

AN EDUCATION

HOLLY DENISE



ELYSIAN PUBLISHING

THERE WAS NO GETTING around it. She was going to have to see Spike.

Buffy blew out a breath and dragged her hair out of her eyes, glaring at the final box in the basement as though the upcoming conversation was its fault. Which it was. Kinda. If the damn camcorder had been where it was supposed to be, she wouldn't be in this mess. She wouldn't need to seek out a vampire who had, at last count, chained her up and threatened to feed her to his insane ex unless she confessed to feelings she definitely didn't have.

Had never had, in fact.

Not even as a passing curiosity.

Or a naughty dream.

Or a lot of naughty dreams.

Buffy shoved that thought back where it belonged—in the scrapheap of terrible thoughts no one could ever prove she'd ever thunk—and turned to give the basement one last glower before resigning herself to her fate. Not only would she have to talk to Spike, but she couldn't even be mad at him about it. Not this *it*, at least, because if she was right and he was still in possession of the camcorder, well, that was on her. Her and the class project Walsh had assigned to those students who had been set to move out of Intro to Psych and into the more advanced levels. The fact that Buffy had forgotten all about her homework the second her professor had been skewered by her own creation was not something she could blame on the resident undead.

What are the odds he still has it? a small, hopeful voice whispered. *You gave it to him more than a year ago.*

That was a perfectly valid point. A lot could happen in a year, especially a Buffy Summers year. This last one had given her, among other things, a fourteen-year-old sister out of thin air, a boyfriend who decided he preferred the company of vampires to his slayer girlfriend, a mom who had come seriously way too close flirting with her own mortality, and one defanged mortal enemy who had lost his ever-loving mind. Buffy had no idea how long Spike had been nursing this thing for her, though it seemed unlikely that his feelings had manifested before Adam, considering how happy he'd been to sell them out. Which meant that the second everything Walsh had become of the past for her, he wouldn't have had any incentive to keep Buffy's stuff in pristine condition. Hell, he'd probably sold the damn thing to pay for his cigarettes.

Unfortunately, there was only one way to find out.

Goddamn him.



Buffy had never learned the point of the camcorder project. At the time, she'd thought maybe she would discover the objective through the actual doing of the assignment, or that it would be revealed upon completion. That had been standard Walsh-protocol—give the class marching orders and expect them to form their own conclusions through the course of doing the work. Those conclusions, right or wrong, would be

fodder for future class discussion, a breakdown of what was learned, what wasn't learned, and so on and so forth.

Buffy had had a few theories—theories she'd expected to flesh out when looking over the results, assuming Spike didn't phone it in, which had been a sizeable risk. He'd been her last resort as it was, tapped because he hadn't had the luxury of saying no while simultaneously expecting to remain a rent-free tenant of Scooby safehouses. By the time he'd moved into his own crypt, the mystery surrounding the Initiative had been resolved and, while he had still relied on Buffy's good graces whenever cornered, he'd also learned he could hit other demons and wasn't as helpless as he'd feared. That had come at the cost of her leverage but again, Walsh had been dead, and the project shelved into the realm of forgotten things. Buffy had had bigger, Frankenstein-shaped monsters to fry.

So Buffy was more than a little confused when her recon mission to Spike's crypt uncovered that not only had the vampire *not* phoned it in, he'd apparently kept going with it. The notebook she found was almost completely full, and the tapes? Well, maybe they weren't *all those* tapes—maybe some were something more explainable, like porn—but Buffy had grabbed them all without thinking. No time to wonder and be choosy when hoping to avoid the vampire who had enough of a death wish to leave his crypt while the sun was out. That much had been a relief, at least. She'd chosen a daytime visit rather than one after dusk so she'd have a convenient getaway if Spike tried anything, but the place had been blessedly empty when she stepped inside. Even better, because of the snooping she'd done the night Spike had chained her up, she'd known exactly where to go.

Now she was home, having found more than she could comfortably carry back to her house. The camcorder was in good working order, the notebook full of observations that had never had a chance to become a term paper, and all the tapes. Like *all* the tapes. She'd had to fashion a bag out of one of Spike's spare shirts—while also not thinking about how said shirt had, at one time, been on his bare skin, thanks—and even then, had just barely made it with everything else she had to juggle. The thought had been there to, you know, *not* take the tapes—some residual part of her remembering Walsh's instructions that they shouldn't be watched under any circumstances, were just a psychological device to motivate the subject—but Buffy had shelved her misgivings fast. If Spike had actually been doing the assignment the way he'd been instructed, whatever was on those tapes might prove valuable.

Besides, did an evil vampire who had chained her up and tried to coerce her into loving him deserve privacy? No. No, he did not.

Though that wasn't what she'd told him at the time.

"Gotta be less obvious ways to keep tabs on me, Slayer," he'd said.

"There are no tabs. I won't even look at whatever you record."

"Sure, you won't."

"Spike, I cannot stress this enough—I have zero interest in seeing what gross stuff you get up to in your alone time or hearing you wax poetic about the good ol' days when you could rip people's spleens out through their nose. I just need the before and after."

"Through their nose? That would be a right accomplishment."

“Will you be serious?”

“I am serious. I ever manage to do that with a spleen, I’ll do more than wax poetic. I’ll write a bloody ballad to commemorate the occasion.”

Buffy chewed on her bottom lip, studying the tapes she’d scattered on her bedspread. Truly, she hadn’t thought this far ahead when she’d decided to go after the camcorder. She hadn’t expected to find any remnants of the assignment, much less a goldmine of material. The objective at the start of the day had been simple—reclaim her property so she could make one of those obnoxious videos that parents forced upon their children before occasions like homecoming or prom, only with full role reversal as her mom would be the star. Another way she and Dawn could tease her about her upcoming date with the mysterious Brian, this brave venture into possible new relationship territory.

Because new? New was terrifying. Buffy ought to know, since it was something she deliberately didn’t do much of anymore, especially since learning how very versatile *new* was as an adjective. New thrills, new fun, new exciting ways to learn her heart could break. New could be downright terrifying and her mom was embracing it after her *new* lease on life, and that deserved to be celebrated. In many ways, Joyce was a braver woman than Buffy.

Hence the camera and the visit to Spike’s after his declaration. After the *new* shift in their relationship following his *new*, inexplicable feelings. Because Spike had to go and be all *Spike* and do nothing the simple way. Instead, he had to just...vex her.

And because of said vexation, not watching these recordings wasn’t an option, either. So, blowing out a breath, Buffy launched herself to her feet and started down the stairs again. Dawn had gotten a combo television/VCR unit for Christmas—one of those compact units that weighed more than it was worth—after a long campaign of “I never get to watch what I want to watch” that had worn their mother down. Only the television hadn’t hit the spot—it wasn’t hooked up to cable, for one, which limited Dawn’s watching ability to fuzzy free channels, video rentals, and their own library of movies. Once she’d lost the remote, she’d declared the whole thing useless and consigned it to the basement to gather dust with all the other things they meant to throw out.

Lucky for Buffy, she didn’t mind a little manual manipulation. In minutes, she had uncovered the gift, wiped it clean and heaved it back to her bedroom. The screen was small—thirteen inches, and the source of yet another of Dawn’s complaints—but that was fine with her. She’d just sit herself on the floor beside it and hope that whatever she was about to subject her eyeballs to wouldn’t cost her her vision.

The first tape she popped in had her heart doing a little skip. Spike’s face filled the screen, large and so close she could almost smell him—annoying that a vampire, a dead thing, could smell as good as he did, enough to leave a permanent mark on her memory—then he sat back, revealing his surroundings. The bathroom at Giles’s place, so presumably this session was one of the first.

“Right,” Spike said into the lens, spreading his legs in that obscene way of his, arms resting on his knees. He was seated on the toilet, staring at the camera like he could see her through it. “Well, let’s get this waste of time over with. How I’m feeling today. Annoyed,

for one, that I'm yammering to a bloody camera. That the Slayer has me by the short and curlies and there's not a sodding thing I can do about it if I am to keep myself in one, undusted piece."

He blew out a breath, then snickered and shook his head. "Bit of a joke, innit? What's become of me. Guess I should've seen that coming. Not like I didn't have plenty of wankers along the way saying it to my face but I didn't feel it until now. William the Bloody defanged, bullied into being the Slayer's whipping boy because if I don't play nice, I might not get to live at all."

Something in Buffy's stomach twisted at that. Something unfamiliar and...uncomfy. She did what she could to ignore it. Like, so what did it matter if the mass murderer had been inconvenienced? Was she really supposed to feel bad for someone whose largest gripe was that he couldn't rip out throats without getting a much-deserved headache?

Good thing Spike didn't need oxygen. He could hold his breath as long as he liked.

"So there it is," the on-screen Spike said with a pained half-smile. "I've sung for my bloody supper. Sorry if you expected more, Slayer, but don't think you're in a place to be a choosey beggar. Just be happy I'm doing this proper, yeah?"

He reached forward and flicked something on the camera, and Buffy barely had time to blink before the image righted itself and Spike was again settling back on the toilet, hunched forward now and wearing a red button-up over his customary black tee. His hair was different too—not in a way she could describe or even fully identify, just that a part that had been a specific sort of tamed wavy was now a different sort of tamed wavy. Another day, another helping of hair gel.

"Lo again," he said to the camera, his expression less defiant than it had been the previous time. "Sounds like the watcher's ready to ship me off with the whelp so he and his bird can shag all over the place. Just when I think I can sink no lower, yeah? Starting to wonder if I ought to have just let those army gits haul me back. At least then I'd have someone other than myself to hate. Not that I *don't* hate you, Slayer, before you get precious about it." He grinned, and again, it was like he was reaching through the screen, looking at her in real-time. Buffy shifted uncomfortably and fought the urge to check behind her, just in case. "Hate you more than ever, point of fact," he went on. "Just, it's my choice, yeah? Could've lit out at any time and I haven't 'cause where the bloody hell am I gonna go? Not exactly overrun with options here, but at least I can choose where to take my lumps. And you lot aren't about to cut me open and take a poke at my insides."

Buffy shuddered and crossed her arms, trying to ignore the niggles of something that might have been guilt. She had nothing to feel guilty over, after all. It wasn't like Spike wasn't, well, Spike.

"Right," Spike said, nodding as though he'd heard the thought—as though it had stretched between time and space to reach him. "Reckon that's all I have at the mo'. Till next time, love."

There was another skip after he reached forward, and this time the whole picture shifted. The surroundings no longer the familiar bland walls of Giles's bathroom but the dark, dank area that was the basement at the Harris house. And Spike wasn't in a

tee anymore, rather the offensively loud Hawaiian print that didn't even look good on Xander but somehow managed to make the vampire look deader than normal. And Buffy wasn't prepared for the way her heart twisted when his face came into view, his cheeks hollower than normal and eyes something beyond haunted. Something more than scenery had changed since the last entry, leaving the Spike on-screen a shell of himself.

"Think this is it," he said hoarsely. "The lowest a man can sink. Though that's the rub, right? Was always rubbish at being a man—just better at hiding it before. Dunno that there's much to stick around for now, so, could be, Slayer, that this little experiment of yours is cut off prematurely. Can't say you've given me much in the way of a reason to see it through. Play nice or else. Turns out I can take the third door. See you around, Summers."

Buffy frowned and leaned forward as Spike moved and the picture went dark. She remembered, vaguely, Willow telling her about walking in on Spike in mid-suicide attempt and not caring very much at the time. Definitely not enough to follow-up or ask questions, as her world had been wrapped up in Riley, Riley, and more Riley. Even then, the idea that Spike would attempt to dust himself had been, well, something not to be taken seriously, because obviously that wasn't the way things would go and even if he managed to succeed, good riddance. Not like anyone here would miss him.

But the way he'd looked at the camera had been serious. More than serious. And she didn't like it. Didn't like the way it made her feel, retroactive shame for not caring and then confusion over that shame. Not even the next video, which was the tonal opposite of what had been essentially a recorded suicide note, could shake the sensation off. She watched as he practically bounced off the walls, grinning and cackling and talking about how he had his fangs back, that he'd discovered whatever the *army wankers* had done to him had a demonic loophole, and thank fuck, for while it wasn't as good as finding someone to eat, killing was killing. He could get his jollies just fine. Find a way forward now that he knew it might exist. That he wasn't helpless.

But it didn't erase what had come before—didn't blank out the despair she'd seen or do much to unrattle her rattled nerves, and she had no idea why. Sense was not being made.

Except no, she realized, sense *was* being made. He'd pulled at something she'd thought she'd left behind, a wound she'd sworn had scabbed over and healed. She knew what it was like to feel helpless, to *be* helpless. To know there were creatures in the world that were strong and knew who she was, knew where to find her, and the fear that if they came for her, she wouldn't be able to fight back. What Giles had done to her on her eighteenth birthday, the test the Council had put her through, the feeling of utter and complete helplessness she'd spent a few days worrying would be her new normal. How she'd torn herself apart wondering how she could live in a world where monsters existed, where she knew how to fight them, but couldn't.

Never would she have ever thought it possible that she'd have something so intimate in common with Spike. But she did.

The knowledge was going to haunt her.



Buffy needed a break after that. Not a big one, just a breather to let her thoughts settle. So, she tidied up her room—Dawn would throw a fit if she saw her discarded television in use without her permission—and rejoined the world. Did the daughter thing in razzing her mom about her upcoming date, the sister thing in plotting with Dawn how they would capture the entire spectacle on video, the friend thing in checking in with the gang, and then the Slayer thing in a thankfully uneventful sweep of Sunnydale’s most active cemeteries. By the time she’d gotten home, she’d been more than wiped and ready to crawl into bed and not think serious thoughts again until the sun was up.

That resolve lasted as long as it took to cram down a fat-free yogurt and get ready for bed. Then she’d been back in her room, where the television waited for her in her closet, and Buffy had found she was wide awake. More than that—wide awake while the house was asleep and she was less likely to be interrupted. Which hey, important consideration. No doubt both her mom and Dawn would have choice words for her if they discovered Buffy was watching recordings that had been expressly told were off limits to her, even if the person who had expressly told her had expressly been a psychopath. Even if Spike was a soulless monster who had chained her up, that did not excuse her own bad behavior, yadda yadda.

Whatever. She was the Slayer. All things vampire-related were ultimately her call. Especially this vampire.

Which was what she told herself as she settled back on the floor next to the television—on the side of her bed near her window, in case anyone came in—with the volume low and the lights off. This was strictly slayer business.

As it was, the video entries that followed Spike’s new lease on life were unremarkable, documenting his move from Xander’s basement into the crypt he now called home. Buffy watched as his surroundings filled out, little by little. The first couple of recordings looked to have been captured while he was sitting on a sarcophagus, holding the camcorder to eye level. Then the perspective changed, the camera once again on a different surface, a collection of things he’d dug out of the dump in the background, though haphazardly, like he hadn’t decided where to put them yet.

“Dunno how homey I oughta make it just yet,” he told the camera. “Army gits doin’ regular sweeps to find me. They might be a load of tossers, but I’d wager even they’d notice if the place started looking too posh. Got the downstairs started, though, and that’s something. ’Course if I do get sniffed out here, I’ll have to pack up, assuming I’m not back in a bloody cage, so might be better not to get comfortable, either. Especially now that you, my sweet slayer, have joined forces with the sodding enemy. Should’ve seen that coming.”

Buffy wiggled and threw a look over her bed to make sure the door was closed. That recrimination was very...recriminatey. She didn’t like it, and definitely didn’t need anyone overhearing it and agreeing.

Then it was the end of the tape. A hard breath punched through her lungs, her head swimming, and she reached for the next of the stack she'd piled beside her. Rewound when she realized it wasn't the next one in sequence, then repeated the process until she found the video that picked up where the last had left off. Spike discussing his near-capture from the Initiative, how he'd been forced to run to the Scoobies again to get the tracker out of his body. His fear when Riley had recognized him, how he'd hurried out of the place before *the wanker* could call in reinforcements. A few entries later, Buffy was staring into his beaten, bloodied face, after he'd been jumped at Willy's, listening to him lisp around his words, discuss how he'd gone and made himself a pariah but he'd be dust before he let a load of demon wankers cower him into submission. He'd survived worse, survived Angel, and if he had to go out, at least it'd be swinging. Not sitting around his crypt like a ninny, waiting for Buffy to decide he'd outlived his usefulness or Riley to point his friends in the right direction. He'd continue to pick fights, have decent brawls until some other sort of creature had themselves a real good day. Die a warrior's death so he could at least have that.

"Anyroad," he said, grinning a split-lipped grin that was mostly daring, "since the professor snuffed it, I reckon this little video diary experiment's run its course. I'd say I'd miss it but, well, much fun as it is yammering to myself, think I'll have better things to do with my time than help the Slayer get good marks. That's it then."

The picture cut again, a quick flash from Spike reaching toward the camera to his face, fierce and close damn near taking up the entire frame. That by itself would have been jarring enough, the sudden perspective change, but everything about him was different too. His eyes wild, his nostrils flared, his lips pulled into a sneer she knew well. He was *pissed off*, and if she didn't know better, he'd say at her.

"Dunno what you think you're playing at, Slayer, but I think you'll find I'm not some simpering ninny you have at your beck and bloody call. Next time you aim to get a fella's motor revved like that, don't be surprised when he takes you for a ride."

That was it. The screen went dark, then brightened once more with another perspective change. Spike was back a comfortable distance from the camera, no longer angry, rather amused.

"So the other slayer took your body for a spin, did she? Well, at least that clears up that rot from the other night. Should've figured it was something like that the second she started flapping *your* trap, that you were too prim and proper to be nearly that exciting."

Oh god. He was talking about Faith. Faith had found Spike while in her Buffy suit. And had apparently said...*something*. Buffy shook her head, trying to banish the sudden barrage of images her stupid traitor mind began inventing. She didn't even know where Faith would have run into him, except maybe at the Bronze, and what she would have said... Well, no, that wasn't true. She had a pretty damn good idea about what she would have said. The things she would have teased.

Next time you aim to get a fella's motor revved like that, don't be surprised when he takes you for a ride.

And Faith would be so down for that ride. At least *that* Faith—the one Buffy had

chased to Los Angeles just to find cozying up with her ex who had chosen to protect her rather than listen to the woman he claimed to love. Her gut twisted, her mind flooding with new images. Images she hated almost as much as the others—of Faith and Spike tangled around each other, moving together, all in pornified Technicolor. There was no reason the thought should make her throat tighten or fill her with anything other than revulsion. No reason why she should experience even a tingle of jealousy, much less a full-on surge.

Except Spike is yours, that same traitor mind whispered. He's always been yours. She's taken everything that was ever yours and you will not let her have him, too.

Buffy shook her head again. That was...nonsensical. Completely ridiculous. But understandable, she reasoned, at the same time. Faith had a tendency to bring out her nonsensical, ridiculous side, and if the result was a fleeting moment of proprietary claim on the resident undead, well, she could hardly be blamed for the misfiring of a brain she'd trained a long time ago to resent any attempt on Faith's part to home in on her territory.

And meanwhile, the video kept on playing.

"Can't wait for bitty Betty to venture out on her own, leave the big guns at home," Spike was saying when Buffy refocused. She blinked and rewound until finding where the recording had stopped and resumed. Listened to him recount one of the nights they'd been under Jonathan's make-me-awesome spell, how *fetching* she'd looked, the daring little sidekick, next to Mr. Big Man Sunnydale.

"Meant what I said," he practically purred, grinning lasciviously at the camera. "Any time you wanna flex your muscles, test your mettle, you know where to find me, don't you? I'll be waiting, bloody well starving for it. A good, proper fight, the pair of us. See who's left standing at the end."

Buffy shivered—a disgusted shiver. Totally disgusted. Not at all touched that even with the super spell in effect, the one that should have ensured Jonathan usurped her rightful place as the largest thorn in Spike's side, his thoughts were still entirely for her.

The next video was back to status quo, thankfully, though Buffy could have done without the reminder of the horny poltergeists, especially with all this extra shiny hindsight at her disposal. She could have also done without Spike discussing in detail all the scents that had assaulted his nose and his theory that without the spooks, she probably would never have reached orgasm with *the tin soldier* so maybe she ought to write them a thank you card. It wasn't...entirely true. Not *entirely*. And certainly none of his business in any case. More alarming was the fact that Spike had spent time thinking about how satisfying sex with Riley was at all. Or that he seemed to intuit that it wasn't.

Then there was the build-up toward the end of the semester. The joy he didn't bother to hide when he revealed Adam's proposal—so tangible it practically radiated off the screen. And again, Buffy was zapped back to that place she'd occupied during senior year, the fear and the uncertainty about her lack of control, her ability to live in a world full of monsters without fighting back, and how under the betrayal that had rocked her sideways, the absolute relief that had washed through her when she'd realized there was a reason her strength was missing, and that it would come back. All of it would come back

with time.

“Should’ve known you’d save the bloody day,” Spike told the camera after the fight was over. The idiot was grinning and shaking his head, but his eyes were light. None of the anger or disappointment she would have assumed, though she imagined it had to be there in droves. More like he was impressed despite his best efforts. “Told that twisted Tony Robbins monstrosity the same—not to underestimate you. That you have a nasty habit of ruining a man’s hard-won mayhem by riding to the rescue. Serves him bloody right for not taking me seriously.”

Buffy blinked, not sure what to do with that, or the strange warmth that flooded her at the...compliment? Was that what that was? Again, she squirmed, exhaled a hard breath and let her shoulders sag when she saw she’d reached the end of another tape. She glanced at those she had left, stacked in the haphazard order that she’d put them in a few minutes ago.

Did she really need to see more? The point of going to the crypt had been to grab the camcorder, not unearth more than a year’s worth of recorded confessionals. She had what she wanted and she already knew what she knew. Nothing that was on these tapes would undo his twisted love confession or make it somehow *less* twisted. She knew that.

But she also knew that she couldn’t stop, that there was something inside of her that was more than just curious. That thing she hadn’t yet managed to say aloud—the fear that she had put something into the universe and was reacting the way she was because she’d finally been caught. Nearly three years of being equal parts fascinated, afraid, and annoyed by Spike had culminated in the quiet part of their relationship no longer being quiet. That tension that had always been there, that they had both flirted with time and again without consequence or repercussion, that she had gotten used to provoking because it was fun. *Spike* was fun. Evil fun, yes, but fun nonetheless. Fun in all the most dangerous ways. Even when she tried to convince herself otherwise, even when he was wearing down the very last of her last nerves, something about him was just...fun. He was, in so many ways, the very definition of a guilty pleasure, because she knew she enjoyed their byplay more than she should.

Because that draw was not one-sided. He had just been the first to admit it—put it out there that there was something between them. That there always had been. That *something* was what had her reaching for the next tape, shoving down the inner voice that sounded like some combination of Xander, Riley, Angel, and Giles combined, warning her that this could lead nowhere good. Curiosity being what had done in so many cats. She was no different.

It didn’t stop her, though. She had hours of unoccupied time ahead of her and nothing to do tomorrow except probably skip another day of classes. Sleep while the sun was out, vampire-style, and chalk it all up to the week from hell. That seemed earned, didn’t it? At least a little.

Though when the video started to play, she wished her brain had put forward a better counterargument. For on the screen was a very naked Spike.

Naked as in no clothes.

Naked as in *penis*.

Naked as in *holy cow Spike has a penis*.

“Oh my god!” Buffy flinched and looked away, slamming her eyes shut, but the damage was done. The image was there in her brain, searing like. Spike standing in the middle of his crypt without a stitch of clothing on, arms spread, penis being all penis-y, long and thick and *how* when it wasn’t even erect? It hadn’t been erect, right? She should look to make sure—*no, she should not*. What she should do was—

But her head had already turned back to the screen, her eyes slits as though seeing it through her eyelashes would make it count less. Like yes, there’s a naked Spike on her television, but she didn’t look at him with both eyes fully opened so it was okay. Plausible deniability.

Except there was no deniability. There was just Spike, naked, splayed all Vitruvian Man-style. *Behold*.

And Buffy, well, she beheld. Or belooked. Bestared. Once her eyes were open and focused, she couldn’t tear them away. Because Spike? Well, he was fucking gorgeous.

Seriously gorgeous.

And it was by virtue of the fact that he was also gorgeously silent, not being his normal cocky—*err*—annoying self that she thought she might understand what the hell he was doing. It wasn’t like Spike could assess himself in front of a mirror or anything, and more than a century without seeing himself in reflective surfaces might mean he didn’t know what he looked like. Not in full.

Like this, which was definitely in *full*. All that pale skin stretched tight over ropey musculature that he typically kept hidden...the definition in his chest and abdomen, the prominent *vs* of his hip bones, the smattering of brownish hair under his belly button leading to—and yes, she was staring at his penis again, because, well, how could she not? It was there and...*there*.

“Good thing Buffy’ll never see this,” Spike said, his voice against the sudden quiet startling her enough she nearly tipped over, which would have been really embarrassing because she was already on the floor. “Reckon she’d have herself a right conniption if she decided to take a peek.”

“What would you expect?” Buffy whisper-shouted at screen-Spike. “You’re *naked*.”

He snorted as though he’d heard her, weirding her out enough she checked her surroundings again just to make sure nothing had changed and she had indeed not fallen into a pocket dimension where the rules were different.

“Course that’s against the rules, innit, Slayer?” He was addressing the camera in full now, arms back at his sides. “The rules as you explained ‘em at the start. Not that it matters anymore. Seem to have forgotten this experiment of yours.”

At that, she flushed and wiggled some more. It wasn’t her fault her professor had been skewered by her own Frankenthing.

“A warrior knows his assets,” Spike told the camera, stalking toward the lens in a way that should have been ridiculous but somehow wasn’t, was instead all jungle cat on the prowl. She hated that almost as much as she wanted to believe she hated him. “Never

know when something unexpected could come in handy, do you?”

Then the asshole winked and reached to switch the camera off, and Buffy was left to the silence, panting in spite of herself, her cheeks hot and her heart thundering and considering things about Spike she was never supposed to consider about Spike, at least during waking hours when her conscious mind was in charge. Thinking thoughts that were very, very bad about parts of *him* that were very, very big. Or bad.

Thankfully the screen flickered to life again before she could let herself get lost too far down that particular pervy rabbit hole, and when she looked up, Spike was back in center, clothed now, muttering this and that about how he didn't know what he was supposed to do now that the Initiative had closed up shop. The entire reason he'd stayed in *Sunnybell* was to get the army blokes to reverse what they'd done, but with the operation completely closed down, he was at a loss. He could try to find a decent surgeon, he supposed, but there were no guarantees, and he didn't fancy taking the risk of his brain being scrambled beyond repair. He knew how hard it was finding someone to do a job right, courtesy of the many efforts he'd made to cure Dru after Prague before finally deciding to leverage the power of an active hellmouth. And say he ran into a human-type along the way that had a grudge and he couldn't fight back? At least in Sunnydale, he had the Slayer, much as it pained him to admit. A nice cozy place where he could kick back, pour himself a pint, and know there was a good brawl just on the other side of his door waiting for him if he got the urge. And yeah, he'd been thrashed but good that one time at Willy's, but was he going to let that stop him? No. He'd be bloody well damned again before he stopped seeking out violence on a nightly basis and any ugly beast that had an issue with that could take their shot at stopping him themselves.

Though he might not go back to Willy's anytime soon. No loss there.

Also—he this he admitted in a voice so low Buffy had to turn up the volume as much as she dared—he had a feeling he could run to the Slayer if things got tough. Appeal to her sense of right and wrong should he ever find himself well and truly outmatched. She might not agree to help with a load of enthusiasm, but that was the sort of person she was. Good down to her sodding bone marrow, even to creatures like him.

“Might be pathetic, but even being surrounded by a load of gits who can't stand the sight of you is better than being alone,” he said in closing, hand outstretched to shut off the camera. “I got that here, at least.”

The video ended, cut to the next, and once again, Buffy didn't know what to think, let alone how to react. Only it wasn't the same feeling as before—not entirely. It was more intense, more visceral, like it had clawed deeper under her skin and made itself at home. Spike was one of the only vampires she'd ever gotten to know beyond staking, and definitely the only vampire who had been in her life for a significant amount of time. He'd crossed a bridge somewhere in her mind from *monster* to *person*, though the bridgework was faulty and prone to fail at any second. That was just a risk she took every time she decided to venture that way, that today would be the day the infrastructure she'd gotten used to collapsed. At the same time, though, she had never given much consideration to things like how Spike must feel, acclimating to the world as he was with the new set of

rules he had to live by. It hadn't mattered at all, because how sorry was she expected to feel for someone whose main gripe in life was their inability to murder innocent people? Not very.

But that was oversimplifying things and she knew it. She just didn't like knowing it.

The next few entries weren't very significant, detailing a long, uneventful summer during which Spike's crypt fully filled out—absence of the Initiative gave him the freedom to openly stake his claim on the place—and featured a few vague references that made her snicker. Like how he hoped Riley's plane went down on the way back to Iowa, or that Xander tripped and fell and speared himself on a barbecue fork at his family get-together. Snide comments that were slightly meaner than *just* snide but in such a way Buffy couldn't help but regard them with what felt like exasperated affection.

The last entry on the tape surprised her. Spike was pacing back and forth, smoking up a storm and snarling about Dracula.

"Bloody told the soldier what the ponce was gonna do, didn't I?" He shook his head hard and flicked his cigarette butt to the stone floor. "From what I hear, it was textbook, the seduction act. Add in the witchy mojo and the wanker might as well have put her on a sodding platter. Dunno why anyone bothers to come by here for information if they're gonna just let it go in one ear and out the other. And Drac got his fucking fangs in her, could've done a whole hell of a lot worse."

Buffy furrowed her brow, her heart thumping. In a thousand years, she never would have expected Spike to be upset over the Dracula thing. And...he'd warned Riley? When? Why hadn't she heard about this?

"Same with Dru," Spike went on, now with a high, manic titter. "No one took her seriously. Not until it was too late. Cut it any finer and we'd have a slayer with fangs running around and much fun as that'd be, doubt any of us would be better off for it."

There was a creak on the video, and Spike abruptly ceased his frantic pacing, the stop so sharp he nearly toppled over. A beat, one panicked look at the camera, and then Buffy watched as she entered the frame.

"Spike," on-screen Buffy said in a very *ugh* tone, "do you want to explain why I found a pack of cigarettes in Dawn's room?"

Spike blinked and turned his head toward the camera once again, though stopped himself before he could entirely give it away. Not that it mattered. The on-screen Buffy was too busy glowering at him to notice his split attention.

"Seriously," Video Buffy continued, practically frothing at the mouth, "I know you're bored these days and I can't begin to tell you how little I care, but if I ever find her with anything else of yours—"

"Oi!" Spike straightened his spine and firmed his jaw, and Buffy remembered this. Remembered the indignation in his eyes, the barely restrained fury, the way he'd radiated rage without surrendering to it. "Hate to break it to you, Slayer, but I am actually not responsible for everything that goes sideways in your life. If you found smokes in kid sis's room, maybe you oughta ask *her* where she picked 'em up."

"I did," Buffy snapped, throwing something at Spike's chest. The confiscated ciga-

rettes. “Why the hell do you think I’m here? The scenery?”

She hadn’t registered the surprise across Spike’s face the first time, either, as quickly as it vanished, and even if she had, she probably wouldn’t have understood it. She also hadn’t noticed when Spike’s demeanor flipped on a dime, defensiveness turning to careless, devil-may-care nonchalance. The Buffy in the past missed the fact that her mortal enemy had clocked that he’d been molded into a handy scapegoat, one no one would question, and instead of ratting her sister out, had decided fall on the proverbial sword.

“Well, Slayer, it’s like you said,” Spike drawled lazily, pulling one of the cigarettes free of the pack—a pack Buffy could see, even through the grainy footage, wasn’t even his normal brand. Never mind how she knew Spike’s normal brand, that was neither here nor there. It was just one of those things that had become one with him the same way the black nail polish and the leather coat were one with him. How he looked different, sometimes naked—*not penis-y naked*—without them. “Gotta get my kicks in somehow. Corrupting the youth is thirsty work, but—”

Buffy’s fist connected with his nose so quickly it took even her, Buffy, by surprise. The Buffy watching, that was, not the one doing the punching. Spike pinwheeled back and crashed with dancer’s precision into that ugly green chair that he’d built the whole crypt aesthetic around. He gawked at her, his expression annoyingly unreadable given how clear everything else was, and otherwise sat motionless as she threatened him four ways from Sunday if she caught a whiff of anything nicotine-scented anywhere near Dawn’s person in the future before spinning on her heel and marching right back out in the same towering temper.

Spike remained in the chair, panting and staring after her, a slow trickle of blood running down his chin. Then he barked a laugh—harsh and empty—and shook his head before tipping it back.

“Keep a tally, Slayer,” he muttered. “Every punch you throw, every nasty little barb, count ‘em up, because when I get this chip out, I’m paying ‘em back tenfold. Could’ve been nice. Could’ve made it tidy and clean. Could’ve done it quick, but no. When it’s finally the two of us squaring off as nature sodding intended, and I get you dead to bloody rights, I’m not gonna be precious about it. Not gonna be gentle. Not gonna make it quick...” He had dropped his hand to his crotch and Buffy watched, one part stunned, one part horrified, and one part don’t-even-ask-her as he began rubbing himself through his jeans. “Gonna take my time with you. Enjoy every second. Bloody bathe in your blood. Like the good ol’ days, yeah? Nothing between us except each other.”

His breathing became ragged, and the loud, unmistakable sound of a zipper being lowered slithered through the otherwise still crypt air. And then there it was, his penis, hard and straining and god, if she had thought it big before, all at ease, then she didn’t think there was a word for it now. Not that, you know, Buffy had a ton of experience where penises were concerned—Angel under the covers, Parker in the dark, and then, well, Riley. She’d seen Riley’s a lot and...well, while there were similarities in that they shared shape, that was pretty much as far as it went.

For one thing, Buffy had never seen a cock that...curved before. Just at the end, like it

was meant to hook inside. The thought had her squirming, had her squeezing her thighs together, which in turn sent a *zing* to places that should never, ever *zing* for Spike, and other parts of her body responding in kind. Like the phantom stiffness in her jaw as she imagined—against her will, obviously—what it would be like to take him into her mouth. How much of him would even fit, if her hands would be enough to compensate.

“It’ll be glorious,” Spike said, voice straining, and his fist was around his cock and he was stroking himself lazily, doing a little twist with his fingers when he reached the tip that Buffy found almost hypnotic. Nearly as hypnotic as the silken skin moving along his shaft, and the way she could tell when he squeezed. “Fangs and fist and nothing else. You don’t know it, Slayer, but I’ve been studying you a long bloody time. Know your moves better than you do at this point. Just gotta decide how I wanna do it. Push you up against something, make you wiggle. Get your arms behind your back. You’d use your head, then, try to knock my teeth out with it, but too bad for you, I’ve already got them right where I want them, in that dainty little throat of yours. Show you what it’s like to have a real pair of fangs inside you.”

He was breathing harder now, like his lungs were working double-time to keep up when she knew damn well they weren’t working at all, arching his hips in time with the pulls of his hand, and rumbling a low growl that teased that fiery spot within her. The spot that blazed and burned and threatened to consume her whole, made her throb with a good, deep kind of ache, her body tense and her skin hot and some pulsing going on between her legs, all of it becoming harder and harder to ignore. Buffy didn’t become aware of her own hand slipping beneath her waistband until her fingers were sliding over her clit, and by then it was too late. She had gone too far, pushed herself over some threshold, and *god*, she was touching herself to a video of Spike touching himself, there was something seriously wrong with her, but she also couldn’t stop. She was too desperate, too wound up, too wet, and the combination was too intoxicating to ignore, for this, *this* was something she had forgotten. That good sort of out-of-control feeling she’d experienced a handful of times when sex had been new and she’d been busy learning what her body was capable of outside of violence. Before everything about intimacy had become routine or maintenance rather than something born out of true desire.

Maybe she was sick. Maybe she’d always been sick. Maybe she needed it to be a little wild, a lot dangerous, in some ways taboo in order to feel alive. But right then, working her fingers over her clit as Spike snarled and fucked his hand while muttering all the ways he would kill her when the chip was out, was doing more for her than the last six months with Riley combined. Longer, even, if she were being honest. And when Spike barked her name and erupted, ropey semen splattering his chest and hand and other things she couldn’t see, Buffy was there with him, trembling and spasming and making the sort of sounds she’d gotten used to performing in bed, only this was no performance. It was real and bone melty, and while she knew the shame would come, the reproach, for the moment, all she could feel was a light, giddy buzz.

But like all good buzzes, it couldn’t last. The clouds she’d chased away for a few glorious seconds were all eager to rush back in, freshly full with new, ready-to-unleash guilt

storms and other recriminations. That growing certainty that something was actually wrong with her, both for doing what she'd just done and the feelings behind it. The feelings that seemed to strengthen with each passing second, and her head was pounding again only not in a good way. And on-screen, the scene had changed, cut to the next like nothing had happened at all, except her legs were still trembling and she could smell herself on her fingers. Except she had just come with Spike, to Spike, and her world was upside down.

Worst of all, Buffy wasn't sure she minded nearly as much as she should. Not enough to jar herself back to her senses when, a few minutes later, Spike started ranting about how *it wasn't true* and *it couldn't be* and *fucking bitch slayer had gotten into his head*. And she realized too late what he was talking about—that he was in love with her, a revelation that had apparently come to him in a raunchy dream the night after his last failed attempt to get the chip out. A human doctor, he'd thought, who specialized in Initiative-level operations had been a safe bet, safer than any hack demon with a bone saw, and that had blown up in his face. Then had come the dream, Buffy storming into his crypt and mauling him with her lips, and that had been fine—grand, even—until the dream version of Spike had gone and used the word *love*, startling him enough he'd jerked awake before it had even gotten to the good part.

"That's it," Spike told the camera, his voice low, presumably to avoid stirring Harmony. "She's done it. Beat me at last. There's no coming back from this."

It was over the course of the next few entries that she got the full context. That Spike had thought about fucking her before, and often, *wanked* to various scenarios and fantasies over the years and all of that had been good and pure and *natural*, according to him, because it was just the way vampires were. Violence and sex were so intertwined that it would've been stranger if he hadn't had those thoughts—if a very real part of him hadn't wanted to lose himself in her just once, just to see what it was like, if she was as fiery and passionate, if she'd make it hurt as good as he thought it would. But the subconscious was more than desire, it was truth, and his subconscious had been screaming as long as he could remember, just not to where he could hear. Not where he wanted to hear. And now he knew the truth. He knew what Dru had been telling him since after Acatlha. He tasted like ashes because the version of himself he'd been before Buffy was dead, dust, gone and scattered. All she could see was the Slayer because that was all *he* could see. Because he was sick with her and had been from the start. Because he didn't just want to fuck her; he wanted to love her.

He did love her.

And that was wrong.

It was strange hearing her own argument from a couple of days ago parroted back at her. Spike was twisted, he was insane, he needed a good wallop to knock this sickness out of his system. He desperately did not want to be in love with her, hated himself for the things he felt. He'd thought a few times he could get away with maybe just standing by the sidelines to watch her get what was coming. The time those demons attacked the Magic Box and he'd gone for a ringside seat, only to realize how empty his life would be

if Buffy was missing from it, so he'd rushed to the rescue even if she hadn't been any the wiser. That wasn't the only instance, though the most significant, and all had culminated in the night at the Bronze when he'd told her the truths she hadn't liked. When he'd tried, one last time, to claim back the scrap of dignity he had, determined and willing to live with the pain of firing the blast that would take her head so long as it rid him of the disease that was Buffy Summers. And how he'd surrendered, wholly and completely, the second their eyes had met and he'd seen her pain, felt the echo of it in his own chest, and understood it was too late. That he loved her, truly loved her, to the point that her hurt had become his, and his only concern then, his only concern in the sodding world, was making whatever had gone wrong right. Because nothing could be more important than that—not his pride, not his feelings, not whoever he'd been before or thought he needed to be still. Just that all-encompassing pull he'd only ever experienced before with Dru, and even more hopeless, for at least Dru had liked him some of the time.

And Buffy sat on the floor of her bedroom, watching him say this, not realizing her cheeks were wet until a tear splattered on her hand, or that her heart was thundering in ways completely different from how it had been at the start. Something inside of her had shifted again, toward a place that was less uncertain and disgusted and more... Well, she didn't know. She didn't know because none of this made the sense it should—made *any* sense. Spike wanting her was one thing but love had been out of the question, impossible, cordoned off for people that were actually *people* and not just playing at it after the sun went down. Except nothing he'd said sounded like a monster's definition of love, or a soulless creature trying to understand something beyond its limitations. And even then, what was love anyway? How could she measure it, define it, say what she felt for her mom and her friends, had felt for Riley and Angel, all different breeds of the same sensation but *different* still, was any more love than what Spike had just described?

The thought lingered as the tape played on, the recordings edging closer to her now. Spike realizing that Riley was running around on her, his decision to show her exactly to what degree, and his remorse—his confusion and anger and fear and more confusion—at the look on her face at the end. The realization that in his haste to remove Finn from her life, he hadn't realized how much she would hurt, and his own self-hatred at being the cause. Then his anger at being the cause because, well, shouldn't she have known? Wasn't it better? Why was this so sodding difficult? Why did nothing make sense anymore? Then through the Council's visit, how it had affected him that Buffy had trusted him with her family—which, *Buffy had trusted him with her family*. Believed after everything that he would watch them, stand between them and danger, and she'd had no reason to. None at all, for he could have easily announced to the whole demon world that he had the Slayer's nearest and dearest for ransom, made her feel as powerless as he'd felt this last year, and that had to mean something, didn't it? After all she'd seen him do, all his scheming and underhandedness—she hadn't even paid him, just thrown her weight around in words and trusted that to do the job, as though part of her had understood that *he* understood. It couldn't mean what he thought but it had to mean something.

And he was right. It had meant something. Just nothing Buffy had been aware of at

the time. Nothing she was sure she wanted to be aware of now, but the Rubicon was behind her, the decision made, the die cast, and she'd watched hours of him by this point. A year's worth of Spike going from the Spike she'd first met to the Spike that was in her life today.

By the time she got to the end, his entry after he'd realized she'd revoked his invitation, Spike sitting in front of the camera, hunched over, shoulders tight and face shadowed with defeat, the thing that had started had started to shift within her before was locked in its new home. Really locked. Like, roots had already spouted and delved into the earth beneath it. Weedy roots she doubted she'd be able to successfully excavate if she tried.

So she sat in her bedroom for a few long moments, the air screaming with its sudden quiet, the absence of his voice or the hum of the VCR, the television off now, everything gone dark except everything that lived inside.



Buffy slept late the next day. No surprise there. Every time she opened her eyes and remembered, the most she could do was turn over to find a new position and fall back asleep. At least until Dawn had come home from school and raised holy hell about how unfair it was that Buffy got to spend the day in bed.

Begrudgingly, then, she'd forced herself to her feet, to the world with all its new uncertainty, with a stack of tapes she wished she'd never watched and a television she needed to haul back to the basement.

There had been a clear objective at the start. A reason she'd just put herself through all that. Buffy had wanted her camera back so she could make her mom smile. That was all. He'd had it far too long and how was she supposed to know he'd been doing the assignment this whole time?

And god, the assignment. The video had just been one part—the testing mechanism. Walsh's instructions had been to have whoever agreed to participate write how they felt before and after their video diary entries. See if there was any improvement in temperament from getting out whatever was being kept in—if the subject became less tense or more with each confession, if they seemed relaxed, unburdened, or if their mood had swung the other way. If they'd talked themselves into a worse place than they'd been before. Or if there was no change at all. And each response would be telling, help shed insight onto the subject that could then be written up into a paper with hypotheses and conclusions. The point of the assignment might have been vague but the instructions had not, and Buffy remembered thinking Spike would make an interesting subject because he was a sociopath. That his before and after journal entries were likely to show little difference, despite however much he unburdened himself. Assuming, of course, that he actually did the assignment part of the assignment—Walsh had said there was a chance people would just write the before and afters and skip the video confessional for a variety of reasons, and that would be telling as well. There would be definite, drawable conclusions regardless of the level of participation. It had been up to the student to

decide what those conclusions were and how they worked into the overall spirit of the assignment. And now Buffy was left with those conclusions and nowhere to put them.

Spike had embraced vulnerability—had done the assignment as she'd asked, no lying and cutting corners. He'd also done so knowing, probably expecting, Buffy to violate the secrecy part, regardless of what she'd told him or even what she'd believed at the time. Because that's what Buffy would have expected Spike to do if the tables were turned.

And now...

Well, she didn't know what to do. She hadn't expected those tapes to exist but finding them had left her too full of that cat-killing curiosity to leave them behind. Only cats had more than one life to take. So did Buffy Summers.

The question was what to do with the things she'd learned during the last one.

Sleep hadn't made the answer any clearer. Maybe socializing would.



Socializing didn't. And god, she tried. Went out to the Bronze with the others, fake smiled her way through the evening, all the while her mind kept dragging her back to that thirteen-inch screen and everything it had shown her. And when she begged off to go patrol, no one seemed to think it was strange or early or any of the usual stuff. No one knew where her feet were going to lead her.

No one knew she was on her way to make perhaps the wrongest decision of her life.

Or not the wrongest. That title had been claimed in how Buffy had gone about the whole *Spike* thing, both internally and to his face. She could admit that now. Admit that a good amount of her reaction had been self-preservation, the attempt to restrain the very real part of her that had known exactly what he meant by *heat, desire*. Bury it so deep and ignore it so long the dirt over its resting place went back to looking natural and undisturbed. No one would know anything rested beneath it.

And that would have worked, though likely not forever. A niggling voice would remain, whispering all the things she didn't want to hear when her mind was at peace. It was hard to see change in real-time; how Willow had gone from the long-haired girl who wore modest clothes and did her best to hide to the confident witch who enjoyed showing off skin whenever she could. How Giles had gone from tweed-wearing stereotype to someone who wore jeans and sweatshirts and giggled at dick jokes. There was her mom too, who barely resembled the Joyce Summers that had moved her daughters to Sunnydale from Los Angeles, or Anya, who was no longer a demon but a proud and vocal capitalist. The only way to really track how much things had changed was to deliberately look back, take stock of the time that had lapsed and the people they no longer were.

Spike's change had been the same—something she hadn't seen. Something still developing, evolving, the way everyone else was developing, evolving. He was not the vampire who had first rolled into Sunnydale three years ago, nor was he the vampire who had agreed, however reluctantly, to take part in Buffy's school project. She'd seen that herself, and much like discovering a new color, she couldn't go back to *not* seeing it just because

it was convenient or more comfortable. And she couldn't undo what it meant for her, either, or what she wanted. Especially now that she was admitting that she wanted it.

That she wanted him.

Buffy blew out a breath as she approached Spike's crypt, feeling as though a decade had passed in the time between now and when she'd sneaked in earlier. She stared at the door handle for a long moment, her skin thrumming with *vampire* and *Spike* loudly enough that she understood he was on the other side. Of course. The reverse of whatever normal vampire behavior would be—out when the sun was out, in after it had set. Or maybe he'd just known she'd drop by tonight, realized the camcorder was gone along with his collection of tapes, and understood what that meant.

She wasn't about to find out any quicker on this side of the door. So, dragging in a fortifying breath, Buffy squared her shoulders and did what came naturally—kicked her way inside.

She didn't get far. Just far enough to make out the form of Spike sitting in his green chair, not wearing a stitch of clothing and pulling on his cock which, holy god, the video had not even come close to doing justice.

Buffy stopped so quickly she nearly tripped over herself. "What the hell?"

For his part, Spike flashed a grin and made a show of dragging his hand up his shaft. "Evening, Slayer. Thought you might drop by."

"Are you out of your mind?"

"You're the one letting herself into other people's homes without an invite, much less knocking first. Can't help if your dainty sensibilities are offended." He winked and did that twisty thing with his wrist when he reached the tip of his cock, and it was Pavlovian, the way her body responded. *How* it had become Pavlovian over the course of one night, she didn't know, but that heat she'd felt earlier was suddenly blazing, hot and bright and potent, and what was worse, she knew he knew. It was in the curve of his lips, the sparkle in his eye, the reckless way he stroked his prick, his pace almost punishing and the air filled with each fleshy pump.

"Spike—"

"Figured I had nothing left to lose, yeah?" he continued conversationally. "Might as well let you see all of it, since you've already seen all of it."

Something in her settled. "I have," she said. "I didn't come here for that, though."

"No?"

"I just wanted my camcorder back."

"And you took it. Along with a load of stuff that doesn't belong to you."

"Are you really going to lecture me about the sanctity of personal property, Mr. Slayer Shrine?"

Spike shrugged, not losing his grin. "Not exactly an upstanding citizen, am I? Not like our daring hero. You wanna do me in, pet, you do it like this."

"This is your plan? You know I've watched the videos, so you decided to throw me off by being naked when I showed up?"

"Seemed like a decent idea at the time. Mostly just wanted you to see everything you're

about to dust. I know I'm impressive on film, but even you gotta admit, Slayer, there's nothing quite like beholding it in the flesh."

"You are so full of yourself."

"Mhmm. And from the smell of things, you wish you were, too."

Buffy's spine went rigid and her jaw tight, all her slayer impulses primed and ready for what should come next. She hadn't brought a stake but she didn't need one—she never had with Spike. And perhaps that should have been indicator enough. Weapons were handy but superfluous; the battle with them had never been physical. Not really.

And she knew what he was doing. She might not have yesterday, but she did today. She understood. But he didn't. He didn't realize how things had changed. And she couldn't blame him. After all, she hadn't until tonight.

"Slower, love," Spike cooed as she started forward, dipping his free hand to his balls and giving them a slow, showy squeeze. "If I'm living my last, let me enjoy it."

Buffy arched an eyebrow and answered by kicking off one of her shoes. "Who says it's your last?" she replied, a thrill running across her shoulders when his face went slack and the hand around his cock stalled. "You haven't asked why I'm here."

Spike blinked, his mouth falling open, closed, open again. And yeah, she'd been right. Among his many, many faults, Spike was a lot of fun. Especially when caught off guard. "I haven't," he agreed slowly. "Didn't know I needed to."

"Let's just say what I saw on those tapes was very, very educational."

He swallowed, and she let herself admire the way his throat worked. It was a really great throat. "Was it, now?"

"I mean, there's a lot we need to talk about." The blouse went next, her second and third thoughts with it, ushered by the widening of his eyes when he saw she wasn't wearing a bra. "Like, so much. Starting with the whole chaining me up?"

Spike didn't respond for a moment, just blinked at her breasts as though he'd never seen a naked woman before. And yeah, that sent another zing down her spine, filled her with a sort of headiness she'd forgotten was out there, all feelable. Her breath started coming faster and if her eyes took a detour down to appraise his cock, well, no one could blame them. It was all there and out and swollen, and while the television hadn't been lying about that curve, the grainy film quality *had* somehow left a lot wanting. Like the color, darker than his normal skin but not too much, the prominent veins that seemed extra prominent, the slick tip that again made her mouth want things her mouth typically didn't want.

"I think I get it now," Buffy went on after a beat—after finding her voice—and took another step forward, letting her hands fall to the waistline of her skirt. "What you were trying to say with the whole 'stake my ex for you' thing."

Spike pulled his gaze off her breasts and met her eyes, his own wide and dark and full of something so raw and primal, she wondered how it could be she'd never seen it before, for she knew this wasn't new. She'd just watched hours of footage of the same—how his face reflected every emotion, how much he betrayed without meaning to, probably without realizing it.

“You do?” he said hoarsely, his chest rising and falling at a pace. “Buffy—”

“It’s about change, right? You’ve changed. You’re not the person you were when you were with her.”

He nodded hard. “You changed me.”

Buffy didn’t know about that—didn’t know if she could take credit for something she hadn’t seen happening, hadn’t even noticed until she’d sat down and forced herself to pay attention—but she wasn’t about to belabor the point. Not when there were so many other things to belabor. “And you were right, too. About... About other stuff.” She was almost upon him, almost, close enough to feel his breaths crashing against her nipples, the cool air of the crypt along her hot skin. “About us. About there being something between us.”

Her skirt fell down her legs, and then she was in his lap, casting herself astride him, his cool to her hot, his hands on her hips, his face a mask of wonder and yearning and his cock between them, pressed to the cotton of her panties. “Be a love and pop me in the nose, will you?” he whispered. “Dunno how else I’m gonna know this is real.”

Buffy arched an eyebrow and dipped a hand between them. “Can always pinch you,” she said, dragging her fingers along his shaft, pulling his foreskin over the head with a slight squeeze. “See if that does the trick.”

“Bloody hell.”

“Or you can just trust me.”

Spike threw his head back, giving her another amazing view of his throat as it bobbed. “Trust you with my life,” he swore. “It’s me I don’t trust.”

“That you’re reading me being naked in your lap a wrong way?”

He barked out a breathy laugh. “Put like that, I sound like a dolt, don’t I?”

“Little bit.” Buffy pressed her brow to his. “I’m not... I’m not saying this is more than this. I’m not saying it’s... It’s what you want it to be. I don’t know what it is. I just... I don’t want to not see what it is or hope it goes away. That *you* go away.”

“Not what you said the other night.”

“Well, I’ve learned a few things since then. Someone helped me with my homework.”

He pulled back just enough that she saw his grin, the softness, the tease, the complete opposite of the way he’d leered at her just a few minutes ago. That had been the mask; this was the real thing. And now that she saw it, she wondered how she’d ever mistaken it for anything else. Not realized how much of himself was costume.

“Yeah, about that,” he said. “Seem to recall it being a part of that assignment that you wouldn’t peek.”

“I don’t know how much privacy a guy who chains you up is really allowed to expect, do you?”

“Buffy—”

“Are you sad I watched?”

Spike laughed again, the sound light and free, and then his hand was between them too, pressing against the wet center of her panties, and they were both groaning, both moving, and before she could register that it had happened, the fabric between them

was gone—he had literally ripped off her underwear—and his fingers were inside of her. Thick and thrusting and she clenched around him on instinct, gasped when he gasped, and there was more to say, a lot more, but he'd covered her mouth with his and everything that wasn't him flew out the window.

She didn't know what would happen after this, where it would lead, but as she slipped him along her slit, felt him trembling with anticipation, with need, and that wondrous completion she didn't realize she'd been chasing until he was sliding inside of her, she thought maybe that was okay, too. The unknown had once been a source of excitement and intrigue. It could hurt, yes, and it was probably scarier than any monster she'd ever faced, but that didn't mean it wasn't worth seeing where the road would take.

Or what she would learn along the way.

“Christ, I love you,” Spike whispered into her throat as she began to move, to dance, to fall right along with him. “I love you.”

Starting now.