. But some months back, crawling out of a grave that hadn't been her own, Buffy had made herself and Dawn a promise—one she was determined not to break.

"Oh god," Dawn said, the sardonic teenage humor fading from her face. "It is another apocalypse? Come on, it's September!"

"It's not an apocalypse," Buffy replied in what she knew was a very end-of-the-worldy tone, but dammit, she couldn't help herself. "I need to tell you something."

Her sister nearly stumbled over her feet in an effort to get closer. "What is it?"

Buffy glanced to Xander, who gave her a small, encouraging smile. At least she didn't have to do this alone.

"It's Spike," she said, turning back to Dawn. "He's back in town."

What seemed like a lifetime ago, Buffy had stood in a hallway of Dawn's school, burdened with the knowledge that she was about to tell her sister something that would make that day the worst day of her life. She'd watched as defiance and bravado melted into shock and worse than shock, as she stole the last of Dawn's innocence away forever, for there was no going back to childhood after burying a parent. And while telling Dawn that Spike had returned to Sunnydale was light years removed from the way she'd broken her heart once before, it felt too similar. There was life

before and life after, and the two were forever separated by a thing that couldn't be unlearned once heard.

Dawn had dissolved that day at her school. She did not dissolve now. But the light in her eyes did go dim as her face went stony, her nostrils flared, and her jaw pulled tight. Finally, she gave her head a shake, met Buffy's gaze head on, and bit out in a cold tone that wasn't nearly as emotionless as she wanted it to be, "Good. Easier to kill him if he's here." Then, without awaiting a response, she whipped around, her hair flying, stomped out of the room and noisily up the stairs. The sound of a door slamming shut followed, an audible exclamation point.

Buffy blew out a breath and sagged into the chair, not realizing she'd been holding her breath until her burning lungs sent a hot reminder.

"Well," Xander said, clapping his hands together. "That...could've gone worse? Maybe?"

Anya patted his knee. "There's the spirit."

TO CARRY THE WEIGHT OF UNRAVELLING WHERE WE WENT WRONG

BUFFY WASN'T SURE WHETHER SHE SHOULD TRY TO TALK TO DAWN OR NOT. ON one hand, she really didn't want her sister running off and doing something she'd regret. On the other hand, she couldn't deny a certain amount of resentment that Dawn's feelings on the matter were so straightforward and easy to understand. There was no baffling gray area, no internal circular arguments, no hesitation at all. Just the conviction that Spike had done something unforgivable and should be punished. A lot. Preferably with wooden, pointy objects in the chest area. In fact, that seemed to be everyone's consensus—everyone except Buffy.

And truth be told, she was getting tired of it. Navigating the subject had been tricky enough when all things Spike had been past tense. Not only had she worried about how others would react, but she had also worried about her own reaction—if her expression was appropriate, if she were thinking or saying the right thing, how her words and actions were perceived by those around her. Hell, it was no wonder her mind was a screwy place at the moment. This thing had happened to her, and she spent most of her time trying to be normal, trying to tiptoe around the feelings of people who hadn't been in that room.

That was par for the course where Dawn was concerned. She was the child in this scenario, and no amount of trial-by-fire growing up could change the way she responded to betrayals she felt on a level like this. Was it fair? No. A world of. But Buffy understood that part of being the parent was assuming burdens like this one.

The others were a different story.

This was the conclusion she'd arrived at after a night of tossing and turning, her mind overrun with the shock of Spike showing up on her doorstep, never mind all the things he'd told her. Then her conversation with Giles, how she'd expected more than what he'd given her—how his blanket dismissal of the possibility had seemed

both reasonable and shortsighted at the same time. How Xander had exploded into her house screaming like the apocalypse was following, all because he'd learned that Spike was back in town.

And in the middle of all that was the knowledge that in a few hours she would be reunited with the woman who had once been her best friend in the whole world, and she'd have to go through all of this again. Not just *this* but everything related to it. Xander inevitably telling Willow what had happened right before Warren had ripped a hole in her world, the shock and recriminations and righteous fury and everything that Buffy had experienced through other people more times now than she could count. And somehow, that would become the headline. The reason to believe or disregard anything Spike-related, and how convenient it was that everyone had something other than Willow to focus on.

So, after rolling over for the umpteenth time in the hopes of finding a position that would coax her brain into sleep, Buffy had made a decision. Dawn might be too volatile to talk to at the moment, but Xander wasn't. Not only that, Xander was kinda responsible for all the eggshells she was being forced to navigate, something she had tried to ignore for months but couldn't anymore. Not with Willow literally in the air and due to land before long, and Buffy still completely undecided on if she was ready for that. Knowing, of course, that she didn't have a choice but to be ready, as it was happening either way.

Buffy fully expected to find her sister in an extra snarly mood the following morning. What she got was a rather sullen version of Dawn, one that didn't seem up for communicating beyond the odd grunt, and that was almost worse. Anger was easier to shoulder than heartbreak—simpler and more to the point. Empowering, in a way, because it made it easy to believe that you didn't care. And whatever else, Dawn wanted very much not to care.

A better parent might have broached the subject rather than avoid it, but Buffy wasn't in the mood to be a better parent, especially when she already had one uncomfortable conversation ahead of her. Instead, she watched Dawn make her way through the throng of teenagers toward the front doors of her school, mentally rehearsing what she would say when she got back to the house where she and Xander intended to do one final sweep to make sure all things magical had been purged.

Not that she knew if that would make any difference or if it was like trying to treat a broken limb with a band-aid. What did herbs and crystals matter to Willow, who hadn't needed either when she'd unearthed the effigy of Proserpexa? And to hear Giles tell it, Willow had become so intertwined with magicks that she *couldn't* stop using any more than she could stop breathing or eating or sleeping, which really wasn't with the reassurance-making.

And Buffy had done this song and dance before, the one where she scoured her home for bits and pieces of magic that needed to be tossed because her best friend had a problem. Only she hadn't understood the full scope of the problem then. She'd barely understood herself.

Xander was sitting on the front porch stoop when she parked by the curb. By the

time she made it up the walkway, he was on his feet, his hands in his pockets and a wry half-grin on his face.

"Get Dawnie off to school okay?"

Buffy nodded, licking her lips and not making eye contact as she dug into her purse for her keys. Wondering, distantly, when she'd become the sort of person who dug into a purse for keys, as that was such a *mom* thing to do. "Yeah. She was not in the best mood this morning. Like she might have gotten a personality transplant from Regan MacNeil."

He rumbled a low laugh that she couldn't help but resent. "It's all this Spike stuff," he said in the same dismissive tone he'd used all summer. "She hadn't worked out how she felt about it and suddenly he's back and she has to deal with it."

Buffy nodded without replying, her jaw tight enough to hurt and her temples starting to pound. Uncomfortable conversations were not her forte—bottling up, keeping things shoved down deep, suffering in silence, all of that was the Buffy Summers special. But she and Xander had made a promise to each other after everything had gone downhill. Or rather, *started* to go downhill. And of the many, many things she had committed to working on, her communication skills were at the top.

But it was more than that, too. She needed it out. All of it. Before she brought someone else in that she had to tiptoe around—there had to be at least one person in her life that could see her without a mask.

"Okay," Xander said, clapping his hands together once they were inside. "How do you want to do this? I take dining room, you take—"

"We need to talk first," Buffy said, turning and crossing her arms, which yes, might have been preemptively defensive but experience had taught her well.

The pause that followed her proclamation was the heavy kind. Xander blinked slowly, then let one of his charmingly baffled smiles stretch across his face. "Whoa, sounds serious. You're not breaking up with me, are you?"

"It is. Serious, I mean. Or... Look, I don't know how to say this. I *should* have said something a long time ago, but I didn't know how then, either, and it was easier just to ignore it."

The smile faded. She'd thought that would make it better, but it didn't. The smile had been safety—she could walk everything back as long as it was in place, abort the talk and try again down the line to pick it up. That line had passed, though. Verbal point of no return and all. It was weird how easy it had been to cross.

"Hey," he said, stepping forward, his eyes now wide with concern. "Whatever it is, you know you can talk to me, Buff. About anything."

"Can I? I want to but we don't exactly have a good history with this topic."

"This topic being...?"

"Spike," she said. Her tongue suddenly felt big in her mouth. "What happened. That night you found me in the bathroom."

Xander furrowed his brow, his look one of genuine confusion, which she couldn't help but find exasperating. Like he truly had no idea what she was building up to say.

"Uhh, color me perplexed. Did he or did he not try to—"

"I need you to stop telling people he tried to rape me. And I know *people* now is

just Willow, assuming she doesn't already know, but don't tell her. You shouldn't have told Dawn. Or Anya. Or anyone."

"Buffy—"

"You *really* shouldn't have told Dawn. You know how much—"

"If you're going to argue that he meant something to her, then yeah, that's exactly why I told her. She needed to know what kind of guy he was. Remember what he was capable of. Nothing else would—"

"Xander, stop," she barked, catching both him and herself off guard for how rough she sounded. How forceful. But she didn't give either one of them a chance to recover, seizing the advantage to get ahead of this before the conversation had the chance to turn into a genuine fight. "You weren't there. I was. *I* was and I don't even know what happened that night. And even if I did—even if it was all super clear to me—it's still *my* story to tell. No one should know what happened unless *I* want them to know. I get to decide who sees that part of me. I get to decide what's best for Dawn. I get to decide how the hell I feel about all of this. Not you and not anyone else."

The edge in his eyes had gone soft along with the rest of him. He looked stumped, which she couldn't help but find equal parts infuriating and endearing. Xander worked his throat and dropped his gaze from hers. "Of course you do," he said. "I didn't... Have I been making you feel like you don't?"

Buffy breathed out, tried to not let her thumping heart or the lightness in her head distract her from the conversation. It felt surreal to be saying these things after having spent so much time thinking them, even more so not knowing exactly where it was she wanted to go with this beyond what she'd already said. The thoughts were there as they always were, a twisted jumble of contortion and contradiction, of mounting frustration and uncertainty and low, simmering anger that didn't have a consistent target.

This was more than she had been prepared to say, to face, to think, and stupidly she hadn't realized that it would all come out the second she uncorked.

"I don't know how I feel," Buffy said at last, her voice cracking. At once, she felt so horribly guilty—an epic failure of a woman and slayer and everything in between. The admission exposing her own indecision, instability, unwillingness to see what was obvious and call a spade a spade. "I know how I'm supposed to feel. How you think I should feel."

"I don't—"

"No, you do. If you didn't think I should feel that way, you never would've told Dawn your version of what happened."

Xander stiffened at that, giving her that look he had perfected so long ago—the one that made her feel small and powerless despite the fact that she could kill him with her pinky finger. It was that look that had haunted her all last year, the fear of standing where she was now. Where she had been so many times before.

"Look, maybe I'm missing something here," he said, bringing his hands up. "But if that's the case, I'm a little confused. We both know what I saw when I found you. If I leaped to a conclusion, it was the most obvious one lying around. And we spent a

lot of quality time together this summer, during which you did not once say anything that would lead me to believe that conclusion wasn't the right one. Are you telling me now it wasn't what it looked like?"

"I'm telling you I don't know what it was." Buffy winced the second the words were out, uncrossing her arms so she could wrap them around herself. "I know how that sounds—I know it's crazy. I've been trying to figure it out for months and I thought... I dunno what I thought. Or what I've been thinking. Maybe I am out of my mind, and it's not complicated at all. The point is I don't know. And if I don't know, *you* definitely don't know."

"Buffy—"

"And I should have said something sooner," she said, talking at a clip in the hopes he wouldn't get the chance to interrupt. And that her thoughts would continue rapid-firing until she'd gotten everything out. "That's a thing I *do* know. I should've told you that you crossed a line when you told Dawn. No matter what, Xan, no matter what happened, it was *my* thing to tell. Or not tell. But I never got the chance to make that decision. Dawn knew, then Anya, then Giles. Hell, Willow might know already. I don't know what Giles has told her. But if she doesn't know, then I'm the one who gets to have that conversation when and if I decide to have it."

And that was it—the most she could manage before her uncertainty caught up with her again. Buffy snapped her mouth shut and took a step back, then forced her arms to fall back to her sides. Forced herself to look at her friend head-on, braced for whatever might come next. A fight or an apology or some combination thereof, hoping that he'd remember the promise they'd made to each other, same as she had.

Finally, he exhaled, his shoulders dropping. All of him seemed to deflate, and it was hard to watch for reasons she didn't quite understand. Maybe because, for once, he looked about as confident as she felt. And here she'd thought her confusion would be easier to handle if she wasn't carrying it alone. Maybe one day she would once again know what it felt like to be right about something.

"I'm sorry," he said in a tone that made it clear he wasn't sure what he was apologizing for, exactly, but she appreciated the sentiment all the same. "I won't... You're right. That wasn't my place." A pause. "But Buffy, you know what he is. You can't tell me that after *that*, you still have feelings for the guy."

"No," Buffy agreed, though she wasn't sure she agreed at all. It was just a gut reflex, the expected answer. The same thing she'd been doing for months now—which was all kinds of frustrating since the entire reason she'd brought this up was to break that habit. But as she couldn't say whether or not she'd just lied to him, whether or not there were still feelings beneath the hurt and misunderstanding, she decided not to double back. It would just muddle things more. "But it's not like anything in our lives is cut and dry."

"You don't think vampires are?"

"I think that one of my best friends tried to end the world and we're leaving in a few minutes to pick her up from the airport so we can bring her back here. Where she'll sleep a few feet away from my sister, who she almost killed. I think if that can be true, then I can't assume I know anything."

Xander's expression shuttered at that. "That is not the same thing."

He was back to sounding certain. That must be nice.

"It's not," Buffy said. "But it's not...*not*. I know what Willow wanted to do—what she almost did do. I don't... I don't think Spike wanted to do what he did."

"Oh, come—"

"I'm not an idiot. I know what would have happened if I weren't the Slayer. I know he would have hurt me."

"Hurt you? Kind of a mild way to put it, don't you think?"

A rush of pure irritation—so pure it was almost a relief—seized her hard and refused to let go. Every fight she walked away from, every bad guy she put down, every scrap of adversity she faced was *mild* in retrospect. There was always something bigger, something uglier, some reason to shove what had just happened to her aside to be dealt with later—or, if she was honest, never—so she could roll right on to the next thing unencumbered. Unbothered by the nonstop assault that was the world, the one where she didn't have the luxury of thinking about the reality of her life because her life was a thing where reality went to die. Buffy lived on the literal mouth of Hell, surrounded by a never-ending army of vampires and demons that had her in their crosshairs, with a sister who was turning seventeen this year when she was *actually* turning two, and all of this was before taking into consideration the complications of what other people would call real problems. She was just the super lucky girl with the lucky lottery ticket who had won the unluckiest drawing on the planet—the one where she got to worry about the fact that her best friend had the power to end the world, that one of her closest friends was a demon again who had the power to *make* worlds, that her sister was somehow the glue keeping all worlds from making chaos soup, and that even her nonmagical friends were super susceptible to magical influence. Like, say, summoning a demon that trafficked in Broadway showtunes when he wasn't busy making people go up in flames. Or maybe casting a love spell that worked on everyone except the intended target. She didn't get breaks.

But god, she didn't want to blow up at him. She didn't want to blow up, period. For starters, there was so much inside she wasn't sure she could trust herself to stop once she got going, and she really couldn't afford to get going right now. They were in a race with the clock—they needed to be done with the talking and on with the looking for contraband and preparing for the week's second homecoming. Xander's questions and presumptions, frustrating as they were in equal measure, were the same she'd nurtured through a campaign of silence. And while that wasn't a good reason to bite her tongue, it didn't make *this* any more the right time to get into all the things they owed it to each other to discuss.

So she blew out a breath and forced herself, for the moment, to let it go.

"I don't know," Buffy said at last. "And like I said, you can't know that for me. Please just...please."

Well, that was nice and eloquent. No one would ever mistake her for a great orator.

For his part, Xander opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again, then gave his wrist a glance as though to check the time—he wasn't wearing a watch—before

edging a step closer to her. Though he didn't say anything, the look on his face told her plainly that he was gearing up to do just that, making her attempts to end the conversation nice and moot. Of course. And here people wondered why she often opted to say nothing over something.

Exhibit A.

"I know this is the world's worst timing," he said, and she had to credit him for his modicum of self-awareness, "but I made a promise to you, and I really wanna keep it. Where we tell each other things and...you know. You don't feel like you need to keep the fact that Spike's back to yourself for whatever reason."

"I—"

"Buffy, let's get real. He's been back for...what, two days?" He waved a hand before she could respond. "You saw him—you knew he was here. You made the choice not to tell me and I... Well, hard as it is, I get it. Would I have liked that information before Anya made me go to Defcon One? Sure. But here I thought you didn't let us know because it was hard for you, or you were doing the brave little toaster thing. Now I'm hearing it's because you're not sure what actually happened there? And I know I'm not the easiest guy to talk to sometimes but... I want to be. So try me. I give you full permission to knock my teeth in if I don't do it right."

Buffy pressed her lips together, considered. Her instinct was just to wave it off, retreat, accept that she'd chosen the worst possible time to have this conversation and that her failure to articulate herself meant she should stop trying. The fact was there were certain things Xander just couldn't get because he wasn't her, other things he couldn't get because he'd made up his mind a long time ago regarding the way the world worked, and his philosophy, while not without its obvious exceptions, had served him well. She knew, in his estimation, he'd also been right more times than he'd been wrong. Angel had done the Armageddon thing. Spike had assaulted her. Both the ultimate cautionary tales for what happened when good girls got too close to monsters.

But what had happened last spring had changed them all. Before Willow had gone off the deep end, Buffy wasn't sure Xander would have ever volunteered his time, money, and know-how into rebuilding the Magic Box for a demon out of the kindness of his heart, former fiancée or not. And he definitely wouldn't have even flirted with the idea that he might still want something with her—that the demon thing wasn't a complete deal-breaker. And he'd been trying all summer. Pushing forward and doing his best to do *his best*. It wasn't going to be perfect but if he was trying, she should too. It was only fair.

"He wanted to talk," she heard herself saying, not realizing she'd made the decision to try to explain the mess in her head until her mouth was already in motion. "About what happened with Anya at the Magic Box."

She expected Xander to wince or roll his eyes or sneer or *something*. He didn't. Well, his eye twitched a bit but insofar as reactions went, that was pretty tame, which kind of wigged her out. Any mention of Spike and Anya's tryst had been verboten these past few months, at least whenever Buffy was in the room. She figured this was probably part of Xander's determination not to

mention *anything* Spike while in her presence. Who knew? Maybe he and Anya had hashed the whole thing out in the time they'd spent alone. Either way, Xander wasn't scoffing or looking away or doing any of what she'd expected, which she took as a sign to move forward.

"I can't claim to know what was going on in his head," she went on, glancing down. Maybe it would be easier to say this to the floor. "What he thought he was over here to do. Even before I ended it with him, things between us weren't...good." Buffy hesitated, her heart skipping, and it hit her out of nowhere that this was really happening—she was actually talking about her relationship with Spike. Out loud. In English. To someone who wasn't her reflection. These thoughts and feelings that had lived in her head for months, almost a year now, were getting form outside of herself, leaving her exposed and vulnerable as a result. Discussing them in such frank terms was like something out of a dream. Or a nightmare.

"Are you sure you want to hear about me and Spike?" she blurted.

Are you sure you want to tell him?

To his credit, Xander didn't rush in to reassure her. He sucked in a deep breath, held it, then let it out in a low stream. "Not saying it's my favorite thing, but I'm not going to freak out on you or anything."

"You have grown."

"I want you to keep thinking that so please, don't get too graphic."

Buffy tried for a patient smile that felt anything but. He was right, though. They had made each other a promise at the start—a promise she'd been pretty lousy at keeping. And she was the one who had brought it up. "Okay," she said. "I'll try." A beat. "The first time we were together, it was only after we nearly beat the tar out of each other. There's this side of me...a bad side. A side that scares me. I'd like to say he's responsible for it, but it's always been there. Faith brought it out in me before and I tried to push it down, and I could. For a long time, I could. Until I got back."

"Until we brought you back, you mean."

She wavered but nodded. Honesty, and all. "Yeah. The other parts of me, parts of Buffy, I thought those parts were gone and all that was left was this badness. And he got that. He kept trying to get me to just give in to it and for a while, that worked. I would give in. Because even though the badness was...well, *bad*, it was still me. It was a part of me no one else got to see, but he did, and he understood it, and it was nice being understood. Then I would remember who I wanted to be and how it was more than the bad, and I'd tell him it was over. But I knew it wasn't, and so did he. The badness would come back, and I'd go to him, or he'd come to me. That was the way it was until I decided for real it was over. He stopped then." Buffy inhaled deeply, her stomach giving an unpleasant lurch. She really, really wanted to just leave it there, but she'd already come this far. "That night, he told me he wanted to talk. He was sorry for Anya—sorry that he'd hurt me like that. I think he thought maybe we'd get back together or something, that seeing them together hurt so much it made me change my mind about us. But I wouldn't listen, so he kept trying. And he kept trying. And then the trying became...that. Trying to get me to remember what it felt like with him and that I wanted it. He just... It was like he

didn't notice that I was fighting him in a different way. Not like I'd fought him before."

Xander made a face—to his credit, it was the first one he'd made since she'd started talking. "Buff—"

"But then he did realize it. I *saw* him realize it. It was when I kicked him off and his face—his face when he looked at me. It was like he was waking up, and it was awful. He just...freaked out. Started crying and shaking all over, and the entire time his face was just..." Something was lodged inside of her, in her chest, pushing up against the inside of her skin, filling her with heat and frustration and a helpless sort of conviction that she was doing a big thing badly. That in trying to reclaim ownership over what had happened to her, she'd fumbled and proven why she couldn't be trusted with it. "And then he left. He was crying and he almost couldn't get out the door, he was so upset. But then he did, and I didn't see him again until the other night."

The air had a weight to it when she stopped talking—a texture too, one that made dragging in breaths almost painful, and the silence that followed even worse. So without thinking, she rushed to fill it, a bit desperate and a lot reckless. "I'm not stupid," she said again. "I know what would've happened. What he would have done. And I didn't explain it right—"

"Buffy, I shouldn't have asked you to explain that at all. My god."

She lifted a shoulder and was startled to find her legs were shaking. Her hands too. When she pressed her fingers to her cheeks, she found her skin was cold and clammy. Paired with the way Xander was looking at her, and she must be a mess.

"I know what it was," she said again. "I know what would have happened. I know that he's a monster. He was the entire time I was with him...but he was never like that. Never. And I think that surprised him. I don't... God, this sounds so stupid and I know it's stupid, but every time I think about that night, I can't help but think he didn't mean to do it." She was talking fast now, and her skin was warming up, but not in a way she found comforting. Too much too quickly, resulting in nothing but numb once the hot met the cold. "I think it surprised him and he wiggled out and that's why he left. I think he's been gone trying to figure out... I don't know. Xander, I just..."

The words sounded more than stupid—they sounded weak to the point of desperate. They sounded like a girl trying to bargain her way out of admitting what had happened between her and the guy she'd been naïve enough to let that close. At once, every bad thought she'd had about herself since that night—since she'd first started to doubt what had actually happened and her response to it—exploded to the front of her mind, harsh and unforgiving. Everything since she'd first heard the word *rape* applied to the situation and wondered how it fit. Since she'd failed to summon the sort of anger she knew was expected of her. Since she'd realized her feelings were so freaking scattered.

Could she even consider herself a survivor of sexual assault if she felt like this? Wasn't this something she should just *know*?

Whether Xander read any of these thoughts on her face, she couldn't say. For a few seconds, she wasn't aware of him at all. He was there but not, and she was some-

where else entirely. That was until she found herself pulled back, pressed against a warm chest as his arms closed around her. Bringing her back, grounding her to the room with its floor and its walls and its ceiling and its realness—the things that were certain, not up for debate. That were absolute and straightforward. That she could trust. Buffy let her brow fall against his shoulder, breathed in his familiar Xander smell and did her best to focus on the present rather than let her mind drag her back into a ravine she didn't know how to navigate and felt stupid for finding herself lost inside in the first place. Hating the twisting inside more than she had ever hated Spike, which made the least amount of sense of all.

"I'm sorry," Xander muttered into her hair. "Buffy, I'm so sorry."

Well, that just confused her even more. She pulled back with a sniff, though was relieved to discover she wasn't crying. The burn was there but not the tears themselves. "What?"

"I just... All of it." He tried for a grin, but it cracked before it could look even halfway genuine. "What I said. You're right. I... Hell, I don't know what to say. Which, I know, usually means I'd say something anyway, because not saying something feels weird...but seeing as my mouth is part of the problem here, I think the best thing I can do is keep it shut."

"You think I'm an idiot, don't you?"

"No," Xander replied firmly—so firmly she nearly started at the force of the word. "I do not think you're an idiot. In fact, I *know* you're not an idiot." He took a breath, and it was weird, nearly being able to hear him think. Knowing that he was considering what to say, handling her with care. She didn't know if she liked that or not—probably not, but she also didn't think she could object without sounding even crazier than she did at present. "You know how I feel about Spike," he said a moment later. "I mean, I hated the guy before he... Before all this. I hate what happened to you, but the thing I hate most is thinking I might've made it worse by blabbing. I just... It seemed like the kind of thing people should know about him. He got close to us once, and look what happened."

"Xander—"

"No. I know. Or I don't, but I know I don't." This time when he grinned, it lasted long enough to reach his eyes, for her to see that he meant it. She wasn't sure he understood—which, she wasn't even sure *she* understood—but maybe he didn't need to in full. Maybe he only needed to understand up to this much.

Maybe that was all she needed, too.

"Okay," Buffy said, letting her shoulders drop. If there was anything further to say on the matter, she had no idea what it was. And being that she'd never had a conversation like this before, she wasn't entirely sure how to end it.

Big ball of not knowing, that was Buffy. Thank god the world didn't depend on her or anything.

"So," Xander said, slapping his hands together, "how do you wanna do this? I tackle basement, you tackle upstairs, we split the rooms down here and then hit the road?"

"Yeah. Yeah, that sounds good."

There was another beat of strained awkwardness, though less so than before. At least she thought it was. Like an open wound that had already started to heal or something. *Or something*. She waited to see if he would say anything else, was relieved when he didn't, and as one they broke apart. Xander for the basement, Buffy for the stairs. Off to do the thing they were here to do before their day became even more complicated.

It wasn't until she cleared the landing and had stumbled back into her room that she realized her insides were doing the Charleston. Hell, that she was shaking all over and feeling the sort of battle-worn exhaustion that typically followed one of the fights that nearly resulted in her death. She wasn't sure if that was thanks to the subject or the fact that she'd, for the first time in as long as she could remember, been forthright with a friend. Given voice to some of the chaotic thoughts running roughshod through her head. Said the things she kept living and been heard in the process. Maybe it was all of it. Hell, maybe it was none of it. She couldn't say she knew much of anything these days.

Except that Xander hadn't called her crazy for thinking the things she did. That had to mean something. And even if it didn't, the conversation at the least hadn't devolved into screaming and name-calling, or any of what she might have expected from him at any other point in their shared history. Even over this. Maybe especially over this.

Put like that, and it felt a huge hurdle had been crossed.

That was at least one down. She didn't want to think about how many were left to go.

AS I LISTENED THROUGH THE CEMETERY TREES

AS OFTEN AS SHE'D PICTURED HER HOMECOMING, WILLOW HAD HOPED TO BE AT least somewhat prepared for the emotional upheaval that would be seeing her friends again. Turned out the joke was on her, because she didn't think it was possible to be any less prepared. Not for the awkward smiles or the stares that were quickly averted once caught or the careful small talk that Xander refused to let die no matter how many long stretches of silence filled the space between questions. For her part, Buffy hadn't done much more than offer a vague smile that hadn't reached her eyes and grunt whenever prompted to contribute to the strained conversation. It was all very tidy, very sterile. It wasn't *them*, and that hurt.

The fact that Willow expected this didn't make receiving it any easier.

The car ride from the airport to Revello Drive seemed to stretch longer than the whole transatlantic flight, which, she supposed, wasn't saying much since those twelve hours had zipped by at breakneck speeds. Willow hadn't set foot inside the house since the morning of Tara's murder and wasn't sure what combination of emotional warfare to expect. If she would just have a meltdown the second she stepped across the threshold; if she'd jolt with remembered rage and feel the urge to reach for the darkest parts of herself. Anything seemed possible, and in her world, that was dangerous. Made her feel out of control, and when she felt out of control, the need to fall back on her power was at its strongest.

In the end, though, the act of crossing the threshold was rather anticlimactic. And for some reason, that was almost worse.

"Wow," she said with a forced, breathy laugh. "It looks exactly the same."

Silence followed this stellar observation—the sort packed with all kinds of sound, mostly that of looks being exchanged and unspoken conversations being had. She couldn't really blame them. It had been a dumb thing to say.

So dumb that when the silence broke, it was as though Willow hadn't spoken at all. Buffy dropped the suitcase she'd volunteered to cart inside with a hard *thunk*, muttered something about needing to check her messages, then tore down the hall without waiting for a reply. It happened with the sort of speed that was usually accompanied by little cartoon puffs of air, and left Willow feeling more than a little whiplashed.

Goddess, this had been a bad idea. Coming home at all, but coming *here* especially. What the hell had she been thinking?

"Don't worry about that," Xander said with the unnerving shrewdness of someone who could read her mind. "She's been a little on edge about moving into the studio and worried that someone'll forget and show up here rather than there. I swear, she's been checking her machine like every five seconds."

None of what he'd just said made sense. "Studio?"

"Oh, guess Giles didn't tell you. The Buffster's joined the ranks of self-employment." He flashed his crooked-Xander grin, the one that had stolen her heart when they'd both been six. Like everything else, it hurt to look at. "She's started giving self-defense lessons to Dawn's friends. And Dawn, too, naturally, but Dawn's lessons are pro-bono. Everyone else is charged an hourly rate—one that people are actually lining up to pay. She was able to quit working at Doublemeat Palace altogether after just a week or so."

"Huh," Willow said. Self-defense lessons. Now that she thought about it, it seemed all kinds of obvious. The one thing they knew Buffy did better than anyone was bust demon butt, and there were no shortages of demons around the Hellmouth. She was a good teacher, too—she'd taught them enough simply by letting them watch her that they'd managed to keep the Hellmouth more or less protected twice in her absence.

Or mostly protected. They had at least come a long way from needing walkie-talkies and code names. And goddess, just thinking about that time—about the summer when she, Xander, Oz, and Cordelia had taken on the slayer mantle while Buffy sorted through things in LA—made Willow feel about a thousand years old. The girl she'd been then, awkward but assertive and replete with worries about what college she'd attend, if her boyfriend would follow her should she choose a university in Europe, and her budding magical talents, seemed so far removed from the person she'd become. The one who had cradled the woman she loved in her arms before setting out to seek something worse and darker than revenge. Something she couldn't have fully grasped in the heat of the moment, no matter how much she'd tried.

"It was here at first," Xander was saying when she cued back into the conversation, "but after we got the Magic Box up and running again, she moved over to the old training room. The Magic Box, by the way, is officially open for business as of today. I'd wait a bit before heading over. Anya is—"

"I'm not going to the Magic Box," Willow practically shouted, her temples beginning to pound. She hadn't meant to do that—hadn't meant to say anything—and now Xander was staring at her with his mouth hanging open, his expression somewhere

between pained and apologetic, like he only then had remembered that she hadn't exactly been away at a spa these last few months.

Or, more likely, that he had been hoping in his naïve, Xander way that everything would truly go back to normal now. What was a little attempted homicide between friends?

"I'm sorry," Willow muttered, her face flaming hot. "I...I didn't mean to yell that."

There was a beat, then Xander plastered on his easygoing smile and waved a hand. "Nah. It was dumb. I shouldn't have said... I just figured you'd find your way back there sooner or later. I mean, Giles didn't tell us a whole lot—just the basics. Like that you were alive, and things were going okay, and you had these meetings you go to—"

"MAA," Willow supplied softly.

"That like AA?"

"Yeah. Magic Addicts... Well, you get the picture." She cleared her throat and looked down. She could do this—this part was easy. The Xander part. "I don't know if I should be here."

He scoffed, looking so certain and carefree she might have hated him if she didn't love him so much. "Of course you should be here," he said, and looped an arm around her shoulders to give her a reassuring squeeze. "Sunnydale isn't Sunnydale without Willow Rosenberg. Ask around if you don't believe me."

"I don't believe you," she replied dryly, somewhat shocked to discover she was grinning. He had always been able to do that—make her smile, even when she didn't want to. Even when it hurt. "Really, it doesn't seem too soon to you? Like...way with the soon?"

"Are we talking normal people time or Hellmouth time?"

"Xander—"

"Cause by normal people standards, maybe with the soon. But we're not normal people so to hell with their standards." Xander pulled her tighter into him, overwhelming her with his scent and his warmth and his *familiar*. The very miracle of his presence hit her with the same force as would discovering that a beloved, cuddly blanket she had somehow misplaced wasn't lost after all. "You're home, Will," he muttered. "Couldn't be soon enough, if you ask me. I was ready for you to come back the second you left."

She sniffed, her eyes suddenly burning. "Goober," she muttered into his collarbone.

"Probably." He held her to him for a moment longer, seeming to know, perhaps in that telepathic way of people who had been friends for years, when to pull back. When he was flirting with crossing the line separating *just enough* from *too much*. "Seriously, though, Will. It is *good* to have you home. These last few months have been...weird. Would've been nice to have you around to help get through it."

It wasn't a dig, she knew, but it couldn't help but feel like one. She made a face. "Sorry."

"Just learning that my former fiancée is a demon again would've been traumatic enough." Xander sucked in a breath and gave a full-body shudder. "Especially since

that's thanks to me. Pretty sure creating demons is one of the Scooby Gang's cardinal no-nos."

Willow pressed her lips together, reached out, and rubbed his arm. "It just... wasn't a good time for anyone. But I guess if Anya's opened the shop again, that means she at least doesn't plan to be as vengeancey as before. You were a good influence on her."

"Not sure I'd go that far, but that is exactly the sort of peppy pep talk I've been missing these last few months. And exactly why it was imperative that you come home when you did." He was still for a beat, and she thought he might continue in the same vein. Comforting but evasive—telling her all the things she wanted to hear without really saying anything. But he didn't, which both did and did not surprise her. "She has missed you," he said softly. "I dunno if she even knows it, how much she's missed you. Believe me, there were many times this summer when Buffy absolutely needed a friend lacking in the Y-chromosome department."

She sucked in a breath and glanced down the hall in the direction their friend had disappeared. No sound rumbled back toward her, no hum of a recording being played back. If Buffy had checked her messages, they must have been the very quiet variety. "I tried to kill her," she muttered. "And her sister."

"And me, but who's counting?"

"Thanks," Willow replied dryly.

He offered a grin that was part-cheeky, part-chastened. "We know that wasn't really you, Will."

The bubble popped almost at once, and though she'd known it was coming—though she'd known she couldn't exist in the stasis between arriving home and confronting the realities of her very recent past—it managed to hit her rather hard all the same. Willow found herself stumbling back to put space between them, shaking her head as a dull ringing took up residence in her ears. "No, you can't do that."

"Do what?"

"It *was* me. All of it. Everything was me from the start. Every decision was one I made. I-I killed Warren and Rack. I wanted to kill Jonathan and Andrew so much I didn't care who I had to mow down to get there." Her hands were shaking and that restless energy that she'd been riding for hours now seemed to crackle under her skin, making her fingertips prickle and her hair feel all sorts of staticky. That this just freaked her out only made everything worse—that sensation of control slipping away from her, the need to seize it back in the only way that had ever really worked. "That was one of the first things I had to understand—to accept. I'm the person responsible for me. I made the choices that made what happened happen. And if you hadn't been there at the end, I wouldn't have stopped. I would have kept going and we wouldn't be having this conversation because you'd be dead along with everything else. That was *all me*, Xander. I have to accept that because if I don't, if I just let myself believe this was a thing that happened to me that I had no control over, it could happen again. I could *let it* happen again."

Xander's eyes had gone wide, his face draining of color, and he was looking at her

as he never had—not even on that bluff, ragged and worse for wear and ready to talk her down from Armageddon. The fact that it had happened in a blink just made that out-of-control sense intensify, such that she really thought she might turn into flame from the inside, and god, this was worse than her worst fears about what coming home would be like. It had happened so fast, too. Just standing there, talking to her friend, and suddenly she was a witch on the verge and wondering why the hell anyone had ever thought her returning to Sunnydale, being around any of these people again, was anything other than a horrendous idea.

“I’m sorry,” he said, bringing his hands up. “I... That was a dumb thing to say.”

Willow held his gaze a moment, forced herself to—forced herself to look at him and keep looking at him and not to look away, no matter how strong the temptation. “It was a Xander thing to say,” she replied. “You have no idea how much I wish it were true.”

He was still a moment longer, then sighed and tugged her to him again, and his hug was different this time. All the wonderful Xanderyness that he’d given her before, only somehow lighter, as though he’d let go of something. She wondered if it was his idea of her—or what they had been, and if that was the case, whether she should be sad or relieved or both.

“You saved my life, you know,” she muttered into his shoulder. “Yeah, you saved the world, but you saved my life too. I’ll try to keep you from regretting that.”

“I could never regret it.”

That was another Xander thing to say. “Have I mentioned I am scared out of my mind to be back here? That I might see or hear something that flips the homicidal switch and makes me go all wicked witch again?”

He pulled back and caught her gaze. “Is that how it works?”

“I don’t know. I’ve only done it the one time.”

“Well, you know what to do, right? Wake up feeling extra Apocalypse Nowish, you just come and hang out with me. I’ll take the time. I might even bring a yellow crayon.”

Willow rolled her eyes in spite of herself, startled when she grinned. “I’ll take you up on that,” she said, hoping with everything she was that she would never feel the need, and fearing that she would.

Also hoping that Xander had more than one touching childhood story in his repertoire. She wasn’t sure she trusted that to work a second time.

Before either of them could say anything else, Buffy reappeared in the hall, making quick, decisive strides back toward the foyer. She plastered on a fake smile and was talking before either Willow or Xander could say anything. “Sorry about that,” she said. “Everyone’s going where they need to go, but it turned out Michelle’s mom had written down eleven rather than one, so I had an annoyed parent on my hands and, well, they like to rant.”

Willow wasn’t sure she believed that, but she wanted to, so she didn’t push. “Xander says you have a studio and you’re teaching girls self-defense.”

“Yeah,” Buffy said, nodding hard. “It kinda just happened.”

"It sounds great. Like 'why didn't we think of this sooner' great. The perfect Buffy job."

"Speaking of jobs, ladies, I hate to do this, but I gotta get to work." Xander flashed Willow a half-grin when she turned to him, wide-eyed, her pulse jumping. "Big project and I could only get a half-day. Told the site manager that I'd be by to whip the boys into shape after lunch, and if I wanna eat before I get there—which I do—I needed to leave five minutes ago."

"Oh." Willow attempted to put on an understanding smile but, from the way Xander's expression fell, she missed the mark by a lot. "I'd hoped you'd gotten today off."

"Yeah, I tried, but it turns out that with greater power comes greater responsibility. Why did no one tell me this before I accepted that supervisor position?" He held her gaze a moment longer. "What do you say to a dinner date, you and me?" A pause. "And Buffy, of course, if she—"

"I can't tonight," Buffy said in a rush. A really rushed rush, which, to her credit, she seemed to realize immediately for the way she turned her attention to the floor. "You know," she went on at a more measured pace, then met Xander's gaze, "the Spike thing. I need to see if I can find out anything else."

There was a long beat in which a lot seemed to be communicated despite the fact that no one was talking. Xander and Buffy were engaged in some staring contest, her daring, him searching, until finally he nodded and released a breath. "Yeah, right. The Spike thing."

"What Spike thing?" Willow asked. "There's a Spike thing?"

"I'll fill you in," Buffy said. "Seeing as Xander needs to—"

"Right." Xander jerked as though he'd been prodded and made his way toward the door. "Xander definitely needs to. Will, I'll swing by around seven? Give me time to shower and get all presentable-like. Then you and I can hit the town. How's that sound?"

She grinned and nodded, not sure if she actually felt up for going out on the town—or at all—but she'd gobble up as much Xander time as possible. Things between them might not be normal, but they didn't feel strained, and Willow would take not-strained over tense and awkward any day of the week. Even if she was jetlagged like crazy. She'd rather be awake and somewhere she felt at least somewhat wanted than asleep in a place where she didn't.

Which, she knew, was asking a lot. A whole lot of a lot. Not many people would open up their homes to the person who had tried to kill them and their sister. But then, not many people were Buffy Summers.

The second the door closed behind Xander, Buffy bent forward to collect the suitcase still on the floor. And maybe if Willow hadn't known her as long as she had, she would have missed the tension in her shoulders or her set jaw. Would have been blind to all the nonverbal ways Buffy communicated discomfort, if not outright anger. But she had known her a long time, had fought her and fought beside her in equal measure, and as a result, knew her cues as well as she knew her own. In an odd way, it was almost comforting to know that hadn't changed.

"I, umm, have you in my old room," Buffy said, not quite facing her but almost. Providing the illusion of eye contact without actually making any. "I decided I wanted the big room over the summer. Hope that's okay."

Willow barked a harsh laugh, surprising them both. She slapped a hand over her mouth as though she could capture the sound, but it was too late, and now Buffy was actually looking at her, some of the hardness in her face softening, her skin dimpling between her eyes the way it did when she was confused.

"Sorry," Willow muttered into her hand, more pressure bubbling inside her chest that she feared would come out as giggles if she tried to release it. "I just... You asking me if it's okay that I don't have to sleep in the room where Tara died. I wasn't expecting that."

Buffy's expression went softer still. "Oh. I hadn't... That wasn't the reason or anything. I didn't even think about that. I should have. It was just more...me being the head of the house and all. It made sense. And there was more room for weapons in Mom's old closet than in mine."

"Tara always thought you should have it," Willow replied. The urge to laugh had faded. "Ahh, that after we...you know, brought you back, that you should have your mom's room. I told her it made more sense for us to keep it since there were two of us. I thought about it once or twice after she moved out but..."

But she didn't know how to finish that thought, so she didn't try.

There would be a lot of awkward stretches of silence between them going forward. She wondered if she'd ever get used to it—this not knowing what to say to Buffy. Not knowing what Buffy wanted to say to her. Though Willow couldn't exactly call it a new phenomenon. Most of last year, she hadn't known what to say to Buffy, too busy trying to not feel guilty for her role in her best friend's misery and lost in misery of her own. Working through quitting magic cold turkey, back when doing so had probably been an option, and trying not to obsess too much about the women she'd see Tara with on the occasion they ran into each other in public.

They hadn't been *them*, not really, at all since Glory. And standing here, Willow wasn't sure they would ever be *them* again.

"Buffy," Willow said before she could stop herself, "if you don't want me here, I'll go somewhere else. I-I don't know *where* I'll go, but I can. Go, that is. Maybe stay with my parents for a while." Though that sounded like a whole new kind of awkward. She and her mother hadn't done much in the way of talking since Willow had brought home Tara and introduced her as her girlfriend. Insofar as coming-out stories went, it hadn't been a total nightmare but it also hadn't been...good. More of her mother ignoring her as she had before, refusing to hear things she didn't want to acknowledge. That Willow hadn't even thought about contacting her actual blood family at all in the aftermath of what she'd nearly done was probably the sort of thing only a good psychotherapist could pick apart.

But they were there, her family. If push came to shove, she definitely had options.

"No," Buffy replied in a soft voice. "I can't... Well, I can't say I know what to do right now, because I don't. Or that I know how I feel about anything at the moment."

There was no good way to reply to that. Willow didn't get out more than a half-hearted, "Yeah," disappointed both with Buffy and herself, disappointed that she was disappointed at all. She'd more than earned uncertainty and misgivings. Wanting more, expecting more, was just greedy.

Maybe that was it—maybe they needed to face the elephant in the room rather than edge around it. Hell, and even if they didn't, it wasn't like things could get more awkward between them, and Willow didn't think she could survive walking on eggshells here. So, drawing in a deep breath, she decided to do the brave thing. Bull, horns, the full nine yards.

"I tried to end the world," she said, her voice stronger than she felt. Clear and firm, unwavering. "And I tried to go through you to do it."

Buffy was still for a beat, then licked her lips as her eyes hardened. "Yeah. You did." Another beat. "You also tried to kill my sister."

"Yeah. And there's nothing I can say to make that not what happened. At least, not a way I can do without... I thought about it—the spells I could do to take it all back. I wanted to. Sometimes I still do. A-and that's not a thing that's gonna go away. None of this is going to ever go away. It's always going to be a part of me, no matter what I do. But I never gave you a choice in anything. I brought you back from the dead and it wasn't your choice. I took your memories, I got Dawnie hurt and worse." She paused, swallowed, the phantom scents of the woods flooding her nostrils, the ghost of a cool breeze dancing along her skin. "I killed a man and I enjoyed doing it. I wanted to kill the others, and then I wanted to kill you for not letting me. These are all things that I did and you had to deal with because you had no choice. So when I say I understand if you don't want me here, I mean that it *is* your choice. If I stay here or not. I promise not to go all world-endy if you decide you don't want me around. And I'm pretty sure I could stay with Xander until I found something else. I dunno even why I brought my parents up, actually, now that I think about it."

Willow sucked in a deep breath and looked down before she could ramble on any further, her pulse pounding in her ears. It was weird, hearing all these things aloud—things that had been living in her head, bits and pieces of conversations she had rehearsed here and there, never sure if she would ever be brave enough to say any of it aloud. But it was out now, and there would be no other take on it. All other versions had been left behind, and the words she'd used just now were the ones that mattered. The final ones.

Finally, she heard Buffy take the sort of breath that preceded speech, and braced herself.

"I meant what I told you," Buffy said quietly. "I don't know how I feel about anything right now. That means me, too. There's...a lot more that's involved with my not knowing than just what happened with you."

"Spike things?"

She seemed to jolt a bit at that, shot Willow a look that was both questioning and somewhat accusatory, before deflating like she was remembering something. "Yeah," Buffy went on after a beat, her voice even lower. "Spike things. It's way with the

complicated and confusing and there's Scooby stuff we should probably talk about on top of everything else, because why wouldn't there be?"

Willow worked her throat again. "What kind of Scooby stuff?"

"The kind I really don't want to get into right now, but suffice to say, it's possible that my life is in danger. Again." Buffy lifted a shoulder, a small smile tugging at her lips. "All I can tell you right now that I know is true is that I miss you. I miss my best friend, and I'd really like you back. It just might take me a while to get there with everything that happened. But I want to. I know I do. If I didn't, I wouldn't have bothered putting new sheets on the bed in my old room. I can't promise I won't change my mind sometime but right now, this is where I am. So... Yeah."

Well, damn. Willow glanced down, sniffing hard and trying to pull the reins on the sudden, intense urge to just burst into tears. It was the exact sort of thing she'd hoped to hear and never been brave enough to believe she would, and it somehow made her situation feel even more fragile, more vulnerable, than it had before she'd gotten on the damn plane. The realization that she still had something to lose, and the knowledge of just how easy it would be to cross the point of no return. To screw everything up in such a way it could never be unscrewed.

"Okay," she said softly, trying not to wince at how weak that sounded. Relieved when Buffy didn't call her out on it.

Instead, Buffy released a long breath, relaxing the same way Willow had seen her relax countless times after one of her gnarlier fights. It was weird being on the receiving end of that, but she knew she couldn't complain. Not when she'd been given this particular gift.

"Okay," Buffy said, turning for the stairs at last. "Let's get you unpacked."



IT HAD BEEN a bear of a day, the sort where Buffy really could have stood a nice, quiet patrol. Or, if not quiet, one where the vamps that did show their fangs were the sort that had literally just risen and therefore didn't know that they had super ninja powers and the strength to back them up. The sort that amounted to nothing more than moving punching bags that would dust once she hit them too hard.

In other words, *not* the kind that had clearly had a few decades under their belt.

But this was Sunnydale, where things very rarely went Buffy's way. Which would account for why she needed to do more than her normal dodge and weave and swing routine. Also why her opponent for the evening looked like he'd been wearing the same suit since 1922.

Also, he was gabby. Because that was the way her luck had run tonight.

"Gotta say, I'm a bit disappointed, doll face," he said, taking another swing at her head with a fist packed with enough meat that it would probably make her see little cartoon birdies if it managed to connect. She ducked and rolled before it could. "Last few years, all I heard about was what a spitfire you are. The kind that could give a fella a real run for his money. This an off night for you or is it just true you should never meet your heroes?"

"Everyone's a critic these days," Buffy replied, raising her stake and giving it a little wiggle. "Wanna see what I do with critics?"

Gabby scoffed. "Hit me with your best shot."

"Nah. You're not important enough to get me at my best."

"Now, that ain't nice. Think I'm gonna need to teach you some manners before I tear out that pretty little throat."

"Vampires better than you have tried."

He gave her a smirk, the patronizing sort that told her he thought she was cute, then snarled and lunged with a roar, and they fell into the familiar dance again.

The truth was, it *was* an off night. If it weren't, this vamp would have bitten the dust several times over by now, no matter that he wasn't a fledgling. She wasn't exactly a spring chicken, either, especially by slayer standards, and that hadn't stopped her from, say, slaying freaking Dracula. But Buffy had set out for patrol tonight with her mind spinning, and the spinning hadn't stopped. Not even when this pain-in-the-ass had sprung out from behind a mausoleum and introduced himself by throwing his fist into her face. Thrashing vampires wasn't exactly new territory for her, after all, and even with more than one death behind her, she found it dangerously easy to slip into autopilot.

Or maybe that was, *dangerously easy* if one weren't Buffy Summers. These days, she was pretty sure she was impossible to kill, though that was the sort of thinking that would have Spike telling her that she had a death wish. He'd probably be right, too. When it came to her, he'd been right more often than he'd been wrong.

Most of all, though, she was exhausted. That frustrating sort of exhausted that wouldn't allow for any actual rest. Battered as she might feel both physically and emotionally, the way her mind kept insisting on rehashing the nuances of each conversation she'd had today—never mind the tangled mess that was her feelings about all of the above—pretty much guaranteed she'd accomplish little more than staring at the ceiling all night. And that was without even getting to consider the thing Spike had told her the night before. Whether Giles had taken the warning seriously enough to do some digging, if he'd found anything yet, and what exactly her plan was if it turned out the warning had been earnest. What it meant that it was all happening now—Spike returning, Willow coming home, the Council ordering her death, and why they had chosen Spike to carry it out. Why they would offer him something as significant as the chip's removal as payment for services rendered.

Put like that, was there really any surprise that she was off her game to this degree?

She really needed to kill this guy so she could go back to ruminating in private.

"I'll give you this, though," Gabby said with a nasty sneer, running his gaze up and down her body as she bounced back to her feet. The small of her back screamed from where it had hit the edge of a headstone, but she forced herself to ignore it. "The stories they tell don't do you justice. You *are* a looker."

"Yeah? Well, *look* somewhere else."

"I mean, I figured you had to be, right?" That sneer stretched even wider, and to

be extra creepy, he threw in an eyebrow waggle. “We’re a picky bunch, vampires, but maybe that’s why you like us so much.”

Buffy—who had been in mid-lunge, stake at the ready—suddenly lost her footing and crashed hard to the ground, her knees hitting the soil with such force her jaw snapped shut. White-hot rage fissured through her without warning, burning away the numbness with force that would have surprised her had she had time to be surprised, and tinged with just enough embarrassment to make her skin feel suddenly feverish. She twisted the second she landed, bringing up her arm again, following the senses that almost never failed her, trusting her body to anticipate the vampire’s moves even if her mind had yet to catch up.

He was there, and he caught her wrist before she was within heart range, his grip brutal and firm. Then there was a pressure against the small of her back, into the pulsing pain left behind from that headstone, and the ground rushed up at her as she went down. It all happened fast, she knew, a matter of seconds, but she felt every move as though experiencing it from a place that existed outside of time. Twisting her arm to free itself from his hold only to feel something pop out of place for her efforts, the stake tumbling uselessly out of her grasp. Then the heavy breaths of a creature that didn’t need to take any at all, ruffling the hair at the back of her neck as her every molecule went haywire and the instincts she relied on at once seemed to blink out of existence.

“What do you say, sweetheart?” the vampire rasped around his fangs. “Always been a curiosity of mine. Wanna take me for a spin, help me answer that age-old question?”

Yeah, no. This was not happening. Buffy gritted her teeth and thrust her head back, splitting the air with a crack that hurt almost more than the blow did. But it did the trick—Gabby released her almost immediately, and she was in motion. Rolling to her left and forcing herself not to whimper at the renewed pain blasting through her arm, at the strain of muscles being shoved back into action. She opened her eyes just in time to catch the flare of yellow eyes as Gabby snarled again, pure animal now, the fingers of her left hand sliding over the familiar contours of her stake. She saw the way the next few seconds would unroll as though she’d already lived them, could practically taste the ash in the air, and waited for him to come crashing toward her and the death he had waiting.

Death, though, had other plans. Gabby never made it to her stake, never even got to lunge. Instead, he rocked forward as something collided with him from behind, his eyes bugging out, his jaw going slack, and then he was dissolving before her, raining dust across her body.

And leaving her blinking up into Spike’s furious face.

YOU'RE FACE TO FACE WITH THE MAN WHO SOLD THE WORLD

NOTHING EVER WENT ACCORDING TO PLAN. NOT A DAMN THING. THIS WAS especially true when Buffy was involved, and it always had been. She had never failed to ensure all his intentions—good and otherwise—meant fuck all for where he landed.

When he'd left her home the night before, reeling from a combination of frustration and guilt and anger—then more bloody guilt because he knew he had no right to anger at all—he'd vowed that the next time he saw her, he'd have his head on. That was the least the sodding soul had to be worth, right? She'd caught him unawares at the crypt, then again when she'd stumbled across him white hatting the following night. Going to her house had been a gamble, yeah, but it wasn't like he had much of a choice. Every interaction since he'd blown back into town had been on terms other than his own and every time, he'd paid for it.

The next time, though, he wouldn't be such a pillock. He wouldn't be in a rush, either, or bloody dripping with desperation. That had been his mistake—knowing how critical it was for Buffy not to turn him away, that she hear him at least enough to be on her guard.

But then she'd gone and thrown him for a bloody loop, hadn't she? He'd been so certain the invitation he'd fought tooth and nail to earn would have been the first thing she tossed. He'd attacked her, pawed at her, made her thrash and scream and cry, and he might have done worse had she not kicked him off when she had, and he'd still been able to step inside her house. No renewed invite. Just right on over the threshold and into her space. Spike wasn't daft enough to believe it meant anything—a chore she'd never gotten around to crossing off her to-do list, most like, having more important things to address first—but it had upset his focus, and everything had gone to hell in a big hurry.

He'd known she wouldn't believe him. Or if he hadn't known it outright, he'd understood there was a good chance she wouldn't. That possibility had hung over him every second since Lydia and the other watchers had helped themselves out of his crypt, along with the hard knowledge that Buffy had no bloody reason to listen to a word he uttered and the only person to blame for that was himself. The fact that she *had* to believe him hadn't helped matters, either—had just made him more desperate, more on edge, and easier to turn away as a result.

No more surprises, then. He'd try again, wouldn't be thrown off course this time by novelties like his still-standing invitation. Would stick to the bloody facts, do whatever it took to get Buffy to hear him. That had been the plan.

And in brilliant form, she'd buggered that up too, simply by the virtue of being her. So here he was, standing over her, panting hard, warring with fury and frustration and guilt in equal measure, his ears ringing with what he'd caught of the other vamp's taunts. Knowing he'd lost his footing again—worse than that, lost control. He'd lost control in front of Buffy, exploded into motion before he could stop himself, and now that it was over, he couldn't grab it back. It was still gone as she looked at him, blinking up at him with those emerald eyes he still craved for the privilege to lose himself inside, her chest rising and falling, her face sweaty and her hair tumbling out of the hold she'd put in. The parts of him that he'd discovered only after the soul had rearranged his insides to make room for itself—the awareness of his inner monster, so used to being fed that it now clawed at his skin, desperate to keep swinging, keep snarling, make something scream and beg and cry before he snuffed its light out for good. He felt that rage and he *couldn't* right now. Not in front of her.

Spike swallowed, forced himself to take a step back, forced his eyes from hers to the awkward angle of her right arm. "You're hurt," he said, reaching out a hand, knowing she wouldn't take it, but what else could he do?

Buffy, though, wouldn't be Buffy if she didn't insist on surprising him. There was hardly any hesitation in the way she moved, the ease of which she slid her fingers along his and allowed him to get a good grip on her. He didn't let himself linger, though Christ knows he wanted to, and instead focused on pulling her to her feet. Watched both the pain that flickered across her face and the resolve that followed, the sort he'd seen there more times than he reckoned any man could reasonably keep track. The staunch determination of Buffy's to remain aloof even when he knew she was anything but.

"Just not my night, I guess," she muttered, giving her wounded arm a look like it had betrayed her. Then she surprised him again. "I... I might need your help with this. I think it's dislocated."

"Yeah, looks like."

"Can you..."

She didn't finish the thought. She didn't need to.

He inhaled, his gaze falling once more to her injured arm. "Gonna hurt," he said, forcing his feet nearer and his mind somewhere other than the only place it seemed to go these days. That dark place he couldn't outrun, where lived the memory of the

last time he'd touched her. He'd hurt her then too. Not meaning to, not wanting to, but it had happened either way. At least they were both prepared for it now. Or as prepared as he supposed they could be.

"I know."

Yeah, of course she knew. Wasn't like this was her first go popping something back into place. Wasn't even like this was the first time he'd helped her get right again, but it was the first time since *that night* that she'd been close enough to breathe in. The pounding of her pulse grew even more intense, the sound almost deafening, but her face remained the same, her eyes on his. And it didn't hit him, until he was reaching to steady a hand against her shoulder, just how bloody surreal this was. How he'd gone from the righteous fury of just a few seconds ago to this moment—to Buffy not flinching back as his fingers made contact with her again. Soft at first, as he wanted to give her time to change her mind, then with a mind to do what he knew needed doing.

After a beat, he clamped his hand around her shoulder to hold her firm, seized her bad arm with his other hand and snapped the limb back into place in one fluid motion. Buffy let out a rush of air, a sound that could have been pain or shock tumbling free, before she nodded and hurried to put distance between them.

"Thanks," she said, looking at the ground again. "I shouldn't be surprised. It's been an off kind of day for me—Willow coming back and all. That it would end like this is probably something I should have seen coming."

He knew he shouldn't, but he couldn't help himself. Story of his life where she was concerned. "Like this?"

She offered a rather grim smile and nodded, raising her gaze back to his. "First with the chatty vampire who wouldn't die, then you. Someone up there must really have it in for me."

Spike sniffed and nodded, his turn to look down as he sucked in his cheeks and fought for calm. Fought to not remember what all the dust pile had been spewing at her when he'd found them—the things that had been said, bloody well thrown in her face, and what all of it had to mean. It wasn't unusual, having no secrets from those who mattered, but never before had those parts been so widely known they'd become weapons for others to use against the people he loved. Sure, he was the bloke who had sired his mum thinking that he was saving her, but he was the only one who got to know that, apart from Dru and the other members of his once-happy family. Angel and Darla hadn't cared much, especially after rubbing salt in the wound had stopped making him weep like a ninny. As for Dru, she'd been bloody relieved to find that his grand plans of traveling the world with his lover on one arm and his mum on the other had been foiled by the creature Anne Pratt had become. One spectacular mistake and the only one who felt it was him.

Until now. The worst mistake of his life came with more than just the horror of what he'd done, the thing he'd become in those terrible moments—it came with *this*. With others knowing. Not just Dawn, not just the others in Buffy's circle, but the bloody locals. The knowledge more than cut. It scalded, leaving him with a deeper understanding that he hadn't asked for and didn't want, but would have to live with

all the same. And it had no bloody right to do that. *He* had no right to feel this uncomfortable, this exposed. He wasn't the one who had to suffer other vamps molding it into blades made to slice anew.

But god, it rankled. Hearing it at first—the boastful taunts of a vamp not worthy of the honor of dirtying Buffy's lungs with his dust. The threat there, a threat Spike had never heard aimed at her before. Or maybe he had, and it just hadn't registered, hadn't stood out to him as what it truly was because she was the Slayer, and the Slayer was untouchable. This one, at least.

Except she wasn't. Knowing what he knew now, how easy it had been to hurt her like that, how close he'd gotten, the look on her face, that anyone would use that against her had him swimming in something deeper than shame and richer than anger. And it was a blow he had no right to feel, since it was one he'd given her.

Worse than that, though, was the disappointment. The same disappointment that made him sick with himself—that Buffy, intensely private as she was, would have let this moment of theirs become something all the world had rights to. He wasn't just the Slayer of Slayers anymore, he was a predator in every sense of the word, and everyone knew it. Knew it enough to use it like this. To use it against her. Somehow, she'd let that happen, and...

No. *No*, he couldn't think like this. Not ever, and especially not in front of her. He staggered back before he realized he'd told his feet to move, and the next second, he was heading in long strides for home. Never mind what he'd come out to tell her, to try to make her believe, Buffy didn't need to see him like this. Fuck, she didn't need to see him at all. He'd been such a wanker to come back, such a stupid, useless git thinking that there was anything he could do to begin to make up for what he'd taken. That he was owed anything, that he could justify being in her town after what he'd done to her. And that he could feel anything even somewhat related to disappointment meant the soul was worth nothing. Much like the rest of him.

He was almost back to the crypt before he realized the screaming in his head had deafened him to the sound of her steps following his, his name, wrapped in her voice, chasing him all the way. But he didn't turn, just hurled himself through the door of his home and slammed it shut behind him. Knowing it was no good but doing it anyway. Wondering if he might just keep running—take a dive to the lower level and make a break through the sewers until she gave him up as a bad job. Dismissing that thought almost as quickly as it was born because he hadn't earned the right to run from her. Hadn't earned the right to anything, and the soul being there meant he would listen to it. Even when it hurt. Even when it made bugger all sense.

Buffy made bugger all sense. She always had. And like always, it made him down-right barking.

Especially when she went around asking asinine questions like, "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong?" he snapped, whirling around to face her. See for himself that she was really there, had really followed him from the cemetery into his crypt. Seemed the Slayer was still a glutton for punishment. And here he'd have thought she'd learned her lesson by now. "Once it was out, it was all out, was it? So much so you got vamps now aimin' to 'take you for a spin'? I wasn't fit to tell anyone about when it was

you showin' up here at all bloody hours, but once I'm a monster again, you blab to anyone who'll listen. Not just Dawn or your mates, but to the whole bloody town. Nice to know what it takes to get you to own something, Slayer."

He snapped his mouth shut, barreled over almost instantly with a rush of self-loathing that rivaled anything he'd entertained since crawling his way out of that Ugandan hole, astonished and disgusted with himself in equal measure. It was bad enough that those thoughts existed, that he couldn't chase them away the second they sparked to life, that they had enough power behind them to brew anything other than self-aimed horror for daring to take up space in his head. To actually give them voice, to spit them at her was something beyond unforgivable. Much like everything else he'd done to her.

If times were normal, this was the part where Buffy would call him disgusting and pop him in the nose. But times weren't normal. Times were what he'd turned them into, the mess he'd created without really trying, and he wouldn't blame her if she decided she'd had enough and came at him with a stake in earnest. A nice, normal solution for a situation that was anything but. The fitting end to William the Bloody.

Instead, Buffy cleared her throat and gave him a look that was far more understanding than he deserved.

"I think he was talking about vampires in general," she said softly. "You know, that I've now been with two. You and Angel. Or maybe even just Angel, since we were more, you know, open. But he wasn't talking about... Well, I don't think *that's* what he was talking about. Not even Xander would be that careless."

None of what she was saying made sense. Neither did the fact that she was standing there, saying it.

As if seeing this on his face, Buffy sighed and tugged a hand through her hair. "For the record, it's today."

"Today?"

She nodded. "What you said. I haven't *blabbed* to anyone."

"Slayer—"

"Today is the first time I've talked about it to anyone at all." A pause. She crossed her arms. "Not that I owe you an explanation or anything. But if you think I've been running around telling people about what happened, what you did, I haven't."

The words were like stakes to the heart, though not as merciful. Spike inhaled and looked down, the thought of holding her gaze at once too much for him.

"Oh," he said. And left it at that.

But Buffy, being Buffy, of course did not. "Xander found me that night. After you left. I was sitting up there, and I guess I looked like hell, but he came in. He knew you'd been by—you left your coat—and he thought he'd find us... Well, he found me. And he saw what he saw and decided what happened, then kinda told everyone. And since talking about it is not on the list of my favorite things, I didn't say anything to him about it. Until today. I talked to him today."

Spike didn't know what to do with this information—or hell, why she was sharing it with him. It wasn't like he was owed an explanation. It wasn't like he was owed anything at all. Nothing Buffy had thrown at him since he'd returned to town had

gone the way he'd thought. Not where he was concerned, at least. Even last night when he'd swung by to give her a heads-up about the sodding Council, the fact that she hadn't outright believed him had been overshadowed by her opening the bloody door in the first place. Now this.

He'd lost his temper. He'd screamed at her for something that wasn't her fault. He'd thrown a right little tantrum and she was still here, showing him patience she never had before. If he were the paranoid sort, he might think she'd somehow learned about the soul and was having him on. The Buffy in his memory had never been this generous with him.

Maybe he wasn't the only one who had changed.

"Right," Spike said when he realized she was waiting for him to speak. That was new, too. New and unnerving. "Just...lost my head out there, I suppose."

There was another pause. Another moment when she could have left but didn't, rather stood where she was, stubbornly in his space, clouding his head with her. Or more with her, as she was never far from it. He focused on the rhythm of her breaths, how they sounded against the still air, on the reassuring beat of her heart, its familiar tempo flooding him with images he couldn't stand to think about while she was near. Of her falling asleep beside him and capturing him in her atmosphere of human warmth. The way she'd looked that last time she'd come here to be with him, when she'd needed the words she more often refused to hear. He'd focused on her heart-beat then, too. How it had picked up when he'd said it, when he'd touched her. How she'd trembled like she'd never trembled before as their mouths met and they began pulling on each other's clothes. That seemed like almost a lifetime ago for everything that had changed, so much so it was hard to believe it had all happened just a couple of feet from where he was standing. That she had ever been here like that.

"I talked to Giles," Buffy said after the silence had stretched just a hair beyond unbearable. "About what you said, about the Council deciding that I'm suddenly Public Enemy Number One. He said it was ridiculous."

He tensed for a second, then snorted. Both relieved she'd changed the subject and a bit unnerved that she was still there. That she was just going to let him know the things she'd told him without demanding anything in turn—without lashing back at him for the things he'd said to her. "Just bet he did," he said.

"Well, you have to admit, it sounds a little on the farfetched side."

Maybe, but *she* didn't sound nearly as skeptical as she had last night. That was something. "Don't think *farfetched* is a condition you've ever concerned yourself with before."

"You live and you learn. Or you die and they bring you back and you learn anyway."

He snickered again, this time in appreciation, the tightness in his chest loosening in a way he didn't trust but couldn't help. "Worked out what I should tell 'em yet? Those Council gits. They gave me three days to consider it, so tomorrow they'll be comin' round to sweeten the pot. Reckon if it's not me, it'll be someone else. A bloke who doesn't care to give you fair warning before he comes to collect your head."

"Assuming this isn't some story of yours—"

“Bloody hell, Slayer, what would I have to gain, eh?”

Buffy wet her lips. He forced himself not to follow the movement. That wasn’t his right anymore, if it ever had been. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “It’s just...with the timing and all. You blow back into town and suddenly there’s this conspiracy to kill me, and you’re the one they came to?”

Well, he couldn’t fault her there. If he hadn’t lived as long as he had, seen as much as he had, how everything had unfolded would have struck him as far too convenient as well. But he *had* lived as long as he had, seen as much as he had, and knew that coincidences were more common than people thought. That most were typically machinations running around behind the scenes to bring certain things to a head. “Way they told it, they want it to be me,” he heard himself say. “Part of the grand lesson, yeah? Slayer got too cozy with vampires and look what happened.”

She sucked in her cheeks and directed her gaze at the floor between them. Not like she needed the reminder—she knew better than most what happened when a slayer cozied up with vampires. They tried to end the world, or they tried something worse. He wished he could take the words back almost instantly, but hell, what else *was* there to say? That was what that Lydia bint had told him, almost verbatim. No sense dancing around the reasoning he’d been given just because Buffy had already learned that lesson in ways these gits couldn’t have predicted.

Or maybe that was more evidence piled on that soul or no soul, William was just a bad man.

“You didn’t mention that before,” Buffy said softly, not looking up. “That that’s why they asked you to do it.”

Spike shook his head, huffing a little. “Well, I meant to.” And if the road to hell was paved with good intentions, he had more than enough bricks to complete his. “Went along with the whole story, didn’t it? Why they want you in the ground in the first place. What better way to save face than to point out you were offed by a creature you let live when you shouldn’t have. Buffy Summers turns into a cautionary tale for future generations.”

She made a noise that could have been simple acknowledgment or a rumble of agreement. “And the crazy good timing? Is there a reason for that, too?”

There had been many times over the last year where his ability to read her had failed him rather spectacularly. Enough so to make him question now, with all this wonderful insight he’d managed to win, if he’d ever had the ability at all, or if he’d simply been fool enough to convince himself he did. At the moment, for instance, he couldn’t tell if she was subtly interrogating him on the hope that he’d stumble and reveal that he’d made up the whole story, or if she was trying to get him to talk her into believing it. If she wanted him to be lying or wanted him to be telling the truth, as though want mattered at all.

But that was a whole new level of delusional thinking. In no universe would Buffy prefer the Council to want her dead if it meant she could trust what Spike told her.

“Dunno,” he replied honestly. “Could be they were watchin’ the place, waitin’ to see if I’d make my way back here. Said they knew I’d been gone.” And more than that—they believed they knew why. Only they didn’t. The most they had were educated

guesses based on fragments of conversation he'd had with other demons. Or just one other demon, and Clem had admitted to believing that Spike had lit out of town with the intent of getting the chip out. Not only that, he'd been a mite chatty about it when asked, apparently with everyone *but* Buffy. He'd thought she might not react well if she cottoned on, especially since he'd had delusions of a sappy reunion for the way she haunted the crypt each night and hadn't wanted to ruin Spike's chances.

Clem was a good bloke. Loyal to a fault too.

"Where did you go, Spike?"

For some daft reason, he hadn't been expecting the question, so it caught him on the hop. When he looked back to Buffy, he found her eyes were on him again, calm and steady. Steadier than they had been since he'd returned. The surprise that had been there last night, that had threatened to swallow her when she'd come in here searching for Clem and found him instead, had been tempered.

"Does it matter?" he replied at last. "Knew I couldn't be here."

"But you came back."

He nodded. "Did at that. Still waitin' for a sign that it was a good idea."

"Why?"

"Why what? Why am I waiting for something that'll never come? Force of habit, I guess." Spike forced out a laugh that sounded strained and awkward to his ears. He wasn't surprised when she blanched and looked away. Seemed he couldn't keep from saying the wrong thing.

But then she was looking at him again, her expression clear. "Why did you leave in the first place?"

"Is this you, seriously asking? Pretty sure we both know the answer."

"I just don't get it. You take off and then show up months later. There's the whole performance you gave me the other night. The things you said—"

"Told you then, that wasn't the way I wanted it done."

"But it's what happened."

He shook his head, feeling himself becoming defensive again and not sure how to stop it. "Wasn't bloody expecting you to let yourself in, was I? Thought I'd have time to work out what I meant to say to you. How to begin to talk to you after what I did. Pretty sure I mentioned I thought it possible you'd stake me on sight."

"And if I had?" Buffy put her shoulders back, a bit of defiance flashing in her eyes, making her look more like the girl he knew. It was a comfort and a curse at the same time—the softer Slayer who had followed him in here was a novelty. A version of Buffy he'd gotten to admire from a distance but never experienced up close. So naturally, the first thing he'd done was run his mouth and chase her off. "You really would've just let me stake you? That's not the Spike I know."

"Yeah, 'cause you know *Spike* so well," he fired back before he could help himself. "Regular bloody scholar you are."

There was more there, in his throat. Things he wanted to say—scream, actually. Make sure she heard and knew, make sure she felt, but he forced himself to shove them back. Say too much and he'd give too much away. Lead her close to the truth, and even if Buffy had somehow become more tempered in his absence, that didn't

give him the right to trouble her with what had become of him. What was she supposed to do with that?

Nothing. And the longer she stayed here, in his crypt, clouding his head and all the other parts of him, the more he risked crossing a line he couldn't uncross. He'd been a git that first night out of fear that she'd see him and though he felt a bit safer where that much was concerned, the worry was still there.

She wouldn't guess about the soul—of that, he was convinced. But that didn't mean she couldn't guess other things. And while he'd decided that the truth was a burden he needn't bother her with, he'd also vowed to himself he'd never outright lie to her again. He hadn't been in the habit all that much in the first place, but the lies he had told, the truths he'd stretched and warped to his liking, had all been selfish. Nearly everything he'd ever done regarding Buffy had been selfish.

The things that hadn't? Those were the parts of them that mattered.

"You should go," Spike said at length, waving toward the door. "Not safe for you here."

"You think so?"

"You don't?"

Buffy didn't reply, rather wet her lips and stared at him. "You're really not going to tell me what happened or where you went."

Well, that was more direct, at least. He could appreciate direct. "No. I'm really not."

"Or why you came back?"

And here he thought it perfectly obvious why he'd come back. If it wasn't, he didn't want to say it—didn't want to put that on her, either. The hopeless, desperate love that he couldn't outrun, no matter how far he traveled or how hard he tried.

But maybe he needed to give her something—not all of it, not even most, but a reason that would help silence the questions he knew had to be running on endless loops through her head. She would never stop wondering or asking, and if he never provided her with anything solid, then his returning to Sunnydale truly did serve no purpose.

They had to start somewhere.

"Most I can tell you is I changed," he said softly. "What happened changed me. No reason for you to believe it, won't blame you if you don't. But I came back because I want to be of some use. However you want, if you want it at all."

Again, Buffy just looked at him, that frustratingly inscrutable expression in place. She was quiet long enough that he wondered if he'd misspoken, but he didn't think so. The words he'd chosen felt right. Not too revealing but still honest—as honest as he could be with her. And while he wasn't thick enough to believe that she'd accept it, he was *just* thick enough to let himself hope.

The silence seemed to stretch forever, weighted with expectation and all the things he'd been careful *not* to say. Finally, she nodded, and this he could read. It meant *I heard you*, not *I believe you*. And that was okay. Being heard right now was more than enough.

"That's...good to know," she said. "Thanks."

He had nothing to say to that, just returned her nod with one of his own. Not sure whether to be disappointed when she turned and headed for the door. While having her here was torture, watching her walk away from him never got easier either.

Even if he knew away from him was the best place for her to be.

THERE'S TOO MUCH CONFUSION; I CAN'T GET NO RELIEF

IT HAD BEEN A GOOD LONG WHILE SINCE BUFFY HAD HAD A SLAYER DREAM. LIKE since-before-she'd-died long while. So long, in fact, that for several minutes after opening her eyes, she lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, trying to catch her breath and wondering if it had been a slayer dream at all. Sure, that had been her first thought upon awakening—*slayer dream*—but slayer dreams were usually somewhat informative. Vague, but the sort of vague that had a higher purpose. In her case, the universe or the Powers, or whatever it was that thought it had the authority to play god with her life, sent her cosmic messages. Things that were coming that she needed to be prepared for—things that had already happened that she needed to know about. Distantly useful information often delivered in the form of riddles, perhaps while she and her murderous sister slayer were making a bed. Or while she was wandering through a desert, searching for something she hadn't yet named, all while being stalked by the world's most enthusiastic cheese salesman.

Those dreams had, at least in hindsight, made some sort of sense. The one with Faith had likely been the PTB telling her about Dawn, about death, well before either had been on her radar. Those that had taken place in a desert had been both prophetic and retaliatory. Defining who she was, identifying who she needed to become in order to face the challenges waiting for her down the road. Lessons she'd learned and reflected upon, not ones that had made sense at the time.

Last night's dream had the same sort of feeling. In some ways, it reminded her of those she'd had back when the universe had been trying to warn her that her vampire boyfriend was about to go homicidal. Parts that felt like memory, or *déjà vu* at the very least. Only the perspective was all wrong—she was seeing through eyes that were not her own, feeling things that were not hers to feel. Pushing open a door with a hand she recognized even if it belonged to someone else. Walking into a room, a

bathroom, in a body that she also knew but had never experienced from the inside. Seeing her, seeing *Buffy*, standing a couple of feet away, looking tired and defeated, dressed in a robe and ready to sink into the bath she'd drawn.

There was pain in seeing her—seeing herself—but not pain she recognized. Pain mixed with longing and despair, with regret and need and anger and hatred and love. It was all there, separate and together, filling her up so much she was surprised when her skin didn't rip with the pressure of it. Even more so when she didn't suffocate. The need to touch and feel rivaled with the need to breathe, only when she filled her lungs, there was no relief. Air whooshed through and out but the burn she'd always associated with drowning remained, denying her relief while also refusing to let her die. She just kept pressing forward.

The Buffy by the tub was talking, and every word added to that pain. The things she said—she couldn't hear them, but she *felt* them, each syllable hitting her as would a papercut to the heart. Excruciating, yes, but not significant enough to do the decent thing and kill her outright. Worse than that, she knew. She knew if she just reached out and touched the other Buffy, if the other Buffy remembered who she was, who *they* were, and everything that had once been, if not good, then better. Better with the possibility of being good. Of being more than good. Of being bloody fantastic. She'd felt it too, she knew, because she'd seen it. Not every time, no, and at times she'd had to really look, but there had been moments. When Buffy would let herself breathe, forget, when their eyes would meet and it would just be *them*, and sometimes she'd smile a little. Just a little. All that was keeping her from realizing there could be more of that was herself.

But this was Buffy, so nothing would change. Even the things she said now, things she knew were true, even if their truth looked different. Love being pain—love burning and consuming. She believed it would destroy her completely and that much, he understood. *He*, for that was whose eyes she was looking through. Clear now, as it should have been from the start. These thoughts and feelings weren't hers at all.

And that obvious realization made everything explode. The tangle of pain and desperation and want, so much want, gripping her—*him*—from the inside, twisted and damn near cancerous for the way it was eating him alive. This certainty of his, that what he had seen the previous night had been telling after all. Buffy did love him. She did. She wouldn't have been so hurt if she didn't. Dawn wouldn't have come to scold him, rub in just how much seeing him and Anya together had cut.

The trouble wasn't a lack of love—Buffy had that in spades. She was just afraid, and god knows she had every right to be. She'd been here before once and that burning, consuming love had left her hollow, so hollow she'd jumped into bed with the first pulser who had flashed his pearly whites in her direction. Sent her crawling into a relationship with a man not good enough to lick her boots, much less anything spicier, in the hope that if she didn't love a bloke with all of her, she wouldn't hurt so much when it inevitably fell apart.

He saw her as he always had—he saw everything. And she saw nothing, least of all him. Not the man he was, rather the one she thought he was. Didn't help matters when he did idiotic things like shag one of her mates, but she had come to save him

anyway. Stopped Harris from plunging a stake into his chest, and that meant something. No matter that she didn't want it to. She could join the bloody club. After all, it wasn't like he'd asked to be in love with her, but trying to fight it had gotten him nowhere.

Worse than nowhere. It had gotten him here.

If she just felt what he felt, if he could just show her, make her see...

So he reached out and tried. Like before. Just like before. She scoffed and batted his hand away, but that was par for the course, wasn't it? Buffy saying no, pulling back, trying to tease him into convincing her. *Stop me*, he'd said more times than he could count now, and Buffy had never stopped him. Never wanted him to stop. Easier for her if he pushed on, if he ignored her and let her believe that she didn't crave whatever they were doing, even as she clung to him, her face in his shoulder, her legs tightening around his waist to leverage his thrusts into her. Raked her nails down his back and nibbled at his jaw and chin and whatever else she could reach with her teeth, knowing he loved it when she bit and knowing she loved his loving it. This was familiar—a tug of war they'd done a thousand times. The sweeter the fight, the sweeter the fuck. And maybe if he was lucky, maybe this time she'd feel it as more than just that. She'd feel everything he'd been trying to tell her for more than a year now.

All he had to do was get her to the moment where she stopped fighting, where she gave in. It was there. He knew it was there. He knew all he had to do was kiss her the right way, touch her the right way, and she would melt into him as she had a thousand times.

Then, abruptly, he was in the air. At the door and crashing hard to the floor. Crashing in every conceivable way.

The next stretch was a blur and an eternity at the same time. The moment where the world came back, hard and unforgiving, the ringing in his ears fading out, unmasked for what they had been. Screams and pleas, the sort he'd heard before but never like this. The air thick with steam from her bath, making the scent of her tears all the more pungent. Tears, for she was crying. Looking at him as she never had before and crying.

It started in his chest first, the bubble of hope—of mad longing and madder desperation—bursting without ceremony. Realization sank in. That awful realization he knew he'd spend the rest of his life trying to outrun. To not feel. To escape. Only there was no escape from this—from the hate shining in her watery eyes, the way she shook, how she held her bathrobe closed with one hand. One trembling hand. He opened his mouth, said something he couldn't hear, and she barked back something he could. That she could never love him, and this was the reason, if he needed any. This very thing he'd nearly done.

And what was it he'd nearly done?

He'd nearly raped the woman he loved.

Spike staggered back, his own eyes starting to burn, the rest of the scene filling out with its sharp edges. Buffy stood feet away from him, panting and crying and looking like hell run over, only hell hadn't been the thing to do that. He had. For the

first time in nearly seven years, she was afraid of him. Not a slayer fear, either. A fear he knew in ways he wished he didn't, but did because he was a monster, and fear was the diet monsters thrived on most.

"Fuck," he gasped, then slapped a hand to his mouth. Tears spilled and began trekking down his cheeks, burning him with their cold. "God."

And that was it—all he could take. He shook his head and turned, barreled his way out of the room and down the hall. Then the stairs and there's the door, and at last he was outside. Dragging in deep breaths that made his lungs burn. Made all of him burn and burn and burn, and there was no end to it. No dusting, no death. No mercy for creatures like him.

Then she'd opened her eyes and found herself back inside her own body, in her own bed, her head swimming with things she had seen but not experienced. Wondering what any of it meant. That it lingered rather than faded upon awakening, much like her slayer dreams. That it showed her events she'd already lived through, *unlike* any slayer dream she'd had before. What she'd felt had been intense and more than intense, amplifying the sense of general uncertainty tied to all things that night, but those thoughts had been there all along. Perhaps she'd dreamt it that way because that was what she wanted it to be.

Or it was her mind working through the minefield her life had suddenly become. Not saying it had been easy just last week—it hadn't—but she had been in a sort of stasis all summer. Letting things happen around her, keeping quiet because it was easier than getting loud, because the thought of trying to explain herself or any of what lived in her head had been intimidating, never mind exhausting. All of that had culminated yesterday—talking about what had happened in the bathroom for the first time, reclaiming the story as hers and only hers to share, welcoming Willow back into the house, and then ending the night with another confusing and charged encounter with Spike.

She didn't know, and pretending she did would do her no favors. As it was, Buffy had more than enough on her plate, and really couldn't afford to spend more time trying to determine what she thought or felt right now. The immediate issue was the Council. Everything else could wait, or just be sorted out in its own time.

By the time she'd pulled herself out of bed, the rest of the house was up and about. She found Dawn and Willow downstairs, exchanging very superficial conversation and stealing glances at one another when the other wasn't looking. Honestly, probably better than she could have expected, given the circumstances. Dawn wasn't nearly as conflicted about what had happened with Willow as she was Spike, which Buffy would try to understand some other time, and seemed more than a little willing to try to return to normal. But normal for them wasn't normal for other people, and even if that was Dawn's resolve, that didn't mean getting there would be easy, particularly since Willow had come back with this shiny new accountability attitude. In fact, Willow was being careful in ways Buffy didn't think she ever had before—not even after the resurrection when common practice had been to treat Buffy like she was made of porcelain.

Today was one of the days that Janice, with her newly minted driver's license, was

picking up Dawn for school. Dawn had begged, pleaded, and tried to bribe Buffy for the privilege, Buffy being disinclined to trust anyone who couldn't yet vote behind the wheel. That she had only recently gotten her own driver's license was a point not worth making. But there were days, like this one, where Buffy had early mornings at the studio and really didn't want to have to rush around—especially since she was keeping slayer hours—and so had agreed that on the Hellmouth there were probably things more monstrous than car accidents to worry about.

"Criminy," Willow muttered as Dawn practically zoomed out of the kitchen at the sound of Janice's laying on the car horn. "You know how people used to look at us and say, 'you're growing up so fast'? And to us, it always felt like, 'Yeah, well, not fast enough.' I've changed my mind. Definitely too fast. Time can slow down any time it likes because Dawn having friends who can drive makes me feel about a thousand."

"Just wait. Next month it's her turn."

"You're actually going to let her drive?"

Buffy let out a short laugh. "She needs to master walking without tripping over her own feet first." And manage not to drop whatever weapon they were practicing with for at least five consecutive classes. That was their deal. "Dawn is still coming to terms with the fact that she has the Summers' klutz gene. I think it was easier when Mom was here and also being all klutzy and *Mom* about it."

"Less so with you?"

"Being the Slayer means I can make my klutziness look like it's on purpose." She paused, considered. "Well, sometimes. Other times, I'm lucky no one's around. Or no one I don't plan on dusting in the next ten seconds."

Willow offered a slight, unsure smile—the sort Buffy figured she would be seeing a lot of over the next few weeks. "So," she said brightly, "today's an early studio day for you?"

Buffy nodded, negotiating her way around the kitchen island and reaching for the cupboard where they kept the bread. "Mostly college girls until the afternoon hits. I need to run by the bank, too. Holding onto all these checks kinda wigs me out, so I try to make deposits regularly."

"You sound so grown up."

"I know. It's weird." She dropped a couple of pieces of bread into the waiting toaster. "So breakfast, shower, general getting ready-age, then off to be a grownup until lunchtime. And speaking of which, I'm not sure what's on your schedule for today, but if you could be at the Magic Box around twelve-thirty, I think it's probably time to get a little less wait-and-see-y with this whole Council thing. We—"

But Buffy cut herself off, realizing belatedly that the light—weak as it had been—in Willow's eyes had gone out. Her friend was standing on the other side of the island, staring at her as though she'd casually suggested that they try to get into the crystal meth business. Buffy closed her mouth, running her mind back over what she had said, and frowning when the obvious occurred to her.

"Except going to the Magic Box for you is kinda like taking an alcoholic to the liquor store, isn't it?" she asked a moment later.

Willow let loose a loud, harsh laugh that made the hairs on Buffy's neck stand at

attention. "I don't know if there's a good enough analogy for me just yet," she admitted, crossing her arms and rubbing them. "I mean, technically, the magicks are part of me as much as the organy bits I need to live, so I can't really go all cold turkey on it. But the thought of being near it gives me a massive case of the wiggins, which might be why I bit Xander's head off yesterday when he mentioned going by the Magic Box."

Buffy nodded slowly, pressing her lips together. "I'm...not sure how this works then."

"How what works?"

"I dunno. Any of it? How can you avoid something you need to survive?" Maybe it was the wrong thing to ask but she couldn't help herself. The nuances of Willow's addiction, when anyone—namely Giles—tried to explain them, had gone right over her head. Buffy understood feeling dependent upon something, the itchiness under your skin when it had been too long since you'd gotten a fix—she'd felt that herself in abundance when Spike had been her drug of choice. It wasn't strictly the same thing, she knew, but it was as close as she could come to a direct comparison. Doing something that made her feel good in the moment and hate herself after, only to swear it off until the itch returned and the consequences of giving in again seemed incidental. But deciding to go cold turkey on Spike, as much as she'd not wanted to do it, hadn't been hazardous to her health. It had just taken a lot of willpower.

She wasn't sure how someone was supposed to handle being addicted to something that they couldn't cut out completely. That just sounded like a big ole recipe for disaster.

"Controlled environment," Willow muttered, startling Buffy out of her thoughts.

"What?"

"Callista from MAA said to start small. Make sure you do it around other people so they can try to pull you back if you go too far." She furrowed her brow and released a shaky breath. "I mean, I couldn't go from zero to apocalypty even if I wanted to. The magic that let me do that was borrowed and siphoned out—as much as it could be. One of the reasons I have to—"

"Will?"

"I know. Rambling. Just trying to psych myself up here." She shook out her hands, looking everywhere, it seemed, but at Buffy. "I've only done a few spells since last spring. Small spells, just to give me a boost. And always with Callista or the coven around to hold my hand."

Buffy nodded, not so much because she understood but because she wanted Willow to know she'd been heard. And she had—way with the heard. In many ways, her friend seemed like a brand-new person, for Willow had never expressed reluctance to do anything magic-related, even and especially when she should. She'd always been quick to jump to a magical solution for the teeniest obstacles, and given the many times that had come back to bite everyone in the butt, it was nice to see her exhibit restraint.

At the same time, though, it made Buffy wonder if her friend hadn't come back home too soon, or if the Hellmouth was a place she could realistically stay long-term.

Eventually, something else would try to end the world and Buffy would need everyone at their battle stations. The ability to rely on magic had become such a valuable tool that the thought of returning to a place without it made her feel a bit handicapped. Which in turn made her feel like a crappy friend and a bit of a hypocrite, and she'd already had her fill of being both.

"You don't have to come," Buffy said, making a snap decision. "If it's too hard—"

"No. I mean, yeah, it might be, but..." Willow finally stopped twitching long enough to meet Buffy's eyes. There was resolve there, if not calm. "Being afraid of it's not going to make it easier. In fact, I'm pretty sure one of the lessons I was supposed to learn was avoidance has a way of making everything worse. Hence why the small bits of magic. Just to prove that I can, you know? Without feeling what I felt before."

Buffy worked her throat, her pulse leaping. "And you think you can."

"Well, I'm not saying I'm eager to break out a spellbook or anything, but...letting my addiction rule me is one of the ways it stays in control. And I don't want it in control. I want to be in control. *Just* regular Willow." She offered a soft smile, and though it was weak, it did reach her eyes. "A-and this is Scooby stuff, right? World-savage on the line."

"Not sure about the world part. Spike just said the Council wants me dead."

"Why is that again?"

Buffy bit her tongue before she could reply. Somehow, she didn't think the answer would instill much confidence. "Part of what we need to find out," she said instead. "If he's telling the truth, that is."

"And we think he might not be telling the truth because...?" Willow furrowed her brow. "I mean, yeah, soulless vampire and all, but you were...you know, *with* him. And this is still the same guy who loves you. Right? Things haven't changed *that* much."

A hard breath rushed out of her as though she'd been punched in the stomach. Buffy hadn't realized until that moment how much she'd assumed that Giles would have shared everything he'd learned from Xander about what had happened. *All* that had happened. She looked down before she could help herself, at a loss for words. And at once irrationally pissed off that she'd told Xander to knock it off with the blabbing, because talking about herself was not a Buffy strength. Much easier when other people just spilled the beans and let her go along with it.

"Oh," Willow said after a beat. "I'm missing something big, aren't I?"

"It's... Yeah. A whole lot of big and messy." She hesitated. "Something happened right before Tara died with me and Spike. I haven't entirely figured out yet."

It was the wrong thing to say if she wanted to end the conversation there, so she wasn't surprised when Willow's eyes went wide or when she leaned forward. "What?"

"I..." The dream that had chased her into morning flashed across her mind again, sparing none of its startling detail or the accompanying emotional punches. Buffy swallowed and crossed her arms, shifting to try to throw off her discomfort. It didn't work. "He wanted to apologize for what happened with Anya. Let's just say it didn't go well."

"Let's just say?"

"It was bad. Bad enough that he left town. He actually just got back—as in *just*. He's only been here a couple of days."

"Oh," Willow said again, somewhat slumping back. It could have been disappointment that Buffy hadn't given her more or it could have been surprise. Hard to tell these days. "I guess this thing that happened was bad enough that you think Spike would lie about something like the Council?"

The more she thought about it, no, and last night had gone a long way in allaying the lingering doubts. But there *were* still doubts, mostly tied to Spike's secrecy about wherever it was that he'd gone and what he'd done. That he wasn't telling her everything, that he was holding *anything* back, wasn't the sort of thing she could just overlook. He was asking her to trust him with something huge while keeping something from her at the same time. And no matter what had happened that night in the bathroom, no matter if it had just been a horrible mistake he hadn't realized he was making until it was too late, there remained the matter of trust. She hadn't trusted him then—not entirely—and she had no reason to trust him now. Trust was a tall order with her. Always had been.

Trusting Spike?

Oh, we don't need to go there.

"We just need to be sure," she said finally. "Before we do anything. If the Council wants to kill me, okay, well, we'll handle it. If not, I don't want to give them a reason to start thinking that it might not be a bad idea by jumping the gun and declaring war on them or something."

Willow nodded, then looked down. She was only quiet for a few seconds, though, before she inhaled and straightened her shoulders as though readying herself to go into battle. "I can do the Magic Box," she said, her voice only wobbling a little. "I just... I'll need you and Xander to be there with me."

"Kinda hard to have a Scooby meeting without the core Scoobies."

Her lips twitched like she wanted to smile but had forgotten how. "You said around lunchtime?"

"Yeah. Get my morning sessions out of the way. And Xander usually swings by around then to see how things are going. Plus, the Anya of it."

"Oh goddess, I hadn't thought about Anya." Willow pressed the heel of her hand to her forehead. "I'm guessing as much as I'm no one's favorite person around here, that's especially true with her."

"Well, you gotta look at it from her point of view," Buffy said. "All you did to me was try to kill me, my sister, and end the world. But you *trashed* the Magic Box. There are just some things a gal can't forgive."

Her friend barked a startled laugh, the hand at her brow dropping to close over her mouth as though she were shocked at her own daring. But when Buffy failed to chastise her, some of Willow's tension receded, and she laughed again, the sound a bit freer this time. "Yeah," she said, nodding. "Just wish I'd remembered to get her something when I was doing my guilt shopping a couple of days ago. With her, at least, a present would go a long way."

"Very true," Buffy replied with a nod. While *she* hadn't really known how to take

the admittedly stylish handbag Willow had given her yesterday after returning from her friend-date with Xander, Anya seemed more the type to accept presents as apology peace offerings. Hell, not that long ago, Buffy would've been right there with her, but the gesture had hit her a bit wrong. Not empty, and she knew it wasn't Willow trying to gloss over whatever piecing together they needed to do to get back where they had been, but still not quite right. As though anything were that simple—doing something like what she'd done, then disappearing for a few months and returning with a shiny new attitude adjustment and a gift to make up for all the bad.

"Tell you what," she said a moment later. "I still have the tags on the purse you bought me. My gift to *you* will be giving it back so you can give it to Anya."

Willow's face fell again. "You... Do you not like it?"

"No, I do. A lot." Another truth—whatever else, her friend knew her well, which made her a champ when it came to selecting things that would complement Buffy's taste. "But compared to the gift that is you and Anya making up? Gotta say, I'll get *so* much more mileage out of that. Plus, you know how hard I am on purses."

"Does it matter that it's not really Anya's style?"

"Anya's style is receiving gifts. I think that's the part that matters."

Willow nodded, huffing out another breath. "If only everyone was that easy," she muttered, then took a step back and waved at the toaster. "I'll just, umm, let you eat breakfast and get ready to go and be Grown Up Buffy. If I'm going to the Magic Box, I should probably prepare."

"Prepare?"

"Some mind-clearing exercises. Meditation. Maybe a 911 call to Callista, see if she has any last-minute pearls of wisdom to drop on me. A-and I should contact the LA chapter of MAA and make sure the schedule I have is still the right one so I don't miss a meeting due to an outdated brochure."

Buffy arched an eyebrow. "Meetings...in LA?"

"Until there are enough of us in Sunnydale to form a new chapter, I guess," she replied. Then she caught Buffy's expression. "It's not ideal, but yeah. I'll be driving to Los Angeles once a week to attend. And there are a few forums and stuff on the 'net that I think will probably become my online home-away-from-home. This kind of thing is just easier when you're not doing it on your own."

That made sense. And now that she thought about it, she had this vague memory of Giles saying something similar when they'd first started discussing Willow's return. Maybe—or maybe she was making that up. They had talked about a lot of things, and it wasn't like Buffy hadn't had anything else on her mind lately.

No, she thought. *Not at all*.

Thankfully, the rest of the morning went by without further kinda-awkward conversations, not that there was much opportunity for it. Buffy sped through her normal routine to compensate for the unaccounted-for time she'd lost and did her best to keep herself focused on knocking items off her to-do list. Fly by the bank, grab herself a coffee, and arrive in time to let her first group of girls into the studio. None of whom cared if she was a bit frazzled or distracted because they were all frazzled and distracted these days—most of them coping with their broadening aware-

ness of their reality, as Sunnydale's worst kept secret was hardly even a secret anymore. Which, hey, Buffy supposed was the kind of thing that would give a girl like her endless job security, as people insisted on remaining on the Hellmouth even after learning it was, well, a mouth to Hell. Apparently, the freakishly high mortality rate was a fair trade when juxtaposed with the low cost of living, and given her own up close and personal experience with bill collectors last year, she hated to admit she understood why people would take the gamble.

Once her lessons were underway, though, Buffy was able to do that wonderful thing where her mind detached from whatever was going on in her personal life. It was hard to wallow in uncertainty regarding her newly reformed best friend or her complicated feelings for her ex-lover while fielding questions from a group of girls whose primary goal was to stay alive just so they could be here to ask more questions next week. Unlike the hours she'd spent mentally rotting away at Doublemeat Palace, she had to remain present and engaged to be an effective trainer, and not only because that was what these girls were paying her to do. Knowing that what she said to them, the things she showed them, could mean the difference between landing in a hospital bed or a coffin was more than enough motivation to make sure she earned her paycheck. And heady as that was, it was nice too. Nice to feel like she was doing something that actually mattered.

In fact, Buffy became so absorbed in what she was doing that other things—things like informing the Magic Box proprietor that its most serious vandal was swinging by for lunch—completely slipped her mind until Anya blew into the studio at about ten minutes till noon.

"Willow is coming here?" she demanded, her eyes taking on that wild gleam that Buffy had long since associated with rants against communism and buy-one-get-one-half-off sales. "She is coming *here*?"

Buffy released a deep breath, glancing at the closed back door. Well, at least Anya had waited until the last student of the morning sessions had vacated the premises, though that was more likely a happy accident than something she'd done on purpose. "I didn't have time to mention it this morning, but yeah. She's coming."

"Great," Anya snapped, crossing her arms. "Just great."

"How did you find out?"

"Xander. He called to ask what I wanted for lunch, which I thought was nice until he told me to not try to make Willow feel bad when she gets here this afternoon." The not-so-former demon pinned her with a glare. "And thank god he did. You weren't going to tell me?"

"I didn't mean to not tell you. This is literally the least busy I've been since I got here." It was perfectly true, though Buffy had a feeling she was in the wrong, especially as she knew how Anya felt about Willow. "Look, she doesn't want to be here anymore than you want her here. There are just things we need to talk about—Scooby things."

"Things like the money she owes me for all the inventory she destroyed? Because that's the only conversation I am willing to have with—"

"Anya, I know this is asking a lot, but we really do need to figure out if the

Council is up to something. And sooner rather than later. Spike said they're expecting a decision from him today."

"What does that have to do with Willow?"

This question threw her off so effectively that Buffy just stood there for a second, opening and closing her mouth as she fought to find the right words. "She's one of the gang," she said lamely. "This is what we do. All of us, together. It's why she came back, right?"

Anya scoffed. "I didn't agree to that."

"Well...if you don't want to be involved, then you don't have to be, I guess."

"Except I do. If she's here, I *have* to be involved." She turned, sending a look that was part wistful, part longing into the shop proper. "I *just* got all this back. It's not easy, you know. Being a demon in a human world. I just got this back and if she takes it away again—"

"She's not going to take away anything."

"And how do you know?"

The mess of complicated thoughts and feelings Buffy had somehow ignored since leaving the house that morning were suddenly front and center once more, and too tangled for her to try to explain to herself, let alone anyone else. She shook her head, scowling when she realized the space behind her eyes was starting to throb. "I don't," she said at last. "But this is what we do. Give people second chances. Like the one we gave you."

"The one you gave me?"

"Well, yeah. You know, after the whole you-tried-to-get-an-evil-version-of-Willow-to-kill-us thing." Buffy paused. "An evil version with fangs. I guess I need to be more specific."

"That was a second chance?"

"Yes. Or I guess it was more of a first chance since that's how we got to know you. But still, a chance."

"*Would* you give me one?"

"Huh?"

"A second chance."

Buffy furrowed her brow, suddenly certain she'd lost the thread on the conversation. Were they still talking about Willow? "I don't get it. Why do you need a second chance?"

"I don't," Anya said simply. "But it would be nice to know you'd give me one. Especially since I know how biased you are against demons. Even when I was a former demon and completely human, I can't say I ever really felt like I was appreciated by any of you. Now Xander and I aren't together and I'm a demon again, and you're telling me that second chances are something you just do. Would I get one too? Or do you need to be human to qualify?"

That was all it took for the slight pain behind her eyes to bloom into a full-blown headache. God, this was the last thing she needed at the moment, and while the path of least resistance would be to simply agree and move on, Buffy had been on more than one painful journey by taking that path in the past. "I don't know," she

said, exhausted just by the sound of her own voice. "It would depend on what you'd done."

"How very typical."

"Anya, I can't tell you what would happen in the future. I don't even know what's going to happen tomorrow or in the next five minutes. But I'd want to, okay? If there was a way for us to get back to being us, I'd want to try." She waved her arms at the room, the frustration she'd been able to put on hold that morning rapidly making up for lost time. "Like right now—I don't know if this is going to work or if Willow can ever be one of us again, but I want to try. All I'm asking is that you try too. Give her the chance that you'd want us to give you."

For a moment, she was convinced Anya was going to keep on arguing. She certainly wanted to—it was there in her eyes, in the hardness of her jaw and the tension in her shoulders. But then she sighed, deflating, and offered a tight, clipped nod. "Not like I have the firepower to stop her from coming in," she muttered. "Maybe it's better she's here. At least I'll be able to keep an eye on her."

Buffy exhaled. "Thank you."

"I don't like it."

"I know."

"And she can't do magic in my shop."

"That is perfectly fair."

"And I think you should offer to buy my lunch today."

"Consider it done."

Anya stared at her for a second. "And if she destroys the shop again, that's on you. Financially, I mean. You assume that risk."

Buffy nearly snorted at that but managed to keep her reply to herself. The one about how her entire life had been defined by assuming risk, and adding one more thing to her responsibility pile wouldn't make much of a difference if the whole thing decided to come tumbling down. Instead, she offered a nod, and hoped that between her assurance and Willow's handbag peace offering, Anya would be open to considering full reconciliation by the end of the day. That didn't seem likely, but it would be nice if at least one thing in her life wasn't a complicated mess. It wasn't much to ask.

Still, Buffy still held her breath when the bell above the door announced Willow and Xander's arrival some forty-five minutes later, and not just for Anya's sake. Maybe if she hadn't heard firsthand just how difficult it was going to be for Willow to be in this environment, she wouldn't have watched her friend like the proverbial hawk...only that was a big fat lie, too, because this had her own nerves on edge. Or more on edge. No part of Willow's return was ever going to be easy, but perhaps especially not seeing her in spaces like this one and knowing just how much damage she could sow, and how quickly. Were it not for the fact that Willow looked about as excited to be there as Anya was to see her, Buffy might have had a harder time than she did finding her poker face.

"Hey," she said with what she hoped was a suitably sincere smile as her friends neared, Xander holding a couple of bags of takeout and Willow making a concerted effort not to not lift her focus from the floor. "Thanks for picking up lunch."

"Anytime, Buffster," Xander replied with a buoyant grin that was one-hundred-percent authentic, which didn't surprise her. "Scoobies do their best scheming while on a full stomach. I might even swing out for the traditional doughnut run if moo goo gai pan doesn't get our brains storming in the right direction."

"I'm pretty sure moo goo gai pan is brainy food," Willow said, whipping her head up. By contrast, the smile she had plastered onto her face was so broad and so fake it almost hurt to look at. "How'd the morning sessions go?"

"Pretty okay," Buffy replied, glancing toward the cash wrap out of the corner of her eye, where Anya stood scowling at the three of them, her eyes narrowed. "Say, umm, what's that you got there, Will?"

Willow frowned and glanced down, blinking at the purse in her hands as though surprised to see it there. "Oh," she said, and looked up again. "This is... I got this for Anya. While I was in Chulmleigh. I thought she might... It made me think of her."

Fortunately, when it came to presents, Anya was pretty bad at picking out blatant lies. Or staged conversation. All Willow had to say was she'd gotten the handbag for Anya, and the demon was rounding the counter, her strides fast and full of purpose.

"What is it?" she asked, not bothering to disguise her eagerness. "Was it expensive?"

Willow blinked again, only this time with a mixture of surprise that flirted with amusement, if her twitching lips were any indication. "Kinda, yeah," she said, not protesting as Anya snatched the purse from her grasp. "I know it's not... I know it doesn't make up for what I did, but I thought you might..."

"You thought I might be won over with bribery."

"I... Are you?"

Anya was quiet for a long moment, applying all her concentration on the handbag. She twisted it this way and that, peeked inside, explored the extra pockets and compartments, and pulled on the strap to test its durability before finally fixing it to her shoulder with an exaggerated sniff. "It's a nice start," she muttered. "But it doesn't make up for what you did."

"No," Willow agreed quickly. "No, I didn't think it—"

But Anya wasn't listening, rather hurrying back to the cash-wrap without a backward glance. And all things considered, Buffy thought the exchange had gone better than everyone could have hoped. It would be a while before Anya thawed entirely where Willow was concerned—and understandably so—but being able to occupy the same space, especially when that space was the Magic Box, without a lot of screaming or accusations flying around was a big step in the right direction. At the very least, some of the tension that she had carried with her since first discussing it that morning had eased, enough so that the smile Buffy aimed her friend was genuine.

"Thanks again for coming," she said.

Willow offered a hard nod that betrayed her nerves but flashed a grin in return all the same. "Baby steps," she replied. "It helps that Callista was ready to give me a much-needed pep-talk. More or less the stuff I told you about this morning. Some-

times even if you know something, it helps hearing someone else say it just to give it that extra oomph.”

“Absolutely,” Buffy said, nodding toward the back table where Xander was busy unpacking today’s takeout order. “Take a seat. Xander’s lunch hour is on the short side, and I have a new session at two, so we should probably be quick.”

The first few minutes were the most strained and awkward, as Buffy had assumed they would be. It had been, after all, quite a long time since she, Willow, and Xander had sat at the same table—or tried to be a version of themselves that felt even a little familiar. Even still, she found she was surprised at how easy it was to transition back into the person she’d once been, at least on the surface. It came on slowly, but once she started talking, going over what they knew courtesy of Spike, she felt a part of herself begin to unwind and another part—a part she had honestly assumed she had lost—kick into gear. Making up a plan of action had always been a Scooby strength, even if those plans had the occasional tendency to go kablooeey. And even though this wasn’t like any other problem, even though the Spike of the matter ensured it could never be, there was some comfort in treating it like one. Made it seem less complicated than it was.

As uncomplicated as the Council’s potential plot to bribe her former lover into ending her life could ever be, in any case.

“So it comes back to this,” Xander said, twirling the package that contained his fortune cookie between his fingers. Any time Spike’s name was mentioned, he went tense, twitched, but so far had not said anything to suggest he hadn’t heard Buffy the day before. In fact, he seemed to be straining to keep his voice even and tempered. “Do we trust that Spike is telling the truth? Like I said the other night, Buff, it’s kind of a big lie for him...but Spike’s been all about the big lies before.”

“And it seems weird that he would just volunteer that the Council would remove his chip,” Willow added. “I mean, doesn’t it? Even if he is all in love with you, he still wants that chip out. Or he did, last I knew. Unless things have really changed...”

“They haven’t,” Xander said swiftly. “I’m pretty sure getting the chip out is second only to getting Buffy... Well, to getting *back* with Buffy. It doesn’t make sense that he’d essentially warn us about something he wants to happen.”

“Well, he *doesn’t* want Buffy dead,” Willow replied. “Kinda hard to do one without the other. What confuses me is why he would tell us *before* the chip is out. Couldn’t he just get the procedure done, *then* tattle on the Council and get us on the case? He didn’t even need to tell you that they asked him to do it.”

“And *why* did they ask him to do it?” Xander asked, shifting in his seat. “I mean, assuming that they did. There are other ways to kill a slayer that don’t involve letting a mass murderer out of prison.”

Buffy wet her lips, thinking back to what Spike had told her last night. She hadn’t let herself do too much of that today, as turning her thoughts to Spike was a surefire way to lose hours of time, and she didn’t have hours to lose. The few times she’d caught herself wandering in that direction—in *any* direction that would force her to sit with what he’d said or the dream she’d had or any combination thereof—she’d thrown up a mental *stop* sign and directed her attention elsewhere. “That much is

because of me," she said, her throat dry. "Or so he told me last night. The reason the Council wants me dead is because I've let...things happen. First with Angel and then with..." She glanced at Willow, hoping she wouldn't have to say it. But then knowing she had to—that dancing around the issue wouldn't do any of them any favors. "Their argument is that it's my fault. Twice the world has almost ended because of people I love. I got close to Angel and I didn't... I didn't do anything about the magicks getting all out of control."

"Buffy, that was *not* your fault," Willow said, the color having drained from her face. "I can't believe they'd—"

"Can't you? These are the guys who tried to kill me when I turned eighteen just to see if I deserved to keep living. Logic isn't one of their fortes." Buffy hesitated, then reached out to put her hand over her friend's, not sure what she was trying to say, or if there was anything beyond basic reassurance. Maybe there wasn't. "They don't have a history of being right about much. Which is why"—she released Willow's hand and turned back to Xander—"I am inclined to think Spike is telling the truth. If they could get him to kill me, it'd be the perfect cap for the cautionary tale they tell the next girl. And all of this is just a bit...*out there* for Spike to come up with on his own."

That much seemed to steal whatever wind remained in Xander's sails. He frowned, sinking back into his seat. "Okay, so as far as evil master plans go, that isn't the worst one," he said. "And yeah, I am definitely in the Council is Evil camp. But still...pretty big serving of crow to swallow if we're wrong about this."

"So let's make sure we're not wrong," Willow nodded, met Buffy's gaze. "Could you...I dunno...*snoop* around Spike's place? See if there's anything there? Maybe a hint as to where he was when he was gone? You said that he hasn't exactly been forthright about that. If he is making this up... I mean, since, with the timing, his coming back and just happening to have this massively huge news..."

The thought sent a thrill up her spine. A bad thrill. A very bad thrill. So bad its warning signs were spelled out in blazing neon letters. The realization of how very much she wanted to know—*needed* to know—exactly where Spike had gotten off to, smashed into her with so much force it would have knocked her clear across the shop had it had physical form. As though simply by suggesting it, Willow had officially given Buffy permission to acknowledge the question that had bloomed the first night she'd seen Spike. The question she'd forced herself to ignore amid everything else going on in her life. But the hint, the *possibility*, that she might be able to get some answers stole all her reserve.

There was only one slightly massive problem.

"He'd know," Buffy said, trying hard to keep her voice from shaking. "There'd be no way he wouldn't know."

"Well, I think the idea is for you to wait until he's not there," Xander replied. "Unless someone has a spare invisibility cloak hanging... Oh my god."

"What?" Buffy and Willow chimed together.

His face had gone slack, his eyes wide with horror. "Invisible. I just..." He glanced at Buffy then away again in a hurry. "I just...put something together that I really, really wished had stayed nice and...separate."

Buffy frowned at him, her mind spinning hard with snoopage possibilities—too hard to follow what he'd said. Only for a second, though, then an unpleasant heat bloomed across her skin as the dots connected. "Oh. Umm..."

"What?" Willow asked, her voice rising with her urgency. "What am I missing?"

"Naked pushups," he muttered.

"Huh? I'm missing naked pushups?"

"Say, Xan, you know how there are things we never mention again?" Buffy asked brightly, well aware now that Anya was staring at them from behind the cash register. "This can be one of those things."

Xander shook his head, still looking somewhere between stunned and sick. "I will never be able to not see that now. And I didn't even see it the first time. But now I see it, you see?"

"See what?" Willow demanded.

"That the time he went to Spike's when Buffy was invisible, he caught them having sex," Anya volunteered, and answered Buffy's corresponding whimper with a shrug. "I remember wondering if I should ask Spike about his workout regimen after Xander told me that he found him exercising in bed, and obviously whatever he was doing was working really well, because—"

"Anya!" Xander snapped, his face going from sickly pale to fire-engine red in an instant. "With the inappropriate!"

"Oh god." Buffy planted her elbows on the table and buried her face in her hands, wishing fervently the hellmouth would open long enough to swallow her. "It was... Can we just not talk about this? As in *ever*?"

"I'd like it purged from my memory if it all possible." Xander shot Willow a hopeful look. "I don't suppose..."

"Not a chance," Willow said.

"Not in my shop," Anya snapped. "I can deal with her being here, but not with her doing magic."

"And there are way more important things to use magic on," Buffy said in a rush, trying to will away her mortification with no luck. "Like how I'd snoop in Spike's crypt without him finding out. Because even if he isn't there, he'll be able to...you know, vampires with their sense of smell and everything. It's been way too long since I've been there. I mean, *really* been there, as in more than a drop-in. If I had to look downstairs, he'd know in like a second."

"I dunno..." Xander ran his hands down his face. "Getting this image out of my head seems pretty important to me."

"You didn't even see anything!"

"But now I know there was something to see, and my mind keeps filling in the things I didn't!"

The embarrassment was beginning to ebb, thank god, making way for more comfortable frustration. Buffy rolled her eyes and turned back to Willow. "Is there some sort of cloaking spell you could do so he doesn't smell me? Or *see* me, if he's there?"

Her friend's eyes went saucer-sized. "What?"

It was dumb and reckless, but Buffy didn't really hear her own question until after it was out. And she couldn't really fault Anya for bellowing a harsh, "Not in my shop! I already said!" as though she hadn't been heard a second before. Because she hadn't. Somehow, Buffy hadn't been in the post-Dark Willow world just a moment ago; she'd been in the world that had been home before all things Glory. The one where casually asking Willow to whip up some mojo was simply the way things got done. Without even pausing for breath. With no thought to the uncertainty and fear and more besides she'd been living with for months now.

But it was still there—out there and between them. And there were things they had to know. Spike and what he was up to, whether she could trust him on this, was high up on the list.

"It's okay," Willow said a moment later, forcing a smile. "I... Well, Callista and I talked about that when I called her. It was only a matter of time, right? Before we needed to whip out the magicks? Especially if we're fighting the Council... I can do this. I can."

"Not in my—"

"Not here," she agreed, turning to give Anya a nod. "But I'll need to buy some stuff. My supplies are a little depleted."

Anya opened her mouth, closed it, as though the prospect of making a sale confused what she was arguing about.

"You're sure?" Buffy asked. "I can try to work it on my own. I've done some small spells before."

Willow shook her head, not with an excess of confidence but also not with the fear that had been there just a few seconds ago. "I'm sure. Like I said, we knew it had to be sometime. Why not today?" She laughed, though the sound was a bit strained. "It's all about the way I approach it. That was one of the things Callista reminded me of. She also told me that avoiding it was just going to make it worse, a-and she's right. The more I build it up, the harder it'll be. Kinda like leaving a term paper to the last minute. The more nerves I have, the more pressure I put on myself, the sloppier I'll be, and it'll be damn hard to get my A. And you know me. Straight A student."

Xander, who had been silent up until now, favored her with a warm, affectionate smile and patted her back. "That's my Will."

All of that made sense. A lot of sense. Or maybe Buffy just wanted it to because life would be easier if it did. That Willow had gone from being nervous about even coming to the Magic Box to being willing to perform magic in the span of maybe four hours freaked her out a little, but then, she had said that using magic was essential for her survival. And maybe it all came down to this—understanding that it was being done with purpose, and with appropriate respect for what could go wrong. The potential under the flash.

And when teased with the possibility that she might find out what was going on with Spike...

"Okay," Buffy said. There was that thrill again, reckless and wild, yet oddly comforting at the same time. "Get what you need, and we'll do it tonight."



COME DOWN AND WASTE AWAY WITH ME

ONCE, WHAT SEEMED LIKE A LONG TIME AGO, THE DOOR TO HIS CRYPT HAD BURST open just for kicks. No girl on the other side, ready to start spewing her denials in between asking him for help, all the while hoping he wouldn't notice the way she kept undressing him with her eyes. Even better, no more excuses as to why they wouldn't work, why it had been a mistake, and the many ways their one night together would never happen again.

Or so it had seemed. It had taken him a minute longer than it should have to cotton on that his lady was actually there—that he hadn't been dreaming her scent or the thrum of her pulse, that the breaths he'd heard hadn't been just his overactive and Buffy-addicted imagination. Granted, he liked to think the primal part of him had known right off, and that was probably true, but that primal part had been at war then with the rest of him. The wiser, less optimistic Spike who had been convinced it would take an actual apocalypse to get Buffy to admit he was what she wanted. To come to him without excuse, subterfuge, or struggle—to come to him simply because she couldn't get enough of him and was tired of trying.

Then she'd grabbed his arse and shoved him against the wall, kicking off some of the most blissful hours of his life. Not only that she was there—and she had been—but that she was giving in at last. No pretense of a fight to provide her cover. Buffy had been hit by something and that something had made her realize what he'd known all along—that when she was left to her own devices, divorced of expectation, the place she wanted to be was in his arms.

And that had been the point, as he'd learned, just not the way he'd thought. It had been a blip—she didn't exist, therefore *they* didn't exist, which meant she could be here without really being here at all, and honest with herself only when she didn't have to catch her own reflection. The change in her had been radical, something out

of a dream. Rather than combative and reticent, she'd been playful and giggly, open to a slow seduction rather than the good, hard fucks that had defined the latter part of their so-called relationship. She'd touched him differently, too. Nibbled on him like she was savoring the experience. Hell, she'd even started in when her mate had shown up, relishing the opportunity to be as *with Spike* as she ever had been. Open and free, and ultimately, that was what had clued him in.

He'd lost all of that after he'd realized she wasn't *with him* at all and given her the boot. The softer, kinder Slayer hadn't shown up again in all the months that had followed.

There was no reason to be thinking any of this now, except the door had blown open as it had that day, seemingly of its own volition. There was no Buffy on the other side. Nothing else, either. Just the familiar view of the cemetery, same old headstones marking the path he would take once the sun had set properly and he had a grasp on where it was he aimed to go. All that came in were the ghosts of memories he knew better than to revisit. Fingments of a life he'd deluded himself into thinking could be his, once upon a time, likely aided by the fact that the Buffy who had followed him home last night had been that softer, kinder one he'd only ever been fortunate enough to catch in glimpses.

No, the door had blown open because it was an old bloody door, and this was an old bloody crypt. The whiffs he had of Buffy were from her last visit, hours old by now and fading fast. He caught no hint of a heartbeat or pulse, no whispered breath or anything else that might indicate more than the wind and a few stray leaves had let itself inside. Spike inhaled deeply, deeper than needed—though he supposed no breath of his was strictly needed—and moved forward to close the door again. If he strained his ears on the way for phantom sounds that ought not be there, it was only because he was a soppy, bloody fool who apparently would never learn the simplest and most straightforward of lessons.

Case in point—even knowing this, even being as full of recriminations as he was, he still stopped when he had his hand on the door, turned to study the clearly empty crypt. Knowing he was a dolt but still daft enough to wonder. Or maybe that was hope. “Buffy?”

The crypt remained resolutely silent, of course, which made the way his heart plummeted all the more absurd. Past was past. He knew that. Past was past, and he had nothing but the harsh, unforgiving present. The reality he'd made over a series of missteps he hadn't seen until it had been too late.

Spike shook his head. “Bloody pathetic, mate,” he muttered, shoving the door closed and casting the crypt into darkness once more.

Every step he'd taken since he'd set out for the soul had been steeped in deep naiveté, and coming back was no different. The trouble was he kept fooling himself into thinking he'd learned his lesson. The soul wasn't the cure-all he'd envisioned—fair's fair, and now he knew better. Buffy surprising him his first night back in town—didn't see that one coming, but he'd be prepared for whatever happened next. On and on it went, culminating in confronting her with anger when he'd thought she'd been blabbing their business to anyone who would listen, which was her right in any

regard, and she kept flipping the script on him. Rather than responding with the punch to the nose that was her signature move, Buffy had met him with calm poise. More than that, she'd given him an explanation he damn well knew he had done jack to earn. Fucking with his head all the while, but not trying to, which was the largest head fuck of all.

The soul should have taught him to take whatever grace was spared his way, without daring to hope, and never to ask for more. Yet here he was, falling back on old habits anyway. Unable to keep that twisted, selfish part of him from asking questions that he knew had clear, definite answers. At least the soul wasn't entirely useless, though. Without it, the softer, kinder Buffy would have filled his head with impossible possibilities—and he would have deluded himself into thinking her softness and her kindness meant her feelings for him had shifted. He knew that, for those thoughts were there now, pressing against his gray matter and demanding recognition that he would not give. Flooding him with fantasies that the rawest bits of him couldn't help but react to, even if only in his own bloody head. Aided at present with the memory of what had happened on a day that felt both not that long ago and centuries in the past, when Buffy *had* been here in all invisible splendor, how she'd touched him. How she'd let him touch her. How blissful those few hours had been.

He glanced at the door again as though it would open on command, trying to ignore the bite of his zipper against his swelling cock. Hell, trying to ignore his cock entirely, not that he'd ever had any luck there. He'd wanked plenty to the memory of them together—sod what the soul said about that—but had been careful not to indulge his mind when it wanted to take him places he couldn't go since he'd seen her again. The Buffy of before, the one he'd never had but had thought he could, was fair enough game for his imagination because it had happened and couldn't unhappen. The one who had followed him home last night, the one he would have to see tomorrow and tomorrow's tomorrow and every tomorrow until he met dust or found the will to leave her behind for good... He had no right to that Buffy. Not in the real world or the one that lived between his ears—not after what he'd done.

Yet tell that to his dick.

Spike swore and set to busy himself about the crypt, determined to get his mind on something else. Trouble was, his mind was a right bastard that he'd long ago trained to fixate on anything tangential to Buffy, and once the thought was there it was bloody impossible to outrun. It remained, nattering in his ear as he made himself a drink, asking what it meant that Buffy had apparently not told anyone what had happened between them that night in her bathroom—that, according to her, the first time she'd talked about it had been just yesterday. Sure, Harris had seen what he'd seen and come to his own conclusions, and sure, Buffy had by her own admission done nothing to dissuade him, but that she hadn't joined in, spilled all... Fuck, what did that mean?

"Nothing," he told the crypt sternly, slamming his glass onto the stone counter. "It means bloody nothing."

Suppose that was true, the soulless bugger in his head went on, it still didn't

explain why she hadn't popped him one for yelling at her. Or why she'd talked to him the way she had—with patience she'd rarely given him before. It also didn't account for Clem's tale of all the nights the Slayer had swung by the crypt during his absence, or that the first time she'd been there to ask for his help. He understood her interest in where he'd gone and what he'd done while away, but not the lack of forceful interrogation. Not the absence of threats, either empty or otherwise, or any hallmarks of the homecoming he knew he should have received. And because of all that, because of the smidgens of what the soulless bugger would have once called crumbs, Spike couldn't keep his mind from venturing where it had no business venturing.

Couldn't convince his cock to go and stay soft, either. No, the damn thing was working in tandem with his imagination, the urge to give in only growing more difficult to ignore the longer he tried. There was no reason for it, except his own blind bloody hope. And eventually, almost without conscious thought, he found himself venturing to the lower level. Found himself staring at the bed that had been their ill-met target so many times, the one he'd once envisioned sharing with her in more than stolen moments. Picturing her there, not the Slayer he'd tried to love but the one he'd tried to hurt, looking at him with some of what she'd given him last night, her hair framing her face, her eyes round and dark in that way they got when she was on the cusp of giving in to what they both knew she wanted. The clothes she wore vanished, as clothing in fantasies often did, leaving him staring at her smooth, soft skin, her nipples hard and her legs spread so as not to deny him a view of her lush, wet cunt. He staggered toward her on legs that were no longer under his control, freeing his cock as he went. Watching as she watched the progression, her cheeks flush and her expression hungry, a small moan rumbling through her throat as he took himself in his hand.

He didn't know how it was happening or why and had even less idea of how long he could expect it to last. Maybe forever, maybe for the next five minutes, and very likely never again. But he wouldn't waste this time with her—wouldn't let himself throw it away for anything. Spike gripped his cock firmly, dragged his fist up the length of his shaft and squeezed his foreskin over the tip in the way he liked best—the way *she knew* he liked it best. And he kept his focus on her. The vision of Buffy on his bed, watching him as he wanked, as he stared at her the way he never could in real life. Not anymore. The tip of her pink tongue making a trip around her lips, leaving them shiny in the weak light. Her breaths coming harder and at a pace he couldn't help but match, her own hand slipping over her hip to cup her pussy. She moaned and he moaned, and for a second, he could almost fool himself that he heard her gasp. Heard the wet sound that was her parting her swollen labia and caught a peek of her clit before she started stroking herself in time with the pumps of his hand, whispering all the while. How he was beautiful, how much she missed him, how no one touched her the way he did. How it was all right, everything was okay, and as bad as things had been, they would be better now. He hadn't meant it—she knew he hadn't meant it, and she still wanted him. Wanted the hands on her now to be his. Wanted to feel his lips on her skin and his cock deep inside her. Wanted to hold him to her so he'd never leave again.

This was the reason why he hadn't let himself think of her as she was now. Aside from the fact that he had no right, it hurt. Everything hurt. But fuck, he couldn't stop. He didn't want to stop. For a few seconds, he wanted to believe it was real. That it could be real someday—the thing he'd set off to do when he'd left on his quest. Become the sort of man who would deserve her. The sort she'd want, the sort she could love. Back when everything had seemed so straightforward. Not easy—never easy—but attainable if he gave it his everything. If he was willing to make the big sacrifices and take his lumps like a good little boy.

The thought that one day, the fantasy would become real. Buffy here, seizing him by the hips to drag him forward. Look him in the eye as she forced his hand from his cock so her own could take over, making certain to keep her gaze on him when she told him she loved him, and proceeded to show him with her mouth just how much the soul he'd won for her really meant.

Spike wasn't sure how he felt when he came. There was the rush of physical bliss, the relief of tumbling into orgasm, the familiar scent of his ejaculation and the splatter as some spilled over his hand. There was also a hollow place carved deep inside that had somehow just become hollower. The place he'd made for her, both knowingly and unknowingly. The place she'd never fill.

For what felt like a stretch of eternity, he stood staring at the Buffyless bed, holding his cock like the prize prat he was, both full and empty and aching as a result. Finally, he found the will to move, to tuck himself back into his jeans and pull up the zipper, though not without biting out a dry, "So, Slayer, was it good for you?" to the empty room. Why, he didn't know, except that he'd wondered if speaking would make him feel better. It didn't. Silence wasn't very forgiving. One of the reasons he'd never been able to stand it—had always needed to load the air with talk or music or moans or screams or some heady combination of all the bloody above. Harder to hear the lack of reply when there was something inside the stillness. Dru, at least, had the whole merry cavalcade of voices in her head to keep her company, the lucky bitch. He only had himself, and the thoughts that filled the void weren't comforting or entertaining. They were more of the same—echoed voices of victims past when not dominated by all things Buffy.

Rather than continue having a one-sided conversation, he thought it might be better to tend to the mess he'd made. There was spunk on his skin and his jeans, probably some on the floor as well. Might be better to change altogether so he didn't have to wear the stink of his own misery more than usual, and that ought to eat a few minutes, give himself time to set his mind on something else. Spike made quick work washing up, traded his clothes for something fresh and pitched everything he'd been wearing into the corner he'd long since designated as the holding place for dirty laundry. Not that any of this made a lick of difference to the course of his thoughts, which, rather than having calmed in the aftermath of his wank, had redoubled their efforts. Now, instead of simply remembering how Buffy had been that day—gloriously carefree, not to mention affectionate—he had a host of new self-loathing to throw in the mix. Wasn't like he was an authority on the subject, but it seemed

wrong, giving himself physical pleasure to the thought of the woman he'd nearly raped. Even worse that it was the woman he loved.

Fuck, he was almost relieved when he heard the telling swing of metal announce he had a visitor, even if the accompanying scent told him right off that it wasn't anyone he actually wanted to see. There was something immensely gratifying at having someone else around to point his anger at—eased the burden for all that he felt for himself, even if only for a few minutes. So when he climbed back to the crypt's upper level and found that Council bitch waiting for him, a loosely held document dangling from her hand, it was all he could do to keep from showing her the truth of the monster she enjoyed teasing herself with.

"Gotta stop meetin' like this, pet," Spike said, enjoying, in spite of himself, the way she jumped at the sound of his voice. No spine of iron, this one, even if she was sneaking into vampire lairs all on her lonesome. And, reflecting on that, he arched his eyebrows and met her startled gaze with an appropriately suggestive look. "See you ditched your escort. Want me all to yourself, do you?"

That delicate flush that had filled her cheeks a few nights ago bloomed back with a vengeance. Lydia favored him with a breathy little sigh, though didn't go so far as to swoon, thank Christ, as that would be embarrassing for both of them. A thought she must have shared, for the glimpse of the besotted schoolgirl she'd given him vanished. Not so quickly he'd have to work too hard to find it, but enough that he knew she was determined to see her business through first. "I hardly thought they were necessary," she said. "The Council knows that your chip is in working order."

Seeing as the Council had opted to send her with an honor guard twice now, he wasn't sure he believed that. More likely Lydia had flexed whatever clout she claimed over the other Council gits to get them to bugger off, ensure her sweet talk would come sans interruption. Or hell, maybe she really did think Spike would take their negotiations to the bedroom. Wouldn't be the first time a vampire groupie had expressed interest and he knew she was just curious enough to say yes.

And since that thought was there in his head, he gave himself a moment to consider it. Truly consider it. He hadn't been with anyone since he'd won his soul—hadn't been with anyone since Anyanka, bloody disaster that had turned out to be. Should sex be what Lydia was after, it'd be easy enough to give it to her. Wasn't like she was hard on the eyes, and even if he would rather snap her neck than get between her legs, he reckoned she might become more loose-lipped if she'd had her brains bloody well shagged out.

Yeah, it was an option all right. One his former self likely would have jumped at back in simpler times.

But then the moment passed and reality set in. Reality and resolve, for these times weren't simple. Nothing in his sodding life had been simple since he'd come to this cursed town. Matters like sex and intimacy suddenly seemed complicated in ways they hadn't before—he wasn't sure if that was his latent Victorian sensibilities returning along with his conscience or something else, and even less sure he wanted to know. Aside from the fact that he had no interest in shagging Lydia, or anyone

else for that matter, the thought alone felt wrong, particularly when his heart belonged to Buffy.

The way he worried it always would.

Maybe this much would ease with time, and he wouldn't feel that old familiar pang whenever he thought of her. Maybe he would eventually suss out how to truly move on, impossible as it seemed. Maybe one day he would want to and mean it.

That wasn't today, though, or any time in the foreseeable future. More's the pity.

"They know, do they?" he drawled, making his way toward the green armchair where he'd draped the jacket he'd scored himself in absence of his duster, suddenly in need of a fag. "Took you lot long enough."

If Lydia was disappointed that he hadn't pursued the subject that was her conspicuous lack of chaperones, she didn't let on. Bird was a real bloody pro. "You can't blame us for taking precautions. Even chipped, you are...formidable."

"Stop, I'm blushing." He surfed his cigs out of the jacket pocket and slid one against his palm. "Wager you're here to sweeten the pot?"

"I beg your pardon?"

Yeah, she *would* be the begging kind, this one. A smirk tugged at his lips as he lit up. "When we talked last, you were gonna get everythin' all squared away with your higher-ups. Give me some reassurance that once the girl's in the ground, you won't pull some trick to clean your consciences for your part."

"Oh. Yes." Lydia flushed again, and this time some disappointment leaked through, though she was quick to clear her throat to avoid letting it show too much. The chit truly had come here thinking he might seduce off her knickers. "The Council has consented to a binding magical contract that would strictly enforce our end of the agreement. The chip will be fully removed, not reprogrammed or otherwise altered for our purposes. Once the terms of the contract are satisfied, we will, of course, return to a state of mutual enmity."

Spike nodded, taking a deep drag of his cigarette, enjoying the facsimile of warmth that accompanied it. Never lasted, that feeling, and always left him a bit colder than he had been before, but it was worth pursuing all the same. One of the few ways a dead man could feel alive. "Return to a state of mutual enmity," he parroted after a beat. "You really know how to suck the fun out of a good slaughter."

"It means—"

"I went to bloody Cambridge. I know what it means. Might be friends now, but that ends when the Slayer's dead." He arched an eyebrow. "Reckon it also means I can expect one of your flunkies to provide a bit of sport after. Easier to stomach settin' a killer loose if you aim to put him down after he's done your dirty work."

"Not at all," Lydia replied, indicating the document she held. "It's all here. The chip's removal in exchange for your services in ending the life of Buffy Summers. Once the deed is done, we will enter a grace period of thirty days, which should be more than enough time for you to disappear. After that period lapses, our association will be considered officially severed and you will become what you have always been—a vampire of note, but not one we are especially interested in hunting down. No more, no less."

No more, no less. She said it straight, sounding like she might actually believe it. But then she hadn't lived the last two years he had, or hell, the three before them. Nothing in his world was that nice and tidy.

He had Buffy to thank for that.

Spike swallowed a sigh. *Buffy.* It wasn't lost on him that, had someone made this same offer to him not too long ago, he would have leaped at it before they had a chance to finish the pitch. Things like contracts and assurances wouldn't have occurred to him, wouldn't have been necessary. All that would have mattered was getting the chip out for the express purpose of first killing the Slayer, then getting on with the rest of his unlife. Maybe track down Dru again, crow at how she'd been wrong and that he had managed to do it at last. And maybe, if she groveled just right, he'd consider taking *her* back, and wouldn't that be nice for a change?

Turned out all he had to do to get everything he wanted was lose everything that mattered most.

Ain't love grand?

"And I'm supposed to just take that on faith, I suppose," he said at length, jerking his chin at the agreement in her hand, before bringing his cigarette back to his mouth.

Lydia furrowed her brow. "Take what on faith?"

"Could do everythin' you say it'll do, sure. Could also be a load of bunk."

"It's not."

"Yeah. Just have your say-so to go on for that, don't I?"

"Well, you could try reading the actual agreement. It's all there, black and white."

Oh ho. This bird might have a bit of spine after all. Spike allowed himself an indulgent puff on his fag, taking his time, considering. "You mean the wankers you work for *don't* have the kind of magical firepower on hand to make a contract say whatever you fancy in the hope of gettin' me to play along, and bugger the rest? Wager you also have a bridge you could sell me, if you're aimin' to make a deal."

She narrowed her eyes, the confusion there hardening. "You are free to have the contract inspected by your own sources, but the Council does wish for this matter to be handled swiftly."

"Oh, of course. Wouldn't want to dawdle when it comes to doin' in your own slayer."

"No, we wouldn't. This entire affair is rather unpleasant. The sooner it is over, the sooner everyone can move on."

"Everyone except the Slayer, of course."

One of her eyebrows went up in a perfect point. "See now, this is surprising. I would have thought you, more than anyone, would recognize that the Slayer would, in fact, move on. Simply not in the form of Buffy Summers." Lydia waited a breath, then stepped forward, offering the document again. "I went to a lot of trouble to secure this, you know. I didn't expect you to be so dismissive."

Oh, now the poor dear sounded wounded. She must have truly thought they'd had something. "Not dismissin' a thing," Spike retorted and, accepting that he'd have

to, snagged the proffered contract. "Pardon a bloke for bein' cautious. I've seen how you treat your friends."

"As I said the other night, we did not make the decision lightly—"

"Yeah, right. The lady doth protest too much, methinks." He lowered his gaze to scan the first few paragraphs, buy himself some time to think. Now that he was here, that he'd had gotten this far, he wasn't sure exactly where to take it next. His plan had started and ended with Buffy—let her know the Council had turned on her, let her call the shots from there. Do whatever would be the most useful to her, if such a thing existed, all the while accepting she might not believe him. And somehow never thinking about what would happen beyond that point. Hoping, wanker that he was, that the answer would be handed to him before he was expected to give it.

But now the moment was here, and the answer wasn't. The answer also wasn't something he could just vaguely leap toward anymore and still expect to eventually stick the landing. His entire sodding life had been lived on the heels of impulse, arriving at snap decisions and trusting that, even if they fell apart, he was clever enough to make something of the resulting mess.

With little exception, that philosophy had served him well. Gotten him this far, at least, and that was farther than a lot of other blokes.

Also pretty well guaranteed that his missteps and mistakes were rather bloody spectacular.

His last one, the worst, had cost him everything. Himself included.

Spike sighed, his head starting to throb. Of course it was. Bloody thing had never hurt like this before he'd gotten the soul. He'd never doubted himself like this, either, and he missed the brash, reckless confidence that he'd once thrived upon. Missed the parts of him that had been too thick to care. All he had now was *care*.

All care, all head, no Buffy. Nothing but memories to wank to, only that didn't bring much reprieve, either. Just a few hollow seconds of physical ecstasy before the self-disgust set in anew, ready to consume him until whatever was left only vaguely resembled the man he'd once been.

And the bitch was staring at him, waiting for an answer that should have been obvious, and he had no idea what to say. All that was in his head, aside from the growing pain borne by indecision and uncertainty, was *Buffy*. So much so he could practically smell her, hear the rhythm of her pounding heart and her racing pulse, taste her in the air as though she were sharing it with him. As though she were right here in this crypt, not a memory plucked from simpler times or even last night, but right now, here in the flesh.

Like she had been here *that day*. Here but not here.

Spike's eyes flew open, his chest growing tight.

Fuck.

Well, he could comfortably say he had not seen this coming.

He drew in a deep breath, then another, his mind whirring in desperation to keep up with this latest turn. To talk him out of the impossible thing he'd just thought—the impossible thing that had scent and texture and wasn't impossible at all, because he knew her. Knew her better than anyone, even herself, and the nose never lied.

Questions like *how?* and *when?* didn't matter a lick—all that mattered was the shape of his new reality.

Buffy was here. She was here in his crypt, watching this. Watching *him*.

And that changed everything.

"Right," he said, forcing himself to refocus on the document. Bloody difficult thing to do when his brain was as scrambled as it was, but for as much as he did not understand, several things had suddenly become very clear. Things like he needed to get the watcher bint out of his crypt before she also realized they weren't alone. If Buffy meant to announce herself, she would have by now. "Temptin' as this all is, think I'm gonna pass, ducks."

Any other time, he would have laughed at the way Lydia's face fell, at the shock that rounded her eyes. How everything about her carefully polished façade slipped away. To her credit, she recovered rather quickly, collecting her jaw from the floor and clearing her throat, but she couldn't do anything about the blood filling her cheeks or the sudden fire with which she regarded him. Surprise was often quick to turn to anger, and she did not disappoint.

"You're going to pass," she replied in a crisp voice that trembled with temper. "May I ask why?"

Spike shrugged and finished off his cigarette. "Does a fella need a reason?"

"Considering the effort I undertook to procure this agreement on your behalf, I would appreciate it." Her nostrils were flaring now, and several strands of golden hair came loose from the tight bun she'd pulled it in as though in protest. "*And* considering the fact that you have built your reputation on killing slayers... Well, call it academic curiosity, but why in the world would you turn down the chance to not only bury your third, but also get that chip removed?" She paused again. "Or were our sources wrong? Did you manage to remove it while you were abroad after all?"

"Yeah, 'cause the first thing I'd do after getting the chip removed is crawl back here. Why, you reckon? All the happy memories?"

"You wouldn't come back to kill the Slayer?"

Fuck, there was a loaded question if he'd ever heard one. He hoped Buffy was up for taking in a show, because he was about to put one on.

"Of course I would," he practically snarled. "After all these years of her bein' the bloody thorn in my side? After she's ruined plan after plan after plan? After god knows how many humiliations, after turning me, *me*, into a bloody joke?" And for the first time since he'd crawled out of that cave in Africa, he stopped resisting at the natural pull inside—the one that never quit screaming at him, no matter how deft he became at ignoring it. No soul could change the fact that he was a predator, and neither could the mess of machinery lodged in his head. It was the reason the Council had been keen to send the dear along with her escort. They knew that being leashed didn't really mean a damn unless Spike let it. Lydia needed to know, too, and she needed to know now.

More than anything, he had to get her out the door before she realized the same thing he had. Before Buffy moved or sneezed and betrayed the fact that she was lurking in the shadows.

"I've been the Slayer's whipping boy for too long to share the glory with the likes of the sodding Council," he continued, prowling a step forward, then another. And she felt it—even if she didn't know she felt it, she did, for the fight in Lydia's eyes melted into something that wasn't fight and she recovered the step in the other direction as her heart started pounding just a hair faster. "When it's my turn, it will be *my* turn. I've let that bitch live this long, mucked up killin' her too many times—"

"Th-that was the point of our alliance," Lydia protested. "To provide you the resources you need in order to finally succeed in doing what you came here to do."

"I don't take bloody handouts," Spike snapped, ripping the contract down the middle without breaking his eyes from hers, still moving forward, slow and methodical. The tear of paper against the otherwise still air made her flinch. "You think I waited this long, let her get away with so much, just to kill her because *someone else* wants her dead? Let it be anyone's plan but my own? I don't need you or anyone else holding my bloody hand. I don't need my killing of the Slayer sponsored. I don't jump for treats. I don't take shortcuts."

"You have before." The chit was nervy, he'd give her that. He *bad* had it wrong from the start. Even shaking all over, with her pulse was drum rolling to a tune he knew well, she still stuck out her pert little chin and kept her eyes locked on his. "You hired assassins to kill her. You even allied with a friend of hers to—"

"I hired assassins to keep her off my bloody back while I made Dru whole again," he spat. "Here I thought you were supposed to be the expert. Does staffin' out a slayer killing sound like somethin' I'd do?"

"But—"

"And there's a big bloody difference between takin' a tip from one of her chums and letting you sorry sods lay the ground rules. I do this, it's my way, on my terms, when I fancy it. Now get the bloody hell out of my crypt before I decide to let you see for yourself just how well this chip works."

Lydia almost stumbled at that—almost. She caught herself before she could go down and negotiated her way up to the door without tripping over her feet, though he doubted she'd be in a hurry to wear heels when visiting a monster's den anytime soon. Still, she managed to surprise him. Though every inch of her was screaming *run*, she didn't run. She met his eyes again, shaking though she was, and said, "You understand that this offer will not be made again. I leave and the Council will consider you—"

"Get out."

Spike spoke with finality, and she heard it. Turned on the spot and wrestled with the door before it yielded and swung open, and then she was gone without a backward glance. He waited until he knew she was a good distance off, until the sound of her gasps and the echoes of her straining heart no longer reached his ears before releasing a breath of his own.

Well, whatever else, he couldn't say that hadn't been fun. He'd almost forgotten what *fun* felt like.

"I'm gonna assume you caught all of that, not just the closing act," he said, hesitated a fraction—not knowing why, except that it felt right, giving her a second to

gather herself—before he turned to face her. Finding her at once in a thatch of shadows near the back, her eyes wide and her mouth somewhat agape. “You have any questions?”

Buffy didn’t say anything. Not at first, at least. She stared at him, half frightened animal and half cornered hellcat. Her gaze darted from his to the door and back again, the question there—*do I try to run?*—and the answer following just as quickly.

No, she didn’t. There were times when Buffy ran, but those times were few and far between, and usually when he tried to get her to confess she loved him. She knew he wouldn’t now, and so did he.

“So,” she said after a beat, “I’m going to go out on a limb and say...you can see me?”

“And smell you. And hear you.” He could taste her, too, but he didn’t volunteer as much. “And I assume the story’s good, so let’s hear it. What are you doin’ here?”

Buffy opened her mouth, closed it, the wheels behind her eyes hard at work. It wasn’t often he caught her off guard anymore, if he ever had, and that threw him. Much like everything else about her had thrown him since he’d gotten back to town. He kept expecting the Buffy in his memory, and this one kept showing up instead.

He didn’t know what to do with that.

Time to find out.

FOR WHAT I READ BETWEEN THE LINES

SHE SHOULD HAVE SEEN THIS COMING.

She really, really should have seen this coming.

But idiot that she was, she hadn't. No reason why—it wasn't like Willow's spells didn't have a rather impressive history of going wrong at inopportune moments or anything, or that her friend hadn't been scared out of her wits at the prospect of performing magic in the first place. Or that since Spike was in the mix, Murphy's Law would be in full swing, making sure everything went as wrong as it possibly could.

Had he known she was there the entire time? The *entire* time?

Buffy worked her throat, tamping down on the nerves that screamed at her to just shove past him and make a mad break for the door. But running wouldn't solve anything and it definitely wouldn't turn back the clock. Spike would still know she'd been in his crypt, and that was mortifying enough without factoring in all the things she'd seen. Hell, knowing him, he'd take her presence here as the wrong kind of signal and the tentative *whatever* that they'd been dancing around since he'd returned would snap.

And if that happened, if Spike just reverted to form after everything, well, she didn't know what she would do. All their encounters so far had been charged and confusing, Spike keeping a careful distance or trying to forge an even deeper one, but it wasn't a huge reach to think that might just suddenly stop being the case. That after a certain amount of time had passed he'd just start talking about how wrong she was, that she belonged in the dark after all, and wasn't that obvious to her? That even after what he'd nearly done and all the things he actually had, she couldn't keep away from him. How she kept sneaking back into the shadows to get another fix, and soon the shadows wouldn't be enough. She'd want the full service.

She could almost hear the words, and that made her stomach twist.

"Buffy," Spike said. He looked closer than he had been a moment ago, closer and maybe a little worried, or that could have been her imagination. Or maybe she was projecting. Or maybe both. "You hear me?"

"You asked me what I'm doing here," she replied, trying desperately to quiet the screaming in her head. "Right? I might've had a little out-of-body experience just now."

"Well, the Slayer turns up in a fella's crypt all cloak-and-dagger like, the fella's bound to have questions."

"Did you know I was here the whole time?"

"The *whole* time?" He stilled and worked his throat, and she saw the question arise in his gaze. The question that, incidentally, answered hers. He wouldn't look so worried if he'd known. "Does that mean you didn't come in with her?"

Buffy willed herself not to glance at the open hatch that led downstairs. Feeling the pull of her body to do just that, to confront what she'd seen him doing and ask all the burning questions that had bubbled up in her throat. Questions she hadn't even known she had until tonight—things she hadn't thought to wonder aloud, or even to herself.

Like, for instance, she hadn't been certain until about twenty minutes ago that Spike was still in love with her. Or his version of love, anyway. Which seemed dumb in hindsight—a Spike who wasn't in love with her definitely would have made it clear, perhaps the first night he'd gotten back, that he wasn't the man she remembered. He wouldn't have apologized for anything he'd bitten out at her, either. He wouldn't have looked at her with such regret.

At least she didn't think he would. Perhaps it was just easier to believe he still loved her, as an in-love-with-her-Spike was presumably less dangerous than the alternative.

"It was Willow," she blurted before her mind took her any further down a path she really couldn't afford to travel. "We... I asked her to. We needed to know if what you said about the Council was...real. So—"

"So you decided to have a poke around," Spike supplied, and there was no inflection in his voice. Just a maddening sort of straightforwardness that was impossible to read. "See if you could dig up anything."

"In my defense, the plan didn't sound so amazingly terrible when I came up with it." She tried for a smile, but it felt broken. "But yeah. That about sums it up. My best friend's first full day back from magic rehab and I asked her to jump off the wagon to do me a favor so I could spy on my ex. And lo and behold, it doesn't work."

"Your ex," he echoed. "Is that what I am?"

Great. Her mouth had run away with her, and it hadn't been thoughtful enough to take her along for the ride.

"I guess not," she replied in a small voice. "We were never..."

"No, we weren't." He looked at her a moment longer, then sighed and dropped his shoulders. "Give yourself some credit, Slayer. Wasn't the worst plan there was."

Buffy released a harsh breath that came out half-laugh. "It wasn't?"

"No. Not sure what you aimed to find, what you thought I might have around here, but I can see it." Spike nodded as though that settled the matter. "Reckoned you couldn't trust me, but you also couldn't sit on what I'd told you, so you went about sniffin' out some proof. See what you can find while I'm none the wiser."

"Yes. Yes that was... That was the idea." Her throat ran dry. The calmer he was, the more painfully aware *she* was that she was the opposite of calm. Also the opposite of invisible. Her heartbeat, her eyes, her pulse, he'd be aware of all of it which meant all of her was on display, and that thought was just this side of terrifying. "And you're right. That was a thought I had—that you're not really a write-my-plans-down kinda guy."

He lifted his shoulder in a shrug. "Had to take the chance, though, didn't you?"

Yeah, she had, but that didn't mean he should understand. Every second he *didn't* yell at her, didn't crow at the fact that *she* had once accused him of spying on her and look how the tables had turned, the more certain she was that the explosion, when it came, would be of the huge. Spike wasn't a guy who did *still* very well, and he'd been doing it ever since he'd gotten back. The few bursts of movement—the couple she'd watched him save, the gabby vampire he'd dusted—had been contained, almost neat compared to the man she knew lurked behind his eyes. The first night, he'd floated the possibility that he'd gotten some magic done of his own, and while she hadn't really considered it then, she wondered if she should now. And if he had, what that meant.

Perhaps not to remove his love for her, but to remove *something*.

"My timing was kind of amazing," she said, talking just to fill the silence. "Of all the thirty-minute windows to pick, I chose the one where the bad guy came and rattled off their entire plan."

"Yeah, well, I'm glad you did."

"You are?"

"If hearin' it from the horse's mouth got you takin' it seriously, bloody right I'm glad. You need to know what's comin' for you."

Buffy stared at him, her ears flooding with white noise, her skin hot and everything else feeling seconds away from melting entirely. She didn't get it. She just didn't get it, and, she realized, she wouldn't. Not if she kept trying to wait him out. Wait for him to start acting like the Spike she knew, the one who had yet to show up. And she needed him to show up—she needed one part of her life to not be so completely confusing and egg-shelly. She needed *control*.

If he wouldn't give it, then fine. *Fine*. She'd take it.

"You are confusing the crap out of me, you know that?" she said.

He had the audacity to look surprised. "Me?"

"Yes. You being all Mr. Stoic. You disappear on me for months and then—"

"Disappear *on you*?" Spike gawked at her like she was the one who didn't make sense. "Is that how you think of it?"

"Well, I'm pretty sure I'm the reason."

"So everythin' has to revolve around you, does it?"

"Spike, cut the crap. You know why you left, and you know you wouldn't have if it

hadn't been for...*that*." Which was an awful way to encapsulate an attempted rape, but she didn't want to slow down long enough to search for a word that would pack a punch. "Then you show up again and you won't tell me where you went—"

"Didn't know it was any of your business, Slayer."

"Maybe it's not, but you can't tell me you haven't been weird since you got back." *Weird* being a massive understatement. "You can't tell me that in the past, you wouldn't have said *yes* to anything that would get that chip out."

At last, she seemed to have surprised him, which only added to her frustration, because he had no right to feel surprised. None.

"Let me get this straight," he said in a low, dangerous voice. "You have your knickers in a twist because the Council gits offered to set me loose on the world again in exchange for your head, and instead of playin' along, I made bloody well sure you knew they had turned on you. Came to you when I know I'm the last bloke you wanna see, told you somethin' I knew you wouldn't believe, just to have you pay me back for it—"

"Pay you back? What the hell does that mean?"

"I dunno, *Slayer*. You just admitted you got yourself all dolled up in magic juice so you could prance around here to your heart's content without me bein' any the wiser."

"And you just said it was a good idea!"

"Yeah," Spike barked, firing up now, and maybe she was sick because seeing that spark in his eyes—the hint of the predator he'd let loose to send Lydia running for the hills—was such a *known* entity that the first thing she felt was relief. "If you're not gonna take me at my word, then sniff around all you like. Not like I've got anythin' to hide."

"Nothing to hide," Buffy echoed, crossing her arms. "Not even where the hell you disappeared to this summer?"

"Fine. Allow me to rephrase. Anythin' concerning *you*."

"I don't believe that."

He tightened his hands into fists, a muscle in his jaw spasming. "I don't care," he replied, his voice straining as though the words cost him something. "I've told you all I'm gonna tell."

Oh no, he had *not*. The fire in her belly was one she wasn't ready to let flicker out. Being angry with Spike was easier than whatever they'd been doing these last few days, all familiar in a way she knew wasn't good but couldn't fight all the same. She wasn't about to let him off now. "You still could have... I dunno, told them that you would do it and then turned on them," she said. "You can't tell me that the old Spike wouldn't have played both sides to his advantage. For the first time since you got that thing, you had a real chance of getting it out. And given that's all you've cared about these last few years—"

"No, it's *not*." He spat it out with such fervor that his voice cracked, which startled her so much she fell awkwardly out of her own anger and back into the confusion that defined all things *Spike* these days. "It's not all I've cared about, and you bloody well know it."

There was a beat. He stared at her, his chest heaving, his expression somewhere between outrage and grief—like he could scream or just burst into sobs, and both would be right because *he* was right. She did know it. Spike hadn't tried to get the chip out in earnest in more than two years. And if he had, his attempts had been so small-scale, so half-hearted, they hadn't blipped on her radar. Ever since he'd confessed he was in love with her, nothing of the conniving, double-crossing Spike who had dominated the early parts of their relationship had shown up. His plans, his ambitions, *everything* had revolved around her.

Goddamn him. *Goddamn him* for taking her anger away.

"So that's it?" Buffy asked, trying to regain her footing. Find the place she'd been just a second ago. "You... You just decided to not even try?"

"Call me crazy, Slayer, but I wasn't exactly keen to give you another reason to hate me."

And there it was. Somehow, again, they'd danced right up to the door of the thing they had yet to talk about. The thing she knew they *had* to talk about if only to stop the dance entirely. He seemed to realize it, too, for everything about him closed down in ways Spike was just *not* supposed to be able to close down. Open and pissed off one second and Pod Spike the next. She shouldn't let him get away with that—she should push, but suddenly she didn't want to. No matter how awkward dancing around the subject made things, the thought of tackling it was beyond her. How did one even begin to have that conversation? "*Say, you almost raped me. What was that about?*" And that was without even taking into consideration the memo she'd maybe-gotten in the form of a slayer dream.

Even still, the urge to confront it refused to die. Just get it over with once and for all. Maybe then she could stop thinking about it so much, reliving it whenever was least convenient. Do the brave thing and tackle the massive Chirago demon in the room rather than let it rampage around and cause more damage. For a moment, Buffy thought she would. The words were on her tongue—they had weight and shape and everything. But the seconds passed, and they didn't come, and they kept on not coming until she knew they wouldn't. Not today, anyway.

She couldn't avoid this forever, but she just wasn't ready. Some things needed to be on her terms.

"This is what I mean, by the way," Buffy muttered in absence of the thing she should say. "When I tell you you're confusing the crap out of me. *This* confuses the crap out of me. Not jumping to get the chip out. Not...not being all *you* about finding me snooping around the place."

"Well, in that case, feel free to *not* let yourself over anytime you fancy."

"You know what I'm talking about."

He shook his head. "Hardly ever."

She let out a breath, wondering, since she'd managed to get mostly calm, if he was intentionally trying to get on her nerves. It was certainly a tactic he'd used in the past to great effect. But it, like a thousand other things, remained a hallmark of a Spike she hadn't seen in months. There were so many versions of him now, and they had started popping up in the days preceding what had happened in the bathroom. There

was the one who had trailed her to the failed wedding, looked at her with sad longing but told her she was beautiful, that she glowed, and had left when she admitted it was hard seeing him with someone else. There was also the Spike who had shown up while some trippy demon had been trying to convince her she belonged in an asylum, lingered all threateningly in doorways and sneered that he would tell her friends about their affair if she didn't. And the Spike who had popped up on patrol, pretending to lend a hand, all the while asking why she wouldn't sleep with him again.

Then there was the Spike who had stepped inside the bathroom, closed the door behind him, and begged her to understand that what they shared was the sort of passionate, fiery love that was worth fighting to keep. Who had looked at her with such desperation, whose eyes she was sure *she'd* looked through the night before even if she had no idea why.

All the Spikes she'd met after the breakup had been tense and tortured in some way. And this one was no different, just more reticent about the reason.

"If that's all, Slayer," Spike said, drawing her out of her thoughts again, "believe you know where the door is. Think you got what you came here for, yeah?"

"You...you want me to go?"

"Might come as a surprise to you, ducks, but havin' you here lookin' at me like that isn't exactly a bloody picnic," he replied. "You've been twistin' my head ever since I got back. Bein' here when you shouldn't. Not comin' at me with a stake when we both know you should. Showing up and makin' me think about—"

But he cut himself short before he could finish that thought, snapping his mouth closed.

And because one of the Buffy specialties was reading the room and proceeding right the hell on anyway, she didn't bother trying to stop herself from blurting, "Think what?"

"Nothing."

"I told you why I came here."

"Yeah, and you danced around tellin' me *when* exactly you showed up," he retorted, the fire rekindling. "Funny thing happened earlier. Only ever happened once before that I can recall. Door blew itself open."

Buffy whooshed out a breath, and it was as good as a confession.

He tightened his jaw. "So I didn't imagine that. Wandered around here like a prized wanker, thinkin' there's no bloody way Buffy would come around now. Not after what happened. What I did."

"It wasn't about that—"

"Don't you think I know that?" he spat with a ferocity that took her by surprise. Him, too, if the look on his face meant anything. And at once, everything changed, as though he'd suddenly woken up, found himself where he was without remembering how he'd gotten there. As though a memory he'd pushed aside had just announced itself all over again. In one long beat, Spike went from glaring at her to breathing hard, his eyes filling and his lower lip trembling, and she stood there and watched him deflate. Not relaxing, but giving in—giving up. Defeated by

the stupid Chirago demon that neither one of them seemed capable of confronting.

"I'm sorry," he said roughly. It was unfair, how much he could pack into two words. "Shouldn't have... I promise, Slayer, I don't mean to keep bein' an arse when you're around. You just... I just can't get you out of my head, can I? Can't have a fucking moment's peace. Earlier, I started thinkin' about the way it was before and... I know I shouldn't. I know I can't. I know it's bloody *wrong*, especially after what I did, you... You got me by the short hairs. You always have." He sighed and pressed his palms to his eyes. "I shouldn't have come back. Knew it from the start but couldn't help myself. Needed to be near you. You've bloody poisoned me."

She had no idea how to even begin to respond to that. "I'm...sorry."

"You're sorry." He barked a short laugh. "You're sorry, I'm sorry, everyone's bloody sorry. Fat load of good it does us. Doesn't change anything, does it? Doesn't take anything back. So let yourself in here and caught an eyeful along with what you were hopin' to find. Surprised you were able to stomach it. Or didn't just bloody wallop me when I unzipped."

"I... What you do in your own home isn't really my—"

"Yeah," he said with another laugh, this one shorter and more bitter than the first. "Like that's ever stopped you."

"Spike, there's a big difference between just...doing *that* and making a whole gross robot sex-toy thing."

"Which helped save the world, long as we're talkin' about it."

"Yes, because that was clearly the point."

He snickered again and broke away, looking a bit manic but also closer to himself than he had since the first night he'd been back. "Was bloody stupid," he murmured, scrubbing a hand down his face. "Whatever mojo Red worked did its job."

"Right up until it didn't."

"Yeah, well, I still had no fucking clue. Never would have if I'd... I hate that you saw me like that."

She heard it, how much he meant it. It was the way he said it—the texture of his voice, the look on his face, how all of him suddenly seemed to be shaking. And of everything that had happened tonight—hell, maybe everything that had happened all week—that was what shocked her the most. Spike was many things and had been many things to her specifically. Enemy. Reluctant ally. Resident pest. Creepy stalker. Person she could count on. Only one around who made her feel like herself. Lover. Ex-lover. Assaulter. For the many roles he'd assumed over the years, the many things he'd been to her specifically, he had never once been this. This person who spoke to the stone floor rather than her, whose words were roughened with emotion, who seemed legitimately horrified. It was such a far cry from the Spike who had gloried in showing off his body, made a point of teasing her when she'd tried to pretend she hadn't come knocking on his door in the hope of finding him relaxed and ready to fuck, that he was hard to recognize.

More than that, it was a far cry from *everything* she thought she knew about him, because this *him* she didn't know at all. How Spike could experience pleasure and

guilt at the same time, how guilt even worked for him when everything she knew about vampires insisted that it shouldn't. Yet here he was again, forcing her to face parts of herself she wished didn't exist. Forcing her to admit that they did. That feeling had been with her as she'd trailed into the crypt. As he'd jolted and looked at the open door, remembering the thing she'd remembered, and stalked around the space that was his, searching for someone who wasn't there. He'd even said her name before catching himself, and when he'd headed downstairs, she'd known it was a bad idea to follow, that she should take advantage of his distraction to rifle through whatever there was to rifle through on the upper level. Though by that point, it had settled in just what a horrible idea this was, as Spike wasn't the sort of guy—villain or otherwise—to scribble down his evil plans and leave that lying around for anyone to peek through during off-hours. That she hadn't really known what she hoped to find, and the entire trip might be a waste, except seeing him when he couldn't see her was a kind of balm for an internal wound she hadn't known she had. Watching him move around, just Spike in his natural habitat, being normal and not exactly evil but still managing to reel her in even though she knew he wasn't trying, as he'd had no one to try for—she'd found that addictive, and herself hungry for more.

So she *had* followed him, telling herself that the last time she'd known him to be evil, the crypt's lower level was where his evilness had been kept. Not that it had made much sense then, but then what did she know about the thought processes of evil vampires? Woefully little, because despite all her protests to the contrary, she somehow hadn't seen his little stunt with the demon eggs coming, and if she hadn't seen that coming, what else had she missed?

Buffy had been thinking on that when Spike had stopped by his bed, lowered his zipper and started stroking himself, and then she'd been too stunned to do anything else. Standing there, inches away from him, caught between a misfire of different instincts all vying to be recognized at once. There was the first and the most nonsensical, and that was to scream at him to stop. *Stop* because they didn't do that anymore. *Stop* because he'd hurt her before. *Stop* because being around him seriously messed with her head. Thinking of him in a sexual way was verboten in the mind of Buffy, or as verboten as a subject she still admittedly thought about constantly could be. But it was one thing when it was there at the corners, whispering things she could dismiss or shove back without much effort and little more than a fleeting rush of guilt for her trouble. It was a completely different thing standing here while Spike pumped his hand up and down his dick at a pace, and despite the warning bells sounding in her ears, she'd known perfectly well that she couldn't tell him to *stop*. The spell Willow had worked would make sure he didn't hear her, for one thing, and for another and much better reason, who the hell was she to say what he could or couldn't do when he was alone?

She couldn't get him to stop. That didn't mean she had to watch. She was better than that.

Except she was so not better than that. Last year had been nothing but a giant exercise in how much *better than that* she was not, and it had been a long summer. A very long summer full of nothing but time rebuilding her life from the ground up.

Time spent thinking, not of those things she couldn't think about—not more than she could help, anyway—but what she'd learned about herself. The parts of the lesson that remained. Why she'd been drawn to Spike in the first place. Sometimes, when feeling less than charitable, she had reiterated the convenience argument, even if Spike was arguably the least convenient person in the universe. Other times, when feeling more honest, she would find herself thinking about the way she had been drawn to him from the second he'd stepped out of the shadows and into her life. And last year, when she'd been drowning, he hadn't made her feel weak for not saving herself. She'd been able to look at him and see love—love for Buffy, which had been in dramatically short supply, and that hadn't been fair either, that he could love her when she could hardly get her mouth around the word.

The part of her that was drawn to him, she'd discovered, was still there. It hadn't gone away over the summer, hadn't been squashed the night in the bathroom, and if that was true, that meant it would likely never be well and truly gone. Some bit of Buffy would always be reaching out to him, which was wrong and twisted, and *she* was wrong and twisted, but that didn't make it any less true. Didn't make her any less starved for the pieces of Spike that weren't hers anymore.

Except in stolen moments. Like that one.

Somehow, it had surprised her just how much she remembered. How she'd known when he was close for the way his breath—his stupid, unneeded breath—started coming faster. The way he vocalized his orgasms, somewhere between a sigh and a groan, a sound that she had always loved even if she hadn't told him. There were things missing too, of course, like the whispered praises and hurried encouragements. Nothing he'd ever said had been new—how good she felt, how much he loved being inside of her, how she hurt him in the best ways being among her favorites—but it had always seemed new. Like he was experiencing her for the first time, surprised all over again by it and her in equal measure, and bursting at the seams to share.

The twinge of loss she felt at the absence of those soft mutterings had nearly knocked her off balance and been chased by a wave of shame and guilt uncomfortably reminiscent of the previous year. The thoughts were different, but the sensations the same—how could she think like that, knowing what she did now? What sort of person missed the man who had attacked them? What sort of person was *she*? How could she stand there as he touched himself and feel anything but disgust?

Nothing in her life could be straightforward. Not even her own damn trauma.

She'd remained where she was, watching but trying not to but also *not* trying not to, hating the way her mind and body betrayed her in tandem. Her heart thumping, her pulse racing, her temples pounding and the throb between her legs that was sick and wrong, just like the rest of her, and watching with bastardized shame and regret as he'd reached orgasm. And the thought, fleeting, that something was wrong, even if she didn't know what that *something* was, beyond herself.

The answer had come the next moment, in the form of Spike panting and staring still at the empty bed, holding his deflating cock. He'd looked nothing like he did in her memory. None of the swagger or the satisfaction, not even that little sigh he used to rumble in her ear. It had been different—obviously, it *had* to be different—but it

still struck her as off, and she hadn't expected that. His lips had curled, and he'd glanced at himself, at the mess that he'd made, then at the bed again, and the question had come as he'd zipped himself back up.

"So, Slayer, was it good for you?"

Her heart had seized, and whatever she'd felt before had been carried away on a wave of dread and horror. For he hadn't moved, just kept where he was as though awaiting her answer, and she'd been certain—dead certain—of several things all at once. That he knew she was there, somehow. He could see her, or smell her, or hear her, and he'd jerked himself off, just to...what, get back at her? Lure her into his most private space, corner her as she hadn't been cornered with him since that night, and make a damned mockery of everything that had come before? Everything they had been through? Everything he had done?

But the thoughts, the welling rage and fury and embarrassment, had only lasted as long as it had taken Spike to turn around. He'd looked right at her, except not right at her. His gaze had landed just slightly to her left, and there was nothing behind it except more of the same misery she'd seen upstairs. Then he'd stalked right past her, started stripping, without so much as a glance in her direction.

He hadn't been talking to her after all. Only he also had, and she didn't know how she felt about that, either.

"It's okay," Buffy said, not knowing what else to say. If it was okay or not—what the hell she was even talking about anymore. Her mind had thrown a bunch of stuff at her again and demanded that she make sense of it. "Again with the it being your place."

"Yeah. My place," Spike said, making her aware all over again just how loud her body was. All the telltale physical betrayals that would let him know just how scattered she was at the moment. She wondered how loud it got in his head. Probably, with her heart thundering, pretty damn loud. "Sure that makes it better for you."

"Well, I didn't know you still thought about me that way."

He lifted his head, and she didn't blame him for the incredulous look he gave her. Nor did she mind it, really. It was better than the thing that had been there before. "Sorry?"

Except now she had to explain herself and she doubted she could. She was pretty damn bad at doing that. "You hadn't said anything. Since you've been back, so I thought...maybe things were different."

"Yeah, 'cause willing myself not to be in love with you has worked out so brilliantly for me in the past."

"Well, you mentioned the first night that magic could take the feelings away. I know that's what you were looking for at the Magic Box the night you and Anya had your...thing." Buffy glanced down quickly, both surprised at the pain the memory caused and not. That was just Spike these days; it was her, too. Reacting in all the wrong ways to the wrong things. Experiencing pain and jealousy over a memory that should cause neither anymore, but did anyway, and in bold defiance to whatever the hell she was supposed to feel. "You said that's why you went there. To find something for you, so the feeling would stop."

"Believe me, Slayer, if such magic existed, I'd've taken it."

She didn't know if that was supposed to hurt, but it did.

"Or not," Spike muttered a moment later. "Sometimes I think that's the coward's way out, and I've never been a bloody coward. But don't worry your pretty little head. My eyes are clear where we're concerned."

"What does that mean?"

"Means loving you is not somethin' I plan on ever acting on again. Not after what I did." He hesitated. "Done a lot in my life, Buffy. Been a monster for most of it. Haven't had much use for regret or what all, even when I should. Not until that night."

A sensation bloomed inside her chest, one that wasn't pain but related to it. It made the air feel thinner, her throat tighter, made her want to shiver and remain still at the same time. For once, she was certain he was telling the absolute truth, the words not laced with hidden or double meaning, rather a pure reflection of what he felt. More than that, she could see how much he meant it—it was there in his eyes, in the way he stood, in practically everything he'd said or done since he'd returned.

And it was too much. Suffocating. She needed to get out.

"I... Okay," she said lamely as she started forward on legs that weren't entirely steady. She didn't think *thank you* was appropriate, but hell if she knew what was. "We might—I might be in touch over the next couple of days. About the Council stuff. See if they come back."

Spike nodded. If he was disappointed she hadn't given a more colorful reaction, he didn't show it. "Pretty sure the lady said the deal walked out with her."

"That doesn't mean they're done with you."

He huffed and nodded again. "Whatever *you* need me for, Slayer. Believe I told you as much during your last little visit. You and your mates come up with a plan that involves yours truly, I'm game. However I can help."

He *had* told her that. This was nothing new. Yet it was also all new.

"You have helped," she said. "I hope you know that."

Spike didn't say anything, just gave her a smile that was both flat and appreciative. And then she turned her back on him, forced herself toward the door on legs that wanted to collapse and run at the same time.

If asked, she would have sworn she felt his eyes on her all the way home, but she knew that was just imagination. The Spike who had dogged her every step was gone. Tonight had made her sure of that. And he wasn't coming back.

Somehow, she was sure of that, too.

WAS THE SOUND OF A CRESCENDO

“LYDIA CHALMERS HAS BEEN TAKEN INTO COUNCIL CUSTODY.”

Buffy didn’t sit so much as crash hard into the couch, clutching the cordless to her ear. “She what?”

“I just received word,” Giles replied. He sounded exhausted, or beyond exhausted, much as he had since she’d told him about the conversation she’d witnessed in Spike’s crypt. “A rogue faction within the Council has been apprehended and will face a series of charges, including mutiny and conspiracy to commit murder. Quentin made a point of delivering the news himself, since the bulk of the charges concern you.”

She couldn’t think of anything to say, her mind at once both overfull and blank, too overwhelmed to sort through the sudden barrage of thought and sensation to select an appropriate response. The past week had been one spent on pins and needles, trying to go about the routine she’d established for herself while also not taking for granted that one of the most well-connected organizations in the world had apparently put killing her at the top of its to-do list.

Buffy couldn’t explain it—why it had taken so long for the reality of what was going on around her to really sink in. Yes, she was being pulled in different directions all at the same time, and yes, her never orderly life had turned even more turbulent over the span of a few days, but adapting to impossible situations with insurmountable odds was all a part of the Slayer package. Take the known—finishing the work on the Magic Box, officially opening her studio, and trying to navigate life with Willow in it once more—throw in the unexpected—Spike returning to town, Spike acting all weird and distant—and add absolute chaos in the form of the Watchers Council, and it was too much for one overworked brain to handle. This was, of course, on top of the eggshells she’d already been treading around the mess that was

everything that had happened last spring and the way she felt about it. There was only so much one person could handle, even if that person *was* the Chosen One.

And as such, her new reality had come crashing down. Now that she knew Spike hadn't been mistaken or making it up, she couldn't afford to avoid thinking about this shiny new threat. She had to face it head-on, terrifying as it was.

Buffy had never set much stock in what the Council wanted of her. It had been easy, or mostly easy, to view them as a nonentity. A group of old men who lived on a tiny island across the sea who did not have the faintest idea what life was like on the ground, and therefore whose opinions she didn't really care about. And had, at one point, completely disavowed because of the first time they'd tried to kill her, even if they'd called it a test and assured her it was something every slayer faced. Routine to the point of being impersonal.

This wasn't impersonal. For the first time in her life, she had been targeted because she was Buffy Summers. Not because some vampire wanted to end the world, not because a formerly human mayor was planning to Ascend, not because she'd accidentally stumbled upon a secret government organization that enjoyed playing with spare demon parts, and not because an unstable hellgod was desperate to unlock the door to reality. Not even freaking Warren Mears had targeted her because she was Buffy Summers—it had been about power, about Sunnydale, about her being the Slayer. In the end, though he'd been wrapped in human skin, his ambitions hadn't differed from any of the demons she put in the ground. She'd gotten in his crosshairs because of her calling. If it hadn't been her, it would have been someone else.

This wasn't like that. This wasn't like anything. The Council wanted her dead because of who she was. Because she'd let Angel turn evil and nearly end the world; because she'd let Willow consume magic until it had poisoned her; because she was uncontrollable and her actions, or inactions, had devastating consequences. Because the world was better off without Buffy Summers.

That had hit rather hard—harder than she'd expected. Harder, even, than learning the Council wanted her dead in the first place. After everything she'd given, after dying however many times now, after sacrificing whatever she'd been asked to sacrifice all in service of doing the right thing, the people who wanted her dead were the ones who had forced her into the gig in the first place. The people who knew better than most just what would have happened all those times if she *hadn't* been standing between the big evil and the world it wanted to consume. They saw everything, knew everything, knew things she probably didn't, and still thought she was the bigger threat.

It was the sort of thing that could get into a girl's head if she let it. That she could hear with indignation but spend hours thinking about when she should be catching her Zs. Staring at the ceiling in her bedroom as her mind pulled her further and further into a past she'd spent most of her life trying to keep firmly *in* the past. The decisions she'd made and the consequences of those decisions. The people who might still be alive if she had, say, managed to find the strength to shove a stake through Angel's chest the moment she'd realized he'd gone bad. The months that had

followed her birthday, students missing from classes and showing up in morgues or surprising her on patrols with new messages from her psychotic ex. Jenny Calendar being lowered into the ground as Giles watched, all stiff-upper-lip, except not so stiff and more with the wobbly in that contained way of his as he tried to keep everything inside. Not blaming her as Xander had but also *not* not blaming her. Not saying the thing they'd both been thinking.

Angel had come close to his goal, too. If it hadn't been for Spike deciding to do the thing no one would have expected, the world would have been sucked into Hell. All because she'd gotten close to a vampire when she'd known it was dangerous. Because she'd been too wounded, nursing her own broken heart and trying to rationalize her way out of doing her duty while the bodies piled up and people she loved suffered the consequences. Buffy had shouldered that a long time, until she'd realized that continuing to shoulder it would just drive her insane. Playing the what-if game with hindsight goggles had never done anyone any good. So she'd buried the burden of guilt, accepted the mistakes she'd made, and vowed to do better as she went forward. To keep doing better and not turn a blind eye just because the person doing the evil happened to be someone she loved.

Until last year, she would have said that lesson had been well and fully learned. But the Council didn't think so. The Council thought her negligence had just taken a new face. Willow and her growing powers, the ones Buffy hadn't taken all too seriously in the beginning because, well, they'd had a tendency to go kablooeey. But there had been signs, hadn't there? Willow using magic to try to cure her broken heart. Willow casually summoning a rainstorm on a cloudless day. Willow juicing herself on dark magicks to hunt down Glory for what she'd done to Tara. Willow invoking dark magic to challenge the laws of nature. Willow playing with people's minds. Willow creating demons. Willow hurting Dawn.

And when the floodgates opened, they really opened, and even the less obvious calls Buffy had made came into question. Like how she'd sent the Gem of Amara to Angel, knowing full well that one little moment of happiness was all that stood between the world and a potentially invulnerable vampire hellbent on its destruction. She'd thought of the fight with Glory, how she'd told everyone that she would let the world die before she sacrificed Dawn, and she'd meant it. That her blood had worked in a pinch had been a lucky gamble—a revelation born of desperation and love and her own growing yearning for death. Then there was Warren, whom she hadn't taken seriously until it had been too late. And sure, he might not have had apocalyptic ambitions, but he'd had ambitions enough, and she'd found him more of a nuisance than an actual threat, right up until he'd killed a girl.

Buffy would lie awake, staring at the ceiling, thinking all these things and more, wondering if the Council might not have a point, then feel a rush of pure resentment that the thought had the audacity to live anywhere in her head. That anyone could look at what she'd been through, what she'd sacrificed, and what she continued to sacrifice and call *her* the problem.

Maybe it would have been better if she hadn't known any of this. But now she did and there was no taking that back. She was the one who had asked to know more—

the one who had gone back to Spike's crypt the night after he'd told Lydia where she could stick her agreement and told him that she had talked to Giles, and they'd decided that the best way forward was to hear everything from the top. As much as he could relay, for they hadn't known what might or might not be relevant, and that information was the difference between life and death.

"I don't trust myself to remember everything, and you're the one who's talked to them," she'd said in a ramble. "So, we're going to get Giles on the phone. Willow's figuring out the speakerphone settings as we speak. Will you come?"

Buffy hadn't expected him to agree right away, and he hadn't. Instead, he'd kept his gaze on the stone floor, every inch of his body tight in ways that looked unnatural on him. "Will Dawn be there?" he'd asked.

"No," she had replied. "I, ah, I kinda went out of my way to make sure she'd have plans with Janice. The gang will be there, though. Xander, Willow...Anya."

He'd sucked in his cheeks and nodded but hadn't looked up. "Will they... This *just* about the Wankers Council, then? Not sending me into the lion's den?"

At that, she'd hesitated, but only for a second. The fact remained that Spike had volunteered to do what would help her out, and this was part of it. And he should feel awkward, right? Hell, awkward should be the *tamest* thing he felt, given what he'd done.

But then she'd thought of the look he'd given her just before she'd left the last time, what he'd said, and how there had been no doubt in her mind that he meant every word. That she'd gone home that night and had more dreams about him, about *that* night, hadn't hurt matters, either. It seemed the Powers wanted her to believe Spike. So she would. She did.

"I did have to tell Willow," she'd said. "The way Dawn acts whenever your name comes up—"

He'd raised a hand. "Got it."

"But they won't say anything. At least, they *shouldn't* say anything. They know about the Council and that's why you're gonna be there. And they know how I feel about it—or as much as they can, anyway." She'd held her breath, waiting for him to ask what that meant. He hadn't. "So it should just be a quick, to-the-point account of everything Lydia told you the night she made the offer. Giles might have some other questions, too."

"And he knows. Rupert."

She'd sighed. "Yes. They all know. I've asked him not to say anything."

"Why?" Spike had finally looked up, his face a mask of confusion. "Why the hell are you goin' to so much trouble to coddle me? They wanna speak a piece, I reckon I earned it."

"I'm not coddling you. I just don't want... It's none of their business."

"But it is yours. You still show up here like it's nothing—"

"I am *not* acting like it's nothing," she'd argued. "It wasn't nothing, Spike. Everything changed for me that night."

"Me too," he'd shot back.

"And I know that. But I'm not going to... It happened to me. Let *me* decide how I

want to deal with it, okay?" Buffy had held his gaze until he'd looked away, overcome again by the guilt that seemed to hound him around every turn. "You said you wanted to help me. You said that was why you came back. This is how you help me. Please don't make this harder than it needs to be."

That had shut him up faster than anything had ever shut him up, and with the sort of whiplash that made her again doubt what she'd thought she'd known about him. Spike wasn't someone who let go of emotions like anger or frustration without a fight—usually the explosive kind. But that night, he had. Just as he had been doing ever since he'd slinked back into her life. "Whatever you need," he'd said. "I'll do whatever you need."

"And I need this."

She also needed about a month's vacation, the world's longest massage, and to find the courage to actually talk about what had happened in the bathroom rather than continue to dance around it. But she still wasn't ready to face the stupid Chirago-sized demon in the room, and likely wouldn't be until she had a grasp on the more immediate problem. Dealing with a present threat trumped dealing with a past indiscretion any day of the week.

Now Giles was on the phone telling her the Council had moved against Lydia, and for the life of her, Buffy couldn't figure out what that meant.

"A rogue faction, huh?" she asked, leaning back into the couch cushions and rubbing her brow. "So...that's it? I don't need to look over my shoulder anymore? Or do we think that they're covering?"

"At the moment, I couldn't say," Giles replied, still in that worn, exhausted tone. He'd spent the previous week trying to do as much subtle digging as possible, all the while still working on some inane task the Council had given him to, in his words, 'justify his salary.' The double-time he'd been pulling had definitely taken its toll. He sounded every second of however old he actually was and then some. "The Council has always operated in secret, never divulging more than needed, and never to the full body, rather to those senior members and those with direct involvement. As far as they knew, you were none the wiser about the plot to end your life, so the fact that they made a point to tell me about it at all is a bit worrisome. They had to know I would keep you informed."

"You think they told you because they think we already know."

"I'm not certain, though it is possible." He released a deep breath that somehow vibrated through her even though an ocean separated them. "It's also possible that they thought this particular bit of news was likely to reach me anyway, being that it is rather...sensational."

"Yes, sensational is definitely the word I'd use."

Giles didn't laugh, not exactly, but the sound that rumbled through the line was a good approximation. "I imagine we will know for certain one way or another sooner rather than later."

"You understand how that doesn't exactly flood me with confidence," she said, unable to keep the bitterness out of her voice.

"Nor should it," he replied. "However, I am inclined, for the moment, to proceed as though we are taking them at their word."

"Oh, how I hate that plan."

"I quite agree. But the last thing we need is to provide them with an excuse to get involved."

"You say that like they won't get involved on their own." Buffy rolled her head back, fixing her gaze on the ceiling. Trying not to think about how, in a few hours, she'd be doing the same in her own bedroom as she willed her spiraling brain to stop spiraling. "Am I that bad a slayer?"

"What?" His surprise was robust, and despite the gnawing at her insides, she found herself flooded with a wave of pure warmth. "Why on earth would you think that?"

"Gee. I dunno."

"Buffy, you are... You are more than extraordinary."

"That doesn't make me a good slayer." She blew out a breath. It was becoming next to impossible, keeping everything bottled in. Being the *de facto* strong one sucked so much. "Come on, Giles. You can't tell me you haven't thought it once or a million times. You know what I was like. I didn't become all Miss Slayer USA until after you'd been fired."

"You were a child. Heaven forbid you actually act like one."

"But you tried. Just because I didn't listen to your lectures doesn't mean I...didn't listen to your lectures. I remember. There was lying, and telling you one thing and telling Mom another, and making each of you my alibi while I went off to spend time with Angel."

"Yes, I am quite astonished that you, as a teenage girl, deigned to act like a teenage girl," Giles said, his tone that wonderful, familiar sort of dry that made her wish he was in the room just so she could get the full package. The eyeroll, the snicker, then that fatherly look that she'd never gotten from her own father. "Buffy, I assure you, whatever the Council's true aims—if Lydia was indeed acting on her own accord or if they are now simply trying to cover their tracks—has no bearing on how remarkable you are." He paused. "I mean that. You exceeded every one of my highest expectations, and you did so from the beginning. You are also human."

"We think," she reminded him.

He rumbled a sigh and wisely didn't take the bait to leap on that particular conversational landmine. "You're human," he said again. "And humans, as you may be familiar, are prone to making mistakes."

"Gee, thanks."

"And relying on their hearts more than their heads. You just so happen to have more heart than anyone I have ever known. I would want nothing less in the person who has been selected as the world's protector."

The cresting swell that had been threatening to engulf her over the last few days began to crash. She felt it, in her chest and her throat, tears stinging eyes that were already so tired of just having to be constantly open. Buffy slapped a hand across her mouth

before she could do something really telling, like start sobbing into the phone, knowing that would only make Giles worry more, and he had enough on his plate without adding some of the stuff on hers. But it was nice to hear all the same, especially from the person perhaps best qualified to tell her if she was the colossal screwup the Council—or at least some people within the Council—had decided she was. And the fact that she cared this much just made everything worse because Buffy *didn't* care about the Council or their rules or what they thought of her. She'd stopped asking *how high* whenever they told her to jump a long time ago, and she hadn't been that diligent about asking in the first place. But for however much she resented the choices that had never been hers to make, the trajectory of her life that had been decided for her from the start, so much of herself was entwined with being the Slayer. Too much to separate, and god knows she'd tried. It informed every decision she made, everything she felt; it was both mantle and shackle, and though she knew she could screw up like nobody's business, this life was the only one she could see for herself anymore, and she was beyond wishing that she could just check out of it. The part of her that had yearned for death had been killed, resurrected, and killed again, and it hadn't crawled out of the grave with her a second time.

No matter how complicated things were. How messed up, how confused, how twisted in the head—being the Slayer had made her who she was. Her legacy might be still in the air, if slayers were allowed legacies, but she wanted it to be one she could reflect upon with pride if ever the day came that she did die a final time. The Council, or Lydia Chalmers at the very least, had thrown all that into question. Would she leave this world better than she had found it, or had the fight, the suffering, the pain, all of it been for nothing?

"Buffy," Giles said, reaching through the storm to pull her back to solid ground, "should I come to Sunnydale? I can make arrangements—"

"No," she replied, a bit harsher than she'd intended, but it got the point across. She sniffed and wiped at her eyes, righting herself in her seat. "No. It's important that you stay. If they're telling the truth and it was just that a few decided to start a He-Man Buffy Haters Club, there's no point in you coming back. If it turns out they do want me dead, then I need you where you can get me information."

"I am not certain what information they would be inclined to divulge to me if that is indeed the case, but I think you're right." He released a long, tired sigh. "I might be able to persuade some colleagues, at the very least."

"There you go with the half-full thinking."

"You will of course be on your guard."

"Always am."

"I know, but in this case—"

"In this case, even more so on my guard than usual. Believe me, I'm just a tin-foil hat away from full-blown paranoia."

Giles's warm, familiar laugh filled the line, and despite the fact that she knew what she'd just told him was right—that he needed to stay in England and close to the source—she wished for a second that she could be a little less responsible and just beg him to come home and be the grown-up for a while. Really, she was kinda over the whole *adult* thing, as was evidenced by the heightened chaos her life had

been since the real adults had checked out or died on her.

"I will call tomorrow to check in," he told her now.

"I'll be here. Unless the Council kills me."

"That isn't funny."

"Hence why I am not laughing."

"Yes, well... Good night, Buffy."

She glanced at the clock. Not for her yet. Not for a while. But she said, "Good night," anyway, because that was what people did, and tried not to think about the towering pile of worries she was balancing. Wasn't like that was anything new, rather simply another day-in-the-life of being Buffy, something no one at the Council would ever understand.

Unfortunately, knowing that didn't make her feel better. Just more alone.



THE COUNCIL DIDN'T TRY to kill her the next day. Or the day after that. Or even the day after that. In fact, after a full week had gone by and no news from Giles—and no new tantalizing offers made to other area frenemies that she was aware of—Buffy found herself sinking into a routine.

She hadn't meant to let it happen, knowing how dangerous routines could be, but when each day was full of more of the same, it was hard not to get a little complacent. She got up, she showered, she went to her studio and taught girls how to kick ass and take names. Lunch hour was spent with Xander or Willow—not at the Magic Box, out of respect for Anya—and featured conversation that was starting to reach a cadence that felt almost like *them*. Then Buffy would go back to the studio for her sessions that would stretch into late afternoon; Tuesdays and Thursdays were reserved for Dawn and a select group of girls from her grade, Mondays and Wednesdays the soccer moms, and Fridays she took off early as a treat to herself. All of that was the same as it had been before the school year had started, before Spike and Willow had returned to Sunnydale, and once the shock of having the two people who had hurt her the most had worn off, Buffy found that things started to feel closer to the *normal* she and Dawn had worked hard to establish.

There were, of course, notable differences. Buffy now wasn't the only adult living in the house, which meant she didn't need to worry about dinner most nights anymore. That task had been handed all-too-eagerly to Willow after she, being unemployed and unenrolled, had volunteered to take on most of the household duties, claiming it was the least she could do, and Buffy hadn't been one to argue. The last thing she felt like doing after a day at the studio and before an evening patrolling the town cemeteries was spend time trying to not burn the kitchen down. Let Willow be the domestic goddess. Honestly, it was such a small thing—house stuff—but once it was off Buffy's plate, she suddenly felt spoiled with a chunk of newfound free time.

Granted, there was every possibility Willow's stint as housewitch wouldn't last. She was currently waffling on returning to UC Sunnydale as a student—waffling in every sense of the word, as Willow didn't want to assume too much too quickly and

be tempted to fall back into old and dangerous habits. But she also didn't want to completely write off higher education and she knew the longer she procrastinated, the easier it would be to just never go back. After all, that was what had happened to Buffy.

"Well, dropping out and then dying and then needing to pay the bills," Buffy had clarified when Willow had brought it up one night, after the dining room had been transformed back into the makeshift office it was during the day.

"Of course," Willow had agreed, and though she'd certainly sounded like she meant it, she hadn't glanced up from her computer screen. "It's a completely different situation. Your hands were kinda tied. Mine are loosey-goosey. I'm just nervous about trying to do too much too fast. That's a good way for magical solutions to start sounding, well, like solutions."

"And that's a bad thing."

"Not across the board, no. It's just when I do it once, it's easier to keep doing it. You know, slippery slope and all." She'd scowled at her computer. "I know I'm not LA girl or anything, but I think MapQuest is trying to get me mugged."

"What?"

"For my MAA meeting tomorrow. I'm trying to find the best way to get there and I'm pretty sure it's routing me through a side of town that Angel told me to avoid the last time I was there." Willow had sat back and blown out a breath that ruffled the strands of red hanging in her face. "Though this might be nerves and all. New place. New group. It'll be fine once I'm settled but this feels like the last hurdle, you know?"

Buffy had nodded, though she hadn't been able to help having the rather bitter realization that she couldn't remember the last time she'd thought of anything as a last hurdle. Every hurdle in her life led the way to another. Take right now, for instance. Things were quiet, but the quiet itself felt like a hurdle—one she had to leap carefully if she wanted to be on her feet for the blast that would inevitably follow.

If it wasn't the Council, after all, it'd be something else. Some new threat to the world that she would have to stop, for if she didn't, who would?

Only for the moment, everything on patrol was pretty status quo. All activity seemed normal for the time of year, and it was no longer a shock to the system to see Spike prowling between graves, getting in his nightly violence same as always. They didn't talk much—they didn't really talk at all, and hadn't since Buffy had stopped him one night to relay Giles's news regarding Lydia and her rogue Council faction.

"Just like that, eh?" he'd asked, both eyebrows shooting up. "And they just offered up this information."

"Made it sound like they had just found out and wanted to give Giles a heads-up, yeah."

"Do we believe that?"

It had shaken her, his use of *we*, but it had also felt familiar. As familiar as everything else where Spike was concerned—and right, too. An odd right, one she'd felt with him before and knew she couldn't trust but felt anyway. Enough to lower her guard to say the thing that had been on her mind since that phone call.

"No. But we can't really do anything but wait." She'd exhaled, hating the truth in her own answer. "If I act and I'm wrong, then I've poked the bear and as much as I would love to tell everyone at the Council where they can stick my stake, it's a bridge worth *not* burning if it turns out they're telling the truth."

He had nodded. "Can see that, I suppose."

"Well, keep reminding me of it, because I sense a lot of frustration in my future."

Which was something she wasn't sure she should have said, given the weird state of everything between them, but she'd said it and she'd heard herself say it and she hadn't taken it back. And Spike hadn't pursued it as he might have once. Maybe one of these days his odd behavior would stop surprising her, though she figured that would only happen when she understood exactly what was behind it. If it was just guilt over what had happened in May or the result of wherever it was he'd disappeared off to.

Buffy was starting to hope that the dreams she kept having about him might clue her in. They weren't constant or anything, and beyond the first one, she couldn't say for sure that they were Slayer dreams, but they were definitely a different caliber of dream than the ones she'd had before his return. Those dreams had been equal parts erotic and horrifying, because nowhere was safe for her subconscious, apparently, and no one had it more out for her than herself. The more recent ones, whether they were messages from the Powers or not, had a different texture and feel. And none seemed to be through her own lens. She was always aware of herself—aware she was not Spike, even if she was seeing through Spike's eyes, feeling Spike's feelings, thinking Spike's thoughts. Some were retreads of the first dream she'd had, almost beat-for-beat identical. Others were just of pain. Deep, unsettling pain that, as far as she could tell, wasn't due to injury or anything obvious, but always felt tied to her somehow. She didn't know, and she didn't know how to find out. But if the dreams were messages from the Powers, the least they could do was give her some sort of hint as to where Spike had gone after he'd left town. Make themselves useful beyond showing her stuff she already knew.

And that was another thing. Buffy *did* know it—that Spike hated himself for what he'd done. She'd known that for months, almost from the moment it had happened. The knowledge had lived there in her head alongside all the other thoughts she wasn't supposed to have, ready to remind her of the way he'd looked, the tears streaming down his cheeks, the hand over his mouth, before those images were chased away by the voice that demanded why it mattered at all. If Spike felt bad, he should. He'd more than earned it.

That voice had started to go hoarse, though. It was one thing to believe he hated himself and another to see it. Seeing it had helped shut up the part of her full of self-recriminations. And since Spike was keeping his distance aside from those times he couldn't, she was confident that forgiving him—or thinking about forgiving him—wouldn't open the door to any dangerous backsliding.

Though living with the word *forgiveness* in her head was a bit like living with a loaded gun that had a hair-trigger whose barrel was always pressed against her temple. Yeah, thoughts like that went a long way in helping calm the nerves that

wanted to do the Charleston every time she set out for her nightly patrols, the prospect of seeing Spike never gone but without its power to throw her off her game, but it opened up a whole new line of questioning she didn't have the energy to address. Not with the Council maybe-probably still determined to kill her. She couldn't expend valuable time thinking about Spike and the general weirdness that was them.

She needed to be ready for anything.

And seventeen days after the call from Giles, *anything* happened.

It was an odd night on patrol, though Buffy couldn't say exactly what made it odd. Just a feeling, the unsettling sort that occasionally took up residence in her gut and refused to move until she'd analyzed all its power to ashes. The rounds were pretty normal—a slew of new vamps thanks to a sorority hazing gone way wrong and one elderly vampire who had been turned, as far as Buffy could see, as a practical joke. Nothing she would call challenging, and also nothing that made the feeling go away once her potential problems had been turned into dust clouds. Instead, the feeling spread, moving from her center outward, making her skin hum and the hairs at the back of her neck stand at attention. Making her shiver and sweat at the same time, telling her heart to pound even though nothing she could see or hear screamed *danger*. Everything around her was still. Graveyard still.

Then she was running. Hard, fast strides that reverberated through her ankles and shins, her lungs working overtime, pumping chilly air, the wind at her face and her hair threatening to fall completely out of the sloppy twist she'd forced it into before leaving the house. She didn't know where she was going, only she knew exactly where she was going, because it wouldn't be so urgent if it were happening anywhere else.

She didn't slow down when she reached the crypt, rather burst right through the door and threw herself into the fray. Over broken pieces of furniture and scattered candles, over a cracked sarcophagus lid that had tumbled from its place, and onto the back of the bitch about to plunge a stake through Spike's heart.

Spike, who was on the floor, his face twisted with pain, one hand on his head and the other bracing to catch the stake aimed at his chest. But he knew—he knew he wouldn't. She saw him get that, saw him accept it, saw that bone-deep understanding that he was living his last and would have screamed her fury had their eyes not met then. Had she not caught the change that took him the instant he realized she was there. All of this happened within a millisecond, and Buffy didn't have time to wonder why he was on his back rather than on his feet, or why he'd resigned himself to death, for her arms were around the neck of his attacker and everything started moving again.

Buffy had invited herself into her fair share of fights, and they always went the same way. Someone about to get away with something they thought would be a breeze until the Slayer showed up and ruined their plans. Always taken off guard, for whatever reason, even though it was common knowledge that this was her town. The woman Buffy had leaped on, however, wasn't taken off guard. Instead, without missing a beat, she broke in a blind backward run toward the nearest wall before

Buffy could catch her breath. There was a brilliant flash of pain as stone met spine, the air punched out of her lungs, and shock cost Buffy her grip, sending her tumbling to the dusty floor.

The strike must have cost the attacker something, too, for she staggered back a few steps. Enough that Buffy saw, when she glanced up, a dark stain dampening the woman's side, stark against the flowy, fabric of her top. At least she thought it was a stain—deep red against petal pink could easily be a stylistic flourish. Only stylistic flourishes didn't bloom or swell the longer she looked. Spike had taken a chunk out of her, and not an insignificant one.

The woman followed her gaze and blinked at the wound as though just noticing it. "Huh," she said. "Did you do that, or did he?"

Buffy didn't reply, her lungs still clamoring to recover from the blow. She also didn't give into the urge to glance in Spike's direction, though some part of her was screaming he should have sprung back into action by now. The fact that he hadn't had her blood thundering in her ears. He'd been awake a second ago—she'd seen him, and he'd seen her. If he wasn't on his feet, then something was wrong.

"Guessing it was him," his attacker continued. "Thought I felt a tickle."

"Who are you?"

The woman smirked. She was almost an ethereal sort of young, likely an illusion bought by the miles of wild white hair that stretched to her waist. "Someone who's not dumb enough to stand in a vampire's lair while I gush blood. Sorry to cut this short—I was looking forward to meeting you. But, you know, all good things."

Then, with a little finger wave, the woman broke for the door, moving far too fast for someone bleeding as much as she was. Buffy watched her go, torn between fury and fear. She knew she had a choice—follow and find out what the hell any of this had been about, take advantage of that wound while it was fresh, or see what was up with Spike. It probably should have frightened her, how quickly she decided. There was no hesitation, no second-guessing.

Before the door slammed shut, she was already moving toward him, her heart in her throat.

"Spike? Everything good?"

No. Everything was very much not good. Spike was where she'd left him on the floor, one hand near his head, the other over his chest, and dead still. The sort of still that would have her checking for a pulse if he were anything but a vampire. Sure, he didn't need to breathe, but he did it so much that it carried over in his sleep. Always had. And that knowledge had her panic beginning to climb, the nervous whirring making her sweat and shiver at the same time.

She collapsed by his side and nudged him. "Spike?" Nothing. "Spike, wake up."

Still nothing. And for a moment, the crazy thought occurred to her that he wouldn't wake up. Not just now, but ever. It was a stupid thing to think but her brain was abuzz, firing off all kinds of stuff that made no sense. She shook him again, and again, considered aiming a punch at his nose—that had sometimes worked in the past—but then at last he was fluttering his eyes open, and he was breathing, and *she* was breathing, too. Deep gulps of air that made her slightly

bruised lungs pinch, but that didn't matter. Nothing mattered except the fact that he was awake.

Buffy sat back, riding high on relief that would have surprised her had she had time to examine it, her hands shaking, her skin hot, her heart thumping so hard it almost hurt. "You okay?" she asked softly. "What happened?"

He didn't seem to hear her. In fact, for a really long beat, he didn't seem to know she was there at all. He hissed and pressed his hand to his head, gave a rattling cough that freaked her out, as she hadn't known vampires could sound like that, before it faded into a pained groan. It felt like hours passed by the time he finally blinked his eyes clear enough to focus on her, and when he did, he stared as though he didn't know whether she was really there.

"Buffy?"

"Yeah."

"Bloody... Fuck, my head about exploded." Spike hesitated, felt along his brow again. "Everythin' looks all right, yeah?"

"What do you mean?"

"Mean I thought it would pop right off there for a second. So give it to me straight—all bits of me where they should be?"

The question confused the hell out of her but she decided not to dwell. She'd never seen him react to a chip fire like that—maybe something was addled. "Umm, yeah, from where I'm sitting, everything's normal." A beat. "What was that? You piss someone else off while you were away? Or was that the world's worst breakup?"

Buffy didn't realize she was holding her breath until Spike barked a laugh and fought to sit up, finally looking and sounding a bit more like himself. "Breakup?" he repeated, a little wheezy. "You know I don't like it *that* rough."

"Then what was it?"

"You really don't know?"

"Know what?"

"That wasn't some ordinary bitch," he said. "That was a slayer."

I WANT A PERFECT SOUL

SPIKE WAS SITTING ON THE COUCH IN BUFFY'S LIVING ROOM, THE LADY OF THE house having excused herself to make a phone call after advising him to keep quiet to avoid waking Willow or Dawn. Too many questions, she'd said, and she wasn't in a mood to handle them tonight. Which was all more than understandable yet no less confusing, considering he still had no bugging idea what he'd done to earn yet another invite, aside from managing to not get himself killed.

Well, that wasn't entirely true. The steps from where he'd started the night to where he was ending it were all there and no one needed to draw him a diagram. After filling his belly with blood, he'd flipped on the telly and slinked into his green armchair, ready to stare at whatever was on without really seeing it and wondering how long he ought to wait tonight before heading out in search of a decent brawl. Give Buffy first dibs, as was her right as the Slayer, and skip the part of the evening where they'd invariably run into each other and do that awkward shuffle. It was the least he could do for her *and* himself, spare him the unique pain that struck whenever she was close enough to smell. Or see. Or taste. The pain he had to live with just in remembering all of the above was unbearable enough.

It was no bloody wonder they kept running into each other, though, considering he'd been taking the patrol paths that they had once taken together. Or, fine, that *Buffy* had taken and he had prowled at a distance because she was the flame and he was the sodding moth and that was just the way it was. Once he'd realized what he was doing, he'd tried switching things up a bit only to have that blow up in his face, as she seemed to be of the same mind, and they kept making the same alterations. Do Shady Hill first, then Harper's, then skip over to Sunnydale Cemetery to round the night off. The next night—start with Sunnydale, hit Shady Hill, then Harper's, give the smaller cemeteries a cursory once-over, then take a final tour of Restfield on

his way home. The night following—stalk around Restfield before hitting the smaller cemeteries, the ones she didn't feel the need to frequent as much. Wait until he was bored out of his mind before heading back to do the other three. It was no good. Each night, Spike ended up running into Buffy, usually around the same time but never in the same place.

The best thing he could say about it was she'd started giving him a soft little smile—*this again?*—every time it happened, which was miles better than what he would have expected. Namely, accusations that he was doing it on purpose like he had in the old days. Trailing after her, all moony-eyed and heartsick, aching for a chance to be needed, to swoop in and try to do something daring and impressive. Or for her to realize what she'd like more than anything was for him to stick around and keep her company, and maybe for afters they could go to his place, enjoy a nightcap, then shag each other boneless.

Buffy hadn't suggested anything of the sort, though. Far as he could tell, the thought that he might be orchestrating these little run-ins hadn't even crossed her mind, and that was a change of pace. One he didn't mind at all. Of course, now it had the added benefit of being true, which it definitely hadn't been before. Everything he'd done prior to seeking out the soul had been about consuming as much of her as he could, be that her time or her body or whatever else had been up for the offering. A little of everything if the night was good and her mood was right.

Those times seemed both simpler and simply pathetic from where he stood now. Yeah, he'd been mad for her and yeah, he still was, but the lengths he'd gone to then, the stories he'd woven and sold to himself—the things he'd wanted to believe—had all been exposed for the lies they were, even if that didn't make the lies go away. Part of him still wanted to believe, desperate and useless and ridiculous as it was. As *he* was.

Tonight, he'd decided to wait another hour or so before heading out to make his rounds, see if he could avoid Buffy that way. Which was how it was, at the particular moment the door had burst open, he'd been watching the telly and not out dusting fledges. All his instincts had started firing at once, the primal beast inside screaming, "*Slayer!*" with such certainty he hadn't given himself a chance to doubt it. Not even when he'd realized his visitor wasn't Buffy. Not even as some white-haired bitch he'd never seen before had strolled in, twirling a stake and looking around as though she were considering renting out the place.

Not Buffy, but unquestionably a slayer. He'd known it and she'd known that he'd known it. That had been the point.

"You're Spike, huh?" she'd said, all casualness and cool detachment that he'd both resented and admired. "Loving the vibe, even if the hair's a little eighties for my taste."

"Who the fuck are you?"

"Me? Oh, I'm the hit squad. Guess who made the list?" An ugly smile had twisted her lips, the sort that made her eyes sparkle but darken at the same time. "I want you to know, I *did* ask them to at least remove the chip. Might have even gotten on my knees and begged a little. Just didn't seem sporting with you all..." She'd wrinkled her

nose and waved at him. “Alas, they wanted this done quick. So, from me to you, just know that if I had my way, we’d have ourselves some actual fun before I shove this where it belongs.”

After that had been a blur. She’d sprung forward, all preternatural skill and grace—the sort he’d once made his business to track down and destroy—and he’d fallen back on instinct. Grab a blade, stay on his feet, try not to get killed. That he wouldn’t be able to fight without the chip going off hadn’t mattered then, because he’d had no choice. It was live with pain or dust, and his will to live was stronger.

One swing of his arm was all it had taken to light his bloody head on fire, but he’d forced himself to ignore it. Fight through if he meant to fight another day. She’d been on him, and he’d fallen back, swiping at her while white-hot shards of electricity stole down his neck, making his spine seize and scorching his insides and more. His mouth had fallen open, but he hadn’t managed a scream—couldn’t for the explosions firing behind his eyes and through his skull. The scent of blood, hot and fresh, had burned his nostrils, and he’d known he’d hit her, but where and how had been a mystery.

Then he hadn’t been able to hold on anymore. The blade had gone tumbling to the floor with a clatter louder than he would have expected, and the bitch had been over him. His head throbbing and threatening to split, little stars still winking across his blurred vision, the rest of him jolting with phantom spasms, feeling oddly distorted and separate from his mind. As though she’d parted his head from his body but without severing the nerves that let him feel it. And none of it had mattered because he’d seen what came next. Caught the smug satisfaction on the bitch’s face, the angle of the stake she had raised in her hand, and understood with perfect clarity what was about to happen and that he, weak and helpless as a kitten, could do rot to stop it.

And he’d thought, *I never got to tell her.*

Quite a realization to have, lying on his back, staring death in the eye. Even in the seconds that were supposed to be his last, he’d been a selfish bastard. Not considering the fight that was ahead, what the presence of this new slayer meant for the one he loved, or that the last conversation he’d had with Buffy hadn’t been about anything substantial—he’d only thought about himself.

And in doing so, he’d discovered that, despite his reasoning and his protests, he wanted Buffy to know about the soul. Sure, it solved nothing, absolved nothing, explained nothing, but the hideous side of him still wanted her to revel in his accomplishment. To burden her all over again, force her to own what he’d done to himself to make up for the thing he’d done to her. So, what, she wouldn’t remember him as the monster he was? She’d spare him a few tears when she realized there would never be another of those nighttime run-ins? That she’d finally cough up to the love she’d never been brave enough to give him?

It was an ugly thing to live with. He’d known that selfishness was there—could hardly move without feeling it—but he hadn’t wanted it to be, and he’d thought not wanting to be this pathetic and self-serving made up for the fact that he was. Had hoped so. Maybe, beneath it all, he wasn’t such a bad bloke. There was something there worth saving.

But there wasn't, and in the infinitesimal seconds that had separated him from oblivion, he'd lived a thousand lifetimes' loathing and regret.

Then, like the bloody Valkyrie she was, Buffy had appeared. Her arms thrown around the bitch's neck, her eyes finding his and scorching him with something that had looked a lot like relief. Or perhaps had been just the chip at work, searing off whatever working neurons remained and showing him something impossible that he desperately wanted to be true. All he'd known was she was there—she was there, and it was all right to let go, so he had, falling away into the blessed inky black of unconsciousness.

His head had still been throbbing like it wanted to split when her voice had reached into that inky black to pull him back to the surface. He hadn't wanted to give in, had wanted to remain where the pain and regret couldn't reach him, but he'd known that wasn't an option. Buffy was asking for him, and when she asked, he went. So it was, and so it would forever be. When he'd opened his eyes, he'd found the scene hadn't changed—he was still on the floor, still shuddering with aftershocks of the chip's assault, and she had been over him. Asking if he was all right, sounding like she really cared. Enough so that a man might almost believe it.

She hadn't understood why he'd wondered if the rest of him was still in one piece. But then, Buffy had never had the unique privilege of feeling her brain had been electrocuted, nor the sense of separation, of disorientation, that always followed. Nevertheless, she'd answered his questions without commenting on them. Right before she'd started rambling about his mystery guest, talking a bunch of nonsense until it had dawned on him that she didn't know.

"That wasn't some ordinary crazy bitch," he'd told her. "That was a slayer."

Buffy's eyes had gone wide. Any other time, he might have laughed. "No. That's impossible."

"Tell yourself that all you like, love, the girl was a bloody slayer." He'd fought to sit up, wincing all the while. The pain the chip brought on was the lingering sort, always had been, and never in quite the same way, as nothing in his life had ever been consistent. Sometimes the throb was just there at the corners of his awareness, not doing much aside from reminding him that it had been a lot worse earlier. Other times, it was a full-on migraine that lingered for hours.

Never had the pain been a whole-body affair, though. Then again, never before had he done more than punch someone without thinking it through first. He remembered claiming he could put Buffy in the ground just by aiming a blast between her pretty little eyes. It'd hurt to point the bloody gun and it'd be agony to pull the trigger, he'd reasoned, but he could do it—he could. And her death would outlast the pain.

But that hadn't happened, as he'd likely known it wouldn't the second he'd set out. And beyond that, the chip had worked exactly as those government prats had intended. The threat of pain had been enough to discourage him from trying to be his old bad self again. Tonight had been the first time in years that he'd taken a swing at a human with intent to kill, and he'd felt it. He felt it still, now sitting on the couch in the Summers' living room, trying to suss out how it was he'd come to be

there in the first place. How he could have gone from being laid out on his back to invited into Buffy's house. What the sodding hell any of this meant.

"She can't be a slayer," Buffy had said back at the crypt. "Spike, think about it—"

"I don't have to bloody *think* about it. Feel it, don't I?"

"What do you mean, you feel it?"

He'd opened his mouth, fully intending to give her a thorough education, but his body had other ideas. The pounding in his head and the pain everywhere else had joined forces, and before he could stop himself, he'd rolled over and emptied his stomach of half-digested blood. Coughed and retched and whimpered at the foul taste that had filled his mouth, his gut in knots and the stone floor spattered with varying shades of red. Just looking at the mess had damn near been enough to make him heave all over again—vampire or not, the sight was disgusting.

Somehow, amazingly, it hadn't sent Buffy running for the hills as it would have in years past, nor had she made some snide remark about how he sickened her. But as he kept observing, the Buffy he'd left was not the one he'd returned to. Could also be that his brain had been fried to the point it was making things up. That would certainly explain how it was that he was listening to Buffy ramble around the kitchen.

But he wasn't making anything up. His imagination might be a vivid place, but not so much that it perfectly mimicked things like touch and smell, or things like the photo on the end table or the titles of the books visible in the backpack Dawn had left by the door. He was in Buffy's house, and she was boiling water in the next room—god knows why—and doing her best to keep her voice low as she chattered the ear off the watcher, all so none of Revello Drive's sleeping residents would stir from their beds and come down to find a vampire on their couch.

If all of that was true, then it stood to reason he hadn't imagined what he'd seen in her eyes back at the crypt, either. Not before she'd rescued his arse or after, looking him up and down, taking in the mess he'd made. The thing he'd thought might have been concern.

"You have other clothes downstairs, right?" she'd asked, plucking up the blade he'd dropped. "Cause we need to get out of here and, no offense, but *I* might ralph if I think too much about what you just threw up."

Spike had nodded, though it hurt to do so. Also hurt to think about negotiating his way downstairs, but he wasn't about to sit in his own sick for the rest of the night. "Where are we goin'?"

"Somewhere that's very much not here."

"Both of us?"

"Well, yeah. There's really no point in saving your life just to leave you here where that...whatever *that* was can just find you again."

"I told you, it was a slayer."

"And I told you that's not possible."

Last he'd checked, the rules on making new slayers hadn't changed. Buffy was up and running around just fine, yeah, but there was that other bird who'd landed herself behind bars, and it wasn't like those places were bloody health clubs. Seemed obtuse to just leap to the conclusion that Faith, or whatever her name was, hadn't finally

picked a fight she couldn't win, and they were living with the results. But he hadn't wanted to argue. Either she'd believe him, or she wouldn't.

"I'll call Giles," Buffy had said, perhaps reading his look, or perhaps having an epiphany of her own. "But we have to do that somewhere that's not here, unless you got a phone line installed since the last time we spoke."

Right, fine, but that still didn't explain why her solution had been to take him back to her house. There were a number of other options around Sunnyhell, and all of them he would have understood a mite easier than Buffy deciding to let her attacker back to the place where she and her sister caught their kip. A motel, for starters, or the Magic Box. Hell, bloody Harris would have made more sense. Somewhere far away from her and Dawn, at the very least.

But Buffy had decided to bring him to Revello Drive. No question, not even the hint of hesitation. Just clean up, Spike, leave your dirties where you can find them later, 'cause we got Slayer business to tend to.

Spike had blinked down at himself, then wished he hadn't, seeing as his eyes hurt even now and moving just made it worse. He'd rooted out some fresh clothing, changed into a new shirt and jeans as fast as he'd dared with his head still ringing. And when he'd climbed back up, fully expecting Buffy to have come to her senses, he'd found her waiting for him, her expression pulled and her eyes anxious, focused on the door. Waiting, undoubtedly, for the girl who was a slayer but couldn't be to make her curtain call.

Then she'd turned to him, saw that he'd cleaned up and all, and that had been that.

And here he was.

"Well," Buffy said now, startling him out of his thoughts as she wandered into the room. Then startling him all over again when he realized she had a steaming mug in either hand and there was no one else around but him. "Giles taught me some new British swear words. Thankfully, I didn't wake him up. It's already mid-morning over there."

Spike's throat tightened. "He say anythin' in particular? Any clues to who the new girl is?"

"He's going to try to get a hold of someone at the California Institution for Women just to make sure that Faith is still alive." She paused and pulled a face before setting the mugs on the coffee table, one on his side and the other on hers. "I mean, I'd think that'd be the kind of thing that I'd get a heads-up about, but who the hell knows anymore."

He didn't reply. He was too busy staring at the velvety liquid swirling inside the mug.

"Oh," Buffy said, as though only then realizing how bloody strange this all was, "I thought you might not want the taste of blood throw-up in your mouth, and I remembered you liked... Well, it's not perfect. I've never been able to do it like Mom."

"You made me hot cocoa."

His confusion—his downright disbelief—must have been screaming across his

face, for when he glanced up again, she was doing that little Buffy wiggle that used to drive him wild. Self-aware, uncomfortable, like her body was too itchy for her skin, but still somehow the most adorable creature he'd ever seen because of it.

It was also a Buffy he hadn't been around in ages—one he was sure he'd chased away for good. Seeing her again filled him both with nostalgia for a time that had never been and more pain for all the things that he'd never had to lose.

"Well, again with the throwing up blood," she said, taking the armchair opposite him. When he continued to stare, waiting for any of this to make sense, she snatched up the mug she'd brought herself and swallowed a mouthful. Then winced and shook out her tongue. "Gah! I forgot how hot hot chocolate gets."

"Buffy, what the hell am I doing here?"

She finally met his gaze, and he saw some of his own confusion reflected back at him. "I told you. It makes zero sense to save your life if I'm just gonna leave you helpless in a place where some crazy wannabe slayer knows she can find you."

"The girl *was* a slayer, love. I know what slayers feel like."

Buffy arched an eyebrow. At least she looked more like herself now.

"Sod it, you know what I mean. Same as it is for you, yeah? That feelin' you get when one of us is around?"

"You mean that goes both ways? Wow with the unfair."

He rolled his eyes. "Yeah, well, most vamps don't recognize it for what it is, do they? Not exactly the brightest lot."

"But you do."

"Seen' as I've been huntin' down slayers ever since I learned about them, yeah, gotten good at pickin' them out of a crowd." Spike seized the mug off the table and threw back a heady, mouth-burning gulp that blistered his tastebuds, but he didn't care enough to slow down. The events of the evening were beginning to catch up with him, best they could still with his head whingeing its protests every time he bloody blinked. "The girl was a slayer. She had the moves and the speed, and it's not like there's only one of you runnin' around anymore. If there can be two, why not three?"

"Because the only reason there are two is I died."

Spike snorted into his mug. "Bad habit of yours."

"Yeah, and only *one* time has it resulted in another slayer," she said as though that settled the matter. "Giles told me. After I was back, after Willow made with the resurrection, he told me that there wasn't another girl called and the Council thought the Slayer line continues with Faith. It wasn't until I was shot this last May that we became sure."

Until what? He swung his head up so fast the room threatened to go sideways on him. "What's this? You were shot?"

She opened her mouth but seemed to lose her steam almost at once. "Uhh, yeah," she said a new note in her voice, one he didn't like at all. "I guess that was after... Right after, actually. The next morning."

The words were a stake to the chest—the sort Finn had used once. Close enough to the real thing to hurt, to be bloody agony, but without giving him the escape of

death. And here he'd thought he'd gone as far as he could with his self-hatred. "You were shot after...after that?"

"And you think *you've* had some bad days," she said with a tragic little laugh.

"Buffy—"

"I told you that Xander found me. Well, he was there to tell me that Warren and friends were downtown causing all sorts of trouble and Warren had done some mojo to make himself all superpowered. Like *way* superpowered." She wrinkled her nose, her eyes taking on an awful faraway look as though she were seeing it all again. "He would have made bread out of the bones of Buffy if I hadn't found his little magical doohickey. Jonathan and Andrew were there, too, and got arrested after Warren made with yet another impossible getaway. It was the next morning that he shot me. I was looking for surveillance cameras in the backyard and Warren showed up, gun included. He fired a few times. I got shot. And so did Tara."

Spike didn't say anything. Couldn't find his voice among all the terrible dots finally coming together. The awful, horrible dots.

Lydia had told him all of this, of course. It had been part of her bloody sales pitch. She just hadn't gone into all the details, hadn't painted a full picture of how it had happened. To Spike, Warren had only ever been a means to an end. Useful in his own way when it came to things like building the Buffybot and running checks on the chip. Last year, the boy had been mostly a non-bloody-entity where Spike was concerned. There but not of much note—not even after he'd tried to make Buffy think she'd killed that girl. No, no, Spike the soulless bastard had been braced at *her* for feeling her human feelings, for bearing the weight that she did to the point where she'd let herself get tossed behind bars. What had it mattered that one girl was dead? Humans died and were awful to each other every day. It was their trade, their one consistency. Once Buffy had seen reason, realized that she wasn't responsible, Spike had stopped caring. Wasn't exactly a stretch, some pillock putting Buffy in his crosshairs. It hadn't been worth worrying over. She was the Slayer. She could handle whatever was thrown her way.

"I didn't find out about Tara until later," Buffy said softly, lulling him back to a present he didn't want to be inside. "But I died again. Just for a second, until Willow removed the bullet."

Fuck, it just kept getting worse. Spike couldn't look at her, rather kept his gaze fixed on his cooling cocoa.

"I mention this because no one was called after Glory and no one was called after Warren, either. So if this girl is a slayer, it has to be Faith. And I would've heard if Faith died."

That seemed terribly optimistic of her, particularly if the bloody Council wanted her head. But he didn't say that, either, as he was certain these were thoughts she had to be having as well, even if she weren't voicing them. And his own head still swimming with the image of Buffy with a hole in her chest. Of Tara, sweet Tara, crumpled in a heap, done in by a bloody bullet. Then of Warren and what he knew of what had followed. The extreme *little* he knew of what had followed. The details hadn't seemed important when Lydia had been sharing. In fact, all that had mattered was

the sods intended to use Willow as an excuse to kill Buffy and he'd needed to learn as much as possible about their plan, not linger in a past that couldn't be changed. Not mourn people he was too late to save.

"Dunno what to tell you, pet," he said, a bit hoarse. "It's like I said, I know what it feels like when I'm around a slayer. You learn to trust that. And it's not just a feel-in', either. It's in how she moves. The way she walks. How she holds herself. It's how I knew *you* were the girl I was there to kill the first time I saw you."

He chanced a glance up, found her looking at him with unflinching skepticism. He'd take it. It was better than what had been there before. "If I remember right, you first saw me in the alley right before I killed one of your friends," she said. "Kind of a giveaway."

"That's the first you saw *me*. Not the first I saw you."

"You're telling me your stalker tendencies go back even further than I thought?"

"It wasn't bloody stalking, it was *studying*."

"And the difference would be?"

"I was there as your enemy. Not tryin' to get into your knickers." Though the thought had certainly occurred to him then, as it never had before. The other slayers he'd faced had been forces of nature in their own right. Each beautiful, cunning, and deadly—the perfect bloody package. But Buffy had been the first to make him truly want to satiate his curiosity, answer the age-old question. She'd been the first to get under his skin, bombard him with images of fucking her and killing her in equal measure. For a long time, he'd told himself it was a part of the hunt, had even believed it, even if his previous conquests hadn't taken up so much mental real estate. And he'd taken those deep, lust-fueled thoughts with him to every fight, that desire for her, *Buffy*, and the Slayer alike. It was what had driven Dru away in the end. "You were with your mates when I first saw you," he went on. "All I'd been told was the Slayer was a tiny blonde slip of a thing and where I was likely to find her. That's how the hunt starts, you see. Move into a new territory, get a feel for the locals, ask around and learn the Slayer's habits. You wanna see what she's like when she doesn't know you're watching. After I got the Anointed Wanker to tell me you fancied the Bronze most nights, I went out on a hunt."

Buffy furrowed her brow. "I forgot about the Anointed One. He kinda just disappeared."

"Yeah, tends to happen when you shove bite-size vamps into steel cages and throw them into the sun."

"That's...oddly specific."

"What, you never knew?" Spike lost his fight with the grin that wanted to spread across his face. "Took care of that problem for you, myself. Was either that or grovel for forgiveness for muckin' up the Feast of Saint What's-its. Those gits took themselves too bloody seriously, anyway. Only use they had was in tellin' me where to go to find the Slayer. And pet, there were a load of other girls at the Bronze that fit the bill, but only one Buffy Summers. I picked you out from the start."

"Oh yeah? What was I doing?"

To his amazement, she genuinely sounded interested. Looked it, too, the disbelief

from just a few seconds ago having faded. It was nothing of the girl who had once asked him to regale her with tales of his previous conquests even if she was going to grimace through the whole affair, or the girl who had balked the time he'd noted, after having shagged her brains out, that she was talking to him like he was more than a walking vibrator. Like he was a friend, if not her lover. This part of Buffy he'd spent two years trying to capture for his own, and somehow here it was. Right in front of him.

"Studyin' French, I think," he said thickly. "Bloody butchering the language, I might add. Can't remember how but it was a hoot. Think there might've been some-thin' about a cow."

Buffy snickered, the sound magical. "Foreign languages were never my forte."

"Languages in general."

"Hey! I always *kinda* got good grades in English. In college. When I showed up." A slight blush filled her cheeks, but she shook it off just as quickly, refocusing on him and crossing her arms. "So, what about me screamed *slayer* then?"

"Well, how do you know when you're near a vampire?"

She blinked, and the light in her eyes dimmed. Not entirely but enough that he missed its warmth all the same. The question, he supposed, had been a bit personal. Even intimate. A sort of intimate they had never been.

"It's a tingle," she said before he could walk anything back. "Usually along the back of my neck."

Hell. If Buffy were on form, she would have popped him in the nose several times over by now and called him one of her pet insults. Spike was starting to think he'd be more comfortable if she did—if she snapped back to the girl he knew, realized who she'd brought into her home, who she was chatting with, and knocked him out on his arse. This Buffy made him feel like he had something more to lose, and for a man who had already sacrificed everything, the thought was something beyond terrifying.

"Neck makes sense," he said. "Vampire, and all."

"Amazingly, I'd put that together, myself," Buffy replied dryly.

"Right. A vampire's always aware of blood. Whereas you, Slayer, are always aware of your surroundings. Isn't that right?"

"Like now?"

"Well, yeah. Somethin' burst through the door, you'd know what to do."

"I'm not sure that's being aware of my surroundings or just knowing where the weapons chest is."

"Bit of both, I expect." Spike paused, scouring his still-sore brain for the right combination of words. He didn't know why it was important that she understand, and maybe it wasn't, but he'd come this far and for the first time, the lady seemed keen to keep listening to him. Seemed to *want* to understand. That knowledge was intoxicating. "You are—aware. Not somethin' you can switch off. I've seen you act on it enough to know—make a grab of somethin', use whatever's nearest to your advantage. That part of you calls out, whether a man is smart enough to recognize it or not. Feels a bit like I'm always bein' watched. Easy enough to ignore for most. Not for me, though. Never when it came to slayers."

Again, she nodded. "And you knew. When you saw me."

"Instantly."

"It was *that* obvious?"

"To me, yeah. I just felt it and I trust that feeling. Even if I didn't, I would've been sold the second your chums pulled you up and I saw you move. You were all strength and grace, bloody alluring even if you didn't know it. If I'd had any doubt, that would've quashed it." He swallowed, and for a second, let his eyes fall to her mouth. It wasn't planned or intentional, wasn't anything more than muscle memory combined with a fierce longing he knew he'd feel until his bones were ready for dust, and it was over before it could become something dangerous. Then he was shaking his head, grounding himself back into the reality he knew and resented, and grasping his cocoa mug to give his hands something to do. Something innocuous. "You know the rest. I sent some poor sod out to grab himself a bite, watched you swoop in for the rescue. Got an idea of how you fought and a taste of what was to come."

Buffy exhaled in a rush and dropped her eyes from his. And he realized, apparently at the same time she did, that she'd been leaning forward, leaning into him, and fuck, if fate wasn't a spiteful mistress. There was a time not too long ago when he would have given anything and everything he had to have the Slayer hanging off his every bloody word. That she was now, or at least seemed to be, was one of life's little cruelties.

It was also why he'd gone. Why he'd fought for the soul in the first place. Buffy was listening because he was offering without asking. Because he'd told her that he'd never pursue his love for her again, and somehow she trusted that he meant it.

For once, he'd had a plan that had worked. Just not the way he'd thought it would.

"And you felt that tonight," Buffy said brusquely. Time to create distance. "When Legolas showed up. You felt that 'being watched' thing. You're sure of it."

"Legolas?"

"That's what I'm going to call her until I have an actual name. Dawn's been obsessed with Orlando Bloom ever since that movie came out."

Yeah, he had a faint memory of that. Had actually caused her to blush once by suggesting she just fancied blokes with blond hair and sexy accents.

The memory, like most things, came with its share of pain.

"I'm sure," he said. "Even if I weren't, I would've been after seein' her in action."

"You did manage to take a chunk out of her."

Spike looked up again. "Yeah," he said slowly.

"So that's...something you can do. If it comes down to it."

"Always had the option to fry my noggin if somethin' was really worth it. Not much is." A beat. He glanced at the remaining cocoa, which had cooled to the point it defeated its purpose. The fact that she'd made it for him at all remained a marvel. All things Buffy did these days. And he wouldn't risk changing that—making her regret the kindness she'd shown him tonight by letting him into her home. By coming to the rescue in the first place. And that meant he'd best be off before she came to her senses, or got it in her head that he was manipulating her time just to

keep her close. "Think I better head out," he said. "Late, and all. Past time for certain slayers to—"

"Spike, you're staying here."

Something in his chest gave a mad lurch. "Sorry?"

Buffy looked down. "Like I've already told you, it makes no sense for me to have saved your butt just to send you back out there, especially if that girl is a slayer. We have a cot in the basement—I mean, it's nothing fancy, but Dawn's friends used to use it when they slept over. I'll get some blankets and—"

"You can't be serious."

"Hey, I'm not saying I'm wild about the idea or anything, or that it's more than just tonight, but—"

"Think about what you're saying, Slayer. Think about—"

"Don't," she snapped, whipping her head up with force that surprised him. Not as much as the sudden fire behind her eyes, though, as that fire seemed to have come from nowhere. "Don't tell me to think about it. I know exactly what you are, Spike. I might have forgotten once, but I will never, *never* forget again. That still doesn't mean I want you to die, so you'll stay here until tomorrow. We can find somewhere else for you after I get home from work."

She broke off just as abruptly, her face red and the rest of her trembling, and he could have staked himself for being an insensitive git.

Of course Buffy was opening her home to him, even if she didn't want him here. He should have known, should have guessed. Fuck, he should have seen this coming a bloody mile off. That was the difference between them and always had been. Why he'd fallen in love with her in the first place. Buffy wasn't the sort of person who could leave someone vulnerable, no matter who it was or what they had done to her. It was why she'd taken him in three years ago when he'd come to her for help, and why she was insisting now.

"Where's it you work?" he asked, having nothing else to say. Well, that wasn't entirely true. He could apologize, admit she was right, *of course she was right*, and he was a git. But she already knew he was a git, same as she knew she was right, and their relationship was a bit beyond apologies now. It also wasn't something Buffy would expect, and while he was about as certain as a bloke could get that she wasn't in danger of guessing the truth about his soul anytime soon, there was no need to take chances by giving her something to wonder after. "Tell me you got out of that nosh slop you were at last spring."

The steel in her eyes faded, though not entirely. Still ready to give him the dressing-down he'd deserve should he press the issue. Always the warrior. "I got *way* out of there," she said. "I teach self-defense now."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I have my own studio and everything." She relaxed further. "We converted the training room at the Magic Box and...yeah, people actually pay me money to teach them how to not be a damsel. I never would have put all this together, but it's kinda nifty."

"It's perfect," he said, and it was. "Perfect for you, I mean."

"Yeah, it is." Buffy held his gaze a moment longer, then licked her lips and looked away. "So...basement."

"Right. Won't argue the point if you're sure."

"I'm sure. Just...don't come out until you hear the house is empty."

She didn't elaborate, but she didn't need to. He could only imagine what Dawn would do if he wandered unannounced into the kitchen while she was eating breakfast. He'd asked Buffy about the others—had to when she'd asked him to swing by the house and tell the whole story from the top. Hadn't wanted to walk into a bloody ambush, even if it was what he deserved. But he hadn't asked about Dawn then, save to make sure she wouldn't be there. The others had never thought much of him, so it was easy not to care what they thought now.

Dawn was another story. Another casualty of Hurricane William. The only person he'd lost who had actually loved him back.

"Right," he managed. "Quiet as a church mouse."

Buffy held his gaze, her own a storm he couldn't read. "I'll get some bedding," she said at length, rising to her feet. "And I'll meet you downstairs."

She snatched up the mugs before she left the room and took the long way back through the kitchen. He tried not to watch her as she moved, but he'd never been good at keeping his eyes off Buffy Summers. Like so many other things, this was a fact the soul hadn't had any luck in changing. Nothing ever would.

And that was the least surprising revelation he'd had all night.

THE MOMENT I LET GO OF IT WAS THE MOMENT I GOT MORE THAN I COULD HANDLE

IT TURNED OUT IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO SLEEP WHEN THERE WAS A VAMPIRE IN THE house. Or, at the very least, *that* vampire. Around five-thirty in the morning, after trying for two hours, Buffy conceded defeat. The move made her already-racing mind race even faster with the expectation of action, though what she intended to do beyond very dramatically getting out of bed, she had no idea. She was still exhausted—had climbed the stairs exhausted, gone through her nighttime routine exhausted, slid between the covers exhausted, and lain down exhausted hoping the exhaustion would overpower the periodic shock of adrenaline as she again relived everything that had happened since she'd set out for patrol. It hadn't worked. The part of her that was Slayer had always been louder than the part that was human. Unfair? Yes, but if she started keeping track of everything *unfair* in her life, she wouldn't get any actual living done.

Furthermore, if she *had* been able to fall asleep like her world hadn't been thrown off its axis, she wouldn't be Buffy Summers.

Well, if she was awake, she might as well be fully awake. No lounging around when there was work to be done. Buffy fought a yawn, threw off the covers, and pushed herself to her feet. First things first—review her schedule and cancel the day's sessions. Not something she particularly wanted to do, but even if there weren't a potential crisis like a new slayer on her hands, the fact that she was running on virtually no sleep pretty much guaranteed she'd be the world's worst instructor. She also needed to be available to respond to information as it reached her, provided that it did, and decide what her next steps would be if it didn't.

And she needed to talk with Dawn.

Buffy's stomach knotted, the rest of her filling with familiar dread. But there was no getting around it now that he was in her house, sleeping under her roof, and

possibly without anywhere else to go. No, *probably* without anywhere else to go. She'd told him it was for a single night, yes, but her saying so didn't magically open up a world of alternatives. What would she suggest, another crypt? A motel? Each presented the same problem, in that there was a probably-slayer running around out there, determined to stick something wooden and pointy through his chest, and he was unable to defend himself. The only other option was Anya's—Anya and her demon strength—but Buffy had stomped that idea down on account that it made her feel even sicker than she had in watching Spike throw up blood. A fact she was not interested in exploring because her overtaxed brain didn't need any more complications at the moment.

For better or worse, Spike was staying at Casa de Summers.

God, her head was starting to pound. She needed coffee, like now. Preferably an IV of it that she could just cart around with her all day as she made phone calls, had uncomfortable conversations, and tried to figure out just what the hell had actually happened last night.

But coffee was downstairs, and if she was going downstairs, she might as well get ready to face the day. Starting with a shower.

Buffy launched herself into her pre-shower routine without thought. Clothes she planned to wear went onto the bed, underwear went with her, and a quick trip to the linen closet produced a towel. And all of this was so normal that it didn't occur to her until she was stepping barefoot onto tile flooring that she hadn't been in the bathroom with Spike in the house since *that* night. That *shower* meant naked and naked meant vulnerable and vulnerable was a thing she hadn't experienced in full since last spring. The water would be running, and the lights would be on, and the door would be closed—and all the bits of herself that she'd set on autopilot abruptly kicked back over to manual.

It was dumb, she told herself almost immediately, because it certainly was dumb. What had happened had been an anomaly—a perfect storm of badness that had culminated in wild, tornadic activity. She was more certain of that now than she had ever been, the questions and ruminations and second-and-third thoughts she'd lived with over the summer placated thanks to the conversations she and Spike had had since he'd returned. At least on a surface level, where knowledge lived, and knowledge was everything, right? Spike was two floors down and even if he weren't, even if he were in the next room, he wouldn't think about coming in here again. Especially if he knew she was in there.

Yet for a second, Buffy still debated just skipping the shower entirely. Sure, she'd worked up a decent sweat last night, been knocked around a mausoleum, and helped cart a handicapped vampire to her house, but how dirty could she be, really? Hadn't she heard somewhere that it wasn't healthy to bathe every day? And if she smelled particularly ripe, wouldn't that be even more incentive for Spike to keep his distance? Not that he wasn't keeping his distance, but he'd seemed a bit more comfortable last night than he had in the entire time since he'd returned to town. Bold enough to ask questions that had been just this side of intimate and do that low, rumbling thing with his voice that couldn't help but make her think of all times when he'd rumbled into

her ear while pounding inside of her. Wasn't that enough to put a permanent moratorium on showers until Revello Drive was a Spike-free zone?

But then the second passed and reality set in. Reality and shame. This wasn't who she was. It wasn't who she wanted to be.

So she switched on the bathroom light and threw her things—her towel and her underwear—where they would be within easy reach, all with an almost profane amount of awareness. Almost like he was there, in the room with her, when she knew perfectly well that he was downstairs asleep. But maybe not asleep. Maybe staring at the ceiling, seeing through floorboards and carpet all the way up to where water was hitting a porcelain tub and also thinking about the thing he couldn't not think about. He'd hear her moving around, likely even deduce it was her from the cadence of her steps or some other creepy vampire thing she was better off not examining too closely. And knowing that—or not even knowing that, but living with that possibility in her head—made the simple act of moving around almost too taxing for her over-exhausted brain. She could have sworn she felt the vibrations of sound, like they were a tangible thing that could be quantified. The soft slide of fabric against her skin as she pulled off her sleep shirt. The way her legs shook as she dragged her panties past her calves. The hesitance to get into the tub, slide back the shower curtain, put a visual barrier between herself and the rest of the room. She knew nothing would happen—she knew it, felt it—but her body wasn't as easy to convince, and she wasn't accustomed to being this out of sync with her body. She and it might not always get along, but they were typically on the same page.

It took some doing and a lot of cursing at herself, but she managed to negotiate her way under the spray. She ignored the way her heart thundered, ignored the pounding against her skull and under her skin, ignored her lungs, which were suddenly working double time, and pulled the curtain closed behind her. The rattle of the rings against the bar was almost deafening—another thing she was sure he could hear however many floors below—and seemed to become more so in the vastness of the nothing that followed.

Buffy stood still, listening to the rush of water as it pounded against her back, and the hard, racing beats her heart took—as though she were training for the Olympics or in some life-or-death fight or pretty much doing anything but standing motionless in the shower. She took stock of how she felt—all her senses raring and ready for an attack, resisting her mental reassurances that all was well, and nothing was happening, and she was safe. Her body didn't want to believe her, and her mind quickly grew frustrated with its refusal to accept what was obvious. A hysterical sort of frustration that wanted to manifest as tears or sobs, which wouldn't do anything but make her feel even weaker than she did at the present. And god, this was not the time to feel weak.

You're better than this.

She drew in deep breaths, slow and deliberately calm to counter the out-of-control sensation in her chest. Her fingers felt numb, and her legs continued to shake, the cacophony in her head swelling, and the urge was there to just let it. Accept that she couldn't change the how or why of what she was feeling and let those

sensations tug her down. There was no shame in being helpless, after all, except she was the goddamned Slayer and *helpless* was not a thing she'd ever willfully embraced.

It was also not something she'd ever been, despite how others had tried to make her so.

Buffy exhaled on a gasp, opening her eyes. Water sluiced down her skin and plastered her hair to her neck and face, and she seized that thought and held it tight.

She was *not* helpless. Not in the slightest.

For a moment she did nothing, and not the still nothing of before, rather a nothing where her mind, previously frozen, began whirring like it had just come back online after a long hibernation. That realization, that thought—I *am not helpless*—well, it wasn't exactly the apple hitting Newton on the head or anything, but for the impact it made upon landing, it might as well have been a whole bushel. Enough to break through the discord, this thing she shouldn't need to be told, and ground her in what was reality and not a land of endless what-ifs. That she wasn't helpless and never had been. Not when they had taken her strength away and not when all signs had pointed to Glory's special doomsday and not even when she'd been dead. Buffy Summers was many things, but she wasn't helpless.

And this was untenable. She couldn't have a freaking panic attack every time she stepped into her own bathroom just because of one houseguest. And not even because of the houseguest, but rather a memory of something that had happened once and would never happen again. She didn't fear Spike, and she rarely had. Even the fear she'd experienced *that night* had been a different sort from the one she was most accustomed to, and perhaps that was why it insisted on lingering when the danger was about as far behind her as it could have been. For Spike hadn't come into the bathroom that night to hurt her. She'd lived with that knowledge for a long time now, resented it and herself for having it but holding onto it nonetheless, because it was right, despite however much it confused her. What had happened hadn't been premeditated and it certainly hadn't been by design. She'd seen it on his face then and she'd felt it in the time that had lapsed—she'd experienced it in those dreams as well, and when everything was screaming the same answer, the smart thing to do was to listen.

Buffy was tired of apologizing to herself for feeling like this. Of the mental gymnastics she forced herself to jump through every time her mind dragged her back to where it didn't want to be, her conflicted feelings and her guilt surrounding the same. The second-guessing and the deliberating and the minefield she made herself navigate in her own damn head, never mind outside of it. What it all came back to was understanding that she didn't fear Spike. That she knew, rationally, if he were standing on the other side of the shower curtain, she would be in no danger. And this wasn't a recent development—yes, the strange new Spike that had returned from *wherever* was safe, but so was the one she'd known before. Or no, that wasn't right—not *safe*, never *safe*—but also not the thing that haunted her when she closed her eyes. That Spike, the one who had fucked her the way she'd needed to be fucked, would never have attacked her either. If he were here, on the other side of the shower curtain, he'd leer and say something punch-worthy, but she

wouldn't have been in any danger with him. At least not the sort of danger she minded.

The Spike who had closed the bathroom door that night was someone she'd never seen before or since. And someone she trusted she would never see again. Someone who existed—she could never forget that he existed, and she never would—but not in the way other men who did such awful things existed. No, he existed the same way the darkest parts of her existed. The parts that had tried to consume her last year and nearly succeeded, the parts that Spike had encouraged her to put on him, so she had. In an alley outside a police station, seeing but not seeing, feeling but not feeling, full of so much and hating every second of it, raining down blows on the face of a man who was stupid enough to love her. Seeing herself doing it but not being able to stop until her knuckles ached and Spike had been unrecognizable. It lived inside her, this ugliness, and it lived inside him too. And it had come out that night.

Maybe she was naïve. She didn't know. The situations weren't exact mirrors of each other. She had a soul, and Spike was guilty of so many terrible things, but he'd also once told her that he didn't hurt her. He'd meant it. She'd known he meant it. She'd known she was his line in the sand, whatever that was worth.

She also remembered staggering away from Spike in the alley, horrified by what she'd done, the evidence of her own lapse of control. She remembered not wanting to think about it after and going to great lengths to make sure she didn't. The fact that she'd left him bleeding and helpless in an alley that would be bursting with sunshine in a few hours? She hadn't known how to handle that—had been too empty to try. But Spike was the opposite of empty and always had been. She'd relied on that during their affair, his fullness and how much of it there was, what he was willing to endure for her as he had proven time and again. If her reaction had been to pretend the worst thing she'd done to him hadn't happened, then what would his have been?

She wouldn't know for certain until the Chirago-sized demon was finally addressed head-on.

The water was running on the cool side by the time Buffy stepped out of the shower, but a refreshing sort of cool that soothed her overly warm skin and made the task of dragging air in and out of her lungs easier. The rapid knocking in her chest had subsided as well, enough that she felt more or less calm as she moved back into her bedroom and set about getting dressed. There were a few things she could do before the rest of the house woke up—like get Dawn's lunch ready and perhaps try a hand at doing something more adventurous than a bowl of cereal for breakfast. Compose what she intended to tell her sister and how, nerve-wracking as that felt. Review the day's intended itinerary and make a list of the clients she needed to call to avoid anyone showing up at the Magic Box. Then kill time until the sun rose and the hour was less ridiculously early so she could stop waiting and start doing.

Since Spike wasn't exactly known for doing what he was told, Buffy half-expected to come downstairs and find that he had not stayed in the basement as they had discussed. But the living room was dark when she peeked into it, the television off, and she decided not to examine the slight sinking feeling in her belly beyond

acknowledging it was there. Being up this early with this much on her mind was difficult to balance alone. Some company, even him, would have been nice.

Also, if he'd actually fallen asleep, she might have to stake him on principle.

Buffy busied herself by crossing off the easiest things on her mental to-do list, which didn't eat up hardly enough time. The names of today's clients and their phone numbers were waiting by the phone, Dawn's lunch prepared and ready to be grabbed on the way out, coffee on and breakfast...well, considered but abandoned, as a survey of the available ingredients was not all that inspiring. It occurred to her while she was searching for things with which to occupy herself that Legolas might have needed more patching up than could be accomplished on her own, so Buffy decided to add calling urgent care, the free clinic, and the hospital to her list. Anything that could help her track down the psycho. Unfortunately, that didn't take up too much time, either, and when she was done, the sun had yet to come up and there was no sign of anyone moving around upstairs.

Which left her nothing to do but consider, exactly, how she would approach the Spike subject with Dawn.

God, it was too early to be juggling this many mental grenades.

Buffy made her way over to the couch, cradling the first serving of what would undoubtedly be an entire café's worth of coffee by the time the day was over to her chest. If she couldn't have an IV, she'd settle for a café. Though the second she sank into the cushions, gravity started working funny, and she found herself slumping back so that drinking her coffee without scalding herself would take slayer skills she had yet to discover.

Sure, now I get sleepy.

But she couldn't be sleepy now. She was awake. She had coffee. She had a long-overdue conversation with her sister she needed to plan, a vampire downstairs, a probable vampire slayer running amok in her town, and so many questions her brain might be better off just exploding to save her the trouble. But these thoughts just furthered her body's decision to go on strike, and within seconds, she was staring up at the ceiling, same way she did upstairs as she waited for sleep to come, and feeling the edges of her mind began to go foggy at last. The sort of foggy that would pull her under and keep her there if she let it, and she couldn't let it. If she fell asleep now, she might not wake up in time to talk to Dawn or make her calls or do any of the things she needed to do.

She knew this, even as gravity—not content with just dragging her body down the couch—began its assault on her eyelids, the fog spreading, thick and pervasive. And she thought the thought that was the death knell of any battle with sleep—*just a few minutes*—before that fog blackened entirely and smothered her under its weight.



RATHER PREDICTABLY, Buffy overslept.

Also rather predictably, everyone in the house let her. She awoke to the rattling walls that announced Dawn's departure—her sister had never learned how to *not* slam

a door—and an apologetic Willow hovering over her, swearing herself blue in the face that she'd assumed Buffy had had an early morning.

"I heard the shower running at, like, five-thirty!" she protested. "I thought you were up and gone."

Buffy hadn't had time to spare for explanations, what with clients to call. Bonus complication of being a small business owner—things like blowing off work in the name of world savage weren't as easy as just not showing up. This time last year, if she'd had a crisis on her hands like a psycho slayer, she wouldn't have thought twice about her shift at the Doublemeat Palace. Work was the thing she did to make sure she had a place to sleep between apocalypses—it wasn't important, and it *definitely* wasn't important enough to be at the top of her list after a night like the one she'd just had.

In terms of slayerness, life would be so much easier if not giving a crap were an option, but it wasn't, so Buffy spent the first hour after waking up with a crick in her neck chasing down that day's clients to let them know all sessions had been canceled. By either sheer luck or divine intervention, no one yelled at her—even though the notice was the definition of *last minute* in some cases—and everyone assured her they understood. Score one for having a secret identity the whole town seemed to know about. If Buffy Summers had more important things to do, the situation must be serious.

"So, do I need to guess what's going on or are you gonna tell me?" Willow asked after the final name had been crossed off the list and the phone placed back on its cradle. She'd remained in the doorway that connected the hallway to the kitchen the entire time, her face fixed in a 'you better explain yourself, missy' expression.

Buffy flipped the sheet over as she let the tension out of her shoulders. Time-sensitive stuff was done. Now to start the search for a possibly seriously wounded slayer. "Some stuff happened last night."

"Yeah. That much I gather. Is it the Council?"

"I don't know. Maybe." She was on the phone again before Willow could follow up. "I'll tell you what I can but—hi, yes. I'm looking for someone who might have come in early this morning. Late teens, long super white hair, with a... Okay, thank you for your time. I appreciate it." Buffy sighed and hit the button on the cordless that ended the call. Then, without sparing her friend a glance, she dragged her finger down the list to the next number. "There's someone new in town who might be a slayer," she said.

"Whoa, what? Might be a slayer?"

"With a major ax to grind."

"But wouldn't that mean..." Buffy looked up just in time to see Willow frown before she continued. "Does that mean Faith is...?"

"We don't know. I talked to Giles last night—he was going to try to see what he could dig up. Call the prison for information." Her head was starting to pound anew. It took disturbingly little to get it to do that these days. "I'd thought I'd have heard if something had happened to her...but given we don't know if the Council wants *me* dead, I guess anything's possible."

She turned fully to Willow in time to catch the shadow that darkened her face. Willow didn't say anything, but her thoughts were so obvious they were practically being broadcast. She'd never been a Faith fan, even before Faith had gone all homicidal. Throw in her own recent experience of taking on the mantle of *villain* and Willow was practically a walking anti-Faith smear campaign.

Buffy wasn't sure she could stand to hear it, though. The past couple of weeks had been filled with the sort of speculation that made her stomach turn, which had surprised no one more than herself, given her own feelings on all things Faith. But listening to her friends, one of whom had tried to kill her sister, talk about how crazy the Council was to have not targeted Faith—if they were suddenly in the business of killing failed slayers—just pissed her off. Not in a way that made sense to her but in a way that was no less real. Maybe because she had been standing there when Faith had turned herself in and made her confession—maybe because, in the seconds immediately preceding that, Buffy had been convinced that Faith had done the easy thing and flown the coop, left her and Angel behind once again to clean up her mess. But she hadn't. In the end, Faith had given a statement and been carted off to prison without incident. No plea deal or attempts at a reduced sentence—just an admission that she'd done the crime, so the time was hers to do, too.

Also, several lifetimes' worth of change had occurred in the time between that moment and this one. The Buffy who had been so determined that Faith receive the punishment she so richly deserved hadn't known what it was like to live in a world her best friend had tried to end. She hadn't lost her mother, either, or realized that death was the ultimate gift, and that living with darkness meant that darkness sometimes exploded. Sometimes it made you attack the one person whose presence made life bearable. Faith had had all that rage, and maybe she'd been right to it. Buffy couldn't say. The only thing she knew for certain was that Willow was in no place to pass judgment on anyone.

"Faith would probably be easy to kill," Willow said at last. "Make it look like a prison fight or something."

"Yeah. I thought about that." She'd also thought she might have to bite the bullet and call Angel, if Giles couldn't find anything for certain. She knew her ex was Faith's one regular visitor and the only other person in a place to get information. "So, yeah, we need to learn if something happened to Faith. And if not...who the hell this girl is."

"You said she *might* be a slayer. Maybe she's not."

Buffy hesitated and looked at Willow again, almost expecting to see Spike behind her, ready to make his entrance. It was actually kinda miraculous that he hadn't already, given she'd only said to stay out of sight while Dawn was around. She would have thought he'd burst onto the main floor the second he sensed the coast was clear. It was certainly something he would have done before, perhaps especially for the pleasure of watching her flounder in trying to explain his presence.

But that *was* before. Not now. Spike *now* seemed a bit more subdued—definitely less presumptive than he had been, which likely meant he was waiting for her to bring up the rest of what had happened last night so his appearance wouldn't be such

a shock. The Spike who had boldly thrown himself into every aspect of her life without bothering to ask had been another casualty of what had happened in the bathroom, she supposed. A piece of the man he'd been that hadn't made it out. Perhaps it was buried with those pieces of herself that she had lost.

"It was Spike," Buffy said, trying to keep her tone casual. "Spike said she was a slayer. And I think he's a guy who would know."

"Spike?" Willow echoed somewhat shrilly. "Wait. Back up. Like all the way back."

And here it was. The first of what would certainly be many retellings of everything that had happened the night before. Buffy abandoned the pretense of making phone calls, turned to face her friend, inhaled, and started the story from the top. Doing her normal patrol rounds and feeling a tickle under her skin that she hadn't understood. The sudden knowledge that something was happening, and she needed to stop it. How she hadn't questioned where her legs told her to go, just followed the impulse, followed that tickle, until she'd burst into the crypt in time to see what would have been Spike's last seconds. Then the fight she had launched herself inside, the wound Spike had managed to levy against his assailant. How Spike had been knocked unconscious courtesy of the chip, and how Buffy had decided that he couldn't stay at the crypt like that. Not vulnerable and with a slayer—and even if *not* a slayer, a human who apparently had killing him at the top of her to-do list—running around unchecked. It didn't take long to get through it all, not even five minutes, but by the time Buffy had wrapped everything up, she felt like she had run a marathon.

Yeah, definitely a good call, canceling the day's sessions. There was no way she would have been worth her rate today.

"So he's...here." Willow frowned and glanced around as though also expecting to see Spike lurking over her shoulder. "You decided to bring him here."

"Well, like I told him, leaving him there kinda defeated the purpose of saving his life."

"Buffy... I won't pretend to understand what you and Spike—"

"It's not about that," she said quickly. "It's about not abandoning someone who can't fight back when he's clearly being targeted."

Willow nodded the nod of someone who didn't agree with her. It was a very specific sort of nod. "But he's not exactly helpless, is he? I mean, you're calling hospitals and everything. He was clearly able to hurt this girl, whoever she was, enough that you think she might have checked in somewhere."

"I think that was just lucky," Buffy replied. "It knocked him out cold—the chip did. And it wasn't normal when he woke up. We've seen him shake off the chip before, but this made him so sick he threw up blood. Which, believe me, as gross as it is to watch a vampire drink it, it's ten times grosser to watch it come back up."

"Okay, there's an image I'll never get out of my mind."

No kidding. "Just be glad you didn't catch the live show."

"But *here*, Buffy? After what happened—what he did? What about Dawn?"

The question threw her for a complete loop. She couldn't have been more surprised if Willow had poured the remains of the coffee she'd made that morning

over her head. There was no reason for this—it was a reasonable thing to ask, but it left her so taken aback that her brain decided to go on strike. The thoughts that were left buzzed just out of reach, nothing but vague shapes and vaguer words whose very existence made her chest tighten, her stomach churn, her blood pump both hotter and harder—the way it did when she was squaring off with an enemy. Then that second passed, and her brain kicked back on again, screaming what was wrong, and bringing with it a massive cerebral tsunami set on destroying whatever was in its path.

It wasn't the question itself, but the way Willow had framed it.

After what *Spike* had done?

"I know what he did," Buffy said, surprising herself with how measured and even her voice was considering the less-than-composed situation in her head. "I was there. I was the only one there, actually."

"I know. That's just—"

"Willow, I love you. You know I love you, I hope. You wouldn't be here if I didn't." She paused and blew out a long, steady breath. "But even though I love you, you are the last person in the world who gets to judge who I let into this house."

"Buffy—"

"Spike did something terrible. And he knows it was terrible. That's why he left town." Her heart was suddenly pounding against her ribcage, like the water had against her back that morning. When she'd been in the shower, in that space, hyper-aware of the fact that the person she had trusted least in the world was just a few floors below, perhaps thinking a combination of the same thoughts. But she didn't let herself linger there, couldn't. She'd found something in that shower, and she wasn't about to lose it now. "I'm not making excuses for him. I won't. Not after what he did. But I've thought about it a lot—god, I've made myself sick thinking about it. And I think what happened is he lost control."

Willow wrinkled her brow. "Uhh, yeah, I'd say he lost control in a big way."

"No, but think about that. He *lost control*. He didn't... He didn't come in there with the intention of doing it. He started talking. That's all he wanted. He wanted to talk, and he wanted to convince me that I felt something for him, and in trying to prove that I did, he lost control." Buffy realized, belatedly, that she'd started to shake all over, and that she couldn't stop. It was one thing to live with those words in her head, especially since she had only just gotten to a place where she didn't resent them or fear their existence. Hearing them aloud, hearing herself say them, was a sort of surreal she associated with dreams. Dreams that often became nightmares.

And god, she didn't want to talk about this—any of it. But she had to. Willow looked unimpressed and unconvinced when she had no right to be either. Not about this.

"I could be wrong," Buffy went on, not quite through gritted teeth but almost. "If I am, though, that doesn't change the fact that what Spike did, he did to *me*. Not to Dawn. Not to anyone else. Not to the world. These are things I can say about him, but I can't say about you. There's the difference."

That did it. The look that was half-pity, half-condescension was knocked clean off

her friend's face, replaced with a visceral combination of pain and shock. And, as expected as it was resented, Buffy was immediately slammed with regret. She had to bite her tongue—*literally* bite her tongue—to keep herself from apologizing or trying to take it back. The urge was immediate, something Walsh might have called Pavlovian, with pressure that swelled almost to bursting.

But no. *No*. There would be no more taking back truths just because they were uncomfortable. She'd heard somewhere that the definition of insanity was doing the same thing over and over while expecting a different result. If that was true, well, Buffy was done being insane. Done with a capital D. Rolling over and handing out *forgive and forgets* was a big part of what had gotten them where they were.

She forced herself to stand there and watch as Willow blinked eyes that were filling rapidly with tears, as the silence spread, and not give in.

"I... I..." Willow worked her throat. "Oh."

"What happened happened, and we have to deal with it," Buffy muttered. Neither a retraction nor an apology, which, go her. "And dealing with it means...you know, actually dealing, whether it's you or him."

"Oh."

"The thing with him is, I know it wasn't something he meant to do. I also know it's something that will never happen again. I don't know how I know it, but I do. Maybe it's a slayer thing or...hell, maybe I'm fooling myself, but I believe it."

"And you don't know that about me," Willow said softly.

She'd come this far. No backing out now. "No. I want to, though."

"Even though he's lacking in the soul department and everything."

"I'm not... Look, I'm not saying... Spike *doesn't* have a soul. But you did. And look what happened."

There was another beat, the air filled with another truth that didn't need to be said because it was being screamed. All the things Buffy had spent the last few months trying hard not to think were suddenly rushing at her, bright and flashy. The look on Spike's face as he'd staggered away from her, his hand over his mouth, tears scalding down his cheeks. Willow conjuring a fireball in her hand, talking casually about how she could kill Jonathan and Andrew, plus anyone who was with them, anytime she liked, and that Buffy should run run run if she didn't want to be digging new graves. The two were not the same.

Spike might not have a soul, but he had a conscience. Granted, that conscience probably began and ended with Buffy, but it was still there. She'd watched it take hold and steer him away. That was part of the reason she hadn't had to think too hard before agreeing to let him be the place Dawn sought refuge. Also why she'd made it her job to swing by his crypt every night on patrol in the months spanning his absence. Some part of her had missed him. Maybe a big part. And even if that was wrong, even if *she* was wrong for feeling it, that didn't make the feeling itself any less real.

"So, I'm worse than a soulless vampire," Willow said at last before barking out a hard, pained laugh, her voice breaking. "I guess I knew that. I just hadn't thought about it in those terms."

"It's not about *worse*. The situations were completely different."

"Yeah. You just said he didn't mean to do what he did. And I did. I really, really did." She cleared her throat, sniffed, and wiped at her eyes. "You're right," she said, her voice wobbly. "I'm guessing you haven't told Dawn yet."

The urge to jump in with more platitudes that did more harm than good rose again. It was easier to fight this time. "No. I was going to this morning before school."

"It's probably better that you didn't." When Buffy frowned at her, her friend made a rolling gesture with her hand and sighed. "Think about it. How much time were you going to have to sit Dawn down and explain Spike being here in a way that would make her understand? Like... I know I was gone over the summer and all, but you haven't been able to mention Spike around her at all without her making some kind of comment. When she found out that he was coming over that one night—you know, to talk to Giles and all of us about what the Council had told him? I didn't want to mention it to you, but I saw her just before she left, and she was... Her eyes were all puffy."

Buffy didn't realize she'd been holding her breath until her chest gave a little twinge of complaint. These weren't exactly revelations, rather things she'd suspected but hadn't been brave enough to confront head-on. That didn't make hearing them any easier. "I didn't know."

"I don't think she wants you to know," Willow went on, spilling more obvious observations that Buffy had been trying to ignore. And with a little relish, though she would undoubtedly deny it, as though repaying her for the distinction she'd just drawn. "He was like her best friend before. While you were, you know, dead? We asked him to watch her so much over the summer. He was the one who convinced her to eat again. For like a week after Glory, she decided that she wasn't a person, and that Keys didn't eat so she wouldn't. She ignored everyone except Spike. I'm still not sure how he did it, but he took her out somewhere and brought her back with dinner." Willow lowered her eyes and nodded at the island. "He stood there and watched her eat. I mean, we all did. Tara and the rest, we all kinda bunched together in the door and just watched. He stayed until she was done and then just walked out. Like I said, I have no idea what he did or what he told her. All I know is getting her to eat wasn't a thing after that."

The twinge in Buffy's chest matured into an outright pain. *That* she hadn't known.

"So," Willow said, "telling her right before school... I dunno, it just seems like a bad idea. I think it should be when she has time—when you both do."

Much as she hated to admit it, this conclusion made sense. So much sense Buffy couldn't help but feel both stupid and selfish for having come up with the original plan in the first place. The time constraint, whether she'd admitted it or not, had been part of the point of having the talk first thing in the morning. Not only would it have gotten the most unpleasant part of her day out of the way, it would also have been equipped with a nice, tidy reason to cut the conversation off at its knees so she didn't have to deal with the emotional fallout. She could just drop the bomb on

Dawn and then send her off to process and come to terms, and that wasn't fair to either of them.

Turned out this whole *honesty* thing was harder than it looked.

"Well, anyway." Willow started to back out of the room. "I, umm, I better go get ready. Xander mentioned something about an office job, and I thought I might run down there and apply."

"An office job?"

"You know—answering phones, sending out invoices, scheduling projects... It all sounds boring but kinda like homework, and I'm good at homework." She flashed a weak smile that didn't reach her eyes and plainly conveyed that she was still smarting. "Let me know if I can help with the slayer thing. Or the Spike thing. Though it sounds like you've got that under control."

There was no bite in what she said, but there didn't need to be to hear the lingering hurt. Buffy decided the best reply was no reply, so she turned her attention back to the phone and the few remaining numbers she had to call, hoping it would keep her occupied until her friend left the house. She didn't think she had the fortitude to balance the remorse of two formerly evil loved ones—or whatever it was Spike had been. And like it or not, she'd made her choice last night.

In many ways, being around Spike was less confusing than being around Willow. Even now, when it had been more than two weeks of trying to acclimate to her new normal, which included having her friend in the house, and finding a routine that had helped them settle back into the people they had once been, or a close approximation. None of that made the threat of a relapse where Willow was concerned any less potent. It hung in the air when they spoke, created things like safe places and conversations, established rules for where they could go and what they could do. And it was always there, the knowledge of what could happen with the slightest nudge. That nothing but her friend's tenuous willpower was standing between her and the brink of another apocalypse. That just wasn't the way it was with Spike.

Because nothing in her life could ever be normal. Not her friendships or her family, and certainly not her lovers. She'd learned that the hard way.

Buffy blew out a breath and threw a glance toward the hall. After she'd crossed off calling the clinics and the prison, she should check in with Spike. He'd probably heard every word, and he probably wouldn't ask what she'd meant by any of it, but she should check in all the same.

This Spike didn't ask. He just accepted.

Only for the first time she realized she wished he would ask. Continuing to not ask would probably drive her crazier than she felt.

Which, these days, was saying a lot.



SHE DIDN'T GET AROUND to checking in on Spike, though. He beat her to the punch.

"Thought it might be safe to come out now," he said as he poked into the kitchen about thirty seconds after the front door shut behind Willow, who had probably set a

new world record in the sport of getting dressed and getting *out*. She'd also left without announcing her departure or bothering with a goodbye, leaving Buffy to wonder, as she'd made her final calls, if Willow's hurt feelings hadn't come with a side of *pissed off*, and just what the hell that meant if it were true. Yay her. Another potential crisis to defuse.

"Safe as it can be for a vampire in a brightly lit home," Buffy said in a falsely cheery voice that nearly made her wince. "I'm surprised you waited as long as you did."

"Your house, your rules, love. Just thought it was better to follow 'em."

Well, that was annoying. Spike was many things, but none of those things were considerate and rule-following. Buffy looked at him for a long moment before sucking in her cheeks and glancing down at the call list. She'd just scratched a line through the last number—the prison hadn't been able to give her any information on Faith, and they'd talked themselves in circles trying to explain why that was—and had been contemplating calling Angel. Trying not to think about how weird that would be, being on the phone with him while Spike was downstairs. Knowing that if she meant to call him, she'd better do it fast. Get it over with as quickly as possible. Lord knew she didn't need any more mind-fuckery to contend with, and Angel always seemed to bring his share, intentionally or not.

It just figured that Spike would decide to finally show his face after she'd finally decided he wouldn't without prompting.

The most confusing vampire in her life propped his shoulder against the kitchen doorway, somehow managing to seem right at home and spectacularly out of place. "Don't suppose you've heard anything," he said, nodding to the phone.

"You would know, wouldn't you?"

Spike arched an eyebrow.

The irritation that had been simmering was getting dangerously close to the boiling point. "Are we really going to pretend you didn't hear everything this morning?" she asked. "I am so tired of everyone pretending."

"Well, all right then," he said, his tone so measured and even she wanted to punch him just to see if that would get him to act more like himself. "Not like I wanted to listen in, is it? Can't exactly turn my hearin' off when it's more convenient."

"Then just say you heard everything and don't beat around the bush."

"What's got your knickers in a twist, Slayer?"

"And here I'd think that'd be obvious."

Spike stared at her, maddeningly unreadable. The man who had once been a walking innuendo closed for business. Buffy knew her current mood wasn't on him, rather the culmination of a lot of things, but he'd always been her lightning rod, and it seemed some old habits were impossible to break. She'd already been running on next to no sleep before the conversation with Willow had raised every single one of her hackles—whatever hackles were—and as usual, Spike knew when to show his face so he could take the brunt of it. Only he wasn't acting the way she wanted him to, the way she *needed* him to, and that was something more than frustrating. It was

damn inexplicable, and she was ready for some things to be explicated all over the place.

But he wasn't in the mood to share. Or take cheap shots or point it out when she said something even slightly suggestive, for he just shook his head and pushed himself upright. "Right. Well, easy enough way to fix that, isn't there?"

"Where are you going?"

"And here I'd think that'd be obvious," he fired back in perfect imitation. "Not gonna stay where I'm not wanted, and it's not like this arrangement was my idea in the first place. If it's all the same to you, I'll just—"

"No," she said quickly, renewed panic swelling without warning.

"No?"

"You're staying here. We've already been over this."

"Yeah, and what you said was I'd stay until you pieced together where else you could shove me," Spike retorted. There was an edge to his voice now, barely discernible but no less there. At least she wasn't the only one agitated. "Plan was to do that today."

"Well, I thought about it and there is nowhere else. You'll just have to stay here."

"Oh, will I?"

"Spike—"

"Obviously not gonna be a popular boarder. And it seems you have your hands full with Red. Don't need me crowdin' the place."

She opened her mouth to retort—hell, to fight—but something inside of her seized hold of the reins and gave a tremendous yank. The effect was immediate, like being dunked head-first into icy water, forcing her out of the place she'd slid inside and back to the less straightforward reality that had been built on a series of bad decisions. Decisions that had started, more often than not, just like this.

She didn't do that anymore. Not with Spike or anyone. She'd promised herself she'd be better.

"Spike," Buffy said, calmer and in control, "this...whoever this is, she was at your crypt last night because she meant to kill you. There's too much we don't know, and I don't know how long it's going to take to find out. But I don't want you dead. You can't protect yourself around her so...so you'll have to stay here until we figure something else out."

The fight drained out of him as she spoke—she watched it go. Watched the tense lines of his face relax, watched his shoulders fall slack. All of him come back just as she had, as though he were remembering, too. These people they were now that they hadn't been the last time they'd known each other.

"You don't need to worry about me," he said at length. "Buffy, I'm the bloody last—"

"I've never been good at being told what to do or who to care about."

The corner of his mouth twitched but he didn't grin. "Know that better than most."

"Then stay. I'm not saying it's gonna be comfy cozy here or anything, because it's not." She paused, then figured there was no point dancing around it. He'd heard

everything anyway. "Dawn's going to be hard. She was...really hurt by everything. But she'll deal. I know she will."

He dropped his gaze to the floor, going, if possible, paler. "I—"

"I really don't want to have to worry about you on top of everything else. Please don't fight me on this."

There was nothing for a long moment, just Spike staring at his feet and Buffy staring at Spike in the loud silence. It was such a strange place to occupy, especially with him—the man she'd sought out because he helped her find the quiet in a world that never stopped screaming. Only at some point, they had started screaming together, and she hadn't noticed until it was too late.

And though she knew what he would say, she found herself holding her breath anyway. Nothing about him was clear to her anymore. Which was fair. Nothing about herself was, either.

Finally, he cleared his throat and lifted his gaze to hers. "Right then. Whatever you want, Slayer. Doesn't make any bloody sense to me but—"

"I know. Me neither."

"Least there we agree." His mouth did that little spastic motion again, still without maturing into a smile. "That's somethin', right?"

Considering the massive *everything* that was between them, Buffy figured it was more than something. "Right now, the plan is to talk to Dawn after school's over, likely at the studio. I'll get some blood while I'm out, too."

He nodded but didn't reply, and she didn't push it. That seemed to be the definition of their relationship these days.

"I'm going to make a few more calls." Two more. Giles would have reached out by now if he had anything to tell her, but she'd call him if it spared her having to talk to Angel while Spike was within earshot.

Spike stepped back into the hallway. "Want me downstairs again, or is it safe to watch a bit of telly?"

"Only person in danger of coming over before three would be Willow or Xander. Watch away." Maybe he wouldn't hear her conversations if the television was on. And she was upstairs. Another floor between them. At the very least, his focus would at least be split.

He nodded again, held her gaze a moment longer, then turned and started down the hall. And she didn't know what made her say it, only that it felt like she should say something, because there was so much they weren't talking about and so much they never had. Neither was sustainable in the long run, especially with him staying here, and even more especially after the panic she'd experienced that morning in the shower, but she didn't know how to broach the big subjects. She had a feeling she wouldn't know until the moment was upon her. In the meantime, she could wet her feet with other things they had never talked about. Everyone had to start somewhere.

"Willow said you got Dawn eating again after I died," she blurted, tumbling into the hall after him.

Spike went still, waiting.

“Thank you. If no one said that. Thank you for what you did then. I know it was a lot.”

One beat. Two. Then he relaxed his shoulders and sighed. “Not a lot. Not anything, really. Just the only way I had left to love you after.” He turned just enough that she saw caught the blue of his eyes, but only for a flicker, and then he was facing forward again, and walking away from her.

SHE'S NOT A GIRL WHO MISSES MUCH

"OH GOD, WHAT'S WRONG?"

Buffy pushed herself off the hood of the SUV, hoping she looked calmer than she felt. Ever since she'd left the house—much earlier than needed, as waiting had been driving her a special kind of crazy—she'd been bursting with the sort of nervous energy she usually counted on patrol to exorcise. Only the sun was still out, and patrol was hours away, and the thing that needed slaying was...well, not a thing at all, but rather open and honest conversation. Which, yes, was entirely out of her wheelhouse.

But she couldn't take any more chances, especially not with Spike actually staying at the house for the foreseeable future. The last thing she needed was Dawn happening across him unprepared and having the sort of meltdown that would make Buffy reflect upon the epic tantrums of old with sepia-colored nostalgia. Really, having this talk anywhere near Spike had been a bad idea from the start, one she blamed on a combination of being physically exhausted on top of overwhelmed and her own lousy track record with open communication. So, with more than an hour to spare and no desire to risk that Dawn had heard her session at the studio had been canceled—some of her friends did have their own cell phones, after all—Buffy had slid behind the wheel of her mother's SUV (she still couldn't quite think of it as hers) and made her way to the school. Being the first parent there had given her primo parking real estate, and she'd chosen a spot right in front of the front doors where the SUV couldn't be missed. There she'd whiled away a few minutes trying out her talent as an amateur steering wheel drummer before concluding that staying cooped up in the vehicle for however long would drive her insane. Buffy was not the sort of person who easily paired *nervous* and *still*. And, she'd reasoned, being outside the vehicle would make the possibility of Dawn missing her next to nil.

And here she was, staring into her sister's wide gaze with no idea where to begin, and no one to blame for that but herself. She'd had all day to come up with what she wanted to say. Had, in fact, considered and vetoed a thousand conversation starters before finally giving up and hoping that something brilliant would occur to her once she was forced to deal with it head-on rather than stall for time.

That hadn't worked, and Dawn was looking at her with an apocalyptic sort of worry.

God, if only the world *were* actually ending. At least she'd know how to handle that.

"Nothing's wrong," Buffy said in an everything's-wrong voice. She cleared her throat. "And what kind of greeting is that, anyway?"

Dawn tightened the hand she had curled around one of her backpack straps, unmoved. "No, seriously," she said. "You're picking me up. You never pick me up. You never even drive that thing if you don't have a reason."

That much was true, and not only because it was the Mom-mobile. "I just... There's something we need to talk about."

"If this is your way of making me worry less, you're really bad at it," Dawn shot back. "Who's dead?"

"No one's dead."

"Okay, who's evil?"

"No one's evil. Or at least, not more evil than usual."

"Is it the Council? Did we find out—"

"No. It's... I need to talk to you about Spike."

The second the words were out, she wished she could swallow them back. Saying Spike's name was a guaranteed way to get Dawn to close down...which she did. Mouth a thin line. Eyes no longer wide. Fear gone, replaced with stony antipathy. "Did you finally stake him?" she asked in a voice that only vaguely resembled her own.

Buffy released a low breath, stepping forward. "You don't want him staked."

"I so do. I really, really do."

"No, you don't. And that's okay."

Dawn gave a frantic shake of her head but wasn't fast enough for Buffy to miss the sudden wobble of her lower lip or the shine of fresh tears in her eyes. And that was all it took for her own resistance to topple over, the nerves that had kept her awake all night exploding into a frenzy. This was exactly what she had worried about and exactly what she'd known was coming, and it was no one's fault but her own. She and Dawn had worked so hard since the spring to build a relationship based on mutual trust, on being honest with each other and themselves, and for the most part they'd done a good job. But Spike had been a verboten subject—for Dawn because she was so upset and angry and for Buffy because she'd been vacillating among fury and hurt and confusion and regret and the insanity that was missing him in spite of everything he'd done and hating herself for all and none of the above. The not talking, the ignoring, the hoping that things would just get better if she gave them

enough time, had been the coward's way out. Not fair to either of them in the end, and especially not to Dawn.

"Come on," Buffy said, nodding at the SUV. "Let's go get some ice cream."

"Is that straight out of the cliché handbook?" Dawn replied with that stinging teenage defiance. "I-I thought we had a session today. At the studio."

"I canceled today's sessions."

"Oh, but I shouldn't worry?"

"Not about Spike."

"I'm *not* worried about Spike," she said, not raising her head as though daring anyone to contradict her. "I don't waste my time worrying about vampire assholes who try to rape my sister."

The comment was loud enough to carry, for a few passing teens to shoot over curious glances. Buffy willed herself not to respond in kind, rather pressed her lips together and stepped close enough to her sister to put a hand on her shoulder. "Come on. We're getting ice cream."

"I don't want to hear it, whatever it is."

"Well, as the sister in question, I'm telling you that you don't have a choice," she said, a bit firmer. "If you're going to insist on remaining this upset with him, you should at least know the full story."

At that, the defiance in Dawn's expression cracked—just a bit, but a bit was enough. She snapped her mouth shut, glanced around at the onlooking bystanders, and nodded once. "Whatever," she said, and thundered past Buffy to climb into the passenger seat without further protest.

It was just one hurdle, but as the first, it felt like the most significant.

Dawn said nothing as Buffy slid behind the wheel and started the engine. A further nothing as they pulled away from the curb. She didn't react at all to Buffy's muttered curses—which included some choice words she had been trying to keep out of her vocabulary while around her sister, futile as it was—and barely grunted in acknowledgment when the SUV pulled into a parking space at Scoops Ahoy a few minutes later.

It wasn't often Dawn played the quiet game, but when she did, she played for keeps. Just as well. Gave Buffy another moment to consider what she wanted to say. Not that her brain was any more in a mood to cooperate than it had been in the hours leading up to the school's dismissal, but she'd take what she could get. So, for a long moment after parking, she sat perfectly still, studying the colorful swirls that made up the rendering of the pink ice cream cone plastered across the glass panes of the parlor's entrance. Mom had only brought them here a time or two, but those memories were the type that stuck. It had been the best way to get to know a new town, taking their ice cream for a spin. The highlight of moving day. Inside, crammed into one of the booths, they had talked wistfully about how this would become their place. Where they would go to decompress when the going got tough. A new tradition for their new lives—Mom doing everything she could to put a positive spin on what had been a move Buffy had forced her into by being herself.

She remembered thinking about the parlor the day Mom had told her about the

shadow on her brain scan. How they should have gone for ice cream then. Or after her surgery. The last time she could remember being here as a family had been more than a year before everything had started falling apart. Victory after blowing the mayor into snake bits, after graduating high school, and wallowing deep in the pain that had been watching Angel walk away. Believing then, naively, that nothing could ever hurt as much as that had.

That version of herself, the last one who had been here with Dawn, felt far enough away she might as well be on another planet. How much she'd thought she'd been through then and god, how wrong she'd been. But also not wrong, because it *had* been a lot. It had been more than most people experienced in a lifetime. And it just kept coming.

Buffy sighed the sort of sigh that started from deep in her gut, consulted the swirling mass of thoughts and decided, fuck it. She had to start somewhere. That *where* might as well be herself. "I was thinking this morning about Katrina," she said. "Warren's girlfriend. The one he killed. The one he tried to make me think I'd killed. Did you ever meet her?"

The silence that followed was not the normal silence—it was charged with confusion thick enough to choke on. "Katrina?" Dawn asked baldly. "I thought the point was to talk about Spike."

"Yeah. We're here to talk about Spike."

"So...what does that have to do with Katrina?"

"You remember that I was going to turn myself in, don't you?"

Even though she wasn't looking at her directly, Buffy didn't miss the way Dawn's eyes narrowed into a glare. "Kinda hard to forget that," her sister said dryly. "You were abandoning me."

"I wasn't. That's never what that was."

"I know. But that's what it felt like."

She let the comment sit, decided not to argue against it. After everything she'd been living with these last few months, she was in no place to be defensive about anyone else's feelings. Even if they weren't fair or didn't make sense. "Well, Spike tried to stop me," she said. "He caught me in the alley outside of the police station. Told me it was an accident, that I'd saved enough lives to not give myself a hard time about someone I'd accidentally killed."

Dawn waited, the weight of her glare almost crippling. But she didn't speak.

"I don't... I don't like to think about this," Buffy forced herself to say a moment later. "I was in such an awful place, and he didn't understand. He couldn't. But he was trying to protect me. It was a selfish kind of protection, but...as much as a vampire's heart can be in the right place, I think his was. Just for me, though. Not for her."

"Buffy, what does this—"

"Spike knew better than anyone what I was going through after I came back. He wasn't... He tried to play it to his advantage, and I let him a lot of the time, even though I knew it was wrong." She paused and released a long, rattling sigh. "I thought I was empty, but I wasn't. I was full of so much that was just...bad. He knew that, too, and I think he saw that when Katrina died. That it was all going to boil out

of me. And maybe if I got it out, I wouldn't turn myself in. So he told me to take it out on him."

There was a change in the atmosphere of the SUV—not a dramatic change, but one Buffy had been waiting for. Dawn's attitude had shifted from teenage derision to something almost forcibly aloof. The way she got when she wanted to make like she wasn't interested or wasn't listening, when it was clear she was hanging onto every word. Something told Buffy not to push, though, and she was right. When the silence had gone on just a smidge too long, her sister cleared her throat and conceded the fight. "Take what out on him?"

"Everything," Buffy replied, doing her best to keep her tone level. "So I did it. I hit him. And hit him. And kept hitting him. I lost control and nearly beat him to dust, and he just let me. You remember my birthday, how banged up he was?"

Dawn inhaled but didn't speak. She didn't need to.

"I made what Glory did to him look like... I dunno. Like I said, I lost control. And I don't know how I got it back—it just was kinda there. It was like I could finally see what I was doing, and it freaked me out. Spike and I would fight, yeah, but I'd never just let loose on him before. I'd never done that to *anyone* who wasn't fighting me back." She blinked, a familiar, awful pressure invading her sinuses. She tried to ignore it. "And I left him there anyway. I went into the police station to turn myself in, and the only reason I didn't is I heard Katrina's name and connected the dots to Warren."

Another beat. Buffy would have sworn she could hear her sister's thoughts, she was thinking so loud. Asking questions—why was she telling her this? How was it relevant? How could she have done such a thing to someone who loved her so much?—that she doubted would ever be voiced. Or maybe that was just her own guilty conscience chirping up, nearly a year too late.

But she couldn't let her mind take her down that path. Not now. So she cleared her throat and forced herself to refocus. Say the thing she meant to say.

"I don't know what all Xander told you about what happened with me and Spike, and I probably don't want to. And I should've talked to you about this before. I know how important he was to you. It was just easier to not think about it."

"Buffy—"

"First things first—what happened is... I don't think it's how these things happen most of the time." Insofar as sexual assaults went, what had happened with Spike certainly hadn't compared to her one and only other experience, but Dawn didn't need to know about that, either. "That's one of the reasons it's been hard for me to think about. I feel like I *should* feel angry, and sometimes I do. I sometimes feel sad or hurt or frustrated, and sometimes I miss him, which doesn't make sense and just confuses me more. Spike wanted to talk. It was after we'd caught him with Anya, and he knew that had hurt me. He'd actually come to apologize for that. And to try to convince me that my being hurt meant I was in love with him after all."

The comment made the air feel thin. Dawn swallowed audibly. "Were you?"

Funny how she could know a question was coming yet still be caught off guard by it. Buffy filled her lungs with stale car air, trying to ignore the way her heart was

suddenly pounding like she had just completed a marathon. While most of the dangerous places in her mind were roped off with yellow tape, she'd sometimes find her way across the border and into not-safe territory anyway. The love question was different—one she'd boxed up and stuffed into some mental room with a locked door and a thrown-away key. It had haunted her once, made her question everything she thought she knew about herself as well as her own sanity. Loving Spike just hadn't been an option. He wasn't what she wanted to want. He didn't have a soul. He represented everything she was against. Yet he'd kept drawing her and kept drawing her and kept drawing her, and the peace she'd found with him, temporary though it was, had kept her alive when she'd wanted to be dead. She hadn't liked herself, and he'd loved her, and she'd hated him for loving her, for making it sound easy when loving herself had been impossible.

To Buffy, love felt a certain way—or made *her* feel a certain way. A measurable way. And Spike *had* made her feel some of those things she'd felt once with Angel. Not the same, by any means, and god knows she'd been burned thoroughly enough not to surrender to the sensation, but it had been real enough to scare the crap out of her. She'd told him she couldn't trust him enough to love him, and that was perfectly true. She hadn't trusted Angel, but she'd loved him anyway with a child's naiveté, and that was a mistake she would never repeat. After all, she wasn't a child anymore, and hadn't been for a long time.

"I had feelings for him," she said, her tone somehow even compared to the absolute riot going on just beneath her skin, "and I told him I did, but that didn't mean anything. And he wanted... He just wanted. I was the most open with him whenever we were...together. Like *that*. You know?"

"No, I don't," Dawn said in an annoyingly impossible-to-read deadpan. It seemed ridiculous that she *wouldn't* know what Buffy was talking about, but her face gave nothing away. Blank. Impassive.

So Buffy rolled her hand, her cheeks heating up. There were certain things she'd never planned to share with anyone, especially Dawn, and her sexual escapades with the local undead was one of them. But unfortunately, to tell this story faithfully, she couldn't skimp the awkward bits. "You know. Like...*together*. Alone. In his crypt." Still nothing. "Are you really gonna make me say it?"

For a second, Dawn just stared at her indifferently, but then her mouth began to twitch, and her eyes crinkled at the corners, and she was the most *rotten* little sister anyone could have asked for. "Say what?" she replied. "That you were screwing like bunnies?"

"You are the worst."

"If you can't say it, Buffy, you shouldn't be doing it."

Buffy thunked her head back against the headrest hard enough to hurt. "The monks could've made you nice. Instead, they made you...this."

"Whatever. You love me."

"Yeah, but you make it hard sometimes." Though the fact that Dawn was feeling relaxed enough to tease her was a good sign, and one Buffy wouldn't take for granted. Even if she wished she really didn't have to steer them back to what they had been

talking about. She'd come this far, though, and she doubted it would be easy to find her way here again if she abandoned the conversation now. Thus, with another deep breath, she firmed her shoulders and turned her attention ahead again. Back to that swirling pink ice cream cone. "Well... I think he thought if we were *like that* again, he could get me to say I loved him. So he tried."

"He thought raping you was going to make you tell him you loved him," Dawn said bluntly, harshly, her smile gone. "And you thought telling me this would make it—"

"No, I'm not telling it right." Mostly because she'd never dreamed of telling anyone this at all. "The first time Spike and I...were together like that, it started with a fight. He'd found out his chip didn't work on me. He said things, I said things, we nearly pummeled each other to death. And then suddenly we were...*not* pummeling each other to death."

"Oh, gross."

Not the adjective Buffy would have chosen but she decided not to pursue the matter. At least the venom had dropped from Dawn's voice again. "It was like that a lot. Vampires are into that kinda stuff, I guess." Though Angel never had been, at least that she'd known. And that was another thing she wasn't going to say. "With us, me and Spike, it was like that a lot. Him pushing, me saying no, and him knowing I didn't mean no, even if I wanted to mean it. So, this time I meant it, and he...just didn't see it."

She stopped talking, which might not have been the wisest thing but felt very necessary. Like the words needed a chance to stand alone against the quiet, to exist and resonate with the hope they'd be absorbed and understood the way they needed to be understood. That Dawn didn't seize the chance to leap in and start filling the silence was a good sign, Buffy thought. Or hoped. Really hoped for whatever had to happen next.

"I think it was like what happened with me, when I lost control and just whaled on him," she said at last. "He was feeling a lot, too. I'd broken up with him, and I knew he was hurting. A lot. And then he thought... He was feeling so much it just took over. He started pushing like he did when we were together, only we weren't together anymore. It was like he was somewhere else, and I couldn't reach him." Buffy tried to work a throat that had gone tight. The effort was near painful. "When it was over, and I'd kicked him off me... I saw the way he looked, Dawn. It was like he'd just come back, and he saw what he'd done, and it... He was horrified. Then he started crying and shaking and just took off. And I didn't see him again until a couple of weeks ago."

Again, she stopped, sensing she needed to—sensing Dawn needed her to—and when she stole a glance at her sister, she saw she was right. Dawn's face had fallen once more, but unlike before, what was in her eyes wasn't indifference. It was something heavier and worse, something closer to actual devastation than she had been since the world hadn't ended. Enough to make Buffy wonder, only for a second, if it would have been wiser just to keep her mouth shut, let Dawn go on thinking the worst about Spike. But she knew that wasn't right, hard as it was to face. If Spike had

been Dawn's best friend, and she was sure he had, then she deserved to know the truth. The full, difficult, unpleasant truth. Even if it didn't change anything. Even if it changed everything.

"I'm not saying that what he did wasn't wrong," Buffy went on, a scratchy quality to her voice now. "It was way wrong. And he knew it. That's why he left when he did—he knew what he'd done. But I... I don't think he meant to do it. I think he lost control like I did. He didn't realize it until it was too late." She glanced to her lap, her hands resting there. Hands that had once been coiled into fists that had thrashed Spike until he was bruised and misshapen. "It's not an excuse. It should never have happened. But he told me once he didn't hurt me. He said it because he believed it and I believed it too. I think seeing that he could, that he had, wigged him out. I think it broke him. And that's why I don't hate him. I don't think it's fair to hate someone who lost control the same way I did. What he did to me was terrible...but it's the one terrible thing Spike's ever done that he didn't *mean* to do. Which, considering soulless vampire here, is pretty massive."

She didn't look up, kept her gaze instead on her hands. Remembering again how it felt when she'd pounded her fists into Spike's cheeks. Watched his head rock back against the pavement, only to lift back up so his eyes could find hers. Yellow and open and trusting and hers, just like the rest of him. He'd trusted her with everything he had, and she'd repaid him like that.

He hadn't been right, then. But she hadn't been either. And he was the one who had suffered for it.

Buffy cleared her throat, forcing that thought back into the recesses of her mind. She couldn't think that now. "Xander found me sitting in the bathroom. There were bruises on my legs and he'd found Spike's coat, so he just...guessed what had happened. And I didn't tell him. I didn't tell him any of this until... I think it was the day Willow came home. I didn't want to think about it and while Spike was AWOL, it was easier to just let you guys think what you wanted. But now he's here and—"

"I haven't been to see him because I was afraid of what I would do," Dawn said, speaking so softly it would have been easy to not hear her, but Buffy heard loud and clear. Heard more than her voice, too. Heard the pain inside of it. The same Dawn had been trying like hell to suppress for the last few months. But there was no reason to fight now—it was all there, and all determined to come out. "I thought about it. Sometime after school, just showing up with a stake and...and I thought I might kill him if I saw him. And I didn't want to kill him. But then I'd feel bad about not wanting him dead for what happened to you—"

"Dawn, I'm sor—"

"I've pictured it so many times. What he did to you. I've tried to. I know he's... I know he's *evil* but he was never like that with me."

"I know."

"I didn't want to kill him, but..." A sob burst off her lips, then another, and Dawn folded in on herself, suddenly a little girl all over again, and Buffy undid her seatbelt and leaned over the console, or tried to. She was short but her sister was tall and somehow between the two of them, they made up the difference. Dawn's head on her

shoulder, Dawn's arms looped around her neck, Dawn's entire body shaking with the weight of her sobs, Buffy rubbing her back and trying to make comforting noises and not knowing if she was actually helping or not but also not knowing what else to do. Wondering if all of this came down to her being selfish, her refusal to talk about it with anyone, never mind herself, and if Dawn could ever forgive her if that were the case.

"I don't know if I can forgive him," Dawn sputtered into her shoulder. "I don't know, Buffy. Is that what you want?"

"You don't have to do anything."

"But you wouldn't have... I know you. You wouldn't have told me this if you didn't want me to not hate him."

Buffy tugged her closer, buried her face in the thick mane of her sister's hair. Inhaled fragrances that reminded her of days spent shuffling from class to class, sneaking away to the library and gossiping about Angel over lunch with Willow. Of times that had been simpler yet still so complicated even thinking about them made it hard to breathe.

"I won't tell you what to do, Dawnie," she promised. "But if you're going to hate him, I just want you to do it for what he actually did. Not for what Xander told you he did." She pulled back to give them both some space, trying to persuade her lips to smile even when everything else felt like it was crumbling. "It took me a long time to get it, but I think I do now."

"Get what?"

"That Spike's type of evil is different from other vampires." She hesitated, not sure she trusted herself to find the right words for what she needed to say. These conclusions weren't anything she'd consciously explored before, rather the result of fragments of feeling and kernels of thought that had only ever independently existed. Until now. "He's tried to be something else. He failed and will probably fail a lot more, but he's still trying. That's why he came back, I think. To try."

"And you don't hate him for what he did."

"No."

Dawn nodded, sniffed hard and wiped at her eyes. "Is it okay that I don't know if I do?"

"Of course. You don't have to know anything."

There was a beat as she seemed to consider this, followed by another of those subtle atmospheric changes. And when she spoke again, it was with a hint of that hardened resentment that Buffy knew so well. Delicate and precarious, trembling under the weight of the losing struggle to keep calm. "Why didn't you tell me any of this before?"

Though Buffy had expected the question, she wasn't sure how to answer it. She was also a little surprised it had taken Dawn this long to ask. "I said I didn't know how I felt about what happened," she replied carefully. "I meant that. And I still don't. It's not like I just...*knew* all this one day. I don't even know if I know it now."

"What does that mean? That everything you just said might be crap?"

"I *believe* it, Dawn. That doesn't mean it comes easy for me. None of this does."

What I know and what I feel don't always match up." Such was the story of her life. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner, but I've been figuring this out as I go. I'm doing the best I can."

There must have been a note in her voice that she didn't hear, or perhaps a look on her face. All she knew was the burgeoning animosity she'd seen in Dawn's eyes vanished in a blink, and suddenly her sister was hugging her again. Tighter this time, and with more authority. Buffy didn't know how she did that—how she could go from being child to adult at the drop of a pin. She'd obviously learned it somewhere.

"Okay," Dawn said. "I'm sorry."

"No, it's—"

"I shouldn't have asked. It's just..."

"I know." Buffy drew in a trembling breath, having not realized how close she was to crying herself. *Stupid*. At least she was almost done with the hard part. She hoped. "I know. It's okay."

Dawn pulled back enough to catch her eyes, and something like herself shone through. "I'm still getting used to... You used to never tell me anything at all."

"I know. And I'm trying."

"I know you are. This just... It's Spike."

If there was anything Buffy understood, it was that. "Yeah."

For a moment, there was just quiet, a pleasant calm settling over the previously charged air. It couldn't last, she knew, because there were still things to talk about—things that might incur more than Dawn's wrath—but quiet was so hard to come by, internally or externally, that she wasn't in a rush to chase it off. Just sat in the stillness, enjoying it. Wishing it would extend forever. That she lived a life where that was possible.

But she didn't, and it couldn't. And she couldn't afford to let herself pretend otherwise.

"There's something else," Buffy said, and felt Dawn tense almost immediately. "The reason I *did* tell you all this now. You're not going to like it."

"Okay..."

"Spike is staying at the house."

And *kaboom*, there went the neighborhood.



SOMEHOW, she got through it. She wasn't sure how once it was over and she was on the other side, and even less certain she could recreate the steps she'd taken to get there, but that didn't matter because it *was* over. Dawn was up-to-speed on all things Spike, and well-sugared-up in compensation—the girl had ordered the largest and most extravagant piece of ice cream artistry Buffy had ever seen, and practically licked the bowl when she'd finished decimating it.

In the end, Dawn had taken the news about as well as could be expected. Understood the necessity of Spike staying in the basement, even if she didn't like it. But it had taken a lot of time and even more arguing-disguised-as-conversation to get there,

leaving Buffy with a pounding sort of headache that was determined to seize upon the lack of sleep she'd gotten the night before to drag her down until she had zero energy left.

So much so that by the time she was on her own again, Buffy was debating just skipping patrol tonight altogether. She was nowhere near in the right mind for any kind of skirmish, let alone with a vampire like the one who had dislocated her shoulder a couple of weeks back. Instead, her brain bombarded her with tantalizing images of herself curled up in front of the television with something calorie-packed, pleasantly checked out of her life for a few hours, nowhere to go and nothing to do until the sun rose again. Even if Spike was there on the edges of her awareness and likely making everything even more confused just by existing, that would be better than going out and getting herself hurt enough to test one of her and Giles's favorite hypotheses. She wasn't sure if she could handle proving *that* particular theory right, and she didn't want to try.

But there were a few hours left before she had to decide for certain, and things yet still to do. Dawn had asked if she could go to Janice's or catch a movie or something, needing some more time out of the house before she could think about confronting Spike, and Buffy—being in the mindset that anything that placated Dawn and didn't cost much now was a good idea—had been quick to agree. Thankfully, Dawn and Janice had the sort of friendship that didn't require things like phoning ahead before just showing up—at Janice's, at least—and that potential *extra* headache was off her plate for the next stretch. The only thing Buffy had left to do was hit the butcher for Spike, and she might be able to make it home in time before the sun set.

Spike had once told her the afterhours butcher was the best place to buy in bulk if you didn't want to be asked questions, and as an added incentive, they had special daylight pricing. It wasn't the most convenient trip, requiring her to go from the residential part of Sunnydale back to the downtown area after dropping off Dawn, but ultimately worth it once Buffy stepped inside and saw it void of any other shoppers. There were definitely perks to living in a demon town. One being demon establishments—the sort respectful citizens avoided. The unneeded cherry on her crap sundae of a day would be running into someone from Dawn's school or one of her clients as she carted home enough blood to transfuse a rhino several times over.

The man behind the counter, if he was a man, seemed genuinely surprised to see an actual customer, but was pleasant enough to deal with. So pleasant that Buffy found, when she left the shop, both hands weighed down by bags of blood she wasn't sure she had room to store, that she'd ended up buying way more than she'd intended. It was only by some measure of slayer coordination that she managed to get the SUV's back open without dropping anything, and by the time she'd heaved the last of it into the vehicle, she was convinced she had been bamboozled.

"The guy must've been a warlock or something," she muttered, surveying the surplus of red-filled bags scattered across the floor of the SUV. There wasn't enough room in her refrigerator and all the other refrigerators on the block put together to accommodate all this. Spike was going to think she'd gone nuts.

“Oh, have you ever had a warlock? Or do you just stick to vamps?”

Buffy went rigid, her heart and stomach plummeting at the same time. “God, not now.”

But God wasn’t there to answer. He never was. The next thing she knew, something slammed into the back of her head hard enough to send her careening into the open hatch of her own damn car, amid packets of blood, nausea turning over her stomach and stars winking across her eyes. There wasn’t time to gather her thoughts, much less her balance, before a pair of hands seized her by the material of her shirt and dragged her back.

“I just had to see it with my own eyes,” the bitch with the white hair, *Legolas*, drawled before shoving Buffy hard to the ground. “They said you were a monster lover, and I wanted to give you the benefit of the doubt. Even after last night, I thought it might just have been a misunderstanding. You know, ‘my town, my kill’ kinda thing. But here you are, stocking up for your bloodsucker boytoy. Don’t trust him enough to let him drink from the tap, eh?”

Buffy didn’t realize she’d swung until it was too late to pull back, until she saw that was exactly what the bitch had wanted her to do. Legolas smirked and caught her fist, used her hold on her to leverage an organ-rearranging kick to her midsection. The wind was punched out of her, and everything went momentarily dark before rushing back into focus.

“Not that I blame you,” Legolas continued as though there had been no interruption. “A vamp’s fangs that close to my throat? Major yikes. But then again, I wouldn’t be doing the undead in the first place.”

Buffy straightened, her gut still throbbing like a son of a bitch, but she forced herself to ignore it. “Are we gonna actually fight, or are you gonna talk me to death?”

“Oh, are you ready? I thought you might need a moment.” The bitch flashed that smirk again, drawing a stake out of her back pocket. A stake—not a blade or a gun or anything crafted with a human in mind—and Buffy couldn’t hide her surprise. She felt her eyes go wide, knew they lingered a second longer than necessary, and Legolas just laughed and gave the stake a little wiggle. “This was my idea. You like fangers so much, you can die like one.”

“You talk too much. Anyone ever tell you that?”

“I know, I know. It’s a bad habit,” Legolas said. “Though—and can I just say this one last thing? This, killing you, such an honor. Really. I was such a big fan of yours.”

God, if she had to stand here and listen to this, she was going to run headlong into that damn stake just to get it over with. Buffy fought the urge to roll her eyes, instead focusing on the girl’s right side. The one Spike had taken a chunk out of the night before. If she could just—

But Legolas was running at her again before she could do more than think the thought, taking a mad swipe with the stake that Buffy dodged more thanks to luck than skill. Her thoughts were spilling all over the place, swarming her too-full head and sending contradicting signals to her arms and legs. It had been a long time since she’d felt this damn uncoordinated, and all of it came down to a lack of preparation.

She hadn’t expected to be attacked. Not before the sun was down. Not while

running errands. And not by some bitch who should have been nursing a wound that rendered her out of commission for a few days. Slayer healing was good, but it wasn't an overnight miracle solution. It had taken almost a week for Buffy to fully recover that time she'd been staked with her own stake and this chick, whoever she was, had nothing on her in the strength department.

It just would have been nice if her own damn body had kicked in with the supporting argument to back that up. But somehow, Buffy found herself on the ground again, her palms digging into hard pavement as she fought to right herself.

"I just wanted you to know this means something to me. Imagine, being asked to take the head of the legendary Buffy Summers." Legolas drew another step closer, twirling the stake between her fingers. Everything about her screamed *try me*. "I mean, who wouldn't want a piece, right? Best way to go down in the history books."

"Who the fuck are you?" Buffy spat out before she could help herself, rising to her feet. Spike had said just last night that she was always aware of her surroundings, but she couldn't feel more unaware now if she tried. Her purse was in the SUV, along with the stake she kept tucked there for emergencies. The street was empty, and she was losing daylight. The butcher might help but—no, she caught a glimpse of him purposefully locking the door and drawing the shades, the coward.

"Isn't it obvious? I'm the cleanup crew," Legolas replied. "You've made so many messes. I'm good at taking care of messes."

Then she was running at her, her eyes narrowed into slits, and Buffy sprang into motion as the rest of her fell back on instinct. She aimed a kick at the bitch's legs, swinging up her arms to catch the downward plunge of the stake, but Legolas feinted and left Buffy stumbling forward into open air, the ground rushing up at her all over again. She managed to catch herself before she could faceplant and rolled back toward her vehicle on unsteady legs. The headache from earlier, the bodily exhaustion carried over from the night before and the emotional exhaustion from her conversation with Dawn, had somehow become physical weights that she didn't know how to wield. And Legolas was there, swiping down at her again with that stake, her face a twisted mask of fury and excitement that was as familiar as it was ugly. Buffy had been here before—had fought this fight before—had lived this all before and she knew how it played out. Only this time, she didn't have the months of studying Faith's fighting style in her back pocket—she didn't have the knowledge of *what* and *why* or *how*, just the bone-deep instinct to keep moving, keep swinging, keep fighting lest that stake find its target.

That part she could do. She did it better than anyone.

Buffy managed to get Legolas in a wide enough loop that she left an opening back for the SUV. It wasn't much of one, but enough—all she needed to do was close the back and get behind the steering wheel. Two easy things she had done a thousand times before.

"Wow," came from behind as Legolas bore down on her, "I was really expecting more, you know? I guess it's true. Never meet your heroes."

But the girl was too close for her plan to work, so Buffy abandoned it and launched herself into the SUV's open back, the force of her landing sending packets

of bagged blood spilling to the ground behind her. She ignored, them, though, even the one that burst under her knee, her hands knowing where to go—*thank god*—and closing around the material of her purse. Then she was twisting, smashing the bag into the side of Legolas's face and sending her careening into the interior side of the back compartment with enough force that the whole vehicle gave a shuddering, whining rock. It didn't buy her much time, but enough to scramble her way back out of the SUV and back onto even footing before Legolas regrouped and came tearing after her.

And that was it. Nothing significant or noteworthy or anything that would stand out to anyone else, but Buffy wasn't anyone else, and something cemented inside her. All doubt fell aside, leaving her with only the burning knowledge that Spike had been right. Of course, he'd been right. He was the only other person who would know. Who could.

This girl, whoever she was, was a slayer.

She didn't have time to sit with that, though, stumbling back toward the exterior wall that made up the butcher's building. It was a bad position to be in and she could have cursed herself for giving the girl the advantage, but Legolas had had the advantage all along. Surprise. Strength. Energy, mental and physical. Knowledge. And health. Whatever wound Spike had levied hadn't been significant after all, for both times Buffy aimed at her sides, Legolas twisted away with the sort of grace that should have been impossible, grinning like they were sharing a joke.

"I could drag this out," Legolas said, chunks of her wild white hair falling across her face and into her eyes, "but I don't like playing with my food. That's a difference between me and your boyfriend."

"Oh my god, would you just *shut up*."

"Well, if you insist."

Then she was on her, squeezing her legs and arms around Buffy in a perverse hug that sent her teetering the final few feet. Buffy didn't feel the plunge of the stake until it had already happened, until her left shoulder was screaming in pain and the rest of the world threatened to blink out. But no. *No*. This was not going to be the way she tested her theory—not here, not tonight, and definitely not courtesy of this bitch. Buffy's mind parted ways with her body, and she watched everything as though from a distance. Watched her wrap her fist around Legolas's hair and yank. Watched the mingled surprise on the other slayer's face, watched as the stake clattered at the pavement by their feet and as Buffy, relying on borrowed strength, twisted and smashed Legolas face-first into the brick wall behind her. The blow was enough. The Slayer went lax, then went down, and crumpled to the ground in a lifeless heap.

And Buffy was staggering around her, forcing legs that wanted to collapse to push on. To carry her back to the SUV. To get her behind the wheel. To just hold on a little while longer until she was home.

All she had to do was get home.

She could focus on the pain after.

THERE WAS A TIME WHEN I HAD NOTHING TO EXPLAIN

THE HOUSE WAS A DEAD SORT OF QUIET. EVEN WITH THE TELLY ON, EVEN WITH the hard, floor-shaking steps he took whenever he ventured from the couch to the kitchen to see if new treats had spontaneously manifested in the cupboards or the fridge, the sound he made seemed to punctuate the silence rather than break it. This breed of quiet didn't bother him too much back at the crypt. After all, graveyards were supposed to be all tranquil-like, at least when the newly undead weren't snarling their way to freedom and giving the Slayer her nightly exercise. Homes, though, were for living, and the absence of that was stark.

It wasn't just that he was alone, either. Spike had been alone in the Summers place before, most often to nick things—the Slayer's knickers being among his favorite pilfered treasures—but those times, the walls had practically been imbued with the echoes of the lives lived between them. Now the walls were silent, and he didn't like it. Perhaps the place just had too many ghosts to make much room for the living. Or maybe he was haunting his own bloody head and being a bit of a prat about it. Wouldn't be the first time. These days, he did more living between his ears than anywhere else, which was so far removed from what his normal had once looked like, he sometimes wondered if the soul he'd won hadn't belonged to someone else.

But no, that much was wishful thinking. Turned out the soul was one of those funny sensory experiences. Like a scent that took him back to childhood, a particular pattern of fabric, or the notes of an old forgotten song his mum used to sing to him before sleep took him away. Spike would never have noticed his soul when he was a man and hadn't thought to miss it after he'd become something more, but the first few seconds he'd lived with it again had been a bittersweet homecoming, steeped so deep in feelings of *Oh, I remember this* that it had seemed impossible he'd ever lived without it. Just an intrinsic piece of himself he'd dropped somewhere along the way

before finally finding it again. The William who lived more in his head than outside of it, who sat around thinking things like *the house is dead quiet* as though that were a problem to solve and not just a mark that no one was bloody home.

He knew better than that too, though. The silence didn't bother him—what it meant did.

No one was here because *he* was here.

Of course, there was no way to really know this. It wasn't like anyone had come right out and been that bloody forthright. Not Willow, who had yet to return from wherever she'd popped off to that morning. Not Dawn, who hadn't shown up at all. And definitely not Buffy, who had spent the bulk of the day trying to ignore him, having hushed conversations that he didn't try to overhear but overheard anyway—couldn't switch off vampire senses whenever he liked. Killing time with a thoroughly pointless call to Rupert, who hadn't had anything new to share with her, and then ringing up Angel to ask if he had any information about Faith. And Christ, Spike *really* hadn't wanted to listen to that, but the visceral reaction he experienced at hearing even the hint of Angel's voice had guaranteed he'd be glued to every word, interloper that he was into Buffy's life. As though he had any right to feel anything other than mild interest to learn she'd called the ex she'd put on a pedestal.

But Spike felt a lot more than mild bloody interest. Hearing Angel's rumble, the cadence of his words, the easy way he and Buffy chatted back and forth, had filled him with something beyond jealousy. An ache he could feel almost as well as he felt the soul, no less familiar but somehow terrible and new at the same time. Perhaps that was what the soul did—sharpened already unbearable pain by adding in layers of context that he'd been too thick to see.

It would never be like that with him and Buffy. Ever. He'd gone off thinking her love was something he could win, could earn, could prove that he deserved as much as any other souled wanker in her life. He'd known the journey would be a rough one, known he might lose his life rather than redeem it, known there would be healing to do and the like, but he hadn't appreciated the gravity of the mess he'd made until that scaly demon had pressed his soul into his chest. Buffy could phone up Angel and have low conversations with him because they'd had something she and Spike had never had. She'd let him in, let him know her, and Angel had done what he did best. The only thing he'd ever done well.

Greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist, and all that.

Only Spike knew that wasn't fair, either. Knew that was just that awful, acidic jealousy talking. For all Angel had done to her when he'd been running around as his more personable self, he'd never hurt her the way Spike had.

Had to be some irony in that, right? Angelus had regaled him and Dru many a night talking in detail about how he would get his second taste of the Slayer's cunt. Make her his next masterpiece—a true reversion to form to celebrate a long century of living in the gutter. Next to over-compensating via apocalypse, raping Buffy into madness had been his greatest ambition. The only reason the apocalypse had come first was that ugly stone demon had dropped into town.

Angelus had never done what he'd really wanted to Buffy. He'd never even gotten as close as Spike had.

And that was why he could talk to her the way he did. All distant warmth and affection, Buffy trying not to laugh at whatever inane bit of nonsense had popped out of his mouth but laughing anyway, and just what was it that the wanker could say that was funny, anyhow? Wasn't like the soul instilled a bloke with qualities they hadn't had before—like, for instance, a sense of humor.

Fuck, Spike hadn't thought his self-loathing could reach new heights, but it seemed it could. He had no right to feel any of this, to resent Angel or his relationship with Buffy, or Buffy for relying on Angel. For having low, familiar conversations with him when Spike was in the other room. The fact that she'd let Spike into her home, bloody insisted that he stay here for his own safety, was more miracle than he could have asked for. Yet that was the story of his life, wasn't it? Give him a nudge and he wants a nibble. Give him a nibble and he asks for a bite. Never satisfied with what he got and always pulling for what he couldn't have or didn't deserve, which were usually the same thing.

Spike had just about decided to take another merry tour of the kitchen and see if he could unearth any of Buffy's cleverer hiding places for booze when the back door slammed open and someone stumbled inside. Someone smelling heavily of blood—*human. Buffy's*—and hissing wildly through her teeth. He was on his feet and tearing into the kitchen the next second, watching as Buffy stumbled her way toward the island. Her hair was a mess, her face skinned and scraped, her palms chewed up and dirt streaking along her shirt and jeans.

And she was bleeding. Not somewhere he could see, not somewhere obvious, but enough that his gums tingled and the beast inside both roared its indignation and purred its hunger.

"Buffy." He moved to close the distance between them before he could think the better of it, his mind not catching him until he registered that he was reaching to take hold of her shoulders. And he hated himself all over again. Touching Buffy wasn't a privilege he had anymore—even in circumstances like this. He forced his hands back to his sides as she braced herself against the island, firmed his jaw and looked her over head to toe. "Where is it? How bad?"

Buffy lifted her head, blinking dazedly. It seemed to take her a second to see him. "Huh?"

"You're bleeding."

She glanced down at herself. "I'm pretty sure that's what was supposed to be your dinner," she said, holding out one of her legs, which was saturated in blood the color of rust. "There are bags still in the car. Not as many as I bought, but they should get you through for a few days."

"I'm not talkin' about the bloody swine." There it was again—the urge to grab her. Start searching for a sign of whatever was causing that heavenly smell to taunt his senses. "Come on, Slayer, I can smell it."

Buffy stared at him for a moment, then carefully turned on the spot. The back of her shirt was soaked through with blood, the heaviest concentration being just under

her left shoulder. "I've had worse," she said, and though he believed it—knew it, in fact—the slight quaver to her voice didn't do much to boost his confidence. "She got me with a stake."

He let out a low breath to calm the clash of contradictory instincts all suddenly vying for attention. Not only was it not his place to be outraged on her behalf, but it was also bloody unnecessary. The Slayer was a force of nature only a few could ever hope to dance with and walk away alive. She didn't need him snarling after those who had hurt her, even if things had been different. "You run into our friend, then?"

She snorted. "More like she ran into me. I'm sure it looks worse than it is. Won't know until I get it cleaned up."

"Need any help?" The words tumbled out before he could catch them, and immediately he wished he could just bite off his own bloody tongue. He was ready when she turned her gaze back to him, raising his hands and stepping back to give her as wide a berth as possible. "Didn't mean—bugger, dunno why I said that. Just forget it."

Buffy didn't move. She didn't say anything, either. Just stood there, staring at him in that unreadable fashion he'd once associated with the resurrection—how she looked when she'd show up at his crypt, blank-faced and listless, all to watch him in his pale imitation of life. That was the only time he could recall that reading Buffy had been a chore. She had always been open to him before then. Perhaps not entirely, but enough that he instinctively knew what words to reach for, what tone would work best to his advantage, and what buttons needed attention to get her fired up in the way he loved best.

But time was past. Much like touching her, he'd lost his right to her in that way, if he'd ever had it to begin with.

"Umm, yeah," Buffy said at last, nearly startling him out of his bloody skin. "Actually... I don't know how I'm going to reach this. It being, you know, on my back and all. I'm guessing Willow isn't back yet?"

He shook his head.

"Then yeah, I need some help." She broke her gaze from his, shuffling her weight between her feet. "It needs to be cleaned and disinfected before it's bandaged up. I don't think I can reach that. So..."

It took him longer than it should have, the realization that she was seriously asking. And once that hit home, all he could do was stand there and ogle at her like a prized dolt. He opened his mouth, no clue how to respond, wondering for perhaps the thousandth time what the hell anything meant with her anymore. It was all too much. Being in Buffy's house, sleeping under Buffy's roof, having Buffy's concern for his well-being, and now being trusted by Buffy to pitch in when she was wounded. Dangerous vampire here, standing inches from her as she bled delicious-smelling blood, knowing full well what had happened the last time she'd had a rough scuffle on patrol. She'd been mucking with his head ever since he'd returned to town, never doing what he expected. Treating him like he mattered, like she cared. Like she so rarely had, even when they had been at their most intimate. It was enough to drive a stable fella batty, and he was far from a stable fella.

"Well, if you are going to help, there's a first-aid kit in the bathroom," Buffy said, raising her gaze to his once more. And something funny must have happened to his face, or perhaps she'd just heard what she'd said, for she rushed on at a clip. "You could go get it and we could do whatever down here. Think we should be next to a sink. You know, for the cleaning."

"You really want my help?"

"Well, I'm not exactly rolling in options here." She hesitated, dragged her teeth over her lower lip. "Spike, please?"

There had never been any risk he'd say no. All he'd had to do was get past his shock. But hearing her ask like that, hearing the word *please* on her lips, tugged on some part of him he'd thought perpetually broken. Not the part that loved her, because that he could never outrun, but something deeper and more primal. He didn't want to engage it, was bloody terrified of what would happen if he woke it up. That it was there at all, that it had survived what had happened upstairs and the soul, was revelation itself. A dangerous one, at that.

"Right," he replied, forcing himself to nod. "Kit's upstairs, is it?"

"In the bathroom."

She looked away again before he could say anything. Not that he would have the first clue what to say about this thing they were both suddenly thinking, and it didn't matter, anyhow. Spike nodded again and started toward the door to the hall. "Back in a flash, pet."

A flash. He could do a flash. In and out, no time to dwell or picture any of the other times he'd made the familiar climb up the stairs. How often he'd stolen into Buffy's room just for the pleasure of being in her space. Inhaling the air that had been in her lungs. Going through her drawers and finding bits of fabric that smelled of her. Frilly knickers he could pocket and wank with once he was back in the privacy of his own crypt. He wouldn't think about that, and he definitely wouldn't think about a night last spring when he'd draped his duster over the banister downstairs and followed the sound of running water into a bathroom he'd only ever peeked inside to see what brand of shampoo she used. He wouldn't think about the last time he'd been in there, when he'd closed the door and the light had been so bright and Buffy had been standing in the middle of the room, dressed in a bathrobe, tired and hurt and in pain because of him.

He'd visited the place so many times in his dreams that he expected it to look transformed. Exaggerated, perhaps, or larger than he remembered. But when Spike flicked on the light, he found the bathroom much as it had ever been. Plain. Ordinary. The floor with the random starburst of red between the white tiles; white tub with its white shower curtain; the green mats and the scattering of girly knickknacks on the counter by the sink. It had only ever been a bathroom, whatever else his mind had tried to convince him.

That was the thing about being a monster. You could be one anywhere. And he had been one here.

The worst sort.

Though he'd promised himself he wouldn't, Spike lingered in the doorway a beat

longer than he should. Couldn't help it. It was one thing returning to the room in his head—another entirely to see it with his own eyes, this place where *he* had discovered who he had always been. The sort of man he was, and the sort of monster. But Buffy was waiting for him, and he didn't have time to take a bloody stroll down memory lane, so he steeled himself and marched with intent toward the counter.

"Not about you, you selfish prat," he muttered, throwing open the drawer beneath the sink. The kit was there, next to a tidy stack of washcloths that would likely come in handy. "Get your bloody head out of your bloody arse."

And then he was moving once more, hurrying his way back down the stairs—again, determinately not thinking about how he'd practically trampled down them a few months ago—and forcing his feet back toward the kitchen. Toward the alluring scents of blood and Buffy.

He found her by the sink, one arm braced against it, wearing nothing from the waist up but a skimpy bra. And though he should have known to expect it—he'd seen where she'd been hurt, after all, and she'd needed to ditch her clothes for him to access it—the sight of her half-naked startled him so much he nearly dropped the kit he'd been sent to fetch. Buffy turned when she heard him, sending another delicious waft of wounded slayer toward his nostrils, and he forced his eyes at the last second from where they had long been trained to go to the ugly puncture mark under her shoulder.

Fuck him, but the thought that Buffy would ever prance around him in her knickers had been beyond the bloody pale. Even if he knew that wasn't what this was, or what she was doing. The girl was hurt, and all his so-called soulful mind could do was bombard him with images of her tits, memories of how they felt in his hands, in his mouth, and the sounds she made when he teased her with his teeth. And again, there must have been something on his face that gave it away, for Buffy held up her free hand and took a step back.

"This isn't... Just to be completely clear, I'm not coming onto you."

"Uhh, all right."

"I mean it. I know it's... With the confusing signals and stuff. You being here and me getting kinda naked and—"

"Buffy, I'm not gonna try to shag you if that's what you're worried about." The words came out a bit harsher than he'd intended, probably owing to that bloody perpetual guilt, but he meant them just the same. Never mind that she had a very good reason for setting the record straight. Playing nursemaid to her was just the sort of situation soulless Spike might have tried to exploit. "You're hurt and I'm the only one around. Convenient and nothin' else, yeah?"

She studied him with an uncertain frown, the same one she always pulled out when she was trying to decide if he could be trusted. Might have braced him off once, but not anymore. Every bad thing Buffy had ever thought about him was something he'd more than earned.

After a long, searching beat, the lines in her face relaxed. "I don't know if *convenient* is the word I'd use."

"There's a first."

The frown pulled into a scowl. "What's that—"

"Forget it. Let's get you patched up, yeah?" He started toward her, battling back a resurging swell of self-loathing at his own inability to keep his trap shut. He was the one being a git here, making things awkward, and it wasn't her fault that he couldn't seem to stop. Also wasn't her fault that the good intentions he'd set for himself seemed to evaporate the second she was around. None of this was on her.

Buffy studied him for a moment longer before working her throat and turning to fully present him with her back. "Start by cleaning it," she said, pulling her hair around so it dangled over her uninjured shoulder. "And try to keep your fangs in your mouth, please."

Spike released a slow breath to steady himself, then dragged his gaze across the puncture mark. There was an angry swell of broken skin and a mass of deep red. She'd bled a good bit, with rivulets stretching down her side and around her stomach, but he could tell—predator's prerogative—that her first guess had been right. The damage that had been done was indeed the sort that looked worse than it was. At least on a slayer. Small bloody miracles, and all that.

He crowded in as close behind her as he dared before flipping on the faucet and filling the otherwise still air with the hum of running water. Buffy went tense at the sound, perhaps—*likely*—thinking the same thing he was, though god, he hoped not. Her tentative confidence in him, if that was what this was, was pretty much the only thing solid enough to wrap his hands around at the moment. If she lost her nerve, he knew he'd lose his, and the wound wasn't so superficial it didn't need tending to.

But she didn't do more than tense. Didn't pull away from him or tell him to back off, didn't recoil when he reached around her again to wet one of the cloths he'd brought with him. Still, though, he had to ask. It was only right. "You sure you want me to do this, Slayer? Can ring someone up if—"

"No. No. I'm okay." She didn't sound okay, rather like she did when she was pretending for the sake of others. He'd never reckoned he'd be one of those others. "I want it taken care of. And before Dawn gets home."

Fuck. Spike's stomach turned at the thought. "Right," he said, and began mopping up the blood. As though this were something they did regularly—or had done *ever*. As though being this close to her, touching her, after so long wasn't both bittersweet and utterly terrifying. He'd fantasized himself here a thousand times before and after the soul, imagined a thousand different things he might say, might tell her, and all he could do with the reality was hope to whatever was out there that he didn't bugger this up. Didn't make things worse. "Wouldn't want that."

"How bad is it?"

"Got herself a nice chunk of you, from the look of things." Though not as nice as the chunk he'd gotten out of the new bitch the night before, which was concerning all in itself. The girl should've been too wounded to be any sort of match for the Slayer. "Gonna guess she's a bit worse for wear."

"If by 'worse for wear,' you mean in peak athletic condition, then sure."

He frowned. "Thought that—"

"I know. And I *don't* know. She should've been out of commission for a couple of days at least. And if not, definitely not well enough to pick a fight."

"That what happened? She attacked you?"

"No, Spike, we were exchanging muffin recipes and I tripped."

The familiar bite in her voice made him grin. "Now, now," he said, clearing away the last of the blood, "just surprised is all."

"Really? 'Cause she didn't strike me as the chatty type when we saw her last night."

"Doesn't explain why she's huntin' down a slayer."

"Well, the Council always wanted a poster child. Maybe they finally have one."

That seemed likely. He'd been turning it over in his mind since the previous night, safer topic that it was than certain others. What it meant that a new slayer had blown into Sunnydale and decided to make his crypt her first stop. How it figured in with everything that had come before—the Council trying to make nice with the local undead to see if they could sweet-talk him into doing their dirty work, then rushing to tell Rupert that the whole thing had been a bloody plot led by some rogue faction. This new slayer, whoever she was, was definitely answering to someone. She'd known exactly where to go to find him, had known enough about the chip in his head to taunt him with it, and had apparently put Buffy in her crosshairs.

The only thing he couldn't figure was what it meant that the Council had made the offer to him that they had if they had a slayer in their back pocket.

But then, when he and Buffy had parted ways last night, she hadn't been convinced the new girl *was* a slayer. Had spent a good chunk of time that morning trying to pin down the other bird that had gotten herself locked up just to prove that she couldn't be. Whatever had happened out there had to have been significant enough to get her to change her tune—he knew from experience that wasn't something she did on a whim.

"You trust that's what she is, then?" he asked as he tossed the bloodied washcloth onto the kitchen island.

"What?"

"Just last we talked, you thought the girl might be somethin' other than a slayer."

"I've fought slayers before. I know what it feels like."

He tried not to smirk at that. It wasn't really funny, after all. Or wouldn't have been if he hadn't made the exact same bloody argument. "Hmm. And where have I heard that before?"

"Do you wanna gloat or do you wanna help me?"

"No earthly reason I can't do both."

"You could sound a little less happy about it," she grumbled in that trademark Summers pout. "I still haven't been able to get anyone to tell me about Faith. Here I think 'hey, did an inmate recently die on you' is a pretty easy question to answer but the prison acted like it was classified or something. Which makes me think she must be alive, which is a whole other can of worms, because dying and coming back is kind of my thing. But Faith always was a big copycat."

She'd taken on a sort of desperate righteousness in her tone that he had no

trouble recognizing as fear disguised as bravado. That was Buffy—trying to hide doubts in indignation while the rest of her worked tirelessly to piece together where her world had gone wonky.

And there was more in what she wasn't saying. In what he reckoned she wouldn't say until she had to. Rules in their world were firm right up until the moment they weren't. Hell, as he recalled it, Spike hadn't had time to adjust to the paradigm shift of there being two slayers before both of them were coming at him in full bloody force. The hows and whys had been of interest, but not important in the heat of the moment. Could be easily that the other slayer had snuffed it for half a heartbeat just the same as Buffy.

Personally, though, he figured something else was at play, and odds were Buffy felt the same. Would explain why she was trusting him now when he knew she didn't otherwise. In times of uncertainty, you didn't doubt your allies. At least not without bloody good reason.

He dropped his gaze back to the wound. The bleeding had slowed, and what was left behind was a swirl of red and pink and white—a glimpse of what kept Buffy in motion beneath her skin. The sight should have tickled his fangs, but it didn't. He didn't care for reminders of how easy she was to hurt, as it just brought to mind how easy it had been to be the one hurting her.

The thought had him dropping his hands and stepping back. "What's next?"

"I dunno," she replied, sounding defeated. "I guess I could always go to the prison and make a scene. Either they'd let me see her or throw me in there with her, but hey. There's a surefire way to get some answers."

"Meant in the doctorin', love. Haven't had much occasion to patch up slayers, if you can believe it."

"Oh. Umm, has it stopped bleeding?"

Spike dropped his gaze back to the wound, forced himself to recover the step he'd taken from her. "Looks like."

"Then there should be some antibiotic cream in the kit. Hopefully a lot. It'd be just my luck if we used the last of it on something stupid like a papercut."

Grateful for a reason to look away, he turned his attention to the kit and started to rifle through the few odds and ends. There were some things in there he suspected didn't come in standard first-aid kits but had been purposefully added as a result of experience. Amid the tweezers and bandages were a couple of tubs of balm he'd last seen being peddled at the Magic Box, and enough antibacterial cream to tend the whole house and then some. Also a bloody yo-yo, for some reason.

"Think you're set."

"There should be some sutures in there, too, if we need them."

She said it so casually, almost casually enough he missed the tremor in her voice. But he didn't. "What's that?"

"You know, to close up the wound. Do you think I need that?"

Bloody hell, how was he supposed to know? "Well, told you the bleeding looks like it's stopped. Wager where it hit you, got more bone than anythin' else." He

waited a beat, then sighed. "Slayer, any reason you're not askin' me to get you to the bloody hospital? Seems this is—"

"I'm not going to the hospital," she said rather forcibly. "They'll just ask questions and take all night and the last time this happened, Riley was able to dress it and I healed just fine, so if you don't mind, I'd rather not waste the rest of my night getting poked and prodded by a bunch of doctors."

"Soldier boy patched you up?" It was hard to imagine Finn ever being helpful, particularly when it came to Buffy. Or maybe his loathing for the boy was another thing the soul hadn't dulled.

"Well, as you said, he *was* a soldier and cross-trained as a field medic," Buffy replied, her tone carefully measured. "So yes. He came in very handy in the wound-treatment department."

Well, fuck. There were a lot of things he could stand but being *less* useful than Captain Cardboard was not among them. Add the fact that he'd sworn he would do whatever Buffy needed him to do, and Spike didn't have much in the way of choice. It was either do as she asked or let her down, and he'd let her down enough to last him a lifetime.

"Reckon it couldn't hurt, right?" He framed it as a question though he was mostly talking to himself. "The suture? Or could it?"

"You wow me with your confidence."

"Oi. Not like the sorta thing that's come up a lot for yours truly."

"And that's not obvious at all." Buffy turned just slightly so he caught her profile, the raw vulnerability that she could keep out of her voice but not her eyes. Not entirely, at least. Not from him. "Fortunately for me, I've had to do quite a lot of reading on puncture wounds and if you think it hit mostly bone, we're probably fine to just bandage it up."

Spike didn't find the use of *probably* all that encouraging, but figured she was the one who would know. And, if he were telling the truth, he was pleased that she seemed to be moving on from anything more complicated than an oversized band-aid. While he had lived long enough to have experienced a bit of everything, he wasn't sure he trusted himself enough to do her right where wound care was concerned.

"Right," he said, unable to keep the relief from his voice. "Right. I can do that."

"I'd really hope so. You'll still need to clean it."

"Thought I'd done that bit already."

"Water's not enough. Wash your hands and get the tweezers out."

Bugger. Life had been so much simpler when he'd been the one putting holes in her, not patching them up. He let out a breath and turned to do as he'd been instructed. A good thorough scrub of his hands—"Make sure you get under your nails, too," she said. "Giles used to love to tell me that more soldiers died of infection than actual battle injuries."—and of the tweezers, before he was ready to be of use. And to her credit, Buffy walked him through the steps with a low, steady way that might have fooled him into thinking she wasn't as aware of him as she was if not for the frantic knocks of her heart. But that was her all over, and always had been.

Composed on the outside even as the inside rioted. She told him to make sure the bleeding had truly stopped, and no, his nose didn't count. He needed to take some gauze and apply pressure, see if she was still leaking. Thankfully, those wondrous genes of hers were hard at work, so all was good there—"Bloody told you so, Slayer."—which meant they could move to the next step. Washing the area with more than just water.

"Not the wound itself, just around it," she said. "And once you're done there, we need to make sure there's nothing inside the wound—like splinters or dirt. Put those vampire eyes of yours to work."

So he did, and the few stray splinters he found were plucked out with the tweezers. Buffy sucked in a breath each time he touched the metal to her, not whimpering but making him entirely too aware of her and how easy it would be to cause her additional pain. After, she instructed him to treat the area with the antibiotic—not too much, but a layer to protect the skin—then bandage her up nice and tight.

It was while he was winding gauze around her shoulder, in the last stretch of the strangest fifteen minutes he'd ever spent with her, that she decided to drop a bloody bomb on him.

"So, just so you know, I did finally talk to Dawn. I don't think you're gonna need to worry about her coming at you with a stake anytime soon."

Spike went rigid, pulling the wrapping a mite tighter than he'd intended so that it snapped clean in half. He cursed and caught the end before it could unwind in a rush, wondering just how in the hell he was meant to respond to that. Buffy arriving home smelling of blood and talking about wound care had put everything else out of his mind—that she would bring anything up like this, while he was touching her, redefined the unspoken rules as he'd understood them.

She never stopped surprising him, his slayer. Not even when she should.

In the end, he decided to play it safe. Or perhaps that was playing it like a bloody coward. He didn't know. Everything was in her court. "Right."

There was a pause. "Is that all I get? 'Right'?"

"Not sure what you expect me to say."

"Maybe, 'what did you tell her?' Here I'd think that's the sort of thing you'd want to know."

He sucked in his cheeks and began rewrapping the wound with renewed vigor, which earned a hiss and a flinch but not a change of subject.

"Are we really never going to talk about this?" Buffy demanded, turning her head as though to catch his eye. "Dammit, Spike, I can't do this anymore."

They moved at the same time—her whirling around to face him and Spike stepping away, his hands up in a gesture of surrender. Off her skin, away from her body, nice and nonthreatening so she could see he didn't mean to touch her if she didn't want to be touched. It was a bloody telling move, one of the thousand he was becoming careless enough to make around her these days, and another she either missed or didn't read for what it was.

"I have to know," she said, snatching up the top she'd discarded and holding it in front of herself like a shield. The wrapping around her shoulder unraveled a few

loops then stopped, dangling limply under her arm. “I have all these...these...*ideas* of what I think happened and I want them to be right. I want to not be making another massive mistake where you’re concerned, and I can’t do it on assumptions.”

Spike swallowed, his skin suddenly feeling too tight across his body. Uncomfortable and awkward, as though he’d slipped it on wrong. And worse, there was nothing he could say. He couldn’t play dumb, couldn’t make like he didn’t know exactly what she was talking about. Bugger, it was a small bloody wonder she was only doing this now. After everything.

Or maybe it made complete sense. Maybe it had just been inevitable. Buffy had never been forthright with what was on her mind—the bits and pieces he’d gotten had either been by accident or because she’d thought telling him wasn’t the same as telling someone else. What had been between them then hadn’t been substantial where she was concerned. Not enough to make a difference. But at some point, that had shifted. She had become more withdrawn, had stopped telling him the things that mattered, had retreated within her Buffy shell where she thought no one could reach her. Just overnight, it seemed, they had crossed some boundary and he had become like everyone else. Next to her life but not inside of it—not the way he wanted.

Then *that* night had happened, and everything had changed. And Buffy hadn’t yelled at him when he’d come back, hadn’t screamed and demanded her pound of flesh for what he’d taken. She’d just kept on the periphery, dancing as close to the subject as she dared before skittering back to safer territory. Away from the things they weren’t saying to each other.

Until now. Standing in the kitchen, Buffy in her blood-smeared jeans and bra, hair falling around her face, the air smelling of both her blood and the goodness that was just *her*, his soul on sodding display even if she didn’t see it.

But she did see something, and that scared him even more.

“Tell me why you came into the bathroom that night,” she said, and though her voice was soft, it had the impact of cannon fire.

“Buffy—”

“Were you there to rape me?”

“No.” He didn’t mean to shout, but fuck, he hadn’t expected her to just ask like that, either. Use that word, bald and ugly and awful, when he’d only had to live with it in his head. Especially not while looking at him like she might actually listen or understand.

Let her hate him forever—that was easier. Far easier than the nightmare that was the impossible hope of forgiveness.

But he couldn’t lie to her either, so he didn’t. “No,” he said again, trying hard for calm. “Never.”

She nodded, fucking nodded, and let out a breath. “Then what happened?”

“What the hell do you mean, *what happened?*”

“Exactly what I asked. You’re in my house—”

“That was *your* bloody call, not mine.”

“And you owe it to me to tell me.”

Spike backed up another step, practically stumbled it. “Owe it to you, do I? What? You tryin’ to make yourself feel better, pet? Tell yourself all kinds of stories about how Spike—”

“Don’t.”

“Don’t?”

“I know what you’re doing. I don’t know why you’re doing it, but I know what you’re doing. And yes, Spike, you owe it to me. So tell me. Don’t make me guess. Tell me what the hell happened the night you came here and didn’t *mean* to try to rape me.”

He stared at her, heaving breaths so hard his chest hurt when the bloody thing wasn’t supposed to do that. That was the rub with Buffy—had been from the start. Everything he wasn’t supposed to do or feel or want or whisper tossed aside because she defied every natural instinct he’d been possessed with since opening his eyes as a vampire. And yeah, sure, he’d never been a big rule follower, but there were certain things that simply weren’t done. Things he’d done anyway. All for her. Even the one thing he’d never thought he could.

And she was right. He did owe her. He owed her a debt he could never begin to repay. One he wasn’t sure he could wrap in words, for there weren’t words enough for it. Even for him, the bloke who had once thought words would be his trade. But he’d been fooling himself then, and one of the things he’d promised he’d stop doing once he landed himself his shiny soul was fool himself of anything. Spike might never be able to tell her what that night had cost him in full or make her realize just how much it haunted him, even if he wanted to. Maybe especially *because* he wanted to. The soul wasn’t something he could spit out at her as a booby prize for everything he’d almost taken.

But he could give her what she was asking, no matter how much it hurt.

“I was bugged in the head,” he heard himself say, his voice low and raw. “Knew I’d hurt you, bein’ with Anya. Hadn’t meant to. Didn’t know... Fuck, didn’t know I could. Not really. I’d just given up. Been low a lot in my life, Slayer. Made quite the habit of it. A hundred plus years and I don’t reckon I’ve ever been so low as I was when I... When it occurred to me maybe you were tellin’ me the truth. That I’d had it wrong, and you didn’t love me after all. That’s what dragged me to the bloody shop. To get the feeling to stop so I wouldn’t waste away missing whatever it was I thought we had.” He swallowed, dropped his gaze to the floor. Might be easier to tell the kitchen tile than her directly.

Nothing about this is easy.

“Then after, when I saw what it did to you...” he went on. “Got my lobes wrapped around the thought that if you were that hurt, it meant I’d had it right the first time, and you did care. That I could’ve only hurt you like that if you loved me, felt it much as I did. And maybe you’d realized it, too, after.”

He stopped before he could say anything about the visit her sister had paid to his crypt, the one that had knocked him off the ledge of misery and back into that place where hope lived. Yeah, he’d made a right mess of things—had hurt Buffy without even trying. But that much could have been in his head, seeing what he wanted to

see. His own warped interpretation of the looks she'd give him, the things she'd say, the way she'd act around him had informed pretty much every part of his view of their relationship. And he'd misread her every step, the girl he'd once been able to read as openly as he'd ever read anyone or anything else.

Then Dawn had shown up to rake him over the coals. Tell him just how heart-broken Buffy was, and that had done what the look he'd seen on Buffy's face alone could not. After all, who would know better than her sister?

Spike inhaled again, another one of those breaths that shouldn't hurt. "So I came here to see if... Fuck, I thought maybe if we talked—if you knew how much I hadn't meant to hurt you. That you were still all I wanted, that I'd never have gone there if I'd known what would happen and that you'd feel any of what I was feeling. But if you were, did that mean something? I thought it had to. All I needed to do was get you to see it too."

And that was as far as he could go in talking about what happened before. The handful of seconds that made up the space between closing the door and being kicked into the wall were a blur, love and loathing and impulse and want and need and desperation and desperation and *desperation* clawing at his insides, propelling him on, keeping him focused on what he just knew would be there for him at the end of it. A new start for them. A relationship based on more than just hate and sex and that awful, poisonous love that was whittling him down to nothing. They could be better—they could be *together*. All he had to do was show her.

The reality of the situation was all so clear now. The way things were and had always been. It shouldn't have taken doing what he'd done, what he'd nearly done, to see it the way it was, but it had. Irreversible and unforgivable as the thing was. It had gone down the stairs and out into the night with the demon in his chest and his head and his heart but the man there, too. All of him screaming and nothing getting better, and he couldn't be what he was supposed to be, and he didn't want to be that, either. Not anymore. Not if it meant he was someone who could do *that* to someone he loved.

"Think I fooled myself there for a bit," Spike said at length, still staring at the floor. "Thought change was somethin' that I could decide to do. A part I could play even if I didn't feel it underneath. Maybe even get me a bloody gold star if I kept at it. Closest I got was what you made me feel—what I felt because I loved you, and I wanted...wanted to be someone you needed. But I was always a monster. And I wager I knew that too. Just never put together what kind of monster I was. Not until that night and I saw what I'd nearly done. I wanted to die."

There was a beat. "So...it was an accident. You didn't mean to do it."

He snickered at himself. "An accident. Like *whoops*, I tripped?"

"No, just that you—you weren't entirely *there* when it was happening."

"Tryin' to convince yourself it wasn't me? Is that how you—"

"Look, Spike, I'm not trying to convince myself of anything," she said in her snappy slayer voice. "I know it was you. But I also know, or think I know, that you didn't realize that's what you were doing until it was over. You were somewhere else and not hearing me. That's what I told Dawn today. That's what I told Xander and

Willow. God, it's what I've been telling *myself* ever since it happened. I've been driving myself crazy trying to figure out why I don't hate you for doing that or wondering if I'm... I'm *broken*."

The word knocked him in the chest with all the power and thrust of a stake. "Bloody hell, Buffy—"

"You know the night you got back, how I just showed up? Wanna know why I was there? Because that was what I did. Every night all summer, ever since you left. I'd show up to see if you'd come home. I'd started to think you never would." Her voice had begun to shake. All of her had. Her eyes shining, her lower lip wobbling the way it did as she struggled to maintain control. And all he could do was stand there and watch. "I don't know why. I just did. Maybe I thought I'd know how I felt when I saw you again, but I didn't because you've been so...*weird*. And you won't tell me where you went or what happened while you were gone and...fine. Fine. But I had to know if I was just completely out of my mind or making excuses for you because I wanted that night to be an...an accident or something. I wanted it to be something that happened because... I don't know, but *not* because it was you. Because I never saw that and if I couldn't see it, then what does that make me?"

It was unfair, how effortlessly she broke his heart. How she could do it over and over again. How the damn thing had anything left of it to shatter.

"I didn't want it to be me," Spike said hoarsely. "I never thought I could do that to you—hurt you like that. Took my head for a spin when I saw it. That's why I left. Bloody terrible thing to realize you don't know what you're capable of, especially after you've lived a life like mine. When you've already done every awful thing you thought you could. That's what happened that night, Slayer. I looked at what I'd done to you and saw my fucking reflection for the first time in a hundred years. Had to get out after that."

For a long moment, there was nothing but the sounds of life she couldn't suppress. Her breaths. Her heart. Her lips meeting and forming a line. Her eyes on him, seeing him but *god*, not all the way. Please not all the way. Not tonight. He couldn't bear it on top of everything else.

"But you came back," she said.

"Yeah. And you waited for me."

"That's not... I don't know if that's what I was doing," Buffy blinked and finally tore her gaze away, and he knew she was lying. She did too. Only he didn't know what that meant—or if it meant anything at all.

"Let's finished getting you patched up, yeah?" he asked, nodding to the loose wrapping hanging under her shoulder. "If you still want the help, that is."

She didn't answer, rather let the words hang in the air just a stretch beyond what was bearable before turning once more to present him with her back. This time when he started to work, she didn't flinch. Just stood as he doctored her up, thinking loudly against the quiet.

And he couldn't tell, so he didn't ask, and she didn't either. But something had changed. Something important. Something that couldn't be changed back.

Bugger if he knew what it was.

WOULDN'T YOU KNOW IT. SHE WOULDN'T SHOW IT.

"UHH, DON'T TAKE THIS THE WRONG WAY OR ANYTHING," WILLOW SAID AS SHE edged into the kitchen, all unfairly bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, "but you look like crap."

Buffy snorted, glancing back down to the sack lunch she was preparing for Dawn. She had only barely managed to crawl out of bed that morning, sleep having hit her with the force of a Mack Truck the second her head had hit the pillow the night before. And that had been both incredibly needed and a big surprise, even with three different types of exhaustion pulling her under. She'd more than expected another night of counting the blemishes on the ceiling as she rolled over the massive *everything* that the day had thrown at her, never mind physical discomfort. The spot on her back hurt like a son of a bitch, though she had been down this road enough times to appreciate that Spike had done a stellar job in patching her up. Odds were good she'd be back in slaying condition in a couple of days. If she took care of herself.

Which was what she was trying to do now. Much as she hated it, she knew she had to cancel today's studio sessions. Hopefully, just the one day would do it, but with an apparently impossible-to-harm slayer running roughshod all over town, Buffy couldn't afford to be anything but in top form. That meant cutting back on all physical activity until she'd healed. Even the relatively light physical activity at the studio.

"Thanks," she replied dryly. "I also feel like crap, so at least I'm consistent."

Willow came a bit closer, her face falling. "Uhh, bad night?" she asked, now staring at the bruise Buffy had noticed along her temple when she'd braved her reflection.

"I've had better," Buffy agreed, feeling along the warm, raised skin with the tips of her fingers. "Kinda surprised to see you here. I thought you might have pulled an all-nighter, wherever you were."

She glanced up just in time to see Willow's cheeks go pink, though she couldn't tell if that was with anger or embarrassment. Maybe a combination. In truth, Buffy hadn't had much mental bandwidth to dedicate to wondering how Willow had spent her day yesterday—not after everything else. It had been there on the periphery, an acknowledgment as she'd climbed the stairs to fall into bed that her friend had yet to return. And the niggling feeling that maybe that was her fault, given the uncomfortable conversation they had had that morning. The possibility that she might have overstepped. That she might have said something detrimental to Willow's recovery, for the last memories Buffy had of Willow being out at all hours involved Amy and wild stories about the Bronze. The magical equivalent of a bender. Yet, as terrifying as that prospect was, Buffy hadn't had the energy to dwell. Not after being emotionally railroaded on top of the actual physical railroading Legolas had done outside the butcher shop.

"I might have made Xander let me hang out...all day," Willow said, avoiding her gaze. "I had some stuff I needed to work out. I probably would have crashed at his place if he hadn't made me come home."

Buffy pressed her lips together.

"You can call him and ask," her friend went on. "I really was with him. He's probably crabby about it because I really wasn't supposed to stay longer than the interview, but he'll tell you I was there. I didn't *use*."

"I didn't say you did."

"Oh, come on, Buffy, I'm not an idiot. That was what you were thinking, right?"

God, it was too early for this much defensiveness. At this rate, her head would never stop pounding. "Yeah, it crossed my mind," she said. "Like, *floop*. One side of my mind to the next. The rest of my mind was on the new slayer in town who tried to turn me into a shish ka-Buffy when I was picking up blood for Spike and then—"

"What?" Willow's face fell, and Buffy would be lying if she said that wasn't the teeniest bit satisfying. "You saw the other slayer last night?"

"Saw' is not the word I'd use. She thought I'd missed my calling as a living pincushion." She wrinkled her nose and started to reach for the spot on her back before realizing what a bad idea that was. Eight years into this gig and she still needed to be reminded that wounds that were left alone healed the fastest. "Which is why I'm canceling my sessions for the second day in a row. I'm gonna be lucky to have any clients left after this week. And still, no one has gotten back to me about Faith. I really thought Giles would've learned something by now."

"Well, for what it's worth..." Willow came a few steps closer, her eyes in roam-mode. "You don't look pincushiony. Maybe a little banged up, but I'm not seeing any holes that shouldn't—okay, I'm just gonna not finish that sentence because I didn't see where it was going when I started it. But are you okay?"

Buffy gestured to her shoulder, deflating a little. "Only got me the once. Spike helped patch me up."

"Spike."

There was no inflection in the way she spoke, but there didn't need to be. The question was there all the same. And boy howdy, how Buffy did not have the energy

to take a turn down that particular conversational minefield. At least not until she had some coffee in her. Or all the coffee. She hadn't let herself dwell too much on the talk she'd practically forced him to have—after all, what better time to attack the Chirago demon in the room than when exhausted and bleeding?—but she could feel her mind dragging her back there. What he'd said and what it meant. If it meant anything at all.

But that wasn't fair. She knew it meant something. It had to. That the things he'd said were the things she felt. That she hadn't been out of her mind all this time after all. Ruminating and justifying and not sure how to feel because she hadn't known exactly what had happened then, and now she did, and *god*, wasn't that a relief? That her instincts hadn't been faulty or confused, or if they had, there had been good reason. That the thought *this wasn't like other sexual assaults* had cause to live in her head, because it hadn't been.

"Yeah," Buffy replied before wetting her lips. "He was the only one home."

"Dawn?"

"Dawn decided to spend some time with Janice after our talk yesterday and didn't get in until late."

"And now she's running late for school," Dawn announced, popping in from seemingly nowhere. Seriously, her sister didn't walk so much as stomp her way around the house, so her sudden appearance was a bit unsettling.

At least Buffy wasn't the only one surprised. Willow actually jumped. "Oh, hey, Dawnie. Didn't hear you down here."

Dawn didn't respond to that—not verbally, at least. She sucked in her cheeks and cast a glance in the direction of the basement door, and Buffy understood. But Dawn didn't dwell, either, instead nodded at the paper sack waiting on the island. "So what's for lunch today?" she asked in her I'm-not-going-to-talk-about-it-so-don't-bother-trying voice. "Tell me it's something good."

She met Buffy's eyes, then, just long enough for understanding to cement. Unfortunately, there hadn't been much of a chance to catch up the night before, given just *how* late it had been before Dawn had gotten in—Buffy would have to emphasize that she was only being not-punished on grounds of extenuating circumstances and school nights meant home before eleven-thirty—but the few words they'd exchanged had been neutral. Careful. The past year had taught Buffy not to press her sister on her feelings unless the world was at stake, as her sister was not the sort of person who kept things bottled up once she was ready to talk. She *was*, however, the sort of person who might be prompted to unnecessary explosion if made to work at anyone else's pace, and things were volatile enough without tempting the wrath of a teenage meltdown.

"PB and J is a time-honored classic," Buffy said, hoping her tone conveyed the unspoken *Got it*. "I consider that good."

"Maybe if I were five."

"Well, if you wanted something else, you could've gotten up early and made it yourself. This is all I had time for."

"Slacker." Dawn snatched up the paper sack, leveling a mock version of the stink-

eye at her before her expression softened. Not much, but just enough. "Did I hear you're not gonna have any sessions again today? And here I thought the point of the studio was to make money."

"Gee. It's nice to know if you flunk out of school, you'll be able to find reliable work as a stand-up comedian," Buffy shot back. "And my shoulder feels much better. Thank you for asking."

"Honestly, at this point, I figure if it doesn't kill you, it doesn't count." Dawn paused just long enough to shoot her a look that said all the things a teenage girl her age wasn't comfortable saying aloud—*I'm just teasing*, and *thanks*, and *I love you*, and *I'm okay*—before she turned and vanished down the hall.

And Buffy let out a long breath, some of the tension she'd been holding since waking up rolling out of her. If her sister was in fact in a mood to be her bratty self, that had to mean that she was processing everything she'd learned relatively well. Or maybe that was just a comfortable lie she wanted to believe because throwing *Dawn* issues on top of everything else was just a bit too much for her overtaxed brain to handle at the moment. It didn't seem too much to hope that at least one thing in her life could be nice and uncomplicated.

"I take it the talk with Dawnie went all right?" Willow asked, staring at the doorway through which Dawn had disappeared. "She seems mostly normal."

Buffy nodded, then gave her head a shake to clear it. Now that Dawn was officially off to school, she needed to get busy with her second day of cancellation notifications. Wednesdays were college girls and soccer moms, and thankfully no repeats of the clients she'd called the day before. "She's not doing cartwheels or anything, but yeah, it was...better than I thought. She did need some quality Janice time to get her mind off things, though. Hence the getting in late."

"And Spike being here to help you when you got home."

She nodded once more, though without as much enthusiasm, not sure how much she wanted to discuss Spike with Willow, especially given the way things had gone yesterday. "He patched me up," she said with a forced smile. "And we talked. It was...necessary."

"Well, good. I'm glad you two had time to...talk." A pause. "It *was* just talk, right?" "Will—"

Willow brought her hands up and backed a step away. "Sorry. Not my business."

No, it really wasn't, but since when had that ever stopped her friends?

"I just... I don't know," Willow went on. "I guess I don't get you two."

Buffy snorted before she could help herself. "Join the club. Pretty sure we have our own secret handshake."

"I think part of my not getting it is I don't know how to look at it," her friend replied. "Which, for the record, not your problem. It's not like we're extremely close or anything—and I know that sounds sarcastic, but I mean it. Last year, we really weren't. I was so wrapped up in my own stuff and you were... Well..."

"Hungover from Heaven?"

She winced as though the reminder hurt, which in itself was a bit rich. "I guess," she said. "And I've been kinda wallowing in my wallowness and I know

that's not fair. What you said yesterday... Well, it pissed me off, if you really wanna know—"

"I—"

"But mostly it just hurt. Because it was true." Willow held her gaze for a long moment before releasing a breath and shifting her focus to the floor. "Look, I think I reacted like a big sourpuss yesterday because I've been feeling... Well, I don't know. You're not the easiest person to talk to, you know."

Oh good. A guilt trip. Just what she'd ordered.

As though sensing she was on unsteady ground, Willow rushed to add, "And that's because of me. Because of...all the things you said. I mean, how *do* you talk to your best friend after you tried to kill her? And her sister? And, you know, the whole world? I keep waiting for someone in one of my MAA meetings to say something that just makes the lightbulb go on over my head. But the thing about being the only wicked witch to be all Armageddon-y is, well, if I want a rulebook for how to be a person again, the only person who can write it is me."

Buffy supposed that made sense. She also, although reluctantly, supposed that she hadn't been the biggest. Not that she knew how to help, as it wasn't like she'd been here before, either. Things ever since Willow's return had been—well, not shaky between them, but a mock sort of normal. They hadn't really talked about any of what had happened last spring beyond the few words exchanged right after Willow had gotten home, settling instead into a routine that involved a lot of focusing on other things because it was easier fighting the next Big Bad than trying to break down the last one. Especially when the last one happened to have been one of them. And Buffy had admittedly been somewhere else mentally—a *somewhere else* that was currently snoozing in the basement. There was so little of her and so much that needed attention. Work. Dawn. This new slayer. The Council. Spike. Willow. Her feelings about all the above. Shoving one aside in favor of another was the only way she could cope without completely losing her head. And Willow, despite everything, was more or less handled. Buffy could at least trust Xander and Anya to keep an eye on her—Anya especially—whereas all things *Spike* and *Council* and *slayer* were pretty much left to her, one-woman show that she was.

Well, she had another free day on her hands. And a problem to solve that she wasn't getting any closer to solving on her own. Maybe some one-on-one time with Willow could help them both, in that regard.

"What are your plans for today?" Buffy asked before she could second-guess herself.

Willow blinked, visibly thrown. "Huh?"

"Well, I'm getting nowhere just waiting for Giles or someone to let me know what's going on. So, you know, time to roll up my sleeves and start cracking heads."

"What were you thinking?"

"For starters, that if I can't get anyone at the prison to give me a straight answer, maybe I ought to just show up and try to see Faith for myself. And today's your LA day, right?"

"Uhh, yeah." Willow glanced around as though to verify that Buffy was indeed talking to her. "I was gonna go shower here in a few, then head out."

"Well, the prison is about an hour outside of LA, according to what Angel told me yesterday," she went on. "So...what if we head up together? Get you to your meeting and then go see if we can get in to see Faith. Make sure she's still alive, at the very least."

For a long moment, Willow didn't say anything, apparently stunned into speechlessness. Then a light entered her eyes, brightening her whole face. Not a lot but with a tentative sort of hope that made something in Buffy's chest give an awful, bitter-sweet pang that their relationship had somehow come to this.

"You wouldn't be able to come into my meeting with me," Willow said, her tone sheepish. "I mean, one of the As is for *anonymous*. So as long as you're okay just waiting in the car, that is very much doable."

"How long are the meetings?"

"Umm, they go about ninety minutes."

Ninety minutes with nothing to do but sit with her own damn thoughts. That sounded rather terrifying, considering all the trouble her brain got her in when she should be focusing on other things. But Buffy nodded anyway. If nothing else, she really needed to make sure Faith was alive. And if she wasn't, she needed to find out what had happened to her. If there was anything linking Faith's death back to the Council.

Not that Buffy knew what she'd be looking for, but she hadn't been lying when she'd said she couldn't wait around any longer.

"That's fine," she said. "It'll give me time to... I dunno. It'll just give me time."

That sounded nice and lame, but thankfully, Willow didn't seem to notice. She was too busy nodding, her previous reticence morphing entirely into enthusiasm. "All right! I'll, uh, just go and get ready then. This'll be fun! We haven't done the road trip thing since before college."

Buffy wasn't sure she'd classify a two-hour drive so her friend could attend magical rehab before swinging by a prison as a road trip, but she didn't have the heart to say as much. Alone-time with Willow would be a lot more bearable if everyone remained in a good mood. "I'll make my calls," she said. "And I better check in with Spike before we go."

She might have missed the telling widening of Willow's eyes if she hadn't been waiting for it, but her friend didn't have any clever remarks to add this time. Just nodded as though having a resident vampire was perfectly ordinary and not at all bizarre. "Okey dokey. Ready to go in a half-hour?"

"Make it forty-five. I'll need to get ready, too."

"All right, but we don't wanna be much longer than that. Not if I wanna get there on time, and I do."

Buffy raised her right hand. "I solemnly swear, we'll be on the road an hour from now."

Which was good, as that also gave her a handy excuse for not dragging out her conversation with Spike. These days, they tended to do a lot of talking around each

other. Or maybe that would have improved, now that the Chirago demon had been slain.

Though she wasn't sure she'd ever let herself fully relax around Spike again. Some part of her guard would always be up.

And that thought, for reasons she didn't care to examine too closely, was rather depressing.



ONLY IT WASN'T AS AWKWARD as she would have thought.

Buffy was still thinking about that as Willow piloted them out of town. The way Spike had looked at her as she'd come down the stairs, his expression that annoyingly unreadable slate he'd somehow mastered while off doing god-knows-what over the summer. And ready for her, as she'd known he would be.

"Heard," he'd said by way of greeting. He'd been on a cot along the far wall, sitting up as though waiting for her. Which, she realized now, he probably had been. "You and Red are makin' a girls' day of it."

"You could try to not eavesdrop on my every conversation, you know."

"Could try not talkin' so bloody loud, too, if it bothers you."

"We weren't talking loud."

"Yeah, well, vampire. We gonna have this fight every morning?"

It had been light, casual, and almost enough to make her grin. Which made her—her being Present Buffy—frown. Grinning at Spike was not something she could let herself do. That way was paved with bad ideas and mixed signals, especially after they had finally talked about that night in the bathroom. But she'd wanted to grin, the same way she'd once grinned when he'd made an off-color remark about having eaten a decorator. There had been numerous things she'd done, ways she'd acted, that had given him reason to think her feelings were anything but what she'd told him they were. And she couldn't afford to go there again.

"How's the shoulder?" he'd asked before she could dwell too long.

She'd rolled it on reflex. "It, uhh, hurts, but not as much. I think I'll be good to start giving classes again tomorrow. As long as I don't over-exert."

"Smells like it's healing up just fine."

"Because *that's* not creepy at all."

He'd smirked, and the sight of that smirk had made her stomach flip. It hadn't been a mean or a performative smirk—any of the sort of smirks she'd come to expect since he'd bulldozed his way back into her life. And that, for whatever reason, had surprised her. Made her think of hours spent in the cozy seclusion of his crypt. Him above her, under her, guiding her up and down his cock and teasing her with his low voice, his lips pulled into a smirk just like the one he'd brought out today. The one that said she was protesting too much, and he thought it was adorable.

"Can help you change the wrapping before you head off," he'd offered, either not realizing he'd knocked her world off its axis by doing nothing more than twisting his mouth in a certain way, or not caring. But that wasn't true, either. Not for Spike. He

always cared. And that had always been the problem. "Did a bit of reading last night after you popped off on how to tend to it."

"It?" she'd echoed hoarsely.

"Your latest battle scar."

"No. I mean, I knew that's what you mean. I just didn't realize I had medical textbooks lying around the house."

He'd shrugged but looked away quickly enough that she'd known she'd embarrassed him. "Not a book. She leaves her computer on the table. Figured it couldn't hurt to learn up on how to care for—"

"You used Willow's computer?"

"Well, yeah. Just for a bit."

The image of Spike hunched over a keyboard, his features thrown into sharp relief thanks to the light of the computer screen, was so anomalous to what she knew about him that Buffy had found herself fighting back a laugh. One that he'd caught, unfortunately, for he'd gone a bit rigid and lifted his chin in defiance. "Somethin' funny, Slayer?"

"Not really, just never pictured you as the computer type. And you better tell me now if you looked up anything *else*. I don't want her accusing Dawn of clogging up her hard drive with porn."

"For fuck's sake, I didn't look up any bloody porn," he'd snapped, rolling his eyes.

"Because that's so outside the realm of possibility."

"If I'm gonna have myself a wank, love, it's not gonna be while sittin' at the sodding table in plain view of anyone who decided to toddle on down those stairs. I'm not a complete animal."

"Right. And with your vampire hearing and sense of smell, you definitely wouldn't have you ample warning—"

"Just how fast is it you think I can move?"

He had looked so completely insulted that Buffy had decided to stop egging him on, torn as she had been between finding his reaction entertaining and utterly bewildering. That was just Spike these days. Very little of what he said or did made sense to her. But then, his notions of honor had always been a bit suspect.

That was one of the reasons he'd always stood out to her, she'd realized. Nothing about Spike had ever been what she would have thought. Even when he'd acted every bit like the vampire he was, he'd done it in ways that left her mystified.

"I don't know if Dawn will come right home after school," she'd said instead. "I kinda doubt it, honestly, but I just thought you might wanna be prepared in case she did."

He'd nodded, tightened his jaw and glanced away. "Thought you said the talk with her went all right."

"It did. I mean, as all right as it could, I guess. That doesn't mean she's *not* a teenage hormone bomb who could go kablooeey at any second. The most I'm comfortable saying is she's not likely to try to dust you."

"Likely," he'd echoed, meeting her eyes again.

Buffy had shrugged. "I'll say it again, teenage hormone bomb."

“Comforting, that is.” Spike had sighed and edged forward. “So, need a hand changin’ the dressing before you toddle off?”

The question had thrown her, and though she thought she’d recovered nicely, there had still been an uncomfortable lull as she’d considered how to answer. Even now that it was behind her, that she was in the passenger seat of Willow’s car as it zoomed its way down the interstate, Buffy wasn’t sure she’d made the right call. Only he’d been there—right there—and offering, and the first-aid kit had still been in the kitchen. And maybe she’d been a bit curious herself. Maybe she’d needed to test him a little. Test herself, too. Coming downstairs and making less-awkward conversation, unburdened from the weight of the one thing they had been determinately not discussing, dipping her foot into the water to see if...what? If he’d revert to form now that it was all out? If she could trust what he’d told her a few nights ago, that he would truly never act on his feelings for her anymore? If he could be near her when she was in a state of undress without leering or making with the suggestive comments or anything else that had defined her understanding of Spike up until he’d returned to town?

There had been a million reasons to tell him no, that it was handled. But she hadn’t. Instead, she’d said all right, turned and walked back up the stairs and to the kitchen with a vampire on her heels. Stripped off her top and let him unwrap the wound he’d dressed up the night before.

“Looks better,” he’d said, his voice low and near her ear. Her neck tingling with the same sort of awareness that had kept her alive this long, every nerve in her body screaming both *predator* and *Spike*, attuned as she’d become to him over time. She remembered when she’d first realized that—that she could feel him the same way she’d once felt Angel. Remembered the thought wiggling her out because it had threatened the rosy soulmate-y picture she’d once painted of her first love, that she’d been able to feel him because he was part of her and that part was always calling out. Nope. Turned out that the body just knew after a while, which tingly was for which vampire. And hers knew Spike.

He hadn’t been kidding when he’d said he’d done some reading on wound care, and he didn’t waste time lollygagging, either. He scrubbed his hands before taking to the angry spot with a wet cloth, applied more antibacterial cream, and wrapped it up all nice again within five minutes. Willow didn’t even have time to come downstairs and catch them in a compromising position—a thought that hadn’t even occurred to Buffy until she was making her way to her room to get dressed.

Another thing that hadn’t occurred to her? She’d been wearing a sleepshirt. No bra underneath. And Spike hadn’t said a word. Hadn’t, to her knowledge, even batted an eye.

That was good, she told herself. It proved what he’d said was true. All he wanted was to help. And there was absolutely no reason for this knowledge to make her feel anything but relief.

Yet here she was. Stewing in not-relief and beyond frustrated with herself because, just what the hell was her problem?

“You’re sure you’re okay with just waiting in the car?” Willow asked, jarring Buffy

out of her confusing Spike-shaped thoughts. “My meetings are not in the best area of town, otherwise I’d suggest window shopping or something fun. There’s a coffee-house within walking distance. Unless it closed down since last time, which, well, I wouldn’t be surprised. One of the guys in my group thinks it was run by—”

“Willow, you’re rambling.”

“I know,” she agreed without hesitation, tightening her grip on the steering wheel. “You’ve just been quiet for so long, it made me nervous. Nervous Willow is rambly Willow.”

“Am I making you nervous?”

A high-pitched laugh peeled off Willow’s lips. “Do I have to answer that?”

“Because of what I said yesterday?”

She nodded, keeping her gaze on the road. And for a few long seconds, neither of them spoke, and Buffy wondered if that was it—all Willow would give her. There wasn’t much she could say, herself, especially if she wasn’t sure what part of yesterday’s I-get-to-choose-who-stays-here speech had caused the most friction. Not that there was anything to do but address said friction, because she certainly wasn’t taking anything back. Just another relationship in her life that she would have to dance around, which was the very definition of unfair considering that—with Willow especially—the stuff that had led to the friction hadn’t been Buffy’s doing.

“Can I just...talk out loud for a few minutes?” Willow asked at last. “I think that might help.”

Help her, maybe. Buffy blew out a deep breath and settled back into her seat. “Okay.”

“All right...well, it’s just...things have been weird since I got home. You remember that day? You said you didn’t know how you felt, and you were still trying to work some stuff out, how you felt about everything that I did, and that was fine. I understood that. I was just thrilled you actually wanted me there.” She began tapping her fingers against the steering wheel, then seemed to force herself to stop once she realized what she was doing. “I dunno what I thought would happen after that. I was just so nervous about being home—before I came back, I really thought you might just tell me to get lost after everything that had happened and it’s not exactly like I could blame you. But you didn’t. And then we started doing normal things and you asked me to go to the Magic Box and even do a spell for you and it just felt like regular Scooby-ness. And everything was just...like it had been before. I mean, I go to these meetings, and I haven’t done any magic since that time you asked, but it felt almost normal. So hearing yesterday that you trust Spike more than you trust me, even after what he did to you—”

“What? I so did not say that.”

“Buffy. Come on.” Willow looked at her again, a bit more directly this time. “You said he didn’t mean to do what he did, and that was the difference between us. *He* didn’t mean to, but I did. And...I know he hasn’t been this for a few years now, but Spike was the bad guy once. After what I learned he did to you, I kinda just slid him back under *bad guy* and figured you had too. But you didn’t—at least, not more than you did with me. And this is gonna sound really dumb, but even after I was

done being all black magicky, I never thought of myself as the bad guy. Or...*our* kind of bad guys. Just that I'd really, really screwed up and hurt the people that I love and that there was something large and dangerous inside me that could eat the world if I let it. But I made the choices that nearly ended the world. I *was* the bad guy. Some part of me had to know it was wrong, that *I* was wrong, but I didn't want to stop because I was feeling so much, and she was gone. So... Yeah, it hit me kinda hard yesterday. Probably should've hit me hard way before then, but yesterday was kind of my lightbulb moment. And I thought I'd already had all of those. Learning I hadn't was...massive."

Buffy pressed her lips together as the air around them fell silent, not sure if she was supposed to say something here or not. Thinking had suddenly become very hard, her mind stuck on the assertion—you *trust Spike more than you trust me*—both in full rebellion and full horror, because that couldn't be true. It just couldn't.

The most terrifying thing? It didn't feel wrong. It didn't necessarily feel right, either, but it didn't feel wrong.

It felt *possible*.

And just what the hell did that mean? That somehow, despite everything that had happened and continued to happen, despite all he'd done to her and all she'd done to him, she'd found believing in Spike less complicated than believing in the person who was and would always be her best friend? But talking to Spike had been like pulling teeth up until last night. An exercise in nerve and frustration and worry and regret, and that *badn't* been the way things had been with Willow. Things with Willow had been...well, as she'd said, kinda normal.

But also not, as Buffy hadn't been willing to slide back into old habits. Hadn't been willing to shelve her worry that something might happen again, might set Willow off, and when she looked at it like that, most of the non-Scooby business conversations they'd had since her return had been superficial. Buffy trying to navigate what life looked like after surviving the apocalypse her best friend had tried to start. Never sure how she felt and not willing to nudge it too much, either for her preoccupation with everything else or her fear of finding out something she wished she hadn't.

And there had never been any question over what had gone wrong with Willow. Buffy hadn't spent a summer turning her actions over and over in her head, trying to figure out how she felt about what had happened. The only questions she'd ever asked herself had been based on her own uncertainty that she *could* forgive. That she *could* trust. That Willow even deserved it. She'd stopped asking herself that recently, but she couldn't pretend that talking with Willow was any easier than talking with Spike. There was only the suggestion of ease because they lived together. Because they didn't really talk about anything substantial, and Buffy wasn't sure she was curious enough to ask. If underneath, she wasn't still livid about everything that had happened.

She had been curious with Spike, though. Enough that it had gnawed at her insides. That she'd thought she might have been completely out of her mind, doubting and questioning and missing him even though she'd hated him, only she'd

never hated him. Not really. At least not the sort of hate that had any weight to it. The sort that took root and stayed.

And without warning, it hit her. This thing that had been there, always on the periphery, always just outside of reach, informing every thought and feeling and whatever fell in between. Why she hadn't hesitated before she'd told him where he was staying. Why the way he felt was so familiar. Why she'd known, somehow, that he was in danger two nights ago and to run like hell if she wanted him to be here tomorrow. It was there in a thousand suggestions, a thousand times he'd told her and she'd said no, and a thousand more questions she'd asked herself. Plagued herself with when she'd been at her lowest and tried to explore when life had been closer to bearable. Those few times they had between the pain.

Turned out the idiot had been right all along. Buffy had loved him. She *had* loved him. And that was how he'd broken her heart.

"I think I'm gonna be sick," Buffy announced, putting a hand to her stomach as she lurched forward. "Pull over."

Thankfully, Willow didn't ask questions, just did as she was told and steered the car onto the shoulder. And Buffy had her seatbelt off and was out almost before the wheels stopped turning, staggering into tall yellowing grass just seconds ahead of everything rushing up and out. Blistering her throat and making her eyes water and her heart was racing a mile a second, and it was still true when she was done. As true as it had been yesterday and the day before that and the day before that. A thing she'd known—and she had known, she had—but had hoped could be ignored into nonexistence.

"Because you love me," he'd said right before.

It hadn't been love the way she remembered it, but it had been love.

And she had no idea what that meant for her now.

DRAIN THE PRESSURE FROM THE SWELLING

FOR SO MUCH OF HER LIFE, BUFFY HAD THOUGHT LOVE HAD A DEFINITIVE FEELING, both universal and easily identifiable, and mostly not requiring further examination. It was just there, a natural part of her, like her fingers and toes. For instance, she knew she loved her mother and her sister. She also loved her father, in a way that was both painful and distant. And when she'd moved to Sunnydale, her definition of love had broadened to include others. Friends like Willow and Xander, who were practically family—but the sort of family you chose. And there was Giles, more a father to her than Hank could ever hope to be. Buffy's social circle prior to becoming the Slayer had been mostly superficial. Friends who were only friends until someone cooler gave them an excuse to cut her out. The idea that she could love her friends the way she loved her family had been rather novel, but also an intrinsic part of her that she just understood as unyielding, even if it made her life confusing at times. For regardless of the ungodly amount of mental seesawing she'd done on the subject of Willow and her place in her life, Buffy had not once doubted that she loved her best friend, or that her love for her was the reason she'd been so conflicted about Willow's return in the first place. Why working through how she felt about everything that had happened last May had been so essential—*was* so essential. Nothing but fierce, unyielding love could make her do that. Make her want to fight her fears and hesitation and herself to let someone who had hurt her so much back into her life.

And somehow, because the love she had for her friends and family felt similar, Buffy had convinced herself that romantic love should follow suit. This had been particularly true after Riley had left, when she'd been in deep analysis of her own hang-ups and second-guessing everything about the relationship. Wondering if he'd been right, if Xander had been right, and she'd been holding back. Refusing to give all of herself over, because her love for Riley *hadn't* been like what she'd felt with

Angel. It hadn't been all-consuming, desperate, and borderline addictive—he the drug, she the junkie. The sort of love that felt like dying. No, it had been nice, comfortable, and safe. A relationship without the pain and fighting she'd warped herself into believing were the price one paid for love and passion.

Riley should have been perfect for her, and he had been on paper. A man who lived in her world of monsters but was not a monster himself, capable of holding his own in a fight, liked by her friends and family, the works. But either he hadn't been enough, or she hadn't been enough, and that had been the end of that. The fact that his leaving hadn't crushed her or broken her heart likely meant that he'd been right in some way. She hadn't loved him or hadn't let herself love him as she had Angel.

And as painful as that realization had been, it had been helpful, too. Let her know that she knew exactly what romantic love felt like and not to mistake anything else for it ever again, lest she hurt another man the way she'd hurt Riley. Lest she feel more unneeded pain, herself.

Then she'd died and been resurrected. And in bold defiance of everything she'd thought she'd known about herself it had been Spike that had truly brought her back to life. With passion and fire, and all the things she'd thought she couldn't have with anyone else...and she'd hated him for it. Hated him for making himself her addiction, poisoning her with the need to touch him and be touched, especially when she'd known—she'd *known*—how completely wrong it was. No flirting with danger the way she had with Angel, rather embracing it with both arms. The craving that started as a low, whispered promise she'd try to ignore until it had crawled under her skin, consumed so much of her she thought she might go nuts if she didn't quench it. And hope, just hope, that this last time would be enough, and she wouldn't need to surrender to it again. That part had felt very much like Angel, only not. Being with Spike had been a temporary balm, one that felt good in the moment but made her miserable after. And that had meant it couldn't be love. Love didn't make people miserable.

Buffy inhaled sharply, giving her head a shake and straightening in the passenger seat. It had been almost an hour since Willow had disappeared inside the old office building for her MAA meeting, all furrowed brow and soft *are you okays* that Buffy hadn't answered honestly because, well, how could she be okay? Spike had spent months trying to convince her that she loved him, and she'd said no. Over and over, she'd said no. She couldn't, she wouldn't, because Buffy didn't love without trust and didn't love vampires, and she certainly didn't love soulless vampires who had tried to kill her and her friends more times than she could count.

Except all of that was completely bogus because she *had* loved without trust. She *had* loved a vampire. She had loved a *soulless* vampire at that, one that had not only tried to kill her and her friends, but also end the world for good measure. And she'd learned how much love like that could cost her. Angel, at least, had been driven to evil rather than evil from the start. No less dangerous because of the soul that hampered him, but easier to embrace. To explain to herself and others. He wasn't a monster—he was a man who happened to have fangs. That he'd become a monster was something outside the realm of his control.

Spike had just been a monster. A confusing monster, yes, but a monster all the same. Someone who represented everything she was supposed to hate, who would never be able to understand her the way she needed to be understood, support her the way she needed to be supported, or care about the things she cared about. All of this had made the question of whether she loved him an easy one to answer. No. She couldn't. Therefore, she wouldn't. End of story.

But that hadn't made him any less her drug or been enough to keep her from returning time and again for her fix. And all throughout last year, she'd been terrified of what she was doing—what she couldn't seem to stop from doing, even though she was supposed to be better than that. She was supposed to be the Slayer, and the Slayer didn't do these things, didn't let these things be done to her, and she especially didn't crave them. What sort of person had her friends brought back from the dead if she could let herself give in to these urges? If she couldn't say no?

And god, her friends. There had been the worry about what they would say, how they would look at her if they knew. Then the emptiness she'd experienced when away from him—or what she'd thought was emptiness—and the promise that he would make her feel something, and feeling something was better than feeling nothing, even if it had made her the worst sort of person for giving in.

And the knowledge that he loved her, even wrong as it had been, wrong as it remained—she had craved that too. Craved it with an intensity that had threatened to burn her out.

But it hadn't made her happy. The more she'd given in to her addiction, the worse she'd felt, and that couldn't be love. It just couldn't.

God, she'd been such an idiot. And apparently, everyone in the world had seen it except her.

"You *just now* realized you were in love with Spike?" Willow had asked, not bothering to disguise her incredulity either on her face or in her voice. She'd been a good friend, helped Buffy negotiate her way back to the car following her epic upchuck, promised they'd stop and get some ginger ale and crackers when they hit the next exit, and hadn't been *too* pushy in the quest for details, but pushy enough that Buffy had known she'd need to offer up some sort of explanation. And she hadn't had a chance to ask herself if this was a situation that warranted the truth or not before that truth had spilled out of her anyway. This awful, suddenly all-consuming knowledge that she had been in love with her mortal enemy.

"Uhh, yeah," Buffy had replied. It had taken a second for everything to hit in a way that stuck in her mind—the words Willow had chosen, paired with the voice and the wrinkled brow—but when it had, it had brought with it another wave of nausea. Lucky her, she hadn't had anything left in her stomach to throw up. "Wait. What do you mean by, *just now*?"

"I just... I'm surprised."

"You thought I was in love with Spike?"

Willow had lifted a shoulder. "I... Yes? I mean, I guess I wasn't, you know, a hundred percent sure or anything. Not until yesterday, when you told me he was staying at the house. I figured you had to love him then."

"I don't," she'd blurted, her heart giving a mad little spasm. On this, Buffy remained resolute. She might have been in love with Spike *in the past*, but she wasn't anymore. And the love she'd felt then hadn't been a good sort of love, anyway. Just the only love she'd been able to feel at the moment—parasitic and lonely, and desperate to experience anything other than what she had to live with the rest of the time. "I did but I don't anymore. I can't."

"You *can't*? Is there a rule or something?"

"Will—"

"Buffy, you told me you love me yesterday. I'm pretty sure if you can love me, you can love Spike, too."

"It's different," she'd argued. "Spike and I... Whatever we were, it wasn't good. We weren't good for each other." Never mind the thousands of other arguments that had lived in her head so long they were practically carved into the inner lining of her skull. The soul, or lack thereof, and how dangerous that was. How dangerous it would always be. That he'd hurt her, hurt her so much there were rooms in her house that she couldn't go inside anymore without feeling some phantom pain. And yes, she loved Willow and always would, but that didn't mean the love was straightforward or uncomplicated, and friend love and romantic love were way different things, with the latter wielding considerably more power than the former because it required a level of complete and total trust that she just couldn't reach anymore. The kind that came with the ability to completely and totally break her, especially if she surrendered to it.

And Spike had shattered her heart once already without even trying. Neither of them had known he could do that.

Buffy knew it now, though. She knew it now and it could never happen again.

"I care about him," she'd told Willow. That had felt right. Scary to say aloud but right. She did care about him—hell, she'd told him as much when she'd insisted that he couldn't stay at the crypt any longer. She wouldn't have let him into her house, back into her life, if there had been nothing there. "I can care about him without loving him."

"You can also love him without being with him," Willow had retorted. "Pretty sure we've both learned that one the hard way."

Another thing that was perfectly true and had made whatever defensiveness Buffy had felt cropping up—the heat along her neck and dancing through her nervous system—fade back to a manageable level. It wasn't like realizing she'd once been in love with Spike had really changed anything. Certainly not their circumstances or what had happened.

But it was still a really big thing to live with, this knowledge. That the love had both existed and that it hadn't necessarily died. That it might still be there somewhere, transformed into something else following what had happened in the bathroom. Something she was still figuring out.

This entire time. God, this *entire time*...

Buffy moved without thinking, shoving open the car door and sliding out until her feet hit the concrete that made up the parking along the building's outskirts. She

drew in a deep breath that she almost immediately regretted—she somehow always forgot how poor the air quality was in LA—wrapped her arms around herself and gave her surroundings a thorough review. Willow hadn't been kidding when she'd said her meetings were in a not-great part of town and that there wouldn't be much to do. She had mentioned a coffeehouse, but being that Buffy didn't want to roam too far, she decided against trying to find it, and she was pretty sure the meeting was almost over. Plus, there were other things demanding her attention, like how she hoped to get in to see Faith when this was all over—she'd never had occasion to visit someone in prison before—and what exactly she would say when they were face-to-face. It wasn't like they had been pen-pals.

There was also the low, burning worry that something would go wrong, and she *wouldn't* be able to see Faith today. Or she'd learn definitively that Faith was dead. And if she wasn't dead, what did that mean? That the Council had lied to Giles following Buffy's leap off the tower? If so, to what end?

No. While there were very few things right now that Buffy believed with absolute certainty, one of those things was that neither of her non-drowning deaths had resulted in Legolas. And if Faith was indeed still alive, then that made matters both more straightforward and more complicated.

It meant the thing she and Spike had talked about was probably right. The Council *had* drafted their very own poster child—one ready to do their bidding, which inevitably opened the door to a whole host of new questions, including why the Council had tried to entice Spike into killing Buffy for them when they had their own little murder machine more than eager to do the job. Why they would even consider setting a demon with Spike's history loose on the world again—if that had been a red herring, and if so, to what end. And all of these questions, and the questions to follow, were more important than the realization that last year, she'd been in love with a vampire. Her life was so much larger right now than who she'd been sleeping with and what she'd felt, yet everything else seemed manageable in comparison. Another day, another threat, another bad guy to beat. Only this potential bad guy was in her head, making her doubt herself and every decision she'd made. And maybe they had a right to it, considering, well, everything.

Buffy heaved a sigh and shut the car door, not sure where she was going to go but knowing she couldn't stay still much longer. *Still* wasn't a thing she did well in any regard, particularly when her mind was so full. If there wasn't anywhere to wander around here, maybe she could just wander around inside a bit. Peek into rooms, read whatever literature they had pinned to the walls, or find a bathroom. The ginger ale and the crackers she'd forced down her throat had dealt with the gross post-puke feeling just fine, but she could stand to make sure she didn't look as runover as she felt. So Buffy found herself moving toward the door she'd watched Willow disappear through, which, despite the sign on the door warning that it was kept locked at all times, swung open without resistance.

The inside was pretty much what she'd expected, based on the exterior. A lobby that led to a network of narrow hallways full of darkened glass doors, some with faded FOR LEASE signs pinned to the front and others marked with peeling decals

promoting whatever business had been last to vacate. This made the office reserved for MAA meetings especially easy to spot—even without the piece of old printer paper taped to the office number, *MAA* scrawled across in thick black ink—as it was the only one lit from the inside. Buffy saw the restroom a few doors down, thankfully clearly marked, and scurried past the MAA meeting, feeling vaguely like she was getting away with something. The voices coming from the other side weren't soft, rather seemed bolstered by the knowledge that the building was otherwise vacant, making it hard to ignore the snippets of conversation as they echoed into the empty hall. Someone—not Willow—was talking about a recent relapse and sounded to be on the verge of a breakdown, and that was the sort of private thing an outsider shouldn't hear.

Once Buffy was in front of a mirror, she almost wished she'd stayed in the car. No one wore *recently vomited* all that well and she looked especially worn out, not to mention waxy.

"Oh well," she muttered, trying to wipe away the fatigue in her eyes. It didn't work. "You're going to a prison, not on a date."

And while that was perfectly true, Buffy was not so far removed from the version of herself that had viewed Faith as competition that she wouldn't have liked to at least have the appearance of having her life together.

Just another thing that had gone wrong recently. The list was starting to get embarrassing.

Buffy stepped back into the hall a few minutes later, hedging on whether she should head back to the car or try to find some other way to eat the time before the meeting ended. She supposed she could always try to hunt down a payphone, call the Magic Box to check-in. There had been a few clients she hadn't been able to reach, rather left phone messages, and it was possible she'd have to do some light damage control if they showed up expecting a session she wasn't there to give. She could also let Anya know to be on Dawn-alert that afternoon, as she wasn't sure what time she and Willow could be expected to return home. Hell, she didn't know what the process was for visiting someone in prison—how long it took to get through security, or for the prisoner to be pulled from whatever they were doing and into the visitation room. If it was an instant thing or if she could expect a wait. Probably a wait. Which meant it would likely be well past dark before she and Willow crossed back into Sunnydale. Beyond the shop's closing time, leaving Dawn to her own devices or possibly home alone with Spike, and that was the sort of heads-up her sister needed.

Except Buffy didn't want to call. She didn't want to talk to Anya or Dawn or anyone just yet, convinced—irrationally as it was—that someone would hear something in her voice that she would have no way to explain. Nothing had changed since she'd left that morning, but at the same time, everything had changed. Everything she'd thought she'd known about herself and the sort of person she was. Sure, what had been true was still true even if the circumstances surrounding that truth had shifted, but the fact that they had—the fact that she'd been so blind to her own feelings—threw everything into question. She wasn't sure how to go back to being the Buffy who hadn't known she'd been in love with Spike. The Buffy who had believed

she'd never be able to love someone without a soul, who had screamed it again and again until it had become her mantra. A piece of Buffy gospel, as irrefutable as it was sacrosanct.

The only thing worse than talking to one of the others—others who, like Willow, might have already known this—was the thought of talking to Spike. He'd always been able to see things she wished he couldn't, known exactly where to push and where to prod, and even if he wasn't doing that now, that didn't mean he wouldn't start. Break the tentative *whatever* they'd reached last night and enjoyed this morning. And god, she couldn't stand that. Not when she'd made it this far.

Buffy let out a breath and decided the car was the lesser of all evils until Willow was free again. She started down the hall, once more doing her best to not listen to what was being said inside the meeting room, and once more failing miserably. It was almost impossible to not listen when she knew she shouldn't—the act of trying to disengage just made her brain latch on harder. Still, she was determined to respect the sanctity of the meeting and hurried past the meeting room both as quickly as she could and while making as little noise as possible.

It didn't work. The words reached her anyway. And they made something inside of her wrench.

"I just wanted to feel," a woman was saying, her voice thick but clear. "And it was...hard, you know. Living like that. *With* that, day after day."

Buffy teetered to a stop without meaning to, inhaling sharply. Frozen for a second, waiting for the rest of her to come online and tell her to keep moving. But there was something so familiar in that, the chords of a song she had just recently gotten out of her head, that there was no hope of convincing her feet to push forward. She remained where she was, her heart thundering and her pulse racing and her skin suddenly on fire.

"Waking up in that house," the woman went on. "Seeing their things. Like they were still there. I know it's dumb, but I couldn't pack it up. People kept telling me I should. Move on." There was a grunt and a sniff. Whoever was speaking took a breath. "I didn't *want* to move on. I wanted them back. My friends... We weren't really a coven, but I guess you could call it that, they did everything they could to stop me. 'It's not possible to raise the dead,' 'even if they came back, they wouldn't be the same,' 'natural law,' yadda yadda. But I figured they couldn't know. That magic existed for a reason. If they wouldn't help me, I'd find someone who would...and that's how I met Malik."

Her blood was rushing so hard now it was a wonder she could hear anything else, but she could. Loud and clear. As though every cell in her body were suddenly completely attuned to what was going on in that room, feeding it back to her in real-time. Buffy forced herself to inhale, then to exhale, make sure her lungs stayed in motion even if the rest of her was on strike.

It wasn't the same, she told herself. Whatever was being discussed, or confessed, wasn't the same as what had happened to her. Wanting to feel, yeah, that had been familiar, but the rest was more Willow's territory. She was just hypersensitive at the moment. Emotionally compromised. Anyone would be after having the realization

she'd had. And it was human nature to pick out pieces of other people's stories and see oneself in them. Hell, she was pretty sure that was the point of these meetings.

Just keep walking, she told herself.

She didn't.

"Malik was...different. He was a Sadecki demon. I'd never known a real demon before." A note of fondness mixed with grief entered the woman's voice. "Sadeckis are psychics. They can put thoughts in your head, talk to you without needing to actually talk... Malik had been a dealer at one point. Not like other demons, not like this Rack that Willow talks about—"

"Good," a voice that was undoubtedly Willow's interjected. There was a beat, then she added, "Sorry, I just... I know he's someone I should feel bad about killing, but the fewer people like him around, the better."

"Willow," said a third voice, stronger than the last, but in a kind way that instantly put Buffy at ease. "This is Molly's time."

"I don't mind," the owner of the first voice—Molly, presumably—rushed to add. "He sounds all kinds of awful. But Malik wasn't like that. At least...if he was, he wasn't with me. It was just... He knew what I was feeling without me needing to say anything. I didn't have to pretend with him. Didn't have to be happy when I wasn't. And that was nice. He always knew what I needed, just when I needed it. For a while that was enough. He could fill my head with other thoughts and let me feel something that wasn't just...*nothing*. But then it stopped being enough. I don't know, maybe I had too much magic inside me. The effects wore off faster and I'd just be back where I was, only it was a thousand times worse because I knew I could feel something else. I asked him for more and he...he said he loved me, so he gave me whatever I asked. Even when it started to hurt him."

The image had been living on the surface of her mind since yesterday, so it didn't take much at all to summon. Spike on the ground in the alley, battered almost beyond recognition, coughing and telling her to lay it on him. Lay it all on him. Buffy pressed her lips together, squeezed her eyes shut, again commanded her now-shaking legs to move forward. Again, didn't move because the rest of her was captured. It hadn't even been the only time, the alley. Just the worst.

Her worst, maybe. She wondered what Spike's version of *worst* would have been. He'd looked awful that night, his eyes swollen shut and blood pouring from his nose, but not lost or dejected. Not frustrated or hurt, the way he'd so often been when she'd pull away from him and start searching for her clothes. When the high had been reached, and she'd felt all she could and shoved at his chest to get him off her, ignored him when he asked if she wanted company on patrol. Tuned him out the times he'd offered to go grab dinner, swing something by for her and Dawn so she didn't have to worry about it. Or perhaps the look he'd given her when she'd told him he was convenient—or every time she'd blanched after he whispered that he loved her.

Except that last time. In his crypt, her heart and head twisted together, full of possibilities and what-ifs and regrets of the path not chosen. Needing to be something to someone, and she knew what she was to Spike. Knew how he felt about her,

how he looked at her, and desperate to be with someone who loved her like he did. Who could see past everything she was and everything she wasn't, all her failures and the things she was trying so hard to be, and not care that she was broken. She'd looked into his eyes then and asked him to say it, and he had, and she hadn't torn away. Had kept looking at him, watched as he lit up, watched as he grappled with the possibility that something had changed. That they had reached a turning point.

It had been the right move, ending it. The way things had been between them hadn't been sustainable. Even if she had been in love with him, what she'd told Willow earlier was true. That hadn't been good love—it had been toxic, parasitic, even. Buffy needing, Spike wanting, pulling each other down and addicted to the fall. Spike giving her whatever she asked and more besides, and Buffy taking, taking, using him even if he didn't mind being used. Knowing it was wrong. Knowing *she* was wrong for doing it but not caring enough to fight.

That wasn't the sort of love that had a chance of surviving on its own. Even if things had been different.

God, so why did she feel like this?

"I didn't take it seriously when he said it hurt," Molly from MAA was saying when Buffy pulled herself out of her thoughts. "I mean, he didn't either. He'd laugh about it, tell me I was making him sore in the best way. But I'm not stupid. I knew he was worried. I just... I didn't want him to be worried and I didn't want to stop. I wanted him to keep taking away those terrible thoughts—I hoped he'd be able to just make me forget completely if he took enough. And I wouldn't have to go home to my house and remember my mom and sister were dead. I even didn't mind the thought that I might completely forget them, because if I did, I wouldn't have to live with missing them anymore." There was a pause. Her voice had grown heavy, started trembling under its own weight. "Last month, it was a year since the accident. I wanted to get... I dunno, wasted? I just kept thinking about all the things I should've done. How if I'd been in the car, I might've been able to think of the right kind of spell to make it so it didn't happen. And those thoughts... Those thoughts can drive you absolutely out of your mind. I begged Malik to take them away and he did, but only for like, a half hour before they were back. So I asked for more and he gave it. He kept giving it, and it wasn't enough. He wasn't giving me *enough* so I decided, fuck it, I know what I need. And I... I..."

But she couldn't get it out, whatever it was, rather dissolved, and Buffy had to clap a hand over her mouth to keep from dissolving with her, torn between being shocked at her own reaction and pissed off. How in the world had she become someone who would lurk in hallways and listen for snippets of stories that sounded like they could have been hers? She was better than this—stronger, too. More than that, she'd already had her breakdown today and couldn't afford another one.

Knowing this didn't do much to convince her legs to start walking, though, or battle down the rising concern that she might get sick all over again. It felt close to her, her stomach already rioting from earlier and therefore easy to persuade into an encore performance. There was no pushing it down because it had nowhere to go, trapped inside herself as much as she was.

And despite whatever she told herself, she *couldn't* move. Not when there was more to hear. Buffy Summers was nothing if not a glutton for punishment.

"No one cares when a demon dies," the girl on the other side of the door said a moment later. "I learned that after he was gone. I'd killed him—and he'd done nothing but try to help me because he loved me, and it wasn't enough. So I took the rest, took so much there wasn't anything of him left. And the awful thing is, every time I think about it, I am just so...*furious* that he left me like this. That he didn't tell me to stop or scream at me to get me to see what I was doing. That he would let me kill him and be dead, like they are, and what am I supposed to do with that? It's just...so much worse now. And I hate being here. I hate him for making me come here."

And that was it. The most Buffy could stand to hear. The buzzing in her head had reached a new peak and the thing in her chest starting ripping at her in earnest. Trapped and fighting, and desperate for escape. There was nothing she could do to answer it, either, except move. Move, move, move and hope that maybe it would get left behind. That if she was fast enough, it would lose its grip on her and she would be able to breathe. One second just outside the meeting room, the next stumbling outside the heavy door that led to the parking lot, her retinas burning and her not knowing if that were tears or the sudden shift from a drab interior to a blazing sun or both. And still, this *thing* she couldn't outrun. This thing that remained latched to her insides, far heavier than the pain she'd carried home the night before. As though it actually had a chance of truly crippling her.

Buffy threw herself into the passenger seat with a hard sob, pushing futilely at the swelling *everything* that seemed to have followed her outside. She didn't even know why she was upset, she told herself, only she knew better, and she wished she didn't.

The knowledge that she had been in love with Spike hadn't been enough on its own. And maybe she had always been coming to this. Maybe it had always been there, waiting to be recognized the same way everything else had been. There was a reason she kept thinking about what had happened in the alley—a reason she considered it the worst thing she'd done to him. A reason she kept saying what they had hadn't been good. They hadn't been good *for each other*. Not just Spike wasn't good for Buffy, but Buffy hadn't been good for him. She'd been the opposite of good. She'd taken and taken and taken and she'd known what she was doing—she'd even told him so at the end, that she was using him. Relying on his love for her to keep her moving, or to keep him from screaming *when*. Just to accept whatever it was she had to give him and be grateful for it. Wasn't like it mattered, using him. He loved her and that was the most she had to offer him. More than she had to offer anyone else.

He'd once told her that you always hurt the one you love. She hadn't seen it then—or if she had, she'd forced herself to convince herself it had been something else.

Spike had given her his explanation for what he'd done to her. Had spilled his regrets, let her feel the weight of his remorse, given substance to the justifications and excuses that had started spilling out of her before her mind had been fully made up. These things she'd believed because she wanted so badly for them to be true, to know that she hadn't been wrong about him, or at least, not *that* wrong.

And maybe he didn't need it the way she did—maybe that was the difference a soul made. He understood why she'd been *that* version of herself better than she did because he was closer to it. He didn't expect better.

But she expected better. From the world and herself.

She hadn't *just* been using him. There was another word for what she'd done.

Buffy didn't cry much anymore. Not like she had once. But she felt it swelling, the pressure that had followed her outside. She felt it and she knew there was no beating it back.

Some moments were simply made for crying, and this was one of them.



FOR THE LAST FEW WEEKS—REALLY, ever since returning to the States—Willow had lived with the highly illogical but very real fear that the others, namely Buffy, doubted the existence of MAA. It was beyond ridiculous, especially since Giles had corroborated everything, but knowing it was beyond ridiculous didn't flip any switch in her mind. In fact, she'd wondered if part of Buffy's road-trip plan hadn't been to try to catch her out on a lie. And when she'd heard someone shuffling along in the hall outside the meeting room, her first thought had been that the worst of her paranoid suspicions had been confirmed.

Though if that had been the case, it didn't explain why she'd found Buffy the way she had—curled up on her car seat, her arms wrapped around her legs, her face puffy from crying. And as Willow had settled in behind the wheel, she'd come back down from the place of irrational thoughts and to the understanding that whatever was going on with Buffy likely had to do with the rather obvious revelation she'd had earlier. It might have been a long time since they'd been best friends in the tell-each-other-everything sense, but she remembered well enough to get that a thing like realizing she'd been in love with Spike wouldn't be the sort of thing she could process easily.

So Willow had kept her mouth closed. Hadn't asked. Just started up the car and pointed the nose in the right direction. The silence had continued until circumstances forced her to break it, but she hadn't done more than ask which exit ramp they were looking for based on the directions they'd printed out. Buffy hadn't volunteered anything, either, and Willow knew enough from experience not to expect her to until she was ready. And maybe not even then, considering the fragile state of their relationship.

In the end, though, they had found their way to the California Institution for Women without much trouble. The place was a sprawling campus, very much at odds with Willow's mental picture of a prison—not that she had a frame of reference beyond what she saw on TV, but she managed to be surprised all the same. There were multiple parking lots and signs pointing visitors to various buildings and the like, necessitating her to make a full circle before deciding on which spot made the most sense.

Buffy hadn't said anything then, either. She'd unbuckled her seatbelt, run her

hands through her hair, and gotten out. It hadn't been until she'd turned to close the door that she'd offered anything.

"I don't know how long I'll be."

Willow had tried for a placating smile. "I'll wait," she said.

And that had been that.

That had also been almost an hour ago. An hour to sit alone with her thoughts, none of which were very forgiving. Left without a drive to distract her, or her own turbulent what-ifs regarding Buffy's motivations behind this trip, Willow's brain had shifted to even drearier subjects. Like that, but for a very specific set of circumstances, her view of the prison might not be on this side of the bars. That she could have been Faith's bunkmate if her friends and Giles hadn't been so forgiving. Or hadn't wanted to help.

And wondering if, maybe, Buffy would have preferred it that way. If she'd been thinking those things, too.

And if she was, could Willow really blame her.

Willow blew out a breath and rolled her head back. God, but life had seemed simpler back in Chulmleigh. There had been meetings and meditation and a lot of self-reflection, guilt and missing Tara so much that breathing became a thing she needed to remind herself to do, but it had also been safe. A life away from the one she'd tried so hard to destroy, which made it also *away* from the not-talking and the guesswork and everything in between. If she were there, there wouldn't be learning this awful new way her best friend thought of her, and that wasn't even fair because Willow had already known all the things Buffy had told her yesterday. Maybe not directly, but certainly in an abstract kind of way. She'd gotten used to thinking of herself as the wicked witch, even evil, knowing both what she'd done and what she'd almost done had more than earned the title. Somehow, though, she hadn't made the leap from that sort of evil to the evil she and the others had devoted the last several years of their life to fighting. Her evil had been *evil*, yes, but understandable.

Stupidly, it had taken Buffy outright saying that she had an easier time around a soulless vampire than she did her own best friend for Willow to fully understand how Buffy viewed what had happened last spring. It hadn't been a simple loss of control, fueled by pain and the most devastating sort of grief—it had been a fight with a Big Bad. Springtime was apocalypse season, and she had been the one to instigate it.

Again, dumb thing to need to be spelled out, and maybe the distinction didn't matter all that much. Except it did to her.

And it was something she wouldn't be able to just move past, either. Willow hadn't realized until yesterday just how much she'd hoped she'd be able to take her lumps and move on with life once the awkward part of coming home finally ended. There would be MAA meetings, yes, as part of her new plan for self-control and awareness, a limit on the magic she used to prevent her from losing herself all over, and if she was welcomed back, a period of acclimation during which everyone got to know each other again. But there would also be an end to it. She wouldn't learn, weeks after returning, that there were all these things still not being said.

Though maybe that was unfair. It wasn't like Buffy had asked for the Council to

try to kill her, or for Spike to show up at the same time, or this new slayer, or any of it. In classic hellmouth fashion, everything had happened at once, and Buffy was approaching it the way she approached everything else—by compartmentalizing and only talking about the things she couldn't avoid.

Willow scowled out the window and tightened her grip on the steering wheel without thinking. She wished she'd had been brave enough to bring any of this up at today's meeting, but she'd been thrown by Buffy's presence and bitten her tongue instead, somewhat convinced that her friend would hear her complaining about her. Even if it wasn't about her—not really. Things between them felt tentative and tense enough that she hadn't wanted to risk it. Especially after she'd heard Buffy shuffling about the halls.

The hard rap of knuckles against the passenger side window shot her out of her thoughts before she could take another winding trip down Speculation Avenue. She jolted in her seat, her heart jolting with her, and turned to see Buffy peering inside, her expression a mixture of exhausted and resigned.

"Hey," Willow said once the door was open, forcing a small laugh. "Sorry, I was off in my own little world there and didn't see you come out. Any luck? Did you see Faith?"

"No," Buffy replied, sliding into her seat. "They kept saying she was unavailable."

"Unavailable?"

"Yeah. Like not dead or hurt or anything, but *unavailable*." She stared ahead through the windshield, scowling at the pathway that led to the entrance. It was a look Willow knew well—well enough not to do something stupid like stick the key in the ignition and start driving. Buffy wasn't one to take failure on the chin, especially when she'd come this far. "Something is really wrong here. Giles can't reach her, the Council's not talking. And I *have* to know if she's dead or *died* or... I just have to know."

Buffy was still for a moment—but a very active sort of still. The sort of still she got when she was about to launch herself into battle. And just like that, Willow saw what was coming. Could feel it in her bones the way old people sometimes said they could feel bad weather. It made her stomach twist and her chest tight and all of her prickle with otherworldly awareness and dread.

Somehow, though, despite this, she was still surprised when the words came.

"I need you to get me in there," Buffy said. "And I need you to use magic to do it."

YOU BETTER START SWIMMIN' OR YOU'LL SINK LIKE A STONE

THOUGH SHE HADN'T BEEN STRICTLY EXPECTING IT, WILLOW HAD AT LEAST FELT somewhat prepared the last time Buffy had asked her to use magic. That was her role in the group, after all—the one she'd labored to create for herself to be useful in the fight against evil. Add to the fact that the request had come shortly after Buffy had asked Willow to accompany her to the Magic Box, the reality that she would again perform magic had been real rather than abstract as it hadn't been since everything had gone so horribly wrong before. Real enough that she'd called Callista for a pick-me-up, a reminder that she was in control of her addiction and not the other way around, that she could use magic responsibly without succumbing to her darkest impulses. Not only that she *could*, but that she *had to*. She wasn't the sort of addict who could go cold turkey and *needed* to use every now and again. Through controlled usage. Magic done right.

Whether Buffy understood that difference, Willow didn't know. But she didn't think so. Else she wouldn't have asked now.

"I can't," she said in a rush, her cheeks burning. All of her burning. "Not now."

Buffy furrowed her brow, as Willow had known she would. As much as her friend would like to claim she understood, there was simply no way she could. Not without having lived it. "I'm sorry. I know you just had a meeting and...yeah, wow with the bad timing. But I *have* to know what's going on inside that prison. If she's alive."

"I get that, but I can't just... I can't." Willow shook her head and turned away, fixing her gaze on the row of cars she could see parked beside hers outside the driver's side window. "It's too dangerous."

"I... I thought you had to use magic every now and then."

"Yeah, I do."

"Then—"

"I don't have anything here, Buffy!" she snapped, hotter than she meant to—hot enough that her palms started to itch in a way she knew they shouldn't, as though sparks were gathering there, ready to be fired. She clenched her teeth and turned back to her friend, not wanting to look at her but needing her to see all the same. "There's the right way and the wrong way to do magic, and all my stuff is at home."

Buffy was still in frown-mode, which was seriously annoying. "Your stuff?"

"Yeah. You know, like, ingredients and the like. And books. I don't have any spell-books with me."

"I didn't think you needed spell books anymore. I thought...it was just a part of you."

Willow inhaled deeply and pressed her eyes closed, wrapped her hands around the steering wheel again. Needing to feel the hot rubber under her skin. Needing to ground herself in the things that were real. "It is a part of me," she said in the calmest tone she could manage. "It's a huge part of me. But...do you remember that shelf we bought for Dawn's room?"

"Huh? Shelf?"

"It was years ago. Your mom gave us money to go get this shelf. I think maybe it was senior year. And when we got to the place, we found it didn't just come all, ta-da, here's your shelf. It was in a box and needed to be put together at home."

A long beat, during which Buffy undoubtedly questioned Willow's sanity. "Okay... Yeah, I remember the shelf. Not sure why we're talking about it, but I remember it."

"We're talking about it because Xander thought that he could assemble it without reading the directions," Willow replied. "That he'd just...look at the pieces and see how they were supposed to go together and reading the directions was a waste of time."

Fortunately, Willow had not subscribed to that line of thinking. *Unfortunately*, she had been outvoted by both Buffy and Xander, who had wanted to finish the project as soon as possible so as not to miss any potential shenanigans at the Bronze. Willow had camped in a corner with the instruction manual, calling out advice that had been promptly ignored and watching with a growing sense of doom as Xander came close to rendering all parts completely useless. He might have succeeded had Joyce not poked her head in, caught a glimpse of the mess, and let Buffy know that she would be financially responsible for the replacement shelf should this one be destroyed. And just like that, the instructions had suddenly become the most important document in the room, and Willow, having read them cover to cover, the unofficial foreman. Xander had later told her that that experience had inspired him to get into construction. At the time, she hadn't been sure if he'd been thanking or blaming her.

"My magic is like that shelf," she said a moment later, her voice lower. It hurt thinking of simpler times like then, back when she'd been a dabbling apprentice who struggled to levitate pencils, eons removed from being able to end the world. Naïve and optimistic, and not knowing the pain that lay ahead. "I know how it's supposed to look. But I need the instructions. And sure, I can make a passable shelf without them, but I might use too much glue or something."

"I don't think we used glue," Buffy said unhelpfully.

"Okay, so, forget the glue. The point is the instructions are important. They keep you focused. Going off-book and winging it? That's how you end up with a big mess." A beat. "You'd be asking me to rely on my instincts alone and that's...that's just not a thing we should do right now. I don't trust myself and we know you don't trust me either. So, no. I can't use magic to get you in."

Not without risking giving myself over to it.

She stopped talking, and silence filled the car. A good silence. Not awkward or strained, but reflective—the sort that told her she'd been heard. She couldn't say how she knew that, but she did. Maybe it was a best friend thing, that she was fluent in Buffy's body language and that was enough. Either way, Willow exhaled and let her grip around the steering wheel relax, the rush of adrenaline that had jolted through her at the request starting, at last, to calm.

She'd done it. She'd been faced with temptation—the real sort of temptation—and said no. Done the boundary drawing thing that Callista had so often encouraged. It was enough to make her proud of herself, and *that* hadn't happened in a long, long time.

Then Buffy drew in a breath and the atmosphere shifted all over again.

"Will," she said, and Willow knew this tone too. Placation and rationalization—*Slayer Knows Best*. Every part of her that had just calmed was suddenly rigid with tension again. Tension and something darker. Something like resentment. "I know... No, I don't know. I have no idea how hard any of this is for you and I'm sorry."

"Buffy, please—"

"And I wouldn't ask you do anything like this if it wasn't really, really important."

Willow snapped her mouth shut hard enough her teeth clacked together, the seeds of that noxious *something darker* digging in and taking root. She didn't know why she was surprised—or if *surprise* was even what she was feeling. It shouldn't be, because this was so completely Buffy. Buffy who could wield her judgments from a place of moral authority but put them aside whenever they became inconvenient. She'd been doing it for years in one way or another, and the more things changed, the more they stayed the same. Such that, just yesterday, Buffy could look Willow in the eye and tell her that the difference between her and the vampire who had nearly raped her came down to intent. That she knew Spike hadn't meant to hurt her the way he had, therefore she could trust that it wouldn't happen again. She couldn't say the same thing about Willow, though. All she had there was hope.

And now Buffy was asking her to do possibly the most reckless thing she could do, saying she understood when she clearly didn't and never would.

How could she?

"I have to know what I'm facing with this new slayer," Buffy went on with full righteousness, blissfully unaware that each word she spoke was an insult. Unaware because she could be—because she didn't have something dark and dangerous lurking inside of her. Didn't have the expectation of failure riding her shoulders, the knowledge that even the people she loved the most didn't have confidence that she would

succeed, or that she even deserved to. "If Faith died, then that's one thing. But if it is the Council—"

"Of course it's the Council!" Willow blurted before she could help herself. Her hands were back around the steering wheel, clutching it so hard she was surprised when the material didn't warp. "How is this anything but the Council, especially knowing about the offer they made to Spike?"

"They said—"

"I know they said that Lydia woman went rogue. I also know that Spike isn't exactly the master of stealth, and they probably figured out that he'd spilled the beans about everything, so they decided to try to get ahead of it. And you know that, too. So tell me again why I need to do something stupid and dangerous just to confirm what we already know?"

She hadn't meant to say all that, truthfully. Hadn't meant to let her resentment into her voice, but it was out there now, and she could do nothing about it. Just sit and wait for her friend to blow up on her.

But Buffy didn't blow up. When she spoke, it was strained—like she, too, had a tenuous grasp on control.

"I know it's the Council," she said. "I'm not an idiot. So what's next? What should I do?"

"What?"

"You said it. I know it's the Council. It has to be. So where do I start?" Buffy stared at her, all open expectation. "Really, Will, if you have a better suggestion, I'm all ears. I don't have proof of any of this, for one."

"Do we need proof?"

"I need *something*. These aren't demons we're talking about—they're people. People who know slayers better than anyone we've faced before." She swelled up, gaining momentum the way she did whenever she'd spotted a mountable high horse. "It's not like fighting the Initiative or some stupid agency that has no idea the powers it's playing with. These are the people who have been trying to control my life in one way or another for eight years now. They had the power to get Giles deported and their power clearly extends to the American prison system, otherwise I wouldn't be sitting here wondering about Faith. I need to know how big the threat is—if it's just bureaucratic power or something worse. If they had Faith killed to get a slayer they wanted or if they just made their own slayer, one who would do whatever she's told. If that's even possible, making a new one. And I won't know any of that if I can't even find out if Faith is still alive. So if you have a better idea of how to do that, then by all means, let's hear it."

There hadn't been many times over the course of their friendship that Willow had hated her. In fact, the only other time that came to mind was when she'd wandered into Buffy's room during her welcome home party and found her hurriedly stuffing clothes into a suitcase. Ready to bolt after having abandoned all of them for months. She remembered that feeling, that hatred, and almost laughed at how simple and mundane it seemed now. Like all the other things she'd been stupid enough to think had been actual hardships in the way back when.

But she didn't have a better plan. Buffy was right. It seemed she always was.

Knowing that didn't make the resentment any less, which in turn didn't scare her nearly as much as it should.

"All right," Willow said stiffly.

"All right?"

"Yeah. I'll get you inside. But that's all I'm going to do." This was important. Her unmovable line in the sand. The I-would-do-anything-for-love-but-I-won't-do-that line. And if Buffy tried to push her over it, she wasn't sure she would survive. "Once you're inside, you're on your own. I can't... I can't let it be more than that. I can't give it a chance to get a real hold of me."

"It won't."

She tried to swallow her snicker and wasn't successful. "You say that but just yesterday, you told me—"

"Will, the difference is you. It's all you. You don't want to hurt anyone, so you won't."

"It's not that simple. That's not the way magic works with me." Willow paused, wiped at the sweat starting to bead along her brow with a hand that wouldn't stop shaking. The drive was always there, the hunger, gnawing at her insides and whispering how good it would feel to give in just once. She remembered those highs well, how liberating they were. How a few hours with Amy had dulled the pain of her heartbreak, made the Tara-less bed she knew was waiting for her at home seem less daunting. Then at Rack's, where the pain hadn't just been dulled, but separate from her entirely. Her mind and body surrendered to powers greater than herself, and it had been awesome. Beyond awesome. She hadn't had to feel anything she didn't want to feel. Hell, she hadn't even had to experience time the way others did, in those long, lonely hours that insisted on crawling rather than sprinting. The boundaries she had blown through last spring meant the heart of that power was always within reach, a low burning hunger that she could try to appease with meetings and meditation and small magical meals contained within the confines of the rules that had been clearly established. But the hunger was always there. The most she could hope was that the efforts she made now were enough to keep it fooled.

"When I'm inside of it," she said a moment later, her tone lower, "it's hard to care. And hard to know what's real. I start to feel a little invincible, so I don't... I don't recognize when I'm doing something dangerous. That's how the car accident happened with Dawn. I was just sure I had everything under control and then I didn't. So who's to say that won't happen again if I tap into this? That I won't just forget who I am and that I don't want to be this version of Willow anymore?"

Buffy didn't respond right away, and it could have been her imagination, but Willow thought the air that separated them had lost some of its heaviness. Then, almost timidly, her friend reached across the console and placed a hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry," she said. "I know what I'm asking is... I know this is a crappy situation to put you in. And I know I don't show it, but I get that you're trying. I'm just... not the best at telling people the good things I see them doing. But I do see it."

It was lovely sentiment. Also the sort she knew she couldn't trust, even if she wanted to.

And god, she wanted to.



IF THERE WAS one thing being the Slayer had helped Buffy hone, it was her ability to compartmentalize. That had kept her alive this long—well, that and a series of deaths that had failed to take—and it was what she was relying on now. She had a job to do, which was why she was here in the first place. Lingering on the things Willow had said—or worse, anything Spike-adjacent—would throw her off her game and leave her vulnerable to mistakes she simply couldn't afford to make. Particularly as, if she wanted to find out anything about Faith, this was pretty much her one shot. She wasn't sure Willow would be open to giving it another try, with or without her spell books and ingredients.

And Buffy couldn't say she really blamed her there. It had been a crappy thing to ask of her friend—and not something she'd done lightly. But none of that meant diddly in the grander scheme of things. Finding out what had happened to Faith, if anything, was essential, and they'd tried all the other ways.

So it was this or bust.

Willow had decided that the best and safest way to ensure Buffy could get in and out without sounding the alarm was a form of astral projection. "Hard to do and harder to do right," she'd said, not meeting Buffy's gaze. "It'll get you in, but it will also leave your body open for any spirit to take for themselves."

"That sounds the opposite of good."

"Yeah, it is. Something else gets into your body, and you're stranded outside of it. The longer you're out, the harder it is to get back in. Eventually your spirit just dies." She'd frowned, and Buffy had wondered briefly if she hadn't decided on a method she suspected would be vetoed on purpose. But then she'd let out a breath and rolled her shoulders. "Which is why I'll need to ward you."

"Ward me?"

She'd nodded. "Keep your body under magical protection while you're inside, so that the only spirit that can get to it is you."

"So...this is bigger than one spell."

It hadn't been a question, and the look she'd earned had made her regret saying anything at all. A sort of "I'm doing this under protest, and it would serve you right if I went evil and leveled the whole prison" kinda look. Or maybe those were her own nerves talking.

"To do what you want, the magic has to be continual," Willow had replied coolly. "We have to get you in and out. And we have to do that without anyone else seeing you and literally raising the alarm. Seeing as we have no idea where Faith is in there, *if* she's even in there, or how long it'll take to find her, I can't just teleport you in—I wouldn't know where. And then you'd have to hide from guards and stuff while looking for Faith, and I'd have no way of knowing when to pull the ripcord

and get you back. This gives you complete control of where you go and how long you take.”

“And I will be able to talk to her, right? Or am I just a ghost?”

Willow had inhaled again, still not bothering to hide her irritation. “Do you need to talk to her? Isn’t just seeing that she’s alive enough?”

It was in terms of answering the most basic question but not much else. Buffy had thought that much perfectly clear. “If I find her, that just tells me she’s not dead. Not *if* she died or anything about the Council.”

“You think Faith’ll know something about the Council?”

“I think it’d be dumb not to ask, considering they *have* tried to kill her before.”

Willow had just held her gaze for a moment, her expression stony but otherwise unreadable. Then she’d pulled her shoulders back and given her a clipped nod. “Say her name,” she’d said. “She’ll be able to see you if you say her name. And you can talk.”

That had sounded all kinds of tenuous, but Buffy hadn’t been in a position to push the point, so she hadn’t. The most she could do was hope that Willow was right—and that *she* was right in trusting Willow to do this. That she wasn’t following up her old mistakes with fresh new ones. And that was too much to consider at the moment. Her head was full enough.

There hadn’t been much to discuss after that. Willow had sat back and closed her eyes, telling her to get ready and that *she’d just know* when the time came to step outside of her body. From there, Buffy would be able to move out of the car and glide toward the prison, go straight through the doors and start her search. It surprised her that even now things could sound fantastical to her ears, given all she’d seen and done, but somehow it did. The act of getting up and leaving her body behind was both exhilarating and terrifying—a disconnection from all the things keeping her tethered. All pain, as well. The place on her shoulder, which had been throbbing steadily all day, blinked out of existence, as did the ache in her feet, the dull throb in her head, and untold other physical discomforts that were so routine they barely registered anymore. Only now they were gone, and she felt where they should be. Felt all the ways her body fought against her now that there was no body to fight.

And it was incredible. Freedom as she had never considered the concept before—at least not consciously. The closest she’d ever come to completely recreating what it felt like to be in Heaven based on sensation alone.

But she’d also experienced a pang the second she’d slid out of her skin. Turned and looked back at possibly one of the oddest things she’d ever seen—her own self slumped in the passenger seat of Willow’s car, the air around her pulsing with what she supposed was the ward meant to stave off any would-be ghostly hijackers. There had been a tug there, a yearning somewhere within her spirit body to forget the whole thing. Leap back inside her actual body and get as far from here and this insane idea as possible, even if that meant racing headfirst back into the swirl of confusing, painful revelations she’d had about things she couldn’t change now.

That was something, at least.

As strange and uncomfortable as it had been pulling farther away from the phys-

ical being that was Buffy Anne Summers, going through the prison was a whole other step in the exercise of weird. Floating her way right through doors and walls as though they weren't there at all, experiencing a rush every time she turned a corner only to remember that the people she saw couldn't see her back. Once or twice, she accidentally stepped through a person, which felt icky and invasive for reasons she couldn't quite verbalize. It was surprisingly difficult to keep out of others' way when they didn't know she was there, particularly in getting close enough to groups of various convicts in the hunt for Faith. Which presented another problem—Buffy had, for whatever reason, had it in her head that Faith would be in a cell or something, but it seemed few prisoners were cell-bound during the day. The place beyond the security checkpoints was buzzing with activity. There was a group in the cafeteria, others in various workshops and stations, some meeting with visitors and others in classes. Thanks to the sprawling layout of the place, the amount of area she had to search was overwhelming. So much so she began to feel the pull of every second as though time itself were dragging her back.

The longer she was outside of her body, Willow had said, the harder it would be to return. So Buffy resolved to make this a pretty short trip.

But every face she encountered was not Faith's face. Every new room she breached, every hall she floated through, every corner of the place she haunted was entirely Faith-free. At first, Buffy pushed this back. Wrote it off. Easy to explain, given the size of the place. There was so much ground to cover and only one disembodied slayer to do a proper search. Faith *had* to be here somewhere—here and *alive*, because nothing else made sense. If she were dead, there was no reason for that information to be kept secret, especially with a slayer running around Sunnydale and attacking people. Cover there kinda blown.

That certainty was what had brought her here—the certainty that she *would* find Faith and that Faith *would* be able to tell her something. Fill in missing gaps or provide information she didn't even know she had. There had to be a reason why Buffy couldn't get a straight answer on the phone.

And finally, after the thought that Faith might well and truly be gone had graduated from passing whim to hard possibility, Buffy found her.

It took a second to recontextualize the memory she had of Faith with the reality. There was that last glimpse she'd had in the police station nearly three years and two whole deaths earlier, her sister slayer pale and gaunt, her eyes soft and vulnerable for perhaps the first time in the entirety of their relationship. Buffy hadn't been in a very forgiving mood that day, given everything that had happened in Sunnydale, up to and including the body-swap and boyfriend-violating. She'd been especially on edge after discovering Angel's approach for dealing with a murderous life-stealer was to cuddle her to death, and yeah, there might have been some overreaction on her part but even now, it was hard to imagine that meeting going a different way. Buffy had come to LA looking to dole out payback, and Faith had gone and taken that away from her too.

Still, in the times she let herself think about Faith in prison, the concept had seemed more abstract than actual. Even all the thinking she'd done on the way up

here hadn't done much to prepare her—though to her credit, she hadn't been envisioning what was essentially a break-in. No, her mind had been full of images pulled straight from the movies, of an appointed meeting area, prisoners and visitors separated by a thick slab of glass and only able to communicate via the telephone mounted on the walls of their specified cubicles. It wouldn't be inside the prison itself, catching her going through what Buffy assumed were her assigned duties. A glimpse into what Faith's life was like and had been for the last three years.

And Buffy wasn't sure what to make of it—the Faith who lived in her head at odds with the Faith in front of her who was stuffing soiled linens into an industrial-sized clothes washer. Her leather jackets and hip-hugger jeans had been exchanged for a navy-blue prison jumpsuit, one that made her blend in rather than stand out. Faith had always been someone who entered a room with a mind to own it, and fuck everyone else. Here, she was just a cog in the wheel—one of many, and almost easy to miss. So far removed from the villain in Buffy's memories and the friend she'd failed to save. They were only recognizable because they wore the same face.

Buffy watched for a few long seconds, not sure how to proceed. There were other prisoners working alongside her, moving together as a unit. Most of the others were talking, even laughing with each other, but Faith kept her focus on what she was doing. Dirty laundry in, turn, in, turn, and once one drum was full, moving to the next. She hesitated a beat, wondered vaguely if prisoners got luxuries like breaks, and how long she might have to wait for the opportunity to get her alone. Then realized she couldn't bank on that—she needed to be able to talk to her now. The longer she was away from her body, the more she longed to crawl back inside of it and never leave. Aches and pains and all.

Which was a funny thing to realize, given everything. And maybe if she hadn't already run through the gamut of personal revelations, it would have hit a bit harder.

Buffy floated closer then, so she was standing—err, hovering—at Faith's right. It was as close as she dared to get, and quite a bit closer than she would have if she'd been solid. She made to clear her throat, remembered there was nothing there blocking it, then said softly, "Faith, don't scream."

Faith didn't scream. She did, however, drop the load of linens she'd been about to shove into the washing machine and lash out a killer right hook that probably would have sent Buffy sailing into the far wall under any other circumstance. Instead, her fist punched through Buffy's head.

Like straight through.

Buffy had experienced her share of weird shit, but someone punching a hole in her head—a hole she couldn't feel—had to be up there at the top. And she learned a few additional things about herself. Like, even without a body to worry about, she couldn't help but flinch when the other slayer's knuckles bore down on her. It was also strangely difficult to pull away or dodge, the way space tugged on her here as opposed to good old-fashioned gravity. There were too many options for deflection, too much area to occupy, and her instincts were off kilter, so she tried a bit of everything all at once. Not that any of it mattered but the sensation rendered her imbalanced for what felt like a beat too long. Long enough to register the comical

widening of Faith's eyes, the sudden rush of color in her cheeks. How everyone around them had stopped doing whatever they were doing all in unison and were now trading increasingly concerned glances with each other and trying hard not to stare at the spectacle that was Faith versus empty space.

Unless Willow had had it wrong, and the others could see her. In that case...

"Goddammit, B," Faith wheezed at last, and lowered her fist with a shaky laugh. "Don't tell me you got yourself axed again."

Insofar as greetings went, Buffy supposed she'd had worse. And given she was all punch-throughy at the moment, it was probably the best she could have expected. "Sorry to disappoint, but I am very much not dead."

"No kiddin'? Well, look at you. There's a trick I wouldn't mind learnin'."

"Uhh, Faith?" one of the women at her back asked, her voice shaking. "Who... who are you talking to?"

Faith furrowed her brow and threw a look over her shoulder, taking in the expressions on her fellow prisoners' faces for the first time. "Guessin' this is a 'only I can see you' thing," she said to Buffy, not bothering to lower her voice. "Magic?"

"Willow."

"Ahh, she's on the good stuff again, is she?"

Buffy didn't know what to make of that—the comment itself or the implications. "Faith, I need to—"

"Yeah, figured this weren't no social visit." Faith sighed and took an exaggerated step over the linens she'd dropped, nodding toward a shadow that Buffy thought might be the entrance to a utility hallway. "Cover for me, gals," she yelled over her shoulder. "Gonna take five."

There was no response to this aside from another rapid exchange of frowns and an immediate outbreak of not-so-hushed whispers the second Faith turned the corner into the adjacent hall. Buffy stared at them all for a second just out of bald curiosity—part of her had always wondered at the stories regular people told themselves when things like this happened—then turned to follow Faith, who seemed thoroughly unbothered at the prospect of being the source of fresh gossip.

"You realize they all think you've lost your mind," Buffy said as she fell in beside her. It was indeed a utility hallway, the concrete walls lined with a network of pipes. They hung from the ceiling, as well, fat and perspiring. This was not the sort of place she'd want to stay for long. It reminded her a bit too strongly of her coffin.

"Keeps 'em on their toes," Faith replied with a shrug, reaching into the pockets of her jumpsuit and pulling out a pack of cigarettes. Buffy really didn't want to know what she'd done to get those. "So, B, been a while."

"Yeah," Buffy agreed for want of something to say. Now that she was here, now that she had found her, she really had no idea where to begin. "How've you been?"

Faith snorted and stuck a cigarette between her lips. "You ditch the body just to catch up? I'm touched. Most people just write."

"I've been trying to get a hold of you for a few days. We all have."

At this, Faith seemed genuinely surprised. She arched her eyebrows and pulled

the cigarette back into her hand. "Yeah? Any reason or is the gang just feelin' nostalgic?"

"There's a new slayer in Sunnydale."

Buffy thought this much might at least score a reaction, but it didn't. "And you thought I might've finally punched my ticket," Faith surmised.

"That's typically the way these things go."

"Between the two of us, you're the one who has a thing for dyin'. Ever consider that?"

"Yeah, well, turns out when I died the first time, I gave over the Miss Slayer Pageant crown for good. It goes through you now."

"Oh, so kinda like I'm the heir and you're the spare? Figures I'm the one who lands in here."

"It's not my fault you decided to kill a bunch of people," Buffy shot back.

To her astonishment, Faith grinned and raised her hands. "Not tryin' to pick a fight, B. Actually kinda good to see you, in a weird way."

"Well, you're seeing me in a weird way, so that checks out."

"Hey, look at you, cracking jokes. Think I might like you better as a ghost." She smirked and again placed the cigarette between her lips. "Nah, last time your name came up, it was some of those English stiffies here offerin' me the keys to the land of milk and honey if I did them a solid and took you out of the picture for good. Much fun as it sounded, I told 'em they were a couple years too late, and I was over the 'wanting you dead' thing."

Buffy's stomach dropped—or a sensation quite like it seemed to pull at her from the inside. "The Council asked you to kill me. And you...said no. Even if it would've gotten you out of here."

"Don't need to look so surprised," Faith retorted, a slight edge to her voice now, patting her pockets until she produced a book of matches. "I've been on the redemption wagon for a stretch now. Ain't always easy to stay on, but I know what's what. And killing you doesn't sound nearly as much fun when it's not my idea."

It was in the absence of feeling that she felt it the most, the words landing but having nowhere to go. She didn't feel her blood rushing or her heart thumping, didn't feel the typical pull at her temples or the electrifying jolt that seemed to paralyze and energize her all in the same stroke.

That was it then. No more doubt. What she'd told Willow, what she'd been telling herself since Giles had fed her the Council's *whoopsie* story about rogue watchers gunning for her head, had been true. Not a real surprise, particularly since she'd already gone through the motions of all these thoughts, been living with them and their consequences for a few weeks now, but a blow nonetheless. There had been comfort in the hope that maybe that Lydia woman *had* been acting on her own and now that comfort was gone.

Faith furrowed her brow and leaned forward. "Can't tell what that look means."

"The Council's trying to kill me."

"Yeah. What gives, anyway? Thought *I* was the bad one."

"You are—I mean I don't know." Buffy pressed her lips together, clinging to just

enough sense to feel sheepish. “Did they tell you anything? Other than the wanting-to-kill me part? Like, maybe, why?”

“What? You think I didn’t ask?” Faith agreed with a harsh laugh as she struck one of the matches, the light from the small flame throwing her features into sharp relief. “Find out they’re suddenly jonesing to kill Their Girl Friday when you were the teacher’s pet for so long caught me wicked off guard.”

Buffy laughed too. Couldn’t help herself. She *would* see it like that. “After all these years you still don’t get me at all, do you?”

“Aww, you mighta bent the rules here or there, B, but cut the bullshit. We both know who their favorite was.” She took a long hit off her cigarette. “Is it true Willow got her apocalypse on?”

If she was asking, it had to be because the Council had brought it up. At least the motive was consistent. “She did. And it’s my fault.”

“Yeah, heard that too. Whole fuckload of things are your fault, the way they tell it.” Faith shot her a look that was pure challenge and blew out a stream of smoke. “Made a helluva good case for it, won’t lie. Took me down your greatest hits. Think they were tryin’ to fire me up. Remindin’ me you’re the one who put a knife in my gut, like I could forget, and that my life would probably be dandelions and rainbows if you’d just stayed dead the first time.” Her face spasmed a bit like she was trying to smile and had forgotten how. “Got this angel on my shoulder—Angel, you know?—tellin’ me all the time to keep my head down and do it the hard way ’cause it’s more rewarding or some shit. Drank the Kool-Aid and am back on the straight and narrow. So I told ’em to fuck off. Haven’t seen ’em since.”

She also hadn’t tried to warn her the way Spike had, but Buffy decided not to pursue the matter. And hell, maybe she had and just wasn’t owning up to it, though that didn’t seem likely, either. Faith might not be evil anymore, but she wasn’t exactly humble. “And you’re sure you haven’t died for like, maybe, a second or two?” she asked instead.

“Seems like that’s the sorta thing a girl would remember.”

It was. Where other memories became foggy or faded, the ones involving her three deaths remained viciously clear in her head. “Or they just didn’t want you to remember,” she said softly. “If they came to you for help and you shut them down, maybe they killed you and did some sort of magical mind-wipe.”

Faith snorted out a thick waft of smoke. “You really think those assholes would kill me just to bring me back?”

Dammit. That was an annoyingly decent point. Buffy didn’t want her making decent points—she wanted something of this, *anything*, to be normal. An explanation she could wrap her hands around. Because if the Council did have the power to just make slayers and had made this one, there was nothing stopping them from making another. Or another. A whole army of slayers, all with her in their sights. The optics and PR aspect that Spike had mentioned—not wanting to piss off wealthy donors—might not matter much if they could just hit *go* on some slayer assembly line and pump out Chosen Ones a dime a dozen.

Would Legolas be the first? Where had she come from, anyway? The Council

didn't have the power to literally make a human being—or, god, she hoped not. Where had Legolas been all this time?

What did she know about Buffy?

These questions and their endless, horrifying list of possible answers were too much to swallow at the moment, so Buffy cast about for something else—anything else—to focus on. Which was how she ended up blurting, “Did you always smoke?” like a crazy person.

But since Faith was equally crazy, she didn't so much as blink at the change in course. “On and off,” she replied, then sucked hard on her cigarette, and blew out a stream of smoke. And even though being all incorporeal apparently came with the added bonus of not being able to smell—something she didn't realize until this second and found she really appreciated—Buffy couldn't help but wrinkle her nose anyway. “These here are a hot commodity. Ain't gonna let them go to waste.”

“You know they'll give you cancer, right?”

Faith arched an eyebrow, puffing out another cloud of smoke. “Cause the alternative is what, exactly? Just figure I'm shortening my sentence. Road to redemption's long, but it won't hurt nothin' if I cut off a few miles.”

That was rather bleak, and the way Faith spoke it made sound even bleaker. Buffy scowled at the cigarette and tried to gather her bearings. It had taken long enough to find Faith that leaving so quickly seemed short-sighted. And it wasn't like she'd get this opportunity again. “Do you have any idea why the Council would have you on lockdown?” she asked.

The eyebrow just hiked up farther. Faith made a show of looking around. “Pretty sure that's the state of California you're talkin' about there, B.”

“No. I'm talking about the Council. We've been trying to get a hold of you for days. Calling just to see if you were alive. And I tried to visit too—today. Same thing.”

“This why you went all Buffy the Friendly Ghost?”

“Dammit, this is serious.”

“Actually, I figured that much out for myself.” She took one last long drag off her cigarette. “Look, appreciate you bein' worried for me and all. Nice to know you still give a shit—”

“I—”

“But I've told you all I know, and even if those girls out there are scared shitless of me, gettin' caught down a hall talkin' to myself is the kinda trouble I aim to keep out of these days.” Faith tossed the butt to the floor and stomped it out under her shoe. “Think we're square, you and me. Least as far as I'm concerned.”

Buffy wasn't entirely sure what they had to be square about but decided not to push the point. Her history with Faith was complicated enough without delving into semantics. And furthermore, she was right. This wasn't exactly the sort of place a person could just disappear for long stretches of time, and she had a witch waiting for her—one who was hopefully not completely stoned on magic. “Right,” she said, and almost instantly felt a tug somewhere deep inside herself, as though her body were calling her home. That much could have been her imagination, but she wasn't willing to chance it. “Take care of yourself.”

Faith smirked. "Always do. Besides, ain't me they're comin' after."

"Not now. They might change their mind."

"Yeah, but I caught this show before. Anyone who tries to take you out ends up in a world of hurt. You'll mow 'em down before I have to worry."

Buffy fought back a grin. "That was almost nice. I wish I could be that optimistic." A pause. "But, you know, do take care of yourself. If the Council decides to come after you, you're kinda the definition of a sitting duck in here."

"Yeah, well, they decide to take me on, they'll find this ducky has some bite to it," she replied with that cool confidence that Buffy had always envied. It was amazing how she could hold onto it, even in a place like this.

"Probably more than *some* bite."

At that, Faith seemed genuinely pleased. "You know me. Five-by-five."



BUFFY INHALED a lungful of air as though she had just breached the surface after a long swim. Not because she needed to—she could feel plainly that her body had been functioning just fine in her absence—but the act of *not* breathing had been strange enough that some part of her brain had tricked her into thinking she might be suffocating.

She was back in the car. Back with her own hands and legs and feet, which felt cozy and warm and right, even with the accompanying aches and pains. Aches and pains that also seemed magnified, particularly the dull throb in her shoulder where her slayer healing was still working to do its thing. Then there was a crick in her neck from the way her body had slumped with the absence of her essence or spirit or inner self or whatever she'd been when she'd been outside of her skin, and she'd been leaning on her leg hard enough that it had fallen asleep.

But it was done. Thank god.

And she knew something. For the first time in days, she had something concrete. Something beyond guesses and speculation.

"They asked her, too," Buffy said, panting as she jolted upright. She ran her hands over her face—it felt hot and clammy and wonderful to the touch—then through her hair and over her arms. Rediscovering the miracle that was her body, even if the damn thing wouldn't let her die. If her options were this or exist without sensation, she never wanted to be outside of it again. "They asked her to kill me. It's—"

"Buffy?"

Buffy turned to Willow, exhilarated and bursting with more energy than she knew what to do with, and her stomach dropped.

Everything dropped.

Willow's eyes were glassy black.

AND NOTHING IS VERY MUCH FUN ANYMORE

BUFFY HAD WONDERED IF SHE'D IMAGINED IT—THE WAY THE AIR AROUND A magicked-up Willow seemed almost watery, like she could reach out and touch it, watch it ripple and expand. One of the lessons the last few years had left her with was that memory wasn't all that reliable, particularly when the brain was stressed. Certain things would stick as more caricatures of the events rather than a hard record of what she had seen or done. Willow's descent into magical madness had been no different, and Buffy's recollection of that handful of hours had likely been compounded by a lot of other things. Say the fact that she had been assaulted in her home by someone she hadn't realized she'd trusted. Or the fact that she'd freshly learned how it felt to be on the receiving end of a gunshot. Then there had been the rush to save the two dweebs who had filled the role of Warren's henchmen, then her sister, then the world, and all of it was a blur of panic and horror rather than a careful mapping of what had happened. The details, the factors that built the scenes she'd had to live through, those things hadn't been important. Some images stuck and others didn't, and it all being past, there had seemed little reason to question what she remembered faithfully and what her imagination had supplied. What was nightmare and what was memory.

But the air was doing that ripply thing. Pulsing around a Willow who was pale and panting, whose eyes were that awful glassy onyx. Her hair had gone all staticky too, strands stretching toward the windows and ceiling as though magnetized. And Buffy didn't know what to do—she *should* know. She should have been prepared. And part of her had been, right? Part of her had been waiting for this to happen ever since Willow had come home. Hell, she'd been damn near certain that it would. That it was just a matter of time before everything they'd fought to save would be on the line again.

Only this time it was her fault. Buffy was the one who had asked, had pushed without thinking anything through. Had ignored her friend's protests and arguments, tunnel-visioned as she'd been about the things she needed to know. And in that, the risk had seemed minimal, even worth it. Managing magic was what Willow did. It was the whole point of those meetings—learning how to maintain the balance she needed in order to survive.

Buffy's high from what had been learned in the prison fell away as though it had never been, leaving nothing behind but the glaring evidence of her own short-sightedness.

"Will," Buffy said softly, but not so soft she could hide the tremor in her voice. "You can stop now."

Willow worked her throat. It was an oddly human move for someone who looked anything but human at the moment. "I'm...trying."

"Trying to what?"

"To stop. I'm trying to stop."

And she was. Maybe it had taken the words to actually see it, but the second they were out, Buffy looked beyond the ripply air and the vision from apocalypses past. Willow's eyes might be black and her hair stretching in all corners, but she was crying too. It wasn't rage or anger powering her now, but fear so tangible it had dimension and texture. Fear Buffy could practically taste.

"You can do it," she said, "This thing, you control it, not the other way around."

Willow barked a laugh and shook her head, and the air shifted with her. "I can't pull it back. It's too much. There's too much of it. I can't stuff it back in."

"Yes, you can," Buffy argued. She acted before thinking, lurching across the console to seize her friend by the wrist. "You can. You're better than this."

"I'm not."

"You are. The magic inside you? Yeah, it's strong. You're stronger. You always have been."

Willow shook her head again and her face started to crumble. "You said that before, you know. The last time."

"And I was right, wasn't I? You stopped it."

"But it's..." She bit her lip, the tears staining her cheeks lifting off her skin as though magically siphoned. For a long moment, they remained suspended in the air, then sizzled out of existence. "Nothing's gotten better. Everything—everything is still so wrong. You can barely even look at me—"

"That's *not* true—"

"And she's still gone. She's still gone, and I can't stop feeling it. I feel it *all* the time." A hard sob burst free. "But I don't have to. I don't have to feel it. Why should I keep feeling it if *this* is all there is?"

Buffy opened her mouth, but she had nothing—could think of nothing, which left her floundering because it was a question that had lived in her head, made itself quite comfortable there the year before. Been there every morning when she'd opened her eyes and chased her into her nightmares the second she'd closed them. Every day waiting for all the attention it knew she would dedicate to try to answer it, ready to

shoot down each reason she came up with, poke holes in her arguments until she was tired of arguing at all. And Buffy had no idea what had become of the question—it certainly hadn't gone away, nor had it been answered. Just at some point, it had stopped screaming at her at full volume, stopped pulling on her hair to drag her focus back whenever it started to wander. Whenever she thought she might be moving onto something else. To be suddenly reminded of its existence was a shock to the system.

There hadn't been an answer then and there wasn't now. Nothing and everything had changed.

Except...if that was true, then other things were too. Things she did know. And things that had worked before.

"Because I love you," Buffy said firmly. "And Dawn loves you. And Xander. And Giles. We all love you. And we all believe in you. And maybe this is all there is. Maybe. But we can make it whatever we want."

Willow's jaw wobbled. The black in her eyes didn't go anywhere, but it didn't deepen either.

"You've been trying so hard," she went on. "You've come so far. God, do you know how proud of you *she* would be for what you're doing? Remember when Anya tried to get you to do magic at my party? When we were all trapped inside? She stood up for you—she was ready to stay in the house forever just because she believed in you that much."

Willow looked down at herself, at her hands, blinked against the black, her expression unreadable. Maybe that hadn't been the right thing to say. "And look at me now. She would be disgusted that I... What good am I if this is all it takes?"

"No, it was me," Buffy said in a rush, her blood starting to race. "It's my fault. You were right. If Tara would be disgusted with anyone, it would be me. I never should have asked you to use magic. You said no and I pushed. I'm sorry. That was... That was wrong."

There was a beat. A long beat in which nothing and everything happened—in which the words just hung there in the space between them, weighty and unchallenged.

Then Willow drew in a deep breath. She was still breathing hard, but her tears had stopped lifting off her cheeks and drying in mid-air. And when she spoke, she sounded different, too. Calmer, more in charge, but somehow also flat and defeated. Occupying all dichotomies simultaneously. "You don't mean that," she said. "You needed to know so you asked. And you got what you needed."

Buffy's throat went tight. "Will—"

"And that's what you do. Get what you need, even if it's dangerous. It's what you've always done." Another beat and without warning, without anything, sound folded in on itself and all went still. The air stopped rippling and Willow stopped crying, her hair falling back into place as though released from some invisible grip. And Buffy held her breath, her heart thumping like mad, her senses firing that cocktail of conflicting instincts. Fight or flee, launch herself forward or out of the car. Push away from the danger or head-first into a battle she knew she couldn't win.

But then the moment passed and brought more nothing with it. A heavy nothing. A nothing that scared her shitless.

"And that's just it—I can't." Willow exhaled a long breath and opened her eyes again. The black was gone. "I know how important this is. Everything you said... It all makes sense. But that doesn't mean it was right. She *would* be disgusted. Maybe with me. Probably with me. But yes, with you too. For asking me to do that. For making me feel like I had to. For...for risking what I just risked."

Buffy felt her stomach plummet. Despite what she'd said, she really hadn't expected that. For Willow to agree with her.

But it was right. She felt how right it was—felt the weight of accusation and the truth. Unburdened by the immediacy of the moment, the growing sense of panic that she'd never get the answer she needed, her brain suddenly exploded with a whole world of options. It wasn't gradual, rather an atom bomb of awareness that had just been waiting to go off to illuminate the paths she hadn't seen. Routes that weren't nearly as dangerous, definitely not as selfish, and now that she saw them, obvious. She hadn't, say, considered asking Willow to hack into the prison's computer systems. That would have been enough, right? She might not have learned everything she had from Faith, but she would know she was alive. Or maybe Angel could have helped in some way. Yeah, he'd sounded all kinds of preoccupied when they'd talked—Cordelia had amnesia or something and they were trying to fix that—but if he'd known the extent of the problem, odds were he would have dropped everything to try to find an answer. He cared about Faith. He would have tried. Probably succeeded.

But those options hadn't been obvious to her, or the endless other options she was sure her brain would dream up without need and time pressing down on her from all sides.

"You're right," Willow said, dragging her back, sniffing and scrubbing a hand across her cheeks. "I do have to... I have to let it out. I don't get to be like other addicts and I wish I could. Or they could just...just take the magic out of me. It's almost worse, knowing I have to use it. That I can't just say no. Because I always *want* to use it—it's always there. Telling me how easy I can make things if I just give in. I think about giving in all the time. And about how I never understood why Xander's dad just wouldn't stop drinking if it made him and his mom so upset. It seemed simple, right? She'd tell him she was going to leave if he didn't get sober and he'd get sober for a little while, then start up again, and it was just like this over and over."

Willow fell silent again, though she swallowed audibly. A thick, wet sound. "But I'm lying too," she continued. "I say I want the magic gone. I do. Sometimes. But I also don't. I don't want to go back to being who I was before it. I was nobody." She held up a hand, foreseeing the inevitable protest. "I was *nobody*, Buffy. That girl... I was so afraid of everything. I didn't even have the nerve to tell Xander I liked him. I just got to watch him pine after you and he never noticed me. Which, I mean..." She rolled her eyes and matched it with a rolling motion of her hand. "Gay now so that point's all kinds of moot, but if I'd had that power then? If I'd been *this* Willow in high school?"

"I think wishing you had been a different version of you in high school is of the normal," Buffy replied, almost too eagerly. She didn't want to talk about this anymore—something was gnawing at the inside of her gut and she wasn't sure, but she thought it might stop if *they* stopped. The weight of what she'd asked her friend to do hadn't seemed so heavy when she'd asked. Even knowing the cost, the risk, the ends had been there justifying the means. This looming threat that was in the present rather than the past. Maybe it had been reckless, but it hadn't been malicious. She hadn't meant to cause hurt—hadn't really realized she could. "Isn't it? Normal, I mean?"

"Do *you* wish you'd been different?"

"I... I dunno. I've never really thought about it."

Willow nodded as though she'd made a point. "You never had to. You were just Buffy. You were Buffy and you were strong and brave and even the people who didn't get you understood that you were important. What did I have? And don't say I was brainy because do you have any idea how boring it is to be the brainy kid? The reliable one? The person who makes sure Percy gets his diploma but gets walked all over by everyone else? Learning about magic gave me power. I didn't want to be the one you needed to rescue or just the computer geek. I didn't *want* to be your sidekick. I wanted to be important, as important as you were. And magic let me do that. Doing magic made me someone—made me the Willow that Tara fell in love with. I wasn't a loser anymore or anyone that girls like Cordelia could make feel small and...small. I was someone who made things happen and not someone that things happened to. So I think about that, too. Whenever I think about my magic being taken from me, I think about the person I was without it, and I'm glad they can't take it. And I'm so sick of myself I could just throw up. Magic made me who I was and that's more important to me than all the bad I can do with it."

Buffy had no idea how to respond to that, either. More things she didn't want to think about, ask herself, along with her growing guilt. There were parts of her that understood—that saw herself in the words too, felt that odd stretch between realities and the impossible desire to bridge them into something that made sense. She had spent the last few years wanting to be a regular girl, and every time she'd been given the chance or stolen a glimpse of what *regular* would look like, she'd resented the hell out of it. She'd also wanted to sever her connection from this world, wanted to know that there would be rest at the end, yet whenever death had come for her, she'd thrown herself into the fight to live.

Even now, with that question hanging over her head, she'd panicked a bit when Willow's magic had cut her spirit loose from her body. When she hadn't been able to feel the evidence of the thing that might tether her to this world, there had been a mad rush to race back inside of it, no matter the physical aches and pain, or the nights of staring at the ceiling, listening to the cadence of her own heartbeat. She could want life and death simultaneously. She could want to be both ordinary and extraordinary. She could live in both places and feel all of the above, which meant Willow could too. That was just human nature. She didn't need to understand it to accept it.

And, as it turned out, Buffy also didn't need to respond.

"I don't know how it was for you," Willow said hoarsely. "After you killed Angel. When you took off. I didn't get it then, what you were going through. I couldn't... I couldn't imagine losing someone I loved like that. Or missing someone that much. Heck, I still have all my grandparents—how could I know what that was like? But I remember how it was when Oz left a-and there was just this hole inside of me that wouldn't stop hurting. I tried to use magic to make it better, and somehow I found Tara. And Buffy...not having her here makes everything worse. I keep thinking about her, things she'd say. How she'd... How she'd *look* at me, knowing what I did. And I'm such a coward. Part of me is glad she's gone so I don't have to see that, and the rest of me is just sick because I miss her so much. It's like I lost part of me. Like Warren took the best part of me and destroyed it. I miss her so much I can't...*breathe* sometimes. And I want to use magic for that, too. When I do, I still feel it—I still feel where she should be and isn't, but it doesn't hurt as much. It feels like something I can survive when every other second is spent just trying not to... Trying not to feel *this* all the time. But I know it's bad—I know I can't trust it. I know if I let myself feel it just a little, I might not come back. And maybe that wouldn't be a bad thing for me, but it could be a really bad thing for the world."

Buffy squeezed Willow's wrist again, gripping her harder this time, as though she could seize her in the middle and pull her away from the worst things she'd thought about herself. "I am sorry," she said, lacking anything else. "For doing that. For making you do that. I should've found another way."

"Yeah, you should have," Willow said. Give her that, she wasn't pulling her punches. "But I should have, too. Said no. I shouldn't have let you talk me into it."

"Will—"

"It has to be me. At the end of the day, I'm the one in charge of me." She closed her eyes, her lower lip trembling, and for a second, she seemed on the brink of losing it again. But she didn't lose it. The second passed and she was in control once more. Drawing in a deep breath, squaring her shoulders, opening eyes that weren't black. "But... Yeah, just...that can't happen again. If you do love me, if you meant everything you told me earlier, you won't ask me to do that again. Or, no, you can ask. You can always ask...but when the answer is no, that's it. That's when you have to stop asking. Okay?"

Buffy drew in a breath and held it the way she'd been holding everything else. "I'm sorry," she said, knowing she was repeating herself but also knowing she needed to. The place on her back gave a wild spasm of pain that might have been entirely in her head but felt very real all the same. "I really am sorry. I won't do that again. Ever."

"Good," Willow replied. She wiped at her cheeks once more, and miraculously, when she smiled, there was nothing forced or strained behind it. "Then we can be okay."

It was a strange thing to hear, given all the arms-length holding Buffy had been doing since Willow had returned to town. Maybe that was her problem too. She didn't know this version of her friend—she knew the version who had left, the one

who had threatened to take out the world and bury the people she loved in order to do it, but she didn't know the Willow who was trying to rediscover herself after that. And yeah, there were good reasons for not knowing her—Buffy's world being what it was—but part of it came back to her. The effort she was willing to make. The things she was willing to forgive.

She'd forgiven Spike without knowing that she'd been in love with him. Forgiving Willow, who she knew she loved, should be simple. Or at the very least, she wanted it to be.

"So..." Willow twisted in her seat to face her more fully, the shadows that had been lining her face brightening. For the first time since she'd returned from England, she looked something like herself, the real Willow peeking through underneath all the misery and guilt. "I was kinda in the middle of trying to not go all bad and veiny, but I think you said you saw Faith while you were in there, which means at least we got the info we needed. So...what'd you learn?"

Buffy furrowed her brow and gave their surroundings a look. The sun was already most of the way down, just a few scant rays peeking through the trees and between the buildings that made up the prison campus. There had never been any hope of the trip being a short one—not with the commute from LA to Sunnydale, the additional drive to the prison, and everything that had happened in between. Still, she'd thought they'd be on the road by now, at least somewhat closer to home. The thoughts she'd managed to shove aside all day, those about Spike and Dawn left alone in the house, began to leak forward, no longer hampered by a slew of other distractions. Then there was Legolas as well, who had probably managed another miracle recovery. Even if she didn't know where Buffy lived, odds were she could find out fast.

"If it's okay with you, can we talk and drive?" Buffy asked. "I kinda don't want to be here any longer than we have to."

"Well, I need to let the jitters run their course before I can drive anywhere." Willow held up her hands, which were still trembling. "Unless we want your next death to be really lame. You could be the first slayer who dies in a traffic accident."

She snorted and shook her head, relaxing by increments. "Tell you what—switch places with me and I'll tell you all about Faith on the way home."

Willow arched an eyebrow. "Switch places as in..."

"As in I'll take the wheel and you can just be my trusty passenger." There was a long pause during which her friend did nothing but look increasingly dubious. "Come on. I promise I'm actually a pretty good driver. Whatever Dawn's told you—"

"You have your license?"

"Huh? You know that."

"No, I don't." Willow's eyes were growing bright, either with excitement or renewed tears—she couldn't tell. "The last I knew, Buffy plus driving equaled badness and you'd given up on it ever being any different."

Buffy just stared at her, completely thrown. It was a little thing, really, in the grand scheme of things, but how in the world was it possible that Willow didn't know about her summer trials with the DMV? Sure, she didn't take the car out all

that often, but it had been known to happen. Recently, even, when she'd picked up Dawn from school.

Somehow Willow had become someone who didn't know everything about her. Even the smallest details—the teeniest triumphs, which getting her license had definitely been. They truly were different people, in every feasible sense.

"I got it over the summer," she said. "Figured if I could have my own business, I should also be able to drive without running into a light pole."

"And you can. Drive without running into a light pole. That's real growth. Wish I had been here to see it."

Buffy rolled her eyes and opened the passenger side door. "Well, we have time," she said, sliding out of her seat. "I'll tell you all about it on the way home."



MORE THAN ONCE, Spike had heard someone spout off the lie that vampires couldn't feel the cold, and more than once, that someone had been Buffy. In the old days, back before she'd started shagging him, his typical response had been a rolling of the eyes. Just another piece of rubbish the Slayer liked to pass off as gospel without bothering to check with the bloody source. Assuming, as she was wont to do, that she knew best and bugger anyone who said otherwise.

After that night in the abandoned building, though, the game had changed. The world had opened to him, loads of retorts he'd normally swallow if he didn't want to be staked given permission to flow freely. And the next time she'd pulled that line out, he'd run his tongue over his teeth, done that little eyebrow waggle that he knew wetted her knickers even if she was keen to deny it, and reminded her of all the ways he felt her heat when he was buried inside of her. How she burned him, damn near blistered him, how touching her was like flirting with daylight in the best way possible. The closest he'd ever get to the sun. And if all of that could be true, then it was certainly true he could feel the cold as well.

Buffy had popped him one anyway. Told him he was disgusting, depraved, and to stay away from her. All the old favorites, in other words. Things she begged him to tell her when she was riding his cock but couldn't abide hearing any other time.

These were the sort of thoughts he shouldn't be thinking now, or ever. Yet they were there anyway, dancing merrily through his head as hot water poured over his face and down his chest and back. teasing him with their presence alone. As though coming into the sodding loo hadn't been agony enough—no, he had to torture himself with memories of times he hadn't known were happier while in the middle of them.

Maybe that had been his fault, though, being thick enough to think venturing into the bathroom to wash off would be easier now that he and Buffy had finally discussed what had happened in here. When he'd awakened that morning, lulled out of sleep well before he typically stirred thanks to the thump and thunder of a houseful of pulses, there had been a curious lightness in his chest—one that had taken him a moment to identify, for nothing in his miserable existence had

been *light* for a good long while. The rest had come to him in pieces—Buffy tumbling into the kitchen looking like hell run over, letting him help patch her up, turning her back to him when she'd been hurt and vulnerable, and then finally, *finally* asking after what they had been dancing around ever since he'd come back to town. Not just asking but listening, all while looking at him as she never had.

Then telling him she'd waited for him to come home. More than that—telling him in all but words that she believed he'd never meant to hurt her. That she knew what had happened that night had been an anomaly, something he hadn't wanted. A bloody *accident*, she'd said. These things he could never hope for her to understand but had hoped anyway, because that was what bad men did. Reached constantly for what would never be theirs.

Even so, though, Spike hadn't been foolish enough to trust it. The Slayer being who she was, she would keep turning everything over—couldn't bloody help that—and arrive somewhere different. Buffy had spooked herself more than once into unmaking a decision she'd already made, found reason to backtrack, especially when she wasn't confident in her conclusions. Especially when those conclusions involved him. If that had been true before, it had to be even more so now. He'd given her no reason to trust him.

The revelations from their conversation had nipped at him well after the rest of the house had fallen asleep. Kept him company as he'd milled around the kitchen to warm up some of the blood that Buffy had bought him. They'd followed him into the dining room and lingered as he'd booted up Willow's computer to smarten himself on how to handle wounds like the one the Slayer had come home sporting and had been the most convincing reason he could find to keep himself from heading out to find something to kill. Buffy believing him, maybe even believing *in* him, if only for a little while. Enough to bring him inside her house and rely on him when she was wounded. To ask him. To listen. To accept.

It hadn't really sunk in until that morning, when she'd come down to tell him about her little day trip, that everything they had shared the night before might not be the sort of thing chased away by the sun. That this new, tentative understanding they had was a different breed from any they'd had in the past, so he couldn't judge it the way he had what had come before. They were different now. Everything was different.

She'd looked at him like she might consider him something more. Talked with him like he were something other than a vampire.

Like maybe they could be friends.

And fuck, if that thought wasn't heady. And terrifying. And more than a tad desperate. He didn't know how to be Buffy's friend. How to interpret the softer looks she'd thrown him, the gentle teasing-that-might-not-have-been-teasing, or the casual way she'd stripped off her bloody top to let him redress the wound he'd patched up the night before. Her breasts bare to him for the first time in what was nearing on a year, as plump and perfect as he remembered, and how he couldn't look or touch then or ever again—doing everything to keep his focus where it needed to be and nowhere else, half-convinced she was testing him while the rest of him was baffled at

how quickly things could change with her. How easy and hard sharing Buffy's space had become. Wondering if it had always been like this, if there had always been the capacity for this sort of relationship with her, and why it had taken a sodding soul to find the path.

And now he was standing in the tub as scalding water streamed over his skin in this place he should never have been welcomed back inside, nothing but a shower curtain separating him from the floor where he'd done that awful thing. This room Buffy had to venture into every day. Had to see and live in. And she'd been in here when he'd been downstairs. Thought things he was certain he didn't want to be privy to but also didn't need to be, because he knew what they were already.

Buffy and the way she forgave.

Spike had hoped washing up would distract him from the fact that he hadn't ventured outside in more than a day, do something to curb his restlessness, but he was out of luck. Didn't help that he had bugger all idea when the Slayer would return from her day trip, and the hour was approaching the time the Nibblet would wander home. *If* she came home, that was. Could be she'd decide to make up another excuse to avoid the place—*him*—and he could put off worrying how she'd look at him for another day. He almost hoped so, because he was a spineless berk who wanted a buffer in the form of the woman he loved. The one he'd nearly turned into the only victim he'd never meant to create.

God, what he'd done to Buffy had bloody well wrenched him apart. Confirmed all the worst things she'd ever thought of him. But awful as that had been, the fall had been almost anticipated. Buffy had never bought the line that he could change. She might have forgotten what he was on occasion—had said as much when she'd come by to end things for good, even if she'd had the wrong measure of the situation then. What good would it have done to argue? There would always be a reason to think he was nothing more than a monster.

But Dawn hadn't felt that way. Of everyone in his life, she had been the only one not just waiting for him to fail. The only one who had trusted in him completely, believed him when he'd said he'd changed, and he'd broken her heart. Even if big sis had tried to *explain* things to her, there was no reason to think it would make a lick of difference to a sixteen-year-old, or to someone who loved Buffy. He knew it wouldn't have mattered to him and he and the Nibblet were a lot alike in that regard. Quick to anger and quicker to action. Slow to forgive when faced with someone who had hurt the person they loved more than anything.

Buffy hadn't cried while talking to him. Hadn't fallen to pieces and asked him how or why he could have done what he'd done. And despite the nightmares he'd had about it, he'd known all along she never would. That wasn't her. That wasn't how Buffy expressed her hurt.

Dawn was a different matter, and he didn't know if he could survive it. He also wasn't especially pressed to find out.

And maybe there were ways he could find to make himself useful.

Spike heaved a sigh, wrenched off the stream of water, and was dwarfed almost immediately by the house's quiet. It was a thick sort of quiet, settled on his skin like

an extra coat, and he didn't like it. Different as it was from the quiet that had haunted him last night before Buffy had stumbled into the house—full where that had been empty, and sparking with an undercurrent of anticipation, like he was slowly turning the crank on a bloody jack-in-the-box and waiting for the inevitable explosion. Things were too bloody loud in his head to make up for the lack of sound outside of it.

Yeah, he needed to get out. Couldn't abide waiting here for Dawn or Buffy. He wasn't a man who did *still* very well, and the soul hadn't changed that a lick.

The first thing he'd do, he decided as he toweled off, would be to head back to the crypt. See if he could sniff out anything more on his guest from the other night, including whether she'd been back. He wagered he could stand to grab a few things too, seeing as Buffy hadn't intended to make him her permanent houseguest when she'd dragged him here and his clothes were beginning to smell a tad ripe. Then he could make his way to the Magic Box. Spike didn't think there was anything in the books Rupert had left behind that would be of much use when it came to slayers, but trying to find something there would be better than sitting around here.

Hell, anything would.



THEN AGAIN, he'd been wrong before. Was starting to become a bad habit.

Spike had reckoned he was risking the most in swinging by the crypt. It had occurred to him, as he'd traversed the familiar sewer path from the basement of Revello Drive to his humble home, that the new bird might be lying in wait somewhere along the way. Or hell, maybe she'd have just squatted there in the hopes he'd come back. He could almost see Buffy's disapproving frown, hear the reprimand she'd be sure to give him. Bloody careless, was what he was, leaving her cushy home just because he was bored, and a coward to boot. He'd already lined up his argument—that they had no guarantees the new slayer wouldn't drop by the Summers place unannounced, and he'd be just as vulnerable there, care of the chip in his head. This way, at least, if the bitch did come at him, none of Buffy's precious things would get trampled in the resulting skirmish.

Point of fact, he'd had himself so worked up for a tussle that finding the crypt vacant had almost been a letdown. Not that he'd particularly been looking forward to getting his arse kicked, or worse, but his head had healed up enough he felt he could abuse it soundly again and that would at least be an outlet for all his unspent energy. But there had been no sign of his new friend in the place—not even a lingering scent to tell him she'd been by. And so he hadn't much cause to dawdle after he'd stuffed a few days' worth of clothes into the duffle bag he'd nicked from the Slayer's basement. No reason he could summon that wouldn't earn him Buffy's ire should he ever need to explain himself, and he was past riling her up for fun.

Kind of a pity, that.

So, lacking a reason not to, he'd set off through the sewers again. North rather than south this time—deep into Sunnyhell's downtown district. It had been a minute

since he'd come this way to the shop, typically having reserved it for daytime excursions when he hoped to be in and out without anyone up top being any the wiser. Had always been a bit of a thrill, actually, that he might get caught in the act of nicking things. Same reason he'd resorted to picking the lock when the sun was down—no sport to it if there was no risk involved. A man had principles.

It wasn't until he'd actually arrived, clomped his way up the stairs that connected the basement to the shop proper, that it occurred to him that he hadn't set foot in the place since the night he and Anya had gotten pissed out of their minds and shagged on one of the tables. That he hadn't seen Anya, either, apart from the others since the first or second night he'd been back in town, when she'd told him she might have to eviscerate him if Buffy ever took her up on her vengeance wish.

Not that it mattered, he supposed. Definitely wouldn't have had he not had a sodding soul. But the Victorian git he'd been, the one who insisted on making himself known every now and then, bristled a bit at the thought of being alone with her here. Where he'd made the mistake that had led to his other mistakes.

"Spike," Anya said in loud, obvious surprise when he opened the door and let himself through. She was by a shelf toward the front of the place, rearranging the showy crystal balls she had for sale. "You're not supposed to be here."

That wasn't much of a greeting, but then he also hadn't expected one. "Thought I'd see if I could lend a hand to the Slayer," he said, adjusting the strap of the duffle bag on his shoulder.

"Buffy's not here."

"Know that. Figured Rupert must've left some of his books, or what all." He waved a hand at the staircase that had, last he'd known, separated the more innocuous books from the sort that could do some actual damage. Though from where he stood, the library looked a mite sparse. Spike dropped his hand and sighed, something in his chest deflating. "Right."

"What exactly were you hoping to find in those books?"

That was a decent question, and one he hadn't bothered asking himself after he'd made the decision to see if he could be of use elsewhere. Truth of the matter was they were in uncharted territory, and whatever had pulled the strings to bring the new girl online was likely nothing he'd find referenced in any of those dusty old tomes the watcher fancied. Spike had been an expert on slayers once upon a time, known more about them than any other beastie who walked the earth. And aside from the surprise that Buffy had thrown at him once, introducing him to another living slayer between punches, the rules had been followed. Hell, even the mistake of there being two had only been a matter of time, way he saw it. The more technology advanced, the harder people clung to life. Wouldn't surprise him if some other cosmic accident threw another girl onto the playing field sometime down the line.

But he didn't think that was the story behind the new bird. And though he hadn't had high hopes, there was always the chance he'd overlooked something back when he'd first been absorbing everything he could on slayers.

"It's me, isn't it?" Anya asked, jolting him back to the present. "You're here for me."

Spike frowned and given his head a shake. "What's that?"

"Look, maybe if things were different, I'd be tempted. I mean, it's not like you were a bad lover or anything. Maybe a little unfocused, though if you were thinking about Buffy at the time—"

Fuck. He stepped back, bringing up his hands. "Anya—"

"I'm just saying that it's not going to happen again. And definitely not in my place of business."

"For fuck's sake—"

"There is no sake. There will be no fucking."

"I'm not here to shag you," he said with a bit more force behind his voice. Then paused, something she'd said nipping at him with just enough persistence to be recognized. "Just what the bloody hell do you mean, unfocused?"

"Well, I've had a lot of sex and there are just certain things a girl can tell," Anya replied with a shrug. "Don't take it personally. I had a very pleasant experience. But you need to accept that it's never going to happen again."

The temptation was there, born no doubt of masculine pride, to argue that he'd never once been *pleasant* in the sack. Bloody hell, he was the bloke who had shagged the Slayer so hard her legs had stopped working. The man who had been the first to bring out the animal in her, borne the bite and claw marks to prove it, thanks ever so. He was a lot of things in bed—insatiable just behind giving, and both at the top of the list. Not even at her cruelest had Dru minimized him by calling his performance *pleasant*.

But thankfully, either the soul or experience kicked in before Spike could do something like argue the point, and instead convinced him the best response was a clipped nod and a dropped topic. Better that Anya had that view, in the end. It would keep her from sniffing around him in the future, should she change her mind.

Just as well he had, too, for the shop's front door swung open the next second and the man who had jilted her at the altar had strolled in like they had a standing date. Which, for all Spike knew, they might. And given the last bloody thing he needed was for Xander Harris to have yet another reason to hate him, all the more reason not to belabor what a fantastic fuck he was.

Xander didn't make it too deep into the place before he caught sight of Spike and stopped short, the easygoing, even eager smile on his face falling away. "Spike. You're here."

"Mhmm," he drawled, going tense and hating himself for it. There were people who had earned the right to put him on guard and Harris was not on that list. "Observant as ever, I see."

Xander didn't reply, rather looked to Anya, then back to Spike with all the grace of a bloke watching a ping-pong match. The question blooming across his face—or the thought, at least, the concern. And because it *was* Harris, he couldn't help but voice it. "For the sake of keeping down my lunch, I really, really hope I'm not interrupting anything."

Spike scoffed and rolled his eyes, ready to laugh it off and regain his footing when Anya piped in with, "I was just explaining to Spike how we will never have sex again."

"Oh, bloody hell. For the last time, I'm not here to shag you."

"I'm just saying, I wouldn't blame you if you were," Anya replied, nonplussed. "I am very, very good at it."

God, he was getting nowhere fast. He dragged a hand down his face and turned back to Xander. "Got quiet at the house, all right? Tired of bein' useless in all this. So I thought I'd pop in and take a peek at Rupert's books. Not likely there's somethin' in there I don't know about slayers, but better than sittin' around doin' nothing. Didn't count on being propositioned the second I showed up."

Anya blinked. "I think I've been very clear that I am *not* propositioning you."

"You show up in the middle of the day to look through books? Like you're suddenly a Scooby or something?" Xander laughed like it was the most ridiculous thing he'd ever heard, then shifted his attention to the duffle bag. "Plan to stay the night?"

"Swung by the crypt to pick up a few things."

"Because you're living with Buffy now. Right."

Spike narrowed his eyes. "Wasn't exactly my call, was it?"

"Yeah, because being that close to her is a real chore. Not like you've been angling for the right opportunity for two years now."

"Bugger this," he muttered, shaking his head and turning to make his way back down the stairs and to the sewer system. The stillness and the silence at Revello Drive might be enough to drive a man barmy, but if the alternative was to hang around bloody Harris, there was no contest. "Just see if—"

But a sound reached him before the thought could form. A sound that had every muscle in his body going rigid. The duffle bag thumped to the floor, and then he was running. Pushing his way through the shop and toward the back area, toward the shriek still ringing in his ears. A shriek he would know anywhere—had heard enough times that it was seared into his brain along with the echoes of all the other things he'd rather forget. Even worse now because it had been so long since he'd heard it, and like all sensory memories, it threatened to tug him back places he would just as soon leave behind.

He knew what it meant, too. The only thing it could mean.

Everything else became secondary, and everything between him and the door weighty obstacles. A table full of breakable knickknacks went toppling over, punctuating the air with the hard crack of shattering glass. And Anya yelled after him, and Xander barked something, but then they must have realized something was wrong, for they were suddenly running too. Trailing at Spike's heels as he launched himself into the space that had once been Buffy's training area. Scenery and staging all a blur, nothing as important as getting through that back door.

And now they could all hear it—the sound of Dawn screaming. The sound of Dawn being hurt. The sound of Dawn in pain.

Spike didn't stop until he was outside, didn't even register the sizzling along his skin until Harris wrapped a meaty arm around his chest and tugged him back into the safety of the shadows. It was shock more than strength that managed to slow him down, followed by a blistering rage that had his fangs exploding inside his mouth

and every instinct in his body commanding him to seize the offending appendage and pull until he heard the bone crack and skin rip. Dawn was there, right there, her face red and furious, trying to wrench away from the psycho bitch slayer, who had her seized about either wrist. And sun or no sun, Spike had to get to her. He had a promise to keep.

But then Harris's breath was at his ear, hot and offensive and telling him, "Let her handle it, man," and that made no bloody sense until the red fog filling his vision began to thin, and he realized that Anya had shoved past him and thrown the slayer bitch off the Nibbles and into the side of the shop.

He was certain he'd seen things more beautiful than the face of Anyanka's vengeance demon, but at that moment he couldn't think of any.

"I've had it with slayers destroying my things," she snapped, though not without stealing a glance at where Dawn had fallen—the sort that betrayed concern and relief and more of those things demons were supposed to not feel. It didn't last long, barely a second, but long enough that Spike caught it before she'd refocused on the Slayer she'd just tossed aside. "There are other parts of town, you know! Fight wherever you like, but I have a business to run."

For her part, the new bitch seemed knocked for a six. She was on the ground by the wall, palms braced against the concrete, blinking as though to orient herself. Or maybe see if she could find the number on the bus that had just hit her. It didn't last long, though, and then she was grinning the same way she had in his crypt the other night. "I didn't come here to fight," she said, pulling herself to her feet. "Cross my heart. I just saw her and thought, 'Hey, isn't that Buffy Summers's kid sister?' All I wanted was to introduce myself. You know the drill. New sheriff in town, yadda yadda. It's not my fault she started screaming."

"That's not what she said," Dawn argued in a voice that shook. "She asked if Buffy had bled out from last night."

"Hey, I was just curious."

"And I was just telling her that if her aim is always that shitty, it's a wonder she's still alive. Think I struck a nerve."

Spike shrugged Xander off him without a fight and stalked as close as he dared to the edge that separated the shaded part of the alley from the sun, both needing to be seen by the new slayer and needing to be close to Dawn. Dawn, whom he hadn't seen in months, who had been more a phantom to him than some of his own victims. The past couple of days at the house had been an exercise in avoidance on both their parts—Dawn making every excuse she could to stay away and Spike making a point not to venture out of the basement if he knew she was up and around. Her school schedule did the bulk of the work for them, keeping her out and occupied throughout most of the day, and she had teenage responsibilities and what all in the hours after.

Suddenly, though, she was here and in front of him. A living figure and not just a memory whose judgment he feared.

His first thought upon seeing her, aside from the crushing relief that she looked unharmed, was how much she'd gone and grown up in just a handful of months. The

sort of thing he reckoned a bloke who had been around wouldn't notice, but a man who had frozen her in his memory in a certain way couldn't help but see.

His second thought was he was going to murder the bitch Buffy called Legolas. No matter how much it hurt his head or his bloody soul—Dawn was white as a sodding sheet and shaking so hard she could barely keep upright. She had her school bag slung over her shoulders still, her hair all tangled up, and though she wasn't crying, her eyes were full and wet with what he reckoned was a combination of shock and fear. What had or hadn't happened didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was that the other slayer had tried to hurt her.

"I asked her if she kissed her momma with that mouth," the bitch was saying, hands up, all innocence. "Remembered a second too late that her momma's in the ground. Right where her sister's gonna be."

"My sister is going to kick your skanky ass," Dawn snapped. Xander was at her side the next second, doing what Spike couldn't. Wrapping an arm around her, lending her strength and support. And Dawn let him without thought, glaring still at the other slayer. "She's good at taking out the trash."

Legolas, for that was apparently what he'd decided to call her too, just grinned. The sort of grin that was supposed to relay confidence, even a profound lack of concern. And maybe if Spike hadn't been paying attention, hadn't known slayers as well as he did, he would have missed it. But he was paying attention and he *did* know slayers, so he didn't miss it when her gaze cut to Anya or the uncertainty there. Not overt or obvious but present nonetheless—enough to tell him she hadn't banked on facing more than a teenage girl or a neutered vampire. Definitely not someone who had strength that mirrored her own.

She'd known Buffy wouldn't be here, though. And that was worrying enough.

"I like you, kid," she said in a voice that wasn't nearly as brave as she wanted them to believe. "Almost enough to feel bad about what comes next. Do let Buffy know I stopped by, won't you? We have some unfinished business."

And with a last glance at Anya, Legolas spun on her heel and broke hard for the street beyond the alley, and then was gone.

WE BOTH KNOW WHAT WE KNOW

DESPITE EVERYTHING THAT HAD HAPPENED SINCE SHE'D LEFT THE HOUSE, BUFFY thought she might return to Sunnydale more relaxed than she'd been when she'd opened her eyes that morning. There was a lot left to sort through—more unanswered questions regarding Legolas and where she'd come from, and of course all things Spike, but she felt her relationship with Willow might actually be on the path to healing. Like there was a way forward because *there was a way forward*, not just her saying there was or wanting to believe it.

Sure, nothing was solved and everything was still shitty, but a small victory was better than no victory at all. Even—and maybe especially—when it came after an emotional blow-up. They were at their most honest when all defenses were exhausted and there was nothing to hide behind.

So when Willow cleared her throat and said, “So...Spike, huh?” Buffy didn't have time to consider how she might have responded were she not completely tapped out.

“I have been trying not to think about it,” she replied instead. “It's...too big.”

“That you love him?”

“*Loved*. Past tense.”

Willow made a sound that Buffy supposed was her way of communicating a disagreement while maintaining plausible deniability. And maybe that was to be expected, given the absolute nothing she knew about how things had been during that brief could-barely-be-called-a-relationship. If she'd known about the alley, about all the times Buffy had broken him just because she could—not meaning to but also not caring enough to stop. How she'd been using him, and how he'd let himself be used. How she wasn't all that different from the witch in Willow's MAA meeting who had confessed to killing her demon lover over an addiction she hadn't wanted to own, much less control.

"Tara knew for a while, didn't she?" Willow asked a second later. "I... It's weird, what I remember about the days before she was killed. We had so much to talk about, and some of what we talked about was you. How you reacted to seeing Spike and Anya getting all horizontal."

Buffy's memory, so faulty in some places and razor-sharp in others, immediately provided her with the image of Spike laying Anya on the table and came with a lance of pain she hadn't expected. One sharper and more white-hot than it had any right to be.

"I asked her if she thought maybe something was going on," her friend continued, oblivious, "and she... Well, she told me everything. Including how you thought I—*we*, meaning the Scoobies—would react."

Buffy didn't respond at first, still focused on that pain. Its sudden appearance and how it lingered. That was dumb. Ancient history. It wasn't like she and Spike had even been anything when it had happened, or like they would ever be anything again, but it still somehow felt like a betrayal. More now than it had at the time it had happened. Maybe because she knew now that she'd been in love with him. "Yeah," she said to distract herself. "Tara knew. I asked her to find out if there was anything wrong with me."

"Anything wrong with you?" Willow asked.

Granted, distracting herself came at a price. This was another subject she wasn't sure she wanted to talk about. But it was also known in ways her love for Spike—whatever it had been—hadn't been known, and maybe easier because of it.

Talk about it or don't?

Her brain sent her another Technicolor snapshot of Spike fucking Anya, then she was talking at a clip.

"For feeling the way I did. For letting Spike do the things to me that I did. For liking it and wanting it. For wanting him. I thought it might've been a side effect of the resurrection spell because Spike could hit me without his chip going off. That if *that* was wrong, then maybe everything about me was." Her eyes started to sting, which they absolutely couldn't do since she was the one behind the wheel, so she inhaled a deep breath and wiped at her cheeks as though to trick her body into thinking she'd already stopped crying. It didn't really work, but hell, nothing did these days. "It wasn't. I was and am one-hundred percent Buffy. Which, good to know now, but was really hard to hear at the time."

Out of her periphery, she saw Willow throw her a look that said plainly she didn't follow. Of course she didn't. How could she without having lived it?

She couldn't. And Buffy could either stop talking or try to explain.

Perhaps talking would help her, too. God knows she'd tried everything else.

"I wanted there to be a reason I was...drawn to Spike," Buffy went on. "A reason I kept going back to him, that I couldn't seem to stop. Some way it wasn't my fault. But it was me. Completely me. And Tara was just...really great. Told me that it was okay if I loved him. That he'd been good for a while—or at least been trying. So it wasn't like I was in love with a monster or anything. At least not a monster the way he had been a monster before."

"Tara knew you were in love with him?" Willow sounded a bit wounded. "I thought you only now figured that out."

"I didn't know I was in love with him." Though that wasn't entirely right, either, she realized. She might not have known, but she'd definitely been afraid she was. Thought it was possible. Worried it was more than possible—that it was true. Then done everything she could to convince herself it wasn't.

That was why she had asked Tara to do that spell sleuthing in the first place. Not just the sex part, which had had her wigged enough, but the parts that had nothing to do with sex and everything to do with the way he made her feel. How she craved him, even missed him when they were apart. How he kept talking about pulling her into the dark and how much she'd wanted to let him. That downward spiral of falling that she'd known before but couldn't let herself be fooled into trusting ever again. Especially not like this. Not with another vampire.

"Uhh, Buffy?"

She pulled her attention away from the road long enough to catch the nervous smile on Willow's face and braced herself.

"Don't, like, run us into a ditch or anything," Willow went on, "but... And feel free to tell me to shut up and all, but hearing you talk about it, it sounds less like you didn't know you were in love with him and more like you were and didn't want to be."

Well, it was nice to know that several months, attempted murder, and a near-miss apocalypse hadn't affected her best friend's sometimes uncanny ability to pluck thoughts right out of her head. Particularly the ones she didn't want voiced. Buffy sucked down a deep breath and tightened her grip on the steering wheel, her pulse suddenly rushing in her ears, the rest of her warring with the instinctive need to shut down this conversation before it led her into uncomfortable territory and the deeper need to let the things living inside her head a chance to breathe. Maybe if she acknowledged them, she'd be able to understand them. Or at least get them to shut up for good.

"I think... The way I felt, if I'd been younger, if I didn't know just how *bad* it could get with a vampire, things might have been different," she heard herself saying. "It would've been easy to get lost in that feeling. But I've done that before—been lost in feeling something good and ignoring everything that told me it was wrong or dangerous. I think it's a *fool me once* kinda thing, you know? So...yeah, I definitely didn't want to be in love with Spike. But I also didn't think I could be, after everything. That I would be stupid enough to let it happen twice was just...unacceptable to me."

"So...what you're saying is you could've loved Spike the way you loved Angel."

The vehicle gave a lurching swerve, her heart and brain in a sudden screaming match she couldn't follow. Buffy cursed and threw out a hand—what Dawn called the *Mom save*—to appease the part of her reptilian mind that would always be convinced the slightest unexpected movement would send her passenger careening head-first out the windshield.

"What the hey!" Willow gasped, slapping a hand to her chest.

"Sorry!" Buffy said with a wince as she corrected. The car might have fishtailed a

bit, but hell, it wasn't like she could help herself. Not like she had asked Willow to say that...that thing. And her response, as far as she was concerned, had been instinctive, *as* instinctive as the cacophony between her ears. The suggestion that she could ever feel for anyone anything remotely comparable to what she'd felt for Angel was ludicrous, and she should know. She'd tried so hard to replicate it with others...only not because she hadn't *really* tried all that hard. She hadn't wanted to. Hadn't felt it.

Until she had.

But no. The circumstances were completely different. Would always be different specifically because of what she'd learned during and after her relationship with Angel. As much as she'd enjoyed being lost inside that love, it had rendered her blind—so blind that everything that had followed had hit her not only where it hurt, but where it killed. Where it *could* kill. And that was something she would never let happen again. Not when she was the thing standing between the world and chaos, when the decisions she made could be the difference between living and fighting another day or losing someone she loved.

"I'm not the same person I was when I was with Angel," she said when her pulse was back to the harsh gallop it had been before. Not quite normal but close enough. "And I can't ever be that person again. I can't let myself love someone like that."

That was it. Or it should have been. If nothing else, Willow should have taken the near-calamity that was Buffy-almost-driving-off-the-road for the warning sign it was. This was not a path one should venture down with her. Therein lay the way to potential pileups on the freeway.

However, either Willow's sense of danger had been seriously damaged over the years, or she was just really bad at understanding the cues, for a moment later, she drew in a breath and said, "What do you mean by *like that*?"

"What?" Buffy snapped, more harshly than she intended.

"You said you can't let yourself love someone *like that*. What's *like that* mean?"

She opened her mouth to respond, closed it. The question made her skin itch. "I don't know. Just...the way I loved Angel, I guess. All...reckless and naïve and stupid. And completely. I was ready to give up everything for him. Just everything. All of Buffy. And when it wasn't enough, it crushed me. I don't think I have it in me to give that much of me to someone ever again."

"Because he left you."

"Because it couldn't work. Him vampire, me slayer. Kinda doomed from the start."

There was a long pause—long enough that Buffy thought Willow might have decided to drop the subject. But then she shifted in her seat and took a breath, and she knew she hadn't.

"But what made it doomed?" she asked. "I'm sorry. And please, tell me to shut up if you don't wanna talk about this. I'm just trying to understand. You say that Spike could've been like Angel if you were younger—that's kinda of the huge. Angel being your one and only."

Buffy drew in another breath, this time wanting to dispute that Angel was her one and only. Not knowing why. Maybe out of some dormant loyalty to Riley, or her

unnamed future partner should he exist, and her own half-hearted attempts to make anything like *normal* work. When she thought of Angel these days, it always came with a tug in her chest. Remembered pain. A bittersweet *if only* that she'd gotten so used to she barely even registered it anymore. Just part of herself. Buffy Summers—Slayer, big sis, shopping enthusiast, avid shoe hoarder, and one half of a romance that had been star-crossed from the start. Very *Romeo and Juliet*. Two households both alike in dignity, the Slayers and the Vampires, Capulets and Montagues of the supernatural world. It had been such an integral part of her identity as long as she could remember. Even when she thought of the early days of her relationship with Angel, that sense of doom seemed inevitable. Hindsight doing its thing.

"I mean, if that's true, then what you're saying is it didn't need to be Angel," Willow said.

Buffy didn't swerve off the road this time, but dammit, she came close. "What?"

"Well...come on, think about it, Buffy. If you could've felt the way about Spike that you did about Angel if it had happened like that, then what you felt for Angel was just... It could've been anyone, is all I'm saying. Any first love type guy who came in and made a big ol' mess."

She shook her head hard enough to knock it loose, though her heart was doing the poundy thing again and her blood had recommenced the hard rush that was becoming way too familiar. And she hated it because she knew what her body was doing—preparing to fight against a thought so outrageous it might just be true. Only this one couldn't be true. It was too big, too much a part of her. Too fundamental to the person she was and who she'd worked to become. No matter how she felt about Angel now, that buried *something* that made up their story was the sort of thing that couldn't be replaced or replicated. It had been singular, and it had only happened because he'd been the guy. The end.

But her mind, too tired to fight and grappling with the mountain of personal revelations she'd had since leaving the house that morning, dredged up the thing she'd been thinking earlier. Sitting outside of the place where MAA met, grappling with the understanding that she had been in love with Spike, and how that love had felt in relation to her previous experiences. The need, the longing, and everything else that had been there from the start. From the moment she'd seen him waiting for her at the bottom of the stairs, caught the wonder in his eyes and felt something spark in her in turn. That spark had driven her to his crypt night after night, let her breathe when the world around her had been suffocating. And yes, after they'd had sex, she'd craved him like a drug, and that craving hadn't been dissimilar to what she'd felt those nights she and Angel had used patrol as an excuse for making out rather than doing anything productive. Only it had been more intense with Spike, refined with an adult woman's sensibilities rather than relying on the instincts of a besotted teenager. The things she'd wanted hadn't been abstract with him, rather very real and always within reach.

Maybe that had been a matter of timing. Or maybe, if things had been different, she would have seen *him* differently from the start. She definitely remembered thinking he was sex on legs the moment he'd stepped out of the shadows, even if she

hadn't been all that into the punk aesthetic. His confidence had been as addictive as it had unnerving. She'd never met a vampire like him before.

You didn't like Angel at first, whispered a traitorous voice.

"Sorry," Willow said a moment later, thankfully drawing her out of her incredibly loud head and back to the present. "I didn't mean... I think I'm projecting. Or maybe that's not the right word. Just...easier to think of stuff that isn't *your* stuff, you know? And now I can't stop thinking."

God, she wasn't sure she wanted to know, except she did. Buffy worked her throat and braced herself. "Thinking what?"

"Just...like how much we wanted things to be a certain way and how we told ourselves they were enough times until it became the truth." A beat. "Like me and Tara. I felt like there was something I needed to do to keep her. And there was, just not what I wanted to do. All I had to do was listen and work and be better. Not even all the way better, just try. I lost so much time with her because I thought things had to be a certain way. I had it in my head that we were *this* and we weren't. Does it make sense?"

It didn't, but Buffy nodded anyway.

"I think about that a lot," Willow went on, her voice somewhat hoarse. "Not just how she died, but that we'd lost so much time because I'd... Because I had a problem, and I didn't want to admit it. I spent so much time trying to control her, make her think things about me that weren't true. Or make it so she just wouldn't care as much about the parts I didn't want to change."

Buffy wet her lips. "And you think you're projecting onto me and Angel?"

"I dunno. You saying it could've been like that with someone else, with *Spike*—"

"But I didn't say that."

She took her eyes off the road long enough to catch the look Willow gave her, which was almost pitying in a way that made her instantly resent it. "Oh sweetie, you did. And that's okay. It just makes me wonder if you and Angel were like me and Tara, how I told myself things I wanted to be true and just weren't. And I didn't see it until we had run out of time together." There was a pause and she sniffed. "I'm still doing it, too. I do it every day."

"Will—"

"I don't know what would've happened if she hadn't died," her friend said, talking over her. "I'll never know. So there's this story I get to tell myself, that if this awful thing hadn't taken her away from me, we could've lived happily ever after, all sunshine and lollipops forever. That can always be true to me...but other things can be true, too. I just don't want to think about them because thinking about them, thinking these other things, takes something away from me. Like maybe I would've gone back to magic behind her back. Maybe things wouldn't have worked out and she would've broken my heart. Or found someone who loved her just as she was, who would never try to make her do anything she didn't want."

"Okay," Buffy said slowly. She fought the urge to look over again, not trusting her hands to keep firm on the steering wheel. "But I'm not seeing what this has to do with me and Angel."

Willow barked a harsh laugh. "That's where I'm projecting. You and Angel never had the chance, really, to see what you'd be like together once all the bad was over. I mean, it was just nonstop bad, right? He started off as this guy who'd show up and mess with your head and then make with the dramatic exits."

"That's not like you and Tara." It wasn't wrong, either, though she didn't want to say as much. The early days of her relationship with Angel had been fraught with frustration. He'd show up, say something cryptic, then disappear before she could ask him to elaborate. Scheduling dates had been a nightmare, as he'd played the *we shouldn't* card, which had just made her want him more, the forbidden being exciting in the heat of the moment.

It had been a long, long time since she'd thought about any of that.

"What you two had was...intense and big, like me and Tara," Willow said. "But... yeah, I know. Nothing much else there. But if I thought of Angel as the big love of your life, and Tara as the love of mine then...you saying it could've been Spike in the right circumstances means it could be someone else for me, too. That maybe there's someone out there I could love...not like I love her, but love as much, maybe. And I kinda hate it." She choked a sound that was half-laugh, half-sob. "I hate the idea that I could love someone else as much as her, because she was my everything and I don't want anyone else to take her place. I want it to be me and Tara forever, even if she's not here for the forever part. I know I should, I know I need to, but I don't *want* to move on."

The words were a gut punch, one she hadn't seen coming—one that slammed the wind out of her. And Buffy had no more wind left. No more room for other big thoughts or revelations, or anything of the sort. If another blow came, it would just knock her out for good. So long, and thanks for all the fish. But she couldn't afford to let that happen—not now or ever—and pressed her lips together to push it back, hold her breath, willing Willow not to notice. She held it to the point her lungs started to whine and her eyes to water, and then longer still with the hope that she could smother the words right out of her head before they took root and started growing the way the others had.

Angel had been the guy. It couldn't have been anyone else. She hadn't been holding onto that out of fear. She'd been holding onto it because it was true. True today and true tomorrow, and true until the stars winked out. And yes, she might have loved Spike, might have even felt something similar, but it hadn't been anything that big. It hadn't been. Because she wouldn't let it be.

She wouldn't let it be with anyone.

Buffy wasn't sure when she began breathing again, but it was after the corners of her vision had started to darken. When she came back to herself, she found the car thankfully as she'd left it, unhurt by her own bold recklessness, and engulfed in the sort of silence that told her the conversation, or at least that part of it, was over.

Good. *Good*. She gave her head a small shake to clear it, perhaps jostle the unwelcome thoughts somewhere toward the back where they would fade from inattention until they disappeared entirely. The same as she did with all the uncomfortable things she didn't want to deal with. Hey, it had worked before.

"What's Angel up to, anyway?" Willow asked a second later. "Kinda surprised we left LA without making a pit stop. You know, say hi. Let him know that Faith isn't dead. I'd have thought he'd be interested to know we got to see her."

Buffy relaxed, not entirely thrilled to be continuing the subject that was her ex, but glad at least that she had been right that the truly uncomfortable part was over. "Nah," she said. "More important things to do at home. And from what he's said the last time we talked, Angel has enough on his plate."

"Oh?"

"I don't know the full. He was apparently gone all summer too. And when he came back, half his team had just split. One of his friends got a gig in Las Vegas." She wrinkled her brow, considering her words. Angel hadn't been all that forthright in the conversation, and she'd been too distracted and in slayer-mode to chase him down for anything more substantial. But now that she'd said it aloud, it felt weird and at odds with her picture of him to consider him with actual friends. She'd been his only friend when she'd known him. The only person he made a point to associate with. And yeah, he'd had Cordelia working as his secretary and some other guy doing... whatever the last time she'd truly visited, but her impression had been less *these are friends* and more *these are people I tolerate*. "There was a thing in getting that friend back, but he didn't say what, just that it had been more complicated than he'd expected. And when they'd gotten back, Cordelia was back too."

"Cordelia went somewhere?"

Buffy nodded. "Again, scarce on the details, but whatever happened was affecting her memory when Angel and I talked. Like, she couldn't remember him or their team or even how she'd gotten there. He was really freaked."

"Angel...freaked over Cordelia?"

There was something in Willow's voice that lent Buffy pause, but she decided not to pursue it. The last thing she needed was to add complicated Angel thoughts to her pile of things to sort through. And given he wasn't a part of her life anymore, he was the easiest piece of today's mind-fuckery to release back into the wild.

"People change," she said instead, offering a one-shouldered shrug. And not thinking about how that could be applied to her. Or Spike. Or anyone else. Because the Brain of Buffy was officially closed for business. No more world-changing revelations for her today. No, siree.

With any luck, she'd herself maxed out for the rest of the year.

There was only so much a girl could take.

Even if she was the Slayer.



THAT HARRIS HAD a bloody point about sticking around didn't make Spike like it any.

"Still don't see why it couldn't have been Anyanka," he snapped as he thundered into the Summers' living room. The sun had just gone down, thankfully, because the only thing that could make being babysat by sodding Xander Harris worse would be

having to hurl insults at him from under the safety of a blanket. "Between the two of you, your former lady's the one with all the muscle. Dunno what you're supposed to do if this bint shows up besides stand in her way."

"More than you can do," the boy fired back.

"Oh yeah, you got me there."

"Yeah, well, sorry for keeping you from putting the moves on my girlfriend," Harris yelled after him. Spike turned and caught the git with his face scrunched up, like the melon inside his head had started working and he didn't know what to make of the noise. "Or...ex-girlfriend. Or fiancée. Or whatever."

"I told you, I wasn't there to get into her knickers. I was there to help the Slayer."

"In the middle of the day. While she's out of town."

Spike rolled his eyes and tossed the duffle he'd lugged from the shop onto the nearest chair. When he looked back up, he was careful to keep his attention solely on the wanker in front of him, even though every instinct was screaming at him to shift his attention to Dawn. She hadn't said much of anything since Anya had chased off the new slayer slag, but her heartrate had yet to drop, and she was shaking in such a way that he knew she hadn't put the shock of it behind her. Or maybe that was just because he was around. He couldn't help but notice that Dawn was making as much of an effort not to look at him as he was her.

"Thought there might be somethin' in one of the watcher's books," he said again. "Better than sittin' around here, anyway. Waitin' for the next bloody shoe to drop."

Xander just scowled harder at him. "I still don't understand what you're doing here in the first place. I know Buffy has a special way of looking at things where you're concerned, but to let you stay here after what you tried to do to—"

"We all know what I *tried*," Spike snapped. God help him, but if the bastard mentioned anything in front of Dawn, he'd risk both the headache and the death he knew Buffy would give him and just tear Harris's jaw off entirely. Someone out there would surely thank him for it. "As for why the Slayer has decided I'm her permanent houseguest, you'll have to ask her."

"Don't think I won't, mister. It's not like you're of any help right now, what with that chip in your head. I—" Xander thankfully stopped in mid-rant, his eyes going wide. He pressed a hand to his gut. "Oh, god, no. Not now."

"What's wrong?" Dawn asked, damn near jolting Spike right out of his own bloody skin with her voice alone.

"I think my stomach is about to put on a production of *Revenge of the Bean Burrito*." He let out a deep breath, screwing up his face as though in concentration. And though it had been a good minute since Spike had been human, he was fairly certain bodily functions couldn't be negotiated with. "Oh god. Yeah," Harris said a moment later, backtracking toward the staircase. "Definitely a bean emergency."

"Brilliant." Spike shook his head and turned away before he could do something he would actually regret. Just when he thought the night couldn't get better. If his luck continued this way, Buffy wouldn't be home until sometime tomorrow. Might have she'd decide to swing by Angel Investigations while she was in town, and he'd get to add the stink of his grandsire to whatever Xander was about to pump into the

air. There was absolutely no consideration for those houseguests with sensitive noses in these parts.

"You two, just stay put," Xander said before making a mad, clomping dash up the stairs. Then a door slammed and everything was quiet again.

And he was alone with Dawn for the first time since before the soul.

Figured it'd happen like this. Sudden and with barely any warning to speak of. Seemed an appropriate reward for his cowardice, all the hiding he'd done in the basement ever since Buffy had strong-armed him into becoming a resident. And he couldn't well leave the room, either. No telling if Legolas—bloody awful name; he'd have to come up with another until they learned more—wouldn't try her hand at breaking into the Slayer's home. Not that Spike would be much good if that happened, as Harris just loved to point out, but should she come barreling through the window, he'd make damn sure the last Dawn saw of him was his fighting to keep between her and danger. Maybe she'd even shed a tear for him after it was done.

Bloody selfish thing to think, but why stop now?

If he knew what was good for him, he'd just follow her lead and keep quiet. Pretend like she wasn't there or what all. Or try to ignore the tension completely—make like the chasm between where they stood and where they had once been didn't exist. Maybe throw himself onto the sofa and start flicking through channels, see if he could find one of those insufferable programs she used to subject him to back during that summer. Even if she'd probably outgrown those shows like she'd outgrown so many other things.

Like she had outgrown him.

No, you git. That's not fair and you bloody know it.

It wasn't and he did know it. Didn't make the thought go away, though.

He was in the middle of trying to work out how to break the silence when she, being a Summers, took the reins herself and made the decision for him.

"So, I thought about killing you," she said. Her voice was soft and all the more brutal for it. A sort of soft that didn't disguise anything—didn't really put anything forth, either. The lack of accusation there, of anything that he could comfortably call any one emotion, somehow made the words even sharper. Harder to hear. To swallow.

But he had to do both. He owed her that much. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," Dawn replied casually. "When Buffy told me you were back. I thought I might just show up someday when you were sleeping and stake you for what you did to her."

"Why didn't you?"

She shook her head and turned away from him, though not so quickly he didn't see her crack. It wasn't much—a slight tremble of her lower lip—and it could have been his imagination, but he knew it wasn't. That he was glad to see it probably made him more of a monster but hell, perhaps he was better off not keeping score there. Wasn't any chance he'd come out ahead, anyway.

"I don't know," she said, and there was no imagining the tremor in her voice. "And I haven't ruled it out. I could still do it, you know."

Spike nodded his agreement, even if she couldn't see it. "Wouldn't be any less what I deserve," he said. "You'd give me a worthy death, at least. You and big sis. If it couldn't be her—"

"Don't."

"Don't what?"

"Don't...don't give me permission to kill you. Don't do that."

"Afraid you might, then?"

"No, you just... You don't get to do that." She whirled around to face him once more, and the pretense was gone. Few could flip a switch as quickly as a teenage girl, he supposed, and Dawn was no ordinary girl. Never had been and never could be. "You don't get to talk to me like that. You hurt her. I trusted you more than I trusted probably anyone, and you hurt her and then you left. You left and Tara got shot, and Willow tried to end the world, and you just never came back. For months, you never came back! And now, what, we're supposed to just accept that you're back and you and Buffy are magically okay again? Like nothing happened?"

"Dawn—"

"Don't say my name. You don't get to do that, either. You don't get to pretend like nothing changed. *Everything* changed."

Spike held up his hands. Somehow, almost impossibly, the more she said, the more she shook, the calmer he became. The moment was here, and instead of the crushing weight of his regrets and self-loathing, the space in his head had started to clear. He didn't get it. He'd thought the first sign of how severely he'd broken her would have all of him screaming the way it had at the start. Clawing his way out of that cave, this new, foreign heat lighting up his insides, spreading through him until the pain he felt was something more than pain. But it didn't.

Maybe because this was the first time something had gone exactly as he'd thought it would. What he'd thought he'd get from Buffy—not tears, but the hatred behind them. What he'd expected, even wanted on some level. As though her anger and disgust could provide some validation to his own. But then she hadn't yelled at him, hadn't screamed, hadn't done anything but react to his feeble attempts to get her nice and braced with more hurt he couldn't undo. The word *forgiveness* hadn't been uttered once, and he couldn't dream it ever would be, but it was what he'd felt.

Especially that morning. Buffy coming down the stairs to talk to him. Whipping off her top without thought so he could check the wound he'd fixed up. Teasing him about looking up bloody porn. They'd finally had it all out the night before, and she'd gotten what she needed and that was just swell for her but left him more than a little lost.

Lost where Buffy was concerned wasn't exactly a new sensation, but it wasn't comfortable either. Particularly this form of lost. Loving her and hating himself, hating that he wasn't strong enough to stay away from her—that no matter how much it hurt, he couldn't stand the thought of being anywhere else. In that regard, not much had changed since last year. Except, miserable as he'd been in the time between her visits and the utter devastation that had come with her breaking it off, he hadn't had much rage to throw at himself.

"Not doin' anything, Bit," he said, mostly to say something, partially because he knew it'd just piss her off more and calm as he was, he was also a bit reckless. Maybe a lot reckless. It was nice hearing someone else hurl these things at him for once. "Think I don't know what a mess I made of things? Think that's not somethin' I live with every sodding day?"

"You should!" Dawn spat back, red blooming across her face. "I thought you loved her! I thought you would be the person who would never hurt her. I *trusted* you because you loved her so much. How could you do that to her? To *me*? Did it mean nothing to you? Or is that just one of the perks of being soulless?"

"Dawn—"

"I told you that you don't get to call me that. Dawn's this little girl who has stupid ideas about monsters. She forgets what they're capable of. Even when they tell her bedtime stories about it." Her eyes glistened as she puffed up her chest. "Even when they're—"

"I didn't know."

The words were out before he could stop them, his bloody mouth turning traitor against his brain. Fuck, maybe the talk with Buffy had lowered his guard more than he'd realized. The convictions of just seconds ago blinked out of existence like a bad joke. That was all it took, and he actually had no resolve at all. Not where Dawn was concerned.

"What?" she asked.

And he had a choice now. Could walk it back. Say something else that she'd hate him for. Make her forget he'd slipped at all. But watching her as she stood there, blinking at him through confusion, the first angry tears spilling down her cheeks, regarding him with the mixed innocence of a child and the fury of an adult, he knew he wouldn't. He didn't have the strength.

"I didn't know that was in me," he said thickly. "That I could do that to her."

Dawn's face fell. All of her seemed to. And he kept talking.

"Done a lot of bad in my time, pidge. Things I'd rather you not think about. But I'd never... I'd never hurt someone I loved like that. The way I hurt her." Spike inhaled, looked away. "It's not an excuse. There *is* no excuse for what I did. Know Buffy has this idea about it that—"

"She told me you lost control and didn't mean to," Dawn blurted. He heard her pulse tick up and when her heart started to pound rather than just beat. "She said—she said you left because you lost control, and you saw what you'd done, and you knew it was wrong. Are you saying she was wrong?"

"What? No, I—"

"Because it sounded like you were about to say, 'Buffy has this idea about it and her idea is bollocks.'"

"That's not what I was gonna say." Honestly, he had no idea what he'd been about to say. Buffy's view on everything had been so bloody generous he still didn't know what to do with it. That it was true, or the truth as he wanted to believe it, didn't matter. Seemed too simple for what he'd done, and he'd seen too much to trust anything simple.

"Then what?"

Spike forced his gaze back at her to find her staring at him, her eyes wide and probing. As though she were trying to see beneath the skin, as though she could extract his thoughts from his head if she focused hard enough. It was a look beyond anything he'd ever seen on her face before. A look that was neither adult nor child, but rather the desperate attention of someone begging to be proven wrong. And it hit him, as it should have perhaps from the start, just how much damage he had actually done. How the hurt he'd inflicted on Dawn was more than just her sense of betrayal and disillusionment, but a fundamental truth about herself that she had thought was solid, unmovable had been thrown into question, likely in ways she couldn't explain or fully understand. Maybe ways he couldn't, either.

It was simple, then, the decision he made. He had no sodding idea if it would be a comfort to her or not, but balls, a man had to try. He owed her that much.

For what he'd taken from her, he owed her everything.

"I left because I was wrong," he said softly. "As a vampire and a man, just wrong. Bitch of it is I thought I had it figured. Thought it was simple-like. That I could be with her if I just stopped bein' evil. That's the thing about vampires, though..." He trailed off, ducking his head with a grunt. "Hardwired for evil, the lot of us. Not just about what you do, but how you think. What you crave. What gives you your jollies. Can't just want to change and call it good. Bloody hell, dunno anymore if it's even possible. All I know is what was inside me wasn't a man or monster, just somethin' torn down the middle. I needed to decide what I wanted to be."

The silence that settled between them was thick enough to choke on.

"What did you decide?" she asked.

"That I wanted to be more man than monster. Wanted to be someone who would never do to her what I did. Never again." A beat. "So I hunted down this legend on the other side of the world. Somethin' that would either kill me or give me what I needed."

Dawn swallowed, and for a fleeting moment, she was the girl he'd known before he'd bollixed everything up. The girl who had sat with him night after night during the longest summer of either of their lives, his companion in grief and guilt and more besides. She was just his Little Bit again, and that was almost too much to take. "You got what you needed then."

"I did."

"What was it?"

Here it was. All bloody in.

"A soul."

Dawn's eyes widened into saucers and her mouth dropped open, the anger and hurt not replaced but outshone by shock.

And Spike wasn't sure what he'd expected—he hadn't exactly had time to consider how this might hit her before making the leap. As soon as the words were out, they were out and gone for good. This thing he'd kept close to the chest, protected the way he'd once protected her, or once tried. Not just his secret anymore.

For whatever reason, it took saying the words aloud for him to realize exactly what he'd given her.

"She doesn't know," he said in a rush, the first stirrings of panic beginning to rise. "No one bloody knows, and I aim to keep it that way. Didn't come back here to show off or beg her to forgive me. Gettin' the soul doesn't mean I've earned rot. And she... You know your sister, way she is about vamps and souls. Just don't want her—I don't want her thinkin' she has to feel any way about me just because I—"

"Oh my god."

"Dawn, you can't tell her." Not the thing to say to a girl who had just recently been screaming at him, but fuck, he hadn't thought this much ahead. "Tell me you won't—"

But then he heard it—heard what he should have heard a few seconds ago. And he was out of time.

A car door had shut out back.

Buffy was home.

AS A FRIEND, AS A FRIEND. AS AN OLD ENEMY

THE PLACE UNDER HER SHOULDER WAS THROBBING BY THE TIME BUFFY PULLED IN behind Mom's old SUV and killed the engine. *Really* throbbing, and in a way that let her know patrolling tonight was going to be ten times as much fun as normal. When paired with the exhaustion already riding her ragged, an argument could be made that she would be better off just staying in and forgetting for the night that she lived on the literal mouth of Hell.

But Buffy knew better. Knew she had to go do her sacred duty because of what would inevitably happen if she didn't. She'd wake up tomorrow to news that some other hapless citizen had died of severe neck trauma and blood loss, and then she'd spend the foreseeable future running over the many ways that it was her fault. Being exhausted was a luxury, one that came with also being alive.

But god, she was so exhausted with freaking exhaustion. Especially *this* brand of exhaustion, which was somehow both completely new and entirely familiar. Maybe a cousin of what had chased her off the tower a couple of years ago, or what had crawled out of the grave with her and insisted on sticking around for a while. Except it seemed more personal. At least then, she hadn't had much to work out, herself. The only thing she'd been tasked to do was survive it.

Right now, the most she could hope was there would be no big fights tonight, or if there were, that the mega she-bitch would do some actual vampire slaying while she was in town. It didn't seem too much to ask, considering the same mega she-bitch was responsible for the throbbing on her back.

"I feel like I could sleep for maybe a thousand years," Willow said as she dragged herself up the back porch stairs at her heels. "Wanna order a pizza and watch bad movies?"

"Oh, yes please," Buffy agreed, rolling her shoulder. "Just don't let me get too comfy."

"No nights off for Buffy?"

"Are you just now learning this?" She snickered and shook her head, gave the doorknob a try, and groaned when the door swung open without resistance. Dawn had to stop leaving it unlocked, even if it saved Buffy the need to dig for her keys. Too many bad things that didn't require invites knew where she lived. "I can't even ask Spike to patrol for me. Stupid chip."

"Stupid, huh?"

There was a bit too much knowing in Willow's voice for her comfort. Like suddenly they were back in high school, and Buffy was trying to pass off a night spent macking on her undead boyfriend as fulfilling her sacred calling. Addressing any of it would be opening a whole can of worms and she was can-of-wormed out, thanks for asking.

As it was, she wouldn't have had time to come up with a reply at all, for the second she'd pushed through the door and into the kitchen, Dawn was there, storming in from the hallway, her eyes wide and the rest of her pasty. And every *mom* instinct Buffy had went on high alert.

Oh god. What now?

She really didn't want to know, but unlike exhaustion, choice was not among her luxuries.

"What's wrong?" she asked, moving forward, the throbbing under her shoulder forgotten. "Did something happen? Where's—"

She heard him before she saw him. It was impossible not to with the thundering way he moved. And in a blink, he was there, exploding into the kitchen, panting like he had again forgotten his lungs were for show only. His eyes also wide and his skin, if possible, even paler than normal. He looked downright wigged, which had her instantly more wigged, as wigged was something Spike rarely got.

Something really bad had to have happened.

The second their gazes connected, though, everything about his demeanor changed. The urgency, or what she thought might have been panic, blanked from his face. It wasn't a natural blank, either—very forced and very obvious. Like he hoped she hadn't noticed that he'd just tripped over himself to catch up with Dawn. Another Spikeism she knew well—the one that practically screamed he'd just been up to something that he didn't want her to know about. "Slayer," he said in a tone of forced casualness that fooled no one, "you're home."

Slayer, you're home.

Something inside her shattered at the words, at the way he said them, the look on his face—all of it had dread melting into disappointment with dizzying speed. Some part of her had known it would only be a matter of time before he became comfortable enough to fall back on old habits, stop walking on eggshells and start acting more like himself, but she hadn't wanted to believe it could happen so fast. Or that it would be so easy for him, so normal, or done with such disregard of the distances they'd traveled together. That she could force herself to face the things she'd faced

only to have him revert to the guy who did things behind her back without batting an eye.

Because Buffy didn't want to go back to that normal—the old status quo. Not now or ever, and especially not after last night. Discussing everything they had discussed had been intense and painful, as intense and painful as all the thoughts she'd spent the day navigating her way through, and it didn't seem fair that Spike could shake it off and call it good, recommence life the way it had been before. That where she'd spent the day beating herself up for the past, he'd moved on from it.

Perhaps the thought had been broadcast, for Spike's face changed again, falling this time. He gave an almost imperceptible shake of his head, then darted his eyes in Dawn's direction.

And she understood. And felt like an idiot for having not understood from the start. For feeling the swell of relief that the understanding brought with it.

Spike hadn't reverted after all. He'd just been left alone with Dawn. And Dawn with him. Maybe for the first time since before he'd left.

It was a good thing Buffy had Dawn to focus on, otherwise she might have just started crying. That had been quite the emotional sucker punch after a day full of them.

"You okay?" she asked her sister, who still resembled those old cartoons where one of the characters had seen a ghost. Not the reaction she would have expected, as it was more surprised than angry, but maybe being one-on-one with Spike had been a different kind of hard on her. "I'm sorry I wasn't here when you got home. Trip took a bit longer than we thought it would."

"You talk to her, then?" Spike asked promptly. "The other bird?"

"It took some finagling but yeah, Faith's there and alive. And apparently also on the Council's shortlist for possible Buffy assassins." Buffy snorted a little laugh. "Offered her an express pass out of jail and everything. Probably says something that I'm more surprised that she said no than I am that they asked. None of the people who used to want me dead want me dead anymore."

Buffy glanced to Spike without thinking, as though to let him in on a joke. That proved to be a mistake, for when he smiled, the relief still buzzing through her triggered something else, and all the other stuff came tumbling out of the mental box she'd stuffed it inside. That this was the first time *they* had been in the same room since she'd realized she'd been in love with him. Or that she had any reason to compare her relationship with him to Angel except for the fact that she had established a precedent of screwing the undead. Heat she didn't want suddenly bloomed in her cheeks and her body decided to give her away by flooding her with a fresh wave of adrenaline she had no means of exorcising. And that was no good. Spike was too adept at reading her—always had been. He might not look at her and just *know* all the thoughts that had been running through her head, or that he'd been a hot topic of conversation on the drive home, but he would know something was up and he *couldn't*. That would introduce a whole new level of difficult into a relationship that had just started to stabilize.

She shook her head and forced her gaze back to Dawn, hoping her stupid overac-

tive body would take the hint. "I'm sorry," she said again. "It wasn't as easy to get in to see Faith as I'd thought it'd be, and then traffic in and out of LA was...well, traffic in and out of LA. Which we got to hit on both sides because we're extra lucky like that."

"Buffy," Dawn said, speaking like Buffy hadn't. Like she hadn't heard a word. The urgency in her voice had Buffy's hackles rising all over again. "There's something you need to know—"

"Yeah," Spike agreed loudly. "That slayer bitch caught up with the Nibblet outside of the shop."

All her stupid emotional shit blinked out of existence. "*What?*" Buffy demanded, jolting forward and looking her sister up and down. "What happened? Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine. But—"

"Think we got a real problem on our hands, Slayer," Spike said, again talking over Dawn. "One thing to come after you and yours truly. No tellin' how far she would've gone if she hadn't been interrupted." When she furrowed her brow and looked at him, he said, "Anya. Couldn't, myself, without frying to a bloody crisp."

"You were there, too?" Willow asked, closing the back door, and reminding Buffy she was there. "I thought Buffy said you were supposed to stay put on account of big head owie and possible dustage if you ran into the wrong person."

Spike's jaw tightened the way it did when his patience was at its thinnest. "Thought I'd swing by and see if I could find anything in one of Rupert's books that might tell us where the new chit came from," he said. "And frankly, couldn't bloody stand another day of bein' cooped up here. No offense, Slayer, just only so many soaps a man can watch."

"Since when?" Buffy shot back, firing up with fresh anger. Okay, forget her emotional hang-ups or worries—now she was pissed. And well beyond the limits of her daily threshold of what-the-fuckery. Dawn being attacked and Spike being reckless. After everything, the idiot had gone wandering around when he didn't have any means of protecting himself, especially with no one else around. He might as well take out a freaking ad in the newspaper—Vampire Willing to be Slain. "And I'm sorry if things aren't exciting enough around here for you. I thought the whole 'staying alive' thing was pretty riveting but hey, what do I know?"

"Think you're missin' the bigger picture here." He pointed back to Dawn. "If demon girl hadn't been willin' to leap into the fight, the new slag mighta taken a chunk outta kid sis."

"He's making it sound worse than it was." Dawn held up her hands, which proved to be an unfortunate move for her, as it brought her wrists to Buffy's eye level. Wrists that had purpled with finger-shaped bruises. She seemed to realize this a second too late and lowered her arms at once, but the damage was done, and Buffy was going to kick some slayer ass.

"Who is here?" she asked with calm she didn't feel. She swore, if the others had left Dawn with no one but a vampire who couldn't fight to protect her, she was going to blow her last remaining fuse. "Just you two?"

"No," Spike replied at once, perhaps sensing danger. "Harris is upstairs pollutin' the loo."

"It's a burrito thing," Dawn added. Then shook her head. "And not even the point! Buffy, Spike has—"

Buffy wasn't quite sure what happened next, only it was really fast and made no sense. All she could say for sure was Spike turned into a blur of motion and then he was clutching his head and Dawn was slapping his arm while screaming, "Did you just *pinch* me? God, what are you, a twelve-year-old girl?"

"Oi!" Spike said, his palm pressed to his brow. "Little care for the wounded here."

"Well, don't *pinch* and you won't be wounded!" And for good measure, Dawn aimed a kick at Spike's shin.

"The bloody hell was that for?" he practically roared, hobbling away from her.

"Oh, I don't know, *Spike*," Dawn said scathingly. She was nearly frothing at the mouth. "The *sole* of my shoe just has a mind of its own, *if you know what I mean!*"

All right. That was enough. They were half a *Lifetime* original movie and half Abbot and Costello, and she was over it.

"What the hell is going on?" Buffy demanded, looking between the two of them. "Someone better start talking before I start cracking heads."

Neither of them answered. Dawn just glared at Spike while Spike stared hard back at her. It was the sort of look that said a lot without saying anything at all—the sort Buffy used to catch them sharing all the time back when her life had been more straightforward and less confusing. Only now, her sister didn't seem like the aiding-and-abetting little enabler she'd been in the past. Her softness had been shaped into rough, hard edges over the last few months, and that was the sort of thing that couldn't be undone in a day.

At once, Buffy felt like an idiot for having gone to LA at all. Never mind what had happened with Legolas—she never should have left her sister alone to deal with the vampire who had been her best friend. No amount of talking or explaining could have prepared her for whatever had happened between them.

Then something changed. She didn't know what, but she watched it happen—the second the fire in Dawn's eyes shifted into something else, and her shoulders went slack.

"I was going to go and look for her," Dawn said a moment later. It was in her voice, too, when she spoke. The vitriol and the hurt gone, a soft, nebulous something in its place—one that Buffy hadn't the first idea how to begin to interpret. "If you weren't back, I was going to try to find her myself. You know, since I know how to fight now. It's not like she'd expect it or anything. Spike... Spike said he wouldn't let me. That she's too strong and I'm just a kid. I told him just try to stop me because we all know how well that'd go. A-and then he said he would go instead. If it's what I wanted. To get him killed."

Well, that sounded nice and harsh. Also like a bunch of bullshit, if the shock on Spike's face was indicative of anything. But kudos to her sister, she had become a rather proficient little liar over the last year, and practice had made perfect.

"Nice try," Buffy said, crossing her arms. "Let's hear it again, though I'd like the truth this time."

Dawn stiffened and frowned, then mirrored her stance. "That *is* the truth. I was just getting through telling him that I didn't care what he did when you got home."

"And ran in here immediately to tattle?"

She lifted a shoulder. "Thought I might get to see *you* kill him instead."

It was still bullshit, Buffy was certain. She might not have been the most attentive parent the previous year, but she'd learned from her mistakes enough to identify when her sister was being straight with her and when she was hiding something. The real Dawn, the authentic Dawn, was a close approximation of the girl in front of her now—the uncanny valley version. Real enough to fool people who weren't paying attention but could never stand up under scrutiny.

And she wanted to push. Push and pick and prod and shove until Dawn caved, but these last few months had taught her something else—that when Dawn felt the need to tap her uncanny valley self, there was typically a reason. Probably not a good one but one she would stick to. She could be stubborn as hell when she put her mind to it.

Buffy glanced to Spike, who shifted his weight between his feet and looked down, making her think of a chastised puppy. Maybe that was it. Maybe it was just that they had been left alone with each other for the first time since... Well, since.

So, despite wanting to, Buffy decided not to prod, rather shoved back her impatience and frustration. She'd get the full story later. And right now, there were bigger, slayer-shaped fish to fry.

"This ends tonight," she said, speaking still to Spike. "This... *Whoever* she is, we have to find her and put a stop to it."

He jerked his head up again, furrowed his brow. "Reckon so, yeah. What do you propose?"

"That you and I go out and find her. I know you can't fight, but you have her scent, don't you?"

"Ooh, in need of a bloodhound? That job come with a collar?"

"Shut up. You in or out?"

"You know I'm in."

She did, so she turned to face her friend. "Will? Get the basement ready. Chains, padlocks, whatever you can find that looks strong enough to hold a slayer. There should be supplies in my room at the chest at the end of the bed, some under the bed, and in the weapons chest in the living room."

"You're going to bring her here?" Willow asked. There was no judgment, only genuine curiosity in the question. And Buffy got it—dragging Legolas into her home came with a myriad of risks, but at least she'd be able to watch her. They'd done the chain-up-the-bad-guy-at-some-other-place thing before. More than once, actually, and it always ended with said bad guy breaking free and running a rampage. This way, there would be some form of supervision, as well as obstacles should things go pear-shaped.

She nodded. "I'm thinking downstairs. That way there's someone between her and the door if she gets loose."

Willow pressed her lips together, and for a moment Buffy thought she might object, but she didn't. "Yeah. Can do."

"Get Xander"—the house creaked with the rush of water, as though Xander had been listening through the vents upstairs, waiting for his name before he decided it was time to flush and join the conversation—"to help. And Anya, if she's willing. I'm guessing she stayed at the shop?"

Dawn snorted. "There were customers when we got back inside," she said. "They'd called the police because... Well, Spike knocked over a table of crystal balls when he heard me outside. They thought there had been a struggle and that something was wrong. So...she's dealing with that."

She paused after the words were out as though just hearing them, herself, and threw Spike another look, this one soft and with the sort of uncertainty Buffy had seen before. It had been with her in the car, too, when she'd broken and demanded if she was supposed to be okay with him now that Buffy had told her everything. If it was all right if she still hated him, or that she didn't know if she did or not. If she could take some time and figure out how she felt.

Spike must have seen it too, for he again shifted his weight between his feet and directed his gaze to the floor. And that solidified things for Buffy. For the moment, at least. Whatever weirdness was there was between them, it wasn't hers to sort through or fix.

"You'll get the house ready?" Buffy asked Willow. "I don't know when we'll be back, but the sooner you can get it done, the better."

"No problem," her friend replied with a half-smile. "Not exactly our first rodeo, is it?"

That shouldn't have been reassuring but it strangely was. "Yeah," Buffy said, making her way toward the doorway. "Not our first."

She started to cut her way through the dining room and nearly plowed face-first into Xander, who did a little impromptu dance jig to get out of her way. "Whoa there, Buffster," he said. "Where's the fire?"

"Where *isn't* the fire?" she shot back.

"Not in my stomach anymore, that's for sure," he replied, rubbing his hands together. "And on that note, the second floor should probably be avoided at all costs for a few—what's going on?"

"Oh gross," Dawn piped in. "You were up there a really long time."

"It was a really big bean burrito."

"Things I could have happily died *again* without ever knowing," Buffy muttered, and decided she didn't want to stick around for a festive conversation about her friend's bowels. She navigated around him and through the door into the dining room, though she made sure to linger long enough to wordlessly signal to Xander that she was fine.

Behind her, she caught the low rumble of Spike's laugh and did her best not to react to the sound.

"Buffy's going on a slayer hunt," Willow was saying as Buffy pushed toward the entry hall. "We need to make this place escape-proof."

"Should be easy enough," Xander said. "Just call me Tool Man. And why is Spike going with her?"

"Bloodhound," Dawn answered.

"Well, it's nice to know we've found something useful for him to do."

Buffy sucked in her cheeks to swallow her response, namely because she wasn't sure what it would be. That *useful* would have been making sure that her sister had been left with someone who had the strength and ability to fend off a slayer. That she didn't know how she felt about relying on Anya, who loved Dawn, probably, but without the dedication or devotion as the vampire at her back. Case in point—Anya had chosen to remain behind. Deal with the mundane parts of being a shop owner rather than follow the people who needed her strength. Sure, odds were that Legolas wouldn't follow them home, but actually, who decided that? And who would have stood between her and Dawn—or Spike, for that matter—in a way that would actually help?

Whatever else, Buffy was used to relying on Spike to protect her sister when she couldn't. And if *he* couldn't, then...

A thought sparked at that. Another dangerous thought on a day that had been full of them. And she didn't have time to pursue it. Maybe later.

Assuming she ever got to a later that wasn't already on fire.



SPIKE FELT Buffy's heart pounding as though it were under his own skin, and the sensation put him on edge. Even more on edge than he'd been at the house after he'd realized what Dawn meant to do when she rushed off to greet her sister. The second it had clued in what he'd seen in her eyes—the weight of the thing he'd told her, and how she intended to use it. Time was he could have asked her not to share anything he'd said with anyone, and Dawn would have been all too happy to agree. Been giddy, even, with the thought that there was something he trusted her with and no one else.

But times had changed. He'd lost that tie to Dawn, the special connection she'd shared with him and no one else. Her loyalty had realigned, taken the shape it had probably always needed to take. Not that Dawn hadn't been loyal to Buffy before—she had—but it had been a rebellious loyal. One entrenched in the sort of love he wagered only siblings could share. Strong and with notable exceptions.

And as much as he hated to admit it, he'd experienced a faint undercurrent of pride in the way she'd immediately turned traitor on him. Because it hadn't been turning traitor. Much like Buffy, the Little Bit owed him nothing.

Granted, understanding this didn't make a lick of difference. The panic had been real enough, the sudden certainty that he was about to be seen in ways he never had been before. Stripped and vulnerable, and as much as he might deserve that, Spike remained convinced that Buffy didn't. Learning about the soul would shock her into the sort of thoughts and misgivings she had no business entertaining. Never mind

that she'd likely be brassed as hell to find out about it that way. To get the information secondhand rather than from the source.

And he'd also understood, for the first time, that the forgiveness he felt in how she treated him—in the casual way she'd been with him that morning—was something he wanted. Wanted in the same way he'd wanted the soul, deep and intent and with all of himself. Perhaps a concept too large to fit in his brain, just as strange and seemingly intangible as his last great quest, but real enough that he could almost fool himself into believing he could touch it. Especially if he stopped whingeing about all the rot he couldn't change—even if that whingeing only ever took place between his ears—and started applying himself to be the sort of man who might actually deserve to be regarded the way Buffy had started to regard him.

He wanted it. And he wanted to earn it in both her eyes and his own. Buffy learning about the soul would take that away from them both.

Except now, he realized, her learning that was out of his control. He'd made sure of that tonight, and he'd done it on a bloody whim. Why *shouldn't* it have been a whim? After all, he'd been winging it since he'd gotten back to town. Doing everything at his own pace, on his own time, gauging what to do by what felt right in the heat of the moment. Not to say that hadn't come with its share of rotten calls, but none that he couldn't fix. So far. Only person he'd ever had to worry about was himself.

That wasn't the way it was anymore, and it could never be that way again. Telling Dawn put a timer on the secret he'd been guarding. Meant he was staring down a fuse he'd lit as it wended its way toward the inevitable bomb, which could go off at any time. Tonight, tomorrow, next week. Fuck, it could be going off right now, Dawn could be spilling all to Willow and Harris, and Spike wouldn't know until he knew. Until he and the Slayer had either returned victorious to Revello Drive or decided to try to hunt down the chit at another time.

The not knowing what waited for him back there was its own brand of torture. And the sort he had to live with without making it obvious, experience through Buffy's pounding heart as his body remembered what it felt like to suffer physical panic. The sinking sensation in his gut, the tension in his neck and shoulders, the parts of him that were long dead tingling like a bloody phantom limb. It was the most unnerving thing he had ever experienced, and he had the bad feeling this was just the start. That every second that lapsed between the moment he'd told Dawn and the moment Dawn told everyone else would be spent like this. Trapped inside an explosion he couldn't outrun.

"Dammit," Buffy muttered, jarring him out of his thoughts. He turned in time to catch her rolling the shoulder that had been injured the night before, blissfully unaware of the chaos going on inside his head. "I meant to take some aspirin when I got home."

"Still smarts, eh?"

"Not as much as it should, but enough to be annoying. Especially after spending most of the day in the car."

"We're not too far from the shop," he said, nodding at the length of sidewalk

waiting to lead them into downtown Sunnydale. Buffy had decided to start within the heart of town rather than the cemeteries—see if they could get information from the living residents before resorting to the unliving ones. “We could swing by. Get something else to put on it.”

“The shop is closed now.”

“Never stopped me before, has it?”

He felt more than saw her turn to look at him. Not a full turn, more a slight tilt of her head in his direction, as though she was trying to get the measure of him. Probably was. Her awareness of him, and his knowledge of it, just intensified the anxious feeling thrumming under his skin. It wasn't in his head—something had shifted. Changed. Even more so than that morning when she'd come down to see him. Any second now, she'd ask about Dawn. About what Dawn had been so bloody intent to tell her when she'd gotten home. The truth this time and not another spun yarn. And he'd have to work out what to say. What she'd accept.

And despite everything he wanted, despite everything he believed, he couldn't ignore the voice that whispered to him that the best thing he could give her was the truth, especially since it was just a matter of time now. And if she were to find out, who would he rather hear it from?

Maybe he'd never had a shot at earning forgiveness. Maybe wanting to was just another way he was selfish. Taking the choice from her.

“You left the house,” Buffy said, again startling him out of his head with humiliating ease. “That wasn't smart.”

“Yeah, well, I never claimed to be.”

“I thought *I* was. I mean, not like Giles or Willow smart or school smart, obviously, but smart enough to not make really stupid mistakes.” She hissed in a breath and leaned her head back, her throat pale under the soft glow of moonlight. “It never... I never thought she'd go after Dawn. If anything had happened to her while I was gone—”

“Never would've let it.”

Buffy snorted and gave him a look out of the corner of her eye. “Sun plus chip equals not a whole hell of a lot you could have done to stop it.”

“Right, fine. Might not have made it far, but I would've gone down swinging. Most a man can hope for these days.”

“It *was* dumb, you know. Leaving. She could've dusted you and none of us would've known until she showed up to brag about it.”

“Think today proved that this bloody mare'll find whoever she wants wherever they are. Not any safer in your basement than anywhere else.”

Buffy didn't respond to that, which he took to mean she agreed with him but didn't want to cop to it. “I just never thought... It *never* occurred to me that she might come after Dawn. And it should have. How many times have the bad guys tried to get to me through my sister?”

“Were we supposed to be counting this whole time?”

“I mean it. How dumb can a person be?”

"Bloody hell, Slayer, this isn't gonna do you or anyone a lick of good. We know now. No sense wallowin'."

Probably not the best thing to say when he was already on shaky ground, but hell, he couldn't help himself. No more than he could help himself from bracing when she stopped short and turned to glare at him. This was better, at least. Familiar territory.

"What would you rather I do?" Buffy demanded. "Oh, I know. I can ask what the hell was going on with you and Dawn when I got home. And don't give me that bull-shit about her wanting to go off on her own. Of all the lame excuses, that might've been the lamest."

Well, he'd bloody asked for it, hadn't he? "You're the one who's been trainin' her up," he replied before he could reconsider. Rolling the dice on what Dawn was telling the others. Or not telling them. "Your new slayer was goin' on about how she aims to put you in the ground."

"Dawn's heard me get threatened about a million times—"

"Yeah, and she also knows what it's like when it's more than a threat, doesn't she? Not to mention the bitch brought Joyce into this."

Buffy's face fell. "She what?"

He nodded, invigorated. At least this much was true. It made him feel a little better about the fact that everything he was about to say was not. "Bit doesn't know if you have it in you," he went on. "It comes down to it—if you'll off the Slayer yourself, seein' as the last time you squared off with another chosen one, it took poisoning bloody Angel to get you in a mind to do more than rough her up."

"Dawn told you that?"

Hell, the whole bloody town knew about that. Angelus had nearly drained the Slayer who had sent him to Hell the previous year, and not even that had been enough to warrant a stake through the chest. It wasn't the sort of thing that could remain quiet. Demons were nasty bastards, sure, but above all else they were a load of gossiping ninnies. Plus, the fang marks on Buffy's throat were a touch too familiar for comfort.

Not that Spike had ever brought that up, though fuck, he'd wanted to.

"Yeah, she did. So she thought she might get one up on you and take the bitch out herself," he said, and did his best to ignore the way his stomach turned at the rot coming out of his mouth. Deceit had never been one of his strengths—at least the sort of deceit that required a convincing story in order to be effective. Even without a soul, he'd preferred to be upfront, and the few times he hadn't been had blown up rather brilliantly in his face. But he was committed to it now—couldn't walk anything back without giving everything away.

This would blow up in his face too, of course. If not today, then sometime.

But he was in it now. No going back.

Spike broke his gaze from Buffy's, anyway. Harder to lie to her when looking her in the eye. "We had words, the two of us. I told her if it came down to it, I'd do the bitch in myself. Chip or no chip. Might fry what's left of my brain, but it'd be worth it. And that while I was at it, I'd make bloody well sure that she—she bein' your sis—felt the hurt for puttin' herself in danger. The usual bluster."

"Felt the...hurt?"

"Yeah," he said, shrugging. "You know, 'step outta line and I'll drink from your brainstem.' 'Make me chase you all over town and I'll rip your lungs out.' Used to tell her stuff like that all the time, back when I was her sitter and she wasn't minding properly." *Back when you were dead and all we had was each other*, but he didn't say that. "Guess hearin' it now hit differently. Doesn't exactly feel as warm and cuddly about me as she did once."

"Oh." Buffy dropped her shoulders, and he glanced up in time to catch the last of the anger in her gaze fading. It should have been a relief, but it wasn't. If anything, the fact that she seemed to accept his explanation—weak as it was—filled him with a mixture of shame and annoyance. Here he was, feeding her a bunch of bunk, and she was accepting it with more of that faith he hadn't earned. Turning his head around when he needed to keep focused—needed to keep moving forward.

All the time he'd spent trying to figure out how to get to a place like this with her and here he was.

And look at what it had cost.

Before he could let the thought work him into too much of a frenzy, though, Buffy had sighed and rolled her head back. "Well, that's something else I get to worry about," she said. "If this slayer is after Dawn and Dawn makes it easy for her... God, I thought we were done with this."

"Done with what?"

Buffy barked a hard laugh. "Everyone trying to get to me by coming through my sister. Even better when she makes it easy and sneaks out—"

"Don't think she will," he said hurriedly. Last thing he needed was it getting back to the Nibblet that he'd been telling tall tales on her, even if she had started it. It was one thing to step in front of a bullet for someone—bloody different thing to be shoved there. And seeing as he had no idea what he might expect when he saw her again, no reason to stack the odds even higher against himself. "Think it was just nerve, yeah? After the trollop tried to take a piece outta her."

"If she doesn't want to be grounded until the rest of forever, it better have been nerve," Buffy replied darkly. "But that still... It's always been like this. Angel came after her when he was evil. Drew me a picture—literally—of what he planned to do to her if he caught her by herself. Then Faith, when she broke into our house during freshman year, scared Dawn so bad she had nightmares for a week. And then Glory... which was the only one of those that was actually real. I'm guessing the monks decided to make me remember saving Dawn as many times as possible so that I just would. But I thought after Glory, at least, it'd be over. Purpose served, you know? Which, yes, I hear myself saying that and I know how lame it is, especially considering the number of baddies that have insisted on coming after her since, but those all seemed more...Dawn *looking* for trouble. Dawn lying and sneaking around and stealing and ending up in danger because she was off being a kid. Not being attacked in broad daylight while she was following her routine. It never occurred to me that this...whoever she is, Legolas, whatever—it never occurred to me that she might

come after Dawn. I don't know why it didn't. Why I didn't even hesitate before I left."

"I do. You look at her and you see a slayer."

"I didn't always. I wouldn't even have known that was what she was if you hadn't made it obvious."

"Not the bloody point."

"Oh, there's a point, now?"

Spike hesitated, then met her gaze again. He wasn't sure what he meant to say, only that her words had triggered something in him, and not the sort of something he could easily bury. There were a lot of things he'd suck up and suffer through—and he had loads of experience doing just that—but Buffy coming down on herself, Buffy's guilt or regret, tipped him over the line. Always had, even before he'd known he loved her. The one girl in all the world not only throwing herself on the sword whenever duty demanded it, but also going out of her way to find other swords she could run herself through when it didn't. It was something as infuriating as it was beautiful. Made her the person she was.

It also made her bloody miserable.

"Yeah. Like I said, you think of her, you think of a slayer. Maybe you didn't at first, but you do now, and you know how bein' the Slayer feels, don't you? Carrying that every day." He paused, considered. "Wanna know where you went wrong, Summers? It's bein' too good."

She furrowed her brow. "I am so not following on how me being an idiot equals good slayer."

"Not talkin' moves or skill. I'm talking about *you*. You're so good you bloody glow with it—how you look at things, how you treat those around you. Even the berks like me who don't deserve it. You think that's bein' the Slayer and it's not. It's being you."

He wished he could swallow his own tongue the second the words hit the air. Hadn't meant to say it like that—like a love declaration. But he had. And he'd heard it. She had too. He saw it in the way her eyes widened, the spark of panic there. The old fear that he was about to start spouting sonnets, or perhaps serenade her the way he had that one night that felt so bloody long ago. All because of noise crammed into syntax and syllables.

Didn't help that, a second later, Spike realized he was also standing a mite closer than he ought. Breathing her in more deeply than he had any right to. He cleared his throat and stepped back. "Sorry," he said. "Just grates, is all. The way you carry everythin'. Anyone ever tell you that you got one hell of a martyr complex?"

She didn't reply, just continued to regard him with wide, unblinking eyes. It seemed to take a long time for the panic there to soften into something less abrasive. A long time in which he stood and panted and wondered if he'd bugged everything up again all by running his stupid mouth.

"Spike, I..." She exhaled, blinking hard and tearing her gaze from his. "I don't get it. How you can do that."

"Not doin' anything," he said immediately, bringing his hands up as though in surrender. "Didn't mean it to sound like I was. I know where we stand. And I—"

"No, that's not what I mean. I mean...how you can think that after everything that happened last year. How...how *I* was. With you."

"What?"

Buffy drew her lower lip between her teeth and looked down. It took a second to register what he was seeing, unused as he was to being on this end of it, and she was talking before he could begin to question himself. "I... I've been doing a lot of thinking. I mean that. Pretty much ever since you got back to town, I've been living in my head. Which is something I very much would not recommend, if you're wondering. But after last night... Talking about what happened—"

"Slayer—"

"I've had a lot of other things to think about today. Willow and I might finally be okay, which is good for its own list of reasons. But that's a whole other thing. I just mean that it's been all kinds of noisy in here." She rapped her knuckles against her skull and barked a little, humorless laugh. "And there's a lot I'm still trying to figure out and some of it that, quite frankly, scares me shitless. But one of the things that I'm pretty sure about is that I was a monster last year. To you."

Spike drew in a breath so sharp he felt it stab him from the inside. Bloody hell, he hadn't seen that coming. "Not in any position to complain here."

"No. No, what you did... It was wrong, but you didn't mean for it to happen. That's what you said, right? That you didn't realize what you'd done until after it was over?" Buffy scuffed her feet along the pavement, keeping her gaze on the ground. "You did something really hard, telling me that. And you've been different since you got back from wherever you were—I'm guessing what happened is a big part of why. But it wouldn't be right of me to just let you take all of it."

Again, he felt her heartbeat as though it were his own, and it was bloody thundering. "You're not lettin' me do anything, pet."

"I used you. You loved me and I just *couldn't*. I could barely stand me and I was just...full of so much." She sniffed and rubbed her arms, lifting her chin but still not looking at him. "I couldn't let the others see how I felt. All the bad that I kept carrying around. You were there and you took it. Whatever I needed to do, even when it hurt you. Even when it almost killed you."

"Almost killed me? No need to get dramatic."

"Spike, I beat you almost unconscious and just left you outside that police station. What if you hadn't made it home and the sun had come up? What if—"

"Seems I remember tellin' you to do that," he said, not sure how much more of this he could take. The bloody woman kept flipping the script on him, catching him unawares. The thought that she would ever bring up the nature of their relationship the previous year wasn't one he'd ever entertained at length for obvious reasons. Whatever she'd done had been with purpose and meaning, even if it had broken him. He was the sort of creature who could stand to be broken now and again. "Told you I could take it."

"That doesn't make anything better," she replied in an infuriatingly even tone. "And me taking advantage of it doesn't make me *good*."

"You were hurtin'. I knew that."

"I know I—" She cut herself off, held up a hand. "I'm not trying to... I just want you to know that I know that the bad that was us wasn't all because of you. Maybe not even mostly. You were trying to help, in your way. You wanted to, even if it wasn't right. And I was... I *wasn't* good. And I'm sorry."

He swore she was the only woman on the bloody planet that could banish all thought and reason from his head. That could make his mind, always bursting with ideas and plans he knew he'd never see through, go completely and utterly blank. Bastard of it was, she kept doing it. Whenever he least expected it, whenever he was beginning to think he might have found his footing around her, she went and changed the game on him.

And the urge came, stronger now than it had ever been, to put all of it aside—his reasons, his rationalizations, his own sodding fear and the rest—and tell her in no uncertain terms how good she was. That she could make a creature like him want something more than the life he'd been handed, even when that life had been bloody swell up until a point. That the need to be worthy of her had driven him across the planet and into a cave he'd been lucky to see the outside of, into trials he'd been arrogant enough to think he understood, all for a prize he'd hoped would fix the parts of him that were broken. She'd visited his crypt night after night all summer, and not to kill him. She'd welcomed him into her home, let him tend to her wounds, and listened when he'd told her that the worst night of his life had been a horrible mistake he hadn't realized he was making until it was too late. And now she was apologizing. Doing the hero thing all over again.

He hated how much he liked it. How good it felt to have it—those words. He hadn't realized that he'd wanted them until this moment. Some part of him that had been smarting without his notice was suddenly calm.

At her expense, though. Always at Buffy's bloody expense.

But if she knew... If she knew just what her good had done, the impact she'd had, the difference she'd made...

Do it. Just a matter of time anyway, you pillock. Tell her now.

A thrill that felt almost like a heartbeat tore through him—terror and desire and the understanding that everything was about to change again, but maybe he could control the change this time. Maybe he could do some actual good of his own, give her back what she needed to truly move on. Put like that, it wasn't selfish at all. He'd tell her he didn't expect anything from her, that he wasn't aiming to win her heart—he'd have to be bloody clear about that—but they could start clean. Finally.

He would have done it. He really would have. He had his mouth open and everything, the words there, waiting. But Buffy lunged forward before he could utter so much as a syllable, her hands at his shoulders and a fierce look burning in her eyes. He just had time to have the absolutely mad thought she was about to snog him before the world went sideways and he found himself tossed onto the asphalt.

"And she saves it by the skin of her teeth," drawled what was becoming a familiar voice. "You're starting to show your age, Grandma."

Of course. Of *bloody* course. Whenever they were close to having a moment, something was bound to interrupt them.

“Nah,” Buffy retorted, the words strained with effort and punctuated between the explosion of punches. “Just trying to judge how bad your aim was. Which, yikes. I hope they don’t put that in your report.”

“Made you bleed pretty good last night, though. And how *is* the shoulder?”

“You tell me.”

Spike pulled himself to his feet just in time to appreciate the sight of Buffy smashing her fist into the tart’s ugly face with enough force that the stake in her hand—the one he wagered had been aimed at his chest just a second ago—went clattering to the pavement.

“Oh, that almost hurt,” the other slayer said, grinning like a sodding loon and wiping a streak of blood from her nose. “You’re right. Maybe I did go too easy on you last time. You know, respect your elders, all that bullshit. We can fix that.”

And Buffy, because she was Buffy, just grinned through the pain and exhaustion and favored her with a shrug. “Less talk. More show.”

The other slayer took that as the invitation it was, and launched.

I'M ROLLING THUNDER, POURING RAIN

IN ALL THE YEARS SHE HAD BEEN SLAYING, BUFFY HAD ENCOUNTERED VERY FEW vampires who had caused enough trouble that she remembered their faces after they were dust. Mostly, the task of carrying out her sacred duty was what she assumed would amount to just another day at the office for normal people. There were highlights and lowlights and, really, lights of all kinds, but the lights that were more *mid* than high or low were just...there. Not memorable. Nothing she'd write home about, whatever that meant. And, admittedly, the gap that spanned the time between her second death and her resurrection had swallowed up a lot of the middling stuff she had carried with her up to that point. Hazard of being in a heavenly dimension for however-many earth years, she guessed.

One of the vampires she did remember, though, was that blonde skank who had stolen all her stuff during freshman year. Not only stolen her stuff but had also broken her class protector award and hurt her arm. Then made a big deal about the arm-hurty thing as though it had been some big feat or something. As though Buffy didn't routinely come home with bruises or gashes. Whacks to her pride were not a thing she walked off easily, even when she ultimately emerged as victor, especially when the pride-crushing vampire in question had been given the chance to gloat about it. Probably why remembering said blonde skank took no effort at all.

Legolas reminded her of that blonde skank. She'd gotten lucky and she was milking it. Case in point—she had seized Buffy's arm and used it as leverage to whirl her around, all for the purpose of digging her fingers into the wound she'd left there before. The shock of pain that had torn through her—new and old alike—had thrown Buffy off balance, sent her careening to the ground. All so Legolas could take her victory lap.

"This is why they don't let geriatrics stay in the game!" she jeered, launching a

kick to Buffy's midsection that knocked the wind out of her. "Could've made out with early retirement, but no... You just had to be *stubborn*."

It took a few seconds—a few seconds that felt like centuries—before her lungs started working properly again. But those seconds passed and Legolas, being a cocky little shit, didn't seize them as the advantage they were. Instead, she just stood there and watched as Buffy sucked in a breath and shoved back at the new and terrible throbbing in her shoulder, digging her palms into the dirt and grit of the pavement. All she needed to do was get on her feet again. There would be time to worry about redressing the wound later. Right now, she had a slayer to humble.

But before Buffy could figure out exactly how to tackle said humbling, a familiar snarl rent the air, and her heart skyrocketed into her throat. *Spike*.

God, the idiot was going to get himself killed.

"No!" she shouted, but it was too late. There was a rush of movement above her, the smack of two bodies colliding, and the crash that followed. Spike's grunts of pain as the chip sent sparks of electrical reward through his brain, Legolas's muttered curses turning into mad, delighted cackles. Buffy clenched her teeth and pulled herself upright. Again, the spot on her shoulder screamed its fury and again she forced herself to ignore it.

One lesson this slayer had yet to learn was how to pretend not to feel her body when it was breaking. It was a lesson Buffy was eager to teach.

"Oh, this is *pathetic*!" Legolas said, throwing a nasty grin at Buffy when their gazes met. "You know, I'm starting to understand why you die so much. You guys just can't get enough of your melodrama, can you? So caught up in the saga that is *you* that literally the whole apocalypse could come down on your head and you wouldn't notice."

"I wouldn't say that," Buffy replied, moving forward. "I've stopped many apocalypses while being caught up in the saga that is me. Maybe you're just bad at multi-tasking."

Legolas narrowed her eyes, the grin on her face settling into a smirk. But there was something else there, too. A flicker that Buffy might not have seen had she not been doing this job as long as she had. It reminded her of the way Faith had presented herself at the start—bluster disguised as confidence and control.

More than that—now that she was looking clearly, she saw the nice bruise on Legolas's forehead, purple and angry from where Buffy had smashed it into the side of the building last night. The sight charged her with a rush of triumph so pure it almost made her own pain blink out entirely.

Looked like the bitch could be hurt after all. The sort of hurt that lingered. Which meant Buffy had been right yesterday when she'd tried to focus on Legolas's right, the side Spike had taken a chunk from before the chip had fried his brain to unconsciousness.

"I really don't want to keep doing this, do you?" Buffy asked to buy herself time. Something told her this girl loved to hear herself talk. Might as well give her a stage. "I mean, this is, what, three days in a row? You're getting a little predictable."

The smirk on Legolas's face grew tighter. "I dunno. If I'm predictable, then you're sloppy as hell. How many times have I caught you off guard now?"

"By my count, just the once."

"I think your boyfriend would disagree with you."

It took a lot of willpower, but Buffy kept herself from sliding her gaze in Spike's direction. He was there in her periphery, on his feet—*not knocked out, thank god*—with his palm pressed to his brow. And so far, totally against-type, not making any noise.

Let her not know. Let her think he's down for the count.

"So far you've cornered a vampire who can't fight back and made with the surprise attack while I was getting groceries," Buffy replied, her temples beginning to throb. The vague shape that was Spike had started to edge forward. "And both times, you had your ass handed to you. What makes you think this is gonna end any differently?"

"My ass looks fine."

"I dunno. Kinda lopsided from here." She sucked in a breath but didn't have much time to decide. Instinct said *go* and so she went. "What do you think, Spike? Yours is the better view."

"Couldn't bloody pay me enough to sink my fangs into that," he retorted without missing a beat. And then several things happened all at once.

Thing one—Legolas started, her eyes flaring wide with genuine surprise. She twisted on instinct, fist raised. Her right fist, leaving her right side open.

Thing two—Spike popped her in the nose, knuckles meeting flesh with a satisfying crunch, and Legolas lost her footing. Stumbled back, caught off guard, and directly into Buffy's path.

Thing three—the heel of Buffy's shoe smashed hard into Legolas's exposed side, and the air shuddered with her answering scream. A true scream, one of pain and shock, none of the rage or jeering that had been there before. Then Legolas hit the ground hard, crumpling in on herself in true wounded animal fashion. Splotches of bright red began to spread across the fabric that made up her blush pink top, and just like that, it was over. There would be no getting up, no regrouping. The girl had run out of road.

And Buffy stood over her, her shoulder throbbing like it had also been ripped open anew but not nearly as much as it would when her adrenaline crashed. She knew just how long she had before that moment, too. That was the advantage that came with age and experience—she and her body were old friends by now, even when they were enemies.

Maybe if Legolas was very lucky, she'd live to the point where she could say the same.

"Here's some advice, from me to you," Buffy quipped, looming over the girl curled on the asphalt. Soaking in the fear that brightened her eyes. That realization that maybe she was mortal after all, and death wasn't in the habit of discriminating who it came for. "Make sure you've won before you start celebrating. Otherwise, you might wind up with boot on your face." Then she smashed her foot against Legolas's brow and watched, with perhaps more relish than she should, as the lights behind the

slayer bitch's eyes went out. As her head lolled back and consciousness departed, and suddenly everything was over, and she had won.

God, she had finally won. A real win. Not one she'd just managed to scrape by. A win that meant something.

It hadn't been that long since she'd last won, but somehow it felt like an age.

"Thought that'd be harder," Spike said a moment later, and was ready to answer the look she shot him with a grin. "What?"

"Next time, I'll let her beat you up even more."

"Don't tease me, Slayer. You know I like it rough."

Heat that had nothing to do with pain or exertion flooded her cheeks, and she looked away before he could catch it. So not the time to get lost in those thoughts. "We got what we came for," she said instead, and nodded at Legolas. "Let's see if she feels like making it worth our while."



SUNNYDALE WAS the only town in the country where a man could carry an unconscious woman through both commercial and residential neighborhoods without attracting attention. No one called the cops. No one shouted questions. No one stopped them to ask if the girl was okay, and what was with all the blood on her shirt, and just where did they think they were going with her. It wasn't lack of opportunity, either, as Buffy had met the eyes of at least one shopkeeper as he was lowering the shades of his front window, never mind the few cars that had passed them as they trekked their way home. One had even slowed down to a crawl, all so they could take a good, gawking look at whatever weirdness was going on now.

If she were in a charitable mood, Buffy might have wondered if her presence had provided would-be Samaritans with the needed reassurance that the situation was covered, or at the least wasn't an abduction in progress. But Buffy wasn't in a charitable mood, and she'd lived here too long to kid herself. As such, she just filed that under *screwed-up-things-to-be-grateful-for* and hoped the day that she needed assistance from the locals never actually came.

Spike seemed to notice, too, for he snickered and shook his head as the offensive glow of headlights transitioned into taillights, and the Buick that had hit the brakes to rubberneck turned a corner on Whiteoak Drive. He shifted to watch the car disappear in full, then huffed again and caught Buffy's eyes as he turned back around.

"Don't say it," she said.

"What's that?"

"That some people deserve to be eaten. I know you were thinking it."

"Was I now? How you figure?"

"I just know. You have that look. The one you used to get when you wanted to prove that humans are just as bad as some demons."

"I didn't say a blessed thing."

"Again with the not needing to. Don't try me, mister. I know the way your mind works."

It wasn't until after the words were well and truly out that Buffy realized they could be construed as flirting, at least in Spike-lingo. Or regular person lingo. And that she might be giving off mixed signals. Or just even more hyper-aware of him than she was normally, on account of the massive everything that she'd thought about today and the other crazy thoughts she'd had while fighting the most annoying slayer on the planet.

"Rather hope you don't, at that," Spike replied after a beat. "Not a place for good little girls to visit."

She thought about responding—the first thing that came to mind also flirty and inappropriate, and god, what was wrong with her? Maybe Legolas had knocked her in the head when she hadn't been paying attention. These were the sort of inner musings that were supposed to stay nice and repressed under layers and layers of... well, layers. Apparently, her adrenaline had taken her sense right along with it when it had crashed and now she was just in an insane headspace. No yellow caution ribbon or red tape around her inner filter. She was lucky to catch half of what danced through her head before it tumbled out of her mouth.

The only explanation she could come up with was she was now cursed with knowledge. Specifically, the knowledge that she'd been in love with Spike, and something inside of her had gone funny as a result. Her lowered defenses combined with the way he'd extolled her virtues right before Legolas had made with the dramatic entrance had completely switched off the part of her that knew better. So here she was. Somewhat delirious with exhaustion and flirting, if not aloud then in her head, with the last person she could afford to flirt with.

And it wasn't over. She had more to do when she got home. More to do that didn't involve a hot bath, a warm bed, and about a thousand hours of uninterrupted sleep. And to think she'd thought she'd been tired before. Now, with all this shiny new hindsight, Buffy couldn't help but laugh at how fucked up she'd thought things had been *before*, and how much had changed. Hell, she wrote love letters to *before*. She kept *before* in a heart-shaped picture frame on her nightstand. *Before* had been a grand old time that she hadn't appreciated enough while she had been in the middle of it, and whoo boy, was she ever paying the price now.

Thankfully, Spike didn't call her out on her weirdness. He didn't even stop to ask her reasonable questions like what the hell she intended to do with Legolas once she had her safely restrained, which was good because Buffy was very much making up this plan as she went and hadn't thought beyond the first objective. Getting Legolas to talk was its own thing.

And in the past, the solution would have been a simple one. Need someone to start spilling the beans fast? That sounded like a job for a truth spell, and wouldn't you know, there was a mega-powerful witch on the team that could whip one up in no time. Point of fact, Willow had been her go-to for so many things that Buffy had forgotten what it was like to operate without her. *Really* without her in a slayage capacity, not just a living-in-her-house-and-being-her-best-friend way. And this was truly the first time since last May that the need for muscle more complicated and nuanced than what Buffy brought to the table had arisen. There had been the

cloaking spell when she'd sneaked into Spike's crypt, but beyond that and what had happened at the prison today, Willow's brand of helping hadn't been necessary.

It was now, and Buffy didn't think she could ask. Not after what she'd already asked—the lines she'd crossed without knowing or meaning to. Even if Willow did have a stack of spell books and ingredients at the ready. Even if it was the sort of magic she felt comfortable using.

As it turned out, she didn't need to ask.

"Oh good, you're back," Dawn called the second Buffy and Spike stepped into the foyer. There was a brief shuffle, then she appeared in the doorway that connected the entry to the family room, not so much as blinking at the unconscious woman they had in tow. "Xander was just putting on the finishing touches to our slayer jail downstairs. And Willow has her stuff ready."

Buffy frowned but decided not to linger on the fact that she could apparently walk into her house with a hostage without fazing her sister. The larger implications around her parenting skills could be dissected at some other point. "What stuff? I didn't know Willow had anything to get ready."

"Truth spell," Dawn replied, thoroughly nonplussed. "For whenever *it* wakes up."

"What?"

The question earned her a look that was teenager for *you're an idiot*. "Umm, well, we got to talking after you left and we figured that expecting a girl who's been beaten and tied up to be honest might be really stupid. Willow said she could do a truth spell." She slid her gaze to Spike but glanced away again as though she'd been caught doing something she shouldn't. "The same truth spell that she and Giles were gonna use on Spike back when the Big Bad was a stupid Frankenthing and the US government."

Buffy huffed. "Ah yes. Simpler times."

"Well, she has it ready to go," Dawn said. "All we need to do is wake up Sleeping Beauty here." She paused, then took a step toward Spike, squinting at the blood that had started to brown along Legolas's right side. "Assuming you didn't just kill her."

"Pretty sure that's from the other night. It's where Spike got her with his blade before the chip went off. I took a chance and hit her there to see if she'd crumble."

"What happened?" her sister asked, still staring with morbid fascination. As though the answer weren't painfully obvious.

God, Dawn had never once had the chance to be a normal girl with non-weird interests. Maybe that was the monks' fault. It'd be nice to have someone to blame.

"She crumbled," Buffy replied dryly.

"Huh. I thought you said she healed, like, super fast."

"And look, there's one of the questions we can ask her." She turned to Spike and motioned toward the door that led to the basement. "Before she wakes up?"

He nodded and shouldered past, sparing a look at Dawn that Buffy didn't know how to interpret. And one that Dawn returned with uncharacteristic stoicism, her expression going slack where it had been bright and full of interest.

This was undoubtedly one of those big sister moments that Buffy was too tired to successfully navigate, but she decided to give it a shot anyway. She waited until Spike

had disappeared through the basement door, then reached out and stroked a hand down her sister's arm. "You okay?"

"What?" Dawn jolted and swung back to her, eyes wide. "Yeah, why?"

"You just seemed... Spike said that he said something to you that upset you before we got home. I really didn't want you to have to do that by yourself, but—"

"No," Dawn said sharply. "It's... It's okay. It was weird and I still... I don't know if I hate him or not."

"You don't have to."

"I know." A beat, and she seemed to deflate. "It's just... It's Spike. I guess I thought he'd be...*not* Spike. Which I know sounds dumb but—"

"It doesn't," Buffy assured her, because it didn't. It sounded exactly like the thing she'd been feeling ever since she'd so confidently let herself into his crypt, expecting to run into his demon subletter rather than the man himself. This phantom she'd been having mental conversations with and about for weeks, whom she'd started to think she would never see again, suddenly very much there and acting way too much like himself. And also not like himself, which made everything more complicated.

It was easy to hate someone in absentia. When they were right in front of you, acting like the person you remembered not hating, not so much.

"I think I don't want to hate him," Dawn offered a moment later, her voice a bit lower, her gaze now trained on the floor. "But I also feel like I should. For what he did to you."

"Dawn, I never wanted you to hate him for me."

"Yeah, well, I did anyway. And now I feel bad for not wanting to."

Buffy opened her mouth to respond, to argue, but decided against it when her sister looked up again. When their eyes connected, and suddenly she saw everything. The vulnerability, the uncertainty and the guilt, and all the other pieces that made up Dawn that she should have recognized much sooner. It hit hard and fast, another gut punch in a day that had been full of them, and this one was her own damn fault.

All this time she'd told herself that Dawn's attitude toward Spike had been straightforward and uncomplicated, and all this time she'd been kidding herself. What was worse, she thought she might have known she was kidding herself, but had kept to it because kidding herself had been the easy option. The path of least resistance. Less to deal with or try to understand. But Dawn had been struggling just as much as she had, just like Willow had told her yesterday morning. Just not in the same way, as Dawn's armor was less polished.

"I'm sorry," Buffy said at last. "I should've talked to you sooner. About...all of this. About everything. I know what he meant to you—"

"I think we did this already."

"Yeah, well, practice makes perfect."

Dawn rolled her eyes in a way that let Buffy know the conversation was closed. Also, that her sister was all right—or as all right as she could be, given the circumstances and the massive amounts of *everything* they had been wading through since last spring. And for now, that would have to be enough. She would just have to trust that Dawn would let her know if anything changed. Not the easiest task, considering

that communication deficiency seemed to run in the Summers family, but one Buffy would trust for the time being. She had to.

There were other, more immediate things to worry about.

And miles to go before she slept.



HE TRIED NOT to be obvious, but Spike couldn't help but stare rather pointedly at Buffy as she made her way down the stairs, the Nibbles on her heels. There hadn't been a good reason to linger after she had dismissed him, particularly seeing as he'd been carrying their hostage, and making a thing out of it would have just had her on alert. Which was exactly where he needed her not to be. Buffy was the sort of person one could fool right up to the moment she realized she was being fooled—then she became a bloody hawk, stripping away layers until the truth gave up and cried uncle.

He'd already dodged a stake by feeding her some bull about what he'd said that had upset her sister. That wasn't a trick he wagered he could pull off more than once.

After this was over, Spike told himself, and assuming Dawn hadn't started blabbing the second he'd been out of earshot, he'd have the rest of the conversation that this Legolas bitch had interrupted. Take control back so he didn't have to spend every waking second worrying if this was the one in which Dawn would spill his secrets. Principle remained the same and all, and he'd do what he could to make sure Buffy knew that. The reason he hadn't told her straight off, that he didn't expect anything from her and never would, that he knew his place now. All the intentions to keep mum that he'd given himself these last few weeks hadn't changed. The only thing that had was his own conviction.

Staying quiet for Buffy's sake had been the objective. He just hadn't considered how that might conflict with what was best for Dawn.

Thankfully, though, when Buffy's face came into view, Spike saw she wasn't any more annoyed than she had been on the walk back. Hell, she wasn't looking at him at all—and not in the way he'd come to associate with purposefulness, rather because her focus was genuinely somewhere else. Which meant he had time to do things right.

Buffy approached Willow, who stood near the wall where the slayer slag was shackled. And those shackles, Spike had to admit, looked about as firm as any he would have found. Harris had done a right tidy job turning the Summers basement into a makeshift prison.

"You're doing a truth spell?" Buffy asked softly, touching her friend on the arm. "You sure you're up for it, after earlier?"

Willow flashed her a weak smile. "It's a spell of the easy peasy variety. Thought it might be best to cover our bases, all things considered."

"Thank you. I wasn't gonna ask but my thoughts were totally along the same line."

"We're just waiting for her to wake up now, aren't we?" Xander asked, rubbing his hands together. "And...she seems to have bled a lot. Is that a thing we care about?"

Buffy nodded without taking her gaze off Legolas, because of course she nodded. Of course she cared. That was her through and through. "From experience, I don't think she'll have any trouble talking. The bleeding has stopped. But yeah, we should patch her up after."

Xander offered a small smile. "Do we have to?"

"We're the good guys, so yes. The first aid kit should be in the kitchen," Buffy replied. Then said, softer, "Spike?"

Right. He was the one who had handled it last. Spike turned and stalked up the stairs without awaiting another word. Telling himself it was all right, that Dawn was smart enough to know this wasn't the moment to unmask him, given that she hadn't yet so far. Also gave him some distance from the sweet-smelling slayer blood, as that was a mite distracting, and he couldn't afford to be distracted just now.

When he returned a moment later, the bitch's eyes were open. And alert. And she was running her trap.

Well, that had been a nice reprieve. Maybe the next one would last longer.

"I was going to make it quick, you know," she was saying. "Little professional courtesy from me to you. But now? Now, you've pissed me off." She glanced down at her shackled wrists, firmed up her jaw and pulled at them with effort that should have knocked her out for as much blood as she'd lost. "I know ways to keep you conscious for hours. Days, if I want. So why don't you—"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, this stuff? I've heard it before." Buffy offered a flat smile. "It stops being scary real fast. If you're going to insist on talking us all to death, why don't you make it worth our while?"

Legolas fired back a smirk of her own. "What? Are we gonna braid each other's hair while you try to sell me on the virtues of banging the undead? Don't take this the wrong way, but that's a big ole nah from me. You see, I don't make friends with bad guys. I kill them." She pulled at her restraints without breaking her gaze from Buffy's. "Something I promise you'll find out for yourself before the night is over."

"The Council likes 'em young and psychotic, don't they?" Xander drawled. "Well, she might be Spike's type after all. Slayer plus crazy and it's like Drusilla on... Well, like Drusilla."

A shadow crossed Buffy's face—one Spike didn't know how to read, and he didn't have time to ask. "Well," she said, "we tried this the easy way. Will, you're up."

The redhead edged forward at that, her expression solemn and her arms tucked around one of those thick tomes Rupert used to keep on hand. "Enemy, enemy, be now quiet—"

The white-haired wench rolled her eyes. "Oh, you've gotta be kidding me. For real?"

"So that the truth may finally riot," Willow went on, not flinching. Also not lifting her eyes from the page she was reading from. "Let your deceitful tongue be broken. Let no untruths be spoken. Speak now with utmost verity and bestow on us the gift of clarity."

An electric charge tore through the room the second she finished speaking—one that made the overhead light burn bright enough to hurt the retinas before it went

dark again. One of the tamer responses to the witch's spells he'd seen in some time, but Spike wasn't going to complain. He wagered that much meant the thing had worked.

"Is it just me or do these spells always sound more impressive in Latin?" Xander asked in a loud stage whisper.

"Shut up," Dawn snapped.

"I'm just saying, without the light show, we'd lose a lot of our street cred."

"Enough," Buffy said. She hadn't once looked away from the bint. Just trusted, in that way of hers, that everything she'd asked was being done. The hardened general built out of the pieces of the girl he'd first known. "I don't know how long this is going to last so we're gonna spend less time bickering and more time getting to know our friend here. Starting with her name." A slight smile curled the corners of her mouth now. "Which would be...what?"

It was a funny thing to watch—the second the bitch realized the spell had worked. There had been a glimmer there, one Spike understood on a personal level, that her captors were wasting their time and she had the strength to withstand whatever they threw at her. Then she was railroaded and defeated, all within the space of half a second. The recognition started behind the eyes, which went wide, and stretched down the length of her face. To her credit, she did try to fight. Clenched her jaw so tight the bloody thing looked like it might crack. But she had nowhere to run and Red's magic, even if it was the watered down sort, was too formidable to fight forever.

When the words did come, they exploded off her lips as though trying to make up for lost time, followed by a bruising gasp. "Gray Asra."

Through it all, Buffy's expression remained impassive. The Slayer had certainly perfected her poker face over the years. "Gray Asra," she echoed. "Okay, Gray Asra. Or just Gray. Can I call you Gray? Wait—no, don't answer that because I don't care. Tell me something, Gray. No, tell me everything. I want to know *everything* you know about the Council's plan to kill me."

"You know this already," the slayer whose name was Gray replied, now through clenched teeth. As though if she strained enough, she could physically hold the words back. Swallow them before they reached the air. It didn't work, though, and what came out was a rushed jumble of syllables tripping over themselves, each vying to be first. "You're a liability, unwilling to make the hard calls. Would rather side with your vampire fuck toys. The witch bitch, too. She nearly ended the world on your watch. How many more people would you have the Council allow to die before saying enough's enough? I'm amazed it took them as long as it did to tap me in."

"Yeah, speaking of..." Buffy had managed to keep from recoiling throughout that whole speech, though Spike could see the dents in her armor. Doubt anyone else could, though. No one had ever studied her the way he had. "Did they give you some kind of super juice? Or is there some other reason you can bleed as much as you have and still talk?"

"Demon adrenal." The other slayer flinched, perhaps with how quickly that confession tumbled out, but she didn't have much time for regrets. The words

weren't slowing down. "Numbs the pain. Ups the healing. Forgot to take my dosage before I left tonight, and allow me to count the ways *that* will never happen again." Gray glanced at her side, seeming to take in how the blood-soaked fabric clung to her skin. "Though you should count your blessings. If I'd had my boost, you'd be dead and your boyfriend dust."

"Uh huh. And you knew I was out of town today how?" Buffy flashed an unpleasant smile. "You know. When you attacked my sister."

"God, you guys are so in love with hyperboles. It's not my fault the little cunt is a drama queen."

Spike was moving before he realized it, fist clenched and raised, ready to knock the bitch's teeth out and watch them scatter. That he would feel it on his end, the rebound and repercussions, was an incidental thing. It was only pain, after all. Pain he'd felt before and undoubtedly would again and again until the buggering chip either short-circuited or he met his end. There was a lot he could swallow when leveled at him and even the Slayer, but the Nibblet was off fucking limits. Especially for dollar store knockoffs like this trollop.

But Buffy caught him by the wrist before he could do more than pull back and prepare himself for the coming pain. "Not worth the headache," she told him.

Her voice was low and soft, and slid over him like a caress, making him forget—just for a second—where they were and what they were doing. They struck him as intimate in a way Buffy hadn't been intimate with him in a long bloody time. If ever, truly.

"Aww, gag me," Gray sneered.

"Believe me," she replied sweetly, refocusing the entirety of her attention on the little wannabe. She didn't let go of his wrist, though. "I haven't ruled it out. But first, answer the question. How did you know I was out of town?"

The other slayer rolled her eyes. "Oh, gee, I dunno. Couldn't be because I know where you live, what you drive, and I saw you and the witch heading out. Nah. Has to be some spooky voodoo. Maybe surveillance cameras. Have you ever wondered if the place is wired?"

Buffy didn't blink. "Is it?"

"No." Again, Gray pulled a face, but again, she was helpless against the spell's compulsion to keep her talking. "I've been watching you for a few days. Getting a handle on your routine. All except the past two days, you go to work at that demon magic shop, the kid goes to school. You meet up at the shop once the bell rings. Anyone ever tell you you're kinda boring for a slayer?"

"How long have you been in town?"

"A week."

"That long, huh?"

"Just getting the lay of the land, is all," Gray retorted, then looked pointedly at where Buffy still had hold of Spike's wrist. "Without going full native."

No one else would know, but Spike didn't miss the way Buffy's heartbeat stuttered or the slight hitch in her breath. He felt it in her pulse, too. The warmth of her skin against his, her fingers digging into his flesh. And though she did release him, he

would have sworn she gave him a little squeeze before doing so. As though to say thank you. Or to reassure.

Or maybe he was just buggered in the head and imagining things. Wouldn't be the first time.

Though Gray must have seen something too, for she snickered and shook her head. "You really do have it bad, don't you? No wonder they needed to call in the big guns."

The Slayer—the *real* Slayer—cleared her throat. "The big guns being you, presumably."

"The biggest."

"Uh huh. And how did they manage that, exactly?" Buffy asked, crossing her arms. "How'd they change the rules? We know Faith's alive and...well, I won't say *well*, but she's alive. Yet here you are. All slayerfied. Did they lie to Giles before, or was it something else?"

Another pause during which he got a front-row viewing at the spectacle that was Gray trying to swallow her answer. It didn't last as long as the first but was still damn entertaining to watch.

"There's a ritual," she said, the words again tripping over themselves in their haste. "The third staff of the Shadowmen ring any bells?"

Not to Spike, but behind him, Willow sucked in a deep breath.

"Yeah, your pal Giles helped with that a lot, so thanks," Gray went on. "The research he did was essential. They had two, you see, but the third's the one with all the juice. If it hadn't been authentic, the whole thing could've gone kablooeey in a city-leveling kinda way but lucky me, it worked like a charm. All because Giles was able to verify where the last staff had been sighted, its markings—really, he was a big help. Be sure to mention that when you talk to him."

"Oh my god," Willow said, stepping back a step. "Buffy... That's how it happened in the first place. A-at least that's what Giles told me."

"Giles knew about this?" Buffy demanded sharply, still not looking away from Gray.

"He said it was a myth. Like the Holy Grail or Excalibur. That it didn't exist."

"Chump," Gray offered with a snicker.

"These Shadowmen were the ones who made the Slayer to begin with," Willow said, her voice shaking. "They used the staffs to do it. I don't know how—it was all right before I came back to Sunnydale and my mind was all over the place, but that's what he said. That the Shadowmen made the Slayer, and the Council had him on some research project that was a waste of his time."

"Gosh, for a smart guy, Giles sure can be a dumbass," Xander muttered.

Again, Buffy didn't balk. Didn't shy away or betray anything the other girl might have considered weakness. She kept on as though the others hadn't reacted at all. "So the Council made a slayer that would do their bidding without question," she said, inching forward. "Lucky you. How'd you get the short straw?"

"Council family," Gray replied promptly. The hesitation of just a few seconds ago had vanished. She seemed to be enjoying herself. "Born and raised for this, baby. Kept

waiting for you or Faith to die so I could be tapped the old-fashioned way, but I think this is better. Get to carve a name for myself, and I'll do it when I'm standing on your grave."

Buffy formed a line with her mouth, still not flinching. "Was it real?" she asked after a moment.

"Now *there's* a question." Gray snorted and pulled again against her restraints, jutting as far forward as she could manage without being jerked back. But she didn't seem bothered when she ran out of chain—just radiated more of that cold amusement. "Can't tell you if you're not more specific."

"The deal they offered Spike. And Faith."

"The one to kill you? Oh, sure it was." She grinned wider, tilting her head so that chunks of white-blonde fell across her face. "Yeah, optics are kind of a big thing for the Council. You had to go and be popular. And then you had to blow it." Then she shifted her gaze to Spike in full, that smirk from before—the one she'd flashed before Buffy had knocked her to the ground—stretching across her face again. "Which, since I'm here and apparently have the time to ask, just how pathetic are you, anyway?"

"Not that we haven't all asked ourselves that question at least once," Xander said slowly, "but inquiring minds..."

"They would have done it," Gray went on, not so much as twitching in Harris's direction. "Believe me, I got the whole rundown when they signed me on. That watcher woman, Lydia? Man, does she have some major wood for you, chip boy. Yet here you are, waiting for Buffy to tell you how high to jump. I think poor Lydia was holding out hope that maybe you were playing some version of the long game. Maybe something Angel taught you. Turns out, you're just a dumbass looking for table scraps."

Something crashed against his side with the force of a small hurricane, and by the time Spike realized it was Dawn, she had already righted herself and stormed the rest of the way over to Gray and delivered the sort of slap that made the air split. It was shock, he wagered, more than actual hurt, what knocked the slayer bitch's head back. What had her eyes going wide and her jaw dropping, and the mock amusement on her face vanishing as though it had never been there.

"You're going to regret that," Gray snarled.

"Doubt it," Dawn replied, and slapped her again before turning and stomping her way back to the first floor.

And fuck if Spike's heart didn't swell up with pride.

CAUGHT BENEATH THE LANDSLIDE

THE INTERROGATION STARTED TO WIND DOWN AFTER DAWN'S DRAMATIC departure, owing to a combination of Buffy running out of questions and Willow's spell running out of juice. Didn't matter, though. Spike reckoned they'd gotten what they needed from the bitch information-wise, and now the hero-types had another dilemma on their hands. This one more immediate, and involving the fate of their prisoner. Wasn't like they could keep Gray at the Summers place indefinitely, and not a one of them had the stomach to off the chit, even if she wouldn't hesitate were things the other way around.

It wasn't a question he had to ask himself seriously, things being the way they were, but Spike couldn't help but wonder how he might react should the decision be his to make. If one of them said, "Say, don't we have a slayer killer handy?" and turned to him for inspiration, chip aside, to do the deed itself. He wasn't squeamish and didn't share Buffy's fanciful ideas of humans above all else, but the idea of taking a life like that—intentionally, while holding all the power—wasn't one that sat right with him.

He hadn't been prepared for thoughts like these when he'd set out to seek his soul. There had been the example set by Angel, played up to great effect when his more personable self was behind the wheel. Morality was a switch in the head. Now you see it, now it's gone. Clear lines of right and wrong governing each issue, rigid and unmoving. And Spike had just trusted that was the way the world was, because how the bugger would he know? It had been so long since he'd been a man that the finer points had been lost to him. Sure, he remembered how he'd wanted the pillocks who had tormented him in life to suffer. How he'd dreamed up fanciful revenge scenarios fit for the stage in which he delivered the comeuppance each deserved. He'd scared himself with how fitful and violent his imagination

could be then, but it had also been all right because it was, after all, *just* imagination.

Then he'd died and been reborn and lived more than a century giving shape and texture to each of those thoughts. Whenever he wanted something, he'd snagged it, often while snapping the neck of whoever stood in the way. No hesitation. No waffling. No sympathy...most of the time. There had been the intermittent voice in his head—his own voice speaking in his true accent—pointing out all the carnage he'd created with something like horror, only to have that horror trampled by his own pure delight. The wrongness of what he'd done was part of what made it fun, after all. Part of what made him crave it.

But even his chaos had come with rules and honor. With what made a fight worth winning, a kill worth claiming. The times when, as dawn started to creep over the horizon, he knew he'd have no trouble catching his kip because he'd done things right. Sought her out. Hunted her down. Given her a sporting chance to put a stake in his chest. Gone in fangs out and fists swinging, reckless and ready and emerging triumphant at the end. Not every kill had been like that, of course. Not even most of them. But the ones that mattered, the ones that meant something, followed the same trajectory. It wasn't a victory if he knew going in that the fight wouldn't be his last.

So yeah, even if he didn't have the chip holding him back, Spike reckoned he wouldn't much care for the idea of offing Gray Asra while she was shackled to the wall downstairs, and the soul had nothing to do with it.

He rounded into the kitchen, figuring now was as good a time as any to grab himself a drink. If he still intended to come clean with the Slayer about the soul tonight, he'd need the liquid courage, as well as some idea of how the hell to begin that conversation. The second thoughts were starting to creep in again, less to do with telling her—just a matter of time now, after all—and more to do with telling her specifically tonight when she'd already had a bruiser of a long day. But then tomorrow could be even worse, couldn't it, and every second he went without confessing was one she came closer to learning it some other way.

Fuck, he should have thought this through before he'd spilled all to Dawn. It had just seemed so intuitive at the time.

As though summoned by his thoughts, Dawn sidled into the kitchen just as he pulled open the fridge. "Hey," she said in a soft tone he hadn't anticipated. It was enough to make him stop what he was doing and look up. "They're still downstairs, right?"

"Think it's just cleanup now," Spike replied cautiously. "Tend to the wounded and all."

"Or here's a thought—we could just let her bleed to death."

There was no chance of that. Though the place he'd taken a chunk out of Gray had been vulnerable and—hopefully—bloody painful to the touch, it had stopped bleeding in earnest by the time he and Buffy had arrived back at the house. Courtesy of those slayer genes, no doubt, the thieving little trollop.

"Big sis'll never go for it," he said instead. "She has this annoying ability to see the good in everyone."

"Or just the human in them," Dawn replied.

No arguing with that. "Her prerogative, that is. Tried arguin' the matter with her a time or two over the years and it never goes anywhere."

He stole a glance at Dawn, who had pressed her lips together in full bitty-Buffy mode, her brow knitted. It was a familiar look, almost achingly so. One he hadn't known to miss until right then. Until that moment.

"Would you?" she asked at length.

"Would I what? Argue?"

"Let her—Gray, whatever her name is—just bleed to death? Is that... How does that work? With..." She paused, then continued in a conspicuously lowered voice, "The soul? Are you like a different person now? Completely?"

Well, he supposed he should have expected that. Spike sighed and closed the refrigerator door. Seemed this might be the sort of conversation he needed to be sober for. "Don't feel all that different. Not like I thought I would."

"How did you think you would?"

"Dunno. Just more than I do now."

"So, it didn't make a difference, is what you're saying."

"Bugger, no, it made a difference," he retorted, somewhat indignant. "I feel it. What I did to her. What I did to everyone I ever... It's there. Always *there*. But I knew it was gonna be. Had caught this show before so it wasn't like I was in for a shock. Maybe that dulled it a bit." Spike broke off, searching for words, and finding none. They always eluded him when he needed them the most. "But I still feel like me. Just more like everything's in focus, yeah? Things I didn't get before, like why your sis wasn't impressed when I didn't nibble on the stragglers who got bloodied up while she was off fighting Anya's ex, I get now. Rot like that."

A small laugh erupted off Dawn's lips. She tried to catch it with her hand, but too late, it was gone—a magical little sound that made the cold parts of him warm with affection and the rest of him ache at how long it had been since he'd heard her laugh. He didn't even remember the last time—what he'd done to earn it, where they had been, what they had been talking about. At some point, Spike had started taking Dawn for granted, believing like a bloody fool that she would always be in his corner just as much as he would always be in hers. He hadn't been able to fathom a world where that wasn't true. Not after they'd lost Buffy together.

Just illustrated what a complete git he was.

"Did you really try to score points by not snacking on whoever got hurt while she was slaying?" she asked, still giggling.

Spike lifted a shoulder, offered a small grin of his own. "Seemed like a decent idea at the time. Remind her that I could but I was choosin' not to."

"It's weird how she didn't just swoon immediately." Dawn smirked, though it didn't take but another beat before her face fell, as though she'd just remembered something. "So...you're you. Just maybe not as dumb?"

"Reckon that's as good a way as any to look at it, yeah."

"And you did it because of what you did to her. What you tried to do."

His throat tightened and he looked away before he could stop himself. "Yeah," he

said. "I had to. Didn't want to be someone who could do that to anyone I... To her. Thought a soul would make everythin' right. Fix me the way she wanted. Didn't see what a pathetic sod I was until after it was done."

"Having a soul makes you pathetic?"

"No," Spike replied testily. He'd forgotten how she did this—how she found things he hadn't said in the things he had. "I was pathetic. Thinkin' it could be simple, that gettin' the soul was the hard part and everythin' else would be a downhill stroll. I'd worked it out, see, thought I'd nab what I needed and that'd be it. After all, there's no better way to say *sorry*, is there? Didn't need to work out what I'd tell her or how I'd begin to make up for it—I'd have a soul and everythin' would be bloody grand. She'd fall madly in love with me and we could finally have that cozy little tomb for two I'd always wanted." He couldn't keep the derision out of his voice, the bitterness and the anger and everything else he'd been carrying with him since that bloody cave. How all of it had swarmed him at once, a cacophony of voices echoing around his skull, screaming at him for crimes so far in the past it was a bloody marvel he was able to remember them at all. Some newer, too, of course, as he'd only been on the leash for a couple of years now, and no matter what circumstances or span of years divided his victims, they all had one thing in common.

And then there was her, and what he'd done to her was the worst because he hadn't meant to do it. He didn't know how that worked out in his head, why the people he'd killed and the families he'd ripped apart mattered less to him than the image of Buffy in the bathroom, clutching her robe tight, but they did. Part of the reason he'd wondered if his soul was broken...that was, until he'd realized the difference was that his other victims had fallen to the monster. The thing that had hollowed him out, scraped away the soft, human feelings and replaced them with a vampire's instincts.

Buffy had made him feel like a man, and the man was who had failed her. Failed them both. He could explain away everyone he'd done in as a casualty of the demon hierarchy but not her. What he'd done to her had been something else entirely.

"Wanker that I am," he continued a second later, "I didn't see it. What tellin' her would do to her. How it'd put it all on her again."

"What do you mean?"

"Mean I'd be makin' it somethin' she has to live with much as I do. However Buffy feels about me now, I've earned it a thousand bloody times over. Only reason to tell her that I could see would be to force her hand. Get her to forgive me. Be all right with what I did to her. Make her feel like she has to feel somethin' for me that she doesn't." A beat. He blew out a breath. "And it... It cheapened it, too. Made the soul somethin' I fought for just so I could get a prize. Like Buffy is somethin' I can win. A trophy or what all. Somethin' I can have to prove to the world that I'm a good boy now."

Spike wasn't looking at Dawn—didn't think he could at the moment. Saying all this, hearing it against the still air, was doing a number on a mind he'd thought he'd made up. Bringing back all the reasons he'd decided Buffy should never know about the soul, just so she could have a modicum of peace in the way she felt about him.

There was no going back, though. Same lesson Pandora had learned, and just like her, only too late.

Fuck. Maybe one of these days he'd learn to keep his mouth shut. Think things through before making a split-second decision that bugged up everything. Much as he loved that Dawn seemed to not hate him at the moment, he couldn't deny that telling her had been just as self-serving. Get her to stop despising him, confuse her enough that she felt she had to reevaluate. Not realizing what he was giving up until it was out.

"You said you don't want her to know because you know the way she is about vampires with souls," Dawn said after a beat. "You meant Angel."

Spike sucked in his cheeks. Oh goody. His other favorite subject. "Who else?"

"I do remember that," she replied, either not hearing the note in his voice or choosing to ignore it. "I was little, but I remember what it was like when he came back. How she was so...broken up about everything and kept trying to make excuses for him. Not at first—at first, it was this weird 'we're not dating' thing."

Yeah, he remembered that too. Bloody pitiful.

"Once they got back together for real, it became a whole big thing about how it was okay because he had a soul and he would never lose it again," Dawn went on. "Like suddenly, she'd decided that everything he'd done to us didn't matter anymore. That he was this complete other person and hadn't been in control the entire time he was off killing people or whatever."

There was that pain again, reliable as it was familiar. The one Spike knew he'd never get to exorcise because he didn't have a right to it. Just a bloody shame he had the words now that he hadn't before—he could speak from a point of experience on why that was a bunch of bollocks. But even after Buffy knew the truth about him, he wasn't fool enough to think he'd be able to rail against Angel with impunity. Wasn't his place.

Though how he'd keep his trap shut should the occasion ever arise, he had no clue.

"And," Dawn continued, "I...kinda think that's crap."

He looked up, narrowed his eyes. "You what now?"

"The whole two people thing. I mean, I've lived here for what...seven years now? I've met a lot of people who became vampires. Like Harmony, who was a moron before she was turned and a moron after. It just seemed... I dunno, convenient. If Angel could be like, 'Oh, that wasn't me. That was the demon,' like they were completely separate, and Buffy just went along with it because it was easier for her that way." Dawn stopped, turned her head toward the hall as though to listen for the others—no need; his ears had no problem picking up that the lot of them were still downstairs—then back to him. What he saw on her face threw him off balance. "I get it," she said. "I think I do, at least. And...I think you're right."

Well, that wasn't something he heard all that often, especially from the Summers women. "I am?"

Dawn nodded, her eyes softening a bit. "I... I hated you. A lot. I spent all summer hating you. For what you did to her because you were... For so long, you were the

only person I could count on, and I know how dumb that is, but it's true. I trusted you because you loved her."

"I—"

"And what you did... Yesterday was the first day Buffy had ever talked about it, told me what happened with you two. So all this time, I've had all these..." She trailed off, gestured as though that would help her find the right combination of words. "I had this way I thought it was. Like it is on those stupid *Lifetime* movies, you know? The jerk boyfriend-slash-stalker guy not getting the whole 'no means no' thing."

Fuck. Spike looked down, willed himself not to react. Somehow, he hadn't put that together—awful as it was, this thing he'd done, that Dawn might have pictured something worse. That he'd lived in her head these last few months even more of a monster.

Buffy had told him she'd decided it had been an accident, and even if he couldn't quite wrap his lobes around such a small word to describe such a large thing, he hadn't wanted to argue. Had been bloody well blown over that she could be so gracious about it. *Accident* was how it had felt to him, being there but not being present, seeing something that didn't exist, or trying to find something that did, convinced if he pushed hard enough it'd show itself. What had happened had been horrible enough without thinking of how it could have been worse, aside from the obvious, and anytime his brain took him down that road it was all he could do to keep from staking himself.

That Dawn would have had this other version of that awful night in her head was just enough to make that particular urge swell anew.

"Buffy thinks everything is her fault even if it's not," Dawn said, drawing him back. "It's been only a few months since she came in and told me she was turning herself in to the police when she didn't even kill anyone. And...more than that. The soul is... It's about punishment, right?"

No, it wasn't. *Angel's* soul had been about punishment—why it was a curse. The one Spike had wrestled out of the jaws of a demon on the other side of the planet, that felt more like a reward. Something he'd fought for, wanted, and earned. Even if he hadn't had the right idea of it, hadn't sussed out what it meant—and more importantly, what it didn't mean. He wouldn't go back and undo that decision if given the chance now. And the soulless prat he'd been before wouldn't either, he knew. He was stubborn that way and always had been.

"She'd know it was for her even if you didn't tell her," Dawn said, apparently taking his silence for agreement, which was just as well. Better than arguing semantics. "She'd know that you'd felt so bad that you'd done this thing to bring all this pain to yourself, and she'd think that was her fault too."

Spike hesitated, unsure he could trust what he was hearing. "You're sayin'..."

"I'm saying...your secret is safe with me." She blew out a deep breath as though the words had cost her something. Maybe they had, but the tension in her shoulders had eased, and she seemed to fold in on herself, whether with relief or something else, he had no idea. She'd bloody well bowled him over. "I don't want her to hurt anymore," she whispered a moment later. "All of this, everything that's going

on with the Council... She was just starting to be okay again before all this happened."

"Before I came back, you mean."

"Yeah, but I don't think the *you* part is what's making her not okay," Dawn said, as though her conclusion were an obvious one and not startling in its own right. "Maybe it was at first, but... Just watching her with you downstairs and how she talks about you now, I think... Well, whatever. I don't know if I'm making any sense. It was like she didn't know how she felt but now she does, or she's closer." Another long pause. She furrowed her brow as though trying to hunt something down only she could see. After a tick, she seemed to find it. "And also...I think it's too easy."

"Too easy?"

Dawn nodded, the uncertainty in her eyes clearing up. "If you're going to get back together with her," she said matter-of-factly, "it shouldn't be easy. A soul makes it too easy with Buffy. Does the hard part for you, the way it did with Angel. For what you did to her, you need to work for it."

Spike just stared at her, his mind spinning its wheels and getting absolutely nowhere. Everything up until this last bit had at least made sense. It was as though Dawn had abruptly stopped talking to him and taken up a conversation with someone he couldn't see, because there was no bloody way he'd heard what he'd thought he'd heard. The thought, the suggestion was a painful sort of funny—the kind that made him ache so much there was nothing to do for it but laugh his fool head off.

He waited for her to realize what she'd said, how ridiculous it was. Instead, she held his gaze, her own sparking with challenge he didn't understand. And then he wasn't sure whether to be frustrated or brassed with her, if this was her idea of a joke or summat, a way of getting back at him, making him hurt to earn back some of what he'd doled out.

But that wasn't Dawn, either. The Bit had always been refreshingly straightforward.

"I didn't come here to win her back," Spike said at last. He kept his voice firm but low and tried to ignore how it shook. "Don't know where you got that barmy idea—"

"Do I look like I'm stupid? And before you answer that, let me remind you that I have gotten very good at kicking butt recently *and* you can't hit me back." This she said with the hint of that Summers smirk she used to flash around so liberally, and the sight of it had him burning hot with anger he hadn't anticipated.

"This is not a sodding game, you hear?" he said in a furious rush. "Not a play I'm puttin' on. Just told you that your sister isn't a bloody prize and I bloody well mean it. I might've been able to fool myself once about us, but my eyes are open now. I'm here to help, fight the good fight, but that's it."

Dawn crossed her arms, that smirk just broadening. "Uh-huh."

Bloody hell. This was not a conversation he could have. Not with her or anyone or ever. And since he couldn't do what he wanted—couldn't start raging at her at a volume or shaking her or anything like it—he swore instead and turned back to the fridge. Time to find that drink.

"I think the soul *has* made you dumb," Dawn told him, not taking the hint. Or, more likely, taking it and choosing to ignore it.

But she couldn't make him snag the bait. "Probably has."

"Either that or you don't know Buffy as well as you think you do."

It was the perfect parting shot and she knew it, for when he twisted to start arguing with her anew—bait and ego be damned—she had skipped into the hallway and out of sight. She couldn't have asked for better timing, either, for the basement door flew open and the air was suddenly filled with the others' chatter, making it impossible for him to chase after her and tell her just how wrong she was.

Leaving him with nothing but the words themselves, and that twist in his chest at the possibility that any could be true.

But he knew better. Even if knowing hurt.



SPIKE DIDN'T GET another chance to corner Dawn in the aftermath of the interrogation, not with the expected Scooby debriefing. That time-honored ritual in which they all stood around discussing what they'd learned and what it meant, tried to suss out what the next steps were and who was in charge of what. A way to make themselves feel better when they hadn't the foggiest how to proceed.

He was pretty sure he was the only one who noticed Buffy swaying a bit on her feet, the only one thinking about the spot on her shoulder that he knew had been ripped open anew. How she was ignoring it and god knows how many other bodily aches to do what she did best. Bringing it up wouldn't have budged her an inch, though, so he hadn't bothered. Just stood there with them as they volleyed suggestions back and forth while mulling over the other bit of what Dawn had said.

Well, *everything* she'd said. The stuff he'd expected and the stuff that had knocked him for a six, mostly revolving around the sudden idea he'd had about coming clean to Buffy. It had been so clear there for a moment—the right path to take, the right choice. Inevitable, even, because of the decision he'd made on a dime, and the seconds counting down before the bomb went off and he got lost in the blast.

Under those circumstances, with the possibility of Dawn spilling all at any bloody second, telling Buffy himself had been the only way forward. Better she hear it from him than her sister or anyone else, if she were to find out at all.

There had been a moment when the right thing had been so clear. Not easy—hell, anything but easy, but clear.

Except Dawn had confused that all over again. Not with the rubbish about him and Buffy being anything other than what they were, but with everything else. Regardless of what she thought his motives were or should be, the fact remained that she knew Buffy better than anyone. She had been there in all the moments the others hadn't seen—the ones he hadn't seen, either, especially during that span of months when he hadn't called Sunnydale home. She knew how the Slayer reacted to news about vampires with souls, how she carried it the way she carried everything else.

Dawn knew and she didn't want that for Buffy. Was prepared to keep her mouth shut if that was what it took to spare the Slayer more pain.

None of this was a new thought or possibility. It was, in fact, the exact thing he'd thought before. His reasons for creating distance beyond what it meant for him, that Buffy would view the soul the same way she viewed Angel's and bear the weight of that responsibility. Believe deep down that she had driven him to choose suffering because of what she'd done, and god knows she was already carrying enough of that. She'd bloody well said as much herself in the minutes before they'd been interrupted by the new girl.

Spike wasn't owed that regret. He wasn't owed a bloody thing.

And fine, he *was* also thinking about the other ridiculous thing Dawn had suggested. Not because he thought it was real or even possible, but because it was out there now and couldn't be rebottled. He might not be delusional, and he definitely wasn't in the market to get his heart shredded again by being fool enough to hope, but that didn't make what Dawn had said entirely wrong.

The soul, removed from everything else, would make things too easy for him to get Buffy to trust him, believe in him, and that felt wrong. As wrong as getting the soul through a curse or some other easy way would have been, like it was something less than what it was. Thoughts like these were probably how he'd gotten to thinking about telling her in the first place—that selfish place inside him that he couldn't smother out of existence. The part of him that wanted her to know just because he felt he'd earned the recognition. And if he could convince himself that Buffy knowing about the soul wasn't for him, that absolved him of what came next. Nice little bedtime story he could tell himself in the fallout.

Bloody hell, he'd nearly made even more of a mess of things, and all it had taken was a slight dip in reserve, the comfort of where they'd left things off the night before and how Buffy had been with him that morning. How she'd been eyeing him tonight, too, for that matter. The subtle change in her voice when they talked. She'd even bloody apologized for the way things had been last year as though her crimes were comparable to his. In the interim, desperate for validation of some sort, his mind working overtime to convince him of things that weren't there.

Old habits and the like.

And while he was mulling all this over, the Scoobies were coming up with plans of their own, best they could. No one had much idea of what to do with their hostage aside from keep her fed and alive until something better occurred to them—everything at the moment centered on getting Giles in from England, let him know how his research had been exploited and hope that he had some insight. Gear up for a fight with the Council itself, because that was what this meant, wasn't it? All roads led to them as long as they had a way of making new slayers. Gray might not be the first one radicalized—she might not even be the only. There could be a whole bloody army of them out there waiting for their chance to make a name for themselves by taking Buffy on.

"You need me to stay?" Xander asked once the conversation began to wear down, giving Buffy a significant look. "Might be a good idea not to split up."

Buffy worried a lip between her teeth as she considered, and Spike wondered idly if this was the most exhausted he'd ever seen her. Battle-worn and ragged, but still standing because that was what Buffy did, no matter what. Always here to answer the call.

"No," she said after a beat. "I need everyone well rested, and that's not going to happen with a slumber party. If the Council had more people in town, they would have acted by now. We need to regroup when we're at a hundred percent."

"Well, and I hate to be Captain Downer, but let's be real. What happens if she gets loose?" Harris asked. "Chained up bad guys are good at one thing—not being chained up anymore. Add the fact that this girl has slayer strength and even my considerable talents as Sunnydale's premier handyman might not be enough."

"Well, that's a cheery thought," Willow muttered.

"You think she'll break free?" Dawn asked, and glanced toward the basement door as though expecting it to burst open at that instant.

"Let's just say I wouldn't bet against *Buffy* getting out of a situation like this even if the workmanship is top quality."

Loath as he was to admit it, Spike was almost impressed with that bit of insight, not to mention humility. Rare form in Harris.

"If that happens, the fewer people she can hurt, the better," Buffy said. "She'll either come right for me or she'll make for the exits. Either way, I don't want anyone standing between us."

"Can I just mention how much I *don't* love the idea of you going to sleep upstairs while an insane killing machine is in the basement?" Xander retorted. "Hell, I hated it when it was just Spike, but now—"

"I won't be upstairs. I'm crashing on the couch tonight."

"You're what?" Spike barked before he could stop himself.

"Buffy, you need to actually sleep," Willow piped in. "Today has been kinda endless and odds are good tomorrow's going to be the same."

"It's not a discussion," she said firmly, and though Spike doubted the others caught it, he didn't miss the way she flexed her fingers, as though trying to keep herself from reaching for something. The spot on her shoulder had to be throbbing and here she was, pushing through it the way she did everything else. "Like you said, Xander, I'm not going to give her even more of an advantage by being two floors away if she gets free."

"Well, I didn't mean for you to get all martyr-y about the sleeping arrangements!"

Even rarer than Harris being intermittently humble were those occasions when Spike found himself agreeing with the boy, but people seemed insistent on surprising him tonight. "You're bloody dead on your feet," Spike snapped at her. Being annoyed with Buffy's martyr complex was infinitely less painful than mulling over his own inadequacies and failures. "Not gonna be in any shape if you don't get enough kip."

And just as everything that rises must converge, it was also true that Harris would be thrown to find himself in league with the sort of creature he hated. Less surprising that he would leap at it, let it distract him from what they were discussing. This much was a bit of normal in Spike's currently abnormal world and was almost

welcome because of it. "I'm sorry," Xander drawled, "but what are you still doing here, anyway?"

Buffy winced and rubbed at her brow. "God, can we please not do this right now?"

"I'm just curious, considering the reason that he's staying here was so the psycho downstairs doesn't stake him. Wouldn't the safest place for Spike be anywhere this chick is not?"

That was a fair point, though Spike would sooner swallow his own bloody tongue before admitting as much. And Buffy seemed even less keen on the matter—or at least surprised, having clearly not thought that far ahead, if the look on her face was any indication. Still, she didn't let herself stay there long, just shook her head and soldiered ahead.

"The people who want us dead right now are *people*," she said. "People Spike can't fight. That puts him at a disadvantage, so—"

"You just said there probably aren't other Council people in town—"

"Xander," Willow said, holding up a hand. "Really with the bad timing."

"He'd at least hear Gray moving around downstairs if she does manage to get free," Dawn volunteered. She went a bit pink in the cheeks when the others turned to regard her with something like shock but did what the Bit was wont to do when cornered and swung around on the offensive. "And Xander, weren't you the one who said he's the reason any of you knew she was at the Magic Box tonight? Maybe he's not the worst person to have around when you're on guard duty. Even if he can't be a guard himself."

Xander stared for a long second, then huffed and shook his head. "There's always an excuse, isn't there?"

"Look," Buffy started, the word weighted down with exhaustion, but that was as far as she got.

"No. I'm not gonna fight. Not gonna understand it as long as I live, but you're right. Now's not the time to argue."

There was a long pause in which the lot of them stood there, looking uncomfortable with each other—a sort of discomfort that was catching in ways Spike didn't appreciate, considering he was already about as bloody uncomfortable as it was possible for a bloke to be, given the circumstances.

At length, Xander cleared his throat and turned to Buffy again, his eyes softer than before. "Thinking now's a good time for me to bail before I... Well, you know. Though if anything comes up and I am not your first phone call, there will be words." He stole a quick glance at Spike, then shifted and cleared his throat. "Would you believe this is me trying?" he asked, offering a half-grin and a shrug. "Cause it is. I really am trying, Buff."

"I know," she said. "Thank you for that."

Spike stared at Harris as he turned and made his way down the hall, and was still staring a second later when the thump of the front door closing rocked through the home. *Trying*. What exactly was he trying? Fuck, there was so little that made sense to him at the present, even less that he trusted himself to try to understand. Especially today, or since last night. Buffy looking at him the way she

was, the subtle change in her voice, how a simple conversation could have changed things as much as it had, even if the conversation had actually been anything but simple. Now Buffy was arguing with her mates about why Spike was still around when he didn't even know why that was. The reason why he'd been invited in the first place was chained up downstairs and unlikely to go anywhere without the Slayer's knowing. He could head home tonight, return to the comfort of his own crypt and try to catch a few winks away from the sense-buggering influence that was Buffy Summers.

"I need to shower," Buffy said, drawing him back to her. Always to her, no matter how hard he tried. She had wrinkled her nose and rolled her bad shoulder again. "And I wouldn't say no to food at some point."

"Yes to food," Willow agreed with a nod. "I know I said I wanted pizza earlier, but the pizzeria takes forever, and I've gotten so hungry my tummy has actually started to growl in other languages. So, how about you shower, and I'll go pick something up?"

"That sounds perfect."

"Good. *What* should I pick up?"

Buffy pulled a face. "This requires more thought than I have brain for at the moment."

Dawn rolled her eyes and nodded at Willow. "I'll go with you. As hungry as she gets after a patrol, you might need help carrying everything in."

It had happened fast—so fast he might not have caught it had he not been paying attention, but Spike was paying attention, so he didn't miss the quirk of Dawn's mouth as she spoke, nor the light in her eyes that she used to get back when she'd been more innocent and set on having him for a brother-in-law. And bloody hell, he didn't know how to feel about that. Didn't even know if he could trust that that was what that look meant or if he was just imagining things now that she'd put the barmy idea in his head that a relationship with Buffy was possible. And being that he'd look like even more of a right git if he drew attention to it, Spike had no choice but to just let it go. Listen as Willow and Dawn whispered conspiratorially about the sort of places they might try to hit to satisfy a slayer-sized appetite as they headed out the back door.

And just like that, he was alone with Buffy again. Alone like he had been last night when she'd stumbled into the kitchen, only everything was different, and he didn't know how. The hours that spanned the soft way she'd regarded him that morning to this moment felt more like centuries for the journey he'd found himself on. The thoughts that had been dogging him all bloody day now come to a head, infected with the desire—brief as it had been—to tell her about the soul. Put everything else on the table and let her decide what to do with it, if anything.

Seemed right fitting that he'd circled all the way back to where he'd been at the start. If he'd intended to tell her, he couldn't have asked for a better opportunity. No telling how long it would take Willow and the Bit to find nosh. He might have had all the time in the world. But that didn't make it right, and he should count his lucky stars that he'd realized it before he'd done the sort of damage that couldn't be

undone. Even more so that Dawn had seen it, too. That she'd kept him from making another mistake where Buffy was concerned.

"I'm, uh, gonna go and grab that shower," Buffy said, startling him out of his thoughts. "Keep an ear out for her, will you?"

The question felt like a trap. Stand about while she went up to that room, stripped down to nothing, and climbed under the spray. *Bloody hell.*

"Sure you want me around?" he forced himself to ask. There was no way she hadn't thought the things going through his head, but he had to be sure. "Harris had a point, you know. No sense takin' up space here when—"

"No, you should stay."

"Why's that?"

"I... I don't know." She pressed her lips together and averted her eyes. "I know I'm not making sense but... I can't explain it. I just want you to."

Well, fuck. She'd done it again—thrown a bloody spanner in the works. Bad habit of hers, especially where he was concerned. And he didn't have time to think about it before she was moving again. Grabbing the first aid kit one of them had placed on the kitchen island then disappearing into the hall.

It was the sort of thing he would never have appreciated before the soul, just how she made everything look and feel easy, like he was the barmy one for being caught off guard. But she did. Somehow, she always did.

To distract himself, Spike headed for the living room, hoping to find something bright and violent on the telly. Something to distract him from the image of Buffy stripping out of her clothes and stepping under a hot spray, her hair plastered to her skin and her hands roaming her body. Decency and decorum were not concepts his mind bothered with, and never had been, even when he'd been at his most Victorian.

Can't take the monster out of the man.

So, he threw himself onto the couch and started surfing through channels, desperate for something to snag and hold his attention. Anything would do. One of those insufferable kiddie programs Dawn insisted she no longer liked or an infomercial or even the sodding evening news—all he needed was to keep his mind engaged and far from what was going on upstairs. Far from everything involving Buffy and the temptation to read more into the things she was saying and those looks she kept stealing than was actually there. Because he knew himself too bloody well at this point—knew that if he let himself go down that route, he'd start thinking of other things. Maybe even believing the impossible.

Buffy wanting him to stay. Buffy telling him she was sorry. Buffy's hand around his wrist. Buffy smiling and joking with him as though they were something other than what they were.

He needed any distraction he could get.

Except she wouldn't let him have one.

"Spike?"

Spike jolted and jerked his head toward the staircase. "Slayer?"

For a second, he thought it possible he'd truly gone toys in the attic, driven himself batty with all his yearning and confusion and warring thoughts and had

started hearing things, but only for a second. Long enough to register that the shower was no longer running—he hadn't noticed it when the house had gone quiet—and the faint waft of Buffy's soap, fresh and warm, had drifted down enough to tease his nostrils.

Then there was her voice. Shaking but firm, and very real. "Uhh, Willow and Dawn aren't back yet, are they?" She didn't wait for him to answer, already knowing what it would be. "Can you... Can you come here and not make it weird?"

Well, that was a bloody tall order. One that had his knees knocking as he rose to his feet. "Where's *here*, love?"

"Exactly where you think it is," she replied, her tone dry now. "Hence the not making it weird. I just need some help. Like before."

"And you...you want it up there."

Buffy didn't respond to that—she didn't need to. Now that he was listening again, fully listening, he heard all the things she couldn't hide, even from a distance, like the thundering of her heart and her racing pulse. Bits of her that betrayed the things left unsaid. And he also knew, just as quickly, what she was doing.

Just bloody like her too.

"Don't have to prove anything to me, Slayer," he said. "Or yourself, for that matter. We said our piece, didn't we?"

That earned a response, and he was perversely relieved when it was one of irritation.

"I just need this looked at and you're the only one around, and you knew what it looked like last. You can tell me if it's worse."

Load of bunk, that, but he wagered the smart thing to do would be to not antagonize her further. Even if the thought of entering that room with her in it made him feel a combination of things he wasn't sure how to interpret. But if she was asking for him, there was no way he would say no, which was how he found himself at the bottom of the stairs, much as he had been last night. Except when he went into that room this time, he'd be confronted with more than just his memories.

Spike drew in a breath and placed his hand on the banister, forced his feet into motion. One step, then another, then somehow, he was there and so was she. Standing in the bathroom doorway, her damp hair draped over one shoulder, and a bathrobe pulled tight around her. Maybe the same bathrobe. He stopped short when their eyes met, his throat going tight and the rest of him seeming to seize.

"I can't get a good enough look," she said softly, waving at her shoulder. "I mean, I see it, obviously, with the mirror, but I don't bend in the right way to tell if it's worse. I did clean it, though, let the water run over it for a minute or two. Probably just need some more of that antibacterial ointment or something and—"

"I got it," he said, stepping closer. Not quite into the room yet but enough he could see inside. See where it had happened before. It was all so familiar—her, the robe, the scent of her soaps and shampoos, the way the light struck her face, as though time had looped back around the way it sometimes did in his dreams and he had another chance. He could erase what had happened and do it right, and everything would be fixed. The memory of hurting her would be like every other night-

mare that had ever plagued him—something with an end, and something that wasn't real. A dark twist in an already dark mind from which he could wake up.

Buffy fell back inside the bathroom and undid the sash at her waist, her eyes remaining on his face. And regardless of what she'd told him or herself, it *was* a test. Perhaps not of him or of her, but of both of them—of whatever they had become to each other in the twenty-four hours that had lapsed since he'd told her what had happened that night, since she had asked and listened and heard him, and everything else. This wasn't the Buffy he'd seen yesterday or even that morning. Something had changed, something important, and she wanted to see just how far that went.

Her hands were shaking when she pulled the lapel of her robe aside, but not the way he thought they might. And when the time came to turn away from him, present him with her back, she did so with a calm that he found humbling. Buffy shifted until her left arm was free, pulled the material of the robe over her breasts and let out a bracing sort of sigh.

"Well?" she asked.

Spike gave himself a second to hesitate, but only a second before he crossed the threshold and stepped into the room properly. Swore if she could be stoic that he could, too. He owed it to her to be anything she needed.

"Think you were right," he said thickly, staring fixedly at the mark. Taking in where it had started to heal—the patches of skin that looked days better rather than just a handful of hours—and the angry red of where the injury had been freshly agitated. "Can doctor you up right quick if you fancy. Or I imagine Red'll be back here in a blink, so—"

"No," Buffy said, and this time her voice was not shaking. Nothing about her was. "Let's just get it done so I can get comfy. Or, you know, as comfy as I can get with a wannabe slayer-killer in the basement."

"Done all right the last couple of nights with me down there, haven't you?"

"I said *wannabe*."

That almost sounded like a joke. More likely it was a reminder.

"Where's the kit?"

Buffy waved over her shoulder, her good shoulder, to the counter against the wall, which was really the only place it could be. That it happened to also be as far into the bloody loo as a bloke could get was beside the point. She was already moving in that direction, and he followed. Not closely, not daring, wanting to keep as much distance between them as possible, make sure he didn't overstep. That was until he no longer had a choice and had to come closer. Close like they'd been the night before one floor down in a room not overrun with the phantoms of bad memories.

"Buffy," he heard himself say as he reached for the ointment. "Need to say it again."

"Say what?"

"That there's nothin' you have to prove to me. We don't need to do this here."

He thought she might bristle or tense, or at the least, snap at him as she had only moments ago. But she wouldn't be Buffy if she didn't insist on surprising him at every turn.

"I think you're wrong. I think I *do* need to do this here," she said. "I don't want this room... I'm tired of it being a place where *that's* what I think about. I don't want it to be anymore." She paused, and he caught the flash of a strained smile in her reflection. "Not saying that I'm not thinking about it right now or that I won't ever again. Maybe I'm doing this the wrong way, but I think it's what I need. Especially if we have this fight with the Council—I can't be afraid of my own house. This is the place I need to be safe."

Spike inhaled sharply, flicked his gaze to the mirror once more as though the Buffy there would tell him something different. It was no good. "Do this however you like," he said. "Whatever you need. Just never reckoned you'd ever feel safe with me anyway."

It was impossible, but somehow, when she lifted her head again, her eyes found his in the mirror. The reflection that wasn't there. "I did before."

If he'd had a heartbeat, it would have either skipped or stopped altogether. "Buffy—"

"This can't be news to you, Spike. I let you handcuff me."

Yeah, well, the world had been bloody different then. Or at least, *they* had been. "Said yourself it could never be trust."

Buffy didn't reply, just held his gaze in the mirror, and in doing so, gave him the answer.

It *had* been trust. Regardless of what she'd said, what she'd told him, Buffy had trusted him. Perhaps not with everything but with the things that mattered. Which just made what had happened hurt all the more.

Spike wasn't sure how he got through the next few minutes following that particular revelation. How he found the wherewithal to uncap the antibiotic ointment and spread it across the place where she was hurt, how he convinced his hands and fingers to remain in motion, do the right things, with his mind ablaze and his stupid sodding heart shattering all over again. He'd lost something he hadn't known he had, and without prejudice, Buffy was giving it back to him.

Any hope he'd ever had of one day not being sick with love for her went up in smoke. Not that it had been much of a hope to begin with.

Barmy thing was, he didn't mind. Sure, he'd gone to the other side of the world to reclaim his soul, but his heart had always been hers.



NO ONE COULD TALK Buffy out of camping out on the couch, but that didn't stop Willow and Dawn from arguing the point anyway until she finally snapped and insisted it was time for bed. Dawn had school tomorrow, after all, and though she had no idea how she was going to manage it, the Slayer was paranoid enough about losing her clientele that she was determined to open the studio. The hope was Giles would ring with some fresh insight between now and when the sun came up, the sort that would help determine what to do next, tell them what to do and give her permission to proceed with her life, comforted in the

knowledge that there was a plan. If he didn't, well, their lives couldn't be on hold indefinitely and Buffy refused to let Gray take more from her than she had already.

All of this she said with a sort of manic desperation as though she were trying to convince herself, which she likely was, and Spike couldn't blame her. No matter how much things changed, the song remained the same. She knew what part of herself she would have to sacrifice first if push came to shove, only this time she had more to lose. Her self-defense gig wasn't just a job. It was something she had created. A piece of her. And she'd fight to protect it the way she did everything else that mattered—with all she had.

"We'll figure it out tomorrow," Buffy had said after she'd dumped an armful of blankets onto the couch. "I don't know if it's a spell or taking it in shifts to watch Little Miss Psycho or what, but... We'll just have to figure it out."

Dawn had released a much-put-upon sigh. "You know what you would tell me if I was hurt."

"Which is why it's a good thing I'm the boss of you and not the other way around."

"Well, you're a dumb boss."

"Yes, it is dumb to want to continue earning money so we don't end up on the street. How careless of me." Buffy had straightened from where she'd been arranging her makeshift bed and narrowed her eyes. "Pretty sure I said it was bedtime about ten minutes ago, so less with the lectures and more with the teeth brushing and sack hitting for you."

There had been another sigh, this one accompanied by a groan to match, before Dawn had stomped heavy feet toward the staircase. "Thanks for the backup, *Spike*," she'd yelled over her shoulder. "You're a big help."

"Just know when to pick my battles, Bit."

She'd paused long enough to throw him a mutinous glare that, perversely, made him warm all over. Something that had not escaped Buffy's notice, for when he'd looked at her again, she'd had an eyebrow arched and an expression that was somewhere between surprised and amused on her face.

"You guys seem back to normal-ish," she'd said in a carefully casual tone. Not demanding an explanation but clearly wanting one.

"Two of us had it out again when I came up for a nip. Wouldn't say all's forgiven but I think she's off tryin' to stake me for the time being."

"Which is definitely progress." She hadn't looked entirely placated, and he couldn't blame her. The way things had progressed still had him at odds with himself—how quickly it had happened.

He wasn't a complete idiot, though. He knew the soul had done the lion's share of the work. And torn as he still was on the matter—if it had been the right call or one made selfishly—right now, he wanted to think that he'd done right by her. That he'd relieved some of Dawn's anger with herself by coming clean, even if he'd benefited from it just as much.

Just a handful of hours had passed since she'd been ready to tear his bloody head

off, and now the Bit was back, somehow believing in him again. Enough to think there might be a chance with Buffy.

"Where, ah, do you want me, Slayer?" he'd asked to get himself off that particular train of thought. "Could catch my kip in the basement with your esteemed houseguest, I suppose, but you'll understand if I'm not all that eager."

But she'd shaken her head, furrowed her brow and given the room a look over as though to see if it had spontaneously rearranged itself. "I'm guessing options are kinda low with me taking the couch... And I know this isn't fair since I kinda made you stay, but I don't think I'm okay with you being in my bedroom."

He'd brought his hands up. "Wasn't gonna suggest it."

"Just...with the telling you to stay but also taking up the only other bed space—"

"Forgettin' I live in a crypt, aren't you? I can grab me a bit of floor. I've slept in worse places."

"You have a bed in that crypt." Buffy had flushed a bit and glanced away as though scandalized—as though she were bringing up something he'd forgotten. More likely her intimate knowledge of that bed for as many times as they'd overshot it in their haste, never mind the few instances that their aim had been true. "So I know you have a preference."

"Well, yeah, reckon most people would. But any corner'll do me fine for tonight."

That had seemed to placate her, which had been enough, though truly he wouldn't be getting much sleep. Not for a stretch, at least. Before, when she'd been a frequent visitor at the crypt, it hadn't taken much to amend his sleeping schedule to complement hers, even if he'd never gotten it exact. Given he rarely had anywhere to go first thing in the morning, he could afford to sleep until mid-afternoon if he fancied. Being tired enough to drift off to slumberland this early would be more of a chore. Always was, especially when his mind was full.

Even more especially, he'd discovered, when under her roof.

Which was why he found himself edging into the kitchen about an hour after Buffy's breathing had become less labored and she'd fallen off for good. He couldn't get the chatter in his head to shut up on his own, but he might manage it if he doused the sodding thing in alcohol. It was worth a shot, and he'd been trying all day.

Been interrupted all day too.

Spike had forgotten that Dawn could be downright stealthy when she put her mind to it. Girl would stomp her way all over the bloody place most of the time, but if she didn't want to be caught, she'd move with care and consideration, and to great effect. Even still, he liked to think she wouldn't have caught him off guard if he hadn't reached that place of dangerous complacency with his nose-blindness.

"Whatcha doing?"

He turned and saw her in the doorway that connected the kitchen to the hall, looking about as close to sleep as he felt. "Thought you were supposed to be tucked in all safe and snug in your beddy-bye," he said in a low undertone.

"Well, you're up."

"Creature of the night here. I'm supposed to be up."

Dawn huffed a very Dawn huff, tossed her hair over her shoulder. "Well, I can't

sleep,” she said. “Call me crazy, but when there’s a psycho in the house, sleep is the last thing on my mind. I have no idea how Buffy expects any of us to get any rest.”

“She seems to be takin’ to it just fine.”

“Well, I don’t know how she did that, either.”

Spike thought he might, considering how bloody exhausted the Slayer had been at the start of the day, never mind the winding road that she’d traveled since leaving the house that morning. She’d been running at full speed, which by itself wasn’t unusual, but without a break, and after a conversation like the one they’d had. Put in its proper context and the question wasn’t how she’d fallen asleep given the circumstances, but how she’d continued to give as much as she had as long as she had without getting sloppy.

But he didn’t want to say that—didn’t really want to discuss Buffy at all, both because she was close enough that he heard each subtle movement she made and because he worried Dawn might start in again on the rubbish she’d said earlier about winning her back, and he didn’t think he could take more of that kind of talk right now. His heart and mind needed a few hours off the pain of want and regret.

“Don’t suppose you know where she hides the good stuff, do you?” he said, waving at the fridge. “Had a peek in the icebox earlier and there’s no accountin’ for her taste in brew.”

“Seeing as I’m the one she’s hiding it from, what do you think?”

“Tellin’ me you haven’t looked?”

A purely mischievous smile stretched across Dawn’s face, the sort that lit up her eyes even in the dark. “You get me in trouble and I’m going to make your life a living hell.”

“Wouldn’t take much at that,” he muttered but grinned anyway. It was impossible not to grin with the Bit looking at him the way she was. Not quite the same as she had before but close enough. “But—”

It came too late, his faculties stalled by the warmth and beat of conversation, the whirring of thoughts his brain insisted on keeping in motion, and the rest of him distracted by that bloody smile of hers. All of it working against him to keep him from hearing what he should have heard seconds ago. But then he did hear, and hearing didn’t help him, because the girl moved like a slayer and slayers were meant to hunt down his kind. Move with preternatural speed and grace to keep their blood pumping and their arms swinging, quietly if quiet was what it took to survive.

Gray burst like a windstorm into the kitchen, and she did so without making a peep. There was Dawn’s jolt of surprise, confusion morphing into alarm, but she didn’t have time for either. The slayer shoved her aside—and even that was quiet—leaped over the island to seize a prize from knife block on the counter, and was halfway to Dawn with the blade she intended to bury in her gut before Spike realized what had happened. What *was* happening. What he was watching and not quick enough to stop, even with his vampire speed and strength and everything else, because he was good, better than good, but he wasn’t a slayer, and he hadn’t been paying attention when he should have. He’d been too busy drinking in that smile he hadn’t earned. And the knife’s blade disappeared just under Dawn’s belly, sending a

bloom of fresh blood into the air and stirring a scream from somewhere deep inside him that seemed to tear out his insides until the bitch cut it off a second later with another swipe.

Then he couldn't make any sound at all—couldn't do anything but collapse to his knees, holding his bleeding throat as Gray used him like a stepping stool to launch herself to the other side of the kitchen. The door cracked the wall with the force of her throw, and she was gone. And Dawn was on the floor. And Buffy was in the doorway and screaming herself, for her throat hadn't been severed, and falling to her sister's side.

It happened so fast, and Spike had seen it too late.

When it came to the women he loved, he was always, *always* too bloody late.

THE RAGE AND LOVE, THE STORY OF MY LIFE

ONCE, WHAT FELT LIKE FOREVER AGO, A YOUNG BOY IN A COMA HAD BROUGHT THE nightmares of the whole town to life, making it damn near impossible to tell the difference between dreams and the waking world. A lot in Buffy's life was ripe for nightmare fodder, it was true, but the worlds she visited while she was asleep tended to contain horrors even beyond the Hellmouth's standards. That was when she wasn't busy having prophetic dreams or dreams about past assaults, or those times when she'd suddenly remember her mother was dead, so the Joyce in front of her was nothing but a phantom.

The nightmares that plagued her these days tended to take the shape of battles she'd already won, only this time she'd lose, and lose big. She'd hesitate before plunging the sword through Angel, and the world would be sucked into Hell. She'd be forced to watch as Adam ripped Riley apart limb from limb and repurposed the remains to make more Frankenthings like himself. She'd thrust the knife into Faith's belly and stare in horror as her insides poured onto the rooftop. She'd be too late to stop Willow from sucking the Keyness right out of Dawn, and she'd find her sister a hollow husk.

But there was always that knowledge, the niggling awareness that she had been here before. That these were steps she'd already taken, challenges she'd already conquered, and she would start to see the strings holding up her little slice of surreal-ity. The safety that came with understanding that what she was seeing was an illusion of her own making, and terrifying though it was, there would be an end. She'd wake up.

Only the nightmare had been in waking this time, not in sleep. Hearing her sister scream before something heavy thunked to the floor. In hearing *Spike* scream before the sound became a gurgle and the floor shook yet again. All this had happened over

the course of seconds. Being startled awake, throwing herself into motion based on nothing more than fear and instinct, and bolting into the kitchen in time to see Gray's hair flowing behind her as she made her escape.

To find Dawn on the floor, her hands pressed to her gut and blood gushing from between her fingers.

Everything had gone fuzzy in her head after that. Thoughts gone, replaced with action. No time to be horrified, to gawk, to scream or cry or demand to know what the hell had happened. Though now, sitting in the hospital waiting room, her hands and clothes spattered with her sister's blood, Buffy thought she had screamed. Not for long but long enough that her throat was sore and it hurt to talk. She'd barely been able to tell the doctor what had happened, babbling at a pace where words became nothing more than useless noise. And now she had her sister's blood on her hands, under her fingernails, perhaps even in her hair, and all she could think about were those stolen seconds between jolting awake and breaking hard for the kitchen. Knowing but not knowing, awake but trapped in a nightmare.

And it was her fault. All her fault. Xander had told her this would happen. The chains in the basement wouldn't have held Buffy overnight. She would have pulled and would have kept pulling, ignored the cries of her muscles and the aches in her body and pulled until the chain gave, and then she would have run. Or not run. No, because Legolas—Gray—had been careful not to give herself away. Dawn had said that, sputtered it mindlessly as Buffy had broken every traffic law and then some to get to the hospital. There in the backseat, holding the temporary wrapping that Willow had provided against her stomach, and sobbing about how she hadn't known. She hadn't heard and Spike hadn't either. How fast it had happened, so fast Spike hadn't had a chance to do more than leap screaming toward the slayer and had gotten his throat sliced open for his effort.

Spike. *God*. Buffy blew out a breath and tipped her head back, then squeezed her eyes shut before the unforgiving fluorescents could make them water. She hadn't spared him much thought since carting Dawn out of the house, but there had been a look. A moment. Her eyes connecting with his and some understanding passing between them. The sort that didn't need to be spoken to be heard, full and bright and *save her. Leave me here and save her*. Knowing, of course, that that had always been what she would do, but telling her all the same.

It had only been his throat—a very survivable wound for a vampire. Perhaps Gray had been trying to take off his head and misjudged her trajectory, or maybe severing his vocal cords had been enough. Buffy didn't know. There had been a mass of blood around him, too, spreading out like a halo, and she hadn't let herself look too closely at the mess behind the flaps of his shredded skin. No time to worry about him when her sister, her living, breathing sister, was struggling to both live and breathe.

Only she had time to worry now, and plenty of room for it. Dawn was somewhere being patched up—*saved*, she told herself, *she's being saved*—and Spike was at the house, wounded and vulnerable. If Gray decided to double back to finish the job, no one would be any the wiser until they returned home and saw the dust on the floor.

The thought made her chest clench. Made all of her want to tear through the exit

and run until she couldn't feel her legs anymore. Away from this place and its memories and death and toward the man she didn't love but had at one point, because that was doing something and something was better than nothing. Something was better than waiting for the sort of news that would sound good at the start but unravel just when everything felt safe again. She could help Spike. She couldn't help Dawn. Not any more than she already had.

She also couldn't leave. She knew she couldn't. Not with Dawn in some room down some hallway, bleeding and possibly dying. She needed to be here. Spike would understand that. Even if Gray did decide to dust him, he would understand.

Spike always understood.

Someone touched her hand, shattering into the loud consuming her head, and Buffy lurched forward as though doing so would wake her up. "What? Dawn?"

Only the scene didn't change. Still in the waiting area. Still in these seats she'd sat in before.

Willow, who had risen to her feet to pace when she couldn't stop fidgeting, shook her head. "Xander," she said softly. "He's here."

Buffy twisted in her chair just in time to watch her friend as he clomped his way down a corridor that had also had a starring role in her nightmares. Sometimes, when she visited this place while she slept, the doctor approached from down the hall, looking somber. He'd stop in front of her and say he was very sorry, but he'd done everything he could. The surgery hadn't worked, and her mother had coded on the operating table. And she would shake her head and say no, her mother wasn't supposed to die at the hospital. She was supposed to die at home, on the couch, where she would be found by her eldest after the last first date she would ever go on. Then he'd nod and tell her that was right but she had died anyway, so there was no need for her to die again.

Nothing good ever happened in this hospital. It was the last place her mother had ever been. Why had she thought bringing Dawn here was a good idea?

"Buffy."

Xander was suddenly in front of her, like he'd teleported. There was no laughter in his eyes, no look that vaguely said I-told-you-so. He just took her by the shoulders—she didn't know when she'd stood, but she was on her feet now, so she must have—and drew her to him in one of his warm Xander hugs. "It's okay," he said into her hair. "You got her here in time, Buff. She'll be fine."

Whether he believed it was anyone's guess, but she wanted to think he did. It would be nice to know that her dark thoughts weren't shared by the others. Willow hadn't said much of anything since they'd gotten here, so Xander was all she had to go on.

"What happened?" he asked when he released her. Only he wasn't asking her, thankfully. Buffy didn't think she could put much of anything into words.

"Gray escaped," Willow said.

"Well, yeah, strangely I put that much together on my own. How did she get to *Dawn*?"

"She wasn't upstairs. She was in the kitchen with Spike." Willow glanced at Buffy

as though to invite her to add her input, but she had none to offer. “She got him, too. Sliced his throat open.”

“Weird method of vampire slaying, but okay,” Xander muttered before shifting his focus back to Buffy. “He okay? Spike?”

Maybe the question would have surprised her if she could feel anything but that horrible, familiar fear. Remembered pain piling on top of everything else. But Buffy couldn’t muster surprise right now. “He’s, umm, he was okay when we left,” she said, rubbing her arms. “I mean, as okay as you can be, I guess. But someone should... Someone should go and check on him.” She didn’t know who *someone* was in this scenario, except that it couldn’t be her. “Just in case she comes back, you know. He can’t defend himself.”

He couldn’t defend Dawn, either.

Buffy pressed her eyes closed again, let out a slow breath. The thought she’d had earlier tonight—what now felt like a million years ago—popped back into her head, louder and more insistent than before. But she couldn’t go down that path right now. Not when the rest of her was consumed with worry.

Just one more thing for the *tomorrow* pile. Assuming, of course, there was a tomorrow. She was starting to think Warren or someone was back and screwing around with time again. Only instead of an endless loop, she was just trapped in an endless day. One full of road trips and revelations and out-of-body experiences and maybe losing the person she loved most in the world because...why? She’d underestimated Gray. She’d overestimated herself. She hadn’t considered that when the other slayer had told Dawn that she’d pay for having slapped her, she’d meant to collect in blood later that night. It would just never end, and every second she thought she might be getting close to some reprieve would make the next blow even harder to walk off.

No one volunteered to go check on Spike, and Buffy didn’t push the issue. He wasn’t a priority for them. At the moment, he wasn’t a priority for her, either, but that didn’t make the worry go away, or lessen the urge to go to him just so she could do something other than sit around. He was another unknown she would have to live with until the current stretch of awful had transformed into whatever was coming for her next.

“Has anyone gotten a hold of Giles?” Xander asked, jarring her back to herself.

Everything had changed again when Buffy hadn’t been paying attention. Now all three of them were sitting in those terrible chairs.

“No,” Willow said. “I mean, he might have called the house, but we’ve been, well, here.”

“You want me to check your messages? Buffy?” Xander was on his feet again in a flash.

She blinked up at him. “You’re going to run to the house to check my answering machine?”

“Well, I could, but I was more thinking about using a payphone.”

Oh, right. That made more sense. “Sure, yeah. If you wanna. You know how to—”

He nodded, urgent but not unkind. “Just need your code.”

"Oh-two-two-six," she said. The numbers just tumbled out, ready. Thank god. She didn't think she'd be able to remember them if they weren't on the surface. "Dawn and I... We couldn't decide on a code. Argued about it for a while before agreeing it had to be something important to both of us. We went with Mom's birthday."

There was a hand on her shoulder again. The same hand. "That's great, Buffy," Willow said, her tone pitched as though choosing an answering machine code was some sort of achievement. "Really great for you and Dawn."

Buffy gripped the edge of her seat and squeezed, anger that felt way out of proportion with what was reasonable surging forward out of nowhere. She had a sudden memory of Willow talking like this at her mother's funeral, and that was not the sort of thing she wanted to remember right now. "It's just a password. It's nothing." She lifted her gaze to Xander. "Go. See if Giles has called."

Xander gave her another nod then rounded the both of them, probably heading back down the same corridor. She didn't know—she didn't watch him leave, just blew out a breath and tried to force herself to relax. Uncurl her fingers from the death grip she had on the chair. She could feel where the material was starting to lose integrity, and knew if she didn't let up, she'd find herself sprawled on the floor.

On the floor like Dawn had been, only not torn open and bleeding. Dawn there and her mother on the couch. She hadn't been quick enough the first time—paramedics had said there was probably nothing she could have done, but *probably* wasn't *definitely* and she was the Slayer so there had to have been something she could have done—and how maybe she hadn't been quick enough this time either.

And Spike had been there but he couldn't help because a bunch of army jerks had decided it would be fun to run experiments on creatures they called Hostiles, and he had been one of them. The seventeenth of them, come to think of it, and that had been good once but it wasn't good now. Or maybe it had never been good and she'd always been fooling herself because it had been good for her. For a while, at least. Long enough to get him to fall in love with her—for him to love Dawn like she was his sister, too. For him to be something other than the soulless thing he was meant to be.

And Gray. *Gray*. The slayer who had been handpicked by the Council. Who had come to Sunnydale to do what Spike wouldn't do. What Faith wouldn't do, either. And tonight had proven just how dedicated she was to that.

More than dedicated—how many people she was willing to bury before she achieved her goal.

However many Buffy would let her bury.

Buffy pressed her eyes closed again, breathed in air that smelled of sickness and death no matter how much they tried to cover it up. The answer was in the smell the same as it was within herself. She hadn't taken Gray as seriously as she should have—focusing more on *how* she was there than the *why* of the matter. Taking for granted that Gray's bluster didn't mean she wasn't dangerous, that she wouldn't mow other people down. Even after today. Even after learning that the bitch she'd called Legolas had come after Dawn at the Magic Box, and Buffy had thought she'd known. That

she'd understood. She'd said as much to Spike when they'd gone out to find her, that she'd been downright naïve not to think that other people might be vulnerable.

Because even after everything she'd seen, after everything she'd put herself through and more, even after Faith, she'd believed fundamentally that there was a sacred line no slayer would cross. Faith had, yes, but she'd stumbled over it—she hadn't run at full speed. There had been a moment between Allan Finch and the coma where Buffy could have done more, where *one* of them could have done more. And then Faith wouldn't have let herself fall the rest of the way. She hadn't been a bad person. She'd just been hurt, and the exact wrong person had known the exact right way to mold that hurt into something dark.

Gray had hurt Dawn, yeah, which meant she wouldn't hesitate to hurt others. But there was a line between *hurt* and *kill* and somehow it hadn't even occurred to Buffy that the line was one anyone would willingly cross. Or that a slayer could look at other people and consider them acceptable collateral damage. Coming after her, after Buffy, was one thing. A not-great thing, but something she could still understand, particularly for a girl who genuinely believed Buffy was a threat to continued existence.

Dawn, however, wasn't a threat to anyone. Unless Gray knew she was the Key, but Buffy didn't think that was it. If Gray knew, she would have said something before now. Dawn would have been on Buffy's list of sins, another reason she was too dangerous to let live. And even if that wasn't the case, where exactly did it leave her? With a slayer who couldn't be reasoned with. A slayer who had stuck a knife in her little sister and wouldn't hesitate to do it again.

A slayer who meant to kill her and anyone who stood in her way. Because that sacred line didn't exist to her. Maybe it didn't exist for anyone but Buffy. Maybe it never had.

"You're so good you bloody glow with it," Spike had told her. *"How you look at things, how you treat those around you. Even the berks like me who don't deserve it. You think that's bein' the Slayer, and it's not. It's being you."*

Good. Good. Spike believed she was good. That was a thing he'd been able to say and mean despite everything she'd thrown at him the year before. He knew her better than anyone—she might have resisted that once, thought it ridiculous, but she didn't anymore. Hell, she couldn't. Not after everything he'd seen or everything she'd done to him. The parts of her she'd kept hidden from everyone else, even herself, had always been on full display where he was concerned. He'd taken her passion and her hate, accepted how broken she'd been, and yeah, maybe his view on things was wonky because of the whole *soulless* thing, but if anyone had any right to call her anything but good, it was Spike. And he still thought she was good.

Buffy didn't know why that mattered, now that she knew she had to kill a slayer. Except it did. It mattered a lot.

"Ms. Summers?"

She started and looked up, convinced for half a beat that her thought had been broadcast. Then she saw the doctor and launched herself to her feet, all the dark

whispers of things she must do being shoved to the back of her mind where they belonged. "My sister," she said, crossing her arms. "Is she okay?"

The doctor—a thin, balding man with glasses—glanced at Willow, who had also risen to her feet, before meeting her eyes again. "Your sister is very lucky," he said. "It looks like the blade managed to avoid seriously damaging any major organs, but only by a hair. There was some light kidney damage, but nothing that really worries us. She is, however, acutely anemic, and we're working on bringing her levels back to normal."

"But she's okay, right?" Buffy asked, barely hearing her own voice. "She's gonna be okay."

"She's doing very well," the doctor replied diplomatically, which made her hate him just a bit. He must have gotten that a lot, for he gave her the sort of look that said he knew what she was thinking and wasn't offended by it. "Aside from getting her blood and iron levels where we want them, we want to make sure her vitals remain consistent and stable before she's allowed visitors."

Her legs threatened to go out from under her, but she managed to keep standing. "So, I can't see her?"

"Not just yet. But if all goes well, you'll be able to see her in a couple of hours." He paused, hesitated, seeming to consider something. "I won't lie to you—it could have easily gone the other way. Like I said, your sister is a very lucky girl."

Buffy wasn't sure what she thought of that but decided not to argue. There was too much noise in her head as it was, with the way her temples were pounding in tandem with her heart. Somehow, the doctor had made her feel both better and more terrified than ever at the same time. "Thank you," she choked out. "So...will someone come and let me know when I can see her? Or should I just ask if it's been more than two hours?"

"Someone will come to let you know," he told her, not unkindly, his eyes softening. "Though we're going to limit her to fifteen-minute visits for the first twenty-four hours. We don't want her exhausting herself. Rest is an essential component to recovery."

She nodded, barely aware of the motion. "Yeah, okay. I'll be here."

The doctor offered a nod in return. "We'll let you know if the situation changes, but if all goes well, the next time I or one of the nurses comes to see you, it'll be to take you back to Dawn."

That would have to be good enough, she guessed. It wasn't like she had much of a choice. "Okay."

Buffy thought that might be it—it certainly seemed like it, but the doctor hedged for a second, like he was at war with himself. Then he sighed and stepped closer. "Look," he said in an undertone, "my personal belief is she's going to be fine. There will be a scar and she'll probably want to avoid strenuous activities for eight weeks or so, but your sister? She's tough." He paused. "I was here a few years ago when another young woman was brought in—stabbing with severe blood loss, a lot like this, but much *more* severe—and major head trauma to boot. My belief was she would

never wake up, but she did, just a little more than a year later. Since that happened... I've come to redefine what is and isn't possible."

It was supposed to make her feel better, she knew, but it didn't. Not when she knew exactly who the other young woman was and how she had ended up in the hospital, never mind what had helped her achieve that miracle recovery. But Dawn wasn't a slayer. She might have been made from one, have veins full of Summers blood, but she didn't have the unique physiology that made for the sort of miracles that could stun medical professionals. All she had was the frail, human body the monks had created for her, one that adhered to regular rules. And the regular rules sucked beyond the telling of it.

The doctor must have seen that too, though, or something else on her face, for he offered a small smile. Nothing more than that—just a smile, but the sort of knowing smile that did what words could not. Made her hesitate, made her think *maybe*.

The bone-deep terror that wouldn't alleviate until she saw Dawn with her own two eyes, but that *maybe* would hold her for the moment.

It had to. It was all she had.

Buffy turned her gaze to the floor, feeling rather than watching as the doctor made his way back down the hall. Leaving her to the vacuum of thoughts too large for her head. All things Dawn, her sister who wasn't okay but would be—*would be, dammit*—and the woman who had brought her here. The dread that came with not knowing and the dread that came with the sort of decision she'd already made. A decision that felt both firmer now and more disturbing because of it. Like she had already committed the crime, and time had just to catch up with the moment it became final. But maybe she had it wrong. Maybe there was a chance she'd be able to stop the Council before it became necessary to remove Gray from the equation, but Gray was *here* and the Council was not—the Council was an ocean away in an ivory tower of whatever, waiting for their weapon on the ground to report a job well done.

And Buffy couldn't do this again. She couldn't spend her nights in hospitals waiting to hear that the people she loved were all right. No matter how much the alternative made her stomach churn.

"Buffy." It was Willow again, with her hand back on her shoulder. "Buffy, it's going to be okay."

That was all well and good for her to say. She already knew what it was like to have killed someone. "Yeah," Buffy said. "Okay. I'm going to go see what's keeping Xander."

And she turned and walked down the same stretch of hall before Willow could get in another word, feeling suddenly suffocated and badly needing to be far away. The last time Dawn had been in danger, it was because Willow had put her there. Not fair, Buffy knew, and completely at odds with the peace she'd found just a few hours earlier, but Gray had sort of blown up everything and sure, that wasn't Willow's fault, but Willow was the one who was here. A proxy for all things happening inside her head and Buffy very much did not need to undo the progress she'd made in repairing their friendship by letting her need to hit something take the wheel.

What was keeping Xander ended up being less of a what and more of a who.

Buffy rounded a corner and found him huddled close to Anya, who was wearing a too-large coat over a pair of pajamas, her eyes ringed and her hair askew, very much like she'd been roused from sleep and had done the bare minimum to get ready before heading to the hospital.

Buffy didn't have time to react beyond that initial flash of shock. Xander must have sensed her stare, for he turned and offered a wry smile when their eyes met. "Look who I ran into."

"I felt your call for vengeance," Anya blurted without ceremony. "I thought it might be Willow again."

"And I was just trying to tell my lovely former fiancée that Willow is much less likely than the psychotic slayer who attacked Dawn earlier today," Xander replied dryly. "And to stop being so jumpy on the 'Willow's evil' wagon."

"Excuse me for worrying. It's not like I lost *everything* just a few months ago."

God, this was going to give her a headache. Or make her current headache even more painful. Buffy sucked down a deep breath and tried to set her growing irritation aside. "You felt *my* call for vengeance? I thought that meant you had to come to me."

"Typically, yes, that is the way it goes," Anya agreed, sticking her chin in the air and wrapping her coat more snugly around herself. "But being that you're Buffy, I assumed you would consider vengeance beneath you. Or you wouldn't have the stomach for the sort of vengeance I dish out."

"But she still felt the need to rush down here in the middle of the night just for shits and giggles," Xander said, turning fully to face Buffy. "Any news?"

"Fine." Anya sniffed. "Next time someone is stabbed by a loony, I won't bother."

"You were here because you thought the shop might be in danger."

"That's not the only reason!"

"The doctor thinks she's going to be okay," Buffy said in a rush. The last thing she needed was a ringside seat to one of Xander and Anya's tiffs, particularly because she knew Xander was reacting from a place of fear right now and would later bemoan how terse he'd been with his ex, whom he wanted to make not his ex at some point. Maybe. All things she didn't have the energy or inclination to deal with at the moment. "I mean, he kinda told me in secret, but he seems confident."

Some of the tension in Xander's shoulders went slack. "Thank god."

"Yes, I am also very relieved," Anya added rather pointedly. Then paused. "I don't feel as much vengeance coming off you as I did when I woke up, but this is still my area, if you wanted to make a wish."

"Can you be that forward about it?" Xander asked, turning back to her. "I thought you had to camp out and hope that someone slipped and used the magic words."

Anya thankfully chose to ignore him, rather kept her gaze on Buffy, waiting. And for a second, Buffy did consider it, but only for a second. Her head might be full of other stuff at the moment, but that didn't mean she'd suddenly forgotten all the stories Anya had told over the last couple of years about the wishes she'd granted in the past and the wacky and wild ways they always seemed to backfire on the person who asked. How sometimes she would apply her own creative interpretation just for

her own amusement, never mind the number of times people had begged her to undo something she'd done once they'd gotten what they'd thought they wanted.

And this, Gray, was something Buffy felt she had to handle herself. No shortcuts.

"Thanks, but, no," she said. "That's not me."

"I know. But I wouldn't be a very good vengeance demon if I didn't ask." She took a breath and looked away. "Of course, as Xander just had to point out, a good vengeance demon *wouldn't* ask, but wait for the right moment. Is it any wonder D'Hoffryn thinks I've lost my edge?"

That sounded like something worth keeping an eye on—Anya's stories about D'Hoffryn weren't of the warm and cuddly variety—but Buffy only had so many eyes, and at the moment, all were trained on the crisis at hand. So instead, she shifted her attention back to Xander. "I take it you didn't get a chance to check the answering machine?"

"Not yet," he replied. "Was just about to when Anya started screaming at me."

"I did not scream. I was just—"

Buffy held up a hand. This was so not a conversation she needed to referee. "You guys...do your thing. And maybe point me in the direction of the payphone?"

Xander waved generally toward the hallway. "My plan was to head for the lobby. Pretty sure there's one across from the information desk. Can still do that if you like. I don't think Anya has a reason to stay."

"Not looking like this." She wrinkled her nose and glanced down at herself. "I need to change."

"Yes, because hospital waiting rooms have a dress code."

Buffy didn't bother with saying anything this time, just started walking toward the lobby at a brisk pace before the bickering could recommence in full. She knew she would miss everyone if she had to do any of this alone, but between Xander's stress response being to snark at everyone in sight, Anya's to be even blunter than usual, and Willow's having decided her job was to keep Buffy calm when she *couldn't* be calm, and Buffy thought there was a good chance she'd start screaming and not stop.

And there would be more. All of this was just a way to fill the space between updates from the doctor, waiting being the hardest part, and everyone had their ways of coping with uncertainty. Buffy's just happened to be motion. Too much standing still made her very aware that everyone was looking at her, waiting to see what she'd do or how she'd act. Trying to read what was going on behind the eyes, making her feel like she needed to be doing something more than what she was, even if she had no idea what. Or worse, making her feel like she was failing because she didn't know what to do. Because she had no plan aside from waiting.

There was something else, too. The knowledge, the dead certainty, that if Spike were here, he'd understand all of this without needing to be told. The way he'd let her be alone with him around before—giving her the distance she needed to think without the demand to perform. To have all the answers. To be the Slayer. Just let her be all right with not being all right, not flood the silence with a bunch of platitudes or reassurances or other fancy terms for people who wanted to pretend to say something while actually saying nothing.

Maybe that wasn't fair, either, but her sister had been stabbed, and Buffy wasn't much in the mood for fair.

It hadn't done much for her lately.



WELL, if Gray had accomplished anything, it was removing all subterfuge from the equation on the Council's part. There had been a chance, albeit a small one, that the information they'd initially given Giles was right. That Lydia hadn't been acting on behalf of the Council when she'd approached Spike to make a deal resulting in Buffy's death, and that the bad guy wasn't a shadow organization with endless resources and influence. Granted, Buffy had never swallowed that lie, but it had remained there in the back of her mind, comfort in an uncomfortable situation.

Gray had killed that hope earlier tonight. And when Buffy finally got Giles on the phone—a payphone whose number he'd left on her answering machine with the instructions to let it ring seven times before hanging up and trying again—he gave it its last rites and buried it.

"My access to Council archives and resources has been suspended, as you might imagine."

"What does that mean?" she'd asked, a whole new breed of dread twisting her insides.

"It means, as of right now, I am no longer under their employ, among other things. My communications are being monitored, and any attempt to approach a Council official—or anyone associated with them—will likely result in my being apprehended, or worse. Whether they take other action remains to be seen."

Her heart had plunged, along with the rest of her. Just when she'd thought there was no more *down* to discover. "What's *other* action?"

"Let's just say there's not much I would put past them. They treat their enemies with hostility, to say the least. If they know we're in contact, if they even *suspect* ... Well, I don't wish to worry you more than I have already."

"Bit late for that, thanks."

"Yes, I do think it best if we suspend our communications for the time being." It had sounded as though the decision caused him actual pain, and it probably had. "I never should have come back here, Buffy. The staff—"

"They would have found it eventually."

"They had me researching the means to ensure they could replace you with someone they selected," he'd sputtered in a rush, his voice full of anger and frustration and all the things she knew he couldn't afford to give into. "And I was daft enough to go along with it."

"They would have found someone else."

"Yes, well, I'm sure it just tickled Quentin pink to assign *me* the task. He has never quite gotten over you showing him up in front of his associates." He'd sighed. She'd pictured him running his hand down his mouth, perhaps leaning against the wall of the phone booth—whether he was in a booth or not, she hadn't known—and

doing his best to gather his bearings. “Insofar as this Gray is concerned,” he’d said a moment later, “I believe, for now, she is the most immediate threat. They still want this to be as contained as possible, and bringing the full might of the Council down upon you would undermine that aim considerably.”

“Why play coy? It’s all out now and they have the resources to do pretty much anything, don’t they?”

“Yes, well, it’s the matter of using those resources. Doing so would create the illusion that you are a problem outside of their sphere of control. That you frighten them, which would make them look unstable.”

All smiling for the camera and playing politics, in other words. “Right. Because the Council exists thanks to the generosity of a bunch of mysterious donors.”

“That’s an oversimplification,” he’d replied. “They do incur a sizable amount from private donations, but there are stock experts and financiers whose job it is to manage the existing assets and find the right avenues to allow their wealth to breed more wealth. They are who control every aspect of the Council’s operations, for better or worse, from the ground level. If all had gone according to plan, they would have learned of your passing much the way they do that of any slayer. I imagine the decision to create a new slayer in Gray was still made with consideration of the narrative they will weave around your death to ensure no one suspects it was an assassination. These are people who are not strictly members of the Council—they wouldn’t be privy to internal affairs beyond the scope of their specific functions, but they would know about you. The Council touts its accomplishments and buries its failures, and everything you have ever done in fulfilling your sacred duty is well known among their world. That much remains true.”

Like any good secretive organization, Buffy had supposed. She thought she’d heard something similar about the FBI at one point. Which wasn’t all that comforting, but in a weird way made her feel a little less isolated. Like a smidge.

The conversation had been a difficult one to end, especially knowing it was the last time she’d speak with Giles for the foreseeable future—or with that unspoken, unacknowledged *forever* lingering in her head where her sliver of hope had been. She’d urged him to get underground, perhaps reconnect with his old contacts to help keep hidden. Maybe even Ethan Rayne, depending on what the Initiative had done with him. Whatever was necessary to stay off the Council’s radar while they worked out just how the hell they were going to fight a global organization with endless means and live to tell the tale.

And she had no idea what to do. None. She’d had the thought earlier that the Brain of Buffy was closed for business, just a few hours back when her most pressing concern had been dealing with realizing she’d been in love with another vampire and learning how the annoying girl who kept trying to poke holes in her had come into her powers. Now, night was on the fast track to turn into day, and everything in her world had changed again.

Things would look better once she got some sleep, she knew, but sleep felt as distant from her as Giles. There was so much to do, so many directions she was being pulled. They still hadn’t let anyone see Dawn—*two hours, my ass*—and soon Buffy

would need to make some phone calls, for she knew there was no way she was opening the studio today, and as insignificant as that was, it also hurt a lot. She'd just started to build something for herself, something she liked and was good at, but she couldn't keep it. She couldn't have anything that was just hers.

Then, as the sun chased away the last of the inky black from the sky, Buffy felt it. A tingle on the back of her neck.

Spike.

It was like a jolt of adrenaline straight to her system. She whipped her head up from where she'd rested it against her legs, which were pulled as close to her chest as possible, part of the ball she'd tried to contort her body into. And she saw him at once, standing at the intersection of merging hallways by the nurse's station, his eyes heavy and pained, his hair askew and an ugly scar stretching the length of his throat where Gray had swiped him with the same knife she'd stuck into Dawn. But he was here, and here meant he was alive. Buffy didn't realize just how much she'd worried that Gray might have doubled back and finished the job on him until that moment—until he was there, all not dusty, and regarding her with the same worn exhaustion and worry that had started to feel like her default.

That was all it took, seeing Spike, for the iron-clad control she'd managed to hold over herself to fail her. She felt it in her lips, particularly one that was suddenly wobbling. She felt it in her eyes and the burn of her sinuses, in how every muscle that had been tense for the last however-many hours began screaming at her at once. Also that damned spot on her shoulder where Gray had dug in with a stake what felt like forever ago, but in reality had been just a smidge over twenty-four hours. Every bit of her screaming like it had never screamed, even after some of the spectacular beatings she'd taken over the years and made worse for the knowledge that it wouldn't stop anytime soon. All of it combined and crashed, and she might have started sobbing in earnest had she not been desperate to not wake Willow, who had fallen asleep in the seat beside her, or draw Xander's attention from wherever he'd disappeared off to. Coffee, she thought he'd said, but she wasn't sure how much time had passed since he'd slipped away.

She needed to be somewhere else—just for a few minutes. Somewhere she was allowed to not be together but also not alone, and for better or worse, Spike was the only person in her life who had ever provided that. Maybe it shouldn't have been as natural for her to go to him as it was now, that he was the destination her feet pointed her toward the second she planted them on the floor and started to walk, but the *shoulds* and the *whys* didn't matter at the moment. They could recommence when Dawn was out of the hospital, safe and sound at home, and Buffy had made sure Gray would never hurt her again.

Even if that meant killing her.

She released a sigh and crossed her arms, stopping in front of him. "Hey."

Spike didn't reply, just looked at her with those eyes full of worry and questions.

"Dawn... The doctor I talked to thinks she's going to be fine. We haven't gotten to see her yet," Buffy said. "It was supposed to be a couple of hours a couple of hours ago. But everything they've told us is good, so... There was some light kidney

damage, and she was anemic last I heard, but again, with the doctor being Mr. Half-Full.”

The taut lines of his face relaxed and he sagged forward, as though he were being held up by strings. And Buffy, who felt about as raw as she could remember feeling, experienced a twinge that she hadn’t anticipated. That Spike would die for her sister was something she had known for a while now, but she thought this might be the moment where she understood, in full, just how much he cared for Dawn and how that *care* was completely independent of whatever he felt for Buffy. Maybe it was dumb—*probably* it was dumb, but for whatever reason, that hadn’t occurred to her before. Even earlier when she’d been thinking about Spike viewing himself as Dawn’s adopted older brother and the love that had to be there because of it. That love, in her head, had been tied to Buffy. Love she’d willed into existence by being the woman Spike had lost his heart to.

And because she thought she understood that now, she was ready for what she saw when he lifted his head again. Some of what she’d seen what felt like several lifetimes ago, one night when she’d visited him in his crypt and he’d sat and watched her, rambling about how he hadn’t done the thing right. Hadn’t been quick enough to keep her alive.

“There was nothing you could’ve done,” she said. “Even if... There was just nothing. I know that. I’m not blaming you for this and you shouldn’t, either.”

Spike narrowed his eyes at her, which in itself was a relief. Better than the haunted look that had been there before.

“There was *nothing*, Spike. If there had been, you would’ve done it. I know that.” Buffy drew in a trembly breath and let her arms fall to her sides. That didn’t feel natural so she crossed them again. “You’re starting to wig me out. I don’t think you’ve ever been this quiet, including the time we all got our voices hijacked.”

But the second the words were out, before he had a chance to point, she saw him on the kitchen floor, his throat slashed open. Her gaze fell to the scar stretched across his skin, which, now that she remembered it was supposed to be there, leaped out at her in all its ugliness. The cut hadn’t been neat and looked deep enough that a doctor wandering by was liable to wonder how this guy was on his feet.

And maybe it was fatigue, or the fact that she had slipped right on past exhausted and into some new territory she’d never ventured into before, but Buffy knew at once what she needed to do. It was obvious and simple, never mind necessary. Things had changed tonight in a way they couldn’t change back. Moreover, she needed him at full strength.

She just needed him, and as scary as that was, it felt right too.

“Come with me,” Buffy said, then turned on her heel and headed down the corridor. She sensed his confusion but as it was with Spike, he didn’t hesitate before following. Not even when she marched him down a hall away from Dawn’s wing, or when she pushed open the door that led to the stairwell. She had the layout of this place memorized thanks to repeated visits, had often found nicotine-addicted cancer patients in here trying to get a fix away from the doctors’ judgmental eyes. The stairwell was empty now, likely owing to the ungodly hour, which was just as

well. Buffy had been prepared to shame whoever she found right back to their hospital beds.

She didn't turn around until the heavy door thunked closed. Spike stood a few feet away, his brow furrowed and his eyes full of questions.

Buffy held his gaze, tugged at the neckline of her shirt. "Drink."

His jaw went slack. Nice to know she could still surprise him.

"This is a one-time offer on account of murderous bitches who stab my sister," she said, thankfully sounding more awake than she felt and just as certain. Every instinct was on her side, even the slayer ones. "We both know you'll heal faster if you take some of my blood, so—"

Spike was shaking his head now, backing up. The confusion was gone and the fear was back, only a different breed of fear.

"Spike, look at me." Buffy waited, and he did. "I need you at full strength and I don't have time to wait. You won't hurt me. I know you won't."

He shook his head harder, his lips parted, his face on the verge of crumbling.

"Please. I need..." She broke her gaze from his. "I need everyone I care about to be okay. And...despite everything, that includes you. Just one of those things I can't switch off, even if I want to." A beat, then she brought her eyes back to him. Prepared for what she'd see but also not, because Spike had this way of looking at her that no one else did. Wonder and awe and so much that a soulless thing shouldn't be able to feel, but somehow did. It had been true before and it was true now, perhaps more so for all the debris that lay between them. How much destruction they had wrought only to still be here, or somewhere like it. "There's nothing I can do for Dawn but wait for them to let me see her and that's killing me. But I can do this. For you. So...please. Let me help."

She held her breath and waited, though she already knew what the answer would be. There had never been any doubt. Spike always did what she asked him to do—not always easily, and *almost* always with some sort of snarky commentary that would invariably earn him a punch to the nose, but always nonetheless, and he wasn't about to start disappointing her now. She watched the moment he realized it too, when the hesitation on his face melted into a sort of bone-weary acceptance.

And it was strange, she thought. Strange that she should need to talk him into it at all. Maybe he thought he'd lose control as he had before, starved as he must be for blood, and she'd be too weak to fight him off this time. That this time things would go the way they hadn't then, and while the possibility was very real, Buffy found she wasn't worried. Somehow, she knew he wouldn't.

Somehow, she *trusted*.

Then he was moving toward her, every step slow and deliberate, his intentions perfectly telegraphed. Giving her time, she knew, to change her mind. Judging her reactions, probably listening to the thumps of her heart, and all the other things his vampire senses told him. Waiting for her to remember who he was and what he was, and all the other things he had ever been to her, but Buffy didn't need to remember. She hadn't forgotten. That was a mistake a person didn't make twice. Her eyes were wide open.

Then he was there, practically right against her so she was breathing him in. His familiar Spike smell, still distinctive even without the leather. *Without* because he didn't have his coat. She did. It was in her closet at home. She should probably give it back at some point. Complete the Spike look through and through. The one she had, unknown to her, fallen in love with.

And then something else happened—something she *hadn't* known to expect. Her body started to react.

Her body started to react in ways she hadn't reacted to Spike in months.

People liked to ask what you would do if you could go back in time with all the knowledge you have now, and that was what this felt like. Going back in time. All the pieces were there, lined up in a row. The helplessness that had chased her to the hospital, the grasping for hope wherever she could find it, this immeasurable sinking in her center that seemed determined to consume her whole. There had been a time, not all that long ago, when she'd lived inside this feeling—this *hospital feeling*. A time when Spike had been her balm, the only way she could make it through the day, and her body remembered. Remembered that physical need to be close to him, touch him, feel his skin under hers, his body against her body, his hands and mouth and everything else she shouldn't have wanted but craved nonetheless. How he could take her pain and despair and fear and everything else away for a while. How he could make her feel something other than that awful void.

It would be so easy, too, to give in now. Let him press her against the wall and make her forget everything that was happening on the other side of it. Give her a few moments that weren't filled with that *hospital feeling* so she found the resolve to move forward. The draw was there and intense. It always had been, even after she'd ended things. And where she might have thought the night in the bathroom had been its death knell, she'd been wrong.

This wasn't new, either. She'd experienced it in pieces ever since he'd returned to Sunnydale, not as desperate and intense as before—as *now*—but very much alive. The past day or so, ever since he'd been staying at the house, it had been on a low simmer, but the time for simmering had stopped and she was in full-blown boil mode.

Blast from the past.

As though he'd plucked that thought right out of her head, Spike went rigid, which meant she had no choice but to drag her gaze from the safe parts to his eyes so he could see she hadn't changed her mind. He stared at her for what felt like forever, waiting, searching, maybe seeing it *all*, just how much he could take if he wanted. How far she would let him if he pushed.

How much, insane as it was, she wanted him to push just then. She wanted everything.

But the smirk she'd expected didn't come, nor did his eyes heat up as they had in times of old. Whatever he needed to find, he found, and she watched as the bones in his face made their shift, as blue became yellow. Then he lowered his mouth to her throat.

At some point, she'd seized his biceps for support, and he was under her hands

again, the feel of him solid and familiar. She dug her fingers into muscle in anticipation, the thought *Spike's lips are going to be on me* exploding through her head with an accompanying thrill that almost scared her. Almost, but not quite, because then it was happening. Not the thing her body was screaming for but almost as good. There was a sting, the same she'd felt before but somehow different, a flash of pain and then...

Buffy threw her head back and moaned. Not a small moan, not quiet and contained, but loud and booming, courtesy of the echoing stairwell. And then everything became a blur. The pain she felt in her muscles, the dull throbbing in her head, even the heaviness of her thoughts turned to liquid and then to nothing. The entirety of her existence came down to the pulls at her neck, slow and deep and vibrating through her body like a violin string. Spike drank and she was in freaking Nirvana, detached and unaware and uncaring, the wall suddenly at her back, the feel of his arm around her, holding her to him, the press of his cock against her belly, because *yes*, maybe he was giving in after all. Even if he wasn't, that didn't mean she couldn't roll her hips, tease herself with what they both knew she really wanted, even if only for this moment here. Right here. Nothing mattered and everything mattered and he was drinking, drinking, and it felt so good she could have cried. Hell, maybe she was crying. Maybe he was too. Maybe they were two idiots crying over something no one else would understand, and so long as he kept drinking, she didn't care. Being an idiot was so much easier than being the Slayer, anyway.

Then it was gone. The pull. His fangs. All of it. And Buffy would have cried for sure, would have railed and begged and demanded that he bring it back if the rest of her hadn't snapped back online, the lusty fog that had settled over her dissipating almost at once and common sense taking the reins again. She blinked open eyes that had seemed fused shut just seconds ago, found she had both arms and one leg tangled around him. That she was breathing heavily, panting, her throat pulsing with a dull hum that seemed tied to the throbbing between her legs.

God, she had been about to climb him like a jungle gym. She was shaking. He was too, breathing ragged against the now-tender place on her throat.

And Buffy realized there was one thing she had yet to experience around Spike until this moment—utter and complete mortification.

What must he think of her?

"Ahh..." Probably with less grace than she wanted to cop to, Buffy fumbled to reclaim possession of her extremities. Both feet on the ground. Arms at her side. Not touching him. Borders redrawn and firmly in place. "Did you take enough?" Her voice was hoarse as though she'd spent the past few minutes screaming.

"Yeah." His voice was also hoarse, but that was fine. At least he was using it. She couldn't quite look him in the eye right now.

"Good," she said, crossed her arms, uncrossed them, then tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. She wanted nothing more in the world than to pretend what had just happened, how she'd just acted, *hadn't* happened. But no, that way lay danger too, and she had had her fill. Better to face it head-on. "Was I just... Did I just try to maul you?"

"Don't worry, Slayer. Not gettin' any ideas."

"It's just... I've been bitten before and it wasn't like that."

The second the words were out, Buffy wished she could snatch them back, but time didn't work that way and the damage was done. But Spike didn't swoop in, didn't make any of the obvious jokes or remarks he had more than earned. Instead, he tipped his finger under her chin and tilted her head back until she had no choice but to meet his eyes, which were full of none of his old smug satisfaction.

None of this made sense.

"Feelin' woozy at all?"

"Woozy?"

"Yeah," he said, and stepped even farther from her. "Heard it happens after you give blood. Think we oughta get you some nosh."

"What's nosh?"

The corner of Spike's mouth quirked up, and she saw it was smeared with red. "Hold onto me if you must," he said, and offered his arm. "But I did what you asked, so now you're gonna do what I ask. Fair's fair. We're gettin' you fed."

Buffy stared at him for a few long, empty seconds, willing any of this to make sense. For *him* to make sense. It didn't. Not the pounding in her ears or the pleasant thrum where his fangs had been, or the way the last dregs of her insanity had left behind an ache she hadn't let herself feel in forever.

What the hell was this? What were they?

She didn't know, and she couldn't find out now. All she could do was take his arm, let him help keep her upright as they headed out of the stairwell and back inside the nightmare.

WHAT'S IN YOUR HEAD, IN YOUR HEAD

GIVING HIM HER BLOOD HAD BEEN THE RIGHT CALL.

Even if she had lost her mind there for a second, even if she had pawed at him like some jungle cat in heat, Spike had needed blood and Buffy had needed him healed, and that was that.

Definitely the right call.

Though she hadn't strictly thought about what came next. Like returning to the others suddenly sporting her very own set of fresh bite marks and no scarf or convenient wardrobe change to disguise the fact. And after a moment's consideration, as Spike guided her toward the hospital cafeteria, she decided she didn't care. There were more pressing things in her world to worry about now.

Way more pressing.

"What do you fancy, love?" Spike asked after selecting a tray by the dispenser near the entrance. The early morning kitchen staff had just started firing up the various grills and friers, undoubtedly preparing for a long day ahead. Which was the nice, normal thing to be doing, except it was still *yesterday* for Buffy and would be until she slept. "Have a run of the place."

Then, without waiting for a response, he started grabbing prepackaged items off shelves and piling them on her tray.

And Buffy just let him. It was easier that way, particularly since she knew he was right and that she should eat, even if her appetite was nonexistent. Not even the sizzle of bacon could coax her tummy to growl; her mind was fully in a where that was else. In Dawn's room. In her home. In her kitchen. With the blood that she would need to clean up and the hunt she would need to start. Something told her Gray would be harder to find than she had been before, though she had nothing to base this on other than the gut feeling she had learned to trust over the years. That

was what bad guys did. They made a big play then went underground until they had a new approach to make up for the one that had failed. And Gray *bad* failed where it counted. She'd failed twice in her attempts to take Buffy down. If she was smart, and Buffy was banking she was, she'd regroup. Perhaps call the Council for pointers. Come up with a new plan—something more elegant than patrol ambush.

While Buffy knew better than to trust the quiet, she would take advantage of it. There was plenty to do until the next fight came.

And though ruminating over the confusing state of her relationship wasn't on that list, she had to admit that her mind kept insisting on dragging her back to the stairwell, and for reasons that had nothing to do with her recent blood loss. What had happened had knocked her off balance. More than off-balance, it had left her shaken. There had been a moment—a collection of moments, even—when it would have been beyond easy for Spike to hike her in his arms and do whatever he liked. She had been very suggestible for pretty much anything, her stupid body being all stupid and muscle-memory-y and dwarfing all common sense that screamed that restarting their doomed affair, or even just relapsing for a quickie, was a recipe for disaster. But Spike wasn't the sort of guy who cared about things like *taking advantage*. A year ago, he wouldn't have hesitated to accept what she'd been practically throwing in his face, regardless of circumstances. That had been part of foreplay with him—push and push and push until she gave in, and sometimes, it hadn't been giving in at all. Sometimes all he'd needed was to *not* hear the word no.

"Stop," she'd say.

"Make me," he'd say.

And she wouldn't.

The game had been a dangerous one, and all the more thrilling because of it. Knowing she should say no, even saying no, and also knowing he wouldn't listen. Not wanting him to listen. Wanting to protest but submit at the same time. And he'd known that too. That was one of the reasons he had been so willing to play. Yes, what had happened in the bathroom had changed things for them both, but she was still Buffy at the end of the day. And he was still Spike. And Spike didn't get her wrapped around him, rubbing herself against his cock without doing something about it.

Once again, Buffy caught herself wondering what had happened in the span of months he'd been away. He wouldn't tell her if she asked and she was too worn and distracted to try to nag it out of him anyway, but the question remained, almost refreshingly so. Like if she could still wonder about this, her life hadn't gone quite as far off the rails as she'd thought.

And she did wonder. There were times when she was with him that he seemed to be doing an imitation of himself. Enough of him to be him, there was no doubt, but with reserve and caution that had never been there before. An earnestness that encouraged her to believe what he said at face value, which was just...weird for them.

Spike guided her to the person manning the checkout station and whipped out some cash before she could begin to forage her pockets. "Got this," he said coolly, handing over a couple of bills. "Find yourself a table and eat up."

Buffy stood immobile for a moment, then gave her head a shake and decided not

to argue. Or wonder where he'd gotten the money. Some moral quandaries need not be explored.

Instead, she sucked in a breath that she seemed to feel all the way down to her toes and began to negotiate her way from the cafeteria itself to the sparsely occupied dining area. There was a table of nurses to her left and a couple of older doctors chatting in the far-right corner, and someone sitting with his back to her in the middle, but otherwise, she had her pick of the place.

"All good?" Spike asked when she stopped to consider her options. "Feelin' woozy at all?"

Buffy shook her head, which in fact did make the room spin a little. "No, just thinking. It's this bad habit I picked up and can't seem to kick."

He rumbled a little laugh that had the parts of her that had yet to stop tingling take immediate notice. "Well, looks like you won't be short on company if that's what you fancy."

"Huh?"

"Xander, pet." He pointed at the guy who had their back to them. "Think I might bugger off while you fill up. Don't know if I wanna be around when he sees what I've done to that dainty throat of yours."

It still took her a moment to realize what he was saying. Perhaps she was woozy after all. "Oh, right."

Now he was looking at her with concern, and she wasn't sure she could take that. Spike being worried about her wasn't new but it was a step too far for her mind at the moment.

Of course, that left her with the alternative of showing off her new neck piercings to the one person guaranteed to have the worst reaction. It was easy to tell herself she didn't care when the coals she was due to be raked over weren't right in front of her—even a few minutes' separation could make a world of difference—but her earlier resolve was feeling a lot less resolute.

No hiding it, though, and no running, either. She should just stick to the facts. Gifting Spike with her blood had been a spontaneous decision, nothing she'd intended but also nothing she regretted. That was the thing about hospitals—everything that seemed noteworthy or important outside these walls became instantly insignificant the moment a loved one was in danger. To her, it had just been good sense, even if it had cost some of her pride.

Xander wouldn't see it that way, though. He never would when it came to her and the vampires she loved. But better to get this conversation out of the way now. Head it off at the pass, take control now rather than sacrifice it later.

Above all, when she returned to Dawn's floor, Buffy didn't want to bring this with her.

"Yeah, you better go," she agreed with a sigh. Not wanting Spike to leave—and *let's not examine that too closely*—but knowing he should. "Him staking you would kind of defeat the purpose of the blood donation. But, maybe, stay at the hospital? If Gray's out there, she could still—"

"Slayer, there's no sodding way I'm leavin' here before the Nibblet does," Spike said. "I'll be upstairs with Red, yeah?"

Something in her chest loosened. "If the doctor comes before I'm back—"

"I'll find you. Bloody count on it."

She did because he would. It was weird, acknowledging that she could depend on him, but nice too. Like she had stopped fighting with herself.

On a whim, Buffy turned to catch Spike's eyes before he started for the door that connected the cafeteria to one of the hospital's many long, rambling hallways, and when they connected, she experienced a zing at her throat that had nothing to do with the fangs that had been there just a few minutes ago. Everything was so jumbled up. Hating him and not hating him, knowing she'd loved him and feeling whatever it was she felt now—this understanding that was strong and true but also confusing and muddled. And though it wasn't her immediate concern, she felt it still, scraping at the edges of her consciousness, demanding recognition. This need to figure him out, and maybe in doing so, figure herself out too.

But that was on her tomorrow list, assuming tomorrow ever arrived.

"Whoa, Buff," Xander said by way of greeting a moment later when she set her tray on the table. "First of all, thank you for that minor heart attack. Second of all..." He took in the mountain of food she'd carted over. "You know the doctors here have to eat too, right?"

Buffy snickered her appreciation as she sank into the seat opposite. "Yeah, Spike might have gotten a little carried away. Feel free to graze. I have plenty."

"Spike?" He looked over his shoulder to give the mostly deserted cafeteria a once-over. "When did he get?"—as though magnetized, his eyes immediately landed on the place where her neck had yet to stop throbbing the second he turned back—"here?"

She let the question, and the slightly squeaky note it had ended on, hang there between them. Busied herself by plucking a cup of yogurt off the tray and fiddling with the top. At least he hadn't immediately started yelling. That was a win.

"Uhh, Buffy? You seem to have something..." Xander motioned at his throat. "Here. Anything you want to tell me?"

God, he had no idea how much power he wielded in moments like these. How every fiber of her being tensed—the parts of her tied intimately to her need for her friends' understanding and approval, and the dead certainty that she was in imminent danger of losing both.

"He was hurt," she heard herself saying. "When she attacked Dawn, she attacked him too. It was my idea, the blood thing. Slayer blood being a cure-all for vampires."

"Yeah, I remember. I caught the show when it was Angel." There was no inflection in his voice but there didn't need to be. His disappointment came through loud and clear. "Well, hey, at least this time you were already at the hospital. Nice little failsafe you got there."

"That's not fair."

"Just making an observation, Buff. You gotta admit your track record where this kinda thing is concerned isn't exactly spotless."

"He didn't take much. And he stopped on his own. I didn't have to push him off or anything."

"What a guy, huh?"

That did it—snapped her back from the known place of shame and justification to more solid ground. "I told him to do it," she said again, harder. "The damage to his throat was... She practically decapitated him, Xander. He was in real pain and I need him at full strength, so I told him to speed up the healing process by biting me."

"Why? It's not like the guy can actually fight—"

"Because the chip is coming out."

"It's what?"

"It's coming out. Or turned off, if we can't actually remove it. Whatever we can manage to make sure it's not operational."

It was almost funny, how easy it was to say. This thing that had been lurking in the recesses of her mind ever since she'd heard about Gray's visit to the Magic Box, this *maybe* she hadn't even begun to start flirting with transformed into an actual *yes*. It hadn't taken much to get there and perhaps that ought to freak her out—it certainly would have in other circumstances, but these were the circumstances she'd been handed and decisions like this couldn't be stalled. She knew what she wanted to do. She had all night.

Rather miraculously, Xander was at a loss for words. All he could manage for a few seconds was blink at her in surprise. Then, finally, "Buffy—"

"My sister was almost murdered tonight by someone my strongest fighter can't actually fight," Buffy said, well aware she sounded defensive. There was a good reason for that. "I'm not going to assume that this was a one-off, especially since it was actually twice in one day. So yes, Spike's chip is coming out because I am *not* doing this again. This psycho is not taking away the people I love. I won't let her."

"Hey," Xander said, hands raised. "I am firmly on your side there. If I never have to see the inside of this place again, I'll die a happy man."

"It's the hospital, Xander. You're going to see the inside of this place again. It's where most normal people die."

"Not this guy. My plan is to drive a '66 Thunderbird off a cliff after a high-speed police chase." He paused, probably waiting for her to crack a grin, but she didn't find much about the subject funny. "I get where you're coming from," he added, lowering his hands. "I really do. Just maybe slow down and think this one through before you pull the trigger? It's still Spike we're talking about. Do you really want to add being his parole officer to your to-do list? 'Cause that's what it'd be. You making sure he doesn't make anyone extra dead, which he will, of course, because even domesticated evil is still evil."

Buffy pressed her lips together and dropped her gaze to the tower of food that was her cafeteria tray. Decided to eat the yogurt rather than play with the top, just so it could do her some good. "I know this isn't something you'll agree with, and I don't expect you to," she said at length. "And yeah, it might come back to bite me on the ass. That's a chance I'm willing to take if it means this is the last night I have to spend waiting for a doctor to tell me it's okay to see my sister. Spike is evil,

but he's also... He's different now. What happened between us made him different."

Xander gave her a look that was equal parts pity and exasperation. It made her want to smash her knuckles into his face.

"I know you don't believe that. And maybe there's no reason to—maybe I am just making it all up. But he hasn't tried anything, Xander. Like at all." Buffy gestured to the mark he'd left on her neck. "Even when I told him to do this. Things got... Well, let's just say if he'd wanted to take advantage of the situation, he could have." She glanced away, warmth flooding her cheeks anew. Sometime when her sister wasn't connected to a bunch of machines, she might gather up the courage to ask Spike about that—about the way she'd morphed into some sex-starved hussy when that hadn't happened before. Oh, she remembered well enough getting to the point where Angel's bite had sent her tumbling into a surprise orgasm, and how Dracula's fangs had made her heart jump for all the wrong reasons, but both of those had been gradual. Pain first, then pleasure. With Spike, the pain had been fleeting and then just gone, and what it had left behind had been some of the most intense physical ecstasy she could remember experiencing. "And if it had been last year, he would have," she continued, her voice rough with memory. "So maybe vampires aren't supposed to change, but he did. We just never gave him the chance to really show it."

"Buffy, we gave him every chance," Xander replied in a deadpan. "He was Dawn's babysitter, for god's sake."

"We never made an effort, though. Not really. Not like we did with Anya." Though the *we* part there was probably a bit liberal. She and Anya had never been particularly close, and part of that had been Anya's innate otherness. The fact that she had been a demon—or was a demon now again—creating a barrier that had gone unacknowledged but universally understood among those on the right side of it. "We used him when it was convenient—to watch Dawn or fight or any time I needed a favor. I knew he'd deliver. But I never treated him like he was a person who could change."

A shadow fell across Xander's face. He gave the cafeteria a surreptitious look as though worried he might be overheard, then leaned forward and stage-whispered, "I really hope you're not blaming yourself for what happened, 'cause you sound way too close to 'it was all my fault' for comfort."

"No, I'm not blaming myself," Buffy snapped. "But I'm tired of all of us pretending like it was this black and white thing. What he did was horrible, and he knew it. That's what I'm saying. He knew it and now he's different. He's stopped trying to be with me completely and he just wants to help. I want him to help too. I *need* him to help because I can't be everywhere at once."

"I just think there are other ways, is all I'm saying."

"Well, if you come up with one, I'd be glad to hear it." That came out a bit harsher than she'd intended—really, the entire conversation had taken a turn she hadn't meant it to take, though in hindsight she guessed she'd been dumb for thinking it could go any other way. Xander hadn't been living with any of this as long as she had, and certainly not the way she had. Part of that probably was on her and

the approach she'd taken all summer, but she hadn't been ready to think about these things then.

She was now, though. The timing might suck but it was what she had, so she was going with it.

"I know you think I'm being an idiot," Buffy said a moment later.

"No, I—"

She held up a hand, not meeting his gaze. "It's okay. Maybe I am being an idiot. I just... I don't know why it's okay to forgive Willow for what she did, what she tried to do to Dawn and the world and all of it, and she *meant* to, but not Spike when he hurt me without meaning to. Both things are bad. They hurt—but I feel like I'm being forced to forgive one and not allowed to even consider forgiving the other. That what Spike did was somehow worse...and it wasn't."

"Is that what you want to do, then?" Xander asked. He seemed to be going to great lengths to keep his tone calm and measured. "You want to forgive him."

"It's not that simple."

"I think it is. I think you just made it that simple."

Buffy blew out a long, slow breath, willing the tension in her body to go with it. The truth was somewhere in the middle—forgiveness being too vague a concept for her to wrap her arms around. She knew what it meant and by the textbook definition, it seemed like something she figured she had already done. Something she had been doing in pieces for a while now, despite the ongoing wrestling match with herself. How she had spent energy she didn't have to burn volleying back and forth between what she felt or didn't feel, never mind what she *should* feel and how wrong she was for not. She suspected the answer was there in the weeds somewhere, waiting to be unearthed. Waiting for her acknowledgment above all else, because life was a series of learning exercises where past events predicted future behavior. Where she was a collection of memories and experiences, some good and others barely survivable, that combined made up the story that was Buffy Summers. A lot of the bad she'd tried to bury for herself, the rest for other people, and that had worked because she'd wanted it to work. She'd seen just how terrible life could be when she and her friends weren't in harmony.

She also knew how alone she felt without them and how much of herself she'd sacrificed to keep them with her. Pain she'd swallowed because it was the path of least resistance. Because she'd known just how upsetting the truth would have been.

Xander was ready when she looked up, a wry half-smile on his lips. The same one she had seen there any time they came to a crossroads, and he made the decision to give in rather than fight. *I don't understand you*, that smile said, and it was true. In many ways, Xander didn't understand her at all. In many ways, he never had. But he loved her and would die for her—had put himself in the middle of fights he had no prayer of winning time and time again. His not understanding her didn't keep him from doing that, or any of the other acts of heroism for which he received little credit. And she loved him for it.

As though he were reading her mind, he offered a little huff and shook his head.

"I'm never gonna get it," he said. "This thing you have for vampires. I'm never gonna get it. Angel can murder half the student body—"

"Xander—"

"And I know... I know you told me about how it was with Spike. Believe me, ever since then I've had some images in my mind I really wish I didn't." He met her gaze again. "But I didn't like the guy much before I found out he was your dirty little secret and then seeing what he did to you..." Xander blinked a few times, then sighed and resituated himself, leaning forward on his elbows. "Part of it is me, you know. Maybe a lot of it is me. I had this way I saw it in my mind. The girl you want more than anything tells you no, and *this* is how a complete creep reacts. He finds her and tries to overpower her so he can take what he wants."

"Because that's what you did?"

He froze.

"You told us you didn't remember," she said, willing her voice not to shake. It hadn't been there, not consciously at least, and she hadn't known she meant to say it until it was too late. But she had said it, and now that she had, the dots couldn't help but connect. "Any of what you were like when you were possessed. But you do, don't you? You remember what you tried to do to me."

Xander opened his mouth, closed it. He still hadn't met her eyes.

"It's just... What you said just now, with the trying to overpower me, that's what happened when it was you." She waited for him to say something, say anything, but he didn't, so she went on. "When you were hyena guy."

"I remember, Buffy."

She closed her mouth. Nodded. "I know."

Xander nodded too, only his nod was directed at the table. "Have you always known?"

"That hyena possession doesn't come with a side-effect of memory loss? There was a time, I thought maybe you did remember. You mentioned something when Oz first went all wolfy, I think, but you didn't mean to. So I let it go. Until, well, right now."

His lips twitched. "Yeah, I was too on the nose there. Describing the way I saw it."

"Describing the way it was when it was *you*," Buffy said softly. She supposed she should be angry—furious, even—at what she had just confirmed. At what he had been pretending for years he didn't remember. But that was life too. Sometimes, life was just the lies you told yourself and your friends in the hope that one day, the lies would become the truth. There were parts of her he'd never seen for the same reason. Parts she'd been too terrified to show him.

And she was too tired to be outraged. Maybe later after she'd gotten some sleep.

"For the record," she went on, "it wasn't anything like that with Spike."

"I know. You told me."

"Then—"

"Because that image is damn hard to let go of, Buffy. Even when I know it's wrong." Xander firmed his jaw, irritation flashing across his eyes. "Because that's all I

can see when I think of someone doing that to you. I don't know how *that* can be an accident, knowing how it felt when it was me. The things that were going through my mind, the things I planned to—

"Stop."

"Hey, I never wanted to start." He worked his throat, glaring at the table as though it had done something to offend him. "But I think I have to finish now, so here it goes. I thought you owed me. That your fear was hot, and it would make everything better. And at the same time, I was so pissed at you for making me do it like that. For fighting me so much when it was so obvious we were right for each other. I wanted to hurt you."

Every word seemed to be its own revelation—Xander's eyes brightening, his features becoming more animated. As though he were discovering this in real-time. Hell, maybe he was. None of them had ever been all that good at bald, unflattering honesty.

"I wanted to do so many things to you because of everything you'd never done to me," he said thickly. "And I wasn't nearly as disgusted with myself as I should have been when I was me again. Not until... Not until last May, when I found you lying there like that. And it was just—something snapped in my head. I got it. I knew exactly what had happened and what he'd been thinking when he did it. It was real to me. And I just can't get it to go away. That anyone could look at you and think those things—"

"Xander—"

"And you can't tell me he wasn't, Buff. He's a vampire. He's probably done this and worse. You really think you were the first? You think—"

Buffy reached across the table and covered one of his hands with hers. Felt the way he trembled under her fingers, whether with nerve or anger or something else, she couldn't say. "As the only person who was there both times, I need you to hear me when I tell you that it wasn't the same. I don't... I don't particularly want to talk about any of this more than I have to. I just need you to trust that I'm not a moron."

That did it. He finally brought his gaze back to hers, his own wide with shock. "I didn't say you were a moron."

Maybe not, but he certainly had in the past. The recent past, too. There were a lot of conversations Buffy would just as soon forget had ever taken place—the argument she and her mom had had right before she'd killed Angel and taken off for L.A. The way she'd begged Angel not to leave her, how small and silly it had made her feel that the future she'd planned was something he didn't want to fight for. The last conversation with Riley before he'd taken off. The look in Spike's eyes when she'd told him their relationship was killing her. And then after she and Xander had discovered their respective exes screwing at the Magic Box and the whole, ugly truth had come out, how Xander had looked at her with absolute disgust.

"I never forgot what he really is. God, what were you thinking?"

He might not have used the word *moron*, but it had been there. She'd heard it loud and clear.

"It wasn't the same," she said again, firmer, as this point was important. What

had happened with Xander had thrown her, yes, but she'd been able to compartmentalize it. Blame it squarely on the circumstances surrounding his possession—understand that there was this part of him, the animal or whatever had manipulated. And afterward, when everything had gone back to normal, she'd been perfectly happy to ignore it. Full reset to the status quo, safe in the knowledge that he hadn't meant any of what he'd done or said. That he would *never*.

What had happened with Spike had more than just thrown her—it had reshaped her world. There had been nothing mystical or magical about it, no one in that room except him and her.

"It was worse with him," Buffy said, more to herself. Then jolted when she realized she'd spoken aloud, heart jumping into her throat. "Not worse like *that*. Not for the reasons you'd think. He didn't hurt me or anything. What I've told you about it is true. That it was like he wasn't there—that he didn't realize this time was different. And god, this makes no sense, I know, but even with all that, it was just worse for some reason. I don't know. I'm just babbling now but the point is, it wasn't the same. He didn't come in there to hurt me, and I think that's important. That's what makes it different."

She snapped her mouth shut before it could run away with her any more than it had already, the points she was trying to make a confusing swirl both in her head and in the air that separated them. Everything true but also so nonsensical even she struggled to follow. Xander just staring at her, his expression not blank but unreadable. As though she had thrown a complex math problem in his lap and told him he had to solve it or else.

After what felt like a short eternity, the clouds behind his eyes cleared and everything about him softened. "No," he said. "You were in love with him. That's what made it different."

God, was she that transparent? Buffy dropped her gaze to her tray. "Yeah, well, I didn't know that at the time."

"You could've told me that instead, you know."

"Yes, because on the subject of me loving vampires, past or present, you've always been way with the understanding."

Xander inclined his head. "The lady has a point," he replied with a short laugh. Then sobered. "When did you know that you were? In love with him, I mean?"

"Earlier today," she said with a small laugh of her own. "It kinda wiggled me out. I might have made Willow stop the car to toss my cookies."

"To be fair, that is also how I would react to that information."

"Yeah, yeah." She snatched blindly for another one of the items Spike had bought her—an apple—and bit into it as a means of distracting herself. Talking about any of this with anyone would still take some getting used to, and she wasn't sure she wanted to get used to it. Being exposed and vulnerable, even among the people she loved, took a lot out of her. A lot she didn't think she had anymore. "For the record—we're not anything, me and Spike. Not now," she said after she had swallowed. "But I did... I trusted him. And he broke that. That's what made it hurt so much."

"And you trust him again now?"

The bite on her neck seemed to pulse at the question. "I trust that he loves me," she said. "I trust that... I trust that he wants to help. And I trust that he wants to be what I need him to be. So yeah, I guess I do. But it's not blind. I know what he's capable of. I won't let myself forget that ever again or take for granted that he's a vampire."

"And the chip is still coming out."

Buffy nodded again, more decisive. "I need him in the fight that's coming, and it's not going to be against demons. We can worry about what happens after when *after* gets here."

Xander sat with that for a moment, then heaved a deep sigh and dropped his face into his hands, the tension in his body seeming to unfurl in one, seamless stroke. "All right," he said at last.

"All right?"

"All right as in *you win*. You know best—"

"That's not what I—"

"But it is, and you do. In Buffy we trust." A small smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "Or *I* do, at least. You know what you're doing. I believe that."

It was a small thing, hearing that. A small thing she thought she already knew, but something in her chest ballooned, or maybe that was snowballed, and everything that had happened today—yesterday now, but still *today* until she slept—came crashing down. The worry and the fear and the frustration and the horror and the love, gathering speed and gaining momentum the further it went, smashing over barriers and taking no prisoners. She was sitting in the cafeteria hospital right now because her sister had been stabbed, and her sister had been stabbed by someone ordered to kill her by people who very much did not believe she knew what she was doing. That every decision, even the ones that had saved the world, were to be poked and prodded and scrutinized.

But Xander had faith in her. Even now. Even after she'd shown up with new bite marks left there by a guy he hated, even after she'd shared her plans to remove the chip they had come to rely on to keep that guy in check. Xander believed in her. He didn't agree but he believed, and that was everything.

Maybe sensing she was on the verge of breaking, Xander shifted and changed tack. "So, speaking of your rabid not-so-secret admirer, any ideas? I hear throwing them off rooftops produces stellar results."

Buffy inhaled and looked away. Great. The other thing she was dreading talking about. Though it probably said something about the state of their relationship that discussing murder seemed less daunting than her ex-whatever Spike was. "Do you think there's ever a time when killing someone, a human someone, is the right thing to do?"

"Yes."

"That easy for you, huh? No hesitation?"

"We're talking self-defense here—"

"Not the way I'd do it."

Xander shook his head and leaned forward, his eyes dark. "Yes, the way you'd do

it. There's no way Buffy Summers kills someone without a good reason. Your reason is self-defense. Or Scooby-defense. Sister-defense. This isn't the kind of person who stops. Killing her was kind of a given."

She nodded, dazed. "It wasn't to me, though. Until tonight. I realized..."

"That crazy doesn't negotiate?"

"That it's the only way to stop her. Make sure this never happens again."

He was quiet for a moment, then breathed out once more. Another full-body sigh. "I'm not saying I'm happy about it, but I've lost people too, you know? If there's a way to not do that, to not lose you or Will or Dawn or any of you, that's the route I want to take. So, if you're asking me if it's okay to kill this bitch, then I have only three things to say to you. One—do you wanna borrow my machete? Two—where do you get machetes? Is there a machete store? And three—I'm in construction. You need a place to hide the body, I'm your guy."

That much surprised a laugh out of her. It felt wrong and misplaced but also really good, so she decided not to question it.

"Seriously, Buff, whatever you need. We're here for you. I know I shouldn't speak on behalf of all the Scoobies, but screw that. I'm speaking on behalf of all of them." He tilted his head. "And considering one of those Scoobies just got stabbed, the other's a vengeance demon with a body count we don't wanna think about because we still love her, and the last one is, well, Willow, I think I am on solid ground here."

Put like that, Buffy did too. It was a nice bit of hope in a day where hope had been in short supply. "I don't know how I'm gonna do it. If there's... She has the demon adrenal thing going for her, and I don't know her fighting style like I did Faith's. The few times we've fought have been by the skin of my teeth."

"I think you're missing the obvious here. After all, we know a guy who's killed slayers before. Maybe he could help." Xander offered a flat grin. "Especially since, I have it on good authority that his muzzle is coming off."

AND ALL THE ROADS WE HAVE TO WALK ARE WINDING

THE LAWS OF TIME WORKED DIFFERENTLY INSIDE A HOSPITAL. FOR INSTANCE, TWO hours didn't mean two hours. Two hours meant whatever the staff said it meant and then not even that, because time was something they deconstructed and rebuilt on a whim. Buffy had been certain she'd return from the cafeteria to find the doctor either speaking with Willow or Spike, or that she had just missed him. That was the way it went, after all, when you were waiting for something. All it took to get it to happen was to dare to steal away for a few minutes. Or, in Buffy's case, a little more than an hour.

But when she and Xander rejoined the others, it was to news of no news and more of that awful waiting. Sinking back into her chair had felt a lot like defeat but seeing as she hadn't had a choice, sunk she had, and fallen quickly back into the strange crossroads that was being desperate for sleep and so awake she thought she might never sleep again.

At least she didn't feel as alone this time. She could close her eyes if she needed to, because if anything happened, Spike was there, and Spike wouldn't let her miss anything. Hell, she almost expected him to just start kicking down doors the longer they waited. Judging from the mounting frustration that defined the lines of his face to the way he couldn't sit still for more than a minute or two, the thought had crossed his mind at least once.

As the hospital started to become more awake, the day shift officially relieving the night shift and the halls filling with other people with other problems, all of Buffy's internal settings flipped from anxious to agitated. Worry was hardening into certainty that something was wrong, that the doctors were deliberately holding back, and the few times she managed to corner someone, she got the same infuriating answer. The delay wasn't due to new and terrifying complications, just that it

was taking longer than expected for Dawn's vitals to get where the medical team wanted them before allowing visitors. But nothing to worry about, Ms. Summers. Two hours might be the standard, but there are always outliers, and please feel free to go home if you need to get some sleep. Someone would call as soon as there was news.

Buffy might have accidentally on purpose smashed her fist through a wall the fourth time someone told her that. It didn't get her into Dawn's room any faster but on the plus side, it also convinced people to stop suggesting that she would be better off waiting somewhere else. As though she'd ever leave the hospital without seeing her sister with her own eyes.

Underneath it all was a more insidious fear—one that hadn't occurred to her before but did now, being that she had nothing but time to sit with it. Dawn was something other than human. Aside from the car accident that had broken her arm last fall, she had never once set foot in a doctor's office. All the visits to her pediatrician, that one stint when she'd had pneumonia, and the tibia she'd fractured in the Great Bicycle Accident of '92—all of that had happened in a past that was made up. And Buffy hadn't considered that. Why would she? She had the memories, after all.

But those memories weren't real. And sure, no one had cried *not human* after examining her following the car accident, *and* the monks had said she was a normal girl, but Tara had also said she was full of green energy, and what if that was the sort of thing that showed up on an x-ray or CAT scan or something? What if it was the sort of thing that looked normal at first but slowly became abnormal the longer it was studied? What if the reason Buffy hadn't been escorted back to see her sister had nothing to do with the knife she'd taken to the gut and everything to do with the doctors poking and prodding at a girl who looked human but wasn't *quite*?

Four hours and forty-three minutes. That was how long it took to get her answer. When the doctor came, the same one who had told her forever ago that he believed Dawn would be fine, Buffy was curled into a ball in the hated seat, contemplating Spike's boots as he paced a hole in the floor. Willow had strung together a few chairs and was snoozing gently, Xander reclined against a wall and snoozing less gently. Perhaps at another time, she would have spared a thought for how nice it was for them that they had been able to sleep at all, but this was not that time.

Finally. *Finally*.

Buffy leaped to her feet hard enough that her chair went toppling over, which woke everyone up. "Tell me I can see her."

"You can see her." The doctor offered a tired smile. "Just Ms. Summers for now," he said to the others as they shuffled in around her. "We don't want her overexcited. And like I said earlier, fifteen-minute intervals to start with. She needs plenty of rest."

Buffy didn't argue for fear he would change his mind, but thought privately, when he turned to lead her down the maze of halls to Dawn's room, that the hospital would need help from the National Guard if they expected her to leave her sister's side again. Especially if the delay had been caused by Dawn's latent Keyness. Glory might be long gone but Buffy wasn't going to gamble that she'd been the only one

who knew how to work that ancient magic. Or, at the very least, that new complications wouldn't arise just when she could afford them the least.

But the doctor didn't talk about crazy green energy or anything of the like. He did rattle off a bunch of medical terminology Buffy tried but failed to follow, most of it sounding like terms she'd heard on *ER* and none of it too scary. He assured her there was a very good reason it had taken Dawn so long to stabilize, though if he'd given her that reason, her brain decided not to hold onto it. Dawn was, in fact, stable and his earlier prediction that she would make a full recovery was now all but a guarantee, though he made sure to couch that in language that wouldn't put him in danger of a malpractice suit should things go the other way. Averages were based on the median of patient experiences. Dawn just happened to be outside that median. Nothing to worry about, except of course for all the worrying Buffy had already done.

Then they were finally outside a door that bore Dawn's name on the whiteboard attached to the wall. Buffy steeled herself, summoned the image of her mother in her hospital bed—how small she'd looked—as a reminder not to overreact if her sister appeared particularly weak and helpless, then crossed the threshold.

"Oh Dawnie," she said, her eyes immediately starting to prickle.

It was the setting, she told herself. It was seeing Dawn in this place, in a bed like that, pale and diminished when she should be bright and lively, and nothing else. But there she lay, her sister who would turn seventeen in a couple of months, with an IV stuck in her arm and a heart monitor attached to her finger. Her typically full, lush hair was now stringy where it wasn't in tangled clumps, her cheeks sunken and her eyes bagged and bloodshot, her skin coated in a waxy sheen. She looked like someone who had gone to a costume shop and found a Dawn mask—not real, but somewhere in the uncanny valley. The way a person was supposed to look after being knifed in the gut.

She looked alive, though only barely. Only in a way that drove home just how fragile the line between life and death actually was. How close she'd come to crossing it.

Yet miraculously, when Dawn saw her in the doorway, she grinned. It was tired and crooked but a grin, nonetheless, and one that propelled her right out of the uncanny valley and back to reality. "Bout time you got here." Her voice sounded hoarse and scratchy. "I've been bored out of my mind."

Buffy curled her lips over her teeth in an effort to keep back the cry that wanted to escape. "Sorry. You were just taking too long. They kept trying to send me home."

"Like that was gonna happen."

"Not—" She caught herself before she could finish the phrase, *not on your life*, and snapped her mouth shut again. If she heard the words aloud, she just might lose it.

Though it must have been on her face too, for Dawn held up a hand—the one connected to the heart monitor, and said, "Don't get weird and weepy. I specifically told them not to let you back here if you were gonna be weird and weepy."

"I'm not being weird. No promises on the weepy."

"Weepy *is* weird for you, Buffy. You don't cry."

Oh, if only that were true. "You've seen me cry before."

"Yeah, but only when you were super angsty about Angel or that time you cried because the world didn't end."

"Those were happy tears, remember?"

"I just remember you being weird." Dawn grinned again, which was her way of communicating she was joking. "So, I think maybe I might have made that Gray girl mad."

Buffy huffed and wiped at her eyes. "Yeah, caught that much."

"And I'm guessing since you've been here that you haven't caught *her* again?"

"You come first, kid. Like it or not."

Dawn nodded and dragged her teeth over her chapped lower lip. "I guess you don't know if Spike's okay? He was hurt pretty bad too. I thought... I mean, she could go back to the house, right? No one's there and it's not like she needs an invite. And if he's just—"

"He's okay," Buffy said quickly. The last thing Dawn needed to do was expend energy worrying about anyone else. "He showed up here a couple of hours ago. Head still very much attached to his body." Without thinking, she reached to run her fingers along the still-tender marks he'd left in her neck and experienced another one of those funny little thrills—the sort that energized and grounded her in the same beat. "He's feeling a lot better now."

"Uhh, is that what I think it is?"

"Is what?"

"You let him bite you."

Buffy froze, realized where her hand was and dropped it again. Not that it mattered. The damage was done.

"I thought you'd only ever let Angel bite you," Dawn said in a tone that was carefully neutral, but in such a way that it was obvious she was fishing for information. She'd never learned how to do subtle all that well. "Well, and Dracula, I guess, but he kinda tricked you into it."

"I wasn't tricked. There was no tricking."

"Right. I forgot. That was a slaying strategy."

"It worked, didn't it?" Buffy retorted, a little more pointed than she'd intended, though not in such a way it disguised her relief. For the first time since being jolted from her dreamscape and into the horror that was the waking world, she found the breaths she took came fast and easy, no longer suffocating under the boulder that had settled on her chest. The understanding that the worst was truly behind them—that Dawn was indeed going to be okay—washed over her with such potency she could have lost herself in the undertow.

"All I'm saying is that the neck of Buffy is typically reserved for vampires Buffy loves. Or fangirls."

"You must be feeling okay if you're up for being a brat."

"I dunno about *okay*," Dawn replied, settling back against her pillow, and it became real again. Just that much movement seemed to have exhausted her. "Though I feel a little holy."

"Holy?" Buffy echoed, her throat tight with emotion once more. *All* of her tight

and tense, because her sister was in a hospital bed making jokes and pretending for her benefit, and that wasn't her job. Dawn wasn't supposed to be the strong one here.

"Cause I got this brand new hole," her sister said. "Plus I was also this thing a bunch of people used to worship, so maybe that goes with the territory."

"Wow. That was almost funny."

"It was hilarious and you know it." Dawn pinned her with a mock-glare. Then she sighed and dropped her gaze to the bed. "They're not gonna let you stay, are they? The doctor said it was just going to be fifteen minutes at first."

"I'm not going anywhere, except to tell the others you're okay so they can go home. Then I'm coming right back here." This time when her sister looked up, Buffy was ready with a soft smile she hoped was reassuring rather than watery. She needed to at least try to be the adult. "Any doctor who tries to keep me out will learn the hard way that I can be pretty darn stubborn when I put my mind to it."

"You? Stubborn?" But her sister was grinning again. "They keep telling me to get some sleep. Every time I close my eyes, though..."

"I'll be here," Buffy promised. "Right here until you go home."

Dawn nodded her brave little toaster nod, and Buffy felt herself swelling once more, that relief gushing forward anew. And love. The same love that had been with her once upon a time atop a tower as she'd watched the sun breach the horizon on a new day she wouldn't be around to live. That reminder of what she would do, how much she would sacrifice, to keep not just the world safe, but *her* world, the girl in the hospital bed at its center.

If Dawn needed her big sister around to sleep, even if she was too grown up now to put that need into those exact words, then Buffy would deliver. She always would.

But she did need to go back for a few minutes, at least. Let the others know what was next for them. For all of them.

The doctor came to check on Dawn promptly after a quarter-hour had passed, which was just typical. They could be nice and regimented when it came to kicking her out but not in how long she would need to wait to see her sister in the first place. Still, Buffy followed him into the hallway without complaint—she didn't really want to have the "how it's going to be" talk in a place where it might upset the other patients.

To her surprise, though, the conversation wasn't the disagreement she'd expected. She explained that Dawn had asked her to stay so she could get some rest that was actually restful, and the doctor told her that was an excellent plan.

"It...It is?" she asked bluntly, a bit cut off at the legs. Here she'd had a whole argument ready, complete with wild gestures. "I thought you were Mr. Fifteen Minutes."

"That's *Doctor* Fifteen Minutes," he replied, not without a wry grin. "And yes, we are limiting her visitors to fifteen-minute intervals. But you're not a visitor, Ms. Summers. You're her guardian. There's quite a difference."

Some more of the pressure that had been living in her chest popped without ceremony. Not all, not by a long shot, but she was at the point where even a little relief felt like a whole hell of a lot. For a stupid, wild second, she thought she might do something really embarrassing like burst into tears. "I thought..."

"You thought you were going to be limited to fifteen minutes?"

"You came to get me."

He shook his head. "To check on your sister, that's all."

Was that right? It had just happened but somehow she already had the memory of being told her time was up. "You were worried about her being overexcited," she protested, not knowing why except it seemed like the thing to do. Make sure she wasn't misunderstanding.

"We are," the doctor agreed kindly. "Which is why we imposed a time limit, especially considering the number of people Dawn has waiting on her. But as I said, you're not a visitor. As her legal guardian, you have every right to stay with her as long as you like. And don't think I missed the way she relaxed the second you stepped into the room. She's tough, your sister. I think her body's been in *fight* mode the entire time she's been here. She needs you. We're not about to stand in your way."

It was nothing Buffy didn't know already, but still rather startling to hear, seeing as she hadn't protected Dawn at all. She'd been asleep, underestimating Gray's determination and resolve, never mind her strength, even after all she'd seen that day. Even after knowing Gray had come to the Magic Box to hunt her sister down. Even knowing the girl was a slayer.

And she couldn't let herself do that again.

Buffy thanked the doctor, then excused herself to find her way back to the others, all the while going over everything once more. Everything that wasn't Dawn because she didn't have to worry about Dawn right now. Dawn was fine and she'd get to stay with her as long as she wanted in this place where time moved differently than it did on the outside. But that worry fading just made the others more pronounced, the outside still being there with its normal rules and structure and things she needed to do. Decisions she'd already made.

Spike saw her first when she emerged from the hall. He had crammed himself into the seat she'd abandoned, though from the way his leg was bouncing, she thought he might have been directed there by the others. She knew him well enough to know he wanted to be pacing.

"Dawn?" he asked, leaping to his feet with enough gusto the chair went toppling back a second time.

"She's okay," Buffy replied with what she hoped was a heartened smile. "They're gonna let me stay with her after all. Perk of being the guardian and not just a visitor. The fifteen-minute rule doesn't apply to me." She drew in a breath. "That said, I think it might be better if you guys come back later. She looks completely wiped out—"

"And you could both use your rest," Xander said wisely, also on his feet again.

"I don't know how much rest I'll be doing, but yeah," she agreed. "And there are things we need to do that aren't here. Starting with the least important." She sighed, then turned to Willow. "Could you... I know it's probably a moot point by now, but I'll need someone to call my clients to let them know that the studio's not opening today or the rest of the week. There's a list by the phone at the house. Two lists,

actually, for yesterday and the day before. The one you'll want should be on the bottom. You can let them know there was a medical emergency if they get lippy or say something like they're never going to come back." It might be dumb and it was definitely grasping—there was no way the business was going to survive what came next, but dammit, she wouldn't let that go without a fight, either.

"Yeah, of course," Willow said. "And not moot, Buffy. It's just been a few days. Your customers will understand."

"Maybe right now, but they won't when I have to do this next week and the week after and however long this fight lasts." Dammit, her eyes were beginning to sting again and she really did not want to start crying over something as insignificant as her studio. It was the last thing in the world to be upset about, the easiest part of her life to cut off, and the least painful, but no amount of telling herself that helped. The fact remained it was still hers, the only thing she'd ever built entirely on her own, and losing it felt like a different kind of failing. Failing at being a grown-up. "Anyway, thanks for handling that."

Willow nodded and wrapped her arms around herself. "I was thinking, too, we should put up protection spells, like we did with Glory? Just something that will let us know if someone up to no good comes within a hundred feet of the house or the shop. Though we'd have to amend it because that was kinda hellgod-specific and Gray is, well, not a hellgod."

No, because nothing could be that straightforward anymore. Enemies that were actual monsters and not living, breathing people were a luxury of the past. "Do you think you can do that? Work a spell that will let us know if she's close?"

"Yeah. I'll have to tinker the one Tara and I... Well, what we originally came up with." Willow expelled a deep breath as though fortifying herself. "I'll call Callista, too. Not sure anyone in my local MAA group would be able to help, but Callista was like me in that her magic couldn't be removed, and she still has to use it because it's a part of her, a-and she's really good at the whole *good* magic thing so working around an existing spell should be easy peasy for her. If it's not, there's also the Devon coven. I didn't spend as much time with them but they're good people."

Buffy exhaled. There went a little more of her tension, at least. The solution wasn't much but it was better than the whopping *nothing* she'd come up with. And if it worked, it meant she stood a chance at getting some sleep sometime in the future. "Good. That's good. And if you can work out how to do that, we can get it set up a few other places too. Xander's apartment, in case she goes there. Even the construction site."

"Uhh, that'd get weird real fast," Xander said. "Considering our construction sites tend to move around a lot."

"So, we'll do them at each one."

"To what end, though?" he replied, and brought up his hands when she responded with a frown. "Look, I get what happened tonight—last night, whatever—has you wigged, but there's a reasonable amount of *I told you so* that I am going to great lengths not to say. Gray was always gonna get out of that basement."

"I think you just failed on the *told you so* thing," Willow muttered.

"No, he's right." Buffy forced herself to relax a bit more, sighed again, then crossed her arms. It felt like she'd been doing a lot of that lately. Boxing herself in. "We should have... *I* should have thought about that. Prepared for her to escape, made sure everyone knew what to do. Maybe asked about spells or whatnot we could've used to make sure she stayed put. But I didn't. That's on me."

"Bugger that," Spike said roughly. She swung her head up once more, her heart doing a little flippy thing she hadn't given it permission to do. He was staring at her with open defiance. "Slayer," he went on, the hoarseness in his voice still present but thinner than before, "you were dead on your feet before you walked through the bloody door last night."

She had a vague, pre-trauma memory of him making the same argument earlier. Using those same words, even. It didn't change anything. "That's not an excuse."

"Oh no? You had a house full of people who did rot, but somehow, it's all your fault?"

"Hey," Xander broke in, scowling, "we've already established that I did tell her that something like this would happen."

"Yeah, then what?" Spike retorted, rounding on him. "You buggered off, didn't you? Could've suggested the witch do a little somethin' extra but you didn't."

"Buffy told me to leave! Go home! Rest!" He paused, then brightened the way he did when he thought he'd found a conversation-ending smoking gun and jabbed a finger into Spike's chest. "What about you? What about your *vamp hearing* that Dawn was banking on? You were in *the kitchen* right above where she was and you heard *nothing*?"

Spike's eyes flashed in a way Buffy found almost painfully familiar—it was the same look he'd given her the night Riley had shown up at his crypt, right after she'd punched him in the nose, cutting off whatever story he'd been about to cook up to account for the eggs he'd had downstairs. All hurt and anger, as well as the resignation that what he tried to do or say didn't matter. That there was no explaining things to her in a way that she would actually hear.

Only, no, this wasn't like that at all. This was worse. All that frustration, all that brewing hostility in need of an outlet, was pointed inward. He truly believed he was responsible for what had happened to Dawn.

And she didn't. There wasn't any question about that—nothing she'd needed to ask herself at the house or in the car or at any point since they'd arrived at Sunnydale Memorial. She'd had hours to waste thinking about all kinds of things she'd rather not give voice to, but the only thing she'd managed to muster for Spike was concern. She'd fixated on that look he'd given her before she'd carted Dawn to the car, that look in which he'd begged her to forget him and fix this. Fix Dawn. Save her. The scar that stretched along his throat had faded almost to the point where she had to strain to see it, but it was still there. Evidence of what he'd done to get to Dawn. What he would do again and again until he was dust or the threat was in the ground. She knew that.

"I get the drop on vampires all the time," Buffy said, holding Spike's gaze. "Including you."

He sniffed but didn't balk. That was something.

"That's what slayers do." She broke, looked at Xander. Needing him to hear this too. "Slayers hunt vampires. She knew Spike was there. She knew he'd be able to hear her, so she did it as quietly as she could. Dawn said the same thing when we were rushing to get here. She doesn't blame Spike and I don't either. The issue isn't how she got out, it's that she got out in the first place. And that *is* on me."

"No," Spike replied shortly, whipping his head up. "Not the way it works, Slayer."

"Yes, it is. It always is. I can't afford to be running on fumes right now, but I was. I should have said something."

"Buffy—"

"No, Spike. It's on me. It's all on me. That's the way it works." Buffy inhaled again and felt it all over. The pressure that simple movement placed on her body—the aches and pains she'd carried with her to the hospital and those that had been born here, the result of cramming herself into seats that weren't supposed to double as beds, of resting her head against unforgiving surfaces when holding it up demanded too much energy, of dragging a vampire into a stairwell so he'd take the blood he needed to heal. And suddenly, it was all coming out. One revelation right after another and she couldn't do anything to stop it. Wasn't sure she wanted to anymore. She couldn't afford to worry about hurt feelings or how they would react.

She just needed them to understand what the situation was and how it was going to be.

"For weeks, we've been trying to figure out if the Council really wants me dead or if something else was going on and we have our answer," she said, fighting to find the right words. "They made her so she would kill me. That's what she's here to do—that's her plan. And she'll go through anyone to do it. Giles isn't coming and we can't rely on him. The Council's having him monitored and if he tries to reach out to any of us, they might... Well, he doesn't know but considering what they were willing to do to Faith a few years ago, I don't think they plan on throwing him a surprise party."

She waited a breath for this to sink in, watched as it did, or as it came as close as it could. Like everything else that had happened today—tonight, yesterday, whatever—the reality that Giles couldn't swoop in and help be the grownup seemed distant, even after everything last year. His resolve that she learn to rely on herself without him to lean on had backed her into a corner then, one she'd thought she understood by the time he'd made possibly the greatest entrance in human history. The tough love lesson, sink or swim, all that stuff. But there hadn't been anything to fight, really, until Willow had given them their Big Bad. His absence had been felt on a personal level rather than a practical one.

That was different now. Giles knew the Council—its inner workings, its leadership, and all of it. Not having him here to help her prepare for whatever came next was a crucial blow. Just hopefully not a fatal one.

"We're it," Buffy said, trying hard to regroup. "We're the fight against the Council. They have money and resources we can't imagine, including access to magicks and god knows what else. We have us. And while Team Us always rises to the challenge, we need to be prepared for this fight to be different. Not even like what we

were up against with the Initiative—they're not going to concede defeat and just leave town if we cripple them. They're not going to stop coming even if Gray dies. They'll send someone else. Maybe lots of someones. We have no idea what's coming or when. That's what we're up against."

"Don't sound so chipper, Buff. We might think you aren't taking this seriously," Xander drawled.

"I'm probably going to kill a girl. Believe me when I say I'm serious."

"Just *probably* now? I thought that was already decided."

"I won't decide that for sure until the last second. I don't want it to be something I just...set out to do. If I can't reason with her, then I'll have to kill her." Buffy rubbed her lips together. It was strange, saying that aloud. Hearing the words and knowing she meant them. But they felt just as true outside of her head as they had inside it—no waffling, no hesitation, no second-guesses. "But she's just one person. The people who come after us once she's gone... That's where the real fight will be."

"You can do that?" Willow asked. She didn't sound particularly scandalized, more surprised and concerned. "Kill a person? Not asking to be all devil's advocate or anything but as the person here who has most recently killed a living, breathing human someone...it does something to you. Even the guy who took Tara away from me." She drew in a shaky breath and looked away. "I'm not sorry he's dead but I don't like that I'm the reason. And I have to live with that. Is that something you're ready to do?"

"Not right now this minute," Buffy replied, not sure if that was true or not. Maybe she just wanted it to be true because she didn't like what the alternative made her. "But to save Dawn? To save any of you? This is the last night she's going to make me spend at a hospital. I won't do this again. I won't live like this. And she's just the first, like I said. She's one cog in the massive wheel that is the Council and winning there will mean spilling blood. I have to be ready for that. We all do." She was still a beat then brought her eyes back to Spike. Though he'd remained quiet throughout her speech, it had been a loud quiet. A Spike quiet, which couldn't be anything but loud. Observing and absorbing the way he did, and now it was time to go big or go home. "I need your help."

He frowned, and she understood why even before he spoke. "Yeah? You askin' or tellin'?"

"Does it matter?"

"In whether I'll do it? Not a lick."

"You said you wanted to help however you could. Well, I've found a way." She wet her lips. "It's been a long time since I've been in a fight like this one. And we don't know—we don't know what comes after Gray. The Council has the power to make as many slayers as they want. Maybe they've already made more than just her... I kinda doubt it, because I think what they want is complete control. Controlling one slayer is a lot easier than controlling a whole army of them, but maybe I'm giving them too much credit. The point is, I haven't fought with anyone—anyone like *this*—since Glory. I was in the best shape of my life for that fight and I need to get there again. And Giles isn't here to help me."

His eyes widened and he barked something that was between a snicker and a cough. "So you want me to play watcher now?"

"You've killed slayers. You know what it takes to put one down."

"Yeah, and as I recall, I told you it wasn't about the moves."

"Maybe not. But the moves matter, don't they?"

Spike snapped his mouth shut at that, though there was no hiding the misgiving in his eyes. Misgiving that didn't make sense to her in the slightest. He wasn't averse to fighting—this she knew intimately—and he'd always enjoyed any excuse to brawl with her. Though, granted, their brawls over the last year had been less brawl-y and more foreplay. The last one that counted for anything had brought down a whole house and them with it—it had also been the closest thing to an actual fight she'd gotten since crawling out of the grave. More so than fighting with Willow, even, because they had been on equal ground. Fighting for something that mattered.

Maybe that was it. Not the fight itself but what it had come to represent for them. But whatever, she didn't have time to hash it out now or add more confusing thoughts to the swarm in her head labeled *Spike*. She just knew what she needed and he was the only one who could give it to her.

"I don't know how to kill a slayer," Buffy said, going for blunt and pragmatic. "I tried once and it didn't work. Don't get me wrong, I'm glad it didn't work, but I need to know why it didn't. Was it because I wasn't good enough, or because my heart wasn't really in it? Was Faith just the luckiest girl in the world or did I do something wrong? If I didn't give that fight everything, then how can I know I'll give the next fight everything?"

"Buffy," Willow started, but Buffy raised a hand before she could do more than that. This conversation wasn't about her or anyone else.

"The only person who can help me do this is you," she said, holding Spike's gaze. Her heart had started thundering in her ears, loud and offensive. She felt like she was on the edge of something—perhaps her own personal Rubicon, because once the rest of this was out, there definitely wouldn't be any going back. "And if I can't do it, I need you to do it for me."

For a long second, sound itself seemed suspended. Quite the feat in the middle of a hospital.

"You want me to off a slayer," Spike said at last, oddly choked. Like he was struggling to keep it together. "Bit of a problem with that—"

"Yeah, the chip is coming out."

"It's what? You're off your bird."

"No, I am very much on my bird. Whatever the hell that means."

"Buffy—"

"Look, you want the chip out, don't you?"

"Of course I do," he barked. "You do know who you're talkin' to, don't you?"

"Yes. Spike. Two-time slayer killer, mortal enemy, he who has tried to kill me and my friends so many times we don't even pretend to count anymore."

"And you want to unleash that."

"What I want is a Spike who can protect my sister," she fired back. "A Spike who

can protect *himself*. Who, when the fight with the Council comes, won't be on the sidelines, but at my side with everyone else. That only happens if the chip comes out. The people we're fighting are *people* and you're no good to me if you can't throw a swing without that thing firing. I am choosing this, Spike. I am choosing you over Gray. Over the Council. I am choosing *you*. So are you going to let me?"

There was nothing for another stretch—just more Spike staring at her like she'd started speaking in showtunes. Waiting, perhaps, for the punchline that wasn't coming. For her to balk or laugh or do something that would reveal the sleight of hand she was preparing to make. And when that didn't happen, when she didn't blink, he turned to Xander and Willow, the words "You hearin' this?" so obviously ready on his tongue that watching his face fall all over again when neither one of them betrayed the outrage she was sure he expected, it was almost as though she'd watched him slam face-first into a brick wall.

And that was funny. Almost funny enough to laugh at, but Buffy didn't laugh.

"This is..." Spike growled out a sigh and whirled so he was facing her again. "What are you playin' at, Slayer?"

"Excuse me?"

"This. All this." He waved a hand, the shock and confusion in his eyes hardening into more familiar territory. "Same old song and ol' Spike was daft enough to fall for it."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Talkin' about *you* and how you enjoy muckin' with my head. That's what this is, isn't it? Havin' me patch you up. Patrol with you. Apologizing to me. Asking me to go into that bloody loo. Lettin' me get my fangs in your throat—"

"Spike—"

"Are you forgettin' what we are, you and me?"

"I know exactly what we are. But I'm starting to think that you don't."

He sputtered a harsh laugh, sounding pained. "What are we then?"

"We're people who have hurt each other a lot but don't want to anymore," Buffy replied. For as hard as her chest was rattling, her tone came out nice and smooth. Not shaky at all. She took heart. "And you don't hurt me, Spike. You told me that once."

"Yeah, and look how it—"

"You *don't* hurt me. You know what hurts me and you don't do it."

"Except when I did," he practically snarled.

"But you would take that back if you could."

"In a sodding heartbeat, but—"

"And I know that. I *know* that. That's what makes it different. What makes *you* different. It's what makes me choose you over Gray. What makes me believe I can." Buffy swallowed, loud against the sudden quiet. She felt the others' attention, sharp and disbelieving, but refused to look at them. Refused to look away from Spike until she knew she was being heard. "You told me once a man could change. I didn't believe it then—I didn't want to. I want to now. Are you saying I can't?"

Spike didn't answer. Not at first. He stood there, feet from her, heaving air his lungs didn't need, his eyes full and pained. She didn't understand and maybe she never would, but it didn't matter so long as he gave her the answer she needed. Then, finally, he shook his head, even though doing so seemed to cost him something.

"I'm yours, Buffy. You know I am."

"So you'll do it."

"Yeah, I'll do it."

"Good. Thank you." She turned back to Willow. Always in motion. Best way to keep ahead of the pressure in her head and chest and everywhere else. "Get the chip out or shut it off. I need to get back to Dawn."

Then she turned and started back down the hall before any of them could raise a new argument she didn't have the time or energy to hear, somehow both lighter and heavier than before.

And that was, at the very least, a familiar place to be.

THAT YOU COULD EVER LOVE AGAIN OR EVEN TRY

BUFFY SPENT THE NEXT TWO NIGHTS CURLED UP IN A STALE, PUKE-GREEN RECLINER next to Dawn's bed. It was hell on her aching muscles, never mind that damned, still-healing place on her shoulder, but still eons better than the sleep she'd get if she'd caved and gone home the way everyone wanted her to. Well, everyone being Xander and Willow, who kept insisting that the best thing she could do for Dawn was take care of herself.

"No," she argued. "The best thing I can do for Dawn is make sure she feels safe. She does with me here. End of story."

Only it wasn't the end of the story. Xander kept talking about how Gray wouldn't be dumb enough to attack someone at the hospital, at which point Willow would jump in with reminders that hospital security, staff, and the Sunnydale Police Department had her description. That as alone as the Scoobies might be in the fight against the Council, they didn't have to be when it came to Gray. She was just one person—yes, a superpowered person, but a single person all the same. And since they were alone, for all intents and purposes, when it came to the Council, they should let the police pick up some of the slack. Do their jobs for a change.

That was nice in theory but less reliable in practice. As Buffy kept saying and would keep saying until she went hoarse.

To Buffy's absolute lack of surprise, the only person who didn't try to get her to go home was Spike.

"Course you're stayin' here," he'd said absently as he'd waited for the hot item cook to fill the plate he'd ordered for her. Eggs and bacon with a side of hashbrowns and toast. That was the job he'd given himself, it seemed, while she and Dawn called the hospital home. Making sure she got fed and dragging her away from her sister's bedside if necessary. "Those idiot friends even know you at all, Slayer?"

She'd snickered appreciatively but hadn't responded. It had seemed the safest bet, as short as her patience was these days.

Still, there was woefully little to do at the hospital. The gift shop was chock full of overpriced magazines and crossword puzzles, but Buffy had no luck in finding anything that could keep her occupied for more than ninety seconds. Articles about upcoming fashion trends were suddenly a snooze, and the celebrity gossip garbage that had once been her guilty pleasure failed to hold her interest. So she'd find herself sitting in the quiet as her sister slept or pretended to be riveted by whatever was on the television, and when all of that didn't work, there was Dawn's endless parade of questions. What they were going to do about Gray, alternate theories of how they might try to contact Giles, what a war with the Council would be like, what it meant that Buffy wanted Spike's chip gone, and speaking of Spike, was he just going to get to drink from Buffy anytime he was hurt now, and if so, what did that mean?

Yeah, Dawn was loving the whole "I'm in the hospital so you can't yell at me" dynamic of their current relationship, and using all the goodwill she could to shame the interrogation skills of Sunnydale's law enforcement.

That law enforcement was involved at all was an angle Buffy hadn't been entirely prepared for, her experience with the local police being spotty at best. There was that time a cop had shot at her after she'd discovered Kendra's body, and when Spike had swooped in from nowhere to save her from an inconvenient arrest. The couple of times she'd been questioned for murder—once of a killer robot that would have done Warren Mears proud, and again after Faith had mistaken a civil servant for a vampire. And, just before then, when Faith had convinced Buffy to take the want, take, have approach to the law. And when Buffy had been arrested while wearing Faith's skin. Really, looking back, Faith had been one huge common denominator in most of Buffy's run-ins with the law. No wonder the other slayer had ended up in prison.

Another common denominator—in all instances, Buffy had been the one being investigated or pursued, whether rightfully or, more usually, not. So, when she'd been asked to give a statement and answer questions pertaining to Dawn's wound, she'd been on edge and a bit more defensive than the situation warranted. Thankfully, the detective had kindly written off her attitude as nerve and worry for her sister. In fact, her past run-ins with the law hadn't been mentioned at all. There had been nothing but promises that Gray would be found, assurances that "their best men" were on it, that they'd handled cases that were a lot less straightforward so Buffy and her sister should have nothing to worry about.

If only that were true. If only this was something the boys in blue could take off her plate like she were any other citizen. But she wasn't, and they couldn't. The most Buffy could hope for was that Gray was smart enough to not get noticed by the wrong people. Anyone who got in her way was bound to end up where Dawn was now, if not worse.

"The Council's trying to keep everything on the DL, though," Dawn had said when Buffy had divulged this concern. She'd been sitting up in bed, a lot more color in her cheeks than had been there the day before. "If it gets out she tried to kill me, that can't look good for them, right?"

"I dunno," Buffy had replied, figuring it was better to go with the truth than the platitude. "When they were here two years ago, they told Giles they could have his green card revoked, shut down the Magic Box, and all kinds of other stuff."

"Yeah, but that was Giles. Who am I?"

The Key, she'd thought, but this she hadn't said. Hadn't dared. She didn't want that fear living in her sister's head. Bad enough it was in her own.

And as it was, there was no shortage of other concerns to keep her occupied. Things like the fight she had ahead and what part of herself she would need to sacrifice in order to win. It wasn't enough knowing she might have to kill a human—it was also what came next. What the Council would do once the tool they had radicalized was removed from the equation. How in the world she could begin to fight an organization on a level like this with the resources she had and hope to make it to the other side without losing herself in the process. There was also everyone else—the people whose lives she had become responsible for; those who were in this fight with her because of a decision they had made to befriend the strange new girl once upon a time. If the Council couldn't keep Buffy in the ground, that made everyone else cannon fodder. Hell, they probably were already. Gray certainly wasn't acting like someone who had been cautioned restraint.

Despite everything they had been through, Buffy wasn't sure the gravity of the situation had really sunk in with the others, particularly what they might be tasked to do in order to survive. Or maybe they had just gotten so used to her having a solution that they couldn't see the mounting odds for what they were.

But there wasn't a ready solution this time—at least not that Buffy could see, and definitely not one that would keep them from getting their hands dirty. If her friends intended to make the next fight theirs as well, the same way they always did, they would need to be prepared for what that meant. Understand that killing Gray would be the start, not the end, and that all the subsequent bad guys would show up wearing human skin. They couldn't rely on the black-and-white lines Buffy had drawn for them at the beginning, for surviving this fight meant acknowledging those lines didn't exist anymore.

The only person she did trust to understand was Spike, which was a weird thing to admit to herself, even if she was getting used to the idea. But then, everything about Spike was weird right now. Everything but his devotion to her and Dawn, at least. Like, she wasn't surprised at all to find him wandering the hospital's halls at odd hours—that he hadn't left was just a given. He'd said he wouldn't until Dawn went home, and Spike didn't say things he didn't mean.

What he did throughout the day, though, she had no idea. He'd pop in for fifteen-minute intervals that weren't claimed by someone else to talk to Dawn, and always seemed to show up around the time Buffy's stomach gave its first rumble to make sure she didn't skip meals. Sometimes she'd wander down to the waiting area to see him only to find the place empty; other times he'd be there the second she stepped into the hall as though he'd known she'd needed a break. She imagined most of what he did involved making sure Gray didn't try to get to Dawn while she was recovering, though he never said one way or another. Nor did he mention the chip or ask after

Willow's progress, and when Dawn brought it up, he was quick to change the subject. As though he worried too much talk or enthusiasm would make Buffy rethink the decision she'd made well before she'd announced it.

It was things like this—Spike's odd reserve, the restraint he demonstrated about things that mattered to him that confused Buffy the most. Because Spike wasn't restrained. He was brash and impulsive and, when after something, damn near impossible to shut up. Before, she'd chalked up his general weirdness to not knowing how to act around her after the bathroom, and that had made sense because she hadn't known how to act around him, either. The reset had been in confronting the thing, achieving closure in what that night had and, more importantly, hadn't been, and for a tiny blip of time, she'd thought they had made their way back to something like normal. An awkward normal, sure, and one still being defined, but normal nonetheless. Normal for them. People who used to fuck and were now trying to be friends.

Then Gray had escaped and attacked Dawn, and everything had changed again. Spike had achieved new levels of bizarre behavior, starting with his reluctance to bite her and... Well, everything about the bite, really. Yes, he'd told her that he wouldn't try anything with her ever again, but that had been before she'd literally thrown herself at him. Easy to say you won't try anything when the opportunity to do so is unlikely—less when you're given the green light. And dignity aside, Buffy knew she had given him the green light.

It wasn't like him to not seize what she offered. It definitely wasn't like him to not badger her to death when she had something he wanted.

So much right now wasn't like him. And though she had more important things to do than fixate on how wiggy it was, that didn't keep Buffy from fixating. There just wasn't a good way to bring it up. At least none that had occurred to her.

Maybe it'd be easier to think once she was home for real.

She could only hope.



ON OCCASION, timing worked in her favor. Not always—not even often, as far as Buffy was concerned—but every now and then, the stars aligned in such a way that she could almost believe the universe wasn't being vindictive just for the hell of it. The afternoon Dawn was discharged happened to be one of those times, as it coincided with Willow's announcement that she had successfully modified the magical alarm system. Not only that, she'd modified it in such a way that it would serve them far beyond a problem like Gray Asra.

"It's kinda like the chip," her friend had explained, brushing wayward strands of red from her face. "You know—the intent to harm is what triggers it. So if anyone who, say, wants to murder you comes a-knockin', we'll know before they ever reach the door."

Something inside of Buffy had loosened, parts of her that had been tight so long she'd gotten used to the strain. "Thank you, Will," she'd said. The words had come

out half-laugh and half-sigh. "This is... This helps. A lot. I might actually get some sleep tonight."

Willow had preened the way she always did under praise. "Happy to help! I've done the Magic Box, too, and Xander's place. And Spike's crypt if he wants to move back in after we've deactivated the chip... I mean, assuming that's still what you wanna do and all. Your call."

For some stupid reason, Buffy's heart had skipped in a less than fun way. "Oh. Well, yeah, that's good. Does he know?"

"Yeah, I told him when I saw him in the waiting area," she'd replied, frowning. "Should I not have? I just assumed that with the protection spell in place, everything could go back to normal."

"No, you're right. It should." Buffy had sighed, trying and failing to banish this sensation of disappointment. She had absolutely no reason to be disappointed. It was the best of all worlds, not to mention would make for a much less confusing environment at home. "I guess it just hadn't occurred to me—that we could do that or that he'd even want to since he hasn't mentioned it. But maybe that's just because Spike's come down with a severe allergy to actual straightforward communication."

Willow had pursed her lips, glanced at the still-healing marks on Buffy's throat. "I take it you haven't told him any of what we talked about? With, you know, having—"

"No," Buffy had said loudly, bugging out her eyes with what she hoped was a clear instruction to not even think about finishing that sentence, particularly as Dawn had been sitting up on the bed and absorbing every word. The last thing she'd needed—then, now, or ever—was to find herself fielding a thousand questions about her feelings, past or present. "No. And I'm not going to." Among other things, telling Spike she'd been in love with him after all would just make the situation between them even more tense than it was at the present. It wasn't like knowing that would give him anything, except maybe delayed satisfaction that he'd been right all those times they'd had this argument. Worse, it might encourage him to abandon his promise that he was never going to try to be with her again, and that was the last thing she wanted.

"Because that would be actual, straightforward communication," Willow had agreed with a mocking sort of nod. "That thing he's allergic to."

"Shut up."

"You guys kinda suck at talking in code," Dawn had chimed in. "Am I not supposed to know that you're discussing Buffy's being totally hung up on Spike?"

"I am in no way hung up on Spike!"

The look her sister and her best friend had exchanged almost had Buffy wishing Gray would burst in, knife swinging. It would at least take the attention off her.

"I am not," she'd said again, then straightened and tried to affect perfect nonchalance. "But speaking of, what's the status on the chip?"

Willow had arched an eyebrow in best friend code for not buying it but thankfully went with the conversational turn without a fight. "Considering Spike hasn't left the hospital in two days and I've been up to my eyeballs in other spells, still as active as ever. I'll get on it as soon as we're all home, safe and sound."

“Good.” Buffy had nodded tightly. “You do that. Then he can move out and everything can go back to normal.”

She was relatively certain there had been another one of those knowing looks, but she’d turned away before she could confirm it one way or another. Too much more of that and she might have done something rash, like yell at them. And she knew from experience that protesting had a way of making you seem like a liar, even if you weren’t.

And she wasn’t.

Even if she didn’t love the idea of Spike moving out of the house. Not that he’d ever moved in, really, but she’d wanted him under her roof to keep him safe from crazy slayers, and the crazy slayer was still out there. Chip aside, there was still strength in numbers, and she really didn’t want to, say, learn the hard way that Gray knew all about that killer of the dead stuff Faith had once poisoned Angel with. After all, crossbows could be fired from a distance without triggering any magical alarm systems, and as often as Spike got his ass kicked, he needed to use more caution—not less—with someone intent on killing him on the prowl.

But she didn’t say that. Not to Willow or her sister, not to Xander when he came by to drive everyone home after Dawn was discharged, and especially not to Spike. If offering up her throat had made things weird between them, asking him to stay at her house without cause would just...well, not be good. And hell, maybe it was better that he left. He’d been pretty much everywhere with her the last few days—if not physically then definitely haunting her thoughts, and that was the sort of thing that could confuse situations that were already confused enough. Make her think things she had no business thinking, things that were themselves likely the byproduct of her unending exhaustion. Maybe after she’d caught a few winks in the comfort of her own bed, her mind wouldn’t be quite as murky where he was concerned. Maybe his unusual reserve and the absence of his constant innuendos and sloppy seduction attempts would make sense, or at least not bother her to the point of taking up space in her head.

Except they did bother her. And after she and Dawn were officially home, Buffy found she had more mental real estate, not less, for Spike to consume. The areas that had been claimed by gut-gnawing worry were free once again now that she knew her sister wasn’t going to die, and her mind didn’t hesitate to refocus on all things vampire. Particularly the wide berth Spike seemed intent on giving her following their homecoming. He wasn’t outright avoiding her, just always managed to be leaving a room the second she entered it, wrapping up a conversation the instant she decided to join, sequestering himself to the basement save for the odd hours to grab blood from the fridge or clomp his way upstairs to check on Dawn. Buffy cornered him a couple of times without really meaning to, only also entirely meaning to, just to make sure he was going to cooperate with the whole training regimen thing, which he agreed to readily, though always while avoiding direct eye contact. As though he worried about what he would see there.

Perhaps Buffy would have worked up the nerve to ask him what gives—or just

burned her way through her mounting frustration—had Willow not found a solution to the chip a day after they returned from the hospital.

“We’re deactivating,” she explained after Buffy discovered the pair of them together in the dining room. Spike was at the table, a couple of medical-grade electrodes lying flat against his brow and connected via a cord to Willow’s laptop. “I can do it from here easy-peasy. Bad news is anyone could flip it back on if they know it’s there, how to read the program, and nab themselves a vampire, but seeing as my brain surgery skills are a little rusty, I feel better doing it like this than trying to actually take it out.”

“Well, that saves us one argument,” Spike replied drolly, tapping his fingers along the tabletop. Once again, he seemed to be making an effort not to look at Buffy, and once again she wanted to punch him. It was a familiar impulse, at least. “Don’t much fancy bein’ a vegetable for the rest of bloody eternity.”

“Plus some insurance for us,” Willow agreed. “You know, in case you decide to go back on the people diet after all.”

Buffy frowned but didn’t say anything. She supposed it was a decent point; maintaining the option to flip the switch and shove Spike back in the proverbial cage had a straightforward, logical sort of appeal. Just in case this decision did come back to bite her on the ass the way so many others had. But the thought wasn’t one that rested well on its own merit. It assumed too much that she knew to be fundamentally not true—most prominently that Spike was like Angel. But he wasn’t. All the evolving he’d done since the Initiative had gotten him under their knives had been self-directed. Removing the chip wouldn’t undo that—it wouldn’t undo anything. Which, in a way, made it more reliable than the soul had ever been, and goddamn if that was a thought she hadn’t been prepared to have.

Maybe it was dumb, trusting him, but she wanted to. Part of her needed to. It meant trusting herself.

“Oh, you need insurance, do you?” Spike drawled. “The lot of you are just brimming with confidence.”

“Let’s just say I remember when you tried to run a broken bottle through my face,” Willow retorted. “And when you tried to bite me in our dorm room.”

A somewhat sour grin tugged on his lips. “Fun times, those.” He slid his eyes to Buffy—the movement furtive, almost as though he couldn’t help himself despite wanting to—and away once more just as quickly. “Think the slayerettes wanna keep the muzzle on,” he told her.

“The slayerettes want to not die in the Council fight,” Willow replied, not looking up from her screen. “This one, at least. I’m counting on you being one-hundred percent Buffy’s bitch. Just not all the way counting, because you’re still you.”

“What makes you think you’ll be able to find me if I take a nip off one of the locals? Might just decide it’s time for me to light on outta here. Move on for good.”

“You won’t because Buffy needs you here. And seeing as you love her, you’ll make sure you do what she needs.”

Spike lowered his gaze to the table and swallowed thickly. “Right. Then time’s a

wastin', Red. Deprogram me. Just keep the instructions in case you need to wire me up again."

The entire exchange was like something out of someone else's reality, or a glimpse into a world that could have been. All the time Buffy had spent wondering what would happen if her friends had discovered her shameful little secret, how Spike could even hope to integrate into her life if she took the plunge, and here she was watching it unfold. Willow casually believing in him, if not all the way, then close enough. Her friends accepting that Buffy knew what was best, trusting her instinct and intuition, not fighting her when she suggested something as revolutionary as restoring a deadly predator to its full potential. That trust might not be absolute but it was absolute enough. Enough to do this. And so much more than she could have ever expected.

What would it have been like had she tried—really tried? Could she and Spike have had something close to normal, or were they where they were now because of all the bad that had come before? Buffy was a survivor of both him and herself, and their relationship now was predicated on understandings born out of mutual pain. But maybe it hadn't needed to be like that. Maybe if she'd tried, they could have had something outside of the shadows. God knows that was what Spike had wanted—and what she had never been brave enough to give him.

And now...

Now, a few simple keystrokes had gifted Spike with what he'd been chasing for three years. It had happened so fast it was almost anticlimactic. This law that had defined their understanding of him suddenly rewritten—no longer a fact but a footnote. He'd come into the dining room a caged animal and would walk out of it completely unharnessed. As whole as he'd been that day on the quad, sun streaming in between tree branches, curling his tongue around his fangs and doing what he did best to throw her off her game. The vampire who had sought her out to put her in the ground before he'd been captured and tamed.

Only it wasn't complete—not just yet.

"Are you gonna leave now?" Buffy asked once it was over, wrapping her arms around herself.

"No need to stay on our account," Willow grumbled before Spike could answer, rubbed her arm where he had pinched her, then turned to pack up the stuff she'd used to work her non-magic magic. There hadn't been a great way to test that the chip was officially out of commission beyond the obvious, and though Spike probably hadn't used all his strength, she had yelped hard enough to make the air ring and would likely sport a full bruise before the night was over.

"Don't fancy overstayin' my welcome," Spike said, rising to his feet. "Besides, if I leave the crypt much longer, some other beastie might get ideas about movin' in."

"Yeah, Clem said it was a primo spot insofar as cemetery living went," Buffy replied, trying for a smile that felt so awkward and forced she didn't want to know how it looked. "There's, umm, something I want to give you before you leave. Can you come upstairs real quick?"

He hesitated before meeting her eyes, his own cautious and wary. “Uh, sure,” he said before rubbing the back of his neck. “Not like there’s a rush, yeah?”

There might not be, but damn, she could feel the tension vibrating off him even at a distance. Or maybe that was her own, amplified by the knowledge that he was on edge. Once more, she was tempted to confront it head-on—demand to know why he was being weird again when she’d thought they were past all the weirdness. But as much as she wanted that answer, she also didn’t. Calling attention to his weirdness was a great way to make things even weirder. All that really mattered was that Spike was in the fight with her—that he would do what he’d said he’d do and help her prepare for what it would cost her to put a human in the ground.

Maybe the weirdness was just the result of everything they had done to each other. Maybe it wasn’t weird at all, rather a new version of normal she needed to get used to.

God, she hoped not.

Buffy kept her grip firm on the banister as she led him upstairs, doing her best to keep her heart from hammering right out of her chest. At the landing, she turned without pausing and headed straight for her bedroom. Spike followed, though his footfalls faltered a bit as he approached the threshold, more cautious and uncertain. He didn’t step inside until she met his eyes over her shoulder, and he saw whatever it was he needed to believe he was welcome in her space.

And that was it.

“Can we be normal?” Buffy blurted before she could help herself. Heat rose to her cheeks almost at once and she looked away. “Sorry, just...you’ve been kinda avoiding me ever since the hospital and it’s starting to drive me all the way crazy. We’re talking Drusilla levels of insanity here and I could really do with not being a loony toon when we take the fight to the Council.”

Spike said nothing for a long beat—long enough that she was certain her skin would grow so hot it could just slide right off the bone. Then, at last, he released a huff that might have been a sigh or a laugh and shifted his weight. “Dunno what you want me to say, Slayer.”

“Well start by not saying it’s all in my head because I know it’s not.”

“Not sure what you expected after you let me drink from you,” he replied in a rush. Like whatever had taken control of her mouth also had control of his, intention be damned. “You let me stick my fangs in you like it was nothin’.”

“It wasn’t nothing—”

“I bloody well know that.” Spike blinked at her as though surprised at his own words. Then he shook his head and, like her, seemed to give in. Accept that they were doing this now. “Then you go and decide to pull the plug on the chip—and I expect you’re gonna let me walk outta here without a different kind of shock collar. Just trust that I won’t find me a snack on the way home now that I can. Quite the turnaround from remindin’ me I’m an evil, disgusting thing on repeat.”

“I told you I was sorry for that—”

“What the hell is it you have to be sorry for, exactly? What could you have possibly done that would make you the sort of person who owes me an apology?” He

shook his head, laughing again, harsher this time. "Just a bit much to swallow. I try and I try and I bloody try to get you to see me as somethin' other than a monster. And now you do. Now, after I did what I did."

"No. We're not doing this again," Buffy snapped, holding up a hand, blood pounding in her ears. A fresh rush of adrenaline began doing its thing, kicking in fight or flight the way it always did when confronted with something that had the ability to hurt her in a way that wouldn't leave a physical mark. She forced herself to ignore it. Neither fighting nor fleeing would do her any favors here. "Look, we both know you've been different since you came home. Don't even try to deny it."

He didn't, thankfully. Just kicked a bit at the floor.

"And we've already had the conversation about what you did. Unless you have something new to tell me, you know how I feel about that."

Spike snickered again. "Yeah. Just don't know how it is that's what you feel."

"It's not your job to know how. It's your job to accept that I am serious and want to move on. You owe me that."

There was a moment—a long one in which she stared at him and he stared at his shoes, thinking so hard she saw it in the furrow of his brow, could practically hear it in the air between them. Then he released a breath, and that breath seemed to release something else, and he looked up. "You're right, of course," he said. "Dunno how to do this with you."

"Do what?"

"Be whatever it is we are now."

"Friends?"

He inhaled sharply, tilted his head. "Is that it? The word? Am I your friend, Buffy?"

Buffy licked her lips, suddenly unsure of herself. He had a knack for doing that—throwing her off her game when she'd thought she'd found it at last. "You know I wouldn't have let just any vampire drink from me, right?" she asked at length. Nice, evasive answer. The sort that filled the quiet gaps without actually saying anything. "Or sleep in my basement."

"Not known for lettin' defenseless creatures suffer, either."

"Chip or not, you've never been exactly defenseless." She breathed out again. "And...you're right. We've never done what we're doing now. It was either you trying to kill me or love me, and me not knowing how to deal. But what I said at the hospital—I meant that. That I'm choosing you over Gray, and I'm doing that because of how I feel about you now. It's weird and kinda uncomfortable, but it took me a while to get here and I'd appreciate it if you didn't throw it in my face."

Spike flinched and made as though to turn away, then seemed to think the better of it. Instead, he remained quiet for another stretch, his eyes in motion as though he were searching for something she couldn't see before all parts of him finally stilled. "Told you I'm yours and that hasn't changed," he said, resigned. "Doubt it ever will for me. It's just bloody confusing, is all."

"What's confusing?"

"You. I never expected any of this—stayin' here, you lettin' me in. Definitely not

you forgivin' me for what I did. Then lettin' me take a bite, deciding to undo my wiring..." He worked his throat. "I thought I had us figured out at one time. Now I'm gettin' I probably never will."

"Well, for the record, you're still one-up on me. I've never thought I had us figured out." Buffy offered a flat grin, a little more grounded now. Or at least at a place where she understood what wasn't understood—that it was something she, herself, had given up trying to understand. There were things in this world that defied logic, and her feelings for Spike were high on the list. "I, umm, have something to give you," she said, and turned to close the distance separating her from the closet. "Something you left here."

She held her breath as she opened the closet and reached in, as her fingers slid over familiar leather and lifted the coat off the clothes hanger. There was a sharp inhalation from behind her that made her heart do the jumpy thing again, then she turned, his duster folded over her arm, and was once more awarded one of those soft Spike stares that made her feel like something other than flesh and bone. How this man had ever won a game of poker, she had no idea. Had to be all the cheating.

"You kept it?" he asked hoarsely.

Buffy tried for a laugh and failed. Thought about going for a joke—gee, what makes you say that?—but didn't. The moment felt too fragile to play with. "Yeah. Seemed wrong to just throw it out, you know."

He lifted his gaze from the duster to her face. "You kept it in your closet."

"That's where coats normally go."

"Buffy—"

"Just...don't make a thing out of it. It was yours and you were gone. I didn't know what to do with it. Throwing it out felt wrong, like I said, so I put it in my closet." God, she was flushing anew and she hated it. She'd never blushed around him as much as she had since he'd returned to town. That he could tell, could sense that she was having trouble controlling herself, made everything worse. "Besides, it's kinda fitting. I've asked you to help me stop a slayer and you pulled this off the last one you killed." Buffy pressed her lips together and started back toward him. "So, here."

She chucked the duster at him with a lot more force than she'd intended, suddenly desperate to not be holding it anymore, and watched as it slapped against his chest with enough impact to have him rocking back a little. Spike caught it before it could tumble to the floor—caught and studied it for what felt like forever, then released another ragged sigh and shifted to slide the leather over his shoulders.

"Thanks," he said, grasping the lapels and straightening himself out, his voice still thick. "Feels like home."

"Good." Buffy gave him a clipped nod. She was buzzing with both nerve and regret—like maybe this had been a bad idea. Maybe she should've just waited until he was officially back in his crypt and then swung it by, not made a big production out of showing him where she'd kept it. "Well, I guess I'll see you at the studio. My studio, I mean. To train. Should put the space to use even if all my clients have fired me."

"They gave you the sack? All of them?"

Well, no. Actually, all her clients thus far had just reported concern for hers and Dawn's well-being. "Not yet," she said. "It's just a matter of time, though. I don't think slayage can be an excuse forever."

"Only if not a one of them has a lick of sense," he replied, and finally turned to head for the door. "So, what, just aim to have me come by at sundown?"

"Yeah. If I have anyone there, they should have cleared out by then. Then you can kick my ass—or try."

Spike paused, a grin tugging at the corner of his mouth. A grin that, along with the duster, had her flashing back to a different time. One that almost pained her to think about, as far away as it seemed now. "Right," he said. "Not sure what you think I can show you that you don't already know."

"I need to not be rusty and I know you won't go easy on me."

"Never have," he agreed, then gave her one last look loaded with meaning she couldn't decipher before he disappeared into the hall.



BUFFY DIDN'T RUN into Gray on patrol her first night home. She didn't run into her on the second night, either, or the third. A full week passed before she stopped expecting the wayward slayer to leap out of the shadows at a moment's notice, and another before she decided to start hunting the girl down herself. Hunting in the sense that she visited Sunnydale's sparse lodging accommodations in between client sessions and asked the dull-eyed employees behind the check-in desks if anyone calling herself Gray Asra had rented a room. And when that led to a dead end, she provided a detailed description. Gray should be fairly hard to miss, with her long white hair and matching skankwear.

Nothing. Nada. Not at the Sunnydale Suites or the Motor Inn Faith had called home before Wilkins had secured her a penthouse view, and nothing at any of the apartment complexes, either. Not even the location spells Willow performed on the regular yielded anything. Gray had turned to smoke overnight, which meant the Council was doing its thing. Working from the shadows, paying people off or bespelling them or both.

This told Buffy at least one thing—Gray had worked out that she needed a plan other than ambush.

Still, as much as she enjoyed the reprieve, the lack of noise on the slayer front had Buffy all kinds of antsy. It would have been way too easy to fall into a false sense of security, believe everything over as quickly as it had started, but she had played this game a time too many to be fooled by the quiet. It never lasted. And in the interim, there were plenty of regular bad guys to slay. Nests of vamps to take out, ritual sacrifices to upset, demons to put in their place. While she did find a new routine—one that involved teaching by day and training by night—it was not the sort that allowed her to forget she was being hunted.

And even if it was, Spike wouldn't let her.

He showed up like clockwork every day, just as the last of her clients were leaving

the premises. On occasion, while she was in the middle of a class or demonstration, she'd feel that familiar tingle along the back of her neck. Those senses that had become his, and for the first time in a way that was comforting. It always seemed she could breathe easier once she knew he was there, safe in the knowledge that Gray hadn't caught him off guard either at his crypt or somewhere along the way. That the next few hours would go as she expected them to go, and even if they didn't, everyone was where they were supposed to be.

"It's going well?" Willow had asked one night as Buffy had gathered plates from the cabinets for dinner. It had been a Thursday and Thursdays meant she brought home takeout—another habit they'd settled into without really trying. "You and Spike, with the training."

Buffy had nodded, offered a little grin. "Yeah, I think so. My reflexes are better, at least. Not that they were all that shoddy to begin with, but I can tell it'd been a while since I'd actually done any training."

"Except with your clients."

"Very much not the same thing."

"Uh huh," Willow had replied, sounding the way she had once upon a time when they had both been in school and Buffy had insisted that Angel was a helpful person to have around while doing homework. In case, while she was studying, the War of 1812 decided to attack her or something. "You meeting him for patrol later?"

"Why do you say it like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like it's a date."

"I didn't say it was a date. Is it a date?"

"Of course it's not a date!"

Willow blinked at her, all innocence. It had been more convincing when they'd been younger. "Then why did you call it a date?"

Buffy had grabbed a dinner roll out of the bag and chucked it at her friend's head, then groused about having wasted perfectly good carbs until taking her spot in front of the television and turning on the news. The normal boring reports about same-old-same-old had been sidelined by some freak event in Los Angeles in which the whole sun had been somehow blotted out. Just in Los Angeles, though, which meant something supernatural was probably to blame, and that meant that any chance of reaching out to Angel for help with the Council right now would have to wait. He clearly had other things to deal with.

She would never admit it to anyone, least of all Willow, but Buffy had been a bit relieved. It made no sense in terms of the amount of assistance she could use in figuring out how to approach the coming war, but she was confused enough about Spike without complicating things by bringing in Angel. She'd mostly managed to avoid thinking about the stuff Willow had said in the car the day they'd made their round trip to LA—get the two vampire men in her life side by side and she didn't think she could do that any longer.

Not that she needed to be thinking about that or anything, really. She so didn't. The best thing she could do was stick to what she was doing. Sleep. Go to work.

Search for Gray during her off hours. Train with Spike after the workday ended. Come home. Do dinner. Patrol, sometimes alone, sometimes not alone. Lather, rinse, repeat.

It was a good system. And it was working, albeit with the occasional drawback. Nothing too revolutionary or threatening. Nothing that kept her up at night, staring at that damn ceiling, trying to find comfort in the familiar patterns while she analyzed every interaction she had with Spike to death.

Nope. She was focused on the fight. Nothing more.

If there was a consistent drawback at all, it came in the form of Dawn, who was always around during Buffy's training sessions with Spike, and morally averse to being in any way helpful. She'd take her school bag and grab a corner in the studio under the pretense of doing homework, all the while making sure to interject the odd comment about how it must be hard to spar with all that sexual tension in the air. And when Buffy snapped at her to shut up and focus on her work, she'd just flash a mischievous grin and bury her nose in her schoolbooks until the opportune moment arose. Say, when Buffy was about to parry the punch Spike had just knocked her with, and instead tripped over her own damn feet. Or if Spike let loose one of those guttural vampiric snarls and pulled her to him, yellow eyes blazing, and lips pulled over his fangs. They would be lost in the moment, in each other, then Dawn would drop another inappropriate bomb and he'd blink like he'd been smacked over the head with a two-by-four and stumble away from Buffy in a hurry. Shaking his head and muttering curses and it would take a while for them to relocate their groove.

And maybe Buffy would actually be angry, maybe, if Dawn didn't have a point. If those nights she spent staring at the ceiling thinking about the turns their relationship had taken over the years didn't exist. If she didn't find herself visiting that car ride after all, and the entirely terrifying thought that her relationship the previous year might have been the closest thing she'd come to feeling that rush she'd once experienced with another man. The same she'd thought couldn't ever be replicated and had given up trying.

Not wanting to think about something tended to have the opposite effect because brains were jerks that way. Stupid brain.

There was something else, too. The more time she spent kicking Spike from one end of the studio to the next, the harder it was to deny that doing this—being with him like this—stirred a part of her she'd thought she'd left in the last grave she'd crawled out of. Turned out it was as alive and well as the rest of her.

Not a single second of her relationship with him had been conventional, not as enemies or as lovers. And as such, she had no one to blame but herself for the fact that beating Spike up brought to mind the last time they had fought—how he'd thrown her into walls and she'd tossed him into support beams and everything had started to crack and crumble and they had been too absorbed in each other, too lost, to see anything but the person in front of them. How she'd finally had enough of trading barbs and punches, of fighting herself most of all, of the inevitability that was them, and had surrendered. And god, that had felt good—liberating. Swallowing his desire and his shock at the same time, feeling the change in him, against him. Feeling

how much he wanted her, both in how he'd surrendered under her mouth and in the sharp thrust of his hips. How he'd struck her, steely hard and perfect, and how she'd wanted to be struck.

It had been a bad idea then. The worst. She'd known it and she'd gone for it anyway. Let herself make the bad decision—the one she would regret when the sun came up and vow to never make again. But even as she'd told herself it could never be more than it was, she'd hear the lie in her voice. In her head. She'd known that once wouldn't be enough because you could never have enough of the best sex you'd ever experienced. So she'd gone back, and back, and back, and eventually she'd stopped pretending with him and herself. She hadn't liked what she was doing but a girl could only have so many last times before she was no longer taken seriously.

Spike had never taken her seriously, though. He'd known what she wanted, known he was it, and he hadn't let her forget.

Except now. Because everything was different. Except she wasn't different, it turned out. For as much pushing as she'd done to make herself grow beyond the person who had fucked down an entire building, Buffy couldn't fight him without finding herself relentlessly turned on.

What was worse—she knew he knew. It had been one of the things he'd loved teasing her about the most last year, back at the start. “No sense lyin’ to me or yourself, pet,” he'd tell her, with that smirk that had, at some point, started driving her a different kind of crazy. “You know I can smell it on you, right? How bad you want me. You don't need to hide it anymore. Just bloody take it.”

And she would. Perhaps not immediately—she hadn't wanted to give him the satisfaction—but after trading a few punches and throwing a few insults, her skin would buzz and her legs would tremble, and the need to touch him for real would overpower her senses. He'd answer with a growl, wrap his arms around her and pull her to him, flush and hot and ready, then dip a hand beneath the waistband of whatever she was wearing so he could feel for himself just how much she wanted what was about to happen.

“Oh yeah, kitten,” he'd growl, spreading her wetness across her sensitive flesh before nipping at her lips. “Someone's desperate for daddy.”

“Don't call yourself that,” she'd protest—only it was never really a protest. Not by this point. She wouldn't start protesting in full until the thrill of her whatever-number-he-got-her-to orgasm had finally started to wane, bringing with it a cold dose of reality. She had hours to enjoy in the meantime. “It's gross.”

“Mhmm. Right. This is you disgusted.” He'd just grin wider, slip between her soaked folds until he was pressing into her, filling her with his fingers, settling his thumb right over her clit so he could stroke her to distraction, and everything would melt away. Everything but him and what he was doing to her, and it wouldn't matter what he called himself or her or them, so long as he kept touching her.

But that was a fragment of the past. A past she couldn't revisit—wouldn't because of the damage it had caused. Why rebuild something just to knock it down all over again? What would be the point? Just because things were different now didn't mean they would be different, and they had hurt each other so much...

No. It wasn't worth it. Not at all.

Except at night, as she lay waiting for sleep to claim her, replaying the events of the day—the way he'd look at her when their eyes met across the room after she'd kicked him into the wall, that little grin as he rebounded and came at her again, how it felt when he seized her wrists and twisted her around so her back was to his chest—it was becoming harder to remember why. Because things were different. They were different.

And if she accepted that, if she truly believed it, then what exactly was holding her back? Fear of what came next? Next was coming whether she wanted it to or not. All she could control was herself.

"Seems like you're somewhere else today, Slayer," Spike taunted, bouncing on the balls of his feet and grinning. He was doing that a lot more than he had since coming home from Whereverville, she'd noticed. Returning to himself bit by bit. Really, ever since the talk they'd had in her bedroom when she'd given back his duster. The strain was still there, the tension, but not as pronounced as it had been. As though he were finally comfortable in his own skin again, and the effect was downright mesmerizing. "Fine way to give a fella the upper hand."

Buffy shook her head, doing her best to banish her thoughts and recenter herself. She'd thought today would be a breeze, particularly since it was the first time since she and Spike had started their training sessions that Dawn wasn't around making distracting comments, but the lack of regular interruptions had her off-gamey. Instead of the environment being less charged, it seemed more so, and that was almost ridiculously distracting.

Next time, she does her group projects here, Buffy told herself, just barely managing to duck before Spike's flying fist connected with her chin. It had been dumb to agree to the whole study group thing in the first place. Sure, the group was meeting at Revello Drive where the Gray-alarm was in place, and sure, Willow was there to provide magical back-up if said alarm went off, and sure, school was actually important, but Dawn had a very critical role to fill during these sessions, and that role was chaperone. Wildly inappropriate comment-making chaperone whose absence was somehow a huge voidy void.

Turned out, her sister had actually been defusing the tension rather than contributing to it. Who would have thought?

"Oi!" Spike snapped, knocking her against the balance beam in the room's center. "Wastin' your time, am I?"

"No," Buffy replied, and caught the next fist he arced toward her face. "Just thinking."

"This was your idea, as I recall. If you're not gonna bother to show up—"

"Hey, I'm here, aren't I?"

"No, you're bloody well not." He jerked away from her, started to back up, then seemed to decide against it. Instead, he came closer, invaded her personal space the way he never did these days. Her skin was on fire and her heart was racing and he was there, suddenly all she could see. "You're not here *here*," he said, and tapped his

fingers along the side of her head. "Look at where you are, love. Got you cornered, don't I? You didn't even notice."

Buffy blinked and looked around—or tried. The balance beam was at her back, which she didn't really think meant cornered the way he apparently did, but she supposed if they were assuming it was a border of some kind, a hard boundary, then she'd managed to get herself into the not-best situation. "I'm distracted," she protested, and the excuse sounded weak even to her ears.

"Distracted gets you dead," Spike replied flatly. "Thought you were over wishin' for it."

"I am." And he was right. All of this was stupid—in vain if she couldn't clear her head and remain in the moment. If these confusing, life-interrupting feelings remained unaddressed. If she kept pretending they weren't there or just hoping they went away. There would be no breaks, no peace, no nothing. Now was not the time to get entangled in the drama that was her love life or lack thereof, but since when had that stopped her?

"Then tell me, pet. Dangerous predator here." Somehow, he was even closer than before. Maybe it was her imagination, but she thought there might have been some tremor in his voice. "You gonna fight or let me have the easy kill?"

Buffy released a ragged breath. "Fight."

"Right then. Show me how."

And that was it. Something inside of her broke. Before she could stop herself, before she even realized what she was doing, she had his face in her hands and pulled him down to her mouth. "Bit like this," she whispered against his lips, then claimed them with her own.

WE'RE JUST TWO LOST SOULS SWIMMING IN A FISH BOWL

FIGHTING HER WAS ADDICTIVE. MORE THAN ADDICTIVE, IT WAS WHAT GOT HIM out of bed these days. The knowledge that she'd be waiting for him in the training room she'd repurposed into a studio, fatigued and tense as ever but ready to throw everything into another fight. Sometimes they'd exchange pleasantries—sometimes she'd be wound up tight as a gnat's chuff after another unsuccessful search for the slayer slag. Those days were some of his favorites. She'd come at him eyes blazing, fists swinging, all of her ready to expel some of the anger he knew she was keeping on reserve.

But no matter how hard she swung at him, she'd end the day the same. A smile, soft and thankful.

"You okay?" she'd ask as she fought to catch her breath.

"Right as rain," he'd reply, whether or not he was.

"Patrol later?"

"You know where to find me."

The smile would grow, lighting her up from the inside. And he'd do his best not to walk right into a wall or trip over his own bloody feet as he showed himself out. But hell, a bloke never got used to being on the receiving end of one of Buffy's smiles, especially after so many years chasing them, wanting them so much that not having them caused physical pain. Now he had them—those smiles and so much more, all tidy in this new, strange place they seemed to have landed together.

But that was Buffy.

At one point, he'd felt he could read her mood simply by catching sight of her across a crowded room, and he'd been right—or lucky—enough times that he'd bought the lie he'd sold himself. It was what had driven him last year, what had possessed him and urged him to keep moving forward beyond the point when he

should have stopped. The damn certainty that Buffy was in love with him and all that stood between them and utter bloody bliss was her admitting the fact. Embracing it rather than running from it. Embracing *him*.

He'd been wrong there. Staggeringly, devastatingly wrong—too wrong to trust what he thought he saw ever again.

But Christ, she made it hard when she looked at him the way she did these days. The way she had ever since that awful night when he'd been certain he'd lost Dawn forever. That night he played on repeat the way he still sometimes played the night on the tower, wondering what combination of moves might have spared the lot of them worry and grief. It always ended the same, though, watching as a knife disappeared in the Nibbler's belly, watching the girl he loved as though she were his own flesh and blood crumble to the floor before his throat had been slashed open and he'd been down there with her. Spike would likely never know if Gray had meant to take his head clean off or if she'd just been intent on getting out the door and he'd been in the way, but it hadn't mattered. Nothing had mattered because he'd failed again.

That much remained—that certainty, that terror. He couldn't outrun it, regardless of how many days he put behind him. It had been with him as they'd carted her out, branded on his bloody soul by the horror in Buffy's eyes. He'd laid there on the floor, clutching at his shredded throat, trying to will himself to move. Grab some of the blood in the fridge, find the strength to get where he needed to be, even if no one wanted him there. Get to Buffy and somehow look her in the eye so she could tell him how richly he had failed.

But that hadn't happened. Buffy had been waiting for him at the hospital, yes, but she'd greeted him with relief and gratitude. She'd risen to her feet and closed the distance between them, telling him that all was well. The doctors thought Dawn would recover just fine, and that it wasn't his fault, what had happened to her. That she didn't blame him so he shouldn't blame himself. Even then, even after she'd experienced firsthand what it felt like to be failed by him, the parts of her that remained soft and good had kept her from lashing out the way he'd more than earned.

And then she'd gone and changed the rules. Spike supposed now, hindsight and all, the fact that he'd been surprised was more a reflection on him than her. Surprising him was what Buffy did better than anyone. But she had—implored him to follow her into that stairwell then scaring him stupid by offering him her neck. It was that moment he'd found himself visiting most often over the last few weeks, and likewise why he'd tried to create distance from her afterward. Because these were the things that a different version of himself would have sworn meant she felt something. That she could love him after all. Bugger, that she *did*, even if the words themselves remained elusive. And even if she didn't love him, she wanted him as she had before—wanted him loving her the only way she would let him. He'd felt it when he'd moved toward her, felt her remembering what it was like to have him inside of her. Part of him had even known to expect it, not because Buffy actually wanted him but because she'd needed the kind of comfort he'd once been so adept at giving her whenever she was lost and vulnerable. And

he'd wanted to give it. She'd been in his arms, her breaths crashing against his ear, her unique bouquet—*Buffy* beneath the grime—flooding his nostrils, including *that* scent that he'd previously thought he'd only ever experience in memory. And she'd whimpered and rubbed herself against him and her blood had been in his mouth, hot and decadent and delicious and *hers*, and it had taken every inch of resolve in him to keep from throwing her against the wall and taking what she'd offered. Probably would have if the sodding soul hadn't been there, a great emergency brake that propelled him from the impossible fantasy and back to the real world with its real consequences.

Spike had seen it in her eyes the second he'd found the resolve to break away from her—the realization of what she'd done, what she'd bloody well allowed *him* to do, and had braced for the fallout, only it hadn't come. Just her blushing and reestablishing the space between them. Shocking him, yeah, by even admitting to what had nearly happened in vague terms, but that had been it. Status bloody quo.

And much as that had bugged with his head, as intoxicated as he'd been by both her blood and what he'd known her body had wanted at that moment, Spike had felt more or less grounded by the time they'd stepped back into the hospital proper. That Buffy had reacted to his bite the way she had wasn't without precedent and didn't really mean anything in the grand scheme. The body remembered better than the mind did at times, especially when it wasn't supposed to. In the heat of things, he'd been glad—being a bit hot for him had spared her some pain, even if it had made his jeans painfully tight. He could handle being hard around her. God knows he'd gotten enough practice over the years.

That was it—that *should* have been it. But no, because Buffy was never done being Buffy, she'd gone and turned his whole bloody world upside down twice in one night by insisting the chip come out. Insisting in front of her mates, no less, who hadn't immediately chimed in, demanding to know just when her marbles had scattered or offering to help her gather them back. They'd accepted it at face value.

And Spike hadn't. Not because he hadn't wanted to, but rather he'd known what would happen if he did.

He'd start thinking things he couldn't think. Things about Buffy. About *him* and Buffy. That was one place the soul didn't matter for rot—his brain remained intent on searching for clues as to what she was thinking. For the crumbs he'd once begged of her, any sign that she might crave him the way he craved her. That she might feel anything that he felt. Even knowing it was impossible—that he'd *made* it impossible with what he'd done to her—he could so easily fool himself. All it took was wanting to be fooled.

Spike didn't want to be fooled anymore. He didn't want anything but the straight truth, no matter how painful it was.

And ever since that night in her room, when she'd given him back his duster—and fuck, he couldn't let himself think on that too much, either, for the same reasons—they had settled into something that felt like theirs. Even if it wasn't entirely comfortable. Even if he caught Buffy throwing him looks when she thought he wasn't paying attention. Even if Dawn insisted on keeping up a running commentary. Even

if he had to experience the painful bliss that was having Buffy close to him, against him, in his arms.

No wonder he was addicted. Beyond the soft smiles she favored him with at the end, he'd get lungfuls of something richer while they were actually trading blows. The intoxicating evidence that Buffy *did* want him. That perhaps, on some level, she had never stopped.

There were days he resented it. Other days he willed himself to ignore it. Every day he craved it, as would any junkie faced with their drug of choice.

Today, he was enjoying it—or rather, letting himself enjoy it, this bit of her that she still shared with him. The jabs he took were brash and clumsy, which was just fine as Buffy seemed distracted herself, and that might have brassed him off were he not soaking in every second. But he was. Dawn being off with a study group made it easier, made him feel less like he was performing on a stage and trying not to let on just how much he relished the time he got to spend with the woman he loved. Drinking in her sweat, her arousal, knowing that he was responsible for putting it there, even if that was all he got. That the light in her eyes was light he'd given her. That she was flushed and panting because he'd made her flush and pant. He'd go home tonight, have himself a nice wank, and if he didn't hate himself too much after, perhaps meet her for patrol. Get the blood pumping all over again and indulge in the new normal they had somehow created together.

"Seems like you're somewhere else today, Slayer," he threw out, unable to keep from grinning as he rocked back a bit on his feet. "Fine way to give a fella the upper hand."

It didn't take long, really, but seeing as a couple of seconds meant the difference between life and death in a fight, that Buffy didn't snap back immediately had him instantly on edge. She shook her head and met his gaze, seeming to refocus, but he knew her well enough to see her mind was somewhere else. Maybe that was just as well. They'd been sparring like this for a minute now—could be she needed a reminder that she'd asked him to keep her on her toes. Make sure she was ready for the fight, whenever it actually arrived.

So he came at her hard, swung a fist at her head, and was only slightly mollified when she bobbed to safety. Only for a moment, though, for she lost her footing and provided him the perfect opening, and that did it. Killed his good mood. "Oi!" he snarled, shoving her against the balance beam that divided the room. "Wastin' your time, am I?"

"No," Buffy had the audacity to throw back, though she did catch the next punch he aimed at her face. That was something, at least. "Just *thinking*."

"This was your idea, as I recall. If you're not gonna bother to show up—"

"Hey," she snapped, her eyes flashing brilliantly, "I'm here, aren't I?"

Oh, that was rich. "No, you're bloody well not." Spike curled his lip and jerked his hand free. Took a step back to calm himself down, except bugger that—she needed a sodding wake-up call. He did her no favors by playing nice. At least that was what he told himself, panting a little as he boxed her in. Closer than he'd dare on most days—close enough to wonder at himself but too worked up in the head to slow down just

now. "You're not here *here*," he said, and though touching her was dangerous, he reached for her anyway. Then her warmth was under his fingertips, hot enough to blister. It wasn't much, just a tap at the side of her head, but it felt like a whole bloody lot, charged as he was. "Look at where you are, love. Got you cornered, don't I? You didn't even notice."

She held his gaze for a beat, then blinked and seemed to come to herself. Develop some sense of awareness, at least. Realize that there was an obstacle at her back and at her front and while neither was the insurmountable sort, especially for her, she would need to be truly present to fight her way out. "I'm distracted," she said in a tone that was almost a whine.

Yeah, like he couldn't tell that. "Distracted gets you dead. Thought you were over wishin' for it."

"I am."

Spike stared, not sure if he believed her. Wanting to, because god knows he didn't think he could survive losing her all over again, especially not now. "Then tell me, pet. Dangerous predator here." He pressed in closer, breathing her in more deeply. This was probably wrong, too—weak and selfish as everything else—but he was there and he couldn't step back just yet. There was a thrill to being in Buffy's space that he'd never gotten over and never would. "You gonna fight me or let me have the easy kill?"

She trembled a bit when she breathed out. "Fight."

"Right then. Show me how."

Something in her eyes went hard then bright, a flash he could have imagined but knew he hadn't. Then her hands were on his face and she was pulling him down. Stepping out of a dream, out of a memory, and this couldn't be happening but somehow it was. He knew that look the same as he did all her others. Knew what was coming next even, mad as it was.

"Bit like this," she whispered.

And then she was kissing him, and the world stopped turning. Everything stopped, his system not so much shocked as it was fried, leaving him to crack and splinter. There had been a line, firm and unmoving and permanent, as permanent as anything could be in this world, with Buffy on one side, Spike on the other. They could come close, they could catch each other's eye, they could trade words or barbs or punches or whatever else, but they could never do this. Never. Not again.

That was his truth, the one blessed thing in this world that he understood. The line existed and it could never be crossed.

Except she had crossed it. She was pressing into him, all hot and sweet and Buffy. Burning him so good with just her lips that all the things he knew and all the things he thought and the one thing that was absolutely true became a right mess. At that moment in time, Spike was certain he had never known anything of value or substance. All that mattered was his entire sodding life had led him where he was now, and it was glorious. The plunge. The fall. Knowing he was going to crash and not caring because the way down would be bloody brilliant.

It wasn't a surrender so much as a release. Something unlocked inside of him and

he couldn't shove it back, didn't want to, because Buffy was in his mouth again. Tearing at his lips with her teeth, her tongue, flooding him with the only thing better than memory. She was kissing him like he was oxygen, like she could have possibly wanted this as much as he had, craved it in any fashion the way he had, and that thought—the only one in his jumbled brain that he had any drive to hear—was beyond intoxicating. Spike had her by the hips the next second, fighting back the only way he knew how. Dragging her in, chasing her, his chest tight and his skin burning because it was pressed against her skin. Because her hands were on his face, then around his neck, and she was gasping into him between kisses, gulping down air then attacking him anew. And then, *god*, thrusting her hips forward the way she had at the hospital when he'd had his fangs in her. When he'd been inside of her again, only in a way he'd never let himself dream possible, and he had no control here. None whatsoever. The voice that had been there before had gone hoarse, so he thrust back and nearly sobbed when she answered him with a moan. A soft moan, yes, but a Buffy moan, one he played on repeat in the soundtrack of his mind but had still somehow forgotten how it felt to be the one to coax it out of her.

Then it wasn't enough. With Buffy, it could never be enough. He had to taste more, taste all of her, see if his memory had failed him in other ways. Replace those last horrible images with something decadent and beautiful. His body knew the moves, had memorized this song and dance a long bloody time ago, ready to perform on demand. Give her what she wanted, what she needed, what kept her coming to him. What he wanted and needed, too, if only in a different way. They both knew where this path would lead them. They always had.

It wasn't until he found himself tugging on her top that the other part of his brain kicked back into gear. That the reality of what he was doing collided with him as only reality could, like smashing hard into a brick wall.

This wasn't right. She couldn't want this. Not now. Not ever. Not with him. He had it wrong. He always had it wrong.

"Ask me again why I could never love you."

Spike tore from her with a lung-scratching gasp, stumbling on legs that shook so hard he had to grab the bloody balance beam. "Buffy," he said, not sure if he'd meant to say her name or if it was just a reflex. The way other men called out for God, he called out for her. "Fuck, I didn't mean—"

"I did," she said, stepping into him or tugging him back or both, and he was looking at her again—not really meaning to, terrified of what he'd see there, but unable to do anything else.

"I did, Spike," Buffy said again, panting. He knew the words but couldn't understand them, and hell would freeze over for good before she made anything clear. "Please. Don't."

"Don't?"

"Don't stop." Then she was against him again in full, her eyes on his as they never had been before. Not even when things had been at their best. "I want this. Please don't stop."

Bloody hell. She knew just how to make it hurt. Spike shook his head, pressing

his brow to hers. Remembering what it had felt like when this was how it had been between them. Never easy, but somehow effortless. Clear and decisive if nothing else. Spike wanting Buffy. Buffy wanting Spike, whether or not she'd admit it aloud. So they'd have each other, again and again. Until they stopped. Until she stopped.

Until everything had changed.

"Shouldn't," Spike murmured, the word coming out choked. "We shouldn't."

"Why?" she asked breathlessly, blinking at him as though she truly didn't understand. "You...you still love me, right?"

God, she really was trying to kill him. He pressed his eyes closed, trembling. "Yes," he said, and didn't let himself say more. That he would love her until he was dust, that loving her was sometimes his greatest achievement and his worst regret. That being near her like this was torture the likes of which would have done Angel proud. That sometimes he hated her for making him love her the way he did, keeping him tethered to her because there was no one else outside of Buffy Summers and never could be. In the end, *yes* was the simplest answer. The one that wouldn't break him to give her. "But Slayer—"

"Then please. Please, Spike."

It was the *please* that did it, had him taking her mouth before he could talk himself out of it. Maybe this had always been the destination for them, caught as they were in this cycle together. Buffy wanting and pushing him away. Buffy needing but holding him at arm's length. He was here again because he'd been here before and despite everything, couldn't find the will to leave. No matter what came next or how much it hurt, how much she was certain to break his bloody heart all over again. But she was asking, and she was here, and she smelled and felt so good, and he was nothing but weak when it came to her. Too weak to tell her no, to pull back, to deny himself kissing her or shuddering when she answered with a whimper. To stop himself from exploring her with his hands the way he had once. Cupping her neck, running his thumb over the place where his fangs had pierced her skin. Feeling her moan and gasp and thrust her hips against his, not retreating when she rubbed herself along his cock but thrusting back so she could feel just what she was playing with—maybe scare her back to her senses, but Buffy wasn't a woman who scared easily. Not when it came to this. This part they had mastered so long ago.

It was everything that came after that had her terrified. And this *after* was sure to put the others to shame. He knew that. Could probably feed her the argument she'd make before she had a chance to voice it herself.

Still, knowing this did not slow him down or convince him to stop. Not when he had Buffy under his hands for the first time in so long, her skin fire, her kisses fire, all of her bloody fire. And his, if only for the next handful of minutes. Arching into him as he dragged his fingers down her arms and up again, hesitating for only a hair before pressing his luck and stroking one of her breasts. Buffy answered with another moan, nodding without breaking her mouth from his, all soft encouragement. Then he was teasing her nipple through her top, swallowing her little reactionary cry and again letting her feel just how much he wanted her, half-delirious and half-frustrated but wholly hers.

"More," she whispered between kisses, sounding drunk and light. "Spike, please. I need..."

She didn't tell him what she needed—he could smell it as well as he always had. It wasn't fair that it happened like this, that it happened at all. That he'd managed to somehow land himself back where they had started. She was ready when he began venturing lower, down to the pull of that exquisite heat. And again, he knew just what he would feel when he slipped his fingers under the waistband of her slacks, exactly how she would jerk and gasp and hold onto him, just as sure as he knew what came next. He knew he'd go home regretting this and hating her and loving her so much he could burst—all that knowledge was there, waiting to embrace him after the high wore off, but he still groaned low in the back of his throat when he slipped his fingers over her sex, felt for himself just how wet she was. How ready. He'd been smelling her for weeks, watching her flush with arousal as she looked at him the way she had once before. It had been part of the trade, knowing that Buffy wanted him, and also knowing nothing could ever come of it. But somehow, here he was, drenched in her again. Holding her with his free arm when her legs gave a telling wobble, capturing her soft moans with his mouth and stroking deeper still. One line up the seam of her pussy, just barely nudging her clit through her folds, then down again. And still she held on, still she demanded more, and still he couldn't deny her—or himself because there was nothing in the world like feeling Buffy around his fingers. Except maybe feeling her around his tongue or his cock and god, he couldn't think like that but also he couldn't help himself. Nor could he help himself from muttering things like, "Fuck, I've missed you," as he pushed his fingers inside, as he felt her clamp down around him, dragging him in deeper, and he, ever helpless, let himself be dragged.

Buffy mewled and clutched tighter at him, rolling her hips in time with the thrusts of his hand. One leg wrapped around his waist, her breaths crashing against his mouth, and she was so hot he could cry. So hot he might. All slippery and silky and tight and perfect, familiar and new at the same time, his bright little star. His fiery sun. But not his at all, not ever, just for moments like this. Moments where she needed him to do what she couldn't, touch her as no one else ever had. Make her feel, bring her peace, before everything lapsed and she moved on.

It'd be all right if he didn't love her like he did. If he could walk away with his heart intact. But he did love her, and he couldn't walk away. So he'd just have this. The way she felt when she started to clench around him, the sounds she made the closer she got, how she dug her nails into his skin, tightened the grip she had on him, and muttered her soft pleas against his lips, and he gave. Stealing the last of the stolen kisses because he knew it wouldn't happen again after it stopped happening now, and he slid his thumb over her clit and pressed into her. And that was it. Buffy threw her head back and let go, spasming hard around his fingers, those muscles of hers squeezing him so tight he wanted to whimper, wanted to beg, wanted to spear her with his cock and feel it happen all over again, because there was nothing better than being inside of her when she came, knowing he was the one who had made it happen. That for a brief second, she wanted nothing but to be

right where she was. To be with him. That he had her in some way, if not the way that mattered.

Spike tried not to shake too much as he pulled his fingers out of her, colder now than he thought he'd ever been. That was the way it was with Buffy—one extreme or another. He could be fire incarnate and then frozen out within the span of the same heartbeat. Dropped. Discarded. Purpose served...until the next time, and there was always a next time, except not now. He couldn't do that again. No matter how amazing it felt in the moment, knowing she was trembling just for him. Old Spike might not have minded being used, but the new Spike, the one standing with her now, couldn't survive it.

If Buffy were aware of any of what was going on in his head, she didn't show it. Instead, she nudged her brow with his, a little laugh exploding off her lips. "Okay," she said at last, breathless. "That was not how I thought this would go."

He didn't know what to say. The most he could manage was a throaty, "Oh?"

She opened her eyes, her mouth still pulled into a little smile that had everything tightening once more. "I don't really know what I thought," she said, then pressed a hand between them. Down his chest and belly, lower, until that exquisite pressure was against his cock, and all bloody reasoning went out the window with the rest of his reserve. "Not like I had this planned, you know."

Spike sucked in a breath. "What's *this*?" he asked before he could help himself. "What the hell are we doing, Buffy?"

He expected to find at least some of his confusion or uncertainty in her eyes, but it wasn't there. All she gave him was a smile—the soft, half-smile he'd seen her give countless others, and his head spun even faster in trying to make sense of it. "I'm not sure yet," she said, then seized him by the belt and started unbuckling it with shaking hands. None of this was real and all of it was. "But I think I wanna find out," she went on, dragging down his zipper. "If you want to."

"If I want to?"

She nodded again, breathing hard, then pressed a kiss to his lips. "*Do* you want to?"

He opened his mouth, the ringing in his ears suddenly deafening. "Buffy..."

"I can stop if you want."

The thought was too much—all of it too much. Buffy against him, her hand still pressed between them, his cock hard and aching for her warmth as much as the rest of him, and the line that had governed his existence since he'd returned to town was suddenly gone. Everything was a tangle of confusion and want, waiting to be unraveled so he could see just how it was this was where he'd ended up today. If he'd known when he'd blinked awake that he would be here with Buffy in his mouth and on his fingers and saying things that, not too long ago, would have had him certain his most desperate longing was close to being fully realized. And she was asking if he wanted her to stop when all he could do was not lose his sodding head that it had started in the first place.

Maybe he answered without meaning to, or maybe she saw it on his face, but Buffy was in motion the next second. Kissing him again and wrapping her hot hand

around his cock, and if there had been any thought left, the feel of her skin there would have burned it away. Spike hissed and rolled his head back, and her lips were on his throat, skating down, down, and she pulled and pumped the way he remembered. Just as he remembered. Only there was so much more now, and the *more* was going to crush him. Make him dust before he had the chance to marvel at how any of this felt.

Then her mouth was around him, sweltering and torrid, and Spike was gone. Completely gone. The last thought in his mind fizzled out and he decided he didn't give a damn, because those thoughts were connected to reality and reality wasn't this. Reality wasn't Buffy on her knees, sucking his cock deeper into all that wet heat, exploring him with her tongue, squeezing the bit of him she couldn't take in. Reality wasn't Buffy murmuring soft encouragement, vibrating her lips against his skin. It wasn't the sensation of her trying to drink him down, hollowing her cheeks, bobbing her head, licking and pulling his foreskin around the head before rolling it back the way he'd taught her. Somehow, he ended up with her hair in his fist, his hips pushing forward of their own volition, watching as his slick cock pumped between her lips. And it was too much—way too much, and it was going to be over, and he was coming. Coming before he could bark a warning, before his stupid bloody head clued back in. That tingling at the base of his spine, his balls growing tight, and Buffy on her knees and somehow he was spilling himself down her throat and she was with him. She was *with him*. Softer than a dream, which was exactly what this felt like. A dream. The bittersweet sort where he knew he was dreaming and that none of what he experienced here would matter out there.

Buffy didn't do this. She never had. The moves, yes, he'd been here before, but not the feeling behind it. Not the soft, breathless laugh when his cock slipped from her mouth or the nudge of her brow against his thigh. Definitely not the kiss she brushed there, or above his navel, or up his shirt until her lips were pressed against his again. Buffy didn't kiss him just to kiss him—it always went somewhere. Always had a purpose. And when they were done, *she* was done, only that wasn't now. Now her tongue was in his mouth, her arms around his neck, and she was kissing him the way she had before. Only also not as before because there had never been a *before* like this. Never.

And Spike was done fighting it—done trying to suss out what was real and what wasn't. If this was a phantom of a future he would never have, let him indulge. She was so warm and sweet and kissing him like she liked him, and he'd never had that. Never felt her like this. It was too good to give up for anything, even his own bloody sanity.

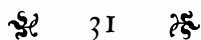
It was Buffy, and he would take all he could get.

"Buffy, there's a phone call for you."

The voice cut through the haze in his head as little else could. Grounded and real and definitely not something that would have a starring role in his fantasies, waking or not. Spike wrenched his lips away from Buffy's with a hard gasp, half-expecting the whole room to tip over with the impact, but it didn't. She was still there, in his arms, dragging in hard, deep breaths as her lust-darkened eyes began to clear.

"A what?" she asked, looking over Spike's shoulder. She didn't make to pull away, though. Shove him off or put any distance between them. Make like they had been doing anything other than what they had been doing.

"There's a man on the phone asking for you," Anya said again, sounding thoroughly indifferent. "He told me to tell you it's about Angel."



IT'S EASY TO BE EASY AND FREE WHEN IT DOESN'T MEAN ANYTHING

FOR THE MOST PART, BUFFY DIDN'T BELIEVE IN SIGNS.

Well, that wasn't true. She did believe in proper noun Signs. They were markedly different from regular noun signs, usually a lot less subtle, and tended to include prophecies regarding her imminent death or the apocalypse. But regular noun signs? Not so much. Sure, on more days than not, it felt like the universe was out to get her, but she'd always thought that was more par for the course when it came to being the Slayer. The demand on her was greater than it was on others, ergo her life was appropriately more fucked up, and when things went bad, they went Murphy's Law bad.

So getting a call about Angel right after she'd made the decision—this potentially devastating decision—to stop looking and start leaping was probably not a proper noun Sign and more just a weird coincidence. Not that her love life hadn't involved Signs before—it had just been a while. A long while. Back when the Powers had been trying to warn her about a curse she'd been about to break. Their methods then had been more direct, too, involving prophetic dreams and all sorts of things she could identify as meaning Bad Times Ahead for Buffy.

Mystical portents to misery ahead did not, say, come in the form of an ill-timed phone call unless the cosmic string-pullers had gotten super lazy over the last few years.

And dammit, Buffy didn't want it to be a Sign. Going for it with Spike, scary and nerve-wracking as it was, had felt good. Like she'd found one area in her life where she could finally breathe a little easier. No more strange limbo where she was trying to pretend the feelings she had were gone, because not only had that backfired like crazy, it had been exhausting in ways she couldn't afford to be exhausted. Deciding to embrace it rather than run from it was ultimately about her own survival. Never mind that she would never know what they could be if she didn't try. Maybe things

would be different if *not knowing* was the sort of thing she could live with—if she wasn't curious at all. If the feelings that had once been love had been even a little bit weaker, and therefore easier to disregard.

But they weren't and so here she was, her insides all twisted as she made her way into the Magic Box proper on shaky legs. Orgasm-shaky. Not wake-up-call-that-your-relationship-is doomed shaky.

Buffy hurried to put on a grateful smile when Anya scooped up the phone behind the wrap desk, hoping she wasn't making it super obvious that she was jittery but also knowing she wasn't a skilled enough poker player to hide her tells. "Thanks," she mouthed.

"So you and Spike, huh?" Anya asked flatly. The bull by the horns approach would be a lot less intimidating if Buffy weren't the bull. "Starting up again?"

"Really not the time to talk about it."

"Think the time to talk about it is before I walk in on you two having wild monkey sex back there."

There were times Anya's characteristic bluntness was refreshing. When Buffy's nerves were already doing the tango was not among them. "For one," she replied with forced patience, "there was no wild monkey sex and for two, hello, hypocrite much? There is literal video evidence of you getting horizontal not five feet from here. At least I was in a place where customers aren't gonna just wander in."

It was an excellent point, one Anya couldn't refute if she wanted to keep both of those legs she was standing on, but that didn't stop Buffy from experiencing a rush of jealousy—old and hashed out as it was—as soon as the words were out. So not fair.

"I just think I should be informed if there's a possibility of sex on my property," Anya retorted. "There are certain things some people *don't* want to see, you know."

Something in her voice lent Buffy pause. "You're not bothered by that, right? Me and Spike?"

Anya frowned, clearly confused. "What, because we boinked?" she asked loudly. "No. That was never about Spike. I thought you knew that. Don't get me wrong, he's a decent lover—"

"Really with not needing to hear this—"

"—but I needed some old-fashioned justice, and he was a convenient way to get that. I just don't appreciate people having sex in my shop when I'm not."

"We weren't having sex."

"You were certainly on the way there. His pants were almost off."

Buffy opened her mouth, closed it, then furrowed her brow and shook her head. "Do we really need to talk about this now?" she asked, lifting the receiver. "I thought this call was important."

"It's also important not to make the shop owner feel lousy about her own lack of orgasms by rudely having them in the next room when anyone could walk in. That's all I'm saying." Anya scowled a second longer before rolling her eyes and jerking her chin at the phone. "Take your call. Just think about the impact your actions have on others."

Well, there was no good way to respond to that—at least none that occurred to

her at the moment. "I'll do that," she said faintly, and lifted the receiver to her ear before anything else could distract her. "Hello?"

"Buffy," a tired man replied. "Thank god. We have a serious problem."

It took a second to place the voice. She knew she knew it, but it had been long enough since she'd heard it that her brain didn't automatically connect the dots. "Wesley?"

"Yes. I hate to skip the pleasantries, but time is of the essence."

Buffy released a deep breath. Her heart had started doing that racing thing and the rest of her just wanted to tell him she had enough of her own problems without adding any more to the roster. But she knew she couldn't. Not if he was calling about Angel. "What's going on?"

"It's Angel. Or rather Angelus. He's back."

"Who's back?"

"Angelus."

This was supposed to mean something, she could hear it in his voice, but it didn't. Buffy frowned, irritation and panic molding into one. "I don't understand."

"His soul, Buffy. Angel's soul is gone."



IT HAD BEEN her greatest fear for a long time. Even after Angel had moved away—removed himself from the temptation that was her—she'd find herself wondering if that other version of him would show up one day. Twisted smile, dancing eyes, and ready to pick up where he'd left off. She wouldn't know until then, until he was in front of her. He'd have made sure of that by killing those who might give her warning. Killing Willow, too, for obvious reasons. No take backs. This time it'd be for real.

Buffy didn't know when the switch had occurred, when Angel going bad had stopped being her greatest fear. It just had. Sure, she would have the occasional nightmare, but even those were less intense. More like a song she'd played so many times it sounded worn when it came through the speakers. A bruise that had healed enough to only feel pain when it was agitated, then once it was gone, not at all. Nothing left behind but the memory of what it had felt like.

Angel hadn't been the worst thing that had happened to her for a long time. And amid all the living and sometimes dying she'd been doing, worrying about the possibility of what might happen if he lost his soul again had slipped off her radar. Become a relic of the past rather than a clear and present danger.

Until now, this moment, with her ears ringing with everything Wesley had told her and the rest of her kinda numb. Her first instinct was to hop in the car and start eating up miles between here and LA, but she knew she couldn't do that. There were plans to make. Conversations to have. People to inform. It wasn't like the Council was going to accept it if she asked for a timeout, and Angel being soulless and on the warpath was the perfect opportunity for them to swoop in and attack. God, for all she knew, maybe soulless Angel was part of their master plan. Who was to say it wasn't? *Think a crazy slayer is bad? Well, wait until you get a hold of this blast from the past.*

Hell of a time to start things up with Spike again.

And god, Spike. Buffy didn't know what to say to him. The buzz of earlier, those blissful moments when the world had been empty save for the two of them, at once felt distant and inaccessible, like they had happened in a dream. But she knew they hadn't and inconvenient as it was, she couldn't pretend otherwise. This was her mess.

Maybe her Sign.

But she didn't want it to be.

Buffy steeled herself as she approached the studio, her nerves flutter and the rest of her scattered. It wasn't like she'd really had a script prepared for what to say to him even if they hadn't been interrupted—it had all been so fast and intense, more a surrender than a decision. That need to stop fighting herself and seize control of the one thing in her life that she actually had power over. Things like what to tell him and what this meant for their relationship had been a problem for her future self to settle, and not really a problem at all because it was Spike. She knew how he felt. Had for years.

Angel complicated things. He always did.

Spike was where she had left him, facing her with either hand braced against the balance beam at his back. He'd straightened his clothes since she'd stepped out but not all the way—there was a little stretch of wrinkled fabric where she'd pulled on his shirt while trying to undo his belt, and for some reason, seeing it made everything real in ways it hadn't been before. She'd made that call, taken this leap with him and herself, and there was no going back to the relationship they'd rebuilt. One way or another, that version of them was gone forever and the next version had yet to be defined.

Put like that, the prospect was rather terrifying.

She stood there for a beat, trying out words to start the conversation she needed to have and rejecting them just as quickly. Spike just let her—something else she was slowly becoming accustomed to, that he seemed determined in all matters to follow her lead—before either sensing she was lost or running to the end of his patience. He didn't bother to hide what was going on in his head when he looked up, rather regarded her with confusion and longing and the spark of something that might have been hope. It was enough to make her chest wrench like her heart was trying to break free, which was probably the right idea. She didn't want to be here, either.

"Everythin' all right with the Great Forehead?" he finally asked, his tone carefully neutral.

And just like that, the words that had eluded her just seconds ago flooded the landscape of her mind, overwhelming her with the urge to tell him everything—just blurt it out in a rush without worrying about what she sounded like. Without worrying about anything except not carrying the sudden burden that was *this* by herself. He would let her too. She was starting to think there was little Spike wouldn't let her ask of him—the stuff he liked and the stuff he didn't, and all the stuff that made up the space between those points. But as quickly as it came, Buffy managed to rein the urge back. Forcing her confused state of mind on him when he was already confused wouldn't help matters. Plus, she really didn't want to have to say any of this

more than once. “Uhh, not really. I’m gonna need to go to LA,” she said instead. Then, when Spike’s expression started to fall, she hurried to add, “It’s kind of an emergency situation and time is, well, time.”

Another long, tense beat. The air between them seemed to harden.

“Well, don’t let me stand in the way, then.” Spike rose to his full height, slid his hands into the pockets of the duster that had spent more than half a year living in her closet. “I’ll be off—”

“Wait.” Buffy stumbled forward on legs that had gone all shaky again. “I need to give the others the rundown. What’s going on and... I kinda need you there too. Especially since I’m gonna be gone for a couple of days.”

“Days now?”

“I’ll explain at the house.” She hesitated, licked her lips, then decided, ah, to hell with it. “It’s not just that I need you there. I mean, I do. Not exactly the best time for any of this to happen—*this* being Angel and stuff, not this meaning”—she gestured wildly between the two of them, her cheeks starting to warm—“because, you know, Council and Gray still being MIA and probably ready to swoop in the second I hit the town line, and if this were anything but an actual emergency I would tell Wesley to just stuff it or something. But it is an emergency and the kind that could possibly become our problem anyway.”

He stared at her, unmoving. Waiting, maybe, for her to elaborate on what exactly that emergency might look like, but she hadn’t changed her mind. In fact, the more she thought about it, the more telling him in front of a room of other people seemed like the safest way forward. Less chance of getting sidelined into a conversation about Angel himself.

It was her fault, being all over the place. Not that there was exactly a crash course on how to break it to the guy you’re currently interested in that you need to rush to the side of the last guy you’d really been nuts over, but there had to be a way to be less flail about it.

“Please,” she said after a beat. “I didn’t... I *do* need you there for just general knowingness. But more importantly, I *want* you there. Please.”

Something in his gaze softened. “You know you have me. Not any bloody good at saying no to you, even when I should.”

At once, every tired muscle in her body went drum tight. What did that mean? Had he not wanted what had happened earlier? Had he just gone with it, fallen into rhythm with her the way he had so many times last year? The thought had her stomach twisting and acid climbing up the back of her throat, but she had no time to entertain it or ask herself these sorts of questions. All things her and Spike had to be put on hold until after she’d dealt with Angel because that was the way her life went. Slayer first, Buffy last.

“Okay,” she said, grateful when her voice came out even. No emotional outbursts for Buffy. She did not get the luxury. “Thank you.”

And that was that. She turned and started back toward the shop end of the building, her fingertips tingling, her heart doing spastic acrobatics and her head fuzzy. It was a bit like the way she used to feel after taking a test she’d been dreading—

knowing she hadn't done enough to prepare but also knowing she'd done as much as she could while balancing everything else, and left with nothing but the wait until she received her grade. But the wait was never quiet for Buffy. She always had more demanding her attention.

Like grabbing Anya before she could lock up and head home, explaining that there was a Scooby emergency and like it or not, demon or not, Anya was still a Scooby and needed to be there. To Buffy's surprise, though, Anya didn't argue or resist, instead favored her with a smile that was almost shy. And being that shy was not something Anya Jenkins ever was, Buffy was thrown long enough that she started wondering again about the state of the group dynamic ever since all the disaster of the previous year. Except she didn't have time to unravel that thread. When Angel had last been running around without a soul, he'd decided to end the world—not only that, he'd come really damn close to doing it. She couldn't hope to survive fighting the Council if she was also trying to stop an apocalypse.

The one good thing about living in a damn near constant state of tension was how quickly everyone rallied once she let them know there was a problem. After assuring Anya that she was an invaluable part of the gang, Buffy made a mad dash for the phone and started punching in numbers. First to Xander's workplace on the off-chance that she could catch him before he headed out for the evening, then to the house so Willow knew not to let Dawn make plans with her friends—not that *plans* had been had all that much since the hospital stay, but Dawn was getting just restless enough to do something reckless. In both instances, all Buffy had to do was say *Scooby meeting* and *urgent* for everything to start falling in place. Xander volunteered to grab dinner—or Scooby snacks, as he called it—on his way to the house. Willow said she'd gather all the safe magical supplies she had on hand, and Dawn embraced her inner Summers and kicked out all her friends without ceremony. Buffy knew—she was on the line listening to the expulsion in real time. And all that was left was to get home and share the good news.

"What's wrong?" Dawn asked by way of greeting the second Buffy stepped over the threshold. "Did you find that psycho?"

"My money's on the Council," Xander added, coming to crowd the space behind Dawn in the opening to the living room. He didn't so much as flinch in Anya's direction when his ex followed Buffy inside. "They've been quiet *way* too long. Maybe got sick of their girl screwing up every time she went against the Buffster so they're deciding to up the ante."

"Or did they find Giles?" Willow asked, rounding into the entry hall, looking even paler than usual. "Please say they haven't found Giles."

"It's not Giles. Or the Council. Or Gray." Buffy blew out a breath and tried not to tremble when she felt Spike come into the house. And it was a true sensation—the back of her neck tingled, and the rest of her body slingshotted into that space of heightened awareness. He closed the front door, the last one in, and caught her eyes before she could pretend she hadn't been watching him. "Look," she said, turning back to the others. "I don't have a lot of time and Willow and I have places to be."

The worry on Willow's face warped into uncertainty. "W-we do?"

"Yeah." Buffy hedged, her pulse suddenly pounding in her ears. It shouldn't be possible to experience déjà vu for something that had never happened, but she was. "Wesley called. Former watcher Wesley. Angel is... His soul is gone."

If she was lucky, this was when she'd wake up. Her alarm clock would start to blare and she'd find herself blinking sleepily at the ceiling, head spinning with the echoes of an old nightmare. If she wasn't lucky, she'd stay in the dream long enough for the accusations to start. Xander calling her a slut or Willow asking how she could be so careless or Dawn screaming that she ruined everything. That was the way it went more often than not, at least, and as much fun as it wasn't, there was some comfort in its reliability. But this wasn't a dream. All she had were the blank stares on her friends' faces, like there was literally nothing she could have said that would have shocked them more.

Then the air split with a hard laugh. A cackle. When she turned, Spike was bent over, bracing his hands on his knees and releasing torrents of manic laughter. The sight had her stunned stupid for a stretch, the neurons in her brain struggling to decipher what the hell she was looking at. It probably didn't last as long as it seemed, because it seemed to last forever, but eventually he got a hold of himself and straightened again, his eyes shining with what looked like tears.

Buffy had about a thousand questions but only managed the one. "You wanna share with the class what's so funny?"

"Not particularly, no," Spike replied, making a poor effort to school his features. The look he gave her was one of utter defiance, even if his lips were still twitching. "Though I'd've thought the berk would've gotten the sodding thing nailed down by now."

"Or just learned to keep it in his pants," Xander said under his breath, pulling her attention away from the vampire. He had the decency to look chagrined when she turned her glare on him. "Sorry, Buff."

"He didn't lose it," Buffy said, not trying to keep the agitation out of her voice. Apparently, her friends were good to just ignore the crazy laughter stuff and maybe she should just roll with it. At least no one was yelling at *her*. "They... There's this creature, I guess. Wesley called it The Beast. It knew Angel—or Angelus."

"Angelus?" Willow asked, her brow knitting.

She nodded, pinched the bridge of her nose. "Yeah. I guess since Angel moved away, he's started calling the soulless version of him by a different name."

"That sounds confusing."

"Or convenient," Spike muttered, the manic grin gone. "And what the bugging hell does that mean, *it knew Angelus*? Don't tell me the wanker's now spreading some rot about not knowin' what he gets up to when he's off the leash."

Buffy took a step back, every one of her hackles doing their hackly thing. Something was very much not right—something beyond the obvious. "I don't know," she said, not bothering to temper her growing impatience. "Wesley said that Angel didn't have any memory of this Beast thing, so they decided to see if he did without a soul."

"So they removed it?" Dawn demanded. "With no plan on getting it back? How dumb are they?"

All very valid questions. "There was a plan to get it back. They had it in a jar, or something, and were going to put it back once they asked Angel—*Angelus* for info on the Beast."

"Because soulless Angel is so accommodating when it comes to helping someone out," Xander said dryly.

Yeah, that was a whole other can of worms that she didn't have time to explore. "They had a cage built but he got out somehow and the soul went missing around the same time. And no, they don't think Angel took it, but who the hell knows. They need help bringing him back in and keeping him there until they can find it and put it back where it belongs, which is where we come in." Buffy blew out a breath and shifted her focus to Willow. "I get him in the cage. You help find the soul. Once we have it, we can curse him again. Then I'm guessing there will be a bunch of yelling at them for being dumb enough to have done that in the first place before we come home, but that's the situation. And while we're gone"—she shifted once more—"Spike and Anya, I'll need you to make sure Dawn—"

"I can't," Willow blurted, though, before she could get any further. "I'm sorry. I can't. Not this."

Buffy blinked, the momentum she'd been building coming to the grinding, screeching kind of halt. "You can't?"

"No," Willow said, shaking her head hard. "This is the kind of magic I can't do. And I shouldn't need to. Can't the guy who took it out put it back in?"

There hadn't been many times since their last trip to Los Angeles that Buffy had needed to call in a magical favor, beyond the Gray-alarm system and the location spells, and each time, she'd been careful. Made sure it wasn't anything like what she'd asked of Willow at the prison. Everything had clear parameters and wouldn't work just by using magic willy-nilly. That Willow would draw a line at the curse made absolutely no sense—it was the first bit of magic she'd ever done. It couldn't be all that dangerous. "If said guy's neck weren't in two pieces, sure," she said slowly. "But this is Angel. You know he goes after the people who can put the soul back in. It's what he did the last time. And yeah, that's scary, but—"

"No, Buffy, you don't get it." Willow went still, then inhaled sharply. "It's...it's a curse."

"Will—"

"A *curse*, Buffy. Curses are dark magic. Even ones like this, that have a net positive result. You're asking me to perform *dark* magic, and I can't do that." She shook her head again and backed up a step, as though to distance herself from the suggestion as a whole. "Not now, at least. Maybe if... I don't know. I don't know if I'll ever be able to do that kind of magic again, but it's not worth it. Angel's scary when he's evil, yeah, but I don't think it counts as bragging if I say I am scarier. And ending the world is a lot easier for me than it would be for him."

Everything in Buffy plummeted. Her stomach. Her heart. Even the ceiling, it seemed, taking the floor with it. "Oh," she said faintly. "Oh."

"We can find someone though," Willow said in a rush. "Someone who's not me. I mean, I have the text of the curse and everything. And contacts."

"In LA? You mean your magical addict people?" Xander asked. Good. At least someone was keeping up. "Maybe this is a stupid question, but wouldn't they have the same problem?"

Willow waved a hand at him. "I'm not talking about the people in MAA. But Callista—my friend in England. She's...well, not a member of the coven that powered up Giles when I was all wicked witchy since she's technically in recovery too, but she has contacts there. So they might be able to figure something out. Find someone local who can work the curse without possibly also going all apocalyptic on us."

Some of Buffy's growing panic started to ebb. Some, not all, and not as quickly as it had come. "Okay," she said, nodding and trying to regain her footing. She needed a new path forward, and time was not on her side. Among other things, she'd been comforted by the thought that she wouldn't have to go to LA and face Angel on her own, but there was no sense in Willow coming with her just for moral support. Especially considering...well, everything else. "Then I need you here," she said a moment later. "Protection magic isn't dark, is it? In case anything happens with the Council. Or if Gray decides to take another swing at Dawn or go after Xander—"

"No, protection magic is definitely not dark. A—at least the sort I'd use," Willow agreed readily, the tense lines of her face going soft, along with her eyes and shoulders and everything else. "I can help here. Whatever you need."

Whatever she needed except the thing she needed the most. It wasn't the most charitable thought to have, but god, Buffy couldn't help herself. And she couldn't voice it, either—couldn't push, because not only had she promised she wouldn't, doing so simply wouldn't be right. Or smart.

"I need a minute," Buffy said, withdrawing from the circle her friends had formed. Then, without knowing what she meant to do until the words were tumbling out, "Spike. Can I talk to you?"

She didn't wait for his answer, just turned and walked into the dining room, arms wrapped around herself, her mind spinning a thousand miles an hour. Stumbling over possibilities and concerns and images from those nightmares, old and new, and pulsing with that steady thrum of dread that had taken residence in her chest the second Anya had come to her with news of a phone call. Riding the rush of what had come before, too, because that had been the closest she'd felt to herself in a long time. Uncertainty still there, yes, but pushed aside for the moment. Appeased by the comfort of making a decision that meant the end of one thing and maybe the beginning of something else.

It would be easy to let herself believe she'd had it wrong, and she *was* being punished. Or if not punished, at least being issued a cosmic reminder of what she risked by involving herself with another vampire. A vampire who might not even want what she'd tried to restart earlier. She hadn't forgotten what he'd said when she'd asked him to accompany her home or the way he'd looked when he'd said it. The things that might mean—all the things she wasn't ready to consider. A world where Spike didn't want her was one she didn't know how to navigate.

Not the time to think about that, but it never was. Willow had thrown water on

the one plan she had and left her grasping at whatever was closest. That just happened to be Spike.

Buffy braced herself and turned, ready when he stepped into the room, wearing that stupid guarded look that he'd spent the summer perfecting. And though it wasn't any more fair than anything else going on—she had kinda thrown herself at him without discussing it first—its presence, combined with the bizarre gigglefit that had answered her soulless Angel announcement, had her nerves straining all over again.

But this wasn't supposed to be an argument. Not that she knew what *this* was supposed to be just yet, as she had firmly entered *making it up as she goes along* territory, but arguing with him, being frustrated or annoyed, was counterproductive.

"I'm not sorry," Buffy said, her heart beginning to thunder again. "For starters. But I can't really talk more about it now. The you and me stuff. Not with this going on."

Spike didn't reply, and god, that was unnerving. Especially when she considered all the times she hadn't been able to get him to shut up.

"I've been feeling things. For you. Distracting things."

He arched an eyebrow, then finally said something. "Thought you couldn't talk about it."

"I can't," she agreed. Great. Now her cheeks were going hot. All of her was. "I can't *talk* about it because I'm still working it out, but you deserve to know what I've worked out so far. That whatever it is, it's not what it was last year. It's not me using you. It's not... It's not hiding or anything. I've just been feeling things and those things aren't going away. So I made with the lepage and while I'm not sorry about it, I know it's probably confusing and I should've done a temperature check before I got carried away."

There was nothing for a beat. Then he snickered.

"Spike?"

"Confusing? That's what you think it is?"

"Is it...*not* confusing?"

"Only thing that's confusin' me at the moment is why we're havin' this bloody conversation now. Shouldn't you be halfway to Los Angeles, ridin' to dear ol' grand-pap's rescue?" Spike arched an eyebrow, not ducking or flinching away when she leveled a glare at him. "Serious question, Slayer. What are you playin' at?"

She swore he was the most infuriating man on the planet, even more so when she knew he was right. Her head should be anywhere except where it was now, but dammit, it wasn't like she had planned any of this. And didn't it say something—something big—that she cared enough to even pull him aside to talk? That she *wasn't* rushing off the way she had in the past because, hey, maybe she had learned her lesson? Maybe she knew exactly what that would look like? Or maybe going for it with Spike had been the only thing keeping her from spiraling in a world that had gone mad and she needed that even more now than she had when she'd made the dumb, brash, impulsive decision she had back at the studio.

"I'm sorry I read it wrong," Buffy said, trying for calm she didn't feel. For

anything, really, aside from the hysterical screaming between her ears. She couldn't afford to lose what was left of her shit over Spike, but if she did, she had no one to blame but herself. Herself and the stupid feelings that refused to go away. "I thought... I thought maybe you wanted what I did." And then, because she couldn't help herself, "It sure seemed like it back there."

For a long second, Spike just looked at her, then he exhaled and rolled his head back. "Of course I want that," he muttered. "I've never wanted anything else. It's just not that simple, is it?"

"What's not that simple?"

"You, for starters. You think I don't know how the rest of this plays out?" He straightened, meeting her eyes again. "I told you before, I want all of it. All of you. Just got around to acceptin' that's never gonna happen and you bloody knock me off balance the way you did earlier. And somehow I forget that this is it—all I get in the end are glimpses. Little flashes of what it might be like to have everything."

"That's not what that was."

"No." He drew in a breath, an almost tragic smile flitting across his lips. "Know that. Doesn't change what I want, though."

"And you don't think I want the same thing?"

"I think you do. Just not with me."

Buffy balled her hands into fists, her nails digging into her palms. "I just told you it wasn't like it was before. I couldn't do that again. Not after everything." She paused. Then decided, what the hell. It wasn't like this conversation could get any more awkward. "Is it Angel? Is it me going to Los Angeles? Because if it is, I don't know what you want me to say. It's not like I can let him run around like that. Not if there's a way to—"

"No, 'course not," he said shortly—too shortly, and from the way he immediately looked away, he knew it. "But I wager I know how that goes, too."

"How *what* goes?"

"This sodding dance with him. Once the soul's back in, all's forgiven. No matter what he did."

"That's not fair."

"Know it's not." For some reason, his agreeing with her just made it all worse. And maybe he saw that, the way he saw so many other things, for his eyes softened and some of the wall he'd hastily put back together crumbled. Not all of it but enough that she thought she might have caught a glimpse of him waiting on the other side. The Spike who wasn't relying on armor to keep himself protected. "You'll never feel for me the way I do for you, love," he said. "I know it now. Same as I know I don't wanna be a bleeding substitute for what you can't have. Even if it isn't like it was before. Don't think I could bear havin' just some of you."

Her heart twisted again, the air suddenly seeming too thin to drag into her lungs. "It's not *some*," she said hoarsely. "That's not what I want either. But I can't tell you what this is before I know it, myself. Are you saying you don't even want to try?"

Spike sucked in his cheeks and looked away, his jaw hard. He didn't reply though, and maybe that was answer enough.

Either way, she had already wasted too much time on this. Buffy shoved down the burning in her throat, gave her eyes a cursory wipe just in case they got any ideas, then shook her head and started back toward the others and the crisis at hand. The one that was most definitely not her love life, no matter how often that seemed to involve vampires and souls and the debris they left behind.

The gang had decided to move the conversation into the living room while Buffy had been busy getting her heart trampled. Good. Hopefully that meant none of them had heard any of what she'd been saying so she wouldn't have to answer questions. She found Xander and Anya on the couch, Dawn between them like a living buffer, and Willow in the chair on the other side of the coffee table. They were talking quietly—another good sign—though they broke almost instantly when Buffy stepped in to join them. She would try not to read too much into that.

"I think I've got something," Willow announced. Her tone was bright and her eyes brighter. "There's a spell I was looking into a couple of years ago before Glory learned Dawn was the Key. It was really complicated...*then*...but I think I can handle it now."

Buffy blew out a breath and crossed her arms. "Okay."

"Essentially, it's this kind of concealment charm. Anyone who doesn't know where Dawn is, for instance, won't be able to find her unless she lets them."

"What I wouldn't have given for a spell like that," Xander mused. "I would never have gone to geometry."

"Which was another one of the reasons Tara and I decided to stop tinkering," Willow admitted. Her voice dipped, the way it always did when she mentioned Tara, but she didn't linger. Just straightened her shoulders and plowed on ahead. "But we have bigger problems now and worrying about Dawn learning school-skippy magic is not one of them."

Dawn rolled her eyes and sank back against the cushions. "You know, I've been a model student all year, but you say things like that and it makes me wonder why I bother." She gave an exaggerated huff, then shifted her attention to Buffy, and the teenage derision fell away from her face. "Uhh, everything okay? You don't look so good."

Buffy pressed her lips together, stiffened when her vamp tinglies announced Spike's presence at her back. Wondering briefly if he felt her the same way she felt him, and if so, how he could stand it. "I'm fine," she said, focusing again on Willow. "So you think you can work this spell so that Gray doesn't know where Dawn is?"

"I was actually thinking for all of us," her friend replied. She seemed to be making an effort not to preen. "It wouldn't last but maybe three days with the ingredients I have on hand, and all that's assuming I can get it to work, but I think I can. I'm... uhh...*way* more powerful than I was two years ago. And it also wouldn't be just Gray who couldn't find us. If the Council decides to move in that time, we'll all be MIA. I'm thinking we could take Dawn and get a room somewhere just until you get back."

"And I was saying that seeing as I lost months of revenue after my shop was destroyed, I refuse to close it because of some slayer," Anya said pointedly. "She'll know where to find me regardless."

"And as *I* told *you*, we're more concerned with, you know, the people who don't have super strength advantage against a slayer," Willow replied. Her smile had become a bit strained the way it often did when she was fighting to keep her cool around Anya. "I'm pretty sure I can work this. We'll just need to make arrangements to not be anywhere super obvious, or that'll kind of defeat the whole purpose. But I think missing a couple of days of work or school right now isn't the end of the world."

"And you would know," Anya grumbled.

"Oh, so skipping school is fine when it's your idea," Dawn added. "Who's a bad influence now?"

If Willow responded in kind to either of them, Buffy didn't hear it. The wheels in her head were turning again, and probably in ways she couldn't afford for them to turn. But hell, she was in this far, so why bother keeping score anymore? Even if it was a bad idea—maybe even the worst idea she'd had—there was some sense to it, too. A beat she could follow and defend even if she knew it was a smoke screen. The fact remained that she would be a liability to herself if she went into this Angel hunt with her thoughts on all screwy, and as avoiding the issue would likely just lead to more issues, she had to confront it in order to survive.

"Good. This is good, because Spike's going with me," she announced before she could second-guess herself. "To LA."

"He is?" Dawn asked, straightening.

"I'm what?" Spike echoed at her back.

Buffy nodded, ignoring the sudden ringing in her ears or the heat that had risen to her cheeks. "Yeah. I'm going to need all the help I can get in finding Angel. He was hard enough to predict the first time, and there are a lot more places to hide in LA than Sunnydale." She shifted so that she wasn't standing directly in front of the vampire she'd voluntold for this trip. "This spell of yours lasts three days?" she asked, looking pointedly at Willow and ignoring the impulse to look anywhere else.

Willow nodded. It wasn't exactly a confident nod, but close enough. "Assuming I do it right, yeah."

"Yeah, I'm hoping to be back well before that wears off," she said, her pulse thundering so hard it almost hurt. And then she had no choice and turned to meet Spike's incredulous stare. "You know Angel better than anyone—especially soulless Angel. Not to mention, you have the whole vampire super smell going for you. I wouldn't have the first idea where to look, and with it being all permanent midnight in LA right now, it's gonna be a party for demons across the city. We'll grab him, stay long enough to make sure he gets his soul back, then leave. Three days."

Buffy held his gaze with a mixture of brash defiance and dread, hoping her misgivings were disguised but knowing they weren't. Spike had a way of seeing more than she wanted him to. He always had.

"You were there the last time," she said after a beat. "You were how I got close enough to kill him. I need that again."

"Last time? Do you know what she's talking about?" Xander stage-whispered to Willow. Out of her periphery, Buffy caught her friend shushing him in response.

"Right," Spike replied loudly, dropping his shoulders with a hard sigh. "Suppose time's a wastin', then. When's it you're wantin' to head out?"

"After we see that Willow's spell works the way she thinks it will," she answered, not bothering to hide her relief that he wasn't questioning her. Not that she'd thought he would, but then, very little with Spike was going as she'd expected anymore. "Angel or no Angel, I'm not leaving until I know everyone here is safe. While you're getting that ready, Will, I'll pack an overnight bag, and Spike? You should grab some blood and whatever weapons you think we'll need. I'd like to be on the road in less than an hour."

Once more, Buffy didn't wait for an answer. Experience had taught her it was harder to stall or make excuses or not do as instructed if you left the room.

And if she stayed still, there was every chance someone would throw a wrench in the plan she'd scraped together.

Or she'd realize why dragging Spike with her to LA was a bad idea, even if it felt like a good one.

AND NIGHT AFTER NIGHT, WE PRETEND IT'S ALL RIGHT

HE WAS FUCKED. THAT WAS THAT. NO MATTER WHAT CHOICES HE MADE, WHAT HE did or didn't do, Spike was irrevocably fucked.

Worse, this time it was his fault. Maybe it had been all the times before, too, and he just hadn't had the wherewithal to understand it. William the Bloody Pillock all the way to the bitter end. And it would be bitter. When it came to him and Buffy, there was no alternative. One or both of them would limp away miserable, and smart money put the odds on him.

It had been so easy. Far easier than it should have been. Even after everything he'd been through and all he'd sacrificed, even knowing exactly where the path would lead, he'd been helpless to stop himself when she'd pulled him down. He couldn't even say that he hadn't known what he was doing, because he bloody well had and he'd done it anyway, ignoring the reality that awaited him outside the space they had occupied. None of it had mattered. Buffy had been against him, tangled around him, kissing him like he was something to savor, and everything else had blinked out. He'd taken his licks like a good boy and learned the things that had needed learning and that time was over. He'd passed. He'd won. He'd made it to the other end of the worst thing he'd ever done in a long line of terrible things, and he hadn't dusted. Let him have his reward.

Holding her, feeling her against him, her whimpers in his mouth and her scent driving him wild—it was everything he'd imagined possible when he'd left town. Everything he'd carried with him through each trial the sadist in those caves had thrown his way. The belief that he could have her the way he never had before. That she would want to be his once she learned what he had done for her. All of that was over now, and he'd finally come home to Buffy.

But Spike wasn't the sort of man who got what he wanted and never had been. Probably a good thing Anya had interrupted them when she had or he might have completely lost himself. Torn Buffy's slacks from her shapely legs so he could feel her with his mouth and cock as well as he had his fingers, just kept on indulging until he swelled so much there was nowhere to go but down. God knows he'd wanted to. She'd been so soft, so warm, and he'd been desperate to explore all the ways she was the same and all the ways she was different. How *they* were different, as she promised. And as blissful as that would have been, holding onto her while drowning in her all the same, it still would have led him here in the end.

That she'd been rung up about Angel seemed appropriate enough. That she was dropping everything to run to his aid even more so, because that was the way it always would be with her, wasn't it? Whole sodding Council at her backdoor and the second the girl hears Angel's in trouble, he takes center stage. No matter how many times the berk had stomped all over her heart.

There was having Buffy and *having* Buffy. Only one man had ever *had* Buffy. And it was more than possible only one man ever would.

"Are you saying you don't even want to try?"

Spike swore inwardly, trying to ignore the pulse of pain in his chest that had taken up residence there ever since he'd let Buffy drag him into the dining room. He still wasn't sure how he'd managed to say anything, full as his head had been. Angel in trouble—Angel having misplaced his whole sodding soul when he was the prat who had started it all, and Spike suddenly being one up on him though unable to say a word about it—had driven him about as far off the bend as he wagered a man could get. And Buffy looking at him and saying it had meant something while she was preparing to run to her ex's rescue, because she was a hero and that was what heroes did. And what would happen when the soul was back, and everyone was dreaming up new bedtime stories to tell themselves so everything they had lost seemed reasonable?

Spike had been here before. Back and forth with Angel when the woman in question had been someone else. He hadn't fancied the situation then either, but he'd forced himself to live through it. Even if the bits of Dru he'd gotten hadn't been enough, they had been *his*. Entirely his. She'd looked at him and known he wasn't her daddy, and as much as that had hurt, there had been enough times that not being Angel had been a boon. He'd known where he stood through all of it. He'd understood his place in her world.

It was different with Buffy. Perhaps he could survive on bits of her the way he had when it had been Dru, but he didn't think so. Moreover, he didn't want to try. The knowledge that there would always be more of her out there, more that she was holding back, would drive him the rest of the way out of his head. Buffy was the first person he'd loved against his will—the first woman he'd loved who he hadn't set out to love the second he laid eyes on her—and he didn't know why that mattered, but it did. Made it so just having pieces wouldn't sustain him. She wasn't a story he told himself. She was everything, and that's how he wanted her.

As it was, Spike didn't get much time to dwell on what she'd said or what he'd told her for all the running around the others were doing. Willow darting upstairs to grab the ingredients for a spell that might not work and Buffy somewhere shoving clothes into a bag. She'd left him to select the weapons best suited to wrangling Angel, but most of what she had on hand was the sort of hardware best suited for taking a bloke's head off, and he reckoned Buffy meant for the big sod to keep his parts. She had a decent set of chains, though, as well as her collection of crosses and holy water. Throw in a couple good-sized blades, and he supposed that was the best they could hope for.

Then he reconsidered and tossed in a few stakes. Just in case. Los Angeles was a demons' city right now and a man couldn't be too careful.

Willow was just finishing setting up what she needed for her spell when Buffy came clomping down the stairs, duffle bag tossed over her shoulder. She slowed the second she saw Spike watching her from the doorway that connected the entry hall to the living room, and for a beat, they just stared at each other the way they seemed to do these days. All the words in his throat, confessions and promises and more than that, and the hurt in her eyes from the question he hadn't answered earlier. It was there and burning between them and *fuck*, he was supposed to spend three hours like this? Just him and her and nothing but the purr of the engine filling the air?

Unless she wanted to talk about it. Buffy in the past wouldn't want to talk about anything—would bite her tongue and swallow her feelings before admitting they existed. That Buffy was gone now, though, and he was still getting used to this one. The one who wouldn't let it sit. The one who would want it out. And once it was out, where would that leave him? What was right? The stupid sodding soul was supposed to answer questions like these. Make everything clear. He shouldn't need to ask or wonder after anything. He should just bloody *know*.

All that work and pain and he was just as thick as ever.

As she was wont to do these days, Buffy made the first move. She gave her head a shake before clearing her throat. "Your car or mine?"

Spike blinked, then straightened and shuffled his feet. "Will have to be yours. All I have's the bike and I don't think you'd fancy holdin' onto me and the cargo." Granted, it would make conversation next to impossible, but the trade-off would be the torment of Buffy being nice and wrapped around him for several hours. A year ago, he would have leaped at the chance.

A year ago, well, so many things.

"Ahh. I'll pass on the bike ride. My car it is." Buffy offered a flat smile that struck him as almost businesslike. "What happened to yours? I hadn't really thought about it, but I haven't seen it in..."

She hadn't seen it since before the jump. Before Glory. He'd wrapped it around a telephone pole the week after she'd died, pissed off his arse and half-hoping the thing would explode in some dramatic, Hollywood fashion, himself still inside. Not able to get out in time, owing to being even more flammable than the average human, and more's the pity. Sure, it would mean he'd failed her again in the span of seven days,

but at least he wouldn't have to relive seeing her lifeless on that slab night after night. The bloody car hadn't obliged him, though. There had been a few tufts of smoke from under the ruined hood as the engine squawked its death cry but nothing more. He'd left it there for some lucky civil servant to tend to and hobbled back to his crypt on a leg that had seen better days, throwing back mouthfuls of Jack as he went.

"Haven't had it for a bit," Spike said, with his own version of that businesslike smile. It felt more like a wince. Probably looked like one, too, given the confusion in her eyes. He let it fall off his lips, wondering what had possessed him to put it there in the first place. "Your wheels are probably more reliable, anyway. Never took the best care of that car."

"I'm guessing driving with the windshield blotted out didn't help."

"Helped keep me in one piece, which was the point."

Buffy's smile turned a tad more genuine, and that pain in his chest that he'd named after her, the heart that couldn't beat but felt like it could when she was near, gave a terrible jerk. "Good enough, then." She traipsed down the remaining steps, tightening her grip on the bag strapped around her shoulder. "Actually, would you mind driving? For the first bit, anyway."

"If you like," Spike replied. "Everythin' all right?" He stiffened and pressed his eyes closed. "Bugger, don't know why I said that."

"Well, we have plenty of awkward left for the car ride," she said with false cheeriness. "I'm just a little on edge and seeing as I'm still kinda waiting for the nice people at the license bureau to decide they made a mistake in letting me drive, I don't think I wanna risk it by getting behind the wheel tonight. Besides, you've been driving since... What, when they invented cars?"

"Thereabouts, yeah." God, this was excruciating. No way he could survive being trapped inside a moving vehicle with her under these circumstances. Better they have it out before they left. "Slayer, I—"

But she held up a finger, shot a significant look at the living room, then back at him. *Not now*, that look said, and though he knew she was right, Spike couldn't help but bristle all the same. He didn't want to wait until they were on the road, distraction-free and without a place he could slink off to when the time came to lick his wounds. It wasn't like he'd asked for any of this, was it? Had been mighty happy for things to continue the way they had been.

But that was a lie, too. Not even one he could sell himself, despite the amount of practice he'd had. Accepting something and being happy with it were two very different disciplines. He'd lived in that space in the middle most of his life.

So he fell back on true William form. Didn't press the issue, didn't chase her down and demand they sort out whatever was going on between them now. Just stepped aside so she could finish coming down the stairs, seized her bag from her like a bloody gentleman and took it along with the weapons he'd gathered back through the kitchen and out the rear door.

When he returned to the house, he found the others gathered in the living room. Time for Red to get chanty with the herbs and incense, then. Spike sucked in a

breath that tasted a bit like his memories of Woodstock and helped himself into a corner to watch, half hoping the whole thing would go up in flames and he wouldn't have to put himself through whatever was coming. Knowing that it wouldn't because Willow was a bloody powerhouse these days, recovery or no, and her confidence had a more grounded sense about it than it had once upon a time. That she believed she could do it told him she could.

"We won't know for sure until someone needs to find us without knowing where we are already," Willow admitted after it was over. "But we have no reason to think it didn't work."

"We don't?" Buffy echoed. "Reassure me."

"Well, if it were a bust, the mandrake root I used would be on fire. And there's a chance the rest of us would be too." This last bit she muttered very fast, her face turning as red as her hair. "A small chance. But there was a reason Tara and I decided this spell was too dangerous to do two years ago. Or...Tara decided, really. She didn't think we had enough discipline."

There was a beat—a long one filled with a load that likely needed to be said but they didn't have time for at the moment. At length, Buffy nodded and blew out a breath. "Well, okay then," she said. "I guess there's nothing to do now but...go and hope. Though if you guys are getting a hotel or something... Well, you can call Angel's place, I guess. Check in that way."

"Or I have a cellphone," Xander said, raising his hand and pushing himself off the wall near the entry hall. "Well, *I* don't," he continued when Buffy turned to him. "It belongs to work, but I think Will and Dawn can hang onto it until you're back in the saddle. I'll give you the number so you can call them from the road. And you can keep us posted on all things Angel."

Buffy visibly relaxed. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah. A soulless maniac coming to slice and dice us is higher priority than the Citizens Bank of Sunnydale opening on schedule," he replied with a light smile. "I mean, just barely. I hear they're gonna have interest checking. But if I'm dead, those sweet, sweet quarterly pennies aren't gonna do me much good."

Whatever tension she'd kept on reserve melted away, and Buffy launched herself against him for a hug, one Xander reciprocated with enthusiasm that betrayed his own anxiety. And Spike felt another twinge, the sort that was both familiar and foreign. Somehow on the outside while standing on the inside right next to her.

It was just these glimpses he got—being a part of her life on the sidelines. Closer than he deserved to be but knowing he could go no further. He could move back, even laterally, every direction except forward, and that was all his doing. This was as close as he'd ever get, and he'd clawed against his own nature to get here.

Spike let out a breath, waited until Buffy pulled herself away from her friend and he caught the shine in her eyes. "I'll be in the car, Slayer," he said, hating the way her face fell when he made her remember. It had nothing to do with him and everything to do with what lay ahead, but he couldn't help but feel it like a blow all the same. "Once you get your goodbyes out."

He turned and stalked toward the kitchen again, not waiting for the response that probably hadn't been coming anyway. Wasn't like he was part of the group, after all, and never had been. Better that he remember that. He'd already let himself hope too much for one day.

And the next few were bound to be a bloody laugh riot. Hearing all about Angel's sodding heroics and what a difference a soul made. How he conveniently wasn't responsible for whatever he was out there doing now, and how quickly Buffy would rush in to forgive him.

Not like Spike hadn't had his chance, though, was it? He'd spend the next couple of days biting his tongue, playing his part, and waiting for the end he knew was coming. Big hugs all around. Perhaps even a snog if Buffy was feeling particularly nostalgic for the old times, and a promise to always do this—always come running whenever he was in trouble. Or, even better, whenever he wanted her to run.

"Hey," came Dawn's voice, cutting into his thoughts just as Spike was about to throw open the back door. "Are you just gonna leave like that?"

He froze, his hand outstretched. "You heard big sis. Got places to be, Nibbles. Souls to hunt down."

"Oh, so that's it? You're being a big baby because of Angel?"

Low bloody blow, that. Spike dropped his hand and turned to face her, narrowing his gaze into a glare. "Got somethin' to say?"

"Just that something is clearly going on with you and Buffy. Or it was."

He stared at her for a long second before sighing and looking away. It was all there. He'd never been any good at keeping himself tucked inside when it came to the things going on in his head, what he felt or how deeply. The warring thoughts and confusion. The conclusions he'd reached only to second-guess, because what else could he do when it came to Buffy? And he wagered the last thing he needed was Dawn throwing in her two cents at the moment. He had enough to consider.

"Look," he said, striving for calm, "I know you've got some idea cooked up that the Slayer and I are gonna end up together. But—"

"Some idea? You mean watching the flirt-fest that is you two every day since I was discharged. You guys are so freaky about fighting, it's almost gross. And so not my fault I noticed."

Perhaps not, but no one had made her spout off at the mouth every bloody chance she got. He bit his tongue before he could say as much, though. Getting into an argument with a teenager would do little to make him feel better about anything.

"And now you're being Mr. Mopey Pants because of Angel," she went on. "Is this a soul thing? Does it just automatically make vampires lame?"

"Oi, watch it."

"I'm sixteen. I'm not stupid. Something's going on with you two and one of you did something to screw it up. She's been all weird since you guys got home."

"Right," Spike said, drawing the word out. "And I suppose that couldn't have anythin' to do with her ex-honey forcin' her to drop all to run in to the rescue again."

Dawn shook her head, unblinking. "No. It couldn't. What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything," he shot back, and that was perfectly true. Everything that

had happened since he'd stepped into the studio that night had been Buffy's doing. The look, the kiss, the pretty way she'd begged against his lips as she did in his memories, in those forbidden corners of his mind where he let himself venture only because he knew he would end up there anyway. Buffy sinking to her knees, pulling his cock out of his jeans and into her mouth—everything that had happened had been a bloody whirlwind and part of the mess in his head was that he had yet to touch down.

He didn't want to. He knew what waited for him when he did. He also knew he had no choice.

"Are you saying you don't even want to try?"

Thankfully, Dawn didn't get the chance to further demonstrate her sharpening interrogation skills, as Buffy rounded the corner into the kitchen. She stopped short when she saw them together, and though it made bugger all sense, Spike could have sworn he caught a flicker of disappointment in her eyes. Whatever it was—real or imagined—it was gone the next second, and Buffy moved forward to throw her arms around her sister.

"You be safe while we're gone," she whispered into Dawn's hair. "Sneak out and you're grounded until you're old enough to start getting mail from the AARP. You're still healing from the last hole she put in you. And if you think I'm joking, just remember that—"

"Joking would mean you had a sense of humor, and we both know you don't," Dawn replied. But she wasn't moving, either, and there was a slight tremble in her arms that Spike knew, just knowing the Nibblet, she was working like hell to hide. When she spoke again, it was in a lowered voice. "You'll kill him, won't you? If you have to. You'll kill Angel."

Buffy stiffened. "I won't have to kill him. His soul's missing, not gone. It went *somewhere*. We'll—"

"No." Dawn pulled back, scowling. "No. Promise me you'll kill him. The last time—"

"This isn't like the last time. A lot has changed since then."

"Angel without a soul isn't like Spike. It's completely different."

Spike inhaled sharply. "Dawn—"

"Well, he's not," she snapped, turning her glower on him, almost accusatory. "Spike without a soul... If he hurts you, it's not—"

"Hey," Buffy said before she could really get started, taking her by the wrists. "I know Angel's not like Spike. I know he'll try to kill me and he won't hold back. I know I have to not hold back, either. But if there's a way to save him, I'm going to look for it. More than that, I'm going to find it."

Dawn closed her mouth so hard Spike felt a sympathy pain in his jaw. And for a moment, he thought she might just start screaming—put her lungs to the test the way she used to when she got nice and wound up. There was that fire in her eyes that he knew so well, the one that burned so like his own, along with fear and resentment and all manner of other things she'd never been good at keeping locked away. But then she sucked in a deep breath and seemed to make an effort to push it all back.

"But if you have to," she said again, a new note in her voice. Tempered and almost desperate. "Buffy... If you have to..."

She didn't finish, though. Or maybe she couldn't. Maybe she, like Spike, didn't really want to hear the answer. Or worried she knew what it was and had already pushed hard enough for the reassurance that wasn't coming. The silence that followed would be too much on top of all this fear.

Except Buffy knew that too. She stepped close and gripped her sister by the shoulders. "I'm coming home no matter what," she said firmly. "If I have to step through Angel's dust to do it, I will. I *am* going to bring him back but if it's him or me, I already killed him once. Should get easier the more you do it, right?"

Dawn's expression didn't change but her eyes did. "Promise?"

"Yeah, I promise."

The look on her face, the steely determination with which she spoke, stayed with him as they made their way down the walk to the car. Fuck, all of it stayed with him. He couldn't outrun any incarnation of Buffy if he tried.

And that was the rub. He didn't want to outrun her. He didn't want to feel the way he did about what had happened in the studio. He wanted to believe, to lose himself in the pure bloody bliss that had overtaken him during those stolen moments. Because even if he had the right of it, even if Buffy could never want him the way he wanted her, the part of him that had always held true that having some of her was better than none *hadn't* been smothered by the soul. No matter what he knew now that he hadn't known when he'd run his mouth at Finn a couple of years back, the unique and devastating heartbreak that came with loving her wasn't anything he would wish away. Not even after everything.

"*Are you saying you don't even want to try?*" she'd asked, and he hadn't had the stones to tell her that trying was all he'd ever wanted. That the thought that she might want it too had him scared out of his wits. With Buffy, he'd never been anything other than terrified. She was the only force on this earth that had the power to destroy him without killing him. Who wouldn't be afraid of that?

He hadn't been happy before but he had been complacent. He'd known his part in her life. The role he needed to play, and now he didn't. Supposed the question then was if he was willing to let her shatter him again. But then, it wasn't like she'd ever stopped.

"Thanks," Buffy said, jarring him back to the present. He glanced over just in time to see her snap her seat belt in place. "For taking the drive, I mean. I think I'm gonna be extra space cadet for the next few days."

He grunted and hoped that passed for a reply, shifting the vehicle into reverse before turning to guide the tires to the road. Listening to the way she breathed and how those breaths offset the soft, affirming beats of her heart. How steady it was now when earlier it had been racing, thumping so hard he'd felt its echo in his chest the way he felt everything else. Buffy had so much life she lent it to him without even being aware of it. Those scorching kisses, the way she'd touched him, how she'd said *please* and told him she wanted what was happening. How she'd felt around his fingers, soft and hot and wet, so wet for him, and it hadn't ended after she'd come

down. She'd taken his mouth and then taken his cock and after she'd kissed him, her heart pounding in a rhythm he knew well but had never thought to experience again.

And then she'd asked if he wanted to see what they could be, and he hadn't been brave enough to give her the truth. Hadn't been sure he could survive losing her a third time, especially if finally allowed the chance to actually have her.

"Hey," she said, cutting through the haze once more. And he could tell, just from her voice, that her mind had been the same place his was. It made every line in his body tense. "I can't... In the interest of this not being just the most awkward road trip ever, I think it might be good to just ignore what happened today."

Spike inhaled sharply and whipped his head to her. "Which part?"

"Starting with where I threw myself at you and ending right after you said you weren't interested. If we could just strike that from the record—"

"I didn't say I wasn't interested," he barked before he could help himself. "Point of fact—"

"I know. It's weird and screwy and I made it weirder and screwier." Buffy seemed to shrink into the seat, and the sight struck him like a blow to the gut. "I just... I guess it never occurred to me that you might not want...me. So I did the leap thing without looking."

"It was never about not wanting you, love."

"Can you just let me say I'm sorry without confusing me more? This is hard enough as it is."

Sorry. If Spike lived another sodding millennia, he would never get used to the concept of a Buffy Summers who owed him her *sorry*s. "What happened to the Slayer who used to get skittish every time I brought up those kisses you kept insistin' meant rot?"

"Probably the same thing that happened to the Spike that kept insisting we belong together," she fired back. "I'm guessing we just did too much damage."

God, she was killing him. She was killing him and he couldn't let her anymore. No matter what came next or how much it hurt—bugger self-preservation and pride and everything else. His reservations and his fears meant nothing if she could think things like that. If she could blame herself for any of what had gone wrong between them when he knew the better of it.

And, more besides, she was right. None of this would have slowed him down at all if the soul weren't in play. He'd been so starved for any morsel of affection he would have leaped at whatever she tossed him, even if it had been impossible. Buffy didn't know what she didn't know, and she was still being honest with him, or trying to. More than she ever had before. He owed her that much back and so much more.

He owed her bloody everything.

"It's not about not wanting you," he said again, his voice low. "Never think that. But you knocked me for a six, didn't you? I never thought you'd want me again after what I did. That you can even look at me still bloody astounds me, most days."

She shifted, crossed her arms. "It's not like any of this has been easy."

"No, but you still did it. You're doin' it now. And what happened today..."

Touching you like that..." He worked a throat that had gone tight. "Meant what I said. It was everything. And that was bloody terrifying."

"Terrifying?" she echoed. "I'm...terrifying. Great. Just what every girl wants to hear."

"Think you know that's not what I mean."

"Do I? It's not like you've been Joe Forthcoming ever since you got back to town. There are times when I look at you and I swear you're a different person."

That struck a nerve, though he couldn't argue the point without revealing more than he fancied at the moment. It might even be true, and god knows he'd hoped as much when he'd set out on his little quest. That the change would be the dynamic sort—he'd feel it in his bones, his toes, the follicles of his bloody hair. Some sort of sincere, deep understanding that divided him from the demon he was and the man he'd been before. And that was there—he knew it was, could feel it, but the difference at the end of the day seemed negligible. Not enough to brag about. He had enough self-awareness to understand where he was lacking, but the thoughts he'd had before were still there. The urges, the desire, the need for violence and all that other rubbish he'd been daft enough to believe would just blink out once the soul was in place.

Truth of the matter was, he hadn't known Angel all that well when he'd been stuffed full of soul. He'd known what Darla had told him, the things he'd pieced together over the years, and what he'd observed from the second he'd blown into Sunnyside, but that version of his grandsire wasn't one he'd had much occasion to spend time with. The stories he'd told himself, the stories *Angelus* had told him when the soul had vacated the premises, had painted a rosy picture that he'd taken at face value. The way he'd *always* taken what his elders told him at face value. Even when he knew better. Some habits couldn't be broken, some training never unlearned.

But now that he was on this side, he could see it the way he hadn't before, which made Angel's apparent conclusion that there were two versions of him sharing the same body even more ridiculous. It had always just been him, and his baser instincts and desires didn't go away because a soul was there. In that sense, he wasn't a different person. Not where it counted, at least, and he'd been hoping he would be. Sure, he hadn't wanted the sniveling ponce that he'd been in life to take control of the wheel, but he'd been hoping for something much further removed from the man who had closed the bathroom door and tried to rape the woman he loved. Something that wouldn't make him question which version of himself had been in control that night.

But there was no explaining that to her without explaining everything else and even if he wanted to, now was not the time. Not when she'd been bloody blindsided by her ex. So the most he could offer was a soft, "You know why," and hope that she would understand without needing to revisit this particular territory.

And thank Christ, she did.

"Yeah," Buffy said, her voice equally soft. "I know why. But I thought... I dunno. I guess I thought if it was different—if *we* could be different than we were... I just never thought you wouldn't want to try. If you knew I wanted it. Wanted you."

There were times he felt truly blessed not to have a heartbeat. This was one of them.

"And that's what has me terrified."

"Again with the not flattering."

"Buffy, you bloody destroyed me," he said, not meaning to but also unable to stop it. If they were going to do this, it had to be real. "I've ripped families apart, understand. I've soaked in blood for a sodding century, and I never once asked myself what I was capable of because I *knew* it. If I could imagine it, I could do it. I thought I knew myself—what kind of man I was. Thought I knew what kind of *monster* I was, too. Turned out I didn't know jack."

"Spike—"

"I scared *myself*. Wanted to blame you but it wasn't you at all. It was all me. And that..." Spike clenched his jaw and cut his gaze to the window at his left. The words were coming faster now, tripping over themselves in their haste to spill from his mouth, and as cathartic as that was, it was dangerous, too. But god, he couldn't stop. Not when he'd come this far. "When you realize you're the sort of monster that *you're* afraid of, somethin' snaps. Did for me. Drove me out of town till I could get it figured and I'm still bugging up every time I turn around. And you lookin' at me the way you have been..."

"I've been looking at you?"

He turned to throw her a look of his own and was somewhat mollified when he saw her cheeks go pink. Maybe she could have played innocent once but not anymore. They knew each other too well for that.

"You asked me if I want to try," he went on. "That's all I've ever wanted. Nothing there has changed. But I want it... I want it to be because you feel somethin' too."

"I told you I do," she said.

Yes, she had. She just hadn't counted on how bloody greedy the soul had made him. No way she could, for obvious reasons, and he hadn't known himself until today. "Somethin' that can be like what I feel for you."

He stole another glance—not a long one but enough to catch that he'd managed to shove her out of confusion and into exasperation. Maybe that was better. At least he reasoned the territory would be more familiar than this strange new landscape she expected him to navigate.

"The entire point of trying is to find out if I can," she replied at length. "If we work or not. It's not about knowing right now—you can't do that. You don't just decide you want to be with someone and that's it. Hard part over."

"Funny, 'cause from the cheap seats, it sure as hell looked like that's what you did with Angel."

"What?"

Spike sucked in his cheeks but didn't reply. Just kept his gaze firm on the road ahead. Safer that way. Less chance for him to dig himself in deeper by running his gob. And he'd take whatever she threw at him next without complaint or rebuttal—no less than what he deserved and not nearly as much.

God, what the bloody hell was wrong with him? Buffy was offering herself up and he kept trying to punish her for it.

"You don't know anything about me and Angel," she said after a tick, her voice low and steady.

There was no stopping it. The words were intent on being heard, no matter what it cost him. "Forgettin' I lived with the git? Man wasn't exactly shy now, was he?"

"Whatever he told you was after he lost his soul. When he was *Angelus*, I guess, if that's the way they—"

"And there's such a big difference there," Spike replied, nodding sagely. "Angel's out, Angelus is in."

"And what would you know about it?" Buffy threw back, sounding more like herself now—or at least the version of her he knew best. The one who resented him and whatever it was she felt, who wished she could turn back the clock to the moment before she'd committed to the bad decision. Hearing it was both a blessing and a curse. "The Angel who doesn't have a soul wanted to hurt me. He hated that he had ever loved me and he wanted to... I don't know, do whatever he could to punish me for making him do that. So whatever he said—"

"This is what you tell yourself?"

"Stop."

"Guess I can understand it. Helps keep the shine on. Easier to remain faithful to a bloody memory if you think—"

"I said *stop*."

That did it—what the chorus inside his own rotten head couldn't hope to accomplish. All the warning bells chiming their song as his own unique cocktail of love, self-disgust, and resentment started to bubble and froth. He had no idea how he had gotten here or what he was even arguing for anymore, except the answer was something that scared the tar out of him, whatever shape it took. But Buffy had said stop. She'd used the word he'd promised himself he would always hear, never ignore again. Never try to bend or mold into something else.

So he stopped, and the air became a heavy sort of quiet. The echoes of everything that had been said hanging there like a pregnant storm cloud waiting to burst, tempered only by the hum of the engine. His mind spinning useless as ever, feeding him all the things he should have said instead of the rubbish that had spilled out instead. Demanding to know just what exactly he was playing at, because none of what he'd said made sense. Matched the euphoria of earlier or the uncertainty. That thrill that he might actually be in danger of getting everything he'd ever wanted.

"I don't know what's going on with you," she said finally, her voice hoarse. "I know I made a mess of things earlier—"

"Buffy—"

"I did. I didn't mean to, but that's what I get for not thinking things through. And with the terrible timing and everything." She let out a soft little laugh that about split his heart. "Pretty much the story of my life. Make a move and everything falls apart."

"That's not—"

"And it's because of what happened with Angel, why I can't just leap in. Why I can't know what I feel right now—why I want to *try* to see if we could be something rather than doing the leaping-without-looking thing." Buffy expelled a breath, and out of his periphery, he saw her drop her gaze to her lap and twist her fingers. "Maybe that's not the way it's been for you ever. With Drusilla or Harmony and I know it wasn't with us. And if I do this again, I have to be smart about it because I've seen how bad we can be. I've just never seen how good. I never wanted to."

Spike's throat was dry. He had nothing to offer.

"But whatever bad we might be would be a different bad than before," she said after a beat. "If we did try and things didn't work out. It wouldn't be like *this*—having to take a break in the middle of imminent danger to clean up one of your messes, and I think that means something too. You know I started to think about the chip as being more reliable than Angel's soul? That's one of the reasons it was easy to choose you over Gray for the fight that's coming. I knew I wouldn't have to do what we're doing now, even if something went wrong. You'd be there at my side. You might be evil but you try not to be...for me."

At some point, she had to stop surprising him. Not always, mind, just long enough for him to remember that dead men didn't need to breathe. That the tightness in his chest and throat were only there because he put them there. He didn't experience his body the way humans did, yet his body had never gotten the bloody memo.

The chip was more reliable than the soul. How was that for irony? Had he the luxury, he might just start laughing and never stop.

But no, it wasn't that funny. Nothing was and everything was.

The real cracker was Buffy saying any of this to him at all. Buffy feeling this. Buffy wanting him. And if he buggered up, if he managed to fumble or shatter or break, he would have nothing and no one to blame but himself.

"You feel like this when it's over," he said finally, forcing his voice to work. "After you take your merry little trip down memory lane—"

"Spike—"

"Remember how bad it can go, Slayer. Know you already know but you need to see it again. And then you'll do what *you* do and get him to the other side." Spike flexed his fingers around the steering wheel. "After, if you still want to try, you know where to find me."

"After."

He nodded, not looking at her. Not sure he could. Didn't seem like he had the right.

"Okay," she agreed softly. "That actually sounds... We'll do this, and we'll see where we are after."

There was more he wasn't saying that he wagered she heard regardless. That he needed her to look Angel in the eye when everything was finished, the day was won, and still walk away believing that she could feel something if they gave this an honest shot. Then there was everything he wasn't saying that he now knew he would have

to, eventually. Everything that would change them forever again, and in ways he had no idea how to prepare for.

Not telling Buffy about the soul so she wouldn't feel obligated to feel anything was a mite different than keeping it from her when she already did. It became less about sparing her and more about being a coward.

But now wasn't the time to break her world again. That would have to wait until after, too.

And they'd see where they stood once they got there.

I WANNA TAKE YOU FOR GRANTED

THE LAST TIME BUFFY VISITED ANGEL, HIS DETECTIVE AGENCY HAD BEEN A TWO-office setup situated atop a basement apartment. Perfect digs for the average vampire, in other words, though she hadn't spared much thought as to how he'd come by the means to secure the place to begin with, or what rent must cost, or how he kept someone with Cordelia's expensive tastes on staff. She hadn't thought about any of that because her daily worries hadn't yet broadened to include things like financial concerns, roofs overhead, or food on tables. The most she'd been bothered with was maintaining her GPA and figuring out why her psych professor wanted to kill her.

But a lifetime had passed since then—a lifetime with its lessons and hardships and all manner of things that couldn't be unlearned or forgotten once she was made aware of them. So when Spike pulled up to the curb outside the hotel that was somehow Angel's, Buffy couldn't help but wonder immediately and aloud just how the hell he had the money to pay for something like this.

Perhaps not the first thought she should have, all things considered, but there it was.

"Seriously," she said, closing the car door behind her as Spike rounded the front. "I knew he'd moved and I knew it was not small but this seems extreme."

"The git always did fancy tryin' to overcompensate."

Buffy somehow managed not to roll her eyes all the way out of her head, but it was a close call. One of the key takeaways from their charged conversation had been Spike's confirming that his reluctance to leap into anything had to do with his insecurities about Angel. Insecurities likely not helped by her dropping everything to rush to her ex's aid, and she got it. She did. She had been that person before, had intimate knowledge of how easy it was to get sucked into a vortex of thoughts and worries

that would drive anyone crazy. Add to the fact that if she and Spike were to start anything again, it *wouldn't* be from scratch and would have plenty of baggage, and his crabbiness made all the sense in the world.

Still, she wasn't about to celebrate the prospect of dealing with jealous vampire crap on top of the current crisis, but at least she understood the bitterness. And she felt marginally better than she had before they'd left the house. As much as she hadn't had the luxury of ruminating on all the reasons Spike might pull the brakes on starting anything up again, Buffy had found it impossible to ignore her hurt after their conversation in the dining room. She'd moved through her bedroom at a snail's pace despite being in full panic mode at all the fires she had to put out, hating that she couldn't just switch off the parts of her that were Buffy. Seemed she should have had more than her fair share of practice by now.

"You better stay behind me," she told Spike as she slung the weapons duffle over her shoulder. "They're expecting me to show up with Willow, not another vampire. And I don't think you made the best impression last time."

Spike snorted and shook his head. "Would've done them all a mercy if I'd just offed the pillock then."

"And saying things like that is probably not the best way to convince them you're who should be helping me find Angel."

"More's the pity."

Again, with what felt like herculean effort, Buffy's eyes remained straight-facing and unrolled. "Okay, I'm thinking maybe you should let me do the talking too."

He huffed and glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, and she couldn't help it—a thrill raced down her spine. It was one of the looks he would have given her back when everything out of his mouth had doubled as innuendo. She'd caught glimpses here and there over the last few weeks but hadn't expected to see anything like it tonight.

In so many ways, he was worse than the hormonalest of hormonal teenagers.

Buffy blew out a breath and pushed herself through the wrought-iron gate at the hotel's entrance, which opened into a small courtyard separating the outer gate from the front door. It was so very chic and old-fashioned—just the sort of ambiance Angel would love, complete with a walkway lined with well-manicured miniature hedges and a large, working stone fountain. She didn't give herself much time to take it in, but she didn't need to. A few glances were enough.

Her trips to LA had been sparse over the years, and that had been very, very intentional. The first time had come just a couple of months after he'd left her—she'd found an excuse to visit her father and turned that into an excuse to confront Angel over his meddling in her life, which had been a conversation she'd needed to have anyway. Just not necessarily face-to-face, especially when the pain of their breakup had still been so raw. The visit had been a short one, sure, but not so short she hadn't been sufficiently bruised by the time she'd gotten home.

The second time had been more utilitarian. Faith had stolen her body, screwed her boyfriend, then skipped town to LA for the big finish. And when Buffy had gotten the call that something had gone down with Angel and her wayward sister,

dropping everything and rushing to what she'd thought would be the rescue had just seemed like the sort of thing you did when you were a superhero and you knew the villain's next target had barely survived the first time. Of course, all she'd gotten for her efforts had been another round of kick-the-Buffy with Angel playing centerfield—if that even worked insofar as metaphors went; she didn't know sports—but her intentions had been good.

Both visits had been to the first office. It had been standard LA fare as far as she was concerned. Dinky and a bit rundown, though with a spacious bedroom apartment that Angel had Angeled up nicely. It had reminded her a bit of his first apartment in Sunnydale with the unassuming exterior but the moody interior. The same that, in another world, another life, had entranced her because it had been a grownup space and she had been... Well, not a grownup but intrigued about how grownups who weren't related to her or way older than her lived. Angel might not have been the best example, being that he *was* way older, but his kind of older had been a breed apart from grownups like, say, Giles. The fact that he hadn't looked a day over thirty had helped with that. The brain knew one thing but the eyes saw another thing and getting those things to reconcile had been a chore.

If the first place had been like his Sunnydale apartment, then the Hyperion was like the mansion on Crawford Street. Grand in scale, imposing from the outside and probably chock-full of character on the inside. Full of little touches of Angel to make the place home. There would be books and weapons and likely a treasured collection of old things. The stuff about him that time had faded into nothing but came roaring back without much effort. All the little pieces that were there when you really knew a person inside and out.

And though she didn't want to feel it—knew it would make what she had to do here more difficult and everything with Spike more complicated—she couldn't deny the pang that struck right behind her ribcage. Not nostalgia, not really, but a close cousin. As foreign as the version of herself that had loved Angel blindly and unconditionally seemed to her now, Buffy kinda missed her. How straightforward things like love and trust had been for her then, when all the lessons she'd thought she'd already learned were still waiting to make sure she got through them the hard way. She hadn't been smart, but she had been earnest and unafraid. Fearless, even, about all the things that scared the crap out of her now.

And it could have been with anyone, whispered some inner voice that sounded a lot like Willow. *Even Spike. All it had to be was first.*

Buffy gave her head a shake to cast the thought aside, even if she knew it wouldn't work. She hadn't exactly ruminated on that conversation with her best friend over the last few weeks, but she hadn't forgotten it either. Whispers of it remained lodged in her brain—whispers that had slowly started to become more than whispers, along with all the other things she'd been feeling or trying not to feel since looking up in the hospital and seeing him standing there, throat scarred and skin paler than pale, his eyes full of understanding. Making her feel a little less dumb for having been in love with him once. Making her wonder if she could ever be in love with him again.

"Right then," Spike said, stopping when he reached her, holding her overnight bag at his side. "After you, Slayer."

She nodded and forced her legs to close the distance between her and the door to the hotel proper, suddenly nervous for reasons she didn't understand. Or maybe she did and just didn't want to consider them. While she had benefited from slayers being called to Sunnydale multiple times in the past, she had never been anywhere in an official Slayer capacity—if such a thing existed—other than her home base. The people who were waiting inside were not her people, and she didn't know their dynamics. Hell, she didn't even know if they were aware she was coming, which could make things really awkward really fast, especially considering she was used to calling the shots.

More than that, she *would* be calling the shots. This might be Angel's town and these Angel's people, but they had made the sort of massive error in judgment that had forfeited their seat at the table. Besides, she was the only person in the world who had ever beaten Angel when he'd been at his vilest. They were just gonna have to accept that everything from this point on would be handled her way.

It was with that attitude that she pushed herself through the front door and into the grand lobby that waited on the other side. The grand *empty* lobby with all its... emptiness, aside from the big round sofa thingy in the middle and some vague signs of life near what Buffy assumed would have been the check-in desk. There was a coffee mug sitting on the edge, illuminated by the faint glow of a nearby but out-of-sight lamp, and in the distance, she heard the low murmur of what might be intimate conversation or a faulty air conditioning unit. The walls were adorned with decorative sconces that complemented the glow emanating from the funky overhead lights that were really too big to be overhead lights but not fancy enough to be considered chandeliers. The fact that these lights were on was, she found, an encouraging sign. Told her that the electricity hadn't been cut. She figured that was one of the first things a psychotic, soulless Angel would do when staking out a kill site. He'd done it at Sunnydale High, after all.

"Bit of a ghost town, innit?" Spike muttered into her ear, his soft shouldn't-be-there breath making a few strands of hair dance.

"Yeah," she replied, not bothering to hide her growing trepidation. "I kinda thought they'd be all, you know, gathered. This *is* the right place, right?"

"Oh, it's the right place," he replied dryly. "Granddad's stink is everywhere."

"Well, is anyone else's?"

Her voice must have carried despite her efforts to keep it low, for the next second a loud, "For an evil guy, you are sure not as sneaky as you think you are," rang through the air and a woman who might have been Cordelia Chase in another life appeared on the other side of the check-in desk, a crossbow at the ready.

And her jaw promptly dropped.

"Buffy? What are you doing here? And is that *Spike*?"



IT TURNED out that Wesley had, in fact, not shared with the class that he'd invited Buffy to the party.

The next few minutes were filled with the sort of chaos Buffy had grown accustomed to over the years. Cordelia shouted for the others, who materialized in short order. A doe-eyed brunette from around the corner that presumably housed the office, a man with a shining bald head and a sour expression to match, and some Indiana Jones-looking guy that Buffy didn't realize was Wesley until he was practically on top of her. The tweed and glasses gone, swapped for a scratchy five o'clock shadow and a leather coat that looked way too comfortable on his shoulders.

Somehow, in the years since he'd been away, Wesley had become kinda hot, which was a thought she didn't want living in her brain. It was too confusing up there as it was.

"I asked her to come," he said calmly, cutting through whatever Cordelia was saying with quiet authority that, like his makeover, made Buffy feel like she'd stepped into the Twilight Zone. "We need all the help we can get if we're going to rein in Angelus."

"Yes, because the last time he was loose, she was oh-so-effective," came the snide reply.

Buffy couldn't help but bristle. "I did what had to be done."

"After how many months, exactly?"

"Can y'all slow down long enough to share with the rest of us who the hell she is, at least?" asked the bald man beside the brunette. "Some of us don't have no context."

Cordelia dipped her head in acknowledgment, a few of the lines in her face softening. "Right. Sorry. Fred, Gunn, this is the famous Buffy you've heard so much about."

"Buffy?" the girl—Fred or Gunn, presumably—asked, her eyes going even rounder. "Oh. *The* Buffy."

"The big love of Angel's life," the bald man added, regarding her now more intently. Not with interest, though, rather bold, shameless curiosity. The sort that made Buffy feel like she were on stage and blinded by the glare of a spotlight. "Huh. Always wondered if we'd put a face to the name. Cool. I'm Gunn."

"Fred," said the brunette with a little wave. "Nice to meet you."

"And she's a vampire slayer, right?" Gunn asked the room at large. "We think the situation's escalated to slaying him now?"

"She is uniquely equipped to bring Angelus in," Wesley said. "The circumstances being what they are."

"Uh-huh." Gunn shifted his attention to Spike. "And who's this?"

Buffy sucked in a breath, waiting for the vampire at her back to chime in with a snide comment or two, though she wasn't sure why since *chiming in* was a hallmark of Old Spike. Perhaps someday she would stop expecting that version of him to pop out when it would be the most awkward or inconvenient. Or maybe she was just antsy after everything they had discussed on the drive up. Either way, she demurred with a faint hand wave and tried for a smile. "A friend," she said. "He's here to help."

"He's a vampire who hates Angel and has tried to kill him and me more times than I can count now," Cordelia retorted in pure Cordelia fashion, glaring. "Not sure we want his brand of *help*."

"So is this a you thing or do all vampire slayers get on with vamps?" Gunn asked, stepping toward Spike, his body language the sort that Buffy knew well—the sort that Riley used to lose himself inside when he felt challenged for some reason. The sort that Xander still adopted likely without knowing it. The sort that was an open invitation for them to prove to themselves and everyone else that they weren't afraid of anything or anyone with fangs. And the sort that Buffy had no time to entertain at the moment.

But the vampire in question was speaking before she could intervene.

"The name's Spike, mate." Spike stepped forward as well, somehow without any of the attitude, and nodded in Cordelia's direction. "Lady's tellin' the truth. I'd like nothin' better than to bathe in your boss's dust. But the Slayer here is who'll be callin' the shots."

"Oh she will, will she?" Cordelia replied.

"She's the one your lot rang up, isn't she?" he retorted. "And the reason he didn't do more than make a load of plans last time around."

"Huh. Interesting way to describe the brutal murder of half the student body. Oh, and one teacher."

"That sounds bad," Fred said, wincing.

"He wanted to suck the whole bloody world into Hell," Spike retorted tersely, not taking his eyes off Cordelia.

"That sounds worse," Gunn intoned. "Like maybe Wes made the right call." He didn't come across as particularly happy about that, but Buffy decided not to question him. "Though kinda wonderin' why it is we had to call in the ex. Could get messy."

"Yes, I thought so too," Wesley said before Buffy could interject. "Given Buffy's rather spotty history with Angelus, I thought it might be better to ask someone who was less emotionally entangled."

"I am not emotionally entangled," Buffy snapped. She was beginning to remember why she and Wesley hadn't gotten along. His metamorphosis into Indiana Jones might have thrown her off-balance—seriously, if Cordelia looked like an actual grownup, Wes looked like a whole new person—but all the stubble in the world couldn't make up for the fact that the pompous dork she'd known had exuded the same sort of blind presumption. "And even if I were, that didn't stop me from killing him before."

Wesley raised a hand as though in apology, and that *was* different. She couldn't remember any time, save for his pitiful offer to help fight the mayor at the end, that he had yielded any ground. No matter how wrong he'd been. "Yes, you did. And that is precisely why I knew we could count on you to do the hard thing if it came down to it."

"But you still thought someone else might be better. And the only *someone else* who is remotely qualified would be Faith. Who, last I checked, is in prison." Buffy

crossed her arms. "And by *checked*, Wes, I mean literally. I saw her a few weeks ago. Very much still living the twenty-five-to-life lifestyle."

"You were fortunate, then," Wesley replied with a sigh, again surprising her with his easy acquiescence. "I was refused when I tried earlier this afternoon."

"You what?" Cordelia asked, her eyes bugging out. "*That's* where you went? What, were you gonna bust her out or something?"

Wesley didn't answer, but he didn't need to. It was all over his face.

"Oh my god, Wes, you were gonna *bust* Faith out of prison?"

"Faith and Angel share a bond—she understands this side of him in a way few people do," he said calmly. "I believed that she would go to whatever lengths she could to ensure Angel returned alive."

Buffy felt her irritation tick up a notch. "And I wouldn't?"

"At the expense of your own well-being? No, I don't believe you would," he said, holding her gaze now with a sort of calm confidence she couldn't remember ever seeing on him before. No, that wasn't right. It wasn't confidence—it was ruthlessness. A cold, determined ruthlessness. This man who had once refused to believe anything good of Angel was ready to sacrifice a slayer to ensure he remained undead.

God, what in the world had happened to him?

She swallowed, willing herself not to blink or flinch, even if her chest had grown tight. "You wanted someone who would die to save Angel."

"Yes."

"Yeah. I can't check that box." Maybe if it had been last year, during the worst of it. Not now, though. Not anymore. The part of her that had craved death had remained in the bottom of the last grave she'd crawled out of. Even with all she knew now, and the rest she and Giles could only speculate. "You were really willing to sacrifice Faith."

Wesley gave her a look that was half-defiance, half-skepticism. "I thought you, of all people, would understand the necessity."

Yeah, because once upon a time, she'd stuck a knife in Faith's gut with the full intention of making her trade her life for Angel's. Faith, whom she'd seen sorting laundry in the prison where she would spend the rest of her days, chatting with her fellow inmates, exchanging banter and insults and the things you did when you were close to people. The past seemed a thousand years behind her when looking through that particular lens.

Somehow here she was again, though. Ready to sacrifice another slayer.

No, not sacrifice. If Buffy was forced to kill Gray, that was exactly what it would be. *Force.* A decision made to protect the people she loved.

She cleared her throat and glanced down. "You know Angel wouldn't want that," she said, rather than argue. Wesley's take-no-prisoners attitude wasn't anything she had the luxury of railing against. This wasn't her town or her life—Angel, when they got him back, could deal with the fallout.

"Angel isn't here," Wesley replied shortly. "If you want him to berate my motives, you know what needs to be done." He paused and flashed Spike a quick look. "You are quite sure your, ah, *backup* can be trusted? The last I had heard about William

the Bloody, while he had a neurological inhibitor that prevented him from harming humans, vampires and demons remained very much fair game.”

“He’s had my back for years now,” Buffy said, her hackles getting all hackly. “He’s here to help.”

“Why?” Cordelia demanded. “Because you say so?”

“Yes, because I say so,” she snapped. “And we need him. He knows Angel better than anyone here—”

“Angelus,” Wesley corrected. His voice was soft but firm, the distinction apparently an important one.

That was going to get really annoying really fast, but again, she didn’t argue the point. They could play semantics all they wanted on their own time. “Fine,” Buffy said, throwing up her hands. “He knows *Angelus* better than anyone here. Plus he’s a vampire, which means he has the whole sense of smell thing going for him. And also, you asked for my help? This is what that looks like. Now, is there anything else? What can you tell me about what Angel—*Angelus* has been up to since you let him out?”

“Pilllocks,” Spike muttered.

“All right, hold up,” Gunn said, raising a hand. “Look, Blondie, I get it. You’re big, bad, and in charge, and Wes called you for a reason. I’m down, but we need to get some things straight, starting with: there ain’t no one here who *let* him out.”

“You tryin’ to convince us of that rot, or yourself?” Spike drawled before Buffy could begin to form a reply.

Gunn shifted his attention to the vampire and swelled up again. “Don’t remember saying a damn thing to you.”

“You children convinced yourselves you could harness the monster under the bed and now you act surprised when you can’t keep hold of the leash,” he replied anyway, not blinking.

“Spike, that’s enough,” Buffy said. She didn’t expect him to listen, but there must have been something in her voice—probably the exhaustion—that cautioned him against ignoring her, for he snapped his mouth closed and took a step back. “Arguing about what happened or why won’t make it unhappen. We just need to focus on what we can do now. Where he’s likely to be and how to find him. If anyone has any—”

But that was as far as she got before the door opposite the entrance exploded inward and brought with it a small tornado in the form of a kid who couldn’t be much older than Dawn. He came tromping into the lobby, his face a mask of the simmering sort of frustration that seemed to be uniquely felt amongst teenagers—that *mad at the world for existing* attitude anyone older than twenty couldn’t possibly understand. He didn’t get very far before meeting her gaze and stopping dead in his tracks, sizing her up in a way that spoke of experience beyond his years. It was a very familiar look—one that, combined with the curve of his brow and the way his lips pulled back into a snarl, almost threw her off completely.

“Who’s this?” the kid barked.

“Who are you?” she blurted before she could help herself.

For the first time since everyone had been called to the lobby, no one seemed interested in looking at her. Not even Cordelia.

"Well?" Buffy asked, her heart starting to thump again. The way it did when it sensed it was about to get trampled. Though how this kid could do any heart-trampling, she didn't know. Except she also did, somehow, impossible as it was. Which it *was*. Completely impossible.

But she still knew.

"Buffy, this is Connor," Wesley said at last, his voice sounding from somewhere far away. "Angel's son."



IT WASN'T QUITE LATE YET. Willow found this surprising. So much had happened over the past couple of hours that it felt like it should be at least approaching midnight. Midnight, however, remained a few hours off yet. A few hours a considerate person might consider waiting before making the phone call she had to make—it wasn't late in Sunnydale, but in London, it was late enough to be ridiculously early—but Callista had encouraged her to call whenever she needed, day or night, and yeah, that was something a lot of people said without really meaning it, but Willow decided to take a gamble that her friend had actually meant it. Even if she wasn't sure the current situation was really in emergency territory, the fact that she'd been second-guessing herself ever since Buffy had taken off to face down her evil ex armed with nothing more than her other evil ex meant she needed validation. Reassurance. The sort Xander and Dawn were woefully unequipped to provide because, well, they didn't really *get it* and they couldn't. The most they could offer was a platitude or two, and while platitudes were nice insofar as good intentions went, they remained by definition just...blah.

And Willow didn't need blah. She needed something firm. Concrete. She also needed to get in touch with someone who could actually perform the magic that Buffy needed performed, and time was of the essence, which made her decision to call Callista when it was some godawful hour in England right now not completely inappropriate.

All of this being exactly what she told Callista, too. Well, not so much *told* as word-vomited the second she heard the familiar, if somewhat groggy, melodic tinkle of Callista's voice on the other end of the line. It was a hushed word-vomit, as Willow and Dawn were sharing a room at the Sunspot Motel and Dawn had only just fallen asleep, but word-vomit nonetheless. Probably equal parts guilt and desperation to justify calling so late. Or early.

"So that's it," she said, sitting back against the less-than-comfortable motel headboard as quietly as she could. "What do you think?"

There was nothing at first except the soft sounds of her breaths. "Wow," Callista replied at last. "You've been busy."

"I guess. Time flies when you're having fun."

"But you did it, Will. Did you hear yourself?"

Willow stole a glance at Dawn, who had yet to move from the vague teenager shape she made in the neighboring bed. The girl had crashed hard despite it being nowhere near her bedtime. Small favors. "Did what?" she asked, her voice soft.

"You said *no* when it counted. We both knew it was coming—that you would be tempted. That even it might be something big and important, and still, you said no." Callista's tone was warm, even if it was tinged with fatigue. "That's big. You did good."

She felt her throat tighten and redirected her gaze to her lap, the reassurance she'd wanted there but the guilt not budging an inch. Stupid guilt. She'd known saying no would be hard—the hardest thing, actually, when it came to this recovery stuff. It was something that had been discussed at length in the MAA meetings back in Chulmleigh, the fact that people who had known you before would expect you to be able to do magic on a whim. Even if they knew you had a problem, they wouldn't understand that problem in terms of addiction. Drugs, alcohol, sex, and all other manner of vices were accessible to everyone—magic was something only a few people ever learned to wield, and even fewer with enough proficiency to become dependent. Add to the fact that it could be done at the behest of someone else and made the peer pressure aspect even more brutal.

Still, being someone Buffy counted on, viewed as her secret weapon, the most powerful person in the room and all the things that had been said about Willow once upon a time...that had been a big part of the initial draw. That she had made herself valuable to a bona fide hero. Essential, even. Except now she was afraid to do even the simplest of curses just because the tendrils of dark magic were the sort that didn't go away once the casting was done. Touching that power as a novice had been inebriating. Touching it now, knowing she could go all mega-apocalyptic at the slightest provocation, would be the definition of stupid.

Yet she hated being left behind. Hated that Buffy had needed her to do this thing and she'd bailed because of her limitations. It had been easy once and it should be easy still. Except that believing any of it could or should be easy was what had landed her in trouble in the first place.

This just sucked.

"You made the right choice," Callista said again, as though sensing she needed to hear it. "Against what I'm assuming are pretty big stakes."

"Not the biggest but up there, insofar as stakes go," Willow agreed in a mumble.

"That takes a lot of strength. Don't sell yourself short." There was a pause. "Now, to the other reason you called..."

"Yeah. Any ideas?"

"The coven has contacts all over," Callista said. "And I happen to know that Los Angeles, being home to one of the branches of Wolfram and Hart, is crawling with practitioners. It should be no problem to find someone who can work the curse. Though does it need to be a curse? Couldn't the soul be restored in a more *permanent* way?"

Willow's eyes shot open, and the air seemed to whoosh out of her lungs. She didn't move for a second. "I... I don't know. We've just always done it as a curse."

And they had. Never had the possibility of a not-cursed soul floated across her mind. Not once, and that was also dumb, right? Angel's potential for evil if he became too content in life was one of those shadows that had hung over all of them for years. It was a primary reason that he had left town in the first place. Get away from temptation, from Buffy. Yeah, there had been a bunch of stuff about wanting her to have a normal life and that she would age, but there was no way the soul's tendency to fly the coop hadn't been a consideration.

And Willow, over years of slowly gaining power and confidence, had never once considered that maybe there was a way to make sure the soul didn't go anywhere. That it, at least, remained a sure thing.

"*Always* a curse?" Callista barked a good-natured laugh. "You make a habit of it, then?"

"Well, he lost it a few years ago because the curse has a really specific escape clause," Willow said. "From what Buffy told me, this time it was removed by choice."

"Quite the friend you've got there."

"How hard would it be, do you think? To give him the soul on a permanent basis? Close the loophole?"

Another long pause before Callista hissed in a breath. "*That* I can't say. I got into dark stuff before I hit my bottom, don't get me wrong, but messing with souls is dangerous. All the spells I know that call for them are dark, so, honestly, I thought you might know the answer."

Willow snorted, then covered her mouth and glanced again at the sleeping teenager in the neighboring bed. "Would you believe that soul magic is the only magic I didn't dabble in while I was black-eyed evil girl? I don't even know if it's possible, what you're talking about."

"Oh, I'm sure it's possible. Anything is possible, especially if you're willing to bend a natural law or two."

"Which we're not...right?"

"Of course we're not." For the first time since they'd met, Callista sounded insulted, which would have made Willow shrink a bit had her friend's voice not immediately gentled. "But even still, it's likely the sort of thing you and I should steer clear from. I'll pass it on to the coven, see if they know anything, and if not, if they would be willing to look into it a bit more. They will likely say no, mind. As I said, dealing with souls is dangerous, and most smart practitioners will avoid anything that heavy. But to have a vampire as dangerous as your friend on the leash permanently, they might make an exception."

That was nice, but it left Willow with more questions than answers...and her brain very much didn't want more questions. It wanted to shut down for the night, along with the rest of her body. Strange considering she hadn't done much to warrant this sort of exhaustion, except that was kinda what living was these days. A slog from sunup to sunset, and the news that Angel was running around sans soul at the most inconvenient time hadn't done much to boost morale.

Still, the thought, the *suggestion* of a curseless Angel wasn't the sort she could just shove off with ease. Not while sitting in a motel room she had rented out for her and

Dawn to hide from a slayer who shouldn't exist and talking to a friend who had become her magical guru without really volunteering for the position but willing to bear it anyway. A few years back, this would have been the sort of possibility Willow would have felt duty-bound to chase, just knowing what it could mean for Buffy. No fixing the immortality clause in a vampire's constitution, of course, but the definite thing keeping her and the love of her life from being together as long as she breathed air? Things had changed, and perceptions along with them. What did it matter if one of them got all wrinkly and gray so long as they got to experience what they had of this life together?

If it were Tara...

But it wasn't Tara. And Buffy wasn't who she'd been a few years ago. Whether she still loved Angel the way she had then... Well, Willow was less than convinced. Over the last few weeks, she'd found herself paying attention to Buffy's interactions with Spike without really meaning to, and as such, there were certain things she hadn't missed. Looks that weren't casual, conversations that weren't entirely platonic, and other exchanges that weren't normal for people who weren't into each other. There was the way Buffy had been at the hospital—how Spike had refused to leave her and Dawn and how much that had meant to her, even if she hadn't said as much. The whole speech about the chip and Buffy's willingness to trust this vampire who had once been hellbent on killing all of them. And then tonight, the way Buffy had immediately decided that Spike should accompany her to Los Angeles if Willow couldn't. Sure, what she'd said had made sense—Spike *did* know Angel better than anyone else, particularly the soulless *Angelus* version of Angel, and he'd likely be able to help narrow down where in the sprawling haystack that was LA he could be found—but that wasn't why Buffy had volunteered him. Maybe she didn't even know that. But Willow did. And Willow knew that flirting with the possibility of an anchored soul for Angel would make things even more confused.

So she wouldn't pursue it. Wouldn't mention it. Wouldn't say a damn thing unless Callista was right, and the coven was interested enough in the outcome to dabble in soul magic.

"Willow?" Callista asked. "Are you there?"

Willow gave her head a shake and released a slow breath. "Yeah, sorry. Just... started thinking. If you could talk to the coven, if they're willing to look, that'd be good. But if they're not, I just need the name of someone who can work the curse we have."

"Absolutely. I'll make some calls. You have the text of the curse?"

"Yes. Believe me, yes." Even if she didn't have a copy to refer to, she'd made herself memorize the text years ago. Just in case.

"Good. We'll start there. And Willow? You did the right thing, not going. No matter how hard it was. I'm proud of you for that."

She blinked eyes that were suddenly stinging, the enormity of the day's weight at once pressing down upon her. "Thanks," she said. "It doesn't feel like the right thing."

"How did you feel when your friend asked you to do this curse?"

"Hungry." Willow worked her throat. It was true, though, even if that hunger had

been fleeting—a blip, really—before reality had set in. She'd heard what Buffy was saying, understood what it meant, and for half a second, she'd been so hungry she could have gnawed her arm off in her desperation to consume that sort of power again. Like all the days that had lapsed since she'd collapsed into Xander's arms at Kingman's Bluff, Proserpexa's effigy haunting the area behind her and the hole where Tara had lived haunting everything else, hadn't happened at all.

Because curses were dark magic and dark magic felt good. Dark magic dulled the parts that hurt. Straight shot of novocaine to the system. Dark magic whispered and simpered and promised, and if you weren't careful, you wouldn't even mind knowing that everything it said was a lie.

They were lies you could make true if you were willing to do horrible things.

"And that's how you know it was the right thing," Callista said wisely. Then, perhaps sensing Willow needed to rest—even though *she* was the one who had been roused from sleep at an ungodly hour—she said, "I'll find out for you and get you some answers soon, okay?" in a tone that meant the conversation was over and it was time to hang up.

"Thanks," Willow replied, her own voice thick. "Really."

"Anytime, love," her friend told her.

Then there was a click and she was alone again. Not a sad alone, not even a complete alone, but one that she felt to her bones with the weight of everything dancing through her head.

And she thought it'd be a miracle if she actually found her way to sleep tonight.



AT FIRST, Buffy had been sure she'd misheard. That was the most likely explanation. Wesley had said something and she'd heard one thing but not the right thing. The thing that *wasn't* impossible—or as close to impossible as things were in her world. Yes, she lived knowing monsters existed and that it was her job to fight them, investigate new demons as they crossed her path, and try to live her own life in the time between apocalypses. It wasn't perfect and it definitely wasn't what passed for normal, but it also wasn't chaos. There were rules that governed her fucked up world—rules about herself, about vampires and what they could do. More importantly, what they *couldn't* do. Like have children. Human children. With other vampires.

Yet there was Connor. And she hadn't misheard at all.

Buffy didn't know what had happened in the moments that followed meeting Angel's son. There had been words, most to the tune of *who is this* from him and a brief but detailed summary of her history with his father supplied by Cordelia. A moment of mingled shock and hurt when Connor didn't even bat an eye at her name, as though he'd never heard of her before, and of course he hadn't because he was a full-grown teenager and somehow *she* had never heard of *him*. Not once. He would have been around Dawn's age when Buffy and Angel had been together, which meant very much alive and very much in the picture unless he was also a mystical key that some holy monks had decided to send in person-form to her ex for protection. And

improbable as it was, as much as she understood she was setting herself up for more disappointment, no amount of better judgment had kept her from hoping the question of *where the hell did you come from?* had an explanation as simple—or reasonable—as Dawn's.

No, turned out she was wrong on that front. Connor might be Dawn's age but that was because he'd spent the bulk of his life being raised in some hell dimension by Angel's arch nemesis, someone Buffy had never heard of. And much like the hell dimension she'd once been inside, and the one she'd condemned Angel to, time hadn't moved there the same as it did here on planet earth. What had disappeared through a rip in reality had been an infant, and that had been a handful of months ago. Probably right around the time Buffy had gone to Spike's demolished crypt to break his heart. What had fought its way back through was Angel's baby boy all grown up.

Angel had gone to Los Angeles to let her live a normal life, and in the time since he'd moved, he'd reconnected with the crazy vampire who had once tried to put Buffy down with a couple of handguns. Because vampires from Angel's family just didn't stay dead, apparently, unless you killed them twice. Angel and his murderous maker had unlost that loving feeling at least long enough to conceive a miracle child, and that child was Connor.

But oh, it was so much more than that. Buffy got what she understood to be the extremely abridged version of all things Darla in the span of about ninety seconds. The highlights being that Angel had gone absolutely *nuts* over her. Way more nuts than Cordelia had ever seen him about a woman, which was probably not meant to be a thing that made Buffy feel bad, but it lanced its way across her heart all the same. He'd done things to and because of Darla that had worried everyone who was around him and even better, all of this had been occurring at the same time Buffy's mom had been in the process of dying and a hellgod had been hunting down her sister. If asked, she couldn't say why that made everything worse except that it did.

Angel had been hung up on his soulless ex. Like majorly hung up. So hung up he'd *knocked* her up. While Buffy had been losing and dying and coming back and fucking the undead, he'd been...

He'd been doing the same thing, only without the losing and dying. Darla had no more soul than Spike. Probably way less, actually, if such a thing were possible. Buffy sure as hell wouldn't have agreed to de-chip Darla or trust her with her family or rely on her in *any* of the ways she'd come to rely on Spike. She wouldn't have let her stay in her basement even *with* a chip, let alone without one. And Angel had been nuts about her. Not in a good way, Cordelia had rushed to clarify, not that that mattered. Maybe in the same way Buffy had Spike, and if that was the case, that meant he'd loved her. Maybe he still did.

In all the times she'd allowed herself to imagine what Angel's life away from her might be like, it had never included...well, any of this. Not another woman and definitely not a son. He'd once told her that he could never move on and she'd believed him.

God, she'd been an idiot.

And now, she was... Well, she didn't know what she was doing, except that it wasn't what she needed to be doing—getting ready for the confrontation with Angel. But then, Buffy hadn't been all that concerned with the logistics of the fight. She'd beaten him before, back when she'd been younger and not nearly as experienced. A child, really, in all the ways that mattered. She wasn't that girl anymore. The only advantage he had was the emotional one, and even that she'd thought she had in the bag up until his *proof-I-moved-on* teenage son had stormed through the door and thrown her world into an even greater state of disarray than it had been before.

But she had to be focused. Not obsessing over the existence of a son that defied nature and logic all in one. Trouble was, she didn't really have time to do any bearings-gathering. Just as everything had quieted to a lull, Cordelia had announced the arrival of an incoming vision—visions being a thing she had these days—and all conversation regarding Connor and the inexplicability of his hereness had ceased.

"Is it Angelus?" Wesley had demanded with single-minded urgency, taking her by the shoulder. "Do you see where he is?"

Cordelia had furrowed her brow and shaken her head. "Not Angelus... But he's been there. It's a dock. These demons—ugh, they're serious uggos. Puke colored and all splotchy. They're trying to smuggle...*ugh*, I can't see it, but they're trying to get it into the city." She'd lifted her eyes to the room, then blinked upon realizing everyone was staring. "That's it."

"That's it?" Gunn had echoed. "That's nothin'."

"Hey, it's not like I control this thing, is it?"

He'd raised his hands and backed away before she could yell at him anymore, and that had been the end of it. Everyone had sprung into motion, rushing to weapons caches Buffy hadn't even noticed. Yelling orders at each other in an unfamiliar shorthand but still one she recognized as shorthand, as it was how she and the gang communicated when they were in a rush. Same dynamic, different group. And she was in it now, too.

Just like that.

Just like that. Start the day in one place and end it in another. It seemed amazing to her that she had woken in her bed in Sunnydale that morning, not knowing that this was where her decisions would lead her. That just a few hours ago, she'd been a different Buffy, scared but hopeful and with a whole set of ideas and problems that had nothing to do with anything in Los Angeles.

How had she talked herself into leaving home? Had it been duty or that gut reflex that had once decided her actions for her when Angel was in the mix? Choices she'd made then that she'd thought she wouldn't make now, except here she was. She'd decided to table everything regarding Gray and the Council to come here, assume the burden of her old ghosts. How high does Buffy jump when someone says Angel is in trouble? Better get a longer measuring tape because the answer is a doozy.

More than once, she caught herself looking at Spike for...well, she didn't know what. Just that he was typically there for what she needed. But Spike wasn't paying attention to her at the moment. In fact, he seemed to have returned to his previous game of avoiding eye contact at all costs, having busied himself with going through

the weapons they'd brought for the hunt. And that was what Buffy *should* be doing other than standing around like an empty-headed moron, overwhelmed by the crush of revelations that had been harpooned at her since she'd walked through the hotel's front doors. What she needed to do to make sure she got to the other side, where she had time for things like reflection and wonder.

Instead, when she got her legs to work, she found herself approaching the boy who was Angel's son. He was near the others without being with the others, considering a selection of blades, his brow furrowed and his jaw set in what had to be a family trademark expression. He wasn't a bad-looking kid. Someone Buffy could easily see Dawn crushing on, and god, how weird would that be. Weirder still when she considered that she was closer in age to Angel's son that she'd ever be to Angel himself, which made her mind do things she didn't want it doing. There was *vampire* old and there was *parent of teenage child* old, and mystic upbringing notwithstanding, Angel had been both the entire time.

Connor was about the age Buffy had been when she'd met Angel, and he looked so damn young. But that was probably another thing she shouldn't spend too much time thinking about. Not if she didn't want her head to hurt more than it did already.

"So," Buffy said, forcing out the word, sounding every bit the awkward adult she used to tease her mom about being. "Angel's really your dad, huh?"

Connor barely glanced up before looking back to the blades he was considering. "Yeah. And you're a vampire slayer...who used to be his girlfriend."

It was weird hearing herself described that way. Buffy had called Angel her boyfriend on more than one occasion, but it had seemed a convenient term rather than an accurate one. *Boyfriend* was something everyone had. Whatever she'd had with Angel had been...bigger. More important.

Though hearing that thought in her own head now made her want to smack herself. A lot.

"Yeah, that's...me." Buffy rubbed her lips together and looked around to see if anyone was watching them. No one glanced her way, though she thought she might have caught Spike whipping his eyes back to the bag he was sorting through. "I—"

"How does that happen?" Connor asked, abruptly turning all of his attention on her. Also like his dad. Aloof one second and full throttle the next—no warning, no in-between. Just a pendulum swinging between extremes. "You're a vampire slayer who is *with* vampires. My father told me about you. Holtz, I mean. He told me all about slayers when I was little. How they had a sacred duty, and that it was the same as ours. I always wanted to see one of you, and now I find out that you're..."

"Human?" Buffy volunteered. She knew she should be on edge, taken aback, even offended, but the unexpected abrasiveness somehow had the opposite effect. If asked to explain it, she wouldn't be able to. It was just there and then not. "Your dad was different."

"Right. Because of the soul. People keep telling me." He glared at her a second longer, then jutted his chin toward Spike. "That one, though. That's a vampire."

She didn't know how he knew that, given he hadn't been around during the awkward introduction phase of the evening, but decided not to question it. "He is."

"Does he have a soul too?"

Buffy shook her head. "No. But he's...different."

The sneer on the boy's face was familiar too. "Different. You sound just like her."

"Her being...?"

"Dad has a type." And then he did surprise her by throwing a very pointed look at Cordelia, who was hovering around the would-be check-in counter. It was unmistakable, both the look and what it meant, and for the umpteenth time that evening, Buffy felt her stomach drop.

First Darla...now Cordelia?

"Oh." Buffy staggered back a step, going a bit numb. Not knowing why but also knowing exactly why. Not knowing what to feel but somehow feeling it all the same. "Oh."

"Y'all ready?" Gunn yelled before her mind could start up again. "Me? Kinda eager to see a slayer in action."

Yeah, that sounded good. Buffy definitely needed to kill things. And if that thing happened to be wearing Angel's face, all the better.

Then she was across the room again, outside of the strange bubble that was Angel and his people. She was beside Spike, accepting the blade he held out for her. Her favorite blade. She'd never told anyone it was her favorite, couldn't really explain what made it better than the others, but the handle felt smooth and familiar against her palm and her fingers knew exactly where to grip it. Her thumb found the crack in the finish—the result of one night's overzealous slay—and pressed down.

Her favorite blade. And Spike knew.

"All right," Buffy said. "I'm ready."

SAID THE JOKER TO THE THIEF

SPIKE'S LIFE UP TO THIS POINT HAD BEEN SPENT IN MOSTLY LOUD MOMENTS, EVEN when he craved the quiet. The phantoms of his past were never happy to keep mum, instead voicing their thoughts on the challenges of his present in a constant stream of *not good enough*, *what a cock-up*, *bloody worthless tosser* and other old favorites. Always there to beat him down, give him something to fight against. A reason to keep moving forward.

He couldn't recall feeling numb like this. Bugger, he didn't even know if *numb* was what he was feeling at all. Seemed too simple, straightforward, for the amount of movement going on between his ears. He'd like to blame her for it. Would love to, in fact, just so he could be sure of what he was feeling. Anger was straightforward and righteous in a way that neither disappointment nor regret could claim, and he could see the path there. Her choice to twist him up with her heated looks and hungry kisses, with the soft promise of *maybe* lingering on the horizon. As though it were an actual destination he could move toward rather than another in a long line of mirages. There but not there. Not real.

The hunt that Cordelia had sent them on ended up being a wild bloody goose chase. There had been a few stray demons making sport of some locals who had somehow not yet learned the new rules of the game, but no evidence of anyone smuggling anything in anywhere, and certainly none that had anything to do with Angel. By the time the lot of them had stomped back inside the physical manifestation of Angel's overbearing pretension that was the Hyperion, they had lost hours, and the humans among the party had been in need of some kip. Buffy too, though admitting it seemed to cost her something, overwhelmed as she had to be by everything that had happened since she'd crawled out of her bed that morning. And never mind the endless revelations that had been waiting for her upon their arrival. She

needed time, and he did too. Needed to suss out his own screaming thoughts before more joined the bloody fray.

Consider the unexpected and radical ways his life had changed since he'd swung by the Magic Box for a bit of their new routine.

There wasn't much to do about it now, of course. What he'd said or hadn't said, the choices he'd made that had led him this far, for better or bloody worse. Spike was done playing the *what if* game with himself. Done with the ceaseless volleying back and forth between the path he'd taken and the path he'd left behind. He'd had his reasons at the start and they had been good reasons. Born out of a desire to do right by her, to not give himself a pass for all the pain he'd caused. And that had been true up until it had stopped making sense. If there had been moments to course-correct, he'd ignored them. Maybe for her. Probably for himself. Perhaps entirely for himself, given how much it hurt simply being here. Watching as she battled with the realization that the Angel in her head and the Angel outside of it were two different blokes, watching her try to cover her hurt. The sort of hurt that could only be born of heartbreak.

Despite everything, Buffy had never learned that final lesson where Angel was concerned. Whether or not she was learning it now, he didn't know, and Spike found himself dreading the time between. If she would reach out for him the way she had once, a bit of cold comfort in a world that was on perpetual fire, the feelings she had for Spike a handy excuse to allow her to forget the heartbreak she'd never gotten over.

And the soul, the sodding soul, screaming louder now than it had since the demon had pressed his hand against his chest. It all came back to that. The spark. The missing piece that had finally made him fit only to reveal the miserable truth that he'd never fit at all. Not as vampire or man. The world was only wide enough for one wretched sod with a soul, and somehow that had become Spike, and his job now was to set things to rights. Bring Angel back from the darkness he'd willingly embraced. It seemed a fitting punishment for all Spike's presumption. Win a soul, get a prize. Only not the prize he wanted. He was forever off to the side.

Buffy hadn't talked all that much when the merry band had returned from the night's failed hunting trip. She had mumbled something about needing a place to catch a few winks, and Cordelia had gestured to the vast expanse around them and told her to pick a room. Or two, if she and her pet vampire weren't knocking boots. Buffy hadn't reacted to that—hadn't so much as glanced in his direction. Just muttered that the vampire in question would need to eat soon, then grabbed her duffle bag and helped herself up the staircase that led to the second floor.

Spike had watched her go, wanting to call after her. Wanting to scream. Wanting to storm back out into the endless night to track down the wanker himself and have this all done with. Hurry on to the next part so he could stop clinging to the shred of hope she'd given him when they had agreed to discuss what they were to each other after all this was behind them. Except it never would be behind them. Buffy had gone into it the way she did everything else—strong-willed and, despite everything, overly optimistic. Quick in and out, no fuss, no muss. No earth-shattering realizations. No

teenage sons courtesy of a mystical pregnancy. Nothing to disturb the sweet bedtime story she'd told herself in the years since Angel had left her high and dry. Keep his image pure, untarnished, so the possibility of *someday* was never too far out of reach. Anyone she fancied in the interim was just there to pass the time and nothing more. Make sure she didn't get too lonely as she waited for the man she actually loved to realize the mistake he'd made.

He'd wanted to do that, but he hadn't. Instead, Spike had let Cordelia show him where Angel stashed the good stuff and warmed up a mug of blood in the microwave. And wouldn't you know, precious Angel didn't sully his fangs on pig swill. The juice was pure and rich and human, ambrosia on the tongue and hell on the stomach, for Spike had trouble getting it to go all the way down. Knowing that this was Angel's life. That these chumps just trusted him to keep on his leash when he had never learned the art of restraint.

And people thought Spike was impatient. Not without cause, mind, but wholly without context.

"It's weird, isn't it?" Cordelia had asked as she'd watched him drain the mug she'd provided. "I felt the same thing when I saw her walk through the door."

"Mm-hmm." He'd licked his lips and placed the mug on the counter. "And what's it I feel, you reckon?"

"It's always them. No matter what." She'd flashed a sad little smile. "That no matter what you go through or what you mean to each other, you'll always be second best."

The blow had landed, as he'd known it would, but he'd done his best not to show it. Last thing he needed was the pity of another pretty seer Angel had somehow suckered into trailing after him like a hapless pup. And here people thought that *Buffy* was his type. "Could do better, you know," he'd said instead.

"Well, obviously. But the heart wants what it wants." The smile grew sadder and the eyes wiser, and though he didn't feel her poking around in his head, that sense of being seen the way Dru had always seen him settled over him nonetheless. Stripped down and bare. On display for the whole sodding world to see. No secrets.

And Spike had nodded, swallowed, and helped himself back into the hotel's main area without another word. Not having any to spill, as it were, and needing to clear his head. Chase down the quiet that eluded him and always had. He'd followed Buffy's scent upstairs. Second floor—far enough away to be alone but close enough that she wouldn't have far to run if someone started bellowing.

For a long beat, he'd stood outside her door, listening to the echo of life from the other side. Thought about knocking. Thought about talking. Thought about all the things they'd said and hadn't said when it had just been them. Thought about the soul and how she didn't know and how that was his fault. How so much was his fault.

He'd thought. Then he'd turned and chosen the room across the hall.

And tried for sleep that wouldn't come.



BUFFY HAD HOPED that sleep would help clear her overly crowded mind, but it hadn't. For starters, she hadn't gotten much of it, too aware of herself and her surroundings. Of the bed she was lying on that wasn't her bed, the ceiling she was staring at that wasn't her ceiling, and the building full of people that were not her people. She knew her mind should be occupied with other things—not-LA things—but Gray and the Council and everything else seemed a thousand miles away, confined to the boundaries of Sunnydale itself, and there was nothing new there for her to tread. Probably wouldn't be until someone made a move and she had a new crisis on her hands.

As it was, she'd already done her due diligence. Called the phone Xander had lent Willow and Dawn to confirm that she and Spike had arrived in Los Angeles, been reassured that there was no news on the home front insofar as the Council was concerned, and that Willow had reached out to her contacts to find someone local who could work the curse. The plan was to email the curse text to Cordelia, along with a list of the needed supplies. Willow advised getting an Orb of Thesulah as soon as possible, though she worried that finding a store that hadn't been looted might be a challenge. She could send the one she'd purchased a few years back when Angel and Buffy had resumed their relationship—an insurance policy, she'd called it—but worried about mail going in and out of the city with the sun being blocked out. If the USPS was even bothering with the Los Angeles area, and if they were, how delicately they would actually handle parcels labeled *fragile*. Something to think about, as the ritual of restoration was useless without a conduit to pull the soul from the ether. Assuming of course they could find the soul in the first place.

Buffy had hung up feeling more weighed down than she had before calling. Then she'd turned to Cordelia and Fred, asked them about places where they might get an Orb of Thesulah. Fred had wondered if their friend Lorne, a demon who could apparently tell your fortune if you poured your heart out in song, might know where to look. He'd been staying at the Hyperion ever since his karaoke bar had been destroyed a second time owing to his relationship with Angel, and had recently left to track down someone who might know how to locate a soul gone missing before Buffy and Spike had arrived. Suffice it to say, he had contacts. Some legit and some less legit, but he was a good demon and could be trusted—a real teddy bear, if you asked Fred—and would probably know better than anyone which of the local magic shops were likely to still have inventory.

Upon seeing the look on Buffy's face, Fred had rushed to assure her that the soul and the orb search were things she, Cordelia, and Lorne could handle. All Buffy needed to worry about was the small task of finding Angel—*Angelus*—and bringing him back to the hotel. They could hardly expect her to do everything.

And Buffy had taken her up on that, both because she wanted to and because she had little choice. Her mind kept circling back to the existence of a child born to two vampires, to the things she'd thought she'd known about Angel—and the enormous amount that she realized now she did not, and perhaps never had.

And what that meant for her, if it meant anything. If what she felt right now was hurt.

The truly strange thing? She didn't think it was. There was definitely some discomfort, even echoes of pain, but not the dying sort of pain she'd always associated with Angel. The way she'd been reduced to little more than a living sore after he'd left, the kind he lanced open every now and then just when she thought she was starting to heal for good. At one point, Buffy would have thought it truly impossible to ever be over him. One part of her locked away, waiting, hoping, clinging to the thought of *what if*.

What she felt most now, though, was a deep-seated wonder of what else she didn't know, what else remained to be discovered. That if she indeed hadn't known Angel as well as she'd always believed she had, what about them she could trust. The way she'd felt for sure—that all-consuming, desperate can't-hardly-breathe sensation that had defined her experience of falling in love for the first time. The things she'd told Willow not all that long ago, comparing that neediness, that intensity to what she'd felt the previous year with a different vampire. How her craving for Spike, the things he made her feel, had dominated her for months, to the point that she'd felt she was losing her own identity, and sometimes that had seemed okay because the life she was living felt like a shadow of the one she was supposed to live, anyway. It hadn't been a good feeling—she'd fought and screamed and wanted desperately to feel anything other than what she did but wishing hadn't made it go away. Neither had the guilt over the fact that it had been there to begin with. That she was doing something with someone she shouldn't, just as she had once. That she was feeling things she shouldn't, just as she had once. That she was in love with the wrong person, just as she had been once—only this time she hadn't been able to admit it until well after it was over. Until they'd done so much damage to each other that there was no more *down* to travel.

Willow suggesting it could have been anyone when Buffy had fallen for Angel. That Angel himself hadn't been the reason it had been so intense, but rather because he had been the first. Her first. Her only up until that point. The true start of Buffy Summers's love life.

That thought still wiggled her out, as it was in such fundamental contrast with what she knew of herself. The things she had been through that made her who she was today. This Buffy right here. The one that Angel didn't know anymore—that no one knew, really, for all she kept inside. No one except Spike, who had seen her at her absolute ugliest and still somehow, despite everything, loved her.

But then, he didn't have a soul. Maybe that helped him appreciate the ugly. He seemed truly floored every time she tried to do something like apologize—not that *apologize* was a word that easily fit into their relationship, but there had been plenty of bad on her end as well as his, and either he was determined to ignore it or simply couldn't see it for what it was because of what *he* was.

That didn't have to mean he was lacking, though. It didn't *have* to.

God, she hoped.

And these were the thoughts that kept her awake. Not worry about facing Angel or the soul that had gone missing, which spoke either of confidence or stupidity. She knew he could kill her—knew he would try. That he'd say things to throw her off her

game, make her belly roll or her heart break or any combination thereof. It was all old and new at the same time, for she wasn't the Buffy who had cried herself to sleep for weeks after he'd gone bad, but she remembered what being that Buffy was like. And there was so much more now that he would attempt to wield into a weapon. Things he believed would cut her open so he could watch her bleed.

Yet she wasn't afraid. She rather felt like she was being asked to go back and retake a test she'd already aced once. In her best subject, no less. Maybe that was naïve. Probably it was. It wasn't like fighting Angel would be easy or anything, and she knew that. But she had also been here before, weaker and more emotionally compromised than she was right now, and she'd walked away then. She could do it again.

That was what she told herself, at least, whenever her brain decided to interrupt the spiral of life thoughts with reminders of what lay ahead. It was also what she told herself when the knock came on her door after a few long, restless hours, letting her know that the others were gathering downstairs. She told herself again when she met Spike in the hall, caught the same sleepless look on his face and found her mind wandering to what must have kept him from finding rest. How he felt about any of this, actually, because the vampire she had spent years trying to shut up had finally shut up, and she was realizing she hated the quiet. That she'd come to depend on his insights and insults and every manner of thing that came out of his mouth, unchecked, and not having it kinda sucked.

But Buffy couldn't ask without drawing attention she really didn't want drawn, so she didn't try, rather forced herself to focus on the group that had gathered in the Hyperion foyer, same song, second verse style. This was one thing that had definitely changed since she'd hunted Angel the first time—there was actual hunting involved. No just stalking the cemeteries to see if he would show up, but location scouting, tip-following, and other things that were standard now but somehow hadn't been when the playing field had been not only smaller, but more familiar owing to its being local. It still felt like a needle/haystack situation, and for good reason.

"What do we know?" Buffy asked as she stepped off the final step and into the foyer proper. "Anything new?"

"Lorne telephoned," Wesley replied stoically, wandering over from the check-in desk, where he had been conversing with Cordelia. "The mage he had hoped to recruit to help find Angel's soul has been murdered. And there was a message there for us."

She pressed her lips together and nodded. There was always a message. "It didn't happen to be longitude and latitude, did it?"

"Not quite so fortunate as that, no. However, I think I can deduce where he's been based on some of the other references he made. It's a decent place to start, at least."

"What, so we go on some random wild Angel scavenger hunt in demon-run LA?" Cordelia demanded in her usual fashion.

"Yeah, 'cause that don't sound like a trap or nothin'," Gunn muttered. He looked

like he had gotten maybe as much sleep as Buffy had. Everyone did, point of fact. Which was understandable, given the circumstances, but also dangerous.

"It probably is a trap," Buffy said, crossing her arms. No sense coddling the evil-Angel newbies. "He's going to destroy anyone and anything that could possibly bring back his soul, and if we want to stop him, we need to make him think we're playing his game, which has an excellent chance of getting someone killed. If anyone wants out, now's the time to get out."

Gunn met her eyes, his own narrowing. "What, you think that scares me? I ain't tappin' out. No way."

"Good to know." She slid her gaze over Wesley, already knowing his answer. Whatever else, the past few hours had taught her that the man she'd known before wasn't in the building anymore. There hadn't been much time to talk, but their first Angel-hunting excursion had yielded a few factoids that had driven home how much nerdy Wes had changed. Like he'd gotten his throat cut while kidnapping Angel's son and then kept a woman chained up in a closet for however-many months when Angel had gone missing over the summer. Stuff that would seriously bother her, probably, once she had time to be seriously bothered. Whenever that was.

She'd also learned just how much Connor hated his father. Or, well, if it wasn't hate, it was a close cousin. The whole having been raised by Angel's sworn enemy thing had done what the sworn enemy had likely wanted in completely turning the kid against him, and Angel's acquiescence to have his soul removed hadn't done much to repair the damage. Honestly, Buffy was surprised Spike hadn't joined in on the Angel-bashing, right up until she'd remembered again that trying to predict what he'd say or do based on past experience was a waste of time these days.

One thing that *had* very much knocked her off guard—learning exactly where Angel had been all summer and who had put him there. It had made the arguments she had with Dawn seem like...well, she was too preoccupied to come up with a decent metaphor right now, but whatever it was, that was it.

It also put a lot of other things into perspective, like the wide berth everyone seemed to be giving Connor. Buffy was starting to think the only reason he was there was because Angel had known Connor wouldn't hesitate to kill him where the others might, should his sojourn as Angelus go sideways. Also reinforced why Wesley had wanted Faith first—it went along with his determination to get Angel back at whatever cost. The slayer who hadn't had her death wish realized yet might stand between father and son if push came to shove.

All Buffy knew was she needed to keep an eye on Connor without making it obvious she was keeping an eye on Connor. A task much easier said than done, as the kid seemed about as fixated on her as his father had been once. It wasn't a pleasant fixation, either. More like an animal doing its best to protect its territory, trying to scare off anyone it thought might be vying to be alpha.

Except Connor was not alpha material. He thought he was, though, and that gave him the capacity to be both erratic and dangerous. He had something to prove to himself and everyone else.

"What was the message?" Buffy asked, still looking at Wesley. "Don't tell me he knows we're in town."

"I'm afraid so. It was a drawing of you. Wearing what you were wearing yesterday."

"How? We came directly here."

"Imagine he's been skulkin' around," Spike said before the other man could reply. "Tryin' to get a lay of the place. See if anyone's close to findin' the honeypot."

That seemed reasonable even if it did give Buffy the wiggins. Over the years, she'd gotten rather proficient at sensing when she was being watched, having learned to understand and trust the subtle warnings her body sent her. More than that, she'd *always* known when Angel was around, both consciously and subconsciously. That he could have been peeking in on her without her notice was a step or two beyond disturbing. Either she'd lost what she'd once thought was an unlosable piece of herself or it had never been there in the first place.

"Why not just come in and kill us?" Cordelia piped in. For once, there was no snide undercurrent in her voice. She was truly asking.

Spike snorted and gave her a look Buffy knew well, having spent a good amount of time on the receiving end. "What, with the way you greeted me and the Slayer yesterday? Seem to remember you were primed and ready to run either of us through with an arrow from that bow of yours."

"Because I'm not an idiot."

"Neither is he, ducks. Would be a damn sight easier to find him if he were."

"So he's been watching us," Gunn surmised.

"Think the lot of you are a mite thick if it took me sayin' it for you to figure it."

Fred wrinkled her nose and pulled the thin cardigan she wore a bit tighter over her arms. "I have had that feeling a time or two. Not the thick thing, but like someone might be watching. Nice to know that wasn't entirely in my head."

"Why didn't you say anything?" Cordelia asked.

"I thought I was being paranoid."

"Trust me, there is no such thing as *paranoid* when Angelus is on the loose."

Buffy bristled. It was weird hearing Cordelia talk like she was the authority on all things Angel or his alter-ego. Or anything, really, because Cordelia had not exactly been *that* person in high school. Part of her wanted to argue even though there was nothing to argue against simply because *not* being the person everyone looked to was uncomfortable. But after deciding that would look every bit as petty as it would be, she turned back to Wesley to assert control in a different way. "So we've lost the element of surprise."

"It appears so." Wesley looked disappointed but no less determined, which was good. They'd need all the spare determination they could find. "It was strictly an invitation to you, what he left behind. Something about owing you a dance in hell."

"Well, I'll just have to explain that unlike him, I'm not on the invite list." She blew out a breath, thinking. "You said he didn't include a *where*, right? But a few places we might check?"

Wesley offered a nod. "I think we might start at the old office location. Below the

drawing itself, he referenced ‘a park where you kissed in the sun.’” The former watcher paused, lifting his eyes to Buffy, his own full of expectation, but Buffy had no clue what *kissed in the sun* meant because, well, they had never done that. Except for a handful of dreams she’d had immediately after she’d sent him to Hell, and to the best of her memory, she had never shared the specifics of any of those with anyone, Angel included. When she answered Wesley’s searching look with a shrug, he sighed and dropped his shoulders. “He might have been speaking hyperbolically, I suppose. But there was a park relatively close to the beach at our former office. It would have been a quick walk away.”

“But this is a park where we’re supposed to have kissed? I’ve visited Angel here twice and neither time involved park kissage. Or any kissage, actually.” Buffy didn’t mean to, but she caught herself glancing at Spike as though to gauge his reaction, then immediately cursed and broke away because so completely not what she should be worried about. And even if there had been park kissage, that obviously didn’t mean anything now. Ugh. Maybe this was why she should avoid vampire relationships—the ones she had were all with the complicated. “Angel wants us to find him. Or at the very least, to go looking for him. He wouldn’t be leaving cryptic stalkergrams if he didn’t. Which means there might be something in the hotel he wants and is waiting for us to clear the decks before making a move.”

“That’s quite a leap,” Cordelia drawled, resting her elbows on the check-in counter.

“No, it’s exactly what he did when he and Drusilla organized the ambush on you and the others at the school library,” Buffy retorted, perhaps a bit more sharply than she needed to, but her nerves were starting to wear on the thin side. She could really do without all the naysaying. “He wanted Giles so he lured me out. Maybe he thinks the soul is still here somewhere and wants to do it all over again.”

“So are you saying you’re not going?”

“No, I’m saying that we don’t want to risk it, especially if the soul *is* here and he has an idea of where.”

“We’ve combed the place,” Fred volunteered. “If it’s here... Well, whoever took it did a good job hiding it.”

“All the more reason to make sure no one lets their guard down.” Buffy considered for a moment, then nodded as she landed on a decision. “Okay. So this is how it’s going to work. Spike and I will hit the old office. The rest of you should stay here to—”

“No,” Connor snapped. The word wasn’t spoken so much as snarled, packed with enough energy she could tell he’d been waiting for a place to interject ever since she’d started talking. “You don’t get to tell us what to do. I’m *not* waiting around here while some girl and a *vampire* hunt down my father. Angelus is mine to kill.”

“To kill,” she echoed, turning to face the hotheaded teen directly. “You’re not interested in getting Angel back at all.”

“He’s a murderer. He told me what to do if things went wrong.”

“Yeah, and I’m sure all of this is coming out of loyalty and not your own daddy issues,” Buffy retorted.

"You don't get to talk to me that way."

"And hey, look how I just did." She squared her shoulders and drew in another breath. If Connor expected her to blink, he was going to be waiting a while. She'd already had this argument a time or a thousand back before she'd known how to really have it—back when she'd been not much older than him, point of fact, and the years had only made her better. "Look, I don't care what your problem is with your father. I get you're not a fan. But that doesn't change the fact that whatever *Angelus* did that pissed you off so much has nothing to do with Angel. He's who we're here to save. So get in line."

"Bollocks."

Buffy closed her eyes, every muscle in her already-tired body going tight. She had known this was coming—had felt it there, lingering in the periphery along with the growing tension that defined her relationship with Spike, but had somehow fooled herself into hoping maybe she had it wrong. That along with his newfound restraint, he would swallow all his Angel-flavored bitterness and resentment until the crisis was over. Last night it had seemed possible, but she should have known better than to trust it.

Still, she couldn't help herself. She turned to him, met the blue steel of his gaze, took in the determined set of his jaw and the frustration that commanded his face, and willed him not to make this any harder than it had to be. "Spike—"

"*Bollocks*," he said again, voice firm. For a long moment, he didn't blink, didn't look away, then finally turned to address the roomful of spectators that had suddenly gone rigid. "Been listenin' to this for years. 'It's not him. It's not Angel. The soul makes a difference.' You wanna know what the soul is, kiddies?" He turned back to Buffy. "You wanna know, Slayer? It's window dressing. You let yourself believe that they're not the same and he gets a pass, doesn't he? For every bloody thing he ever did to you—"

"Stop it," she said hoarsely.

"Everything he did to *me*. Everything he did to Dru and god knows how many others. Not his responsibility, right? So you don't have to think about it. How you cozied up to a killer. How he can tear you apart limb from limb and still have the bloody gall to ask if he can kiss it better. He's even got this lot"—he waved at the others—"callin' him by a different name so they can pat themselves on the back. Believe that their leader is somethin' other than a man with two centuries' worth of blood on his hands. Haven't you been listening? We're not hunting *Angel*. It's *Angelus*. Just a damn shame those two have to share a body. You know what would be left of *Angel* if you took out the parts that are *Angelus*?"

Again. Firmer this time. "Stop it."

"Sorry, am I spoilin' the delusion?"

"How? By running your mouth? Get over yourself," she snapped, the numbness washed away by a fresh rush of anger. And god, that was better. More like herself—clarity spearing through a mind that had been muddled by confused feelings and unwelcome revelations and all other things that had gathered there since yesterday. Or hell, way before yesterday. All the stuff she'd been living with for months. "You

might know Angelus but you don't know a damn thing about what Angel goes through when it's over. I do. I was there. I saw it. And you being jealous—"

He cut her off with a hard, cold laugh. "That's what you think this is?"

"Well, what else am I supposed to think, *Spike*? I give you a chance at something real with us, and I am going into it with my eyes wide open, but that's not good enough? You want me to see you the way I see Angel? If he's a killer then it's okay that you're a killer too?" Her temples started to throb as heat stormed her face, but the embarrassment just fueled the anger. That he had to do this now. That he had to do it in front of a room comprised half of strangers, half of people she hadn't seen in years, and the son of the man she'd once loved beyond all reason as a bonus. All because Spike needed what, exactly? Needed her to accept him the way he was? Here she thought she'd been trying to do just that, no matter how reckless or irresponsible. No matter that she still didn't feel comfortable in her own goddamn shower, or that she'd spent months trying to hate him when she didn't, living with the guilt for not feeling the way she should. Trying to move on while weighed down by something she hadn't even realized was remorse until she'd eavesdropped on someone else's therapy session. Reconciling that he'd hurt her as much as he had and she'd hurt him as much as she had, but somehow she'd loved him then. She'd loved him and she'd done *that* to him, and he'd loved her and he'd done *that* to her, and they had been all kinds of fucked up and wrong, but still wanting. Still thinking. Still believing there might be a future for them where hurting each other wasn't something they did simply by waking up.

All she'd hoped for was a chance to do it the right way. But it wasn't enough. She never was.

"Just want you to know who it is you're breakin' yourself tryin' to save," Spike said at last, sounding calmer, but she knew that was a mirage. Just like everything else where they were concerned. "Some people aren't worth the effort."

"That's not for you to decide."

"No. 'Course not. I only know it better than anyone—"

"You don't know a damn thing. Not about this."

He sucked in his cheeks, his eyes like daggers. Something between them had broken.

"Right," he said. Still with that deceptive calm. "Then let's have it over with."

And without another word, he turned and stormed toward the door with hard, purposeful strides that had those in his path clamoring to get out of his way. He didn't pause when he reached the exit, didn't slow down or look back, either. Just walked out into the night. Leaving Buffy staring after him.

"Uhh, was that weird for anyone else?" Gunn asked loudly. "And was I the only one who didn't know that it wasn't just Angel some slayers got all snuggly with?"

A fresh wave of heat rose to her face then spread. She lowered her gaze to the floor, knowing full well she needed to go after Spike but her legs refused to cooperate. Maybe her legs knew better than she did. At this point, she wouldn't be surprised.

"Buffy?"

That was Wesley. Buffy snapped her head back and inhaled. “Okay,” she said, “everyone else stay here. Especially you,” she added to Connor, even if every bit of the authority she’d tried to command felt compromised. Goddamn Spike for doing this now. “Spike and I will check out the area around the old office. Have the cage ready.”

Then she was moving too, snagging up her favorite blade along the way.

And thinking Spike would be beyond lucky if she didn’t decide to use it on him by the time she caught up.



FUCK, he never should have come here.

It had been there—the impulse to tell Buffy she was off her trolley if she thought them teaming up to lasso her ex was a good idea. Bugger her reasons and bugger her rationale, Spike knew things that she did not. He understood things she could never understand, and as long as that was true, he was better off distancing himself from situations where that information had the capacity to do more than hurt.

Because that was where this was leading them. The only place it could. The one thing he’d wanted to avoid was now inevitable, and it was all on him. He could almost taste it, the way the news would hit. How hurt she would be, how foolish she would feel, how she might just decide to hate him anyway because he’d lied to her. That was how it all shook out, right? His intent meant rot for how it would affect her when it was all said and done.

And there was the other part—ugly and twisted and as monstrous as all the other pieces of himself he’d tried to banish. All that fury and frustration simmering until the explosion was inevitable, and just now he’d wanted to scream at her the thing she didn’t know. Wield it like a weapon, watch her righteous indignation melt into shock and horror. Hit her where it would hurt. And he hated himself for that—hated that the drive was there, that he had the thought at all. He’d been selfish before but that was downright cruel. That was taking pleasure out of someone else’s pain, even in theory, and what sort of man did that?

The sort of man he was. Also the sort of man he was hunting. The sort who weren’t men at all.

The quicker they got this mess with Angelus settled, the better. It wasn’t good for him, thinking these thoughts. Having these urges. Feeling the cancerous rot that was jealousy consuming him from his insides, knowing that was what it was and that he had no right to it—that he was bugging up the chance Buffy never should have given him—but unable to stop himself anyway. Because souls were fairly worthless in the end.

How do you like me now, love?

He snickered before he could help himself as he rounded the corner that would have led him to the old Wanker Investigations office—the one that had been blown to smithereens, if the stories could be trusted, and tragically without the wanker in question tucked away inside. And yeah, there it was. Easy to pick out,

even if it had been turned into a bloody parking lot. Some of the landmarks around the area had changed, likely bulldozed and repurposed the way everything else was in this city, but the deli across the street was still there. He had a clear memory of popping in for an evening meal—courtesy of the neck of the cashier. It wasn't too far from here that he'd found that Marcus chap, recruited him to do the fun bit for reasons Spike hadn't been willing to explore at the time but understood now came down to more of his inadequacies. The same he'd once convinced himself had fuck all to do with him and everything to do with the chip. Muzzling him. Shackling him. Sanitizing him until he couldn't spy the line that divided man from beast.

But no, it had been there all along in some form. That thing that made him different and kept him from fitting in with the others of his kind. Perhaps had kept Dru from loving him the way he'd loved her, too, for all his badness had never been bad enough for her the same way all his goodness had never been good enough for Buffy. Just bloody figured he'd never fit in anywhere.

Except when Spike stopped to consider the place, and delved a hand into his duster pocket for his fags, he knew that wasn't right. Not right but the problem all the same. Somehow he had gotten here, to a place where he was wearing a duster that should have been tossed at best and burned at worst, but had been given back to him because Buffy had kept it in her closet. So he had it again, this once-grand prize he'd fought tooth and nail to win. The familiar weight on his shoulders, the smell in his nostrils, the inner pockets he'd fashioned himself to store weapons and the like, and the ever-ready pack of smokes he made sure to never leave home without. Buffy had given this back to him, a part of the identity he'd spent so much time constructing for himself, and she'd had no reason for it.

No, she kept trying to carve space for him in her life. And he kept...what? Thinking about where he was and where he'd been. Thinking about how it would never be the same—how it *shouldn't*. That she would never stand in front of her mates the way she had tonight and loudly proclaim that all his past sins had been committed at the whim of a man who no longer existed, and if she tried, he couldn't let her. A comfortable lie was, after all, still a lie. He wouldn't be like Angelus, but he would hate the bastard all the same for making it this difficult. For bugging her up so much that was the sort of rot she would let herself believe.

And what happened then? What happened *next*?

Hell, he didn't know. It was all a mess. *His* mess. And he hadn't the foggiest idea how to start clearing it up.

But now wasn't the time for that. He had to find Angelus, and if that bugging clue was to be believed, he was in the right spot. So he started forward again, lighting up a fag to give his hands something to do. The street ahead and behind him was deserted in ways a stretch of demon-filled Los Angeles shouldn't be with the sun on indefinite hiatus. It had been like this all along the walk, too, quiet except for the noise in his head. All the action taking place somewhere that wasn't here as though the area had been claimed for staging. Spike wondered, idly, how much of a lead he had on the Slayer. If he should be concerned that she hadn't caught up to him just

yet. She was most monsters' worst enemy, but in droves, the monsters could overpower her just fine. She'd be a nice prize, too. He should know.

Maybe he ought to double back. Make sure she hadn't wandered into trouble—and take the thrashing he almost certainly had coming while he was at it. It was a tempting thought, but it came too late. He'd made it to the other side of the old Angel Investigations site, close to the beach and the park that overlooked it. It could have been a ruse, could have been the git's attempt at poetry—something as sad and pathetic as William's had been—but it wasn't, because this was Angel, Angelus, whatever he wanted to call himself. And he wanted Buffy.

So when a light wind carried over a scent he would know anywhere, Spike wasn't surprised, rather resigned.

It was now.

"I should've known she'd send you," came the low, arrogant drawl that still sometimes found its way into Spike's nightmares despite his best efforts. "Do you even ask *how high* any more when she tells you to jump?"

"Lo to you too," Spike returned, starting forward again. Angelus stood near a tree at the fence that separated the park from the beach, hands in his pockets and that infuriating smirk fixed to his face. He looked perfectly at ease, if not a bit eager. That damnable control in place—the same Spike had never been able to break. "To hear your mates talk, last time I saw you properly you were gettin' your arse kicked by the Slayer. Couldn't turn down the chance at a repeat performance."

"Yeah, thanks for reminding me. I've been meaning to kill you for that."

Spike flicked his cigarette to the ground then spread his arms. "Standin' right here. Take your best shot."

"You always did have more bravado than brains." Angelus shook his head, snickering still as though this were all very amusing, then turned and walked a stretch up the green beside the fence. "So...before we get started, is she even coming? Don't get me wrong, nice to see you and all, but I kinda had my heart set on Buffy being a team player. See if she's feeling as sentimental as I am these days. I came ready for a trip down memory lane she's not gonna want to miss."

Spike forced himself to stand still, and soul or not, that had never been easy for him. Especially with every nerve in his body fired up and ready for the violence that was coming. That Angelus had designed this wasn't shocking, that he had a plan less so, but Buffy hadn't mentioned any particular concern she had in facing him again. In fact, she'd been rather adamant about how prepared she was, given how she had changed since the last time her ex had been off the leash. And yeah, there'd been a few surprises she hadn't counted on—the kid especially—but Angelus had to know she was prepared for that, too. Perhaps not as rigidly as she had been for everything else, but Spike knew Buffy well enough to know these weren't the sort of distractions that would cost her much in a fight. She wasn't a child anymore and hadn't been for quite some time.

Angel hadn't had the privilege of watching that transformation, but Spike had. Every glorious second.

"Aren't you going to ask?" Angelus prodded a second later.

"What's that? Sorry. Started to drift."

"That's the problem with you, Spike. You were never a good audience."

"Audience is only as good as the entertainment. Not my fault if you can't keep me interested."

"You know, speaking of entertainment, I've heard some highly entertaining things about you over the last couple of years," Angelus said, turning on his heel in an overly showy fashion that nearly had Spike's eyes rolling out of their head. He'd always been a dramatic sod. "Like...did a bunch of soldiers *really* stick a chip in your head? The way Buffy tells it, you're nothing but an overgrown, declawed kitten these days. One that dogs her like a little lost stray just hoping she'll take pity on you and give your ears a scratch. Is that true? Oh, I hope it's true."

Spike gritted his teeth but said nothing.

Where the bloody hell was the Slayer?

"It's just like you, too. I don't know why I didn't see it coming," Angelus was laughing now, the sound flat but no less earnest because of it. "You always were hungry for my sloppy seconds. And pathetic enough to do anything you could to get your hands on them."

"You gonna do anythin' more than yammer my ear off? Thought we were gonna have it out."

Angelus splayed his hands in welcome. "I'm right here. By all means, take your best shot."

He wanted to. God knows he wanted to, but he couldn't. Not yet. Not without Buffy. Among other things, Spike wasn't sure he trusted himself not to dust the wanker if he got close enough. Everything in him was set to boil, and he was ready to stop fighting it. "What? Scared to take the first swing?"

"Please, I'm just testing a theory. It's much better if I kill you *after* she shows up. Telling her I dusted you is just not as effective as letting her watch you die. That's the problem with vampires—can't set a stage if there isn't a body."

Spike hesitated, his stomach twisting. There was something in Angelus's voice that he couldn't identify—something that shouldn't be there. At once all of this started to feel like the trap Buffy had warned against, only not the one they had anticipated. It was too quiet here. No sound, scent, or sight of another creature in a city overrun with them. Like Angelus had planned all this down to the last detail.

"Where is she?" he heard himself ask before he could bite the words back, his voice shaking. "What have you done with her?"

"Me? I've been standing here."

"Bollocks. Not here to play games—"

"No, no. You're here to kill me. Or rassle me into submission so they can make me like you. All mopey and pathetic. Sorry. Not happening."

Bloody hell. He knew. He sodding knew.

And it wasn't a trap at all. It was more of what Angelus did best—what he'd always done best. Setting the stage, as he'd said, so it was ready for her when she arrived. Spike felt her then. Buffy. *Slayer*. And he saw what would happen next—the thing that he'd led her to without being any the wiser, because that was him all over.

Idiot William. Fool for love. Fool for her. Buffy hadn't been delayed or captured or any of the ridiculous possibilities that had darted through his head—she'd been doing what *she* did best. Stalking her prey. Waiting for the right moment, the right advantage, but she hadn't had all the information. She just thought she had. And he'd let her. He'd brought her to this moment and he couldn't stop what was coming from coming. All he could do was watch.

And he did. As though from a distance, Spike watched as she parted from the shadows, one with the night, fluid and free. He had time to wonder how he could have missed her, time for his mind to drag him back to that night in the house when Gray had stormed into the kitchen like a hurricane of her own making. A creature that was not human and was not demon, but built of both and made for moments like this. Born for the hunt and the kill and ready to deliver both.

She crashed into Angelus with all that delicious strength and more, went with him to the ground, her stake as much a part of her as her fingers and toes. It didn't matter that he knew she didn't want to use it—it was there, a threat she was ready to make good if forced. And Angelus was laughing like this was a game, like she was playing, and Spike started to move toward them but there was no forward. No backward, either. No hiding from what was to come.

"Just tell me, Buff," Angelus rasped. "Was it because of me? Were you so eager for a replacement that *any* cold body would do?"

Buffy didn't respond with words. She crashed her knuckles into his nose, and his head recoiled, smashed into the soil along with the timely crunch of breaking cartilage. There was a gush of blood and then he was laughing again.

"Come on. I started it. If you're gonna rip me off, at least credit the artist."

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about, but this"—she punched him again—"seems to be the best answer."

Angelus rocked back again, and the cackles came harder, the pitch higher, and Spike couldn't get there fast enough. They seemed to be at the end of a very long tunnel, one that laughed at things like vampire speed and agility, one situated outside of the place subject to the rules of the natural world. He could run all he liked but he couldn't move an inch—the only part of him that was working was the ears.

"You don't know!" Angelus threw his head back, laughing as blood from his broken nose trickled into his mouth. "You don't *know*!"

"What don't I know?" Buffy spat, all frustration. All hardened warrior, certain that she had already seen the worst of everything, that nothing left could hurt.

But she was wrong. One thing could.

"Your boy." Angelus grinned a bloody grin. "He has a soul."

AND NOW'S THE TIME, THE TIME IS NOW

SHE DREAMED OF FALLING SOMETIMES. NO, NOT FALLING. JUMPING. THE VAST pulsing energy of a thousand other worlds opening up beneath her, ready to swallow her into whatever came next. There was the wind at her face, the pull of gravity as she soared closer to the ground, the thumping of a heart that was beating its last, the plummeting sensation in her gut, and the knowledge that she was about to collide head-on with death. Buffy would jolt awake before she hit pavement, sometimes panting, sometimes shaking, sometimes both, and would find that her heart and stomach were still in free fall, having not gotten the memo that it had been nothing but a memory.

That was what she felt now. Falling. The plunge. The sudden rush of cold adrenaline—because there *was* cold adrenaline—and it wasn't because she was about to die. Angel or Angelus or whatever he wanted to call himself could have said anything to get to her, could have chosen any combination of words to wield into a weapon, and he'd said that. Something that didn't hurt but stunned, as it was just the sort of thing too wild to be true but too random to be random. It knocked her off balance, made her feel like she'd rammed face-first into a brick wall that had simply sprung into being, stripping her of the ability to do anything but tumble over until things inside her head started making sense again.

It was exactly what Angel wanted, too. Exactly what he needed to say to get her to stop hitting him so he could start hitting back, knock her off him and to the ground. Roll back to his feet, bouncy now with all that barely contained glee. He cackled again, that awful sound that she hadn't realized until that second she hadn't forgotten, and delivered a sharp kick to her gut just to rub it in.

"You really didn't know," he said, clapping and laughing harder when something thunked into him. Something being Spike, who was snarling and swinging and hitting

him with good, hardy punches that smacked through the quiet but didn't drown out the things Angel was saying. "But then, *Willy*, you've always been a special breed of pathetic, haven't you? All this time, I thought Dru was weak for not putting you down when it would have been humane. I get it now. This is better. Took your goddamn time getting here, but *man*, do I love the punchline."

Buffy rolled onto her stomach, dragging in gulps of air and begging the noise in her head to start making sense. For Spike to say something that would put everything right once more, turn her world back to the way it was supposed to be. Make it so she could stop falling.

But he didn't. Instead, he roared again, swung again, all the while Angel laughed and spat, "How whipped were you, boy? How much of an embarrassment if she couldn't even tell?"

Couldn't tell. Couldn't tell. I couldn't tell. Couldn't tell that something was different. But I did. I knew. I asked him what was different. I asked and I asked and he wouldn't say. Where he'd gone. What he'd done.

The fall didn't break. Instead, she hit the ground hard enough that everything inside of her shattered. The reason for those differences, those furtive looks. Why he sometimes left the room the second she walked into it. Why he'd promised he would never try anything again. The awkwardness and the tension that had defined them up till this point, why he'd pulled away after she'd realized that she wanted to try. All of it tore through her at once—the truth that had been in front of her for weeks, maybe months, and she hadn't seen it. She hadn't seen any of it.

Spike has a soul.

And there was no time. She had no time. Shattered or not, she had a job to do, and it was bigger than her and him and all of this. Buffy planted her hands on the ground and forced herself to her feet, the screaming and the pain and everything else shoved back. She couldn't let herself feel it. Not while Angel roamed free.

"So I gotta know," Angel said, and Buffy looked up just in time to watch her ex crack his knuckles into Spike's face. "Who can I thank for this? Someone deserves a gift basket."

Spike rocked back but otherwise seemed to absorb the blow like he hadn't been struck at all. In a blink he was shooting forward again, another of those guttural snarls tearing through his lips, all mingled fury and pain. He swung wildly, sloppily, and with none of the technique or skill Buffy had come to view as uniquely his own. And Angel just laughed again, bloodied and bruised but having the time of his life, swatting away Spike's fists as though they were nothing more than buzzing gnats.

"It's really like I taught you nothing," he called. "Come on, Spikey. You're among friends here. Who'd you piss off? Was it Xander? Xander get the witch to make you even more pathetic than you already are?"

Spike bared his teeth. "You'd like that," he spat, and finally managed to pop Angel in the nose. "Can't be somethin' I did on my own. Somethin' I did that you could *never* do. And that burns, doesn't it?"

Something like surprise flickered across Angel's face. "What the hell do you mean?"

"Just what I said." He swung again, connected again, and though he didn't look her way, Buffy could tell he knew when she started moving. It was in the subtle shift of his body, how he edged to his left so that Angel's attention would follow. How he clenched and unclenched his fists, his jaw pulled tight and his eyes full of hard steel. "It's always about you tendin' to that massive ego of yours. You get a soul by a curse and that's the only way it can happen. Makes it easy for you to think you're somethin' special, when any plonker can get himself cursed. No effort in that. Just gotta brass off the right witch. Be at the right place at the wrong bloody time. Only one vampire in the sodding world ever had the stones to do what I did. Somethin' you've never thought of with or without your precious soul. And that's what makes me better than you."

Spike punctuated his words with another sharp jab, one Angel wasn't fast enough to block, and Buffy saw her opening. Pushed herself toward it with everything she had, certain her thundering pulse or her fractured heart would give her away, but either she was better than she thought she was or Angel was worse, because he didn't see her until she was practically on top of him—smashing into him the way she had just seconds before, tumbling to the ground all over again, only this time she wouldn't lose focus. There would be no earth-shattering revelations, nothing to distract her from what she was doing now. What had to be done.

And Spike was ready. The second Angel was on his back again, the vampire that wasn't supposed to have a soul smashed his boot into the brow of the one that was with enough strength that, for a second, Buffy wondered if his neck had snapped.

But there were no snapped necks, only unconscious vampires and the all-consuming quiet that followed. Outside, at least. Inside was a different story. She didn't know if it would ever be quiet there again.

"It's true," she forced out, not looking at him. Not able to. "What he said. You have a soul."

Spike didn't reply, but that didn't surprise her. All he'd been doing for the last however-long was not talking when he should. Everything she'd gotten from him had been clawed out rather than freely given, since that first night when she'd stumbled into the crypt expecting to see someone else, expecting in some way to never see him again. The coldness with which he'd greeted her, the distance, and then later the apology for the same. He hadn't known what to say to her and how could he? It was the first time he'd ever looked at her with eyes attached to a soul.

"No," he said after a stretch, bending forward and shoving his arms under the bulk that was Angel. "I don't have *a* soul, Slayer. The one I have is mine. Was set on that. Didn't want to shove just any tosser inside."

And he straightened, and she looked up. Watched as he threw Angel over his shoulder in a fireman's carry, perfectly imbalanced but somehow not.

His eyes met hers then flicked away once more, but not before she saw it. The thing that had been there all this time. Glaring at her in bold defiance through god knows how many missteps. How blind she'd been. How goddamned stupid.

His soul.

One night many months ago, Spike had come into the bathroom and closed the

door behind him. What had happened inside had reshaped everything she'd thought she'd known about him and herself, and by the time it was over, he'd torn out of there with tears streaking down his face. Then he'd disappeared, and she'd spent all summer wondering where he was and why she should care. More than that—wondering who she was, what they had been, and what it had meant that the worst thing he'd ever done to her had been an accident.

All the while Spike had been hunting down his soul.

And he'd succeeded.

And she hadn't known.



BUFFY DIDN'T THINK she could face the group at the Hyperion. She barely felt like she could face herself. But it wasn't like she was overrun with options or anything, so when Spike started in that direction, she followed at a distance. Half-hoping that some demon would jump out of the shadows to give her the distraction she needed, help clear the mental fog, but knowing, courtesy of the unique lens that was experience, that avoiding the thing that hurt wouldn't make it hurt any less. Besides, there were other things she could be doing—things she *should* be doing, even. She'd accomplished what she'd set out to accomplish and still had her own fight waiting for her at home. Sure, the soul—the one she'd known about—was still missing and all, but as long as no one let Angel out of the cage a second time, Buffy's role here had kinda played itself out.

And maybe, if she had the slightest idea what to do back home, she would have leaped on that. Better than returning to a hotel full of people who were mostly strangers after having promised them and herself that Angel wouldn't be able to recreate the damage of the past. She'd been prepared, right? She'd known what to expect going in. Only, no, she hadn't, because no one had warned her about the teenage son or the revolving door of other women or, most critically, that the vampire she was traveling with had been lying to her almost from the second he'd stumbled back into her life.

Maybe that wasn't fair. She wouldn't know. In order for her to know, Spike would have to talk to her, and he'd made it very clear he wasn't interested in talking. Not anymore.

The more she thought about it, the more certain she was that that should have been the first clue, the fact that he didn't run at the mouth like he once had. A smarter person would have clocked the difference, asked herself what could have caused it, and perhaps not been so self-involved to believe what had happened between them was the reason.

As it was, Buffy was not a smarter person. She was a very dumb person who had been dumb enough to fall in dumb love with a dumb vampire for the second dumb time in her dumb life. And when that vampire had disappeared for months only to return a shade of the man she remembered, what had she done? *Not* asked the impor-

tant questions. *Not* refused to take no for an answer. *Not* made demands she'd more than earned after everything he'd put her through.

She hadn't seen it. Why hadn't she seen it?

And how was she supposed to look anyone in the eye and ask them to trust her judgment again?

The way her head was spinning, she was glad to find the hotel mostly empty when she finally made it back. That was one good thing about giving Spike such a large head start—he'd arrived ahead of her, and the party had followed him downstairs. All but Fred, at least, who sat at the check-in desk, ready with an encouraging smile and her gratitude that everything had been handled so tidily. If she noticed that Buffy's response was anything less than enthusiastic, she was good enough not to mention it.

"Oh, your friend called," she said as Buffy made to head upstairs. Not really because she was tired or thought she could sleep, but it was somewhere to go where she wouldn't be expected to be the Slayer. "Willow," Fred added. "She wanted me to tell you that they think they've found someone who can work the curse. Someone local. He hasn't been here all that long, but if I'm understanding right, he's already made a name for himself in this area. We're still waiting on the specifics, but once we have them, I think Charles and Wesley are going to pay him a visit."

Buffy opened her mouth to ask who Charles was, but at that moment, a door swung open somewhere and Spike stalked into the lobby, moving in hard, angry strides. The swell of things she wanted to say—*scream*—jammed tight in her throat, and all she could do was watch as her brain fired off inane questions like *is that the way he's always walked or is that the way he walks with a soul?* How much of him was the man she'd known and how much was this new, altered form that had been living in her town and working side by side with her for weeks? Even staying in her home. Helping mend her wounds. Drawing lines where lines had never been drawn before.

How did I not see it? How?

She had to know, even if knowing hurt. For that was what her professor in that English class she'd dropped would have called her fatal flaw. Buffy Summers was addicted to pain, and not in a masochist pain-is-actually-pleasure kinda way, but real, hard, grueling pain that she would barely survive. That she would sometimes wish she wouldn't. There had been too many moments like this to try to kid herself—moments where she understood that pushing forward would just make her bleed but unable to stop because knowing was more important than surviving. More important than anything else.

So she followed this stranger who wasn't a stranger as he threw open the doors opposite the hotel's main entrance and barreled into a well-manicured courtyard. Like everything else about the Hyperion, the space was classy in a kinda gothic way that practically screamed *Angel*, but she didn't give herself much time to look around, afraid that Spike might have just vanished by the time she steered her attention back. For a second she wondered if that was his intent—there *was* a gate, it looked like, on the far side of the courtyard that would presumably lead to a street that he could follow as far from here as he pleased. Hell, if he wanted, he could just keep going. Fuck her and everything else; now that his secret was out, there was no reason to

keep pretending. But despite everything, despite the throbbing sore that seemed to comprise her insides, Buffy knew he wouldn't, and that confused her most of all.

Running wasn't something Spike did. Not the Spike she knew, or the Spike that had returned with a soul. And not for lack of opportunity.

She needed to know why. She needed to know *everything*. No matter how much it hurt.

Spike stopped suddenly, and she stopped with him. For a moment they just remained like that—his back to her, his shoulders pulled and tense, and he looked so familiar for someone she wasn't sure she knew that she found the words she'd managed to pull together had scattered again. Like she was looking at the funhouse mirror version of her life. Standing in the school and staring down someone who looked at her through Angel's eyes but wasn't Angel. Standing here now looking at someone whose body she knew but everything else she didn't. Angel but not Angel. Spike but not Spike. The same cause at the root, only reversed.

Finally, though, her mind started to work again, and she found her voice.

"How?"

He didn't answer for a long beat—long enough she started to think he wouldn't. "Kind of a long tale, that. Not sure it's worth the trouble. You already know the ending."

"You have a soul."

"Again, love, not just any soul. Mine. It's a bit worse for lack of use, but mine all the same."

"And you were...what, just never going to tell me?"

He surprised her by turning to her, that unreadable mask in place. At least now she knew where he'd gotten it. "That was the plan at first, yeah. Didn't wager it mattered in the end."

"It *didn't matter*?"

"How could it, after what I did?" He held her gaze as though daring her to contradict him, then sucked in his cheeks and looked away. "You want me to say somethin' to make it all better. Explain everything. Every rotten thought I've had about myself. Why I came back. Why I decided not to share. How I've been aimin' to tell you all this time but couldn't work up the nerve. I can't kiss away your pain, Slayer. I'm the one that put it there in the first place."

"So that's what this is about?"

As if she hadn't known. As if her mind hadn't taken her there the second Angel had spilled the beans. Still, some part of her needed to hear it.

"It's *all* what this is about," Spike replied, and there was finality in his voice. Strange thing to recognize when the man in question had once been incapable of shutting up, even and especially when he should, but she saw it now. It was a piece of him that was suddenly making sense. Spike without a soul didn't know when to stop. Spike with a soul was all about stopping. Guarding himself. Standing apart. Giving space. Making space. Not looking. Not bothering.

He'd kissed her, though. Back in Sunnydale, in her studio. She'd kissed him first, yes, thrown herself at him rather unabashedly, but he'd kissed her back. She hadn't

imagined that. Not the way he'd felt against her, the strokes of his mouth, how he'd trembled when he'd touched her and again when she'd sunk to her knees. His reactions had been his but they'd still been *reactions*. Spike responding to Buffy. Spike letting Buffy take the lead. Spike not pursuing her when she all but threw herself at him. Spike not answering her in the living room when she'd asked if he wanted to try.

She'd told him not too long ago that she hadn't known whether he still loved her, whether he even thought of her that way, and he'd said he'd never try to be with her again and he'd meant it. Every inch they'd edged forward together had been at her doing.

And how must all this look. How must *she* look, after everything bad that had come before. Spike knowing that she didn't know about the soul but she wanted him anyway. Was the soul the reason he didn't want her now? Did he think less of her for having been with him in the first place? When he looked at her, was it with the same disgust she'd felt the previous year? Every bad thing she'd thought about herself, suddenly amplified by the only other person who would know better than she did. Then there was every confusing conversation they'd had, every time she'd begged for patience or tried to understand, tried to push, tried to get to a place where she felt somewhat at peace with him and herself. The mess that was them had all this startling new context and she didn't know how to deal.

Neither did he.

"If it's all the same to you, I'd just as soon not do this now," he said after a moment, still in that strained tone. "Gotta big city full of things needin' a good killing out there. Wager I might as well put myself to some use while Angel's people try to hunt down the spark *he* managed to lose."

Right. Angel. *God*, Angel. Spike was the vampire with a soul in her life and Angel, right now, was not. The thought was dizzying and loud all at the same time. Kinda like everything else.

But she couldn't let him go just like that. Not when there was still so much to say. "Spike—"

He held up a hand, not looking at her, and that was it. He didn't have to say anything else...except all the things left unsaid, of course, but it wasn't like anyone was keeping score. Instead, he turned and stalked the rest of the way toward the gate at the back, then disappeared into the city.

Buffy stood still for a long beat, half-tempted to follow and demand that they do this now. That he owed it to her—that keeping this from her was too big for him to get to set the terms on when they talked about it. There was a great blob of *something* growing inside her, pressing against her skin and squeezing her lungs so that each breath became the kind she had to fight to take. Her head felt heavy and her limbs heavier, all the exhaustion she hadn't felt earlier crashing down on her once, now that the adrenaline charge was gone. But sleep wasn't an option—not until Angel's soul was back where it belonged, except not even then because she still had a war to prepare for back home. A war she was no closer to winning than she had been when she'd burst into Spike's crypt and found him on the receiving end of a new slayer's stake. And now this—this heady *everything* that she

was just expected to carry along with her, because why not? It was how she'd been doing it for eight years and three deaths, possibly more before it was all said and done.

It never stopped coming, no matter how badly she needed it to.

Eventually, though, she had to move, and when she did, it was back into the Hyperion. That was another fact of life when you were the Slayer. Choice was an illusion. Her focus had to be on whatever would get her back to Sunnydale the quickest, and it wasn't out on those streets, following a vampire who didn't want to talk.

The others were gathered in the lobby when she returned, making plans to go find the practitioner Willow's contacts had drummed up. Sure, the soul was still MIA, but better to have all the essential pieces close by when they found it. Maybe the practitioner could help there, too. Work some additional mojo that they hadn't considered. A soul-finding spell or something.

For a flash, she considered joining them. Let herself forget everything else for a while, even if there was no actual forgetting. A fresh pair of eyes, now that they weren't focused on the hunt, might be exactly what the situation called for. The trouble was Buffy's eyes didn't feel very fresh. If she was missing things as big and, now that you mention it, obvious as Spike having a soul, there was no telling what else she would overlook. What else she didn't want to see.

"Your boy. He has a soul."

How had Angel known? Spike sure as hell hadn't told him. He would have known better than anyone how Angel could turn the truth into a weapon, would have seen it coming a mile away. There was still something she was missing. Probably a lot of somethings.

And only one person who could point her in the right direction.

Somehow, Buffy managed to negotiate her way to the lower level where Angel's people had installed the cage that had failed to hold him the first time around. No one tried to stop her—no one seemed to notice her at all. They had their people and she was not among them. Maybe she would have been annoyed about that earlier. Actually, no, she definitely would have. But that had been earlier. That had been when she'd been confident in her own leadership and insight. When she and Spike had been here as partners, possibly more, and she'd been annoyed with him because he was pulling the jealous vampire crap she'd sworn she couldn't afford to let run rampant at the minute.

Only that wasn't what he'd been doing at all. At least not in full. He'd been trying to prepare her for something she'd only thought she already understood—something she now knew she couldn't. He could have snapped, could have rolled his eyes, could have told her she was talking out of her ass, but instead he'd let her spool out the rope and fit it around her neck. Because Buffy knew best. Buffy had unique insight. Buffy had lived through the soul drama once and once was enough—it had taught her everything a person could possibly know about acclimating to life after you'd spent the past century and some change playing the part of monster. Hell, even Angel had had a vacation in Hell to do the lion's share of his dealing the last time around, save for the one brief stint around Christmas when some dime store Casper with Dicken-

sian ambitions had played a game of *This is Your Life, the Homicidal Edition* and nearly talked him into watching the sunrise.

Spike could have told her all this. She would have listened. She would have had no choice, if she'd known about the soul.

Probably. Maybe.

Right?

Buffy blinked, gave her head a shake, and refocused. There was a chair a couple of feet from the bars, just barely outside of peak grabbing range. It was like none of these idiots had even seen *The Silence of the Lambs*. Or maybe that had been the point—lull Angel into a false sense of security so he thought he might be able to grab someone and hold them hostage. Granted, that could turn into a very real sense of security in a hot minute. She'd never gotten the skinny on how he'd gotten out in the first place.

Not that it mattered. Except all of it mattered. And all of it was in her head and out of it. She took another quick perusal of the space and spotted the handy-dandy crossbow someone had left down here for maximum intimidation cred, decided she'd be an idiot to not arm herself even with Angel on the other side of those bars, and had just familiarized herself with the weapon's subtle differences from her own when she felt, rather than heard, him stir.

"You are terribly predictable, you know that?"

Buffy remained, the hairs on the back of her neck standing at attention. Not that long ago—or so it seemed—she and Spike had discussed what it was like, the sensation the body gave off that alerted them a predator was nearby. A tingle in the neck for her, which he'd found appropriate considering her prey, and a sensation of being watched for him. Low and underlying, easy enough to write off for younger vamps who didn't know any better. Assuming, of course, that the feeling was universal among vampires. Maybe it had just been him.

Or maybe Angel had awakened with that *being watched* feeling. She kinda hoped so. It would be nice to, just once, unsettle him as much as he unsettled her when he was like this. When he was *Angelus*.

"*You know what would be left of Angel if you took out the parts that are Angelus?*"

She forced herself to shove that voice—Spike's voice—back into the dark from which it had come. Letting him take control here would throw her off her game.

Not that her game was much to write home about at the moment.

"How did you know?" she asked before she could stop herself.

There was a pause, then the sound of something dragging itself across the floor. Buffy turned in time to see one of Angel's hands encircle a bar of his cell, leveraging the hold to pull himself into a sitting position. He grinned at her when he caught her watching, sent her a wink that made her skin crawl anew. Overly familiar in a way that made the years spanning the gap between the last time she'd been here with him and right now seem like nothing at all. She hated that he could do that. Hated more that she let him.

"What?" Angel replied, still with that grin. "Spike?"

"You knew he had a soul. How?"

"Come on, Buff. You really need to ask me that?"

Yeah, she really did. That might be the only thing of value Angelus had to offer. God knows he hadn't done much to help with the Beast problem, or whatever stupid reason Wesley had had for doing the soul-ectomy in the first place. "I'm asking you."

"I can see that," he said, still with that grin. "Got yourself all worked up. What's the deal with you two, anyway?"

Buffy pressed her lips together. Nope, not touching that. Wasn't like she had a good answer even if she was in a mood to share. "You saw something in him. Something that gave it away. What was it?"

"Oh, gee, I dunno. Can't be that I have experience in this kinda thing, can it?" Angel seized another one of the cell bars and pulled himself to his feet, the smile falling away. "Though it is kinda hard to pin down just one giveaway. I mean, there were so many. Like, say, the hangdog way he looks at you. You gotta understand, I'm a guy who has seen Willy at his most lovesick. We're talking literal sonnets here. The things he used to write about Dru... Well, you know the real reason why they called him *William the Bloody*, don't you? Or has he never filled you in?"

"Just answer the question."

"I am answering, darling. Not my fault you don't like what you're hearing." Angel's grin returned to his face and he shook his head. "He's always been...special, our boy Spike. You know what the Judge said about him? And gosh, there's a blast from the past. Pretty sure the Judge was the only decent present Spike ever gave Dru. Well, I showed up and big ol' blue tried to zap the humanity out, but you, dear sweet Buff, had already done that part. He was the one who got to give them the good news. He was so tickled, too. Seemed he'd been let down by how tainted he found the others. How...*human*." A beat. He seemed to be waiting for something. "You *do* remember the Judge, right?"

"Of course I do. A girl never forgets her first rocket launcher." And she saw what he was trying to say, too. No diagram necessary to reach the conclusions that Spike had always been different. Not good, but not the same as Angel, or most any other vampire that had ever crossed her path. That was how she'd managed to fall in love with him the first time around, even if she hadn't known it. But it still didn't answer her question. "You know," Buffy said, letting the crossbow fall to rest against her leg, "I'm starting to think Spike was right."

"Are you now?"

"He said the whole Angel/Angelus thing you've got going on is a bunch of bull. I said he was full of it, but considering how Angel never gave me a straight answer about anything I ever asked him, I gotta say, his argument's starting to look persuasive."

Angelus grinned again, wider this time. The expression seemed wrong on his face. "You wanna know how I knew. I knew because even at his sappiest, Spike always had a bit of fight in him. I could never quite stamp it out, though believe me, I tried. The harder I pushed, the harder he fought. He might be an idiot but he made it this far for a reason. Until you." He broke, a twisted titter spilling off his lips. It was wrong, like the grin. Like the rest of him. "You showed up in town and that sad sack

followed you in...all his fight gone. He was just that weak little mama's boy Dru was nuts enough to want to give a good home. Call it the Buffy Summers special, I guess. You do seem to have a knack for making the men in your life miserable."

The worst thing about knowing he meant to hurt her was giving him what he wanted. Letting him see her flinch. Buffy had thought she'd developed a good poker face over the years—thanks in no small part to the man on the other side of the bars—but she couldn't help dropping her gaze when the blow landed the way he intended. Or in thinking how right he was.

"Though when you see him," Angel went on, still with that barely restrained glee in his voice, "do tell him I have a mind to put him over my knee. He kinda stole my thunder. See, I thought tonight was going to be special. Just you and me stuff, like the good ol' days. When you showed up, I was gonna ask you to give me a kiss. A big whopper, like the one I laid on you that day when I found you there waiting for me. Then you would've asked what the hell I was talking about." He fell quiet. "That's your cue, by the way. Your line. 'What the hell are you talking about, Angel?' I know this isn't exactly the right setting, but a guy's gotta roll with what he's given."

Buffy kept her gaze on the floor, refusing to give him the satisfaction. If it weren't for her own cancerous curiosity, her insistence on being complicit in her own pain, she would be halfway up the stairs by now, heading him off before he could land another kick. One that, despite how numb she was, she knew she'd feel anyway.

After a moment, he gave a long-suffering sigh. "This is why you were such a disappointment in the sack, Buff. You made *me* do all the work. We both know I'm gonna get my rocks off either way—at least *try* to put in a good performance." Another pause—another chance to make for the door that she didn't take. "Fine. Have it your way. So you go, 'What the hell are you talking about, Angel?' And then I say something like, 'Oh that's right. You don't remember.' I hadn't worked out the particulars just yet of *how* I was going to tell you about that day—the one you don't remember. Gotta leave a little room for improv, you know. But it would've been good, seeing you learn that your boyfriend had pissed away the chance to be human. That he *was* human for a full day you don't remember because—what's that? Oh, right, he took it from you. Held you sobbing in his arms while you promised—and I mean it, Buff, you put on one *hell* of a show then—to never forget. Never forget feeling my heart beat." He raised both hands to his chest and began to tap in rhythm. *Pat-pat. Pat-pat. Pat-pat.*

Buffy had honestly thought she hadn't had any further *down* to go. She'd been wrong. "You're lying," she said, but it came out as weak as her conviction. He wasn't lying. This was too wild to lie about.

Angel just laughed, still patting his chest. "It was right after Thanksgiving. You showed up at the old office, all huffy and full of that righteous Buffy indignation. 'Come to my city and don't even have the courtesy to let me know.' Was a pretty boring conversation up until that demon decided to make it interesting. And oh, it did get interesting. Our blood mixed up and the next thing your champion of a boyfriend knew, he was breathing air again. Making the big dramatic gestures like... kissing you in the sunlight." He waited to make sure the words landed—that she did

the rest for him. Put what he'd said with the clue he'd left behind. "Also got to take you out for another spin. You're a better fuck the second time around, I'll admit, but maybe that was just because I'd adjusted my expectations."

She bit the inside of her cheek, images that weren't memories but could have been flashing across her mind, and she couldn't feel them. Couldn't feel anything but numb. As though her system had reached its max and the rest of her needed a moment to catch up.

And he was still talking. Of course he was. He'd scented blood in the water and he hadn't even taken a proper bite yet. "Here's what I don't get though, and maybe you can help me out. See, Angel had it. He had everything he ever told *you* he wanted. You, an all-access pass to your cunt. He had you in his bed, licking ice cream off his chest, and the chance to give you a real normal life just...there. But he decided, nah, not enough. So he goes to see these mystical fuckheads and gets them to work the voodoo to turn back the clock, make it so he never spent that day in the sun with you. And just like that, it never happened. Not to anyone but him. But then, months later, he learns about this prophecy. One about the vampire with the soul playing a role in the apocalypse. Dealer's choice on what side he fights on but the prize is becoming human for real. And wouldn't you know it, *that* lit a fire under Angel's ass. So here's my question. If he wants to be human so bad, why did he throw it away when he could've given you the storybook life he always said you deserved? I have my theories but I'd *love* to hear yours."

There were some lessons she felt she was destined to repeat forever. Some lessons she never mastered, no matter how many times she took them. How many opportunities she'd had to walk away, leave him without the satisfaction of telling her what he'd called her out to tell her. But he'd known she wouldn't, and she hadn't. Fatal flaw in action.

And here came the pain. Harsh and deep, the kind that would bleed for days without the courtesy of death. Yet even still, not as strong as she would have expected. Not as intense as it would have been at the start of the day, and even that would have paled in comparison to how it would have felt a few weeks earlier. Surprise benefit to having already been knocked off her ass today. The fall wasn't as steep the second time, nor the impact as crushing. She was standing here and she was breathing. He hadn't destroyed her.

"You know, I'm really disappointed. I thought you'd be a better sport with all this," Angelus said, again with the dramatic sigh. Though when she looked up again, when she forced herself, he still had that grin. "Since you're not gonna play...my theory is Angel loves the idea of being human. He just doesn't love the idea of being saddled with you for the rest of his miserable life. And hey, maybe that's the reason Spike decided to keep his mouth shut about the whole soul thing. He knows tortured vampires with souls are your personal catnip, and he just couldn't stomach the thought of you mooning after him the way you did me. Though, let's not kid ourselves. There's only one *us*, isn't there, Buffy? He never seemed to get that girls want the real thing, not the knockoff."

Another stretch of silence. The longest yet. But there was nothing to fill it, not

inside her head or out. She had hit a wall. Anger, sorrow, rage, frustration, heartbreak—it was all there, on the other side, waiting for her to scale it and keep moving forward, but she was done moving for now. She had come as far as she could.

Instead, she looked back at Angel and raised the crossbow once more. He snickered.

“What? We both know you’re not gonna kill me.”

“Right,” she replied, and fired. Sure, it didn’t go into the heart, didn’t even hit the right side of his chest to matter, but she couldn’t deny feeling some satisfaction when he let out a howl of pain and doubled over.

And that was a nice reprieve from what she knew was coming next.

YOU ARE ONLY COMING THROUGH IN WAVES

WILLOW HAD NEVER WANTED TO BE THE SORT OF PERSON THAT EXPECTED HER friends to drop everything and immediately call her back once they'd been given a message. And even if she were that person, it wasn't like she could even know that Buffy had even received said message, let alone had the opportunity to respond to it. Buffy was in Los Angeles, hunting one of the greatest monsters of her past. She might be on the prowl for hours. That scenario was even likely—Buffy stalking the demon-run streets, slaying leads, following the breadcrumbs Angel had left for her. Maybe even worse than that.

God, Willow hoped not worse.

However, no amount of knowing this could stop her from being more than a little disconcerted when she didn't hear from Buffy that night. And hey, because of that Angel thing, disconcertment was way warranted. The woman who had picked up the phone when Willow had called before had said that Buffy and Spike were out following some cryptic clue Angel had left behind and that she'd take a message. She'd also sounded reasonably jazzed about the coven having found a practitioner so Willow had assumed this was the sort of thing that would need following up the instant Buffy got a free moment.

But the night had worn on, stretched into that awkward time where it was no longer night but couldn't be called morning quite yet. And Willow, stuck inside the motel room she and Dawn were living in until Buffy was home, had spent the time doing a lot of non-restful pacing in absence of having anything with which she could distract herself. She didn't quite trust herself to turn to magical remedies in this state of heightened agitation, and she also hadn't wanted to incur a bunch of questions from Dawn. Or any *more* questions, really, as Willow was learning that hours on end with a teenager made her cranky. And cranky meant snapping and snapping meant

fighting and she didn't want to fight. Especially since fighting, in this case, would just be a means of distracting themselves from the thing they were both worried about.

They hadn't talked about it at all, that thing they were both worried about. Without the distraction of finding a practitioner to work the spell in the first place, Willow suddenly had all this time to dwell on what it had been like when Angel had been terrorizing Sunnydale. The worry she'd forced herself to swallow, as she'd known that the last thing her best friend needed was another person's anxiety on her shoulders.

But it had been scary. Angel had been someone in their lives, and then he hadn't, and everything had hinged upon Buffy's ability to compartmentalize her feelings for him. And *that* had been awful. The stress. The worry. The unbridled relief whenever Willow would pick up the phone and hear her friend's voice or run into her the next day at school—that confirmation that Buffy was okay and not maimed or worse.

And if she were being really honest with herself, she'd never thought she'd be the one left behind in the "what happens if Angel goes bad again" scenario that had lived in her head for the last five years. Willow hadn't been a threat the first time around. At best, she'd been moral support; at worst, she'd been a possible prop for Angel to pick up and twist into one of his mind games. But she'd always imagined, after she'd started in earnest down the witchcraft path, that if they ever had another showdown, she'd be the thing he feared. Or that she'd be so beyond worrying about his brand of evil at all that the idea of him posing a threat again would be laughable.

But that had been before she'd been the worst thing that had happened to any of them. Before she'd become the real danger.

Point was, she was worried, and she needed to hear from Buffy to become not worried. So, Willow decided she'd call at sunup. Or, okay, sunup was still too early. She'd call when *The Today Show* started. People were up for that, right? All casual, not because she'd spent the night fretting or reminiscing or anything like that. Just hey, did Buffy make it in? Did you give her my message? Has she been super busy, or why hasn't she called to let us know she's all right?

As it was, the need to make the call never arose. Close to seven in the morning, the phone Xander had lent Willow began to vibrate. She jumped and made to answer, then glanced at the still-sleeping Dawn and reevaluated. Right. Better not wake anyone up until there was news to share. Also, if past experience was anything to go by, Dawn might spend the duration of the call firing off questions she expected Willow to get answered, and no one would learn anything of value.

Willow hopped off the bed and motored to the motel bathroom, closed the door as quietly as she could, then finally let herself answer the call. "Buffy?"

"Hey," said her friend in a low voice. "Sorry, did I wake you?"

"Uhh, no." Willow frowned. "Are you okay? You sound kinda sick."

It was true. If she didn't know any better, she'd think Buffy had spent the last twelve hours battling a head cold. "I've not had the best night."

"What happened?"

"Emotional hell, Will. Not actual hell."

"Well, you never know."

"I guess not." There was a sigh. "Angel's back in the cage. We found him—me and Spike."

"That's good, right?" Willow asked slowly. Only she shouldn't have to ask. *Angel in cage* should equal obvious good. Something was seriously wrong here.

"Yeah. All with the good. I, ah, think the others here—Angel's people—are gonna go try to find the person you called about. Do you have a name? An address? Fred didn't mention."

"Not a name but an address."

"Why no name?"

"I don't know. Callista just said it wasn't important." Which, yes, had struck Willow as odd but she'd decided not to be a choosy beggar. The fact that the coven had come up with anyone on such short notice was good enough. "I'll give you the address in a sec, but there's more. Like, the curse itself. I have it printed up and stuff, but not sure if the person they have is going to be able to do it in the original Romanian or if I need to translate it. I guess I could go ahead and do both and then email it to someone. Cordelia, maybe?"

"Probably the best bet," Buffy said in a tone that Willow interpreted as only half paying attention. Whatever had gone wrong the previous night had gone wrong in a big way. "Is that everything? How's Dawn? You're still laying low, right? The spell's holding?"

"Dawn's fine. Xander went by the house yesterday and said it looked all housey. No special visitors or anything." Willow paused. "But there is something else, Buffy. About the curse. I wasn't sure whether I should bring this up or not, but it's too important."

"Okay..."

"When Callista and I talked, she mentioned that maybe there was a way to do it differently."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, maybe not a *curse*, but a spell. One that would take the whole perfect happiness clause out and hopefully make it so this is the last time we have to worry about this." She paused again, this time to brace herself. After everything they had been through, after the endless back-and-forth regarding Angel and how his leaving had left Buffy shattered for years, Willow imagined news this big would take time to digest. It would be met with a gasp, at the very least, and probably about a thousand questions. So certain of this was she that when she heard nothing, Willow pulled the phone back from her ear to double-check that the call hadn't dropped. Xander had said this thing wasn't exactly the definition of reliable. "Buffy? Did you hear me?"

"Yeah," came the soft response. "So, your friends think they might be able to make the soul permanent. That's good."

Good?

"Buffy, what's wrong?"

"What?"

"I... Well, I just thought that there might be more, umm, excitement. About the whole perma-soul thing." That sounded a bit too petulant, even to her ears, but she

couldn't really help it. Even with the added complication that was however Buffy felt about Spike these days, the possibility that they could remove the largest obstacle standing between her and Angel seemed cause for celebration. Especially after all the waffling Willow had done in deciding whether to mention it in the first place. "I'm honestly wondering why we never thought of it before," she added. "I mean, there had to be a way. Granted, I didn't have the magical chops back in high school that I do now, but you'd think it would've occurred to me to make the curse less trigger-happy."

"Well, Angel didn't think of it either," Buffy replied in that same flat tone. "And he's the one most affected. But yeah, it'd be good for him. And Cordelia too, probably."

"Cordelia? Angel and Cordelia?"

"That's the vibe I'm getting, but no one's come out and admitted it."

Willow frowned. "But that's not why you're upset?"

"Who says I'm upset?"

"Buffy, come on. It's me. I know when things are not right in Best Friend Land. And even if you are all move-onny"—and lord, when had that happened?—"I know *you* well enough that seeing Angel with anyone else must be a wallop of confusing thoughts and feelings. I mean, last we talked about this, you thought there was no one you could ever love like—"

"You were right."

"I was huh?"

"You were right."

"About what?"

"All of it." Buffy fell quiet, then drew in a breath, the deep kind that starts in the toes. "Let's just say this trip has been educational. Among the things I've learned—Angel has a son, and he's about Dawn's age. Maybe even a little older. The kid's mom? Darla. Who Angel just went crazy over when she came back, never mind that she was evil, so he got all horizontal with her and they somehow had a kid. But she's dead, *again*, and completely out of the picture, which is good because I don't see Cordelia being the type who's hip to sharing."

Very little of what Buffy had just said made sense. Or maybe that was the lack of sleep talking. Willow furrowed her brow and gave her head a shake. "Whoa, Angel has a kid who's Dawn's age? With Darla? Who came back?"

"I forgot to mention the interdimensional kidnapping. Connor—that's the son—spent most of his life in some hell dimension with Angel's worst enemy. A guy I'd never even heard of, because Angel never told me anything." At last, some bitterness was creeping into Buffy's voice, but now that it was here, Willow found herself wishing she'd stewed in ignorance instead. With the bitterness came pain, and Buffy had had more than her share of that where Angel was concerned. "The last thing I learned was that a few years back, Angel had the chance to be with me for real. It's complicated and I still don't know if I completely get everything, but Cordelia said it was true when I asked her."

"Asked her what?"

"If Angel had really been human." Buffy broke off with a sharp laugh. "He had, Will. For an entire day. I was here... It was after the siege. Remember, when Xander spilled the beans about Angel being in Sunnydale over Thanksgiving? I went to LA after to... I don't know what my plan was. Probably something pathetic, like see if he was having second thoughts or something. And I also don't know what happened because Angel somehow had the day erased, but there was a demon whose blood got all mixy with his and it made him human. And at the end of it, he decided he didn't want to be with me enough. He'd rather be a vampire."

"Oh, damn."

To her surprise, Buffy laughed again, and this time it sounded like she might actually mean it. "Yeah. Pretty much sums it up. And maybe I could get that if there weren't also this prophecy Angel's been all obsessed with. One that might make him human if he can trigger it. And don't bother looking for the logic there, because the most I can come up with is that he—he being Angelus—was right. That it wasn't the human part that was the problem."

"Oh, Buffy..." Willow collapsed against the closed toilet seat, pressing the phone so hard against her ear that she was certain the grooves of the little Motorola would be imprinted into her skin. Of all the uncharitable thoughts she'd ever had about Angel—and she'd definitely run through the gamut over the years—she was surprised to find that any part of her could still be...well, surprised. But here she was, all kinds of stunned. Even with everything he'd ever put her best friend through, Willow had never once doubted that he loved Buffy. That he, like Oz, would have done anything in his power to make the relationship work. That unlike Oz, Angel could come back at any time, and it would never be too late. He always had that option because she would, for better or worse, love him forever.

It wasn't exactly shattering, learning the truth, but it left Willow feeling hollow all the same. There were so many things she'd thought about herself—about her world and the people in it—that had turned out to be naïve and idealistic. And here she'd always considered herself a realist.

"I just didn't know him," Buffy said in a flat tone that unnerved Willow more than anything else she'd heard. "I thought I did. This entire time... But I didn't. He never let me. And that's hard. But kinda good too. Good that I know it now, I mean. Better than just thinking whatever it was I might've thought about him for the rest of my life."

The line fell quiet, and Willow let it, almost afraid to prod any more. And there *was* more. However much her relationship with Buffy had evolved over the years, Willow was confident she could still pick up her friend's cues. Pinpoint those times when she was holding back. Like now.

But she also knew that trying to force anything out of Buffy would have the opposite effect. And if the Angel part of the equation was the stuff Buffy felt up to talking about, that meant the other stuff had to be of the large. Way large.

Probably involving Spike.

"It's not certain on the soul," Willow said after a minute. "Callista just thinks there's probably a way that she and the others were going to look into. I just thought

you might wanna know. 'Cause of, you know, the big. We can leave that info with Cordelia too, I guess, if it's not an immediate thing. Let them decide what they want to do regarding the curse once everything is back to normal over there."

"Or as normal as it gets between mystical pregnancies and evil law firms," Buffy replied dryly.

"Evil law firms?"

"Yeah. They are evidently a thing." There was a beat and she let out a breath. "I'll get Cordelia's email address for you so you can send the curse over. And let her—all of them—know that there might be permanent solutions if they don't want to do this for the rest of their lives. How is your magic person on finding missing souls?"

"No luck on that front?"

"Not yet, but with Angel in the cage, I can start tearing this place apart, at least," Buffy said. "If it's not here, and it's probably not, then I don't know. We're heading home tomorrow either way. The reason Wesley called us was because Angel was on the loose. That's not the case now, and we have problems enough waiting for us in Sunnydale."

God, Buffy was considering leaving Los Angeles before Angel was back behind the wheel? Before she knew that he would, in fact, come back at all? Willow opened her mouth, not sure which of the million questions buzzing through her mind would tumble out first, only to find her thoughts were racing too fast to separate into intelligible, independent sentences, but it all amounted to the same. If the soul was never located, there would be zero reason to keep one of the most dangerous vampires to ever walk the earth alive. And Buffy wasn't stupid—she had to know that. In the big book of hard truths about the world as understood by Willow, that meant Buffy should be overturning every stone available and digging up new ones to find the soul that justified Angel's continued existence. That she was ready to call it quits was... Well, it wigged Willow out.

"You're really going to leave even if you haven't found the soul?" she asked because she had to. Just to make sure she was hearing right.

"I said three days," Buffy replied, still in that listless tone. "And Gray's not gonna wait forever before making another move. She's been MIA since she almost killed Dawn and that... Three days is already more than I could afford to spend focused on anything beyond this thing with the Council. We are still nowhere close to figuring out how we're going to fight them or even what happens if I do kill Gray. I don't think they're going to be happy just sacrificing girls left and right and not escalating, and I know *I* can't live like that even if they can. That's the larger crisis."

That made an academic sort of sense—an argument Willow could easily hear Giles voicing. Logical and divorced from the emotional complications that comprised most of life's big decisions. It was just a bit jarring hearing it from Buffy and believing that she meant it.

"I'll call you when I have Cordelia's email," Buffy said, this time with a finality in her voice. She was ending the call.

"Okay. Let me get you that address—the magic user's address." Willow rattled it off, listened to the faint sound of pen scratching along paper. Trying to think of

something else to say but coming up with nothing. Wishing more than ever that she'd been able to make this trip, hating her weakness and her addiction and for a moment herself before remembering how little good that did in the end. Buffy wasn't blaming her. Buffy was just...hurting.

"Give Dawn a hug for me," Buffy said after repeating the address to confirm she'd written it down right. "And make sure she keeps out of trouble."

Willow nodded, useless though it was. "Will do. Take care of yourself."

Buffy replied with a slight huff, and that was it. The line went dead.

And she wouldn't worry, she decided as she lowered the phone. Not about whatever was going on with Buffy—not now. Even if it had to do with Spike, he was still there, and that meant something. One thing no one could ever say about that vampire was that he didn't have Buffy's back. No matter what.

Maybe she should be uneasy to take comfort in a soulless vampire's dedication to her best friend, but honestly, by this point, Willow had just accepted it as a fact of life.

And she'd take as much comfort in uncomfortable facts as she could.



THE GOOD THING about turning the lights out permanently meant there were plenty of uglies out on the town, just waiting to be slaughtered, and Spike had no trouble obliging them. He'd been buzzing since he'd left the hotel, desperate to dole out some pain to ease the roaring in his head, and being that Angelus wasn't out and about anymore to dictate the terms of the playing field, he had his pick of demons on which to vent his rage. It was dangerous and reckless, yeah, but he was a dangerous and reckless sort of bloke, despite what the soul had tried to twist him into. Just another place where he had failed and continued failing. No surprises there. All his past wins could be chalked up to happy accidents, with him fool enough to believe the mythology he'd been busy spinning for himself.

But Spike knew he couldn't stay out forever, no matter how tempting the prospect. More than once, as he prowled the streets of Los Angeles, he wondered if he might just start walking in a direction—any direction, he could pick his favorite—and not stop until he was far enough outside of whatever mojo had turned the city wonky and the sun was again a factor in his decision-making. It had all been idle fantasy, but there had been comfort in it, too. The thought that he might never have to go back and look Buffy in the eye, explain to her just exactly how much he'd bugged things up. Or, more likely, endure the version of events he was certain she was busy putting together to explain it for him.

Not that he could exactly blame her there, either. It wasn't like he'd left her much option. He was the one who had walked away when she'd been begging for him to make sense of things. But then he'd *had* to walk away. Matter of self-preservation and all. Or, in his case, prolonging the inevitable, whatever that was. He would have sworn he'd known at one point but then she'd gone and changed the rules on him,

and all the things he hadn't told her had become things he should have told her a bloody long time ago.

There had been so many opportunities, too. Times when it would have made sense. And without fail, he'd managed to convince himself that he was doing the right thing by keeping quiet. Not forcing it on her, the idea of absolution. Not making her feel the weight of the decision he'd made, hurting her more than he had already. Except for nights like tonight, situations like the one they were in, where keeping her in the dark could well have gotten her killed. He'd allowed Angelus to mold that information into a weapon, and Angelus hadn't hesitated. Why would he? He'd always been deadliest with the truth.

And that was what dragged Spike back, ultimately. That and the knowledge that avoiding her would only hurt her more in the end. He didn't have much of his own feelings on the matter sorted, aside from his disgust that he'd let it happen the way it had. There was anger and loathing, all aimed at himself, resentment and defiance, and an underlying sense of dread that seemed to have its own heartbeat, never mind that he did not.

He was a right wreck. He knew it. Same as he knew, seconds after he'd stumbled through the hotel's front doors, that the smartest thing he could do would be find Buffy, wherever she was, and bare all. Answer whatever questions she had, even let her rage on him like in the old days. God knows he couldn't say he hadn't earned it.

But that wasn't what he did. Instead, Spike found himself striding with intent toward the door that led to the basement level. To Angelus. Perhaps he would have hesitated had anyone been in the lobby, but it seemed the whole crew had packed up for what they had decided was proper evening and gone to catch their kip. Clearing the bloody path. Spike made his most reckless decisions when no one stood in his way; another thing the soul hadn't cured him of. Probably he ought to make a list just to keep it all straight.

He wasn't surprised to find Angelus awake, though. The pillock wouldn't sleep if he could help it. He'd want to keep alert, absorb as much information as possible, suss out the weak points and exploit them in a bid for freedom. Do whatever he could to disarm anyone who walked down those stairs, try to look aloof, disinterested. Just the way Spike found him—sitting on the floor along the far wall, one leg stretched before him and the other bent at the knee, supporting his arm, looking casual as you please. Nothing to see here except a bloke who happened to be on the wrong side of the bars. Never mind the definitive waft of blood in the air, or the menace behind his eyes. The way his mouth quirked into a smirk when he saw who had come to visit him.

Because he'd known Spike would come down here. Had been waiting for it.

For a long minute, they just stared at one another. The bad soulless vampire and the one seeking redemption. The poor, hapless sap that was in love with the Slayer and the monster that wanted her dead.

It was strange in how it wasn't strange.

At last, Angelus gave a theatrical sigh and gestured to the tears in the shirt he wore. "I don't remember her being so touchy. This a recent development?"

Spike arched an eyebrow and glanced at a crossbow lying beside the chair just out of reach, then saw the arrow at Angel's side. "She shot you?"

"Yeah. She used to have a sense of humor." He snickered and made a show of pulling the broken fabric aside to inspect his wound. "Not a good one, granted, but you could tell the girl a few hard truths without her getting all trigger happy." A pause, then Angelus met his eyes again and grinned. "Though maybe this was meant for you. She was upset even before I told her about the day Angel had sucked out of her mind. You really kept that soul a secret from her?"

Spike didn't want to answer. Didn't have to, either. He could stroll right back upstairs without anyone ever being the wiser. Was probably the smart thing to do, too, given the bugged state of his head. But Spike didn't head back to the lobby. He also didn't blink, rather helped himself into the empty chair he imagined Buffy had occupied some hours earlier and settled in. Not like there was anywhere else to go, especially if he hadn't worked out what he meant to say to her. Plus, there was no one else here he knew. No one except Angelus.

They had so much in common, too. Right happy little family. If only Dru could see them now.

"Look, I get it," Angelus said when Spike didn't take the bait. "You were always into your grand gestures, and Buffy *is* the sort of girl who goes for them. So you decide the soul thing worked for Angel and if nothing else is making her spread her legs for you, might as well give that the old college try. Because that's what this is about, right? You wanting to get into her pants."

Spike tightened his jaw but didn't take the bait.

"Xander's the one who spilled the beans about you being gaga for the Slayer, in case you were wondering," Angelus went on, almost wistfully. "He had to. Angel got all curious, wondering why you had turned into such a sad sack. Not that it wasn't obvious. I mean, show up in town and find out Buffy's dead and Spike can't stop crying... Give Angel a little credit, he's not as stupid as he acts most of the time. He was even...kind. Didn't spread around how you were always falling in love with the idea of love and sniffing at my leftovers in the hopes of finding a good scrap or two. And he could have. He wanted to. But he didn't because it wasn't *noble* or some other bullshit." He rolled his eyes as though he and Spike were in on the same joke. And maybe they were. Maybe they both knew that no version of Angel was noble for the hell of it—that that *nobility* would evaporate if the circumstances were tweaked even a little.

Except this plonker was following the same script as the others. *Angel* did this. *Angel* did that. Separate bloke steering the ship. That imaginary line was so established the git didn't even realize he'd picked it up, himself. That he was mimicking whatever *Angel* had been feeding the chumps upstairs. Letting himself bask in this comfortable delusion.

Spike wondered when that had started. It certainly hadn't been in place five years ago when *Angelus* had been running wild in Sunnydale. Instead, there had been caterwauling about all the insipid human emotions he'd been forced to feel and how much a sodding violation that was. There had been endless rants about the rats he'd eaten,

the kills he hadn't claimed, the missed opportunities scattered throughout the twentieth century that had been denied him because he'd been harnessed with guilt and regret and all manner of useless emotions. That had been felt by him. Angelus. The Scourge of Europe. The fiercest, baddest vampire in all of history, made tame by one little curse.

Sometime over the last half decade, Angel had decided that Angelus was someone else, and without any sense of self-awareness or irony, his soulless self had adopted that as well. That same philosophy, that same rigid dedication to separating these halves of himself and making them their own complete wholes. Made the whole *battle for redemption* thing a bit of a joke.

Though, Christ, it wasn't like Spike couldn't see the appeal. He very much could. How he would love to believe the monster who had closed the bathroom door all those months ago, who had wanted her to *feel it*, wasn't the man standing here now. That he had already made all his past wrongs right simply by slaying the beast he'd once been and leaving its carcass in a cave on the other side of the world. The guilt he felt nothing more than shadows of some other sod's memories mucking up his head since they were unlucky enough to share the same space. But he couldn't do that—he knew better. It was the beast who had made the journey to begin with. He wouldn't be where he was without it, and if he was taking credit for seeking the soul out in the first place, he damn sure had to assume the burden of all the crimes committed before then.

It *would* be nice, though.

"Here's the rest of my theory, Spike, and maybe you can help me fill in the gaps," Angel said a moment later, climbing to his feet and, while he didn't make a big show of it, gathering the arrow off the floor to take it with him. "Buffy comes back from the dead and you think, hey, this is my time to shine. She's already feeling low, depressed—don't think I didn't notice that when she fled town to share with Angel all the woes of being alive." He snickered again, shaking his head. "Women. So damn dramatic. 'You wouldn't understand, Angel. It's so hard, Angel. I don't want to be around my friends, Angel.' And even though you are slow on the uptake, never let it be said I didn't give you credit for catching things others didn't. And that's what happened with her. You saw your opening. Your chance to swoop in and maybe she'll be pathetic enough to forget how pathetic *you* are, and you two can be pathetic together. Except death hasn't made Buffy quite that desperate."

"You really can't get over the sound of your own voice, can you?"

Angelus grinned broadly and clapped his hands together. "There you are. Was beginning to think you were just gonna stare at me to death. The soul's made you a bit dull."

"Not sure you're one to talk on that, mate."

He inclined his head. "I'm warm, though, aren't I? You thought the soul would get you laid, but whoops. Soul goes in and it forces the one or two brain cells you actually have to rub together. Make you realize that even with the upgrade, you still aren't enough. A knock-off of what she really wants"—Angel gestured at himself with a grin, pressing the arrow against the wound in his chest as though to make the point more

impressive—"is still just a knock-off. She tried that once with that walking Swiss-army knife, and look where that got her."

Spike sighed, at once exhausted both with himself and Angel and whatever the fuck this was. All the thoughts that had dogged him as he'd tried to outrun the worst of himself, the fear and the regret, the knowledge of what awaited him upstairs when he finally found the stones to confront his last terrible mistake, came crashing down without ceremony. As small as he'd ever been made to feel, he didn't think he'd ever been quite that low. And while not much, that was saying something. "You just can't stand it," he said softly. "The thought that at any moment, the people you know might be doin' somethin' that has sod all to do with you."

"Well, gee, what's a guy supposed to think when you start singing his song? Not like you would've thought about trying a soul on for size if it weren't for me. And definitely not like Buffy would ever look at you twice."

Spike snapped his mouth shut before it could get any bright ideas. No. He wasn't doing that—wasn't going to play the game the way Angelus wanted it played and he definitely wouldn't help the bastard's fishing expedition by throwing out something that would snag on the line. That was all this was. The git had an unanswered question he wanted answered, and that was all fine for him, but Spike refused to appease his curiosity.

For he knew something Spike wagered even Buffy didn't. Buffy, who had lived with this comfortable idea of what Angel's Los Angeles life was like ever since he'd left her behind—one she'd had to come here herself to see plainly wasn't true—didn't know she wasn't the only one who had been living a happy delusion. Angel had developed his own view of what went on in Sunnyhell, how Buffy lived her life while out from under his thumb, and now he was having a time reconciling that with reality. Harder for him, as he'd even given her the blueprint of what he thought she should do or want, believing wholeheartedly she'd gobble it up and not without reason. She had been a good little apostle, too. And in doing so, she'd made sure her heart and mind could never truly be occupied by anyone else. No, she would forever remain a toy Angel could pick up and play with whenever he got the urge, and woe betide the man who tried to snatch it up when he was off doing other things. Angel didn't share—he owned.

That was the way it had been, at least. Or the way Angel had seen it. The way he was able to live apart from her while still keeping her.

Until tonight. Now, he wasn't sure he still owned Buffy. The thought that he might not bothered him, and he wanted Spike to make it all better. Feed him reassurances either with honesty or denial—the shape of the package didn't matter nearly as much as what was inside.

"Think what you want," Spike said at last, relaxing a bit into the chair. "Don't bother me any."

A shadow fell over Angel's face—the sort that Spike figured he only saw because he knew to look for it. "For something that doesn't bother you," the wanker said, "you sure seemed put out when I let your secret slip tonight."

He shrugged. "Man's own business, yeah?"

The shadow deepened. “Just strikes me as the sort of accomplishment that you’d go out of your way to brag about,” he replied, strolling down the line of his cell, dragging a hand along the bars. “So how did you do it, Spike?”

“Do what?”

“What do you think?”

He thought Angel was wasting his time, that’s what he thought. There had been a reason, a need to look at Angelus through these souled eyes, face him and everything he was or had once been. The consummate boogeyman of his youth, the bastard who had ruled and ruined his life more than once, more than twice, more times than he could sodding count. The eternal yardstick by which the women he loved measured every other man. Because looking Angel in the eye was somehow easier than braving Buffy right now and seeing for himself just how hurt she was by what she’d learned tonight. How many steps back they’d trodden of those he hadn’t even realized they’d taken until it was too late.

Angel, Angelus, whatever name the prick was hiding behind, didn’t deserve to hear any of this before Buffy did. He didn’t deserve anything.

Spike rose to his feet, keeping his gaze fixed on his grandsire. “Doesn’t matter how I did it,” he said. “All that matters is *that* I did. Did somethin’ you never could, with or without your useless soul. And that’s what hurts, innit? You thought all this time you were special. Bloody gloried in the idea. Then ol’ Spike comes along and shows you just how boring you really are.”

“Careful, William. Your daddy issues are showing.”

“You bought into your own sodding fairytale. The story you tell yourself where you’re the biggest bad when you’re *not* the great misunderstood hero.” He stepped closer to the cage—a sort of close that would be downright daft in most other circumstances, but he was feeling bold and reckless again. “You’re not special. You never bloody were. All you had was ego and a load of sods thick enough to stroke it for you.”

Angelus held his eyes for a long moment in that same inscrutable stare that had been the last thing seen by countless others. Anger, rage, and the sorts of emotions expressed by lesser men tucked neatly behind a façade of control. One of the many lies Angel had told about himself, that he knew how to convert the feelings that made him feel weak into strength. That he was unpredictable and all the more terrifying because of it.

Spike had bought that once. Might have even recently. But here, right now, he didn’t. He felt he was seeing his grandsire for the first time.

So when Angel made his move, he was ready. There was a burst of motion, one beefy hand shooting between the bars to fist the material of Spike’s shirt and the other bringing up the arrow, and Spike caught the bastard’s wrist and squeezed with one hand, wrapped the other around Angel’s forearm. Then he leveraged his hold and yanked Angel into the bars with enough force that his massive forehead smashed into wrought iron and the arrow clattered noisily against the cement floor.

“Sorry, pops, not this time,” Spike said, not bothering to hide his smirk as Angel rebounded deeper into the cell. He made sure to keep his gaze on him when he bent

forward to collect the arrow, just in case there were other surprises waiting inside. “Thought there was somethin’ I needed down here. Easy mistake to make. Old habits, and all that. But I just realized I have nothing to prove to you. I never have.”

He turned and started back up the stairs without awaiting another word. And there *would* be another word—probably more than he cared to count. There was little Angelus hated more than losing hold of someone he’d thought he had under his boot. Indeed, Spike hadn’t made it all the way to the door before the ponce started hurling insults, some twist on an old classic, but Spike forced himself not to listen.

In fairness, it wasn’t the first time he’d sworn off Angel—he’d been here many times before. In fury and in heartbreak, in jealousy and everything else. The sore places spotted through his life where he’d tried to do as he’d thought Angel might, either for himself or for Dru, for Buffy, too, even if he hated to think of it like that. But for the first time, in a sea of other misgivings, he wanted to be separate. He wanted to be something else. He wanted to be his own man.

And it was nice, for however long it lasted. Feeling and sensation was fluid, highs temporary and lows as well, no matter how eternal they felt. He would hate Angel. He would envy him. He would be haunted by the impossible standards he’d set, rightly or wrongly, and how Spike’s crimes would always be more severely judged, his accomplishments less impressive. But for the first time, he saw he would also have *this* in the minutes in between. Not peace but a clarity he hadn’t realized he lacked.

It would have to carry him until it was time to face her.

He had nothing else.



BUFFY WAS WONDERING if she would ever sleep again.

The phone call with Willow had consumed most of the energy she’d woken up with, such to the point that it was another hour before she felt she could face whatever was waiting for her downstairs. Not that avoiding things would accomplish anything—she was painfully aware of the ticking clock she’d set for herself and half-convinced she should just let it run out, or else announce she was leaving now that her part was done.

But no. She knew she’d feel even more miserable if she took off without trying to put Angel back together again, no matter how bruised she felt from everything she’d learned the day before.

There had been a point back in college when her concern for her mother had been at its peak that she’d stopped experiencing leaps of anxiety or dread at the continuous outpouring of bad news. Like there was only so much the brain could handle before it reached capacity and all subsequent blows just sort of ricocheted. She knew they had happened, acknowledged that the pain would come when she was in a place to feel it, but even then it would be muted by everything that had come before.

It was easier, in that regard, to think about everything Angel had lobbed at her

because it was more of an irritant than a hurt at the moment. The natural conclusion of what she'd been realizing ever since she and Spike had walked through the door and she'd been baldly confronted with the truth of what Angel's life had looked like since he'd left. Much more so than letting her mind wander into dangerous Spike territory, even if doing so was practically impossible.

She just wanted to go home to the less confusing world that included the Council trying to kill her and the homicidal slayer they'd called to do it. At least she knew those blows were coming.

But there was still stuff to do, like getting Cordelia's email address so she and Willow could curse-swap. And since they knew where to find the practitioner, Buffy figured she should go provide some extra muscle, never mind persuasion, to make sure there were no hiccups. She needed to be doing *something*, at least, rather than the great tempting nothing.

The email address thing was easy enough to square away, and soon the text of the curse was whizzing through the phone lines, all nice and ready to be put to use once the soul was found. And hopefully the witch or wizard or warlock or whatever would be able to help there, as the prospect of overturning this particular haystack might just be what tipped Buffy over the edge, regardless of what she'd said earlier. On top of everything else, she couldn't help but feel that Angel's people were unimpressed with her, and that chafed more than it had a right. Even if she *had* successfully wrangled the monster they'd unleashed and helped throw him back in his cage, the otherness she experienced around them was amplified by the weight of expectation. Angel had clearly talked about her enough that everyone who hadn't known her before yesterday had had some idea of what she would be like. Everyone except Connor, of course, but that oversight seemed fair considering the fat load of nothing Buffy had known about him. It could all be in her head but even if that were the case, its existence wasn't helping matters any. Nothing was.

Still, when she finally made her way to the lobby to bring them up to speed, she managed to sound more or less like herself.

"We have the curse and the location of our magic user," she said, stepping off the final step and approaching the B-Team Scooby Gang, as she was starting to view them. "Anyone up for a field trip?"

Some of the lines deepening Wesley's face relaxed. "Oh, excellent," he said, sounding as weary as Buffy felt. "How many were you thinking?"

"Well, we want to get there and back in the middle of demon-run LA presumably without losing anyone," she replied, glancing between him and Gunn. Fred was there too but it seemed a given that she would hang back—she was almost as small as Buffy and didn't have the super strength to compensate. "So I'm thinking me and at least one other person. Where's Connor?"

"Connor accompanied Lorne to scout out some supplies," Wesley replied. "Specifically, blood. Angel only had so much before we lost the sun and now that we're accommodating another vampire..."

A blood run now? Buffy knitted her brow but bit back the comment that wanted out, namely that trying to find suitable drinking blood in a town overrun with

demons seemed dangerous, if not downright stupid. But hey, not her town and she wasn't exactly sad that Connor wasn't around. The looks he gave her and Spike kept all of her slayer senses on alert.

Something of her thoughts must have been on her face, though, for Fred nodded as though she'd spoken. "We're not certain how long it will take, or if any of the blood supply places are even operational at the moment, given the state of things, but we would rather not find ourselves in a situation where we have two of the most dangerous vampires in history experiencing blood withdrawals at the same time."

"Seemed better that the kid go," Gunn said, nodding. "Get him away from Angelus. Also, he's strong enough he can handle himself in a fight."

"And Lorne to keep an eye on him," Wesley added.

Again, Buffy said nothing, though she couldn't help but wonder if these concerns would remain prevalent if Angel had been more Angel and less Angelus, or if she'd told them about Spike's soul. Except telling them about Spike's soul would mean talking about it and she wasn't ready for that just yet. At least not before she got to talk to him herself and get answers to at least a few of her million questions.

Not that that seemed likely anytime soon. She didn't even know if he'd returned from killing things. Hell, if he had been practicing the art of avoidance before, he was well on his way to becoming a master now. Maybe the first time since she'd known him that he actually reminded her of Angel...and she was remembering how very much she'd hated this about Angel.

"We need someone to stay here, I'm guessing," Buffy said after a minute. "I'd really like to not have to hunt Angel down a second time."

"Agreed. And I think that person should be Spike," Wesley replied. "Were anything to happen, he has the strength to—"

"Spike's here?" she blurted before she could help herself. Warmth bloomed across her cheeks at the look Wesley and Fred exchanged. Maybe she was reading too much into stuff, but it seemed like the sort people gave each other when someone else referenced a topic they had previously been discussing.

So the B-Team Scooby Gang hadn't forgotten the spat from the night before. Just perfect.

"Yes, he headed upstairs around an hour ago," Fred said after a long beat. "I was just coming down to check the monitors"—she gestured to the space behind the repurposed check-in desk—"and... Well, he'd been in the basement with Angelus."

Buffy sucked in her cheeks and looked away, a slew of conflicting emotions swarming her at once, frustration and hurt at the forefront. One or two bitter thoughts slid out between the noise—the idea that Spike was more comfortable talking to someone he hated than he was her, that Angel was owed an explanation about the soul before she was—but she stamped them out before they could gain much traction, shoved them to the back of her mind along with all the other things she was not dealing with at the present and forced herself to focus.

"Okay, so Spike stays here," Buffy said. "Fred, too. I mean, no offense, but—"

Fred lifted a hand and offered a small smile. "None taken. Battleground LA really isn't my scene. And Cordelia will probably want to stay close to Angelus." She paused

and met Buffy's gaze, her own wide as though she worried she'd said something she shouldn't have. "I mean in that—"

"No, that makes sense," Buffy replied before the back-pedaling could begin. "Wes? Gunn?"

"I'm with you," Gunn said immediately. "Not that you need the backup, but I don't like the idea of the one person who can put Angel's soul back havin' nothin' but Polly Pocket for protection between there and here, assumin' we even get them to say yes. Does this dude or whoever we're going to get even know we're coming?"

"Polly Pocket?"

"What? You're tiny." She stared at him for a moment longer, enough for him to sigh and shrug. "Know you pack a helluva punch and all, but whatever's out there ain't gonna know that just by lookin' at you. They see you walkin' alone or even with this guy and some big ugly mother might get ideas. There's a reason I ran with a crew and not solo and that's safety in numbers."

"Observe me with the not arguing. Just not sure I love the Polly Pocket thing."

He shrugged again, this time with a grin. "You're still tiny. And you never answered. We showin' up to someone who knows we're comin' or do we need to be ready to persuade? I'm cool with either but I'd like to know goin' in."

"Considering we don't even have the guy's name, I'm going to assume they'll be surprised."

"If that's all they are, then I think we shall count ourselves fortunate," Wesley said heavily. "Circumstances being what they are now..."

But he didn't finish. He didn't need to. It wasn't anything Buffy hadn't already thought, amid the swarm of other things on her mind, but she couldn't afford to wonder what would happen if they turned up and found the place had been raided by demons, the resident gone or—worse—dead. That was a problem to consider when and if it became relevant.

Instead, she looked at Wesley and asked, "Does this mean you're coming, too?"

"I think it best, yes." Wesley favored her with a tragic half grin that again knocked her off balance. There was so little of the man she'd known in that grin. They might as well have been a different species. "And the sooner the better."

Buffy broke away with a nod. "Okay, umm..." She considered, then looked to Fred, who immediately offered a small encouraging smile. "You can tell Spike? He can be kinda hard to wake up..." And he often slept in the nude, or at least he had before. Suddenly this seemed like a bad idea. Like the kind that might make her throw up. "You know what, I'll just—"

"No worries, Slayer," came from behind her, right along with a rush of the telltale tinglies that would have been much more appreciated about thirty seconds ago. "Think I got the gist. You lot are off to find the wizard. Rest of us make sure berk stays in the box. That the long and short of it?"

Over the course of the last ten seconds, Buffy lost radio contact with her body and as such, she wasn't aware of turning to face him any more than she was the beats of her own heart. But suddenly he was there, right there, with eyes that met hers without flinching. Eyes that had a soul behind them. And her stomach both tight-

ened and dropped. All of her seemed to, shattering through her careful attempt at compartmentalization without ceremony, and damn had it ever been a long time since that had happened. Like Angel-long time. Which oddly seemed appropriate.

“Yeah,” she forced out when she realized they were all looking to her for an answer. “Yeah, that would...be good.”

She waited to see if his expression would change, but it didn't. Instead, he offered a solemn nod and marched toward the basement door without another word.

Buffy watched until he disappeared. Let out a breath.

“All right,” she said, turning back to the others without meeting any of their eyes. “Let's go bag us a curse caster.”

AND THERE'S SOME RUMORS GOING 'ROUND

WELL, THAT ANSWERED ONE QUESTION.

"Jonathan," Buffy said, blinking hard as her already overloaded mind fought to process what she was seeing. Or rather, *who* she was seeing.

To his credit, Jonathan responded in the exact way she would expect from someone who had repaid the kindness that had been saving his skin by abandoning his rescuers.

"Oh shit," he said.

"Who is it?" came a voice from farther in the apartment. Another voice she knew all too well.

At her side, Gunn nudged her shoulder, reminding her that she wasn't alone. "You know this dude?"

"She's found us," Jonathan said in a deadpan before Buffy could begin to form a response.

There was a screech—a shriek, really, and a blur of motion. And then the other one, Andrew, was crowding the door as well, bug-eyed and terrified, ogling at her like she had kicked the door in rather than knocking. "It's the Slayer!" he hissed, then turned and slapped Jonathan upside the head. "Some cloaking spell, idiot. You've brought destruction to our doorstep!"

"I'll take that as a yes," Gunn muttered, a mixture of bemused and impressed.

Buffy just offered a short laugh, incapable of anything else just now. Still in that numb place where she couldn't really feel shock or hurt or anything more complicated than a general acceptance of how increasingly twisted her life was becoming, even by slayer standards. She was fresh off learning the man she'd been wrestling with feelings for wasn't who she thought he was, that the things she'd thought about her ex were even less true than she'd already been forced to admit, and now this. Sent to

fetch a magic user who could stuff Angel's soul back where it belonged, and the person in question just happened to be one of the same idiots who had done everything in his power the year before to make her yearn for her coffin.

She supposed it could be worse. Buffy had spent the walk from the Hyperion in an increasing state of certainty that Willow's coven contact would have high-tailed it out of Los Angeles unless they had a death wish. Turning off the lights in one of the largest cities in the country and letting demons run loose was a good way to make a place look like those black-and-white photos in her old history textbooks of cityscapes following a monumental battle or hostile occupation. Buildings looted, cars overturned, scattered glass across what seemed like every inch of pavement, not to mention other debris and the unmistakable signs of senseless violence that Buffy didn't want to dwell on more than she had to. As before, they'd had little trouble getting from one place to another—a couple of demons had popped up here and there, but they seemed to understand that those humans who had not yet fled at least this part of the city were the sort that knew how to handle themselves. The only slaying she'd had to do had been a vampire who realized a second too late who exactly she was, and crumbled to dust staring at her with open wonder, as though the prospect of being killed by her was an honor.

Suffice it to say, discovering that the apartment building where the coven's contact lived was unscathed—magical protections, Wesley had surmised—had been a bit of a shock, and enough to make Buffy think that her luck might be turning around. Anyone who could work enough mojo to keep a whole complex like that in one piece had to be powerful enough to do what they needed done.

And that person was evidently Jonathan Levinson.

So much for luck.

Buffy lifted her hands in what was supposed to be a placating gesture, but Andrew shrieked again and practically climbed over Jonathan in his haste to close the door. That was all it took for the wheels in her head to start working once more; she leaped into action, catching the door before he could swing it even a quarter of the way shut, then shoved it back hard enough it rebounded on the interior wall.

All right. The hard way, then. Not like she hadn't gotten ample practice.

"Oh god. I knew this day would come." Andrew collapsed to his knees without ceremony, clasped his hands and brought them up before him as if in prayer. "Please, spare us, oh brave, Slayer. We are but—"

"Shut up," Jonathan spat, turning his head as far as he could without tearing his gaze away from Buffy. "You're embarrassing me."

"You're embarrassing everyone," Gunn drawled, though he sounded like he was enjoying himself too much for that to be true. "I'm embarrassed just standin' here."

Wesley, who flanked Buffy's other side, released a deep sigh. "I see you still have a way with people," he said with a wry grin.

"I'm a people person," she quipped back, and that was nice. Almost like something she would have done if her world weren't spinning off its axis. Then she shifted her full attention back on Jonathan, who was still regarding her with a stricken, fearful expression that might have cheered her up under other circumstances.

"Believe it or not, I'm not here to tear out your spine. Which is good news for us because I'd probably have to find it first."

Jonathan nodded shakily, backing up a step. Whether this was an invitation for Buffy and the others to come inside, he didn't say—he didn't get a chance to. Gunn stepped in without hesitation and, deciding he had the right idea of things, she followed his example. It was almost worth it for Andrew's corresponding squeak of alarm, though she also figured his sniveling would get old really fast.

"Look," Jonathan began, "I know we shouldn't have run off like that. We were just..."

"Chicken-shit?"

He nodded. "That's... Yes. We were both chicken-shits."

"I am the shittiest chicken," Andrew agreed with a whimper.

Gunn started to laugh. Buffy was surprised he'd lasted this long.

"You *were* chicken-shit," she continued. "But that's not the reason any of us are here. We're here because a coven in England told us that someone at this address could pull off the magic we need performed." Now at least she understood why the coven had not given Willow the name of the practitioner. Buffy wasn't sure how everything had worked over in England—she knew Willow had attended the support group and that there had been a tangential relationship with the coven that had partnered with Giles to stop the apocalypse, but that might have been the full of it. And if that was the case, then all the coven knew, really, was that Willow had gone on a rampage to kill everyone she'd decided was responsible for Tara's death, which included Jonathan and Andrew. Alerting her to their whereabouts had probably been high on their no-no list.

"Magic?" Jonathan practically squeaked, drawing her attention back to him. "Y-you need me to perform magic? Does this have to do with..." He turned a delicate shade of red and glanced down before he could finish the thought.

"It's not Willow," Buffy said, doing her best to keep her tone measured. "Willow doesn't know you're here. Or... Well, okay, she knows someone who practices magic is here but not who. I don't think killing either of you is on her agenda anymore." She'd have to decide later just how confident she was in that. There were more pressing matters. "How much do you know about the vampire Angel?"

"Angel?" Jonathan echoed.

"Isn't he the one with a soul?" Andrew asked, still hanging behind Jonathan and shooting Buffy furtive looks as though expecting her to start lobbing stakes at him. "He's... Well, if you're on the supernatural beat in LA, it's kinda hard *not* to hear about the vampire with a soul."

The vampire with a soul. The. As in one. The only one.

Another thought to be forced back. Way back. As far back as it could go without falling out of her head. "That's the one," she said. "His soul was removed and it needs to be put back. There's a curse. We have the text. We have the supplies. We just can't work the magic itself."

"Removed?" Jonathan wrinkled his brow. "Who removed it? Does it have to do with the sun being gone?"

"No, it has to do with idiots thinking that a soulless Angel would make that situation better rather than so, so much worse."

Beside her, Gunn offered a very pointed cough but otherwise didn't respond. Nor did Wesley. The most he could muster was a look that was half-exasperation and half-defiance. Though they hadn't exactly sat down and had a heart-to-heart on the matter, Buffy was under the impression that he still believed the call had been the right one. Maybe, if she had the energy later, she could explain to him just exactly how stupid he had been. Everything he'd known about soulless Angel prior to this had come from books and secondhand accounts, and even as powerful a picture as those things could paint, there was a world of difference in hearing or reading about something and experiencing it. Hell, Buffy still couldn't believe Cordelia, who had lived through it the first time, had had the temerity to sign off on the whole bonkers idea.

"I-if you have the stuff you need for it, then yeah, I should be able to work the curse," Jonathan said. "And...you said a coven sent you to me? Err, us?"

"No, definitely *you*," Andrew assured him quickly, though his gaze remained fixed on Buffy. "You're the reason we have this lovely hacienda. And all the protective spells saved us from being killed extra dead by all the scary demons out there. He also makes a mean omelet." This he directed to Wesley and Gunn. "If anyone can help—"

"Shut up," Jonathan urged in a loud stage whisper. "She's not here to slay us. Don't give her a reason to change her mind."

"You don't think it's even a little bit weird that out of everyone who could have knocked on our door, the person who's closest to Darth Rosenberg was—"

Buffy held up a hand and, unlike Jonathan, Andrew paid attention to her, promptly snapping his mouth shut as his eyes rounded with fear. That was fine. If scaring him kept him from pointless rambling, she was up for the challenge. And rather hoping he'd hang back because she'd only barely been able to keep from knocking his teeth in the last time around. The stress she'd been under then had been a completely different breed of stress from what she felt now, and she wasn't sure she'd have the same restraint.

"That's part two of the problem," she said to Jonathan. "Part one is finding the soul itself."

"What do you mean, finding it?"

"I mean," she replied, her patience starting to run thin, "it's missing. When Tweedle Dum over there decided to remove the soul, they put it in a jar or something for safekeeping."

"It was a magically reinforced jar, thank you," Wesley muttered. "The idea was to keep it nearby for ease of reensoulment. It was supposed to be safe."

"Unlike, say, just letting it go back to the ether with all the other souls, where it definitely couldn't be stolen by anyone who walks in off the street," Buffy retorted, unable to keep the edge out of her voice. "Yeah, definitely too risky."

She knew she shouldn't have said it the moment the words crossed her lips, bypassing the brain-to-mouth filter that she'd been relying on and flying out with the

sort of bluntness that would do Anya proud. Or maybe they hadn't bypassed the filter—maybe the filter had just collapsed, her temporary ability to stop experiencing sharp jolts of shock coming to an end, bringing with it the weight of everything she'd been shoving back in an avalanche of badness.

She had put her own life on hold, her own crisis, to solve a mess that had been made willingly by people who should have known better. Who *did* know better and yet had done this. Created this. All while the Council was trying to kill her and wouldn't stop and she'd been dumb enough to let herself fall in *whatever* she was with Spike now, only it wasn't Spike at all. Or not Spike as she knew him. A Spike who had been lying to her since he came back into her life, and yes, lying by omission counted because how could he keep that from her? How could he keep that from her *now*? How could he let her throw herself at him, pour her heart out—not an easy thing for Buffy to do, by the way—all the while withholding this huge thing that changed *everything*?

And now he wouldn't talk to her. He wouldn't talk to anyone except Angel, apparently. And instead of forcing the issue, reminding him of exactly what he owed her and why, she was standing here trying to convince Jonathan Levinson of all people to help them dig their way out of someone else's mistake. Buffy called in for the clean-up. Buffy forced to make nice with someone who, despite whatever overtures he'd tried to make at the end, had been prepared to step over her and who knew how many others to get what he wanted. And when she'd rolled up her sleeves and made his survival her priority, the little dweeb had repaid her by leaving her sister and Xander to face the wrath of an unstable witch.

She wouldn't be here in the first place if the other knuckleheads hadn't released the thing they called Angelus. She'd be home, probably navigating some sticky Spike feelings without the burden of knowledge that was the soul he'd decided she didn't need to know about. She'd be doing her sweeps of Sunnydale trying to find Gray, in between studio sessions and brainstorming what could possibly be done about the Council, because she was no nearer that now than she had been when Spike had first shown up on her doorstep to announce that Lydia Chalmers had tried to recruit him to kill her. And yes, it was good she knew about the soul, but it was also distracting for how much it hurt. How much everything hurt when she couldn't afford for it to hurt, and despite her best efforts, she couldn't keep that in. Not while being forced to make nice with yet another person who had done his best to make her life a living hell and bailed without ceremony.

"If there's something you'd like to say to me, Buffy—" Wesley began, cutting through the fog in her head.

"There are any number of somethings I'd like to say, but we don't have that kind of time. It all amounts to the same thing." Buffy drew in a breath and tried to seize back some measure of control. Eyes on the current crisis and all. There wasn't anything she could do until the Angel problem was handled or she'd decided to leave his ragtag team of not-Scoobies to pick up the pieces of their own mess—something she suspected she would only be able to threaten, as she'd never had any luck in

walking away from problems like this. “We need to find the soul to put it back in Angel,” she continued, looking back at Jonathan. “Is that something you can do?”

He took a step back but, to his credit, kept his gaze firm upon hers. “A-are you gonna beat me up if I can’t?”

“Wasn’t on the agenda but I can put it there if it’ll get me the answer I want.”

“Is it just me or is she goin’ off the rails?” came Gunn’s voice from behind her.

“*She* is tired,” Buffy snapped at him. “And honestly, I think *she* deserves it for everything *she* has been put through the last eight years.”

He brought up his hands, his eyebrows shooting skyward. “Just seemed to come out of nowhere, is all.”

She ignored this, keeping her focus still on Jonathan, trying to tamp down the regret that she could already feel forming at her outburst. Control wasn’t a thing she could afford to drop like that—not like she had when she’d been younger, and especially not if she meant to survive. “Well?”

Jonathan gave a shaky little nod. “I’m sure I... I can come up with something. To find the soul—or at least break the container so we can put it back where it belongs.” A pause. “As long as you promise you’re not going to tell Willow where we are. Or that you saw us. Or that you know anything about us at all.”

“I don’t think you’re on Willow’s radar at all anymore.”

“All the more reason not to tell her.”

Buffy opened her mouth, every part of her wanting to ask where Jonathan thought he got the authority to make demands but snapped it shut again before anything could come out. Despite however much she would enjoy giving him the verbal beatdown he so richly deserved, some part of her understood that it wasn’t Jonathan she really wanted to scream at. The person she wanted to scream at was back at the hotel, ignoring her and refusing to give her the answers she deserved. The person she wanted to scream at was someone she didn’t really know at all, even after everything she had shared with him.

“I won’t tell her,” Buffy said. “But not for you.”

She had a vague recollection of saying something similar to him on a night that would soon be a year in her past, and she saw in his eyes that he remembered that too.

“That works for me,” Jonathan replied, glancing at Gunn and Wesley as though expecting them to weigh in, then back to her. “So...uhh, lead the way, I guess.”



THANKFULLY, Jonathan managed to convince Andrew not to tag along. Not that Andrew showed much interest in tagging along, rather anxiety about being left alone without anyone to stand between him and any potential demon that might try to kick down the door. It had taken a few minutes and even more of Buffy’s rapidly vanishing patience to assure him that whatever voodoo Jonathan had done in the first place was still in effect, and he was quite safe remaining behind.

“For the millionth time, it’s an intent-based spell,” Jonathan had said, sounding

way more exasperated than he had a right to be, considering. "Buffy found us because her intent wasn't to do damage."

"Not until I showed up, anyway," she'd muttered, though if he'd heard her, he'd done a better job than she would have expected in pretending he hadn't.

The walk back to the Hyperion had been full of the sort of tension she knew she probably should have tried harder to avoid. Wesley had been busy with the dramatic brooding thing that he seemed to have picked up from Angel, and Gunn had kept asking questions of Jonathan. Namely how he and Buffy knew each other, what was up with his boyfriend—which had led to a full three-minute rant about how Andrew was not Jonathan's boyfriend—and how he planned on recovering Angel's soul since it was missing.

To his credit, Jonathan hadn't tried to play innocent. He'd answered everything honestly—the fact that he and Andrew had been involved in criminal activity the year before, that it had escalated to the point that a woman had been killed, his growing misgivings about Warren but how he'd been too much of a coward to do something like go to the police and inform them what he knew. Some of his jealousies and insecurities had come through as well, the fact that Andrew had been Warren's favorite and they had tried to cut him out of whatever it was they'd been planning, either because they'd sensed his reluctance or they'd wanted a fall guy in place or both. What had happened to earn the wrath of one of the most powerful witches in the world, and that at the first chance they'd gotten, they'd lit out of town without looking back.

"There were times I thought of just leaving Andrew behind and disappearing," he'd admitted. "It'd hit me, what he and Warren had been ready to do, and I thought he deserved whatever he got. But the thought of being alone... It was like *a* friend was better than no friends."

Gunn had grunted, and though she hadn't heard his reply, his tone had her thinking it had been something along the lines of how much damage shitty friends could cause and there was something to be said about solitude. At any rate, Jonathan had admitted that Andrew could be a bit much day after day, but the tradeoff was worth it, especially after Los Angeles had lost the sun. Though, after glancing at Buffy, he hadn't wanted to elaborate on the how.

"Let me guess," Buffy had drawled, "Andrew summons demons to do your bidding around town and you play with the magicks to keep those demons under control in addition to whatever protection stuff you've worked on your building."

Jonathan hadn't replied, but he hadn't needed to. His blush had been answer enough.

And Buffy had bitten her tongue rather than let loose the tirade that wanted out because, really, she was already stretched to the max. As long as Jonathan and Andrew stayed out of Sunnydale—stayed someone else's problem—she need not get involved. Except that for a magic wielder recommended by the coven that had been so concerned about Willow, Jonathan was demonstrating an amazing lack of regard for the people in this city he could be helping with his magic. Just like before, more content to save his own skin than get in the thick of things.

But that wasn't her fight, and she wasn't going to try to claim it. Once Angel was back in the mix, he could deal with Jonathan and Andrew however he thought best. It was, as he'd told her years ago, *his* town. Far be it from her to intervene when he so clearly had things under control.

God, the sooner she got out of here, the better. All the numbness was beginning to crystalize into something substantial—something that would keep her moving forward rather than stunned motionless. At this rate, it would be a miracle if she managed to leave without screaming at someone. Like Spike. Probably Spike. Definitely Angel, should Jonathan actually be what the coven thought he was. Screaming at Angelus would just tickle him and she was done performing. Done giving any of the men in her life what they wanted at the expense of what she deserved.

Like answers. Lots of them.

This much must have been emblazoned across her face when she shoved into the Hyperion, for almost immediately, Fred was in front of her, holding up her hands and doing her best to block her path. "Buffy, there's—"

"This is Jonathan," Buffy said blandly, turning and seizing her would-be arch-nemesis around the arm. Jonathan gave a little squeak of pain that she decided not to acknowledge. "His hobbies include jewel theft, turning people invisible, aiding and abetting sexual assault and murder, and running away like a weenie when the going gets tough. Lucky us, he also works magic, so we're ready to work the curse."

"Everythin' okay?" Gunn asked before Fred could open her mouth to respond.

"Yes." Fred nodded, though the half-smile she affected didn't quite hide her surprise at the brusque greeting she'd received. And that was just tough because Buffy wasn't about to apologize. If Wesley had wanted a goodwill ambassador, he'd chosen the wrong chosen one.

"There's just something I think Buffy might want to see," Fred continued, skittering along the floor so she remained in Buffy's path. "It seemed...maybe important?"

Important wasn't a word that did much for Buffy anymore. As the Slayer, everything was important, which meant oftentimes nothing was. Still, she wasn't exactly in Kansas at the moment, and given Angel's team knew next to nothing about what was going on back home, she forced herself to slow down.

"It's about Spike," Fred went on. "And Angelus."

Buffy's chest tightened. "What about them?"

"Nothing bad. Angelus is still in the cage. And Spike is still undead, I guess." She paused then shifted her attention to Gunn and Wesley as though only then remembering they were there. "Oh, you guys. Cordelia's in the office for the spell stuff. I think she just got the printer to work to print off the text of the email." Fred glanced back to Buffy and leaned in with the air of someone sharing a joke. "Angel had it jammed up again, which Cordy swears he does just by looking at it. Something about him being a million years old makes him allergic to technology."

Gunn took the cue to muscle Jonathan toward what was evidently the office—a door behind the check-in desk, where Buffy imagined Angel did all his private eyeing when times were less chaotic. She had just enough time to appreciate Cordelia's gasp

of surprise before turning fully back to Fred, who had stepped closer. A bit too close for someone she didn't know that well, actually, but Buffy didn't have the energy to reclaim her space.

"I know I shouldn't have," Fred said in an undertone. "It really wasn't any of my business, but, well, the monitors are just there. We're recording everything that's going on downstairs. So I thought maybe there was a chance Angelus mentioned something about the Beast to Spike. He hasn't been of any help to us and it was kind of a longshot, plus I didn't tell Spike that I was going to look because I don't know him and he looks like the kinda guy who can be scary when he wants—"

"You're saying that you saw what they talked about," Buffy said, the knot in her chest giving a funny little throb.

Fred nodded, though not without glancing around guiltily. "I don't know what's going on with you two and it's none of my business. But it's been kinda tense around here since... Well, for a while now and not all of it is you but I wondered if maybe..."

She didn't finish the thought, though. She didn't need to. It was all there, and the temptation swelled with such rapidity Buffy found it hard to breathe. And god help her, there might be a million reasons to not leap astride the gift horse she'd been presented with, but damned if she could think of anything convincing enough to slow her down. "Where—?"

But Fred was already moving, circling back around the check-in desk. She glanced over her shoulder as though to check on the progress being made in the other room, then very pointedly slid a VHS tape across the counter. "There's a VCR in my room upstairs," she said. "Room two-oh-five."

Then, with a bright smile, Fred whirled around and headed into the office area, where Cordelia was regaling the others with the story of that one time she'd allowed Jonathan to date her.

For a long beat, Buffy just stood there, staring at the tape. The initial rush had faded, taking her excitement with it and leaving behind more of the old mess. Everything she wanted to know, everything she *needed* to know, the pressure she had forced herself to become accustomed to rather than addressing, and the hurt...all of it gathered and stormed, not with the same intensity as it had back at Jonathan and Andrew's place, but with something harsher. Anger and frustration giving way to just plain hurt. The hurt she'd known was there waiting for her, patient and enduring, not scared by the other things she tried to fill herself with in an effort not to feel it. Knowing those things were temporary and that sometime, she'd have to come home.

Only Buffy didn't think she could manage right now. Not here, in this place that wasn't hers, where even the people she'd known before were strangers. What Spike had done was too large, and the hurt he'd left her with even more so. She wasn't ready to let go of the idea she had of him—the Spike she'd fallen in love with against her will and the one who had been at her side ever since he'd barreled back into her life. She wanted to believe he had a reason for not telling her about the soul, something that would make her feel less stupid. She wanted to believe the soul had nothing to do with the things he'd said before they'd set out on this stupid trip, and at the same time, she hated what she wanted because it meant she cared more than

she'd already admitted. That the impulsive decision she'd made in the studio hadn't truly been impulsive at all but the natural conclusion of...

But she didn't want to think that word. Not about Spike. Not in the present tense. If she thought that word, it would make everything worse.

It would make the hurt something more than hurt.

Still, somehow, Buffy found herself wandering upstairs with the tape in hand a moment later. She needed distance from what was happening with the soul—not much she could do there, and it wasn't like she was all that eager to talk to either version of Angel, anyway. And though her room wasn't really *her room* so much as a place where she had gotten some of the most restless sleep in her life, it was there as an option. Available to hide away for a while, and not equipped with a television or a phone or any other modern convenience that one might expect in a swanky hotel, because this wasn't really a hotel. If she wanted to find something to watch, take her mind off stuff, she'd need to find a room that was made for living. And just her luck, Fred had given her a room number.

There was no need for locks or keys in the old not-a-hotel, either. All Buffy had to do to get entry was turn the doorknob and step over the threshold, then make her way through a place littered with someone else's belongings—Fred was a bit messier than she would have thought—to get to the television. The television with its VCR, and look at that, the remotes were not buried under the clutter. Right there on the credenza waiting to be plucked up and put to use.

Buffy flexed her fingers around the tape hard enough that the plastic gave her a little whine of warning, forcing her to relax at once. Then unrelax right quick as a rush of nerve jolted through her system, and she was scrambling forward, shoving the tape into the VCR's mouth, fumbling for the remote and punching buttons until the blank screen lit up.

The shot of the cage was from the back left corner of the basement level, the color so washed out it might have been black and white. She had no trouble making out Spike as he stepped into frame—far less trouble, in fact, than she had finding Angel, who was mostly obscured in the shadow across the far wall, all except one leg, which he had stretched out before him. Spike strolled forward until he was just out of arm's reach of the bars, then stopped, and for a long beat—a really long beat; she thought the tape might have glitched—the two of them seemed captured in some staring contest.

Then, at last, Angel spoke.

"I don't remember her being so touchy. This a recent development?"

But that was as far as she got before the door to Fred's room flew open. Buffy twisted, flooded with the dueling sensations of guilt and relief, her heart slamming hard against her ribcage, and was honestly surprised to find that Spike was not the one striding toward her with intent.

"Jonathan." Just as quickly, she whirled back around and punched the *stop* button on the VCR before he could get close enough to see what was on the screen. "What are you doing up here? Isn't there a curse you should be casting?"

He didn't answer right away, rather regarded her with the sort of worried look

that immediately had her switching back into Slayer mode. Finally, he swallowed and stepped closer. "Sorry," he said, and her stomach dropped. No good conversation had ever started with a preemptive apology. "I know... Look, I know last year, I wasn't the best person. I've had a lot of time to think about that and I know it's going to take me even longer to make up for the things I did. But I am trying now, Buffy. Really trying. I need you to know that."

Buffy furrowed her brow. "Okay. Consider me informed."

"No, I *really* need you to know that because I also need you to trust me right now." Jonathan hesitated, glanced over his shoulder as though to check for interlopers. "I think we might have a problem. How... How well do you know these people?"

"What?"

"Look, I don't have a lot of time. Told them I had a question about the herbs."

"Herbs?"

He nodded. "Cordelia mentioned something about smelly herbs that she waved around the last time. Only the text didn't say what herbs so... Well, Fred told me you were up here."

She blinked, not following. "And that...I can help with herbs? I was kinda saving the world when they did that curse."

"Right, but that you could call Willow since, well, not a good idea for me to." He inhaled and threw another look over his shoulder. "But I don't have a question about herbs. If you get me."

"I'm definitely going to get *something* if you don't get to the point."

"This isn't the curse text," he said in a rush. "There's nothing in here about restoration. In fact, I'm pretty sure to do this spell would mean *destroying* the soul, like, for good. And I have to believe that Willow would know that. U-unless this is her way of, umm, being evil again?"

It was an odd thing to feel the color draining from one's face, but Buffy did. She stared for a few long seconds, her brain somehow stalled and racing at the same time. "Willow would not," she said, and she was both surprised and pleased to hear how confident she sounded. "Not now."

"I didn't think so. Which means that this...this isn't what she sent." Jonathan swallowed and edged closer. "So, someone here wants me to do a soul-destroying curse instead of a soul-restoring curse. And that person is probably who stole the soul in the first place. The call is coming from inside the house, if you catch my drift."

Drift well and truly caught. Buffy inhaled deeply, stepping back on legs that had gone numb. The racing side of her brain had won out, and everything was rushing now. A barrage of information gathered over a handful of hours spent among people she didn't know well, if at all. "Not Gunn and not Wesley," she murmured. "They wouldn't have had the chance. I gave Cordelia the contact info before we left to find you. And... Connor. There's a kid—a teenager. He and this other demon were on a blood run. I didn't see either of them downstairs, so I don't know if they're back. And Fred..."

Buffy pressed her lips together, glancing at the television. She wouldn't be up here in this room if Fred hadn't suggested it, but that didn't have to mean anything. Could

be coincidence. On the other hand, Fred was brainy in a Willow-like way, and Buffy wasn't sure she believed in coincidence.

"There's the other vampire," Jonathan said. "Spike. I saw he was here too."

"It wasn't him."

"Are you sure? I seem to remember—"

She held up a hand to cut him off, shaking her head. "It wasn't Spike. Spike..." A beat. There was so much she didn't know about Spike right now, so much in question. Somehow, though, maybe with idiotic certainty, Buffy understood... Well, she didn't know what she understood. Only that he wouldn't. Not the man who had been working at her side these last weeks, the one she had seen the night Dawn had nearly died. The one who had looked at her with such awe and trepidation when she'd pulled his duster from her closet. The one she had thrown herself at just a couple of days ago.

And yes, her questions remained, as did her hurt. The knowledge that he had kept from her, the lies of omission, that sense of confused loss at the way he'd responded to her in the studio. Hot kisses and whimpers and all things *Spike* just as she remembered them, but with distance that had never been there before. The way he'd brushed her off when she'd asked if he wanted to try, and the thing she'd thought last night—that maybe Spike didn't want her now *because* of what had happened before. That he was sickened that she had ever been with him in the first place.

It was easy to fall into those thoughts. Hell, it was what had kept her up last night, why she'd woken up with puffy eyes and a tear-stained pillow. Everything she'd known about souls and vampires had been, in her mind, absolute. The change in Angel so dramatic it had felt like someone else was in his body, using his memories to lash out and wound. And in that way, separating the monster from the man had become intrinsic to her own survival. Even if she hadn't taken it as far as Angel's team had in calling him by some other name, that was how she had treated it. Souled Angel and soulless Angel were two different people who happened to occupy the same space. Souled Angel not responsible for what happened when he wasn't in control—a victim as much as anyone else.

But that was the point Spike had been trying to make last night. And perhaps why she hadn't seen it—the thing that was now obvious. There wasn't *souled* Spike and *soulless* Spike as far as he was concerned. There was just Spike, and he was responsible for all of it.

And if that was the case, then Spike wouldn't do something like this that would hurt her. Not intentionally.

"It wasn't Spike," she said, her voice not as firm as it had been a moment ago, but somehow more convicted. The tender place in her chest, that angry wound she had been nursing since they'd thrown Angel back in the cage, calm at last. "Cordelia was the one printing the spell off, right? Did you see her do it?"

Jonathan knitted his brow and looked at her as though he didn't understand the question. "You think it could have been Cordelia?"

No, she really didn't, but then again, it wasn't like she really knew Cordelia anymore. The Cordelia she'd gone to school with hadn't been able to click her way

around a computer, but she also hadn't been on a shortlist to become a higher being, whatever that meant. There wasn't much Buffy felt she could take for granted.

"I don't know," she said after a beat.

"So how do we find out?"

Buffy glanced back to the television with its VCR and unwatched tape, and all the answers she'd thought, fleetingly, might be unlocked if she let it play. Answers she didn't have now because Spike wasn't talking to her, and how her mind was an absolute mess as a result. All that uncertainty, the doubt, the wondering if she was the sum of all the worst things she had ever done—if he saw her that way, and if not, why he had kept something so significant from her for so long.

And the precedent she had set for it. All the things she had kept from her friends, all the ways she had tried to hide. The bits of her that were Buffy even though she hadn't wanted to claim them, and the trail of destruction those unspoken things had left in their wake.

If she couldn't get him to talk to her, maybe it was time to do the talking herself.

"I think this calls for drastic measures," Buffy said.

Jonathan swallowed. "Drastic?"

"Yeah. We're gonna have to ask them."



IT MADE SENSE, actually, once the full truth came out. After all, if a demon spirit could hitchhike its way to this plane of existence when a soul was forcibly ripped out of Heaven, it stood to reason that returning to earth after having been a higher power carried the same risks. At least that was everyone's best guess—the thing the others were speculating now that the deed was done.

In the end, there hadn't been much to discuss. Buffy and a very nervous Jonathan had rejoined the others on the ground floor. *All* the others, including Connor and Lorne, who had scoured the city in search of bagged blood and returned with little to show for it. Spike had been there, too, and for the first time in nearly a day, he'd met Buffy's eyes in a way that betrayed a shadow of himself. The wall between them still there, but she thought maybe the sort she could climb if she had the courage to discover what was on the other side.

So she'd cleared her throat and done the thing. Explained that the spell wasn't the one Willow had sent, that it had been swapped out, and the person who had done the swapping had to be one of them.

To Buffy's surprise, there hadn't been a lot of grandstanding and denial. She'd expected a big argument, for someone to say she was mistaken, that they trusted each other with their lives and knew no one here would do such a thing, or that Willow had sent the wrong spell. Willow was the one who meant for Angel's soul to be destroyed, and how dare she even suggest one of Angel's inner circle could have anything to do with it? Buffy had been ready, actually—prepared to argue that the soul hadn't stolen itself and the most likely scenario was that the person who had done the stealing was among them. She'd been ready for yet another fight.

Instead, Wesley had turned to Lorne and inexplicably started to sing. Then Gunn had done the same, then Fred, Connor with some convincing, and when it had been her turn, Cordelia had made a break for the staircase. Faster but not fast enough to outrun the vampire who immediately set off in pursuit.

And that had been that. A cursory search of her room was all it had taken to recover the stolen soul, and after a quick call to Willow, the correct version of the spell had landed in a different inbox. Now Cordelia was under some kind of house arrest for the foreseeable future, and Jonathan was off doing the spell that would ensure the soul made it back where it belonged. Soon, the door on the cage would open and Angel would come up the stairs. Maybe Cordelia would take his place for the interim—at least until they sorted out exactly what kind of fresh crisis they had on their hands. If it was a hitchhiker they were dealing with or something else. Something more sinister.

“Don’t know the bird all that well,” came a voice from behind, startling Buffy out of her head. She turned from where she was packing up the few things she had let scatter across the room the others had lent her, her heart doing a cartwheel when their eyes met. “Threatened her a few times, and this once she pulled a bloody crossbow on me.”

Buffy didn’t say anything for a moment, just looked at him. “You do bring that out in people.”

Something that might have been a grin flickered across Spike’s face. “Been told that once or twice,” he replied, hesitated, then stepped across the threshold and into the room. “Seems a mite obvious now, doesn’t it? Whole bloody thing just starin’ us in the face. Had to be one of them who took it. Not like anyone else could get close.”

Again, she didn’t respond, her cartwheeling heart fumbling and crashing in a heap. “Sometimes people don’t see the obvious,” she said in a voice far too hoarse for her liking. But dammit, she couldn’t help herself. “Even if it *is* staring at you in the face.”

Spike didn’t balk or look away, duck his head or shift the way he sometimes did—or had—those times she’d caught him in a lie. He also didn’t try to pretend he didn’t understand. She didn’t know whether that made things better or worse.

Thankfully, she was spared the task of trying to figure that out the next second, for Fred appeared at the door behind Spike, a broad smile on her face that betrayed what she was about to say before her mouth opened.

It was over. Angel was back.

And it was time to go home.

WHEN YOU WERE YOUNG AND YOUR HEART WAS AN OPEN BOOK

IT WOULD BE EASY TO JUST LEAVE. FOLLOW SPIKE OUT TO THE CAR UNDER THE pretense of needing to check her bag, make sure she had packed everything, and then just conveniently forget to come back inside. Odds were she already had one painful conversation in front of her—Buffy didn't think she had the energy for a warm-up act. Especially if Angel was the performer.

He would never let her do that, though. Not after everything he as his alter ego had thrown at her. Not with what she assumed were a mountain of questions she didn't think he had any right to ask but probably would anyway. Angel had never let a little thing like her comfort stand in the way of pursuing truths she'd rather not face. If she didn't deal with him now, she would have to later. Over the phone if she was lucky, and Buffy was never lucky.

But that wasn't what convinced her to direct her feet to the courtyard after she touched down at the lobby for what she sincerely hoped was the last time. Spike stalked ahead, her bag tossed over his shoulder, and didn't bother to slow down or catch her eye before disappearing through the main door. He'd wait for Buffy to get her goodbyes out, he'd said, but that didn't mean he wanted to linger close enough to catch all the sweet nothings. Man had to draw a line in the sand somewhere, and all that.

What convinced her was this sense that if she didn't do this now, if she put it off, she might find herself back here in a few years' time. The door would be left open just a teensy amount, and the things she didn't say or hear said would become less tangible. Drift back into what-if territory. She might convince herself she had misunderstood everything that she'd learned since coming to Los Angeles, try to claw her way back to the place she'd been about Angel before—that endless stasis of *maybe*. It wasn't a huge possibility, as Buffy had never felt *this* exact way for Angel, and she

wasn't a kid anymore so the youthful romanticism had long since died. She didn't think she would find herself backsliding, but god, there was something so intoxicating about its memory. Even if she was mostly sure she was just doing what people did when looking back over their life, even if she was sure what she'd felt then—intense and real as it had been—had also been heightened the way every first love was heightened. Extraordinary to her but ordinary on the grand scale of life. A story she'd told herself enough times she'd believed it.

It was quite a thing, though, holding onto that story. Like a security blanket keeping her from experiencing the sort of hurt Angel's leaving had inflicted. If she never loved like that again, she could never hurt like that again. Easy peasy.

Except no. She wasn't that girl anymore and she couldn't do this again—as in *ever*. It was time to close the door. Face and embrace the way things actually were rather than give herself the option to continue keeping the fake version of Angel's life alive.

He was waiting for her in the courtyard, looking every bit the dashing lead from pretty much every romantic movie she'd ever seen. Hands in his pockets, his shoulders tense in that way she knew meant he knew she was there. Buffy let out a breath and ate the distance between them until she was at his side, looking out on the water fixture. She and Spike had stood almost in exactly these same spots the night she'd learned about the soul.

"I think we're heading out," she said, speaking like they were continuing a conversation that had been interrupted. Maybe it would be easier that way. "Much as I'd love to stay and fight whatever evil has blacked out the sun, there's this whole thing back home that's kind of dire. I told them I'd be back within three days."

Angel didn't respond. Didn't nod or grunt or move to acknowledge her, either.

Great. And here she'd been worried he might try to make this easy.

"I'm leaving some information with Fred," she continued, "but Willow said that her coven contact was also going to look into ways to make your soul less flight risky. Might be worth doing if they can manage it. Dealing with you soulless is officially not on my list of favorite things."

There was a beat. Angel swallowed, the sound loud against the strange quiet that seemed to cloak the Hyperion from all things LA. She remembered a time that both seemed recent and a thousand years ago when she'd lived for the words between his silences. The scraps he'd give her, the pieces she could use to weave together the image of him she'd kept alive. Standing close to him, the man who had been her everything, was like standing next to a younger version of herself. Seeing the things that she would have leaped at and seized, held close to her as she had everything else associated with Angel.

The urge to pick up where she'd left off, though, wasn't there, and that was the weirdest thing of all. Bittersweet. Almost sad.

"A way to do it," he said at last. "The way Spike did."

"I don't know. Maybe." She'd have to know the way he'd gotten his soul first. "Anyway, just a thought."

"What is it with you and Spike?"

The words tumbled out so quickly that Buffy knew at once he'd been chewing on them for a while, maybe since being reunited with his soul, and there it came. The sort of pang that was Angel-specific. It was followed closely by annoyance, but she couldn't deny its existence any more than she could the relationship that had preceded it. They were all products of their own histories.

"I don't know that it's any of your business."

He pushed on as though she hadn't spoken. "I know it's something *more* than what Angelus thought. Fred said—"

"I don't know what *Angelus* thought it was or what Fred said." Though she had little trouble imagining, especially given the argument she and Spike had had in full view of Angel's entourage. The fact that their audience lacked context likely hadn't helped.

"Angelus thought that Spike was just... I dunno, this pathetic, lovesick sap who went out and tried to do what he thought would get in your pants." Angel shifted—not a lot, but in Angel bodyspeak enough to let her know he was really agitated. "Or maybe that's what I told myself. I don't know. But Spike, really? You and Spike?"

"What about you and Cordelia?" she said before she could stop herself. "Or you and Darla? What about the son I never knew about?"

"That's not the same. What happened with Darla was a mistake. I was in a bad place—"

"Believe me, Angel, I know all about bad places." She crossed her arms, turning to face him more directly. "But Cordelia's not a bad place, is she? Or... Well, maybe that's a bad example right now, but there are feelings there, right? Like, major feelings? You left because I deserved a normal life, but I guess she doesn't?"

A muscle in Angel's jaw twitched rather noticeably as he angled his face away from her. And that feeling from before swelled until she couldn't contain it, and it was like being seventeen all over again—desperate to know what was happening inside of his head, certain if she listened hard enough she could hear the thoughts he was keeping to himself, and god, she'd forgotten how much she hated this about him. How endlessly frustrating it had been to constantly wonder and question, to never know if what he was about to tell her was the truth or the sanitized version of it he'd decided was more appropriate.

Angel's silence wasn't like Spike's at all, in that way. Not like she'd thought before. With Spike, Buffy was as close to certain as she could possibly be that whatever he gave her would be the full truth. He'd never once hidden from her what he was or what he'd done—not until the soul, at least, but even then, his refusal to talk hadn't been this. It hadn't been Angel's brand of noncommunication.

Though Angel surprised her the next minute, sighing away the tension that defined his shoulders. "Look, I...I know I don't have a leg to stand on."

"Wow. That's a first."

"It's not like this is easy for me, though." He stole a glance at her, just a flash, really, before looking away again. "If what he said is true..."

"If what was true?"

"His soul. Did he really go out and hunt down his soul on his own?" Angel didn't wait for an answer, though. He was shaking his head. "That... I can't. It's too..."

"Crazy?" Buffy supplied softly. "You can't get it because it's something you would never do."

He looked at her full-on then for the first time. "If it's something he chose, something he wasn't forced into... But then, there was that chip, right? You told me about that. Kept him from being the monster. Maybe that made him—"

"Decide to punish himself with a soul he knew had a good chance of driving him insane?"

"Well, it's not like he was ever one for thinking things through," Angel replied, not bothering to hide the bitterness in his voice. "If it was one or the other—"

"Angel, stop. This isn't about Spike. It's... You just know you never would. With or without a chip. And that bothers you."

It might have been a little blunt, but it was also the truth, and she didn't want to waste time dancing around it. Even if it was wiggy, bordering on bizarre, to hear Angel openly jealous of anyone. Even stranger to know that the jealousy wasn't baseless. The last time she'd seen him insecure about how he measured up against someone else had been just after she'd tormented Xander on the dance floor following her first death. Maybe a little with Scott Hope, too, but at least then Angel had tried to come across as stoic and reserved. Not wanting her to see just how much the thought of her with someone else got to him.

And now, standing here, knowing what she knew—having lived with the evidence of just how thoroughly Angel had moved on from being the guy who had promised he never could move on, Buffy couldn't help but be a little confused. Though she thought she might get it, too.

There were different kinds of moving on. Maybe Angel had thought he could find his way back if ever he were so inclined, that she would be waiting for him the way she had been for so long. And maybe there had been comfort in that. A nice safe *never* that was there only to serve as an invisible shield standing between the self and hurt.

She should know. That was what she had done.

"Yeah," Angel said after a long beat, almost too low to hear. "It bothers me. It bothered Angelus too. As much as he hates the soul, I think he was jealous. He hates being shown up by anyone."

Buffy hesitated, pressing her lips together. "When did that start?"

"What?"

"You calling yourself by a different name when you don't have a soul." She waited until he looked at her again, ready and not disappointed by the hurt in his eyes. "Spike said something the other night. Before you... Before I found out about the soul. That there's not a lot of difference between who you are with it and without it."

"Because he's suddenly the authority," Angel muttered.

"Angel, I didn't know. He was gone for months and never told me where he went but that had to be it. When he went away to get his soul. And he's been back for a while now and I knew something was different, that *he* was different, but it never

even crossed my mind that it might be a soul.” She felt her cheeks go hot but didn’t let herself dwell there, the things she’d seen and thought and wondered, and how through all of it she hadn’t arrived at what now seemed obvious. “He wasn’t that different. It wasn’t...like you. All this time I’ve been thinking that the soul made this huge difference, turned you into a different person. And I believed it because of you. But Spike hasn’t been a different person. Not like you were. But you never shared much with me, did you?”

He whipped his head toward her. “That’s not fair.”

“No? So the entire time I’ve known you, you’ve been up-front? Straightforward?”

“I told you what I was.”

“Yeah, *after* I let you sleep in my room down the hall from my mother. How long would you have let me go on not knowing you were a vampire if you hadn’t fanged out when we kissed?”

Angel opened his mouth, closed it, didn’t open it again. She wasn’t surprised.

“I’m not trying to make you feel bad. I’m just talking out loud and trying to figure things out. Like if Spike’s different with a soul, but I can still recognize him, then does that mean... What does that mean?” Buffy fell quiet, but only for a second, her mind still racing, uncovering evidence as it went. “And Harmony. Spike’s ex. She went to Sunnydale High with me and was friends with Cordelia. You met Harmony, right?”

He cleared his throat and looked away, and she didn’t understand that, but didn’t let herself slow down long enough to question it. “She was turned in the fight with the mayor, and vampire Harmony? Pretty much the same as non-vampire Harmony,” Buffy said. “And there’s Willow, too... When we met the vampire version of Willow, she was power-hungry and gay and, well, turns out that wasn’t too far off the mark, either. So *Angelus*, I don’t get. How you can be so different—or maybe you’re not. Maybe souled you is just quieter. And maybe you know that and that’s why you do the two-name thing.”

Angel kept his gaze on the ground between them. The weight of his silence was almost suffocating.

“It just seems like maybe *Angelus* is a convenient excuse not to feel guilty for things you did,” Buffy concluded, figuring she’d come this far and didn’t have much left to lose where he was concerned. “And for your friends to not worry about it, either.”

“It’s not like that.”

“No?”

“I... I don’t know. It wasn’t exactly a decision I made. I didn’t sit down with the team and tell them to start referring to my soulless days as *Angelus*. It was just...” He trailed off, seeming to search for the right word. She thought she might have it.

“Convenient?”

Angel jerked his head up then flinched as though the sight of her was painful. “I guess.”

Buffy exhaled slowly, considering. Another hurdle into new territory—she’d never seen Angel uneasy, or something other than in complete control of himself. Or sure. He’d always spent the moments in between his conclusions in solitude, reaching deci-

sions on his own. Even the decisions that had affected them both. In that way, he and Riley might as well have been cut from the same cloth.

Although she didn't think she wanted to open that door all the way. What was on the other side might be too much for her.

"I don't like feeling like this," Angel said at last.

"Like what?"

"Like...like he's better than me." He blanched the second the words were out, turned as though to put his back to her but didn't make it all the way. Just enough for her to study his profile. "If it's true, if he did hunt it down on his own... You're right. It's something Angelus—something *I* would never do. That feeling when he's in control... It's contempt. And disgust. Anything that makes me feel human, I want to rip apart. It's like punishing myself. Taking all the things and people I love and making sure that if the soul ever does come back, I will have destroyed all the best parts of my life because he..."

But he trailed off, and Buffy didn't pursue it this time. In the end, it wasn't all that important. She wasn't here to make him feel better about not being as well-rounded a monster as the other vampire in her life.

And for a moment, that seemed like it might have been it. Everything they had to say to each other said. All the questions she'd had, all the hurt she'd been wrestling with since arriving made unimportant because the answers wouldn't change much of anything, least of all how she felt about him now. It had been difficult navigating her feelings since, well, forever, and coming here had been a painful reminder of the many miles she'd put between the teenage Buffy Summers and the person she was now, but also an opportunity she hadn't anticipated. And maybe that was how she should leave it. Leave him.

Then Angel asked the question.

"Do you love him?"

"What?"

"Do you love Spike?"

"I..." The noise inside her head started to climb again toward a familiar pitch. Her body followed suit, her skin going waxy-hot. "I don't know how to answer that."

Angel snorted and turned to angle his body toward her once more. "I think you just did."

Had she? Blood rushed to her face, bringing all that heat with it. "No, I didn't. I know I... I did love him. Once. But it wasn't good. *We* weren't good. I was in a bad place, and he didn't know how to help me... and why in the world am I telling you any of this?"

"You know he can't give you normal," Angel said, speaking as though she had not. "What happened with me and Cordelia... That wasn't planned. And I don't know what it is—we never got a chance to talk. I didn't *set out* to take her chance at normal away. But even so, it's not the same. Cordelia had a choice and this was it. This life. And she could walk away anytime she likes."

Buffy arched an eyebrow, the racing sensation tearing her insides apart starting to slow again. "Really? Even with those visions?"

"All right, *before* the visions. And the visions don't mean she has to do anything—she chooses to act on them. She—"

"Isn't she part demon now?"

Angel let out a low groan, shaking his head. "My point is you never had that choice. It was made for you. The one part of your life that can be normal *can't* if you're with Spike."

"Or with you."

"And that's why I left! That's—"

"Angel, drop it," Buffy said, her voice calm. All of her calm now, actually. The spirited rush of adrenaline spurred on by the use of the I-word in relation to Spike—as though she could know that now, when everything was so screwed up and he still hadn't talked to her—slowed again now that she saw it for what it was. "Normal is... It's not in the cards for me. It never has been."

He stared at her for a long beat, the air between them heavy. "But it's what you wanted."

"Yeah. It was. I also wanted a pony when I was eight and I didn't get that either. I got reality instead. The reality that you can't have a pony if you live in the city, and you can't have normal if you're the Slayer." She held his gaze, unblinking. "And even if you could, you chose not to give that to me when you had the chance."

It was gratifying, watching all these human emotions play across a face she had so rarely seen reflect anything other than determined fatalism. It was also a bit strange—perhaps no stranger than any other aspect of this trip, but the sort of strange that just kept compiling upon itself, impossible to ignore or rationalize. Ever since she'd walked through the hotel doors, the components that made up the idea she'd had of Angel had been chipping away. Breaking him down, *bringing* him down, from that shrine of infallibility where he'd lived in her head all these years. So much of what she'd learned here would have crushed her once, and probably not all that long ago. The fact that it hadn't, that she'd absorbed those blows the way she had any other bump or scrape she received on patrol, meant a part of her life that she'd always assumed would be happening was no longer happening. There was a dull ache, some remembered pain, but that was all it was. Remembered. A thought spared for the girl who had once thought she was dying before the world had shown her what death actually felt like.

"I was going to be a liability for you," Angel said at length, the words strained. "I was going to get you killed."

"Newsflash, Angel, I died anyway. Twice."

"Yes, but—"

"And *anyone* I love who doesn't have my strength is going to be a liability. That's the risk I take when I love someone. I've known that since sophomore year with Willow and Xander." Buffy paused, wet her lips. "But I'm not going to argue with you over this. It's happened. It's over. You made the call and...for some reason decided that you knew better. Or maybe *Angelus* had it right and you just didn't want it because of me, since there's this prophecy you're all gung-ho about."

"That's not—"

"And it's okay. I'm not demanding an explanation. You have your life and I have mine." She couldn't see much good that would come from knowing, anyway. Knowledge like that at this point could only serve to anger or hurt, and she wanted no part of either of those things. "As for normal, any chance I had of that, even if I did want it... I think that's gone forever."

Angel frowned, and that was better. More like the Angel who lived in her head. "What do you mean?"

"I mean... Giles and I have this theory. It's all tied up with the resurrection spell that Willow used and maybe it's bogus. I don't know. But I was shot last spring." She waited to see if he would react, then decided it didn't matter. "There was this guy. Friend of Jonathan's, actually."

"Jonathan the soul guy?"

"The very same. This guy—not Jonathan—was... He started causing trouble. Small stuff at first but it became very *not* small very fast." The grin fell off her face without much effort, and she worked her throat, her mind suddenly swimming with images of Katrina's lifeless body. Of that sinking feeling that had threatened to pull her under when she'd thought she was the reason the girl had died, accident or not. And Spike in the alleyway, trying to convince her that it was all right. That these things happened and she had saved so many people, so what was one girl in the grand scheme? How that had echoed another argument she'd heard once—when Faith had been trying to justify a death she had actually caused, not just one staged for her benefit. How she had hated him for not understanding, hated herself for not being able to make him understand and even more for not caring what happened to her half as much as he did. Then her fists flying, and he was under her, not fighting. Not trying to defend himself. Just his head slamming back against the concrete with every blow. Gazing up at her with yellow eyes, then blue, then eyes too swollen to see at all.

And he'd loved her. He'd been there because he loved her, and yes, he hadn't understood, but she had, and she'd done that to him.

"It's a long story," she said now to Angel. "But at the end, he came at me with a gun. He shot me. Not just me, but I was the one he meant to kill." Another flash—Tara on the floor of the bedroom that was now Buffy's, that had once been her mother's, and having to call the police and explain that another person she loved was gone. Buffy shook her head, not wanting to see that, either. "There was this moment when I was on the operating table before Willow came in and magicked the bullet out of me where my heart stopped and I coded, or whatever they call it. I didn't know this then. Kinda had to go from dead to full slayer duty, but one of the nurses who was in the room started coming to my studio—I give self-defense lessons. She filled in the blanks, said I was some kind of medical miracle. And when I asked why, she told me that I died on that table."

"Buffy—"

"I told Giles," she said over him, needing to get this out now that she had started. The first time she'd voiced any of these possibilities to anyone who *wasn't* her watcher, too nervous that giving them air might also make them true. As though that were the way anything actually worked. But this wasn't her world, and these weren't

her people, which made saying it here like not saying it at all. Just whispering to phantoms. "He asked Willow about the spell she used to get the bullet out, if it was more resurrection magic, but it wasn't. He also talked to doctors who said the damage would've been done with or without the bullet actually in my body. So it's not like one of those stories you hear about how people get into accidents and die for like a second before the doctors bring them back. The doctors didn't do anything. They never had the chance, and neither did Willow. I just woke up on my own."

She glanced at Angel out of the corner of her eye, caught the way he was looking at her—flashed back to the way Spike had looked at her one afternoon not so long ago when she'd shared something with him, too—and felt another pang she didn't know how to interpret.

"So, what," Angel said after a beat. "You can't be killed?"

"That's the theory."

"And you...haven't tested this theory?"

Buffy blinked at him. "Considering that testing it would mean trying to die and I am not looking to die again anytime soon, no, we haven't tested it. Strangely enough." Not that it hadn't been on her mind, along with all the other things. Hard not to think about her own mortality with someone out there trying to claim it every time she stepped outside. "So, anyway, there's this chance that I'm going to live forever anyway, if Giles is right about it. And even if he's not... Angel, there is no other-people normal for me. There's just my normal, and my normal comes with monsters. It always will."

"That might be true, but it doesn't mean you have to give up on everything else," he said in that stubborn, *always right* Angel way of his. She might have found it endearing if it didn't make her want to punch him. "Like kids or marriage or—"

"Who says I want either of those things?"

For the first time, Angel looked surprised. "I thought you did."

"Well, right now, I do not." And she honestly couldn't ever see the *kids* thing changing. Maybe she'd considered it before, the way she'd also considered taking a semester abroad or becoming a prima ballerina or trying for the US Olympic Figure Skating team, but never in a way that had been serious. Rather, it had been a lofty *maybe* couched in a load of qualifiers she'd already passively accepted she was never going to meet and probably didn't even want to. And even if that weren't the case, the last few years of having essentially been a single parent to Dawn, with all-consuming worry about hellgods and social services and shoplifting, Buffy was confident any ambition she would have had to squirt out kids would have died an unceremonious, permanent death.

"Regardless of all that," she went on, "I've spent a lot of time trying to live the way other people think I should. And I've decided... So much of my life isn't mine. I'm the Slayer. I have a calling. Maybe the *Buffy can't die* theory is wrong and maybe it's not. But if I'm living forever, I'm living the parts of my life that *are* mine my way. And if I can die again, well, even more reason to not just do what people think I should with the time I have."

Buffy stopped herself before she could say more, having not really planned on

saying that much in the first place. Not fully knowing that was how she felt until this moment, but it was right. She knew it was right. And some deep tension that she hadn't realized she'd been carrying began to unspool, bringing with it a peace she hadn't felt since...well, before Angel. Before everything had started going wrong and hadn't stopped.

And she realized now, more than ever, why she'd needed to talk with Angel rather than just leave. She'd owed it to herself to have the second half of the breakup conversation that had been on hold since that day in the sewer—her half of it. The stuff she hadn't known she believed until this moment. But it couldn't have come any sooner. She'd needed to live and lose a lot first before growing up.

"So what happens now?" Angel muttered at length, and there was finality in his voice. A real finality, unlike the goodbyes she'd heard in the past. This was a question he was asking rather than answering—terms he was requesting rather than dictating. For the first time since she'd known him, Buffy felt like they might actually be on equal footing. Not just her pretending that his ideas were also her ideas or that she agreed with him because he was the grown-up and probably smarter than her. It was nice. And strange. The chapter she'd been trying to finish for years might actually be at its end.

Also bittersweet in the same way. Finishing that chapter meant putting the book back on its shelf when she'd become so used to carrying it around with her, she felt stranger without its weight than with it. But like all things in life, there were adjustments. The indentations someone made by occupying space in your world could be smoothed out again. It just took time.

"I go back to Sunnydale," she replied. "You...stay here. Get the sun back. Try to figure out what's up with Cordelia. See if you can save her."

"We can save her." This he said without hesitation or doubt, and the words seemed to transform him into someone else. A version of Angel she'd never seen before. And that was also a little bittersweet. Not a lot, just a little. She'd never talked with Angel knowing, accepting, that he was in love with another woman. Never thought she would.

"Then that's what you do," Buffy agreed. "And if you guys haven't figured out how to flip the switch on the sun by the time I'm done dealing with the Council, we're just a phone call away. You know, you really should use us more. Not that we don't have a ton of our own stuff to deal with, but competing apocalypses? That sounds like a group effort kinda thing."

The corner of Angel's mouth twitched. "To be fair, I think you got the apocalypses in the divorce. Jury's out on whether the Beast counts, but if it turns out it does, I'll make sure to call the pros."

She grinned and went in for the hug, second-guessed herself the moment she moved but didn't falter until she was pressed against his chest, his arms around her like they had been so many times in the life she had somehow outgrown after years of trying. And it was good, too. Good to remember how hugging him had once had the power to quiet everything, no matter how insane the world around her had become. How she had been a simpler person, a person who could subsist on hugs and long

silences, occasionally filled with mostly truths or half-truths, but rarely full truths, and pain they didn't talk about unless forced, and experiences they'd shared but from opposite ends of a battlefield. The things she'd believed wholeheartedly she'd wanted once and how the absence of that want left her feeling both better and a little lost.

But when she pulled out of his arms and met his eyes a final time, seeing a man who loved her, maybe, but wasn't in love with her, it felt right. Things could be right and good and a little sad all at once.

"I'm happy for you," she blurted in classic Buffy fashion. Then caught herself and shook her head with a laugh-groan. "I mean, bad that Cordelia is currently evil and all, but you really love her, don't you?"

Angel seemed uncertain, but the answer was there in the uncertainty.

"It's good, Angel. It's good that you love her." A pause. "And it's good that I know. I think I needed to. To really let you go. I needed to close the door on us."

He didn't move, didn't blink, but still, she couldn't help but feel that she caught him flinch. "And it is," he said, a question even if his voice had forgotten the question mark. "The door is closed."

"It's closed. And it's going to stay closed. No matter what happens."

A little thrill ran through her as she said it—relief and regret, release and pain in equal measure. It would have been easy, so easy, to fall into a pattern of maybes and justifications and what-ifs. The comfortable familiar built upon years of experience. Angel had never been a choice for her, but rather a force she'd been swept up inside. He'd barreled into her life and she'd fought him, and then she hadn't, and then she had, and then it had been over but not over because he'd been back and there had been more fighting and more not being over until it was. Until it was his decision. His call. Not hers. Anytime she'd tried to make that call it hadn't stuck, maybe because she'd known she hadn't really meant it. Maybe because *he'd* known she hadn't really meant it. Maybe a lot of things.

But she meant it now. More than she had meant anything where Angel was concerned in a long time. The piece of her that had always been his handed back to her, not unmarked but wiser. And ready for the past to truly be the past.

The next time she loved, it would be with all her parts.

ALL THE WORDS ARE GONNA
BLEED FROM ME

HE'D TRIED. PROBABLY NOT ENOUGH, AND PROBABLY LATER THAN HE SHOULD have, but god, he'd still tried.

Spike tapped his fingers along the steering wheel, doing his best to ignore the impulse to throw yet another glance in the direction of the looming hotel, tricking himself into believing he might have seen movement. Perhaps waiting out here had been a bad idea after all, but he didn't think he could stand it in there another second. There had been a breath up there in the room with Buffy, one where he'd thought everything would come tumbling out and they'd get it all square between them before they had to face the prospect of being trapped in a bloody car with each other for hours on end. The journey home had been fixed in his mind ever since he'd walked away from Angel's cage, twirling between his fingers the arrow the prat had tried to shove in his chest. A looming deadline of when he and Buffy would have to have it out, where there would be no more hiding or mulling over the litany of explanations and excuses that had been running roughshod through his head alongside the disgust that he'd let it get this far to begin with.

And there was the other part—the part he hated but couldn't snuff out no matter how hard he tried. The gnawing, aching awareness that what Buffy was doing now was chatting up Angel, and what it meant for the agreement she'd made with Spike after leaving Sunnydale. If it was even possible, that she could still want something with him, or if he was a selfish wanker for entertaining the thought to begin with.

Except no, he knew he was a selfish wanker. Thinking she might still feel the way she had when she'd lunged at him just a couple of days ago was more delusional than anything else. Even Buffy, who had a yen for men who hurt her, had to draw the line somewhere.

The next time he looked toward the hotel entrance she was there, striding toward

the car with one of her hallmark inscrutable expressions fixed on her face. Spike immediately sucked in his cheeks and turned the keys in the ignition, taking small comfort in the hum of the engine and the other sounds of the vehicle coming to life. Anything to distract him from the hurricane about to descend. He resolutely did not glance in her direction when she opened the passenger side door, nor when she slid into the seat, bringing the scent of night air and Angel into the space. And though he knew he shouldn't, though he knew he had no right, Spike found himself gripping around the steering wheel a mite firmer than was necessary, jealousy and resentment hitting him with a precision he nearly found comforting. Better, at least, than self-loathing alone.

"Get your goodbyes out and all?" he asked without thinking. "Surprised he took time out of wallowin' to see you off."

Buffy arched an eyebrow as she closed the door, and then suddenly the world outside was gone and it was just the two of them again. The two of them the way they hadn't been together since arriving, everything between them tense and fraught and tinged with possibilities he'd thought he'd known better than to believe in but had believed in anyway. The fact that he had no one to blame but himself for having lost that didn't soften his resentment a lick, and that wasn't fair to her and he knew that but knowing it didn't ease the burn at all.

It was about to hit him, the thing he'd been dreading. He could smell it the same way he smelled Angel. The coward's reason for not wanting her to know about the soul—the bloody certainty that he was seconds from confirming just how pathetic he was for pursuing a dream he'd never deserved. A dream Angel hadn't deserved, either, but by virtue of the fact that he'd been at the right place at the right time, said the right things, had the opportunity to twist Buffy's head to his liking, got to keep as his and his alone.

No matter how large the cock-up, Angel was forgiven every time and for every transgression. And Spike was not.

And that wasn't fair. Fuck, none of this was fair. He hadn't a single sodding fair thought or instinct since crawling out of that cave, half a man and even less a monster, and wasn't that just hilarious? Joke's on him. The entire point of the soul had been to fix the part of him that was broken—make it so he'd fit in somewhere after an eternity of fitting in nowhere, least of all with her. He couldn't even win the right way.

At least he'd held his own with Angel, though. Realized after all this time that he had nothing to prove to the wanker.

"You're really going to go all jealous vampire on me now?" Buffy asked at last, her voice not harsh but also not needing to be. "Really?"

Spike inhaled through his nose, forcing himself to keep his gaze set straight ahead. "No. Not gonna do that."

"Good. Because from where I'm sitting—"

"I know, Slayer." He threw the car into gear and pulled out onto the street before she could say any more, focused on putting distance between them and the Hyperion. It'd take a stretch to get out of the city proper, and he had a feeling she'd wait

until they were really on the road to launch into the full lecture. If there was anything worse than having a row in the car, it was having one broken up by bobbing and weaving among other drivers or negotiating city traffic. Dru had been handful enough in those situations, though almost always lacking a decent reason to be truly cross with him, even if those buggering pixies had done their best to make him a villain. Buffy needed no such help.

The traffic the city was known for was scarcer than it had been even a couple of days ago, but even still, it took a good amount of time before Spike cleared the last of the Los Angeles stretch of the drive. Buffy asked once if he thought they might run into trouble once they were clear of the city, as she'd lost track of what time of day it was with the current state of unending darkness. He told her, nice and matter-of-fact, that the sun wouldn't be an issue the more distance they put between them and Angel's lot. His vampire senses had no trouble knowing when it was day with or without the help. No risk of going up in flames the second they were far enough away that the mojo that had blackened the skyline didn't affect them. And that was it—all she said and all he said for what felt like an age. Until the scenery outside the car windows changed from buildings, billboards, traffic signs, and scattered neighborhoods to the rolling Southern California hills, and it felt like they were truly alone at last.

Then she shifted, and the air shifted with her, and it was time.

"Were you ever planning on telling me?" Like before, her voice wasn't harsh or even accusatory. It was soft and honest, and that was all well and good, better than he could have expected.

It was also hurt. *She* was hurt. And she wasn't trying to hide it.

The result was a pain in his chest that felt deep enough to swallow him whole. Somehow, Spike forced himself to keep his eyes on the road. "Dunno," he said after a beat. "Didn't really think that through. Didn't think much of anythin', really. Wagered I'd have to say somethin' if you... If you decided you still wanted to give us a try after all this rot with Angel."

"But not before then," she said. It wasn't a question.

"Before then, love, I can't tell you."

Christ, maybe he wasn't in the right mood for this talk. His temper had been building steadily the last hour or so, and Buffy taking her sweet time to say goodbye to Angel hadn't helped. Sure, he didn't have the right to feel like this, but that didn't stop him any. Or his mouth.

And Buffy kept pushing. She always would. "Try. I need to understand this."

"Do you?"

"Yes." At last, he caught a flash of anger. Anger he knew he'd earned and then some. "I need to understand how you could... How you could do any of what you did. Leave the way you did. When did you decide to get a soul?"

Again, he felt it, his worst impulses poking at him, always there to get him into trouble, whether by speaking without thinking, lashing out when he needed to be restrained, or throwing around sarcasm when he needed a place within himself to hide.

When did I decide to get a soul, Buffy? Do you really need to ask me that? Isn't it bloody obvious?

But he didn't say that—didn't give in. After everything he'd kept from her, she'd earned the right to her questions. Even those that were bloody ridiculous.

"That night," he said. "It was that night. Went back to the crypt after, and I just kept seein' it. Seein' *you*. How I hurt you. Clem was there, tryin' to talk me through it. Not knowin' what had happened, of course, but knowin' *something*. And I dunno when I thought it, but I did, and as soon as I did, I knew I had to go after it. See if I could pull it off. Easier to think about winning my soul than what I'd done to you." Spike inhaled, felt his lungs inflate with all that useless air, and let it out after a minute as though he needed to. That perfect mimicry of life that he had never been able to shake, despite its futility. "Lit out not too long after that. Told myself I'd either win what I wanted or die tryin' to get it. Nothin' to lose by that point."

Buffy was quiet for a breath, thinking so loud he could nearly hear the echoes. "I know it wasn't long," she said. "I brought Dawn to stay with you when Willow was... When that was happening."

"Still don't understand how you could—"

"Because I knew you'd never hurt Dawn."

"Said I'd never hurt you, either."

"We both know you didn't mean to do that."

"Don't think it matters, what I meant to do."

"But it *does* matter. It matters if you weren't fully conscious when you did it."

Again, he stopped himself before his mouth got him in even more trouble, but only just. He had no sodding idea what she meant by that, and he wanted to ask. Was this more of her justifications, her trying to make right something that could never be right? Was it something she genuinely believed or something she needed to believe in order to rationalize how it was she could have experienced what he'd done to her but still want him in her life? More than in her life—in her bed, by last count. She'd kissed him and touched him and taken him into her mouth, and it was easier to do all of that if she convinced herself the man she was with was the conscious version of the monster she'd spent years fighting without ever truly meeting.

But he had been in a space—detached and far away from her, even more so from himself. She'd been under him, crying and pleading and beating against his chest, and he'd seen it all without seeing it. Without realizing what those cries and pleas meant. The part of him that knew had been switched off and distant, too far away to rely on. Until the moment she'd kicked him off and he'd hit the wall, and all the selves that made up Spike had rushed back together, coalescing in horror and shock, and she'd been there, clutching at her bathrobe, looking at him the way she never had before. With hurt and pain and fury and he'd seen it all but never on her, never wearing Buffy's face, and the reality of what had just happened—what he'd *made* happen—had crashed on him and kept crashing.

Beside him, Buffy shifted in her seat once more. He'd been quiet too long and she was getting restless. Anxious to keep the secrets pouring out. After everything, he could hardly blame her.

"If you were never going to tell me," she started, "why did you even come back?"

"Bloody good question."

"Spike—"

"I don't know," he said, and it came out a bit harsher than he meant but fuck if he could help himself. He'd spent weeks asking this question and others like it, chasing after different answers, trying them on and casting them aside when they didn't fit. The honest truth at the center was one he'd managed to complicate through a rash of decisions that had seemed perfectly reasonable at the time and didn't anymore. Couldn't explain to her that she was home, even if she hated him. He knew how that sounded. He knew how *all* of it sounded, and that was one of the reasons he'd kept to himself. "Had nowhere else to go and that was always the plan. Light out, win my soul back, show up on your doorstep and ask if this was enough. Only when I got the sodding thing, it hit me that even that would make me a selfish wanker."

"How?" she asked. The Slayer to the last, ever relentless.

"How? For thinkin' a soul would make it all okay. For expectin' you to just forgive me the second you saw how sorry I was." Spike grimaced at the words and the way they tasted in his mouth. "That I could take what I'd done to you, what I'd done to myself, and make it somethin' you had to deal with. Reckoned you had every right to feel about me however you felt. Gettin' a soul didn't change that. And I didn't want it to. Didn't want you to feel like you had to do anything. Hate me. Ignore me. Stake me. It was your call. What I did didn't matter."

"How can you say that?"

"It's true. Tends to help."

"Spike, you won your soul. How can that not matter?"

He didn't answer—didn't think it safe to try. It was hitting him in waves, that they were really having this conversation. That he would wake up tomorrow and it would still be done, no longer a point on the horizon or a vague *maybe* to be addressed at an even vaguer someday. He'd talked with her in his head more times than he could count, said all the things he was saying now in a combination of ways, all the while imagining how she might react. He'd see her anger and hurt and awe and love and more than that, for Buffy was predictable in her unpredictability. She could laugh with him when he suggested murdering her friends and scold him for hinting that he might make her date his dinner, and both were Buffy all at once, at the same time.

There would not be any wondering after this. There would just be what was or had been, and that was bloody terrifying. Especially when he was known for cocking up the big things.

"I won my soul," he ground out, "to win you back. Give you what you deserve. A lover that wouldn't hurt you—would never do what I did. And not just that, Buffy, but bloody all of it. Bein' with me was killing you, you said. You couldn't trust me, you said. You couldn't love me, you said. What's the best way to fix Spike? How to make him what Buffy needs, someone she could love? Figured there had to be a way. Somethin' I hadn't considered. Knew you liked me a little. Liked the way I shagged you. How I made you feel. Just needed to find the piece that fixed all the stuff you

didn't like. Always takin' for granted the fact that you'd have to want it too, and you didn't. But the soul—the soul might do the job.” He paused, trying not to hear the way her breathing had quickened or the scent of wet salt in the air. Trying not to think about how he was still hurting her, even with the truth. “I was a selfish berk and I still am. Soul didn't change me where it counts. Best it did was made me see myself the way I really am and understand why someone like you could never love me.”

The next quiet that descended was a different breed and he welcomed it. The reprieve, the ghost of what he'd said—all he had said—settling over him with both finality and a twisted sense of relief. It was out there now, no longer thoughts trapped inside his skull. He didn't have to hold onto them anymore, at least not alone. This knowledge now belonged to them both.

“I did,” Buffy said thickly, shattering the quiet and him in the same stroke.

Spike whipped his head to her at last, his chest and throat tightening with such force he was surprised when neither cracked. Buffy wasn't looking at him. Wasn't looking forward, either, had instead turned her attention to the passenger window and was staring with intent at the dark scrawl of night on the other side. He pulled his gaze away well before he was ready to, trying to calm the sudden rush of *everything* pounding against his insides but not making a dent. She could have meant something else, anything else, other than what he thought she meant, but it was there all the same. Hanging between them, another casualty of things unsaid, and he didn't want to talk or move or make a sound for fear of lurching them out of this moment and into the one where she started to define it. Its existence here was already too much to bear.

And as though hearing him, hearing the thought, Buffy went in for the kill.

“I loved you. You were right. The entire time, you were right.”

A high-pitched ringing took up residence in his ears. Spike firmed his jaw and blinked eyes that were suddenly stinging. But fuck *all*, he would not start blubbering now. He had to maintain control, if only to prove to himself that he could.

It was the sweetest and the bitterest thing he'd ever heard.

“I didn't know,” Buffy said, a bit quicker now as though she sensed how fragile the moment was. “Didn't put it together until recently, actually. So I didn't... It's not like I was lying to you, when I said I couldn't love you. I thought it was true. And either way, the love wasn't *good*. We were eight kinds of screwed up and I knew that, but it wasn't... It wasn't just casual for me. There was a reason I went to you. You made me feel all the things I wanted to feel and that scared me. It still kinda does.”

She had to stop talking. He didn't think he could take much more.

But, of course, she was Buffy. And Buffy had never done anything to make his life easier.

“You've asked why I went to your place over the summer to see if you'd come back,” she went on pitilessly. “That's why. I didn't know it then, either.” She laughed as though any of this could be funny, and he hated that he loved her so much that there was nothing for him to do but bear it. No fighting. No protests. No telling her *stop*, he couldn't hear this, couldn't know it, couldn't live with this knowledge of

what he'd had and tossed away, what he'd had without even realizing he had it and what he'd lost in his desperation to win. There was only this awful knowing and Buffy still talking. Pushing the stake in deeper. Telling him, "It's what made what happened that night hurt the most. I did love you. So if your soul is telling you that I couldn't—"

"My soul told me exactly the same thing you did," he said, unable to help himself, trembling. His vision had gone blurry at the edges, but he didn't want to wipe his eyes. Didn't want to let her know she'd reduced him to tears. "Everything you did. And it doesn't change anything, right, you throwin' this plot twist in my face."

"Plot twist?"

"It doesn't change what I did to *you*. It doesn't change what happened the second I stepped inside that bloody bathroom."

"We've already talked about this—"

"Yeah, and you wanted to chat about the soul. *That's* the soul, Buffy. That's the reason I traveled to the other end of the world to find a legend that would give me what it took. Make me whole." Spike sniffed and gave his head a shake, pushing himself further into comforting anger. Much easier to exist in this space than the other, where all of him was alive and screaming and *she'd loved him* all along. Fuck, maybe this was hell after all. "I came back having won the bloody thing and knowin' I could never ask you for anything. Then the bint from the Council shows up and I have to get you to trust me, but the soul's not a sodding bargaining chip. And even if it was, I had no reason to think you'd believe me if I told you. Why should you? Just another ploy from ol' Spike to get into your knickers."

"I wouldn't have thought that."

"No?" Spike thought it safe to risk looking at her again, felt both better and worse when he caught the look on her face. His throat burned and he thought he tasted acid, but he forced himself to ignore it. "Every time I thought about tellin' you about the soul, I remembered you had a right to feel about me the way you did. I didn't want to take that from you or make you feel like you had to forgive me. Also wasn't gonna hide and tell you some rot about it not bein' me, who did it to you, much as I would've liked. I knew better. The soul didn't change me the way I thought it would—didn't make me a better man. Just made it so I could see all I'd been missing."

"It feels like a lie, though," she said, not pulling her punches. Buffy never had. "And like I can't be mad no matter what. You tell me you don't tell me about the soul for me—"

"It wasn't—"

"And that's all everyone has ever done. Made decisions for me. What I can or can't handle. Angel did it—he told me I needed a normal guy and that he wasn't it, and then he left. He knew better than me, and I let myself believe he was right for so long that it still feels wrong to say that he wasn't." She swallowed thickly. "He did it more than once, actually. I don't remember the last time because that decision involved wiping my memories. But he did it *for me*."

Spike ground his teeth hard enough his jaw twinged its complaint.

"And Riley... He did the same thing. He decided our relationship wasn't working and why, and—"

"I am *nothing* like either of those wankers."

"Maybe not, but you still chose for me. What you thought I should know, what I could handle. You were in my life again, Spike. I *let* you back in my life."

"I never asked for that."

"No, but you did come back, and you knew what that meant." Buffy fell mercifully quiet, though he wasn't thick enough to think it would last, and his insides were rioting and his head felt like it might just explode because what she was saying wasn't fair or even remotely equitable. "I deserve to—"

"No," he snarled, unable to help himself. "Not this time."

"What?"

"You don't get to be right. Not now. Your exes kept stuff from you? Take it up with them. We weren't together, were we? What I did might've been for you but the only person it affected is me. Seems that means I get to decide when and who I tell." Spike fell silent just to see if she would argue. He didn't know whether to be surprised or not when she didn't leap right in. If she was festering in anger or hurt or both, or if some miracle had happened and she saw he had a point. "I came back thinkin' I'd be lucky if you didn't stake me. I've told you that. Never in my bloody wildest did I think you'd... Did I think *any* of what's happened would happen. That you'd let me into your house. Have me taste your blood. That you'd switch off the chip. That you'd tell me to kill a slayer if I got a chance. I've hated myself and loved you and it's been drivin' me nutty, tryin' to figure out how it is you can look at me at all, never mind the way you do now. That before we had to come ridin' to the rescue here, you wanted something else. With me. After everything. I never saw any of that, and it was about *me*, Buffy. Not you. Not *us*. And I already told you I'd pieced together that I'd have to tell you about the soul if that changed, but we weren't there yet. We decided to wait."

Or rather, *he'd* decided to wait. Faced with everything he'd ever wanted and the impossible hurdles they'd had ahead, he'd forced himself to not leap in blind. To protect himself best he could, for she had the power to destroy him and had already come close once before. And if losing her after not really having her had been as devastating as it was, losing her now would be something beyond pain. The least he could do was make sure she wanted him for more than a joyride.

Silence stretched in that awful way it had, crawling through the space that separated them with a heaviness that put him on edge. It was entirely possible he'd finally done it—snapped her out of the relative calm and tossed her into that righteous indignation he knew so well. Buffy had never been the type to quietly accept that she was wrong and he saw no reason for her to start now. God knows he wouldn't, and that was one of the many ways in which they were alike. Easier to focus, to think, if you weren't wallowing in your own sodding misery. If you weren't thinking about all the ways you'd bugged up, or all the opportunities missed because of bloody awful timing.

She'd loved him, she'd said. All that time she'd loved him. That gnawing certainty

that had sent him to her house in the first place hadn't been wrong. It hadn't been right, strictly—loving him in no way meant wanting him—but his instincts there had been on the mark. Only it was good he hadn't known. The man he'd been then wouldn't have known how to handle it. Wouldn't have had the capacity to understand that just because she loved him didn't make everything that had happened between them all right. If he'd known, he might have hurt her worse. Stumbled all over himself trying to get her to change her mind about them until crossing the sort of line that couldn't be uncrossed.

That didn't make the pain any better, though. Just made him understand its necessity.

"You're right," Buffy said at length, bursting through the quiet. To his shock, the fight had drained from her voice. "It was different with them. I just... God, I feel so stupid."

Spike's stomach pitched all over again. "Slayer—"

"All this time I knew something was different. Maybe it didn't change you, but it changed *something* and I just didn't see it."

"You did. Just said you did, didn't you?"

"But a soul, Spike? A *soul*? I never would have... And that means something. That for weeks, I've been around a vampire with a soul and didn't know." She barked a laugh and, unlike him, didn't hesitate to wipe her eyes to catch the tears there ready to fall. "And how dumb I must look now. How many times you probably looked at me and thought *why isn't she just getting it*? How you kept your mouth shut at all when I'm over here just throwing myself at you—"

"Buffy—"

"And what you must think of me because of it. Knowing you have a soul and knowing I didn't know that but coming onto you anyway like it doesn't matter."

"I never thought that," he swore, and that was true. There had been times he'd been baffled by her, times he hadn't understood her, times she'd shocked him silly, but that was just Buffy. She'd been turning his world on its head ever since she'd danced her way into it, and she wasn't about to stop just because he'd gotten himself an upgrade.

But she didn't seem to hear him, rather went on in a voice growing increasingly hoarse. "Then there's everything I did to you last year. How awful I was. And I've wondered about that. Xander was disgusted when he found out. Willow threw it in my face when she was evil. And I was... I used you because you loved me, and I needed to feel that because I couldn't feel anything else. It was wrong—everything about us was wrong, and I knew that. You said you didn't care but I have to think the soul changed that too."

Spike wasn't sure he was following but was plenty sure wherever she was leading him wasn't a place he'd like.

"If it did, I get it. I'd be pretty disgusted with me if I were you."

His hands slipped on the steering wheel and the car lurched wildly into the oncoming traffic lane. Thankfully, the road was vacant—no one daft enough to be traveling into Los Angeles right now. Spike swore and jerked back into the right lane,

head spinning with more of those screaming thoughts, all vying to be heard over the din. "Disgusted?" he rasped with effort. "You think I'm disgusted with you? What the bleeding fuck are we talkin' about here, Buffy?"

She turned to him at last, met his eyes, her own bold with defiance and daring alike. "Why wouldn't you be, after everything?"

"Because I'm in love with you, you daft bint." The words were so familiar, as was the frustration, it was almost a relief. At least this was the sort of exasperation he knew, seeing as it was where he lived—or had lived before he'd gone and turned everything on its arse. And somehow, he was here again. Maybe he'd never left. Arguing with Buffy over things that weren't up for debate, were just hard fact, and more's the pity if she couldn't accept it because that was just the way of the world. "I'm *in love with* you, and I nearly raped you, and you think *you're* the one I'm disgusted with?"

Buffy didn't say anything; she didn't look away, either. The power of her attention crashed onto him like the sun itself, as lethal as it was all-bloody-consuming. And there was nowhere to hide. All his secrets out now. No more excuses.

"Wanna know what else *disgusts* me, Slayer?" he drawled a second later. "I went through all that and the soul doesn't make a lick of difference. All bloody smoke and mirrors."

She inhaled, the sound shaky. "What... I don't understand."

"I mean every time I've thought about tellin' you about the soul, every time I've wanted to, it hasn't been for anythin' other than me. This idea that you'd finally realize what a special boy I am." Spike snorted and shook his head at himself. "I'm the only one, yeah? The first. No other vampire in history ever done what I did, and I'm so much better than him. Who's laughing now? Thought you'd have to see it—accept it. And maybe it would be all right after all, what I nearly did to you, 'cause look what I did to myself. The soul was supposed to make me better and it didn't. It just let me see all the ways I'm broken."

Not to mention pitiful. The defeat in his own voice was hell on his ears. He didn't want to think of how it sounded to her, this morality tale of William learning what it was like to be a true monster.

"I don't think that means the soul doesn't make a difference," Buffy said, as only Buffy could. Buffy who would never know any level of hell. "That's...that's not how souls work. You don't stop thinking bad things. *I* think bad things. I do it all the time. I do bad things too. Like you remember last year, don't you?"

"It's not the same."

"Why? Because you say so? People are just...screwed up, Spike. All of us. Getting your soul back doesn't mean you will be perfect. Just, maybe, more like you were before."

Again, he scoffed. "And there's the rub, pet. I remember what it was like then. Wasn't perfect by any stretch but I was a good man at least. A decent man. Someone who wouldn't think the sorta thoughts I've been thinkin' for months now. Dunno what I expected—to go back to that. Not that the ninny I was before would've been an improvement all around, mind, and I didn't really want to be *him* again... Just

hoped the man I was once would be of more use to me than a painful memory. More than *this*."

"You thought you could just pick up where you left off as a human?"

Put like that, it did sound a little batty. "No. I suppose I... Suppose I just thought it'd be a mite clearer, is all. Separating the monstrous bits from everythin' else. I'd know which was which."

Out of his periphery, he saw Buffy nod, though he couldn't tell if it was in acknowledgment or agreement or if there was enough of a difference between the two to matter. Then, so softly he might have missed it were it not for his enhanced hearing, she said, "You would have told me, if we'd... If we decided to try to be together again. Or I guess for the first time. The first real time."

Once more, his throat went tight. "Yeah. I would have."

"But not before that."

"I don't know. Never imagined there'd be a need for it."

"You didn't think I might need to know that the strongest fighter I have has a soul?"

"Not like you need a soul to fight," he replied dryly. "If that's all you were gonna use me for."

"That's not—"

"It's what you meant." A pause. "We're back to where we started, what I would've done. If I ever would've told you. I can't say one way or another. There were times I wanted you to know and thought it might just come tumblin' out. The nights I doctored you up, or after..." Fuck. There was no way to finish that without telling her the rest. No way to not tell her the rest, either. Especially now. "One night in particular, after you and Red came in from your little day trip. Thought about tellin' you then 'cause it seemed likely to come out anyway."

It didn't take her but a second to follow. "Someone else knows?"

"Yeah." And there was no way this wouldn't hurt. "It's Dawn."

Buffy straightened at once, and he didn't have to look at her to see the shock and hurt in her eyes. He could feel it radiating from her side of the car. "Dawn," she said hollowly. "Dawn knows."

"Yeah. She was... Dunno how it happened, really. Just couldn't stand to see her that upset. She was yelling and crying, and it was the only thing I could think to do to make anything right."

"Oh my god." She seemed to fold in on herself, and when he hazarded a glance, it was in time to watch her face fall into her hand, her eyes screwed shut. "Dawn's known this whole time and she didn't tell me?"

"She wanted to. Rushed in to do it, point of fact. Had to head her off before she started—"

"Just stop. You're making it worse."

Spike released a low sigh, hesitated, then figured to hell with it. He'd already come this far. "I would've that night, when we were out lookin' for the slayer slag, if she hadn't interrupted us. I was so bloody sure Dawn would tell you right off and wagered if you were gonna hear it, it should be from me."

"Gee, and how did that turn out?"

"I didn't—"

"And Dawn never said anything."

"I know."

"She's more loyal to you than she is to me."

"No," Spike said shortly. "That's a load of bollocks. She just got it in her head that you knowin' about the soul would make it too easy to forgive me."

"She's a kid. What does she know?"

He sucked in a breath before he could snap at that, tell her Dawn knew plenty. Dawn knew her the same way he did—understood that the presence of a soul changed everything for Buffy, and she was prone to forgiving those who didn't deserve it. Buffy was reacting from a place of shock, of hurt, and like everything else, she was owed those feelings. He'd react no differently if he'd learned something similar.

Still, he couldn't let her be mad at the Bit. If Buffy were to hold onto her anger, let it be pointed in the right direction. He was the one who had bugged things up.

"I asked her not to say anything."

"Oh, thanks. That makes it loads better."

"But she *would* have, I think, if she hadn't decided I needed to work for it," he said, speaking with deliberate calm. "After what I did. That's what she decided, what made her agree not to say anything. That the soul would—"

"I heard you fine the first time, thanks."

"Well, for fuck's sake, Slayer, it's not like she didn't have reason to think it." The calm apparently had a short lifespan, even if he knew it was unfair. And it was. None of this was fair to her. Didn't slow his tongue any. "All Angel ever had to do was make bloody moon eyes at you for you to forget everything he ever threw at you—"

"Don't say that."

"Buffy—"

"No," she said, her voice having gone full Slayer. Hard but fragile at the same time—the sort of fragile that would ensure he went down with it if it shattered. "No, you don't get to say that to me. I never forgot anything he did. Not once. I couldn't. It's been there with me through everything, Spike. Every decision I make, every relationship I've had, everything, always, and all the time. Maybe I did forgive him, but I never forgot. And if you knew me at all, you would know that."

Well, fuck. Spike let the quiet descend over them again, fighting for something to say but coming up blank. She wasn't right, not entirely, but she wasn't wrong, either. He knew how well she carried her failures—how deeply she felt them. He also knew how easy it was for her to isolate her experiences to the corners of her life they affected and keep them in nice, tidy little boxes to inform her decisions going forward but not wholly.

But there was so much she didn't see, either. And he couldn't hold his tongue.

"You sent him the sodding Gem of Amara," he said softly. "We're comin' back from Los Angeles havin' just shoved that soul down his throat, and had he not been

so thick as to smash the bloody thing, he would've been out there, unkillable, because you sent him the gem."

Buffy went stiff but didn't respond, which could mean a number of things, and not all good for him. Still, wasn't like he could turn around now. He'd come this far.

"I don't think you forget what it does to *you*, love. But with him, there was just a load you took for granted. That there weren't other ways to lose the soul, for one. Or that he might not move on when we saw—"

"I know what we saw. And I know all this too. It's not the first time it's been brought to my attention that giving him the gem was a bad call."

"And that's what I mean. What Dawn meant, too. She thought if you were gonna forgive me like you did him, it had to be because I'd earned it. Not because of a soul." He stopped, found himself dithering again before once more deciding he had nothing left to lose and no reason to hold back. "I already told you I didn't want you to forgive me because of the soul. I also didn't want to find out that the soul didn't matter to you."

"Didn't *matter*?" She sounded close to tears again, and he hated himself, but knew he had to push on. One last time.

"Not like his did. The soul of a bloke you loved."

And that was it—the most he could say without breaking. Her confession running circles in his head, hanging in the air between them. Spike waiting to see if it mattered—*I loved you. You were right. The entire time, you were right*—but not letting himself crack when she didn't speak. When she let the quiet stretch until it was more than quiet, and he knew for certain the conversation had ended.

Just as well. There were still miles to go, and no undoing what had come before. No fixing what he'd shattered without realizing it.

Seemed fitting that, for the first time since coming back to Sunnydale, sharing space with Buffy was no longer confusing or terrifying.

He supposed that's what happened when things were over.

NOW THAT I KNOW WHAT I'M WITHOUT

THEY HAD LEFT AT NIGHT, JOURNEYED TO A CITY WHERE THERE WAS NO SUN, AND arrived home somewhere close to one in the morning. Buffy didn't realize how much everything in LA had felt like one exceptionally long day—the longest she could remember, save perhaps the one that had sent Dawn to the hospital—until the car was back in the drive where it belonged and she was looking at the back of a dark house. Dark not because of the hour, but because Willow and Dawn wouldn't know she was back and that it was safe to come home until she called them, and Buffy hadn't had the presence of mind to do that before leaving LA. As it was wont to be these days, her mind had been overfull of other things.

And now... Well, Buffy was a bit numb—drained, depleted, and probably other d-words that her brain was too mushy to conjure up. The longest stretches of the journey home had been spent in screaming silence, echoes of the things Spike had said and the things *she* had said colliding with one another on an endless loop that she didn't think would ever make sense.

All she knew was how it had hit her, the revelation that Spike had a soul. How she had spent the time since rolling it over in her head—trying to rationalize, trying to understand, trying to tend to her hurt. Thinking, though she had never admitted it to herself, that perhaps everything would make sense once Spike explained. Because no matter what she'd been through or how many times she had taken this lesson, Buffy had never learned that some things simply *were*.

Spike had gotten a soul for her. A soul he hadn't wanted her to know about because souls were easy outs, among other things. Because he was still selfish. Still himself. Because he'd known she'd been hurt and angry, that she hated him for what he'd done to her, and he hadn't wanted to take away that hate.

Except Buffy had never hated him the way she should have, because she'd been in

love with him. That was what their relationship had been from the start. Hate, love, hate, love, bouncing between dynamics that seemed opposite but actually weren't. He loved her so he'd wanted to let her hate him. She'd hated him because she'd loved him. And hating him had been a means of hating herself.

He still loved her. There was that. A bright *what does this mean* tangled in everything else he'd said. Not that she could answer what it meant, either. She had no idea. Just that it somehow made her feel less alone, less like an idiot, to know that he did still love her.

It had been so long since she'd heard him say it.

Closing the door on the part of her life that Angel had owned had been surprisingly easy compared to everything that had followed. Buffy supposed that meant something, too, but she was too *done* to figure out what.

And everything she was too done for, she thought as she slid out of the SUV, could wait now that she was home.

Except this last thing. Saying goodbye to her travel companion and making plans for the days to come.

"Tomorrow," Buffy said, fitting the strap of her bag along her shoulder. Spike stood a few feet away, but she wasn't looking at him. Couldn't drag her eyes off the ground. "At the studio. We haven't trained since"—*kissing you and climbing you and begging you to touch me before giving you a blowjob I don't know if you wanted*—"the other day. We should probably get back to our routine. And double down on finding Gray. Make up for lost time."

Spike nodded. Or she thought he did. It was hard to tell out of her periphery. "Yeah. Can do that. Same time, I expect?"

"Same time," she agreed, and for a second imagined that this might actually be it. Everything said and implied and confessed left there in the SUV for her to remember every time she slid behind the steering wheel. The ghost of her mother gone and the ghost of her relationship—what it had been and what it could have been—in its place. Spike would show up as he had, and they would continue on as they had, and everything would be as it had been before she'd decided she wanted something more and confused things.

The thought made her stomach twist. Made all of her twist, actually, but she couldn't let him know that.

"Tomorrow then," Buffy said. Then she was cutting through the backyard toward the deck and the door that would lead to the kitchen. A path she had walked a thousand times made strange the way all ordinary things felt unordinary when life barreled off course. She wondered for a wild second if Spike might follow her but knew better than to be disappointed when he didn't.

It had been naïve, thinking that talking things out with him would clarify anything. Or that any such talk would go any way other than the way it had. The entirety of their relationship had been built on blunt, often brutal honesty, and hell, that was one of the reasons she knew she could trust it the way she did. The way she knew he wasn't holding back or telling her just what he thought she wanted to hear. She couldn't even say whether she believed not telling her about the soul had been a

lie anymore—it felt dishonest, but he had a point. Doing it *for* her didn't automatically make it her business.

And how would she have reacted, that first night when she'd let herself into his crypt and found him there instead of Clem, if he'd looked at her and said, "Buffy, I went out and got my soul back. That make everythin' all right, then?" It would have hit her with all the subtlety of an atomic bomb, thrown her entire existence out of orbit, forced her to think about things she knew she hadn't been ready to think about and consider all the nuances of a relationship she had just started to examine. She hadn't even worked out if she hated him or not then, and had been endlessly frustrated with herself as a result. Always feeling like she should feel one way and ashamed for feeling another. Hustled on stage to do a Buffy impression every time Spike was mentioned, either directly or indirectly. The weight of expectation thrust upon her by others, by herself, and experiencing a full spectrum of emotion as a result.

The soul on top of that, all the while she tried to negotiate whether she was happy he was back—and how *could* she be happy he was back?—or hated the very sight of him, would have muddled things up beyond repair. Buffy might not remember exactly everything she'd thought during those first tentative weeks, but she remembered the feeling itself. The anxiety, the fear, the knowledge that she could no longer hide from the things she'd been hiding from all summer. Spike being back meant she had to deal, and so she had. Best way she knew how.

And the place she'd been just a few days ago, sparring with him in the studio, exhilarated and excited and tired, so tired of trying to arbitrate whether she was right or wrong to want him, stuck in an endless stasis until she made the call. Did she want to see what they could have been or not? Did she want to try?

She'd wanted to try. And she'd gotten there without this crucial, fundamental bit of information. Had she known about the soul from the start...well, Buffy couldn't say what would have happened. That was a life she hadn't lived, a set of circumstances she could never experience. But she thought it safe to assume it would have overwhelmed her, confused her, made the things she was thinking and feeling seem even larger and more unwieldy than they already had.

That didn't make what he'd done, what he'd withheld, better or not painful. Didn't make what she was feeling at the moment any clearer. Right or wrong, Buffy couldn't will her hurt to disappear. All she could do was keep moving forward.

Maybe it had been the wrong time to try to start something with Spike, anyway. Or with anyone. She had a war to win here. Who was sharing her bed was sort of incidental in the grand scheme of the Council wanting her dead and using ancient magicks to call slayers they felt they could control. If Giles were around to give his advice, he'd probably berate her for applying this much of her mental reserves on what essentially amounted to a personal issue.

But Giles wasn't around. He was in hiding—or god, she hoped he was still in hiding. There was no way to know as she hadn't spoken with him since Dawn's stint in the hospital, and didn't that just drive the point further home that she was

focusing on the wrong stuff? All things Spike-related had taken up way too much mental real estate when she couldn't afford to be distracted.

And there was the rub. It was supposed to have been easy. When she'd been in the moment, when she'd been sparring with him that last time, there had been a line dividing the parts of her life into the things she couldn't control and the things she could. How she felt about Spike, that she wanted to see what they could be, was supposed to have been the balm. The one thing she could call her own—the question she could answer. Which in hindsight was perhaps the dumbest reasoning her stupid brain had ever come up with because she and Spike had never been a thing she could control. Not until she'd gathered the strength to walk away.

She didn't want to walk away, though. Even now.

Buffy sighed and let her bag drop to the floor beside the door. As tired as she was all over, she worried her mind might be too awake to allow for sleep, and it wasn't like there weren't things to do. Starting with placing a final call to the work phone Xander had lent Willow. With the field trip over, everyone could come home.

It was a brief conversation. Willow had clearly been in slumberland, though she'd snapped alert fast enough, eager to learn what had happened after Cordelia had been unmasked as the soul-snatcher. Buffy gave her the highlights without going into too much detail, finished by saying it was safe to come back to the house *but no, don't worry about making the move tonight*. The morning would be soon enough. Then the lie that she was okay, even though she knew full well that Willow could hear how okay she wasn't, and her gratitude when she didn't press the issue.

And for the first time, Buffy hadn't asked about Dawn. She wasn't sure she was up for it—hadn't even let herself fully wrap her mind around the reality that her own sister had been lying by omission for weeks now, Spike's reasons be damned. She'd have to work out how she felt about that some other time. Like, say, before Dawn came home and Buffy had to look her in the eye.

Nothing in this world could be easy.

All in all, talking to Willow hadn't worked to make Buffy any sleepier, rather more agitated about what came next. She stood in the kitchen for a moment, debated making something to eat—her diet had been kinda all over the place the last few days—then eyed the bag she'd abandoned and decided to get a jump on the laundry first. Then maybe she could curl up with a sandwich and watch infomercials until she could no longer hear the noise in her head, and everything would look better in the morning because it would actually *be* morning. Three days living without the sun had done her no favors.

She snatched the bag off the floor again and made her way to the basement and the rest of the laundry that had sat abandoned ever since Anya had taken that phone call. It wasn't a full load, but enough of one that she didn't feel guilty about starting the wash, so she began throwing clothes in after the detergent, first from the pile of dirties that had been waiting and then opening her bag.

And immediately going still.

There was a VHS tape sitting on top of her LA garb, with an accompanying sticky note. Buffy stared at it for a few long seconds, frowning, the swish of running

washer flooding her ears. She knew what it was without needing to read whatever Fred had scribbled out, though why it was in her bag—despite the obvious—was completely beyond her. Unless Spike had said something in that conversation that was relevant, and she couldn't see how it would be. It wasn't like they had any secrets anymore.

God, what if they did?

Buffy stuffed the rest of her laundry into the washer without nearly as much care as some of her outfits required, then sprinted back up the stairs, bypassing the kitchen entirely. No time to eat. She went straight for the living room, tape in hand, and hesitated only long enough to peel the sticky note off the top before shoving it into the VCR and backing up. All the better to see whatever was about to hit her next.

Fred had thoughtfully rewound the tape to the start. For the second time, Buffy watched Spike come into frame. Caught the shape that was Angel, too, lounging against the wall of the cell. Then the small talk before Angel launched into what she assumed had been eating at him since he'd realized what no one else had. The soul, that Spike had sought it out, and his guesses as to the motivations behind it. And yeah, Angel hadn't been kidding when he'd said that his soulless self had been jealous. He was practically foaming at the mouth, looking to provoke a response, twirling the arrow that Buffy had fired at him in clear threat. And Spike just stood there, silent, reserved, not taking the bait.

It was so obvious now, the soul, and that's what killed her. It was obvious while also being anything but, because he had never been like the man on the other side of those bars. Not even in his vilest days before the chip and the love and everything that had redefined his role in her life. That wasn't to say he hadn't been evil—he had, and she knew it—but it hadn't been Angel's brand of evil. Spike had always been more the little boy on the playground that shoved other children into mud puddles while gleefully evading the teacher. Soulless Angel had been the little boy on the playground that took something that didn't belong to him just to destroy it and watch the other children cry. One reveling in the mess and the other in the pain. Even in the way they taunted—Spike had never been one to hold back, and while he could certainly be cutting, he hadn't seemed to relish in others' misery the way Angel did. More like he wanted a response, wanted anger rather than hurt. Wanted to annoy, irritate, get someone in a place to fight.

The recording didn't last as long as she'd expected. Angel baited and she could see what was coming, right up until the moment he lunged with the arrow. She also saw what would happen next, so clearly she was surprised that it seemed to catch her off guard. Then Spike was trudging back up the stairs as Angel scrambled to regroup.

"She'll never love you, Willy," he called after Spike, his hands wrapped around the cell bars. "You can play dress-up all you like, but I'll always be what she wants deep down. Put that soul back in me and see how long it takes her to come running home."

Buffy inhaled a shaky breath and waited, but nothing else came. Spike was offscreen by that point, his presence marked only by his heavy footsteps. Then there

was a slam of a door and everything fell quiet once more, until Angel started humming some old-timey tune to himself and slunk back into the shadows. She thought he might speak—address the camera directly, for she knew he knew it was there—but after a good ten minutes of nothing but an increasingly offkey rendition of whatever-it-was, she accepted there wasn't going to be anything else.

Though maybe there didn't need to be. Maybe Angel had said everything she needed to hear. None of it was new or all that surprising, except in the way it counterbalanced what he'd told her himself just a few hours ago. The bitterness and the hurt, the incredulity and resentment, very easy to see as coming from the same man, soul be damned. And that question he'd asked her at the end, if the door really was closed, when she knew full well that it was for him. How that had come as a surprise, and why shouldn't it? Angel might have said he was what she would always want with the intention of hurting Spike, but hadn't it been true for years? A fact left unobserved as it was never changing, therefore requiring little maintenance.

Buffy blinked and tore her gaze from the screen to the sticky note still in her hand. What was written there wasn't exactly helpful either. The print was on the tiny side to fit on the small square of paper but she had no trouble making it out. *Spike has a soul. Don't think you knew before you came. Thought you should see this.*

A harsh laugh burst off her lips before she could help herself.

What was the saying, all roads led...somewhere? Well maybe *somewhere* was this. Spike had a soul. And he'd chosen not to use it as a shield or an excuse. And maybe he would have told her eventually, but just as she didn't get to know exactly what she would have done if he'd told her that first night, he didn't get to know what he would have done if the choice had remained his. They would never know what they had never been able to think or feel or experience and that was just the way it went. Decisions made by other people and each of them left behind to sort through what it meant.

She had to get out of here.

Buffy was moving before the thought took full shape in her head, but her body knew the score well enough not to need instruction. Open the weapons chest. Grab a stake, two stakes, three stakes—could never be too careful in Sunnydale—then head for the door. Hope that the town's monster population was enjoying its reprieve from her nightly patrols, lulled into a false sense of security, that the cemeteries would be positively teeming with creatures in need of a good slay.

It wasn't until she was almost at the gate that Buffy realized her feet had carried her to Restfield, and she slowed at once, considering. Then she figured, hell, she was here, and it wasn't like she could avoid certain spots of town just because she might run into Spike—something she'd learned the hard way the previous year. No reason to think he was out and about, anyway, or that her sweep would take her anywhere near the Hawley mausoleum, so better to suck it up and proceed so she didn't have to swing by later.

She exhaled and hung a deliberate left where she would have taken a right and began her trek along the cemetery's outer edges. The first few minutes dragged by like hours, the graves stubbornly peaceful, uncaring of the itch that had taken resi-

dence under her skin or how it had been growing there for days, demanding attention she hadn't had time to give it. Even fighting Angel hadn't been all that satisfying, as it hadn't taken much to fell him—perk of the fact that he was out of practice watching her, she supposed, and that she was a stronger warrior now than she ever had been—and that was all good but it also wasn't, because Faith had been right. Buffy did need this. Crave it, even, on a level that had long since stopped scaring her.

There was just so much inside, pressing against her skull, her ribcage, all these things she had once been so adept at shutting down so she didn't have to experience them at all, and yeah, she'd gotten the memo. Repressing was bad, however comfortable it made the current moment, and if she kept doing that she'd just explode, or something. But exploding was starting to sound not terrible, and she had to get it out. Had to put all this inside energy to outside use. And this was the goddamn hellmouth so where the hell were all the hellbeasts? They ought to be crawling all over the place.

Then, *yes*, the sound of a hard grunt reached her ears, and Buffy was flying. Feet slamming against the soft graveyard ground, cool night air biting at her face, her stake—the one she'd opted not to hide on her person—clutched tight and ready and hungry for dust. The grunts grew louder, harder, and there was something else. The rhythm of bodies in battle, blows being exchanged, and her elation bled fast into fear then rage when she realized what exactly she was hearing.

Not now. Not tonight.

Buffy sprinted across a clearing, between two of the larger mausoleums, and there they were. Spike on the ground, on his knees, panting and already starting to turn so he could leap back to his feet and launch another punch, but Gray was right behind him, stake raised and angled perfectly. And there was too much space to cover and not enough time to do it, but somehow, Buffy crashed into the bitch before she had a chance to so much as scratch the leather of Spike's duster. They went tumbling to the grass, Gray's eyes wide with shock and panic. Eyes that Buffy had last seen the night her sister had almost died, and everything inside her head—all that noise she had been eager to get out—went from sound to color, and the color was red.

"Where the fuck did you come from?" Gray spat, scrambling to her feet.

Buffy didn't answer with words. Not at first. She lunged forward, caught the other slayer's chin with her knuckles. The blow reverberated up her wrist and to her arm, warm and righteous and *right*, and she swung again before she could lose her momentum, this time in an undercut that knocked the wind out of the other slayer's lungs. Gray folded over, coughing, and Buffy kept swinging.

"Not tonight," she spat through her teeth. "You don't get to do this tonight."

At last, Gray managed the coordination needed to block one of the incoming blows, her shock having melted into steely determination. "I don't remember asking you for permission."

"*Now* you show up?" Buffy went on, barely hearing her. Barely hearing herself, for that matter. "Was beginning to think you skipped town. It would've been the smart thing to do, after what you did to my sister."

Gray leaped to her left to dodge an incoming punch and whirled, smashing her leg

into the small of Buffy's back in a way that had her staggering into one of the larger mausoleums. But anger and something else—that sensation that had started to swell back at the house—kept her from colliding. She rebalanced, not with focus but almost preternatural understanding, and leveraged herself against the stone wall instead to shove back. Gray was there, ready to slam her head-first into the crypt, and fell into it instead.

"Funny thing. I wasn't like this before." Buffy seized the bitch by the hair, tendrils of white spilling between her fingers, and pulled her head back to an angle she knew had to hurt and good, *good*, she wanted it to hurt. Needed her to feel some of the mess that was swarming inside. Had to get it out. "Maybe I wasn't the best slayer. Maybe I messed up. Maybe I made the wrong calls. Maybe I was just fucked out of the starting gate. But you know what? *I tried*. Everything that they wanted, every bit of Buffy. I gave it over and over, and you're how they repay me?"

Distantly, Buffy was aware of movement at her back, but she didn't turn. Didn't have to. The tingle at her neck told her it was Spike. And Gray was kicking, trying to push off the mausoleum, scratching at Buffy's hand to get her to slacken the grip she had on her hair, glaring up at her through those harsh eyes that might have been the last thing Dawn had ever seen. The sister Buffy had died to protect, entrusted by monks—more magical men wielding their power to bend her life to their will—to keep safe. Knowing that she would, that she would love her. That even if the history in her head was fake, it also wasn't, for life was nothing if not the memories of how it was lived. So Dawn had been there for the lion's share. Her mom had brought her home and shown Buffy her new baby sister, and Buffy had made a promise then that she had swan dived off a tower to keep.

The world had been asked of her, and she'd provided. Even when she hadn't wanted to—even when the price had been her life.

"I gave them everything," she said, releasing Gray on a whim. Needing the other slayer to do more than just hiss at her. The fight that she'd wanted, craved, was here at last. She was going to savor it. "I gave the *world* everything. I killed my boyfriend. I stayed in Sunnydale. I defeated a god. I fought my best friend. I fucking *died*."

"Are you gonna fight or just whine all night?" Gray snapped, and though her expression was fierce, her voice shook. "You never got that, did you? The privilege of being the Slayer. Too busy fucking your vampire boyfriend."

"The one I just dumped or the one who just dumped me? You need to be a bit more specific."

Gray twisted her lips into a sneer. "And you wonder why they want you dead."

No, she didn't wonder. She knew. It was the same as it had been since the beginning. The Council sweeping in and telling her what she was, what she had to do, that her life had been decided for her. Being given the gift of strength and speed to fight the forces of darkness, never mind that she had never wanted them. That she'd been a regular teenager with regular teenage problems, all things death and dying so far on the horizon they might as well be figments of someone else's reality. And every time she had tried to carve out a bit for herself, make the best out of something that could never be good, the Council had been there, pushing back. Telling her she was wrong.

That the life she had wasn't really hers. That she had a calling, a duty, a purpose larger than herself that would demand every piece of her.

And here she was, eight years and three deaths later. Still alive because she couldn't get the freedom of death. Not back when she'd wanted it and not now that she didn't, when she was fighting to stay in a world that kept trying to destroy itself—and maybe not ever. Maybe this was the way it would always be. A fight for a life that wasn't really hers and never had been. That was defined by fake sisters made real, and hospital trips, and the occasional drive to Los Angeles...and losing her heart to men who didn't want it anymore.

It was too much, what was being asked. It always had been, but she didn't think she could survive it anymore. Not the way she had been trying.

Buffy screamed and didn't know what happened next, blanked out of her own head for a second, but when she came back Gray was under her, flat on the ground, her face a bloody, almost unrecognizable mess, and Buffy was raining blows, the air quiet all save for the meaty thumps of her fists slamming into flesh and the hard sobs coming from somewhere, someone. Gray's eyes weren't so wide anymore, but they were open and full, maybe seeing the thing all slayers saw in the end. Maybe even craving it now. The final gasp. The look of peace. Maybe she finally understood, too, exactly what the Council meant for her to sacrifice. And if she didn't, well, Buffy could show her. That was the promise she'd made that awful night in the hospital, for Gray would never stop coming for her, and the Council wouldn't either. Not until she'd either died or proven that she couldn't.

Somehow her hands ended up wrapped around Gray's throat, thumbs pressing into her windpipe, and at last the red began to turn white. Someone was still sobbing, and Buffy's vision was a watery blur, but in seconds everything would be over until the next time. The next threat. The next thing to be asked of her. Gray began to thrash and gag against the otherwise still air, clawing at Buffy's wrists and trying to pry her away, but Buffy was stronger. She always had been. That was her curse. The person strong enough to bear it, to do the impossible and make the hard choices. Leap when the world demanded it and just keep leaping, over and over until she was exhausted from the effort but no breaks for Buffy. No timeouts. Freedom was an illusion.

Gray's struggles started to slow, her slaps becoming half-hearted. And then a pair of arms wrapped around Buffy's middle and she was pulled away, her hands torn from the throat she had been seconds away from crushing for good. She toppled into Spike, the hard chest at her back, his legs on either side of her. They were on the ground together, and Spike's voice was in her ear, and he was telling her no. No, not like this. She wasn't a killer. He wouldn't let her become one, even for this bitch. It wasn't her burden to carry and never had been. He was the one with blood on his hands, so it was him who would do what needed to be done. She wasn't alone, and she didn't have to be, and he was sorry. So bloody sorry for all of it.

The words reached inside her and something snapped, and the next thing she knew, Buffy was crying in earnest. Clinging to him the way she knew she shouldn't and sobbing

so hard she ached with it. And she thought of that night last year in the alley, when she'd been swollen with so much ugliness it had come spilling out of her, how she'd beaten him until his outsides matched her insides. How he'd given her what she needed no matter what it had cost him, and she'd never thanked him for that, twisted as it was. Spike just passively handing her the tools that had helped her mold her own survival, knowingly and unknowingly. Putting her first in all the ways that mattered when he shouldn't have been capable. When he should have been the dead thing and she the one bursting with life and love and everything that it had taken months to chase down.

"It's all right," he said now, sounding as though he believed it, impossible as that was. "It's me that's gotta do it. It's why I'm here. Bloody selfish to ever let you consider it."

Buffy wasn't sure what the *it* was in this case, only that when she became aware of her own breathing again, the heavy sensation that had been pressed against her sternum was no longer there. She blinked and pulled her head back, realizing she'd had it buried in his chest, and felt his arms fall away from her almost at once. Giving her space she didn't really want, but she didn't know how to tell him that. She swallowed and turned to the place where Gray still lay, moving feebly in the aftermath of the onslaught. A minute later, the girl she'd meant to kill rolled over onto her stomach and raised herself onto shaking arms, and Buffy saw what would happen so clearly she didn't need to ask, yet also did.

"You're not going to kill her now, are you?" Her voice was rough against the otherwise perfect stillness of the cemetery.

"Not like this," Spike agreed. "I'll do her in properly. Fight to the death, and all that."

"Looked like she had you tonight."

He didn't bother denying it. "Was a bloody idiot, head in the clouds. She caught me unawares. Not the sort of thing I'll let happen twice."

Buffy nodded, sniffed, the air against her wet cheeks feeling at once immeasurably harsh. "What were you thinking?" she asked, watching as Gray pushed herself onto unsteady feet. It seemed to be happening far away.

"About you, mostly."

"Sorry."

"Buffy..." He took her chin and directed her face back to him, to his eyes. It seemed like he'd had something to say, but either she'd misunderstood or he'd lost it, for all he did was look at her for a few long beats before they both turned their attention back to Gray, who started to stumble-sprint in the opposite direction, favoring her right side as she moved.

And Buffy felt like an idiot for doing it—letting her go. It was the sort of thing that she knew would come back to haunt her, the way so many other things did. But the red from before had faded and taken her strength with it. That itch, the need to get out, unleash all her confusion and disappointment and heartbreak on something else, was gone. All that was left was the hollowness.

Spike pulled her to her feet, and she let him. He started her toward the house,

and she let him do that, too. He didn't guide her, wasn't touching her anymore, but remained at her side as he had so many times.

She didn't want to think about how many times were left after this was over. If *over* even existed. There was another reason she'd found herself going to his crypt so frequently over the summer—the inexplicable fact that imagining her life without him in it, however that looked, was almost impossible.

But then she'd thought that and been wrong before. And somehow, she'd moved on. If push came to shove, she could do that again.

Spike deferred the lead to her once they reached Revello Drive but remained on her heels as she pushed up the steps of her front porch and opened the door. She thought he might beg off once she crossed the threshold, but he didn't, rather helped himself inside and closed the door behind him. For another second, they stood in the foyer, exchanging glances, before Buffy remembered that she'd been hungry earlier. She wasn't now, but eating was doing something other than standing around and trying not to be caught staring at someone who probably had just as much confusion in his head as she did hers, so she turned and started for the kitchen.

Again, he followed. Stood and watched as she puttered around, finding what she'd need to slap together a peanut butter sandwich. She didn't have any blood to offer him—had stopped keeping it in stock after he'd moved back to the crypt—but there was a leftover box of crackerjacks that he'd taken to crumbling in his blood, so she tossed it to him without thinking. It was better than nothing, probably.

"What did you mean?" he asked, setting the box on the island.

"What did I mean about what?"

"The one you dumped and the one that dumped you?"

Buffy placed her sandwich center on a rather small plate and considered it for a moment. Bits of peanut butter gooped off the left side, the slices of bread resting against each other all cattywampus. She thought about how very much she didn't want to eat it before picking it up and taking a nice, slayer-sized bite. It was better than having to think of anything she'd said or done back there. But for as impatient as Spike seemed to the casual observer, she knew he would wait her out. He didn't move as she chewed, didn't fill the quiet with anything else. Just watched with unnerving intensity until she'd swallowed her bite and started contemplating a second one.

"I guess you need to be together to be dumped," she replied at last. "It just came out. Sometimes that's just how the brain of Buffy works."

"Right, but who did you dump?"

She frowned and raised her gaze to his intentionally for the first time since they'd walked through the door. "What?"

Spike shrugged and looked away quickly. "Just curious, is all."

"Well, again with the whole 'probably can't dump someone you're not with,' but I don't know what else to call it."

"Call *what*?"

"The conversation I had with Angel," she said—louder than she intended, but the heat from before was starting to rise to her skin once more.

"You dumped Angel." He didn't bother to disguise the disbelief in his voice.

And that was annoying because what the hell else had he expected? But then Buffy remembered the tape, what Angel had shouted after Spike as he'd retreated out of frame. Then the look on his face when Fred had burst into Buffy's room at the Hyperion, bright with the news that the curse had worked, and Buffy's own insistence that she talk to Angel before they left. And finally the way Spike had greeted her when she'd eventually made it to the car. She'd even called him on it—"You're really going to go all jealous vampire on me now?"

That had been the reason he'd pushed back. Maybe not the full reason but enough of it. And dammit, he'd told her himself when they'd left town. On the way back, too, come to think of it. Soul goes in and all's forgiven where Angel was concerned.

Had she done anything to make him think differently? And what now? She had already been all over the place tonight—frustrated with him and herself and depleted of all the filters that kept her from losing her shit on a daily basis. She'd just nearly killed a woman with her bare hands. Would have, if he hadn't been there to pull her off. But then if he hadn't been there, would she have even seen Gray tonight? Would she feel the way she did, this combination of hurt and longing, this pain that had somehow become specific to Spike?

"It was one of the things we talked about," Buffy said carefully, not sure how much of herself she wanted to reveal. How much more she could risk getting bruised. "Most of it was him acting like a child about how you got your soul. The rest was me asking him about all the things that he hadn't shared with me over the years. But yeah, before I left, I told him I was really moving on, the way he had. He has Cordelia now, or will whenever they find a way to save her. I don't think he wants me anymore, anyway. I think it was just...convenient, me being there in the background in case things didn't work out. Or maybe I have that wrong too, but that's not the point anymore. I'm just not going to be there. I'm done." She paused, somewhat breathless. That had been more than she'd thought she'd share—but hell, what was pride, anyway? Just another thing she had to sacrifice.

And just like that, she was back where she'd started. Stupid for having believed she could do this—for ever having let herself give in to the urge to leap at Spike in the first place. Those feelings, real and confused as they were, were better off unexplored. Hadn't she decided that once? Why would things be any different now, just because she was different?

Except this felt like a different break. The end of something that hadn't had a chance to start.

Buffy finished her sandwich in three more bites, turned and washed off her hands while painfully aware of Spike behind her. Wishing he would say something—cut through the bullshit running through her head—and dreading it all the same. She darted her gaze to him only when she was left without anything else to do, found him frowning at the floor, his cheeks sucked in and his expression fixed in a way she knew meant he was trying to work something out. Past times, he would have started spouting off before now, ideas half-formed, just to keep her from putting more distance

between them. But she was beyond thinking of the way Spike used to act. There was just the now, the caution the soul had granted him. The understanding that sometimes it was important not to leap without first looking, talk without first thinking. And she both loved and resented that—that she could no longer count on him to be brash and impulsive. To convince her with nothing more than a smirk and a flick of his eyebrow.

Those days were gone.

"You should stay here tonight," she heard herself say. "Dawn and Will are coming home in the morning, and since Gray is back in the picture, it probably wouldn't hurt to have as much of the gang here as possible just so we can regroup." She worked her throat. "Did...did Gray say anything before she made with the attack? I never asked."

Spike shook his head, keeping his focus on the floor.

Buffy hesitated, then figured, the hell with it. It wasn't like she had anything to lose by asking. "What did you mean when you said you were sorry?"

That did it. He looked up in a hurry, his eyes bright.

"It just... You said that while I was..." She waved vaguely to encapsulate the thing she knew had been an emotional breakdown. She felt a bit too fragile still to say the words themselves—as though they could act as a talisman. And why not? It was the Hellmouth. "I could've sworn you said you were sorry. I just... Sorry for what?"

Spike held her gaze. "Dunno. All of it, I'd wager."

"All of..."

"Take your bloody pick. Stopped keepin' track, myself." He sighed and braced his hands on the island, dropping his head again and tensing. "I just keep makin' the wrong call, love. I dunno how to change that. Every time I think I might have figured it—what I need to do to be the sort of man I want to be—I get turned around."

"What man do you want to be?"

"A better one than this." Spike pressed his eyes closed, then opened them again. "It was for you, Buffy. From the second I lit outta here, it was about you. Giving you what you deserve. Giving you something better than the thing that nearly... Except when the soul went in, I knew it could never be me."

Shit, maybe she shouldn't have asked. Buffy drew in a ragged breath but didn't tell him to stop. That he'd never start again wasn't something she wanted to risk.

"Knowin' something's impossible doesn't mean you don't want it, though," he went on hoarsely. "And I did. I wanted it. I've never stopped wanting whatever scraps you'd give me. Only difference is I know I can't live on scraps alone—but I can never ask for more, can I? Then you... You start looking at me like maybe I'm not a thing after all, and that about scares the soul right on out of me because it can't be what I want it to be."

"You're not a thing, Spike."

"Not anymore."

"No. No, I haven't thought that... I never really thought that. It was just... I wanted to hurt you because you loved me."

Amazingly, he snorted but swallowed whatever immediate and probably blunt reply had occurred to him. "All I've been since I came back here is scared," he said.

"First of how you'd look at me. What I'd begin to say to you. Sorry's no bloody good. Tellin' you I'd gotten myself fixed all right isn't either. Because then you'd know what I'd done and how sorry I was, but how the fuck is that right? All so *I* can feel better for somethin' I did to *you*, and bugger how you feel about it at all? At least Spike can sleep soundly knowin' he did right."

Buffy didn't say anything. This much she knew from everything he'd already said, though his tone was different now, and she thought there might be something else behind it. She needed more. She needed him to stop. She needed both and neither at the same time.

"It's gotten worse, too. Thought the blood would be the full of it, but then you gave me back the duster. Just little pieces, crumbs, and I've been gobbling them up. Then the other day, when you..." Spike closed his eyes again, only for a second. "When you kissed me and let me touch you—Christ, I've never been more terrified in my life. And I would've found a way to bollix it up even if you hadn't gotten called in, 'cause I can never trust it, see? There's always somethin' to snatch it away. Angel. Or learnin' about the bloody soul. Some reason for you to decide you don't want it and crush me so thoroughly I might as well be dust. So I can't... I can't let myself think I can have it."

"Spike—"

"And that's it. That's why I'm sorry. I keep buggering up. All I wanted was to be someone who wouldn't hurt you. Instead I find new ways to hurt you more." Spike sniffed, stepped back and wiped at his eyes. "But it's all right now, Slayer. I think I have it figured at last. This soul of mine might be tarnished, but yours isn't. So when it comes to doin' the things that need doin', I'm here. I can do that. Be what you need. Whatever that is."

Buffy licked her lips. She didn't know what to do with this any more than she knew what to do with the rest of it. The part of her that could process had been shut down. Overloaded. There was nowhere to go from here. "This is what you were thinking about when she got the jump on you?"

"A bit, yeah."

"And the rest?"

He just looked at her as though to tell her she already knew. She supposed she did.

"I didn't take anything out of the basement," she said after she got tired of pretending he might say anything else. "The cot and... I guess I thought there was a chance you might need it again. Bedding's down there, too. Just in case."

Spike inhaled and nodded, stepping back. "Yeah, all right."

"I'll run to get some blood in the morning. Or make Willow do it." Buffy hesitated, and for no reason at all, her heart jumped on some wayward surge of adrenaline. Ignoring it, she went on, "And I started a load of laundry earlier. Do you know how to work the dryer? Can you handle that?"

He favored her with a wan grin that made everything in her go tight. "Wager I can manage."

"Look at the tags. There might be stuff in there that needs to air-dry or different heat levels."

"Learned that lesson the hard way once."

She nodded, looked down. "All right. Well...good night, then."

And then she was moving, almost flying toward the adjoining hall and the staircase beyond. Needing to put distance between them before the escalating *whatever* in her head hit its crescendo. Somehow, what Spike had just told her had her more confused than everything that had come before. Like he had picked up the thread going through her mind and started to answer snippets of thought out of context. Knowing she needed to hear something but not knowing what.

That had been him last year, too, she thought dully as she entered her bedroom, closing the door behind her. Knowing she needed something, not knowing how to give it. Trying, though, and succeeding more than he failed, especially in the beginning before she'd thrown herself at him. Before she'd given in. And that had been the wrong move—it had nearly killed her—but in so many ways, it had also saved her life. Knowing he was there, that he could take whatever she threw at him. He could be her lightning rod, absorb all the bad and still somehow love her. Even now.

He had a soul now, and he still loved her—loved her enough to keep being her lightning rod. Prying her off Gray tonight because Buffy wasn't a killer. Telling her he would take the girl's life because her soul mattered more to him than his did. Believing that she would forgive him if he gave her a reason, for something he couldn't forgive himself. Both wanting and not wanting that forgiveness, the same way she had once both wanted and not wanted his love. Only the love had been there anyway, and—her breath hitched—the forgiveness too. She might not have thought about it in those terms, accepted it so baldly, but she had forgiven Spike. And maybe that was what he saw that he couldn't handle. Forgiveness that shouldn't exist. Love that shouldn't exist. A relationship that shouldn't exist but did, *did*, despite everything she had done to kill it. Everything he had done, as well. They had been on the same journey at different points, just never lucky enough to cross each other's path. Never landing at the same place at the same time.

Buffy paused after toeing off her shoes, her heart still cadencing like mad against her chest. Making her whole body tremble with the force of it. She couldn't live with maybes, or any thoughts like this, for that matter. And without a definite answer, *maybe* was all she had. The conclusions she'd reached based not on things he'd actually said but what she'd thought she'd heard. It was that day in the studio all over again—the question of control and focus, and she remembered why it hadn't been a mistake after all, doing what she'd done. Messy as she and Spike were, they were messier when they were like this, guessing at each other. Making assumptions. She could fight a war while wounded, but she couldn't while distracted. He loved her and she forgave him, and they didn't have to be anything now, but she had to know if there was a someday or if their story was truly over. Both for her and for him. They would go nuts otherwise.

Buffy was moving across the floor before she realized it, her temples pounding and a dull ringing filling her ears. She had no idea what she was going to say, fueled by

nerves and that terrible sense that she was about to be crushed again, but living without knowing was worse. At least it would be over, whatever came next.

She threw the door open then stopped before she could plow into Spike, who stood there with his hand raised as though to knock. And when she met his eyes, they were her eyes. A reflection of everything inside of her, the mess that had reached its boiling point. Or maybe that was just wishful thinking, but she didn't think so. For the first time in forever, she thought they had landed at the same place.

"Sorry," Spike said, lowering his hand but not looking away. "Didn't mean to... Was just..."

She stared at him, every inch of her shaking. "What?"

"Just occurred to me, is all, that I never asked." A nervous little smile—or what she thought might be a nervous smile—tugged at his lips. "Thought I knew the answer, but I never heard you say it. Just got it in my head that I did."

God, he was killing her. "What answer?"

Spike didn't look away, didn't blink, and she understood before he spoke, but she still needed it. She needed it for both of them.

And then the words were there, between them.

"Do you still want to try?"

Everything inside of her coalesced, bright and burning, before it broke. Her eyes stung and her hands shook, and the next thing she knew, her body was in motion again, but different than before. Winging forward and off that precipice, and he was there, catching her, swallowing the maybe-sigh, maybe-scream, her endless line of maybes with his mouth. His hands at her arms, his chest at her chest, and kissing her like she was life. Like she was blood. Like she was home.

And she was tugging him back into the room, needing more, and he was following, following. Not pushing her away but walking with her, his lips on her and his chest against her and maybe this was crazy but it was a crazy she could live with. All was right at last.

At last.

AND TIME CAN DO SO MUCH

THOUGH HE'D NEVER DREAMED THE DAY WOULD ACTUALLY COME, SPIKE COULDN'T say he hadn't considered what he would do if he ever got to experience this again. He had considered it in great, excruciating detail. Specifically, how he would take his time to show Buffy how much he loved her. How he knew she was giving him a gift and *fuck*, what a gift. Even for a chance.

He'd been counting on the soul to reel him back, keep him from losing control. From doing exactly what he was doing now.

But fuck, he couldn't stop, and neither could she. Buffy wasn't kissing him so much as attacking him with her mouth. Slashing at his lips with her teeth, tongue, grunting low in the back of her throat and pulling him deeper into her room. Into *her*. And all his senses had dulled except those that controlled his cock. One of them closed the door—or wait, that had been him when he'd spun her around and pinned her against it—and she was panting and he was gasping, and she was tearing at his belt and he was tugging on her trousers, and then—*fuck, yes, yes, yes*—her hand was around his cock, and she wasn't gentle. She pulled and pumped and made his hands fumble as he worked to strip her knickers down her legs until he just fucking gave up and decided he'd buy her new trousers if she got cross with him.

She didn't. If anything, the sound of ripping fabric seemed to invigorate her.

"Yes," Buffy said against his mouth, nodding hard. "Spike, now."

He was helpless to do anything but obey, need and desire and so much else swelling beneath the skin until he thought he might burst. But not yet. Not *yet*, dammit. He hiked her into his arms, pressed her against the door again, and barely had time to appreciate the sensation of the head of his cock sliding along her drenched cunt before he plunged inside. And Buffy cried out, throwing her head back hard enough to *thunk*, her hands linked behind his neck, nodding again and that

was all he needed. That little nod. Spike buried his head in her chest and bucked his hips, and they were off to the bloody races. Buffy panting in his ear, scratching at his back, at his head, and the door rattling behind her in its frame in time with his thrusts. Everything hard and fast as Spike chased sensation, chased down the phantom that he had carried with him for bloody months. And she was there, too, meeting him with hard, smashing bucks of her own, trying to fight him because of course she was—that was all she ever did. Only now they were at last fighting in a language he understood.

“Buffy,” he whispered, pulling back just enough to catch her eyes. He didn’t know what to say. The neurons between his ears had fizzled out. All he could see was her. All he could feel. Her heat around his cold, her breath against his face, her nails digging into his back and her pussy... *Fuck*, her pussy. He’d eaten it, stroked it, sung to it, even written bloody sonnets about it, and she could still surprise him with it. How those muscles of hers clamped around his cock, squeezing and clutching and making him want to beg for something she was already giving him.

“Touch me,” she said, cupping the back of his neck. “Spike, please.”

He nodded and kissed her because he could, because her lips were there, and she gasped into his mouth before answering with the same fire from before. That pure Buffy fire that had crawled inside him once and never gone out. And he tightened his grip on her arse with his left hand so he could delve between their warring bodies with his right. Feel where she was hottest. Remember the way she liked this—the tease rather than the ambush, how little it took to get her to fall over the edge. Just a few strokes of her clit had her writhing and clamping, and god, she needed to tumble because he didn’t think he could hold on. Needed her to go first. Needed because nothing in this world felt quite so good as Buffy Summers coming apart on his cock and—

And she threw her head back again and let him watch. The shape of her mouth, the flush to her skin, the darkening of her eyes as her pussy spasmed and vised and sent him skyrocketing into that elusive realm of pure ecstasy he hadn’t known before her. Never. Not in a hundred-plus sodding years. Spike buried his face between her breasts once more and shuddered as he pulsed and emptied into her, Buffy seizing and holding him close, so close, taking into her the pressure he’d been carrying for what felt like an eternity. Catching it for him. Carrying it. Or maybe letting it go. He didn’t know. All he knew was when his legs buckled and he went down to the floor, she was with him. On him. Over him. Around him.

Spike wasn’t sure how long they stayed like that. Buffy panting into his shoulder, sprawled across his body, the thunderclaps of her heart beating into him hard enough that he felt their echo within his chest. It took a bit before the fog in his head started to thin, sensation fading in favor of thought. And he had a lot of those, each one shouting over the next in a bid for attention that he didn’t want to grant but knew he must.

“Sorry,” he said at last, that particular thought louder than the rest.

Buffy lifted her head and blinked at him somewhat drowsily. “Sorry? Why sorry?”

“Meant to do this slow. Take my time.”

"Oh." She blinked a few more times before her face cracked into the single most beautiful smile he had ever seen. "Oops?"

He laughed before he could help himself, and she laughed, and then they were laughing together as they never had before. And it was blissful. Beyond blissful. The feel of her shaking against him, eyes that had been filled with tears just a little while ago now bloody dancing and light. And then those lips were on him again, softer than before. God, than *ever* before. Gentle and exploratory, like she was learning him, and the fire that always burned for her roared with renewed enthusiasm. In seconds, he had his fingers tangled through her hair at the back of her head, holding her to him through gentle pushes and delves and explorations, and his cock hardened all over again.

This time. Maybe he could do it right this time.

As though she'd had the same thought, Buffy pulled back to gasp in a breath, regarded him with those darkened emeralds she called eyes and said, "Do over?"

Spike nodded so quickly she laughed, and god, that sound. *That sound*. To be the one that inspired it. He would never know how he had gotten here. Not after everything, and certainly not tonight, but somehow he was.

"And I know missing the bed is a time-honored tradition," Buffy said a moment later, pulling herself to her feet with a bit of effort, "but it'd be kinda nice to make it there at least once."

For a long beat, all he could do was stare at her, his brain whirring more than he fancied but it wasn't like he could stop it. Was this what *trying* with Buffy was going to be like, he wondered as she offered her hand and tugged him up to join her. Light and airy, her teasing and flirting? Being on the receiving end of more of her laughs, her joy. Maybe even being the cause of it. Christ, it was almost too much in those terms. Too bloody terrifying.

Don't bollix this up, mate. For fuck's sake.

"Buffy," Spike said, trailing after her toward the bed. Watching with no small amount of wonder as she shimmied her way out of what remained of her trousers before ditching her top. Then she turned to him, a question on her face, and he remembered saying her name but not what he'd meant to tell her. There weren't enough words to encapsulate this moment, at least none that his inner poet could find. This, her, everything, was beyond his comprehension.

Amazingly, though, Buffy didn't ask for clarification. She pressed close to him, danced her fingers across his chest before rising up on her toes to kiss him again. "I know," she said against his lips.

He laughed again in spite of himself. "You can't possibly."

"Well, then I don't care." She pulled back just enough to start tugging his shirt over his head. "But also, I think that's crap."

"Oh you do, do you?"

"Give a girl some credit. I do pay attention." Buffy's eyes were warm though her smile had turned watery, but she didn't seem to want to linger there, instead taking his hands in hers and bringing them to her breasts. And he needed no direction but he also did, for despite the intensity of having just been inside her, and still feeling

the ghost of her warmth around his cock, touching her had become a novelty. He didn't quite trust himself to let his gaze drop, admire her bra or how he could see the outline of her nipples straining against the fabric, just held her there, her flesh hot against his palms.

"Spike," Buffy said, and he jerked back up to her eyes—turned out his own hadn't been as reticent as he'd thought—as she lifted a hand to his cheek. "Is it... Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Just catchin' up with me a bit, is all."

Her expression softened. "Yeah, me, too. I mean, I lost my shit and almost killed a girl like an hour ago. And I thought you..."

"I know." Spike pressed his brow to hers, inhaling. "I was wrong, what I said before. Just been goin' outta my bloody head. Had this idea of what I am and what I did, what I deserve because of it. Scared of you and myself, and that I can bugger this up so easily. I... Hell, I dunno what I'm trying to say here."

"I think that you were extra lassy because you were afraid of being hurt and were sure that's what was coming."

He snorted and pulled back. When the hell had she gotten so insightful?

"And I can't say there won't be hurt," Buffy went on. "You don't think *I'm* scared of that too?"

"Slayer, the thought of you bein' scared of me at all is bloody unfathomable."

"Well, start fathoming. Because I am... I don't even know what I am." She barked a laugh and pressed her palm against her brow. "It's not like I've been luckiest in this department. And it being you... Feels a little like playing with fire. But I want it, Spike. As long as you want it."

"Oh, I want," Spike replied in a low growl, dropping his hands to her hips and pulling her closer so she could feel just how much he wanted. His prick was thankfully not the issue here—everything lending him pause was up top. The sound between his ears, the flashes and the doubts, the noise he'd been living with one way or another for damn near a year now. "I want, Buffy," he said again, rolling his hips so his cock, hard and straining out of his open jeans, slid along her stomach, reveling in her gasp, feeling just for a second almost like the man he'd been before. The good parts of that man, at least, and there had been some. "I've never stopped wanting."

She gave him a smile that was somewhere between shy and relieved. "Thank god," she said, rolling her head back and again flashing him that bite mark. This time he couldn't resist them. Spike lowered his mouth to her throat and sighed, exploring that patch of skin with his tongue. Feeling the contours of where he had slipped his fangs inside of her and digging his fingers into her hips when she answered him with a mewl.

"Oh *shit*," she panted, folding at the knees, and that made him laugh. Made it second nature to catch her, hold onto her, soak in all the warmth he'd missed. The thought flickered, the same one that had been there so many times before—that if she liked this, she'd like something else just as much. More, likely. He never had bitten her while she was around his cock—had threatened to, sometimes while pounding into her just to feel her respond. That rush of excitement and fear and

want before her mouth got in the way and spat out something about how she'd dust him just as fast. It would just take once—one time feeling what it was like to have him inside of her in two places to make her an addict. But despite teasing her with the possibility, he hadn't been able to bring himself to do it just on the off chance that he was wrong, and she would lash out after all.

He thought it best not to mention it now and possibly spoil the mood, though *later*, maybe. If he was so bold and so lucky. Instead, he teased his blunted teeth along that tender spot, clutching her tighter when she whimpered again, and thrusting himself against her center, feeling how hot she was. How wet, because god, she was drenched, and the scent was heady and intoxicating and he'd missed it so much. Missed the way she fell apart under his hands and tongue. How he could bring the strongest person in the sodding world to her knees just with a few licks.

"Oh, my god," she moaned, practically melting into him, "why does that feel so good?"

"Hmm, does it?"

"Is it supposed to feel like that?"

"Not the first pair of fangs you've had. Meanin' to tell me you never got curious?"

"I seemed to have missed that day in sex ed where they went over vampire bites as happy zones." Buffy laughed at her own joke, pretty as a windchime, then she was on him again, mouth hot, dragging him in, and there was nowhere else to go. Nothing he could do but follow, lose himself in the strokes of her lips, her tongue, the little whimpers she made when he met her hunger with his own. And it wasn't enough. He needed more—needed to show her more. Needed her to feel his soul as richly as he did, for she was the one who had given it to him.

"Touch me," she whispered against his lips. "Please."

Spike trembled. "How do you want me to touch you?" he asked, kissing his way along her jaw toward her ear. "Any requests?"

"The way you used to."

"Care to be more specific?" He tugged her earlobe between his teeth, and she rewarded him with another of those low moans. "Seem to remember touchin' you in lots of ways."

"I liked your hands. Those are good hands to have."

He chuckled without meaning to, and Buffy pulled her head back just enough to catch his gaze.

"I like that too," she said, her fingers finding his chest again. "I like the way you laugh."

"Yeah?"

"It's a very nice sound." Her hands were wandering once more, one curling around his neck to bring him back to her mouth and the other wrapping around his cock and squeezing. He felt her lips curl into a smile when he gasped and thrust into her touch, and that was a bloody marvel in itself. Buffy smiling while kissing him. While stroking him. While being with him at all. He wanted to slow and savor but part of him remained locked, certain that if he did she would come to her senses and this would all be over. Even if he knew it wouldn't—that things truly were

different now. *They* were different and everything she did, every move she made, just reinforced how much. It might take a minute for all of him to catch up and believe it.

Until then, he'd enjoy the ride. Buffy against his mouth, his chest, Buffy pumping his cock like that, her grip so tight it almost hurt but felt all the better because of it. Her scent in his nostrils and her taste on his tongue, the air around them thick with sex and lust and promise. It was like stepping into his most impossible fantasy and discovering it was real.

Finally, because she had to, Buffy broke away with a deep gasp. "God, I didn't know," she said, her brow against his again. "Until now."

"What's that?"

"How much I missed this."

Christ, she was killing him. "Tell me," he murmured, turning with her so the bed was at her back. "Tell me all you missed. What you liked apart from my hands."

Buffy kissed him again, then sank onto the mattress so she was eye-level with his cock. Looking at him with hunger he'd never seen there before. Unabashed and unafraid—just pure Buffy. "We might be here for a while," she said, seizing him by one of the belt loops and tugging him forward until he was as close as he could get.

"Perish the thought."

"And I think there are better things to use my mouth for than talking." He thought she might finish the job at last, shove his jeans down the rest of the way, but she didn't, rather fisted him at the base and gave him a long, almost experimental pump, rolling the foreskin over the head and back. Keeping her eyes on him until he growled low in his throat then, smirking, fixing her attention on what she was doing.

"I liked this," she said before leaning in to swirl her tongue along the exposed head. "If you want me to make a list."

Spike rolled his head back, tunneling his fingers through her hair. "Fuck."

"Mhmm." Buffy drew her tongue down the length of him. Taking her time as she never had before and driving him out of his mind as she did. "Oh yeah, I liked this a lot," she said when her lips were at his crown once more. Then she parted them and began inching him into her mouth, wet and scorching, and tender. As though she worried he might break. Not exactly an unfounded concern, either, from the way his bloody knees wouldn't stop knocking. With every second that passed, he was feeling more like the bumbling oaf he'd been once upon a time. The one who hadn't so much as sniffed a woman's cunt before Drusilla had followed him into that alley.

Seemed appropriate, he supposed, since he'd never experienced sex with a soul before.

And he couldn't stand it. Much as he wanted—and he did want—there were other things he wanted more. So he jerked back until his cock plopped free of her mouth, aching harder than before, then bent to attack her mouth. Kissing her had always been the most honest thing he could do, pour how he felt, how much he felt, into her in a way she would accept. No words but all the words too. And once more, she met him with the sort of hunger that humbled. Desperate and biting and in search of more. The more he always had to give.

"I like this too," she whispered against his lips, ghosting her fingers down his face. "The way you kiss me."

Spike pressed his eyes closed, but only for a second. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. Like you can't get enough."

"Bloody good reason for that." He kissed her again with a light growl that turned into a moan when she met him with her tongue. She tasted of him now, and that always made him burn. Relish the evidence that Buffy had explored his body, that she'd savored some part of it even if she didn't savor all of him. It was with difficulty that he broke his lips away. "Be a lamb and keep tellin' me what you liked. Wanna make sure I do this right."

She cracked an eye open in a thoroughly *Buffy* look that had his balls tightening. "I don't remember you ever doing *that* wrong."

"Kinda thing a fella likes to hear." He grinned, lowering himself to his knees and seizing her around the hips to tug her to the edge of the mattress. "So, tell me anyway. *Please*."

Buffy breathed out, the smirk falling off her face in favor of something else—something he had never seen there before. Soft and open and searching. "I liked how it seemed like you wanted to kiss me everywhere."

He arched his eyebrows. "Yeah? Anywhere in particular?"

"Let's just say you're the one who made me realize that I actually do like being touched here." She brought one of his hands to her breasts, still supported by the bra he had yet to remove, and he took the hint. Let his fingers roam over the material, over the cup itself, admiring the weight of her breast against his palm, then following the band around her back until he arrived at the clasp. And even now, still buzzing both over having been inside her and knowing that more was coming, his chest went tight as he pulled the bra straps down her arms and freed her breasts, a hitch there that damn near made him feel human at the realization that she was about to be naked with him.

"Fuck," Spike breathed out, not taking his eyes off her as he tossed the bra over his shoulder. "Buffy..."

She squirmed a bit under his scrutiny as though embarrassed. As though she could be, even after everything they had done to and with each other. All the things they'd said, her breath hot at his ear as she'd bucked and moaned and given the instruction he'd never needed but had gobbled up anyway. "You've seen everything before."

Spike flicked his gaze to her face. "Not with these eyes, I haven't," he replied, cupping her breast again and gliding his thumb over her dusky nipple. Marveling at the way she responded, the echo of her heartbeat against his hand. "And not for a very long time before that. You say you didn't fancy being touched here before yours truly?" He leaned in and teased her nipple with his tongue, fighting a growl when she threw her head back and groaned, her fingers trailing along his scalp as though to hold him in place. In how different it was while still being similar—that he could feel that even like this. The way she touched him now in contrast to the way it had been before, even in how she fisted his hair. He'd known that he'd never had all of her, had

accepted it almost from the start, even if it had driven him batty. He'd also known he'd been the exception of her lovers, whatever Captain Cardboard had thought. Buffy was a creature of passion, and it poured through her in everything she did. In anger or affection, hate or love, she gave everything she had to give. Spike couldn't imagine having her like this and not realizing what a gift it was or taking it for granted. Couldn't imagine believing there might be something more.

"Never understood what they had, did they?" he said, voice low but not quite a whisper. "The sorry lot of them."

"There weren't a *lot*," she replied. "There were four, you included. And one doesn't count."

"Right..." Spike lifted his gaze to hers and leaned in to kiss her.

"And you did," she whispered against his lips. He felt her heart pick up, making her skin go warm. "Understand, that is. I didn't want you to, but you did anyway."

There was that tight feeling again, this time in his throat. "Bloody right I did," he replied hoarsely, and licked a path around her areola, once, twice, closed his mouth around it. Growling into her flesh when she moaned, unable to help himself. Not sodding wanting to help himself, either, for this was Buffy, open and honest. Looking at him through half-lidded eyes as he sucked and licked and explored, holding his gaze the entire time. Not even blinking, it seemed, until she couldn't hold off any longer. Just watching as he rediscovered the parts of her that she hadn't known she liked touched or kissed until he'd come along. Breathing hard, shaky little breaths, interspersed with a soft gasp when he swirled his tongue or teased her with his teeth. Arching and grasping and holding, just holding, letting him lick and bite and soothe before trailing a series of kisses between her breasts so he could do it all over again.

"Where else?" he rasped against her seconds, minutes, hours later, breathing in time with her. Her pretty little tits were swollen now and slick from his mouth. "Where else did you like being kissed?"

"Uhh..." She blinked at the sweat threatening to drip into her eyes. Her skin had deepened a shade, which again had him bloody mesmerized. Buffy coy with him was a version of her he'd never seen before. "You know where," she said, lowering her gaze.

"Yeah," he agreed, grinning. "Also know *you* know what it's called."

"You're really gonna make me say it?"

"Why so shy? Used to bloody demand it, you did."

"Demand? Really?"

He chuckled and sat back on his legs to admire the picture she presented. "Seem to remember a good amount of demanding."

"Yeah, well, you liked me demanding."

"Bloody loved it."

"I can do that again." She flashed him a soft smile that did nothing to hide her sudden uncertainty, and that was a sight too. "Everything okay?"

What a bloody question.

"For the first time I can remember," he said, placing his hands on her thighs, and looked up again—at her, lying completely naked now against the bed she'd never let

him into. Her cheeks flushed, her hair all rumpled, her eyes wide and fuller than they had ever been before. It was another snapshot straight from the deepest recesses of his most prized fantasies. Buffy lying before him in her space, the space where she wanted him, and looking at him as she was now. His breath hitched before he finally forced himself to drag his gaze down, take in all of her. Her breasts, her nipples, her flat stomach that wasn't without its scars, the curve of her hip and the curls at her mound. Rarely did reality meet the expectations set by an active imagination, but as it turned out, there were limitations to what the mind could do. Like the scent filling his nostrils—her of course, but more than her, for this was the most personal place she ever occupied and she was everywhere. And there was the cadence of her heart along with the breaths she took, filling the air with more of her. Altogether, it was bloody transformative, and he shouldn't have been surprised. That had always been the way with her.

And then he let himself let go. Sink in. Push forward into the moment and shove the bloody awful poet back where he belonged. Buffy had just parted her lips to say something else when he lowered his head and drew a line with his tongue along the sweet folds of her pussy, and that was it. The taste he remembered in his mouth again, all hot and wet and uniquely Buffy. She whimpered and seized him about the head, and he fed her back a growl, spreading her open with his fingers and licking her again. And again. Until licking wasn't enough and everything inside of him clamored for more.

"Christ, I missed this," he muttered, never meaning anything more in his life than he meant that. "Missed this so much."

"Me too," she said, the words riding out on a gasp. "Spike..."

"Mmm?"

"Are you really going to tease me all night?"

He favored her with an arched brow, grinning in spite of himself. "You think I'm teasin' you?"

"What else am I supposed to think?"

"Told you, I had a way this would go in my head. Let me savor the moment."

She lifted her head to glare down at him, and his heart about burst. Bloody fortunate he'd made the call he had. A curse might have achieved the same result, but those things were mighty unreliable. There was so much more to do and say and so much farther to go with her, but even with all of that lingering in the distance, he knew he would have lost the thing he'd fought so hard for right now, this second, had his soul come with an escape clause. It was pure and bright and felt so good it was almost painful.

"Less moment-savoring and more me-savoring."

"I'd love to, but I could've sworn I asked you a question." Spike lowered his face back to her pussy, trembling himself now, his cock throbbing with the sort of ache that teetered on too much, but he was still bloody determined to do this proper. Savor her, as he'd said. He drew in another breath deep enough to scratch the bottom of his lungs, filling himself with her as best he could. "Where do you like to be kissed by yours truly? Know you can say it, love. Used to whisper such nasty things to me."

"This... This is different."

"How so?"

"Because we're... I'm not using you. This is about trying to be something."

"Oh ho, and trying to be somethin' means you have to bite your filthy tongue, is that it?" He regarded her cunt, so pink and swollen and open for him, wet with both herself and him, and licked her again from her opening to her clit. Grinned when she jolted and raised her hips to follow his tongue, but he was wise to her and slipped away, back down so he could take an earnest lap of her, taste her for real. Taste himself, too, and god, if that wasn't heady. The ache in his balls intensified but he ignored it, wanting this too much, to feel her come apart on his lips. It had always been one of his favorite things. "No rules like that here. I love hearin' what you want me to do. Love tellin' you how you taste and feel. If you aim for me to keep these thoughts to myself, I've got some bad news for you."

Buffy sucked in a deep breath and scraped her teeth over her lower lip. "Oh," she said after a long beat. "It's just... Before, when..."

"Just us here, right?"

"Yeah." It was such a simple thing, but the thought seemed to strike her like a revelation. He watched it blossom across her face, lighting her eyes and tugging at the corners of her mouth. Felt her react, too—the skip of her heart and the fresh wetness that coated his chin. Made it all the more difficult to tamp down on his control, but he managed. It'd be worth it.

And fuck, it was. "I like it when you lick my pussy," she said after a beat, looking for all the world like the coppers might just burst in and haul her off for her daring.

"Oh, do you? Never would've guessed." He rewarded her by doing just that, taking his time now. Long, slow laps along her slit, between her folds, up and down and up again, then inside of her truly. Feeling her tremble against his tongue as she sighed and cried and thrust some more—but she hadn't asked for what he knew she wanted most, so he didn't give it. Just set his tongue to a rhythm, dipping inside of her, lapping at her, drinking her and him together with relish then slipping back up to circle her clit. Circle, not touch, for she hadn't asked for that, yet. Another of her mewls pealed through the air before fading to a softer sigh as she arched and rolled, and begged in every way she could except saying the words themselves, which was just fine because he was having a grand ol' time on his own.

He'd never thought he'd have her taste in his mouth again, hear those sounds again—the sweetest little sounds that had ever graced the air. He could stay here all night and be happy with it, relearning all the tricks that coaxed his favorite responses. The hair pulling—like she needed to hold into him lest she tumble away. Or the way her breaths grew heavier the more frustrated she became. The more she lost herself to it. How she always seemed a bit mystified that he enjoyed eating her as much as he did, that he had to push his fingers inside of her to keep from touching himself. One hand on her thigh, holding her open, the other thrusting into her at a slow rhythm. Watching the way her flesh molded around him, welcomed him, how her whole body seemed starved for him. For this. How much she wanted it but not just *it* because this wasn't an *it* for her. It was them. *Him*. She

wanted *him*. Spike. No one else. For the first time, she wanted him, and that was everything.

Then Buffy lifted her head and met his eyes, her own having gone dark. “Spike,” she said. “Put your mouth on my clit. God, *please*,” and that was everything too.

“That’s my girl,” he replied in a low growl, then fastened his lips around her clit and teased it with the balled end of his tongue, and Buffy cried out, hoarse and guttural. Lifting her hips when she thought he might be about to pull back, but Spike wasn’t going anywhere. Not for long, at least. A few more laps of her cunt that he couldn’t help because he hadn’t known the last time was the last time, and while he trusted she was right and they were at the start of something now, that wasn’t a gamble a man made twice. But then she was asking again and he couldn’t deny her, so he flattened his tongue against her clit and pressed down as his fingers pressed up from inside her pussy. Finding that spot she hadn’t known existed until he’d shown her. Finding it and nudging it as he curved his tongue over her and that was it. Buffy came apart. Trembling. Gasping. Moaning a combination of syllables that could have been nonsense or his name. Digging her fingers into the mattress with one hand and tightening her grip on his hair with the other. Pressing her cunt against his face, then dropping away. All of her dropping back but not so far he couldn’t follow, and he did. Resting his cheek against her thigh, listening to the rush of her blood beneath the skin. Admiring the picture she presented, sweaty and limp, her hair all a-tumble, legs spread and her pussy flushed and soaked.

It would have been so easy not to end up here—too bloody easy. Yet somehow, he *was* here. He was here and he was with her, and for the first true time, she was with him, too.

“Is it just me,” she said a moment later, her voice gentle and rough. Then she tumbled into a laugh that warmed his dead heart more than he thought he could stand. “Wait, that *was* just me.”

“What’s just you, love?”

“I was going to say, is it just me or is this even better than it was before? But you haven’t—”

“It’s better,” Spike swore, and dropped a kiss on her inner thigh. “*Christ*, is it better.”

“Not that *before* was bad,” she added in a hurry.

“*Before* was bloody brilliant. The best it’s ever been. You were an animal.”

“You told me that once and I didn’t love it.” Buffy raised herself on her elbows to meet his eyes, her own brimming with warmth. “Will it... I know what you’re going to say, but I’m going to ask anyway. Do you think it’ll still be good if I’m not an animal anymore?”

He nodded at the door that, though it was still standing, was sporting at least one crack that hadn’t been there before. “Think we learned already you’re still an animal.”

If possible, her cheeks went even darker. “That was... Yeah. But it’s different.”

“Yeah, and different’s not bad, baby.” Spike pressed another kiss to her thigh, then moved higher. Took a quick detour between her legs—couldn’t help himself, with her spread out there—and swiped his tongue along the seam of her pussy and over her

clit again before continuing through the soft curls at her mound, up over her belly, which tensed and trembled under his lips. "Told you," he murmured at her bellybutton, "it's better. It's all better. Because of you."

She breathed a shaky breath. "Me?"

"Maybe the soul a bit, too. Can't say for sure." Spike trailed his lips along her belly, along the underside of one breast then another. "Just feel it, is all. I loved you before. Love you now. None of that has changed."

She inhaled sharply at the words, and he met her eyes once more. They had gone large and round.

"Not expecting you to say it," he assured her quickly. "Even if... Even if you did before. Like you said on the drive. Dunno if I'd believe it, either, if you said it now. Might be what convinced me I'd gone completely toys in the attic. Could never have imagined this was where I'd end the night."

"Spike—"

"But that's the difference, love. All that's changed, far as I can see, is the soul and...you want me."

"Wanting you was never the problem."

He smirked. "Is that right? Did a fair amount of protestin' there at the start."

"Yeah, and you knew why."

He sobered at that and nodded, then rose completely to his feet. "I knew why," he said, gripping the waistband of his jeans. Seemed barmy, but they hadn't done more than free his prick before so the bloody things were most of the way on. "Still want me in that bed?"

"What the hell do you think?"

Spike grinned and set to shoving the jeans down his legs, fussing with his boots before kicking them off into whatever recesses of the room. And before he could fully comprehend it, it wasn't just her naked with him but them naked together, him standing there, watching her as she appraised him, as her gaze roamed over the body she already knew by bloody heart, and with hunger he'd didn't think anyone had ever had for him. She licked her lips the lower her eyes went, then sat up again and wrapped her deceptively strong hand around his shaft. Making him inhale sharply. Making him moan the next second when she pumped him down to the base and up again. Running her thumb over the head, spreading the beads of precum that had gathered there, then down again.

"Slayer..."

"Vampire," she replied, meeting his eyes.

"You know what's gonna happen if you keep that up."

She grinned, and he experienced another one of those surges of absolute bliss, one so counter to everything in his existence it almost felt like it should belong to someone else. But it didn't. That look, that grin, was for him and him alone.

"I have an idea, yes," Buffy replied, tightening her grip around his cock. "Wouldn't be the worst thing in the world."

"Next time. Need to be inside you now."

"Dunno how you're gonna do that by standing there."

Spike worked his throat. It was almost impossible to think with Buffy stroking his prick and he had a feeling she knew it. But as much as he was teetering, he had still one thought, and that thought was not to crawl over her. Not to do anything that might wreck the moment. She needed to tell him. "Where do you want me?"

"Just here with me." She paused, leaning forward to brush a tender kiss along the tip of his cock and holding his gaze the entire time. Then she released him and started to move, shuffling over on the bed to make space for him, thank god, because he hadn't wanted to ask. Hadn't wanted to bring more of that awful memory into this moment than it was already.

And maybe she sensed that too, for the second he was beside her, she turned to him, cupped his face and guided his mouth to hers. Then he wasn't thinking at all anymore, just lost in her. In this new way she kissed him, in how she touched him. Gently rolling him back until he was flush against the mattress, blinking up at the ceiling, at her, and she was astride him, her hand back around his cock, stroking at a rhythm, and still regarding him with that look on her face that was too good to be something he'd inspired.

"Be here with me," Buffy said again, lifting herself over his cock. He watched as she teased him along her folds, wetting him with her juices. Pressing him against her clit and gasping when he gasped, throwing her head back and rubbing herself along him. Torturing them both now, but it was sweet torture. Almost too sweet to end, and he cried out when she dragged him back down her slit, inhaled, and then, *fuck*, he was there. Notched at her opening and she was sinking onto him, her pussy hot and familiar and *Buffy*, Buffy as she could never be in his fantasies or memories, for the reality that was Buffy was too sweet to try to capture in dreams. He watched, somewhat dumbstruck, as she slid down his length, as he watched himself disappear inside of her, and then she was moving, rocking, squeezing around him, and Spike was gone. Lost to her. How she looked astride him, bright and warm and her eyes on him still. Not blinking away. Not closed. Not picturing herself somewhere else or with someone else. Not wanting to be anywhere but where she was—in the bed she'd invited him to because she wanted him. Somehow, despite everything, Buffy wanted him, and that want was as honest and pure as everything else about her.

How the fuck had he landed here?

"Right here, Spike," Buffy whispered as though she had heard the thought, steadying a hand on his chest. His own had found her hips, and he wasn't sure if he was guiding her or just holding on. She was so warm under his fingers, around his cock—even hotter than he remembered, and he watched, shaking, as she found the flow she wanted. The quick, exploratory movements evening out, and then she was just riding him in the rhythm that was hers, the strokes gaining speed but not only that, as though she were afraid to disrupt the connection or the moment by going harder, as though sensing along with him that it was fragile. The air was thick with the sounds of them, flesh wetly coming together, and she was still looking at him. Moving over him like a goddess, but somehow—he realized—too far away, even if he could see where they were connected. Could feel her around him, hot and wet and velvety and squeezing him in that way that had always seemed heightened when he

wasn't inside of her and then revolutionary when he was. And he had to touch more of her, experience more of her, so he hauled himself up so she was in his lap, her nipples grazing the skin of his chest, and slid a hand around to grip her arse as the other cupped the back of her head, and the only thing better than being inside of Buffy was being inside of her while she loved him with her mouth. For that was what it felt like, he realized. Even if she never said the words, never felt them, even if he'd lost that the way he'd lost so much else, Buffy kissed him like she loved him. With desire and need that he had never experienced thrown back on him. She wrapped her arms around his neck to hold him to her, teasing and nipping and licking and chasing, always chasing. His mouth, his tongue, feeding him something beyond hunger, and when she finally broke away for air, tipping her head back, it was with a mewl of complaint.

"Spike," she breathed as he scaled his lips down her throat, again over where he'd bitten her. Felt her go tense when he raked his teeth over the mark before moaning low, coming down harder on his cock, growing impossibly wetter around him. "Oh god. Tell me you're here."

"I'm here, love," he said at once, pressing kisses along her collarbone, pulling sweat-damp hair over her shoulder. Then lower so he could tease her nipples again, relish the way she jolted at the touch. Her hand at the back of his head once more, holding him to her. And moving with deepened urgency, now damn near bouncing in his lap, on his cock, and her heartbeat was so strong, thumping just inches away. And he had to feel her let go, because only then could he follow, and he wasn't sure how much longer he could last.

Somehow, someway, through all the bloody fumbles and wrong calls he'd made, the lashing out and the protecting himself, and the hurt he'd caused without meaning to, he was here. Buffy in his arms, all around him, sweaty and panting and making those sounds like she was about to burst—and maybe she was because it was all he could do to hold on, all while his brain kept blasting the reminder that he'd never had her like this. Right with him, just with him, her thoughts and wants along with her hands and eyes and mouth and cunt. He was wrapped in her and she in him, and if he started bawling like a sodding infant, there wouldn't be a damn thing for it.

"Buffy..." he breathed against her neck, slipping a hand between them, growling and groaning and more in need than he had ever been in the whole of his existence. And then he found her clit and stroked—not hard but enough, for she tensed, squeezed, and cried out, crashed over him harder. And he kept stroking, and she kept whimpering, kept tightening, and then at last she took his face between her hands and kissed him as her pussy spasmed around his cock, clenching him as no one else had or could, and he followed. Held her to him, her sweat-slickened breasts pressed to his chest, her hands still at his face, and he spilled inside of her with a breath that was half-gasp, half-prayer.

He had no idea how much time had passed before he opened his eyes, and that was all right, because time didn't matter where they were. He was on his back again, and she was against his chest, breathing hard, letting him feel the cadence of her

racing heart. And he was still inside her, relishing the afterjolts of her orgasm as her body calmed. Lying new in a different world.

“Tell me,” she said a moment later, her voice pleasantly scratchy.

“Mmm.” He pressed his lips to her damp forehead. “Tell you what?”

“That you love me. Still.”

The tears came again and this time there was no stopping them. Over the course of his life, he’d experienced no shortage of miserable nights and only a handful of ones sweet enough to ever call among the best. Except now he’d realized he’d been kidding himself or thinking too small because the memories of those were pale specks now, washed out by the supernova that was this.

“I love you, Buffy,” he told her. “Christ, I never stopped. Not for a second.”

She lifted her head enough to catch his eyes, then smiled that soul-stealing smile and kissed him.

STARS FADING BUT I LINGER ON, DEAR

SHE'D OVERSLEPT.

Granted, she'd known she would. By the time she and Spike had finally stopped talking, touching, kissing, and just reveling in the new state of being they had entered together, the pitch black of nighttime that had been the eternal backdrop in LA had started to lighten. And thank god she'd still been awake then, for she'd realized that she'd left the blinds open, and aside from having perhaps given the neighbors quite the show, open blinds were hazardous for the health of a certain vampire. Try telling him that, though. Spike had moved to draw her back the second she'd started to wiggle away, claiming the sun was hours off and there was plenty of time.

"I can barely keep my eyes open now. Sorry if I don't want to risk it," she'd retorted, swatting at his hands and rising to her feet. Feeling his gaze follow her, particularly her backside, as she went about vampire-proofing the room. Buffy had been naked in front of Spike more times than she could count, but never before had she been this self-conscious about it. Not that it made sense or he'd ever given her reason to be self-conscious, but that was simply the way of things. Before, even with her twisted-up feelings, she'd never thought of their arrangement as anything other than, well, an arrangement. Not a relationship. He hadn't been her boyfriend. He'd just been Spike.

Everything was different now, though. This whole *trying* thing, whatever it ended up looking like, made her every move and thought feel significant. So when she'd returned to the bed, to the vampire she'd left there—now studying her with that expression of mingled wonder and hunger on his face—the urge to blush and cover herself up had been very strong.

"You didn't have to watch me," she'd said.

He'd arched an eyebrow and, rather predictably, raked his gaze down her body. Lingering for a second on her breasts, upon which she was pretty sure she was developing a hickey, and then lower. "Beg to differ," he'd replied in a low rumble. "Didn't appreciate this view enough when I had it."

"I remember things differently."

"You didn't like me doin' it, then."

"Not a huge fan now," she'd replied, again swatting at him so he'd move over and let her slide back under the blanket.

"Aren't you the most adorable little liar?" he'd replied with a dazed grin before tugging her back against him and immediately setting his hands in motion. That was something new—something she didn't remember from before, at least—the fact that Spike couldn't seem to stop caressing her in some way. Running his fingers along her arm, pulling her hair over her shoulder, skimming over her hip, drawing mindless patterns against her stomach. It was like he was afraid she might slip away if he stopped, though it felt nice so she'd decided not to call attention to it lest he become self-conscious too. Even if Spike self-conscious made way less sense than Buffy self-conscious, at least in her head.

Still, she saw where it came from and understood why it was there. As much as they knew each other, or had known each other, what they were doing now was unlike anything she'd ever tried before with anyone. Leaping into a relationship while knowing some of the potential risks and pitfalls—but at the same time, it felt like they had already been through the worst. That if they could survive last year together and still want this, if he could still love her after everything she'd done to him and everything he'd done to himself, and if she could still—well, *love* was not a word she was prepared to use right now, but she could see it, maybe, sometime down the line—then the potential future didn't seem nearly as scary as the ground they had already trodden. Which was probably all kinds of naïve, and maybe it had been dumb on both their parts to leap straight to sex, but Buffy couldn't say she was sorry.

Even if she *had* overslept by a lot.

The arm draped around her middle tightened suddenly, bringing her back to the marvelously new *now*. "Know you're awake, love," Spike rumbled into her ear, once again gathering the mess that was her hair to drag it over her shoulder, leaving her neck nice and exposed. "Felt your heartbeat change."

"Anyone ever tell you that's creepy?"

"You mighta mentioned it a time or two." He squeezed her to him before his grip went slack, and though he didn't pull away, Buffy had the confusing sense that he was fighting the urge. She was about to call him on it when his voice came again, lower and more vulnerable than before. "No regrets, right?"

The question made her heart skip and her stomach twist. "I can promise I'm thinking a number of things, and none involve regret," she said, reaching behind her and taking his wrist, wanting his arm back around her. "Don't go away."

There was a beat—not a long one, but enough that she felt the tension fading from the room as quickly as it had swelled. "Nowhere I wanna go," Spike assured her,

and dropped a kiss on her neck. Just above the place where, not too long ago, he'd sliced into her with his fangs. He seemed particularly fond of that mark—fond enough to make a slayer think things she probably shouldn't, but hell, that ship had left the harbor a long time ago. No turning back now. "Just..." he continued, speaking into her skin. "Fella's got to ask, doesn't he?"

"Hopefully not *every* morning after. Kinda puts a damper on the mood."

"Hmm. Wouldn't want that." She felt his mouth curve into what was unmistakably a smile as the hand at her belly began a teasing path south. Buffy sucked in a breath and watched its progression under the blanket, the rise and fall of fabric until his fingers were slipping over her pussy. She let out a sound that sounded wanton even to her ears, let her legs fall open even as the rest of her tried to chime in with the reminder that she should really be getting up right about now and doing grown-up things that were not, sadly, *this* grown-up thing. But god, it had been so long, and everything he did felt so good. Somehow even better than those hours spent in his crypt, making the walls shake. She'd felt it last night—or earlier this morning, or whatever—and she felt it now. So strange how something she'd done so many times could feel so different.

But that didn't mean she should lounge the day away in bed.

"Spike," she said, trying to go for authoritative but there was a bit too much whimper in her voice to be believable. "I need to shower."

To her chagrin, he pulled away almost immediately, and her heart sank a little. Spike in the past would have grinned and asked, all sotto voce, "Who's stopping you?" and it would've been a delicious push-and-pull that ended only when her legs were over his shoulders. She would be annoyed but very satisfied, and actually not annoyed, except maybe with herself.

For all the bad of their past relationship, she'd actually liked that. Probably too much.

"This is not your cue to stop," Buffy told him in a harsh whisper now. "This is your cue to convince me to stay."

There was a brief pause, then his mouth was at her ear again. "Is that right?"

"I'll say something if I really want you to stop. Something like...pinochle."

And, *yes*, there was the chuckle. The one that rumbled pleasantly against her back. "Pinochle?"

"Guaranteed to not say that during sex just randomly," she agreed, then gave another sharp inhale and rolled her hips forward without meaning to—or maybe really meaning to—and he obliged, dancing his fingers where she was already wet (thanks, body) before parting her folds to caress her clit. She jolted and felt more than heard his answering laugh.

And god, she wanted to feel more. Really wanted. But she also hadn't been kidding when she'd mentioned needing a shower.

"Really, I should go," she said, then winced at herself. "Sorry."

Spike went tense all over again. "What's that, love? Sorry for what?"

"Being all mixed-signal Buffy this morning."

He didn't make a sound but she could still somehow hear it when he relaxed once more. "Became fluent in that a long bloody time ago," he replied. "But now that you mention it, I didn't hear you say *pinocle*, and you and I never had a proper mornin' together, did we?"

"Did we have improper mornings? That sounds possible." But he had a point. They hadn't ever cuddled or woken up together—well, not intentionally. The few times she'd fallen asleep after sex had been completely accidental. A byproduct of every muscle in her body being all noodly. And she'd made a point to not hang around long after waking, too. Not wanting him to get the wrong—or right—idea, and not wanting to sit still long enough for feelings to catch up.

There *was* a lot to do. First, she needed to figure out what time it was and start making calls, as there was little hope of her actually getting to the studio today. The fact that she'd been planning on it had been more to keep busy, keep pushing, give her overloaded brain something else to do while she worked through all her complicated feelings. Also, she wasn't even sure what day it was anymore. For all she knew, it was the weekend and therefore she had time to sleep and stretch and have morning sex with the vampire who was her ex but had somehow never been her boyfriend. Until now.

And damn, there was a thought. *Boyfriend*. Spike was her *boyfriend*.

Before she could help herself, an almost hysterical giggle tore through her lips. Light and airy and, best of all, genuine. It surprised her but not nearly as much as it did Spike, who stilled the movement of his hand between her legs. Then his mouth was at her ear once more and he asked in a low, rumble voice, "Somethin' funny, Slayer?"

"No. I just... I realized something."

"Mmm." He sucked her earlobe between his teeth and gave it a small tug—the kind that zinged right to her clit, which he again resumed teasing. "What's that?"

"That Spike is my boyfriend."

He hesitated once more, but this time there was nothing heavy behind it. None of the tension, at least. Rather, he seemed to melt into her, his firm lines and planes going soft—all of him going soft except for the one part that struggled to be anything but hard. He pressed a kiss to the hollow of her throat, the hand at her pussy suddenly gliding over her hip, lower, and she might have complained had he not slid that hand under her knee to part her legs. And if she was being reckless, she didn't care. After everything in LA and last night, she deserved a little more time. The morning after she'd never let herself have with him.

"Your boyfriend?" he said, then his cock was at her opening, nudging through her folds, and she moaned and he sighed, and he teased himself and her for a few long, torturous seconds until finally pressing the head inside her, then more than the head, then all of him. Spreading her open and filling her up at the same time, and Buffy seized his hand and squeezed, needing something to hold onto and needing that something to be him.

"Christ, you feel good," Spike mostly gasped into her hair, and she tightened her grip on his hand as he began to move in tender, languid strokes. For as much hard

fucking as they had done in the past, they'd only done slow a handful of times, and never like this. Slow had just been a pace, not a feeling. Or maybe she'd just never wanted to feel the feeling along with it. How Spike had wanted to love her and she hadn't wanted to be loved. But god, she did now, and she felt it. In the moves, his voice, in the fingers entwined with hers, the mouth he kept busy at her neck, licking and kissing and nibbling, and his voice there, always there. If not speaking then rumbling low, nonsensical sounds that somehow made all the sense in the world. "Used to think I'd imagined it," he whispered. "How good you feel. How hot you are."

And she'd missed this, too. The things he'd tell her when he let himself go. The things he brought out in her—all that she used to fear but didn't anymore because it was finally right.

"Tell me," Buffy said, stretching her leg back over his and moaning when he slid in deeper. The bed was beginning to whine with their movements, the air around them growing thick with the sound and smell of them together. The slick press of his cock into her again and again, wet and illicit. The sunlight trying to stream in through the slits in the blinds, the sun she hadn't seen in such a long time, proving at last that they had finally brought this thing of theirs out into the daytime. Out where it had never been before.

Though not because he hadn't tried. Because she hadn't let it.

It felt so good to let it.

"What do you want to hear, pet?"

And then it wasn't what she wanted to hear, but what she wanted to see. Buffy gave his hand a parting squeeze before releasing it and sliding her own between them. Catching his cock before he could plunge back into her and squeezing there too.

"Fuck." Spike groaned and rolled his hips. "What are you—"

"Lay back," she said, twisting in his arms. Their eyes met for the first time that morning, and he kissed her before she could think things like *morning breath* and *need a shower*, as the time for both of those considerations had already come and gone. And if Spike had any complaints, he would never let her know. Just kept kissing her, chasing her lips with his whenever she tried to pull away, until finally she laughed and maybe the sound startled him, for he jerked back and that was her chance. Buffy twisted, gently shoved at his chest until he went, rolling all the way onto his back.

"What are you doin'?" Spike blinked up at her in clear befuddlement that couldn't help but make her grin. Buffy stole another kiss from his lips, then his cheek, his chin, and either he forgot he'd asked her a question or no longer cared, for he tipped his head back and didn't ask again. Just shook slightly as her mouth traveled down the length of his throat, her hands exploring all those hard muscles she'd been admiring before, only now as she never had, for she *never had*. She'd never skated her teeth over his chest just to see what he would do, or done more than play with his nipples on a whim—on a crash course to getting to the good stuff. Never had she considered any of this the good stuff.

"Fuck, Buffy..." Spike shifted—not much but enough that she couldn't miss his

cock straining in a delicate arc toward the ceiling. Having him here in this bed was surreal after this last year, but a good kind of surreal. There was stuff waiting on the other side—stuff she didn't want to think about—but for now, she had this. Edging down the mattress along one of his well-muscled legs. Exploring the dips and curves and angles that made up her boyfriend. Trailing her mouth over pale skin, around his belly button, grinning when he wove his fingers through her hair, when he peeked his eyes open long enough to glance down the length of his own body as though he needed the reassurance that she was really there. Then over his hip bone, feeling him jolt and gasp again, then *arch* and she knew what he wanted because it was what she wanted too, only she wanted it on her terms.

"Such a hot mouth," he said, lightly stroking along her scalp—not seizing her there, just holding. "Feel so good, baby, but you're bloody killing me."

"Mmm," Buffy replied as she settled between his legs. "Wouldn't want that, now would we?"

He opened his eyes again and groaned low and deep when he saw her lying there. "Buffy..."

"That's my name." She lowered her face to his testicles and traced the curve of one with her tongue. Spike hissed and briefly tightened his grip on her hair before relaxing, then sighed when she began licking her way along the underside of his cock, and god, that was an experience. He was still wet from having been inside her, still a bit warm too, and that made her heart jump. Made her need to press her legs together to stave off a rush of need she hadn't expected. There was just something about tasting herself on Spike's cock that made her a little crazy.

"Fuck," he said again, reaching for her with both hands. Cupping her face and watching hotly as her mouth descended upon him. As she rolled back his foreskin with her tongue and treated the head of his cock with a long, swirly lick. Still, he didn't guide, didn't try to force her anywhere, though she felt him starting to tremble, felt that perhaps he was losing control, and she liked that too. Enough to flirt with it—with him. Keep her eyes on him as she took his cock as far into her mouth as she could, then hollowing out her cheeks as she pulled back. And continued like that for what was probably no more than a handful of seconds but seemed much longer, tucking her lips around her teeth when she reached the tip, and trembling when he moaned and roaming her tongue to swallow him again.

"Buffy." Spike's eyes were bright, his nostrils flared, his hair delightfully mussed. Altogether, he looked downright edible. "Buffy...come here."

She ignored him, gripping him around the base and squeezing that squeeze that was almost too much but also not quite, and she knew because he'd shown her once. A lifetime ago. A different Buffy ago. And then he was swearing and bucking and she kept moving, kept pulling on his cock with her mouth, kept doing the swirly tongue thing she knew he liked. Exploring the dip in the head, licking under the foreskin, and Spike's breath rattled when he drew it in and she loved that—loved that it rattled, loved that he breathed, until finally he barked what she was pretty sure was supposed to be a warning before throwing his head back and spilling down her throat.

Buffy kept her eyes on him, drinking him in. The slight curve of his mouth in a lazy smile, the slow bob of his Adam's apple when he swallowed, and how utterly and completely relaxed he looked, when *relaxed* was something she hadn't truly seen him in a long time. Not even before, when they had torn at each other with hunger and abandon. Spike had always been on alert, ready to leap to the offense or the defense or wherever he sensed she needed him to be—wherever role she needed him to fill. And maybe that wasn't fair to herself, but it was how she remembered it, and everything she wanted what they had now not to be.

At length, Spike peeked an eye open. "Pleased with yourself, are you?"

"Should I not be?" Buffy brushed a soft kiss against the crown of his cock, which was already beginning to swell, thank god, because aside from having been a lot of fun, watching him like that had intensified the ache between her legs and she wasn't ready to start being responsible just yet. She wanted and needed, and it was just a little while longer. Just a few more minutes. That didn't seem too much to ask. At least she hoped not, for by the time she'd crawled back to straddle him, his cock was curving toward the ceiling once more. "I didn't do that often before and I had the urge," she said, sliding forward so he was flush against her, cool and thick where she was wet and throbbing. "So sue me."

Spike snorted but the grin didn't go anywhere. "The urge? This is the same one that snagged you before we left town?"

"It might have been a cousin of that, yes."

"Sounds like we have an epidemic on our hands. Fortunately, Slayer, anytime you fancy droppin' to your knees—"

She slapped his chest which just made him grin wider, and the sight filled her with a rush of something as light as it was large. And it was a good feeling, a *happy* feeling, and for that reason alone a feeling that would also scare the crap out of her once she had time to analyze but not now. "Don't make me regret telling you that," she said, sliding along his cock until he was again where she wanted him. "I will make you pay."

"God, I hope so." Spike's hands were at her hips again, his eyes wide and greedy, fixed hungrily at the sight of her slowly impaling herself on him. Then he sighed, worked his throat and raised his gaze to her face once more. "You're glorious," he whispered. "So bloody glorious."

Buffy steadied herself against his chest as she began to move, wanting to see it again. That blissful look that overcame his face, that lazy half-smile. It wouldn't be over after this, but it would be different—more complicated than it was right now, and after so much complication, she needed *right now* a lot. Where there was nothing to consider except how beautiful he was when he came, or how good he felt, how right, how she loved the way he sucked in his cheeks and firmed his jaw, the feel of his hands on her hips then up to cup her breasts, playing with her nipples just enough to make her grind down hard, and another smile, lascivious this time, before he dropped to grip her ass. Not just gripping, guiding her, encouraging her to bounce harder on his cock, filling the air again with the wet, desperate sound of them. The only thing that would have made the moment better was a litany of those things he

used to tell her. Not just how beautiful she was, but how he loved the way she fucked him. How good she felt, how wet, how she squeezed him just right, how he'd never been with anyone he loved fucking more than he loved fucking her. How he hadn't known what he was missing until she'd come along, and all kinds of other whispers and praises that she had pretended to ignore but had secretly relished. Only not so secretly, she thought, because Spike had always felt her—always known when she needed just a little more encouragement before shattering.

It had been more than the words, too. She'd known he was saying all that because he couldn't say he loved her. Not freely, at least, because there had been no surer way to spook her than tell her exactly what she wanted to hear. He'd just found other ways, and even though she'd known exactly what he was doing, she'd been starved for his love any way she could steal it without losing face.

"Buffy," Spike said now, his voice just barely above the wet smack of their bodies. "Stay with me, love."

She nodded, forcing those thoughts back where they belonged. "I'm here."

"I'm here too." He squeezed her ass then let one of his hands slip back over her hip. And then, *yes*, his fingers were there. Just there, so she could tease her clit on each downstroke, softly at first, then mounting until all the individual sparks running rampant under her skin began to coalesce and build. And she dug her fingers into his chest to anchor herself there, and he growled a growl that wasn't human or vampire but something in between. She crashed over him, hungry, and took his mouth before her own could betray her, and he wrapped his arms around her, holding her to him as she trembled and he tensed and then she was coming hard, shaking and gasping and Spike followed, fisting the hair at the back of her head and crying out against her lips. A soft, fragile sound that somehow made that earlier happier feeling contract almost painfully in ways she didn't really understand. Only maybe she did. Maybe.

Buffy went boneless, panting and sweaty and pleasantly achy. She listened to him breathe in time with her, his arms still around her, and that question remained. That maybe.

No rush in getting to it, she supposed. It would be there when she was ready to know the answer.

Until then, if she was very lucky, she could hold onto this.



IT WAS A VERY different Buffy that made her way down the stairs that morning, especially compared to the one that had trudged up them the night before. That Buffy didn't seem distant, everything still fresh and new and very fragile because of it, but far enough away that the confusion and pain and mounting mess of emotion that had spilled out of her felt safely out of reach. If not for the bruises on her knuckles from where she'd nearly pummeled Gray through the cemetery ground, she might have convinced herself the entire episode had been several days in the past rather than just a few hours.

It hadn't been easy getting out of bed, even less so climbing into the shower despite however much she'd needed it. For a brief flash, she'd debated letting Spike in there with her, but a glance around the bathroom had her stomach tightening in a way that wasn't really tied to the memory but rather the memory of the memory. She'd been in the bathroom with him before—done the whole brave speech about how she didn't want to associate that space with that horrible night—and while she'd meant every word, there was a huge difference between being in the room with him and *being* in the room with him. Hopefully, that was something they could work on together if the whole *trying* thing lasted. Nothing either one of them needed to be forced to do.

Spike had understood. Hadn't done much more than nod, though his mind had been hard at work behind those eyes, and she was grateful for that—that she hadn't had to explain.

It also hadn't stopped him from blurting, "I love you," before she'd left the bedroom. Like his love could act as a talisman.

Buffy had offered a smile and left a soft kiss on his lips, all the things she was feeling, those in harmony and those in conflict, pressing against her chest until she thought she would explode. But she hadn't exploded. She'd let him give her that talisman and spent her time under the spray thinking about a future that might actually be possible if they lived long enough to get to it.

Now, he was the one washing off, and Buffy was preparing to face the music. All the music. She found Willow and Dawn at the dining room table, nursing coffees and talking in hushed tones, the bags from their motel stay thrown casually in the doorway. No telling how long they had been home, though Dawn wore a smug smirk that was a little too knowing for Buffy to convince herself they hadn't heard anything incriminating.

"Hey. Just get in?" she asked, going for casual as she helped herself into one of the chairs. Then immediately wishing she hadn't, for she could use some of that coffee.

"Yeah, we only just got here," Willow said quickly, though the way her face was coloring told a different story. One oddly reminiscent of those days in high school when all the experience she had was that she got from living vicariously through Buffy's love life. And just as it hadn't then, her tone was fooling no one.

Buffy slumped in her seat with a sigh. "All right. Let's hear it."

"Hear what?" Willow exchanged a significant look with Dawn. "We certainly didn't hear anything."

"Yeah. No sex noises that will require many years of therapy coming out of your bedroom at all," Dawn added before lifting her coffee mug to her lips.

"Except that," Willow muttered.

"And," her sister went on, all smugness, "I guess the bad mood you guys were in when you left, you found a way to make up?"

Buffy narrowed her eyes but didn't take the bait. It wasn't fair that she face this on her own. Once Spike had joined them, he could field the more sensitive questions.

"It doesn't matter what we heard," Willow assured her a moment later, as though

the silence was too much for her. "As long as you're happy. I guess that's... You haven't sounded happy on the phone when we've talked. Was that because of Spike?"

Or maybe she couldn't avoid the more sensitive questions. Buffy sighed and shifted in her seat. "Well, LA was just a barrel of laughs all around. But we got the job done. And...yeah. While I was discovering all kinds of fun stuff about Angel, I also learned something about Spike that threw me." She looked directly at her sister. "More than threw me. It... It made me question myself a lot. Question him, too, and pretty much everything that I'd ever thought about vampires and..."

"Spike has a soul," Dawn interjected with all the care and tact becoming of a teenage girl, and slumped back against her seat. "I thought he might tell you on the trip."

"He didn't exactly get that far," Buffy said, and this time there was no keeping the edge out of her voice. Enough that the knowing look on her sister's face immediately slackened into something more like confusion. "Angel knew, though. Or Angelus. The soulless version of Angel. He took one look at Spike and knew, and then the secret was out."

"Oh, damn," Dawn breathed. Horrified at last. "Buffy..."

"I'm sorry, Spike has a what?" Willow demanded, shaking her head and glancing between the two of them all rapid-fire. "He has a soul? How did that happen? Was he cursed? The spell I gave you should've just worked on Angel. Whoever did it must've really screwed—"

"It's not a curse," Buffy said calmly. "He... I still don't know how he did it. He didn't tell me that much." She glanced at Dawn, who quickly shook her head, and thank god. Call her childish, but this was a part of Spike that Buffy wanted for herself. At least at first—for now. That he hadn't told Dawn everything loosened some of the anger and hurt from earlier. "But he's had it for a while. Before he came back to town, actually. He went to win his soul last spring right after he took off."

"Oh goddess." Now Willow slumped back against her seat, her eyes rounding to almost comic proportions. "This whole time? He's had a soul this *whole* time? Why didn't we know?"

"Because Spike without a soul isn't like Angel without a soul. And he didn't want me to know."

"But Dawn knew?" Willow whipped to face Dawn. "*You* knew?"

Dawn didn't look remotely smug now. Rather, she regarded Buffy with apology-eyes before lowering them to the table. "I kinda forced it out of him a while back," she said. "I was really mad at him and, well, I might've been yelling a lot. I don't really remember. It wasn't like he wanted to tell me. I think he was just trying to calm me down and didn't know what else to say."

"So all this time, all I needed to do to get him to tell me was to yell at him," Buffy muttered, not able to suppress the hurt that stirred over the thought of everything that had been withheld. Or the reminder of just how much more she needed to be truly at peace with what and how it had happened. She breathed out, not wanting the nice, warm place she'd been in since opening her bedroom door last night to vanish. Needing to ride that high a bit longer before she had to crash back to earth.

But maybe that was part of it, too. Learning how to exist in these in-between spaces where she was nervous about this new twist on an old relationship, but excited too. Understanding that it would take more than just some incredible sex to get to a place where she felt like they had truly gotten past all the bad that had come before. And that she wanted to get there, she really did, with just as much intensity as she'd once wanted other things. Only this felt different. Like it might be built on something firm rather than half-hearted.

"Are you mad?" Dawn asked after a stretch, sounding small. "That I knew? That I didn't say anything?"

And there was one of many million-dollar questions. Buffy took her time answering, not *not* to make her sister sweat a bit in retribution but mostly to poke her own feelings and see where they were before trying to give them voice. "I'm not thrilled," she replied. "And I don't really get why you didn't tell me."

"I didn't want you to forgive him because he had a soul," Dawn said in a rush. "I thought it'd be too easy, you know? You were like that with Angel—"

"Yeah, I heard all this last night."

"And obviously you're not mad at him because of all the sex—"

Buffy held up a hand. "Spike and I still have things to work out. Learning that he has a soul... It's big. Bigger than big. And I'm still reeling about what it all means. But I think I understand why he didn't say anything. You are a different story," she told Dawn. "I know you thought it was the right call. And I don't know what I would've done if I'd learned any other way than the way I did. But it happened and it's done so there's really no need to dwell. Except that if you *ever* keep anything like that from me again, I don't care what your reason is, you're going to be so grounded you'll need my permission to attend graduation. Understand?"

Dawn looked like she understood—she looked like she understood she was getting off the hook. Some of the teenage attitude leaked back into her eyes, and her frown was suddenly a lot more smirky. "Yeah, you really want me to *not* graduate. That's the lesson I'm getting."

"Dawn."

She brought her hands up. "Okay. No more keeping things."

"That'd be a lot more convincing if it wasn't something I had to tell you"—Buffy nodded to Willow—"and *everyone* to do on a regular basis."

"Hey, I kept nothing secret!" Willow protested.

"This time," Buffy repeated, though now with a grin. Above them, the water from the shower switched off. Spike would be down soon, and then they would be in truly uncharted territory. Together but not in secret. In front of everyone, doing couply things and acting like...well, a couple. The thought was both invigorating and terrifying. But a good kind of terrifying. The sort that challenged rather than intimidated, even with all the unsettled stuff being all unsettly.

"Okay, enough about Spike and his soul," she said.

"According to who?" Willow demanded, raising her hand. "I still have so many questions."

"Yeah, well, get in line, but they'll have to wait anyway. The other thing that

happened last night was Gray.” Buffy looked at Dawn, whose expression had immediately gone stony though not before betraying a flash of fear. She thought her sister’s hands might have also jerked in the direction of her still-healing wound, but didn’t have time to ask. Didn’t have time to continue, either, for a somewhat lackluster but very real knock sounded at the door the next second and the atmosphere in the room immediately tensed.

Buffy frowned, looked over her shoulder toward the foyer. “I don’t suppose either of you called Xander to tell him we’re back in town and to be here for a Scooby meeting, did you?”

“No,” Willow answered. “I was going to call him this morning but...well, the noises in your room. I didn’t know when you’d surface. Also, I’m pretty sure he’d just come in.”

That was true. At the very least, he’d announce himself after knocking. “All right. Well...the protection spell you did on the house—”

“If it’s anyone with bad intentions, yeah, that spell should be going off. We’d all know.”

Okay, well, that was a little less with the nerve-racking. Buffy rose to her feet and started to make her way toward the door, her mind spinning. There were only so many people who would come knocking and most of them were either evil or out of the country, in hiding from the Council.

Unless they weren’t in hiding anymore. Unless they’d found a way to get back to California.

God, Giles. Could it be Giles? At last?

She hurried her steps at the thought, crossing into the foyer just as Spike completed his journey down the stairs, his hair still wet and a few water splotches darkening the fabric of his tee. Like he’d gotten dressed without completely toweling off.

“Thought I heard a knock a mo’ ago,” he said when their eyes met. “Expectin’ anyone?”

Buffy shook her head, her heart thundering in her ears. She could almost feel the hug Giles would give her. The relief she would ride at knowing he was all right, that he was there. She’d been so worried about other things these last few weeks, the weight of her worry for her watcher hadn’t really sunk in. But it did now and with it the certainty. Blind and rash, but very real all the same. “I think I know,” she said breathlessly, and quickly closed the remaining space between her and the door. “I think—”

“Slayer—”

But she was already twisting the knob, throwing the door back, and so ready to lurch forward into the arms of her watcher that it took a second for her brain to translate what she was seeing.

It wasn’t Giles. It was Gray. Gray, whose face was splotched with swollen patches of purple and yellow, and whose throat bore the bruised impressions of the hands that had tried to crush it just hours before. Were it not for her shock of white hair, Buffy might not have recognized her.

And seeing what she'd done made her glad she hadn't eaten breakfast.

Gray didn't seem angry, though. For a long beat, she didn't seem anything, least of all aware of where she was. But then that beat passed and she looked up, met Buffy's eyes best she could.

"We need to talk."

I GOT THIS FUCKING THORN IN MY SIDE

BUFFY OPTED NOT TO BRING OUT THE CHAINS. OR THE ROPE. SHE DID, HOWEVER, encourage Dawn to grab the crossbow so someone could keep it trained on their guest, who looked almost as wildly out of place sitting on the living room sofa as Spike had the first time she'd let him into the house. Unlike Spike, though, Gray wasn't looking around with mild curiosity. She wasn't looking around, period, just sitting with her knees pushed together and her hair falling into her face. It was at such odds with the arrogant blustering Buffy had gotten used to that she didn't know if she could trust it. Hence the crossbow.

"My trigger finger's all slippery," Dawn was saying from where she stood near the doorway into the foyer, running a hand over the crossbow like it was a beloved pet. "And the doctors did say that I should avoid heavy lifting because of the hole this bitch put in my stomach."

"Can take it for you, Nibblet," Spike replied, but Dawn twisted away from him before he could do so much as reach.

"I'm good with chancing it," she said coldly.

Buffy met Spike's eyes and shook her head at the look he gave her. Dawn was more than owed her bitterness, and if holding the crossbow made her feel more at ease with their unexpected houseguest, she was not going to take that from her.

Then, there was a knock at the front—a familiar one this time—before the door blew open and Xander rushed inside, followed closely by Anya. Which was weird, but in a way that Buffy didn't immediately clock until Xander made a point to put the room between them.

"Reinforcements are here," he said brightly, as though there was nothing odd about him showing up alongside his not-really-estranged-but-not-friendly-either ex-fiancée. "I would've stopped to bring the usual supplies but Will made it sound like

this was a thing not even doughnuts could fix.” He paused, looked first at Spike and sort of jerked his head in the Harris version of cordial acknowledgment before he realized there was someone unaccounted for in the room. “Whoa,” he said, taking a step back from the couch. “Are we just forgoing the formality of restraints? ‘Cause last time she was here—”

“She came to us,” Buffy said, hoping she sounded more certain than she felt. Her first instinct had been, naturally, to kick Gray’s ass back to the curb, but that was always her first instinct when it came to the bad guy showing up with what seemed like a truce. “Will’s warning spell didn’t trigger, either.”

“And we think that matters because...”

“Because no one with bad intent could have gotten close to the house without some siren thing going off,” Willow explained. “Kind of the whole purpose of the spell.”

Buffy nodded, holding onto that piece of information like a lifeline, trying not to think about the fact that they had never tested the spell and that Willow’s magic wasn’t always one-hundred percent reliable. She might be far from the girl who had accidentally gotten two mortal enemies engaged while trying to fix her own broken heart, but that didn’t make her immune to slip-ups.

Still, there was the fact that Gray was here at all. That she’d come in, walked listlessly to the living room and plopped down on the sofa without saying much of anything. Something was definitely going on, and trick or not, Buffy needed to know what. Even if knowing meant facing her demons.

“What happened to her face?” Xander asked in a loud stage whisper. “That must have been one angry bee.”

Buffy sucked in her cheeks and glanced down. “That was me,” she said. “I... Well, Spike and I got in late last night and I decided to go on a patrol. Was just all kinds of antsy.”

She met Spike’s gaze and he offered her a soft, encouraging smile—the sort only he could give, as it reflected back the tangled feelings she had about everything post-return to Sunnydale. All the stuff they hadn’t yet talked about but needed to, once there was time. The hard part might be behind them but there were other parts to consider. Or at the very least, more things she wanted to say to him and have said to her.

But not now.

“I found her whaling on Spike and...something in me snapped. I almost killed her,” she went on, forcing herself because she had to, even if her voice had gone rough. “Probably would have if he hadn’t pulled me off.”

“Well, that’s dumb,” Dawn said baldly. “I thought the idea was to get rid of her, keep her from hurting us.”

“You think that’s somethin’ big sis wants hangin’ over her head?” Spike asked, his own voice as soft as the smile he’d just given her. Not condemnatory or argumentative, just posing a question. “I’ve seen her when she thought she was responsible for someone’s death, pidge. It’d bloody destroy her.”

“Then maybe *I’m* dumb, but what the hell has the plan been, then?”

"I'm a bit lost on that too, actually," Xander said, staring at Gray. "We were all there when you said it, Buff. Not the kind of thing that's easy to forget, your best friend announcing she's gonna kill someone."

"Not even me this time," Willow added in a tone of forced whimsy that failed to meet its mark. Then she winced, wrapped her arms around herself and directed her attention to the floor.

"I think what Will was trying to say is, what changed?" Xander concluded.

It was a perfectly fair question. For weeks, Buffy had been gearing up to fight Gray and put her in the ground if necessary. That had been the reason behind the extra sparring sessions with Spike, the careful combing of Sunnydale to find the errant slayer, deactivating the chip in Spike's head. Every decision she'd made since the never-ending night at the hospital had been in service of getting to the other end of this thing with the Council. And she'd known, accepted, that bloodshed would inevitably be a part of it. Told herself she would find some way to make peace with whatever she had to do in order to ensure the survival of the people who mattered most to her. Even more radically, she'd believed it.

And should Gray leap into action now, rush at Dawn with a mind to kill, Buffy knew what she would do. She just didn't know what would happen in the after, and that was scary too. Resolutions were easy to make when emotions were out of control. Harder to keep after time had passed and dulled the fear and anger and pain. Not all the way, not hardly, but enough that the thought of taking a life was not something she could still regard with cold detachment.

Buffy was ready to tell Xander—all of them—this, or try. Explain as much of it as possible, but then there was movement from the sofa and Gray drew her face up.

"She would have," the other slayer said, the words coming out harsh. "Then that vampire pulled her off. Told her he would do it. But not last night."

Xander swung his head around to Spike. "What? Why? Wasn't that, like, the reason we did the thing with the chip?"

"It wasn't a fair fight," Buffy said. "He wanted it to be fair."

"Uhh, sorry. I know he's one of the gang and all now, but since when has Captain Peroxide ever given a damn about fair?"

Buffy fought a snicker. Really, for as much time as Xander had spent around Spike over the years, he really didn't know him all that well. "Big fight with a slayer, can't really call it a victory if the hard part's already done," she said, again meeting Spike's eyes. This would be the point to share about the soul, especially seeing as Xander and Anya were the only ones left to tell, but for some reason, she didn't want to blab about it in front of Gray. As reticent as Spike had been about sharing the news with anyone, and especially the things he'd said on the drive about how it was no one's business but his, who knew and when seemed like the sort of thing he should be in charge of.

Or Dawn would do what she'd done earlier and run her mouth without thinking. Or Willow would let it slip. Either way, Buffy would talk about it on his terms...or maybe when they were alone together, as she still had so many questions only he could answer.

Fortunately, there were more pressing issues at hand. So before Xander could follow up with a lot of questions or other Xander-esque observations, Buffy turned back to Gray, crossing her arms. "All right," she said. "You're here. You said you wanted to talk. Let's hear it."

For a moment, Gray just stared at her through those sunken, swollen eyes. And all things being equal, it *was* a bit wiggy to see her so spiritless. No spark. No sneer. No fight. As though Buffy had pounded that out of her the night before and left her with nothing.

Then the girl who was to be her assassin wet her chapped lips and said, "I don't know what I'm doing here."

"I can't help you there. All I did was open the door."

"I should have died last night."

"Is that what you want? You came here so one of us can finish you off?"

Gray shook her head. "You won't. And he won't either." She flicked her gaze in Spike's direction. "I suppose one of the others here might. The witch. She has blood on her hands. Or the vengeance demon."

"I don't kill people," Willow piped up at once, her voice shaking. "I know I was jokey a minute ago, but that's not me. Not anymore."

"I could be persuaded," Anya said, sounding a bit bored but in a way that Buffy had come to identify as a defense mechanism. Protecting herself by pretending she wasn't invested in what was going on around her. "Though it'd be easier if someone got vengeance and made a wish."

"No one is killing anyone," Buffy said tersely, holding up a hand. "Especially not in cold blood. That's not how we do things."

Gray just nodded, though she didn't look assured at all, rather more conflicted. Her mouth pulled into a frown and her eyes filled with uncertainty. "I stabbed your sister. I nearly killed her. I know that. They told me."

Buffy narrowed her eyes. She didn't need to look at her sister to know she'd gone white, or that she was shaking. "If you're trying to convince me to relax my rule about violence against hostages, you're doing a good job."

"Hostage. Is that what you call it when someone knocks on your door?"

"You tell me. What should I call you?"

Gray didn't answer, rather snapped her mouth closed. There was a brief silence in which she seemed to be contemplating something—probably wondering why exactly she was here in the first place—before she released the tension in her shoulders and nodded in Spike's direction. "I almost killed him, too. He would have been dust if you hadn't..."

"Do you have a point or are you just trying to piss me off?"

"He stopped you from killing me."

"Something I'm sure he's starting to regret."

"Vampires aren't supposed to do that."

"It's Spike. He does a lot of things vampires aren't supposed to do." And god, if that wasn't the understatement of the year. She somehow kept from snickering.

"*Spike* isn't supposed to do that," Gray shot back, a bit more heat in her voice. "They told me about him. He's a slayer killer. It's what he does."

"And you never once questioned why super slayer killer *Spike* has been working at my side for the past four years?"

"I know about the chip."

"And you know that the Council offered to remove the chip before you showed up," Buffy went on. She remembered as much from the night Dawn had been stabbed, along with a plethora of other things Gray had sneered. "Yet that didn't make you wonder even a little bit about the sort of people you were dealing with? They were willing to set what they thought was a monster free in order to kill me, but I'm the one that needs to be put down."

Gray sniffed and broke eye contact. "They made it sound necessary," she said, speaking with a quiet poise that made Buffy think of Kendra for the first time in a long time. Another girl raised on whatever the Council had force-fed her, her belief steadfast and unwavering. Everything in black and white.

If Kendra had lived, would she be here in Gray's stead? Would she have believed in the justness of the Council to the point where she would kill another slayer just because it was what she had been told to do?

Buffy wanted to think not—her memories of Kendra were warm and bittersweet—but she supposed she could never say never.

"They told me you had endangered the world," Gray said, jarring Buffy back to the present. "That you thought you were better than they were. That your life...your friends' lives, your monster's life, was all that mattered. That you sliced open another slayer to save a vampire. A vampire who you let slaughter half your town because you loved him too much to do what was necessary."

It was hardly the first time she'd heard this story told this way, but all the same, Buffy's spine stiffened and her muscles tensed as though preparing to launch into a fight. "I—"

"And that you killed a doctor because he threatened your sister."

Well, that was a new one. Enough so it threw Buffy right off her rant. "If you're talking about Ben, then that's a flat-out lie. I didn't kill him. Plus, he was sharing his body with a god that was so set on going home, she'd destroy the world to do it, so I'm not sure why the Council would want him alive in the first place, but I get the picture. Buffy bad. Buffy evil. Buffy out for herself. Are you saying you don't believe that anymore?"

There was another long pause. "I don't know what to believe. Except that what happened last night...shouldn't have happened. A vampire shouldn't have stopped you from doing what you wanted to do to me. A vampire shouldn't think about things like..." She glanced in *Spike's* direction as though to verify he was still standing there. "I don't know what that was. A trick, maybe. Maybe you're trying to confuse me."

Buffy tamped back her growing impatience. It seemed like Gray was dancing around the point to avoid getting close to it. "Confuse you to what end, exactly?"

"I don't know. They said you would do anything."

"The Council."

She nodded stiffly. "To keep from facing the consequences of all the damage you'd caused."

"And by *damage* you mean all those times she's saved the world," Xander said, his voice sharp. "You know, I really don't get you Council guys. Do you have any idea how much you owe Buffy, how dead you—*we*—would all be if she hadn't done exactly what she'd done each time it mattered? Will and me, we've been here from the start. Or, well, not the start, but as close to the start as you can get."

"Me, too," Dawn piped in.

"Dawn, too," he added, not looking away. "And yeah, there have been times when she's done things I didn't like. Didn't agree with. Like everything with Angel." He broke and met Buffy's gaze. "Suffice to say I was not the most supportive friend when all that was going on. But she still did what was needed—what she had to do." Xander firmed his jaw and turned back to Gray. "She killed him to save the world. She *died* to save the world. And for the most part, she did it without help from the goddamn Council. So spare me all this bullshit about the damage she's *caused*. If she's caused damage to the world, it's only because there was a world left to damage after she got done saving it."

Buffy was stunned into silence, her mind blank and her heart full. It had been a long time since... Well, just a long time. After a long beat, she blinked back the sting in her eyes and forced herself to focus on the task at hand. "Now would be the time to tell us exactly what you wanted to talk about," she said to Gray. "Because if it's just to parrot the same crap from the Council—"

"You'll do what, exactly?" Gray interjected, finally with some fire in those swollen eyes and her voice growing rougher from exertion. "Thought we'd established you're not going to kill me."

A familiar click, then a hard *thunk* as an arrow from Dawn's crossbow sliced into the sofa back just inches from Gray's head. And Gray exploded into action, scrambling back along the cushions until her ass collided with the arm of the couch and it was either anchor or topple over. She anchored, panting, and stared at the arrow for a few seconds before whipping her head around to gawk at Dawn.

She wasn't the only one. Buffy turned as well and didn't know whether to be unnerved or proud of the smirk she saw on her sister's face.

"Told you my finger was all slippery," Dawn said sweetly, resetting the crossbow without taking her eyes off their guest.

Buffy edged a step toward her. "Dawn..."

"All good. Just thought that she shouldn't think that she's getting out of here alive just because *you* won't kill her." Dawn brought the crossbow back up again. "My sister's been training me for almost a year now," she told Gray. "When I miss, it's on purpose."

"Or we could just go back to what we were doing before," Willow said, clapping loudly as though to distract Dawn away from casual homicide. "I should still have ingredients if we want to do another truth spell."

"Stop," Buffy snapped. "No spells and no killing slayers in the living room."

"Party pooper," Dawn muttered.

"We're *not* the Council," Buffy retorted hotly. "And she came to us, so maybe a little less with the hostility. She'll have no reason to trust us if we force her to—"

"Trust us?" Anya cut in. "Is that what you think is happening here?"

"Not if we don't give her a reason." Buffy waited to see if there would be any other objections, and though she could feel the tension in the room mounting, no one else volunteered an opinion. Good. She had no idea what Gray was doing here, but she did know what Gray was *not* doing, and that was anything threatening. There had to be a reason the Council's attack dog had shown up looking more lost than determined—why Willow's warning spell hadn't been triggered. And if Buffy was wrong, then she was really wrong and she would regret it forever, but she didn't think she was wrong.

She thought something had changed. Something significant. Something worth waiting out. So that was what she did. She waited. Watched. Let Gray look all she wanted—at her, at the others, at the arrow Dawn had embedded in the sofa, at Spike and everything else. For looking was how people began to see, and the wheels behind the girl's eyes were in clear motion. Absorbing rather than imposing, and maybe, if they were very lucky, clearing a little.

For some people, all it took was a nudge.

At length, Gray swallowed and centered her attention back on Buffy. "This is really you, isn't it?"

"This is me. Always has been."

Gray nodded, dropping her gaze—and, Buffy thought, maybe something else too. Maybe a lot.

"I told you I come from a Council family," she said after another stretch of silence. "We believed... We *all* believed I was supposed to be Called. But it never came. And eventually, I was too old for it. I wasn't lying when I said I'd looked up to you. I did. For a long time. Even after you quit the Council, I thought you were just... the coolest. You died and that wasn't enough to kill you. That blew my mind. I even wondered if I might get to work alongside you when Kendra died. But then Faith got it and that sucked, because I was sure that was the last chance. And it was. The Council tried to kill her, too, but gave up once she turned herself in. They didn't need her, anyway, what with you around. And there went my shot."

Buffy pressed her lips together and shifted her weight between her feet. It was something else, listening to someone speak wistfully about the death that hadn't been. Every natural instinct pushed at her to say something—snap—but the learned instincts, the ones she'd forced herself to adopt over the last year, pushed back.

Not now. Not yet. The girl was still talking.

"It was last year when stuff began to change," Gray went on. "The Council was different. I started hearing more about everything you'd done wrong. The vampires you'd fucked. How you'd destroyed so many traditions that were there for a reason, didn't respect the Council or your duty."

"Just last year?" Buffy asked before she could help herself. "I fired the Council when I was in high school."

"Yeah, and I knew about that, but... It's hard to explain if you weren't there. I

wasn't even there. Not really. My father works for the Council and I'd hear stuff he told my mom about you but it wasn't...bad. It wasn't good, but it wasn't bad. And not often, either. You weren't really the focus of his department." Gray paused, then inhaled. "Then he was talking about you a lot. Every night, it seemed, and always about how much damage you had done. How lack of oversight had gone to your head and you thought your word was law. That's the thing you need to understand—it didn't happen all at once. It was slow. Started out with a little and before you knew it, Buffy Summers was the biggest problem the Council had ever faced and something needed to be done. And when they started discussing what to do about you, how to take back control of the Slayer line, my father asked me if I wanted to restore honor to the Council. What else was there to say?"

"I dunno, I can think of a few things," Willow muttered.

Buffy glanced at her friend, thought about saying something herself but nothing came to mind. In the end, she settled for an awkward, albeit grateful smile before turning back to Gray. "So you're here now. What do you expect us to do with this?"

"I'm trying to understand."

"Understand what?"

"How... How what I saw last night was even possible with what they've told me."

"Gee," Dawn drawled, "it seems maybe what you've been told is a lot of horse-shit." She was ready when Buffy aimed a disapproving guardian look in her direction and affected a challenging *what are you gonna do about it* glare in return.

"That's not the full of it, either, is it?" came Spike's voice from Buffy's right, drawing her attention back again. She felt him approach the way she always had, her slayer calling out to his vampire, reaching through the space that separated them to connect. "It's what it means, isn't it? The Slayer's not like they said she was."

Gray inhaled. "No. If it's not a trick."

"And you're puttin' it together that they wanted you to believe it. If it was as simple as just doin' what you were told, they wouldn't have needed to put a spin on it at all. No, these wankers meant for you to believe what they were sellin'." He shifted his attention to Buffy. "Goes back to what that tart told me when she made the offer. Can't declare open bloody war on you without reason and save face with the pissants who keep their coffers full. They need you to be hated. Classic wartime tactic." Spike held her gaze a moment longer then turned back to Gray. "And that's it, innit? You're pickin' up on it. Figurin' out that if these pillocks want others to believe Buffy's the Big Bad, it's for a bloody reason. Gives 'em the excuse they need for whatever comes next."

Gray flinched and turned her eyes to her lap once again but didn't argue, and everything inside Buffy seemed to plummet.

"What?" she barked. "What do they have planned?"

There was a long stretch of thick nothing—long enough that she became certain that was the end of the conversation. Gray had reached a wall and she wasn't sharing anymore. Her faith might have been shaken but she wasn't ready to deconvert in full. That was too much too fast, except Buffy couldn't afford to wait for the girl to be ready. If Spike was right and something else was coming—and she was sure he was—

then they needed to start preparing for war with the information they had, sparse as it was.

Then Gray started to talk again.

"They blamed me," she said, her voice once more hoarse, as though she had been freshly strangled. "When I was here last. You had me downstairs, and the witch performed her magic, and I couldn't hold back. I answered your questions. Told you about the staffs and the ritual. How they had Called me. And then I got out... I contacted them immediately. I was sure you were going to use every tool you had to find me and kill me for what I had done to your sister. They demanded to know everything, so I told them...and they told me I had failed in doing the one thing they needed me to do. So they sped up what they were doing, ordered me to stay indoors until they decided how to handle me."

"Handle?" Xander asked.

Anya snorted and, out of her periphery, Buffy saw her draw a line across her throat.

"At the very least, I thought they would protect me," Gray went on as though there had been no interruption. "You know, with magicks. But they didn't."

"What do you mean, they didn't?" Buffy demanded, furrowing her brow. The past three days notwithstanding, she had spent every night since Dawn had been discharged turning over stone after stone in her search for the missing slayer. There had been location spells, repeated visits to Willy's, multiple rounds through cemeteries—all while also trying to balance the training sessions she had with Spike and tending to her client list. The only explanation they had come up with was that the Council had used its resources to make sure Gray stayed off everyone's radar. Nothing else made any sense.

"I mean they said it was my fault and as their Slayer, I should be able to handle whatever you threw at me," Gray explained to her lap. "That if I died, they could start over with someone stronger. Someone who wouldn't disappoint them."

"We searched for you," Willow said, her voice also tight with confusion. "And it's not like location spells are advanced magic. I wouldn't have messed that up."

Gray nodded, still not lifting her head. "I got help. My own help. A demon told me about a place you can't find unless you're...otherworldly. It moves around town."

Buffy's blood ran cold. Last she'd checked, Rack was dead. Very dead. She glanced at Willow, not sure whether or not to be relieved at the color draining from her friend's face.

As though hearing her suddenly very loud thoughts, Anya cleared her throat. "It's not Rack, if that's what you're worried about."

Buffy turned—hell, everyone turned. Everyone except Dawn, who, though she was visibly shaken, kept her focus trained on Gray.

"And how would you know that?" Xander asked, strained.

"How do you think I know?" Anya retorted. "I'm a demon. I can feel these spots. And one of my vengeance gigs took me there at the start of summer. I answered the call because I thought they were seeking vengeance on Willow"—she waved a hand before anyone could shout another question at her—"and being that Willow had

destroyed my shop, I wasn't *not* interested in seeing how exactly I could put it together with some vengeance of my own. But no. The damn demon just wanted vengeance against Rack's replacement for dumping her ass after a night of magical merging, not the person who had created the necessity for a replacement in the first place."

"Rack has a replacement?" Willow asked hollowly. To her credit, she didn't seem either surprised or concerned that Anya had been interested in seeking vengeance against her. Buffy wasn't sure what exactly to make of that, but now was not the time to investigate.

"Of course he has a replacement." Anya rolled her eyes. "This is the Hellmouth. Rack's clientele didn't go anywhere. If anything, your little rampage drove up the need for magical protections from power-hungry practitioners. Not to mention those who wanted to see if they could do it themselves. Where there's demand, there's supply. Don't you know anything about business?"

If possible, Willow went paler. "There are demons trying to do what I did?"

"I am embarrassed on your behalf that you are surprised by this." Anya sighed and shifted her attention back to Buffy. "Rack's replacement is a warlock named Zephyr. And before you ask, no, I didn't grant the wish that would have killed him. In this town, it seemed more prudent to have a man like Zephyr in your debt than clear the way for someone new."

That was all very sensible. The Anya sort of sensible. Except the part where this was the first time Buffy was hearing any of this. "So this entire time, you knew that there was a place I hadn't looked for Gray—that *we* hadn't looked for Gray—and didn't say anything?"

Anya wrinkled her brow, her eyes filling with a sort of confusion that looked annoyingly genuine. "Why would I say anything?"

"Just a wild leap here, because we're friends?"

"And how was I supposed to know that?"

"Maybe all the time we spent putting your shop back together!"

Anya stared at her for a beat before shaking her head and giving a pronounced sniff. "Well, it's just polite to do that after you destroy it," she muttered, then cleared her throat. "You all thought that the Council was hiding her with magic anyway, so, I don't know why you're mad at me."

That was closer to a fair point, though it did little for Buffy's annoyance. Knowing there was a place she could have looked, even if she would have likely never ended up there, chafed a lot. With effort, she forced her attention back on Gray. "So you got some help from a dark magic dealer. That doesn't sound very Council-approved."

Gray pulled her lips back into a sneer. "It's not like I had a choice."

"Gee, what's that like?" Buffy held up a hand to stave off the response, which she imagined would be cutting, and stepped back. If they started taking verbal swings at each other, it wouldn't be long before those turned into actual swings and the opportunity to learn anything new would go up in flames. "Never mind. Why were you out last night if you were trying to be all low-profile girl? Or was that just bad timing?"

There was another one of those long pauses in which Gray seemed to weigh whether she was going to answer. "I thought maybe if... Maybe if I did it right, if I killed you, they'd let me back in. I could make up for having fucked up the last time. Then I saw your vampire and thought that—that was a start."

And Buffy knew the rest. "Okay, so that brings us up to speed. What do you want us to do with this?"

"What do you mean?"

"You show up, demand to talk because you're losing the faith. So you're here. We've talked. Now what?"

"I'm not losing—"

"Yes, you are. And you came to me with this for a reason. You know whatever the Council's planning is something I can stop. You wouldn't be here, telling me this, if you didn't want me to stop it." Buffy exhaled, her heart starting to pound in earnest. "Help me stop it."

Gray swallowed again, slower this time, like she was working something down her throat. But there wasn't any fight in her eyes now, and that was good. They had finally arrived at the heart of it—the crux. She might not have crossed the Rubicon yet but she had tested the water and knew there was no path but forward.

"I'm not supposed to know," she began a moment later, her voice thicker than before. "But my father was the one who found it. Discovered what it was. He told me. Just the other night. He's been checking in. Making sure I'm still alive."

"What did he find?" Buffy asked, trying not to betray her mounting anxiety, though damn, it was hard.

So close. She was so close.

"A weapon," Gray answered. "They were studying the place the first Slayer was made, according to ancient records. Looking for answers to how they might pull it off. And they found this." She pressed her eyes closed. "It's... It's hard to describe. I can't remember all he said. Like an ax. Only the handle's a stake."

"An ax with a stake for a handle."

"Yes. You can fight from both ends, my father said. It matches the description of a weapon mentioned in—not the Watchers' Diaries, but other records. Legends. They said it was made for the Slayer. Specifically for the Slayer. A weapon forged with enough power to defeat the Old Ones." Gray opened her eyes again, and they seemed a bit clearer. "It took time to verify what it was. Or what they think it is. But it's how they're going to do it. They were trying with the staffs but this... They believe it will work."

And now Buffy couldn't help but bark, her nerves stretched well beyond their limit. "Work in doing *what*?"

"In ending the Slayer line so it's not random anymore. So they can pick the girls they want as the Slayer."

A hard breath exploded out of her lungs before she could stop it, but not in surprise, more in relief that the time for guessing was over. And in a strange way, she felt she had known that was the answer—like it had been there the entire time, somewhere deep within the recesses of her mind, waiting for acknowledgment—for

what hit Buffy after that uncanny relief wasn't fear or horror. It was calm. Her heart didn't plummet, she didn't go cold all over, or hot, and didn't start shaking. She just stood there with this thing she felt she had always known, tied to the crucial understanding of the place she'd lived for most of the last decade, and always on terms that weren't hers. Not even when she'd tried to make them hers. The scraps that had always been there started piecing together, filling gaps, connecting dots, and more than that, and suddenly she was viewing her life from a place of absolute clarity.

Of course this was the Council's goal. Their blustering, their reasons, their excuses and their grandstanding. Buffy might have inspired them, but killing her wasn't the objective. It was just one piece of the objective. The inspiration. Out of their control, irreverent of their customs and their methods and their whole damn role in the business of protecting the world. She'd died but that hadn't solved the problem—it had just created a new one in Faith. A slayer serving twenty-five to life, and just strong enough that she would probably make it to the end. If Buffy was taken out of the equation, they were still one slayer down. And killing Faith... Well, that was certainly possible, but there was no telling who would be called next. What problems they would present. How difficult they might be to control.

Gray wasn't a tool—she was the entire plan. Clear the slate. Handpick the world's guardians based on how subservient they were. Mold them the way they had molded Gray. And if something went wrong, if the girl was too headstrong, back to square one. No more luck of the draw. No more passing it down through death. Just complete and absolute authority.

"How will they end the Slayer line?" Buffy asked at last. "How much time do we have?"

"With the ax," Gray replied, seeming both somber and relieved that she hadn't had to explain more. "They believe that will do it—that the weapon of the Slayer can end the Slayer line."

"Based on what? Why would that work?"

"I don't know."

Buffy clenched her jaw and forced her gaze away, but decided almost at once that it didn't matter that she didn't know. All that mattered was the Council thought it would work. Which meant it might. "They're going to use it on Faith," she said, looking back. "The Slayer line is through her. We have to get to that prison. Get her *out* of it. Protect her somehow. Will—?"

"It's too late for that," Gray blurted, rising now to her feet. "My father called last night. Faith has been moved."

"Moved? Moved *where*?"

"To London. There's some ritual involved but they want to do it there, at headquarters. Where they're protected."

Now Buffy's stomach did drop, her mind starting to race once more. "Giles," she said wildly, as though his name was enough to summon him. "Maybe he can—"

"He can't," Gray said. "He's alive," she rushed to add, taking in Buffy's expression. "But he was taken into Council custody four days ago. They're planning... I don't know what they're planning with him. Treason, maybe."

Somehow, when Buffy spoke, her voice didn't shake too much. "Will they kill him?"

"I honestly don't know."

Buffy didn't move for a moment, didn't trust herself. The calm that had come with knowing was gone. Everything from before was gone, and all she had was the vise around her heart and throat, the cold rush of escalating panic, nausea included, and rage most of all. She didn't know if she had a passport, but she didn't think she did. And if she did, it had to be out of date, right? She hadn't traveled out of the country in years and never as an adult. How many hours stood between now and the chopping block? How many of those would be spent strapped into an airplane seat while, for all she knew, her surrogate father was being tortured or worse? When Faith and more than Faith was on the line.

"I need to get to London," Buffy said slowly, looking now at her friends. "Does anyone have any idea how to do that?"

"Think you need a pronoun check there, Buff," Xander said, and Willow and Dawn nodded behind him. "Don't you mean we?"

"No," she said. "There's too many of us. We don't have time, and they would know. Like they did with Faith. That's why we couldn't reach her." Buffy inhaled and met Spike's gaze. Not even he could come. It would just be her, alone. Someone had told her that once, and she'd done a good job of ignoring it, but there was no ignoring this.

"I think you're overlooking an obvious solution here," Anya said, raising a hand. "One that will get everyone to London who wants to go."

Buffy turned to her, what was left of her patience running out fast. "What's that?"

"I can feel it, you know. What you're feeling. How strong it is. How powerful. Your thirst for vengeance." The vengeance demon fluffed out her hair and grinned. "So I think it's time to make a wish."

ALL OUR TIMES HAVE COME

HE COULDN'T BLAME HER FOR BEING SKITTISH. ACCEPTING A DEMON'S OFFER, even if it was a demon she knew, wasn't something that came naturally for the Slayer. Still, in the end, her fear for Giles and her trust in Anyanka overpowered her nerves, so much so Spike was convinced it went unnoticed and underappreciated—just how much Buffy was saying without saying anything at all. How she was taking very little for granted and placing everything else on pure faith.

That wasn't to say there weren't questions. There were, and they all fired in rapid succession. How it would work. *Why* it would work. What was the catch? How could they be sure a wish wouldn't come with terrible consequences? And Anya's responses had all been straightforward. No catch, no bloody fine print. The manner in which a vengeance demon answered a summons was at the demon's discretion. Yes, D'Hoffryn did expect and demand a certain amount of bloodshed and mayhem as a result—they were demons, after all—but that was something he trusted to happen organically and wasn't baked into the magic itself. Essentially, whatever the Slayer needed doing could be done, no fuss, no muss. A gift horse Anya was handing over, dental records and all.

"But you've been a demon again for almost a year," Buffy had said, her brow furrowed. "How much bloodshed and mayhem have you been getting away with?"

"None, as though it's any concern of yours," Anya had replied with a pronounced sniff. "In fact, Hallie keeps telling me that I am the gossip of pretty much every demon group we know. They say I've lost my edge. And that D'Hoffryn isn't pleased."

Buffy had turned to Xander as though for an explanation, but the boy had had none to offer. "That...doesn't sound good," she'd offered after a tick.

"No, it's not good. D'Hoffryn thinks my time as a human compromised my ability

to perform my job. To the point that he could be considering making me human again.” Anya had paused before plastering on a plastic smile. “So, before he makes me human again, we should take advantage of the powers I do have.”

“You think he’ll strip your powers?”

There had been a shrug, and her smile had become even more strained. “Either that or kill me. Dealer’s choice.”

At that, Xander had let out a pained cry that he’d tried to disguise, and Buffy had been visibly thrown. But then she’d done what she always did—the thing that made her a hero—and lucky bastard that he was, Spike had gotten to watch. Witness the moment her eyes hardened and her jaw firmed, and understand that she’d just made a decision that she would die to see through.

“We won’t let that happen,” she’d said with all that wonderful Slayer confidence. “No matter what, okay?”

Anya had shrugged again as though it didn’t matter either way, which might have pissed Spike off if he hadn’t gleaned that it was more her own fear doing the steering now than actual indifference. While he had done his best to banish the memory of their drunken tryst, he remembered enough to understand, for all her bluster, how easy she was to bruise. Also that, whatever else Harris had been doing in the time since, he clearly hadn’t been as bold about trying to make sense of the mess he’d made of their relationship as had Buffy with Spike.

But still, Anyanka was there. She was trying. And it heartened Spike that the Slayer saw it too, and not only because it reinforced how much had changed between them. It was more how much *she* had changed, and mostly while he’d been a miserable sod who had been too focused on himself to notice.

Once Buffy had agreed to let Anya grant a vengeance wish, the debate had become about where they should go when they touched down in London, who should be involved, what they should bring, if all of them were coming or not, and if *all of them* included Gray. Ultimately, though she wanted to burst in stakes a-blazing, Buffy had conceded she needed more of a plan. For starters, to learn where Giles was being held, the exact danger he was in, and when the Council gits planned on doing this ritual that would, among other things, off the other slayer. Then there was sussing out what sort of magical protection the headquarters had in place, as it was bound to be robust. How they would get in and where to go once they were inside. All sorts of things that required more consideration than they could manage while debating the issue at Revello Drive, half a world away from where all of this was taking place.

At one point, Xander had observed that the wish itself could clear the playing field for them. Level the Council, save Giles and Faith and the rest. Might have seemed like the obvious, most direct solution, but Spike had known the second it was out that Buffy would reject it. If she was going to take the Council out, it needed to be on even terms—terms she could live with long after the fight was behind her—and those terms could never include waving a hand and killing a building full of people. They also couldn’t involve shirking a fight. There had to be a confrontation, or this would never be over.

In the end, Buffy's wish was straightforward and pragmatic, taking them as far as London and giving them room to suss out their next move. She wished for a place close to the Council where she, Dawn, Spike, and the Scoobies could remain undetected while preparing for war, and fuck, how Anya had delivered. Conjured up a cottage stocked with food, water, weapons, computers, and all sorts of gadgets for brainy types like Willow to put to good use.

Sure, the floorplan was a mite dodgy, but Spike assumed that was from necessity. They landed right inside the place, not outside, and had quickly been put under house arrest by Buffy, so no telling if it looked as wonky from the street. Though he supposed it had to be normal enough as no one came knocking, and that was all they needed. There were two common areas—one with a sofa and a telly and one littered with supplies—separated from the hall lined with bedrooms by a cozy kitchen. The kitchen itself had two points of entry, making it the central hub that Willow claimed almost immediately as her workstation.

In fact, the lot of them didn't hesitate to set up shop—all except Anya, who opted to hopscotch back across the pond to tend to her store. There wasn't much for her to do there beyond what she'd already contributed, and considering she'd put her neck on the line just for that, Buffy clearly hadn't had the heart to ask for more. After all, Demon Girl had outdone herself, even throwing in a fridge full of blood amid other human-friendly offerings, and a cellar for Spike to help him avoid the sunlight.

Not that Spike intended to spend much time in the cellar, though he supposed that revelation had been placed on hold. He hadn't given much thought to what Buffy's chums might say when they learned he and the Slayer were, well, together. But then he hadn't exactly had time. There had been the mad, intense lovemaking and the blissful morning that followed, then everything had kicked into high gear the way it always seemed to come springtime. He'd come downstairs to find matters such as who was shagging who again weren't on the Scoobies' radar, and for bloody good reason.

But even with things left in the air, Spike couldn't help but marvel at how radically his life had changed in just a few hours. There was tension still, yes, and things he knew he and Buffy needed to talk about once the current crisis was behind them—questions he could see brimming in her eyes that she was too overwhelmed to start unraveling—but they were still here. Somehow, they had gotten *here*. Together.

And they *were* together. During that first day, as the others worked—Willow at her computer, Xander keeping watch, and Dawn alternating between looking over Willow's shoulder and making sure Gray hadn't sneaked off somewhere—Buffy didn't create or insist upon distance from Spike, rather touched him openly and frequently, sometimes stealing a kiss in a way that suggested she wasn't even thinking about it. That it was instinctive, no explanations needed. Harris might have looked over with a question in his eyes, but that was the extent. Just a question, no surprise or condemnation. The witch and Dawn had both noticed as well, though again, neither appeared to have been caught off guard. And aside from regarding them with blatant

curiosity, and perhaps some lingering disgust thrown in for good measure, Gray also held her tongue.

Spike's entire life had changed—his understanding of the world and his place in it—in ways he'd been too bloody cowardly to even properly crave. This, Buffy, having her with him and really *with him* had been impossible. Yet here she was. Here *they* were. Casually but clearly together.

"I might need you to restrain me," Buffy said now as she sank onto the sofa in the living space beside him, her head finding his shoulder. "This sitting still stuff is driving me up the wall."

He kissed her brow. "It was your idea."

"Still a good idea. The last thing we need is someone from the Council running into one of us on the street. I just didn't think through the whole everyone-will-have-something-to-do-but-me thing. Hence the restraints. It might become necessary."

Spike grinned in spite of himself, reaching for her hand and something beyond elated when she allowed him to take it. Watching another of his most treasured fantasies come to life as their fingers laced together, and how bloody understated it was amid everything else that was happening. "Sorry, love. You never much fancied being trussed up, so I didn't think to pack the cuffs," he replied, making sure to match her in tone.

He half-expected her to admonish him, say something about how now wasn't the time. Instead, she rattled off an anxious laugh and squeezed his hand. "If memory serves, you got me to change my mind."

Bloody right, he had. Spike tried and failed to keep his smile from spreading wider at the memory. Buffy lying on his bed, spread out in front of him, her hands cuffed and looped around one of the bedposts. How she'd trembled when he'd approached and arched when he'd touched, and how strange and wonderful it was that he could think about moments like that without experiencing a stab of pain at what he'd lost or what he'd mucked up—or at least, not as deep a stab as those he'd long since grown accustomed to.

"Buffy!" Willow called, causing the Slayer to jolt. "I think we might have something!"

Buffy was in instant motion, practically flying toward the kitchen with Spike right behind her. Harris filed in from the other door, breathless and tense. They found Willow and Dawn at the table, sitting in front of a computer, looking tense and excited.

"I got it working," Willow said, holding up a small gadget. "It'll give us a live feed of everything she sees. See?" She gestured to the monitor, moved the gadget this way and that, and the picture on screen shifted accordingly, reflecting the confines of the kitchen. "Audio is good too. In here, at least."

Buffy didn't say anything, just drew near enough that she could study the thing properly. "We're sure?"

The witch nodded. "It's mostly just good ol' fashioned spy tech, though I might've given it a magical boost just in case there's mystical interference. Which,

honestly, I'm going to be very disappointed in the Council if there isn't and just anyone could walk in off the street. Talk about sloppy."

"Yeah, that's going to be my biggest disappointment, too," Buffy replied dryly, though not without a grin. "So we really think this is the best angle? We're sure?"

"As reasonably sure as one very unsure person can be," Willow said, briefly glanced at Xander then Spike. "This part is really only dangerous for Gray, assuming she doesn't wimp out."

"And if she does," Dawn chimed in brightly, "I'll remind her just how good I am with that crossbow. You know, to motivate her."

"Where is she, anyway?" Xander asked, speaking up for the first time since they'd rushed into the kitchen.

The light in the Nibbler's eyes went out. "In the weapons room. Buffy made me let her in there."

"She needs to be prepared, same as all of us," Buffy retorted.

Xander looked between the two of them. "And we're sure *that's* a good idea? Sending her to the Council? We're taking a lot on faith here. Like, that she won't immediately let the bigwigs know where we are so they can send in a kill squad."

Buffy sighed and shook her head, though in a way that Spike interpreted as more noncommittal than exasperated. That while she was proceeding under the assumption that Gray was telling them the absolute truth, she was also not discounting the possibility that the girl was leading them into an elaborate trap. In other words, exactly as she should proceed. It would be downright barmy to take everything she'd learned wholly at face value, especially after all the trouble the trollop had caused.

But that was the choice the Slayer had to make. Believe and act on that belief or wait for clarity that might not come.

"It's a chance we have to take," Buffy said finally. "I can't risk Giles or Faith because of a maybe."

"Agreed, and on that note..." Willow sat back. "I know you don't want us to leave here, and I get it, but the more I think about it, the more I need to get in touch with the coven. They need to know what might happen."

"The coven," Buffy echoed. "The Devon coven?"

The witch nodded. "And Callista, my first MAA sponsor. I think it's important she knows that I'm here too. Just in case anything goes kablooeey."

"You mean in case you go kablooeey."

"Well, yeah." Willow shifted a bit, crossed her arms then uncrossed them and dropped them into her lap. "I'm not wrong to assume there might be a level of kablooeyness, am I? The magicks that we're likely to face are of the big and dangerous variety, which means I'm going to need to become big and dangerous. And if something goes wrong there—if I can't come back from it—they need to be on alert."

Buffy licked her lips but didn't argue, still staring at where the camera was feeding back images of the kitchen. "We didn't talk about that before we left."

"We didn't really have a chance," Willow replied. "But I'm right. If we're really storming the Council, you're going to need me to be power girl."

"Is that something you can handle?" Xander asked, pulling his gaze from the computer.

"Honestly?" The witch looked at them all in turn before barking a short, harsh laugh. "I don't know. That's why I want to see the coven. There's the raw, dangerous magic—the magic that's in me all the time and is just too unstable for me to use willy-nilly."

"Like at the prison," Buffy said. "When I asked you to get me in to see Faith."

"Yeah. Without the books and ingredients, without doing it the right way, I could just go all megalomaniac Willow again easy-peasy. I-if I start reaching for magicks the way I did before." Willow stopped shortly and exhaled. "But I'm not seeing a way around it here. I can prepare some spells, and I might be able to figure out a few things from looking at the footage, but odds are we won't know what we're up against until we're in there, so I'll have to do whatever I do on the fly. And once I open that door, it could be impossible to close. Especially if I'm feeding off all the energy within the building. That's what happened last year, you know? Only I meant it to happen because I was in revenge-mode."

Buffy was quiet for a stretch, her brow furrowed. At length, she sighed and sank into the open chair beside her friend. "Do I need to plan this without you?"

"What?"

"I just need to know now. Before we go any further. Because you're right—we don't know what's coming. We don't even know if what Gray told us is true."

"The spell would have gone off if she had bad intentions, Buffy."

"But that's not exactly foolproof, is it? Couldn't there be a workaround? And let's just say there's not—that she did tell us exactly everything. There's no reason to think she can't be wrong, either." Buffy leaned forward, placing her elbows on the table. "Her source for all this is her father, who could have fed her a bunch of crap just to keep her complacent. Or maybe things have changed, and she doesn't know. There are about a katrillion ways this could blow up in our faces and throwing you into the ring makes that a katrillion and one if you don't think you can handle it."

Willow bristled. "It's not about *handling* it. It's about—"

"I know what it's about."

"Then you need to trust that I know what I'm doing."

"No, I don't," Buffy retorted simply. "You just said yourself that you don't know what's coming and you don't know if you can handle it. That's why I have to ask, especially after what almost happened at the prison."

"That was because you pushed me."

"Guys," Xander said in low warning, holding up his hands. Both Slayer and Witch ignored him.

"Yes, and I was wrong. I just don't want to be wrong again, especially now." There was a pause and Buffy dropped her gaze to the table, twisting her fingers together. "One of the reasons things went bad was we... I got used to you being able to come up with a magical solution for anything. I did that with Glory. You were my loaded gun, and I needed that to win. But it almost cost us everything."

"No. It almost cost *me* everything." The air split with a loud *screech* as the witch

pushed her chair back so she could spring to her feet. "My addiction is my problem, not anyone else's. But I also... I *can't* pull myself apart from it. That's what Callista told me—that's what I've been dealing with all year. I can't not be magic. And I'm telling you that if you ask me to sit here while you and Xander and Dawnie go into a fight while I know I could help, that's going to be worse." Again, Willow took inventory of the room. Caught the Nibbler's eye and held, glanced at Harris and Spike before finally settling on Buffy again. "I need to be there. But I also need you to be ready to do something—to stop me if I start to turn again."

"You mean kill you," Buffy surmised without blinking.

And to her credit, Willow didn't blanch, rather slid once more into her seat before awkwardly shuffling forward. "Yes. And that's why I'm getting in touch with the coven and Callista. I know they... I know they'll be able to do it if you can't. If I'm too powerful for you."

Spike wagered he didn't have much to add, his role here somehow undefined but also strictly defined. He placed a hand on the Slayer's shoulder in case that did anything—gave her support or clarity or hell, even just a reminder that whatever came next, she wouldn't be alone. There was still so much he'd missed, stories and perspectives he hadn't heard, too bloody swamped by his own misery and regret. But he understood what losing her mate would do to Buffy—what even the thought of it would mean for her mindset when the time to fight was upon them.

"Contact the coven," Buffy said at last, reaching up and placing her hand over Spike's. "Take whatever precautions you think you need to and we'll hope we don't have to use them. But that's not the only option, Will. You don't need to put yourself in a place where you might go big bad on us. We can find another way."

Willow was shaking her head before Buffy finished talking. "I can't sit here while my family goes off to fight. If one of you is hurt or killed and I could've stopped it, I'd never..." She broke away with a tremulous sigh and wiped her eyes. "You're right. It's a problem and I *don't* know what I'm doing. I want to know what I'm doing because I want to be in charge of it, but I know I'm not. But this is my life, Buffy. Whatever we do is going to have situations like this where I *could* help, and I can't just be afraid to do it all the time. Even if you have to kill me, at least maybe I'll have done some good before that happens."

"Well, let's try not to get to that point, okay?" Buffy replied, dropping her hand back to her lap. "I'll be the first to admit, I'll feel a lot better about going into this fight with your magicks than without them. And whatever you believe about yourself, I know you are strong enough."

Spike wasn't sure if the Slayer was talking true or blowing smoke, but that wasn't nearly as important as Red hearing the words and having the chance to accept them. And he saw Willow knew the same—that whatever Buffy felt or feared, she was standing by her friend. Not arguing or trying to impose what she thought was best, trusting Willow to make the right call if the need came.

"So," Dawn said when the silence had crept on just a hair past tolerable, "have we figured out what the story's going to be for Gray yet?" Buffy and Willow turned to her at the same beat, though neither had an answer at the ready. And when Dawn

realized this, her eyes widened. "You're telling me no one thought of this but me? Like, she's supposed to be in California, right? You don't think the Council guys are gonna be all suspicious if she walks through the door? I mean, they're probably tracking everything in and out of Sunnydale. They'll know she didn't just hop on a plane or...or am I being dumb?"

"No," Buffy said, and Spike tightened the grip he had on her shoulder, feeling her frustration as it started to mount. "I just... I hadn't gotten that far. Shit, I am no good at this covert-ops stuff."

Willow shook her head and opened her laptop with renewed determination. "It shouldn't be hard to create a flight record," she said, fingers zooming over the keyboard. "Like not hard at all. But we'll need to get her cover story squared away. Like her father called her home. Or, no, that won't work. Maybe she decided to come back to see what progress had been made or...or to talk to her watcher. Did she even mention a watcher?"

"I don't think so," Buffy replied. "Maybe her dad is the watcher."

"He's not," came from the kitchen's other entrance. Gray looked perhaps a little better than she had when she'd first shuffled into the Summers place. The finger bruises along her throat were starting to fade, at least, and her voice wasn't as hoarse or strained. The swelling around her eyes had also gone down. "They thought that would be a conflict of interest. My watcher is Lydia Chalmers."

"Lydia." Buffy shifted so she could catch Spike's eye. "That's who made the first offer."

"Yeah," Gray agreed. "She was not happy when your vampire turned that down." She crossed her arms, which stretched the fabric of her oversized sweater and pulled the sleeves even further over her hands. It was a small thing that did wonders to transform her from the sassy would-be assassin she had tried to embody and into something that was undeniably a confused little girl. Which was, of course, exactly what she was. Never mind that she wasn't all that young for a slayer—closer to Buffy's age by her own account—but decades away from being close to what Spike would call an adult. He supposed that was the sort of thing that happened when your sole purpose in life was to be a weapon.

"Why do you need to know about my watcher?" Gray asked, sidling farther into the room but keeping close to the counters. "Or am I still not allowed to know anything?"

"You act like we've been talking in code," Dawn muttered without looking up from the table.

"You act like I've been invited to talk at all," Gray shot back coolly.

"And you're both acting like children," Buffy said.

"Sorry," the Nibblet replied, plainly not sorry at all. "Guess being almost murdered will do that to a person."

"Well, there's a lot we need to know," Willow told Gray, speaking loudly as though to distract her. "About everything going on inside the Council. Like that Giles is still alive. We know you said he was but we need to confirm it. And where Faith is being held. And maybe this weapon too."

Gray blinked. "You think Lydia would tell me that? We're not exactly close. I think she was assigned to me because she knew I was going to go after the vampire, and she has some gross crush on him."

"Which apparently is only not-okay when I do it," Buffy mumbled.

Dawn sat back hard, her eyebrows going up. "So you can say things like that and I can't?"

"I'm just saying—if they're going to put *dating the undead* at the top of their Reasons to Kill Buffy list, maybe don't lust after them in a way even the underlings can spot."

Spike squeezed her shoulder again, more to keep himself from chuckling as he didn't reckon that would endear him to Buffy any. But she seemed to sense it all the same and rewarded him with the sort of glower that had driven him crazy once. Drove him crazy still, come to think of it, only he was getting used to the freedom that came with embracing those reactions rather than trying to ignore them.

"Maybe that's the way in," Xander offered suddenly.

Buffy turned to him. "Maybe what's the way in?"

"Lydia's interested in Spike, so we give her Spike."

Buffy went rigid. "Xan—"

"Not literally," Harris rushed to add, holding up his hands. "This isn't some ploy to get him away from you. But if this lady is all gung-ho about Spike, then maybe that's our way in. Gray can say Spike has reconsidered the initial offer. Or if that's off the table, he wants to work something else out. And he knows that he needs to talk to Lydia directly."

"If you think we're sending Spike into the *Council*, you're out of your mind," the Slayer retorted. "Lydia is one person. One very sick, twisted person."

Spike leaned down so his mouth was at her ear. "What's so sick and twisted about her, again?"

She turned and thumped him hard on the chest. "Stop enjoying this."

"Not enjoyin' anything," he fibbed and kissed her temple before she could get further cross with him. Not that much could stop her when she was of a mind to be cross. "Don't think that's the way to go, anyhow," he told Harris when he glanced up. "The bird might fancy me a little, but I don't think she'd be tempted with a shag."

Buffy gave the most adorable little harrumph that made him want to snog her breathless.

"I don't think Xander was suggesting anything shag-adjacent," Willow offered. "Just that she has this interest in Spike that might help us get into the Council."

"And I say that's way too dangerous to even consider," Buffy said firmly. "It's clear that Spike was on Gray's hit list so there's no reason to think they wouldn't just stake him before hearing him out. Or stake him *after* hearing him out, for that matter. And then what's he supposed to do if he *does* get out? Pretend to try to kill me?"

The witch brought up her hands. "All right, all right. Picture gotten. It was just an idea. Not even mine."

"Thanks, Will," Harris said dryly.

Spike straightened, a thought occurring—a thought he knew the Slayer wouldn't

like. "Would be better if it's personal for her," he said before he could talk himself into keeping his mouth shut. "Somethin' she goes after for her rather than the sodding Council."

Buffy twisted in her seat to look at him more fully. "Like what?"

"Not a deal with yours truly, but information. She fancies herself a scholar on all things William the Bloody, but there's somethin' she doesn't know."

He held her gaze, watched as confusion melted into understanding—then understanding into something harder to identify. There was surprise and disbelief, anger and protest, and worst of all hurt. More of that hurt he'd put there that they hadn't talked all the way through. Spike swallowed and drew back, not at all surprised when she rose to her feet, then turned and backed out of the room. He didn't know where they were going—not much privacy in this place—but wagered he'd know when he got there.

"Excuse us for a second," he heard her say to the others. Then she was hot on his heels, and he ducked down one hallway until his feet touched down in the room Buffy had claimed as her own.

He didn't turn until he heard the click of the door and understood that, for as much as they could be, they were alone.

And bless her, she didn't waste a sodding second.

"You want to tell her about the soul," Buffy said stiffly, crossing her arms. "You go months without saying a word to me, but you'll tell Dawn if she's mad at you, and now it's a part of our plan to take down the Council?"

Spike lifted a shoulder, knowing he didn't have much else. "Use the tools you've got, love."

"It's your *soul*, Spike. It's not a tool. It's not a weapon."

"It's somethin' that won't concern the bloody Council. Somethin' that the girl's watcher'll want to know for herself. Give her this, and she might make up a story as to why Gray's back for us. That's what matters, right? Gettin' her in to get a lay of the land? Find Rupert?"

"You're willing to let them know you have a soul because your groupie *might* make up a story. *Might*."

"I don't see what the hurt is. They can't take it from me, Buffy. It's not loose like Angel's."

That was the wrong bloody thing to say—a revelation he had, true to form, the second it was too late. The calm Buffy had been trying to affect blinked out of existence, letting all the anger and hurt avalanche through everything else. "First of all, we have no way of knowing that," she said in a harsh whisper. "We don't know what the Council can and can't do. We don't know anything about what's going on in there. Hello, kind of the reason we need to do this recon mission in the first place! Second, that is so not the point. The point is that you kept this from me. You *kept* it from me but now that it's out, it's not a big secret? Everyone can know? Just like that? Tell Willow, tell Xander, tell this Council hussy. Why don't you take out an ad in the *New York Times*, while you're at it? If it doesn't matter anymore."

Fuck, she could be the most infuriating person on the planet when she put her mind to it. "I never said it doesn't matter."

"You might as well have."

"Slayer, it was for *you*. All of it was for you. So apart from you, I didn't give a piss who knew what."

Again, wrong thing to say. He was certainly on a roll.

"Wow," Buffy said, the light in her eyes going dull. "I'm the only one you cared about lying to. That is the most romantic thing anyone has ever said to me."

Spike gritted his teeth. He was just digging himself in deeper, he knew—could feel it—but that didn't mean he wasn't right. Or if he wasn't right, it certainly didn't mean he could start changing the script now. All he had was the truth. "You bloody well know what I mean," he ground out. "Been over this, haven't we? I didn't want—"

"You didn't want me to swoon because you'd decided to win back your soul. Believe me, message received."

"Right, and that's not what happened." He swore he was bloody seconds from tearing out his own hair. "I don't know what the sodding problem is."

"The problem is I still don't know *when* you would have told me if Angel hadn't run his mouth. The *problem* is Dawn knew. Dawn *knew* about this, and you convinced her to keep secrets from me."

"That wasn't—"

"Maybe not directly, but she bought into your bullshit. And this is *huge*, Spike. It's the biggest thing that anyone has ever kept from me, and *you* were the one doing it. You've always been honest with me. Always. Except about this. This...this *huge* thing that you did." She held up a hand as though to ward off a protest she could see coming. "And I know your reasons and I get why you think they're good and hell, maybe they are. Maybe I did need to... But I still didn't get to make that decision. You won your soul and I was throwing myself at you and even then, you didn't tell me. After I made it clear that I wanted...*this*."

The ringing in his ears was absolute and deafening, his chest hollow where a mortal man's heart would be raucous. Spike worked his throat. "*Wanted?* Meanin' you don't anymore?"

Buffy looked confused for a second, then deflated. Every part of her seemed to wither and shrink upon itself, and he hated that he had done that, for he knew he had. He knew he was the reason.

"I still want this," she replied hoarsely. "Believe me, after everything, it's going to take more than being mad at you to make me call it quits. But I need you to understand how much it hurt learning the way I did. And how cavalier you're being about it now. Like suddenly it doesn't matter, when it matters more than anything. I thought... I thought you were the person who always told me the absolute truth. Even when I didn't want to hear it."

Now he was glad his heart didn't beat. He was pretty sure it would be breaking—and in ways it had never broken before. Ways new and awful, but also not. It was almost like last May. Looking at her, seeing her pain, and understanding he was the cause. "Buffy..."

"And now that it's out, that I know, it's okay to use the soul to impress someone who has the hots for you?"

"That's not what I'm doing."

"I know," she replied softly. "I know—I know part of this is just me being crazy, but that's how it feels. Like I have all this hurt that I can't do anything with, and that doesn't make sense to me because part of me does think you were right not to tell me, but I'm still so... I can't make the feeling go away just because I want it to."

Spike released the sort of breath that made him feel faint, like all the air holding up his body had whooshed out. He staggered blindly back a couple of steps until the backs of his legs hit the bed, and down he went, head falling into his waiting hands. "Fuck," he muttered. "*Fuck.*"

The mattress dipped beside him, and she was there. Warm and soft. Taking his left hand in hers and giving it a squeeze, and he didn't know how she did that. How she went from being brassed to touching him the way she was. It made his stomach twist.

"I didn't mean to let that all out," she said a moment later. "Sorry."

He barked a harsh laugh before he could stop himself. "You're sorry?"

"A little." When he dared a glance at her, he saw a faint smile on her lips. "And... you're probably right about Gray telling watcher lady about your soul. I just... I think, and this is gonna sound really wacky, but after I learned about it, I started to think of it as mine. Or at least kinda mine. You got it for me. So other people getting to know about it... I don't know. It's dumb."

Spike squeezed her hand. "The soul is yours, love. It was yours before I bloody knew you."

"That *is* romantic," she said with a faint tease.

"And if it wasn't, it was from the second I walked into that cave. Hell, the second I decided to go after it. It was for you, Buffy. All of it was for you."

"There was a cave?"

He turned to her, caught her eyes. Bright and green—and home. More home than any other place had been throughout his miserable life. "Can tell you the whole story, if you like. Didn't know how much you'd want to hear it."

"All of it," she said without hesitation. "I want to hear all of it."

"Few parts aren't that pretty."

She shrugged. "Same could be said for us."

"All parts of you are pretty."

"And that is just crap."

There was no sense in arguing with her, so he didn't bother. Just held her gaze as she sighed and rested her chin on his shoulder. He exhaled again, this time without the sense that he was coming apart at the seams but he was still shaken, fragile, a bit like he had somehow survived a fall that should have left him shattered. What he'd done, the decisions he'd made and the reasons behind them, had been so clear from the start. But from that start, he never could have imagined that this was where he'd end up. That he would be with Buffy in any capacity, holding her hand—holding any part of her—experiencing this tenuous *this* that was the best and most terrifying

thing that had ever happened to him. What he wanted least in the world was to hurt her. Christ, the whole drive behind the sodding soul had been to fix that, keep it from happening again.

Turned out hurt wasn't something that could be done by monsters alone. Intellectually, he'd known that, just as he'd known all the soul's failings he'd been clocking over the last few months weren't failings at all, just a side-effect of being an imperfect man in an imperfect world. Still stung, though. More than stung—it paralyzed him with the fear that he could muck this up and it would be all his fault. No monster to hide behind. No quest to go on to put things right. Nothing but his pitiful *sorries* and hopes that he'd make a better call next time. That he would smarten up enough to know when he was in danger of hurting her again.

"I'm sorry," he said finally, lacking anything else. "No bloody good at this."

"Neither am I."

"I don't want to muck it up, love. What we're doin'. Don't think I could survive it."

Buffy let out a sound that wasn't quite a laugh. "Well, I've been kinda walled off emotionally ever since... You know. And when I said I wanted to try, part of what I meant was I don't want to be like that anymore. Which means, I guess, accepting that things might go really wrong and I could end up completely trounced." She dragged her chin down his shoulder until her brow was pressed there instead. "Not the first time I've been made aware of this, by the way. Last time I thought maybe I wasn't able to love anymore. That being the Slayer was making me hard inside."

"Buffy—"

"But I was told that I was full of love and that love would lead me to my gift. Turns out it wasn't a great gift, but it wasn't wrong." Buffy pulled back just enough that he caught her eyes again. "And if I'm going to live forever, I want to be able to feel that love while I do. Even if I'm scared of being trounced."

Spike's mind had run out on him, overwhelmed and confused and hopeful and terrified all at once. He wasn't so daft to think she was saying what it sounded like she was saying—or dancing around—but the second words like *love* left her lips, a man couldn't help but wonder. Hope. And that hope reawakened an ache that had gone from hunger to starvation the longer their affair had run. Eviscerated him without doing the courtesy of ending his life, driven him mad with longing and certainty and desperation, and the thought of revisiting that place was horrible.

Except it wouldn't be that place. That place had been a contrivance of the relationship they'd had before, and that relationship was nothing like the one they were trying to build now.

She had loved him then. Just not in a way she'd been able to live with.

And that thought might have led him down a different spiral altogether had his brain not clued back in long enough to register what else she'd said.

"Live forever?" he asked. "That literal, love?"

Buffy shrugged without breaking her gaze from his. "Who knows?"

"Sorry?"

"Let's just say there's reason to believe I should be dead right now and I'm not."

She paused, furrowed her brow as though to continue, but then shook her head. "Bottom line is we don't know. Giles thinks there's a chance the resurrection spell had consequences...like I can't die at all. And seeing as the only way to test that is to try to die, we're not rushing to prove or disprove anything just yet. I just... I want the scary, is what I'm trying to say. With or without possible immortality. I want to feel love like I once did and not run from it or need some mystical desert guide to tell me it's there at all. I want that. And I think I can have it."

Spike nodded hard, forced himself to swallow back the words that wanted to spill out, hopeful and presumptive as they were. Everything he'd always been when it came to her. "We all right, then?" he asked instead. "Bout the soul?"

Buffy lowered her gaze. "I'll get to all right. Can't just flip a switch and make the bad feelings go away. Just...there's nothing else you're keeping from me, is there?"

"No," he swore.

"And you're still 'say what's on my mind' guy? Even if it makes Buffy crazy?"

"You want that?"

She nodded. "Turns out after you've been in relationships that defined the word *miscommunication*, honesty is a pretty big turn-on."

"You won't always fancy what I have to say."

"Believe me. Well aware. Hence the 'even if it makes Buffy crazy' provision. It's right there in the title." A slight, ironic grin tugged at her lips. "But you were one of the things I could always count on, even when I didn't want to. I want that. I need it."

He took her mouth, grin and all, with his own, still relishing that he could. That he was allowed. That this was something they had. Maybe the newness, the awe, would wear off one day, but he hoped it didn't. If the fear of losing Buffy was what made him worthy enough to keep her, he'd be happy to spend the rest of his days just like this.

"Should tell the others," he murmured when they broke apart. "Get the girl to ring up her watcher."

Buffy was quiet for a moment, then nodded and pushed herself to her feet, and he rose to follow. They had almost made it to the door before she stopped and turned, her eyes wide. "I do want to know," she said. "About the soul. How you got it. You *will* tell me?"

"I'll tell you," he promised her, and sealed the promise with a kiss. "I'll tell you everything."

"Mmm. I'll hold you to that."

WHEN I THINK OF LOVE AS SOMETHING NEW

LYDIA HAD TAKEN THE BAIT.

Of course she had. A vampire willingly seeking out his own soul was revolutionary. No, more than revolutionary. More than unprecedented, more than all the big, SAT-level words that Buffy had once memorized while dreaming about a future she would never have. What Spike had done defied everything she'd ever known, ever been taught about the nature of vampires, demons, of good and evil itself. It rewrote entire philosophies, undermined those things that had always been hard truths, and exposed the Council in a fundamental way as less interested in protecting the world than controlling it. Vampires, they said, couldn't change or evolve. Vampires were just demons masquerading in human suits. Vampires existed to create chaos, and that was final.

As long as no one questioned that, their authority remained absolute. Which was why no self-respecting watcher could pass up an opportunity to learn more on the subject of lore-defying vampires. Especially not one who also liked to think of herself as the foremost authority on William the Bloody.

"A soul?" Lydia had asked sharply, and loud enough that Buffy hadn't had any trouble following her end of the telephone conversation. "You are quite certain? Spike has a soul."

Gray had looked up, taken a quick survey of the people surrounding her. Xander and Willow had been antsy, Dawn trying for impassive but too tense to effectively pull it off. Spike had been standing with his arms crossed, ignoring the sidelong glances the others kept stealing of him, and Buffy at his side, heart in her throat and waiting for something—anything—that indicated Gray had cold feet or worse.

"I heard him arguing with Summers," Gray had said, holding Buffy's gaze. "In the cemetery."

"You weren't seen, were you?" Lydia's voice had gone up an octave. "You know perfectly well—"

"They didn't see me. They were too focused on each other. Apparently, the vampire Angel let the cat out of the bag while they were in Los Angeles. Summers was—well, furious. Kept demanding who had cursed him. But Spike said he'd gotten it on his own. Because he wanted to." Gray had paused and worked her throat. "That's not possible, is it? That a vampire would seek out his own soul?"

"No," Lydia had remarked, though in a way it was clear she wasn't really tuned into the conversation. "Gray, you are absolutely certain of what you heard?"

"Hundred percent."

"Then... Dear god, this changes everything. You need to come to London straightaway."

"I do?"

"Yes. Give evidence to Travers and the rest. The order had been to kill Spike, obviously, but if he does have a soul—one he was not cursed with but sought on his own—it is worth investigating. They will want to know all of your interactions with him. Your observations." There had been a shuffle. "I will wire you enough to cover travel expenses. We have no time to waste."

And indeed they hadn't. The money wire had gone through, and Anya, back home, had managed to collect it without fuss. Buffy decided it would be a nice, Council-sponsored boost for Dawn's college fund, though she hadn't shared that yet with Gray, or anyone except Spike. The Scoobies' focus after getting the green light had been both determining the specifics of how the exchange would go at Heathrow, and arguing about what exactly Gray could share once she was safely within Council custody again.

And there, Buffy had drawn a line. There were things she knew now that she wasn't ready for anyone else to know. And Gray shouldn't have all the sordid details anyway, based on what she'd told Lydia she'd overheard. So Spike had provided table scraps of truth, just a few bits to whet the appetite and, if they were very lucky, divert attention from whatever the Council was doing with Faith just long enough for Buffy to figure out her next move.

The immediate next move, unfortunately, involved a lot of waiting. Willow had a bit to fill her time with, hacking into the flight plan and making sure Gray's name was among the passengers coming in from California. The rest of them were left sorting through what everyone would do after Gray was in the Council's headquarters, though there wasn't much to decide. Buffy, Spike, and Dawn were pretty much under house arrest until it was time to make their move—partly owing to the sun but mostly owing to the fact that they were the most recognizable if anyone from the Council happened to cross their paths. Really, though, she didn't much like the idea of anyone leaving the cottage at all. Xander was under the least amount of scrutiny, making him the obvious choice for running out if the need arose, but lower risk didn't mean no risk, and Buffy wasn't wild about any risk at the moment. Not when so much was in the air.

But there wasn't a lot of choice to be had in the matter. The electronics Willow

had fashioned into James Bond spy gadgetry, not without magical enhancement, needed to be tested, which required Xander to walk around London wearing a fashion brooch to ascertain the mini camera's range and whether the quality suffered by venturing into shops or libraries or museums. Not that even those were foolproof, for there was no way to know what sort of magical protection the Council might employ that could cause additional interference, but as reasonably as they could be prepared, they were.

Likewise, there was the Willow part of everything. The stuff Buffy wasn't sold on, given their recent conversations, but understood she would have to accept because working with magic would be a lot simpler than working without. Even with the risks. Thankfully, Willow had succeeded in making contact with the Devon coven and had arranged a meeting that she would leave for just as soon as Gray was back with the Council. She'd also mentioned possibly going into Chulmleigh to reunite with her sponsor and catch an MAA meeting; she hadn't been to one since the sun had gone out in Los Angeles. Just a refresher before she risked everything.

At last, though, it was time for action. The flight that Gray was allegedly on touched down at Heathrow Airport. And Gray, fitted with the hidden camera that Xander had tested across London, had shuffled into the throng of deplaning travelers.

All of this Buffy watched from the kitchen of the wish-cottage, courtesy of the laptop Willow had set up with the live feed of whatever the camera captured. So far, so good. The visual quality was miles beyond Warren's surveillance stuff from the year before, and it had the added benefit of sound, though it was a bit hard to hear anything over the roar of noise in the airport.

"I'm still not convinced we're not making a huge mistake," Xander said, leaning over her shoulder to squint at the screen. "She could tell them anything."

"I know," Buffy replied, her gut giving what was by now a rather familiar twist at the thought. "But it had to be this way. We had to get someone in there, and she's the one they're least likely to try to kill on sight."

"Forgive me if that doesn't fill me with optimism."

"It was either this or wait for a better plan. Giles and Faith might not have that kind of time." Which was really the only thing she could come back to—how fast everything had happened. How quickly the others, herself included, had leaped onto this particular way forward, uncertain that it would work but desperate enough to try just about anything that sounded even halfway good. Her own trust in Gray was on the wobbly side, but she couldn't let herself think about that too much lest she succumb to all kinds of second thoughts that were too late to think anyway. This was the plan. This was what was happening. It was too late to reconsider. "I hate this," she muttered.

Xander eased to her left and dragged over one of the other kitchen chairs, splitting the air for a second with the screech of wooden legs over linoleum. Then he plopped down beside her with a long sigh. "Which *this* are you talking about?"

"Waiting. Sitting still." On the screen, Lydia looked over her shoulder and said something too faint to come through the speakers, though the movement of her lips

left little room for doubt as to what they were discussing. They weren't even out of the airport yet, and the watcher lady was already digging for information on Spike.

Buffy scowled at her, shifting in her seat, her butt starting to fall asleep and the rest of her just restless. She didn't reach to beef up the volume, thinking it might be better if she *didn't* hear the way Gray would put the few bits of information she'd been fed to good use. She might have signed off on this plan, but that didn't mean she had to like it.

"You were never good at that," Xander said, his voice warm.

She snapped her gaze to him. "Good at what?"

"The sitting still thing. You're too much *Last Action Hero* for it." He offered a wry grin and nodded back at the screen. "Especially when it comes to people you don't trust."

"Oh. Yeah, I guess." There was something in his voice that had her raising her guard, though only a little. It had really been just a matter of time before he broached the subject she sensed he was dancing around, especially after, well, the whole announcement thing. Kinda hard to suggest telling the Council about Spike's soul without telling *everyone* about Spike's soul. Xander had been uncharacteristically quiet, though his eyes had bugged a bit and flooded with a tsunami of questions that Buffy had known would eventually come spilling out.

With Willow gone to see the coven and Gray in espionage-mode, now seemed as good a time as any.

"So," Xander said as though hearing the thought and taking it as permission, "I saw Spike showing Dawn some of the more lethal-looking weapons that Anya dreamed up for us. Guessing that's Buffy-sanctioned? She did seem a bit trigger-happy with that crossbow."

"I've taken the 'if she's going to do it, do it in the house under controlled circumstances,' approach."

"Yeah, she's all mini-Buff now. Which is just brimming with irony seeing as she's taller than you." When she glanced at him, she saw his attention fixed on his hand, which he kept flexing and balling and flexing again. "I guess I'm less surprised that she's playing with sharp objects and more that she seems to think she's gonna be in the fight when it comes. Is that a good idea? I know you've been training her and all, but this has a very high risk of death attached to it."

"Unlike all the kid-safe things she's been through over the last few years, you mean?"

"Well—"

"Am I wild about it? No. Do I think I can stop her if I wanted to? Well, probably, but I made a promise last year that I'm pretty sure she's armed and ready to throw in my face if I even look like I'm thinking of asking her to sit it out." Buffy released a deep breath, refocusing on the screen. Gray and Lydia Chalmers had made it as far as the airport parking lot. "She's almost as old as I was when I killed Angel."

"Shit." Out of her periphery, she saw Xander scrub a hand down his face. "I feel like I'm too young for that to make me feel old."

"Tell me about it," Buffy agreed with an appreciative snort. "Just glad I haven't

had to deal with her dating misadventures beyond the odd make-out session with a vampire, which is already too much like looking in a mirror.”

“She’s been making out with vampires? Where the hell have I been?”

Buffy grinned in spite of herself. “Just once that I know of, and it was last year. Spike and I caught her necking with the undead on Halloween. She swore up and down she didn’t know he was a vampire until he tried to bite her.”

“It really is hereditary, isn’t it? This thing the Summers women have for blood-suckers.”

They were closer now—so close she could almost sense the words pressing against the fabric of the air, waiting for whatever needed popping to pop.

“While we’re on the topic,” Xander said after a long beat, his voice artificially high, “were you ever going to tell me about Spike’s soul?”

Again, Buffy smiled, this time because the question was so familiar, even if it was a bit weird hearing it posited by someone else. “It wasn’t my thing to tell,” she answered. “I thought it should be up to him.”

“You didn’t think that we might all be more understanding if we knew about it?”

The smile faded. “God, Xander, haven’t we already had this conversation?”

“Well, yeah, but in my defense, I didn’t have all the info then.”

“Neither did I,” she replied, trying and failing to keep the edge out of her voice. “That thing we had Gray tell Lydia about how I found out? That was true. Most of it was true, actually. I didn’t know until Angel spilled the beans. Not even all the details of how he got it until last night.”

Xander fell quiet then, though only for a second. “So that part was also true. Spike got the soul on his own.”

Buffy nodded, her throat going tight. She hadn’t let herself think too much about everything she’d learned the night before. The thing Spike had told her after sneaking into her room after everyone else had gone to sleep.

It had been so soft, that rap on her door. She’d known it was him at once—had been a bit surprised that he hadn’t just followed her when she’d told everyone she was going to try to get some sleep. But then, there was a lot that remained undefined, even if she was certain everyone here knew that she and Spike were together. She hadn’t made any kind of announcement, but she also hadn’t been shy about stealing kisses or touches or whatever else, and as it was, Xander was the only one who didn’t know anyway. Or know everything.

But Spike hadn’t wanted to presume. Instead, he’d waited until the cottage was quiet, and when he had knocked, it hadn’t been to seek out sex, rather to see if she wanted him in there with her or if she needed space after the day they’d had.

Buffy had seized him by the belt loop and dragged him inside.

It would take a while, she supposed, before the sensation of simply lying with Spike, feeling his arms around her and his chest beneath her cheek, would stop being...well, not weird. Not really. Just a different kind of intimate, one she hadn’t shared with him before. She’d gotten him naked and had been in the process of taking another tour of his body when he’d stopped her. Told her he was good just holding her, as he knew her mind wasn’t really with him at the moment. That not

every time they were in bed together needed to be about sex. And yeah, the temptation had been there to just let him take her away anyway, more novocaine for the brain, but it had harkened back too much to using him, and she hadn't wanted to do that. Not now, anyway. Not when they were trying to build something new.

So instead, Buffy had folded herself into him, let him fold himself around her in turn, and said, "Tell me now. How you got the soul." And he had.

He'd told her everything and, in doing so, driven home just how little of this new reality she'd been able to reconcile. Just how it was that this vampire she'd known for years had done the impossible—not only made the decision but seen it through. Let it become more than idle thought, but rather transformed into action.

For now, Buffy was the only one with the full story. She could share Spike's soul with the others, with their enemies, with the world itself, but the motivation behind it—what had sent him on a journey across the world, what he'd put himself through physically and mentally to prove worthy of his reward—that was just for her. Maybe someday, she'd feel less protective of it. Of the way Spike had looked at her in the bathroom that night once he'd come back to himself. How he'd torn down the stairs, out of her house, into the night and back to his crypt, where Clem had been waiting. Where Spike had broken down, wondered what his place was in the world if he couldn't be a man and was kept from being a monster. Why, if he was a monster, he'd felt that crippling guilt, the despair over what he'd done, and what had possessed him to stop in the first place. And if he was a man, how he'd ever let himself go that far. Hurt her that much.

How he'd realized he was nothing and then resolved to do something about it.

The idea had taken root and taken over, Spike had told her. It hadn't been something he'd let himself debate—it hadn't even been a question, really, more just an understanding. A decision made the second it occurred to him. He'd been in motion just as quickly, gathering what he'd need to seek out a legend on the other side of the world. There hadn't been much to take, though. He'd left everything of value behind, half certain he'd never see any of it, or Sunnydale, or Dawn, or Buffy again. Half certain he would die trying to win what he'd realized was missing, though not before giving every ounce of himself to the fight.

Then the journey—he'd gotten there fast. Did a deal with a warlock in Sacramento, one he'd previously dealt with when Dru had been at her weakest, and that had hopped him across the ocean and into Uganda, at the border of a village near a cave that the locals knew to avoid. He'd gone in, and there had dwelt the demon. The source of the legend. It had sneered, and jeered, and called him pathetic, said he'd been weakened by his love for the Slayer, that he'd once been a warrior but she'd domesticated him, and there was no way he'd survive the trials necessary to secure the prize he'd come to win. Spike had scoffed, and dared, and not backed down—and then proceeded to be nearly beaten to death by a parade of challengers meant to test his physical strength, his endurance, his mental fortitude, and more.

And through it all, he'd told her as he lay curled on the bed she'd welcomed him inside, he'd thought of her.

He'd thought of the bathroom. He'd thought about the shock and betrayal in her

eyes, the hurt he'd caused. He'd called upon her words—*"Ask me again why I could never love you."*—and he'd pushed on. Needing to prove to himself that he wasn't that monster—that he could reject it. That he could make a choice, be a man if he fought for it. That he could prove it to Buffy too and chase that look off her face forever.

And finally the pain. The demon finding him when he'd been damn near a husk, hollowed out, lying on the cave floor with muscles that ached and legs that wouldn't cooperate, but the will to keep fighting if that was what was needed. To keep on, push himself until his body began to wither and erode away, for he would stop only when he had no form left. Only when he was truly dead, not just a mimicry of it.

Then the soul had been inside him, a searing thing that nearly shredded what was left of his skin and sinew. It had burned until he'd been certain he would burn too. That perhaps he wasn't strong enough after all. Not to hold it, keep it, not to experience more than the knowledge that he had won before he finally met his dust. And he'd screamed himself hoarse, screamed at pain that transcended pain, for the burning hadn't subsided. Not then. Not after he'd collapsed in a heap, and those first few soulful thoughts had flitted through a mind he'd been certain would shatter. That he needed to get home, and that meant getting to Buffy, only he couldn't do that. Could never. Not after what he'd done.

And Buffy had sighed and buried her face in his chest, and tried to imagine what she would have done if he'd let himself believe it. If she'd gone into his crypt that night and found Clem, same as always, and every night thereafter. What these last few months would have looked like without him—the Council declaring war, Gray putting Dawn in the hospital, the entire ordeal with Angel, and now this. Hiding out in an English cottage while other people did things she could not. Waiting with nothing but her worry for the war to come to keep her occupied—her fear that she was too late to save Giles, or those doubts that whispered that the Council had good reason to want her dead and the slate clean.

"Well," Xander said, snapping her back to the present, "I guess that's...something. Fighting for the soul, I mean. Makes him a little more like the not-shitty parts of Angel."

"It doesn't make him like Angel at all," Buffy argued. She supposed the comparison was inevitable, considering Angel had trodden the ground first, but that didn't mean it didn't grate. Especially now, knowing what she did. What Spike had put himself through. "It makes him like Spike. Spike...saw that he'd hurt me and decided he didn't want to be a monster anymore."

Xander nodded as though he understood, though Buffy wasn't sure that he could. It was still too large for her—had been since LA, but even more so now. This huge, amazing thing that defied everything she'd thought she'd known about vampires and herself.

"I talked to Angel before we took off," Buffy said a moment later. "When I was still trying to figure out how I felt. That was part of what we talked about—that Spike had fought for his soul and how Angel... He just knew he never would, and that bothered him."

"Well, did we even know this could happen? Did he?"

"I don't know. But that's just it, isn't it? If he knew, he didn't try. And if he didn't know, he didn't try to know. It never occurred to him to ask." She blew out a breath and did her best to refocus on the screen, though nothing of interest was happening. Just Lydia driving on what looked like the wrong side of the street, occasionally throwing a glance over her shoulder. "Maybe he'll try now."

There was a beat. "And if he does...?"

Buffy frowned and threw Xander another look. "If he does what?"

"I'm just trying to figure the you and Spike stuff out. If Angel can superglue his soul in place, what does that mean for you guys?"

Stupidly, it took Buffy what felt like a long time to understand what he was getting at. When she did, she snickered and shook her head again, turning once more to the live feed. "Angel and I have very different lives now," she said. "Of the many things that were made clear to me in LA, that was the clearest. For starters, I'm pretty sure he's in love with Cordelia."

Xander made a choking sound. "Cordelia?" he echoed between coughs. "My Cordelia?"

"*Your* Cordelia? Really?"

"Well, she was my girlfriend."

"Who you cheated on and haven't seen in, what, three years? Four? And in the meantime, you went and got yourself engaged."

"Well, yeah, when you say it like that, you make me sound all unreasonable," Xander muttered, dropping his head, though only for a second. "Seriously, though. Angel's got the hots for *Cordy* and you're just...all okay with it?"

Buffy rolled her eyes, though not at Xander or what he'd said—more at this nebulous idea of *being okay* with something that she had no say in regardless. Still, the fact of the matter was, she *was* okay. Learning that Angel's life hadn't been what she'd thought it was—that he wasn't just sitting in a lonely room somewhere pining for the love he'd decided to leave behind—had been a bitter pill to swallow, but she *had* swallowed it. There had been hurt, yes, but not hurt like she would have thought once. Not the crippling kind, rather the kind she associated with having the lights switched on suddenly in a dark room. The shapes and shadows she'd thought were one thing suddenly thrown into stark relief, letting her see everything clearly for the first time probably ever. And what was left behind wasn't the burn of brightness but rather the embarrassment of realizing the room looked nothing like the room in her mind. That she'd been content to stay in the dark as long as she had, not bothered by what she couldn't see.

In some ways, she understood how she'd let that happen. Getting over Angel was something she'd once regarded as impossible, especially in the early days when the bruise of his departure had been the angriest. Not even that long ago, she'd considered how at least death had a finality to it, unlike that brand of hurt. *That* hurt had been awful and consuming, the type she hadn't known could even exist until she was in the middle of it. The easiest way to avoid experiencing it again was to avoid the feelings that led to it. Hence the walling off and all things Riley.

But she'd meant what she'd said to Spike yesterday. That if she was going to live

forever, she didn't want that forever to be spent in fear of what might happen if she got hurt again. Odds were good she would get hurt, probably many times over. That wasn't a reason to stop living, or loving.

"I don't know Angel anymore," she said at length. "It's possible I *never* knew Angel."

Xander blinked. "What?"

"I'm not saying I didn't love him," she added, lifting a shoulder. "I did. And that feeling—that *in love* feeling that I remember was so intense it just kinda took me over. But did I actually know him? Like, did I trust him to tell me the truth? Not to keep things from me? There was a reason I tried to use my mind-read-y powers that one time to read his thoughts. We didn't even patrol together all that much. Everything with us was just...hard. And the harder it was, the more I wanted it."

"Right but, I don't think it's exactly been a picnic with Spike, either."

That was a fair point—or would have been if the situations had been comparable beyond the fact that both Spike and Angel were vampires. She'd never given things with Spike a chance to be easy. Not once. And he'd taken his cues from her, as he always had. Given as good as he got, only not quite as good as he got because the entire time, she'd been calling the shots. Pushing him back. Wanting him but hating that she wanted him, hating herself for giving in, but also needing the love he gave her. That brief warmth before the cold nothing swept her away.

If last year had been the result of them trying together, then yeah, she'd be an idiot to consider opening that door again. The fact remained that she didn't know what the world looked like if Spike was her boyfriend and not her dirty little secret, and god help her, she wanted to find out.

"Spike saw parts of me that no one else ever has," Buffy said slowly. "Not you guys. Not Angel. Not Dawn, even, or anyone else. And I'm talking really awful, ugly parts that I wish weren't there. Things I did... And things he did too. We were just messy and all kinds of screwed up. But I think because we were so messy, we can be honest now. Like instead of just having this *idea* of who he is, I *know* who he is. And he knows who I am. Even with all the bad. I don't know if Angel would be able to take all the awful ugly Buffy and love it the way Spike does. I was never as open about who I am with anyone as I am with him."

Without warning, the memory of the *morning after* she had denied herself with Spike until yesterday filled her mind. Waking up with him, feeling him around her, holding his hand as he moved inside of her. Then climbing over him and watching the way pleasure lit his face. Watching the way *he* watched *her*. How he could look at her the way he did now, in that way that was singularly Spike, so intense it was almost an internal caress.

Buffy tried to shake her head clear, find and refocus on the point she'd been in the process of making. "I never let myself see the parts of him that weren't evil, and that's one of the many reasons why last year was the way it was. That he did what he did at all just... I didn't think vampires could do that. Even Spike, who was already just this vampire anomaly to begin with in a lot of ways. It's also why it took it liter-

ally being spelled out for me to get what was different about him. I just didn't see it. But I do now, and I want to. I want to try."

She shifted her eyes back to Xander's face, and it was a gut reaction, instinctive, to tense up. Prepare herself for whatever was coming. His expression was a bit dazed, like she'd hit him over the head with a frying pan. She and Xander had never been too talky about the relationship stuff to begin with—that was more Willow's domain. From where he was sitting, this was all coming from nowhere.

Hell, where she was sitting, too. There was a reason she had been historically reticent when it came to discussing the men she loved with this best friend and not the other.

"Anyway," she went on in a rush, desperate to fill the quiet, "all that to say, if Angel wants to be with Cordelia and she's, you know, not evil at the time and feels the same way, then they should be together. Just based on everything I heard while I was there, everything they've been through... Cordelia knows him a lot better than I ever did. Seen more than I did, too. Seriously, some of the stuff he's been up to is just downright weird."

"Wow, Buff, that's all...unexpected."

She glanced at him and snickered before she could help herself. "Which part?"

"Mostly the whole Angel part. I can't say I saw any of that coming...ever."

"Yeah, well, neither did I." And that wasn't getting into other things she'd discovered in LA. Things like the day Angel had rewound because, when push came to shove, he didn't want to be Mr. Normal with her. In the gospel according to her ex, they couldn't be together if he was a vampire, and they couldn't be together if he wasn't.

He'd never tried. Not like Spike had.

For a few minutes, Buffy assumed that had been the end of the conversation. Xander seemed lost in thought, so she turned her attention back to the computer screen and clicked up the volume so the low hum of conversation was easier to follow. It was probably not a good idea anyway, talking about all this when her focus needed to be on making sure Gray played her role. While Buffy was reasonably certain that the other slayer's turn had been legitimate, both in what she'd said and with Willow's magical reassurance, there was always a chance it wasn't.

Not that anything interesting was happening at the moment. Gray had been led into what Buffy assumed was Lydia's home and was currently sitting on a sofa, giving them a nice view of an ugly vase set against flowery wallpaper. Vague sounds could be heard in the background, like someone was puttering around, but most were dwarfed by Gray's unsteady breaths that would have betrayed her anxiety if anyone were to pay attention. They had discussed this briefly—that Gray was nervous about returning to the Council after essentially being cut off from them, and that she should use that fear to her advantage. Fashion it into a shield to hide her true motivations behind. If someone should say, "Hey, you seem tense," there was this handy-dandy reason for said tension within reach.

Easy to say in prep mode. Harder to remember when it was go time. And Gray,

despite being close to Buffy in age, was so young. She'd never had to do anything like this before.

After what felt like an exceptionally long time, Lydia came strolling into the frame, smiling and announcing that Travers had agreed to hear Gray's testimony tomorrow at the Council headquarters. He sounded *interested*, according to Lydia, though mostly incredulous. After all, it was an extraordinary claim, and extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. More than simply the word of a girl who had likely been in over her head.

Buffy had worked with several watchers over the years—enough that she caught the cadence of Council-approved messaging and where it broke with Lydia's inherent interest. To her credit, the woman didn't seem uncaring, rather pompous in an old-school Wesley kind of way, set in her beliefs that what was happening around her was absolutely right. She had enough people skills to identify that Gray was nervous, and enough compassion to back those people skills up. The same woman who had, not that long ago, tried to coerce Spike into doing the Council's dirty work. It was easy to not like her for those reasons, and Buffy very much wanted to not like her. She'd heard the sales pitch, the cold detachment with which her own life had been regarded and had enough good old-fashioned no-one-makes-eyes-at-my-boyfriend-but-me resentment to wish Lydia's hair on fire. But in watching the way she was with Gray, Buffy couldn't say the woman was evil, and that bothered her.

It would be so much simpler if the world were black and white. The stupid grays all over the place kept confusing things.

Beside her, Xander made a sound that might have been a laugh or a cough. Buffy turned to him with a freshly arched eyebrow.

"Sorry," he said, catching her look and waving a hand. "Just random thoughts over here."

"Okay, cryptic."

"It's about what you were saying. About Spike. And Angel too, I guess."

That tension that hovered around all talk about her relationships, past or present, had her muscles tightening all over again.

"What about it?"

"It's not important."

"When in the history of verbal communication has saying *that* ever made someone *less* curious?" Buffy scowled and shifted in her seat so she was more angled toward him. "Important or not, you gotta tell me or face my Slayer wrath."

Xander snickered but didn't put up a fight. "It's dumb. I was just thinking how you and Spike kinda did the reverse of you and Angel."

"Meaning?"

"Well, with Angel, you did the romance part, got all horizontal and he went evil. With Spike, he's already evil when you get horizontal. And instead of going bad, he goes good. And *then* you do the romance." He huffed another laugh and shook his head again. "I don't know, there's a chance I'm rambling because I'm incredibly sleep-deprived. Makes the brain do funny things. Ignore me."

Buffy couldn't ignore him, though, or what he'd said. Some door in her head had

been unlocked, and all the things she'd been feeling since Los Angeles, since she'd looked at Spike and understood that Angel was right, began to connect. There were the disjointed thoughts and feelings, the confusion and the anger, the awe over the enormity of what she had been forced to accept. The hurt and the doubt, too, and everything that had been building steadily over the last few months. *Everything*. Spike in his crypt. On her doorstep. Telling Lydia that he wouldn't play her game. Helping her mend after Gray's stake had pierced into her shoulder. The look on his face after his throat had been slit and Dawn hurt. How he'd protested when she'd demanded he take her blood to heal. Training with him in the studio and reveling in the rush, the pull that had been there since the beginning.

Then, of course, the gut-punch she'd experienced when she'd realized that what she'd felt for Spike the previous year had been love, even if not good love. And how that love had informed every decision. Why hating him after the bathroom had been impossible, even if she'd wanted to. Why she hadn't been angry, not really, but hurt. Hurt because someone she loved had betrayed trust she hadn't meant to give.

The soul had thrown her mind for a loop not only because of what it meant for Spike. It rewrote everything she'd thought she'd known about vampires, yes, but more importantly, everything she'd thought she'd known about herself.

"Buffy?" Xander was looking at her again, this time concerned. "You okay?"

Buffy was on her feet. She didn't remember standing. Her heart was pounding, too. Raucous, jolting knocks against her ribcage. It seemed impossible that Xander couldn't hear it. Spike almost certainly did. And *god*, just thinking his name made it pound harder. "I, umm, I'll be back. I need to tell Spike something. Can you..." She waved at the laptop. "Can you keep an eye on...?"

"Sure." He blinked at her as though he hadn't just made a lightbulb go off over her head. Maybe it was better that way. "Nothing good on TV anyway."

Buffy nodded absently, then turned and headed out the kitchen door that would take her to the weapons room. She wiped her hands along her sides—sweaty palm problems—and hoped it wouldn't sound to vampire ears like the approach of a drumline but she was sure that was *exactly* what it sounded like, even when complemented with the tinkle of teenage laughter. Whatever Spike and Dawn were getting up to, it didn't sound much like fight preparation.

Indeed, when she poked her head into the room, Buffy found Dawn brandishing a sword that looked like it weighed about as much as she did, which accounted for the reason the pointy end was embedded in the floor. And Spike was standing back, trying to look annoyed but not pulling it off very well. There was too much amusement in his eyes, and his mouth had a twitching problem.

"Yeah, you'll be a right terror," he said as Dawn, huffing and puffing, tried to pull the sword upright. "Care to try somethin' you have a chance of actually holding on your own?"

"Buffy's trained me on swords!" Dawn protested before blowing at the hair that had started to slide into her line of vision. "I saved her butt last year, too, when we were in a grave and all these skeletons started coming to life. And it looks so much cooler than the crossbow!"

Spike rolled his eyes—rolled his whole damn head, in fact—and landed his gaze on Buffy's as he righted himself in a way that told her plainly he'd known she was there. He smiled, warm and commiserative at the same time, a sort of *she's your bloody sister* look that had the situation in Buffy's chest nearing levels that a cardiologist would probably have something to say about.

"I had to *beg* Giles to let me use the crossbow," Buffy piped in, and watched as her sister tried to whirl around without letting go of the sword to hilarious effect. Dawn finally gave up and let the thing crash to the floor. "Actually, he never officially let me. I just kinda took it."

"There's a shock," Dawn replied dryly. "I'm good with a crossbow, I know. But swords—"

"Are way less practical and the only reason you're obsessed with them is I *just* started training you on that. If we're going into a fight, your weapon needs to be something you can A, carry and B, use with confidence. That sword is neither of those things."

"You're just saying that because you want me to be as far from the action as possible."

"I also don't want you to poke your eye out with the pointy end, but yeah." Buffy offered what she hoped came across as an understanding smile. "Go with what you're best at. We'll practice more with swords when we get home."

Dawn favored her with the age-old glower of put-upon younger siblings everywhere but nodded. "Right. Okay," she grumbled. "Any news on the Gray watchage?"

"Nada yet. Go keep Xan company—you might hear or see something he doesn't."

"But I'm—"

"Spike and I need to talk," Buffy said. "And you're still not allowed to be around lethal objects without adult supervision, so that means you need to amscray."

She expected more argument—that was the way it went with asking Dawn to do anything, after all, even if the last year had tamed the usual discourse from actual acidity to more playacting the part of the railroaded baby sister. But Dawn didn't argue. Her eyes went momentarily wide before she shifted a glance at Spike, who had also stiffened, before she nodded and made her way toward Buffy and the hall beyond.

"Don't dump him," she whispered when she was near. "Please?"

Buffy grinned and patted her sister's shoulder. "No dumping. It's a good talk."

"In that case, don't be too loud. Remember, you get the bill for my therapy."

She snickered but nodded at that, waited for Dawn to pass before giving Spike the full force of her attention. The tightness in his shoulders had slackened somewhat and his face... Well, it was one of the many Faces of Spike. This time, a tremulous sort of excitement—not too hopeful, not too curious, as though he were trying to temper himself, and of course that was exactly what he was doing. A gift of the soul.

"Come with me," Buffy said, and turned to head toward her room. Or their room. It was really their room. The back of her neck tingled as he obeyed, his presence as always this physical thing that called to her the way few things ever had.

He stepped across the threshold after her and, without needing instruction, turned to close the door behind him. And when he met her eyes once more, she felt that stirring from before. The one that had her heart thumping and the rest of her shot through with nerves. Which was stupid—her body was being really stupid—but it was big too.

The last time she'd done this, really done it, she'd been a kid with nothing to lose and no idea how much pain the future had in store for her. Standing on the other side of that, knowing that pain was out there, could fall on her at any time, was a brand of terrifying that she'd spent years trying to avoid.

But she'd said she wanted to try, and she'd meant it. This was trying.

"Why did you fight to get your soul back?" she asked.

Spike blinked in surprise. She didn't blame him. The words had rushed out, clumsy and raw. "What is this? You know already."

"Tell me anyway."

He hesitated but, as always, didn't deny her. "So I could be someone. Someone who wouldn't... Someone you could be with. Who wouldn't hurt you like I did."

That was close. Buffy nodded shakily and pressed on. "If you'd never met me, would you have done it?"

"What?"

"The trials. The torture. Everything you went through to earn your soul. Would you have done it anyway?"

Spike stared at her agog for a few seconds, and with good reason, before furrowing his brow and shaking his head. "What kind of bloody question is that?"

She surprised them both by laughing in response—the sound a bit hysterical. "Sorry," she said, bringing a hand to her face, prepared to cover her mouth if necessary. "I don't know. I just... Xander and I were talking and he said something that made me realize just how much you are *not* like Angel."

The air between them grew heavy with its silence. Finally, Spike arched an eyebrow and said, "That somethin' you really needed pointed out?"

"You'd think no, but I kinda did." Buffy fidgeted and tucked fallen locks of hair behind her ear. "I'm gonna be ramble girl here for a minute so...bear with me. It's just that there's this very special Buffy pattern when it comes to men. Starts off good, goes way bad, ends with him leaving town forever. And the most common denominator in these relationships has been me."

"Well, that's a load of bollocks."

"Not to me. After Angel turned evil, I felt so guilty for doing that to him. Making him evil."

"Slayer—"

"And Riley too. Riley was Mr. Straight Shooter. An all-American boy next door. And being with me made him go—"

"You finish that sentence and I'll thump you." Spike stepped forward, his eyes dark. "You really think that? You think you drove that wanker to do what he did?"

"Yeah, I guess." She rubbed her arms. "But that's not... I don't even think that's the point. Just that it's how it felt. If it hadn't been for Buffy, Angel's soul would've

stayed where it was, and no one would've gotten killed. If it hadn't been for Buffy, Riley would never have set foot in a vamp brothel. I should have a warning label stamped on my forehead, so people know the exact risks of getting involved with me. Like, danger: could be bad for physical or spiritual health."

He stared at her, not bothering to hide his exasperation. "What are you tryin' to say, love? Aimin' to warn me off? Bit late for that." Another step and he was in her space, close enough to breathe in. "And even if you were, I think you know I don't scare easy."

"I'm not trying to warn you. I don't need to. You already did it. I threw all my bad at you. All of it, and there was a *lot*. I treated you like... I don't want to think about how I treated you. It was just bad."

He touched her arm, squeezed. "Think we also talked about this before, yeah? That's all past now."

"But that's just it, Spike, I *tried* with Angel. Tried to be perfect. Tried to hide all the crazy, irrational, ugly parts that make me *me*." She breathed out and did her best to ignore the increased cadencing in her chest, but it was no good. Her heart was pounding so hard that her whole body seemed to shake with it. "And I did the same with Riley—or not the same but close. I held back. I didn't share everything, just the stuff I thought he could handle. I knew being completely open would freak him out or intimidate him. He was already so worried about keeping up with me that he was willing to poison himself to try. And then you, I didn't try at all. I was just a complete fucking mess. And still, somehow, the Buffy pattern didn't take. You... You fought for your soul. You fought to become better. Why did you do that?"

Spike let out a ragged breath and squeezed her arm, his face softening with understanding. Seeing through her as he always seemed to do, hearing both what she was saying and what she was trying to say. At least she hoped so. It was a hard thing to do, especially with the thoughts all jumbled and confused, never mind that the scars of the past were suddenly raw again, all the hard-earned self-preservation instincts she'd developed screaming at her just to shut her trap or that it was too late and the damage was done. Her chest was tight, and her lungs seemed to be working overtime, and she could feel how hot her skin was, like it could melt off the bone. And Spike was still looking at her and his eyes were full of so much she thought she might drown in them, and that scared her too, but the rest of her knew she would be okay. After all, she'd drowned once before and somehow lived to tell the tale.

"I wanted to be what you deserved," he said thickly. "Cause even at your darkest, you're still light, Buffy. Pure light. So bright it's almost blinding, but a fella can't look away, either. I've been cold most of my life, but when I look at you, there's nothing but warm. You're the best bloody person I know or have ever known. The kindest and the strongest, too, and I was so desperate for that, for all the things that make it impossible not to love you, that I tried to bring you into my world, keep you just for me. I left to fight for my soul so I would be what I thought I was—someone who would never hurt you. But also so I would be someone who wouldn't try to drag you into the dark anymore but be enough to stand in your light. Not the way it worked out, of course, but that was the thought behind—"

Buffy moved without realizing she meant to, her arms going around his neck and her mouth swallowing the remainder of his words, taking them into herself, feeling him respond in kind. No one kissed her the way Spike kissed her—with hunger and yearning and love bordering on reverence, passion and heat and softness too, and most of all like she was something he would always need. Always want. An addiction of the sweetest sort.

And it was light, too. This feeling, alongside the nerves and the fear and the parts of her screaming that none of it would go the way she hoped or wanted. That she'd never once given her heart to someone without being destroyed in the process.

But this time, maybe. God, *maybe*. If anyone could make a believer out of her, it was Spike. After all, he'd already done the impossible.

"I love you," she whispered against his lips, her eyes burning and her heart burning and all of her burning. "I'm not great at saying it but—"

That was as far as she got before Spike clutched her to him, hands and mouth everywhere, words whispered against her skin. And the mattress at her back and the weight of him on top of her briefly before he rolled so that she was astride him, and he was smiling and laughing and crying and she was too. Here at the end of the line. The fight ahead and the fight behind them. The fight never over.

This one was. It was over and she'd won. Even if she never said it again, though she hoped she did. She wanted to. But should her nerves and fears, the ghosts of the past get the better of her, she'd know she'd won today. When it mattered the most.

And that was something.

ANOTHER HERO, ANOTHER MINDLESS CRIME

THE THING WAS, GRAY STILL WASN'T SURE SHE'D MADE THE RIGHT CALL.

It had been touch and go, and quite possibly the result of being starved for action. She had, after all, spent weeks inside those four flimsy walls. Walls she'd had to fortify herself through bargains forged with creatures like that warlock Zephyr, who had looked at her like she was something he wanted to eat. Eat as in with teeth and chewing and swallowing, not the sexy kind of *eat* that Gray was beginning to doubt she'd live long enough to experience.

Something had shifted in her mind, born of desperation and probably a healthy helping of stupidity. The thing about isolation was there was no one to bounce ideas off. Her father had stopped telling her much of value and trying to get anything out of Lydia hadn't been any better.

Then that night in the graveyard, amped full of righteousness, she'd seen the vampire and thought it possible she could redeem herself.

She had relived that moment endlessly over the last couple of days—the rush, the thrill...and then the plummet when Summers had slammed into her out of nowhere. Gray hadn't been looking, too focused on the vampire to worry about the girlfriend.

That had nearly cost her her life, and that realization had set those moments on an endless loop in her head. Staring up through a world that was slowly going dark. Buffy Summers, her hero, her idol, her first crucial assignment, snarling down at her as her lungs began to burn. Knowing that death had come for her the way it did for all slayers, and by that point not having the will to fight it. She'd fucked up. Couldn't seal the deal with Summers, couldn't keep that witch's magic from betraying the Council's secrets, and couldn't stay inside when that had been her one order as other people made the necessary plans to clean up her mess.

Maybe this fate was what she had deserved, she'd thought, for failing so miserably.

It hadn't been until after she'd limped her way back to her crummy motel room that the full implications of what had just happened—what she'd witnessed and how close she'd come to death—had hit her fully. The vampire she'd been poised to slay coming to her rescue, telling Summers that she wouldn't forgive herself if she went through with it, that it was okay, and he would handle the girl. Just not then. Not when she lacked the strength to defend herself. And none of that should have been possible. None of it meshed with the things she'd been told, the stories that had slowly transformed Buffy Summers from hero to monster. She hadn't known what to do with it. Had called her father, who hadn't given her much except that the Council was waiting until Faith was dead and the existing Slayer line severed to decide what to do with Gray. Reclaiming that power was more important than figuring out how to solve a problem like Buffy Summers. After all, if it worked, they would have something to tell the legacy Council members who still needed convincing.

And maybe it would be better if Buffy Summers *did* kill Gray. Her own father had said that. They were at war, after all, and sacrifices had to be made. The second the rest of the Council turned on Summers—the second everyone understood just how vital it was that Buffy Summers be stopped—the sooner they could cease this cloak and dagger bullshit. Just bring down the full might of the Council on her without pretense.

Gray had wondered then, for the first time, if that had been the intent all along. If she had been chosen to become the Slayer with the purpose of being a sacrifice—the final move before checkmate. That she had almost surrendered to it the night before, had been *glad* about it, had left her feeling...

Well, she hadn't known exactly. And that *not knowing* had led her to Buffy Summers's doorstep. Which, in turn, had led her here. Wearing a camera fashioned by the witch whose magic had wrung Gray's secrets from her own mouth, poisoning the Council against her. Navigating her new existence as someone who was in league with the enemy, all the while her own goddamn mind seemed at war with her. Trying to rationalize everything she'd seen in Sunnydale as an elaborate ploy to get her to doubt, screaming at her that she was a traitor now, same as Summers, and if the Council killed her it would be more than warranted. That it wasn't too late to turn back. Come clean with Lydia that she was doing Buffy Summers's dirty work because she'd been weak and confused, driven mad from forced isolation. It would be so easy, too. Sure, Summers and the others would know they had been betrayed but they also expected it so, why not? At the end of the day, Gray owed them nothing.

But every time those words were in her mouth, pressing against her lips, her gut clenched and her heart skipped and she remembered her father telling her she could make history as a martyr. The one who had restored the Council to its intended glory by realigning the distribution of power, and therein doing her part to save the world. And she couldn't help but wonder if he'd known it might come to this—if he'd even expected it—and had still volunteered her for the part.

Gray had never been particularly close to her father—his work came first, and that was just understood in the Asra household—but their relationship hadn't been exactly cold, either. Just distant. Him always working, sometimes away for days or weeks at a time, and her mother always ready to explain why that was necessary. How the fate of the world relied on the actions of men like her father, and what an honor it was to be a part of it, even on the periphery. Gray was sure some well-paid psychologist with a bunch of fancy degrees would have plenty to say about that dynamic and how it had informed her own desire to be Chosen. That what she'd really wanted was all that attention and pride and yes, okay, so she was a walking cliché, but she was self-aware now, and that surely had to account for something.

So she didn't say anything at all. Didn't let Lydia know about the cottage the vengeance demon had magicked into existence that just happened to house the remaining loose ends the Council had to tie up. She said nothing of the brooch-turned-camera currently transmitting the rather ordinary interior of the building she had spent her youth worshipping from afar, just kept her eyes facing forward as the rest of her waited for a chance to do something worthwhile rather than whatever the fuck she'd been doing all her life.

And hoping that no one could see any of this—the fact that she was having what had to be a mental breakdown while on center stage.

Something must have been on her face, though, for Lydia's expression went from excited to worried the next time she turned to catch a glimpse of her. "Are you quite all right, dear? You look a tad peaky."

Gray licked her chapped lips and forced a smile. The bruises Summers had given her had mostly faded, but it still hurt when her mouth formed certain shapes and there was a *clicking* sound in her bones every time she tried to move her head. "Just the jetlag," she said, and this seemed to satisfy her watcher, for Lydia promptly whirled back around and continued forward down a hall that managed to be both ornate and dull at the same time.

That was another thing. Gray had lived for years with what she'd always imagined the inside of the Council Headquarters would look like. Those images had been vague when she'd been very young, as it was a place her father didn't visit but for very important occasions. Yet the first time she'd been here, she'd been too juiced with anticipation to give her surroundings more than a passing thought. Her parents had ushered her straight down to the ceremonial room to get the ritual underway. By the time she'd left, brimming with the new strength gifted to her, everything cosmetic about the Council had been unimportant, superficial. All that mattered was the power she possessed.

Now, though, with months behind her and the lenses in her rose-colored glasses all shattered, Gray allowed herself some disappointment that the place didn't match the one in her head. The exterior was stately, like many of the older buildings, but the inside resembled maybe a slightly fancier version of a regular office. More wood that would be used in modern architecture, and a few dated embellishments, but nothing...grandiose or important.

It was disappointing, and that was a sensation Gray was slowly becoming accustomed to.

That wasn't to say it wasn't impressive. It was. There was a nice sort of foyer, even if it had been startlingly open, equipped with a single desk in the middle of the place and staffed by an older, librarian-ish sort of woman whom Gray supposed was there to keep civilians from accessing the Council proper. Also to keep an eye on the watchers who passed through, as she'd raised her eyebrows rather imperiously at Lydia when she'd walked in and made a note in some thick, ancient-looking registry. Behind the front desk woman was a set of elevators that took them to the third floor, then opened into an empty hall that branched out on either side. Lydia started down the left without hesitating, and Gray followed, doing her best not to jostle too harshly lest she risk the brooch falling off. That hall led to another area that Gray couldn't help but compare to a waiting room, where someone behind yet another desk was informed that Lydia Chalmers and the Slayer were present to meet with Travers. Then more walking until Lydia came to an abrupt halt outside a door bearing a placard with his name and title listed in scrolly text.

Stupidly, Gray also found that disappointing. It just seemed so ordinary for something she'd always considered extraordinary.

Lydia turned, though, and regarded her with a wide, bright smile. "Don't be nervous," she said, patting Gray's shoulder. "He is quite interested in your testimony."

Considering the testimony was a big fat red herring, Gray didn't find that altogether comforting, but she nodded anyway and did her best to blank her face as Lydia rapped her knuckles against the door. What Gray wouldn't give for just a smidgen of the confidence she'd experienced when she'd first arrived in Sunnydale—filled with conviction and daring, naïve enough to view all of this as fun.

That version of herself seemed far away, much more so than just a handful of weeks. She'd always believed she was so grown up, mostly because other people told her she was. Only now it seemed what they'd meant was she was obedient. Never made too much noise. Never caused a fuss. Never set a toe out of line. Authority figures were revered rather than challenged, and all the instructions and knowledge and wisdom they imparted were swallowed and accepted as the gospel truth.

She'd never had reason to question before now. Everything she'd ever been told had been backed up by her senses—measured in things she could see and smell and touch. Blatant, indisputable fact. And all it had taken to destroy her worldview was one vampire doing something he shouldn't have.

But she couldn't think of that now. She had a role to perform.

"Miss Asra," Travers said in a deep, rough but cultured voice as he rose from his seat. "So good to see you again."

Gray nodded and forced a grin, wondered for a second how she normally greeted people she'd just met. Certainly, she didn't curtsy, as her stupid legs wanted her to do now. She took the hand he offered and gave it a hearty shake. "And you, Mr. Travers."

He gave her an indulgent smile that did nothing to quell her nerves. "So, not to

get straight to business, but you'll understand we are quite busy at the moment. Lydia tells me you overheard quite the exchange between Miss Summers and William the Bloody. I would like to hear it in your own words, if you don't mind."

She drew in a deep breath and nodded again, her heart skipping. This was the part she was most concerned about—even if the lie was mostly true, there was still enough *lie* in there to make her skin itch. Lying was something she'd never gotten good at, having skipped the whole rebellious phase of her teen years, and trying to learn when the stakes were this high seemed a recipe for disaster. She just had to hope what she was about to say matched what she'd told Lydia.

Travers didn't say anything while she recited the story—he didn't react much at all, just studied her with unblinking eyes and an unreadable expression. When she finished, she snapped her mouth shut and fought the urge to fidget or glance at Lydia for guidance, wanting to appear calm and unworried, though she was sure that the sweat starting to gather along her brow would betray her. If she was lucky, maybe her heart would just explode from her chest *Alien*-style and make being caught the least of her worries.

"You believe this is accurate," Travers said at length. "That the vampire Spike was telling Miss Summers the truth about this...soul quest of his."

"I-I don't know," Gray replied, running her palms along her pant legs. "But from what I overheard, it sounded like the soul was something he didn't want her to know about, and that it just came out because of this trip they took to Los Angeles. Spike's been back in Sunnydale for months now so if he was going to try to lie to her about this, I'm not sure what he gained by staying quiet."

"You also said that, according to this conversation, it wasn't Spike who revealed himself to Buffy Summers," Lydia chimed in, damn near making Gray jump out of her skin. "That the vampire known as Angel, sometimes Angelus, made the revelation while they were attempting to capture him for re-ensoulment." She placed a hand on Gray's shoulder that was probably meant to be reassuring but did little more than excite her already frenetic nerves. "If Spike was in fact not telling the truth, he was certainly depending quite a lot on luck to ensure the story came out at the optimal time."

"Which would be a noteworthy observation were we speaking about anything other than a vampire," Travers said. "I believe there are times, Lydia, when you overestimate their abilities to reason and rationalize."

"Just as there are times when you underestimate them," she replied in a clipped but not hostile voice. Rather, it sounded like the beats of a familiar, revisited discussion. "I will remind you that I have studied William the Bloody extensively, as well as interviewing him two years ago. If you ask me, Quentin, this perfectly explains why he turned down the offer we made last fall. Particularly if Miss Summers was indeed the motivation behind his quest. He refused to betray her."

Travers huffed something that might have been a chuckle before shifting his attention back to Gray. "She never forgave him for that," he explained. "In hindsight, we never should have attempted to negotiate with such a creature. It cost us the

element of surprise—the reason, I believe, that you have been unable to fulfill your duty in ending Miss Summers’s life.”

And there it was. Gray swallowed hard but didn’t say anything. Just waited.

Travers offered a flat smile. “In many respects, you are not to blame for this failure. You were sent into a volatile situation against, whatever else she may be, a very skilled and competent slayer. While your training was extensive, it left you with little practical experience.”

“I’ve fought vampires before,” she protested, unable to help herself this time.

“Yes, back when the prospect of you being Called under the old ways was more likely, but still carefully supervised by those who were around you,” Travers said, nodding. “Not the same as preparing you for a task as monumental as removing a slayer with Miss Summers’s experience and uncanny knack for survival from the equation. Circumstances being what they were, I daresay we’re fortunate that you made it out of that situation with your life.” He paused before chuckling again. “You look surprised.”

That was because she was. “I thought...” Gray breathed out and stole a glance at Lydia. “I thought I was in trouble.”

“Trouble? What on earth for?”

“Well, my father—”

Travers scoffed and waved a hand. “I respect your father a great deal,” he said, shifting to lean forward. “He is a remarkable watcher, one of the few Americans I find I can tolerate, as well as a good friend. However, I do think he is an excellent example of why we discourage the appointment of family members in the position of watcher over slayers. The role calls for discipline, emotional and intellectual objectivity that is difficult to maintain even without a familial bond. Your father told you what, exactly?”

Gray was shaking now, and there was no hiding it. No helping it, either, or the creeping doubt she could feel poisoning her convictions. Her upside-down world was beginning to feel like it might rotate again. “That I wouldn’t be given protection from the Council because I told Summers about the staffs and how I was Called. Gave away Council secrets.”

“It was my understanding that you were under the compulsion of a truth spell that forced you to reveal as much.”

“I was.”

Again, Travers grinned, though this time there was some pity in the expression. “Your father is a great man, as I said. He is also very proud. Yes, very proud indeed. And pride can be a fragile thing.”

But it hadn’t just been her father. She’d called him first—gotten an earful about that, about how her watcher should always be her primary point of contact, but she hadn’t wanted a watcher at the time. She’d wanted someone familiar, someone whose voice she knew, and thought there was a chance he could help if it turned out she really had screwed up. He’d told her he would do what he could to smooth everything over. The call informing her of the Council’s displeasure hadn’t come until later, but it had come from him. He’d spoken with authority. Not speculating, just telling her

how the Council viewed her screwup and that she was essentially on her own until they decided what to do with her. Contacting her watcher at that point seemed useless. What could Lydia tell her that her father already hadn't? Certainly no better news.

Unless Travers was right. Unless all of that had been bluster. Bluster she'd never bothered to double-check, because why would she?

Gray had never had a panic attack before, but she was familiar with the term and wondered idly if that was what was happening now. The bruising intensity of her thumping heart, the clamminess in her hands, the sweat that seemed to be running into her eyes, the way air itself had thinned to the point she couldn't tell if she was breathing or not, the corners of the room going blurry then black. For if she had misunderstood—if all that had really happened since the night Summers had tied her up and forced the truth from her mouth was that her father was disappointed—then she'd *really* fucked up.

Summers and the others knew about the ritual, knew about the plan. And Gray hadn't been bespelled into giving them that. She'd told them of her own free will. She'd come here with the intention of undermining the very establishment she'd spent her life idolizing. She was betraying them *right now* with the camera the witch had disguised as a brooch.

"You look unwell, Miss Asra," Travers said from what sounded like very far away. "Lydia, have my assistant fetch the girl some water."

Gray shook her head, which only made the room spin. "I'm fine," she replied, having never been less fine in her life. Her hands were twitching now, instinct screaming at her to rip off the goddamn camera, to smash it. Start confessing and hope that nothing irreparable had been done. And she could have—it would be so easy to just turn away from this wild world she'd somehow stumbled into. Go back to what she knew.

Except that doubt remained, toxic and all-consuming and impossible to shake. Even if the Council hadn't turned its back on her as she'd thought, even if the only person who blamed her for what had gone wrong was her own father, some things remained unchanged. Like the fact that the Council had left her to her own devices to find ways of keeping herself off Summers's radar. Like the fact that the vampire had swooped in, stopped Summers from ending Gray's life, then refused to do it himself. Like the fact that he had fought for a soul, if the story was to be believed. Perhaps the Council hadn't blamed her but they *had* abandoned her. She'd been left for dead.

Then she'd shown up on Summers's doorstep and, aside from the kid trying to scare her with a crossbow, Summers and her friends hadn't done anything. Hell, they'd let her have the run of that house the demon had conjured up for them, including the treasure trove of weapons. They had demonstrated trust that the Council never had. That the Council *still* wasn't.

"Here you are, dear." That was Lydia, returned now with the glass of water. "Drink up."

Gray accepted the glass and did as she was told, but the symptoms had already

started to calm, her head clearing. The shifting of her world evened out, and while she felt shaky, everything else remained in place.

"Thank you," she said, lowering the glass. "That's better. I don't know what happened."

"Quite all right," Travers said. His voice acted as an anchor, helping her regain her focus. "Tension has been high the last few weeks, particularly if you were laboring under the impression that you were, as you say, in trouble. We are incredibly appreciative of the effort you have put forth into addressing the Buffy Summers problem. Again, you have done extremely well considering her experience." A slight pause. "Is there anything else on the subject of William the Bloody? Did he mention how this soul was allegedly obtained?"

"No." Gray sipped again at her water, giving herself time to relocate the script she had memorized. "No. Just that he fought for it. My theory is he might have tried one of the pocket dimensions."

Travers raised his eyebrows in an indication of polite interest.

"I read about those," she went on, trying not to speak so fast she tripped over her words. The last thing she needed now was to ramble. "In my studies before I was Called. These dimensions that exist just slightly adjacent to our reality, where the sole purpose is to survive a certain number of tasks to win something considered unattainable. Or am I confusing that with something else?"

"No, no, you are quite right, though I doubt very much this was the process by which William the Bloody obtained his soul, if the soul does in fact exist," Travers said. "The odds of surviving these trials are remarkably slim, and there is typically a terrible price to pay in order to reach the other side. I find the likelihood of a vampire successfully completing any such set of trials close to impossible."

"Maybe for most vampires, but not this one," Lydia interjected, sounding almost defensive. "He has always been rather unique. Running toward danger rather than from it. Seeking out the Slayer rather than attempting to escape her notice. Were there any who could pull off such a feat, I do believe Spike would be he."

Travers favored Lydia with what Gray thought was an exceedingly patronizing look but, after a long beat, nodded. "It might be worth it to suspend efforts to eliminate the vampire Spike for the time being. If he could be captured, he could be studied. At the very least, questioned to ascertain the credibility of his claim. I'm sure you, Lydia, would be the first to volunteer."

"I would," Lydia agreed, perhaps a smidge too readily, and with the sort of gleam in her eye that would likely have Summers ready to punch something. Still, it was nice to know at least *this* much was true—everything else Gray had ever believed might have been built on a lie, but not her watcher's infatuation with a certain vampire—that was unassailable fact.

"Very good," Travers said before returning his attention to Gray. "Now, there is of course the other matter. As I understand it, you are aware of what is to take place here tomorrow evening."

Gray blinked, her heartbeat kicking up again. This was not expected. "Tomorrow?"

"Your father has been very forthright in everything he shared with you." The smile on Travers's face had faded into something less than kind. "A bit more than we would have hoped, especially after what occurred with that truth spell. While I am intrigued by the possibility of this souled vampire, I am also troubled that you, knowing the witch had extracted valuable information from you once already, left your sanctuary in search of Buffy Summers against strict orders to remain unseen."

"I was—"

Once again, he held up a hand and nodded. "Child, I do respect that your pride was wounded and you were attempting to right a wrong for which you felt responsible. That tenacity is admirable, but not at times such as these. Our dealings with Miss Summers have only reinforced that she has a rather unique ability to create a good amount of chaos even when facing what appear to be insurmountable odds. We will be sending you back to the States as soon as the ritual is complete, and this time, you will not be alone."

Gray glanced at Lydia once more, who met her with the sort of encouraging smile that would have been most welcome months ago when she'd first been apprised of the situation in Sunnydale and told that she would be traveling there alone. Assured then that she was capable and trusted and more than a match for anything Summers decided to throw at her, as well as informed that the Council's involvement needed to remain quiet as long as possible. There had already been a close call in which Summers had nearly discovered the truth, and they couldn't risk it happening again until all preparations had been made—or the Rubicon had been crossed, as her father had said. At that time, Lydia had been publicly accused of spearheading the effort to kill Buffy Summers, acting independent of the Council itself. The Council had needed that story to be believed until they discovered how to end the existing Slayer line. Keep Summers from forming plans that could disrupt their own.

For some reason, it hadn't struck Gray as odd when she'd heard it, rather seemed obvious and straightforward. But sitting here, still shaking from what she was certain had been her first panic attack and lying to the most powerful man in the world, she wondered how much the Council truly feared Buffy Summers. They had certainly gone to lengths to convince her that everything was business as usual. That the offer made to Spike had been a result of disunity within the Council and not representative of a change in policy. That Gray had been Called as a result of the natural order, and that her predecessor Faith's death had simply been covered up by the prison.

Suddenly, it seemed dangerous bordering on stupidity to be sitting here at all.

"Furthermore..." Travers rose to his feet. He wasn't an especially tall man but for as much influence as he had, Gray couldn't help but shrink within herself. "We have a useful bargaining chip. One of which I believe you are already aware. If you would be so kind as to accompany me."

It took her sluggish brain a beat longer than it should have to realize what he'd said, and another for her to feel confident that her legs wouldn't betray her if she stood. She did look to Lydia one last time, wondering, but her watcher had only a nod to offer—a sort of *you do as Quentin asks* nod—and remained seated. As much as

Gray didn't love the idea of being alone with him, she didn't see that she had much of a choice, and followed him out of his office.

"You know we arrested Rupert Giles, of course," Travers said conversationally as they walked. "Your father shared that with you."

"He did, yes."

"Yes," he repeated. There was something in his tone she didn't like, and for the first time, Gray wondered if her father was the one in trouble. "When Lydia told us of her intent to bring you to London to discuss the vampire, we thought it might also provide a unique opportunity for you to learn more from the man who knows Buffy Summers the best. As you can imagine, he hasn't had much of use to say to us, even when compelled by some of the more persuasive techniques we have at our disposal. I am hopeful, however, that he might be more receptive to you."

Gray couldn't see why and wasn't sure she wanted to ask. It was just occurring to her that she was about to complete at least one of Summers's objectives—see where Rupert Giles was being kept and ascertain he was indeed alive.

Travers didn't deign to fill the silence between them with further small talk, so Gray focused instead on the somehow deafening cadence of their feet against the hard floors. She wasn't interested in the walls this time, or the occasional antiquity prominently on display, instead trying to focus on what the plan would be once she was safely on the outside again. If she should try to give Lydia the slip and head back to Summers, or if there was more to be gained by playing her part. She couldn't imagine Travers extending the invitation for her to attend the ritual...though maybe he would, and then what would she do? Just hang back and wait for Summers and the others to burst through the door and start doing whatever it was insurgents did in these situations? They hadn't talked about what came next—Gray hadn't let herself think too much about it, either, as *next* had seemed like a fairytale place she'd never actually reach.

Except she was here, on the cusp, and after she verified where the Council was holding Rupert Giles, *next* would arrive, and she needed some idea of how she was going to navigate it.

Travers led her around a final corner, then stopped at a familiar single elevator with its single button. "Not too much further now," he told her with what she assumed was supposed to be a reassuring smile before pressing the button. The door slid promptly open, and then she was inside, examining her surroundings. The last time, she'd been so jazzed about becoming the Slayer that she hadn't bothered to look, assuming it was the same as elevators everywhere. Now she saw the control panel was comprised of three buttons in a neat, horizontal row, and none with a floor marker. Travers chose the one on the far right without glancing at her and the next thing she knew, her stomach had dropped and they were descending.

"We don't use this floor often," Travers said conversationally once the elevator had come to a smooth halt and the door opened again. "It's not normal Council practice to engage in ritual magic. Until late last fall, I don't believe I had been down here in more than a decade."

Gray let out a low breath and nodded, not really wanting elaboration. She remem-

bered enough from her last visit—remembered feeling completely detached from the outside world in a way that had both terrified her and filled her with calm purpose. The underground here was not a mild underground like a Midwest basement, but deep underground. Enough that if she took the stairs, it'd be a few hours before she saw daylight.

There was no calm purpose now, just the understanding that she was far from the front door Lydia had escorted her through. Too far for anyone to help her if she decided to scream. Travers could do what he wanted, and no one would ever know.

"Naturally, we're very cautious with the magic we do practice," Travers went on, ushering her into a dark corridor. Unlike those above, the walls here were a slate gray—like the new stainless-steel refrigerator her mom wouldn't stop going on about—and adorned with crimson tapestries. They had looked regal and important the first time she'd seen them, but she couldn't recapture that. All she saw now was the color of blood. "Magic, as you know, is unpredictable, so we do what we can to contain the effects, ensure they do not extend beyond the boundaries we establish. But of course, you'll remember how it works."

She did. She could never forget the room where she'd been led by her father. Where she'd stood, shackled like a King Kong bride as dark energy had swirled and carved serpentine paths through the air, and she hadn't understood that she had to consume it until it had been forcing its way into her, her eyes watering and her muscles cramping and everything in her body seizing, and she'd willed herself through the pain because it had been what she'd wanted. God, what she'd wanted more than anything.

"When this was first established as the Council's permanent home, it was common practice to capture certain demons for further study," Travers said when the hallway T'd off into another. "Appropriate holding cells were installed, and we have found them most useful in keeping both Mr. Giles and Miss Lehane quite secure."

And indeed, *cells* were exactly what they looked like. Medieval cells at that, as though the elevator had taken Gray both underground and back in time. Each was guarded by a heavy, arched, iron door with a little barred-off window that she desperately wanted to stop and peek through but knew better than to try. "You put them in demon cells?" she asked instead, some of the panic from before setting in again, though she didn't know why this time. She wasn't really shocked by what she was seeing. She wasn't sure what she *was* anymore.

"Not ideal, I will grant you, but convenient. We did provide some comforts of home for Mr. Giles in the hopes he might be more cooperative. Alas..." Travers splayed his hands in a vague *what can you do* gesture before finally coming to a stop. "Here we are," he said, and reached into his pocket to procure a long, skeletal key that also looked like a prop for some period drama. "After you, my dear."

Gray nodded and steeled herself, tried not to flinch at the metallic clang of the door's internal mechanisms at work. Every sound down here was deafening against the quiet. No way to sneak up on anyone—no way to not know when you weren't alone anymore. From inside the cell, she heard what sounded like feet being dragged

against a stone floor, and then the door was open, and she was stepping over the threshold before she could overthink it.

The man inside was someone she'd never met in person—someone she knew through the stories shared at home and could only identify thanks to the Council's photo library. Though unlike every picture she'd ever seen of him, he wasn't wearing a suit, rather a pair of jeans and an oversized, dark olive sweater. The glasses sitting on the bridge of his nose were smudged—she could tell even at a distance. His hair had a bit too much shine to it, betraying that he hadn't been able to wash the grease or the dirt out in some time, and a graying beard spread across a face that she had only ever seen as clean-shaven. Even still, he was unmistakably Rupert Giles.

And he was ready to fight.

"Quentin," the man said in a voice thick with disuse, all British politeness despite everything.

"Rupert," Travers replied in the same manner. He stepped in beside Gray, sweeping his gaze around the cell as though taking stock. There was a bed against the wall to the far right, a small one but at least it *was* a bed, complete with pillow and blankets. A small circular rug took up most of the stone floor; there was a sink in the corner as well as a bucket, and a small thirteen-inch television atop a credenza along the wall opposite the bed. "I trust you are being treated well."

"Oh, yes," Rupert Giles said without blinking. "You are indeed the most hospitable captor. I'll be sure to tell my friends that, should they ever be imprisoned, they could do worse."

"How long has it been since you were taken to bathe?"

"How long have I been here?"

Travers chuckled at that, then turned to Gray. "I thought it was time that you meet the Slayer."

"I've met her, thank you. We're quite close."

"I mean the real Slayer, of course." Travers gave another little titter, and out of nowhere, Gray realized she hated him. No build-up, no revelation, just a switch flipped somewhere deep inside her. She hated him and she was here to stop him, and that knowledge filled her with such absolute purpose its very existence seemed to act as a shield.

She had been willing to kill for him. Had tried. Had nearly succeeded. And now, god, how she hated him.

"Gray Asra," Travers said, "this is Rupert Giles. Rupert, as you know, was charged with the training and oversight of Buffy Summers. You are standing here as the Council's Slayer largely owing to his tremendous failure in that regard."

"And she is standing there because Buffy is too bloody noble to put her in the ground," Rupert Giles replied without missing a beat. "That has always been Buffy's largest weakness, you see. She believes all human life is worth protecting."

"Yes, lives like that of the witch who nearly destroyed the world. Or the doctor she let harbor a hellgod."

Mr. Giles scoffed, walked over to his bed and lowered himself to the mattress. "So now she's no longer responsible for *killing* him for some imagined infraction, rather

for *not* killing him when she should have. Don't feel too ashamed, Quentin. I imagine it's difficult to keep up with your own propaganda."

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

"Quite right. That is giving you a tad too much credit. It's not difficult at all, is it? You just fashion the truth to be whatever you need it to be to manipulate whomever you are speaking with."

Again, Travers just scoffed and smiled as though all this were very amusing. "Gray brings us interesting news," he said. "The vampire known as Spike claims to be in the possession of his soul. A soul he sought himself, no less."

Mr. Giles wasn't fast enough to mask his shock. His jaw fell slack and his eyes dulled in their hatred. It was a victory for Travers and she knew it. They all did.

"I wanted to discuss with you the possibility that this might be a clever tactic on part of a skilled predator to get your girl to lower her guard," Travers went on. "After all, it is common knowledge that Miss Summers has a weakness for souled vampires, and William the Bloody a predilection for hunting slayers. If she were to, say, decommission that chip provided by the United States government—"

"The one you meant to decommission to get Spike to do your bidding, you mean," Mr. Giles said in a clear attempt to regain his footing. "Yes, I'm certain your concern is very sincere."

A sound that might have been a sigh or a grunt rumbled through Travers's throat as he linked his hands behind his back. "We are clearly getting nowhere, you and I."

"Yes, I feel just terrible about that."

"I'm sure you do." Travers was still for a moment, his expression thoughtful, then he turned his attention to Gray. "I'm afraid I have another engagement at the present. Would you be so kind as to take the next half hour to see if you can convince Mr. Giles to be more cooperative?"

At the words, her ears began to ring, and her heart to do jumping jacks. Of the many things she'd thought might happen here, access to Rupert Giles had been far down the list. It was what she'd known Summers wanted—visual confirmation that her watcher was alive, if not well—but the possibility of getting in front of him had been so remote that no one had been counting on it. Yet here she was, not only in the same room with the man but being left alone with him?

The brooch on her shirt was suddenly heavy. Like the importance of her next actions, her next words, had become a physical weight. Gray tried to keep her expression blank—how would she be acting if she were here for any other reason?—as she nodded at Travers. She balled her hands into fists to hide how hard they were shaking, hoping that her face wasn't as bright hot as it felt. The echoes of her first panic attack threatened to grow louder, but then Travers was moving away. He wasn't locking the door, he said, as he trusted her to handle herself should Mr. Giles attempt to overpower her. Otherwise, she was to remain where she was until he returned to collect her. That all happened fast—the explanation, the movement, then he was on the other side of the door and closing it. And Gray held her breath, despite how much it hurt, waiting for the telltale clink of the lock being shifted into place, because it couldn't be this easy, could it? Travers certainly

wouldn't leave her alone with Rupert Giles just like that. There had to be more to it.

But the clinking didn't come. Instead, she listened as Travers's footfalls took him farther from the cell, until she couldn't hear them at all.

"I don't believe it," she muttered, and rushed to the door to test it. Could be he'd locked it another way, but no. The heavy iron swung outward, not easily but only because of its composition. "He actually left me here alone with you."

"Please do not be too excited. Quentin does still want me alive, whatever else."

Gray turned and locked eyes with Rupert Giles, the tension that had gathered in her muscles still there, only it wasn't alone anymore. It felt like everything that had happened since she'd met with Lydia at the airport had been building to this moment. Only she couldn't leap at it—not without first making sure they were truly alone.

"Can I help you?" Mr. Giles asked when she burst into motion. The corners of the room seemed the most obvious places for hidden cameras, but she saw none, so she checked the likely alternatives—under the bed, inside the bucket, the television credenza. Heck, even under the rug. But there was nothing there. Nothing she could see at least. Nothing obvious, unless they were using magic.

And they could be. She was, after all.

She'd just have to take that chance.

Gray whirled around to face the perplexed prisoner and, before she lost her nerve, spat out, "What do you know about the ritual? Anything?"

Mr. Giles just stared at her. "Pardon?"

"I'm... It's a long story. I don't think I can get you out of here—not without them finding out. But she'll come. She's going to try to stop it. Do you know how to stop it?"

The defiance that lined the watcher's face—the parts not currently covered in hair—started to soften, becoming something more like confusion. "Stop what?" he asked. "What are you talking about?"

"Summers," Gray blurted. "Or *Buffy*. She's here. They're all here. She can see you now." She beat a fierce tattoo against the brooch, probably jostling it all over the place but that didn't matter. All that mattered was that he start talking. "And I'll tell you everything when this is over but we don't have a ton of time here. What do you know about the ritual?"

"I don't understand. You are their slayer, are you not? The one who put Dawn in the hospital?"

It took every ounce of willpower she had to keep from rolling her eyes. "Yes, that was me. And again, I do not have time. All you need to know is that I am working with Summers now, and at the top of her to-do list is busting you out of here. So talk to me. Tell me—tell *Buffy*"—again, she tapped the brooch—"what you know about the ritual. *Do* you know anything?"

The silence that followed wasn't absolute and didn't last but a few seconds, but each of those seconds felt like anchors. Pulling her down, scrambling, certain she would crash. He clearly didn't know what to think of her and was trying to arrive at a

conclusion using time neither of them had. Then, finally, he flicked his gaze to the brooch, and something hardened behind his eyes.

"I know what they believe will happen, yes. Quentin has been rather insistent on keeping me informed of his plans and progress. Part of my punishment, you see. To know everything and not be in a position to stop it."

"Well, you're in that position now. Or as close as I can get you." She tapped the brooch a third time, hard enough that the fabric pulled against the pin and made a scratchy sound that warned against doing that again. "Tell me what's going to happen. What this ritual is."

Giles was staring at the camera, unabashed. "The working theory is that the power to sever the Slayer line lies within the weapon they uncovered."

"I knew that," Gray snapped, her patience reaching its end. "I don't know why they think it'll work."

"Because the weapon was forged by powers outside of those that created the Slayer. Powers that worked to correct the imbalance that formed when man harnessed the essence of a demon to force untold generations of girls into servitude." He raised his eyes back to hers, speaking rapidly now, as though feeding off her anxiety. "Whoever is responsible for the weapon intended for it to be the Slayer's strength and salvation, as well as granting her the ability to reject the demon forced upon them. Her escape, in other words. Killing the demon that lives within her."

Gray's pulse jumped. "The demon. *Just* the demon? How does that work?"

"I don't believe it will. I'm quite confident it will kill Faith," he said. "That the intent revolved around sacrifice. Either accept the power that was bestowed or destroy it, thereby ending the Slayer entirely. As far as a ritual goes, I'm not sure. Quentin has been less forthcoming with those details, though I suppose it could be an inverse of what occurred when the Slayer was first created—mystical insurance that the blade acts as they will it to when it strikes. And—"

"And I believe that is enough," came from behind, and Gray whirled around, her heart dropping. Everything dropping. She hadn't heard—she'd been listening so hard and she hadn't heard. And Travers was there in the open doorway, grim eyes fixed on her, and she understood something at once. Something she'd thought she'd understood the other night in the cemetery, Buffy Summers crushing her windpipe, the world going dark as her lungs clamored for oxygen she couldn't give them.

"Thank you, Miss Asra," Quentin Travers said simply. "This has been most illuminating."

Then he raised his hand. Her last thought—*you can beat this guy*—just barely had time to race across her brain before the gun fired and took her brain with it.



GILES WAS SCREAMING. He was screaming, and Buffy had never heard him scream. Not like this, anyway—not a prolonged sound, one of more than surprise or fright. No, it was raw and guttural, and it, more than anything, told her what she had just seen happen had actually happened. That it hadn't been a trick of the eye or some-

thing else. That Quentin Travers had walked into that cell and killed his slayer, almost without breaking his stride.

"So unfortunate," he was saying, his voice somehow carrying over Giles's screams. The image on the monitor was almost impossible to make out, the camera having fallen when Gray had, giving Buffy and Spike and everyone else who had gathered around her a view of what might have been the remains of a meal. Or the remains of something else. She didn't want to think about it. "I had such high hopes for her. Her father will be very disappointed indeed."

A sound like something being dragged along the floor filled the speakers, and the view changed. Fingers fumbling over the camera as someone tried to pry it loose. Behind her, Buffy heard Xander say, "I think I'm gonna be sick." She thought she might, too, but she couldn't. She couldn't balk now; couldn't look away.

It seemed so stupid. The plan—if she could call it a plan. This rash, impulsive thing she'd agreed to out of desperation and anger. The camera shook as it was freed, filling her eyes with a view of the room she didn't want—the body lying on the floor among a spreading pool of red with half its skull missing—before swinging around so that Travers's face took up the whole thing.

"Clever," he muttered. "Very clever. Cameras are wondrous, aren't they? Most useful when you need information. I admit I wasn't expecting something quite this juvenile, but then, Mr. Giles's personal biases have long been a point of contention. He nearly had me thinking there was cause for concern."

Buffy's breaths were coming harder. There was a hand on her shoulder, *Spike's*, gripping tight as though to ground her, but there was no ground. No ceiling, either. Just a beating rhythm inside her chest, warning her toward what she couldn't outrun.

"Lest you think any part of this exercise was a victory, let me assure you that everything you saw, everything you learned, was by design," Quentin went on, now sounding almost cheery. "You see, no foreign magic may cross into the Council premises without our being aware. We knew from the second she set foot inside that she was compromised, just as we know you will try to stop the ritual tomorrow evening. My dear, you are welcome to try. I expect we will be seeing each other very soon, regardless."

Buffy rose to her feet, barely aware she was moving, not taking her eyes off the screen. Not even after the smug prick's face blinked out, and everything went black.

"He didn't," Willow said, sounding far away. "He didn't really—"

"He did," Buffy said dully. "He killed her."

It had been over so fast, the camera looping around. Quentin standing there with the gun, and even after he'd raised it, Buffy had thought *no*. No, he wouldn't do it. Put her in a cell or something, maybe, but not shoot her. Not like that.

Her ears were still ringing from the sound of the report. How the impact of the shot had exploded from the speakers, as though the bullet itself was fighting to get through, and how the camera view had swung wildly before falling with its host. With Gray.

She'd trusted them, and she'd fallen, and now she was gone.

Gone like so many other girls.

"Buffy," said someone else. Spike again. His hand on her shoulder once more. When she met his eyes, something inside of her centered.

"We go to war tomorrow."

"They're expecting us," Xander put in. "They know we're coming now."

"They're expecting Buffy Summers. What they're going to get is the Slayer." Buffy drew in a deep breath. She was shaking still, shaking hard, but also certain as she hadn't been before. "They've never really seen one. All those girls, and they've never seen one. Tomorrow... We're going to show them."

SHE DIDN'T BELIEVE IN TRANSCENDENCE

SHE WASN'T SLEEPING, THOUGH HE HADN'T REALLY EXPECTED HER TO. SURE, SHE'D give the others a rousing speech about making sure they got their rest and that was all well and good—didn't keep her from staying up most of the night considering what was to come. Buffy had never been the sort who could turn off whatever was going on in her noggin, not even during those stolen hours spent in his crypt, fucking each other raw in the hope of keeping reality at bay. But he'd known then, even if he hadn't wanted to admit it, that all time with her was borrowed. He'd see it in her eyes, the passion and the heat but also the thing she'd come to him to chase off in the first place. The life she hoped wouldn't be waiting for her when she eventually made her way back home.

Of course, things were different now. Buffy wasn't trying to ignore the world, rather preparing to face it. Going into battle as she so often did, and she couldn't sleep through that. Spike couldn't fuck her through it, either, though she'd been a shade of her old self tonight. Not in manner but in how she'd clawed at him, dug her nails and teeth into his skin, held onto him so tight he would bear the marks for days and possibly limp a little when they strolled into the Council tomorrow.

Still, that hadn't been enough to quiet the noise behind her eyes. At the end, watching him, all open and bare as she never had been before, she'd leaned forward and touched her mouth to his in a soft caress. The sort he felt whisper against his soul. Or at least that's the closest he could figure—the thing between them that had changed. Knowing Buffy loved him and feeling it too, unlike he'd ever felt anything. She'd kissed him and murmured, "I meant it, what I said earlier," and he'd grinned and asked if she could be more specific, and she'd made the most adorable face before slapping his chest and lifting herself off his cock so she could tuck in at his side. He'd wound around her, his chest pressed against her back, and buried his face

in her hair, marveling as he reckoned he would for a time now that he was here at all.

It was strange to be so full when he knew he could lose it in a matter of hours. Strange and terrifying. It wasn't like it had been before Glory—that sense of mounting dread he'd never wanted to admit mixed with the pure bloody defiance that had seen him live this long. Every fight he entered held the possibility of dust. That was half the fun and always had been. Flirting with death on a daily basis, cheating it at every turn. Sauntering up to the biggest, baddest beastie on the bloody block, or the one girl in all the world uniquely made to hunt his kind and being the one who walked away.

That he had cheated death for so long was what scared him, especially now. Being with Buffy, lying in bed beside her, listening to the cadence of her breaths and knowing he had her love was the zenith of his existence. He wanted to see tomorrow and the next day and all the sodding days after—in a blink, he'd been given the world to live for, which meant he had the world to die for too.

"You're not allowed," Buffy murmured, speaking as though continuing a conversation. It was the first thing she'd said since she'd turned over.

"Mmm." Spike nipped at her earlobe and squeezed her to his chest. "Not allowed to what?"

"Die tomorrow."

Bloody figured she'd only start hearing his thoughts when he didn't want her to. "Good thing. Wasn't planning on it."

"I mean it."

"And you think I don't?"

"I think between the two of us, you're a bit more fragile."

Spike snorted, trying to press closer even though *closer* wasn't exactly possible. "Anyone ever tell you that you do wonders for the ego, love?"

"I've died a lot more than you have and now we don't know if I even can anymore. I'm kinda counting on you being there to help me figure out this whole forever-living thing." Her voice was light but he knew better than to trust it, especially with the thunder of her heart in his ears. "Also, it'd kinda suck to finally get together for real just to have one of us die."

"Mite poetic, though."

"You better not be serious."

"About it bein' poetic? 'Course I am. That's the stuff of great tragedies, that is."

"Spike, don't make me kick your ass before the biggest fight of my life. I'm going to be seriously mad if you dust on me before we even have a chance to see what this is. And I'm thinking forever's a long time to live with regret."

He sobered at that, thrown. "What would you regret?"

"It's not important."

"Think it is if it's keepin' you up."

"Hey, conceited. Not the only thing keeping me up." She sighed and turned over, her skin sliding against his until she was on her back. "Willow might go wicked witch on us. Dawn is in the fight. Xander... Well, he can hold his own to a point but we

have no idea what they might throw at him. I'm worried about all of them. The fact that I'm even letting Dawn into this still just..."

"Right call, I think," he said, brushing stray strands of hair from her brow. "Nibblet's come a long way. Think she'd do more bloody damage if you had her stay back, the tantrum she'd throw."

"Not exactly a ringing endorsement for her maturity, but I agree with you. And I did promise." Buffy let out a breath, then shifted her gaze to his. There was so much there, too. She was still guarded, still hesitant, in a way that seemed less like she was holding herself back and more that she was feeling more than she knew what to do with. And all aimed at him—or if not that, then certainly there for him to see and share and carry. "But yeah, I'd regret stuff about us. More than I already do, at least. Mostly that we never got to see what we'd be like together without all the bad."

Spike brushed a kiss across her temple. "Wager it looks somethin' like this."

"Well, I want a lot more *this*. And I want to know what our first couple-fight is and what it's like to just hang out with the gang with you as my boyfriend and how well you dance—because you so owe me dances—and if we really can just stay together or if we'll end up driving each other crazy—"

"Answer to that is yes, pet. You've always driven me crazy."

"Thanks. That's very romantic."

He narrowed his eyes at her. "Wouldn't have it any other way and I feature that's somethin' you know. It started the second I saw you and didn't stop. Just changed a bit, dependin' on whether we were fighting or—"

"Watch it."

"*Shagging*," he said, and grinned when she sniffed. "Even when you're impossible, I love you. Keeps a man on his toes."

"I can't decide if that's sweet or offensive." Buffy rolled again so that her face was just a breath away, her focus entirely on him. "But probably same goes."

"I'd hope so. I like to think I give as good as I get."

"You do." She smiled, soft and earnest. "I just don't want this to be it for us, is all. Feels like I wasted a lot of time not knowing what I wanted. And then everything last year is just... So much I want to make up for."

Spike ran a hand down the length of her arm, his chest tight. "Not sure I would've believed it any sooner than you said it, love," he murmured. "Havin' a time wrappin' my lobes around it now."

"But you do. Believe me."

"I do." He snapped his mouth shut before he could say more, though everything in him wanted to elaborate. Tell her it was less about not believing she meant it and more about not believing he deserved it. Looking back at the choices he'd made, the things he'd done, the hurt he'd caused before and after the soul, and accepting that somehow he'd ended up where he was. Sharing Buffy's bed and her worries and her pain, having her look at him the way she did now and knowing it wasn't a dream. Just a couple of days earlier, he'd been bloody certain he'd ruined any chance she might have wanted this—how everything had come out in Los Angeles, the sheer enormity of what he'd kept from her. The venom he'd shot at

her on the drive back and that she'd still opened the door to him, said yes when he'd asked.

"Good. Like I said earlier, I'm not great with the words. I'll try to say them more."

"You show me, Slayer. You don't have to say a thing."

A hint of red warmed her cheeks, and she lowered her chin. "But I want to say it, too. Like it's not a big deal. Like everyone else."

"It is a big deal. And you could never be like everyone else."

Buffy looked up again, her eyes gemstones even in the dark. "I love you."

Everything inside of him warmed and swelled. And he thought, as he neared to kiss her, that it was a bloody marvel Angel had ever been able to keep hold of his soul if this was what being loved by Buffy was like. Even with everything looming outside these walls, Spike couldn't fathom a feeling better than what he was feeling at the moment or any purer form of happiness. The prat must have been determined to remain miserable or just taken for granted how rare and perfect it was, what she'd given him. Nothing else could compete with it.

"Then I'm not dusting tomorrow or any day soon," he whispered. "I'm with you."

"Good. Then I won't have to kick your ass."

"Let's not be hasty here."

A half-snort, half-giggle erupted from her lips, splitting her face into a smile bright enough to outshine the sun. "Freak."

"Right, but I'm your freak."

"That is an important distinction."



DESPITE HER MIND'S best efforts, Buffy did eventually find sleep. Not nearly enough, but she supposed some was better than none and that beggars couldn't be choosers and whatever else people said that essentially amounted to "suck it up." She came awake in a flash, too, like her body had just been hovering on the edge—close enough to call whatever she'd fallen into *sleep* but only just. And the thought she awoke with was the same one that had occurred before she'd drifted off.

That this time tomorrow, it would all be over. The moves made, the fight fought, and she'd be living in a world of consequences of whatever happened today rather than the low-simmering dread that had been her constant companion these last few months.

And as much as the thought scared the shit out of her, there was also comfort inside of it.

"Do you have everything in place?" she asked Willow, whom she'd found at the kitchen table nursing coffee and inventorying a selection of herbs and other assorted ingredients she'd been gifted by the coven. "How are you feeling?"

"Answer to the first question—as much as I can. Answer to the second—I'm pretty sure I'm having anxiety diarrhea," her friend replied with a weak attempt at a smile. "Which is why I'm skipping breakfast."

"Thanks for that information, Will," Buffy replied, wrinkling her nose.

"Yeah, sorry. My filter is all..." She made a wild motion with her hand. "But I've done everything I can think of to prepare, and I have all this and the meeting yesterday helped calm some of my nervier nerves. Just gotta stay focused."

Buffy nodded, wondering if she should say something else or just leave it. Willow had seemed calm when she'd returned yesterday, just in time to join the rest of them around the laptop to follow Gray's journey through the Council, though she hadn't shared much of what had been discussed. Just a few remarks that mostly revolved around the fact that she hadn't realized how much she'd missed Callista until they'd been face-to-face again. And how Callista had called a special MAA meeting with the other people Willow had missed—the group that had been so instrumental in getting her to where she was today—just because she'd known how much Willow needed the company of people who understood.

"It felt like I was home again," Willow had said. "A completely different kind of home than Sunnydale. Like there are two mes and you and Xander and Dawn get one me and the other me belongs here. They just...know me, Buffy. Or the part of me that's hard to share with you guys. I can say anything there about how hard it is, how scared I am, and they get it. Not that you don't get it, it's just a different kind of *getting it*. That probably doesn't make any sense."

It had, though, because it had also been true for Buffy once. First with Kendra, then with Faith. She'd never had a chance to get there with Gray—and maybe never would have, given all the bad—but there was still a space hollowed out inside that Gray had started to occupy. Especially ever since she'd shown up on Buffy's doorstep, eyes full of doubt and fear and more than that.

Buffy had done what she could not to think about Gray since turning away from the computer last night, but among the worries about what was to come, the sense of finality and purpose, her concern for Dawn and the strange not-quite-but-kind-a mourning she was doing for the relationship she hadn't yet gotten to have, she kept turning back to those last seconds. To the bone-deep knowledge that she was the reason the girl was dead—that if Gray had stayed the course and not trusted her, she would still be alive. No amount of rationalizing could get that voice to quieten. It didn't matter that Gray had tried to kill her, had nearly succeeded in killing Dawn, or anything else that had happened since the other slayer had burst her way into Buffy's life. None of that erased the fact that a girl who had been raised and brainwashed by the Council, who'd done everything in her power to live up to their expectations, had been shot without ceremony. Without so much as a flinch. Quentin had walked in and fired and that had been that. Gray's reward for doing the right thing an earlier grave than the one they'd already dug for her.

More than that, their last action had mirrored their first. The Council had used her to figure out what Buffy wanted her to learn—that was the only reason she or anyone else had been able to scratch up as to why Gray had been taken to see Giles. Travers had wanted information and Gray, so new and untested in everything other than brute force, had provided.

Then been disposed of. Her purpose served.

"I'm glad you had that," Buffy said to Willow, desperate to pull herself from those thoughts. "Really glad. If we make it to the other side of this, do you think I could meet them? Your friends, I mean?"

It was the right thing to have said. Willow's face brightened almost immediately, the shadows and worry that had been there forgotten, if only for an instant. "Yeah, that'd be great. I mean, if they want. It is Magic Addicts *Anonymous* so, you know, with the anonymous, but I'd really love that."

Buffy nodded, smiling in spite of herself. "Good. Something to look forward to, then," she said, then sobered. "And you think...you're good? For today?"

Willow looked away as the shadows returned. "I don't know if I'm good. Right now I'm just focused on not being bad. Some of this"—she waved at the ingredients in front of her—"may help. Like the newt eyes. It's supposed to help me see my addiction as just one speck of the infinite, unknowable universe, to help not get lost inside of it. It's also supposed to boost my levels of confidence and trust. There are other things it does that are all of the good...or at least that's the idea. So I'm going to do some self-spell work before we go in and my magic becomes less predictable."

"That'll help, you think?"

"No idea. I just figure it couldn't hurt." Willow blew out a breath before meeting her eyes again. "But I'm doing this, Buffy. We heard Quentin say that they have magical wards and stuff in place, which means you need a heavy hitter to, well, hit back. And I'm the heaviest hitter there is. The coven wasn't all that happy happy joy joy about giving me magical boosts but they also know that what we're doing is important—not just for you but for whatever comes next. I thought they might get into the fight themselves once I told them what was happening, but they're all very... you know, *do no harm* and while I get that, sometimes harm has to be done to undo other harm, you know?"

She did. "Just...be careful."

"As much as I can be," Willow agreed before turning her attention back to her witchy supplies. "Do we know when we're moving out?"

"I was curious about that too," came Xander's voice as he stepped into the kitchen. "Either of you guys check the weather? Looks like all of England is in a bad mood today."

Buffy furrowed her brow and instinctively turned to the window over the sink. Not that this did her any good—like all windows in the place, the curtains were drawn out of consideration for the resident vampire. "Bad?" she asked.

"It's all stormy today," Xander confirmed. "Really dark out."

"And it's supposed to stay that way?"

"I mean, I'm not a meteorologist, but according to the weather guys, yeah."

Her pulse leaped, the wheels in her head beginning to turn. Time was the only thing they hadn't settled on—Travers had given them the where and the when, but not the *specific* when. And while Buffy knew Spike could get around just fine when the sun was up, she hadn't been too excited about the prospect of busting down the Council's doors while her boyfriend was even more flammable than usual. For one thing, there was no telling that *busting down the doors* was even possible. Willow

thought it likely that there would be magical protections preventing easy entry, and Buffy had a feeling she was right. Especially since the Council knew they were coming. For another thing, well, it just seemed like a bad tactic to provide the Council with an additional weapon. Odds were they were prepared to fight vampires and the sun being out was an advantage they didn't need.

"Then I don't think we wait," Buffy said, the decision firming. "We're not going to be any more prepared tonight than we are right now, and they might not be expecting us until later anyway. If there's any chance to catch them off guard, we should take it."

"Better n' better," came from behind her, and she turned in time to meet Spike's eyes as he stepped into the kitchen from the other door. "Been caged up too bloody long. Ready to give someone a good thrashin'."

"It certainly sounded like you guys were thrashing last night," Xander muttered, but was ready with his hands raised in supplication when Buffy pinned him with a glare. "Just saying I'm understanding a lot why Spike's place always looked like a very determined little hurricane had hit it all last year."

"Anya could have made the walls a little thicker and not one of us would have complained," Willow said with a nod. "Might have actually gotten some sleep."

"Oh, come on," Buffy snapped, now uncertain where to aim her glare. She needed more eyes. "We weren't *that* loud."

Willow also raised her hands. "No judgments. Just kinda jealous I didn't have the option of doing the pre-battle smoochies. It's great for tension release."

That was a good point, even if it hadn't strictly worked last night. Buffy's brain had been determined to override any tension release with increased doses of anxiety so that, ultimately, the two efforts canceled each other out and left her feeling physically relaxed but mentally restless. But that wasn't a thing she wanted to share with her friends—or anyone, for that matter—especially since Dawn joined them the next second, edging in behind Xander with a serious case of bedhead and eyes that were only kinda open.

"It seems way too early for everyone to be up and perky," she groused, making her way toward the counter where the coffeepot lived. "Or was I the only one kept up last night by the sexcapades?"

"All right, new rule," Buffy said, planting her hands on her hips. "No more talking about my sex life. It's off limits. And," she added, as her proclamation seemed to have gotten Dawn from zombie mode to annoying sister mode; there was a spark in her eye that Buffy definitely didn't trust, "I have enough dirt on each and every one of you that I will be only too happy to start spilling if said rule is ignored. Do we understand each other?"

Willow nodded almost at once, as did Xander. Dawn just shrugged and raised an eyebrow as though in challenge, which was so the wrong move to use on the older sibling. Buffy smirked in return to call the bluff, and was vindicated seconds later when the smugness faded from Dawn's face, becoming first curiosity, and then alarm.

That was a trick she'd learned early on. Nothing was as bad as whatever the other

person could imagine. And Dawn was at that age where everything mattered, even the stuff that didn't.

At least some things never changed.

"We're leaving soon," Buffy said, both to get the conversation back on track and to inform her pesky little sister of what had been decided. "With the sun out of commission all day, there's no need to wait until tonight. Which means we need to decide where everyone's going to go once we get inside. Thanks to Gray, we have a general idea of where everything is. Quentin said the ceremony was happening in that creepy underground place. So when we get in, we'll have to get to the elevator."

"And how are we getting in?" Xander asked. "I mean, I'm all for trying the front door and hoping someone forgot to lock it, but I'm guessing we have a Plan B?"

"I think Willow's going to be our Plans A through Q. After that, we'll have to improvise," Buffy said, sparing her friend a glance to gauge her reaction. Not that she knew what she'd do if she saw anything other than resolve—they'd come this far on practically nothing and had no time left to dream up something else. "We were talking about that before you joined us. Quentin mentioned that there were magical protections in place when he was giving us his James Bond speech. Odds are we're going to need to blow our way in and keep blowing."

"Always in for a plan that involves blowing," Xander replied with a grin that didn't quite reach his eyes. "But once the blowing's over, I'm assuming we're thinking more hand-to-hand? Or do we expect these guys to be all juiced up on magic?"

"I'm thinking we'll have a few who know how to kick ass and take names in the general capacity," Buffy said. "The guys who came after Faith a few years ago definitely meant business. On the plus side, we have no idea how many will bring weapons to this ceremony thing."

"Maybe a lot if they're expecting an attack," Dawn pointed out.

"Maybe," Buffy agreed, nodding, "but something tells me they're not counting on us getting into the actual building. Quentin isn't really a *contingency* kind of man. He's so convinced we're not a threat that he didn't care we knew when this ritual thing was happening. He talked openly in front of Gray knowing she wasn't playing for their team anymore."

"Which could spell T-R-A-P," Xander said, studying her closely. "When bad guys tell you their plan, it's usually for a reason, right?"

"Except Travers doesn't think he's a bad guy," Willow put in. "He thinks this is all for the greater good."

"Yeah, and not-bad guys are also really good at springing traps," Xander argued. He was ready when Buffy turned her full attention to him. "I'm not saying we don't go. We obviously go. If we don't and this is what he says it is, then bye bye Slayer line and they'll have even more control than they do already. But we should be prepared for the possibility that he's full of shit."

"I think we can be," Buffy said, and looked back to Willow. "I think we go in without announcing that we've gone in, as much as we can while also getting through whatever magical protection they have guarding the front."

Her friend furrowed her brow. "How?"

"Same way I got into Spike's crypt without him noticing a few months ago. You make us invisible."

Spike stepped more deeply into the room, coming around so he could see her face. "Sorry to spoil the party, pet, but I *did* know. Had to hustle that bint out before she clued in that you were lurkin' about."

Yeah. Buffy remembered that clearly enough—the discomfort of being there and the utter mortification of getting caught. She needed no reminder. "Yeah, but at first, you had no idea. I was at the crypt for maybe a half hour before the spell wore off. That's all we need, really. A half hour to get where we need to be. If it lasts longer, great. If it doesn't, well, we'll deal. I think it's our best chance if Willow can do the spell."

At that, everyone's attention fell on Willow, who went even paler for someone who was already way pale. "I can," she agreed shakily. "I have the ingredients. But a half hour isn't that much, especially if I can't get whatever protection surrounds the building itself down before then. We might all be perfectly visible again before we get inside."

"I think the spell will give us at least an hour," Buffy said. "Maybe more. I had to get from the Magic Box to Spike's crypt, and I know I said a half hour a minute ago, but I'm not sure exactly how long I was there before the magic wore off. It might've been longer." She'd certainly been there for what had felt like an age before Spike had started ushering Lydia toward the door—seen more than she had bargained on seeing, even if thinking about it now left her feeling dramatically less mortified. "I'd say no more than an hour and at *least* thirty minutes."

"It's the same problem though," Willow argued. "We have no idea how long it'll take to actually get into the Council."

"I know." And she did. Everything they were talking about now was conjecture. Hell, she was even taking the *getting into the Council* part on faith, because the alternative was not an option. "But we have to plan for what we do once we're in the building."

She could feel Xander's frown without needing to look at him. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"Exactly that. There are five of us." Buffy paused and braced herself—she knew what she was about to suggest wouldn't be popular. "I think we need to split up."

The explosion of sound she'd expected didn't come. Instead, Xander, Willow, and Dawn exchanged a series of glances, all of which were a mixture of resignation and *told you so*.

"You guys knew I was going to say that?"

"What, get me out of the action part of the fight and doing something much more kid-appropriate?" Dawn arched an eyebrow and folded her arms. "That doesn't sound like you, does it?"

"It's not about that." Not entirely, at least. "Thanks to Gray, we know where they're keeping Giles. If we don't get him out before we stop the ceremony and something goes wrong, we're not getting another chance. They'll kill him. Or move him. Hell, they might have done that already. We have to try."

"And coincidentally, you think the perfect people for this jailbreak are me and Xander, right?" Dawn asked. "Not Spike, who has picked so many locks he could teach a B&E course. Or Willow, with the magic."

Buffy had no argument there—it was exactly what she'd been thinking.

"You know they might be guarding Giles extra heavy because of what happened with Gray," Xander put in. "Even if they haven't moved him, I can't see why they wouldn't put extra security in place to make sure we don't do exactly what we're planning on doing."

"You're right." Buffy looked between the two of them. "But that's where the crossbow comes in, Dawn. No one will think you're a threat. Either of you. They completely wrote Xander off a couple of years ago and they'll do it again. They'll also know that I'm going to be focused on stopping what they're doing to Faith so most of the firepower will be there."

"So you're not even going to try to deny it," Dawn said. "That you want me out of the fight."

"I told you that you could be there and I meant it, but part of being in fights like this is being strategic. Willow, Spike, and I are the strongest fighters here, so yeah, we need to go where the action is going to be." Buffy hesitated, then negotiated her way across the kitchen until she was eye-to-eye with her sister. "You and Xander get Giles and get him out. Then you can come to us, okay? If all goes well, we'll have taken charge of the situation and that's when we'll need reinforcements like your crossbow."

Dawn just stared at her for a long moment, her face impassive, before the tension in her shoulders relaxed and she looked down as though defeated. "You are so predictable."

"Oi, bite-size, that's enough," Spike said suddenly. "Time was big sis would've bloody chained you up to keep you from gettin' near the fray. Now she's givin' you a job and that's not enough? You mean to tell me you don't know how much it means that she's trustin' you with this?"

"Of course you take her side," Dawn said, though she was looking at the floor now, a blush deepening her cheeks. "I thought I was going to help."

Xander clapped a hand on her shoulder and offered a sideways grin. "You are helping. This is what it means to be a part of the gang, Dawnster," he said, hugging her to him. "Sometimes we're on rescue duty. Doesn't make it not important. Do you have any idea how big Giles is going to owe us once we get him out of that hellhole?"

"You were saying the same thing to me yesterday!" Dawn shot back. "That you were worried Buffy would bench you when *you're* the one who saved the world last year."

It was Xander's turn to go all red in the face. He coughed loudly and shook his head, seemingly doing whatever he could to avoid looking at Buffy. "Yeah, well, I was wrong," he said. "Then and just now. Last year was an anomaly. I don't think I can yellow-crayon-speech the Council into not killing Faith."

Willow bristled, shifted her weight between her feet. "I'm never gonna live that down, am I?"

"And Dawn, it's not like the world's not going to try to end next spring anyway," Buffy added before anyone else could jump in. They did not have time for tangents—they didn't really have time for this at all. She could save her annoyance for later. "We might need you to do something else next time. This is what we need you to do now."

"You're just saying that," Dawn replied, the sulk lifting a little.

"What, you *don't* think we're due for another apocalypse any day now?" Buffy waited for a beat, then another, until Dawn raised her gaze again and nodded the *you're right* nod. The one that let her know that there would be no more fighting—at least not now. She imagined she might get an earful when they all got to the other side, assuming everyone was in one piece, but that was one of those bridges she'd worry about when the time came to cross it.

"Okay," Buffy said. "Then if everyone knows what they're doing, we need to get to the *doing it* part. Will?"

Willow was already nodding, rising to her feet and gathering supplies. "No time like the present," she muttered. "I'll work on making us invisible."

A shot of pure adrenaline surged through Buffy's system—that combination of cool purpose and utter dread, and the drive to see the other side. She let out a breath and met Spike's gaze. "We need to armor up. Grab whatever we think will be useful."

He nodded. Whether it was to reassure her she was making the right call, that he understood, or that he had her back regardless, she didn't know. Even so, she treasured it—the quiet confidence he fed her. It could all be smoke, but it was still there, and that mattered.

The next time she was in this kitchen, the war would be over, and it was possible the world would look a lot different.

Though as it was with any fight, Buffy found it hard to look that far ahead.



NO MATTER how far she got, how much she mastered and understood, the simplest things still managed to throw her off.

Like, for some reason, it hadn't occurred to Willow that casting a cloaking spell over all of them meant she wouldn't be able to see the others once the magic took. In her head, she'd kinda just assumed they would be invisible to the world but not each other. Why, she had no idea. Sometimes even a smart brain thought dumb things. Needless to say, the second the spell had done its thing, everyone started running into each other, which would make for a nice Three Stooges act were it not for the fact that there were lethal weapons involved.

It had taken a couple of minutes to find their bearings, all while Buffy had become increasingly tense, and embarrassment aside, Willow couldn't blame her. The clock was ticking on how long the enchantment would last and they had a lot of obstacles to tackle in the interim. Those who had been forcibly sequestered inside the wish-house the longest were the first out and into the torrential downpour that was keeping the skies dark, which Spike started complaining about almost immedi-

ately—"Dunno why it couldn't have been nice out seein' as the sun'd have a time findin' me."—but had thankfully shut up when Willow had retorted she had no idea if the spell would keep vampire skin from sizzling so maybe they should just take this as a good sign anyway.

Not that it was easy to take epic thunderstorms as a good sign. Rain, especially violent rain, was typically the sort of thing that signaled badness in books and movies. Willow tried not to fixate on that—she had plenty of real-world concerns following her into what she was about to do and hardly needed to add fictional ones.

Primarily getting into the Watchers Council building itself. She'd had this image in her head of standing outside, wielding the magical equivalent of an atomic bomb, throwing everything she was strong enough to hold at the door, and it not budging. The magicks safeguarding it too strong, and Willow straining futilely under the enormous weight of Buffy's expectations.

Reality wasn't nearly as dramatic. In fact, she and the others had managed to get up the steps to the ornate front door without any fireworks—no mystical barrier preventing access to the premises, no magical tripwire signaling a boobytrap, no nothing. Willow actually started to wonder if she'd psyched herself up for no reason at all by the time they were crowded in the headquarters' lobby. Even the lady who had been at the desk, checking to make sure that no random people from the street walked in, was nowhere to be seen. Maybe the Council really *was* that arrogant. It would certainly help her get the most mileage out of the cloaking spell.

Except when she tried to move beyond the lobby, take the route Gray had taken the day before, Willow walked firmly into an invisible wall.

"Ow," came Xander's voice from her left. "Did anyone else's nose get squashed or did you guys just go ahead and I'm standing here talking to myself like a big invisible idiot?"

"I'm here," said Dawn, sounding just slightly farther down. "I almost dropped my crossbow."

"Will?" Buffy piped in from Willow's right. "I'd really like to get downstairs, so if you can get us moving again..."

"Gimme a minute," she replied, lifting a hand she couldn't see to the barrier she also couldn't see. At least not conventionally. Now that she knew it was there, she didn't know how she'd missed its energy. The spellwork was strong and solid—the sort she had once used to keep the Knights of Byzantium at bay. She felt its hum against her skin and the corresponding, unnamable thing inside her that matched it, her own power rising as though in answer. And the doors inside her mind aligned and opened at once, bombarding her with a rush of understanding that shouldn't have surprised her but did anyway.

This magic was powerful. But not as powerful as she was.

"I can get it down," Willow said. "There are two ways. One way will take a bit, and I'd need to check the ingredients I brought to make sure nothing's missing."

There was a beat. "And the other way?"

"The other way won't take as long, and I can do it now."

She waited to see if Buffy understood.

"You mean the not-right way. The way that's more dangerous for you."

"Yeah." She swallowed, her heart suddenly beating hard enough she was sure she could feel her chest rattle. "A protection spell is light magic. I can either fight it with more light magic—spell book magic. Or I can go wild card, and who knows what'll happen."

"Explain the wild card thing to me," Xander said. "Cause not loving the sound of that."

"Essentially, cooking without a recipe. Or ingredients. I'd be pulling on all the magic I have access to and trying different things until something stuck." A beat. "The other way could take hours, so—"

"Willow," Buffy said, "if you need to say no, say no. I promised I wouldn't ask again."

"I know. I'm asking you. What do you want me to do?"

She didn't need to ask—she could feel her friend's urgency almost as clearly as she did the magic itself. They might have hours. There was no telling when this ceremony thing would take place. Travers hadn't been specific about a time beyond *today*, so it could be happening now or scheduled for after the six o'clock news. All the while the cloaking spell would wear off and she and the others would be standing here at the front door, trying to get in before anyone realized they were there. And failing, most likely. Giving the watchers a chance to fortify the other protections they had in place.

"Never mind. We're doing this the easy way," Willow said. She needed to—it had to be her. As much as she would love to blame whatever was about to happen on someone else, the risk was hers to take. No one else could make the decision.

"Will, you don't have—"

"I do," she said, closed her eyes, and unleashed the thing inside of her.

It was like it had been in Los Angeles—sitting in the car with Buffy outside of the jail where they'd hoped to verify Faith was alive, reaching into the well that she'd started to dig so many years ago, fueled by nothing more than thirsty enthusiasm. A desire to find a place in the world she hadn't known existed before Buffy. A way to make herself useful, no, *valuable*. A way to fight the monsters without needing someone to rescue her. Consuming as much information as she could about magic, practicing spells between classes, inventing reasons why she needed to open her spell books. Feeling the first pulses of her raw power—feeling it even when she wasn't trying to—and knowing that it meant she was doing something right.

This was the part of her that had led her to Tara. To the confidence of taking on a hellgod. To resurrecting the dead. How she'd just known one day that she could defeat Amy. What she'd called upon when Tara had tumbled to the floor and her heart had broken, and gods, *Tara*, it still hurt to think about her. The light that had been snuffed out, how quickly it had happened when Tara's light had been bright enough to consume entire galaxies. A bullet shouldn't have been enough to break that, break her, but it had been, and Tara had been gone and taken all the good inside of Willow with her, and she hadn't cared.

And now it had been a year since she'd seen Tara. Held Tara. Kissed Tara. A year

since she'd consumed the magic of a death god in her rage and grief. Still there pulsating beneath everything she tried to pile on top of it, angry and devastated and time had passed but it also hadn't, because some part of Willow was always there. Always in that moment. Seeing Tara's eyes go wide, hearing her final words—"*Your shirt*"—and knowing there was no magic out there that would allow her to rewind time. Or none she could touch, at least. Even though she wanted to. Even though the wheel was within reach, the understanding that all things were possible if you used enough magic, and wanting to cast all aside so she could go back to that moment and, if not save Tara, then die with her.

There was that part of her that wondered about the paths she hadn't taken that morning a year ago. Niggled at her to take the path now, how easy it would be. How there wasn't harm in trying. It was low, sweet and seductive, whispering in her ear when she was at her most vulnerable. Shouting at her now that she was flying into that space few practitioners before her had ever explored. Willow's eyes were closed but she saw just fine—saw the wall the Council had erected, how flimsy it was. How fragile. She could see other magic, too. The spells that were bound to trigger once the wall came down, and those safeguards and the ones after them. Not too many but enough to keep out most people. Those who couldn't see the strings the way she could.

Moreover, how easy those strings were to cut.

How easy *everything* was when she was riding this high.

She could draw it out. Unravel the wall thread by thread, take her time with the next thing, and the thing after that. The pain and loneliness and grief—god, the grief—that consumed her waking days was muffled here. And they could be more muffled. They could be nothing. She could smother all unwanted sensations with magicks until they were barely more than someone else's memory.

But she had a job to do, not to mention people who were counting on her. It took a lot to redirect her focus but she managed it, finding the place where the wall was the weakest. Where even the slightest magical attack would render it compromised before it failed completely.

"I've got it," she said, her voice ringing around her head as though she'd spoken the words into a cavern. If the others replied, she didn't hear them, instead narrowing in on that weak spot. The place where the magical fabric could be tugged and unspooled. She found the thread easily enough, considered, and pulled.

Pulled into herself.

"What are you doing?" Buffy demanded loudly enough that there was no chance of missing it. "Willow?"

"What?"

"What's going on? The light show is getting wiggly."

"I'm taking their magic," she said. "It's safer with me."

"Are you sure about that?"

No, she wasn't. About herself or the world, or anything inside of it. Everything she'd once been sure of had died a year ago, and she'd been faking it without making it for too long. This, though, she understood. And it might be crazy and was defi-

nately dangerous, but they could do with more power now than less. Letting it go to waste when they had no idea what lay ahead was stupid bordering on suicidal. Not now.

The wall came down and into her, and she drank it. Drank down the whole damn thing. Then the failsafe kicked in and she drank that too before it even had a chance to serve its purpose. Same with the last one—the warning the Council’s magic wielders had baked into their spells to alert the occupants that the wards had been breached. Willow opened her mouth and swallowed it, felt herself expand around the new magic as it became *her* magic, and somehow—she would never know how—when it was all over, she managed to loosen her grip. Just a little at first, then enough that she floated back to the floor. Not even realizing she’d been hovering above it until her feet were once again on something solid.

It was all there, buzzing within reach of her fingertips. That vast wealth of power she had spent most of the last year ignoring or wishing could be banished with as much ease as it was from others in her MAA group. Knowing it was there and not touching it was the closest thing to torture she hoped she ever got on some days. Like smelling a delicious, decadent chocolate cake that was always warm and buttery and fresh but forcing herself to be happy on carrot sticks.

She’d just gotten the first big bite of chocolate she’d been allowed since that day outside the prison.

And she had to curb the urge to binge.



MAYBE IT WAS BETTER they were all invisible to each other, as Buffy wasn’t sure she wanted to see Willow’s face just then. She had no idea what had happened to topple the mystical barrier that they had all literally run right into, but the ease with which it had come down had her kinda freaked. She’d expected to spend a lot more time trying to get into the Council—enough that the charm would have worn off well before they were this deep into the structure. Instead, they were making their way forward, betrayed only by their footsteps and the breaths they took.

Things that came too easy were hard to trust. Buffy had learned this from experience.

“The first spell was a wall,” Willow whisper-explained as they hurried down yet another corridor. So far, they were sticking to the path Gray had taken yesterday—even if it was a roundabout way to get places, it was the one they had memorized. “The second spell would’ve frozen us in place. The third spell was a magic alarm. That was it.”

“Lucky,” Dawn said, also softly, not that it seemed to matter. The hallways were empty and quiet. A sort of oppressive quiet, full but not at the same time.

All this added up to Buffy worrying that Xander had been right back at the house, and they were all walking into a trap. Which did nothing to settle her nerves, even as her logical brain kicked in with all the reasons she was doing this now, trap or

not. Truth of the matter was they couldn't afford to wait. Not with the stakes as high as they were.

"Good job, Will," she said, hoping her voice didn't tremble too much. She was the leader—she couldn't afford a moment's doubt.

"I'm a little shaky," her friend replied. "It...umm...was a bit too easy. Calling on those magicks. And I started thinking some things that are not good thinky things."

"We're right here with you," came Xander's voice, low and soothing. "Always, Willow. We have your back."

"I know. I'm just... It's closer now. The power, that feeling from last year. I don't think it's been this close since I nearly destroyed the world."

The words had Buffy's heart jumping. It had only been a couple of days ago that they'd discussed the possibility of Willow losing her grip on the control she'd spent the last year trying to master, and there hadn't really been a resolution or a decision of what to do should that happen. Just that Willow had to be here—she had too much power to wait out on the sidelines, and too much to lose. The visits with her old MAA group and the Devon coven had been helpful but when push came to shove, Willow was on her own.

"We won't let that happen," Xander said, sounding more confident by far than Buffy felt. "We love you and we won't lose you like that."

Except for them. Willow was on her own except for them. Same as Buffy was. That was why they were in this fight.

"All right," Buffy said, shoving back on those fears and doubts and other things she couldn't do anything about. They just had forward to push. "Will, you let us know if you need help. Xander, stick close to her. Dawn, close to Xander. Spike?"

"Here, love," he said, pressing close on her left. She could feel him in ways she didn't the others—her slayer senses keeping her attuned to his every movement to the point it almost didn't matter that she couldn't see him, she felt what he was doing well enough.

"Keep your vampire ears and eyes and nose peeled. It's too quiet in here, and I need to know if that changes. I'm talking mouse sneezes, you tell me."

"Knew you were just usin' me for my body," he teased, and she felt a whisper of his lips against her temple before he stepped ahead of her. She might have protested but he had her hand in his the next moment, which left her somewhat lopsided with the ax she was carrying but Buffy didn't pull away. Touching him, feeling his skin against hers, made the whole invisibility thing easier on her senses. Knowing something was there wasn't the same as seeing or feeling it. She needed to feel it.

And that was how they pressed on, navigating the labyrinth of halls she'd forced herself to study from the footage that had come at the cost of Gray's life. Occasionally whispering directions to the others, left here, right there, though whispering seemed unnecessary as none of the rooms or offices were occupied. Every few seconds, she'd ask Spike if anything had changed, and every few seconds, he'd assure her that she'd be the first to know if it had. But he never did. Not once. Just led her and the others slowly through the maze until they had arrived at the elevator that

would take them to the lower level. The one they had all watched Gray board through the stolen footage on what had proven to be her last ride.

Assuming he hadn't been moved, Giles was down there, as was perhaps the rest of the Council and the trap they might have waiting. It hadn't hit her until this moment just exactly what she was asking the others to do. Follow her beneath the earth, possibly to be stranded with only one escape route that the Council themselves controlled. She could be leading her friends, her vampire, her sister, to their deaths. But this was it—her existence summarized with a button click. Making the call and hoping her plans didn't cost anyone their life. Knowing they were here because of her and what happened to them, to any of them, would only happen because she'd allowed it.

She wanted to say something but there was nothing to say. So she pressed the button, and at last the silence broke with sound, even if the sound itself was nothing more than the mechanical whirl of their electric carriage coming to possibly lead them to their deaths.

"We get down there," she said, not bothering to turn, "you know what to do, Xander, Dawn?"

"Bust our high school librarian out of the clink," Xander whispered back, and Buffy let out a breath. "Then hope you guys have left enough Council assholes for us to rough up."

"It might... You guys have to know that it might not be that easy. If there's another way out down there, we don't know what it is. We could be cornered."

"Are you just realizing this now?" Somehow, Xander sounded amused. "Buff, we're with you. Believe me, I stayed up all night going over the many ways this could go wrong."

Maybe he had, but he'd been here—or here-adjacent—before. Dawn had not. At once, the whole *letting her come along* thing seemed beyond stupid, promise or no promise. But there wasn't time to voice that or any of the other second, third, or hundredth thoughts she was having now, for the elevator doors were sliding open and Spike was tugging her aside, telling Dawn and Xander to go first, then Willow. Better if he and Buffy were at the head in case they needed to fight their way through when the doors opened downstairs.

And then somehow Buffy was in an elevator, plummeting what felt like forever under the earth. Spike at her side, hand still wrapped around hers as her grip on the ax grew slippery in the other. Her heart was pounding and her throat was tight, and she felt the others as she hadn't been able to before—their breaths and their anxiety, and how it was all mounting. Yet that determination too, firm and resolved as it had been for years. Ever since these two classmates had tumbled into a world Buffy couldn't keep them safe from, and they'd insisted on going with her. Being there for the moments like this one, at her side or her back so she didn't have to face whatever came next alone.

Then the elevator slowed and the doors opened onto the stony hallway Buffy had seen Gray walk through the day before, and she was moving, tumbling out with the

others on her heels. Again following the steps of a dead woman, and again trying not to let that thought take the lead.

"Definitely where the party is, love," Spike whispered. "Heartbeats. Bloody loads of them. Someone's yammerin', too. Sounds like Travers."

"Where?" But she already knew where. Travers had said as much the day before. Take the hall to the left to get to the cells, go to the right for the ceremonial chamber. He hadn't changed his mind or the location—they were truly doing this here. "All right. We don't know how much longer the cloaking spell will last, so Xander? Dawn?"

"We'll find Giles," Xander assured her, sounding farther away, as though he'd already started in that direction. "Dawn, better get ahead of me while you're all invisible. You'll need the clearance to shoot and an arrow to the back's gonna slow me down a lot."

"I'm not going to shoot you in the back."

"Maybe not on purpose, but do I really need to bring up what happened to Miss Kitty Fantastico?"

"That was, like, three years ago!"

"Quiet, you two," Buffy snapped. "Dawn, do what Xander says and try not to shoot anyone who's not a bad guy. Xander, I'm trusting you with her—"

"I know. I've got her."

"I've got you, you mean," Dawn grumbled, and Buffy didn't have time to reprimand her. Spike was gripping her tighter, not letting go, and even though she couldn't hear what he heard, she felt the rush all the same. Whatever was happening was happening now.

"You get yourself killed, and you're grounded," she said instead, hoping her sister knew all the things Buffy hadn't had the presence of mind to say back when they'd had more time.

And then she was moving down the other hall, trying not to consider what she was facing ahead or what she was leaving behind. The weight pressing down on her chest, the questions she didn't want to entertain but couldn't ignore—was this the day she tested Giles's theory?—growing louder and heavier with each step. Willow at her side, unseen but there. The cadence of her breaths and the swoosh of her clothes familiar as she walked the way Willow walked. And Spike, still holding onto Buffy's hand, pulling on her as she pulled on him.

She'd made him promise he wouldn't dust and god, she was going to hold him to it.

"Stop," Spike said suddenly, tugging on Buffy's arm. "It's close."

"What's close?"

"Wherever we're goin'." There was a pause and the sound of straining leather, which she took to mean he was looking around. "Willow, grab hold of my coat," he said a moment later. "Probably ought to keep mum from here on if we can. Dunno how sound carries but best not chance it."

"Right," Willow said in a whisper. "After you, then."

A few steps later, the thing Spike had heard reached Buffy's ears—a sound she'd know anywhere, and the fight was now. Travers was somewhere close, talking at a cadence that had the unmistakable hallmarks of a speech, using words like *reclaimed* and *righting a wrong*. Her throat tightened, and she squeezed Spike's hand, and his steps increased in urgency. Just a few feet and then he veered hard right, a corner she hadn't even seen, into a short hall that ended in a set of black, almost velvety-looking double doors.

Tomorrow might not arrive for everyone. Everything depended on what happened when she was on the other side.

"I go first," she said. Neither Spike nor Willow argued, though she didn't expect them to. And then she was moving, closing the last steps separating her from whatever came next. The uncertain future. The regrets and things she'd wished she'd said, the people she loved and everything else.

She always felt this way going into battle. It was just especially strong right now. The wealth of what she stood to lose by opening those doors.

But they had to be opened, so Buffy did what she always did in these situations—she pushed on.

The room on the other side looked very much like a modernized amphitheater, complete with a captive audience. People with faces she knew and others she didn't, men and women but mostly men—not hundreds thank god, but at least two dozen, maybe three. Some who seemed in good shape to fight and others old or Gilesy, but she knew not to discount them based on that. The Council hit squad was nearby as well—those goons who had come after her when Faith had been wearing her skin. But none of them, not even Travers, who stood on the plinth at the center—the leader of this show—so much as looked her way, too engrossed in what he was saying to notice.

They were all here. The halls and offices above empty because of this. Because Travers had decided the time was now. Buffy's intuition had proved right again.

One of these days, maybe that would stop surprising her.

It took a moment for the last detail to register—for Buffy to see that the table she thought was to Travers's right wasn't a table at all, but an altar-like structure upon which lay Faith, her arms and legs bound, her mouth covered, too, but her eyes open. And even though the span of what felt like a football field separated them, Buffy was sure she saw Faith's fury reflected in her eyes. Fury and maybe a little fear, but either was a welcome sight.

If Faith was furious, that meant she was awake, which meant she could fight. All Buffy had to do was get to her.

"The Slayer is the instrument of the Council," Travers was telling his loyal choir. "The way we combat the forces of darkness and maintain order. Over the years, the line has become diluted—the old magicks ineffective, the selection sloppy. Our lack of proper governance is to blame, which makes the problem ours to rectify."

Buffy's skin started to tingle. She thought it was anticipation at first, but then Willow drew in a sharp breath and she turned before realizing what she was doing, and blinked before realizing what she was *seeing*. That was Willow, flushed and trying

not to pant, her expression worried but determined. And when Spike touched Buffy's arm again, she understood. The spell had carried them as far as it could.

Which was just fine. She loved the chance to make a good entrance.

"We take no pleasure in the ending of a life," Travers continued, drawing her attention back. He was also holding something—an ax of his own, with a red blade. The weapon Gray had told her about. The weapon that, even from a distance, Buffy knew belonged to her. "It is the sacrifice we make, purified by the Scythe of the Slayer, to serve the greater good."

"I think Gray Asra would have something to say about that," Buffy said loudly, stepping up to the first row of seats. The sound of untold necks craning in her direction snapped through the air, and it was like everything in the world had frozen. Silence at first, a freaky quiet, before a low agitated murmur began to take its place. A word here, a whisper there, then the air was buzzing with sound. She kept her gaze on Travers. "It sure seemed like you enjoyed killing her."

If this was the moment that preceded her death—if she were minutes away from learning that Giles's theory was a load of garbage—Buffy decided she could accept that, all owing to the stunned look on Travers's face. All their speculation, all their worry about traps and grand plans, even his own words spoken so calmly just yesterday, had been a bluff. A smokescreen.

That was kinda delicious.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded as though he didn't know.

"You invited me," Buffy replied.

Travers stared at her and she stared back, and for the first time since meeting him, she thought she might have glimpsed a flicker of fear in his eyes. And that was delicious too.

It didn't last, though. In a flash, his expression hardened with rage, and he turned back to Faith, ax or scythe or whatever it was raised, and Buffy shot forward with a burst of speed even as her stomach dropped. She didn't know why she hadn't expected that, but she hadn't, and she was too far away. She'd never get there in time.

Only the scythe wasn't in Travers's arms as he brought it swinging down.

It was in hers.

NOW I'VE DONE MY BEST, I KNOW
IT WASN'T MUCH

THE WHOLE *INVISIBLE* THING WAS STARTING TO WEAR ON XANDER'S NERVES. IT was bad enough he couldn't see himself—make that majorly weird; he had no idea how Marcie had done it—but knowing that a volatile teenager was just a few feet ahead of him wielding a pretty hefty, not to mention lethal, weapon was just *not* a comforting thought. Especially with said teenager's track record for accidents. She might be Buffy in miniature, or the reverse of that since Dawn was technically taller, but it was hard to let go of certain perceptions when those perceptions involved a mangled kitty whose only crime had been being on the wrong ledge at the wrong time.

"All right, check," Dawn said as they stopped outside yet another of the identical cell doors. Xander did as he was told—that was his role here. She was weapons girl, he was check-for-imprisoned-librarians guy. The hall Gray had walked down yesterday was lined with these cells, and from the many times Buffy had forced them to watch the footage, Xander knew full well that Giles should be farther down. Still, they weren't taking any chances. He could have been moved, if not worse, or he could have been assigned a guard or something. That's what a smart supervillain would have done.

Buffy was insistent that Travers wasn't a smart supervillain, rather an arrogant one. Xander wasn't convinced those two things didn't go hand in hand but he wasn't the one who called the shots around here. He was the one who peeked through the barred windows of cell doors while the others did the heavy lifting.

And he was okay with it. Much more okay than he would have thought once. Maybe it was the knowledge that he had already done the hero bit once, saved the world. Maybe it was just the result of the better part of a decade spent somewhere other than on the frontline. Or the dead certainty, the fear that had settled in his

bones yesterday when he'd watched the skull of a girl he more or less hated get blown to smithereens like she didn't matter. He'd seen people die, too many people, but not like that. Not even last year when that madman had come bursting into Buffy's backyard, waving the gun that had killed Tara. That had been awful but Warren had been unhinged. Riding a high of pure fucking crazy resentment, and looking back, everything that had happened that day was tinged in a vague sense of inevitability. Of course Warren had come armed. That was what little boys like him did when they didn't get their way. They threw tantrums. Some small, others deadly.

Travers hadn't thrown a tantrum, though. It hadn't been a big hero's death, the culmination of months of back and forth, of battles waged and lost, or whatever. There had been no emotion behind it at all, and that was what scared Xander shitless. That death could be both random and meaningless. Everyone he'd lost in the war between good and evil had been lost for a point. Everyone but Jesse, at least. Jesse, like Gray, had just *been there*.

Xander felt that maybe he'd cheated death one time too many over the years. Been saved at just the right moment, managed to say just the right thing. His luck couldn't run forever and now that you mention it, there were a lot of things left he wanted to do before he kicked the bucket. Open his own construction company. Maybe buy a house. Have a couple of kids. Well, take or leave the kids. That depended on whether vengeance demons could even get pregnant, for god yes, he still wanted Anya. Didn't deserve her and probably never had, but that didn't make the want go away. Nothing made the want go away.

And if he lived through this, if he got to go home and see her again, he would do better. Helping her rebuild the Magic Box had been a nice gesture but still just a gesture. That was all he was good for, it seemed. Not saying the words. Not being open or sorry. Just making gestures and hoping that much did the work for him. He could tell Willow he loved her if that saved the world but he couldn't tell Anya what she meant to him because, well, it was the kind of thing maybe you didn't realize until you'd seen some poor girl get shot in the head for doing what was right.

"Anything?"

Xander gave himself a shake and gazed back in the direction the question had come from. "Not here. Keep going."

"Xander? Dawn? Why can't I see you? And what are we looking for?"

He froze, his heart leaping into his throat. Either he'd dreamed her here by thinking of her, or Dawn had whipped out a pitch-perfect Anya impersonation just to screw with him. "Uhh, what?"

"Anya?" *That* was Dawn, hitting those shrill notes only accessible to teenagers and completely forgetting that they were supposed to be in stealth mode. Xander turned in time to see Anya, *his* Anya, get bowled over by what looked like empty air, her expression contorted with the expected mix of confusion and extreme discomfort. If Dawn noticed, she decided to ignore it. "Oh my god, what are you doing here?"

"Why are you invisible?" Anya asked, straining uselessly as though she could will herself to see them. "I didn't prepare for you to be invisible."

"Willow did a spell to get us in without being seen," Dawn replied in a rush. "Buffy didn't think it'd last very long so it should wear off soon."

"Oh. I suppose that makes sense."

"Any," Xander interjected, nerves beginning to ratchet up as the shock of seeing her subsided, "what are you doing here? And *how* are you here?"

"I'm here to help. And *dub*, I can teleport." She rolled her eyes before affecting a large smile. "So what are we doing? How can I be of service?"

"You can teleport straight to us? Just like that?"

Her smile became a little strained. "Yes, I can. You should already know this—I did it a lot last spring when Willow went all evil on us. After I heard about what happened to the Gray girl, I thought my services might be needed."

"How in the world did you hear about that?"

The smile fell away altogether. "Because I'm a vengeance demon? You don't think Gray's mother wanted vengeance when she heard what had happened?"

In fact, Xander hadn't thought that at all. He hadn't heard much about Gray's family aside from her asshole father. "So you're here to seek vengeance on Travers?"

"No, my vengeance business is done. I'm here because I want to be."

"But how..." The dots were not connecting, but it didn't take long for the rest of his brain to kick on and fill in the gaps. And once he knew, Xander snapped his mouth shut. There was one person a grieving mother might blame for her daughter's death more than the man who had actually pulled the trigger. And while the asshole father probably deserved whatever vengeance Anya had brought down upon him, that didn't mean that Xander wanted to think about it. He'd been all too heartened when Anya had revealed that her return to demoning had been largely bloodless and was too afraid of what he might say if he got any grisly details.

Especially considering...well, everything.

"I closed the store to come here," Anya said, her eyes taking on that edge that always appeared whenever she felt her livelihood was not being respected. "On a *Saturday*. I even kicked a few people out to do it. People with my merchandise in their hands, ready to give me money, and I decided to come here to be with you instead. So, what are we doing and how can I be of assistance? I... Oh, that's handy."

"What?" Xander asked, but he didn't need elaboration, as Dawn had just materialized out of the corner of his eye, the crossbow in her arms pointed at the floor. Looked like Willow's spell had run out of juice. "Ah, well. This is either going to get a lot simpler or a lot harder."

"What is?"

"Well, for one thing, Giles is in one of these cells. We're getting him out while Buffy takes on the Council."

Anya nodded and immediately started down the hallway, peeking through the small bars the same as Xander had been. She didn't get far, one or two doors before rocking back on her heels. "I think that's Giles," she said, not bothering to lower her voice or try to be in any way covert. "He's hairier than he was before. And sleeping." She paused, then slammed her hand on the door, open palm, so hard the entire thing shook. "Giles! Wake up! We're here to rescue you!"

There was a piercing shrill that Xander knew far too well—Giles could sound pretty girly when he screamed—followed by a *thunk*. “Did he just...?”

“He fell out of bed,” Anya confirmed with a nod. “But he looks happy to see me.” She waved and favored him with her warmest smile. “Hi, Giles! You need a shower.”

Xander snickered and exchanged a look with Dawn, who seemed torn between amusement, relief, and perhaps some minor annoyance. Annoyance he wasn’t sure even Buffy would have understood if she’d been there, but Xander knew how much Dawn had enjoyed being the authority with the crossbow. That she wasn’t saying anything in that regard, or even pouting, spoke to how much she’d grown up in the last year. If Buffy didn’t honor her promise of *next time*, there’d be a real fight on their hands.

“Come on,” he told Dawn, nodding toward Anya. “And keep that crossbow up. We still don’t know if we’re alone back here.”

Indeed, by the time Xander and Dawn had crowded in around Anya, Giles was slowly climbing to his feet. And further indeed, he did look hairier—even hairier than he had yesterday in Gray’s ill-gotten footage. Also years older, the bags under his eye deep and purple, his skin somewhat sallow and beginning to droop. But his eyes, haunted as they were, lit up when he realized what he was seeing, letting the Giles they all knew shine through.

“Is that really you?” he asked, his voice sandpapery.

“Think we’ve been over this before,” Xander replied. “Even if you were gonna dream up someone to come rescue you, no chance it’d be me.”

To his shock, Giles gave a mild chuckle—the sort that quickly turned into a cough. “After what I’ve been through, you might be surprised,” he replied, his gaze shifting to Dawn. “You’re here too?”

Dawn offered a half-shrug, looking remarkably like her sister. “Buffy made me a promise and I made her keep it.”

“Where is she now?”

“We’ll tell you everything we can later,” Xander said, and nodded at Dawn, who handed over her crossbow without a fight before pulling out a bobby pin. They had already decided that she was the one who stood a better chance at picking the lock since, in her words, she’d been taught by the best. “Right now, we need to get you outta there so we can go help Buffy kick some Council hiney.”

Giles, thankfully, didn’t need to be convinced. Rather, his eyes darkened, and he nodded as he stepped back. And from the look on his face, Xander thought there was little chance the man would be content to be escorted to safety until everything was over. Which was fine. If he wanted to fight, that was his call. Not Buffy’s.

Hopefully whatever was happening at her end of the hall was going well enough that she’d see it that way, too.



BUFFY DIDN’T HAVE time to react. Not really. One second she was in the middle of the makeshift theater, miles from where she needed to be as the ax, the *scythe*, carved

through the air in an arc that ended with Faith, and the next she had her free hand wrapped around it. The weapon, whatever it was, had blinked out of existence for the span of a heartbeat and come to her. Chosen her, for that was what it felt like. The handle of the thing seemed to hum against her skin, a song she knew but hadn't known she knew until she was faced with it, one that filled her with warmth and purpose and power and the knowledge, somehow, that all the decisions she'd ever made had been the right ones. The tough calls and impossible sacrifices, anything that had ever kept her up at night made clear.

The first thing she'd thought when she'd seen the scythe was that it belonged to her. Now, somehow, it did.

And damn good thing, because the world around her had tumbled into chaos.

Buffy was in motion almost from the instant she'd realized what had happened, her body knowing what to do even if her mind hadn't caught up yet. She whirled to face Spike entirely on instinct, letting the ax she'd brought from home leave her hand, knowing that he would understand. And he did. For years now, Spike had been fighting like he was an extension of her. Extra hands and legs and pure strength for her to wield. Moving as though in response to commands sent from her brain rather than his. Which was why she knew she didn't need to look to see if he'd realized what she was doing—if he'd snatched the ax from the air as she intended. There simply wasn't any other possibility.

But Travers wasn't on the plinth any longer. He'd disappeared, leaving Faith bound and gagged and exposed in the middle of the explosion of confusion and panic. A room filled with mostly men trying to stampede for the only exit, climbing over chairs and each other, uncaring who they left behind. But not everyone was trying to get away. Out of her periphery, she saw an assortment of weapons being drawn—swords, knives, crossbows. A couple of watchers had rushed toward the plinth, toward Faith, but smacked head-first into the same sort of invisible wall that had been erected at the front door. *Willow*, Buffy realized, putting that stolen magic to good use, but that was as far as she got before the crack of a gunshot split through the air. The sound stark and deafening, and Buffy stopped thinking about magic and started looking for her people. Needing to know they were okay, that she hadn't lost yet.

But god, it was impossible to see anything in here. Too many people running in every direction. Toward her, toward the plinth and its invisible wall, over chairs and each other, shouting orders and questions and not waiting for answers. There was a flare of red hair to Buffy's right, but when she turned, she couldn't see anything for the hulking bodies in her way. A roar from behind rang out loud and reassuring, and Buffy turned again in time to catch Spike in full game face, snarling and pushing back at those trying to leave, guarding the exit and swinging the ax she'd thrown to him with the sort of fluid mastery that always managed to catch her off-guard.

Right now, he was keeping the watchers at bay, but it wouldn't take them long to pluck up the courage to rush him. And they had the numbers advantage.

Not to mention, these men wouldn't hesitate to kill.

"All right there, girlye," came a guttural voice, and Buffy turned to find herself

face-to-face with the business end of a crossbow, one of the goons from the Council hit squad grinning toothily over its frame. "You've had your fun. Now, be a good lass and put the scythe down. All you're gonna do here is get your little friends killed."

"Gee, you convinced me," Buffy replied, and started toward him. "Drop the crossbow before you hurt yourself."

His stupid smirk grew wider. "You first."

"Oh, you want *me* to drop the crossbow? You should have said." She hefted up the scythe, and grinned when a shadow crossed the man's face. Whatever else her new toy could do, he was afraid of it.

"You're playin' with things you don't understand," he snarled, then took quick aim and fired before she could think to react.

But she didn't need to think. Her hands, her fingers, her arms knew what to do. How to move. Whipping up so fast her muscles almost pulled, she positioned perfectly for the bolt to glance off the shiny red metal and go twirling into the fray.

"Well, that's all kinds of nifty," Buffy said, letting her gaze follow the arrow until it clattered to the floor. Then the hairs on the back of her neck stood at attention and she was in motion again, twisting around and bringing up the scythe in time to meet the blade of the sword curving toward her neck. The resulting clash seemed to throw her attacker off balance—hell, it nearly threw her off balance, too, the vibration rippling up her arms with more force than she had been prepared to absorb. As for the other guy, he stumbled back a few feet, not fast enough to disguise his shock or his fear. Whatever had happened had been on her end—the scythe, the power she felt radiating from metal to her skin, the purpose and rightness.

It was more than a weapon. It was... God, she didn't know *what* it was. Just that it telegraphed to her what she needed to do next. When to bend, what side to favor, when to swing, and when to duck. Mr. Crossbow came at her once more, his lips pulled into a mean snarl, and like before, she trusted what the scythe told her to do. Another bolt glanced off the blade and was lost among the surrounding pandemonium, and there were more men surrounding her now. Mr. Sword had recovered but was giving her a wide berth. A new man appeared, brandishing what looked to be the same sort of military-grade taser the Initiative used to favor. And then her eyes met with someone she hadn't thought to wonder if she'd recognize, the man who had come at her with a gun once before when she'd been a hostage in Faith's body, intending to put her down like a dog.

He had a gun now, too. Maybe the one she'd heard fire earlier. Buffy felt her heart skip, and this time, the scythe had no suggestions—no intuitive acrobatics to leap into. The other men were closing in on her, boxing her in, and all she saw was her once-would-be executioner raising the gun. Giving her a perfect view of the last thing Gray had seen. *Exactly* the last thing Gray had seen.

The thought made her cold. Made it hard to think, harder to move. And as though sensing that, the man who had tried to kill her once flashed her a smile of pure smug triumph.

Then the air split and Travers's voice was booming at levels that seemed improbable, screaming the order to stop the witch. Smother her magic. Take her out. And

Buffy tried to tear herself away—her pulse jumping, a rush of panic striking her system—needing to see what Willow was doing that Travers was so worried about, but her eyes didn't obey her brain's commands, which just left her staring down a barrel and thinking about Gray, about Warren, about the emergency room and the bullet that should have ended her life a year ago.

She wasn't ready to know. Didn't want to know.

But she'd been still too long—just a couple of seconds but seconds that weighed whole lifetimes.

This was where she found out.



DAWN WAS BEGINNING to regret all the times she'd cut PE last year. Or accidentally-on-purpose forgotten to bring her gym clothes this year so, oops, guess she wasn't running the mile that day after all. Not that she didn't like working out—she did. She loved working out when it meant there was a lethal weapon within reach to help her visualize what her life would be like once Buffy started taking her on patrols in earnest. Running just to prove she could struck her as a massive waste of time, and besides, the last thing she wanted before going to fourth period was to get all sweaty and gross. It wasn't like there was actually time to hit the showers, either. That was a Hollywood lie.

Now, though, her legs were burning with the exertion of the run back to the stretch of the hall where they had parted ways with the others, making her think maybe she'd overlooked the value of PE. Should she make it back to Sunnydale, she might even apologize to Coach Saunders.

"Here!" Xander said, somehow not winded at all despite the fact that he was definitely not what she would consider athletic. Granted, he also wasn't hauling a crossbow, so it was easier for him to maneuver. He disappeared around a corner to the right, Anya on his heels, Dawn on hers, and Giles bringing up the rear. And this hall was short, ending with a broad set of doors that, from the sound of things, were the only barriers between them and hell itself. Someone was screaming about the witch, and too many someone elses were just plain screaming. Roaring, too. A familiar roar.

That was her family in there. They needed her help.

"Ahn," Xander said, glancing at his ex. "You ready?"

Anya was shaking free her demon face, terrifying and oddly beautiful at the same time. "They're not," she said in a voice that was both her and not her. At least not the *her* Dawn knew. She'd never gotten to see Anya in action.

"Dawn?" Xander asked.

Dawn raised her crossbow, swallowed her weight in nerves, and nodded.

"Giles—?"

"Just open the bloody door!"

A laugh burst from Dawn's lips before she could stop it, shrill and strained in a way she felt sure would betray how stupid scared she was under all the bravado, but

no one said anything. Xander threw open the doors and plunged inside without bothering to wait.

Again, Dawn followed, crossbow first, all her senses set on bright, chaotic fire. The first thing she saw was the back of a familiar head; the first thing she heard was another vampire roar, harsh and almost deafening against her ears, but he was there, *alive*, twirling the ax Buffy had been carrying when they'd left the cottage, surrounded by a bunch of Giles-knockoffs who were trying to close the gap around him but not quite brave enough to get within striking distance. Those who got too close were knocked off their feet, or free of their teeth, a few glancing off the ax enough to splash blood through the air. But he wasn't killing them. There wasn't a little pile of bodies. He seemed to be making an effort to avoid claiming lives.

Then Xander yelled, "Buffy!" and forced Dawn's attention past Spike.

To where some asshole had a *gun* pointed at her sister's head.

Oh, hell no.

There wasn't thought behind what she did next, just instinct. Her body moved independently of her brain, understanding what came next. She took aim and fired, held her breath, her eyes following the trajectory of the bolt as it soared through the air toward the target. Whipping through the throng, between bodies and over heads, and somehow, miraculously, never shunted off course. It struck the barrel aimed at her sister, the force of which knocked the asshole back and had arrow and gun alike tumbling through open air on different trajectories. She watched as long as she could, until gravity did its part and pulled both out of view.

Then Dawn breathed out, relief and adrenaline pulsing through her in equal measure.

She'd done it. A thing heroes did.

And she was ready to do it again.



THERE HAD BEEN a lot of discussion yesterday and before they'd set out that morning, even more if you counted the pillow talk he and Buffy had indulged in throughout the night, but one rather crucial matter had somehow gone uncovered. Namely what the plan was when they got inside. How they hoped to defeat these blighters.

Specifically, if Buffy would ever forgive him if he started swinging that ax with a mind to bury it somewhere, not just keep the surrounding gits on their toes.

It was a stupid thing, but it also wasn't. Not for Buffy. She would have told herself she knew what was at stake, the decisions she would be forced to make when put to the test, even thought she accepted it—the thing she would never accept. He'd known it that night in the hospital when she'd declared her intent to kill Gray herself, and he'd known it a few nights ago when he'd wrapped his arms around her to keep her from doing just that. Right or not, human life was something she viewed as singular and precious, and everyone in here—the prats who kept pressing in on the

circle around him, trying to get close with the stakes and holy water they'd pulled out of seemingly nowhere—was human.

Humans who were quickly discovering that the roaring vampire wasn't doing much more than roaring. That though he brandished an ax and swung it with enthusiasm, he wasn't actually aiming to kill. The most he was doing at the moment was keeping the lot of them from pouncing on him.

Far to his left, Willow was wielding some mojo, mumbling words that didn't make a drop of sense to his ears, but the noise around him was at a volume that made it hard to hear his own bloody thoughts. A few times, when he dared to look, he caught a few of the men around her staggering as though weighted down at the ankles, but whatever she was throwing at them was unstable and weak, not holding much longer than it took to conjure. It was at such odds with the tremendous power that she'd used to get them this far into the Council, like she was holding back. Like she also didn't know what the line was, or just as likely, was petrified of crossing it again. Which he'd sympathize with plenty if they all made it out of here with their heads, but his own nerves were hitting points dangerous for anyone around him.

He was starting to feel like a cornered animal. If he wasn't careful, he'd start to act like one, too.

And across the room, Buffy was dancing with the weapon she'd won without trying, moving with such grace and poetry, he was almost glad for the distraction around him. She was so bright, luminous, the few glimpses he stole of her seemed almost indecent, like he was a voyeur. Buffy had always been a force he'd had trouble not watching. Back to those early days when he'd sent minions out to capture her battles on film for future study—and wanking, though he'd felt some guilt in that, knowing what Dru would say—and the glorious times they'd been going head-to-head. Every twist, every bend, every decision she made calling to him like nothing else ever had. In a thousand years, Spike would never have thought that sensation the kind that could be topped, but he would have been wrong.

It was still Buffy, just Buffy as he'd never seen her. Fluid and charged with purpose, with rightness, knocking Council gits off their feet seemingly just by looking at them. Even that second the plonker had aimed a gun at her head—that moment when Spike had watched her reckon with her mortality had been short-lived—Buffy might have been still, but she was still with motion. A move had been coming even if the gun hadn't been knocked off by an arrow. Her mind might not have known, but her body had. Her body had been preparing to do what slayers had been doing since the dawn of bloody time, and fight.

Even still, she was knocking men over left and right, but she wasn't killing them. No matter how hard they tried to kill her.

As for the rest, these men were getting over their shock at what had happened—they were getting agitated. Those who had given up trying to flee were now circling back around, gathering fallen weapons, some even chairs, and pushing him back until he had a wall at his back and nowhere else to go.

Daring closer and closer as he swung and snarled, knocking into those who came leaping at him, thunking their skulls together and shoving them back into the arms

of their colleagues. There hadn't been that many of these wankers but enough that rendering one or two unconscious didn't do much to thin the herd.

Someone shoved a crucifix under his nose, too close for his instincts to ignore this time. Spike hissed and let out another roar, bringing the ax down with the full intent of severing the limb holding the sodding thing, but he didn't make it. At once, the left side of his face was on fire. Hot, wet fire that ate through skin and muscle and carved a clear path to the bone, and Spike was on his knees, slamming there hard enough to knock his teeth down his throat, and still the pain came. Endless, burning, and he felt himself eroding, and the prat who had thrown the holy water in his face was reaching for another bottle as others pressed closer. More bottles. More crosses. And he was a single vampire in a roomful of people who had dedicated their lives and sacrificed others to bringing him and his kind down.

But *no*. This was not how it ended for him. Not on his knees among a load of human gits. Spike forced himself back to his feet, throwing off the crosses and the vials and the stakes hurtling toward him from all directions. Each move painful but not as painful as the thought of letting them do him in. And he'd made a promise, after all. A promise he intended to see through no matter the sodding cost.

If these bastards wanted the monster, the monster was what they would get.



THERE WERE a few things Xander had forgotten about vengeance demons. Not that he'd ever really taken the time to learn too much to begin with, which he knew would be a part of a longer conversation he and Anya would have, assuming they both made it to the other side of this. One of the lessons from the previous year that had taken some time to really sink in—he couldn't make something not true by refusing to talk about it. Putting that into practice might be tricky but here, now, in the middle of all this insanity, it was right at the top of his to-do list.

A to-do list that would have to wait to be tackled, for Anya was a little busy at the moment, using some of those demon abilities he'd forgotten she had. Making it painfully obvious that if she'd wanted to hurt him or anyone else in the year that had lapsed since their failed wedding, she could have. Easy. *Scary* easy. Not only was she rocking the demon strength, but there were other abilities too.

Like waving her arm at the crowd of watchers climbing over themselves for the chance to stake Spike and sending them soaring through the air all Carrie-style. Then it was raining watchers, some plummeting to the floor and others blasting into walls. And Anya didn't break a sweat, barely even looked Spike's way before charging forward, her demon face pulled into a snarl that would make any reasonable man shit his pants. Giles was somewhere in that madness too—Xander had lost sight of him. He'd been there one second and gone the next, probably out to dole out a little payback of his own, but it bothered Xander that he didn't know where. Keeping Giles safe had been pretty much his only job. He couldn't even claim a kick-ass rescue with a crossbow if they got to the other end of this and Buffy asked him why her watcher was among the casualties.

"Spike!" Dawn cried, jarring Xander back to the present just as the youngest Summers rushed to the vampire's side. "What the hell did they do to you?"

"Evened the playin' field, I expect," came the weak response. The last Xander had seen, Spike had been roaring and charging into the masses charging into him, but now he was hunched over, his head bowed. "Decided if they all had to be ugly gits, they were gonna take me with 'em. First splash just brassed me off. Then the bastard got me with one that actually hurt."

Xander stepped forward without thinking, then blanched and tried not to make an out-loud *ick* noise when Spike lifted his head. The left side of his face was all charred skin and cooked muscle tissue. His lips had been burned away as had a good amount of cheek, exposing the back half of his jaw and teeth. Amazingly, though, he shook his head and waved Dawn off when she went to drape his arm over her shoulder.

"It's nothin'."

"Nothing? You look awful."

"Thanks ever so, pidge."

Missing half a face or not, Spike seemed okay. He'd dragged the ax off the floor and looked ready to charge in again—though where was anyone's guess. The watchers Anya had knocked off their asses were slowly climbing back to their feet, grabbing at anything they could fashion into a weapon. Deeper into the room, Willow was standing amid a swirling storm of her own making, her hair blowing like wild and her eyes that endless onyx that still showed up in Xander's nightmares sometimes. He had no idea what she was doing, as he couldn't feel it or see it beyond the contained circle of magic, but she wasn't alone. Four watchers, three men and a woman, had formed a circle around her and were all getting their chant on along with her. Fighting magic with magic, he guessed, or whatever it was these creeps got up to in here.

Anya had attracted her own set of chanters, which might have been the only way anyone knew how to slow her down. She was still lashing out at anyone who was stupid enough to get within punching range, but the special telekinetic trick she'd pulled just seconds ago didn't seem to be an option at the moment. And Buffy was carving an elegant swath through the rest, deflecting blades and arrows and everything else being hurled at her head. She looked different somehow—Xander had seen her fight more times than he could count, almost to the point where he'd stopped being impressed, but this wasn't like those times, and he didn't know what had changed. Except she was swinging a red ax that he was pretty sure he'd never seen before but looked like it fit with her in ways completely different from any of the other weapons she'd mastered.

Xander forced himself to pull his gaze from her after a moment—there was something mesmerizing about the way she moved—and the only place left for it to go was the stage or the pulpit or whatever was going on at the head of the place, where the man he recognized as Travers was screaming orders that disappeared into the surrounding cacophony, or did to Xander's ears. The man was gripping a flash of silver and striding toward a table that Xander realized belatedly wasn't a table but

Faith. Faith strapped down, gagged but not blindfolded, and the silver in Travers's hand suddenly took shape.

A knife. And Xander understood. Travers might not be getting his way with the ritual, but he was determined to claim at least one slayer life.

"Buffy!" Xander screamed. "He's going for Faith!"

There was a hard chest at his back, hot, putrid breath at his neck, and he didn't have time to turn. Didn't have time to do anything but sputter his shock as a bar closed in against his windpipe, cutting off oxygen and his voice and everything else. He flailed his arms before seizing control again and started clawing at the thing suffocating him, but whoever was behind him was too strong, and things in his head were growing fuzzy.

Of all the fights to die in, he'd really hoped to be killed in a better way than choked by a watcher. But that was life. Chock full of disappointment.



EVERYTHING HAD HAPPENED FAST. Too fast. Willow had thought she'd been prepared for fast, but she hadn't. The ax-thing had appeared in Buffy's hands and changed the ballgame. No one had expected that, and everyone had freaked out about it. The second the room had dissolved, Willow had gone into protect mode. No curses, no dark energy, just keep her family safe.

And at first, that had gone okay. She'd had the boost from what she'd absorbed of the Council's magical defenses, enough to put up the remnants of the wall around the plinth to keep Faith protected. Then the second spell, the one that would have glued their feet to the floor if she hadn't seen and consumed it first, poured out of her to stay as many of the watchers as possible. Once that had been gone, though, she'd been left rather dry. Realizing, for the first time, just how much energy she had expended in getting them this far.

Not just energy. Magic. Magic that wasn't endless. That could exhaust itself just as easily as any other muscle. God, it had been so long that Willow had forgotten that was a possibility, and she'd just had a major workout without stretching first. So when the crash came it came hard, like a dog that had decided it didn't want to walk anymore and just plopped down in the middle of the street, unresponsive to the tugs and pleas of its owner. Suddenly she was surrounded by Council practitioners murmuring spells, her own magic well dry. No dark books to consume. No pick-me-up at Rack's. She'd used up what she'd brought and what she'd stolen and had turned herself into a sitting duck at a duck hunting party in the doing.

Only that wasn't quite right. Not all the magic was gone. Just what was safe. There was the well of unsafe.

There was the weapon in Buffy's hands.

Willow didn't know what it was, just that she'd felt it the second she'd stepped inside. Not the way she suspected Buffy felt it, for whatever else that weapon was, it clearly was for the Slayer. Buffy had become some ethereal force the second it had touched her skin, a painting given life, brightened in a way that was almost painful,

for though Willow had never been an aura reader she felt she could see the glow and was certain if Tara were here she would have remarked upon it. The power vibrating from that thing—the ax, scythe, whatever it was called—was like its own contained nuclear bomb.

And unlike the people around her, that weapon could be drained of its power without rendering anyone a useless husk wrapped in human skin. It was the first thing she'd thought upon seeing it, the thirst, the hunger terrifying in its strength and insistence. She'd wanted to tell herself the reaction had only been that intense because she was fatigued and that weapon was a lifeline, a source of potentially endless power just a few feet away, but she knew better. She wanted it in a way that defied sanity, even the drive to exist to the next moment and all the ones that followed. She wanted it because it was power—pure and pulsing and within her grasp. It would be easy, too. She could take what she had left and drain it, absorb it, have that power become part of her. Consume it and let herself be consumed by it. There was numbness in power like that. Bright and blissful, the sort that burned away everything else. A year's worth of grief and disappointments, of sleeping in a bed that was too big and too cold, of waking up from dreams of Tara only to remember and feel that same, crushing emptiness as though for the first time.

The temptation had been strong before but was almost unmanageable now. Everything about her was weak. Last year, she'd nearly brought the world to its knees, and this year she was struggling to fend off a few wimpy watchers whom she could easily make whimper and cower. Make it so nothing like this ever happened again—no more threats to Buffy or Faith or anyone else. A world shaped the way Willow envisioned. Exactly the way things should be.

And once she realized she was reaching for it, that her hand was outstretched, her fingers sparking with the last remnants of her magical reserves—*just a touch, that's all I need*—Willow thought of a song the woman she loved had sung to her on a bridge, her eyes filling along with her heart, and instead of pulling she pushed what little she had left, the meager scraps of her power, into the scythe. She felt herself falling into it, tumbling and not caring if she got up again. All the sorrow and regret and hunger and desperation that had carried her this far spilling out and over but not winning. Not today. Not again. She could make a choice.

That choice was to surrender her remaining magic into the weapon that belonged to the Slayer.

And when she did, the room went white.



SHE FELT it before it happened. The charge, the surge, the metal of the scythe burning hot enough to blister and char, like she had just pulled it out of a fire. Yet the heat had no accompanying pain, at least not for her. It was just awareness, the same way she knew when vampires were nearby. The metal should burn her, but it didn't.

It *did* burn the watcher she smacked it with. Buffy let out a cry that was almost louder than the one he screamed, watching as the flesh of his forehead sizzled and

smoked. She pulled the scythe back with enough force that her sweaty hair smacked against her face and watched as the man, cradling his head, melted into a whimpering pile on the floor. Not dead, thank god, but not fighting anymore either. Down for the count.

Buffy turned, panting, but she didn't have time to wonder or debate. Her friend with the crossbow had reloaded once more and was preparing to fire. She flipped back, clutching the scythe with renewed determination, and swung hard in mid-air when the arrow released. Smacking it hard enough it went thudding back into the watcher's gut, and he went down, too. Buffy kept turning, listening to the rhythm of her body. The way sound moved against the air, feet on the floor, men running up to her and away from her in equal measure. All the while the scythe burned hotter and hotter until the metal itself started to warp. Until it transformed into pure light.

"What the—" But that was as far as she got. The reds and silvers of the blade melted, leaving behind nothing but white. A white that burst from the weapon with such force she nearly lost her grip and tumbled back, but somehow managed to hold on. To watch as those around her were thrown into the air.

It was just a moment, but a long moment. The flailing members of the Watchers Council suspended above the floor, their expressions mingled terror and confusion and anger and more. Buffy not knowing how but also knowing exactly how, knowing it was because of the burning light she'd claimed as her own. And as she'd watched them go up, so did she watch them come down. The stretch broke and the building shook under her feet as dozens of bodies slammed back to earth.

It wasn't until she tore her gaze from the human heaps on the floor that she realized something else. Whatever had just happened had only affected the watchers. Xander was still on his feet, looking as shaken as she felt. Willow over to Buffy's right, no longer surrounded by the hulking masses that had kept her out of sight. Near her staggered someone Buffy immediately recognized as Giles, thin and gaunt and sporting a wild mane of hair with a beard to match. He held a blood-soaked blade but looked unharmed. Just bewildered like the rest.

"Uhh," Willow said, sounding a bit loopy, "anyone else feel that?"

Buffy's heart thundered, panic and confusion combating for the steering wheel. The men remained where they had fallen, not moving. Not moving but not dead. She didn't know how she knew that, but she did. Like she could feel their heartbeats, their pulses, the rush of their thoughts. The scythe pulsed against her skin as though hungry for another blow, but the light that it had radiated had faded, and it was back to normal. Its version of normal, at least, which she still didn't understand.

For the first time since it had found her hand, she wondered if she should be afraid of the thing.

"What...what happened?" That was Xander, the uncertainty in his voice oddly comforting. "Who did that? Was it me?"

"Of course it wasn't you," said a voice that Buffy knew belonged to Anya but didn't fully accept until her friend stepped into her line of sight, her hands on her hips and her demon face in place. "It wasn't me, either. I'm good but not that good."

Buffy swallowed, tearing her gaze across the landscape as fear overtook her need

to understand why the fighting had stopped or why all the watchers had yet to start climbing back to their feet. Answers could wait. Knowing the people she loved were okay could not. "Dawn?" she asked, staggering forward—or trying to. It was hard with a bunch of people strewn about the floor. "Spike?"

"Here." As though she'd been waiting, Dawn emerged from a sea of debris across the room—what looked like the remains of chairs that had been recruited into weapons—holding her crossbow in one hand and supporting Spike with her shoulder. "He's fine," Dawn added upon catching the look on Buffy's face. "As you can tell by the fact that he's still standing rather than being a dust cloud."

"Some bloke thought I ought to take a bath with holy water," Spike said. He sounded strong, stronger than Dawn had, and some of Buffy's panic subsided. "Got me twice. All's good, Slayer. Except what'd you do to turn 'em off?"

"She didn't do anything."

Everything inside of her froze, but Buffy still managed to turn. Travers had pulled himself up on the plinth, his clothes torn, his eyes wild and his hair no longer neat and orderly. Whatever barrier had been there was gone now, as was the composure he brandished like a weapon. For the first time since meeting him, Buffy saw what he worked so hard to hide. His smallness. His insignificance. The portrait of another man raging over the fact that he hadn't gotten his way.

"That belongs to me," Travers said, his voice deep, almost guttural. Entirely mad. "The Slayer is the weapon of the Council, and as such—"

"Oh, do shut up."

Buffy didn't think she'd ever been so glad to hear Giles's voice—not even last year when he'd made his extraordinary, life-saving entrance. Seeing him had been a relief; hearing him was even better. It told her he was okay, too. He had to be okay if he could sound that exasperated.

"You never understood that," Travers went on, staggering toward the place where Faith still lay, and the relief Buffy was riding vanished without ceremony, seeing exactly what would happen next. What he was planning to do.

That awareness barely had time to bloom before she burst into motion again in spite of her protesting muscles. She was closer now, much closer than she'd been at the start, and faster, too. Every ounce of remaining strength pumped into closing the gap between her and the Head of the Council. Travers didn't get to win, not even a little, and he definitely didn't get to kill another slayer. Not while Buffy had breath.

But she wasn't the only one making a beeline for Travers. Giles was right on top of him, his face contorted with a fury born out of weeks of captivity, of betrayal, of all the time she knew he had been waiting to die. And he was going to get there first, so Buffy let him, breaking instead to Faith, whose wide eyes reflected relief and fear and more of that righteous fury she was more than owed. Buffy didn't hesitate, just started swiping the scythe at the fabric bonds holding her in place. Surprised to see they were indeed fabric but understanding almost at once.

Magic. Magic to subdue her. Magic to keep her in place. Magic to separate her from the Slayer line. It had all come down to magic.

"Took you long enough," Faith said after spitting out the gag, lurching upward. "You slowin' down in your old age, B?"

Buffy threw the arm not occupied with the scythe around her and pulled her in for an awkward, lopsided hug. A hug that, for all she knew, might have surprised Faith more than being kidnapped had, but she didn't care. It didn't matter. It was over now. Finally. It was over.

It was oddly fitting that this was the thought filling her head. Optimism or naivete or some combination thereof, something she hadn't let herself entertain in what felt like a long time. Something that should have been further out of reach than it was. Somehow, though, she touched that high. That moment of elation that always followed when the battle was won. She basked for a full second, then another, and then someone screamed her name in a way she'd never heard it screamed before. Buffy tore away at once, adrenaline coursing anew, and that was when her stomach split open.

And she didn't get it. Even as she staggered back, she was swinging the scythe, ready to fight, body and brain existing on different levels. One in the process of collapse and the other searching for what she'd missed, the enemy she hadn't identified. Now several people were yelling her name, a chorus of screams coming from all sides, and Buffy didn't know what they wanted so she swung again, blindly, and felt rather than saw the scythe find its target, the impact vibrating up an arm that was going numb. Then the fight went out of her. She looked down and saw the hilt of the blade buried in her gut and then her brain finally caught up with her body, realizing it was dying. There was pain when her knees slammed onto the floor but it already felt distant because it was. And so was she.

It wasn't hours later that Buffy looked up, she knew that, but it seemed like a long time. Faith gripping her shoulder, Giles trying to scramble onto the plinth, Dawn and Spike miles away, and the man who had stuck the knife in her on the floor. Only he was in two pieces. His body slumped where it had fallen when he had lunged around the altar, and the head her scythe had removed several feet away, glassy eyes open in a frozen look of shock.

Travers was dead, and Buffy had killed him.

But he had killed her first.

THE BATTLE'S DONE AND WE KINDA WON

SHE DIDN'T DIE.

Somehow, that was all anyone could talk about.

"You didn't tell us," Dawn said for what had to be the millionth time since she'd been allowed into the room. "You knew all this time and you didn't tell us."

Buffy didn't rush to respond, mostly because she was still struggling to wrap her mind around what had happened. Or really, define it in any way. Her descriptions thus far had been underwhelming to the point of tragic. What had she seen? Nothing. What sort of nothing? The nothing sort. Really, that was all? It had just been empty. Black, empty, and forever. She'd called out for help, for Dawn, for Spike, for her mom; she'd called and called and only her echo had answered. Then suddenly there had been light, and she'd scrambled toward it. Light that turned out not to be *the* light, rather the sort that intensified until there was no choice but to open her eyes. Only then had she tumbled out of the empty and back, finding herself in a bed and wired to a bunch of beeping machines. Her sister had been curled into a chair on one side, asleep, and Spike had been in the other, awake, holding her hand and regarding her with one of those unreadable expressions he'd mastered over the last year.

Except maybe not entirely unreadable. He hadn't had to tell her. She'd known.

"How long?" she'd asked in a sandpaper voice.

"Bout an hour," he'd replied, squeezing her hand before dropping his head. "Scared the bloody life outta me, love."

"That sounds like a very survivable thing for you."

He'd chuckled, a tragic little sound that said more than words ever could, and hadn't looked up. Hadn't said anything else, either, just kept hold of her hand. She'd appreciated that. The time to start analyzing the fact that she should be dead again

was not within ten seconds of waking up. She needed time to process, to think. To work through what her life was going to look like in a world where Giles's theory was no longer just a theory. The *maybe* answered and defined.

Buffy had decided she didn't want to think about it, and for the most part, the others had agreed to give her time to process. They weren't lacking other things to discuss.

Dawn, however, refused to budge.

"You don't know what it was like," she said, whirling back around once she reached the end of the strip of floor she'd been pacing. "You *died*, Buffy. I had to watch you die *again*. Spike had to watch you die *again*. Are you sensing a theme?"

"Dawn," Spike began, but it was no good. She was in full rant-mode and not about to be deterred.

"I can't believe you didn't tell me about this. Let me know that if I saw something like you dying, it wasn't anything to worry about. That you'd bounce back all—"

"I did not bounce," Buffy argued. Her voice wasn't exactly at keep-up-with-teenager levels of strength but firm enough that Dawn stopped pacing to glare at her. "Well, I didn't. See the IV? That's more limping than bouncing."

"You know what I'm talking about, and that's not it."

"And as I've told you eight times now, we didn't tell you because we *didn't* know." Buffy sat forward, careful not to jostle any of the wires attached to her, but she was beyond tired and edging on cranky, and if there was anything she hated more than being cranky, it was being cranky when unable to punch things. "I haven't told *anyone*. We didn't know if there was even anything *to tell*."

"You told Spike," Dawn shot back.

Buffy rolled her eyes and fell back against the pillow. She was starting to miss the empty. "That's different."

"What, because he's your boyfriend? I'm your sister."

"Because I know a thing or two about immortality, you nit," Spike said, and perhaps because the patient tone was gone, Dawn actually gave him her attention this time. "Easier to talk to someone who's bloody lived it."

A flurry of conflicting emotions swarmed over Dawn's face, anger and confusion the most prevalent. Not surprising, given her chronic need to keep arguing until she'd won or was forcibly ejected from a room. It was one of the more irritating traits they shared. "Still," she said after a moment, "it would've been nice to know going in. I wouldn't have worried as much."

"Yeah, and I might not have gotten up, either," Buffy replied dryly. "We didn't know what would happen. It was just a theory."

"A theory you thought was right."

More like a theory she'd worried was right, but Buffy decided to keep that much to herself. Another part of the *don't want to think about it* edict that everyone but Dawn was respecting at the moment. Which was why it was a good thing that her "medical team" was stricter on the visitation rules than Sunnydale Memorial—Dawn couldn't just camp out in her room and make inane chatter all day.

Granted, it wasn't so much a medical team as it was Spike, but he was the only one around that Dawn even pretended to listen to anymore.

And Buffy wouldn't be bedridden for long. While moving wasn't exactly fun right now, it wasn't impossible, even with the beauty mark Travers had left her with. She just couldn't twist or bend in certain ways until her body was done repairing itself. That was one of the things they had confirmed over the last twenty-four hours—that while she might be able to rebound from mortal wounds, Buffy's body otherwise reacted and responded like a normal slayer body. The healing process wasn't any faster than it had been before, and serious wounds would require serious time to heal. Which also explained why she would have to keep tampons on the grocery list for the foreseeable future—though Buffy was hoping there might be a magical remedy for that, because an eternity of PMS was just adding insult to injury.

Granted, from the look Spike had given her when she'd complained about it, she was willing to explore the possibility that might not be the worst thing in the world. For now.

A soft knock jarred her from her thoughts before they could start spiraling again, and Buffy glanced up to see a much less hairy Giles in the doorway of her hospital room. She let out a slow breath before turning her attention back to Dawn, whose protest was thankfully limited to a dramatic sigh. "One of these days, you're going to have to let me stay for these meetings," her sister whined.

"Stop acting like you're being babied. You were a big part of the fight *and* I said you could tag-team the next apocalypse with me."

Dawn snickered and shook her head, but didn't stop, just eased past Giles before disappearing into the hall. "And you better stick to that."

Giles watched her go, his expression somewhere between bemused and resigned. "This is a rather marked improvement from what I can tell," he said, then turned to regard Buffy with his warmest smile. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I wanna slay the next person who asks me that."

"I think that counts as better."

"Probably." Buffy forced a bland smile that she imagined would be less bland in time. Regardless of circumstances, it was hard not to feel *blah* while bed-ridden. The looming existential crisis was just a nice bonus. "What do you have for me?"

Giles edged deeper into the room and though she could tell he was trying very hard, he wasn't quite able to keep from favoring Spike with a look that was more pointed than strictly necessary. "Is he... Are you also staying?"

Spike shifted a bit and met her gaze the way he had every other time this question had come up. Not asking anything, not seeking permission, just making a determination based on whatever he saw in her eyes. Thus far, he hadn't been moved to leave, but there must have been something different when he looked at her now, for he nodded and rose to his feet.

"Gonna go find me a pick-me-up," he said, and gestured to the mostly healed side of his face. It turned out—for reasons Buffy really didn't want to dwell on—that the Council had whole freezers full of slayer blood on the premises, which had cleared up most of the damage done by the holy water. "Anything you need, love?"

"I wouldn't say no to chocolate if you happen to find any."

He smiled softly and nodded again. "I'll see what I can do," he replied, then brushed a kiss to her brow. "Back in a mo'."

There was an awkward shuffle—well, awkward from Buffy's view, watching Spike pretend not to notice the way Giles studied him as he made his way out the door. It might have been a bit optimistic to hope that Giles would skip the relationship interrogation part of the script, or at least postpone it until the gaping wound in her gut was closer to healed, but she hoped anyway. She wasn't in the mood to defend her choices to anyone.

Still, when the observation came, it was carefully neutral. "You two, ahh, seem to have gotten close," he said.

"Yeah. He's... We're together. Spike and me."

"I gathered as much." Giles moved in farther still, keeping his gaze on the floor. "Is it true that he has a soul now?"

"Yes."

"Ahh. And that he sought this out of his own accord?"

"He fought for it, Giles. He won it for me." Might as well cut through the bull. There was so much more to talk about. "He risked everything to be a better man. Everything is different now. *We're* different."

"I can appreciate that," he replied, still in that careful tone, still not looking at her. "I just... I want you to be sure this is truly what you want. Whatever Spike did was his own choice. Winning a soul for you, as you put it, does not make you indebted to him in any way."

If Buffy didn't love her watcher so much, she'd throw something at him. Like the hospital bed. "And that's one of the reasons he decided not to tell me about it," she replied, trying to keep her voice level. It wasn't Giles's fault he'd missed most everything that had happened. "Spike didn't tell me about the soul to get me to forgive him or be with him. He was pretty clear he didn't want that. I'm with him now because I love him. And it's good, Giles. It's new but it's good. *I'm* good. Or I have a chance to be, and I'd like to take it."

He met her eyes at last, and the tightness that had started to gather in her chest instantly loosened. "I suppose that addresses my concerns. Forgive me if I believe he'll never be good enough for you."

A smile tugged at her mouth. "Do you think anyone would be?"

"That is neither here nor there." But he smiled too, a smile that couldn't quite erase the weeks he'd been in that Council cell but came close. "You did remarkably well, Buffy. I hope you know that."

"And I have the gut wound to prove it. I'm sure after Dawn is over the whole 'I died' thing, she'll be mad at me for copying her injury." Buffy directed her gaze to her lap, but only for a moment. She needed to prepare herself for what she knew was coming next. "So...any updates?"

"Plenty, but none you need to concern yourself with."

"Yet here I am, concerned."

"There's truly nothing you can do. These things take time."

These things being the massive overhaul of the Council—the complete organizational restructure from the top down, and not just because Quentin Travers was dead. Buffy still wasn't entirely sure what had happened, having been dead herself for a chunk of it, but from what she'd learned since opening her eyes, the magic Willow had funneled into the scythe had essentially ended the fight. No one had gotten to their feet afterward, some owing to broken bones, others because they had hit the floor hard enough that they had yet to wake up. There had been expected chaos in what had followed—Spike collecting Buffy into his arms, screaming for someone to do something, Giles taking control and leading him to the Council's infirmary. Apparently, Buffy had been wrong in assuming everyone in the building was at Travers's ceremony, as there had been a collection of doctors and magical practitioners going about their business, completely oblivious to the happenings of the floor below them.

"It was just the inner circle," Giles had explained after he'd been ushered in to see her, and she was sure that had been a sight. Covered in dirt and blood, her hair a wreck, never mind the pain ricocheting through muscle and nerve. But she had tried to ignore that and focus on the words, not that they had been much better. Ultimately delivering information that Buffy had processed that the way she'd processed everything else—all thoughts of immortality and the fact that she should be dead shoved aside in favor of finding out just what the hell had happened.

The Council's inner circle hadn't been a small one, and was comprised of those that Travers trusted or had recruited over the last few months. There were the watchers who had come to evaluate Buffy in the fight before Glory. The networks team the Council dispatched to handle rogue slayers like Faith. The watchers who had been a part of the campaign to turn the Council's benefactors against Buffy in the first place, and those who had started to buy the snake oil. Those were the people Travers kept around him at all times, which was why the main halls of the Council had been empty. The elites of the organization had been given priority status and the honor of witnessing the birth of a new era. The building's other areas, areas Buffy hadn't seen, had been plenty full. The people studying ancient texts, decoding prophecies, doing magical experiments, and otherwise occupied with the standard ins and outs of their day job hadn't had the faintest clue. They were not the employees who had Travers's ear, though they had heard the rumors along with everyone else. Known enough to know Buffy Summers had lost the Council's faith but not enough yet to be poisoned on her entirely, as the Slayer wasn't inherently their concern.

And it was a good thing, too. According to Giles, there hadn't been any hesitation the second that he and Spike, along with the other Scoobies, had barreled into the infirmary, demanding immediate medical attention. Or rather, no hesitation about helping—the healers had balked at the presence of a vampire and even more so at a vengeance demon, as Anya had appeared in full demon face, but Buffy's blood-soaked body had taken precedence and they'd leaped into action. Getting her a room, hooking her up to fancy equipment—some of which had been built with technologies even the most elite hospitals had no idea existed. Not that it had done any good

in the long run. Buffy had died within minutes of arrival from a combination of blood loss and trauma-induced organ failure. Nothing they could have done, according to the Council healers, even if they had, by some miracle, gotten her there even sooner. The damage had been too extensive; Buffy had likely lived as long as she had simply by virtue of being the Slayer.

Giles had been arguing with the head doctor or healer or whatever the Council called them about beginning an autopsy for future study—the body of the Slayer being a thing the Council rarely had on-premises and the researchers determined to take full advantage—when the machine that monitored her heart rate had started beeping again. No one had realized it at first, not until Spike let out a roar and shoved Head Doctor Guy into the wall to both get his attention and inform him that anyone who cut her open was going to be cut open themselves, and he'd make sure they stayed awake and aware. *For research.*

Suffice it to say, everyone in the infirmary had been the epitome of helpful since then. And they'd also had their hands full, as Buffy wasn't the only one in need of medical attention. Those in critical condition, or suffering wounds not easily explained in neutral settings, were housed in rooms alongside the same hallway, whereas others had been shipped off to various hospitals with a standard cover story of a mass accident. A few had been dragged down to the cell block by Faith, who had taken possession of the scythe. Just for the time being, she promised, to keep the other watchers in line. They were more scared of the weapon than they were of her.

Buffy didn't want to admit it, but the thought of Faith with the scythe made her skittish. It had felt like hers too much to be trusted with someone else, no matter the intent. And she knew, somehow, that Faith felt it too. The second the metal had touched skin, how it had become a part of her. An extension of the self that she felt somewhat naked without, now that she knew what she was missing. And it wasn't outside the realm of possibility that Faith would decide she wanted to keep it after all. Certainly wouldn't be the first time.

But that was another thing Buffy was trying not to think about too much—a list that was in danger of reaching an all-time high.

"I just worry that this isn't it," she said now, forcing herself back to the present. "What was happening here was bigger than any one person. Quentin might have been the driving force behind everything but he had a lot of people in his corner. We can't just keep them locked away forever."

"Can't we?" Giles replied. "I was rather hoping we could."

"You know what I mean."

"I do. And I understand your concern, but the situation is not quite that black and white."

"And I would know that how? You're not exactly being the most forthcoming."

She had him there and he knew it. Giles glanced down and sighed, removing his glasses. "You have quite enough on your plate without worrying about the particulars here. At least now."

"Hello, have you met me?"

He huffed and caressed the bridge of his nose before sliding his glasses back into

place. "Very well. Don't say I didn't try." A pause. "From what I have been able to gather, Lydia Chalmers has taken it upon herself to reach out to legacy members of the Council to inform them of what has happened here. The entire story."

Well, you asked for it. Buffy's gut plummeted, the wound pulsing anew as though it had just been agitated. "Oh."

"And I believe the consensus is that you, once you have recovered entirely, should assume the role of the head."

"I should *what* now?"

Giles offered a soft smile as though this weren't the most ridiculous thing he'd ever heard, sliding his hands into his pockets. "It seems her allegiance to the Council, to Quentin, did indeed have a limit, and that limit was the life of Gray Asra."

This was not right. Not what she had been prepared for—not in the slightest. Buffy blinked as she fought to make sense of what she was hearing, though without much luck. Her head was filling with static, her heart thumping at a rib-crashing pace. The Council. Gray. Quentin Travers. Eternity. All of it vying for mental real estate she didn't have to spare. In the end, she focused on the part that seemed less complicated. "Lydia didn't know what Travers planned to do with Gray?"

"Apparently, she wasn't aware that any action had been taken against Gray at all, only that he was planning to," Giles replied with a slow nod. "That she had indeed come here under false pretenses but managed an escape when confronted with the fact. She was under the impression that you had succeeded in brainwashing the girl and, once the existing Slayer line was severed, the Council would send its recovery team—"

"Hit squad," Buffy muttered.

"—to locate and return her to her watcher's care for rehabilitation. When you interrupted today's proceedings and announced that Quentin had in fact murdered the girl... Well, Lydia took it upon herself to uncover the truth."

"How? No one got out of that room, I thought. Spike was at the door, keeping everyone inside."

"Indeed, but there was another way out behind the dais. It was only known to a few individuals, placed there as an emergency exit—a contingency for any ritual that might end poorly. It was how Quentin was able to leave and return the way he did. The second the fight broke out, he made sure to seek safety."

A bitter taste filled her mouth at the words, and without her permission, her mind went back to Travers. Specifically, the body that had hit the floor minus its head thanks to an action she'd taken without thought or intention. Yeah, he'd killed her, but the knowledge that she'd killed him more permanently pressed at the inside of her skull, making her brain throb just as much as the rest of her. Every mention of his name furthered the discomfort, the thing she would have to deal with eventually.

She wasn't sorry he was dead, and that was what hurt most of all. The thought of what that made her.

"It seems while the fight was unfolding, Lydia seized the initiative to access the archival security footage," Giles went on, either not noticing Buffy's discomfort or pretending not to notice. To stop talking now would be to acknowledge it. "Quentin

had ordered the footage to be doctored to support his version of events, but if there is one area in which the Council lacks the resources to move quickly, it is in technology. Lydia saw what happened—the camera in my cell was located in the overhead light fixture, incidentally—and reached out to Gray’s mother, who had procured a confession from her husband courtesy of Anya.”

“Anya?” The sick feeling took a back seat. “I saw she was here.” She had been kinda hard to miss, as she’d been plowing her way through the crowd, waving her hands and making it rain watchers. “I didn’t know how or why.”

“She took it upon herself to join the fight after fulfilling Mrs. Asra’s vengeance wish.” Giles offered a flat smile. “Her method was...rather brilliant, if I do say so myself.”

Buffy’s throat went tight. She wasn’t sure she wanted to know, but it wasn’t like she had a choice. “Does that mean he’s still alive?”

“Oh yes, quite. The wish was that he live with what Quentin did to their daughter for the rest of his life. Anya’s interpretation was to imprint the back of his eyelids with the footage of her last moments, both from the camera the Council had in that cell and what was captured with the one hidden on her person.” His smile turned into one of grim satisfaction. “He will never be able to close his eyes without seeing what he allowed to happen, not even to blink. Another reason why you are currently the favorite to assume control of the Council.”

“That makes the kind of sense that doesn’t.”

“It does, actually. They are afraid.”

“Afraid?”

“Buffy, it has been more than eight years, and still you don’t understand just how remarkable you are.” He stepped forward so he was directly beside her bed, then took a seat on a patch of unoccupied mattress. “You forged alliances unlike any other slayer in recorded history. You tamed not one, but two vampires with brutal reputations, including a known killer of your kind, and fashioned them into powerful allies.”

“I think *tame* is a bit—”

“You have arguably the most powerful witch the world has ever known on your side, who is not without her own allies and support. And when you decided to take the fight to the Council, you did so aided by a vengeance demon whose loyalty you have somehow earned, even if she denies it, and I’m sure she will,” he added with a smile that was almost fond. “The fact remains that Anya decided to assist you without hesitation, complaint, or caveat. She fashioned you a war house equipped with everything you might need to infiltrate a building as protected as the one we are in. The vengeance she wrought upon Joseph Asra is arguably more painful than any of the gruesome deaths she has caused over the centuries, and largely informed by your influence. Entirely bloodless. You have every right to more vengeance should you seek it, and the threat that you might do so is not one any of the Council’s remaining members, allies, or benefactors will take lightly. This is in addition to your own extraordinary skill and power, already formidable before you were in possession of the Scythe of the Slayer. I believe the events of the past day have done much to

convince any potential dissenters that standing against you is tantamount to suicide.”

Buffy sat still for a moment, not breathing, just trying to absorb everything she’d just learned into her overcrowded mind. “So essentially, they’re giving me the Council because they’re afraid of me.”

“Of you and your allies, yes.”

“That’s... It’s not like the Council doesn’t have its own allies, right? I mean—”

“Buffy, you burst through the front door with a witch who dismantled some of the most robust magical defenses in the world. I know it seemed easy, and that is precisely what has people worried. All it does is reinforce how powerful *Willow* is, and she is on your side. Never mind what Anya and, yes, Spike were able to do on their own. Even Xander and Dawn, with no extraordinary power of their own, managed to hold their own in a room full of enemies.” Giles took a breath. “Then there is you. What you accomplished. Whatever else he was, Travers was a feared man with considerable power, and you quite literally took his head.”

She couldn’t help it—she flinched and looked away. That was still a long way off from sounding like a compliment.

“And the Scythe of the Slayer is now in your possession, an instrument as fabled and significant to the Council as is the Holy Grail. We have no idea what powers it possesses, only that they are considerable and, as you demonstrated, available only to the Slayer.” His smile faded, his mouth falling into a flat line. “The Council has long sought this artifact with the sole intention of harvesting whatever magic was used to create it—in the hands of the Slayer, they viewed it as too powerful. Only to be used as intended should the need arise. It very well might have been enough to cut down Glory.”

That made everything inside of her run cold. “It might have stopped Glory?”

“It was designed to defeat the Old Ones, whose powers are arguably comparable, yes.” He must have seen some of what she was thinking, for he hurried to add, “They hadn’t found it at that time, Buffy. Remember, the scythe was only recently unearthed.”

“Do you think they would have let me have it?”

Giles sighed and shifted his attention to his lap. “No. They would have viewed you as too volatile.”

“Same goes for any girl who might have had it.” Or they would have just counted on the Slayer at the time doing what Buffy had done—throw herself between the threat and the world, for it was what slayers had done since the beginning. Each girl was incidental. A tool, as Quentin had said, to be used by the Council, not unlike the scythe itself. In case of emergency, break glass, only there would never be an emergency emergent enough for the Council to offer up the means for its own end. The Slayer forever a weapon wrapped in human skin—interchangeable, expendable, and malleable to be whatever the Council wanted her to be.

Only they hadn’t known. Buffy had been on one side of the room and Travers on the other, and he’d tried to bring the scythe down upon Faith to no avail. The scythe

had abandoned him, flown or appeared in her hands. Unwilling to be used against the Slayer.

Handy trick she still didn't entirely understand, even if the pieces were there.

"It might not be mine anymore," Buffy said after a beat, crossing her arms. "Faith has it now. She's just as much *the* Slayer as I am."

Giles looked up again, his eyes betraying surprise. "Pardon?"

"Well, she took it, didn't she? After I died?" *For a fourth time*, though that part she didn't need to say aloud. Not going there yet. "Maybe it stays with her. It wouldn't be the first time she decided she wanted something that's mine."

That last bit was not supposed to be an *out loud* thought but her brain filter seemed to be malfunctioning. Either that or some habits were harder to kill than others.

"She does have the scythe now, yes," Giles replied. "And she has reported to me that while she can feel its power, she is having trouble touching it the same way you did."

Buffy tried not to be pleased at that news, she really did, but the relief was there all the same. "Oh."

"It chose you. The scythe was only meant to have a single master at any given time."

"Right, but I'm the anomaly. The line doesn't even run through me anymore."

"And why does that matter to a weapon?"

She frowned, the ache in her head giving a particularly forceful throb. "How should I know? You're the watcher guy. I'm just the muscle."

"No, Buffy, you are so much more than that. Haven't you been listening at all?" Giles was looking at her again, his expression having firmed into what she always considered his father face. That combination of mentor and parent that he had so defined for the better part of a decade. The calm that came with being the grown-up, knowing what the child could not. Being the person to help guide them where they needed to go to get there on their own. Seeing it made her throat go tight and her eyes start to burn, made her love for him take almost a painful shape, combined with the intensity with which she suddenly felt her mother's absence. Bright and furious as though the loss had happened two days ago rather than two years.

"Ever since you were called, you have dedicated yourself to protecting the world at any cost," he said gently. "You made the hard choices, you've suffered unbearable losses, you have both died and killed to save the ones you love. You could have walked away at sixteen when we learned of Kendra, and you knew that. You thought about it. Discussed it. I might not have been privy to those conversations but I know full well they happened. Ultimately, you chose to continue fighting. A choice you made again the following year when Faith presented the same opportunity." He paused and worked his throat. "During the Cruciamentum, your primary concern wasn't for yourself, but how you could live in a world with monsters and not be in the fight. You were chosen to be the Slayer, Buffy, and you couldn't do anything to change that. But when circumstances gave you the choice, you chose to put the world above yourself. It is that choice, not your strength, that makes you a hero. That makes you

the embodiment of what it means to be the Slayer. Whether or not the scythe has any sentience, I cannot say. All I know is that today proved it can only be wielded by *the Slayer*, and it chose you. Not Faith. I believe, were she to attempt to keep it, it would prove as useful to her as any other weapon, but not more so. Until you are the Slayer no more, you will remain its true master.”

Buffy let out a breath, her cheeks hot and her eyes wet, and for a long moment, she didn’t know where to look, full enough she wondered if all the excess noise in her head would finally cry uncle and start leaking out. That niggling question she’d been living with for months, that thing she’d asked one night so long ago she couldn’t remember anything but the sensation, the worry that the Council might have been right to call her dangerous. Asking Giles if she was bad at what she did, if the mistakes she’d made had been too egregious to justify the good. Haunted by thoughts of Angel and Acatlha, of Willow and addictions, of decisions she’d made following her heart rather than her head, all of it compounding into a fear she hadn’t been able to shake—the fear that at the end of the day, she hadn’t made a difference at all. At least not one where the victories outweighed the failures. And there had been many, many failures. That was what had brought her here, after all. The Council’s decision that she couldn’t continue the way she was without endangering the world she’d given so much to protect. It might have been a power play, it might have been political, but it had hit her where she was the most vulnerable and had refused to leave.

If the scythe was everything Giles said it was, though. If it had chosen her...

As with so many other things right now, this was too much to think about. Like receiving the Class Protector award, which remained her single best memory of high school. Filling her with love and gratitude she hadn’t known she could experience on that level—how amazing it was to be seen and recognized. To have others, people who didn’t love her or even necessarily know her, appreciate how much she’d put into giving them what she could never have.

“Is all that true?” she asked, floundering for other words. Her mind seemed to have emptied of anything meaningful.

“I believe so. Though it is worth noting that, at this point, this is all a theory on my end and nothing more.”

“Your theories are proving to be accurate,” Buffy said, not really meaning to but, well, here they were. No matter how much she didn’t want to think about it, she wasn’t crazy. There was no way Giles would leave without discussing the elephant in the room. “All your theories.”

Giles tensed but only briefly, dropping his gaze to the place Quentin’s knife had pierced her abdomen. “I am so sorry.”

“No, it’s not your fault.”

“It is, though. I was so...distracted after your death that I lost focus.” He paused, swallowed. “I lost myself. And I trusted Willow, despite all evidence to the contrary, to be more than what she was at the time.”

“A mega-powerful witch?”

“Who was also grieving and had proven to be reckless with magic when her emotions are particularly volatile. We overlooked her attack on Glory following what

happened to Tara, but she could have easily done greater harm to herself. Perhaps not *only* herself." He released a deep breath that seemed to cost him something. "I wanted her to be what I didn't feel I could be then. A leader. A voice of reason. So I left. Twice, I left."

"The second time—"

"The second time was pure idiocy on my part," he said, his voice hardening in a way that surprised her. "Having you back was wonderful but...difficult. A watcher's duty is to educate and train a girl who will ultimately die a violent, painful death." He blinked and turned his face so she could only see him in profile, trembling. "I knew I wasn't prepared to watch you die, even if I also knew I had to be. That it could come at any time, no matter how strong or capable or enormously skilled you were. It is the fate that awaits all slayers. And even knowing I wasn't prepared wasn't enough. When I saw you lying there, I shattered. And when you were back, all I could think of was how eventually, I would have to do it all again. I was a coward and a fool."

Buffy didn't know what to say. She also didn't realize she'd started crying until she sniffed and a droplet plopped softly on the bedding. "That's not what you said," she managed eventually. "Not what you told me."

"Yes. I had some grand reason for leaving—it was better for you if I wasn't there. I forced myself to believe that. Even worse, I convinced you of the same." Giles exhaled. "I left you when you needed me the most. You were asking for help, desperate for it. Willow's magic was unchecked, and she refused to listen to my concerns. So rather than stay and monitor the situation, to be the help you needed, I decided to leave. And when I returned, you accepted that I had been right to do it, and I was still a coward. Not wanting to admit that I had made you complicit in one of the worst decisions of my life, beyond what happened in Sunnydale. I never want you to think that it's a sign of weakness to ask for help, Buffy. It is not. It's one of the bravest, strongest things a person can do."

He fell quiet again, though whether unable to continue or to give her time to sit with what he'd told her, she didn't know. His words wrapped around her like a blanket. There were parts of her she hadn't even realized were still aching because she'd become so accustomed to the discomfort, parts that she felt rear to awful life, old hurts made fresh again. The despair so thick she could have drowned—had wanted to at times. The disbelief that she'd been left on her own with it, abandoned by the person she had unequivocally trusted the most. Buffy wasn't sure when her mind had changed—when Giles's explanation and rationale had become her own, when she'd started to agree with him. Just that she'd hit a point where she knew something had to change, that *she* had to change, and had thought that was what he'd been talking about all along.

Only he'd been wrong. *He'd been wrong*. He was admitting as much. Which meant, maybe, not everything she'd done wrong last year had been her fault. That she needn't continue to punish herself for actions she couldn't undo and decisions she couldn't unmake. She was responsible, of course, for so much. Things that likely would have been the same with or without Giles there to guide her, but maybe it

wouldn't have gone as horribly as it had if she'd had a life preserver in the water with her. If she hadn't been so exhausted from just trying to stay afloat.

"Thank you," Buffy said once she could find her voice. "I... I think I really needed to hear that. But I also... Why are you telling me this? Why now?"

"A couple of reasons. One, as you said, you needed to hear it, and I needed to be brave enough to give that to you." Giles paused. "You were not my only responsibility, or my only failure. I knew what it was like to be seduced by powerful magicks, how performing them can make you feel invincible. There are many things in my life that bring me shame, and that period—the period where I was known as Ripper—is high among them. It cost people their lives. Nearly yours once, and Jenny." Another pause, and another deep breath, the sort that trembled. "I saw myself in Willow. I wanted to believe she was better than me. And she is in many ways. Very bright, her intentions good if nothing else. She didn't dabble in dark magic for the same reasons I did. The missteps she had were, I thought, understandable. Even when I had concerns, I didn't push as hard as I should have to make her appreciate the precarious nature of her talent. There were so many signs, and it was easier, more comfortable for me to ignore them."

"Giles, we've been over this." And they had, ad nauseam. The first few weeks after Willow's near apocalypse had been filled with phone calls and long conversations, along with some rather horrifying revelations. And then, when one of the nurses that had been on duty the morning Buffy was shot had shown up at the studio and shared her disbelief that Buffy was alive at all, much less in peak physical condition, they had started looking at the spell itself. All parts of it.

Like that Willow had killed a fawn that might or might not have contained the essence of a higher being. And the fact that she had asked for the *warrior of the people* to be returned to life, not Buffy herself. That had led to a large metaphysical conversation about the nature of the Slayer—that Slayer's power was the sort of thing that never died, even when the girl did. Rather, it jumped from girl to girl, always surviving. And that it had survived with Buffy, too, the first time she'd died, which implied it was intrinsic to her genetic makeup, and therefore incapable of being removed.

That was the crux of Giles's theory. The Slayer part, the warrior part that Willow had called back, was what was keeping her alive. Alive and young, always in the best physical shape she could be to answer the warrior's call. And any work they might do to untangle the mess Willow had made was just as dangerous, for Buffy wasn't sure where she would go. Back to Heaven, maybe, but also maybe not if Willow actually had killed a higher being in the resurrection spell. Buffy couldn't help but think that might be why she hadn't gotten a glimpse of Heaven after Warren had shot her, or yesterday when Travers had murdered her again. The last time she was let into Heaven, a higher being had been killed. Maybe that meant no more Heaven for Buffy. One eternal life had been exchanged for another. Them's the breaks.

Like everything else, that was something Buffy didn't want to think about just yet. She would have to tackle it in pieces, reconcile with leftover feelings of hurt and betrayal. A lot of that she'd already done, but there was always further to go.

The one comfort Buffy had was Willow hadn't known about the higher being bit. Or, more accurately from what Willow had told Giles, she hadn't wanted to know. She'd known the magic was dark, that she was doing something unnatural, and while she'd understood the words themselves, she hadn't explored their meaning. Hadn't looked up the things Giles had looked up, hadn't questioned, for she'd thought she couldn't be hurt by what she didn't know. And even if it could, she'd reasoned any cosmic price would fall on her to pay, not Buffy or anyone else. Just more of what had landed her in magical rehab. Assuming the means were justified if her intentions were good.

It was still a lot, though. And a lot more Buffy had to learn to live with now that she knew for certain that she wasn't going to die permanently anytime soon. Maybe never. An idea, a possibility, looming in the background of her brain, demanding attention she knew she would have to give it, but not yet. She'd already done a lot of the legwork already. Understanding that she didn't want any solution to involve more magic. Not now, at least. It had already done enough.

"I know we have been over it," Giles said, snapping her back to herself, "but I do... I am responsible for what happened. I had a duty to you that I overlooked. You have every right to be furious with me. With Willow as well, naturally, but with me especially. My role wasn't to be your peer or your friend. I was there to guide you, prepare you, and do everything in my power to protect you. That we're even having this conversation, the consequences of that spell... That is entirely on me. I am so sorry, Buffy."

"I know," she told him. If nothing else, she was certain of that. What it meant—what anything meant going forward—was another story, and one she assumed she'd take one day at a time the way she had everything else. Mourn what she'd lost and focus on what she'd gained, and maybe one day there would be a way around it. An answer to the questions that remained. All she could do was keep moving forward.

"I believe that is all I had to discuss," Giles said, rising to his feet. "I think it's best that you get your rest."

Good. She was a hundred percent certain she didn't want to talk or think about this right now. And since she was in no danger of running out of time, she didn't have to. "Yeah. And Spike?"

"You want him in here, I presume?"

"Yes."

"I will never understand that, but perhaps I am not meant to." Giles smiled, more genuinely this time. Less burdened. "But I am glad you have someone you trust. And before I go... About the Council. I don't want to rush you, but this period of goodwill and fear will not last. If we mean to make true, lasting change, you will need to be prepared to make a decision soon and act upon it. Perhaps sooner than it takes to heal in full. I know it is a massive undertaking, but I hope you do consider it. There is so much good you can do with the resources at your disposal."

Buffy groaned and crossed her arms over her belly. He'd been so close to leaving without making her brain turn back to that and everything else he'd said since stepping inside this room. The Council and what to do with it, the prospect of what lay

ahead, was enough to make her want to burrow under her blankets and sleep for a thousand years. But as with most things, Giles was right. It was a rare day when he wasn't.

Not so rare it didn't happen, though. Sometimes he made the wrong call. And sometimes, that had the potential of costing her everything.

But no one said he couldn't try to make it up to her.

"If I say yes, if I decide the Council is mine, there are going to be conditions."

"That is perfectly reasonable."

"And you're going to be a big part of it."

"I had assumed as much."

"No, Giles," Buffy said, and there must have been something in her voice, for his expression changed. "I mean a *really* big part."

TIME TAKES TIME, YOU KNOW

ONE OF THE THINGS WILLOW HADN'T BEEN PREPARED FOR WHEN SHE'D COME home all those months ago was how little Sunnydale had changed in her absence. Of course, expecting it to have changed was kind of stupid too—just because she'd turned her own life on its head didn't mean the whole town would follow suit. The Sun Cinema had been right where she'd left it, along with the Espresso Pump, UC Sunnydale Campus, the ruins of the old high school, and the many graveyards that littered the landscape. All of the largest changes had been the sort that couldn't be visually measured. Her relationship with her friends, her feelings of inadequacy and guilt, and more than anything, the grief that no matter where she looked, one face would always be missing.

Now she was home for the second time. Everything had moved pretty fast once Buffy had been released from the Council's version of the hospital. Tickets had been procured, travel arrangements made, and a last tour of the house Anya had created with her vengeance wish taken just in case there was anything there that would be of use. Then the whole gang had been on their way to one of the Council's private hangars—because they had those—to take advantage of necro-tempered glass, which was a thing that apparently existed and would likely be all over the Summers place before fall rolled around. At least the contract work would keep Xander busy.

The flight back had been a bit tense, though, given the circumstances. While Willow couldn't say she was sorry that her best friend had managed to walk away from a mortal wound with nary a scratch, she'd known almost immediately that there had been more than slayer genes at work. Buffy had died *again* and instead of staying dead, she was alive. Alive and talking about all the clients she was sure to have lost with her many recent absences from her studio. Or arguing with Dawn about how she would have to make up the days of school she'd missed while they'd been over-

seas. Or planning spa days—"because, god, I deserve it"—and badgering Spike about the sort of date he was duty-bound to take her on now that they had both survived the fight.

And even before the conversation with Giles, Willow had known that all of this—everything involving Buffy's continual survival—was because of her.

Because of the resurrection spell.

Another way she had failed.

That had been quite the downer, especially on the heels of what she'd considered a victory. Not just that Quentin Travers's plans had died with him, but that Willow had made it to the other side. That she'd felt the power pouring off the scythe and despite being tempted, despite wanting to lose herself inside of it, had pushed her magic into it instead. She'd felt free at that moment, liberated from the phantom self she'd been last year, reassured that if she could overcome her worst impulses when she was as weak as she'd been at the end of the Council fight that she could continue to do that. Take the strength she'd found within herself as proof that perhaps one day she would be absolved of her worst crimes.

But life didn't work that way. It never had.

The worst part was the conversation hadn't been nearly as bad as she'd imagined. If Giles had been yelly or Buffy spiteful, Willow would have hated it, but she'd have had the comfort of knowing the Willow they were mad at wasn't around anymore. Instead, the explanation she'd received had been rather blameless, not to mention bloodless, delivered by someone browbeaten into sharing the information rather than volunteering it willingly. But then, she wasn't sure what Giles had expected. Everyone had seen what had happened. Everyone knew. And if there had been any room for doubt, Dawn had pretty much destroyed it when she'd returned from visiting her sister, complaining loudly that if anyone should have known Buffy might be immortal, it was her. Would have saved her a lot of unnecessary worrying.

After that, everyone had wanted answers. Answers Giles had given after telling an antsy Spike that he could rejoin Buffy—"Though do bear in mind what she needs is rest now"—and found himself facing Xander, Anya, Dawn, and Willow, none of whom had been susceptible to his attempts to postpone explanations.

Sometimes she could just kick herself.

"You didn't know," had become Xander's mantra, and he was right. Willow hadn't known any of this was possible when she'd done the resurrection spell—the thought hadn't even crossed her mind. And that was part of the problem. She hadn't slowed down, hadn't asked, hadn't looked. Hadn't even bothered to see if Buffy was in a hell dimension, because there had to be a way to check, right? If spells existed that allowed you to pull someone out of the grave, then certainly spells existed where you could determine if the person in the grave was enjoying their afterlife. It had just been so straightforward, so simple. Buffy had jumped into a sea of hell dimensions so that was where her soul had gone...except there had been the nagging voice that wondered why her soul would leave her body behind. There was also the answer she'd given that nagging voice, namely that she wanted her friend back and shut up, whose side was it on, anyway?

No, Willow hadn't known. And that wasn't a point in her favor. The more she actually knew about the spell she'd convinced herself to perform, the less she could pretend like it was something good. She'd figured whatever she didn't know wouldn't hurt her and *would* help Buffy, and aside from one dead deer, what was the harm?

Evidently a lot. The next few days after that conversation had been some of the hardest she'd had since arriving in Chulmleigh the previous spring. Taking a look at herself in the mirror and admitting that she hadn't performed one of her more spectacular spells for some altruistic reason, no matter how she'd justified it in her head or to the others. A lot of her magic had been selfish and destructive because *she* had been selfish and destructive. She couldn't blame the spells for doing what she'd commanded or pretend that access to power was what had corrupted her. Buffy had power. She had power out the wazoo. She'd never once gone all evil and world-endy, so the problem was calling from inside the house.

And this was why Willow had had such trouble acclimating when she'd returned from England the first time. There had still been a lot to work through, not to mention damage to acknowledge. Even now, the high of their victory had caveats. No more saving the day just to party away the night. She had made some decisions with consequences that would linger, and that was just something she'd have to learn to live with.

Which really, truly sucked.

It would be better if Buffy would just yell at her—embrace the anger she was owed and do all the things that Willow imagined she would do if the shoe was on the other foot. But Buffy hadn't even mentioned it. Once she'd been declared good as new by the healer people, she'd rejoined her friends with big hugs and thank yous and everything else Willow knew she didn't deserve. Sharing the details of what had been decided would happen to the Council, what Giles's role would be, and the many ways she was planning to decompress after they all touched down in Sunnydale once again.

In some ways, Willow resented her forgiveness. It was harder to live with. Made it impossible to target her anger at anyone other than herself.

"Pretty sure that's how it works, right?" Xander had said when she told him—after he'd pried it out of her. Willow had asked if she could crash at his place upon returning home from England, and her explanation of *no reason* had gone over exactly as well as she'd expected. Still, he'd said yes, because Xander always said yes, allowing her some additional time before she had to be in close quarters with the consequences of her actions. "It's a one-day-at-a-time thing, if MAA is like any of the other addiction programs with which I am even slightly familiar from my father's on-again-off-again relationship with sobriety."

"It is," Willow replied. "And you're right. I just... I guess I thought all those days and all those times would add up quicker than they did. Like, I'm an overachiever. Always have been. Can't I just apply that to this?"

"I don't think it works that way."

"Well, it should."

"Will," he said, throwing the rather small bag of stuff she'd brought back with her

onto his couch. "You need to look at the good along with the bad. Look at how far you've come."

Yeah. How far. She'd thought so, back in the bowels of the Council, when she'd looked at the scythe and thought about how easy it would have been to draw its potential into herself. How much she'd *wanted* to, in fact, with the sort of hunger she could still feel days later. But she hadn't. She'd thought of Tara and she'd grounded herself. Managed to keep from losing her tenuous hold on control and given the last of her power to someone else.

All so she could learn about more ways she'd failed.

"Look, I can't tell you what to do," Xander said, stepping back from the couch. "But I don't think hiding here's the answer. Buffy didn't say she wanted you out of the house. I got the impression, talking to her, that she'd known this was possible for a long time."

That almost made everything worse. "She never told me."

"She probably didn't want to worry you."

"Well, maybe she should have worried me. It'd make a lot of things make sense."

"What things? I thought you two were good."

They were. Or at least Willow had thought they were good, and damn, getting to *good* had taken a long time. Dancing around things neither one of them wanted to talk about, negotiating their way back to the relationship they'd had before everything had gone to hell. But even still, Willow thought she might understand a few things better now—the lingering tension she'd tried to tell herself was just in her head, the way Buffy sometimes seemed withdrawn or avoidy. All this time she'd been living with the knowledge that she might just *keep* living and she hadn't said a word.

"She should have told me," Willow whispered, sinking onto the sofa. "I deserved to know."

"Uhh, yeah." The cushions dipped as Xander sat beside her. "And how would that have gone? 'Hey. I know we have a lot to work through, but here's something else to throw on the pile. You're the reason I maybe can't die. Let's talk.' Kinda don't see that going well."

"We don't know that! Maybe we *could* have talked it out."

It sounded weak to her ears. She didn't want to know how it sounded to Xander's. He told her anyway.

"Ask yourself this..." Xander placed a hand on her knee. "You've just come home from England. It's your first time seeing Buffy since the whole world-engage thing. She was... I don't agree with her on everything, you know, but we talked a bit before you came home. She was already having trouble getting over the almost-apocalypse and the way you threatened Dawn. What was she supposed to do? Sounds like she and Giles weren't even sure about this whole not-dying thing until, well, now."

"That's not a reason not to tell me."

"I haven't gotten to the *asking* part. Say Buffy does tell you. Things between you two are already the definition of tense. Will, you spent way more time with me when you first came back than you did with her because of that."

"Because you understood." Another thing that sounded weak. Xander hadn't

really understood—or he had as much as he could, but he was also just Xander. He of the yellow-crayon best friend status. She hadn't tried to hurt him the way she had Buffy, verbally or physically. She also hadn't gone after anyone he loved. Well, she'd kinda gone after Anya but it hadn't been personal, more just that Anya had been there and in the way. She hadn't been a target, and there hadn't been any genuine vitriol. Not like there had been toward Buffy, who had just been so ungrateful for everything Willow had done or tried to do, who had taken her for granted almost since the start as the ever-loyal sidekick. In her mounting grief and frustration, her rage and fury, Willow had allowed years of resentment and insecurity to come spilling out of her mouth as she'd reveled in her stolen ability to toss Buffy around like a ragdoll, told herself it was just because she'd been in the way but had known better. She'd *known* better. She'd wanted to be the Slayer, the one who was always right, always in charge—or at least the one whose authority was never questioned.

There had just been so much poison inside of her, and not all of it because she'd put it there. Some was just pure Willow truths she'd been trying to ignore the way she ignored everything else.

"I understood," Xander agreed, squeezing her knee, "because it was different with me."

"When did you get so smart?"

"I'm not smart. I just know you. And Buffy." He squeezed her knee again before pulling back. "I further know that as shitty as you feel about everything, Buffy's trademark Buffyness is not the only thing that is bothering you. Maybe not even the biggest thing. So why don't we skip right on over to that?"

There were definitely benefits to having friends who had been there since you were in pull-ups training pants, but there was also this. The part where they could cut through the surface stuff to get to the not-surface stuff before you were ready or had even acknowledged to yourself that the not-surface stuff existed. But it was there now, and she couldn't ignore it just because ignoring was comfortable. Willow pressed her lips together in an effort to keep them from trembling, though it didn't do much good. Nor did it keep her lungs from seizing like oxygen was suddenly in short supply and she better watch out lest she use it up before it could replenish.

"Will?" Xander prodded—of course he prodded. "What is it?"

She hesitated a beat longer. "It's Tara."

"Tara?"

"I... I haven't been to see her since..." Willow swallowed, blinked her stinging eyes. "I haven't been to see her at all since I came back. And I want to. I mean, I know she's not there, but she's there, you know? In some way? And I just... I wanted to be okay when I went to the cemetery, and I was so close. I was close to being okay before I learned this. I thought I'd done something good. Something to make her proud."

"And you don't think she'd be proud now?"

"To learn that I talked her into a spell that not only tore Buffy from Heaven but maybe made it so she could never go back?" Willow sputtered, not so much saying the words as sobbing them, for it had all swelled and there was no pulling the reins.

She couldn't. Everything spilled forth—that pain that was not new pain but had started to dull. Enough that the light at the end of the tunnel didn't seem a whole tunnel away anymore, just that she had a few more yards to crawl before she was finished. “She'd never forgive me for that. Or herself. It would kill her to know that she'd been a part of something so...so... It was dark magic, Xander. It was all dark magic and I convinced you guys that it wasn't. Getting her back was good so the way we did it couldn't be bad. Magic's only bad if your intentions are bad and I was the one taking the punishments so it couldn't be wrong. I knew she'd do the same for us. But I also knew if I really looked I might find something that I didn't want to know.”

An arm closed around her, pulling her into a chest she'd know anywhere, and she willingly went. Letting herself be wrapped up inside Xander's hug, his warmth and his reassurance, and his getting things without needing them said but his willingness to hear them anyway. For the moment, this moment, not worrying about feeling weak or stupid or small—unburdening that worry that had followed her home from England. She cried, and he let her, and just for that moment, it was all she needed.

But the moment passed, as moments always would, and Xander pulled back enough that she knew he wanted her to see his eyes while he said whatever he was about to say. Willow gave herself a few seconds, trying to seize control of all the spiraling emotions that, for so long, she'd numbed with magic. Sitting with them, feeling them, was as uncomfortable as anything else she'd ever done. Necessary, too, even if knowing that didn't make her hate it any less.

“You don't think Tara knew exactly what you were doing with that spell?” he asked finally, careful and measured.

“She wouldn't have gone along with it if she had.”

“Will, I love you, and you know how much I loved Tara, but there's this thing I've noticed when it comes to people who died.” Xander swallowed. “I did it with Jesse. You know, where you forget everything they did that wasn't great? Like, as much as I miss Jesse sometimes, I gotta remember that he could be a bit of a jerk. Think about things like the time he borrowed my Nerf gun without asking if he could, broke it, and then laughed when I told him he owed me a new one.”

“What are you saying?”

“That as great as Tara was, she also wasn't this perfect person. She made mistakes too. Remember that time she made demons invisible and nearly got everyone killed on accident?”

“But that's just it—it was an accident! She didn't mean to do that!”

“I know. I also know that she wasn't stupid. Will, a snake came out of your mouth. You painted yourself in blood. I might just be a lowly carpenter, but even I know dark magic when I see it.”

Willow drew in a deep breath and met Xander's eyes. His warm, nonjudgmental eyes. Even after everything she'd done, he could still look at her like she was someone other than the person who had almost annihilated the world once. Someone who had killed a man by flaying him alive and considered her best friend collateral damage in her quest to claim the lives of two others.

He looked at her like she was Willow and he was Xander, and that was almost too much to bear at times.

"And even if she didn't," Xander went on, "I don't think it matters."

"Of course it matters."

"Yeah, to us, and especially to Buffy, but keeping you from going to Tara's grave?"

She broke her gaze from his and swallowed. "I just wanted the first time... The first time I saw her after everything, I wanted to be able to tell her I'd done something to make her proud. That all the bad was behind me and I was someone she could love again...e-even if she's not here."

"Okay," Xander said slowly, "maybe I'm not looking at this with my full brain, but here I'd think that everything you've done—the magical rehab, the meetings, and everything else would be things that would make Tara proud."

"But to undo the bad?"

"That's just it. I don't think there is a way to undo it." He held up a hand. "In the sense that time travel doesn't exist—at least not without some wiggly demon magic, I'm guessing—and that you can't go back and make what happened *not* happen. I can't go back and *not* leave Anya at the altar or talk to her about all the reasons I was having second thoughts or anything that might make it so I didn't ruin the best thing in my life. But I'm hoping maybe I can just be better at that stuff. Be more like Buffy, or god, even Spike."

That was enough to shock her out of her self-pity. "Spike?" Willow echoed, raising her eyebrows.

Xander shrugged. "Can't deny he turned it around. I mean, getting a soul and everything. That's a plot twist I never saw coming."

Neither had Willow—the soul or really any of what had happened there. In some ways, she resented it, that there wasn't a huge gesture like the soul-getting that she could do to make quick amends, even if she knew—or had been told, at least—that quick amends hadn't been Spike's objective. It was just, what better way to say you're sorry? What better way to make sure you would never again be the sort of person who made the big mistakes like that?

But that wasn't what Xander was saying at all, and she knew it. He was saying there was only forward. Only what she did today and tomorrow and the next day and next week. Maybe even accounting for learning more about the damage she'd caused when she'd been at her worst, the things that would make the scales in her head seem permanently uneven but choosing to continue to try to be better anyway. No massive reset. No one great act that washed the board clean. No amount of cookies to make it right. Just living each day knowing what she was capable of at her worst and making the choice to be her best instead.

She might never have been good enough for Tara when Tara was alive, but Tara had chosen her anyway. *Forgiven* her anyway, probably when she hadn't deserved it.

"I think," Willow said thickly, "I think I wanna go see her. Now. Will you take me?"

Xander offered his Xander smile, gave her a squeeze, and did just that.



IT HAD BEEN a while since she'd felt this—the crash, the relief, that came with being at the other end of a fight. And yeah, said crash had left a minefield of debris she needed to sort through, but for the moment, Buffy was determined to relish the simple things. Like being home at all without the Council hanging over her head. Or sleeping in and enjoying lazy mornings with her vampire boyfriend, who didn't stay over every night but did a lot of nights. And applying her energy and focus to one of the only things in this world that was truly and solely hers.

Somehow, despite flat-out disappearing for more than a week, Buffy didn't lose a single client, as she discovered the first Monday back when she went to open the studio. All her regulars were there, overflowing with relief and concern, not to mention understanding that there wouldn't be any physically demanding demonstrations until her wound was truly just a scar. But there *had* been questions—lots of them, and Buffy had ultimately decided the pretense of a secret identity was too much hassle. Especially for this group, these women who had come to her because they wanted protection from the local monsters.

So she'd told them everything, starting with admitting the thing they all already knew—monsters were real, Buffy was the Slayer, yadda yadda—and from there going into the hows and whys that worked. She'd explained that slayers existed because a long time ago, a bunch of men had decided they were necessary and forced the essence of a demon into a human girl, guaranteeing her a short, violent life, and how said demon essence hopscotched to the next warm body when death finally came. That most monsters were happy just to be a nuisance satisfying their ids, but there were some that had ambitions of the world-ending variety. When pressed, she'd divulged the number of apocalypses that she'd stopped, and that on occasion, she might pull a disappearing act, but she would always leave notice when she had the chance and would always return.

"What if you die?" Leslie-the-single-mom had asked.

"Trust me," Buffy had replied, perhaps a tad drier than she'd intended, "not an issue."

She'd worried that might pave the way to more questions, but something in her voice or on her face had convinced the others just to take her at her word. And that had been that. The same story and subsequent explanations had been offered to the next class, and the next, to varying degrees of surprise and acceptance. As Spike kept telling her, people in this town knew more than she credited them with. No one had been outright shocked, though a few admitted the situation was worse than they'd imagined. Another had said she'd always known but had never asked, worried she might not be able to sleep if she knew all of it. The most prevalent response had been anger—on Buffy's behalf; the term "child soldier" had been thrown around more than once—combined with renewed determination to master everything Buffy was being paid to teach them.

"And these Council guys you mentioned," Dana-the-biochem-major had said. "Are they out of the picture now? You don't have to worry about them swooping in again?"

Indeed, Buffy did not. At least that was what Giles kept assuring her, and given that she'd left him in charge of Council operations, she assumed he'd know better than anyone.

Not to say that there weren't problems. Change of any kind was always met with resistance; in the Council's case, Buffy was in the process of toppling literal generations of institutionalized prejudice, dominance, and entitlement. While her efforts were being mostly met with support—what the distributed footage of Gray's murder hadn't accomplished, Buffy's own alliances definitely had—Travers and certainly his ideology were not without their loyalists. But Giles was working on it, with the help of Gray's mother and Lydia Chalmers, whom Buffy still didn't like but could begrudgingly respect since she'd ultimately done the right thing. Others continued to come forward as well, including some legacy Council members who had been put off by the Council's change in rhetoric, as well as families of slayers past who had never gotten a satisfactory answer as to what had happened to their daughters. Including, to Spike's intense discomfort, the son of the Slayer whose life he'd claimed in the seventies.

"Didn't even know she had a sprog," he'd muttered after she'd broken the news, his eyes on the floor and his shoulders tense as though he'd expected her to start screaming at him. They'd been in the kitchen when the call had come, talking about routine couple things like what to order for dinner and what program to try to catch up on. The news had been something of a mood killer. "Never heard of a slayer with a brat before."

"Would it have mattered?" she'd asked, running her hand along his arm. There hadn't been any judgment in her voice—or at least she'd hoped not—and if there had, he'd ignored it. He also hadn't rushed to reply, rather let the question stew until she'd wondered if he just intended to skip answering altogether.

But then he'd swallowed and met her eyes. "Dunno. I loved the hunt, pet. Still do. Soul's not all or nothin'. Still enough in me that's the way I was before. Thought for the longest time maybe that meant I wasn't as good a man as I'd thought I'd been."

"And now?"

"Now I know a lot of what I thought about the soul was bloody rubbish and Angel made it look easy."

"Not always," she'd said, thinking about an approaching sunrise and fat flakes of snow coating the ground.

"I'd imagine not, and I wasn't around for most of it. But you were still makin' eyes at each other when I came back to town after he tried to suck the whole miserable world into Hell. Saw that and thought if you could look at him like that..." Spike had pulled in a breath, shaking his head and plastering on a forced smile, looking very much like a funhouse mirror version of himself. "Just thought it could be me too. Or somethin' close. Wasn't until after I had the sodding thing that I knew how bloody daft I'd been. It didn't make me good, just closer to not bad."

"You're good, Spike," she'd told him, meaning it with everything she was. "You're so good."

The smile had lost its edge and found its way into his eyes. "Still dunno if I would've let the bird live if I'd known she had a kid."

“You don’t have to know. I shouldn’t have asked.”

“But I want to have. I want to think I would have.”

As far as she was concerned, that settled the matter. Spike wanted to be good, and he’d wanted that a lot longer than he’d actually had the soul. The want was what made it true—a monster had wanted that, wanted to change. A monster had made a trip across the world to seek out something that would bring it tremendous pain, all because the monster had gotten a true glimpse of itself and said *enough*. It hadn’t been an empty want, either. No, this want had been packed full of intent and movement and dedication and suffering and sacrifice. A want that the monster had made real by overcoming every hurdle thrown in his path, including himself.

Any monster who did that was not a monster in her book. It was so easy for her to see now, the things she hadn’t before. The things that were almost painfully obvious.

Even still, she understood that it was sometimes impossible to recognize the same in yourself. It was one of the reasons she’d thrown herself into her work the way she had when they got back, trying to fill all the still moments with noise, for in the silence she saw the things she wanted desperately to not be true. Travers’s body hitting the ground, followed by his head. The black quiet nothing that had enveloped her as her heart had stopped, and the visceral pain of returning to life. The things she would have to learn to live with, truths about herself and others. What it meant to be a girl who couldn’t die but could claim the lives of others.

Buffy wasn’t stupid. She knew the arguments, the things the others would tell her should she voice any of what was going on in her head. The others excluding, well, Spike, but she hadn’t felt up to discussing it with him, either. Part of her thought she should be able to do what everyone else was doing in the wake of what had happened—celebrate that the Council was under her control, that Travers was gone, and focus on what came next. Namely, the total and complete restructuring of an institution that had flexed its authority over her and an untold number of girls before her. Her chance to truly seize control of what it meant to be the Slayer, live by a definition that she now had the power to rewrite. It was everything she had ever wanted, which was what made the price of purchase all the more unbearable.

She sensed that Spike knew a bit of what was going through her head, though true to form, he wasn’t pressuring her to talk. When she asked him to come to the studio during sessions—“It’d be helpful if these women could practice on someone they’re not afraid to hurt”—he’d shown up, filled whatever role Buffy needed filling, encouraging the students to use and abuse him as much as they fancied, assuring them that whatever punishment they doled would pale in comparison to even the tamest of fights with the Slayer. By the end of the first week, Buffy was convinced most of her clients had a crush on him, and hey, wasn’t like she could blame them. Though she wouldn’t hesitate to mark her territory if the need became apparent—something she imagined would make Spike’s century, so she did what she could to quell the urge.

When she wasn’t volunteering his services as a human-shaped punching bag, they were trying to find some semblance of normal, though it seemed they were both

doing a job talking around the larger things. It was a little maddening, and it was just as much her fault as it was his. Even though she knew she loved him, Buffy found the prospect of discussing the future a little nerve-wracking, especially without a nebulous ticking clock out there to force the issue. The future wasn't a question mark anymore. She had definite answers she hadn't had before, particularly regarding just how long she could expect to live. And there was still so much other stuff to figure out. If Giles could serve indefinitely as the Council head or if she would one day need to move to England and do it herself. If there would be other fires to put out among the remaining Council members, if the loyalty she had won was fair-weather or if it would actually last. If she liked that Spike returned to his crypt on some nights, or that he was talking about getting a more respectable place of his own—something not, as he said, in the graveyard, to allow her distance from all things that went bump in the night.

It was all earnest, Buffy knew. Something she had learned definitively over the last couple of weeks was the version of Spike steeped in ulterior motives and selfish intent, while not gone, was not in charge anymore. He was waiting for her, even now that she'd said the words and been adamant on their survival to ensure they actually had a chance to build something real. Just turned out she was kind of lousy at that when her mind was in so many places, worry replaced with responsibility and responsibility never-ending.

But through it all, Buffy never felt distant from Spike, rather comforted by the knowledge that he was waiting for her. That he understood she needed time after everything that had happened in England, this new-old life to which she was supposed to adapt, the discovery about who she was and who she would always be. Finding their rhythm as a couple would come by way of course—it wasn't a problem to solve or a thing to keep her up at night. Even with all the unanswered questions that remained, Spike was a source of comfort and support. There for what she needed, not pushing for more. Not telling her how to feel and why. Just trusting that when the time came to talk, she would let him know. He wasn't on the outside anymore. He was as *inside* as anyone in her life had ever been.

Now he was helping her reset the studio for tomorrow's session, moving the practice dummies and the punching bags back where they belonged, then answering her wordless cue by joining her at the balance beam. The very same balance beam where, what seemed like a lifetime ago, he'd cornered her after a sparring match and asked her a question she'd answered with a kiss and a decision.

Maybe he was remembering that, too, for there was a subtle but very present smirk on his lips by the time they had the thing righted. And either for all the reasons in the world or no reason at all, it was the presence of that smirk on those lips that broke the dam inside her. Reminded her that for as much as her life had and would continue to change, the landscape of forever that stretched before her, she would always have this. That smirk on those lips that were attached to that face and head and body, for that was simply the way of it. She could hate him or love him, kiss him or punch him, fuck him or abuse him, and Spike would always be there. Beside her, in her periphery, thinking things that made him smirk. Things about her and

them, turning even the most confusing and jumbled moments of their story together into private jokes he could enjoy after the confusion and the jumble was behind them.

Buffy had worried she wouldn't be able to say it often, but she'd said it twice so far and it had gone okay. Now, it felt like she couldn't help but say it. That the words were bursting up her throat, over her tongue, and exploding from her mouth before she even realized they were there.

"I love you."

Spike looked up and met her gaze over the length of the balance beam, his eyes bright and his face happy. God, she loved that, too. Loved seeing him happy when she didn't think she had before now, save for that one time where they'd both been so deliriously into each other Giles had been thankful he'd been too blind to catch the show. Even more, she loved knowing that Spike was happy because of her, even after having spent years as the source of his misery. It was what made her confident he truly did love her—what showed her that love more than anything, even the soul.

"Love you, too, pet," he told her, his eyes, if possible, growing even brighter when he said it. "I do anything in particular to earn it?"

"You mean just now, or are you fishing for me to start listing things?"

"Could stand a bit of both, I expect. I like your version of events more than mine."

There was that, too. Spike not seeing what she saw, but of course seeing her as no one else did, either. Maybe that was just the way it was when you were with someone. Balancing the scales between truth and doubt, seeing the best in one another even if the view was never quite the same on either side.

"I was just thinking about when we were in here before going to LA," Buffy said, and started toward him, dragging her hand along the balance beam. "When I took you by surprise."

Spike snorted and nodded before pushing forward to meet her. "Puttin' it lightly."

"I know." She stopped when he was within touching distance, watched her fingers ghost along the back of his hand, up his arm, and how he seemed to tense and relax simultaneously with some inherent vampire magic. "Probably better ways to get my point across."

"Fancy a redo?"

Buffy smiled, keeping her gaze on his chest. And again, she didn't realize what she intended to say until it was there, between them. "How do you do it?"

She glanced up in time to see Spike arch an eyebrow and looked pointedly at his crotch. "Think you know well enough—"

"Spike."

He closed his mouth and nodded. "Livin' with it, you mean?"

"I killed a man." Just saying the words made her throat go tight. "It's not that... I know I don't save people all the time. There have been a few who died before because of me."

Spike gave her a look that was so reminiscent of the Spike of old that her breath caught. It was the same exasperation he'd shown her outside the precinct last year,

only this time with enough fondness that she understood he wasn't mocking or condemning her. He was just listening.

Had she ever had this? God, she didn't know. Her relationship with Riley felt years in the past, and Angel a whole lifetime ago. Whatever this was, new or forgotten, it was nice. She wanted more of it.

"I'm specifically talking about people who started playing with demons and then got eaten by the demons they were playing with," she went on. "It didn't happen a lot, but every now and then...and I just kinda let it. But what happened in the Council wasn't even that. It was me swinging a weapon and taking off a man's head."

"Think it was a fair trade, considerin'."

"I've never been able to think of lives as a fair trade."

"I know you haven't." He wound an arm around her waist and pulled her to him, not so she was leaning on him but enough that she felt his firmness, his presence. The realness of his being there. "One of the things I love about you."

"I thought it was one of the things that drove you crazy."

"Never said those things couldn't be the same." Spike fell into a contemplative sort of quiet. "Was rough at first. Knowin' what I'd done. All those bloody voices for over a century...and the worst was I couldn't remember a lot of them. Never stopped to watch the carnage, just bulldozed my way through it. That was the sort of monster I was. Out for a good time, and sod all who got in the way."

"And now?"

"Now? Won't say it's not still there, but I think I got a better grasp on things than I did before."

"Like what?"

He paused, considering her. "You sure you wanna hear about this?"

"No. Tell me anyway."

"Well...it's different."

"Thanks. That much I gathered on my own."

He favored her with another vintage-Spike expression before drawing in a breath. This part, she imagined, would take some getting used to. The Spike who didn't run his mouth or speak without thinking. It wasn't new—he'd been doing it ever since he'd come back to town—but now that she understood why, she found herself enamored by the time and care he took, how he no longer rushed to keep ahead of his thoughts.

"Vampires are pretty simple, all told," he said at last, his tone measured. "Give us a spot of violence and some blood, we're happy as bloody clams. I know I was evil, but there weren't many times I felt it. Was just followin' my impulses. Doin' what came natural. It's not the same for all of us, mind, and I can't claim I didn't enjoy the messes I made or makin' them. I just wasn't wired to care. I didn't see people the way you do. Saw them the way I imagine you see all the uglies whose good times you ruin. It wasn't until I was forced to slow down that any of that changed."

Buffy frowned. "What are you saying?"

"That I killed because I'm a vampire. Didn't ask to be made one, had no bloody way of knowin' that's what was in store for me, but it's what happened."

And I could spend my days feelin' rotten for what I can't change or I can accept it. Be grateful enough that I got myself leashed." He blinked and glanced away, as though worried about what he might find if he looked at her. "I don't see the point in hatin' myself for what I did when I was a monster. Would take it all back if I could, of course, but bein' miserable about it doesn't do rot to change anything, and it doesn't honor any of the people I killed. Just makes the story about poor, hapless William. Wrong place, wrong time, and look what happened to him."

She was quiet for a beat. "That's..."

"Not like precious Angel," he said dryly.

"That's not what I was going to say, but you're right. It's not like him." There was very little about Angel's life before Sunnydale that he'd shared with Buffy, which she realized was just another part of the whole *knowing him* thing that they'd kinda skipped before they'd first started making out. Still, she did know that he hadn't gotten into the fight until meeting her. That seeing her was the moment he'd decided who he wanted to be. The many years prior were a big question mark that she'd never bothered to try to answer. It hadn't been relevant to who they were, or so she'd thought.

Wonder of wonders that relationship had failed.

"I'm not going to encourage a pissing contest with Angel," she began, "but I think... I think your way might make more sense."

Spike's eyebrows shot skyward. "Yeah?"

"Don't get too excited."

"No promises."

Buffy snickered in spite of herself, until her thoughts wandered back to Travers, to the Council, to the endless road stretched ahead of her. In her case, taking someone's head had never been her intention, though she hadn't deluded herself into believing the fight would be bloodless. That said, if she were honest with herself, she'd never thought she'd be the one doing any killing. It was never her—not directly, at least—and now that she'd officially joined the ranks, she didn't know how to feel.

And maybe that was part of it. Not that she'd killed someone, but that doing so in her head had always been a big line. A line she'd been dangerously close to more than once—with Allan Finch, with Katrina last year. Neither one of those deaths were on her hands but had been close enough to terrify her. That was why making the decision to kill Gray had been so momentous, and also why Spike had pulled her away when she'd had the chance. She'd been focused on the act of killing, not considering how she'd experience echoes of that decision for the rest of her days. And if she had killed Gray the way she nearly had that night, Buffy doubted very much she would have been able to forgive herself.

Travers was different. Here she'd been hoping for Spike to give her some great insight on how to live with it, and the truth of the matter was Buffy was more bothered by the fact that she wasn't more bothered. She wasn't sad that he was dead, just regretted that she'd been the one who had made him so. And even then, if she could go back, relive those moments knowing what was coming, she wasn't convinced she

would change anything. Well, aside from sparing herself the inconvenience of dying again, but hey, at least they'd answered a question. Better to know, probably.

Altering what had happened would have just put the burden of killing Travers on someone else. Because he'd needed to die—if the past few days had convinced her of anything, it was that. He'd been too dangerous to just keep imprisoned indefinitely, with far too much influence, too many people loyal to him. More than that, he'd believed himself protected. Sure, there was a chance everything would have fallen the same way if he'd been captured instead, but Buffy wasn't convinced. Too many variables.

And maybe the rest was easier knowing what sort of man he'd been, what he had done, and that there truly hadn't been a human justice system capable of holding him accountable to those crimes. Maybe also the fact that she hadn't swung the scythe with an intention to injure, but on reflex from the knife he'd plunged into her gut. Look at it a certain way, and you could argue Travers had killed himself.

Which, incidentally, was exactly what Faith had told her right before Buffy and the others had left England. They had been at the hanger, about to board the plane that would take them back to the States, Giles and Faith there to see them off. Well, see them off and return the scythe, which Faith handed over without so much as a snarky comment.

"Thanks, and everything. For not lettin' that blowhard chop me up." She'd shrugged as though it mattered little either way, but Buffy had read between the lines. "I know it mighta been easier for you if you had."

"Nah," Buffy had replied. Still a little amazed, truthfully, that she was going home with the scythe after all. "One death too many on my conscience."

"Even if you didn't swing the ax yourself? Always the motherfucking hero." There had been a pause, during which Faith had studied her. "I get it, though. You're worried you're gonna step into big sis's shoes now. Slippery slope, B. Or so they tell me. Except you never had that in you like I did."

"I'm not worried," she'd said, much too quickly to be believed.

"Always were a rotten liar. But I know you. You bounce back wicked fast. Odds are you'll be five-by-five the time you land."

"Pep talks aren't really your thing."

Faith had snorted and crossed her arms. "Look, you saved my ass. That ain't the kinda thing I'm gonna forget. And because I owe you now, I do want to try to give you what I hope is actually good advice." A beat. "Don't run from it like I did. That's where I fucked up. I tried to pretend like I didn't give a shit. Like his life didn't matter. Travers was a twisted motherfucker, and I'm not sorry he lost his head, given he was tryin' to kill the both of us. World's better without a son of a bitch like that in it. But bein' the one to actually do it—yeah, B, don't run from how that felt. Don't pretend it was nothin' but don't make it everything, either. Just let it be what it is."

"And what is it?"

Again, Faith had gone quiet. And again, she'd surprised her. "One of those necessary evil things, I guess. If you let it be that."

And as much as she'd never thought she'd listen to what Faith told her, Buffy had

found she agreed. She could carry Travers's death with her, along with everything else she was carrying, without taking on the weight she would have once attached to it. If she'd learned anything over the last couple of years, it was that a lot of damage could be done when forgiveness was withheld, even and especially from the self. She wasn't sure if she forgave herself yet but for now, she would allow that these parts of her existed whether she wanted them to or not, and there was time to figure out what she wanted to do with them.

Time and more than that.

"Are you staying over tonight?" Buffy asked Spike as she pulled away to collect her things and pack up her thoughts. No more of those today—at least not the brain-hurty kind. It wasn't like there was a rush to detangle how she felt about anything. She had tomorrow for that, and the day after, and the day after. It'd kinda suck to answer all these questions now and leave herself with no moral quandaries for the rest of eternity.

"You want me to stay over?" Spike replied as though the question were an academic one.

"There might be room in my bed if we look very hard."

At that, he smirked the way she'd hoped he would and tugged her close once more. "You want us doin' somethin' hard in your bed, you say?"

"More like *I* want to do something hard," she replied. "You know me. I like a challenge."

"Think you're propositioning me."

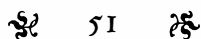
"That a problem?"

"Yeah, sun's still out. Got a wait before I can hold you to anything."

Buffy eyed the balance beam and arched her eyebrows. "Well, I guess we have some time to kill. And I heard a rumor you like killing things. Wanna take a stab at it with me?"

He bent to capture her lips, and she warmed, and all the uncertainty blinked away for a few wonderful seconds. There was more to talk about, more to conquer, but then, there always would be.

And if she was very lucky, there would also always be time to kill before the sun went down.



I DAMN WELL DID THIS

HE AWOKE WITH HER SCENT IN HIS NOSTRILS, THE ECHOES OF HER KISSES AGAINST his mouth, the thrum of her heart in his ears and her heat against his skin. And when he opened his eyes, he got to see her, too. She'd fallen asleep while they'd been talking last night.

That might be his favorite thing about what had changed. Only no, that wasn't right. He couldn't have just one favorite. He loved everything. The light in her eyes when she looked at him, the slight curve of her lips as she tried to fend off a grin, how she leaned into him when he touched her, didn't hesitate to steal snogs in front of her mates. But this was high up there, the quiet moments between the not-so-quiet ones. Listening to Buffy talk about nothing in particular, just whatever was on her mind, and revel in the fact that he was the one she was sharing these bits with.

Spike wasn't even sure how they'd gotten on the topic last night. Just sometime after she'd pulled herself off his cock and rolled onto her side of the bed—he had a dedicated side in Buffy's bed, would wonders never cease—she'd started musing about all the things she'd have time to do now that time was set to never run out. Things like finish the last book she'd started, which had been far enough back that she'd forgotten nearly all the details except that she'd enjoyed what she'd read so far. Might be worth picking up again, she'd mused, even if it wasn't for a grade this time around. Or any time, as she wagered she was never returning to UC Sunnydale, which was a pity. She'd been a decent student and there had been courses she'd really fancied. Including a poetry class she'd been enjoying even if she had no idea how poetry would fit in with the life she'd been building at the time.

Spike had dragged hair away from her brow and mentioned that he could help her out if she liked poetry. She'd snorted, but her expression had softened when she'd realized he was serious, and she'd asked and he'd told, and she'd looked like

Christmas had come early. Started peppering him with questions about the poets he was familiar with—quite a lot, as it turned out—and what his favorite poems were and if he had any of them memorized and would he please recite something, just for her.

He would, he'd told her. And he had. Then she'd asked if he'd ever written any himself, and he'd gone quiet and she'd known.

The strange thing was he hadn't been worried about sharing any of that with her. Not even the bloody awful stuff that had made him the sodding laughingstock of his social circle. He'd tucked her to him and whispered the lines of the poem that had ultimately sent him into that alley and into Dru's arms, stroking her shoulder and listening to the rhythm of words he'd long since memorized as they tumbled out of his mouth. Wondering about the cyclical nature of things, how those words had been born on parchment more than a century ago only to be used to belittle and humiliate him. Then, eventually, molded as a weapon he'd spat back into the ears of his tormenters before running their heads through with the spikes whose name he would adopt as his shield. And then, somehow, sharing the Slayer's bed and her warmth and all else she gave him, and smiling at the lie that she liked his poetry because it didn't feel like a lie. Maybe it wasn't. Maybe she just had bloody awful taste, and that was just fine, because he could fill her with enough bloody awful verses to keep them both happy.

Happy. That was the feeling. Somehow, through all the chaos and the hurt he'd inflicted, that they'd both inflicted, Spike was happy. It wasn't naïve happiness either—there lurked the understanding that nights spent whispering terrible poetry to each other were not guaranteed. Buffy had a lot to suss out herself, not the least of which was how she felt about what she'd learned in England. She had known it was possible, perhaps had even resigned herself to it being probable, but eventually the knowledge would hit as it wasn't hitting at the moment. Spike expected she knew that, too, but wasn't in any hurry to get there, and he couldn't say he blamed her. Not after everything that had happened.

In the quiet, though, while it lasted, he was going to enjoy these moments they had, because it was a sodding marvel that they had them. That he was waking up in her bed *again*, to the music of her heart, breath, and blood, and that when her eyes started to fight their way open, she'd smile when she saw him.

And she did.

"Hey," Buffy said, her voice pleasantly raspy.

"Lo yourself."

"How long have you been stare-y guy?"

"Not long. Minute or so."

"Creep." She rolled over onto her back and stretched her arms at an adorable angle. "What day is it? And please make sure the answer is Saturday before you give it to me."

"It is indeed." Somehow two full bloody weeks had passed since the fight with the Council. How, he had no sodding idea, though being preoccupied with her probably helped. Finding a pace back in Sunnyhell that they could fall into together, dealing

with loads of questions and logicalities that had never been on his sodding radar as a vampire but were now. For instance: the living situation. Nearly the whole of his relationship with Drusilla had been spent in her company. They'd been separated a time or two but typically by circumstance, rarely choice, and when they were together there was no *his place* or *her place*, rather *their* place, which just happened to be whatever corner of whatever little town they'd decided to carve out for themselves. It was how vampires lived. How *they'd* lived.

But Spike wasn't living like a vampire anymore. He and Buffy were a proper couple, or trying to be, and he wagered that meant finding a place more respectable than a crypt where she could visit him, perhaps plan weekend stays or the like. She'd already discussed getting him on the Council's payroll as a consultant or what all—not necessarily because she wanted or expected him to do anything but in recognition of the part he'd play simply by being in her life. The same went for others, and anyone else who might be absorbed into the Slayer's found family down the line. Being in the fight meant making sacrifices, and she didn't want her people to worry about where their next paycheck was coming from if the reason they'd missed work was averting an apocalypse.

"Plus," she'd told Spike, "it's all kinds of screwy that the watchers pay themselves to do nothing when we're the ones taking all the risks. They really did just consider us tools. Bet Travers patted himself on the back every time the world didn't end and thought, 'Wow, I did a good job.'"

Spike hadn't argued, reckoning she'd been right. All she was doing was making it so she wouldn't have to fret over losing her students the next time they were tasked to fight the good fight. Granted, those women she was teaching now were firmly in her corner, but if living as long as he had had taught him anything, it was that nothing ever stayed the same. What was understood today might be resented tomorrow, and Buffy didn't need to expend her energy worrying over her livelihood on top of everything else she carried. She hadn't, though, done what he thought she was owed—taken enough from the coffers to pay off the mortgage or set up a nice little college fund for Dawn, on the off chance that higher learning was in the cards for her. Buffy didn't want to be greedy, didn't want her second official act as the Council head to be raiding their resources. The blokes who had given her the keys to the kingdom might get buyer's remorse, and while Buffy wasn't too worried about that now that she had said keys, she wagered she'd make more lasting allies by not running victory laps.

That was what made her who she was—the hero and the woman alike. She had every right to bleed the sodding Council dry after everything they had put her through, and she wasn't taking it. She was thinking about what came next. *Always* thinking about what came next. Doing her best to be ready, as she knew it would never be over.

"Mmm, Saturday," Buffy said with a smile in her voice. She lowered her arms back to her sides, then sat up to gauge the time on the clock seated on the nightstand. "Wow, we made it all the way to ten am. Remind me to let Dawn stay the night at her friend's house more often. I actually get to sleep in."

"I'll remember just to rub it in your bloody face when we learn she's off necking with some creature of the night again."

Buffy scowled at him, though her eyes remained playful. "And when I scold her, she'll be even more 'pot, kettle' than she was before. At least I've taught her how to use a stake." She kicked her legs over the side of the bed, treating him to the stunning view of her smooth back, all lush, creamy skin, interspersed here and there with the remnants of battles that even slayer healing couldn't erase altogether. Like the place where Gray had stabbed her all those weeks ago—it was barely there anymore, a blush of a scar, but enough that Spike wagered she might carry it with her forever.

He'd helped dress that wound more than once. Tended to her in the kitchen downstairs and again in the loo, which she'd invited him inside. They hadn't done that again since, though she'd surprised him a few days back by bringing it up. Saying that she thought they ought to start trying to be in the bathroom together until it felt safe for both of them. When he'd protested the *both*—not like it should ever feel safe for him—she'd called him out on his bollocks, claimed it was as traumatic for him as it had been for her. He'd scoffed, shaken his head, told her that she was taking on more than she ever deserved to carry because he hadn't known how else to handle that conversation.

Thing was, he knew she was right. Whether he deserved to be haunted didn't make the noise in his head any less intense. It was there waiting for him every time he stepped into the room, anytime Buffy came downstairs smelling freshly showered, or whenever he heard the telling whine of the pipes as they filled with water. He couldn't escape it, and he didn't think he should. Even now, with life looking like it could get close to perfect, he knew having her love couldn't undo the terrible things he'd done. Didn't matter if he'd intended to do it or not or, as Buffy had told him once, if he hadn't been fully conscious at the time.

"It's weird for me, too," she'd said after he'd confided as much. "And I don't know how to make it not-weird."

"Maybe we don't."

"No. I don't want us dancing around this for the rest of our relationship. Especially since *the rest of our relationship* might be, well, a long time." Buffy had sucked in a breath and looked away quickly, her cheeks taking on that delicate blush he loved. Neither one of them had yet braved what her immortality meant for them together—it was too much, especially for something so new. But he couldn't help but find it heartening that she was thinking in terms of *forever* even if they weren't talking about it. God knows he was. It was just a given for him—so long as Buffy lived, he would be hers. If that happened to be until the sun blinked out, then he would thank his lucky stars they had carried him this far.

"What do you reckon, then?"

"I don't know. There's not really a manual on this. Or if there are, I dunno if they'd fit us." She'd nibbled thoughtfully on her lower lip for a moment. "I guess... When I'm going in there, I'll tell you. And maybe you can come with me. Or you can say pinochle, and that'll be that until next time."

"And if *you* always say pinochle?"

"I don't think I will. I trust you, Spike. It's part of the love thing."

And that had been everything. Bloody everything. Hell, the fact that Buffy had put as much thought into this as she had meant it had been on her mind along with everything else they had been parsing through. How she managed it was beyond him, but he was determined to do whatever he could to ensure all parts of the house were safe for both of them, that none were defined by their worst moments. Not the bathroom. Not the kitchen where Dawn had nearly lost her life. Not the couch where Buffy had discovered her mother one horrible afternoon. That attitude wasn't, in her words, fair to the room, and it definitely wasn't fair to each other, especially when they had both come as far as they had.

Thus far, though, Spike hadn't put the technique to the test. He hadn't wanted to crowd her—had also been a bit of a coward. But waking up with Buffy smiling at him, being soft and playful, with a whole day ahead full of unclaimed time, was a way to make a man feel bold.

He reached out, trailed his fingers along her skin. "Gonna pop in the shower, I think. 'Less you want in there first."

Buffy stilled. He'd expected that, as well as the light skip in her pulse. After a moment, she relaxed. "No. You go ahead. Or is today a company day?"

"Could stand a bit of company if you like."

She turned to catch his gaze. "No pinochle?"

Spike tried to smile despite his nerves. "Not at the moment, just sittin' here. What about you?"

"Same. Not just sitting here."

"Then I'm keen to try."

There was a beat in which she seemed to consider him, then she leaned forward and brushed a gentle kiss across his lips. "You go ahead, and I'll join in a few."

Spike worked his throat and nodded, hoping he hadn't spoken out of turn or else he was about to really embarrass himself. But there was safety in that too, knowing that he could and it would be all right. Even if one of them had to cry uncle in this, it wasn't a dead-end, just a speedbump, and that was something he'd never had before. This thing with Buffy wasn't about appeasing the woman he loved at any cost but meeting her where she was, knowing she was doing the same. He didn't have any hoops to jump through, nothing he needed to grit back and swallow and tolerate out of fear he might lose her. And yeah, it might be early stages yet but it was Buffy. She didn't do anything in half measures. She didn't love with just a part of herself. This version of the relationship was new, but the actual relationship was not. Just in the process of being redefined, a little at a time.

He grabbed a towel and made his way into the loo, trying hard to just think about it as any other space. Not reflect on where he was stepping. Not think about what had happened a night over a year ago when he'd shut the door to the hallway, or how bright it was when he switched on the light. Once the towel was positioned within reach, it was time to face the tub itself. Turn on the nozzle and let the air fill with the cadence of water slapping against porcelain. Spike inhaled and stepped into the tub, pulled the curtain around, then tugged at the stopper that switched the flow from

the spout to the shower head. The sound changed and he breathed out, closed his eyes against the water suddenly slapping his face.

For a moment, there was just that. The sensation of being here. Knowing where he was and existing with the awareness of what had happened just a few feet away.

Except no, that made it sound like an act of bloody God rather than something horrible he'd done, a crime he was responsible for, and he *was* responsible. That was something he could never forget. No matter how far he got, no matter how bloody blissful his life was on its way to being. No matter that even now, he could hear Buffy padding into the room. See her through the curtain, soft and bare, and approaching the shower, stepping right through the place where he had hurt her most. Her heart was pounding but not at a gallop—not so fast he thought she was afraid, but reckoned she was remembering all the same.

Then the curtain rings rattled and her scent surrounded him, and she was there. Pressing herself up against his back, her arms around his middle, her cheek resting on his spine. The water rushed in tandem with her blood, the heat and the slight hitch in her breath. And Spike did his best to focus just on her, will everything else to fade. For the truth of the matter was that regardless of what she said, she was the only one between them who had any right to call the shots here. If she wanted this, then he'd give it. If she didn't, then she'd tell him. Say the word they'd chosen.

"Okay?" Buffy asked. He couldn't tell if she was shaking or if he was. Or both.

"Dunno."

"Can you... Can you turn around?"

Spike worked his throat, forcing his eyes back open. "You sure?"

"I'm sure. If you're sure."

He decided not to answer that, rather twisted in her arms, and she was all he could see. Buffy with her damp hair and her trembling lips and that wide look she was giving him that said everything and nothing at the same time. And when she pressed closer, her breasts against his chest, he could feel the rabbiting of her heart as well as hear it, feel her courage and her nerves alike. See it, too, in her eyes. The awareness of where she was and who she was with, and the acceptance.

Still, he had to know. "All right?"

"So far, so good," she replied lightly. After a beat, she turned from him to snatch something from the collection of bottles lined against the bottom ledge where the tub met the wall. When she was facing him again, she had a bar of soap in hand.

"Have you already washed up?"

Spike shook his head.

"That's the point of showers, you know."

He barked a harsh laugh, one that almost made him wince, but Buffy didn't react, rather focused on working the bar along his chest until she had a nice foam going. Then her hands were there, lathering up his skin in a way that, despite himself, Spike couldn't help but enjoy. The tightness in his shoulders went slack, and the sensations comprised of his worst memories began to break apart until only she remained. The Buffy he was with now—not the Buffy he had hurt then. She watched him as she massaged the suds into his muscles, across his shoulders, over his abdomen, then

around his back—she motioned for him to turn again—before guiding him around so they were face-to-face again. Her expression spoke of thoughts she wasn't sharing, but would when she was ready. And then, finally, he was able to depart from his thoughts and just enjoy the sensation of her hands on his body, moving when prompted to help the water find each crevice and wash away the soap until all of him was clean.

Or almost all of him. His prick had taken notice and was doing what it did best when presented with a naked Buffy—straining toward her in the hope of getting some attention. Spike didn't know what to do about it, having no expectation that the jaunt to the shower included a shag. He might have been embarrassed, thought perhaps he should be, but Buffy wasn't rolling her eyes or wrinkling her nose or even acknowledging it at all. Probably better that way. Just ignore that it was there, that he was aroused, and maybe one day they would be able to enjoy each other here too. Not just coexist in the same space.

"Good?" she asked hoarsely.

"Yeah. You?"

She nodded, then turned to put the soap back where she'd found it. "Which shampoo do you use when you're in here?"

"Yours."

"How do you know which one is mine? Wait, that's a dumb question." She was facing him again, now with a healthy dollop of shampoo pooled in her palm. "I'd be jealous of your super vampire senses if I wasn't sure they're more of a pain than they're worth."

"How you figure?"

A slight smile pulled at her mouth. "Give me your head." He obliged, tipping forward, and didn't quite manage to swallow his groan when she started running her fingers along his scalp. "Eau du Buffy is not great across the board. I get really gross really fast. All sweaty and—"

"You always smell delicious, pet."

She snickered, but in a way that meant she was pleased rather than put off. "I'll remind you that you said that the next time I come home covered in goo or guts or pus or something else really gross."

"And I'll snog you just to prove you wrong."

Buffy laughed again, the sound light and wonderful. Almost as wonderful as knowing he was the one who had brought it out of her. After another moment, she finished lathering up his head then encouraged him to tip back so the spray could wash away the suds, then let her eyes follow the soapy rivulets of water that ran down his chest in a way that couldn't help but make him smirk a little. He'd never tire of this, either. The version of her that wasn't ashamed to look her fill, openly enjoy what she saw as much as he did when the tables were turned. Spike had lived for a couple of years now knowing she approved of him physically, but being ogled by her was something else.

"I pronounce you almost entirely squeaky clean," she told him once the soap had cleared and she had lifted her gaze to his.

"Almost, eh?"

"Well, legs. I didn't do legs. Or this." Buffy trailed a finger from the base of his cock to the tip. "Wasn't sure if you were up for it."

Considering it had been alternately prodding her belly and sliding along her thighs, Spike didn't know how she had missed it. "Seems *up* for a few things."

"I meant I didn't know if you were just having a guy moment or if it was...real. Like you wanted me to touch you." She blinked and met his eyes again, her own round and earnest. "Do you want me to touch you, Spike?"

"That a trick question, love?"

"Yes and no. You seemed a little on edge when I got in here."

"Mmm, but you have a way of calmin' a fella down."

"Do I? That's a shame." Buffy pressed herself up on her tiptoes to whisper a kiss against his lips. "Here I thought I might be working you up."

Spike growled and grabbed her by the waist, pulling her against him, all warm and wet, and covered her mouth with his. It was still jarring, the difference in the way she kissed him. The heat and hunger was there as ever before, but so much more than those things alone. He'd felt it in her studio when he hadn't known what it was, he'd felt it the night they'd come back from Los Angeles, and every time their lips had been while they'd been in England. He'd felt it every night since they'd returned, as well, and he felt it now. As she met him with hunger that seemed almost too much for her teeth and tongue, pouring herself into him, grasping him, letting him kiss her in this place of all places. Letting him stroke and touch, clutched her by the hips to put her back to the shower wall. Letting him have her at all.

"All right?" he asked, because he had to ask.

Only she didn't answer. Not right away. Long enough to prompt him to open his eyes and see that, in that sliver of time, something had changed. The playfulness had vanished, taking with it the slight grin and the flush and the warmth. As though a switch had flipped, and it had. He saw it. And even as she found her voice, told him, "I... I don't know," he was wrenching away, moving with such haste he nearly went tumbling backward, would have taken the curtain and the bar and god knows what else with him in the fall had his reflexes not kicked in to help him keep his balance. But he didn't feel balanced. The world had tipped over again, spun backward until enough days had been consumed between now and *then* and he was in the *then* and it was happening just as it had. Worse now, worse, for Buffy did trust him. Did love him. She'd invited him into her home and her bed and her heart, and he'd buggered it all up, same as he always did.

But fuck, he wasn't the one who mattered right now. Spike shook his head—he could do the self-loathing bit later, away from her, without making it her problem. "I'm sorry," he said, hesitated, then reached back into the tub to switch the shower off. "Fuck, Buffy, I'm sorry. I thought..."

But it didn't matter what he'd thought. None of it mattered. Not if he'd hurt her.

Except, when he found the courage to find her eyes again, she didn't look hurt or particularly scared. Just confused, arms wrapped around herself now, shaking her head and dragging wet hair out of her face. Like she couldn't decide if she was

alarmed or irritated. Her skin had gone pale, though, even under the sheen of warm shower water, and her eyes were round and haunted. If he studied her enough, he wagered he could see some of what was reflected in them, but call him a coward, he didn't want to study. He didn't think he could survive it.

"Sorry," Buffy said at last, her voice hoarse.

"You're sorry?" Spike repeated, incredulous. "You never say that, Slayer. Not to me. Not about this."

"I don't know what happened."

"What happened is we're in a room where I—"

"I know where we are," she snapped, some of her color returning. "You didn't do anything wrong. It just suddenly... It hit. I wasn't expecting it to hit. I thought I was okay."

"Buffy—"

"Everything was good but then... I guess I'm not ready for that in here. My mind went kinda kablooey and I couldn't get it back. I'm sorry." She swallowed and seemed to ball up in herself even more. "I think—"

"Think you should go on and wash up, love," Spike said, taking another step back. "Without me in here."

"Okay," Buffy agreed shakily, "but please don't leave the bedroom just yet. I want to do the talking thing. Right now, before it gets scary."

Right. Bloody scary, like it wasn't that already. But she was asking, and he'd have to trust she meant what she said. All he had were her words, after all, and assuming he knew better than what she was telling him hadn't done him any favors in the past. So Spike dried off and wandered back into the bedroom, this place that was starting to feel more like home, with his side of the bed and the space she'd started to clear for his boots and clothes, the duster that she dutifully slid back among her things whenever it was off his shoulders. He tucked the towel around his middle, feeling he ought to start covering up but feeling a bit stumped as to where to start, like he'd forgotten how trousers and shirts worked. As it was, it didn't take long for the shower to turn off for good and the house to fall quiet again, save for the sounds of Buffy tending to herself and clearing what all up in the loo. He turned as she came back into the room, looking a combination of chagrined and relieved. And gorgeous, of course, but there was nothing new there. Buffy was always gorgeous—a work of bloody art, all pink skin and wet hair, wrapped neatly in a towel that matched his own.

For a long moment, they just looked at each other, Spike knowing he was being an idiot but unable to stop. Now that he was feeling brave enough, he could study her eyes, her cheeks, listen to the harmony of her pumping heart and rushing blood all he fancied, but that didn't mean rot without knowing what was going on between her ears. And she'd said she wanted to talk.

Was he supposed to start or was she? Fuck, he was bloody useless at this.

"I am...sorry," Buffy said at length. "I wasn't expecting what just happened. Obviously, or I wouldn't have suggested we do anything."

"I'll say it again, love, but don't tell me you're sorry. Not for that."

"Well, I did kinda... I did all the stuff that leads to sex. My signals were of the clear."

"Yeah? And you changed your mind. You can change your mind."

Buffy was still for a beat. "I can. I know that. I just... I really wanted us to do that. Or I thought I did."

"It's all right."

"I know but..." She sniffed and glanced away again, sucking in her cheeks. "I wanted it to be more than all right. I was hoping maybe it was just fixed. That we were fixed."

Christ, she broke his heart without even trying. "Don't think that's somethin' you can force," he said, his voice steadier than he felt. "Can't just be all right overnight. Even if things are different."

"I know. I just wanted it. I wanted to take the bathroom back. It's my room, and I want it."

Spike let out a breath, mind racing and the rest of him desperate to keep up. He'd never been good at this—well, he had, but the situation had been different. Not a woman like Buffy. Dru had wanted coddling, wanted him to simper and swoon and pet and worship her, and he'd been keen enough to play the part as long as she'd have him. It was the only relationship language he'd ever truly been fluent in, which was bloody tragic in its own right but no less true because of it. Buffy being vulnerable with him, open and honest as she was these days, was something he couldn't answer with assurances or platitudes, and especially not promises that he could make up for what he'd bugged up.

"We'll do that, pet," he said instead. It took effort, but he managed to keep his feet firm where they were, and his hands at his sides. Not to try to reach for her, no matter how much he wanted to. "You don't have anything to prove to me."

He figured that'd light a fire in her, and he wasn't disappointed. Her eyes bloody blazed. "I know I don't."

"You sure about that? Just askin', love. This—us... Don't think it means everything's all right. Loving me doesn't change what I did to you."

"I know that too."

"And I reckon same goes for forgiving. Doesn't take away how you felt then. Doesn't make it better." Spike paused, still searching for words. Hoping beyond what he was worth that the ones he found were decent. "I love you, and it's all right if you can never be in that room with me. It's all right, Buffy. It's not weakness. It's like the scar you have on your shoulder. The one there too." He pointed at her belly, where, behind the towel, she bore the consequences of Travers's blade. "All the bloody scars you have. Needs time to heal and I wager it'll just take longer if you fuss with it too much."

Buffy inhaled deeply and nodded. "You're right."

That was good to hear, especially after having been wrong for so long. And good to remember, too. If she was truly keen on it going both ways here, then he might do well to keep his advice in mind for himself. Especially if it was right.

"But I will want to try again," she went on. "Not now but...sometime that's not

now. I know it's all right if I can't be in that bathroom with you, but I don't *want* that. I want us to be us in every room. Even if it takes a long time."

"Not goin' anywhere."

"I know. And neither am I." She was still, but only briefly, then lifted her chin to meet his eyes again. "And Spike, you stopped."

"What's that?"

"You heard me. I didn't even need to say the word. I didn't get that far, but you heard me anyway." Buffy held his gaze a beat longer before looking away again. "That just seems important. None of what just happened was like that time. I wanted to be in there with you. I wanted to make love. I wanted everything we did, and when I stopped wanting it, you heard me, and you listened. Like, *immediately*, you listened."

Spike nodded, relaxing just a little. His mind wasn't quite as restrained, screaming in a thousand bloody directions and trying to pull him along for the ride. She was right. It hadn't even occurred to him, but she was right. And in the cacophony of noise, the violent resurgence of all his worst thoughts and impulses, something else came forward. A semblance of calm over a part of himself he hadn't thought would ever be quiet, only he knew better now. After a year spent terrified of himself in a way that, like the scars they both carried, he doubted would entirely fade anytime soon, he'd walked into this place that starred in his most vivid and horrible nightmares, dreading the moment that might come when he'd have to see what sort of man he really was. Answer the question he'd been asking himself for months, what the soul was actually worth.

The soul might not be what had brought him here, ultimately, but it had given him what he needed to make the journey.

And she was right, too, in what she wanted. No matter how long it took to get there. Look how far they'd come already.

"Spike?"

He nodded once more, forced himself to meet her eyes, and breathed out when there was nothing there but the Buffy he'd come to know and fall in love with all over again. No more shadows. "We'll try," he promised. "We'll keep trying." Might be he'd be the one pulling the brakes next time, or maybe she would, or maybe neither of them would. And maybe they would have days, weeks, years together with neither of them saying it, until one day a switch flipped back, and *pinocle* tumbled out, ready and packed with enough meaning neither of them needed to ask too many questions. They would just know.

That would be all right. Fuck, it'd be better than all right.

For now, though, he would remain cautious. Let her set the pace—make the judgment calls. "You want me to step out?" he asked, nodding to her towel.

"Huh?"

"Just if you need or...or want more time, some space from me, I'll give it."

Buffy considered this, or she seemed to, at least, pressing her lips together and furrowing her brow. Then, slowly, she shook her head. "What I really want right now is to be close. Can you just hold me for a minute?" She stepped forward, tentative,

then again with greater confidence until she was close enough to breathe in once more. "Please?"

"Slayer—"

"I know. It's not for you. It's for me. Unless you need space."

He didn't and he did, but he didn't want to need it. He wanted to wrap himself around her and hold on for dear bloody life, clutch her and kiss her and do whatever he could to erase the scars he'd left her with. At the same time, run as far from here as possible before the monster inside him could rear its fangs and make anything worse. But that came down to trust, same as everything else, not just in her but in himself. That he *was* in control. That he wouldn't hurt her because he didn't want to hurt her and that want, combined with awareness and intent, as well as everything else they'd built together would be enough.

It took being seated there at the foot of the mattress, his arm around her, for him to find words again.

"This all right?"

She curled up into a Buffy ball at his side. "This is very all right. You?"

"Yeah. Me, too."

"Maybe... Maybe we should start with a different bathroom. When we try again. Work our way up to this one."

"You mean you'd like to pop over to Harris's and ask if he minds if we shag in his loo?"

She snorted, the light sound doing wonders to ease the tension in his muscles. "I was thinking more like hey, hotel, but sure. Let's go scar the friend who was the hardest to convince you weren't a bad decision."

"Still think I'm not a bad decision, then?"

Buffy lifted her head, her eyes narrowed, and she looked so much more like herself than she had since she'd stepped into the room that the parts of him that remained tight almost immediately went slack. "Considering how long it took us to get here and how many times I tried to talk myself out of it, yeah, I'm pretty sure I've examined this decision from every angle. You're not getting rid of me that easily."

"Perish the thought."

She smirked, impish and unrepentant, then leaned in and brushed a kiss across his mouth. It was gentle, almost hesitant, and she lingered there another moment. Their lips just a breath apart.

"Spike?"

"Yeah?"

But she didn't answer, instead rolled to her feet, keeping a hand on his shoulder as though to stay him. It was only when their gazes met again that he saw what she intended, the fierceness in her expression, and the softness as well. The love most of all—love that kept him from running his mouth or questioning it, doubting her or him or either of them, for love was trust and he trusted. He did trust. So when she dipped down to kiss him again, all damp and sweet-smelling, her hands sliding around his neck, Spike gave himself over to instinct, the part of them that had been as easy

as it was difficult. She was there and entangling herself around him again, pushing away just long enough to drop the towel she still wore, baring herself to him, and each time was like the first time, because each time was a choice. Another moment she'd decided to let him stay, let him be with her, let him see her and trust him that wouldn't do anything to lose the faith he still didn't entirely know how he'd earned.

And when she was close enough to touch once more, he didn't hesitate. Took her by the hips and tugged her between his open legs—his own towel having fallen open—and then her breasts at his face and then inside his mouth, first one, then another. Her heady little sighs in his ears, her fingers tearing through his hair like they had in the shower, only better now. More urgent. She lifted a knee to rest on the mattress beside his own so she was straddling him, surrounding him, pressing closer, whimpering and nodding and *yes, Spike, yes*, as he dragged his teeth over her nipple and slipped a hand between her open thighs. Stroked through the downy curls at her mound then lower until he was there, feeling with his hands what his nose and ears and eyes already told him. She trembled when he touched her, and it was a good tremble—a good mewl, too, that tore through her throat as he slipped between her folds.

"You like teasing me too much," she whispered after he let her breast plop free of his mouth.

"You like bein' teased," he whispered back, dragging up his finger until it nudged her clit—just a small press—and grinned at the slight growl he earned in turn. "Certainly free to take what you fancy if you have any complaints, love. You're in charge here."

She was, and at once, she looked like the knowledge bothered her, her brow furrowed and her kissable mouth pulled into a frown. But she also didn't give him time to wonder, to question, instead placed her hands on his shoulders to shove him back to bed. And he knew what happened next. Buffy would climb over him, tease herself along his cock, watch him fall to bloody pieces under her heat, and then finally put them both out of their misery by sinking onto him. It was how they played now, a game he liked very much. One that left him entirely at her mercy and very content to be there.

Only the expected attack didn't come. Instead, Buffy fell onto the space beside him with a little bounce, turned and regarded him with that guileless look he was coming to love and dread in equal measure.

"I don't want to be in charge," she said, seizing him by the wrist. Tugging until he understood he was supposed to follow the pull. And his stupid, useless breath caught, his mind trying to race and slam hard on the brakes at the same time.

He ended up on his side, staring down at her. "Buffy—"

"I know."

She did. Of course she did. They hadn't discussed this, not like they had the loo, but they also hadn't been together like this, with him above her, either. Not since before. "I don't..." he began, his tongue tripping over the words like it had forgotten the shape of his mouth. "After what just happened, think it might be better to—"

"Spike, we have the word for a reason." She blinked up at him, those eyes he'd

fallen into once and then just never stopped falling. "If I need it, I'll say it. If you need it, say it. Otherwise..." She pulled on his wrist again, bringing his hand to the perfect, sweet swell of her breast and leaving it there. Her skin against his palm, his fingers knowing what to do even if his mind hadn't reconciled the steps. A teasing swipe of her nipple, then a pinch to draw the blood to the surface, another when she whimpered, and then he had her in his mouth again, under his tongue, his teeth, and then rolling the rest of the way until he was over her, above her like he had been once without any sort of thought except *Buffy*. Buffy under him, her heart beating against his lips, her warmth becoming theirs, her hands on his shoulders, his neck, and again through his hair, and everything else fell away. Those lingering doubts and accompanying fear—anything that wasn't this. Wasn't touching and being touched. Buffy cupping his cheeks to drag him up so she could take his mouth. Smiling into his kiss. Saying his name in little whispers. Nodding when he scraped his teeth along her lips, asking for more. Telling him yes. Telling him she wanted it. Telling him everything he needed to hear.

And then, when he didn't move as quickly as she would have liked—or as quickly as *he* would have liked, come to think of it—hooking her ankles under his arse and leveraging all that wonderful strength to pull him more fully against her, whimpering when his cock slipped along her slick cunt, drenching him with her. Then his lips were on her neck and she was arching into his mouth, into his hands, sliding her foot down his leg and telling him now, please, she wanted it now, and he chuckled and told her he thought she wanted someone else to be in charge, and she shot back that good leaders took suggestions. Good leaders also knew when to lead, he replied, and she scowled and he laughed again, and she pouted and he kissed her, and he kept kissing her as he parted her again with his cock and then he was inside her and she wasn't saying anything but his name.

And yes, he remembered this too. Remembered how it felt to have her under him, to again be captivated by those eyes and fall up rather than down. To roll his hips and thrust at his rhythm, to watch as she gasped and moaned and bucked and begged and scratched and pleaded, to know that he might be unworthy of her but he was also the one doing this to her. Wringing this from her, experiencing it with her, and trying to absorb as much as he could because he knew it also had an end. Everything with Buffy had an end.

Except not now. There was no hurry. No ticking clock. No inevitable plummet back to earth and a reality where she only let him into moments like this. She was watching him, panting, nodding, smashing her hips to meet his thrusts, the air filling with the sounds their bodies made, with the whine of the bed springs and the moan of the furniture, and he pounded harder when she asked for harder, and her pussy vised around him, hot and wet and *his* the way she never had been before while still somehow not being his at all. Just her. Uniquely Buffy. Buffy with her warmth and her grace and her strength and her wit and that endless, amazing capacity for love and forgiveness. To be here, chosen by her, having her trust and her heart was the sort of thing that could crush him if he let himself dwell, but also he never wanted to stop. She was extraordinary.

And, apparently, she'd decided she wanted to be in charge after all. The next thing he knew, he was on his back, the air knocked out of him and Buffy over him, working herself up and down his cock at a frenzied pace that set his blood on fire. He'd never get enough of this, either. Of Buffy taking, Buffy bouncing, Buffy teasing him with her breasts and the glimpses of his slick cock plunging into her again and again. Spike growled and groaned, dropping his hands to her arse to help her move, help her take, and take more himself. As much as she would give him.

"You cheated," he panted, grinning up at her.

Buffy snickered and stuck her tongue out at him, her eyes full of challenge, and something in his chest snapped at the sight. He closed his hands around her arms and braced to roll them over again. Reclaim the control she'd borrowed. Except there was no more mattress, only the cruel tug of gravity, and then they crashed to the floor hard enough the whole house trembled with the aftershocks.

"Bloody hell." Spike pulled back to look at her. While he knew she could take a tumble, he always tried to be the one who landed on his back. "You all right—"

"Spike, if I haven't said the word, let's assume I'm all right," she said with a faint laugh. Then she lifted her head to capture his mouth, teeth scratching at his lips, and that was all the incentive he needed to start to move again, and in seconds he was lost to it. Bloody unleashed, and she was right there with him. Smashing her hips upward every time he pulled away, fighting him in earnest, parrying to his pounding, then crossing her ankles under his arse once more to increase the pace of his thrusts. And god, she felt so good. Like warmth and light and Buffy, with her Buffy scent and her Buffy skin and her Buffy cunt and her Buffy hands and her Buffy heart, and he was here somehow, here with her, and he'd be here tonight through another sleep, and the next day and the day after until she got sick of him. He'd be here for all the tomorrows.

And he needed to feel it—feel her. That exquisite ecstasy of Buffy coming all over his cock. He knew just how to touch her, what she liked, how soon she'd fall the second he started teasing her clit, and she didn't disappoint. She whimpered his name and lurched forward, her teeth finding his shoulder as her pussy clenched and spasmed, and he lost his grip on the control he'd won and tumbled after her. His spine tingling, his cock pulsing with his orgasm as he let go. Let go and fell into Buffy, knowing she'd catch him because she always did.

Spike had no grasp of how long they lay like that, tangled in one another. It could have been hours but was probably only minutes, and it didn't matter because for the first time in a while, they had nowhere to go. No demands on their time. He could spend the day right where he was, listening to the cadence of her heart, of her lungs, of the miracle that was her body, soaking in her breaths and her sweat and, when he raised his head to look at her, the light in her eyes was bright and vibrant as it had been when she'd woken up.

"Remind me," she said after a beat, her voice shaking with barely repressed laughter, "is Willow here? Or did she crash at Xander's last night?"

"Haven't heard her all mornin'. Don't think she's had a night here since we got back."

“Good.” A pause. “I mean, I should probably talk to her about that, she’s being all avoidy, but I can’t say I’m sad that we won’t get any jokes or funny, funny comments about the noise we make. And all things considered, that was pretty tame for us.”

Spike smirked and brushed a few strands of hair away from her brow. “Good thing about the crypt. No one out there’s gonna say a thing if you scream your head off.”

“If you ever do get rid of that, I’ll miss it. In a weird, very dysfunctional way.” Buffy wrinkled her nose. “I guess that’s just *our* way.”

“We’re dysfunctional?”

“Not right this second, but in the past? Yes. In the future? It’s us, so maybe. At the very least, we’ll still be weird. But I love you anyway.”

He inhaled sharply, wondering if he’d ever get used to hearing that. Hoping he didn’t. Hoping that rush lasted as long as they did. “For a girl who thought she might have trouble with the words, you’ve said them a few times now.”

Buffy shrugged, all nonchalance. Might have been more effective if she hadn’t been pressed against the floor. “Practice makes perfect.”

He grinned and kissed her. “Practice all you like, then.”

“I could use some coaching.”

“That so? You used to not fancy it when I told you I love you.”

“Yeah, well, that was then. I’m all about the now.”

Spike stroked her hair back from her eyes, full and warm. “I love you, Buffy.”

“Good. Now get back to kissing me.”

He was all too happy to oblige.



THAT NIGHT, Spike finally took her on the date he owed her. Or at least something close to it. But for the sake of relationship mile markers, Buffy was going to consider it a date. This was what dating was in Sunnydale. Gathering at the Bronze to do some celebratory boogying, filling life’s quiet moments with loud music and dancing, and engaging in as much gratuitous PDA as she wanted.

Granted, if Spike were to point out that their first date was not-a-date on account of everyone being there and that he still owed her a real one, Buffy wouldn’t argue. He did have the more salient life experience, after all.

But the gang needed this. *She* needed this, too, now that the recovery period of the fight was behind her and she was feeling good enough to be fucked right off her bed. And especially after the letter she’d received from Giles.

It had thrown her, finding that particular envelope in the mailbox when she checked the mail that day, especially since everything she’d discussed with Giles so far Council-wise had been phone call material. She’d wandered back into the house on legs that were a little trembly, her stomach tightening with the sort of dread that only being the Slayer could instill. And instead of opening the envelope like a rational person, she’d decided if there was bad news, she didn’t want to read it. She wanted to yell and make decisions and a piece of paper would not be nearly as receptive, so

she'd picked up the phone to call the acting head of the Watchers Council to force him to tell her what was going on.

Turned out she should have just opened the envelope.

"It's a status report," Giles had explained, sounding exasperated—it had been whatever time for him—though thankfully also a little amused. "I thought they should be in writing for the purpose of recordkeeping."

"What's it say?" she'd asked, still staring at the letter. From the other room, the television switched off. Seemed she'd gotten Spike's attention.

"You have it there, don't you?"

"Yes, and I have you on the phone. So tell me."

Giles had sighed—again, she'd thought, fondly—and explained. With things at the Council settling, or in the process of settling, he'd determined that the first task that needed undertaking was the support provided to the Slayer herself. The letter documented the results of his initial inquiries.

"What do you mean by support?"

"I mean you will not be the only person in this world who is constantly fighting to save it," he'd replied, still with that mix of exasperation and amusement. "While I do hope this endeavor benefits Faith, or any girl who finds herself bearing the mantle, I admit I undertook this with you in mind. You and...this eternity business. For the last fortnight, I have extended a hand of friendship on behalf of the Council to every organization I know of, in addition to a few only rumored to exist. I truly thought this would take much more time than it did to yield results, and wasn't too optimistic about what those results might be. The Council has long been a secretive, insular entity, often refusing to share resources or even recognize other enterprises as legitimate allies, and therefore not many on the outside hold us in high regard."

Buffy had rolled her eyes. "Gee, shocking."

"But that is precisely the point, Buffy. This is the Council's reputation, not yours. All I had to do was mention your name, and doors started to open. It's just a few organizations at the present, but word is spreading, and the consensus is they want to be in the fight at your side." Giles had paused. "It is remarkable, understand. We are seeing your legacy unfold. The trust that people around the world have placed in you because of the good you have done. It is unprecedented, and quite frankly, I am disappointed in myself for expecting anything less."

"My legacy?" Even the word felt heavy in her mouth. Maybe it was short-sighted, but she'd never considered that she was the sort of person who would have a legacy. Mainly because legacies were about the long term and the long term had always been elusive—a distant point on the horizon that didn't get any closer, no matter how many strides she took toward it. Only she had time now. God, she had more than time. She'd gone from living under the threat of a short, violent life to...well, a long, violent life. She'd be around to see the sort of impact she made rather than just leave that for future generations to decide.

That was more than a little daunting. And apparently, it was happening already.

"A living legacy, as it were," Giles had agreed. "The Council by itself was a considerable force, but one hindered by the old prejudices and dogmatic practices. My hope

is that, in time, we will be part of a vast network of allies and shared knowledge. It doesn't mean you won't be relied upon to lead the fight, but perhaps you won't be the only one in the fight. That the burden isn't yours alone to bear."

Buffy hadn't known what to say to that. To Giles or to Dawn, who chose the moment after she'd disconnected the call to burst in through the back door. She'd paused, taken one look at Buffy, and said something like, "Well, that was fast. What's the latest crisis?"

"What?"

"You look like someone died."

"No. It's good news."

"Good news? I didn't know there was such a thing as good news." Dawn had waltzed over the fridge, all ambivalent teenager, and started scouring the contents as though she expected to find something that wasn't among their usual seven staples. "So what's the good news?"

It had taken what felt like a long time to explain, mostly because Buffy's brain hadn't finished processing everything Giles had shared or what it meant. Just that it sounded...big. Like life-changing big. The prospect of having help on a global scale was completely overwhelming and borderline unbelievable—like those products peddled in infomercials that were supposedly revolutionary convenience-creators that, in truth, ended up breaking after being out of the box for five minutes.

And these potential allies were not limited to just humans. There were demons who were coming forward, initiating contact. Those that had kept to the shadows for generations out of fear that the Council would view them as a threat, not entirely trusting now but open to communication. Interested enough to explore how they might be of service if ever the world needed them. Decades, even centuries of potential experience and information unlocked because Buffy Summers had changed the rules of the game.

Dawn had listened to all of this with a blank, *well duh* look on her face, then shrugged and turned back to the fridge. "After I'm all trained up on weapons and stuff, I think I want to try learning more about me," she'd said instead.

"About you?"

"Well, I might not be the Slayer, but I am a mystical Key-thing. I know we've all been acting like I'm not anymore, but, well, no one said that."

"That sounds...dangerous."

"Yeah, good point. Wouldn't want to be in danger."

Buffy had rolled her eyes and muttered something about smart-ass sisters, to which Dawn had answered with an eyeroll of her own.

"I don't get how you can still be surprised by this stuff," her sister had said. "I mean, isn't that the entire reason the Council wanted you dead in the first place? Because of the Buffy Summers domino effect?"

"Gee, thanks."

"Well, obviously they thought it sucked because they saw this, right? You've always been different, according to pretty much everyone. That's why you were able

to beat things like the Master and Angel and even Spike, who were all with the powerful and legendary vampires and stuff.”

Spike had naturally chosen that moment to walk into the kitchen, the not-so-subtle smirk on his lips betraying he’d overheard every word. “Told you once, love,” he’d said, also stalking over to the fridge, “all about your sodding ties to the world. Kept you tethered long enough to make you bloody invincible.”

“You say that like I asked for invincibility.”

He’d sobered almost immediately and met her eyes over the open refrigerator door. “Know you didn’t. But I wager that’s part of it, yeah? Like the Bit says, those wankers wanted you offed for a reason. Same sodding reason they bloody caved after Travers was gone and saw you couldn’t be killed. The fight might come down to just you but you got others that have a yen to be in the thick of it at your side.”

“Which is why Willow started learning magic,” Dawn had added. “And Xander started learning... Well, I guess carpentry is kind of an evergreen skill but you know he got good at it because of you. And I only exist because of you and since I’m also not going anywhere, I wanna find out what kinda stuff a mystical Key can do that might help kick as much demon booty as whatever these other guys that Giles has found can do. Because let’s not even pretend this isn’t what I’m going to be doing for the rest of my life. And”—she’d held up a hand—“before you start in on the whole *you have a choice and I didn’t* mumbo jumbo, I ask you to remember that yes, I have a choice, which means I can choose this. And I do. At least for now. So let me learn how to be the Key, already.”

She’d glared until Buffy had raised her hands in submission, deciding on the spot not to tell her sister that she’d had no intention of saying no. That part of training her to fight had always been a concession that averting apocalypses would forever be a part of Dawn’s life. If Dawn wanted to feel like she’d won something, well, there was no harm in that.

“Good,” Dawn had said, finally selecting an apple from the fridge, one that probably should have been tossed out last week. “And you guys should also stop pretending that Spike doesn’t just live here now,” she’d added before striding out of the kitchen.

Spike had met Buffy’s eyes, his own wide in an ‘I didn’t tell her to say that’ kind of way that she couldn’t help but find endearing. But she also hadn’t known how to respond to the now-spoken thought of him moving in any more than she had Giles’s news about the network they were building, so she’d settled instead for stealing a kiss and hoping they could push pause on that conversation for a little while longer. Enough for her to decide just how much she hated the idea of him moving out of his crypt and into anywhere that wasn’t her bedroom. She really didn’t want to risk spoiling what they were building by moving too fast.

But then, she thought that night at the Bronze after he murmured that he wanted a proper dance with her, too fast was relative. It wasn’t like this relationship could be measured by conventional standards, and why should it? Neither of them had ever been conventional.

"This was it, you know," Spike said into her hair as the band started up the next song. "Where I saw you first."

"I have a vague recollection. I'm pretty sure there were death threats involved."

He chuckled, his lips at her brow. "How else do you reckon I stood to make an impression?"

"My impression was that I was going to kick your ass and wipe the smug off your face."

"Really?"

"Well, that was Impression B. You might have had me just the teeniest bit wigged. Oh, don't look so happy," she scolded, though it was her own damn fault for having said anything in the first place. "It was years ago, and I wasn't used to vampires who just *announced* themselves like you did."

"Was always a rebel," Spike replied, his grin not dimming a bit. "Liked keepin' people on their toes."

"You did at that." Buffy laced their fingers together, rolling her hips in time with the thump of the bass from the stage. And when Spike leaned in to steal a kiss, like it was the most natural thing in the world, she couldn't help but think that if the endless future that stretched ahead had more moments like this one, she could get through the bad that would always be waiting, lurking in the shadows of happy moments. That the happy moments themselves couldn't happen if the bad didn't happen first.

The hardest thing in this world was to live in it.

Thank god she didn't have to do it alone.

AND WE KEEP LIVING ANYWAY

"ALL RIGHT," BUFFY SAID, GLANCING AT THE CROWD PRACTICALLY WEDGED around her dining room table. Most everyone here was someone she knew, but there were a few stragglers that had simply been in the neighborhood when the Council's broadcast had gone live. "Anya just called to let us know that Mygnoth is on the move, so it's happening now. This is the last chance to ask questions if you have them."

She held her breath and waited, watched as the people in her home exchanged the same series of looks that were exchanged before every apocalypse. Hoping someone would hurry up and volunteer whatever was on their mind, as there was *always* something. Typically a something that spurred on twelve other somethings that people never thought to share when she asked the first time.

Finally, one of the demon hunters that had shown up alongside Faith cleared his throat. "So, just so we get the timing on this right, the witches are gonna get their chant on right before the tall dude's crew makes their move."

"No, that happens right after," Willow said in a voice strained with thinning patience. "The magic is dependent upon the energy of the attack. Without that, it'll just fizzle out."

"Think Ducky was talkin' about Wright," Faith retorted, leaning an elbow against the guy she'd just called Ducky. "Wright goes in, pisses the motherfucker off, then the girls get chanty. Light show starts and then Angel and friends do their thing."

Ducky favored Faith with the sort of look that, even if Buffy hadn't already put together that those two were knocking boots, would've given the game away. "Angel's the other vamp, right?"

"I'm right here," Angel muttered from the far corner. "And when exactly did I become *the other vamp*?"

"Well, you are the other vamp," Xander threw in. "As in, not the vampire who lives here. The *other* vamp."

"I have more than a century on him, you know."

"Whatever you say, *other vamp*."

Buffy shook her head. She didn't have time for another rendition of the *whose fangs are bigger* arguments. And thankfully, Spike knew full well not to take the bait this close to the fight and instead placed a calming hand on the small of her back. "Yeah, Faith has it right," she said. "Angel, Gunn, Cordelia, and Connor come in with the distraction while Willow's team ramps up the disillusion magic and Wright stays on Mygnoth as long as he can, but we know this guy won't be on his own for long. Once he realizes he's under attack, he's going to call for reinforcements."

"Which is where I come in," Dawn said with what could only be called a smug smile. No matter how old she got, she was always an insufferable brat during the fights where her innate powers played a major role in the day's savage.

"Yes, we know," Buffy replied dryly.

"What? Everyone else got to say what they were doing."

"Because Faith's latest boy toy got Wright and Angel confused."

"Hey," the guy who would now forever be *Ducky* in the brain of Buffy, and therefore impossible to take seriously, snapped, "I am not a boy toy."

"I promise I don't care," Buffy shot back, then shifted her attention to the others in the room. "Are there any more questions?"

"Yeah. What is Spike doing again?" Angel threw in, his hands already raised when she turned her glare on him. "I'm truly asking. We've had basically no time to prepare and there are a lot of people in play here. It's easy to get lost in the shuffle. I just want to make sure—"

"I'm pullin' my weight," Spike drawled, and though Buffy wasn't looking at him, she heard the eyeroll in his voice. "Whole bloody thing hinges on the Slayer, so I'll be doin' what I do best."

Angel nodded and made a vague gesture. "Remind me what that is."

"He's with Buffy, just like he said," Cordelia snapped, and took advantage of being the one person in the room who could whack Angel upside the head with impunity. "It's the same thing he does every freaking time we do this so either you're just not paying attention or are seriously deficient at retaining this incredibly basic bit of information."

Angel ran his hand over the back of his head and shot her a wounded puppy look but didn't otherwise respond. Cordelia had seemingly long since mastered the art of ignoring him, though, for she didn't so much as bat an eye in his direction.

"You know where to swing that thing?" she asked Buffy, nodding at the scythe lain before her across the table. "Cause I don't think we get another shot at this."

"Vision?" Buffy asked.

"More like experience."

"Ahh, well. Thankfully, I *have* gotten pretty good at this part." She ran her fingers along the smooth handle of the scythe. It could have been her imagination, but every

time she touched it like this, she swore the metal responded, humming its power, its reassurances, into her skin. Similar to the hand at her back in that way. Constant and calming, fueling her with confidence that what came next, while not easy, was surmountable. Just like everything that had happened before and would happen after.

In this particular fight, Buffy's part of what lay ahead was pretty straightforward, though it relied heavily on the precision of everyone else's combat choreography. Everyone else being the people who were crammed in this room and those who were positioned, awaiting word. The apocalypse they were averting today was, all told, kinda on the skimpier side when compared to the others they'd stopped, but she wouldn't let herself become complacent. Never. Not with so much at stake.

"Is there anything else?" she asked. "Because we really should move."

She waited for a beat, then another, and then, as one, the group exploded into motion. Grabbing weapons and ingredients as loved ones stole quick kisses and exchanged the goodbyes that hopefully would turn out to be unnecessary. Dawn made her way over to sneak a side-hug from Buffy but was out the door before Buffy could respond in kind. That was the way they did things—Dawn not wanting to make a big to-do if it turned out this fight was her last, Buffy not wanting to think about what would happen when that day finally came. She couldn't afford to measure the current fight against the eventual losses, rather just facing what happened as it happened.

In all respects except one.

Buffy waited until the dining room was empty, the last shouts of their makeshift army fading down the street, before turning to Spike. "Final chance. You need another power-up?"

He smiled, his eyes falling to the mark on her throat. The one that never quite healed because, well, she liked opening it too much. That her blood also gave him a boost that made him damn near unkillable in battle was just a bonus. "Let's save that for afters, yeah? Need you in top form."

"If you say so. But I swear, Spike, you dust on me, and I will kick your ass so hard..."

"And if that's not proper incentive, I don't know what is." He kissed her, his lips cool and familiar and reassuring and home. Just like the rest of him. "Normal stakes, then?"

She nodded, grinning against his mouth. "You wanna be on top tonight, you gotta out-slay me."

"No cheating this time. Takin' out the head wanker still just counts for one."

"Yeah? We'll see about that."

Spike pulled back to favor her with that smirk she loved so very much, and winked. "Race you." He was out the door before she could so much as swat his ass, letting loose the sort of roar she probably shouldn't find hot but hey, Buffy had never been good at playing by the rules.

Then again, in this life of theirs, rules mattered way less than results.

She was sporting, though, and waited a full three seconds so Spike would have a

HOLLY DENISE

head start. While this wouldn't stop him from complaining when she beat him anyway, it was more ammunition in her belt, and she would take all she could get.

Buffy grinned, snatched the scythe off the table, then finally tore after him.

Off to save the world again.