

MASQUERADE



HOLLY DENISE





HIDE YOUR FACE, SO THE WORLD WILL NEVER FIND YOU

IT WAS KIND OF INSANE, HOW SOME THINGS STAYED THE same in the face of so much change. For instance, Buffy's whole town had disappeared in a blip—something not a single one of the national channels had bothered to mention—and rendered her and her sister without a home or really a solid idea of what to do next. An entire life upended in a handful of seconds. All the while, a couple hundred miles away in Los Angeles, her father was hiding the spare key in the same place he always had. As though some part of him had expected his girls to show up freshly homeless and in need of shelter.

Only that was being far too charitable, and she knew it. Buffy would be surprised to learn Hank Summers even owned that he had kids. As it was, the fact that he was an old dog who refused to learn new tricks was just one of those rare lucky breaks she'd heard so much about. It meant that when she stormed out of the Hyperion after learning about the deal Angel had made with a certain evil law firm—a deal that might or might not have resulted in the death of the man

she'd discovered too late that she loved—she had a place to go. Spare pieces of stability that she could salvage, make her own, and put to use as she looked to rebuild.

Even better, her father was apparently away on business with wifey number whatever, so Buffy didn't have to come up with a clever cover story to explain why it wasn't just her and Dawn who needed a place to stay, but also her old high school librarian and her friends, plus Faith, Wood, Andrew, and a slew of freshly switched-on slayers with varying degrees of attitude. All she'd had to do was guess the code to silence the alarm, which had been easy-peasy, as it remained the birthdate of Hank's very favorite person—himself. And just like that, they had a roof. A small roof, sure, but small was better than nothing.

Very few people in her circle even knew about Hank Summers, given he was as present in Buffy's conversations as he had opted to be in her life. While she couldn't say for sure that no one would think to look for her at her father's house, she was almost certain that Angel wouldn't. No, Angel would expect her to do exactly what she'd claimed she was going to do—leave town to start the task of locating girls from across the world.

"I can help," Angel had said, watching as she stuffed what little had made it out of Sunnydale back into her travel bag. "Once we take control of Wolfram and Hart—"

"No," Buffy had barked rather forcibly, then snapped her mouth shut before she could say anything else. The fact that she hadn't known what Wolfram and Hart was before she and the other Sunnydale refugees had rolled into LA didn't matter—she was a quick study, had to be, and everything she'd learned in the days since made her stomach roil. It wasn't that she couldn't see the logic behind Angel's decision, but she

could also see the pitfalls. The dangers. The massive hazard signs outlined in blinking neon lights, arranged in such a way that they inevitably and unmistakably formed the word TRAP.

If anyone needed proof, look no further than Wolfram and Hart's first goodwill gesture. They'd given Angel something—vague disclaimer included, fine print skipped—and had he been the one to ultimately use it, well, Wolfram and Hart would have been without a ceremonial figurehead. Or worse. And Buffy didn't want to think about the *worse*.

Except, because no one else was, she had to. Which was why she was here, not quite breaking but definitely entering her father's home, taking advantage of his perpetual absenteeism to set up a base close to Angel's headquarters. There were other things to be doing—things she knew she should be focused on, and not only because everyone in her circle kept reminding her of the fact—but the thought of walking away from one apocalypse while her somehow bafflingly short-sighted ex walked into what could be the next one... Well, it wasn't the fuzzy, post-world-save-age experience she'd been hoping to enjoy after the First was back in its cave.

Also, it wasn't exactly like Buffy was *needed* to do any of the post-apocalypse things. She'd been expressly told that she wasn't the one and only anymore so, yes, the love and responsibility could be shared among the masses. Slayers worldwide needed to be found, if not to recruit them to the cause, then to give them a few practical pointers to help them avoid casual manslaughter or explain why otherworldly creatures might find them attractive. All of that was true. But the to-do list of finding a permanent base of operations, rebuilding the Watchers Council, and establishing what the post-Sunnydale world would look like was a lot like Rome—it couldn't be

achieved in a day, and it really shouldn't be left to Buffy to figure out all the moving pieces, especially considering all the energy and investment it would demand while other evil things kept evil-ing throughout the world. The forces of darkness were hardly going to take a break while the heroes got their shit together. And with Angel willingly and, in her opinion, overconfidently assuming control of an ancient source of evil, Buffy felt the best use of her time was pretty damn obvious.

"So," Willow said blankly once Buffy reached the end of her sales pitch. "You're...staying. In Los Angeles. Indefinitely."

Buffy furrowed her brow, glanced around at the others. It was just the core gang—Willow and Xander, Giles and Dawn, plus Faith and Kennedy, the latter of whom was there more as an accessory to Willow, considering Buffy didn't give a crap how she voted. Those girls who were set on seeing through the slayer gig were out with Andrew and Wood, and thank god for that, as there wasn't enough room in her father's house to accommodate everyone. Barely enough room to accommodate the people she was looking at, all of whom were looking at *her* with varying degrees of uncertainty. Something Buffy did not appreciate.

"No," she said slowly. "I'm not staying in Los Angeles indefinitely. Just until we find out what Angel is up to."

"And what do we think he's up to?" Xander asked, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. The eyepatch and shaggy hair gave him an air of manufactured authority that Buffy could do without, particularly when he was looking at her like she had a screw loose. "No offense, Buff, but none of us even knew this law firm was a thing until, what, last week?"

"What does that have to do with anything?"

“Just that you seem really worried about something that wasn’t on our radar before.”

“Xander, how do you think things *end up* on our radar?”

He shifted a bit at that, gave the room a once-over with his good eye as though trying to drum up support. “I’m just saying... Is it possible that you’re overreacting to this Angel news?”

“How so?”

“Because Spike died,” Kennedy said shortly, then threw up her hands when Willow shot her a warning look. “What? It’s what we’re all thinking, right? She learned that the necklace or whatever that killed her boyfriend came from this law firm, and suddenly it’s all she can talk about. She didn’t even care until that Angel guy told her.”

“I didn’t care?” Buffy echoed, her shoulders going tense. Not that that was saying much—she was always tense whenever Kennedy opened her mouth. “According to who? You?”

“What? You were all proud on the trip up.”

“I’m still proud of Spike. I can be proud of him and suspicious about the thing that killed him at the same time.” She turned to glare at Willow—it was safer than glaring at Kennedy directly. Not as likely to lead to a larger screaming match, and therefore easier on her blood pressure. “The amulet—”

“Closed the Hellmouth,” Giles said in his watcher voice, or as she was starting to consider it, his I-know-better-than-you voice. “It worked as it should have and remained the only option we had at the time for reasons we’ve already discussed.”

Reasons they had discussed and Buffy *so* wasn’t in the mood to rehash, especially with an audience. She was still smarting over the accusations that had been thrown her way

after the high of winning had worn off—that had made her look up phrases like *deus ex machina*—and the reality of what winning looked like had settled in. So far, at least, those accusations had been kept just between them. If the others felt the same, they were at least doing her the courtesy of not directly making it her problem.

“Furthermore,” Giles went on, “given the information Angel was provided, we can’t say that the outcome was unexpected. The amulet was said to have cleansing powers—it did. Angel also told you that it was volatile, dangerous, and it was. What precisely do you think you would have done differently?”

It was the exact right sort of question to ask, as it made Buffy sound like she was creating mountains out of molehills. Enough so that Kennedy shot her a smug look and Xander and Willow avoided her gaze completely. The only people who didn’t seem satisfied were Dawn and Faith, the latter of which would have shocked her if she could have afforded to be shocked. The former was a bit more complicated.

Dawn hadn’t said much about Spike since the battle at the Hellmouth—or since he’d been back in their lives, actually, which Buffy knew had everything to do with her own conflicted feelings about what had happened to precipitate his leaving in the first place. And yes, Buffy also knew there was an overdue conversation to be had where that was concerned, one that would involve anger and regret and grief and a bunch of other messy emotions she had never been really great about managing. But it was necessary. One of those undertakings she’d inherited as the parental figure, and likely would have been tasked to handle even if their mother had survived. Suffice it to say, Buffy understood why Dawn might be conflicted about all things Spike, and

considering she'd never been a fan of Angel's, inclined to be highly suspicious of anything he said, did, or otherwise made happen.

However, Faith not being sold on the "Buffy's overreacting" wagon was an unexpected boon, as she had sorta become Angel's biggest cheerleader without the actually-being-a-cheerleader part, all likely owing to their special relationship—something that no longer caused stirrings of jealousy, score one for personal growth—and everything that had happened before she'd joined the fight in Sunnydale. And since Giles had started listening to Faith more than he did Buffy, maybe her slayer frenemy's reticence would convince him where Buffy could not.

"I don't know what I would have done," Buffy said at last, looking back at Giles. "Telling me the amulet was dangerous is not the same as 'it's dangerous and was given to me by an ancient, evil organization that has been trying to kill me since I moved to town.' Driving a car can be dangerous. Driving a car that was given to you by people who want you dead? That's just stupid."

"So what's the plan?" Willow asked, thankfully providing her a reason to look away from Giles. "If you're staying in LA to keep an eye on Angel, I'm guessing it's because you have something in mind."

"I do." A slightly crazy something. "I go undercover."

There was a pregnant pause, then Kennedy sputtered a laugh. "What? Like you're Nancy Drew or something?"

"Undercover how?" Xander asked. "No offense, but I don't think you're cut out to make it as a lawyer."

"Not a lawyer," she replied, trying for patience. "But there's more to a law office than just lawyers, right? Like a receptionist or something. A paralegal. A fact-checker.

Someone there who keeps to the background. That's all I really need—to be close enough to watch him.”

“Watch him do what?” Faith asked, and raised her hands when Buffy shifted her attention to her. “Serious question, B, ’cause I think you’re onto something. I’m the only one here who has ever been in that place. Couple Marie and Donny Osmond-looking motherfuckers picked me up off the street when I came there straight from Sunny D. This was, of course, before I hopped on the redemption train.” She grinned in that self-effacing way Buffy found she was starting to like rather than resent, the more often she saw it. “Anyway, they wanted me to take out Angel. Were wicked serious about it, too. Pretty sure they’re the ones who sent that demon we ganked right before you showed up. I didn’t do the job, so they tapped a pinch hitter. And I know I’ve been on the inside for a few, but that sort of thing stays with a girl, you know? Angel getting all comfy cozy with these chuckleheads right after he did his last soulful apology tour? You don’t gotta be a brainiac or some shit to figure it’s a trap.”

No, you certainly did not. Buffy did her best not to preen or smirk, as she felt all lingering animosity for Faith falling away. Years of tension and bitterness and jealousy eradicated in a blink. Hell, she would have hugged the other slayer if either of them were huggy people, but they weren’t, and she figured it’d look too much like a victory lap. Smug righteousness was not the way to get her friends on board.

“It is curious that they would hand everything over to him,” Giles said, his tone lighter. “I cannot pretend to understand what Wolfram and Hart hopes to accomplish, only that they do not act without reason. Whatever plans they have for Angel are likely significant.”

"You didn't seem all that concerned a minute ago," Buffy muttered.

Her former watcher went stiff in the shoulders. "I am concerned. Of course I am. Any reasonable person would be. I just am not ready to presume the amulet they gave Angel was itself cause for alarm."

And there it was, Giles still trying to have it both ways. "No," Buffy replied, "just that it would have killed him if he'd worn it."

"We don't know that. Perhaps the amulet performed the way it did specifically because they *expected* Angel to wear it and he did not."

"You have any more straws you wanna grasp for? I think you might've gotten them all."

Giles's expression shuttered, his eyes going the sort of dark she was starting to regard as the default where she was concerned. The fissure between them was expanding rather than repairing itself, despite whatever strides they took to find their way back to the place that had defined their relationship throughout its duration. Only that place required a measure of servility from Buffy that she no longer possessed. The once sacrosanct dynamic, she the student and he the teacher, turned on its head so slowly that neither of them had realized it was happening until the damage was done.

Though Buffy wouldn't regard it as damage, and she knew Spike wouldn't, either. He'd told her as much the night they'd spent in the house she'd convinced the owner to abandon, away from Revello Drive and its noise and its traitors and the politics of managing the end of the world. At the time, Buffy hadn't known if she bought into his spin on things; while the bitter part of her had been happy to seize any reason to distance herself from the accusations that had been leveled in

her direction, the rest had been too consumed with the fears that everyone else had a point. Spike hadn't thought so, and she'd trusted him to tell her the truth. That was how they worked—how they had always worked. The one person in the world she knew would not fill her head with lies, atta-girls, or platitudes.

Still, when Spike had suggested Giles resented that Buffy had eclipsed him, surpassed the point in her journey where he could provide her the sort of support she needed, she hadn't leaped at it. The thought—even then, even after the failed murder attempt and shutting the door in his face—had left her feeling hollow and disloyal, and guilty as a result. So she'd filed the possibility away for examination at a later date. Getting to the other side of the fight had been more important, and that meant shelving petty personal squabbles. And for a moment there, she'd thought the shelf was where they would stay. Winning at the cost of losing everything enough to keep the hatchet buried with the rest of Sunnydale.

That had been until Los Angeles. Until learning about the amulet. Until Giles had restarted with the accusations. Until Buffy had once more taken charge rather than looking to her elders for guidance.

Spike proven right yet again. The bastard.

God, she missed him.

At length, Giles shifted and crossed his arms. "I worry that you are letting your emotions cloud your judgment." Not the first time she'd heard that. "Ever since Spike died, you have been singularly focused on litigating the cause of his death, when it seems fairly straightforward. I think perhaps this new idea of yours is just another way to continue avoiding accepting the reality that a decision you made killed him."

And there it was. *Buffy, you didn't do enough. Buffy, you were*

too focused on Spike. Buffy, maybe if you'd been less distracted by your love life and more intent on the apocalypse, we'd still have a place to call home.

This was a new variation, though. As though he'd been stowing it away, saving it for a moment just like this to cause maximum damage. *Buffy, you were so negligent, you got him killed anyway.*

"A decision I made," she echoed, proud of herself when her voice didn't shake.

"Yes," Giles replied succinctly. "In choosing Spike as your champion, in not explaining to him that the amulet might be dangerous."

Spike had known it was dangerous—he'd been present, seen or not, when Angel had given his little spiel—but knowing that didn't dull the edge of the verbal blade, and Buffy wasn't fast enough to keep from flinching this time. "That's not true."

"In what world would Buffy rather Angel be dead than Spike, anyway?" Xander asked with his signature profound lack of tact. Not even Anya had been that abrasive. "I mean, not to speak ill of the guy or anything. I might not have been his biggest fan but even I can admit he did save our butts in a big way. Even still, come on. If it hadn't gone to Spike—like Giles said, maybe the necklace would've worked differently, but if it hadn't, does anyone here seriously believe that Buffy would rather Angel have bit the dust over Captain Peroxide?"

"Angel had information that Spike didn't have," Buffy argued, her face heating. The last thing she needed was for Giles to get his way and this to devolve into a discussion of her love life, much less the roles either vampire had played in it. Her reasons for wanting to investigate Angel were completely separate from her feelings for Spike. Though, at

the very least, it sounded like Giles hadn't vocalized his Buffy-caused-Sunnydale-to-go-boom conclusion with the group at large. Small favors. "Again with the difference between 'this thing is dangerous' and 'this thing is dangerous and was given to me by my sworn enemies.' If he'd worn it and things went the same, well, I'd be mad as hell with him for being a moron, but it would have been his choice to make."

"And Spike wearing it was his choice—" Giles began, but Buffy had had enough.

"It's not the same thing. Stop pretending like it was. Angel didn't tell me everything. The fact that he trusted it to work at all when these guys are the real deal Big Bads is exactly why I think we need to stay close."

There was a beat, one Buffy spent in a staring contest with her watcher. Him glaring at her and her glaring right back, the air between them thick and electric. It didn't ease, either, rather seemed to intensify the longer the silence stretched.

"I will concede Angel is worth investigating," Giles said carefully. "I just do not know that you are the best person to do so."

Another goalpost moved. His back must be killing him. "Why is that?"

"You are clearly emotionally compromised."

"Maybe. But does anyone here know him better than I do?" She arched her eyebrows, glanced around the room for a volunteer that she knew wasn't coming. "I mean, if Angel's acting weird—if he's off—we need someone who would know. Who wouldn't make excuses for him but also wouldn't jump at the chance to pin something on him out of the blue."

"Hey, I resemble that remark," Xander muttered.

"Someone who knows him in more than just a professional setting, too," she went on. "Someone who gets him."

“Faith seems to get him,” Willow suggested, though quickly wilted at the glare Buffy threw at her. “I mean, just, they have a history that’s more...cozy than the rest of us have with Angel. She did come to the rescue when he was running around all soul-free. So, in terms of him not going bad, she’s gotta want it a lot too.”

“I do,” Faith agreed before Buffy could interject, and despite herself, despite the fluffier feelings of just a few minutes ago, she felt her previously relaxed defenses rear to life, her body kicking in with the tried and true we’ve-been-here-before warnings that always preceded the lobbing of a Faith-sized bomb into her plans.

But Faith wasn’t done talking.

“You don’t want me in there, though. I’d just be messy.”

“Messier than Buffy?” Kennedy asked with naked skepticism.

“If B’s not in love with him anymore? Yeah. A lot messier.” Faith winced and raised her hands. “Shit, that sounded like I’m hot for him and I’m way not. But the reason I came in before was because he was running around as Angelus and he needed some wrangling to be saved soul-style. If we’re talking Angel-Angel, there are calls I ain’t gonna make. I haven’t been on the rehab train long enough to trust I’d see someone who was slipping, but Buffy? She doesn’t want to be right about Angel, but she’s done what she’s had to before so you know she will again if it comes down to it.”

Once more, silence descended over the room, along with a flurry of quickly exchanged looks and unspoken conversations. Buffy caught Faith’s eye and nodded her thanks, was grateful when the other slayer just shrugged as though to say it was no big thing. But it was a big thing and they both knew it. The past few weeks had been an exercise in reeducating

herself on all the things she'd thought about Faith, parsing apart what might have been true at one point but wasn't anymore and struggling to not jump to conclusions when experience and the barely healed wounds it had left her with started blaring the warning bells.

The Faith in her memory had always centered herself, either in what she claimed she could do or what she blew off doing in favor of something else. Buffy wasn't sure what to do with this new Faith, especially without the distraction of an apocalypse or someone significant in her life that she feared losing. It truly was a brave new world.

"Okay, so say Buffy does do this," Kennedy said a moment later, breaking through the loud quiet. "What happens to the girls?"

"What girls?" Dawn asked. "Cause if you're talking about Rona, Vi, and the others, I don't know what to tell you. Like, you weren't expecting that we'd all stick together forever, right?"

"I'm not talking about Rona and Vi," Kennedy retorted hotly. "I'm talking about the possibly hundreds that she switched on in that last fight. I thought we were gearing up to find them. Wasn't that the plan? They have no idea what's happened to them, and they deserve to have someone help them through it."

"And that person automatically has to be Buffy?" Dawn countered, crossing her arms. "You're a slayer now, too."

Kennedy flushed but didn't look away or back down. "I just think it'd be good for the slayer with the most experience to be available to help rather than playing stalker on her ex."

"Look, it's not forever," Buffy said. "If something is going on with Angel, I don't think it'll take more than a few months to be

obvious. But Dawn is right—it's not exactly like we're hurting for slayers to lead the charge in finding the girls who were activated. And it might be good, even, for someone else to do that. Someone who's gone through it more recently." She paused, debated, then decided, what the hell. "That actually makes more sense to me. Getting this organization started is going to take time and focus, and it's not like the world is going to wait for us to get everything into gear before throwing another crisis our way. Since I *do* have the most experience, shouldn't I be focused on the big picture? It's not like I'm great at bureaucracy. Plus, if the new slayers are involved at the start, it'll be less a *me* thing and more a *we* thing. Isn't that the point now?"

Buffy sat back, proud of herself and what she felt was an incredibly salient argument—one good enough that even someone who was just fighting to fight would find difficult to counter. And that was what Kennedy was doing, she knew. Everything with her had been a power struggle from the start, something that had not improved over the last few weeks. Which was fine. Kennedy had been vying for the strength she had now since she learned what a slayer was; she was also older than most of the other girls, with more of her identity tied into what she brought to the table. And that was also fine. Some girls had been built for this life, and they were good to have around. Those who insisted on finding the sunny side of slaying, enjoyed the power and the authority, and even if they were a little hotheaded, still managed to save the day more often than not. More and more now, it seemed likely that Kennedy's lingering hangups were owed to insecurity over Buffy's relationship with her girlfriend and her determination to be the most important person in Willow's life. The most important *slayer*.

Well, she could have it. The role certainly came with its minuses as well as its pluses.

"So, are we decided?" Buffy asked, looking around again. "I go undercover at Wolfram and Hart?"

"I think so, yeah," Faith answered before anyone else could, a slight smirk on her lips. "You and me get along best when we're far away from each other, anyhow. And I ain't planning on staying in LA longer than I have to. They're probably still looking to find me and wrassle me back to the clink."

"Where will you go?"

"I dunno. Guess it depends on what Robin wants to do, since he suckered me into giving monogamy a shot. Knowing him, he'll go all goodwill-ambassador on the girls who were flipped on." She lifted a shoulder. "Could be fun, I guess. See if I'm any good doing something like that."

Buffy pressed her lips together to smother a grin. "The girls out there will like you a lot more than they would me, anyway."

"Pretty much a given, yeah. I don't have a stake up my ass."

If someone had told her that she'd ever find herself snickering at a joke Faith had made at her expense, well, Buffy would have assumed the invasion had begun and she'd been replaced with a pod person. As it was, she thought it was kinda nice. Maybe they would never be friends, but as they stood now, things between them had never been more honest. It was wildly refreshing, even if it made the Spike-shaped hole in her life even more pronounced.

And funny enough, she probably had Spike to thank for that. The belief he'd had in her to let her be her, not the Buffy everyone else wanted her to be.

"Well, with that settled..." Xander said, shifting a little as

though he wasn't sure how exactly it had been settled but was willing to roll with it. "I guess the next question is, how exactly do we get Buffy into this law office without Angel making her on day one. You know, vampires being with the power sniffers and stuff."

"I'm pretty sure that's the easy part," Buffy replied, shifting her gaze to Willow. "You up for some corporate-level espionage?"

Willow opened her mouth to reply, closed it, and threw Giles a surreptitious glance as though seeking his approval. Of everyone in the room, he alone hadn't said anything to indicate he was on board with this plan, but Buffy knew better than to hold her breath. Perhaps time would help bridge the gap between the broken halves of their relationship; perhaps it wouldn't. All the better for her to be outside his sphere of influence for a while. On her own in a way she never had been, with confidence in herself that Spike had helped her nurture into being.

"Yeah," Willow said at length, shifting her attention back to her. "Secret Agent Buffy Summers coming right up."



A WEEK. That was all it took. A week, a spell, some computer wizardry, and Buffy was walking into Wolfram and Hart with a new job to match her new face and new name.

Well, her face wasn't entirely new—if she studied her reflection long enough, she could find herself in what she saw. But it did take foreknowledge, which Angel wouldn't have, and a lot of intense scrutiny, which Angel wouldn't do. It was a perfectly nice face, with a more boring nose, brown eyes rather than green, and a slightly wider mouth that she was

still getting used to working. Buffy wouldn't have thought the size of her mouth would make much of a difference in basic communication, but as it turned out, it was a lot like talking around braces had been. Just reconfiguring how sound moved across her tongue and between her teeth and making adjustments where necessary so she didn't come across as someone who had not only been born in a barn, but born there yesterday.

The wardrobe for her persona was completely different, too. More conservative than Buffy was accustomed to, even over recent years when her skirt hems had gone a little longer than mid-thigh. No sleeveless blouses, no going braless under any circumstances, lots of blazers and smart shoes—actually, a whole lot of brown overall, as brown was neutral and inoffensive, which Willow believed would make it easier for Buffy to fade into the background. Her hair, also a dark brown, was thick and shiny, always to be worn piled in a hurried mess on top of her head. Completing the camouflage was a rectangular pair of glasses—Xander's suggestion on the basis of "Hey, it worked for Superman."

There had been some trial and error, not to mention a lot of reassurance that the transformation wasn't permanent. Buffy wouldn't have worried, probably, if she hadn't learned that Willow's inspiration for this particular spell came from one of the *Harry Potter* books and something called Polyjuice Potion. Only unlike the books, Buffy's disguise was unique to her and not sourced off another living person, and also altered her natural scent to keep her safe from vampire super senses. Like the books, however, Buffy's disguise *would* require her to sip something nasty every few hours, lest the effects wear off.

"And what happens when I run out of Polyjuice?" Buffy had asked.

“You won’t. I actually found this nifty spell that will connect the refrigerator in your apartment to wherever mine is.” Willow had been more than pleased with herself. “Like an old, magical smuggling ring. It became really popular during the Burning Times to get aid and magical remedies to people without attracting the attention of witch hunters. Just link two items with the same spell, and what you put in one appears in the other. Really old school stuff.”

That had taken a few minutes for Buffy to wrap her mind around. “So, you’ll make the stuff and put it in your fridge, and it’ll just appear in mine?”

“Yep! Ingenious, huh? Great way to get stuff to people without getting caught. Those older witches really knew how to stay under the radar. And thankfully, the fundamentals haven’t changed, and it was easy enough to apply them to a refrigerator.” Willow had beamed. “So I’m leaving you with enough to get you through two weeks, no sweat. That’ll give me time to get set up in England and make more. Also to make an antidote, just for, you know, emergencies and the like.”

“Break glass in case of need of Buffy?” she’d asked dryly.

“Well, you never know. It’d be good to have both. And I’ll just put them in the fridge and bibbidi bobbidi boo, it’ll show up for you, safe and sound.”

That had sounded all right in theory, but Buffy couldn’t help but worry that the second Willow touched down in England, she’d get swept up in whatever new life she started to build for herself. Easier to drop things like making bootleg Polyjuice Potion when the need wasn’t right in front of her face, pestering her to do her homework. Nevertheless, Buffy didn’t have a better option now, and maybe if all went well, she wouldn’t need a supply of the stuff that lasted beyond

those two weeks. Or maybe Wolfram and Hart's grand scheme wouldn't be as subtle as she believed it would be, and they'd have extracted Angel well ahead of time. It was possible. Unlikely but possible.

The last bit had been Buffy's credentials. Or she should say, Randi Joan Pratt's credentials, for that was the name she'd selected for herself. Randy for the self-proclaimed vampire with a soul who had only wanted to fight at the Slayer's side, Joan for the girl Buffy had never gotten to be with or without her memories, and Pratt for the man Spike had been before stumbling down the wrong alley one night. Though she was certain he would argue that it had been the right alley, despite what came after.

That was something she had considered more in the days since his death, since closing the Hellmouth—Spike and his pragmatic, straightforward way of looking at the world. How he'd understood that slayers slayed and vampires killed, how he hadn't tried to hide the man he'd been in the past behind the man he had become. It had challenged the way she'd thought of vampires, of souls, of the dichotomy she'd thought existed between the two but maybe didn't, at least not to the degree she'd always assumed.

And like she had after she'd lost Mom, Buffy found herself thinking of all the time wasted. All the conversations she'd never gotten to have, assuming there would always be a tomorrow. The summer she'd spent in Los Angeles after killing Angel—three whole months of time she'd never get back with Joyce, and while it had felt necessary while living it, Buffy couldn't help the stab of regret that always accompanied memories of that period. It was the same with Spike. He'd been in her home, in her basement, for months, and only toward the end had she started taking advantage of that.

Learning things about him that she hadn't thought worth knowing before, like what his last name had been, that were now precious bits that she got to keep to herself. Broaching difficult subjects or even allowing herself to laugh at the few points of their shared history that were genuinely funny. There had been an evening she and Spike had spent on the back porch like old times, reminiscing over the adventures of Randy and Joan, superhero and supervampire, and he'd told her that Randy had had a *yen* for Joan, whatever that meant. Buffy had only thought it fair to admit that Joan had thought Randy had cheekbones for days and a sexy accent on top of that, and Spike had favored her with a soft, sad little smile and said something about wishing he'd gotten to be Randy just a while longer. Might have saved them all a world of pain.

Buffy had similar regrets, though she hadn't voiced them.

There wasn't anything she could do to reclaim the time she'd so carelessly thrown away before, not with Spike or her mother—there was just moving forward. In this case, moving forward meant reckoning with the thing that had cost Spike his life. Wearing his name as part of her camouflage felt good, like maybe she was carrying him with her in some way. Taking the bits and pieces of the life she'd managed to smuggle out of Sunnydale and using them to build the foundation of her new reality.

Her first official day as Randi Joan Pratt was spent mostly on the sidelines, pretending to do paralegal stuff—something she didn't feel as unprepared for as she would if she hadn't had years of experience researching obscure things in ancient manuscripts—while watching as Angel and team tried to reconcile the moral blahness that came with working within the parameters of the deal they'd made. And it was a damn good thing she'd browbeaten the others into letting her go

along with this, because holy crap, were these guys ever in the business of questionable decisions. Decisions like Gunn getting his brain a boost in the fastest law school in the world, Angel negotiating to keep a guy who had used his own son as Patient Zero out of jail, and all of them thinking they could keep ahead of evil intent by having their walking green fortune teller read everyone who sang him a jingle. Lorne was starting with the top brass, thank god, since they were the ones most likely to ding as morally compromised, which provided her enough time to figure out just how the hell she was going to get around singing. A problem for Future Buffy.

By the time the day started to come to a close, though, Buffy felt more than vindicated. Possibly even up to doing a few renditions of the “I Told You So” dance.

She had just about decided to head to her shiny new LA apartment when something went boom in Angel’s office.

No, not something. Someone.

Buffy was loitering at Harmony’s desk—and lord, do not get her started on the fact that Harmony worked there—trying to get a peek at Angel’s itinerary when it happened. What sounded like a mini-explosion, and suddenly the space on Angel’s side of his office glass had become a cloud of swirling black, and Buffy hadn’t let herself think before she’d run to the doorway. Stopped there, one hand braced against the frame, panting hard as the air shrieked and swirled and the swirling black began to assume a shape. A shape with legs and a torso, arms and shoulders. A shape wearing a familiar leather duster, a shape regrowing skin over burned muscle and sinew, sprouting white-blond hair over a scalp that materialized from nowhere. A shape that screamed horribly. Screamed as though he were burning up from the inside.

The way he had.

And then it was over, and he was there.

Spike was there. Standing in Angel's office, eyes wide, expression panicked.

And the wibbly wobbly pieces of the world that Buffy had managed to gather and stack came crashing down.

PAPER FACES ON PARADE

NINETEEN DAYS AGO, BUFFY HAD STOOD AT THE EDGE OF hell itself, inhaling dust and dirt with breaths that made her lungs protest, her eyes full of bright golden light that pierced its way through rock and stone to capture the man she loved. The perpetual thorn in her side, the ache in her heart, the bad penny she couldn't lose no matter how often she threw him out. Buffy hadn't realized until after how much she'd come to rely on that—the knowledge that she could throw Spike out of her house, out of her town, out of her heart, and he was just stubborn enough to claw his way back inside. There was no getting rid of him. There never had been.

Except that time had felt different. It had felt like something close to the end. No more overtures or curtain calls, no more last saves or surprise returns. She'd had that feeling all morning. It had been with her when she'd woken up, tucked close to his firm, bare chest, the breaths he didn't need to breathe ruffling the hairs at the back of her neck. She'd thought about that, how he breathed when he slept too, not

just when he was awake and looking at her, arguing with her, pleading with her, scolding her, holding her, kissing her, loving her, capturing her face between his hands and looking at her with such raw intensity she would have sworn she felt it down to her soul. Sworn she felt it in *his*. That she could see through skin to the bits of Spike that were cordoned off from everyone else in the world but her. She'd thought about his breath, about how alive he was no matter how hard she tried to kill him, and when she'd twisted to kiss him good morning, certainty had flared behind her breastbone before hardening into a physical ache.

Spike had smiled softly, running his hand up her arm until his fingers were funneled through her hair. Whispered that it was brilliant, this waking up with her business. Having her here when he opened his eyes, looking at him like he was something. Perfect way to start a man's last day on earth.

And that had been it—the chance to ask if it really was the last. To put words to the feeling she'd awoken with so he could get to dispelling and *they* could go about enjoying the first morning after she'd ever allowed herself to have with him. She could have done that, and the knowledge that she could have—that she'd had the chance—had ridden with her all the way to Los Angeles as her new reality cemented. As everything that had happened at the Hellmouth had calcified, no longer supported by nerve and adrenaline, but left to the more brutal unforgiving truth she had found herself living in. She'd thought of that morning, of Spike telling her it was his last day on earth, and that she hadn't argued with him. Was it because she'd been too chickenshit to ask? Too afraid she knew the answer? Too worried she might make the answer true?

Or had she been so certain of the immortality that was

Spike, in the way he never truly vanished from her life, to believe that this time might be different. Spike had always talked about going out swinging, after all. It wasn't the first time she'd heard him prepare for his own demise. He was her perennial fighter, the guy who had withstood so much that should have killed him and always scraped by. Beaten the odds. Yeah, he'd break bones here and earn himself some bruises there, but when she needed him, Spike turned up. That there could be a world in which that wasn't the case had been unfathomable.

Was that why she hadn't asked him about the possibility of a *them* after the fight, and he hadn't volunteered? That instead, she'd just thought, *get to the other side of this. Get to the other side of the apocalypse*. One more battle until they could start to figure out what exactly they had been building these months together.

If that was the case, then goddamn, she was stupid. All this time living in this world and she'd somehow skipped the lesson where it couldn't be predicted. No, instead of winning the day the way she always did when she didn't have a death wish, she'd been stabbed, and he'd been encased in golden light, and when she'd climbed back to her feet he'd yelled at her, demanded that she run. That he'd hold off the armies that might try to follow. That he had to end this. That it was his job. The job she'd given him, cementing his fate by putting that goddamned amulet in his hand. Looking into his eyes and telling him he was a champion.

In hindsight, that was when everything had snapped into place. When she'd understood that she had killed him by telling him exactly what she thought he was—what he could be—because champions didn't run. Champions didn't do a half job. Angel certainly wouldn't, and Spike had needed to

show her that she hadn't made a mistake in sending home the big guns. He'd had something to prove to her and himself, maybe the whole household of naysayers. He'd needed to make her proud.

But hindsight hadn't come for a few days. She'd needed space before she could see the missteps she'd made, the hidden signs pointing to the path not taken. She'd needed to crash, to shower, to catch up on what seemed like a lifetime's worth of missed sleep. Only after that had she realized exactly what she'd done in approaching a man who had, just months before, tried to convince her to kill him because he was too dangerous to let live, that he was the champion she'd chosen. That she was giving him something that Angel had meant to wear himself. He'd followed that through to its logical conclusion.

Angel wouldn't run until the job was done because that wasn't what heroes did. It wasn't what Buffy had done two years prior, and it wouldn't be what Spike did then. He'd see it through, make sure there was no room for error, and he'd tell her it was her world *up there* because that was the line in the script. The world he was giving her with the nobility of his sacrifice. Angel had tried to end the world, and, well, Spike was going to save it. Angel had left Sunnydale for her own good; Spike was going to leave existence altogether. All so she could live in the sunlight where everyone had decided she belonged.

Only that wasn't what had happened. She'd come to Los Angeles and stumbled headfirst into understanding exactly what she'd lost. And when she'd learned she wasn't the only one to blame, not the only reason Spike wasn't with her in the aftermath of the new world she'd created, she'd set her sights on the person who was. Who had swept into town with his

amulet and his familiarity, and she'd been so enraptured by the memories of a time that had miraculously been simpler than the one she was living in now that she hadn't realized the depth of the damage he'd managed to do in just ten minutes.

That much was on her. Some on Spike, too, for assuming he knew better than she did. And the rest fell on Angel for being Dr. Frankenstein. For creating the version of her that had clawed its way out of the corpse of their relationship. For engineering the version of Spike that had been so conditioned to expect exactly what he'd thought she'd given him.

Angel wasn't infallible. He wasn't *right*. He hadn't been four years ago when he'd told her she needed normal and he wasn't right now, thinking he could outfox this source of great evil that Buffy had somehow managed to go most of her time as the Slayer without hearing about. That was why she had appealed to her friends, to Giles, insisting that she needed to stick close to him. She didn't know the real Angel—she knew the one she'd invented at age sixteen and, after doubting him and herself for months, had spent zero seconds ever doubting again once she'd allowed herself to be swept into the tragic romance that was a slayer and the vampire who loved her.

Right story, it seemed, but wrong vampire. And the tragedy had been that she hadn't known that until it was too late.

And now, *god now*, Buffy was standing in the doorway of Angel's office, her face not hers, her clothes not hers, her hair and her name not hers, looking at the gasping, panting form of the vampire who *was* hers, who was supposed to be dead.

Spike was here. *Spike was alive.*

Wasn't he?

Everything unfolded quickly. The scream, the confusion, Angel's crew gathered around Spike and rapid-firing questions

to everyone and no one. And Spike saw Angel in the midst of that, and either reacting out of instinct or habit, unearthed a roar and sprinted across the space to do exactly what Buffy had wanted to do since arriving in town. Only he tumbled through Angel instead, stumbled until he was standing in the middle of the ornate desk in the back of the executive suite. Startled out of his rage and looking at the furniture that was solid where he wasn't before raising his eyes to the stunned room around him and saying the only thing that could be said.

“Bugger.”

And Buffy, who had lived and died a thousand times in the last fifteen seconds, had to cover her mouth before she laughed. Because if she started, there was almost zero chance she would stop. Then her cover would be blown and she'd have to pack her bags.

But no. *No*. There was no way she was going anywhere now.

“What...” Spike said in a voice that shook. “What's happened to me?”

“Well, I'm not a doctor,” Harmony said—Harmony, had she been in here the entire time?—“but I think you're a ghost.”

The word seemed to knock something loose in Spike's head. “I'm no—I'm no bloody ghost,” he snapped, pointing at her.

“Hey, you're the one sticking out of a desk, pal,” Harmony replied with a sniff. “And you can't talk to me like that. We're not going out anymore.”

“Where'd he come from?” someone else asked, thankfully distracting Buffy from thoughts of forcibly removing Harmony's head from her neck.

"From this." That was Wesley. He had something in his hand.

"What is it?" Fred asked.

Angel was staring at the thing, his expression stoic. "Something I gave to Buffy before—"

"Buffy!" Spike said on an expulsion of air, and for a wild second, she thought he'd seen her. Thought he knew. But no, his gaze was on Angel. "Is she...?"

"She's okay," Angel replied, and Buffy had to force herself not to react to that. Not to sneer or roll her eyes or outright laugh at him, because how in the fuck would he know?

"Where?" Spike asked, undeterred. "Where is she?"

"Europe, last I heard from her."

If by Europe, he meant the cell phone Willow had given her after working some of her computer wizardry to mask the signal, then yes. The last time Angel had heard from Buffy, she'd been in Europe. Definitely not an apartment she'd rented using the Council's money right here in Los Angeles.

"Wanna see her," Spike said, because of course he did. Everything in Buffy's resolve was in danger of crumbling at the words alone. "Wanna talk to her."

"That's gonna be tough," Angel replied.

Spike favored him with a challenging look, a scoff. "You can't keep her from me."

"She's not mine to keep. Or yours."

"Says you," he shot back, wounded now. "You got no idea what we had."

That much was certainly true.

"You never had her," Angel retorted.

That much was certainly not. And Buffy would have said as much, would have opened her mouth and revealed that the girl behind the curtain—or the glasses, as the case might be—

was in fact the Slayer in question, even as Spike stepped up to Angel to argue the point, had Harmony not interjected.

“Oh. My. God,” Spike’s bimbo ex said dramatically. “You and the Slayer actually... I mean, I know you had that twisted obsession with her, but...*yech*. That’s just...*yech*.” And with that, she turned and strolled out the door, pausing only once beside Buffy to let loose another way-over-the-top retching sound. If she hadn’t kept walking, Buffy might have been tempted to stake her on principle.

“I must be in hell,” Spike muttered.

“Uh, no, LA,” Lorne replied. “But a lot of people make that mistake.”

“So Buffy and Spike are...?” Fred asked, talking now to Gunn and Wesley alike, as though either of them could possibly know. Buffy hadn’t exactly been forthright in explaining the details of their relationship when she’d given Angel the debrief.

“He was, um, an ally of hers for some time,” Wesley replied. “At least that’s what Angel told me. That’s *all* Angel told me.”

Well, that figured.

“So he’s a good guy vampire like Angel?” Gunn asked.

“He’s nothing like me,” Angel snapped.

“Got that right,” Spike retorted. “What have you done to me? What is this place? Who are you people?” At last, he turned and looked at Buffy directly, and for a flash, it was just him and her. The office, the others, Angel, all of it seemed to fade. And it was stupid—it was so beyond stupid, but Buffy was beyond stupid at this point so a little more hardly seemed to matter—but she hoped he’d see. Hoped he’d meet her eyes behind these ridiculous rims and know, despite everything, exactly who he was looking at.

But he didn't. Nor did he keep his eyes on her, rather turned back to the others and ground out, "What the bloody hell is happening?"

"Is there something you need?" Angel asked next.

It took a beat before Buffy realized she finally *had* been addressed. And that everyone was looking at her now, not just Spike. All with a sort of blankness that she found jarring even with the benefit of the disguise she wore.

"I...umm," she said in her not-Buffy voice. "I just...wanted to see if *you* needed anything."

Spike was frowning, his expression a mask of confusion, but Angel rolled his eyes—rolled his whole head—before fixing her with another dark glare. And, well, at least she knew Willow's spell was working, because not once had her ex ever looked at her like that. Not even during those months he'd been running around Sunnydale all sans soul. He'd always at least found her interesting, worthy of attention. Never a nuisance to be dealt with and dismissed.

It was like looking at a version of Angel that wasn't Angel, and god, she didn't know what that meant. If she was seeing Angel the way others did or if whatever she'd worried might happen at Wolfram and Hart had already started. If it was something about this place that leeched warmth or humanity or *anything* that might make the puppets inside easier to manipulate.

"What's your name?" he asked, startling her, and not only because his tone said plainly he didn't give a damn. That he was asking just to ask.

And maybe that was why she fumbled—why, despite all the hours of preparation and memorization and all the other *ations* she'd put herself through just so she'd answer questions exactly like this with full confidence, she heard herself saying,

“Bu,” before her brain kicked in and forced her to course correct to, “Randi,” all within the span of half a blink so the sound that came out was “Brandi.”

So, not the worst fumble, but god, she did not want to be Brandi.

“Brandi?” Gunn asked. Maybe it was her imagination, but she would have sworn he found the name as ridiculous as she did. “What department are you?”

“Special Projects,” she answered. “And it’s *Randi*. Not Brandi.”

“Special Projects.” Wesley stepped forward, studying her with a ruthless intensity that should have been out of place on him, but one he wore like a second skin. The stuck-up watcher who had managed to prove himself clueless, useless, and utterly sycophantic to the Council had transformed into someone unrecognizable, no potion or subterfuge needed. “Do you work with Lilah?”

Buffy knew better than to answer with, “Lilah who?” Instead, she just nodded.

“I haven’t seen her all day,” he continued. “Or at all, actually, since she made us the offer. Is there a reason for that?”

She worked her throat, her skin starting to go hot. Hot in a way she imagined true Wolfram and Hart paralegals did not go under pressure, and definitely in a way Angel would notice. “If there is, I don’t know it.” Or who the hell Lilah was or why Wesley cared. “I was just told to see how your team—”

“Lilah was the one who gave me the amulet,” Angel said suddenly, glancing at Wesley. “It would be good to talk to her if we could. She might know what’s going on. Why”—he firmed his jaw, rolled his eyes in Spike’s direction—“*he’s* here.”

“I’m sure she can take some time out of her busy *being dead* schedule to come and tell us what she knows,” Gunn added.

“Not to say we don’t trust you, *Randi*, but, well, you’re Wolfram and Hart. So yeah, actually, it’s a lot like we don’t trust you.”

“I’m sorry, aren’t you the guy they just Matrixed into a lawyer?” she asked before she could stop herself, before she could wonder if that was too much *Buffy* in Randi. The words were out and there was no taking them back. Just living with the consequences.

Gunn’s expression shuttered. “And it’s already come in handy.”

“But the firm literally poured itself into your head.”

“And?”

“And you just called *me* Wolfram and Hart. Are you the pot or the kettle in this scenario?”

Spike whipped his head up at that and stared at her directly, and her heart somersaulted so hard she was surprised it didn’t crack a rib. A look had flared across his face, his eyes, like he’d caught a whiff or a glance of something he recognized and was trying to hunt down the source. Or worse, that he knew the source but couldn’t see it.

Except maybe he could.

Oh god, had she just given herself away? On the *first day*?

But no. When Angel spoke again, it was clear he had dismissed her—both from his office and as a person—turning his attention to the others as though she didn’t exist. “We’re wasting time here—time we could be spending figuring out exactly what Spike is and how to get rid of him.”

Buffy held her breath, keeping her eyes on Spike, still not convinced he hadn’t made her. Unsure if he would put the rest of the pieces together if he had, realize that she was undercover for a reason before announcing to the room at large that Buffy was standing just feet from them and how the hell

had they managed to not notice? It was the sort of thing he'd do. Even when they'd been enemies, she hadn't been any good at hiding from him.

"Just call the bloody Slayer, will you?" he growled at Angel. "She'll—"

"What? Drop everything to come pick up her pet ghost?"

"She'll want to know, yeah?" Spike puffed out his chest with what she recognized as empty bravado, more hope than certainty in his voice. Enough so to kill the thought that had bloomed just a second ago. "I bloody well know she cared."

"Maybe, but she has better things to do than to chase you across the globe. What use do you think you'll be to her like this?"

Spike's expression darkened. "What's the matter, Angel? Worried she might be cross that your trinket was defective?"

"It wasn't defective. It closed the Hellmouth."

"Think you mean *I* closed—"

"Both of you, just, shut up," Wesley said with way more authority than Buffy had ever seen him wield. "We need to understand what we are dealing with—what Spike is and why the amulet might have acted the way it did upon use. Fred, do you have anything in your laboratory that would be of use in answering some of these questions?"

"Yes, absolutely," Fred agreed readily. "This exact situation is what those labs were built to do."

"This exact situation?" Gunn echoed. "Ghosts pop out here on the regular?"

"I'm not a bloody ghost."

"Well, okay, not this *exact* situation, but we'll get further with situations involving the essence of recently deceased vampires here at Wolfram and Hart than they would at Lawrence Livermore. Maybe even CERN."

“Gesundheit.”

Buffy nearly stumbled over her feet to get out of the way as the group marched toward her, Fred and Gunn at the head, Wesley and Lorne following, and Angel glowering at Spike until he deigned to move, though not without throwing one last look in Buffy’s direction. A look she couldn’t discern, that made her already overwhelmed brain threaten to just stop sending electrical impulses until it had the chance to recharge, which would be never. The endless loop of *Spike’s here!* had assumed all unclaimed mental real estate and wasn’t slowing down anytime soon. She still wasn’t entirely convinced any of this was actually happening, as surreal as it felt. Her most desperate wish granted in the most awful way, and she was pretty sure she hadn’t tampered with a monkey’s paw recently.

Just as Angel reached the threshold of his office, he snapped his attention back to her, his gaze icy once more. And again, she had that feeling that she was looking at someone she hadn’t seen before, someone who was Angel but not Angel.

“I don’t know who’s in charge of Special Projects now,” he said, not bothering to disguise the steel in his voice, “but I’m stripping that department’s access to my team effectively immediately. We’re not playing by the old rules here. I don’t care what they told you or what they threatened you with—we’re running this place the way *I* want to run it. No exceptions. Do you understand?”

She very much did not, but she *did* understand that this was not a time to argue. “Of course.”

“Good. Then I trust this is the last I’ll be seeing of you.”

“Bloody hell, Angel, leave the poor girl alone,” Spike barked, wisping into view, and maybe it was her imagination, but he seemed to be putting some effort into not looking at

her. "Ever consider that they sent her down here knowin' she's exactly the type you fancy when you're looking to put the hurt to someone?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yeah, you do. She's bloody tailor-made for you. Cute. Out of her element. Innocent. If she came with a dog, you'd be nailing it to the wall just to prove your point." Spike paused and did look at her now—and she was close enough to see, definitively, that it wasn't with recognition. But it wasn't with nothing, either. "Don't let these wankers turn you into a sacrificial lamb, pet. Get out while you can, or this one'll make sure you live to regret every chance you turned down."

Buffy swallowed and nodded, dropping her gaze to the floor before it hit her again, what exactly she was facing. The impossible reality of it, what it meant or could mean. She couldn't think about that now, though, had to compartmentalize, shift focus, get to the part of the day where she went home and put distance between herself and everything that had happened within these walls. There, the fact that Spike was back, go-throughable or not, could crash over her in full. There, she could be Buffy. Here she had to be Randi Joan Pratt, and Randi Joan Pratt had never met Spike. Had never met Angel, either. Randi Joan Pratt was supposed to be scenery and nothing more, and already that part had gone up in smoke, to the point where she'd need to call Willow and see about a department change, for if Angel really did have ways of keeping her off this floor, then there was no point in continuing at all.

Still, she hadn't appreciated how difficult it would be, standing still while others pursued answers she needed. Granted, in a thousand years, she wouldn't have been able to guess that her first day undercover would come with a Spike-

shaped surprise, that she would be left behind as he walked away from her, hurling insults at Angel's back, and going somewhere she could not follow. Going to get answers, maybe, on the miracle that was his continued existence. Answers Randi Joan Pratt had no right to but would chase anyway, once the coast was clear.

Provided she didn't wake up before then.



BUFFY HAD BEEN PREPARED to lie her ass off, but Willow hadn't asked any. She'd barely sounded surprised at hearing her voice on the other end of the line, either, instead asking what was needed and confirmed that it would be no problem to get Randi transferred to another department. Just give her some time and she'd call when the switcheroo was made. Easy peasy, lemon-squeezy.

No, the hard part had been the waiting. The wondering. The sitting on her hands rather than storming after Spike and Angel and Angel's entourage and demanding she be brought up to speed. That someone tell her what the hell had happened in Sunnydale and how the amulet had gotten there. Insisting that someone tell her and not moving, not budging an inch until she had some answers. Then seizing Spike—however you seized a ghost—and leaving Angel to whatever the hell he thought he was doing here, nothing being worth the agony of waiting on the sidelines.

The first time she'd gone to re-up her dose of the special look-like-someone-else potion had been the hardest—the question there, niggling, demanding if she was still completely committed to this plan. If she was prepared to throw in the towel, admit that everyone had had a point in claiming the

only reason she wanted to tail Angel was that she resented what he hadn't said, even more what he hadn't known, when he'd come to Sunnydale with his instant-apocalypse-winner. No need to hold onto that resentment when the largest piece of what she'd lost was suddenly back again, even if not entirely.

She'd considered it. She had. All she had to do was let the potion wear off, let her hair fade from deep brown to dirty blonde, let the artificial inches she'd gained recede, her vision to go funny as her eyes adjusted back to not needing glasses. If she just stood there and waited, Randi Joan Pratt would disappear and Buffy Summers would be in the thick of Wolfram and Hart, floors away from Spike, and he'd look at her and realize that she'd meant everything she'd said in that cavern. Then they could fix him, somehow, and yeah, Angel would still be compromised, possibly on the road to full-out corruption, but she and Spike could figure out a different plan together. Or just throw Angel into a burlap sack and beat him with clubs until they managed to knock the senses that he'd lost back into place.

But Angel was just one piece of the overall puzzle. She knew that, or she thought she did. And regardless of what had brought her here initially—be it grief or resentment or conviction or a combination thereof—she'd already seen enough to know she was on the right track. That there was knowledge to gain by watching Angel when he didn't know he was being watched, or by whom. That eventually, the reason he'd been offered the keys to the castle would present itself, and she needed to be here when it did so she and the others could prepare.

So Buffy had thrown back a mouthful of the potion and let Randi live another day. After all, she'd told the others she'd

been prepared for anything. No going back on that now, no matter how much *anything* had never once included Spike being in the world again somehow and out of her sight, his existence a question, and her unable to demand a right to him. The fact that the game had changed after the first round didn't mean a damn. Such was life. Or hers, at least, and she'd learned to adapt fast over the years.

Only none of that brave talk managed to prepare her for seeing Spike next, this time alone—thank god—and after some excitement involving a necromancer. Whatever had happened had taken its toll, for Spike didn't look the way he had in Angel's office, the kaleidoscope of emotions ranging from confusion to anger blanked out.

No, he looked defeated. Something Buffy had never once known him to be.

Except that's not exactly true, is it?

She swallowed back the bitter taste that filled her mouth at those particular memories and hurried her steps to catch him before he could do something like walk through a door or a wall to a part of the office that was currently off limits to her.

"Hey!" she called out.

Spike jerked his head up, his eyes finding hers immediately. He paused mid-stride, turned to her with a perfunctory sort of smile. "You again," he said. "The bird from Angel's office, yeah?"

Buffy stopped in front of him and nodded like an idiot, realizing belatedly she had no idea what she meant to say to him. The most pressing question—"Hi, have you called your girlfriend yet?"—and its likely follow-up—"When are you going to call your girlfriend?" would raise too many questions, along with that notorious eyebrow of his. And there was probably a law

or something against calling herself his girlfriend when they hadn't had the talk that came before the talk where labels were issued. He hadn't even said he wanted that talk in the first place when she'd hinted at it, though she'd hoped that had been more smokescreen. The sort she'd deal with once the crises in her life had dwindled to the point that relationship drama could comfortably take the top priority slot.

But those were considerations for a woman named Buffy Summers—a woman who, as far as anyone knew, was not standing in front of this vampire, rather a whole ocean away. So she had to come up with another reason to have stopped him, and the quicker, the better.

"I just... With the watching of what happened. I was curious." Buffy smiled a smile that felt more like a wince, suddenly aware of beads of sweat dancing along her forehead. In all the time she'd known him, she could think of maybe three instances where she'd been genuinely nervous, and two of those really ought to count as one as they had occurred on the same night. Suffice it to say, she felt more than just a little off her game.

"Curious?" he echoed.

"Like...did anything come up? In the lab? Do they know what happened to you yet?"

Spike studied her for a moment, then broke off with a dry huff. "What happened is I tried to save the sodding world, and it didn't take."

"It didn't? The world's still in danger?"

He furrowed his brow. "Well, yeah, probably, but not from the First. At least I bloody well hope not or it truly was for nothing." A beat, and he sighed. "What'd you say your name was?"

"Randi," Buffy replied, her cheeks going hot. It was

beyond asinine, but some part of her thought it was possible that the name might make him do a double-take, as though there weren't plenty of *Randys* in the world. "I work—err, *worked*—in the Special Projects Division. And I know about you."

That did it. The eyebrow went up.

"Okay, so that sounded a lot more...*more* than I expected it to. But you know, part of the job and everything. Knowing about Angel's connections."

At that, the skepticism in Spike's eyes dimmed a bit, and he nodded. "Imagine so. The ponce has turned bugging up into a bloody art form." A beat. "Not a spook is the most they can tell me. Fred, at least, the only one of the lot who seems to have anything going on between the ears. And lucky me, I can't get more than a few miles away before being yanked back to square bloody one."

"Yanked back?"

"Forcibly. Like a bloody boomerang." He snickered the sort of snicker where nothing was funny but laughing was the only reaction that wouldn't draw attention. "Tried to scarper. Just brought me back here. Thought it might be a glitch or what all so I tried again, and lo and behold, seems as long as I'm tied to that sodding amulet, I'm a permanent resident of this godawful place."

"You tried to leave?"

Spike offered a distracted sort of nod. "Some reward, yeah? Turns out I can't save the world right. Can't even die properly. Life's been one sodding joke after another, and now my death is, too."

"You're not a joke, Spike. This is something that happened to you—not something you did or caused or deserved."

“Nice sentiment, ducks, but we just met. You have no idea what kind of man I really am.”

“The kind of man who fights back against the monster inside him?”

At that, Spike raised his head, looked at her directly with a frown, and she realized too late she’d let her mouth run away with her like a big idiot. “What are you on about?” he asked, studying her with heightened interest that had her heart hammering in a way that she really hoped he, as a non-corporeal vampire, couldn’t hear or sense. “It get around already?”

Buffy opened her mouth, willing wisdom to come spilling out—it only seemed fair given how fluidly unhelpful, identity-blowing stuff seemed to—only the wisdom fairy was not cooperating. The most she could manage was a very inelegant, “What?”

“Seems Angel’s been keeping mum on a few things. Didn’t think it was important to tell his mates that he’s not the one and only vampire with a soul these days.”

“He... He hadn’t told them?” A red-hot rush of anger chased away the awkward, making her jaw go tight and her hands curl into fists. “God, that is so...so just *him*. He became such a child after he found out, too. I have never seen him that childish.”

“You and Angel really close then?” Spike asked, back to looking confused, and she knew she was screwing up again—felt the need to rein herself back—but her frustration was greater at that moment than her concern for self-preservation. Frustration with Angel and herself, because she had been there at the Hyperion after Sunnydale, stood there among his people, told them what had happened and why, and how in the world had Spike’s soul *not* been discussed? Had Wesley and the others really thought that the vampire

who had offered up his life to save the world had been the average variety? Had there been no questions at all about the sort of person Spike had been to have made that sacrifice?

"We're not close, no," she heard herself saying, her mind still racing. "But, umm, being in Special Projects, I've just... watched him do a lot. Enough that I thought I knew him."

Spike snorted and shook his head. "Greatest bloody trick the devil ever pulled, I suppose."

She didn't know what he meant by that and decided not to ask, still reeling from the insult that such a huge piece of what had happened in Sunnydale had been left out of the narrative. Was *she* the only person who had ever cared about that? Assassination attempt aside, Buffy would never have thought Giles would gloss over something as monumental as a vampire willingly seeking out a soul. That he wouldn't be academically curious about figuring out how this thing that should be very much impossible was not only possible but had happened, in bold defiance of everything he and Wesley and anyone who had ever been associated with the Watchers Council had known to be true about vampires.

"Do you think you might call Buffy?" she blurted, and again felt her face go red-hot, first at her appalling lack of chill and then again at the surprise with which Spike regarded her. "I just... Wesley said that you were an"—how had he put it?—"ally of hers. If you're trying to leave and can't, she might be able to help."

"Must've escaped your notice, pet, but it's not exactly like I can pick up the bloody phone." He stuck his hands into his duster pockets and shifted a bit. "Also wouldn't have the first idea of where to call. Most the Big Forehead would tell me is that she's in Europe."

“There have to be other ways though, right? Like, couldn’t you get Harmony to—”

Spike snorted and shook his head. “Harm would just as soon toss me out on my arse. Thinks it’s sick, what I had with Buffy. Can’t exactly blame her as it’s an honest enough conclusion to draw. God knows it took me long enough to accept it.”

Well, that wasn’t something a girl ever wanted to hear. It wasn’t new, *per se*, but it also wasn’t a sentiment Spike had shared with her since before the soul. “Then Fred or Wesley. It’s not like Angel is the sole keeper of the knowledge around here, is it?”

“Wouldn’t put it past him.”

“Fine. *I* could do it. Wolfram and Hart have all kinds of information tucked away. Shouldn’t be hard to find one lousy phone number.

Spike’s mouth tugged into a tragic sort of smile, and this part *was* familiar, shooting her back to the awkward dance they had done around each other for what had felt like weeks back in Sunnydale. Not knowing how to act, after everything they had shared and everything else they weren’t saying. “It’s a nice thought, pet, but nah.”

“Nah?”

“That’s right. I don’t want the Slayer worrying with it.”

“With what?”

“Me, for starters. Something else is goin’ on here. I keep blinking out.”

“Whatting out?”

“Blinking out. Means it’s a mistake, right? All this. I shouldn’t be here, and whatever let me out’s trying to drag me back. Happened a few times already—I’ll be talking to someone and then presto, scene changes and I’m somewhere else.” Spike shook his head and, if possible, seemed to close in

on himself even more. "The place I go when it happens...not exactly the sodding Elysian Fields I was promised, you know?"

God, the more he said, the stupider she felt. "The what?"

"Where the hero-types go when they snuff it. Thought I might qualify, but turns out I had everyone fooled, including myself." A pause. "Think it's hell, where it's trying to take me. And if it is, means it's all for nothing. Not gonna drag the Slayer into a useless rescue mission. She deserves to live without me mucking up her happy ever bloody after."

Buffy had no idea what to say to that. She felt vaguely as though someone had socked her in the gut, punched the air right out of her lungs—out of her brain, even—leaving her suspended without thought or direction. "I don't think she'd think of it as mucking up anything," she managed at last. "From what I know about her."

Somehow, amazingly, he smiled at that. "She wouldn't. Doesn't mean she'd be right. And I wouldn't want her here for that—for obligation or what all. Outta gratitude for what happened back there. Means more to me than that."

"So you're just going to let this happen to you?"

"No. Fred's on the case. Dunno her all that well, but it seems if there's a solution, she's the one who'll find it. I just got here, and already I can tell the girl's the bloody brains of this operation."

Something twinged in Buffy's chest. Something dull and uncomfortable.

He trusted someone else, someone he'd just met, to help him more than he trusted her. After all they'd been through. It had only been hours since he'd spilled out of the amulet, demanding to know where Buffy was, if she was all right, claiming he needed to see her, to talk to her. And now he

couldn't be bothered. Was distancing himself for her own good.

What the hell was going on here? Was it the same thing happening with Angel? Did the atmosphere at Wolfram and Hart just work like that—play upon weaknesses and insecurities, shape the way people viewed the world and themselves? And if it did, would it happen to her? Had it already?

How the hell was she supposed to fight something that won by becoming its own enemy?

"Appreciate the talk, love," Spike said a moment later, and when she glanced up. "Dunno what Angel was thinking, tossing you out. Think you might be the only genuine person in the whole of this place."

"Spike—"

"But you'd do better to heed what I said, yeah? Get as far away as you can before the monster swallows you whole."

But the monster was here already, and she was straddling its mouth. The thing standing between it and consuming more than just her, but everyone else as well. She wanted to tell him that, warn him not to trust whatever he was feeling—that it was the essence of this place working its will. That she thought she understood Wolfram and Hart now, what exactly they were facing.

And she would have, had Spike not done what he'd warned her about, and blinked out.

LOOK AROUND, THERE'S
ANOTHER MASK BEHIND YOU

HE'D NEVER THOUGHT OF IT BEFORE, THE ODDITY THAT WAS living as a vampire. Exhaustion was such a human sentiment, the body responding to being put through its paces, its functions exorcised and tired for the day. Lungs pumping, heart beating, brain doing whatever it was brains did, and all the other shit that separated the living from the dead. Spike had fancied sleep enough as a human, even if his nights had been riddled with all the bugging concerns that came with being a part of a society that largely had rejected him, but as a vampire, he'd bloody well luxuriated in it. Thrumming with energy as he was during his waking hours, he still had enjoyed the ability to crash and detach. Fall into dreams of decadent wonder (or life-altering revelations) or hell, even bloody blackness, the abyss of nothing at all, and scrape his way back so he could continue bulldozing his way across the world.

Spike had felt the urge, the pang, the drive to sleep as a vampire, and for the first time, he was wondering why. If there were truly phases of being dead and what he'd been before,

what he'd been for nearly the whole of his existence, had been simply a cousin of the humanity he had rejected. For he'd been a spook now for a few days, and not once had his noncorporeal body felt the need to slow down. Shadows would grow long, people would filter out of the office, the lights would switch off, and Spike would be left to largely empty halls for empty hours, nothing but his own thoughts for company, and Christ, if that wasn't ever a sorry thing, for his thoughts were not soft or kind, quiet or civil. His thoughts, like the hell he kept being dragged into, screamed.

He wondered if it had been this loud for her. She'd told him once—told him that this world was bright and harsh and violent, and he'd nodded like a dolt, thinking he understood, but he hadn't really. Just bloody figured that now that he did understand, she was too far away from him to tell.

Not that their situations shared more than superficial similarities. Buffy had been finished, done her duty and all that, dived to glorious death and rested in Heaven for a hundred and forty-seven days until some bint with a god complex had decided to snip her wings and send her plummeting back to earth. Spike, on the other hand, had only been gone a handful of days. Not even three weeks, just nineteen turns of this miserable floating rock. And when he'd been spat back out, his sacrifice deemed unworthy, he'd had nothing to do but stand about uselessly in a lab full of mostly strangers who prattled on about meaningless bunk, knowing he should be doing more, thinking more, thinking anything, but things inside his head were quiet in contrast to the outer loud.

Nineteen days he'd been gone from the world, and he hadn't any sense of it. There hadn't been pain, sure; there hadn't been anything. Just a gap in his memory, an awful disorientation. Buffy there and Buffy gone. The sensation of

burning, of crumbling, of whispering away on the wind as whatever had been in that amulet consumed him from the inside. He'd died on fire and he'd been spat back out on fire, too. And if that weren't enough, he was straddling the gulf between worlds, trying his bloody hardest to hook his hands around something that could anchor him to this awful reality because the alternative was worse. The alternative was the hell Spike had never truly believed in until now.

Maybe it was good he couldn't sleep. If he could, he was certain the dreams that weren't about her would be about the hell that was coming, and he wasn't sure he could stomach that—never knowing if he was trapped in a nightmare or trapped in something far worse.

Fred was working on it, though, bless her. Far as he could tell, she was one of the only people around who was worth a damn, even if she had shown appallingly bad judgment in accepting the gig in the first place. Truly, were it not for her, he might have just let hellfire drag him off to his fate and call it good.

Well, not only for her. Not even mostly, come to think of it, and he didn't want to think of it, even if he knew exactly where his feet were carrying him when he started roaming the halls again come sunrise. Over the last few days, Spike had found himself spending the bulk of his time haunting that cute paralegal who had taken such an interest in him the day he'd come tumbling out of the amulet. At first it had been because no one else seemed to care all that much that he was around—Angel was always snarling at him to bugger off and when he didn't, he'd start dropping asides that Spike knew better than to listen to yet couldn't help but hear anyway. The most he could say was it was nothing he didn't already know.

Things like Buffy was better off without any vampire exes

in her life. That she deserved this chance she'd been given to truly move on. Learn who she was apart from the Slayer, relish the freedom that came with not being the only Chosen One anymore, find that bit of normal she'd been chasing for the last few years. Hell, maybe take a break altogether. See the world she was usually too busy busting her arse saving to truly enjoy. And what was it Spike thought he could offer her, anyway? He was still a vampire, at the end of the day, ageless where she was mortal, unable to give her sprogs if she decided she wanted them, unable to follow her whenever she dipped into the sunlight. All the rot that he'd once well and fully believed to be rot spewed back at him now in a way that seemed too convincing to just ignore. Like if he were to get his body back and were to follow Buffy, it'd be undoing all the good he'd done those last months with her. Undoing their last *moments*, even, when he'd told her to run, it was her world, and he was giving it to her, no strings attached. Letting her go to live her life as she wanted, untethered from the things that had once hurt her the most.

He'd nearly destroyed everything with Buffy once—*bad*, in fact, destroyed everything—and returned to town with nothing but a bruised and tattered soul and the vague hope that it might guide him well enough to be of some use to her. Not fix anything, because god, you couldn't fix what he'd broken, but maybe he could help. Maybe he could be what she needed, even if all she needed was extra muscle.

And somehow, they'd gotten to the place they'd been at the end. Buffy holding his hand, her eyes full of pride and respect, and even if it hadn't been love, it *had* been so much more than he'd ever thought he'd get. The perfect ending he hadn't deserved, with the imprint of her skin on his, her scent in his nostrils, and the knowledge that she'd cared enough to

feed him the most beautiful lie a man could hope to hear before bowing out.

As long as he steered clear of Buffy, that moment, that memory, would always be perfect. Untarnished. If he were selfish enough to go after her, presume anything beyond what she'd given him... Well, that perfect moment could go up in smoke much like he had. Only it wouldn't come back.

So, right. Spike wagered he was decided as far as that was concerned, though he also knew himself well enough to understand it was easy to have convictions when you didn't have options. Give him skin and form, give him the ability to go to Buffy rather than haunt an ancient, evil law firm, and he might act against his better senses and go about mucking up that perfect goodbye.

Maybe that was why he fancied hanging around Randi as much as he did, though, Christ, he hadn't the faintest idea how a girl so sweet had stumbled her way into Wolfram and Hart without being consumed whole. She was the bloody antidote to everything miserable in his life, and the only one who seemed constantly concerned with his disappearing act. Even Fred, diligent worker as she was, kept getting pulled away to other matters that Spike couldn't help but think were low sodding priority compared to his tug-of-war with hell itself.

Randi, though, always had time for him. Made him feel a mite self-conscious, to be honest, the way he caught her looking at him sometimes, but it was hard to be all that worried about it when no one else seemed all that concerned with his continued existence. Add to the fact he found he liked her. She was witty and self-effacing in a way that was as disarming as it was charming. She also wasn't afraid to push back when someone came around to bully her into submis-

sion, and she could turn a phrase or smart-off in ways so familiar, he'd find himself growing a specific sort of homesick. It made her easy to talk to—hell, it made her easy to talk *too much* to. Half of the time he was with her, he found himself confessing things so personal he'd walk away baffled. Wondering, again, just what it was about her that encouraged him to share as much as he did without reservation.

In addition to all that, she was also easy on the eyes. Had a bookish look about her with her glasses that the bits of him that were all William couldn't help but find appealing. Then there was how she looked in a pencil skirt, and that spoke to the parts of him that were all Spike.

"Cute little rebel, aren't you?" he'd drawled when he'd caught her skulking around the day after his adventure with the necromancer. "Didn't Angel give you the old heave-ho?"

"He closed off this floor to anyone from Special Projects," she'd confirmed, sounding so mightily proud of herself he couldn't help but grin at her cheek. "Funnily enough, it was right at the time I decided that I'd gone as far as I could in that department. So I switched over to something with more...what's the phrase? Growth potential."

"That a fact?"

"Yep. Just call me Growth Girl." She'd beamed, looking awfully smug and all the more adorable for it. "Any news on your ghosty situation?"

"Claim they're workin' on it, but I suppose we'll see."

Randi had nodded, then gotten a funny look on her face—her lips pressed together, her eyes suddenly darting away all furtive-like, and then she swelled up like something was fighting its way to the surface. It was a look he grew to know well over the next few days, as it always preceded what had fast become her favorite question.

“You haven’t given any more thought to reaching out to Buffy Summers, have you?”

Spike hadn’t known how to respond that day. Fuck, he still didn’t know how to respond, even now that he had a couple of weeks behind him. Every time she asked, the conclusions he’d thought he’d reached would unravel and he’d find himself at the start again. He wasn’t sure how long he’d stood there that first time, going through it all again without saying a word, but Randi hadn’t pushed, hadn’t urged, had just looked at him with her pretty brown eyes and waited for the answer, and for reasons he couldn’t even pretend to understand, seemed to wilt a little when she had it.

Those were the moments he wondered if it was all in his head, and she wasn’t nursing a tender spot for the poor vampire spook after all. When it seemed like she couldn’t wait to be well shot of him, mentioning the Slayer and her willingness to help whenever she got the chance. As though she knew Buffy personally and was advocating on her behalf, and that would have been grand if his certainty of the truth didn’t hurt so damn much.

It was a full month before he reached his boiling point on the matter. A month of walking the halls of this place, of listening in on conversations, of slipping through the cracks into the hellscape that waited for him and clawing his way back to some semblance of non-existence that wasn’t utterly horrifying. A month of waiting for Fred to decide on the miracle cure to restore him to his body, of watching Angel take everything and everyone around him for granted—he hadn’t even noticed that Randi was back on his floor after the big to-do he’d made of it—and doing what he could in the time between to further the conviction that Buffy was better off far removed from all things them. A month of seeing

without touching, of hands disappearing through whatever he reached for, of flexing his fingers and not feeling his joints or his muscles or any of the crucial pieces that made up a man. All of it had been wearing on him, pressing on him, until he thought he might suffocate or just bloody explode with *nothing*, for *nothing* was all he was, so when Randi inevitably brought up reaching out to Buffy during an otherwise pleasantly distracting conversation, Spike lost his head.

"Will you just lay off the bloody Slayer?" he snapped, coming around to glare at her face-to-face. They were in a hallway between Randi's little, tiny broom closet of an office and the copy room, a trip he often made with her several times throughout the workday. And though something had told him he ought to keep to himself this time, he'd ignored his better judgment and rushed up to her to fill a few more endless minutes with chatter outside of his own bleeding skull. Joke was on him, he supposed. "I swear, dove, it's all you sodding talk about. *Buffy Buffy Buffy*, all bleeding Buffy. It's enough to drive a man out of his bloody noggin, even if that man is *me*, you hear? Just knock it."

"I'm sorry," Randi said, her face flushed, her glasses sitting somewhat askew on her nose. As though his ire had been enough to make them go wonky. "I... I didn't mean... I just thought... I'm sorry."

And that was all it took to make him feel like a prized git. In a flash, weeks of tension, of uncertainty, of blinking in and out of reality, scraping as much as he could to hold on before he was sucked into the true underworld, of wanting Buffy and accepting that she was beyond him and always had been, crashed upon him with the weight of all the sodding stars in the sky. It was almost nice in how familiar it felt. To run his mouth, snap, let out the thing that he tried to keep inside,

and experience the plummet of regret the second those words landed.

“Don’t,” he said, holding up a hand. “Don’t. I’m a wanker. Shouldn’t have snapped at you.” He waited for a beat, but she didn’t say anything. Just looked at him with those large, guileless eyes and made him feel like an even bigger tosser than he was. “It’s not that I don’t want it... I do. God, more than anything, I do. But she’s got her own life, you know? Off performing wonders, changing the world. She wouldn’t want to be bothered with me, and the last thing I want is for her to feel obligated. To haunt her when she’s finally free of all this.”

That was the best he could offer without cutting himself too deeply, the real reason being far too intimate to share with just anyone. Perfect moments weren’t something a man got too many of in a lifetime, and it just so happened that his own perfect moment had come at the end. He’d had nothing in those last seconds but the words she’d given him, the insane hope they were true, and from there till eternity to imagine the life they might have had had things been different. Some kids got bedtime stories, and he’d had himself the perfect lullaby to sing him to eternal sleep. But just as the sweetest dreams didn’t follow you into the waking hours, the sweetest hopes remained in the grave. And saying any of that would mean being seen on a level he wasn’t ready for anyone else to know existed, so he didn’t say it. Much as he liked Randi, he wasn’t ready to share that part of himself with anyone. He doubted he ever would again.

So instead, Spike offered what he hoped was a commiserating smile, the sort that apologized for snapping while simultaneously discouraged the subject’s continued survival. He wagered it was too much to hope that she’d smile back, but held out for a nod at least, for the tension in her shoulders to

lessen, for any indication that things between them were all right.

They had to be all right. Christ, they had to be.

But Randi didn't smile or nod, didn't relax or do anything that might reassure him that she understood. Rather, she stood there staring at him with a look on her face that he didn't understand, one that shifted from stricken to devastated, her brow wrinkling, her already-wide eyes taking on a watery sheen. It made no sense at all. It made him bloody crazy. So much so he didn't try to stop her when she finally did snap back to herself and start down the hallway again, this time at a clip that screamed she didn't want to be followed. That she was outrunning something. That she was outrunning him.

Instead, Spike turned and watched her disappear around a corner, the fabric of her skirt fluttering in her wake.

And despite his confusion, his irritation, despite every contradictory feeling he had right now, Spike knew that if running his mouth had cost him the only real friend he felt he had in the place, he'd never forgive himself.



IT WASN'T fair to him, but Buffy needed time after Spike exploded at her—at Randi—to gather her bearings. Time that she'd initially thought would be just a matter of days, but somehow turned into weeks. Not by design or anything, just whenever she thought of attempting to talk to him again, her head would fill with the echoes of what he'd said. Worse, the earnest way those words had rolled off his tongue. How he'd believed them. How he'd believed that of *her*—that after everything they had been through together, after those last

nights in Sunnydale, after she'd given him her love and tried to give him more, he thought that she would view him as little more than a loose string to tie up. An obligation. That she wouldn't drop everything she was doing to come help him figure out what the hell was going on and why.

Even worse, she wondered if he was right.

That much wasn't fair to herself, she knew, but it was still there. Every time she started reaching for the phone, ready to give up, throw in the towel, call Willow and let her know what was going on, beg her to research ways to give a ghost form and shape, to concede that this idea had been a bad one all along—that everyone who had accused her of coming up with it in the first place because she blamed Angel for what had happened to Spike had had a point. That she had just invented a problem and a potential enemy where there was none all so she could wallow in the chance she'd had and missed, blame someone else for what she'd lost.

But that wasn't it. It wasn't. As mad as Buffy had been at Angel—was still, actually—for his carelessness back in Sunnydale, that anger lived somewhere completely independent of the reason she'd come up with this idea in the first place. Calling Willow or Giles would likely come at the expense of blowing her cover, and god, she couldn't let that happen. Not while Angel and his new allegiance to Wolfram and Hart remained a question mark. Not when she knew firsthand just how bad things could get when he was at his worst.

And even if sounding the alarm didn't blow her cover, even if they had changed their tune and were suddenly all in on Operation Espionage, there was little chance they would let her remain the person on the inside. Not with Spike in the equation, because god knows how much that had jeopardized her judgment back in Sunnydale. How her preoccupation with

him had *cost* them Sunnydale, according to her watcher. And then what? Goodbye bootleg Polyjuice Potion, goodbye corporate credentials, goodbye everything that enabled her to spy on Angel right under his nose. Buffy had negotiated her way into a position where she couldn't just call the shots and damn whatever anyone else thought on the matter—she needed Willow. Which meant she needed to keep her mouth shut and just suffer in silence.

Or find someone to talk to where she wasn't risking everything by venting her frustration.

One of the first things Buffy had done as Randi Joan Pratt was some casual snooping on Cordelia's condition. Angel had been tight lipped on the subject during the brief window she and the others had been guests at the Hyperion Hotel, which she'd found odd but hadn't thought to question all that much at the time because, well, all the other stuff that had been demanding space in her head. But once the dust had settled and she'd started thinking critically about Angel's new employment arrangements, Buffy had found herself circling back to the question of what had happened to Cordelia with increasing frequency. The most she'd been able to glean was that Cordelia had had some sort of massive psychic episode that landed her in a magical coma and now, courtesy of Wolfram and Hart, she was receiving state-of-the-art medical attention with daily reports issued directly to Angel's desk.

Buffy had decided to check out the accommodations herself one day over her lunch break, desperately needing a distraction from the Spike-shaped wrench that had thrown her entire agenda off-course. Getting in had been a bit of a thing, especially since she didn't want it getting back to Angel that the girl he'd kicked out of his office was snooping around his comatose former employee, so she'd made a point to not

talk to anyone, offering only head shakes and the occasional grunt whenever someone asked if she needed help. She'd spent that first visit just getting a lay of the land, seeing how far her Wolfram and Hart credentials would get her on her own, and making mental notes for what she would need to get further the next time she swung by. Then she'd gone back to her desk like a good girl, eaten a chicken salad sandwich purchased from the employee lounge, hurried her way through the rest of the tasks on Randi's to-do list for the day, then started drafting a list of questions for Willow.

She didn't go back until after Willow had supplied her bespelled refrigerator with items of magical concealment. The sort of goodies that would enable her to go completely unnoticed, even if she did stop to ask for directions or floor designations or room numbers. Also a few parlor tricks meant for small-scale operations, like a mixture that would make it so anything captured by recording equipment would mysteriously glitch upon review. Little things to ensure Randi's visit to Cordelia Chase, a woman she'd never met, wouldn't get back to anyone who might decide the only way to solve a problem like Randi Joan Pratt was to fire her.

The first visit had been the most intense, and also the shortest. Even though Willow had world save-age—and also near-world annihilation—on her resume, Buffy wasn't inclined to just trust that her friend's magic would work the way it was advertised. She had too much experience with things blowing up in her face, and the stakes were too large to allow for a screw-up. But when a full week passed without incident, she thought it safe to try again, this time getting all the way into Cordelia's room, and still no alarm sounded. Once she'd been reasonably certain she was well and truly alone, Buffy had started snooping in earnest.

Cordelia was in a private ward of a hospital not far from Wolfram and Hart, and one specially tied to the law firm in such a manner that there were certain protocols in place that wouldn't fly in other parts of the facility. But for secrecy purposes, Buffy guessed it worked well enough, and it kept her from having to encounter too many people. The level of care was undoubtedly excellent, but the long-term patients were typically dubbed so because their conditions weren't expected to improve and therefore they needed less direct supervision.

Buffy had no idea how involved the law firm was with the hospital beyond its financial contribution, but she was determined to take nothing for granted. She never visited as herself—always made sure she had a healthy supply of her Randi potion every time she thought she might make the detour to see if Cordelia's condition was improving. The first couple of times, she'd even continued the pretense once she was on the other side of the door, saying that she'd been sent over to get a first-person account of Cordelia's progress and to determine if she was responsive to the sound of her name or anything else that might be familiar. That didn't last more than a week, though—when no one swung by her desk to grill her on her extracurriculars, Buffy started viewing Cordelia's room as the one place she could go where she didn't have to worry about putting on the Randi Joan Pratt show. The one place where she could be Buffy, even if she didn't look the part.

She hadn't appreciated how much she would need that, the being Buffy thing. Hadn't had any idea of how draining it would be to pretend day in and day out that she didn't know more than she did, that she was a neutral party in all matters Spike and Angel; that when Spike said idiotic things like *Buffy wouldn't want to be bothered*, she couldn't scream at him for

being an idiot because someone who was just a paralegal wouldn't know that. Wouldn't know that Buffy Summers had absolutely meant it when she'd told him she loved him and would be devastated at the thought that, after everything they had shared, he didn't trust in her enough to even try to reach out.

That was what she didn't get most of all. Much as she hated it, Buffy could understand that his doubt came from an honest place, especially with their past being what it was and Spike having seen what he'd seen just a couple of nights before the apocalypse. They'd been cut off at the knees before they could reach any understanding about what they were to each other, and it wasn't like the circumstances of his return helped matters. If he had tumbled out of that amulet completely whole, then maybe he would have taken off before the second and third thoughts could settle in. Just followed his gut, the way he always did, rather than sit still long enough for his brain to start throwing up roadblocks.

But even still, he wouldn't even ask for help. Help he had to know—*bad to*—that Buffy would provide without hesitation. That even if she didn't love him, she absolutely cared enough to want him to be able to exist in the world as something more than a specter.

And since she didn't have anyone else to talk to, anyone else she could trust to keep her secrets, Buffy found herself increasingly making the trip to Cordelia's room. Doing her snooping thing, taking her pictures, making her notes, then sinking into a chair beside the bed and just rambling on about all the things she couldn't say outside this room. It was probably stupid and almost certainly in her head, but Buffy found that talking tricked her brain into thinking she'd actually accomplished something. And god, after the last couple

of years, she *needed* to talk. She needed to be heard by someone who wasn't herself so she could begin to make sense of how she felt about any of the turns her life had taken.

She used to do this. Used to be able to chat with her friends about relationships and worries and disappointments and stuff, and like so much else, had lost that over the years. Withdrawn, become more private, kept her feelings close to protect them from harm. To protect *others* from harm should they learn what those feelings were. What was really going on inside her head. And even though it wasn't exactly the best scenario, saying any of this out loud was at least a start in the right direction.

And when she sank into the chair at Cordelia's bedside that afternoon, she had a whole lot to get off her chest.

"Hi," Buffy said self-consciously. "I'm back. Again. I know I said I'd bring flowers this time but, well, I'm me and I forgot. I would say *next time* but we might need to just accept that I'm not together enough for that to be the sort of thought that sticks. Also, I kill pretty much every flower I try to take care of, so it's probably for the best for plant life everywhere that I just leave them alone, and no, I didn't plan to ramble this much but here I am, ramble girl. There's just so much and I have no one, Cordy. No one at all to talk to. No one who would understand, at least."

The room fell into a silence Buffy could only describe as heavy. The breed of quiet that didn't expect to exist, that expected to be trampled over with words and barbs and back-and-forths and everything else that Cordelia couldn't give her at the moment. It was the sort of thing you'd think might fade with exposure, but somehow only grew stronger. The wrongness that was Cordelia's lack of response, of the indif-

ferent beeps of the machines that were keeping her alive but couldn't speak for her.

Buffy licked her lips and leaned forward, her elbows on her knees, the events of the past few days pressing against the inside of her skull, thoughts climbing over themselves to be the first voiced. There was just so much to say, to hear said against the blanket of silence, to get out of her head so she could focus on the things that demanded her focus. And though she knew she needed to be thinking about a hundred different things—literally anything but what she *was* thinking about—the fact remained that she was hung up on anything but the thing she was here to do. Might as well address that elephant.

“Spike had a chance to get his body back,” she said in a rush, feeling her cheeks heat for no reason whatsoever. Seriously, there was no one around to judge her for her fixation, yet she maintained a complex. “You know how I told you he’s been popping in and out? Well, it turns out there was a nasty ghost haunting Wolfram and Hart, and long story short, Spike sacrificed his chance to be unghosty so that this ghost could be punished in a nasty way. He saved a girl’s life.” Buffy snapped her mouth shut, her skin flaming hotter still. “He saved *Fred’s* life. I’m starting to wonder if he might have a thing for her. He spends a lot of time lurking around her lab, especially now.”

Cordelia didn’t respond; didn’t roll her eyes or make one of her trademark cutting comments or anything at all, and while Buffy hadn’t expected more, she couldn’t help but feel some measure of disappointment. This had been haunting her for days—this stupid, non-thing thing that she’d let dominate her mind and more simply because she couldn’t let Spike know who she was or anyone else know what she knew. And

Spike's reticence to try to contact her didn't help matters. Like maybe the reason he wasn't contacting her was because he no longer wanted to. He'd found someone who was sweet and kind and pretty and, from the things she heard around the office as Randi, pretty much every man's fantasy in the super-smart-hot-chick but not-lording-her-intelligence-over-men kinda way.

In other words, the anti-Buffy.

"I'm telling myself it's nothing to worry about," she said hoarsely. "That all of it is nothing to worry about. Spike is Spike, you know? Even when we were enemies, it was him and me. I was the one he wanted to fight, the one he came back for over and over again. Just last year, he told me that it would *always* be about me for him, but...people can say stuff like that and be wrong, you know? I was wrong about the things I thought were true for me and Angel. I was wrong when I thought I would feel the way I felt about him for the rest of my life, and it *wasn't* all that long ago that I thought that, either. So maybe falling out of love with someone can happen overnight? Like snap, no more love. And I know what you would say if you were awake, by the way. 'Jeez, Buffy, why don't you just tell him who you are? Put yourself out of your misery?' And I get it, you're right. I could do that. Maybe I *should* do that...but what I'm doing here, this thing, it's more than me and Spike. It's potentially the biggest, most dangerous thing I've ever done, and I can't blow it because I'm afraid a guy might not like me anymore, you know? I don't get the luxury of that choice. I don't get to be the one who follows her heart when it could put the world at risk. Angel taught me that. And Giles pretty much ran it into the ground."

Buffy fell quiet then, not sure she had more to say. And it

wasn't like it mattered, anyway. Cordelia couldn't give her answers. No one could. The most coming here could do was provide her a distraction and an outlet, and as vital as those things were, Buffy so far hadn't managed to leave Cordelia's bedside feeling unburdened. If anything, the world looked even hollower on the other side.

But that was the path she'd chosen, and the path she'd keep. The potential consequences of straying were too costly for her to gamble. She had a job to do. A mission.

And the mission was what mattered.

BUT WHO CAN NAME THE FACE?

BUFFY WAS STARTING TO WONDER IF ALL SHE'D NEEDED THIS entire time was a party.

She watched Lorne stumble away, rejoining the throng of revelers, who absorbed him like he was one of their own—which, of course, he was, being the maestro behind the evening's shenanigans. And somehow, even though she'd been slaying demons for nearly a full decade now, Buffy had only just learned what happened on the other side of the night when the demon population decided to stay indoors. No mayhem on the streets, fine, but that hardly meant humans were the only people having a good time on Halloween.

It was strange, watching all of this from the inside. No expense had been spared and no detail overlooked. Lorne had been so consumed with ensuring everything ran smoothly that he'd admitted to having had his sleep removed so he could literally work around the clock—an apparently not-uncommon practice that Buffy one hundred percent did not

understand because sleep was one of the only luxuries she had left.

At the same time, though, she couldn't deny that being perpetually awake had made Lorne even more perceptive than an empath demon ought to be. Her ears were still burning with his advice, a burn that seemed to sink into her skin itself, into her blood, pounding with such intensity she wondered how she had managed as long as she had without seeing the obvious.

He'd found her, admittedly, during a weak moment. She hadn't meant to be caught staring at Spike, who seemed to be having the time of his life after weeks of ghostly brooding, but there she was. Staring. Trying to understand what had inspired the transformation—trying to resist succumbing to the insecurities that had been mounting ever since he'd blown up at her. Things she fought hard not to think, to only make room for when she was spilling her soul to Cordelia. Except Spike's inexplicable good mood had overridden her senses, and she hadn't been able to look away, too worried about what she might miss if she did.

"Aww, honeycakes," Lorne had said, sidling up to her and throwing an arm around her shoulder. "This is breaking my heart."

Buffy had jolted, flush with the knowledge that she'd been caught but still determined to play dumb because, well, that was her way. She'd cleared her throat and immediately set about glancing around the room as though looking for someone, all the while channeling as much innocent incredulity into her voice as she could manage. "What's breaking your heart? People seem to be enjoying your party! Seems like you should be in celebration, anti-heartbreak mode."

"Ah ah ah. You are not turning this around on me." Lorne

had squeezed her to him with more familiarity than she thought they had established by this point, but given how much she'd found she liked him, she'd decided not to be annoyed. "Lemme guess. You can't get a not-so-tall but very, very blond and British drink of water out of your cute little noggin. Am I close?"

Way too close, actually. She'd forced a laugh. "What?"

"Darling, everyone knows about your little c-r-u-s-h. Even the big bossman." Lorne had turned his head as though to check their conversation wasn't of interest to anyone else. "It's why he didn't boot your adorable little patootie the second he realized you pulled a switcheroo on him with your game of musical departments. I think he's hoping that our resident ghost will lose interest in a certain slayer, if you know what I mean, should he realize there are other lovely fish in the sea. And while I don't agree with his methods, I can't say that Angelcakes is wrong. There *are* other lovely fish in the sea, and maybe what Spike needs to perk right on out of this funk he's landed in is a reminder."

Buffy's heart had started rabbiting like mad, her face so hot she worried whether magic might just melt until her Randi disguise was puddled at her feet. She'd needed Lorne to find another subject of interest fast. "Well, that's certainly a thought. A thought I will...think. Later. In the meantime, where are the hors d'oeuvres? There's a rumor that the lady fingers are actual lady fingers, and I need to see for myself."

Lorne had given a long, theatrical sigh. "All right. I'll let you go. But seriously, Randi, for me, woman up and tell that special someone how you feel. With Fred on the case, he's bound to firm up any day now."

Then the weight of his arm had disappeared, and Buffy had found herself alone once more. Alone in an officeful of

people—alone with a head suddenly spinning with thoughts that hadn't been there just a second ago. Or no, that wasn't right. Thoughts that *had* been there, had been blaring and obvious for weeks, but always ignored. Always shrugged aside. Always relegated to the *not right now* part of her brain where everything that was truly Buffy went to die. Because Lorne was right, wasn't he? Maybe she couldn't tell Spike who she was—not when she was so raw and unsure, still trying to figure out that *thanks for saying it* thing—but that didn't mean she couldn't tell him all the other stuff.

Like that she missed him. That she regretted so much of what she had and hadn't said. That she'd stupidly thought they'd have more time for all the things they hadn't.

She could do that. Or, if not all of it, then certainly some. Enough to get them to start talking again.

And that particular line of reason had led to this moment. To the fluttery sensation in her chest. To her clammy hands that she wiped along the sides of her pencil skirt. To approaching Spike, who appeared to be in a great mood for once, and thank god for that. There was a large smile on his face, and his eyes were bright and full of laughter—and, actually, she wasn't sure she'd ever seen him look quite that relaxed, or like he was truly enjoying himself. Not outside of sex, at least, and the nights they'd spent together leading up to the last apocalypse, but that had been intense and fraught and layered with so many misgivings and uncertainties about the future that for all the peace they'd given her, every moment felt unfinished.

Buffy swallowed past the lump in her throat, forced herself to move forward on legs that were no longer sturdy to approach the man she loved, who seemed happier than ever before during the time they'd known each other, bar perhaps a

spell or two. She didn't stop until she was beside him, closer now than she had been in a few weeks, and feeling an absurd amount of nerves considering this was the one person who had never once managed to throw her off her guard.

"Hi," she said before she could talk herself out of it. Not that she was in danger of that—nerves aside, Buffy felt unreasonably bolstered by Lorne's little pep talk. "I, umm—"

"Randi!" Spike said in a high voice, like they were old friends and not somewhat estranged acquaintances. "Good to see you, pet. Been meaning to talk to you."

Her pulse jumped. "Oh?"

"Yeah. I know we already said our piece, but truly, I was a right wanker the other day. You know the one." He pressed his palm against his brow and closed his eyes as though trying to locate a memory. "You asked me about contacting the Slayer and I lost my sodding head and said things I oughtn't. Been a bit of a mess up here, as of late, but you, love, are one of the only people in this miserable place I can stand to be around. I shouldn't have gotten so bloody cross when all you were trying to do was help."

"You already apologized for that."

"Well, I'm apologizin' some more. Missed seeing your face. Hoping we can get back to where we were."

The lingering pain from the internal bruises she'd carried after that encounter healed up in a blink. And without meaning to, without even realizing what she was doing, Buffy leaned forward and blurted, "I'm in love with you," into his face.

And that was when time decided to slow down. Not in the seconds before, not as the words ran through her mind and across her tongue, but right then when they were out, coloring the air between them. When he was watching her,

hearing her, his expression still cheerful right down to the twinkling eyes, and maybe it would have been funny if it weren't so mortifying. But it was. It was beyond mortifying. And it came with a rush of absolute panic that seized her from the inside and spread fast, the way that the thought of putting feelings into words always did. Because not once had it gone well. Not once had she been able to give her heart away safely. No, she always ended up beaten. Cowed. Overwhelmed by the power, the control, she'd surrendered.

"You are?" Spike asked in a booming voice, still smiling widely and looking utterly delighted. "That's brilliant, that is!"

Buffy's whole world somersaulted. "It... It is?"

"Course! Love is grand. Or at least it is when it's not kicking me in the bloody arse. And you love me! Bloody hell, you have no idea how badly I've needed to hear anything good."

The words were right but also wrong somehow. Wrong the same way coming over here had been wrong, the way her head felt wrong and her hands felt wrong and the very air she was breathing felt wrong. Only Buffy had no idea why when it was exactly what she'd wanted to hear. Only no, she hadn't wanted to hear that, because Spike wasn't looking at Buffy, he was looking at Randi, and shouldn't that give him just a little pause? Shove him in the direction of some damn pertinent questions, like how in the world could this girl who didn't know him, who had at last count been encouraging him to reach out to his ex, could up and decide she loved him? Why was that brilliant and not wiggy?

Why had she come over here in the first place? Why had she said anything? Why couldn't she leave?

"And you're a lamb," Spike said, edging closer to her. "Truly, like I said, one of the only people here that means

anything to me. If I were a more selfish bloke, I'd tell you to wait for the day I get my body back so I can make you love me even more. But you deserve better than me."

"Don't I get to decide that?" she asked, her chest growing tight. "What I do or don't deserve?"

"Just think you can do better than a lovesick vampire who can't even touch you," he replied, still smiling like he was having a ball, and raised his hands to wiggle his fingers in her face. "See. Long as I'm Casper, I'm no bloody good to anyone. Least of all paying proper attention to a girl like you."

Again, Buffy's brain was no match for her mouth, which hurried to assure him, "I think you could make me come with your voice alone," before the rest of her could begin to form a coherent thought.

And then she had to stand there with *that* dangling between them. Something she would never have said in a crowded room. Or any room, really, that wasn't her bedroom or a place where she could be sure she and the person she was saying it to were the only ones who could hear. Definitely not at a decibel level high enough to earn appraising looks from those within vicinity, and a leer from more than one lawyer that she would just as soon kick out of a window on the top floor of this place.

Worst of all was the way Spike's eyes darkened, the flicker of interest there. How he stepped back to look her up and down, how his mouth twitched as though in approval. How all of her seemed to live and die within those seconds a thousand times over for it couldn't be this easy. Not after everything. Not after three years of hating him and loving him and going through hell with him and here she thought *she* was supposed to be the one. Only Spike was gazing at someone like he didn't have a *one* and it was a damn good thing he didn't have

his vampire senses at the moment or he might just hear the shattered pieces of her heart as they struck ground and splintered.

“Tempting,” he said at last, sounding more like himself than he had all night. “But it’s no good, love. Know a bit what it’s like, being used, and that’s all it’d be for me. Couldn’t do that to you. Maybe if I liked you a little less. If things were different.”

Buffy nodded and stepped back, at once desperate for space. To put the whole office between them. Hell, maybe the whole city. Or the country. She’d know when to stop when she was far enough away—all she needed to do to get there was place one foot in front of the other and keep moving until this burning heat at her insides began to wane, taking with it the awful pressure against her chest and lungs, everything that was making being alive right now a struggle.

“I’ll leave you alone,” she mumbled. “Sorry to... For that.”

“Don’t apologize. Always nice to hear, innit? That someone loves you?”

Spike gave her a tragic smile that stomped all over whatever remained of her heart. And Buffy nodded again, not knowing what else to do except keep stepping back. Keep moving away until she could turn around and lose herself in the crowd once more.



THAT HAD BEEN BLOODY PAINFUL.

Spike watched her as long as he dared, half cursing himself and half cursing her for bringing him down when he’d been having a right jolly evening. Not that it was the girl’s fault—it wasn’t and he knew it wasn’t. After all, *he* was the pillock who

had gone out of his way to avoid her these last few weeks. Who hadn't sought her out immediately after the stint with Pavayne despite wanting to, despite needing to be with someone who would look at him and be glad he hadn't been sucked into the ever after. And sure, he'd had Fred, but Fred wasn't his to have, and beyond caring enough to recognize that she deserved to live more than he did, Spike didn't want her anyway. He liked her just fine—she was a hard bird not to like—but she didn't know him. Not the real him. All she knew was the man who had screamed his way out of that amulet, this reformed murderer of hundreds, perhaps thousands, who she had decided was worth saving. And under the terms of his miraculous quasi-reappearance on this mortal plane, he did come out looking pretty good. The vampire who had thrown his heart and soul on the line for love and saved the world in the process. The best of him absent the worst.

And there was only one person who knew the worst.

For that reason, it was hard being around Fred. Spike didn't much like being regarded as someone heroic, at least not by a girl who didn't know the full story. It had meant something each time Buffy had told him she believed in him, told him that he could be a good man, that he was a champion, because he'd had no secrets from her. Because when Buffy said it, it had been with open eyes and a firsthand knowledge of how far he'd come.

Also, it was Buffy. The woman he loved. Despite however much easier it'd make his life, he didn't love Fred. She was simply the only person he could tolerate who he also hadn't recently yelled at for no good reason.

Worse—yelled at for challenging him, for telling him to stop being a bloody coward. For daring to be right.

That was the truth of the matter, the reason he'd been

avoiding Randi this past stretch. He'd made a right mess of things, as was his bloody way, but to a point where he couldn't look at the girl without seeing the Slayer. Hearing the whispered encouragement to just pester someone until they picked up the bloody phone and let Buffy know that while he wasn't—strictly speaking—alive and well, he was at least around. Let her decide what that meant to her, if anything, and exit one of the sodding limbos he'd managed to get trapped in. End the greater of his torments once and for all.

And now it turned out Randi fancied him. Randi, who couldn't stop flapping her lips about Buffy, had just declared her love.

He hadn't the faintest idea what to make of that. Of her. Of anything she'd told him now or then or at any time since he'd popped up in Angel's office, for nothing even remotely like this had happened to him before. Not to Spike. He was always the pursuer, the one left behind, the one making overtures and moves and gestures to get the attention of the women in his life. The one chasing after what was perpetually out of reach, or his until he blinked and then gone forever. The idea that life could be that simple as to put him in the path of someone whose love he wouldn't have to win, that was just there for the taking if he decided he wanted it, was too bloody large for his incorporeal head to contain. Just the words on a loop felt like they were spilling everywhere, nowhere and everywhere to go.

And it'd be easy, wouldn't it? Blessedly easy the way nothing else in his life had been. He might not love Randi, but he liked her, and that was more than most people got in this miserable world, wasn't it? She was cute and sweet and god knows he didn't deserve her. Didn't deserve much of anything.

Then there was the other part. The part he didn't like to acknowledge, would just as soon pretend didn't exist, but couldn't now because she'd bloody well confronted it. The part of him that was drawn to her. That had been grateful for the space he'd insisted upon after blowing up on her in the hallway. That felt disloyal and wrong for letting any piece of him feel anything for someone who wasn't Buffy. She might not be his but he was hers, forever and ever. He didn't want to be anyone else's. He didn't want sodding easy. He didn't want to let go of her.

Bloody pathetic, was what he was. And if he had any brains about him at all, he'd seek out Randi and put her theory about being able to get her off on his voice alone to the test. Might be torture for him but he'd both done and suffered worse.

Christ, what a sodding mess.

Spike shook his head, though that did rot to clear anything, and refocused on the party, that damn near manic high he'd been riding before. Thankfully, it wasn't hard to find—not nearly as hard as it should have been. It just seemed impossible to focus on everything that made his existence tortured when everyone around him was in such brilliant spirits. The parts that were intent on fogging him up, keeping him in the miserable mood he'd been in since being denied the hero's death he'd wanted for himself, were nothing to the flash and flare taking place around him. After a few minutes, even the confusion that had encompassed him involving Randi and her declaration became little more than inane background noise shoved into the deepest corner of his awareness. A bit more and perhaps he could have forgotten it entirely.

It wasn't like the night was short on distraction—not with

Wesley and Fred sloshed out of their minds and making the rounds, or Angel shagging the evil bird who seemed to exist just to spout off cryptic nonsense. Or Gunn pissing all over the place for reasons unknown, which Spike couldn't help but find extraordinarily funny. And somewhere, popping in here and there, would be Randi. Randi looking at him with those wide eyes behind her specs, making something in his chest pull every time their gazes connected, and flooding him with a rush of emotion he couldn't identify. That addictive elation that seemed to be in the air, yes, but something else as well. Something his conscious mind knew but was having trouble keeping in one place, the thought, the feeling darting here, there, and bloody everywhere each time he tried to capture it.

That was until a hulking beast gate-crashed the party. Sadly, not a bloody euphemism. A real sodding beast that knew how to make an entry.

And that, incidentally, was when Spike finally clocked that he was under the influence of something—the profound giddiness that washed through him as the creature made its roaring debut. One second, a couple of the wankers Angel was hosting were threatening Lorne for some reason or another, and the next a bloody monstrosity three times Lorne's size was testing out its lungs from the open mezzanine then launching itself into the party proper. And it made Spike laugh uproariously, laugh so hard he thought, ghost or not, he might just choke on oxygen, but now he understood the laughter wasn't his. That the rush was manufactured—the sensation of detachment, of not caring, of being utterly divorced from the myriad of thoughts that were determined to weigh him down. Even the full weight of Randi's declaration seemed more figurative, a thing he might feel eventually but could only understand in an academic sense at the

moment. Not even the sight of Angel being tossed about like a bloody ragdoll could snap him out of it.

There was also the notion that all of this was familiar in a tragic sort of way. Feeling joy that wasn't his to feel, his mind and form not moving in sync. Like being under a spell that featured a gorgeous slayer warm and wriggling in your lap, dragging kisses off her mouth and swallowing her declarations of love like they were more precious than blood, all the while knowing somewhere that this wasn't the life he lived. That things like this didn't happen to demons like William. That Buffy, beautiful and warm and alive, was acting in a way that she never had before—that he was, too—and even knowing that, still giving in. Still enjoying himself. Perhaps, on some level, hoping the delusion would last a bit more.

Throw in a giant bloody beast ripping its way through a load of unprepared party-goers, and he might as well be back on the Hellmouth, tucking something under a random bint's head while stealing glances at the Slayer, hoping she might notice that he was being more helpful than a villain ought to be.

And then, from nowhere, Randi was there. Launching herself at the beast the way only a slayer would, throwing punches and landing kicks and ripping the pencil skirt bloody when the fabric wouldn't yield the way she needed. Spike watching from a distance as people screamed and ran, his mouth hanging ajar and the rest of him unable to do more than stare, for he knew those moves. Knew them intimately. Had bobbed and weaved and dodged and met someone who fought in that exact way blow for blow. Hell, more than that. He'd stood at her side, at her back, answering each twist and shift and punch and turn with one of his own, feeding off the energy she radiated and molding himself to amplify it best.

Only it wasn't Buffy out there, ducking and parrying and grunting every time the beast's meaty fist came swinging for her head. It wasn't Buffy catching punches that made the whole bloody building tremble; it wasn't Buffy at all. But it sure as hell was a slayer—one that moved almost exactly like Buffy, seemed to share her instincts. Knew when to dodge and when to pounce, how to make use of the environment around her to best leverage her strength. Bloody hell, even how to take a blow in such a way that she could fight back to her feet in seconds. Spike watched, feeling a dull combination of exhilarated and dumbstruck, as the girl who had just given him her heart on a platter contorted her body in pure bloody homage to the woman who owned his soul.

He would never have believed it if he hadn't seen it with his own two eyes, which made him wonder what else he'd missed these last few months, because reformed or not, identifying slayers was supposed to be his specialty. He could perhaps give himself a pass on account of the whole lacking a body thing, but it wasn't like Randi was just another face in the crowd. Not to him. The fact that he hadn't seen it, that it hadn't been obvious until now, was one of those realizations that might take a while to walk off.

Or maybe it explained everything, why he felt inexplicably drawn to her without having a reason. Aside from seeing her around the law firm, it wasn't like he knew her. Also wasn't like they had talked about anything real, either, for every time she tried, he threw up barriers, afraid of getting close. Of sharing himself with someone who wasn't *her*, of opening himself up at all. Yet at the same time not afraid of those things and all the more confused because of it. Some part of Randi had been calling out to him since the moment he'd seen her, and it was this part. This part he

hadn't seen but had felt all the same. The part that battled monsters.

In this case, a monster that was—concussions, property damage, and a few demon casualties aside—wrangled and contained without too much effort. All the players had to do was flip the switch on Lorne, get him sleeping again, and everything returned to whatever passed for normal in Angel's law firm. Almost instantly, too, which was both a relief and not, as Spike had kind of fancied the joyful fog that had blanketed the darkest of his thoughts, even if he'd known not to trust it.

Put other things in perspective too. Lorne's ability had been firing on all bloody cylinders, influencing others to follow his advice, taking literally the most offhanded of remarks. Not much different from Willow's spell after all, only the results might be more tragic. It didn't take a Cambridge education to deduce that Randi was among the casualties, that she wouldn't have said a word had she not been guided there by a sleep-deprived empath demon.

"I'd offer to help pick up, but seein' as I can't, I'll just enjoy the fact that this is Angel's sodding mess," Spike told Randi after the place had cleared out, most of the revelers either having curled up on the floor or left for the evening. He hadn't wanted to approach her, hadn't wanted to talk to her at all, but figured he was better off doing it now rather than tomorrow or later. This entire mess was the sort of thing that would get more awkward with time, not less. "You should go on home, love. Already did more than your fair share."

Randi grunted a response without lifting her eyes or her head or doing anything to physically acknowledge him, which he supposed was the most he could expect after she'd been magically coerced into pouring her heart out, rather hurried

past him, clearly determined to make a quick getaway. Not the best of signs. Still, whatever it was, he prayed to whatever looked out for the imprinted remains of former vampires that it wouldn't last. She might confuse him, might make him think and feel things he didn't want to think or feel for people who weren't Buffy, but she was someone who cared, who seemed more his than anyone else in this miserable place. Maybe it made him a wanker—probably it did—but he needed that. He needed someone who seemed content to be in his corner and sod the rest.

Trouble was, he'd never before needed to do this brand of damage control. He'd never been fancied by a girl he liked but had no interest in. Never had to say no to someone or worry about what might happen after a heart had been broken. If he'd been a better man, Harm might have qualified once, but he hadn't cared enough about her feelings to be delicate about hurting them. Everything now was new bloody territory.

And he was probably just going to make a bigger mess of things, but a man had to try.

"Oi, Randi," he called, breaking into a sprint to catch her before she made it to one of the lifts. "Wait a tick."

She pressed the *down* button on the panel and made like she didn't hear him.

"Randi, please—"

She hit the button again, harder this time.

"Look, we need to clear the air."

That, at least, earned some acknowledgment. "No, we don't," she said, her gaze not leaving the lift doors. "The air? Already clear. It can't get any clearer."

"I didn't mean to hurt you, love."

"I'm not hurt," she said in a rush, her cheeks reddening. Still, she did not look at him. "See? I scraped by all unhurt."

“Right, well. Just wanted you to know, whatever you said—”

“It was a spell, Spike. I was under the magical influence. It’s nothing.”

Randi sucked in her cheeks and reached forward again to punch the button a third time, now with enough strength that he wondered if she might cause the whole system to short-circuit. And Christ, in that moment, she reminded him so much of Buffy it was almost painful—the rigidity of her body language, the expression on her face, the determined refusal to grant him an inch. It was like being slingshotted back in time, chasing the Slayer through graveyards and trying to get her to admit she thought he was good for a snog if nothing else. Buffy would bristle, play at ignoring him, then finally spout off some nonsense about how magic was to blame. Or if not magic, a moment of personal weakness in which she had been too compromised to make good decisions about who she dragged into dark corners.

His answering frustration was likewise familiar, almost too much so. But he didn’t want to do another rendition of this dance with someone else, particularly since his intention was to make sure her feelings weren’t hurt. Ultimately, it was her decision how she wanted to proceed now that all was out.

So he opted for a different tack. “Got some moves on you for a lawyer type.”

And rah bloody rah, that seemed to do the trick. At least startled her out of her defensive anger long enough that her hand fell to her side and her face drained of all that fetching color. Randi cleared her throat. “They take their safety training seriously here.”

“Must come in handy for all the girls on the payroll who *aren’t* slayers.”

He was waiting, smirk in place, when she whipped her head to face him at last. "What?" she hissed.

"Oh, come on, pet. Don't bloody insult me." Spike edged nearer—as near as he could without tumbling through her. Near enough that had he been solid, she'd be burning him through with all that wonderful body heat. Her scent in his nostrils and yeah, his bloody traitor cock at attention, because even if his heart belonged to Buffy, this girl reminded him enough of her to have the rest of his parts confused. "Do you *really* think I don't know a slayer when I see one? *Me?*"

Now she was looking at him with something like horror. "I... It's new. The spell that—that spell. I just woke up like this, and I'm trying to fight it."

"Sounds like a brilliant way to get yourself killed." It also sounded like a load of bollocks. Even the girls that had trained under Buffy those months leading up to the fight hadn't been nearly as refined when the switch had been flipped. Randi most certainly didn't move like a slayer who was just learning her strength—she was far too graceful, far too resourceful.

Too Buffy, some inner voice whispered, but he did his best to shake it back. No need to confuse himself any further.

"Well, no one told me it was going to be bring-your-monster-to-the-office day," she managed to snap after floundering for a beat, and there was that twist again. That insane lurching in his chest that was becoming harder to avoid or explain away. "I can't be held responsible for other people being absolute morons."

"Spoken like a girl who hasn't worked here nearly as long as she wants me to think she has."

She bristled at that and turned away again, and again it hit him, that punch of familiarity. Of déjà bloody vu. That sense

that, despite his memories and his knowing better, he'd stood beside this woman a thousand times. Walked with her, argued with her, fought with her, that none of this was new, and that both heartened him and terrified him, for Buffy Summers was not the kind of woman you could ever meet twice. God knows he'd tried. He'd tried so many times to change the trajectory of the story he'd set in motion, and it had been impossible for a reason.

More than that, there couldn't be more of her. He couldn't feel like this, this sense of closeness, for someone who wasn't her. It would bloody break him.

"Hey." Fred's voice came from beside him, thankfully throwing that train of thought off course before he could make himself more miserable. "I saw what you did," she went on, speaking to Randi, who was blinking rapidly as though she'd forgotten there were other people around. "Fighting the Lorne beast. That was... You were amazing."

Randi shook her head and threw the still-closed lift doors a longing look, as though she could will the elevator to arrive. "It was nothing."

"I wouldn't call that nothing. You were so brave. And strong!" Fred beamed like a proud mum and lifted a hand, which Spike now saw was occupied with a tumbler of whiskey. "I keep telling Angel that not everyone here is evil. Hopefully he'll start to listen now."

If anything, Randi looked more panicked at the suggestion. "You don't need to do that. It was nothing. Really."

"Well, your definition of nothing and mine must be really different." Fred released another tinkling laugh and pressed the glass into Randi's hand, then hesitated and pulled a face. "I'm sorry, I should've asked, especially since you're on your way out. Angel keeps good stuff—or Wes says it's good stuff,

anyway—and I thought... Well, peace offering, I guess? But maybe we should just go for coffee or something less drinky-at-the-office, but considering there are people literally sleeping in the hallway, I thought the party was still going and—”

Randi abruptly raised the glass to her lips and threw back the drink in one large swallow, then lowered it just as quickly, pulling the sort of face Spike had only seen once before. Sitting on a coffin back in his crypt, his heart in his throat and threatening to burst out of him at how bloody cute she'd been. The way she shook her head, the sound she'd knocked free of her lips, how her eyes had scrunched and the shape her mouth had made—all of it uniquely her. Uniquely Buffy.

And that was when it hit, exactly what he was seeing. When the screaming in his head and soul suddenly fell silent.

How he felt around her. How she drew him in. How she moved. The words she used. The expressions she made. The times she'd told him to reach out to Buffy. The declaration she'd made while under Lorne's influence. And now, that face...

Christ, it *was* her. It was Buffy, somewhere beneath the get-up, the glasses, the hair and the eyes that weren't the right color. The body that was too tall, the shoulders too broad, the nose not as distinct, the mouth a sight wider. There was a reason he felt the way he felt simply by being in her orbit, like he was split down the sodding middle, and she'd been here from the start. Right from the moment he'd come out of the amulet, and he understood that, too. No bright flash or bloody fanfare, just perfect clarity as to what would drive Buffy Summers to take on a name that wasn't hers.

It was Angel. That had to be it. The wanker had gone and lost her trust so she'd decided to play dress-up, and Spike was

the spanner in the works. The thing she hadn't counted on being here. And why, god yes, why she'd been so bullheaded about him contacting the Slayer. Not only to get him out of the way, but to—

"I'm in love with you."

—tell him again what she'd said as the world had started to fall in on itself. Not a pleasant send-off, not a thank you for stopping the apocalypse. Buffy had held his hand in hers and fused herself onto him, and she'd loved him.

She loved him.

And now she was leaving. Thrusting the empty glass back into Fred's hands as the lift finally arrived and bolting before his brain started working again. Her face, her beautiful, borrowed face falling into her hands the second the doors started to slide shut, and he wanted to follow her, wanted to scream, wanted to demand why she hadn't told him from the start, why she'd let him do this pathetic dance all this time, but instead he just stood there, his mind spinning.

"Was it something I said?" Fred asked, also staring at the lift.

"No," Spike answered without looking at her. "Not you, pidge. Pretty sure it was me."

"You? What did you do?"

And that, indeed, was the question.



YOU WILL UNDERSTAND IN TIME

HER NAME WASN'T *JUST* RANDI.

Spike couldn't check himself, of course, as he lacked physical fingers, never mind computer skills. He could, however, sneak away from the prying eyes of anyone who mattered and sweet talk someone in HR into pulling Randi's file. Why? Well, why the bloody hell not, that's why. Sure, he wasn't technically a part of Team Angel, and he had bugger all plans to be, but he was, in their own legalese, property of Wolfram and Hart so long as he was tied to that sodding amulet, and that ought to account for something.

As far as arguments went, it didn't hold much water, but the bird he'd chatted up hadn't seemed to notice any of the logical leaps. She'd just preened and batted her eyes and told him how much she'd admired his work in Vienna, which had made him uncomfortable because Vienna had been a bloodbath, but if it earned him a groupie thick enough to cough up what he was after without much question, Spike decided he wouldn't fight it. Even more so when she'd offered to send the

files to a special room on the thirteenth floor where the firm's noncorporeal clients could do things like flip through the pages of the contracts they were about to sign.

Figured this place would have everything, even a sodding holodeck for the spooks. Also figured that Angel wouldn't deign to let Spike know such a room existed. Couldn't let him get too cozy in the afterlife. He'd remember that the next time his wanker of a grandsire started mouthing off about Spike being a nuisance, throw it in his face that he could be curled up in the ghost-friendly part of the building brushing up on his Byron but no, Angel wanted to make sure he was as bored as possible.

Not that Spike would opt for reading over tormenting Angel in most cases, but he wouldn't mind being given a choice in the matter. Or a place to retreat when he wanted a break from Angel's snide asides and dramatic eyerolls.

For now, though, he'd settle for Randi's file. Randi's file which was a bloody neon sign flashing *I am Buffy Summers* in his face. He hadn't had any doubts after Halloween, not really, but if he had, all he'd have needed to dispel them would have been a glance at her full employee name.

Randi Joan Pratt.

For the first time since he'd gone up like a firework, Spike felt something in his chest lurch. Something that was a pale mimicry of life, even unlife, but still *something*. Something that settled and spread, made the parts of him that weren't even alive enough to be cold flicker and spark. He stared at the name until the lines in the ink blurred, until he wasn't seeing the paper at all. Until he wasn't even in the building anymore, but in a shop that no longer existed, feeling that curl of excitement as Buffy's lips curled into a smile. As she studied the stake in her hand, fresh off a kill guided by the sort of

instinct too bone-deep for even the most powerful of magics to blink out. Telling him, telling the lot of them, that she was a superhero. A superhero named Joan. And because of his godawful wardrobe choice, he'd been Randy. Randy Giles.

She'd chosen to go by his name. That fear, that bloody stupid fear that had kept him standing in one place, had been wrong. There was a *forward* with her, an *after*. The moment in the cavern before the world had collapsed on him hadn't been the best he could hope for. It hadn't just been sweet sentiments to sing a man to death, and maybe he was a git for even thinking that possible, for believing Buffy would play fast and loose with love to make the act of dying less painful, but that had been easier to accept for him. Much easier to assume she was doing him a kindness than that she actually meant it.

Not only had she meant it, but she'd meant it so much that she'd wrapped herself inside of him. His real name and the ones that reflected the people they'd never gotten to be, and she'd done it to spy on Angel.

This entire time she'd been asking him if he'd reached out to Buffy. *Wanting* him to reach out. To what end, he didn't know. It would have been so easy for her to tell him from the start, pull him aside and whisper her grand plan, but he knew his Slayer. Knew she didn't take any action without a reason, and considering she'd had a good stretch of time now to wade through the shock of his resurrection and change course, the fact that she hadn't was significant.

He just couldn't see what it was. Or why it even mattered if she, as Randi, was going to continue to be bloody insistent that he get the Slayer on the line. Clearly, she wanted Spike at her side—she just needed him to be the one who did the heavy lifting for some reason.

And he reckoned he could, easily enough. Mention to her

that he was thinking of having Fred or Harm put out a call to Buffy after all, just to gauge her reaction. But he wasn't sure where that would leave him. Which brought him right back around to wondering what the point to any of this was, considering Buffy clearly thought she needed to be here on the ground right now, and she'd determined that she ought not loop him in. Maybe she just wanted to see if he would do it, make sure he hadn't fallen for the load Angel was trying to pass off as righteousness these days. Or maybe she needed something else from him—something he wasn't sure how to give right yet. The true response to the words that had seen him off to the ever-after. The love he hadn't believed and couldn't accept but that had been there, real as she was.

Maybe she was hoping to get him away from the action. Assuming Willow could work the right mojo to fit him into new skin, it wasn't like Spike could hang around as Randi's beau after making plans to run away to Europe. Also wasn't like Buffy could out herself as Randi if she hoped to make sure Angel steered clear of his more apocalyptic tendencies. Angel wouldn't respond well to being the one under the microscope, especially by her. He needed control too much. He needed to control *her* too much.

Whatever the case, Spike couldn't see any scenario in which he did as Buffy wanted but got to remain in Los Angeles anyway. And as long as she was here, he would be too. Pretending he didn't know she was pretending. Pretending right along with her.

Buffy loved him. He couldn't be anywhere but where she was.



IT WAS like one of those wonky Magic Eye images—shapes and images that couldn't be tucked back into the background once recognized. Spike watched Buffy—or Randi, rather—in the days that followed, talking to her, listening to the conversations she had with lackeys and lawyers alike, and every time she opened her mouth, made a face, or even blew her hair out of her eyes, all he could see was all he hadn't seen. Buffy parading around in plain sight, doing rot to disguise herself in any other way, trusting that the costume she was wearing would be enough.

And the sad thing was, it probably would have been. If he'd had his head on straight, if he'd been thinking clearly at all over these last few weeks, Spike wanted to believe that he would've cottoned onto the truth well before Halloween just from how well he knew her. He'd known enough to find Randi charming, to seek out her company whenever possible, to feel like a git for snapping at her, to be conflicted about the feelings she stirred in him. Angel hadn't done more than glance in her direction before dismissing her. Only way he'd ever realize it was the Slayer under those spectacles was if someone drew him a sodding diagram, and even then the odds weren't spectacular. More and more now, Spike was convinced that Buffy lived as something other than what she was in Angel's head. Not the Slayer but a decent enough approximation that the two might be confused at first—but only at first. A passing likeness that could imitate Buffy Summers like little else could, more alive than the bot, but a facsimile all the same.

And yeah, while this had likely been true all along, Spike could admit it had only become obvious to him in this brave new world where he existed in Angel's space knowing that Buffy had meant the words she'd given him on the Hellmouth. That what he'd thought might be there in those final days

actually *had* been there, despite the snog she'd laid on her ex the second he'd swept into town. Buffy feeling what he felt. Buffy wanting him the way he wanted her. Buffy as hungry to live a new story with him, to see if they could get it right, as he had been since well before the soul. Since he'd known just how much of him was hers. Carrying that with him inoculated him against Angel's jeers and sneers and color commentary. Made it possible to laugh off the assertions that Buffy was happier without worrying over the undead men who had done their best to muck up her life, that she was baking or some other rot, readying herself up for who she wanted at her side once she stopped becoming whoever it was she was meant to be.

All this while the bird in question was flitting about the office, performing tasks entirely bloody beneath her, all so she could keep an eye on what Angel was up to. Experiencing the receiving end of his flippant dismissals and his righteous pomposity, being ignored whenever she asked him questions, and always because he was convinced whatever he was doing was more important. That Randi was suspect on account of her always lurking in the shadows, that she'd been hovering when Spike had come tumbling out of the amulet, and Spike's subsequent knack for seeking her out, something she'd done nothing to discourage.

In fact, the most Spike could say in Angel's favor was that the ponce had also come to the conclusion that Randi was a slayer. Not that this was anything to crow about, as he would have had to have stuck his head in the sand to think anything else, especially after the mess with the bloody cyborgs and Percy's father, but at least he wasn't so thick that he was blatantly denying what was obvious.

That didn't stop him from being a git about it.

"It's suspicious that she didn't tell us," Angel argued as he, Gunn, and Lorne headed into his office after the robot bits had been scraped off the roof. Spike, as always, trailed behind them—the pest they couldn't shake. "A slayer on staff is something I should know about, don't you think?"

"Maybe she didn't know herself, strudel," Lorne argued, sounding little like he bought what he was selling but very much like he wanted to give Randi the benefit of the doubt. "It's not like it's been all that long since little Buffykins flipped the switch."

"I don't believe that," Angel retorted.

Spike snickered. "Don't have to believe it, mate. I was there. It *hasn't* been that long."

"That's not what I mean, you idiot. I mean I don't believe she didn't know she's a slayer. She *would* know by now. And it's been twice, Lorne," he added, whirling back to Big Green. "She hasn't hesitated either time—just thrown herself into the fight. Do we think that's normal?"

"How's it any different from what you do?" Charlie asked, then brought up his hands in surrender. "Just saying, you sound like she's done something wrong. She hasn't. It's not like Eve always turning up to drop something cryptic. So far the most Randi has done is bring us coffee and save our collective asses when our collective asses needed saving."

"Eve doesn't try to be something she's not," Angel snapped in return. "It doesn't strike any of you as a little weird that ever since day one, Randi has been trying to ingratiate herself to the team? Anyone who works that hard to earn our trust is *not* trustworthy."

There was a pause and a series of exchanged looks, then Lorne sighed and shook his head. "I don't think she's trying to earn anything, bossman. I mean, call me crazy, but anyone

who *doesn't* hesitate before jumping in to help us fight Mega Me and robot assassins—and wow, is that ever a thing I never thought I'd say and mean it—she has my vote.”

And that was the crux of it, really. Why Angel had his knickers in a twist. Why he'd just glared at the lot of them before muttering his disapproval and stomping off, a toddler having a tantrum. He couldn't get a read on Randi. Hadn't been prepared for her to leap into action, use her slayer strength and her slayer moves to fight the good fight. Definitely hadn't expected her to burst into full slayer speed to rescue Fred from the bloke everyone had thought to be Roger Wyndam-Pryce before he'd been unmasked as another sodding robot. In those moments, it hadn't mattered that she didn't look or sound like Buffy, that her eyes were the wrong color—Spike had had a front row seat, and all he'd seen was the Slayer. His Slayer. So radiant and so obviously Buffy Summers that he wondered how it was no one else could see it, even when they were looking right at her, the way Angel had been.

It was just as well, he knew, but Spike couldn't keep from experiencing a sting of annoyance anyway. Buffy had hung onto every part of that plonker for so long, and despite all his protests, she hadn't made a lasting impression on him. He'd used her as a footstool.

Spike left Angel to his bitter mutterings to seek her out after that, and wasn't at all surprised to find her chatting with Fred, who was all twisted up about Wesley's feelings about what had happened. For while Buffy had gotten to the roof first, she'd been in true form once there, so focused on talking everyone down without spilling blood that she hadn't heard Wesley behind her, hadn't clocked he was there at all until it was too late—the gun raised and fired, the imposter father

slain and Fred whisked away to safety. If Wesley was at all cut up about it, he didn't say, though Spike also had been more interested in following Angel. Ensuring Angel hadn't gotten a whiff of the truth had been more important than tending to a bloody ponce with daddy issues.

He lingered in the door for a while as the ladies chatted, taking the opportunity to study Randi's profile, the subtleties to her movements, the curve of her arms when she crossed them, the twitch of her mouth when she was fending off a grin. The way she seemed to wear her exhaustion like armor, both weighed down and strengthened by it. How she held herself at a distance, but not the sort of distance just anyone could clock. A subtle shift of the body, an angling away from the person she was chatting to—one part of her always ready, always cognizant, always knowing everything might change in a flash.

That was his girl. Brilliantly, boldly Buffy.

He truly couldn't believe he was the only one who saw her. Except he also could.

Now if he could just get her to understand that without him having to come out and say it.

"Nice moves up there, love," Spike told her after Fred begged off to check on Wesley, falling into step beside Randi as she packed up her things and started for the lift. "You hero-types always rush in for the rescue. Reminds me of someone I used to know."

"That's nice," she said, picking up her pace, though not as much as he knew she wanted to. Caught between two worlds, Buffy was. Couldn't avoid him—despite how much she'd tried since Halloween—and wouldn't let herself be alone with him for prolonged periods of time. Spike wagered she thought he wanted to talk about the love she'd confessed to before, but

he wasn't fool enough to bring that up. It'd spook her too much, and she was already spooked.

"Funny, innit?"

Buffy didn't so much as glance at him. "What's funny?"

"The robot thing. Second time in as many years as I've seen one made half as decent."

He thought that might be enough to snag her curiosity, and he was right. She paused, her finger hovering over the button that would summon the lift, then turned to face him directly for the first time since the party where she'd inadvertently spilled all her secrets. "Oh?" she asked in a voice of extreme feigned interest. He had to stop himself from smirking his victory. "What...what was the other one?"

"A little number made specially for me. Modeled after the Slayer. After Buffy."

"You..." She worked her throat before breaking away to glance around—perhaps looking for Angel. Making sure the coast was clear. "You had a robot Buffy? That sounds... What was it for?"

"What do you think it was for?"

A blush touched her cheeks—a delicate blush in exactly Buffy's shade of pink. After a beat, she cleared her throat. "Oh. I see." Of course she did. "Was this before or after the soul?"

"Not exactly scrupulous, is it? Getting a wank doll made that looks like someone else. Wouldn't do that to her now. She wouldn't like it. *Didn't*, point of fact, when she found out."

"She found out?" she asked as if she didn't know the answer.

"Wasn't exactly subtle, was I? Decided to have it programmed to do all the things she did, so the thing went out on patrol one night to be the bloody Slayer. Ran into her

mates and, well, they weren't the sharpest bunch but even they eventually sussed out something was going on."

Randi's eyes widened, the move more genuine this time. It occurred to him that perhaps she hadn't known that much—the features he'd requested. All the bits and bobs that would have made the bot something more than a sex toy even if it could never have been a true companion. He'd always wagered the way she'd learned about it in the first place was thanks to Harris snooping around the crypt after Spike had been carted off by Glory's boys. It hadn't seemed important enough to ask after once everything was out in the open.

"You programmed a Buffy robot to patrol?" she asked. "I thought Wi— I mean, why would you do that? I-if it was before when you had a soul and everything. Programming your girlfriend to go out and slay vampires seems..."

"Daft?"

"Dangerous."

Spike smirked. He might have a soul these days, might be a different man than the one who had initially gone to the wank-stain that had been Warren sodding Mears with a box of ideas and hastily jotted down specs, but as much as things had changed for him, others had remained the same. It had taken time to understand that—to divorce himself from the idea that there was a *before* and an *after* rather than just a continuously unfolding line, one that took shape based on the decisions made as it was forming. He wouldn't ask anyone to make him a Buffybot now, but he couldn't say it was one of those things he would take back if given the chance, and not just because it had been an important stepping stone in his story with the Slayer.

No, because those little scenarios he'd requested had been

a spot of fun at the time. Not the sort of fun that lasted, but he'd enjoyed himself while she'd been his alone.

"Part of the appeal, innit?" he told her now, keeping his eyes intent on her face. "Told her once she was a little in love with death. Didn't mention at the time that it's something she shares with us—with vampires. Hard not to be in love with it when it's when you started living for the first time. You get addicted to it—the danger. You know there's nothin' good waiting for you at the end of a stake but you can't help but wonder if you're wrong. You were wrong before, right?"

Buffy frowned, her skin dimpling above her nose the same way it did when she wore her own face. "Do you still feel that way?"

"What way?"

"That you only started living after you died."

Spike's smirk faded. "Didn't say that."

"You did, though. You said a lot of vampires feel like they didn't start living until they were turned."

"Right, fine, but I didn't say *I* was like that." Only he had, and he knew it. Knew she knew it too—knew exactly where her thoughts had taken her then. The dance backward that pieced together whole towns out of the craters they'd become and wrote over time, filling clubs with people, with music, with the pair of them studying each other across a pool table as Spike told her about the night Dru had found him in that alley. Something Buffy would remember that Randi would have no way of knowing, and maybe this was it. Maybe this was when she would look at him and tell him she knew because she'd been there the first time.

"Sorry," she said instead. "I thought... I guess I misunderstood. I thought you were talking about you personally."

The kick of disappointment was intense enough to startle

him, but only at first, and then he had to resist the urge to roll his eyes at himself. Buffy had made it clear what she would tell him through everything she *wasn't* telling him. It'd take more than a slip of the tongue to get her to confess who she was and what she was doing. He knew his Slayer—knew her better than anyone, he'd wager—and once she got an idea in her head, it was bloody impossible to shake it loose.

Pushing wouldn't get her to budge an inch, so he was better off not trying. Buffy had her reasons. She always did. Even if the reasons were bloody stupid, she'd have them.

"You're not wrong," he said. "I did feel like that—death gave me a new lease on life and all. The first one, at least. Not too wild about how this second one has shaken out."

She nodded in a way far too careful for his Slayer, but he supposed he had to reap what he'd sown. He was lucky she was talking to him at all, considering she was probably still licking her wounds after the Halloween incident. The thing to remember with Buffy was to take what she gave you and be bloody grateful for it. If there was anything else, it would come out when she was good and ready.

"But the soul hasn't changed that," she said a moment later, surprising him. He'd thought the moment had passed, and she was about to beg off. "I mean, that's what I was asking. If you're still glad you were turned into a vampire. Even knowing everything that happened?"

It was the sort of question he should probably at least pretend to think over before answering—do a whole show of contemplating the lives that might not have been destroyed in a world where he'd died William Pratt, unremarkable bloke and son of Anne. Where at least two slayers would have met different ends, and one would never have known him at all. All the blood on his hands gone, his tortured soul at rest, and

all that. A straightforward *what if* with an equally straightforward response.

Except that'd be a lie. It'd all be a lie. And as much as possible, he didn't want to lie to her.

"Wasn't at first," he said. "Pain was unbearable in the beginning. 'Course, I was halfway around the world and bloody well all the way out of my sodding mind. Spent the first few days tryin' to survive, and the rest trying to remember why I even wanted to. And things didn't get much better until... Well, until the Slayer swooped in and sussed out that the First was using all that guilt to turn my head around. So yeah, in the beginning, when it was all fresh and the like, I might've wished I'd died a normal man."

"I sense a but coming."

He snorted. "Always is, yeah? Thing is this—all this—is a lot more bloody complicated than the lot of us want to think. It's not as simple as wishing I'd died a different man. I'd have to think of everything I'd give up. Everything I'd never see, which beyond daytime soaps and the Sex Pistols includes the whole of the bloody world, as I wasn't exactly what you'd call well-traveled when I snuffed it. Then her, of course. I'd've died a century before I could've known her."

"Her being...?"

"Who do you think?"

Once more, Buffy went pink in the cheeks and glanced down, he thought perhaps to hide the smile he swore he saw tugging at her lips. "It was hard, though," she said. "From everything I've heard about...*her*. She wasn't the easiest person to love."

"Count your blessings I'm not solid yet or I'd rip out your tongue for that," he said, not having to fake the growl in his voice. "Loving Buffy was never the problem. It was the easiest

thing I've ever done, once I stopped fighting it, and definitely the best. She was always straight with me. I was the one who made a mess of things."

"That's not—I mean, that's not what I heard."

"And what did you hear?"

She was still studying the floor, though the grin was gone now. "Just that she... She could be...not the nicest."

"To a bloke who barged his way into her life, turned it on its head, showed up and demanded what I did? Who tried to keep her in the dark when she needed the light most of all?"

"I feel like that might not be the fairest summation."

"Which one of us was there, pet?"

She did look up at that, her eyes bright with the fire he knew so well, and everything else became background noise. The lawyers milling about, the inane chatter, the walls, the floor, the magic she'd done to bury her face beneath someone else's—it was all gone in an instant. Buffy meeting him on a battlefield, literal or figurative, knowing she was stronger in every capacity, but choosing how to use that strength. Choosing the battle she wanted to focus on. The one that was most worth winning.

"You were, I guess," she said. And maybe he was daft to think it, but the way she spoke, he could have sworn he heard an implied *this isn't over*.

God, he hoped it wasn't. Going toe to toe with Buffy was his favorite form of foreplay. "You guess, do you?"

She rolled her eyes. "Well, obviously you were. Just... I don't know, the way you talk about it, it makes it sound like none of it was her fault. Pretty sure it takes two people to screw up a relationship."

"Dunno if you could call what we had a relationship."

"I would. I mean, based on what I've heard."

"And what have you heard? Seem to have a lot of knowledge about somethin' that was just between the two of us."

Buffy opened her mouth, closed it, her blush returning. "I don't. I'm just...guessing."

"Guessing."

"Well, I don't know Buffy, obviously, but I know you. And I know what Angel has said about you." At this, her expression shuttered, her eyes narrowing in a telling way that plainly indicated she had things she wanted to say but wasn't going to. He was a bloody expert in that look. Could teach a whole lecture series on it. "The way Angel talks, it sounds like he doesn't think you've changed all that much. And if that's true—"

"That's a load of bollocks."

"I think—" A pause. "From everything I've heard, Angel, when he doesn't have his soul, is a completely different person. Like, completely."

"Also a load of bollocks, but yeah, that's the tale they tell around these parts." Perhaps a bit bold, all things considered, but the words were out and he wasn't keen to take them back. Especially since she couldn't argue without letting the mask slip even more than it already had. There were things he'd wanted to say since last year, things that he'd bitten back because they stemmed from a place of bitterness and resentment that had little to do with his relationship with Buffy and more about his new understanding of how souls actually worked to change a man. It wouldn't have been fair to her to list all the things she'd gotten wrong about her first vampire honey while they were building whatever it was they'd built over the debris of the damage they'd wrought on each other. "I've known Angel longer than anyone here," he began a moment later, carefully but truthfully. As much as he could.

“Known him before the soul and after. He’s not a different person, pet. No matter what’s going on inside. Just the one with a soul has a bit more restraint. He still does whatever he fancies no matter what. Always has. Might have to jump through a few more hoops nowadays to convince himself what he wants is also what’s right and proper, but at the end of the day it’s all the same. Fuck, it’s how we’re all here. The whole bloody reason he took charge at this place. The reason there was a sodding amulet for me to get sucked into. More I’m around him, more I wonder if that’s not what brasses him off the most. I’m different than who I was before but I’m not bloody delusional. It was still me. It’s been me this entire time. There’s no one else to hide behind. So when I talk about what happened with me and the Slayer, I know more than he does, and not just because he didn’t learn about it until later.”

“And you still think Buffy was largely blameless?”

Spike considered her, wondering for the first time what exactly she was getting at. She seemed to expect a certain sort of response—as though fishing for the second half of a conversation they’d already had, and for all he knew, she was right. He couldn’t deny, either, that there had been some bitterness back when everything had been fresh and he’d been sorting through the ins and outs of their affair with a fresh perspective, free of the immediate, raw intensity of his guilt and the First’s mind games.

But time kept moving forward, kept him moving forward with it. And yeah, he’d been right when he’d told her that he’d redefined pain and suffering after falling in love with her, that he’d finally understood what had happened between them the months that he’d been her dirty little secret. That he had been a lightning rod for her hurt and self-loathing, able to accept it, to become a reflection of everything she was

worried she was. Only he hadn't quite fit the bill. Hadn't been exactly what she'd needed, because no matter how much vitriol she threw at him, he still loved her.

That understanding had helped him sort through the bits he hadn't been able to see before but it hadn't kept him from thinking on it more. Reliving certain exchanges, conversations, whole bloody days again and again, parsing through what he'd known at the time and what he knew now.

"Don't think *blameless* is the right word," he said carefully. "What happened then... She was goin' through something no one could understand. Something no one else has ever experienced, and she couldn't get her mates to see that. I couldn't see it, either, but I could understand darkness. Could understand that she needed somethin' the others weren't giving her, and yeah, I tried to use that, too. Thought she'd piece together that I was the one who was there for her, who would listen and take everything she needed to let out, that she'd see it was because we were the same. Or that the world she was tryin' to claw her way back to wasn't worth it. But I had it wrong. Twisted up. Wanted that to be true so I made myself believe it, tried to pull her down with me."

She was watching him fiercely now, her eyes large behind her specs. "You helped a lot," she said hoarsely. "I mean, you had to have. I-if it was as bad as you say it was."

"What she needed was someone to pull her up, not drag her down."

"Or maybe she needed exactly what you gave her when you gave it. Maybe she resented that she needed it."

"Sure she did. Doesn't make the way I handled it any better. But that's on me, yeah? Everything I did, even when she was using me as a bloody punching bag, it was because I told her she could. Because I wanted her to. Thought if she

let enough of it out, she'd see I was the sort of bloke who couldn't be chased away." Spike broke away before his mouth could run further away with him. As much as he wanted her to hear this, he reckoned he was close to revealing too much—or treating her like she was someone other than Randi Joan Pratt, Wolfram and Hart lackey. If he started treating her like Buffy, he might spook her again—and whatever else, he couldn't have that. "Least that's the way I like to think about it now. Reckon the truth's not as pretty."

"I think if you would talk to her, she'd work out the truth with you. The pretty and the not pretty."

Of course, when she said things like that, the resolve he'd thought he'd landed on became a lot less stable. Made him feel less like the man she loved—and she did love him, otherwise what the hell was going on here?—and more like the convenience she kept both at a distance and within reach. Buffy wanted him to do the heavy lifting but wasn't willing to tell him she was right in front of him. Wanted him to jump through hoops like usual, but to an end that made no sodding sense. Maybe one she didn't even understand herself. There was trusting her, which he did, and understanding her, which he did not, and the more those two halves interacted, the more his less-than-soulful side screamed at him to take the bloody wheel.

And he couldn't do that. Buffy had all the cards now. If she wanted him, she knew where he was. She knew how he felt. He couldn't always be the one making the grand gestures and putting pride on the line. He'd done that and done it and done it. Fuck, he was doing it now. The entire reason he'd started this whole conversation had been to poke at her about the bot, see if he could get a rise, and had somehow ended up here, with Buffy poking right back but on uneven terms. Par

for the bloody course where she was concerned. Mucking up his best laid plans and his spontaneous bursts of inspiration alike.

If this weren't one of the reasons he loved her so much, he'd probably be properly pissed off.

"Yeah, suppose we could," Spike said instead, taking a step back from her, experiencing a rush of vindictive gratification when her eyes widened again, this time in alarm. "But I'm not gonna chase her. Been straight about that. She has her own life to live, and she doesn't need it spent shackled to the likes of me."

"That's not—"

"And we've been over this, haven't we, pet? My fault for bringing it up again but that doesn't change what I told you before."

Buffy snapped her mouth shut, her lower lip giving a wibble that just twisted his head more than it was already. Maybe he'd had it right the first time with his seventy-six bloody trombones, but he doubted it. More like he wasn't seeing something he didn't know to look for, which wasn't her fault but also didn't make toeing the line of whatever it was she was doing here any easier.

He could only hope when he did understand, he didn't want to throttle her too much.

Or at the least, no more so than usual.



SPIKE WAS ON THE FLOOR.

He was on the floor and his nose throbbed.

He was on the floor and his nose throbbed because he had just walked into a bloody door. Angel's bloody door, in fact.

He'd walked face-first into a door, the way he had been doing for months, since being shoved back onto the mortal coil, even if less solid than before. But he was solid now, on the floor, the sodding floor, not in Angel's office because—

"Hold on," he said, bracing his hands against the floor to push himself up. Realizing he could feel the bristles of carpet under his palms, against his fingers, that when he used his muscles, there was an answering push. A strain. Not considerable but also monumental, for that strain hadn't been there before. Hadn't been there at all—not since the Hellmouth. Not since he'd let go of Buffy's hand and watched her flit on out to safety, knowing he was living his last.

Spike rose onto legs that shook, legs that bore his weight, and staggered a few steps back. His skin was tingling. His eyes were watering. When he drew in breath, it came with a ripe olfactory experience that spoke of industrial lemon-scented cleaners and aggressive air-fresheners. And people. The salty, sweaty, musky aroma of people and more than people. Vampires. Demons. Family. Exes. Unknowns. And not Buffy, *not Buffy*, but Buffy was here. Nearby. She was nearby, and he could touch her.

Christ, he could *touch* her.

"Hey," he said slowly, pressing a hand to his chest. Yeah, felt that just fine. His hand, familiar weight and shape, against the fabric of his shirt. Against himself, alerting all kinds of nerve-endings that contact had been made. "I'm... I can feel."

Spike blinked and looked up, realizing for the first time that Angel was glowering at him, crowding the now-open door he'd just tried to walk through. "I can feel," he said again, and set about providing a demonstration by pushing his fingers against Angel's chest. Once, twice, his insides catching the best sort of fire as his grandsire's expression became

increasingly sour, because that meant this was real. It was real and he was feeling...this.

Feeling what it was like to be undead rather than really dead.

“Hey,” Angel snapped at last, shoving him back. “Stop touching me.”

That was just fine, as Spike had only then realized his collision with the door had sprung a leak in his nose. One that he could smell and, oh god, *taste*, only that was his blood, old blood, and his body needed new blood. Needed blood like he’d never needed anything. Blood like the blood in the mug Angel was holding, only Angel didn’t need it the way Spike did, so he snatched it up right quick and immediately started to guzzle.

“Hey!” Angel protested from somewhere far away. Way too bloody far to be of any concern.

“Mmm.” Spike swallowed and closed his eyes, wondering if anything had ever tasted as good. “Mmm. *Mmm*. Oh god, it’s bloody ambrosia,” he said once he was able to pull away, his lips and tongue tingling. He raised his gaze to Angel, who was back to glowering as though that had ever done him any good. “Is this otter?”

But if Angel mustered up an answer, Spike didn’t notice, for she was there. Buffy. She’d walked up along with Gunn, holding a stack of important-looking files, and she knew something had happened. Fuck, maybe she was the one who had made this happen—sent Harmony that box with his name on it, made good on what Randi Joan Pratt had been telling him Buffy Summers would do if he’d just let her know he was in existence again. From the way she was regarding him with a mixture of uncertainty and hope, he was certain that was it. Spike was standing there while Gunn and Angel and Harmony

prattled on about things that didn't matter, gazing into the eyes of the only person in the world who did.

And then he was moving, fast and giddy, the mug tumbling from his fingers as he reached for her wrist. Felt the warmth beneath his skin as he clamped his hand around her, the rush of her pulse, the skip, and he didn't give himself time to think or wonder or any of it, but tugged her with fervent desperation away from the others and their talk of phones and lights and all else. His mind swimming with Buffy, all of Buffy, the way he knew her and the way she was now. Those glasses. That hair. The mask that she wore but he saw right through. He could touch and be touched and right now, more than anything, he needed that.

Needed her.

Spike didn't know where he was going. He wasn't even fully aware of stopping, of pushing open the door to the office he found a little ways down the hallway. Didn't know if it was empty because he'd known it or because he'd been lucky. The only thing he knew when he whirled around was that Buffy was with him. Buffy, who had given him her love on the Hellmouth, who had come to Los Angeles for god-knows-what-reason, who had chosen to call herself names she associated with him, with *them*, and spent her time trying to get him to reach out to her.

He was reaching now. Reaching for her face, soft beneath his touch, her warmth, her eyes, her lips.

"Spike," she whispered hoarsely. "Spike, I—"

But whatever she was going to say, he didn't know. He was too busy kissing her to listen.

NO MORE NOTES, NO MORE GHOST

PART OF IT WAS SURPRISE, BUT ONLY PART. DEFINITELY NOT all of it; hell, not even most of it. She knew that, too. Had known exactly what he was going to do the second he'd grabbed her hand and pulled her after him down one of the labyrinthine hallways that comprised this place. Her chest had been all fluttery, her head the good kind of light, all of her ready to surrender to this version of herself. The one without agendas or missions or secret identities, the one who could follow the guy she liked into a secluded room just to make out a little—or a lot—and revel in the absolute freedom that came with being twenty-three years old and beholden to no one but herself. Not the Slayer, not even Buffy, just someone who could just kiss and be kissed without thinking about it too much, because *god*, it seemed all she did anymore was think. Think about what she was doing. Think about Angel. Think about Spike. Think about the fact that Giles and the others were a world away happily ignorant of the things she knew.

Think about the decision she'd made and why she'd made it and why it was the right decision and everything else that was working in concert to ensure she was as miserable as possible.

The second Spike's mouth touched hers, she gave herself over to not thinking. Some internal muscle memory was switched on by the feel of his lips and tongue, the hungry, desperate way he kissed her that she'd once tried so hard not to miss. The same that, for nineteen days, she'd been sure she'd never experience again. She had fought and lost and mourned, and now she had him back. Had him kissing her like he wanted to devour her, his hands on her face, scaling down her neck, gripping her shoulders and then sliding up again, like there were too many places he wanted to touch her and not enough time. Even the metallic taste she knew to be blood didn't turn her off as much as it should. Didn't turn her off at all, in fact, for it was all *him*, and she'd just found him again after losing him for the last time.

But that couldn't last, no matter how good it felt. Eventually the faucet on her brain switched on and thoughts started flowing again. Thoughts like *yes*, Spike was kissing her, but this *her* wasn't Buffy. Spike *was kissing someone who wasn't Buffy*, and he was kissing her like he wanted her the way he'd always wanted Buffy. Not only that, he was hard and not trying to disguise the fact, rather rubbing up against her in a way that, times past, would have been all the persuading she needed to abandon her noble intentions in favor of a good screw. It wasn't what she remembered from the night they'd shared before the last apocalypse—more reminiscent of their affair following her resurrection—and all the worse because of it. The giddy rush of getting away with something, of plowing right through bad decisions so they couldn't be analyzed until

after the fact, only to realize repeatedly that the rush led nowhere because what she really wanted wasn't on the table.

It was the pain that did it—tore her from the place between surrender and sanity, lodged her firmly where she needed to be in order to have the strength to plant her hands on his chest, to push him and his mouth from her, to tear away. The pain of knowing he was Spike but she wasn't really Buffy, and he was kissing her as though she was.

That hurt. A lot.

"What are you doing?" she gasped, blinking hard as her swimming head tried to find its way back to solid land.

For his part, Spike barely looked like he'd realized she'd said anything at all. His eyes had that lusty gloss she knew intimately; they remained fixed on her lips. "Celebrating the fact I can do this," he replied, then dipped his head as though to kiss her again, but despite her trembling legs, Buffy was quick enough to dodge away from his mouth before it could make contact.

"Seriously," she said, fighting back the rising tide of emotion threatening to leak into her voice. God, she almost felt like a parody of herself—all the work she'd done to build an impenetrable wall around her heart, one that had cost her at least one relationship and the belief in another, and she was on the verge of cracking the way she hadn't since high school. "Just like that? You're all solid and you're ready to...to..."

"What?" he asked, sounding so earnest the rest of her threatened to crack. "What's the matter?"

"I thought you... Aren't you in love with Buffy?"

Spike frowned. "You know I am."

"Then why are you kissing *me*? Why did you bring me in here? Why..." She licked her lips and shook her head, heat

creeping over her skin in that sickly way it did when she felt on display. “I guess I never thought... I didn’t think you were the kind of person who could be in love with someone and want to boink someone else.”

“Dunno how you can be so innocent working in a place like this,” he murmured, wrapping his fingers around one of her brunette curls and giving it a tug. “Adorable, is what it is.”

“I’m not adorable.”

“Beg to bloody differ.”

“And what you’re doing—it’s wrong.”

“That a fact?”

“Look, I might not have meant to say anything the other night, but I did and we both know it,” she snapped. “I told you how I felt about you, and you told me no. You were pretty damn clear on the why, too. Was that just a line? Get the girl to swoon because you’re so committed to the memory of someone else you can’t be bothered? Do I have *stupid* tattooed anywhere I should know about?”

To her horror, Spike responded by giving her one of his trademark leers—the sort that screamed he didn’t even need to see her naked to know what she looked like without any clothes on. “Dunno, but willing to check if you like.”

“Stop it!” she screamed, slamming her hands against his chest. “You’re not supposed to be this way!”

“And what way is that?”

She stared at him for a prolonged moment, trying and failing to find words strong enough to embody what was going through her mind right now. Thoughts and sensations she didn’t want, that made her stomach knot and roil. There were a lot of things she could have believed about Spike—could have accepted, even, given their rocky history—and there were things she *did* believe, *had* believed, because he’d proven

them to be true time and time again. He'd let a hellgod torture him to near death. He'd fought alongside her friends even when she was dead. He'd sought a soul for her. He'd sacrificed himself to save the world. And it would always be about her. He'd told her as much, so that wasn't ego talking. Spike loved her, and that love was like the sun. Just there. Indisputable.

Except everything he was saying now had her questioning the parts she'd believed sacrosanct. So innate to the fabric of who he was that it wouldn't have occurred to her to consider the possibility that she might ever find herself here. Wondering if she'd ever truly known him at all.

"You were supposed to be someone who wouldn't betray someone you love."

"I'm not betraying anyone."

"How can you say that? You're in love with her, and you're here with someone else."

"And are you?" Spike asked, his voice different than it had been a moment ago. Enough so to pull her out of her head and her misery spiral to favor him with a confused huff.

"Am I what?"

"Someone else?"

She was fairly certain that was the moment her heart stopped. "Who else would I be?"

Spike didn't respond—not immediately, at least. Rather he regarded her with one of those penetrating looks, the ones he'd gotten so good at giving her those last months of dancing around each other. Saying a lot without saying anything.

God, did he know? Was that what he was trying to tell her? Her throat ran dry at the prospect, her chest growing tight. There were reasons to not want him to know. Good reasons, she'd thought, except that was a lie. The only real

reason had been her own uncertainty, a choice made the second Spike had tumbled back into her life—hasty and gut-reaction-y, but in the aftermath of his death and the pain of not knowing whether he'd believed her, the only choice among a sea of bad ones that let her protect herself. After all, *vulnerable* was not a color Buffy Summers wore well, especially in circumstances like these. She'd already been vulnerable with Spike—more vulnerable than she'd been with anyone, more *seen* than she'd been with anyone, and at the time she'd needed him to believe in her the most, he hadn't. And she hadn't even had the luxury of being comfortably mad at him afterward because he'd been dead, leaving her with a head full of all the things she should have done and said, ways to rewrite history to make those last few seconds with him less painful, and the conviction that everything was probably her fault in the end.

So, yes, Buffy's first thought had been to protect herself. Use the disguise to her advantage, see if he would open up to someone who wasn't Buffy, *talk* to someone that wasn't Buffy, if she could gauge how he felt about her by being anyone except Buffy Summers. He'd already done that once by his own admission during those weeks he'd shared living space with Xander, giving her a wide berth and trawling the town for dates so he could unburden his soul with others since he couldn't with her, and while she'd thought them past that, she hadn't known for sure. After he'd rejected the love she'd tried to give him, she hadn't known anything at all.

And what was the result of this stellar decision-making? Weeks that had turned into months of her acting like a teenager, living for the moments he'd pop into her office to talk and fixating on all the stupid reasons he kept giving her about why he wasn't rushing to be where he thought Buffy

was. Why he wasn't, at the very least, contacting the woman he claimed to love. Acting exactly the way Giles had accused her of acting in the end—all tunnel-visioned on Spike at the expense of the mission. She'd somehow reverted to the girl she'd been before Angel had lost his soul, open and vulnerable and way too in her head about her relationship status. The girl who still had to learn that what she wanted didn't matter so much as what the world needed.

What the world needed was a focused Buffy Summers, not one mooning over a vampire who was apparently happy to stick his tongue down just anyone's throat. She'd come here to tail Angel and had let herself get swept up in all things Spike, and if it turned out that he had known this entire time, well, then she had no idea what he'd been playing at. Whatever it was, she wasn't a fan.

But goddamn, she wasn't about to throw everything away now if she was wrong. If he *didn't* know after all—if he was just poking her to see how hard she'd poke back—then she certainly wasn't going to budge an inch. And should the opposite be true and he *did* know, well, she'd been the brave one last time. It was his turn now.

"Seriously?" she asked, putting as much scorn as humanly possible into her voice. "*Seriously?* Who else would I be? Have I ever done anything to make you think I'd be happy being anyone's second choice?"

"You think you're second?"

"Unless this whole *I love Buffy* thing is a big practical joke, then yeah."

"A practical..." He stared at her for a moment longer, and at last the façade appeared to crack, knocking him from smug asshole to somewhere between anger and confusion. "We're

really gonna keep playing at this, are we? Right, fine. Have it your way. God knows you always do.”

“I don’t know who you think I am,” Buffy bit back, “but it’s not someone who...who is happy to be a stand-in for someone else. A-and if you’re the sort of person who can say they’re in love with someone but put the moves on me, then you’re not who I thought you were, either.”

Spike glared at her. “Not that cut and dried, is it? She’s not—”

“Here? And whose fault is that? Who has had chance after chance after *chance* to contact the person he claims he loves more than anything and has still chosen to keep her in the dark?” Emboldened, Buffy stepped toward him, her heart thumping and her face hot, and if he *did* know, then this would be the moment he broke. Called her bluff. Told her that he didn’t need to reach out to her because Buffy was right in front of him and had been from the start, and then she’d have a decision to make. If it turned out that Spike had been playing along this entire time, she’d be mad, sure, but she wouldn’t have a leg to stand on. *How dare you play me while I was busy playing you?* wasn’t exactly an argument that would win over a jury.

But if he didn’t know, if she’d misunderstood all that double-talk, then she guessed she had the answer she needed. And that would be fine, as much as it would hurt. Wasn’t like she hadn’t survived before by compartmentalizing her personal life to focus on the fight. It was practically second nature.

“I’ve already told you,” Spike said at last, all low and gravelly. “Didn’t want to be a bother.”

“So nice to know how little you think of her.”

“Shut your gob.”

“Why?” she shot back. “I mean, it’s true, isn’t it? This woman you claim to love so much, who you shared so much with, and you don’t respect her enough to let her know you’re back from the dead? A-and the second you get a body back, removing the only thing that’s kept you grounded in LA, you drag *me* back here for a round of tonsil hockey? Who am I, Spike? You told me at Halloween that you were too in love with someone else to lead me on. What’s changed? Did you just decide you don’t actually love her anymore? Or maybe it’s the slayer thing. You found out what I am and thought, wow, only one girl in the world has fucked two vampires so maybe you’ll try to be the first vampire to fuck two slayers. Hell, there are lots to choose from now, so why bother with the one you said you loved? And if that’s the case, you can just—”

The next thing she knew, Spike’s hands were around her arms, fingers digging into flesh, and the floor was moving beneath her feet. She didn’t have time to fight or protest, not even to open her mouth before her spine met the wall and knocked her lungs free of air. Then he was against her, breathing hard, his eyes dark and dangerous, his lips curling into a leer or a sneer or something else that rhymed, she didn’t know, but all aimed at her. A side of Spike she hadn’t seen up close in years but could never forget existed. The one that was all danger, all the time.

It should have embarrassed her, the shiver that ran up her spine. The shiver that had nothing to do with disgust—that was her body responding to him on a primal level, craving the violence almost as much as the sweetness. But Buffy was too far gone to be embarrassed by her reactions to him anymore, especially the ones she couldn’t control.

“You got one already?” he rasped, his mouth biting

distance from hers. "Usually takes the new girls a bit of time to work up to it, but who knows, could be you're special."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"A death wish."

"Oh please, like you'd kill me."

"Seem to be trying awful hard to press my buttons."

"I'm just trying to get you to snap out of it," she retorted, planting her hands against his chest and shoving him hard enough to send him stumbling over his own feet. "Or just... I don't know, trying to keep you from making a stupid mistake. The sort you can't come back from."

Spike righted himself before gravity could pull him to the floor. "How bloody charitable of you."

"I think maybe you've convinced yourself that Buffy doesn't care about you because that's less scary than putting yourself out there. Or you're trying to give her reasons to not care so you don't have to feel guilty for being a big old vampire chicken. Either way," she added, firing up again, "you're a coward and an idiot *and* an asshole, because you know how I feel about you. You know, and you decided to use that information, to use *me*, to either forget her or get back at her for reasons you've just made up. And god, Spike, if I'm right about that, then I don't know why I liked you in the first place. You definitely don't deserve it."

She snapped her mouth shut before more could spill out, despite the pressure against her lungs and the pounding in her head, the *everything* working in tandem just then that screamed at her to keep going. Throw even more at him that he would have to answer if he did know. If he'd guessed she was Buffy and was having fun pushing back. Sharing a joke they could both laugh at some day, reflecting on that time they had tried to pull one over on each other.

That was the only end to this she saw that didn't result in heartache. The only one she was certain she could take. And of course, not the one he gave her.

"You're right," Spike said softly, cutting her down to the bone.

"I am?"

He nodded, the fire and fury of just a moment ago gone now. The shift had happened too fast to clock, much like everything else, leaving her reeling with whiplash to accompany the pain, fresh and throbbing as it was. "Want to know the truth, pet?" he asked. "It's not pretty. I *am* a sodding coward. This whole time... It's that last moment with her, you know? Keep coming back to that. She was looking at me like I was really something. Like I was... Like she could love me. Dying's the end of everything, yeah, but there's some comfort in that. In making up whatever future you might've had with her during your last seconds, knowing you'll never know and being all right with it, because odds are what's in your head's better than anything you'd ever get. Then without asking, you're popped back to life, and that comfort's gone. Just left again with the possibility of being trampled. Of learning she didn't mean what she'd said, or you'd dreamed it all up in the first place, because having it's impossible."

Buffy stared at him, breathing hard, devastated and furious at how quickly her anger seemed to be abandoning her. That he could do that—make her feel the way he had since he'd dragged her back here, put her through all that, twisted her up, gotten her to the edge of sensations she hadn't let herself experience since she'd been a different version of herself—then dispel it with ease was frustrating and just plain not fair. But he was, at last, speaking a language she understood as intimately as she'd ever understood anything. This secret

knowledge that existed only with people who had made the decision to die, finished in an unfinished way.

Not only that, but he was right. Maybe not about the full thing but enough of the full thing—the understanding, the writing of your own ending when you know you’re not going to be here to live it. She’d felt that, too, that moment of perfect clarity, racing toward the horizon as the fabric of reality ripped and tore, and whatever she wanted to be in her future had been in those seconds of absolute freefall. She could go home to her mother. She could reenroll in school. She could start thinking about a career in real terms rather than just fantastical abstracts. She could live happily ever after with Angel, or anyone, really, as long as the *happily* part was there. The future was closed to her, a gift to those she was leaving behind, but open at the same time, providing her comfort in the finality and the promise of quiet. For those few seconds, Buffy Summers’s life could have taken any turn she wanted. All equally possible.

Then equally impossible, for the future hadn’t been absent Buffy Summers after all. She’d been pulled from that quiet, the calm, the endless what-ifs, and slammed back into a life she hadn’t chosen the first time around. Forced back into the box she’d finally broken free of by the people she’d trusted to understand her the best. To accept that sometimes death wasn’t sad. Sometimes it was liberation itself.

The thought that Spike could have been going through any of that... The knowledge that he probably had been... Yeah, she thought she might understand now. That every decision he’d made had come from that middle place, lost between purpose and existence, staring down the possibilities of all the futures he’d thought he’d given up. And there, it made total sense that he was reticent to reach out to her—it

allowed him to keep those possibilities alive. Allowed him to prolong his stay within Schrödinger's Box. Allowed him to be both.

"Oh," she said at length, the word scraping against her throat. "Oh."

"Yeah. Bloody oh." When she looked up, not having realized she'd directed her gaze to the floor, she found him studying her with an intensity that almost startled her out of her skin. "I know what I want, pet. What I've wanted for years now. But imagine dying the way I did, thinking you might have something, but then living with the odds that you didn't. That it was all in your head."

She nodded, swallowed. "And if it's not in your head?"

"Well, hope she can forgive me, I guess."

"Or that you're not too late. If she thinks you're dead...she might move on. Meet someone else. Then you would've lost her twice, and the second time it'd be your fault."

He seemed to consider that, then offered some facsimile of a smile, managing to look hopeful and tragic at the same time. "Reckon she might find *me* first?"

"Find you? How?"

He lifted a shoulder. "Dunno. Think it's possible she'll drop in someday."

"Why?"

"Just seems like the sorta thing she'd do."

The grin melted back into his face, then, replaced with the sort of look that had her questioning everything all over again. As though inviting her to join in for the latter half of a joke when she'd missed the set-up. It didn't last; after a moment, he nodded and started toward the door, muttering a soft, "Sorry," as he passed. She didn't know what he was apologizing for and didn't feel brave enough to ask. Not with her

nerves calming and her world righting once more—as right as it could be, given the circumstances.

So she stood there and watched as he disappeared into the hall, back into the din of noise and confusion, the lights and phones going haywire, and not only the lights and phones. Enough to remind her of what else had happened in the last twenty minutes aside from her own personal emotional roller-coaster.

Someone had sent Spike something to make him solid, which meant he was important to people in addition to herself. And if that was tied to whatever was going on with Angel, well, she had more on her plate to deal with than bruised egos and fractured hearts. She had to get to the bottom of who had their sights on Spike and why.

And, she supposed, she needed to figure out what to say if he did reach out to Buffy. If he decided to step outside of the box, answer the question and exist in a place with answers rather than possibilities. For as much as Buffy wanted Spike to try to find her, allowing him to would be dangerous for them both.

Because nothing in her life was ever straightforward. Especially death.



THE SITUATION at Wolfram and Hart devolved fast. Like, scary fast. For an evil law firm, they didn't have much in the way of contingency plans for when all things normal got extra para. And whatever was happening here was *way* extra para—there were people screaming like they were possessed while bleeding from the eyes and everything. Even on the Hellmouth, that would've been a weird day.

Unfortunately, the general pandemonium meant there was little chance for snooping. Too many people were in the main office area, all to either raise hell or file a serious HR complaint. Even though it looked like Angel and his people had amscrayed, likely to deal with the crisis in other areas, Buffy hesitated to do anything in full view of wandering eyeballs—bleeding or not—as she'd learned one of the favorite pastimes at Wolfram and Hart was screwing over colleagues to fast-track advancement. No telling who would report what to whom. And while she wasn't afraid of Angel, she didn't need him breathing down her neck more than he was at present.

The most she was able to do in the ensuing mayhem was snatch the shipping box bearing Spike's name—a task Harmony had thankfully made easy by leaving the thing on her desk within grabbing distance of anyone who happened to be in the vicinity. Buffy did have the presence of mind to wait until something large and lumbering ambled by for cover, knowing there were probably security cameras to capture what in-office snitches did not, but fast made her way toward the exit once she had the package in her possession. Not knowing what she meant to do when she got a moment to think but determined to at least get that far.

She didn't breathe easy until she was safely behind the door of her apartment. It wasn't exactly Fort Knox but miles above the place she'd called home in the months between her junior and senior year of high school, and as far as she knew, completely off the evil law firm's radar. It was also of the huge, complete with an expansive living room, a modern kitchen—plus one magically altered appliance—three bedrooms and two bathrooms, which seemed both excessive and very earned after the last year living in a house overflowing with potential

slayers. Still, it had surprised her when she'd found herself making use of all the space, as she'd thought habit would have her keeping to certain corners and ignoring the rest. But one day she'd decided to start compiling everything she'd been able to gather from her Angel observations into one of the spare bedrooms, and just like that she had a central hub of operation. Not in the middle of the apartment but somewhere tidily out of sight in case someone decided to pay a house visit. The last thing she needed was anyone from Wolfram and Hart catching a glimpse of her large whiteboard or the table strewn with books full of the known history and manifestations of the law firm across various worlds and cultures. Not that she'd made much progress on anything yet, but it was the thought that counted.

That room was where the package bearing Spike's name would live for the time being, right until she decided what she wanted to do with it. The smart thing, of course, would entail looping Willow in on what had happened, see if her friend could run a magical test or twenty to help determine what energies had been triggered the second the box had opened. But doing the smart thing would probably result in a five-alarm freakout from those on the other side of the pond, accusations of Buffy being too compromised to continue with this self-assigned mission given Spike's return, and some decisions made for her own good that wouldn't do her any good at all. Like, she could kiss the supply of Polyjuice Potion goodbye, and as soon as it ran out, Randi Joan Pratt would officially cease to exist. Buffy was relying on everyone cooperating with her endgame too much to trust them with the truth.

The other options weren't much better. She could do some research of her own, see if she could find a freelancer in

the area, but one thing she'd learned over the last few months was that Wolfram and Hart were everywhere. They had eyes and ears pretty much any place eyes and ears could serve them, had probably had a dedicated spot in Sunnydale as well to keep them posted on Hellmouth activity. With no local connections, Buffy would have no way of knowing which sources were truly independent and which were reporting to the Senior Partners.

Which got her precisely this far. A room in her apartment. Still, she couldn't help but feel at least a little slaphappy that she'd gotten away with the package wrapping. It might not be significant, but it was something. And who knows? Maybe she'd find a way to test for magic residue all on her own. It wasn't like Willow was the only one capable of spellcasting. Buffy had done her fair share of magic as well.

Well, maybe not her fair share, but at least *some*.

Buffy stared at Spike's name on the box's open flap a moment longer, then decided she should head back to the office. She made sure to first add details to her whiteboard—*anonymous package to Spike, Spike corporeal, W&H lights and phones wonky, people bleeding from eyes, related???*—before heading back for the door, her mind full of all the things that weren't on that board and never would be.

Maybe it would be easier if she did just tell him. Granted, it wouldn't be easier right away, as they would spend some time in *incredibly difficult* territory first, but it would remove at least one distraction vying for her attention. Add to that, odds were great that Spike would be eager—thrilled, even—to help her prove that Angel was either corrupt or in the process of being corrupted, and launch into plans on how to take him down. Coming clean would also solve the existential crisis he'd alluded to earlier, as not even Spike could doubt Buffy

loved him when she was right in front of him, telling him in conditions both bespelled and normal that she'd meant every word she'd said on the Hellmouth.

Yet as much as the thought appealed to her, something inside of her advised caution. She couldn't say what it was or why, couldn't really make sense of it at all, but it was there, a piece of intuition she knew better than to ignore. A faint whisper in a voice not unlike Giles's reminding her of how complicated it was with Spike when your name was Buffy Summers. The slow fall she'd experienced over their final months together, tangled in emotions she hadn't begun to unweave because, well, there had been no time. She'd barely started the post-mortem of their previous relationship before he'd been back in her life, crowding her space and making her contend with the reality of everything they had put each other through. The darkest part of herself she hadn't wanted to revisit but knew she needed to—had started to explore that night with her former-classmate-turned-wannabe-therapist vampire on patrol.

Then the falling had happened. Slow but somehow also fast, culminating in a date with Robin Wood that had been informative but not exhilarating, Buffy unable to completely disconnect from the conversation she'd had with Spike in the hallway. The disappointment when he'd told her he was fine with her going out with someone else, that he no longer envisioned them together, and the damn near certainty after the fact that she didn't want that to be her reality. By the time she'd realized she was all the way in love with him, it had been too late, and he'd died. And in the midst of mourning him, she'd also mourned the possibilities they hadn't had a chance to explore together. Possibilities she wasn't certain she would have immediately acted on if given the chance. Actually, prob-

ably wouldn't have, as it would've been too awkward, too confusing, if Spike had been with her at the Hyperion following the final battle. Angel there, fresh with his you-said-I-might-get-cookies-someday eyes and Spike fresh with his I-saw-you-kissing-Angel eyes, Buffy might have ignored them both in favor of sleeping alone. Figure out next steps with as little boyfriend noise as possible.

Instead, she'd been grieving. Relieved the fight was over, the world was saved, that the future was open and unencumbered, but still feeling the loss of Spike as she might have her arm or leg, not quite grappling with the reality that he was really gone until she'd found herself looking for him, reaching for him, wanting him, and then remembering.

And Giles was there, always there, whispering his disappointment. Telling her that her fixation on Spike was what cost her Sunnydale. Sure the war was won, the First harnessed, but the destruction that had come with winning was something she might have avoided. The people who had lost their homes, their livelihood, their connections to their past and beyond—that was on her shoulders too. Because she hadn't had a plan, rather a *deus ex machina* they were fortunate had worked. And as much as she resented that, well, weren't the past few weeks just living proof of how right he'd been? How much time had she devoted to the Angel part of her Angel mission since Spike had returned? Beyond the fancy room she'd set up to make herself feel productive, she hadn't exactly accomplished anything.

The thing was, there was still a lot for Buffy to sort through. If she'd learned nothing else today, it was that. And while being Randi Joan Pratt wasn't necessarily the answer, it would allow her the time and space she needed to figure out what was next for Buffy.

So she'd keep doing what she was doing now. Just be smart about it—or at least smarter than she had been—and hope that by the time the charade was over, she and Spike both had what they needed to move forward without hesitation or subterfuge.

It didn't seem like too tall an order.

ON THE MERRY-GO-ROUND IN AN
INHUMAN RACE

HE'D BUGGERED THINGS UP.

He supposed the fact that he knew he had was growth of some sort, so he had that going for him, at least.

What he didn't have going for him was timing. Everything came down to sodding timing, and it bloody figured that he'd gone and bollixed that up, too. Impulse had long been one of his larger vices, tempered somewhat by the soul but not enough to stop him before he made rash, not to mention bloody awful decisions. Case in point—a less impetuous Spike would have thought before seizing Buffy by the wrist and dragging her down a hallway with the intent to snog and perhaps more, depending on how receptive she was. He would have stopped, thought it through, perhaps realized he was being a presumptuous git with someone he could never presume anything with ever again. That even though Buffy had donned a disguise and even selected his name to wear as her own, they hadn't ever decided what they were to each other. There had been hints, suggestions, the promise of

perhaps a conversation after the apocalypse, but he'd been too much of a coward to consider it as a real possibility. He'd died, and she'd said she loved him, and while he now realized he'd been an arse to ever doubt her, that didn't change the fact that they weren't anything yet, except undefined.

There was also the fact that Buffy was apparently committed to the role she'd selected for herself. That was a twist he hadn't seen coming. For whatever reason, Spike had assumed that if he were bold enough to press, she'd crumble and let him in. Perhaps realize whatever she was doing here wasn't something she needed to tackle alone.

But that wasn't what had happened. Instead, she'd stuck to the script. Pretended with all earnestness that it wasn't Buffy Summers standing in front of him, all seething hostility and wounded indignation, but a girl whose name really was Randi Joan who had inexplicably taken a liking to him, enough that Lorne's mojo had her confessing feelings that made bugger all sense when paired with the way she seemed determined to shove him out of the country.

He wasn't sure what he'd say when he saw her next. Hell, he wasn't even sure he felt up to seeing her at all, not after the hours he'd just lived. The wounds he bore on his newly restored skin courtesy of her wanker ex, and the weight of all he'd learned since leaving her in that office, all of which would demand an explanation he didn't have beyond the obvious.

"This?" he imagined himself telling her, gesturing at whatever bruises hadn't healed by tomorrow. *"Oh, it's nothing. Had it out with Angel. Believe me, the pillock's worse for bloody wear. Gave him what he's had comin' to him for an age now."*

All well and good, he supposed. Nothing Buffy wouldn't expect, and also nothing Randi could claim to find surprising. Though it would come eventually, the questions, particularly

with the way gossip spread in this abysmal place. She'd hear tale, and before long, she'd want to strip fact from fiction and he'd tell her. Of course he would.

Angel had at least been good enough to grant him a bit of space following their brawl yesterday—physical space, featuring a bedroom and a telly and all. Nothing like the penthouse Angel himself called home these days, but more than Spike had expected, and that had been nice. And temporary, as Angel had made that much perfectly clear. He wasn't about to continue doing Spike favors if he insisted on remaining in Los Angeles, just this one small act of kindness, likely to repay him for the fact that Spike hadn't dusted him when he'd had the chance. Either way, the room had been as comfortable as a former ghost could have asked for his first night back in a proper body, and in the upper levels of the law firm itself so he didn't have far to travel the next day when the time came to seek her out.

Only this time he couldn't just wander through a door or a wall to enter her space. He had to knock. Terrifying in itself, because knocking was a question, and questions could be answered with *no*.

"Come in," she called in response.

And that was terrifying too.

He pushed the door open and stepped into the modest space that was Buffy's office. Little more than a closet, in truth, but one with enough room to tightly accommodate at least three people, provided certain would-be paralegals weren't bent over their desk, trying to collect a scattering of papers while in action showing off the perfect roundness of her arse wrapped up in a pencil skirt. Spike's throat went tight and he averted his gaze quickly, because that was another thing he'd decided. For better or worse, he was bloody well

determined to be on his best behavior going forward. No more assumptions like yesterday, no more leaping in believing he had the full story. No more tricking himself into thinking the name she'd chosen and her constant prattling about reaching out to the Slayer meant he was safe. The last time he'd believed he knew what she felt, he'd made a mistake that would haunt him until he was dust.

She must have sensed him the way slayers do, for the next second, she'd drawn back up to full height, tension stretching her shoulders. "Oh," she said, then turned around to give him a look at her eyes behind those spectacles. Eyes that weren't Buffy's but took him in the same way regardless. "Hi."

"Lo."

"I... I wasn't sure if you were going to be here or not." She flattened her mouth into a line and gestured at the hall. "The things people are saying..."

"Like what?"

"That you and Angel got into the kind of fight that would take a normal person months of physical therapy to recover from, if it didn't outright kill them."

Spike blew out a breath just because he could—because the act of filling his lungs, of feeling air travel down his windpipe, was among the many things he'd never take for granted again. Silly facsimile of life that he hadn't realized he did because it was what separated him from the truly dead. But he wasn't truly dead anymore, nor was he doomed to an existence worse than death as he had been before that package had shown up.

"Yeah," he replied a beat later. "Don't suppose they're also chattin' about the fact that Granddaddy Forehead got his arse handed to him, are they?" Call him petty, but that part was important. The first time he'd truly trounced Angel on an

even playing field was the sort of thing that needed to be acknowledged and celebrated, not to mention relived as often as possible.

Truly, Spike would have assumed this part of the encounter to have been quashed in a hurry—he couldn't see Angel tossing him keys to some miserable room while his underlings whispered about the beating he'd taken. There was only so much the sod's ego could handle. He was surprised, then, when Buffy offered a short nod, her already-wide eyes going even wider behind her glasses.

"That's the rumor, yeah."

"Ought to be. It's what happened."

"Is the rest of it true, too?"

"Dunno. Would have to be told what the rest of it is first."

"That the reason everything was so chaotic yesterday had to do with you two and some prophecy specific to souled vampires who save the world."

Ah. That.

"Yeah," Spike replied, looking down. "Turns out I threw my hat into the running by doing the heroics back in Sunnyhell. Became a proper champion and everything. And all these gits thought Angel was special enough to have his own prophecy."

"So it's definitely about you, then?" she asked in a rush. "You're the vampire?"

"That was what the tussle was about, yeah. Trying to prove who had the stones to take the prize in the box." He paused, inhaled a breath. "Only it was a bloody gag. Someone sent the pair of us on a sodding wild goose chase to drink from some magic cup and become the special boy. Dunno what their aim was, except to make us look like a couple of pillocks."

At that, her brow furrowed, concern leaking in behind her eyes. “What do you mean?”

“It was Mountain Dew, pet. Not an elixir or what all. Turns out I knocked the stuffing outta him for the fun of it and that was it.”

Which, all told, wasn’t a bad gig. It *had* been fun.

The rest, though... The noise that had polluted his head last night, after the chase was over and his thoughts had a chance to sort themselves out, that much was less fun. In the moment had been a different story—this prophecy that could be about him. *Should* be about him, if the wankers upstairs had any smarts to them at all, because everything else in the miserable world was about Angel. Just seemed right that after all this time Spike would get his due.

And it’d make her happy. All the girl had ever said she wanted was someone normal—something, much like Spike, she could never be herself.

In the days before the soul, he’d been convinced that was all window dressing, or Buffy not knowing herself well enough to suss out what she actually wanted from what she thought she should want. After all, someone as extraordinary as the Slayer shouldn’t settle for ordinary. She’d be bored to tears, same as she had been with Cardboard. But with the soul came perspective, came the understanding that his own desires often clouded his way of looking at things. It was more convenient for him if Buffy did fancy a bit of monster in her man—meant he wasn’t off his trolley to try to woo her, convince her that he was the right combination, not to mention one who could shag her without becoming any eviler than he was already. If Buffy couldn’t make it work with Joe Normal then surely, *eventually*, she’d get tired of running off blokes, take a gander

around and realize what had been in front of her the whole time.

That had been wish-fulfillment. A lie he told both her and himself enough that he suspected they'd both started to believe it. Riley's lack of demon hadn't been what had come between them. A man who saw her the way Spike did, who was enamored with her strength without feeling the need to match it, who was comfortable playing lieutenant to her general, understood that her duty always came first and gave her what she needed in the time between crises, could make her just as happy. Perhaps even more so. The problem had been she'd chosen the wrong bloke to try normal on with.

And that was what had hit him yesterday after he'd left her to gather her thoughts, stumbled back down the hallway only to find Angel and friends had hopped over to the prophecy department because there was some hullabaloo about something everyone had assumed had Angel's name written all over it. Vampire with a soul plays a pivotal role in the apocalypse and instead of dying, he lives, which everyone took to mean turned human. The sort that could give Buffy a proper normal. An escape from the world of vampires and demons in which she lived. And that had lit a fire under him—one that had sent him on a quest for something that didn't exist. Had fueled each blow he'd landed on Angel in the fight to get to the chalice first. Because what he'd told her yesterday hadn't been a lie—he was living with uncertainty now. More so than even he could have thought when he'd first spilled back into being in Angel's office. And Buffy had chosen Spike's name but maybe that was a tribute more than anything else. Maybe she only loved him when circumstances prevented them from actually being together, like say he was dead or a ghost or she was someone else entirely. He hadn't

forgotten what had happened right before the apocalypse—how eagerly she'd leaped back into Angel's arms even with years separating them from the people who had been together. Spike had saved the world, her world, and soul or not, it wasn't one he could fully live in. The vampire with a soul who did a bit of heroics and turned up human, however, could.

And that would have been brilliant had the whole thing not been a farce. Had he guzzled whatever was in that chalice and passed some sort of Rubicon—decision made, no backward glances. But nothing ever went as planned, and in the interim, his brain had started feeding him a new course of doubts. Reminding him what a git he'd been in life, how much he'd hated living in that world, how being Spike had given him new purpose. It wouldn't be the same should he take mortality for a spin again—he'd changed too much to relive any of the past's greatest hits. But it wouldn't be *this*, either, and maybe he was a fool, but Spike found he rather fancied *this*. Even with all it had cost him. He wasn't sure he could ever be truly happy if not in the thick of things.

Though he did know he would try. If that's what she wanted, god, how he'd try. He just didn't know that he was ready to hear how eager she'd be for a vampire redeemed into human skin. Not only would it mean sacrificing a part of himself, it'd be another reminder of how much he still lacked. How much further he had to travel.

As though hearing the thought, Buffy shifted her weight between her feet. "Do you know what's in the prophecy?"

"It's like you said." Spike worked his throat and lowered his gaze to the floor. He didn't know if he could say this next bit if he was looking at her directly, too afraid of what he

might see there. "Some noise about the vampire with a soul who has a role to play in the apocalypse."

"Okay, but which apocalypse? By my count, there have been many."

The corners of his mouth twitched but he didn't grin. "Reckon the one the prophet behind the sodding thing thought would be the one that counted most. Either way, doesn't say what side the vampire fights on or anything. Just that at the end, he'll become a real boy."

"A what?"

He hesitated. There was no getting around this. He was going to have to look at her directly. "Human, love," he said. "Way it shakes out according to this, at least. He'll turn human."

There was nothing for a moment—one too long for his liking. Buffy seemed to take the information in, puzzle it over, her brow knitting and her lips pulled into a frown. Finally, she gave her head a shake and blinked back up at him. "That's just...a lot to wrap my mind around."

"Surprised you didn't know already."

More blinking, this time as though in search of a thought. "Well, I heard people talking about it. I just assumed they got the details wrong."

"And you didn't think to ask?"

"I asked you, didn't I?"

Spike snickered. "Yeah, well, reckon there are more reliable sources. You're the one who works here. And Angel—"

"Doesn't talk to me, as we've established."

"Well, he's a wanker."

This time she snickered, and he was a simple man, for that was bloody music to his ears. Still, snickering was the most she did—no verbal agreement or disagreement. Just the sound

of that little huff that could mean so many things, and probably did. "So," she said a moment later, "you heard this prophecy could be about you and you decided you *wanted* it to be about you? That's why you and Angel fought?"

"No."

"No...to which part?"

"Think the prophecy was window dressing. Reckon the real fight was over her."

He didn't know how she managed to look surprised over perhaps the least surprising thing to come from this mess, but she did. Blinking again, her forehead wrinkling in a familiar way, even if on an unfamiliar face. Buffy shining clearly through those eyes that stared at him from behind lenses she didn't need. "Your fight was over Buffy?" she asked hoarsely. "I... I don't understand."

"Don't you?"

"Don't do that. I just said I didn't."

There was that bite he loved so much. "Right, well. Reckon that's what it came down to. Angel thinkin' he's owed this, how he's so much better than me and all. That the reason Buffy never loved me was because I'm not him, and this isn't the way to win her."

"He said that?"

"The first part. Second part's what I was supposed to take away from it, I expect." Spike paused again, taking her in, or trying. Once again, her expression had closed down. "I dunno that this gig's for me, though," he said after a moment, and she startled and looked at him once more. "All this Champion business. Knocked Angel on his arse, told him I won my soul fair and square where he'd had his forced on him, that I was the better man for it."

"A-and what did he say?"

“That I’d won it to get into the Slayer’s knickers.”

It probably shouldn’t have made him happy, but it did—the way her eyes immediately darkened, the indignation that rippled across her face. “I swear, he has the emotional range of an aardvark,” she muttered, planting her hands on her hips. “Was he always like this or is it a thing I’m just now seeing?” God, she just got him more twisted up when she said things like that—though she seemed to catch herself this time. “I mean,” she added a moment later, “from, you know, what I knew about him through working here. I guess I didn’t think of him as being petty.”

Spike snorted. “Man’s always been at the top. Anytime someone threatens that, he does what he can to put ’em in their place. Been that way for ages—ever since I’ve known him. One of the first things he did when I joined the family was make sure I knew Dru was mine on loan. He could have her anytime he fancied, and he would if he thought I was getting too big for my britches. Same thing happened a few years back when his soul popped out—knew I’d been alone with her for more than a century by then, that he’d been out of her life much longer than he’d ever been in it, but he could waltz back in and she’d bloody melt as always. Think he’s feelin’ that now over the Slayer.”

“Over...Buffy?”

“Dunno. Near as I can figure.” Spike waited a beat, then stepped back when he realized she wasn’t going to say anything else. Maybe couldn’t. Maybe he’d given her too much to think about. Maybe he was a wanker for saying anything at all. Fuck, all this was so much more difficult to navigate than it had a right to be. “Anyway,” he said a moment later, “I wanted to apologize again for yesterday. Mind’s been a bit of a

mess ever since I came back. Shouldn't have gotten you involved in any of it."

"Oh, you don't—"

"No, it was wrong. Know what it's like to be used."

She winced. He'd known she would, but it was hard to watch all the same.

"Anyway, reckon I won't be seein' you around much anymore. Wanted to make sure we were square."

Her brow furrowed again. "Are you... Did you decide to leave after all? To go to her?"

"No," he replied, and tried not to feel anything when her face fell. Tried to keep himself from assuming he knew what it meant, that it meant anything at all. "Not yet, at least. Gonna stay in the city, keep my ear to the ground about what's goin' on here. I'm just not a problem that needs fixing anymore so no reason to keep popping up."

"Oh." She seemed to deflate but didn't argue with him. "Yeah, I guess that makes sense. You don't work here. But...we can still be friends, right? I don't want to not see you anymore just because you're not here."

"Really? Even with earlier?"

"It was a mistake, Spike. Everyone makes them. It's not a reason to not be friends. A-as long as it doesn't happen again."

Something that had been coiled tight inside of him began to unfurl. Something he hadn't even realized was there, too used to the weight, the pressure. She wanted him in her life. Was still not ready for him to not be a part of it. Whatever else happened, he had that. "Then yeah, pet, we'll be friends," he said, sliding his hands into his duster pockets when the urge came to reach for her. "We'll be whatever you fancy."

The spark that had gone out a moment ago flared back to life. "Oh good. Yeah. Umm." She turned and bent over her

desk again, jotted something down in a flash. "Here's my address," she said, holding out a torn piece of paper. "And my number. Let me know where you end up. Maybe we could make, like, regular thing? A friend date, not date-date."

Spike grinned and took it. "A friend date would be aces."

"Good." She glanced down, blushing. "I've gotten too used to you being in my life for you to not be anymore."

It was almost too close to what she'd told him before, as though she'd plucked the memory from the top of his head. Maybe she was thinking about that too. He wondered what it would mean if she was.

And how long it would be before he truly found out.



THING WAS he didn't know what to do with himself.

Spike spent the bulk of that first day popping in and out of the various haunts he'd known from the soulless years, not really certain what his plan was but eager to kill time (or other things) until said plan occurred to him. Without Angel to annoy or a decent reason to have even more confusing conversations with Buffy, he was at a loss. There was the housing situation, in that he didn't have one, and what he intended to do for dosh, in that he'd need some way to fund whatever lifestyle he settled in for the next stretch, and he was at a loss in both regards. The majority of the money-earning methods that had served him for more than a century now did not rest well on the conscience and the rest were likely more short-term patches than long-term solutions.

Granted, they were patches that worked. Once he decided to start looking in earnest, it took barely any time at all to find an underground high stakes poker game and even less

time to bluff his way to a seat at the table. And just like that, he lined his pockets with enough cash to both get a decent room somewhere and earn a handful of new enemies that vowed he would pay for making them look like chumps, and he probably hadn't helped himself by pointing out that technically, they were the ones who had paid anything. Spike wasn't terribly worried either way. He'd already survived living as a social pariah on the sodding Hellmouth, after all. Doubted there was much anyone here could throw at him that would leave a mark.

But he could hear her, too, the reprimands, the encouragement to be cautious and not stir trouble where it didn't need stirring, and while that sounded less than fun, it wasn't like he had a lot of ready muscle to throw in a fight if it came down to it. Also Los Angeles was a stretch larger than Sunnyhell and getting from one place to the next could take hours, depending on the time of day. So for the first week, he decided he'd hang up his boots at one of the nicer luxury hotels in the area. It wasn't close to Wolfram and Hart, necessarily, but not so far he couldn't get there quickly with a little ingenuity and sewer access, and it *was* the sort of place that tended to attract big names and celebrities, which provided a decent cover from any demons thinking about exacting a little payback. Few would dare to sniff him out anywhere so visible.

And that settled him just fine for a couple of days, giving him a place to stretch out. Make a mess. Drink until the corners of the room went fuzzy, luxuriate in longer showers until management asked him to be more considerate of the other guests, sleep in a large, lonely bed and wolf down bacon and eggs each morning. Eventually, though, the urge came to fill his stomach with something more substantial—and ease the burden on his gambling winnings by laying off the mini-

bar. He managed a trip to an underground butcher without rousing any special attention and decided to press his luck by visiting a liquor store. The little samples in his fridge didn't exactly hit the spot and tended to go bloody fast, and he had a feeling he'd need that pleasant lull to dull the sharper edges crowding his mind.

The joint he found was sparse on variety but near enough his hotel to make up for it, particularly since the hour was growing long and he didn't want to attract the wrong kind of attention by carting around his earlier blood purchase. Spike was in the process of attempting to juggle a bottle too many toward the checkout when another shopper sidled up to swipe the bourbon that had been about to hit the floor.

"Oi," Spike snapped at the wanker, some bloke with shaggy hair and a scowl so intense Angel might be able to sue for trademark infringement. "You fancy your hand stayin' attached to your wrist, keep it off another man's sauce. There's more in the bloody aisle."

To his surprise, the would-be liquor thief snickered. "I'm guessing that's something that runs in the family," he said mildly, then calmly placed the bottle on the counter before stepping aside. "The hand thing," he clarified when Spike did little more than stare at him. "When I tried to be an emissary to your... What do you call Angel? He's not a sire. Is grandsire a thing?"

"Who the hell are you?"

"I'm a friend, don't worry."

"Think I'll be deciding that on my own, thanks." Spike stalked forward and all but shoved his remaining purchases on the counter beside the rescued bottle, glowering at his new chum all the while. "Now piss off if you know what's good for you."

At that, he turned his attention to the clerk, who was watching the exchange with rapt interest but quickly began ringing him up when he caught Spike's glare. And for a few seconds, no one said a thing, just stood there as barcodes were scanned and items were added to paper sacks. It wasn't until Spike turned to leave with his bagged goods that the bloke tried his luck a second time, though in a manner a mite more direct.

"You get any interesting mail lately, Spike?"

Spike froze, turned to glare at him once more. "Who the bloody hell are you?"

The man just grinned and held out a hand. "Your new best friend."



HE HAD a tall tale to sell, but the more Spike listened, the more he was inclined to believe him. Though maybe that was just because he wanted to.

The story made sense, not to mention accounted for what Buffy was doing here playing dress-up. Once upon a time Angel had been the big hero, out fighting the good fight, helping the helpless, answering the call from the Powers that Bloody Be, doing his part to be a thorn in evil's side, all that jazz. Then one day Angel had up and switched teams, perhaps not knowing that was what he was doing but doing it anyway, so the Powers thought maybe they'd bet on the wrong horse. Maybe the vampire with a soul who was going to play a pivotal role in the apocalypse wasn't the berk who had raped and tortured and pillaged and slaughtered his way into a cursed soul, but the vampire willing to fight for restoration. Some wires had been crossed, some communication lost in

translation, but Spike had gone and done the impossible and no one had seen it coming. The fact that Angel had turned traitor around the same time Spike had given his life for the world seemed like a cosmic wakeup call.

So the Powers had found this bloke, Doyle, stuffed his head full of the visions that they'd thought had been steering Angel toward a destiny he was no longer qualified to claim, and sent him on an errand. Dig up the amulet from the bottom of the Hellmouth and ship it to the heart of the problem. And now that Spike was back in the flesh, so to speak, they had a to-do list about a mile long to sort through. Back to bloody basics, fighting the good fight.

As it turned out, it wasn't all bad business being on a higher plan's payroll. The job came with an underground flat, fully furnished, including a video game console that Spike took an almost instant liking to. There was something very satisfying about smashing buttons and destroying pixelated baddies—also helped with hand dexterity, which Doyle said had been a lifesaver for him. Turned out he'd crossed paths with Angel back in the day and come out of it an appendage short. Not that he'd meant to say as much, as had been evident by the look on his face, or the sigh he'd let out.

"I wasn't exactly playing on the home team then," he'd admitted, though not graciously. Spike had been around long enough to identify the signs of someone Angel had done wrong in some fashion, and whatever else he was, there was no denying Doyle was bitter. But this was his redemption gig too—doing his part to make up for his own sordid past, which he kept to himself, to appease the powers. They'd even given him a good faith deposit of a new hand, and if that sounded bizarre, well, they'd given Spike his life plus a whole new body, so who was he to question?

The only downside to any of this was he was expected to be at Doyle's bloody beck and call anytime the Powers decided to ring him up. Bird needed saving because she'd taken a stroll down the wrong alley, that was now Spike's problem. Some fool landed himself in a demon's crosshairs, Spike was to ride in to the rescue. Doyle had even fixed him up with some fancy gear, such as a contraption that fit along his arms and with a quick release that would have stakes bursting from his sleeves like he was a bloody Polgara demon. Things that were fun to play with and made for an efficient job taking care of vampires, though Spike suspected once the novelty wore off, and he started jonesing for an actual fight, he'd probably leave such toys at home.

It was after Spike had settled into what he thought might be the closest he'd come to an actual routine that he dug out the scrap of paper Buffy had left him with, debating whether it was too soon to see if she fancied a *friend date*. Despite a lot happening since he'd last walked out of Wolfram and Hart, not all that much time had passed, and he knew bugger all about the norms surrounding courtship these days, even *friendly* courtship. He'd already bungled so much—he wasn't sure he was ready to risk the rest.

That lasted until Wesley and Gunn decided to invite themselves over. Spike wasn't surprised his movements were being tracked—Angel did like to think he was in control of the universe, after all. While they issued their sales pitch, Spike made a big show of playing the bored, dismissive git, but their showing up at all meant he ought to reach out to the Slayer just so she didn't hear about his new circumstances from someone else. He waited until they had cleared the place then leaped to his feet and snatched up the cell Doyle had given him, punched in her number and waited.

And after that first *hello*, the soft way she said his name made his dead heart sing.

Now she was here, having invited herself over to check out his flat. It was all on the pretense of being interested as a friend, but Spike knew better. She wanted to scope out the lay of the land, familiarize herself with both the space itself and the surrounding area, just as any skilled warrior would.

He'd expect nothing less.

"It's..." She wrinkled her nose, glanced around again. "It's nice, I guess."

"It's free, love. Never been a choosy beggar."

She gave him the sort of look that screamed she knew better before wandering over to the bright red sofa. "I guess it could be worse. Just gives me major bachelor pad vibes."

"Well, I'm a bachelor, aren't I?"

"I guess," she said again as she sat.

Spike quirked a smile and sank onto the other end of the couch, leaving room for Jesus, as the old pastors would say. "Don't see myself spending much time here," he said. "Place to catch my kip, keep my blood. Reckon I'll be out and about being the Almighty Wankers' new chosen boy too much to do much else."

She nodded, still frowning, but didn't comment. She *hadn't* commented much at all on the new gig, and he didn't know what to make of that. If she was skeptical that he was in fact important enough now to be handed one of those destinies that seemed all the rage or if she was turning over something he hadn't considered or what. Buffy wasn't one to bite back her opinion once decided.

At length, she sighed and shifted to angle toward him. "This guy just walked up to you while you were buying booze and said hey, I'm selling higher purposes, wanna buy one?"

"Thanks ever so. Wasn't quite like that."

"But he took credit for the amulet being sent to Angel. And for the package that made you all touchable again."

"That's the story."

"Why the ghost stuff? If he had the power, then why put you through all that?"

Spike opened his mouth, closed it. It was a decent question, and not one that had occurred to him. "That didn't come up."

"How about how he's paying for any of this?" She gestured at the flat. "Real estate in LA is expensive. Do the Powers or whatever have a bank account somewhere?"

And now he was starting to regret having told her at all, which meant she probably had a point. Or more than a point. It occurred to him then, what should have been obvious from the start, that some part of him had assumed that Doyle was connected to Buffy. That perhaps she'd even had a hand at pointing the bloke in his direction, though Doyle hadn't said a word about the Slayer—or any slayer—and Spike had deliberately refrained from bringing her up out of an excess of caution. The two aims as he believed he understood them went hand-in-hand. Doyle directing Spike to pick up all the excess slack Angel had dropped when he'd accepted the lawyer gig, and Buffy sneaking around undercover, presumably to make sure her ex didn't trigger an apocalypse.

But that was all it was. Presumption. Presumption he'd had faith was true—the sort of fervent faith exclusive to zealots, his belief in Buffy absolute—but a presumption nonetheless. Same as he presumed he was correct that Randi Joan Pratt didn't exist and wasn't, in fact, sitting with him in his gift-wrapped flat making him question the choices he'd made this week. That the woman who called herself Randi was

actually a slayer by the name of Buffy—the Slayer, so far as Spike was concerned—playing an extended game of espionage for reasons she didn't feel she could share with him. He didn't know that for a fact—he'd put the pieces together based on what his eyes and ears and intuition had told him in bold defiance of all evidence to the contrary because at the end of the day, he found more reason to believe she was Buffy than not. It was just something he knew in his gut, and with little exception, his gut had never steered him wrong.

Case in point—his gut had never fully bought the story Doyle had sold him, rather let him proceed on hope more than belief. The vague, barking hope that perhaps there was a reason for his continued existence after all. That he could be someone with a purpose, someone who mattered to more than just the handful of people he knew gave a damn now. And maybe it wasn't all bollocks, but if it wasn't, he'd need to know why Doyle hadn't tapped the strongest resource on the field before coming to him. The Powers ought to see through a disguise as well as Spike did, so either Buffy truly *was* on the other side of the world and he'd deceived himself into believing otherwise, the Powers didn't fully trust Doyle, or Doyle was answering to an entity that wasn't the Powers at all.

"Spike?" Buffy asked, snapping him out of his thoughts. He blinked and shook his head, then realized the pounding he'd thought had been the start of a headache was actually coming from outside of himself. Someone was at his door.

"Fuck," he muttered, and rolled to his feet. "What now?"

"What is it?"

But he knew. It was Doyle. It was *always* Doyle. Quickest way to summon the devil was to think about him loudly.

"Leave the talking to me, all right?" Spike told Buffy, knowing there was very little chance she would actually go

through with that but needing to say it all the same. Until he had more of the puzzle figured, he didn't want Doyle knowing more than he absolutely needed to.

"What talking?"

He shook his head again in place of an answer, then opened the door and stepped back as the would-be cowboy let himself over the threshold.

"There's a problem," Doyle said by way of greeting, wincing and rubbing along his brow as though pained.

"I'll say. Don't recall inviting you over, mate."

Doyle batted the hand that wasn't currently massaging his forehead in clear dismissal. "I had to hurry. These visions... I can't control when they happen, and this one came on fast. It's Angel. You have to hurry. He's in trouble."

Of course. Nothing could be simple, could it?

"Angel's in trouble?" Buffy was on her feet now, staring at Doyle with a mixture of concern and wariness. "How? What's going on?"

For a second, Doyle looked stumped. Frozen solid to the floor, still trying to rub away a migraine, and blinking at Buffy like the bloody proverbial deer in headlights. "I... He's... Who are you?" He turned to Spike. "Who is this?"

"Who are *you*?" Buffy shot back with her trademark indignation. "Cause if you're the Powers, I think I need to speak to the manager."

"The Powers?" Doyle echoed before throwing Spike a mutinous glare. "What exactly have you been telling her? You can't blab what we're doing to just anyone. If it got out—"

"Oi, no one's blabbing," Spike snapped, his temper firing up. "Bu—" *Balls*. "*Randi's* not *just* anyone, you plonker. And I reckon who I have over and what I decide to tell them is my own bloody business."

"It's dangerous! You have no idea the powers at play here."

"Think I know her a mite better than I know you, mate, if it's all the same to you." He threw Buffy a quick look and arrived at a quicker decision, instincts on bloody overdrive. "She's... We're together, Randi and me. So yeah, I tell her things, including where I live and that a git called Doyle sometimes has visions that have me racing around this sodding city at all hours."

"And Angel too?" Doyle demanded, his face red and his nostrils flared, a particularly juicy vein pulsing prominently along his brow. Bloke had no sense of self-preservation around predators. "You told her about Angel? If this gets back to him, what do you think he'll do?"

"And I'm blabbing to Angel, why?" Buffy asked, crossing her arms.

"I don't know. I don't know *you*," Doyle shot back. "And that's the problem. Spike, if you had entanglements, you should've told me. We have no idea who she is—"

"I bloody well do," Spike snarled. "She's a slayer, that's who she is. And she has nothing to do with the pair of us. She's just a bird I met and fancied who I don't have to bloody lie to. So yeah, she knows about me. About Angel. About the soul and all else, and if that's a problem for you, mate, you better find yourself another champion to throw your weight behind. Or you can just appreciate the fact that she's not punching your nose down your throat despite how much you're begging for it at the mo', you hear me?"

If looks were anything to judge by, Doyle had indeed heard. Something behind his eyes had changed, a light Spike didn't know how to interpret but didn't like all the same. But he also didn't have time to worry about that now—not if Angel was truly in trouble and the Powers had decided he

ought to remain undead a little while longer. He had places to be, in that case. Places Buffy would almost assuredly rush to if he didn't first. And Spike didn't want that. Didn't want Doyle knowing more about Randi than he did right now, especially her proximity to Wolfram and Hart.

"Right," Spike said, turning to her, hoping she'd read his expression well enough not to slug him when he kissed her goodbye. "I'll be quick. Do be a love and wait up for me."

He turned and strode out the door before she could reply, trusting Doyle would follow and grateful when he did. More grateful still when Buffy didn't yell or race to catch up.

Something was rotten in the state of bloody Los Angeles. And until he knew what, Spike reckoned he needed to keep these two apart.

YOU CAN FOOL ANY FRIEND WHO
EVER KNEW YOU

THERE WAS NO REASON NOT TO TRUST SPIKE'S NEW VISION friend. Sure, he'd swooped in from nowhere to claim responsibility for both digging the amulet out of the Hellmouth wreckage and helping Spike flip the switch from ghost to functioning vampire, but he had also validated her "Angel is possibly being corrupted" theory. So yes, she could admit being suspicious of someone whose interests so clearly aligned with her own probably didn't make a whole lot of sense, but there was something about the guy that Buffy couldn't shake. Everything about him was just too neat, too pat. Answered too many questions while conveniently ignoring those it created.

For example: if Wolfram and Hart wasn't to be trusted, and Angel by extension, why go to the effort of digging up the amulet just to make sure it landed on Angel's desk? Buffy hadn't been around for all the conversations surrounding the amulet—Angel himself had seen to that—but she had heard through the grapevine that Angel's first impulse had been to

force Spike to cross over, whatever that looked like for a vampire. More than that, had it not been for Fred, he might have found a way to do it. That the resident scientist had ethics that the rest of the team apparently did not came down to pure dumb luck.

Which begged the question, why chance it at all? Why dangle Spike in front of Angel if he was supposed to be working in opposition to him? Sense was not being made. And questions such as those were not being answered. Hell, they weren't even being asked. Not by Spike, at least, and not by her either, because Buffy wasn't sure how much she could push him on the matter. It wasn't like she had any authority where he was concerned.

Not even as his so-called girlfriend.

"Sorry about that," he'd told her when she'd called him later that night. It had been late, and though she'd already known how the thing with Angel had gone down, she'd wanted to check in with Spike. See if Doyle was still lingering nearby—gauge what sort of tabs the so-called seer was keeping on her vampire. "Kissing you, I mean. Just thought it was better to keep you out of the mix with all this."

"Out of what mix?"

"Taking on the evil law firm, of course."

"Is that what you're doing?"

"Dunno. Suppose it depends on what happens in these visions of his." There had been a pause. "Just don't fancy you getting caught in the middle, is all."

"I'm already in the middle, Spike. I am the mayor of the middle." But still, she'd understood—understood in a way she hadn't wanted to explore too much, because it meant that his feelings for Randi were... Well, she didn't know what. More complicated than was comfortable to think about, even if her

own were scattered and undefined. "But anyway, in the world according to Doyle, I am your girlfriend."

"That a problem?"

"No, just as long as you know that's not a real thing. Me being your girlfriend."

He'd sighed into the receiver. "I know, pet. Not in the right place for a girlfriend now, anyway. But seein' as you and I are friends, and you plan on dropping in from time to time, I thought it better that we have a reason. That was what popped into my head first, is all." A pause. "Not a hard sell, either. Doyle knows my history with slayers."

"You mean Buffy."

"No. Well, yeah, Buffy's the only one I've ever loved, but I've had a yen for slayers as a whole ever since I first learned they exist. Wouldn't be much for me to convince anyone that you're my kind of woman based on that alone."

She'd hesitated and licked her lips, a question popping into her brain, loud and unwelcome, but thankfully also the sort she could shove back with effort. Mostly because she didn't want the answer—didn't want to have to hear that Randi *was* Spike's kind of woman. That the only reason they weren't together now was the line she'd drawn the day he'd turned corporeal. For if anything had become clear to her over the last few weeks, it was that her heart had not been lying to her when it had broken after his death. Even if she remained confused about them, about him, half-convinced he'd decided it was better to move on, that perhaps loving Buffy Summers came at too high a price, her own feelings hadn't changed.

And while she could accept it if his had, that didn't mean it'd be fun to have a front-row seat to the Spike Moving On Show. Or that she was looking forward to the pain of his

shock and then disappointment once the charade was over and she could go back to being herself full-time.

But being Spike's fake girlfriend did provide a decent cover story for Doyle. Granted, he'd undoubtedly find Randi Joan Pratt's employment history should he go looking for it, and then Spike would have another problem on his hands, explaining why he'd withheld the Wolfram and Hart connection. But so far, the seer seemed to be taking Spike at his word—a fact that, in Buffy's opinion, was another reason to believe he was full of shit. Like psychics who couldn't give you the correct lottery numbers, seers whose visions couldn't unravel the obvious triggered her fraud alarm.

That wasn't the only thing about Doyle that got her hackles all hackly, but the only thing she could put into words. There was something else. Something much more nebulous, a thought or a memory that had fallen out of her head but left an impression of itself where it had once lived. She couldn't will the answer into existence, though, and remained hesitant to reach out to Willow or Giles for Spike reasons. So in her free time, and often while at the office, Buffy started doing some digging on her own. Research might not be her forte but she was certainly no stranger to it, especially when motivated.

And Buffy was very, very motivated.

She was also starting to feel the weight of her isolation in ways she hadn't anticipated. Part of the agreement she'd struck with Giles and the others was routine check-ins, but their phone calls were brief and rarely anything but business. There was also the steady supply of potion that kept her Randi suit in check, but Willow was busy doing coven work, and whenever they did get a chance to talk, things between them were strained, if not downright superficial. The

consensus being that Buffy was still wasting her time when she could be in Europe doing the grunt work along with everyone else—that she'd tried this Angel espionage thing and it hadn't yielded results, so shouldn't she just call it quits and go where she was actually needed? The words themselves might not be spoken but Buffy knew how to read the silences, and while she definitely didn't regret the choices she'd made or the path she'd taken, she did miss the versions of her friends, of Giles, who'd had faith in her.

Or maybe she was fooling herself. Maybe they had been illusions this entire time.

Either way, communication with the others was so regimented and fractured that when her phone started ringing late one Sunday night, she almost didn't answer, convinced it'd be a telemarketer or wrong number. But the thought was a fleeting one, cast aside quickly when paired against the reality of her quiet, lonely apartment, so she made a grab for the receiver and pressed it against her ear. "Hello?"

"Buffy." It was Giles, his voice steady and warm, triggering a homesickness so intense her stomach seized and her chest tightened. Not for him, necessarily, but the home she'd lost. The one buried under rubble, miles below sea level. "I have some... I'm sorry, how are you?"

"Hey, Giles. I'm good," she lied, maneuvering around her living room so her butt could find a sofa. "It's been a while since you called."

"Yes, well, things have been quite busy on this end, as you might imagine."

"Right," she said, telling herself not to take the bait. "How, umm, how's that going?"

"It was touch and go there for a bit, but I daresay the largest obstacles are behind us. Untangling the Council's

finances was the most pressing matter, particularly without any of its most senior members, but we were able to get in touch with the right people and commence the transfer of assets.”

“Your name’s on the account now?”

“Yours will be too, once you’re... Once you join us.”

The more direct passive-aggressive guilt trip. Maybe she should have wished for a telemarketer after all.

Thankfully, when he spoke again, it was all business. The niceties acknowledged but behind them. “Listen, Buffy, an issue has arisen that requires your attention. I am sending Andrew to Los Angeles to collect a girl called Dana Rawat.”

Buffy’s heart skipped and a dull ringing filled her ears. No. No one could come to LA. Not for some girl named Dana. Not for any reason. Not while she still had a job to do, and especially not while the world outside of this city was supposed to believe Spike was dead. “Why?”

“We have been monitoring her closely over the last few months—she was a Potential, you see, and activated when the other girls did. At the time, we decided she was best served where she was.”

“I sense a *but* coming. That no longer the case?”

“Yes, well, she’s quite unwell. Mentally unstable, prone to violent behavior.”

“Snyder used to say the same thing about me,” she said, still reeling.

“You were not institutionalized.”

Shows what you know.

Buffy bit down on the inside of her cheek to keep her inside thoughts inside, then swallowed everything back down.

“She’s in an asylum?”

“An institution,” he corrected. “It provides long-term

medical care for patients who pose a threat to themselves or others. As I said, we were quite happy to leave her there as long as there were no issues, but her behavior has become increasingly erratic over the last few weeks.”

“Define erratic.”

“The medication that kept her sedated is no longer effective, and there have been violent attacks on staff and other patients. She has nearly escaped more than once, and I personally believe it’s only a matter of time before she manages it.” There was a long sigh. “She’s a very sick girl in the care of people who do not understand her. It’s essential that we extract her immediately.”

Buffy nodded to the empty room, the rush of panic starting to subside as that quiet, almost eerie calm that had driven her during the last months on the Hellmouth assumed control. “Immediately, nine months later, that’s the same thing.”

A pause, and another sigh. “If there’s something you wish to say to me, Buffy, I’d rather you just say it. Circumstances are difficult enough without unwarranted hostility.”

“Unwarranted? You guys were going to let her just rot in an institution until she became inconvenient.”

“She was perfectly safe!”

“So which is it, Giles? Perfectly safe or a very sick girl in the care of people who don’t understand her? Because both of those things can’t be true.”

“Well, by all means, if I am cocking it up so terribly on my own, feel free to stop piddling around Los Angeles, chasing phantoms and avoiding responsibilities, and take actual charge.”

If she could, this was where she’d reach through the phone line and sock her former watcher in the eye. Since that partic-

ular ability was not among her powers, she had to settle for words. "When did you become this?"

"What?"

"*This*, Giles, when did you become this? When did you become someone who trusts Angel over me?"

"That is patently absurd. I do not trust Angel more than you. If you'll recall, I supported your decision to undergo long-term surveillance."

"Only after I twisted your arm and got Faith on board, and you don't sound very supportive now."

"Well, I'm sorry, Buffy," he replied in that not-sorry-at-all tone, "but perhaps you have neglected to realize that it has been some months since Angel assumed control at Wolfram and Hart and nothing cataclysmic has happened. Has it occurred to you that he might have a better grasp on the situation than you gave him credit?"

On second thought, it was good they were separated by oceans and continents and regular phone lines, for Buffy was suddenly angry enough she probably wouldn't pull her punches, just start swinging. "This is what I'm talking about. What happened to the Giles who made me feel like shit for not telling him Angel was back? Who reminded me that Angel tortured him for hours on end just because he was bored? Because *that* Giles would not be fine with Angel being in charge of something as big, powerful, and historically evil as Wolfram and Hart. *That* Giles would be right here with me, trying to figure out why they decided to time their handing over the keys of their entire operation to someone whose soul is not nailed in place right around when we defeated the First, but not before giving Angel their own *deus ex machina* that, if he'd worn it, would've killed him at best."

"I think you just answered your own question," Giles

replied calmly. The adult to her screaming child. "They recruited Angel with the intent to kill him."

"And when that didn't happen, they what, shrugged and said oh well? Do you know some of the stuff I've learned about him since becoming Randi Joan? How about the fact that a couple of years ago, a fully souled Angel, good guy Angel, locked Darla and Drusilla in a wine cellar with a bunch of Wolfram and Hart lawyers and let them chow down?" Her voice was rising, and she knew that was dangerous—knew there was a chance that her words were carrying beyond the walls of her apartment—but at the moment, she didn't care enough to rein herself in. "Does that seem like the kind of thing a big evil group of evil would just forgive? Roll over after a couple of years, white flag ready, and say, 'Hey, good guys! Here are the keys to the castle.' When has that ever happened, Giles? Tell me one time it's happened, because I don't know who you are anymore if you can say with a straight face that none of this is worries you."

"I never said it didn't—"

"Right, because referring to what I'm doing as 'piddling around' screams that you're concerned about what's going on here." She pinched the bridge of her nose, the space behind her eyes starting to throb. "Send Andrew. I'll keep an eye on the Dana sitch on this side and make sure it goes smoothly."

"Buffy—"

"But thanks for the reminder that even now, after I was right about Spike, about the vineyard, about everything to do with the First, and god knows how many things before that, that you still don't trust my judgment."

"You are putting words in my mouth."

"That doesn't mean they're the wrong words. Tell Andrew I'll see him when he gets here." And as there was nothing else

to say after that, she hung up before he could reply. Hung up and forced herself not to throw the phone across the room or rip the cord out of the wall or something else that would come at the cost of her security deposit.

This was the reason alone was better, she reminded herself. Even if this brand of alone was particularly isolating. There were wounds from the Hellmouth that a victory couldn't heal. Wounds she thought might just become a part of her, the way so many others had.

Only she was through being quiet about them. Through just taking whatever was lobbed her way because it was more convenient to swallow her hurt than acknowledge it. There were certain lines that couldn't be uncrossed, and all the people she loved most had made the decision to cross an important one months ago.

All except him.

And though it was stupid, though it made no sense at all, the pang that struck her at the thought was pure grief, her mind tearing itself apart with rationalizations it didn't need, reminders that Spike wasn't dead anymore. That he was somewhere right now in this city, perhaps on a mission care of Doyle to save some poor soul who had wandered too far into a world that wasn't their own. Only that didn't do her much good, for while it was true, it also wasn't. Spike was alive, but not the Spike she'd lost, the Spike who had held her those last nights of the apocalypse. The relationship they'd been building toward, the promise of everything they'd never had before and suddenly had a chance to build, had been swept away by flaming hands and a collapsing town, and what had come out of the amulet, while solidly Spike, was distant enough from the version he'd been of himself that he wasn't even trying to find her. He'd given up on Buffy, something

she'd truly never thought possible, and instead of trying to cross oceans to find her, regardless of what he thought she felt, he was running around Angel's LA, doing good, yes, but out of her reach. Close enough to touch, to kiss, but not to truly have.

And sure, she'd decided this was ultimately for the best—or rationalized it enough to convince herself that maybe she did need time to figure out what she and Spike were to each other before leaping in and making a bigger mess of things—but that didn't mean it didn't hurt. Didn't make parts of her want to scream and lash out and sob and demand that he just fucking look at her and see that she was there. Recognize her behind the glasses and the eye color and the height and all the other minute differences that had gone into compiling the Randi Joan disguise. If anyone should be able to know her—look at her and just *know*—it was Spike.

The fact that he didn't, that he hadn't, made her think he never would. And if that was the case, then perhaps all the doubts she had were there for real reasons, not just Buffy reasons. Perhaps the history she'd thought she understood, the story that was them, had never been more than mythology.

It was another lonely thought in a head already crowded full of them, only this one had the power to break her if she let it. But she had a job to do. An intuition to vindicate. And now a visit from Andrew to prepare for, all while balancing the largest secret she'd kept from her friends since they'd brought her back from the dead.

If Buffy ever did break, it would have to be on someone else's time.



IT TURNED out that Giles was right. Partially, at least. Dana Rawat was a ticking time bomb. Not two days after the phone call, a rumor tore through Wolfram and Hart that a woman exhibiting supernatural strength had escaped from a mental institution, care of a medication mix-up that left one doctor dead and several others wounded. And just like that, Angel was on the case, making plans and barking orders and rushing to the scene of the crime to do some old school investigative work.

All this together pretty much guaranteed Andrew would need to come here directly—here as in Wolfram and Hart, not Buffy's apartment—and that he'd have to talk to Angel himself, probably negotiate transferring Dana to his custody. And though she couldn't deny she was nervous about how Andrew would react when and if he learned Spike was back among the living, she was starting to think he needed to. That *she* needed him to.

All this time, she hadn't had the future in mind. When you were the Slayer, you learned to live in the present, think just to tomorrow and trust that the days that followed would make a sort of sense once you got there. But the world had changed—*she* had changed the world, enough so that she could start planning now for what came next. What her life would look like once she was done spying on Angel, what she had waiting for her on the other side of the world, and if she wanted to claim any of it. And maybe he hadn't meant to—hell, *probably* he hadn't meant to—but talking to Giles had made her realize something she likely should have seen well before now.

What was going on here was important, but so was whatever was going on in Europe. The girls being collected, absorbed into the new version of the Watchers Council, the

fundamentals being put in place. Right now, the assumption was that Buffy would take over when she joined them, but that assumption was faulty, based on a foundation of trust that no longer existed. She had to prepare for the possibility that the next fight might involve claiming her own legacy. And if it did, she needed to start firming up her allies. Andrew might not be her ideal starting point but he was the one she'd been handed, so she'd find a way to make it work.

And since the best way to get in front of Andrew was to be on the premises when he arrived, Buffy worked late the next two nights, finding pretend tasks to occupy her time while keeping an open ear for new voices, excited murmuring, or any rush of activity that wasn't common for the hour. When she wasn't doing meaningless paperwork, she focused on what she would tell Andrew when he arrived and working through the possible responses—Andrew loyal to Giles, Andrew excited to be on a secret mission for the Slayer, Andrew wetting himself with glee over Spike's resurrection, Andrew cracking under pressure the second he stepped off the plane back in England—and more besides. Plus, she needed to have a plan in place in the event he blew her cover, either here or by dropping the Spike-bomb in front of Giles, and her refrigerator supply of Randi-potion dried up as a result.

There was still so much she didn't know and so much she wanted to do.

Andrew *had* to understand that. He *had* to be on her side. She just had to get to him first. Which was why it was pushing ten o'clock on a Tuesday night and she was still in her office, sharpening pencils and staring at the walls and wishing she'd thought to pack a yo-yo to give her hands something to do. Waiting, pushing herself in circles with her rolly office

chair, because Angel's team was still on the premises, and she wouldn't go home until they did.

Maybe tomorrow she should bring a sleeping bag.

"Burnin' the midnight oil, are we?"

Buffy squeaked and seized the edge of the desk before her chair could make another circuit, her heart in her throat and the scenery in front of her more than a little lopsided. But Spike was in the doorway of her office, his eyes dancing and his mouth quirked into a grin, because of course he was. Of course he'd be here now.

"Good god," she said, shaking her head and immediately regretting it. Not the best way to make the room stop spinning. "You need a bell around your neck, you know that?"

He chuckled, the bastard. "Been told a time or two before."

"And yet, here you are. Bell-less."

"Sorry. Didn't know the dress code had changed since I last visited," he replied, helping himself into her minuscule space without waiting for permission. "Or are you trying to tell me I'm not allowed to drop in anymore?"

Buffy scowled. "Of course you... I just... I didn't expect you. It's late."

"Tried you at yours. Reckoned you were still here when no one answered."

"Oh. You know where I live?"

"Is it a secret? You know where I live."

"Right, because you gave me the address."

He rolled his eyes, sliding his hands into his duster pockets as he pushed further into the room. "Yeah, all right, I had Harm pull your info for me after the scuffle with Angel. Didn't want to lose touch."

“So naturally you wouldn’t ask me with the phone number I definitely gave you, but instead a vampire you used to bang.”

Spike smirked that devastatingly gorgeous, annoying smirk and tilted his head. “That jealousy, pet? Didn’t know it mattered to you.”

“It doesn’t,” she snapped, heat flooding her cheeks. “Just usually when you want to hang out with someone, you ask that person. You don’t go around getting favors from vampires in HR.”

“Someone oughta write these rules down. Hard to keep up with social norms when you’re dead.”

“Did you come here just to annoy me, or was there something you needed?”

He gave another low chuckle and half-sat on the edge of her desk. “Girl’s escaped the looney bin,” he told her. “Know Saint Angel’s on the case, but Doyle got one of those bloody vision memos which means it’s better if someone else gets to her first. Don’t suppose there’s anything you can share that might help a fella do that?”

Buffy drew her shoulders back. “What makes you think I know? Doesn’t your seer friend have the four-one-one?”

“Yeah, but you’re cuter than he is.”

“So he told you that the girl’s a slayer?”

Spike’s eyebrows shot upward. “Now that you mention it, that part never came up. Suppose it makes sense though, yeah? Powers having an interest in the welfare of one of their own and all, making sure the wankers here don’t get their mitts on her first.” He sighed and rose to his feet. “Fancy goin’ on a slayer hunt?”

“What?”

“Pair of us can probably track her down quicker than I

would on my own.” He paused and favored her with a look that was pure challenge. “So long as it’s not a conflict of interest or anything. Don’t reckon you for being one for company loyalty.”

Well, that would certainly help with the Andrew of it all. How better to expedite his visit if the slayer in question was already all captured by the time he arrived? Granted, it would also absolutely guarantee that Andrew would leave knowing that Spike was alive, but perhaps he needed to anyway. Buffy wouldn’t know who she could trust if she didn’t take chances.

And if it did blow her cover, well, she’d still learn something. So would Angel. So would Spike. So would everyone.

“Yeah,” Buffy said, pushing to her feet. “What does Doyle want you to do with her once she’s found?”

“Dunno. Didn’t ask.”

That wasn’t worrying or anything. “You don’t have a plan for this girl after you find her?”

“Reckon that’s the sorta thing we can worry about when we get there, yeah? Just make sure we get to her before Angel.”

Yeah, none of what she’d just heard had her doing cartwheels, but there wasn’t a great way to say as much without possibly putting Spike on the defensive. And perhaps, should they find Dana before Andrew landed, Buffy could test something else. Go to Doyle with the gift-wrapped slayer, see what he intended to do with her, and therein gauge how sincere he was in this role he’d forcibly assumed in Spike’s life. Because any answer aside from, “Make sure she gets to Buffy Summers” would all but confirm for her that he was working his own agenda and using her vampire to do it.

Buffy let out a breath and gestured at Spike, who was watching her with an intensity she’d long since given up trying to read. “Okay,” she said. “Lead the way.”

“Me? Thought you’d wanna spearhead this job.”

“Why?”

He opened his mouth, closed it, his brow knitting. “Dunno,” he replied a moment later, and she knew he was lying. He did know—the answer was there behind his eyes, present and defined. She might have called him out on it if hadn’t kept talking. “Suppose I’m just used to slayer types taking charge, is all.”

“Oh. Buffy was...all about being the leader, huh?”

Spike lifted a shoulder, grinning now. “Role she was meant for, if you ask me.”

“That good, huh?”

“The bloody best,” he replied without hesitating, then jerked his head toward the door. “Reckon we oughta start at the hospital in any case. See what we can suss out there. Or if I can pick up a scent. Hard to follow in this town but it’s better than nothing.”

She nodded, her heart doing the squeezy thing again, though she didn’t know why. He hadn’t said anything revolutionary, and certainly nothing she found all that surprising. Just enough to grab the attention of Buffy’s non-brain parts—make her think and wonder what it really meant if Spike still thought that much of her. If he believed that, yet hadn’t tried to contact her. That he was here with Randi rather than somewhere else with Buffy.

But those were the sort of thoughts that would freeze her in place, and she couldn’t afford to freeze now. Maybe later when all this was behind her and there was less at stake.

And if it mattered that this was the same thing she’d been telling herself for the better part of a decade, well, maybe that was better off ignored.



IT WASN'T LOST on her that, mission aside, Buffy was starting to truly dislike Angel. At first, she'd thought it was just her nerves on display as she navigated the strange new dynamic she'd created. It had made sense that he regarded her with suspicion and hostility, as she was, after all, one of the inherited lackeys that had come with the Wolfram and Hart takeover. She'd be distrustful of anyone she thought had voluntarily sold their soul to work for the ultimate evil, too. Hello, that sort of misgiving was the entire reason she was here.

But time had progressed, and Angel seemed to come to an understanding that the vast majority of Wolfram and Hart employees—especially the underlings like Randi Joan—weren't inherently bad people. He might treat them with caution but he'd shelved the blanket assumptions some time back. Lorne being on staff with his magical empath powers was probably a huge help.

And yet, even though Angel's opinion had shifted, his treatment of Randi Joan had not. He was bossy, dismissive if not outright condescending, often asking her to perform tasks that did not match the job description Willow had magicked up for her. It had taken some time, adjusting to this Angel from the one she was so accustomed to, and more than one attempt at rationalizing his attitude before she'd forced herself to admit that maybe her ex was just a jerk.

Like, take now, for instance. He was glowering at her rather unapologetically from across the distillery basement where she and Spike had found Dana waiting to spring a trap on whoever crossed her path. It had taken a lot of quick thinking, and she'd worried more than once that Dana might

just stake Spike in her determination to subdue him, but Buffy had managed to use the poor girl's delusions to her advantage and juice her up with her own sedative. Just in time, too, for her cellphone had started to squawk with a harassed Andrew on the other end demanding to know where she was.

For some reason it hadn't occurred to her that Andrew would call upon landing. It hadn't even occurred to her that he had her phone number. They were both lucky she'd even had her cell phone with her, more so that it hadn't been damaged in the skirmish. It was like her stake these days—something she carried with her out of habit and hadn't had much reason to use since she'd gone undercover.

Though Buffy wondered now if she ought to try to hit a cemetery every now and then. Or hell, just the streets themselves. She hadn't realized until she'd been in it with Dana how much she missed the thrill and the fight.

Then again, maybe she could settle for clocking Angel. God knew he had it coming.

"What the hell is she doing here?" he asked, storming over all self-important. As predicted, Andrew had gone straight to Wolfram and Hart upon landing in LA. Also as predicted, Angel had insisted on coming along upon learning that Dana had been subdued. But he hadn't come alone. The distillery was teeming with enough Wolfram and Hart lackeys to take up a city block, yet Angel had managed to scope her out almost immediately. "Don't you work for *me*?"

"I do," Buffy replied, trying to sound like she wasn't mentally staking him. He made it so hard these days. "I didn't realize I needed you to sign off on what I do in my downtime."

"You wouldn't if you'd choose your friends a little better," Angel retorted, all righteous and huffy, then turned his atten-

tion to Spike. "What the hell are you playing at, huh? Wes and Gunn said you turned down their offer—fine, good, whatever. But you're still sniffing around my employees?"

"And doing the job better than you while I'm at it," Spike shot back. "That what's got your knickers in a twist, pops? I grabbed the right person to sniff out this slayer of yours and beat you to the sodding punch."

"How did you know she was a slayer?"

"How the hell do you sodding think?"

Buffy shot Spike a sideways look, her mind racing, barreling toward a fast decision. One made faster by the fact that it was just a matter of seconds before Andrew meandered over and started with the theatrics at seeing Spike among the living. There was a ready-made reason why he would have come to her that might help in getting Angel off her case for at least enough time for her to come up with something better. So Buffy cleared her throat and took Spike's hand with confidence she didn't feel. "He knew because I told him," she said. "And I knew because of Andrew."

Angel blinked at her. "Andrew. You know that guy?"

"I am an activated slayer, so yeah, we've been in touch." That would at least explain why she needed to talk to Andrew one-on-one when he finally made his way over. "Andrew called me to give me a heads-up in case he needed my help once he got here. Then Spike showed up also looking for her, and since I'm on my own time, I didn't see the harm in lending a hand to my boyfriend. That's generally not the sort of thing you have to run past HR."

Now Angel's jaw fell slack. "Your boyfriend?"

"Yeah, my boyfriend," she replied firmly, heart pounding. She hadn't done this much improvising since Sunnydale, and as nerve-wracking as it was, it also felt good. The right kind of

reckless. A bunch of things she'd need to remember to keep straight for later, but more like a version of herself she'd almost forgotten existed. "Is there a problem?"

And like always, Spike didn't miss a beat, just threw his arm around her shoulders and tugged her close to kiss her temple. Complete the lie, the same way she had for him.

For a long beat, there was nothing, just silence accompanied by one of those unreadable Angel expressions as he took her in. And this, too, was familiar, slingshotting her back to a period in her life when she'd lived and died a thousand times over in moments exactly like this one. Waiting for him to talk, to give her a glimpse of what was going on behind his eyes. Something she was never fully certain she could trust but craved all the same, because anything was better than nothing, and Angel excelled at giving her nothing.

Finally, though, something shifted, and the blank canvas that was his face transformed into a smirk. "So," he said, turning to Spike, "this is what was worth staying in Los Angeles over. You haven't let Buffy know you're back because you're too busy running around my city and fucking the help?"

Buffy went rigid with a combination of shock and fury, and Spike must have sensed it, for he squeezed her shoulders. "Don't see what any business it is of yours," he replied smoothly. "And you're even thicker than I thought if you think that's all the girl is."

"Right. The help and a knockoff." Angel looked back at her, still with that condescending smirk that was somehow both foreign yet not. "Not many people would be happy playing stand-in. Your standards must be even lower than his."

And that might have been it—the moment she broke cover just for the satisfaction of punching the smug off his face. She could feel it, her anger and resentment coalescing

into something she didn't have the bandwidth to rein in, and she knew the second she swung would be the second everything she'd been building over the last few months unraveled. There would be no future at Wolfram and Hart for Randi Joan if she attacked the boss, and god, even knowing that, she could convince herself it was worth it just for the satisfaction of watching Angel's dawning horror when he realized who he'd been fucking with this entire time.

But before her body could make that decision for her, a high-pitched shriek pierced the air and someone who looked an awful lot like Andrew in a bad wig was rushing over, his eyes wide and brimming with tears. And the moment was over, barreling hard into the one that followed. The one where Spike barely had a chance to swear before Andrew crashed into him hard enough to force him away from Buffy and nearly to the concrete floor.

"I had no idea," Andrew was gushing. "No one told me you would be here. But this is fantastic, Spike." He pulled back and cupped Spike's startled face between his hands like he meant to kiss him. "It makes so much sense. All the things that didn't before. Like, hello, sticking around for a little while made sense to me, but after all this time... The things people are saying. But now I know—"

But before he could share what he knew, a couple of things happened in quick succession. The first being that Buffy aimed a kick into his shin with enough force that she experienced a stab of guilt when he gave a wail and began hopping on his good foot. At nearly the exact same beat, Spike stumbled forward like he'd been shoved, careening into Andrew and almost sending him sprawling onto the ground. Buffy managed to snatch up a fistful of his oversized suit before he could lose his balance altogether and helped him

find his footing with what she hoped passed for an air of casual concern. Just an ordinary citizen doing her part to keep people from suffering unnecessary injuries.

And never mind that her mind was spinning again. She knew why *she* had stopped Andrew from finishing his thought, but what the hell was Spike so worried about?

"Ow," Andrew hissed in his loud, grating voice. "Was that called for? Really?"

"What the hell?" Angel demanded, pushing forward to get into Spike's space. "What are you thinking?"

"Can't a man trip in peace?" Spike replied gruffly, rolling his eyes and stepping back. "Got nicked by the girl's drug, all right? The lot of you are lucky I'm standing at all."

"You did?" Buffy asked, some of the pressure on her chest sliding away.

"Yeah. It's what happens when you're the *bait*, love."

"You okay?"

"Nothin' a smoke and a nip of blood won't cure," he assured her, now with a soft smile that made her heart skip for a completely different reason. It was a look he'd given her before, before when she'd been Buffy. "You saved the day right nice for me. It's what you hero-types do." He paused, then shifted his attention to Andrew, who was busy straightening imaginary wrinkles out of his Giles costume. "Ain't that right, Andrew? Randi might've decided not to join the team, but she's got the stuff where it counts."

Andrew looked up at that, his eyes still large and wild, but softening all over again when they landed on Spike. Then the words themselves seemed to hit him and he went ramrod straight, imaginary wrinkles forgotten. "Right," he agreed, nodding. "*Randi*. She has the stuff. And Spike...is alive. And helping Randi."

“Other way around,” Spike muttered.

“Someone catch me up here,” Angel said, glancing between them. “How do you two know each other?”

There was a beat. Spike looked at Andrew and Andrew looked back, glanced at Buffy as though awaiting direction, which was a good sign except not now, when she needed him to be thinking faster on his feet, or at least putting two and two together. Just as the silence had stretched on a hair too long, Andrew turned to Angel and answered, loudly, “Spike and I saved the world together. Only the last I heard, he went all pillar of glory at the Hellmouth. I had no idea he was working for you.” He paused then, and it was like watching one of those old timey cartoons where a lightbulb went on over a character’s head. “I had no idea... So Mr. Giles has no idea. I... I see...”

“Why would Giles know?” Angel retorted with a snort. “Despite talking a big game, it’s not like Spike’s been brave enough to let anyone outside California know that he’s back. Granted, he *was* all gung-ho about taking off to reunite with Buffy right up until that was actually an option for him. Then, I don’t know what happened, either he faced reality or chickened out, but he’s been a thorn in my side, in my city, ever since.”

Andrew nodded as though he were listening, but Buffy had seen that particular nod before. Paired the slightly glazed quality to his eyes and it was a safe bet he was far off somewhere, if not putting pieces together then at least playing with them to try to make them fit. At length, he gave his head a shake as though to snap back to himself and plastered on a smile. “Well,” he said, looking now to Buffy. “Miss...Randi. Sorry, I forget your name. I could use your assistance, umm,

making sure Dana's restraints are...restrainty enough for travel."

"Wait, travel?" Angel demanded, the sneer out of his sails, or however the saying went. "What do you mean, travel?"

And then, despite all odds, Andrew surprised her. Both in the look he threw Angel and the absolute lack of...well, Andrewisms. As in the ones he'd had on full display not ten seconds earlier. Suddenly, the uncertainty, the inelegance, the downright goofiness that she had come to expect from him was gone, and in its place a calm, patient smile in the face of someone Andrew had to know could rip him limb from limb in easy seconds if the mood seized him. The transformation was so startling, so complete, it took Buffy more than a few heartbeats to realize exactly what she was seeing.

"I mean," Andrew said, "that Dana is coming with me."

"I didn't authorize that."

"Since I didn't ask, I would be surprised if you had."

"Bloody hell, this one grew some stones while he was away," Spike noted, grinning now himself. He moved forward and clapped Andrew hard on the shoulder—Andrew's face did contort in such a way it was almost indecent, proving he was in fact still somewhere inside the competent adult costume he had decided to try on—then aimed a smirk at Angel. "Just goes to show even the big boss man of Wolfram and Hart can't always get his way."

"She stays," Angel said, keeping his gaze on Andrew. "We have the resources to take care of her here. Make sure—"

"It might be hard for you to hear, but this isn't your call," Andrew said. "Why do you think I traveled all this way?"

"No one asked you to do that."

"No one had to."

Angel opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again. He

was floundering fast. "You are way out of your league. I'll just clear this with Buffy."

"Where do you think my orders came from?" Andrew replied. Even more impressively, replying without sliding his gaze to Buffy and back. This truly was a new man. "News flash—nobody in our camp trusts you anymore. Nobody. You work for Wolfram and Hart. Now, we can do this the easy way, but if you want to play football—"

"Hardball," Buffy muttered.

"—hardball," he corrected without missing a beat, "then I can play. You don't think Mr. Giles just sent me by myself, do you? I knew Bu—Randi would be here so I didn't see the need to bring an entourage, but if you insist, I can have twelve vampyre slayers—twelve vampyre slayers who haven't dated you, by the way—here within a matter of minutes. It's your call."

There was a beat. Then another. In the third, Angel moved with the speed and fluidity that betrayed him as something other than human, turning from Andrew to the woman he knew as Randi and favoring her with a look of such utter contempt it hit her with the power of a physical blow, a punch to the gut. Buffy had known Angel for a long time now, good and evil, boyfriend and ex, man she loved and man she was trying to get over, and not once in any of those iterations had he ever regarded her with anything—an expression, a remark, an action—that made her feel...she didn't even know what, but *this*. Whatever *this* was. She hadn't known he could do that, and she didn't have time to adjust to her new reality before he was speaking. Throwing more of that venom in her face.

"Are you just determined to undermine me at every turn?" he asked softly. "When were you going to share any of this?"

If she weren't so startled, she might have laughed. Was he serious?

"Are you serious?"

"Do I look serious?"

"You look ridiculous. You're seriously going to contort yourself into believing this is *my* fault?"

"You work for *me*."

"Yeah," Buffy spat. "And I know just how much you appreciate all the long hours I put in. Do you even know my last name? The department I'm in now? How about what I do all day?"

"That's not the point," Angel all but growled, his jaw tight enough to crack.

"Oh please, tell me what is."

He pointed a meaty finger in Andrew's direction without tearing his eyes from hers. "You've been in contact with the Council this entire time, knew that he was coming, and decided not to tell me, your boss, knowing that I was out here busting my ass looking for this girl. Now I've wasted time, and—"

"Wasted time? Is that what you call helping people these days?" She crossed her arms, feeling wild and reckless and more than owed it. "Here I thought you were supposed to be some big hero. Well, *boss*, the most I can say is, so sorry you inconvenienced yourself into trying to find a sick girl with superpowers that you can't exploit. But maybe this is exactly why Buffy sent someone here."

"Am I really going to get a lesson in ethics from someone who's been working at Wolfram and Hart for years? Don't act like you have a moral ground to stand on, *Pratt*, because I know better. And yes, I do know your name."

"Good. We'll give you a gold star. And I know you're

enjoying the view from your high horse, but it might do you good to remember the people who live on the ground level don't always get multimillion dollar law firms gifted to them with a garage-full of fancy cars and private jets." Her brain had lost radio contact with her mouth—they were running completely separate agendas now, and she had no idea where the reins even were to try to pull them. Just suddenly every bit of penny pinching and burger flipping and bill-worrying she'd done since clawing from the grave was in her throat, on her tongue, spilling out before she could reflect on the words her anger had decided to form to decide if she even agreed with them. "But when I'm buying off-brand cereal and checking my bread for mold, I'll be sure to think about the ethical sacrifice you have to make in order to go to sleep in your million-dollar penthouse with a clear conscience while the rest of us plebes do what we can to survive to our next paycheck." She turned to Andrew, whose uncharacteristic poise had melted into a very characteristic slack-jawed stare. "Isn't there a slayer we need to be preparing for travel?"

Andrew nodded dazedly, then blinked and snapped back to attention. "Yes. Erm, right. Thank you, Miss Pratt. If you would follow me..."

Buffy turned and fell into step beside Andrew—or rather, forced Andrew to fall into step beside her as she used her longer-than-usual legs to burn as much distance as possible between her and Angel, all the while fully expecting him to seize her by the arm to halt her or yell something at her retreating back—"You're fired!" being the most likely. Only when she hazarded a glance over her shoulder, she found Angel exactly where she'd left him, staring at her impassively and ignoring Spike, who had started yammering the second she'd taken the first step.

Beside her, Andrew was breathing hard. "Oh my Gandalf," he panted. "Slow down, will you? I'm pretty sure I'm supposed to be in charge here?"

That was perfectly reasonable, and considering the vampires were right where she'd left them, safe enough to put into practice. Buffy forced her legs to cool it with the workout, and just in time too. They had crossed the pavement to the ambulance where Dana was being loaded by EMTs.

"They're my—*our* guys," Andrew said, seeming to anticipate her next question. "Giles thought it better that we be ultra prepared in case... Well, in case *that* happened." He nodded showily over her shoulder. "Speaking of, have you lost your ever-loving marbles? I thought you were supposed to be James Bonding over here. Hello, stealth warning! I know I'm new to the team and everything, but going off on your ex-boyfriend like that might be a bad idea when you're trying to fly under the radar!"

The worst part was she couldn't even be mad at him. He was entirely right. "How fired do you think I am?"

"Like, majorly."

"Well, there goes Randi," she muttered, running a hand through her hair. It was a strange thing, knowing she had just lobbed a grenade in the whole operation, knowing that regret was waiting there for her once adrenaline stopped doing its thing and she crashed unceremoniously back to planet earth, but for the moment, she was buzzing with righteous indignation and enough raw energy to power a hydrogen bomb. If nothing else, she could definitely say the part of her forever waiting for Angel was dead, buried, and rotting. The guy she'd gotten to know was not someone she could imagine feeling anything other than a low buzz of annoyance. Angel treated the people he respected differently from the people he didn't,

and sure, that was probably one of those universal things, and even more sure, he had reason to suspect her for being at Wolfram and Hart in the first place, but at the same time, it wasn't like he was exactly in a position to pass judgment. It also wasn't like he treated the other Wolfram and Hart lackeys, even Eve with her whole probably-a-bad-guy thing, with the same derision. It was something he reserved for Randi and Randi alone.

So, yeah, when the penny dropped, she was going to be in Regretsville, Population: Buffy Summers over the loss of her cover. But here, right now, burning with fury and fire and fighting off the urge to storm back and (re)introduce his face to her knuckles, she felt the good kind of reckless. Like maybe she *had* just thrown away the last few months, but it was okay because it hadn't been a waste. It had enabled her to release the part of herself she'd kept on hold for Angel.

But now she needed to start thinking about what came next. Especially if it happened to arrive as soon as tomorrow.

"Still," Andrew said as they drew to a stop beside the ambulance, "it was very Elizabeth Bennet of you, taking on Angel like that."

"Elizabeth Bennet?"

He nodded and stuck out his chin a bit. "Since I am now English, it is upon me to read the English classics. Plus, I might have stayed up all night watching that BBC miniseries immediately after we set up shop. Colin Firth is...commanding."

Buffy bit the inside of her cheek to stave off the smirk that wanted to form, and definitely made a point of swallowing the observation that her mother had said the same thing once. "I'll take your word for it."

"But I mean it, though. He was all 'listen here, missy' and

you were like ‘nuh-uh, *you* listen’ and then just trampled him.” Andrew crossed his arms, gazing over her shoulder in the direction of the vampires she’d left behind. “Honestly, Spike? Way cooler, and when he goes for threatening, it doesn’t feel like you’re being sent to your room.”

“Andrew—”

“And speaking of...” He dropped his arms and the wistful expression on his face to pin her with a stare. “Giles didn’t tell me he was back or anything which makes me think maybe he doesn’t know, and that’s on purpose?”

“Giles and I don’t exactly see eye-to-eye anymore,” Buffy said cautiously. “He thought—a lot of them thought—that I was just doing this because of what happened in the last battle. So Spike coming back the way he did—”

“How *did* he come back?”

“Jury’s still out on that but someone’s trying to take credit.” She hesitated, debating the path forward, though there wasn’t much to consider. The Rubicon had already been crossed in more ways than one. “I just didn’t think they’d think I was up for the task if Spike was involved. You were out with the girls when I pitched this whole thing to the gang but there was...doubt. The only reason any of them signed on was Faith thought it was a good idea so everyone else band-wagoned. They thought I was vendetta girl against Angel because Spike died, so if they knew he was back...”

Andrew held up a hand, shifting once more into that uncanny valley version of himself that threatened to give her double vision. “Say no more. He’s the Han to your Leia and if you need a Wookiee to strangle Lando, I can be that Wookiee. Except if Angel is Lando, because, you know, the breathing thing. And the strength thing. And the... Okay, so I’m a shitty Wookiee, but I’m working on becoming better.”

She wasn't sure she'd followed him around that analogy. "Angel's not who I'm worried about...in this case. He already knows Spike is back."

"Plus you're super fired." Andrew furrowed his brow.

"But in the event I'm not—"

"Oh, you are."

"But if I'm *not*, I need to know that when you go back..." Buffy held his gaze, willing him to just get it without her needing to say anything. Unfortunately, she and Andrew had never had that sort of relationship and all she earned for her efforts was a blank, expectant look. "I need to know that you're not going to give the others a reason to think I need to be yanked off this thing. Even if I'm fired, there's still stuff I can do here to keep an eye on Angel. Only I can't do that if Giles or Willow think I'm too...emotional. Willow especially."

Andrew stared at her for a moment longer in clear confusion, and then, mercifully, the clouds parted. "You want me to be *your* spy," he said in a rush. "Like double-agent within the Council."

That wasn't what she'd said, but hell, if it had him excited, she could work with it. "Well, I'm not *against* the Council or the others. I just know they don't trust me."

"And that's stupid."

Her heart leaped. "It is?"

"Of course. Like I said, you're Leia. No, no. Not Leia. You're Mon Mothma. And Giles is a good Admiral Ackbar, but we all know Mon Mothma's in charge." Andrew was practically bouncing by the time he finished talking. "But this is perfect. I'm the Bothan you recruited to bring you information. Except one of the ones that didn't die, because, well, it's not like Giles is the Empire. And also, I can't die now." He gestured at himself. "I got too cool."

If ever Buffy had wished she'd been more into science fiction, it was now. Andrew was speaking a language she just didn't understand, but he seemed to be speaking in her favor, and she supposed that was the important takeaway. He didn't need convincing. "So...we're good?"

Andrew nodded with unbridled enthusiasm. "We're good. I will be the best Bothan for you."

"Thanks, Andrew." Buffy licked her lips then, at last released the tension that had stretched across her shoulders. That was one hurdle down, at least. "And...make sure she gets the care she needs," she added, nodding at the ambulance. "What happened to her isn't her fault."

"I will," he promised, and then saluted her to make it extra weird, and god, she hoped Angel wasn't watching, but he probably was. Hopefully he'd just think it was a random Andrew thing. "May the Force Be With You."

"You too," Buffy said.

Andrew beamed at her, and despite herself, she grinned back.

At the very least, she wasn't alone anymore. And that mattered a whole lot.

RUN AND HIDE, BUT A FACE WILL
STILL PURSUE YOU

SOMEHOW, SHE WASN'T FIRED.

It was one of those things she knew she should question because there was no way Angel would just let everything she'd lobbed at him roll off his back. He'd been on her case since Day One, and if she'd learned nothing else in her time here, it was that he knew how to hold a grudge. But when she returned to her apartment after seeing Andrew and Dana safely off, the answering machine registered no new messages.

So the next morning, Buffy decided to press her luck and get ready as though it was another regular workday. Brown from the closet, a nip of Willow's magic potion, the day's allotment poured into a thermos, a cursory glance in the mirror before setting out. Fully expecting that when she arrived at Wolfram and Hart, it would be to news that her credentials had been revoked and they would send her whatever they found in her desk by the end of the week, *if* she was lucky. More likely they'd just confiscate or destroy anything they found that wasn't already theirs.

But no one stopped her when she stepped through the doors. No one called after her as she made her way to the bank of elevators. No one looked surprised to see her wandering the halls toward her office. One of the other paralegals even offered a grin, a good morning, and gave a reminder that today was a mandatory lunch meeting during which they would review the list of acceptable workplace hexes.

Buffy just nodded, dazed, then shut herself inside her office.

Okay, so, maybe Angel wanted to do the firing in person. Make a big production out of it. Set an example of what happened when you crossed the boss-man, lest any of the other underlings decide to follow in Buffy's footsteps.

The day wore on, though, only remarkable in how unremarkable it was. There was the curse review luncheon (curses on fellow employees should be limited to the employee, not their family, unless authorized by a senior member of staff), some research on a specific set of demonic burial rites, and a bunch of busywork that was as advertised. Even still, Buffy felt like she half-assed more than usual, distracted as she was every time she heard someone moving in the hall outside her office, or her phone rang, or her inbox dinged with another email. It wasn't until the sun was well on its way toward setting that she allowed herself to wonder if Angel was just going to drag out the termination for kicks, or if this was his way of getting back at her. Not firing her but also not acknowledging what had transpired to make her think she was a candidate for unemployment.

Honestly, by the time her inner slayer alarm system triggered the *vampire nearby* tingles, it was almost a relief.

That was until she looked up and saw Harmony in her doorway rather than Angel.

"I just want you to know that I could get him back any time I wanted," she said by way of greeting, the words rushing out as though in a race. "But I won't because it's not—you're not special. Whatever he tells you."

Buffy just blinked. "What?"

"He'll never be over *her*," Harmony went on, crossing her arms and giving an exaggerated roll of her eyes. "So do yourself a favor and don't read anything into it, okay?"

"Read anything into *what*? What the hell are you talking about?"

"Duh. Spike."

"What about Spike?" Except the fact that it was getting around that Randi was his girlfriend, which meant Angel had to have said something about the previous night's ordeal. How *that* had managed to be the takeaway headline, she had no idea.

The forced disdain on Harmony's face faltered, then faded into a frown. "Wait, you don't know?"

"Know what?"

"He didn't even *tell* you?"

Was there a reason she'd never staked Harmony? If there was, she was struggling to remember it. "Tell me *what*?"

"Spike. He came by today."

Well, that was certainly news to her. Spike usually made a point of dropping in for a visit on the days his whatever-work brought him to Wolfram and Hart. Buffy swallowed, shoving down the questions suddenly overcrowding her head. "Okay. Good for him."

"To save your job? Hello?"

"Huh?"

Harmony rolled her eyes. "Wow, I am so wasting my time. If he didn't even tell you, then what the hell do I care?"

That was it—the end of her tether, the place where thought departed and instinct took over. Buffy didn't remember grabbing the letter opener off her desk, didn't register flying across the scant space, only knew she'd been on one side of the room just a second ago and now she was on the other, with Harmony pinned against the wall, makeshift blade held to her throat. Watching, with more than just a little gratification, as the smug disdain became something else. Something more like the fear Buffy was used to striking in the hearts of vampires, demons, and whatever else thought it could fuck with her.

To Harmony's credit—a sentence that had never once lived in Buffy's head—she tried to recover, masking her fear with bluster. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" she asked in her haughtiest tone, belied by the wobbling of her chin and the panicked rattle in her voice.

"You know I'm a slayer, right?" Buffy asked perkily. "Like, a *vampire* slayer. Pretty sure that's gotten around."

"Well, sorry to break it to you, but that thing is metal." Harmony made a show of glancing down at the letter opener, her face pulling in an exaggerated frown as she tried to keep from brushing her skin against it. "You can't stake me with it."

"Hence why I have it positioned at your throat and not your heart, you doofus."

Now Harmony's lips were shaking too, like she might start blubbering. "I am not a doofus, you're a doofus."

"Whatever. Just tell me what Spike did that involves my job."

"Or what?"

“What do you mean, or what? Or I start sawing, that’s what.”

Harmony glared at her, that solid mean-girl glare she’d perfected when life had been simpler for both of them, but she dropped it before Buffy could apply any pressure to the letter opener. “It’s not like it matters,” she said. “He just told Angel that he can’t fire you because then *Buffy* will have even less reason to trust him. That’s why he did it—*Buffy*. So don’t go getting any ideas that Spike gives a damn about you or anything. With him, it’s always about ‘the real slayer.’ He’ll just fuck you a few hundred times then tell you to get lost.”

Buffy blinked again, her heart stuttering. That was the reason she hadn’t been fired? Spike had gone to bat for her? Why? She would have thought he’d be happy to get her out of here, the way he felt about Wolfram and Hart. Particularly *her* working here, his friend Randi.

God, he was the most confusing man on the planet.

“Well?” Harmony demanded, her shrill voice slicing through the noise in Buffy’s head. “You can let me go now!”

She supposed she could. “Why would Spike want me to keep my job?” she asked instead.

“How the hell should I know?” Harmony wiggled a little as though to test the amount of force being used to keep her pinned to the wall, and whimpered when Buffy pushed her back into place. “I don’t know, I swear. Probably something else to do with his sick slayer fixation. I wouldn’t put it past him.”

“Put *what* past him?”

“Use you to get to her. Get you to tell him things he can pass on to *her*. I told you, it’s all about Buffy with him. He’ll fuck you and he’ll talk sweet to you and promise to take you

to Paris, but he doesn't mean a word. He's not yours. He never will be as long as she's around."

Oh. For whatever reason, she hadn't expected that—the words themselves or how they were spoken. The pain there. The hurt that hadn't healed. She also hadn't expected her heart to twist, to feel anything resembling pity, but suddenly, and without warning, that was all she could feel. In truth, Buffy had never given Harmony all that much consideration as a vampire—more like a walking punchline. A joke some vampire had played on their own kind without realizing it, one made even funnier once Spike had decided to make her his Drusilla rebound.

Suddenly, though, the whole thing wasn't funny anymore. More just sad. And Buffy had not signed up for anything *sad* where Harmony was concerned. "You really love him, don't you?" she asked softly, finally relaxing her hold and stepping back. "Spike."

"Ugh, *no*," Harmony replied with a scoff, though she was quick to look away, patting her collarbone as though to assure herself she hadn't been cut open. "I don't love him."

"But you did."

"I thought slayers didn't think vampires could love without one of those stupid soul things."

The pang that hit her this time was more familiar, but no less pang-y because of it. "Those slayers are stupid," Buffy said. "I know vampires can love. It's not... It might not be the same way people love, but it's love. And sometimes you love the wrong people."

"Spike is definitely the wrong people," Harmony agreed. "He didn't appreciate me when he had me, and now that he's back, he pretends like I don't exist."

Buffy arched an eyebrow in spite of herself. "Didn't you

come in here saying you could get him back whenever you wanted?"

"Well, I *could*. I just don't want to." Harmony tossed her hair over her shoulder in a move so practiced she somehow managed to make it look natural. "Because it'd be the same thing all over again. Spike being gaga over the *Slayer* like some big freaky freak of nature, and yeah, he's great at sex, but a woman has standards, you know? As long as Buffy's alive, no one else will matter to him." There was a pause, then Harmony's eyes bulged, and a smile broke across her face. "Wait. I've got it! You could kill her!"

"Kill Buffy?"

"Yeah! I've tried bunches of times, and while I came really close, she was always able to find a way to stay alive." She rolled her eyes again. "But you? You're a slayer! Buffy would never see that coming!"

She would have laughed, almost did, but she didn't want to have to explain the joke. Nor did she want to examine why she was amused rather than annoyed all over again that Harmony had managed to swing from wanting Randi dead to wanting Randi's help to make Buffy dead. It all seemed right in a Sunnydale way.

"Yeah, but then Angel wouldn't have any reason to *not* fire me," Buffy replied instead. "And if he fired me, I'd have to tell him it was your idea and then he'd fire you too."

"Oh. Good point." Harmony frowned, then glanced around the small office as though she'd misplaced her reason for coming in here. "So, umm, I'm gonna go. Just remember what I said."

"Which part?"

"Duh. All of it." And with that parting scoff, Harmony turned and sashayed back into the hall.

The really annoying thing was Buffy probably would remember all of it—the ridiculous stuff and the informative stuff alike. Her mind wasn't likely to shut down anytime soon or stop wondering why Spike had gone out of his way to advocate that Randi remained employed at a place he didn't trust. It would deepen and fester, and while there was no reason not to just ask him the next time they were together, something in her urged caution.

Just damned if she knew what.



BUFFY WOULD HAVE LIKED to have said that she didn't owe her *aha* moment to having nothing better to do on a Friday night, but that was exactly what happened.

The rest of the week progressed without incident...or contact from Spike, something she tried not to over-analyze, particularly with what she'd learned from Harmony. But it was there, lingering in the back of her mind, the urge to call him and see if he fessed up to his role in her continued employment or was planning on playing dumb, and to what end. If he was looking out for her as a friend, if he had a vested interest in her remaining at Wolfram and Hart or if there was another option she just couldn't see at the moment. And if that option was the sort that had teeth, that could bite and tear into her and make her hurt.

Not that *hurt* was the default, just what history had taught her to expect when people didn't tell her things. And deciding she'd had her fill of vampires and watchers and slayers alike, Buffy swung by a movie rental place on her way home once set free for the weekend. Wandered down through the comedy aisle because god knew she could use a good laugh,

and found herself debating the virtues of *Uncle Buck* over *When Harry Met Sally* and if she could handle a romance in her current mindset. Then if the scene she was thinking of in *Uncle Buck* was actually in *Uncle Buck* or if that was *Planes, Trains, & Automobiles*, and how that was one Thanksgiving tradition that had died with her mom, watching that movie. How she and Dawn would look forward to it especially because it was rated R but in a mom-approved way—and only for one decidedly hilarious scene—and how the last time they'd watched it had been before she'd graduated, because the final two years that her mother had been alive had been aberrations. That last year, she'd been in recovery from surgery and not up for much of anything; the year before, she'd left Buffy and Dawn to fend for themselves, which had turned into hellmouth shenanigans care of, well, the hellmouth shenanigans.

And Angel had been there then, too. Lurking in the shadows much the way Buffy was doing now—only he'd had no good reason and she had a great reason, thanks—and how angry that had made her. That he'd come skulking around her town just because a friend of his had had a vision of her in peril, like that didn't happen at least thirty-seven times a week, anyway. If he cared so much, maybe moving away from the hotbed of paranormal action wasn't the best idea, now was it? Even the Powers had thought he needed to be in her life, if the memo they'd sent his friend was any indication.

His friend. The guy in the office she'd met for all of three seconds.

Buffy stood there, holding *Uncle Buck* in one hand and *When Harry Met Sally* in the other, her brain whirring and her heart pounding and that was it. That was *it*. That was why Doyle was familiar—the story, at least, not the man. Because

the Doyle she'd met in Spike's apartment was not the Doyle she'd met at Angel's first office.

Someone was revisiting the greatest hits of Angel's LA past and trying to...what, get Spike to do a cover? All while convincing him that the music and lyrics were original? Stringing him along so that he would...what?

Whatever the answer, it couldn't be anything good. Probably was about Angel. No, scratch that. Definitely about Angel. Doyle, visions, how so many of those visions put him in Angel's path. Someone was using Spike to get to Angel.

And Buffy had no idea who.

Even less, how to begin to tell Spike that the work he was doing was in service of a charlatan who had, if not a grudge, then definitely an agenda of his own.

It was times like this that her isolation sucked the most. She had nowhere to turn for help. Not without jeopardizing everything else—and it would. She knew it would.

She was completely alone.



WELL, not completely alone. There was Andrew, working diligently behind the scenes as her *Bothan* in *Imperial* territory, the way he wrote it in the emails they were now exchanging. She passed on what she could to him, though she cautioned him against being overly zealous in whatever digging he did—the Spike part of the equation needing to remain a secret. Beyond Andrew, though, there was someone else, even if that someone else was in a coma and couldn't do much more than lie there as Buffy rambled. But rambling had kinda-sorta helped before, and maybe it would again. And even if it didn't, well, she needed to go somewhere.

Needed to talk this out, hear the words in the air and not just in her head. It was too big to live inside her and nowhere else. A weekend of dissecting it, reassembling it, and breaking it down again had been enough to teach her that.

So on Monday morning, Buffy made a point to leave for the office early. It had been more than a week since she'd stopped by the hospital, anyway, and even though she knew that her fly-bys were more for herself than the patient, she couldn't help but experience a stab of guilt all the same. To her knowledge, Cordelia didn't get visitors, everyone at Wolfram and Hart being busy with the management of the evil law firm. Or staying away because of guilt, maybe. Buffy hadn't quite figured that one out yet, and she was on thin enough ice to know not to pry.

And damn, she never had brought the flowers she'd promised.

Even with the magical doohickey Willow had supplied her with to help her evade notice, Buffy usually took care in negotiating her way to Cordelia's room. Today, though, she didn't bother, too focused on the Spike/Doyle conundrum to give it much consideration. It wasn't until she'd entered the room and turned to close the door that she realized anything was amiss.

Anything being Cordelia.

Who was awake.

For a long beat, Buffy just stared at her, this face she knew so well, dazed and waxen, her hair hanging lifelessly around her in a miserable halo. The possibility of Cordelia ever opening her eyes again had been so far off her radar she'd never accounted for what she might do, and now everything that had been crowding her brain for more than forty-eight

hours had blanked out. None of it mattered because all that mattered was this.

Finally, Cordelia lifted a hand, the movement slow and aimless. Then she parted her chapped lips and croaked a feeble, "Water?" and Buffy's paralysis broke.

"Water," she repeated eagerly. "Yes, I can get you that. Hold on. I'll go get someone—"

"No." The hand she had raised flopped unceremoniously back to the hospital bed. "No, don't."

"Don't... Don't get water?"

"Don't...tell." She made a face as though pained, and she probably was. "Buffy?"

Buffy froze all over again, this time running cold with panic. But then she glanced down and saw the hands attached to her arms were Randi hands, not Buffy. Reminded herself she was wearing snug-fitting Randi clothes that were two-sizes too big for Buffy and made for taller people. "H-how did you know?"

"Vision." Cordelia flicked her eyes to the door, and there was no mistaking it now. The alarm. The fear. "Out... Got to get me...*out*. Before."

Nearly a decade of living between crises told her that now was not the time to ask *before what*. Now was the time to move, and if the urgency in Cordelia's eyes was anything to go by, move fast. In an instant, Buffy was at her bedside, detaching the wires that had been responsible for monitoring her vitals and throwing her arm under Cordelia's shoulders to help her sit up. Mapping the way out of the hospital as best she could, trying hard to ignore the voice that whispered there was no way she was going to make it without being caught, because that voice was not helpful.

One thing at a time.

Once Cordelia was on her wobbly feet, hissing as she applied pressure to muscles that had likely atrophied to some extent, Buffy edged toward the door. Eased it open to peer into the hall, gauge how many people-shaped obstacles stood between her and the nearest stairwell. The magical enhancement Willow had provided had been for one person, not two, and likely not to be of much help in getting out of here. A tall someone was far enough down to her right she doubted whoever it was would be able to clearly see them at this distance; to her left came a gaggle of voices that seemed to be wandering in this direction, and maybe she should wait but waiting meant not moving and Buffy needed to move. Fast decision then. She swooped Cordelia into a bridal carry and began walking briskly—walking being less noticeable than running—toward the vague could-be-a-doctor at the right. She had maybe twenty feet to go before she hit the stairwell.

“Hurry,” Cordelia whispered hoarsely.

Buffy didn’t reply, wary, instead crossed to the other side of the hall as the stairwell door came into sight. She was close enough now to see the person at the end was likely a man, and one who had his back to them, head bowed as though looking over something in his hands. The voices behind them were somehow both closer and not, and her heart was pounding in her ears, and Cordelia dug her fingers into her shoulders with an almost shocking amount of strength, and then *yes*, they were there. Buffy pressed her back to the door to open it, then slipped inside.

“All right,” she said, breathing hard. “You okay if I start running?”

Cordelia didn’t nod so much as whimper, which Buffy decided to interpret as *run like fucking hell*.

So that’s exactly what she did.



“WE HAVE A PROBLEM.”

Spike didn’t bother glancing up from the television, despite the fact that he couldn’t remember what the bloody hell was going on in this scene or even who the characters were. Get out of soaps for a day and it takes an age to catch up; get out for a couple of years and good bloody luck. But he liked *Passions* well enough to give it a try, despite the storylines not being as entertaining as he remembered. Or maybe his mind had just been emptier then, consumed only by the disease that was loving the enemy and the crushing knowledge that he was doomed because of it.

Simpler times, those.

“Hello?” Doyle said, stomping forward. “Did you hear me? We have a problem.”

“Course I heard you,” Spike replied. “Just don’t care all that much, especially when you just let yourself into the place. Ever heard of knocking?”

“Need I remind you that I’m the reason you even have an apartment? Be grateful I don’t demand rent.”

Spike rolled his eyes. “Some Powers poster boy you’ve turned out to be.”

“You have a problem, file a complaint. Until then, there are bigger fish to fry. Specifically your girlfriend.”

Well, that bloody did it. Spike sat forward, switched the telly on mute. “Randi?”

“Yeah, *Randi*. She just kidnapped someone. A very high-profile someone.”

Then she probably had a very high-profile reason. Not that he would know, seeing as he’d made a conscious effort to give her space following the debacle with the renegade slayer.

It had just seemed right, what with Andrew having swooped in and the like, and her being on the outs with Angel. No matter how delicious it had been to watch, Spike understood that the argument she'd had with the big wanker would have left her shaken, likely for an assortment of reasons, some regarding whatever her mission was and others personal. The personal sort not being ones Spike wanted to consider all that much, just knew they had to be there.

But balls, if she'd been planning a sodding heist this entire time and he'd left her to pull it off on her own...

"I'm sure the lady has her reasons," he told Doyle now. "Who'd she snag?"

"Cordelia Chase."

"Angel's bird who's in a coma?"

Doyle shook his head, and for the first time since he'd arrived, Spike took in the man's wild eyes, the expression that wasn't too far behind. Something was off. There had been a lot of unexpected visits since Doyle had worked his way into Spike's life—a lot of visions he'd received on a dime that demanded immediate attention—but he'd never shown up in a sodding panic before. Never appeared anything but in control, if not a little urgent.

"She woke up," Doyle said. "Or that's what we think. If you know where she'd go, now's the time to get there, before Angel finds her."

Spike was on his feet in an instant, his chest lurching. "He knows?"

"Yes, he knows."

Which meant Buffy was in trouble. The sort of trouble she might not be able to talk herself out of—the sort that Angel might decide required a wet-works team or something similar. Enough firepower to take down a slayer. Buffy could

handle herself just fine but if she was outnumbered, surrounded, she'd find herself in a corner right quick. "Right," he muttered, then turned and started for the door. "I'll get to her. Thanks, mate."

"Wait, there's something else you need to know."

He groaned and whirled back around, not bothering to contain his growl. "Well, bloody spill it. My lady needs me."

"I think she's being controlled," Doyle said in a rush. "By Cordelia. Or should I say, the thing inside Cordelia. The real Cordelia died last year—was invaded by some entity that—"

"Yeah, right, I've heard the story. Thought she got over that when she gave birth to it, or what all."

"We thought so too, but considering the first thing she did was harness a slayer to orchestrate an escape from a medical facility, odds are not looking good. It was clear in the security footage that Randi was acting under her orders."

"So? I didn't know her all that well, but enough to know the bint could be a mite bossy."

"That's the problem, Spike. The Powers *do* know Cordelia Chase. She was one of their emissaries before her body was hijacked. There's a reason they sent me this vision." Doyle appeared calmer now—no less intense, by any means, but enough that it seemed he'd regained the control he hadn't had when he'd burst in. "The entity that took over her body, Jasmine, had a way of infecting the minds of the people it encountered. Turning them into loyal soldiers who were willing to do anything asked of them. It's a sort of brainwashing. Your girlfriend is in danger, and not from Angel. To save her, you need to be prepared to take Cordelia out."

"And how do you propose I do that if she can just open her mouth and make me a sodding puppet?"

"Her power won't affect you," Doyle said in a rush. "It has

no influence on people who have died and returned the way you did.”

Well, wasn’t that handy? Also sounded like a load of bollocks. “It doesn’t, eh?”

“No. Its purpose is to take over this world. You have demonstrated that you’re willing to die for it—you *did* die for it. That power, that sacrifice, creates a sort of magic itself, one that makes you immune to the will of those looking to control it.”

“Convenient,” he replied.

“Yes, it’s very convenient. Now will you hurry before this gets out of hand? Jasmine took over the city in a matter of hours last time—if she gets the chance to do it again, there may be no stopping her.”

Spike nodded to show he was appeased, did his best to keep his expression neutral as he turned and headed for the door once more. Not give anything away just yet. Hell, he wasn’t sure if there was anything *to* give away, if the *ping* of doubt that had just shot through him had been a false alarm or instinct trying to be heard above the sudden fray. If Doyle was who he said he was—if his information was coming from the bloody Powers or whatever was out there pulling the cosmic strings. Or if Spike had been desperate enough for a reason justifying his own existence to believe the first snake oil salesman to show up at his door, ready to give him a purpose that was all his own. Something to set him apart from the failings of the past and the ambiguity of the future, independent of everything, even Buffy, and his devotion to her.

But if the Powers were feeding this bloke information, they would know what Doyle didn’t. They would know, if the line Doyle had just fed him was true, that Buffy wasn’t someone who could be controlled by a mind-hijacking entity.

That if she'd snagged Cordelia from her hospital bed, there was a reason.

Spike just needed to focus on getting there first.



IT WAS PROBABLY the worst possible place she could have brought her, but it wasn't like Buffy was high on options.

"We don't have a lot of time," she said as she came back into the living room. Cordelia was on the couch, guzzling her third glass of water and, despite logic and all else, looking better than she had a right to. Like all the way around. Her cheeks were fuller, her color improved; even her hair seemed to be shinier. As though there had been some hospital filter applied to her that couldn't reach her now. "Angel's going to know where to find me, so we need to get our story straight."

Cordelia made a loud slurping sound, tilting her head back until she was sucking on air. Then, finally, she shifted and placed the glass on the coffee table before rubbing the back of her hand over her mouth. "Good," she said, settling back. "I need to talk to him. Like pronto."

"Good? I thought he was who we're running from."

Cordelia frowned, though not all at once. It was as though the words hit her in stages, requiring a few seconds for the impact to fully settle in. "Wait, huh?" she said at length. "Why would we run from Angel?"

"Well, he's who they'll contact about the great escape. I just assumed—"

"But why? Why would you assume that?"

Buffy blinked, her head starting to spin. "I... Didn't you have a vision?"

"Umm, yeah." Cordelia's expression morphed into one

Buffy knew well—the one she'd worn throughout high school whenever confronted with a particularly bad style choice—and she flung her hand at Buffy as though that explained everything. “Enough to know that this walking fashion disaster is a disguise for Buffy Summers, and that if I stayed one more minute in that hospital, I would croak.”

“What?”

Cordelia edged forward with strength she shouldn't have but somehow did, wrapping her arms around herself. “They were keeping me there,” she said softly. “Giving me something so I wouldn't wake up. I did a couple of times, and each time, this nurse would come in with a big syringe and then the lights would go out again. If I'd...” She licked her chapped lips, seeming to compose herself. “Last time I was awake, it was long enough for a vision of you and that there would be no more Cordelia Chase if I didn't get out of there.”

“Oh my god.”

“Yeah, my thoughts exactly.” There was a beat, and then Cordelia pointedly eyed Buffy up and down. “So...my vision told me the what but not the why. What are you doing in LA? Why would we be running from Angel? What is up with the frump look? Whose face is that? What the hell has been going on?”

A hard laugh escaped her before she could stop it. “It's a long story. All of it.”

“Okay, so give me the Cliff's Notes.”

“All right, then, starting at the top.” Buffy drew in a breath. “I'm in LA because Sunnydale doesn't exist anymore. Angel is running Wolfram and Hart. I'm playing Nancy Drew because Angel running Wolfram and Hart sounded like a recipe for bad, and I figured it was better to keep an eye on him. I look the way I do courtesy of a magic potion Willow

ripped off from *Harry Potter*, and as for what the hell is going on, I have been trying to figure that out for months now.”

Cordelia didn’t respond for a long beat, just sat there staring, as though waiting for her to continue, her eyes dull and her mouth agape. Then, slowly, she blinked. “What the fuck?”

“That pretty much sums it up, yeah.”

“No, Buffy, *what* the actual *fuck*?” She sat forward with a burst of energy that was quite frankly terrifying, and was on her feet the next moment. Literally on her feet, this woman that Buffy had personally carried down several flights of stairs before they had commandeered a wheelchair for the final escape. “Angel is *running* Wolfram and Hart? Did I wake up in the right universe?”

“Maybe not. How are you doing that?”

Cordelia frowned. “Doing what?”

“This whole instant-recovery thing you have going on.” Buffy waved at her. Her nerves, while not on edge, were in a position where they could get there fast. This wasn’t normal but it wasn’t the sort of not-normal that had snagged the attention of her slayer instincts. “You could barely talk while we were at the hospital and now you’re wow with the mobility.”

“Oh.” Cordelia glanced down at herself as though to confirm, her frown deepening. “I...dunno. I mean, I felt like I’d been run over by a truck at the hospital but less road-killy here. Maybe they had something else going on. I mean, I *am* part-demon so score one for demon genes, I guess?”

“You’re part-demon?”

She looked up once more. “Did you not know that?”

“I’m beginning to think the amount of stuff I did not know could fill that fancy hotel you guys used to live in.”

“Oh god, what’s happened to the Hyperion?” Cordelia’s

eyes widened. “What’s happened to my *apartment*? My beautiful, rent-controlled apartment. Do you know if anyone has checked in on Phantom Dennis? I didn’t even say goodbye to him before I walked into that stupid ascension trap.”

“Ascension?”

“Not like the mayor, to a higher plane. As in *I* was supposed to *ascend* to a higher plane. Except that was a bunch of bullshit that I fell for that enabled my body to be hijacked by some hell-beast or whatever.” She paused then threw her head back. “And, oh god, I got a front-row seat to that thing seducing someone who might as well be my stepson which, by the way, I very much recommend not doing.”

Rather than slowing down, Buffy’s mind was spinning faster. “You... I really, really missed that part of the ‘so what have you been up to’ debrief when I got to town.”

“I never even got a debrief, beyond the whole *you died* thing. Angel hasn’t exactly been keen on sharing what all’s going on in Sunnydale.” Cordelia pulled a face, threw Buffy a somewhat apologetic look. “Also, not to make this super awkward or anything, but Angel and I are kind of... Or we *were* a thing. Or going to be a thing. I think. There were...feelings and things unsaid and it’s all very *Days of Our Lives*, and I don’t know where being cosmically possessed to boink his son falls in that—”

“His *what*? Angel has a son? A son you...” Forget spinning—the world had just tipped over on its axis. Buffy had been in LA for a hot minute now, both as herself and Randi, studying Angel in close proximity and from a distance. At no point had a son been in the picture, let alone referenced. Like since she’d started this gig or, say, at any point in all of the years she’d known him. And while her memory might be slightly shoddy on

things like former associates she'd met once, it was pretty damn sharp on all things Angel. There had been at least one discussion involving children, and he hadn't even hinted at already having a kid. Seemed pertinent information to leave out.

Unless he hadn't known himself—some kid he'd fathered back in his wild, womanizing days that had also ended up a vampire and had tracked him down in the intervening years. Buffy could almost buy that, but it also seemed like the sort of thing that would have been at least casually mentioned by now. Much the way Cordelia was referencing it.

She was just gathering the courage to ask more about this son she'd never heard about when several hard thumps struck the front door. "Sl—Randi!" came Spike's voice, harsh and urgent. "I can hear your bloody heartbeat, so I know you're in there."

"Oh my god, is that Spike?" Cordelia asked, wrinkling her brow. "And...Randi? Who's Randi? Do you have someone else living here?"

"I'm Randi," Buffy hissed, her heart in her throat, pounding now. "I'm Randi. Randi Joan Pratt. I work at Wolfram and Hart as a paralegal. No one knows that I'm actually Buffy. *Including* Spike, so hush." She started for the door on trembling legs, all the pieces she'd been compiling since coming home, and everything that had been there before, scattering like dandelion seeds. Former classmate frenemy at her back, former lover at her door, so many balls in the air she'd lost track, and all of them liable to surrender to gravity at any second.

She opened the door to Spike, who had braced his hands against the frame on either side, his eyes flashing with the same impatience that had been in his tone. He looked at her

and then at Cordelia, then back again. "You're about to be in a world of hurt, love. Care to tell me what's going on?"

"Um, *why* is an evil vampire at your door, B-Randi?" Cordelia asked.

"Brandi?" Spike echoed, arching an eyebrow.

"Oh, shut up, I just woke up from a coma."

"He's not evil," Buffy said, stepping back, not breaking her gaze from his. "He has a soul."

"And yet no invite?"

"He hasn't been over yet." She pressed her lips together, trying to wrangle her frazzled mind enough to do a quick mental inventory of the apartment, but it was no use. If there was something out that would identify her as Buffy, he was going to find it. She had no reason not to invite him in. She could, however, stall for time. "How did you know?"

"How the bloody hell do you think I knew?" he retorted. "How I know everything, yeah? Doyle had a vision."

"*Doyle?*" Cordelia echoed, her voice catching now. "Doyle... My Doyle?"

For the first time, Spike pulled his gaze from Buffy's, furrowing his brow. "Your Doyle?"

"My friend Doyle. My... He died, several years ago. Saving the city. Probably the world."

Buffy turned in time to watch as the confusion on Cordelia's face hardened, and god, she knew that look. That flash of remembered pain being sliced open again, chased by anger that anyone would dare violate something so sacrosanct. And that look, more than anything, settled at least one thing for her. Cemented the knowledge that had been scraping at the edge of her subconscious since she'd met the man who called himself Doyle, the near-certainty she'd had since *not* renting a movie on Friday.

Spike was being played by someone who wanted access to Angel.

“What,” Cordelia said in her most dangerous voice, “the *fuck* is going on?”

Movement flashed to her right, because of course it did. Of course he was there. Of course. For if fake-Doyle had known enough to send Spike on a goose chase, Angel would too. No vision needed, just inside information. And all roads led to Buffy.

“Excellent question,” Angel said as he thundered down the hallway toward her apartment door. “Someone care to fill me in?”

DRINK IT IN, DRINK IT UP 'TIL
YOU'VE DROWNED

A LOT OF THINGS HAPPENED AT ONCE. MOSTLY SHOUTY things, all of which took place in the hallway, as Buffy had refused to let Angel into her apartment.

Which, naturally, had pissed him off even more. Seriously, Angel's anger was something Buffy now understood she'd only seen glimpses of in the past. It made the line separating him from his unsouled self, the one she'd always regarded as solid, look almost transparent. Never mind that this particular outburst had been short-lived, exchanged quickly for wide-eyed astonishment once he'd clocked that the comatose Cordelia he'd expected to find was walking around and shouting right back at him. Screaming things like, "Wolfram and Hart?" and "Are you an idiot?" and "She saved my life, dumbass!" Buffy had still seen what Angel looked like when he hated someone, what it felt like to be that someone, and wondered how tenuous his grip on his soul actually was.

Then there was Spike's confusion and hurt, which had flashed bright in his eyes when, after the shouting was done

and they moved onto rapid-fire questions, Cordelia shared the story of the real Allen Francis Doyle. A half-demon who had sacrificed himself more than four years prior, one Spike had even met in his eviler days. But Spike hadn't been able to stew for long, because once Angel had heard the full story, he'd been less concerned about why someone was trying to convince Spike he'd been gifted a shiny new destiny and more focused on finding the person responsible for besmirching the memory of *his* friend. So more anger, just pointed in another direction.

And in the middle of all this was Buffy herself, except not Buffy herself because she was Randi. Random Wolfram and Hart employee who couldn't seem to breathe without annoying Angel in some fashion, and okay, stealing the woman he loved from the hospital was probably not the way to get herself off his shit list, but it wasn't like she'd walked into Cordelia's room with abduction on her mind. In fact, if she hadn't swung by, there was a good chance Cordelia would have died a quiet, unremarkable death courtesy of the chemical cocktail she'd been injected with on the regular to keep her out of Angel's sphere of influence. That last part was a motive Buffy had yet to verify but trusted was accurate, given what she'd witnessed—how Cordelia had taken Angel to task the way no one else ever had, and even had him looking somewhat abashed by the end of it. That right there was a superpower, and a damn valuable one, solidifying for her that whoever had prolonged Cordelia's coma had done so with the intention of removing from the equation perhaps the one person in the world who would boldly challenge him.

It was a good strategy, and one that had come damn close to succeeding. And while Buffy was definitely giving herself all the back pats for having thwarted something sinister, she was

also frustrated that she hadn't really done anything except stumble into the right place at the right time. If she'd come on a different day, or hell, even a different hour, the story would have had a very different ending.

All this time in LA and the one accomplishment she'd managed had been an accident. Everything else? Well, the term *unmitigated disaster* came to mind. And now it was likely to end with a whimper because outcome aside, Angel had officially had enough of Randi Joan Pratt.

The one good thing about all of this—or, really, the only good thing—was the ally she'd gained in Cordelia. Someone who believed, wholeheartedly, that Angel had walked into a trap and was determined to ride his ass about it. And if this was the end of Buffy playing Harriet the Spy in LA, she had, accident or not, managed to undermine one of the firm's significant long-term goals, and that was nothing to sneeze at.

Buffy was so convinced of an imminent and abrupt departure that after the shouting, the fallout, the threats were over and everyone retreated to their various corners across the city—Spike presumably to kick fake-Doyle's ass to the curb and Angel finally caving to Cordelia's demands that he take her to reunite with the friends who had thought her permanently comatose—she didn't bother reupping her Randi potion as the effects started to wear off. Just as well, she figured. She was tired of pretending to be someone else, especially within her own apartment. So she changed into her comfiest Buffy clothes and prepared for an evening of watching Buffy comfort TV while she waited. Angel hadn't explicitly said when he would be back after it was all done but had told her that she was to stay off Wolfram and Hart property and not go anywhere until he returned, with all the arrogance of someone used to getting his way about everything. And she

could have fought but hadn't. She was all out of caring, even more so than she had been the night Dana had been taken into custody. Let Angel find Buffy in Randi's apartment. Let him realize who had been watching him the entire time, seeing the real him at last. Let him rage at Buffy for Buffy-reasons, because god, she was ready to rage right back.

But when the knock finally sounded, it was without the accompanying sensation of vampire tinglies, and followed by a slightly muffled, "Buffy! You better be in there after all the ass-busting I just did for you."

"I'm here," Buffy called back, bemused, and rushed to open the door. The Cordelia waiting on the other side was miles removed from the Cordelia who had left her apartment. It was like opening a door to the past, or maybe a future that had unfolded in another universe. In short, she looked amazing in a way that was completely and utterly unfair. No one should rebound that quickly from a months-long hospital stint; she didn't care who they were.

"He wants you to sing for Lorne," Cordelia said before pushing her way past her and into the apartment, moving as though she'd not only been invited, but expected. "Said something about how you did already but Lorne's power has been fooled before, and now you need to again. So tomorrow, you go to his office and sing for Lorne, and I think we're home free."

"Am I supposed to know what you're talking about? Because I think I missed a memo somewhere."

Cordelia helped herself over to the sofa and sank into the cushions with a flourish. "You know about Lorne, right? How he can read you if you sing?"

"Yes, but really not seeing how home-free plays into any scenario in which I actually sing." Especially without time to

get Willow to concoct a magical workaround like she had a few months back while Angel had been subjecting all Wolfram and Hart employees to Lorne's ingrained lie detector. Even if she called now, Buffy distinctly remembered her friend saying that particular bit of spellwork had been more involved than expected.

"Look, I'm not saying it's a sure thing, but Lorne isn't a dummy. If he unmasks you..." Cordelia wrinkled her nose and gave Buffy an appraising up-and-down look. "You're just answering the door like that now? Hello, way to stealth. Did you take spy lessons from Austin Powers?"

Buffy shrugged, not even bothering to get defensive. "You heard Angel before he left. I figured it was a done deal."

"Well, it is with that attitude." Cordelia bounced to her feet. "Lorne is loving life right now because the evil assholes in charge knew to put him in the entertainment department, but that doesn't mean he became stupid overnight or forgot about that time Angel PMS'd himself into manslaughter."

Buffy's mouth ran dry. "I heard about that." She'd also thrown it in Giles's face—this thing she knew now about Angel that she hadn't known before. This piece of incriminating evidence to support the need to have someone on the ground keeping an eye on him. Still, it was a big thing to wrap her mind around. The first time she'd learned what had happened, there had been just enough goodwill left in her to believe maybe it was the sort of thing that sounded worse than it was. She wasn't that naïve anymore.

"Yeah," Cordelia went on. "We stopped working together for a few months until he came back to Jesus, and even then, it was touch and go. And then finding out he'd banged Darla in the middle of all that set us back even more. I know he was going through something, but coming to grips with the fact

that Angel could get to a place where he was Mr. Careless with his soul was... It was a lot. Especially since there was no way we would've even known that much if Darla hadn't shown up pregnant nine months down the line. Not that anyone else remembers that but me, but that's a whole other rant and believe me, I'll get there in a sec."

Buffy had been wrong before—wrong in thinking she'd hit the ceiling on the number of things she could learn about her very ex-boyfriend. *That* was the son Cordelia had mentioned? Not some dalliance from Angel's human days come back to haunt him, but a child he'd had in the years since leaving Sunnydale? And hadn't Cordelia said *she'd* slept with him? Only there had to be another mind-bendy explanation for that, too. That was all anything Angel's life had been, she was discovering. Far removed from the image she'd held for so long, the one he'd nurtured through his claims of never being able to move on. Angel had moved way the hell on. He was *still* moving on now, all the while expecting her to stay in the same place.

"Anyway," Cordelia said, jarring her out of her head once more, "I do think you have a real shot with Lorne. My guess is he'll be stoked to have someone else keeping an eye on things. And the fact that you saved my life? Big bonus points with the team all around. He already told me that he's super relieved to have the link to the PTB open again, and he knows you're the one to thank."

Buffy decided to nod as though she understood, fake-it-until-you-make-it style. "What did you tell him? Or any of them?"

"About what?"

"I don't know, any of it? I mean Angel was raving about kidnapping charges when you guys left earlier."

Cordelia rolled her eyes. "Such a drama queen."

"I'm serious. Randi Joan Pratt had no reason to be at the hospital. She never met you, as far as the world is concerned."

"Yeah, but being vision-girl means I could have met *her*. They don't know how that works, and I was barely starting to understand my aspect-of-the-demon thing when I took my extended vacation to Mandyville." Cordelia shrugged, then turned abruptly and headed in the direction of the kitchen. "You got anything good to eat? Apparently, demon metabolism plus yearlong coma equals an intense case of bottomless stomach."

Buffy followed. "So that's what you told them? That you had a vision?"

"Vision, transmission, something like that, yeah. Essentially that I needed someone to come to my rescue, and you were the one who picked up the phone." Cordelia paused by the fridge and cracked it open. "Seriously, do you ever go shopping?"

"I've stopped keeping stuff in there because Willow helps herself to it," Buffy retorted, approaching to peer over Cordelia's shoulder. The fridge was sparser than it had been that morning, the few items she'd thought might be safe from pilfering gone. "And I wouldn't drink that," she added as Cordelia reached for the lone surviving juice carton. "Not unless you want to see what it's like to live in Randi's shoes for a few hours."

"What?"

"Magical refrigerator. Willow puts the potion into hers and it pops up in mine."

"Huh. Convenient." Cordelia gave the empty shelves another longing look as though she could populate them with

sheer force of will before closing the refrigerator with a sigh.

“Do you wanna order takeout?”

“Also Willow’s in England. They’re all in England.”

“And Sunnydale is a crater.”

“Yep. Only way to officially close the Hellmouth for business.”

“Is that a yes or no on takeout?”

Buffy blinked, her brain stalling. All of her stalling. The conversation had officially exceeded the amount of punches she could just roll with. She’d started the day dreading the prospect of telling Spike, trying to convince him that Doyle wasn’t really Doyle. She hadn’t anticipated staging a prison break from a hospital or grappling with the possibility of her carefully curated cover story coming crashing down around her. Then there was the fact that she was Buffy now—Buffy, not Randi, having the first honest conversation she’d had with anyone since before Sunnydale had fallen. It seemed frankly ludicrous that Cordelia was here at all, wandering through her apartment like they were people who had done more than live with a vague notion of each other’s existence ever since graduating high school. Like they had been more than kinda friends.

“Why are you here?” she asked before she could help herself, the words just sort of tumbling off her tongue.

“Duh,” Cordelia retorted, having moved on to inspect the contents of her cabinets. “You saved my life.”

“But you’re *here*. Shouldn’t you be with Angel? Or Wes, or Fred, or—”

“I am *not* spending any more time at Wolfram and Hart than I have to,” she said shortly. “Angel has his hands full dealing with Lindsey.”

“Who?”

"The guy that Spike thought was Doyle. Turns out it was Lindsey McDonald."

"She says as though I should know who that is."

Cordelia glanced at her from the corner of her eye, and for a flicker of a second, a bit of the old Cordelia shone through. It wasn't much but enough to help soften the whole illusion that perhaps none of this was actually happening. "Lindsey was a lawyer. Guess where he worked."

"What did he want with Spike?"

"To put it plainly? He wanted to fuck with Angel." Cordelia paused then as though only just registering the words as she spoke them. As though she'd been hurtling toward a destination that hadn't been clearly mapped and was startled to realize that she'd reached it. After a beat, she sighed and wrapped her arms around herself, less like the old Cordelia now, but in a way that made her instantly more human. "Lindsey and Angel had this thing a few years ago. Of everyone who has ever worked at Wolfram and Hart, he was the only one I ever knew that had something kinda like a conscience, even if it was broken most of the time. The Senior Partners used him in their war against Angel, and he eventually just got tired of it and left, only with one massive chip on his shoulder. Apparently finding out that Angel got just got handed the CEO job instead of working for it like Lindsey had broke whatever was still unbroken in his head. And that's why he came here. There's this prophecy that the Senior Partners think has Angel's name written all over it, but Lindsey wanted them to think they'd gotten it wrong, and Spike was the perfect way to do that." She paused then, wrinkling her nose, and lifted her eyes to Buffy's. "And when exactly did Spike get a soul? I am so fuzzy on all of that."

Buffy swallowed and looked away, her heart somersaulting

hard. It had been a long time—a really long time—since she'd had the chance to talk to anyone about Spike in a way that was open and without judgment. He'd been such a point of contention among her friends their last year in Sunnydale, his presence and her reliance upon him not creating rifts, exactly, but exacerbating ones that had already been there. And then Giles deciding he knew what was best, that Spike was a blind spot she couldn't be trusted to think rationally about because they'd spent a few months swept up in a torrid affair. Hell, now that she thought about it, the only time she'd felt free to talk about Spike had been with a dead former classmate she'd ended up staking later that night. And before that, Tara.

Her life had never been simple, but it used to not be this complicated.

"He got it for me," she said softly, meeting Cordelia's gaze again, but briefly. It was hard to look at anyone directly while talking about any of this. "I... I was in a bad place, after the whole dying thing. And I started sleeping with Spike as a sort of...band-aid."

Even though she wasn't looking at her directly, she still somehow caught the way Cordelia's eyebrows winged upward. "A band-aid?"

"A really hot, steamy band-aid?" Actually, the perfect metaphor, because steam would make a band-aid completely ineffective. Yay for accidental brilliance. "He was in love with me before I died, and when I came back, he was just...the only person who wasn't insisting that I be okay. He let me be whatever I needed to be, there were no expectations or anything, and that's what I needed then."

"Also he's sex on legs."

"He is?"

Cordelia smirked. "Come on, Buffy. I have eyes. Kinda

goes with the whole *seer* thing. You were tapping that and *didn't* think he was sex on legs?"

A hard bark of laughter exploded from her before she could help it. "I thought he was sex on legs. If I was going to start boinking an evil vampire, that vampire was going to be a major hottie. I have standards." Buffy flushed in spite of herself. "Just not used to other people saying that out loud."

"Other people are not Cordelia Chase, which sucks for them. And you said *thought*. Do you not still think that?"

"Oh, I definitely still think that. Probably even more than I did then." She sobered then, refocused. "But it was bad. I mean, the sex wasn't bad. The sex was... I didn't know sex could be like that until him."

"Girl, you're making me jealous. The last guy I boned was my kinda-boyfriend's teenaged son, only I'm going to say that one doesn't count since I was technically possessed." Cordelia pulled a face at that and gave a shudder that managed to be both exaggerated and understated at the same time. "I can't believe he made them forget about him. Well, I can, I guess. That's Angel."

"What? He made who forget what?"

She shook her head. "In a minute. You were telling me about Spike. You were screwing so you, what, screwed a soul *into* him? Does it work like that in reverse?"

"Not exactly." Though also, now that she thought about it, Buffy supposed an argument could be made, and holy cow, how her brain was not equipped to handle anything remotely that philosophical at present. "It got bad between us. I was using him, and he loved me, and I knew it was hurting him and I... I felt something for him and didn't want to keep hurting him, and that was pretty much all I could do. Every time he tried... I just kept lashing out. So yeah, it got bad.

And then something happened—he hurt *me* trying to win me back, and I think that shocked him into realizing he *could* hurt me, and he felt so terrible about what he did that he sought a way to win back his soul so he'd never hurt me like that again.”

“Holy shit.” For the first time since opening her eyes in that hospital room, Cordelia looked shocked. Jaw slack, eyes wide, thousand-yard stare, the full shebang. “He *fought* for his soul? Like willingly went out and said, ‘Hey, you there, soul me up?’ Jesus, Buffy, that is... No wonder Angel is so freaked out.”

“Angel’s freaked out?”

“Yeah. Over that same prophecy. He won’t tell you using, you know, English, but I know him. I know what he’s like when he’s worried about something.”

The idea that anyone could know what Angel was like at all, especially over something as human as worry, once again gave Buffy the sense of looking at her life from inside a funhouse mirror. She truly felt over Angel in ways she never had—ways she honestly hadn’t thought possible—but being over him didn’t blunt the stab of remembered pain. Didn’t lessen her regret any, or her resentment, for that matter. The resentment was there in heaps.

Angel could have been known to her. That was all she’d wanted once—all that would have been needed to make her short, violent life complete. Granted, now that it was several years later and she was perhaps centuries wiser, Buffy saw how hollow that had been, how sad, really, that her happiness had been so dependent upon any guy. Particularly a guy whose specialty had been making her miserable. But then life had also been simpler in a way she hadn’t appreciated, even with the persistent threat of an early grave dogging her every step. Her home provided. Her days mapped out. Her

concerns apocalyptic but also framed by a general lack of experience that made even the hardest stuff feel survivable. The knowledge that her mother would be there. Giles would be there. Her friends would be there. The world might strip everything else away, but those parts of her life were immutable.

And in the center of that, the simple girlish desire to know and be known by her boyfriend. To not feel like she needed literal mindreading powers to understand what was going on in his head. To understand his looks and his moods the way Cordelia did. All this time she'd thought Angel just wasn't capable of giving that, but the truth had been less charitable. The truth had been he wasn't capable of giving it to *her*.

"So Angel's wiggling over the prophecy?" she asked at last, doing what she could to shove the bad thoughts back where they belonged. She couldn't undo the past, couldn't unmake decisions that had set her on the course to becoming who she was now. For Buffy, there was only forward. "And now he thinks it might be about Spike? I guess it's one of those rare *yay* prophecies. How come I never get a *yay* prophecy?"

"I don't know how much of it is *yay*, but that's definitely how we decided to interpret it when we found out." Cordelia at last seemed to be recovering from the how-Spike-got-his-soul bombshell. "The prophecy was all with the vague, the way the best prophecies are, but the fine print was something about how the vampire with a soul will play a significant role in the apocalypse—fighting for either Team Evil or for the good guys, but we decided since it was Angel he had to be fighting for good—and will become human at the end. Angel hadn't talked about it in a long time so I wasn't even sure it was still on his radar, but way with the apparently yes. And ever since Spike saved the world, plus his soul, he's been

thinking maybe the prophecy he thought was his was a wrong number all along.”

Buffy’s heart did more than somersault this time. *That* prophecy. The one Spike and Angel had fought over not too long ago and she hadn’t let herself think about too much for as unreal as it had sounded. Pie-in-the-sky. Vampires turning humans. Like, she lived in a world where the impossible happened on the regular, but *that* had been a bit much to swallow.

“If that’s the case,” Cordelia continued, “then *man*, did Angel ever make the wrong call when he did that whole rewind-a-thon on the day he spent with you.”

“You keep saying words as though I should know what you’re talking about.”

“What?”

“Exactly, that’s my question. *What?*”

For a moment, Cordelia just frowned at her, waiting as though Buffy was the one recovering from a coma and struggling to remember things. Slowly, though, her eyes went wide and the confusion faded into something closer to shock, then horror. “Oh,” she said at length, her voice scratchy. “Oh. Oh, Buffy. I’m sorry, I... Forget it.”

“I’d love to, just as soon as you tell me what I need to forget.”

“No, forget I said anything.”

“Well, yeah, that’s gonna happen.” Buffy crossed her arms. “Come on, you can’t not tell me now. Spill.”

Cordelia shook her head, her lips pressed together in that exaggerated way kids did whenever they were trying to hold something back. But her eyes told a different story, and after a few seconds of being stared down, she capitulated. “All right, *fine*,” she said. “But I cannot stress how much I did not know

that you did not know this already. I mean I knew that *he* would remember it but I thought he'd at least... Actually, no, now that I say this, it was stupid of me to expect him to tell you anything. That's Angel. Keeping secrets. Closing people out. And hey, now that I think about it, wiping memories."

If she didn't spill whatever it was, Buffy was going to start throwing things. And by things, she meant people. "Cordelia!"

"Okay!" She winced. "Do you remember a few years ago when you came to our office—the old office, before the hotel? The first time, I think, when you were all mad at Angel because he came to make sure you weren't getting scalped or whatever?"

"Yeah..." It had been on her mind nonstop over the weekend, courtesy of the Doyle connection. Having someone else bring it up unprompted was kind of wiggly. "Why?"

"Well, there were two versions of that day. I don't remember anything but the second one, where you came, there was some bitter ex talk, and then left in like two seconds." Cordelia paused, then inhaled deeply. "The first version of that day, there was a demon attack and blood got mixed with blood and long story short, Angel became human. From what I've been told, you two made with the grand romance until he realized that he was too breakable for you to be with and went to the Oracles to have them turn the clock back so it never happened, but he'd have to remember that forever and everyone else... Well, we didn't know so—"

"Oh, my god."

"Buffy—"

"No. Just...just stop."

Cordelia stopped, and Buffy... Buffy just stood there, trying to keep from screaming. Trying to find words, find anger, find something other than the spreading cold, all of her

feeling both detached and weighted down, anchored somewhere outside of this world. She blinked and she was standing, then blinked again and she was sitting on the floor, and she didn't remember how she had gotten there.

The way he looked at her. The way he treated her. The things he said to her, believing she was someone else. The kid he'd never mentioned. Each had been a new line, a new threshold of discovery, a new understanding of what she'd been too lovesick and stubborn to understand before. Somehow, she kept ending up here, wrestling with this feeling—this belief that she had finally hit a limit on the things that could surprise her, could hurt. Could unmake the world she'd believed she'd lived in, threaten her understanding of herself and the universe.

This, though, was more than just him keeping secrets or sons. It involved her in intimate, invasive ways. In foundational ways. In ways she had taken as seriously as others took religion. The knowledge, the absolute certainty in the midst of the chaos she had slowly been absorbing, that Angel had left specifically because he *wasn't* human. Because a human guy was what Buffy needed in the world according to him—a human guy to be in the sunlight with her and everything he couldn't do because he was a vampire. And that was a lesson, an edict, Buffy had taken to heart. A fundamental unbreakable law of physics or whatever. She'd carried with her into her relationship with Riley. Hell, had kinda driven her into jumping Parker's bones on, what, date number three? Because he'd been normal and had a reflection and that was the sort of guy she should go for, and all this time—*all this time* Angel had kept from her that not only did he not want to be the vampire in her life, but he didn't want to be the man, either.

And god, don't get her started on Spike. How the fact that

she'd let herself fall in anything with another vampire, all with the Angel in her head whispering all the reasons why it couldn't work. Why it would never work even before she considered the soul of it all. How she'd been angry with herself for feeling the way she felt, and how she'd taken all of that out on him.

"Oh, Buffy..." Cordelia knelt beside her, her eyes brimming with concern. "I am so sorry. I... Like I can't say I thought you knew, because if I'd stopped to think for even a second, I'd have realized there was no way Angel would've told you after the fact. But—"

"But he told you," she said hoarsely, her overloaded brain seizing upon that at once. "You knew, so he told other people. He's fine going around telling other people about this but not me?"

"I don't think he told anyone but Doyle. And Doyle's who told me."

"And how many people have you told?"

"Including you? One."

Buffy let out a breath, nodded. She was still shaken, still numb, still felt like some part of her was falling, falling and flailing to find purchase on something—anything—but either there was nothing there to grab or her hands were too slippery, but the rest of her was starting to accept the new equilibrium. The new shape her world had taken, not much changed and everything changed at the same time. The past she'd thought she'd lived a lie, the decisions she'd made, the relationships she'd valued, the lessons she'd thought she'd learned given new form and definition.

"Are you okay?" Cordelia asked after a beat, her voice soft, her eyes softer. She was such a far cry from the person Buffy had known in high school the two versions were a bit hard to

reconcile, but also not, in an equally strange way. “I get it if you’re not. And my own feelings for Angel aside, it was a really shitty thing he did to you. But that’s Angel, you know? Thinking he knows best. Going out on his own to do stuff he should trust other people to help him with. That thing I mentioned before that I would get around to? Highly relevant, as it turns out. I found out he did the same thing to the others—Wes, Gunn, Fred, and Lorne, none of them remember Connor.”

“Connor?”

She nodded. “His son. I asked him about it when we were alone, and he said something about it being better that way. Connor’s with some family and apparently living a great life with no clue who he is or where he comes from. Meanwhile, I have to watch what I say around the people who are essentially *my* family because they remember everything that happened last year in a way that, well, didn’t happen.”

“How do they remember it?”

“I have no clue. Apparently, Angel didn’t ask, just had Wolfram and Hart rewrite some memories and presto.” She rolled her eyes. “That boy needs to learn to respect, literally, any boundary.”

Buffy snorted, and that felt better. Not much but some, and right now, she would take a world of *some*. “Hard to argue with someone who thinks they’re right all the time.”

“For you, maybe,” Cordelia retorted with a smirk.

“And that’s why Angel and I would never have worked.” A lesson that was several years and more than one trauma too late, but she supposed the fact that it had arrived at all was cause for celebration. “Maybe why you two can.”

A pause. “That doesn’t bother you?”

“You and Angel?” The instinctive urge was to rush in with

reassurance, but that wouldn't be honest, and if nothing else, Cordelia had earned her honesty. Earned it and then some. So Buffy took inventory—the feelings she'd had once, the feelings she had now, and how those balanced with the nostalgia for a time that had never really been. “No,” she said after a beat. “I think Angel liked a version of me that doesn't exist anymore. And I... Maybe I liked a version of Angel that *never* existed. The Angel I knew wouldn't have done the stuff real Angel has done. Killed people, I mean. Taken my memories. Willow did that to her girlfriend a couple of years ago, and it was *such* a violation. Then she took *my* memories—all of ours—and... Forgiving her for that, for everything she did, was really hard. With Angel... I don't care what he thought he was doing. It was wrong.”

“It was.” Cordelia offered a somber nod. “Probably helps that you're in love with someone else too, huh?”

That did it—chased the last of the numbness away. At once, Buffy was sitting up, spine rigid, every muscle pulled tight. If talking about all things Spike with Cordelia had been strange, hearing those words was like something out of a dream. Even last year when loving Spike in the open would have been easier, she'd felt the subtle pushback anytime she mentioned his name. Caught the exchange of knowing glances, felt the weight of silent conversations, the judgments and the eyerolls, and she could have taken that from the Potentials—they'd been young and out of their depth—but it had been in Willow's eyes, too. Xander and his determination that she never forget what had happened in the bathroom. And Giles most of all. Giles who had left her when she'd been at her lowest and convinced her it had been the right move. The nudge she needed to stop leaning on him and start trusting herself, only the second she'd started making choices

he didn't like, he'd swooped back in to resume the role of mentor that she had outgrown because he'd forced her to outgrow it. None of them had understood what Spike was to her—what he could have been. And here was Cordelia, perhaps not understanding but seeing all the same. Not judging, either, when she'd been in Sunnydale along with everyone else when Angel had lost his soul. Just looking at her and getting it.

Maybe the wrong friend had moved to LA after graduation. God, as much as Buffy loved Willow and Xander, the fact that this exchange—loaded and upsetting as it was—was also this easy couldn't help but smart. Everything with her friends had been difficult since Glory, some her fault but most of it not. And she was so tired of being the one forced to make allowances. To be the bigger person. To forgive when amends had only been alluded to, not made.

"What?" Cordelia asked a moment later, a laugh in her voice. "You are in love with him, aren't you?"

Buffy blinked and forced herself out of her spiraling thoughts. "What?"

"You've been sitting there staring into space for, like, a long time. Amazed you hadn't started drooling." Cordelia laughed again, the sound lighter. "It's not exactly a brain buster, you know. You *are* in love with Spike."

"I... Yeah."

"And he's in love with you."

"He was. Before, at least."

"No, Buffy, trust me. No guy goes out and wins a soul for someone he's not one hundred percent committed to. That's... That's big." Cordelia shook her head. "That's not something anyone would do for someone they just kinda love. So why isn't he here? He kept calling you Randi when we were

talking to Angel, and I know you have a secret identity and everything, but I can't help but think that if he knew about all this, I wouldn't have found you alone tonight."

That was a fair point, and a complicated mess Buffy wasn't sure she wanted to start trying to untangle, much less explain. The shock she'd suffered when Spike had been pieced back together in a whirlwind of magic. The confusion and the heartache that had dogged her while he'd been a ghost, his reticence to reach out to her, then his eagerness to make out with someone else the second he'd been given a body. The realization that she hadn't given herself room to breathe from Sunnydale and the maybe-relationship they'd been building toward and that maybe that was what she needed to do more than anything. Figure out who Buffy was if she wasn't the one and only anymore, if she wasn't tied to the Hellmouth, if she wasn't running from crisis to crisis.

Only time hadn't changed anything about her feelings for Spike. She did love him. She just hadn't given herself a path forward. And right now, sitting here with that knowledge and that love and the weight of all the above, she wasn't even sure a path existed. Maybe if she kept pushing she would find one, something intuitive rather than convoluted, for it wasn't going to be an easy conversation in any regard. Too much time had passed. Too much had been said. Spike would forgive her for anything, she was sure, but she also knew she couldn't take advantage of that. It wasn't fair to either of them.

"It's complicated," she said at last, knowing the explanation was weak but the only one she felt up to offering.

"I'm getting that." Cordelia was quiet for a moment. "I won't tell you what to do, except to sing for Lorne. I *know* he'll understand, and maybe he can help you figure out all this Spike stuff while he's at it."

“And if he doesn’t? Understand, that is.”

She seemed to consider this. “Well, it’ll be in the open then, at least?”

Buffy snorted but nodded just the same. It wasn’t like she had much of a choice—not if she didn’t want to lose her job. And she didn’t, despite however confusing it was to disappear inside someone else’s skin. It wouldn’t be as easy to keep an eye on Angel from the outside, and given the metric ton of information she’d just received—never mind however much other parties seemed intent on driving him out of his mind—now was not the time to retreat.

There were forces vying for Angel to fail. One way or another, he was bound to buckle under the pressure, and she needed to be here when that happened.

So yeah, she’d sing. And hope Cordelia was right.

STOP AND STARE AT THE SEA OF
SMILES AROUND YOU

HE KNEW IT WAS BUFFY CALLING. NOT LIKE THERE WAS any occasion for anyone else to give a damn, was there? Certainly not the bloody higher powers, or whatever rot he'd managed to convince himself. No, no one called for William the Bloody who truly meant to get him. The whole of his miserable existence served as a joke played upon others.

Except her. Buffy. Buffy who was Randi, who had pulled some truly slayer-level hijinks that would have impressed a more sober version of himself. Did impress him, actually, except he didn't really care to be impressed right now. All he wanted was to sit in this bloody basement flat that he shouldn't be in, given to him by a man he'd stupidly believed saw something in him apart from the Slayer and Angel and everything else that had defined his life since he'd died, and throw back liquor until the buzzing in his head was too distant to hear anymore.

In other words, Spike wanted to feel sorry for himself. He thought he was doing a ripping good job.

Only the bloody phone kept ringing.

He glared at it over the lip of the bottle he was about to finish, willing her to just give up, knowing her well enough to know she wouldn't. *Give up* were words outside of Buffy Summers's vocabulary, even when the whole sodding world gave her reason. Even when she seemed to surrender, beaten down by circumstance and worn ragged by everything else, she'd rally. She'd pull herself back to her feet. She'd square her shoulders and throw in with everything she had. One of the many reasons she was better than him. The numerous other reasons she was better than him might account for why he was still here, on the fringe of her life despite everything. Why he was waiting for something that felt more distant now than it had when he'd been a sodding ghost.

But that wasn't fair. Nothing was fair. Such was life. And death.

And she wouldn't stop ringing. If he didn't answer, she'd just show up, pounding on his door and yelling herself hoarse until her patience snapped and she decided to kick her way in like in the old days, only he wouldn't be able to say that to her, would he? He also didn't think he could stomach looking at her now, the face that wasn't hers, knowing that at least part of whatever she had to tell him would be a lie. Sure, the lie might be one of omission, but those still bloody counted.

"Fuck it," he snarled, setting the bottle aside and forcing himself to his feet so fast his chair nearly tipped over. Might as well cut her off now before she *did* turn up on his doorstep. Mood he was in, he was liable to say something terrible, and this way his nose would be outside of punching range. Spike snatched up his mobile and flipped it open. "Know you wanna chat it out, pet, but tonight's not good," he said by way of greeting. "Fraid I'm piss-poor company and very determined

to stay that way. So bugger off and let a man drink in peace, yeah?”

The silence that filled the line was the sort with weight, enough so that Spike second-guessed himself, pulled back to squint—keen vampire eyesight undone by intense vampire inebriation—at the pixels that comprised the caller’s name.

Nope. It was her. Guess he’d just caught her unawares.

“Spike?” she said at last, her voice small and tinny and *Randi*, not Buffy. That much was almost enough to have him hurtling the damn phone at the wall. He reckoned he held back by virtue of the soul and his own unique brand of pathetic. “I just... It was intense earlier. With everything.”

He fought the urge to snort. Yeah, bloody right it had been intense. The story he’d been putting together for himself had gone up in smoke. And sure, it had needed to, if only to spare him further humiliation down the line, a pawn in one man’s revenge quest against Angelus, no matter how much Spike could sympathize. He just wished he’d been the one to realize it, to confront Doyle—*Lindsey*—and wrangle the true story out of him. Instead, he’d been punted to the side, incidental, his part in the play gone. The more important players shuffled front and center, ready to assume the reins and disabuse him of the idea that he was important at all.

The true insult of the matter was Spike knew he would have wised up on his own. The would-be Doyle had already tipped his hat, set in motion all anyone would need to conclude he was a charlatan. It hadn’t taken much, just a slip, a fast explanation that would have worked for anyone except the only two people to sacrifice themselves for the world only to be brought back into it, kicking and screaming. Another day was all he would have needed, if that. Spike had already started to work through it on the walk over to

Randi's flat, the conclusion there but not ready to be unearthed just yet. Not until he got some answers of his own.

Angel had stolen that from him. And though it wasn't fair to blame her, Buffy had, too.

Except, no, that was a lie. Buffy hadn't taken anything. It was just easier to be cross with her than himself for falling for the trick in the first place. For wanting it to be real, desperate to prove he had purpose outside of himself. Needed his continued existence to be something other than a punchline at someone else's expense.

And it was this, these thoughts, that he couldn't share with her. Couldn't bear to pretend. Even if she'd phoned to drop the masquerade entirely, he wasn't sure he'd be up for that much honesty. Not when his wounds were still red and swollen, and prone to start bleeding anew if agitated.

"Listen," he heard himself say—the himself that was *hers* rather than the one at the wheel right now. He just hoped he could hold on long enough to get this out and be heard. "Know you mean well, but I'm not likely to be good company tonight. Got a bit to sort through on my own."

"Oh," she said, sounding disappointed. Nothing new there, then. "Okay, I just... It had to be *something*, learning what—"

"Not up for talking about it," Spike said again, this time with a bit of a growl. "I'm serious now. Need some time, all right? Might not come around for a bit while I sort all this out."

"Oh." More disappointment.

"Unless you need me, of course," he added before he could stop himself. Not sure he meant it—not sure he wanted to mean it. Resenting it and the parts of him that couldn't shake

her, even for a little while. “Anything you need me for right now, *Randi*?”

There was a pause. A long one. He might have thought she’d disconnected if it weren’t for the steady rhythm of her breaths.

Had she heard it? Did he want her to have heard it? What would happen if this was the moment—if she finally cracked and told him, and all the rage and frustration and disappointment and despair was forced to become secondary all over again?

He wasn’t sure whether or not to be disappointed when she finally answered with a soft, “No.” Damned if you do and damned if you bloody don’t. Buffy didn’t need Spike. Randi didn’t either. The whole universe and everyone in it would do just fine if he buggered off forever.

The one thing he could say about this feeling was it was a familiar one. He knew how to navigate it. He should.

He’d had more than a century of practice.



“ALL RIGHT, LITTLE MISSY,” Lorne said gently. “Whenever you’re ready, let’s hear it.”

Buffy swallowed, glanced at Cordelia, who was nodding her encouragement and smiling just a tad too brightly, which did nothing to calm the nerves making merry in her stomach. Still, it was too late now to back out. She’d decided to sing for her supper. All that was left to do was the actual singing part.

She just wished they could have done this at her apartment rather than Angel’s office. Because if Lorne didn’t react the way Cordelia had sworn sideways he would, the people milling about

in the area beyond were about to get some high-quality office gossip. Especially with Harmony out there. The only thing worse than being found out this way would be *Spike* finding out this way. Call her old fashioned, but Buffy thought the way a guy should learn that the woman he maybe loved and had maybe gotten over had been spying on him—however unintentionally—for months was straight from the horse’s mouth.

Especially after that phone call. The one she couldn’t stop replaying to save her own stupid life.

“Any day now,” Angel intoned, making a show of glancing at his watch. “We have a lot to do and I’d like to get to the desk-cleaning-out portion of today’s meeting done before lunch.”

Cordelia elbowed him hard enough that he flinched. “Don’t be such a dick.”

Someone slid a couple of fingers under her jaw to tilt her head up, and the next thing she knew, Buffy was in a staring contest with Lorne. Lorne and his red eyes and his horns and his demon face, all soft and kind, and yet still somehow sharp. He was a teddy bear but not a gullible one. And she had no idea how he was going to react once she started singing. “Honey bunch, just focus on me, all right? Don’t let Mr. Broody Pants distract you, or he’ll just get broodier, and it might not matter what I see.”

Buffy nodded, worked her throat. “Okay,” she said, then squared her shoulders. Now or never. Moment of truth. “*My loneliness is killing me—*”

“*And I!*” Cordelia shout-sung in accompaniment, which nearly had Buffy jumping out of her skin.

“*I must confess,*” she went on, shocked to find herself fighting off a grin, “*I still believe—*”

Cordelia pumped her fist, pointedly ignoring the stunned stupid look on Angel's face. "*Still believe!*" she added.

"*When I'm not with you, I lose my mind. Give me a sign—hit me, baby, one more time.*" Buffy stopped, her heart thudding like mad and her pulse deafening in her ears, but her grin was still in place. "Is that it?" she asked Lorne, trying not to wiggle too hard at the dumbfounded look on his face. "Do you need any more?"

Lorne stared at her for a moment—a long moment, the sort of moment entire futures were decided inside—and she thought his stupor might be enough to send her packing, good verdict or not. Even though he was in her periphery, Buffy could tell that Angel was ready to pounce. Finally, though, Lorne punched out a breath and shook his head. "Well!" he said, then laughed. Not a normal laugh, either, a full-on manic titter laugh. An am-I-on-Candid-Camera laugh. Buffy glanced at Cordelia, whose eyes were about to bug out of her head, but before she had to make any decisions, Lorne managed to seize hold of himself and wrangled the gigglefest under control.

"You, little lady, are full of surprises," he said, his tone warm even if his face remained unreadable. Another beat, then he turned to Angel. "I don't know what to tell you, Angelkins. Well, I *do* know what to tell you, but it's not what you're expecting. Suffice it to say, she is not Wolfram and Hart-grown evil. She's like us, trying to do a little good in a world that tries to do a whole lotta bad. We're lucky to have her on board."

Angel couldn't have looked more stunned if Lorne had grabbed him by the cheeks and kissed him full on the mouth. Thankfully, as he was occupied by a stare-down, he missed the look Buffy and Cordelia exchanged, one of full palpable relief.

Regardless of her bravado, Cordelia clearly had been uncertain, and more than she'd ever likely admit.

"You're serious?" Angel asked when it became clear Lorne wasn't going to follow up his endorsement with an appropriately timed, "Psych!"

"One-hundo percent-o, boss-o," Lorne replied cheerily, throwing an arm around Buffy's shoulder and reeling her in for a side-hug. "Little Miss Randi here is the real deal. A slayer with a heart of gold who also happens to work for us. Couldn't *buff* up our credentials any more to get the message out that the tide is turning here at the Great Evil."

Cordelia rolled her eyes, so hard Buffy was impressed they remained within her skull. Another thing Angel fortunately didn't notice. "So everything she's told us is true," Angel said again, his voice deadpan. "All of it? And there's no way she could be getting around your ability to read the way Jasmine did last year?"

"Good god, Angel, what more do you want?" Cordelia demanded, slapping his shoulder. "She rescued me because of a vision I sent her, *and* Lorne says she's good. Do you need the pope to sign off? If so, I'm sure someone in this hellhole can get the Vatican on the line. But if you're done being an ass for no good reason, I think I'm going to take Randi to meet Dennis. She so deserves a day off after putting up with your shit."

"She just had a day off," Angel complained, because of course he did. He didn't want Randi around but he didn't want to do her any favors, like freebie PTO. "What the—"

"No part of yesterday was a day off," Cordelia shot back, striding toward the door. "She saved me from certain death and then faced an inquisition about company stuff on company time, and you're the one who told her to stay put

while you checked out the obvious. So, yes, I am hijacking your paralegal for the day. Phantom Dennis will be happy to meet the person responsible for my, you know, not being dead.”

“Cordelia—”

“Who’s Phantom Dennis?” Buffy asked, trying to subtly untangle herself from Lorne and make her own way toward the exit. Even with the stamp of approval from the resident empath demon, she didn’t think it would do her any favors to remain in Angel’s company. Either he would say something that fired her up or he’d find another new, exciting reason to think the worst of her. Better for everyone if she got as far from him as she could.

Though she’d really like to touch base with Lorne—figure out what he’d seen and what he planned to do with the information. It would just have to be somewhere other than Wolfram and Hart; she didn’t trust for a second that there was a single square inch of this place where audio, *at minimum*, wasn’t constantly being surveilled.

“Dennis is my undead roomie,” Cordelia replied, having paused at the door to wait for her. “And a good thing Angel did for me, lest you think that all he does is glower and try to scare the pants off his underlings.” She flicked her gaze back to Angel, and something in there softened—something that Buffy recognized, if not the look then the feeling behind it. A feeling she found she didn’t associate with Angel at all anymore.

But then there was no reason to. Watching Cordelia and Angel interact was a glimpse at what could never have been with them—the easy way with which Cordelia gave him crap, the shoulder slaps, the attitude, and the underlying current of mutual respect.

Buffy hadn't had this with Angel, but she had with Spike. And what she hadn't had, she'd *almost* had. Maybe even still could if Cordelia was right, and he was still in love with her after all.

If she could get him to talk to her.

"What's the good thing?" Buffy asked, knowing she was supposed to.

"My old apartment," Cordelia answered. "Apparently, Phantom Dennis has been making life hell for anyone who tries to move in because he was waiting for me to come home."

"So he's like poltergeist undead, not vampire undead?"

She snorted. "Poltergeist potential, for sure, care of his momma, but that's not his nature. Anyway, Angel checked on the place yesterday after he was through being an ass at your apartment, and it's still unoccupied, so guess who gets to move home?"

That *was* a good thing. And another example of all the trouble Angel had never gone to for Buffy, busy as he had been convincing her that what she needed was a nice bit of normal. Refusing to tell her that when push came to shove, he would erase whole days of her life to keep her from discovering that he didn't want to be a part of it.

Yeah, she might be a lot pissed off about that. The second her stint as Randi was behind her, she was going to let him have a piece of her mind and then some.

For now, though, she'd just nod and smile and regard Angel with a look that hopefully masked all the things she was feeling underneath. "Glad to know you reserve your worst behavior for me specifically," she said, which probably didn't help but was in keeping with the rapport they had established. "I'll be back in the saddle tomorrow."

“And I’ll be here to yee your haw,” Lorne said with a wink. “Hopefully by the end of the day, we’ll have turned Mr. Sourpuss’s frown upside down and he’ll be singing your praises with the rest of us. But, ahhh”—he threw Angel a glance—“maybe don’t hold your breath on that.”

“Was never going to,” Buffy assured him, grinning in spite of herself. Then she decided to make with the escape before Angel could volunteer a reason why she shouldn’t. If she couldn’t hash things out with Lorne yet, she could, at least, with Cordelia. And maybe Lorne would find a reason to leave early so they could work together to form a plan beyond the one she’d been following thus far. Having on-the-ground allies changed the game considerably, and Buffy was ready for a change.

Especially allies like these. Allies who trusted her were a nice change of pace.



EVEN NEARLY A DECADE after slaying her first vampire, Buffy could still be surprised. Granted, she didn’t think there was any other possible reaction to seeing Cordelia whip through the air like a rag doll, even if this particular rag doll was the picture of delight at being handled, squealing with laughter that almost hurt to hear with how happy it was. Buffy couldn’t remember that feeling. She was starting to wonder if she’d ever had it or if the memory was more monk magic. Might as well liven things up while screwing with her head.

Only she didn’t say that. Cordelia’s utter glee at being home was not an excuse to throw herself a pity party.

“All right!” Cordelia said, still laughing and play-swatting at the air that Buffy assumed was Dennis. “Put me down before

I get dizzy. That's probably not good for a recent coma patient."

Buffy watched, bemused, as Cordelia lightly floated to the floor in a manner that, even if he was invisible, somehow managed to come across as extremely handle-with-care. As though Cordelia was made of porcelain rather than Teflon.

"Oh, Dennis," Cordelia said, all Disney princess-like. "I don't know what I'd do without you. The best friend a girl could ask for." She blinked and twirled around the empty expanse of her apartment—the furniture and assorted belongings in storage and set to return sometime tomorrow. "Thank you for not giving up on me. For not letting someone else move in." More blinking, more twirling, like she was working to absorb the magnitude of the moment. Then she stopped and met Buffy's eyes, and her bright smile returned. "Oh! Doh, I'm a moron. Dennis, this is Buffy. Buffy's... Well, a lot of things. She's a vampire slayer, a fellow Sunnydale survivor. Also Angel's ex and the reason I'm standing here, because she swooped in before the doctors or whatever they have over there at Evil Health and Wellness could inject me with—"

But that was as much as Buffy heard before she, too, was swooped up and swung about ragdoll style, and she could see why Cordelia had giggled her way through being serenaded—it was kinda fun. Like a carnival ride only infinitely more secure, for while she couldn't strictly *feel* Dennis, she also kinda could. Just a sense of presence that was both there and not, looping her around the space with care and ease alike.

"Thanks," Buffy said awkwardly once her feet touched the floor once more. "It, ahh, was nothing."

"No," Cordelia said forcibly. "Nothing was what everyone else did. You showed up."

"I mostly just ranted at you about stuff I couldn't say to others."

"And thank god you did. I am too fabulous to die with eight months of bedhead." Cordelia performed a pirouette as though to emphasize, and all in all, it wasn't the worst argument. She was rather fabulous. "All my real, quote-unquote, friends"—she air-quoted appropriately—"were too busy being seduced by evil, and a lot less subtly than whatever seducing I did when I wasn't me, but somehow, they don't see it."

Buffy released a breath. "What do you think Lorne saw? How does that work, exactly?"

Cordelia tilted her head as though not understanding the question before a big grin spread across her face. "I think that's the sort of thing you should ask him yourself."

It took longer than it should have before Buffy got that someone was behind her. Maybe because he wasn't directly behind her, like in the apartment, but standing outside the rather gorgeous crescent window, wearing a trench coat, bowler hat, and sunglasses that made him look way more conspicuous than just going out all horny and green would have. He waved when she saw him, all frantic energy, and Buffy felt something inside of her go warm.

"Sorry," Lorne was saying a second later, having taken some cue she'd missed that it was okay to come inside. "Didn't want to interrupt but boy howdy, I could not wait another second to officially meet the famous Buffy Summers."

"Officially?" she said weakly.

"Well, as official as a guy can get, sugar-pie." He was shaking her hand, she realized belatedly, and had been since he'd materialized on this side of the door. "I've heard many a tale over the years, but I was starting to think yours and mine were just paths not meant to be crossed. Tickled pink

—or green, as it were—to be wrong.” He released her abruptly, then turned his attention to Cordelia, still all beaming smiles. “And you,” he said. “You are quite the crafty diva.”

“It is my way,” Cordelia agreed, her tone particularly regal. “It was the quickest way to get it across.”

“Get what across?” Buffy asked.

“When she joined in your little number,” Lorne explained, glancing at her over his shoulder. “Gave me a mega dose of *keep your mouth shuts* along with everything else.”

Buffy frowned, looking at Cordelia. “You did?”

“Insurance,” Cordelia replied with a shrug. “In case Lorne took the wrong lesson away. I knew if he heard me sing, he’d know what I knew, or something like that.”

“Something like that,” Lorne agreed, sounding amused in an affectionate way. An “it doesn’t really work like that but close enough for government work” way. “Anyway, she did clue me in that I was seeing exactly what I needed to see, and how she hoped things would go once I was on the inside.”

“A-and what is that?” Buffy asked, rubbing at her arms. Even if everything had worked out exactly as they’d planned, it was still unnerving to be the one on this side of the decision making. Leaving her fate up to chance? Yeah, she got that. Part of the package. Not realizing just how much gambling had been going on was a calling of a different color, and not one she liked too much.

As though sensing the thought—and for all she knew, he could—Lorne offered a softer smile. “You’re here to do what needs to be done. Angelkins, and I love him like the brother I wish I never had, has been known to, err, make bad decisions. Whoppers, if you will. Flame broiled with cheese, and a supersized order of onion rings on the side.”

"Got your restaurants mixed up there," Buffy replied with a slightly nervous titter.

"And Angel can get a little mixed up, too, is what I'm saying." Lorne hesitated, studying her, then sighed. "You've been in some tight spots since you got here, missy. Made some tough calls, too...some that I don't understand, even if I have seen inside that darling little noodle of yours."

Buffy blew out a breath. "Spike?"

"Why-oh-why haven't you told him?"

"It's...complicated."

"Because you're making it complicated," he argued. "And sweetie pie, truly, I understand. There are people who have been put through the wringer, and then there's you. Your friends, your watcher, your own sister? Yeesh, I would not wish that on my worst enemy. Well, all right, I would, but that's only because they really have it coming."

"I don't—"

"But Spike? He's the real deal. So much it scares the boss-man. And honestly? After the shenanigans with Lindsey, I think your boy could use some good news. You, honey, are the best news a fella could wish for."

Buffy drew her lower lip between her teeth, uncertain, and glanced at Cordelia, who was decidedly *not* uncertain, rather nodding with such enthusiasm she was *this close* to becoming a human bobblehead. At least she didn't actually say the words, "I told you so."

She didn't need to.

"Okay," Buffy said, which had her heart skipping, then pounding hard enough to hurt. "Okay. You're right. It's time."

Cordelia rolled her head back. "Finally!"

"Finally? You've been back in my life for like two days."

"Yeah, but I'm *already* exhausted trying to keep everything

straight, and girl? I just woke up from a coma. Please don't exhaust me."

Buffy tried for a grin, doing her best to ignore the thundering in her chest. The familiar push-pull of adrenaline, fight natural and flight all too tempting, given what she had to do next. Throwing herself into battle was infinitely easier than putting her heart on the line, taking a step outside of stasis and watching as all possibilities dwindled to one reality.

It *was* like death, in a sense. At least the way Spike had described death—the world stopping, the future gone, but also unlocked, everything she could want attainable in the comfort of never knowing. Once Spike knew, once all of it was on the table, there was no turning back the clock. No undoing it if it went poorly, if Cordelia *wasn't* right, if too much damage had been done to come back from. If there *was* a reason Spike hadn't shared yet that explained why he was still here when he could be, theoretically, off with the woman he claimed he loved.

Telling him meant stepping outside of Schrodinger's whatever and accepting what came next, even if it broke her heart.

At least there she had a lot of practice.

YOUR CHAINS ARE STILL MINE

THERE WAS ANOTHER NOTE TAPED TO HIS DOOR.

That made six this week. Six notes, all the same. All from her. All innocent, all delicate in their worries and tone, all careful to contain nothing incriminating—not that she would, of course, but since Spike knew to look for it, the precise wording she chose couldn’t help but stand out as *exceptionally* careful.

The notes weren’t all of it, either. She also wouldn’t stop ringing his bloody phone, filling the voicemail box he had yet to properly set up with more of the same. Checking in, wanting to talk, make sure he was all right, asking him to please reach out when he could. That she was worried, and wasn’t that a kick in the head? Buffy worried about him. All it took was being shunted to the side on a cosmic playing field, his entire existence boiling down to a sodding joke. At least when her mates had summoned her back from the great beyond, it had been because they wanted *her*. She hadn’t been pulled out of eternal slumber as a part of a pissing contest.

These thoughts were the reason he couldn't be around her—couldn't be around anyone just yet.

And that was the real insult of it all. He *did* want to see her. Of course he did. Those first couple of days, yeah, he'd been boiling with anger and resentment, but it hadn't lasted. Had died rather abruptly and without fanfare, the way all superficial things did. Buffy was not responsible for his lot in life, and it wasn't up to her to compensate for the empty space his purpose had once lived. The person he was truly angry with, the one he actually resented, was the ponce who had fallen for the bunk in the first place.

In other words, himself.

And that was the way it should be. He was the one who had ignored his instincts, his misgivings, and allowed himself to fall into the fantasy of being important beyond the scope of his otherwise aimless existence. That he'd been taken for a fool was a punch he should've seen from a wind-up. There was also the fact that he'd cared enough to care at all, because, why the hell should he? And why should he still? Why should it matter that he hadn't been brought back with some grand design in mind? Who needed a higher purpose? Not him. He'd hardly sought out the soul because he wanted to win himself a destiny.

The trouble was it *had* been nice there for a bit. Imagining there was a contest at last in which he could triumph over Angel, with an arbiter who wasn't an ex or an ally. The Powers had the eagle-eye view, didn't they? Saw more than Spike could know, all the rot that Angel had worked so hard to hide from the saps he'd duped into working with him. This scale was truly large enough to count. And it had been a lie.

Spike sighed as he stomped his way into his flat, tossing his meager sack of groceries onto the sofa. All he'd brought

home needed to go into the fridge, but he didn't think he could wait to read the new words Buffy had left for him. He might be avoiding her but that didn't make his hunger any less. If anything, he felt the weight of her absence even more than he had in the days before he'd realized Randi's true identity. That sense that if he was solid, he could be where she was. Bridge the distance, pick up where they had left off, stop holding onto the final moments they'd spent together and see about making new ones.

That was the problem with the soul, though. It made you aware when you were too bloody broken to bother someone else. And he loved her too much to force her to deal with his crisis when she had other reasons for being here. Reasons that did not involve him.

Spike opened the note and smiled in spite of himself at the familiar curve of her lettering. As reliable as a fingerprint, it was, there to ease the doubts during those truly bad spirals.

Buffy remained the one thing in the world he was sure of. That certainty was all he had left.

Hey, just wanted to make sure you're not dead. Or dusty. Don't know if you heard but some old enemy of Angel's showed up and tried to take out the office. Actually, it was a vampire he made back in the 1940s on a submarine. Cordelia told me that Angel said you were also on that submarine so the guy might've had a vendetta against you, too. Don't know why he would since you didn't have a soul and Angel did and still made the decision to turn him but I worry. It's been too long since I've seen you. Really want to catch up. There's stuff we need to talk about.

Love,

Randi

The stroke of the R on her name was a little shaky, like

she'd remembered only after she'd started to write that the letter she was making wasn't a *B*. Spike stared at it for a long moment, longer than he intended, and he could almost see it happen. The way her pen trembled as she caught herself, kept from looping the letter closed and signed off with the name that wasn't hers. Another note in his collection, another time Buffy had given her love, though not as herself.

He wanted to see her. God, he did. But it still felt too soon for *her* to see *him*. Too much like he might do or say something he wouldn't be able to take back. Spike had no shortage of sins where she was concerned; no need to add more now.

Not until he was ready.



THAT DIDN'T MEAN he would say no to a glimpse of her, though.

Honestly, Spike hadn't even meant to end up at the law office when he'd finally dragged his arse out of bed that afternoon. He still wasn't sure how it had happened, as he'd been quite keen to go about his business the way he had ever since the day everything had gone to hell. Play some of the games courtesy of the system that smarmy git had used to sell the redemption story and wait around again to see if anyone dropped by demanding rent or the like, because Spike sure as hell hadn't been the one footing the bill. Enough time had passed that he was starting to think Angel had decided to take pity on him, if he wasn't already insulted enough.

That thought had somehow led him to where he was now, standing just down the hallway from where he knew Buffy

was, his head telling him one thing and his heart another. It'd be easy. She needn't even know he'd been there. Just find a reason to keep busy near her bullpen of offices, skulk in the shadows and the like and catch a glimpse of her on her lunch break or as she hurried off to the loo or sommat. There was a lot he could glean just by looking at a person, especially someone he knew as well as he knew her.

But because he knew her so well, he also knew he'd be an idiot to chance it. That coming here was bad enough, actually, regardless of the reason he'd given himself. She'd always known when he was standing about in the past; there was no reason to think this time would be any different. He'd be lucky if her inner alarm hadn't gone off already—if she didn't stumble out into the hallway in search of him before his head and his heart could come to an understanding.

Bollocks. He'd made a mess of everything. The best he could hope for was getting out of here without anyone seeing him.

"My oh my, are my eyes deceiving me? That can't be our platinum strudel, can it?"

"Where's a stake when you need it?" Spike muttered, turning to meet Lorne's overly eager eyes as the green bloke lumbered up the hall. "On my way out, point of fact, just as soon as I see Angel."

"Angel. You're here to see Angel? Not, uhhh..." Lorne cut his gaze over Spike's shoulder in the not-so-subtle direction of Randi's office. "Don't tell me there's trouble in paradise."

It took longer than it should have for Spike to suss out what he meant, remember that in the world according to everyone else, he and Randi were an item. Because his life was such a jolly laugh. The fake suitor of the real woman he loved who happened

to be pretending to be someone else. "Fine then. I won't," he said, and made to dart around Lorne back toward the lifts. Better to let Angel pay his bloody lease if it got him out of here unseen.

"Hold on there, cupcake."

Spike, in fact, did not hold on. If anything, he picked up the pace. Not that it did any good. Lorne was beside him in a blink, panting a bit but undeterred, reaching a claw-tipped hand for his shoulder as though to force him to stop.

"I have never seen a man this desperate to get away from a gorgeous woman since Tom and Nicole split," Lorne half-wheezed, half-laughed. "Wait, you didn't join a funny church, did you?"

Spike rolled his eyes and stopped short, temper rising along with his panic. Balls, trying to leave had caused more of a scene than being there had. The Slayer's office was out of his line of sight now, but any second, she could come down the hallway, following the titters and the gossip. He swore, the law types around here more closely resembled the teenagers on his soaps than actual kids did these days.

"Look, mate," he said through his teeth, "had a question is all. For Angel, not...anyone else."

"Easy there, tiger. I happen to be a member of the *Randi Joan Pratt* fan club." Lorne gave him a pointed look, the sort that spoke volumes. "If there's a special reason you're giving her the runaround, maybe the time to tell her is now."

"Tell her what exactly?"

"That your heart, big and bruised as it is, still belongs to a certain *other* slayer? She deserves to know, if that's what this is. You giving up—"

"I'm giving up on nothing," Spike all but snarled, his patience nearing its limit. "Bloody nothing. Just not the best

company at the mo', all right? Don't wanna bother the girl with the rot that's in my head."

"And here I am, a simple country bumpkin who thought that was the point of relationships. *Sharing*."

"And what do you reckon I should share?" he demanded, increasingly aware of his dwindling time, that from the looks being exchanged by other assorted rubbernecking underlings, it would be minutes—if that—before Buffy showed up to take over the scolding. He needed to be gone, *now*. "The fact that I just made a sodding fool outta myself running all over this bloody city on the orders of someone who mojo'd me back from the ever after just to take potshots at my wanker of a grandsire? That I was the dolt who thought maybe there was some grand reason for my bein' here, some purpose, that I could have a destiny of my own? That I was so desperate to believe in something that I let that tosser look me in the eye and sell me a lie every day? Not exactly the sort of thing you can just shake off, is it? So yeah, I've been avoiding her. Not sure I can stand to be told it's all right when it bloody well isn't. When I'm here because someone had a vendetta and decided to use me to see it through. What do you think, sensei? Think I oughta dump all that on a bird I'm dating?"

Lorne's face had gone through quite the journey throughout that rant. Surprise, then shock, then pity, then understanding, and finally panic, all conveyed through widening eyes and a progressively gaping mouth, as though gravity were working to pull the demon to a place as low as the one Spike was trying to make him understand. There was victory in that, hollow perhaps, but victory nonetheless. The sort Spike seemed to win the most.

"I..." It was perhaps the first time in Jolly Green's life that he'd been truly tongue tied. Another hollow victory.

And like the majority Spike experienced, it didn't last. "Woof, babe, that is a *lot*. Your aura's all cloudy with a chance of self-pity, and here I thought it was the soul blues, or confusing feelings for one slayer when you're hung up on another. There's a serving of humble pie if I ever had one. Me thinking you're an apple all this time when you're actually an onion."

Spike rolled his eyes and punched the elevator button. "Just tell Angel I don't take bloody handouts. If he's decided to pay for my flat, we'll find a way to get square."

"And I get it—I do," Lorne said, speaking as though Spike had not. "But you know, if you need some help getting back on the path, all you gotta do is sing me a little ditty and I'll help you find that yellow brick road. And you know something else? So will she."

The lift arrived, thank fuck, and Spike wasted no time hurrying onto it. "Thing I learned the first go around with Buffy," he said, hitting the dial for the lobby. "It's no good trying to love someone when you can't bloody stand yourself."

The doors slid closed then, framing Lorne's freshly stunned face in a way that would have been gratifying if Buffy hadn't spilled out of the hallway in time to catch the last, giving Spike exactly what he deserved—fresh reason to loathe himself as the elevator carried him down.



THERE WERE a lot of things Buffy needed at the moment. Mostly, she needed Lorne to stop giving her the sad eyes. The apology eyes. The "how much did you hear?" eyes. Any eyes of any kind, actually, because all of them made her feel like she was on display. Or worse, that all the things she was trying to

keep bottled inside were not inside at all, rather emblazoned across her face in neon lettering.

Not that there was much inside that wasn't already out. The office had exploded in frenzied whispers the second the elevator doors had closed, and either sensing her there or just understanding that Murphy's Law meant she *had* to be there, Lorne had whipped around with a dramatic flourish, coughed up some sort of choked sound at whatever expression she'd been making, then quickly ushered her down the hallway and back to her office where he had done...this. The staring thing with the eyes and everything those eyes were saying.

Finally, though, he seemed to realize that looking at her wasn't accomplishing anything, and made a show of clearing his throat. "I think I need to amend my little pep talk from the other day."

"You *think* you need to?" Buffy snapped, then immediately looked away so she wouldn't have to see his expression when the words landed. She could have been kinder and elaborated but given what had just happened, she didn't feel up to it. There was too much to process—the glimpse into what Spike was feeling now, had nearly shouted for the whole floor to hear. The things she'd expected but still somehow managed to find surprising. Like the fact that he was hurt by the revelation that Doyle was an imposter, that made complete sense. The degree of that hurt, though, and what it meant for whatever was going through his head and how he saw himself...

That was the stuff she *should* have seen coming but didn't. Not even because she had been there and done that, which she had, but this wasn't the first time she'd watched someone grapple with the purpose of their continued existence from the sidelines. Angel had gone through the same after Acatlha, looking for meaning before eventually finding it in what

seemed like an answer from the cosmos—validation in the form of improbable fat snowflakes blanketing southern California in the middle of a heat wave. An unambiguous sign that he was back for a reason and that reason *mattered*.

The larger implications of what Spike had learned had somehow eluded her. Or maybe she hadn't wanted to consider them.

"Personally, I think you took for granted that your platinum honey returning to this mortal coil couldn't be anything other than a blessing," Lorne said sagely. He was ready with a grin when she whipped her head back to him. "You were muttering most of that, but I caught enough to feel like my read is on the money."

"I was muttering?"

"Well, no, but you made this little..." He imitated a pitchy throat sound. "The ol' empath noodle, when it's hot, can pick up this and that and the other, and it was musical enough to register."

"No one told me that."

"That's because I don't go around blabbing just how sensitive this thing can be." Lorne rapped his knuckles on either side of his head. "Except when I want it to be, that is. Couldn't get a darn thing off your man except...wherever he's at? It's not a good place."

"I got that myself. Mainly from him saying so."

"I know you did, and I don't think you should take it to heart."

"You just said you needed to amend your pep talk."

"And so I am. Amending." He straightened and adjusted the lapels of his suit jacket. "We take things for granted, and no one is guiltier of this than yours truly. I do think honesty is the key to a long, healthy life, but picking and choosing the

times to be honest? That's just common sense. If our boy feels foolish for not seeing the Lindsey-monster at the end of the book, I imagine learning that a certain slayer he's devoted to has also gotten in the business of wool-pulling is going to be an even bigger blow. That's just the way this particular cookie is going to crumble, and there is no avoiding it."

Everything inside her sank. *Everything*. Even her feet felt heavier. "Because I didn't tell him right away."

"Don't be too hard on yourself, strudel. I know your intentions were good, if a little misguided." Lorne offered a soft half-smile. "And I imagine, if he loves you as much as all signs indicate, he'll understand too. But there's a time and place to add insult to injury, and this ain't it. Let's let the injury heal a little first."

That was the sort of thing that made perfect sense, should have made her sag with relief. Putting off hard emotional stuff was Buffy's forte. She was the recognized founder and caretaker of the Land of Not Dealing.

Only the brain was silly sometimes, and her brain even more so. Revealing the truth to Spike was something she'd been dreading and anticipating and entirely overthinking, and while she had been living in the world of possibilities by choice, she'd been, not comfortable, exactly, but okay with the decision of *when* being for Future Buffy to decide. Of it being a choice she could make whenever she wanted, whenever she was ready.

The past few days, she'd been ready, or as ready as she'd thought she'd get. And now that she couldn't? Well, it sucked.

And like most things, she had no one to blame but herself.



AS MUDDY AS Buffy's life was at the moment, one thing that had become beyond crystal-clear was the reason Wolfram and Hart had been intent on either killing Cordelia or keeping her trapped in a coma—because she got shit done like nobody's business, and she didn't exactly tiptoe while doing it. She was also fiercely loyal in ways Buffy had never appreciated, though not a blind loyalty. Like, despite the fact that she and Angel had kinda sorta started dating, Cordelia did plenty of ranting about him and his decisions. She also took regular inventory of the resources she could access to help Team Not Evil (as christened by Cordelia) find their best advantage in what she was sure would be a fight. The lawyer gig had an expiration date, and when it came to pass, heads were going to roll. Literally.

It was a nice distraction from the fact that Buffy hadn't seen or heard from Spike in almost a week. Or six days going on fifteen and a quarter hours—whatever the time had been when he'd made his dramatic elevator exit from Wolfram and Hart—but who was counting? Not Buffy. Nope. Sure, Buffy was still calling, still dropping by, still leaving notes, but one thing she wasn't doing was counting. She wasn't *that* pathetic. There had to be a line somewhere.

Or yes, she was that pathetic. But at least she was the sort of pathetic that had a social life, one that made her think of the Scooby Gang of old—the one that had rallied in the fight against Glory before death and resurrection and attempted apocalypses and unforeseen betrayals had fissured them entirely. Only instead of Willow and Xander, Buffy had her former best frenemy, a gregarious demon with a heart of gold, and a ghost whose appreciation was expressed through an endless parade of chocolate whenever she visited. And the more time she spent with them, the more her mind couldn't

help but make disloyal comparisons. There was no denying how much easier her days were when Cordelia, Lorne, and Phantom Dennis were the friends she got to share them with. No judgments, no second-guessing, no loaded looks or lectures about the choices she'd made or the people she loved.

It was life as Buffy had forgotten it could be. She didn't know if she could trust it—if the specific circumstances of the experience were what separated it from what things had been like among the Scoobies—but for now, it was nice. More than nice. It was having friends who understood her.

"I don't know how you've done it," Cordelia said one night at her place over chopsticks-full of kung pao chicken. Dennis, ever the accommodating co-host, kept refilling their wine glasses anytime the bottom was in danger of peeking through the red. "I went undercover a few times when working for Angel, but a long job like this? Especially with that redwood-sized stick up his ass where you're concerned? I'd've let him have it a long time ago."

Buffy assured her she intended to the second the cloak-and-dagger gig was behind her. Cordelia whooped her enthusiasm and made the tiny request of being present when the hammer came down. And if Buffy could spare it, enough advanced warning so there could also be a camcorder in the room.

"Might be needed anyway, just to keep everything straight. Make sure things happen as we remember them," Lorne muttered, as he had just learned about the day Angel had rewound. And yeah, Buffy found that comforting too—that Cordelia hadn't been lying when she'd said that it wasn't an open secret or anything and that Buffy wasn't the only one Angel kept stuff from. Though neither of them had been brave enough yet to tackle the subject of Lorne's own missing

memories and all things Connor. "It's all about the conditions with Angel," he concluded at last. "That's the only thing that makes sense about why he'd turn that down. Humanity isn't worth it unless he gets it a certain way. What the nincompoop doesn't realize is that there's *always* a reason something shouldn't happen. That doesn't mean you throw it away when it does."

"Being a vampire, having that strength, was more important to him than being with me," Buffy replied. Then she hurriedly glanced at Cordelia, compelled to reassure her that she wasn't bemoaning the lack of Angel in her life, only remembering when their eyes met that no such reassurance was needed. Cordelia got that—she got how Buffy could be mad at having lost something she no longer wanted. That the injustice of what had been taken from her remained. "Everything else wasn't enough."

"And that's the rub, sister," Lorne agreed, nodding sagely. "Easy enough to never hit your goals if you keep shifting what those goals are. I doubt the big dumpling would know what to do with himself if you took the fight away from him. The fight is what makes Angel who he is. What gives him any sort of identity. He stops fighting and who does he become? Some guy with a blood diet watching the world go by? Or say he gets that prophecy he's so hot for. What happens then? All the many, many legions of demons he's managed to piss off over the years suddenly have an advantage on him that could cut his life-expectancy to nothing. Do either of you seriously see Angel with a steady nine-to-five? Out in the suburbs somewhere, dropping off little Angelina and Angel Junior at their preschool while he clocks in, puts in his hours, then comes home to a night of cozy television watching? That boy is never going to be happy. And as long as that pesky curse is

in place, that's fine and dandy. Without it, though? When he has no excuse keeping him from being happy?"

"That's not Angel," Cordelia put in, looking one part wistful and one part frustrated. "I just don't know that he knows that."

Buffy was almost certain he didn't, otherwise he wouldn't have swooped in all ready-to-smooch and moody when she'd told him the role of Champion had been cast and his services were no longer needed. Looking back with all this fresh hindsight, she saw the holes she hadn't been informed enough to clock the first time. It was just too bad it had taken months of subterfuge to see what was obvious. That she couldn't have realized this, say, years ago. Preferably when he'd been walking out of her life to start the great new one he'd insisted couldn't exist because he would forever remain suspended in post-Buffy stasis.

And when Buffy wasn't distracting herself with her new friends, or mulling over the Angel she knew and the Angel she thought she'd known, when her thoughts inevitably turned back to Spike—"It's no good trying to love someone when you can't bloody stand yourself."—she found herself increasingly landing in the same place. That maybe the answer to her Spike problem wasn't just coming clean but retiring Randi altogether. She'd been here for months, as Giles loved pointing out, and while she had definitely done good, she'd kinda just tripped into it. Cordelia was alive and well, and that was great, but ultimately that was because of luck and timing. Buffy certainly hadn't set out to rescue her. And with the way Angel kept shutting her out... Well, it seemed plausible that Randi had outlasted her usefulness. She could discreetly leave the picture, and Buffy could enter as herself.

That wouldn't fix things with Spike, who would wonder

where Randi had gone, and though the idea of just swapping places and never having to have that talk was attractive, Buffy knew better. There was also the persistent voice that kept telling her the reason she hadn't done much of anything was her preoccupation with Spike, and if it hadn't been for her good timing, even that would've been a waste. But she was trying, really, to not listen to that voice as much. Being around the others helped. They were both loud and opinionated and tended to speak right over her inner Giles.

And both of them were firmly against Randi Joan Pratt exiting the scene.

"Not yet," Cordelia told her when Buffy brought it up the next time she and Lorne convened at Casa de Chase for some takeout and light espionage. "We saved your ass for a reason, and not just to show Angel what a buttface he's been where *Randi* is concerned. Don't count your chickens before they're ready to be slain."

"Can't argue with that, Little Miss Buffet," Lorne added. "Don't think the forces of evil are going to take a break just because you handed them one whopper of a defeat by rescuing our Cordy. The more firepower we have here, the better I'll feel whenever this whole thing goes kablooey."

That made sense, and not a small amount. It also left her feeling stranded in ways she couldn't explain. Because ever since Lorne had told her that she *had* to tell Spike, she'd been itching to do it, and his backtracking on the matter hadn't done much to change that. She had been so close to having this part, the hardest part, done, out of stasis, so she could move toward whatever came next. Stasis might be comfortable but stasis also meant inert, and the last time Buffy had been inert, she'd been dead.

And while Lorne might be right in believing Spike was too

wounded to make the wound worse, he also didn't know him the way Buffy did. No one knew Spike the way Buffy did.

Her intuition screamed at her that he would want to know regardless. Better to be totally beaten than only partially, so he could do all his healing at once.

But that was something Buffy kept to herself. Much as she was growing to love her new friends, she'd had too many experiences with the old ones where she'd declared her intent, only for them to vote it down in committee. Some things weren't group decisions—some things were personal, and this was one of them.

Spike had never been anything but personal, and she was tired of pretending otherwise.

This was no one's call but her own.



OF COURSE, Buffy's timing had always sucked. It was all well and good to resolve to tell Spike the truth, but another thing to actually do it, especially when he wasn't taking her calls or answering the door when she pounded on it. She'd considered more than once going over just *as* Buffy and explaining the Randi situation from the start, but with Cordelia and Lorne both intent that Randi needed to remain in place, Buffy Summers couldn't be seen anywhere she might be identified. Outside Spike's apartment unfortunately counted as anywhere. No telling if the place was under surveillance or not.

So, between visits and notes and phone calls and more visits and notes and phone calls, there was nothing to do except continue the Randi charade while at work. But thankfully *only* at work. A perk of Cordelia and Lorne knowing her

secret was she didn't have to pretend with them. She actually got to let herself turn back into Buffy when the workday was over and it was time to relax in private with her friends, so long as she also kept a vial of her magic Randi potion and change of clothes on hand. After all, Angel could show up at any time and she needed to be prepared...which ultimately meant even the times she was Buffy she was on edge. Ready to jump into someone else's shoes—literally—at any given moment and resenting it more and more, even if all of this had been her brilliant idea.

Maybe she should try once more to reason with Cordelia—explain the futility of remaining undercover when Angel had someone close by who would help keep him in line. Someone he definitely listened to more than he had ever listened to Buffy, disguise or no disguise. And if something happened that required slayer intervention, well, Buffy would swoop in, hopefully with an army of slayers at her back, assuming that the information Andrew continued to supply her with helped her reclaim her role as general when she finally joined the others.

The more she thought about it, the more convinced she became that it was the right call to make. And maybe something she shouldn't wait around to discuss with Cordelia, after all; that like telling Spike, she shouldn't give anyone the chance to talk her out of this decision. Maybe she should just walk in and tender her resignation so by the time Cordy or Lorne discovered what had happened, it was too late to reverse course.

That was the thought that tailed her into work the following day. She rode the elevator to Angel's floor, nerves dancing in her belly, hoping she'd feel like eating once she got this part behind her, then stepped off and marched with

intent toward his office, tunnel-vision style. Not slowing down when Harmony called after her that this wasn't a good time—heck, not even so much as glancing in her direction. Determined to be fast, in and out, before her brain could start the overthinking cycle from the beginning and she did this whole dance again. Taking options off the table should help settle things.

“Angel,” she said, pushing his office door open without bothering to knock. “I have something I—”

But that's as far as she got before stopping dead in her tracks, caught in the glaring eyes of the puppet sitting behind her ex's desk.

“What the hell?” she asked, then gave an un-slayer-like start when the puppet, its face pulled into a fierce scowl, pointed one of its felt hands toward the door.

“Get out,” it snarled in Angel's voice.

Buffy stood rooted to the spot, too shocked to blink, let alone move. It wasn't the sort of shock that lingered, though—rather, it began to sizzle at the edges almost immediately. Burning away the numb until all that was left was the reality of what she was seeing and the fire dancing inside of her with a lightness that tickled. That made it impossible not to laugh.

“Oh my god, who turned you into a puppet?”

Angel didn't answer, just glowered as her giggles intensified, exploding through her with all the tension that had weighed on her the past couple of days, leaving her light and airy for the first time in as long as she could remember. So much so she didn't even fight when hands—real hands, not puppet hands, hands belonging to someone who turned out to be Harmony—closed around her biceps and pulled her back out of the office.

She was too busy laughing to care.



AFTER ALL THAT DEAFENING SILENCE, it turned out the secret to summoning Spike was slapstick. Granted, Buffy didn't realize that he was at Wolfram and Hart until the day was almost over and another paralegal ran down the hall screaming that it was WWE meets Sesame Street on the boss's floor, and everyone had been on their feet, eager to take in the mayhem. It was entirely possible Spike's plan had been to sneak in and out again without detection, and he had just shat the bed by poking a fight with a pint-sized puppet man. But that was how it happened, how Spike came to stop avoiding her. Suddenly he was just there, wiping dust and glass off his duster and trying—not succeeding—to stop laughing.

Then he found her eyes through the crowd of onlookers and beamed as though their meeting here had been prearranged. As though they'd had an appointment to reconnect at Wolfram and Hart, following a wrestling match with a version of Angel as depicted by Jim Henson.

The pressure that had been building—the driving-her-crazy uncertainty of everything vaguely resembling her life—seemed to evaporate the second he looked at her. The second he smiled. And as much as she liked that, part of her resented it, too. Spike had gone from being Mr. Avoidy to grinning at her like he hadn't...well, been Mr. Avoidy. Like all of that had been in her head. And the worst part was she was pretty sure none of this was by intention. Just Spike being unusually aloof until he decided to switch back to straightforward.

"I can't believe you were going to quit."

Oh, right, and Cordelia was there too. She of the alternatively really great and really terrible timing, who had swung into her office just as Buffy confessed to a still post-Angel-

fight-giggly Spike that when she'd come in this morning, her thoughts had been resignation-bound.

"Seriously, what were you thinking?" Cordelia asked, then turned to Spike as though for support. "Will you talk some sense into her?"

Spike shook his head, his mouth twitching like he was trying to school it into something other than a grin. "Dunno. Can see it, myself. Only so much Angel a person can take. Randi here might be at capacity."

"So not helping."

"Didn't say I would, did I?"

"It was *implied*." Cordelia rolled her eyes and pushed herself off the wall of Buffy's office, though the effect was diminished by the fact that she didn't have a ton of room to maneuver and so ended up just kind of standing there. "I know that the two of us have both gone to bat for her recently, and I dunno. Feeling all kinds of unappreciated if the way you thank me is to quit."

"Dunno what you mean about *the two of us*," Spike muttered before Buffy could begin to formulate a response. "Haven't been around much the last stretch."

"Believe me when I say I've really, really noticed," Buffy piped in, unable to help herself.

At that, Spike averted his gaze, sucking in his cheeks. "Yeah, got twisted up top-wise. Think it's sorted now. Just needed a swift kick in the arse."

"Oh? And who did the *arse* kicking?"

His mouth twitched again but he still didn't fully grin. "Me. When I realized I was moping around enough to give Angel a run for his money. If ever there was a bloody wake-up call..."

"Oh my god, you guys are so dramatic," Cordelia inter-

jected. “And not the point, which is that we both did our parts to keep Randi on the payroll and you were just going to throw it away, why? Do you have *any* idea how valuable it is to have the Slayer on staff?”

There wasn’t much that could have pulled Buffy’s attention off Spike just then, but Cordelia managed just fine, making her heart somersault in the process. “Watch your definite articles,” she replied through her teeth. As resolved as she was to come clean—desperate for it, even—she didn’t want to do it with an audience. It was much more a just-them conversation, and preferably off Wolfram and Hart premises.

“Well, for real, *Randi*, what happens after you resign? There’s some bad shit happening right here in LA, and we’re in the literal hub of it. If you wanna be useful, here’s where you do it. And it’s a lot easier to work against Wolfram and Hart if you know what’s going on inside of it.”

“Gee, where have I heard that argument before?”

Cordelia pulled a face. “Look, was Angel a big dummy-shaped dummy for getting us into this mess? Yes. But the mess remains, and since it’s located in the right-the-hell here area of town, probably where most of the good guys should keep focused.” She paused, flicked her gaze between Buffy and Spike as though waiting for something. Or perhaps realizing what wasn’t being said, but what was on the *cusp* of being said, for she started moving toward the door the next instant. “And on that note, I better go see how the idiot’s doing—if that puppet magic has worn off. And maybe go have a little chat with the werewolf lady because Angel does *not* have the social awareness to realize she’s interested in him and someone better let her down gently.”

Buffy’s heart started thundering anew. “Okay. Later?”

“You know where to find me.” Cordelia flashed her one

last meaningful look—all full of *do what you gotta and if you think this is the moment, then go for it, girl*—then disappeared into the hallway, leaving Buffy alone with Spike for the first time in what suddenly felt like eons, even if it had only been a few days.

And he was looking at her, too, now with curiosity and a hint of expectation. He was too good at reading people—at *her*—to not have clocked that there was something on her mind. Something more than what she'd already said. Which was good because hey, no need to grab his attention, but the result was Buffy's tongue suddenly felt too big for her mouth and her throat too tight to try that talking thing.

After what felt like an unbearably long silence, she managed to force out, "I went by your place hoping you'd just be there, like just getting home or leaving, and you'd talk to me. A few times I did that."

Another silence, not as long but definitely as uncomfortable. "I know."

"You knew?"

"Well, there were the notes, for one thing. For another, it's hard to drop by a vampire's crypt and not have him know it. Scent gives it away."

She had, in fact, dropped by a vampire's crypt—*this* vampire's crypt—on more than one occasion where he hadn't realized she was there until she made herself known, but it wasn't like she could say as much. Also not like she hadn't put together that Spike would know she'd been there through his super sense of smell. Or the aforementioned notes, which, yes, of course he would have known.

"I realize that was probably borderline creepy behavior," she replied, trying hard not to sound as hurt as she felt and

failing miserably. “Or maybe full-on creepy behavior. Like stalking after you’ve told a girl to fuck off.”

Spike’s mouth twitched for a third time. “Didn’t want you to fuck off, love. Just had a bit going on between the ears. Second time in two years I’ve been fucked around by someone as a means to their end. Reckoned I wasn’t fit company while sorting that out.”

“I don’t mind you being bad company. I’ve been...really not great company before.”

“It wasn’t just that. Just having to work through the reasons I was brought back.” He flicked his gaze from hers, his jaw right. “Even if you’ve had the unique pleasure of being raised from the dead against your will, think most reasons why are nobler than the one I got.”

Once again, her chest went tight, and a shiver raced across her skin. He wasn’t talking about her—about Buffy—but he also wasn’t *not* talking about Buffy. And giving her one of those meaningful looks while he did it. As though answering a conversation they weren’t having aloud but were having all the same.

God, could he know? It wasn’t the first time she’d wondered but it was the first time the question had rattled her on a level that couldn’t be quickly rationalized.

“Spike—”

He shook his head, batted a hand. “Nah, it’s all right.”

“No, there’s something I need to tell you,” she said in a rush, lurching forward to seize his arm. “When we’re...not here? Somewhere neutral?”

“Neutral?”

She nodded, holding his gaze. Willing him to understand. “Neutral.”

There was a beat, then something in his eyes softened.

Changed. At least she thought so—thought she saw the familiar turn, the look that said he understood—but she had no time to analyze it, for the next second, Cordelia had burst back into the room, the cheeky serenity of only a few seconds ago gone, her expression a mask of panic.

“We have to hurry,” she said, panting. “It’s Fred.”

SEETHING SHADOWS BREATHING
LIES

WHEN IT WAS ALL OVER, HE WAS LEFT WONDERING WHAT she'd been about to say before Cordelia had burst back into Buffy's office. There had been something in her eyes, a look so *Buffy* he'd almost sworn the magic getup had faded, and he'd thought maybe this part was an end. The part where she was pretending to be someone else, where he had to pretend to believe she was someone else, that whatever had changed while he'd been off licking his wounds had been significant enough to make her realize the distance between them only existed because she'd put it there, and he was bound and bloody determined to respect it.

But whatever Buffy—*Randi*—had been about to tell him blinked away the second Cordelia rushed back, harried and wide-eyed and imploring Randi's help in stopping something awful from happening to Fred. Buffy hesitated long enough to throw Spike one last look before taking off in a sprint for the lab where Fred spent most of her days, and since he wasn't one to sit on the bloody sidelines, he was right on her heels.

“Oh good,” Cordelia said, breathing hard and turning in circles as though to investigate every nook and cranny. It was late enough that the place had mostly cleared out. “It’s not here yet.”

“What’s not here?” Buffy asked, also looking around, her focus less precise, more *slayer*. Scoping out the lay of the land for threats. “Generally helpful to know what I’m fighting, Cor.”

“It’s a big coffin. An old one.”

“A sarcophagus?”

“Yeah, one of those.”

“How am I supposed to fight a sarcophagus?”

“It’s not a sarcophagus, it’s...” But then Cordelia paused, narrowing her eyes, and Spike turned in time to see that Knox bloke emerge from one of the lab’s more discreet nooks. “It’s him,” she said. “He’s the one.”

Buffy followed her gaze. “Knox is the sarcophagus?”

“He’s the one bringing it here.”

Knox watched the exchange, thoroughly unsettled, before slapping on that smile he always wore when trying to sweet talk Fred. Only Fred seemed to have caught wise to it in recent days, enough so that, last Spike had heard, she’d politely told her colleague that she wasn’t interested in him for anything other than his brain. Word was he’d moped around a bit but otherwise rebounded like a bloody champ. And now, Spike reckoned he knew why.

“Hi, ladies,” Knox said. “Can I help you with something? If you’re looking for Fred, I think she had something to talk to Wesley about, so—”

“Can it, science boy,” Cordelia snapped, fixing her hands along her hips. “I know I don’t work here or anything, so this isn’t official until it is, but you are *so* fired.”

“Excuse me?”

“The coffin-thing—”

“Sarcophagus,” Buffy quietly corrected.

“Whatever. Your grand plans for Fred? Here is where they come to an end, my friend.”

Knox paled—the sort of pale Spike reckoned was visible to more than just creatures predisposed to track the way blood flowed. The sort of pale that was a confession. There was a beat in which they all stood there, sizing each other up, before the git started inching toward the nearest door, apparently deciding he was better off running for it.

Didn’t stop him from running his mouth, though.

“It’s not what you think,” he said.

“So you’re not going to put Fred in the path of whatever’s inside that sarcopha-thing so it can kill her dead?”

“That is not the intention.”

“You don’t intend to kill her?”

“She’s not being *killed*,” Knox insisted, though this time with a gleam in his eye that Spike knew well. He’d seen it in Angel back in Sunnydale, the manic certainty that he was about to be elevated into something else, something greater. That by waking up old Stony, he himself would *become*. “She’s evolving. Becoming a part of something bigger than her. Bigger than me, you, and all of this. And I chose her because she’s worthy. It’s an honor, being chosen. A true honor.”

“You know, I’ve heard that before,” Buffy replied, stepping forward. “Actually, a lot, come to think of it. What an honor it is. How *grateful* I should be. This sacred, specific gift given to me because I was chosen by some higher power to be more than just a regular, wimpy human. Here’s the thing, though—if you have to convince me it’s an honor, it’s not an honor. An honor is something you want, something you work for. Now, I

don't know what the hell Cordy saw in her vision"—she nodded at Cordelia without taking her gaze off the boy—"but I *do* know that I was done with men deciding how I or any other girl should feel about trouble we didn't ask for a long time ago."

Knox looked at her then as though seeing her for the first time, his brow crinkling, face contorting with obvious confusion. Either he hadn't heard about Randi the Vampire Slayer-slash-paralegal or he wasn't entirely all there, but even so, some part of him clearly identified danger, because fear stank up the air right quick along with the thundering rush of his pulse, the hard thumps of his heart. He stepped back and Buffy stepped forward, unwavering, and the writing on the wall must have been clear, for Knox broke for the door. He didn't have any hope of clearing it—no hope of beating either a slayer's or a vampire's speed, let alone both together—but he gave it a decent shot all the same.

Nice way to work up the appetite, even if it wasn't much of a chase.

By virtue of being closer, Spike got to him first, seized him by the back of the lab-coat and punched his head against the nearest wall with just enough force to daze without rendering unconscious. An important distinction, as he'd note later when they had the wanker tied up and ready for Lorne to work his mojo. Something you learned to estimate with age when subduing a bloke you wanted to question. Or, in their case, have sing like a canary for the resident fortune-teller. Not that Spike had much faith in Lorne or his particular mojo at the moment—presumably he'd already read Knox once and rubber stamped him through. If there was anything else to be learned, he ought to have learned it the first time around.

Thankfully, it turned out Knox didn't need much persua-

sion before he spilled everything. He might have been a git but he'd been savvy enough to know that keeping mum would only make things more painful for him. That Cordelia already had a good chunk of the tale courtesy of her visions just solidified it.

The long and short of it was fairly straightforward—Knox was a fanatic trying to bring his god back to life. He'd worked it out that Fred was the perfect vessel for the job, even manipulated Charlie into pulling some legal strings, courtesy of his mental upgrade, to fix it so the god's sarcophagus would land in Fred's lab. Once there, it would appeal to the lifelong student in Fred, and she wouldn't be able to resist getting up close and personal in trying to piece it apart. And as she poked and prodded, a puff of god dust would burst free, Fred would inhale it, and kick off the process that would slowly liquefy her insides, destroy her human soul, and make space for the entity known as Illyria. Leaving this world to face the wrath of an Old One, whatever that meant. At the end of the day, the fault would be Angel's. Angel deciding to play nice with evil under the guise of trying to master it. Flying too close to the sun or whatever cheery spin his acolytes wanted to put on it. He wouldn't have meant for it to happen, but he'd still be the reason, and damn anyone who argued otherwise.

Spike didn't know if anyone appreciated just how close they had come to losing this battle—even Buffy herself, though she'd always been shy about taking bows after performing her heroics. But even if no one else said it, he knew. He knew she was the reason it hadn't gone tits up. Buffy being in Los Angeles had saved more than just Fred's life—she'd perhaps saved the world in another of those unsung ways. The small apocalypses and near-misses being

something her mates and even Angel's crew just accepted as part of doing business, never appreciating how close they came to losing everything, maybe because appreciating meant acknowledging how near the edge they lived day-to-day. Buffy making the hard calls, living on the fringe, her mates absent for whatever reason, missing the smaller parts of what constituted a hero. Being in the right place to save Cordelia, who had in turn had the vision that had helped them save Fred. And maybe, even probably, the world.

But the world was still turning. Fred and Wesley, who had apparently stopped dancing around each other at long last, were snuggled up together, counting their lucky stars that their blooming romance hadn't been cut off at the legs. Knox was probably in some torture chamber of Wolfram and Hart's, where he might well deserve to be but without any sense of irony on part of the man who had put him there. Meanwhile Angel got to pat himself on the back while he and Cordelia continued their rekindled whatever-it-was.

And Buffy lost her nerve about whatever she'd been about to confess. Spike didn't need her to tell him to know it—he'd seen it in her eyes. The conviction, the certainty that had been there before Cordelia had burst into her office had vanished, left with more of the same misgivings he'd grown accustomed to over the last few months. As though Fred being saved was a setback, though he couldn't begin to fathom why. Either way, they had retreated to the song and dance they'd been doing up until now. The one that was slowly driving him crazy.

That wasn't fair to her, and he knew it. Just as he'd known it before he'd withdrawn to lick his wounds following the Doyle's-not-Doyle reveal. Get himself back in top form, ready to throw down and fight, to follow her, or otherwise go wher-

ever she commanded. Spike wasn't accustomed to taking it so hard on the chin. Failure was just a part of existing and all, and if he happened to crash and burn, he'd brush himself off and show up the next day like nothing had happened. Hell, to memory, the only time he'd ever been out of commission entirely hadn't been his choice, rather the result of a sodding organ snapping his spine into pieces. Not even the chip had slowed him down all that much where it counted. Once he'd figured out he could hit demons, he'd been back in the thick of it, perhaps not causing the same chaos he'd come to consider his bread and butter but doing destruction of some sort. He hadn't bloody hidden.

What had happened with that Lindsey wanker had been a different breed of hurt, and yeah, Spike knew he'd thrown himself a pity party in the aftermath. And yeah, in the heart of his misery, he'd found his way toward bitterness for the one person he'd promised himself he'd never resent. For things that weren't even her fault, just the way events had fallen. Cordelia awake. Buffy there. And Cordelia knew the truth, he was sure of it. She was a sodding seer. There wasn't much getting past her, no matter how good the disguise. Everything he'd witnessed in their interactions, brief as that had been, just reinforced it. She knew. She *had* to know.

Spike might be a better man now than he had been before, but that didn't keep the knowledge from smarting. The fact that the second life he'd started to piece for himself, been fool enough to believe in, had shattered. Or that Buffy had been trusting precious parts of herself with someone else.

The more he'd thought about it, the more it hurt. He hadn't *wanted* to think about it, hadn't *wanted* to stew in that hurt, but the mind didn't care about things like wants. It went where it felt the pull, and negativity like that had a way of

being too alluring to ignore. The fact that Buffy had finally shared her secret with someone who wasn't him—by choice or by circumstance, he didn't care, and it didn't matter—had scratched beneath his skin with just enough pressure to pierce the flesh and make him bleed, the way it had that night in Sunnydale toward the end. When he'd followed the Slayer to the vineyard with a mind of helping her put that Caleb wanker in the ground once and for all and had caught an eyeful of her snogging Angel instead.

He wasn't owed anything from her, he knew, and he hadn't asked for anything, either. Every inch he'd gained had been on her end—Buffy moving closer, Buffy bridging the gap, Buffy opening herself up little by little just to pull away once he started to trust it. And it hadn't been intentional or planned, had probably surprised her more than it had him, but few things in this world had hurt as much as letting himself believe it might mean to her what it did to him, then seeing for himself that it didn't. Even after he'd tried to let her off the hook—let himself off the hook, too, before he could go get his heart trampled anew—he'd remained standing still, ever the poet. Ever the lovesick wanker. Ever the bloody fool.

He was no good to anyone with his head on like this, least of all her. He was also being a dramatic berk, as he could go to Buffy any time he liked and take her by the shoulders, shatter the distance her little getup had put between them and force the issue, but he also couldn't do that because just what exactly would that make him? Never mind that there was definitely a way of looking at all this that made his misery his own bloody fault. Something to do with the fact that he'd known the truth about Randi almost from the start and done fuck all with that information, even when it probably would have spared them both a lot of awkward moments. And when he

started thinking like that, he fell deeper in, wondering if maybe the bulk of it rested on his shoulders after all, and he was being a complete wanker, lashing out rather than looking inward. Focusing on his hurt rather than entertaining the possibility that he was the one responsible for it.

All this boiled down to a solid truth—there were two hells. One was being near Buffy and one was not being near her. If Randi was as close as he could get to Buffy these days, then he'd reach out to Randi. That was what the plan had been the day he'd gone over to Wolfram and Hart, and, upon finding her office empty, popped into Angel's to see if she was perhaps being reprimanded for some new imagined infraction only to find a puppet sitting behind Angel's desk rather than the wanker in charge. Laughed himself into stitches he hadn't realized a vampire could feel without functional lungs, stumbled across Randi's path, all while cackling still, and eventually found himself back in her office with Cordelia. And then that moment when his chest had hitched for a different reason altogether, when it had just been the two of them and he'd thought she might be about to come clean. Look at him and be Buffy in truth rather than the girl beneath the mask.

Then Cordelia had returned with news about Fred and, well, things had deteriorated from there. And Spike hadn't found his way back to the moment they'd almost had in the weeks since. He'd resumed the pattern they'd had before—dropping by, stealing her away for lunch, calling her like they were old mates, even going on patrols with her when she asked, as she'd started hitting the cemeteries. All the things that had defined their working relationship before the Doyle imposter had filled Spike's head with flights of fancy. And as much as he appreciated it—needed it, in fact, having not realized how miserable he was simply being away from her until

he got enough over himself to rectify the situation—he couldn't seem to find the right footing that would encourage her to pick up the thread she'd dropped in favor of saving Fred's life. And he was too much of a chicken-shit wanker to do it for her. Stuck in that limbo he knew so well, damned if he did and damned if he didn't.

Still, if he had to pick a bloody limbo, this one—the one with Buffy—was preferable to the other. So he'd keep knocking on her office door, keep catching that look on her borrowed face—the half-hopeful, half-terrified look—keep asking himself what any of it meant, keep hoping today would be the day that she decided to finish the rest of the sentence that had been interrupted.

“Bad time?” he asked when he showed up one evening in late April. The sun was back to staying up later, courtesy of the clocks having sprung forward sometime within the last month, but Buffy was lingering at the office later and later each night, for no reason he could see beyond it was what she did this time of year. Springtime was, after all, apocalypse time, and even if an apocalypse hadn't yet presented itself for the offing, he knew all too well how the body remembered. Some of that tension had settled into his bones as well—the anticipation, the memory of pain. They were both nearing their own bloody death days.

If Buffy had any of this on her mind, though, she didn't show it. Rather favored him with a tired but sincere smile as she pushed herself back from her desk. “I was about to call it, actually,” she said, rising to her feet. “Thought I might hit Hollywood Forever before going home if you wanna join me.”

Spike grinned back at her, helpless to do anything but when she was looking at him all soft and fondly. “Hollywood Forever, eh?”

"It's not my fault that celebrity cemeteries get more action than others. Just shows the undead are as shallow as the rest of us."

"*Newly* undead. You get less starstruck as you get older."

"Well, that's their problem, then. They make themselves easy pickings for the likes of yours truly and never advance to that more mature stage of celebrity apathy." She fixed her purse over her shoulder and started toward him. "And I seem to recall a certain someone sneaking over to pay his respects to Dee Dee Ramone the last time we were there."

"And I suppose you expect me to believe that if Brittney bloody Spears was buried there, you wouldn't be curious?"

"Why Brittney? Why is that always your go-to?"

The grin on his face pulled into a smirk. "Oops. I did it again."

She rolled her eyes but couldn't glance away quickly enough to have him thinking she was anything but amused. It was light and airy the way she so rarely was, and probably accounted for how she managed to catch him so off guard with her question. "Did you know Angel has a son?"

"What now?"

"A son. Teenager. Same age as D—a teenager." Her cheeks went rouge but she didn't slow down. "There was a whole thing today, I guess. I don't know the specifics, but the kid was here and this demon was involved and... Well, long story."

He bloody gathered. Balls, he was still stuck on the first part. "Angel has a sprog?"

"A sprog? That sounds like a fungus."

"It means—"

"I know what it means. Hello, I am queen of the context clues."

At that, Spike relaxed, finding himself fighting off another

grin. Odds were she wasn't aware, but if any part of her had ever been trying to sound less like the Slayer when she was with him, it had long since thrown in the towel. A habit dropped and never picked up again. "All right then, tell me about Angel's sprog. Who's the unlucky mother? Cordelia?"

"Very much no. There's a creepy story there that someone else will give you sometime." She shuddered, reaching past him to switch off the light to her office before helping herself out the door and into the hall. "Darla was the kid's mom. A few years ago, I guess she got brought back from the dead—"

"Right, yeah, I knew about that."

"You did?"

Spike nodded, going for blasé as he fell into step beside her. "Dru tried to romance me back once. Caught me up on what she'd been up to since she kicked me to the curb. Didn't go into a load of detail, but enough that I knew Darla got pulled back into the mortal coil." To torment Angel. There was something he'd never reckoned on having in common with the bitch. "Didn't know he got her up the duff, though. Or that he'd make super babies that age in sodding dog years."

"He didn't. The kid was kidnapped by an enemy and raised in a hell dimension where time moves different."

Spike snickered again. "Lucky kid. I know this enemy?"

"I think his name was Holtz."

"Then yeah, I did. Not personally, but Angelus and Darla loved telling tales." Especially tales that catered to their already overblown egos. Holtz had been a bloody force, to hear them talk. A real Van Helsing type, one who had dedicated his life to ending theirs, chasing them across Europe and northern Africa until finally giving up decades later, after he'd lost everything. After they'd *taken* everything. "Looks like

everyone connected to Angelus gets mojoed back from the beyond.”

“I’m not sure what the story is there. Could be no resurrection mojo at work.”

“Right, ’cause eighteenth-century vampire hunters pop up in modern LA all the bloody time.”

The corners of her mouth twitched. “All right. Fair point.”

“So Angel’s son was raised by a man whose family he slaughtered. Suppose there’s some poetic justice in that.” And he supposed it’d be a bit of a sore spot, which could account for how it was that they were nearing a full year of his being tied to this sodding operation and no one had thought to mention that this kid existed. Even still, though, he couldn’t help but feel stupidly hurt that Angel hadn’t said anything. They might not be chums, might not even like each other all that much, but they were family. In the vampire way of looking at things, this son of Angel’s was part of that. An uncle or something. And if the kid was raised by Holtz, well, it was likely they could bond over their mutual hatred of Angel. Might be the only member of the whole clan that wouldn’t be completely taken in with the wanker.

“Angel slaughtered Holtz’s family?”

Spike paused and threw a look at her. “If this comes as a shock to you, I’m bloody baffled you haven’t been sold a bridge before.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“That of course Angel—”

“No, I got that part, thanks. The bridge part.”

“Someone says they have a bridge to sell you, pet, it means they think you’re an easy mark. Believe anything you hear.”

“Oh, so you were calling me gullible.”

“If you’re genuinely surprised that Angel offed Holtz’s family, you’re damn right I am.”

She rolled her eyes. “No, of course I’m not... There’s just not much I know about this because, according to Cordelia, he worked some mind control magic or whatever and no one remembers this kid exists.”

“What now?”

“Yeah, it’s this thing Angel does apparently.” Her tone had taken on a decidedly bitter edge, and Spike immediately went on alert. “Cordelia’s the only one who remembers because she was in her coma when the magic happened and I guess Wolfram and Hart didn’t expect her to ever wake up so they didn’t include her in it anyway, but Angel’s son... Bad stuff happened, Angel’s son was about as well-adjusted as you’d expect for being the child of two vampires raised by their sworn enemy in a hell dimension and then dumped back in this one with no idea how anything worked. I guess he went off the deep end, and Angel decided to press *reset* when he took over here, sent his son to live with a human family with a new set of memories, and also took the memories of his son from all his friends so none of them had any idea who he was except Cordelia.”

“Bloody hell.” Spike let that sit for a moment, both surprised and not, as little involving Angel surprised him anymore. Still, he had to admit, the wanker was good at finding new ways to exert control over the people in his life. Only maybe not new. “You said it’s a thing he does, rewriting memories. You know of other times?”

“Just one. Cordelia told me about it.” She hesitated, then put her hand on his arm to tug him to a stop. They were in the middle of a hall, one that was only partially lit as business hours were well over now, but she took care to glance in either

direction to make sure they were truly alone. Or as alone as they could be in this building. “A day he had with— with *Buffy*.”

Spike tensed, his throat tightening. “Oh?”

“Yeah. I guess there’s this demon or something that if its blood mixes with a vampire’s, the vampire comes down with a case of the human condition.”

Well, fuck. There was a new one. The sort of revelation that could scare a man stupid if he gave it too much thought. The talk about the Shanshu prophecy had been heady enough, and he’d managed to more or less put it out of his mind save the times it came up in relation to Angel, but a demon was much more random, and he didn’t know how he felt about that. Bugger, he still didn’t know how he felt about the prospect of being the subject of that sodding prophecy—whether the appeal was because winning it meant taking it for Angel, because he genuinely wanted it, or because he thought it was what Buffy would want for him.

Then the rest of his brain kicked in, and he realized what she was saying. What she was admitting.

“Angel turned human.”

“For a day, yeah.” She swallowed. “With Buffy. But he decided it was too hard and it was better for her if he went back to being a vampire.”

“Better. For her.”

“Yeah. The same way it was better for Connor—that’s his son—to think he was a normal kid, and better for all his friends to not remember that Connor exists.” It was more than just bitterness in her voice now, something a step beyond, and that lanced him solidly across the chest, both her hurt and the fact that it existed, which of course it did. Buffy felt everything with her whole bloody being, and even if she

was completely over the git, that didn't mean past wounds wouldn't be agitated if prodded. "Anyway, just seems like more of the same. Angel decides what's best for everyone and the people involved don't get a say, or even a heads-up. Even if it contradicts things he's said. Things like the truth are up for interpretation. Whatever is most convenient for him at the moment. Like he told m—I mean, Cordelia told me that he had this whole thing where he left Buffy for her own good because he couldn't be what she needed, which was *normal*. Except the second he could, he couldn't do that either because it'd be too dangerous. So according to the Gospel of Angel, his superpowered girlfriend both needs a normal guy to be whole but will probably always be distracted by a normal guy to the point of putting her life in danger, so I guess the ideal solution for her is to become some sort of warrior nun because all relationships are doomed. And his kid—Connor is also superpowered, or at least stronger than the average human, given who his real parents are—so yeah, let's send him out into the world with zero context just to let him discover just how strong he is by accident, never mind that can get people hurt or killed. And goody, everyone will forget that Connor existed at all, and by lucky co-inky-dink, Angel also escapes having to tell anyone what he did and have them challenge him with the possibility that he might have been wrong."

Spike swallowed, his throat having grown tight, his mind somehow both blank and overfull at the same time, competing with itself to find the right combination of words—the ones she needed now, not the ones that wanted out, or that he still couldn't give her. She remained too out of reach for that.

But at the same time so close it was hard to think clearly.

Choosing him. Relying on him. Confiding in him—Buffy making these decisions, entrusting him with these parts of her, all while using his name and looking at him in ways both imploring and intimate. As though daring him to make a decision she hadn't revealed she needed him to make.

It'd be so much easier if she'd just tell him what that was.

"Sounds like Angel," he said at last, having nothing else. Then, unable to help himself, he added, "You seem extra put out by all this, love. Everything all right? Don't tell me you're disappointed. Thought you had his number by now."

Her cheeks colored and she dropped her gaze from his, that steady brown that was both nothing like the eyes she was hiding but still somehow everything like them, for they were hers in the most important way. "I just... I'm mad. For her."

"Her?"

"Buffy. Just seems like there are all these things she didn't know about him. Things he... Things he made sure she didn't know. By memory stealing." She was still a beat, then looked up at him again. "Things that I wish she... I think she should know. Should *have* known, you know? Because maybe if she had, you'd..."

Every molecule in his sodding body was suddenly vibrating, with such unbearable intensity he was afraid to move lest he explode. Somehow, he had wandered into territory even more precarious than the normal day-to-day. If he made the wrong move now, he could ruin everything. "Maybe I'd what?"

"Well...you're still here, aren't you? Not off where she is. Despite the fact that you love her." A beat. "You do still love her, don't you?"

"You say that like it's a choice."

"What does that mean? You wish you didn't?"

"There were times I have, yeah. God knows my life

would've been easier." His mouth was apparently determined to run away and do whatever it damn well pleased, bugger the screaming in his head. "But sod easy. Loving her, painful as it's been, made me better. Even if she wanted nothing to do with me, trying to be the kind of man who might be worthy of her means there's one less monster running around out there. Someone else fighting to make the world what she wants it to be. I could never regret that."

She glanced down once more, but not before he caught the shine in her eyes, magnified behind the square glasses that sat pert on the bridge of her nose. All a part of the disguise to convince berks who didn't know her that she was someone else.

"You still don't..." She wet her lips, not looking at him. "I still don't understand, if that's the way you feel, why you haven't reached out to her to let her know that you're alive. Why you're not with her. I know it's none of my business, but hearing the way you talk about her... I can't help but wonder."

That was it. The end. Something inside of him snapped, and everything he'd swallowed, bottled up, everything he'd told himself over these endless, confusing months was erupting, and spilling over the walls he'd tried to box around it, and he was through. Bugger waiting and bugger everything else. He'd been existing in this space too bloody long and if he stayed here one second longer, whatever tenuous hold he had on his sense of self was going to snap away entirely.

Spike opened his mouth, not sure what was about to come out—a demand or a scream or a sodding song and dance—except that it would be irrevocable, plainly telling her that the reason he wasn't with Buffy across the globe was because Buffy was right here and couldn't they please just stop

pretending, when Fred suddenly tumbled into the hallway, panting like she'd run all the way here.

"Oh, thank god," she said when she spied them, and began striding forward, her eyes fixed on Spike. "I tried calling but it went to voicemail. You need to leave, right now. I made Charles get a plane ready."

"That's nice, ducks," Spike replied, not bothering to hide his confusion. He was done hiding across the board. "But might help to tell me what this is about first. Was just havin' a chat with—"

"It's about Buffy," Fred blurted as she stopped in front of him. "We think she's in trouble."

YOU WILL UNDERSTAND IN TIME
(I'LL UNDERSTAND IN TIME)

THE FRONT DOOR AT 1630 REVELLO DRIVE HAD RARELY been locked after her mom died. At that time, it had just seemed pointless, as the town's most dangerous elements already knew where she lived and weren't above kicking the door in if they wanted to take on the Slayer. So when Buffy had moved into the apartment in LA, she'd had to retrain herself on things like door lockage and security. She hadn't been all that worried about anyone actually breaking in, but LA was LA. Better not to invite trouble by being stupid.

That night, though, Buffy didn't bother locking the door after she arrived home. Instead, she wandered on numb legs toward her bedroom to strip out of her Randi attire, tossed a pair of Buffy-sized PJs onto the bed, then padded into the attached bath to remove her makeup. By the time the task was complete, the face in the mirror was her own. Smaller shoulders, lost inches, hair back to its goldish blonde, and her eyes, tired and green and *hers*, lined with dark circles that made her look at least ten years older than she actually was,

but there was no fixing that so Buffy opted not to linger. Instead, she made her way back into the bedroom and tugged on her pajamas—a tank top with some sleep shorts—then let her feet carry her to the kitchen where she swore to god, she better find booze in the fridge. If Willow had decided to claim the wine she'd bought last week, Buffy might just have to fly across the world to punch her best friend on principle.

Thankfully, the wine was still in there in all its unopened glory. Buffy snagged it by the neck, grabbed one glass, then another, then traipsed into the living room and threw herself onto the couch.

And that was exactly how Cordelia found her when she blew in through the unlocked door a half hour later.

“What the fuck are you doing in Rome?”

Buffy motioned to the wine glass on the coffee table with the one in her hand. “I’m very obviously not in Rome.”

“Well, duh, but that doesn’t explain why my boyfriend and your not-boyfriend decided to hop two different planes to go rescue ‘Buffy’”—Cordelia made aggressive air-quotes—“from someone called the Immortal which, by the way, is maybe the *lamest* name I’ve ever heard.”

“No arguments here.” Buffy sighed and rolled her head back. “According to Andrew, the Immortal is some demon playboy who’s really big on the Italy scene and he thought it’d be a good cover story for something he and Giles are apparently up to their elbows in over there. He has one of the new slayers pretending to be me and dating him to lure out some... I don’t know, I stopped listening after ten minutes. He swears it’s necessary.”

“Well, *I* swear I’m going to stick my stilettoed foot up Angel’s ass when he comes back.”

“I take it you got no warning.”

"The dingus called me from the plane," Cordelia grouched, throwing herself into the chair at Buffy's left with a dramatic flourish. "From the *plane*. Apparently riding to your rescue takes precedence over talking to the actual girlfriend."

"Sorry."

"Don't be sorry. He's the dingus." She sniffed, folded her arms, then unfolded them to snatch the waiting wine glass off the coffee table. "And Spike too. Fred said he made tracks the second he learned Angel was Italy-bound."

Yeah, Buffy still didn't know how to feel about that. Or any of it, really, but then that was the way it had gone since she'd gotten here so no sense expecting anything different.

"You know what would've helped there," Cordelia said, looking at her shrewdly, once again reading her mind despite her frequent reassurances that mind-reading wasn't a part of the seer gig.

"I know."

"You were about to tell him."

"I know."

"And yet it's been how long since then, and he remains untold."

Buffy rolled her head back, her eyes falling shut. She'd had this conversation once or twenty times already and was so not in the mood for another iteration. It was enough she kept arguing with herself—revisiting old territory in the hope of finding something new, something she hadn't explored already. But the fact remained that while Fred *hadn't* been transformed into some Lovecraftian nightmare, she very easily could have been, and that knowledge had been enough to snap her back to some earlier version of herself. The one that had come here for a reason that had nothing to do with the sorry state of her love life and every-

thing to do with making sure Angel's tenure as the head of Wolfram and Hart didn't have consequences like *unleashing a hellgod*. The fact that Spike had more or less reverted to the status that had been quo before Cordelia had woken up had helped as well.

In short, she'd lost her nerve. All that certainty she'd felt before had evaporated, along with her confidence, for yet another thing had almost happened under her nose. Another thing had only been thwarted by stupid crazy luck, this time in the form of Cordelia and those visions she received.

It was easier to stand in one place than make a move that might topple everything over. And with Spike back to being, well, Spike, the consequences of knocking him off his axis right now felt more severe, especially heading into apocalypse season. He might have processed the Lindsey thing, but she had no idea how Spike would react to learning she'd essentially been spying on him for the better part of a year. Lorne's stark warning had taken on greater volume, which was funny in a way that wasn't, as Lorne had started encouraging her to spill the beans again. Spike was on solid enough ground he could keep standing if it quaked a little now. And maybe that was true—hell, it definitely was true—but it didn't magically return the conviction she'd lost. Or the courage.

"We've been over this," she said to Cordelia. "I told you—"

"I know. And Buffy? It's boring."

She lifted her head off the back of the couch. "Boring?"

"Yes. You going back and forth on the whole Spike thing is way boring. Like, life inside the coma was more exciting." Cordelia snickered and raised her wine glass—now filled almost to the brim—to her lips. "And if Spike was in the know, he'd know not to waste his time polluting up the ozone

to fly to your sarcastic air quotes ‘rescue’ alongside my dipshit boyfriend.”

“Are you sure you’re not projecting?”

“Of course I’m projecting! Angel and I are trying to actually build something here and he just—*whoosh!* the second he hears his ex, who can kick his ass and the Immortal’s without breaking a sweat, might be in some vague sort of trouble.” She threw back a healthy swallow of wine. “The thing is, I accept this, you know? Whatever this is, it never had any chance of being normal, and not just because some multi-dimensional god used my body to boink his son. Angel has all these ideas about destiny and redemption, and I know he doesn’t love you—not like that, and no offense—but he still thinks of you as being tied up in all that, and it’s soooooo frustrating. Imagine being as cool as I am about your boyfriend dropping everything to do a continental hopscotch because he heard his ex might be in the exact sort of danger she’s always in and oops, her other ex is already on his way and if you don’t hurry, he’ll get there first. Never mind that the reason you know any of this is because you’ve decided to use your corporate evil powers to have her followed.”

Well, that was an awful lot to take all at once. “He what?”

“Whoever’s pretending to be you put some of Angel’s guys in the hospital when she realized she was being tracked, but yeah, that’s how this Immortal sitch even crossed his radar.”

The anger that surged through her was so familiar it almost made her homesick. Buffy sat forward, then back again, deciding it was safer for everything in the immediate vicinity if her hands remained empty. “He’s having me followed?” she repeated. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Well, he’s obviously not having *you* followed, but yes.”

“I am going to kill him.”

"I don't blame you."

"You might when he's dust because I've killed him," Buffy retorted, every muscle in her body tight and her temples beginning to pound. "God, Cordy, how do you stand this?"

"It's just Angel. It's how he is."

"But you know that. I never did. You know it and you're still trying to—" She broke off, but the damage was done. Cordelia was appraising her with arched eyebrows and a defiant look. "Never mind," she muttered.

"No, not *never mind*. Say it."

"I don't want—"

"Say. It."

Buffy wet her lips, released a deep sigh, and lowered her gaze to her hands, which she suddenly didn't know what to do with. "I don't think he still loves me," she said after an uncomfortably stretched silence. "I mean, not the real me, at least. I'm starting to wonder if he ever saw me at all, which is...hard to say because he was such a big part of my life for so long. But here you are, trying to date him and I believe he loves you, Cordy, I do. The way he is with you, even the way he *looks* when someone mentions you, I never saw him look that way about me ever, even when things were good."

Cordelia didn't bat an eye. "I must have missed that half hour."

"Well, it would've been easy to miss." She hesitated, then inhaled and figured, hell, she'd come this far. "Even believing that he doesn't love me, the fact that he did this—dropped everything to race across the globe because he thinks I'm in danger, that he's having me followed... I dunno, I would not be okay with a guy I was seeing doing that to his ex. And the guy I'm hung up on was with his ex for more than a hundred years. If Spike knows where Drusilla is, much less what she's

up to, I would be beyond surprised. If he took off without warning, without even letting me know until after he was already gone... I don't know. I just don't think I could do it. In fact, I know I couldn't. It doesn't take much to make me jealous."

She forced herself to stop then before more could come out—not that there was *new* more, just the rambling sort of building-on-previous more that, if left unchecked, would run until she was blue in the face and had shoved more than her foot in her mouth. Hell, if she really got going, she might find herself choking on her full leg. The quiet wasn't comfortable but a step above filling the air with more awkward nonsense, and that was what mattered. So Buffy sat back, made a grab for the wine to give her hands something to do, and was in the middle of refilling her glass when Cordelia broke the silence.

"I'm not okay with it."

Buffy paused and looked up, her heart in her throat.

"I mean, of course I'm not okay with it," Cordelia continued, then barked a little laugh. "But it's also not like I went into this not knowing that Angel was... That he could get tunnel-visioned about certain things, and you're at the top of that list."

"I don't want to be."

"I know that, too, and I don't think he really realizes what he's doing. There's the part of him that has moved on and the part that is so convinced that he can never move on that he just does stuff like this without thinking. You know he left town after you died," she added, studying the bottom of her now-empty glass. "Went to a monastery or whatever to center himself."

"Yeah, he told me about that," Buffy replied. That clandes-

tine meeting had haunted her for what felt like an age after they'd parted ways—the anticipation of relief she'd been certain she was driving toward, the peace and calm, the ability to breathe again without choking on air. She'd left in such a hurry she hadn't had time to think about what she would say, tell him, believing that he could be the keeper of her secrets because he'd always been a source of comfort in the past. Only by the time she'd actually pushed into the diner, met his eyes, the fog had lifted, taking with it the version of her relationship with Angel that she'd carefully constructed around the real thing. And then she'd remembered—the tension, the uncertainty, the way she carefully chose her words when communicating anything significant, how on edge she was when he was around, waiting for the next thing. A blow to knock her off her feet or shatter the tenuous peace she'd finally managed to find. How the only time she could remember being happy with Angel, really happy, had been at the end of their relationship, when she'd forced herself past the hurt and the jealousy and the not-knowing, only to have the mayor throw in her face the challenges that lay ahead. Or not challenges—realities that Angel had decided to make challenges, and she'd decided to embrace as well because the alternative was that he just didn't love her enough to try. Getting over Angel was a lot easier if she believed the reason they couldn't be together was anything other than what it was.

She might not have known about the missing day when she'd walked into that diner, but maybe some part of her had. Or maybe the full illusion had shattered along with her bones when she'd plummeted off the tower, because seeing Angel hadn't made her wish for days that had never been, but rather had cemented a resentment of his role of making her believe in something not supported by their lived experience. Buffy

deserved a nice normal life. Well, that might be true, but that wasn't what Buffy had been given. She hadn't gotten a normal death, either, or a normal afterlife. Nothing in her world could ever be normal, and the one bit of abnormal she'd tried to wrap her arms around had rejected her. Not only that, fled the country after her death, and maybe she could understand that—she'd fled Sunnydale after his—but that had seemed like an excuse, too. She'd fled because she'd lost everything; he'd fled because he'd lost something he'd already let go of. And yeah, it had been a bitter pill to swallow, knowing that Angel had chosen solitude over what Spike had done. Enough so that she'd feel disloyal and pissed at Spike every time the thought crossed her mind, as though Angel's decisions had been his fault.

In the end, walking into that diner had just reminded her of a time before the one she'd occupied, where the awful in her life had been different but no less awful. How heavy Angel's presence weighed on everything she did, how commanded by her feelings she'd let herself be once upon a time. And then how in order to survive, she'd shoved those feelings deep within herself to the point she'd started to suspect she didn't feel anything at all. That love and tenderness and all the parts of her that were Buffy and not *slayer* had been hardened into stone, making *love* a word she couldn't wrap her lips around without struggle, much less her mind. For to love was to lose, and who had taught her that better than Angel?

It took a second to realize Cordelia was still talking—had been, in fact, for a while now. Buffy shook her head and tried to refocus, searching back through her overloaded mind to find the thread where she had left it. Picking up words here

and there, and not really snapping fully into place until Cordelia said, “—told me that it didn’t kill him.”

“What didn’t kill him?”

Cordelia paused, scowled. “Have I just been talking to myself the last five minutes?”

“Maybe. I don’t know where I zoned out.”

“Gee, you’re all kinds of fun to hang out with.”

Buffy brought up her hands. “I never promised to be entertaining. Or entirely present.”

“Whatever.” Cordelia rolled her eyes, but as Buffy had come to expect, revealed a moment later how put out she wasn’t by shifting in her seat, scooting to the edge and leaning forward almost conspiratorially. “He said losing you didn’t kill him and he thought it should. That he spent more time away thinking that it would hit, that you were gone. What that meant for him. I think that was the first time he realized it was possible to let you go.”

Buffy nodded, though her thoughts dragged her right back to that diner. “And then I was back and he, what, regressed?”

“I don’t think so. Nothing changed after you were back. Like, he went to see you, but once it was over, he never mentioned it or you again.”

She thought it might hurt hearing that, and maybe it did a little, but not as much as a younger version of herself would have expected. “Until he came back to Sunnydale with the amulet, at least. He acted very... I dunno how to say this, like the person who hadn’t been picked?”

Cordelia scowled. “The huh?”

“It didn’t occur to me at the time. Angel had always been the one calling the shots, and I’d just followed his lead. Chronically followed his lead.” She snickered, the sound

empty. Everything empty. “But then he swooped in with what I’ve been told is something called a *deus ex machina* and went all territorial on me because he could smell that Spike and I had gotten close. And he started giving me the third degree the way he had with Riley, only it was different. I didn’t realize how different until it was over and Spike was gone, but after... It was like he had been rejected. Like this whole time, I was the one who called the shots, who had said we shouldn’t be together. Which...is kind of fucked up, you know? I never had that choice. I never got to make that call. And the one time I tried, he told me he didn’t accept it—and he really, really didn’t. We were back together in less than a month, I think.”

If any of this was difficult for Cordelia to hear, she didn’t let on, and god, Buffy didn’t know how she managed that. She’d never once considered Cordelia a more evolved person than herself, yet here she was. Nodding and frowning and making all the sounds a proper grown-up might make, and in a way that was totally genuine, not performative. If Buffy were *less* evolved, she might hate the other woman on principle.

“When he came to see you in Sunnydale, it was just after he’d given up Connor,” Cordelia said after a beat. “And when he’d thought he’d lost me too.”

“So, what, I was his consolation prize?”

“Maybe, yeah.” Cordelia held up a hand as though to stave off a protest. “I don’t think he, like, intentionally thought of you that way, but maybe it was just too much, you know? The idea that he’d lost his son and me and then you, the reason he got into the fight in the first place. I’m not saying it was right or anything, but he was probably feeling... I dunno, like the last part of himself was slipping away. The thing he thought would always be there for him, failing everything else.”

“So I’m like a safety school. That’s very flattering, thank you.”

Cordelia rolled her eyes again, but the corners of her mouth twitched all the same. “Don’t even act like he wasn’t yours, too.”

“Well, I’m not the one booking it across the Atlantic to track down my ex while supposedly in a relationship with someone else.”

At that, Cordelia’s expression shuttered. “No. That’s the part where he’s an idiot. I think he’s just desperate to make sure his safety school is still, you know, accepting applications. In case things go south with us.”

“I’m really loving this metaphor.”

“Hey, you started it.”

She had. Didn’t mean she had to like it. “And Spike went because he’s a moron who apparently needed the threat of Angel beating him to the punch to decide to *finally* go see Buffy.” And no telling what he would do when he realized she wasn’t there.

God, she had really made a mess of things. And she had no one to blame but herself.

“Face it. We both just have really shitty taste in men.” Cordelia snorted and raised her glass as though to toast. “Still a step up from Xander Harris, though.”

The part of her that was a loyal friend crashed headfirst into the part of her that had been stewing in resentment for the past few months, and before she could stop herself, she heard herself say, “If that’s the bar, it’s no wonder we’re doomed.”

Buffy’s eyes went wide the second the words cleared her lips, regret and guilt surging past all the resentment but in such a way the only thing to do was release a bark of laughter.

For a moment, she and Cordy just stared at each other, and then—she wasn't sure who broke first—they were cackling. Like full on belly laughs, the way Buffy hadn't laughed since that time she'd lost her shit catching Giles up on everything he'd missed while he'd been off trying to force her into adulthood trial-by-fire style. Laughing so hard her chest began to whine and her sides to ache, and all of that just served to make the situation funnier, made it harder to stop laughing. To come back to the place where none of this was actually funny, because *god*, her life had been the opposite for so long she'd forgotten it could also be this. Even for just blips of time. Stolen moments over a glass of wine with a frenemy who was on the fast track to challenging Willow's claim to the best friend mantle. And that should make her feel disloyal, too, but hell, it wasn't like Willow had been all that loyal to her when push came to shove.

There was a strong possibility she would hate herself for thinking any of this by the time the laughter stopped and reality set in again. But for now, she'd enjoy it.



SPIKE WANTED TO PUNCH SOMETHING.

No, not something. Angel. Not exactly a new impulse, either, but one he found increasingly difficult not to act on the longer this stupid charade dragged out. It hadn't been enough that the big sod had commissioned one of his fancy private jets to take off on Spike's tail the second he'd heard that the Slayer was in trouble—or that he'd tried to burst into the flat Buffy and Dawn supposedly called home only to find himself on the wrong side of an invite. It was the bloody whining that was going to tip him over, make Spike finally

fulfill the fantasy of plunging a stake through the wanker's chest—and as satisfying as that would be in the moment, he knew full bloody well that he'd have a brassed-off slayer to answer to, and he didn't fancy their first honest conversation since Sunnydale being an argument.

But it was hard. Especially since Andrew had decided to go with the ridiculous story that Buffy and the Immortal were Rome's newest power couple. Almost as ridiculous as Angel buying it with nary a blink or a sniff to realize that Buffy had never once set foot in the flat she supposedly lived in. Truthfully, how neatly he'd accepted the lie was an embarrassment to their kind. No thoughts, no questions, just rolling with the sodding punches, shifting his attitude only enough to assert that his goal was to keep Buffy safe from unsavory associations, and they both knew what a ponce the Immortal was, and it was in her best interest to keep her from getting hurt to find her and slap some sense into her. All the while pretending not to hear when Spike asked how Cordelia felt about his having dropped everything to rush to the aid of an ex who didn't need it. Had to smart, considering the scenic route they'd taken to their own blissfully ever after.

"Only it can't be blissful, can it?" Spike barked at Angel's back, trailing behind him toward the club Andrew had sent them to supposedly to find Buffy. "Is that why you're here? Keep things a little miserable at home so that loosey-goosey soul of yours doesn't light out the first time you actually let yourself enjoy the person you're actually with?"

Angel paused just long enough to throw a particularly nasty glare over his shoulder but didn't answer, rather kept on, pushing his way into the club where Buffy definitely wasn't dancing and letting his cover story—some business with a demon head—fall to the wayside. Because heaven forbid

anyone get near the girl he'd left nearly half a decade earlier and hadn't recognized despite the fact that the same girl had been under his bloody nose for going on eleven months now.

At some point, Spike wagered he and Buffy would laugh about this. Or he hoped so. Hoped he'd get past feeling like a git for chasing a rumor he knew bloody well to be untrue across the sodding Atlantic, all because he'd worried that Angel would do exactly what he'd done and the gig at home would be well and truly up.

Spike clomped after him up to the bar and listened, sort of, as Angel spouted off the physical description of the Buffy who lived in his head and nowhere else, all the while becoming more annoyed. Yeah, keeping ahead of Angel was probably for the best where Buffy was concerned, but Spike had acted without thought. Had done little more than glance at her disguised face to gauge how the news was hitting her—if she'd decide right then to go ahead and drop the act altogether so they could figure everything out, the two of them, but knowing ultimately that she wouldn't because that fell under the category of decisions Buffy would not make spontaneously. Not one she'd obviously gone back and forth on, probably to as much her exasperation as his own.

And that was part of the problem. She had been close before—more than once, he wagered—and something had come up to change her mind. Make her go back to the sodding drawing board for reasons he wouldn't know until he bloody well asked her, because as good at understanding Buffy as he was, he wasn't a sodding mind-reader, and she, while not—as she'd claimed—*unattainable*, did keep a lot close to the chest. Most everything of significance, in fact, as it pertained to what she was thinking on any given day.

Spike had wanted to give her space, let her set the pace,

keep the ball in her court. Following her example had rarely led him astray, even when he didn't understand what was informing her decisions, and he hadn't wanted to dictate the terms of something he wasn't convinced she even wanted. Except it was bigger than the pair of them now—Angel taking off and turning over every stone he encountered to find a reason to justify his continued interference in her life. Muttering to himself how it was for Buffy's own good, and she'd realize that once the shine wore off her new boy toy and she saw him for what he truly was.

The most infuriating thing about this escapade was that Spike hadn't had a chance to talk with Andrew properly. Not that he was certain what he would have said, except perhaps to let him know that he knew Randi's true identity, and if there was anything pressing to tell the lady, he could cart it back across the ocean. There had been a moment there before Angel had started pounding his meaty fist on the door where Spike had been certain Andrew was about to start spilling secrets, himself. He had a look about him, a fevered glow that Spike recognized from his days as an amateur documentarian back in Sunnyhell, every time Buffy's name was mentioned. Also he was pretty sure the little git had winked at him after announcing that the Immortal was Buffy's new beau. As though they were sharing a joke.

In a way, he supposed they were. Just at different phases.

Ultimately, the entire sodding excursion turned out to be a waste. The girl posing as Buffy kept a pace ahead of them, and the Immortal, while definitely involved in some demon mob politics, did a decent job of handling the bulk of the so-called emergency without once dropping by to gloat about his new relationship. That much alone, Spike thought, should have clued the Angel into the fact that the lady he'd

neglected, *his* lady to chase, wasn't actually anywhere in the vicinity. The Immortal wasn't subtle when he felt like he'd won, and since neither Dru nor Darla were around to share the good news of an epic shag for him, he would have felt compelled to show up in person to make sure they both caught his unapologetic crowing. Sending a note after the fact wasn't his bloody style and never had been.

But Angel hadn't thought of that or anything else that might have led him toward the truth. Instead, he'd sulked the whole way home—the plane ride Angel had insisted he and Spike take together so that Spike didn't get any funny ideas about returning to Buffy's flat on his own—muttered about how at least he had a girlfriend to return to, that he'd get right on putting Buffy behind him the second the wheels touched down and practically daring Spike to do the same with Randi, claiming it was healthier for everyone if they all just moved on, and a bunch of other rubbish that Spike had tried hard not to listen to. No point seeing as how he didn't believe a word of it.

Angel might have let her go, but in no world would he ever *move on*. Not in such a way he got outside of grabbing distance.

And maybe that was what snapped in Spike the second the plane came to a smooth stop at the private Wolfram and Hart hangar. The utter futility of the continent-hopping he'd just done combined with Angel's ever-present sense of proprietary ownership where all things Buffy were concerned, despite the circumstances or the woman he had waiting for him back at home. The frustration with the endless months of dangling on Randi's thread, hoping she would cross whatever invisible boundary needed crossing, waiting to understand what she needed from him all the while making wild guesses with

nothing more than the hope that he was right. And maybe most of all the wondering what it all meant. Buffy had chosen his name—twice, as he supposed he was claiming Randy—in the disguise she had made for herself. She'd been all but shoving him toward the bloody door and the idea of Buffy Summers ever since she'd introduced herself, then alternated between avoiding him and making eyes at him, and there was only so much a man could take.

Spike had tried it her way. He'd more than tried it. And he was bloody done.

So when he left Wolfram and Hart after listening to Angel swear off the Slayer for good, Spike set out for Randi's flat. He had no idea if she'd be there, but she hadn't been at the office and he was determined to have this out before he lost his bloody nerve or some other voice inside his noggin started shouting louder than the one currently in charge.

Time did that wonky thing it was wont to do as he made the trip, seeming to crawl as he negotiated traffic and people and rushed to keep ahead of his own bloody nerve, but then speeding up at the end so that by the time he was in front of her flat, the previous span of minutes seemed almost dream-like. He didn't give himself long to think about it, though, rather pounded his fist against the surface hard enough to make the bloody door shake. Not sure yet what he would say or how it would come out, if he'd wilt when he saw her or if the sight of that false face would stoke all his ire all over again. In those loud seconds, anything seemed possible.

Finally, there came a rustling from the other side of the door. "Who is it?"

"Spike. Open up."

"Spike?" Her voice squeaked, and he noticed now that it was *her* voice. Not Randi's. Buffy as Buffy was standing just

feet from him. But it didn't last, or she seemed to realize the same, for then she was clearing her throat and pitching her voice in a way that was comically unnatural and even more so comically not-Randi. "Umm. Now isn't the best time. Could you—"

"Just wagered you'd fancy knowing what went down between me and the Slayer in Italy. Been trying to shove me that way for a spell now, haven't you?"

"I—err, I think—"

"Or maybe," he continued, pressing forward as the screaming in his head hit a new decibel level, his body tight in that way even more than a century of being dead couldn't strip from him. Like it remembered the sensations of a racing pulse or pounding heart, how it forced breaths from his lungs even when he wasn't paying attention. "Maybe I can just tell you. Put your mind at ease, yeah?"

There was a pause. "Tell me what?" she asked, half of her phony inflection slipping away.

"That I kept him from finding out," Spike said in a rush. "Your secret's safe. Far as your ex is concerned, Slayer, you're hanging off the arm of a ponce you've never met who doesn't even have a proper name. Could be your type, though, if you'd like an introduction. Not sure what side of the fight he's on but I'd wager that might be part of the appeal."

What followed wasn't a pause so much as it was a chasm. There and open in front of them, brimming with inky dark, sudden and not, for it had been there the whole bloody time, and they'd just been dancing around pretending they didn't see it. Perhaps waiting for a moment like this—a moment where one of them would stop playing bloody chicken and see if the fall was as endless as it appeared. And then it was as though he was on the other side of that door, as though he

were standing beside her, watching her, the way her eyes widened, how the color drained from her face. The thumping heart and rushing pulse, the breaths coming faster and faster and faster still, all of her trying to reconcile with the unmaking of a lie she'd been living for almost a year now. The questions that would come, hows and whys and how longs, and Spike would have to account for every one. The chasm might just swallow him whole—or he might find it less a chasm and more a leap of faith he'd been putting off taking for months because at his core, he was terrified of finding the fall had been for nothing.

Then, at last, he heard the telltale slide of a chain lock being undone, followed by the click of a deadbolt. And, god, the door was opening by increments, and it was her on the other side. Buffy, his slayer, the only one that mattered in this or any world. Looking at him through eyes that were hers, set into a face that was hers, and everything else was so perfectly *her* that even though he'd known, it still managed to shock him in ways he didn't quite understand.

"How long?" she asked hoarsely, tears brimming in her eyes. She looked exhausted and terrified and brave all at once. Like Buffy.

And he could have played dumb but they'd both had enough of that to last them several sodding lifetimes. "Since Halloween."

She didn't react at first, just tightened her jaw and nodded, information absorbed. "How?"

"Face you made when you threw back your drink." He smiled softly, some of the tension in his chest uncoiling. "Pieces started comin' together. All made sense then."

"And you didn't say anything?"

"Neither did you, pet."

"But you just let me—" She cut herself off, shaking her head. "All this time. You knew all this time. Why now?"

Good question, that. "Wager I just got tired of waiting."

"Waiting for what?"

"To ask if you meant it."

Buffy furrowed her brow, studied him for a long moment as though not following—that was, until she did. "I meant it," she said hoarsely. "I just didn't know if it mattered anymore. You didn't—"

He knew what she was going to say—hell, in a flash, he knew all the steps that would follow this one. The arguments she would make, the things he'd fire back, the rationalizations and the excuses and the misunderstandings, and all of it would happen, *needed* to happen, but not nearly as much as something else. And she seemed to know it, too, for she didn't resist when he pushed forward.

"Invite me in," he said, his voice low and gravelly. "Invite me in, Buffy."

She was nodding before he stopped talking. "Come in, Spike."

And he did. Then her arms were around his neck and her breasts were pressed to his chest, and she was in his mouth, on his tongue, crying and laughing and fighting, always fighting, as he kissed her for the first time—the real first time—since the time before. His hands tangling into her hair, his legs pressing him into the room, some part of him clicking on in time to kick the door shut so they didn't give the whole floor a peep show.

He had things to say and more to hear. He knew it. He did. But right now, for once, he and Buffy were on the same page, and neither of them was fighting it.

Everything else could wait.

AND WE CAN BREATHE AT LAST

SHE WAS KISSING SPIKE.

She was *kissing* Spike.

And her head was full of so many things, the foremost being a consistent mantra of *Spike knows Spike knows Spike knows*. God, not only did he know, he had known practically the whole time. Every visit to her office. Every phone call and dinner date. Every offer to help Randi work out her frustrations as a newly switched-on slayer. Every flirty grin. Every knowing look. Every wink. Every time she'd started to second-guess him and herself and everything else, he'd known. When he'd tugged her down the hall and into an empty office to maul her with his lips after first becoming corporeal, he had known. Each time she'd bugged him to contact Buffy and he'd resisted, he'd known. And he'd taken off to Italy ahead of Angel just to make sure the secret remained a secret. All without telling her. Just following her lead as he had before. Trusting she knew what she was doing, that she had a plan, even if he didn't know what it was. He hadn't ridden off to, as

Cordelia had put it the night before, Buffy's *rescue*. He'd been working for her without telling her.

At once it was so obvious she felt like an idiot.

And she was still kissing him.

Buffy tore her lips from his with a gasp, her pulse pounding and body humming and everything else on turbo charge. There were things to talk about—lots of things. Important things. But now Spike was peppering kisses down her neck, groaning and growling and thrusting and *oh god*, she'd somehow managed to forget how this felt. How *he* felt, hard and demandy, vibrating with need, with hunger that was somehow all hers. *Hers, hers, hers* the mantra now as her brain-ignoring hands shoved his duster off his shoulders, making him almost trip over it as it puddled, which in turn startled a laugh from her lips. The sound or perhaps the struggle with gravity had Spike pulling his face up, his eyes on hers then, deep and intense, and it struck her anew that this was happening. He was here and with her. Here because he knew her, because she was Buffy, and he'd been waiting and waiting and waiting until he couldn't wait anymore.

And before she could help herself, before she could stop to consider just how inane the question was, she pulled away long enough to ask, "Why didn't you tell me you knew?"

The light in his eyes faded almost immediately. Let no one say Buffy Summers did not know how to kill a mood. She was a certified mood killer.

"Why didn't you tell me who you were?" he returned softly.

"I asked you first."

"So you did. Just wager if you're gonna get high and

mighty about it, it might do well to have your own story straight.”

“High and mighty?” Buffy repeated, placing her hands on his chest and pushing—not wanting space, but needing at least a modicum of breathing room if she had any hope of thinking clearly. “Just... I don’t get it. You knew all this time, and you didn’t say anything?”

“Yeah, pet, heard you the first go ’round.”

“But—”

“But *what*, Buffy?” he demanded, staggering back another step, not so far he was out of reach but enough that it made her feel that distance. “Last thing I knew, you were running for sunny freedom, leaving the likes of me behind.”

“You *told* me to!”

“I bloody well know that, and I meant it. It was all I wanted for you. All I could’ve hoped for myself, too, come to think of it—dying a hero. Dying *your* hero. Someone you said you loved, even if you didn’t mean it. Someone you wanted to give those words to before he went up like a firecracker.” Spike narrowed his eyes, which he kept on her, unblinking, his jaw pulled tight. “Then I was back, and I was *here*, stuck with sodding Angel and unable to do a bloody thing about it. My brilliant exit all for nothing—”

“For nothing? How can you say that?”

“All right, not for *nothing*. Saved the world and all that.” He said it like it was incidental, which she was so going to yell at him for once she got done yelling at him for other things. “But for you? Yeah. It was nothing.”

That made zero sense. “You thought it was nothing to me?”

“No, pet, I *knew* it was something. The way I went out.

That I'd finally done the right thing where you were concerned."

"Okay, you need to start making sense or I'm going to start throwing sharp things at your head."

Spike gave perhaps the most dramatic eye roll she'd ever seen on his face, then dragged his hands down his cheeks. "You remember what I told you?" he asked a moment later, a little calmer. "The day I got my body back and I dragged you down that hall for a snog?"

She did. And she knew he knew that she did when she met his eyes, for it was the sort of thing she doubted anyone in the world could understand outside of this room. That feeling of completion, of possibility, the freedom to create whatever version of the future you would wish for yourself were you there to experience it. Then the crash that followed when all those possibilities were unraveled, when you were forced back into a life you had left behind and had no choice but to pick up the threads to see where they led, knowing no destination could ever match the ending you had already given yourself. The one you had carried with you as you took your last bow.

"You said you loved me," Spike continued a moment later, with a voice that had grown hoarse. "You said you loved me, and I had that. Could have it mean whatever I wanted it to mean. Could imagine what it'd be like, being with you in the world you'd help build after. As far as last thoughts go, it was a bloody nice one." He paused, holding her gaze. "Then you were there when I came out again. Didn't know it was you until Halloween, but by the time I realized it, you'd had months to tell me yourself. Wagered there was a reason you hadn't, especially after I stole you away for that *welcome back* snog and you got cross because you thought I was making

a move on another bird. Not sure what a bloke was supposed to think given all that.”

And there it was—they were back to her. Right where they were always going to land. And while yes, she couldn’t deny feeling a certain amount of righteous indignation that Spike had let her put on a charade this entire time, the more mature, rational part of Buffy understood it was window dressing. The call was hers, had been from the beginning, and Spike had just done exactly what Spike had done ever since he’d returned from his quest to win his soul. He’d let her set the pace, happy to follow her lead. Be for her what she needed him to be rather than insisting he knew better.

“I wanted to tell you,” Buffy said after a long beat. “I did. And there were times I thought I would.”

“Times I thought you would, too.” It was unfair, how even and reasonable he sounded. He couldn’t even muster up some of the accusation that had been in his voice when she’d tried to make everything his fault. Just even-tempered and understanding, the way pre-soul Spike never had been. And as much as she loved him and that soul, there were times she missed the Spike he’d been before. That Spike would have at least said something to justify her trying to turn everything back on him again. Instead, he continued in that low, calm voice, “You gonna share why you didn’t?” and she had no choice but to consider the question head-on, stripped of pretense and excuse. A good, honest look at the truth.

Whatever that was.

Buffy released a sigh and turned, walking deeper into the apartment until she was by the couch. Might as well settle in—they probably weren’t going to be having that hot reunion sex her body had been vying for before her mouth had decided to pull the brakes.

"I don't know," she said, exhausted as she sank into the cushions.

"You don't know?"

"No." Buffy pressed her lips together, watched as he made his way over to the seat Cordelia typically claimed when she visited. "I don't... Everything has been kind of... crazy since Sunnydale. Since the First. After the dust settled, there was a lot of talk about pretty much everything. Willow and Xan were... I guess the bottom line is we're not good. Sunnydale might have fallen into a crater but the problems we were having at the end very much did not. And as it turns out, when your *save the world* plan has consequences that cost you your hometown, even if that hometown is a hellmouth, there are strong feelings. Giles told me more than once that if I had been more focused on the apocalypse than you, things might have gone differently."

It was gratifying, watching his face contort, first with confusion then with that familiar fury—the indignation he'd worn when he'd found her in that empty house right before the end of the world. Buffy still didn't know what had happened to send him after her, aside from his own account of hitting Faith a bunch of times after discovering what had happened in his absence. But it was there again, what had carried him across town and into the house—into her misery bubble. What had led him to his knees to tell her the best and most terrifying thing anyone had ever told her. Made her feel seen, truly seen, as no one else ever had.

It was that utter conviction he'd given her that she had been holding onto these last few months. Keeping close to her when everything else seemed to be falling apart. For if someone who knew her as well as Spike, who had seen her

more fully than any other person ever had, could believe what he'd said to her, maybe she was right in trusting herself.

"You were more focused on me than the bloody apocalypse?" he said at last, blinking rapidly and landing hard on consonants as the words left his mouth. Like their existence was something to reconcile.

"That's the going theory." Buffy held his gaze for a moment, taking enormous comfort in the incredulity he gave back. "There wasn't really a plan until the end, you know? The end-end. And if Angel hadn't shown up with that necklace, well, *Deus ex machina*, is what Giles called it. Which is—"

"A bloody literary term," Spike snarled, twitching as though fighting the urge to spring back to his feet. "Something Ivy League wanker critics use when they mean the author didn't stick the landing without ever stopping to think how much of life comes down to good sodding timing and luck."

Buffy snorted. "Yeah, one of those things I might have learned about had I gotten to finish college. Sounds about right."

"Slayer—"

"It all amounts to the same, though, as far as they're concerned. I had one part of the plan, and Angel provided the other part. Like showed up out of nowhere and said, here, have a plan. And maybe if I'd had more time—if I hadn't insisted on moving when we did—we could've checked out the amulet and come up with something that didn't leave a whole lot of people homeless, if not worse." She shook her head and looked away. "But I was focused on you, so there's a good chance I missed something that might've kept Sunnydale safe and sound while defeating the First at the same time, because nothing I do is ever enough."

“Bollocks.”

“Well, we don’t know, do we?”

“Bugger that, Buffy. *I* know. Anyone who claims you didn’t do enough when you’re the reason the lot of them got out alive in the first place—”

“Not all of them did,” she argued softly, meeting his gaze again. “We lost girls. We lost Anya. And you.”

“And how many more made it?” he threw back, nostrils flaring, his eyes wide with more of that wonderful, awful, familiar outrage. “How many more are alive now because you gave them a roof and the means to defend themselves? Those girls were being hunted, and you opened your door to them, and it had sod-all to do with you being the Slayer and everything to do with you being Buffy Summers. Because that’s who you are. It’s the reason you drive me barmy—how you always put other people ahead of you, even when they show you how little they deserve it. How little they deserve *you*. You’re always thinking of everyone else before yourself and never ask or even expect anyone in your life to do the same.”

Buffy nodded, feeling an odd mixture of emotions. Warm and comforted, even vindicated, but still distant from the sentiment all the same. It was one of those things she could grasp in theory but not apply practically—not seize beyond the platitude and the righteous knowledge that it wasn’t *just* a platitude. She’d never been able to make that leap or keep firm on the ground she landed on without backsliding to more familiar territory. The path of least resistance, there and comforting for its *knowns* than the frightening *maybes* that lay beyond. “Anyway,” she said. “It’s been there. The whole *what I could’ve done* thing. Especially when I think of things like how I’ll never get to visit my mom at the cemetery again, or how

none of the photos or her art pieces survived. Like, I'm responsible for that but I don't get to mourn it."

"According to who?"

She didn't have an answer. It was just one of those things. An inexplicable truth of her world. The leader didn't get the luxury of regret. The person who had blown up the town didn't get to look back, reflect on what they had lost. Buffy was the one who had called the shots, and no one wanted to entertain the emotional mess that those shots left in their wake. Not when they were busy tending to their own.

"Yeah," Spike said slowly, "that's what I thought."

"It wasn't just that, either," she said. "I don't think it hit the others until we were in this, you know? It's not like everything just came out the second the fight was over. We got to LA and went to Angel's—that hotel where he used to have his PI company, that is. And after I learned what had happened, where the amulet came from... And the others didn't get that, either. They both blamed me for what had happened but also were like, well, it worked, didn't it? Angel might have given us this thing that caused Sunnydale to fall into the earth, but the apocalypse was stopped, and he just gave you the gun. You're the one who pulled the trigger, and now you have buyer's remorse?"

There was a pause. When she looked at him, she saw his mouth tugged into a soft sort of smile—familiar and wry.

"Got a few metaphors twisted up in there, pet."

"Maybe they taught metaphors the same day they taught deus ex whatever."

The spark in his eyes was also familiar—a familiar that made her chest tighten and her eyes sting and the bits of her that were trying to remain upright struggle against the weight of everything that had happened over the last ten minutes.

Ten hours. Ten days. Ten months. Buffy didn't even realize she was folding in on herself until it had already happened, until her head was in her hands and the stupid, useless tears she kept trying to keep from escaping were trailing down her cheeks, the rest of her vibrating with the struggle to remain upright. Remain strong. Remain in control of this thing that had never been controllable, the runaway train that wasn't only her life but her everything.

But he was here now—here in the place where she'd missed him the most. At her side, taking her by the arms, pulling her into him, letting her rest her head against his shoulder. His hands firm and his chest firmer, and his mouth at her neck, soothing her burning skin with cool lips, not saying anything but not needing to, just being here, and god, she didn't care anymore. Not about the past or the future or what was being said a world away, not about regrets or fears or anything that she could control. Just Spike, the man she'd loved and lost, the man she'd forced herself to keep at a distance despite herself and for the world. She was done with distance and done with denying and done with not being this Buffy. The one who got to love him exactly the way she should.

"I wanted to," she whispered. Somehow, her hands had wound up in his hair, breaking through the gel there to cement her grip. "I wanted to tell you so many times."

"I know you did, love. I know."

"But I didn't... There was always a reason—"

"I know." He took her wrists in his hands and pulled them to her lap. Buffy didn't realize she'd looked up until his lips were on her cheek, then her brow, then trailing down the bridge of her nose, over her closed eyes, down along her jaw, and finally he was in her mouth again, and everything else

melted away. The wear of time, the doubts and fears and hesitation, all the things she'd been fighting with herself to resolve, everything that had been making it hard to breathe, and it was just him. Just him as it had been the night before the apocalypse, and there would be a tomorrow but maybe not for them. Maybe they only had this one chance to get this right—to be with each other without all the bad. Just Spike loving her and Buffy loving him right back, pouring that love into every kiss, every sigh, every soft groan that broke through the air between them. They'd have this memory to carry them through the end of the world and beyond.

And though he didn't need to breathe, it was still Spike who broke away from her, panting as though he did. His brow against her brow, both familiar and somehow new, and Buffy chased his mouth back with hers, needing more of that, more of the love that had survived. That she'd tried to ignore and outrun and reject and sometimes slay, because it was a deeper, bigger love than anything she'd experienced before, realer in ways that she still didn't entirely understand. In ways that scared the shit out of her and had from the start because of what it meant to *risk* in a world where she had already risked and gambled and sacrificed everything she had, would be expected to continue to do so forever, even if nothing was ever enough.

"Slayer," Spike murmured against her lips, his own pulling into a soft grin. "Tryin' real hard not to take it personally that you're crying more now than you were a minute ago. Anything wrong?"

Buffy shook her head, as though that could banish her thoughts away. "Sorry," she replied with a sniff. "Nothing... maybe everything. I'm just a dope."

“Seem I recall I’m one too, so at least the company’s good.”

“It’s not just what I said. There have been other thoughts. Lots of them. Like that we never got the chance to see what we’d be like when the stakes weren’t life or death.”

“Mm-hmm. That your way of telling me you’d like me to drum up an apocalypse?”

“Or that you might not... You might be interested in someone else, and it was too late for us.”

Spike snickered at that, the sound both incredulous and affectionate. “Someone else? Like who?”

“Well, you seemed really into Randi.”

“Do you need me to point out—”

“No, I know. But I didn’t know that you knew, you know? You were just...all with the lungy and the comments and—”

“And I knew it was you pretty much from the start. Big bloody mystery why that was.”

“But I didn’t know,” she argued, battling back a sudden surge of frustration. Yeah, she understood what he was saying but that didn’t negate the things she’d felt then. The things she’d felt intermittently ever since then, either, in between all the other shit crowding her head. “I thought it was possible. It *seemed* possible. You weren’t running after Buffy—after *me*—and how did I know that wasn’t because you didn’t love me anymore? You were really chummy with Fred, too. Maybe a fresh start with someone who hadn’t caused you as much grief as I have over the years was what you wanted after—”

A sound that was part growl, part snarl, part groan tore through the air, through her train of thought entirely, and before she could do more than blink her surprise, Spike had cupped her cheeks and drawn her back to his mouth. Back inside those kisses that melted brain synapses and reason alto-

gether, that had once been her addiction, her downfall, and her saving grace all rolled into one. The way his lips moved against hers, hungry and desperate, and how that hunger and desperation only seemed to intensify with time rather than fade. As though the more he got of her, the more he craved.

This time it was Buffy who broke away, gasping, her skin abuzz, Spike kissing his way down her chin, her neck, the hands that had been at her face now at her hips as he moved with that familiar liquid grace, both quickly but subtly, somehow, so by the time she realized he'd slid onto his knees in front of her, between her legs, it was like time had jumped ahead without her notice.

"So what's it gonna take?" he asked, his fingers ghosting over her ankles in a light not-a-tickle tickle that sent shivers across her skin. "Feel like I've been up-front since the beginning, but the message clearly hasn't sunk in yet."

She blinked, her ears still ringing. "What message?"

He gave her the sort of look that was both exasperated and loving, and it made her chest tighten all over again. "Not that I don't love a challenge," he replied in lieu of a response, now inching his hands over her pajamas, along her calves, then her hips, and upward still until he reached the elastic waistband at her belly. "I'll jump through whatever hoops, say whatever you need me to say, go win a whole bloody conglomeration of souls if that's what you need to believe me."

Buffy waited for the words to make sense, but either he was speaking in code or her brain had just maxed out on what it could process. "Believe you about what?"

Again, Spike didn't answer. Not at first. He inhaled a breath that seemed to fill his whole chest and wrapped the fabric of her pajama bottoms around his fists. That was all he did, though. Just bunched his hands in the elastic at her waist

and looked at her while she looked at him, her heart in her throat and her mind still racing.

“That I don’t *just* love you,” he finally said in a low, raspy voice. “It was never *just* love, Buffy. Not for me. You’re my bloody north star. You’re home, and you’re love, and you’re light, and you make me better just by drawing breath. Whether or not you want me, I’m yours. Tell me to sod off and I will but that won’t change a thing for me—won’t make this feeling stop. Won’t make me love you any less. Won’t make me not marvel at what a lucky bastard I am to have lived when I did, and died when I died, that each step I made after, in some way, made it so I knocked on your door tonight.” He tugged absently at her pajama bottoms but still didn’t do more, just sat there gazing at her, his eyes brimming with something she couldn’t name but recognized all the same. A Spike look. A Spike-looking-at-her look. “That I’m sitting here, looking at you now, someone who somehow thinks there could be anyone else. That I’d ever want to be anywhere else ever again if I have the choice to be with you. If you want me, if you feel anything like what I feel, even just a sodding crumb, it’s everything. And if you don’t, that still doesn’t change what you are to me. What you will always be. There is no one else. There’s *everyone* else, and there’s you. End of story.”

She didn’t know when she’d started crying again—didn’t feel it, didn’t register until he once again reached up to catch the tears as they spilled. And then he was close, either because he’d moved or she’d pulled him, and it didn’t matter, for they were kissing then, more than kissing. He was consuming and she was consumed, and it wasn’t enough because she wanted too much to ever be enough. Wanted to crawl inside him the way he had her, those pieces of herself

that only comfortably fit when he was there to even out the edges, soften her where she was hard and support her where she was soft. Then, of course, his words spinning through her head on repeat, much the way they had a year ago in that house that, for one night, had been *their* house. Feeling how much he meant what he said in every stroke, in the hungry murmurs he rumbled against her lips, in the way he touched her, needy but not demanding. Allowing her just enough space if she wanted it, which she didn't, but there in deference to everything that had come before.

Then his hands were at her sides again, fingers skirting beneath the hem of the clothing she still wore, once more in that light not-ticklish-but-ticklish touch, until he was prying open the bottom button of her pajama top. Spike pulled back just enough to admire the sliver of skin he had exposed, breathing hard and ragged as he drew a circle around her belly button, then lifted his gaze to hers. "Can I?" he asked, and she nodded hard enough her brain seemed to jostle, but it made him grin, which made her grin, and then his mouth was over hers and another button had been undone. Then another, the tips of fingers feather-light against her flesh, and another, as he grinned some more and murmured incoherent nothings that meant everything. And her skin was on fire, his soft touches both charged and soothing, cooling her where she was burning but somehow stoking the flames at the same time.

"You're going to get me completely naked before you take a single thing off, aren't you?" she asked.

Spike met her eyes again, his either hand occupied with the lapels of her now thoroughly unbuttoned top. He held there for a moment, teasing the flannel fabric against her very perky nipples, before bringing out that grin again. Though she

wasn't sure if *again* made sense because it hadn't completely gone away, just was somehow *more*. "Coat's off."

"And only your coat."

"You want me naked, Slayer, all you gotta do is ask."

"Consider this me asking."

"And consider this me hearing and deciding to wait just a mo'." Spike swallowed, dropping his gaze back to her chest before he peeled back the fabric to reveal her breasts. This he did with a soft, guttural sigh that zinged directly to her clit, for god, it was heady and powerful knowing that the sight of her naked, which was not a new thing for them by any stretch, was something that could provoke a sound like that. Make him whimper, make him yearn, make his eyes go wide as he took in something as unremarkable as, well, her. But it was real with him, and it always had been. He'd always made her feel like this, and always with a look, a sound, not needing to add words but adding them anyway, because that was Spike. He did nothing in half-measures.

"Christ, but you're pretty," he said now, his voice raspy and thick as he palmed her breasts, once more soothing her hot with his cool. Making her aware of herself as she hadn't been in a long time and hadn't realized she missed. "How I've longed for this view."

Buffy wiggled in spite of herself. "They're just... I mean, you've seen it before. Not just me, girls in general. Others."

"I don't want *others*. I want Buffy," he countered, flicking his eyes back to hers, and holding her gaze as he lowered his lips to tease one of her nipples. Echoing her groan when she gave it, then again when she fisted the hair at the back of his head. And yeah, maybe she had forgotten too—how his mouth felt when he put it on her, how the parts of her body that had always been just *there* in existence seem to transform

into something else. How he could have her squirming in seconds with his tongue alone, both inflaming and easing the burn in the same stroke. How much he enjoyed it, too. Enjoyed the bits of sex that were just this, fairly insisted on it, his time to wander and explore and rediscover the parts of her that she knew he hadn't forgotten but would pretend anyway just so he had a reason to leave her breasts swollen and slick from his mouth before moving further south. Making her jump and sigh and want to slap him when he chuckled at her expense, knowing the precise places she was most sensitive, but then he was moving lower, pressing kisses across her stomach, around her belly button, then he was dancing his lips above the soaked center of her pajama bottoms, all the while drawing in a breath so deep it almost seemed indecent.

"I love the way you move when I touch you," he said, his voice soft but in a reverby way, making her shiver and tighten with anticipation. "Always have."

"Always?"

"Course. It's a dance. My favorite kind."

"All we've ever done, right?"

Spike flicked his gaze back to hers, his own warm. "All we've ever done," he agreed. Then, thank god, finally, he stopped toying with her and stripped her pajama bottoms and panties down her legs in a move so fluid and effortless she would have protested had he not immediately put his mouth there, *there*, dragging his tongue between her folds, making all of her go electric. Buffy didn't want to close her eyes but found them fluttering shut anyway, her body remembering, all of her remembering, and he was pressing more open kisses where she was wettest, spreading her open and whisper-asking if she needed him to tell her all the parts of her that he loved, and *okay, yes*, that would be just fine, and him chuckling again.

A good chuckle that did more of that reverberation, like a fiddle string had been plucked from deep inside and the echoes were little waves of their own.

"I love how wet you get for me." He teased her with a finger now along that wetness before chasing it with his tongue in long laps that seemed downright decadent even if he was ignoring her clit for the moment. She knew this, too. The way he liked to make her squirm under him and give her somehow exactly what she wanted and not at the same time. How his mouth curved into a smile when she whimpered and arched, tried to guide him to the part of her screaming for him the most, and how that chase just made the burn sweeter. So it felt, with little coaxing at all, that her clit had developed a heartbeat of its own, throbbing and swollen the way the rest of her was throbbing and swollen. And "Love your heat," he went on, fingers teasing her opening with shallow, exploratory thrusts just so he could hold up his hand and show off the slick juice clinging to his skin. "And your taste. Christ, your taste."

"Spike—"

"Love the way you say that. My name. Like a prayer, almost." He pressed his fingers into her again, deeper this time, and groaned when she groaned. Groaned again when she clenched around him, which she didn't even mean to do but also did, because inside her was exactly where she wanted him. A very specific part of him, granted, but she'd take whatever he was in the mood to give her now. "Love how hot you are," he whispered. "How you burn. No one's ever burned me so good as you, love."

"Bold words for a man who literally crispy crittered to death," she replied, and grinned when he turned his smirking eyes back to hers, all warmth and love and those things she'd

somehow convinced herself were behind her. God, it all seemed so small now. So silly. These barriers she'd constructed and rebuilt, no matter how many times they were torn down. All this time relying on instincts that weren't hers—listening to doubts she felt because other people had put them there. This long, lonely stretch of time that she'd made longer, lonelier, so that her decisions wouldn't be questioned. So that her conclusions would be trusted. So that she, the Slayer, the savior of the world several times over, wouldn't lose face among people who had once decided that sleeping in her own home under her own roof was a privilege she no longer deserved.

It must have shown in her face, for Spike's expression was suddenly no longer smirky, rather intense and serious. And like so many times before, he just knew. There was no need for explanation, for pause at all. He shook his head and lowered his mouth back to her pussy, watching her watch him as he flicked his tongue out in a quick tap along her clit, jolting her back to him. Back to the moment she'd been on the verge of losing.

"I love how much you care," Spike said, picking up his cadence with effortless grace she couldn't help but envy. "How much you give, even when no one gives back."

Buffy blinked hard, as words were starting to become less wordy. "You...you, ahh, you give back."

"And," he added, giving her a daring look, "I love the sounds you make when I do this." He flattened his tongue against her clit and pressed down, twisting the fingers inside of her at the same time, wrist-up now, and rubbing along that spot she hadn't believed existed until he'd proven her wrong. And that her body remembered too, but in a way that was still a surprise, the kind that grew and overloaded fast. With Spike stroking her

and kissing her, drawing circles around her clit with his tongue, flicking and licking, and then—*oh god, yes*—closing his mouth around it and sucking. Buffy again fisted his hair, a hoarse something scratching its way to freedom from her throat as she thrust against his mouth and cried out when he responded with a growl that plucked at that inner string again, a more intense reverberation than before, because this one was building, building, and she arched and held and he kept sucking, kept licking too, kept doing both somehow while teasing that perfect spot inside of her, and everything coalesced until the color she saw at the back of her eyelids was pure white. Pleasure, in its rawest form, shuddering through her the way she'd forgotten it could. Hot and intense and almost painful, but the best sort of pain, addictive and indulgent and freeing all at once. And Spike whispering her name still, almost soft enough that she could believe it was in her imagination. Could believe, but knew it wasn't.

"Fuck, I've missed that most of all," he whispered against her skin. She forced her eyes open, both ready and not for the way her body reacted at the sight of him between her legs, his face wet with her; his eyes wet too. "The way you come apart on my tongue. The sounds you make."

"You already said the sound thing," Buffy told him, feeling her lips pull into a grin she could only imagine looked a little dopey. That was fine. She hadn't experienced *dopey* in so long she'd forgotten it was an option for her. Other people? Yes. Buffy Summers? Once, maybe, but not anymore.

Except there was no either-or. She'd forgotten that, too.

"Said it twice 'cause it was true twice," Spike replied, grinning back at her. He held her gaze as he dipped his head back to her pussy to press a parting kiss to her clit, chuckled when she jumped, then slowly climbed to his feet, so that she could

see the strain in his black jeans, the pronounced outline of his cock against the denim. And before she could really register that she was moving at all, she had one hand pressed against him there, cupping the hard length of him while the other pulled at his belt.

“Bloody hell,” he said, rolling his head back, thrusting against her searching fingers. “Buffy...”

“You said all I had to do was ask,” she replied, fumbling with the buckle and then prying open the buttons to his fly.

“What?”

“If I wanted you naked. I asked. You said to wait. Well, I waited and waited, and now I’m done waiting.” Something she demonstrated by pointedly *not* waiting the second she had his pants undone, rather immediately reaching in to wrap her hand around his cock, all velvety smooth and hard and familiar but not, as they had never been together like this. Not really. Not with a tomorrow to look forward to. And Spike groaned, teetering forward, bracing his weight against the sofa back as she began to pump the length of him. As she remembered what this felt like, too, how he could be both large and fit her perfectly whether she was stroking him with her hands or mouth or had him inside of her. How his skin shifted when she pulled, how she could feel the veins in his dick and how, despite everything, they seemed to pulse. How she enjoyed watching his foreskin wrap around the tip of his cock because she also loved rolling it back, exposing the head. How he jerked and sighed and moaned all at once the second her mouth descended to lick up his precum. And yes, god, how much fun it was to tease him the way she’d learned, to give back the same he gave her. How he was salt and musk and man all in one, and how his reactions had taught her to

crave the taste of him, even when she'd told herself she hated it.

"Buffy," Spike whimpered, tunneling his hand through her hair, soft at first and then not soft—then tight, locks woven around his fingers, at the mercy of his grip, as he swore and gasped and thrust his hips in tandem with her mouth. "So hot. Fuck, baby..."

She hummed around him, earning another moan and a sharp thrust forward, his cock sliding along her tongue and lightly striking the back of her throat, and she knew what to do there, too, even if it had been long enough that her gag reflex kicked in, she remembered all too well how to master it. To pull and lick and squeeze in just the right way that he lost contact with the part of his brain in charge of mastering language. Then, yes, following a new tempo, moving with him, working her throat around him, feeling him tremble, this creature of immense power and strength, who had lived for more than a hundred years but could still fall apart because of her. Into her. Still wanted and craved what she had to give him to the point the control he'd spent all that time cultivating after the soul went out the window, and he was fucking her mouth with enough abandon his balls struck her chin, the grip he had on her hair actually kinda hurt, and he was babbling things that weren't words but didn't need to be, because she knew what they meant all the same.

And there was more—more she wanted, more he wanted too, so much to make up even if time was no longer against them—so Buffy closed one hand around the base of his cock, used the other to cup his sack, then firmed her lips around him and sucked until her cheeks hollowed, and Spike let out a sound that was pure vampire, holding her to him as he began to spurt down her throat.

"Bloody hell," Spike panted a moment later, dragging in those stupid breaths he didn't need, his cock leaving her mouth with a decidedly wet *plop*. "Wouldn't have thought it possible."

"Thought what?"

"That it could get better with you."

"Is it better?"

"It's sodding everything."

She grinned. "What's different?"

He shook his head, but not dismissively—another thing she knew without knowing—and began tugging off the rest of his clothes. Jeans, shirt, and no, she hadn't forgotten this view, but she suddenly understood what he meant about appreciating it the way she hadn't before. All that pale, satiny skin, stretched tight over firm muscle that honestly looked unreal because, well, regular men were not built this way. At least not the ones she'd been with, which admittedly wasn't a high number, but enough that she felt a reasonable amount of authority in making that particular judgment call.

"*Always* been different with you," he said finally, lowering himself to the couch beside her, reaching for her as though they had decided it together, which they had very much not, but this felt natural too. The way Spike had always just known, or seemed to know, or how she'd known or seemed to know. That effortless rhythm in which they found themselves when they were together, for yes, this was what she wanted. What she needed. To cast herself astride him, over him, to feel his cock, wet from her mouth, teasing along the seam of her pussy, wet from both of them, and then—at last—to feel him parting her, pushing into her, sliding along her flesh as she sank down and he thrust up, and she had him back where she needed him most. With her. Inside of her. A part of her.

"Fucking hell." He threw his head back against the seat, and she tracked the bobbing of his throat as he swallowed. There was something about that movement, about the hard gasp in his voice, that once again tugged at the string that led to her clit, making her clench on instinct, and he moaned again, this time with a little laugh. "Exactly what I'm talking about."

Buffy grinned, leaned forward to nip at his Adam's apple as she rose up the length of his cock again, enjoying the slow drag of him inside of her, wet and slick and *full*, and it had been a while since she'd experienced this, but she remembered the moves, or her body did, anyway. "What is?"

"Different," he told the ceiling, panting. "Always been different. Since the start."

She almost didn't care that she didn't follow what he was talking about. Almost. Something told her this was a thing she *needed* to understand. "What's been different since the start?" she asked, sinking onto his cock again, and she wouldn't be able to last long going slow so she had to make these seconds count. "Tell me."

"You. Us. Always..." Spike blinked and lifted his head to look at her, capture her in that sea of cerulean, and it was like something inside her snapped into place. Maybe inside both of them. "You bloody slay me, Slayer."

"You are not making sense," she told him in a low, teasing murmur, grinning again. She was moving in solid strokes now, still taking her time, relishing both the sound and the sensation of working him inside of her, even as her patience—both her mind's and her body's—edged closer to snapping. There was pleasure in resisting, too, for the way it amplified the inevitable surrender. "Should I take that as a compliment?"

"You're fire. You're light. You're the sodding sun." He

worked his throat again. "And yeah, Slayer, you slay me every time I touch you. That's what you do. Have done since the first time. You make me bloody crave it like I've never craved anything. I wouldn't have thought it could get better, except this, now, this is better."

"What part?"

"All of it." Spike seized her by the hips then, fingers digging into her skin, and she surrendered, let him, fell into him, his tempo, and surrendered as he dragged her up and down his cock, his eyes flashing and his chest heaving, and he was still speaking and probably still making no sense, and she officially didn't care. All that mattered was this, Spike inside of her, stretching her, moaning when she tightened or squeezed, releasing ragged breaths against her lips before chasing them with a kiss, clutching at her with increased frenzy and desperation as the air filled with the sound of them, wet and messy and *hot*, if hot had a sound, and some of the words Spike was spilling began to take shape once more, that he could feel her the way he'd felt his soul before, burning bright and searing and yeah, kinda stinging, and that that was what made it better. Having Buffy around him and over him and inside him, same as he was her, fire under his skin, feeling in the way she moved, the way she touched, the way she looked at him branding him with love so thoroughly he'd never have reason to doubt again.

And she didn't realize when her eyes filled this time, or when tears spilled down her cheeks, until Spike released her hip to thumb them away, holding her face and watching her with ravenous intensity. The same that had been too much during their torrid affair, Buffy scrambling hard to keep to the shadows, the dark, not letting herself see a way to bring him into the light with her. Not wanting to look at him and under-

stand just how much it meant to him, the time she decided to make theirs. That open, vulnerable, terrifying love staring her in the face in a way that was bold and unquestionable, and it had been so much easier for her then to pretend it didn't exist. That no one would be hurt if she gave in just one more time.

Only she'd never been able to manage that—the ignoring thing. She'd been very aware, not only of his feelings but her own, and it had slowly poisoned her. And now was the opposite of that, of then, for when she started to experience that familiar burn, there was no need to run. She could fall into him, his eyes, his arms, the words that spilled from his mouth, as he bucked and bounced her on his cock, explored her cheeks, her neck, her collarbone, her nipples with wandering lips and teeth, told her how good she felt, how right, how *home*, and then—*yes*—slipped the hand that had been at her face down between her breasts, over her belly, before finally landing where she wanted him the most. Buffy blinked sweat out of her eyes and glanced down to watch as he first ran a finger up the length of his cock, slick and shiny with her, then curled that finger so her clit struck his knuckle on the downstroke. Scoring her with little pulses of pleasure, of *yes*, and *more*, and he was at her ear, whispering the way he knew she liked, a tangle of words both praise and profane. *God, baby, do it. Come all over my cock. Drench me. Squeeze me until I cry. Make me bloody pop. Make me fall. Make me yours.*

And when she did, when it crested and spilled, shooting her clear with pure white-hot awesome, a harsh moan scratching her throat as she pulsed and clenched and spasmed, and there again with Spike's surrender, it was more than coming home. More than rediscovering the part she'd

tried so long to convince herself wasn't missing. More than all of that, because it was with him. With this man who saw all of her, *knew* all of her and, inexplicably, loved her anyway.

Buffy collapsed against chest, panting, her heart pounding so hard it almost hurt. And Spike wrapped his arms around her, kissed her damp brow, whispered that love into her skin, and when she said it back, he answered with the two other best words in the English language.

"I know."

She would have cried had she the energy. She didn't. Instead, she kissed him.

OF DELIGHT, OF ELYSIAN PEACE

HE WAS DREAMING OF HER. MORE SPECIFICALLY, HER mouth. On him, around him, tongue swirling and exploring, teasing the head of his cock, then licking along his length until he thought he might roar or cry or both. He shifted in his dream, felt the slide of the sheets under his skin as he did, and pushed back, not wanting it to end. Not wanting the real world to intrude just yet, wanting to stay in the dream a little while longer, where she was skimming her lips along the underside as she made her way to his balls. Where she took her time tasting and flicking, occasionally giggling when they brushed along her chin, all the while pumping him with her hand. And then her mouth was back, tongue licking a long line starting at the underside of his cock and moving up, up, up until she was there at the tip once more, teasing the dip in the head before wrapping her lips around him and sucking him in deep, then at a rhythm. And again, his mind and body conspired against him, trying to drag him from this vivid, happy place, and again he resisted, but it was no good. Too

much of him was awake now, aware of the surrounding reality and its bloody awful disappointments. Another day pretending to be someone he wasn't while the woman he loved did the same.

Except the sensations didn't fade the closer he grew to consciousness. If anything, they became more vivid, more intense, and then his mind joined the waking world and he was swimming in visions that weren't dreams, but memories he'd made before he'd closed his eyes. Buffy standing in front of him, truly Buffy now, Buffy against him, kissing him, pushing his duster off his shoulders as he walked her deeper into the room. Buffy talking to him, the secrets gone, the deception over, and finally Buffy over him. Riding him. Loving him.

He opened his eyes.

She was there, of course, grinning up at him from her place between his legs, her mouth stretched full of his cock, which gave an almost painful throb as though to also welcome him to the party. Spike released a low groan and reached for her, half-convinced she'd become vapor before he could make contact and nearly bursting into tears when she didn't. When he watched his fingers thread through her tousled golden hair, felt the warmth of her scalp, and nodded when she started bobbing her head in earnest, his saliva-slick cock disappearing and reappearing as she worked him in and out of her mouth, her eyes on him, watching him as she hadn't before—as he thought perhaps she never had.

"Bloody hell," he groaned, his hips rolling almost of their own volition. "This real?"

Buffy hummed in lieu of replying, which was answer enough. Dreams, even the best ones, never felt like this.

Nothing ever felt like this. Like her. Nothing ever had.

Every stroke was charged in a way that it hadn't been before. The strokes of her mouth, the squeezes of her hand, the look she gave him when her eyes connected with his, all of it familiar and not, *Buffy* but not Buffy as he had experienced her before. Like he could feel the words she'd given him, like they were there lighting up his skin along with her, and it was so pure. His chest swelled in response, all of him feeling full to the point of bursting. It seemed a marvel he didn't just dust. Surely this was too much for one man to feel, especially a rotten old sinner like him.

But no, she was there. Loving him, her eyes warm and her mouth fire, letting him watch as she sucked and pulled on his cock, giving him intermittent glimpses of that perfect pink tongue when she pulled back to swirl a lick across the head, grinning at his whimper then dancing his cock against the seam of her mouth in a tease before swallowing him again, and again, and again, and he was babbling, he knew he was, all the things that exploded across his head, how she looked, how she felt, how hot she was, how he loved this, loved *her*, and more and more and more and everything, just bloody everything, and she hummed something back but didn't try to give the words shape, rather wrapped her hand around the base of his cock and began to squeeze, and he realized then how close he was. Registered the way his balls had tightened, that familiar tingle along the base of his spine, how his body was tensing with the inevitability of release. And Buffy was there, smirking at him around her mouthful. Not just Buffy but *this* Buffy—the one with whom he'd gone through hell and back. The one who had made it to the other side and loved him, somehow, the way he loved her. He could feel that love in every lick and slide, every stroke, every time she hollowed her cheeks and made him tremble. In the challenge in her

eyes when he barked his warning and then the way she swallowed him when he began shooting down her throat.

Spike kept his eyes on her the entire time, watching her watch him right back, her mouth working along his shaft still even as the tremors subsided, not giving him time to soften but then, when had she ever? He watched, panting, as his cock swelled and stretched her lips wider, and only then did she release him with a *plop* before pressing a kiss along his inner thigh.

"Bloody hell, baby," he breathed, caressing the side of her head.

"Good morning."

"I'll say." He released a gaspy laugh that quickly turned into a moan when she kissed the wet tip of his cock. "Don't think I've ever had a better wakeup call."

"No?" Buffy pushed herself up on her arms and started crawling up his body, trailing biting kisses from his pelvis to his stomach, then along his ribs, his chest, stopping to tease both of his nipples in turn, wicked minx that she was. Grinning at him when he seized her by the arms, fingers digging into those firm slayer muscles, and brought her teeth into play because she knew what that did to him. Then up some more, kissing along his collarbone now, then up the sensitive column of his neck, and casting herself astride him so that her hot cunt was pressed against the underside of his freshly aching prick. "It occurred to me," she said, taking him in her hand, "that we've never had a good morning together."

Spike slid his hands from her arms to her hips, watched as she arched to tease his cock down the slit of her soaked pussy, sure there had never been a prettier sight. "Suppose we haven't," he murmured. "Don't reckon you have a newspaper we can read while playing footsie under the table or sommat?"

“Not exactly what I had in mind,” she replied with as she rubbed the head of his cock against her clit, and god, he could have shot off right there, at the sound she made, the shape of her mouth, how she squeezed her eyes shut and rolled her hips, at the way she coated him in all her honey, the burn of her hot flesh against his. But then she was sliding him along her folds again and he was notched at her entrance, watching her cunt sink onto him and no, he didn’t want to shoot off. Didn’t want to miss a second of this, of her, for he had already missed so much. No more. Never again. God, he hoped never again. He didn’t think he could survive it. Probably wouldn’t want to.

“Hey,” Buffy said softly, cupping his cheek as she began rolling her hips. “Where’d you go?”

Spike gave his head a shake, turned to brush a kiss against her palm, doing his best not to well up all over again because yeah, this was new. Or if not new then still fragile, in his way of thinking. He had her, had Buffy, and not only was she riding him but she was looking at him with worry, with love, and that wasn’t exactly new either, but it was new *like this*. To have her while actually having her, no caveats. Buffy loving him the way he loved her, touching him, wanting him to be in this moment and the next. It was Buffy as he’d never experienced her—hell, *love* as he’d never experienced love—and the knowledge was more than just overpowering; it shifted his whole bloody world.

“I’m here,” he said once he trusted his voice, though the words came out gravelly. “I’m here.”

Buffy pressed closer, lowering so her breaths crashed against his lips, rolling her hips all the while. “I am, too,” she told him. “I’m here.”

Spike barked a harsh laugh and blinked eyes that were

suddenly stinging, dropping his hands to her arse and squeezing, then gripping to help her work herself up and down his cock, trying to focus on sensation and sensation alone but unable to because she was right there, looking at him with those eyes that reflected the earth itself, and yeah, she was hot and soaked and she felt good enough around him to make a man find religion, but all of that was nothing to the knowledge that last night hadn't been the end. That life would go on past the moments they'd shared, the things they'd said, that she was loving him today because she did love him—that hadn't been stolen or dreamed or anything but as real as she was. "Balls, dunno what's wrong with me," he said, huffing when the first tear spilled. "It's just..."

Buffy nodded and kissed him, all heat and passion and life, and again, that might have been it but Spike wasn't done. He groaned, then growled into her mouth and seized her by the shoulders to flip her over, under him, second-guessing himself only long enough for Buffy to wrap her legs around his waist, lock her ankles just under his arse, and leverage all that marvelous strength to pull him into her, press against the resistance when he tried to pull back, and then, *yes*, moving with him. Bucking, arching, rocking into him, her nails digging into his shoulders, then his neck, then scratching along his scalp, and she nodded when his thrusts became more frenetic, and nodded again when he began to pound into her in earnest. Hard enough that the sounds around him almost topped the volume in his head, for there was Buffy, panting and gasping and sighing and her voice just barely edging into her breaths as though she couldn't hold it back, and the headboard was thumping a harsh cadence into the wall at its back, and she was clenching around him the way she did when she needed him to know *now* was the time to

touch her. To slip his hand between their warring bodies, stroke down her sweat-laced skin, over her wetness and nudge just right, a flirt, a suggestion, a whisper of a caress against her clit and she would whimper and claw and squeeze his cock so hard he shot into that place where pain turned to pleasure, where he wanted more of it, needed it, and where he was driving into her with increasing desperation, for more of that exquisite torture. And murmuring a litany of sweet little everythings into her ear, his brain disconnected from his mouth but that was okay, because whatever he was saying was making her hotter and wetter, and she loved him.

She loved him.

Buffy Summers loved him and she was trembling and squeezing and spasming hard, his name on her lips, and he buried his face in the crook of her neck, licked at the salt of her skin, her blood rich and rushing and loud, and it hurt not to bite her, hurt to keep his fangs in his mouth, but a hurt that was also somehow, inexplicably, also ecstasy, for he was spurting his release as her pussy convulsed, emptying himself into her, falling into her, and there she was, catching him. Wrapping her arms around him, dragging her feet down his thighs toward the backs of his knees, pulling him deep into the gravity, the world, the wonder that was her. That was Buffy Summers loving him.

Spike had no concept of how long they lay like that, just wound around each other in the quiet aftermath. He drank in the rhythm of her breaths, the steady and slowing beats of her heart as her body came back down, swimming in the heady scent that was her and him and them together, and the thought occurred to him, softly then with conviction, that what he was feeling right then was the sort of happiness that could make other men lose their souls. Men not crafty, not

dedicated, not driven enough to make bloody well sure what was theirs could never be taken from them again. Perfect moments in Spike's life had been few and far between, and he'd rarely had the presence of mind to identify them while they were occurring. But this, with her, was perfect in a way that had him terrified. As terrified as he'd been a year earlier, confronted with the possibility that existence might not get better than a night he'd spent just watching her sleep.

There might not be anything to fear now—Buffy loved him, he knew she loved him—but that didn't make the fear lessen at all. Just made him more aware of everything he stood to lose.

"Spike?"

He stirred at her voice, forced himself to lift his head from where it had fallen so he could gaze down at her. "Not crushin' you, am I?"

She grinned, which made his chest swell. "I don't think you *could* crush me. Physically, anyway."

"I could crush you in other ways?"

"Do you really want me to answer that?"

At that, he sobered, then rolled onto his side, experienced the pang of loss as he slipped out of her, and tried to wrap his mind around what she'd just said, though *balls*, his head was in so many places.

"I know," she said when he failed to find words, shifting to her side so she was looking at him directly. "I go from unattainable to needy in half a blink."

"You were never unattainable, love. Thought we had that out already."

"Well, I definitely wasn't, 'Hey, you, attain me,' either. I held myself back. I know that." Buffy shifted a bit as though uncomfortable, then settled with a sigh. "Just some of

the *everything* I've been thinking about the last few months. If I'd been more open, more... I don't know, even. Braver, I guess? When it came to you and me? Maybe you wouldn't have died thinking I was just trying to give you a nice last memory. And then remembering when I was...not necessarily brave, but more open to being vulnerable. If it was just a *young* thing or if I was actually better at relationships then. They haven't exactly been my strong suit since...well, since Angel left."

"And crushed you." Spike swallowed, ignored the flare of remembered pain. If this was going to work, if he was going to have a future with Buffy outside of perfect, isolated moments, he needed to be able to do this, confront the realities of her past without letting his feelings sour his mood. "Makes sense, really. Easier to walk off a beating than a broken heart. It's why it gutted me when Dru didn't just put me out of my misery—dying's easier than losing everything. Dying has an end."

She furrowed her brow, shifting some more. "I know this is good, talking, and that you get it, but can I be irrational girlfriend Buffy and say I hate hearing about you and Dru?"

He barked a laugh before he could help it. "Dru is—"

"I know. And I started it by bringing up my ex first, but"—she winced—"irrational girlfriend Buffy is, as it turns out, irrational. And possessive."

"You can be irrational and possessive over me anytime you fancy."

"Do *not* give me that permission. I *will* abuse it."

He grinned wider, considered needling her further, but caught himself before his lesser impulses could claim control. As uncomfortable as it made the pair of them, he wagered what she'd been trying to say was the sort of thing that

needed saying. The sort of thing that needed hearing, too, if they were going to make any of this work. So, despite every instinct, every snippet of memory that warned inviting comparisons was a bad idea, he forced himself to backtrack. "You carry the way you feel even if you don't say it," he told her softly. "About the things that matter. The things that are important."

Buffy licked her lips, and he knew what was coming. "But you still didn't believe me."

"That had nothing to do with you. I didn't believe *me*." She looked at him askance, and yeah, he'd like to not have to say this next bit, but he also had to. Spike released a breath and dropped his gaze to the mattress between them. "Thought you might feel something before, didn't I? Told you as much when I laid my bloody heart out the first time. Didn't think it would go anywhere, wasn't that daft, but I was convinced it was there. A little spark. A crumb. And—"

"There was."

He froze, whipping his eyes back to hers. "Yeah?"

"I didn't want there to be, but yeah." She started to flush but, bless her, didn't back down. Didn't look away, either. "I had dreams about you. Dreams with gratuitous adult content. And... God, pretty much everything you ever threw at me, yeah, some truth to it. I actually... Look, I'm not saying *sorry* for anything because, really, chaining a girl up and threatening to feed her to the psychotic ex is not the way to go, but I wiggled out before that. Like *really* wiggled out, and if I'm being all honesty girl, it's because it was safe to kind of have a thing for you when I knew it wasn't possible. It could be my very shameful little secret."

"None taken," Spike said, grinning. He had no sodding idea what to do with any of this.

“But once it was something that *was* possible, I... Like I said, major wiggage. And I *couldn't* tell you that because you'd be obnoxious about it, and I already felt like someone who couldn't make it work with anyone, especially another vampire.” She licked her lips, glanced away and back again. “But until Glory took you, I don't think I really knew you, either. Not in a conscious way. I mean, I had been trusting you with Dawn and my mom in ways I would never have trusted any other vampire, chipped or not, but that didn't really click with me until after you did what you did. And then when I came back... Spike, what we had that year was twisted and wrong, and *we* were both just twisted and wrong, and I wasn't in a place to love anyone because I hated myself so much. But despite that... I think I *did* love you. It wasn't love the way I thought of love, but it was still love. The kind of love I was capable of then. Just not good love.”

Christ, it was like a bloody atom bomb had gone off in his head. Spike was only vaguely aware she had stopped speaking, that she was looking at him now with a mixture of emotions he couldn't begin to parse. Everything was loud between his ears—a roaring sort of loud that snuffed out all other sound, including those of his own thoughts. All this time. All this time and Buffy had loved him after all. Loved him then, when he'd been so certain of it. Convinced that she couldn't feel nothing because he knew her, saw her like no one else did, and she couldn't be with him the way she was without experiencing a little of what he experienced. And for a moment, once he could hear his own thoughts again, yeah, he felt a burn of something less charitable. Something that wasn't anger but also wasn't *not* anger, some reflection of the version of himself that had been beaten until he couldn't move without hurting. That part of him, the part that had known

the way he knew the sky was blue and the sun would kill him that Buffy had loved him, gave a war cry both of and for vindication.

But it didn't last—hell, it was barely a flicker. A flame dancing in the breeze, desperate to survive but doomed to snuff out. For that was what the soul had given him—the grounding, the understanding to accept that Buffy could never have told him that before. That the Spike he'd been, even if she had loved him, hadn't been good for her. Had barely been good for himself. He wouldn't have heard anything but confirmation that she loved him, and he wouldn't have been able to drop it—to give her what she needed to become the Buffy she was now. And he'd been too selfish, too focused on bringing her down to his level hoping that there, *there*, maybe all the things that made her miserable wouldn't matter anymore. Not wanting to accept that the things that made her miserable also made her Buffy, and she'd had to reconcile living with herself before she could begin to think about the likes of anyone else, especially him.

“Spike?”

He didn't realize he'd lowered his head until she spoke again. “Yeah. All right.”

“All right?”

“Just... Bloody hell, Slayer, I wasn't expecting that.” And he couldn't say it reframed everything—there was no going back, no accounting for the things he'd been thinking this time last year. “Mucked with my head a little.”

“Yeah. I... I guess maybe then it's my fault?”

Spike looked up sharply. “What's that?”

Now she was studying the mattress, pulling at the fitted sheet beneath them. “I mean, if you'd known I had loved you, maybe—”

“No.”

“You’d have known—”

“Buffy, only person to blame for what I did or didn’t know is me. I couldn’t... After the soul, it took me an age to fathom how you could look at me.” He paused, waited for her to meet his eyes again. “I wanted to hide it from you. The soul, that is. Wagered if you knew about it, you’d feel obligated somehow. Thought about staying away for good but I had nowhere else to go, and I was still weak, wanting to be near you, but then when I got there...”

“The First.”

“The First, yeah,” he agreed softly, “but also me. Also what I knew was right and what wasn’t, what to put on you. You hated yourself when we were together. I hated myself for what I’d done. Couldn’t imagine you loving me at all after that, so no, I couldn’t believe it when you told me. But I also needed it—I wanted it to be true, and it was all right, going out with that being the last thing I heard.”

Buffy nodded, her brow still furrowed, but she didn’t drop her eyes from his. “I know it won’t be easy. Us. Any of this, probably. I’m a mess, to put it mildly, and—”

“I love you.”

Her expression went soft, as though she hadn’t known it before now. As though he hadn’t said it a thousand times, a thousand thousand times, and more. “I love you, too.”

“And you’re right,” he said, reaching for her without realizing it, running the backs of his curled fingers along her cheek. “Might not be easy, but it won’t be harder than anything else we’ve done to each other.”

She offered a dry smirk. “And if that didn’t chase you off...”

“You’re stuck with me, Slayer. Long as you’ll have me. I’ll

fight for you, for whatever you give me, every day if that's what it takes."

"Do you really think we'll fight every day?"

He grinned. "Maybe if we're lucky."

"You are so weird."

"You love it."

"Yeah, well, I'm weird too. Freak Buffy with her freak boyfriend."

Everything in him swelled at that, his heart most of all. Boyfriend. Fuck, he was her boyfriend. She'd said so. Used the word and everything. Such a simple thing to want, but having it still felt like a marvel after all these years. Made it real with her in ways that were probably ridiculous but no less true because of it. Because being close to her, experiencing this, was all he'd ever wanted. All he'd always thought he'd never have.

But he did now. By some miracle, he had her. The look on her face, the warmth in her eyes, the light and the smile, they weren't for anyone else. It was heady and terrifying and so fucking good. As fucking good as anything in his life had ever been.

And while that almost assuredly meant the world was about to end for real this time, he'd milk as much out of its last seconds as he could, and regret none of them so long as they were spent with her.

TAKE YOUR FILL, LET THE
SPECTACLE ASTOUND YOU

IT WAS FASCINATING, WATCHING BUFFY GO THROUGH THE motions of becoming Randi Joan Pratt. Almost as fascinating as the blush that spread across her cheeks when he asked about that, the name, never mind the little wiggle she performed as though trying to fend off a shiver or an itch. There was the juice, or whatever potion was used for the transformation, apparently provided to her through some old magic Willow had dug up. There was also, he learned, an antidote. Something Buffy hadn't used in great amounts at first but had found herself going through more the longer the Randi job stretched on, and especially after Cordelia had woken up. The moments she could spend being herself were too precious to waste waiting for the potion's magic to wear off on its own, and god, he could understand that. As fetching as she was in her Randi get-up, and as much as he loved her regardless of what she'd look like, Spike couldn't help but experience a pang of loss once Buffy was no longer in the room with him. It was almost too easy to fool himself into

believing his imagination had run away with him, especially when he wasn't used to liking the circumstances of his reality.

But it was her, as it had been this entire time. She pulled her face the same way, touched her hair the same way, sighed the same way, and smirked at him the same way. All his Buffy, just under a load of padding.

"Might not hurt to take some with us," Spike noted as she checked the stock of potion she had in her purse. The effects lasted for around four hours, she said, but she always carried enough potion to get her through a day in the event something came up, like it had when that girl Dana had woken up. She never knew when she might be required to work longer hours.

"Take what with us?" she asked in her deeper, Randi voice.

"Some of the stuff that turns you back. Makes you Buffy again."

She glanced up, her brow wrinkling. "Why?"

"Dunno. Just a feeling."

"A feeling? Can you be a little less specific?"

He scowled at her, then smirked when she flicked her eyebrows in challenge. "Just seems like a good idea, is all," he said finally. "Never know when you might need a slayer."

"Randi's a slayer. Everyone knows that."

"Right, fine, never know when you might need *the* Slayer. Might need *Buffy*." Spike nodded at her, waved a hand. "We both know Angel won't listen for rot if Randi tries to lay down the bloody law, but if he learns who's really behind the curtain? Might slow him down long enough to get him to use the lone working brain cell he has left."

She snorted and rolled her eyes but started back toward the refrigerator all the same. "Angel doesn't have a history of

listening to me regardless of what face I'm wearing. He's just less polite about it to Randi."

"Maybe," he conceded, "but the others?"

"Yeah, all right, fine, I'm grabbing the antidote. I think it's silly, but I'll take it with me."

Spike nodded, satisfied, and then stalked over to the flat door and opened with a flourish. "Thought we might go in today like a proper couple," he explained when she arched an eyebrow at him. "Since everyone knows *Spike* is shagging *Randi*."

"Shagging, huh? So it's only physical between Spike and Randi?"

"Think Randi knows the score, sweets. My heart belongs to another." He grinned at her as she joined him in the doorway, snagged a kiss from her Randi lips, then set off at her left as always, ready to face the big bad world together.

Or that was the plan, at least, but they didn't get far. Not even to the place where the sun would have forced them to separate. Cordelia burst through the lobby front doors just as Spike and Buffy rounded the corner from the stairs, and didn't waste a sodding second in storming over to them, marching like she'd known to expect them but not without a stern, schoolmarm sort of flare to her eyes.

"Thank god," she said by way of greeting, glaring at Buffy. "Do you have any idea how many times I tried to call you last night?"

Buffy frowned and glanced at Spike. "Umm, no?"

"And this morning?"

"What's going on?"

"What's going on is the world is falling apart, that's what's going on." Cordelia huffed, then, by degrees, relaxed, particularly as she seemed to register that Spike was there too, at

Randi's side, his hand clasped in hers. "Oh," she said, blinked, then smiled. "Oh. I get it. Good for you."

"What?"

"You told him. And..." Cordelia was now eyeing her up and down, nodding in approval. "I'm taking it he took the news very, very well."

Spike couldn't have helped his smirk if he'd tried, and he wasn't much in the mood to try. It had been such a long time since he'd had fun he'd almost forgotten what it felt like. "What, that our girl here's really *our* girl?"

"Turns out I didn't need to tell him," Buffy said. "He already knew."

"Damn." Cordelia regarded him with a look of high regard. "That's love. And I'm happy for you, really, but we need to get upstairs. The others will be here soon."

"The others? What others?"

The answer to that was, evidently, all of Angel's crew. As Cordelia told them, shooing them back to the elevator all the while, when she'd failed to get Buffy on the phone the night before, she'd rung up the others and told the lot of them to skip going to the office in the morning, that there were things to discuss and Wolfram and Hart was hardly neutral territory. They needed somewhere safe, and Randi's was safe. How she had convinced them of that, she didn't say, only that she was powerfully persuasive when she put a mind to it.

Which was how, not ten minutes after leaving, Spike and Buffy were back in Randi's flat, only now with a bloody entourage.

"Here," Lorne said, handing Spike a large thermos after divvying up the assorted pastries he'd brought to the gathering. "Thought you might need something with a bit more iron in it."

"Thanks, mate," he replied, touched. It had been a minute since he'd eaten anything substantial, sustenance having not been high on his list before he'd sprinted over to the Slayer's. "Otter?"

"With a hint of cinnamon. I have it on an authority you are never to question that it helps the gamey taste."

Spike smirked and screwed off the lid, took a whiff. "Think your source was on the money."

"Can we cut to the chase?" Gunn snapped, bringing the soft chatter in the full living room to a close. He'd been pacing since he arrived, huffing and impatient as the rest of the crew settled into nervous but genuine small talk. Fred had just been helping Buffy-as-Randi get plates and napkins for everyone while Cordelia and Percy exchanged hushed whispers near the doorway. "I know cloak and dagger is cool and all, but I, for one, would like to know what the hell we're doing here. I didn't come for no social hour."

"Gunn," Cordelia started, but he dismissed her with a wave.

"I know you two have become tight, but the rest of us?" He looked around the room. "We don't know this girl. Yeah, she's powerful and all, but she ain't exactly on the inside. If we want a slayer, we already know one. One that at least knows Angel enough to be able to talk him down. You worried about his soul? Call the chick who helped us get it back the last time."

Confusion flashed across Buffy's face, though it was short-lived. Probably a mite strange hearing about another slayer being suggested as the one best suited for anything involving Angel. "Faith won't be able to help," she said calmly, stealing the wind from Charlie's sails. "That's the reason I'm here."

Gunn stared at her. The whole bloody room did.

After a long beat, Wesley cleared his throat. "That is certainly a dramatic pronouncement. Can you please elaborate?"

There was another beat, one that seemed to pulse through the air with its own brand of electricity. Buffy caught Spike's eyes. "Is this the feeling you had earlier? 'Cause wow with the freaky timing."

He lifted a shoulder, grinned. "Could be a sense us ne'er do wells get when the heroes are about to stop some big bad's idea of a good time."

"Like some supernatural bloodhound for when we're about to do the big fight?"

"Stranger things have happened," he agreed.

"Can one of y'all please tell me what the hell is going on?" Gunn snapped, apparently having decided to fall back on anger. It was an instinct Spike understood well. Anger had more appeal than confusion—felt more active, more like you were the one in control. "We cool enough to be in your little club?"

Buffy fell quiet once more, wetted her lips, then nodded. "Okay. You're right. Too many people know now, anyway."

"Know *what*?" Gunn all but snarled, glaring daggers into the back of her head as she turned and strode to the handbag she'd left on the coffee table. He watched—everyone watched—as she pulled out the small vial she'd stuffed in there earlier, uncorked it, then threw back its contents without hesitation.

Just like his girl. All in.

"All right," she said hoarsely, bottling the vial and throwing it back in her bag. "Get ready to see something."

Just as there had been something oddly satisfying about watching her become Randi, the same was true for the reverse transformation—both in the act itself and in how the indig-

nant, bloody defiant look on Gunn's face melted the second the changes began to take form. The inches on Randi disappearing, the shoulders growing small, the hips less wide, the feet suddenly too small for the shoes she wore. There was the slow spread of dirty blonde across the mane of mahogany hair, the sharpening of her face, the clothes she wore going baggy over her lithe frame. The last was the glasses, which fit Randi's head exactly but were, like everything else, too large on Buffy. What was left, when the transformation had run its course, was something rather adorable, like a child who had raided their parents' wardrobe and been caught before they could put things to rights.

"Buffy," Wes said, a note of awe in his voice. "You... You're Randi?"

She affected a tight smile and stepped out of her heels. "I am Randi."

"Wait," Gunn said, his earlier venom transformed into shock. "*Buffy?*"

"You met her in the spring, Charles," Fred admonished lightly, though she was also staring at the Slayer like she was a phantom of some sort.

"Yeah, for like half a minute." He looked Buffy up and down, his jaw agape. "I don't get it. What the hell?"

Buffy held up a hand; the effect was somewhat diminished by the fact that her sleeves now draped over her fingers. "I know this is a lot—"

"You've been lying to us for a year," Gunn said. He seemed to be fighting his way back to anger, and as much as Spike understood the urge, much more of that and he'd have to pop him in the throat. That would at least shut him up long enough for Buffy to get a word in. "A *year*. That's more than a lot."

"You're right. And I don't expect any of you to be okay with it, but right now, there are more important things." Buffy wrinkled her nose and gave herself a once-over. "Starting with finding clothes that actually fit."

"I—"

"Look, you wanna yell at me? Yell at me. But give me a couple of minutes to change first."

"And actually, no, there will be no yelling," Cordelia said, stepping forward as Buffy turned to hurry back to the bedroom. She rolled back her shoulders and met Gunn's challenging look with one of her own. "You want to be mad at someone, you can start with me. I've known since coming out of the coma. Buffy had no reason to trust any of you, or anyone who was working for Wolfram and Hart."

"That's—" Gunn began, but that was as far as he got.

"And as much as I *don't* get it, I do get that you guys agreed to do this thinking you could turn the place around." She rolled her eyes and made a dismissive shooing motion with her hand. "As stupid as that was."

"Thanks," Fred murmured.

"But for real, think about this. She's just saved the world for like the millionth time, lost her boyfriend in the process"—Cordelia waved toward Spike—"and shows up and learns that the amulet thingy that Angel swooped in to give her came from Evil Incorporated and by the way, you all work there now. Angel, who she had a very front-row seat for when he lost his soul the first time around, and Wesley, who—and no offense, Wes, you know I love you—had so much blind loyalty to the stupid Watchers Council that he sent the last slayer he was in charge of off the deep end?"

Spike glanced at Wesley, whose gaze was fixed on the floor. "No, no, none taken," the man said.

"And the rest of you she doesn't know at all, but she's supposed to just trust you aren't evil even though you signed up to work for evil?" Cordelia looked at each of them in turn, hand on her heart now. "I *do* know you. I know you, I love you, I'd die for you. But guys, y'all done fucked up. If it weren't for Buffy, I'd be dead. She was the only person stopping by to check on me the entire time I was in that stupid coma. Which means—"

"We visited," Fred protested, looking a combination of scandalized and nauseated. "We didn't just leave you there—"

"Honey blossom," Lorne said softly, coming around to throw an arm around her shoulders. "You did. We all did. It's not what we planned but it's what happened. The second we walked through those doors and shook hands with the devil, we were out of the game. They kept the stars in our eyes and the phones at our ears and just hoped that we'd be too distracted to see what they were doing."

Wesley favored him with an appraising look. "You've known all along, too, haven't you?" There was no accusation in his voice, just a flat sort of acceptance. "Or perhaps not all along, just enough for this morning's revelation to not be a surprise."

Lorne nodded, somewhat abashed but only somewhat. "She sang me a lovely little ditty, so I got a look inside that big, beautiful brain of hers."

"Well, ain't this nice?" Gunn drawled, his tone still sharp as he flicked his gaze between Spike and Lorne. "All of y'all got together and decided the rest of us didn't need to know."

"Dunno where you got the idea that I owe the lot of you a sodding thing," Spike retorted, then hesitated and inclined his head in Fred's direction. "Cept you, ducks. But as it is, the Slayer didn't tell me any of it."

"She didn't?" Fred asked, clearly puzzled. "But I thought you two—"

"We are." He tried to keep the grin out of his voice, but his traitor brain flashed back to that morning, to Buffy waking him up with her mouth wrapped around his cock, to the way she'd held him to her after they had tumbled over together. "But she didn't tell me. Didn't expect me to come poppin' out of that amulet, did she? Then I spent a while bouncing from here to the bloody netherworld and—"

"And by then, I'd had months of him telling me not to call Buffy to make me think maybe he considered dying on me a breakup," Buffy said as she strolled back in, her Randi costume exchanged for hip-hugging jeans and a black, drapey sorta number without sleeves. She'd also pulled her hair into a loose ponytail, wisps of golden hair framing her face in a way that made her look positively angelic. "So it was a comedy of errors for the first little while."

"But Spike knew," Wesley said. It wasn't a question. "He knew Randi's true identity."

"I know Buffy," Spike replied. "No matter what she looks like."

Buffy stopped when she was at his side, nudged his shoulder with hers. "It took you a few months."

"Still had it figured, didn't I?" Spike slipped his hand into hers, relishing her warmth, the satin of her skin against his, the slight squeeze she gave him in encouragement. "Not gonna bloody apologize, either," he said once he managed to tear his eyes off hers. "My loyalty's always been to her. If she hadn't brought anyone else in, I wasn't about to. Especially when she hadn't even told me herself."

"And we can get off the subject that is Buffy anytime now and start talking about the reason we're actually here,"

Cordelia said, clapping her hands once to claim the room's full attention. It was abrupt but effective, the hard smack of skin against skin cracking through the air like an exclamation point. "Angel, and don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about. Something is off, as in *way*. He's been distant."

"In a way that is more alarm-belly than his normal Sir Broods A Lot," Lorne added, nodding his agreement. "I've noticed it too. Or I started looking, I suppose would be more accurate, after I learned the real reason why we had a slayer on staff."

There was a beat—not a long one, but meaningful all the same. They had arrived at a crossroads, and there was a decision to make. Either continue smarting on the subject that was the Slayer's undercover gig or address the actual issue.

"It doesn't surprise me that he would experience a measure of disconnect," Wesley said carefully, and that was it. All it took. The energy in the room shifted focus without additional fight, which Spike truly wasn't accustomed to, all told, as the Scoobies' interpersonal squabbling had been known to create divides deep enough to nearly cost them whole wars. Hell, he'd engineered that once himself, poking and prodding at insecurities and doubts that had nearly consumed the lot of them from the inside.

It likely wasn't much a credit to Angel himself, rather the people he'd roped into his life. Those who had become allies before they'd been friends, and not the other way around. Less bloody baggage.

"Yeah, well, the last time he experienced *disconnect*, he disconnected himself from all of us and went on a one-man rampage against Wolfram and Hart," Cordelia retorted, crossing her arms. "Not saying it's the same now, but he went

bad enough then to make us all wonder if he'd hopped off the soul train."

"We never wondered that," Wesley replied, frowning.

"We never *talked* about it," she countered. "But I know the question kept me up at night, and if it didn't do the same to you, well, I guess that's just because you didn't meet Angelus until last year."

Spike snickered softly and wasn't quite quick enough to hide his eyeroll—which was a pity because he didn't much fancy dragging the room's attention back onto him in case Buffy got caught in the crossfire, but too many people were looking at him with expectation now, and he wasn't sure he had the patience not to just say what was on his mind. Tension had always existed between him and Angel for a multitude of reasons, but the slow march toward whatever this was over the last few months had pushed him beyond his sodding limits.

"Uhh, you got something you wanted to add?" Gunn asked at last.

"Nothing I wager any of you want to hear." Spike glanced at Buffy, half-expecting to see her glowering at him and pleasantly surprised to find nothing but soft encouragement. It truly was a brave new world. "Except, all right. It's the way you talk about him. That you didn't *meet* Angelus until you had the bright idea to magic the soul out."

"But we didn't," Fred said, frowning. "He's been Angel ever since I've known him."

"The lady just said he went on a sodding one-man rampage," Spike retorted, pointing at a slightly reserved Cordelia. "Doesn't sound too far off from a monster, does it? Fact of the matter is, kiddies, the soul doesn't change who a

person is, no matter what watcher boy there might've told you."

Wesley frowned. "That isn't entirely true. After a person is turned, they may retain the memories, even the personality of the human they once were, but they are essentially—"

"The memories and the personality," Spike retorted with a dry huff. "What the bloody hell are *any* of you without your memories and personality? And even if that weren't the case, Percy, think of everyone here, I'd know better than most. Anyone else spent a century carving through continents before deciding to shackle themselves up?" He made a show of glancing around, eyebrows perked. "No one, really?"

"But that's you, right?" Gunn asked, looking around the room as well now, confused. "Like it ain't the same for everyone across the board. People are different so vamps are too."

The question seemed one asked in good faith, which was pretty much all that kept Spike from surrendering control to his temper. "We're different in the same way," he said through his teeth.

"What? That makes no sense."

"Meaning we're different the way the lot of you are different from each other. Without a soul, I'm an evil bastard, yeah, but not Angel's brand of evil." Words were tumbling out of him faster than he could think them, before he could decide whether or not they were the sort that ought to live outside his own noggin, the bitterest thoughts he'd ever entertained, things he'd never throw in anyone's face save maybe Angel himself. Just spilling from him unchecked, in a rush of catharsis he hadn't anticipated. "We were killed the same way and came back the same sort of creature, but we *weren't* the bloody same, because the men we were in life,

the men we were *before*, weren't the same. Angel had his memories and personality and they made him the vampire he became. They didn't make him someone else—they made him exactly who he'd always been but hadn't had the strength or the freedom to put to bloody action. That's what becoming a vampire does to you—it takes away the reasons to not do what you want, bugger the consequences. Gives you a new perspective, makes you feel powerful, which is bloody addictive to those of us who have never felt anything but weak. Angel hated his father in life, so he killed him the second his shackles were off. I hated the wankers who liked to shove me around, so I ran them through with railroad spikes. But my mum? I didn't set out to murder her. I loved her. You take someone as twisted as Angel and shove a soul in him, yeah, I'd wager he'd like to think of himself as something other than the monster he was. But there's no *Angel* and *Angelus*, same as there is no *Spike* and whatever the hell you'd call me now that I have a soul. There's just us, who we are with a soul and who we are without."

He managed to cut himself off there, stop, even if he had a long way to go before he ran out of rant. Maybe, if he was lucky, he'd get Buffy to entertain that someday. Listen to more than a century's worth of anger and resentment, a load he reckoned he should probably try to exhaust regardless, just so the big git's shadow didn't trail over him forever after.

"All right," Cordelia said after a long moment. "Not saying I want to dive too far into soul philosophy, but...all that aside, Angel, soul included, has gone down a morally ambiguous path before, and because of Wolfram and Hart. Because he wanted to *get* Wolfram and Hart. Wanted to bury them. And I know I missed the first half of the brilliant plan to rework the beast from the inside, but I know Angel. He was in a mood

before he rushed off to Rome because he thought Buffy was in danger of dating someone other than him—”

“Cordy,” Fred began, her tone soft and commiserative, but Cordelia plowed on ahead.

“—and he’s been in a worse mood since he got in yesterday. Not to mention the pissy phone calls I got while he was away.” She threw a wry glance at Buffy. “And while *you* were having your sexy time reunion, I got to listen to him make meetings with a bunch of people I’m guessing aren’t actually people, and about things that sounded very much like the things the bad guys talk about with their friends.”

“So what do you suggest?” Gunn asked, earnest. “We confront him? Get him to fess up, assuming there’s something needing confessing? Try getting water from a stone first. It’ll be easier.”

“Depends on what we want him to confess,” Cordelia replied. “That he’s gone evil or that he wants us to think he has.”

The air around them seemed to shift at that, and there was a beat during which the lot of them exchanged a series of confused looks. All of them except Buffy, whose eyes had gone wide with realization.

“You don’t think he’s actually gone evil,” she said. “You think he’s putting on an act.”

“Bingo,” Cordelia replied. “Which means he has a plan he hasn’t told us.”

“Wait, what?” Gunn asked, holding up a hand. “Back up. So you *don’t* think Angel’s gone bad, and that’s what this is about? Damn, Cor, not sure I approve of this use of sounding the alarm.”

“Then those lawyers have clearly zapped out your senses to make room for all that law bullshit,” she retorted. “Because

when has Angel going off on his own, one-man crusading in the name of whatever, ever ended well for any of us? That's exactly the kind of crap that got him spiraling the last time—he was focused on beating them to the point of cutting the rest of us out. The entire reason he took on this gig was to get the best of Wolfram and Hart, change them from the inside, and what's he actually done? It's almost been a year. Can you honestly say he's even had one win in that time?"

"I dunno, sugar blossom..." Lorne was suddenly at her side, throwing an arm around her shoulder to squeeze her into him. "You waking up from that coma put a spring in his step."

"Except it didn't," Buffy said. "I mean, no offense, Cor, but his reaction was to jump all the way down my throat about it."

"Sis, you were acting suspicious as hell," Gunn observed.

"Maybe, but enough for him to be all about the *Randi* of it and not the walking miracle that is Cordelia?"

"And that wasn't his win," Cordelia added. "God, you guys know I love Angel. I really do. But without Buffy here, I was never waking up from that coma. He didn't save me. If anything, he nearly let me die. And if I had died, the Powers or whatever would've had nowhere to send the SOS that saved Fred's life. None of the *wins* have been Angel's, and that's the sort of thing that will really weigh on him. He'll be desperate to prove it was for something, especially with what he gave up to make it happen."

Christ, they were in it now, weren't they? But the lady wasn't off the mark. Spike had seen it. Despite the span of their shared history, they hadn't, in truth, spent much time together, and definitely not within the last hundred years or so. Not since Angel had gotten himself saddled with that soul, branched off on his lonesome only to pop up at the turn of the century in southern California. After he'd first come to

Sunnydale, he'd been bloody ringside for the better part of a year, first as a means of tormenting Angel, then by continued necessity. But there were certain things that never changed, and Angel not being in charge of his own bloody fate, not making a difference—whether it was by turning cruelty into an art form or saving the sodding day—was the sort of thing that would drive him barmy. Would make him question his own worth, the legacy he was leaving behind. Life wasn't fun if no one remembered his name.

And yeah, everything that Angel had accomplished this year had been on the coattails of others. The recent stint in Rome had all but confirmed that, Angel riding in because he'd felt duty-bound to do something good, to rescue Buffy from a bogeyman she could more than handle on her own, feel useful again even if it was just in meddling once more in his ex's life, stopping her before she got too far outside his sphere of influence. Even with someone he loved waiting for him at home—and whatever else, Spike trusted that what Angel felt for Cordelia was genuine—not being the agent of change was slowly driving him out of his marbles.

If the rest was true, then yeah, it was fair to say that Angel had never been more dangerous than he was now. Desperate to prove something, if only to himself.

"Cordelia," Wesley said softly, jarring him back to the present, "the offer was made to all of us. There wasn't a quid pro quo. As underhanded as we all know Wolfram and Hart to be, they were rather straightforward."

"I know. But there was another part of the deal, something he didn't tell you guys about." Cordelia flicked her gaze at Buffy, then back to the group. "He gave up his son. He gave up Connor."

"Who?" Fred asked, her brow wrinkling.

“His son?” Wesley echoed, blinking. “Cordelia...”

“How the hell could Angel have a son?” Gunn demanded. “Last I checked, there are very specific things vamps can’t do, and passing on the family name is one of them. Unless this is some other old member of the twisted family y’all haven’t told us about.”

“Yeaaaah, Cordykins,” Lorne added, giving her a sideways look. “You know I’m with you a hundred and ten percent, but you’ve even lost me with this one.”

“I know I have, because that was part of the deal, too. That you wouldn’t remember.” This time when she sighed, she seemed to pull the air down with her. “But I wasn’t part of the deal. Probably because no one expected me to wake up, and Wolfram and Hart had drafts of my eulogy on file before the ink on your contracts dried, but whatever. The point is I woke up, and I *do* have these memories. Memories of Connor, Angel’s son. The one he had with Darla after he banged her during the aforementioned losing-his-marbles time a few years ago. This is the same son who, by the way, showed up at the office a few weeks ago, the one with the freaky strength? Where do you think he got that?”

Spike swallowed, glanced again at Buffy. He knew all this, of course, had been told just before the trip to Rome, but had also managed to put it somewhere else in the time since. Just one more crime of Angel’s that didn’t surprise him. But he did remember the lad Cordelia was talking about, even if they hadn’t interacted all that much. He’d been a bit on the straggly side, young, maybe Dawn’s age, with hair that definitely reminded Spike of the Angel of old, only perhaps slightly less painful to look at. The boy hadn’t been around long—there had been some business with a demon or what all that Angel had insisted on handling on his own, and because

Spike hadn't cared all that much, he hadn't bothered asking questions after. But there had been something about the kid, a part of him that felt familiar when it oughtn't have. A part of him that had felt like family.

"This time last year," Cordelia said slowly, "you all knew Connor, had changed his diapers, given him formula, taken turns watching him while we took cases. And then something happened"—she skirted her gaze over Wesley in a way Spike couldn't help but clock—"and Connor was abducted and raised in a hell dimension where time moves way fast, but he came back and—"

"Does anyone else's head hurt?" Lorne asked with a faint laugh.

"Look, the point is, part of the deal Angel made when you took over was to essentially give Connor a fresh start," Cordelia said. "With a non-vampire family. Your memories of him were part of that. He essentially erased Connor from your minds. But Connor exists. And considering that he found his way back to Angel as quickly as he did, whether or not he has the memories of the absolute shit-show that became his life, I have to think Connor reappearing is weighing on Angel, too. The fact that in order for his son to be happy, he had to not know where he came from. Add in the fact that I'm here because someone else saved my life, and Fred's here because I was around to get a cosmic warning from the PTB, and yeah, I'm worried. I think he's about to do something stupid just to prove to himself he made the right call. And we need to stop him."

She stopped talking then, gave them all a long, expectant look, either waiting to see if someone would jump in or making sure they wouldn't, for it seemed perfectly clear that Cordelia had sussed out the path they needed to take. That

this wasn't a discussion so much as it was informing them what was coming next, and making sure everyone understood their role.

"Just so you know," Gunn said finally, "I'm gonna need someone to explain this *kid* thing to me all over again once this is over, 'cause a vampire who can make babies just... Damn, man, that ain't right."

"We get to the other side of whatever Angel's planning, and I promise, everything will be answered." Cordelia glanced at Buffy. "For all of us."

"You're damn right, it will," the Slayer agreed. "And I intend to collect."

"What do you have to collect?" Gunn asked.

"Let's just say this isn't my first rodeo with stolen memories and people in my life playing God. The last time that happened, my best friend almost ended the world. Never mind the enormous heap of bullshit Angel has thrown at me since Randi joined the staff."

At that, Fred winced. "He has been...not the best with Randi."

"Cause she's not someone he can bully around," Spike offered with a soft grin. "Angel's used to being the bloody cock of the walk. He can't stand it when someone has the brass to tell him he's wrong."

"I've told him he's wrong plenty," Gunn retorted.

"As have I," Wesley added.

"Me too," said Lorne.

"That's pretty much all I do," Cordelia offered with a snicker.

Right. Fine. He hadn't particularly wanted to say this part, but he was doing no one favors by pretending otherwise. "It's easier for him to hear if it comes from those he respects."

"Probably why all of you have been good for him," Buffy muttered. "To a point, at least. You've all earned his respect at one time or another."

"So have you!" Fred insisted brightly, though her smile was a mite forced. "You know, as Buffy, not Randi. Which...as I'm saying it, I realize isn't all that good, really. But—"

"I don't think he respects me as Buffy, either," Buffy said, then held up a hand at the stricken look that declaration earned. "I'm not... I think Angel loves me. Not like he loves Cordelia, obviously, or any of you, but I think I'm... I *know* I'm something to him. But he met me when I was barely sixteen years old. He never talked to me the way he talks to you guys. And I'm not... That's something I've had to come to terms with over the last few months, among many other things. It's okay. Or not *okay* but something I can live with, because he's not whatever he was to me when we first met anymore. But I still love him enough to want to help him or stop him before he does something stupid that can't be undone." She met Spike's eyes, and whatever she saw there had her relaxing. "So if that's what we need to do, stop him from doing something stupid just to prove *whatever* to himself, then I am all in."

"Good," Cordelia said, then let out a deep breath. "Then I think we might just stand a chance."



SHE WAS NERVOUS, but it was a good nervous. The sort of nervous she experienced right before launching into a high-stakes battle, fortified with the understanding she had what it took to get to the other side but respecting that she could only account for herself. That emerging victorious hinged

upon things outside of her control. And since nothing Angel-adjacent had ever been in the zip code of her control, this sensation was even more familiar. Almost as natural to her as breathing itself.

It also helped that confronting Angel, unmasking herself, was one of the only things Buffy had planned for from the start. She was never going to be content with just spying and quietly exiting from his life, had never doubted that there would come a time when she'd have to play her hand because Angel had bitten off more than he could chew. It was the entire reason she was here at all—the conviction that he'd made a mistake in accepting the reins. And sure, maybe things had unfolded in ways she hadn't predicted, but a desperate Angel was a dangerous Angel, and if he was even half as desperate as Cordelia thought he was, the shit he was in danger of stirring could definitely reverberate on the apocalypse scale.

And she couldn't deny that a small, petty part of her was looking forward to seeing the look on his face when he realized just who he'd been such an ass to all year.

"All right, pet?" Spike asked, his voice a soothing rumble in her ear. He had fallen into place on her left, the way he always did, close enough to make her skin hum with that Spike-unique awareness but distant enough that they weren't appearing overly coupley. Not that coupley was a bad thing, but Buffy had a feeling Angel would glom onto that if it was too overt, and they needed him open to hearing other things rather than going another few rounds on her love life.

"I'm good," she told him. "Just antsy."

"I still say we should've done this somewhere neutral," Gunn said, tearing himself away from the rather amazing view

afforded by Angel's penthouse apartment. "Little close to the lion's den for my comfort, you feel?"

"Why do you think I've refused to move in?" Cordelia retorted. She was leaning against the dresser, arms crossed, and if it weren't for the fact that she jumped every time the floor creaked, Buffy would have thought she was calm and collected. "Just being here gives me the creeps."

"What if something went wrong?" Fred asked nervously, wringing her hands and exchanging a worried look with Wesley. The pair stood in the middle of the room, her all fidgets, him impressively stoic. "Something could have gone wrong."

"In the last twenty minutes?" Lorne replied, not unkindly. "We just saw him, strudel. Big man's probably dotting some last-minute *i's* before calling it a day."

That didn't seem to placate her. "Maybe we should have waited. I mean, it probably looks really suspicious. All of us not turning up this morning and then arriving at the same time. And with her." She cut her gaze to Buffy. "No offense, but I still think it was a mistake to not come as Randi."

Yeah, Buffy couldn't say she hadn't had her own slew of second thoughts the second she'd arrived, feeling more than a little naked without her added height and heels and the glasses through which Randi viewed the world. She also wasn't sure why she'd decided against it—why the thought of donning her costume for one last reveal had felt as wrong as it had, only that it *had* felt wrong, and when it came to matters like this, she trusted her gut. And she'd be lying if she said she hadn't hoped that word would spread that Buffy Summers was in the building and make Angel pump the brakes on whatever he was doing to rush to see why she was in town. Or that his continued presence wherever-else wasn't stressing her already—

frayed nerves. But then, they hadn't exactly paraded through the halls, either; she and Spike had walked in, side by side, and strode directly toward the elevators. No stopping, no chatting, but that didn't mean Wolfram and Hart hadn't clocked her presence.

And yeah, she could admit... That had her pre-battle nerves a little jumpier than normal, but with more of that exhilaration. That readiness. That desire to start swinging just so she could get to the finish line that much sooner.

A *ding* sounded through the air and suddenly, she was there. At the moment all the other moments since Sunnydale had been building toward. The elevator had arrived at the penthouse floor. And wouldn't it just be her luck if the door slid open and someone other than Angel was on the other side? But that's not what happened.

It was Angel. He was alone. And somehow, with unerring precision, despite everyone else around them, his eyes found hers almost immediately. The sort of thing that would have made her swoon once upon a teenage romance but didn't now.

Nope, when it came to Angel, she was all swooned out.

"Buffy. This is a surprise," he said, stepping off the elevator. He held her gaze for a beat, then another, before he seemed to realize they had an audience. It was only then that he blinked, true confusion pulling at his face. "What is this? Cordelia? Wesley?"

"It's over," Buffy said. "That's what it is. This dance or whatever you're doing with Wolfram and Hart. It's over."

Angel narrowed his eyes, the confusion fading in favor of more familiar annoyance. "Aren't you supposed to be off cuddling with the Immortal? What the hell are you doing here?"

"I just told you."

"Yeah, I heard. Sorry, it takes more than showing up at the eleventh hour and making dramatic proclamations to make something true."

"Really? And when exactly has that ever stopped you?"

Cordelia stepped forward—almost stumbled forward, actually, like she thought she might need to throw herself bodily between them—and raised her hands. "Look, I know something is up."

"You do," Angel echoed without inflection.

"Umm, duh? I know the signs, especially when it comes to you and this law firm." She motioned to Wes and Fred, nodded over her shoulder at Lorne and Gunn. "We all do."

"And so, what, you got together and decided to bring in Buffy to talk sense into me? This is..." Angel struggled for a second, apparently unable to find words to describe what *this* was, but then shook his head and broke off. "Look, yes, there are things you need to know that I've set in motion. I'm tired of playing into their hands; it's time to take the fight to them. But Buffy's not a part of this." He broke off again, drew in a breath as though to center himself, then fixed his gaze on her once more. "All right. I appreciate you coming. I do. But this, what I'm trying to do, it's not your fight. And you can't just show up and decide what's best without a clear picture of what's been going on."

"I think you'll find I have a very clear picture of what's been going on," Buffy said, sliding Randi's glasses onto her face, holding his gaze all the while. Watching, not without a thrill, as his jaw went slack. "And that's just one of the reasons why I'm taking charge."

WAIT 'TIL THE TIME IS RIGHT
(WHEN WILL THAT BE?)

“IT’S CALLED THE CIRCLE OF THE BLACK THORN. WE DON’T know a lot yet, but what we do know isn’t good. Angel’s been warring with Wolfram and Hart for going on six years now, and this is the first time this has come up.” Buffy sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose as she tried to recall the finer points she’d learned that night. It didn’t help that, sometime in the middle of Operation Confront Angel, something behind her eyes had started to throb, then ache, and even an hour later, showed no signs of slowing down. Probably because she didn’t, either, and her body knew it. Stupid body. “Does it ring any bells for you?”

A vagueish sort of shuffling noise filled the line. “Circle of the Black Thorn? No, I cannot say it does.”

She tried to stifle her disappointment. It had been a long shot—a secret organization so secret that the CEO of the firm it controlled hadn’t learned about it until he’d started poking around? They knew how to keep mum. Still, some childish part of her, the part used to Giles having all the

answers or at least a way to get them, couldn't help but feel let down. "Angel described them as the—god, what word did he use—*instrument* of the Senior Partners. Like the ticking clock the firm has on the apocalypse? All thanks to these guys."

"And Angel just...shared this information with you? When we last spoke—"

"Things have changed since we last spoke."

"So I gather."

Buffy inhaled at that, glancing at Spike, who sat in the armchair he'd occupied the previous night. His duster was draped over the back, and he'd removed his shoes and socks at her insistence, gotten all homey-like after they'd gotten in. Because yes, she wanted him to stay the night. Now that it was all out there, now that the subterfuge was behind them, it was possible she'd never want another night away from him. The past year had been filled with far too many.

And if that meant sounding like a sap in her own head, well, she'd earned it. It was best to bask in the comforting afterglow of where they were now because there was no way it would last. They were too volatile, too similar in so many ways and different in others, and yeah, half the fun of pissing each other off was making up, but still, she had her share of horrible memories. Time to balance that out with some warm fuzzies.

"Angel knows," she told Giles now. "The Randi secret is out of the bag."

"Yes, I rather assumed as much there, as well."

"You did?"

"Given that you have provided more information in the past ten minutes than in the cumulative last ten months, yes. It wasn't a difficult conclusion to reach."

Buffy's stomach tightened, a sour taste flooding her

mouth. There it was. The same sort of casual, blink-and-you-miss-it passive aggressive bullshit she'd come to expect from her former watcher, right on cue. *See, Buffy? See how silly you were. All along, you just needed to be yourself!*

She glanced at Spike again and knew he had heard it too. He had sucked in his cheeks and his eyes were now dark with anger, which strangely—or maybe not-so-strangely—warmed her from the inside. It was so nice not being alone in this anymore.

"We both know there was no way Angel was going to let me snoop around Wolfram and Hart the way we left things," she replied in what she hoped was a measured, even tone. "And definitely not as long as I've been here."

"It may very well be that you are correct."

Don't celebrate. Wait for the but.

"However," Giles continued, "we do not know for certain. It's all speculation."

"Yeah, that's what it always is when you do one thing and don't do another. You can only guess what would have happened if you'd gone the other way." Buffy let out another breath, doing her best to rein in her irritation. It didn't work. "But I *do* know, Giles. He wouldn't have trusted me, and even if he did, there would've ultimately been some *we can't be together* talk, because there's a reason he moved away. And no, the fact that I wouldn't be here to get back together with him wouldn't matter. It'd be a thing. It's *always* a thing. We're people who don't work well together and never learned how to be friends outside of being a couple, and... I just know. And if I didn't before, believe me, I do after watching him these last few months. There was one way to do this, and it was my way. We'll all be happier once everyone admits it."

There was another stretch of silence over the line. As

much as she would have liked to have believed he was being all introspecty, Buffy knew better.

"I am sure your judgment was best," he said after a beat in the same keeping-the-peace voice that had gotten so much use after the plot to murder Spike had blown up in his face. "However, that is beside the point at the moment."

Of course it was. Then he might have to say something radical like *I'm sorry* or *you're right*.

"Right," Buffy replied, forcing herself to recalibrate. Infuriating or not, he wasn't wrong. The point of this call hadn't been to defend her decision for the umpteenth time, rather bring him up to speed. "Circle of the Black Thorn. The movers and shakers the Senior Partners use to get all their ducks in a row. We don't know who they are, just that they have a lot of power together. That's the bad. The good is that by themselves, they're pretty much run-of-the-mill demons. Even some humans, I think. No species is off the guest list so long as they can prove themselves. And that's what Angel's been trying to do since Cordelia came out of her coma. Prove himself. He's essentially a pledge at rush week. The problem is, the key to securing a seat at the table is more than mastering the secret evil handshake."

"I would imagine so. The intent is, I assume, to information-gather."

"Yeah, but so deep undercover that he's done or been involved in some..." Buffy trailed off, searching for words. Not the easiest thing to do while her mind was still trying to process the wealth of crap that had happened today. "Giles," she said finally, "it's awful. Like child sacrifice awful."

Something like a *thump* sounded through the line. "Child sacrifice? Angel was involved in that?"

"Wouldn't be the first time," Spike muttered.

"The baby is still alive," Buffy said, giving Spike a look, "but yeah. He essentially handed it over to this demon cult so they could kill it for one of their rituals. And that's not all. I don't even know if it's the worst."

"How can it not be the worst?"

"Do you want me to answer that or do you want to trust me when I say it's not?"

"That is a rather salient point." Another shuffling filled the line, this one sounding like he had changed ears or was attempting to polish his glasses one-handed. "I assume it's working, this plan of his?"

"Meaning do they believe he's on Team Evil? Yeah. I think they're close to being convinced."

"Child sacrifice would be a persuasive argument."

"Pedophile politicians are just icing on the gross cake."

Something else *thumped*. "Pardon?"

"That would be the *worst* I was telling you about," Buffy replied dryly. "Or if not worst, at least equal. Adjacent."

"You said that he has been doing this since Cordelia awoke. What is the correlation?"

"Well, Cordelia. Cordelia's a big ol' correlation. You know she gets visions. Apparently, sometimes those are transferrable."

"Meaning what, exactly? She can bestow them upon others?"

"I don't think it was a voluntary bestowing. She didn't even know it had happened until tonight, when Angel told us."

"So Angel experienced this vision."

"The night she got back. He thinks it's because she kissed him—that's apparently how Cordelia got the visions in the first place. Doyle, the original Doyle—"

“Original? Was there an unoriginal Doyle?”

Buffy pressed her lips together and met Spike’s eyes again. Nope. Not opening that door just yet. Call her crazy but she wasn’t ready to invite Giles or anyone from Sunnydale into the circle of people who knew Spike was alive. “Not important,” she said hurriedly. “Doyle transferred his visions to Cordy by kissing her before he died. And we don’t know why Angel got the vision this time—Cordelia is definitely still vision girl, but they think there might have been some funky Powers stuff at work. Like maybe they wanted only Angel to know.” That was the theory Angel had presented, at least. One of his many justifications for keeping everything under wraps. Nice and tidy. “He got a vision of this symbol along with what he claims was an apocalypse. Like biblical sort of apocalypse, with fire. And of course, since he’s Angel, he didn’t tell anyone about this, just decided to go all secret agent man. Infiltrate the Circle, once he knew that was what the symbol was, and learn the identities of all its members so we had a face to put to the enemy. But he has to get initiated to do that.”

“And how close is he to this initiation?” Giles asked. “If he has arranged for children to be sacrificed...”

Well, that tone was definitely something new. Or rather, something old. Something more hesitant, less trusting, Giles before he’d decided that Angel was a paragon of rational judgment calls. Buffy thought it best not to read too much into it, but damn, it was enough to make her hope.

“He swears there’s a way to save the kid before it’s sacrifice time.”

“Forgive me if that isn’t incredibly comforting.”

“Angel *does* think he’s close. Just a couple more hoops to jump through. But he told us they’ll give him something big to

do. Something to prove his loyalty to them. Bigger than the baby sacrifice, at least from their perspective.”

For a moment, the line fell silent again, all save for Giles’s breaths. “Do you have any inkling?”

She did. It was the same inkling everyone else had. “We think it’s Cordelia.”

“Cordelia?”

“That he will have to kill Cordelia.” She swallowed the bitter taste that filled her mouth at the words. Still no idea how they were going to work around that hiccup, but hopefully Giles would have an idea. Maybe something involving Willow. “Cordelia was supposed to die in her coma and she didn’t. Because she didn’t, Angel’s link to the Powers was restored. More than that, she’s... Angel loves Cordelia. He’s better when she’s around. Like a lot better.”

A sigh filled her ear. “Buffy—”

“Don’t worry, I am the opposite of broken-hearted about it.” Again, she looked at Spike, and felt her lips curl into a smile at the warmth in his eyes. “It’s a little weird, but a normal weird, if that makes sense? Like how it’s supposed to feel when your ex moves on. But that’s also what makes her dangerous to them. The Circle. They’ll never trust him while she’s around. And aside from severing his ties with the mystical higher-ups, it’d be the ultimate sacrifice, the best way to prove he’s ready to give it all up for evil.”

“Yes, I can certainly see the logic.” Giles cleared his throat. “And assuming he is successful in convincing them that he has killed Cordelia, does Angel have a plan for moving forward?”

“Learn the identities of the Circle of the Black Thorn, enlist his underlings to take them out, hunker down and prepare for Armageddon.”

“Prepare?”

“Essentially, there’s a non-zero chance Wolfram and Hart won’t retaliate if we kill their proxies. And by retaliate, I mean unleash all hell on us.”

The line went quiet once more, a different sort of quiet than before. A heavier quiet. And though, again, she knew better than to hope it meant something, that hope was harder to shove away this time. Her breath caught and her chest tightened.

“Buffy,” he said at last. “It appears... I believe I have been shortsighted.”

She tried to keep from huffing audibly and failed.

“Yes,” Giles went on, as though that huff had been a reply. “It is probably too much to discuss now, but this... If all of this comes to pass as you say, more than the world could well be at stake. We won’t know for certain, of course, until we have time to truly—”

“Giles, if you’re trying to tell me that I made the right call, I already know that. In fact, we just talked about it.”

“You are again quite right.”

“And the best way to say *I’m sorry* is to get your ass on a plane, preferably with Willow and Faith and a whole army of slayers, because if this goes down the way Angel thinks it will, we need to prepare for war.”

“Should also start thinking up a way to off Cordelia without actually killing her,” Spike volunteered. “Wager the witch could come in handy with that. Work some smoke and mirrors mojo or the like.”

Something on the other end of the line shattered. Like, really shattered, startling Buffy so much she had to pull the phone from her ear just to make sure whatever had broken

hadn't been her fault. She grumbled a curse and threw Spike a glare.

Really? That's how we're doing this?

He answered with a cheeky Spike grin. *Yeah. That's how we're doing this.*

"Buffy," Giles said finally, his voice surprisingly tempered, "who is with you right now?"

Well, at the very least, she wouldn't have to toss and turn worrying over how to break this particular news. It might not have been the ideal way to go about it, but the band-aid was off. And Giles now had the length of a transcontinental plane ride to come to terms.

Still, she was going to have words with her vampire once she hung up.

"Spike," Buffy said at last. "Spike is with me."

"Spike," Giles repeated.

"Yep."

"He's back."

"In the flesh. Though not at first. He was a ghost for a while."

"What is a while?"

"A few months?"

"So this is not a new development."

"Nope."

"I see." He swallowed loud enough for her to hear it. "How long has he been... How long?"

"The entire time."

"And he's known about... He knows you're—"

"He figured out Randi Joan Pratt was Buffy Anne Summers really fast, yeah. The name kinda gave it away." Buffy waited a beat, then another, then decided she was done waiting. "Look, Giles, I'll tell you all about it. Answer all your

questions and let you lecture me to your heart's content. But after we save the world, okay? And he's not wrong. We need to find a way to kill Cordelia without killing her."

For a moment, she was sure he was going to refuse, insist that they have it out now. That was, after all, what they did these days. And given he'd just admitted that she'd been right all along, he had to be feeling some sense of confusion of things—finding the words to tell her that she'd been right in the wrong way. Still making bad calls, leading with her heart instead of her head, or whatever new combination of those arguments was selected as the current favorite.

Instead, Giles sighed. A long, hard sigh that she felt to the bone. "I'll begin making arrangements," he said. "And though I understand most of these moving parts are outside of your control, the more time you can provide, the better. Especially if Angel's predictions are accurate; we will need as many slayers as are available and prepared for this sort of fight, as well as any additional magical resources."

Buffy swallowed a throat gone dry, nodded. "Yeah. Okay. I'll do what I can. Thanks, Giles."

"Stay safe," he said, and that was it. The call disconnected, and Buffy lowered the phone, her heart thundering in her ears and her face going hot.

It was over. Just like that. Not the hard part, sure, but one of the hard parts, and definitely the hardest part of this particular *whatever*. The area of her life that was cordoned off, devoted to her friends and family, that had been carrying so much additional weight since Sunnydale had fallen. At the very least, she felt more fully in charge of herself once more—vindicated again despite the resistance she'd encountered. And kinda proud of Andrew, too, because he'd done as she'd asked and kept her secrets. It was a small thing that ought to

not be surprising but was. She'd have to remember to thank him for that.

Buffy didn't realize that Spike had moved until the cushion beside her dipped with his weight, and he had taken her hand in his. Grounding her with his cool.

"All right?" he asked, his voice low.

She blinked and shifted her gaze to him. "You were kind of a shit."

"Reckoned it'd be easier that way."

"Yes, things are often easier when you're obnoxious."

He lifted a shoulder, unrepentant. "Not like we could hide that I'm back when he and the others land, is it? Seemed better to get ahead of it. And you could blame me if it went wrong. Say I'd spoken outta turn or hadn't let you do it on your own."

"Throw yourself on a sword, in other words."

Spike shrugged again, this time offering a soft smile. "It's nothing to fall on a sword or two if you're doing it for the right person."

"If you're trying to get out of me being mad at you...it's working."

He rumbled a low chuckle and squeezed her hand. "All part of my evil plan."

"I knew it. Fiend." Buffy felt her lip twitching and decided to call it, leaned in and pressed a kiss to his mouth. "Thank you. You make a good bad guy."

Spike grinned the sort of grin that lit her up from the inside. That made her feel the mounting pressure in ways she'd been trying to avoid, the sudden but also inevitable countdown to the next big loss. She'd known there was a fight ahead but somehow still hadn't been prepared for it. Definitely not prepared for the possibility of reaching the other

side. Of losing everything she'd managed to claim as her own. Stranded at the back half of an apocalypse once more, having lost even as she'd won.

Not this time, though. She wouldn't let it happen.

This time, they were both making it.

They were *all* making it.



TURNED out that a highly motivated witch and her coven could pull off some truly remarkable feats, like creating massive space folds. As Willow had explained it, this particular fold would be large enough to essentially consume the distance between two locations—"Think of it like folding a map so that London and LA are side-by-side. We're doing that, except it won't be a map, but reality instead."—and while the magic was sustained, anyone, including a whole army, could just walk across that fold and abracadabra, find themselves on American soil without having to worry about the inconvenience of customs or airport security. The thought was more than a little humbling, especially considering that it had taken an entire coven to send them their emergency Giles-o-gram a couple of years ago when Willow herself had been the apocalyptic threat. Like, the solution was beyond neat, but was the coven sure they would be up to the task when it was more than just one former librarian hopping the pond?

The answer to the question was a humbling *hell yes*, as Willow herself was apparently the Energizer Bunny of witches. Where lesser mortals ran out of juice, she just kept going and going. Thank god she was on the right side of the fight this time, and with luck she'd stay that way. The last

Buffy had seen of her friend, she'd been riding the good-magic high of switching on all the slayers—something she'd described as pure, positive energy—and optimistic about what came next. All good signs. But it also hadn't been all that long ago that Willow had shied from doing any big spells out of fear of how far it would push her, and the last thing anyone needed in a showdown with Wolfram and Hart was for Willow to rediscover her inner wicked witch.

But those were observations Buffy felt better kept to herself. Instead, she applied the lion's share of her focus on finding a place that was both large and discreet to serve as the landing base for a legion of battle-ready slayers and the magic wielders who had made the journey possible. Somewhere out of Wolfram and Hart's periphery, and preferably with enough space to comfortably host the reinforcements until it was time to fight.

"What about the hotel?" she'd asked the previous night. The entire crew had crowded over at Spike's place, having decided it was a safer meeting location than anything on the law firm's campus. Or even Buffy's apartment. While Lindsey McDonald had caused a lot of trouble those weeks he'd spent cosplaying Angel's dead friend, keeping off Wolfram and Hart's radar had been one of his foremost concerns. Add in the fact that Spike had never officially joined the team, despite the offers he'd received, and his basement apartment was as neutral as they could hope to get.

"It might be under surveillance," Gunn had told her. "I mean, it was before we were on staff. No reason to think it wouldn't be now."

"Lorne was able to hear the frequency the time we knew they had cameras all over the place," Cordelia had replied. "And if they're there, well, I know *you* don't know Willow well,

but when she's not dropping souls off in our friends, she was hacking into city plans and doing all kinds of nerd crap that I did not appreciate enough when we were in high school."

"I'd keep the *nerd crap* thing to yourself, but yeah." Buffy had turned to Gunn and nodded. "If there's something there, Willow will be able to find it and either shut it down or make it something we can use. You can count on that."

"You better make sure that she can solo jump the pond first, is all I'm saying," Gunn had replied. "Would kinda suck to go to all this trouble just for the bad guys to swoop in the second the cavalry arrives, you feel me?"

Buffy had nodded, doing her best to not demonstrate her nerves while knowing full well what a crappy poker face she had. Thing was, as much firepower—potential and otherwise—as they had going into this fight, the more she turned it over, the more unprepared she felt. Most of the apocalyptic wars of her past had been the sort that had spent a good chunk of time on the horizon, a small dot slowly becoming larger, but at a pace that didn't leave her winded. Yeah, the Hellmouth had opened during sophomore and then senior year, and there had been those kamikaze demons who had tried to trigger the end times by sacrificing themselves, and both had been hurried, race-against-the-clock five-alarm emergencies, but also rather simple in hindsight. The goals had been clear-cut, straightforward, and while the fight had definitely taken a lot out of her, she'd felt solid on what needed to be done. Understood her role in everything.

It was too late to Monday-morning-quarterback the calls Angel had made or undo any of those decisions. He'd been acting on his own pretty much the entire time, and rather than trying to stop the world from ending, putting things in motion that almost guaranteed it would. And yeah, Buffy

supposed she could maybe, possibly see the logic behind what he was doing. Like if she squinted a little, the reasoning was slightly less insane. Wolfram and Hart had had an apocalypse on the books for years; taking out the Circle of the Black Thorn would be a monkey-wrench in those plans, force them to immediate action, remove high profile players from the equation—all in all, ensure they were reactive rather than proactive and therein make their orderly evil a lot more chaotic.

At the same time, though, it was a suicide mission. No matter how many times she thought it through, no matter how many angles and approaches and caveats she brought into consideration, she couldn't get past the fact that Angel was essentially instigating the apocalypse because doing it now would be less convenient for the people who actually wanted the world to end. That he was essentially conceding that the apocalypse had to happen at some point, and maybe it did, but the best way forward was to be a cog in the wheel rather than try to dismantle the cart itself.

At some point, he had become very nihilistic. Or maybe that was just him—the Angel he'd always been, that she'd been too young and in love to see clearly.

And though it was way past the point of arguing, Buffy felt it weighing on her, the need to say something. To try to appeal to the Angel she'd thought he'd been, discover once and for all if he had ever existed. So, the night before Willow was set to arrive—do her space fold thing dry run and make sure the hotel was thoroughly cleansed of surveillance devices, whether magical or otherwise—Buffy found herself riding up to the penthouse, needing to have this done. Get it off her chest. Then, at least, she could move on with him fully behind her.

"Your guard dog know you're here?" Angel asked once she stepped off the elevator. He was just there when the doors opened. Or not just there—there and missing both shirt and shoes.

Buffy quirked an eyebrow. "Tai chi?"

"I thought it'd help relax me." He turned and presented her with his back, the back she'd once loved, complete with its tattoo. For the first time, she found herself wondering if he'd gotten it before or after he'd been turned.

"I didn't know you even did that anymore," she called after him as he disappeared into the next room, presumably—hopefully—to find clothes.

"Not as often as I'd like." There was a pause, then he reappeared, wearing what looked like a sleepshirt. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to talk."

"So talk."

"Maybe not here? You know..."

From the look on his face, he very much did not know.

"Lion's den thing?" Buffy clarified. "As in that's where you live?"

"I brought in an independent contractor. The place is clean."

"When did you do that?"

"This morning. Spike know you're here?"

Buffy made a sound in the back of her throat. Well, that had been a nice reprieve. "You already asked me that."

"And you didn't answer."

"He's not my guard dog."

"Lap dog, then."

She rolled her eyes. "So you want to be difficult? I didn't come over here to be difficult."

"Then why did you come over? No one asked you to."

"Not sure what I've done to earn the attitude."

"Oh no?" he retorted sharply. "No, you just spied on me for the better part of a year."

"What pisses you off the most? The fact that I spied on you, or that I'm a better spy than you?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Don't play dumb. You've had Wolfram and Hart goons following someone you damn sure thought was me since you took the job. Sorry they suck, but hey, really not my problem."

That at least stole Angel's argument. "Spike told you?"

"Yeah, of course."

"Yeah, of course," he echoed.

"Are we really doing this? You're dating Cordelia, you *have a child*, and you're still gonna be Dawson?" Buffy couldn't help it—she snickered. "I don't know how it happened, I really don't, but somehow, Cordelia has come down with a big ol' case of saint-patience where you're concerned, because you haven't been acting like someone who wants to have a real relationship with her. Is it just that I'm a loose end? Or that I moved on to someone who isn't you?"

He didn't reply, just favored her with his patented Angel glower, the one that told her nothing while also, somehow, telling her a lot. Mainly that there were things he wasn't willing or able to share. It had driven her crazy once; hell, it still drove her crazy, though for reasons a younger version of herself couldn't have conceived. The recognition that there would always be this division, the parts of him that he would keep from her even when doing so had stopped making sense. There was no *them* to fight for, no relationship to salvage—just a path forward, should they choose to take it.

Then, at last, he swallowed and dropped his gaze to the floor. "You're right."

Well, that was a first. "I'm what now?"

"You're right." He worked his throat as though the words were costing him something. "Look, when I came to Sunnydale last year and saw you, it was... It was like going back in time. When I left... There were things I told you. Things I believed, even, about not being able to move on. But then I did move on. I didn't realize I had until it had already happened, and it wasn't like I planned on it. I thought once we were over that my story would stay the same."

She exhaled slowly, willing her tense muscles to relax. Somehow, she'd stumbled into a conversation she'd never thought she'd have with him and given how hot she'd been a moment ago, she didn't know how to feel about the change in tone. "That's stupid."

"I know."

"But I believed it, too. Because you told me you couldn't move on. So I guess we were both stupid."

Angel nodded slightly, still not looking up. "It *was* like being back in time, though. Seeing you. Remembering what it had been like before I'd lost...everything. When the most I'd lost was you, and that somehow didn't kill me. But I'd just lost Cordelia for the second time—lost her and didn't know if I'd ever get a chance to make things right. And my son... I'd given him up. It was the right call, it was what he needed, but I couldn't even mourn him because the others didn't remember that he existed."

"I guess this is not the time to tell you just how fucked up it is to remove someone's memories like that, right?"

"It was the *right* call."

"For him, maybe. For everyone else?" Buffy crossed her

arms, ready when he raised his eyes to glare anew at her. "Look, maybe I'm too close to this, but as someone who has frequently had her memory screwed with because someone wanted a quick fix with no arguments, I can't help but think it's a copout. A really shitty copout. You're stealing pieces of people's lives, deciding what experiences get to shape them and editing out the ones that are inconvenient for you. And there was a lot of bad, too. Are you going to tell me that just because Wes's new history has no instances of kidnapping, you look at him as anyone other than the guy who stole your son from you?"

"You're the second person to ask me that."

"And how did you answer the first time?"

Probably the way he did now—by not answering. Instead, he looked away again, his features tense. "This isn't about Connor. I'm not asking you to understand why I did what I did."

"Yeah, 'cause we'd be talking until the next apocalypse."

"The point is, when I saw you, I couldn't help but think you were it. The reason the fight still mattered to me, after all I lost. So, when I learned you and Spike were..." He gestured, wrinkling his nose. "When you told me to get lost because you already had a Champion waiting for you at home, yeah, it hit me hard. You... You'd never told me to leave before."

No, she hadn't. For all the distance she'd tried to forge, back when she'd been trying to stay away from him, she hadn't asked him for anything. Just told him she wouldn't be around anymore. The decision to stay in her periphery, in her life anywhere, had always been his. "I'm sorry that was hard for you."

He must have heard the edge in her voice, for he narrowed his eyes. "I mean it, Buffy."

"I know you do," she replied in the same tone. "But I'm not going to get all swoony over the fact that I was your safety school."

"That's not—"

"Or your consolation prize after you lost the things that really mattered to you."

"You aren't a consolation prize."

"You're right, I'm not. But you've treated me like one, Angel. You lost Cordelia and then you swooped in and kissed me, like, immediately after?"

"Hey, it takes two people to kiss, you know. You kissed me too."

"I know," she shot back, her face heating. "I mean, it doesn't technically take two people to kiss, that's stupid, but not as stupid as the fact that I *did* kiss you. I did, and I regretted it every day for almost a year. I only stopped regretting it once Spike told me he knew who I was and that he was tired of waiting for me to tell him, myself."

It was subtle, but she didn't miss the slight lessening of tension in Angel's shoulders. "You *didn't* tell him?"

"No." She shifted her weight between feet. "I didn't. He figured it out on his own. Just decided that I must have had a good reason not to loop him in, which I didn't, except more being-a-coward stuff." And the fact that she had still been working through the accusation that Sunnydale might have been spared if she hadn't been so focused elsewhere, but Buffy *so* didn't want to get into that. The last thing she needed was Angel chiming in with just how right everyone was. "I was a fraidy Buffy with Spike, and that could've cost me everything. But I also know that. I'm done making excuses or trying to justify myself. I'm done with all of it."

Nothing for a moment—a thick, heavy nothing. Just Angel

staring at her and her staring right back, feeling, perhaps for the first time, like she was seeing him plainly. Like maybe they were on equal footing at last.

"Is that why you came here?" he asked finally. "Get that off your chest?"

"No. That was just a bonus."

"Then please—"

"Angel, whatever happens with this fight..." Buffy sucked in her cheeks and looked away, but only briefly. "Maybe it was inevitable, but we don't know that. We'll never know that because you made decisions without talking to the people who look to you. You sprang this apocalypse on them with zero warning."

"And I've already explained why I did that."

"You explained why you thought it was the only way forward, and it's the same as it always is. Angel knows best. Angel decides. Angel goes on a one-man crusade. Whether it's dumping me because you had an idea in your head of what sort of life I deserved—"

"So now you're mad about that too? What about your great new boyfriend?"

Buffy snapped her mouth shut, anger turning her blood hot, but dammit, she refused to blow a gasket just yet. "You were right to leave," she said through gritted teeth, "because you didn't love me enough to stay and try."

"How can you say that?"

"It's the truth, which helps."

"I—"

"And it's also not the point."

"Well, make it the point. Call me curious." He folded his arms, glaring at her as though he had the right. "Tell me how I

didn't love you enough. Explain how walking away wasn't the hardest thing I'd done. I'm all ears."

Once again, Buffy found herself wondering if he'd always been this infuriating or if it was something that had developed over time because seriously, there was a very real possibility she was going to stake him before she left. But fine, if he really wanted to know how much she had worked out over the last year—how much she'd *learned*—then she'd tell all. Make sure he regretted asking.

"Well, for starters, you said I needed someone normal when normal is the one thing I can't have, ever. You told me that and you had me believing it so much that I tried. I really tried with Riley, who found me so mysterious and closed off that he started getting suck jobs from vampires because they needed him more than I did."

Angel rolled his eyes. "Oh, I see. You tried once and it didn't work, so therefore it was bad advice. Couldn't be that you picked the wrong guy. Nope. Must be that you're better off with vampires."

"I'm better off with someone who understands—who *loves* all the parts of me," she spat. "Someone who gets that they sometimes, maybe even most of the time, have to come second. That I have this...this darkness in me and they can't expect me to hide it. Maybe it would've worked with someone else—maybe not. But one of the reasons it does work with Spike is he understands slayers. He understands *me* the way no one else has ever even tried. Yes, even more than you. You *didn't* understand that I need someone who would see me at my worst and love me anyway. Who is a part of the Slayer part of my life, or at the very least gets that it's not a choice for me. It's not a decision I make. It's a piece of who I am. An important piece. I need someone

who will listen and not railroad me with decisions and assumptions that they know better, that I'm too silly, too emotional, too short-sighted to know what's best for me. Who will be honest about why they're doing what they're doing and not dress it up like it's anything other than a decision they made by themselves."

"So Spike was honest about the reason he sought his soul, was he? That was entirely selfless, not at all because he hoped you'd swoon? You expect me to believe that?"

She dropped her arms to her sides, balled her hands into fists. "He never asked anything of me. Not once. It's something he did to himself—not something he did to me. Unlike the brilliant relationship advice you gave me when you left, and unlike Riley bending over backwards to blame me for his decisions, Spike's call was something that affected *him*. Just him. He gave me the choice of being a part of it or walking away. He *offered* to leave and listened when I told him to stay. He believed me, trusted that I knew what was best for me."

"And the fact that it happened to be what he wanted, too, didn't play a part of that, I'm sure."

"Angel, you have zero right. And you're just proving my point. The fact is he tried. Every reason you ever gave me—can't have sex, can't go in the sun, can't be a freak dating a vampire—is something you had the choice to change, and you didn't." Buffy released a shaky breath, trying not to feel too vindicated at the way his expression fell. Trying and failing because, well, she'd been sitting on this for a moment now. "Yeah. I know about the day you rewound."

Angel just stared at her, somehow paler than before. "How?" Then he swallowed. "Cordelia?"

"Cordelia."

"I don't... I don't remember telling her."

“Well, someone did,” Buffy muttered. Then shook her head. “And it doesn’t even matter. It’s just more of what I was saying—decisions you made by yourself. Things you did on your own. I don’t remember what happened the day you took back, but I know *me* enough to know that you being human wouldn’t have mattered to me, as stupid in love with you as I was then.” She breathed out again, starting to approach something like calm. “You’re so convinced you’re right that you trample over everyone in your life to get your way. And the people you have are worth keeping. They won’t always be there if you keep treating them like an afterthought.”

He blinked, and for a moment, it seemed that blink might be the only reply he had. One blink and then a return to the same pure, Angel-brand stoicism that had tormented her throughout high school. The mask he kept in place to keep her ignorant of what was going on behind the eyes. *Thoughts cast no reflection* or whatever other bullshit. But then he glanced down and tightened his jaw, and maybe that wasn’t one of the more obvious tells but it was one Buffy immediately recognized. Which in itself was surprising, as the Angel in her memory hadn’t been expressive when it came to anger and frustration; the one she’d gotten to know over the last year was a different story. Or maybe she was just better at reading him than she had been then. A superpower she would have killed for at age sixteen almost entirely wasted on her now.

“Is there anything else?” he asked in a tone that managed to be exhausted, defeated, and defiant all in one. “I know... I’m not an idiot, Buffy. I know Cordelia is here because you saved her life. And Fred is here because Cordelia was here. And I am grateful for that, truly. But it could’ve happened another way. Everything you’ve said... I can’t help but think

you chose the deception route because you were mad at me. Felt you needed to get back at me for something. And the way you acted as Randi—”

“I acted just like me as Randi,” Buffy replied coolly. “Maybe the issue is you don’t know *Buffy* as well as you think you do. But hey, Giles will be happy to know someone agrees with him. It’s just so strange how it seemed to happen with both of you after I stopped trusting you had all the answers.”

“No. That... *Randi* wasn’t the Buffy I know.”

“And I believe I just explained why.” She blew out a breath to center herself, refocus. As therapeutic as it was, getting all this off her chest and out in the open, it truly hadn’t been why she’d decided she needed to stop by, and she was in danger of maxing out his willingness to listen. If that willingness existed, anyway. “Look... I actually had a reason for coming over here, and it wasn’t to litigate the past.”

“Really? Could’ve fooled me.”

“It’s this plan. I need to know, after it’s over, that I don’t need to worry about you doing something this...careless again.”

“Great. Now I’m careless. I’ll add that to the other things you’ve accused me of being tonight.”

“Well, Angel, it *is* careless. You know Wolfram and Hart has an apocalypse in the works and your answer is to speed it up?”

“I had that vision for a reason.”

“And you know *this* is the reason how?”

“I just do. It felt right.”

“Like everything else you’ve done that’s felt right, I’m sure. Never mind that it might end the world.”

He rolled his eyes again. “We don’t know what will happen.”

"I know what you think will happen because you told me, and it sounded a lot like scorched earth."

"Look, if the apocalypse is coming no matter what we do, then it makes sense to try to control it," he snapped. "I know you think you understand Wolfram and Hart because you've been playing dress-up these last few months, but you don't. I've tried to take them on, and I learned there is no *getting rid* of them. It's not like Wilkins or the Master—or even the one that you died to stop. Wolfram and Hart is the reason those things exist. You can't just wipe them out and move on. They'll always be. *Always*."

"First of all, that's stupid," Buffy fired back.

"It's what?"

"Stupid. Wolfram and Hart is the reason evil exists? I heard that fight all last year from a source way more credentialed. Second of all." She drew in a breath. "Even if they are always there, I'll always be there, too. Ready to shove them back where they belong, and I won't be alone. Evil might always exist, but so will good. People who are willing to fight rather than throw up their hands and say, 'Well, if you can't beat 'em.'"

"That's *not* what I'm doing. I'm taking the power back from them."

"And I'm sure that makes you feel big and important," she retorted, "but sorry if I don't see the advantage of rushing to get a bunch of people killed. Yeah, Wolfram and Hart might have an apocalypse in the works, and yeah, maybe eventually one of theirs will take, but I'd rather die knowing I'd done everything I could to stop it than die knowing I'd sped everything up."

"Well, if the world ends as a result of what we're doing, you have my permission to rub my face in it."

"I'm not worried about what happens if the world ends. I'm worried about what happens when it doesn't," Buffy said. "I'm worried about the next time you decide it's worth it to risk the apocalypse so long as you have all the cards. Because, Angel, if it comes to that, I will not hesitate to send you back to hell and make sure you stay there."

He gave a short, dismissive snort. An "I don't believe you" snort. A "you're being dramatic" snort. But she wasn't, and that was what scared her. What had driven her to come here in the first place—the itch beneath her skin, the sense of disquiet she'd been wrestling with since Angel had shared his plan. The thought that this might not be the last time Angel rushed them into a fight no one had asked for, one that could determine if the world kept spinning, and all with practically zero time to prepare.

And if it wasn't the last time, what she intended to do about it. Let Angel keep instigating the apocalypse to stick it to an entity that was never going to be defeated, just with the hope of destabilizing them enough to score a quick win, or step in and do what she had been Chosen to do.

There was no question. If asked to kill Angel again in order to save the world, she wouldn't hesitate. She would resent it, but it wouldn't be nearly as hard as it had been the first time.

"Wait," Angel said a moment later, the jeer on his face fading. "You're serious."

"I would say *as a heart-attack*, but—"

"Buffy, this is insane. We're on the same side."

"I'm not on any side that starts an apocalypse."

"Again, we don't know—"

"No, we don't. But it could. And I'm not talking in an abstract 'I could be struck by lightning' way—I mean very real

consequences to events you set in action. I mean that if I were to place a bet on the odds of *apocalypse: yes or no*, the smart money would be on *yes*.” Buffy blinked, waited, though she knew nothing was coming. He wasn’t stupid enough to argue with her. “So yeah, Angel. We’ll do your plan because we have no choice *but* to do your plan, but the next time? It’s my job to put down those who threaten the world. If you don’t want to be enemies, don’t be on that list.”

Once more, silence answered her, and once more, she knew better than to wait around for him to break it. That was another thing about growing up—you learned not only to identify impasses, but when to walk away from them.

Or in this case, from *him*. All she could do was hope that some of what she’d said had gotten through, otherwise the next time might not be so pleasant.

For now, though, she’d apply her focus on getting to the next time. She could worry about the future all she liked once the world didn’t end.

TILL YOU'VE DROWNED IN THE
LIGHT, IN THE SOUND

NEARLY TEN YEARS AND HOWEVER-MANY APOCALYPSES under her belt, Buffy had become accustomed to a sense of anticlimax in the aftermath of world save-age. There was the immediate endorphin rush, the brain alerting the body that they had won and all systems could stand down, no need to remain on edge, keep the adrenaline pumping so she'd be able to face whatever catastrophe came next. The deeper knowledge—the sort that felt settled and real—typically didn't come until a few days had passed. And even then, only if she didn't need to steal away for a summer, bury her trauma in shoe shopping or waitressing or trying to get over the guy who had stolen the big bad's thunder by dumping her at the eleventh hour. If there wasn't a best friend heading to magical rehab; if she wasn't staring down the ominous stretch that was the rest of her life knowing someone she loved hadn't believed her when she'd told them she did. Trying to move on with a heartful of missed opportunities and more than that.

Put like that, and most of Buffy's post-apocalypse celebra-

tions had come with caveats and mountain-sized asterisks.

This time would be different, she promised herself. Promised Spike as well, when she'd gotten home, both before and after the frantic last-night-on-earth lovemaking. Bombarding the quiet with as many confessions as she could, determined and desperate that should things not go their way, should she find herself once more in a world without him in it, that she'd at least know that he'd known.

That was what she'd done rather than sleep. Not that Buffy could sleep, tense as she was. If these were the last moments, then she wanted to be awake for them. Fill them as much as she could. A lifetime's worth packed into a few stolen hours. And every time she tried to say this, he would kiss her, roll her onto her back or onto his front and distract her with pretty words spoken between his pretty lips while he did pretty much anything in his power to drive her out of her mind. And she was fine with that because it worked until it didn't, until the darkness began to deepen into light, hints of day finally breaking over the horizon, pressing against the blinds of her room. The last day either of them might live, following the last night they had shared together.

And Buffy wanted to burrow herself deep inside of him, rewind time or speed it up—whichever option gave her more of this. Whichever end of her life had Spike in it.

"I'm not ready," she whispered. "I'm not ready for it to be morning."

"Quickest way to get to tomorrow, though."

"Stop being all wisdomous."

He pressed his lips to her brow, chuckling, the vibrations a pleasant tickle. "Wisdomous?"

"Stop making fun of my English."

"I will when it starts being English."

Buffy lifted her head so he could enjoy the full impact of her scowl, but managed to abstain from sticking out her tongue, as she'd learned he just took that as an invitation. And as much as she'd love to let him whisk her away again to the place where she couldn't hear her thoughts, she knew she couldn't. It wasn't their time anymore—it was the world's time.

"Is there anything I haven't said?" she asked instead, blinking rapidly against the rising sting. "Anything you need to hear that you're not sure of before we do this?"

She was surprised when he didn't immediately reply. Surprised and pleased, for it seemed like he was actually considering the question, not just dismissing it as a given. As much as what was riding on the next few hours, she needed this. Needed certainty for the things in her life that were very uncertain. That certainty was what she would rely upon in the days and weeks that followed. No stone unturned. No repeats of past mistakes.

Finally, though, he parted his lips. "What you're looking for is the answer to this. 'For of all sad words of tongue or pen,'" Spike whispered into her hair, squeezing her to him. "'The saddest are these: 'It might have been.' And we beat that, didn't we, love? This time around, we beat it.'"

Buffy tried to ignore the funny spasm in her heart, or the way the words landed—somehow making her feel sad and lonely despite the fact that he was right. They had beaten it, and she had her *might have been* wrapped around her to prove it. Had, in fact, all night, and everything she was experiencing now was in service of outrunning a feeling. Filling the hollow cold that had overshadowed the thrill of victory there at the edge of the crater, then later in Los Angeles as she'd watched as the ashes from their shared flame trickle into the sink

before disappearing forever. Not realizing, in her haste, just what she'd scrubbed off her skin—not just the remnants of battle but the remnants of him. The only bit of him she'd had left.

It was that thought, that memory, that made sleep impossible. That *might have been*.

"You believe me," she whispered back, suddenly desperate. Suddenly a lot of things. "If things don't go our way, if I lose you again, tell me you believe me."

Spike tightened his arms around her. "I believe you, love."

"But I don't want the *might have been*. I want what comes after. I want... I want *us*."

"And you think I don't?"

"I think if I get to the end of the apocalypse and you've gone and died on me again, I'm going to be very cranky."

His lips curved into a smile. "Have plenty to live for, don't I?"

And this time she had a response at the ready, there and scratching at her throat, all the things she could remember feeling a year ago before they'd gone into battle, all the things she could remember feeling when the dust had settled. First at the edge of that crater, then at the sink, and the anticlimax. The *knowing* that the world was different, changed, that nothing would ever be as it had been, and that all the afters she'd considered had had Spike in them. How somehow she hadn't thought it possible to get to the other side without him on her left, because Spike just never went away. Never. He said he would, he even tried, but he always made his way back to her. Except he wouldn't this time, because Sunnydale was gone, and she actually wanted him.

That was it. She'd hated him and told him to leave and never come back, and every time he'd come back, she'd rolled

her eyes, resented it. Or not resented it, but not *not* resented it. Not embraced it. Not had a clear picture of who he was to her and what she wanted him to be, just a collage of confusion, bitterness, hurt, and that messy, tangled love she'd spent months trying to rationalize, only to finally give up because sometimes love wasn't rational. Sometimes it simply was.

Her life just happened to thrive on ironic timing. Such as knowing exactly how she felt when it was exactly too late. Having the words and the feelings and no one to share them with. Nothing but a memory. Understanding finally that her love for Spike *was* rational, perhaps the most rational love she'd ever fallen into, and the only reason it had seemed complicated were the barriers left behind by people who hadn't gotten her in the first place.

Spike had plenty to live for now, but he hadn't the night before Sunnydale had fallen. He hadn't inside the cavern where she'd taken his hand and the power that was them, somehow, had set them ablaze.

And Buffy? She'd lost him before, when she'd believed it impossible to lose him. It didn't matter that he'd come back—in fact, *that* he had come back scared her even more. The odds of that happening a second time were beyond abysmal, and it seemed possible, didn't it? With her track record for ironic timing—the soap opera logic that seemed to govern her life. Anytime something seemed to go her way, that was precisely when *everything* fell apart.

As though hearing the thought, Spike slipped a hand under her chin, guiding her head up so he could catch her eyes. “No bloody *might have beens*,” he whispered. “We’re gettin’ through tomorrow, the both of us.”

Her throat went tight, but she nodded all the same. “All right.”

“And you better believe I’ll hold you to that, Slayer. You go out, I’m just gonna follow. Find you wherever you are and remind you that you made me a promise.” He grinned softly, his fingers slipping up her face, over her cheek. “That’s my idea of Heaven, anyway.”

Her vision went blurry, and she moved to capture his lips, and he responded the way she’d known he would. All passion and heart, all of him ready for all of her, and for the moment, at least, she found herself trusting. Believing there would be an after, that whatever apocalypse Wolfram and Hart threw at them in retaliation was the sort both she and Spike could survive, because yeah, they’d gone into final fights before—too many to count—but never like this. And maybe that belief was what it took for those wins to feel real, less anticlimactic. For her body to settle and accept that it was over and, at last, she could rest.

At the same time, it seemed dangerous to let herself hold onto that feeling. Optimism could be a jinx.

So, as the sun chased away the last vestiges of inky night, Buffy forced the feeling aside. It was time to get out of bed, anyway. Start preparing for the fight that would decide if there was a tomorrow. At least she and Spike would have the first part of the day together, as the member of the Black Thorn that Spike was taking out wasn’t accessible until the sun had completed its journey across the sky, and plenty to get ready in the meantime.

Miles to go before they didn’t die.



AS IT TURNED OUT, Buffy hadn’t done a great job of preparing, either. She just didn’t know that until the knock

came just before sunset.

"Coming," she called, securing the sash around her robe and finger-combing her wet hair, her mind fast-forwarding through a library of potential scenarios waiting on the other side of the door. One of the legal teams from Wolfram and Hart, a band of demons sent to take her out, Cordelia on the tail end of another vision that would undo the flimsy ass plans they were relying on getting them to the other side, Angel determined to have another argument—literally anything except who it turned out to be.

"Willow," Buffy said, not bothering to hide her surprise. Indeed, her best friend of eight years was somehow on her doorstep, completely drenched from head-to-toe, her arms crossed as though she could bottle warmth. "I don't... What are you doing here? What happened?"

"Accident," Willow said, bouncing from one foot to the other. "I only had pictures to go by so the visualization part of the space fold was a little iffy." She peered over Buffy's shoulder. "Can I come in? Kinda making a puddle here."

"And you want to make one inside." But that was stupid. Wasn't like she was even going to stay in this apartment after the fight, anyway. "Sure. Come on in. Spike's still in the shower. I'll go grab you a towel and make sure he knows not to strut out here with his boy parts flopping around."

Willow went a bit red in the cheeks and let out a laugh that only sounded a little forced. "So you two are...?"

Buffy paused long enough to throw her a look. "Yeah. We are. I didn't think it was a secret."

"It's not," Willow said in a rush. "Not a secret. Just... before with all the Spike stuff, you were kinda...under the radar. I'm not used to you being, you know, over the radar."

"Things are different." And they hadn't been in the same

room in nearly a year, which made this all the more awkward. Hell, more than a year since she and Willow had been the kind of friends who talked about their relationships with each other. The last time they'd dished about boys had been about Riley, and even then only barely, as Willow had been in the midst of discovering stuff about herself that she hadn't felt comfortable broadcasting. "After everything we've been through, we just... We want to try. To be an actual couple, that is. We never had that."

"That's good! I mean not that you never had that, but that you have that now." Willow's smile was watery but sincere, which helped dispel some of the more nervy nerves Buffy hadn't even realized had started crowding her stomach until they calmed. "Look, Buffy, there's a lot of stuff I want to say and I know this isn't a great time, and not only because I'm dripping all over your floor, but after the fight, can we...talk?"

Her throat tightened. Willow was right—there *was* a lot, and now was not the time to get into it, but Buffy had been living in a world boxed off from her own. She didn't know when she'd started writing off the relationships that had once defined, sustained, and saved her life, only that she had. And it was now that she realized just how much her own conclusions had been weighing on her. "Yeah. I'd like that. After the apocalypse."

"And after you tell Spike not to come out here with his, uh, *s-p-i-k-e* on display."

Buffy grinned. "I'll make sure he's decent."

"You can do that? Color me shocked."

"Well, decent enough for people," she amended quickly. "Don't expect miracles."

It wasn't until she returned with a towel and assurances of no male nudity that Buffy learned why Willow was sopping

wet. She'd already been planning on making the global hopscotch, as per the established plan, but had decided to start by checking in with Buffy to make sure they were same page-y, since they hadn't done much of the talking thing all year and it felt weird just meeting at the Hyperion like soldiers rather than catching up like friends. So instead of telewhatevering directly there, Willow had done the visualization for this place instead...and being that visualizing places you had never seen firsthand was kind of iffy, she'd managed to land in one of the neighbor's showers, unfortunately while said neighbor was in it. How Buffy hadn't heard the ensuing racket was almost miraculous...or would have been had she not also just come from the shower after enjoying some last minute good touchies. If she'd given into Spike's whispered pleas that she let him tongue her to orgasm again, Willow might have found herself stranded in the hallway.

As it was, the shock of Willow's arrival effectively ended Buffy's desperate pre-battle moment-gathering, shoving her head-first into fight mode. And that was okay, she told herself—the moments she had gathered, while she would always want more, were precious. The sort that could never compete with the lifetime she hoped to get but would keep her warm on the nights she needed warmth the most. Spike seemed to sense it, too. He stomped out of the bedroom a few minutes later, wet curls plastered to his head, gave Willow a quick nod then pulled Buffy to him for one last desperate kiss before they met at the end of the world.

"We're making it," he murmured against her lips. "The pair of us. We'll both go out fighting one of these days, but not tonight, you hear me?"

She nodded. "I hear you."

He grinned and kissed her again. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

"And that's why we're making it out. Not about to miss what life with you's gonna be like, and I'm sure as hell not gonna let you welsh on me."

"No welshing. You're the welsher."

Spike shook his head, cupped her cheek, and pressed his brow to hers. "Not this time. Let someone else play martyr, yeah?"

"Sounds good."

He pulled back enough that his face solidified once more, the blurry lines smoothing into the familiar curves and edges. "I'll see you," he promised at last, stole a final *final* kiss, then tore away from her as though her skin was doused in holy water. And she understood, too—any more dragging it out and he might never leave.

In many ways, it was easier going into these battles when you didn't know what losing might cost you. Buffy liked to think she wouldn't feel this uneasy if it weren't for the accelerated timeline, Angel's recklessness forcing them into action with a mere concept of a plan rather than an actual plan. It wasn't like she hadn't pulled off more with less, but with everything in play completely out of her control—the bad guy not even fully defined, rather a nebulous, volatile conglomerate—nothing felt certain, and everything felt fragile.

But she'd go forward, the memory of Spike's kiss on her lips, his promise in her ears and heart, and hope to god she got to make him pony up at the end of it.



THE SECOND SPACE FOLD, by all accounts, went off splendidly. At the very least, it opened in the right spot, and the right people stepped through.

Buffy hadn't known what she expected when Willow had first described what she was doing, except that she had kept the visualization of a folded map just because that was easier to understand than the complex magicks at work. In action, the actual fold looked less like a fold than a circle of static, or one of those tunnels painted on the side of a mountain by a hungry coyote hoping to fool its dinner into colliding head-first with rock. Only there was no mountain, no rock, just the outline against the open air suspended a few inches off the floor of the Hyperion lobby, Willow standing ahead of it with her hands splayed and her hair whipping through magical wind and her eyes apocalypse black.

"Here they come," Willow said in a deep voice that seemed to make the air itself shake.

And she was right—the swirls within the circle started to take form, vague at first and then people-shaped. People with features that at first looked distant and cartoony but rapidly solidified into real and recognizable. By the time Buffy realized the person she was looking at was Faith, the other slayer had stepped all the way through the portal with her familiar smirk and even more familiar swagger, walked straight over to her, and thrown an arm around her neck in a very un-Faithlike hug. So un-Faithlike that Buffy's first thought was to wonder if she was being choked.

"Damn, B," Faith said, a laugh in her voice as she pulled back. "Ain't you unwound yet? Thought your vamp was back from the dead. Did you never teach him how to use his mouth beyond just running it?"

A surprised laugh squeezed through her throat, and Buffy relaxed. "Good to see you, too."

"Hey, I might actually believe you mean that." Faith favored her with a wicked grin, her eyes alight with that unique blend of mischief and smartass that had pulled Buffy into her orbit all those years ago. "You sure know how to get everyone's attention. Look at all the noise you've been making."

"What can I say? I live for drama," Buffy replied. "And don't take offense to this, but please tell me you're not the whole army that's coming to the rescue?"

"What? I can take 'em." Faith winked as Kennedy materialized in the shimmery magic of Willow's fold. "But I decided to break in the newbies, anyway. Exciting stuff. Every girl remembers her first apocalypse."

"Excuse me, it's the second one for some of us," Kennedy said with every bit of the prissy attitude Buffy had spent the last year not missing. Something her face must have broadcast, for Kennedy narrowed her eyes and greeted her with a clipped, "Summers."

"Hey, Kennedy," Buffy replied in her best gracious voice. Not that it did much beyond make her feel like the bigger person, but sometimes that was enough.

"Seriously, B, you did good," Faith went on as though to make up for her travel companion's lack of pomp and circumstance. "Would it kill you to fall on your ass once in a while?"

"I can start now, if you like."

"Nah. Save it for after the fight. I like my odds of getting to the other side more if you're throwing down with the rest of us."

Buffy snickered an agreement, though she didn't have time to do more than that before the space fold gave a staticky

crackle as though in warning, and then the Hyperion's lobby started filling in earnest. The next faces through were familiar—the girls who had fought and survived Sunnydale, along with Giles, Xander, and Andrew, then, well, a lot more she didn't know. God, *so many* she didn't know. Some who looked at her with guarded wonder, others with open disdain, and some who plainly had no idea who she was or why they should care.

And more, still. Once the slayer entourage trickled out, Willow said it was time for the magical arm of the assembled forces—those practitioners she had spent the last year working with, some human and some noticeably very not. All walking through this mystical tunnel thing as though it weren't a big deal at all. As though this was the sort of stuff they did on the regular. And holy crap, Buffy had expected people she didn't know, but not in these numbers. Not so many that the din in the hotel became so overwhelming it was hard to hear her own stupid thoughts, and still more were coming. More surprises, too, like Oz—their Oz—following the witchy horde with a pack of what she assumed were werewolves at his back, his smile reliably stoic and his eyes warm and his, “Hey, Buffy,” unheard over the noise.

“How did you do this?” Buffy asked, not bothering to hide how hard her voice was shaking. It wasn't like she'd be heard over the ruckus anyway.

“What?” Xander appeared at her side, goofy smile at the ready, his face much more rugged than she remembered and complete with a five o'clock shadow that surprisingly looked really good on him. “You think we've just been sitting on our tushies the last few months? Come on, Buff. Where's the trust?”

“It was actually Andrew's idea,” Faith said, coming to

stand on her other side. “Don’t much like giving the little twerp credit if I can help it, but once he brought Dana back, it was like someone lit a fire under that boy’s ass. Wouldn’t know anything about that, would you, B?”

Buffy blinked, a hard, incredulous laugh riding off her lips. “Andrew did this?”

“Well, we all did it,” Xander said. “But yeah, Andrew said something about it being time for us to stop going at stuff solo, and behold, people were contacted. Willow made a phone tree and everything. Started reaching out to anyone we knew who might be interested, and, well...” He waved vaguely around the room. “This happened.”

This being more than just slayers. *This* being witches and werewolves and warlocks and more. Buffy shook her head in absence of anything else to say. People were so good at exiting her life, she’d gotten used to the idea of them being gone for good once gone at all. Even those who returned had a way of not sticking around for long, and then not keeping in touch once they left. She glanced over at Oz, who was stroking Willow’s back with quiet, Oz-like encouragement as she continued to do whatever it was that was keeping that portal open, and Buffy’s heart gave a pang of something that wasn’t nostalgia but close.

Here they all were. Somehow, inexplicably, her first family had come home.

And surprises just kept piling on, for someone else was stepping through the portal now. Someone she wouldn’t have expected...maybe ever. Especially after everything. But there he was, the last of her exes, striding toward her with a smile that said plainly half of the reason he’d come was to catch the look on her face.

“Riley,” she said, blinking hard. “I... I don’t understand,

what are you doing here?"

Riley shrugged his commando shrug, turned and nodded at the new shapes materializing in the portal. More Riley-like shapes, complete with camo and weapons that looked like something out of a science fiction movie. "Xander called, said there was going to be an apocalypse. That's the kind of thing we want to know about."

"Xander just...called you? He knew how to do that? I thought all his military knowledge had finally been tapped."

"Military, yeah," Xander agreed, nudging her shoulder with his own. "But I'm pretty sure I've told you that my mind is a steel trap for spy movies and stuff. Just turns out the paranormal branch of the US military isn't that inventive. It didn't take me long to track him and the missus down. And once I let him know what was going on, well..."

"We thought we could be of use," Sam Finn said, stopping at her husband's side. "Plus, apocalypse? I've never gotten to see one of those."

Buffy forced a smile she hoped was serviceable, all the while trying to stifle a sudden surge of very familiar annoyance. The last time she had seen Sam Finn, she'd been too intimidated and jealous and self-conscious about her own miserable life to really take a measure of the woman independent of those thoughts. And while now was not the ideal time to make up for it, she couldn't help but flash back to the frustration she'd experienced when she and Riley had first started dating. How his unbridled enthusiasm for demon hunting had rubbed her the wrong way, knowing what she knew and having survived what she'd survived. How she'd convinced herself it was a good thing he viewed tangling with demons as an adventure, because maybe that was the breath of fresh air she needed. Something more grounded and reliable than

Faith's devil-may-care approach to slaying, but loosely embracing the same spirit.

It was good, probably, that Sam viewed the potential apocalypse as a thrill ride. Just proved how well suited she was for the man she'd married. And how Buffy had been kind of a moron to ever try to make him fit into her world with how little he truly understood it. Riley would always be a tourist who thought himself fluent in the local language, and that was fine. It just wasn't for her, and it never had been.

Perhaps he'd heard the thought, for Riley's expression shifted from easygoing to that forced casual demeanor he'd never worn all that well, his eyes not quite matching his voice. "Xander tells me you're with ass-face still."

Buffy glanced at Xander, who was suddenly very interested in something way across the lobby—so interested he made himself scarce in chasing it. "*Still* is a bit of a misnomer," she said, returning her attention to her ex. "We spent some time figuring out what we are to each other. I figured it out right around this time last year, but it still took us a bit to get our act together."

"What happened last year?" Sam asked with bright-eyed innocence.

"Apocalypse," Buffy replied, deadpan. "Spike sacrificed himself to save the world."

That seemed to shut Riley up, or at the very least startle him enough that whatever he'd been planning to say next never made it past the thought stage. Instead, he blinked with surprise he wasn't quick enough to hide. "Sacrificed himself?"

"It was his turn," she explained. "To die and come back. But we've made a deal this time around—no dying this apocalypse. We'd actually like to try this dating thing."

"Well," Sam said, her tone still bright, "let's get you to the

finish line, shall we? What's the plan?"

"Right now? Fool a bunch of evil people into thinking Angel killed Cordelia, see how big of a mess this scheme makes, and be ready to beat back the armies of hell. You game?"

"Angel's the other vampire, right?" Sam asked, miraculously without judgment. "Your other, other ex?"

"Yep. Looks like all of Buffy's greatest hits are in one place tonight."

"Well, first impressions being what they are, I think I see why you prefer this Spike over Angel. Men who save the world are so sexy. Much better than the ones who put it in danger." Sam winked and gave Buffy's shoulder a playful jostle that surprised her right out of whatever annoyance lingered. "Let's get you to that date, shall we?"

"Yeah, B!" Faith said loudly, materializing at her right and swinging her arm around her neck all over again. "Think it's time we took this show on the road. Teach these LA motherfuckers that we're not to be fucked with."

"We need to wait for the signal. Angel said everyone's gathering in the alley after they do their...whatever."

"Then I suggest we should be in the alley, too," Willow said, popping in on Buffy's other side. "Be ready for whatever these lawyer people throw at us. After I go make Cordelia look like a corpse."

"Hell yeah." Faith nodded, then looked at Buffy once more, all grins. "Got just the thing for you, too. Been keeping it warm for you."

Buffy opened her mouth to ask, then stopped, her eyes catching on the thing Faith had tried to conceal behind her hip. That flash of silver and red she'd know anywhere, the hum that seemed attuned specifically for her. Reaching out,

calling for her, making every cell in her body stir with a need to close the gap between skin and scythe.

"You're giving it back?" Buffy asked hoarsely.

"Was never mine. Just on loan."

"It belongs to the Slayer. That's you. Or Kennedy. Or anyone else here."

"Yeah, think we all know it's actually you." Faith slipped her other arm free so she could push the scythe into her hands. "You're the reason we're all here, B. For better or worse. What do you say?"

It took a moment to find her voice, to work her throat, to think beyond the words and what they meant—the disparity between the last few months and the last few minutes. Faith at her side, Willow too, and a whole hotel full of people who had gathered here to fight. There was so much more to do, to unpack and understand, to experience and survive, never mind the insecurities and bitterness and all the other noise that had crowded her head these last twelve months. Too much to start addressing now, but hopefully, if all went well, there would be time later. Tomorrow, assuming they made it that far.

So okay. One more battle until the next one. She could do this. There was an other side to reach and a life to live. And god, she was ready to start.

Buffy tightened her grip around the scythe handle, felt its reassuring thrum under her hands, and nodded. "I say we save the world, then we party."

Faith whooped her support and clapped her on the back. Willow grinned and did the same. And it was easy to say—easy to feel—even with the distance between here and the finish line. Even still, Buffy couldn't help the surge, the optimism, poisonous as it was. Possibly devastating.

She just had to get to the end. From there, she'd have a world to finally discover.



WHAT SCARED HER MOST WAS, at the end of the day, the fight was much closer than it should have been. That if she hadn't been there, if Willow and the others hadn't been prepared to meet the apocalypse with an army of their own, that might have been the last call for the world. And how quickly it had happened, with practically no fanfare, all because her ex-boyfriend got it in his head that the only way to win was to control when they lost.

No, scratch that. Her ex-boyfriend was what scared her the most. Even after they had cleared the field, beaten back hell itself before it could spread beyond that strip of street outside of the Hyperion, Buffy wasn't sure Angel had accepted that they were standing on a battlefield that should never have existed. One that he had created out of a sense of righteousness that not even coming that close to death, to losing everything, had knocked out of him. Because at the end of it, walking through the carnage, stepping over debris that was equal parts man-made and organic, Buffy had caught a glimpse of him talking to Giles. Grinning, proud, gesturing at this feat they had accomplished as though it had been *his* accomplishment. As though he was the one who had pulled off the impossible at the last minute and weren't they all so grateful for his ingenuity.

This wasn't the end of anything where he was concerned. It was, however, the end of everything else.

And she couldn't find Spike. No one could.

Buffy crossed her arms, trying to ignore the trembling in

her legs, trying to keep her mind from wandering down the paths it knew so well, to beat back the sick certainty that had been growing from the second she'd lost sight of him. He'd been there, roaring and launching himself into the fray the way he always did, all fangs and punches and fierce strength, and she'd looked away for a blip, a blink, and when she'd turned back, he'd vanished on her. No dust in the air that she could see; she could barely see anything in the downpour as it was. The demon he'd been fighting had been strewn across the pavement, its insides leaking out of its outsides, but Spike gone. His roar, his voice, that tingle of his presence she'd made her lifeline—all gone.

She hadn't been able to stop then. Hadn't been able to look. Had just borne it the way she bore everything else and told herself to wait. Get to the end of the fight. Talk to the others, see if they had seen what had happened. Find him once the world was saved. Make sure he knew he wasn't getting out of his promise that easily.

"Any luck?"

For as noisy as the alley was, it was downright miraculous that the voice had reached her at all. The night was alive with cries and screams, with chatter and sirens and the steady beat of unrelenting rain hitting pavement, but none of that could compete with the sheer will of Cordelia Chase's lungs. If she meant to be heard, she would be heard.

Buffy turned just as Cordelia stopped at her side, panting. "I don't think so. He's..."

But she couldn't say it—couldn't let the words be true. The certainty might be there, but she didn't need to listen to it yet.

"Look, no one as annoying as Spike is going to die without people noticing," Cordelia said, wiping a hand across her

brow, which did little more than worsen the mess left there by blood, sweat, and dirt. "We'll find him."

Buffy pursed her lips and nodded. At this point, agreeing was the path of least resistance, and she had too much to do still before she got to break. So she'd turn and keep walking until it didn't make sense to go on. Until the certainty was absolute, and she could give herself time to confront what the rest of her already knew.

And then she'd do what she always did—pick up the pieces left behind and reshape them into something else. Think about that morning and the night before, the moments she'd been stockpiling, scant as they were, to sustain her in the long stretch ahead. At least this time he'd known, and she knew he'd known. That was more than she'd had before, which made it everything.

Then the back of her neck tingled.

"Fuck," Buffy breathed out, and the next thing she knew, she was running. Her legs no longer trembling, her body no longer exhausted, just possessed and desperate and running. Running toward that tingle, running with her heart in her throat and Cordelia screaming her name at her back. Running through the rain and debris and the dead, the cacophony of sound rising through the alley reaching a fever pitch, and still running when a storefront on her left exploded in a shower of glass and rolling wet leather wrapped around the man she loved as he pummeled one of the most beautiful demons she'd ever seen. Pus and horns and maybe seven bulging, rolling eyes, its cavernous mouth open and chomping and Spike, oblivious to everything but the fight, reeling back to punch it where its nose ought to be. Not realizing the change of scenery at all, maybe not even that the rest of the fight was over, and everything inside of her threatened to burst anew

because he was there. He was *there*. Alive and kicking and punching and being everything that made him Spike, including his need to make an entrance, the *asshole*.

She knew the moment he sensed her—saw the tension in his shoulders slack and the grin that stretched across his fangy face. “Sorry, mate,” he told the demon, seizing it by the head. “Been fun, but gotta go see about a girl.”

The snap of bone somehow rang out above the cacophony of going celebrations around them, and Buffy was running toward him again, ready to beat his bones to dust for doing that to her, but finding herself wrapped around him instead, her mouth on his mouth, the pressure that had been building and pushing against her ribcage finally cracking, and she hated him and loved him and hated him again with conviction and fluidity she didn’t know how the hell to begin to pull away. To let herself find ground in this world, the one with him in it, with them on both sides of the end, with Spike scaring the crap out of her maybe on purpose, maybe not, but still here, against her lips, her tongue, his fangs and breath and blood and everything else entirely hers.

“What’d I tell ya?” Cordelia said, much closer than she ought to have been, given the distance Buffy had run. “Too annoying to die without anyone noticing.”

Spike pulled back at that, his brow furrowed, and searched her eyes. “Who said anything about dying?” he asked, his demon receding. Yellow back to blue. “Just tidying up, is all.”

“I am going to kick your ass so hard,” Buffy told him, fists wrapped around the lapels of his duster. “So. Hard.”

And ass that he was, he grinned. “God, I hope so,” he said, then was kissing her again before she could snark back.

And, she decided, that was okay.

She had until the end of the world to make him pay.

WHAT A BLESSED RELEASE

IT PROBABLY SAID SOMETHING THAT PACKING UP DIDN'T require much actual packing. Not that she'd come to LA with more than the clothes on her back, but still, Buffy couldn't help but marvel at the three compact boxes she'd managed to fit the last twelve months of her life inside. A slew of outfits, some occult books, the notes detailing everything she had been able to commit to paper about the inner workings of Wolfram and Hart and... That was kind of it. Everything else—the furniture, the wardrobe-full of Randi clothes, the giant whiteboards that she hadn't been able to scrub entirely clean even with super strength—*dry erase my ass*—were either staying behind or scheduled for donation pickup.

Leaving here wouldn't be like leaving Sunnydale, but still, she'd just survived the second consecutive apocalypse that left her uprooted. And once again she was staring down a future that was still taking shape, unsure of where she would land.

Déjà vu ought to have its limits.

“You mean to leave this, Slayer?” Spike asked, appearing in

the hall the next moment, holding up a box of tampons like the spoils of war. "Seems like it could come in mighty useful, unless this means you're finally gonna take me up on my offer."

"What offer is that?" Cordelia asked from where she sat at her customary place on the sofa, not bothering to look up from her magazine. This was her self-professed way of helping pack. Or perhaps staging a sit-in protest. The entire *leaving Los Angeles* item on Buffy's agenda had not received a ton of support. Something about how alpha boss bitches needed to stick together.

Spike looked to Buffy expectantly, and she felt her face color before she could do anything to stop it—skin hot and itchy and *god*, she didn't want to wiggle but now he was grinning like he could read her mind. Like he knew she'd been slingshotted back to that moment last week and wanted to relive it with her.

"Like I'd spill a drop," Spike had whispered that night, looking all sin and seduction between her legs, his hands braced on either thigh, ready to fight her should she get shy on him. "I'll be so careful. Not waste any of this precious commodity."

"Laying it on thick, aren't you?"

"God, I hope so."

Buffy had tried to scoff, tried to roll her eyes, then tried very hard to keep from screaming the second his lips were around her clit and his fingers pulling ever-so-slightly on the string until she was, in Spike's words, a goddess fountain, and he'd busied himself proving that his ideas were the very, very best.

"No," Buffy said now before Spike could get any bright ideas about answering himself, which was of course the exact

wrong way to handle it, as Cordelia had only been half paying attention before but was now all ears. "You say anything nasty and we're not having sex again for... I don't know, a really long time."

Cordelia snorted. "That's what for you guys, an hour?"

"So you don't want me to ask if you're keen to let my tongue do all the absorbing during—"

"Spike!"

"Hate to tell you, buddy, but the faucet never turns off when Aunt Flo's in town," Cordelia added, thoroughly unbothered as only she could be. "You'd end up with a massive case of lockjaw."

"Telling me nothing I don't already know, pidge. Why do you think I keep offering?"

"Cause you're a freak. Which should go without saying, vampire and all, but you manage to take it to new levels." Cordelia lifted her head again, meeting Buffy's eyes this time. "If I didn't love you, I'd hate you, you know that?"

"I've had the same thought once or twice, but what I'd do to earn it this time?"

"Having a guy who wants to be your personal sanitary napkin is *so* not what I'd call a problem. Even being a vampire, Angel gets *so weird* when it's—"

"Hey, how about we don't talk about this?" Buffy said, shooting Spike what she hoped was an appropriately withering look. From the way he seemed to be fighting back some serious giggles, her wither needed more practice. "I cannot stress how much I do not need to know."

"You asked," Cordelia replied, shrugging and tossing her magazine onto the coffee table. The coffee table that was likewise being left behind. "I still can't believe you're letting this place go."

“Well, it’d be a hell of a commute from Cleveland.”

“I also still can’t believe you’re moving to Cleveland.” She affected a theatrical shudder. “You had all the choice in the world, including all of freaking *Europe* and—”

“And nothing has changed since we last had this conversation.”

Cordelia rolled her eyes and waved a hand in a way that was both dismissive and conciliatory. “Just saying.”

Yeah, Cordelia had been *just saying* since Buffy had announced she was moving out of state and taking her vampire with her. And she would likely continue *just saying* until Buffy was on the plane, Ohio-bound. Some might call it nagging, but Buffy knew the better of it, and therefore tried not to let the naysaying hit her like actual naysaying, but rather as Queen C for “I’m going to miss your stupid face.”

It was only fair. Buffy would miss Cordelia’s stupid face, too, though she was intent on returning as often as possible as part of the new post-most-recent-apocalypse paradigm she was set on implementing.

The days following the showdown with the Partners had been spent in varying states of organized chaos, first tending to the wounded and paying respects to the fallen, then trying to negotiate safe passage home for everyone who had shown up for the fight. Over that time, Buffy had caught up with Giles and the others—really caught up, in ways good, bad, and undecided. There was still a lot of healing to do, and a lot of trust to rebuild, but having been proven right yet again had bolstered Buffy with new confidence; the fact that Angel’s team fully had her back but without the litany of questions and second-guessing that normally fed into her decision making had led to some harsh but necessary conversations. For now, Buffy felt she was on the road to finding peace with

what had happened in Sunnydale's last days. It was still a ways off, but she could see journey's end—a place where she might find a balance with the life she'd thought she'd been leading and the one she was actually in, as well as the people who occupied it.

In the short-term, that meant some downtime...or as much downtime as one could be afforded in her line of work. With the Sunnydale hellmouth closed for business, things in Ohio had grown steadily extra demonic. Not yet in apocalypse territory, but the situation could get real bad real fast. Giles had been monitoring it from a distance, in conjunction with the identification and recruitment of slayers in the area, but what made the most sense was someone permanent and seasoned. Someone who understood hellmouths, and someone who wasn't currently tied down in any other role.

And Buffy couldn't say there weren't benefits. One of the initiatives Dawn had championed was a standing salary for all slayers who worked with the new Council, and she'd apparently done it by following Giles around nonstop singing "This is the Song That Never Ends" until he'd relented and said he'd peek at the financials and see if it was feasible.

Turned out it was more than feasible. Like even if nothing changed for the next fifty years and they kept a steady worldwide staff of five hundred, the Council would still not be in danger of going broke. As a result, Buffy had guaranteed salary for life—another of Dawn's stipulations, with back pay for the years she'd spent doing it for free—and a Council-purchased Cleveland house currently being retrofitted with necro-tempered glass to accommodate all soon-to-be occupants. Plus magically reinforced soundproofing because, well, even though Dawn was at the age where she was filling out college applications, the immediate plan was to reunite as a Summers

family unit, Spike included, until she decided what she wanted to do with her life.

Whether Dawn liked it or not.

“I already know what I wanna do!” she’d complained when Buffy had said she couldn’t start working for the Council immediately after high school. It had been a few days after the big battle, Dawn having swooped in like a thunderclap to let everyone know what she thought about being excluded and also how dare Spike not let Dawn know he was alive, even if he had pegged Buffy as Buffy in, like, five minutes. There had been yelling and tears and hugs and apologies, and then a pizza order—extra anchovies—before the talk had turned to Dawn’s immediate future, with Dawn in full “I should be a watcher, dammit” campaign mode. “And hello, I’m already working for the Council! You’re welcome, by the way!”

“Dawn, if this is what you want to do, then I’m not going to stop you. I am, however, going to require you to get a degree first.”

“You don’t have a degree!”

“Or a choice,” Spike had intervened, dropping onto the couch at Buffy’s side, arm seamlessly fitting around her shoulders. “Big sis’s life was decided for her. She just wants you to have what she didn’t.”

“She doesn’t need to be the Slayer anymore!” Dawn had complained, sounding dangerously whiney. “Hello, kind of the point of the entire slayer spell!”

“You know better than that,” Spike had fired back before Buffy could start to get annoyed. “Come on, Bit. It’s not about *need*. It’s who she is—who she’ll always be. She got that much sussed out. Even if she decided to hit the books, go get some fancy initials after her name, the Slayer’s what’ll always be first for her.”

“Not *first*,” Buffy had protested, her cheeks warming. But even she’d heard the uncertainty in her voice—the concession that it was true. The part of herself she was more or less at peace with, even if she didn’t always love what it meant. “I mean, you guys are more important to me than being the Slayer.”

“No, we’re not,” Spike had said simply. “Because being the Slayer is being *you*, pet. Would’ve reckon the last year would’ve had helped you figure that much. How important it is to be Buffy Summers, and everything that comes with it. It is who you are, the whole sodding package. Nothing’s more important than that.”

She hadn’t had much of an argument there, still relishing the freedom of living inside skin that was entirely her own round the clock, no more worrying about potion refills or whose face she was wearing when someone came knocking on the door. And Dawn had, after some grumbling, agreed that she would give college a shot. An actual shot with actual effort while doing whatever occult stuff she wanted to pursue on the side, so long as it didn’t interfere with her studies. That way she could keep a foot firmly in each world and not have to play a game of catchup once she decided what she wanted to do with her life.

It was the best possible outcome—for Buffy and Spike, who agreed they needed some time together that wasn’t defined by subterfuge or miscommunication to develop their footing as an actual couple; for Dawn, bickering aside; for both Faith and Andrew, who had come into their own over the last year and wanted to maintain the positions they currently held; and for Angel’s team, all of whom had relocated to the Hyperion. All except Cordelia, who refused to leave Phantom Dennis, but was otherwise set to return to the

way things had been before the great law firm takeover. Last Buffy had heard, Angel's son was even kinda sorta reintegrating into his life, something having happened to screw with the memory spell that had reset everyone in the first place. She wasn't sure of the details, and seeing as she and Angel weren't exactly talking buddies these days, she was also not inclined to ask. The only people she was determined to keep in contact with were Cordelia and Lorne, and Lorne was already teasing Buffy with talk about moving to Cleveland with her to open a new karaoke bar, which would obviously be hopping hellmouth clientele. Add in a more reasonable cost of living and it was a no brainer.

"Never happen," Cordelia had said when Buffy told her. "Mr. Star-struck leave the Hollywood Hills? Yeah, hell hasn't frozen over yet."

"That we know of."

"It'll never happen," she'd said again, though not with as much confidence as Buffy would have thought. There had been other stuff on the Angel side of things that Buffy hadn't been privy to, conversations that had been had behind closed doors and, while she didn't know or want the gory details, seemed to have concluded with even more fissures in the team dynamic. What would become of those fissures, Buffy also didn't know, but somehow the thought that Lorne might show up on her Ohio doorstep one night didn't seem too far-fetched.

As though hearing the thought, Cordelia gave a loud, theatrical sigh and rolled to her feet. "I'll say this once," she proclaimed, making a show of looking around the apartment. "I bet I could sweet talk Angel into making sure this place doesn't get snatched up too fast. You know, for when you

inevitably come to your senses and realize that Midwest living is boring, hellmouth or no.”

Spike snickered, still holding onto that box of tampons like it was the spoils of war. “Don’t think either of us are keen to be in Angel’s debt for rot. If Buffy decides she misses sunny LA, we’ll manage on our own.” He shifted his attention to Buffy. “Right?”

“I cannot stress how right,” she agreed, and tried not to feel too bad when Cordelia deflated. It was nice, knowing she would be missed. “We’ll be back on the regular, though. If we’ve learned anything, it’s that I’m not going to let Angel run around unchecked ever again. Really don’t want to do a repeat of the last five years and find out even more... Well, you know.”

Cordelia did know, though she didn’t say anything, and Buffy wasn’t sure what to expect there going forward. If her friend’s relationship with Angel would survive long-term, given everything that had happened on the way. What she *did* know was that Cordelia wanted it to survive, and would fight for it with every ounce of Queen C energy she possessed. But there was a lot to repair, and with all subterfuge unmasked and things reverting to the sort of normal Cordelia remembered, no distractions.

If anyone could pull off figuring a way to make it work with Angel, it was Cordelia Chase.

“Well,” Cordelia said a moment later, plastering on a bright smile, “since you’re determined to proceed with this stupid plan, I better go make sure your surprise bon voyage party is on track. Eight o’clock at the Hyperion. Don’t risk my wrath by being late.”

Buffy considered pointing out that, given it was supposed to be a surprise party, she could always plead plausible denia-

bility, but decided against it. "What's my excuse for dropping by again?"

"I don't give excuses, just commands. Figure something out on your own." Cordelia breezed toward the door as though someone had lit a fire under her ass. Probably trying to avoid getting emotional before it was actually time to get emotional. She did pause before leaving, though, to look over her shoulder, at the apartment again, and at Buffy, who was making her way toward Spike to hopefully reclaim the tampons. "In case I forget to tell you tonight, thank you for going undercover and saving my life and all that jazz. I really owe you."

"No you don't," Buffy replied, but Cordelia shook her head.

"Enjoy me being in your debt. It doesn't happen to many." Cordelia shifted her gaze to Spike, then smirked. "Also enjoy enjoy giving that bed a send-off, but don't be late."

She blew a kiss and disappeared before Buffy could open her mouth and do something like, well, lie and say she and Spike had no plans to have sex. In truth, it was hard for them to keep their hands off each other when they were alone—that fun, exciting *start of a relationship* phase that she honestly never saw entirely going away, because it had taken them so long to get here, death, resurrection, and mistaken identity included. Add to the fact that they hadn't had much time alone since Dawn had swept into town and, yeah, odds were good they were going to give the neighbors one last reason to complain before she officially handed over her keys.

"I guess that's it, then," Buffy said, glancing first around the room, then at the box of tampons. "Also, fork those over please."

Spike snickered and shook his head, stretching out an arm

and putting his slight height advantage to good use. "Finders keepers, I believe as the saying goes. Not even the right time for you."

"It's disturbing how you know that."

"Yeah, right disturbing that I have it down when you smell even better than normal."

"And that's *also* disturbing."

"Pity you fell in love with a vampire, then," he replied, his voice full of challenge, but his eyes—those eyes—shining still with vulnerability she was beginning to doubt would ever ebb. No matter how many mornings they awoke tangled in each other, no matter how many times the words she'd denied them both so long crossed her lips, no matter where the road took them. But they were beyond their *might have been*, and were getting ready to live in the world they had created together, so who knows. Maybe she was wrong. Maybe, after enough time, she'd be able to snuff out the bit of him that doubted.

For now, she'd settle for meeting him where he was. "No more a pity than you falling in love with the Slayer."

Spike tossed the tampons on the table without breaking his gaze from hers, then sauntered forward until the space between them was gone, hooked an arm around her middle and pressed his lips to her brow. "Best fall I ever took," he whispered into her skin. "Brought me here."

"And now it's taking you to Cleveland."

"Imagine we'll have a right time. Bloody hellmouth won't have any idea what hit it."

"What if Cordy's right? What if we hate it?"

He lifted a shoulder. "Don't feature I could ever hate a place where you are."

"You don't know that."

Spike stilled, his expression growing serious—the playful edge gone, the flirtiness as well. The way he got when he needed her to hear him beyond the words. The effortless reassurance he provided with his eyes alone. “I know it,” he told her. “Not a dull moment to be had with you, no matter how hard you try.”

“I try to be dull now?”

“Whenever you try to be anyone other than Buffy? Yeah. Thankfully, you’re bloody awful at it.” He grinned again, soft and sweet, and something in her chest settled that she hadn’t realized was tangled up until that moment.

He was right, of course. As long as she was Buffy, and he was Spike, they could be anywhere and trouble would find them—the sort they liked and the sort they didn’t, and they’d face it all the way they faced everything else.

Side-by-side. Hand-in-hand.

Only this time, truly and finally together.